

The Performance of Seneca's Tragedies

by R.A. Faber

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, more commonly referred to as Seneca, lived from c. 4 BC to 65 AD. Belonging to a wealthy equestrian family, Seneca came to Rome from southern Spain early in his life. There he studied rhetoric and philosophy, in the latter discipline being influenced especially by Stoicism. Later, Seneca was the tutor and then advisor to the young Nero, who would become emperor in 54. Seneca's influence was extensive at first, especially when Nero permitted experienced politicians to guide him. Indeed, Seneca is often remembered as a statesman and philosopher; but he was also a playwright whose tragedies are receiving increasing attention.

Eight plays have been ascribed to Seneca without dispute. These tragedies are based in part upon Greek models, including the *Medea* by Euripides and Oedipus by Sophocles. But they are affected by Latin tragedies, and also by the epic poetry of Ovid. In keeping with the tastes of the time, Seneca's plays are marked by a fascination for recounting vivid, graphic events, for lengthy depictions of human suffering, and an exaggerated style. The dramatic episodes contain pointed speeches, while the choral passages comprise general reflections.

One question that has plagued the study of the plays for the last two centuries is whether they were actually performed on the stage. Unfortunately there is very little external evidence for the staging of plays during Seneca's lifetime, and the references to public performances are few and insubstantial. Thus scholars are forced to draw as much evidence as is possible from the text of the plays themselves.

For some readers the shocking nature of certain scenes, the bombastic tone, and the disproportionately large number of (lengthy) speeches, seemed to suggest that the plays were never intended to be performed on the public stage. Others, comparing Seneca's plays to those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, argued that the conventions of fifth century Greek tragedy were not being followed, and concluded that the plays were nothing more than literary exercises. This observation, however, suffers from the fact that very little evidence survives for the conventions of first century Roman drama - conventions which no doubt influenced Seneca.

Another group of scholars has argued that Seneca was influenced by the schools of declamation that were so influential in the first century. They hold that the apparent rhetorical excesses and the lack of theatrical effect in the plays point to their origins in the Roman educational system. Thus the view was developed that Seneca's tragedies were intended for public recitation by a single speaker. Following the norms of tragedy loosely, the plays were meant to be performed by an effective speaker. It did not matter that the scenes were disjointed, that the choral passages were irrelevant to the 'action'; the goal was to score rhetorical points, to appeal to the listener, and to move the audience by the power of persuasion. While it is true that Seneca's plays appear episodic, are marked with an overly brilliant style, and are characterized by descriptions, it should be noted that these features were appreciated by the people of the time, and so permeate the literature of the post-Augustan period generally. In other words, the aesthetic qualities of the plays cannot be used as arguments for or against public performance.

Indeed, the theory that Seneca's plays were intended for theatrical performance continues to have its supporters. They point to the dramatic techniques of the play,

techniques that were common to other performances of the time. Many of the scenes are especially effective when they are performed. Some critics take a 'middle' position: Seneca did not compose entire plays for performance, but did envisage certain scenes to be staged. For certain portions of the texts have greater theatrical impact than others. After all, there had been a tradition, going back to the fourth century BC, of staging excerpts of tragedies, and Seneca's plays may have been composed for such performance. At any rate, some think, Seneca's plays may have been written for performance in the private villas of wealthy Romans. There remains a number of well-respected scholars who hold the view that Seneca's plays were intended for limited performance before a private audience. On this view, the tragedies would have been recited in a more or less dramatic fashion. In this way, the argument runs, we can explain the contradictory and vague character of the chorus, understand the episodic nature of the scenes, and appreciate the immediate impact of the rhetorical arguments.

Whatever the answer to the question about the performance of Seneca's tragedies, we may observe that scholars will continue to examine the surviving evidence. The problem is a happy one, for it forces students of drama of the period to read the texts even more closely, to look for evidence of staging, to examine the theatrical nature of the scenes and choral passages. An increasing number of students is studying the literary qualities of the plays. Despite the limited evidence, also the staging of plays in the first and second centuries is being studied afresh. For Seneca's tragedies the outcome will surely be a better understanding of the thematic, literary, and dramatic concerns.