

Identifying the Epistolary in Seneca's Tragedies

Genre, for the Romans, was a flexible notion and consequently, overlaps and intersections can be identified between different forms of ancient writing (Rimmell 2007). Seneca's tragedies demonstrate this flexibility in their intersection of philosophy, rhetorical writing, and dramatic context (Kohn 2013). Using Altman's six polarities of epistolarity (distance, trust, writer and reader, creation of self and the space, closure, and coherence) and drawing from her approach to the epistolary novel, I demonstrate the intersections between dramatic and epistolary writing (Altman 1982). First, I use the divergences Seneca made from Euripides' *Hippolytus* in *Phaedra* to demonstrate his deliberate employment of letter-like speech in lieu of actual letters. Then, concentrating on Hera's monologue in *Hercules Furens*, I employ a combination of close reading and Altman's theory to show how Seneca manipulates and deploys the conventions of theatre and epistolary writing to achieve specific effects on his audience.

Hera's direct address in the prologue opens up a letter like communication with the audience. However, the function of her speech, and her subsequent absence from the rest of the play, deprives the audience of a way to respond with any opinion or criticism of her plan. This is a benefit of letters, the ability to confess or confide something with the guaranteed impossibility of an immediate response. The distance created by letter-like discourse is also a function of theatre, which creates a similarly imagined distance between speaker and listener. Perhaps at first, when the audience could expect Hera to return and speak with another character the monologue could be perceived as a piece of a narrative. However, as the audience comes to

realize that Hera will never speak again, her words become more epistolary in nature, both more spontaneous and unresolved.

Having examined the letter-like quality of Hera's monologue, I then move to Seneca's *Phaedra*. Seneca's use of Euripidean tragedy allows a reader to compare, for example, Seneca's *Phaedra* with Euripides' *Hippolytus* and examine the ways in which Seneca has altered the plot or production to suit his own style and goals. While the climax and tragic downfall of Euripides' *Hippolytus* hinges on Phaedra's letter blaming her stepson for her demise, *Phaedra* contains no such letter. Instead, Seneca has Phaedra deceive Theseus while still alive, and use as proof Hippolytus' letter that he left behind after refusing to kill her. At first glance, this deliberate omission of the letter plot device appears disappointing. The fact that Seneca seems to have gone out of his way to exclude Euripides' letter could defy an attempt to read epistolary out of Senecan tragedy. However, the speech that Phaedra gives in place of her letter and suicide makes a compelling case for Seneca's use of letter-like writing in his tragedies. By omitting the letter from Euripides' version in favor of passionate speech, Seneca allows Phaedra to speak for herself and makes the recipients of her emotional plea not just Theseus but the whole audience.

In sum, I demonstrate that Seneca moves deftly between the two genres and sometimes blurs the distinctions between them. This kind of genre-mixing ultimately leaves the reader/watcher/listener unsure of their relationship to the goddess and her aims. Using this kind of analysis I show that the contradictions inherent to a letter, which Seneca knew well as a frequent letter writer, are found in his dramatic works and contribute to the complicated notion of isolation that Hera presents in her monologue. The interplay of epistolarity and tragedy in Seneca's *Phaedra* and *Hercules Furens* confirm that Seneca used features of genre as literary devices to be deployed rather than as roadmaps to be followed.

Bibliography

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