

James M. PFUNDSTEIN

Phaedra on the Tiles: Seneca Phaedra 1154ff

The proper "performance" question of Seneca's tragedies is not the stageability of the plays, but which stagings would yield the most meaning or the most effect. The specific issue here: where Phaedra stands in the final scene of her eponymous tragedy by Seneca. The text as we have it presents two different scenarios-- perhaps both at the same time (i.e. an internal contradiction).

After the close of their last choral song, the chorus remarks (1154f) Quae vox ab altis flebilis tectis sonat strictoque vecors Phaedra quid ferro parat? The most obvious sense of these lines is that Phaedra has entered on the roof of the stage building. Theseus then addresses Phaedra, shouting (with the exquisite sensitivity he has shown since his first appearance in the play), Quid ensis iste quidve vociferatio planctusque supra corpus invisum volunt? (1156-1158) Phaedra tells him, and kills herself using the sword Hippolytus had threatened her with, earlier in the play, and which she used as evidence when she accused him of rape. The perceived contradiction: how can Phaedra grieve over Hippolytus' body (supra corpus) if she stands on the roof of the stage building? (Zwierlein 13ff, Fantham 35f.)

There are two obvious ways to resolve this issue without assuming a contradiction: either lines 1154f do not imply that Phaedra is on the roof of the stage building (see Hill, Lawall, Coffey & Mayer, Giomini, Grimal, Boyle) or line 1158 does not imply that Phaedra is standing over Hippolytus' corpse (as in Sutton 17f; this is suggested as a possibility by Tarrant, 14n76, who calls it "a poor management of stage space"). An (unlikely) possibility is that supra is being used here in the sense of super "about." This is common in Medieval Latin, and must have been present in Vulgar Latin-- giving rise to Italian sopra, and present as early as the early 2nd century AD (P. Mich. 471.20f). Slightly more probable: the supra of the manuscripts is an early scribal error for super, due to the overlap of the terms in the spoken language.

But neither supposition is really necessary to defend the scene as it stands from contradiction, even if we assume that Phaedra appears on the roof of the stage-building. Supra, in its root sense, implies superiority in position, but not necessarily proximity (e.g. Vitruvius 9.5.4, Caesar De Bello Civili 1.34.4). Further, supra might well be used in a metaphorical sense (cf. Seneca Thyestes 45f), since it is the living (superi) who grieve for the dead (inferi).

If two stagings are possible, which should we prefer? As philologists we may find the question unanswerable-- it hinges on Seneca's intentions, which are probably not recoverable here. As dramaturges, our answer depends on which staging is more effective. Phaedra's appearance on the rooftop illustrates the reversal of fortunes at the play's end. When Phaedra and Hippolytus last confronted each other it was she who was beneath him-- physically and in every other way, as she grovelled for the favor of death at his hands, and he judged her unworthy even of that (703ff). Now he has been disgraced by her successful slander: he is both dead and utterly beneath her. This reversal is merely

apparent and ironic-- Hippolytus is still innocent, Phaedra ever more guilty --but that is all the more reason that it should appear-- that the staging should vividly represent, by use of theatrical space, Phaedra's disastrous victory over Hippolytus.

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