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Senecan Tragedy as *Monstrum*

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

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

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

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