CLASURON

The Swansea University
Classics, Ancient History, and Egyptology
Online Student Research Journal

Issue #2: Roman Theatre and Spectacle

This journal is published by students and staff of
the Department of Classics, Ancient History, and Egyptology at Swansea University.
The online version of this journal
can be found at https://projects.swan.ac.uk/ancient-world/?page_id=8.
The journal features first-class work by Swansea University students.

Issue #2

Roman Theatre and Spectacle

CLC314

"This issue contains a selection of essays from the honours module CLC214/314, Roman Theatre and Spectacle. Covering a diverse range of genres and a broad span of time (from c. 200 BC – AD 500), the module offers a survey of Roman performance culture, paying particular attention to how and why Roman dramatic traditions differed from their Greek predecessors. In addition to reading numerous play texts, students in this module study the material elements of performance: Roman theatre architecture; actors' costumes and masks; stage properties; gladiatorial equipment; pantomime costumes and instruments. The module premiered – as it were – in 2015/16, and the results were fantastic! This issues of *Clasuron* features two of the very best essays: Elizabeth Moore on the vexed question of whether Seneca's plays were written for the stage and Dominic Stoddard on Terence's sophisticated play with gender roles in the *Eunuchus*. I hope you will enjoy reading these pieces as much as I did. Many thanks are due to all the students who made this module such a success, and to the student editors of *Clasuron*, as well, for their tireless efforts in bringing this particular issue to fruition." - Dr E. Bexley, module co-ordinator.

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Were Seneca's plays written for the stage?

By Elizabeth Moore

The question of whether Seneca wrote his plays for the stage or not has long been a point of debate among modern scholars, with the lack of contemporary evidence for the staging of the plays, and indeed any evidence that Seneca himself intended for his plays to be staged, making a decisive conclusion hard to reach. Due to this lack of proof that Seneca's plays were staged in antiquity, the texts themselves must be examined to find evidence to support the arguments either for or against Seneca writing for the stage. Many historians, such as Fantham, have argued that there are a number of features in the plays which would have made staging in antiquity a challenge, suggesting instead that Seneca had another medium in mind, namely the growing Roman custom of plays being recited to a select audience either by the author himself or by another employed speaker. Others however, like Marshall and Davis, have shown that not only were these features not obstacles to staging the plays but that they made the goal of full-scale performance likely, and arguably even necessary. Indeed, a close examination of Seneca's texts reveals no obstacles towards staging that cannot be explained or overcome and instead reveals a dramatic potential to the dialogue and actions that, as Davis says, fairly demanded performance.[1]

One of the features throughout Seneca's plays is the lack of stage directions, which, it has been argued, would make staging them a problem as the actors would have no written cues for entrances or exits from the stage. An example of this is Pyrrhus in *Troades* who enters (999) and then exits a short time later (1003), leaving it unclear if Helen and Polyxena, also present on stage, go with him or exit at the end of the scene after the chorus has spoken (Seneca *Troades* 999-1055). Also, Hine discusses the scene in *Medea* where Medea herself

[1] Davis, (2003) 27.

enters and gives her soliloquy.[2] Medea does not acknowledge the presence of anyone else onstage but when the nurse speaks (150-1) it is clear she has heard Medea and so she must have entered either with Medea or during Medea's speech without cue (Seneca *Medea* 116-51). Fantham has argued that these ambiguities would confuse actors and producers.[3] However, this lack of explicit stage directions was not uncommon in antiquity. Indeed Davis has said that stage directions were almost always left implied rather than explicitly stated and that leaving them unspecified allowed the plays to be open to interpretation by the producer.[4] Besides, it would be wrong to say that Seneca gave no stage directions at all in his plays as a number of times a character's entrance or exit is clearly conveyed by the speech of the characters already onstage. For example, the entrance of Creon in the play *Medea* is clearly shown by Medea's words (Seneca *Medea* 177) as is Ulysses' entrance in *Troades* by Andromache (Seneca *Troades* 522). The use of this technique suggests that Seneca envisaged the staging of scenes such as these when writing his plays.

As well as the lack of explicit stage directions, explicit scene changes are also absent from Seneca's texts. Fantham has stated that a number of times scene changes are needed but not acknowledged in the texts, giving the example of act two in *Troades* where the scene of Talthybius and the chorus cannot occur in the same place as the following scene between Pyrrhus, Agamemnon and Calchas (Seneca *Troades* 164-408).[5] However, Marshall gives some possible solutions to this problem. He shows that Seneca may have envisaged a producer of a play using the movement of the chorus and the direction from which the characters enter and exit the stage to clearly convey to an audience where a location change occurs and in which direction. He shows also that Seneca uses what Marshall refers to as iconic characters who would act as anchors, only appearing in a certain scene location so that

[2] Hine, (2000) 130.
[3] Fantham, (1982) 37.
[4] Davis, (2003) 20.
[5] Fantham, (1982) 37.

when one of them was onstage the audience would know where the scene was located.[6] These solutions though could only be understood if the plays were performed onstage as they must be seen. This then suggests that Seneca was writing with a view to staging his plays or at least shows that the problem of no explicit scene changes within the texts was not insurmountable and so is not proof against the staging of Seneca's plays.

The presence of long monologues or asides, like the one given by Andromache in *Troades*, is another common feature of Senecan drama (Seneca *Troades* 642-62). It has been argued by Fantham that these long speeches would have made a staged performance of the plays static and undramatic as well as leave the other actors onstage with nothing to do for a period of time.[7] Conversely, Davis has argued that this is a modern view. For people used to the action of playwrights such as Shakespeare, Seneca's plays may seem dull but Davis has pointed out that they actually contain more action than some other popular plays in antiquity.[8] Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, for example, consisted mainly of long speeches but in the fifth century BC was performed to great success.[9] Seneca's plays, which contain scenes of horror and plenty of philosophical moralising, would not have seemed static at all in antiquity and would not have failed to appeal to a Roman theatre audience.[10] Moreover, Fantham has speculated that these long speeches could have been used to build characterisation.[11] A similar suggestion can then also be applied to another common feature of Seneca's plays; that of the fact that actions which would have been clearly visible to a watching audience are often described, such as the nurse's description of Medea's actions in the play *Medea* (Seneca

[6] Marshall, (2000) 44.
[7] Fantham, (1982) 44.
[8] Davis, (2003) 20-1.
[9] Davis, (2003) 20-1.
[10] Duckworth, (1952) 71.
[11] Fantham, (1982) 41.

Medea 380-6). Her actions do not need describing here as they can be seen but the added words would have improved the effect and power of the performance.[12]

The strongest argument against the staging of Seneca's plays is that many of the scenes would have proved impossible to stage as they included violent murders or suicides taking place onstage. The old argument that these scenes would have been too violent for the stage is unlikely as the Romans of this time were used to witnessing the brutality of gladiatorial shows and public executions and would have thought nothing of this level of violence onstage.[13] However, some, like Beare, advocating for a goal other than stage production, have said that the scenes such as Jocasta's suicide (Seneca *Oedipus* 1024-61) and that of Medea murdering her children (Seneca *Medea* 893-978) happening upon stage would have been unfeasible and unrealistic to a population accustomed to the entirely real violence of gladiatorial shows.[14] Nevertheless, these scenes have been successfully staged in modern times showing that their difficulties are not insurmountable. Beare himself suggests that dummies could have been used for a number of the murder scenes including that of Medea's children and Fitch explains that Jocasta's suicide in *Oedipus* could have been achieved through the use of a retractable sword and a blood bag, both of which are attested for in Seneca's time.[15] These scenes were clearly not impossible to stage and so are not proof that Seneca's objective when composing his plays was anything but full-scale stage production. There is one scene, though, that Fitch admits would have been difficult to perform onstage; that of the sacrifice scene in *Oedipus* (Seneca *Oedipus* 371-80). He reasons that, as many playwrights recited their works before staging them as a way of improving their work, this scene may have been included for recitation and then adapted for staging.[16]

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[12] Davis, (2003) 22.
[13] Costa, (1973) 5.
[14] Beare, (1965) 112.
[15] Beare, (1965) 112. ; Fitch, (2000) 9.
[16] Harrison, (2000) 138.

So far then an examination of Seneca's texts has provided no satisfactory evidence that he was not writing for the stage. Hine has stated that in antiquity all plays were seen as suitable for staging as long as they stuck to the technical requirements of stage production and there are no features of Seneca's plays which do not, suggesting that they were probably written with the intention for stage performance.[17] The fact that the earlier versions of these plays, upon which Seneca based his, were successfully staged in Athens and that Seneca's own plays were performed in the Elizabethan period reinforces this statement, as there is no reason why they then could not have been staged in Rome with the technology available.[18]

The strongest alternative put forward by those who argue against staging, such as Fantham, is that Seneca wrote his plays for recitation either by himself or another speaker.[19] However, if this was the case a number of new problems arise that cannot be easily resolved.

A number of times throughout Seneca's plays the speakers are not identified either by themselves or by others in the scene and we only find out later who is speaking by the subject matter of their speech, if at all.[20] In the play *Troades*, for example, Talthybius is not named either by himself or the chorus at the start of act two (Seneca *Troades* 164-202) and later Pyrrhus is only confidently identified with his use of the word *pater* (232) to describe Achilles during his speech, identifying himself as Achilles' son despite speaking for twenty nine lines before that (Seneca *Troades* 203-249). This problem can easily be overcome if the plays were intended to be staged as the costumes would clearly identify individual characters, but if Seneca did not mean for his plays to be performed on a stage there is no satisfactory solution.[21]

Some of the conversations between characters within Seneca's plays would also have proved difficult for recitation as the stichomythia, used in a number of places, would have

[17] Hine, (2000) 39.
[18] Davis, (2003) 20.
[19] Fantham, (2000) 18.
[20] Fantham, (1982) 46.
[21] Fantham, (1982) 46.

been difficult for a single narrator to perform. More than one speaker could have been employed but there is no evidence that this was the norm.[22] It seems unlikely that the fast-paced dialogues between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon (Seneca *Troades* 318-46) and Medea and the nurse (Seneca *Medea* 170-1) were written with a single speaker in mind and indeed would lose much of their power and effect on the audience if they were, suggesting that these scenes were meant for more than one speaker and so not for recitation.[23]

There are also a number of scenes within Seneca's plays which would only have been successful if they took place on a stage as they rely on the action which takes place within the scenes rather than the words. For example, only through seeing the actions performed can it be understood at what point in the text Medea murders the first child as there are several places where a listener might conclude that Medea had killed him (Seneca *Medea* 893-978). The same happens in *Thyestes* in which Atreus reveals to Thyestes the heads of his murdered children. The action is never verbalised but Thyestes realises that his children are dead (1006) so a listening audience would be left confused as to how he knows (Seneca *Thyestes* 970-1021). Mayer has argued that dumbshow could be used by the narrator to convey these crucial moments but, as Fitch says, this would be only second best at most.[24] Scenes like these ones would need to have been acted out onstage to be fully appreciated.

In conclusion then, an analysis of Seneca's plays shows that he was very likely writing for the purpose of staging his plays in a Roman theatre. There are no features of his writing that could not have been performed with the technology available in that period and the lack of stage directions, frequent long monologues and the descriptions of visible actions were actually common elements of theatrical technique in his time and not proof that Seneca was not writing for the stage.[25] The argument that he intended them for any other medium,

[22] Fantham, (1982) 47.
[23] Fantham, (1982) 47.
[24] Mayer, (2002) 98. ; Fitch (2000) 6.
[25] Fitch, (2000) 2-3.

namely recitation, creates a number of problems that cannot be easily resolved, such as characters not being verbally identified and many scenes requiring the visual aspects of a performance on a stage to be understood. Also, the recitation of works in antiquity was mainly employed as a way to improve a play before staging it and was merely preliminary to full-scale performance.[26] Seneca's tragedies required a stage to have been fully appreciated and so Seneca most likely had staging in mind when writing.

Elizabeth Moore, 791921

Roman Theatre and Spectacle (CLC314)

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How and to what effect does Terence play with gender roles in the Eunuchus?

By Dominic Stoddart

Terence's Eunuchus is an Ancient Roman Comedy, the events of which revolve around one character's decision to disguise himself as a eunuch in order to infiltrate a brothel and interact with a girl he has fallen in love with. Throughout the play, Terence plays with gender roles by reversing the contemporary characteristics of his male and female characters. The playwright also, chooses in some instances, to conform to stock character stereotypes however on other occasions ignores these stereotypes in order to play with the audience's expectations of gender. By contradicting the traditional gender roles within the comedy Terence adds to the already prevalent sense of confusion and chaos which can be observed within the Eunuchus.

First of all, let us examine the character Chaerea, the young man who pretends to be a eunuch and subsequently proceeds to rape Pamphila, which is described as "the central action of the play," (Brown, 2006). Chaerea asserts his masculinity through rape, an act which is brutally violent and places the rapist in a position of total dominance over their victim. Through his actions, Chaerea creates a dynamic between himself and Pamphila which is of the "aggressive-passive, dominant-submissive, me- Tarzan- you- Jane," nature (Herman, 1984). The character also makes allusions to the god Jupiter, who is renowned for his extramarital affairs and numerous rapes of humans and nymphs. When informing his friend Antipho of his recent interaction with Pamphila, Chaerea mentions a picture hanging from the wall which "showed how Jupiter once sent down a shower of gold into Danae's lap, as the story goes," (Eunuchus, L584). "Chaerea, as a viewer of the painting, discovers that the god, who secretly comes into Danae's bosom in the form of golden rain, plays the role he intends to play,"

(Frangoulidis, 1994). The explicit link between rape and Jupiter coupled with his status as the most powerful deity seems to suggest that by behaving like Jupiter, Chaerea feels that he can emulate his power.

However, as is the case for many of the characters within the Eunuchus, Terence distorts the expectation for his male and female characters. One way in which Chaerea is portrayed as being effeminate, is that for the majority of the play he pretends to be a eunuch. Eunuch's were not considered to be men which is made evident when Chaerea reveals that the prostitute Thais ordered him, "that no man was to go near her, and she ordered me to not to leave her side," (Eunuchus, L575). Also whilst disguised as a Eunuch, Chaerea is forced to spend the majority of his time within Thais' brothel, surrounded by the company of women in what can be described as the feminine stage space. Another way in which Terence presents the audience with Chaerea's effeminacy is through his emotional outbursts regarding his feelings towards Pamphila. When the audience is first introduced to Chaerea, he is disoriented and when he is asked as to where he has been, the young man responds "Me? I really don't know- I don't know where I've come from or where I'm going to; I've completely lost track of myself!" (Eunuchus, L308). Later on in the play, Chaerea expresses his wish to marry Pamphila where he exclaims "I shall die if I don't get her as my wife!" (Eunuchus, L885). In Ancient Rome, men were commended for behaving in a stoic manner and refraining from becoming over emotional. Here Chaerea's behaviour is totally dictated by his feelings for Pamphila and as a result can be considered to be feminine.

Chaerae's elder brother, Phaedria, is similarly overwhelmed by his affection for Thais to the extent that he constantly reminds the audience of the emotional torment he is suffering. In the opening scene of the play, during an exchange with Parmeno, Phaedria exclaims "Now I

realize that she's wicked and I'm miserable. I'm sick of her, but I'm on fire with love; I'm dying… and I don't know what to do!" (Eunuchus, L70). Phaedria finds himself caught in two minds; on the one hand he is angered by what he feels is mistreatment at the hands of his lover yet he cannot help but be "on fire with love." Phaedria's opinion and actions towards Thais throughout the early exchanges of the play are quite inconsistent. At one point he directly expresses his discontent towards Thais when he berates her by saying "You bitch! Do you expect me to answer at all when you behave like that?" (Eunuchus, L153). Parmeno even encourages Phaedria's behaviour stating "At last you've got properly upset: you're a man," (Eunuchus, L156). However moments later he agrees to leave town for a couple of days whilst she spends time with another of her lovers as he concedes, "Well, if it's for two days. – But don't let it turn into twenty days," (Eunuchus, L182). Despite initially displaying some resilience Phaedria is unable to resist Thais' request, with his inability to reject her suggesting that he is in a servile relationship and establishes her position of superiority. Both Phaedria and his brother Chaerea find themselves in the stereotypical comedic role of the young man in love, a role which in itself is quite feminine as the character finds themselves blinded by their love and overly emotional as a result.

Terence even elects to add feminine qualities to the character Thraso, whom one would presume to be the most masculine given his occupation as a soldier. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Thraso does include some masculine traits. For example, his manner of speaking is fairly brusque and simple as opposed to the elaborate dialogue attributed to characters such as Thais and Parmeno. During a conversation with the parasite Gnatho, Thraso's responses are often limited to singular words or very short phrases such as "Its mine," (Eunuchus, L428) and "I do indeed," (Eunuchus, L438). As a result of his restrictive style of speech Thraso is ineffective at expressing his emotions and therefore does not appear to be overly emotional.

As the play draws to a climax, Thraso arrives at Thais' brothel with a group of men with the intention of attacking the inhabitants within. After arriving at the house, Thraso delegates orders to the men with him, "Simalio, Donax, Syriscus, follow me! First I'll storm the house," (Eunuchus, 772). Thraso displays the aggression and leadership one would expect from a soldier, yet at the same time when one considers the details of the situation, the perception of the character can be significantly altered. In fact the whole state of affairs is an "elaborate scene of rich farce," (Norwood, 1965) and comic as a result. Instead of laying siege to an enemy encampment containing trained soldiers, Thraso leads his comrades in an assault against a group of untrained women, stating that "I'll beat up the woman" (Eunuchus, 777). Gnatho points out that Thraso takes up a position behind his men when he addresses the audience. "There's wisdom for you; in drawing up his men, he's chosen a safe position for himself," (Eunuchus, 781). The soldier's decision to place himself at the rear of the party reveals his cowardice. One of the members of Thraso's party joins the group equipped solely with a sponge (Eunuchus, 779) further emphasising the ludicrous nature of this attack and simultaneously undermining Thraso's position as a dangerous antagonist.

Thraso is the third male character who behaves in a radical manner in order to win the affections of a woman. He too is in love with Thais and he showers her with lavish gifts, which is made evident when he asks during their first on stage interaction "Do you love me for the lyre-player I gave you?" (Eunuchus, 454). Gnatho sheds light on the servile relationship between Thraso and Thais retorting that "Hercules was Omphale's slave, wasn't he?" (Eunuchus, 1027). Gnatho compares Thraso and Thais' relationship to Hercules' enslavement to Omphale which he undergoes in order to be delivered from an illness he suffers "as a result of his murder of Iphitos" (Apollodorus, 2.6). After Thraso's attack on the brothel is foiled he returns to the house saying that "I've come to surrender to Thais and do what she commands," (Eunuchus, 206). His willingness "to make any sacrifice of dignity or

money if only he may be near her." (Norwood, 1965) further demonstrates Thraso's dependence on and subservience to Thais.

After examining the ways in which Terence bestows feminine characteristics upon his male characters, it seems necessary to observe how his female characters display masculine behaviour. The principal female character of the Eunuchus is Thais, the courtesan who is subject of both Phaedria and Thraso's love. As previously mentioned Thais is the dominant figure in not one, but both of these relationships. Both men present her with expensive gifts, with those from Phaedria including "a slave girl from Ethiopia," (Eunuchus, 164) and the titular eunuch. Thais is also able to command these men to behave as she pleases as Phaedria leaves for the countryside under her instruction whilst Thraso explicitly states that he will act exactly as she commands him. As Thraso and his group of scoundrels descend upon her residence, Thais takes control of the situation by instructing another man, Chremes, on how to behave during his confrontation with Thraso. She consoles him saying that "There's no need for helpers, Chremes. All you need say is that she's your sister and that you lost her when she was little…" (Eunuchus, 765). Thais continues to direct Chremes informing him that he should "keep your nerve while you're speaking… pull up your cloak," (Eunuchus, 769) highlighting her natural ability to lead, which is so strong that she constantly finds herself in charge or in a position of authority over men.

Pythias is Thais' second in command and is another female character who possesses such so-called male traits. Pythias is outraged at Chaerea's rape of Pamphila and aggressively confronts Phaedria about his apparent rapist eunuch as she tells him "Why don't you buzz off where you deserve to go?" (Eunuchus, 651). She goes as far as to violently threaten Chaerea when she warns that "I'm going to let fly at his hair," (Eunuchus, 859) exposing a belligerence and capability for violence which other male characters, such as Thraso and Chremes, do not possess. Pythias also enjoys tricking Parmeno as a punishment for

suggesting Chaerea dress up as a eunuch by expressing her desire "to be able to torture him the way I'd like to," (Eunuchus, 919) emphasising her wish for vengeance, another character trait which is typically male.

With the inclusion of these two characters, Terence is able to challenge the stereotypical roles of females in the Roman Comedy. Thais' role as a courtesan is "far more a matter of social status than of morals," (Norwood, 1965) for as opposed to being a conniving, treacherous woman, as prostitutes were frequently portrayed. She displays genuine affection towards Phaedria and her efforts to restore Pamphila to her family demonstrate a nobility and goodness within the character. In the scene where Pythias deceives Parmeno "our poet dextrously turns upside down the traditional conception of the rascally slave," (Norwood, 1965), a role that is nearly always occupied by an intelligent, witty male slave. Terence in a move that mirrors the behaviour of Pythias, tricks the audience into thinking that it is Parmeno who fulfils this comedic role when in reality it is he who actually falls victim to the trickery of Pythias.

One of Terence's key motivations behind his decision to play with gender roles in that, in doing so, the playwright is able to contribute to the already prominent theme of confusion. Throughout the play, characters are continuously confusing situations or being tricked into behaving a certain way. An example of this can be seen when Chremes doubts Thais' motivations for contacting him, instead thinking that "this Thais is clearly going to do me a lot of harm… she was cunningly trying to weaken my defences," (Eunuchus, 510). Chaerea not only deceives the courtesans but additionally confuses his friends Antipho with his Eunuch's disguise who wonders "Who's this coming out of Thais' house? Is it him or isn't it?" (Eunuchus, 546). The frequent misunderstandings within the play reflect Chaerea's climatic act of deception, the ramifications of which ultimately shape the play's conclusion and also add to the farcical tone Terence implements.

In Terence's play the Eunuchus, the poet plays with the gender roles of his characters by introducing female characters, primarily Thais and Pythias, with what were considered male characteristics such as being strong willed, leadership, aggression and intelligence. Contrarily the male characters are easily manipulated, overly emotional and cowardly. Terence's reason for obscuring the gender roles of his characters is to add to the already prominent sense of confusion and ultimately humour of his play.

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Written for Roman Theatre and Spectacle (CLC214)

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