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Tyranny and Tyrannicide in Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*

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Introduction

This paper will explore the representation of tyranny and tyrannicide in Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*.¹ Like the rhetorical exercises upon which the *Controversiae* are based, these concepts are originally Greek in origin and became part of the Roman discourse of autocracy during the Republic.² Therefore Seneca's work represents a continued transmission of these ideas into the Imperial age.

Scholarship upon Roman declamation has explored the capacity of the genre to illuminate aspects of Roman culture and society. Scholars have highlighted that declamation was a space where social norms and ideals could be tested, challenged and defined.³ I believe that this framework helps us to understand the presentation of autocracy and resistance to autocratic rule in these exercises, as well as their increasing appeal during the Imperial age.⁴

Focusing here on 1.7 (which is representative of the themes found in these extracts), I will analyse the way in which the *Controversiae* engage with earlier discourse and contribute to the transmission of anti-autocratic traditions during the Principate. I will argue that this transmission of potentially contentious anti-autocratic ideas was aided by the anachronistic Greek subjects and settings typical of the genre.

Themes of Tyranny and Tyrannicide

¹ Specifically *Controversiae* 1.7, although in the course of my research I have also examined *Controversiae* 2.5, 3.6, 4.7, 5.8, 7.6 and 9.4. All Latin text and translations in this article are from the Loeb edition by Winterbottom 1974. For the life and work of Seneca the Elder see Sussman 1978, Fairweather 1981.

² For the Greek background of Roman rhetorical exercises see Bonner 1949:1-26; Sussman 1978: 4-5. For examples of Greek influence upon autocratic discourse in Latin see Dunkle 1967, 1971; Goldenhard 2006.

³ Bloomer 1997: 200; Gunderson 2003: 6; Pagán 2007/08: 167-8.

⁴ While legal exercises like those found in the *Controversiae* were designed to prepare students for judicial oratory they were also popular with grown men who continued to practice their rhetorical skills. In the early Principate this form of practice declamation appears to have become increasingly popular as a pastime among the Roman elite. Bonner 1949:41-43; Sussman 197: 13-17.

Controversiae 1.7 features a very convoluted scenario where a son is on trial for refusing to support his father.⁵ The significance for my research is that the son's status as a tyrant-slayer means the sample declamations provided for and against him engage with themes surrounding the figures of the tyrant and the tyrannicide. These themes are related to earlier Greek and Latin discourse and to the cultural memory of the two most renowned tyrannicides from the Greek tradition, the Athenians Harmodios and Aristogeiton.⁶

The Tyrannicide as Representative of the State

In 1.7.1 a speaker for the tyrannicide argues that 'The rest of my limbs belong to me - the hands belong to the people'.⁷ This appears to present tyrannicide as an act transforming the tyrant-slayer from an ordinary citizen into a representative of the state, just as the resistance of the Athenian tyrannicides turned them into symbols of Athenian democracy. However, at 1.7.12 Seneca dismisses this line of argument as invalid in a Roman context. I suggest this could be related to the contentious nature of anti-autocratic discourse in the Imperial age.⁸ This causes Seneca to relegate this idea to the foreign, historically distant Greek past, denying it relevance in the Roman present.

The Rewards of Tyrannicide

There may have been a law rewarding tyrannicides in Republican Rome.⁹ Romans were certainly aware that in a Greek context tyrannicide was rewarded with privileges and renown for both the tyrannicide and his family.¹⁰ An example of this

⁵ Loeb edition pp. 151: "Children must support their parents, or be imprisoned. A man killed one of his brothers, a tyrant. The other brother he caught in adultery and killed despite the pleas of his father. Captured by pirates, he wrote to his father about a ransom. The father wrote a letter to the pirates, saying that he would give double if they cut off his hands. The pirates let him go. The father is in need; the son is not supporting him."

⁶ An account of the Tyrannicide phenomenon in Athens can be found in Taylor 1981. For the Tyrannicide statue groups see Brunnsåker 1971.

⁷ *cetera membra mea sunt, manus publicae sunt.*

⁸ For example in the aftermath of the assassination of Julius Caesar Brutus and Cassius were hailed by some as tyrannicides. However, in Imperial discourse the death of Caesar was presented as a horrific act of parricide, not one of resistance to tyranny. Examples of this can be found in Valerius Maximus at I.5.7 and I.8.8.

⁹ Bonner 1969: 104.

¹⁰ The clan to which Harmodios and Aristogeiton belonged, the Gephyraioi, received honours such as the right of *sitesis* which allowed them to eat meals in the Prytaneion at the expense of the state.

appears in 1.7.2 where one speaker argues that the social renown for the son's deed also benefits his father with equal privilege.¹¹

Associating with Tyrants

The *Controversiae* also address the issue of how followers and relatives of the tyrant should be regarded after his death. In 1.7.8 the father denies benefiting from the rule of his tyrannical son. A later argument suggests the man's status as father of the tyrant makes him an enemy of the state (*Controversiae* 1.7.13). This issue is also raised by *Controversiae* 3.6.¹² This shows the same unease with the position of those who obey the tyrant as can be found in the speech of Lepidus in Sallust's *Histories*.¹³

Motives of the Tyrannicide

Thucydides casts doubt upon the motives of the Athenian tyrannicides.¹⁴ The *Controversiae* also address the issue of tension between the public or private motives of the tyrannicide. In 1.7.8 the father argues that his sons 'fought among themselves and the commonwealth won'.¹⁵ Presenting the assassination as the result of a private quarrel that turned out well for the state.¹⁶

Conclusion

I suggest the continuation of discourse to be found in the *Controversiae* is significant because this was a form in which anti-autocratic traditions could survive during the Imperial age. I believe this also relates to, and was facilitated by, the continued Greek influence to be found in these exercises.

Members of the family took part in public affairs from the mid fifth to late third century. See Taylor 1981:10.

¹¹ *Quidquid habes, pro redemption filii mitte; non est quod timeas: non deerunt tibi alimenta, cum dixeris <te> tyrannicidae patrem.* Whatever you have, send it to ransom your son; there is nothing to be afraid of: you will not go short of food if you say you are father of a tyrannicide.

¹² Here a house has been burnt down in order to assassinate a tyrant and its owner demands reparation. The homeowner's possible status as a supporter of the tyrant is used to argue against his right to sue the tyrannicide.

¹³ Here regarding the followers of the dictator Sulla, Sallust, *Histories* 1.48.1-11.

¹⁴ *Thucydides* 6.54-56.

¹⁵ *Dum inter se pugnant, vicit res publica.*

¹⁶ This is also the central issue of 4.7 - did the tyrannicide kill the tyrant in self-defence as an adulterer or was his seduction of the tyrant's wife part of a plot to slay the tyrant?

The Greek settings and fantastical themes of the material created distance between declaimers and the contentious subjects under discussion. This separation from Roman reality was perhaps part of the continued appeal of practice declamation.

In the Imperial Era the tyrant and the tyrannicide allowed declaimers to debate questions surrounding the nature of autocracy and resistance to autocratic rule, in a way that placed those subjects outside the more dangerous realm of commentary upon Roman politics and the place of the emperor. The alien setting allowed anti-autocratic ideas to continue to be transmitted and debated in a way that could be seen as posing little threat to political or social stability.

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