

Seneca Tragicus, Seneca Tragoedus: Seneca's transformation in Tacitus' *Annales*

It has for some time been accepted that historiographers highlight the theme of theatricality in their accounts of Nero's reign (Bartsch, 1994). It has also been noted that in Tacitus' account of the last Julio-Claudian emperor, one of Tacitus' most tragedy-informed narratives in the *Annales* (Santoro L'Hoir, 2006), Seneca does not use language reminiscent of his own tragic corpus in his speeches (Woodman, 2010). On the other hand, Ker has shown that it is possible in accounts of Seneca outside of Tacitus' *Annales* to trace a tragic arc of Seneca's life in which he "decline[s] from tragedian to tragic character...a tragic reversal in its own right" (Ker, 2009). Tacitus' account of the reign of Nero, in other words, lends particular importance to the theme of tragedy and theatricality, but these same themes have not been deployed in analyzing the character of Seneca, the contemporary master of Roman drama. In this paper, I aim to show that such a reading as Ker's is ultimately indebted to Tacitus' portrayal of Seneca's life in the imperial court of Nero. It is my claim that in the beginning of Nero's reign, Tacitus portrays Seneca like a director giving instructions to Nero, a fledgling actor who performs the role assigned to him; as Nero matures, however, there is a role-reversal, as Seneca is forced to play whatever role his former pupil assigns to him.

Seneca's role in the *Annales* as a director for Nero is clear from the young emperor's first entry onto the stage of Roman politics. In his first public speech (*Ann.* 13.3-4), Tacitus says that the audience knew that Nero was speaking Seneca's words and not his own (*oratio a Seneca composita*). Indeed, Tacitus describes the speech, in commemoration of Claudius' death, as a performance, *imitamentum*, a word which regularly conjures the theater in Latin (*TLL* 7.1.430.25). Tacitus' explanation for Nero's need of Seneca is telling, for it is Seneca who understands what is pleasing to an audience (*fuit illi viro ingenium...temporis eius auribus*

accommodatum). Nero, however good an actor he may be, needs Seneca to provide material which will be welcomed by his audience.

Another instance in which Tacitus portrays Seneca and Nero like a director and actor is in Nero's courting of the slave girl Acte (*Ann.* 13.13). Seneca plays the role of a director, assigning someone the role (*simulatio*) of a lover to cover up Nero's identity. The scene itself, furthermore, is reminiscent of the plots of mime, which focus on the theme of ζηλοτυπία, defined as a combination of jealousy and rage (Fantham, 1986). The idea of jealousy is introduced at the opening of the episode, implied by the word *aemula*, "rival." Agrippina's raging (*fremere*), furthermore, is described as *muliebriter*, for which the safest translation might be "jealously" (cf. *Ann.* 2.43: *aemulatione muliebri*). The incestuous undertones of Agrippina considering Acte an *aemula* also activate a further typical plot device of the mime: the love triangle.

It has been noted that in his death in the *Annales*, Seneca performs the role of a Socrates (Auffarth, 2009). In this reading, Seneca is portrayed as playing the role assigned to him by Nero, who condemns his former tutor to death. In this scene (*Ann.* 15.64), Tacitus reveals the arc of Seneca's life from director to tragic actor. Seneca was not given any funerary rites as he himself had instructed long before (*ita codicillis praescripserat*). Tacitus reveals that the poison with which Seneca kills himself had been ready for some time (*provisum pridem*). This prop, as it were, for the unfolding tragedy reveals both sides of Seneca: his role as actor playing the part of Socrates and his role as tragic playwright, writing in advance the circumstances of his own death. Tacitus leaves us, then, with a juxtaposition of Seneca's two roles, thereby highlighting the tragic arc of the Tacitean Seneca's life.

Bibliography

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