CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CAPTIVE AUDIENCE?
THE AESTHETICS OF NEFAS IN SENECAN DRAMA

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1. Introduction

In the imperial Rome of Seneca’s day, crowds seemed unable to resist grisly spectacles, and flocked to the arena in droves to witness all varieties of gladiatorial violence, torture, and death. Outside the arena, depictions of horror were part and parcel of the aesthetic world and featured prominently in literature, plastic art and painting, and drama. Seneca’s tragedies offer particularly vivid examples of graphic violence but present a different set of challenges than, for example, the gladiatorial spectacles, which featured not just representational but real violence.

Tragedy possesses a special capacity to model a variety of moral and epistemic viewpoints, and dramatizes the process of choosing between them. As such, tragedy does not simply entertain but can also hold up potentially conflicting worldviews for scrutiny and critique. When the moral positions of the drama are coterminous with those of its spectators, no apparent disjunction arises. But tragic depictions of the underbelly of human nature activate some thorny issues of ethics and art. Seneca’s plots teem with morally problematic characters who engage in filicide, self-mutilation, rape, incest, and cannibalism. Such acts are often described as nefas in Senecan drama,

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1 Bartsch’s lucid study (1994) analyzes the blurred boundaries between the categories of performer and audience in the early empire. Barton 1995 provides an indispensable account of gladiatorial spectacle. In an interesting link to tragedy, gladiatorial shows were often presented as staged mythological tableaux; see Coleman 1990. Boyle 1994 links these ‘fatal charades’ with Senecan tragedy.

2 On the aesthetics of imperial violence in terms of fragmentation and physical dismemberment, see Most 1992. Scholarship has moved away from roman à clef readings of the tragedies where, for example, Atreus represents Nero—among other reasons, because the dating of the plays is so uncertain. Of course, theater can and does provide a window onto social realia, and the cruelty represented in Senecan tragedy has (perhaps rightly) been seen as reflecting that of emperors’ inner circles.
where the tension between what should and should not be spoken is linguistically marked. What is more, such scenes are often presented as inset dramas, with concomitant actor-, audience-, and playwright-roles among the dramatis personae.

The plays I will examine in this chapter (Thyestes, Medea, and Troades) all feature extensive metatragic ‘staging’, and the internal audiences share some form of ‘captive’ status—some are targets of revenge, while others embody a more subtle captivity. Jason and Thyestes are the intended victims of avengers who (as dramaturge figures) also force them to play the role of audience. The final act of Troades presents the most intricate picture of audience captivity: a mise-en-abyme of embedded audience- and actor-figures whose responses multiply and refract off each other as they negotiate the two ‘performances’ of murder-sacrifice. The relationship between aesthetic and ethics is called into question by the rupture their disparate reactions engender. I would like to argue that Seneca’s internal audiences provide potential models for, and dramatize the process of, the aesthetic judgment of nefas, and that the ‘plays-within’ actively challenge Seneca’s own audience to contemplate what it means to enjoy or otherwise to respond to such representations.

2. Audience Captivity: Setting the Stage

How can an audience delight in witnessing an act in drama that it would consider morally abhorrent in reality? The evaluative markers involved in witnessing, say, cannibalism in tragedy are patently distinct from those of reality, as are the effects—we do not, of course, intervene to help the on-stage victim, nor do we fear that the actor-cannibal may come for us next. As the moral compass of art goes haywire, other factors can supervene, exercising a mysterious force on the audience—hence the age-old dilemma of to what extent morality is bound up with aesthetic evaluation of fiction.

Goldie has recently examined Matravers’ notion of the ‘fictional assent’ involved in engaging with a work whose moral code is not in alignment with our own. Citing the example of Sade’s Juliette, he asserts that in such cases (2003, 67; my emphasis):

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3 Schiesaro 2003 makes this persuasive claim. For the semantics and semiotics of nefas, fari, and related terms, see Bettini 2008.
4 See Busch 2007 on the ‘dialogic’ quality of Senecan drama which is especially conducive to representing a polyphony of viewpoints.