The Timelessness of the Parthians in Senecan Tragedy

Isolated references to Parthia and the Parthians occur in most of the tragedies attributed to Seneca, occurring most frequently in the choral odes among catalogues of other exoticized places and peoples. This paper will examine the portrayal of the Parthians in Senecan tragedy as a case study for considering the way that non-Roman cultures and nations figure into the temporality of Roman tragedy. I use the word "temporality" here to refer to the way that tragedy as a genre structures and interacts with concepts of time. Extant scholarly discussion of the significance of references to Parthia in Senecan tragedy has generally emphasized the establishment of the order in which the tragedies were written (for an overview, *cf*. Nisbet, 2008). Other scholarship discusses Parthia in the context of the geography of Senecan tragedy, its aesthetics, and relevance to the Roman empire (Cattin, 1963; Grant, 2000). This paper considers, instead, the way that the temporality of Roman tragedy treats the non-Roman periphery in light of its Roman context.

First, I outline the way that Parthians of Senecan Tragedy are essentially reducible to a series of discrete traits: they are associated with geographic marginality and local conflict (*Thy*. 462, 603; *HO* 161) and are one of the nations, along with the Medes and Arabs, from which Medea derives her poisons (*Med*. 710). More frequently, though, the Parthians are associated with archery and, especially, the Parthian shot maneuver (*Oed.* 118, *Phoen*. 248, *Thy*. 384), a common *topos* that has clear relevance to 1st century BCE Roman history (Töchterle, *ad loc.*). These depictions of Parthia and the Parthians suggest that the Parthians of Senecan Tragedy are most accurately recognized as the (post-Seleucid) Arsacid Empire, not the *Parthoi* that appear as minor Persian allies in Herodotus: the Parthians that appear in Senecan tragedy *are* the Parthians

of early imperial Rome. Essentially, the Parthia of Senecan tragedy lacks any sense of temporality that can be separated from the embedded idea of a future Rome.

Next, I use Walter Benjamin's critique of historicist formulations of progress to argue in this paper that Senecan tragedy conceives of radically different temporalities for the Parthians and the Romans. By projecting a homogenized, Orientalized "timelessness" onto the Parthians of the quasi-past, the Parthians are set up as an unchanging, constant presence that serves as a background to Roman progress. One way of reading the timelessness attributed to the Parthians might situate this phenomenon within Boyle's notion of the palimpsestic Senecan tragedy (Boyle 2008, 205-208), framing the appearance of the Parthians in Senecan tragedy as a neutral feature of the way that Seneca's tragedies intersperse Greek narratives with Roman elements. By projecting Rome's contemporary foes back into a chronologically ambiguous, Greek before-time, however, Senecan tragedy erases the possibility of any development, genesis, or essential change in Parthia or the Parthians: they are inextricably bound up in what Benjamin describes as "empty, homogenous time," a time against which Roman progress is prefigured.

While Senecan tragedy is not set in chronological or historical time, but a mythologized past, by projecting the Arsacid Empire into the fictionalized "before-time" of the *fabula palliata* and essentializing the Parthians to a series of discrete qualities, Senecan tragedy creates a setting that is simultaneously difficult to fit into a specific chronology and predicated on a historicizing approach to Roman progress and Rome as an entity that has yet to come. Senecan tragedy attributes fundamentally different temporalities to the Parthians and to Greek and Roman entities. Although, unlike the *Aeneid*, Senecan tragedy does not *explicitly* anticipate the coming of Rome, the situation of Parthia and other non-Roman cultures within "empty, homogenous time" creates a distinction between non-Roman timelessness and Roman progress. This case

study highlights how non-Roman cultures are set up in Roman tragedy as an static, unchanging presence onto which Roman progress can be mapped.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn, 255-269. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.

Cattin, Aurèle. "La Géographie Dans Les Tragédies De Sénèque." *Latomus* 22, no. 4 (1963): 685-703.

Boyle, A.J. *Roman Tragedy*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Grant, Mark. "Seneca's Tragic Geography." *Latomus* 59, no. 1 (2000): 88-95.

Nisbet, R.G.M. “The Dating of Seneca’s Tragedies, with Special Reference to *Thyestes*.” In *Seneca*, edited by John G. Fitch, 348-371. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Töchterle, Karlheinz. *Oedipus: Kommentar mit Einleitung, Text und Übersetzung*. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1994.