

Chapter 15: Roman Tragedy

Quintus Ennius

- first major Roman-born playwright after Livius Andronicus
- devised the equations of Greek and Roman deities
- also wrote comedy, history, satire, religious treatises
- freely adapted/Romanized his Greek models

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fabulae praetextae

- plays based on Roman life
 - literally, “toga-wearing plays”
- first known author is Gnaeus Naevius
 - who is also known to have gotten into trouble for irritating important politicians
- only one surviving example of these plays: Seneca’s *Octavia* (after 68 BCE)

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Marcus Pacuvius

- tragedian (ca. 220-130 BCE)
- used *contaminatio*
 - e.g. merged Sophocles and Euripides
- said to have been grave in tone
 - but *Nerei repandirostrum incurvicervicum* genus (“Nereus’ bent-beaked, convex-necked brood,” i.e. dolphins)?

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Lucius Accius

- tragedian (ca. 170-86 BCE)
- considered Rome's best tragic poet
 - his work was available for reading at least 500 years after his lifetime
- like his predecessors, engaged in *contaminatio*
- and wrote *fabulae praetextae*

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Age of Popular Entertainment

- horse races, gladiatorial combat, public executions of criminals
 - “**bread and circuses**” (Pliny the Younger)
- but not all entertainments were low-brow
 - closet dramas, cf. Ovid’s *Medea*
- also, **pantomime** (soloist + chorus)
 - stories told through dance and expressive gesture

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Horace's *Ars Poetica*

- poetic instruction manual for how to write a drama
 - cf. Aristotle's *Poetics*
 - n.b. neither Aristotle nor Horace are known to have written a play

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Horace's *Ars Poetica*

- *Ars Poetica* codifies the “rules” for drama
 - e.g. begin your story by leaping *in medias res* (“into the middle of things”)
 - through Horace these rules were passed to early modern dramatists
 - especially classical French playwrights like Racine and Molière
 - in particular, the five-act rule

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Seneca

- only surviving Roman tragedies
- these dramas may not be by the famous Roman philosopher and tutor of Nero
 - *Octavia* cannot be by Seneca
 - he is a character in the play
 - hints at Nero's death (three years after Seneca's)
 - the plays do not espouse **Stoic** principles
 - characters are brutal and unsympathetic
 - cf. **Atreus** in *Thyestes*

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Seneca

- **performability**: were these tragedies even designed for performance?
 - can they even be performed the way they're written?
 - full of ***sententiae*** (“opinions,” pithy axioms for living)
 - do they conform with the type of performance spaces attested for the day?
 - yes! both physically and emotionally!

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Seneca

selections from Seneca's *Phaedra*