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Show or Tell? Seneca's and Sarah Kane's *Phaedra* Plays

Abstract: This article analyzes the Senecan background to Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* by focusing upon both playwrights' predilections for graphic violence and sexual content. Kane's version of the Phaedra story presents sex, death and mutilation as acts that often defy meaning – these phenomena have such a strong experiential impact that they are slow to move into the referential realm of sign and symbol. By placing these acts centre stage, Kane also implicates the audience. Of course, we cannot propose the same performance effects for Senecan tragedy, owing to lack of evidence. Nonetheless Seneca's work, like Kane's, plays upon dramaturgic techniques of showing and telling: Phaedra's passion is *nefas*, simultaneously immoral and something she physically cannot speak. Death is also meaningless in Seneca: the final scene shows Theseus trying and failing to make sense of his son's torn body. Both Seneca and Sarah Kane push the boundaries between theatrical illusion and visual reality and, in the process, comment on the nature of theatre itself.

Keywords: Sarah Kane, Seneca, tragedy, Phaedra, violence, reception, phenomenology.

Early in 1996, London's Gate Theatre offered Sarah Kane a commission to adapt a Greek or Roman classic. Her response was somewhat less than enthusiastic: 'oh, I've always hated those plays. Everything happens off-stage, and what's the point?'¹ Given the style of her début drama, *Blasted*, her reservations were valid, albeit blunt. The ancient Greek tragic tradition of murder behind the *skene* certainly shares little with the brutality that occupies centre stage in Kane's dramaturgy. Her plays are stark; they generate 'a compelling horror-soaked atmosphere'² and they foreground violence

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1 As she confessed in an interview with Tabert 1998, 11.

2 Benedict 1998, 18.





to the extent that certain scenes are simply not performable within the bounds of purely naturalistic theatre.³ To classicists, it therefore comes as no surprise that when Kane accepted the Gate's commission she chose a Senecan model instead of a Greek one. The resulting work, *Phaedra's Love*, owes far more to Seneca's *Phaedra* than it does to Euripides' *Hippolytus*, yet critics seldom recognize or make much of this fact.⁴ Needless to say, this omission hampers our understanding of both Seneca's version and Kane's. Scholarly argument over the performability of Senecan tragedy is a useful lens through which to view *Phaedra's Love*. So are the unfavourable reactions some classicists display toward Senecan aesthetics: if staged, they say,⁵ the violent scenes in Seneca's plays would be unbelievable, laughable or numbing. Graphic moments in Kane's plays were described in similar terms, indicating that academics and reviewers alike share common assumptions about what should and should not be shown on stage.

This thread of interpretation may also be drawn in the opposite direction: reading Seneca via Kane enables us to elucidate central themes in the text that have rarely been noticed before. Although Kane by no means wanted to reinterpret a classic – she confessed to reading Seneca's *Phaedra* only once⁶ and the adaptation is certainly loose⁷ – the two plays nonethe-

3 On Kane's relation to naturalistic theatre, see Greig 2001, xii–xiii and Hattenstone 2000, 26. Obviously, claiming that Kane's works on the whole resist naturalistic staging implies that some of their violence must be presented symbolically rather than realistically. Its effect could therefore easily be more referential than experiential. For further discussion of this point, and its relation to my phenomenological analysis of Kane's dramaturgy, see pages 14–15 below.

4 Euripides' *Hippolytus* is not an adequate basis for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of Kane's adaptation and often leads critics to misunderstand the performance. Billington 1996, 2 clearly relies on Euripides' version when he summarizes the Phaedra story as follows: 'in classical legend, the power of the story lies in two things: the sense of stepmotherly passion beating against moral restraint, and the punishment of Hippolytus for spurning the power of love.' Seneca's version, however, relegates Aphrodite's revenge to an aside (124–28) and makes Minos' family guilty instead of Hippolytus. Like Billington, Hall 1996, 20 views *Phaedra's Love* according to a Euripidean rather than a Senecan template. Benedict 1996, 6 acknowledges that Kane chose Seneca's version of the myth, but dismisses this important difference by declaring, 'Euripides covers the same ground in *Hippolytus*.' Brusberg-Kiermeier 2001, 165–72 recognizes the Senecan intertext, but does not really explore the many fascinating parallels between the modern British rendition and its ancient Roman model.

5 Obviously, not all classicists subscribe to this view of Senecan aesthetics. In fact, it is increasingly less common in contemporary scholarship.

6 Tabert 1998, 11–12.

7 Mayer 2002, 86.





less display a common concern for how graphically violent and sexual acts often resist explanation within the symbolic order. In Seneca's *Phaedra*, this concern is evident in the pointed use of *monstrum* and *nefas*, two words for evil whose root meanings of showing and telling represent contrasting dramaturgic techniques.⁸ When Seneca's *Phaedra* eventually manages to speak the unspeakable, she indirectly causes Hippolytus' final appearance as a messy collection of incomprehensible body parts. In Kane's version, the techniques of show and tell are portrayed in the characters of Hippolytus and *Phaedra* respectively: the latter struggles to communicate her lust while the former has grown numb through repeated exposure to tawdry graphic sensation. The violence Kane places centre stage thereby acquires a metadramatic quality. It challenges members of the audience to interrogate their own reactions and to make sense – if possible – of the physical nastiness displayed before them.

At this point, some readers will no doubt be skeptical about the validity of studying Kane's reception of Seneca. After all, the playwright admitted that she was not especially interested in this earlier version.⁹ Doesn't this mean that any similarities are mere coincidences? They may be, to some extent (although coincidental resemblance must surely occur even between a work of very conscious reinterpretation and its original).¹⁰ But to assert that Kane's play bears little or no relation to Seneca is to ignore the revival of interest in this Roman playwright that permeated British theatre in the latter half of the twentieth century. Ted Hughes' translation of Seneca

8 In terms of modern linguistics, deriving *monstrum* from *monstrare* is not an accurate etymology. It is far more likely, although still not certain, that *monstrum* is related to the verb *monere*, 'to warn'. The latter etymology is espoused by some Roman authors – e.g. Varro ap. Servius auct. *A.* 3.366 – but by far the majority prefer *monstrare* – e.g. Cicero *N.D.* 2.7 and *Div.* 1.93; Servius *A.* 2.681 – and it is this derivation, however officially false, that matters for Seneca. For further discussion of *monstra* in Seneca, see Staley 2010, 107 and for a full list of ancient etymological explanations of *monstrum*, see Maltby 1991, 391–92.

9 Tabert 1998, 11–12.

10 The problem is compound: Kane only read the Senecan play once and certainly used a translation. Unlike Hughes and Churchill, she did not have a rudimentary knowledge of Latin, so any similarities her version bears to Seneca are necessarily mediated. Whether a modern author engages with a text's original ancient language is clearly a crucial issue for scholars of classical reception: for insightful discussions of it, see Hardwick 2009, 39–49 and Talbot 2009, 62–80. However, as I argue throughout, this paper is not trying to trace direct parallels between Kane's text and Seneca's (there are virtually none). Instead, I am analyzing their mutual tendency to foreground violent and sexual acts, as well as the corresponding reactions this dramaturgy has drawn from scholars and critics alike.





ca's *Oedipus*, directed by Peter Brook at the National Theatre in 1968, marked the turning point.¹¹ Brook was heavily influenced by Artaud's theories of drama, which saw the theatre as a place for primal, transformative ritual, intensely physical experience and sensory assault.¹² Taking his cue from Artaud, Brook regarded Senecan tragedy as an apt means of tapping into this raw, proto-religious power.¹³ Theatre of Cruelty calls for immersion in 'sound, light, image, myth, shock and sensation'.¹⁴ For Brook and Hughes, Seneca's plays seemed far more amenable to this than their Greek counterparts.¹⁵ The resulting adaptation was so influential that it became a classic in its own right, even to the extent that Seneca's name was all but erased from the program notes of later re-performances.¹⁶ Yet the ghost of Seneca's style never vanished. Reinvigorated by Brook and Hughes, the hallmarks of Senecan tragedy – its oppressive atmosphere in which the characters' psychologies mirror the surrounding environment;¹⁷ its penchant for shocking detail and staged violence – became an important influence on British theatre in the three decades prior to Kane.¹⁸

While the stage was set, as it were, by the 1968 *Oedipus*, a later production of Senecan tragedy was more immediately relevant to Kane's choice. Not long before she received the Gate's commission, she attended a performance of Caryl Churchill's translation of the *Thyestes*.¹⁹ Staged at the Royal Court in 1994 and directed by James McDonald (who also worked with Kane), this adaptation of Seneca made liberal use of electronic media to create a pervasive sense of spectatorship.²⁰ This theme of voyeurism and violence as entertainment resurfaces in *Phaedra's Love*. Thus

11 Slaney 2009, 53.

12 For more details on how Brook used Artaud's ideas, see Harrison 2009, 152 and 156–57, and Slaney 2009, 57–60.

13 Slaney 2009, 59.

14 Slaney 2009, 57.

15 Hughes 1969, 8.

16 Slaney 2009, 52 and 61 remarks on this arresting fact.

17 Herington 1966, 433–34 and Segal 2008, 138 both note that the confluence of characters' mental states with their surrounding physical environment is a trait typical of Senecan drama.

18 Interestingly, the confluence of physical reality and mental states has also been observed in Kane's work. Commenting on Kane's first play, *Blasted*, Greig 2001, x remarks, 'It is as though the act of rape, which blasts the inner world of both victim and perpetrator, has also destroyed the world outside the room.'

19 Tabert 1998, 11. Kane tells Tabert that she enjoyed Churchill's translation and that this was her main reason for choosing Seneca.

20 See the review by Keen 1994.





Kane's play contains elements that Artaud, Brook, Hughes, Churchill and company had canonized as inherently Senecan, and they are present even though Kane did not especially rely upon her primary text. To quote Harrison: *Phaedra's Love* 'makes only glancing allusions to Senecan drama, but ... [it] constitutes an effective appropriation of its spirit.'²¹

There is one further, if broader connection worth drawing between Seneca and Kane. Although separated by nearly two millennia, *Phaedra* and *Phaedra's Love* emerged from analogous performance contexts.²² The Roman amphitheatre may be a structure far grander than the humble television, but each medium blurs the boundaries between real and spectacular violence. In Seneca's Rome, gladiatorial duels – real fighters, real blood and, on occasion, real deaths – were a very popular form of entertainment.²³ Public executions also drew a large crowd, and it is possible that this era witnessed a particularly elaborate form of capital punishment in which the criminal, often dressed as a mythological character, was made to act out a fatal role.²⁴ Gladiators, too, drew their stage names from myth,²⁵ while the additional paraphernalia of the arena sometimes included individuals dressed as Charon and Mercury who would drag away the dead.²⁶ Compared to these spectacles, television may seem innocuous, but it does in fact perform a very similar function. As the main instrument of entertainment in every suburban household, television is also a major source of news bulletins, which often show graphic clips of physical suffering. Modern media likes to create performances out of real material. Concerns about the blurring of real and fictive entertainment were certainly com-

21 Harrison 2009, 168. Another link between Kane and Seneca is Jacobean Revenge Tragedy, especially mediated through writers like Edward Bond. This is undoubtedly a crucial stylistic influence on Kane's work, but it is further removed from Seneca than the performances detailed above.

22 See Boyle 1997, 6–12 for a fuller description of performance culture in early imperial Rome.

23 Of course, given the sensational nature of the material, the modern imagination tends to exaggerate the number of gladiatorial combats that were fights to the death. Conversely, Beard and Hopkins 2005, 86–94 argue that gladiators were expensive human resources and were not therefore slaughtered *en masse*.

24 The most comprehensive study of this phenomenon is Coleman's 1990, 44–73. Although the most famous examples of these 'fatal charades' come from Martial's *Liber Spectaculorum*, there is some evidence that the Romans were performing this style of execution during Seneca's time as well: see Suetonius, *Nero* 12.2 and Lucilius, *AP* 11.184.

25 See Versnel 1974, 367.

26 On which, Wiedemann 1992, 85.





mon in the 1990s when Kane was writing even though Big Brother was as yet an embryo in a producer's brain.²⁷

Of course, I do not mean to imply that Senecan tragic violence derives from arena culture alone. There are enough graphic scenes present in classical Athenian tragedy – Sophocles' *Ajax*; Heracles in the *Trachiniae*; Pentheus' cruel fate in the *Bacchae* – to indicate that Seneca was drawing on Greek dramaturgy as much as he was engaging with contemporary Roman aesthetics. Only in the case of Rome, real and fictive violence converges far more frequently and readily.²⁸

Such an obsession with reality inevitably influences the theatre – that original site where illusion is created from actual objects and bodies. Scholars have detected gladiatorial imagery and language in Senecan tragedy.²⁹ These ancient plays repeatedly establish internal models of spectatorship, thus equating the myth's bloody outcome with amphitheatrical spectacle.³⁰ Kane is likewise aware that staged pain and actual pain have the potential to overlap.³¹ At the beginning of *Phaedra's Love*, Hippolytus is watching a violent film on television (scene 1). By scene four, the broadcast has turned to news, which Hippolytus summarizes casually: 'News. Another rape. Child murdered. War somewhere.' At the play's end, Hippolytus is dismembered by people who have come to his execution seeking entertainment as much as justice (scene 8). The violent and sexual

27 On real and fictive violence in the 1990s, see Monaghan 2003.

28 On this theme, see Woodman 1993, 108–109.

29 Boyle 1997, 120–21 and 132–37, and Erasmo 2004, 128–29. The examples of gladiatorial language listed by Boyle (132 and 232 n.33) can be found in *Medea* 550 and 1019; *Agamemnon* 901; *Oedipus* 998.

30 On which, see Boyle 1997, 112–37 and Shelton 2000, 87–118. Another small and curious overlap between arena games and Senecan tragedy is the description of Hippolytus' death in the *Phaedra*. The messenger reports that Hippolytus' groin has been impaled on a sharp tree stump (1098–99). Seneca draws upon Ovid here – *viscera viva trahi, nervos in stipe teneri* (*Met.* 15.525) – but Hippolytus' groin is a new detail, which not only suits the play's motif of perverted sexuality, but may also recall a common form of public punishment. See *Ad Marciam* 20.3. Seneca gives a similar account in *Ep.* 14.5 – the punishment closely resembles Hippolytus' fate, although in this instance the groin is not mentioned.

31 In fact, staged pain is one of the defining characteristics of British theatre from the 1990s. Sierz 2001, 3–35 names the trend 'in-yer-face theatre' and describes it as 'a theatre of sensation' that 'affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown on stage.' Urban 2004, 354 rightly modifies Sierz's view, claiming that 'in-yer-face theatre' or 'British Brutalism' was far from a unified artistic movement. Nonetheless, he recognizes shock and violence as two of its most prominent stylistic features. See also Ravenhill 2006, 14.





content in Seneca and Kane is a clear example of how these playwrights and their audiences regard reality's encroachment on the world of theatre and spectacle. It is also the major focus of this article. What these two versions of the Phaedra myth choose to show and what they leave to the audience's imagination – and why: these will be the central topics of my discussion from hereon.

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In order to explore the fundamental effects of Kane's dramaturgy, we must begin by studying the interaction of her two main characters, Phaedra and Hippolytus. In the fourth scene of Kane's play, Phaedra confesses her feelings for her stepson:

Phaedra: I love you.

Hippolytus: Why?

Phaedra: You're difficult. Moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt. You stay in bed all day then watch TV all night, you crash around the house with sleep in your eyes and not a thought for anyone. You're in pain. I adore you.

Hippolytus: Not very logical.

Phaedra: Love isn't.

Here the cliché of love being blind reaches quite an ugly extreme: 'moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt' hardly warrants the conclusion 'I adore you.' Hippolytus is right to point out that what Phaedra says does not seem to make sense. His retort, 'not very logical', is meant to deflate his stepmother's rhetoric as well as display his trademark brutal honesty.³² Yet Hippolytus fails to understand Phaedra at a fundamental level: what seems like rhetoric to him is perfectly real to her; she is just as honest about her feelings as he is.³³ The scene derives its stark humour from two deeply held and essentially opposed character traits. For Phaedra, as for most of us, the world is meaningful. Her feelings, raw, violent and confusing as they are, can easily be transferred to the symbolic order and given headings like 'love' or 'lust'. As Hippolytus remarks, logic does not enter into it. What matters is that Phaedra acts and feels within an accepted code of meaning. Indeed, her penchant for symbolism is so strong that she often transforms literal statements into figurative ones (scene 3):

32 On Hippolytus' honesty, see Saunders 2002, 73–74.

33 Saunders 2002, 77.





Phaedra: Wished you could cut open your chest tear it out to stop the pain?

Strophe: That would kill you.

Phaedra: This is killing me.

Strophe: No. Just feels like it.

Strophe deflates her mother's words just like Hippolytus does. Of course, Phaedra is not actually dying, but she prefers to speak of her real pain in terms of illusion – 'this is killing me'. Hippolytus, in contrast, stubbornly resists interpreting his life in this way. He concentrates on bodily appetites and sensation, and treats sex and violence as meaningless (scene 4):

Phaedra: The last time you-

What you asked me.

Hippolytus: Had a fuck.

Phaedra: Yes.

Hippolytus: Don't know. Last time I went out. When was that?

Phaedra: Months ago.

Hippolytus: Really? No. Someone came round. Fat bird. Smelt funny. And I fucked a man in the garden.

Phaedra: A man?

Hippolytus: Think so. It looked like one but you can never be sure.

The exchange is as funny as it is bleak. Phaedra is shocked. She has to ask, 'a man?' because to her, Hippolytus having sex with a man symbolizes something: homosexuality, bisexuality. But for Hippolytus, no such meaning can be gleaned from the act: sex simply *is*, and no more. As far as Hippolytus is concerned, physical reality remains phenomenological, that is, heavy with a kind of presence that resists interpretation.³⁴ Stepmother and stepson are perfect opposites: Phaedra makes everything symbolize something else, while Hippolytus is interested in what can be seen and felt simply because it can be seen and felt.

This dichotomy between the two central characters in *Phaedra's Love* provides the play's main dramatic impetus. How Phaedra and Hippolytus view one physical action – oral sex – precipitates a bloody concatenation of catastrophe. Naturally, Phaedra sees the act as symbolic, of love in this case.³⁵ When her verbal declaration 'I adore you' has no effect on Hippolytus, she performs fellatio on him, hoping that he will feel love because of her actions: 'I think you'd enjoy it. With me.' (scene 4). Of course, this does not happen. Hippolytus merely responds, 'There. Mystery over.'

³⁴ For this and further definition of what phenomenology means for the theatre, see States 1985, 22–47.

³⁵ An interpretation given by Saunders 2002, 76.





(scene 4). But Phaedra continues to pursue the idea that her act signifies more than its drab reality:

Phaedra: Will you get jealous?

Hippolytus: Of what?

In order to get jealous, Hippolytus would have to be emotionally invested but, unlike his stepmother, he understands this act solely as a physical phenomenon, and not a very interesting one at that – 'I've had worse' (scene 4). Ultimately, Phaedra responds by accusing her stepson of rape. We know the allegation is false, yet it also appears to be the only way Phaedra can cope with Hippolytus' callousness, define it and make it meaningful for herself (scene 5):

Strophe: Did you force her?

Hippolytus: Did I force you?

Strophe: There aren't words for what you did to me.

Hippolytus: Then perhaps rape is the best she can do.

Phaedra may have interpreted the event imperfectly, but as Strophe points out, it is a struggle for anyone to express what Hippolytus makes them feel. 'There aren't words': it is difficult to transfer Hippolytus' acts to the realm of speech and symbol. The varying reactions of stepmother and stepson will be mirrored in their fates: Phaedra will commit suicide behind the scenes while Hippolytus will be dismembered in full view of the audience.

Hence, a close reading of Kane's characters helps to explain her dramaturgy. It is because Phaedra tends to regard actions as symbolic that her suicide must occur offstage. In a drama full of brutality, this is the only graphic scene not presented to the audience, indicating that what it *means* is more important than what it *is*.³⁶ Hippolytus' appetites, on the other hand, are best illustrated by a more confrontational style of theatre. Since Hippolytus privileges the raw phenomenon of sex and violence over any semiotic meaning they could potentially have, these acts must be shown to the audience in their full sensory senselessness.

36 Although Kane told Nils Tabert 1998, 11 that she did not read Euripides' *Hippolytus* until after she had composed her play, her version of Phaedra's death certainly derives from it: see Brusberg-Kiermeier 2001, 168 and Hall 1996, 20. In this instance, the standard ancient Greek convention of telling rather than showing acquires new meaning. Kane makes a point when she prevents Phaedra's death from being graphic entertainment in a play so full of graphic entertainment.





Essentially, it is a phenomenological theory of theatre that best explains what Kane chooses to show versus what she chooses to tell in *Phaedra's Love*.³⁷ Outlined succinctly by States (1985) and Garner (1994), this theory demonstrates that theatrical performance, in contrast to literature, painting and film, is not just referential and mimetic, but actually incorporates items and movements that really *are* what they seem to be.³⁸ To provide a very simple example: a chair on stage is a real chair, as well as symbolizing a particular chair in a particular story.³⁹ Since theatre uses actual bodies and objects, the act of viewing and interpreting theatre demands a kind of 'binocular vision'⁴⁰ by which an audience member 'can maintain broader awareness of signification as the essential other dimension of the perceptual object, the other pole in the object's oscillations between the experiential and the referential'.⁴¹ Thus the phenomenology of any given performance is just as important as its semiotics.⁴² As States remarks, 'among the various appetites of the theatre we find the need for a certain roughage of hard-core reality that continuously nourishes the illusory system.'⁴³ By 'hard-core' he does not mean fellatio and disembowelment; something as simple as a cup will be an experiential presence on stage. The actor's body, though, is the site where fictionality and actuality converge with the most power. In particular, evocations of 'corporal duress ... cast into relief the experiential exchanges of character, actor and spectator'.⁴⁴ This is even more true for imperial Roman performance genres than for Kane's plays. Yet many of Kane's scenes, too, demand something far closer to the experiential end of the continuum than Clytemnestra's symbolic



37 I understand that a phenomenological approach conflicts with some of the more deconstructionist views defining postdramatic theatre – see Lehmann 2006, 16–28. Moreover, Kane's last two works – *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* – certainly seem to fit under the heading 'postdramatic'. *Phaedra's Love*, however, retains a traditional dramatic structure, as it pursues a single, un-fractured sequence of events and implicates the audience only to the extent that it compels them to evaluate spectatorship; it does not compel them to co-construct the performance. Phenomenology is a valid theoretical approach for these reasons and also because *Phaedra's Love* provides many opportunities to stage events whose visual and physical presence destabilizes dramatic illusion.

38 States 1985, 20.

39 See States 1985, 41–46 who, naturally, goes into far more detail.

40 States 1985, 8.

41 Garner 1994, 15.

42 On which, Garner 1994, 1–17.

43 States 1985, 39.

44 Garner 1994, 45.





off-stage scream.⁴⁵ There may not be any real bloodshed, but in the theatre *Phaedra's Love* has far greater physical and hence phenomenological presence than kitchen sink drama.

One very reasonable objection to my analysis so far is that the graphic scenes in Kane's plays need not be staged literally. Kane herself complained that the Berlin production of *Blasted* revealed too much in its explicit material⁴⁶ and she wanted the violent acts in *Cleansed* to be symbolic rather than realistic.⁴⁷ However, when she directed the first season of *Phaedra's Love*, she aimed 'to do the violence as realistically as possible'.⁴⁸ This statement largely describes my experience of the play as well.⁴⁹ And even if directors choose not to depict the graphic scenes in naturalistic terms, their representations will still require a lot of physical movement and props, making the onstage field of phenomena more dense than if these acts were merely reported in words. Accounts of performances show that simulated acts of copulation, masturbation, mutilation and suicide understandably involve more physical contortion, more props, and in most cases, more lighting and sound. Such sensory immersion is especially fitting in *Phaedra's Love* given Artaud's influence on twentieth-century Seneca. Of course, in one respect all these acts are symbolic – they are *simulated* – but they also invest in the kind of material likely to draw attention to its materiality at the expense of dramatic illusion.

This explains why graphic scenes have such a memorable impact on the audience: they are not immediately subsumed into the symbolic order; they do not easily become conventional, although they will eventually.⁵⁰ As a result, an audience at *Phaedra's Love* experiences acts of sex and violence in a manner analogous to Hippolytus. The facticity of these events strikes us and delays our process of interpretation.⁵¹ We may even leave the performance feeling that all this sex and death did not really mean anything. This is exactly how Kane's hostile reviewers responded: 'viscerally,

45 Which is not to say that Clytemnestra's scream does not have some experiential impact. An actor's voice is, naturally, another 'phenomenon' in performance. Yet, as I maintain above, an actor's bodily presence is a more dense actuality than his or her disembodied voice.

46 So Hattenstone 2000, 26 reports.

47 As Zimmerman H. 2001, 179 reports.

48 So she tells Tabert 1998, 16.

49 The performance I attended took place at the Store Room, in Melbourne, 2004 and was directed by Julie Waddington.

50 For which, see States 1985, 29.

51 Garner 1994, 182 explains this response quite clearly.





her play has undeniable power: intellectually, it's hard to see what point it is making';⁵² 'the acts of brutality ... are either tedious or laughable';⁵³ 'lashings of stage violence are not really shocking, just hard to believe'.⁵⁴ These reactions are understandable. Since graphic scenes necessarily entail more physical and sensory content, they repeatedly threaten to break through that thin veil we term suspension of disbelief. As Basset says, they are 'hard to believe',⁵⁵ but this should not necessarily be a criticism. If anything, the most immediate response to powerful onstage phenomena is visceral.⁵⁶ On stage, actual phenomena – bodies, objects – are always somewhat unpredictable, so too are the reactions they generate.⁵⁷ Many of Kane's critics felt that her violence hindered the story. In other words, they wanted to see these acts incorporated more thoroughly into the semiotics of dramatic convention. Some responded with laughter – 'more in-yer-lap than in-yer-face' wrote one reviewer.⁵⁸ Clearly phenomenological content can be very distracting for an audience and often risks eliciting an inappropriate response. It might be difficult to keep a straight face during Theseus' suicide if you can smell the tomato ketchup. Further, graphic material is by nature excessive and numbing – two concepts that also featured prominently in the reviews. Hall spoke of 'atrocious fatigue' while Billington concluded that *Phaedra's Love* shocked the audience into submission.⁵⁹ Yet there is one crucial point that all these critics have missed: repeated exposure to sex and violence is precisely the origin of Hippolytus' numb indifference. The phenomenology of Kane's stage mirrors the behavioural characteristics of her protagonist.⁶⁰ Although they are inter-

52 Billington 1996, 2.

53 Hall 1996, 20.

54 Basset 1996, 34. For an overview of Kane's relations with the British media and some possible reasons for their strong reaction to her work, see Luckhurst 2005, 107–24.

55 Basset 1996, 34.

56 See, for instance, Billington 1996, 2. When I witnessed them, the final scenes of *Phaedra's Love* made me feel physically sick. Some members of the audience around me were inadvertently clutching their sides or sitting in defensive postures much like, during Gloucester's blinding in *King Lear*, spectators occasionally cannot resist touching or even covering up their own eyes. When the stage body is under duress, it often has physical repercussions for the bodies in the audience.

57 On which, States 1985, 42–46.

58 Cited by Sierz 2001, 108.

59 Hall 1996, 20 and Billington 1996, 2.

60 On a related note, Scarry's 1985 study, *The Body in Pain*, is also useful for interpreting Kane's dramaturgy and her characterization of Hippolytus. Although she does not use a specifically phenomenological approach, Scarry 1985, 5–6, 54, and





connected modes of viewing, the experiential and referential aspects of any act become almost polarized on Kane's stage, the former typical of Hippolytus, the latter of Phaedra.

When we see Hippolytus for the first time he is sitting on a couch and watching a Hollywood movie (scene 1). A paradigm of spectatorship is thereby established; Hippolytus is the internal audience of *Phaedra's Love*. From the outset, Kane's play prompts us to consider our own act of viewing.⁶¹ When the drama is over we, the external audience, will be able to judge whether our reactions reflect those of Hippolytus.⁶² In this first scene, Kane's stage directions read: 'The film becomes particularly violent. Hippolytus watches impassively' (scene 1). In fact impassivity is Hippolytus' number one response to almost every event in the play, and especially to anything graphic or physical. In scene four, Phaedra asks her stepson why he bothers to have sex since he obviously does not enjoy it:

Hippolytus: Life's too long.

Phaedra: I think you'd enjoy it. With me.

Hippolytus: Some people do, I suppose. Enjoy that stuff. Have a life.

Phaedra: You've got a life.

Hippolytus: No. Filling up time. Waiting.

Phaedra: For what?

Hippolytus: Don't know. Something to happen.

Phaedra: This is happening.

Hippolytus: Never does.

Phaedra: Now.

Hippolytus: Till then. Fill it up with tat.

Bric-a-brac, bits and bobs, getting by,
Christ Almighty wept.

For Hippolytus sex is just a physical distraction from the tedium of reality.⁶³ Yet this is a cause as much as it is a symptom of his all-engulfing *ennui*.

161–62 observes that physical pain tends to destroy language and therefore resists verbal objectification. Similarly, Kane depicts physical sensation as the point where language disintegrates, and meaning with it.

61 Zimmerman H. 2001, 177 is, to my knowledge, the only critic to have noticed this rather obvious detail.

62 This might initially look like a contradiction of my preceding argument: in order to make a judgement we have to objectify this violence somewhat and in doing so distance ourselves from its immediate facticity. But, as I have already pointed out, any initial phenomenal impression will inevitably recede and be replaced by some kind of signification. Also, it may be argued that in making a judgement about the protagonist's behaviour, we are assessing his reaction to physical phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves.

63 As Saunders 2002, 74 astutely observes.





Paradoxically, his preferred form of escapism *is* reality and his perverse addiction to sensation deadens him more and more. Ken Urban is right to remark that in Kane's work 'hell is hyper-real, reality magnified.'⁶⁴ Hippolytus' life exemplifies the bleak cycle envisaged by Bataille: a succession of intensely physical experiences that dulls the senses and lessens belief in the metaphysical.⁶⁵ If by the end of the play our nerves are equally numbed – and many reviewers imply that this is so – then perhaps Kane has simply compelled her audience to sympathize with Hippolytus.

Only one thing even mildly excites Kane's protagonist: the prospect of his own trial and condemnation as a rapist. When he learns of his fate, he declares, 'Me. A rapist. Things are looking up.' (scene 5). For Hippolytus, this is 'life at last' (scene 5); it is the best present he has received all day: 'This isn't tat. This isn't bric-a-brac.' (scene 5). The language of these lines echoes his statement in scene 4 – 'fill it up with tat. Bric-a-brac, bits and bobs' – and so reinforces the idea that only his trial and possible execution can stimulate Hippolytus' dulled appetite. Quotidian sex and violence do not satisfy; Hippolytus needs something more sensory and sensational. Ironically, it is Phaedra who has granted him this opportunity. When the stepmother over-interprets the symbolism of one physical act and turns fellatio into rape, she sets off a chain of events that will eventually allow her stepson to undergo the ultimate, unintelligible physical sensation: death. In the play's final scene, mutilated and barely breathing, Hippolytus murmurs (scene 8), 'if there could have been more moments like this'. Such an oxymoron is typical of Kane's black humour: this is a once-in-a-lifetime event, figuratively and literally.

Hippolytus is obsessed with the 'hyper-real' to the extent that death by dismemberment becomes a pleasure: it does not mean anything; it is simply exciting. Hence the number of graphic events escalates at the end of the play: a crowd tears Hippolytus apart; when Strophe tries to defend her stepbrother, Theseus rapes and kills her; then, upon realizing his mistake, Theseus adds his own corpse to the pile (scene 8). By placing everything directly before the audience, Kane challenges viewers to interrogate

64 Urban 2001, 45. Garner 1994, 93 comments on this effect as follows: 'Whereas illusionism sought to suppress the mundane materiality of the object, to incorporate it into the displaced materiality of dramatic fiction, the "actualized object" precipitated an alienation of the illusionistic field from itself, through ruptures of the "otherness" to which it was supposedly transparent. As a result of this alienation, illusionism foregrounded the object with an unprecedented, almost hyperrealistic materiality.'

65 Bataille 1985, 237 and 239.





their own reactions. They may laugh; they may be stunned: at the very least, they will realize just how meaningless these corporeal acts can be. Theatre is also the perfect medium for achieving this realization. After all, dramas create their illusory worlds from the raw material of the physical body. Both phenomenological and semiotic elements are fundamental to how theatre works.

On a simpler but no less important level, Kane's dramaturgy ensures that members of the audience do not forget their status as spectators. In the first scene they watch Hippolytus watching TV; in the final scene they are entertained by a crowd that seeks entertainment at Hippolytus' trial (scene 8):

Theseus: Come far?

Man 1: Newcastle.

Woman 1: Brought the kids.

Child: And a barby. [barbecue]

Not only have these people brought their children – they even have equipment for a picnic! But the only thing this BBQ ends up grilling is Hippolytus' genitals (scene 8). These nameless bystanders effect a rapid transformation from spectators at a sensationalized show trial to frenzied pseudo-Bacchants.⁶⁶ As they cut and slash at Hippolytus, we the audience cannot help realizing that watching these acts is exactly the sort of entertainment Hippolytus enjoys. At this point we surely ask ourselves – if we haven't already – whether we enjoy it too.⁶⁷

As a general rule, the more discomfiting the material, the more aware we are of watching it. It is unsettling to see even an imitation of things that are usually kept out of sight. In this sense, the graphic moments in drama traditionally remained backstage not just because they present potential problems for enactment: they are also, quite simply, private. On the classical Greek stage, the area behind the *skene* is imagined as an enclosed, interior space, whether it is a palace, a tent, or the underworld.⁶⁸ Most often, it is domestic. The physical contrast between private, mysterious, enclosed

⁶⁶ Here Kane is probably not alluding to Euripides' *Bacchae* directly. As Segal 1986, 215 observes, the final act of Seneca's *Phaedra* draws upon the *Bacchae* quite heavily. So, if Kane's images seem Euripidean, it may just be because of Seneca. It is also worth noting that Kane's Hippolytus becomes a kind of Jesus figure in this final scene: Man 1 declares, 'He has to die' while Man 2 rejoins, 'For our sake'. Later, Theseus resembles Judas when he kisses Hippolytus before throwing him into the hostile arms of the waiting crowd.

⁶⁷ See Zimmerman H. 2001, 177.

⁶⁸ Wiles 1997, 165–68 provides valuable analysis of this.





spaces and those that are open to the public gaze reflects the analogous conceptual contrast of what should and should not be seen. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, the scene between Phaedra and her nurse cleverly engages with these polarities (170–361): a private, domestic conversation takes place on stage and the dramaturgy mirrors Phaedra's revelation of her secret, incestuous desire. Kane's plays, in contrast, barely acknowledge the existence of offstage space.⁶⁹ Sex – generally something that happens behind closed doors – now happens in full view. Violence, too, violates the dichotomy of inside and outside, as it opens up regions of the body that are not usually seen. An audience compelled to witness such events is placed in a position of extreme discomfort, upset for and by someone else's exposure. By staging graphic material, Kane emphasizes the distance between what these acts often symbolize and how they appear visually. In *Phaedra's Love*, when offstage acts appear on stage, they very literally move away from a symbolic region and into a more experiential register.

So the graphic scenes in *Phaedra's Love* clearly amount to much more than just 'shock tactics'.⁷⁰ They help explain the drama's crucial interaction between Hippolytus and Phaedra and illustrate, physically, visually, each character's defining traits. Kane's version blasts through the classical conventions of what should and should not be shown on stage. This kind of dramaturgy sometimes creates a species of *aporia* in the audience: many people are unsure how to react. Their initial bewilderment is, however, perfectly explicable: graphic actions are not immediately subsumed into the symbolic order and so we, in turn, have no immediately programmed response to them. Instead of focusing on plot, motivation and meaning, audience members may start wondering how the effect was created, and whether that is real blood;⁷¹ some may simply find the sensory onslaught exhausting, or greet it with embarrassed laughter. Either way, such re-

69 In fact, like most modern drama, *Phaedra's Love* turns the dichotomy inside out: offstage space represents the public domain – the outside world.

70 'Shocking' is a word commonly applied to Kane's theatre, and indeed to many British plays from the 1990s: see Armistead 1998, 12; Billington 1996, 2; Sierz 2001, 36–64. For me, the term is problematic because it implies that the plays' violence is mere sensationalism. Stating that Kane's work has 'shock value' suggests that the playwright consciously anticipated, and courted, a storm of media attention. It also deflects critical attention away from the dramas' content and onto their most controversial scenes. In this article, I am in part attempting to show that the graphic material in *Phaedra's Love* is integral to the play's overall meaning rather than ornamental, that is, stuck on to make the audience gape and reviewers froth at the mouth.

71 Again, see States 1985, 42–46.





sponses are integral to the drama's purpose. Whether it is numbness, confusion, distraction or enjoyment, our gut reaction to the phenomena of sex and violence reveals how we make meaning out of troubling confrontations with the human body. *Phaedra's Love* compels both audience and characters to acknowledge this confrontation.

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Like Kane's version, Seneca's dramatization of the Phaedra story focuses upon acts that resist or confound interpretation in words. Naturally, the two playwrights approach the issue in significantly different ways: whereas Kane works this theme into her play's on-stage action, Seneca's concern is present chiefly in his language. Words for showing and telling abound in the Latin *Phaedra* and throughout, the heroine struggles to communicate the incomprehensible lust that seethes inside her. Violence, like sexual desire, is equally meaningless: the closing scene of the play witnesses Theseus trying in vain to reassemble his son from a collection of barely recognizable body parts.

Unfortunately, whether a real Roman audience also witnessed Theseus piece together his son's torn limbs is an unanswerable question and a potential snag for my comparative interpretation of Seneca and Sarah Kane. There is simply no evidence that these plays were ever staged during their author's lifetime.⁷² It is as a result impossible to argue, with any degree of honesty, that Seneca wrote his graphic scenes with their metadramatic impact in mind.⁷³ Granted Senecan tragedy may be 'performable'; granted many contemporary directors are choosing to stage it, but to assess Senecan dramaturgy via these modern manifestations would be disingenuous and a-historical.⁷⁴ Evidently, States' theory about the phenomenology

72 On which issue, see Boyle 1997, 10–11; Goldberg 1996, 265; and Herington 1966, 444.

73 By 'metadrama' I mean the technique by which the internal drama of the play is duplicated through its dramaturgy and provokes amongst the audience effects analogous with the stage characters' reactions, as I argue for Kane's work above. In Seneca's case, we simply cannot assess this, since we have no basic knowledge of whether or not the plays were performed. Metatheatre in Seneca is another matter entirely. In his tragedies there are manifold instances of characters acting self-consciously and internal audiences regarding, even judging, the action. Informative studies of Seneca's metatheatricality include Boyle 1997, 112–37; Erasmo 2004, 122–39; and Littlewood 2004, 172–58.

74 This scenario is extreme, but the thought-process it entails is one of the potential pitfalls of reception studies, a discipline that sometimes assents to blur or, worse, dismiss the concept of an originary text – used here in its broader sense of inter-





of performance cannot be applied to an analysis of Seneca's *Phaedra* like it can to Kane's. Nonetheless, the same duality of showing and telling, the occasional conflict between an event's referential and experiential aspects, is a prominent theme in the text of Seneca's play.

Of course, the bare fact that there is no ancient evidence for the staging of Senecan drama has not prevented scholars from arguing about the possibility. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to draw attention to one aspect of the scholarly debate: classicists frequently cite Seneca's graphic scenes – mostly onstage killing and suicide – in support of a reci-

pretable material – and its original meaning. In response to this tendency, I have adopted a largely historicist viewpoint (without claiming full allegiance to that school). Understandably, historicism plays a contested role in reception studies, with both sides of the debate claiming that the other's methodology is insufficiently historical. For instance, Martindale 2006, 1–13 asserts that each generation and era irreversibly alters the text it receives so that these works 'mean differently in different situations'. He criticizes historicism for not being historical enough (2006, 4). Yet he also recognizes that many classicists use the concept of reception to chisel away an accretion of meanings and access the text in its original form (2006, 2 and 12). For my part, I accept that meaning is conditioned by context *only to a certain degree*; a text does not alter in its essentials. What these essentials are or may be, it is the duty of the scholar to ascertain. As an example closer to home, I offer Slaney's pronouncements on the recent performance history of Hughes' *Oedipus*. Blurring the distinctions between the dramatic character and the dramatic work, Slaney 2009, 53 argues for a non-linear performance genealogy: 'To conclude that Seneca's 'original' work has simply been mediated by Hughes, then further mediated by a director, misses the point; this sequence retains the linearity that *Oedipus* defies, or defiles. *Oedipus* may be defined instead as the fusion of multiple superimposed realisations, or as the gestalt of all his presences onstage.' In the vein of Worthen 1997, 1–43, Slaney wishes to dismantle the perceived hierarchy between script and performance. I agree that performances should not be assessed in terms of their 'faithfulness' to a script that, in many cases nowadays, does not even precede them, but Slaney's denial of linear associations is tantamount to denying a text's existence through time. If taken to an extreme, this approach would altogether negate the use of Seneca as a source text. Such methodological difficulties pervade reception studies primarily because it can privilege audience response at the expense of scholarly judgement. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with studying the responses of readers/viewers, it becomes problematic when it encourages scholars to abdicate from their position of knowledge and critical authority. Hughes' *Oedipus* might be the only version most people know (see Slaney 2009, 53), but anyone studying his adaptation admits that it has a history (even Slaney organizes her study of its various performances in chronological order). Although the idea of an 'original' text can be problematic in the collaborative and ephemeral arena of live theatre, we can only access the Latin Seneca via his writing. Hence I cannot, in good scholarly conscience, use the visceral effects in contemporary performances of Senecan tragedy as evidence for their author's original dramaturgic intentions.





tation scenario.⁷⁵ This trend began with Boissier, whose assessment of Seneca's 'horror scenes' became remarkably influential.⁷⁶ His ideas were perpetuated in Leo's 1878–79 edition and, most recently, in Zwierlein's 1966 monograph.⁷⁷ Criticism of Senecan violence was particularly common in the nineteenth century – looking back on decades of previous scholarship, Hermann exclaimed, 'On a tant reproché au theater de Sénèque ses horreurs!'⁷⁸ Although no longer so dominant, skepticism about Senecan violence has persisted. Interestingly, Seneca's critics often harmonize with Kane's reviewers, demonstrating shared assumptions about what should and should not be shown on stage. For instance, Mayer remarks that the scene in which Theseus reassembles Hippolytus could easily be laughable if staged.⁷⁹ Zwierlein prefers to emphasize the disgust these enactments might cause: 'daß solche übersteigerte, ekelerregende Phantasiebilder in wirkliche Bühnenhandlung umgesetzt werden könnten, ist schlechthin ausgeschlossen.'⁸⁰ Two assumptions appear to unite Seneca's critics: that his violent scenes are sensationalized and ornamental, distracting the audience from the plot, and that they risk eliciting from spectators a response inappropriate to the assumed dignity of tragedy.⁸¹

The parallel reception of Seneca and Kane is important inasmuch as it shows a similar aesthetic espoused by both playwrights. Senecan tragedy, like Kane's work, foregrounds graphic physical events precisely because they are affronting and difficult to interpret. Nor are these details mere

75 As Kragelund 2008, 182 observes.

76 See Boissier 1861, 9–10.

77 For information on Leo, refer to Fitch 2000, 1. Zwierlein 1966, 24–9 airs some very conservative ideas about the (non)staging of Senecan drama.

78 Hermann 1924, 208. Eliot (1927: 63–68) also acknowledges that nineteenth-century scholarship characterized Seneca as 'the author of the horrors which disfigure Elizabethan drama.' Contrary to this opinion, he concludes that Seneca's reputation for sanguinary detail is unmerited.

79 Mayer 2002, 16–17.

80 Zwierlein 1966, 28.

81 On the pro-performance side, Braun 1982, 44–47 puts forward the rather compelling argument that certain scenes in Senecan tragedy actually rely on stage action in order to make sense. Interestingly, the scenes Braun chooses are the graphic ones – Medea killing her children; Atreus revealing the severed heads of Thyestes' sons. Whether used in support or refutation of a recitation scenario, the violence in Seneca's plays is a site for debates about staging. A more recent scholarly trend, moreover, attributes the relative prevalence of violent scenes in Seneca to the influence of pantomime: see Lada-Richards 2007, 35 and Zanobi 2008, 227. Zanobi's fascinating investigation expands upon ideas first suggested by Zimmerman B. 1990.





sensationalism; they are, rather, integral to the play's meaning. The characters in Seneca's *Phaedra* share numerous traits with those in *Phaedra's Love*. In the Roman as in the modern version, physical sensation is difficult to communicate and comprehend: it remains obstinately in the realm of *being* rather than *meaning*. Seneca achieves this effect via one small but necessary word – *nefas*. A common term for 'sin' or 'crime', it is formed from *ne* ('not') and *fari* ('to speak'): anything *nefas* is essentially unutterable. It is Seneca's preferred word for describing Phaedra's incestuous desire,⁸² and at several points in the play he exploits its literal sense. Appropriately enough, Phaedra is unable to verbalize her lust directly. In the pivotal third act, she struggles to communicate her feelings to Hippolytus (602–607):⁸³

Phaedra: Sed ora coeptis transitum verbis negant;
vis magna vocem mittit et maior tenet.
vos testor omnes, caelites, hoc quod volo
me nolle.

Hippolytus: Animusne cupiens aliquid *effari* nequit?

Phaedra: Curae leves locuntur, ingentes stupent.

Phaedra: The words begin. My mouth won't let them out.

Something huge is urging speech; something greater holds it back.

I want the gods to witness – what I wish for, I don't want!

Hippolytus: You desire something *you can't talk about*?

Phaedra: Minor problems are eloquent. Catastrophes are speechless.

Hippolytus' line (606) is heavy with dramatic irony. As Segal remarks, Phaedra is both *cupiens aliquid* and *cupiens aliquid effari*: her desire for her stepson and her desire to speak it overlap.⁸⁴ Yet, at the same time, she is virtually unable to speak (*effari*) because her feelings are *nefas*.

Admittedly, Euripides' Phaedra also worries about speaking her feelings, but there is no question of Seneca slavishly replicating the Greek playwright's ideas. In Euripides' version, Phaedra guards her tongue as if she were hoping to stay ritually pure or legally unaccountable. 'You cannot trust the tongue', she says to the audience (395: *γλώσση γὰρ οὐδὲν πιστόν*). Earlier, when her Nurse cross-examines her and finally prises out the necessary information, Phaedra declares, 'You're hearing these things from yourself, not from me' (352: *σοῦ τάδ', οὐκ ἐμοῦ κλύεις*). This is not

82 Seneca could, and does, use *malum* fairly frequently, but *nefas*, *nefandus* and *infandus* are his most common terms for describing Phaedra's love.

83 All the translations of Seneca's *Phaedra* used in this article come from the work I did with Helen Slaney, translating the play for a staging by Omniprop Productions at the University of Melbourne in 2006.

84 Segal 1986, 157.





Seneca's *Phaedra* at all. Euripides' heroine suffers from the same lust, but communicating it is not represented as a bodily struggle. Clearly Seneca's *nefas* provides him with an opportunity that Euripides lacks with *κακόν*. The connotations of the Latin word also explain why Seneca chooses to have *Phaedra* confront *Hippolytus* in person, since this is where the word's literal and figurative meanings converge.⁸⁵

With her halting efforts to verbalize physical impulses, Seneca's *Phaedra* does not resemble Kane's. At the same time, she does not simply refuse to interpret the phenomena she experiences; she hardly exhibits the same cynical stupefaction characteristic of Kane's *Hippolytus*. The *Phaedra* of Seneca's tragedy is somewhere in between these two extremes. She does try, repeatedly, to make her feelings meaningful and in the process, she pours out metaphors: her love is volcanic (101–103); her mind is carried off course like a helmsman in a storm (181–83). In these moments, *Phaedra* certainly transfers physical sensation into the symbolic register. Yet the metaphors also demonstrate *Phaedra*'s inability to state her desire clearly and directly. Lust resists being revealed in words; it is instead most manifest in *Phaedra*'s physical appearance (362–66):

Nutrix: torretur aestu tacito et inclusus quoque
quamvis tegatur, proditur *vultu* furor;
erumpit oculis ignis et lassae genae
lucem recusant; nil idem dubiae placet,
artusque varie iactat incertus dolor

Nurse: She is seared by a silent heat. It's locked up inside.
Though she covers it up, her *face* betrays her raging passion.
Fire erupts from her eyes, and they are tired,
And don't like light. Nothing pleases her:
Misery pulls her this way and that, tears her apart.

For Herington this scene shows the close 'causal connection between moral and physical realities' in Senecan drama: as soon as *Phaedra*'s reason surrenders to her passion, her appearance alters.⁸⁶ Further to this, I would sug-

85 General scholarly opinion asserts that Act 3 of Seneca's *Phaedra* follows Euripides' earlier (now lost) version of the story – see Segal 1986, 121. Yet, even if Seneca has borrowed the scene directly from Euripides, he has nonetheless shaped his characters' behaviour around connotations that are specific to the Latin language.

86 Herington 1966, 434. The visible effects of *pathos* are also explored by Gazich 2008, 209–25. He investigates Seneca's Stoic idea that external, physical symptoms reveal (*ostendere*) a character's internal, psychological/moral state. When one is able to perceive these symptoms in a precise and circumscribed manner, then they act as an *admonitio* that points to (*demonstrare*) the correct interpretation and, conse-





gest that here the binary opposition of passion and reason works in tandem with the duality of phenomena and signs outlined above. Emphasis upon desire's physical presence underscores Phaedra's struggle to locate it in the realm of speech and symbol. Appropriately enough, what Phaedra really wants (*vult*) appears in her face (*vultus*).⁸⁷ The image recurs in Act 3, at the critical moment when Phaedra expresses her infatuation (646–48; 654–56):

Phaedra: Hippolyte, sic est: Thesei *vultus* amo
illos priores, quos tulit quondam puer,
cum prima puras barba signaret genas
...
tuaeve Phoebes *vultus* aut Phoebi mei,
tuusque potius – talis, en talis fuit
cum placuit hosti, sic tulit celsum caput.

Phaedra: Hippolytus, it's like this: I love Theseus' *face*,
the boyish one he used to have,
when a beard first defined his delicate cheek
...
A *face* like your moon-goddess, or my bright sun –
like yours, really – like this, look, it was like this
when he charmed his enemy, like this, he held his head high.

Phaedra describes her longing obliquely, by talking about Theseus' corporeal characteristics – ones that are replicated, even improved, in Hippolytus' appearance (661–62). Once again, it is the raw phenomenon of lust that Seneca chooses to emphasize. The phrase *talis, en talis fuit* (655) begs accompanying action: instead of saying *te amo*, Phaedra touches Hippolytus' face and declares *Thesei vultus amo* (646). This tension between showing and telling is obviously more apparent when the scene is performed, but unlike many scenes in Sarah Kane, it does not depend upon performance in order to reveal these contrasting dramaturgic techniques. Even if she does so only on the page, Seneca's Phaedra still wavers between symbolism that is always inadequate and potent sensation that has to be shown because it just won't go into words.

quently, the correct behaviour. Although I do not as a rule support Stoic interpretations of Senecan drama, a study of characters' physical and facial reactions set against the background of Stoic ethics, as Gazich partially undertakes, would be fascinating. Certainly, Gazich is right to point out that Seneca's use of *ostendere* and *demonstrare* has a certain theatrical, even metatheatrical, quality.

⁸⁷ Although it seems quite clear to me that Seneca is playing with this etymology in his *Phaedra*, all definitions connecting the two words stem from a later period of antiquity. See Maltby 1991, 657.





It is not only in Phaedra's lust-crazed brain that Theseus and Hippolytus overlap. Father and son often use similar language in this play, especially when asking others to speak.⁸⁸ At 640, addressing his stepmother, Hippolytus commands *effare aperte*. Theseus echoes the phrase when talking to Phaedra's nurse (859) and repeats the command – *effare* – to Phaedra at 875. In this latter encounter, Phaedra is once again lost for words. She replies in fragments – *temptata precibus restiti; ferro ac minis / non cessit animus: vim tamen corpus tulit* (891–92). Mayer interprets Phaedra's reply as deliberate deceit; everything she says, after all, has a double meaning.⁸⁹ Yet a rapid turnaround from hapless victim to conniving vixen seems improbable and Phaedra, as demonstrated above, is not that adept with words. Hence I prefer to read Phaedra's response as genuine confusion, as another instance in which she cannot fully communicate what she feels. Unable to speak properly, she informs Theseus through gesture. Instead of saying the name 'Hippolytus', she hands Theseus his son's sword (896): *hic dicet ensis*. By stating explicitly that the sword will *speak* about Hippolytus, Seneca draws attention to Phaedra's lack of language: what the heroine is experiencing stubbornly remains *nefas*. This motif develops when, stunned by the sight of the weapon, Theseus cries out (898): *quod facinus, heu me, cerno? quod monstrum intuior?* Once again, the dramaturgic techniques of showing and telling are focused in the language of evil and horror. The *monstrum* is a monstrosity and a bad omen; it is also just something that is shown (*monstrare*).⁹⁰ Phaedra's desire, which resists being expressed clearly in words, gives rise to a *monstrum*, the gesture that suggests Hippolytus' crime. Theseus must look upon what Phaedra cannot say. This act will, eventually, create an even greater *monstrum*: the hideous bull from the sea.

Given Phaedra's behaviour, a visible death is fitting. The heroine's on-stage suicide is the only possible response to the *nefas* she feels – *hac manu poenas tibi / solvam et nefando pectori ferrum inseram* (1176–77). It is an act of revenge against herself and the only way, as she sees it, of atoning for what has happened to Hippolytus. It is also sexualized: ultimately, Phaedra expresses her desire via self-penetration with Hippolytus' sword.⁹¹ Granted

88 On this, see Segal 1986, 161.

89 Mayer 2002, 28–29.

90 See n. 8 on page 3 above.

91 This, at least, is the theory proposed by Boyle 1997, 86 and it seems perfectly reasonable to me. I do not agree with Mayer's claim (2002, 30) that the sword in Phaedra's hand does not in fact belong to Hippolytus. Mayer speculates about the sequence of stage action, asserting that after Phaedra has given the sword to Theseus at 896–97, the latter keeps it, thus precluding Phaedra from running back onto





it is not as confronting and phenomenologically ‘present’ as the acts on Kane’s stage, especially not if it is read or heard instead of being witnessed. Nonetheless in the internal imaginative world of the play, Phaedra’s death satisfies and communicates her lust through gesture rather than words. Seneca further illustrates this tension between vision and speech by having Phaedra refer to Hippolytus’ face (1168–69): *Hippolyte, tales intuoꝛ vultus tuos / talesque feci?* The repetition of *tales* recalls her earlier speech (655). Now, as then, her desire emerges through resonant words like *vultus*, but in this final scene the face she touches is mangled and separated from the rest of Hippolytus’ body. Her attempt at seduction in Act 3 and her lament in Act 5 mirror each other and conflate the inexpressibility of her desire with its visible, monstrous outcome. Phaedra’s onstage death is not only appropriate, it is also necessary since, by the end of Seneca’s play, her *nefas* has become a *monstrum*.

The effort to express a *monstrum* in words is clearly one of the major motifs in this tragedy and it is not restricted to Phaedra alone. The messenger, too, finds it difficult to verbalize what he has seen (991–99):

Nuntius: O sors acerba et dura, famulatus gravis,
cur me ad *nefandi* nuntium casus vocas?

Theseus: Ne metue clades fortiter *fari* asperas:
non imparatum pectus aerumnis gero.

Nuntius: Vocem dolori lingua luctificam negat.

Theseus: Proloquere, quae sors aggravet quassam domum.

Nuntius: Hippolytus, heu me, flebili leto occubat.

Theseus: Natum parens obisse iam pridem scio;
nunc raptor obiit. mortis *effare* ordinem.

Messenger: Fate is vicious, savage! I can’t bear this slavery.

Why me? Why should I play the messenger for these *unspeakable* events?

Theseus: Don’t be afraid to *tell* me about bitter disaster.

I’m prepared to bear the worst.

Messenger: My tongue won’t voice this painful tragedy.

Theseus: Speak. What else has broken my family?

stage with the weapon at 1155. Although Mayer is right to point out that the text gives no indication about whether Phaedra is carrying her stepson’s sword, it is equally true that the text gives no indication of Mayer’s proposition either. If these scenes are staged, Phaedra can regain possession of the sword in any number of ways and if these scenes are recited, the issue is somewhat moot. Mayer concludes that if Phaedra kills herself with a different weapon, ‘this does not really diminish the symbolism of the scene’. It is a mistaken assertion: since the scene is inherently sexual, Hippolytus’ sword lends it a symbolism that another random weapon would not.





Messenger: Hippolytus – it's horrible – Hippolytus is dead.

Theseus: I already know I've lost my son.

Now a rapist is dead. *Tell* me all the details.

Although he quickly comes to the point at 997, the messenger's self-conscious opening gambit – 'why should I play the messenger for these unspeakable events?' (992) – recalls Phaedra's struggle to make *nefas* meaningful. Once again, Theseus commands that a horrible event, replete with violence and confusing corporeality, be translated to the symbolic register (999): *mortis effare ordinem*. The messenger complies. But when servants hand to Theseus bits of the young man's body, the sheer physical mess of mutilation denies verbal description. This latter scene undercuts the messenger's monologue: Theseus has told him to make sense of the horror, but when he is faced with it himself, making sense is an almost impossible task. Theseus cries *Hippolytus hic est?* (1249), implying that these remains no longer have the power to signify his son. Even parts of the body are scarcely recognizable, let alone the whole human they once represented (1265–68):

Theseus: hoc quid est forma carens
et turpe, multo vulnere abruptum undique?
quae pars tui sit dubito, sed pars est tui:
hic, hic repone, non suo, at vacuo loco.

Theseus: What is this shapeless, ugly lump
gouged out by so many wounds?
I don't know what part it is, but it's part of you.
Here, put it here – not in its proper place, but in an empty one.

In this final scene the whole system of signification breaks down. Theseus cannot comprehend the phenomenon of Hippolytus' mangled limbs. In performance, this alienation occurs on two levels: just as Theseus cannot recognize his son, so the audience no longer sees the actor who played Hippolytus. Seneca clearly represents violence as something that will not fit easily into the symbolic order. To do this, he needs to bring Hippolytus' remains before his characters' eyes, and make them and his readers (and, perhaps, his audience) more aware of this gross corporeal presence. Like Kane's graphic scenes, the visible brutality in Seneca is not just shock tactics, or a morbid imagination running rampant. It is a carefully integrated part of the drama's motifs and meaning.

By way of conclusion, I return to Harrison's statement that Kane's *Phaedra's Love* 'makes only glancing allusions to Senecan drama, but ... consti-





tutes an effective appropriation of its spirit.⁹² Harrison is right: there are undeniable Senecan resonances in Kane's play. Yet his statement also raises some analytical difficulties. Since there is little textual correspondence between Seneca's version and Kane's, classicists working on reception cannot, in this instance, employ their usual technique of *quellenforschung*. The Senecan elements surfacing in *Phaedra's Love* are mediated not only by translation, but also by a performance tradition rooted in twentieth-century theory. How, then, can we confirm that hunch about Kane appropriating the 'spirit' of Senecan tragedy? The simple answer is that these playwrights display similar aesthetic and dramatic qualities in their work. Kane, like Seneca, foregrounds violent and sexual events and grants them a metadramatic function. In *Phaedra's Love*, graphic scenes illustrate the characters' conflicting personalities and, more importantly, challenge members of the audience to interrogate their own reactions. Repeated exposure to sex and violence aligns viewers with Hippolytus. Similarly, Seneca's *Phaedra* engages with the idea that corporeal sensation is not easy to express in words. The loaded terms *monstrum* and *nefas* convey this motif, while at the same time referring to a theatrical tradition that dictated what should and should not be shown on stage. In this regard, the content of Seneca's tragedy is as self-reflexive as Kane's dramaturgy. Both playwrights openly contest the widely accepted dramatic precept that certain events should be heard and not seen. Analogous responses from their respective critics reveal that this precept is deeply ingrained.

A further affinity between Seneca and Kane is the related performance contexts that witnessed the genesis of their works. While western media culture of the late twentieth century is hardly identical to early imperial Roman spectacles, there are nonetheless some revealing parallels. Both eras used real material as entertainment, blurring the boundaries between illusion and reality and redefining the territory occupied by 'art'. Kane and Seneca acknowledge the instruments of a voyeur culture: in *Phaedra's Love* it is the television; in *Phaedra*, the arena. For these two playwrights, such forms of entertainment naturally preclude a strict division between on- and off-stage events. As Kane once remarked, 'why pay ten pounds not to see it?'⁹³

Admittedly, the Senecan traits in *Phaedra's Love* are not the product of conscious imitation. Still, it is only by acknowledging this Senecan background that we can fully appreciate Kane's play. Critics who use Euripides'

92 Harrison 2009, 168.

93 Cited by Benedict 1996, 6.





Hippolytus as the basis for assessing *Phaedra's Love* inevitably misunderstand its dramaturgy. It is also the case that Kane's version highlights motifs central to Seneca's, albeit unintentionally.⁹⁴ Concern for the contrasting theatrical techniques of showing and telling is certainly present in the Latin *Phaedra*, but close reading of *Phaedra's Love* makes them much more apparent. Analyzed in tandem, Seneca's and Kane's plays demonstrate that the staging of graphic material is not just a matter of taste. It also addresses a fundamental issue: how language makes meaning out of real phenomena. Theatrical performance illustrates this process perfectly: neither Kane nor Seneca allow their audience to forget the physical matter that forms the basis of their diversion. Given the focus of their work, it is understandable that these playwrights sometimes prefer to show, rather than tell.

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⁹⁴ This suggestion, that reading Seneca can be informed or even improved by viewing Kane, is not a-historical. All I am saying is that themes already present in the Senecan text can become more apparent when considered in the light of Kane's *Phaedra's Love*.





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