The Argo Killed Hippolytus: Roman Tragedy in the (Meta-)Theatre

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Hooper: “This was no boat accident.”

(Jaws, 1975)

The highly allusive description of Hippolytus’ death in Seneca’s Phaedra draws comparisons to epic. Coffey and Mayer go further and see the piecing together of Hippolytus’ body parts as a metaphor for the writing process:

Just below the surface of Seneca’s text, with the attempt to recompose mutilated fragments of a once beautiful form, lies Seneca’s own authorial problem: recomposing into a beautiful unity the now scattered pieces of a past tradition: the two Hippolytus plays of Euripides, possibly the Aegaeus, the finale of the Bacchae, Sophocles’ Phaedra, even Ovid’s Fourth Heroides, and the seventh book of the Metamorphoses. The self-conscious blending of two separate plays of Euripides at this point, Hippolytus and Bacchae, gives the issue an immediate grounding in the text.1

An impressive number of Greek tragic and Latin poetic intertexts are identified from the point of view of writing but what about the effect of intertextuality on viewing the play?2 I examine this scene for its potential in eliciting intertextual

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2 Cf. Segal (1984: 311–325) for the effect of intertextuality on performance reception, in particular 312: “His description of the death of Hippolytus in the Phaedra, the chief concern of this essay, is half again as long as Euripides (114 verses to 76). This expansiveness is probably an indication of an author composing at least as much for readers or hearers of recitations as for spectators in the theater.” Whether one believes that the plays were performed or are performable, as Harrison (2000: 137–138) notes on the performance of Seneca’s plays: “First things first: every play is produced and receives full staging if only in the mind’s eye of the poet.” Cf. also Littlewood (2004: 172): “Senecan tragedy is written as drama. Whether or not the plays were staged they have the literary form of theatrical events.” The same conclusion is reached most recently by Kohn (2013: 140): “First and foremost, it should now be clear
allusions to even more intertexts on and off the stage and potential audience/reader reactions to them. Through the associative viewing/reading process with previous plays, poetic intertexts, and spectacle entertainment, the scene produces the unexpected intertextual outcome of the Argo killed Hippolytus. The complex intertextuality of the narrative goes further however, and serves a metatheatrical purpose that situates the play in the figurative space of (meta-)theatre.

In Seneca’s *Phaedra*, Theseus believing that his son Hippolytus attempted to seduce his wife Phaedra, calls upon his father Neptune to punish him. Theseus’ wish is fulfilled as Hippolytus rides his chariot along the shore and a threatening sea-monster/bull appears and frightens his horses. Hippolytus, thrown from the chariot, gets caught in the reins and his body is mangled as the horses flee. Events are described in a lengthy messenger speech (1000–1114) that begins with a description of the turmoil at sea (1007–1034):

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cum subito vastum tonuit ex alto mare
crevitque in astra. nullus inspirat salo
ventus, quieti nulla pars caeli strepit
placidumque pelagus propria tempestas agit. 1010
non tantus Auster Sicula disturbat freta
nec tam fures Ionis exsurgit sinus
regnante Coro, saxa cum fluctu tremunt
et cana summum spuma Leucaten ferit.
consurgit ingens pontus in vastum aggerem,
[tumidumque monstro pelagus in terras ruit]
nec ista ratibus tanta construitur lues:
terris minatur; fluctus haud cursu levi
provolvitur; nescioquid onerato sinu
gravis unda portat. quae novum tellus caput 1020
ostendet astra? Cyclas exoritur nova?
latuere rupes numine Epidauri dei
et scelere petrae nobiles Scironides
et quae duobus terra comprimitur fretis.
Haec dum stupentes sequimur, en totum mare 1025
immugit, omnes undique scopuli adstreptunt;
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that Seneca was, in fact, a dramaturge in the truest sense of the word: a maker of dramas. Regardless of whether he composed with an actual theater or a fictive stage in mind, the Roman playwright constructed his tragedies with a certain consistency. A careful reading of the plays reveals entrances and exits, gestures, properties, and the emotions of the characters."