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## “GOTHIC” ELEMENTS IN SENECA’S TRAGEDIES

ABSTRACT. Pyłacz Joanna, “Gothic” elements in Seneca’s tragedies.

In the present article I discuss the remarkable fact that many of the motifs to be found in Seneca’s tragedies – such as a horrible death, a madman, an obsession or some supernatural agent – are also to be found in abundance in the work of “Gothic” authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Edgar Allan Poe. Indeed, these motifs are now commonly considered to be the hallmark of the Gothic genre. I also analyse some of the techniques which Seneca uses in order to arouse fear and stimulate the reader’s imagination, comparing them with those used by Poe and other Gothic writers.

Keywords: Seneca; Gothic tragedy; imagination; Poe.

### 1

When we speak about the Gothic in literature, we usually mean novels by Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe or short stories by Edgar Allan Poe. This is so because we associate the concept of Gothicism with a certain literary movement whose main characteristics were cruelty and a nightmarish atmosphere. A short (and perhaps one of the most accurate) definitions of “Gothic” literature is that given by Coral Ann Howells: “Gothic fiction presents a peculiarly fraught world of neurosis and morbidity, for these novels are death-haunted, full of violent deaths and fears of death and fantasies about death.”<sup>1</sup>

The main characteristics of Gothic literature and art are therefore: death, madness and any type of obsession (especially with death, as has been pointed out by Howells). The protagonists of works belonging to the category of Gothic fiction are mostly maniacs and neurotic people with extremely vivid imaginations who are dominated by their own illusions.

One such protagonist is the main character of Poe’s gloomy short story entitled “The Black Cat”, who is an alcoholic. Above all, however, he is a tyrannical psychopath. He cannot tolerate any situation in which someone or something fails to recognize his power or pay due homage to him. Whenever an adversary

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<sup>1</sup>Howells 1982 [2004]: 223.

who ignores his domestic omnipotence comes onto the scene, he immediately becomes obsessed with the idea of exterminating that particular person:

The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame.

This enemy is the eponymous black cat, an animal which in the sick mind of the protagonist takes on the proportions of a demon. In order to get rid of this particular adversary, he takes the ruthless step of hanging the animal from the branch of a tree:

It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only – that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree.

Other protagonists of Poe’s short stories are possessed of a similar personality, an example being the mad painter in “The Oval Portrait”, who becomes totally obsessed with art and with his own genius. Having decided to paint a perfect portrait of his wife, he shuts himself up with her in a palace tower. When the moment of completion finally arrives, he finds that in the meantime his model has died without him noticing it — just as he is about to put the finishing touch to his masterpiece.

In the works of “Gothic” writers, the main role is played by death.<sup>2</sup> If it is not presented as the main character at the very beginning of the story, it always lurks in the background, eventually emerging triumphant from the twilight. Obsession is its faithful ally. The characters give in to it unknowingly, because for them it is a higher imperative.

## 2

In the present article I shall attempt to describe those elements of Senecan tragedy that may be considered to be “Gothic” from a modern point of view. It goes without saying that I do not in any way intend to interpret the works of this Roman poet in an anachronistic manner, but merely wish to determine and briefly discuss those Senecan literary strategies which resemble the techniques used by English-speaking “Gothic” writers.

“Gothic” novels and short stories are dominated by two main motifs: death and madness. As far as the former is concerned, it must necessarily be horrific or, as is often the case, sickeningly repugnant. Considering madness first, we

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<sup>2</sup>Botting 1995: 75.

may ask how Seneca describes the condition of a man who goes mad and what the mad characters of his tragedies say of themselves.

Arguably, Seneca's most famous mad character is Hercules in the tragedy "Hercules Furens." When Juno inflicts him with madness, Hercules believes that his wife and children are the family of his enemy, the tyrant Lycus, and – blinded by this conviction – he murders his nearest and dearest. This madness is accompanied by an obsession with his own superhuman power:

*Perdomita tellus, tumida cesserunt freta,  
inferna nostros regna sensere impetus:  
immune caelum est, dignus Alcide labor (vv. 955–957).*

A similar obsession takes hold of the painter in Poe's story entitled "The Oval Portrait":

And he was a passionate, and wild and moody man, who became lost in reveries.

The protagonist of "The Black Cat" falls into a similar state and, possessed by the desire to kill the animal which he detests so much, proceeds to murder his own wife:

Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demonical, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain.

While Hercules is obsessed with the idea of fighting monsters and enemies, Poe's protagonist is driven to madness by the devilish power which he attributes to the black cat. In both cases, an innocent person falls victim to violence meted out by a maniac: in Poe's story it is the protagonist's wife that suffers, while in Seneca's play it is the protagonist's entire family that is slaughtered.

Both Seneca's Hercules and the protagonist of "The Black Cat" are eventually set free of their madness, but the damage which they have done is irreversible. The legendary ancient Greek hero goes into exile, while the protagonist of Poe's story, who is an ordinary mortal, is punished much more severely: in accordance with American law, he receives a death sentence.

One character who definitely deserves to be called a psychopath is Atreus in Seneca's "Thyestes." He too suffers from an obsession, considering himself to be the equal of the gods and harbouring a truly demonic hatred for his brother Thyestes:

*Aequalis astris gradior et cuncta super  
altum superbo vertice attingens polum.  
[...]*

[...] O me caelitum excelsissimum,  
regum atque regem! Vota transcendi mea (vv. 885–886, 911–912).

The murder by Thyestes of his own sons is related by a messenger:

Ipsē est sacerdos, ipse funesta prece  
letale carmen ore violento canit;  
stat ipse ad aras, ipse devotos neci  
contrectat et componit et ferro admovet,  
attendit ipse; nulla pars sacri perit (vv. 691–695).

During this infernal ritual, Atreus fulfils a threefold function: that of priest, observer<sup>3</sup> and god, as he offers this bloody sacrifice first and foremost to himself, or rather to the hatred which he feels for his brother-rival. He utters the ritual formulae *violento ore*, which does not preclude the fact that, as R. J. Tarrant has suggested, the ritual may have proceeded without disruption. The same scholar is of the opinion that here Seneca is not consistent, for if no part of the ritual is deficient (*nulla pars sacri perit*), he need not have described the character as being crazed (*furens*).<sup>4</sup>

There is indeed no reason why Atreus's madness need have taken the form of uncoordinated behaviour. On the contrary, it may have been a methodically performed ritual. In Poe's short story entitled "Eleonora", the narrator describes his madness thus:

Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought – from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect.

Seneca's Atreus is precisely such a remarkably intelligent person who is mad at the very outset. His *furor* is therefore different from that of Hercules, who succumbs to vainglory while under the influence of the madness visited on him by Juno. The disease of his soul is a disease of his thoughts, which, however, follow a highly consistent pattern. Indeed, the symptom of Atreus's madness is precisely this determination, which is the hallmark of all his actions, especially those which are the most abominable. They aim to achieve one objective: absolute power and the total extermination of his rival.

Combined with hatred, this determination is also an important trait of the personality of the protagonist of Poe's "The Black Cat", who decides to get rid of the detested animal at all costs. He ruthlessly eliminates all obstacles that stand between him and his goal, which is to kill the cat. And it is this determination that leads him to murder his own wife as she tries to stand in his way. Later on,

<sup>3</sup>Tarrant 1998: 191.

<sup>4</sup>Tarrant 1998: 190.

with this very same determination he walls up the woman's corpse in order to hide the evidence of his crime.

This important "Gothic" element – i.e. an overwhelming obsession – is to be found everywhere in the works of Seneca, as also in those of modern English and American writers. His characters not only succumb to the force of *affectus* – which Seneca opposed on philosophical grounds – but above all are possessed of minds that act quite differently from those of ordinary people.

By way of example, let us take a look at Hippolytus in "Phaedra." Apart from his passionate love of hunting, he holds a deep prejudice against women, which eventually becomes an obsession:

Detestor omnis, horreo fugio execror.  
 Sit ratio, sit natura, sit dirus furor:  
 odisse placuit. Ignibus iunges aquas  
 et amica ratibus ante promittet vada  
 incerta Syrtis, ante ab extremo sinu  
 Hesperia Tethys lucidum attollet diem  
 et ora dammis blanda praebebunt lupi,  
 quam victus animum feminae mitem geram (vv. 566–573).

The source of this hatred is a longing for the mother whom he has lost:

Solamen unum matris amissae fero,  
 Odisse quod iam feminas omnis licet (vv. 578–579).

What Roland Mayer sees as stereotypical criticism of women<sup>5</sup> and as mere generalization<sup>6</sup> would in my opinion seem to be rather the expression of a hatred that is just as fanatical as his love of hunting. Like Seneca's other protagonists, Hippolytus is possessed of a superhuman determination that likens him to the gods. Indeed, the heroic force of his character allows him to take the side of one deity (Diana) against another (Venus).<sup>7</sup>

### 3

Charles Segal deemed Seneca's tragedies to be a symbol of the Roman "baroque", adding that he was using the term to designate a literary and artistic phenomenon that was similar to the one which appeared in Europe after the Reformation:

Roman "baroque" does not, of course, have behind it the cultural forces of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation that stimulated such artistic developments in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mayer 2002: 55.

<sup>6</sup> Mayer 2002: 55.

<sup>7</sup> Mayer 2002: 59.

<sup>8</sup> Segal 1984: 311–325.

He goes on to write that not only can the Roman “baroque” be compared with the European Baroque, but also that their very sources lend themselves to comparison: in both cases, the appearance of this aesthetic trend was preceded by violent political change and a rule of terror.<sup>9</sup>

The same scholar is of the opinion that it is to the overdrawing which is omnipresent in “Phaedra” and Seneca’s other tragedies – together with a pungent style abounding in extremes – that the plays owe their “baroque” character.<sup>10</sup> As he notes at the beginning of his article, “Lengthy narrative ephrasis, often of violent or horrible content, is a hallmark of Senecan tragedy.”<sup>11</sup> In my own opinion, however – leaving aside linguistic and stylistic considerations – Seneca’s tragedies are closer to “the Gothic” than to the baroque.

From a stylistic point of view, the term “baroque” is entirely justified. However, as far as the content of these tragedies is concerned, it can be seen that they abound in elements which are generally considered to be characteristic of “Gothic” literature, these being, for instance, the model of the madman-protagonist or (as we have also seen in the case of Atreus) the psychopath-protagonist, fantasies on infernal subjects (e.g. the appearance of the ghost of Tantalus in the prologue to “Thyestes”) and the presence of supernatural phenomena (such as, for instance, the sea monster in “Phaedra” or the sacrifice in “Oedipus”).

This last feature of Senecan tragedy is of particular interest to us on account of its fairly obvious affinity with “Gothic” literature. As far as sheer content is concerned, parts of these works do not differ greatly from Poe’s “Tales of Mystery and Imagination” — and in particular all those places where the literary strategies used by the poet are quite clearly intended to terrify the audience or reader. As Michael von Albrecht writes in his discussion of the necromancy scene in “Oedipus” and the description of Hercules’ journey to the underground in “Hercules Furens”:<sup>12</sup> “Scenes added by Seneca often enhance horror.”<sup>13</sup> The same scholar also draws attention to the fact that Seneca’s tragedies abound in ritual scenes, of which there are many more than in the tragedies of Euripides.<sup>14</sup> The rituals are always extraordinary and mysterious, like the sacrifice in “Oedipus.” In this way, the poet creates an atmosphere of Burkean obscurity, which is also one of the major hallmarks of “Gothic” literature.<sup>15</sup>

Other important elements of Senecan tragedy are ghosts, fantastic creatures, apparitions and supernatural forces. This has been noted by Segal, who in this

<sup>9</sup> Segal 1984: 311–325.

<sup>10</sup> Segal 1984: 311–325.

<sup>11</sup> Segal 1984: 311.

<sup>12</sup> Segal 1984: 311..

<sup>13</sup> Von Albrecht 1997: 1181.

<sup>14</sup> Von Albrecht 1997: 1181.

<sup>15</sup> Howells 1982 [2004]: 225.

context has compared Seneca's "Phaedra" with Euripides' "Hippolytus." The comparison works to Seneca's advantage, for while Euripides manages to keep the scene of Hippolytus' death "within a human scale", in Seneca's plays there is a preponderance of supernatural forces.<sup>16</sup>

A similar situation occurs in "Thyestes", where the ghost of Tantalus appears at the beginning of the play. As we know, there had indeed been ghosts in Greek tragedies, but their function was quite different. The ghost of Polydorus in Euripides' "Hekabe", for instance, serves primarily as the play's exposition and as a means of arousing compassion or fear. The primary function of the ghost of Tantalus, however, which in part also serves as the play's exposition, is to give the work a decidedly metaphysical atmosphere. The function of this prologue, as has been observed by Paolo Mantovanelli, is also to foreshadow future events and to give momentum to the plot.<sup>17</sup>

The same scholar also notes that Tantalus personifies the manifold crimes perpetrated by all the members of his family<sup>18</sup> and rightly dubs him *il demone*.<sup>19</sup> He is indeed an evil demon who infects Atreus's palace with himself. Because of the function which he fulfils in the represented world, this character is more reminiscent of the Red Death demon in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" than of the ghosts which we know from Greek tragedy.

Although he begins by flatly refusing to carry out the horrifying task that the Fury endeavours to place on his shoulders, the words in which he presents the deed that he is called on to commit are an excellent example of the stylistic creations of Seneca's "Gothic" imagination:

[...] Mittor ut dirus vapor  
tellure rupta vel gravem populis luem  
sparsura pestis? [...] (vv. 87–89)

As we can see, Tantalus compares himself to a malevolent vapour (*dirus vapor*) and a pestilence (*pestis*) and even he is terrified by the vision of himself playing such a role:

[...] Ducam in horrendum nefas  
avus nepotes? [...] (vv. 89–90)

Using terrible tortures, the Fury finally goads him into action, which means infecting the palace with his evil:

<sup>16</sup>Segal 1984: 316.

<sup>17</sup>Mantovanelli 1993: 206.

<sup>18</sup>Mantovanelli 1993: 207.

<sup>19</sup>Mantovanelli 1993: 209.

[...] *Stabo et arcebo scelus.*  
*Quid ora terres verberare et tortos ferox*  
*minaris angues? Quid famem infixam intimis*  
*agitas medullis? Flagrat incensum siti*  
*cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat.*  
*Sequor* (vv. 95–100).

Although it takes Tantalus all of ten lines to decline (86–95), his torment-induced consent consists of just one word: *sequor*.

Initially, therefore, the audience might have the impression that – notwithstanding the crimes which he has previously committed – Tantalus exhibits indomitable courage, a sense of honour (*stabo et arcebo scelus*) and a determination that he will never agree to play the role of *dirus vapor*. In one moment, however, when – coerced by the Fury – he ends the discussion and almost without a word agrees to carry out the terrible order, he takes on the debasing status of a vile monster. In the eyes of the audience, this sudden change of decision (albeit enforced by blackmail) makes Tantalus appear to be even more despicable than if, without more ado, he had promptly and eagerly proceeded with the task of annihilating members of his own family.

Why, may we ask, does Tantalus not agree to do the deed straight away? For the very simple reason – I believe – that the poet was wary of monotonous exaggeration when he created him. If Tantalus had equalled Atreus in strength of character and determination, the play would have become boring and superficial, as Atreus would then not have been able to make a strong impression on the audience, who would have seen little difference between him and Tantalus.

However, as Atreus has no compunction in doing evil deeds and does them not only with great persistence and determination, but even with evident pleasure (notwithstanding the fact that he has been “infected” by Tantalus), the audience sees him as actually being worse than the latter. Atreus thus acquires the status of a true god of evil, while the spirit of his ancestor remains for ever a *dirus vapor* and a *detestabilis umbra* (vv. 23–24). And, as has been noted by Tarrant, Tantalus shows himself to be totally obedient to the Fury.<sup>20</sup>

The whole force of the impact which Atreus has on the audience lies in his total autonomy and in his unflinching determination to act destructively. Indeed, at the very beginning of the play Tantalus himself says that – compared with his descendant – even he appears to be quite irreproachable:

[...] *iam nostra subit*  
*e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus*  
*ac me innocentem faciat et inausa audeat* (vv. 18–20).

<sup>20</sup>Tarrant 1998: 103.

The ghost utters these words before the Fury comes to see him. What this would seem to imply is that his mission will not bring about a radical change and will perhaps merely serve to stimulate his victim's murky mind. From the very outset, therefore, Atreus is presented as evil incarnate.

The entire prologue of "Thyestes" consists of nothing but the poet's infernal fantasies. Infernal scenery (*custos carceris diri*, v. 16, *quod maestus Acheron paveat*, v. 17, *ad stagna et amnes et recedentes aquas*, v. 68, etc.) is accompanied by an atmosphere of general suffering (*nova ... supplicia*, vv. 13–14) – physical (*fugaces ... cibos*, v. 2 etc.) as well as mental – which is caused by the insults that are hurled at the dead by the gods of the Underworld (*perge, detestabilis umbra*, vv. 23–24).<sup>21</sup>

Victoria Tietze Larson has drawn attention to another interesting element of Seneca's tragedies, namely the so-called *locus horridus*.<sup>22</sup> These are passages in which the poet describes places that arouse fear. This particular scholar has found four such places ("Hercules Furens" 662 et seq., "Oedipus" 530 et seq., "Thyestes" 650 et seq., "Hercules Oetaeus" 1618 et seq.) and discusses their common features, the most important of these being that they are places which are far removed from civilization and are usually groves of ancient trees traversed by a river.<sup>23</sup>

The tradition of the *locus horridus* is, of course, a virtually constant motif of Roman epic poetry.<sup>24</sup> And, as Tietze Larson aptly observes, Seneca in his descriptions of "terrifying places" was inspired by the groves of Virgil and the *nekylia* from book VI of the "Aeneid."<sup>25</sup> Let us now take a look at the most characteristic of these descriptions, namely that of the terrifying grove in "Thyestes."

Unlike a similar description in "Oedipus" – which itself is inspired by "The Metamorphoses" (*Met.* X, 90–103)<sup>26</sup> – where the poet gives the names of many kinds of trees, the description of the grove in "Thyestes" only includes the names of poisonous trees such as the taxus, or those which the Romans associated with something terrible or unlucky, such as the *ilex nigra*.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Seneca has constructed his description in such a way that the picture which emerges from it is that of a place which is not only terrifying, but also quite repulsive:

Fons stat sub umbra tristis et nigra piger  
haeret palude; talis est dirae Stygis

<sup>21</sup> Compare Tarrant 1998: 91.

<sup>22</sup> Tietze Larson 1994: 87.

<sup>23</sup> Tietze Larson 1994: 88.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Tietze Larson 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Tietze Larson 1994: 89.

<sup>26</sup> Tarrant 1998: 185.

<sup>27</sup> Tarrant 1998: 185.

deformis unda, quae facit caelo fidem.  
 Hinc nocte caeca gemere ferales deos  
 fama est, catenis lucus excussis sonat  
 ululantque manes. Quidquid audire est metus  
 illic videtur; errat antiquis vetus  
 emissa bustis turba et insultant loco  
 maiora noctis monstra [...] (vv. 665–673).

What immediately strikes us is the description of a foul spring which resembles a black swamp (*nigra ... palude*) or the waters of the Styx. The poet describes it as being *deformis*. In my opinion, this adjective not only means “shapeless”, as has been suggested by Tarrant,<sup>28</sup> but also stands in opposition to *formosus* and so can refer to something disgusting or murky and misshapen.

Here Seneca has devoted a great deal of attention to ghosts and apparitions. What is particularly interesting is his use of the technique of onomatopoeic effects. In this connection, a pertinent observation has been made by Tarrant, who notes that in lines 669–670 Seneca uses multiple instances of the sound “u” to imitate the moaning of ghosts: “catenis **lucus excussis sonat/ ululantque manes.**”<sup>29</sup>

I myself think that in the previous line the poet also imitates the moans (*gemere*) of “dead gods”, in accordance with Tarrant’s reading of *ferales deos*:<sup>30</sup> “nocte **caeca gemere ferales deos**” (v. 668). Similarly, the sound combination “ksk” and the repetition of the sound “s” in the word *excussis* together imitate the clanking of chains (*excussis catenis*). Tarrant rightly notes that the combination *excussis catenis* is “more energetic” than Virgil’s *tractae ... catenae* (*Aen.* VI, 558).<sup>31</sup> In a similar fashion, several lines further on Seneca imitates the sound of sparks being struck: *excelsae trabes* (v. 674) and, by repeating the consonant “t” combined with the consonant “r” (i.e. the so-called *littera canina*), he imitates the barking of Cerberus: *latratu ... trino* (vv. 675–676).

Seneca therefore also makes an impact on the aural domain of his audience’s imagination. His descriptions of ghosts and apparitions are more vivid and clear-cut if we compare them with those of his predecessors (as is shown in Tarrant’s comparisons of the motif of chains in “Thyestes” and the “Aeneid”). He describes supernatural phenomena and ghosts with great stylistic precision in order to make the strongest possible impression on his audience.

Particular attention ought to be paid to lines 671–672, in which Seneca describes how the dead leave their graves and wander about the grove (“errat antiquis vetus / emissa bustis turba”). Tarrant is of the opinion that Seneca introduces this motif in the context of impending disaster (i.e. Atreus’s crime),

<sup>28</sup>Tarrant 1998: 187.

<sup>29</sup>Tarrant 1998: 187.

<sup>30</sup>Tarrant 1998: 187.

<sup>31</sup>Tarrant 1998: 187.

as does Ovid in his account of the assassination of Caesar (*Met.* XV, 796–798).<sup>32</sup> In my opinion, however, this motif should not be treated as being nothing more than a *prodigium*. Rather, it is an integral part of the description, to which it adds an even greater element of horror.

## 4

The examples given above show clearly just how much Seneca's tragedies have in common with English and American "Gothic" prose. Above all, what we have are lots of macabre fantasies on the subject of death. The *dramatis personae* are lunatics who are possessed by destructive obsessions. The most common source of these obsessions is a conviction of one's own divinity (as in the cases of Atreus and Heracles) or lust (as in the case of Phaedra).

Seneca's works also abound in supernatural phenomena, esoteric rituals and ghosts. The poet gives particular prominence to motifs which are both macabre and disgusting. In his descriptions, he plays on both the visual and aural imaginations of his audience. With remarkable accuracy, he imitates certain sounds by using combinations of vowels or consonants that have been specially selected for the purpose.

Seneca is particularly fond of the motif of the so-called *locus horridus*, which, though used by earlier epic poets, has a special meaning in his own works. He has brought to perfection the techniques of arousing terror previously developed by Virgil (and Ovid), as is amply shown by the description of a *locus horridus* in "Thyestes."

As far as the *locus horridus* is concerned, one of the most apt modern works with which "Thyestes" could be compared is Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", where, at the very beginning of the story, we have the description of a *locus horridus* which is similar to that of Seneca. The eponymous house, whose windows resemble eyes, is situated in a secluded place and is surrounded by sinister-looking trees:

[...] I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down [...] upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows. [...] an atmosphere which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

The story contains many more descriptions of this sort, which are also reminiscent of that of the grove in "Thyestes" and, like that grove, function as *loci horridi*. The forbidding setting immediately draws the audience into the

<sup>32</sup>Tarrant 1998: 187.

story's represented world. This technique – which was used by modern “Gothic” writers – was also used much earlier by the ancient Roman poet Seneca in order to achieve the very same effect.

Although Seneca's works have surprisingly much in common with those of the much later modern “Gothic” writers, this can in no way be taken to mean that Poe or any other “Gothic” author was “influenced by Seneca.” All we can say is that almost two thousand years after Seneca, the authors of modern “Gothic” literature rediscovered a similar kind of subject matter and had recourse to similar literary strategies.

All the artistic techniques which are so characteristic of Radcliff, Mathew Lewis or Poe have already been used by Seneca, who moreover delights in using their very same favourite motifs. We may therefore say that although it is difficult to prove the existence of any particularly strong links between Seneca and the English and American “Gothic” writers (who may or may not have known his tragedies), a close analysis of the texts shows that – despite a time span of about two thousand years – all these authors had a very similar type of artistic imagination.

The adoption of a broader time perspective – supported by thorough historical and literary analyses – makes it possible for us to see significant differences and similarities between individual texts, as well as between literary epochs. It also allows us to gain a better understanding, which can then be shared with contemporary readers. It is therefore no anachronism to compare ancient and modern works of literature whose authors would seem to have independently developed literary strategies that are identical or very similar. From the point of view of the modern reader, for whom the world of Roman literature is quite remote, it would seem to make more sense to say that there are “Gothic” elements in Seneca's tragedies than to say, for example, that Poe's short stories are Senecan in character.

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#### "GOTHIC" ELEMENTS IN SENECA'S TRAGEDIES

##### Summary

In the present article, I discuss elements of Seneca's tragedies that are to be found in abundance in the works of modern Gothic authors – so much so, that they could even be called "Gothic" themselves. These motifs – together with literary techniques whose aim is to stimulate the audience's imagination – are now generally considered to constitute the hallmark of Gothic fiction. From the point of view of the modern reader, therefore, Seneca's plays can be seen as having an affinity with the novellas of Poe or the works of other exponents of what we now refer to as "Gothic fiction."