Experience and *Stimmung*: Landscapes of the Underworld in Seneca’s Plays*

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1 Introduction

Whenever a character in Seneca’s plays prepares to transgress the boundaries between the upper world and the realms of the dead, be it a hero who is about to descend to the underworld or a seer who conjures up its ghosts, the scene usually opens with the vivid and detailed description of a landscape. Like most descriptions in Seneca’s plays, these passages have not remained without criticism for their disproportional length and apparent lack of substantial contribution to the plot.\(^1\) They are usually explained as set pieces meant to create a gloomy backdrop for the most hideous crimes.\(^2\)

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1 This criticism was already expressed in the eighteenth century by Lessing and Schlegel in their works on literary criticism and aesthetic theory (Lessing 1967 [1766], 32–33; Schlegel 1966 [1809–1811], 234–235). Despite denying the dramatic quality of Seneca’s plays in *Laokoon*, Lessing shows an approving as well as a critical opinion of these scenes in his early writings (cf. Barner 1973, 16–34): on the one hand, he admires the splendor and power of Senecan descriptions (ibid. 114); on the other, he disapproves of the lengthy delay they cause in the plot (ibid. 142). For similar criticism in classical scholarship cf., e.g., Jacobs 1796, 339–408; Leo 1878, 148–158; Zwierlein 1966, 112–113.

2 The ways of approaching description in Seneca’s plays can be categorized according to the three general ways of dealing with an ecphrasis which Fowler 1991, 26–27 suggests. According to him, a ‘narratively redundant’ description is explained (a) as ‘increas[ing] the sense of reality of the scene before us’, (b) by ‘integrating it with the narrative’, and (c) by looking for a ‘relation of description to narrative on a psychological level’. Senecan descriptions are said to convey vividness and a sinister atmosphere (e.g., Tietze Larson 1994, 13–15; Schmitz 1993, 64 n. 174; Töchterle 1994, 430) or to contribute to the plot or the characterization of the protagonist (e.g., Henry and Walker 1965; Shelton 1978, 56–57); often, they are interpreted on a psychological level (Tietze Larson 1994, 159–167; Mastronarde 1970; Segal 1986). My analyses will confirm Fowler’s point especially with regard to vividness and integration but also emphasize another factor: the recipient. A generic approach to
The landscape itself and its purpose have received little attention so far. The descriptions, however, encourage such a focus by accentuating the representation of space and its experience, sensory perceptions, and corporeality. Whereas a lot of research has been conducted on the literary tradition, especially Seneca’s links with Vergil’s *Aeneid*, scholars have yet to investigate how the apparently emotional quality of the underworld in the plays, i.e., its dark and threatening atmosphere, is brought about or why such effort is put into creating this effect. It is the aim of this chapter to consider these problems.

Prime examples are to be found in the *Hercules Furens*, where Theseus gives a precise account of Hercules’ underworld journey, in the *Thyestes*, where the messenger elaborately describes the deepest recesses of Atreus’ palace as an underworld-like place, and in the *Oedipus*, where Tiresias opens the underworld to perform necromancy. As it provides the most detailed description, Theseus’ account of the underworld in the *Hercules Furens* appears to be a particularly fruitful and promising object of investigation. Nevertheless, the versions given in the *Thyestes* and the *Oedipus* will also be considered. Literary tradition is, of course, important and comparisons with the literary models for Theseus’ report, the *katabasis* in Vergil’s *Aeneid* 6 and the representation of Tartarus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 4, will at times illuminate the examination.

First, I will analyze how the experience of space is produced and conveyed by the description of the underworld landscape. How is the strong impression of vividness created (section 2)? In a second step, I will examine how the emotional quality of the place is brought into the text; I propose to use the concept of *Stimmung* to analyze the literary technique employed here. In accordance with this focus, the role of the recipient to whom the description is directed will come to the fore: after having been carefully guided down to the underworld, he is also meant to re-experience the quality of the place (section 3). This is part of a more general technique to destabilize what is normal and

the problem of descriptions in Seneca’s plays is put forward by Zanobi 2014, who considers Senecan set pieces to be influenced by pantomime (an idea first put forward by Zimmermann 1990). This approach, however, presupposes (as does the criticism on Senecan descriptions) that the plays consist of loosely connected scenes which can be separated and read independently from one another (cf. Friedrich 1933; Jacobs 1796, 351–352). The recipient, as will be shown, is a crucial factor as to why the plays should rather be understood as a unity.

In the following, I use the term in a general sense, which is not meant as a statement on the question whether Seneca’s plays were ever actually (or intended to be) performed.