The Reception of Latin Archaic Tragedy in Ovid's Elegy

Marco Filippi

Omne genus scripti gravitate tragoedia vincit:
haec quoque materiam semper amoris habet.

(OVID TRISTIA 2.381–382)

The death of Accius († c. 86 BC), the last great leading figure of the so-called “Republican tragic triad”, ends a literary age, the one of tragedians meant as professional figures, and starts a gradual process of ennoblement of dramatic genre, characterized by amateur essays by famous representatives of society which are not anymore the object of scenic productions and thus do not have great diffusion among the general public.¹ Such a process must be justified by a progressive changing not only in public taste, increasingly oriented towards more trivial forms of popular entertainments like gladiatorial games, mimes and pantomimes, but also in the idea of performance: tragic composition starts to be conceived as a sort of literary divertissement and closet drama replaces scenic performance privileging the use, more and more evident, of forms of rhetoric and gestural art intended for small halls (auditoria) or private homes.

We must not consider, however, that tragic theater, even though by now encoded in its new “literary look”, has lost, together with a lot of its past audience, the ability to be interesting and fascinating as it had been at its acme. Nevertheless, many years after Accius’ death, the plays of the “tragic triad” continued to be performed at the state-sponsored ludi scaenici² in larger and more


² In ancient Rome ludi scaenici were theatrical performances associated with the celebration of public games. It was at ludi Romani in 240 BC that Livius Andronicus produced the first translation of a Greek tragedy. The Romans of Classical period considered this event the beginning of their national theatre. Accordingly, at the time of Plautus and Terentius there were four yearly recurrences for the representation of ludi scaenici: ludi Romani (on September), ludi Megalenses (in honor of Magna Mater, on April), ludi Apollinares (on July) and ludi Plebei, dedicated to Jupiter (on August). Ludi scaenici were managed by magistrates, aediles, or urban praetors. During the festival there were not only dramatic performances but also competitive entertainments and gladiatorial combats because the electorate had to be entertained. The public and civic nature of theatrical festivals promoted by magistrates
magnificent theaters of permanent construction, and some tragic events had become so much a part of the common memory that Cicero does not have to quote his source precisely, a clear sign that tragedy was being appropriated into different contexts, largely political. During the transition from Republic to Principate tragic theatrical reminiscences are individuated with certainty both in Virgil and in Horace, notwithstanding the judgments expressed by the latter on archaic Latin tragedians.

It is within this historic-literary framework of reminiscence and appropriation of Republican tragic theater by leading Augustan writers that we must try to contextualize the possibility of a lively relationship between Latin elegiac poetry and archaic Latin tragedy. Such an investigation is impeded by two unavoidable problems: first, the fragmentary nature of archaic Latin tragedy, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to determine the context (and often the text) of the plays, restricts any claim to the level of hypothesis. Second, and even more severe, by its nature, elegiac poetry was an “open” genre or, rather, a “merging of several literary genres,” characterized by a refined use of . By this I mean its sources are re-elaborated or purposely contaminated, becoming at times unrecognizable, using a form of “reduced” poetry, as tribute to the main rules of Alexandrianism, which inhibits modern scholarship, problematizing analysis of the content and of its eventual

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3 Re-performances of Republican dramas on stage were available down to triumph of Augustus. The first permanent theatre at Rome was the Theatre of Pompey, which was built in 55 BC. Other temporary stages, as that of Scaurus, were too expensive because of their decoration. Consider, for example, ostentatious performances of Accius’ and of an (Naevius’ one?) as cited in Cic. Fam. 7.1.2.

4 Cf. the opening speech in Pacuvius’ Iliona (Cic. Tusc. 1.106) or the famous friendship scene between Orestes and Pylades contained probably in Pacuvius’ Chryses (Cic. Lael. 24), not to mention the opening of Ennius’ and Medea exul or oderint dum metuant in Accius’ Atreus (Cic. Off. 1.97 et al.).

5 Cf. Accius’ Brutus: Tullius, qui libertatem civibus stabiliverat (R3 praetext. 40 in Cic. Sest. 123) and adesp. TrRF1 15 nostra miseria tu es Magnus . . . (Cic. Att. 2.19.3).

