

## LATN 4002 Roman Drama (TTh 12:30-1:45)

East Carolina University  
Tomorrow starts here.



<http://myweb.ecu.edu/stevensj/>

Prof. John A. Stevens

Office: Ragsdale 133

Hours: T-Th 10-11, 1:45-3:15 & by appt (<https://ecu.webex.com/meet/stevensj>)

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**Course Format and Continuity of Instruction.** This is a synchronous online course meeting by WebEx in Canvas. In the event of a disruption to campus operations, the course will continue in this mode. For office hours, though I am available to meet in person on campus upon request, the default will be to meet by WebEx at the personal URL above, preferably by appointment during the times listed. I am available to answer questions by email and to meet outside of office hours if needed.

**Objectives.** Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

- read and understand Roman comedy (2nd c. BC Republican Latin) and tragedy (silver Latin)
- identify and explain all the elements of philosophy in Roman drama.
- situate Plautus and Seneca in Roman life and letters.
- discuss the argument and literary-philosophical implications of Seneca's *Thyestes* and Plautus' *Menaechmi*.

### Textbooks:

- Seneca's *Thyestes*, ed. with commentary R. J. Tarrant (APA 1985) 9780891308713
- Plautus' *Menaechmi* ed. Lawall and Quinn (Bolchazy-Carducci 1981) 9780865160071
- Alpheios Reader plugin. <https://alpheios.net/>
- Texts of Seneca and Plautus: <https://latin.packhum.org/>

### Grading:

Daily Translation	40%	Scale: A 92.50-100, A- 89.50-92.49
Midterm	30%	B+ 86.50-89.49, B 82.50-86.49, B- 79.50-82.49
Final Paper	30%	C+ 76.50-79.49, C 72.50-76.49, C- 69.50-72.49
		D+ 66.50-69.49, D 62.50-66.49, D- 59.50-62.49,
		F 0-59.49

We will begin the course with a brief introduction to the philosophy of Roman Stoicism. Seneca was writing his tragedies in the age of Nero (emperor 54-68 AD). To judge by Suetonius' *Life of Nero* and Tacitus' *Annals*, it was an age of theatricality, perhaps best illustrated by the story that the great fire of 64 AD may have been intentionally set or allowed to spread because Nero imagined himself like a Stoic version of god and a second Romulus, refounding Rome from the ashes of the old city. One of his favorite performance pieces was the burning of Troy, and it is from this that we get the tradition that Nero 'fiddled' (played the lyre) while Rome burned (Tac. *Ann.* 15.39). Nero had already built a large porticoed palace complex to link the Palatine with the Gardens of Maecenas (the *domus transitoria*). When it burns, he orders it rebuilt on a much grander scale: his 'golden house' (*domus aurea*) has a dining room rotating beneath a dome portraying the constellations, which lets down jets of perfume and flower petals to simulate the experience of eating ambrosia like a god (Suet. *Nero* 31). It also had the nature of an ecphrasis with a miniature city within a city, pastoral countrysides with sylvan views and grounds in which to hunt game (like the little worlds in Central park). Here Nero said, at last he could live like a human being. His belief that he was recreating the world, or at least his part of the eternal city, fit with Stoic theory that at various periods in history, civilization would march through ages from gold to silver to bronze and heroic to iron and then suffer destruction by fire. When the whole universe returned to a state of divine fire, god would create it anew.

In the years of his regency (54-58 AD), Nero had fancied himself a performing bard, and traveled about Greece, exhausting audiences with long performances and collecting prizes (Suet. *Nero* 20-24). His reign also displayed a political theatricality. He thought of himself as performing the role of emperor like a tragic character, which is not so unusual considering that Cleopatra and Marc Antony (from whom Nero descends via his daughter with Fulvia, Antonia Minor) had dressed up as Aphrodite and Bacchus, and Antony also as Hercules. In *Thyestes*, Atreus engages in a dialogue with his servant (as if a conscience) to discuss how a king ought to behave, but Atreus has a grander vision of how to play his part – a grander feast in which his skills at pretending will be the difference between failure and vengeance perfected.

One Senecan question is whether the Stoic philosopher is the author of the tragedies under his name. A play in the collection of ten (*Octavia*) portrays the funeral of Seneca, and another stands out for its unusual length (*Hercules Oetaeus*). So, it is often thought that Seneca wrote the other eight, but not these two. One prominent modern critic (Stephen Harrison) argues they all date to the reign of Domitian. But this scepticism over whether Seneca wrote the tragedies has grown because of our inability to describe what the plays have to do with Seneca's philosophical writings. There is a large body of criticism arguing that anything in the plays that sounds philosophical is actually no different than Roman ideas from the poetry of Vergil, Horace, and Ovid, and that any philosophical characters come to bad ends in the plays. Even worse, their words attract the attention of the villains of the plays (Grinch-like evil geniuses) and seem to help them hone their evil. Various scholars make the case for a Stoic metaphysical world in the background (Thomas Rosenmeyer), and for compatibility with Stoic theories of epistemology and poetry (Staley and Schiesaro), but it is difficult to explain how these can be 'Stoic tragedies' when philosophy must end in man's salvation, while tragedy must end in his destruction. As Dingel, Rosenmeyer and others observe, they have opposite purposes. I have offered a solution to this problem in an article that we'll look at.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, (Seneca the younger) born Cordoba Spain in 4 BC, died by opening his veins in a bath at a dinner party for his loved ones, at the demand of Nero for joining the conspiracy of Piso to overthrow Nero in 65 AD. His father, Seneca the Elder was a famous rhetorician (author of rhetorical practice topics: *Controversiae*, *Suasoriae*); his brother's son Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (Lucan) was author of *Pharsalia* or *Bellum Civile*. Seneca the younger himself studied philosophy in Rome with the foremost Neo-Pythagorean minds of the age (Attalus and Sotion), a study to which he may have been introduced while his aunt was in Egypt 16-31AD (Alexandria was home to Quintus Sextius' school of NeoPythagoreanism). This strain of philosophy is important in the history of thought since it blends elements of Plato, Stoicism and ideas putatively attributable to Pythagoras. Seneca was exiled to Corsica in 41AD by Claudius (and his 3rd wife Valeria Messalina) on a charge of having an affair with Caligula's sister. He was recalled from exile when his mother (Agrippina the younger, great granddaughter of Augustus) became Claudius' 4th wife in 49 AD. Upon the death of Claudius and accession of Nero in 54, Seneca, already Nero's tutor, became his domestic regent (with Sextus

Affranus Burrus, chief of the praetorian guard acting as military regent). Seneca was influential for 5 years or so, until Nero murdered Agrippina. He remained an advisor until 62 and upon the death of Burrus, retired. It is often assumed that Seneca wrote the tragedies attributed to him during his exile or for the education of the youthful Nero. But when Tacitus says that he started writing poems (tragedy) more often after a love of it came over Nero (Ann. 14.52, placed immediately after his account of the death of Burrus in 62 AD), the implication seems to be that he may have written them after he stopped being regent in 58 AD and was forced into semi-retirement. He is author also of *Epistulae Morales*, *Dialogues / Moral Essays*, and Dio Cassius calls him author of the satirical *Apocolocyntosis* (apotheosis of a pumpkin-head, on the death of Claudius). We lack any further information about dating of his works.

In the second half of the course, we will read a comedy of Titus Maccius Plautus called 'The Menaechmi' about two brothers called Menaechmus. The setup is that one twin wandered off one day in Syracuse and was sold into slavery. The father dies of grief at being unable to find the boy, and the grandfather renames his other son for the twin he lost. Menaechmus I has been sold into slavery in Epidamnus, to which Menaechmus II now arrives searching for his lost brother. Confusion with servants and girlfriends ensues. Plautus (254-184 BC) writes in a style of Latin full of archaic features not taught in our grammar books based on the styles of Cicero and Caesar. His plays are presumed to be adaptations and combinations of lost plays from Greek new comedy of Menander, Dyscolos and others spun with Roman content and his own originality, since Plautus is clearly no mere imitator. His *floruit* of 205-184 BC corresponds to the end of the 2nd Punic war and the start of wars with Greece and Macedonia, which figure prominently in the background of many plays. There is a deep moral sense underlying his plays full of whore-houses and scheming slaves: the characters are usually risking all, including esp. looking ridiculous, in order to trick a severe judgmental rich business minded father so that the right person finds love and triumphs. Good and justice seem to triumph amid a comedy of errors and through the morally suspect actions of slaves. We are forced to laugh at ourselves in the process and to judge harshly any hypocritical element in our character, and we are asked to remember how important it is for young people in love to be given a chance. Nobility of spirit is not found in the rich and distinguished, but in the slaves and whores, who are most fearless at battling fortune.

### **Assignments:**

- 8/22. Introduction to the course and to Roman Stoicism
- 8/24. Seneca's *Thyestes* 1-67
- 8/29. *Thy.* 68-121
- 8/31. *Thy.* 176-244
- 9/5. *Thy.* 245-309
- 9/7. *Thy.* 310-335, 404-444
- 9/12. *Thy.* 445-511
- 9/14. *Thy.* 512-545, 623-640
- 9/19. *Thy.* 641-716
- 9/21. *Thy.* 717-788
- 9/26. *Thy.* 885-946
- 9/28. *Thy.* 947-998
- 10/3. *Thy.* 999-1051
- 10/5. *Thy.* 1052-1112
- 10/10. **No Class. Fall Break.**
- 10/12. Take-home Midterm due. Plautus, *Menaechmi* 1-76
- 10/17. *Men.* 77-134
- 10/19. *Men.* 135-207
- 10/24. *Men.* 208-308

10/26. *Men.* 309-378  
10/31. *Men.* 379-478  
11/2. *Men.* 479-558  
11/7. *Men.* 559-660  
11/9. *Men.* 661-741  
11/14. *Men.* 742-839  
11/16. *Men.* 840-908  
11/21. *Men.* 909-1008  
11/23. **Thanksgiving break**  
11/28. *Men.* 1009-1099  
11/30. Last class. *Men.* 1100-1162  
12/11. Paper due