

SENECA *and the*
IDEA *of* TRAGEDY



GREGORY A. STALEY

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OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Staley, Gregory Allan.

Seneca and the idea of tragedy / Gregory A. Staley.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-538743-8

1. Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, ca. 4 B.C.–65 A.D.—Tragedies.

2. Mythology, Classical, in literature. 3. Tragedy. I. Title.

PA6685.S73 2009

872'.01—dc22 2009010340

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To my wife, Mary Ann

*quid enim iucundius quam uxori tam carum esse,
ut propter hoc tibi carior fias?*

Seneca, *Epistle* 104.5

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Preface

I have been thinking about Seneca's idea of tragedy ever since I was an undergraduate at Dickinson College, where Robert Sider guided me in writing my honor's thesis on the topic. I turned to Seneca to help me construct a rationale for my own interest, which was then just emerging, in a life dedicated to ideas and literature, and I assumed that, as philosopher and poet both, Seneca would provide answers to my questions about the value of the humanities. As it turns out, Seneca did not make the task easy, which is partly why it has taken me so long to write this book. At Princeton University I made Seneca the topic of my dissertation, under the direction of Bernard Fenik and D. J. Furley, who shaped in ways that are still visible in this book my approaches to literature and philosophy. As a fellow at the American Academy in Rome in 1983–1984 I drafted most of what is now chapter 2 of this book. I am grateful to the academy, to its library, and to its staff for creating a marvelous setting for the life of the mind and to the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding my year of research in Rome.

My sense that Seneca wrote tragedy as a Stoic, however, became less secure as I read the work of R. J. Tarrant, Elaine Fantham, A. J. Boyle, and Gordon Braden, among others. After setting Seneca aside for many years, I returned to him afresh in 2000–2002, when I enjoyed an extended period of leave, funded by the University of Maryland and by the Helen Clay Frick Foundation. The chair of my department at that time, Judith Hallett, was instrumental in making this all possible. I conducted most of the research for this book in the Milton S. Eisenhower Library of Johns Hopkins University, where the staff has always

made me feel at home. Alan Shapiro and Matthew Roller of the Hopkins Classics Department helped me to secure research space in the library during my leave, and I thank them for that crucial support. I was able to make the final revisions to my manuscript during a semester of sabbatical leave funded by the University of Maryland and its Department of Classics; I am grateful to the chair, Hugh Lee, and to my colleagues in the department for their support of my research.

I had long suspected that Seneca approached tragedy with Aristotle's analysis of the genre in mind, but I was unable to advance that argument since I could not establish a chain of evidence that would lead from Aristotle to Seneca. Kathy Eden's book *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1986), which demonstrates that Aristotle's ideas about images and their role in persuasion had a later influence even when his *Poetics* was not available, opened the way for me to make my case. Although I consistently argue against the reading that Alessandro Schiesaro offers of Senecan tragedy in his book *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), I admire his book greatly, learned much from it, and was spurred to refine my own interpretation through the strength and clarity of his arguments. I have met neither of these scholars, but this book would not have been possible without them.

I have discussed various parts of my argument over the years with Margaret Reesor, Philip Lockhart, Gary Meltzer, Kathy Geffcken, James Leshner, Jørgen Meyer, and Eva Stehle and am grateful for the guidance and insights they have offered me. Stefan Vranka, my editor at Oxford University Press, saw the potential of this project and patiently worked with me to develop it. I thank him and the two anonymous readers he called on to read the manuscript. The careful reports these readers prepared have improved this book immensely; I appreciate the time and effort they devoted to helping me make my case.

The dedication acknowledges the crucial role that my wife, Mary Ann, has played in bringing this book to print. We met many years ago as summer students at the American Academy in Rome and have shared our love for Latin and for each other ever since. Mary Ann has endured late dinners, lost weekends, authorial moodiness, and self-centeredness with grace and constant faith in the worth of my work.

Ellicott City, Maryland
February 12, 2009

Acknowledgments

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Strabo, *Geography I*, Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 49, trans. Horace Jones, 1917.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 73, trans. H. Rackham, 1926.

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Seneca, *Tragedies II*, Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 78N, trans. John G. Fitch, 2004.

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The frontispiece of Thomas Lodge, trans., *The Workes Both Morrall and Natural of Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, London: William Stansby, 1614, has been printed with the permission of Special Collections, The Sheridan Libraries, The Johns Hopkins University.

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List of Abbreviations

EK	<i>Posidonius: The Fragments</i> , ed. Edelstein and Kidd
<i>Ep.</i>	Seneca, <i>Moral Epistles</i>
<i>Lives</i>	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers</i>
LS	<i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i> , ed. Long and Sedley
PHP	Galen, <i>On the Precepts of Hippocrates and Plato</i> , ed. de Lacy
SVF	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> , ed. von Arnim

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SENECA AND THE IDEA
OF TRAGEDY

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Introduction: The Idea of Tragedy

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Macbeth voices here a sentiment that many over the centuries have shared: Tragedy, like life, just does not make sense.¹ Tragedy's problem of "signification" begins with the word itself; it is one of those terms in which we speak Greek without knowing what we are saying. Tragedy is a "goat song," but we can only speculate about why. Was the tragic poet in Athens given a goat as a prize if his tragedy was judged the best? Or did tragedy acknowledge that as humans we are like satyrs, those goat-men hybrids who attended Dionysos, the god in whose honor drama was performed? Tragic plays explore our animal natures, our "filthiness," as one medieval commentator called it, our violence and depravity. Or does tragedy get its name from the simple fact that tragedians wore shoes made of goatskins?² As George Steiner (2008, 29) has noted, "The semantic field of the noun 'tragedy' and of the adjective 'tragic' remain as indeterminate as its origin."

Stephen Booth has argued that our difficulty in defining "tragedy" is not merely semantic but at root existential: "Tragedy is the word by which the mind designates (and thus in part denies) its helplessness before a concrete, particular, and thus undeniable demonstration of the limits of human understanding" (1983, 85).³ Edith Hamilton, who sought to explain the ancient world to twentieth-century Americans, likewise appreciated that making sense of tragedy required making sense of life: "To answer the question, what makes a tragedy, is to answer the question wherein lies the essential significance of life, what the

dignity of humanity depends upon in the last analysis” (1930, 145). Hamilton, however, was confident that Greek tragedy could signify; writing in a chapter titled “The Idea of Tragedy,” Hamilton asserted that the Greek tragedians had answered life’s great questions “with no uncertain voice” (*ibid.*, 145).

Plato (428–348 BC) long ago had disagreed and in fact been disturbed that poets were treated with such respect, as if they knew how to make sense of human experience. For Plato the true craftsman “gazes at the idea” (*Republic* 596b5), but the poet works three removes from this realm (*Republic* 597e3–4). Ironically, the “idea” of tragedy developed in the Western tradition as a response to Plato’s assertion that tragedians had no “idea” what they were doing. Explaining human experience, as tragic poets were thought to do, requires knowledge and wisdom, attributes of the philosopher, Plato argued. The traditional Greek notion that poets like Homer were wise men explains why literary criticism was in antiquity largely the province of philosophers and was in its origins “critical.”

Beginning with Aristotle (384–322 BC), however, philosophy came to tragedy’s defense. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined the nature of tragedy in his typical fashion not by looking for some transcendent “idea” behind it but by articulating what he saw to be its inherent characteristics, derived from an analysis of actual plays.⁴ Tragedy was, he acknowledged, a form of *mimesis* or “imitation,” but this did not imply that it was a paler version of reality. In fact, poetry is more “philosophical” than history because it relates universal rather than particular experience. Moreover, tragedy’s presentation of human sorrows does not harm and weaken us, as Plato had suggested, but instead benefits us through the catharsis of pity and fear. Although Aristotle offers an often opaque and technical discussion of tragedy, his treatment of the subject has affected, both directly and indirectly, almost all subsequent attempts to define the idea of tragedy. Writing as he did after the Greek tragedians of the fifth century BC, Aristotle actually had his greatest impact not on Greek tragedy itself but on the later history of the idea of tragedy, beginning, I argue, with the tragedies of the Roman poet and Stoic philosopher, Seneca (4 BC–AD 65).

Tragedy was written early and often at Rome, but the tragedies of Seneca are the only complete tragedies in Latin that have survived from antiquity.⁵ Seneca’s plays were unknown throughout much of the Middle Ages, but around 1300 they were rediscovered by Italian humanists and played a crucial role in the Renaissance’s attempt to understand the ancient idea of tragedy. The tragedies of Shakespeare (1564–1616) would in many ways not have been possible without Seneca. As Polonius remarks to Hamlet about a pending performance, Seneca was the benchmark for tragedy: “Seneca cannot be too heavy” (*Hamlet* 2.2.366). Macbeth himself is a typically Senecan character, an ambitious villain who on occasion seems to be quoting Seneca: “Things bad begun make strong

themselves by ill” (3.2.55) sounds like a line spoken by Seneca’s Clytemnestra: “*Per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*” [For crimes the safest path is always through crimes] (*Agamemnon* 115).⁶

Seneca’s influence on tragic plays in the Renaissance has by now been well examined and widely acknowledged.⁷ I wish to explore instead Seneca’s influence on the Renaissance’s theory of tragedy, which is what I mean by the “idea” of tragedy. Seneca himself never articulated his poetics for tragedy even though, as we shall see, he was widely conversant with ancient thinking about literary criticism. When Shakespeare’s contemporary Philip Sidney (1554–1586) composed his *Apology for Poetry*, published posthumously in 1595, he assumed that Seneca, the model tragedian, must have been guided by Aristotle’s model of tragedy. Sidney in fact borrows from Seneca the word “idea” to designate what we would now label as a “theory” of tragedy. Through Sidney’s work, Seneca’s plays came to exemplify an idea of tragedy that was at its core Aristotelian.

Seneca’s place in this history of tragedy is usually thought to be accidental; his plays were simply available to be theorized when Greek tragedies were not.⁸ I aim to show that this accident was indeed a fortunate one, however, for Seneca did know the essentials of Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy and wrote his plays with an idea of tragedy in mind. Since, as I have noted, the ancient critique of tragedy was philosophical, Seneca’s own status as a Stoic philosopher will prove instrumental in shaping his theoretical interests. The Stoics played a central role in the creation of literary culture in the West by showing how to teach literature as a source of correct language and moral truths. Readers of Seneca, beginning with Nicolas Trevet (c. 1258–1328), have regularly assumed that Seneca would practice poetry in the same way as his fellow Stoics taught it. The result has been confusion since Seneca’s tragedies yield more lessons in vice than in virtue. Seneca’s poetics was not, I argue, the traditional Stoic notion that poetry teaches through allegory. Instead, Seneca practices an Aristotelian poetics that sees tragedy as “a just and lively image of human nature representing its passions,” the definition of the genre offered in John Dryden’s *Of Dramatic Poesy* (1668).

Chapter 1, “Theorizing Tragedy,” examines the theoretical challenges that Senecan tragedy has posed for his readers. Seneca himself never wrote a poetics that might explicitly explain his plays. For other poets or poets of other genres this would not necessarily be an issue, but Seneca was a philosopher, and poetic theory was in antiquity part of a philosopher’s portfolio. Moreover, tragedy had been for Plato and Aristotle the genre most implicated in philosophy’s concerns. Over the centuries Seneca’s silence has consistently produced two schools of Senecan criticism: a moralistic school that assumes that the plays are a vehicle for Stoic teaching and a skeptical school that sees them instead as utterly unconcerned about morality or even as hostile to it. Senecan criticism over the

last fifty years has predominantly been skeptical and increasingly sought to identify in Seneca's prose writings a Platonic poetics that is antagonistic to tragedy. In this chapter I turn to Philip Sidney because he articulates and applies to Seneca a version of Aristotle's ideas that in their later transmission had passed through the hands of the Stoics. Seneca comes between Aristotle and Sidney, yet both theorists are relevant to his idea of tragedy. Aristotle defends tragedy on epistemological and psychological grounds that were later to influence Stoic thinking about images, ideas, and the emotional component in judgment. Sidney in turn illustrates what Aristotle looked like in a Stoic guise; he thus provides the kind of Aristotelian-Stoic poetics that would have been contemporary with Seneca. To study Seneca in light of Aristotle and Sidney, before and after, is therefore not an exercise in anachronism.

Chapter 2, "The Very Ends of Poesy," examines Seneca's own occasional comments on poetry and the various theories based upon them that scholars have advanced to explain his tragedies. Seneca does not compose a poetics, but he regularly shows in his prose writings a wide knowledge of ancient poetic theory. Sidney praised Seneca's plays for their delightful teaching, which constituted the "very end of Poesy" (*An Apology for Poetry* 134.3); yet in ancient theory "delight" and "teaching" were themselves separate "ends" that could also appear in combination. By default it was long assumed that Seneca's tragedies were intended to teach since the Stoics regularly read poetry for lessons in life. Surprisingly, however, Seneca seems opposed to poetry when used as a vehicle for teaching, whether it appears as a script performed in the theater or as a textbook studied in class. By contrast, he acknowledges the pleasures that aristocratic Romans could derive from engaging in "lighter pursuits" such as versifying, a source of delight during their free time. "Lighter" (*levior, levius*), however, usually designated the poetry of love rather than tragic verse, which was considered "heavy" (*gravis*), as Polonius acknowledged.

Most recently Alessandro Schiesaro and C. A. J. Littlewood have sought to characterize Seneca's poetics as Platonic, pointing in particular to Seneca's characterization of poetry as a form of madness in which writers can step outside of themselves. On this reading Senecan tragedy is something apart from Senecan Stoicism, art composed for its own sake, or an expression of doubts about Stoicism normally repressed. In discussing "poetic madness," the *furor poeticus*, Seneca cites, however, not the Plato of the *Republic*, who bans tragedy from his ideal, philosophical state, but the Plato of the *Phaedrus*, who finds common ground between poetry and philosophy.

None of the theories that have been woven from Seneca's occasional comments on poetry, I argue, provides the essential clue to the "end" of Senecan tragedy, for none of them focuses on tragedy in particular and on the critical traditions in which it was featured. Poetic theory in antiquity was regularly

genre specific; therefore, what Seneca says about elegy, didactic epic, or mime cannot provide his theory of tragedy. The search for a Senecan poetics that might explain Senecan tragedy has failed essentially because it has not focused on what Seneca says about epistemology and psychology, the basis on which after Plato the traditional poetics of tragedy had been established.

In chapter 3, “A Just and Lively Image,” I turn to the Stoic epistemology of poetry. Dryden’s pairing of the adjectives “just” and “lively” to characterize the image of tragedy reflects the Stoic definition of *enargeia* or “vividness”: an image that is true to life (hence, “lively”) and that offers its own *kritēriterion* or *iudicium* (a sound or “just” basis for judgment) of its truthfulness. Stoics such as Chrysippus (c. 280–207 BC), the third head of the school and the major authority for Stoics who came later, and Epictetus (c. AD 55–135), a former slave who was an influential teacher of Stoic ideas, regularly turned to tragedy because it modeled the cognitive process, illustrating how knowledge begins with a *phantasia*, or “visual impression.” When such impressions are striking, they are labeled “kataleptic” and compel our assent. The author of *On the Sublime*, traditionally known as “Longinus” and a contemporary of Seneca, defines *phantasia* both as a vivid image in this Stoic sense and as a scene from tragedy that leads the audience to “see” what the author had visualized in creating it. When Sidney speaks of a poet’s “idea” or “fore-conceit” of what he is about to write, he is using this Stoic epistemology of images. Sidney’s “speaking picture of Poesy” is the Stoic’s *logikē phantasia*, an impression that can be expressed in language. Seneca can serve as Sidney’s “peerless poet” of tragedy, I argue, because Seneca composed his tragedies as vivid images of just this sort. The key to Senecan drama lies not in the “word,” as T. S. Eliot once described it, but in the “image,” which, as the definition of tragedy attached to the manuscript of Seneca’s plays described it, constitutes an “image of truth.”

Chapter 4, “The Soul of Tragedy,” explores the Stoic psychology of tragedy in several senses. Plato’s second objection to the genre had been that tragedy portrays and thereby inspires irrationality; the Stoics agreed with Plato on the first point but not on the second. Psychology had proven as challenging a subject to ancient philosophers as it still does to psychologists today, for the soul cannot be examined through surgery but only through listening to the words that humans speak. The Stoics regularly turned to the words of tragic characters to elucidate psychology, for it was thought that poetry was a vivid source of evidence about the unseen soul: Tragedy was the plot of the soul, an illustration of the process of cognition that produced emotion. Seneca’s plays regularly depict characters who are angry, frightened, or even in love, for passion was the Stoic explanation for the events traditionally considered tragic, and tragedy was the genre best suited to the world of mad emperors in which Seneca lived. Yet within both his plays and his philosophical essays, Seneca suggests that these

vivid portraits of passionate souls serve not to make us passionate but instead help us to understand and to reject similar feelings. Aristotle's notion of catharsis as a process of "clarification," I argue, shaped Seneca's approach to tragic response.

Chapter 5, "Reading Monsters," turns from theory to practice and illustrates, through Seneca's *Hercules Furens* and his *Oedipus*, how to read Senecan tragedy in light of the Stoic poetics I have outlined. The Roman poet Martial (AD 40–102), writing in the generation after Seneca, identified the key to Seneca's plays: He said that to read tragedy was to "read monsters." *Monstra*, shocking, unnatural events that offered warnings from the gods, were a central element in Roman religion and a defining feature of Seneca's plays. They were on the one hand "just and lively images" of the sort the Stoics identified with tragedy; on the other hand they regularly "represented the passions," emerging from the underworld as the Erinyes or Furies. To read these monsters, I argue, means to read Vergil as Seneca did. Seneca's tragedies are now regularly seen as epilogues to the *Aeneid*, as stories in which the anger of Juno, infecting the hero, is endlessly reenacted. The *Hercules Furens*, for example, opens as Juno summons the Furies from the underworld to drive Hercules mad, just as she had sought in the *Aeneid* to infect Turnus. If, as has often been suggested, the Furies are the Muses of Senecan tragedy, how are we to understand this Vergilian form of inspiration?

Alessandro Schiesaro's recent book, *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, answers this question by turning to Freud, who prefaced *The Interpretation of Dreams* (first published in 1900) with Juno's words from the *Aeneid*: "If I cannot bend the High Powers, I will move the Infernal Regions" (*Aeneid* 7.312). Freud suggested that Juno's actions symbolized the release of repressed desires, which is the model for Schiesaro's reading of Seneca's infernal monsters. Seneca's tragedies, he argues, give expression to desires that Seneca's public and philosophical persona sought to control. I, too, turn to Freud to elucidate Seneca's interest in monsters, for both Seneca and Freud read as psychologists, seeking in the signs of the body evidence for the nature of the soul. However, whereas Schiesaro sees Seneca's plays as the mad poet's dreams, I read them instead as the analyst's interpretations.

Seneca's *Oedipus* is central to my argument, for it constitutes not only the founding myth of psychoanalysis but also a case study in how to read monsters. In Seneca's play, Oedipus does not himself discover the truth about himself but relies instead on the seer Tiresias, who uses divination (the interpretation of *monstra*) in a variety of forms to reveal Oedipus' incestuous and murderous past. In his essay *De Ira [On Anger]*, Seneca had expressed a wish to commit *extispicium* on the human soul—to examine our insides in the Roman fashion for meaningful signs. Seneca's *Oedipus* turns metaphor into reality and thereby

models for us how to read the monstrous events that stand at the center of every Senecan tragedy. Seneca turned to Vergil's monsters because, as Freud noted (1955, 160–161) about his own use of literary sources, “a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables [us] . . . to obtain at least some kind of insight into the cause of that affection.” The unnatural events of tragedy are neither meaningless nor inexplicable; *monstra* in Senecan tragedy offer through their vivid images and emotional impact clues that guide an audience toward the kind of insight that Aristotle believed the best tragedies can foster.

The conclusion, “Stoic Tragedy,” returns to Macbeth's observation that tragedy is “a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing.” Shakespeare was in these words thinking of a passage in which Seneca, in one of his letters (80.7–8), compared life to the performance of the tragedy of Atreus, the mad king of Mycenae who fed to his brother Thyestes the bodies of his own sons. Seneca's point in this comparison is that power in life is often an illusion: King Atreus, Seneca reminds us, was played by an actor who was a slave. In this case as always, however, tragedy for Seneca and the Stoics signifies. In fact, the very comparison of life to the stage, which the Stoics often used, suggests that tragedy does not connote helplessness in giving life meaning.

Seneca's plays have shaped the idea of tragedy precisely because the Stoics had resolved the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy that led Plato to ban tragedy. T. S. Eliot once wrote that it would be futile to ask what was Stoic about Senecan tragedy, and many have followed his lead, expecting that somehow Stoic tragedy would be a depiction of Stoic lives and Stoic saints. For the Stoics, however, tragedy was not a form antithetical to philosophy; it was the perfect vehicle for imaging lives that are antithetical to philosophy. Tragedy portrays life as it is normally lived and offers case studies in the ways in which human misjudgments (this is what the passions are for the Stoics) produce misfortune. Passionate characters are by their nature theatrical characters, so that tragedy is a genre well suited to portraying an angry Atreus, a frightened Oedipus, or a lovesick Phaedra.⁹ Tragedy also models through the role of its spectators the cognitive process in which we all regularly engage as we form judgments in reaction to life's impressions.

The kind of tragedy that many have thought a Stoic would write can be found not in Seneca's plays but in his life: As Tacitus reports, Seneca committed suicide, surrounded by his friends, with whom he discussed philosophy until his last moments. The theatrical cast of Seneca's death and the parallels it consciously created with the famous death of Socrates suggest that Seneca was offering philosophy's alternative to traditional tragedy. For Socrates had played such a role both for Plato and for the Stoics: the virtuous man facing death nobly and without fear, teaching life's lessons as he departs. It is a measure of

Philip Sidney's admiration for and empathy with Seneca that he, too, died such a death. At least that is how his friend Fulke Greville portrayed the final scene of Sidney's life in a biographical sketch that prefaced two plays in the Senecan manner that Greville had written to honor Sidney and his poetic principles. Seneca's tragedies provided Greville with images of wit, and Seneca's biography provided an image of life, both of which served to honor Sidney as a Senecan. The juxtaposition of Seneca's plays and his life here is a telling indication that Seneca's idea of tragedy was not three removes from reality. For Seneca and the Stoics, tragedy was not just a literary form but also a metaphor for life in which all the world was a "stage." Tragedy in the traditional form portrayed lives lived badly; lives lived well, however, such as those of Socrates or Cato, constituted philosophy's alternative to tragedy, an alternative Seneca sought to emulate through the manner of his death.

1

Theorizing Tragedy

For any understanding knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in that *Idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *Idea* is manifest.

—Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*

Behind every work of art, Philip Sidney argued in *An Apology for Poetry* (1595),¹ there stands the idea of the artist who made it, an idea that existed even before the work was begun. Although this notion sounds in general Platonic, it was from the words of Seneca (4 BC–AD 65), the Roman philosopher, poet and advisor to the emperor Nero, that Sidney derived it. As Wesley Trimpi has argued (1999, 189–190), Sidney appears to have read Seneca’s discussion of art and the Platonic *Idea*; Seneca’s two literary epistles on the subject (58 and 65) are in fact the only places where Plato’s Greek word ἰδέα appears as the Latin *idea*, the source in turn for Sidney’s English word.²

Seneca’s conception of the *idea* of art, although labeled in these letters as Platonic, is in fact something different, an “idea” in the epistemological rather than the ontological sense.³ Seneca’s artist need not gaze outside himself at Plato’s eternal Forms and use them as his models; he can find his *exemplar* within (*intus*) and indeed can “conceive” and “place” it there himself (*Ep.* 65.77). The artist’s *idea* exists for Seneca both apart from the work and prior to it (*Ep.* 58.21), which is what Sidney means by the poet’s “fore-conceit.”⁴

Sidney and his Renaissance fellows firmly believed that Seneca had just such an “idea” of tragedy since Seneca constituted for them the model poet of this noble and representative form of poetry. Seneca bequeathed to the Renaissance and to us the only complete tragedies in Latin that have survived from antiquity, tragedies that were known and admired even before the rediscovery of Greek tragedy in the fifteenth century. From the moment when Seneca’s plays were rediscovered around 1300, they were thought to constitute “tragedy”

and to exemplify the ancient “idea” of tragedy. This assumption, I aim to show, is not as implausible as it at first may seem.

It is true that Renaissance critics, in the absence of Greek tragedy, turned to Seneca by default in order to understand what was for them a strange literary form. Moreover, Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy, both in the *Poetics* and elsewhere, shaped much of the theorizing about this genre that the Middle Ages and the Renaissance pursued, yet Aristotle’s *Poetics* is thought to have been unknown during Seneca’s lifetime.⁵ Finally, Seneca himself shows in his extensive prose writings on philosophical subjects only occasional interest in poetry, even though literary criticism from its beginnings in antiquity had been a subject for philosophy. Indeed, Seneca’s predecessors in the Stoic school had regularly written on the subject—Zeno a book titled *On Listening to Poetry*, for example, and Chrysippus, one named *On Poems Addressed to Lovers of Knowledge*.⁶

Seneca’s failure to discuss explicitly in his philosophical writings the idea behind his tragedies has led modern scholars to put T. S. Eliot in the position that Philip Sidney had earlier occupied in the Renaissance. Eliot, in his essay “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” one of two important essays on Seneca’s tragedies and their influence that Eliot wrote in the 1920s, rejected the very notion that a poet could or should have an “idea” that shapes his art: “Poetry is not a substitute for philosophy or theology or religion . . . ; it has its own function. But as this function is not intellectual but emotional, it cannot be defined adequately in intellectual terms.” Eliot’s poetics provided a useful justification for Seneca’s silence as a philosopher about his own practice of poetry: “The poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics,” Eliot asserts (1964, 118). Even if Seneca began his tragedies with an idea in mind, the ecstasy of the artistic process, several critics have suggested, led him to create in his plays a vision that challenges his Stoicism.⁷ It is, I think, revealing that A. J. Boyle (1985, 1304) quotes Eliot’s own poetry to explain what Boyle takes to be Seneca’s point in his *Phaedra*: the illusory character of human power and rationality: “Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow.”⁸ By Eliot’s reasoning, these lines could also serve to describe the gap that separates philosophy from poetry, “ideas” from “acts.”⁹ In rejecting the notion that poets have “ideas,” Eliot comes close to Plato’s view, which he seems to echo in censuring Senecan tragedy as “at one remove from reality, compared to the Greek” (1964, 53). Unlike Plato, however, Eliot defends the “unity of thought and feeling, action and speculation” in Greek culture and drama; it is Seneca who has sundered them: “In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it” (54).

I aim to show that as a literary critic Sidney understood Seneca the tragic poet better than did Eliot and the New Critics who have followed in his wake.¹⁰

For Seneca did have an idea of tragedy, I argue, and the Renaissance was right to link his plays with a theory of the genre that was derived in its essentials from Aristotle's defense of poetry against Plato's criticisms. Seneca's tragedies play a formative role in shaping the Western tradition of tragedy not just through accidents in the cultural history of his plays' reception. For Seneca's tragedies were not just "received" as theoretical models but were also fashioned by theory from the very beginning. Although it is true that Seneca did not write a *Poetics*, a systematic account of the nature and function of poetry, he had read several and interweaves his knowledge of these various traditions into his discussions of a wide range of other topics.¹¹ Seneca also brings his knowledge of these ancient critical traditions, I argue, to the composition of his tragedies. It is surely accidental but nonetheless revealing that our only mention of Seneca as a tragedian in his own time highlights his interest in the "idea" behind tragedy. Quintilian reports a debate between Seneca and another tragic poet over proper tragic diction, a discussion that later became part of the *praefationes* to their plays.¹² Such prefaces apparently allowed poets to treat issues of technique or criticism relevant to their work prior to its presentation.¹³

A. Tragedy and Philosophy

Lacking Seneca's own prefaces, we can best reconstruct his theory of tragedy by examining the philosophical traditions in which tragedy was first critiqued, traditions that begin with Plato, continue with Aristotle, and later influence Stoic thinking about epistemology and psychology. Of ancient forms of poetry, tragedy was the one most closely connected with ideas, with philosophy, and with philosophy's theory of poetry.¹⁴ It is my thesis that Seneca, in choosing to write tragedies, was aware of Plato's criticisms of the genre and of the dangers that it posed to the goals of philosophy. Seneca acknowledges that tragic verses can stir misguided passions (*Ep.* 115.12–14) and his two letters on Plato's "ideas" show that Seneca understood that art was a form of mimesis. Art is an *imitatio naturae* (*Ep.* 65.3), and the artist "imitates" (*imitatur Ep.* 65.8) a model.¹⁵ If there is an idea that informs Senecan tragedy, it ought to be found in the long quarrel between philosophy and poetry that Plato cited (*Republic* 607b) as his rationale for denying poetry and in particular tragedy a place in his ideal state. Through his *Republic*, Plato thereafter established tragedy as the genre of poetry most closely associated with philosophy in antiquity. Although Plato banned all poetry except for hymns and encomia from his ideal state, he highlighted tragedy as the most mimetic and hence most philosophically harmful form of poetry: "[H]ave we not next to scrutinize tragedy and its leader, Homer, since some people tell us that these poets know all the arts and all things human

pertaining to virtue and vice . . . ?” (*Republic* 598d8–11). Writing in the wake of tragedy’s century of prominence at Athens, Plato perhaps chose as his target the genre most recently dominant in civic life.¹⁶ Nonetheless, tragedy, which was by its very nature intensely mimetic and focused on moments of extreme human emotion, embodied to the highest degree those characteristics of poetry that Plato found inimical to philosophy.

After Plato, literary criticism from Aristotle through the Renaissance took the form of an “apology” or “defense” of poetry against Plato’s charges that mimetic poetry misrepresents true reality and in the process harms our emotional health.¹⁷ I argue that as a Stoic philosopher Seneca would not have composed tragedies without at least addressing in his own mind this “ancient quarrel.” As Halliwell (2002, 267) has noted, Stoic thinkers “strongly tended toward the Platonizing principle that poetry should be judged, in large measure, by the truth and ethical value of its ‘thought’ or (quasi-)propositional content, as well as by poetry’s impact on the emotions.” My thesis is that Seneca’s tragedies are most properly understood in terms of the critical tradition that featured that genre and its particular nature.¹⁸ Although tragedy shares the generic traits of poetry, it was a genre with distinctive features: dramatic rather than narrative, serious rather than playful, intensely ethical because it involved moral choices and their consequences, and particularly linked with the human soul and its psychology.

Seneca’s treatment of the philosophical objections that Plato raised against tragedy bears the imprint of Aristotle’s defense of poetry, an assertion not as implausible as it at first may seem.¹⁹ Although the fate of the *Poetics* is “enshrouded in a general mist of obscurity” for two hundred and fifty years after Aristotle’s death, “there is no doubt,” according to Stephen Halliwell, “that in time, and through various channels, many Aristotelian ideas did become commonplace” (1986, 288n4).²⁰ Two of these channels appear in the legacy of Aristotle’s psychology and rhetoric, which had a continuous influence on the analysis of literature down to Seneca and beyond, as Kathy Eden (1986, 6) has shown: “[L]iterary theorists after Aristotle, from antiquity through the Renaissance, turned to [Aristotle’s] treatment of the imagination and of its relation to judgment and action—even more than to the *Poetics*—in their efforts to understand and express how literary discourse works.”

As we shall see, Aristotle’s assessment of poetry is inextricably linked with all aspects of his philosophy, making it possible for the central principles of his poetics to survive even in the absence of his *Poetics*.²¹ When Vergil casts Dido’s story as a tragedy, her *culpa* becomes central to the explanation of events, a reflection, many scholars have argued, of Aristotle’s discussion of the tragic hero’s *hamartia* since both words mean “fault.”²² If Vergil knew even indirectly of Aristotle’s categories for interpreting tragedy, Seneca, who takes Vergil as his tragic model, knew them, too.

For Plato, tragedy is unacceptable quite simply because it is a fiction rather than reality, a mimesis three removes from truth: “It is phantoms (*phantasmata*), not realities they produce” (*Republic* 99a3). As G. Ferrari (1989, 120) writes, “Plato’s fundamental criticism of poetic imitation and thus of poetry as such is that poets see imitation as good in itself, as a process of knowledge or understanding, regardless of what is imitated. But at this point we surely want to ask: what exactly is *wrong* with taking poetic imitation to be a process of understanding?” Aristotle asked himself this same question and, as chapter four of the *Poetics* shows, treated mimesis as product of a human desire to understand: “[U]nderstanding gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but likewise to others too. . . . That is why people enjoy looking at images (*eikonas*), because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each element means” (1448b12–16). For Aristotle, knowledge and understanding depend on “images”: “And for this reason as no one could ever learn or understand anything without the exercise of perception, so even when we think speculatively, we must have some mental picture (*phantasma*) of which we think” (*De Anima* 432a7–9). The Stoics will inherit the essentials of Aristotle’s analysis of the role of imagery in psychology and thus share with him a sense of its value and importance.²³

If the mind thinks with images, it also feels with them; the *enargeia* of poetry, its capacity for creating lifelike images, naturally arouses emotions that Plato saw as harmful to mental health. Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, however it may be interpreted, was undoubtedly intended to respond to Plato’s characterization of poetry as a “waterer of emotion” (*Republic* 606d). It is clear from his *Rhetoric* that Aristotle did not see emotion as a threat to reason but rather as a necessary element in the formation of right judgments.²⁴ What is implicit in the *Poetics*, Kathy Eden has argued (1986, 61), is explicit in the *Rhetoric*: Tragic drama is comparable in processes and goal to a speech in a court or assembly. Both aim, by placing events before the eyes, to create emotions that support right judgments: “The spectator at an Aristotelian tragedy does not see a random sequence of events designed merely to excite his basest feelings. On the contrary, he sees a preeminently logical construct designed to increase his understanding and, with the aid of the proper emotional responses, enrich his judgment.” Stephen Halliwell and others have argued that catharsis in some way seeks to “harmonize [our emotions] with our perceptions and judgments of the world” (1986, 201). Furthermore, G. F. Held (1984, 173–174) has noted that Aristotle uses the same adjective, *spoudaios*, to characterize both tragedy and contemplation; the latter is, moreover, for Aristotle the activity that produces perfect happiness. When, therefore, Aristotle describes poetry as both *spoudaioteron* (“more serious”) and *philosophoteron* (“more philosophical”)

than history (*Poetics* 1451b3), he is affirming that the pity and fear first aroused and then relieved by tragedy support rather than subvert human happiness.²⁵

Aristotle's conceptualization of tragedy reached Seneca through the influence that Aristotle's psychology and rhetoric had on the Stoic tradition. Through his *De Anima*, Aristotle answered Plato's objection that fiction is but an imitation of reality by showing that *phantasiai* can present vivid images that lead us to truth and knowledge; through his *Rhetoric*, he answered Plato's objection that fiction arouses harmful emotions by showing that in fact emotion helps to shape judgment. These Aristotelian ideas in turn influenced Stoic psychology, which characterized all human action as judgments formed in response to the images of experience. At its core, tragedy was for the Stoics simply a *phantasia*, a vivid image or mental impression; this connection can be seen in the fact that the Stoics use the word *phantasia* also to characterize a literary passage, especially a tragic one, which offered a poet's vivid re-creation in words of his own "idea" (*ennoēma*).²⁶ When Sidney writes, "And that the poet hath that *Idea* is manifest," his choice of adjective highlights his indebtedness to this Stoic tradition of tragedy as vehicle for "manifestation."

This Stoic psychology, which, like Aristotle's, conceived of the soul as analogous to a court of law, a place of *iudicium*, therefore found in tragedy a natural ally. For Aristotle had conceptualized the analogy between law courts and the stage that was embedded in Greek culture, as seen most obviously in the *Oresteia*, where a tragedy is staged as a trial and explains in the process the very origin of legal proceedings. Tragedy, as Kathy Eden has argued (1986, 62), shares with the law court the "shared final aim" of "making right judgments." The soul itself becomes for the Stoics, as for Aristotle, just such a law court, for in the dominant Stoic tradition associated with Chrysippus, passion is not an irrational force but a perversion of reason, a wrong judgment. Seneca reveals Chrysippus' influence when he defines anger as *concitatio animi ad ultionem voluntate et iudicio pergentis* [the disturbance of a soul moving toward revenge by choice and by judgment] (*De Ira* 2.3.5). It is no accident that the later tradition of revenge drama owes a debt to Seneca, for Seneca's tragedies regularly portray "souls moving toward revenge by choice"; tragedy was for the Stoics a natural venue for portraying the psychology of such judgmental passions.

B. Peerless Poet, Perfect Pictures

Although we can trace Seneca's thinking on these philosophical issues in his prose writings, we must wait fifteen hundred years to see their implications for his tragedies. Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* is among the first works of literary theory written in English, but it is built on a classical foundation of criticism,

some of which Sidney knew directly (e.g., Horace's *Ars Poetica*) and some through French and Italian interpretations (e.g., Aristotle's *Poetics*). As Kathy Eden (1986) has demonstrated, moreover, Sidney inherited a version of Aristotle's theory that had been filtered through Stoic thought. It is this Aristotelian/Stoic theory that Sidney finds exemplified in Seneca's plays. For Sidney, the "peerless poet" creates a "perfect picture," "an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description" (107.9–11, 14–15). And of "high and excellent Tragedy" the poet whom Sidney quotes and praises is Seneca (117.34, 118.5–6, 134.3).

In defending poetry against the old Platonic complaint that it tells "lies" (123), Sidney asserts that the poet's mimesis produces "a perfect picture" that blends the philosopher's abstraction and the historian's "particular truth" in a way that is superior to both. The greater truthfulness of poetry for Sidney lies in its *energia*,²⁷ its "vividness," which constitutes the "material point of Poesy" (138.5), for the poet is a "maker" of images more than of words: "[T]he peerless poet . . . giveth a perfect picture . . . , for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul" (107.9–11, 13–16). Sidney's description of the power of poetry's pictures, their *enargeia* in Greek terms, echoes the Stoics' characterization of a kataleptic impression, an image that testifies to its own truthfulness. Such an impression, "being plainly evident (*enargēs*) and striking (*plēktikē*), lays hold of us almost by the very hair, as [the Stoics] say, and drags us off to assent" (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 7.257). Sidney's perfect pictures "strike" in just this way.

It is revealing that the Stoics regularly illustrate their concept of kataleptic impressions using scenes from tragedy, which constitute the same kind of "perfect pictures" that Sidney associates with effective poetry, poetry that offers an image of truth. Longinus, author of *On the Sublime* and Seneca's approximate contemporary, seems to draw on this Stoic tradition when he defines the word *phantasia*, the Greek equivalent to the Latin *imago*, in two ways, side by side: first as a cognitive impression and then as a literary passage where "you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience," a notion that he then illustrates with a scene from tragedy (15.1–2). Sidney's account of poetry's pictures, I believe, draws not just on Aristotle's defense of poetry's universality but also on the Stoics' emphasis on their vividness as the criterion of truth. Sidney's "peerless poet" does just what Longinus praises: He places an image before the mind's eye.²⁸ It is also what Seneca, I believe, consciously sets out to do as tragic poet.

That is why Sidney, when he praises the ideal tragedy, turns to Seneca as the genre's "peerless poet," for Sidney rightly senses that Seneca is drawn to tragedy's cognitive power and its kataleptic impressions:

[H]igh and excellent Tragedy . . . openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue . . . maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours, . . . with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded: [it] maketh us know,
Qui sceptrā saeuus duro imperio regit,
Timet timentes, metus in auctorem redit. (117.34–118.6)

These last lines, quoted without attribution, are drawn from Seneca's *Oedipus* (705–706; Sidney reverses the order of *duro* and *saeuus* in the Senecan original.): “The man who cruelly and harshly wields power fears those who fear him; anxiety returns to claim its author.” Sidney's definition of tragedy highlights the two categories of discussion that had, since Plato, been central to criticism of the genre: its cognitive status and its psychological impact. On both scores, Sidney offers an essentially Aristotelian defense against Plato's criticisms: Tragedy is a revelation of truths (made “manifest”) that through “commiseration” and “admiration” (a modification of Aristotle's “pity” and “fear”)²⁹ teaches us proper values and thus to accept the tribulations of experience, which was the Renaissance's understanding of catharsis.

Everything that Sidney says here about tragedy could have been drawn from Seneca's own words—in his prose and in his plays. While we cannot prove that Sidney knew of Seneca's similar sentiments, we can acknowledge that Sidney, a sixteenth-century man with a résumé much like Seneca's own (a point that I develop further in the conclusion), responded to Senecan tragedy with a powerful insight that deserves closer attention. Sidney, using sources that were available to Seneca in his own time, creates the kind of poetics that Seneca might himself have composed in defense of his decision to write tragedy. I aim both to confirm Sidney's reading of Seneca and to examine the somewhat surprising ways in which Aristotle's ideas shaped Stoic thinking about poetry. Along the way I also demonstrate that Sidney's conception of poetry bears traces of this Stoic tradition.

The essence of tragedy lies for Sidney in its cognitive power: It “openeth,” “showeth forth,” “manifest[s],” and “maketh us know.” It is a perfect picture because it constitutes a vivid revelation, as Sidney's metaphor of the ulcer suggests. Tragedy's power “to open wounds” is epistemological rather than therapeutic; as D. W. Robertson argued (1941, 61), Sidney uses the ulcer to characterize the content of tragedy rather than its effect. Tragedy opens wounds, in other words, not to drain and thereby to heal them but to show us what the ulcers beneath the skin look like. Seneca expresses a similar desire to look inside the souls of those who suffer from “tyrannical humours” and sees poetry as a

means by which to do so. For Seneca, the angry face, so contorted and hideous, is already powerful proof of the unnatural character of the emotions inside. When the image on the outside is so foul (*extra imago tam foeda est; De Ira* 2.35.4), the soul within must be diseased, *ater maculosusque et aestuans et distortus et tumidus* [black, spotted, inflamed, misshapen and swollen] (2.36.2). If tragedy is for Sidney something like exploratory surgery, it is for Seneca a kind of *extispicium*, an examination of the insides in the search for meaningful signs: “Now anger’s deformity is so great even as it passes out through bones and flesh and so many impediments. What if the soul could be shown naked?” (2.36.2).³⁰ Passion is a disease, a tumor (*De Ira* 1.20.1), or an ulcer (3.9.5), and poetry, Seneca suggests, offers a way to make this truth manifest: “Let us picture anger like the monsters poets imagine, wreathed in serpents and breathing fire” (2.35.5). At this point Seneca cites a description of the Furies from Vergil’s *Aeneid* of the sort that he regularly features in his own tragedies. Poetry can be for Seneca, then, as for Sidney, a mechanism that “showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue,” and tragedy is the genre most closely associated with such diseased emotions. Shortly after his discussion of the angry soul, Seneca cites tragic Ajax as an illustration of the harm that anger can do to those who experience it: “Many therefore have persisted in their angry fury and have never regained the sanity which they had banished. Furor drove Ajax to his death and anger drove him into his fury” (*De Ira* 2.36.5). Sidney uses Ajax to make this same Stoic point: “Anger, the Stoics say, was a short madness: let but Sophocles bring you Ajax on a stage, killing and whipping sheep and oxen, thinking them the army of the Greeks, with their chieftains Agamemnon and Menelaus, and tell me if you have not a more familiar insight into anger than finding in the schoolmen his genus and difference” (108.1–6).

Sidney may or may not have read Seneca’s *De Ira*, but at the very least he is drawing on the same interpretive traditions that influenced Seneca and of which Seneca himself became a part.³¹ Except for the reference to Sophocles, whom Sidney knew only at second hand, all of the allusions to tragedy in this section of the *Apology* refer to Seneca’s plays, as Myrick has argued (1935, 100). Moreover, Sidney’s way of reading poetry, as “speaking pictures” that “illuminate” and “figure forth” (107.33–34), offers a version of Aristotelian mimesis that had passed along the way through Stoic hands. Sidney was applying to Senecan tragedy an essentially Stoic poetics in which tragedy is a manifestation of the soul.

We might expect that Seneca, as a Stoic, would reject the Aristotelian concept of catharsis under any interpretation since it uses pity and fear, emotions that Seneca condemns as harmful.³² Yet Seneca’s attitude toward these emotions as responses to drama is surprisingly tolerant. He classes the *tristitia* [sadness] and *timor* [fear] that we feel in watching a play, for example, as

instinctive and hence natural reactions that need not be condemned (*De Ira* 2.2–5). Moreover, Sidney could have found support for his reading of Senecan tragedy in Aristotelian terms in the *Troades*, where Seneca stages the climax of the tragedy as a play within the play, a metatheatrical trope of which he was fond. The son and daughter of Hector are about to be put to death, Astyanax to be hurled from the walls of Troy, Polyxena to be sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles, all to ensure that Troy will never rise again. The Greeks have assembled as spectators (*tumulo ferus spectator Hectoreo sedet* [a barbarous spectator sits on Hector's tomb] 1087) of the scene, gathered in a valley that naturally has the shape of a theater (*crescit theatri more* 1125). Polyxena, proud and beautiful, “moves” (1144) the crowd as she awaits the blade: *omnium mentes tremunt,/ mirantur ac miserantur* [the minds of everyone there trembled; they admire and they pity] (1147–48). Here Sidney could see tragedy's “admiration and commiseration” at work; indeed, his English words are built on the Latin roots of Seneca's.

C. Squemysh Areopagites

Even in Sidney's own age, however, there were those who had doubts about Senecan tragedy and its effects; Thomas Newton called them “squeymish Areopagites,” those who judge and reject plays on moral grounds.³³ Newton, who in 1581 published a collection of English translations of Seneca's plays by various hands, acknowledged in his introduction that such tragedies posed “a great danger of infection”:

[I]t is by some squeymish Areopagites surmyzed, that the readinge of these Tragedies, being enterlarded with many Phrases and sentēces, literally tending [at the first sight] sometime to the prayse of Ambition, sometyme to the mayntenaūce of cruelty, now and then to the approbation of incontinenie, and here and there to the ratification of tyranny, cannot be digested without great daūger of infection.³⁴

Sidney had anticipated this objection and answered it with a notion of poetic justice. Tragedy can tolerate immorality as long as it shows the ruin to which evil leads: “[I]f evil men come to the stage, they ever go out (as the tragedy writer answered to one that misliked the show of such persons) so manacled as they little animate folks to follow them” (111.32–35).

Sidney here alludes to an anecdote transmitted in Plutarch's essay “How the Young Should Study Poetry”: “Euripides is reported to have said to those who railed at his Ixion as an impious and detestable character, ‘But I did not

remove him from the stage until I had fastened him to the wheel' ” (*Moralia* 19e). If immorality is punished on stage, its seductive appeal is neutralized. When Newton seeks to defend Seneca's plays against the charge of moral infection (1966, 5), he uses just this argument. When Senecan tragedy voices immorality, he asserts, we need to “consider the circumstances, why, where, and by what manner of persons such sentences are pronounced” and observe these characters' ultimate fate. Just like Sidney, Newton believes that those whose words “praise Ambition” or “ratify tyranny” come to bad ends; Seneca, he asserts, “bytingly layeth doune the guedon [i.e., the reward or wages] of filthy lust, cloaked dissimulation, and odious treachery.”³⁵ We should expect Seneca to agree since he cites a similar anecdote (*Ep.* 115.14–16) about Euripides, who stood up in the audience of one his plays and asked the crowd to wait until the end to see how Bellerophon was punished for his greed.

The last fifty years have increasingly produced readers of Seneca who are squemish Areopagites, alert to the moral dangers inherent in tragedy and inclined to believe that Seneca was, too. As Charles Segal has argued (1986, 11), “Seneca's portrayal of powerful emotions to shock or horrify his audience seems increasingly refractory to a philosophical interpretation which would see him as combating these emotions.” For these contemporary Areopagites,³⁶ Seneca's *Thyestes* is the model Senecan tragedy on which to build their case against a philosophical reading. Alessandro Schiesaro's recent book, *The Passions in Play: Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (2003), highlights this tragedy because it “foregrounds the complexities inherent in creating poetry as well as in reading and watching it. Atreus dominates the stage as a gifted poet. . . . Inspiration, role-playing, deception and recognition are not only staged, but metadramatically analysed and questioned” (1). After Atreus kills and cooks the sons of his brother, Thyestes, in their long-running feud over the throne, he serves them to their father and then becomes audience to the very scene that he has scripted. As A. J. Boyle has noted, “The play's theatricality reaches both its climax and most overt display in the final act . . . , in which Atreus plays again . . . character, actor, audience and dramaturge” (1997, 117).

Yet Atreus' reaction to this “play” is neither admiration nor commiseration but rather *Schadenfreude*, a delicious pleasure in his brother's suffering: *libet videre, capita natorum intuens/quos det colores* [I enjoy watching how his face changes color as he looks at the heads of his sons] (903). Tragedy neither moves this king to learn nor teaches him that fear can redound against those who create it. When his servant makes just this point (207–208), Atreus brushes it aside: *Quod nolunt velint* [Let them learn to like what they don't like] (212). This seems to be Seneca's version of a similar and more famous line spoken by Atreus in a play by Accius, performed in 140 BC: *Oderint dum metuant* [Let them hate me as long as they fear me]. Seneca uses this, as he describes it,

“detestable verse” in both his *De Ira* (1.20.4) and his *De Clementia* (1.12.4 and 2.2.2) to advise future rulers against tyrannical behavior, For it is a sentiment, he tells Nero, that has “led many to their ruin.”

In Atreus’ “play,” however, there is no poetic justice, no ruin for tyrants. Alessandro Schiesaro has argued that Atreus embodies the pleasures, not the moral reservations, associated with poetry that indulges violence: “[W]e must also be prepared to recognise that Atreus, the playwright with hands drenched in blood, stands out in the play as the embodiment of a victory against the constraints of moral repression that is inextricably connected with the force and pleasure of poetry” (1994, 207). The play within the play, staged by Atreus, suggests for Schiesaro that Seneca himself, in staging *Thyestes*, found pleasure and release from the morality he elsewhere preaches. That is why, perhaps, Seneca does not stand up, like Euripides, and point out that the wicked have received their due here. Seneca has so emotionally identified with Atreus, the “playwright,” that he leaves it to Atreus to speak the playwright’s words about poetic justice: *Te puniendum liberis trado tuis* [I hand you over to your children for punishment] (1111).³⁷ In a moral and Stoic sense, the Areopagites agree, the *Thyestes* offers no poetic justice; evil triumphs and Atreus is its *triumphator*.

Lacking an explicit Senecan poetics outside of the plays, scholars such as Schiesaro have readily been drawn to the metatheatricity of Seneca’s plays to articulate that poetics from within. Seneca (and the Stoics in general) were fond of seeing the world as a stage, and, as we shall see in the conclusion, Shakespeare drew perhaps his most famous expression of this metaphor from Seneca’s own words.³⁸ The very prevalence of this trope, however, diminishes its interpretive power as a key to Seneca’s theory of tragedy. If drama can symbolize politics, psychology, and even the nature of philosophy itself, then theater need not, even within the plays, represent only or always itself.³⁹ Atreus need not, in short, be Seneca the playwright; he may be Caligula or Nero; he may be anger personified, *Atreus iratus*. He may be the madman and fool who is, for the Stoics, the regular star of tragedy. Ovid famously said, “Believe me, my character differs from my poetry. My life is chaste, my Muse is playful” (*Tristia* 2.353–354). We readily take Ovid at his word and accept the principle that art is not biography. Why should we treat Seneca differently? The plays within Seneca’s plays are not an infallible guide to Seneca’s poetics.

Although critics have for the last century tried to find chapter and verse in Seneca’s philosophical writings for a poetics (even an unphilosophical one) that might explain his tragedies, their efforts have either lacked coherence and depth or have faltered when applied to the plays themselves. As Roland Mayer has argued (1994, 151), “The neophyte in the mysteries of Senecan tragedy could be forgiven for feeling at sea when confronted with the issue of the philosophical interpretation of the plays.”⁴⁰ The source of this confusion, I argue, lies in

the assumption that Seneca adopted the standard Stoic theory of literature as a form of moral education, as a vehicle for Philosophy 101. If he had, we would have expected a very different form of Senecan tragedy, one in which Atreus would be punished and Thyestes would have the courage of his moral convictions. Seneca, however, generally shows disdain for the idea that the humanities can teach virtue or that drama can serve as a vehicle for engaging a broader public to think about philosophy. When Sidney finds “notable morality” and delightful teaching in Seneca’s plays, as we shall see in the next chapter, he applies to them a Stoic moralistic tradition that Seneca himself rejects.⁴¹

Seneca’s tragedies grow out of a different aspect of the Stoic tradition, the view that tragedy offers a vivid image of the human soul, that it provides, in Sidney’s words, “perfect pictures,” or in Dryden’s, “a just and lively image of human nature representing its passions and humours.”⁴² Just as Vergil wrote epic informed by the critical traditions that emerged in Homer’s wake, so too, Seneca, I believe, wrote tragedy shaped by the critical traditions formed in reaction to Greek tragedy. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, composed after Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and thus reactive rather than formative, paradoxically may have more to tell us about Senecan than about Greek tragedy.

2

The Very Ends of Poesy

Gorboduc . . . is full of stately speeches and well-sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca's style, and as full of notable morality, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtain the very end of Poesy.

—Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*

A. The Causes of Art

Struck by the fact that Seneca never mentions his tragedies in his prose essays and confused by his seemingly contradictory remarks about poetry and its worth, scholars have wondered whether in fact Seneca was really interested in, as Sidney puts it, “the very end of Poesy.”¹ Seneca's sixty-fifth epistle shows, however, that he had thought about the question and about how to frame it properly. There Seneca discusses ancient theories of causes (*causae*) in nature and, following the lead of Plato and Aristotle, uses art and the artist as an analogy in exploring the issue. Aristotle believed that there were four causes for any phenomenon, including a work of art: the material, the efficient, the formal, and the final. This last, the *causa finalis*, expresses the end of the work, the *propositum totius operis*, its “purpose” in Seneca's description (*Ep.* 65.5):

The fourth cause is the purpose of making it. For if there had been no purpose the statue would not have been made. What is the purpose? Either it is money (if he proposed it for sale) or glory (if he worked for renown) or piety (if he made it as a temple offering) [Seneca is using the example of a statue.]. Therefore this too is a cause on account of which it is made. Or do you not think we should count as a cause that in whose absence the artefact would not have been produced? (*Ep.* 65.5–6; trans. Inwood)

Although Seneca proceeds in the letter to reject this “swarm of causes” in favor of the Stoic view that there is only one cause, “that which makes,” along the way he is rejecting not so much Aristotle’s analysis as his terminology: “[Aristotle] says, ‘The purpose of the artisan, because of which he proceeds to make something, is also a cause.’ Granted that it is a cause, it is not an efficient cause but a subsequent cause” (*Ep.* 65.14; trans. Inwood).² As Brad Inwood has noted in his commentary on this epistle, “It is clear that behind their basic notion of cause as something because of which and through whose activity something else occurs, the Stoics also developed a rich and complex theory of causal factors” (2007, 145). The artist’s purpose can be considered one of these “causal factors.” Seneca was quite capable, then, of thinking about art in terms of its “end,” even though he never applies this sort of analysis of motives explicitly to his own tragic poetry.³

Nicholas Trevet, however, did. Trevet (c. 1258–1328), a Dominican scholar working in Oxford, was one of the most accomplished classicists of the early fourteenth century; he wrote commentaries on pagan, as well as Christian, authors, on Seneca the Elder’s *Declamations*, Livy’s history, and Seneca’s tragedies, as well as the works of Augustine and Boethius.⁴ Cardinal Niccolò Albertino da Prato, a member of the papal court at Avignon, wrote to Trevet asking him to write a commentary that would make Seneca’s tragedies, recently rediscovered and written in a genre that was at the time new and strange, more readily readable. As was then common, Trevet began his commentary with an “Aristotelian prologue” that applied the four causes to Seneca’s tragedies. Although Trevet was unusual in realizing that the tragedian was also the philosopher, he did not apply this scheme to Seneca’s plays because of Seneca’s own discussion of it in *Ep.* 65. Rather, Trevet did so because Aristotle, whose works had recently been rediscovered, had reshaped the methods of all disciplines from astronomy to theology. One important consequence of the application of this method to literature was the emphasis it placed on the author’s role in creating a work of art.⁵

Trevet offers two alternatives for the *causa finalis* of Seneca’s tragedies:

The ultimate purpose is the enjoyment of the audience, or else, in so far as there are narrated here some actions which are praiseworthy and some which deserve censure, the book can in a certain manner be placed in the category of ethics. In that case, its end is the correction of behaviour by means of the examples set out here. (Minnis and Scott 1988, 346)

It is not surprising that Trevet, as a churchman writing for his superior, offers a moralistic reading of the tragedies and posits a rhetorical and Horatian

dichotomy of goals. In fact, Trevet believes that Seneca *omne tulit punctum* (*Ars Poetica* 343) [carries every vote] by combining the two *desiderata* praised by Horace and highlighted by Sidney as well: delight and teaching. In his reply to Cardinal Niccolò he suggests that Seneca through his tragedies offers “bitter medicines coated with honey” and that he “instil[s] into tender minds ethical teachings . . . while at the same time amusing them” (Minnis and Scott 1988, 342).

Trevet applied to Seneca’s plays a neoclassical poetics that was assumed to apply to almost all forms of literature; therefore, he did not provide Senecan evidence in support of his thesis. Modern critics, however, have sought to construct Seneca’s own “end” for his poetry from his own words. They have proposed a variety of possibilities: Seneca was guided by Stoic *grammatica* and its use of poetry for education; or, trained in rhetoric by his father, he viewed tragic myths as mere exercises in cleverness; or, guided by the poetics of Alexandria, he treated poetry as a game; or, influenced by the Platonic condemnation of tragedy, he wrote plays that undermined his philosophy and expressed his unconscious inner turmoil. That none of these theories of Senecan tragedy has decisively prevailed is in large part a consequence of the complexity of the issues involved and of the nature and scarcity of the evidence that Seneca provides on the subject. Since Seneca never wrote a *Poetics*, his random comments on poetry must be carefully contextualized and then mapped, based on their terminology, against the various critical traditions to which he alludes. It is tempting (I, too, succumb) to draw broad conclusions from Seneca’s *obiter dicta*, but these conclusions must, at the very least, be compatible with the implications of the immediate point Seneca is making and consistent with the distinctions between the various genres regularly implicit in the language of literary criticism in antiquity. In the following sections I examine the various theories that scholars have advanced for the “very ends” of Senecan tragedy and look carefully in each case at the evidence that they have assembled from Seneca’s own words.

B. Seneca the Stoic Moralizer

The ancients assert . . . that poetry is a kind of elementary philosophy (*philosophian tina . . . protēn*), which, taking us in our very boyhood, introduces us to the art of life and instructs us, with pleasure to ourselves, in character, emotions, and actions. And our School goes still further and contends that the wise man alone is a poet.

That is the reason why in Greece the various states educate the young, at the very beginning of their education, by means of poetry; not

for the mere sake of entertainment (*psuchagōgias*), of course, but for the sake of moral discipline (*sōphronismou*). (Strabo, *Geography* I.2.3)

Strabo (64 BC–AD 23), a Greek geographer and historian who described the ancient world in the age of Augustus, considered himself a Stoic, and it is generally thought that the picture he paints of poetry here represents the official Stoic view.⁶ Even Plato gave poetry a place in the elementary training of his guardians, so it is not surprising that the ancients, and particularly the Stoics, might consider poetry as a form of elementary philosophical instruction for the masses.

Berthe Marti has been the most prominent modern proponent of the view, first voiced centuries ago by Trevet, that Seneca composed his plays as a form of *prima philosophia*, as parables of the Stoic lessons taught at a more advanced level in the prose essays:⁷

Seneca realised that drama, with its vivid representation of men struggling against destiny, might become a useful illustration of what he taught in the less popular *Moral Essays* and *Moral Epistles*. His aim always remained the teaching of philosophy, but since it was proving a bitter pill for his contemporaries to swallow, he used the dramatic form as sugarcoating, somewhat as Lucretius before him had used poetry to make Epicureanism more palatable. (1945, 219)

Although Marti cites various philosophical traditions that treated poetry as philosophy for the masses, she does not examine Seneca's own views on the issue of poetry as a form of popular philosophy.⁸ In contradiction to what Strabo says of the ancients, Seneca in fact argues that almost all of the philosophical schools have refused to present their views in a way designed to please the public. The Peripatetics, Academics, Stoics, and Cynics, Seneca writes, agree with Epicurus, who says, "I have never wanted to please the masses. For what I know they do not like" (*Ep.* 29.10). *Non est philosophia populare artificium nec ostentationi paratum* [Philosophy is not a device to win public favor nor designed to make a show] (*Ep.* 16.3). Strabo had argued that wondrous stories increase an audience's pleasure, "which is a charm that leads to learning" (I.2.8). Seneca believes, however, that philosophers should not aim to give their listeners pleasure (*Ep.* 75.7) but should, like doctors, seek to heal, not charm them: "Consider also that the mind is accustomed to entertaining itself rather than to healing itself, to making philosophy into an amusement when it should be a remedy" (*Ep.* 117.33).⁹ In general, Seneca seems to have little sympathy for the idea that philosophy needs a sugarcoating: *Non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint* [Let our words not please but profit] (*Ep.* 75.5).¹⁰ In all of

these contexts, it must be admitted, Seneca is speaking explicitly of oratory, not of poetry, but the aesthetic and pedagogical principles he voices in them seem applicable to poetry as well. It appears improbable, based on his own testimony, that Seneca would have turned to poetry as a form of philosophy simply because it made the subject more pleasurable to learn.

1. *Philosophy and the Theater*

The theater in particular was for Seneca a venue largely alien to philosophy and its message. Strabo may argue that “philosophy is for the few, whereas poetry is of greater good to the public and able to fill theaters” (I.2.8), but Seneca criticizes those students of philosophy who approach the subject with the attitude of theatergoers: “Some come [to a philosopher’s classroom] to hear, not to learn, just as we are drawn into the theater for the sake of pleasure, to delight our ears with a speech, a song or a story” (*Ep.* 108.6).¹¹ On several occasions Seneca praises the value of the moral *sententiae* with which drama is filled (*Ep.* 108.8–12 and 115.12–14), but as Joachim Dingel has argued (1974, 29f.), Seneca’s praise of the theater in this one respect explains little about his own plays. Seneca recommends the philosopher’s use of such maxims, not necessarily his composition of them, and he clearly intends for the philosopher to extract such verses from their poetic context, not to use poems as a whole:

In response to verses like these the lowest of men applauds and rejoices to hear his own faults reproached. How much more likely do you think that is to happen when such things are said by a philosopher, when verses are grafted (*inseruntur*) onto his salutary teachings in order to instill these same ideas more effectively in the minds of the inexperienced? (*Ep.* 108.9)

Seneca’s approach to poetry in this regard is much like that made to his own plays by his admirers in the Middle Ages, who mined his poetry for their *sententiae* (cf. Pastore-Stocchi [1964]). There is in Seneca’s praise of poetry’s memory verses not a sufficient poetics to explain his plays.¹²

Martha Nussbaum (1993, 127), however, has argued that there is an implicit if not an explicit poetics here applicable to drama:

I suspect that Seneca’s view of poetry here is more complex. The effect that he describes as happening in the theatre is surely not independent of the whole experience of going to a mime of Publilius. The relaxed atmosphere, the audience’s identification with the characters who live

and to some extent speak like them and whose lives are full of engaging and amusing incident—all this appears essential to the effect of self-recognition and “confession” that Seneca describes, although he is not explicit on this point.

In fact, Seneca’s remarks elsewhere make it clear that the “whole experience” of the theater is *not* essential to the beneficial effect that versified ideas can offer. In *Ep.* 94.27 Seneca notes that precepts (versified maxims of the sort he admires in Publilius Syrus, a first-century-BC writer of maxims and mimes) have a marked impact in and of themselves (*per se multum habent ponderis*) whether they are woven into a poem (*carmini intexta sunt*) or condensed into prose. Later in this same letter (94.43) he illustrates this point with a few proverbs that are not metrical, such as *Nil nimis* [Nothing in excess] and *Avarus animus nullo satiatur lucro* [No amount of wealth satisfies a greedy mind]. Everyone will acknowledge being struck by *his brevissimis vocibus, sed multum habentibus ponderis* [these pithy expressions, but with a marked impact]. We hear these “with a sort of shock” (*cum ictu quodam*) because “truth itself even without reason leads us on.” Their impact, in other words, is precisely the same as that of verses heard in the theater, for both lead us to a “confession of the truth” (*Ep.* 108.12), but here the truths are “very brief,” utterly without context. In *Ep.* 115.12–16, in a passage I touched on in chapter 1, Seneca again turns to the theater and its power but in a way that confirms that the impact of versified truths is immediate and independent of the context in which they are found. Seneca cites a series of maxims that praise wealth, including one from Euripides’ *Danae* that leads its audience to erupt in hostility. Euripides, present in the audience, urges them to be patient since the character who praises money as a blessing greater than mothers or children will end up dead before the end of the play. Here the dramatic context can neutralize the negative impact of a misleading maxim, but in fact the impact is always instinctive, a “blow” that comes immediately and emotionally. The poetry that Seneca finds effective with the masses is generally limited to the length of a single verse. These momentary truths in the theater may promote self-knowledge, as we shall see in chapter 4, but in general, Seneca realizes, people go to the theater for pleasure rather than for profit.

2. *Educating the Young*

In Greece, Strabo reminds us, education of the young began with poetry. Since Seneca was a practicing poet who also wrote on the proper education of children (*De Ira* 2.21), we might expect him to approve of this tradition. We should remember from the first, however, that tragedy was not the ideal form of poetry

one might choose to write with children in mind; Aeschylus points out in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1054–1055) that students have their teachers at school while tragic poets like him compose for adults. In *Ep.* 88 Seneca criticizes from a philosophical perspective the curriculum in literature, music, math, and astronomy traditionally followed by a Roman boy, conceding value to these subjects in the end only as a preparation for the real education to be found in philosophy: “Those arts addressed to boys and somewhat similar to the liberal arts, which the Greeks call ‘cycle of studies,’ we call ‘liberal.’ However, only those arts, whose concern is virtue, are liberal, or more truly said, free” (*Ep.* 88.23). In its Roman incarnation, this curriculum taught boys to control a horse but not to control their passions, to defeat an opponent at boxing but not to defeat their own anger (88.19). Even when poetry is introduced in school, its study is limited to the memorization of plots and to the application of the rules of prosody. Seneca asks (88.3), “Which of these removes fear, eliminates desire, or reins in passion?”

For Strabo it is less poetry than myth that is useful in attracting the young to philosophy: “For man is eager to learn, and his fondness for tales is a prelude to this quality. It is fondness for tales, then, that induces children to give their attention to narratives and more and more to take part in them” (I.2.8). These myths can work in two ways: Myths about the monstrous (*to teratōdes*), about gorgons or giants, frighten and thereby deter (they produce *apotropē*); pleasant myths about heroes such as Heracles or Theseus inspire emulation (*protropē*). Seneca recognizes that myths can produce both of these reactions, but he is at best ambivalent about myth and does not treat it as a form ideally suited to children. As we shall see in chapter 5, Seneca makes extensive use of the monstrous in his tragedies and emphasizes its deterrent power as a symbol of human emotion. He is, however, dismissive of the myths of Hades when they are read as literally true: “[T]he tales which make the dead frightening to us are mere stories . . . poets upset us with empty fears” (*Ad Marciam* 19.4). In the *Troades* (405) the chorus denigrates these myths in a similar way as *rumores vacui verbaque inania* [idle rumors and meaningless words]. *Fabula* becomes a more positive term for Seneca when it is not the specific Latin designation for the familiar Greek myths but a more general label for the kind of story or legend that we can find in history: [*animum*] . . . *historia fabulis detineat* [Let history enthrall the mind with its stories] (*De Ira* 3.9.1).¹³

Strabo argues that some audiences, particularly women and the public at large, need such myths because they cannot be influenced by philosophical arguments:

Most of those who live in the cities are incited to emulation by the myths that are pleasing, when they hear the poets narrate mythical

deeds of heroism, such as the Labours of Heracles or of Theseus, or hear of honours bestowed by the gods, or, indeed when they see paintings or primitive images or works of sculpture which suggest any similar happy issue of fortune in mythology; but they are deterred from evil courses when, either through descriptions or through typical representations of objects unseen, they learn of divine punishments, terrors, and threats. (I.2.8)

Marti has suggested (1947, 14) that in this regard Strabo could be reflecting the thinking of Posidonius (c. 135–51 BC), the Greek Stoic who, in a rejection of orthodox Stoicism, retained Plato's three-part soul and as a consequence emphasized the need for "irrational" forms of education: "Help and harm comes to the irrational through irrational means, to the rational through knowledge and ignorance" (EK fr. 168.16–17). One such irrational means appears in what Posidonius calls the *anazōgraphēsis*, a "pictorial representation" that is true to life (EK fr. 162.8). Perhaps Strabo's "primitive images," "works of sculpture," and "typical representations" are a legacy of Posidonius' use of what Seneca was to call *descriptiones*, which offer "tokens (*signa*) and traits (*notas*) of each virtue and vice" (*Ep.* 95.65). Seneca was fond, in both theory and practice, of such visualizations, as we shall see in the next two chapters, but mythology does not function in Seneca's tragedies in the ways that Strabo here describes.

Hercules, one of Strabo's case studies, confirms this point. Seneca's *Hercules Furens* does not present a "pleasing" image of the hero, nor does it suggest a "happy issue of fortune" to crown his lifetime of labors. As Seneca acknowledges in his *De Constantia* (2.2.1), "our Stoic school has declared [Ulysses and Hercules] to be wise men, unconquered by toils, disdainful of pleasures, and victors over all terrors." Such a Hercules might have offered a useful lesson to elementary students of Stoicism, but Seneca's play offers a more ambivalent and challenging interpretation of the hero, as John Fitch (1987) has shown. Juno sees in his superhuman achievements not virtue but arrogance (63–74); Lycus takes Hercules' year of submission to Queen Omphale, during which he dressed in Tyrian robes and wore perfumes, as a sign of Hercules' taste for pleasure (465–471), and the chorus recommends to Hercules an Epicurean leisure in place of his Stoic pursuit of good deeds (192–201). As Fitch acknowledges (43), this does not reduce *Hercules Furens* to a "literary exercise in a particular genre"; Seneca is using the myth to think about important ethical, philosophical, and historical issues. The "harsh pessimism" of the play, however, leads even Marti to acknowledge that, taken on its own, it offers neither easy nor clear Stoic lessons but at best only "partial solutions to the problems" it raises (1945, 223, 225).¹⁴

3. *Critical Spectatorship*

If poetry is to serve as a basic philosophical education for the masses, the philosopher must be present as teacher to supplement the partial solutions that poetry itself offers and to counteract the negative lessons it often teaches. As Martha Nussbaum (1993, 131) has noted, Plutarch (AD 46–120), the Greek historian and essayist, compares a student’s situation when hearing poetry to Odysseus’ in listening to the Sirens. Rather than plugging the ears with wax, the Stoics recommend instead controlling the students’ response by binding them to “some upright standard of reason” offered by their teachers (*Moralia* 15d). In his essay “On the Way in Which Young Men Should Read the Poets,” Plutarch (15f–16a) shares Strabo’s view that poetry is a form of philosophy for the young and illustrates the teacher’s role in fostering among them what Nussbaum has called “critical spectatorship” (1993, 136–145). Plutarch would not purge poetry of all that is misleading and potentially harmful but instead would guide the young very carefully in their reading of it.

While he sketches here what is primarily a hermeneutics rather than a poetics, Plutarch does argue that the poets themselves can within their poems guide the audience to the conclusions that a philosopher would have it draw: through internal commentary (19a), through poetic justice (20b–c), and through emendation of the text (33c). If Seneca wrote his tragedies in some way to teach, we might expect him to use at least some of these strategies. In various ways, Plutarch suggests, poets can indicate to their audience the proper way in which to assess the behaviors depicted; “[Homer] in advance discredits the mean and calls our attention to the good in what is said” (*Moralia* 19b). Drama, through dialogue and especially the chorus, lends itself to a form of running commentary within the text, and Senecan tragedy utilizes this natural tendency of the genre. In his *Medea* her nurse urges Medea to restrain her passion and describes (380–396), in tendentious tones, the *notas*, the “marks” of her anger in just the way Strabo and Posidonius recommend. The chorus does the same (849–878), but it also highlights the dangerous power of passion by comparing it to a storm at sea (579–594) and by condemning the human daring that first led men to confront the dangers of the sea (301–379). Poetry’s presentation of “disreputable deeds” likewise is corrected when those who perpetrate them experience poetic justice in the form of “disgrace and injury” (*Moralia* 20b). Plutarch (19e), like Seneca before him and Newton later, uses the anecdote of Euripides in the audience to make this point, but, as we saw in the first chapter, Seneca in his own plays does not “correct” injustice by punishing his villains: In the end Medea exacts (1008) punishment rather than suffers it, much as does Atreus in the *Thyestes*.

Plutarch’s most surprising strategy invites the philosopher to emend the texts that he teaches so as to counteract their dangers, either by adding

marginal corrections, juxtaposing verses that offer contrary views, or even by rewriting (*metagraphōn* 33c) the lines. Since Seneca, in rewriting Greek tragedy, is engaged essentially in just this act of emendation, we might expect him to transform the myths in Stoic ways, especially since, as Yun Lee Too (1994, 217) has suggested, Seneca uses the metaphor of the emended text to describe his own process of moral improvement in the *Moral Epistles*: *Intellego, Lucili, non emendari me tantum sed tranfigurari . . . Et hoc ipsum argumentum est in melius translati animi, quod vitia sua, quae adhuc ignorabat, videt* [Lucilius, I understand that I am not only emended but that I am transfigured . . . And this is itself the plot of a soul translated into something better because it sees the faults which it did not previously know] (*Ep.* 6.1 trans. Too).¹⁵ If moral improvement is analogous to textual revision, then Seneca should, if he wishes to use his tragedies in some way as a means of teaching, reform the text in ways that reform the audience.

It would be a major undertaking to test this thesis with even one complete tragedy, but Christopher Gill (1997, 215–228) has analyzed in some detail a passage that we might use as a test case, the famous scene from Euripides' *Medea* in which Medea proclaims, "I know that what I am about to do is bad, but anger is master of my plans, which is the source of human beings' greatest troubles" (1078–1080, trans. Gill). According to Galen, Chrysippus used these lines to confirm his own analysis of passion; as Gill has noted, Chrysippus "seems also to have taken Medea's lines . . . as an expression of the fact (as Stoics regard it) that a *pathos* constitutes a 'rejection' or 'disobedience' of the rationality of which human beings are constitutively capable" (ibid., 227). When Seneca constructs his own scene dramatizing Medea's internal debate, he emends and supplements Euripides in ways that conform to Chrysippus' Stoic analysis of the text. In fact, when Seneca's Medea says, *Medea nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis* [Now I am Medea; my talent has grown through misfortune] (910), Seneca is in one sense acknowledging that Euripides' protagonist has evolved into a new figure. It is typical of Seneca's sense of *aemulatio* that he does not translate Medea's famous lines (he comes closer to them at *Phaedra* 177–179), but he does develop their Stoic implications.¹⁶ Medea's dialogue, in which she refuses the advice of her more reasonable nurse, and her rationalization—a sign of her inherent sense of virtue and rationality—that her crime is acceptable only if it punishes her for the murder of her brother, make sense "as a way of exemplifying the Chrysippian conception of *pathos*" (Gill (1997, 228). Medea's decision to kill her children thus becomes an illustration of Seneca's definition of *ira*: "Anger ought not only to be aroused but to rush forth, for it is an impulse. An impulse, however, never arises without the assent of the mind; for it isn't possible that revenge and punishment could be transacted without the mind's knowledge" (*De Ira* 2.3.4). This is why Medea says,

nescio quid ferox/decrevit animus intus [My fierce mind has within me decided on something] (917–918). Even the passionate soul acts rationally.

4. Allegory

Although allegory or *hyponoia* [undersense] had a long pedigree in antiquity, it appealed particularly to the Stoics. Because Stoic poetic theory divided discourse into *lexis* and *logos* [style and content, respectively], the Stoics found it easy to argue that wisdom might be disguised behind words and therefore require explication. Poetry was truth in disguise, well expressed. Such an approach is defended by Strabo and practiced by Plutarch, both under the influence of Stoicism. Since Seneca, as we have seen, does not conceive of poetry as “first philosophy” and does not as a poet always practice those strategies that Plutarch as a critic finds useful in neutralizing poetry’s dangers, we should not be surprised to find that he disapproves of allegory as well. In every sense Seneca rejects an art of teaching and interpretation based on subtleties of argument, which he dismisses as the “amusements (*ludicris*) of ineffective brilliance” (*Ep.* 108.12). Tellingly, Seneca quotes Euripides, *ille tragicus*, to support his view that “the language of truth is simple” (*Ep.* 49.12).

Seneca seems to have considered allegory to be one of these “amusements of ineffective brilliance,” for he condemns Chrysippus’ use of it as “inept” and a misuse of his “subtle acumen.” In *De Beneficiis* 1.3.2–1.4.6, Seneca recounts an allegorical interpretation of the three Graces, companions of Venus, which he attributes at least in part to Chrysippus. Allegory here is essentially deanthropomorphization, an explanation of why these mythic embodiments of good deeds are three in number, sisters who dance in a circle, wear flowing robes, and are named as they are. Their robes are loose and diaphanous, for example, because kindness should not be restricted and should want to be noticed. Seneca is dubious of this form of argumentation, although, as Glenn Most (1989, 2047) has noted, he can tolerate it up to a point; he “draws the line,” however, “at explaining the names Hesiod bestowed upon each of the Graces.” Etymology and allegory were coordinate procedures in Stoicism: “A dual allegorical method emerged, one at the level of the lexicon (etymology), the other at the level of larger structures of textual discourse (allegory)” (Irvine 1994, 37).¹⁷ Seneca’s hostility toward Chrysippus’ etymological arguments is therefore a mark of his skepticism toward the underlying Stoic justification for allegory, that words are a natural expression of wisdom, *lexis* an embodiment of *logos*. When Lucilius criticizes the style of a philosopher whom Seneca admires, Seneca distinguishes wisdom from its expression: “You want him to pay attention to something insignificant, words; he has devoted himself to the greatness of his subject, trailing eloquence in his wake as a shadow, without striving for

it at all" (*Ep.* 100.10).¹⁸ The relationship between words and the reality they denote is less important to Seneca than the relationship between words and the actions that fulfill their promise. Allegory was a "species of metaphor or transferred, non-literal discourse" (Irvine 1994, 244), but Seneca denigrates such figures of speech (*translationes inprobas figurasque dicendi*) in favor of a transfer between words and deeds (*magnificas voces et animosas, quae mox in rem transferantur*) (*Ep.* 108.35).

In his attitudes toward allegoresis Seneca stands in marked contrast to his contemporary, L. Annaeus Cornutus, a freedman of one of Seneca's relatives who took the family name and worked in Rome as a *grammaticus*, serving as the tutor to the poets Lucan and Persius. Cornutus' *Summary of the Traditions concerning Greek Mythology* offers an orthodox Stoic form of allegorical interpretation, etymological in method and cosmological in focus. As teacher and author of a schoolbook, Cornutus was an embodiment, contemporary with Seneca and probably known to him, of the Stoic grammatical tradition of interpretation, which Seneca strongly rejects. Glenn Most (1989, 2048–2050) has plausibly suggested that Seneca's scornful treatment of allegory in his *Phaedra* could perhaps have been intended as a rejection of Cornutus' approach to interpreting myth. When *Phaedra* seeks to justify her frenzied attraction to Hippolytus, she cites the tales of Cupid's pervasive power, which has effected even Jove (186–194). In reply (195–203), her nurse deconstructs this myth by arguing that Cupid is merely a fiction generated by lustful minds, a notion that she dismisses as imaginary and meaningless (*vana ista* 202). Seneca's play thus offers an attitude toward myth and its allegorical interpretation closer to Lucretius' than to Cornutus'; in essence the nurse says, *Haec Venus est nobis* (*De Rerum Natura* 4.1058; cf. 3.978f. on myths of Hades).

In his scorn for philosophical forms of instruction, for the idea that Homer is necessarily a wise man and a Stoic (cf. *Ep.* 88.5), and for allegorical interpretation, Seneca stands in opposition to a tradition of interpretation with which the Stoic school has been closely identified and that became, Martin Irvine (1994) has argued, the foundation for literary culture in the West throughout the early Middle Ages. Although Seneca admires certain qualities in poetry and believes that it can be a positive educational tool, when it is read with the eye of the philosopher, there is no evidence that he accepted the Stoic theory that poetry is a necessary form of elementary philosophy. Poetry contains effective *sententiae* and striking images of virtue and vice, but philosophers can borrow these elements from existing poetry. They do not necessarily have to treat whole poems, and even more important, there is no suggestion that they would need to write poems themselves to use for this purpose. Even in Strabo and Plutarch, who explicitly recommend poetry for philosophical

purposes, the philosopher is viewed as an interpreter of poetry, not a creator of it. It is at least conceivable that philosophers might choose to write their own poetry so as to eliminate those aspects of existing poetry, seemingly inimical to philosophy, on which they normally have to exercise so much interpretive energy. However, the fact is that Seneca's plays abound in statements, characters, and actions that, on the surface, seem hostile to his philosophical message. If Seneca wrote his plays to present the ABCs of Stoicism, he must have realized that he would still need to play the role of critic as well, explaining the truths that regularly seem to be denied by the events themselves. Although the Stoics played a dominant role in the development of literary interpretation in antiquity and beyond, Seneca is a Stoic who rejects many of the central elements in his own tradition.

C. Seneca the Aristocrat at Play

If Seneca rejects the Stoic view that poetry should advance morality, does he instead see its purpose as delight? Does he, as Elaine Fantham (1982, 23) has phrased it, possess "literary appreciation in the modern sense of aesthetic, rather than moral, enthusiasm for poets"? *Levia carmina* had been since the late republic a regular avocation of the Roman elite, and during the imperial era, as Ludwig Friedländer (1965, 3.28) points out, occasional poetry of this sort "offered a doubly welcome refuge to peaceful spirits, who sought an ideal support for life and an escape from reality." In defending his own use of poetry in his way, as an *oblectamentum* with which to fill his leisure time, Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 5.3.5) cited a long list of famous Romans before him who had done the same, Seneca among them. Some scholars have therefore wondered whether in fact Seneca's tragedies are representative of this "cultured game," in which "the composition of poetry was a polite accomplishment of men of culture."¹⁹

Seneca tells us that during his eight years of exile on Corsica (just the kind of withdrawal from responsibility during which Romans typically engaged in poetry) he divided his time between lighter and more serious pursuits:

Sunt enim optimae, quoniam animus omnis occupationis expertus operibus suis vacat et modo se levioribus studiis oblectat, modo ad considerandam suam universique naturam veri avidus insurgit.

Circumstances could not be better, since the mind, free of all worry, has time for its own interests and at one time amuses itself with lighter studies, at another, eager to discover the truth, rouses itself to consider its own nature as well as the nature of the universe. (*Ad Helviam* 20.1)

Seneca here contrasts the pleasure of these *leviora studia* with the more challenging activity of ethical and cosmological studies. Critics have naturally been led to ask whether poetry in general and Seneca's tragedies in particular could have been for him a *leve studium* of just this sort, a pleasurable release from the preoccupations of philosophy.²⁰

Cicero had used the term *leviora studia* to describe music and poetry, and Seneca understands it in much the same way.²¹ In the *De Ira* (3.9.1–3) he advises that people who are prone to anger avoid the *studia graviora* and surrender themselves to just the opposite:

Studia quoque graviora iracundis omittenda sunt . . . et animus non inter dura versandus, sed artibus amoenis tradendus: lectio illum carminum obleniat et historia fabulis detineat; mollius delicatiusque tractetur. Pythagoras perturbationes animi lyra componebat; quis autem ignorat lituos et tubas concitamenta esse, sicut quosdam cantus blandimenta quibus mens resolvatur? Confusis oculis prosunt virentia et quibusdam coloribus infirma acies adquiescit, quorundam splendore praestringitur: sic mentes aegras studia laeta permulcent.

Those prone to anger should avoid the more serious pursuits . . . and their mind should not dwell on things that are difficult but should be surrendered to arts that charm: let the reading of poems soothe it and let history with its legends occupy its time. Let such a mind be handled softly and delicately. Pythagoras used to calm the troubles of his mind with the lyre. Who does not know that bugles and trumpets stir the mind, just as certain songs are charms to relax the mind? Green things help irritated eyes and certain colors soothe weak vision, while others dazzle with their splendor: in this same way pleasurable studies soothe troubled minds.

These are probably the activities Seneca labels as *leviora studia*, even though here he calls them *studia laeta*: reading poetry and history, performing and listening to music.²² Although he does not explicitly mention the composition of poetry in this context, it is implied in his discussion of the lyre and the *cantus* of relaxation since both are regular metonyms for poetry.

The terminology that Seneca uses here to describe the poetry of relaxation, however, contains generic markers that point away from tragedy and toward pastoral, lyric, and elegy: *amoenus* [pleasant], *mollis* [soft], *blandimentum* [delight].²³ Propertius (2.34) illuminates the poetic tradition that Seneca has in mind in recommending poetry as a “lighter” enterprise intended to offer relaxation. In that elegy Propertius urges his addressee, Lynceus, a man involved in

philosophical and cosmological studies of the sort Seneca mentions as one alternative for spending his time on Corsica, to turn his attention instead to the poetry of a “lighter” Philetas and that of Callimachus:²⁴

desine et Aeschyleo componere verba coturno,
desine, et ad mollis membra resolve choros.
(2.34.41–42)

Stop composing poetry in the tragic style of Aeschylus,
Stop, and relax your body to softer rhythms.

Propertius wants Lynceus to compose elegies like his own, the kind that Ovid (*Tristia* 2.465) calls *blandus* and Pliny (*Ep.* 9.22.2) calls *mollis*. This is the kind of poetry that Seneca calls for as a “lighter study” in *De Ira* 3.9, the kind that offers a soothing relaxation: *quis ignorat . . . quosdam cantus [esse] blandimenta quibus mens resolvatur?* [Who does not know . . . that certain songs are charms to relax the mind?]. Tragedy, however, as Propertius advises Lynceus, is a form of poetry apart and neither easy nor light; in fact, Propertius addresses Lynceus the tragedian as *dure poeta* (2.34.44), a mark not just of his philosophical resistance to emotion but also of the grandeur of the genres he has up to now pursued. Seneca’s plays, therefore, were probably not the kind of poetry he had in mind as an alternative to philosophy on Corsica or as an antidote to irascibility in the *De Ira*, for the language that he uses in those contexts to describe poetry was associated with an Alexandrian aesthetic that excluded tragedy.²⁵

Tragedy was one form of poetry of which *levis* could not be used, as Horace suggests in *Ars Poetica* (231): *effutire levis indigna Tragoedia versus* [Tragedy finds it beneath its dignity to spout trivial verses]. *Grandis* was the label appropriate to tragedy; *Grande sonant tragici*, Ovid tells us (*Remedia* 375), and Cicero describes an unknown tragedy as *tam grande carmen* (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.16).²⁶ Seneca’s tragic protagonists understood the generic implications of these literary labels: Atreus’ premonition is that his crime will be “grand”: *haud quid sit scio, sed grande quiddam est* (*Thyestes* 269–270) [I do not know what it is, but it is something mighty].²⁷ Seneca makes clear this association between *grandis* and tragedy when he has Lucilius describe what he looks for in the language of a philosopher: *Sit aliquid oratorie acre, tragice grande, comice exile* (*Ep.* 100.10) [Let there be something passionate in the style of oratory, something exalted in the style of tragedy, and something simple in the style of comedy].²⁸ As we noted in the introduction, Shakespeare’s Polonius understood the generic implications of *levis* and saw that it was not Seneca’s word: “Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light” (*Hamlet* 2.2.366).

Although in these two contexts (*Ad Helviam* 20.1 and *De Ira* 3.9.1–3) Seneca defines the *studia leviora* rather narrowly and with specific genres in mind,

Cicero shows that the term can have cultural, as well as generic, implications. In Seneca's usage, the *levis* that defines these poetic studies seems to be the *levis* that distinguished the playful, Alexandrian genres from those more serious forms of poetry known as *grandis* or *gravis*: epic and tragedy. When Cicero calls poetry a *levius studium* (*De Senectute* 14.50), however, he mentions Naevius' epic and Plautus' comedies, broadening the term, it would seem, to include poetic activity of all sorts. Cicero is using the adjective *levis* not to distinguish among genres but to contrast these activities of leisure with the more important public duties that an author would otherwise be performing. The comparative form of the adjective is sign of a basic Roman anxiety about the value of the arts in comparison with public involvement in the life of the community, an anxiety implicated in Anchises' advice to Aeneas as a "Roman": "You, Roman, remember to rule nations with your power (these will be your arts)" (*Aeneid* 6.851–852).

Both temporally and spatially, elite Romans set the life of the intellect apart from the public realm, practicing poetry during their *otium*, their "free time," defined as the opposite polarity to "business," *negotium*, and in their private homes, outside the public spaces of the city and often outside of Rome itself.²⁹ Eumolpus, Petronius' parodic image of a poet, mocks Roman poetasters, who view poetry as a tranquil refuge from the forum's professional standards: "Worn out in this way by service in the forum they frequently flee to the tranquility of poetry as if to an easier port, believing that a poem can be constructed more easily than an argument decked out with sparkling wit" (*Satyricon* 118.2). Seneca's Medea is aware of the political and social implications of *levis*; her past crimes are *levia* [trifling things], done when she was young. To punish Jason she now requires a *gravior dolor* [a more serious indignation] (48–49). As Gordon Braden (1985, 46) has noted, "Those shadings of *levis* and *gravis* come from respectable service in Roman politics." Cicero links the lighter studies with a time when "one's term of service to lust, ambition and strife" has been completed (*De Senectute* 49). Aper in Tacitus' *Dialogus* (10.5) contrasts the "rather trivial pursuits" (*levioribus*) of the tragic poet Maternus with the opportunities that his eloquence offers for distinguished service in public life and the fame that might flow from it. Likewise, Seneca turns to lighter studies when his "mind is free of all commitments (*occupationis*)" (*Ad Helviam* 20.1).

A *studium* is not *levius*, therefore, solely because it produces *levia carmina* but also because it is less serious and important than political activity. Poetry of all sorts was created during a Roman's *otium*; in fact, *otio et litteris* [leisure and literature], is essentially a form of hendiadys for Seneca in particular and for the Romans in general.³⁰ The fact that *levis* in this context does not serve as a genre marker is made clear by Tacitus' Aper, who emphasizes that he includes both the grand genres of epic and tragedy and the playful ones of lyric and elegy

in what he calls *leviora* (10.4–5). Seneca does, too, in his *Consolation to Polybius*, written, like the consolation to his mother, Helvia, during his years of exile. There (8.1–4) Seneca offers a fuller description of poetry and its role in leisure. Polybius, grieving the death of his brother, should in his quiet moments turn for comfort to “the more light-hearted” forms of literature (*hilariora studia*) like Aesop’s fables, as well as to “the more serious” (*severioribus scriptis*) such as Homer’s and Vergil’s epics. Seneca emphasizes the value of alternating between these two generic classes, each of which constitutes a component within the *studia leviora* of literary activity. In his own terms, Seneca’s tragedies would have constituted *scripta severiora*, serious poetry written to relax, to seek fame, to engage in *aemulatio*. However, his tragedies would not, as a necessary consequence of their status as *levius studium*, have embodied the poetic principles and aims associated with Callimachus and the Roman neoterics like Catullus, who were inspired by him.

Seneca derived pleasure from poetry, as his work in a variety of genres shows, and not everything he wrote was obviously stamped with his philosophy. Seneca “plays” as a poet in his *Apocolocyntosis*, his parody of the apotheosis of the emperor Claudius, a satire that in some manuscripts was titled *Ludus de morte Claudii*. As P. T. Eden (1984, 3) has noted, *Ludus de* was not “paralleled as a title until the Middle Ages, although *ludus* and *ludere* . . . do sometimes denote sportive literary activity in Roman Latin.” The title, even if neither Senecan nor ancient, would have seemed appropriate to Seneca nonetheless, for the *Apocolocyntosis* is in genre and attitude the kind of poetry that Seneca considered playful.

If there is no necessary connection in Seneca’s mind between philosophy and poetry, it is also true that he sees no necessary antagonism between them either. The fact that poetry is composed during leisure does not make it a respite from philosophy since Seneca’s philosophical writings are produced during his leisure as well. Near the end of his life Seneca offers to his alter ego, Lucilius, words that sound like the epitaph Seneca might choose for himself: “I entrusted myself to the Liberal Arts. Although my poverty urged otherwise and directed my talent toward a pursuit with immediate rewards, I turned aside to poetry that didn’t pay (*gratuita carmina*) and devoted myself to the wholesome study of philosophy” (*Naturales Quaestiones* 4a, 14). Poetry stands here side by side with philosophy, not synonymous with it but not antithetical either.

Since Seneca labels both as components of the *liberalia studia*, it is useful to recall his famous treatment of the liberal arts in *Ep.* 88. Seneca there distinguishes between the normal definition of these studies (literature, music, astronomy, the visual arts) and the revised definition he would offer instead: “But there is one truly liberal study, that which makes a person free. This is the study of wisdom, a pursuit which is sublime, courageous, great-souled”

(*Ep.* 88.2). If Seneca includes “poetry that doesn’t pay” alongside “the wholesome study of philosophy” under the heading of the liberal arts, it is not because of the traditional definition of that term. As we have seen, he is hostile to literature’s normal role in the educational curriculum; poetry and philosophy must constitute *liberalia studia* because they both in some way serve the wisdom that sets us free.

D. Seneca the Platonist

The notion that poetry is a “game” perhaps originated with Plato, who in the *Republic* says that “imitation is a form of play (*paidia*) not to be taken seriously and . . . those who attempt tragic poetry . . . are altogether imitators” (602b). By Plato’s logic, tragedy would therefore be the most playful genre of all. Some critics have speculated that Seneca’s tragedies may be playful games not in the Callimachean sense but in the Platonic one.

1. *Mad Poet*

These critics begin with the fact that Seneca’s tragedies seem to portray a Stoic world that is turned on its head: “In [the *Moral Epistles*] Seneca is concerned often to assert the Stoic view of the universe as an ordered whole; the plays reject entirely the Stoic view and proclaim disorder. In other words, the Seneca of the tragedies is, so to say, disloyal to Stoicism.”³¹ Why would Seneca the poet seek to refute Seneca the philosopher? As Alessandro Schiesaro (1997, 98) suggests, the tragedies must “aris[e] from a deeply passionate realm which has no room for reason” and thus be an expression of Seneca’s inner doubts about philosophy. To find a poetics for this view of Senecan tragedy, Schiesaro (2003, 22) turns to Plato and his notion of the inspired poet: “According to the *Phaedrus* (245a), which Seneca translates at *De Tranquillitate* 17.10, ‘the sane mind (*compos sui*) knocks in vain at the door of poetry.’” In this passage in his essay on peace of mind, Seneca cites Plato as but one of several authorities to justify the occasional exultation or “madness” that, paradoxically, supports rather than subverts mental health:

[S]ometimes nonetheless the mind must be led to exultation and freedom and solemn sobriety must for a little while be set aside. For whether we believe with the Greek poet that “it is sometimes pleasant to go mad,” or with Plato, that “in vain does a sane person knock at poetry’s doors,” or with Aristotle that “there is no great genius that does not have a mixture of madness,” the mind, unless aroused, is unable to say anything grand (*grande aliquid*) or above the thoughts of the crowd.

When it has shown contempt for the vulgar and customary and risen higher under divine inspiration, then at last it has sung something more grand than mortal voice allows. It is not able to achieve anything sublime (*sublime quicquam*) and difficult to accomplish as long as it is in its senses. It must abandon the ordinary, turn wild and chomp at the reins and carry its rider along with it to where it would have feared to ascend on its own. (*De Tranquillitate* 17.9–11)

This passage, according to Joachim Dingel (1974, 26), proves that Seneca has adopted Plato's critique of poets and poetry and thus that Seneca, like Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (248d–e), ranks poetry, even when inspired, as six rungs below philosophy. Seneca alludes here, however, not to the Plato of the *Republic*, who bans poets from the ideal state, but to the Plato who in the *Phaedrus* finds common ground between the poet and the philosopher through the divine madness they share, a madness that is the source of "the greatest goods" (244a). In citing the Plato of the *Phaedrus*, Seneca adopts the language of poetic inspiration to characterize the *philosopher's* need to express truths beyond human rationality.³² Moreover, it is misleading to single out Plato in particular from this context, for Seneca in fact cites three authorities who recommend enthusiasm, including Aristotle. Ultimately the ideas Seneca voices here can be traced back to Democritus, whose own essay on *euthymia* Seneca cites at *De Tranquillitate* 2.3.³³

2. *Sublime Poet*

Seneca also characterizes the *grande aliquid* [something grand] that enthusiasm here produces as *quicquam sublime* [anything sublime], a label that has led several scholars to explore the possibility that the essay *On the Sublime* may have influenced Seneca's attitude toward poetic enthusiasm. This treatise, of uncertain authorship, has traditionally been ascribed to Longinus and can be dated roughly to the time of Seneca.³⁴ Essentially a rhetorical handbook intended to guide "political men" (1.2), *On the Sublime* takes what elsewhere is one of three styles of oratory and transforms it into a characteristic of language and thought in all forms of writing; the sublime is the expression of great thoughts in superb and moving words and images. One of its prime sources is *enthusiastikon pathos* (8.1): "I would confidently lay it down that nothing makes so much for grandeur as genuine emotion in the right place. It inspires the words as it were with a fine frenzy and fills them with divine spirit" (8.4). Seneca's point is essentially the same: *non potest grande aliquid et super ceteros loqui nisi mota mens* (*De Tranquillitate* 17.10) [Unless it has been stirred, the mind cannot say anything grand or above the thoughts of the crowd].

Although not a philosopher, the author of *On the Sublime* shares with Seneca several Stoic attitudes, as Russell (1964, xxxviii–xxxix) has noted:³⁵ “His ideal—and it is more Stoic than anything, an eclectic Stoicism like Seneca’s—is the man who rises superior to weaknesses such as pity, fear and pain, and to current trends of materialism . . . and who at the same time ennoble himself by contemplation of the works of God in the universe. This is the kind of man who will produce ὑψηλά.” Longinus’ rhetorical principle that great ideas produce grand expressions is linked to his ethical principle that greatness of mind (*megalophrosunē*) produces the sublime (*to hypsos*) (9.2): “No, a grand style is the natural product of those whose ideas are weighty. This is why splendid remarks come particularly to men of high spirit” (9.3–4). True to his Stoic heritage, Seneca, too, considered the sublime to be a trait of a noble mind: “The *summum bonum* is unbreakable strength of mind and foresight and *sublimitas*” (*De Vita Beata* 9.4). In a passage composed largely of “philosophical commonplaces” (Russell [1964, 165]), Longinus attributes the quest for the sublime to humankind’s very nature in tones similar to Seneca’s in the *De Tranquillitate*. For Longinus (35.2), nature has “breathed into our hearts” an “unconquerable love” for whatever is divine and seemingly beyond our reach; for Seneca, it is an aroused mind that leads us to speak “something grand” that surpasses the attempts of others.³⁶ The sublime, although it can be expressed in a variety of forms, is therefore for Longinus, as for Seneca, the product of an essentially philosophical impulse that arises out of the human love for knowledge and for truth.³⁷

None of what Seneca (or Longinus) says in support of enthusiasm as a spur to poetry suggests that poetry created in this way is antithetical to philosophy or a vehicle for expressing thoughts that challenge philosophy. Schiesaro (2003, 52–55), however, draws that conclusion from the portrait of Atreus in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, a portrait that Schiesaro (*ibid.*, 128) takes to be “a case study of a ‘sublime’ poet in action” and hence of Seneca the poet at work. As Atreus ponders the means of his revenge, he feels “inspired” and is filled by a power beyond his control:

nescioquid animus maius et solito amplius
 supraque fines moris humani tumet
 instatque pigris manibus—haud quid sit scio,
 sed grande quiddam est. (267–270)

My mind is swelling with something greater and fuller than the ordinary, beyond the bounds of human norms and it urges on my sluggish hands. I do not know what it is, but is something mighty.

For Schiesaro, Atreus here represents the very genesis of poetry and of this play, for Atreus is the playwright of his own drama and his passion is his Muse, a passion that here begins to inspire him to create tragic grandeur. Schiesaro (2003, 23) suggests that Seneca's declaration of the need for a *mota mens* in *De Tranquillitate* 17 helps us to understand Atreus' experience of ecstasy: "[T]he same state of enthusiastic lack of control lies behind artistic creation and philosophical excitement."

What Atreus is here experiencing, however, is not the enthusiasm that Seneca recommends to Serenus in *De Tranquillitate* (17.11):

Cum uulgaria et solita contempsit instinctuque sacro surrexit excelsior,
tunc demum aliquid cecinit grandius ore mortali. Non potest sublime
quicquam et in arduo positum contingere, quam diu apud se est.

When it has shown contempt for the vulgar and customary and risen higher under divine inspiration, then at last it has sung something more grand than mortal voice allows. It is not able to achieve anything sublime and difficult to accomplish as long as it is in its senses.

Rather, it is the madness that Seneca mocks in the *De Ira* (1.20.2–3):

Omnes, quos uecors animus supra cogitationes extollit humanas, altum
quiddam et sublime spirare se credunt; ceterum nil solidi subest. . . .
Non habet ira cui insistat; non ex firmo mansuroque oritur, sed ven-
tosa et inanis est, tantumque abest a magnitudine animi quantum a
fortitudine audacia.

All whom a frenzied mind inspires to thoughts beyond human norms believe that they are expressing something lofty and sublime. But there is nothing solid underneath. . . . Anger does not have anything on which to stand but is a puffed up and empty thing, as far from greatness of mind as rashness is from true bravery.

Atreus is not the inspired poet of the *De Tranquillitate*, pursuing the sublime through ecstasy; he is the madman of the *De Ira*, deluded by his frenzied mind. In Seneca's terms, Atreus believes that he is pursuing the grand and sublime, but his anger is a "puffed up and empty thing," a *tumor* or *tumultus* that is the antithesis of philosophical ecstasy. "There is a great difference," Seneca says, "between a sublime mind and an arrogant one" (*De Ira* 1.20.3), and it is precisely the difference between the *De Tranquillitate* and the *De Ira* and accordingly between a sublime philosopher/poet and an arrogant Atreus ("I walk among the stars and above all others, touching the sky with my haughty head [*superbo vertice*]" [885–886]).

The sublime rises from a *mota mens* (*De Tranquillitate* 17.10), but tragic bombast from a *commota mens* (*De Ira* 1.7.3).³⁸ Atreus' persona does not illustrate what Longinus meant by the sublime but instead embodies "empty bombast," a distinction that Longinus (7.1) develops in a lengthy simile:

We must realize, dear friend, that as in our everyday life nothing is really great, which it is a mark of greatness to despise, I mean, for instance, wealth, position, reputation, sovereignty, and all the other things which on the surface have the grandeur of tragedy (*to exōthen prostragōidoumenon*), . . . well so it is with the grand style in poetry and prose. We must consider whether some of these passages have merely some such outward show of grandeur (*tina megethous phantasian*) with a rich layer of casual accretions, and whether, if all this is peeled off, they may not turn out to be empty bombast (*chauna*) which it is more noble to despise than admire.

The genuinely sublime "elevates" (*epairetai* 7.2), but we "look down on" (*kataphronein* 7.1) the showy appeals of external goods such as power, which tragedy makes appealing. Longinus' characterization of tragedy here echoes the standard Stoic definition of tragedy found in Epictetus: "For what are tragedies but the presentation in verse of the passions of humans who have admired external things (*anthrōpōn pathē tethaumakotōn ta ektos*)?" (1.4.26–27).

In Longinus' logic, tragic bombast is greatness that has swollen beyond its proper limits to become a "tumor"; the verbal root of the adjective (*chauna*) he uses can mean "to puff up." This logic is not uniquely Longinus', however, for the language he uses was commonly associated with one of the three oratorical styles, labeled as the *genus grande* or *sublime*. If handled inappropriately this style can become *sufflatum* or *tumidum*.³⁹ Seneca uses this same language to distinguish virtue from anger. *Virtus* alone is *sublimis et excelsa* (*De Ira* 1.21.4); anger is a *tumor*: "The conclusion must never be drawn that anger contributes anything to greatness of mind. It is not greatness but a tumor" (*De Ira* 1.20.1). Atreus' "poetic" behavior, therefore, which in its process may parallel that of the sublime poet, is anything but a case study in sublime poetry.

When Longinus illustrates sublimity in tragedy, C. A. J. Littlewood has noted (2004, 122–126), he cites with particular praise Euripides' portrait of Phaethon, the son of Apollo and of a mortal mother who seeks to prove his paternity and thus divinity by driving his father's chariot through the heavens. In creating this scene, Longinus writes (15.4), Euripides "has taken wing with the horses and shares the danger" (Littlewood's translation) and thereby becomes the inspired poet of Plato's description, for Longinus has "interpreted the myth of Phaethon as Plato's metaphor of poetic inspiration" (Littlewood 2004, 123).

Since Seneca approved of Phaethon's aspirations (*De Providentia* 5.10–11), Littlewood argues that Seneca's allusions to that myth in his tragedies and particularly in his *Hercules Furens* constitute an image of his own poetic inspiration. Just as Hercules is both a Juno infected with furious madness and a Phaethon climbing the heavens, so too is Seneca a tragedian torn between "the deliberate criminality of a Fury and the flawed magnificence of a Phaethon" (2004, 106). There is in Plato's vision of the inspired poet an inherent ambivalence that Seneca himself never resolves; as poet Seneca is, in Littlewood's reading, both inspired and mad, at times in tune with his philosophical self and at times dissonant from it.

Littlewood's argument rests on two pillars: that Longinus' discussion of tragedy and the sublime is guided by the contrasting images of poetic excitement represented by the Furies and Phaethon and that Seneca alludes to both myths in varying degrees in his tragedies as a way to encode his own "conflicting 'autobiographies of the work'" (ibid., 105). In chapter 3 I argue for a different reading of Longinus and his treatment of tragedy; here I express my doubts about Seneca's interest in Phaethon as a trope for his tragedies. Littlewood acknowledges the challenge posed by the metadramatic or self-reflexive elements in poetry since they "may be extended to exclude very little" (ibid., 103); his solution to this challenge is to identify a larger mythic narrative and the texts that have presented it and to use them as a control to verify his reading of the Senecan text at hand. For the *Hercules Furens* one such tradition is represented by Phaethon and his failed assault on heaven. Littlewood's reading of the *Hercules Furens* along these lines runs roughly as follows: The play opens with the theme of a mortal assault on heaven and the dangers thereby posed; in its first ode the text alludes to Euripides' *Phaethon*; the charioteer was often a figure for poetic inspiration, and Longinus "interpreted the myth of Phaethon as Plato's metaphor of poetic inspiration" (ibid., 123); Hercules, in his similarity to Phaethon, is therefore a metadramatic image of the tragedian and thus of Seneca himself.⁴⁰

The leaps of association involved in this analysis seem all the more implausible when we look at the text of Seneca's play: Phaethon is never mentioned; Euripides' play is only partially recalled through its description (in its first ode) of the dawn of a day (Littlewood concedes this point: "Whether Seneca had read all of Euripides' tragedy or just this ode is another question and one that cannot be argued by reference to Seneca's *Hercules Furens*" [ibid., 107n12]; in other words, Seneca does not touch here on Phaethon's chariot ride). Moreover, the mention of a chariot ride in "the non-Euripidean part of the ode" (*alius curru sublimis eat*, 196) "creates a political Phaethon with reference to a Roman triumph" (Littlewood 2004, 108). But why should this chariot be mythical rather than simply Roman? I am sympathetic to Littlewood's attempt to

challenge Schiesaro's argument that the Fury is Seneca's self-image; he does so, however, not by questioning the use of metatheatrical argumentation or its interpretive weight but rather by seeking a counterimage of the poet that casts his emotionality in a more positive light.

3. *Inept Poet*

Joachim Dingel (1974), in his belief that Seneca has adopted Plato's view of poetry as the antithesis of philosophy, turns for support to a series of passages in which Seneca characterizes poetry as "nonsense," whose only purpose is to "please": *Istae vero ineptiae poetis relinquuntur, quibus aures oblectare propositum est et dulcem fabulam nectere* [Truly nonsense of that sort should be left to poets, whose object it is to beguile the ears and to weave a pleasant tale] (*De Beneficiis* 1.4.5). *Ineptiae* is a word that Seneca uses on five occasions to characterize poetry,⁴¹ a fact that leads Dingel (1974, 27) to conclude, "Nonsense is the concept under which Seneca's entire literary criticism is subsumed." However, Dingel ignores the fact that the term *ineptiae* was used programmatically by the Romans to characterize particular genres of poetry such as lyric but not poetry in its entirety. Seneca writes (*Ep.* 49.5), "Cicero denied that he would have the time, even if the length of his life were doubled, to read the lyric poets. Put dialectical philosophers in the same category; they are more pitifully inept. The lyric poets play openly, but the dialectical philosophers think that they are really accomplishing something." In his use of *ineptiae* and *ludere* to characterize poetry as a source of pleasure (*oblectare*), Seneca is using with disapproval the language that the Roman neoterics and their Alexandrian models took as their credo.⁴²

The Alexandrians were particularly fond of the sort of poetry that the Greeks often labeled as *πατριγία* and that their Roman admirers such as Catullus, Horace, and Martial came to call *nugae*, *ludi*, and *ineptiae*.⁴³ Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 4.14) characterizes poetry of this sort as follows:

I am passing on my trifles (*lusus*). Together with this letter you will receive my hendecasyllabic poems, with which I amuse (*oblectamus*) myself during my free time in the carriage, in the bath, in the midst of dinner. With these I joke, I play, I love, I grieve, I complain, I grow angry, I describe at one moment something more restrained, at another something more elevated.

Pliny cites as his model Catullus, who in poem 16.5ff characterizes his *versiculi* as *molliculi et parum pudici* [rather amorous and unchaste], and refuses to defend his *ineptiae*.⁴⁴ It is clear why Seneca as a philosopher would disparage

this kind of writing, which is self-indulgent, a mere form of entertainment fit, as Ovid describes it, to please the ear (*Tristia* 2.358). In *Ep.* 108.6 Seneca acknowledges that many approach the theater with such pleasures in mind, but he denigrates this majority in comparison with those who seek instead self-knowledge.

Seneca also uses *ineptiae* to characterize the genre of theatrical mime: Publius Syrus, an actor and writer of mimes, is more forceful than any writer of tragedy and comedy “whenever he sets aside the frivolities of mime (*mimicas ineptias*)” (*De Tranquillitate* 11.8). When Trimalchio imitates the histrionic behavior of this same Syrus in the *Satyricon* (52), his wife describes his behavior as *ineptias*. It seems plausible, therefore, that *ineptiae* was a word commonly applied to the sorts of plot and styles of acting associated with these theatrical presentations.⁴⁵ Adultery and love were their principal themes, and they regularly brought gods on stage to be ridiculed for their shortcomings. Seneca, I believe, has these mimes in mind when he imagines (*De Vita Beata* 26.6) a wise man’s response to those who criticize him:⁴⁶

I endure your ravings in the same way as Jupiter Greatest and Best does the nonsense (*ineptias*) of poets, one of whom gives him wings, another horns and a third presents him as an adulterer who stays out all night. One presents him as cruel toward the gods, another as unjust to men, yet another as a sexual predator on innocent young men and even on relatives.

It is not all poets who create such “nonsense” but rather the mime writers who regularly portrayed Jupiter in the way Seneca here describes. The fathers of the Christian church cited similar descriptions of Jupiter’s escapades when they wished to criticize the mimes presented as part of Roman games.⁴⁷ Typical of these is St. Augustine’s remark: “In those games (the *ludi scaenici*) the most shameful actors used to sing and act the part of Jupiter, the corrupter of morals, and please him in the process” (*De Civitate Dei* 4.26).⁴⁸ Seneca had special reason to be hostile toward mime and theatrical presentations of that sort; they attracted larger audiences than did the philosophical schools (*Ep.* 76.4), and philosophers were among the targets that the comedians liked to mock. Just before the passage above, in which he cites the poets’ attacks on Jupiter, Seneca recalls the example of Socrates, a philosopher who had likewise ignored the taunts of poets like Aristophanes directed against him. As Hutchinson (1993, 15) notes, Seneca’s attitude toward other genres in his prose works is colored by the fact that he sees them as rivals.

To suggest, as Dingel does, that Seneca would have viewed his own tragedies as “poetic games” is to ignore the poetic programs and principles with

which these words were closely associated. For it was the shorter poetic forms, the ones that allowed the poet's own voice to be heard and that dealt with the less serious side of life, which characterized themselves as a *ludus poeticus*. We can be fairly precise, then, about the kind of poetry Seneca considers to be *ineptiae*, as well as about the qualities in poetry he uses this term to criticize. Poetry that deals playfully instead of seriously with its subject, which is composed with the thoughtless masses in mind and aims only to please, poetry that is for its creator but a game and an entertainment, is indeed the antithesis of philosophy.⁴⁹ Poetry like that of the neoteric poets and the composers of mime. However, Senecan tragedy is so different in form and subject matter from these genres that it seems misguided to conclude, as Dingel (1974) does, that Seneca would have considered his own poetry as *ineptiae* consciously created to have the very defects that he as a philosopher criticizes. The lyric poets "play on purpose" (*Illi ex professo lasciviunt Ep.* 49.5), Seneca says, but as Demetrius says in his essay "On Style" (169), "No one can imagine a playful tragedy (*tragoidian paizousan*)."⁵⁰

J. P. Sullivan (1968b, 255) has argued that one of the subsidiary purposes of Petronius' *Satyricon* was "not only to present a classical critique and an Epicurean theory of literature, but also to snipe at various literary and philosophical targets, such as Lucan and Seneca, rhetorical moralizing, and Stoic doctrine in general."⁵¹ The *Satyricon* regularly discusses literary and aesthetic principles; the most prominent of these discussions, Petronius' defense of his work (132), has a direct connection with what we have been saying so far about Seneca's characterization of poetry as *ineptiae*. The "Catos" of the world, stern moralists like Cato the Elder and Stoics like Cato the Younger, have been attacking Petronius' work on moral grounds:

Quid me constricta spectatis fronte Catones
damnatisque novae simplicitatis opus?

Why do you Catos look at me with furrowed brow
and condemn my work of novel simplicity?

Petronius answers his critics by asserting that he presents men as they are, as creatures who, in accordance with Epicurus' teachings, pursue pleasure as the goal, the *telos*, of life. The line that follows this defense encourages us to believe, along with Sullivan, that Seneca was one of the "Catos" against whom these words were addressed: *Nihil est hominum inepta persuasione falsius nec ficta severitate ineptius* [Nothing is more false than the silly ideas people hold nor more silly than false morality]. The repetition of the word *ineptus* here suggests that Petronius had special reason to emphasize it; the reason was, I propose, the

fact that Seneca had used the word regularly to attack poetry of just the sort Petronius was writing, poetry that itself pursues pleasure by depicting men pursuing pleasure. What really deserves to be called “inept,” Petronius replies, is the attempt to persuade people that life should be something other than what it is or that we should be other than who we are. In other words, what is really “inept” is writing that, like that of Seneca, sets out to teach.⁵²

Petronius’ use of the word *ineptus* in this context not only encourages us to accept the plausibility of a “Neronian literary feud” but also offers yet another argument against Dingel’s (1974) assertion that Seneca’s tragedies were *ineptiae* of the sort Seneca himself condemned. For one of the many ways in which Petronius parodies Seneca and his writings in the *Satyricon* is by imitating Senecan tragedy in the poem “The Fall of Troy” (89). Walsh (1970, 47) has catalogued the “striking” connections between these two and suggested that “Petronius is demonstrating how fatally easy it is to write tragedies like Seneca’s.”⁵³ This suggests that in Seneca’s own time his tragedies, just like his essays and epistles, were perceived in Neronian literary circles to be part of his *inepta persuasio* and his *facta severitas*. Since the *Satyricon* is the sort of poetry that Seneca called “inept” and since Petronius used the *Satyricon* in part to mock Seneca’s own tragic poetry, then we must conclude that both Seneca and his contemporaries viewed his tragedies as the antithesis of the kind of poetic *ineptiae* represented by the *Satyricon* and condemned by Seneca. The only sense, then, in which Seneca’s plays are *ineptiae* is not the sense in which Seneca used that word but the one in which Petronius used it.⁵⁴

In this connection it is instructive to recall Tacitus’ description of Petronius’ death scene. In every way Petronius was Seneca’s antithesis, even in his manner of dying. Whereas Seneca spent his last hours discoursing on philosophy and staged his death as a specifically tragic reenactment of Socrates’ (*Annals* 15.62),⁵⁵ Petronius did just the opposite and listened to “light poems and easy verses”: *Audiebat (amicos) referentes, nihil de immortalitate animae et sapientium placitis, sed levia carmina et facilis versus* (*Annals* 16.19) [He listened to friends talking not of the immortality of the soul nor of the doctrines of philosophers but sharing light poems and easy verses]. *Levia carmina et facilis versus* were Petronius’ answer to Seneca’s philosophizing and tragic pose. If Seneca’s tragedies had in any way been perceived to be “light and easy” poetry of this sort, I suggest, the contrast that Petronius wished to make between his character and Seneca’s would have lost its whole point.

These various “ends” proposed for Seneca’s tragedies demonstrate, if nothing else, the wide and engaged knowledge that Seneca had of poetic theory in his own time. Even though the evidence for this knowledge largely comes from moralizing contexts, surprisingly Seneca does not advocate a narrowly moral-

istic or philosophical reading of poetry. The purposes of poetry vary with genre, which was a defining matrix for the poetics of antiquity. Seneca knew how to “play” as a poet, which is why he wrote the *Apocolocyntosis*. Yet he also realized that the grand genres raised moral issues that engaged both inspired poets and inspired philosophers. Seneca’s tragedies were probably not tools for teaching philosophy, but they offered an opportunity to think about philosophy and its concerns, both ethical and poetical. None of the theories that we have discussed here provides an essential clue to the “end” of Senecan tragedy precisely because none focuses specifically on tragedy and the critical traditions in which it was featured. In the next two chapters we turn to those traditions, to the issues that Plato raised about tragedy, to the defense that Aristotle offered in response to them, and to the ways in which Seneca’s plays were informed by philosophy’s critique of tragedy as imitation and clarification.

3

A Just and Lively Image

The writers of tragedy who have come since have achieved great honor, excelling in the plots of stories shaped to offer the image of truth (*veritatis imaginem*).

—Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636)

A. *Imago Veritatis*

Isidore of Seville, the medieval encyclopedist whose definition of tragedy was appended as a preface to our best manuscript of Seneca's plays, the *Etruscus*, highlights the fact that tragic poets excel at creating "the image of truth."¹ Ultimately this emphasis on tragedy as truthful mimesis can be traced to Aristotle, for Isidore's definition comes at the end of a chain of transmission that extends back through Diomedes, Donatus, Suetonius, and Varro to Theophrastus and Aristotle.² To appreciate the Aristotelian roots of this definition of tragedy, we need to set it beside the definition of comedy that Donatus attributes to Cicero: *Comoediam esse Cicero ait imitationem vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imaginem veritatis* [Cicero says that comedy is an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, an image of truth]. As Donatus demonstrates, *imago* is a synonym for *imitatio* and thus a Latin equivalent to mimesis. The notion that drama is an "imitation of life, an image of truth" is a later version of Aristotle's assertion that "tragedy is a mimesis not of persons but of action and life" (*Poetics* 1450a15–16).³

Unlike Plato, who considered poetry a form of imitation "easy to produce without a knowledge of the truth" (*Republic* 599a2), Aristotle associated mimesis with "the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity" (*Poetics* 1450a38–39). That is why poetry is more philosophical than history, for it reproduces universals that offer a generic truth that particular instances cannot. As Kathy Eden has noted (1986, 35), Aristotle associates poetry with disciplines such as ethics and rhetoric, which, unlike the

mathematical sciences, treat subjects where truth is not a measurement but an approximation: “We must therefore be content,” Aristotle writes, “if, in dealing with subjects and starting from premises thus uncertain, we succeed in presenting a broad outline of the truth” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.4). When properly crafted, tragedy is for Aristotle a mimesis that offers just such a “broad outline of the truth” through the universals it represents.

It is this Aristotelian notion of tragedy as an “image of truth” that the Middle Ages applied to Senecan tragedy. Isidore’s definition of tragedy containing that phrase, as we have seen, was appended to the manuscript of Seneca’s plays, and Nicholas Trevet mentions it in the general prologue to his Senecan commentary.⁴ Even more revealing is the fact that Albertino Mussato (1261–1329) features just such an *imago* at the beginning of his *Ecerinis*, the Renaissance’s first attempt at a tragedy in the Senecan manner. Ecerinus (Ezzelino) opens the play with language that creates a horizon of expectation for his audience, an expectation that this play will embody the received definition of “tragedy”:

Ecerinus: Effare Genetrix. Grande quodcumque & ferum est
Audire iuvat.

Adelheita: Heù nefandi criminis
Stupenda qualitas! quasi ad uultum redit
Imago facti. frigore solutum cadit
Exangue corpus.

Ecerinus: Speak out, mother. It is pleasant to hear something grand and cruel.

Adelheita: Alas, the nature of this unspeakable crime is stunning! The image of the deed seems to appear before my very eyes. My body, shivering and drained of blood, collapses.

The story his mother will tell will be a “tragedy,” for it is labeled with the traditional adjective that distinguished the genre: *grandis*. In his *Life of Seneca*, Mussato (1969) links the “tragic stylus” with “grandiloquence.”⁵ Moreover, the grand deeds of kings are usually wicked in tragedy, according to Isidore and others, and thus tragedy is also *ferus* [cruel].⁶ For example, Seneca’s Atreus, who wishes to plot *grande quiddam* [something grand] (270) in the form of the ultimate crime (*facinus* [271], *scelus* [273], *crimine* [321]), enacts his plan when he “cruelly” (*ferus* 721) plunges a sword into Thyestes’ son. In a similar way, Adelheita’s words tell of the birth of a tyrant like Atreus, her son Ezzelino, whose father was Satan himself.

It is to the *Thyestes* that Mussato alludes in these opening lines, as Braden (1985, 101) has demonstrated. When Ecerinus’ mother envisions the “crime” she is about to relate, her words recall the language that Seneca’s messenger

uses to describe the murder of Thyestes' children: *Haeret in uultu trucis/imago facti* [The image of the savage deed lingers in my mind's eye] (*Thyestes* 635–636). In both cases, it is “the image of the deed,” the *imago facti*, that messenger and mother envision and in turn re-create for their audience.⁷ Mussato has sensed, I suggest, that Seneca's “image of the deed” is what definitions of tragedy called the “image of the truth.” In noting the importance of *imago* in Senecan tragedy, Mussato appreciated, without yet a knowledge of its ancestry, what constitutes the Senecan version of Aristotelian mimesis, tragedy as image and imitation. The key to Senecan drama is not in the “word” but in the “image,” for Seneca was interested not in tragedy as an allegory of Stoic doctrine but rather as a visualization of human experience, as a *humanae vitae mimus* (*Ep.* 80.7), which is what Isidore meant by *veritatis imaginem*.⁸

B. Tragic Epistemology

When Dryden updated Aristotle for the Renaissance, however, he added two adjectives to his definition of tragedy that point to the later influence of Stoic traditions; tragedy, he wrote, is “a just and lively image of human nature.” In this choice of words Dryden reflects Stoic traditions of epistemology, in which the vividness and accuracy of images are the criteria for judgments and hence knowledge. Likewise, Sidney praises poetry that offers a “true lively knowledge” and a “judicial comprehending” (1965, 107.24–25, 28), the sort of vividness that the Stoics associated with *katalēpsis* [grasp], a Greek term that became *comprehensio* in Latin.⁹ Under Stoic influence, Longinus, we shall see, illustrated such moments in poetry from tragedy, and philosophers regularly used tragic scenes to debate whether images offered a proper *kritērion* or *iudicium* of truth. A “lively” image is almost always for the Stoics “just” and “true,” and tragedy constitutes itself as image in just this sense, as the foundation for true comprehension. Julia Wildberger (2006) has explored the ways in which this Stoic theory of cognition shaped Seneca's composition of his *Moral Epistles*, which seek to generate “grasp” and to remove any obstacles to the knowledge that derives from it. Seneca, I argue, likewise writes tragedies that are informed by his Stoic epistemology.

1. *Phantasia*

And what tragedy has any other source than this? What is the *Atreus* of Euripides? His sense impression. The *Oedipus* of Sophocles? His sense impression.

—Epictetus, *Discourses*

Senecan tragedy's function as image, as dramatic realisation of human psychology, behaviour, experience—seems self-evident. Often indeed what might be regarded as purely formal features of drama in Seneca seem designed to underscore tragedy's function as emblem and image.

—A. J. Boyle, "In Nature's Bonds: A Study of Seneca's 'Phaedra'"

Stoic epistemology is central to Seneca's tragic poetics because the Stoics, unlike Plato, did not denigrate the senses but made them the ultimate source of knowledge. As Diogenes Laertius reports (*Lives*, 7.49), "The Stoics agree to put in the forefront the doctrine of presentation (*phantasia*) and sensation, inasmuch as the standard by which the truth of things is tested is generically a presentation."¹⁰ Likewise, Seneca characterizes sense impressions as the beginning of knowledge and action: "Every living creature endowed with reason does nothing, unless it has first been stimulated by a visual impression (*species*) of some thing" (*Ep.* 113.18). Seneca's word *species* is a Latin translation of the Greek word *phantasia*, used by his Greek predecessors in the Stoic school.

These *phantasiai* constitute for the Stoics a natural and necessary feature of poetry, as Epictetus illustrates: "The *Iliad* is nothing but a sense-impression (*phantasia*) and a poet's use of sense impressions," (1.28.12) and so too are tragedies, as the quotation from Epictetus at the beginning of this section illustrates.¹¹ Seneca would have agreed with Epictetus that drama presents sense impressions for us to process: "That first mental shock . . . which moves us after we have formed the impression (*opinionem*) of injury . . . steals over us even in the presence of plays upon the stage and readings of past events" (*De Ira* 2.2–3).¹² It was from Aristotle that the Stoics learned that "the soul never thinks without an image" (*De Anima* 431a817–18; cf. Eden 1986, 97); they may also have learned from him that the tragic poet does the same: "One should construct plots, and work them out in diction, with the material as much as possible in the mind's eye (*pro ommatōn*). In this way, by seeing things most vividly (*enargestata*) as if present at the actual events, one will discover what is apposite and not miss contradictions" (*Poetics* 1455a21–25). The tragic poet, like the soul, begins with an image.

Both Seneca's messenger and Mussato's Adelheita illustrate this point, for neither can begin their narrative without first creating an *imago* of it in their mind. Tragedy models the cognitive process, which is the reason the Stoics turned to it regularly in their discussions of epistemology. As Epictetus explains, "Great and dreadful deeds" begin, as does the *Iliad*, with a decision made in response to the evidence of the senses. The notion of carrying away Helen

“appeared” to Paris, and he assented to it (*Discourses* 1.28.11–13). In what reads like a reminiscence of Protagoras’ famous dictum, “Man is the measure of all things” (Diels-Kranz 80b1), Epictetus asserts that “the measure (*metron*) of every man’s action is the impression of his senses” (1.28.10). Epictetus illustrates this principle by analyzing the famous lines in which Euripides’ Medea announces (1078–1080) that she knows what evils she is about to commit but does so because of her *thumos*. Unlike Chrysippus, who sees Medea’s pronouncement as a deliberate rejection of her rational understanding of her actions, Epictetus argues that Medea acts on an impression that seems true to her: that killing her children is more profitable than saving them. If she had believed otherwise, she would not have killed the children. A philosopher could have prevented the tragedy had he been able to show her that her belief was wrong, for the philosopher’s task “is to test the impressions (*phantasias*) and discriminate between them” (*Discourses* 1.20.7). In so doing, the philosopher is practicing a hermeneutics of tragic *phantasiai*. Although Epictetus’ concern is not to construct a poetics for tragedy, I argue that Seneca approached composition with these Stoic analyses of tragic cognition in mind. Seneca’s *imago* is Epictetus’ *phantasia*.

2. *Enargeia*

For Epictetus, poetry is a *phantasia* in two senses: an impression and a poet’s use of impressions (*Discourses* 1.28.12). Although Epictetus does not elaborate, he is probably thinking of the two meanings that Longinus gives to the term. For Longinus illustrates how this Stoic interest in the image can become a guiding principle for poetic composition:

Weight, grandeur, and urgency in writing are very largely produced, dear young friend, by the use of “visualisations” (*phantasiai*). That at least is what I call them; others call them “image productions” (*eidōlopoiias*). For the term *phantasia* is applied in general to an idea which enters the mind from any source and engenders speech, but the word has now come to be used predominantly of passages where, inspired by strong emotion, you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes (*hyp’ opsin*) of your audience. (*On the Sublime* 15.1)

Longinus’ first definition of *phantasia* seems to have been derived from Stoic sources; for as D. A. Russell (1964, 120) and Gerard Watson (1988, 67) both point out, Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* 7.49) offers essentially the same account and attributes it to the Stoics.

By juxtaposing this first, epistemological definition with his second and literary one, Longinus confirms the link between the vividness of proof and that of poetry, which the Stoics believed that true sense impressions natively offer. In a similar way, Quintilian links *phantasiai* and *enargeia* and shows how, in the Roman mind, they are a natural feature of drama:

There are certain experiences which the Greeks call φαντασῖαι, and the Romans *visiones*, whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes. . . . Surely, then it may be possible to turn this weakness of the mind [i.e., its power to fantasize or daydream] to some profit. I am complaining that a man has been murdered. Shall I not bring before my eyes all the circumstances which it is reasonable to imagine must have occurred in such a connection? . . . From such impressions arises that ἐνάργεια which Cicero calls *illustratio* and *evidentia*, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene (*ostendere*). . . . I have often seen actors, both in tragedy and comedy, leave the theatre still drowned in tears after concluding the performance of some moving role. (6.2.29; 30–32; 35)

Quintilian cites as examples tragic moments from Vergil's *Aeneid* (9.474; 11.40 and 89; 10.782). Likewise, Longinus draws almost all of his vivid scenes from tragedy, a sign, I suggest, that the Stoic sources that defined the term for him also suggested the venue for his examples. Euripides himself saw the Furies in portraying Orestes' response to them, and he "rode" along in Phaethon's chariot in order to depict the young man's disastrous ascent. Euripides' Cassandra, Aeschylus' seven heroes fighting against Thebes, and Sophocles' scene of Oedipus' death or of Achilles appearing above his tomb are Longinus' other examples; he suggests that these are but a few of the many he could cite (15.7). As I discuss in chapter 2, Littlewood sees in this choice of examples a focus on contrasting images of poetic excitement: The Furies represent poetic madness, while Phaethon represents the philosopher's quest for wisdom. However, not all of Longinus' tragic examples can be subsumed under these headings; I argue in chapter 5 that the more important commonality they share is the depiction of omens and fantastic events of the sort that the Romans called *monstra*.

For the Stoics, tragedy is naturally characterized by just this kind of vividness or *enargeia*. Chrysippus and Posidonius, two Stoics who in other respects offer contrary analyses of the soul and its functions, nonetheless both turn to tragedy to illustrate the nature of emotion, for there, as Posidonius describes it, we can see "clearly" (*enargōs*) the soul's powers (EK fr. 165). Likewise, when Seneca wants to make "manifest" and to place "before the eyes" the ferocity of

anger (*De Ira* 1.5.2, 3.3.2), he turns to Vergil's image of the Furies (*De Ira* 2.35.5–6), a frequent element in his own plays and one that Vergil drew from tragedy, as we shall see in chapter 5. The importance of the idea of “vividness” (expressed in Latin as “clearness,” using *clarus* and its cognates) to the early Stoics and their association of it with poetry is evident in Seneca's translation of a maxim of Cleanthes: “Just as our breath makes a sound louder (*clariorem*) when it passes through the long and narrow tube of the trumpet to emerge from the flared bell, so too the strict demands of poetry make our ideas clearer (*sensus nostros clariores*)” (*Ep.* 108.10).

Juvenal in his second satire alludes to this Stoic association between poetry and vivid truths when he notes how Laronia attacked the Stoics as hypocritical moralists: “These sons of the Stoics (*Stoicidae*) fled in fright from her as she was singing things that were obviously true (*vera ac manifesta canentem*)” (2.64–65). Juvenal here seems to be scoring literary, as well as moral, points against the Stoics; there is concessive force to the participle *canentem*. The Stoics fled Laronia's satiric poetry *even though* she was singing the plain truth, something that the Stoics are supposed to admire in poetry.

When Sidney praises vividness of this sort, he uses the term *energia*. According to Geoffrey Shepherd, Sidney (1965, 226) is thinking here of ἐνέργεια as Aristotle uses the term at *Rhetoric* 1411b, where it is treated as synonymous with πρὸ ὀμμάτων [before the eyes]. Elsewhere in ancient rhetoric and philosophy, however, presentation “before the eyes” is labeled as ἐνάργεια.¹³ Since Sidney is here the first writer in English to use the term *energia*, he is understandably confusing and blending two similar Greek terms, I suggest. Sidney glosses the word as “forcefulness” and means by it, according to Shepherd (*ibid.*), “the intellectual clarity with which the poet distinguishes or apprehends the fore-conceit or Idea.” This definition recalls precisely what the Stoics called a kataleptic presentation, a cognitive impression that testifies to its own reliability: “[Zeno] did not attach reliability to all impressions but only to those which have a peculiar power (*declaratio*) of revealing their objects. Since this impression is discerned just by itself, he called it ‘cognitive’” (Cicero, *Academica* 1.41 = LS 40B). Rist argues (1969, 140–41) that Cicero's *declaratio* is the equivalent to *enargeia* even though there is no evidence for this Greek word among early Stoics such as Zeno. The term is in fact Epicurean but nonetheless appropriate to Zeno's conception of *katalēpsis*: “[B]y *enargeia* Epicurus meant to denote just that quality of a *phantasia* which Zeno denoted by the word *katalēptikē*, that quality which makes a man feel certain of its truth” (Sandbach 1971, 32).

Sidney's description of poetry's power bears the imprint of the Stoic epistemology we have been tracing, as we can see in the parallel between what Sidney says about poetry's perfect pictures and what the Stoic Posidonius calls an *anazōgraphēsis*. Sidney writes the following:

For as in outward things, to a man that had never seen an elephant or a rhinoceros, who should tell him most exquisitely all their shapes, colour, bigness and particular marks; or of a gorgeous palace, the architecture, with declaring the full beauties might well make the hearer able to repeat, as it were by rote, all he had heard, yet should never satisfy his inward conceits with being witness to itself of a lively knowledge; but the same man, as soon as he might see those beasts well painted, or the house well in model, should straightways grow, without need of any description, to a judicial comprehending of them, so no doubt the philosopher with his learned definition—be it of virtue, vices, matters of public policy or private government—replenisheth the memory with many infallible grounds of wisdom, which, notwithstanding, lie dark before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy. (107.18–34)

In one of the earliest Stoic uses of the term *enargeia*, Posidonius says about a lion much of what Sidney says about an elephant:¹⁴

For I fancy that you have long observed how men do not experience fear or distress when they have been rationally persuaded that evil is present or is approaching, but they do so when they get images (*phantasias*) of those same things. For how could you stir the irrational by means of reason, unless you place before it a picture (*anazōgraphēsin*), as it were, that resembles a picture perceived by the eye? Thus some persons fall victim to desire as a result of a verbal account, and when vividly (*enargōs*) ordered to flee the charging lion, even though they have not seen it they are afraid. (Galen, *PHP* v. 473.25–474.31 = EK fr. 162)

Other Stoics consistently praised in a similar way the perfection of pictures; Cicero (*De Finibus* 2.69) reports that Cleanthes sometimes began his lectures with pictures drawn in words, and Chrysippus was known for his interpretations of art and for his use of “verbal” paintings.¹⁵

If we were to translate Sidney’s argument into Seneca’s language, we would say that *exempla* are more effective than *praecepta*. In fact, Sidney uses these very terms to distinguish philosophy from history:

The philosopher therefore and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example. But both, not having both, do both halt. . . . Now doth the peerless poet perform both: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he [i.e., the poet]

giveth a perfect picture of it. . . . he coupleth the general notion with the particular example. (106.34–36; 107.9–13)

The advantage of poetry is that it can, in Aristotelian terms, illustrate the general (*to katholou*) through the particular, or, in Stoic terms, the precept through the example. Sidney echoes here, I suggest, Seneca's well-known dictum: "You ought to come to the scene of action, first, because people trust their eyes more than their ears, and secondly, because the journey to knowledge is long through teaching, but short and effective through examples" (*Ep.* 6.5). Although this is an ancient commonplace, elsewhere (*Ep.* 95.65–66) Seneca reports in detail Posidonius' view on the role of these two elements in philosophical instruction. Posidonius recommends, in addition to prescribing rules for living, the creation of *descriptions* as well, for they provide "signs and marks of each virtue and vice." Although Posidonius uses the Greek term *ethologia* (called by others, Seneca says, *characterismos*), he is calling for *enargeia* by another name; Seneca's choice of a Latin equivalent, *descriptio*, confirms this.

Seneca, inheritor of a Stoic epistemology that valued vividness and of a Posidonian pedagogy that recommended *descriptions*, could have viewed the verbal paintings of his tragedies not merely as rhetorical adornment, as "purple patches" in Horace's famous description, but also as a natural exploitation of tragedy's "sense impressions." Plutarch notes that poetry is "articulate painting" intended to create *enargeia*: "[T]he underlying aim of both [painting and poetry] is one and the same, the most effective historian is he who, by vivid representation of emotions and characters, makes his narration like a painting" (*Moralia* 347a). Seneca's call in the *De Ira* (3.3.2) to "place before the eyes . . . what a monster a person is raging against a fellow human" can be read as a poetic manifesto for just this kind of "articulate painting," for in epistemological terms *descriptio* of this sort offers a *credibilis rerum imago*, a persuasive, vivid, and true "sense impression" of the sort that, according to Epictetus, constitutes the very nature of tragedy.¹⁶

3. *Phantasma*

The ecstasy (*furor*) of my prophetic mind has never before revealed things so clearly to my eyes; I see and I am present and I enjoy (*fruor*). No dubious image (*imago*) deceives my vision: Let me watch (*spectemus*).

—Seneca, *Agamemnon*

Cassandra, in one of the most explicitly metatheatrical scenes in Senecan drama, engages in *vaticinatio* or inspired prophecy as she, standing outside the

royal palace, “sees” the murder of Agamemnon taking place within and stages it for us through her imagination. Her use of *clara* emphasizes the *enargeia* of her vision, and when she characterizes this *imago* as one that is not *dubia* (874), she is using the language usually associated with *monstra*, with visual warnings from the gods, which by their very nature are usually kataleptic impressions. Minerva, Aeneas tells us (2.171), foreshadows Troy’s fall *nec dubiis . . . monstris*. Cassandra’s vivid imagination, her *imago* or *phantasia*, is present, however, like the orator’s, to affect her audience: *Spectemus*, she says, “let us watch” (875).

Alessandro Schiesaro (2003, 252) has taken the experience of Senecan protagonists who see vividly, as Cassandra does here, as a sign that Seneca did not fully understand the implications of tragic epistemology: “Bad behaviour will take centre stage, represented with accuracy and artistic as well as psychological credibility. This fact alone introduces into the play a degree of openness and ambiguity that no amount of authorial intention can hope to dispel for good.” If Cassandra “enjoys” her vivid image of violent death, will we, the audience, not do the same? The more mimetic the depiction of criminality, the more seductive its appeal. The Stoics, however, including Seneca, had already answered this critique, for it had been raised in antiquity by the philosophical opponents of Stoicism. As Julia Wildberger observes (2006, 83), “We may . . . assume that . . . [Seneca] did not want to take up a serious debate with the skeptic critics of this concept [grasping impressions], because he thought the possibility of certain perception was either evident . . . or at least a necessary precondition for doing philosophy at all.”

The Academic school, skeptical of sense perceptions as had been its founder, Plato, had challenged the Stoic notions that sense impressions come packaged with their own interpretation and that they can testify to their own truthfulness. The debate on this issue regularly seems to have turned for evidence to the behavior of tragic characters, acting under the spell of passion, who “see” falsely. Carneades (214–129 BC), for example, onetime head of the Academy, challenged the Stoic claim that vividness guarantees the reliability of an impression. Similarly striking impressions can arise from what does not exist, as for example, from the visions we have in dreams. False impressions, or impressions of what is false, can by their very vividness adduce assent and consequential action. Here Carneades cites the example of Hercules “*furens*”: “When Heracles was deranged, he got an impression from his own children as though they were those of Eurystheus, and he attached the consequential action to this impression, which was to kill his enemy’s children, as he did” (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 7.404–405 = LS 40H). Heracles’ impression that these were Eurystheus’ children was false, but he took it as true; where was his natural faculty of discrimination? Carneades, like Schiesaro, points to the behavior

of tragedy's furious characters to argue that vivid impressions can guarantee neither their truth nor their consequences.¹⁷

The Stoic reply emphasizes Heracles' abnormality; impressions that are true induce assent in *normal* minds. All of us, whether wise or foolish, are capable of a kataleptic impression as long as we are neither morbid nor deranged.¹⁸ Orestes (a favorite example in such discussions) had a true impression that he was seeing Electra, but because of his madness he had a false impression that she was a Fury (ibid., 7.244–245 = LS 39G). Seneca, I believe, would, like his Stoic brethren, have asserted that Atreus' or Cassandra's reactions to their sense impressions were not "normative" because these characters were acting under the influence of a *furor*: "[T]o the angry indeed no image is more beautiful than one that is fierce and savage" (*De Ira* 2.36.3). Seneca emphasizes that point by juxtaposing *furor* and *fruor* at the ends of adjacent lines (872–873) in Cassandra's vision:

Tam clara numquam prouidae mentis furor
ostendit oculis; video et intersum et fruor.

My prophetic madness has never shown things
to my eyes so clearly. I see the scene, I am there,
I enjoy it.

Cassandra's "enjoyment" is a consequence of her "madness"; Seneca creates a false *figura etymologica* by connecting the words in this way. What these tragic figures see is not a *phantasia* or an "impression" but a *phantasma* or "figment," which Chrysippus defines as "that to which we are attracted in the empty attraction of imagination; it occurs in people who are melancholic and mad" (Aetius 4.12.5 = LS 39B).¹⁹

The Stoics, in short, would not have agreed that "the authorial intentions" of an image maker were "irrelevant" (Schiesaro 1997, 107), but they asserted instead, as Long and Sedley note (1987, 1.241), that "impressions [are] . . . along with language itself, . . . a way of interpreting experience."²⁰ Ruth Webb (1997) has shown that ancient writers assumed that they could predict and control the response such vivid scenes would create in their audiences; rhetorical *enargeia*, like Stoic *katalēpsis*, "being self-evident and striking (*enargēs ousa kai plēktikē*), all but seizes us by the hair, they say, and pulls us to assent, needing nothing else to achieve this effect or to establish its differences from other impressions" (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 7.257 = LS 40K3). The allusion would appear to be the story from the first book of the *Iliad*, in which Athena appears and takes Achilles by the hair to stop him from attacking Agamemnon. When Longinus discusses the power of *phantasiai* (15.1–2), he notes that they engender

both *enargeia* and *ekplēxis*, the same traits that the Stoics attribute to kataleptic impressions. Although *ekplēxis* is classified as a form of fear by the Stoics (SVF III.408–409), I believe that, when used to describe vivid impressions, its primary sense is “striking” or “overpowering,” metaphorically, “seizing us by the hair.” Quintilian expresses the effect of *enargeia* in a similar way; it “dominates” its audience (*Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.62); Longinus uses the metaphor of “enslavement” (15.9), as Webb (1997, 119) notes.

Seneca characterizes our first reaction to theatrical events as an *ictus*, a “strike” or “blow,” which we cannot avoid (*De Ira* 2.2.2–5), yet he also argues that this initial reaction is not the real response. As we see in the next chapter, an impression then leads to a judgment; passions for the Stoics are the results of judgments and are, as a result, always in our power. Seneca clearly believed, however, that even this first “blow” can be tendentious, for it is characterized by a “tendency in favor of a particular point of view.” When he insists in the *De Ira* upon “showing” the madness of anger, it is precisely because such an image will ensure that “no one will be deceived that it is ever profitable” (3.3.6).

Schiesaro acknowledges (2003, 234) that Seneca may have written tragedy with this intent, but the metatheatrical moments in the plays themselves suggest, he argues, that images of anger more often than not produce more of the same: “There is too much pleasure in Atreus for the author or the audience to be unaffected by it” (*ibid.*, 255). When the messenger reports the omens that accompany Atreus’ slaughter of his brother’s children, however, he describes a clear contrast between Atreus’ reaction and that of others: *Movere cunctos monstra, sed solus sibi/immotus Atreus constat* [The omens move everyone, but Atreus alone remains unmoved] (703–704), a contrast emphasized through enjambment. Moreover, the typical response that internal audiences within the plays have to tragic events is not enjoyment but sadness and revulsion. The messenger in *Thyestes* (623–626) wants to be carried away in a whirlwind, for he finds Atreus’ crimes shameful even by the standards of the house of Pelops; when Amphitryon watches Hercules kill his children (*Hercules Furens* 1004), he describes the crime as “unspeakable, sad, and horrible to see,” and even the Greeks who watch the death of Hector’s son (*Troades* 1098–1099 and 1119), cruel (*ferus spectator* 1087) as they are, are moved to tears by the spectacle. When Polyxena then courageously faces her death (*Troades* 1147–1148 and 1153), her example moves both Trojans and Greeks with “wonder, terror, and pity” but not with a desire for further cruelty.

The mad protagonists of Seneca’s plays do not see clearly even when confronted with powerful images. Their reactions, therefore, do not model the way in which Seneca would have conceptualized the effect of the images of truth at the center of his tragedies. When Atreus conjures up the image of the cruel deed he is about to commit, he is acting, to a degree, in the ways of a poet: He

wants to make his image a reality, but judging from the audiences within the plays, we can conclude that this enacted image, which is the tragedy proper, produces horror rather than emulation.

C. The Speaking Picture of Poesy

When Philip Sidney adopts Aristotle's argument that poetry is more philosophical than history (*Apology*, 1965, 109.23f.), he does so, Jeffrey Walker (2000, 326–330) has argued, within the traditional, Stoic, grammatical tradition, which saw poetry as “pretty allegories” (*Apology*, 1965, 109.16). I have argued instead that Sidney was primarily influenced by a Stoic epistemology that acknowledged the vividness of poetry. If we recall the full context (107.18–34, quoted above), in which Sidney praises “the speaking picture of poesy,” we see that his justification is epistemological rather than didactic.

Sidney's praise of poetry's “figures” is not based on the assumptions that underlie allegory and the grammatical approach: that poetry contains a wisdom hidden and obscure that needs to be translated into simpler terms. Quite the opposite, in fact; poetry is a vivid demonstration (Sidney's words are a “true lively knowledge”) that requires *no* “description.” It is the philosopher's “learned definition” that “lie[s] dark.” Thus, a good poem speaks for itself, requiring no interpreter. For Sidney, as I note in chapter 1, the “perfect pictures” (*Apology* 107.10–11) of poetry “strike” and “pierce” (107.15–16) just as do the “striking” kataleptic impressions that the Stoics find regularly exemplified in tragedy.

When Sidney proceeds, moreover, to characterize these same “picture[s] of poesy” as “speaking” (*Apology* 107.33–34), he alludes, I suggest, to the Stoic definition of a *logikē phantasia* and the process of cognition that it initiates: “For the impression arises first, and then thought, which has the power of talking, expresses in language what it experiences by the agency of the impression” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.49 = LS 33D).²¹ This “thought,” which impressions generate, is what Sidney (107.32) calls “the imaginative and judging power,” the reader's own translation into words and values of the sense impressions provided by poetry. Poetry's pictures speak first of all in the language of the poet, in the text or script, but they subsequently speak in the reader's own translation of images into words. An interpreter could stand in for the reader in this role, but the “judicial comprehending” produced by Sidney's poetic pictures suggests the kind of kataleptic impression that the Stoics believed could provide its own interpretation.

Sidney in fact is using the terminology of vividness that the Stoics associated with poetic images: “[T]hat the poet hath that *Idea* is *manifest* [my emphasis].” Poetry constitutes a cognitive impression, an image so forceful that it

arrests our attention and shapes our judgments. In fact, Sidney's "idea" of poetry, which requires that poets have a vivid "fore-conceit" of what they are about to write, reflects essentially the same Stoic epistemology behind "speaking pictures." Sidney's "idea" is Longinus' *phantasia*, "any idea which enters the mind from any source and engenders speech" (*ennoēma gennētikon logou*) (15.1).

Seneca served as Sidney's "peerless poet" of tragedy in large part because Seneca's tragedies constituted for him "perfect pictures" of just this sort. For Seneca, tragedy was the most vivid genre of all quite simply because tragedy is the portrait of human passions, of the body "*magnasque irae minas agens*," "performing anger's mighty threats" (*De Ira* 1.1.4).²² Through this phrase, which may be an iambic fragment borrowed from a tragic play, we can trace the epistemology of Senecan tragedy in its origins:

To know that those whom anger has possessed are not sane you only need to look at their appearance. Just as madmen bear infallible marks of their illness, a bold and threatening countenance, a grim brow, a fierce face . . . so too the angry bear these same signs (*signa*): their eyes burn and flash, their whole face is suffused with a redness that boils up from the depths of their heart . . . and their entire body is aroused to "perform anger's mighty threats." . . . Anger displays itself and comes out in the face; the greater it is the more vividly (*manifestius*) it seethes. (*De Ira* 1.1.3–5)

The angry body is by its very nature a tragic actor, providing "signs" that are "manifest" and kataleptic impressions that demonstrate the insanity of passion; these are "infallible marks" (*certa indicia*). The *imago* of Senecan tragedy is this vivid face of an angry body, a monstrous image naturally linked with poetry: "Let us picture (*figuremus*) anger . . . like the hellish monsters (*monstra*) poets create" (*De Ira* 2.35.5). Seneca is not in the Stoic tradition of poetry as wisdom encoded but of tragedy as a vivid window into the human soul, which, as we see in the next chapter, is for the Stoics tragedy's true setting and subject. It is not surprising that Sidney attributed to poetry's pictures "the sight of the soul" (*Apology* 107.16).

4

The Soul of Tragedy

Plot is . . . , as it were, the soul of tragedy.

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

It is in its power over the emotions that the life and soul of oratory (*spiritus operis huius atque animus*) is to be found.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*

Aristotle calls plot (*muthos*) the “soul” of tragedy, but his choice of metaphor has appeared puzzling to some. As Gerald Else argues, “A poem is not a living thing and cannot literally have a soul . . . by ‘plot’ Aristotle means primarily the *shaping* of the structure of incidents, the forming process which goes on in the mind (soul) of the poet” (1957, 263). However, even though a poem is not a living body, Aristotle uses the body as a metaphor for poetry; like a living creature a poem has parts, and to be beautiful they must be given proper order and size (*Poetics* 1451a3–6). Halliwell therefore comes closer to Aristotle’s sense when he defines plot as “the one indispensable component of tragic drama, the ‘soul’ (or life-source) of tragedy” (1987, 93).

If tragedy could have a “soul,” it was also in part, I would argue, because tragedy was thought to reflect the soul’s nature. It is in this sense that the Stoics regularly turned to tragedy in philosophical discussions. For if plot is the soul of tragedy, tragedy is also the plot of the soul. As Epictetus defined it, tragedy is “the presentation in verse of the passions of humans who have admired external things” (*Discourses* 1.4.26–27). The traditional events of tragic plays, especially those of Euripides, result, in the Stoic view, from a failure of judgment in the soul, whenever anger, love, ambition, and fear act out their desires. The difficulty that philosophers faced in defining and illuminating the soul is the fact that it is invisible; the value of poetry is that it makes the unseen soul vivid. Seneca wishes that he could perform an act of *extispicium*, could show the soul

“naked,” for then “its appearance, black, spotted, inflamed, distorted and swollen, would upset us” (*De Ira* 2.36.2). Charles Segal (1983b, 249) has argued that we might find the “autobiography” of Senecan tragedy in passages in which the insides of dramatic characters are literally penetrated and explored; I maintain that such penetrations are less significant as tactile experience than they are as cognitive recognition. Seneca’s desire to explore the human soul, to show it naked, may indeed be the “autobiography” of his tragedies.

In turning to tragedy in this way, Seneca, we shall see, was part of a long Stoic tradition. I argue that Seneca wrote tragedy in the way that his fellow Stoics read it: as a model of the cognitive process and thus as a means by which to clarify the nature of the emotions. Inevitably, to write tragedy is for a Stoic to explore psychology, but in the process Seneca was not so much teaching psychology as persuading his audience and making a case about the causes of tragedy. As Aristotle had shown, a tragedy was much like a trial and thus required a poetics that was essentially rhetorical. Seneca, we shall see, knew about catharsis as interpreted in a variety of ways, all with the goal of defending tragedy against Plato’s charge of emotional harm. Ultimately Seneca’s defense of tragedy and its pictures of passion will not depend on notions of inoculation or purgation but on the kind of clarification with which the Stoics associated the vividness of poetry. Tragedy’s plot is argumentative in that it makes a case about the emotions as the causes of misfortunes; the rhetoric of Senecan tragedy, therefore, is not merely ornamental but also ultimately seeks to persuade or, in Quintilian’s words, “to exercise power over the emotions,” which is the “soul” of oratory.

A. Poetry, Psychology, and Politics

1. *The Argument from the Poets*

In one of his treatises he copied out nearly the whole of Euripides’ *Medea*, and some one who had taken up the volume, being asked what he was reading, replied, “The *Medea* of Chrysisippus.”

—Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*

According to Dryden, tragedy is a “just and lively image” in general and an “image of human nature representing its passions and humours” in particular. This, of course, constituted Plato’s second objection (*Republic* 605c–d) against the genre: Tragedy presented characters reacting with tears and groans to life’s misfortunes rather than responding to them “philosophically.” The Stoics,

however, emphasized and utilized this aspect of tragedy in their characterizations of the genre. The association of tragedy with psychology made it a useful source of evidence and vivid illustration for discussions about the nature and function of the soul. The notion that tragedy was a “lively image . . . of passions” was central to Stoic discussions of the genre, a reason to turn to tragedy in philosophical discourse rather than to condemn it. In doing so, ironically, the Stoics were simply following Plato’s model.

As John Dillon has shown (1997, 211), “The ‘Argument from the poets,’ that is, the tendency to buttress one’s arguments by adducing characters or situations . . . as portrayed by Homer, Hesiod, or any of the lyric or tragic poets, is deeply ingrained in the psyche of educated Greeks.” Philip Fisher (2002, 8) argues that philosophers turned to literature and to certain genres such as elegy or tragedy because they were naturally associated with particular experiences or *pathē* such as grief or anger. Galen (1981, 129–200), the Roman physician and philosopher who is our main source for the competing Stoic psychologies offered by Chrysippus and Posidonius, notes that even Plato cited a line from the *Odyssey* to support his case for the nature of the soul: “Striking his breast he rebuked his heart with words” (*Odyssey* 20.17; *Republic* 441b; PHP v.7.82).

Stoic philosophers turned to the evidence of poetry more than most. Although Chrysippus is perhaps better known for his interpretations of poetry in an allegorical mode, his citations of poetry in connection with psychology treat it not as a source of hidden truth but as a direct revelation of human emotion. Like Seneca, Chrysippus lamented that the soul was not accessible (PHP iii.1.15) and turned to poetry because “the poet . . . says more than enough about these (things)” (PHP iv.1.7). On questions of psychology, poetry conveys not an “undersense” (*hyponoia*, an early term for allegory) but an open message on the literal level, for characters wear their hearts on their sleeves.¹ Plutarch reports (*Moralia* 450c), for example, that Chrysippus, in order to demonstrate that the passions drive out all of the processes of reasoning, quoted the following lines of Menander: “Ah woe, alas for me! Where in my body were my wits wandering when I chose to do this, not that?” Chrysippus in fact was regularly ridiculed for the degree to which he practiced this argument from the poet: “Chrysippus filled his whole book with lines from Homer, Hesiod . . . and cited in addition to these no few lines from tragedy” (PHP iii.4.15).

Teun Tieleman (1996, 266) has argued that the Stoics constructed a theory of dialectic that allowed a valid place for persuasion (*to pithanon*) in areas where absolute proof was not possible; human psychology was one such area. Galen, as a physician, wanted to demonstrate the nature and location of the soul through dissection and scientific research; he therefore roundly condemned the contrasting methodology of Chrysippus, who turned to poets for his evidence and argumentation: “It would be better, I think, for the man who

really seeks the truth not to ask what the poets say; rather he should first learn the method of finding the scientific premises" (PHP iii.8.35).

Tieleman suggests (1996, 225) that Chrysippus and the Stoics offered "specific, theoretical support" for their use of poetry in the context of philosophical argumentation, a support linked to the Stoic epistemology that I discuss in chapter 3. Poetry utilizes common beliefs, on which the Stoics claimed that their philosophy was grounded, to offer with greater clarity and therefore in a more persuasive way "evidence" (our word, of course, comes from the Latin *evidentia*, which means "vividness" and is derived in turn from *videre* [to see]) from which stable knowledge could be constructed. Galen seems to acknowledge Chrysippus' epistemological rationale when he concedes that "it is fitting to call Homer as a witness . . . concerning things which appear to the senses vividly (*phainomenōn enargōs*) or which offer proof similar to a sense impression, such as the emotions of the soul" (EK fr. 156).² Galen's objection is that Chrysippus uses poetry even when it does not offer such vivid proof or when its proof undermines his case or when logical argumentation is needed instead. For Chrysippus, however, poetry "expresses an evident and certified ('cataleptic') presentation" (Tieleman 1996, 288) of his argument about the soul and its functioning. On questions of psychology, the Stoics accepted not just Aristotle's analysis of the role of images in the formation of judgment but also his analysis in the *Rhetoric* of the means of persuasion available to treat a subject for which proof is not possible. As Tieleman suggests (*ibid.*, 290), "the key notion of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the *πίθανον*, is central to Chrysippean dialectic." Poetry possesses persuasive and evidentiary power when the soul is the subject, which was the essence of its appeal for Chrysippus, as Paul Veyne (1988, 64) has noted: "[Poets] do nothing but reflect things as they are. They express the truth as naturally as springs flow, and they could not reflect what does not exist. . . . Poetry is an involuntary and truthful mirror, and it is because it reflects involuntarily that Chrysippus did not tire of accumulating the evidence of the poets." The mirror, which is here Veyne's metaphor for poetry as Chrysippus sees it, was Seneca's own conscious symbol for poetry and its ability to lead us "face to face with reality" (*De Ira* 2.36.1), as we will see later in this chapter. In his book *Seneca: The Life of a Stoic*, originally published in French in 1993 and in English in 2003, Veyne unfortunately never discusses Seneca's tragedies or how they might fit into a Stoic's life. Seneca, like Chrysippus, I argue, saw tragedy as an "involuntary and truthful mirror" of the human soul.

As we can see in the epigraph to this section, Chrysippus cited lines from Euripides' *Medea* so often in one of his books that someone suggested that an appropriate title for this work might be "the *Medea* of Chrysippus." It would be revealing to know the subject of this treatise since the *Medea* seems particularly suited to a discussion of the passions. Galen does, however, on two

occasions report Chrysippus' treatment of Medea's famous lines (1078–1080), "I know the evil I am about to do but my passion is in control of my plans, which is the cause of the greatest misfortunes for mortals" (PHP iii 3.16 and iv 6.19). Chrysippus' discussion originally occurred in his *On the Passions* and probably in his *On the Soul* as well. Christopher Gill has examined Chrysippus' use of Euripides' tragedy and concludes that Chrysippus anticipates the analysis of contemporary scholars in seeing in Medea not a division between two sides of herself but between "two possible (complete) selves" (1983, 142). Medea, because she is so articulate and self-conscious about what is happening inside her, provides a valuable illustration of *pathos* and its relationship to judgment.³

Posidonius seems to enjoy using Chrysippus' own poetic evidence and own type of evidence against him. For example, he cites some verses of the Stoic Cleanthes, the teacher of Chrysippus, in order to refute Chrysippus' view of the unified soul; Cleanthes presents "Anger" and "Reason" speaking in alternating responses, a sign that for him the soul has parts (EK fr. 166). Indeed, Posidonius even quotes Chrysippus citing verses from the *Iliad* on the question of why emotions wane over time and suggests that these verses and Chrysippus' analysis of them "clearly" (*enargōs*) prove his own point (EK fr. 165.102–116). When Posidonius wants to prove that habituation is a useful defense against passion and the situations that arouse it, he "supplies poetical quotations and historical accounts as evidence for his statements" (EK fr. 164.50–52). In the extant fragments Posidonius turns for such evidence to Homer and Euripides.

Seneca inherits, I believe, this Stoic tradition of turning to poetry for its vivid incarnations of the human soul. He suggests that anger should be imagined as the poets picture it, as the monstrous Furies, with fiery eyes, weapons in each hand, dark and bloody, and cites two examples of what he means "from our poets" (*De Ira* 2.35.6).

2. *Mirror for Magistrates*

Theodor Birt in 1911 initiated an approach to Seneca's plays that has become an enduring (and largely Germanic) tradition, one that sees the plays as frightening pictures that warn Romans against the dangers of passion.⁴ I have myself argued for this approach in the past, but I now believe that it requires revision. In reading Senecan tragedy we have confused cause and effect.⁵ As a Stoic, Seneca was predisposed to see tragedy as a portrait of the passionate soul, but that does not also entail that he composed tragedies solely or even primarily in order to teach psychology. For the Stoics, tragedy illustrates psychology because psychology explains tragedy. As we shall see later in this chapter, the Aristote-

lian reading of tragedy requires that the genre make intelligible the painful and seemingly inexplicable events it portrays, and Seneca adopts this Aristotelian assumption. As a Stoic, therefore, Seneca finds in the passions the causes of the misfortunes traditionally considered tragic. If we look more closely at the *exempla* that Seneca offers in the *De Ira*, however, we can see that he turns almost exclusively to events from Roman politics and history and not to poetry. Ironically, the very fact that Seneca does *not* use the argument from the poet in his treatise on emotion is an important clue to his purpose in writing tragedies.

Although the *De Ira* cites poetry as a potential image of the soul, L. Balzamo (1957) has pointed out that the essay has in fact a very low ratio of poetic citations in proportion to its length. Seneca cites lines from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.3.5 and 2.9.2) and Accius' *Atreus* (1.20.4), as well as from a play by Laberius (2.11.3) and another of uncertain author (2.15.5) in addition to lines of Vergil (2.35.6). He also alludes to (rather than quotes) Homer's story of Priam and Achilles (2.33.5) and to the tragedy of Ajax (2.36.5). Most revealing, however, is his use of Ovid at 2.9.2, for there he uses a passage from *Metamorphoses* (1.144f.) to illustrate the pervasiveness of crime in human society. Ovid mentions the familial crimes that are traditionally the subjects of tragedy (hatred among brothers, stepmothers who poison their children, sons who challenge their fathers), but Seneca dismisses these as minor in comparison with the public and political crimes that characterize the period of Rome's civil wars.⁶ The preference Seneca shows here for the historical over the poetic or tragic governs the *exempla* he offers throughout this essay.

Written ostensibly for Lucius Annaeus Novatus, Seneca's brother and eventual proconsul of Achaëa, the *De Ira* uses political illustrations of anger's destructive power with its addressee's situation particularly in mind. As Cooper and Procope (1995, 15) have noted, "people in positions of power could cause enormous damage by losing their tempers . . . The outrages of monarchs—Persian, Greek and Roman—were the supreme example of the cruelty to which anger could lead." Seneca, who had suffered at the hands of Caligula, makes that emperor a favorite case study in the dangers posed by those powerful and prone to anger (*De Ira* 2.33.3, 3.18.3). Janine Fillion-Lahille (1989, 1617) has suggested that Seneca wrote the *De Ira* with the new emperor Claudius in mind, a man who likewise had suffered Caligula's cruelties and who had on his ascension proclaimed his intention to control his anger.⁷

The *De Ira* was thus an early version of that genre of moral advice written for rulers and intended to curb their excesses that became so popular during the Renaissance, the "Mirror for Magistrates." Although it is Seneca's *De Clementia*, written for the instruction of Nero, which more explicitly adopts this metaphor of the mirror, Seneca uses it as well in his treatise on anger.⁸

Seneca recalls the advice of his teacher Sextius about the usefulness of looking in a mirror when one is angry (*De Ira* 2.36.1): Confronted by their distorted visage, the angry, in most cases, are shocked into self-control. Nonetheless, Seneca acknowledges that there can be exceptions and that “to the angry there is no image more beautiful than that which is fierce and dreadful” (2.36.3), thinking, I suggest, specifically of the emperor Caligula. Both *deformitas* and *foeditas*, used here to describe anger’s reflected visage, are cited in *De Constantia Sapientis* (18.1) to describe Caligula in particular. Moreover, Suetonius (*Gaius* 50) reports that “[Caligula] worked hard to make his naturally repulsive face all the more so by doing bizarre grimaces at himself in the mirror.” The images of anger that the *De Ira* creates are embodied primarily in historical *exempla* such as that of Caligula rather than in poetic ones, in large part because the essay was written with specific political audiences in mind: Novatus, perhaps Claudius, and ultimately but proleptically for Nero himself, for whom Seneca was later chosen as tutor in part because of his reputation as psychological “therapist.”⁹

Theodor Birt (1911) argued that the tragic Ajax is the exceptional illustration drawn from tragedy in the *De Ira* (2.36.5) because Seneca was saving tragic *exempla* of that sort for use in his plays, which are to be read in just the same way, as warnings of passion’s baneful power. In the tragedies as in the essay, I argue instead, Seneca’s goal is not so much to illustrate anger as to explain the political and historical world in which he lived. Seneca writes tragedies because, as Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies* 18.45) was later to note, “Tragic poets are those who celebrated in sorrowful song the deeds and misdeeds of wicked kings.” Just as tragedy was the right form for Livy to adopt in depicting the reign of Tarquin (his rise to power is a *scelus tragicum* [1.46.3]), so too tragedy was the genre suited to Seneca’s imperial world.¹⁰ Livy lamented in his excursus on the origins of drama at Rome (*History* 7.2) that drama had become by his time “an insanity scarcely tolerable in opulent kingdoms”; the world in which Seneca lived, especially under Nero at the end, constituted just such an insanity. As a Roman, Seneca turned to tragedy to represent wicked kings; as a Stoic, he turned to psychology to explain their insanity.

B. Catharsis

For the actor . . . stirs and audience by his declamation not when he is angry, but when he plays well the role of the angry man; consequently before a jury, in the popular assembly, and wherever we have to force our will upon the minds of other people, we must pretend now anger, now fear, now

pity, in order that we may inspire others with the same, and often the imitation of emotion (*imitatio adfectuum*) produces an effect which would not be produced by genuine emotion.

—Seneca, *De Ira*

As Giancarlo Mazzoli (1970, 128) has observed, Seneca here gathers into one context many of the concepts central to Aristotle's *Poetics*: *mimēsis* (*imitatio*), *psychagōgia* (*populum movent*), and the distinctively tragic emotions of *eleos* (*miseriordia*) and *phobos* (*metus*). What effect did Seneca imagine that this "imitation of emotion" might have produced? Like Quintilian, he believes that the life of oratory can be found in its power over the emotions. Seneca's inclusion of anger in this context, alongside pity and fear, is a sign of his focus on rhetoric. When Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (2.1.8) introduces the orator's appeal to the emotions, he lists as exemplary emotions anger, pity, and fear. Seneca's immediate point in this passage is, of course, simply that real emotion is not necessary for persuasion; simulated anger or fear work just as well.¹¹ Is there, however, also some acknowledgment here that a rhetoric of persuasion with its use of pretended emotions might be effective in the theater? Elsewhere (*Ep.* 11.7) Seneca does speak of "stage performers who imitate emotions, who express fear and trepidation, who portray sadness."

Since the Stoic philosophers who used the argument from the poet were not themselves poets, they did not need to construct a poetics that answered Plato's second objection against tragedy—that it "puts the emotions in charge of us when we ought to be in charge of them" (*Republic* 606d). Seneca, however, as philosopher and poet both, needed not just a tragic epistemology but also a tragic psychology. Ironically, the Aristotelian and Stoic characterization of tragedy as a vivid and truthful representation of experience, which blunted Plato's first objection against the genre, actually made his second objection all the more cogent, for vividness arouses emotions. What power over the emotions did Seneca conceive that tragedies such as his might have had? If Seneca inherits an essentially Aristotelian poetics, does he inherit some form of catharsis, some defense of poetry's impact, as well?

In applying this enigmatic term to Senecan tragedy, I am not presupposing a particular interpretation of it. As Else has written (1957, 439), "Every variety of moral, aesthetic, and therapeutic effect that is or could be experienced from tragedy has been subsumed under the venerable word at one time or another." I wish to use this term as a general label for the responses of an audience to a dramatic work and to discuss, as they are appropriate to Seneca, the various interpretations that scholars have offered of Aristotelian catharsis.

1. *Feelings without Assent*

Anger . . . is not one of those things that result from some condition of the general lot of man and therefore befall even the wisest, among which must be placed foremost that mental shock (*primus ille ictus animi*) which affects us after we have formed the impression of a wrong committed. This steals upon us even from the sight of plays upon the stage (*ludicra scaenae spectacula*) and from reading of happenings of long ago. . . . Such sensations, however, are no more anger than that is sorrow (*tristitia*) which furrows the brow at sight of a mimic shipwreck, no more anger than that is fear (*timor*) which thrills our minds when we read how Hannibal after Cannae beset the walls of Rome, but they are all emotions of minds being moved involuntarily; they are not emotions but the first beginnings preliminary to the emotions.

—Seneca, *De Ira*

Seneca understood that drama has an emotional impact, and his psychology allows him to accommodate it within his system, for our reactions to fiction constitute but the first stage in passion's development and are as such not true passion. Stoic *apatheia*, in other words, does not require that Seneca, like Plato, ban tragedy. Our emotional reactions to plays, books, or public spectacles are but *primus ille ictus animi* [that first mental shock] that we have to all vivid impressions and that are as such beyond our control. Margaret Graver (2007, 85–101), whose label for these first responses (“feelings without assent”) I have borrowed, has shown that Seneca's thinking on this topic is not novel but constitutes “textbook Stoicism,” which can be paralleled in Cicero and Epictetus, with roots in the thoughts of the earliest Stoics. As Brad Inwood has noted (1993, 178), however, Seneca's juxtaposition of anger here with *tristitia* and *timor* hints at a knowledge, if only indirect, of Aristotle's pity and fear as the characteristic responses aroused by tragedy.¹² The first question we must ask, then, is whether Seneca, in characterizing the Aristotelian tragic emotions as involuntary and preliminary responses, is thereby also defending them against Plato's charges. If the emotional pull we feel in response to vivid events is not really emotion in the full Stoic sense of that word, then it cannot really be harmful.

Graver's analysis of this passage in its context, however, suggests that Seneca is here merely trying to define anger as a conscious assent to impressions and thus as something under our control. It is *not* like our responses to fictive experience or to the sound of a trumpet or like the goosebumps we feel when we are doused with cold water, all of which we cannot control. The question left

unmasked and therefore unanswered in this passage, however, is whether our preliminary responses to drama can in any way be pleasurable or helpful to our emotional and moral well-being. The following sections treat various passages in Seneca's philosophical writings that address this question by exploring the emotional, moral, and intellectual implications of fictive experience.

2. *Stoic Catharsis*

There are three forms of *katharsis*, the Pythagorean, Socratic, and the Peripatetic or Stoic, and the Stoic cures opposites by means of opposites, applying desire to the spirit and thus softening it, applying spirit to desire and thus strengthening it and arousing it to be more manly, just as those who wish to straighten crooked sticks bend them round in the opposite direction, in order that a balance (*summetron*) might appear from twisting in the opposite direction. So too in the case of the soul they intend to impose a harmony in a manner like this.

—Olympiodorus the Younger, *Commentary on the First Alcibiades of Plato*

Olympiodorus, in this his commentary on the *First Alcibiades* of Plato, reports that there was a form of "Stoic" catharsis that was identical with the Aristotelian.¹³ The emotional balance or harmony, however, that this process is intended to induce can more easily be seen as Aristotelian than Stoic since for Aristotle health is a "mixture or proportion (*summetria*)" of opposites (*Physics* 246b5).¹⁴ An emotional balance of this sort makes no sense in orthodox Stoicism, which holds, as Seneca puts it, that "moderate passion is nothing but moderate evil" (*De Ira* 1.10.4; cf. 1.7).¹⁵ Posidonius, however, breaks with this tradition and offers a psychology that sees emotion as a natural and inevitable element in human nature. In the context of discussing education, Posidonius suggests a scheme of emotional therapy that fits Olympiodorus' description of catharsis rather closely:

"And the modes of education," says Posidonius, "are defined by the recognition of the cause of the emotions." We shall prescribe for some a regimen of rhythms, modes and exercises of a certain kind, for others those of a different kind, as Plato taught us; bringing up the dull, sluggish and timid characters with tense rhythms, modes that strongly move the spirit, and with exercises of a like kind, but the more fiery crazily helter-skelter natures with the opposite. (EK fr. 168.1–8)

Posidonius uses some of the same terminology as Olympiodorus: *thumos*, *harmonia*, *epitēdeuma*, and *enantios*. The process he describes undoubtedly derives at least in part from Plato's discussion of musical education in the *Republic* (410c–412a), although Aristotle discusses the same topic in his *Politics* and there mentions catharsis (1341a23). Posidonius' goal is, through the application of opposites, to restore a healthy balance; musical education is a means of "therapy" (EK fr. 167) or "cure" (EK fr. 169.106f.); this is most probably what Olympiodorus labels as "Stoic *katharsis*."

Seneca was aware of Posidonius' ideas about emotional therapy and seems to have approved of them, which is somewhat surprising, given his otherwise orthodox stance on the emotions and his hostility toward "moderation." At the very beginning of the section of the *De Ira* (2.19), which deals with *remedia irae*, with "cures for anger," Seneca discusses physiognomy and the need to maintain a balance between the hot, the cold, the dry, and the wet in our constitutions. Most scholars agree that he is here using Posidonius as his source since Posidonius discusses in a similar way the impact of physiognomy on emotional therapy, both in the passage we examined earlier, where the "sluggish" characters were prescribed a regimen different from those who are "crazily helter-skelter," and elsewhere (EK fr. 169.84f.).¹⁶ The latter type, Seneca argues, should seek to reduce the heat that makes them prone to emotional outbursts: "They should exercise, but not to the point of exhaustion, so that their heat may be diminished but not consumed and so that their excessive fervor might settle down. Games also help, for moderate pleasure relaxes and moderates the mind" (*De Ira* 2.20.3). Later in the *De Ira* Seneca elaborates the means by which the mind might be "relaxed" and "moderated" in a passage I discuss in chapter 2 (*De Ira* 3.9.1–3; cf. p. 37): reading poems or history, playing the lyre, looking at green things. The repetition of the words *citra lassitudinem exercenda* (*exerceat*) [they ("work" or "serious pursuits") should be indulged short of fatigue], in both passages (2.20 and 3.9) suggests that Seneca is still thinking of Posidonius here, too.¹⁷ For in its use of music and rhythms as opposites to restore balance, Seneca's therapy recalls Posidonean catharsis rather closely.

Seneca differs from Posidonius, however, in one important detail: He explicitly includes poetic and prose narratives in his list of therapeutic "agents." As Martha Nussbaum has noted (1993, 113), Posidonius followed Plato's lead in "show[ing] little interest . . . in dramatic or narrative poetry" as a means of emotional therapy. Therefore, Ludwig Edelstein (1966, 58) was, I believe, wrong to suggest that Posidonius offered a definition of education in which drama too was therapeutic: "[I]n the actions of the drama, we have that vicarious experience needed by all of us."¹⁸ When Posidonius asserts that "since the passionate part of the soul is non-rational, [the young] are aroused and calmed by means of non-rational motions" (EK fr. 168), he is speaking not about "actions," or

what Aristotle called the *mythos* of drama, but about “rhythms and modes,” or what Aristotle called “sweetened language” (*Poetics* 1449b25). Posidonius’ catharsis therefore does not fit into a theory of poetry, only into a theory of musical education.

By mentioning poetry in this context, does Seneca extend Stoic catharsis in a way that might explain his own tragedies? Given the theory of humors, on which this therapy is based, Seneca’s plays would seem to be “contraindicated,” to use a medical term that is here not just metaphorical. The *iracundi*, who are inclined to anger, are predominately hot and dry and therefore require the application of the opposite to keep their emotions under control: *studia laeta*, such as games, relaxation, and poetry, which soothe (*obleniat*). However, Seneca’s plays abound in angry characters and with an almost pathological analysis of the very condition that the *iracundus* needs to escape.¹⁹ For the angry Seneca has in mind poetry that creates the same effect as the color green, something cool and moist, whereas his plays regularly despoil the verdant by replacing it with the hot and dry. When the ghost of Tantalus revisits the house of Atreus, the streams dry up, a fiery wind blows, and “every tree loses its color and the branches stand empty, bearing no fruit” (*Thyestes* 110–111); the plague that has struck Thebes has left a landscape in which “the fields do not grow green” (*Oedipus* 156). The *studia laeta* require poetry that could be called *levis*, the kind of poetry that, as we saw in chapter 2, has more in common with Aesop’s fables than with the grand genres of epic and tragedy.

3. Purgation

In *Ep.* 88.3 Seneca criticizes the traditional literary curriculum in the schools by asking “What is there in this which removes fear, eliminates desire and reins in passion?” Clearly it is the purgation of passion rather than its moderation that appeals to him most; in fact, the *De Ira* concludes with a call for the “purgation” of anger (*Careamus hoc malo purgemusque mentem* [Let us be freed of this evil and purge our minds] [3.42]). Seneca should approve, we would think, of a catharsis that does just that.

In describing the spectator’s reaction to a gladiatorial contest and in comparing it to the reaction of children who have fallen down, Seneca suggests that an audience can so identify with events that their emotions may be both aroused and exhausted by the imaginary spectacle before them.²⁰ Spectators at gladiatorial contests grow angry with gladiators who will not gladly die, and, as a result, “in look, gesture and passion they are changed from a spectator into an adversary” (*De Ira* 1.2.4). Like the sorrow inspired by a simulated shipwreck or the fear that the story of Hannibal’s assault on Rome arouses, however, the spectators’ emotional involvement in the contest is not real anger but *quasi ira* (1.2.5)

comparable to that of children who throw a temper tantrum. When they fall down, they want the earth to be punished; their pseudo-anger is appeased by pseudo-revenge: "And so they are deceived (*deluduntur*) by the imitation (*imitatione*) of blows and are appeased by the simulated tears of those begging for forgiveness, and false resentment is removed by false retribution" (1.2.5). Vicarious experience through mimesis here not only produces a kind of passion but also exhausts it. Could there be some therapeutic value in this? Might our aesthetic experience of emotion get the desire for emotion out of our system? Norman Pratt (1983, 193) hints at an interpretation of this sort: "The world of his drama and the world of his real life are essentially identical, a battleground of moral extremes . . . The homeopathy of his drama is a medical specific for contemporary diseases."

We should notice first of all, however, that Seneca does not mention these examples while discussing therapy. Instead, he is trying to define anger and to show that it always begins with a sense of injury or insult. Moreover, from what Seneca says elsewhere about the experience of gladiatorial contests and about the rearing of children, it is clear that he would see harm rather than value in the vicarious satisfaction of desire. He notes that "there is nothing so harmful to good character as to sit around at some spectacle. Then through pleasure the vices more easily seep into our souls" (*Ep.* 7.2). Seneca returns home from these contests "more cruel and more inhuman" (7.3). When he discusses child rearing, Seneca emphasizes that "nothing makes children more prone to anger than a soft and indulgent education" (*De Ira* 2.21.6), just the sort, we should imagine, that would allow temper tantrums to succeed. The vicarious satisfaction of passion's desires does not really diminish them; moreover, "virtue will never imitate the vices while it seeks to suppress them" (*De Ira* 2.6.2).

4. *Moralistic Catharsis*

Beginning in the sixteenth century a group of critics saw Seneca's imitation of the emotions in his tragedies as the means to what Halliwell (1986, 350) has labeled "moralistic catharsis," a phenomenon that Baxter Hathaway (1943, 665) has characterized as inherently Stoic: "The Neo-Stoics of the seventeenth century demanded a purgation from tragedy in which the spectator is led by means of fear for himself to resist the approaches of passion in his breast, lest the passions overcome his reasoning faculty and lead him into evil ways. Tragedy demonstrates the dangers resulting from action based upon passion." This tradition began even before the seventeenth century and was influenced at least in part by Stoicism. Vincenzo Maggi, working in the mid-sixteenth century, argued that tragedy "by the intervention of pity and terror . . . purge[s] the mind of wrath, which causes much harm, and of lust . . ." Likewise, Agnolo

Segni asserted that “the general end of poetry is the purgation of the mind from various noxious and blameworthy passions.”²¹ Although this interpretation of catharsis is undoubtedly a wrong reading of Aristotle, it is in some ways a plausible reading of Seneca. Indeed, some of the same critics who argue for a moralistic interpretation of Aristotle are the very ones who see Seneca as the model tragedian. Giraldi Cinthio, for example, who believed that tragedy “purges the minds of the hearers from their vices and influences them to adopt good morals,” also preferred Seneca over the Greek tragedians: “[I]n my opinion, Seneca is superior to any and every Greek in the artistic propriety, the gravity, the decorum, the power, and in the *sententiae* of all his tragedies.”²²

Roland Mayer (1994) has argued that such a moralistic reading of Seneca’s plays is essentially anachronistic, a product of the intellectual climate of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its first advocate was Martin Del Rio, a close friend of Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius. Lipsius, the prime force in the development of Neostoicism, had sought to reconcile Stoicism and Christianity.²³ In an attempt to defend the faith against paganism, the Jesuit Del Rio searched Seneca’s plays for evidence of Stoicism’s morally harmful teachings and regularly used Seneca as his own best commentator, juxtaposing passages in the tragedies with excerpts from the prose writings. As Mayer himself shows, however, such an approach to Seneca’s plays existed both before and after Del Rio, largely the product of the general assumption that poetry is intended to please and to teach.

It would be misguided, therefore, to dismiss such a reading of the plays as merely anachronistic. Even though no commentaries on the plays from antiquity existed to guide later readers, it would have been relatively easy to construct from Seneca’s philosophical essays a didactic poetics of this sort, even if, as I suggest in chapter 2, Seneca’s *obiter dicta* on poetry are easily misunderstood if taken out of context and are not always applicable to tragedy. The rhetorical and moralistic assumptions about literature held by these neoclassical critics were, after all, originally classical, derived from Aristotle and Horace. Even if these texts of ancient criticism were read with the same moral bias that was brought to bear on poetry, it is not correct to say that moralism is entirely read into them.

Could Seneca, in arguing for the value of *imitatio affectuum*, have believed, together with Maggi, that terror can purge anger? He does say that an angry visage, seen in the mirror, causes *perturbatio*, but he acknowledges that only those who go to the mirror intent on moral change are “deterred” by the reflected image (*De Ira* 2.36.1–3), a point to which I return in the last section of this chapter. There was, it seems, a Stoic tradition of using poetry’s deterrent power, judging from what we read in Strabo and Plutarch. As chapter 2 illustrates, both of these writers on philosophical education cite the value of

frightening myths, Zeus' thunderbolts, for example, or the scales in which he weighs human fate, which turn away (*apotropē*) listeners from wrong (Strabo 1.2.8) or stun (*ekplēxis*) them (Plutarch, *How to Study Poetry*, 17a). As De Lacy notes (1948, 249 and note 39), the Stoics considered *ekplēxis* to be a form of fear (SVF III, 98–99). When, just before describing a mirror's deterrent power, Seneca suggests that the Furies, *inferna monstra*, constitute a perfect image of anger, he characterizes their faces as “dire,” “fear-inspiring” (*De Ira* 2.35.6). Strabo similarly characterizes the monstrous (*to teratōdes*) as frightening (*phoberon*), thinking of figures such as the Gorgons and their effect on children (1.2.8).

Since, as we will see in the next chapter, Seneca's plays are filled with hellish monsters, it is at least plausible that he might have seen them as frightening warnings of the baneful power of passion. It seems unlikely, however, that he, like Strabo, conceived of his audience as the kind of “simple-minded” folk who can be affected by “religious awe.”²⁴ Seneca is scornful of such fears: “[N]o one is so childish as to dread Cerberus or the shadows and spectral images of those held together by fleshless bones” (*Ep.* 24.18). It is more likely, I believe, that Seneca is thinking of the kind of *ekplēxis* that Longinus (15.1–2) considers to be the natural consequence of *phantasia* and *enargeia*.

By figuring anger as a *monstrum* in his plays, Seneca would have expected to create a certain *frisson*, not because his audience would have believed in such creatures but because their appearance, “blood-stained and serpentine,” would have been inherently disturbing. When the messenger Talthybius describes the appearance of Achilles' ghost, he connects his *tremor* with what he has seen: “My heart is afraid and a dreadful tremor shakes my limbs. Portents (*monstra*) larger than life can scarcely be believed, but I saw them myself, I saw them” (*Troades* 168–170). The crowd of Thebans that witnesses the Furies summoned forth by Tiresias has its breath taken away and is stunned (*stupuit*) (*Oedipus* 590–598). Seneca often uses *stupere* to characterize the impact of theatrical events, whether they are frightening, as with the Furies, or inspiring, as the death of Polyxena in the *Troades* illustrates. Observing the scene like a crowd in a theater (1125), Greeks and Trojans are frightened (*terror attonitos tenet* 1136) and stunned (*stupet* 1143) at the sight of the beautiful girl who is bravely about to die. As we will see later in this chapter, they feel most of the emotions that Seneca associates with the orator's or actor's imitation of emotion.

Seneca understood that *enargeia* of the sort that “puts before the eyes how much of a monster a person is raging against his fellow humans” (*De Ira* 3.3.2) inevitably has an emotional impact that he could use when “the minds of others must be led to our way of thinking” (2.17.1). He would characterize this impact as *primus ille ictus animi* (2.2.2), the mental shock that we feel involuntarily when we form the impression that either we or others have suffered wrong, a reaction that he explicitly links with the *ludicra scaenae spectacula*

(2.2.3). Impressions, whether real or imaginary, are in Stoic terms “fantasies” that move our minds. Seneca most likely turns to writing tragedies, Richard Tarrant has acknowledged, in order “to make his audiences feel the appalling consequences of passion . . . the shock and revulsion aroused by his most effective scenes were meant to be the stimulus to moral awareness and growth” (1985, 24–25). “Shock and revulsion,” *ekplēxis* or *stupor*, serve, however, not to teach an audience but to make it feel; they are a natural property of effective drama. They are also, however, only the first step in the cognitive process.

C. The Plot of the Soul

If poetry needed to present only vivid pictures with immediate impact, it would not need to take the form of drama, but for the Stoics, as for Aristotle, tragedy was an imitation of action. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as “a representation not of people as such but of actions and life” (1450a16–17) should be juxtaposed with Posidonius’ definition of poetry as “a representation of things divine and human” (EK fr. 44.5) and with Epictetus’ definition of tragedy as “the misfortunes (*pragmata*) which happen to befall fools” (*Discourses* 2.16.31). For the Stoics, human psychology is itself a drama or *agōn* of judgment that arises in reaction to the sense impressions that strike us:

In order that you might know how the passions begin or grow or carry us away, the first movement is involuntary, as it were, a preparation for passion and a threat of things to come. The next movement is voluntary but not unyielding; it assumes that I deserve vindication, since I have been harmed or that this person ought to be punished since he has committed a crime. The third movement is now beyond control, which desires revenge not because it deserves it but no matter what; it has defeated reason. (*De Ira* 2.4.1)

As Seneca characterizes this progression elsewhere, *species* or “impression” gives rise to “impulse” (*impetus*), which then is “confirmed by assent” (*Ep.* 113.18). This stage of confirmation in the epistemological process puts the impressions to the test, puts them, in Seneca’s language, on trial: “Harm” requires “vindication,” and “crime” requires “punishment.” This psychological process is a Senecan version of Aristotle’s complex plot. Seneca rejects the idea that impressions lead directly to action in favor of a process with several stages, including the intervention of judgment: “The former idea is simple (*simplex*), the latter is complex (*compositus*) and contains many elements (*plura continens*)” (*De Ira* 2.1.5).

Aristotle appreciated, Nussbaum has argued, that “the very literary form of a tragic drama embodies a commitment to the beliefs that ground the emotions” (1993, 108). The same is true of Seneca, I believe, although for different reasons. For Aristotle, the emotional responses typical of tragedy—pity and fear—require a complex plot, one in which a reversal of fortune leads to recognition; we must feel pity for those who have suffered misfortunes of the sort that we fear might happen to us. The plot of a tragedy is not ethically innocent, for our emotional responses are a reflex of our moral values. For Seneca, the complex plot of human emotion has moral implications, too, because the passions are in our power. Tragedy in Stoic terms almost always results from a failure of moral judgment that leads to the *pathē*, which, Epictetus tells us, constitute the subject of tragedy. The literary form of Senecan tragedy, we shall see, is built on a Stoic psychology that traces a complex plot that leads from impression to judgment to passion.

Janine Fillion-Lahille has noted that Seneca’s presentation of the debate between passion and reason, which constitutes the second of his three stages of cognition, is “a kind of dramatisation of a psychological order” (1984, 165).²⁵ The appropriateness of this metaphor is confirmed when we notice that the typical plot of a Senecan tragedy follows the pattern of action leading to judgment that characterizes the Stoic analysis of emotion. Herington (1966, 449–457) has shown that it is possible to draw up something like a regular outline for the plot development of a Senecan tragedy. There is first the “Cloud of Evil,” the sense of impending doom that usually pervades the prologue of a Senecan play. Although Herington has not noticed it, this fits rather nicely with Seneca’s conception of the first stage of anger, in which a person like Medea has just received a *species iniuriae*, the shock of having been wronged (Medea has just learned that Jason is to marry Creusa), and is full of threats of revenge: “[T]he first movement is involuntary, as it were, a preparation for passion and a threat of things to come” (*De Ira* 2.4.1). Herington’s second unit he calls the “Defeat of Reason by Passion,” and this segment of a Senecan play usually comes in the first episode.

Scholars have long recognized the imprint here of Stoic psychology, and indeed the second stage in the development of anger is a debate of just the sort we find in the plays.²⁶ Phaedra, for example, is intent on an affair with her stepson, Hippolytus, but her nurse seeks to dissuade her; Phaedra’s response articulates the psychic conflict that the scene dramatizes: *Quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor* [What could Reason do? Passion has conquered and rules] (184). Herington’s third unit is the “Explosion of Evil,” the terrible crimes such as Medea’s killing of her children, the sacrifice of Polyxena, the death of Astyanax, and the banquet of Thyestes. This is Seneca’s third stage, which actually represents, as Graver (2007, 129) has argued, “psychopathic behavior [that is] beyond remediation.” The exceptional protagonists of Senecan tragedy are thus

comparable to the tyrants Apollodorus and Phalaris, with whom Seneca in the *De Ira* (2.5) illustrates such cruel and feral conduct. Phalaris was infamous for roasting his victims in a hollow bronze bull; Apollodorus, like Atreus, killed and cooked a child whom he then served as a meal to comrades to test their loyalty. The plot of a Senecan tragedy is thus the plot of the human soul.²⁷

1. *The Soul's Court of Judgment*

We shall prevent our becoming angry if we constantly picture to ourselves all of anger's faults and judge it properly. It must be arraigned in our presence and condemned.

—Seneca, *De Ira*

Before we can understand Seneca's presentation of this psychological process as a tragedy, we need to notice that he also conceives of it as a "trial." The conceptual link that makes *argumentum* the Latin word both for a "plot" and for the presentation of a "proof" ultimately underlies Seneca's plays and their literary form. For Seneca considers cognition a "trial" in which passion and reason constitute judges of differing temperament who are considering the "proof" presented to them.²⁸

Reason grants time to both sides in the case and then seeks an adjournment, so that it may have time to discover the truth; Anger is in a hurry. Reason wishes to judge what is fair, Anger what it judges to seem fair. Reason takes into consideration nothing beyond the case at issue; Anger is stirred by insignificant issues that look beyond the case. A look of self-confidence, a voice that is rather loud, conversation which is frank, dress that is too elegant, an advocacy which is too self-serving, and popularity with the crowd, all these things irritate Anger. Often it condemns a defendant out of hostility toward his lawyer. Even if the truth is stacked before its eyes, Anger loves and defends error. It does not wish to be proven wrong. . . . (*De Ira* 1.18.1–2)²⁹

Since the soul must assent to or reject its impressions, passion is for the Stoics an act of *iudicium* or "judgment"; true emotion is not found in the excitement aroused by an impression but in the next stage, "the violence of a mind proceeding to revenge by a willing judgment (*iudicio*)" (*De Ira* 2.3.5). This is the stage in cognition that Sidney (107. 28) characterized as "judicial comprehending," the stage of judgment that Seneca envisions as a trial.

Seneca's treatise on the emotions, the *De Ira*, is in an extended sense a trial of just this sort: "We shall prevent our becoming angry if we constantly

picture to ourselves all of anger's faults and judge it properly. It must be arraigned in our presence and condemned" (3.5.3). Seneca thinks of himself as an orator presenting the case against passion and trying to convince a judge or jury that it is indeed criminal. For example, he characterizes his presentation as a *quaestio*, a "judicial inquiry" (2.2.1), and he repeatedly uses the cognate verb *quaerere* to describe it.³⁰ The issues of trial and judgment that are raised here may be due in part to Seneca's dedicatee, Lucius Annaeus Novatus, who is Seneca's elder brother and was subsequently to become a provincial official whose duties would include judicial proceedings. Especially in the first book, Seneca treats the role of public officials in judging and punishing (1.6.3; 1.14–19), but it is a periodic theme throughout (2.29.3; 2.33.3; 3.16.2; 3.22.2).³¹

The *De Ira* uses rhetorical forms and techniques to make the case against the emotions because of the central role of persuasion not just in the public process of judging wrong but also in the private one. Cognition is itself a rhetorical or persuasive process whose end is right judgment: "Someone imagined that he has been harmed, he wanted revenge; when some plea (*causa*) has dissuaded him, he immediately settled down" (*De Ira* 2.3.4). The analogy between public and private judgment can be seen in the fact that a ruler's role within the state replicates reason's role within the individual soul.³² The person who is the *legum praeses civitatisque rector* [legal authority and ruler of the state] must persuade (*suadeat*) the people to do what they should—to desire the honorable and to spurn vices (*De Ira* 1.6.3). Within the soul, reason engages in a similar persuasion, but it has anger opposing it: "Often therefore reason persuades (*suadet*) us to be patient, passion to be vindictive" (2.14.3). The act of judgment, which assents to or rejects an impression, is the result of an essentially rhetorical process; psychological therapy or education must therefore be an analogous art of persuasion: "That other movement, the one which arises through judgment, is eliminated through judgment" (*De Ira* 2.4.2). If we are to understand how Seneca conceptualized catharsis, we need to recognize how persuasion and judgment work in the soul and on the stage.

2. *Tragedy and Trial*

The disposition toward making right judgments, in fact, might even accurately define the shared final aim of both the tragic performance and legal procedure as Aristotle understood them.

—Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition*

This trial, which is the plot of the passionate soul, shapes Senecan tragedy because, as Philip Fisher (2002, 11) has observed, “it is in these two domains [literature and court cases] that deeply thought out human experiences over dozens of centuries reveal the contours of the vehement passions.” When passion is a form of judgment, as it is for the Stoics, the plot of its development, of its “contours,” can be staged in the form of a play that reads like the transcript of a trial. The real model in Aristotle for “spectators experiencing fear or pity” in response to a “literary representation” is “the court of law, its decisive moment of the verdict” (ibid., 132). Seneca’s analysis of cognition is already inherently dramatic, but the metaphor of the courtroom, which he uses to characterize it, creates a link with tragedy that goes back to the *Oresteia* and to the subsequent development of the analogy between tragedy and trial, which was transmitted to the Romans through Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Seneca was, I believe, the descendant not just of a philosophical tradition that saw tragedy as an *imago* of the human soul but also of a rhetorical tradition that saw tragedy as the counterpart of a court of law.³³

Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* stages the trial of Orestes for the murder of his mother as a tragedy because both forms are concerned with the assessment of error and responsibility, as Kathy Eden (1986, 5) argues: “In tragedy as in legal oratory, the object represented is human action, usually a past action and often a *hamartia*, an error in judgment. The tragic poet and the forensic orator, equally bound by the demands of probability, both face the task of transforming this past action . . . from a random and inexplicable series of isolated events into a logical sequence of cause and effect.” The tragic poet and orator employ similar methods because both work to shape “right judgments.” Tragedy offers “proof,” as we see even in the opening lines of the *Oresteia*, where the torches serve as *tekmērion* (272) of the Greek victory at Troy (cf. Eden 1986, 17).³⁴

The logic of this connection is revealed in the fate of Aristotle’s word in the *Poetics* for the “plot” of a play; he calls it (1450a22 and 38) a *muthos*, but this term was soon replaced by *hypothesis*, a term of philosophy and rhetoric transferred to drama. This substitution indicates that what Aristotle called in literary terms a *muthos* or plot was in logical terms “the starting point of proofs” and in rhetorical terms “an investigation of particulars.”³⁵ In Hellenistic rhetoric, as Walker notes (2000, 280), *hypothesis* was the term for a particular “case” being considered in a declamation; thus, tragedy is for Aristotle “a sort of declamation arguing an interpretation and a judgment of the case.” This may be the reason that *argumentum* is used in Latin to mean both “proof” and “plot”; Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 5.10.9) cites both meanings but does not explain their connection. Since plot and “thought” (*dianoia*) are juxtaposed in the *Poetics* (1450a38–1450b6) as the first and third most important components in tragedy, plot is in Aristotle’s scheme inherently “argumentative”: “Thought”

represents “the parts in which, through speech, [characters] put forward arguments (*apodeiknuasin*) or make statements” (1450a5–7). As such, it is naturally linked with politics and rhetoric (1450b6–8). Eventually classified as epideictic, as we shall see in the next section, tragedy is for Aristotle originally “apodeictic,” both a “show” and a “demonstration.”

The Latin equivalent to *hypothesis* is *causa*, which can mean a legal case, the subject of a declamation, or the theme of a literary work. Anger, which is so often Seneca’s theme, is for a Stoic the *causa* of tragedy in several senses. As Epictetus’ definition reminds us, tragedy presents *pathē*; anger is for Seneca the most powerful and illustrative such emotion and thus the “subject” of tragedy. In turn, anger in Seneca’s legalistic definition is a sense of injury based on a “case”: *Causa autem iracundiae opinio iniuriae est* [the cause of anger is the belief that we have suffered an injustice] (*De Ira* 2.22.2). The “case” for *iniuria* becomes the “cause” for anger, a point confirmed when Seneca goes on to suggest that we can forestall anger by arguing the “case” for the person who has, we believe, injured us: “The case (*causa*) of the absent party must be pled against our own” (*De Ira* 2.22.4).

A tragic tale of anger will therefore naturally take the form of a “case,” laying out the *iniuria* that motivates the action.³⁶ When Atreus first appears in the *Thyestes* (176f., 220f.), he immediately catalogues the crimes and injustices he has suffered at the hands of his brother. Medea, as if heeding Seneca’s advice to hear the other side, invites Jason to present his case: “But speak; time should be allotted to hear your ‘compelling’ case [*causae*]” (202). Oedipus complains that he has been declared guilty with his “case unheard” (*incognita . . . causa* [695]). Seneca’s protagonists, in presenting the case for their sense of wrong, are particularly effective because their anger has been trained, so to speak, through declamation: “O how skilled anger is at contriving (*figendas*) causes/cases (*causas*) for its furor!” (*De Ira* 1.18.6).

Causa was Cicero’s label for a practice speech on a fictional topic, a school exercise intended to prepare the orator for a career in the courtroom. In Seneca’s time these exercises were called *controversiae* and *suasoriae*; *hypothesis*, the term we earlier met as the label for “plot,” was the Greek name. Since Seneca’s father is our main source of information for this form of rhetorical education, it is clear that the younger Seneca would have been thoroughly familiar with it. Although these practice speeches were often based on historical characters and events, their defining characteristic is their fictionality. *Controversiae* prepared the student for speeches in court, *suasoriae* for speeches in the assembly, but as exercises with no practical consequences these declamations fostered the assimilation of oratory to drama or performance and of the orator to the actor. If Aristotle’s *Poetics* “presupposes a fundamentally rhetorical conception of poetic discourse” (Walker 2000, 281), then ancient rhetorical education, both

Greek and Roman, presupposed a fundamentally poetic conception of rhetorical discourse. Quintilian urged students to take actors as their models and to practice speeches drawn from comic plays; he cites Euripides in particular as a model for the aspiring orator (*Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.67).

Even more important, the cases that students used for their practice were occasionally dramatic and tragic. The author of the *Ad Herennium* cites an exercise based on the *Oresteia*, a particularly apt choice since, as we have noted, it made a trial its subject: "Orestes killed his mother; on that I agree with my opponents. But did he have the right to commit the deed . . . That is in dispute" (1.10.17). Later the story of Ajax and his suicide is used in a similar way (1.11.18).³⁷ Seneca's father includes in his collection one *suasoria* (3) based on the theme of Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in order to sail to Troy. Seneca's protagonists construct a plot for tragedy that could just as easily have been their exercise in school or their case in court.

D. Epideictic Tragedy

The rhetorical forms in which tragedy was plotted can also help us to understand how Seneca would have conceptualized the impact of his plays. The Romans, recognizing, as Cicero said, that "poets are closely related to orators" (*De Oratore* 3.7.27), inherited the essentially rhetorical conception of poetry that had led Aristotle to link tragedy and trial. Indeed, the tragic poet Curiatus Maternus argues that poetry was the initial form of oratory (Tacitus, *Dialogus* 12.2–4), reversing the chronology that historians of rhetoric have usually traced.³⁸ This kinship is particularly marked when it comes to drama, for as Maternus remarks, "orators need applause to do their work and what I call a theater" (39.4). It seems perfectly natural to Seneca to compare the orator and the actor, both of whom stir an audience best when they pretend to be angry (*De Ira* 2.17.1), or to Quintilian to turn to the stage to illustrate the effectiveness of impersonation for the orator (*Institutio Oratoria* 6.1.26; cf. 11.1.38, where both dramatists and orators are said to study character so as to better impersonate it).³⁹ Similarly, Cicero suggests that "orators . . . are the agents (*actores*) of truth; . . . actors (*histriones*) . . . only imitate the truth" (*De Oratore* 3.214). This rhetorical conception of poetry's construction also requires a rhetorical conception of audience response.

By dividing oratory into three main types, deliberative (advice given in private or in public assembly), forensic (debate in a court of law), and epideictic (all other settings, including ceremonies and festivals), Aristotle created a rhetorical framework within which poetry could and eventually would be fit as an analogue to pragmatic discourse.⁴⁰ In Kathy Eden's words (1986, 8), "Even as

spectator [of a dramatic performance] . . . [the average citizen in Athens] would not be able to resist making judgments about the artistic quality of the presentation and the ethical quality of the events presented.” In Aristotle’s scheme, such a spectator or *theōros* is precisely the audience specified for an epideictic speech; aesthetic, as well as moral, judgments are its province.⁴¹ As D. A. Russell points out (1981, 28), epideictic oratory was eventually perceived as a “half-way house between oratory and poetry,” for its “most obvious functions, praise and blame, were the traditional spheres of the poet.” Everything that we now consider to be literature and more came in antiquity to be considered an epideictic form of speech and subject to the same terms of analysis as oratory in a court or assembly. Herein lie the roots of the essentially rhetorical character of ancient literary criticism in general and of the more specific analogy between a tragedy and a trial. As Epictetus will show, here too we can find the Stoic key to the impact of tragedy, for tragedy was by its very nature epideictic.

1. *Impressionistic Spectators*

God has brought man into the world to be a spectator (*theatēn*) of himself and his works, and not merely a spectator, but also an interpreter (*exēgētēn*). For this reason it is shameful for man to begin and end just where the irrational animals do [i.e., as a mere spectator of impressions]; he should rather begin where they do, but end where nature has ended in dealing with us. Now she did not end until she reached contemplation (*theōrian*) and understanding and a manner of life harmonious with nature. Take heed, therefore, lest you die without ever having been spectators (*atheatoi*) of these things.

—Epictetus, *Discourses*

For Epictetus, theater constitutes an impression of the cognitive process not just within the characters portrayed but also for the audience observing them. As chapter 3 points out, tragedy is for him a *phainomenon*, an appearance or sense impression that strikes us. It is central to Epictetus’ philosophy, however, that we learn to make correct use of our impressions (cf. LS 62K). “Intellect” is the power “when we meet sensible objects . . . not merely [to] have their forms impressed upon us, but also [to] make a selection from among them” (*Discourses* 1.6.10). Epictetus’ term for “intellect” is *dianoia*, the same word Aristotle chose for the “thought” of a play; Epictetus recognizes, however, that “thought” is a facet not just of the poet’s or the character’s role but also of the spectator’s. For Aristotle, as Halliwell has argued (1986, 154–155), “‘Thought’ is defined . . .

in such a way as virtually to identify it with rhetorical argument: it is the province of verbal demonstration, refutation, and kindred matters.” The Stoic spectator must engage in rhetorical argument, too, analyzing the impressions and forming judgments in response to them.

Epictetus puts his Stoic pupil in precisely the role of the *theōros*, Aristotle’s prescribed audience for epideictic oratory, whose task it is “to form opinions about and in response to the discourse presented” (Walker 2000, 9). What is here but a general metaphor for our role as spectators in life, however, elsewhere becomes literal when Epictetus defines tragedy in epideictic terms: “For what are tragedies but the portrayal (*epideiknumena*) in tragic verse of the sufferings of men who have admired things external?” (*Discourses* 1.4.26). From such a “demonstration” Epictetus’ spectator “learns” (*mathein*) the proper selection of those externals that are not just “portrayed” in tragedy but also given a showy “display” that makes them seductive. Jeffrey Walker (*ibid.*), without having Epictetus in mind, has characterized epideictic oratory in just the same way: “In every case the function of the epideictic in its nonpragmatic setting is a suasive ‘demonstration,’ display, or showing-forth (*epideixis*) of things, leading its audience of *theōroi* to contemplation (*theōria*) and insight and ultimately to the formation of opinions and desires on matters of philosophical, social, ethical and cultural concern.” When tragedy stages the plot of the soul, it invites the audience to “plot” alongside the characters—feeling, contemplating, and ultimately forming their own opinions. Epictetus’ use of the theater as a metaphor for this process of cognition can help us to understand Seneca’s own analysis of audience response.

2. *From Pleasure to Judgment*

In *Ep.* 108.6–8 Seneca enumerates three distinct modes of response to a philosopher’s lecture, the first and third of which he compares to an audience’s responses in the theater:⁴²

(1.) “Certain people come to hear, not to learn, just as we are drawn to the theater for the sake of pleasure in order to delight our ears with the presentation, the voice, or the story.”

(3.) “Some are stirred in response to splendid words and quickly are transformed, in face and feeling, into the emotion of those speaking just as the effeminate worshippers of Cybele are accustomed to do, aroused by the sound of the flute and ecstatic on command. The beauty of the subject takes hold of these students and spurs them on, not the sound of meaningless words. If they hear something spoken forcefully

against death or defiantly against fortune, they delight to do that which they hear. . . . Do you not see how the theater resounds whenever words are spoken which we publicly acknowledge and by our consensus testify to be true?"

These reactions construct a hierarchy; although both involve pleasure or delight, the third is preferable because it pairs delight with the recognition of powerful truths. Seneca's *Troades*, which stages the heroic deaths of Hector's children as a theatrical spectacle, follows a similar hierarchy in its depiction of audience response. Awaiting Polyxena's death over Achilles' tomb, the crowd of Trojans and Greeks gathers as if in a theater (*crescit theatri more concursus frequens* 1125) with a mixture of joy and hatred (*gaudent* 1128; *odit* 1129), yet all watch enthralled. As they anticipate Polyxena's death, the audience feels fear (*terror* 1136) and astonishment (*stupet omne vulgus* 1143); they "tremble, admire and pity" (1147–1148). As Gottfried Mader (1997, 351) has suggested, "Seneca's minute and detailed analysis of [the onlookers'] reactions . . . surely reflects his personal observation of the Neronian circus mob." Yet the course of events here does not suggest the "psychologically destructive spiral of contagious and irrational bloodlust" which Mader (341) rightly associates with Seneca's condemnation of gladiatorial spectacles. As Mader acknowledges (345), the crowd is in the end moved by heroic deaths that have "an unmistakable Stoic complexion" and thus "the 'philosophical' and dramatic lines interact in harmonious symbiosis" (351). The internal audience of the *Troades* moves from mere emotion to something closer to insight and understanding.

Seneca acknowledges pleasure as one of the effects of drama but not as its defining feature; the importance of this point becomes clearer if we notice what kind of pleasure Seneca is talking about in his first level of response in *Ep.* 108, a sensual delight for the ears in the sounds of the presentation or performance of a play.⁴³ Elsewhere Seneca enlarges this category to include the pleasures of the eyes as well in a passage that may help us to coordinate Seneca's conception of theatrical pleasure with Aristotle's. In *Ep.* 88.21–22, in the context of discussing the liberal arts, Seneca enumerates four kinds of *ars* as defined by Posidonius, arranged hierarchically from the common through the liberal. Next to the lowest are the *artes ludicrae*, which "aim at pleasure for the eyes and ears" (88.22). The examples Seneca gives are all visual and equivalent to what Aristotle calls *opsis*: the elaborate staging of plays, including elevators and devices that open and close automatically, effects by which "the eyes of the inexperienced are struck in amazement at all things new, because they do not know their causes."⁴⁴ Halliwell (1986, 62–77) has shown that Aristotle identifies several pleasures associated with drama, including those created by "pleasurably gar-

nished" language (*Poetics* 1449b25) and by theatrical spectacle (1450b16–20). Sensual pleasure of this sort is not for Aristotle an essential element of mimetic art, although he recognizes that it has a "legitimate, secondary part to play" (Halliwell 1986, 67). Seneca's hierarchy similarly acknowledges pleasure as an effect of the theater but characterizes it as a sensual and preliminary one appealing particularly to the lower classes (note his initial characterization of the audience in the *Troades* as a *uulgus leue* [1128]); as a result he ranks it at the bottom of his scale.

In contrast to this merely pleasurable appeal to the senses stands what Seneca characterizes as a higher response to the theatrical, an essentially cognitive one. When an audience applauds a line like "The poor lack many things, the greedy lack everything," it is responding not to sounds but to ideas that it "recognizes" (*adgnosimus*) to be true (*Ep.* 108.8). This recognition is clearly based on an element of Stoic epistemology, the "common conceptions" or "preconceptions," which "cover truths that cognitive impressions, or at least sensory ones, do not transmit directly" (LS I.252).⁴⁵ In addition to kateleptic impressions, the Stoics acknowledged the existence of *koinē ennoia* and *prolēpsis* as additional criteria of truth; as Seneca says, "We are accustomed to grant much to the presuppositions (*praesumptioni*) of all men, and in our school it is a proof of truth (*veritatis argumentum*) that something seems to be so to all people" (*Ep.* 117.6). Lines like the one about greed appeal to just such preconceptions ("words . . . which we publicly acknowledge and by our consensus testify to be true"), to the "foundations" and "seeds of virtue" that nature has given us (108.8). As Sandbach has noted (1971, 32), these preconceptions are closely linked with the idea of *enargeia*; both by their "clearness" convince us of their truthfulness. The power of the theater, which Seneca here praises, is therefore once again linked to its cognitive role as evidence.

It is connected as well, however, with its role as persuasion, as the equivalent to oratory. Seneca acknowledges that cognition has an emotional element, for the "beauty of the subject matter" takes control of the listener, who becomes emotionally identified with the speaker ("they pass into the emotion of those speaking"). This identification is compared to that of a worshipper of Cybele, transported by the flute into religious ecstasy. This homeopathic emotional response recalls in part Aristotle's discussion of catharsis in his *Politics*, where it is similarly compared to the effect of "sacred melodies" (1342a). In the *Politics*, however, Aristotle is discussing music and its role in education; in this letter Seneca uses music only as an analogy for the experience of a speech or play. Moreover, the emotion that Seneca's audience shares with the performer is motivational rather than therapeutic. Seneca seems to be thinking of the orator's appeal to emotion, which serves to win over the audience to his point of view and which, as we saw in *De Ira* 2.17, functions in the theater as well. The

moral insights that “seize” the listener because of their vividness as preconceptions are inevitably linked with emotion.

In acknowledging that the theater uses emotion to shape understanding, Seneca voices a view that comes close to what several recent scholars have argued that Aristotle meant by catharsis. Martha Nussbaum has examined the root meaning of words in the *kathairō* family and concluded that “in many different contexts—everyday practical, educational, medical, religious, literary” they share the sense of “clearing up or cleaning up by removal of an obstacle or obstacles” (1992, 280–281). In Plato we find such words used in an epistemological context to describe cognition that is “clear” and unimpeded; indeed, Plato uses these *katharos* words in much the same way as the Stoics later use *enargos*: to describe cognition that is vivid.⁴⁶ This usage continues in Aristotle and in other philosophers. While Nussbaum acknowledges that we cannot be sure whether this reflects Plato’s influence or is an independent development, nonetheless she believes that, “in a work written in reaction to Platonic criticisms of the cognitive value of rhetoric and poetry,” we have good reason to translate catharsis as “clearing up” and to think of this process as “psychological, epistemological, and cognitive . . . Our cognitive activity, as we explore the ethical conception embodied in the text, centrally involves emotional response. We discover what we think about these events partly by noticing how we feel” (1986, 390, 15). Although Halliwell resists any particular translation of *catharsis* of the sort that Nussbaum advocates, he, too, sees it as a process both cognitive and emotional, using pity and fear to “harmonise them with our perceptions and judgments of the world” (1986, 201).

On this interpretation, catharsis is, by Aristotle’s standards, inherently rhetorical: “The emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgments, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain” (*Rhetoric* 2.1.8). If the *Poetics* offers “a fundamentally rhetorical conception of poetic discourse” (Walker 2000, 281), then we should expect it to offer as well a rhetorical conception of listener response. When Seneca talks of orators and actors who imitate emotion to lead others to their point of view, and when he describes how the “beauty of the subject matter” in a lecture or a play “stirs the hearer with a longing for what is right” (*Ep.* 108.7–8), he suggests that “we discover what we think about these events partly by noticing how we feel.” Aesthetic emotions can shape judgments, both moral and immoral ones. For the very process of cognition is for the Stoics a form of judgment in response to “aesthetic” impressions, to perceptions charged with potential emotion. That is why Seneca compares the first stage of emotion to the sensations we feel in seeing a play or reading a book (*De Ira* 2.2.5). What should come next, in both cases, is a discovery of what we think and the formation of judgment.

E. The Mirror of the Self

The Stoics turned to tragedy both because it modeled the cognitive process and because it helped to clarify the nature of the emotions. Just as Seneca seems to be aware, through whatever channels, of the essence of Aristotle's treatment of tragedy (pity, fear, emotional identification, catharsis of various forms), so, too, does he recognize, both in his discussion of drama in *Ep.* 108 and in his plays themselves, that tragedy should involve *anagnōrisis*, a change from ignorance to knowledge (1452a28–30). It is an index of the *Poetics*' prospective rather than retrospective force that neither *anagnōrisis* nor its cognates are used in extant Greek tragedy, whereas Seneca used the Latin equivalent regularly. Although Seneca never uses the Latin noun that comes closest to Aristotle's term (*agnitio*; cf. Cave 1988, 5), he regularly features the cognate verb *agnoscere* in his plays. Seneca can use it for simple recognition, for the discovery of the identity of the person standing before you (*Hercules Furens* 624–5, *Troades* 95), but he uses it more often for the recognition of the human potential for violence and destructive passion. After slaying the last of their sons, Medea asks Jason, *Coniugem agnoscis tuam?* [Do you recognize your wife?] (*Medea* 1021). In a similar way Atreus offers Thyestes the heads of his sons and asks, "Do you recognize your children?" Thyestes replies, "I recognize my brother" (*Thyestes* 1005–1006). When Phaedra, driven by her illicit desire for Hippolytus, feels compelled to escape the city for the wilds, she acknowledges her link with her mother, Pasiphae, lover of the Minotaur: "I recognize the deadly misfortune which befell my poor mother" (*Phaedra* 113). What Phaedra learns about herself or Jason about Medea, the spectators of a Senecan tragedy can through these characters learn about themselves.

The plays offer the kind of *anagnōrisis* that Seneca had said a mirror would produce through its reflected image of anger: "Led as it were face to face with reality they did not know (*agnoverunt*) themselves" (*De Ira* 2.36.1). Mirrors exist, Seneca tells us in the *Naturales Quaestiones* (1.17.4), precisely for this purpose: "Mirrors were invented in order that man himself might know himself and thereby gain many benefits from this: first knowledge of self and then counsel about particular concerns." When cognition is itself an act of judgment, our response to dramatic events should use the initial emotional impact they arouse as a spur to the recognition of truths about human nature.

Shadi Bartsch (2006, 280–281) has analyzed Seneca's use of the mirror as an image for self-knowledge but concluded that Seneca's tragedies fail in this role: "It seems . . . that Seneca's internalization of the mirror of society and his revision of the values reflected in that mirror fail in his tragedies because there are no controls on second-order volition when there can be no sanctions imposed

by one's ethical environment." "Second-order volition" constitutes what Seneca characterizes as the second stage of emotion, the stage in which impressions are judged. Because Medea fails in this act of judgment, Bartsch concludes (281), she offers a "sobering counter-example to the exemplary mirror, the mirror of philosophic self-transformation." In place of a society that gazes at and thus guides the individual, Seneca creates within the self a monitor that mirrors that self, one that, as Medea demonstrates, can easily fail because it likes what it sees. The radical autonomy of the Stoic self can produce saints or monsters, as Gordon Braden (1985) has shown. Ironically, however, it is the very clear and self-conscious way in which Medea judges her impressions that suggests the possibility of another choice for those who observe her; Medea's self-consciousness enables our own, for we can see that her "tragedy" was neither fated nor accidental but freely chosen. As we have noted before, furious characters like Medea may like what they see of themselves in a mirror, but those who while calm look over Medea's shoulders into that same mirror should reach a different decision, Seneca believes.⁴⁷

Senecan tragedy, like the Senecan self, is a private place, or a "closet drama." Indeed, Seneca's form of drama is the perfect type for a world in which public performance, either of plays or of values, is exceedingly dangerous. Lacking an assembled audience of fellow citizens to guide its responses, the Senecan self must be actor and audience both. As Bartsch notices, Seneca uses metaphors of the theater and of the law courts to characterize this process of self-formation, and therein, I have argued, lies the key to Seneca's conception of theatrical catharsis. The soul constitutes "an internal court of judgment" (Bartsch 2006, 200) in which we, too, are judges who can say *agnosco* [I recognize]. Like Aristotle, Seneca, I believe, accepted the notion that a tragedy should, by its plot, make its actions "intelligible." Since the traditional plots of tragedy involve, in Stoic terms, actions that arise from passion, Seneca's *De Ira* is the treatise best suited to comment on the genre. There Seneca's constant refrain is, "In order that you might know . . ." He describes the stages of passion's development with this goal: knowledge, understanding (*intellexerit* 3.3.3), and insight (*videndum* 2.36.4). By structuring his plays according to the progression from *species*, to *iudicium*, to *affectus*, by giving, in other words, his plays the same plot as that of the passionate soul, Seneca implicitly seeks through them to promote the same kind of intelligibility that his treatise constructs. By showing that Phaedra or Atreus succumb to an impulse that their judgment could have rejected, he presents their actions not as innocent mistakes worthy of pity but as deliberate acts that we should condemn, just as we would if we were judges in a court.

The Stoics accepted the Platonic notion that tragedy is an image of the passionate soul; they did not, however, find harm in the experience. Influenced by

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the Stoics interpreted emotion as a cognitive and persuasive process in which judgment follows and is influenced by our preliminary and unavoidable emotional responses to powerful impressions. One of the ways in which the Stoics viewed all the world as a "stage" was their comparison of this process of cognition to the experience of the audience in the theater. As "spectators" to life's impressions, we constantly see, judge, and then act. Tragedy is therefore a portrait of the soul in several senses: The soul is the venue for the misjudgments that lead to tragedy; its plot is a depiction of this process of misjudgment; and the souls of tragedy's audiences replicate in their responses the same process of judgment with the potential for a different conclusion. Seneca's tragic protagonists argue the case for their acts; we sit in judgment, persuaded to follow their logic or dissuaded by the consequences that follow. For the Stoics, psychology is in a very real sense also epistemology; emotions are our judgments made in response to the evidence of our impressions. The vividness of tragedy's images may arouse our emotions, but these are only preliminary and involuntary; we can in the end judge their truth value.

5

Reading Monsters

Qui legis Oedipoden caligantemque Thyesten,
Colchidas et Scyllas, quid nisi monstra legis?

You who read of Oedipus and Thyestes, when
he turned the sky dark, and of Medeas and Scyllas,
of what do you read but monsters?

—Martial, *Epigrams*

Tragedy had by Seneca's time long been associated with *ekplēxis teratōdēs*, with the shocking effects created by the monstrous.¹ Aeschylus' Erinyes, the serpentine women of his *Oresteia*, became the monsters synonymous with the genre, the "Erinyes of tragedy," as Propertius called them.² At Rome, portents, snakes, ghosts, and maenads are a recurring feature of Republican tragedy, judging from the fragments that survive.³ But it was Seneca, I suggest, who gave to Martial his label for tragedy—*monstra*—for Seneca's recent plays had made *monstrum* the leitmotif of the genre.⁴ Seneca's characters are called "monsters": Oedipus is more of a monster than the Sphinx (*Oedipus* 641), and Atreus wants to be filled with a greater monster (*Thyestes* 254). His protagonists commit monstrous acts (*Medea* 675, *Thyestes* 632). Almost every play, moreover, presents an event that was in Roman religion considered a *monstrum*, something unnatural and abnormal that both shocks and calls for interpretation: In the *Phaedra* (1016) a bull comes from the sea, and in the *Troades* (169) the ghost of Achilles appears above his tomb.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has argued (1996, 4) that "the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant." How, then, should we read Seneca's monsters? Seneca highlights and exploits the monstrous in his plays in a way that suggests that they are more than simply a traditional element in the tragic repertoire.⁵ I argue in this chapter, therefore, that we should read them as a natural

product of the Stoic poetics we traced in chapters 3 and 4: *Monstra* are sense impressions of the most vivid sort that offer manifest “signs” of their meaning, and Seneca’s summoning of infernal monsters from the underworld, in Vergilian fashion, is a metaphor for tragedy’s elucidation of the soul. Like Freud much later, Seneca turned to Vergil to construct an argument from the poet, an image of the invisible soul.

Freud is central to my discussion of the psychology of Senecan tragedy for two reasons: first of all, he offers a modern analogue to Seneca’s interpretation of Vergilian monsters, an analogue that underlines Seneca’s interest in the soul of tragedy; second, Alessandro Schiesaro has read Seneca’s monsters as a Freudian return of those latent desires that Seneca’s Stoicism otherwise repressed. I argue instead that Seneca’s poetics grows out of a conscious recognition that the soul must be made manifest; Seneca does not summon Furies from the underworld in order to release repressed desires but to reveal the otherwise invisible nature of forbidden emotions. When Seneca describes his exploration of human psychology in terms that suggest an *extispicium*, the act of exploring the entrails of sacrificial animals, he points to a Roman model for interpreting signs that conceptualizes for us how to read his plays. The semiotics of Senecan tragedy is rooted both in Stoic epistemology and in ancient divination, a religious tradition that the Stoics sought to harmonize with their philosophy. The soul of Senecan tragedy offers signs that constitute kataleptic impressions; the reading of Seneca’s monstrous plays, therefore, is not analogous to the decoding of a dream but to the recognition of truths made evident in just and lively images.

A. Reading Vergil

Qualia poetae inferna monstra finxerunt . . . talem nobis iram
figuremus. . . . sit [ira] qualis apud vates nostros est:
Sanguineum quatiens dextra Bellona flagellum
aut scissa gaudens vadit Discordia palla.

Let us imagine anger to be like the infernal monsters which
poets create. . . . Let us take our picture of anger from our
poets:

Flaunting her bloody scourge the War-dame strides
Or Discord glorying in her tattered robe.

—Seneca, *De Ira*, with lines modeled on
Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.702–703

We must begin, as Seneca himself did, by reading Vergil's monsters. For Seneca, Vergil provided the master text for the representation of the human soul and its passions. When, in the lines quoted above, Seneca seeks a vivid portrait for the face of anger, he turns, as his Stoic predecessors regularly did, to poetry. The fact that Seneca, who elsewhere in his treatise on anger uses historical *exempla* more often than poetical ones, turns to Vergil on this rare occasion, is a mark, I suggest, of Vergil's importance in shaping Seneca's poetics. For Vergil showed Seneca how to restore to tragedy the monstrous Furies that Aeschylus and Euripides had earlier domesticated and thereby to give form and visibility to the "underworld" of the soul within.

1. *Juno and the Face of Anger*

Adsint ab imo Tartari fundo excitae
 Eumenides, ignem flammae spargant comae,
 uiperea saevae uerbera incutiant manus.

Let the Eumenides appear, summoned from
 the depths of the Underworld; let them spread
 flame with their fiery hair and let their cruel
 hands brandish snakes as whips.

—Juno speaking in the prologue
 to *Hercules Furens*

It is in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* that we can see most clearly the role that Vergil plays in providing Seneca with an "image" of the monstrous very different from the one he found in Greek tragedy, for although the *Hercules Furens* is ultimately based on Euripides' *Herakles*, it is indebted to the *Aeneid* for its *monstrum*.⁶ In Euripides' play, madness appears in the form of the monstrous Lyssa, who reluctantly carries out Hera's vengeance against the hero by driving him mad. In form and function, Lyssa was linked with those quintessential monsters, the Erinyes, who had received their traditional portrait in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In the course of that trilogy, however, the Erinyes had lost their frightening and serpentine visage and abandoned their role of avengers to become beneficent members of the *polis* as Eumenides. What happens to the Erinyes in the *Oresteia* is what regularly happens to monsters in Greek myth: They are defeated by a hero (in this case, Orestes), who thereby imposes "human order on the chaos that threatens to engulf him" (Segal 1981, 3). Euripides had read his Aeschylus, and so his Lyssa, although still an Erinys in appearance, had become in character *eumenēs* [kindly]. When Iris brings to Lyssa Hera's command to drive Heracles mad, Lyssa resists, arguing that she does not enjoy haunting those who commit murder (846). As Wilamowitz

(1889, I.371) suggested, Lyssa is thus a strange Fury, indeed a contradiction in terms. Iris has to remind Lyssa that Hera did not send her to practice self-control (*sōphronein* 857).

It is not surprising, then, that Seneca, in recasting Euripides' play, chooses not to borrow Lyssa, for a Hercules who is *furens* needs as his inspiration a model of madness neither as kind nor as gentle as the one Euripides provides. In adapting Euripides, Seneca therefore faced the same dilemma that Vergil had earlier confronted in adapting Homer's *Iliad* for the second half of the *Aeneid*: Both poets lacked a suitable Greek model for their needs.⁷ Since the *Iliad* opens in the ninth year of the Trojan War, Vergil devised his own *casus belli*: Juno summons a Fury from the Underworld to drive the enemy mad. Seneca borrows this model to picture anger and the tragedies it causes: "Just like the foulest of the Underworld's inhabitants who come forth to spread discord among nations and to shred the peace, . . . so let us picture anger" (*De Ira* 2.35.5). The Juno who opens the *Hercules Furens* is a Vergilian figure of just this sort: She comes to start a war (*movenda iam sunt bella* [Wars now must be set in motion] 123), and she summons *inferna monstra* (*inferos* 91), including the goddess Discord (93) to help her do it. It is, however, a war within, a passionate strife that Hercules directs against himself.

Vergil's Juno and the Fury Allecto, whom she summons from Hades, appealed to Seneca as images of *furor* because in them madness resumes the monstrous aspect of which Greek tragedy largely deprives it. When Seneca cites the Furies as appropriate poetic *monstra* for anger, it is within the context of discussing the "face" or "aspect" of emotion (*De Ira* 2.35.3, *facies*; 2.35.5, *aspectus*). There, after cataloguing the traditional iconography of the Furies, Seneca suggests that a perfect example of what he has in mind could be found "in our poets" and quotes the epic lines, usually attributed to Vergil, which I cited earlier. Seneca's use of the plural *vates nostros* suggests, however, that he is taking Vergil as the lead representative of a class of poets who regularly represent the Furies or Discord in this way.⁸ When he opens his *Hercules Furens* with an angry Juno who summons the Fury Megaera to drive the hero mad with her serpents, Seneca follows a primarily Vergilian paradigm of the monstrous because Vergil's Allecto had looked the part, as Vergil emphasizes:⁹

Odit et ipse pater Pluton, odere sorores
Tartareae monstrum: tot sese vertit in ora,
tam saevae facies, tot pullulat atra colubris.

Even her father Pluto and her hellish sisters
hate the monster: she transforms herself into
so many looks, so cruel are the faces she assumes,
her black hair sprouts numberless serpents. (*Aeneid* 7.327–329)

In juxtaposing the word *monstrum* here with a description of Allecto's appearance, her "faces," Vergil has anticipated Seneca's conception of a *monstrum* as "that which shows," an etymology to which I will turn later.

Vergil's personification of Discord makes it monstrous in a way that Homer's personification of Eris did not:

Eris . . . rages incessantly, sister and comrade of man-slaying Ares; she first rears her crest only a little, but then her head is fixed in the heavens while her feet tread on the earth. She it was who now cast evil strife into their midst as she went through the throng, making the groanings of men to increase. (*Iliad* 4.440–445)

As Heraclitus says in his *Allegories of Homer*, "For Eris, Homer did not allegorize obscurely . . . in these verses Homer does not in any way give shape to a monstrous (*teratōdēs*) divinity" (29.4–5). Eris is neither monstrous nor infernal; her appearance is a mark of anger's ability to grow out of all proportion but does not otherwise convey the nature of anger itself.

Likewise, when Achilles wishes that "*eris* and *cholos* [strife and anger] might disappear from the hearts of gods and men" (*Iliad* 18.107–108), he neither personifies nor divinizes these forces. In his account strife and anger have no appearance, only an effect; they must be described through similes that liken their appeal to that of honey and their ability to spread to that of smoke. Even when such figures are described in Homer, the description is not an index of their nature. Agamemnon tells us little of Ate's (Delusion's) appearance: She has "delicate feet for she does not walk on the earth but over the heads of men" (*Iliad* 19.92–93). Her tender feet seem intended to explain why she does not walk, not why she clouds the judgment of humans. Seneca turns to Vergil for his *monstrum* because Vergil gives to Allecto the monstrous form that Homer had not and that Greek tragedy after Aeschylus had largely removed. Vergil's Furies give anger a "face" through vivid images that bring emotion to life.

2. *Acheronta Movebo*

Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.

—Vergil, *Aeneid*

Vergil's monstrous forms of madness were appealing to Seneca not just because they were visual but also because their external appearance matched their inner nature, indeed symbolized it. Richard Heinze, writing in 1903, noted that Vergil used divine forces such as Juno or the Furies "to symbolize what we regard as natural psychological processes" (1993, 244–245).¹⁰ Heinze had already been

anticipated in that reading by Sigmund Freud, who had chosen Juno's words, "If I cannot bend the High Powers, I will move the Infernal Regions," as the epigraph for *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which was published in 1900. We can better understand why Seneca turned to Vergil to illustrate his conception of monstrosity if we understand why Freud later did, too.

Freud sees his exploration of the human unconscious and its forbidden passions as analogous to Juno's evocation of the forces of Hades. When he repeats this Vergilian quotation later in the work, he provides a commentary on it that has often been cited since as an epitome of psychoanalysis: "The interpretation of dreams is the Royal Way to an understanding of the unconscious in the life of the soul."¹¹ In his *De Ira* (2.1.1), Seneca uses Vergil in a similar way, for there he likens his discussion of the nature and destructive power of anger to a descent into Hades phrased in Vergilian words: *Facilis enim in proclivia vitiorum decursus est* [Easy is the descent down the road of vice]. Although perhaps only unconsciously, Seneca here echoes the Sibyl of Cumae's words to Aeneas in book six of the *Aeneid*: *Facilis descensus Averno* [Easy is the descent to the Underworld] (6.126).¹² Since the descent into passion is for Seneca, too, a "royal road" to the underworld and the soul that it represents, it is entirely appropriate that the passions themselves are for Seneca *inferna monstra* (*De Ira* 2.35.5) of the sort that Vergil associates with Avernus: Allecto, Discordia, and the Furies.¹³

Like Seneca, I would argue, Freud turns to Vergil to thematize his discussion of the soul because poetry offers an image of what even science, with its methods and measurements, cannot see. Freud sounds like a new Chrysippus in justifying his own use of the argument from the poet:

[I]t still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own. The fact is that local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection. (1955, 2.160–161)

Although there have been many interpretations of Freud's use of Vergil's line, at its most basic level Freud's interest in Juno and Allecto arises from the fact that Vergil's imagination gave Freud "insight" into "affection."¹⁴ Jean Starobinski (1987, 406) has noted that Juno and Allecto constitute for Freud

the “story of the soul”: “[I]t is by means of the pathways of myth, and through the behavior of Oedipus, . . . Juno, and perhaps even Allecto, that psychoanalysis has developed the story of the soul.” For Freud, as for Seneca, to explore the soul is to visit the underworld and to confront the monsters who reside there. That is why both “psychologists” read Vergil.

3. *The Return of the Repressed?*

If a painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse, and to spread feathers of many a hue over limbs picked up now here now there, so that what at the top is a lovely woman ends below in a black and ugly fish, could you, my friends, if favored with a private view, refrain from laughing? Believe me, dear Pisos, quite like such pictures would be a book, whose idle fancies shall be shaped like a sick man’s dreams.

—Horace, *Ars Poetica*

Horace begins his theory of poetry by explaining and rejecting the monstrous; on his reading monsters are the products of the sick poet’s dreams, an idea that has had a long history since then.¹⁵ As Kayser observes (1966, 21–22), during the sixteenth century the grotesque was characterized as “dreams of painters,” and Freud would later propose a functional parallel between fantasy and literature. I have sought to understand Seneca’s and Freud’s shared interest in Vergil’s “story of the soul” as a corrective to a very different Freudian reading of Seneca’s plays that sees them instead as a “sick man’s dreams.”

Carlin Barton, in her book *The Sorrow of the Ancient Romans* (1993, 136), explores the social psychology behind the Roman fascination with the monstrous and in so doing offers an interpretive paradigm for understanding Seneca’s plays as an expression of desires that cannot be fulfilled in the real world: “The Roman fascination with the monster, with the actor, with gambling and spectacles, often used as evidence (by ancients as well as moderns) of the moral laxness of the culture, are at the same time evidence for its excessive rigidity and inflexibility.” Art can play a compensatory role by balancing through Dionysian play an all too Apollonian world. More than just a symptom of debased culture, these monsters can also serve as “remedies” (132).¹⁶ Barton argues (76) that this is the dynamic at work in Seneca’s monstrous tragedies: “The Seneca who wrote emotionally frenzied plays is the same who writes the monotonously restrained *Moral Epistles* . . . It does not surprise anyone familiar with the emotional patterns of this period that Seneca, at the very end of a long essay on tranquillity and restraint, erupts in a dithyrambic rapture on intoxication.” As we saw in chapter 2, however, Seneca’s tragedies are hardly the sort of

poetry that Seneca describes in the *De Tranquillitate* (17.10–11) as *grande aliquid* and *sublime quicquam*. Moreover, the intoxication of poetry praised there produces not something compensatory to philosophy and its strictures but rather something that intensely embodies the insights of philosophy.

Although Seneca tells us a great deal about his inner life in his prose writings, he tells us nothing there that explicitly links that inner life with the creation of the tragedies. Alessandro Schiesaro (1994, 2003) has sought to resolve this problem by finding in the tragedies traces of both the “dreamer” and his “dreams” and in so doing interprets Seneca’s fascination with the monstrous in light of the psychology of the poet: “*Thyestes* invites from the very beginning an engagement with concepts masterfully explored by Freud, since its prologue stages a conflict between the Fury’s order to unleash tragedy and Tantalus’ desire to repress it. As the Fury succeeds, the words of the tragedy emerge as the product of a violent creative urge rooted in the underworld of the Furies and their passions” (2003, 2).

As “playwright,” the Fury is Seneca himself; her passions overcome Tantalus’ resistance and thereby allow the expression of “realities which would otherwise tend to be repressed” (1994, 196). Seneca’s tragedies and their monstrous events are thus, in Schiesaro’s reading, the return of the repressed, the poet’s revelation of feelings that elsewhere moral forces can control but that here overwhelm all attempts at salutary silence, as Tantalus’ and Thyestes’ futile attempts to resist make clear. In his short essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1959, 144), Freud suggested that “[t]he creative writer does the same as the child at play.” Writers fantasize (Freud’s German word is *phantasieren*) and thereby give expression to repressed desires in a socially acceptable form as “literature.”¹⁷ The title of Schiesaro’s book, *The Passions in Play*, highlights the Freudian paradigm that guides his approach to Seneca’s tragedies, which are “playful” not in the Alexandrian sense that we discuss in chapter 2 but in the Freudian use of the term. Freud notes that, in German, *Spiel* (“play”) is the label for several forms of imaginative writing; that is why the otherwise distressing and socially unacceptable experiences portrayed in fiction can bring pleasure to readers and audiences (1959, 144) since the writer and reader are only “playing.”

Although Freud’s own comment on his Vergilian epigraph suggests that it “is intended to picture the efforts of the repressed instinctual impulses,” in fact Freud’s interpretation of his own motives in this (as in other) cases should not be read as definitive.¹⁸ Freud suggests that Vergil’s Juno finds an outlet through Allecto for feelings that her “Ego” finds unacceptable. Yet Juno’s words are spoken in the first person, through “ego,” and are expressed with an active verb (*movebo*), indicating, I maintain, that Juno is bringing the underworld to light, revealing the soul and its emotions. Just as Freud took Oedipus as a paradigm

not only for repressed desires but also for the process of interpreting them, so, too, I suggest, he featured Juno at the beginning of his *Interpretation of Dreams* because she was also a model for interpretation and revelation. As Starobinski observes (1987, 405), “For Vergil, to move is also to unfold.” Jupiter (1.262) “will move the secrets of the fates”; Juno “will move” and hence “unfold” the secrets of the hidden powers below. In exploring the world of monsters, I would argue, Seneca is, like Freud, not a dreamer but an interpreter, and Senecan plays are not horrendous dreams but, as tragedy in the Aristotelian sense should be, attempts to make *nefas*, that which is horrible and unnatural, explicable.¹⁹ As James Hillman has written (1979, 21), Freud’s book on dream interpretation was “a *revelation* [Hillman’s emphasis] of the underworld, formulated in the faith language of his time and of his personal code: the metaphors of rational science.” Vergil provided to Freud, as he had earlier provided to Seneca, the key metaphor for this “revelation” of the underworld within.²⁰

B. *Monstra* as Metatheater

Beginning with Homer, ancient poets were fond of putting images of their art into their works. Homer’s bard Demodocus sings in the *Odyssey* an epic tale of the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus that reminds us of the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, with which the *Iliad* begins. Euripides’ *Bacchae* presents Pentheus’ tragedy as a play within the play, with Dionysos as actor and director. Vergil at the beginning of the sixth book of the *Aeneid* portrays the artist Daedalus sculpting on temple doors his life story, which in many ways parallels the dynamic of the story Vergil himself is telling. After Vergil, as Schiesaro has observed (2003, 13), poets increasingly felt compelled to mirror in their works their own “processes of composition.” In the weaving contest between Minerva and Arachne, therefore, Ovid portrays in the iconoclastic Arachne an artist with an aesthetic like his own. Seneca, likewise, portrays theatrical events as part of his own plays; as we have seen before, Atreus stages his punishment of Thyestes as a “play” to be observed, and the Greeks and Trojans watch the deaths of Hector’s children like an audience in the theater. Although I am cautious about using such metatheatrical moments as the key to Seneca’s poetics—since the theater need not represent only itself—I do believe that Seneca provides within his plays important clues to his idea of tragedy. One such clue appears in Seneca’s *Oedipus*, where the prophet Tiresias engages in a series of *monstra* or acts of divination in order to discover the truth about Oedipus and the plague. This scene can serve as a revealing touchstone of the differences between the Senecan tragic poetics for which I have been arguing and the one that Schiesaro has advocated.

1. *Tiresias*

The *vates*, who through his song, that is, through carefully chosen words endowed with active power, *rata verba*, can bring to life the underworld's demonic creatures, is analogous to the poet, whose inspiration vivifies the characters of tragedy.

—Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*

Tiresias, the blind seer, is for Schiesaro a model of Seneca the poet. Tiresias uses “magic song” (*Oedipus* 561) to discover a truth that Seneca's Oedipus, in contrast to Sophocles', is too cowardly to reveal through his own rational thought: “Knowledge can be found in a poetry which is profoundly passionate in its origins and inevitably chthonic in its appearance. It is a knowledge which exists and acts in lieu of reason and against it” (Schiesaro 2003, 12). As *vates*, however, Tiresias is not primarily a poet but an interpreter who uses several forms of divination to seek a truth that is hidden and ambiguous. It is, in short, not the creation of poetry but the search for signs that leads him to explore the underworld and to discover there that Oedipus is an *implicitum malum/magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua* [an entangled evil, a monster more ambiguous than his Sphinx] (640–641). Tiresias is, therefore, not analogous to the dreamer releasing repressed desires but to the analyst examining the soul for signs that can be interpreted. *Monstrum*, not *carmen*, is the term that is central to understanding his role. Tiresias is a model interpreter who can guide us in reading Seneca's “monsters.”

Tiresias performs literally the sort of *extispicium* that is Seneca's metaphor for tragedy's exploration of the soul.²¹ Although he examines the body of a sacrificial animal, it functions as an analogue to Oedipus' own, a foreshadowing of Oedipus' own identity and situation. The blind Tiresias asks Manto, his daughter, to describe the *certas uiscerum . . . notas* (352), the “dependable signs of the innards” of the heifer; later Oedipus asks the shepherd to describe the *certas corporis nostri notas* (811), the famous marks on the exposed child's feet. In each case (378, 1021) the body is a *truncus*, a “mutilated” or “dismembered” body. When Manto says of the fetus inside the heifer, “The mangled forms sadly try to take a step” (378), the allusion to the lame Oedipus is obvious. Like the sacrificial animal, Oedipus will prove to be a *monstrum* whose appearance offers signs of the truth. The fire burning at the altar, the sacrificial animal's countenance and movements, and the marks of the entrails all function as outward signs (352, 384) of an inward reality that Tiresias seeks to discover through interpretation. Although the gods do at times send their signals through “dubious *monstra*,” as Aeneas acknowledges (*Aeneid* 2.171), Seneca, I suggest, uses

the difficulties that Tiresias encounters here in divining the truth not to cast doubt on the procedure itself but to intensify the sense of monstrosity and of confused and intertwined relations, which the signs portend about Oedipus himself as *monstrum*.

When the *extispicium* produces inconclusive signs, Tiresias resorts to a *monstrum* of a different sort, necromancy or the summoning up of the dead, including the release of a Fury and *Furor* in the Vergilian mode: *Tum torva Erinys sonuit et caecus Furor* [Then the dreadful Erinys was heard and blind Rage] (590). Seneca introduces divination here in multiple forms, I suggest, as a way to underline the metatheatrical implications of this process. When Tiresias tells Oedipus that the knowledge that he seeks must be found in the Underworld, he uses the same expressions of necessity (*alia temptanda est via* [392: Another path must be tried] and *populus infernae Stygis/huc extrahendus* [396–397: the people of infernal Styx must be dragged here]) that Seneca uses in the *De Ira* to describe the need to reveal the nature of anger (*perscrutanda eius mala et in medium protrahenda sunt* [3.5.3: Its evils must be examined and dragged out into the open]).

Seneca's tragedies regularly include *monstra* of this sort and merit Martial's label for that reason alone. In fact, the plays present practically every variety of divination: Andromache's dream of Hector in the *Troades*, Cassandra's prophetic frenzy in the *Agamemnon*, the raising of the dead in *Thyestes* and *Oedipus*, and unnatural natural events such as earthquakes and preternatural darkness in several plays and a bull from the sea in *Phaedra*. I argue, in fact, that for Seneca *monstrum* is the core concept of tragedy. Indeed, two of the passages that Schiesaro takes as paradigms for Seneca's sense of the theatrical are ones that Seneca himself labels as *monstra*: the incantation in which *parat/Medea monstrum* (670f. Medea prepares a *monstrum*) and the necromancy in the *Oedipus* (530f.), which the chorus characterizes as the latest *monstrum* associated with Thebes.

2. *Demonstratio*

It is necessary therefore to demonstrate the foulness and fierceness of [anger] and to place before the eyes what a monster a person is who is raging against fellow humans (*quantum monstri sit homo in hominem furens*).

—Seneca, *De Ira*

Seneca's desire to put monsters "before the eyes" indicates that he wants thereby to engage in *demonstratio*, the creation of a vivid and persuasive image. The visual and vivid were essential elements in the Roman conception of *monstrum*,

which is why Vergil's face of anger was so appealing to Seneca. Because at its root it was a sign or "warning" from the gods, *monstrum* was derived from the verb *monere*, "to warn." Several writers, however, incorrectly but understandably associated it instead with *monstrare*, "to show." Servius, commenting on the *mirabile monstrum*, "wonderful portent" (*Aeneid* 2.680), of fire around Iulus' head, remarks: *Monstrum . . . dictum a monstrando* [The word "monster" is derived from the word "showing"] (He was later corrected by his editor, who inserted, *id est monendo*, "that is, from 'warning'").²² Seneca also seems to accept this false etymology. When his interlocutor in the *De Ira* commands, *quemadmodum [ira] sanari debeat monstra* [Show how anger ought to be cured] (3.3.1), Seneca replies by presenting anger as a *monstrum*, the "monster" of an angry man (3.3.2). *Homo furens* is a monster in a double sense: a frightening creature but also a vivid warning. In this regard, Seneca is in harmony with Roman tradition; *monstra* or *portenta* are intended to be seen, as Vergil (*hic oculis subitum obicitur magnoque futurum/augurio monstrum* [At this point a portent suddenly was thrust before their eyes which would prove to be a great omen], *Aeneid* 5.522–523) and Livy (*portentaque alia . . . observata oculis* [other omens observed with the eyes], 3.5.14) confirm.

As visual phenomena, *monstra* constituted just the kind of vivid sense impressions that the Stoics associated with tragedy. As Tiresias acknowledges (302), the gods offer *manifesta . . . signa*, the sort of images that the Stoics called kataleptic. Longinus, as we have seen, illustrates how the Stoic concept of *phantasia* can inform literature, drawing his examples largely from Greek tragedy. Several of the "imaginative passages" that Longinus catalogues (15.7) constitute *monstra* of the sort that Seneca features in his plays, suggesting that the Stoic epistemology of impressions could have influenced Seneca's predilection for the monstrous: "Sophocles too describes with superb visualization the dying Oedipus conducting his own burial amid strange portents in the sky (*diosēmeias*); and Achilles at the departure of the Greeks, when he appears above his tomb to those embarking, a scene which nobody perhaps has depicted so vividly (*enargesteron*) as Simonides." Seneca does not write the scene of Oedipus' death, but he does regularly depict rituals such as Medea's incantation, Tiresias' necromancy, or Atreus' act of human sacrifice to the accompaniment of "strange portents."

As Atreus prepares to kill his brother's children at the altar, for example, the earth and palace shake, a shooting star appears ominously from the left portion of the sky, and ivory statues begin to weep: *Movere cunctos monstra, sed solus sibi/immotus Atreus constat, atque ultro deos/terret minantes* [These omens stirred everyone except Atreus, who stood alone, unmoved, and purposely sought to frighten the threatening gods] (703–705). Here we meet *monstrum* in its root sense, as a warning from the gods, but Atreus does not heed the gods'

wrath manifest in unnatural events such as “strange portents in the sky.” His own status as *monstrum*, as an unnatural being who inverts norms, leads him to turn the tables on the gods, threatening them through his horrific acts just as they would threaten him. Longinus would, I think, applaud Seneca’s scene for its vividness and the emotional effect that inevitably follows from it. *Monstra* are by their very nature *phantasiai* and have as their goal, therefore, the *ekplēxis*, which Longinus specifies as imagination’s impact.

The vividness that 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). Talthybius describes the event as a series of *monstra*, frightening in their impact and visual in their message: “My mind was frightened and a horrid temer shook my limbs. I have seen myself, I have seen, omens (*monstra*) larger than life which surpass belief” (168–170). On this occasion the earth does not just shake but splits open, revealing Hades below and creating a passage for the ghost of Achilles to reappear on earth.²³ Ghosts appear regularly as *monstra* in Seneca’s plays: We meet the ghost of Laius in *Oedipus*, of Thyestes in *Agamemnon*, of Tantalus in *Thyestes*, and of Achilles in the *Troades*. These ghosts are not “mere decorative figure[s],” as Charles Whitmore (1915, 107) once argued, but powerful forces perhaps at the very root of tragedy: “[A]ccording to one theory, tragic drama is in its origins closely associated with the worship of the deceased hero, the ‘dangerous’ individual whose life was too exacting for social comfort and whose death was a source of wonder and solicitation” (Rosenmeyer 1982, 266).²⁴ The tombs of great heroes occupied a place on the Greek stage, and their ghosts could, like Achilles’ here, appear to influence events. Longinus (9.6) cites a similar scene in Homer in which “hell itself [is] laid bare” as another example of *phantasmata*, but his label for such scenes is ambiguous; they are *hyperphua*, either “extraordinary” or “monstrous.” When Longinus proceeds to censure Homer’s scene as “frightening” and “indecorous,” we are left to suspect that for him the hellish is closer to the “monstrous.” In regularly calling forth ghosts from Hades to activate his plots, Seneca purposely takes tragedy beyond fear to the production of horror, to something that both Longinus and Aristotle would see as monstrous tragedy.

As Longinus confirms, the appearance of ghosts or furies and signs from the heavens prove to be vivid and visual experiences of the sort that the Stoics called *phantasiai* and that Epictetus characterized as synonymous with tragedy.²⁵ As signs that are manifest, *monstra* also function as proof of just the sort that the *argumentum* of a play requires as it puts anger on trial. Indeed, as Kathy Eden (1986, 16) has noted, Aeschylus’ *Persians*, our earliest extant tragedy, includes a dream, an omen, and an oracle that function as proofs; Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 5.7.35) acknowledges that orators may use such *divina testimonia* as evidence for their case. Finally, *monstra* are *moving* experiences

that create the *ekplēxis* that Aristotle on several occasions associated with tragedy (*Poetics* 1454a4, 1455a17, 1460b25; cf. Stanford 1983, 29). The spectators of Atreus' crimes (*Movere cunctos monstra, Thyestes* 703) are "moved" rather than "warned" by the omens that portend his violence, a small sign that Seneca has assimilated the experience of the monstrous to that of the theatrical, an impression reinforced by Seneca's word order, which encloses "all" between "move" and "monsters." *Horror* and *tremor* are also regular terms in Seneca for the stunning effect of the unnatural.

If, as Andrew Feldherr has argued (1998, 1), Livy conceives of his history as a *monumentum*, a "luminous . . . visual artifact" for his readers to "view," Seneca conceives of tragedy as a *monstrum* that is vivid and visual in a similar way. Both Livy and Seneca acknowledge the importance of visual display in Roman culture and assimilate their texts to spectacles and performances that Roman audiences were already trained through the civic life of the state to evaluate and interpret.²⁶

3. *Interpreting Signs*

[A]ccording to Stoic doctrine, the gods are not directly responsible for every fissure in the liver or for every song of a bird . . . But, in the beginning, the universe was so created that definite results (*certis rebus*) would be preceded by definite signs (*certa signa*), which are given sometimes by entrails and by birds; sometimes by lightnings, by portents, and by stars, sometimes by dreams, and sometimes by utterances of persons in a frenzy. And these signs do not often deceive the persons who observe them properly.

—Cicero, *De Divinatione*

In reading *monstra* through the visible signs they offer, Seneca is applying to tragedy the hermeneutics that antiquity had developed for reading the various signs that the gods offered to indicate their will to humans. The Greek word for "monster," *teras*, was at its root, like its Latin equivalent, an omen or *semeion*, a sign from the gods. George Kennedy (1989, 79, 210) has argued that the interpretation of omens constituted in early Greek literature perhaps the first model for what we now call semiotics and that in fact it parallels in some ways the Stoic analysis of cognition. The Stoics were unusual among ancient philosophers in accepting the validity of divination in its various forms. Cicero, who himself dismissed such practices as superstition, organized his *De Divinatione* as a debate between the Stoics, who defended divination in light of their belief in Providence,²⁷ and his own, skeptical school of Academics. Cicero's brother,

Quintus, voices the Stoic case in the quotation above: The world is providential, pervaded by divine reason, and so it constantly offers meaningful signs that are not likely to deceive those who observe them properly.

Cicero draws his evidence for this Stoic view largely from Posidonius, who had defended divination by collecting various omens and showing that in fact they had been accurate (Luck 1985, 231). The Stoics justified divination in light of what they called *sympatheia*, a kind of natural connection in the nature of things (*De Divinatione* 2.33); hence, Seneca can assert that “whatever happens is a sign of a future thing” (*Naturales Quaestiones* 2.32.4; cf. 1.1.4). Seneca dismisses as trivial the idea that Jupiter from Olympus “arranges dreams for some people, entrails for others” (*Naturales Quaestiones* 2.32.3), but Jupiter does “give the sign (*signum*), the force, the cause, to all” through all-pervasive reason or *ratio* (*Naturales Quaestiones* 2.46).²⁸

Peter Struck has recently argued that Stoic divination was closely connected with Stoic allegorism, each of which sought to interpret the enigmatic and symbolic messages of signs: “Based on the points of contact between divination and allegorism . . . we should consider seriously the notion that divinatory semantics, a field dominated (in intellectual circles at least) by Stoic theories for most of antiquity, would have something to say to those allegorical readers who gave thought to how literary signs make their meaning” (2004, 191). In fact, the term *allēgoria* was used in divination as the label for a type of dream that carried hidden messages that could be decoded to reveal truths about the dreamer (182). If Seneca believes in and features divination in his plays, how can we reconcile this interest with his rejection elsewhere of allegory as a literary mode? Do the *monstra* of his plays in fact function, as Schiesaro has argued, as symbolic equivalents to dreams that reveal ambiguous truths? These questions become especially important to my thesis that Seneca adopts an Aristotelian poetics for his tragedies. For as Struck has argued (4), the allegorical tradition in ancient literary criticism stood as a distinct alternative to the rhetorical approach exemplified by Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Precisely reversing the scale of poetic virtues put forward by critics from the Aristotelian line, the allegorists claim that *unclear* language, whose message is by definition obscured, is the chief marker of great poetry.”

As Kathy Eden (1986, 12–24) has shown, Aristotle considered the testimony of witnesses, written documents, oracles, and omens as *atechnoi pisteis* or “inartificial proofs” since they did not rely on the art of rhetoric and its ability to construct probable arguments.²⁹ As physical evidence, such material belongs to spectacle (*opsis*) rather than to plot and arouses excitement without fostering understanding. By contrast, “fear and pity, like the better recognitions which inspire these emotions (*Poetics* 11.7), should be aroused by *entechnic* means, that is by the probable disposition of the events (*Poetics* 14.5)” (Eden 1986, 23).

The monstrous (*to teratōdes*) is irrational (*alogon*) because it violates the laws of plausibility and intelligibility (*Poetics* 1454b6–7). We fear the monstrous—and intensely so—but we do not feel pity because we cannot picture ourselves in a similar situation. For Aristotle, tragedy needs to be understood by the logic of the events that produce it.

Seneca's monsters, by Aristotle's standards, seem in fact unreadable. Martha Nussbaum (1994, 445) has suggested that the "ugliness" of Senecan tragedy is not "self-explanatory." In Carlin Barton's view, it is in the very nature of the obscene and deformed that we are confounded in their presence; for *monstra* speak "a mysterious language calling for decipherment" (1993, 101). Vitruvius (7.5.3), as we shall see shortly, condemns frescoes that depict *monstra* instead of *imagines certae* [true or definite images] of recognizable things, but for Seneca *monstra* regularly offer "signs" that are "clear" (*clara*) and "definite" (*certa*). As Long and Sedley (1987, 1.264) note, "[a] sign, according to Stoic doctrine, is an evident truth by which some further, non-evident truth is revealed." In their vividness and their clarity, monstrous signs can function like kataleptic impressions that convince us immediately of their fidelity and truthfulness. As we saw at the end of chapter 3, the angry body is for Seneca a tragic body that offers clear and manifest signs of its condition; it is an actor in a play, conveying meaning through its facial expressions. Seneca begins his *De Ira* by describing the angry face precisely because it is the most convincing evidence that he can offer against this hideous emotion. Moreover, the diagnosis of the signs of the angry body is analogous to the interpretation of the signs of an animal used for divination, as we saw earlier in the parallels between Oedipus' body and that of the sacrificial animal; the body offers *certa indicia* that are made manifest (*manifestius*) (*De Ira* 1.1.3 and 5).

Tiresias finally discovers the truth about Oedipus, significantly enough, when Laius openly reveals his horrid face:

... in apertum efferat
vultus opertos Laius—fari horreo.
stetit per artus sanguine effuso horridus,
paedore foedo squalidam obtentus comam. . . .

Laius reveals his hidden face. I shudder to speak of it. He stands caked in blood that poured over his body, with his hair covered in squalid filth. (*Oedipus* 622–625)

There is nothing ambiguous about these signs, nothing that requires interpretation; the horror is immediate. Within Seneca's plays, the meaning of monsters

and hence of tragedy itself is not allegorical, for monsters wear their meanings openly on their faces.

C. Theorizing the Grotesque

These motifs, based on patterns drawn from reality, are rejected because of the debased tastes of the times. For our contemporary artists create frescoes of monstrous forms (*monstra*) rather than clear images (*imagines certae*) of recognizable things.

—Vitruvius, *De Architectura*

Long before Mikhail Bakhtin, antiquity had sought to theorize the monstrous or what later came to be called the “grotesque.”³⁰ Writing late in the first century BC, Vitruvius describes and condemns an aesthetic in Roman wall painting that in some ways anticipates Seneca’s own literary taste in his tragedies. Although the approach to painting that Vitruvius characterizes as “monstrous” predates Seneca by more than fifty years, it endured to become an element in the artwork of Nero’s (and Seneca’s) own age, a style that, when rediscovered in the (then) underground rooms (*grotte* in Italian) of Nero’s *Domus Transitoria* and *Domus Aurea* in the late fifteenth century, came to be known as “grotesque.”³¹

I want to review ancient theories of the grotesque and to show how they can help us to understand the nature of Senecan tragedy. Seneca was on this literary question (as on others) aware of ancient theory, and his creation of monstrous tragedy was guided by his theoretical knowledge. In antiquity, the monstrous was associated with visual distortions of reality, with the abnormal body, and with moral decadence. In Vitruvius’ discussion of this aesthetic we see the first and last of these elements at work: Vitruvius condemned this new style, which depicted unnatural combinations of plants and animals, because it rejected Aristotelian standards of mimesis and indulged the tastes of a decadent age. To understand fully Seneca’s idea of tragedy, we need to reconcile his focus on the monstrous with the assertion, in both ancient and modern criticism, that the grotesque is never tragic.

1. *The Visual*

Those who use the spectacle (*opsis*) to create an effect not of the fearful but only of the monstrous (*to teratôdes*) have nothing at all in common with tragedy.

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

Frank Granger (1934) suggests that Vitruvius “follows the Stoic insistence on reality, as distinguished from the fantastic compositions which transformed the ‘architectural’ style under Alexandrian influences” (2.105n1). There is, however, nothing Stoic about Vitruvius’ treatment of monstrous images. Rather, as J. J. Pollitt (1966, 127) points out, Vitruvius follows the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition of art as mimesis: The best art is that which is most faithful to reality. Aristotle recognized a form of tragedy like Seneca’s, which relied on visual impressions to create not fear but horror; yet he stigmatized it as “untragic.” I have argued that Seneca practices a poetics ultimately derived from Aristotle’s, for Seneca believes (1) that images are not merely imitations of reality but credible and persuasive embodiments of it and (2) that the emotional impact of tragedy becomes healthy when it uses emotion to foster understanding and shape judgment. Yet Seneca’s application of Aristotelian principles produces tragedy that is, paradoxically, un-Aristotelian precisely because it is monstrous tragedy.

A *monstrum* is at the center of almost every Senecan play because Seneca sees tragedy as a visual and horrific revelation of the truth. On each of these points, Seneca’s vision of tragedy parts ways with Aristotle’s; Seneca’s creation of monstrous tragedy reflects a Stoic tradition of criticism that, in contrast to the Aristotelian, valued drama for its *opsis*, its visual power. The reliance on “theatrical spectacle” is at the heart of Aristotle’s rejection of *to teratōdes*, as the quote at the beginning of this section indicates. While scholars debate whether Aristotle is referring to the visual element in connection with actors only (masks, costumes, gestures) or with all of the elements of a theatrical production (scene painting, stage machinery),³² Gerald Else (1957, 278) argues plausibly that Aristotle is thinking of the famous first performance of the *Eumenides*, when the masks of the Furies were so frightening that children fainted and women miscarried. As we have seen, it is precisely the face of the Furies onto which Seneca concentrates so much of his concern with “showing,” both in his *De Ira* and in his tragedies. In recognizing that Seneca, in contrast to Aristotle, values the visual aspects of tragedy, I am not, however, asserting that Seneca’s plays were performed or intended to be performed. The “spectacle” of Senecan tragedy is not created through costume or scenery but through the images that readers or listeners create for themselves in their minds, spurred by Seneca’s verbal paintings. In Seneca, as in Longinus, the instrument of *phantasia* is to be found in the text; Longinus regularly cites the scripts of Sophocles and Euripides, but he never mentions performance. Even Aristotle acknowledged (*Poetics* 1453b3–6) that the words alone were all that was necessary to create the appropriate tragic effect as long as events were structured properly.

Horror is a leitmotif of Seneca’s *monstra* and their impact,³³ but for Aristotle, as Elizabeth Belfiore argues (1992, 232), only a “bad tragedy, like a horror film,

might arouse fear of this kind by its use of such visual effects as terrifying masks.” Horror is a shock effect that stuns us, whereas Aristotle wants tragedy to foster pity and fear as the means by which to make its events intelligible. In Halliwell’s words, “the basis of the portentous . . . would be unnatural phenomena (grotesque horrors), which means they would flout necessity or probability: hence their spuriousness in contrast to the intelligibility of events which cause pity and fear” (1986, 66n26). This is why tragedy is the antithesis of the grotesque, according to Wolfgang Kayser (1966, 186): Tragedy finds a deeper meaning behind the absurd; either fate, the will of the gods, or a hero’s own superiority help to make sense of suffering. “The creator of grotesques,” by contrast, “must not and cannot suggest a meaning.” Seneca, however, does find a meaning in the grotesque, the meaning that the Romans, trained in the ways of the supernatural, discerned in the signs of the unnatural. Seneca’s visual epistemology and his Roman semiotics are directed toward clarity and comprehension.

2. *The Body*

Nor should it be held a fault that I am divided into acts and scenes, but it should make me appear much more pleasing, for as a man would make a strange figure in the world who did not have limbs distinct from each other, so I think it would be disagreeable to see me confused in one large whole. And indeed Seneca and the ancient Romans realized how wrong the Greeks appear in this. And that I should be large and have my parts great beyond what is proper is not natural.

—“Tragedy” speaking in the preface
to Cinthio’s *Orbecche*

In 1541 Giraldi Cinthio staged his tragedy *Orbecche*, the first Renaissance tragedy written in the vernacular and a powerful influence in establishing Seneca as the model tragedian for the era.³⁴ Since the genre was still new, Cinthio published a preface to his play in which the figure of Tragedy spoke to define and defend itself. In accord with Aristotle’s emphasis on unity and proportion, which became in Horace the five-act rule for drama, Cinthio’s Tragedy compared its form, as we can see in the preceding passage, to that of the human body. A tragedy whose “parts” violate the natural proportions of normal bodies would be “monstrous,” for Aristotle defines a monstrosity (*teras*) as “anyone who does not take after his parents . . . since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type” (*Generation of Animals* 767b7–9).

Cinthio here reflects a long-standing tradition in ancient critical theory, the comparison of a work of poetry in its shape and form to the human body; Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (264c), for example, asserts that “every discourse must be organised, like a living body, with a body of its own, as it were, so as not to be headless or footless.” However, in applying this critical assumption to Seneca’s plays, Cinthio goes seriously wrong. Seneca may divide his plays into the five acts prescribed by Horace, but in other respects the “body” of his tragedies is the monstrous and deformed one that Aristotle rejected as untragic. Seneca, I argue, in full awareness of ancient traditions about poetry and the body, sets out to violate them, for his plays grow out of a very different conception of the tragic body and of the relationship between tragedy and the body.

Aristotle’s praise of Sophocles’ Oedipus as a model tragic hero stands in seeming contradiction to Aristotle’s praise of the unified plot, which, he said, should be “the imitation of a single, unified action, and the separate ‘limbs’ (*merē*) of these events should be arranged so that, if one part is displaced or removed, the whole is disjoined and dislocated” (*Poetics* 1451a31–35, the translation of Kirk Freudenburg [1993, 149]). For Aristotle’s metaphor of “disjoined limbs” describes Oedipus’ own body quite literally. Seneca’s tragedy about Oedipus, however, explores the significance of Oedipus’ maimed and unnatural body, as we have seen. Seneca’s *Oedipus*, however, is not unique; tragedy in general is for Seneca closer to the *truncus*, the mangled and dismembered body, than it is to the unified form that Aristotle had prescribed.

As a Stoic, Seneca was aware of these critical traditions in which the body served as a metaphor for composition. Indeed, Seneca’s famous version of a Greek proverb focuses on this very issue: *Talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita* [a person’s speech is like his life] (*Ep.* 114.2). By “life,” Seneca’s means one’s *ingenium* or “character” and one’s *animus* or “soul,” both of which are reflected in the mannerisms of the body: “If they are closely observed,” Seneca writes, “all acts are meaningful and it is possible to gather evidence for someone’s character from the smallest movements . . . Laughter reveals the rascal and his countenance and bearing indicate the madman” (*Ep.* 52.12). As we saw before, the body speaks through transparent signs. Moreover, as Glenn Most has noted (1992, 407), Seneca’s acceptance of the ancient analogy between discourse and character leads him to apply “moralizing terminology drawn from the description of bodily beauties and defects to the characterization of discursive virtues and vices.”

Most argues for a connection between Seneca’s own style, which in corporeal terms is “dismembered,” and the dismemberment of human bodies in Seneca’s plays, suggesting that Seneca may be exploring in reverse his own analogy between body and style. What might happen to real bodies, Most imagines Seneca asking, when they are presented in a style that is metaphorically maimed

and disjointed? We can, I believe, confirm that Seneca was conscious of the stylistic implications of his use of the dismembered body in his tragedies, as his *Phaedra* shows. Near the end of that play (1256–1258), Seneca stages the reassembly of the body of Hippolytus, mutilated when it was dragged behind his chariot. The chorus addresses Theseus:

Disiecta, genitor, membra laceri corporis
in ordinem dispone et errantes loco
restitu partes.

Father, arrange the scattered parts of his
torn body and restore to their proper place
the missing parts.

Here Seneca has Theseus do to Hippolytus' body what Aristotle would have the tragedian do to the "limbs" of a play: Put them in their proper place.

In using the phrase *disiecta membra*, I suggest, Seneca indicates that he appreciates the stylistic implications of this moment. For Horace had earlier used these words in one of his programmatic satires in a context in which he was discussing proper "composition." You could recognize that Ennius was a poet, Horace writes, even if you rearranged the order of the words in his verses: *invenias etiam disiecti membra poetae* (*Satire* 1.4.62). Kirk Freudenburg (1993, 145–149) has shown that Horace is here voicing a tenet of Stoic stylistics to which he himself was in fact opposed, the notion that word order should be natural rather than artful. In his literary epistles, Seneca, however, does subscribe to this Stoic notion that "man arranges his morals, not his words" (100.2) and that the arrangement of parts is subservient to the shaping of hearts. Horace's line about the "limbs of a dismembered poet" expresses a sentiment, then, of which Seneca would have approved; poetry does not depend on proper arrangement, nor does it need to be a whole body. The *Phaedra* makes that sentiment and the metaphor behind it literal when it creates a tragedy out of Hippolytus' *disiecta membra*.

In his *Phaedra* as in all of his tragedies, I suggest, Seneca rejects an aesthetic based on unity, arrangement, and anthropomorphic norms. Senecan tragedy is not about perfect bodies but about broken and penetrated ones; Seneca is typically grotesque in his interest in exploring the insides of the body. The bodies of Seneca's tragic characters act out through their physical distortions the destructive emotions they feel inside; their fury makes them as monstrous as the Furies.³⁵ The part of Hippolytus that Theseus cannot identify and cannot put in its proper place, *hoc quid est forma carens/et turpe* (*Phaedra* 1265–1266) [this foul and shapeless thing], is therefore Seneca's corporeal equivalent for tragedy, the exact opposite of the one that Cinthio ascribes to him.

3. *The Age*

The violent state of affairs at Rome under a series of blood-thirsty tyrants had in rhetoric and in poetry begotten monstrosity (*Unnatur*).

—August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Vorlesungen
über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*

Seneca's interest in dismembered bodies and monsters has often been read simply as a reflection of his imperial age, a time when, as Schlegel (1972) suggests, violence begot monstrosity. As Vitruvius shows, the Romans, too, were fond of moral explanations for artistic tastes, especially during the decades after the Augustan age, as Gordon Williams (1978, 6–51) has chronicled. Seneca, too, acknowledges that times have a tenor and that luxury and laxity produce a taste for the “new” and the “corrupt”: “When the mind grows accustomed to scorn what is customary and to consider it vulgar, it searches out the novel even in language . . . Therefore wherever you will see a corrupt manner of speech giving pleasure, there is no doubt that there morals will also have degenerated from what is right” (*Ep.* 114.10, 11). In penning monstrous tragedies, Seneca succumbed, on this perspective, to the spirit of his age and to the same defects of style that he had himself condemned in others.

I have argued that Seneca chose to make his tragedies monstrous precisely because in Stoic epistemology *monstra* constitute vivid images of reality. Yet the reality of Seneca's age lies behind the images of his tragedies in a way that his relationship to Vergil can help us to understand. For as several scholars such as Michael Putnam have noted, Seneca's tragedies begin where Vergil's *Aeneid* ended. In yielding to the Furies and to anger at the end of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas exemplifies a Stoic paradigm of emotion and is presented as culpable precisely because his furies “transport him from the realm of rational thought into the darker abysses of madness” (Putnam 1995, 248):

Aeneas stayed his hand; more and more Turnus' words had begun to make him hesitate, when the unhappy baldrick of Pallas, high on the boy's shoulder, caught his attention . . . Aeneas, after he had dwelt with his eyes on the armor and its reminder of his savage grief, aroused by his furies and terrible in his anger . . . raging plunged the sword into his enemy's breast. (*Aeneid* 12.939–951)

As Christopher Gill reads this scene in Stoic terms, Aeneas yields to a vivid and fresh visual impression (his eyes dwell on the baldrick) that Turnus has wronged him; although he acknowledges through his hesitation that Turnus may deserve

mercy, he yields nonetheless to his passion, which thereby is both rational and irrational in a characteristically Stoic way (1997, 240).³⁶ If indeed Vergil's psychology is distinctively Stoic, then Seneca's Stoic reading of the *Aeneid* in his tragedies seems less an imposition than an exposition.

The violence and passion that erupt from Aeneas at the end of the epic, although they are an echo of the *ira* and *dolor* of Juno with which the poem begins, nonetheless stand in counterpoint, Putnam notes (1995, 278), to the *Aeneid's* other voices on behalf of reason, restraint, and civilization's ameliorating powers. Like Greek tragedy, Putnam suggests, Vergil's epic defines heroism as a "struggle against misfortune and evil, even inner evil." In short, the *Aeneid's* public voice announces Greek tragedy's regular theme, that civilization has the power to subdue the monstrous and the demonic. Nowhere is this clearer than in book eight, where Aeneas is styled the successor to Hercules and the forerunner of Augustus, both of whom are monster slayers. Hercules strangled the *monstra* (8.289) of his mother-in-law, the snakes she sent against him while he was in his crib, and later (8.198) he does the same to the monstrous Cacus, the fire-breathing "Bad Man" who once terrorized the future home of Rome. On the shield of Aeneas, Augustus leads the forces of Rome against the monstrous (8.698) divinities of Egypt and the East, which, with Apollo's help, he defeats.

Seneca, however, has doubts about civilization's power, and, therefore, it is not the public voice of the *Aeneid* to which he responds in his tragedies. In *Ep.* 90, for example, he ponders the issue of social progress and reveals himself to be a "soft" primitivist who admires the lives of early men.³⁷ Several times in this letter he quotes Vergil's *Georgics* in support of his view that technological progress has brought neither happiness nor social harmony. The next letter, ninety-one, extends this analysis and, although it does not allude directly to Vergil, rejects by implication the *Aeneid's* overt thesis that Rome will possess *imperium sine fine* [power without end] (1.279). As the fate of Lyons, destroyed by fire, shows, *Nihil privatim, nihil publice stabile est* [Nothing public or private is lasting] (*Ep.* 91.7). Even the labors of countless humans and the "indulgence of the gods," the elements that in the *Aeneid* will make Rome eternal, can be undone by the disasters of a single day (*Ep.* 91.6). *Quota quaeque felicitatem civitas pertulit?* [How few are the states whose good fortune has endured?] (*Ep.* 91.7).

After suffering through the reigns of Claudius, Caligula, and Nero, Seneca not surprisingly questioned Rome's ultimate and enduring power for good. That is why, I think, he was impressed by what Putnam calls the *Aeneid's* "negative open-endedness." Aeneas' killing of the fallen Turnus, an act in which he is "enflamed by his furies and terrible in his wrath" (12.946–947), bodes ill for "a golden future soon to dawn after the poem's dark termination" (Putnam

1995, 277). Seneca was thus perhaps the first to read Vergil's epic as a pessimist; his tragedies are epilogues to the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas' final and exceptional act of passion becomes the norm. That pessimism also leads Seneca to adopt as his *monstra* those Vergilian figures that symbolize passion as a force of disorder in the universe and the soul, the Juno who opposes Rome's civilizing mission, the Furies she summons to arouse war, and the serpents who set in motion the fall of Troy.³⁸

Seneca's conception of the monstrous, therefore, differs from that of both Greek tragedy and the *Aeneid*'s public voice. Monsters are not external forces for civilized heroes to subdue but embodiments of the drives that dwell within them; they are what Putnam has called "monstrosities in human form" (278), an oxymoron that itself highlights what is distinctive about Seneca's conception, which makes monsters not the antithesis of human beings but synonymous with them. When, for example, Seneca calls his Oedipus "a monster more ambiguous than his Sphinx" (641), he offers a conception of the hero radically different from Sophocles'. The Greek Oedipus defeats the monstrous Sphinx as mythic heroes regularly do. He may be equivalent to the Sphinx in that, like her, he embodies a tripartite nature, "the simultaneous combination of all three stages [of the riddle], a monstrous abnormality," but in the end he "emerges as the civilising hero that he was all along: savior of the city, destroyer of the fearful monsters that terrify its people," as Charles Segal has written (1981, 248, 405).

By contrast, Seneca's Oedipus shrinks in fear from the hero's role; Jocasta has to urge him to act the part (81f.). No longer the proud slayer of the Sphinx, he claims to be her victim, even though she is dead: "[T]he deadly ashes of that clever monster are rebelling against me, that scourge which I killed is now destroying Thebes" (106–108). Oedipus is but one of the *nova monstra*, "the strange portents" (724), which Thebes has long produced, starting with the fratricidal men born from the dragon's teeth. When no wild beast answers his call to punish him, Oedipus turns "lion" himself ("he rages as a Libyan lion does through the fields," 919), becoming the face of passion and tearing out his own eyes. Seneca's Oedipus, in short, fits perfectly the definition of monstrosity that Eteocles offers in Gide's *Oedipe*: "In our present state of advanced civilization, and now that our father has killed the last of the sphinxes . . . monsters no longer inhabit the upper air or the open countryside; they are within us."³⁹ Seneca's plays make the same point about the age of Claudius, Caligula, and Nero.

To read Senecan tragedy is to read monsters in several senses. First of all, we must read Seneca as Seneca read Vergil since Vergil's Juno and her Furies are Seneca's preferred monsters. What Vergil urged his readers to ponder, when

observing Juno—*Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?* [Do the souls of gods experience such angers?] (*Aeneid* 1.7)—Seneca wants us to ask of his own furious protagonists. Monsters are embodiments of our emotions and are called forth from our souls; to read them is to read as psychologists do, as Freud did. That means, second, that we must become readers of signs, interpreters of deformed bodies that offer sure marks of their message. *Monstra* are not only characters but also events; they are extraordinary, visual, and shocking. They are thus both the kind of kataleptic impressions that Stoic tragedy should present, as well as occasions for interpretation and judgment that model cognition and encourage understanding. Seneca's idea of the monstrous cannot thus be adequately expressed through the modern conception of the grotesque. For as Geoffrey Harpham (1982, 3) has asserted, "When we use the word 'grotesque' we record . . . the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding has been unsatisfied." Unlike *teras*, the equivalent Greek term, or grotesque, the Latin word *monstrum* through its etymology is programmatic. Seneca's monsters are true to their name: They show, they warn, and they move so that we can in the end understand.

Conclusion: Stoic Tragedy

[I]t would be futile to attempt to decide what, in the dialogue and characterisation of Seneca's plays, is due to Stoicism, what due to the Roman mind, and what due to the peculiar form which Seneca elected. What is certain is the existence of a large element of Stoicism in the plays.

—T. S. Eliot, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation"

The idea that in some sense Seneca's tragedies are "Stoic" puzzled T. S. Eliot and many before and since. Although critics from Trevet through Marti have suggested that the plays offer Stoic lessons, it is difficult to reconcile that view with the consistent failure of Stoic doctrines, when they are expressed in the tragedies, to change the course of events. Since the Stoics believed in a provident Fate that assured a blessed outcome in the long run, Stoic tragedy might even be seen as a contradiction in terms. Alternatively, we might imagine that Stoic tragedy would present the traditional heroes of Stoicism, Hercules or Cato, for example, standing firm in the face of adversity. Yet Seneca's Hercules is *furens* [raging], and Cato is praised in Senecan prose but never appears in his poetry.¹ The "peculiar form" Seneca has elected, however, is the key to the problem that Eliot here poses, for Seneca's very choice of tragedy, I argue, is due to Stoicism. In choosing as a philosopher to become also a tragic poet, Seneca bore the weight of a long critical tradition. Seneca was clearly aware of Plato's criticisms of tragedy, of its mimetic construction, and of its potential for emotional harm. Some scholars have therefore argued that Seneca composed tragedies as Plato's successor, knowingly courting poetic dangers either because he wanted to escape the strictures of Stoicism or because he wrongly believed that he could control the consequences. I have suggested instead that Seneca's tragedies played a central role during the Renaissance in conceptualizing tragedy

because Seneca had followed a Stoic version of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the text that, directly and indirectly, had long been the guide to making sense of a challenging genre. Aristotle's ideas about tragedy shaped Stoic thinking about the role of images in cognition and of the emotions in persuasion.

In this closing chapter, I suggest that Seneca's idea of tragedy included more than simply his tragedies. By linking tragedy with both his art and his life, Seneca played a role in transforming the idea of tragedy from simply the theory of a literary genre into a broader vision of experience. As Glenn Most (2000, 21–22) has observed, for philosophers in general tragedy is first of all metaphysical and only in a secondary sense literary:

[A]mong philosophers and philosophically minded scholars . . . “[t]he tragic” . . . is not in the first instance an aesthetic concept useful for analyzing a specific genre, but rather it is a metaphysical category developed in order to describe the human condition; it is designed above all to designate an important lesson about our place in the world (“tragic wisdom”), and it can then sometimes go on to entrust that lesson to a certain kind of text (“tragedy”) that is said to embody and communicate that lesson with supreme effectiveness.

This was certainly Plato's view, although he doubted that literary tragedy was the form in which to embody his metaphysical categories. Seneca and the Stoics, however, may have been the first to reconcile these two notions of the tragic. To understand in what sense Seneca's tragedies are Stoic we must therefore first appreciate that tragedy for the Stoics was also a metaphor for life itself.

In contrast to T. S. Eliot, Thomas Rosenmeyer (1989, 37) has recognized that “all drama, and especially tragedy, carries a Stoic stamp.” In Rosenmeyer's taxonomy, tragedy can be Stoic in presenting the “Stoic saint,” a role model who “act[s] out his life and death in full awareness of the impression made upon the gallery,” or in depicting the “Stoic sinner, the villain swollen with his passion.” Seneca practiced both of these forms of Stoic tragedy: In his life and death he becomes the Stoic saint, emulating Socrates and the transformation of tragedy that Plato and the Stoics read into Socrates' final hours; in his plays, he presents villains and fools. Scholars such as A. J. Boyle and Alessandro Schiesaro have rightly highlighted the metatheatrical character of Senecan tragedy; in using the plays within Seneca's plays as a key to their interpretation, however, critics have unduly narrowed the interpretive breadth of drama as an explanatory category for Seneca and the Stoics, as we will see in the following sections. Tragedy can signify in Stoicism the whole world, which contains villains, as well as heroes; therefore, tragedy can appear in different guises—as a literary type and as an admirable life worthy of emulation.

A. Tragic Villains

Saepius hoc exemplo mihi utendum est, nec enim ullo efficacius exprimitur hic humanae vitae mimus, qui nobis partes, quas male agamus, adsignat.

I feel compelled to turn rather often to this analogy, for there is no more effective way to express this mime of human life, which assigns us parts which we play badly.

—Seneca, *Moral Epistles*

In epistle eighty Seneca turns to the “analogy” between life and art, and in so doing he demonstrates that as a form tragedy was not for him the antitype to philosophy; it was the perfect vehicle for imaging lives that were antithetical to philosophy.² It offered a true and effective “image of human life,” *humanae vitae mimus*, even when the lives it portrayed were false and contrary to philosophy’s vision. Seneca is clearly thinking of tragedy in this instance since he proceeds to cite as his examples lines from two tragedies about the house of Atreus. For the Stoics, tragedies of the traditional sort, in the plots canonized by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, are by their very definition stories about characters who are not Stoic wise men but rather fallible humans who “play our parts badly.” In Seneca’s plays, therefore, we should not expect to find “tragic wisdom” presented through the words and deeds of Stoic wise men. To the Stoics, literary tragedies are by definition stories about characters who are not Stoic.³

That was the mistake that Joseph Addison (1672–1719) made when he wrote his influential tragedy *Cato*. Addison turned to Seneca for “his tragic theory, his subject matter, and his moral”⁴ and derived from Seneca the conception of “a perfect tragedy”:⁵

As a perfect tragedy is the noblest production of human nature, so it is capable of giving the mind one of the most delightful and most improving entertainments. A virtuous man (says Seneca) struggling with misfortunes, is such a spectacle as gods might look upon with pleasure: and such a pleasure it is which one meets with in the representation of a well-written tragedy.

Since Seneca wrote a *Thyestes* but never a *Cato*, we must conclude that for him a perfect tragedy was not possible and that Addison’s “Senecan” tragic theory was in fact not Seneca’s own. Addison takes as his source *De Providentia* 2.9, in which Seneca describes Cato, standing tall amid the ruins of a state, as a

spectaculum that even Jupiter would find worthy of his attention. The word *spectaculum*, however, suggests that Seneca is thinking of Cato as a gladiator in the arena rather than as a character on the stage. To the extent that Seneca has a literary model in mind for Cato's role, it is to be found in Homer's epic *Iliad* rather than in tragedy, as the fact that the gods might wish to be spectators of such an event shows.

For Seneca as for his fellow Stoics, tragedy in its traditional form was not the realm of the perfect but of the real; in Epictetus' words, tragedies constitute "the misfortunes which happen to befall fools" (*Discourses* 2.16.31). The Stoic conception of tragedy in this traditional sense is thus not really concerned either with Rosenmeyer's "Stoic saint" or with Addison's "virtuous man struggling with misfortunes" but rather with "villains swollen with passion," who are at the same time fools, as even they seem to realize. Medea rebukes herself for having killed Creusa before she was carrying Jason's child (*stulta properavi nimis* [Fool that I am, I acted too fast] 919), using ironically the language that the Stoics attached to all evil acts such as hers.

Seneca's concern with tragic heroes as passionate villains undoubtedly grows in large part out of the political world in which he lived: "It is not the cruelty of Caligula, but of Anger, which it is my goal to describe," he claims (*De Ira* 3.19.5), but the Caligulas and the Neros of his lifetime were in fact the prototypes of *Atreus iratus* and the like, not least of all because Nero was so fond of casting himself on a tragic stage. If the Hercules of the *Furens* is not the exemplar of the Stoic wise man, "undefeated by toil, scornful of pleasure, and triumphant over all fears" (*De Constantia* 2.1), that is, the kind of hero that Addison thought a Stoic would put on stage, it is perhaps because Seneca had Nero in mind for the part. The emperor, Suetonius (*Nero* 53) tells us, had sought to find a lion so that he could emulate the hero. Seneca's Hercules is therefore more like a mad Emperor than a Stoic saint, especially since "Mad Hercules" was one of Nero's favorite roles.⁶ When Theseus says to Hercules at the end of the play, *nunc magna tibi virtute agendum est; Herculem irasci veta* [Now you must act out a role which requires great virtue; don't allow Hercules to rage] (1276–1277), we may hear in the metatheatrical cue an acknowledgement that in this play we have met not the Stoic hero but the evil emperor.

It is testimony, however, to Seneca's poetic honesty that his plays show not just mad kings but also ineffective philosophers. Seneca had himself played in real life the role of "warner," which both Amphitryon and Theseus play in the *Furens*, the voice of reason raised against madness. That is why the author of the *Octavia* cast Seneca himself in that typically Senecan role, one in which Seneca gives to Nero the kind of advice that Vergil's Anchises had given to Aeneas:

A fine thing it is to stand out among famous men, to care for one's country, to spare the fallen (*parcere afflictis*), to abstain from cruel slaughter, to be slow to anger, to give the world rest, to one's own age, peace. This is the highest virtue; this is how to enter heaven. (*Octavia* 472–476)

Seneca's message, however, fails on the stage, as it did in life, to alter Nero's course and personality. The author of the *Octavia* had the benefit of historical hindsight in shaping his plot, but Seneca in his own tragedies had already foreseen such a dénouement. In the *Thyestes* Seneca creates a character whose biography resonated with his own, a man who has lived in exile, who has through that experience learned the emptiness of what the Stoics called life's "externals," wealth and power, and who is now tempted by the opportunity to return to that false world, as Seneca was tempted by recall from exile on Corsica to serve as Nero's tutor. When Thyestes says, *Immane regnum est posse sine regno pati* [It is a vast kingdom to be able to endure without a kingdom] (470), he sounds like the Seneca who says, *Imperare sibi maximum imperium est* [The greatest empire is the one in which you rule yourself] (*Ep.* 113.31). Thyestes, moreover, fails to heed his own advice, to live by his own precepts, as Seneca failed, too. Seneca's critics even in antiquity often asked him, "Why then do you speak more bravely than you live?" (*De Vita Beata* 17.1). In his prose Seneca offers an orator's, a lawyer's, defense against those charges. In the *Thyestes*, we might surmise, he offers a poet's more probing admission that they are true. Seneca's tragedies, therefore, are not Stoic in the sense that they offer a vision of a Stoic life lived well; as Seneca's theatrical analogy in epistle eighty emphasizes, the genre of tragedy presents lives "played badly."

B. The Truest Tragedy

As mimesis, as *imitatio affectuum* (*De Ira* 2.17.1) and *humanae vitae mimus* (*Ep.* 80.7), Seneca's tragedies bear out Socrates' point in the *Republic* (604 d10–e2): The lowest part of the soul provides the most opportunities for imitation (Seneca implicitly acknowledges this when he notes the theatricality of the angry body). By contrast, the "intelligent and temperate disposition, always remaining approximately the same, is neither easy to imitate nor to be understood when imitated" (604e2–4). Socrates' point highlights the fact that tragedy in general, and not just Senecan tragedy, is a genre uncongenial to the virtuous and the saintly.

By having Socrates note the difficulty of imitating someone of "intelligent and temperate disposition," Plato implicitly makes a claim for his own superior

artistry, for Plato has managed to “imitate” Socrates, a character of just that sort. In his dialogues, Plato the philosopher is also Plato the poet creating an alternative to tragedy in which Socrates stars as the hero. As Helmut Kuhn (1941, 2) has written, “[The poets] dabble, Plato thinks, in the philosopher’s business, and he sets out to supplant their faulty tragedy with a poetry of his own, the ‘truest tragedy.’” Plato uses this latter phrase in the *Laws* (817b) to describe the vision of life that his lawgivers have created in their new city. Speaking to a hypothetical group of tragedians who might wish to perform their plays there, the Athenian lawgiver says:

Most excellent of Strangers, we ourselves, to the best of our ability, are the authors of a tragedy at once superlatively fair and good; at least, all our polity is framed as a representation of the fairest and best life (*mimēsis tou kallistou kai aristou biou*), which is in reality, as we assert, the truest tragedy. Thus we are composers of the same things as yourselves, rivals of yours as artists and actors of the fairest drama, which, as our hope is, true law, and it alone, is by nature competent to complete. (817a9–b10)

This assertion, coming in Plato’s final work, has retrospective implications for all that Plato has written before about philosophy and tragedy, as Stephen Halliwell (1996, 338) has argued: “This passage could be claimed to disclose . . . more than almost any other about the nature of Plato’s engagement with tragedy, since it indicates how that engagement is not simply an opposition but an active attempt to transform and overcome tragedy within a new kind of philosophical writing.” Tragedy thus becomes “the ultimate trope for philosophy itself and for its efforts to create an alternative vision of what ‘the finest and best life’ might be” (*ibid.*, 339).

Socrates is both the expositor and the exemplar of this life, the hero of Plato’s truest tragedy. Socrates himself acknowledges his heroic status when he compares himself to Achilles and the Homeric heroes who died at Troy. When asked in the *Apology* (28b–d) whether he is not ashamed of committing acts that could now result in his death, Socrates aligns himself with the archaic code of a shame culture, claiming that he is like Achilles, preferring to die doing what he believes right rather than to live in shame. Achilles was the model for many a tragic hero, and Socrates stands, Helmut Kuhn argues (1941, 10), as the “Achilles of a new age” and “as a kinsman of Aeschylus’ and Sophocles’ heroes.” It is particularly in his confrontation with death that Socrates seems most like Achilles, as Charles Segal has argued.⁷ Thus, the story of Socrates’ death in the *Phaedo* becomes “the Platonic anti-tragedy” and a “philosophical substitute for a tragedy.”⁸

This image of a tragic Socrates appealed to Epictetus, who, like his fellow Stoics, considered Socrates to be “*the philosopher, a figure canonised more regularly and with more attention to detail than any other Stoic saint.*”⁹ The true philosopher must be able, Epictetus asserts, “to lift up his voice, and, mounting the tragic stage, to speak like Socrates: ‘Alas! men, where are you rushing?’” (*Discourses* 3.22.26). Seneca is very much a part of this Stoic tradition, for he includes Socrates alongside Zeno, Cato, and others in his list of the ancestors whom he reveres (*Ep.* 64.10, 104.22). He praises Socrates for making ethics the central concern in philosophy (*Ep.* 71.7), approves of his equation of truth with knowledge (*Ep.* 71.16), and cites him as an example of our ability to control our anger when we have been insulted (*De Ira* 3.11.2). It is less on the level of doctrine, however, than on the level of character that Seneca is drawn to Socrates; immediately after he voices his famous dictum on the utility of examples, Seneca cites Socrates as one whose character teaches us more than do his words (*Ep.* 6.6).

Seneca turns to the character of Socrates most often in the last years of his own life when the parallels between their biographies became marked. Seneca’s summation of Socrates’ life and death in one of his last letters highlights their similar political situations: “[T]he state was surrendered to the Thirty Tyrants, most of whom were his enemies. In the end he was charged with the gravest of crimes . . . After that came prison and poison” (*Ep.* 104.28).¹⁰ Seneca writes these words when he is himself living under a tyrant who has become his personal enemy and is himself awaiting his final *damnatio*. Seneca knows the fate that lies ahead and sees Socrates as an *exemplum* in particular of “how to die if it becomes necessary” (*Ep.* 104.21). Readers of Seneca’s death scene in Tacitus’ *Annals* (15.62–64) have long recognized that Seneca took that example to heart, for what is most Socratic about Seneca is his manner of dying. Like Socrates, Seneca urges the friends who are with him as he dies to live in accordance with the philosophy they have studied together, requests that his wife withdraw to a different room, and asks to take hemlock; according to Tacitus, Seneca chose that poison in particular because it was the one by which “those condemned by the citizens of Athens were put to death” (15.64).

Through his death Seneca thus seeks to add his own name to the roster of Stoic saints and, I maintain, to cast himself as a tragic hero.¹¹ Epictetus reveals what, I suspect, was a general Stoic tendency to see Socrates’ death scene as an “alternative vision of what ‘the finest and best life’ might be” and as “a philosophical substitute for tragedy,” to use again Halliwell’s and Marti’s words. Instead of emulating tragic heroes like Priam and Oedipus, who proclaim “Woe is me” in the face of sorrow, we should, Epictetus argues, instead “learn the meaning of death, exile, prison, and hemlock” through the example of

Socrates (*Discourses* 1.4.24). In emulating Socrates' attitude toward death, Seneca assumes the mantle of philosophy's substitute for the tragic hero. Indeed, his words suggest that he considered his life an exemplar of what Plato had called "the truest tragedy" or "a representation of the fairest and best life (*mimēsis tou kallistou kai aristou biou*)."¹² When his guards deny him the opportunity to rewrite his will and thereby to reward the friends who are by his side as he is about to die, Seneca offers them something else instead: "the most beautiful thing he had, the image of his life" (*quod unum iam et tamen pulcherrimum habeat, imaginem vitae suae, Annals* 15.62). Unlike Plato, Seneca could not hope that this truest tragedy might be embodied in the constitution of an ideal state, for Seneca had failed, in his service to Nero, to create such a polity. As *imago* or *mimēsis*, Seneca's life is the text in which philosophy's alternative vision to tragedy is written. There we meet the Stoic saint absent from Seneca's tragedies yet nonetheless in a dramatic form appropriate to the Stoic vision he embodies: "the ego as exemplar; the agent as performer within the sight of an audience and answerable to it; death as a source of moral edification."¹² Whether in literature or in life, Senecan tragedy offers "images."

In dying as Socrates does, Seneca participates in writing the "Platonic anti-tragedy." However, he also, unlike Plato, writes tragedies of the traditional sort as well. For Seneca, tragedy is not just the "ultimate trope for philosophy itself," as Halliwell noted of Plato, but a trope for life whether lived well or badly—life, in other words, lived according to philosophy or against it. Seneca's Socratic death would be, in his own use of the metaphor, a life "well acted": "Just as in a story, so too in life it matters not how long it lasts but how well it is acted. It doesn't matter where you stop; stop wherever you want. Just give it a good ending" (*Ep.* 77.20). In a sense, Plato tried to transform all tragedy into philosophy by giving it a good ending, by rewriting poetry as philosophy, by making Socrates its hero. Whether true or not, it is revealing that Plato was reported to have burned his tragedies of the traditional sort once he met Socrates. Although Seneca shared Plato's view that the values represented in tragedies were often false (this was the general Stoic interpretation, as Plutarch and Epictetus illustrate as well), Seneca did not as a consequence ban or burn tragedies but instead wrote them. In his death Seneca tried to rewrite poetry as philosophy by creating the truest tragedy. In his essay *On the Constancy of the Wise Man* (2.1) Seneca contrasts Cato with Ulysses and Hector and argues that the gods have "given us in Cato a *certius exemplar sapientis viri*, [a more manifest or indisputable illustration of the wise man.]" Seneca would say the same about the *imago* of his own life when contrasted with the images of his tragedies.

C. Images of Life, Images of Wit

The two versions of Stoic tragedy that, I have argued, Seneca offers through his plays and through his life were the inspiration for our first biography of Sir Philip Sidney, written by Sidney's close friend Fulke Greville as the dedication to a pair of tragedies in the Senecan style. Critics usually attribute this surprising juxtaposition to Greville's politics: The plays, as well as the praise of Sidney and Queen Elizabeth I, which introduces them, center on the theme of monarchy and its proper conduct. I argue that an equally important issue is the role that poetry should play in public life and in the life of a public man like Sidney, whose "image" Greville is here seeking to fashion. Indeed, the word *image* is a leitmotif of Greville's dedication to Sidney, "that exact image of quiet and action (happily united in him, and seldom well divided in any)," as Greville (89.16–18) describes him.¹³ The two poles of identity singled out here, quiet and action, highlight Greville's interest in creating a composite image of his friend that reconciles his poetic and political selves and validates not only Sidney's interest in poetry but also Greville's own. To construct this dual image of the poet and the politician, Greville turns for his model to the career of Seneca, the ancient poet who comes closest to fulfilling Sidney's own definition of the "peerless poet," the person who "giveth a perfect picture" of "whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done" (*Apology* 107.9–11).

As Greville himself acknowledges, the association created by his dedication between his own Senecan poetry and Sidney's life grows most immediately out of Sidney's poetics as laid out in *An Apology for Poetry*: "Sir Philip Sidney . . . being ever in my eyes, made me think it no small degree of honour to imitate or tread in the steps of such a leader; so that to sail by his compass was shortly (as I said) one of the principal reasons I can allege which persuaded me to steal minutes of time from my daily services, and employ them in this kind of writing" (89.16–23). For Sidney, a poet is known by "feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else" (103.29); in both his biography of Sidney and his tragedies Greville is motivated to create "notable images" of this sort. By "this kind of writing" Greville means his tragedies, *Mustapha* and *Alaham*, which are appended to his introductory account of Sidney's life and seek to emulate the poetic ideals ("well-sounding phrases" and "notable morality" [*Apology* 134.2–3]) that Sidney had found fulfilled in Seneca's own tragedies.

However, Greville found "notable images" also in Sidney's career, for Sidney exemplified in the "too short scene of his life" (3.29) the power that "this representing of virtues, vices, humours, counsels and actions of men in feigned and



unscandalous images” (3.25–27) had to inspire people to virtue. Although the metaphor of life as a play upon the stage was a commonplace in the Renaissance, as it had been in antiquity, Greville’s use of it throughout his dedication to characterize Sidney’s life highlights the logic behind his pairing of biography with tragedy, each of which serves the same ends, which are in Sidney’s terms the “Very End of Poesy”: to teach and delight through perfect pictures. This link becomes even clearer in the word Greville chose to characterize Sidney’s death: “The last scene of this *tragedy* [my emphasis] was the parting between the two brothers” (82.31–32). Although he writes poetry of the sort that Sidney had praised as a means to honor his friend, Greville is a reluctant poet: “For my own part, I found my creeping genius more fixed upon the images of life than the images of wit” (134.22–23). The biography of Sidney that constitutes the dedication to the tragedies, therefore, can be seen as an “image of life” that complements the “image of wit” found in plays.

It is in Greville’s use of this phrase, “images of life,” that we can begin to trace the role that Seneca played in providing Greville with a model for Sidney’s career. As we saw earlier, Tacitus reports in *Annals* 15.62 that Seneca, in his last days, bequeathed to his friends the “image of his life,” and this scene was well known in England during these years, both through Montaigne’s summary of it in his essays and through Richard Grenway’s translation of the *Annals*.¹⁴ Greville devotes disproportionate attention to Sidney’s death in the account of his friend’s life because, as Samuel Daniel, Greville’s friend and protégé, wrote, “tis the ev’ning crowns the day./This action of our death especially/Shows all a man.”¹⁵ This notion lies behind the frontispiece that introduces Thomas Lodge’s translation of selected works of Senecan prose, published in 1614 at about the same time that Greville was composing his *Life of Sidney*. This frontispiece, labeled *morientis effigies*, “the image of the dying man,” offers an epitome of Seneca’s life. The image of a dying man was, in Seneca’s case, through Tacitus’ account of Seneca’s words, the ideal “image of his life.” Greville, I believe, had this scene in mind when he composed his narrative of Sidney’s death, for the Tacitean approach to biography



Figure 6.1. The frontispiece of *The Workes of Lucius Annaeus Seneca Both Morrall and Natural of Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, trans. Thomas Lodge. London: Printed by William Stansby, 1614. Seneca is shown in the upper segment—in his bath, with a cup of poison in his hand, saying the words *Iovi Liberatori*, “To Jupiter the Liberator.” He is linked with Socrates and Cato—two models for his suicide, whose names and images are displayed on the plinths at the bottom left and right—and with Zeno and Chrysippus, the founding figures of Stoicism, whose statues are placed above. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, The Sheridan Libraries, The Johns Hopkins University.

was in vogue during these years. In his edition of Greville's dedication, John Gouws suggests (xvii) that Tacitus' historical writings in general and his biography of Agricola in particular informed Greville's approach to Sidney's life.

Sidney prepares for death by "entreat[ing] this choir of divine philosophers about him to deliver the opinion of the ancient heathen touching the immortality of the soul" (81.27–29), recalling the death scene of Socrates as recounted by Plato in the *Phaedo*, which Seneca earlier self-consciously imitated himself. Tacitus reports (*Ann.* 15.62) that Seneca discussed the *praecepta sapientiae* concerning death; the subject of those precepts is suggested by what Tacitus tells us (*Ann.* 16.19) of Petronius' own subsequent suicide, which was presented as the antithesis of Seneca's. As we saw in chapter 2, Petronius rejected a discussion of immortality in favor of light and cheerful verses. Then, according to Greville, Sidney asked for his will. Seneca had done the same but in the end could offer his followers only the *imaginem vitae suae* [the image of his life]. The purpose that Seneca attaches to this bequeathed image is precisely the one that Greville associates with his image of Sidney: the imitation and emulation of virtue. Seneca tells his friends that if they remain mindful (*memores*) of his image, they will "receive as the reward of their constant friendship the fame of their virtuous action." In a similar way, Sidney is said to have commanded his friends: "Love my memory, cherish my friends" (*Dedication* 83.12–13).

Greville was not unique in making this association between Sidney and Seneca. Sidney's sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke, had done much the same when she published her translation of Robert Garnier's tragedy, *Antonie*, together with her translation of Philippe de Mornay's *Discours de la vie et de la mort. Antonius: A Tragedie*, as it was titled in the countess's translation, was, as Gary Waller (1979, 108) has noted, "the first attempt in England to act upon Sidney's urgent cry for the establishment of a drama dignified by the 'notable morallitie' and 'stately speeches' of the French neo-Senecans." Mornay's essay, in turn, was both in form and content a Senecan consolation and meditation; it quotes Seneca, voices the Senecan view that death offers the ultimate freedom, and in the French edition had Mornay's translations of several Senecan essays appended. The countess, who in all of her writings sought to honor her brother and to continue his intellectual legacy, found in the combination of Senecan poetry and prose an appropriate homage to Sir Philip's life and death.

Greville sensed, as did the Countess of Pembroke, I believe, that Seneca was the ancient "image of quiet and action" who best represented Sidney's own situation. Sidney himself had acknowledged the parallels between his own age and that of imperial Rome when he wrote that "the perticuler stories

of present Monarchies follow the Roman" (*Works* 3.130). Sidney, like Seneca, belonged to a noble (although impoverished) line and lived the life of a courtier, depending on the support of a monarch whose favors were fickle. The image that his contemporaries created of Sidney is in important ways like the one that Seneca had tried to create for himself, that of a man who sought "to make himself and others, not in words or opinion, but in life and action, good and great" (*Dedication* 12.7–9). Sidney appears to have had for the curriculum at Oxford the same scorn that Seneca had expressed for its essentially Roman model: It teaches words rather than things. In a letter to his brother Robert, Sidney wrote: "So yow can speake and write Latine not barbarously I never require great study in Ciceronianisme the cheife abuse of Oxford, *Qui dum verba sectantur, res ipsas negligunt*" (*Works*, 3. 132). Seneca likewise had condemned both the philological (*Ep.* 88.3–4) and rhetorical (*Ep.* 100.10) focus on words at the expense of subject: *Sic ista ediscamus, ut quae fuerint verba, sint opera* (*Ep.* 108.35) [Let us learn those things so that what have been words might become works].

Seneca, moreover, was known to the Renaissance primarily as a political figure whose occasional discussions of poetry in his prose writings generally subordinated art to more serious public duties, seeing it as an *oblectamentum*, a source of pleasure and relaxation for one's free time. As Edward Berry reminds us, this same aristocratic ethos prevailed in the Renaissance: "For men of Sidney's status, poetry was at best a courtly game . . . not to be confused with the serious business of life" (1998, 143). Both Sidney and Greville labored to find a justification for their interest in what they had learned from antiquity to call "toyes," to validate a life of quiet as an escape from public duty. This problem was for Sidney and Greville especially acute since their monarch denied both of them opportunities for a more active involvement in affairs of state. Sidney thus begins his *Apology* by acknowledging that "in . . . idlest times having slipped into the title of poet, [I] am provoked to say something . . . in the defence of that my unelected vocation" (95.29–32).

My thesis that Seneca provided the ultimate image for Sidney's life necessarily entails the problem that the Renaissance had in sorting out what Martial had called "the two Senecas" (I.61.7–8).¹⁶ Martial was thinking of the Seneca we now know as the "Elder," the tragedian's father, who wrote a treatise on rhetoric, and his son, who wrote both tragedies and philosophical essays. However, Seneca the "Younger" also seemed to be two men: Seneca the dramatist was regularly disassociated from Seneca the Stoic. As Gordon Braden (1985, 69) notes, someone who, in 1620, purchased *The Workes of Lucius Annaeus Seneca* found no tragedies there. If my argument holds, Fulke Greville had already in the first decade of the seventeenth century recognized that these two men were one, motivated in large part by a desire to validate the union of quiet and action

in Sidney's career. In writing a Senecan life as a prelude to Senecan plays, Greville appears to recognize how much Sidney's idea of poetry owes not just to Seneca's tragedies but also to the philosopher behind them. Greville, however, as well as the Countess of Pembroke, must surely have been anticipated in this recognition by Sidney himself, for both Greville and the countess honor Sidney through the ideals he had himself valorized.

The juxtaposition of Seneca's life with his plays in Greville's tribute to Sidney is revealing. Sidney and his circle had recognized, it suggests, that Seneca's idea of tragedy encompassed life, as well as art: Seneca's personal image was seen to function in the same way as the images in his plays, as perfect pictures, and Seneca's death scene, like Sidney's, was a "tragedy."

D. Sound and Fury, Signifying

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

In closing I return to Macbeth's famous words, with which we began, in order to draw some conclusions about the *significance* of Senecan tragedy. When we looked at this passage in the opening of my argument, I used Macbeth's characterization of tragedy to highlight the challenge that the idea of tragedy has regularly posed: What does it signify? As it happens, Seneca's discussion of *hic humanae vitae mimus* (*Ep.* 80.7), which is quoted in part earlier in this chapter, served as the source for Shakespeare's verses (cf. Jones 1977, 280). The Senecan model behind Macbeth's remarks draws our attention to a concept that is central to Stoic poetics and to Seneca's own idea of tragedy: signification. The one adjective that the Stoic Posidonius used to characterize poetry was *semantikon* [significant] (EK fr. 44). Peter Struck (2004, 190) notes that the Stoics, who believed that the "providential care of the gods ensure[d] a semantic dimension to all things," viewed the world and the poetry that depicted it as "entirely readable." Macbeth's assertion, therefore, that life, like a tragedy, "signif[ies] nothing" completely misconstrues the Senecan sources on which it draws.

Seneca turns on this occasion to his often-used analogy between stage and world to make a point about the seeming happiness of the rich, their *personata felicitas*. Their joy is but a mask: They are like actors who play Atreus and the like:

That man, transported onto the stage in a litter, who says,
as he lies there,

See how I rule over Argos! Pelops has left to
me kingdoms where the Isthmos is bounded by
the Hellespont and the Ionian Sea.

is a slave, earns five measures of grain and five silver
coins. That arrogant and head-strong fellow, swollen with
confidence in his strength, who says,

Unless you stay your arms, Menelaus, you will
die by this right hand.

receives a day's rations and sleeps on rags. (*Ep.* 80.7–8)

Actors in antiquity indeed were slaves; they possessed neither the wealth nor the power of the kingly characters whose roles they played. In real life, too, Seneca suggests, the rich and famous are only pretending, wearing an actor's mask only to suggest a happiness they do not actually feel. Seneca's point is not that tales such as Atreus' signify nothing: It is that these plays signify a truth different from the one that we might at first perceive. Shakespeare uses the status of the "poor player" to offer a more fundamental challenge to the theater's ability to signify.

It was not just Seneca's meditation in this letter on life's theatricality, however, that shaped Macbeth's observations; it was also Seneca's tragedies themselves, for which the phrase "full of sound and fury" is an apt summation. Although Shakespeare derives from epistle eighty his idea that life is a "mime" and that the player is poor, his characterization of the tale he tells as "furious" comes instead from Seneca's plays, where Fury is a regular character and fury a constant theme.¹⁷ Indeed, sound and fury, the behaviors associated with *Atreus iratus* in particular, regularly bear "signs" that observers can and should read. Early in his essay on anger (1.1.3–4), when Seneca catalogs the physical behaviors of the furious—their fierce look, agitated movements, and their "sounds" (*sonus*)—he calls these *signa* or "signs." This impassioned body, "performing the great threats of anger," is like the actor in a play, and indeed, as we have seen, Seneca's phrase itself seems to be borrowed from a tragic play. For Stoics steeped in the traditions of divination, angry bodies and plays that stage their sound and fury *signify* much.

By using Seneca's metatheatrical observation in his letter as an implicit gloss on Seneca's own furious plays, Macbeth calls our attention to the challenges that the theater as metaphor poses for understanding the theater itself. Lacking explicit guidance in Seneca's prose writings that might articulate the philosopher's poetics, recent critics have turned to the metatheatrical nature of Seneca's plays to identify Seneca's tragic poetics. In short, they allow Atreus the

“playwright” to define Seneca’s theory of tragedy: “[P]oetry is the sphere of human activity where the kinds of thoughts, feelings and images which reason would rather keep under control and even silence are expressed and communicated” (Schiesaro 2003, 120). Would we allow Macbeth “the critic” to interpret Shakespeare? No one would suggest that Shakespearean tragedy signifies nothing. Metatheater as an interpretive model needs to be read as centrifugal: It connects the stage with the world outside it and suggests the potential for faithful mimesis. The plays within Seneca’s plays image not the source of his poetry but its object and intent: human life and the desire to give it significance. If all the world’s a stage, then the stage must represent not just itself but all the world: an emperor on the stage, a philosopher wearing a mask, a society of bread and circuses, the rhetorical world of fictional debates, and a soul where passion and reason act out their parts. Seneca was drawn to tragedy precisely because its sound and fury signified most completely all of the worlds in which he lived.¹⁸

Seneca’s idea of tragedy need not be constructed only from his plays but can also be articulated by mapping his thoughts about imitation and catharsis onto the complex history of philosophy’s debates about tragedy. Seneca is like Plato in seeing tragedy as inevitably implicated in issues that concern philosophers; it is not just a literary form but also a representation of human experience, a *mimus humanae vitae*, a form that “mimes human life.” Yet Seneca sides with Aristotle, whose poetics shaped Stoic traditions even in the absence of his *Poetics*, and sees in poetry’s images the potential for truth and in its emotions a tool for understanding. Senecan tragedy is therefore not Stoic because of its content; the plays are not lessons in doctrine. It is Stoic because of its form, which in a variety of senses embodies Stoic ways of thinking. As I have argued in these chapters, tragedy presents images of truth; it stages the plot of the soul, the scene of true action for the Stoics; it is the genre best suited to Stoic villains swollen with passion, for their bodies are especially theatrical; it dramatizes those events that the Romans called *monstra*, vivid impressions that offer signs to guide our interpretation; it reminds us that life is itself a stage on which we construct a sense of self by playing a part and that tragedy is the tale of parts played badly; it is an emblem, as Epictetus points out, for the process of perception and judgment in which we constantly engage as spectators to life’s “impressions.” If readers like Eliot have struggled to see what is Stoic about Seneca’s plays, it is perhaps because they have approached the issue with the wrong assumptions. When Senecan tragedy fails to stage virtue, we should see in this not the failure of Stoicism but a Stoic conception of tragedy as the right vehicle for imaging Seneca’s familiar world of madmen and fools.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Simon Goldhill (2008, 45) cites an incident narrated in Aesop's fables that appears to make a similar point. A fox once came upon a tragic actor's mask, turned it over, and exclaimed: "But it's got no brain."

2. See the index to Kelly (1993) under "goat" for the various attempts, from antiquity through the Middle Ages, to provide an etymology for "tragedy."

3. It is curious, however, that Booth (1983), in a chapter about *Macbeth*, does not connect this observation with the famous words of Macbeth with which I began.

4. Cf. Halliwell (1987, 126): "Unlike Plato, who comes much closer to regarding (and rejecting) tragedy as a holistic view of reality, Aristotle shows no inclination to enlarge the experience of pity and fear from tragedy into anything resembling a world-view."

5. Seneca's surviving tragedies are the *Hercules Furens*, the *Agamemnon*, the *Medea*, the *Phaedra*, the *Oedipus*, the *Thyestes*, the *Troades* (Trojan Women), and the *Phoenissae* (Phoenician Women, fragmentary).

6. This connection is noted by Miola (1992, 93) and by others before him.

7. See Miola (1992) and Braden (1985) for a detailed discussion of Seneca's influence on Shakespeare's tragedies.

8. During the Middle Ages, ancient Greek texts were generally unknown in Europe, and few people had the ability to read Greek. Greek tragedies were known only through references and excerpts until the fifteenth century, two centuries after Seneca's plays had been rediscovered.

9. The phrase "drama queen" conveys a similar idea in contemporary English: "a person given to excessively emotional performances or reactions."

CHAPTER 1

1. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (1965, 101.2–5). All page references to Sidney's *Apology* refer to this edition.

2. Cicero uses the word in its Greek form at *Orator* iii.10, but when he gives it a Latin equivalent, he translates it as *forma* rather than transliterating it as *idea*.

3. As Trimpi (1999, 189) observes, the artist's preconception of his work, as Sidney describes it, "could be Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic (Senecan), Ciceronian, Boethian, Thomistic, as well as Neoplatonic." Trimpi, however, favors Seneca's epistles and Horace's *Ars Poetica* as Sidney's primary sources. Vickers (1988, 738) highlights the role of Cicero in turning Plato's negative concept into something "glorious." Erwin Panofsky (1968, 19–25) discusses Seneca's two letters and observes that Seneca uses the term *idea* "with total disregard for Platonic usage." As Levaio notes (1987, 130), Sidney wanted to authorize the poet's autonomy and freedom, and therefore he rejects Plato's notion of "a very inspiring of divine force, far above man's wit" (*Apology* 130.8–9). Michael Mack (2005, 54–80) surveys the many possible sources and meanings for Sidney's idea of the "idea." As I show in chapter 3, Sidney's "idea" is essentially the artist's preconception, the vivid image in his mind, which guides him to create—an important principle in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in Stoic epistemology, and in ancient rhetoric.

4. As Gerard Watson (1988) has shown, Seneca was influenced by the mingling of Platonic and Stoic traditions that had, by the first century AD, begun to transform Plato's ideas into something like the modern concept of "idea." Watson surveys the history of the term *phantasia* and shows how it evolved from a term of perception into a term for the creative imagination. Although Plato condemned art that imitated reality only from a distance, portraying not *idea* but *phantasia*, under the Stoics, who argued that all knowledge began from perception, the artist's vision came to receive a higher respect. The artist was parallel to the Creator, "who also had his 'Ideas' as his model: one mode of the artist's activity is based on his vision of some beauty which is invisible" (1988, 94).

5. Cf. Brink (1963, 140): "I know of no evidence of any first-hand knowledge of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Horace's time." Likewise, Gerald Else (1957, 337n125) argues that there was no explicit evidence for the *Poetics* between Theophrastus and the fourth century AD.

6. Cf. Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* 7.4, 175 and 200).

7. R. J. Tarrant (1985, 25) paraphrases Shakespeare to make this point: "Seneca's Stoic convictions may have led him to probe the extremes of human behavior, but his artistic response to that challenge contains more than was dreamt of in his philosophy."

8. These lines are from Eliot's "Hollow Men" (1925).

9. The next stanza of Eliot's poem in fact repeats the point in artistic terms: "Between the conception/And the creation/Between the emotion/And the response/Falls the Shadow."

10. Eliot's comment about the "word" in Seneca might well be taken as a general statement of the New Critical approach to poetry. The "words" of the poetry are what is important; behind them there is "no further reality," whether that be the biography of the author, the intellectual climate of the times, or the poetic models that the poet may

have used. Mastronarde (2008) offers a good example of how this approach can be applied to a Senecan tragedy.

11. Cf. Ker (2006, 31–32): “Seneca is . . . fairly methodical in his approach to a given genre. His method can be determined most clearly from the self-conscious statement he makes in letter 118 . . . which concerns his reworking of . . . epistolography as bequeathed by Cicero.”

12. Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.31).

13. Pliny (*Ep.* 4.14.8 and 8.21.3), in describing the prefaces to his own poetry, makes clear that these introductions could raise literary critical issues and offer an *apologia* for poetry. In both cases Pliny is introducing his occasional poetry, his poetry of love and sorrow in the tradition of Catullus, and feels a need to define the nature, purpose, and circumstance of his compositions.

14. Most (2000, 18–19) notes that “no other genre was theorized so early and so intensely” and speculates about why. He notes that tragedy was a “recent invention” and the object of Plato’s deeply emotional engagement. Most does not explore the ways in which tragedy was implicated in the epistemological, psychological, and ethical concerns to which philosophers were naturally drawn.

15. Cf. Halliwell (2002, 263), who notes that “by the Hellenistic period the vocabulary of mimeticism had become part of the lingua franca of Greek criticism and philosophical aesthetics.”

16. As Alister Cameron recalls (1978, 39), Plato’s biographers report that he was a poet himself as a youth, until one day, as he carried his own tragedies on the way to the theater of Dionysos, he encountered Socrates for the first time. Inspired by Socrates’ call to philosophy, Plato is said to have returned home to burn his tragedies. Ancient biographies, of course, are regularly suspect, as Mary Lefkowitz (1981) has shown; nonetheless, this anecdote highlights the way in which Plato’s formative years coincided with tragedy’s heyday.

17. Indeed, Plato had called for just such an “apology” from poetry (*Republic* 607d3–4 *apologēsamenē*) in the same passage in which he cited its long quarrel with philosophy.

18. Littlewood (2004, 2), by contrast, argues that critics have allowed the plays’ “generic identity as drama” to limit our perspectives on them too narrowly. In a similar way Ker (2006, 31) argues that “no Senecan genre allows itself to be read in a mono-generic way.”

19. For Aristotle, as for Plato, tragedy was the particular genre through which the characteristics of poetry in general were to be illustrated. It is not merely an accident of transmission, which has left us Aristotle’s treatment of tragedy but not of comedy, which leads to this conclusion. As Brink (1963, 86) observes, “The argument of the *Poetics* rests on a set of general axioms. But Aristotle, for reasons of his own, propounded the axioms not in the general context of his introduction but in the specific context of the one genre of tragedy.” Nussbaum (1993, 107) acknowledges that the *Poetics* influenced Stoic theories of poetry, although we cannot be precise about the chain of transmission.

20. Carnes Lord (1986) offers a survey of the history and transmission of Aristotle’s works after his death. Halliwell (2002, 263–264) suggests that the survival of Aristotle’s (now lost) works *On Poets* and *Homeric Problems*, as well as Aristotle’s influence on

Peripatetic thinkers who followed his lead, “compensated for the apparent circumstance that the *Poetics* itself was little known in the Hellenistic period.”

21. Mazzoli (1970, 121), following Rostagni, asserts that the Aristotelian tradition of poetics was “adopted and copied” by the Stoics. See Barnes (1997) for a detailed and skeptical account of the textual tradition of Aristotle’s works in Rome, including the so-called edition of Andronicus. Although the *Poetics* presumably would have been part of Andronicus’ edition, there is no evidence to show that it received any significant notice in the first century BC and for centuries beyond; cf. Else (1967, 10).

22. See Moles (1984) and Wlosok (1976) and the bibliography cited in both.

23. Kathy Eden (1986, 97) argues that the “Stoic view of judgment and action corresponds in various details to Aristotelian psychology.” Lloyd (1978, 233) argues that the Stoics’ psychology of action derives “more directly than has perhaps been recognized, from Aristotle.” Long and Sedley (1987, 1.319) note that “so much of Stoic psychology recalls Aristotle.” Sandbach (1985), by contrast, argues that in general Aristotle had little if any influence on the Stoics, in large part since his esoteric works remained unknown until the first century BC.

24. Cf. Fortenbaugh (1975) and Kosman (1980).

25. Cf. Smithson (1983, 6–7). Plato, by contrast, characterizes poetic imitation as “play” that is not to be taken “seriously” (*ou spoudēn tēn mimēsin*, *Republic* 602b).

26. Cf. Longinus (15.1). I will throughout use this conventional designation for the author of “On the Sublime,” although it is clear that we in fact do not know the name of the author of this treatise. Longinus catalogues five sources of sublimity, “the first and most powerful of which is the capacity of forming great thoughts” (8.1). The process for creating poetry or oratory is for Longinus the cognitive process writ large: An idea produces speech, which is why the Stoics can use *phantasia* to describe both cognition and composition. Sidney’s poetics, in which idea precedes text, may well have its roots in Stoic epistemology. Longinus uses *idēa* on five occasions, but not, D. A. Russell argues (1964, 86), in a technical sense. The “great thoughts” that are productive of poetry are variously named *noēsis*, *noēma*, *ennoēma*, and *ennoia*.

27. This is how Sidney transliterates the Greek word *ἐνέργεια*, which I believe he confuses with *ἐνάργεια*, an issue I discuss further in chapter 3.

28. Aristotle, too, urges poets to construct their plots “with the material as much as possible in the mind’s eye” (*Poetics* 1455a 21–22), but what is for him a mechanism for ensuring the intelligibility of the plot becomes in the rhetorical tradition the guarantor of verisimilitude and vividness, essential either to move or to persuade.

29. Cf. Gilbert (1940, 459–461).

30. Segal (1983b, 249) has in fact taken the scene of *extispicium* from Seneca’s *Oedipus* as emblematic of Seneca’s conception of tragedy: “In the *Oedipus*’ imagery of handling and scrutinizing these concealed deformities, we have also another depiction of the autobiography of the work, a tactile experience which is a model of the work’s total effect and perhaps of the imaginative genesis which impelled it into being.”

31. Myrick (1935, 101–105) argues that Sidney derives the material in this passage from the Italian critic Minturno.

32. Cf. Kathy Eden (1986, 101–102).

33. On this term, see Faverty (1926), who argues that Newton is referring not to any specific organization but more generally and satirically to self-appointed “judges” of

literature such as Stephen Gosson, who wrote *School of Abuse* (1579), an attack on poetry in the Platonic tradition. Seneca was not unique in being the target of “Areopagites”; Barish (1981) chronicles the long history of antitheatrical prejudice, which begins with Plato.

34. Thomas Newton, *Seneca, His Tenne Tragedies* (1966, 4–5). The original edition, published in 1581, was reissued in 1927 with an important introduction by T. S. Eliot. I refer to a reprint of that edition issued in 1966, which is now more generally available.

35. Rosenmeyer (1989, 13) draws our attention to a similar anecdote in Justus Lipsius’ *De Constantia* (2.13).

36. In this category I would place, in addition to Charles Segal, Shadi Bartsch, A. J. Boyle, Joachim Dingel, and Alessandro Schiesaro. Schiesaro epitomizes what I mean by “squemysh Areopagites” when he writes (2003, 3), “We do not have to posit a radically modern notion of consciousness to accept that *Thyestes* challenges the Stoic prescription that poetry should have an educational value.”

37. Schiesaro (1997, 107) notes the importance of *Ep.* 115 (where Seneca recounts how Euripides stood up at the end), applies its implications to the plays, and concludes: “Again we are confronted not so much with the fact that Senecan tragedy represents immoral conduct, as that it conspicuously fails to offer a convincing image of punishment.” Schiesaro revisits this argument in his later book (2003, 234).

38. Curtius (1953, 138–144) briefly outlines the ancient use of the theater as an image for life before exploring at greater length its use in the Middle Ages. Christian (1987, 11–23) examines the Stoic use of the “world” as a “stage” (*theatrum mundi*). Armissen-Marchetti (1989, 166–167 and note 240) catalogues Seneca’s use of the motif.

39. Rosenmeyer (2002) notes how widely and variously the term “metatheater” has been used by critics, beginning with Lionel Abel’s coinage of it in 1963. Most commonly, the term has been reduced to the play-within-the-play and has been used, Rosenmeyer argues (99), to “form a mirror to the play as a whole . . . and in turn [to] affect our understanding of the play.” Rosenmeyer, who wrote an important book on Senecan tragedy (1989), rejects the notion that metatheater provides a useful or consistent guide to the plays in which it appears.

40. Hine (2004, 186–187) has more recently sought to “fill out Mayer’s picture further” and concluded that “where scholars have claimed to find an intended Stoic purpose in the plays, all they have really succeeded in doing is offering Stoic diagnoses of the plays.” Hine acknowledges that tragedy is a genre that invites ethical reflection but suggests that Seneca did not necessarily choose to write his plays for that reason.

41. We should not be surprised by the fact that Sidney applies to Seneca both an Aristotelian and a traditional Stoic poetics. As Mack has noted (2005, 5), “Sidney’s inclusiveness [of a range of poetic theories] makes him appear to hold antithetical positions.”

42. This famous definition of drama is found in Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and reads in full: “A play ought to be ‘A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.’” Offered by Lisideius, an admirer of the French Neoclassical dramatists, this definition is debated in the fictional dialogue that constitutes this essay. I have not quoted the full definition because I believe that Seneca would not have agreed with the final element in it.

CHAPTER 2

1. Cf. Hine (2000, 6): “From Seneca’s scattered remarks, it is not possible to construct a coherent theory of poetry, nor did he necessarily have a coherent theory at all”; Rosenmeyer (1989, 39): “Can we get help from what Seneca says about tragedy in his prose writings? Regrettably, like other Stoics, and unlike Academics and Peripatetics, Seneca has relatively little systematic commentary on this head . . . the Stoa seems not to have interested itself in poetics . . . Seneca’s feelings about poetry and drama emerge only marginally and are not always consistent.”

2. “Subsequent” is Inwood’s translation of *superveniens*, a term whose meaning here has proven puzzling. It could mean “occurring unexpectedly” or “coming in addition to.” The implication seems to be that “purpose” is something secondary or subordinate. Inwood (2007, 147) takes it to mean that the *propositum* is “a redundant or superfluous factor,” a reading that seems to me to be unduly pejorative.

3. Readers of this letter will be struck by the vividness and energy with which Seneca describes Aristotle’s views; Seneca clearly can relate to the complexity of causes involved in the creation of art even if his own school cannot. In her book on the Stoic theory of causation (2001, 12), Susanne Bobzien acknowledges that Seneca’s comments on the subject are “too unorthodox, too difficult” to fit neatly into the Stoic tradition. Brad Inwood (2005, 2) notes that Seneca is a “well-read Stoic, though a Stoic with a strong inclination to think for himself in the context of an intellectual climate teeming with influences from other schools.” Seneca may not have been an orthodox Stoic in thinking about art in terms of “ends,” but he acknowledges early in his collection of letters that he often ventures into “enemy territory” not as a traitor but as an explorer (*Ep.* 2.6).

4. See Minnis and Scott (1988, 316) and the bibliography found there in note 8.

5. See Minnis and Scott (*ibid.*, 340–341) for a translation of Cardinal Niccolò’s letter: “The book of tragedies . . . is full of such obscurities, tangled up in such deeply hidden meanings, and has interwoven into it such a jumble of mythological stories, that by dint of its very obscurity it immediately puts off anyone who tries to read it.” On the Aristotelian prologue, see Minnis and Scott (*ibid.*, 197, 314–315 and 324–328). Cf. Minnis (1984) on the author’s role.

6. Strabo here reacts to Eratosthenes’ assertion that poets pursue delight. Cf. Rudolf Pfeiffer (1968, 166): “Eratosthenes’ categorical statement that every poet aimed at [entertainment] was a highly provocative declaration. Strabo, of course, when he had quoted it, immediately contradicted it with his own opinion which he may have derived from earlier Stoics like Posidonius.” Philip DeLacy (1948, 270) also takes Strabo’s statement as illustrative of a Stoic view. Wolfgang Aly (1957, 383) argues against this view and posits instead a Peripatetic source for Strabo’s statement: “Hence it follows that we find ourselves in a Peripatetic atmosphere, which one could have long since deduced from the close connection with [Horace’s] *Ars Poetica*. The Stoic-sounding formulation could be nothing more than a memory from school on the part of a man who calls himself ‘philosopher’ without any inner calling.”

7. The phrase *prima philosophia* is not Senecan in origin; I have simply translated the Greek phrase used by Strabo. The fact that Seneca never uses such a phrase is perhaps one sign that he never advocated this view of poetry.

8. In searching for precedents for the philosophical use of tragedy in just this way, Marti (1947) turns to the example of the Cynic school, whose founder, Diogenes (412–323 BC), is said to have composed tragedies (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.80), probably as part of his campaign to interest the public in philosophy (*ibid.*, 6. 27). Franz Egermann (1940) earlier had made this same suggestion. In trying to link Seneca's plays with those of Diogenes, Marti dismisses too readily, I believe, Seneca's strong statement of disapproval of the Cynics' evangelism: "One should not talk to anyone unless they are about to listen. For this reason it is doubtful whether Diogenes and the other Cynics ought to have spoken so freely and advised anyone they happened to meet" (*Ep.* 29.1–2). Moreover, what we know about Diogenes' plays suggests that they were coarse, obscene, and in general more like mime than drama proper. "[Diogenes' tragedies] presumably consisted of long tirades and tedious philosophical dialogues, relieved only by the dramatic action of the legend and by the vividness of Diogenes' style and the addition of numerous coarse jokes and sarcasms" (Marti 1947, 7). This is not the kind of description we might offer of a Senecan tragedy. Seneca has nothing but contempt for mime, both for its irreverence and for its popular appeal. Tertullian (*Apology* 14.8) describes the literature of Diogenes and his Roman counterpart, Varro (116–27 BC), in terms that we shall soon see Seneca criticize: "But even Diogenes has some fun (*ludit*) at Hercules' expense; and the Roman Cynic, Varro, introduces three hundred Joves, or better said, Jupiters, without heads." So it appears unlikely that Seneca would have had the Cynics and their methods in mind in composing his own plays. To make her case for Diogenes' plays as Seneca's prototypes, Marti must acknowledge that Seneca rejects Diogenes' popularizing approach and his coarse humor. We are thus left only with the idea that Seneca "borrowed Varro's and Diogenes' method of teaching through dramatized myths" (1947, 15), a conclusion that is circular since it is based on the assumption that Seneca does teach through his plays.

9. Cf. *Ep.* 52.12–13: "Let there be some difference between the clamor of the theater and the clamor of the school . . . Let those voices whose intent is to please the people be left to the arts; philosophy should be worshipped."

10. As Mazzoli (1970, 27) points out, Seneca rejects the Peripatetic reconciliation of virtue and pleasure. Cf. *De Vita Beata* 15.3: "He indeed who makes an alliance between virtue and pleasure and not even an equal one dulls by the fragility of one good whatever strength there is in the other."

11. As I show in chapter 4, Seneca does not completely reject the pleasures of the theater but sees them as preliminary to a higher, more thoughtful response to the events portrayed.

12. Even the most wicked man applauds when he hears vice denounced on the stage in pithy and striking lines. Philosophers can take a lesson from this and use such verses in their teaching, recognizing the truth of Cleanthes' dictum, "Just as our breath makes a sound louder when it passes through the long and narrow tube of the trumpet to emerge from the flared bell, so too the strict demands of poetry make our ideas clearer" (*Ep.* 108.10). Such maxims are particularly useful to the neophyte (*Ep.* 33.6–7) because, like the rhymes we tell to children, they are easy to remember. Dihle (1973, 50–51) traces the origins of this view back to Posidonius: "*Praecepta* as a medium of moral education have to be applied to children, to beginners in the struggle for virtue, and to persons intellectually incapable of getting a philosophic instruction . . . This kind of education

appeals to the irrational part of the pupils' souls, and in the case of children and intelligent beginners it has to precede the training of the rational forces."

13. Cf. Rudich (1997, 56): "To [Seneca], what mattered in history was not a record of events that actually happened, or a study to establish their truth, but an assemblage of *exempla* to illustrate rhetorical, philosophical, or moral points."

14. Marti (1945, 223) believes that Seneca's tragedies must be read as a series, with the *Hercules Oetaeus* as the final solution to the problems that the individual plays raise:

Others have suggested before this that Seneca's aim in writing the plays was primarily philosophical or pedagogical. They did not, however, realise that each tragedy is but part of one whole and that apparent variations in some of them from Seneca's eclectic Stoicism, deliberate contradictions and unsolved problems, are removed in the final conclusion. Thus they failed to see that the individual plays, being the constituent parts of one set, present only partial solutions to the problems they raise, and that Seneca's ultimate aim can only be judged from the total effect of all the tragedies.

Such a view, in one sense, is quite appropriate to the Stoic way of thinking. In life, too, the Stoic argues, we can understand the seeming misfortunes that befall us only in the end, when providence's beneficent plan becomes clear. However, when applied to the plays, Marti's theory just does not work. The *Hercules Oetaeus*, it is now agreed, was not written by Seneca, and the order of the plays in a manuscript can be given little significance, especially since the order differs in the two main traditions. There is no reason to take the order of the plays in E as a better indication of Seneca's intent than the order given in A since subsequent work on the text has shown that, apart from the extensive but late interpolations in the A family, both the E and the A families must be given equal stemmatic value. While I share Marti's view that there is something noteworthy about the *Hercules Furens* being first and the *Hercules Oetaeus* last (both manuscript families agree on this), this order reflects at best the insight of Seneca's early interpreters rather than that of Seneca himself.

15. In Seneca, *emendare* is always used in its primary sense to mean "to correct faults in character"; its use in connection with the correction of texts is transferred from this primary meaning and is not found in Seneca except where the reference might be ambiguous. While I agree with Too that Seneca's language of moral reform would have had literary overtones for a Roman audience, I emphasize that for Seneca the moral meaning of *emendare* is always primary. Too believes that "the philosophical identity which Seneca writes for himself . . . is that of a literary text" (1994, 217), a reflection of the postmodern notion that subjectivity is a fictional construct. While Seneca follows the ancient tradition that "all the world is a stage" (*hic humanae vitae mimus, qui nobis partes, quas male agamus, adsignat*, "this drama of human life, which assigns us parts which we play badly" [Ep. 80.7]), he believed, as the word *mimus* suggests, that art *imitates* life, not that it constructs it. I also believe that *argumentum* in this passage should be translated not as "plot" but as "proof": "And indeed this very fact is proof that my spirit is altered into something better,—that it can see its own faults, of which it was previously ignorant" (the Loeb translation of Richard M. Gummere).

16. Gill (1987) analyzes in detail the monologues of self-division in Euripides' as well as Seneca's *Medea*.

17. Long (1992, 54–55) and Most (1989, 2027–29) discuss the role of etymology in the *Epidrome* of the Stoic Cornutus and more generally in Stoic interpretation. For allegory in general and the Stoic use of it, see also Struck (2004).

18. Cf. *Ep.* 40.12, where Fabianus is praised for his life, his knowledge, and finally for his eloquence, “which is less important than these.” To speak quickly, Seneca advises Lucilius, he would have to transfer his attention from “subject matter to words,” a strategy Seneca does not recommend (*Ep.* 40.13).

19. These are the observations of Mayer (Grimal 1991, 213).

20. In her commentary on Seneca's *Troades*, Fantham notes that “Senecan scholars normally assign his plays to the empty years of exile, when, as he reports, his mind . . . diverted itself with *levioribus studiis*” (1982, 11–12). Although Calder (1976, 3–4) sees Seneca's tragedies as “occasional poetry,” he dismisses this notion that they were composed during Seneca's exile on the assumption that only then would he have had the time to do so. Quintus Cicero wrote four tragedies in sixteen days, and Julius Caesar wrote an *Oedipus* in the midst of a political career. Fantham (1996, 41) points out that leisure was a periodic feature of Roman life even for someone as active in politics as Cicero: “It could be a national holiday, or springtime in Campania, or high summer in the Alban hills—when the Senate and courts are adjourned, and gentlemen have settled into their villas.”

21. *De Senectute* (14.50): *Quid in levioribus studiis sed tamen acutis? Quam gaudebat Bello suo Punico Naevius, quam Truculento Plautus, quam Pseudolo!* [And what about those involved in studies that are lighter but nonetheless intellectual? How Naevius rejoiced in composing his *Punic War* or Plautus in composing his *Truculentus* and *Pseudolus!*] In *De Oratore* (1.49.212) Cicero includes the musician, the teacher of language and literature, and the poet among the practitioners of the *levia artium studia*. See Malcovati (1943, 13f.).

22. Further evidence of what Seneca means by this term is provided by *De Tranquillitate* (17.7): *Quidam medio die interiunxerunt et in postmeridianas horas aliquid levioris operae distulerunt* [Some people take a break in the middle of the day and save something of a lighter sort to do into the middle of the afternoon]. The examples of *aliquid levioris operae* that Seneca gives here are sports, games, dancing, walking, and drinking. It is in connection with the last that Seneca mentions poetic composition, a passage I treat in the text shortly.

23. Boyle (1993, 4–5) provides a useful list of such generic descriptors. *Mollis* is linked with lyric and elegy, whereas *durus* (Seneca here urges its avoidance: *animus non inter dura versandus* [The mind should not dwell on things that are difficult]) is associated with epic.

24. I follow Goold's text (1990, 240), which in line 31 reads *leviorem . . . Philetan*.

25. Alexandria, founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC, was home to a great library in which the ideals of poetry came to be redefined primarily through the influence of Callimachus (c. 305–240 BC), a scholar, as well as a poet. Poetry that was short, learned, allusive, playful, and personal (elegy, lyric, pastoral) was preferred to the grand, serious, and public genres of epic and tragedy. Callimachus' aesthetic was influential at Rome, shaping the poetry of Catullus and others whom Cicero labeled (*Ad Atticum* 7.2.1) as the “neoterics.”

26. *Grandis* expresses of tragedy in Latin what *megethos* does in Aristotle's definition of the genre: "Tragedy, then, is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude (*megethos*)" (*Poetics* 1449b23–25).

27. Cf. *Hercules Furens* (1148); *Oedipus* (925).

28. Mazzoli notes that "grandiosity" is "the essential element of tragedy" and a marked feature of Seneca's own plays (1970, 135).

29. Cf. Paul Zanker (1995, 203–210) and Tacitus, *Dialogus* (9.6): "Add to this the fact that poets, if they wish to create and polish something worthy, have to leave the company of their friends and the pleasures of city life, abandon all other duties, and withdraw into the solitude, as they describe it, of woods and groves."

30. *Naturales Quaestiones* (4a, preface 1). Seneca here acknowledges "how suited to leisure and literature" his friend Lucilius is. Catherine Connors (2000, 493) notes that all literature was for the Romans "the product of leisure," whether it took the form of serious epic and tragedy or frivolous light poetry.

31. Henry and Walker (1963, 109). Cf. Fitch (1987, 41): "The strong impression of moral chaos cannot easily be reconciled with the Stoic conception of a universe governed by divine providence."

32. Berger (1960, 357f.) shows that the Stoics, under the guidance of Posidonius, developed the notion of a divinely inspired prophetic power bestowed upon the wise man: "He alone, in truth, is capable of great things, because he lives in an essential communion with divine reason" (363).

33. Mazzoli (1970, 51) discusses the evidence for Seneca's knowledge of Democritus, which he probably acquired through Panaetius and his essay *Peri Euthymias*. Cf. Berger (1960, 364).

34. D. A. Russell (1964, xxii–xxx) discusses the evidence for date and authorship. Cf. also Michel (1969, 246).

35. Cf. Arieti and Crossett (1985, xvii), who, while asserting that "Longinus is not a Stoic," acknowledge that "he could scarcely have failed to be influenced by Stoics." For the Stoics, the good man (*ho spoudaios*) is sublime (*hupsēlos*) (SVF I 216); cf. Mazzoli (1970, 48f.). The four terms that Zeno uses in this passage (SVF I 216) to characterize the moral man are, as Arieti and Crossett note (1985, xviiin7), the same ones that Longinus uses to describe the aesthetic virtues of the sublime: *meγas* (great), *hadros* (solid), *hupsēlos* (sublime), and *ischuros* (strong).

36. Cf. Longinus (36.3): "In language that which surpasses human norms is sought."

37. This becomes clear when we examine other passages in which Seneca uses similar language to describe the philosopher's quest for wisdom, happiness, and inner peace. In the passage from the *Ad Helviam* (20.1) describing his activities in exile that we considered earlier, he contrasted his pleasure in "lighter studies" with his "climb" upward in search of understanding of himself and the world: *modo ad considerandam suam universique naturam veri avidus insurgit*. Elsewhere in the same essay he describes this effort in greater detail (8.4f). By studying the heavens, he can commune with things celestial, and his mind can dwell *in sublimi*. In *Ep.* 102.28 he speaks of this same process, emphasizing there the necessity of separating ourselves from our bodies in order to reach that which is more sublime: "Estranged from this [body] meditate on something higher and more sublime." The goal of this quest, which is really the goal of philosophy itself, is the inner peace and freedom that results from knowledge: "How great an reward awaits us if only we break

free from our worries and the evils that cling to us so tenaciously! . . . tranquility of mind and complete freedom await us after we have dispelled all errors” (*Ep.* 75.16, 18).

38. This is a point that Seneca humorously illustrates in his *Apocolocyntosis* (7.3), where a Hercules *tragicus* delivers his speech *satis animose et fortiter, nihilo minus mentis suae non est*, “passionately and bravely, in spite of the fact that he was out of his mind.”

39. See Russell (1964, xxxv–xxxvi). Cf. Too (1998, 205): “If frigidity (*psuchron*) stands in opposition to the sublime, then tumidity (*ongkos*), literally ‘swelling,’ is the sublime transgressed.” She cites Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 9.26.5), who notes that what he considers “sublime” his friend considers “swollen,” what he considers “full,” his friend finds “excessive.”

40. It is difficult to see Hercules as an image of the poet. Of all ancient heroes, he was the one who refused to learn to play the lyre and killed his music teacher in a fit of madness.

41. *De Vita Beata* (26.6), *De Tranquillitate* (11.8), *Naturales Quaestiones* (3.27.13), *De Beneficiis* (1.3.8 and 1.4.5).

42. In labeling as “sweet” (*dulcem fabulam*) the stories of poets who seek to please, Seneca recalls Callimachus’ use of *glukus* and *melichros* as terms of literary praise (*Actia* fr. 1.11 and 1.16). One sign that Seneca’s criticism of poetry as *ineptiae* is part of a general hostility to the Alexandrian school appears in what Seneca says about the library at Alexandria in *De tranq.* 9.5 (Seneca does not, like others, praise this library as a monument to wealth but as one to luxury) and about the Alexandrian form of literary scholarship in *Ep.* 88.37–39 (Didymus wrote too much about unimportant questions, and Aristarchus’ textual emendations are *ineptiae*). As Sullivan has noted (1985, 81), Seneca in the *Apocolocyntosis* (2) mocks the Callimachean taste for “ingenious periphrases for time.”

43. Philitas (c. 340–c. 285 BC), who was an important influence in the development of literature at Alexandria, wrote a group of poems called *παίγνια*. Strato used the word of his own poetry (*Greek Anthology* 12.258). Stephanus (*Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* VI.28, A–B) defines it as *et Poemata aut alia scripta ludicra*. Cf. Catullus (14A.1–2), *Siqui forte mearum ineptiarum/lectores eritis*; Pliny (*Ep.* 9.25.1), *lusus et ineptias nostras legis*; Martial (11.1.13–14), *sunt illic duo tresve qui revolvant nostrarum tineas ineptiarum*; Horace (*Epist.* 2.2.141–142), *Nimirum sapere est abiectis utile nugis/et tempestivum pueri concedere ludum*.

44. *Nam longa praefatione vel excusare vel commendare ineptias ineptissimum est* [For by a long preface to commend or to excuse one’s nonsense is the most nonsensical thing of all] (*Ep.* 4.14.8).

45. Seneca’s use of the word *ineptiae* to characterize both mime and neoteric poetry may reflect the ways in which the Greek word *παίγνιον* was used to describe short, personal forms of poetry, as well as comedy (Plato, *Laws* 816e) and mime (Plutarch, *Moralia* 712e).

46. It is, likewise, mime that Seneca has in mind when he accuses “poets” of inflaming human vice by showing Jupiter lengthening the night so as to have more time for his adulterous pleasures (*De Brevitate Vitae* 16.5f).

47. Nicholas Horsfall (1982, 293) notes that “moralists’ condemnations [of mime] continued ineffective and unabated into the Byzantine period.” The church fathers did not limit their criticism of the portrait of the gods in classical literature just to mime; everyone from Homer on received their disapproval. It was in theatrical presentations

like the mime, however, that Jupiter was depicted most often in the ways that Seneca censures in this passage. Moreover, Seneca compares the poets' portrayal of Jupiter to the attacks made on the wise man by skeptics. This suggests a form of poetry in which mockery and parody are the objectives. Homer certainly did not aim to make fun of Jupiter when he portrayed him as succumbing to Hera's seduction, but the writers of mime consciously poked fun at the gods. In short, the evidence in St. Augustine and others suggests that the poets whose *ineptiae* Seneca attacks here were the composers of the comic farces so popular on the stage in Seneca's day.

48. See Dox (2004, 20–21) on St. Augustine's attitude toward the theater. Cf. Arno-bius, *The Case against the Pagans* (4.35) and Tertullian, *Apology* (15.1–2).

49. On this subject Seneca's remarks in *Ep.* 88.21f are instructive. There he quotes with seeming approval Posidonius' four-tiered ranking of the arts, which progresses from lowest to highest: 1. *volgares et sordidae* (handicrafts); 2. *ludicrae*, which "aim at the pleasure of the eyes and ears"; 3. *pueriles* (the standard school curriculum); and 4. *liberales* (the study of virtue). Seneca defines the *artes ludicrae* as special effects such as moving elevators and objects that fit together automatically and then fall apart, effects of the sort created for mime shows. Such *artes ludicrae*, whose goal is pleasure for the eye and ear, are two ranks below those arts that truly serve the needs of philosophy.

50. Tragedy is, in contrast to playful verses, called *severa*. Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 8.8, "I will pass over tragedies and our toga plays. For the latter have also a degree of seriousness and stand halfway between comedy and tragedy."

51. See also Sullivan's article, "Petronius, Seneca, and Lucan: A Neronian Literary Feud?" (1968a), and his book, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nero* (1985, 172f.).

52. Cf. Sullivan (1985, 174–175): "By comparison with Seneca, Petronius' style is Atticist in some sense of that abused term, and his artistic *credo* stressing simplicity, pleasure, and the acceptance of life as it is (132.15) would be diametrically opposed to all that Seneca stood for in his life and writings." Persius uses *ineptus* and *nugae* in a similar way in *Satire* 5 (vv. 12 and 19) to denigrate poetry that fancies itself *gravis*, turning these terms of denigration of "light" poetry back against the advocates of the grand genres. Hutchinson (1993, 28) paraphrases Persius' point: "It is tragedy that is aesthetically and morally the real *nugae*, 'frivolous, worthless stuff.'"

53. Cf. also Sullivan (1968b, 188): "When we add to this the many echoes of Senecan tragedy to be found in the *Troiae Halosis*, the conclusion is hard to resist that the poem is a general imitation and parody of Seneca's tragic style." Connors (1998, 96) is skeptical that an attempt to parody Seneca can be proven.

54. Cf. Martial, who in epigram 10.7 characterizes monstrous tragedies as *ludibria*, "playful shams," a description that "ironically reverses the term 'play' often used of epigram," as Hutchinson has observed (1993, 24).

55. See the conclusion for a more detailed discussion of this connection.

CHAPTER 3

1. The *Etruscus* was probably discovered late in his life by the prehumanist Lovato de' Lovati (1241–1309). For a description of the *Etruscus* and its history, see Tarrant (1976, 24–28).

2. Cf. McMahon (1929, especially 130–135). Theophrastus (371–287 BC) was Aristotle's successor as head of the Peripatetic school; Varro (116–27 BC) was a Roman polymath; Suetonius (c. 69/75–130) was a Roman historian and biographer; Diomedes and Donatus were fourth-century AD grammarians. Donatus' definition of comedy appears in Georg Kaibel's *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (1899, 67).

3. Both of these definitions (of tragedy and of comedy) reach Rome through Theophrastus and serve, as Kelly has argued (1993, 15), as Romanized versions of Aristotle; what Donatus describes as the purpose of comedy could "serve just as well for the whole dramatic art," eventually becoming "the basis of Hamlet's definition of the purpose of playing: 'to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature, to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the Time his form and pressure.'" As McMahon (1929, 198) concludes, "The definitions of tragedy and comedy, ultimately derived from Aristotle's *On Poets*, dominated European theories from the time of Aristotle down to the Romantic movement."

4. Cf. Minnis and Scott (1988, 344).

5. *Sumpsit [Seneca] itaque tragedum stilum, poetice artis supremum apicem et grandiloquum* [Seneca therefore took up the tragedian's pen, the supreme and grand-speaking apex of the poetic art]. Cf. Kelly (1993, 138).

6. *Tragoedi sunt qui antiqua gesta atque facinora sceleratorum regum luctuosa carmine spectante populo concinebant* [Tragic poets are those who used to sing in poetry, with the people as audience, of the ancient deeds and sorrowful crimes of wicked kings] (*Etymologiae* 18.45).

7. Macbeth does much the same: "[W]hy do I yield to that suggestion/Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,/And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,/Against the use of nature?" (I.3.134–137).

8. Armisen-Marchetti (1989, 365), in her study of Seneca's use of "images" (defined as metaphor, simile, and imagery in general), has concluded, "On the whole, the tragedies seem less embellished with images (*moins imagées*) than the philosophical works." I am using "image" in the epistemological rather than the literary sense, however. While imagery can help to create a vivid presentation in a text, it is not synonymous with it. In his tragedies, it is true, Seneca uses the word *imago* only three times (*Agamemnon* [874], *Thyestes* [282, 636]) and in each of these instances in the nominative. These examples, however, emphasize the rhetorical and epistemological foundation for Seneca's understanding of the word; the *imago* is an image in the mind of a viewer like Cassandra or Atreus, who sees vividly and then narrates. When Daut (1975) surveys the concept of the *imago* at Rome, he finds that the word is used almost solely to characterize a work of art; by contrast, Seneca in the tragedies reserves it for an idea in the mind. Moreover, what is most important in the tragedies is not the use of the word *imago* but the practice of creating vivid scenes. Seneca uses *imago* most frequently in his *Naturales Quaestiones*, where he is treating perceptual issues such as rainbows.

9. In his book on the philosophical sources for Sidney's *Apology*, Robinson deals with Stoicism only in a brief and general way and finds the source for Sidney's "idea" primarily in the influence of the French humanist and logician Peter Ramus (1515–1572), who believed that "innate knowledge is graphic and diagrammatic rather than verbal" (1972, 117).

10. What Plato denigrated as *phantasmata*, the Stoics more neutrally called *phantasiai*, reserving *phantasmata* for figments of the imagination, an issue I explore further in section B3 on *phantasma* in this chapter.

11. Galen (PHP v.5.16–19) attributes to Chrysippus the view that “corruption arises in inferior men in regard to good and evil because of the persuasiveness of appearances.” Like Epictetus, Chrysippus seems to suggest that what we call tragedy results when we improperly respond to our sense impressions.

12. Seneca uses *species* and *opinio* as synonyms in *De Ira* 2.1 and 2 to designate the visual impression that precedes a judgment of injury in the cognitive process: *speciem . . . acceptae iniuriarum* (2.1.4) and *opinionem iniuriarum* (2.2.2).

13. The author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, for example, defines *demonstratio* as “*cum ita verbis res exprimitur ut geri negotium et res ante oculos esse videatur*” [when affairs are expressed in words in such a way that the business seems to be conducted and the affairs to occur before our very eyes] (4.55). *Demonstratio*, *evidentia*, *repraesentatio*, and *sub oculis subiectio* are all Latin equivalents to *enargeia*.

14. Sandbach (1971, 32) cites Galen (PHP iv. 400 = EK 165.146) as perhaps the first Stoic use of the term. It is not clear in that passage, however, whether it is Galen’s term or Posidonius’. The use of *enargōs* in the passage I have quoted above is explicitly attributed to Posidonius.

15. Cf. Aulus Gellius (14.4) for Chrysippus’ creation of an *imago iustitiae* and Seneca’s *De Beneficiis* (1.3.8) for his analysis of the iconography of the Graces. Chrysippus offers an allegorical interpretation of a painting in which Hera is fellating Zeus (SVF 2.1071–1074).

16. This is Quintilian’s definition of *enargeia*, a scene “which seems to lead the audience as it were face to face with reality (*in rem praesentem*)” (*Institutio Oratoria* 4.2.123).

17. Speaking of anger, Seneca acknowledges that even vivid impressions can be false: “The cause of anger is the impression of injury, to which we should not easily grant our belief. We must yield immediately not even to obvious and manifest wrongs; for some things that are false bear the appearance of truth” (*De Ira* 2.22.2). The difference between a mad character and a normal one lies in part in the speed with which they yield to their impressions. The proper discrimination between impressions involves judgment and the time to make it. That a vivid impression can be false does not mean that our response is beyond our control.

18. Cf. Sextus (*Against the Professors* 7.258): “[E]very man, when he is anxious to apprehend any object exactly, appears of himself to pursue after a presentation (*phantasia*) of this kind; (7.151–152): “[The Stoics] assert that there are three criteria—knowledge and opinion and, set between these two, apprehension (*katalēpsis*) . . . And they say that, of these, knowledge subsists only in the wise, and opinion only in the fools, but apprehension is shared alike by both, and it is the criterion of truth”; (7.247): “And of true presentations some are apprehensive, others not,—not apprehensive being those which are experienced by persons in a morbid condition; for countless sufferers from frenzy and melancholia receive a presentation which though true is not apprehensive” (cf. Wildberger 2006, 80). Sextus reports (*Against the Professors* 7.253–256 = LS 40K) that later Stoics refined the concept of grasp; a cognitive impression generates truth only if there is no “impediment.” Madness would appear to be just such an impediment.

19. Cf. Imbert (1980, 182–183); Graver (2007, 112–114) discusses Chrysippus' terminology and the Stoic interpretation of Orestes.

20. Posidonius (Galen, PHP iv. 372 = EK 164.42–50) parts ways with the dominant Stoic tradition on this issue, as on others. He notes that the same *phantasia* can affect two different people in different ways or the same person differently at various times. He attributes this variance to character and training; one of his therapeutic strategies is to have people visualize in advance situations that arouse painful emotions so as to desensitize them to the real thing.

21. In his commentary on the *Apology*, Geoffrey Shepherd (Sidney 1965, 160) notes that Sidney's comparison between pictures and poetry is frequently used in Plutarch's *Moralia*; my suggestion is that Stoicism provided an epistemology to justify it. As Otto Regenbogen (1930) and C. J. Herington (1966) have noticed, Seneca works *tamquam pictor*, like a painter (*Ep.* 113.26). When in the *Hercules Furens* Theseus, newly returned from Hades, describes what he saw there, he turns Cerberus into a painting of anger, a serpentine monster like the Furies: *par ira formae* [his anger was equal to his appearance] (788). This almost mathematical equation between inner emotion and outer form characterizes Seneca's painterly style throughout his plays and suggests that the impressions they create faithfully mirror the realities they describe.

22. Albertino Mussato, who, as we noted earlier, wrote the first Renaissance tragedy in the Senecan style, also wrote a "Life of Seneca," in which he sought to define tragedy and Seneca's motives for writing it. Mussato is perceptive in noting that tragedy is the genre of the passions: *Proprius enim per trageda carmina exprimuntur et representantur summe tristitie, gaudia, et alie passiones anime quam per alia genera metrorum* [It is more appropriate that the highest woes, joys and other passions of the soul be given voice and representation in tragic poems than in all the other genres] (1969, 159–160).

CHAPTER 4

1. Cf. Tieleman (1996, 221): "The Stoics are often said to have practiced allegoresis. But it is worth noting that Chrysippus' mode of interpretation is almost invariably non-allegorical. Psychic functions are associated with the heart on their literal or 'surface level'—no specific techniques, etymological or other, are employed to uncover a hidden or underlying meaning in order to accommodate them to Stoic doctrine."

2. Heinrich Von Staden (1995, 64) argues that Galen seeks to appropriate the virtues of vivid, rhetorical demonstration even for his anatomical research. Galen performed dissections in public, narrating what he "saw" for his audience: "The visible physical evidence is 'real' but, according to ancient rhetorical theory and practice, it has to be verbally interpreted and rhetorically secured as proof, and this is precisely what Galen's verbal *epideixis* aims at. In these contexts Galen often deploys an intense rhetoric of observation, at times claiming to see and describe what in fact cannot be seen, while exhorting his audience not to disbelieve him until they, too, have succeeded in seeing what he is seeing and describing."

3. See Graver (2007, 70–71). The Stoic Epictetus (*Discourses* 1.28.7–9) offered a less subtle analysis of Medea's situation, as we shall see later. His Medea, like all tragic heroes, in his view, makes a mistaken judgment about the value of externals: "Show her

clearly that she is deceived, and she will not do it; but so long as you do not show it, what else has she to follow . . . ?” By contrast, Chrysippus uses Medea to illustrate the difference between a *pathos* and a *hamartēma* or “mistaken judgment”: “Medea . . . was not persuaded by any reasoning to kill her children; quite the contrary, so far as reasoning goes, she says that she understands how evil the acts are that she is about to perform, but her anger is stronger than her deliberations; that is, her affection (*pathos*) has not been made to submit and does not follow reason” (PHP iv.2.27).

4. See also Egermann (1940), Edelstein (1966), Knoche (1972), Lefèvre (1972), and Marti (1945).

5. See Staley (1981).

6. See Tarrant (2006, 4): “Seneca realized that Ovid’s description of the Iron Age bore an unmistakable resemblance to the Rome of Ovid’s (and Seneca’s own) day.”

7. For Caligula, see Griffin (1976, 213–215) and Rudich (1997, 22); for Claudius, see Suetonius, *Claudius* 38.1.

8. The *De Clementia* begins, “I have decided to write about mercy, Nero Caesar, in order that I may function in some way as a mirror and show you to yourself as you are on the verge of attaining the greatest pleasure of all.” Bartsch (2006, 183–188) argues that Seneca here uses the mirror in a way not representative of the “specular tradition.” Nero is not urged to use the mirror either as a tool for self-improvement or as a sign of vanity; instead, the mirror encourages “self-congratulation.” In fact, Seneca uses the language of pleasure to characterize virtue: “[I]t is pleasing to inspect and to examine a good conscience.” Seneca discusses both traditions of the mirror in his *Naturales Quaestiones* (1.17.4–5), as Bartsch acknowledges (32–34).

9. See Tacitus, *Annals* (12.8).

10. My reading of Livy is indebted to Andrew Feldherr’s book *Spectacle and Society in Livy’s History* (1998). See especially his chapter 5, “The Alternative of Drama.”

11. Aristotle in the *Poetics* (1453a32) argues that the speaker must “actually be in the emotions,” a view echoed by Cicero (*De Oratore* 2.189, 3.215) and by Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 6.2.35). Horace (*Ars Poetica* 102–103) gives famous expression to the point: *Si vis me flere dolendum est/primum ipsi tibi* [If you want me to cry, you yourself have to grieve first]. In the *Tusculan Disputations* (4.55) Cicero accepts feigned emotions.

12. *Tristitia*, of course, is not a precise Latin equivalent to the Greek *eleos*; *misericordia* is the best translation, whereas *tristitia* means “sadness” or “gloom.” Seneca, however, treats the two terms as roughly equivalent: “*Misericordia* is a sickness of the mind brought on by the sight of the troubles of others or a *tristitia* provoked by the bad things which happen to others” (*De Clementia* 2.5.4). The Stoics were criticized, Seneca acknowledges in the *De Clementia* (2.5.2–2.6.4), for their seeming harshness in characterizing pity as a mental defect, not a virtue. As a form of *adfectus*, pity brings mental distress; good people will do all that others would prescribe for those who are suffering, but they will do so without causing themselves the unnecessary pain that is pity.

13. Westerink in his edition of this commentary by Olympiodorus the Younger (1956) suggests an emendation in line 19, which I follow in producing my translation of the epigraph that introduces this section. The text otherwise repeats the same phrase, “applying desire to the spirit,” in two contexts intended to convey an alternative.

14. See Janko (1992, 347–348), who quotes Iamblichus on what Janko sees as an Aristotelian notion of *katharsis*: “[I]f [human emotions] are briefly put into activity and

brought to the point of due proportion (*to summetron*), they give delight in moderation, are satisfied and purified by this means.” Janko links Iamblichus’ interpretation with that of Olympiodorus. For a discussion of the “Aristotelian” character of this form of allopathic and medical *katharsis*, see Belfiore (1992, 328–331). Olympiodorus’ use of the analogy of the crooked stick that is straightened through a bend in the opposite direction has a long history; Aristotle uses it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1109a30–b6) to describe the process by which we attain *sōphrosynē*, the intermediate point between excess and deficiency. Seneca uses it in the *De Ira* (1.6.1–2) to describe moral reform; his emphasis, however, is on the slowness of the process. If a crooked spear shaft is straightened too quickly, it will break; if out of anger we vigorously attack someone’s mistakes, we risk hurting rather than healing.

15. See *Ep.* 116.1, where Seneca distinguishes the Stoic desire for the extirpation of the passions from the Peripatetic goal of moderating them.

16. See Fillion-Lahille (1984, 183–184) and Reinhardt (1921, I.322).

17. Rudolf Huber (1973, 122–123) has made this same point.

18. Posidonian catharsis does not exhaust the harmful emotions by having us vicariously experience them, as Edelstein (1966) suggests, but seeks to prevent them by substituting for them emotions of the opposite type.

19. Long (1974, 220) was therefore wrong to suggest that “Seneca’s tragedies . . . may be regarded as a practical Stoic example of the poetic purgative which Posidonius had in mind.”

20. As Hathaway shows (1962, 248–249), Agnolo Segni, working late in the sixteenth century, initiated a tradition of contrasting the effects of gladiatorial contests on spectators with those created by a tragedy. Spectators at gladiatorial contests cannot identify with the fighters, who were socially inferior to them, and therefore could not feel pity and fear. Moreover, those who go to the games have become accustomed to the violence and therefore feel no emotions. Abbé Charles Batteux, working in the eighteenth century, argued that tragedies soften and civilize, whereas gladiatorial fights make us callous to human suffering. Seneca’s discussion of the games and their effects would certainly support this view; it is possible that he might, as these critics do, view tragedy differently, but there is no explicit evidence of that.

21. For moral catharsis as Stoic, see Hathaway (1962, 214 and note 1). The quotations from Maggi and Segni can also be found in Hathaway (*ibid.*, 222, 250).

22. Cinthio’s first comment is cited in Gilbert (1940, 252), the second in Charlton (1946, xxviii). Scaliger is another critic who prefers Seneca while also arguing for a catharsis, which is a “shaping of emotion”: See Regnbogen (1930, 179f.) and Edelstein (1966, 58).

23. See Kraye (1988, 370).

24. Seneca acknowledges (*De Ira* 2.11.2–3) that most people fear anger in the same way as children do repulsive masks, but revealingly he rejects the strategy of frightening people out of wickedness by noting the powerful impact in the theater of Laberius’ line, “It is necessary that he fear many whom many fear.”

25. Mazzoli (1970, 121) speaks of a similar “drammaticità” but finds it in Seneca’s own sensibility and style, as analyzed by Alfonso Traina (1978).

26. See Trabert (1953, 16f.) and Anliker (1960, 51f.).

27. Cf. Mader (1988, 65), who has analyzed Seneca’s Clytemnestra along the lines I am suggesting: “Seneca constructs a complex but psychologically coherent portrait broadly

consistent with the Stoic analysis of *affectus*. . . . We may posit a correlation between the shape of the scene and the philosophical point the dramatist is demonstrating.”

28. Kathy Eden (1986, 102, 96) notes Seneca’s use of this “analogy implied by Aristotle in the *De Anima* between the operations of the law court and those of the mind” and suggests that it results from “the influence of Aristotle’s psychology on the early Stoic philosophers.” In her reading of *De Ira* 1.18.1–2, Eden (ibid., 103) characterizes reason as a judge, anger as a juror. I see no reason in the text to make this distinction; each is a judge of a different sort. Since he is writing for Novatus, who will be asked to serve as a judge but not as a juror, Seneca is presenting, I think, two different conceptions of judgeship.

29. See *De Ira* 2.29.3, where Seneca uses similar language in an explicitly judicial context.

30. Cf. Cicero, *De Inventione* (1.104), where the orator’s presentation of a crime in court sounds just like Seneca’s agenda in the *De Ira*: “[W]e bring together all the circumstances, both what was done during the performance of the deed and what followed after it, accompanying the narration with reproaches and violent denunciations of each act, and by our language bring the action as vividly as possible before the eyes”; cf. Seneca’s uses of *quaerere*: *De Ira* 1.5.1 (*quaeramus*); 2.1.1, 2.1.3 (*quaerimus*), 2.5.1 (*quaerendum*). Cupaiuolo (1975, 118–128) analyzes in detail the rhetorical structure of the treatise.

31. *Acts* 18.12–17 describes Novatus’ tenure as proconsul of Achaëa; as Cooper and Procopé note (1995, 3), Seneca’s brother, now bearing the adoptive name of Iunius Gallio, refused as proconsul to try St. Paul on charges brought against him by the Jews of Corinth. Miriam Griffin (1976, 319n5) has suggested that Novatus is only a nominal addressee here since his personality did not really seem to require a treatise on self-control. Even if this is so, he seems to have been chosen to make plausible Seneca’s advice to rulers on the dangers of anger, a vice especially royal (“Each person has the soul of a king within” [*De Ira* 2.31.3]) and most dangerous when practiced by kings (*De Ira* 3.16.2). That is why I find Rudich’s characterization (1997, 87) of this dialogue misleading: “One notes that in the *De Ira* . . . Seneca’s arguments and *exempla* pertain, at first sight, to the problems and concerns of private individuals rather than public issues.” Seneca does offer several examples of how the weak need to restrain their anger in the face of the powerful (3.13.7–3.15), but that theme soon yields to examples, both foreign and Roman, of rulers who need to control their passions (3.16.2–3.21.–3.25) and of those who, like Augustus, are said to have done so (3.22–3.23).

32. In *Ep.* 114.22–24 Seneca likewise treats this analogy between soul and state, one at least as old as Plato’s *Republic*. “Our soul is at one moment a king, at another a tyrant,” Seneca argues; when reason is in control, the soul is kingly, but a passionate soul is tyrannical.

33. As Kathy Eden points out (1986, 9), “Aristotle often illustrates rhetorical strategies with examples from the plays.” For example, Aristotle points out (*Rhetoric* 3.14.5) that the opening of a forensic speech often has the same effect as a dramatic prologue. In a case (3.15.8) where Euripides was a litigant, his opponent accused him of impiety for having defended perjury in one of his plays; Euripides argues that decisions in the “court” (*agōn*) of Dionysos cannot be transferred to the law courts.

34. Seneca noticed Aeschylus’ use of this word and translated it as *signum*; the messenger Eurybates relates the use of a torch as a *signum recursus* (*Agamemnon* 427), “the

signal to return,” which announced that the Greek ships should depart from Troy on their way home.

35. These definitions are drawn from Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Professors* 3.3–3.5) and are cited by Trimpi (1983, 26).

36. Cf. Hine (2000, 138 note to line 202): “Seneca’s tragedies regularly speak of characters having a quasi-legal case to defend.”

37. See Bonner (1949, 23–24).

38. See Walker (2000, vii–viii).

39. Cf. Quintilian’s treatment (*Institutio Oratoria* 6.1.52) of the peroration of a speech as especially “theatrical”: “It is at the close of our drama that we must really stir the theater, when we have reached the place for the phrase with which the old tragedies and comedies used to end, ‘Friends, give us your applause!’”

40. As Walker notes (2000, 7), epideictic, although not explicitly linked with poetry by Aristotle, was so identified by the fourth-century-BC sophist Isocrates and more inclusively by the second-century-AD rhetorician Hermogenes of Tarsus.

41. *Rhetoric* (1.3.2–3); the audience for an epideictic speech judges the “ability of the speaker” and offers “praise or blame.”

42. The second, in which students take notes at a philosopher’s lecture but do not “hear” anything said, does not really seem comparable in any way to the experience of the theater.

43. Given the context, the pleasure supplied by “stories” in *Ep.* 108.6 must be connected with their sounds rather than with their characters or actions; Seneca makes them coordinate with “presentation” and “voice” as aural experiences. This is not, it would seem, the pleasure to be found in a good story that one could read in silence.

44. Some scholars take *opsis* to mean “visual effects,” including masks, costumes, and props. Halliwell argues for a more limited definition: “the various visual aspects of the actors, rather than the stage setting as a whole” (1986, 339; see his entire appendix 3 for a full bibliography and discussion). Although Seneca includes stage machinery in the *ludicrae artes* and Aristotle perhaps does not in his conception of *opsis*, both of these categories include things that arouse “wonder” (cf. *mirantium* [*Ep.* 88.22] and *teratōdes* [*Poetics* 1453b9]) and which appeal to the eyes (cf. *oculi* [*Ep.* 88.22] and *dia tēs opseōs* [1453b7]).

45. Cf. Sandbach (1971).

46. See Nussbaum (1986, 389–390).

47. As Christopher Gill (2006, 435) has noted, “If even [Seneca’s] Medea or Phaedra can . . . recognize or express the badness of their passionate state or of its consequences, that carries implications for the type of message which is also conveyed to the audience.” Gill argues against Schiesaro’s view that Seneca’s audiences would identify with Medea’s or Atreus’ powerful and triumphant sense of themselves as evil.

CHAPTER 5

1. According to his ancient biography (7), Aeschylus incorporated monstrosity into his plays to shock his audiences. Oliver Taplin (1977, 44–46) argues that much of this

material was drawn by the biographer from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where Aeschylus is likewise linked with the monstrous (*eterateuto* 834).

2. Propertius, *Elegies* (2.20.29). Cf. Padel (1992, 170), who observes, "Tragedy made Erinyes very much its own. Their cluster of roles suited the genre. After the *Oresteia*, Erinyes were connected profoundly, but not only, with tragedy, whose subject matter was central to their daemonic province."

3. In a satiric attack on tragedy Lucilius contrasts the simplicity of satire with the grandiosity of tragedy: *Nisi portenta anguisque volucris ac pinnatos scribitis* [Unless you are writing about portents and winged snakes that fly] (Warmington fr. 723). Fiske (1909, 127) argues that Lucilius is attacking the early Roman tragedian Pacuvius, who must have featured omens and flying snakes in his plays. Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.16.37f.) offers evidence of ghosts, scenes from Hades, and Furies in Roman tragedy before his time.

4. In using the word *monstrum*, Martial has in mind the *personae* of tragedy: not only Oedipus and Medea but also centaurs, gorgons, and harpies. Juvenal (*Satire* 6.643–645), by contrast, thinks of the monstrous deeds that tragic women have committed:

Credamus tragicis quidquid de Colchide torva
dicitur et Procne; nil contra conor. et illae
grandia monstra suis audebant temporibus . . .

Let us believe whatever the tragedians say about
savage Medea and Procne; I have nothing to offer
in their defense. Those women dared crimes
that were monstrous in their own day.

Courtney, in his commentary on this satire (1980, 674–675), cites Seneca's Medea as an illustration of what Juvenal means by the term *monstrum*: *maius parat/Medea monstrum*.

5. Thomas Rosenmeyer (1989, 158) connects Seneca's monsters with the "well-attested Roman fascination with *prodigia*." Mary V. Braginton (1933, 45) had earlier made the same point.

6. Cf. Fitch (1987, 44–50) for a discussion of Seneca's sources.

7. Macrobius (*Saturnalia* 5.17.3–4) lamented Vergil's introduction of the monstrous into his epic:

The greatest of goddesses is brought down from Heaven and the greatest of the Furies from Tartarus is enrolled as an ally. Snakes are everywhere, begetting madness, just as they do on the stage. . . . I would have been happier if Vergil, even in this part of his poem, had had something else to imitate, either in Homer or in any other Greek author he wished.

Lacking in Homer a model for the origin of a war, Vergil turned to tragic sources for his use of Juno and Allecto to incite the Iliadic second half of the *Aeneid*. Macrobius' phrase *velut in scaena* [just as on the stage], suggests that Allecto is a tragic figure of the sort who might have been found in tragedy—but in Roman tragedy rather than Greek. After

all, Macrobius would not have wished that Vergil had instead imitated a Greek author if indeed he had turned to the *Greek* stage for his Fury.

8. Seneca's choice of these particular lines as his illustration is in some ways puzzling. First, he reverses the order of Vergil's lines; his first line recalls the sense but not the exact form of *Aeneid* 8.703; his second is almost a verbatim quotation of *Aeneid* 8.702. These differences could simply suggest that Seneca is recalling the lines from memory. Seneca's use of the plural "our poets," however, could indicate that he is citing not just Vergil but another poet as well. Indeed, the first line is quite close to Lucan's *Sanguineum veluti quatens Bellona flagellum* (*Pharsalia* 7.568) [Like Bellona, brandishing her bloody whip], as noted by Cooper and Procopé (1995, 74n60), although the *Pharsalia* postdates Seneca's essay. Lucan could be echoing a line from another poet known to Seneca. Seneca's use of *aut* [or] instead of the Vergilian *et* [and] supports this interpretation since it indicates that he is offering two *different* illustrations. It is also puzzling that Seneca should choose to quote from book eight of the *Aeneid* rather than from book seven since the appearance of Allecto in the latter better illustrates Seneca's points, as Bäumer (1982, 105–106) has observed. There Allecto is *inferna* (7.325) and *monstrum* (7.328).

9. Cf. Putnam (1995, 254): "The opening monologue of Juno, though it has parallels in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, carefully echoes the initial lines of the *Aeneid* with phraseology not found in the later poem, to such a degree that it often resembles a powerful dramatization, in soliloquy, of what Vergil leaves implicit in his third-person narrative." Both Fitch (1987, 116–117) and Lawall (1983, 6–9) catalogue the contributions of Vergil and Ovid to this scene. As Lawall notes, Ovid provided "details for Seneca's characterization of a Juno indignant over her husband's mistresses"; it is Vergil, however, who provides the framework and scenario for this episode. Ovid, through his *aemulatio* of Vergil, has joined the class of poets who treat the Furies, but he is not, for Seneca at least, the exemplar of this class. It is instructive to contrast Ovid's treatment of this same scene in *Metamorphoses* 4.447–454. When Ovid's Juno arrives in Hades, she summons the Furies: "She called the sisters born of Night, goddesses formidable and implacable. Before the adamant doors of Tartarus, shut tight, they were sitting and combing the black snakes from their hair." Here the monstrous dimensions of the Furies are effaced by the all-too-human (and comic) scene of sisters combing their hair, or rather, their snakes. Their appearance does not match their essence.

10. It is noteworthy that Heinze (1993, 245) turned to Seneca to corroborate and illustrate Vergil's psychological use of the gods:

Rationi se subicere [to submit to reason] and *deum sequi* [to follow god] as, Seneca, for example, so clearly teaches, mean virtually the same thing regarded from this viewpoint, and other common phrases—*deus ad homines venit, immo, quod est propius, in homines venit: nulla sine deo mens bona est* [god comes to men: indeed, he comes nearer than that—he comes into men: no mind is good without god] (*Ep.* 73.16), etc.—are extremely close to visual presentation of them in mythical terms.

If Seneca can be used to elucidate Vergil's conception of divine intervention, we should not be surprised if Seneca himself turns to Vergil and particularly to Vergil's innovative

use of Juno and Allecto when Greek sources did not fulfill his needs, for these gods are for Seneca a “visual presentation . . . in mythical terms” of the nature of angry passion and of “psychological processes.” It is precisely this use of *monstra* to represent inner emotion that distinguishes Seneca’s Juno from Euripides’ Lyssa, as John Fitch has argued: “[W]hat is original to Seneca, as far as we can tell, is the *psychological* causation of [Hercules’] madness . . . Euripides underscores the external origin of the madness, and the discontinuity between the hero’s behavior when sane and when insane” (1987, 31 and note 40). Seneca’s concern with psychological causation was, I would argue, one of his reasons for using the Vergilian Juno in his prologue. For, as Brooks Otis (1964, 324–325) has noted, Vergil makes precisely the same distinction between his Juno and Euripides’ Lyssa that Fitch has noted in Seneca: “Euripides’ Lyssa wholly distorts and deranges the mind and spirit of Heracles so that he is in fact the quite unwitting agent of his own ruin. . . . But Allecto . . . only takes advantage of an emotion *already present*. . . . Vergil shows great skill in the way he depicts Allecto as a motivator of *internal* feeling or more exactly as an externalized image of such feeling.” Vergil’s Juno (and Allecto, her agent) externalizes emotions that Amata and Turnus already feel.

11. On Vergil and Freud, see Theodore Ziolkowski (1993, 3–4 and note 1), who notes Freud’s second use of the Vergilian quotation and provides the translation of Freud’s comment on it which I quote above.

12. Later in the *De Ira* Seneca completes the comparison: *Nec, ut quibusdam visum est, arduum in virtutes et asperum iter est* [Nor, as some think, is the journey toward virtue steep and difficult] (2.13.1). Here he does not recall Vergil’s description of this return journey (6.128–129), but he does allude to it in the *Hercules Furens* (675, 678–679). At *Apocolocyntosis* 13 Seneca borrows Vergil’s language of descent to characterize the Emperor Claudius’ entry into Hades: *Omnia proclivia sunt, facile descenditur* [It’s all downhill, the descent is easy].

13. Cf. Segal (1983a, 179), who notes that “the powerful symbol of the underworld” corresponds to “the darker hell of the soul.” Likewise, Fitch (2004, 12) observes: “Clearly there is a correspondence between the lower part of the mind and the lower part of the cosmos, the underworld where dwell Furies, Crime, and blind self-destructive Rage.”

14. For a survey of these interpretations, see Starobinski (1987) and Schönau (1968, 61–73).

15. Although Horace does not himself use the word *monstrum* of such creatures, Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.60), in commenting on this passage, does.

16. Barton in this context (1993, 132) quotes the psychological language of Richard Bernheimer: “[T]he repressed desire for . . . unhampered self-assertion persists and may finally be projected outward as the image of a man who is as free as the beasts.”

17. Freud’s psychology bears comparison in some respects with the Stoic analysis of cognition: “Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject’s major wishes” (1959, 147). In both cases, impressions lead to a debate between desire and reason, which, in normal waking life, reason usually wins. “Fantasy” in the Freudian sense is not just the Stoic *phantasia* or “impression” but a complete and alternative form of cognition in which desire, even when normally forbidden, triumphs and is acted out. Francesco Orlando (1978, 137–138), whose Freudian literary theory Schiesaro uses as his model,

defines literature as acceptable fantasy, as “a return of the repressed made accessible to a community of men but rendered harmless by sublimation and fiction.”

18. Freud’s comment appears in a note attached to the 1925 edition. When Freud returns to Vergil near the end of his analysis, he introduces the line by saying: “In waking life the suppressed material in the mind is prevented from finding expression and is cut off from internal perception owing to the fact that the contradictions present in it are eliminated—one side being disposed of in favour of the other; but during the night, under the sway of an impetus towards the construction of compromises, this suppressed material finds methods and means of forcing its way into consciousness” (5.608).

19. Schiesaro (2003, 43) takes *nefas* to mean “unspeakable”: “In giving voice to *nefas*, poetry reverses the repressive instance that *ne-fas* would encode. Silence was, after all, the standard, expected reaction to *nefas*.” That etymology, however, is doubtful; in practice *nefas* means “that which is against divine or moral law”; it denotes a “crime,” a “portent,” an “unnatural event.” The mechanism of Senecan tragedy is not that of a dreamer expressing what should be left unsaid; as I suggest in chapter 4, Seneca, like an orator, is making the case about a crime or, as I suggest in this chapter, interpreting the meaning of the unnatural through signs.

20. Cf. Meisel (2007, 9), who likewise argues that “Freud is the proper referent of that citation from that *Aeneid*” because Freud is not just Oedipus but also “epic Freud, Freud as Odysseus or Virgil, surviving the trials of the underworld or the unconscious and returning home . . . to narrate them in retrospect.”

21. Padel (1992, 12) notes that “Greek tragedy describes what happens inside human beings daemonically and biologically” and suggests (17) that divination was enacted in tragedy as an expression of the human desire to know what the gods and other humans intend: “Greek mentality associates the innards’ darkness with their status both as the physical center of life and consciousness and as the source of potential knowledge” (75). Seneca intensifies this Greek interest and connects the mechanism of knowledge provided by divination with a Stoic epistemology of signs.

22. Cf. Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.42: *Quia enim ostendunt, portendunt, monstrant, praedicunt, ostenta, portenta, monstra, prodigia dicuntur* [Because they manifest, portend, show, and predict, they are called *ostenta, portenta, monstra, and prodigia*].

23. Tiresias’ necromancy is similar: “The earth suddenly gapes open and exposes its huge hollow within” (*Oedipus* 582–583).

24. Rosenmeyer refers to the theory of William Ridgeway in Ridgeway’s *Origin of Tragedy* (1910).

25. Rosenmeyer (1989, 85) connects Seneca’s use of divination in the plays to Stoic science rather than religion: “Divination furnishes an imponderable link between Stoic science and Senecan dramaturgy. The ghosts document the Stoic awareness that the structure of the world is not completely amenable to methodical inspection.” I emphasize instead their epistemological and rhetorical implications; Senecan ghosts do not image the inexplicable but instead the nature of human *furor*, which they aim to make “comprehensible” in the cognitive sense of that term.

26. See Feldherr (1998, 3): “Livy assimilates the audience’s experience of his text to their experience of the actual spectacles, such as sacrifices and public assemblies (*contiones*), through which so much of the political and religious life of the Roman state was

conducted.” Cf. Fitch (2004, 10): “Seneca’s scene [of necromancy in the *Oedipus*], then, is based on a religious practice that occurred regularly in the Roman world; and the notion it implies, of a physical interconnection between human and nonhuman worlds, would not have seemed alien to a Roman audience, even if some were intellectually sceptical of its validity.”

27. Cf. Diogenes Laertius (*Lives*, 7.149): “[T]hey say that divination in all its forms is a real and substantial fact, if there is really Providence.”

28. For a survey of Seneca’s thoughts about divination, see Armisen-Marchetti (2000).

29. Cf. Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 5.7.35).

30. In the 1940s Bakhtin published a dissertation, which was later translated into English and published as *Rabelais and His World* (1968), in which he explores the generic and social implications of the grotesque body as a literary mode. His ideas have been applied to Roman satire and to Seneca’s contemporary, Petronius. See Miller and Platter (1993) for an overview of Bakhtin’s ideas and their application to classical texts.

31. Cf. Kayser (1966, 19–22).

32. See Halliwell (1986, 337–343) for a summary of these arguments. Halliwell (as does Else [1957, 279]) favors the interpretation that limits *opsis* to “various visual aspects of actors” (1986, 339).

33. See *Troades* 457, *Medea* 670, *Oedipus* 576, and *Thyestes* 104.

34. I use the translation of *Orbecche* found in Gilbert (1940, 244).

35. Cf. Cohen (1996, 4): “The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy.”

36. See now Gill (2006, 435–461) for a fuller discussion of the philosophical sources of Vergil’s depiction of Aeneas’ emotions.

37. This term was coined by Lovejoy and Boas (1965) to describe the notion that life was both easy and ideal at the beginning of time—during the Golden Age.

38. The serpents that attack Laocoön and his sons in book two of the *Aeneid* served as a model for Seneca’s monster from the sea in the *Phaedra*; see Staley (2000).

39. As Charles Segal, to whom I owe this citation (1986, 7), writes, “In reinterpreting Greek myths in psychological terms, Seneca is modern in the sense suggested by André Gide in his own version of the Oedipus myth.” My citation is drawn from André Gide (1950, 36).

CONCLUSION

1. Cf. Tarrant (1985, 24): “The *sapiens* is glanced only at a distance in an off-stage figure like Astyanax in *Troades* or in passages of choral lyric.” Littlewood (2004, 25) grants a slightly larger role to the Stoic vision of the hero: “With the possible exception of *Troades* Senecan tragedy does not portray Stoic heroes, but it does place its victims in this familiar environment of Stoic heroes and it does suggest the Stoic fortitude which they might display.”

2. Cf. Mazzoli (1991, 204): “In this perspective all of the contrary values which seem mostly to set the tragic worldview in opposition to the Stoic one are revealed, because of the label ‘tragic,’ as just as many examples of the suffering perpetrated by irrationality in the world.”

3. Cf. Nussbaum (1994, 470): “*Medea* can be a tragedy only by having characters who are not Stoics.” Littlewood (2004, 56–57) comes close to making this same point: “In so far as Stoicism is implicated in the fragmentation of the world in Senecan drama perhaps we should observe not only anti-Stoicism but the makings of a Stoic tragedy.” The categories of “un-Stoic” and “anti-Stoic” are easily elided in Littlewood’s reading of the plays; the sage’s autocracy exhibits uncomfortable similarities with the tyrant’s own (30). Schiesaro misunderstands the connection between tragedy and immorality when he asserts (2003, 28), speaking of *Thyestes*: “[F]rom the very beginning of the play, there is no escaping the daunting connection between poetry and *scelera* [crimes].” I would emend his text to read “between tragedy and *scelera*.”

4. These are the comments of Stephen L. Trainor (1993, 227).

5. The following extract is cited by Trainor (*ibid.*, 227–228). Addison’s remarks originally appeared in the *Spectator* 39 (April 14, 1711).

6. Braden (1985, 14–15) suggests this connection.

7. Segal (1978, 320–321). Both “heroes” place devotion to what they consider *aretê* ahead of “human commitments in this life.” Segal goes on to articulate how the philosophical definition of “excellence” differs from the Homeric one.

8. Kuhn (1941, 25) and Marti (1947, 3).

9. Long (1986, 150); see also chapter 3 (“The Socratic Paradigm”) of his recent book, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (2002).

10. Inwood, in his commentary on Seneca’s epistle 58 (2007, 110), notes that at the time Seneca was writing this letter, in his last few years of life, he seems to have been interested in Plato’s *Apology* and *Phaedo*.

11. See Staley (2002). James Ker (2009) examines the ways in which Seneca’s death scene was depicted and interpreted from Tacitus through the twentieth century.

12. Rosenmeyer (1989, 38). Seneca would disagree, I think, with Jürgen Blänsdorf (1996, 218) when he says that “in this ideal form [the Stoic philosopher] is a figure deprived of tragic status (*tragicità*).”

13. This and all subsequent references to *A Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney* are cited from John Gouws’ edition (1986).

14. For Montaigne, see *The Complete Works* (2003, 662, 686–687).

15. Cited by Joan Rees (1971, 63).

16. Monsarrat (1984, 34–35) catalogs the evidence on this issue. Dante and Boccaccio, for example, separated Seneca the philosopher from Seneca the poet; Erasmus, however, attributed some of the plays to the philosopher, and Thomas Newton, who published English translations of the plays in 1581, linked poet with philosopher. Monsarrat concludes: “The prefaces of Renaissance editions I have read never invoke any Stoic content of the tragedies in order to father them upon the philosopher; none of the English translators ever mentions Stoicism, nor does Sir William Cornwallis in his *Discourses upon Seneca the Tragedian* (1601), although he was an admirer of the Stoics in general and of Seneca in particular” (35).

17. Miola (1992, 92n39) notes the suggestion of several scholars that Shakespeare had been reading Seneca at the time he was writing *Macbeth*. One of these, J. A. K. Thomson, argues (1952, 124) that Seneca was reading the *Hercules Furens* in particular and perhaps another play as well, probably in Latin.

18. As Shadi Bartsch has noted (1994, 41–42), under Nero “the direction of travel from life to theater proved entirely reversible . . . the theater seemed to lose its character as a site merely for mimesis. . . . Instead, we find a theater that spills over into the emperor’s offstage life. . . . the invasive reach of the stage and the reversal of reality and drama are clear to see.”

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