

We All Fall Down: Cyclical Dramatic Structures in Seneca's *Troades*

Scholars of Senecan tragedy cannot escape the question of performance, and Seneca's *Troades* has not come out of this battle unburnt. A peculiar tragedy, *Troades*, a peculiar tragedy, is perhaps most notable for its disjointed narrative characterized by abrupt transitions, unclear progression of time, and contradictory scenes. Scholars who use *Troades* as evidence against the performance of Senecan tragedy argue that the incongruous pattern of events strips the tragedy of dramatic coherence (Tarrant 1978; Wilson 1983) and that the episodic nature of the narrative, if performed, would fragment audience attention (Fantham 1982; Lawall 1982). In contrast, those in favor of performance have embraced the *Troades*' irregularities, suggesting that the tragedy's dramatic action is organized by a triad of "concentric circles", emphasizing broad themes and motifs (Boyle 1994; Keulen 2001).

In this presentation, I expand upon on the work of Boyle and Keulen, arguing that dramatic continuity in Seneca's *Troades* comes not from a traditional five-act structure (Tarrant 1978; Kohn 2013) but rather from a series of seven pairs of scenes. These pairs can be conceptualized as nearly symmetrically arranged narrative "rings": as each event unfolds, a ring "opens" and is then "closed" by a later, parallel event that shares striking similarities in language, themes, and *topoi*. Understanding the organizational scheme in this way accounts for many of the structural ambiguities described in previous scholarship. Moreover, by organizing the narrative in this way, Seneca not only creates an underlying cyclic rhythm that reinforces the play's central themes—the recurrent nature of history, of life and death, and of waxing and waning power (Fantham 1982; Boyle 1994; Keulen 2001; Shelton 2016)—but also provides a sophisticated dramatic framework suitable for performance. In addition to philological evidence

attesting to these rings, my presentation includes clear graphic representation of the structures I describe.

Efforts to make sense of Senecan tragedy and the question of performance often turn to its literary precedents. There exist obvious connections between the Senecan dramatic corpus and fifth century Greek tragedy (e.g., characters, plots). Less obvious are its connections to post-Classical dramatic forms, such as New Comedy and Roman comedy (Tarrant 1978). Besides those noted by Tarrant (e.g., asides, choral techniques, suspension of dramatic time), the composition of the *Troades* seems to have been influenced by another dramatic form: mirror scenes. When a scene is resolved or recalled (i.e., “mirrored”) by its doublet, the audience is invited to appreciate the parallels and contemplate the differences highlighted by the scenes’ similarities (Taplin 1978). As a sample analysis, one narrative ring deals with Polyxena’s prophesied sacrifice (168-202) and its fulfillment (1056-117). Although both scenes begin and end abruptly, through their shared imagery of shaking trees (173-4; 1082-3), fearful audiences (168; 1136-7; 1143), and transitional environments (171-172; 197-199; 1142), audience members are reminded of the initial scene and prompted to consider the liminality and vulnerability of Polyxena’s character as she evolves from a *desponsa* maiden (191) into a mature *pronuba* (1133). Rather than detracting from dramatic coherence, the mirrored elements of these scenes add a layer of complexity to audience response. Each scene is stronger and takes on new meaning when its doublet is staged. Likewise, when all the scenes have doublets, the entire tragedy takes on new meaning.

The abundance of parallelisms and the nearly symmetrically arranged pairs of scenes ultimately demands a more sophisticated explanation than has been offered by prior scholarship. Beyond reinforcing its cyclic themes, understanding the organizational scheme as several

overlapping rings formed by mirrored scenes elucidates its structural ambiguities. Though the integrity of individual scenes is prioritized over a traditional, linear narrative progression, Seneca's pairing of scenes has precedent as an accepted dramatic form that enriches the meaning of the individual scenes and the tragedy as a whole.

Bibliography

Boyle, A. J. 1994. *Seneca's Troades: Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary*. Leeds: Francis Cairns.

Fantham, E. 1982. *Seneca's Troades: A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Keulen, A. J. 2001. *L. Annaeus Seneca Troades: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill.

Kohn, T. D. 2013. *The Dramaturgy of Senecan Tragedy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Lawall, G. 1982. "Death and Perspective in Seneca's "Troades"." *The Classical Journal* 77, no. 3: 244-52.

Shelton, J. 2016. "The Fall of Troy in Seneca's Troades." In *The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean: Commemoration in Literature, Folk-song, and Liturgy*, 183-211.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taplin, O. 1978. *Greek Tragedy in Action*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Tarrant, R. J. 1978. "Senecan Drama and Its Antecedents." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 82: 213-63.

Wilson, M. 1983. "The Tragic Mode of Seneca's Troades." In *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*. Edited by A. J. Boyle, 27-60. Berwick: Ramus.