

The Use of the Balcony in Senecan and Pseudo-Senecan Tragedy

The balcony (or at least the roof of the *skene* building) is used twice in the plays of Seneca *tragicus*. In each, the female title-character on the upper platform is separated from others on stage. In Act 2 of the *Phaedra*, the wife of Theseus appears after the upper doors of the palace have opened. She does subsequently come down to the stage floor where she reveals her shameful desire to her Nurse. Similarly, in the final act of the *Medea*, after slaughtering one son, the title-character ascends to the balcony in order to avoid Jason and the pursuing townspeople. Besides showing physical distance, movement to or from the balcony allows the tragedian to draw attention to a character's changing status. When Phaedra descends to the stage floor, she gives up the high ground, both literally and figuratively, physically allowing the audience to witness her fall from virtue, as she prepares to succumb to her unnatural lust for her step-son. In a reversal of this process, Medea's ascent demonstrates her superiority to Jason, both morally and physically. Her abandonment of mortal morality by slaying her children, by leaving her unfaithful husband and by flying away in her grandfather's chariot is illustrated by her desertion of the stage floor.

Juno in the *Hercules Furens* may be an exception which proves the rule. In the soliloquy which begins the play, the erstwhile queen of the gods complains that her rightful place in the heavens has been usurped by the various mothers of demigods. The actor playing her stands on the stage floor, not on the *machina* as one familiar with the conventions of fifth-century Athenian tragedy might expect for a goddess, illustrating her altered status, differing from Phaedra only in that the audience did not see Juno before her fall.

Scholarly opinion differs concerning the usage of the balcony in of lines 363-442 of the incomplete *Phoenissae* (e.g., Fitch (2002), Frank (1995), Kohn (2013) and Sutton (1986)). In this passage, Jocasta, her daughter and an attendant observe the two armies, as if from above. In the following section (lines 443-664), the queen seems to have left her previous vantage point and confronts her sons. It is unclear whether the former episode takes place on a balcony. But if it does, then once again we have a character physically giving up both spatial and moral superiority.

Finally, the first episode of the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* likewise has led to disagreement among scholars. Octavia and her Nurse are clearly both on stage, but in different dramatic places. Kragelund (2016) and Wiseman (2008) both suggest that the audience would accept that the characters are dramatically separated if they stand in specific symbolic areas. I find this to be somewhat anachronistic, there being no evidence for such a practice in Classical theatre. Kragelund further proposes that Octavia in wheeled in on the *exostra*; but this also seems contrary to conventional usage. Instead, I agree with Boyle (2008), that the queen is "aloft," i.e. on a balcony. Much like in the *Phaedra*, this use of the balcony graphically shows Octavia's fall from grace, moving from wife to ex-wife. The audience observes the soon-to-be former queen give up her unique position – for she is the only character in the drama to use the balcony – and assume a status equal to her Nurse. Subsequently, she will be seen to be outside the palace, a move symbolizing a second change from humiliated divorcee to condemned captive.

We see, then, that the use (or absence) of the balcony in Roman drama graphically shows a change in status for female characters.

Works Cited

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