

est genitor in te totus: Significant Role Distribution in Senecan Tragedy

Sutton (1986), arguing directly against Zwierlein (1966), has shown that with only two exceptions, the tragedies of Seneca can be performed using three speaking actors, provided that the actors play multiple roles. This paper examines each of the genuine dramas and determines how the roles may have been distributed. There are sometimes several alternatives, and my assignments do not always agree with those of, for example, Sutton (1986), Ahl (2008), Fitch (1987), or Fortey and Glucker (1975). This paper demonstrates, however, that by the sensitive distribution of roles among a limited number of actors, one can detect patterns which nonverbally convey significant insights about the characters and the plays themselves.

In the *Hercules Furens*, one actor must portray Amphitryo throughout, since he appears in all of the episodes except for the Prologue. A second must play Megara and Hercules, which is significant not only because the roles of husband and wife are given to the same performer, but also because the two characters are both murderer and victim; indeed, Hercules literally takes away Megara's life, since her on-stage presence must be eliminated so that he can appear. The third actor is left with Juno (who in the Prologue states her intentions to persecute Hercules and then watch his demise), Lycus (who persecutes the family of Hercules), and Theseus (who observes the hero's demise). Thus, all three characters portrayed by this actor fulfill the same dramatic functions. The title-character in the *Phaedra* metatheatrically comments that her stepson, Hippolytus, closely resembles his father, Theseus (*Phaedra* 646-62). Of course he does! He is played by the same person. Again, these characters are not only related, but one takes the life of the other. In the *Agamemnon*, one actor is assigned all of the male roles, who also happen to all be related. Likewise, all of the male characters in the *Medea*, who not coincidentally are hostile towards the title-character, are given to the same actor. In the *Troades*, one actor plays Talthybius, Calchas, the Old Servant, Helen, and the Messenger, all of whom are messengers or facilitators. A second actor portrays Pyrrhus and Andromache, who have links to the supernatural entities in the play and who have vested interests in the sacrifices which are performed. The third actor is assigned the blocking foils Agamemnon, Ulixes and Hecuba. Finally, the *Thyestes* begins with a vindictive Fury compelling the unwilling ghost of Tantalus to bring disaster upon his House. Although there are several options, it would be highly symbolic if the actor who portrayed the Fury also plays the vengeful Atreus, while the Tantalus actor is assigned the role of Thyestes, who reluctantly returns to Mycenae and unknowingly consumes his own children.

Thus, through the convention of role distribution among a limited number of actors, Seneca is able to nonverbally reinforce familial relationships, emphasize murderers and victims, and show thematic connections between seemingly disparate characters. This practice carries with it some implications for performance. It provides strong evidence that Seneca had at least a fictive stage in mind, since it would be much easier for an audience to recognize significant role

sharing by seeing it in performance than by reading it on the page. Further, there must have been some technique, such as the use of masks, which allowed the characters to be distinguished. But at the same time, the audience must be able to discern which actor is playing which parts. The cleverness of having the Fury and Atreus portrayed by the same man would be lost if no one could tell that it was the same man. The means of this recognition are uncertain. Perhaps each actor wore an easily identifiable costume. Or maybe Seneca had in mind men who were physically distinctive. It is even possible that the characters played by a single actor would use similar gestures, postures, etc. But in order for the technique to be most effective, the audience must be able to recognize each actor while at the same time accepting that he is playing different parts.

Works Cited

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