

# The Supernatural In Senecas Tragedies

The Supernatural In Senecas Tragedies The supernatural in Seneca's tragedies is a defining feature that sets his works apart within the landscape of Roman tragedy. Seneca, a Stoic philosopher and playwright of the Silver Age of Latin literature, employs supernatural elements not merely as theatrical devices but as profound symbols that explore human destiny, divine justice, and the limits of mortal understanding. His tragedies, including works like *Phaedra*, *Thyestes*, *Hercules Furens*, and *Oedipus*, are marked by intense psychological exploration intertwined with supernatural motifs that heighten their dramatic impact. These elements serve both to evoke emotional responses from the audience and to reinforce philosophical themes related to fate, divine power, and human suffering.

**The Role of the Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies**

Seneca's use of supernatural phenomena functions on multiple levels—literary, philosophical, and theatrical. Unlike some Greek tragedians who incorporated gods and divine interventions as integral components of their stories, Seneca's supernatural elements often serve to emphasize the tragic universe's chaos, moral ambiguity, and the inescapable power of fate.

**Divine Intervention and Omnipotence In Seneca's tragedies**

Divine Intervention and Omnipotence In Seneca's tragedies, gods and divine forces are portrayed as powerful and often indifferent to human suffering. These divine entities may intervene in human affairs, but their motives are rarely benevolent or comprehensible from a human perspective. For example:

- In *Hercules Furens*, the gods' wrath manifests through divine curses and punishments that are beyond human comprehension, illustrating the unpredictable and often cruel nature of divine justice.
- The gods in Seneca's plays are often distant, emphasizing the Stoic view that divine reason (Logos) governs the universe, but not necessarily with human-like benevolence. This portrayal underscores the Stoic theme that humans must accept the divine order, even when it manifests as chaos or suffering, and that understanding divine will is beyond mortal reach.

**Supernatural Omens and Portents**

Seneca frequently employs omens, prophecies, and supernatural signs to foreshadow tragedy or to heighten suspense. These elements serve as warnings and as reflections of the characters' inner turmoil. For example:

- In *Thyestes*, prophetic dreams and omens foreshadow the cycle of revenge and violence.
- The appearance of strange sights or sounds often signals impending doom and emphasizes the inescapability of fate.

**Supernatural Motifs and Themes in Key Tragedies**

Different tragedies by Seneca explore various supernatural motifs that deepen their thematic complexity. Below are some notable examples.

**Phaedra**

While *Phaedra* primarily explores themes of forbidden love and passion, supernatural elements are subtly woven into the narrative to evoke the gods' influence over mortal affairs:

- The gods' presence is implied through divine signs and omens that foreshadow tragedy.
- *Phaedra*'s inner torment is sometimes depicted as being influenced by divine or supernatural forces, emphasizing her helplessness against fate.

**Thyestes**

This play is rich with supernatural motifs, including visions and prophetic dreams that symbolize the inescapable cycle of violence:

- The infamous feast involves supernatural themes of cannibalism and divine retribution.

Omens and dreams foreshadow the destructive cycle of revenge that ensues. Hercules Furens Supernatural elements are central to the play's dramatic tension: - The madness of Hercules is depicted as a divine punishment, with supernatural visions tormenting him. - The appearance of divine or supernatural voices underscores the play's exploration of divine justice and human suffering. Oedipus Though based on Greek myth, Seneca's Oedipus features supernatural motifs that highlight the tragic inevitability of fate: - Prophecies and divine warnings are central to the plot. - The divine origin of Oedipus's curse emphasizes the power of divine will over human free will. The Psychological Dimension of the Supernatural Seneca's tragedies often blur the lines between the supernatural and the psychological. The supernatural elements frequently reflect the inner torment of characters, serving as external manifestations of internal chaos. 3 Visions and Madness - Characters like Hercules or Thyestes experience supernatural visions that symbolize their inner struggles. - These visions serve as a narrative device to explore themes of madness, guilt, and remorse. Supernatural as a Reflection of Fate - Omens and divine signs often mirror characters' internal fears and guilt. - The supernatural thus becomes a mirror of human psychology, emphasizing Stoic ideas about the importance of rational control amidst chaos. The Theatrical Function of the Supernatural in Seneca's Plays Seneca's use of supernatural elements also serves specific theatrical purposes: Creating Atmosphere: Supernatural phenomena heighten dramatic tension and evoke a sense of awe or terror. Symbolic Representation: They symbolize moral and philosophical themes, such as divine justice or human hubris. Foreshadowing and Dramatic Irony: Omens and visions build suspense and underscore the tragic inevitability of events. Unlike Greek tragedy, where gods often directly influence characters' actions, Seneca's supernatural motifs tend to be more psychologically and philosophically oriented, aligning with his Stoic worldview. Philosophical Implications of the Supernatural Seneca's integration of supernatural elements reflects his philosophical stance: - The universe is governed by divine reason (Logos), but this divine order often appears inscrutable and indifferent. - Human beings should cultivate rational acceptance of fate, recognizing that the supernatural signifies the limits of human understanding. - The supernatural thus becomes a reminder of human humility and the importance of Stoic virtues in facing chaos and suffering. Conclusion The supernatural in Seneca's tragedies is a multifaceted device that enhances the emotional intensity, philosophical depth, and theatrical impact of his works. Whether through divine omens, visions, or divine punishment, these elements underscore the themes of fate, divine justice, and human helplessness. They also serve to reflect the inner psychological states of characters, emphasizing the Stoic belief in rational acceptance of the universe's divine order. Ultimately, Seneca's supernatural motifs 4 contribute to a tragic universe where human suffering is intertwined with divine power and mystery, inviting audiences to ponder the limits of human understanding and the nature of divine justice. --- Keywords: Seneca tragedies, supernatural motifs, divine intervention, omens, prophecy, Greek tragedy, Stoicism, divine justice, divine signs, visions, psychological tragedy QuestionAnswer How does the supernatural function as a thematic element in Seneca's tragedies? In Seneca's tragedies, the supernatural often serves to emphasize the gods' influence, destiny, and the inevitability of fate, reinforcing the tragic cosmos where divine forces directly impact human suffering. What role do supernatural beings or omens play in the development of the plot in Seneca's tragedies? Supernatural beings and omens act as catalysts for action, foreshadowing future events and heightening the sense of doom, thereby shaping characters' decisions and accentuating the tragic atmosphere. How does Seneca portray the gods or divine forces in relation to human characters in his tragedies? Seneca often depicts divine

forces as powerful and inscrutable, exerting control over human destiny, sometimes appearing as vengeful or indifferent entities that underscore the futility of human efforts. In what ways does the supernatural contribute to the emotional intensity of Seneca's tragedies? The supernatural amplifies emotional intensity by creating a sense of cosmic disorder, unpredictability, and the presence of inescapable fate, which heightens feelings of fear, awe, and despair. Are there specific supernatural motifs or symbols that recur across Seneca's tragedies? Yes, motifs such as omens, prophecies, ghosts, and divine voices recur, serving as symbols of fate, guilt, or divine intervention that deepen the tragic themes. How does Seneca's use of the supernatural differ from that of other Roman tragedians like Seneca's influence from Greek tragedies? While influenced by Greek tragedy, Seneca's use of the supernatural tends to be more visceral and psychological, emphasizing internal torment and divine vengeance rather than distant gods, often highlighting the characters' internal struggles with supernatural elements. What is the significance of ghosts or spirits in Seneca's tragedies? Ghosts or spirits in Seneca's tragedies symbolize guilt, conscience, or the repercussions of past sins, often appearing to haunt characters and serve as agents of moral or divine retribution. How does the supernatural in Seneca's tragedies reflect Roman attitudes towards fate and divine justice? The supernatural elements embody the Roman belief in divine justice and the inescapable nature of fate, illustrating that human actions are ultimately subject to divine will, which governs moral order and cosmic balance.

**The Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies: An In-Depth Exploration**

The presence and influence of the supernatural in Seneca's tragedies represent a compelling dimension of his dramatic universe, intertwining Stoic philosophy with the theatrical and poetic conventions of his time. As a Stoic philosopher and playwright of the Silver Age of Latin literature, Seneca employs supernatural elements not merely as theatrical devices but as profound symbols that illuminate the moral and philosophical themes woven into his tragedies. This detailed examination explores how the supernatural manifests in Seneca's works, its functions, and its philosophical implications.

--- **Understanding Seneca's Tragic Universe**

Seneca's tragedies, inspired by Greek models—predominantly Euripides—are characterized by intense emotional expression, rhetorical grandeur, and philosophical introspection. Central to these plays is a universe where divine forces, omens, ghosts, and supernatural interventions serve to mirror human passions, moral dilemmas, and the inexorable fate that governs human life. Key features of Seneca's tragic universe regarding the supernatural:

- Integration of divine and supernatural elements: Gods, spirits, and omens appear to influence mortal affairs.
- Philosophical underpinning: The supernatural often underscores Stoic themes of fate, providence, and the Logos.
- Theatrical purpose: Supernatural elements heighten dramatic tension, reinforce moral lessons, and evoke emotional responses.

--- **Types of Supernatural Elements in Seneca's Tragedies**

Seneca employs a variety of supernatural motifs, each serving specific thematic and theatrical functions.

1. **Omens and Portents** Omens are recurring symbols signaling impending doom, divine disapproval, or moral correction. They serve as warnings to characters and audience alike.
2. **Ghosts and Spirits** The spirits or ghosts in Seneca's tragedies are often spectral manifestations of the dead, serving as messengers, avengers, or symbols of guilt.

- Examples:

- In *Thyestes*, the motif of the blood-stained hands and violent omens foreshadow the cycle of revenge.
- In *Phaedra*, signs from the gods warn of tragic consequences, emphasizing divine oversight.

Function: Omens reinforce the idea that human actions are under divine scrutiny, aligning with Stoic notions of fate and divine reason.

2. **Ghosts and Spirits** The spirits or ghosts in Seneca's tragedies are often spectral manifestations of the dead, serving as messengers, avengers, or symbols of guilt.

- Examples:

- The ghost of Atreus in *Thyestes* appears to incite revenge.
- The apparition of Agamemnon's ghost in

Hercules Furens warns of impending tragedy. Function: They function as narrative catalysts, moral symbols of conscience, or divine voices calling for justice or warning. The Supernatural In Senecas Tragedies 6 3. Divine Interventions and Deities While Seneca's universe is governed by Stoic rationality, gods and divine forces appear to intervene, often to deliver moral lessons or punish hubris. - Examples: - The gods' voices in Phaedra and Hercules Furens serve as moral arbiters. - In Thyestes, divine omens and curses highlight the inescapable nature of fate. Function: Their presence underscores the idea that divine reason (Logos) pervades human affairs, and moral order is maintained by divine justice. 4. Supernatural Phenomena and Miracles Some plays feature extraordinary events that transcend natural laws, emphasizing the potency of divine or supernatural forces. - Examples: - In Hercules Furens, Hercules' divine strength and miraculous deeds accentuate the hero's semi-divine status. - In Phaedra, the sudden appearance of the goddess Aphrodite's influence signifies divine intervention in mortal passions. Function: They serve to elevate the tragic scale, evoke awe, and reinforce the moral or philosophical point. --- Philosophical Significance of the Supernatural Seneca's incorporation of supernatural elements is deeply rooted in Stoic philosophy, which emphasizes the rational order of the universe, divine providence, and the unity of all things under the Logos. 1. Supernatural as a Reflection of Divine Providence - Stoic view: The universe is governed by divine reason (Logos), and everything occurs according to divine law. - In Seneca's plays: Supernatural signs, omens, and spirits symbolize divine oversight, emphasizing that moral order is maintained by divine rationality. 2. Supernatural as a Moral and Didactic Tool - Moral lessons: Ghosts and divine voices often serve as reminders of moral truths, guilt, or the consequences of immoral behavior. - In plays like Thyestes and Hercules Furens, supernatural elements act as moral catalysts—warning characters or exposing their moral failings. 3. The Inescapability of Fate and Divine Justice - The supernatural underscores the idea that human free will operates within the bounds of divine destiny. - Characters often face supernatural warnings or visions that reinforce the Stoic acceptance of fate, emphasizing that resistance is futile. --- The Supernatural In Senecas Tragedies 7 Theatrical Function of the Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies Seneca's tragedies are theatrical texts, and supernatural elements serve multiple dramatic functions. 1. Heightening Emotional Intensity - Supernatural phenomena evoke awe, terror, and pity—key emotions in tragedy. - Ghosts and omens amplify the horror of revenge, guilt, and moral chaos. 2. Creating Dramatic Irony and Tension - Divine warnings or supernatural signs often come too late, creating dramatic irony. - Characters' ignorance or disbelief in supernatural warnings heightens suspense. 3. Reinforcing Moral and Philosophical Themes - The supernatural visually manifests abstract Stoic concepts like fate, divine justice, and moral order. - Spectral appearances and divine voices symbolize the moral universe's overarching rationality. 4. Spectacle and Audience Engagement - Supernatural elements lend grandeur and spectacle to the plays. - They evoke visceral reactions, making tragedies more memorable and emotionally impactful. --- Comparison with Greek Models and Unique Features in Seneca's Use of the Supernatural Seneca's tragedies are heavily influenced by Greek models, especially Euripides, but he adapts supernatural elements to fit his philosophical outlook. Greek Influence: - Greek tragedians frequently used gods, ghosts, and omens to explore moral and religious themes. - Euripides, in particular, employed supernatural phenomena to question divine justice and human morality. Seneca's Distinctive Approach: - Emphasis on psychological intensity: supernatural elements often reflect inner guilt and moral turmoil. - Philosophical rationalization: supernatural signs often symbolize internal states, divine justice, or the inexorability of fate, aligning with Stoic

rationality. - Less reliance on elaborate divine pantheon: gods and spirits are often less anthropomorphic and more symbolic or ominous. --- Critical Perspectives on the Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies Scholars interpret the supernatural in Seneca's works through various lenses: - Philosophical: As expressions of divine reason and moral order. - Theatrical: As devices to The Supernatural In Senecas Tragedies 8 evoke emotional responses and heighten dramatic effect. - Psychological: As manifestations of guilt, conscience, or inner chaos. - Religious: As symbols of divine justice or cosmic order, aligning with Stoic pantheism. Some critics argue that Seneca's supernatural elements serve more as rhetorical devices than genuine mystical phenomena, reflecting his Stoic skepticism about religious superstition. --- Conclusion: The Supernatural as a Bridge Between Morality and Cosmology In Seneca's tragedies, the supernatural functions as a vital nexus linking human passions, moral order, and the divine cosmos. It encapsulates the Stoic view that divine reason presides over all, manifesting through omens, ghosts, and divine voices to remind mortals of their place within the rational universe. The supernatural heightens the tragic stakes, deepens emotional engagement, and reinforces philosophical truths. It embodies the tension between human agency and divine destiny, illustrating that moral and cosmic justice are intertwined within the grand design of the universe. By weaving supernatural elements into his tragedies, Seneca not only amplifies dramatic intensity but also invites reflection on the Stoic ideals of acceptance, moral resilience, and the pursuit of virtue amidst the inexorable march of fate. His use of supernatural motifs remains a testament to his ability to fuse philosophical profundity with theatrical grandeur, ensuring his tragedies continue to resonate as powerful explorations of the human condition in relation to the divine and the supernatural. Seneca, supernatural elements, tragedy, Greek influence, fate, gods, ghosts, destiny, divine intervention, Gothic themes

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lucius annaeus seneca known commonly as seneca was a roman stoic philosopher statesman and dramatist of the silver age of latin literature he is most noted for developing a new type of drama the senecan tragedy which differed greatly from greek tragedy while the greek tragedies were expansive and periodic senecan tragedies are more succinct and balanced in senecan tragedy characters do not undergo much change there is little or no catharsis in the end and violence is acted out on stage instead of being recalled by characters to the audience often seneca s plays contain pronounced elements of the macabre grotesque and even the supernatural not only have these plays withstood the test of time but they essentially fueled the growth of elizabethan and jacobean drama in england many centuries after their creation seneca s work exerted significant influence on writers like thomas kyd ben jonson and william shakespeare to name a few this edition is printed on premium acid free paper includes the ten tragedies thought to be authored by seneca and follows the translations of ella isabel harris

lucius annaeus seneca ca 4 bce 65 ad known commonly as seneca was a roman stoic philosopher statesman and dramatist of the silver age of latin literature he is most noted for developing a new type of drama the senecan tragedy which differed greatly from greek tragedy while the greek tragedies were expansive and periodic senecan tragedies are more succinct and balanced in senecan tragedy characters do not undergo much change there is little or no catharsis in the end and violence is acted out on stage instead of being recalled by characters to the audience often seneca s plays contain pronounced elements of the macabre grotesque and even the supernatural not only have these plays withstood the test of time but they essentially fueled the growth of elizabethan and jacobean drama in england many centuries after their creation seneca s work exerted significant influence on writers like thomas kyd ben jonson and william shakespeare to name a few

the question of why seneca wrote tragedy has been debated at least since the 13th century since seneca was a stoic critics have assumed that he must have written with the standard stoic theory of literature as education in philosophy in mind seneca and the idea of tragedy argues instead that seneca was influenced by aristotle s famous defense of tragedy against plato s critique when renaissance scholars applied aristotle s theory of tragedy to seneca and found him to be a model tragedian they were taking the correct approach one which has since been discounted since aristotle s poetics was presumed to have been unknown during seneca s lifetime staley shows that aristotle s ideas about poetry influenced the stoics through channels other than the poetics and that aristotle s idea of tragedy was adopted by seneca in a stoic guise

pantomime was arguably the most popular dramatic genre during the roman empire but has been relatively neglected by literary critics seneca s tragedies and the aesthetics of pantomime adds to our understanding of seneca s tragic art by demonstrating that elements which have long puzzled scholars can be attributed to the influence of pantomime the work argues that certain formal features which depart from the conventions of fifth century attic drama can be explained by the influence of and interaction with this more popular genre the work includes a

detailed and systematic analysis of the specific pantomime inspired features of seneca s tragedies the loose dramatic structure the presence of running commentaries minute descriptions of characters undergoing emotional strains or performing specific actions of monologues of self analysis and of narrative set pieces relevant to the culture of roman imperial culture more generally seneca s tragedies and the aesthetics of pantomime includes an outline of the general features of pantomime as a genre the work shows that the influence of sub literary genres such as pantomime and mime the sister art of pantomime can be traced in several roman writers whose literary production was antecedent or contemporary with seneca s furthermore the work sheds light on the interaction between sub literary genres of a performative nature such as mime and pantomime and more literary ones an aspect of latin culture which previous scholarship has tended to overlook seneca s tragedies and the aesthetics of pantomime provides an original contribution to the understanding of the impact of pantomime on roman literary culture and of controversial and little understood features of senecan tragedies

phaedra oedipus medea trojan women hercules furens thyestes seneca s plays are the product of a sensational frightening and oppressive period of history tutor to the emperor nero seneca lived through uncertain and violent times and his dramas depict the extremes of human behaviour rape suicide child killing incestuous love madness and mutilation afflict the characters who are obsessed and destroyed by their feelings passion is constantly set against reason and passion wins out seneca forces us to think about the difference between compromise and hypocrisy about what happens when emotions overwhelm judgement and about how if at all a person can be good calm or happy in a corrupt society and under constant threat of death seneca was one of the most prolific versatile and influential of all classical latin writers and the only tragic playwright from ancient rome whose work survives this new edition of his six best plays captures seneca s style in a verse translation that is both lively and accurate about the series for over 100 years oxford world s classics has made available the widest range of literature from around the globe each affordable volume reflects oxford s commitment to scholarship providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features including expert introductions by leading authorities helpful notes to clarify the text up to date bibliographies for further study and much more

this ethical context is a productive frame of reference for interpreting the strange artificiality of senecan tragedy the consciousness that its own dramatic worlds events and people are literary constructs in troades for example achilles ghost and its vengeance is represented both as an inexorable dramatic reality and the creature of a fabula to be dismissed as a malignant fiction book jacket

in two tragedies of seneca medea and the daughters of troy the roman playwright lucius annaeus seneca deftly explores themes of vengeance passion and the volatile nature of human emotions through his powerful use of language and dramatic structure these tragedies reflect the stoic philosophical underpinnings of seneca s thought intertwining moral dilemmas with intense psychological introspection the plays are characterized by their stark imagery and rhetorical flourish drawing readers into a world of moral complexity and human fragility as they engage with the consequences of wrath and suffering set against a backdrop of familial discord and divine intervention seneca a statesman and

philosopher deeply entrenched in the tumultuous socio political landscape of ancient rome infuses his work with personal experiences and the teachings of stoicism his philosophical writings on ethics particularly the struggle for virtue in the face of adversity resonate throughout these tragedies examining how characters like medea and the daughters of troy embody the moral crises prevalent in his time this interplay of philosophy and dramatic narrative contributes to the enduring significance of his theatrical works for readers interested in the intricate interplay of personal torment and philosophical inquiry seneca Åôs medea and the daughters of troy serve as profound meditations on the human condition the plays invite audiences to reflect on the darker aspects of love and the moral implications of revenge making this collection essential for anyone seeking insight into the foundations of western tragedy and the complexities of human emotion

this study focuses on the descriptiveness of senecan tragedy a characteristic which sharply distinguishes it from the practice of classical greek tragedy while the senecan descriptions can and have been explained in terms of the influence of rhetoric or as devices that compensate for the absence of performance this book presents them as an integral aspect of a conception of tragedy which *sui generis* is quided distinct from classical greek precedent senecan tragedy is in fact an amalgam of narrative and dramatic modes a kind of epic theatre the descriptions of which are to be seen as an imported narrative technique which affords seneca the means to control his audience s view of the moral meaning of the plays

in their practice of *aemulatio* the mimicry of older models of writing the augustan poets often looked to the greeks horace drew inspiration from the lyric poets virgil from homer and ovid from hesiod callimachus and others but by the time of the great roman tragedian seneca the augustan poets had supplanted the greeks as the classics to which seneca and his contemporaries referred indeed augustan poetry is a reservoir of language motif and thought for seneca s writing strangely however there has not yet been a comprehensive study revealing the relationship between seneca and his augustan predecessors christopher trinacty s senecan tragedy and the reception of augustan poetry is the long awaited answer to the call for such a study senecan tragedy and the reception of augustan poetry uniquely places senecan tragedy in its roman literary context offering a further dimension to the motivations and meaning behind seneca s writings by reading senecan tragedy through an intertextual lens trinacty reveals seneca s awareness of his historical moment in which the augustan period was eroding steadily around him seneca looking back to the poetry of horace virgil and ovid acts as a critical interpreter of both their work and their era he deconstructs the language of the augustan poets refiguring it through the perspective of his tragic protagonists in doing so he positions himself as a critic of the augustan tradition and reveals a poetic voice that often subverts the classical ethos of that tradition through this process of reappropriation seneca reveals much about himself as a playwright and as a man in the inventive manner in which he re employs the augustan poets language thought and poetics within the tragic framework seneca gives his model works new and uniquely senecan life trinacty s analysis sheds new light both on seneca and on his augustan predecessors as such senecan tragedy and the reception of augustan poetry promises to be a groundbreaking contribution to the study of both senecan tragedy and augustan poetry

perry reveals shakespeare derived modes of tragic characterization previously seen as presciently modern via engagement with rome and senecan tragedy

although the thyestes is widely acknowledged to be one of seneca s most powerful tragedies there has until now been no modern commentary on the play in any language my principal aim has thus been to make this extraordinary work more widely accessible and so contribute to a greater appreciation of its quality the thyestes seems to me an even better and richer play now that it did when i embarked on this commentary i hope that the pleasure i have had in exploring it will be reflected in what i have written and that my enthusiasm will offer some compensation for my failures of understanding preface p ix

this book studies seneca s poetic drama from a novel point of view whereas most criticism of seneca s dramas has tended to focus on their relationship to stoicism i approach them from the perspective of seneca s own theory of literary decadence which he sets forth in the 114th of his letters to lucilius his theory can be summed up as follows the various forms of stylistic corruption are the result of a straining for effect which itself reflects a taste for the extreme a writer or speaker s stylistic vices thus mirror the vices of his character they also reflect the vices of the time and place in which he lives since every user of language is conditioned by his environment what is especially striking about seneca s discussion is that a number of the vices he lists hyperbole disruption of natural word order excessive metaphor are notable features of the poetic style of his own dramas i argue for a rehabilitation of the decadent style of seneca s tragedies in seneca s hands this style is a precise diagnostic tool for revealing the self destructive irrationality that governs not only the individual but also his society and the entire universe

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written in nero s rome in about ad62 thyestes is one of the greatest and most influential of classical tragedies peter davies explores the key aspects of the play including the circumstances of its composition its performance history and its impact on subsequent dramatists

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