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Senecan Tragedy as Monstrum

When both Martial and Juvenal characterize tragedies as monstra, they are using a term which Seneca's recent plays had made the proprium nomen for the genre. Seneca's use of this word needs to be viewed in light of its literal meaning as portent, for his plays present practically every form of divination. Scholars traditionally attribute Seneca's interest in such themes to a general Roman fascination with the occult, but I shall argue that Seneca has a more specific interest in them which grows out of Stoic epistemology.— Monstra, as sense impressions of the most vivid and persuasive sort, offer the kind of demonstratio which [Longinus] and the Stoics associated with effective tragedy.

Seneca's creation of monstrous tragedy reflects, I suggest, a Stoic tradition of criticism which, in contrast to the Aristotelian, valued drama for its opsis, its visual power. The Romans considered monstra to be intensely visual experiences, as their (incorrect) attempts to link its etymology with monstrare indicate. When his interlocutor in the De Ira asks Seneca to "show" how anger can be cured, Seneca replies by presenting anger as a monstrum which needs to be placed ante oculos (3.3.1-2). This latter phrase is regularly associated in ancient rhetoric with demonstratio or the creation of vivid impressions, a task which the Stoics saw as native to poetry.- Epictetus characterized epic and tragedy as "sense impressions" and "the poet's use of sense impressions" (1.28.12) and Seneca acknowledged that plays create species or opiniones, which he characterizes as impressions, ictus animi (De Ira 2.2.2-3).

[Longinus] illustrates how the Stoic concept of phantasia can inform literature when he juxtaposes a Stoic and cognitive definition of this word as "sense impression" with a second, literary one, in which phantasia describes passages that bring events "vividly before the eyes" of an audience (15). When [Longinus] catalogues a series of exemplary "imaginative passages", all but one are drawn from tragedies and several constitute monstra of the sort which Seneca features in his plays. For example, the vividness which [Longinus] finds in Simonides' depiction of Achilles' ghost above his tomb could also be ascribed to Seneca's treatment of that scene in his Troades (168-202). Seneca's messenger describes the event as a series of monstra, frightening in their impact and visual in their message.

The scenes which Seneca characterizes as monstra can be read as synonymous with his definition of tragedy, for they are inherently metatheatrical. When Cassandra in the Agamemnon "sees" the murder of Agamemnon in a trance, her description of the scene perfectly illustrates Cicero's definition of demonstratio. Although Alessandro Schiesaro would view her as the "poet" in the text, creating furor-inspired drama, she is in fact characterized by Seneca as a model spectator. When she says that her imago of the event is not dubia, she is using language usually associated with monstra and their interpretation. A monstrum is at the center of almost every Senecan play because Seneca sees tragedy as analogous to the numinous: visual, horrific, and a revelation of hidden truths.