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THE DEATH OF HIPPOLYTUS:  
RECEPTION AND REPRESENTATION  
IN SENECA, RACINE, AND KANE

Every author who treats the story of Phaedra's love for Hippolytus must deal with his grisly death. Even Ovid's fourth *Heroides*, Phaedra's persuasive epistle to her beloved stepson, cleverly and ironically asks, «what harm will come from reading a letter?» (*quid epistula lecta nocebit*, *Her.* 4, 3)<sup>1</sup>. The spectacular scene of his destruction, first elaborated in Euripides, has inspired the imitation and emulation of poets and artists for ages<sup>2</sup>. The classical Messenger speeches of Seneca and Euripides act as fulcrums for the action of their tragedies, both crystallizing the emotional turbulence of the primary characters, and straining the limits of language to accurately express the off-stage calamity<sup>3</sup>. How this death is described, and the reaction of dramatic characters to it, provide authorial and spectatorial views of the brutal scene. The Messenger's speech illustrates the hermeneutics of reception, which places the death in its literary and dramatic context, and interprets the violence that Hippolytus suffers<sup>4</sup>. This paper analyzes the way that Seneca, Racine, and Sarah Kane incorporate this scene in their tragedies, and explores the different outlooks on violence and cruelty that each author manifests. Because Racine and Kane emphasize different aspects of Seneca's version, a thorough investigation of Seneca's Messenger's speech and its purpose in his *Phaedra* will begin this paper, followed by analyses of Hippolytus' death in the tragedies of Racine and Kane.

Critics such as Otto Regenbogen, Charles Segal and Glenn Most have discussed the dark violence of Senecan tragedy, commenting on Seneca's philosophical interest in personal identity in the face of brutality, and have found this scene to be a para-

<sup>1</sup> Ovid foreshadows the Euripidean version of the story in which Phaedra's suicide note accuses Hippolytus of rape and is the primary proof of his "guilt".

<sup>2</sup> A comparison of paintings by Rubens (1611) and Vernet (c. 1800) shows notable variations in the portrayal of the monster from the sea as well as Hippolytus' fall.

<sup>3</sup> More so in Seneca than Euripides. Euripides follows a "less is more" ideal in his description, allowing the audience to imagine the details, while Seneca's rhetorical style seems to believe that "more is more".

<sup>4</sup> Because the death was prefigured in the work of Euripides (as well as any sources no longer available to us), one can speak of the Messenger speech as a figure of reception, which reports something previously portrayed. Cfr. G. SAUNDERS, *Making an Example out of Marsyas*, in C. MARTINDALE-R. THOMAS (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, Oxford 2006, pp. 32-43 for a discussion of Marsyas as a figure of Reception because: «Ovid's Marsyas... serves as an illustrative example of a text which responds well to a consideration of the role of its audience, while Dante's articulates the desire for a reading and writing practice which can break free of its current historical constraints and which can consequently transfigure the objects of its study rather than merely repeat them» (p. 40). It is my contention that Hippolytus' death can be similarly conceived.

mount example of Seneca's baroque style<sup>5</sup>. When the Messenger of the *Phaedra* appears on-stage, he reports to Theseus and to the Chorus his personal perspective of what he saw off-stage<sup>6</sup>. The Messenger acts as both a spectator of Hippolytus' death as well as an "author" of his speech and, in this position, he can be seen as a stand-in for Seneca himself. Alessandro Schiesaro describes the authorial functions of the Messenger of the *Thyestes*, «In his capacity to recreate for our eyes an otherwise irretrievable scene, the messenger is yet another authorial persona in the text and is subject in turn to the disruptive dialectic of the repressed and the repressive that shapes the play at different levels»<sup>7</sup>. In the *Phaedra*, the Messenger presents what is essentially an epic ecphrasis of the events surrounding Hippolytus' demise. He stresses Hippolytus' heroism in the face of a monster worthy of Hercules (or Theseus), and the pathetic rending and flaying of his body inverts the hunting imagery that began the play. As a spectator to Hippolytus' destruction, he gives his emotionally charged reaction to the events that occurred before his eyes, and he attempts to influence his audience's response to the narrative<sup>8</sup>. Seneca's version of Hippolytus' death is unique for its rhetorical expansion (in which intratextual motifs are developed), its complex intertextual fabric, and its inherent questioning of the cruelty of his death.

The rhetorical flourishes, intratextual echoes, and intertextual matrix of this speech (in essence, the authorial functions of the Messenger telling the audience *how* the events happened) influence our interpretation of Hippolytus' death, and reinforce the motifs of recognition, passion, guilt, and punishment that are stressed in the *Phaedra*. The Messenger girds his speech with the accoutrements of epic poetry (long similes, an account of Hippolytus' *aristeia*), as he attempts to imbue Hippolytus' death with the trappings of a heroic narrative<sup>9</sup>. His speech recalls language found in

<sup>5</sup> O. REGENBOGEN, *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas*, in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* 7, Leipzig 1930, pp. 167-218 (r. *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas*, Darmstadt 1963); C. SEGAL, *Senecan Baroque: The Death of Hippolytus in Seneca, Ovid, and Euripides*, in *TAPA* 114 (1984), pp. 311-325; ID., *Language and Desire in Seneca's Phaedra*, Princeton 1986, pp. 315-336; F. CAVIGLIA, *La morte di Ippolito nella Fedra di Seneca*, in *QCTC* 8 (1990), pp. 119-137; G. MOST, *Disiecti membra poetae: The Rhetoric of Dismemberment in Neronian Poetry*, in R. HEXTER-D. SELDEN (eds.), *Innovations of Antiquity*, Ann Arbor 1992, pp. 391-419.

<sup>6</sup> I.J.F. DEJONG, *Narrative in Drama: The Art of the Euripidean Messenger-Speech*, Leiden 1991 considers the Euripidean Messenger from a narratological angle, finding that each Messenger presents his unique point of view of the off-stage event. The question of the staging of Senecan tragedy does not affect my argument.

<sup>7</sup> A. SCHIESARO, *The Passions in Play. Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 236-237.

<sup>8</sup> Note how he refers to Hippolytus as Theseus' son (*gnatus*, 1064), a relationship that Theseus denied at the beginning of the speech («I, the father, know my son died long ago», *gnatum parens obisse iam pridem scio*, 998). Hippolytus' address to the monster likewise emphasizes his paternity («For it is my task inherited from my father to defeat bulls», *nam mihi paternus vincere est tauros labor*, 1067).

<sup>9</sup> Not impressing all the critics, cfr. M. COFFEY-R. MAYER, *Seneca: Phaedra*, Cambridge 1990, *ad loc.*: «These similes increase the bulk of the speech but not its impact». The epic elements of Greek messenger speeches have been analyzed by J. BARRETT, *Staged Narrative: Poetics and the Messenger in Greek Tragedy*, Berkeley 2002, pp. 23-55, *passim*. He finds the focalized view of the Messenger shapes his interpretation of events. This can be particularly fertile in the discussion of Seneca's *Phaedra* because one of the primary intertexts involves Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15, 492-546, where Hippolytus/Virbus gives the speech and the different views provide an interesting test-case for what "really" happened (see discussion below).

previous Acts in order to tie the monster into the larger dramatic context of the tragedy. I will analyze two sections of the Messenger's speech – his description of the monster, and his blow-by-blow account of Hippolytus' death – in order to show how his version elaborates major themes in the play.

The amphibian monster is not the mere bull of Euripides and Ovid, but a hybrid creature, half-bull, half-serpent that is birthed from the sea to torment Hippolytus<sup>10</sup>. The Messenger prepares the audience for his description by claiming that it is going to be frightening («an evil greater than fear» *malum / mains timore*, 1032-3 ...«trembling shakes my mouth» *os quassat tremor*, 1034), so frightening that he is unsure if he can portray it accurately<sup>11</sup>. Seneca's monster reinforces the theme of the destructive power of passion, and the description recalls language and imagery from earlier in the play. The bull's blue neck and half-blue eyes evoke the world of the sea, a world not immune to the rule of Eros, as we know from the first choral ode (274-357). There, the azure group of Nereids is unable to alleviate love's fire, even with the sea, and here the monster's eyes mingle water and fire imagery as his blue eyes emit flames<sup>12</sup>. In addition, the bovine characteristics of the monster mimic Phaedra's earlier account of her mother's love. As the monster has a color befitting «the leader of a wild herd» (*feri dominator... gregis*, 1039), so Pasiphae's passion was for «the wild leader of a savage flock» (*pecoris efferum saevi ducem*, 116) or «the leader of an untamed herd» (*ductor indomiti gregis*, 118). The monster is a development of Pasiphae's passion, connecting this beast with the myths of the Cretan house, and, throughout the play, Phaedra consistently describes herself as the victim of a hereditary curse involving illicit love<sup>13</sup>. However, such intratextual echoes can also subvert previous language. The Messenger's initial exclamation, «What was the

<sup>10</sup> The birthing/pregnancy imagery around this hybrid beast is important for possible parallels with Pasiphae and the Minotaur. Cfr. W.D. FURLEY, *Seneca's Horrible Bull: Phaedra 1007-1034*, in *CQ* 42 (1992), pp. 562-566: «Seneca's choice of metaphor here emphasizes both the continuity between the generations in Phaedra's family, and her own active part in engendering the monstrous bull by loving Hippolytus». For more on his death in different Greek and Roman versions, see R. DEGL'INNOCENTI PIERINI, *Finale di tragedia: il destino di Ippolito dalla Grecia a Roma*, in AA.VV., *Fedra: version e riscritture di un mito classic*, Firenze 2007, pp. 85-111. More on the poetics of this monster can be found in C.V. TRINACTY, *Senecan Tragedy and the Reception of Augustan Poetry*, Oxford 2014, pp. 174-185, on which this material is based.

<sup>11</sup> Note how he calls attention to the results of terror on his account (*vocem dolori lingua luctificam negat*, 995 and 1034). In doing so he calls attention to the authorial nature of his statement, and emphasizes the poetic nature of his description. As SEGAL, *art. cit.*, p. 318 states: «The narrative voice in these lines is less that of a messenger who has really seen such a thing than that of the poet himself who wants us to 'see' this object of terror with our inner vision of emotional participation».

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. «The blue group of Nereids is unable to quench the flame even with the waves of the sea» (*Caerulus undis grex Nereidum / flammamque nequit relevare mari*, 336-337) and «Its eyes pour forth flames from this side, from that side they shine strikingly blue» (*hinc flammam vomunt / oculi, hinc relucent caerula insignes nota*, 1040-1041). Seneca's monster manifests in a tangible manner the figurative fires of passion described by Phaedra's Nurse «flame burst from her eyes» (*erumpit oculis ignis*, 364).

<sup>13</sup> «I recognize the fateful evil of my miserable mother: our love knows how to sin in the woods» (*fatale miserae matris agnosco malum: / peccare noster novit in silvis amor*, *Pha.* 113-114). «No Minoan has enjoyed easy love, always crime is yoked to it» (*nulla Minois levi / defuncta amore est, iungitur semper nefas*, 127-128). Some aspects of this hereditary passion have been analyzed in R. ARMSTRONG, *Cretan Women: Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Phaedra in Latin Poetry*, Oxford 2006.

nature of that beast's huge body!» (*quis habitus ille corporis vasti fuit!* 1035) pointedly recalls the Chorus' description of Hippolytus himself who may «dare to defeat the gods with his strength and the huge size of his body» (*deos viribus audeas / et vasti spatio vincere corporis*, 806-807). Despite the Chorus' belief that Hippolytus is the equal of Hercules or Mars (808-809), human strength is powerless in the face of divine anger, as will be borne out in Hippolytus' confrontation with the sea-monster. Thus, the monster's appearance highlights Phaedra's passion and the universal power of love, but inverts the Chorus' praise of Hippolytus' burly body.

Seneca's monster embodies the violence lurking under the surface of passion, and intertextual echoes both expand and complicate the literary ramifications of his monster. Intertextuality calls attention to the incorporation of previous literary material in a novel context and, as such, can be seen as part of the larger reception of mythological and literary tradition<sup>14</sup>. Intertextuality adds nuance and metaliterary significance to Seneca's description of the sea monster, which blends the portrayal of the sea serpents of Virgil's *Aeneid* with the actions of the bull-in-love of his *Georgics*<sup>15</sup>. The description of the monster is often faulted for being too long or too fantastical for its own good, but the intertextual nods to Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Georgics* point out further implications of the monster as an amalgam of a particular Augustan literary tradition. Verbal similarities between the *Aeneid* and the *Phaedra* hint at its power as well as its size (*Aen.* 2, 206-208; *Pha.* 1036-1037, 1046-1048):

*pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta iubaeque  
sanguineae superant undas; pars cetera pontum  
pone legit sinuatque immensa volumine terga.*

Their chests rise among the eddies and their blood-red crests top the waves; the rest of their body skims the water behind and twists their huge back in coils:

*caerulea taurus colla sublimis gerens  
erexit altam fronte viridanti iubam...  
tum pone tergus ultima in monstrum coit  
facies et ingens belua immensam trahit  
squamosa partem.*

<sup>14</sup> G.B. CONTE, *The Rhetoric of Imitation*, Ithaca 1986; S. HINDS, *Allusion and Intertext*, Cambridge 1998; A. LAIRD, *Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power*, Oxford 1999, and L. EDMUNDS, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Roman Poetry*, Baltimore 2001 have informed my view of intertextuality. Cfr. C. KALLENDORF, *Virgil, Milton, and the Modern Reader*, in MARTINDALE-THOMAS (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 67-79, for more on intertextuality and reception: «The alluding author begins the process by reading an earlier text, then working out an interpretation of that text. As he or she begins writing, the new text unfolds in dialogue with the old one, in such a way that the potential meaning of one or more words resonates against their original usage in another text, where they meant something that is seen as relevant again. The critic, the second reader, works backwards and recreates this process as he or she is able to understand it...» (68).

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. SEGAL, *art. cit.*, pp. 320-321, who concludes: «Whereas Virgil humanizes the bull, Seneca de-personalizes it into a murderous machine. This creature becomes terrifyingly and pitilessly Other». There are additional intertextual resonances with *Geo.* 3 and the first choral ode. See A.J. BOYLE, *Seneca's Phaedra*, Leeds 1987, *ad loc.*



The bull lifting its blue neck high bore a lofty crest from its green forehead... then, behind its back, the hindquarters of the monster are drawn together and the huge scaly beast drags a large tail.

The snakes of the *Aeneid*, sent by a god to destroy Laocoon, and the sea monster, roused by Neptune to kill Hippolytus, reveal the pitiless nature of the gods when angry<sup>16</sup>. As the snakes wind around their defenseless victims, so Hippolytus' reins are drawn taut as he struggles with his bonds<sup>17</sup>. The epic snakes from the sea befit the heroic tone of the Messenger's speech, but, as the narrative continues, it also takes on characteristics of Virgil's didactic poetry. The description of the bull in the *Georgics* is part of a larger discussion of passion and its negative impact on the animal world (*Geo.* 3, 232-234)<sup>18</sup>:

*et temptat sese atque irasci in cornua discit  
arboris obnixus trunco, ventosque lacessit  
ictibus, et sparsa ad pugnam proludit barena.*

He spurs himself and learns to focus his anger in his hornssparring with a tree trunk, he tears the winds with blows, and rehearses the fight on the scattered sands.

*hic se illa moles acuit atque iras parat.  
ut cepit animos seque praetemptans satis  
proluditirae, praepeti cursu evolat... (Pha. 1059-1061)*

Here that monster sharpens and prepares his anger. When it has roused its strength and tested itself enough in its rehearsal of anger, it flies forth headlong..

The *Georgics* passage details how a bull, strongly personified as a frustrated lover, rouses his anger before returning to defeat his rival. Here, the intertext is appropriate because of the passion of Phaedra for Hippolytus, and the bull imagery unites many strands of the mythic history of Minos, Pasiphae, Theseus, Ariadne, and the Mino-

<sup>16</sup> Seneca's *Phaedra* notably does away with the divine "framing" of Aphrodite and Artemis in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Seneca chooses to focus on the damage caused by human agency throughout his play, with this "divine" punishment sanctioned by Theseus alone. One may also compare the frightening vision offered to the reader in *De ira* 2, 35, 5: «Hellish monsters of the poet's brain, fitted out with snakes and breathing fire» (*qualia poetae inferna monstra finxerunt succincta serpentibus et igneo flatu*). G. STALEY, *Like Monsters of the Deep: Seneca's Tragic Monstra*, in S.K. DICKISON-J. HALLETT (eds.), *Rome and Her Monuments*, Wauconda 2000, pp. 325-355 also discusses these allusions.

<sup>17</sup> *Aen.* 2, 215 (*implicat*) and *Pha.* 1085 (*implicuit*); *Aen.* 2, 217 (*ligant*) and *Pha.* 1087 (*ligat*); *Aen.* 2, 220 (*nodos*) and *Pha.* 1087 (*nodos*).

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. *Geo.* 3, 209-211. Note also how Seneca, in his *De ira* 1, 1, 6 comments on the signs of a bull's anger: «The horns of bulls are tossed into the air and the sand is scattered with a blow of its hooves» (*taurorum cornua iactantur in vacuum et barena pulsu pedum spargitur*). Virgil uses this imagery again as a simile to describe Turnus at *Aen.* 12, 101-106. Clearly, Virgil is calling attention to the similarity between Turnus' wrath (esp. considering the lost "heifer", Lavinia) and the anger of the bull. The repetition of this imagery may have led to Seneca's recollection of the lines.

taur<sup>19</sup>. The monster's hybrid figure can be seen as emblematic for Seneca's poetic project in the tragedies as a whole as he combines genres and the works of previous authors in order to distill the most meaning from his language<sup>20</sup>. Here, the intertext works to emphasize the ferocity and background "motivation" of the monster as a divine scourge meant to punish the false "passion" of Hippolytus (i.e. the rape that he has been accused of) or the true passion of Phaedra. The Virgilian intertext also shows Seneca's pessimistic application of Virgil's work in his tragedies, and indicates his larger literary concern, since his tragic view consumes the imagery and language of competing genres<sup>21</sup>.

Of course the primary intertext operative in this speech is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15, 492-546, where Virbius (the resurrected Hippolytus) tells of his death to the nymph Egeria<sup>22</sup>. Often, the Ovidian intertext supports details that the Messenger offers about, for instance, the wave preceding the monster's approach (*mugitus summoque cacumine*, 15, 510 and *immugit... summum cacumen*, 1026-1027), and reinforces the terror of the situation and Hippolytus' heroism<sup>23</sup>. Rainer Jakobi counts over twenty instances of verbal allusion to Ovid in this section and the very ubiquity of intertextual references makes the reader sensitive to the moments when Seneca's account differs from Ovid's<sup>24</sup>. At these moments, we can see how Seneca attempts to elaborate and possibly "correct" the Ovidian material, adding details important to his version of the tale. I will concentrate on the two descriptions of Hippolytus' *sparagmos* in order to show how Seneca cleverly develops and expands language from the *Metamorphoses*.

In Ovid's account, Virbius claims that his very identity was wiped out by his dismemberment: «There were no parts of my body that you would be able to recognize, all was one wound» (*nullasque in corpore partes, / noscere quas posses, unumque erat omnia vulnus*, 15, 528-529). In Seneca's version, Hippolytus' beauty, «perishes in a great wound» (*peritque multo vulnere infelix decor*, 1096), and his body suffers further punishment (1098-1102):

<sup>19</sup> All of which is discussed by M. PASCHALIS, *The Bull and the Horse: Animal Theme and Imagery in Seneca's Phaedra*, in *AJPb* 115 (1994), pp. 105-128. When Phaedra sees Hippolytus' body she asks, «what minotaur with horned head ripped you apart?» (*quis... taurus biformis ore cornigero ferox / divulsit?*, 1170-1173).

<sup>20</sup> This parallels Seneca's discussion of literary *imitatio* and the need for multiple sources in *Ep.* 84, 6-10.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. SCHIESARO, *op. cit.*, p. 225, «From this perspective the vast mass of circumscribed intertextual points of contacts with previous poets, especially Virgil and Ovid, becomes in *Thyestes*, and in Senecan tragedy at large, a source of *horror* and at the same time a reiterated – if imperfect – apology for its legitimization».

<sup>22</sup> In a similar manner, *Heroides* 4 is the primary intertext when Phaedra confronts Hippolytus and attempts to persuade him to acquiesce to the affair. For more on Ovid's version and what it can tell us about Euripides' original plays, see P. PARRONI, *La fine di Ippolito in Euripide, Ovidio e Seneca e il problema dell'ambientazione dei due Ippoliti Euripidei*, in *Myrtia* 21 (2006), pp. 65-73.

<sup>23</sup> The bovine part of the monster also has Ovidian characteristics (*naribus et patulo partem maris evomit ore*, 15, 513 and *naresque hincis bautibus patulae ferment*, 1043).

<sup>24</sup> R. JAKOBI, *Der Einfluß Ovids auf den Tragiker Seneca*, Berlin 1988, pp. 83-88.

*tandemque raptum truncus ambusta sede  
medium per inguen stipite eiecto tenet;  
[paulumue domino currus affixo stetit]  
haesere biuges vulnere — et pariter moram  
dominumque rumpunt.*

At last, as he is dragged along, a tree trunk, charred into a stake, grips him with its stock thrust out, right through his groin. The team stops a moment, with its master impaled; the wound halts the yoked pair. Then they break the delay and with it their master.

The gruesome physicality of this description has been read as the result of Hippolytus' repressed sexuality, and an inversion of his hunting prowess<sup>25</sup>. The violent zeugma of *moram dominumque rumpunt* shows Seneca's interest in pushing the limits of language in order to represent Hippolytus' dismemberment. This passage expands Virbius' account where he tells Egeria, «my muscles are held by a stake, some of my limbs snatched...» (*nervos in stipe teneri, / membra rapi partim...* 15, 525-526). Seneca's Messenger casts light on a detail Ovid's Virbius left fuzzy, as the word *nervos* can signify both «muscle» as well as «penis»<sup>26</sup>. While Virbius shies away from stating what actually occurred, the Messenger points to the painful truth, *medium per inguen stipite eiecto tenet*<sup>27</sup>. Seneca wants to emphasize Hippolytus' suffering and to illustrate the sexualized violence that results from the frustrated passion of Phaedra and her false conviction of Hippolytus. This will be graphically elaborated in Sarah Kane's version.

The literary fabric of the Messenger's speech calls attention to its novelty through rhetorical expansion, intratextual links to previous moments in the play, and through its intertextual relationship with the works of Virgil and Ovid. The Messenger, as an authorial figure, creates a narrative of Hippolytus' death that stresses his innocent suffering and his futile attempts to confront the monster. But the Messenger also stresses his position as a spectator to the action, who wishes to control the subsequent reactions of Theseus and, incidentally, the Chorus<sup>28</sup>. The Messenger's reaction can be seen as the ideal audience reaction to the violence, which is subsequently questioned and, possibly, misunderstood by Theseus. The Messenger's and Theseus' reactions to Hippolytus' violent destruction reveal their different perception of the tragic nature of his death.

Theseus' reaction to the Messenger's speech is paralleled in other plays of Seneca in which violence has been observed by characters in the play. In the *Troades*, the Messenger reports (in a very metatheatrical manner) the varying reactions to the

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. BOYLE, *op. cit.*, p. 23: «Diana's kingdom of field, rock, bramble, bush and tree tears his flesh and his body apart in a grotesque and unambiguous orgy of sexual violence».

<sup>26</sup> OLD 1b. Cfr. J.N. ADAMS, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, London 1982, p. 38, and D. KENNEDY, *The Arts of Love*, Cambridge 1993, p. 59, who interprets OV. *Am.* 1, 17-18 in a similar manner.

<sup>27</sup> Note the close detail and repetition of forms of *stipes*, and *teneo*.

<sup>28</sup> Although not nearly as much as Euripides' Messenger who stresses his eye-witness account (cfr. *Hipp.* 1173, 1187, *passim*). SEGAL, *art. cit.*, pp. 314-315 notes the difference. While Euripides stresses the visual, Seneca stresses the textual.

deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax, one of which mimics Aristotle's idea that tragedy will evoke pity and fear («The minds of all tremble, wonder, and pity» *omnium mentes tremunt, / mirantur ac miserantur*, 1148)<sup>29</sup>. The Messenger of Seneca's *Thyestes* begins to relish his description of Atreus' violent actions, indicating the triumph of evil over all the characters of that play, even ancillary ones<sup>30</sup>. Seneca's epistles consider the crowd's varying reactions to violence and death in the arena, and exploit violence in order to make the reader consider more consciously his own lifestyle or mortality<sup>31</sup>. Catherine Edwards finds that depictions of suffering in Seneca's prose works consistently empathize with the tortured victim and further,

In Seneca's writings the violent and the spectacular so characteristic of the Rome he lived in, the admiration for feats of heroism characteristic of Roman tradition generally, are translated into the internal, mental world of writer and reader. Roman culture is transcribed, internalized, for Stoic purposes<sup>32</sup>.

So what is Theseus' reaction to the verbal account of the Messenger? He states (1114-1117),

*O nimium potens  
quanto parentes sanguinis vinco tenes  
natura! quam te colimus inviti quoque!  
occidere volui noxium, amissum fleo.*

O Nature, all too powerful: how strong is the blood-tie of parents! How we, even unwillingly, give you loyalty! For his guilt I wanted to kill him, but I weep that he is lost.

<sup>29</sup> Seneca stresses the metatheatrical nature of these sacrifices (*Tr.* 1125: *theatri more*; *Tr.* 1087 *ferus spectator*). Cfr. BOYLE, *Tragic Seneca: An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*, London 1997, pp. 119-121 for more on the metatheatrical implications of this scene.

<sup>30</sup> R.J. TARRANT, *Seneca's Thyestes*, Atlanta 1985, ad 623: «By the latter part of the scene he [the Messenger] has absorbed Atreus' flair for the ironic retort, and in his final lines he sounds as jubilantly confident as Atreus himself that the crime can no longer be suppressed».

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. *Ep.* 7, where Seneca muses on the brutalizing results of watching gladiatorial contests and rubbing elbows with the common rabble. The violence seen in the arena is used for didactic effect in Seneca's letter as it is meant to do in the *Phaedra*, although Theseus may miss the point. In a slightly different context, *Ep.* 95, 33 attests to death in the arena as a spectator-sport, «Men seek pleasure everywhere... Man, a sacred thing in the eyes of man, is now killed for fun, as a lark; and he for whom it used to be a sin to learn to inflict and accept wounds, now is led out exposed and unarmed; and a man's death is a satisfying sight». *Ep.* 14, 4 includes a description of spectacular punishments, including dismemberment by chariot: «For just as the torturer achieves more, the more instruments he displays – indeed the spectacle overcomes those who would have patiently endured the suffering – similarly among the forces which coerce and dominate our minds, the most effective are those which can put on a show».

<sup>32</sup> C. EDWARDS, *The Suffering Body*, in J.I. PORTER (ed.), *Constructions of the Classical Body*, Ann Arbor 1999, pp. 252-268. The Romanized violence of Seneca's prose works finds its Hellenized counterpart in his mythical tragedies. While the prose works should not be looked at as the key to understanding Seneca's dramatic aims, there are points of convergence.

*Natura*, which earlier in the play claimed all for its own (*vindicat omnes / natura sibi*, 352-353), reveals its power here in another manifestation, that of the bond between father and son<sup>33</sup>. It would appear Theseus has attained some wisdom from his son's death, pulling back and offering an almost Stoic view of the scene (the idea of following *natura* is, after all, a Stoic commonplace). Yet the Messenger wants Theseus to clarify his emotions, claiming that it is a dishonest man who weeps over a desired outcome. Theseus rationalizes that he cries because he was the instrument of Hippolytus' death, «I weep for destroying him, not for losing him» (*quod interemi, non quod amisi, fleo*, 1122). It would appear that the Messenger's speech has not convinced Theseus of Hippolytus' innocence and undeserved suffering, and Theseus denies the emotional truth of his tears. The Messenger tries to control the interpretation of his tale through his questions, but Theseus overrules the pathos he feels. He chooses not to forgive but to foster the anger and hatred (*odia*, 1121) that are central to Theseus' characterization<sup>34</sup>.

If a description of violence is not enough to move Theseus to self-reflection, the remnants of Hippolytus' body force Theseus to come to grips with his past behavior. The conclusion of the play affirms the fragility of Theseus' proud declarations of his kingly power and knowledge. Phaedra's revelation of guilt and her suicide in the final Act cause Theseus to rethink his role in Hippolytus' death. Throughout the tragedy, the characters have emphasized Hippolytus' beauty and implied that such attractiveness inevitably leads to trouble<sup>35</sup>. The destruction of his body parallels the destruction of his identity, an idea that Seneca develops when Hippolytus' remains are presented to Theseus. At this point Theseus realizes his crime: «Is this Hippolytus? I recognize my crime: I killed you» (*Hippolytus hic est? crimen agnosco meum: / ego te peremi*, 1249-1250), and attempts to reassemble his son's body, «I recognize the signs of the left side» (*laevi lateris agnosco notas*, 1260). However, Theseus doubts his assembly of the deformed remains (1265-1268):

*Hoc quid est forma carens  
et turpe, multo vulnere abruptum undique?  
quae pars tui sit dubito; sed pars est tui:  
hic, hic repone, non suo, at vacuo loco*<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> BOYLE, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-24 discusses the ubiquity of *natura* in this play and finds *natura* to be operative in the characterization of Hippolytus («let it be reason, let it be nature, let it be dire fury: it is pleasing to hate [women]»). *Sit ratio, sit natura, sit durus furor: odisse placuit*, 567-568), Phaedra, and Theseus. P.J. DAVIS, *Vindicat omnes natura sibi: A Reading of Seneca's Phaedra*, in BOYLE, (ed.), *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, Berwick 1983, pp. 114-127 finds: «The concept of a natural covenant adhered to or defied by human beings is a useful means of ordering our understanding of the play» (126), before showing how each character defies that covenant.

<sup>34</sup> Theseus himself notes that anger motivated his curse, calling Poseidon a «too willing guarantor of my anger» (*irae facilis assensor meae*, 1207).

<sup>35</sup> The second choral ode stresses this (736-823). Note the Messenger's rhetorical question, *hocine est formae decus?*, 1110; Phaedra's address, *quo tuus fugit decor*, 1173; and Theseus' response to Hippolytus' remains, *huc cecidit decor?*, 1270. The beauty of Virbius' son is stressed in VERG. *Aen.* 7, 761-782.

<sup>36</sup> COFFEY-MAYER, *op. cit.*, *ad loc* comment on 1267 «this is arguably the worst line in Senecan drama». While it is certainly darkly comedic, the development of Ovid's language grants it literary interest.



What is this piece hideously lacking form, cut up on every side with much damage? I don't know what part of you this is; but it is part: here, rest here, not in its correct place but an empty one.

This Senecan passage expands the words of Ovid's Virbius (*nullasque in corpore partes, / noscere quas posses, unumque erat omnia vulnus*, *Met.* 15, 528-529) and horrifically shows the extent of the damage. The language of anagnorisis (note the repetition of forms of *(ag)nosco*) aptly concludes the tragedy, but the reader is left to question the accuracy of Theseus' recognitions<sup>37</sup>. Does he truly understand his role in Hippolytus' death, or is his knowledge as fragmentary as the body in front of him? Theseus' attempts to re-assemble Hippolytus' body symbolize his attempts to make sense of the tragedy in which he has found himself performing. He acts as a stand-in for a reader, trying to understand the signs (*notas*) before him and make sense of the body before him<sup>38</sup>. He tries to fashion Hippolytus' body (*corpusque fingit*, 1265) as it was when alive, but finds himself, ultimately, unable to fill in the missing pieces, and resigned to the long period of mourning to come<sup>39</sup>. His shameful treatment of Phaedra's body and failure to commit suicide himself (after his impassioned claim to «learn from a stepmother what a parent ought to do when he loses his son, hide yourself in Hades» *quid facere rapto debeas gnato parens, / disce a noverca: condere Acherontis plagis*, 1199-1200) have been rightly criticized, and lead to misgivings about just how much he has learned<sup>40</sup>. As Egeria would not be able to recognize Virbius, so Theseus cannot recognize the various pieces of his son, but, additionally, he does not fully recognize his role in Hippolytus' death.

The differing subjective views of Hippolytus' dismemberment show Seneca's concern with violence on the body and the individual reactions to such a spectacle. Seneca's tragedies allow for a multiplicity of conflicting views on a single event, one reason why he favored this genre<sup>41</sup>. As Jean-Pierre Vernant states,

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. *Thy.* 1005-1006, *Med.* 394, 1021, *Ep.* 31, 1 for additional moments in which *agnosco* acts as a signpost for character recognition. S. BARTSCH, *The Mirror of the Self*, Chicago 2006, pp. 260-262 discusses the literary possibilities of *agnoscere* in Roman literature.

<sup>38</sup> See OLD *s.v.* *nota* 6. Hippolytus «marked a long trail with a bloody sign» (*longum cruenta tramite singat nota*, 1107) which his dogs tracked. MOST, *art. cit.*, p. 408: «What happens to the bodies of the characters in Seneca's and Lucan's fictions corresponds to what happens to the bodies of these fictions as well... these fictions may well be filled with scattered limbs, and their style and architecture may well tend to sacrifice large-scale structure for moment effects; but on a more profound level there is an astonishingly rigorous coherence between precisely these phenomena of dissolution and dismemberment».

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. SEGAL, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-218 for the literary significance of *fingit* in this passage. See OLD *s.v.* *fingo* 6a. Theseus commands the parts assembled to be burned but recognizes that more of Hippolytus' body remains to be discovered (1273-1279). At *Aen.* 8, 634 *corpora fingere* refers to the she-wolf 'forming' Romulus and Remus on the shield of Aeneas. Whereas Virgil indicates the formation of Rome's founding father, in Seneca's tragic world the words point out the pathetic annihilation of the royal family.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. BOYLE, *op. cit.*, p. 26: «[Theseus] who in the final act comes to see the vanity of his previous belief in his own power and judgment, the absurdity of his earlier vision of the world, and comes to appreciate part at least – though by no means the most signal part (Theseus' final judgment of Phaedra at 1279f. shows how little in the end he has understood) – of his role in Hippolytus' death».

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. M. PUTNAM, *Virgil's Aeneid: Interpretation and Influence*, Chapel Hill 1995, p. 279: «Only through myth's combination of temporal remoteness with universal applicability and through the drama's con-

The tragic message... is precisely that there are zones of opacity and incommunicability in the words that men exchange. Even as he sees the protagonists clinging exclusively to one meaning and, thus blinded, tearing themselves apart or destroying themselves, the spectator must understand that there are really two or more possible meanings<sup>42</sup>.

The Messenger's epic narrative figures the death of Hippolytus as a pivotal moment that blends various motifs and literary texts in order to prove that it is an inevitable result of such passionate forces at work. Phaedra understands her guilty role in Hippolytus' death and kills herself either to follow him in the underworld or to atone for her false charge<sup>43</sup>. The Chorus interprets it as an *exemplum* of the supremacy of Fortune, and the tendency for awful things to happen to those in positions of power<sup>44</sup>. Theseus' observations on how his only son has become a mess of scraps shows a distinct lack of understanding, pointing, in part, to the tragedy of the play, namely, that such misunderstanding often persists, despite the suffering. This is not the Aeschylean «learning through suffering» (*Ag.* 177), but an even darker nod to self-blindness and lack of introspection.

From the first century to the seventeenth century, from Nero to Louis XIV, from Seneca to Racine, one can draw, surprisingly, a rather straight line as Racine not only depicts some of the myths familiar from the ancient world, but also employs a neo-Classical style similar to the rhetoric of Senecan drama<sup>45</sup>. Racine's tragic sensibility was informed by his reading of the Classics, both Greek and Roman, and his plays show a mind grappling with his classical forbearers<sup>46</sup>. My study of the reception of

frontational mien, where provocations, hesitations, and responses illustrate the ethical dilemma of the private individual caught up in life's emotional thickets, could he compose an imaginative foil to philosophy's perfecting road of conversion and conviction».

<sup>42</sup> J.-P. VERNANT-P. VIDAL-NAQUET, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, tr. Janet Lloyd, New York 1988, p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> «Die for your husband, if you are chaste; for your lover, if unchaste» (*Morere, si casta es, viro; / si incesta, amori*, 1184-1185).

<sup>44</sup> The Chorus views Hippolytus' annihilation as the workings of *Fortuna* (1125), and chance (*casus*, 1124), and as proof that great suffering tends to happen to those in positions of power.

<sup>45</sup> See G. STEINER, *The Death of Tragedy*, New York 1961, pp. 75-105 for a discussion of Racine's neo-Classical poetics, which focuses on its rhetoric, «the violence is all in the poetry» (91) and discipline, «the discipline imposed on the movement of the play by the solemnity of discourse and the containment of outward action allows the poet to exhibit at the same time the literal and figurative aspects of his material» (90). R. BARTHES, *On Racine*, Trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley 1964, p. 116 gives a similar assessment, «In *Phèdre* it is language's very being that is put on the stage: the profoundest of Racine's tragedies is also the most formal; for the tragic stake here is less the meaning of language than its manifestation, less Phaedra's love than her avowal» (p. 115).

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. T. KAMINSKI, *Neoclassicism*, in C. KALLENDORF (ed.), *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, Oxford 2007, pp. 57-71 discusses the dramatic «rules» derived from Aristotle and Horace how, «the rules appear to have been a spur to [Racine's] genius, for they allowed him to explore directly and intensely the passions of his characters». P. FORD, *France*, in KALLENDORF (ed.), *op. cit.* (2007), pp. 156-168 comments, «his mastery of Greek as well as Latin allowed him to develop a far greater feeling for the Greek theater, and in particular Euripides, than many of his contemporaries, while his assimilation of Aristotle's *Poetics* leads to some of the most moving works to be produced in the seventeenth century».

Seneca's text by Racine highlights the way Racine may have understood or "read" Seneca's *Phaedra*. In the words of Hans Georg Gadamer, «When [the text] does begin to speak, however, it does not simply speak its word, always the same, in lifeless rigidity, but gives ever new answers to the person who questions it and poses ever new questions to him who answers it»<sup>47</sup>. What questions did Racine ask Seneca's text, and what were the answers he derived from his reading? Meaning is constituted at the point of reception, whether that is Racine's reception of Seneca's text, my reading of the relationship between the two, or your reading of this paper<sup>48</sup>. A reading concerned with the reception of the texts establishes a dialogue between them, allowing us to see how Racine interprets Seneca's *Phaedra* but also how Racine's tragedy can influence our interpretation of Seneca's<sup>49</sup>. As Seneca had looked back to Ovid and Virgil for the details of Hippolytus' death tableaux, so Racine's monster and his version of the Messenger speech recall Seneca's tragic world but with the contemporary political, literary, and social mores of his time.

Racine's *Phèdre*, produced in 1677, takes up the challenge of updating Seneca's play and his version of Hippolytus' death reveals subtle transformations that underline his anxiety about obsessive violence in the royal family and the political strife that can result from it<sup>50</sup>. Hippolyte's body represents the future of the monarchy and, after his ruination, Theseus must come to terms with the political ramifications of his curse.

In Racine's play, Hippolyte is a young prince, who, until now, has been more concerned with hunting and outdoor activities than life at court. Recently, he has become enchanted with Aricia, the sole survivor of the house of Erechtheus and the true heir to the throne of Athens (in this play Theseus is a usurper or at least a rival claimant to the throne)<sup>51</sup>. Racine has transformed Hippolyte into a shy young lover and also a political player, who could unite two strands of the royal line through a marriage with Aricia<sup>52</sup>. He describes how his passion for Aricia has changed him, a passage that foreshadows his demise (II.ii. 549-552):

Mon arc, mes javelots, mon char, tout m'importune;  
Je ne me souviens plus des leçons de Neptune;  
Mes seuls gémissements font retentir les bois,  
Et mes coursiers oisifs ont oublié ma voix.

<sup>47</sup> H.G. GADAMER, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1976, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> C. MARTINDALE, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*, Cambridge 1993, p. 3: «Meaning is always realized at the point of reception». This maxim, and the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Jauss have inspired recent studies of Classical reception, resulting, in part, in the volume of MARTINDALE-THOMAS, *op. cit.*, Oxford 2006.

<sup>49</sup> MARTINDALE, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-74 displays this in his readings of Marlowe, Titian and Ovid, and Lucan and Virgil.

<sup>50</sup> R.C. KNIGHT, *Hippolyte and Hippolytos*, in *Modern Language Review* 39 (1944), pp. 225-235 points out Racine's innovative political visualization of Hippolyte, «I only wish to show that Hippolyte's views on politics are French» (234 n. 1).

<sup>51</sup> While this is an unattested myth, the name Aricia is found in Virgil's account of Virbius (*Aen.* 7, 762). Racine is clearly flaunting his learning.

<sup>52</sup> This is a major change in Hippolytus' character and shows Racine's attempt to modernize certain facets of character to better resemble the court lifestyle of the seventeenth century.

My bow, my spears, my chariot, they beckon to me, I ignore them. The breaking and taming of wild horses, everything the god of the sea taught me, it is beyond me – I have forgotten it. My own horses run wild – They have forgotten my voice<sup>53</sup>.

His love for Aricia distracts him from his previous pursuits, and this passage hints at the violence he will endure later on in the play when his horses do not obey his voice<sup>54</sup>. An announcement that Theseus is dead leads to Phaedra's avowal of her passion for Hippolyte, again tinged with political significance as Hippolyte is informed that the people have awarded the crown to Phaedra's son. Hippolyte shirks from her advances and Theseus (of course) is not dead. Upon his return, Phaedra announces that Hippolyte attempted to rape her. Hippolyte tries to defend himself (in an Euripidean debate scene), and, finally, Theseus curses Hippolyte. After Theseus tells Phaedra of Hippolyte's love for Aricia, Phaedra's jealousy explodes in a fierce speech (IV.vi. 1268-1272):

Chaque mot sur mon front fait dresser mes cheveux  
Mes crimes désormais ont comblé la mesure.  
Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture.  
Mes homicides mains, promptes à me venger,  
Dans le sang innocent brûlent de se plonger.

Everything I say makes my hair stand up. My life is so bloated with my crimes there's no room for another. I stink of incest and deceit. And worse – My own hands are twitching to squeeze the life out of that woman, to empty that innocent blood out of her carcass and smash her to nothing.

This is rich poetry and shows Racine's own development and "capping" of the psychological distress that Seneca's Phaedra undergoes in the course of his play. Not only do passion, guilt, and shame torment her, but also hatred and jealousy. Racine's Theseus is a more sympathetic figure as he tries to find out the truth behind Phèdre's distress and Hippolyte's story, and it is at this moment that the Messenger, Thérémène, enters to report the result of the curse.

The speech of Thérémène, describing Hippolyte's death, unites imagery from earlier in the play while highlighting the destruction of the royal line embodied in Hippolyte. Previous to this scene, Hippolyte and Aricia have decided to leave Troezen together and to marry in a small temple near the royal tombs outside of the city, and it is precisely here that the horses drag what's left of his body after his confrontation with the monster. As Levitan observes, «Racine's Hippolyte is taken out of the condition of Senecan isolation and given a context through the introduction of a society and a landscape that carries the marks of a civilized community»<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> I use 'Ted Hughes' translation throughout to illustrate another version of reception – literary translation.

<sup>54</sup> V.vi. 1536: Ils ne connaissent plus ni le frein ni la voix.

<sup>55</sup> W. LEVITAN, *Seneca in Racine*, in *YFS* 76 (1989), p. 207.

The monster is modeled on Seneca's, «an uncontrollable bull, a vehement dragon» (*indomptable taureau, dragon impétueux*, V.vi. 1519), and the scene once again drips with horror, «The sky looks upon the savage monster with fear» (*le ciel avec horreur voit ce monstre sauvage*, V.vi. 1522)<sup>56</sup>. Thérémène reports that Hippolyte's final words focus on Aricia and the hope that she will succeed to the throne<sup>57</sup>. Thérémène assesses the funereal scene, emphasizing Hippolyte's heroism and his familial tie to Theseus (V.vi. 1567-1570):

A ce mot ce héros expiré  
N'a laissé dans mes bras qu'un corps défiguré  
Triste objet, où des Dieux triomphe la colère,  
Et que méconnaîtrait l'œil même de son père.

With this word the hero died, and I was left embracing the latest prize of the triumphant gods – an object hardly recognizable as a man. I think his own father would not know him<sup>58</sup>.

The dramatic irony of the description is that Theseus clearly did not know his son well enough when alive, believing he could be guilty of rape<sup>59</sup>. As Seneca's Theseus struggled to identify the remains of Hippolytus, so Racine focuses on the damage done to Hippolyte's body and the incomprehension surrounding his body. Thérémène emphasizes Hippolyte's formlessness as Aricia comes to find him and is unable to recognize her lover (V.vi. 1578-1582):

Elle voit (quel objet pour les yeux d'une amante!)  
Hippolyte étendu, sans forme et sans couleur.  
Elle veut quelque temps douter de son malheur;  
Et ne connaissant plus ce héros qu'elle adore,  
Elle voit Hippolyte, et le demande encore.

<sup>56</sup> R.W. TOBIN, *Racine and Seneca*, Chapel Hill 1971, pp. 137-139 considers the many close parallels between Seneca's and Racine's accounts. The monster once again resonates with various characters: «Hippolyte wishes to conquer monsters in imitation of his father; Phèdre's family has been cursed with a monstrous love (and she tells Œnone that she considers the unyielding Hippolyte a «monstre»); finally Phèdre is conscious that she is a «monster», an outcast from the human race because of her criminal love» (139).

<sup>57</sup> Seneca's Hippolytus challenges the monster with his final words in that play.

<sup>58</sup> V.vi. 1567-1570. I have modified Hughes' translation slightly, bringing out the word *héros* (which Hughes elides). Racine's Hippolyte is more successful in his *aristeia* than Seneca's, delivering a blow to the monster and proving himself as a hero in the mold of his father (cfr. III. 935-952). LEVITAN, *op. cit.* p. 210 sees this moment as a recognition of the Senecan influence on this passage: «In the end, and even on pain of mis-recognition, it is of a textual tradition not of a unified and continuous nature, but of another nature – indeed, of an *other* or Senecan nature – that Racine's own text in the horrified voice of Thérémène speaks».

<sup>59</sup> A point that Aricia makes to Theseus at V.iii. 1427-1438. Her question, «Avez-vous de son cœur si peu de connaissance?» (V.iii. 1429) emphasizes his ignorance.



Then she saw what we stood around and looked down at. The drained rag of Hippolyte's body. For a moment she could not recognize that this was all that remained of her happiness. Her eyes refused to understand it. She stared at the corpse and asked for Hippolyte.

Hippolyte's body is the locus for each character's self-definition at the play's conclusion, and each struggles to comprehend his or her loss. His destruction is an apt metaphor for the state of the royal house, which has now lost its prince. He has been dragged to the royal tombs, near the temple where he was to marry Aricia, and Racine imbues the locale with significance indicating the premature demolition of the family line. Theseus realizes that he doesn't want to know the truth, telling Phèdre (V.vii. 1600-4):

Je le crois criminel, puisque vous l'accusez.  
Son trépas à mes pleurs offre assez de matières,  
Sans que j'aie chercher d'odieuses lumières,  
Qui ne pouvant le rendre à ma juste douleur,  
Peut-être ne feraient qu'accroître mon malheur.

If you accuse him, let me live with that. I will think him a criminal and a traitor. His death alone is suffering enough without me searching for scraps and broken bits of information that could drive me mad but never bring him back<sup>60</sup>.

These lines wonderfully equate the truth of the situation to the shattered remains of Hippolyte, and show Theseus' knowledge that Hippolyte cannot return. But Phèdre admits her guilt, telling Theseus the truth of what happened, before killing herself. Theseus repents for his error, and, in the final words of the play recognizes Aricia as his adopted daughter. For Racine, tragedy is ultimately didactic and he utilizes the swirling violence around Hippolyte to show Theseus the grisly results of his anger, and to allow him to acknowledge his guilt and attempt to make amends for his actions.

Theseus' true knowledge of the situation and his role in the death of his son, however, is still questionable. While the political implications of Hippolyte's obliteration are rectified in the adoption of Aricia, Theseus' passionate anger and Phèdre's jealousy and hatred [transferred to Œnone (V.vii. 1629-32)] continue to haunt the play's finale. As John Campbell writes, «It is paradoxical that, in what seems a *locus classicus* of recognition following error and reversal (V.vii. 1647), the degree of self-recognition should be so low, and passions so high»<sup>61</sup>. Racine highlights the ambiguity present at the conclusion of Seneca's play, revealing himself a careful reader of the emotional turmoil and troubling ignorance still present in Seneca's Theseus. Racine

<sup>60</sup> This is a rather free translation of the French but shows that Hughes has connected the idea of truth with the body of Hippolyte as his punishment embodies Theseus' misinformed and misdirected curse.

<sup>61</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *Questioning Racinean Tragedy*, Chapel Hill 2005, p. 243.

adapts language, themes, and aspects of the myth to suit his own purpose, but his Theseus, while a more sympathetic figure than Seneca's, continues to grope blindly for the meaning of his suffering, even as Racine strongly links his own meaning to that of Seneca.

The British playwright Sarah Kane was asked by the Gate Theatre in 1996 to update a classic, and chose Seneca's *Phaedra*, possibly influenced by Caryl Churchill's recent translation and production of Seneca's *Thyestes* in 1994. In *Phaedra's Love*, Sarah Kane deconstructs formal aspects of the play, including the Messenger speech, and demythologizes the characters, providing a startling interpretation of Seneca's play. Kane's gruesome rendition of the myth stages the raw emotions and vicious actions of the characters without the sublime poetry of Seneca and Racine. Hippolytus resembles a spoiled Prince Harry, unconcerned with the world around him with the exception of pornography, hamburgers, masturbation, and violent television programs<sup>62</sup>. He has, literally, walled himself away from others, in an exaggerated expression of self-reliance and self-love, waiting for something meaningful to happen but, until then, «Fill it up with tat. Bric-a-brac, bits and bobs, getting by»<sup>63</sup>. Kane has brought the less savory aspects of Seneca's Hippolytus to the fore, and she stresses his royalty in a Racinian manner. Phaedra's passion consumes her, and she defines herself through her relationship with Hippolytus, as her daughter Strophe reports, «You don't talk about anything else any more. You don't work. He's all you care about, but you don't see what he is»<sup>64</sup>. When her attempted seduction of Hippolytus fails, Phaedra kills herself, leaving a note stating that Hippolytus raped her. Instead of fighting the charges, Hippolytus accepts it stating, «This is her present to me... Not many people get a chance like this. This isn't tat. This isn't bric-a-brac» and is jailed<sup>65</sup>. On his way to court, an angry mob (including Theseus) accosts Hippolytus and rips him apart. The stage directions focus on his bloody undoing:

<sup>62</sup> In an interview Kane stated, «I was struck that it is about a sexually corrupt royal family, which makes it totally contemporary» (quoted in S. BRUSBERG-KIERMEIER, *Re-writing Seneca: Sarah Kane's Phaedra's Love*, in B. REITZ-A. VON ROTHKIRCH (eds.), *Crossing Borders: Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium*, Trier 2001, pp. 165-172).

<sup>63</sup> S. KANE, *Complete Plays*, London 2001, p. 80. We learn that this is a response to his own failed love with a woman, Lena, in itself a Racinian touch. Hippolytus shuts himself off from the world emotionally as well as physically, «No one burns me, no one fucking touches me. So don't try» (83). For a more sympathetic view of Hippolytus' character, cfr. K. URBAN, *Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the 'Nineties*, in *NTQ* 20 (2004), pp. 354-372: «Hippolytus's cruelty, however, comes not out of malice, but from a desire for complete honesty. His belief in a metaphysics of absolute truth does not allow him to function in the material world; his crippling depression renders everyone into a liar» (267).

<sup>64</sup> KANE, *op. cit.*, p. 72. Strophe and Phaedra attempt to get at the pith and marrow of Phaedra's feelings for Hippolytus with little success. «There's a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be» (71). For more on Phaedra's passion in this play, see D. SUSANETTI, *La purezza dell'impuro. In margine a Sarah Kane, L'amore di Fedra*, in *Dioniso* 5 (2006), pp. 140-153.

<sup>65</sup> KANE, *op. cit.*, p. 90. It is his birthday, hence the present. This restates through «bric-a-brac» his world view from above, p. 80, and is important for accentuating Hippolytus' desire for some «real» experience.

**Man 1** pulls down **Hippolytus'** trousers.  
**Woman 2** cuts off his genitals.  
 They are thrown onto the barbecue.  
 The children cheer.  
 A child takes them off the barbecue and throws them at  
 Another child, who screams and runs away.  
 Much laughter.  
 Someone retrieves them and they are thrown to a dog.  
**Theseus** takes the knife.  
 He cuts **Hippolytus** from groin to chest.  
**Hippolytus'** bowels are torn out and thrown onto the barbecue.  
 He is kicked and stoned and spat on.

When Kane first produced this play, she planted actors in the audience and, when this scene began, they leapt from their seats and took part in Hippolytus' destruction<sup>66</sup>. Kane's production demonstrates that violence, like a disease, spreads from the action on-stage to the spectators<sup>67</sup>. The castration of Hippolytus follows Seneca's sexualized punishment, but Kane puts the knife in Theseus' hand to disembowel his son, diminishing any ambiguity that may have been present in Seneca<sup>68</sup>. For her, no words can describe the power of violence and the reaction of the crowd to violence is primarily in action (note how there is no dialogue during this dismemberment – a previous attempt to intercede by Strophe, Phaedra's daughter, meets with her rape and subsequent murder at the hands of her father, Theseus). Kane has shown how language is fallible in the broken communication of characters, leading to its apogee in this scene where true dialogue breaks down into bloodshed<sup>69</sup>. Kane sets such action within the royal family to critique the monarchy, and she portrays them as out-of-touch and uninterested in the cares and concerns of the people. One wonders, after reading Kane's scathing play, whether Seneca may have had something similar in mind in penning his *Phaedra* as the emperors and empresses under whom he wrote all (Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Messalina, Agrippina) could be seen in figures such as Theseus or Phaedra.

But it is the differing perspectives on violence that a reading informed by the tenets of Reception theory can help to clarify. Each of these authors is representative

<sup>66</sup> SAUNDERS, *Love me or Kill me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Manchester 2006, pp. 80-81 reports this production detail.

<sup>67</sup> A. ARTAUD, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. Victor Corti, London 1970 comments on this aspect of the theater of cruelty claiming an essential theater is like the plague, «not because it is contagious, but because like the plague, [the essential theater] is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized» (30).

<sup>68</sup> While it is Theseus' curse that causes the monster from the deep, that same monster possesses characteristics of each of the major characters and may lead one to believe that *natura* is really to blame. In Kane's version, Theseus bluntly says, «Hippolytus. Son. I never liked you» (102).

<sup>69</sup> Kane's dramatic language, heavily stichomythic and riddled with *sententiae*, also may derive from her reading of Seneca. Seneca's style certainly made an impact on C. CHURCHILL, *Plays: Three*, London 1998, p. 296: «I began to feel he was far blunter, faster and subtler than I'd thought».

of his or her era. Seneca's style is paradigmatic of the Neronian Renaissance, and his influence on later Latin rhetoric and literature is not to be underestimated. Racine's tragic artistry – the poetry of his Alexandrines, the tight structure of his plots, and his view of the passions – is often rivaled but rarely surpassed<sup>70</sup>. Kane's work, renowned for its violence and bleak outlook, has been grouped with writers such as Irvine Welsh and Mark Ravenhill as part of «a new style of radical political theatre»<sup>71</sup>. As Bexley clarifies, «Analyzed in tandem, Seneca's and Kane's plays demonstrate that the staging of graphic material is not just a matter of taste. It also addresses a fundamental issue: how language makes meaning out of real phenomena»<sup>72</sup>. For Kane, violence trickles down from those in power to the people at large and the emotional background, divested of the poetic touch of Seneca or Racine, becomes debased and meaningless. Kane herself, however, claims that the experience of such art may inspire change in the observer.

The choice is either to represent (despair and brutality), or not to represent it. I've chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering, whereas speculation leaves us untouched<sup>73</sup>.

Kane draws the contrast between «speculation» and «experience», a distinction staged in Seneca's *Phaedra* as Theseus contends first with the words of the Messenger and then the reality of Hippolytus' fragmented body. For both authors, the graphic violence is necessary to truly understand the fundamental issues of the tragedy. For a reader of Seneca's play, the different outlooks on violence act as a controlled sample of possible perspectives and, while Seneca may criticize certain views, the multiple perspectives also show just how difficult it can be to make the right choice or pick the correct path in life. Seneca points out the mistaken understanding underlying this act of violence, and his poetry amplifies the various emotional responses<sup>74</sup>. At the close of Seneca's play, Theseus weeps over the body of Hippolytus, while the audience realizes how intertexts to the Augustan poets further enhance not only the

<sup>70</sup> About the *Phèdre*, H. PEYRE, *The Tragedy of Passion: Racine's Phèdre*, in J.L. SANDERSON-I. GOPNIK (eds.) *Phaedra and Hippolytus: Myth and Dramatic Form*, Boston 1966, pp. 308-328 remarks, «It would be no exaggeration to say that the magnificent love declarations in the play and its burning picture of jealousy have done much to frame the French conception of love and even the behavior of French men and women when possessed by the sacred malady» (310).

<sup>71</sup> C. INNES, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2002, p. 529.

<sup>72</sup> E. BEXLEY, *Show or Tell? Seneca's and Sarah Kane's Phaedra Plays*, in *TiC* 3 (2011), pp. 365-393, cit. p. 391.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in H. STEPHENSON-N. LANGRIDGE, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, London 1997, p. 133.

<sup>74</sup> Seneca endorses such a view in *Ep.* 108, 10: *Nam, ut dicebat Cleanthes, 'quemadmodum spiritus noster clariorem sonum reddit, cum illum tuba per longi canalis angustias tractum patientiore novissime exitu effudit, sic sensus nostros clariores carminis arcta necessitas efficit'* («For', as Cleanthes was accustomed to say, 'as our breath makes a louder sound when it passes through the long and narrow opening of the trumpet and leaves by a hole which widens at the end, even so the confining rules of poetry clarify our meaning»).

emotional excesses behind Hippolytus' death, but also the metapoetics at play. In Racine's *Phèdre*, Theseus adopts Aricia into the royal family, keeping the monarchy intact, and attempts to atone for his crime. His neoclassical take on Hippolytus' death emphasizes the connections between knowledge, evidence, and proper literary decorum. At the close of Kane's play, the entire royal family lies dead (Theseus cuts his own throat onstage when he realizes he has raped and killed Strophe), the stage overflows with blood and guts, Hippolytus mutters, «if only there could have been more moments like this», and a vulture descends to eat his body<sup>75</sup>. Her "shock and awe" perspective on violence does not lead to introspection in any of the dramatic characters (after all, the mob takes the place of the sea-monster), but Kane hopes the audience leaving the theater will reflect on the brutality which pervades modern life, and attempt to change it<sup>76</sup>. No longer is violence mediated and interpreted by a Messenger, but the audience is bifurcated into murderous actors who take part in the violence, and those left behind itself who must decide for themselves what to make of the devastation onstage. A reading of these plays collectively reveals how they reflect and refract issues of royalty, representation, and violence. Each author contextualizes Hippolytus' death within the play as the fitting finale for their personal conception of tragedy, and the language of the play helps to delineate what this violent act means for their philosophical and ethical concerns.

#### ABSTRACT

Quando i drammaturghi descrivono la morte di Ippolito, le loro versioni sono emblematiche dei motivi letterari, politici e filosofici che ogni tragedia mette in scena. Il contributo esamina le versioni di Seneca, Racine e Sarah Kane al fine di evidenziare come questi autori utilizzino tale scena concettualizzando il tema della violenza nelle loro rispettive tragedie.

When playwrights describe the death of Hippolytus, their versions are emblematic of the literary, political, and philosophical issues that each play dramatizes. This paper examines the versions by Seneca, Racine, and Sarah Kane to indicate how these authors utilize this scene in order to conceptualize the purpose of violence in their respective tragedies.

KEYWORDS: Hippolytus; Seneca; Racine; Kane; violence.

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<sup>75</sup> KANE, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103. The suicide of Theseus is a drastic alteration from Seneca and Racine, and emphatically expresses the downfall of the entire royal family at their own hands and through their own destructive passion.

<sup>76</sup> Kane finds violence underlies much of modern society, «Class, race and gender divisions are symptomatic of societies based on violence or the threat of violence» (reported in STEPHENSON-LANGRIDGE, *op. cit.*, p. 134).