

## Tragic Language and Successful Spectatorship in Seneca's Tragedies.

This paper aims to analyze Seneca's tragedies from a meta-dramatic perspective in order to draw conclusions on the nature of the tragic language and, especially, on the issue of tragic spectatorship.

It is especially in the course of the past decade that numerous scholars have come to recognize Senecan plays as a highly meta-dramatic form of theatre, and, as a consequence, an increasing number of scholars has resorted to a meta-dramatic approach to the tragedies in order to shed light on issues of tragic poetics and tragic response.

Major contributions regarding these issues have been provided by Alessandro Schiesaro (2003) and Cedric Littlewood (2004). Their meta-dramatic studies have singled out and analyzed two of the most recurrent elements of Seneca's tragedies, namely their tendency to present characters viewing and being viewed, as well as characters deceiving and being deceived. The occurrence in the texts of terminology and images that suggests a parallel between real life and stage has led Schiesaro and Littlewood to use the interactions between certain characters and their internal audience as a model for the interaction between the tragic poet and his own audience.

Concerning tragic language, both have convincingly concluded that the language of the characters performing "authorial roles" (such as Atreus and Medea e.g) is deceiving, and resorts to allusions and double-entendres that their respective tragic victims fail to understand. On viewership, Littlewood (2004) has claimed that by presenting people reacting differently to the creation and performance of a tragic *nefas*, Seneca displays his awareness of the fact that tragic spectacle could trigger different reactions from the audience. Alessandro Schiesaro (2003) had come to a similar conclusion, and stated that "Senecan tragedy can often be seen to dramatize the

emotional quandaries of spectatorship,” but overall concluded that it never seems to indicate a clear model of audience response.

Whereas I agree with Schiesaro and Littlewood that the plays mirror different types of spectators (from sadistic, to sympathetic and emotional), in this paper, instead, I will argue that the plays, even while mirroring different possible audience’s reactions, suggest and perhaps even encourage a detached and rational reading of the events displayed on stage, a reading that Martha Nussbaum (1993) labeled “critical spectatorship,” and that in her article she proved being practiced and encouraged by the Stoics.

In arguing my point, I am going to focus my attention on some of the dramatic interactions, such as those between Phaedra and the nurse in *Phaedra*, Ulysses and Andromache in *Troades*, for, these interactions (by displaying an internal audience questioning the truthfulness of facts and statements voiced on stage) seem to mirror the type of “critical spectatorship” that, according to Nussbaum’s reconstruction (Nussbaum, 1993), the Stoics hoped for. Moreover, by looking at the *Oedipus* and Cassandra’s prophetic utterances in the *Agamemnon*, and expanding on Schiesaro and Littlewood’s observations, I will explore what specific traits make the tragic language deceiving.

On the basis of my arguments, I will eventually suggest that mainly three elements might have discouraged Seneca’s external audience to fully identify with any of the characters on stage, or from uncritically and irrationally accepting any of their statements: first, the emphasis on the deceptive nature of the tragic language – a characteristic continually paraded in the tragedies; second, the persistent breach of the dramatic illusion operated by characters that, while playing their dramatic role, constantly point at the literary nature of their identity and of their *labor*; and

– last, but by no means least – the example set by some characters who react rationally and critically to the statements made by other characters who perform authorial roles.

Since, in his discussion on how one should listen to the poets, Plutarch (16d-e) states that, “he who always remembers and keeps clearly in mind the sorcery of the poetic art in dealing with falsehood...will not suffer any dire effects or even acquire any false beliefs,” I will conclude that, the ostentation of the deceptiveness of the tragic language, the occurrence of examples of “critical spectatorship”, and the reminder to the audience of the artificiality of the tragic spectacle, might speak to Seneca’s attempt to encourage his audience into adopting a rational approach to the tragedies, in accordance with the Stoic guidelines on poetic readership.

#### Bibliography

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