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What is Dramatic Recitation?

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Abstract

This article examines the literary evidence for recitations of drama in first- and early second-century C.E. Rome. It begins by contextualizing the practice of *recitatio*, and thereafter focuses on the central question of how a solo speaker could recite a play so as to render it intelligible for his audience. Two solutions suggested by extant sources are voice and gesture; it is possible that the individuals reciting plays either altered their intonation or inserted specific movements to signify a change of character. Although both of these solutions are tentative, they indicate nonetheless that dramatic recitation involved elements of performance.

Keywords

Recitation – Seneca – Roman tragedy – performance – voice – gesture

The main issue surrounding any study of Senecan tragedy is whether Seneca wrote his plays for performance or recitation. No ancient evidence absolutely confirms or denies either hypothesis, but this has not stopped scholars from arguing about them.¹ Put simply, those in favour of recitation cite the plays'

¹ The only evidence we have is Quint. *Inst.* 8.3.31, a reference to Seneca and Pomponius Secundus discussing issues of diction in *praefationes*, that is, in the preamble summaries assumed to precede actual *recitatio*. Contrary to claims made by Fitch (2004, 19-20), however, the anecdote does not make clear whether Seneca or Pomponius or both were presenting their works in recital, nor whether the works presented were definitely tragedies.

episodic form, descriptive language, and relative lack of cues as indications that Seneca did not compose for the stage.² Those who favour performance, in contrast, argue that Seneca's tragedies are not just able to be staged, but must be in order to realize their full effect and meaning.³ What the entire debate misses is the potential for overlap or exchange between these two activities. First, the idea that Seneca wrote plays only for recital is part of a larger scholarly narrative of decline, one which regards a dwindling performance record as confirmation that Roman tragedians of the early empire no longer composed for the theatre.⁴ The most conservative versions of this theory separate *recitatio* from stage performance to a degree that the two pursuits appear mutually exclusive, and that reading to an audience is assumed to be a less sophisticated pursuit than acting in front of one.⁵ The division, however, need not be so stark; Roman cultural practice did not switch instantly from staging plays to reading them, nor was the act of reading itself necessarily un-dramatic.⁶ Therefore, of the two main questions addressed in this article, the first considers whether and to what extent the practice of recitation eclipsed actual tragic theatre in the early imperial period.

The second, and closely related, question is how one speaker could possibly recite a dramatic text. One of the most frustrating aspects of pro-recitation

2 Zwierlein 1966 is the major 20th-century work arguing that Seneca composed *Rezitationsdramen*. Prior to Zwierlein, similar views were put forward by Boissier 1861 and Beare 1945, among others. More recent claims in support of recitation can be found in Fantham 1992, 34-49; Goldberg 2000; and Mayer 2002, 19-35. Fitch (2000, 1-12) summarizes both sides of the debate; Goldberg (2007, 577) traces the issue through recent scholarship.

3 Major proponents of the pro-performance argument are: Herrmann 1924, 153-232; Sutton 1986; and most recently, Kohn 2013. Others include: Boyle 1997, 11-12; Davis 2003, 20-7; and Braun 1982, who puts forward the clever argument that some moments in Senecan tragedy (like *Thy.* 997-1006 or *Med.* 893-875) would be completely unintelligible *unless* they were staged.

4 A view put forward with slight variations in Beare 1945, 15-19, and 1964, 233-234; Beacham 1991, 125-126; and Goldberg 1996, 272-275, who presents the standard 'decline narrative' in a more positive manner, arguing that the movement from performance to recitation saved rather than destroyed Roman tragedy as a genre.

5 As proposed by Butler 1909, 25-30; Eliot 1927 (reprint, 1948), 68-70; and Beare 1945, 15-19. Jory (1986, 143) comments: "the absence of later literary texts has led to the assumption that sophisticated theatrical entertainment was a feature of Republican life which all but disappeared with the arrival of Imperial rule."

6 Harrison (2000, 138) notes: "The distance between recitation and performance is considerably narrower than one might presume: it is limited to the presence or absence of physical action guiding the reception by an audience, and to some degree colouring interpretation through nuance and gesture of oratorical delivery."

arguments about Seneca is that they rarely if ever ask how Seneca's tragedies were read aloud to an audience.⁷ Such an omission hampers scholarly understanding both of *recitatio* and of Roman imperial drama more generally. For instance, it is often unquestioningly assumed that Seneca's tragic style suits recitation better than it suits the stage; yet it is a difficult task for a solo speaker to recite a drama, and close inspection of Seneca's text reveals many elements that do not make the job any easier. So if Seneca was writing for oral performance, we must allow that such a performance was fairly sophisticated. The overall point to bear in mind is that dramatic recitals and dramas acted on the stage were not antithetical pursuits, but contiguous ones.

1 Recitation in Context

The performance of Varius' *Thyestes* represents a crucial juncture for historians of Roman tragic theatre.⁸ Leading up to this event is a rich tradition of playwrights composing tragedies for the stage; following it, references to recitation predominate instead. To paraphrase Sander Goldberg, those studying Roman tragedy must wrestle with the paradox that not a single play known for certain to have been performed survives intact, while the only plays that have survived, the Senecan corpus, are not accompanied by any production history.⁹ Does Augustus' principate therefore mark a break in the style and purpose of Roman drama?

Perhaps. But not one as definitive as scholars imagine. Periodization exists far more in the minds of historians than it actually exists in history, and accidents of survival have unfairly accentuated the parallel divisions between republican and imperial tragedy, performance and recitation.¹⁰ The practice of

7 Walker (1969, 184) raises this issue in her review of Zwierlein. Beare (1945, 15); Herington (1966, 445); and Fantham (1992, 47-48) likewise acknowledge the challenges involved in reciting drama but do not subject the issue to any sustained analysis.

8 Evidence for the play's performance comes from a note written in an 8th century codex from Monte Cassino (Paris, Bibl. Nat. Lat. 7530) and appearing again in a 9th century codex from Benevento (Rome, Bibl. Casanatense 1086): *Lucius Varius cognomento Rufus Thyesten tragoediam magna cura absolutam post Actiacam victoriam Augusti ludis eius in scaena edidit pro qua fabula sestertium deciens accepit*. The performance probably occurred as part of the triumphal celebrations in 29 B.C.E. For close analysis of the manuscript note, see Jocelyn 1980, 387-400.

9 Goldberg 1996, 265.

10 A more measured view of imperial performance culture can be found in Fantham 1992, 7-9, and Boyle 2006, 185-186 and 192-193.

reciting plays was certainly prevalent during the early empire: Pliny the Younger declares tragic drama a standard feature of *recitatio* (*Ep.* 7.17.3-5), while Juvenal's first *Satire* (1.5-6) lists two tragedies—a *Telephus* and an *Orestes*—in its scathing catalogue of second-rate recitals. Further, the Maternus of Tacitus' *Dialogus* has recited a *Cato* (*Dial.* 2.1), and declares his intention to present a *Thyestes* in the same manner (*Dial.* 3.3). Yet there is also evidence that at least one tragedian in this era was actually putting new works on stage. According to Tacitus, the aristocratic playwright Pomponius Secundus was accustomed to present plays in the theatre (*carmina scaenae dabat*, *Ann.* 11.13.1) and may once have suffered the crowd's displeasure precisely because of such a show (*Ann.* 11.13.1).¹¹ The younger Pliny likewise testifies to Pomponius' theatrical activities: apparently, whenever Pomponius' friends criticized his tragedies, the playwright replied that he would appeal to the people and make a final decision depending on whether the crowd applauded or was silent (*dicere solebat: 'Ad populum provoco', atque ita ex populi vel silentio vel assensu aut suam aut amici sententiam sequebatur*; *Ep.* 7.17.11) The anecdote implies that recitation could function as a preliminary exercise, a way of testing one's composition prior to actual performance.¹²

Accompanying these direct references is the general evidence of early imperial Rome's burgeoning performance culture. John Jory rightly points to this era as a time when Romans constructed more theatres and added more festival days to their calendar than ever before.¹³ Granted that venues and opportunities do not necessarily equal literary output, it is still difficult to imagine that these new buildings did not host new dramatic works when they definitely hosted mime, pantomime, vocal performances, and revivals of older plays.¹⁴

¹¹ Quintilian praises Pomponius as by far the best tragedian of his era: *eorum quos viderim longe princeps* (*Inst.* 10.1.98). Tempting as it may be to translate *quos viderim* as 'whom I have seen' and therefore take it as further evidence of performance—as Kohn (2013, 10) does—the phrase actually means that Pomponius was Quintilian's contemporary; see Beare 1945, 16, and *OLD s.v. video* entry 3b.

¹² An observation I owe to Fantham 1992, 7. Interestingly, non-dramatic works that passed through this process also appear to have been presented in the theatre, for which phenomenon Quinn (1982, 153-157) presents a useful summary. Recitation was also a writer's preliminary step in preparing his work for publication; see Dupont 1997, 48, and Gurd 2012, 105-126.

¹³ Jory 1986.

¹⁴ Most of the evidence for mime being performed in theatres is epigraphic rather than literary; see Csapo and Slater 1994, 373-378. Literary evidence for pantomime performances in the first-century C.E. is plentiful: Ovid *Tr.* 2.519-20, 5.7b.25-26; Sen. *Suas.* 2.19; *AG* 9.248 (Boethos), 9.542 (Crinagoras), 11.254 (Lucilius), 16.290 (Antipater), 16.289 (anonymous);

Further, the very practice of reviving and re-performing earlier drama indicates that Romans of the first century C.E. were willing, perhaps even eager, to see plays staged in actual theatres. When Quintilian criticizes actors for making their voices quaver, he names as examples two plays of Menander, which presumably he had attended (*Inst.* 11.3.91).¹⁵ He all but confirms these as re-performances of Greek New Comedy when later in the same work he mentions two comic actors, Demetrios and Stratocles, whose respective performance styles he describes in eye-witness detail (*Inst.* 11.3.178-180). A brief citation in Juvenal (3.99-100) also makes clear that these two performers were Quintilian's contemporaries. Nor was comedy the only genre appearing on stage: Seneca *Ep.* 80.7-9 describes a performance of, and cites some lines from, two tragedies of uncertain authorship, which given their diction are probably revivals of earlier, republican plays.¹⁶ Since dramatic works had not entirely disappeared from the stage during the first century C.E., it seems reasonable to suppose that contemporary playwrights were also contributing new compositions.

By the same token, reciting dramatic works may not have been the exclusive preserve of first- and early second-century C.E. Rome. Athenaeus, for instance, reports that Antiphanes once read one of his comedies to Alexander (Ἀντιφάνης ὁ κωμωδιοποιός . . . ἀνεγίνωσκέ τινα τῷ βασιλεῖ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῶν ἑαυτοῦ κωμωδιῶν, *Deip.* 555a). In the Latin tradition, Suetonius records a story about Terence, who was ordered to recite his *Andria* to Caecilius (*iussus . . . Caecilio recitare*, *Vit. Ter.* 2), and Gellius declares that Accius read his *Atrius* to the elderly Pacuvius (*tragoediam suam, cui Atrius nomen est, desideranti legit*, 13.2). Although these stories should be interpreted with caution, and although the Latin anecdotes in particular clearly belong to the biographical cliché of a younger poet presenting his work to a famous older poet, it still seems fair to say that writers of the pre-imperial period did occasionally read their plays aloud, even if they were not composing solely for the purpose of recitation. After all, giving and attending public recitations of non-dramatic poetry, and

Suetonius, *Cal.* 57 and *Ner.* 54; Tac. *Ann.* 1.54, 1.77, 4.14, 11.13, 11.28, 13.21, 14.21; Lucian *Salt.* 64; Macr. 2.7.12-19. Vocal performances were given by Nero (Pliny *Nat.* 37.19; Suet. *Nero* 21; Tac. *Ann.* 14.15; Dio 61.20.2), and of course, singing had always been an important aspect of tragedy and *palliata* alike. On revivals of older dramatic works, see below, n. 17.

15 Fantham (1984, 308) is sceptical, suggesting instead that Quintilian attended a recital or private performance, not public theatrical event.

16 Warmington (1957, vol. 2, 609, n. d) conjectures that the second of the two extracts quoted by Seneca may belong to Ennius' *Telephus*. Further evidence for re-performances of earlier drama can be found in: Suet. *Nero* 11; Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.60-61; SHA *Hadr.* 19.6. Nervegna (2007, 21-25) discusses more fully revivals of old drama during the Roman period.

of prose, was a popular activity throughout antiquity:¹⁷ why would theatrical compositions have been completely exempt from this pursuit until the time of Augustus?¹⁸

Admittedly, reconstructing early imperial performance culture is no easy task when references are so scattered and inconclusive. Yet all of these small anecdotes have a cumulative effect, and taken together they imply that throughout the first-century C.E. recitation existed alongside the theatre, not competing with it but, if anything, complementing it. Moreover, close analysis shows that the practice of recitation itself required a reading that was at least quasi-dramatic. It is to such analysis that I now turn, beginning with the crucial question of how one recites a play.

2 One Reader or Many?

The main difficulty involved in reciting a play is its form, namely its lack of contextualizing narrator. Whereas in epic and elegy, novels and Platonic dialogues, narrative interjections of the ‘I said . . . , he said . . .’ variety allow reciters to avoid any sustained confusion over which character is speaking, drama by its very nature has no such mechanism. Because plays as a genre are intended for physical performance, their texts rarely signal changes of speaker, which makes passages of stichomythic exchange, or three- or four-way dialogue, a particular challenge to follow when they are read aloud by only one voice.¹⁹

17 Funaioli 1914 is a comprehensive list of all Greek and Roman references to recitation. Mayor (1880, *ad. Juv.* 3.9) also provides an extensive list, though he focuses on Latin sources of the late republic and early empire.

18 Contra Dupont 1985, 399-400, we should approach with caution the idea that dramatic recitals either originated or gained a significantly new form under Augustus. Arguments of this nature tend to focus on the figure of Asinius Pollio and to place undue weight on Seneca the Elder’s claim that Pollio *primus . . . omnium Romanorum advocatis hominibus scripta sua recitavit* (*Con.* 4 *prae.* 2). Since Pollio is known to have composed plays (*Hor. Carm.* 2.1.9-12; *Tac. Dial.* 21.7), he is assumed to have recited them as well, perhaps even inventing the entire practice of dramatic recitation. However, claims of priority are a standard feature of ancient biographical remarks—as Jory (1981, 148) acknowledges—and Seneca the Elder’s statement should not be taken too literally. Rather than invent public recitation *per se*, Pollio may at best have formalized the practice. For an even-handed analysis of Seneca’s claim, see Dalzell 1955.

19 A point I have confirmed through my own experiments on conference audiences, both at Cornell University, and at the 34th annual meeting of the Australasian Society for Classical Studies in January 2013.

John Herington raises precisely this issue in his 1966 article on Senecan tragedy, where he cites the following exchange between Medea and her nurse:

Nutrix: Rex est timendus. **Medea:** Rex meus fuerat pater.

N: Non metuis arma? **M:** Sint licet terra edita.

N: Moriere. **M:** Cupio. **N:** Profuge. **M:** Paenituit fugae.

N: Medea—**M:** Fiam. **N:** Mater es. **M:** Cui sim vide.

Nurse: A king must be feared. **Medea:** My father was a king.

N: You are not afraid of armed force? **M:** Not even if it has sprung from the earth.

N: You will die. **M:** I want to. **N:** Escape. **M:** I regretted escape.

N: Medea—**M:** I shall be. **N:** You are a mother. **M:** See who made me so.

(*MEDEA* 168-171)

In his subsequent interpretation of the passage, Herington wonders how a single reciter can possibly cope with such an exchange and suggests, by way of solution, a separate voice for each part.²⁰ It is tempting to imagine that plays were read by more than one person, and Herington's hypothesis has enjoyed a fair degree of scholarly support. Anthony Boyle, for instance, cites Herington's idea almost as if it were a fact: "if Seneca's tragedies were written for recitation *in toto*, they were **undeniably** written to be delivered by a number of voices playing separate parts."²¹ Elaine Fantham is more cautious, but even she conjectures that Seneca may have given dramatized readings "in cooperation with others."²² The solution's popularity lies in its appealing ability to amalgamate recitation with performance: if there is more than one speaker, then dramatic *recitatio* begins to resemble a basic read-through or lines-run prior to actual staging, a proto-dramatic activity that must appear enticing to Seneca scholars who argue in favour of the plays' performance.²³

Yet the hypothesis is ultimately untenable, because a recitation involving several speakers requires a plural verb (*recitant* vel. sim.), and extant accounts never use a plural in this way. The descriptions of dramatic recitation that we find in ancient works unanimously imply that there is a single speaker, one who is, most of the time, also the work's author. Thus the opening gambit of

²⁰ Herington 1966, 445.

²¹ Boyle 1997, 12 (bold type added).

²² Fantham 1992, 48.

²³ On the potentially dramatic qualities of group recitation, see Boyle 1997, 12, and Herington 1966, 445.

Juvenal's first *Satire* uses a singular verb to denote a comic playwright reading his works: *impune ergo mihi recitaverit ille togatas?* (1.3). The Maternus of Tacitus' *Dialogus* likewise gives a solo recitation: *postero die... Catonem recitaverat* (*Dial.* 2.1). Finally, Suetonius records that the emperor Nero recited songs both at home and in the theatre (*recitavit et carmina, non modo domi sed et in theatro, Nero* 10). This last example is, admittedly, a little ambiguous, since *carmina* could mean 'drama' on the analogy of Tacitus *Ann.* 11.13.1 (*carmina scaenae dabat*), but could just as easily mean 'lyric' or 'epic'. The other two examples, however, quite clearly refer to dramatic texts and indicate that these pieces are being read by one voice only.

It is also unlikely that singular forms of the verb *recitare* could imply multiple readers by translating more obliquely as 'to give a recitation' or 'to make a recitation happen'.²⁴ Militating against this proposition is the fact that Latin will use *recitare* in the plural to designate two or more speakers engaged in the same activity, but only in political and legal contexts, such as when edicts are being read aloud. Hence, Livy reports that the censors M. Livius and C. Claudius recited their list of senators (*censores... M. Livius et C. Claudius senatum recitaverunt*, 29.37.1); Pliny similarly mentions people reciting an edict (*illi... edictumque recitaverunt*, *Ep.* 10.56.2) and citizens making official statements (*quae dicebant quaeque recitabant libello complecterentur*, *Ep.* 10.47.2).²⁵ Moreover, the Livy passage also seems to indicate that the recital in question is a joint, possibly simultaneous activity, not merely a case of several people reciting texts singly on separate occasions. Since Latin is evidently capable of using this plural, there is no reason to suppose that it would avoid doing so simply in the case of dramatic recitation. On the other hand, since references to dramatic recitation remain resolutely in the singular, we are justified in assuming one reader as opposed to several.

Further evidence in support of a singular verb denoting a single reader comes from the internal logic of both Juvenal's and Suetonius's remarks about recitals. When Suetonius declares that Nero recited songs (*recitavit et carmina, Nero* 10), the whole point of his statement is that Nero himself performed rather than simply hosted recitations. The passage from Juvenal's first *Satire* likewise implies a solo performance because it equates someone reading *fabulae togatae* with someone else reading elegy (*impune ergo mihi recitaverit ille togatas / hic elegos?* 1.3-4); given that the latter genre would not require several

²⁴ A clever but ultimately refutable suggestion, for which I must thank Robert Cowan.

²⁵ Even in these instances Latin rarely uses an active plural verb, preferring passive forms instead (for example: Petr. 53.9.1, *iam etiam edicta aedilium recitabantur*). On *recitatio* and *recitare* as legal terms, see Valette-Cagnac 1997, 24, and in more detail, 171-245.

speakers, it seems fair to say that the former, too, is being read by just one individual.

The same situation prevails in passages that do not use the verb *recitare*. When Pliny attends a recital by Vergilius Romanus, the poet himself reads his comedies and there is no mention of anyone accompanying him (*nuper audiui Vergilium Romanum paucis legentem comoediam*, *Ep.* 6.21.2). Solo readings also appear to have been the norm at more private recitals. Pliny remarks on several occasions that he enjoys listening to a *comoedus* after dinner: in one letter, he regrets that forensic business sometimes forces him to forego this entertainment (*si agenda necessitas instat, quae frequens hieme, non iam comoedo vel lyristae post cenam locus*, *Ep.* 9.40.2); in another, he grumbles about guests who prepare to depart as soon as the *comoedus* begins (*quam multi, cum lector aut lyristes aut comoedus inductus est, calceos poscunt*, *Ep.* 9.17.3). In each instance, Pliny groups comic actors with performers who provide essentially aural entertainment, *lectores* and *lyristae*. He likewise speaks of comic plays in a manner that suggests they were read aloud, not acted: *et comoedias audio et specto mimos et lyricos lego* (*Ep.* 5.3.2).²⁶ In *Epistle* 1.15, Pliny pairs a plural—*comoedos*—with the verb *audio* (*audisses comoedos*) in a manner that suggests an auditory performance as opposed to a visual one. This is the only time Pliny mentions *comoedi* in the plural, and if the passage can be taken as referring to a recital, it is the closest evidence we have for anything approaching ‘group recitation.’²⁷

For the parallel context of Menander at Greek symposia, Eric Handley makes a similar suggestion about group recitals. Discussing the notational sigla preserved on some papyri of Menander’s plays, Handley proposes that these marks were meant for dividing a text among multiple readers.²⁸ The sigla, which take the form of Greek letters surmounted by a macron, are generally

26 *Comoedi* were also capable of *acting* scripts in after-dinner contexts, as Trimalchio implies at *Petr.* 53.13: *nam et comoedos . . . emeram, sed malui illos Atellanam facere*. However, we need not infer a staged performance every time *comoedi* are mentioned; Fantham (1984, 306) is surely right to point out that Pliny talks of *hearing* comedy, not *seeing* it, and Quint. *Inst.* 1.12.1, suggests that *comoedi* were valued for their vocal skill. For a contrary view, see Jones 1991, 192–193, and Nervegna 2013, 183–185.

27 Nervegna 2013, 81 and 183–184, argues that the singular, *comoedus*, could likewise imply a whole troupe, on the analogy of victory inscriptions and laws. Pliny, however, is using neither epigraphic nor legal discourse (while the law that Nervegna cites—Gaius *Inst.* 3.212—suggests only that *comoedi* could work as a troupe, not that the singular noun could represent the plural). Also, Quint. *Inst.* 1.12.1 implies a solo *comoedus* working as a trainer.

28 Handley 2002, 170–171.

thought to represent ordinal numbers and hence, to designate which individuals belong to which parts.²⁹ Since at least one papyrus bearing such sigla can be dated to the mid first-century C.E.,³⁰ it is tempting to regard these divisions as parallel evidence for Pliny's *comoedi* or even for Roman *recitationes*. The more likely explanation, however, is that the sigla indicate either role-divisions for professional actors or, in some cases, reading marks for school students.³¹ If performers at Greek symposia recited Menander together during the early empire, they have, unfortunately, left no trace of their activities.³²

So, Herington's hypothesis of group *recitatio* finds no confirmation for the contexts in which Seneca would have presented his tragedies, and slim confirmation—if any—for more private, informal performances. If Seneca's plays were read aloud, they were read by a solo reciter, which compels us to revisit the initial problem of how a single speaker could interpret the multiple voices and characters of drama in a manner that rendered a play's action intelligible to his audience. Once again, ancient authors provide at best slight clues and half answers, from which two main possibilities may be deduced: vocal intonation and gesture.

3 Voice

According to some scholars, Roman drama of the early empire altered its form as a result of its new medium.³³ Since recitals rely on aural effects, the play

29 A standard view, summarized by Jory 1963, 65-67.

30 On the dating of *PSI* 1176, see Nervegna 2013, 241.

31 Handley (2002, 170-171) conflates abridged texts with those bearing notational sigla and so concludes a) that excerpts were read at symposia and, b) that these excerpts were read by different voices. However, the abridged text that Handley cites, *POxy.* 409+2655, bears no sigla (see Arnott 1996, 154-155), while the papyrus he cites as featuring notational symbols, *PSI* 1176, is in fact a complete text (see Lloyd-Jones 1963, 445, and Harder 1985, 24). For the theory that notational sigla represent actors' role-divisions, see Andrieu 1954, 230-257; Jory 1963; Harder 1985, 23-24; and Gammacurta 2006, 52-56. For the contrasting idea that some of these papyri are copies used by students, see Nervegna 2013, 240-243.

32 Plutarch mentions τοῖς Μενάνδρῳ ὑποκρινομένοις (*Moralia* 673b), but the participle could denote either declamatory reading or full dramatization.

33 Goldberg (1996, 274-275) remarks: "The ubiquity of recitation as a medium for bringing literature to its audience doubtless encouraged the assimilation of poetry to the demands of rhetorical display." The issue is, fundamentally, chicken-and-egg: is Seneca's style proof that he wrote for recitation, or the result of a pre-existing recitation culture? Most scholars who support this overall view argue for the former option, though few draw definite

texts composed for such events would, it is assumed, include more monologues and lengthier descriptions, which would be easier for a solo speaker to read than complex scenes featuring three or four interlocutors.³⁴ Such suggestions have of course been made on the basis of Seneca's tragedies and are therefore problematic, both because they derive a general rule from one particular author, and because they do not take differences of genre into account.

This latter point is crucial. Although no comic drama survives from the early empire, references in Juvenal (1.3) and Pliny (*Ep.* 6.21.2) demonstrate that contemporary poets were not only composing new comedies, but also reciting their works in public.³⁵ Without knowing the content of these plays, we cannot pass any conclusive judgement on their form; we may, however, make a couple of broad observations, namely that comic dialogue is on average more brisk and conversational than exchanges in tragedy, and that comedies are more likely to involve scenes with three, four, or even five speaking characters.³⁶ Terence, for instance, is supposed to have read his *Andria* aloud to Caecilius (Suet. *Vit. Ter.* 2, above), and this play frequently presents four speaking characters on stage simultaneously (*An.* 412-431; 459-480; 684-715; 842-871; 904-956). If reciting tragedy represents a challenge, how much more of a challenge is it for a *recitator* to present a comic play?

The obvious solution is that readers were adept at modulating their voices. Quintilian suggests as much when he advises that professional *comoedi* be employed to coach young orators-to-be in the arts of intonation and delivery (*dandum aliquid comoedo quoque, eatenus qua pronuntiandi scientiam futurus orator desiderat*, *Inst.* 1.11.1). Such *comoedi*, it seems, specialized in vocal training; they were the ones who taught students how to deliver a courtroom *narratio*, how to persuade in an authoritative tone, how to sound angry, how to make their voices evoke pity (*debet etiam docere comoedus quomodo narrandum, qua sit auctoritate suadendum, qua concitatione consurgat ira, qui flexus*

distinctions; see Beare 1945, 14-19; Fantham 1992, 34-49; Goldberg 2000, 223-227. Zwierlein (1966, 127-166) contends that Senecan drama evolved from a philosophical tradition of writing tragic plays for recital.

34 On Seneca's monologues and descriptive passages, see Zwierlein 1966, 63-72 and 110-124; Fantham 1992, 41-44; Goldberg 2000, 223-224. Herington (1966, 436-443) presents a more general and positive appreciation of Seneca's descriptive art.

35 For an opposing view, see Goldberg 1987, 365-366, who speculates that Roman comedy had virtually died out by Quintilian's time.

36 Arrangements involving three or four speaking characters are common for *palliata* in particular; an example of five is Plautus *As.* 851-941 (Argyrippus, Philaemon, Demaenetus, Artemona, Parasitus). On roles and role-division in Roman comedy more generally, Marshall (2006, 83-125) is indispensable.

deceat miserationem, Inst. 1.12.1). So developed was the skill of these *comoedi* that Quintilian warns against young men learning inappropriately ‘stagey’ tricks from them, like imitating the high pitch of a female voice (*femineae vocis exilitate, Inst. 1.11.1*) or the tremulous tones of old men (*seniliter tremere, Inst. 1.11.1*). The advice implies that some orators and declaimers were engaging in quasi-dramatic impersonation. Moreover, excessively theatrical imitation appears to have been one of Quintilian’s pet peeves, since he even complains about comic actors who alter their voices in order to report another character’s words (*Inst. 11.3.91*). Both those reading comedy aloud and those performing it on stage evidently had a reputation for vocal agility. We may therefore surmise that members of the Roman elite were capable of an equivalent vocal agility, which they would have used mostly in the courtroom and senate, but which would have served them equally well in the recitation hall.

A flexible voice is likewise required to deal with the specific kinds of texts that *comoedi* were presenting at banquets (Menander) and young Romans reading aloud in school (Menander; Terence). Both of these authors offer diverse opportunities for impersonation, not just in sections of dialogue, but also in monologues, where their characters frequently report, imitate, and even mock each other’s words. Generally referred to as ‘narrative speech’ or ‘speech within speech’, this stylistic trait constitutes a defining aspect of Menander’s comedies, one that Terence inherits and develops further.³⁷ Its effect is to make monologues more complex and more demanding on the actor’s vocal skills. The character of Demeas in Menander’s *Samia*, for instance, even uses his monologue to report an entire conversation that he has overheard:

] και θεραπεινιδίω τινί
 ἔξωθεν εἰστρέχοντι, “λούσατ’, ὦ τάλαν,
 τὸ παιδίον” φησίν, “τί τοῦτ’; ἐν τοῖς γάμοις
 τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς τὸν μικρὸν οὐ θεραπεύετε;”
 εὐθὺς δ’ ἐκεῖνη “δύσμορ’, ἡλίκον λαλεῖς”
 φήσ’· “ἔνδον ἐστὶν αὐτός.” “οὐ δῆπου γε· ποῦ;”
 “ἐν τῷ ταμειῷ” καὶ παρεξήλλαξέ τι·
 “αὐτὴ καλεῖ, τίτθη, σε” καὶ “βάδιζε καὶ
 σπεῦδ’· οὐκ ἀκήκο’ οὐδὲν· εὐτυχέστατα.”

37 Handley 2002, 178-186, and Nünlist 2002, 219-259 are both informative studies of Menandrian ‘speech within speech’. Handley’s chapter also includes an epilogue on Terence, though the subject awaits further research. For more on Terence’s ‘speech within speech’, see Bexley 2014.

] and she says to some servant girl
 running in, "The baby must be bathed, wretch.
 What's this? You're not looking after the little one
 on the father's wedding day?"
 But the girl says straight away,
 "You're talking too much, you good-for-nothing;
He is inside." "Oh no! Where?" "In the storeroom,"
 and she changed her tone a bit, "The mistress is calling you, nurse,"
 then, "Go, hurry; he hasn't heard anything. That's lucky."

(*SAMIA* 251-259)

This complex passage requires one actor to alternate between three separate voices that are not always distinguished by φησὶ (esp. 256-257). As such, it provides a useful parallel to dramatic recitation, and in particular to the stichomythic exchange that Herington cites from Seneca's *Medea* (168-171, above). Since Menander's monologue was made to be performed by a solo speaker, why would a solo reciter of Senecan tragedy not possess the same skills? After all, those giving recitals during the early empire had read Menander in school, and had used his drama as a resource to help them develop their oratorical delivery. Quintilian advises that students study Menander both for his eloquence (*tanta in eo . . . eloquendi facultas*, *Inst.* 10.1.69) and because his character sketches are useful for declamation (*plus adhuc quiddam conlaturum eum declamatoribus puto, quoniam his necesse est . . . plures subire personas*, *Inst.* 10.1.71). Further, Statius acknowledges the skill involved in reciting Menander's texts when he praises a young slave boy for his enunciation: *gratus amictu / Attica facundi decurreret orsa Menandri / laudaret gavisa sonum . . . / . . . Thalia* (*Silv.* 2.1.113-116).³⁸ Given that Romans were reading Menander aloud, it seems reasonable to suppose that they were also changing their intonation and speaking style in order to represent a series of characters. In the passage cited above, the phrase *καὶ παρεξήλλαξέ τι* may even be a stage direction advising speakers to modify their voice. It would be odd if, having read such a phrase aloud, *comoedi* and students alike did not alter their tone to fit the context.

Besides the evidence relating to comedy, there is some suggestion that tragic performances too demanded a degree of vocal skill. Cicero remarks that the ideal orator requires a *vox tragoedorum* (*de Orat.* 1.128) and recommends that orators study tragedians' vocal techniques (*de Orat.* 1.251). Close inspection of

38 Fantham (1984, 307) groups Statius' slave boy with the professional *comoedi* performing at dinner parties. Nervegna (2007, 31, n. 115) disagrees, and suggests instead that *Silv.* 2.1.113-116 describes a school recitation, not a sympotic one.

Senecan drama also reveals some passages of ‘speech within speech’, albeit in a style less complicated than Menander’s. In Seneca’s *Oedipus*, for instance, Creon quotes both Teiresias’ words (571-573) and those of Laius (626-658) in his speech describing his ritual consultation of the dead (*Oed.* 530-658). Like Menander’s monologues, this passage is designed for a single voice, and so requires at least a modicum of impersonation in performance as well as in recital. In fact, any speech that reports another characters’ words, whether from tragedy or comedy, is a text that begins to collapse the difference between recitation of drama and its full stage performance.

Finally, whenever Roman writers describe recitations, they emphasize the quality and appeal of the reader’s voice. The Roman populace depicted in Juvenal, for instance, seems as eager to hear Statius’ ‘pleasant voice’ as it is to hear the *Thebaid*: *curritur ad vocem iuncundam et carmen amicae / Thebaidos* (7.82-83). Works and their presentation are in fact inextricably linked, as in Suetonius’s story of Julius Montanus, who said that he would plagiarize some of Vergil’s lines if only he could appropriate the poet’s voice, expression, and delivery as well (*Iulium Montanum poetam solitum dicere, involaturum se Vergilio quaedam, si et vocem posset et os et hypocrisin: eosdem enim versus ipso pronuntiante bene sonare, sine illo inanes mutosque, Vit. Virg.* 29). Here the term *hypocrisis* (ὑπόκρισις) corresponds to the Latin *pronuntiatio*; it indicates not full theatrical performance, but the spoken delivery typically practised by orators.³⁹ Persius, too, acknowledges the efforts that some reciters would make to acquire a supple tone. In his first *Satire*, he mocks the *litterateurs* who warm up their voices with a sequence of modulations prior to reciting their works (*liquido cum plasmate guttur / mobile conlueris, 1.17-18*).⁴⁰ That Persius ridicules these vocal effects further proves that they were an expected part of public recitation.

It is therefore possible that a solo reciter of, say, Senecan tragedy, could make the text intelligible for his audience either by adopting a variety of voices, or at least by shifting his tone. Since most upper class Romans had received professional voice training and had already practised reciting drama as part of

39 Markus (2000, 170) misses this distinction when she translates *hypocrisis* as ‘acting skill.’
 40 *Plasmate* denotes some kind of vocal warm-ups, which Persius likens to gargling (see Lee and Barr 1987, *ad loc.*) The term also appears in Quint. *Inst.* 1.8.2, where it is similarly treated as a piece of effeminate showmanship: *sit autem in primis lectio virilis et cum sanctitate quadam gravis, et non quidem prorsae similis, quia et carmen est et se poetae canere testantur, non tamen in canticum dissoluta nec plasmate, ut nunc a plerisque fit, effeminata.* Markus (2000, 155-162) demonstrates that effeminacy and theatricality are often paired in Roman critiques of public *recitatio*.

their schooling, there is no reason to suppose that they would have found Seneca's stichomythia a challenge to read aloud. Further, the example of Demeas in Menander's *Samia* clearly shows that monologues can be just as complex as dialogues, and from this simple fact, we may draw two important conclusions: first, that Seneca's preference for monologues over conversation need not imply *ipso facto* that he was writing for recitation rather than performance; second, that reciting drama probably required similar vocal skills and delivered similar vocal effects as acting it. This is not to say that Roman recitals of dramatic works equalled or even approximated performances, merely that *recitatio* was an event requiring some degree of dramatic talent from the speaker.

4 Gesture

Another technique that may have been used to interpret readings of dramatic works is gesture. Pliny mentions such a practice in *Epistle* 9.34, when he wonders what to do while he has a freedman recite some poetry, whether to sit still or to accompany his own verse "with low voice, eyes, and hand, as some people do" (*sedeam defixus et mutus et similis otioso an, ut quidam, quae pronuntiabit, murmure oculis manu prosequar? Ep. 9.34.2*). The phrase *ut quidam* suggests that such accompaniment was relatively common, and although Pliny is not forthcoming, the techniques he describes would have been as useful for explicating drama as they were for embellishing Pliny's own occasional poetry. Unfortunately, we do not know whether Pliny was sitting in the audience or beside the reader, so we cannot say for certain whether his gestural accompaniment would have transformed the *recitatio* into a dual performance of speech and action.

We can, however, be certain that the activity was quasi-dramatic. When Pliny defines it, somewhat facetiously, as 'dancing' (*sed puto me non minus male saltare quam legere, Ep. 9.34.2*), he likens it to pantomime, a theatrical genre in which solo dancers mimed mythical stories to the accompaniment of a choral libretto.⁴¹ The specific techniques that Pliny lists also evoke pantomime, since interpreting texts with the eyes and with the hand (*oculis manu*

41 *Saltare* is the standard verb used to describe pantomime in Pliny's era; when referring to mimetic dance, it is generally followed by a noun in the accusative designating the role (e.g. Juv. 6.63: *chironomon Ledam molli saltante Bathyllo*). On the connections Pliny draws between recitation and pantomime, see Valette-Cagnac 1997, 119. Recent studies of pantomime include: Garelli 2007; Lada-Richards 2007; Webb 2008; Hall and Wyles 2008.

prosequar) is precisely what this genre of mimetic dance was known for. For instance, an epigram from the Latin Anthology depicts a dancer gesturing *solerti manu* (*anth.* 100.4); Lucian calls pantomime artists χειρισόφους (*Salt.* 69); and Libanius defines mimetic dance as φορῶν χειρῶν (*Or.* 64.57).⁴² Closer to Pliny's era, the younger Seneca observes that those skilled in dancing possess very expressive hands (*mirari solemus saltandi peritos quod in omnem significationem rerum et adfectuum parata illorum est manus*, *Ep.* 121.6). To a lesser extent, the artist's eyes were also important, and Apuleius writes of one particular pantomime dancing by means of these alone (*nonnumquam saltare oculis solis*, *Met.* 10.32). Given that pantomime was a popular genre throughout the first century C.E., Pliny's comment places *recitatio* within a contemporary performance context.⁴³ More importantly, his evidence assumes no strict divide between techniques used in recitals and those used on stage; when Pliny decides not to accompany his text with low voice, eyes, and hand, he does so because he feels he lacks talent, not because he regards such behaviour as inappropriate to the dignity of a recitation. This is a valuable point, because it implies that recitals of drama, too, could adopt theatrical styles of delivery when and if they were needed.

Further, most upper class Romans were trained in gesture just as they were trained in voice. It is in fact possible that professional pantomimes were engaged to teach future orators hand movement and general bodily deportment in the same way that *comoedi* were teaching vocal agility.⁴⁴ Although Roman culture differentiated quite sharply between the physical conduct appropriate for actors and that appropriate for orators and aristocrats more generally, Pliny's *ut quidam* indicates that some Romans of his status were willing, able, and permitted to accompany recitals with a small amount of body language.⁴⁵ This is not surprising, since manual movement in particular was a

42 Weinreich (1948, 140-145) and Wüst (1949, 853) provide thorough summaries of pantomime's manual skill.

43 On pantomime's development, see Jory 1981. The genre grew in popularity to the point where it provoked riots under Tiberius and Nero, on which, see Slater 1994 and 1993, 205-212.

44 Quintilian *Inst.* 1.11.15-9 may imply that pantomimes are the ones training young men in *cheironomia* or 'hand gesture'. Morel (1969, 525-535) demonstrates that Roman elite youths shared other forms of training with pantomime artists, notably for theatricalized military displays like the *lusus Troiae*. Slater (1993, 208-211) examines the evidence for pantomimes and elite Romans learning calisthenic skills together.

45 Roman culture differentiated between an actor's body and an aristocrat's primarily because actors had no legal status; they were considered *infames*. Leppin (1992, 71-83) is the best and most thorough authority on the social and legal status of Roman actors; see

crucial part of the orator's skill-set, and Quintilian (*Inst.* 11.3.85-124) lists over one hundred individual gestures that could be used in pleading.⁴⁶ Many of these are meant to designate specific parts of the orator's speech (like the exordium: *Inst.* 11.3.92), or to articulate specific emotional reactions (like fear or surprise: *Inst.* 11.3.103). Given this extent of gestural detail, we may surmise that Roman audiences were familiar with a wide range of subtle hand movements; if equivalent gestures were employed in recitations of dramatic poetry, they could easily have signalled changes of speaker, entrances, exits, and even some emotions. Certainty is of course impossible without further evidence. Yet Pliny's comments in *Ep.* 9.34 at least allow us to glimpse another way in which play texts could be rendered intelligible for listeners at a recitation.

Conclusion

Overall, the skills that dramatic recitation demanded of its speakers were ones that most elite Romans could attain via their oratorical training. Although any conclusion must necessarily remain speculative, gestural and vocal techniques appear to have been just as crucial for reading play texts aloud as they were for guiding and embellishing the various parts of a forensic speech. In fact, in the diverse performance culture of early imperial Rome, dramatic recitation seems to combine elements from the stage with elements from courtroom and declamatory traditions.⁴⁷ Hence in some contexts, plays are read by professional *comoedi*; in others, they are presented by their aristocratic authors. Recitation may be performed for the assorted purposes of entertainment, education, or eliciting a critical response. The entire practice has its own continuum, and every single point on that continuum demands a presentation style that is at least quasi-dramatic. In the specific case of Senecan tragedy, *recitatio* is not anti-performance, but merely another kind of performance, one that mediates between theatre, courtroom, and schoolroom. If Seneca's plays really were written for recital—and there is no conclusive evidence either way—then it is better to regard these recitals as active vocal displays in the tradition of public oratory rather than disappointingly passive substitutes for actual theatre. Whenever scholars debate whether Seneca's tragedies were (or could

also Edwards 1997, 66-95. On concepts of physical propriety in Roman oratory, see Gleason 1995, 103-130; Richlin 1997, 99-105; and Gunderson 2000, *passim* but esp. 59-86.

46 Maier-Eichhorn 1989 is the fullest analytical account of Quintilian's catalogue.

47 Markus 2000 makes a similar argument for recitals of epic, when she measures their social function against Roman views of rhetoric and oratory.

have been) performed, they invoke the conventions of ancient dramaturgy and the technical capacities of ancient theatres; unless we pay equal attention to the conventions and capacities of dramatic *recitatio*, we shall judge Seneca's style according to uneven and unfair criteria. It is therefore imperative that we attempt to understand how dramatic recitation functioned and what it may have involved.⁴⁸

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