

A DREAM SHATTERED? PASTORAL ANXIETIES IN SENECAN DRAMA

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I. *Chthonic mastertexts*

No 1st century author appears as impervious to the attractions of pastoral—a landscape, a form of life, a poetic genre—as Seneca in his tragedies. The almost complete absence of idyllic settings, the conventional background to pastoral in its various permutations (even highly idiosyncratic ones, such as Calpurnius¹), is all the more evident because of the parallel abundance in the plays of staggering *loca horrida*, a key feature of Seneca’s original take on tragedy. Greek models did not offer anything approaching the depth and breadth of topographic luxury we find in his plays, since *loca* both *amoena* and *horrida* are reduced to functional backdrops evoked in a few lines.² Most plays eschew *topothesia* altogether, and even in the few cases—*Prometheus Bound*, *Bacchae*, *Philoctetes*, *Oedipus at Colonus*—where a specific locale is essential to the plot, descriptive elements are hardly elaborated upon. In Seneca’s *Oedipus*, *Thyestes* and *Hercules furens*, as well as in the *Oetaeus* and *Phaedra*,³ extreme landscapes described in a wealth of details occupy a central position, and, needless to say, they deserve to be seen as crucial nexus for the articulation of the plays’ ideological and literary agenda rather than tokens of allegiance to the conventions of rhetoric⁴ or compensatory elements for the lack of proper staging.

¹ See Mayer in this volume, esp. pp. 459–461, on the disappearance of Arcadia in Calpurnius’ *Ecloques*.

² See Elliger (1975) 211–274.

³ A complete list of classified *loca* in Aygon (2004) 472–475.

⁴ The contrast Curtius (1948) 194 suggests between the “poetically felt” and “harmonized” ideal landscape in Virgil and that of Ovid and his successors, where ‘descriptions of nature become brief interludes’, still exerts influence on contemporary criticism.

The most extended *locus horridus* is Theseus' eyewitness account of the Underworld in *Hercules furens* (662–725).⁵ Access to the realm of the dead is on a mountain which provides the emotion of 'vertical' sublime (note *attollit*, "rises", at l. 662), intensified in this case by the clash between the land and sea (663 *ubi aequor Taenarus ... premit*, "where Cape Taenarus hems the sea"). Colours are not mentioned, but darkness is conveyed both by the height of the impending mountain and the thickness of the vegetation (663 *densis ... silvis*, "with its dense forests"). Here *ora solvit Ditis invisī domus / hiatque rupes alta et immenso specu / ingens vorago faucibus vastis patet / latumque pandit omnibus populis iter*, "the house of hateful Dis opens its mouth; a tall cliff gapes wide, a cavernous abyss extends its vast jaws and spreads a broad path for all nations" (664–667).⁶ The vertiginous effect of the *rupes alta* and the *specus* is enhanced by the vastness of the *vorago*, an essential component of the *horror*-effect which is also developed a few lines later: *hinc ampla vacuis spatia laxantur locis, / in quae omne mersum pergat humanum genus*, "then there open up empty regions, spaces extensive enough for the human race to enter, once plunged into the earth" (673–674). Seneca, as he states explicitly in his *Letters to Lucilius*,⁷ is aware that vast expanses of space with uncertain contours can be horrifying.⁸ The quality of light in this liminal area contributes to the overall disconcerting effect, since complete darkness does not immediately prevail: *non caeca tenebris incipit primo via; / tenuis relictæ lucis a tergo nitor / fulgorque dubius solis afflicti cadit / et ludit aciem: nocte sic mixta solet / praebere lumen primus aut serus dies*, "at the outset the way is not obscured by darkness: there falls a faint brightness from the light left behind, a twilight glow of the weakened sunshine, which baffles the eye. Such is the light, mingled with darkness, familiar at dawn or dusk" (668–672).⁹

⁵ On this passage see Fitch (1987) 292–293, and now the excellent treatment by Aygon (2004) 372.

⁶ For Seneca's tragedies I print Fitch's excellent translation, with occasional divergences. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations are from the relevant Loeb editions.

⁷ See below, p. 446, on *Letter 41*.

⁸ As theorized centuries later by Saint-Évremond's *Dissertation sur le mot de vaste*, a 17th cent. ancestor of Freud's theory of the uncanny (Orlando (1995) 381).

⁹ The detail features in Virgil's Underworld, *Aen.* 6.270–272; for its association with numinousness cf. e.g. *Ov. am.* 1.5.1–8 with McKeown *ad loc.* It will be picked up in the modern archetype of the *locus horridus*, Tasso's selva: "Qui ne l'ora che'l sol più chiaro splende / è luce incerta e scolorita e mesta, / quale in nubilo ciel dubbia si vede / se'l di a la notte o s'ella a lui succede" (*Gerusalemme liberata* xiii.2.13–16).