Aspects of Evil in Seneca’s Tragedies

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Classics
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Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of evil in Senecan tragedy through the prism of his Stoic principles, as they are illustrated in his philosophic treatises, with special reference to *de ira*, *de clementia*, and *naturales quaestiones*. The introduction defines evil and situates this study in the historical context of Julio-Claudian rule at Rome. In addition, I sketch the relative chronology of Seneca’s works and chart Seneca’s interest in the myths on display in Greek and Roman tragedy.

Chapter One, “The Beast Within,” investigates the contrast of the civilized and uncivilized behaviour of Seneca’s characters in the *Phaedra*, *Thyestes* and *Hercules Furens*. I argue that although Seneca’s characters represent themselves as creatures of civilization and the city in their rejection of wild nature and their embrace of the values of civilization, in their words and actions they repeatedly revert to the wild landscape and bestial appetites that lurk outside the safety of the city walls.

In Chapter Two, “Anger,” I examine the emotion of anger as represented in the *Medea* and compare that tragic exploration with Seneca’s discussion of the emotion in the *de ira*, where it is called the greatest vice. I conduct an extensive comparative investigation of the language of Seneca’s treatise *de ira* and his tragedy *Medea*. Fitch contends that “the dramas do not read like
negative exemplars designed to warn of the dangers of passion,”¹ but I argue that here and elsewhere they do indeed.

In Chapter Three on “Cruelty,” I discuss the theme of cruelty in the *Troades* with reference to the *de clementia* where Seneca develops the theme of cruelty as the opposite of mercy, in an effort to guide the eighteen-year-old emperor Nero to compassionate rule. However, Seneca takes up the question of cruelty not only in the treatise, but also in his moral epistles and in his tragedies, especially the *Troades*. There I show that Seneca employs tragedy to hold up a mirror to his audience so that they can see their own behaviour reflected in it.

Chapter Four, on “Ghosts and Curses,” takes its starting point from Seneca’s well-known use of ghosts in his tragedies, a feature which had a great influence on Tudor and Jacobean drama. In Senecan tragedy, the presence of ghosts often threatens the safety of the living. I contend that there are four types of ghost in Senecan drama.

In the conclusion, I show that Seneca’s tragedies can be read as a criticism of the powerful, and that his Stoic interpretation of human behaviour can be seen throughout his tragedies.

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Introduction

The problem of evil, defined as the depraved desire to harm another,\(^2\) pervades the writings of Seneca from his tragedies to the _Apocolocyntosis_ and his philosophical treatises. “Depraved” is defined as “rendered morally bad; corrupt, wicked” (_OED_ s.v. 2). The modern philosopher A. Vetlesen (2005, 2) argues that to do evil is to inflict pain and suffering intentionally on another human being, against his or her will, causing serious and foreseeable harm. Thus evil is a product of human agency and choice, or the assent of the mind as Seneca writes in _de ira_ (2.3.5): *adsensu mentis*. A philosopher as early as Plato writes that desires are either honourable or base (πονηρῶν), and we ought to control and subdue the latter (_Rep_. 8.561c). To Seneca, *malum*, evil, is the opposite of virtue, the chief good of the Stoics, and therefore evil is synonymous with vice. He writes that we can make ourselves happy if we understand that what is blended with virtue is good, and what is joined to evil or vice is base (*Fac te ipse felicem. Facies autem, si intelleteris bona esse, quibus admixta virtus est; turpia, quibus malitia coniuncta est, Ep. 31.5*). Here Seneca uses *malitia* as the antithesis of *virtus* and as a Latin equivalent of κακία in Stoic thought. He goes on to say that what is evil does harm (*quod malum est, nocet, Ep. 85.30*). He urges us to love virtue as our only good and to avoid baseness as our only evil (*virtutem unicum bonum hominis adamaverit, turpitudinem solum malum fugerit, Ep. 94.8*).

Evil manifests itself in various ways. Phaedra’s passion is uncontrolled due to the lack of self-control or σωφροσύνη of her mother Pasiphaē. Anger is an emotion that Seneca calls the greatest evil (*de ira 2.12.6*): *Quantum est effugere maximum malum, iram!* Cruelty is the result

\(^2\) _OED_ s.v. A.1.3a; _OLD_ s. *malum* 5.
of a cold, calculated policy of the Greeks to annihilate the Trojans in *Troades*. Ghosts are manifestations of a person’s guilt for murder in *Medea, Oedipus* and *Phoenissae*.

Seneca himself knew three Julio-Claudian emperors and witnessed at first hand their depraved desire to harm others, the very subject which Tacitus would later explore as emblematic of the dynasty’s capricious rule in his *Annals*, under the view that absolute power corrupts absolutely.³ In this Introduction, I shall examine Seneca’s relations with the Julio-Claudians and his recognition of his imperial masters’ repeated embrace of evil before tracing Seneca’s considerable influence as a dramatist and reviewing recent scholarship on the tragedies. Both Senecan tragedy and the posthumous *Octavia* may well have influenced our sources for Nero. I shall discuss the question of whether Seneca’s plays were performed and construct a chronology of his works before outlining the chapters of my dissertation.

Suetonius reports that Seneca’s relations with the Julio-Claudians began with Gaius Caligula, who prided himself on his oratorical skill (*Cal. 53.2*):

> Peroraturus stricturum se lucubrationis suae telum minabatur, lenius comptiusque scribendi genus adeo contemnens, ut Senecam tum maxime placentem ‘commissiones meras’ componere et ‘harenam esse sine calce’ diceret.

Gaius despised Seneca’s style of oratory for being too polished and elegant. The emperor ridiculed Seneca’s speeches as “mere exercises” and “sand without lime.” Suetonius implies that Seneca was such a popular orator in the 30s that he attracted the envy of an emperor who was already displaying psychopathic behaviour. It is an ironic comment on Gaius’ twisted judgment that his sister Agrippina the Younger later appointed Seneca tutor in rhetoric for her son Nero.

³ Lord Acton, letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 3 Apr. 1887: Creighton (1904) i.372.
Griffin discounts another account of Gaius’ hostility to Seneca, Dio’s story (59.19.7-8) that Gaius ordered Seneca to commit suicide for pleading well before the Senate, because she considers speaking well to be a weak reason to motivate Gaius’ order to execute Seneca and suspects Dio’s citing an unnamed mistress of Gaius who claimed that Seneca would soon die of consumption. Although the reason may be weak, it seems no less rational than Gaius’ reason for torturing senators and knights, which he did for the pleasure of the spectacle (de ira 3.18.3):

Modo C. Caesar Sex. Papinium, cui pater erat consularis, Betilienum Bassum quaestorem suum, procuratoris sui filium, aliosque et senatores et equites Romanos uno die flagellis cecidit, torsit, non quaestionis sed animi causa.

Gaius whipped and tortured leading men of Rome not to extract information but for amusement. Perhaps not surprisingly, Gaius features as Seneca’s prime example of a masochistic, cruel tyrant in the prose treatises.

The death of Gaius did not improve Seneca’s relationship with the dynasty. Within a year of Claudius’ accession in 41, Seneca was tried in the Senate before the new emperor (Cons. Polyb. 13.2). The charge was one of adultery with Julia Livilla, another of Gaius’ sisters (Dio 60.8.5; Schol. Juv. 5.109), but the real cause may have been the enmity of Claudius’ wife Messalina. Claudius exiled Seneca to Corsica, where he remained for eight years. His recall was arranged in 49 through the influence of Agrippina, Claudius’ new wife, who recommended him for the praetorship (Tac. Ann. 12.8). At the same time, Seneca became tutor in rhetoric to her son Cn. Domitius (the future Nero), who was then twelve years old. According to Tacitus

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4 Griffin (1976) 53.

5 Seneca casts Gaius as the type of the cruel tyrant at de ben. 2.21.5: Si exemplo magni animi opus est, utamur Graecini Iulii, viri egregii, quem C. Caesar occidit ob hoc unum, quod melior vir erat, quam esse quemquam tyranno expedet; and de ben. 4.31.2: Quare C. Caesarem orbi terrarum praefecit, hominem sanguinis humani avidissimum, quem non alter fluere in conspectu suo iubebat, quam si ore excepturus esset?
(Ann. 12.8), Agrippina expected Seneca to advise them on how best to secure the succession to the throne.

By contrast to the representation of Claudius as a jolly and just man in Robert Graves’ novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, Seneca’s view of Claudius is uncomplimentary. In the *Apocolocyntosis* (10-11, 14), Seneca credits Claudius with killing many senators and *equites* unjustly, before hearing their testimony. Seneca’s stance in his satire coheres with that in his philosophical works: in *de clementia* (1.23.1), he calculates that in a five-year period Claudius had more people killed as parricides than had been condemned on that charge in all the centuries before him. Moreover, Claudius was as given to incest as Gaius and Nero,⁶ for Claudius married his niece Agrippina and changed Roman marriage law to do so (Tac. *Ann*. 12.5-8).

Claudius’ Julio-Claudian wife, Agrippina, initiated a sequence of events worthy of tragedy, proving herself a Clytemnestra when she took a lover, Claudius’ freedman Pallas, and killed her husband by feeding him a dish of poisoned mushrooms (Tac. *Ann*. 12.65-67). Upon Nero’s accession, Agrippina chose Seneca and Burrus, the commander of the praetorian guard, to advise the young emperor (*rectores imperatoriae iuventae*, Tac. *Ann*. 13.2.2), but they both had to struggle against the domineering character of Agrippina (*ferociam Agrippinae*, Tac. *Ann*. 13.2.3) who, Tacitus writes, burned with the all the passions of an evil tyranny (*cunctis malae dominationis cupidinibus flagrans*, Tac. *Ann*. 13.2.3). Tacitus here represent the influence on his historical writing of Seneca’s creation of the figure of conniving queens such as Phaedra in his tragedies (*alitur et crescit malum / et ardet intus, Phaed*. 101-2; *intimis errat ferus / visceribus*).

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⁶ Suetonius reports that Gaius had incestuous relations with his three sisters (Suet. *Cal*. 24.1). Nero married his stepsister Octavia and was reputed to have had incest with his mother (Tac. *Ann*. 14.2; Suet. *Nero* 28.2; Dio 63.22.3). The Romans interdicted marriage between brother and sister by adoption (*Dig*. 23.2.17: *per adoptionem quaesita fraternitas eousque impedit nuptias*).
ignis mersus, 642-3). Other negatively viewed aspects of her character are illustrated in Tacitus’ report that when Armenian ambassadors were pleading before Nero, Agrippina was about to ascend the emperor’s tribunal and sit as an equal beside him, and was only forestalled by Seneca’s advising Nero to go to meet her (Tac. Ann. 13.5.3). In the early years of Nero’s reign, Seneca continued to give him lessons in eloquence (*praecipit eloquentiae*, Tac. Ann. 13.2.1) and wrote the eulogy of Claudius which Nero delivered at his funeral (Tac. Ann. 13.3.2). Both Seneca and Burrus tried to limit the lustful and impressionable youth of seventeen if he rejected the Stoic ideal of virtue to pleasures that public opinion allowed (*lubricam principis aetatem, si virtutem aspernaretur, voluptatibus concessis retineret*, Tac. Ann. 13.2.2).

Nero soon did reject virtue. At the Saturnalia of 54, perhaps the occasion for which Seneca produced his *Apocolocyntosis* or *Ludus de morte Claudii*, Nero ordered his stepbrother Britannicus to sing. The thirteen-year-old sang of his expulsion from his father’s house and from supreme power (*evolutum eum sede patria rebusque summis*, Tac. Ann. 13.15.3)—themes movingly expressed by Thyestes in Seneca’s eponymous play (404-405): *Optata patriae tecta et Argolicas opes / miserisque summum ac maximum exulibus bonum*. By implication, Britannicus charged Nero with these crimes in his song. In the following year, when Agrippina threatened to switch her allegiance to Britannicus, Nero may have ordered poison to be put into Britannicus’ drink while he was dining in the palace as a guest of the emperor. Tacitus relates that those of greater understanding (*altior intellectus*, Ann. 13.16.4) remained motionless with their eyes fixed on Nero (*Neronem intuentes*) and acted as if nothing was wrong (*proximus quisque Britannico neque fas neque fidem pensi habere*, Ann. 13.15.5). But Tacitus reports that Agrippina struggled

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7 Furneaux (1907) vol. II, 171. However, Eden (1984) criticizes Furneaux for stating the date as a fact. Griffin (1976) 396 suggests November or December 54 as a date for the composition of the *Apocolocyntosis*. 
to suppress her terror and confusion (Ann. 13.16.6). Even Octavia, Britannicus’ sister and Nero’s wife, had learnt to hide every emotion (omnis affectus abscondere didicerat, Ann. 13.16.7).

Tacitus’ use of abscondere, for concealing emotions, recalls Seneca’s in his de ira, where Astyages, the king of the Medes, serves Harpagus his own children (3.15.1). Harpagus astutely flatters the king by saying, Apud regem omnis cena iucunda est. By his acting, he escapes an invitation to eat what was left. In this passage, Seneca teaches the moral lesson that it is possible to conceal the anger that arises even from monstrous evils (posse etiam ex ingentibus malis nascentem iram abscondi, 3.15.2). Seneca counsels Stoic self-control when he writes that such restraint of indignation is necessary for the survival of those who are invited to the tables of kings (Necessaria ista est doloris refrenatio, utique hoc sortitis vitae genus et ad regiam adhibitis mensam, 3.15.3).

After a brief silence, Tacitus continues, the superficial merriment of the banquet resumed (Ann. 13.16.7). Nero had directed the spectacle of his brother’s death for the viewing pleasure of himself and his guests, making the Imperial dining room into a theatre. Bartsch has argued that each courtier of Nero was expected to become an actor and play along with the script that Nero developed. She interprets the scene similarly, though she regards Nero not as a performer or impresario but as an observer here, too. I would liken him rather to Atreus in Thyestes who acts as director of the scene of Thyestes’ feast (885-1112). Schiesaro writes that Atreus is a director of his own tragic play, but does not identify him with Nero. Yet Schiesaro adds that possible

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8 Hdt. 1.118-119; Bouillet (1973) vol. 1, 138 ad loc.
9 Bartsch (1994) 14-16.
audiences of Seneca’s play included the emperor, dissident aristocrats, and family members. He speculates that Atreus’ winning combination of wit and violence would have looked very different if staged in front of Nero not long after Britannicus was conveniently dispatched or in the secrecy of Seneca’s home as the Pisonian conspiracy took shape, the former an occasion for flattery, the latter for incitement to revolution.\textsuperscript{11} Tarrant, by contrast, would date \textit{Thyestes} to 62, which predates the conspiracy by three years.\textsuperscript{12}

Nevertheless, would it not have been a fine irony if Seneca’s \textit{Thyestes} was later produced in the Imperial dining room before the Emperor? The situation would be parallel to that in \textit{Hamlet}: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”\textsuperscript{13} What does it mean if the plays were produced at court? Nero’s court must have been very edgy with the emperor and his tutor often at loggerheads. Perhaps Seneca wrote plays because Nero had a great interest in the theatre, and read and wrote poetry himself (Tac. \textit{Ann.} 14.15-16, 15.33, 16.4; Suet. \textit{Nero} 10.2): \textit{recitavit et carmina, non modo domi sed et in theatro}. Suetonius also reports that Nero was amazingly tolerant of the insults that everyone cast at him in verse (\textit{Nero} 39.1):

\begin{quote}
  mirum et vel praecipue notabile inter haec fuerit nihil eum patientius quam maledicta et convicia hominum tulisse, neque in ullos leniorem quam qui se dictis aut carminibus lacesissent extitisse.
\end{quote}

The author of the \textit{Octavia} may be representing Nero’s true attitude toward his adviser when he says that he will act in a way that Seneca disapproves (\textit{Oct.} 589): \textit{liceat facere quod Seneca improbat}.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Schiesaro (2003) 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Tarrant (1985) 13, n. 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Shakespeare, \textit{Ham.} 2.2.604-5.
\end{itemize}
Marshall discusses the possibility of the *Troades* being produced in a Roman dining room and notes that evidence from the following century, in the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, refers to tragic production not only in the theatre (*Hadrian* 19.5), but also, significantly, *in convivio* (*Hadrian* 26.4 ‘at banquets’). The dining rooms of Nero’s *Domus Aurea* may also have been large enough to house productions of drama. Suetonius describes the spectacular effect that was created there by turning panels that showered the guests with flowers and by the revolving, spherical ceiling that resembled the heavens (*Nero* 31.2):

\[
\text{cenationes laqueatae tabulis eburneis versatilibus, ut flores, fistulatis, ut uguenta desuper spargerentur; praecipua cenationum rotunda, quae perpetuo diebus ac noctibus vice mundi circumageretur}.^{15}
\]

We know from the reference to Nero’s age of eighteen (*de clem. 1.9*) that Seneca wrote *de clementia* between December 55 and December 56, in an attempt to persuade the emperor to be merciful. That is, Seneca wrote this treatise soon after, and perhaps in reaction to, the murder of Britannicus. Seneca tries to shame Nero into kindness (*de clem. 1.11.3*):

\[
Praestitisti, Caesar, civitatem incruentam, et hoc, quod magno animo glorius es nullam te toto orbe stillam cruoris humani misisse, eo maius est mirabiliusque, quod nulli umquam citius gladius commissus est.
\]

Nero knows, and Seneca’s readers know, that it is not true that he has not shed a drop of human blood; however Seneca uses the compliment to urge Nero to become merciful. As we shall see,

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15 Bradley (1978) 179 notes that Seneca (*Ep. 90.15*) may allude to the *Domus Aurea* when he criticizes excess: *Hodie utrum tandem sapientiorem putas, qui inventit quemadmodum in immensam altitudinem crocum latentibus fistulis exprimat, qui euripos subito aquarum impetum impet aut siccat et versatilia cenationum liquearia ita coagentat, ut subinde alia facies atque alia succedat et totiens tecta quotiens fericula mutentur?*

Seneca has a tendency to use the comparative degree (*maius est mirabiliusque*) to top what has been done before, and here he uses it to convey the sense that Nero has the potential to be more magnanimous than earlier *principes*, even to be greater than Augustus, and he has the opportunity to prove it at a younger age.

Griffin notes, however, that Suetonius shows Nero’s inherited personality traits as anger, cruelty, and violence (*Nero 2-5*)—the central aspects of evil explored in Seneca’s tragedies.\(^{17}\) Thus Nero graduated from fratricide in 55 to matricide in 59. Tacitus opens his narrative of the matricide by explaining that in her eagerness to regain her influence over Nero, Agrippina offered herself to her intoxicated son, “dressed up and ready for incest” as Tacitus memorably puts it (*comptam et incesto paratam*, Tac. *Ann.* 14.2.1). On this occasion too, Tacitus reports, Seneca intervened, this time by sending in Nero’s mistress Acte, who claimed that Agrippina had made their incest public and that the soldiers would never tolerate the rule of an impious *princeps* (*Ann.* 14.2.2). Nero accordingly accepted the suggestion of Anicetus, the commander of the fleet at Misenum, to send Agrippina out in a collapsible ship, but Tacitus records her survival of that attempt on her life by swimming until she was picked up by people in sailboats, who took her to the Lucrine lake and her villa at Bauli. In the aftermath of this failed attempt, Nero summoned Seneca and Burrus to a meeting. Tacitus imagines that a look from Seneca to Burrus signified his question whether the praetorian guards would be required to murder Agrippina (*Ann.* 14.7.4). When Burrus answered in the negative, Anicetus undertook the consummation of the crime. Agrippina, recognizing that the end was near when Anicetus arrived at her villa, is reported to have offered her belly and told the centurion to strike her belly (*Ann.*

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\(^{17}\) Griffin (1976) 136 and n. 3.
14.8.6): *protendens uterum* ‘ventrem feri’ *exclamavit*. This is a motif that Tacitus may have found in the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* (368-372):

```
caedis moriens illa ministrum
rogat infelix,
uteru dirum condat ut ensem:
‘Hic est, hic est fodiendus’ ait
‘ferro, monstrum qui tale tulit.’
```

The unknown author of the *Octavia*, probably writing early in Vespasian’s reign, has Agrippina vilify Nero as a monster, *monstrum*, a person of extreme wickedness.

The action of striking the belly recalls the death of the archetypal incestuous mother, Jocasta, in Seneca’s *Oedipus*, where she commits suicide with a sword (1038-1039): *hunc, dextra, hunc pete / uterum capacem, qui virum et natos tulit*. Earlier in the play, the ghost of Laius characterizes his son as a monster (641): *magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua*. Again in Seneca’s *Phoenissae* (447), which Fitch dates to Nero’s principate, Jocasta commands Eteocles and Polynices, *hunc petite ventrem, qui dedit fratres viro*. Boyle offers the attractive suggestion that the motif of an incestuous mother striking her womb in Seneca may have inspired the author of the *Octavia*, who in turn seems to influence Tacitus to conflate the two Senecan passages.

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20 *TLL* s. *monstrum* II B β II: *per contumeliam aut despectum de hominibus improbis; OLD* s. *monstrum* 5.
21 The play was probably written during Seneca’s exile of 41-49; see below.
Significantly, two of Nero’s favourite roles to perform in tragedy were the blinded Oedipus and Orestes the matricide (Suet. *Nero* 21.3). Tacitus writes that Nero sent a letter written by Seneca to the Senate, claiming that Agrippina had sent a freedman to assassinate Nero. Nero’s monstrous conduct (*immanitas, Ann.* 14.11.4) beggared criticism, so Seneca was faulted for having written what amounted to a confession of matricide. Indeed Suetonius reports that, in the aftermath of Agrippina’s murder, Nero began to confuse his dramatic fantasies with reality: he imagined that like Orestes, he was pursued by his mother’s ghost and by the whips and burning torches of the Furies (*Nero* 34.4): *saepe confessus exagitari se materna specie verberibusque Furiarum ac taedis ardentibus*. This passage may allude to Aeschylus’ *Choephori* (1048-1061) where Orestes’ guilt for killing his mother reveals itself in a vision of the Furies, which the Chorus does not see. But Suetonius’ line could equally be an allusion to a lost Roman tragedy in which the Furies torment Orestes, such as Pacuvius’ *Hermiona*,24 or to the similes in which Vergil compares Dido to tragic characters.25 Suetonius even records a sequel, in which Nero employed Persian Magi to try to raise his mother’s ghost and beg her forgiveness (*Nero* 34.4): *Quin et facto per Magos sacro evocare Manes et exorare temptavit*. The Roman belief in necromancy, so vividly documented in Suetonius’ anecdote, is also reflected in the raising of Laius’ ghost in Seneca’s *Oedipus* (559): *Vocat inde manes*.

Tacitus explains that Seneca lost influence with Nero and became liable to attack after the death of Burrus in 62 (*Ann.* 14.52.1). One of the charges brought against Seneca was that he composed poetry more frequently, after a passion for it had come over Nero (*carmina crebrius


factitare, postquam Neroni amor eorum venisset, Tac. Ann. 14.52.3). The plural carmina, the
comparative crebrius, and the frequentative factitare all point to a period of increased poetic
composition. Here we may have a reference to Seneca’s composition of Thyestes, which Tarrant,
accepting Fitch’s analysis of sense-pauses, dates to this year.\textsuperscript{26} Coffey and Mayer note that
carmen is a term used in the singular by both Cicero (\textit{Sen.} 22) and Tacitus (\textit{Ann.} 11.13.1) of
tragedy.\textsuperscript{27} Thus Nero’s amor eorum may refer to Nero’s passion for tragedies. Tarrant and
Fantham interpret the phrase differently, to mean Nero’s love of Seneca’s poetry, although
Fantham also admits the possibility that it refers to Nero’s own poetry or Seneca’s epigrams.\textsuperscript{28} In
an attempt to avoid the ire of Nero, Seneca offered to resign his considerable property to him
\textit{(iube rem per procuratores tuos administrari, in tuam fortunam accipi), Tac. Ann. 14.53-54} so
that he might retire, following the principles of Stoic philosophy by scorning exterior goods.
Tacitus adds that from this point Seneca rarely appeared in Rome, on the grounds that he was
kept at home by weak health or philosophical studies \textit{(rarus per urbem, quasi valetudine infensa
aut sapientiae studiis domi attineretur, Ann. 14.56.6)}. Indeed it is likely that he devoted himself
to philosophy in this period, and so Griffin implies by her dating of his \textit{Naturales Quaestiones}
and \textit{Epistulae Morales} to the years 62-65.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite his retirement, Seneca was accused of plotting against Nero with C. Calpurnius
Piso (Tac. \textit{Ann.} 14.65.2), a gentleman amateur actor (Tac. \textit{Ann.} 15.65.2; Schol. on Juv. 5.109).
Seneca’s nephew, M. Annaeus Lucanus, author of \textit{Bellum Civile}, joined Piso’s conspiracy

\textsuperscript{26} Tarrant (1985) 13.
\textsuperscript{27} Coffey and Mayer (1990) 3, n. 12. However, Nisbet (1990) 97-98 doubts that carmina refers to tragedies.
\textsuperscript{29} Griffin (1976) 396.
because Nero, out of envy, had forbidden Lucan to publish his poem (*famam carminum eius premebat Nero prohibueratque ostentare, vanus adsimulatione*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.49.3). It was even said that some of the conspirators preferred Seneca as the next emperor over Piso because of his outstanding virtues (*tradereturque imperium Senecae, quasi insontibus claritudo virtutum ad summum fastigium delecto*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.65.1). Nonetheless, Antonius Natalis denounced Seneca as a conspirator in the first group (*Ann.* 15.56.2).

Nero forced Seneca to commit suicide, but the philosopher’s interest in drama manifested itself even in his death scene. As Connors and Ker observe, Seneca chose to make a theatrical display of his suicide in front of his friends in the manner of another philosophic martyr—Socrates (*Ann.* 15.61-64). Seneca seems to have had the example of Socrates’ death in his mind for a long time, for he refers to it already in *de providentia* (3.12), which Griffin dates after the death of Tiberius in 37. Seneca rebuked his friends for their tears (*simul lacrimas eorum modo sermone, modo intentio in modum coercentis ad fimitudinem revocat*, Tac. *Ann.* 15.62.2), as Socrates had done (*Phd.* 117c-e). When opening his veins proved ineffective, Seneca asked for poison—the same hemlock which Socrates drank (*Phd.* 117a-b): *orat provisum pridem venenum quo damnati publico Atheniensium iudicio extinguerentur promeret* (Tac. *Ann.* 15.64.3). One difference was that Seneca reminded his friends of Nero’s well-known cruelty: *cui enim ignaram fuisse saevitiam Neronis?* (Tac. *Ann.* 15.62.2). As I will argue in chapter 1, *saevitia*, “savagery,” is a key theme in Senecan tragedy.

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31 Griffin (1976) 396.
Although we cannot date his individual plays with certainty, we can state unequivocally that Seneca’s tragedies enjoyed immense importance after his death. He significantly influenced not only the author of the Octavia, and thence Tacitus, but also such greats of literary history as Shakespeare, Racine and Corneille. For example, Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus (5.2-3) engages closely with Seneca’s lurid elaboration of the theme of cannibalism, on spectacular display in the Thyestes. Not only does Shakespeare’s early play recall Seneca, but his mature play Hamlet also recalls Senecan models, beginning with the appearance of a ghost and developing into a revenge play, both characteristics of Thyestes. Racine’s Phèdre and Corneille’s Médée are indebted to Seneca’s plays of the same names. As Inwood writes, Tudor and Jacobean tragedy had an essentially Stoic and therefore Senecan character.

32 Kermode (1974) 1021 writes in his preface to Titus Andronicus that certainly the famous banquet of the two sons served by Atreus to their father Thyestes in Seneca’s drama of that name can scarcely have been out of Shakespeare’s thoughts. Thompson and Taylor (2006) 262 write that Shakespeare’s Titus is particularly influenced by Seneca. Bate (1995) 29-31 observes that two Senecan themes exercise a deep influence on the play, as they did on Renaissance high culture more generally: that death is a release into rest which is not to be feared and that the wise man has an inner stability which makes him immune to the blows of nature. When Titus discovers that his daughter has been raped, he speaks Latin at a moment of extreme emotional stress (4.1.81-2): ‘Magni dominator poli, / Tam lentus audis scelera, tam lentus vides?’ The linguistic turn has been taken as evidence that Titus here turns himself into Senecan man, for the quotation is derived from a moment of discovery of appalling sexual knowledge in Phaedra (671-672). However, Titus’ ‘dominator poli’ is incorporated from a well-known passage of verse contained in Seneca’s Epistle 107.11 on accepting death: Duc, O parens celsique dominator poli, / Quocumque placuit. Philosophical Seneca’s idea of submission to the will of the universe is thus skilfully combined with tragical Seneca’s scene of anagnorisis, of terrible recognition. Typically, the hero of Senecan tragedy undergoes an explosion of passion (furor) which elicits on the one hand grief and lamentation, and on the other consolation in the wisdom of Stoic philosophy.

33 Daniell (1998) 78 writes that in that special late-Elizabethan and Jacobean genre known as revenge tragedy, Hamlet is the finest. Miola (2002) 33 observes that Shakespeare, while he recalls Seneca’s depiction of extreme passion, his operatic, superbly playable [my italics] rhetoric, his concern with the supernatural, nevertheless struggles to transform the monomaniacal revenger of Senecan drama into a tragic hero who can develop in the course of the action and move pity as well as terror. Miola (2002) 36 adds, “Seneca’s real presence in Hamlet appears in transformed conventions—such as the Ghost—rather than in specifically imitated passages.” Thompson and Taylor (2006) 386 note on Ham. 4.5.155-6 that when Laertes says, “thy madness shall be paid with weight / Till our scale turn the beam,” he asserts the Senecan view that revenge has to outdo the original crime.

34 Salles (1968) 22 writes in his preface to Phèdre that Racine “doit aussi beaucoup à une tragédie de Sénèque, Phèdre; il lui a emprunté en particulier l’aveu de Phèdre à Hippolyte.” Abraham (1972) 50 observes about Corneille’s Médée, “While the Senecan horror has been toned down somewhat, the story itself owes much to its Roman antecedent.”

contemporary influence on modern dramatists can be seen in Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* (1996).\(^\text{36}\)

Although scholarship on Senecan tragedy has been less sustained, and sophisticated, than his dramatic reception, Herington’s 1966 article, “Senecan Tragedy,” prompted a resurgence of interest in the topic.\(^\text{37}\) Three important monographs have appeared in the last decade. Schiesaro’s *The Passions in Play* (2003) contrasts the desire to watch with the repulsiveness of what is on display in the *Thyestes*, while Littlewood’s *Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy* (2004) emphasizes the metatheatrical and intertextual aspects of the plays. Schiesaro finds wholly unpersuasive the proposition that Seneca meant his tragedy to be a systematic refutation of the philosophical positions that are advocated in his prose.\(^\text{38}\) Staley’s *Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy* (2010) corroborates my thesis that Seneca wrote tragedy as a Stoic. He argues that when Senecan tragedy fails to stage virtue, we should see in this not the failure of Stoicism but a Stoic conception of tragedy as the right vehicle for imaging Seneca’s familiar world of madmen and fools.\(^\text{39}\) Volk and Williams’ *Seeing Seneca Whole: perspectives on philosophy, poetry and politics* (2006) is a collection of essays which offers a theoretical approach that invites us to consider Seneca’s tragedies as an integral part of his entire oeuvre, and this perspective animates my study. In his essay that gives the book its title, Tarrant observes

\[\text{36} \text{ Saunders (2002) 71; Giannopoulou (2010) 57-67.}\]


\[\text{38} \text{ Schiesaro (2003) 252.}\]

\[\text{39} \text{ Staley (2010) 136.}\]
that Seneca’s prose works offer a depiction of real life in which weakness and vice are as prevalent as they are in the tragedies. Tarrant also notes that tyrants such as Lycus, Aegisthus and Atreus believe that the chief prerogative of their position is the capacity to inflict pain on their hapless subjects, and that most of the references to rulers in Senecan prose are negative.40

Davis observes that since Zwierlein’s statement in 1966 that Seneca’s tragedies were recitation dramas, his position has steadily been losing ground in the English-speaking world.41 The publication of Harrison’s Seneca in Performance in 2000 marked a sea-change in the attitudes of Anglophone scholars. For there, Frederick Ahl, Gyllian Raby and C. W. Marshall contribute chapters in which they support the view that Seneca’s tragedies can be performed on stage. Harrison astutely remarks that colleagues in countries that are not German or Anglophone hold that the plays are not only capable of being produced, but also were performed during the first century AD.42 To say that there were no performances in antiquity because there is no evidence for stage performance of Seneca’s tragedies is to argue from silence—a logical fallacy. Besides, Suetonius writes that among the roles which Nero performed were the blinded Oedipus and mad Hercules (Nero 21.3: Inter cetera cantavit Canacen parturientem, Oresten matricidam, Oedipodem excaecatum, Herculem insanum), both roles found in the tragedies of Seneca.43

When Shakespeare has Polonius say of the itinerant actors who have come to Hamlet’s court, “Seneca cannot be too heavy nor Plautus too light” (Ham. 2.2.400-401), the best English dramatist gives us to understand that Seneca’s plays can be performed on the stage equally well


43 D. & E. Henry (1985) 176 make the same observation.
as Plautus’ comedies. Later in the same scene (Ham. 2.2.448-518), Hamlet demonstrates how playable a Senecan tragedy is when he asks an actor for a speech about Priam’s slaughter by Pyrrhus—such as may recall Hecuba’s in Seneca’s Troades (44-56).\textsuperscript{44}

Davis does not doubt that Seneca’s tragedies are as playable as any other dramatic scripts which have come down to us from classical antiquity.\textsuperscript{45} Herington adduces evidence from the plays themselves in support of this view. Thus he notes that some Senecan passages demand more than one speaker, citing Medea 168-171:\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{verbatim}
Nut. rex est timendus. Me. rex meus fuerat pater.
Nut. non metuis arma? Me. sint licet terra edita.
\end{verbatim}

Herington then asks: “What can a \textit{single} reciter make of that?” Although there were contemporary pantomime performances of whole episodes from tragedy and myth by one actor,\textsuperscript{47} a single reciter turning his head from side to side to represent the two characters would produce an unintentionally comic effect. Even a pantomime actor holding a mask in each hand and switching them for each speech would hardly produce a satisfactory result.

\textsuperscript{44} Thompson and Taylor (2006) 71 note that when Hamlet talks of Hercules and Pyrrhus he is probably drawing on Hercules Furens and Troades.


\textsuperscript{46} Herington (1966) 244-245; Boyle (1994) 165 supports this view, arguing that Tro. 301-349 (especially the stychomythic lines and \textit{antilabai} [divided verse-lines]) would flounder in recital by a single speaker, as would the following exchanges: Her. F. 422-438, Med. 155-173, 490-559, Phaed. 218-273. Boyle holds that what such passages show is that the thesis that Senecan tragedy was written only for recitation by a single speaker is untenable.

\textsuperscript{47} Lucan wrote fourteen pantomime scripts (Duff [1964] 127). A generation later, Statius is reported to have written a pantomime libretto, Agave, for Paris, a famous pantomime dancer of Domitian’s reign (Juv. 7.87).
Davis concludes that Seneca’s tragedies are not merely playable: they demand performance on the stage.\textsuperscript{48} To this we may add that a writer who chooses to write drama as opposed to another genre does so because he hopes to have his work performed on a stage—whether that be a public stage or a dining room in the Imperial palace. Littlewood collects evidence to show that during the principate a tragedy could be acted in private aristocratic houses (Pliny, \textit{Ep.} 8.12), in the public theatre (Hor. \textit{Sat.} 1.10.39, \textit{Ep.} 1.19.41-42, Sen. \textit{Ep.} 80.7), in the forum (Cic. \textit{Phil.} 9.16), in a temple (Hor. \textit{Sat.} 1.10.38), a circus, or even a bath (Petr. 91-92).\textsuperscript{49} Thus I concur that the tragedies could have been read privately, recited (by one or more persons), and even performed.

To the reign of Claudius or Nero, specifically the period between mid-48 and mid-55, Griffin dates the \textit{de brevitate vitae}. Seneca (confirmed by Tac. \textit{Ann.} 11.3) tells us that he wrote the \textit{de constantia sapientis} after 47 (\textit{de con. sap.} 18.2) and addressed it, the \textit{de tranquillitate animi} and \textit{de otio}, to Annaeus Serenus,\textsuperscript{50} who died before the spring of 64 (\textit{Ep.} 63.14). Griffin accordingly dates these three works to sometime before 62. Very early in the reign of Nero, in November or December 54, Seneca wrote the \textit{Apocolocyntosis} on the death of Claudius. Since passages from \textit{Hercules} and \textit{Troades} are echoed in the \textit{Apocolocyntosis}, Fitch suggests that

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Davis (2003) 27.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Annaeus Serenus, a young relative and friend of Seneca, is reported to have been the prefect of Nero’s watchmen (Plin. \textit{NH} 22.47.96). He assisted Seneca in concealing Nero’s affair with Acte (Tac. \textit{Ann.} 13.13.1). He, like Claudius, died at a banquet from a dish made of poisoned mushrooms (Sen. \textit{Ep.} 63.14; Plin. \textit{NH} 22.47.96; \textit{RE} vol. 1 [1894] 2248, no. 18).
\end{itemize}
Seneca may have written those two plays shortly before 54.\textsuperscript{51} Nisbet regards this as the most generally accepted piece of evidence for dating these two plays.\textsuperscript{52}

In his satire, Seneca has Hercules speak like a tragic actor \textit{(tragicus fit, Apoc. 7.1)} as the hero does in \textit{Hercules Furens}: \textit{Tum Hercules primo aspectu sane perturbatus est, ut qui etiam non omnia \textit{monstra} timuerit...putavit sibi tertium decimum \textit{laborem} venisse} \textit{(Apoc. 5.3)} recalls \textit{Her. F. 40-42: monstra iam desint mihi, / minorque labor est Herculi iussa exequi / quam mihi iubere}. In addition, Fitch compares \textit{hoc ne peremptus stipite ad terram accidas} \textit{(Apoc. 7.2.2)} with \textit{Her. F. 1296 hoc en peremptus spiculo cecidit puer.}\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, \textit{Apoc. 12.3.1, fundite \textit{fletus, edite planctus} recalls Troad. 113-114: Accipe, rector Phrygiae, \textit{planctus, / accipe fletus}}. Fitch puts \textit{Hercules Furens} and \textit{Troades} in the middle group of Seneca’s plays, and includes the \textit{Medea} as well in that grouping. He also cites Quintilian (8.3.31) as a noteworthy piece of evidence: \textit{memini iuvenis admodum inter Pomponium ac Senecam etiam praefationibus esse tractatum, an ‘gradus eliminat’ in tragoedia dici oportuisset}. Fitch writes that these \textit{praefationes} appear to have been remarks delivered by the authors before recitations or performances of their tragedies. Fitch concludes that at least one of Seneca’s tragedies was presented publicly in the early 50s.\textsuperscript{54} Dingel agrees with this last point, but believes the \textit{Medea, Troades} and \textit{Agamemnon}

\textsuperscript{51} Fitch (2002) 12.

\textsuperscript{52} Nisbet (1995) 294.

\textsuperscript{53} Fitch (1987a) 51

\textsuperscript{54} Fitch (1987a) 50-51.
are Seneca’s fourth to sixth tragedies, respectively.55 Again, Fitch and Dingel agree on two plays in the second group, but not their order.

Seneca refers to Nero’s age of eighteen at de clem. 1.9, which leads Griffin to date the treatise to between 15 December 55 and 14 December 56. She also puts the de vita beata, addressed to Seneca’s brother L. Junius Gallio Annaeanus (who was suffect consul in 55),56 and de beneficiis in the period after 56. Tarrant dates the Thyestes to 62, a date with which Nisbet agrees.57 Fitch places the Phoenissae later still,58 and suggests that Seneca may have left that play unfinished at his death.59 Coffey and Mayer, in their commentary on Phaedra, and Frank, in hers on Phoenissae, find Fitch’s secondary test more convincing than his analysis of sense-pauses: the incidence of the shortening of final -o is significantly higher in Thyestes and Phoenissae than in the other plays.60 Moreover, the frequency of this feature is so much greater in Phoenissae than in Thyestes that it suggests that Phoenissae was the last of Seneca’s dramas.61 Dingel agrees that Thyestes and Phoenissae are Seneca’s last tragedies.62

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55 Dingel (2009) 1, 90-114, e.g. (98-100) since Ag. 213-214 mentions the Xanthus and Simois, river-gods fought by Achilles, not Agamemnon, Dingel argues that their inclusion in a list of threats to Agamemnon is contamination from Tro. 185-187. Therefore Dingel concludes that Troades was written before Agamemnon.


60 Coffey and Mayer (1990) 4.


References to contemporary events show that Seneca wrote the *Naturales Quaestiones* and *Epistulae Morales*, both addressed to Lucilius, after his retirement in 62. Book 6 (1.2) of the *Naturales Quaestiones* mentions the Campanian earthquake of 62 or 63; book 7 mentions the comet of 60 (7.21.3), but not the comet of late 64 (Tac. Ann. 15.47.1). Thus Seneca wrote the *Naturales Quaestiones* before late 64. I will show that his late prose references to earthquakes as *malum*, an external bad thing, overlap with his dramatic practice, since he employs them as precursors of evil in both *Phaedra* (1050) and *Troades* (171-172). Griffin notes that the dramatic date of the *Epistulae Morales* is the winter of 63 to the autumn of 64 (the fire at Lugdunum occurred at the end of July 64, *Ep.* 91) and she suggests that the date of publication was between the summer of 64 and the spring of 65, when Seneca committed suicide. I summarize this chronology of Seneca’s works, which I accept, in Table 1.
Table 1: Chronology of Seneca’s works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emperor</th>
<th>Griffin’s dating of prose works</th>
<th>Fitch’s order of tragedies</th>
<th>Dingel’s order of tragedies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caligula</td>
<td><em>de providentia</em> (after March 37)</td>
<td><em>Agamemnon</em></td>
<td><em>Hercules Furens</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>consolatio ad Marciam</em></td>
<td><em>Phaedra</em></td>
<td><em>Oedipus</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Claudius</td>
<td><em>consolatio ad Polybium</em> (not long before the British triumph of 44)</td>
<td><em>Oedipus</em></td>
<td><em>Phaedra</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>consolatio ad Helviam matrem</em> (Seneca’s exile 41-49)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>de ira</em> by 52 (to Novatus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claudius or Nero</td>
<td><em>de brevitate vitae</em> (mid-48 to mid-55)</td>
<td><em>Hercules Furens</em></td>
<td><em>Medea</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>de constantia sapientis</em> (after 47)</td>
<td><em>Troades</em> (both shortly before 54)</td>
<td><em>Agamemnon</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>de tranquillitate animi</em> and</td>
<td><em>Medea</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>de otio</em> (both before 62)</td>
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In the following chapters, I explore the theme of evil in Senecan tragedy through the prism of his Stoic principles, as they are illustrated in his philosophic treatises. Chapter One, “The Beast Within,” investigates the contrast of the civilized and uncivilized behaviour of Seneca’s characters in the Phaedra, Thyestes and Hercules Furens. I argue that although Seneca's characters represent themselves as creatures of civilization and the city in their rejection of wild nature and their embrace of the values of civilization, in their words and actions they repeatedly revert to the wild landscape and bestial appetites that lurk outside the safety of the city walls. For Seneca the philosopher, it is the conquest of the passions which should be the aim of every civilized person (Ep. 73.13). In tragedy, Seneca found a medium for the exposition of cautionary tales of savage behaviours that should be avoided by civilized Romans.
In Chapter Two, “Anger,” I examine the emotion of anger as represented in the Medea and compare that tragic exploration with Seneca’s discussion of the emotion in the de ira, where it is called the greatest vice. I conduct an extensive comparative investigation of the language of Seneca’s treatise de ira and his tragedy Medea. Fitch contends that “the dramas do not read like negative exemplars designed to warn of the dangers of passion,”63 but I will argue that here and elsewhere they do indeed. Seneca’s tragedy can be interpreted as a demonstration of the accuracy of the Stoic analysis of anger on display in de ira: Medea realizes that she has suffered a wrongdoing; she grows indignant; she condemns the wrongdoers; and she exacts revenge. Medea progresses through all the stages of anger as diagnosed by the Stoics, which overwhelms her rational thought.

In Chapter Three on “Cruelty,” I discuss the theme of cruelty in the Troades with reference to the de clementia where Seneca develops the theme of cruelty as the opposite of mercy, in an effort to guide the eighteen-year-old emperor Nero to compassionate rule. However, Seneca takes up the question of cruelty not only in the treatise, but also in his moral epistles and in his tragedies, especially the Troades. Seneca knows Greek literature and its topoi of cruelty, but he is especially interested in drawing on Stoic theoretical models and applying them to Greek mythological subjects. Tragedy is a particularly significant genre for the exploration of the spectacle of cruelty because the theatre is the site for the display of crisis. In the amphitheatre, cruelty was performed for the gratification of the audience. In the theatre, violence was described to titillate and provoke thought, as well as pity and fear.64 Seneca


64 Arist. Po. 1453b 4-6.
employs tragedy to hold up a mirror to his audience so that they can see their own behaviour reflected in it.\textsuperscript{65}

Chapter Four, on “Ghosts and Curses,” takes its starting point from Seneca’s well-known use of ghosts in his tragedies, a feature which had a great influence on Tudor and Jacobean drama. In Senecan tragedy, the presence of ghosts often threatens the safety of the living. In the \textit{Troades}, the anger of the ghost of Achilles proves to be eternal and cruel in demanding the sacrifice of Polyxena. In the \textit{Agamemnon}, the ghost of Thyestes infects his descendants with a desire for revenge. We shall see that there are four types of ghost in Senecan drama. One type, for which Achilles provides a model, exhibits the Stoic vices of anger and cruelty in requiring the death of Polyxena. Another type, exemplified by Hector, is a bereavement vision that is a manifestation of the protective instincts of Andromache in the face of Greek cruelty. Thirdly, the sighting of a ghost can function as a symptom of the guilt of a character as, for example, in the case of Oedipus in the \textit{Phoenissae} for killing his father Laius. A fourth type is a reluctant, almost comic ghost such as Tantalus in \textit{Thyestes}, who nonetheless motivates the cruel actions of Atreus in the play.

Throughout I argue that the Stoic philosophy espoused by their author informs the tragedies in complex ways. As in any good author, his didacticism is implicit in his dramatic artistry. But, as Fitch notes, while the settings and plots of the tragedies are Greek, their atmosphere is that of Seneca’s Rome.\textsuperscript{66} The passions of the characters of the plays are those of the imperial court: the murderous madness of a Gaius, the raging lust of a Messalina, the

\textsuperscript{65} Bartsch (2006) 279 argues that drama can provide the viewer with a corrective mirror of his own sins.

domineering ambition of an Agrippina. The gargantuan ambitions and excessive passions of the Julio-Claudians are reflected in many of Seneca’s tragedies.
A question that fascinated both Greeks and Romans was, “Where does nature end and civilization begin?” In this chapter, I examine several tragedies of Seneca in an attempt to illustrate how nature impinges on culture, wilderness on the city, in the imagery, themes, and characterization of the plays. I shall argue that although Seneca's characters represent themselves as creatures of civilization and the city in their rejection of wild nature and their embrace of the values of civilization, in their words and actions they repeatedly revert to the wild landscape and bestial appetites that lurk outside the safety of the city walls. My study will draw comparative examples from the *Phaedra*, *Thyestes* and *Hercules Furens*.

Seneca inherits a long philosophical tradition that treats the appetites as subhuman or bestial. Among the Greeks, Plato in Book 9 of the *Republic* discusses the nature of the tyrannical man. Such a personality has its origin in allowing oneself to be dominated by one’s irrational desires. Everyone appears to have certain of the unnecessary pleasures and appetites which are considered to be unlawful (571b4-6). There is a beastly and savage part within us (571c5): τὸ δὲ θηριῶδέες τε καὶ ἄγριον. In a modern critical interpretation which has been widely accepted, Julia Annas has identified this ‘savage part’ as lust.67 When the reasoning, civilized and ruling

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part of the soul is asleep, the beastly part, when full of food and drink, goes forth to satisfy its
own instincts; there is nothing it will not venture to undertake as it is released from all sense of
shame and reason. It does not shrink from attempting to lie with its mother or with anyone else--
man, god or beast. It is ready to commit murder.

In short, we all have desires like incest and murder, but most people are able to control them, and
they are fulfilled only in sleep when reason and inhibitions do not restrain them.

At the end of Book 9, Plato creates an image of the soul which contains a many-headed
beast (Θηρίου πολυκεφάλου, 588c7-8). To represent the three parts of the soul, he uses the
analogy of a many-headed beast, a lion and a human inside each person (588d2-e1). The unjust
person will allow the many-headed beast and the lion (which represent the appetites and courage
respectively) to dominate the human (which represents reason) whereas the just person will make
the human within us take charge of the many-headed beast and make an ally of the lion’s nature,
which is related to courage (588e2-589b4). Plato concludes that it is honorable to subject the brutish part of our nature to that which is human in us (τὰ ὑπὸ τῷ ἀνθρώπω, μᾶλλον δὲ ἴσως τὰ ὑπὸ τῷ θείῳ τὰ θηριώδη ποιοῦντα τῆς φύσεως, 589c8-d2), while it is shameful to enslave the civilized to the wild (τὰ ὑπὸ τῷ ἄγριῷ τὸ ἡμεροῦν δουλούμενα, 589d2-3).

Aristotle addresses the issue of bestial appetites in the context of morality in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He uses θηριώδης (1145a30) to mean “a brute.” He asserts that θηριώτης (“brutishness”) is one of the moral states to be avoided. The θηριώδης is rarely found among civilized people; it is found chiefly among barbarians. As examples of brutish states, Aristotle gives the female who rips open pregnant women and devours the infants, and the tribes about the Black Sea which are savage (ἀπηγριωμένων) and delight in raw meat or human flesh, or in lending their children to one another to feast upon (1148b19-24). Again in the *Politics* (1338b12), Aristotle, speaking from the point of view of a supporter of Athenian civilization, discusses how gymnastics should be only one of four subjects (the others being reading and writing, music, and drawing) in a universal and publicly organized educational system. He describes as θηριώδεις Spartan boys who are made animal in nature by their overtraining. Hard exercises will result in animal ferocity (τὸ θηριῶδες, 1338b29) and render men vulgar (βαναύσους).

An ethical discussion in the *De Divinatione* brings Cicero, as an adherent of the New Academy, to translate the passage from Plato referred to above (571c5-d1), using feritas to render τὸ θηριῶδες: *in qua [parte animi] feritas quaedam sit atque agrestis immanitas* (1.60).
In the *De Inventione*, Cicero uses the related adjective *ferus* to speak about the wild state of men at the beginning of civilization: *vir et sapiens...ex feris et immanibus mites reddidit et mansuetos homines* (1.2.2). The cause of the transition from the primordial and beastlike state of men to that of civil society was the appearance of a wise man who had the highest qualities of the human spirit—eloquence joined with wisdom. In the same passages, Cicero employs *immanitas* (savageness) and *immanis* (savage) as synonyms for *feritas* and *ferus*.

Seneca’s reflection on *feritas* in *de ira* 2.5 takes its origin from the first part of Book 7 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (ch. 1-10), where the Greek philosopher distinguishes vice (κακία), incontinence (ἀκρασία) and bestiality (Θηριόότης, *feritas*, especially 1148b15-1149a24; 1149b27-1150a8). Seneca argues that men who habitually rejoice in human blood do not display *ira* but *feritas*. His examples of Phalaris, tyrant of Acragas, c. 570 BC, and Apollodorus, tyrant of Cassandria, 279-276 BC, were bywords for savagery. Phalaris roasted his victims alive in a hollow bronze bull; Apollodorus secured the loyalty of the fellow-conspirators with whose help he became tyrant by butchering a youth whose body he served to his adherents. In the same passage, Seneca uses *saeviunt* for those who are habitually savage or *saevus*, as they make a pastime of savagery (*per otium saevi, de ira* 2.5.3). Into this category falls Hannibal, whose savagery was a commonplace among Roman writers (e.g. Livy 21.4.9).

For when Hannibal saw a trench full of human blood, Seneca reports his exclamation, “*O*

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70 Ermanno Malaspina. *L. Annaei Senecae De clementia libri duo*. Torino (Edizioni dell’Orso, 2002) 392, ad 2.4.2.


72 Other passages where Phalaris and Apollodorus are cited as examples of savagery include: *Cic. de Nat. Deorum* 3.33, *de Off. 3.6-7, Sen. de ben. 7.20.4, Diod. Sic. 9.18-19 and 22.5, Aelian, *Var. hist. 14.41, Pausan. 4.5.*
In the de clementia, which Seneca addressed to Nero as his moral tutor, he again uses *saevire* when he argues that the inclination to vent one's rage should be less strong than the provocation for it: *Voluntas oportet ante saeviendi quam causa deficiat* (1.8.7). It is bestial madness to rejoice in wounds and blood, to cast off the man and turn into an animal of the forest: *ferina ista rabies est sanguine gaudere ac vulneribus et abieicto homine in silvestre animal transire* (1.25.1). The reason *saevitia* is hated is because it transgresses all customary, human bounds: *Hoc est, quare vel maxime abominanda sit saevitia, quod excedit fines primum solitos, deinde humanos* (1.25.2). To Stoics such as Seneca, *saevitia* is ἀρρώστημα (an illness) of the soul or, more exactly, κακία, a vice.\(^{73}\)

Änne Bäumer agrees that the Senecan idea of *feritas* is parallel to Aristotle’s θηριότης, but distinguishes two different meanings: Aristotelian θηριότης suggests on the one hand all that lies beneath the level of man and, on the other hand, bestiality, a baseness (κακία). It is the second meaning which feeds into the Senecan idea of *feritas*. Although both moral terms are derived from words for beast (fera, θηρίον), they denote a baseness peculiar only to man, whose guiding principle is reason. Aristotle expressed this directly; in Seneca, *ira* puts reason in its service. There arises from *ira* a habitual desire to destroy and kill. With the distinction of *feritas* from *ira*, Seneca goes beyond Aristotle, who only describes the phenomenon of θηριότης. The concept of θηριότης-*feritas* is not found in the Hellenistic schools of philosophy. Seneca may

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73 Malaspina (2002) 369, *ad* 1.25.2
therefore be correcting Aristotelian doctrine.\textsuperscript{74}

Tragedy is another genre in which Seneca explores these ideas, by using various themes to set in play the philosophical idea of the inner beast in man. One of these themes is the hunt.

In \textit{Phaedra}, Hippolytus does not have an interest in the city. The Nurse has to tell him: \textit{urbem frequenta, civium coetus cole} (482). Instead, Hippolytus prefers to spend his time hunting in the woods outside of Athens. Hippolytus’ use of red colour imagery may suggest his bloodthirstiness toward the game: \textit{tum rostra canes sanguine multo / rubicunda gerunt} (78-79).

His vividly gory language shows how eagerly he awaits the kill: \textit{tu iam victor curvo solves / viscera cultro} (53-54).

Hippolytus’ immersion in wild nature can be read as a sublimation of his lust into the activity of hunting. Thus his weapons invite interpretation as phallic images:

\begin{quote}
tibi libretur missile telum,  
tu grave dextra laevaque simul  
robur lato derige ferro. (48-50)
\end{quote}

He also sublimates his lust into religion. He adores no woman but Diana, goddess of the hunt, a masculine goddess for whom earth’s secret places are open:

\begin{quote}
Ades en comiti, diva virago,  
cuius regno  
pars terrarum secreta vacat. (54-56)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{74} Anne Bäumer, \textit{Die Bestie Mensch: Senecas Aggressionstheorie, ihre philosophischen Vorstufen und ihre literarischen Auswirkungen}, Frankfurt (Peter Lang, 1982) 97.
Seneca here draws on a long tradition of the metaphor of the field applied to the female sexual organs so that we can interpret the “secret part of the earth” as both the female pudenda and the wild domain of Diana that is separate from man’s civilization. Hippolytus remembers that Diana hunts the deer of Crete (Cretaeas...cervas, 61) in a line that recalls Vergil’s simile comparing the lovesick Dido to a deer pricked by a hunter in the Cretan woods: *qualis coniecta cerva sagitta, / quam procul incautam nemora inter Cresia fixit / pastor agens telis* (A.4.69-71). This reminiscence sets up the Dido-esque tragedy of Phaedra who herself comes from Crete.

Hippolytus is carried away with his passion for hunting and the woods: *vocor in silvas* (82). He lays snares for animals (*laqueum, 75*), but he will be treated like an animal in a snare when his horses entangle him in his reins (*laqueo, 1086*). When his dogs track their master’s limbs (*maestaeque domini membra vestigant canes, 1108*) ‘sadly,’ however, Seneca imbues the animals with human emotion: the animals are shown to be more human than the humans.

Other characters in the play pick up this strand of bestial imagery and apply it to Hippolytus, too. Thus the Nurse uses the adjectives *ferum, saevam* and *immitis* when she characterizes Hippolytus: *meus iste labor est aggredi iuvenum ferum / mentemque saevam flectere immitis viri* (272-273). She attributes his celibacy to his uncivilized Amazonian heritage: *immitis annos caelibi vitae dicat,/ conubia vitat: genus Amazonium scias* (231-232). Usually Amazons did not marry (cf. Herc. 542: *quae viduis gentibus imperat*). Hippolytus is as wild

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77 Ibid., 153.

as the animals he hunts: *ferus est* (240). The Nurse asks if he can be tamed by caresses: *resistet ille seque mulcendum dabit?* (236). She prays to Diana to tame and soften his wild heart: *animum rigentem tristis Hippolyti doma: / det facilis aures; mitiga pectus ferum* (413-414).

*Doma* recalls the Ovidian Phaedra’s injunction to Hippolytus: *duaque corda doma* (*Her.* 4.146). Even his father Theseus wonders whether Hippolytus’ nurture was Greek or barbarian: *hunc Graia tellus aluit an Taurus Scythes / Colchusque Phasis?* (906-907) Theseus also interprets Hippolytus’ abstinence from women in conjunction with the alleged rape to be characteristic of his Amazonian inheritance. His father views Hippolytus as worse than beasts since (in his opinion) they do not commit incest.

```
est prorsus iste gentis armiferae furor,
odisse Veneris foedera et castum diu
vulgare populis corpus. o taetrum genus
nullaque victum lege melioris soli!
ferae quoque ipsae Veneris evitant nefas,
generisque leges inscius servat pudor. (909-914)
```

However, Hippolytus himself has a more positive, if unrealistic, view of nature, especially in opposition to the corrupt morals of the city:

```
non alia magis est libera et vitio carens
ritusque melius vita quae priscos colat,
quam quae relictis moenibus silvas amat.
non illum avarae mentis inflammat furor
qui se dicavit montium insontem iugis. (483-487)
```

This speech is a Narcissistic portrait of himself as a man who has abandoned the city for the forests and dedicated himself to innocence in the mountains. Hippolytus, like Narcissus, was
scornful of suitors, a hunter of deer, and a wanderer per devia rura (Ov. Met. 3.354-370).

However, this speech recalls Horace’s integer vitae scelerisque purus (Car. 1.22.1) in its Epicurean, sensual enjoyment of nature.\(^7\) We may even see Hippolytus’ non illum (486) as an echo of the phrase illum non with which Vergil began his praises of country life (G. 2.495).\(^8\) Hippolytus understands crime between family members as a symptom of moral decline occasioned by civilization: tum scelera dempto fine per cunctas domos / iere, nullum caruit exemplo nefas (553-554). He avoids the subject of stepmothers except to point out that wild beasts are more merciful: taceo novercas: mitior nulla est feris (558).\(^9\)

Hippolytus contains a contrast between civilization and barbarity within himself.

Phaedra observes that in his Greek face there appears a Scythian sternness: in ore Graio Scythicus apparet rigor (660). When Phaedra tries to embrace Hippolytus, he treats her like an animal he would sacrifice to Diana:

\[
\begin{align*}
en & \text{ impudicum crine contorto caput} \\
laeva & \text{ reflexi: iustior numquam focis} \\
datus & \text{ tuis est sanguis, arcitenus dea.} \tag{707-709}
\end{align*}
\]

To escape from Phaedra’s grasp, Hippolytus prefers the idea of exile among barbarians and beasts:

\[
\begin{align*}
quis & \text{ eluet me Tanais aut quae barbaris} \\
Maoitis & \text{ undis Pontico incumbens mari?} \\
non & \text{ ipse toto magnus Oceano pater}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^7\) Thomas F. Curley, III, The Nature of Senecan Drama, Roma (Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1986) 35.


After his departure, the chorus imagines that Hippolytus will become prey for the gods of the woods, the Naiads and Pans.

cingent, turba licens, Naïdes improbae,
formosos solitae claudere fontibus,
et somnis facient insidias tuis
lascivae nemorum deae
montivagive Panes. (780-784)

Pan is a half-man, half-goat creature, prone to lust (Ov. Her. 4.171, Met. 1.699-706, 14.515). The Naiads too are famously lusty as in the case of Salmacis; she entraps Hermaphroditus, who, like Hippolytus, does not know what love is (Ov. Met. 4.284-388). Salmacis’ embrace results in Hermaphroditus’ assuming a biform nature (biformis, Met. 4.387), here gendered rather than bestial like the Minotaur (Phaed. 691). When Theseus determines to chase Hippolytus, however, the erstwhile hunter becomes the hunted prey: profugum per omnes pertinax latebras premam (938). Latebra is characteristically the lair of an animal (OLD s.v. 1b) while premo can be used of running down prey (OLD s.v. 5b).82

When Hippolytus leaves the city as an exile (ut profugus urbem liquet, 1000), a bull--symbol of male sexuality (cf. Zeus’ rape of Europa in the form of a bull, Moschus 2.125, Verg. B. 6.46, Ov. Met. 2.850, 869)--rises from the sea (Phaed. 1036). Hippolytus inherits bull-conquering skill from his father: haud frangit animum vanus his terror meum: / nam mihi paternus vincere est tauros labor (1066-1067). Hippolytus acts as a civilizer using his reason in bravely facing the bull. However, when Hippolytus loses control of his horses, he resembles

82 Coffey and Mayer (1990) 171 ad 938.
another adolescent charioteer whose early death prevents his passage into adulthood—Phaethon (1092, a reference to Ov. Met. 2.167-324). Like Pentheus (\textit{membra viri manibus direpta nefandis}, Met. 3.731), Hippolytus is torn apart, not in this case because he was a voyeur, but because his ephebic beauty is transient.\footnote{Glenn W. Most, “\textit{Disiecti membra poetae}: The Rhetoric of Dismemberment in Neronian Poetry,” in R. Hexter and D. Selden, ed. \textit{Innovations of Antiquity}, New York (Routledge, 1992) 394-395.} As the chorus says, beauty is a short-lived gift:

\begin{quote}
anceps forma bonum mortalibus,  
exigui donum breve temporis,  
\textit{ut velox celeri pede laberis!} (761-763)
\end{quote}

and
\begin{quote}
\textit{res est forma fugax: quis sapiens bono confidat fragili? dum licet, utere.}  
tempus te tacitum subruit, horaque  
semper praeterita deterior subit (773-776).
\end{quote}

The Epicurean thought is similar to the \textit{eheu fugaces} of Horace (\textit{Car.} 2.14) and his Leuconoë ode (\textit{Car.} 1.11). The cliché that beauty is fleeting is also found in Ovid: \textit{forma bonum fragile est} (A.A. 2.113), but the chorus adds the ominous note of inevitable punishment: \textit{raris forma viris (saecula perspicere) impunita fuit} (\textit{Phaed.} 820-821). Hippolytus resembles the Homeric Trojan youth Euphorbus, whose youthful beauty is contrasted with the blood that mars it (with 1095-1096 cf. \textit{Iliad} 17.51-52).

In Latin epic, a handsome young man killed by a beast more readily recalls Ovid’s Adonis gored by a boar: \textit{trux aper insequitur totosque sub inguine dentes / abdidit et fulva moribundum stravit harena} (\textit{Met.} 10.715-716). Hippolytus’ virginity is taken by the tree trunk on which he is impaled: \textit{tandemque raptum truncus ambusta sude / medium per inguen stipite}
ejecto *tenet* (*Phaed.* 1098-1099). Seneca has Ovid’s passage in mind as we can see by his reuse of Ovid’s *inguine* in *inguen*. But it is not enough that Hippolytus is impaled; thorns card his flesh, his head is smashed (*inlisum caput*, 1093) and his body is dismembered (1102-1104) in what Boyle terms “a grotesque and unambiguous orgy of sexual violence.”84 Seneca’s description of Hippolytus’ death owes a great deal to the corresponding passage in Ovid (*Met.* 15.524-529):

```
excutior curru, lorisque tenentibus artus
viscera viva trahi, nervos in stipe teneri,
membra rapi partim partimque reprensa relinqui,
ossa gravem dare fracta sonum fessamque videres
exhalari animam nullasque in corpore partes,
noscere quas partes: unumque erat omnia vulnus.
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Ovid has the stake, the body torn in pieces, the widespread wounds and the indistinguishable body parts.85 Seneca emulates Ovid but outdoes him in violence: Nature, which Hippolytus has unleashed, is bloody and beastly.

The play’s imagery is often a clue as to the character’s true inclinations. Thus Phaedra says her own pleasure lies in pursuing beasts in the chase: *iuvat excitatas consequi cursu feras / et rigidi molli gaesa iaculari manu* (110-111). Not only is she appropriating the hunting interests of Hippolytus in enjoying the out-of-doors but the hunt is often a metaphor for the pursuit of a beloved. The second quoted line hints at her desire to bring Hippolytus to climax.86 As the

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85 Most (1992) 393.
86 cf. Catull. 56.7: *protelo rigida mea cecidi.*
ancients believed that mollis was derived from mulier, we can see Seneca playing with the sexual dynamic implicit in her soft womanly hand handling her beloved’s hunting gear in her imagination. In Phaedra, the normal roles of the sexes have been reversed as the female pursues the male: she will become a huntress with Hippolytus as her quarry as if he were a deer which she chases:

\[
\text{hunc in nivosi collis haerentem iugis} \\
\text{et aspera agili saxa calcantem pede} \\
\text{sequi per alta nemora, per montes placet. (233-235)}
\]

Phaedra’s amatory guilt is inherited, for her desire for love in the woods is a trait she recognizes from her mother: fatale miserae matris agnosco malum, / peccare noster novit in silvis amor (113-114). Agnosco is an “allusive self-annotation” in Hinds’ phrase whereby Seneca makes reference to his literary sources: agnosco recalls Vergil’s Dido recognizing the traces of her love for her husband (A.4.23) as she prepares to betray his memory by beginning a passionate affair with Aeneas. Also Hippolytus’ dux malorum femina (559) is an echo of Vergil’s dux femina facti (A.1.364). Thus Seneca continues to play with Dido as a model for his tragic Phaedra.

Even Phaedra’s grandmother Europa was attracted to a beast, another bull which was a god in disguise: fronte nunc torva petulans iuvencus / virginum stravit sua terga ludo (303-304).

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Here Seneca’s use of *virginum...ludo* points to Ovid’s *ludere virginibus* in his tale of Europa (*Met. 2.845*). From this union was born Minos, Phaedra’s father.91 Her mother Pasiphae showed her bestial side by pursuing a male who was an animal—a bull: *infando malo / correpta pectoris efferum saevi ducem audax amasti* (115-117). Pasiphae committed bestiality with the bull; the product of their union was a half-man beast, the Minotaur, which Daedalus imprisoned in the Labyrinth: *qui nostra caeca monstra conclusit domo* (122)—with an echo of *clausit* in *Ars Amatoria* 2.24-25: *Daedalus ut clausit conceptum crimine matris, / semibovemque virum semivirumque bovem*. Phaedra personalizes the Minotaur as “our monster.” So the wild creature is confined within the palace as the civilization of Minos required for its safety.

The Nurse tries to restrain Phaedra’s love for Hippolytus by asking what Minos would think: *quid ille, lato maria qui regno premit / populisque reddit iura centenis, pater?* (149-150). Minos, ruler of the seas (*Met. 7.457: classe valet*) and lawgiver to a hundred cities, would hardly approve of Phaedra’s lust for her stepson. The Nurse asks Phaedra to check her passion, a wrong that not even a barbarian has ever yet committed:

```
compesce amoris impii flammias, precor,
        nefasque quod non ulla tellus barbar
        commisit quumquam. (165-167)
```

Thus the Nurse makes the barbarian land appear more civilized than the city of Athens. With his use of *nefas*, Seneca follows Vergil (and Ov. *Met. 8.155-156*) who identifies Pasiphae’s bestiality and her two-form progeny as the evidence of her unspeakable passion:

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hic crudelis amor tauri suppostaque furto
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91 Boyle (1987) ad 299-308.
Seneca’s use of *monstrifera* and *biformi* shows him working particularly closely with the thematic complex of female crime and bestial passion set in play by Virgil and Ovid. When Hippolytus hears Phaedra’s declaration of love for him, he judges her to be worse than her monster-bearing mother:

{o maius ausa matre *monstrifera* malum
genetrice peior! illa se tantum stupro
contaminavit, et tamen tacitum diu
crimen *biformi* partus exhibuit nota,
scelusque matris arguit vultu truci
ambiguus infans. ille te venter tulit! (688-693)

The Nurse asks sarcastically if the palace of the Minotaur doesn’t have enough monsters: *cur monstra cessant? aula cur fratris vacat?* (174) She implies that the product of Phaedra and Hippolytus’ incest would be another monster such as the Minotaur. Phaedra’s lineage makes her susceptible to making improper and irrational choices when falling in love. Thus it is a family trait that Cretan women break the laws of Nature whenever they fall in love: *natura totiens legibus cedet suis, / quotiens amabit Cressa?* (176-177).

As a result of her mother’s history, Phaedra initially believes that wild things, like a bull, a Minotaur, or Hippolytus, can be overcome by love: *amore didicimus vinci feros* (240). She is optimistic that love can tame wild males (*feros*) such as Hippolytus. Nonetheless, Phaedra wants at first to neutralize her desires, wishing to preserve her reputation and avert her wrongdoing by death:
haud te, fama, maculari sinam.
haec sola ratio est, unicum effugium mali:
virum sequamur, morte praeventam nefas (252-254).

In reviewing her options, she considers using a snare such as we have seen Hippolytus sets for animals (75) and as will later ensnare him (1086). But she rejects hanging, the womanly way in which Euripides’ Phaedra died (Hipp. 770), and concludes instead with the prospect of jumping from the Acropolis (259-260), as Aegeus did (Catull. 64.241),92 though, in the end, she returns to the manly choice of dying by the sword (Phaed. 1177).93 In her delirium, Phaedra wishes to divest herself of the trappings of civilization to take up the equipment of the huntress:

removete, famulae, purpura atque auro inlitas
vestes…laeva se pharetrae dabit,
hastile vibret dextra Thessalicum manus. (387-8, 396-7)

Comparing herself to an Amazon woman (399-401), she represents herself like Hippolytus, the son of an Amazon. Like him, she will be carried away by her passion to the woods: *talis in silvas ferar* (403, cf. Hippolytus’ *vocor in silvas*, 82). Yet Amazons, like Cretan women, defy the laws of Athenian civilization.

The quintessential hero of Athenian civilization is Theseus, slayer of the beast:

*monstrique caecam Cnosii vidit domum / et longa curva fila collegit via* (649-650). Yet, Theseus too has difficulty controlling his appetites, for at the beginning of the play Phaedra describes him seeking illicit sex in the underworld: *stupta et illicitos toros / Acheronte in imo quaerit Hippolyti*


Phaedra regards Theseus as a ravisher of Proserpina since he is aiding Pirithous in an attempt to carry her off from Pluto: thalami remittet ille raptorem sui? (627) Phaedra also complains that Theseus is Pirithoi comes (244); as Seneca read Ovid’s Heroides 4, this phrase may refer to the variant that Pirithous was Theseus’ lover.

illum Pirithoi detinet ora sui.
praeposuit Theseus—nisi si manifesta negamus—
Pirithoum Phaedrae Pirithoumque tibi. (Her. 4.110-112)

Phaedra also complains that Theseus by being absent in exile (profugus, 91) shows his wife his usual lack of fidelity: praestatque nuptae quam solet Theseus fidel (92). Seneca’s ironic use of fides here recalls Catullus 64.191 in which it is precisely Theseus’ fides that Ariadne calls into question. Moreover, Phaedra recalls that Theseus bore a savage hand against his chaste first wife, Antiope, though it was she, as an Amazon, who was called barbarian by Athenians: immitis etiam coniugi castae fuit: / experta saevam est barbara Antiope manum (Phaed. 226-227), for Theseus killed her with a sword even though she had borne him a son, Hippolytus. Theseus is savage again when he thanks the gods that he murdered Antiope because he suspects that Hippolytus would have committed incest with his own mother:

iam iam superno numini grates ago,
quod icta nostra cecidit Antiope manu,
quod non ad antra Stygia descendens tibi
matrem reliqui (926-929).

95 Coffey and Mayer (1990) ad 240.
96 contra Coffey and Mayer (1990) ad 97 and 244.
Theseus is a failed hero who has a literary history of harming his own people: he deserted his lover Ariadne (Catull. 64.133), caused the deaths of his father Aegeus (Catull. 64.244) and son Hippolytus (Phaed. 1165), and killed his wife Antiope (Her. 4.119f.). Hence Phaedra says to Theseus:

{o dure Theseu semper, o numquam tuis
tuto reverse! natus et genitor nece
reditus tuos luere; pervertis domum
amore semper coniugum aut odio nocens (Phaed. 1164-1167).

She imagines Hippolytus’ limbs must have been scattered by a savage brigand like Sinis the pine-bender or Procrustes the limb-lopper or a beast-man like the Minotaur—a list of savage brutes defeated by the civilizer Theseus.

membra quis saevus Sinis
aut quis Procrustes sparsit aut quis Cresius
Daedalea vasto claustra mugitu replens,
taurus biformis ore cornigero ferox
divulsit? (1169-1173)

Here we see Seneca taking up Vergil: the use of taurus biformis shows intertextuality with A. 6.25f., prolesque biformis / Minotaurus inest. Theseus contrived barbaric deaths for these uncivilized men, yet restores civilized practice by passing sentence upon himself. Recalling that he acted as executioner of the savage Sinis and Sciron, he calls himself a man of blood:

crudus et leti artifex,
extia machinatus insolita effera,
nunc tibimet ipse iusta supplicia irroga.

97 Coffey and Mayer (1990) 188 ad 1172.
pinus coacto vertice attingens humum
caelo remissum findat in geminas trabes,
mittarve praeceps saxa per Scironia? (1220-1225)

He deserves eternal punishment such as that given to Ixion, the father of “my own Pirithous” (*mei...Pirithoi*, 1235). One of Theseus’ last thoughts in the play is of his intimate friend--when it should have been of his son.

The chorus leader has to remind forgetful Theseus to pay his son the last rite of civilized life—burial: *nunc iusta nato solve et absconde oculus / dispersa foede membra laniatu effero* (1245-1246). Hippolytus’ death has sacrificial overtones.98 Theseus reconstructs his son’s corpse as if he were rearranging the body of a sacrificed animal in its proper order: *disiecta, genitor, membra laceri corporis / in ordinem dispone* (1256-1257). Theseus calls the gods savage for having destroyed Hippolytus’ beauty when the blame should fall on Theseus himself for his curse: *huc cecidit decor? / o dira fata, numinum o saevus favor!* (1270-1271) As Hippolytus ordered a hunt at the beginning of the play, Theseus orders a hunt for his son’s remains at the end (1277-1279).99 Theseus’ last wish is for cruel treatment of his recently deceased wife. He reverses the usual formula of civilized burial, to ask that the earth not rest lightly on her bones.100 He does not even have the courtesy to call her by name but uses instead the contemptuous pronoun *istam*: *istam terra defossam premat, / gravisque tellus impio capiti*

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100 Ibid., *ad* 1279-80.
incubet (1279-1280). Whereas Hippolytus receives a hero’s cremation (1277), Phaedra is to be degraded in her inhumation.\textsuperscript{101}

All three major characters of the \textit{Phaedra} exemplify in themselves the polarity between civilization and wild nature. Hippolytus avoids the city in his occupation of hunter. Theseus is king of Athens, but has been absent from the city for four years in the underworld (838). Phaedra is queen of Athens, but is ruled by her animalistic passion. As the antithesis to the Stoic sapiens, she says, \textit{quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor} (184).

In the \textit{Thyestes} too, the wildness of the woods is again brought into the palace. Bestial features characterize the house of Tantalus as both the Fury (\textit{feros/pectus}, 85-86) and the Chorus (\textit{feros...impetus}, 136) recognize.\textsuperscript{102} The play deals with the appetites: Tityus is regarded as something to be consumed by black birds called monsters (9-12); the Fury wants Libido to be victrix (48). She commands Tantalus to infect the whole house with himself: \textit{imple Tantalo totam domum} (53) where Tantalo represents by metonymy insatiable desire and refers to Tantalus’ own punishment of everlasting hunger and thirst in the underworld (149-150; Ov. \textit{Met}. 4.458-459). The Fury commands him to cause the Thracian crime to be performed with greater numbers: \textit{Thracium fiat nefas maiore numero} (56-57). This statement alludes to the feeding of Itys to his unwitting father Tereus in revenge for his raping his sister-in-law (\textit{Met}. 6.647-651). So the crime and the punishment are similar to those of Thyestes, and a cannibalistic punishment has been served before in a palace in the wilds of Thrace. Moreover, Tantalus’ barbaric crime of feeding his son Pelops to the gods (\textit{dapibus feris}, 150; Ov. \textit{Met}. 6.407-8) is a familial precedent

\textsuperscript{101} Boyle (1987) 212 \textit{ad} 1279.

for the feast Atreus will serve Thyestes. Tantalus reacts to the Fury’s command with hunger in his marrow and burning thirst: *quid famem infixam intimis / agitas medullis? flagrat incensum siti / cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat* (97-99). The marrow is a seat of passion where the fire of lust burns in Catull. 45.16: *ignis mollibus ardet in medullis*. Unrequited lust is associated with dryness. Tantalus’ passage through the world dries it up: *cernis ut fontes liquor / introrsus actus linquat, ut ripae vacant?* (108-109). Satisfaction of libido is associated with liquid.

Thyestes will drink blood mixed with wine: *mixtus in Bacchum crur / spectante te potetur* (65-66).

Tantalus’ literal thirst becomes in Atreus and Thyestes a thirst for power. Thyestes violated civilized behaviour (*fas...omne ruptum*, 179) when he seduced his sister-in-law Aërope to gain the golden fleece, symbol of the kingship of Argos: *coniugem stupro abstulit / regnumque furto* (222-223). Atreus reveals his desire for brutality when he says, *impleri iuvat / maiore monstro* (253-4). This *monstro* is his lust for a revenge that is savage enough to outdo Thyestes’ crime:

\[
\text{scelera non ulcisceris,} \\
\text{ nisi vincis.—et quid esse tam saevum potest} \\
\text{quod superet illum? (195-96).}
\]

Atreus feels he must make a preemptive strike against Thyestes because Atreus is convinced that Thyestes has like himself the same lust for power (201-204) and lack of moral bearings. Atreus imagines that Thyestes is preparing an equally savage trap for him:

\[
\text{istud quod vocas saevum asperum,} \\
\text{agique dure credis et nimium impie,} \\
\text{fortasse et illic agitur (314-315)}
\]
Atreus rationalizes his serving Thyestes his sons’ blood mixed with wine by reasoning, 
\textit{sanguinem...meum bibisset} (917-8).

Seneca employs the theme of exile to show that civilization ends and nature begins outside of the city. Atreus hated being in exile because of its insecurity and uncertainty: \textit{per regna trepidus exul erravi mea} (238). Atreus deceives Thyestes by telling him to stop being a wandering exile and by inviting him to share his throne:

\begin{verbatim}
relictis exul hospitiis vagus
regno ut miserias mutet atque Argos regat
ex parte dominus (297-299).
\end{verbatim}

Like Thyestes, the barbaric Scythians will be called \textit{vagi} at line 631. When Thyestes returns from exile, he refers to the city of Argos as the greatest good for exiles (\textit{miserisque summum ac maximum exulibus bonum}, 405), but he senses Atreus may not welcome him. He seeks safety in an area that is usually unsafe--the forests with the beasts: \textit{repete silvestres fugas / saltusque densos potius et mixtam feris / similemque vitam} (412-414). Thyestes prefers the misery of exile to his present feelings of danger (427-8).

Seneca again uses hunting imagery in the \textit{Thyestes}. The Assistant asks, \textit{sed quibus captus dolis / nostros dabit perductus in laqueos pedem?} (287-8). He imagines Thyestes being caught like an animal in a snare. Atreus also uses a hunting metaphor to speak of his brother as prey he has caught fast in nets he has spread: \textit{plagis tenetur clausa dispositis fera} (491). Atreus shows his own beastly nature when he compares himself to a hunting dog:

\begin{verbatim}
sic, cum feras vestigat et longo sagax
\end{verbatim}
loro *tenetur* Umber ac presso vias
scrutatur ore, dum procul lento suem
odore sentit, paret et tacito locum
rostro pererrat; praeda cum proprior fuit,
cervice tota *pugnat* et gemitu vocat
dominum morantem seque retinenti eripit (497-503).

*Tenetur...cervice...pugnat* recall *teneant...pugnaces...collo* used of the restraint put on the necks of the dogs who are fighting against it in the opening scene of the *Phaedra* (32-34). Thus Atreus is more beastly than Hippolytus as the former resembles the latter’s hunting dogs. For the *dominum* and *retenti* of the line 503, we could substitute *ratio* or the reasoning part of the mind that holds us back from unlawful or uncivilized action. The dog has an instinctual drive which can be compared to Atreus’ own *ira* (504).103 This instinct drives the dog to track its prey. The dog obeys its master until the prey is within grasp.

The Messenger underlines Atreus’ bestial nature when he compares Atreus to a hungry Indian tigress (707-11) and a lion in the Armenian woods whose jaws drip with gore and which continues his slaughter although his hunger has been appeased:

```
silva iubatus qualis Armenia leo
in caede multa victor armento incubat;
cruore rictus madidus et pulsa fame
non ponit iras...
non aliter Atreus *saevit* (732-737).
```

The Messenger sees Atreus’ feeding sons to their father as a worse fate than what was usually thought to be the worst final indignity—being thrown to wild animals: *avibus epulandos licet*

---

103 Schiesaro (2003) 100.
ferisque triste pabulum saevis trahat (750-1). Atreus the beast triumphs by perverting the kinds of institution which make civilized life possible: kingship, sacrifice, feast.104

In seeking revenge, Atreus also proves himself to be wild and of an uncontrolled mind: ferus ille et acer / nec potens mentis truculentus Atreus (546-547). Atreus takes sadistic pleasure in deciding which nephew he will kill first: saevum scelus / iuvat ordinare (715-6). The Messenger heaps abuse upon Atreus as he describes the murder: ast illi ferus / in vulnere ensem abscondit (721-2). Atreus’ plan of revenge stems from the belief that incest and cannibalism are homologous acts.105 Schiesaro argues that Atreus’ strange logic, where symmetry replaces the conventions of Aristotelian thought, is an innate part of his thinking, given free rein in the workings of the unconscious but normally suppressed during conscious activity.106 Atreus transgresses the norms of civilized behaviour by killing and serving up his nephews to Thyestes. The Messenger therefore rightly wonders whether this is the city of Argos or the country of the barbarous Alani or nomadic Scythians:

Quaenam ista regio est? Argos et Sparte…

an feris Hister fugam

praebens Alanis…

an vagi passim Scythae? (627-631)

The chorus wonders if Atreus’ crime is due to a new rebellion of the Giants: victi temptant bella Gigantes? (806); the original battle of the Giants against the Olympians was interpreted as a

104 Boyle (1983) 212.


106 Schiesaro (2003) 94-95. He cites the Plato passage with which I began this chapter.
struggle between barbarism and civilization (Hor. Car. 2.12.7, 3.4.42ff.).

Thyestes himself will cite two examples of barbarians when he asks,

\[
tale quis vidit nefas? \\
quis inhospitalis Caucasi rupem asperam \\
Heniochus habitans, quisve Cecropiis metus \\
terris Procrustes? (1047-50)
\]

Yet Atreus kills his nephews on Pelops’ citadel that overlooks the city:

\[
In arce summa Pelopiae pars est domus... \\
cuius extremum latus... \\
urbem premit (641-643).
\]

More specifically, the crime is concealed by a gloomy forest setting which, contrary to the norm, is inside the palace. The city has an uncivilized region within the palace precinct, which should be the most civilized area. Among the trees are the poisonous yew and the cypress, the tree of death (cf. A.6.216: \textit{ferialis cupressos}; Met. 10.142):

\[
sed taxus et cupressus et nigra ilice \\
obscura nutat silva, quam supra eminens \\
despectat alte quercus et vincit nemus (654-656).
\]

Bestial imagery also serves Seneca’s thematic exploration of sacrilege throughout the tragedies. Major characters behave in a brutish manner when they treat minor characters as animals. Atreus tries to sanctify his crime by acting as a priest and following the accustomed ritual of sacrifice:

No part of the ritual is overlooked but the sacrificial victims are human and even related to him, for they are his brother’s children. Atreus again commits sacrilege by sacrificing to himself as if he were a god: *mactet sibi* (713). Moreover, he drags Plisthenes to the altar and kills him on it: *tunc ille ad aras Plisthenem saevus trahit* (726).

Thyestes is driven by his hereditary libido to accept the crown (542). The crown binds him (*vincla*, 544) to his brother’s lust for control over him. The chorus mistakenly believes Atreus’ friendly overtures to his brother: *iam minae saevi cecidere ferri* (573). Thyestes becomes contaminated by savagery, however, when he accepts his share of the crown. This return to power exposes him to his inherited bestial glutony. He does not feast in a civilized fashion but rips his sons’ bodies apart and gnaws upon their bones as an animal would: *lancinat gnatos pater / artusque mandit ore funesto suos* (778-779). The words *lancinat* and *mandit* suggest not human but bestial eating.\(^\text{108}\) In his drunken feasting, he dispels any memory of his unhappy past: *sed iam saevi nubila fati / pelle* (934-5). He does not know how savage he has

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 49.
become. Using *libet*, the verb associated with *libido*, he says: *libet et Tyrio / saturas ostro rumpere vestes, / ululare libet* (955). The clothing of the king has been saturated with the liquid dye of Tyrian purple, but Thyestes is not satisfied. Now his desire is to get rid of the trappings of civilization and kingship altogether: his pleasure is to howl like an animal. He has foreboding of a *fera tempestas* about to break (959). When Thyestes sees his sons’ severed heads, he asks for their remains: *utrumne saevis pabulum alitibus iacent, / an beluis vorantur, an pascunt feras?* (1032-33). He does not realize he has been made into a monster by being fed his children. In *Thyestes*, there is no *pietas* for familial ties or institutions of civilization. Thyestes’ incest with his sister-in-law in an unlawful attempt to wrest the kingship from his brother leads, apparently inexorably, to Atreus’ bestial delight in killing his nephews and making his unwitting brother a cannibal.

Atreus is not the only king in Seneca’s tragedies who acts more like a beast than a man. In the *Hercules Furens*, Lycus, like a beast, has wandered into Thebes from the wilderness. As the tyrant of Thebes, he has murdered Creon, Megara’s father, and his sons to usurp his throne. Himself an exile, Lycus oppresses Thebes as Amphitryon remarks to the people of Thebes: *tremitis ignarum exulem, / suis carentem finibus, nostris gravem* (269-270). The topsy-turvy situation in Thebes is expressed in the chiasmus of line 274: *tenetque Thebas exul Herculeas Lycus*. He, like Atreus, tries to win over Megara by saying *particeps regno veni* (369). As we have heard similar words from Atreus, these words indicate Lycus’ intent to kill Hercules’ family. Megara underlines Lycus’ crimes by asking, *Egone ut parentis sanguine aspersam manum / fratrumque gemina caede contingam?* (372-373) Amphitryon calls Lycus a brutish king (*regis feri*, 518) for ordering a pyre to be built to destroy Hercules’ family (506).
Even a goddess is savage in her anger against Hercules. Juno is wrathful that she has been displaced from her position as wife of Jupiter by a number of paelices which include Hercules’ mother Alcmena: *templa summi vidua deserui aetheris, / locumque caelo pulsa paelicibus dedi* (3-4). She fears that Alcmena will ascend to heaven and hold her place and that Hercules will be made a god: *escendat licet / meumque victrix teneat Alcmenae locum, / pariterque natus astra promissa occupet* (21-23). This fear is her motivation for transferring her savagery to Hercules and causing his madness. As in *Aeneid* I.4 (*saeva memorem Iunonis ob iram*), the anger of Juno is directed against a hero with devastating consequences. She suffers like a tragic heroine from the passions of hatred, anger and grief: *non sic abibunt odia: vivaces aget / violentus iras animus, et saevus dolor / aeterna bella pace sublata geret* (27-29). She will remove civilizing peace and wage eternal wars against Hercules. Yet she realizes that Hercules is a civilizer and has already tamed whatever is *ferum* in the world (32). By her own admission, she gives commands that are too savage (*nimis saeva impero*, 35) and yet she has no more monsters to send Hercules to face (*monstra iam desunt mihi*, 40). He has survived the *fera tyranni iura* (43) of Eurystheus, through whom Juno’s commands were conveyed. The fact that Hercules arms himself with the beasts he defeated presages that he will act like an animal toward his family on his return to Thebes (*pro telis gerit / quae timuit et quae fudit: armatus venit / leone et hydra*, 44-46). She dismisses the wild beasts (*discedant ferae*, 77) and commands her anger to act like a wild beast in tearing Hercules apart (*manibus ipsa dilacera tuis*, 76). She calls for the monster Typhoeus to be released against him (*tellus Gigante Doris excusso tremens / supposita monstri colla terrifici levet*, 81-82). She summons from the Underworld the Eumenides whose savage hands brandish snaky whips (*viperea saevae verbera incutiant manus*, 88) and fierce Impiety that licks its own blood (*suumque lambens sanguinem Impietas ferox*, 97).
Even the city is made to appear an uncivilized wasteland. Juno calls the land of Thebes wild and monstrous (*dira ac fera*, 19) as it has produced a crop of impious mothers (*matribus...impiis*, 20) impregnated by Jupiter: Semele, Antiope (mother of Amphion and Zethus) and Alcmene. Moreover, Thebes has a history of crimes committed by women: Agave and Ino tore Pentheus apart like a beast when they thought he was a boar (*Met*. 3.713-731). Even Cadmus, as he traversed Illyria’s realm in exile, became a beast—a snake (393-394)—as Seneca draws on Ovid’s “Thebaid” of *Metamorphoses* 3 and 4.

With their mention of Cadmean Bacchantes and the Thracian mistress, the Chorus alludes to two examples of *sparagmos*: Pentheus and Itys (134-149). Ovid’s Theban narratives show how both of them were treated like animals in being torn apart (*membra viri manibus direpta nefandis, Met*. 3.731 and *membra / dilaniant*, 6.644-645). In contrast to these allusions, the Chorus present images of civilization. One set of images is pastoral:

```
pastor gelida cana pruina
grege dimisso pabula carpit;
ludi prato liber aperto
nondum rupta fronte iuvencus;
vacuae reparant ubera matres;
errat cursu levis incerto
molli petulans haedus in herba (139-145).
```

A shepherd gathers fodder for his flock; a heifer plays; cows graze; a boisterous kid wanders.

Another set of images is nautical:

```
carbasa ventis
credit dubius navita vitae,
laxos aura complente sinus.
```
A sailor sets sail; a fisherman prepares his concealed hooks. But this final image introduces the use of deception in the service of civilization before the chorus draws the contrast between the innocent country, where innocent lives delight in their own small means (159-161), and the cities, which should be centres of civilization but in fact are places of great ambitions and trembling fears (162-163). This observation may reflect Seneca’s views on the city of Rome in his own day and is similar in thought to Hippolytus’ speech on the simple life in the forests in the *Phaedra* (483-564).

Alcmené’s son is the champion of mankind and the great civilizer against the forces of nature: Hercules has tamed every fearful thing the earth has produced (*ferum/ fractum atque domitum est*: 33-35). Yet although Hercules at times works to civilize the world, he contains a contradiction within him as his untamed valour is revered (*indomita virtus colitur*, 39). He harnesses the elemental forces of the beasts he has defeated to the values of civilization by wearing the skin of the Nemean lion and dipping his arrows in the Lernean hydra’s poison (45-46).¹⁰⁹ Juno describes him as *ferox* for having smashed the prison of the ghosts and led Cerberus through Argive cities (57-59). She claims that he himself will forge a path to heaven by destruction (67). He is returning from exile in the underworld to the city, but he will slay his sons in Thebes (113).

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Juno’s wish that Hercules conquer himself (116) suggests that his behaviour is uncontrollable. Lawall argues that Juno is here slandering Hercules.\textsuperscript{110} Juno herself bears savage resentment (\textit{saevus dolor}, 28, an echo of her \textit{saevique dolores}, A.1.25) and gives savage commands (\textit{saeva impero}, 35) because of Jupiter’s indiscretion with Alemene and it is for this reason that Juno persecutes Hercules and will cause him to kill his wife and children. In Ovid, the Theban women condemn Juno’s savagery toward Ino (\textit{parum iustae nimiumque in paelice saevae / invidiam fecere deae}, Met. 4.547-548) but are themselves transformed by Juno into what she calls \textit{saevitiae monimenta meae} (Met. 4.550). However, Fitch notes that divine and human causations for mental events are often not mutually exclusive in Greek and Roman literature. Dido’s passion is described as fostered by Cupid (A.1.718-722), but it is hardly incomprehensible in human terms.\textsuperscript{111} Furthermore, Littlewood sees a resemblance between Juno and Hercules. To combat him, she is prepared to be equally ruthless and destructive: she vows to fight \textit{aeterna bella} to keep Hercules in his place (27-29). She does not realize she is as damaging to the Olympian order as Hercules.\textsuperscript{112}

Hercules’ mortal father, Amphitryon, defends his son’s labours as acts by which Hercules defeated the monsters Juno has sent against him to bring peace to the human race (205-250). Hercules is thus a great benefactor and bringer of civilization. In his absence, the blessings of civilization have been denied to the city:

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
Hercules’ father portrays him as one who hounds crimes and is a champion of justice over savage tyrants: *qui scelera terra quique persequitur mari / ac saeva iusta sceptra confregit manu* (271-272). Neither does Megara speak of her husband as a savage. She knows him as a tamer of nature as when he split the mountains to create the vale of Tempe (283-288). As she has no knowledge of her fate (*ignara nostrae sortis*, 296), she calls on Hercules to defend his family (*omnes tuo/ defende reeditu sospes*, 306-307).

Lycus, by constrast, denigrates Hercules by calling him unmanly, a “present” for a girl, Omphale, with his hair dripping with nard (like Thyestes’):

Fortem vocemus cuius ex umeris leo,
donum puellae factus, et clava excidit
fulsitque pictum veste Sidonia latus?
fortem vocemus cuius horrentes comae
maduere nardo, laude qui notas manus
ad non virilem tympani movit sonum,
mitra ferocem barbara frontem premens (465-471).

Omphale despoils Hercules, the paradigm of masculinity, of his manly valour and transforms him into a soft eastern barbarian. Yet Lycus further troubles our view of Hercules by attributing to him the idea of relaxing after much labour by harassing herds of maidens as if they were cattle (*pecorumque ritu virginum oppressi greges*, 478). Hercules treats women like animals. The reference may be to all the girls debauched by Hercules, for the phrase *pecorum ritu* suggests
promiscuous sexual activity (cf. Livy 3.47.7: *placet pecudum ferarumque ritu promiscue in concubitus ruere*).\(^{113}\)

Amphitryon counters with an example of Hercules’ acting justly: the altars drank the blood of Busiris whom Hercules killed as a punishment for sacrificing so many strangers (483). Amphitryon does not see, however, that in killing Busiris, Hercules’ own violence also includes committing the sacrilege of polluting the altar. The chorus recalls Hercules’ civilizing feats when he trod the frozen back of the sea and conquered Hippolyte, the queen of the Amazons (535-546). However, whereas Orpheus tamed beasts with music, nature with culture (574), and conquered Pluto’s kingdom with music, Hercules will conquer Pluto’s kingdom and Lycus’ kingship by force: *quae vinci potuit regia carmine, / haec vinci poterit regia viribus* (590-591).

Hercules stresses his role as civilizer when he says, “I brought earth’s secrets to light” (*in lucem extuli / arcana mundi*, 596-597). Yet his language recalls Hippolytus’ interest in *pars terrarum secreta vacat* (56), symbolic of the female pudenda (p. 32), and reinforces Hercules’ own violent sexism. Amphitryon calls him “the tamer of the world and glory of Greece” (*domitor orbis et Graium decus*, 619). But Hercules’ civilizing mission is not as far removed from his violence as we might think, for he relishes the task of killing Lycus: “I go to drain his hateful blood” (*ad hauriendum sanguinem inimicum feror*, 636). His brutal language underscores his hyper-bestial nature. Hercules’ animal obsession with violent action is also shown in his cold rebuff of the loving greetings of his father and wife with the curt injunction “postpone your embraces” (*differ amplexus, parens, / coniunxque differ*, 638-639).\(^{114}\)


\(^{114}\) Fitch (1987a) 274-275.
Theseus describes Hercules’ recent descent into the Underworld in terms that recall the dark site of Atreus’ vengeance in the *Thyestes* and Ovid’s description of the underworld in his Theban narrative (Met. 4): *est in recessu Tartari obscuro locus, / quem gravibus umbris spissa caligo alligat* (709-710). Yet Theseus assures Amphitryon that the judges of the Underworld carry on the institutions of civilization in meting out justice to wrongdoers: a ruthless tyrant’s back is flayed by the hands of the plebs (*impotentis terga plebeia manu / scindi tyranni*, 738-739), while whoever conducts a gentle, bloodless reign reaches the blessed Elysian grove. Theseus’ moral is that rulers should avoid shedding human blood (741-746). Yet Theseus killed his wife Antiope (*Her. 4.119-120* and *Phaed. 1167*). His statement is also ironic in that Minos did not conduct a gentle, bloodless reign but nevertheless serves as a judge in the Underworld (733). Moreover, the timing of his comment is telling, for Theseus speaks while Hercules is killing Lycus offstage.

Theseus relates Hercules’ impatience (*non passus ulla satus Alcmena moras*, 773) in demanding passage from Charon (770). Hercules shows his violent streak again when he subdues Charon with his own pole and forces his way into Charon’s skiff (774-775). Hercules terrifies even the shades of the monsters he had killed, including the savage Centaurs (778). To frighten Cerberus, Hercules uses the fierce gaping jaws of the skin of the Nemean lion: *tunc ipse rictus et Cleoneum caput / opponit ac se tegmine ingenti tegit* (798-799). He wears the lion’s skin almost as a disguise that makes him appear as a wild beast.

The chorus sings that by the hand of Hercules there is peace (*pax est Herculea manu*, 882) and that his labour has tamed every tract of land (*quodcumque alluitur solum / longo Tethyos ambitu, / Alcidae domuit labor;* 886-888). Yet when the hero re-enters, he announces
that he has slain not only Lycus but also his companions whom Hercules has deemed guilty only by their association with Lycus (895-897). He prays not only to Pallas whose aegis issues fierce threats but also to wild Bacchus (901-904). Hercules shows his bloodthirstiness when Amphitryon tells him to purify his hands, dripping with Lycus’ blood, but Hercules wants to commit the sacrilege of pouring a libation of human blood (918-921). He wishes that no savage and cruel tyrants might reign (non saevi ac truces regnent tyranni, 936-938) but significantly, just before his madness, Hercules says, “If the earth is preparing a monster, let it be mine” (si quod parat / monstrum, meum sit, 938-939). He is ready to kill another monster, but does not realize that there is a monster within his own nature which is about to kill his family. Lawall notes that Hercules is turned into “a savage tyrant of monstrous proportions.”

In his madness, he sees his symbol the Lion pouncing on other constellations (944-947), as he is about to commit murder. He has another vision of the Giants in arms against the Olympians (cf. Thy. 806). Hercules calls his son a monster (sed ante matrem parvulum hoc monstrum occidat, 1020) when it is Hercules who is the monster as he slays his own children. He smashes his wife’s bones with a club smeared with the blood of monsters (stipitem istum caede monstrorum illitum. 1029). The chorus prays that his spirit be freed from monstrosities (solvite tantis animum monstris, 1063) and that sleep not leave his wild breast (torva pectora, 1080). They observe that savage dreams whirl in his fierce heart (saeva feroci corde volutat / somnia, 1083-1084). They perceive him here as fully bestial.

When Hercules wakes from his madness in Act 5, his left side is now bare of his lion’s skin (1150-1151). He is now less *ferus* and more human. He was savage when he was wearing it over his head. His mode of dress is emblematic of his behaviour. It is ironic that Hercules assumes someone like Lycus killed his family (1161). Hercules bids others point out the author of the savage slaughter (*saevae cladis auctorem indica*, 1166) and threatens everyone with the force of his anger (1167-1168). When he sees the crime is his, it is Hercules who practices justice and condemns himself; he wants to punish himself with the torture and exile from which he freed Prometheus—being tied to the desolate Caucasus that feeds wild beasts. He wants to subject himself to being torn apart by wild beasts and birds (1206-1210). He realizes his heart has been too wild: *Pectus o nimium ferum!* (1226). Amphitryon always feared monsters (*monstra timui*, 1254); he did not realize that his son had become one as a result of so much killing. Hercules calls himself an impious, savage, merciless, and wild monster (*monstrum impium saevumque et immite ac ferum*, 1280), as if recognizing that he has taken on the qualities of his monstrous foes.  

117 He is not a literal monster like the one that confronts Hippolytus, but Hercules realizes his actions during his madness were characteristic not of a man but of a monster. If his arms are not returned to him, he threatens great crimes against Nature—cutting down the whole forest of Thracian Pindus, wild Bacchus’ groves and Cithaeron’s ridges along with himself (1284-1287). In the end, Hercules is kinder to his father Amphitryon and accedes to his request not to cause him grief by committing suicide. Instead, Hercules passes the sentence of exile on himself (1322). He asks what violent Tigris or fierce Rhine will be able to wash his right hand clean. He names the rivers at the edge of the civilized Roman world: Tanais (the home of the Amazons, cf. *Phaed*. 401 and 715), Nile, Tigris, Rhine, Tagus (*Her. F.* 1323-1327).

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117 Fitch (1987a) 443.
In his career, Hercules kills monsters and makes the world safe for Greek civilization. He is a civilizing force for the Greeks but he resembles the monsters he kills. He does good things for the community but he goes astray. What Hercules, Atreus and Phaedra represent in Seneca’s tragedies is the bestial aspect of human nature. Phaedra has the insight to know that unreason compels her to follow the worse path (furor cogit sequi / peiora, Phaed. 178-179, quoting Ovid’s Medea in Met. 7.20-21). Usually our rational mind keeps our bestial impulses in check, but these Greek examples transgress the limit of what is acceptable. For Seneca the philosopher, it is the conquest of the passions which should be the aim of every civilized person (Ep. 73.15). As courtier of Gaius and Claudius and the adviser of Nero, Seneca had knowledge from his observation of others of the difficulty of resisting the temptations of avarice, ambition and lust. In tragedy, Seneca found a medium for writing cautionary tales of savage behaviours that should be avoided by civilized Romans. Thus Seneca wrote in de ira (3.18.1): utinam ista saevitia intra peregrina exempla mansisset nec in Romanos mores cum aliis adventiciis vitiis etiam suppliciorum irarumque barbaria transisset!

Chapter 2

Anger

\[ \text{θυμῷ μάχεσθαι χαλεπόν· ὃ γὰρ ἂν θέλῃ ψυχῆς ὄνειται. -- Heracleitus, fr. 85, quoted by Plutarch, } \]

Coriol. 22.\(^{119}\)

We move from an examination of the bestial appetites to an emotion. Anger is a universal emotion but its instantiations are culturally diverse. The ancient Greek concept is significantly different from the modern.\(^{120}\) In this chapter, I review the accounts of Aristotle and the Stoics Chrysippus and Posidonius before turning to consider Seneca’s \textit{de ira} and exploring the application of this treatise to his \textit{Medea}. Fitch contends that “the dramas do not read like negative exemplars designed to warn of the dangers of passion,”\(^{121}\) but I will argue that they do. As Seneca writes, \textit{legas, omnia ad mores et ad sedandum rabiem affectuum referens} (Ep. 89.23). Hine notes that the play is often treated as a warning about anger, showing the lengths to which uninhibited anger may go\(^{122}\) and Hinds sees the plays as cautionary tales of turmoil which put on display an absence or perversion of Stoic wisdom.\(^{123}\) Harris too has argued that \textit{ira} is a central theme in Seneca’s \textit{Medea} and the author’s Stoic views are openly on display.\(^{124}\) However, none

\(^{119}\) “It is difficult to fight with anger, for whatever it wants, it buys at the cost of the soul.”


\(^{121}\) Fitch (2002) 22.


\(^{123}\) Hinds (2011) 56.

of these scholars has conducted an extensive comparative investigation of the language of Seneca’s treatise *de ira* and his tragedy *Medea*, which is the subject of this chapter. In the past, scholars have written about Seneca the tragedian or Seneca the philosopher. This limited approach presents half the picture. Recently, however, scholars have begun to explore the Senecan corpus as a whole.¹²⁵ Schiesaro writes,

The connections between prose and poetry in Seneca must be evaluated afresh, taking as a starting-point not ethical norms and their presumed subversion, but the startling similarities of forms of expression and stylistic nuances which connect the two sides of Seneca’s production.¹²⁶

This is the project to which I hope this chapter will contribute.

### 2.1 The Philosophical Background

Aristotle is the earliest ancient philosopher to write at length about the emotions:

> Ἐστι δὲ τὰ πάθη, δι᾿ ὠςα μεταβάλλοντες διαφέρουσι πρὸς τὰς κρίσεις, οίς ἐπεται λύπη καὶ ἡδονή, οίνον ὀργή ἔλεος φόβος καὶ ὁσα ἄλλα τοιαύτα, καὶ τὰ τούτοις ἐναντία (*Rhetoric* 2.1.8, 1378a).¹²⁷

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¹²⁷ “The emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgments, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries.” (trans. Freese)
Defining the emotions as those affections which cause people to change their opinion in regard to their judgments—including anger, pity, and fear—Aristotle specifies anger as a desire for retaliation:

Ἐστω δὴ ὀργή ὑφεξις μετὰ λύπης τιμωρίας φανομένης διὰ φανομένην ὀλιγωρίαν τῶν εἰς αὐτόν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ, τοῦ ὀλιγωρεῖν μὴ προσήκοντος (Rhetoric 2.2.1, 1378a). 128

That is to say, anger is a desire, accompanied by pain, for revenge for a perceived slight when the slight is undeserved. Anger is also accompanied by a certain pleasure due to the hope of future revenge (Rhetoric 2.2.2, 1378b). Aristotle limits the causes of anger (ὀργή) to intentional offences of a single kind—a slight (ὀλιγωρία)—but he identifies three classes of slight: 1) contempt (καταφρόνησις), the belief that something is of no value; 2) spite (ἐπηρεασµός), the obstruction of another’s wishes; 3) arrogance (ὕβρις), acting so as to cause shame to another for one’s own pleasure (Rhetoric 2.2.3-5, 1378b). In Aristotle’s view, the result of a slight is that we find ourselves diminished in esteem and this feeling motivates an act of revenge. Konstan writes that the aim of anger is thus to cause pain to the other. For an angry person to get revenge, the first offender must be aware of it. When we are angry, we want the other person to suffer in their turn the kind of belittling that provoked our anger (Rhetoric 2.4.31, 1382a 14-15). For Aristotle, the death of the other would render that awareness impossible. He recognizes, moreover, that there are those who have the status to slight an inferior, and those who do not. 129

128 “Let us then define anger as a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved.” (trans. Freese)

Aristotle’s analysis of the emotions had a great impact on the philosophical schools of Hellenistic Greece. The Stoics were interested in the polarity of the emotions versus reason in their study of ethics. The third head of the Stoic school, Chrysippus, takes up Aristotle’s definition of anger and expands upon it, defining ὀργή as “the desire to take vengeance against one who is believed to have committed a wrong contrary to one’s deserts” (ὀργή μὲν οὖν ἐστιν ἐπιθυμία <τοῦ> τιμωρήσασθαι τὸν δοκοῦντα ἣδικηκέέναι παρὰ τὸ προσήκον, SVF 3.395 = Stobaeus 2.91.10). Chrysippus here shows support for revenge, which Plato had condemned (Crit. 49c). In On Moral Virtue, Plutarch quotes Chrysippus’ views about anger:

ἐν δὲ τοῖς περὶ Ἀνοµμολογίας ὁ Χρύσιππος εἰπὼν ὅτι “τυφλὸν ἐστιν ἡ ὀργή καὶ πολλάκις μὲν οὐκ ἐὰν ὅραν τὰ ἐκφανή πολλάκις δὲ τοῖς καταλαμβανοµένοις ἐπιπροσθεῖ,” μικρὸν προελθὼν, “τὰ γὰρ ἐπιγινόµενα, φησί, πάθη ἐκκροῦει τοὺς λογισµούς, καὶ τὰ ὡς ἔτέρως φαινόµενα, βιαίως προωθοῦντα ἐπὶ τὰς ἐναντίας πράξεις” (Plutarch, On Moral Virtue 10, 450C).130

This statement suggests that Chrysippus followed Plato in believing that the passions were a separate part of the mind that could overpower another part such as reason.131 Chrysippus goes on to say that every rational creature by nature uses reason and is governed by it; but often reason is rejected when we are under the impulse of some other more violent force—such as anger (Plutarch, op. cit., 450D).

130 “In his book On the Failure to Lead a Consistent Life Chrysippus has said, ‘Anger is a blind thing: often it prevents our seeing obvious matters, and often it obscures matters which are already apprehended;’ and, proceeding a little further, he says, ‘For the passions, when once raised, drive out the processes of reasoning and all things that appear otherwise than they would have them be, and push forward with violence to actions contrary to reason.”’ (trans. Helmbold)

A Greek Stoic who intersected with the Roman world was Posidonius. Kidd writes that Posidonius was convinced that Chrysippus had distorted Stoicism in defining emotion as mistaken judgement. Posidonius argued that we have irrational faculties with affinities towards pleasure and power; these are natural, but not good. He observed that the root of evil lies within us. As no complete work of Posidonius survives, we must cull his thought from others. His only surviving statement about anger is found in a late source, Lactantius’ De Ira Dei (17.13), which apparently also preserves a definition of anger by Seneca that seems to have stood in the lacuna in the text of de ira at 1.2.3: *ira est, inquit, cupiditas ulciscendae iniuriae, aut ut ait Posidonius, cupiditas puniendi eius a quo te inique putes laesum.* Seneca has condensed the definition of Posidonius, but both philosophers have kept Chrysippus’ thought of taking revenge for suffering a wrongdoing.

Stoic theorizing about the emotions continued into the Roman period, when we find Seneca viewing anger as such an important subject of philosophical analysis that he wrote an entire treatise on it, the *de ira.* Seneca’s use of the term *ira* in this treatise has a wider application than Aristotle’s *ὀργή,* as he regards anger as the most hideous and frenzied of all the emotions.

Exegisti a me, Novate, ut scriberem quemadmodum posset ira leniri, nec immerito mihi videris hunc praecipue affectum pertimuisse maxime ex omnibus taetrum ac rabidum (1.1.1).

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132 *OCD*³ 1232.


134 Cooper and Procopé (1995, p. 3) place the composition of the *de ira* after AD 41 due to the references to the Emperor Gaius (1.20.8, 2.33.3-6, 3.18.3-19.5, 3.30.16-20). Moreover, Seneca must have written it before Novatus became proconsul of Achaea c. AD 52 (*OCD*³ 95).
In his proem, Seneca sets forth his aim in writing the treatise as effectively therapeutic, for he advises his brother Novatus how to alleviate anger. The treatise opens with a description of anger that sets into play the controlling themes and imagery for his discussion:

hic totus concitatus et in impetu doloris est, armorum sanguinis suppliciorum minime humana furens cupiditate, dum alteri noceat sui neglegens, in ipsa irruens tela et ultionis secum ultorem tracturae avidus (1.1.1).

In this passage, Seneca uses a number of terms that are not only important to his treatise on anger, but also central to the action of the Medea: concitatus, impetus, dolor, furere, avidus. Concitatus is used of emotions and states of mind to mean “roused, agitated, stirred up” (OLD, s. v. concito 2). Concitare means to inflame the feelings of or to rouse to anger (OLD, s.v. 5).

Seneca uses the related noun concitatio when he defines anger: ira est concitatio animi ad ultionem voluntate et iudicio pergentis (de ira 2.3.5). Inwood observes that Seneca describes anger as an agitation of the mind which proceeds by resolve and judgment toward revenge. This suggests that the angry person makes a conscious decision to want to exact revenge; Harry Frankfurt calls this ‘wanting to want’ a second-order desire. We shall see many examples of second-order desires in the Medea. The Senecan Medea herself uses the word concitatum in a philosophical observation that describes her emotional condition: Difficile quam sit animum ab ira flectere / iam concitatum (203-204).

Seneca employs impetus of a violent mental impulse, often unpremeditated, like a sudden fit or burst of passion, such as anger (OLD, s.v. 5, 7), as, for example, Amphitryon means when

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he says to the maddened Hercules: *pectoris sani parum / magni tamen, compesce dementem impetum* (Her.F. 974-975). In *de ira*, Seneca writes about these violent impulses:

Ideo numquam adsumet ratio in adiutorium improvidos et violentos impetus, apud quos nihil ipsa auctoritatis habeat, quos numquam comprimere possit, nisi pares illis similisque opposuerit, ut irae metum, inertiae iram, timori cupiditatem (*de ira* 1.10.1).

He identifies fear, anger and desire among the violent impulses which reason cannot control. In Seneca’s view, it is only by setting one of these impulses against another, such as fear against anger, that reason could crush them. Later Seneca comments:

Ergo prima illa agitatio animi, quam species iniuriae incussit, non magis ira est quam ipsa iniuriae species; ille sequens impetus, qui speciem iniuriae non tantum accepit sed adprobavit, ira est (*de ira* 2.3.5).

He uses *impetus* here of a mental impulse that is subsequent to an impression of wrongdoing and accepts it as true; tellingly, that impulse is anger itself.

*Dolor* can mean a feeling of resentment or indignation (*OLD*, s.v. 3). Seneca writes that a calm mind is a remedy for anger: *simulabit iram, ut tamquam adiutor et doloris comes plus auctoritatis in consiliis habeat* (*de ira* 3.39.7). So Fabius Maximus harassed Hannibal by delaying: *doloremque ultionemque seposuit in unam utilitatem et occasiones intentus; iram ante vict quam Hannibalem* (1.9.5). Here Seneca again uses *dolor* in conjunction with a desire for *ultio* as he had at 1.1.1.

Seneca makes extensive use of the vocabulary of rage: *furere*, ‘to rage with anger, hatred or similar passions’ (*OLD*, s.v. 3) and the related noun *furor*, ‘hostile rage, fury and anger’ (*OLD*,
s.v. 2b). Thus he asks, *Quis enim traditus dolori et furens non primam reiecit verecundiam (de ira 3.6.2)?* Here he uses *traditus dolori* as a synonym of *furens*. Seneca identifies anger as the greatest evil and encourages us to avoid it altogether: *Quantum est effugere maximum malum, iram, et cum illa rabies, saevitiam, crudelitatem, furem, alios comites eius affectus!* (2.12.6) In this way, he associates *furor, saevitia,* and *crudelitas* most closely with anger, as emblematic of the states of mind that come with anger. Furthermore, Seneca writes in his philosophical treatise: *Multi itaque continuaverunt irae furem nec quam expulerant mentem umquam receperunt.*

*Aiacem in mortem egit furor; in furem ira* (2.36.5). He links *furor* to *ira* in the context of the frenzy of madness that anger can produce. Seneca here writes about the madness that characterizes Ajax *qua* tragic hero (cf. Soph. *Ajax* 51-355): Agamemnon and Menelaus slighted and dishonoured Ajax when they awarded Achilles’ armour to Odysseus instead of Ajax (*οὔποτ᾽ Αἴανθ᾽ οἵδ᾽ ἀτιµμάάσου᾽ ἔτι*, Soph. *Ajax* 98). His anger (*χόόλῳ βαρυνθεὶς*, Soph. *Ajax* 41) drove him to madness during which he slaughtered sheep instead of the Greek leaders. Just as Ajax progressed from anger into *furor,* a state of hallucination, so we shall see Medea suffers the same state. The allusion to the tragic Ajax in the *de ira* indicates that Seneca is thinking about tragedy when writing philosophy. Similarly, we will see that he works his philosophical ideas into his tragedies.

*Avidus,* the last term in Seneca’s analysis of anger, means ardently desirous of or eager for (*OLD*, s.v. 5), and hence links anger to the passion of *cupiditas,* its desire for punishment or revenge (*ultio*): *ira, ut diximus, avida poenae est, cuius cupidinem inesse pacatissimo hominis* comites eius affectus! (2.12.6) In this way, he associates *furor, saevitia,* and *crudelitas* most closely with anger, as emblematic of the states of mind that come with anger. Furthermore, Seneca writes in his philosophical treatise: *Multi itaque continuaverunt irae furem nec quam expulerant mentem umquam receperunt.*

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pectori minime secundum eius naturam est (de ira 1.5.3). A little later he adds, nam si quis poenam exigit non ipsius poenae avidus sed quia oportet, non est adnumerandus iratis (1.9.4). In both passages, avidus means “desirous of” and has poena (punishment) as its object to show the tight conceptual link between anger and the desire for revenge. This same nexus of anger, desire and revenge is on display in the Medea, where the Messenger describes the punishment of Creon and Creusa with the metaphorical application of avidus: avidus per omnem regiae partem furit / ut iussus ignis (885-6). Here the fire is the material manifestation of Medea’s anger which rages (furit) greedily through the palace as if it is a servant under orders from Medea to carry out the destruction. In the Troades, Seneca also characterizes the Greek victor as avidus irae (22). All of these terms (concitatus, impetus, dolor, furere, and avidus), so crucial to Seneca’s discussion of anger in de ira, are on display from the very opening scene of the Medea.

2.2 The First Stage of the Stoic Progression of Anger: the Perception of a Wrong and the Invocation of the Furies

In his seminal article on Senecan tragedy, Herington argues that all Senecan plays can be divided into three parts: (1) the cloud of evil, (2) the defeat of reason by passion, and (3) the explosion of evil.138 While this is undoubtedly true of the plays in general, it is my contention that Seneca himself provides a more precise division for the Medea. I will argue that Medea progresses through the four stages of anger which Seneca outlines in the de ira: [animus] intellexit aliquid, indignatus est, damnavit, ulciscitur (2.1.5). The first scene of the Medea presents the heroine speaking a soliloquy, in the first stage of the Stoic progression of anger: she has perceived that Jason has wronged her by breaking his marriage vows and leaving her for Creusa, the princess of

Corinth. As Seneca writes in the *de ira: iram quin species oblata iniuriae moveat non est dubium* (2.1.3). At the play’s outset, Medea accordingly asks the *sceles ultrices deae* (13), the Furies or *Dirae*, to bring punishment, in the form of death, upon Jason’s new wife and father-in-law (*coniugi letum novae / letumque socero et regiae stirpi date*, 17-18) and the vengeance the Furies accomplish concludes the play (958-971). Seneca writes in *de ira:*

> qualia poetae inferna monstra finxerunt succincta serpentibus et igneo flatu...talem nobis iram figuremus, flamma lumina ardentia, sibilo mugituque et gemitu et stridore et si qua his invisior vox est perstrepentem, tela manu utraque quatientem...incessus vaesani...terras, maria, caelum ruere cupientem (2.35.5).

Seneca thus conceives of anger in his prose work precisely as the infernal monsters, the Furies, wearing snakes, who also appear in his tragedies.

Seneca here deploys the *Dirae* programmatically. On the one hand, they function as thematic markers of anger, for the ancients believed that their name derived from *dei ira.*

Moreover, his description of them as *crinem solutis squalidae serpentibus* (14) recalls Vergil’s description of the *Dirae* in *Aeneid* 12.845-852:

> dicuntur geminae pestes cognomine Dirae, quas et Tartaream Nox intempesta Megaeram uno eodemque tuliit partu, paribusque revinxit serpentum spiris ventosasque addidit alas. hae Iovis ad solium saevique in limine regis apparent acuuntque metum mortalibus aegris, si quando letum horrificum morbosque deum rex molitur, meritas aut bello territat urbes.

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Here Vergil offers the precise explanation of the etymology, for Jupiter sends them on his business to terrify mortals. The phrase *ultrices deae* also recalls another passionate appeal by a wronged woman in the *Aeneid*: Dido. She too appeals to Juno, Hecate and the *Dirae ultrices* (*A. 4.608-610*) and has been analyzed by Harrison as a figure from a tragic drama.\(^\text{140}\) Like Medea, moreover, Dido is driven mad by the anger of the gods. Another poetic precedent is furnished by Ariadne’s lament in Catullus 64:

\begin{quote}
quare facta virum multantes **vindice poena**
Eumenides, quibusanguino redimita capillo
frons exspirantis praeportat pectoris **iras**,
huc huc adventate (64.192-195).
\end{quote}

Like Medea, Ariadne summons the Furies to punish the deeds of the faithless Theseus with revenge. Ariadne describes their foreheads as encircled by snaky hair and bearing the signs of anger. Jason will describe Medea similarly as a Fury: *furit, / fert odia prae se* (445-446). Hence *furor, furiae* and *furere* seem to act as tragic markers in Seneca’s tragedy.

Thus we can appreciate Seneca’s appropriation of anger, which is a theme common to epic (e.g. *Iliad* 1.1), for his tragedy through the mediation of the tragic *dramatis personae par*

excellence, the Furies.\textsuperscript{141} In Seneca’s \textit{Hercules Furens}, Juno summons the Furies to avenge the hero’s desecration of the underworld:

\begin{quote}
Incipite, famulae Ditis, ardentem incitae concutite \textit{pinum}, et agmen horrendum \textit{anguibus}
Megaera ducat atque \textit{luctifica} manu
vastam rogo flagrante corripiat trabem (100-103).
\end{quote}

Fitch writes that the literal fire of the Furies’ torches becomes the metaphorical fire of \textit{furor}.\textsuperscript{142}

Hercules in his madness has a vision of another Fury just before he kills his children:

\begin{quote}
flammifera Erinys verbere excusso sonat rogisque adustas proprius ac proprius sudes in ora tendit; saeva Tisiphone, caput \textit{serpentibus} vallata, post raptum canem portam vacantem clausit opposita \textit{face} (982-86).
\end{quote}

The torches of the Furies fire their victims with madness.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{141} They have been a generic marker of tragedy, as Frankel (1950, 545) observes, since Cassandra had a vision of the Erinys hanging above the hall, chanting their song of hate (Aesch. \textit{Ag.} 1190-1192). The Erinys comprise the chorus in their eponymous play, \textit{Eumenides}, while Lyssa, madness, the Gorgon of Night with the hiss of a hundred snakes (\textit{Her.} 883-884), maddens Heracles in Euripides’ \textit{Heracles} (843-884). Likewise the Furies appear in Roman tragedy. In Ennius’ \textit{Alexander}, Cassandra compares Helen to a Fury: \textit{quo iudicio Lacedaemonia mulier Furiarum uma adveniet} (fr. XV, l. 49). Ennius stresses the wickedness of Helen; Cassandra thinks of her as a bringer of fire and destruction to Troy as Medea is to Corinth in Seneca (885-6). Servius notes that the Furies attack Orestes in Pacuvius’ \textit{Hermiona}: a Pacuvio Orestes inducitur Pyladis admonitu propter vitandas Furias ingressus Apollinis templum, unde cum vellet exire, invadebatur a Furiis (ad Aen. 4.473).

\textsuperscript{142} Fitch (1987) 151.

\textsuperscript{143} Fitch (1987) 373, who compares the guilty Nero, Suet. \textit{Nero} 34.4: \textit{confessus exagitari se materna specie verberibusque Furiarum ac taedis ardentibus}.\end{quote}
Madness thus motivates Senecan tragedy. In the *Thyestes*, *Furia* commands the ghost of Tantalus:

\[
\text{nec sit irarum modus} \\
\text{pudorve; mentes caecus instiget furor,} \\
\text{rabies parentum duret (26-28)}.
\]

As Tarrant notes, the Fury significantly opens the sequence with *ira*, the most destructive of the passions (*hunc...affectum...maxime ex omnibus taetrum ac rabidum, de ira 1.1.1*) and the primary motive force in the play. The Furies were improperly sidelined in epic poetry; Seneca self-consciously returns both Medea and the Furies to their generic home.

Indeed, a little later Medea imagines herself as an avenging Fury at the wedding ceremony, whose firebrand is identified by Costa with the processional torch: \textit{hoc restat unam: pronubam thalamo feram / ut ipsa pinum (37-38).} Like an avenging Fury, Medea curses this marriage. The Furies, the tragic agents of anger, appear from the beginning of the *Medea* as the voice of destruction and of excessive revenge. Later in the play, the Nurse describes Medea in a similar fashion as madly walking about (*incerta qualis entheos gressus tuit,*, 382); this description corresponds closely to the symptom of anger described in *de ira* 2.35.5: \textit{incessus vesani}. Moreover, Medea says that she will destroy all (*sternam et evertam omnia, 414; invadam deos / et cuncta quatiam, 424-5*), again recapitulating the description of anger at *de ira* 2.35.5: \textit{terras, maria, caelum ruere cupientem}.

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As Hine writes, Medea envisions a worse punishment even than death for Jason, by vowing to let him live (mihi peius aliquid, quod precer sponso, manet: vivat, 19-20). This strategy fulfils Aristotle’s principle that for an angry person, here Medea, to get revenge, the first offender, Jason, must be aware of it (Rhetoric 2.4, 1382a 14-15). This Medea is not the innocent virgin of Apollonius’ Argonautica (3.616-686); like Euripides’, Seneca’s Medea is a mature woman who has given birth: parta iam, parta ultio est: / peperi (25-26). Here Seneca draws on Ovid’s Medea who uses a similar metaphor in describing the birth of her plan against Jason: ingentis parturit ira minas (Heroides 12.208). Seneca’s repetition of parere three times recalls Euripides’ Medea saying she would rather stand three times in the front of battle than give birth once (Eur. Med. 250-1). But Seneca’s Medea is three times as tough as Euripides’: she has given birth twice to two boys (peperi duos, 957) and a third time to her vengeance (ultio, 25) upon their father.

Unlike Euripides’ Medea (1321-2), Seneca’s heroine does not want just to escape in the Sun’s chariot; she wants to drive the Sun’s chariot so that she can incinerate Corinth out of a desire for revenge:

da, da per auras curribus patriis vehi,
committe habenas, genitor, et flagrantibus ignifera loris tribue moderari iuga:
 gemino Corinthos litori opponens moras cremata flammis maria committat duo (32-6).

This nexus of ideas recalls another child of the Sun: Phaëthon’s scorching the world in Ovid’s Metamorphoses 2. Jakobi notices that we can compare Ovid’s currus rogat ille paternos / inque

Phaëthon, however, is inexperienced and incompetent, while Medea is experienced in magic arts and acts deliberately when she prays. Unlike Phaëthon, who inadvertently scorches the earth when he drives the Sun’s chariot, Medea purposefully seeks a path to punishment through the very guts of the victims on the altar, employing the word *supplicio* for capital punishment, the term used by Seneca in *de ira* (1.1.1): *per viscera ipsa quaere supplicio viam* (40). Hine notes that the guts are those of the animals sacrificed, but they also point toward those of her human victims, Creusa and Jason.149

Medea returns to the role of a Stoic philosopher when she addresses her mind (*anime*, 41) and bids it rid itself of emotions, specifically womanish fears (*pelle femineos metus*, 42). Her sentiments resonate against Seneca’s views in *de ira* that women suffer the extremes of emotion:

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iracundia nihil amplum decorumque molitur; contra mihi videtur
veternosi et infelices animi, imbecillitatis sibi conscii, saepe indolescere...
ita ira muliebre maxime ac puerile vitium est. “At incidit in viros.” nam
viris quoque puerilia ac muliebria ingenia sunt (1.20.3).
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Medea functions as Seneca’s exemplar of the angry person and indeed the Senecan Medea is herself aware of her womanly weakness. In a metatheatrical comment, as if she were an actor changing costumes, she commands herself to put on the fierce resolve of her barbaric

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background (*inhospitalem Caucasum mente indue*, 43). Seneca uses the metaphor again himself in a letter: *regum nobis induimus animos* (Ep. 47.20). Moreover, he sets this metaphor in the context of anger: *sed ad rabiem nos cogunt pervenire deliciae, ut quicquid non ex voluntate respondit, iram evocet* (ibid.).\(^{150}\)

### 2.3 The Second Stage in the Progression of Anger: Indignation

Finally Medea calls forth a more serious attack of resentment (*gravior exsurgat dolor*, 49), employing *dolor*, the very term that Seneca used in *de ira* (*hic totus concitatus et in impetu doloris est*, 1.1.1) to denote the second stage of the development of anger after the mind has been struck by a perceived wrong: *[animus] intellexit aliquid, indignatus est, damnavit, ulciscitur* (2.1.5). Seneca thus shows us a textbook example of the progression of anger in the very first scene of his *Medea*.\(^{151}\)

Medea’s indignation is now wholly aroused: *accingere ira, teque in exitium para / furore toto* (51-52). *Ira* and *furor* will drive her actions.\(^{152}\) However, she shows herself to be the

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\(^{150}\) Statius also uses this metaphor: *cornipedes.../ corpora ceu mixti dominis irasque sedentum / induerint* (Theb. 8.391-393).

\(^{151}\) As Medea has reached the status of a mature woman and a mother, she feels she is capable of greater crimes than those she committed as a girl: *maiora iam me scelera post partus decent* (50). The comparative is the controlling degree of Seneca’s play, as he here draws on Ovid’s famous concluding line of the Medea-epistle in the *Heroïdes*: *nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit!* (Her. 12.212) As Stephen Hinds (1993, 40) has shown, “This epistolary Medea is working herself up to truly tragic stature at the end of *Her.* 12 because ... she is about to ‘enter’ a tragedy.” That is, she is going off to become a tragic heroine, leaving elegy behind. By moving into the comparative degree, she is developing her tragic self, leaving the humbler genre of elegy behind for the more elevated genre of tragedy, which stands higher in the hierarchy of genres (cf. Ov. *Am.* 3.1, 3.15). Both Ovid and Seneca allude to Vergil’s greater project of the second half of the *Aeneid*: *maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo, / maius opus moveo* (A. 7.44-45). Thus Seneca’s Medea offers a metapoetic comment here to the effect that her latest appearance in Latin literature will surpass its predecessors in greatness and move up the generic scale: this is the hyperbolic world in which Seneca writes.

\(^{152}\) Hinds (1993) 18. In another metapoetic comment, she makes a wish for literary recognition, that this play will be as famous as the former versions (such as Apollonius 3.616-1162) that were told about her: she wills that the story of her divorce equal those of her marriage (*paria narrentur tua / repudia thalamis*, 52-53).
opposite of a Stoic sage when she says *rumpe iam segnes moras* (54), for it is precisely delay that Seneca counsels to diffuse anger: *quo alio Fabius affectas imperii vires recreavit, quam quod cunctari et trahere et morari sciit, quae omnia irati nesciunt?* (de *ira* 1.11.5)

At the beginning of Act 2, Medea again has a soliloquy.\(^\text{153}\) Hearing the Chorus’ wedding song for Jason and Creusa drives Medea to distraction: *Occidimus* (116). In suffering wrong, she feels she has been killed. She expresses her incredulity at these proceedings: *vix ipsa tantum, vix adhuc credo malum* (117). Jason’s evil is clear: *merita contempsit mea* (120). He has scorned Medea’s former services and broken his oath of loyalty to her which he swore by the gods (*quosque iuravit mihi / deos Iason*, 7-8). As a result of this offense, Medea seeks revenge, asking *unde me ulcisci queam?* (124) She describes her state of distraction: *incerta vecors mente non sana feror / partes in omnes* (123-124). Her use of *vecors* recalls a passage from *de ira*: *Omnes, quos vecors animus supra cogitationes extollit humanas, altum quiddam et sublime spirare se credunt; ceterum nil solidi subest* (1.20.2). Medea is just the kind of person whose anger will give her the confidence to believe that she controls all nature and the gods: *Medea superest: hic mare et terras vides / ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina* (166-167).\(^\text{154}\) In her indignation, again we see Medea enact the Senecan progression of anger.

Medea considers putting Jason’s new wife to the sword: *est coniunx: in hanc / ferrum exigatur: hoc meis satis est malis?* (125-126) Seeking satisfaction for the evil she has suffered,

\(^{153}\) Manuscripts *ECPS* indicate the Nurse’s entrance with Medea at line 116: Costa (1967) 85.

she asks herself if killing Creusa would be sufficient reparation. Her death, however, will be only one of four; and it will be necessary for Jason to witness at least one death.\footnote{155}

Medea claims that she was not suffering from anger when she committed her earlier crimes: \textit{et nullum scelus / irata feci: saevit infelix amor} (135-6). Rather, another passion just as strong as anger directed her thoughts: love.\footnote{156} Medea’s use of the word \textit{infelix} shows that Seneca is thinking of an amatory tradition that goes back to an earlier incarnation of his heroine in Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} 7.18 where she calls herself \textit{infelix} because she could not overcome her passion with her reason: \textit{postquam ratione furorem / vincere non poterat} (7.10-11). The Ovidian Medea is well aware of her dilemma:

\begin{verbatim}
aliudque cupido,
mens aliud suadet: video meliora proboque,
deteriora sequor (19-21).
\end{verbatim}

When she was in love, she feared that Jason might be killed by the fire-breathing bulls, and so she urged action to let him live (\textit{vivat tamen!}, Met. 7.24), and then exhorted herself to gird

\footnote{155} In a similar fashion, Seneca continues to explore the theme of anger in his \textit{Thyestes}: Atreus asks himself whether the punishment he is planning for Thyestes will be enough: \textit{iam sat est etiam mihi. / sed cur satis sit?} (Thy. 889-890) It is not enough that Atreus has killed his nephews; he continues, \textit{pergam et implebo patrem / funere suorum} (890-891) and \textit{quod sat est, videat pater} (895). It will only be enough if Thyestes is aware of and will be a spectator of his punishment as Jason will be. Like Medea, Atreus is motivated by anger: \textit{verba sunt irae data / dum propero} (1056-1057).

\footnote{156} The adjective \textit{infelix} recalls most famously the Vergilian Dido, whose anger at Aeneas’ desertion inspires her death and the curse that led to centuries of warfare between Carthage and Rome (Verg. \textit{A}. 4.68, 450, 596). As an \textit{infelix} heroine, moreover, Seneca’s Medea also recalls the Vergilian Pasiphaë, who suffers from mad passion for a bull (Vergil, \textit{B}.6.47, 52). Both Vergilian comparanda open up a stark contrast between the lovesick maiden Medea in her earlier epic incarnations (\textit{haec virgo feci}, 49), such as in Apollonius (Arg. 3) and Ovid (\textit{Met.} 7) and the mature, more powerful tragic instantiation of Medea, who is now capable of carrying out greater crimes (\textit{maiora iam me scelera post partus decent}, 50). In this she will surpass her old self, just as Atreus in the \textit{Thyestes} will look for ever greater punishment (\textit{nescioquid animo maius et solito amplius}, 267, and \textit{maius hoc aliquid dolor / inventiat}, 274-5). Atreus’s \textit{nescioquid...maius} constitutes another reminiscence of Ovid’s conclusion to \textit{Heroides} 12. Moreover, these statements by Medea and Atreus also function as metapoetic comments by Seneca to indicate with the comparative degree that his versions will surpass those of his predecessors. Hinds (1993) 40-43 and (2011) 23.
herself to save him (*accingere*, *Met*. 7.47). Seneca draws on Ovid when his Medea says *accingere ira* (51); her Senecan weapon is anger. Now she says *vivat* (20) so that he may be aware of her revenge. However, she repeats *vivat meus* and Ovid’s *vivat tamen* when she reverts to her lovelorn self, hoping that Jason too will have a change of heart and remain her husband, mindful of the services Medea performed for him in saving his life:

\[
si \text{ potest, vivat meus,}
\]
\[
\text{ut fuit, Iason; si minus, vivat tamen,}
\]
\[
\text{memorque nostri muneri parcat meo (140-42).}
\]

At this early point in the play, Medea is planning vengeance only on Creon; he alone will pay the penalty: *Culpa est Creontis tota...petatur, solus hic poenas luat, / quas debet* (143, 146-7).

When Medea observes that it behooves Jason *ferro obvium / offerre pectus* (138-139), she catches herself; like a Stoic, she addresses a part of herself, her raging resentment, and gives it a second-order command: *melius, a melius, dolor / furiose loquere* (139-140). We see here a struggle between Medea’s reason and anger; she acts out the dichotomy that Ovid’s Medea analyzes in her monologue in *Met*.7. As Seneca says in *de ira, [ira] cum sit inimica rationi, nusquam tamen nascitur; nisi ubi rationi locus est* (1.3.3). Anger is the enemy of reason, but it is found in the same place and time with it.

In the second scene, the Nurse converses with Medea. Unlike the passive character in Euripides, the Nurse takes on a more active role in Seneca’s version. Like Medea who measures her actions against Stoic wisdom, she is the Stoic sage who tries to control the anger of Medea in a passion-restraint scene. As Costa writes, the Nurse urges Medea to conceal her frenzy, and
opens with a string of Senecan *sententiae*. She begins, *siste furialem impetum!* (157), and concludes *compesce verba, parce iam, demens, minis / animoque minue* (174-175). The adjective *furialem* (157) reminds us of the Furies and indicates that Medea’s behaviour is worthy of them and the genre to which she has returned in Seneca’s play. It also suggests that Medea’s invocation of the avenging goddesses at lines 13-18 has borne fruit. As Fabius buried his resentment (*de ira* 1.9.5), so the Nurse encourages Medea to do the same:

\begin{verbatim}
  sile, obsecro, questusque secreto abditos
  manda dolori. gravia quisquis vulnera
  patien
tente et aequo mutus animo pertulit
  referre potuit; ira quae tegitur nocet;
  professa perdunt odia vindictae locum (150-154).
\end{verbatim}

In Stoic fashion, she urges Medea to endure her wounds with patience and with a calm mind. Line 152 is particularly close in thought and language to Seneca’s formulation in *de ira*: *Quid alter Scipio? Non circa Numantiam multum diuque sedit et hunc suum publicumque dolorem aequo animo tulit?* (1.11.7) Scipio Aemilianus serves Seneca’s purpose as an example of a good Stoic because he bore adversity with equanimity. Seneca uses these synonyms: *saepe itaque ratio patientiam suadet, ira vindictam* (2.14.3). The course of action that the Nurse counsels—concealing anger until Medea can execute her plan of revenge—shows a further debt to the epic tradition, however, in its echo of Agamemnon’s advice to Odysseus to return home secretly (*Od*. 11.443, 456). In fact, Chrysippus cites an example from the *Odyssey* in his discussion of anger: when Odysseus observes the treachery of his maidservants consorting with his wife’s suitors, he

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157 Costa (1973) 85.
addresses his heart and tells it to endure the slight (Od. 20.17-23). Thus Odysseus is a hero of the Stoics because he succeeds in restraining his anger.  

Seneca employs stichomythisa in a philosophic debate between Medea and the Nurse that illustrates Medea’s indignation (159-163). Whereas Cicero says, “Fortes” enim non modo “fortuna adiuvat,” ut est in vetere proverbio, sed multo magis ratio (Tusc. Disp. 2.4.11), Medea adapts that proverb into fortuna fortes metuit (159) where fortes refers to herself. The Nurse and Medea debate about virtus:

Nut. tunc est probanda, si locum virtus habet.
Med. numquam potest non esse virtuti locus (160-161).

Here the basic meaning of virtus is “courage,” but in the context of Medea’s Stoic progression of anger, we are also invited to recall that virtus in Stoic ethics is also virtue (Si virtus animal est, virtus autem bonum, non est omne bonum animal? Est. Hoc nostri fatentur, Ep. 113.20). Hine acknowledges that Medea’s qui nil potest sperare, desperet nihil (163) is a typical Senecan sententia, but her sentiment also maps closely onto the views expressed in Seneca’s


160 Cicero is quoting Terence, Phormio 203.
philosophical letters. Quoting the Stoic Hecato, Seneca observes, *desines timere si sperare desieris* (Ep. 5.7).\(^{161}\)

The Nurse again seeks to diffuse Medea’s indignation, telling her to control her anger: *animosque minue* (175).\(^{162}\) Medea observes, *fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest* (176), expressing the Stoic ideal that the external world is of secondary importance; what matters most is the state of one’s mind.\(^{163}\)

Creon enters and converses with Medea. Medea does in fact control her indignation when she has her interview with Creon. She dissembles to deceive Creon and to obtain her desire. She acts as Creon’s inferior in power as she knows Creon regards her as such. She speaks very rationally as she asks Creon for a fair trial: *Qui statuit aliquid parte inaudita altera, / aequum licet statuerit, haud aequus fuit* (199-200).

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\(^{161}\) Hine (2000) 135. When the Nurse points out *nihilque superest opibus e tantis tibi*, Medea retorts: *Medea superest: hic mare et terras vides / ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina* (166-167). Medea asserts that she has a divine control of the forces of nature, the elements, even the gods and their weapons. Here Seneca draws on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.179-293, a famous passage on magic in which Medea herself controls all the elements. Moreover, Medea also plays upon the etymology of her name here: the ancients derived it from \(\mu\eta\delta\)ος, ‘planning’, and related it to the cunning that they believed was a characteristic of the female (Eur. *Med.* 402). Certainly, as Zeitlin (1996, 347, 357) writes, in tragedy it is the female who plots and brings about the destruction of the male hero. When the Nurse then repeats Medea’s name, Medea completes the Nurse’s sentence with *fiam* (171). As Schiesaro (2003, 18, n. 31) observes, her statement emphasizes her self-awareness of being ‘a Medea,’ of being part of a literary tradition that substends Medea’s metadramatic character. It is part of Medea’s planning to imagine the kind of person she wishes to be and to become that person. As Hinds (2011, 26) notes, Seneca’s tragic heroes are obsessed with realizing their full tragic potential.

\(^{162}\) The *OLD* states that *animus* in the plural means anger (s.v. 12).

\(^{163}\) Cooper and Procopé (1995) 9. The chorus, who are hostile to Medea, are also conscious of the threat that Medea poses: *maiusque mari Medea malum, / merces prima digna carina* (362-363). Medea is a greater evil than the dangers of the sea and regarded as merchandise brought home on the first ship built by thieving men. Seneca again employs the comparative degree to claim that his Medea exceeds earlier representations of her (such as Ovid’s). Hinds (2011, 23) has noticed a triple alliteration of m-words in Ovid’s *Heroides* 12.212 (*nescioquid certe mens mea maius agit!* which underlines the etymology of Medea’s name; but here Seneca surpasses Ovid with a quintuple alliteration.
We have seen that the adjective *aequus* is a key word in the Stoic concept of bearing adversity with a calm mind (*de ira* 1.11.7). In addition, Medea conducts her own defence as if she were a rhetorician speaking in the forum.\(^\text{164}\) She begins by explaining how difficult it is to turn a mind from anger once it has been aroused (*difficile quam sit animum ab ira flectere / iam concitatum*, 203-204), using *concitatum*, the term employed by Seneca in *de ira* (1.1.1). However, she does manage to speak without anger and set out her piteous plight in highly rhetorical pleas for pity:

*clade miseranda obruta, / expulsa supplex sola deserta, undique / afflicta* (207-209).\(^\text{165}\)

When Creon grants Medea one day in which to prepare for exile, she says she is in a hurry (*et ipsa propero*, 297); so Ovid’s Medea banished all delay (*omnem / pelle moram*, *Met*. 7.47-48), and the Nurse picks up this theme of haste at the beginning of Act 3: *alumna, celerem quo rapis tectis pedem* (380)? But as Seneca explains in *de ira*, haste is a characteristic of anger: *ratio utrique parti tempus dat, deinde advocationem et sibi petit, ut excutiendae veritati spatium habeat; ira festinat* (1.18.1). The good Stoic sage would counsel delay and restraint of anger, as the Nurse does: *resiste et iras comprime ac retine impetum* (381). But she senses the futility of her counsel when she describes Medea as running about like an impassioned Maenad:

*incerta qualis *entheos* gressus tulit
  cum iam recepto *maenas insanit* deo...
  talis recursat huc et huc motu effero,
  *furoris* ore signa lymphati gerens (*Med*. 382-3, 385-6).

\(^{164}\) Hine (2000) 139.

\(^{165}\) She describes herself as Ariadne does (Catull. 64.165, 200) or Dido (*A.4* 330, 466-468), thereby appealing to the literary tradition in her claim that she outdoes the heroines of earlier Latin literature.
Maenas is related to the verb μαόνομαι, to rage or be mad, and Bacchants had had a bad name in Rome since 186 BCE. Seneca thereby documents Medea advancing on the Stoic path to anger here. In these lines, the Nurse indicates that Medea’s indignation has increased. Line 382 recalls 123 where Medea says incerta vecors mente non sana feror, which in turn recalls one of the surviving lines of Ovid’s Medea: feror huc illuc, vae, plena deo (fr. 2 Ribbeck). Seneca alludes to the phrase plena deo with the Greek loanword entheos in line 382.

The nurse’s language here is consistent with Seneca’s exposition of the progression of anger in de ira since in Stoic thought anger drives one insane. Taking Ajax as his exemplum, Seneca explains:

nulla celerior ad insaniam via est. multi itaque continuaverunt irae furorem nec quam expulerant mentem umquam receperunt. Aiacem in mortem egit futor, in furorem ira. mortem liberis, egestatem sibi, ruinam domui imprecantur et irasci se negant non minus quam insanire furiosi (de ira 2.36.4-5).

In his philosophic treatise, Seneca explains that it was anger that drove Ajax, the tragic hero, into madness and his madness drove him to commit suicide. Furor, then, is the mad frenzy that anger produces and that drives people like Ajax to commit acts of terrible bloodshed. Angry people, like Medea, call down death upon their children and destruction upon their house; they deny that they are angry just as the mad deny that they are insane. In the next book too, Seneca reverts to this explanation:

166 LSJ, s.v.; Hine (2000) 155.

Here, however, the comparative degree has graduated to the superlative, as she who is successful in her anger will be proud and arrogant. Similarly, Seneca’s Medea plans greater crimes than those of her earlier incarnations and thereby becomes the superlative Medea.

The Nurse observes the symptoms of Medea’s indignation:

flammata facies, spiritum ex alto citat, proclamat, oculos uberi fletu rigat, renidet; omnis specimen affectus capit. haeret minatur aestuat queritur gemit (387-390).

Costa observes that these symptoms cohere closely with those which Seneca cites as characteristic of anger in de ira:168

ut scias autem non esse sanos quos ira possedit, ipsum illorum habitum intuere;...multus ore toto rubor exaestuante ab imis praecordiis sanguine... spiritus coactus ac stridens, articulorum se ipsos torquentium sonus, gemitus mugitusque et parum explanatis vocibus sermo praeruptus...et totum concitum corpus magnasque irae minas agens (de ira 1.1.3-4).

Moreover, the Nurse uses exundat of the metaphor of the wave of emotion (exundat furor, 392), a verb which is first found in Seneca, in both tragedy and prose. Significantly, he employs it of

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168 Costa (1973) 108.
anger in both passages: *optimum itaque quidam putant temperare iram, non tollere, eoque detracto, quod exundat, ad salutarem modum cogere* (de ira 1.7.1).\(^{169}\)

In recognizing the hallmarks of Medea’s old anger, the Nurse also shows her familiarity with earlier versions of the Medea story, such as Euripides’ play (*Med.* 615):

\[\textit{irae novimus} \] \[\textit{veteris notas.}\]

\[\text{magnum aliquid instat, efferum immane impium.}\]

\[\text{vultum Furoris cerno (394-6).}\]

*Novimus* amounts to what Stephen Hinds has called a self-annotating allusion.\(^{170}\) This signalling of a specific allusion by a poet through appeals to tradition intensifies the verses’ demand to be interpreted as a system of allusions and often indicates the superiority of his own treatment.

Seneca’s usage here points to symptoms of earlier instances of Medea’s anger such as her killing of Pelias (Ov. *Met.* 7.332-349). *Magnum aliquid* is also programmatic, once again playing off the conclusion of Ovid’s *Heroides* 12. Besides the consonance of m’s underlining behaviour characteristic of Medea, she again appears as a Fury, suggesting the anger of a god.\(^{171}\) Seneca uses *Furor* in this sense also in the *Hercules Furens* (*in se semper armatus Furor*, 98) and in the *Oedipus* (*tum torva Erinys sonuit et caecus Furor*, 590). Here he draws on his epic predecessor, Vergil, as well: *Furor impius intus / saeva sedens super arma et centum vinctus aenis / post tergum nodis fremet horridus ore cruento* (*A.* 1.294-6). Ovid too uses the personification in his elegiac *Amores* in mock-epic style: *blanditiae comites tibi erunt Errorque Furorque* (2.35).

\(^{169}\) Ibid.


\(^{171}\) See OLD s. *furor* 1 c: “Madness; also, an avenging deity, a Fury (= FVRIA).”
Hence *vultum Furoris cerno* can be heard to offer a metapoetic comment on Seneca’s choice of genre; Medea has returned to her original and proper generic home, viz. tragedy.

In Act Three, Medea again uses self-address to examine the state of her mind, asking herself, *regias egone ut faces / inulta patiar?* (398-399) She identifies the royal marriage as the slight that has offended her and rejects the idea that she should endure it. Instead, she shows herself indignantly resolved on revenge.

> numquam meus cessabit in **poenas furor**, 
crescetque semper. quae ferarum immanitas, 
quae Scylla, quae Charybdis Ausonium mare 
Siculumque sordes, quaeve anhelantem premens 
Titana tantis Aetna fervebit **minis**? 
non rapidus amnis, non procellosum mare 
pontusve coro saevus aut vis ignium 
adiuta flatu possit inhibere **impetum** 
irasque nostras. sternam et evertam omnia (406-414).

By invoking many images of infinity in nature (401-405), she suggests that her rage is not only eternal but will ever increase. Medea is indignant that Jason has been so ungrateful for the services she rendered him (*ingratum caput*, 465; cf. *occidat ingratus*, Ov. *Met*. 7.43). Hine writes that Medea’s anger is more powerful than wild beasts; this thought is a continuation of the theme that her powers exceed those of the natural world. Not even the forces of nature can restrain her angry impulse.

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173 Ibid.

174 In a metapoetic comment she adds, *faciet hic faciet dies / quod nullus umquam taceat* (423-424). Like a poet, she can stand back from the action and comment on it; she is aware that her actions on this day will win her eternal renown.
The Third Stage in the Stoic Progression of Anger: 

Condemnation

The climax to her long speech is her declaration of her plan to attack the gods, shake up the world order and destroy everything: *invadam deos / et cunctaquatiam* (424-425). Her proposed theomachy recalls that in *Hercules Furens* (*quaerit ad superos viam*, 74; *limitem ad superos agam*, 970) and suggests that Medea is as great a hero as Hercules. But her statement also recalls the comparison of anger to a Fury in Seneca’s *deira*: *et omnium odio laborantem, sui maxime, si aliter nocere non possit, terras maria caelum ruere cupientem* (2.35.5). Seneca goes on to compare anger to Bellona and Discord, and quotes from the epic poets: *scissa gaudens vadit Discordia palla* (Vergil, A. 8.702) and *sanguinem quatiens dextra Bellona flagellum* (Lucan 7.568) where Bellona is brandishing a whip in her right hand as the Dirae brandish snakes. Seneca then continues: *aut si qua magis dira facies excogitari diri affectus potest* (2.35.6), where he again uses *dirus*, the adjective derived from *dei ira*, the origin of the Dirae.\(^{175}\)

The Nurse acts as a Stoic sage in urging Medea to control her anger: *recipe turbatum malis, / era, pectus, animum mitiga* (425-426). Medea picks up on this Stoic thought and adds:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sola est quies,} \\
\text{mecum ruina cuncta si video obruta;} \\
\text{mecum omnia abeant. trahere, cum pereas, libet} \quad (426-428).
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{175}\) See p. 74.
*Quies* or peace is one of the main goals of Stoic philosophy though sometimes it can be won only by dying (*Quid est animi quiete otiosius, quid ira laboriosius?, de ira 2.13.2; Tum illud orietur inaestimabile bonum, quies mentis in tuto conlocatae, de vita beata 4.5; his utilior negotio quies est, de tranquillitate animi 6.2; quietem Polybus aeternam obtinet, Oed. 785*). It is also Medea’s goal, but she says she can attain it only if she observes like a spectator that everything is destroyed as she dies, a thought which recalls the definition of anger in the opening paragraph of *de ira*: *dum alteri noceat sui neglegens, in ipsa irruens tela et ultionis secum ultorem tracturae avidus* (1.1.1). However, Medea is a Stoic fool as she thinks that she will gain *quies* through *ira*.

The Nurse warns Medea of the dangers involved in condemning the royal family: *nemo potentes aggredi tutus potest* (430). Jason picks up on her warning when he notes how serious the anger of kings is (*gravis ira regum est semper*, 494). He sees anger as the right of kings, but Seneca has shown its impact on women and foreigners. Jason too plays the Stoic philosopher: *constituit animus precibus iratam aggredi* (444). He describes his mind operating rationally when he tries to deflect Medea’s anger with entreaties and as he observes her approaching him, he details the symptoms of her anger: *atque ecce, viso memet exiluit, furit, / fert odia prae se; totus in vultu est dolor* (445-446). Jason’s use of *exiluit* (445) recalls Seneca’s statements in *de ira*: *illa est ira quae rationem transsilit, quae secum rapit* (2.3.4) and *[ira] cupit enim exilire et incendere oculos et mutare faciem* (3.13.2). Medea’s anger has taken control of her reason and become the dominant force in her mind. Anger is a destructive emotion that sweeps all before it.

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In telling Jason that she is fleeing, she is again dissembling to deceive a male—this time specifically the husband who has wronged her. She adopts a submissive pose before him and bids him punish her. Medea imagines her enemies to be angry at her, attributing the language of anger to them.

\[
dira\supplicia\ ingere:
\]

merui. cruentis paelicem poenis premat
regalis \textit{ira}, vinculis oneret manus,
clausamque saxo noctis aeternae obruat:
minora meritis patiar (461-465).

She orders Jason to bring on ‘dire punishments,’ imagining that the king is angry with her and will crush her with ‘bloody tortures’. The other punishment she envisions for herself, being buried alive in a stony prison, recalls the penalty meted out to Antigone (Soph. \textit{Ant} 773-780) and unchaste Vestal Virgins;\(^\text{177}\) however, there is also a cross reference with Seneca’s \textit{Agamemnon}, where Aegisthus allots this punishment to Electra (\textit{Ag} 988-993).

In response, Jason acts the Stoic sage again, urging Medea to control her heart though it has been aroused with anger: \textit{quin potius ira concitum pectus doma} (506). Instead, however, Medea’s anger causes her to make an outburst in which she shockingly disowns her children:
\[
abdico\ eiuro\ abnuo\ (507).
\]

Seneca uses the second verb of anger in \textit{de ira}: \textit{ira...naturam hominis eiurat} (3.5.6). By being angry, Medea has renounced her human nature in disowning her children. She is not only hurt at being deserted by her husband; she is also dishonoured.

\[
Ne\ veniat\ umquam\ tam\ malus\ miseris\ dies,
qui\ prole\ foeda\ misceat\ prolem\ inclitam,
\]

\(^{177}\) Hine (2000) 160.
Phoebi nepotes Sisyphi nepotibus (510-12).

She makes it clear that she considers herself of higher status than Creusa. The two women are both princesses; however Medea is descended from the sun god, whereas Creusa is descended from Sisyphus, a dishonest mortal (κέρδιστος ἄνδρῶν: Iliad 6.153). Jason, as well, a mere mortal and an exile like Medea, is not fit to slight her.

Jason suspects that Medea is planning their mutual destruction: Quid, misera, meque teque in exitium trahis (512)? This line recalls Seneca’s observation in de ira: homo in adiutorium mutuum genitus est, ira in exitium (1.5.2). But Medea has no concern for helping others; her anger will cause many deaths. When she asks Jason to allow her children to accompany her in exile, he refuses saying haec causa vitae est (547). In an aside to the audience, Medea asks, Sic natos amat? (549) indicating that she realizes where to hurt Jason most. She changes her plan from destroying Jason to causing him great psychological suffering by condemning his sons. At the end of their interview, Medea deceives Jason by claiming to be about to depart and asking to give her sons her final instructions (551-552). She requests that he forget her words that she said in anger: haec irae data / oblitterentur (556-557). Jason again asks her to control her temper: precorque et ipse, fervidam ut mentem regas / placideque tractes (558-559). Her response, numquam excidemus (562) offers metapoetic comment on the drastic measures of her revenge that will result in her never being forgotten, not only by Jason, but also by future audiences. She gives herself several second-order commands to get to work: hoc age, omnes advoca / vires et artes (562-563). Costa notes that hoc age was the formula spoken at

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178 LSJ s. κέρδιστος II citing Iliad 6.153: “most cunning, crafty.”

Roman sacrifices at the moment of killing the victim and so these words formally articulate Medea’s angry condemnation of her enemy Jason. She shifts her attention to the first victims whose deaths will cause Jason pain. The tension increases as she shows she has condemned Creusa and Creon by giving the Nurse instructions for their destruction (568-578).

2.5 The Fourth Stage of the Stoic Progression of Anger: Revenge

When the Nurse re-enters at the beginning of Act 4, she describes Medea’s preparations offstage:

magna pernicies adest.
immane quantum augescit et semet dolor
accendit ipse vimque praeteritam integrat.
vidi furentem saepe et aggressam deos,
caelum trahentem: maius his, maius parat
Medea monstrum (670-675).

Again we have the consonance of m’s and the comparative degree which are Medea’s hallmarks: magna...immane quantum...maius...maius Medea monstrum. Pernicies indicates that Medea is moving on to exacting revenge in causing the destruction of her enemies. The language of anger surfaces again in dolor, and the metaphor of fire applied to anger in accendit. Moreover, praeteritam invites interpretation as a metapoetic term that refers to past representations of Medea as well as her past crimes, such as killing her brother (Eur. Med. 1334; Ov. Tr. 3.9). Vidi too invests the Nurse’s words with metatheatrical import, hinting at the Nurse’s role as a

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180 Costa (1973) 120.
181 Ibid., 83.
messenger who informs the audience of what she has seen as if she were watching a performance of the *Medea*. We share in this experience because we have heard Medea say that she would attack the gods (424). The mention of drawing down heaven (*caelum trahentem*) also takes us back to the image of anger in *de ira*: *caelum ruere cupientem* (2.35.5).\(^{182}\)

The Nurse acts like an actor in reproducing Medea’s speech for us to hear:

> “Parva sunt,” inquit, “mala et vile telum est, ima quod tellus creat. caelo petam venena. iam iam tempus est aliquid movere fraude vulgari altius.” (690-693)

The earth’s stage is too small for Medea. She must search for her poisons in the sky. *Aliquid movere* recalls Ovid’s *nescioquid* (*Her.* 12.212) and Vergil’s *maius opus moveo* (*A.* 7.45). But Medea is no longer looking for something *maius* (674) like Atreus (*Thy.* 267); the comparative she uses here is *altius* (*Med.* 693), underlining her status as greater than the gods. The Nurse’s announcement of Medea’s approach (*sonuit ecce vesano gradu*, 738) recalls the description of anger in *de ira*: *incessus vaesani* (2.35.5).

The incantation scene is one of terror as Medea shows her complete control over the dead and the gods of the underworld (740).\(^{183}\) Medea says *gravior uni poena sedeat coniugis socero mei* (746). She is now in the final stage of anger and planning punishment even for Creon’s dead

\(^{182}\) Similarly, the hyperbole involved in Medea’s preparing something greater than the destruction of the universe finds a parallel in Atreus’ summoning the Furies for the similar purpose of exacting revenge on his brother Thyestes by another act of child killing: *dira Furiarum cohors / discorsque Erinyis veniat et geminas faces / Megaera quatiens: non satis magno meum / ardet furore pectus, impleri iuvat / maiore monstro* (*Thy.* 250-254).

ancestor Sisyphus: she commands his rock to roll him back downhill.\textsuperscript{184} In collecting substances for her spells, she says \textit{impiae matris, facem / ultricis Althaeae vides} (779-780). She uses the torch of another vengeful mother, Althaea. \textit{Vides} is a metatheatrical comment working to frame how we view the action in the \textit{θέατρον}, literally ‘a place for seeing.’\textsuperscript{185} Medea will act like a maenad in adding her own blood to the spell: \textit{tibi nudato pectore maenas / sacro feriam bracchia cultro} (806-807). Again, Seneca seems to invite us to consider the importance of the etymology of \textit{maenas}, from \textit{µαίνοµαι}, in his characterization of Medea, for at this point, the Chorus asks,

\begin{quote}
Quonam cruenta maenas
praeceps amore saevo
rapitur? quod \textbf{impotenti}
facinus parat \textbf{furore}?
vultus citatus \textbf{ira}
riget (849-854).
\end{quote}

We again see the symptoms of anger: Medea prepares her crime with the uncontrolled madness of a Fury (\textit{impotenti...furore}). This line recalls Seneca saying in \textit{de ira} that anger is uncontrolled (\textit{aeque enim impotens sui est}, 1.1.2). Likewise, the Chorus’ description of Medea’s face as \textit{citatus ira} resonates against the compound \textit{concitatus} Seneca employs in \textit{de ira} 1.1.1.

When the Chorus observes her pacing to and fro, \textit{huc fert pedes et illuc} (862), we recall Seneca’s use of the adjective \textit{incursitantem} of anger personified (2.35.5). Costa also compares

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{184} Costa (1973) 139.
\textsuperscript{185} LSJ s.v.
\end{footnotesize}
the line *feror huc illuc ut plena deo* from Ovid’s *Medea*. The Chorus comments specifically on Medea’s unbridled anger:

**Frenare** nescit iras  
Medea, non amores;  
nunc ira amorque causam  
iunxere: quid sequetur? (866-867)

They recognize that Medea has no control over her passions, as a good Stoic should have. So, at least, Seneca advises his brother, *Quod maxime desiderasti, Novate, nunc facere temptabimus, iram excidere animis aut certe refrenare et impetus eius inhibere* (3.1.1).

At the beginning of Act 5 when the chorus asks the messenger how Creon and Creusa were trapped, his answer *qua solent reges capti* (882) reads like a metatheatrical comment that alludes to how the royals always die in this story—burned by the poison in Medea’s gifts (cf. Eur. *Med*. 1136-1230). Hine adds that there is also a philosophical point in that it is the trait of tyrants to be susceptible to greed and flattery. The messenger’s description of the fire that consumed them (*avidus per omnem regiae partem furit / ut iussus ignis*, 885-6), contains the same terminology as Seneca uses of anger in *de ira* (1.1.1). The fire is thus the personified manifestation of Medea’s anger: it is described as *avidus* and it rages with the action of anger, *furit*.

Medea again addresses her mind, *quid, anime, cessas? sequere felicem impetum* (895). *Impetum* literally refers to the vengeful attack she has made on the royals, but it can also refer to

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186 Costa (1973) 149.

the impulse of anger upon which she has chosen to act. She continues her dialogue with her mind:

pars ultionis ista, qua gaudes, quota est!
amas adhuc, furiose, si satis est tibi
caelebs Iason. quaere poenarum genus
haud usitatum, iamque sic temet para (896-899).

We see that her mind is bent on revenge (ultionis) and punishment (poenarum) as she addresses herself as mad (furiose), all in the language of de ira (1.1.1). Like Atreus (Thy. 252), she is not satisfied with her first act of punishment—making Jason a widower. She gives her mind a second-order command to look for an unusual sort of punishment (898-899), and continues with the commands to her mind:

incumbe in iras teque languentem excita
penitusque veteres pectore ex imo impetus
violentus hauri (902-904).

Thus she tells herself to devote herself to anger and to draw up her old impulses, as veteres functions metapoetically to refer to earlier representations of her anger in Euripides, Ennius and Ovid. It is almost as Ovid’s Medea says, video meliora proboque, / deteriora sequor (Met. 7.20-21). The difference is that Seneca’s Medea sees the difference between the rational and the angry, but chooses the latter. In another metatheatrical comment, she says hoc agam (905): not only will she commit this crime, but also she will act out this part. She continues, prolusit dolor / per ista noster (907-908)—again a metatheatrical comment where ista stands for prior versions of her tale: in those earlier renditions, her resentment was rehearsed for the greater

\[188\] OLD s. ago 26; cf. agere domita feminam disces malo, Ag. 959.
revenge of Seneca’s version. She questions what the anger of a girl could accomplish: *quid puellaris furor? / Medea nunc sum: crevit ingenium malis* (909-910). She metatheatrically draws a contrast between representations of herself as a naïve girl (as in Apollonius’ epic) and what she has now become—a mature tragic heroine. Schiesaro writes that she feels she has lived up to the audience’s expectations.189 She has been preparing and building herself up for this rôle since Ovid’s *Heroides* 12. Now her incarnation as a woman worthy of her name (“planner”) has come to fruition. She wishes to find a way to surpass her earlier crimes: *quaere materiam, dolor* (914). Here *materiam* here may even refer metatextually to the subject matter of her play.190 In philosophical terms, moreover, Medea again gives a second-order command to her angry mind, specifically addressing her passions: *dolor* (914, 944), *ira* (916, 953) and *furor* (930).191

She addresses not only her mind but even her anger and asks, *quo te igitur; ira, mittis* (916)? Her anger is now the dominant force driving her actions. She recognises the ultimate crime: *ultimum, agnosco, scelus / animo parandum est* (923-924). *Agnosco*, like *nosco* earlier in the play, may be interpreted as a marker of self-annotating allusion to Medea’s crime in earlier literary versions.192 She does not have to say what she is thinking of; we know from our knowledge of Euripides, Ennius, and Ovid. In an apostrophe to her children, she says, *vos pro paternis sceleribus poenas date* (925). This line recalls the old Solonian idea that innocent children pay for the sins of their fathers (*ἀναίτιοι ἔργα τίνουσιν / ἢ παῖδες τούτων ἢ*


191 Costa (1973) 153.

γένος ἐξοπίσω, Solon 1.31-32), but it also betrays the hallmark of the Stoic analysis of anger in Seneca’s treatise *de ira* that anger culminates in punitive vengeance. This thought could be the first means by which Medea justifies her chosen course of action to herself. However, a few lines later she considers her children innocent (*crimine et culpa carent, / sunt innocentes, fateor*, 935-936), admitting that the children do not deserve to pay for their father’s sin.

But she cannot, has not, and need not mention the deed that she is contemplating: *ira discessit loco / materque tota coniuge expulsa redit* (927-928). Hine writes that for the first time she talks of killing the children, only to recoil from the idea in horror (*cor pepulit horror*, 926). Her anger has departed and her maternal instincts have returned to the fore. In her more rational state, she speaks to her mad rage: *melius, a, demens furor! / incognitum istud facinus ac dirum nefas / a me quoque absit* (930-932). Melius recalls the Ovidian paradox, *video meliora proboque, / deteriora sequor* (*Met*. 7.20-21), but in the comparative mode suggests the generic conclusion—a tragic murder. Just for the moment, however, the Stoic sage has returned as she wishes that she be without the crime of anger (*dirum nefas*). She asks her mind, *quid, anime, titubas? ora quid lacrimae rigant / variamque nunc huc ira, nunc illuc amor / diducit* (937-939)? Hine notes that anger against Jason and love for her children pull her in different directions. She observes *cor fluctuatur: ira pietatem fugat / iramque pietas. cede pietati, dolor* (943-944). At one moment, her anger acts as a warring army and puts to flight her devotion to her children; at another moment her devotion wins over her anger. She gives a second-order command to her anger to yield to her mother love. Tarrant comments that


194 Ibid.
introspective monologues such as this one offer a complement to the de ira, which describes the outward appearance of the iratus but lacks a corresponding portrait of such a character’s inner workings.\textsuperscript{195} And so we see Medea arrive at her decision:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{rursus} increscit\textbf{ dolor}
\begin{quote}
et ferver odium, repetit invitam manum
antiqua Erinys. \textbf{ira}, qua ducis, sequor (951-953).
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

That the Fury, the goddess of anger, is called ancient (\textit{antiqua}) and reaches again (\textit{repetit}) for her hand is an allusion to the representation of infanticide in Euripides, Ennius and Ovid. Words for ‘again’ such as \textit{rursus} and the \textit{re}- prefix emblematize the tradition here. Seneca draws, too, on Ovid’s \textit{quo feret ira, sequar!} (\textit{Her.}\ 12.209)

Suddenly, Medea has a vision of the Furies:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Quonam ista tendit turba Furiarum impotens?}
quem quaevit aut quo flammeos ictus parat,
aut cui cruenteras agmen infernum faces
intentat' ingens anguis excusso sonat
tortus flagello. quem trabe infesta petit
Megaera? cuius umbra dispersis venit
incerta membris? frater est, poenas petit.
dabimus, sed omnes. fige luminibus faces,
lania, perure, pectus en \textit{Furiis} patet.
Discedere a me, frater, \textbf{ultrices deae}
manesque ad imos ire securas iube (958-968).
\end{quote}

This speech serves as the culmination of her request at line 13 for the \textit{ultrices deae} to attend her; now that they are here, she commands her brother’s spirit to order them to depart (967), but

\textsuperscript{195} Tarrant in Volk and Williams (2006) 13.
assures them that the revenge for which they came will be fulfilled (securas, 968). She describes the throng of Furies as impotens (958), the same adjective that Seneca used to describe anger in *de ira*: *Quidam itaque e sapientibus viris iram dixerunt brevem insaniam; aeque enim impotens sui est* (1.1.2). Moreover, Medea suffers a brief moment of insanity in which she sees visions of the Furies and the ghost of Apsyrtus, the brother she killed. Her vision of a huge snake entwined in a lashing whip accompanying the Furies recall Seneca’s quotation of Vergil in *de ira* (2.35.6) where he was drawing an image of anger from the poets: *Et scissa gaudens vadit Discordia palla, / quam cum sanguineo sequitur Bellona flagello* (A. 8.702-703). Medea observes about her brother: *poenas petit* (964). Apsyrtus too seeks revenge.

Inwood writes that in *de ira* 1.3.3-8, Seneca states that human psychology is explained in part by the sharp difference between brute beasts and rational animals. Only humans can feel anger since anger can be understood only as an expression of reason. Anger is an agitation of the mind which presses on for vengeance out of a desire and a judgment. There are three distinct *motus* or psychological reactions: 1) the first involuntary reaction, *primus motus non voluntarius*; 2) a conscious judgment that one ought to act, i.e. assent (*alter cum voluntate non contumaci, tamquam oporteat me vindicari, cum laesus sim, aut oporteat hunc poenas dare cum scelus fecerit*); 3) the passion of anger which overcomes reason (*tertius motus est iam impotens, qui non si oportet ulcisci vult, sed utique, qui rationem evicit, 2.4.1). This Stoic understanding of anger informs Seneca’s characterization of Medea throughout her eponymous play. Medea has had the second and third psychological reactions Seneca describes in the *de ira* (2.4): she makes the conscious judgment that she ought to act and she is driven by the passion of

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anger which has overcome reason: *ira, qua ducis, sequor* (953). Anger overwhelms her reason and motivates her revenge.

In his 1987 article “Two Monologues of Self-Division,”

197 Gill argues that the conflict between maternal and avenging impulses becomes subordinate to the conflict between moral and immoral responses to her own plan of infanticide. Medea resolves the conflict by conceiving the infanticide as a means of self-punishment as well as a crime. Her past history is one of unrelieved violence; Medea urges herself to outdo her previous *scelera*, to show that she has ‘matured’ in evils, and that her life-long quest for evil has reached its goal. She embraces infanticide as a means of punishing Jason precisely because she recognizes it as the *ultimum scelus* (923). Medea disowns the children (*liberi quondam mei*, 924) and treats them only as instruments of their father’s punishment.

In his 1997 book, Gill argues further that Medea rationalizes the resurgence of her anger as the work of the ancient Fury (*antiqua Erinys*, 953) which seeks again her hand against her will. Speaking with the voice of anger, she expresses pleasure at having produced two children for revenge (*in poenas*, 956) to appease her brother and father. Her words (*pectus en Furiis patet*, 966) suggest she gives in to her madness. In her mad vision, she sees the brother whom she killed and asks him to use her hand to kill her child (*utere hac, frater; manu / quae strinxit ensem. victima manes tuos / placamus ista*, 969-971). She sacrifices her first child to placate the spirit of the brother she killed for Jason’s sake. She thus resolves the conflict between anger and mother-love by describing the infanticide (and the punishment of Jason of which this is the

means) as a form of self-punishment for the crimes she previously committed. Seneca explains in *de ira*: *nihil rationis est, ubi semel adfectus inductus est iusque illi aliquod voluntate nostra datum est; faciet de cetero quantum volet, non quantum permiseris* (1.8.1). In this way Medea’s reason has yielded control and authority to anger when she kills her son. Her mad frenzy has blinded her to the reality of what she is doing; it enables her to kill her first son and is parallel to the madness of Hercules that causes him to kill his children: *Quo se caecus impegit furor? (Her. F. 992)* Her rage or *furor* presses on for vengeance on the basis of both her desire and her judgment to punish Jason.

At the crisis of the play, Medea continues to give her mind second-order commands:

\[
\text{nunc hoc age, anime. non in occulto tibi est}
\text{perdenda virtus; approba populo manum (976-977).}
\]

These two lines may be read as a metatheatrical comment. In saying *hoc age*, she is telling herself to act the rôle of Medea to the end. She, like a Roman warrior, does not want her *virtus* to go unrecognized, but desires to win eternal fame through this telling of her story. Seneca’s version differs from Euripides’ in a significant way: Medea is even manlier, for she acts outside, in man’s space as Zeitlin writes, and kills her sons, not in secret, but on stage, in front of the spectators. She then asks for applause from the audience as was frequently done at the close of a Roman comedy (cf. *vos plausum date*, Plautus, *Most.* 1182).

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199 See n. 192.

Although Jason has arrived with his troop of loyal citizens, Medea continues to speak to her mind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{perfectum est scelus—} \\
\text{vindicta nondum: perage, dum faciunt manus} \\
\text{quid nunc moraris, anime? quid dubitas? potens} \\
\text{iam cecidit ira? paenitet facti, pudet (986-989).}
\end{align*}
\]

She has killed one son, but her revenge is not yet complete (\textit{vindicta nondum}, 987). She upbraids her mind for delaying, for this diffuses anger (\textit{de ira} 1.11.5). She realizes that her anger has subsided; her reason again assumes control of her mind as she now regrets what she has done (989). Seneca describes just such sudden change in \textit{de ira}:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Putavit se aliquis laesum, voluit ulcisci, dissuadente aliqua causa statim resedit. Hanc iram non voco, motum animi rationi parentem; illa est ira, quae rationem transsilit, quae secum rapit (2.3.4).}
\end{align*}
\]

But soon she feels pleasure for what she has done:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{voluptas magna me invitam subit,} \\
\text{et ecce crescit. derat hoc unum mihi,} \\
\text{spectator iste (991-993).}
\end{align*}
\]

In these lines, Medea displays the character of the anti-Stoic, for Seneca says the good man does not rejoice in punishment: \textit{Si vir bonus poena non gaudet, non gaudebit ne eo quidem affectu, cui poena voluptati est; ergo non est naturalis ira (de ira} 1.6.5). In assuming her fully evil stature, Medea acts as a director of a play:\textsuperscript{201} \textit{hic te vidente dabitur exitio pari} (1001). She kills her second son because she realizes that the psychological punishment the act will inflict on

\textsuperscript{201} Schiesaro’s metaphor is “author-on-stage”: Schiesaro (2003) 223.
Jason is more painful than any physical harm would be to him. Jason thus becomes a helpless spectator of her vengeance. She realizes that she does not gain revenge unless her offender witnesses his punishment, and thereby fulfils Aristotle’s requirement for revenge (Rhetoric 2.4.31). Medea best exacts her revenge by performing it on the stage—spectators demand the theatre and vice versa.

Medea’s resentment is so great that she says she will not be satisfied with the death of two sons: \textit{ut duos perimam, tamen / nimium est dolori numerus angustus meo} (1010-1011). Although Jason tries to engage her in conversation, she gives her resentment an order not to hurry but to enjoy its crime: \textit{perfruere lento scelere, ne propera, dolor} (1016). This line recalls that in \textit{de ira}: \textit{ira festinat} (1.18.1). So too the fact that Medea’s anger is so great that it drives her to kill her children recalls another passage from \textit{de ira}:

\begin{quote}
maximum enim illos malum cepit et omnia exsuperans vitia. alia paulatim intrant, repentina et universa vis huius est. omnis denique alios affectus sibi subicit. amorem ardentissimum vincit, transfoderunt itaque amata corpora...nullus affectus est, in quem non ira dominetur (2.36.6).
\end{quote}

Medea’s anger has overcome her mother love for her children and caused her to destroy the ones she loved the most.

When she kills her second son, she at last concludes:

\begin{quote}
bene est, peractum est. plura non habui, dolor, quae tibi litarem. lumina huc tumida alleva, ingrate Iason. coniugem agnostis tuam? sic fugere soleo (1019-1022).
\end{quote}
She is finally satisfied with her vengeance. But *peractum est* is also a metatheatrical comment that signals that the play is nearly finished.\(^{202}\) Medea’s question *coniugem agnoscis tuam?* is another self-annotating allusion to her earlier incarnations as child-killer, as in Euripides (*Med.* 1393).\(^{203}\) As Schiesaro writes, she forces Jason to acknowledge that she is the person in control of events as she always has been.\(^{204}\) *Sic fugere solem* is another metatheatrical comment alluding to the literary tradition of which Seneca’s Medea is a part, according to which she customarily escapes by her grandfather’s chariot (Eur. *Med.* 1321, Ov. *Met.* 7.218-222).

In his treatise on anger, Seneca has many negative examples of the ruinous anger he instructs his brother to avoid: *haec cogitanda sunt exempla, quae vites (de ira 3.22.1).* We have seen that many points from Seneca’s discussion of anger in his treatise are dramatised in his tragedy *Medea.* He has shown in both works that anger is the most powerful emotion and the greatest evil. Moreover, there is a close correspondence in the language and the philosophical points between the play and the treatise. The world of drama was never far from Seneca’s mind. Seneca compares life to a play in a letter to Lucilius: *quomodo fabula, sic vita: non quam diu, sed quam bene acta sit, refert (Ep. 77.20).* Thus Schiesaro is probably right to note that, “It is perfectly possible to assume that Seneca’s intention in portraying Medea was to move his audience to a stern criticism of the passions which dominate her.”\(^{205}\) Indeed, as I have argued in this chapter, Seneca’s tragedy can be interpreted as a demonstration of the accuracy of the Stoic analysis of anger: Medea realizes that she has suffered a wrongdoing; she grows indignant; she

\(^{202}\) *OLD* s.v. 8, cf. *peracta iam pars matris est*, *Her. O.* 1025.


\(^{204}\) Schiesaro (2003) 213.

\(^{205}\) Ibid., 234.
condemns the wrongdoers; and she exacts revenge. Medea progresses through all these stages under the influence of the destructive anger which overwhelms her rational thought. Tarrant rightly observes that tragedy was a genre in which Seneca could represent the disordered *animus* from the inside out.\(^{206}\)

In the course of his analysis of anger in the tragedy, Seneca documents a relationship between anger and cruelty, especially visible in Medea’s killing of her children. Early in the play, she plans her escape: *Fugiam, et ulciscar prius* (172). Yet she will exact vengeance. Medea even commands Jupiter to assist her: *vindices flammas para* (532).\(^{207}\) She asks for his thunderbolt to strike down the guilty party: Jason (535-537). Medea incinerates Creon and Creusa: *nata atque genitor cincere permixto iacent* (880). Jason tries to retaliate: *huc rapiat ignes aliquis, ut flammis cadat / suis perusta* (996-997). He takes up the same instrument of torture and punishment as Medea used. The intimate interconnection between anger and cruelty in the tragedy invites our closer study of the nature of cruelty in Senecan drama. In the next chapter, we shall examine cruelty’s causes, aims and effects, with a focus on Seneca’s *Trojan Women*, a play which also includes incidences of extreme cruelty.


\(^{207}\) Fire is both a metaphor for anger (*semet dolor / accendit ipse*, 671-672) and a means for destruction.
Chapter 3

Cruelty

*non avaritia, non crudelitas modum novit.*—Seneca, *Ep.* 95.30

We move from an emotion to examining a character trait. Cruelty is an important theme in the writings of Seneca, as Motto and Clark have shown in their article “Seneca on Cruelty.”\(^{208}\) Taking a biographical approach, through Seneca’s experience of what might seem the ultimate cruelty—accused of complicity in the Pisonian conspiracy and condemned to death in AD 65—they focus their exploration of the theme of cruelty on Seneca’s philosophical letters and treatises. They argue that Seneca’s belief that vices can be overcome by constant exhortation led him to attempt to instill mercy in the young Emperor Nero by writing the *de clementia*. From a broader sociological perspective, Melissa Dowling traces the development of the themes of clemency and cruelty linked to governance through Hellenistic kingdoms, the Roman Republic and Empire.\(^{209}\) She discusses the impetus given to *clementia* in the Augustan period by authors and visual artists.\(^{210}\) While she has given a good analysis of the topic in Seneca’s philosophical treatises, she has not given due attention to the tragedies.\(^{211}\) Similarly, Motto and Clark survey cruelty in his plays in the course of only one paragraph. My aim in this chapter is to trace the history of the concept of cruelty as Seneca inherited it, and then to examine his treatment of this theme in his *Troades*.

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\(^{209}\) M. Dowling (2006)

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 76-168.

\(^{211}\) Ibid., 195-209.
All three scholars focus on Seneca’s development of the theme of cruelty as the opposite of mercy in his *de clementia*, a treatise which aims to convince the eighteen-year-old emperor Nero to rule with compassion. However, Seneca takes up the question of cruelty not only in the treatise, but also in his moral epistles and in his tragedies, especially the *Troades*. Seneca knows Greek literature and its topoi of cruelty, but he is especially interested in drawing on Stoic theoretical models and applying them to Greek mythological subjects. Tragedy is a particularly significant genre for the exploration of the spectacle of cruelty because the theatre is the site for the display of crisis. In Aristotle’s famous formulation in his *Poetics*, the audience will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place in the theatre (τὸν ἀκούοντα τὰ πράγματα γινόμενα καὶ φρίττειν καὶ ἔλεειν ἐκ τῶν συμβαινόντων, 1453b 4-6).

### 3.1 The Literary and Philosophical Background

Andrew Lintott argues that the Greeks employed words for cruelty far less often than the Romans. Nevertheless, he demonstrates that the Greeks developed the theoretical basis for the concept of cruelty that the Romans inherited. He begins his discussion with the panhellenic poems of Homer, which had a great influence on later authors. In the Homeric epics, the heroes go on rampages of physical violence, which are often described in minute detail and highlighted by powerful imagery. In *Iliad* 9, for example, Phoenix counsels Achilles to control his anger (*Il. 9.496-497*):

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ἀλλ’ Ἀχιλεῦ, δάµμασον θυµὸν μέγαν· οὐδὲ τί σε χρὴ / νηλεὲς ἦτορ
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ἔχειν. Here Homer employs θυμόν to signify anger, as we saw Heraclitus do in the epigraph to chapter two (fr. 85), where he counsels that it is difficult to fight with anger: θυμῷ μάχεσθαι χαλεπῶν. The Homeric Phoenix describes Achilles’ heart as νηλεές, “pitiless, ruthless.” Later in the Embassy, Ajax describes Achilles’ anger as ἄγριον, σχέτλιος and νηλής (II. 9.628-632):

αὐτὰρ Ἀχιλλεῦς ἄγριον ἐν στήθεσι θέτο μεγαλήτορα θυμόν, σχέτλιος, οὐδὲ μετατρέπεται φιλότητος ἐταίρων τῆς ἤ μιν παρὰ νησιῶν ἐτύμων ἐξοχὸν ἄλλων, νηλής.

Ajax stresses three terms in the important first position in each of three lines: ἄγριον (9.629) indicates that Achilles’ anger is “fierce”; σχέτλιος (9.630) characterizes Achilles as “flinching from no cruelty”; and Ajax agrees with Phoenix that Achilles is νηλής (9.632). Homer thus deploys a panoply of synonyms for cruel.

214 “But Achilles, master your great anger; and it is not at all necessary for you to have a pitiless heart.”
215 LSJ s.v. II 4. Hainsworth (1993) 126 notes that the θυμός is the seat of the passion to which Achilles has yielded.
216 LSJ s.v. II 4.
217 Cunliffe (1924) s.v.
218 “But Achilles has made savage the proud heart in his chest, cruel man, and he does not show regard for the friendship of his comrades with which we honoured him among the ships above all others, pitiless one!”
219 LSJ s.v. II 2.
220 LSJ s.v. I 2.
However, it is not cruel for a warrior to strike an adult male combatant unless a wound has disabled him. Thus it is cruel, as well as cowardly, for Hector to stab Patroclus in the belly after Apollo has knocked him senseless and unarmed him, and Euphorbus has speared him from behind (Il. 16.818-822):

"Εκτωρ δ’ ὡς εἶδεν Πατροκλῆα μεγάθυμον
ἀψ ἀναχαζόμενον, βεβλημένον ὡξεί χαλκῷ,
ἀγχίμολόν ὃά οἱ ἡλθε κατὰ στίχας, σῶτα δὲ συγι
νείατον ἐς κενεώα, διαπρὸ δέ χαλκόν ἔλασσε.
δουπτησεν δὲ πεσών, μέγα δ’ ἡκαχε λαόν Ἀχαιών."

Hector was cruel since he took advantage of Patroclus as he was retreating, already stunned by Apollo and wounded by Euphorbus.

Moreover, any mutiliation is cruel, especially of the dead. After Achilles kills Hector, other Achaeans deal wounds to Hector’s corpse while they taunt him with being softer than he was when he was burning their ships (Il. 22.369-375):

"ἄλλοι δὲ περίδραμον νίες Ἀχαιών,
οῖ καὶ θηήσαντο φυήν καὶ εἶδος ἄγητὸν
'Εκτωρὸς· οὖδ’ ἄρα οἳ τις ἀνουτητί γε παρέστη.
ἄδε δὲ τις εἰπεσκέν ἰδών ἐς πλησίον ἄλλον·
"ὡ πότοι, ἥ μάλα δὴ μαλακότερος ἀμφαφάσθαι
'Εκτωρ ἢ ὅτε νῆας ἐνέπρησεν πυρὶ κηλέω."

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221 “But Hector, when he saw great-hearted Patroclus drawing back, struck with the sharp bronze, came near him through the ranks, and thrust with his spear into the lowest part of his flank, and drove the bronze right through; and he fell with a thud, and greatly grieved the army of the Achaeans.”
In this passage, a number of anonymous spectators display cruelty in that they take pleasure in viewing (θηήήσαντο) and mutilating Hector’s corpse and joking about it. Homer excludes no one from the blame by negating the indefinite pronoun (οὐδ’ ἄρα οί τις, II. 22.371). Achilles himself defiles Hector’s corpse by dragging it around Patroclus’ tomb (II. 24.15-18):

The fact that he dragged Hector’s corpse three times around Patroclus’ tomb suggests a magic act. Achilles imposes a further indignity to the corpse by leaving it face down in the dust.

In a special category of cruelty is the eater of raw flesh. Achilles’ Myrmidons are likened to wolves that eat raw flesh (珌μοφάάγοι, II. 16.157), while Achilles himself wishes that his anger would drive him to cut off and eat Hector’s flesh raw (II. 22.346-347): αἲ γάρ πως αὐτόν με μένος καὶ θυμός ἀνείη / ὡμ’ ἀποταμνόμενον κρέα ἐδμεναι, οία ἔοργας.

Because Hector has killed Patroclus, Achilles’ anger is so violent that it makes him feel he could

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222 “And the other sons of the Achaeans ran up, and looked at the stature and admirable form of Hector. Not anyone stood near without wounding him. Thus one would say, with a look at his neighbour: ‘Oh wow, Hector is now really softer to handle than when he burned the ships with blazing fire.’ Thus would one say and standing near would deal a wound.”

223 “And he would bind Hector behind the chariot to drag him; and when he had dragged it three times around the mound of the dead son of Menoitius, he would rest again in his hut, but would leave Hector outstretched face down in the dust.”

224 “If only somehow my wrath and fury might urge me to carve your flesh and myself eat it raw, because of what you have done.”
eat Hector’s flesh raw (ἡμ’, II. 22.347). After Hector’s death, Hecuba tries to dissuade Priam from going to ransom his corpse from Achilles whom she calls ὠµµηστής, an eater of raw flesh (II. 24.206-208).  

Thus Hecuba characterizes Achilles as a savage and faithless man who does not respect the norms of civilization. As Buchan writes, Achilles imagines cannibalism as a way of satisfying a limitless fury. It is significant that Achilles does not cannibalize Hector, but remains a part of society by respecting this taboo. He leaves behind the fascination of what is prohibited, and the prohibition makes the act that it prohibits all the more intriguing.

The chief example of an eater of raw flesh in Homer is the Cyclops Polyphemus (Od. 9.287-295):

'Lς ἐφάµην, ὁ δέ μ’ οὐδὲν ἀµείβετο νηλέι θυµῷ,
ἀλλ’ ὧ γ’ ἀναίξας ἑτάροις ἐπὶ χεῖρας ἰαλλε,
σὺν δὲ δῦω μάρψας ὡς τε σκύλακας ποτὶ γαίη
κοπτ’· ἐκ δ’ ἑγκέφαλος χαµάδις ρέε, δεῦε δὲ γαίαν.
τοὺς δὲ διὰ µελειστὶ ταµῷν ὑπλίσσατο δόρπον.

225 LSJ s.v.

226 “For if he gets you in his power and looks at you with his eyes, so savage and faithless is the man, he will not pity you nor respect you at all.”


Homer describes Polyphemus’ actions with two words that he employed for Achilles: ἰηλέη (pitiless) and σχέτλια (cruel). He compares the Cyclops to a savage beast, a lion bred in wild territory, and in gruesome detail names the body parts that the Cyclops separates in order to eat the men (ἐγκατάα τε σάάρκας τε καὶ ὀστέέα µμυελόόεντα, Od. 9.293). It is important that there are witnesses whose reactions of weeping and praying attest to the cruelty of the Cyclops. Buchan notes that to eat human flesh seems to menace the existence of any meaningful society at all.²³⁰

Cannibalism has special relevance for Seneca, for Atreus’ serving Thyestes his children is the crowning act of cruelty in Seneca’s Thyestes (755-763):

erpta vivis exta pectoribus tremunt
spirantque venae corque adhuc pavidum salit;
at ille fibras tractat ac fata inspicit
et adhuc calentes viscerum venas notat.
Postquam hostiae placuere, securus vacat
iam fratris epulis. ipse divisum secat
in membra corpus, amputat trunco tenus

²²⁹ “So I spoke, but in pitiless spirit he answered me nothing, but leapt up and reached for my companions, caught two together and struck them like puppies against the ground, and the brains flowed out on the ground and drenched the earth. Cutting them up limb from limb, he prepared himself supper; he ate like a mountain-bred lion, and didn’t leave anything behind, entrails, flesh and the marrowy bones. But we weeping raised our hands to Zeus, since we saw cruel deeds.”

²³⁰ Buchan (2001) 14. He also suggests that humans invent monsters as symptoms of their own disavowed, monstrous desires (p. 29).
umeros patentes et lacertorum moras,
denudat artus durus atque ossa amputat.

Seneca employs imagery similar to Homer’s: Atreus too acts like an Armenian lion (*qualis Armenia leo*, 732), which comes from an exotic region that symbolizes lawless violence.\(^{231}\) He acts like a wild animal in ripping the entrails from the still palpitating bodies of Thyestes’ sons. Atreus is cruel in another respect in that he is butchering innocent young men. Like the pitiless Cyclops, Atreus divides the bodies limb from limb and is *durus* as he cuts the flesh from the bones (763). Tarrant notes that *vacat* suggests the enjoyment Atreus derives from his preparations for his brother’s feast and which the Messenger seems vicariously to share in describing them.\(^{232}\) Poe writes that the poet derives satisfaction from describing the slaughter and the reader from reading the description: the play declares that it is satisfying the natural human impulse to violence.\(^{233}\) Davis finds the Messenger’s speech not only revolting but also enthralling and compelling.\(^{234}\) Seneca is very much aware that depictions of cruelty make for effective drama. The philosophical tradition, too, explores the problem of the cruelty of princes. Plato considers a tyrant to be the cruellest sort of man. Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias* discusses the nature of a tyrant:

\[
\text{Οὔκοὖν ὁ ποῦ τύραννός ἐστιν ἄρης ἄγριος καὶ ἀπαίδευτος, εἰ τις τούτου ἐν τῇ πόλει πολὺ βελτίων εἴη, φοβοῖτο δὴ τοῦ ἂν αὐτὸν ὁ...}
\]

\(^{231}\) Tarrant (1985) 195.  
\(^{232}\) Ibid., 199.  
\(^{233}\) J. P. Poe (1969) 359.  
\(^{234}\) Davis (2003) 75.
τύραννος καὶ τούτῳ ἐξ ἄπαντος τοῦ νοῦ οὐκ ἂν ποτὲ δύναιτο φίλος γενέσθαι; (510b-c)

Plato here follows Homer in employing ἄγριος in the sense of “cruel”. It is significant that Plato uses the word in a political context and links it with the figure of the τύραννος, someone who has seized power by force. Plato’s use of βελτίων suggests that he is making a moral judgment about the tyrant and the better citizen. Plato characterizes the tyrant as fearful of his morally better citizen and incapable of sustaining friendship, implying that the tyrant’s cruelty springs from these roots.

In the Republic, moreover, Socrates posits that tyranny develops out of democracy:

εἰκότως τοίνυν, εἶπον, οὐκ ἐξ ἄλλης πολιτείας τυραννὶς καθίσταται ἢ ἐκ δηµοκρατίας, ἐξ οἶµαι τῆς ἄκροτάτης ἐλευθερίας δουλεία πλείστη τε καὶ ἄγριωτάτη (564a).

Here he sees in the contrast of democracy and tyranny a corresponding contrast in the degree of freedom and slavery that the citizens feel under each constitution. Under a tyrant, citizens feel as if they have been enslaved. Plato employs three superlatives (ἄκροτάτης, πλείστη and ἄγριωτάτη) to indicate that he thinks the slavery of tyranny imposes the harshest conditions on citizens who had recently enjoyed the

235 “So where you have a savage, uneducated ruler as tyrant, if there were some one in the city far better than he, I suppose the tyrant would be afraid of him and could never become a friend to him with all his mind?”

236 LSJ s.v.

237 Dodds (1959) 344 notes that fear of good men and distrust of flattering courtiers are traditional traits in the portrait of the typical tyrant; both of them appear in the argument which Herodotus puts in the mouth of Otanes (3.80.4-5).

238 “Probably, then, I said, tyranny develops out of no other constitution than democracy—from the height of freedom, I think, the fiercest extreme of servitude.”
freedom of democracy. But Plato argues for a close and causal link between the cruelty of tyranny and democracy. For he describes the tyrannical man who emerges in the context of the anarchy that rages when a democracy breaks down (565e-566a):

Although Plato does not employ a term for cruelty in this passage, he certainly describes the cruel behaviour that is characteristic of a tyrant, representing him as one who exercises power without justice (ἀδίκως) and perverts the normal workings of the courts. The tyrant falsely accuses citizens, exiles them and has them put to death. He makes offers of cancelling debts. He has no scruples about killing his family members and will likely meet a violent end himself. Plato even indulges in the grotesque and the fantastic as he writes that the tyrant tastes the blood of his relatives and turns into a wolf, an animal which in literature represents savagery and cruelty.240

239 “And is it not true that in like manner a leader of the people who, getting control of a very obedient mob, does not withhold his hand from tribal bloodshed, but by the customary unjust accusations brings a citizen into court and assassinates him, blotting out a life of a man, and with unholy tongue and mouth that have tasted kindred blood, banishes and slays and hints at the abolition of debts and the partition of land—is it not the inevitable consequence and a decree of fate that such a one be either slain by his enemies or become a tyrant and turn from a man into a wolf?” (trans. Shorey with modifications).

240 For the image, cf. Verg. B. 8.97; Lycaon changed to a wolf, Ovid, Met. 1.163ff; Pliny the Elder, Nat. Hist. 8.34; Petronius 62.
3.2 Seneca on cruelty

In his own philosophical meditation on the tyranny of princes, the *de clementia*, Seneca urges Nero at the beginning of his reign to show clemency, which Seneca holds to be the opposite of *crudelitas*.

Quid ergo opponitur *clementiae*? *Crudelitas*, quae nihil alius est quam *atrocitas* animi in exigendis *poenis*...Illos ergo *crudeles* vocabo, qui *puniendi* causam habent, modum non habent, sicut in Phalari, quem aiunt non quidem in homines innocentes, sed super humanum ac probabilem modum *saevisse*. Possumus effugere cavillationem et ita finire, ut sit *crudelitas inclinatio animi ad asperiora* (*de clem*. 2.4.1-3).

Seneca is specific about the close relationship of *crudelitas* and the context of exacting punishment. He calls those who do not show moderation in punishment cruel, and he offers as an example Phalaris, the Sicilian tyrant who roasted the limbs of Perillus in a bronze bull. Seneca’s most recent commentator wonders how apt an example this is for the philosopher to use since it seems to be a case of gratuitous violence. However, Ovid judges Phalaris a just punisher and states as a law that contrivers of death should perish by their own contrivance (*A.A*. 1.653-656):

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Et Phalaris tauro violenti membra Perilli
torruit: infelix inbuit auctor opus.
Iustus uterque fuit: neque enim lex aequior ulla est,
quam necis artifices arte perire sua.
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Seneca seems to have derived his example from Ovid or from the same stock of rhetorical exempla as Ovid. For Valerius Maximus in his chapter on cruelty (9.2) also has the story of Phalaris (ext. 9).

Besides the stock exemplum, Seneca works with the traditional Roman vocabulary of cruelty in this passage. *Atrocitas* occurs in Seneca only in this passage of the *de clementia* and its related adjective *atrox* is surprisingly rare in Seneca, found only in the tragedies at *Troades* 289 (discussed below) and a few other passages (*Her. F.* 31-33; *Thy.* 193-195, 745-746). In the *de ira*, Seneca had already connected *atrocitias* and punishment in the context of discussing the effect that watching tragedies has on the viewer: *movet mentes et atrox pictura et iustissimorum suppliciorum tristis adspectus* (*de ira* 2.2.4). It is significant that Seneca is consistent about the tight connection between *atrocitias* and punishment across the philosophical treatises.

Seneca here further defines *crudelitas* as *inclinatio animi ad asperiora* (*de clem.* 2.4.3), and elsewhere, for example, he often uses the adjective *asper* in the sense of “harsh.” In the *consolatio ad Helviam*, he talks of the effect the word “exile” has on a person (*ad Helviam* 5.6.7): *verbum quidem ipsum persuasione quadam et consensu iam asperius ad aures venit et audientis tamquam triste et execrabile ferit*. Here he uses the comparative adverb *asperius* in the sense “quite harshly.” He also employs the related noun *asperitas* to refer to the ferocity of wild animals (*Ep.* 85.41):

> certi sunt domitores ferarum, qui saevissima animalia et ad occurrum expavescenda hominem pati subigunt nec *asperitatem* excussisse contenti usque in contubernium mitigant.

When he observes how animal-tamers train the ferocity out of very savage animals, the meaning of *asperitas* closely approaches the English “cruelty.” We may in addition compare a passage
from de beneficiis (2.4.1): at plerique sunt, qui beneficia asperitate verborum et supercilio in odium adducunt eo sermone usi, ea superbia, ut impetrasse paeniteat. Here the lexical fields of “harshness” and “cruelty” overlap in Seneca’s discussion of the cruelty of words; he also employs superbia “arrogance” and supercilio “disdain” as synonyms of asperitas in speaking of psychological cruelty. Therefore, we should understand inclinatio animi ad asperiora in de clem. 2.4.3 as signifying “a disposition of the mind toward things that are too cruel.”

The adjective is already in the comparative degree, a phenomenon we examined in the previous chapter in connection with Seneca’s use of maius in the Medea (362) and interpreted as an index of the hyperbolic world about which Seneca writes. We shall see more of the same in the Troades.

Seneca repeatedly asserts that the source of cruelty is anger:

Haec...feritas est...Origo huius mali ab ira est, quae ubi frequenti exercitacione et satietate in oblivionem clementiae venit et omne foedus humanum eiecit animo, novissime in crudelitatem transit (de ira 2.5.2-3).

In the foedus humanum, we may identify the Stoic concept of the common bond of humanity, here developed in tight connection with the nexus of anger, clementia and crudelitas. One who is habitually angry forgets how to be merciful and instead becomes cruel: we shall see that cruelty entails suffering and death at many instances in the Troades. Seneca observes that the tyrant does not keep his fury even from his relatives (de clem. 1.26.4):

horum ne a necessariis quidem sibi rabies temperat, sed externa suaque in aequo habet, quo plus se exercitat, eo incitator. a singulorum deinde caedibus in exitia gentium serpit et incere tectis ignem, aratrum vetustis urbibus inducere potentiam

242 OLD s. asper 9. Authors before and after Seneca used asper in the sense of “cruel”: at Verg. A. 1.279, Jupiter calls his wife aspera Juno because of her attempt to harm Aeneas; Sil. (14.530-531) describes Polyphemus as having a mens aspera, vultus in ira / semper et ad caedes Cyclopi corde libido.
putat; et unum occidi iubere aut alterum parum imperatorum credit; nisi eodem tempore grex miserorum sub ictu stetit, crudelitatem suam in ordinem coactum putat.

Recalling the imagery of the Furies wearing snakes, Seneca says the tyrant’s fury (*rabies*) creeps like a snake (*serpit*) from the slaughter of individuals to the destruction of entire nations.

In the last chapter, we saw evidence of this progression when Medea proceeds from killing Creon and his daughter to burning down the palace (*Med. 879-886*) and killing her own children (*Med. 970-1019*).

With the image of fire, Seneca may be thinking of the fall of Troy as depicted in Euripides’ tragedy (*πυρὶ καταθαλωμένης*, Eur. *Tro. 60*) or his own (*tectis adustis; regiam flammae ambiunt*, *Tro. 16*). The phrase *vetustis urbis*, moreover, may also cause the reader to remember Troy although the image of drawing the plough over the city suggests Carthage. If the purpose of war, as Scarry writes, is to out-injure the other side in order to designate one of the disputants the winner, then Seneca’s *Troades* exemplifies this principle with the Greeks’ destruction of Troy by fire, the slaughter of all its males and the enslavement of its women.

Seneca differentiates carefully between cruelty and savagery (*de clem. 2.4.1-2*):

‘sed quidam non exigunt poenas, crudeles tamen sunt, tamquam qui ignotos homines et obvios non in compendium sed occidenti causa occidunt nec interficere contenti saeviunt, ut Busiris ille et Procrustes et piratae qui captos verberant et in ignem vivos imponunt.’ haec crudelitas quidem; sed quia nec ultionem sequitur (non enim laesa est) nec peccato alicui irascitur (nullum enim antecessit crimen), extra finitionem nostram cadit; finitio enim continebat in poenis exigendis intemperantiam animi. Possumus dicere non esse hanc crudelitatem, sed feritatem, cui voluptati saevitia est; possimus insaniam

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244 Scarry (1985) 20.
Seneca’s imaginary interlocutor makes the point that there are people who do not exact punishment (*non exigunt poenas*), but are still cruel (*crudeles*). Therefore, Seneca disagrees with Aristotle when he argues that one can be cruel without punishing or being motivated by anger. Some kill for the sake of killing; he mentions as examples Busiris, the mythical king of Egypt who sacrificed strangers on the altar of Jupiter until Hercules killed him;\(^\text{245}\) Procrustes, the mythical innkeeper who made his guests fit his bed by either lopping off their feet or stretching their legs until Theseus punished him by subjecting him to his own torture;\(^\text{246}\) and pirates who burn their captives alive. These, Seneca admits, are examples of cruelty (*crudelitas*) but because their aim is not vengeance (*nec ultionem sequitur*) and no one is angry (*irascitur*) at someone for committing an offence (*peccato*), Seneca defines these instances with the more extreme term *saevitia* (“savagery”). Taking pleasure in savagery is brutality or wild behaviour (*feritatem*) and madness (*insaniam*).

For Seneca, cruelty is a chronic and hardened vice, a disease of the mind, and he holds that virtue alone possesses moderation whereas evils that afflict the mind do not: *Numquam dubium est, quin vitia mentis humanae inveterata et dura, quae morbos vocamus, inmoderata sint, ut avaritia, ut crudelitas, ut inpotentia?* (Ep. 85.10) Like greed and the lack of self-control, cruelty is one of the diseases of the mind that lacks moderation. The passions are also beyond control; for it is from the passions that we arrive at vices. Thus one must not allow cruelty to begin to take hold of one. In another letter, Seneca reasons that emotions are corporeal since

\(^{245}\) Seneca mentions Busiris elsewhere at *Her. F.* 483-484 and *Tro.* 1106-1107.

\(^{246}\) Seneca refers to Procrustes also at *Phaed.* 1170 and *Thy.* 1049-1050.
they have an effect on our bodies. For example, anger knots our foreheads (Ep.106.6): *Si affectus corpora sunt, et morbi animorum, ut avaritia, crudelitas, indurata vitia et in statum inemendabilem adducta*. Moreover, if cruelty becomes a habit, it is incurable (de clem 1.25.2): *tunc illi dirus animi morbus ad insaniam pervenit ultimam, cum crudelitas versa est in voluptatem et iam occidere hominem iuvat*. Cruelty reaches the height of madness when it becomes a pleasure to kill a human being.\(^\text{247}\) Here Seneca characterizes cruelty as *dirus*, employing the adjective that recalls the anger of a god.\(^\text{248}\) Seneca thus progresses from calling cruelty a disease of the mind to calling it insanity.

Cruelty is therefore an activity that deprives us of the essence of our humanity.

*Crudelitas minime humanum malum est indignumque tam miti animo; ferina ista rabies est sanguine gaudere ac vulneribus et abiecto homine in silvestre animal transire...Hoc est, quare vel maxime abominanda sit saevitia, quod excedit fines primum solitos, deinde humanos, nova supplicia conquirit, ingenium advocat ut instrumenta excogitet per quae varietur atque extendatur dolor, delectatur malis hominum (de clem. 1.25.1-2).*

Seneca calls cruelty *ferina rabies* (“wild madness”; *ferina* is the adjective derived from *fera*, a wild beast).\(^\text{249}\) It offends the *dignitas* of man (*indignum* who is the gentlest of creatures (*tam miti animo*), but cruelty delights in the blood of others (*sanguine gaudere*). When he has cast off his humanity (*abiecto homine*), he becomes a wild animal, like Plato’s wolf.\(^\text{250}\) Savagery first transgresses the limits of custom (*fines...solitos*), and then those of humanity. It looks for new means of capital punishment (*nova supplicia*), instead of inventions which will benefit

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\(^{247}\) Gill (1997) 231 writes that the characterisation of this state of mind as ‘madness’, and not just ‘passion’, is also indicative of the Stoic understanding of emotions.


\(^{249}\) *OLD* s.v.

\(^{250}\) Rep. 566a.
mankind. It misapplies man’s genius in the discovery of instruments of torture (instrumenta) whose purpose it is to vary and prolong pain.

In another letter, Seneca explores the question of the limits of cruelty (Ep. 95.30-31):

Non privatim solum, sed publice furimus. Homicidia compescimus et singulas caedes; quid bella et occisarum gentium gloriosum scelus? Non avaritia, non crudelitas modum novit...Non pudet homines, mitissimum genus, gaudere sanguine alterno et bella gerere gerendaque liberis tradere, cum inter se etiam mutis ac feris pax sit.

The passage explains Seneca’s view that this madness (furimus) extends not only to individuals (privatim) but also to nations (publice). We enact preventative measures against the murders of individuals; however, we consider war against entire nations to be heroic and glorious. Yet war is murder on a mass scale. Emotions such as cruelty know no limits (non crudelitas modum novit). Man, Seneca repeats, rejoices in another’s blood (gaudere sanguine alterno). He is the only species that destroys his own kind and hands down the waging of wars to his children as their inheritance (gerendaque liberis tradere) when even wild animals keep peace among their own kind.

In Seneca’s view, cruelty is greater if the pain of the punishment is drawn out.

Quemadmodum acerbissima crudelitas est, quae trahit poenam, et misericordiae genus est cito occidere, quia tormentum ultimum finem sui secum adfert, quod antecedit tempus, maxima venturi supplicii pars est, ita maior est munerus gratia, quo minus diu peependit (de ben. 2.5.3).

The worst part of the execution is enduring the interval which precedes it. This view can be paralleled in Senecan tragedy, where Aegisthus, the tyrant in the Agamemnon, argues that a swift execution is merciful (Ag, 995): rudis est tyrannus morte qui poenam exigit. The Senecan
Aegisthus implies that he is an experienced tyrant who will draw out Electra’s punishment by burying her alive in an underground prison.

In *de clementia*, Seneca argues that the man who indulges in cruelty has to protect himself with ever more acts of cruelty (*de clem*. 1.13.2).

Hoc enim inter cetera vel pessimum habet *crudelitas*, perseverandum est nec ad meliora patet regressus; sclera enim sceleribus tuenda sunt. Quid autem eo infelicius, cui iam esse malo necesse est?

Cruelty becomes a habit that is not only difficult to change but also retributive: cruelty is avenged by cruelty. Therefore a cruel man has to watch his back: the more people he kills, the more likely is his own murder.

Matura talem virum a tergo sequitur aversio, odia, venena, gladii; tam multis periculis petitur, quam multorum ipse periculum est, privatisque non numquam consiliis, alias vero consternatione publica circumvenitur (*de clem*. 1.25.3).

After discussing how it is insanity to delight in killing a man, Seneca makes the point that the killer will incur the enmity of both individuals and the entire community. Braund observes that Seneca here develops the private/public antithesis to illustrate that the extent of a tyrant’s cruelty determines the response to it.\(^{251}\) Slaves may rise in revolt and kill their cruel master, even though the penalty for doing so is crucifixion.

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\(^{251}\) Braund (2009) 373.
Domestic cruelty functions as an analogue for state cruelty. A cruel Greek tyrant or Roman emperor is a target for an uprising and assassination attempts. Seneca employs the clause *quidquid ab illis didicerant* to underline the reciprocity of the ruler-ruled relationship: an evil ruler teaches his people to be evil.²⁵² Braund suggests that *sua praesidia* may refer to Cassius Chaerea, the tribune in the praetorian guard who assassinated Caligula (Suet. *Gaius* 58.2), for Caligula is one of Seneca’s stock examples of the cruel tyrant.²⁵³ Seneca writes in the *de ira* (3.18.3-4) that Gaius had citizens flogged and senators beheaded to satisfy his pleasure:

> Modo C. Caesar Sex. Papinium, cui pater erat consularis, Betilienum Bassum quaestorem suum, procuratoris sui filium, aliosque et senatores et equites Romanos uno die flagellis cecidit, torsit, non quaestionis sed animi causa; deinde adeo impatiens fuit differendae voluptatis, quam ingentem *crudelitas* eius sine dilatione poscebat, ut in xysto maternorum hortorum, qui porticum a ripa separat, inambulans quosdam ex illis cum matronis atque aliis senatoribus ad lucernam decollaret.

Thus Gaius was committing acts that were legally cruel since he was violating the treatment of categories of persons who were protected by law.

Seneca advises the good ruler to distinguish between good and bad people: *Non tamen vulgo ignoscere decet; nam ubi discrimen inter malos bonosque sublatum est, confusio sequitur et vitiorum eruptio;...nam tam omnibus ignoscere crudelitas quam nulli* (*de clem*. 1.2.2). It is against the interests of good people if bad people are pardoned.²⁵⁴ A similar view is expressed in the *Hercules Furens*, where Lycus says (*Her. F*. 511-13):

> Qui morte cunctos luere supplicium iubet


²⁵³ *de ira* 2.33.3-6; 3.18.3-21.5; *de const*. 18.1-5.

nescit tyrannus esse. diversa irroga:
miserum veta perire, felicem iube.

However, Lycus shows his true colours as a cruel tyrant with his arbitrary last statement (513): forbid the wretched to die, command the happy to do so. He seeks to impose unhappiness on all people. His distinguishing factor is not whether people are good or bad, but rather whether they are happy or not.

We have seen that Seneca connects cruelty with anger, when he describes what angry men see in the mirror: *iratis quidem nulla est formonsior effigies quam atrox et horrida,* *qualesque esse etiam videri volunt* (de *ira* 2.36.3). Thus angry men are so deluded that they think their cruel image is beautiful. The association of *iratis* with *atrox* and the phrase *videri volunt* suggests that they are putting on a mask for a spectacle, acting with the fierceness of the Furies as if they were in the *θέέατρον*. Seneca’s language suggestively evokes the spectacle of tragic drama.

### 3.3 Cruelty in Senecan Tragedy

Certainly, Seneca explores the nature of cruelty throughout his tragedies. The prologue of the *Thyestes*, for instance, exemplifies the reciprocity of punishment and torture in the expression of surprise uttered by the ghost of Tantalus—an archetypal violator of the laws laid down by Jupiter for the conduct of human society—that he is being asked by a Fury to be a punishment instead of suffering them (*Me pati poenas decet, / non esse poenam!* 86-87). He even asks if he is to lead his grandchildren into evil (*ducam in horrendum nefas / avus nepotes?* 89-90). He then declares that although his tongue has been assessed a penalty and will be
tortured for being talkative, he does not intend to be quiet about his present commission (91-93):

\[
\text{ingenti licet}
\]
\[
\text{taxata poena lingua crucietur loquax}
\]
\[
\text{nec hoc tacebo.}
\]

He also alludes to his previous crime of revealing secrets of the gods to humans (*taciti vulgator;* Ov. *Am.* 3.7.51), which was one reason for his punishment in the underworld of suffering eternal thirst and hunger (Hom. *Od.* 11.582-592).\textsuperscript{255} He specifies the part of the body that is being punished (*lingua*), and employs a word associated with torture (*crucietur; OLD s.v. 1 and 2*). But, as Tarrant notes, the juxtaposition of the two underlines the unusual character of the situation: it is a singular cruelty that the tongue should be crucified or subjected to the rack.\textsuperscript{256}

In the prologue to the *Phoenician Women*, too, Seneca sets out some of the paradoxes of cruelty. There Oedipus commands Cithaeron to give him death, the punishment that was originally intended when Laius exposed him as a baby on the mountain (33-35).\textsuperscript{257}

\[
\text{recipe supplicium vetus.}
\]
\[
\text{semper cruente saeve crudelis ferox,}
\]
\[
\text{cum occidis et cum parcis.}
\]

\textsuperscript{255} Apollodorus, *Ep.* 2.1: κολάζεσθαι δὲ αὐτὸν οὕτως λέγουσι τινες, ὅτι τὰ τῶν θεῶν ἐξελάλησεν ἀνθρώποις μυστήρια. “Some say that he was thus punished because he divulged the secrets of the gods to men.”

\textsuperscript{256} Tarrant (1985) 101.

He addresses Cithaeron with a powerful string of adjectives: bloody, savage, cruel, ferocious. For Oedipus, the place of his exposure is cruel, as Frank writes, because the site not only killed others (such as Actaeon, Pentheus, Dirce and Ino), but also spared him to live a life that would bring him so much psychological torment. This mental type of torment is often the most prolonged and cruel.

### 3.3.1 Regnum crudelitatis

The classic site of cruelty is the urbs capta, as G. M. Paul has shown in his article of that title. He quotes the rhetorical treatise *Peri methodou deinotetos* ascribed to Hermogenes in which (p. 450 Rabe) the writer, following Plato (*Resp*. 10.598d), names Homer the father of tragedy, and cites *Iliad* 9.593-594, describing the fate of cities when captured: 

> ἄνδρας μὲν κτείνουσι, πόλιν δὲ τε πῦρ ἀμαθύνει, / τέκνα δὲ τ᾽ ἄλλοι ἀγουσι βαθυζώώνους τε γυναῖκας.

Paul notes that the lines form part of Cleopatra’s successful appeal to her husband, Meleager, and thus the capture of cities is already a rhetorical motif. The elements of the motif are the killing of men, the destruction of the city by fire, and the carrying off of the women and children into slavery. Another passage where Priam pleads with Hector not to fight Achilles alone includes other elements (*Il*. 22.61-65):

> κακὰ πόλλ᾽ ἐπιδόντα, 
> νῦὰς τ᾽ ὀλλυµμέους ἐλικεθεῖσας τε θύγατρας,

---


260 “They kill the men, and fire utterly destroys the city, and others lead away their children and deep-girdled wives.”
Priam imagines himself as a spectator of the horrors to which the Greeks will subject his city such as the plunder of treasure chambers, the murder of children (including a foreshadowing of the death of Astyanax) or their violent separation from their parents. Other elements of the motif include rape, and the wailing of women and children.262

Seneca’s most sustained and intense explorations of cruelty in the tragedies are to be found in the *Troades*, a play that explores precisely this situation. Seneca asks in *de clem.* (1.26.2), what sort of kingdom a cruel king possesses: *Sed puta esse tutam crudelitatem, quale eius regnum est?* Seneca answers: *Non aliud quam captarum urbium forma et terribiles facies publici metus.* A cruel king possesses captured cities and his people’s fear. This is the very situation depicted in the *Troades*: the Greeks have captured Troy, and the Trojan women are afraid of each announcement of the Greeks. Ulysses observes of Andromache: *matrem timor detexit: iterabo metum* (626).

In the play’s prologue, Hecuba describes the murder of her husband Priam (*Tro. 44-50*):

\[
\text{vidi execrandum regiae caedis nefas,} \\
\text{ipsasque ad aras maius admissum scelus} \\
\text{Aeacius armis, cum ferox, saeva manu}^{263}
\]

261 “[Zeus will slay me] when I have beheld many evils, my sons perishing and my daughters dragged away, and my treasure chambers laid waste, and infant children thrown to the ground in the dread conflict, and my daughters-in-law being dragged off by the deadly hands of the Achaeans.”


263 I read Zwierlein’s (1986a) text of line 46.
coma reflectens regium torta caput,
alto nefandum vulneri ferrum abdidit;
quod penitus actum cum recepisset libens,
ensis senili siccus e iugulo redít.

With *vidi* at the beginning of the line, she draws attention to the fact that she was required to witness her husband’s fall from the heights of power. Seneca not only coins *execrandum*\(^{264}\) to stress the horrific offence of the killing of a king but also underlines the *maius scelus*—the sacrilege of committing it as Priam took refuge at the altar of Jupiter.\(^ {265}\) The intensification of evil is a common motif in Senecan tragedy, often expressed in the comparative degree (as we saw in the previous chapter at *Med.* 50 *maiora iam me scelera post partus decent*).\(^ {266}\) Furthermore, the adjectives *ferox* and *saeva* are juxtaposed to emphasize Pyrrhus’ savage nature. As Boyle notes, *ferox* is an ambivalent term sometimes used to indicate male bravado but also used to suggest brutishness and the proximity of man and beast, *fera*.\(^ {267}\)

The interlocking word order of *coma...regium torta caput* suggests the pain Pyrrhus is inflicting upon Priam by twisting his hair and bending his head back. Seneca models his description closely on that of Vergil at *A.* 2.550-553, where the Augustan poet describes Priam’s death. However, Seneca intensifies Vergil’s *implicuitque comam laeva* (2.552) into *coma reflectens regium torta caput* (47) to emphasize Pyrrhus’ cruelty. As Schweizer observes,

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\(^{264}\) *OLD* s. ex(s)ecror 2, *TLL* V.2, 1840.2.


\(^{266}\) Keulen (2001) 104-105.

\(^{267}\) Boyle (1994) 141; cf. my chapter 1, “The Beast Within.”
torquere and reflectere are stronger verbs than implicare. Both alto…vulneri and penitus stress the depth of the wound which Pyrrhus made in Priam. Seneca specifies the affected part of the body with iugulo, which is modified by senili to draw a pathetic contrast between the aged victim and his young assailant. Seneca heightens the cruelty of the king’s death by emphasizing the brutal way in which the young warrior takes advantage of the feebleness of the old man. But he also locates the origin of Pyrrhus’ cruelty in the anger he inherited from his father by employing the patronymic Aeacius (46).

3.3.2 Origo feritatis ab ira est

In Act 2 of the Troades, Talthybius describes the appearance of the ghost of Achilles (Tro. 185-190):

aut cum inter acies Marte violento furens
corporibus amnes clausit et quaerens iter
tardus cruento Xanthus erravit vado,
aut cum superbo victor in curru stetit
egitque habenas Hectorem et Troiam trahens.
implevit omne litus irati sonus.

Achilles, legendary for his anger (Il.1.1), fought with berserker rage driven by the desire for revenge after Hector’s killing Achilles’ friend Patroclus. So great was Achilles’ rage that he filled rivers with the bodies he killed (cf. Il.21.120-220). The Senecan ghost of Achilles is still angry and anger enflames his cruelty, to demand that Hecuba’s daughter Polyxena be betrothed to his ashes and sacrificed on his tomb (193-196):

\[^{268}\text{quoted by Keulen (2001) 107.}\]
Again, as Boyle notes, anger functions as one of the major motors of action in Senecan tragedy; rage triumphs in an uncivilized world.\textsuperscript{269} The mention of \textit{iras Achillis} (194) reminds the reader that in the \textit{Iliad}, Achilles grew angry at being deprived of his war prize, Briseis (\textit{Il.} 1.184-192). Here Achilles employs phrases drawn from the economic register (\textit{parvo luit, magno luet}, 193-194), which reduces the status of the female war prize to that of the Homeric commodity for exchange between men. He also uses a legal term, \textit{desponsa} (\textit{TLL} 4.749-50) that asserts the male’s dominion over the female. Thus a major theme of the \textit{Troades} emerges as the gendered nature of cruelty in men’s treatment of women.

In the second scene of Act 2 of the \textit{Troades}, as Fantham notes, Pyrrhus and Agamemnon engage in a philosophical debate about killing Polyxena (203-350).\textsuperscript{270} They can be philosophical about it—they are Greeks (i.e. the victors), not Trojans (i.e. the vanquished); men (i.e. sacrificers), not sacrificial victims; agents, not passive recipients of the knife. Pyrrhus ends his first speech of the debate with an impassioned plea (246-249):

\begin{verbatim}
dubitatur et iam placita nunc subito improbas,
Priamique natam Pelei nato \textbf{ferum}
mactare credis? at tuam natam parens
Helenae immolasti: solita iam et facta expeto.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{269} Boyle (1994) 155-156.

\textsuperscript{270} Fantham (1982) 241.
He employs *ferum*, the adjective related to *feritas*, which Seneca uses in the *de clementia* (2.4.2) for brutality. Yet Pyrrhus argues like a sophist, perversely citing Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia as a precedent. He makes the logical mistake of generalizing from one example as if a single precedent authorized standard procedure (*placita*). As Boyle argues, however, the juxtaposition of *tuam natam* and *parens* underscores instead the cruel nature of Agamemnon’s deed and its infrequency.  

Agamemnon here acts the Stoic sage in an attempt to restrain Pyrrhus’ impetuosity:  

*iuvenile vitium est regere non posse impetum* (250). *Impetum* is the very word Seneca employs for an impulse in *de ira* (2.3.4) and it is an important term in the Stoic account of the emotions.  

Agamemnon’s next *sententia* expresses the theme of the *de clementia*: *quo plura possis, plura patiener feras* (254). The line is similar in thought to Seneca’s definition of the clement man (*de clem*. 1.20.3):  

> ita clementem vocabo...eum qui cum suis stimulis exagitetur non prosilit, qui intellegit magni animi esse iniurias in summa potentia pati nec quicquam esse gloriosius principe impune laeso.  

In the treatise, Seneca makes the point that a good ruler does not react rashly when offended, but endures injuries without retaliation (*de clem*. 1.20.3), and this seems to be the point of Agamemnon’s *sententia* in the play as well, as he draws the moral at the end of his first speech (286-290):  

*exactum satis poenarum et ultra est. regia ut virgo occidat*  

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tumuloque donum detur et cineres riget
et facinus atrox caedis ut thalamos vocent,
non patiar.

Anything further would be a cruel crime of slaughter. To describe the killing of Polyxena, Seneca employs atrox, the adjectival form of atrocitas, which he uses in the definition of cruelty in the de clementia: Crudelitas, quae nihil aliud est quam atrocitas animi in exigendis poenis (2.4.1). As Fantham observes, this passage represents Seneca’s judgment concerning the evil of the Greeks’ behaviour, and it is evident, from statements in his philosophical writing, that he saw this evil as inherent in victory and beyond the power of man to stop.273 Thus in de beneficiis (4.37), Seneca comments: Non sufficit homo iustus unus tot armatis cupiditatibus, non potest quisquam eodem tempore et bonum virum et bonum ducem agere. Quomodo tot milia hominum insatiabilia satiabuntur? The moral is that the cruel king cannot expect to rule for long. Agamemnon says to Pyrrhus (258-9): violenta nemo imperia continuit diu, / moderata durant. Again, moderation is what the clement ruler displays whereas the cruel tyrant gives violenta imperia.

This sentiment is very similar to the message of the de clementia to Nero:274 quid enim est cur...tyrannorum exsecrabilis ac brevis potestas sit?...nisi quod tyranni in voluptatem saeviunt (de clem. 1.11.4). Braund notes that given the quotation from Accius in the next chapter (oderint dum metuant, 1.12.4, Accius’ Atreus 203 R² = 168 W), Seneca’s use of exsecrabilis may here recall Accius’ tyranni saevom ingenium atque exsecrabile (Trag. 270 R³ =

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274 Boyle (1994) 162.
This is a particularly attractive suggestion, as we would thus see once again the importance of the theatre in the formation of Seneca’s philosophical views. Furthermore, in the *de ira* (3.16.2), Seneca predicts that no power can last if it is used to the detriment of many: *nec diu potest quae multorum malo exercetur potentia stare*. The thought of Agamemnon’s lines is similar to both Medea’s *iniqua numquam regna perpetuo manent* (*Med*. 196), which reminds us that kings who are guilty of injustice do not remain in office forever, and Polynices’ *invisa numquam imperia retinentur diu* (*Phoen*. 660), which emphasizes that hated rulers have short reigns. Seneca’s tragedies thus repeatedly invite us to reflect on Stoic ethical and political principles regarding cruelty.

3.3.3 *Pati et mori*

Cruelty often involves suffering and death. In the *Troades*, the Greeks complete their genocide of the Trojans. At the beginning of Act 3, Andromache speaks of her suffering and her husband Hector’s death (411-417):

levia *perpessae* sumus,
si flenda *patimur*. Ilium vobis modo,
mihi cecidit olim, cum *ferus* curru incito
mea membra raperet...
tunc obruta atque eversa quodcumque accidit
torpens malis rigensque sine sensu fero.

Andromache uses two words that convey the suffering of the Trojan women (*perpessae, patimur*). As Fantham notes, Andromache says that life stopped for her when her husband was...
killed by *ferus* Achilles. \(^{276}\) The adjective draws a comparison of Achilles to wild animals, which Seneca describes as *rationis expertia* (*de clem.* 1.26.4). Andromache too suffers Achilles’ brutality vicariously; she identifies so strongly with her husband that she feels her limbs dragged behind Achilles’ chariot. Moreover, she describes herself as *obruta atque versa* as if she were the city that had been sacked by the Greeks. Three elisions in brief compass (*obruta atque versa quodcumque accidit*) underline her suffering by suggesting her sobbing. In addition, she characterizes herself as numbed by adversity (*torpens malis rigensque sine sensu fero*, 417). In this image, Seneca may recall Ovid’s heroines Niobe (*Met.* 6.303, *deriguitque malis*) and Hecuba (*Met.* 13.540-541, *duroque simillima saxo / torpet*), who were the subjects of famous Greek tragedies (Aeschylus’ *Niobe* and Euripides’ *Hecuba*, respectively, of which the latter relates the death of Polyxena as well). Seneca apparently innovates by having Andromache fear for the life of her son and hide him in Hector’s tomb, although Seneca may owe this concealment to Accius’ *Astyanax* (273-276 Dangel), in which Ulysses asks where and how Astyanax was discovered:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{itera, in} \\
\text{quibus partibus (namque audire volo} \\
\text{si est quem exopto) et quo captus modo,} \\
\text{fortunae an forte repertus.}
\end{align*}
\]

Scafoglio has suggested that Ulysses may have spoken Accius’ lines\(^{277}\) and this is an attractive possibility since the use of *captus* and *repertus* certainly suggests that Astyanax has been “found” and “captured.”

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After concealing her son, the Senecan Andromache assumes the role of the Stoic sage when she says she will bear whatever happens without passion (sine sensu, 417). Yet she is not able to hold this pose once Ulysses enters to demand the life of Astyanax from her (553-555):

\[\text{neve crudelem putes, quod sorte iussus Hectoris natum petam; petissem Oresten. patere quod victor tulit.}\]

Seneca increases the cruelty in the play by having Ulysses, who did not appear in Euripides’ Troades, take a prominent role, perhaps because he was the arch-villain and deceiver of Greek tragedy (e.g. in Sophocles’ Philoctetes) as well as in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (13.31-32):

\[\text{sanguine cretus / Sisyphio furtisque et fraude simillimus illi. Ulysses performs cruel acts, not because he is angry, but deliberately and with cold calculation as an act of policy resulting from Calchas’ proclamation that Astyanax must die so that the Greek ships may sail (368-369): quem fata quaerunt, turre de summa cadat / Priami nepos Hectoreus et letum oppetat.}\]

Ulysses tries to disarm Andromache by asking her not to think him cruel; but the request shows that this is exactly what he intends to be. Though a Greek king and officer, he adopts the role of a subordinate and employs the excuse of an underling that he is acting under orders (sorte iussus, 554). He commands her to suffer what the victor did, alluding enigmatically to the loss of a child (Agamemnon’s of Iphigenia), to allow the fleet to sail. He begins his

\[\text{278 cf. the Nurse’s advice at Medea 152: patiente et aequo mutus animo pertulit; and de ira 1.11.7, 2.14.3: saepe itaque ratio patientiam suadet, ira vindictam.}\]

\[\text{279 This is consonant with what Todorov (1977) 61 notes about Odysseus in the Odyssey: “Invocation of the truth is a sign of lying.”}\]

\[\text{280 Fitch (2002) 221, n. 34.}\]
interrogation of Andromache, as Keulen writes, in a prosaic policeman-like manner with *ubi natus est?* (571). As Elaine Scarry argues in a different context, moreover, the interrogation itself initiates the process of wounding. Andromache replies with a series of frantic rhetorical questions: *Ubi Hector? ubi cuncti Phryges? ubi Priamus? unum quaeris: ego quaero omnia* (571-572). The last statement Fitch well translates as “I look for my world.” Seneca thereby implies what Scarry will argue—that the torturer causes the disintegration of the prisoner’s world.

Ulysses indulges in psychological cruelty when he threatens Andromache with torture: *coacta dices sponte quod fari abnus; stulta est fides celare quod prodas statim* (573, 587). The torturer is aware that the prisoner’s confession will be an act of self-betrayal (*prodas*, 587). Similarly, Theseus in the *Phaedra* thuggishly threatens the Nurse: *verbere et vinclis anus altrixque prodet quidquid haec fari abnuit* (882-883). The two passages remind us that it was Roman legal practice to torture slaves. As Keulen notes, Ulysses thus implicitly indicates to Andromache that she is now merely a *captiva*. She shows that she is proof to his intimidation: *Si vis, Ulixe, cogere Andromachen metu, vitam minare: nam mori votum est mihi* (576-577). Life for her will be more torment than dying; similarly Electra in the *Agamemnon* pleads with her tormentor Aegithus, *concede mortem* (994). Andromache, as Fantham notes, answers the

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282 Scarry (1985) 46.
284 Syffert (1956) 593.
threat of torture with the Senecan argument that death makes safe the person who has the will to
die.\textsuperscript{286}

Ulysses cruelly intensifies his threats of torture (578-580):

\begin{verbatim}
Verberibus igni cruce cruciatu eloqui
quodcumque celas adiget invitam dolor
et pectore imo condita arcana eruet.
\end{verbatim}

He names in quick asyndeton four means of inflicting pain, for it is Andromache’s pain that will
act as the agent that forces the confession from her.\textsuperscript{287} His figurative use of \textit{eruet}, which literally
means “to remove (especially from the ground) forcefully”,\textsuperscript{288} suggests the image of a torturer
tearing the secrets out of her chest. Seneca the Elder provides a parallel use of the verb when he
recalls a rhetor’s vivid image of eyes being plucked out: \textit{vives, sed eruentur oculi tibi} (\textit{Suas. 7.3}). Boyle notes that torture was treated in the rhetorical schools as the mark of a cruel
tyrant,\textsuperscript{289} and we see similar language at Sen. Rhet. \textit{Con. 2.5.6}: \textit{instabat tyrannus: torque...seca,}
\textit{verbera, oculos lancina, fac iam ne viro placeat matrix}. Thus the younger Seneca draws not
only on the philosophical and the exemplary traditions in his characterization of Greek cruelty,
but also on his father’s redaction of the Roman rhetorical tradition about cruelty.

Andromache defies Ulysses to bring on the torture (582-586):

\begin{verbatim}
287 Scarry (1985) 47.
288 OLD s.v. 1.
289 Boyle (1994) 188, e.g., Sen. Rhet. \textit{Con. 2.5} “The Woman Tortured by the Tyrant for her Husband’s Sake”.
\end{verbatim}
Propone **flammas**, vulnera et diras mali
doloris artes et famam et **saevam** sitim
variasque **pestes** undique et ferrum inditum
**viscera** ustis, carceris caeci luem,
et quidquid audet victor **iratus** timens.

The Romans were well known to have favoured heat as a form of cruel torture. One instrument was the lighted torch brought close up to the skin; Ulysses refers to it at 578 *igni*, as does Andromache at 582 *flammas*. Another was the heated metal plate set onto the flesh (cf. *ferrum inditum / viscera ustit*, 584-5); poets referred to the plates as *ferrum*. Andromache diagnoses the victor’s cruelty as arising out of anger (*iratus*, 586), while the interrogation demonstrates how even the threat of torture represents a power struggle between the victor and captive. Ulysses wishes to complete the defeat of the Trojans by eliminating Hector’s child (*futurus Hector*, 551). Thus Ulysses’ cruelty has caused both psychological suffering for the mother and a sentence of death for her child.

### 3.3.4 Poena prorogata

The suffering of the Trojan women is especially cruel when their punishment is prolonged. Andromache feels herself torn by the loyalty that she owes her dead husband and living son (419-421):

```latex
Iam erepta Danais coniugem sequerer meum
nisi hic teneret: hic meos animos domat
morique prohibuet; cogit hic aliquid deos
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ad hoc rogare, tempus aeraumae addidit.

As Fantham writes, love for her son keeps Andromache from the escape that death could have given her.292 Love and responsibility to others deny a person the right to choose death and force her to fear; but the Stoics saw fear and hope, like anger and desire, as the worst obstacles to the individual’s pursuit of virtue and reason in the soul. Seneca thus advises Lucilius in Epistle 101.10 about the futility of hope and fear: *in spem viventibus proximum quodque tempus elabitur subitque aviditas et miserrimus ac miserrima omnia efficiens metus mortis.*

When Andromache refuses to divulge the whereabouts of her son, Ulysses threatens sacrilege to Hector’s ashes (636-639):

```latex
hoc Calchas ait
modo piari posse redituras rates,
si placet undas Hectoris sparsi cinis
ac tumulus imo totus aequetur solo.
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In antiquity, the greatest indignity was the desecration of a burial (cf. *Il.* 22.354). Ulysses’ shrewd guess about the hiding place of Astyanax throws Andromache into a psychological crisis: *animum distrahit geminus timor / hinc natus, illinc coniugis cari cinis* (642-643). In an aside, she explains how her fear pulls her in two different directions as she tries to be loyal first to her son and then to her husband. She imagines the horrors that the Greeks will perpetrate on her husband’s ashes (648-657):

```latex
prorutus tumulo cinis
mergetur? ossa fluctibus spargi sinam
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disiecta vastis? potius hic mortem oppetat. 650
poteris nefandae deditum mater neci
videre, poteris celsa per fastigia
missum rotari? potero, perpetiar, feram,
dum non meus post fata victoris manu
iactetur Hector. hic suam poenam potest 655
sentire, at illum fata iam in tuto locant.
quid fluctuaris? statue, quem poena extrahas.

Andromache twice asks herself poteris (651-652) before answering her question with potero (653). The greatest emphasis, however, falls on videre in the first postion of line 652. For Andromache fears that the Greeks will cruelly subject her to watching as her son is thrown from the battlements. Hence this is a metatheatrical comment about her watching the performance of a play about her son’s death. The phrase missum rotari (653) anticipates the cruelty of Ulysses as she imagines that he will swing Astyanax around before letting him go. As Keulen notes, Seneca similarly employs rotari in the Hercules Furens of Hercules brutally winding up or “swinging round” (OLD 2b) his son before throwing him away (1005-6): dextra precantem rapuit et circa furens / bis ter rotatum misit.293 Remarkably, however, Andromache declares she will endure with Stoic fortitude her son’s death in order to prevent her husband’s desecration. Three verbs, potero, perpetiar, feram (653), convey the strength of her resolve to bear her suffering. She sympathizes with Astyanax because he can still feel his punishment (suam poenam potest / sentire, 655-656) whereas Hector is in the Stoic safe place of death.294

293 Keulen (2001) 373.
294 OLD s. tutus 4a.
Later, in Act Four, Andromache laments the cruel fate that the Greeks visit upon the Trojan women (969-970): *Nos, Hecuba, nos, nos, Hecuba, lugendae sumus, / quas mota classis huc et huc sparsas feret.* The simple anaphora of *nos* and Hecuba’s name effectively conveys Andromache’s desperation. Instead of Hector’s ashes, it will be the Trojan wives whom the Greeks will scatter across the sea to serve as slaves, separated from each other, in different Greek masters’ homes for the rest of their lives. Hecuba herself comments on the cruelty of the arbitrary process by which women are assigned to new masters (984-986):

> quis arbiter *crudelis* et miseris gravis<br>eligere dominos nescit et *saeva* manu<br>dat iniqua miseris fata?

She characterizes the judge as *crudelis* and uncivilized (*saeva manu*) in handing out unjust lots (*iniqua...fata*). Thus the victors’ treatment of the Trojan women is especially cruel as they prolong the women’s punishment for the rest of their lives. Here too we can see the gendered nature of cruelty as Greek men practice it upon the Trojan women.

### 3.3.5 *non crudelitas modum novit*

Seneca repeatedly demonstrates in the play the Stoic concept that cruelty knows no bounds. In Act Three of the *Troades*, when Ulysses suspects that Andromache has concealed Astyanax, he catches her out by suddenly revealing what end he plans for her son (621-2): *quem mors manebat saeva praecepitatem datum / e turre.* Even her enemy admits that such an execution is uncivilized (*saeva*). Her retort mocks Ulysses for his lack of bravery (755): *nocturne miles,*

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fortis in pueri necem. She scolds him for his cowardice in acting under the cover of night in raids against the Trojan camp (cf. Hom. *Il.* 10) and in being so cruel as to kill a boy.

Andromache judges that this kind of murder is sadder than death itself (783): o morte dira tristius leti genus! Significantly, she employs the adjective *dira* to suggest that this death will incur the anger of the gods upon the Greek fleet. Ulysses speaks disrespectfully of Astyanax when he orders his men to act precipitately (813): abripite propere classis Argolicae moram.

Indeed, he treats the Trojan prince especially cruelly, like baggage, to be carried off to his death.

The action thus turns to fulfil the first of Calchas’ demands, that Pyrrhus should deliver to his father Polyxena dressed as a bride (361-364). A wedding is usually a joyous occasion and one of the institutions that is characteristic of civilization (as in the depiction of the city at peace on the shield of Achilles, Hom. *Il.* 18.491-496). However, Helen begins Act Four with an aside during which she reveals the Greeks’ plans for the perversion of a wedding that will culminate in the murder of Polyxena (861-867):

Quicumque hymen funestus, inlaetabilis
lamenta caedes sanguinem gemitus habet,
est auspice Helena dignus. eversis quoque
nocere cogor Phrygibus: ego Pyrrhi toros
narrare falsos iubeor, ego cultus dare
habitusque Graios. arte capietur mea
meaque fraude concidet Paridis soror.

Seneca juxtaposes *hymen* with the adjectives *funestus* and *inlaetabilis* to emphasize how joyless this wedding will be.\(^\text{296}\) He arranges *lamenta caedes sanguinem gemitus* (862) chiastically to signify that instead of cries of joy, lamentation will accompany bloodshed in this ceremony. At

\(^{296}\) Boyle (1994) 208 notes that *inlaetabilis* is a rare word not found before Verg. (*A.* 3.707, 12.619).
the end of the sentence, Seneca reveals that the Greeks are using Helen as a decoy to lure the unsuspecting Polyxena to the place of her execution. Helen comments on the extreme cruelty of the Greeks, inasmuch as even after the Trojans have been conquered, the Greeks use her as a weapon to bring further harm to the Trojans (nocere cogor Phrygibus, 864). Moreover, the Greeks force Helen, the faithless queen of Sparta, to deceive and betray her former sister-in-law (meaque fraude concidet Paridis soror, 867). Andromache appreciates the full cruelty of the situation: the Greeks require the Trojan women in the midst of their sorrows to take on the rejoicing of their victors (888-895, 899-900):

Hoc derat unum Phrygibus eversis malum,
gaudere. flagrant strata passim Pergama:
o coniugale tempus! ...
quisquam dubius ad thalamos eat,
quos Helena suadet? pestis exitium lues
utriusque populi, cernis hos tumulos ducum
et nuda totis ossa quae passim iacent
inhumata campis? haec hymen sparsit tuus... 895
taedis quid opus est quidve sollemni face,
quid igne? thalamis Troia praelucet novis.

Andromache appropriately calls Helen pestis exitium lues of both nations as her marriage to Paris caused so much death on both sides. This scene is a tragic reversal of the τειχοσκοπία of Iliad 3.160-242: instead of Priam asking Helen to identify the Greek leaders, Andromache is asking Helen to look at and take responsibility for the tombs of the Trojan leaders and the indignity of their unburied bones. It is ironic that Helen’s wedding to Paris caused so many deaths (haec hymen sparsit tuus, 895). Andromache points out the link between marital and funereal uses of fire: there is no need for bridal torches when burning Troy itself will illuminate the strange
marriage that masks the cruel slaughter of an innocent virgin (thalamis Troia praelucet novis, 900).

Helen does show remorse for her part in the deception when she wishes for her own death (938-944):

> Utinam iuberet me quoque interpres deum
> abrumpere ense lucis invisae moras,
> vel Achillis ante busta furibunda manu occidere Pyrrhi, fata comitantem tua,
> Polyxene miseranda, quam tradi sibi cineremque Achilles ante mactari suum,
> campo maritus ut sit Elysio, iubet.

She wishes that Calchas had commanded her too to cut short her life with the sword. She reveals how Pyrrhus plans to kill Polyxena with his infuriated hand (furibunda manu).^297 We recall Seneca’s statement that anger is the greatest evil (de ira 2.12.6). Achilles, famous for his anger, commands this sacrifice from the grave. Achilles’ undying anger causes a virgin’s death and thereby demonstrates that Greek cruelty knows no bounds.

### 3.3.6 crudelitas infinita hominum

In her article, “The Spectacle of Death in Seneca’s Troades,” Jo-Ann Shelton has interpreted ommissis nugis mera homicidia in Epistle 7.3 as suggesting that Seneca did not object to executions performed in a dramatic context, where the victims’ lives were used up, like inanimate equipment, to edify the spectators. With respect to Seneca’s Troades,
Shelton concludes that the Greek soldiers who arrange and witness the deaths of the children are not depicted as evil villains.\footnote{Shelton (2000) 100 and 112. J. R. Baron (2001) writes, “Shelton’s chapter left me totally unconvinced.”} I wish to argue against these statements. In Epistle 7, Seneca notes the allure of the cruelty of the amphitheatre, and discusses the effect that watching gladiatorial games has on the spectator (Ep. 7.2-3):

\begin{quote}
 nihil vero tam damnosum bonis moribus quam in aliquo spectaculo desidere. tunc enim per \textit{voluptatem} facilius vitae surrepunt. quid me existimas dicere? ‘avarior redeo, ambitiosior, luxuriosior’? immo vero \textit{cruelior} et \textit{inhumanior}, quia inter \textit{homines} fui. casu in meridianum spectaculum incidi, lusus exspectans et sales et aliquid laxamenti quo \textit{hominum} oculi ab \textit{humano} cruore acquiescant. contra est: quicquid ante pugnatum est, \textit{misericordia} fuit; nunc omissis nugis mera \textit{homicidia} sunt.
\end{quote}

Seneca considers nothing more damaging to good character than to watch a gladiatorial show. Seneca associates pleasure with the spectacle of cruelty, suggesting that we acquire vices more easily through the pleasure (\textit{per voluptatem}) of watching violence. Summers notes that the verb \textit{surrepunt} is significant because it is used of a stealthy, insidious attack, as in Catullus’ \textit{sicine subrepsti mi} (77.3) or \textit{mihi subrepons imos ut torpor in artus} (76.21).\footnote{Summers (1956) 158. Summers adduces Poem 77.3, but not Poem 76.21.} In Seneca’s view, vices enter us like a disease of the mind or a passion without our knowledge;\footnote{Summers (ibid., 157) observes that the conception of sin as a disease of the mind and of the philosopher as a physician was especially common with the Cynics: cf. Antisthenes in D. L. 6. 4 \textit{ἐρωτηθείς διὰ τί πικρῶς τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἐπιπλήττει, ”καὶ οἱ ἰατροί,” φησί, ”τοῖς κάμινουσιν,” who uses the adverb \textit{πικρῶς} in the sense of “cruelly.” Summers supplies this parallel, but does not quote the entire sentence.} instead of affording relaxation, therefore, the games render the spectator a crueller and more inhumane person. Seneca employs the paradox of \textit{inhumanior quia inter homines} to make the point that being among a large number of people imparts socially undesirable tastes and principles. Five words related to \textit{homo} in this passage stress the inhumanity of the games. In the last line, Seneca’s
contrast between *misericordia* and *homicidia* underlines the difference between the morning and midday shows: in the morning, the armed gladiators could defend themselves and if wounded, ask for mercy; at noon, condemned criminals had no defensive armour and often were forced to face their opponents and certain death. 301 Thus the spectator of the gladiatorial games enjoys the uneasy pleasure of watching cruelty much as does the spectator of Seneca’s tragedies. In taking pleasure in watching a victim suffer pain or humiliation, the spectator becomes as cruel as the killer. 302

This pleasure in viewing is also on display in Act Five of the *Troades*, when the Messenger describes the crowd that assembles to watch the death of Astyanax (1076-1083):

```
undique adfusa ducum
plebisque turba cingitur; totum coit
ratibus relictis vulgus. his collis procul
aciem patenti liberam praebet loco,
his alta rupes, cuius in cacumine
erecta summos turba libravit pedes.
hunc pinus, illum laurus, hunc fagus gerit
et tota populo silva suspenso tremit.
```

The crowd is composed of both the aristocracy and the commoners (*ducum / plebisque turba*). By his use of *plebis*, Seneca signals that he is recalling a scene such as he has seen at the amphitheatre. Thus he takes us back to his critical attitudes of the crowd at the amphitheatre (*Ep. 7*) and his analysis of the effect that watching bloodshed has on the crowd: it causes a mass

301 Ibid., 158.

302 E. Bronfen (1992) quotes Edgar Allan Poe’s essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” in which he writes, “The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”
reaction in them to become bloodthirsty. The activity of watching in an amphitheatrical maps onto spectacle in the theatre as well; but instead of the whole city (*totum coit /...vulgus*) assembling to watch a play, the Greeks come to watch a cruelty done to a defenseless boy. And yet the setting is specifically that of a Greek theatre: a hillside provides a clear though distant view across open ground (*collis procul / aciem patenti liberam praebet loco*). The line *erecta summos turba librarit pedes* (1081) conveys the pathological eagerness of another part of the crowd to see the execution; they not only stand straining (*erecta*) but balance on tiptoe (*summos...librarit pedes*).

As Fantham notes, *suspenso* (“in suspense”) does double duty like *erecta*; both participles express a psychological state as well as a physical position.\(^{303}\) The mention of people hanging from trees to catch a glimpse (*hunc pinus, illum laurus, hunc fagus gerit / et tota populo silva suspenso tremit*, 1082-1083) takes us back to the world of the theatre and may recall Euripides’ *Bacchae*, in which the Messenger relates that Pentheus climbed a fir tree to see the Bacchantes’ rites (*Ba. 1058-1136*), through a window allusion to the same scene in Ovid’s Theban narrative of *Metamorphoses* 3 (521-523, 701-731).\(^{304}\)

The Messenger describes where other spectators sit (1084-1087):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{extrema montis ille praeerupti petit,} \\
\text{semusta at ille tecta vel saxum imminens} \\
\text{muri cadentis pressit, atque aliquis (nefas) } \\
\text{tumulo ferus spectator Hectoreo sedet.}
\end{align*}
\]

They are so eager to see cruelty that they take little thought for their own lives: one spectator approaches a cliff’s edge; another puts his weight on a half-burnt roof or rock jutting from a

\(^{303}\) Fantham (1982) 370.

collapsing wall; Seneca characterizes a third as an uncivilized spectator (*ferus spectator*, 1087) who commits the sacrilege (*nefas*, 1086) of sitting on Hector’s tomb in order to watch the death of his son. The use of *spectator* here suggests that Seneca is implicitly comparing this scene to the Greek theatre and the amphitheatre in Rome. As Boyle notes, *ferus* is the appropriate word for spectators of beasts (*ferae*) in the arena; the savagery of the victor remains (from line 23).\(^{305}\)

Even the gods whom Ulysses summons to the sacrifice are savage (*saevos ciet / ad sacra superos*, 1101-1102). However, Astyanax robs Ulysses of the satisfaction of killing him, by leaping willingly to his death (*sponte desiluit sua*, 1102), like a Stoic *sapiens* (*de Prov.* 5.8). For as Seneca observes in the *de ira* (3.15.4), the only way to freedom from this slavery is suicide:

\[\textit{Vides illum praecipitem locum? Illac ad libertatem descenditur.}\] \(^{306}\)

Andromache reacts to the news of her son’s death with a series of questions (1104-1109):

\begin{verbatim}
Quis Colchus hoc, quis sedis incertae Scyth
commisit, aut quae Caspium tangens mare
gens \textit{iuris expers} ausa? non Busiridis
puerilis aras sanguis aspersit \textit{feri},
nec parva gregibus membra Diomedes suis
epulanda posuit.
\end{verbatim}

She cites several barbarian nations as capable of enacting such cruelty: the Colchians, nomadic Scythians or an unnamed lawless tribe (*gens iuris expers*, 1106) from the edge of the Caspian Sea. Fantham suggests that with *Colchus* Andromache is recalling Medea’s cruel

\(^{305}\) Boyle (1994) 225.

\(^{306}\) Keulen (2001) 512 comments on the use of *praeceps* in the context of suicide at *Phaed*. 260 and 262-3, and on the fact that it is a favourite word of Seneca (38 occurrences) and Lucan (39 occurrences); however, Keulen does not draw the parallel of *de ira* 3.15.4.
dismemberment of Absyrtus. Andromache may also recall Medea’s infanticide of her two sons as a parallel to her son’s death. Keulen identifies *Caspium tangens mare / gens* (1105-6) as the Hyrcanians, comparing Dido’s scathing words to Aeneas about their cruelty (Verg. *A.* 4.366-7): *perfide, sed duris genuit te cautibus horrens / Caucasus Hyrcanaeque admorunt ubera tigres.* The places mentioned by Seneca were located on the northeastern border of the Roman Empire in his day. By asking which of these killed her son, Andromache implies that whoever committed the deed is crueller than the nations that the Romans considered to be examples of uncivilized people beyond the borders of their empire. She adds examples from Greek mythology, calling Busiris *ferus* because he performed human sacrifice, but observing that not even he went so far as to kill a boy. Similarly, she notes that Diomedes was notorious for feeding human flesh to his horses (Eur. *Alc.* 483-496), but never fed them young limbs. In these lines, Seneca employs Roman and Greek exempla in the manner of Valerius Maximus. The Senecan Andromache thus implies that her son’s killer was crueller than these mythological exemplars of cruelty. Fantham suggests that the language of feasting in 1109, *epulanda posuit*, underlines the cruelty; she compares *A.* 4.602, *Ascanium patriisque epulandum ponere mensis*, a Thyestian allusion that probably inspired Seneca’s language here and at *de ira* 3.15.1, where the

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309 Thomas (1982) 53 observes that Vergil’s description of the Scythians as a *gens effrena virum* (*G.* 3.382) suggests the primitive harshness which is a quality of uncivilized societies, which was viewed positively, and in contrast to the softness which exists in more advanced cultures. Ovid describes the cold climate of Scythia: *nivosa* (*Her.* 12.27); *nee prosunt Scythiae sua frigora* (*Met.* 2.224). Williams (1994) 11 writes that Ovid views Rome as the social and cultural antithesis to the untamed barbarism of Tomis. Seneca contrasts the civilized and uncivilized nations again when he has Theseus say of Hippolytus, *hunc Graia tellus aluit an Taurus Scythes / Colchusque Phasis?* (*Phaed.* 906-907).
Median king, Astyages, served Harpagus his children: \[^{310}\] *quo offensus liberos illi epulandos adposuit.* \[^{311}\]

Seneca sustains the metaphor of the theatre in the scene of Polyxena’s execution (1119-1129):

\[
\text{flevitque Achivum turba quod fecit nefas,}
\]
\[
\text{idem ille populus aliud ad facinus redit}
\]
\[
tumulumque Achillis. cuius extremum latus Rhoetea leni verberant fluctu vada; adversa cingit campus, et clivo levi erecta medium vallis includens locum crescit theatri more. concursus frequens implevit omne litus. hi classis moras hac morte solvi rentur, hi stirpem hostium \textit{gaudent recidi}; magna pars vulgi levis odit scelus spectatque.}
\]

The Greek crowd realizes the wrong that they have done and weeps; however, their remorse is short-lived and, as Seneca writes in *Ep. 92.29* (*animum habet mobilem ad prava*), they have a mind that easily changes to depravity. They demonstrate their cruelty by their fickle behaviour: the sight of Astyanax’ hurtling to his death moves them to weep (*flevitque Achivum turba quod fecit nefas*, 1119), but their lust to see more bloodshed causes them to change moods immediately, and they hurry to the scene of Polyxena’s execution. Here Seneca explicitly describes the scene as like that of a theatre: facing the seating area is level ground (*adversa cingit campus*, 1123); the verb *cingit* suggests the curve of the orchestra. The valley that serves

\[^{310}\] Hdt. 1.118-119. Seneca mistakenly calls the king “Persian.”

\[^{311}\] Fantham (1982) 373.
as the seating area is on a gentle slope (*clivo levi*, 1123), and rises in the manner of a theatre (*theatri more*, 1125).\(^{312}\) The description of the audience *concurpus frequens / implevit omne litus* (1125-6) conveys the cruelty of the crowd assembled in great numbers to witness the human sacrifice. Some of the Greeks reduce Polyxena to the status of a commodity that delays their fleet (*classis moram*, 1126) as Ulysses did Astyanax (813); but the phrase *gaudent recidi* (1128) exposes the crowd’s pleasure in bloodshed and recalls the thought of the *de clementia* (1.25.1): *ferina ista rabies est sanguine gaudere*. Seneca characterizes the crowd as fickle (*levis*, 1128) and demonstrates this in the phrase *odit scelus spectatque* (1129)—they feel revulsion at the crime but cannot resist gazing nonetheless. Thus Seneca demonstrates that the Greek crowd is not in control of its passions and implies that the same is true of his own Roman audience.

Asmis argues that our pleasure in watching Senecan tragedy seems to assimilate us to the pleasure his characters take in inflicting suffering on one another. In the tension between sadistic voyeurism and horror, we recognize the uncomfortable position of the spectator of Seneca’s despairing plays.\(^{313}\)

When Pyrrhus kills Polyxena, he does so in a manner that recalls his killing of Priam (1155-1157):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{ut dextra ferrum penitus exactum abdidit,} \\
&\text{subitus recepta morte prorupit cruar} \\
&\text{per vulnus ingens.}
\end{align*}
\]

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\(^{312}\) Boyle (1994) 229 compares the description of an imperial amphitheatre (probably that built by Nero in 57) at Calp. *Ecl.* 7.23ff., which “rises” (*surgere*, 24) above “gently lying slopes” (*clivos lene iacentes*, 25) and is “just like a valley” (*qualiter...vallis*, 30).

\(^{313}\) Asmis et al. (2010) xxiii-xxiv.
Seneca repeats *ferrum...abdidit* from line 48, and *penitus* from line 49. *Exactum* (1155) picks up *actum* (49), *recepta* (1156) recalls *recepisset* (49), as *vulnus* (1157) does *vulneri* (48). These verbal echoes invite us to compare the two deaths and recall that both victims died willingly (*libens*, 49; *audax virago*, 1151), thus winning a moral victory over the cruelty of Pyrrhus.

Boyle points out that both Priam and Polyxena accept death like a gladiator or a Stoic *sapiens.*

Hecuba sums up the cruelty on display in the play when she observes that the war has ended with the deaths of a boy and a maiden (1167-1168): *concidit virgo ac puer: / bellum peractum est.* The Greek victors were so cruel to the vanquished that they felt it necessary to add to the thousands of Trojan dead by forcing a boy to jump off a tower and butchering a maiden. In executing the boy before the maiden, the Greeks feminize the boy by treating him as less important than the woman. In *peractum est* we may also hear a final metatheatrical metaphor, signaling the end of the bloody spectacle. For *peractum* has a theatrical usage in the sense of “to play a part or role.”

Boyle writes that it is unclear how Shelton’s argument is to be reconciled with the moral outrage and pity of the Greek messenger, whose account not only underscores the brutality in the Greek army but also the evil of the spectacle itself: *scelus, nefas.* In the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena, Seneca dramatizes how infinitely cruel it is to watch another human being’s death as a spectator sport. This is precisely his point in *Epistle 7* and the *de clementia*, where he writes

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314 Boyle (1994) 141.

315 Keulen (2001) 526 cites as parallels *Med.* 1019 *bene est, peractum est*, *Oed.* 998 *bene habet, peractum est*, *Ag.* 901 *habet, peractum est*.

316 OLD s. *perago* 8; cf. *peracta iam pars matris est*, *Her.* O. 1025.

that taking pleasure in savagery is nothing short of madness (2.4.2): *possumus insaniam vocare; nam varia sunt genera eius et nullum certius quam quod in caedes hominum et lancinationes pervenit*. Yet in writing tragedy, Seneca employs such cruelty to excite his audience and to hold their attention. He seems very aware that scenes of unbounded cruelty fascinate human beings. Seneca is eager to give us bloodshed and implicates us in the guilt of enjoying the bloodshed. In his tragedies, the victory of evil is complete and all pervasive, extending even beyond the drama to its audience. Against this outcome, both internal and external, he dramatizes through the noble deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena active individual resistance to evil.

In the amphitheatre, cruelty was performed for the gratification of the audience’s baser instincts. In the theatre, violence was described to provoke thought about cruelty. Seneca employs tragedy to hold up a mirror to his audience so that they can see their own behaviour reflected in it. Seneca wants people to control the cruelty that they perform on one another. As he writes at the end of *de ira* (3.43.5): *dum inter homines sumus, colamus humanitatem.*
Chapter 4

Ghosts and Curses

Igitur perquam velim scire, esse phantasmata et
habere propriam figuram numenque aliquod putes an
inania et vana ex metu nostro imaginem accipere.—
Pliny, Ep. 27.1

In this chapter, I will examine Seneca’s use of ghosts and curses as devices which precipitate disaster. Ghosts are premonitions of evil and all too often, as in the case of Achilles in the Troades, Laius in the Oedipus, and Tantalus in the Thyestes, a source of cruelty. Some ghosts function as stage characters who are vehicles of evil, as are Tantalus in the Thyestes and Thyestes in the Agamemnon. Other ghosts are only reported by characters and never appear onstage. In the Troades, for example, Talthybius, the herald of the Greek army, reports to the chorus of Trojan Women that Achilles’ angry ghost cruelly demands the death of Polyxena (181-197) while Andromache tells her attendant, the Old Man, that Hector’s ghost advised her to try to hide Astyanax in order to frustrate Ulysses’ intention to kill their son (443-456).

Everywhere in Senecan tragedy, the appearance of ghosts presages disaster. Judith Rosner argues that Seneca uses the supernatural to represent externally the evil within the protagonist.318 Thus Seneca’s interest in the supernatural arises from a need to demonstrate that an aberrant psychology infects the world with its evil. This is true not only of Rosner’s examples, Atreus and Medea, but also of characters who are not the protagonists of their plays, such as Pyrrhus and Ulysses in Troades. We shall see that there are four types of ghost in Senecan drama. One type, for which Achilles provides a model, exhibits the Stoic vices of anger and cruelty in

demanding the death of Polyxena. Another type, exemplified by Hector, is a bereavement vision that is a manifestation of the protective instincts of Andromache in the face of Greek cruelty. Thirdly, the sighting of a ghost can function as a symptom of the guilt of a character as, for example, in the case of Oedipus in the Phoenissae for killing his father Laius. A fourth type is a reluctant, almost comic ghost such as Tantalus in Thyestes, who nonetheless motivates the cruel actions of Atreus in the play.

4.1 The Literary and Philosophic Background

The appearance of the first ghost in Western literature contains elements which Seneca would later employ in his dramaturgy. Plato called Homer the leader of tragedy (ἐπισκεπτέον τὴν τε τραγῳδίαν και τὸν ἡγεμόνα αὐτῆς Ὄμηρον, Rep. 598d)\(^{319}\) as his poems contain many elements which the Attic tragedians adopted. Homer’s use of ghosts to frighten his listeners inspired the tragedians to include them for their great dramatic potential. In the Iliad, when Achilles does not immediately bury the body of his friend Patroclus, the ghost of Patroclus appears to him alone, at night, in a dream, and scolds him for neglecting his interests (Hom. Il. 23.69-74):

εὐδείς, αὐτὰρ ἐμείο λεσσιμένος ἐπλευ, Ἀχιλλεῦ.
οὐ μὲν μεν ᾑωντος ἀκήδεις, ἀλλὰ θανόντος.
θάπτε με ὅτι τάχιστα, πύλας Αἴδαο περήσω.
τῆλέ με εἰργουσι ψυχαί, εἰδώλα καμόντων,
οὐδὲ μέ πω μίσγεσθαι ὑπὲρ ποταμοῖο ἔώσιν,

\(^{319}\) “We must consider tragedy and its leader, Homer.”
ἀλλ’ αὕτως ἀλάλημαι ἀν’ εὐρυπυλὲς Ἀιδὸς δῶ.\textsuperscript{320}

Patroclus demands burial in order for the soul to enter the house of Hades, cross the river Styx and associate with the other dead.\textsuperscript{321} As long as the body is not buried, the ghosts of the dead prevent the newcomer from entering Hades and the soul wanders on the threshold of the house of Hades.

The appearance of a ghost is frightening to a mortal because its very proximity threatens the living with death. Indeed, Patroclus prophesies that Achilles will die at Troy (\textit{Il}. 23.80-81):

καὶ δὲ σοὶ αὐτῷ μοίρα, θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ’ Ἀχιλλεῦ,

τείχει ὑπὸ Τρώων εὐηφενέων ἀπολέσθαι.\textsuperscript{322}

This ghost appears to someone to whom he was close in life and reminds him of his mortality. However, sometimes the living want to talk to the dead. In \textit{Odyssey} 11, Odysseus follows the instructions of the witch Circe (\textit{Od}. 10.516-537) and performs sacrifices and prayers to Hades and Persephone to summon ghosts in the underworld (\textit{Od}. 11.34-37). Like Patroclus, Odysseus’ friend Elpenor addresses him and asks for burial so that he does not become a curse upon Odysseus himself: μή τοί τι θεῶν μήνιμα γένωμαι (\textit{Od}. 11.73).\textsuperscript{323} But Odysseus’ main aim is to talk to the shade of Tiresias who gives him advice about how to survive Polyphemus’ curse

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{320} “You are sleeping, and have forgotten me, Achilles. Not in my life did you neglect me, but now in my death! Bury me as quickly as possible, so that I may pass within the gates of Hades. The souls, the phantoms of the dead, keep me far off, nor do they allow me to mingle with them beyond the river, but vainly I wander through the wide-gated house of Hades.”

\textsuperscript{321} N. Richardson (1993) 173.

\textsuperscript{322} “And you yourself also, Achilles like to the gods, are fated to die beneath the wall of the wealthy Trojans.”

\textsuperscript{323} “lest I become the cause of divine anger for you.”
and achieve his homecoming (Od. 11.100-134). Yet Tiresias also prophesies the manner of Odysseus’ death (Od. 11.134-136), and thus reminds him of his mortality.

Ghosts appear three times in extant Greek tragedy, on two of those occasions in Aeschylus, who sets the precedents for ghosts in tragedy. In Aeschylus’ Eumenides (94-139), the ghost of Clytemnestra appears and speaks to her sleeping Furies.

εὕδοιτ’ ἂν. ὦη. καὶ καθευδουσῶν τί δεῖ; ἐγὼ δ’ ὑφ’ ὑμῶν ὠδ’ ἄπητιμασμένη ἄλλοισιν ἐν νεκροῖσιν, ὧν μὲν ἕκτανον ὀνείδος ἐν φθιτοῖσιν οὐκ ἐκλείπεται, αἰσχρῶς δ’ ἀλῶμαι (Eum. 94-98).324

The ghost of Clytemnestra tells the Furies that because of their inactivity in avenging her murder, she is dishonoured among the other dead (ὑφ’ ὑμῶν ὠδ’ ἄπητιμασμένη, Eum. 95).

Sommerstein notes that the opening of Clytemnestra’s appeal to the Furies is markedly similar to the opening of the speech of Patroclus’ ghost to Achilles: there is the same reproach of the addressee for sleeping and neglecting the speaker’s interests, the same complaint that the speaker is suffering dishonour among the dead (αἰσχρῶς δ’ ἀλῶμαι, Eum. 98 echoes Patroclus’ ἀλλ’ αὖτως ἀλάλημαι, Il. 23.74).325 But Clytemnestra incites the Furies to hunt Orestes to the death for killing his mother—evil requites evil. This ghost thus sets in motion the action of the play, just as Tantalus will do in Seneca’s Thyestes. As Aeschylus employs Clytemnestra’s ghost

324 "You would be sleeping! Hey! What need is there of sleepers? But because of you I am thus dishonoured greatly among the other dead. Because of whom I killed, reproach is not omitted among the dead, and I wander shamefully."

to start the action of the *Eumenides*, so Seneca will employ Thyestes and Tantalus in the prologues of the *Agamemnon* and the *Thyestes* respectively.

In the *Persians*, Atossa has a dream which portends disaster to her son Xerxes (176-200). After hearing of the annihilation of the Persian fleet at Salamis, Atossa, like Odysseus, pours libations to the nether gods at the tomb of her husband Darius while the chorus recites chants to call up his ghost (619-680). Thus necromancy belongs to the genres of epic and tragedy. Darius prophesies the defeat of the Persians at Plataea because of the arrogance and impiety of Xerxes (739-842). Aeschylus’ scene of Atossa raising the ghost of Darius to foretell the disaster that the battle of Plataea will cause Xerxes may have suggested to Seneca the dramatic purchase of raising Laius to foretell the punishment of Oedipus. Aeschylus’ ghost scenes contain the germ for the explosion of Seneca’s interest in ghosts.

Euripides in his *Hecuba* introduces the first ghost as prologue speaker in the wraith of Polydorus (*Hec.* 1-58).

"Ἡκὼ νεκρῶν κευθµμῶνα καὶ σκόότου πύύλας λιπώών, ἵν’ Ἅιδης χωρὶς ᾤκισται θεῶν (1-2).326

He has returned from the gates of the underworld (σκόότου πύύλας, 1). Thus Euripides follows Homer in representing the ghost as not resting until it receives proper burial. As Patroclus stands above Achilles’ head (*Il.* 23.68), so Polydorus flits over the head of his mother Hecuba (*Hec.* 30-31) and appears to her in a dream.327 He relates that Achilles’ ghost, driven by dishonour like

326 “I have come having left the hiding-place of the dead and the gates of darkness, where Hades dwells apart from the gods.”

Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides*, appeared to the Greek army to demand the honour of the sacrifice of Polyxena on his tomb so that he would not be without gifts (οὐδ’ ἀδώρητος, 42).

Thus both Aeschylus and Euripides follow Homer in their depiction of ghosts as wandering until they receive satisfaction, which includes proper burial, and both introduce ghosts in prologues. But Euripides is particularly important for Seneca, who will develop the ghost’s eight lines (*Hec.* 37-44) into the essential framework of his *Troades*. Euripides’ Polydorus relates that Achilles’ ghost appeared above his tomb, stopped the Greeks from leaving Troy and claimed Polyxena for sacrifice on his tomb.

The philosophers also grappled with the question of what happens to the soul after the death of the body. Plato argued that the soul is immortal (*Phaedo* 81a). Aristotle believed that all the powers of the soul (sense perception, desire, locomotion), with the exception of νοῦς, are inseparable from the body and perishable: νοῦς, however, exists before the body and is immortal (λεῖπεται δὲ τὸν νοῦν μόνον θύραθεν ἐπεισιέέναι καὶ θεῖον εἶναι μόνον, *GA* 2.3 736b 27-28). In the Stoic system, however, personal immortality was scarcely possible since the Stoics held that all souls return to the primeval fire at the final conflagration. The only dispute was on the subject of what souls persist after death until the conflagration; and while Cleanthes asserted that all souls continue to exist until the conflagration, Chrysippus wrote that only the souls of the wise endured (*Diogenes Laertius* 7.157): Κλεάνθης μὲν οὖν οὖν πᾶσας

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328 Fantham (1982) 74.

329 “It remains that only the mind enters from outside and it only is divine.”
The Stoics also held that there were Daemones, who have sympathy with mankind and survey human affairs; and that heroes were the souls of virtuous people (D.L. 7.151):

Φασὶ δ’ εἶναι καὶ τινὰς δαίμονας ἀνθρώπων συμπάθειαν ἔχοντας, ἐπόπτας τῶν ἀνθρωπείων πραγμάτων· καὶ ἥρωας τὰς ὑπολειμμένας τῶν σπουδαίων ψυχάς.

By contrast, the Epicureans and atomists believed that the atoms of the soul disperse upon death (Lucr. DRN 3.417-444, discussed below).

The Pythagoreans elaborated a particularly complicated scheme. For example, Alexander Polyhistor (b. c. 105 BC), a Pythagorean who came to Rome and was given Roman citizenship by Sulla c. 80 BC, wrote that after death impure souls were not permitted to approach the pure or each other, but were bound by the Furies in unbreakable bonds (D.L. 8.31):

τὰς δ’ ἀκαθάρτους μὴ’ ἐκεῖνας πελάζειν μὴ’ ἀλλήλαις, δεῖσθαι δ’ ἐν ἀρρήκτοις δεσμοῖς ὑπ’ Ἐρινύῶν.

This belief resonates with the action of the Senecan Fury who drags Tantalus from the accursed abode of the underworld to the upper world in the Thyestes (1-4). Alexander

330 “Cleantes therefore asserts that all souls endure until the conflagration, but Chrysippus writes that only the souls of the wise endure.”

331 “They say that there are also some Daemones who have sympathy with mankind, overseers of human affairs; and that heroes are the souls of the good people which were left behind.”

332 RE 88.

333 “The impure souls approach neither them nor each other, but are bound in unbreakable bonds by the Furies.”
goes on to say that pure souls wander in the air as *daimones* and heroes, who send men dreams and signs of future disease and health (D.L. 8.31-32):³³⁴

εἶναι τε πάντα τὸν ἀέρα ψυχῶν ἐμμπλέεων· καὶ ταύτας δαίμονας τε καὶ ἡρώας ὀνομάζεσθαι· καὶ ύπό τούτων πέμπεσθαι ἀνθρώποις τ' ὀνείρους καὶ τὰ σημεία νόσου τε καὶ ύγιείας.³³⁵

This view corresponds to Vergil’s representation of Hector appearing in a dream to Aeneas and giving him a warning about the danger to the Trojans and encouragement to establish a new city (*A. 2.289-295*).³³⁶

Picking up the Platonic thread, Cicero described ghosts from an Academic perspective in his late Republican philosophical works. In the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations*, he follows Plato in accepting the pre-existence and immortality of the soul, and rejects the Stoic doctrine of a limited existence after death.³³⁷ As an illustration of the Academic belief, Cicero quotes verses from Pacuvius’ tragedy *Iliona* (1.44.106) in his discussion of ghosts.

Ecce alius exoritur e terra, qui matrem dormire non sinat:
*Mater, te appello, tu quae curam somno suspensam levas,*
*Neque te mei miseret, surge et sepeli natum tuum.*

--Haec cum pressis et flelibibus modis, qui totis theatris maestitiam inferant,


³³⁵ “All the air is quite full of souls; and these are called both *daimones* and heroes; and by these are sent to men both dreams and the signs of disease and health.”

³³⁶ Hicks (1958) Vol. 2, 347 n. 6, who compares Hesiod, *Works and Days* 121-126 where *daemones* are superhuman beings, guardians and benefactors of mankind, watching over the earth where they once lived.

³³⁷ J. E. King (1927) xxix.
Cicero interprets Pacuvius as representing the ghost of Deiphilus rising from the earth and waking his mother Iliona from her sleep. Cicero judges that these lines make it difficult to avoid the thought that all who are unburied are unhappy until they are properly buried. If the body were not properly burnt and buried, the ghost would walk and was dangerous to the living.\textsuperscript{338}

The Epicurean Lucretius, Cicero’s contemporary, adheres strictly to atomist principles and therefore suggests that tales of the underworld were the invention of poets who aim to scare us:

\begin{quote}
Atque ea nimirum quaecumque Acherunte profundo prodita sunt esse, in vita sunt omnia nobis (\textit{De Rerum Natura} 3.978-979).
\end{quote}

So Lucretius reasons that the myths of eternal punishment in Hades are allegories of what happens in this life. The Epicureans believed that there is no afterlife (\textit{DRN} 3.434-439):

\begin{quote}
nunc igitur quoniam quassatis undique vasis diffluere umorem et laticem discedere cernis et nebula ac fumus quoniam discedit in auras, crede animam quoque diffundi multoque perire ocius et citius dissolvi in corpora prima, cum semel ex hominis membris ablata recessit.
\end{quote}

Thus they argued that the atoms of the soul disperse at death and that the soul is physical and subject to death, along with the body.\textsuperscript{339} Bailey points out that Plato also used the comparison of

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 32, n. 2.

\textsuperscript{339} Bailey (1947) 1067.
the soul being dissipated like smoke (Phaed. 70a), an image which goes back to the description of the ghost of Patroclus in Hom. Il. 23.100. Although Seneca’s philosophical stance is largely consistent with that of the Stoics, as we shall see, he maintains an eclecticism that allows him to express views like those of the Epicureans on occasion.

In de consolatione ad Polybius, for example, Seneca presents two views of death: the Epicurean “death is nothing” and the Academic “the soul is immortal” (9.2-3).

Seneca argues that one must choose between the two views. If death is nothing, one’s brother has escaped all the evils of life and suffers no emotions such as fear or desire (evasit). But Seneca abandons the Epicurean point of view and takes up the Platonic one: if the soul is immortal, it has been released from its long imprisonment in the body (diutino carcere). Seneca then adapts Cicero’s view from the Somnium Scipionis (17) and describes the soul looking down upon human things and gazing at divine things from a closer vantage point: humana omnia ex loco superiore despicit, divina vero, quorum rationem tam diu frustra quaesierat, proprius intuetur. But Seneca, playwright as well as philosopher, adds that the soul, like a spectator in the theatre, will enjoy the spectacle of Nature from its elevated position: rerum naturae spectaculo

340 Ibid., 1071 ad 3.436.


342 written during his exile of AD 41-49: Griffin (1976) 396.
fruitur. As Fitch argues, the salient point about each view of death is its consolatory value to the living.\textsuperscript{343} However, Seneca seems to favour the view that the soul is immortal since he accords that view the final place in each of his treatises \textit{de consolatione}.

Seneca articulates a belief in the immortality of the soul in the \textit{de consolatione ad Marciam} (25.1).\textsuperscript{344}

\begin{quote}
Integer ille nihilque in terris relinquens sui fugit et totus excessit; paulumque supra nos commoratus, dum expurgatur et inhaerentia vitia situmque omnem mortalis aevi excutit, deinde ad excelsa sublatus inter felices currit animas. Excepit illum coetus sacer, Scipiones Catonesque, interque contemptores vitae et veneficio liberos parens tuus, Marcia.
\end{quote}

Seneca depicts the soul as leaving the earth after it has delayed a little while above us \textit{(paulumque supra nos commoratus)} until it shakes off the inherent vices of its mortal life \textit{(inhaerentia vitia situmque omnem mortalis aevi excutit)}. In this, he reveals a debt to Plato \textit{(Phaedo} 81c). Moreover, just as Cicero writes that Paulus welcomed his son Scipio in heaven,\textsuperscript{345} Seneca shows the impact of Cicero by mentioning that a sacred band including the Scipios welcomed Marcia’s son to the hereafter. Seneca includes in that number Marcia’s father Cremutius Cordus, who freed himself from the tyranny of Tiberius by committing suicide (Tac. \textit{Ann.} 4.34-35).

In the \textit{ad Polybium}, Seneca adds (9.7-8):

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{343} Fitch (2002) 168.

\textsuperscript{344} written during the reign of Gaius: Griffin (1976) 396.

\textsuperscript{345} Cic. \textit{de Rep.} 6.14: “\textit{Quin tu aspicis ad te venientem Paulum patrem?” Quem ut vidi, equidem vim lacrimarum profudi, ille autem me complexus atque osculans flere prohibebat.”
Ne itaque invideris fratri tuo; quiescit. Tandem liber, tandem tutus, tandem aeternus est. Superstitem Caesarem omnemque eius prolem, superstitem te cum communibus habet fratribus. Antequam quicquam ex suo favore Fortuna mutaret, stantem adhuc illam et munera plena manu congerentem reliquit. Fruitur nunc aperto et libero caelo, ex humili atque depresso in eum emicuit locum, quisquis ille est, qui solutas vinculis animas beato recipit sinu, et nunc libere illic vagatur omniaque rerum naturae bona cum summa voluptate perspicit.

Seneca uses Platonic imagery\(^{346}\) when he writes that the souls of the blessed are free of their chains of mortality (\textit{solutas vinculis animas}), wander (\textit{vagatur}) in heaven, and derive the greatest pleasure in examining the good things in nature. His use of \textit{perspicit} suggests the view of one looking down as if one were seated in the top row of an ancient theatre.\(^{347}\) Moreover, in his \textit{Epigrams} (4.5-6), Seneca implies his belief in the immortality of the soul:

\begin{quote}
Crede mihi, vires aliquas natura sepulchris attribuit: tumulos vindicat umbra suos.
\end{quote}

In this elegiac couplet, he comments that the ghost (\textit{umbra}) still has force and the ability to avenge (\textit{vindicat}) desecration done to its tomb, a conceit which we will see return repeatedly in his tragedies.

\section*{4.2 UMBRAE ET SOMNIA: \textit{Troades}}

The appearance of ghosts in Senecan tragedy is often motivated by revenge and presages disaster. In the \textit{Troades}, where characters report the offstage appearances of not one but two ghosts, the messenger brings evil news that begets evil. Seneca may be following the tradition in Greek drama of having a messenger report horrific happenings because the effect on the

\[^{346}\text{Plato writes that the souls of the wicked wander (\textit{πλανῶνται}) until they are imprisoned in another body (\textit{ἐνδεθῶσιν εἰς σῶμα, Phaedo} 81d-e).}\]

\[^{347}\text{So Ovid writes of Jupiter, \textit{terras hominumque labores / perspicit} (Met. 2.404-405).}\]
imagination of the listener is more terrifying than actually seeing the horror represented on stage. Thus Talthybius begins his speech in Seneca by reporting his own reaction to seeing Achilles’ ghost: *pavet animus, artus horridus quassat tremor* (168); in this way, he sets a mood of fear. His own shaking is a prelude to a tremor of a greater kind. His next words—*maiora veris monstra* (169)—warn us that we are about to hear of supernatural phenomena.\(^{348}\)

Unusual natural phenomena herald the materialization of the ghost. An earthquake and splitting open of the earth make possible the ghost’s ascent from Hades.\(^{349}\) Earthquakes are an important topic in Book 6 of Seneca’s *Naturales Quaestiones*.\(^{350}\) In his Stoic scientific discourse, he represents an earthquake as an external bad thing that is broadly harmful (6.1.7):

> Hoc *malum* latissime patet inevitabile, avidum, publice noxium.

He goes on to say that before an earthquake a bellowing sound is often heard as the winds fight unseen, quoting Vergil’s description of the arrival of the goddess Hecate (6.13.5):

> Ideoque antequam terra moveatur, solet *mugitus* audiri, ventis in abdito tumultuantibus. Nec enim aliter posset, ut ait noster Vergilius: *sub pedibus mugire solum et iuga celsa moveri* (A. 6.256).\(^{351}\)

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\(^{348}\) The use of the comparative degree recalls the description of Medea: *maiusque mari Medea malum* (Med. 363). It also suggests that Seneca is claiming to present a greater spectacle than those of his predecessors: cf. Hinds (1993) 9-47.

\(^{349}\) Earthquakes in Greek tragedy include: Aesch. *Pr.* 1081 (the cataclysm which buries Prometheus), Soph. *OC* 95 (a portent that indicates that Oedipus has found a resting place), Eur. *Hipp.* 1201-1202 (the earthquake heralds the supernatural bull from the sea), and *Bacch.* 585 (the earthquake by which Dionysus destroys the palace of Pentheus). In Matthew 28.2 an earthquake precedes the appearance of the risen Christ.

\(^{350}\) Williams (2006) 124-146.

\(^{351}\) Statius (*Theb.* 7.794-796) follows Seneca in having an earthquake split the ground to the sound of the verb *mugit*, not for the rising of a ghost, but for the *katabasis* of Amphiaraus and his change into a ghost:

> iamque recessurae paulatim horrescere terrae
> summaque terga quati graviorque effervere pulvis
> coeperat; inferno *mugit* iam murmure campus.

I owe this citation to Lorenza Bennardo.
Thus loud sound effects accompany the ghost’s appearance (170-177):

summa iam Titan iuga  170
stringebat ortu, vicerat noctem dies,  170\textsuperscript{bis}
cum subito caeco terra **mugitus fremens**
concussa totos traxit ex imo sinus;
movere silvae capita et excelsum nemus **fragore vasto tonuit** et lucus sacer;
Idaea ruptis saxa ceciderunt iugis.  175
nec terra solum tremuit: et pontus suum
adesse Achillem sensit ac volvit vada.

The earth roars (**mugitus**, 171, the same word that Seneca employed in the *Naturales Quaestiones* 6.13.5), while lofty trees thunder as they break (**fragore vasto tonuit et lucus sacer**, 174). Francesca Berno notes the following correspondences between the *Troades* and the *Naturales Quaestiones*: *freno* (*Tro*. 171; *Nat*. 6.18.2), *concutio* (*Tro*. 172; *Nat*. 6.1.4; 6.12.3; 6.29.1), *moveo* (*Tro*. 173; *Nat*. 6.4.1), *tremo* (*Tro*. 176; *Nat*. 6.1.2; 6.2.3; 6.2.5; 6.4.1; 6.6.4; 6.31.3),\textsuperscript{352} *scindo* (*Tro*. 178; *Nat*. 6.1.11; 6.30.5), *frango* (*Tro*. 180; *Nat*. 6.32.4). Devastation arises, in the tragic context as in the scientific, *ex imo* (*Tro*. 172) and *ab imo* (*Nat*. 6.1.4; 6.30.1).\textsuperscript{353} Berno also remarks that the sudden passing from the cataclysm to calm (*immoti iacent / tranquilla pelagi*, 199-200) is anything but a sign of tranquility; rather it heralds Polyxena’s condemnation to death. Moreover, the earthquake, accompanied by a sea-quake (*nec terra solum tremuit: et pontus suum / adesse Achillem sensit ac volvit vada*, *Tro*. 176-177; also present in the same context in *Nat*. 6.1.14; 6.2.5; 6.2.6; 6.32.4), is the most obvious sign of the

\textsuperscript{352} Keulen (2001) observes *ad loc*. “the usual verb in the context of earthquakes.”

extrusion of the infernal world onto the earth.\textsuperscript{354} Seneca’s treatment of earthquakes is consistent across both genres in his emphasis on roaring noise, violent movement and the splitting of the earth.

Talthybius’ anaphora in \textit{vidi ipse, vidi} (\textit{Tro}. 170) stresses the veracity of this eyewitness account, despite the unusual timing of the ghost’s rising which took place at dawn, instead of the conventional night manifestation.\textsuperscript{355} Although Talthybius reports the sighting, he was not the only one to see the ghost: we know from the later conversation between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon (203-352) that the entire Greek army saw the ghost.

Jakobi observes that Seneca models the appearance of Achilles after Ovid’s description of the corresponding scene in \textit{Metamorphoses} 13.439-452: \textsuperscript{356}

\begin{verbatim}
Litore Threicio classem religarat Atrides,  440
dum mare pacatum, dum ventus amicior esset:  hic subito, quantus, cum viveret, esse solebat,
exit humo late rupta similisque minanti  temporis illius vultum referebat Achilles,
quo ferus iniustum petiit Agamemnona ferro  'inmemores' que 'mei disceditis,' inquit 'Achivi,
'inmemores' que 'mei disceditis,' inquit 'Achivi,
obrutaque est mecum virtutis gratia nostrae!  445
ne facite! utque meum non sit sine honore sepulcrum,
place Achilleos mactata Polyxena manes!'  dixit, et inmiti sociis parentibus umbrae,
dixit, et inmiti sociis parentibus umbrae,
ratta sinu matris, quam iam prope sola fovebat,  450
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{354} Berno (2003) 281 and n. 156.

\textsuperscript{355} As in Hom. \textit{Il}. 23.69-74.

fortis et infelix et plus quam femina virgo
ducitur ad tumulum diroque fit hostia busto.

Following Jakobi, we may note the similarity of the opening with Seneca’s *cum subito* (Tro. 171) adapted from Ovid’s *hic subito* (Met. 13.441); Seneca’s *ruptis...iugis* (Tro. 175) recalls Ovid’s *humo late rupta* (Met. 13.442); and the tragedian’s *irati sonus* (Tro. 190) picks up the epic poet’s *similis minanti* (Met. 13.442) as *iras Achillis* (Tro. 194) alludes to the μήνης motif of Met.

13.442-444, itself an allusion to Hom. *Il.* 1.1. Ovid’s attribution of direct speech to Achilles (Met. 13.445-448) suggests that device to Seneca (Tro. 191-196). His *debitos manibus meis / auferte honores* (Tro. 191-192) recalls Ovid’s *utque meum non sit sine honore sepulcrum* (Met. 13.447) and *indomitae deberi praemia dextrae* (Met. 13.355). Seneca’s *solvite ingratus rates* (Tro. 192) echoes Ovid’s *virtutis gratia nostrae* (Met. 13.446). Finally, the dramatist’s *desponsa nostris cineribus Polyxene / Pyrrhi manu mactetur* (Tro. 195-196) alludes to the epic poet’s *placet Achilleos mactata Polyxena manes* (Met. 13.448). To Jakobi’s analysis, we can add that Seneca follows Ovid’s lead in presenting Achilles’ ghost as *inmiti...umbrae* (Met. 13.449).

However, Seneca innovates by moving the setting of the scene from Thrace to Troy, the location of Achilles’ tomb. Thus Seneca signals the demise of both Troy and the Mycenaean Greeks.

Strikingly original, too, is Seneca’s personification of the trees in the *Troades*: they have heads that move (*movere silvae capita*, 173). The felling of a sacred grove for funerary purposes recalls Ennius’ sixth book of *Annales* (179-182 Sk), where trees are cut for the funeral of war dead after a battle with Pyrrhus of Epirus, and Vergil’s allusion to the passage in *Aeneid* 6.179-183, where Aeneas’ men fell an ancient forest for Misenus’ funeral; both passages look to a Homeric model in *Iliad* 23, where the Greeks harvest oaks for Patroclus’ pyre after his ghost

The ghost of Achilles appears like the demi-god he is: he is huge (*ingens*, 181) as reflects his stature as a warrior in life and a hero in epic. He flashes out of the earth—*emicuit*—the same word that Seneca uses of the soul’s ascent from a low and sunken region in *ad Polybium* 9.8.2. In the *Troades*, the word conveys the flashpoint which is Achilles’ anger. Achilles looks as he did in his youth when he laid low Thracians before he fought at Troy (*Threicia qualis arma proludens tuis / iam Troia fatis stravit*, 182-183) or when he stood as the arrogant victor in his chariot (*superbo victor in curru stetit*, 188; the epithet is transferred). His ghost retains the anger for which he was famous in the *Iliad* and his voice rings loud (*implevit omne litus irati sonus*, 190). As Achilles is the exemplar of anger in epic, he continues here to exemplify epic anger.

Talthybius delivers Achilles’ speech verbatim. Achilles, a semi-divine *numen*, speaks with divine authority. Fantham notes that Achilles opens with an ironical command, a popular figure of Augustan rhetoric, *ite, ite* (191), suggesting that the Greeks leave without doing him honour, that is, they are doing what is wrong. Achilles is angry that his companions carry away the honours (i.e. women as prizes of valour) owed to his hands (*inertes, debitos manibus meis / auferte honores*, 191-192). The ghost’s demands illustrate his anger, the quintessential

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357 Hinds (1998) 12 notes that *silva* is the Latin for the Greek ὕλη. Thus this passage may be a metaphor for Seneca plundering ancient material.

358 Doing violence to nature is also the theme of the story of Erysichthon (Ovid, *Met.* 8.741-742: *ille etiam Cereale nemus violasse securi / dicitur et lucos ferro temerasse vetustos*. Anderson (1972) 401 comments on the sacrilegious action of Erysichthon, also related by Callimachus in his *Hymn to Demeter* (6.32-41). Another pristine forest in the *Metamorphoses* is the one to which Cadmus sends his men (3.28): *silva vetus stabat nulla violata securi*. Seneca’s nephew Lucan combines all these models in his account of Caesar felling a grove sacred to the Druids at Massilia (*BC* 3.399-499).

Stoic vice,\textsuperscript{360} which motivates him to call for the sacrifice of Polyxena on his tomb. Now that Achilles is immortal, he requires a sacrifice to his godhead. That Polyxena is to be betrothed to his ashes recalls another sacrifice, that of Iphigenia, which Agamemnon brought about on the pretext that she was to be wed to Achilles (Eur. \textit{I.A.} 884-885). Once again, as we saw with Medea, anger sets the tragedy in motion, but here the ghost’s commands—motivated by anger—cause the death which will form the climax of the tragedy. The ghost cruelly drinks Polyxena’s blood as soon as it is shed: \textit{obduxit statim / saevusque totum sanguinem tumulus bibit} (Tro. 1163-1164). The Messenger’s lines show that the ghost in the tomb still has the strength about which Seneca comments in his \textit{Epigram} 4.5-6: \textit{vires aliquas natura sepulcris / attribuit: tumulos vindicat umbra suos.}

In Act Three, Andromache relates the appearance of a second ghost. Like Talthybius, she discloses how the dream she has had fills her with fear (\textit{hic proprie meum / exterret animum noctis horrendae sopor}, 435-436). Andromache follows the pattern of Achilles in \textit{Iliad} 23 in seeing a ghost in her dream, but she has the only nighttime dream in Seneca’s tragedies. The ghost of her husband Hector appeared to her two-thirds of the way through the night (\textit{partes fere nox alma transierat duas}, 438).\textsuperscript{361} Andromache attests to the sight of Hector standing before her (\textit{nostros Hector ante oculos stetit}, 443), and her words \textit{ante oculos} recall Aeneas’ sight of the visitation of Hector in a dream in the \textit{Aeneid} (2.270): \textit{in somnis, ecce, ante oculos maestissimus Hector}. In contrast to Achilles’ ghost, however, the Senecan ghost of Hector, following Vergil, does not appear as confident as he did when fighting on the battlefield in Homer’s \textit{Iliad}.

Seneca’s \textit{nec caede multa qualis in Danaos furens / vera ex Achille spolia simulato tuit}

\textsuperscript{360} See chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{361} around 2 a.m.: see Fantham (1982) 280.
(446-447) recalls Vergil’s *redit exuvias indutus Achilli / vel Danaum Phrygios iaculatus puppibus ignis* (*A.2.275-276*). Both poets describe Hector wearing the armour of Achilles that he stripped from the body of Patroclus. However, whereas in Vergil Hector is triumphantly hurling torches onto the Greek ships, in Seneca Hector appears as one already defeated and in sympathy with the mourning Andromache, his hair covered with dirt (*fessus ac deiectus et fletu gravis / similisque nostro, squalida obtectus coma*, 449-450). As Hector urged Aeneas to save himself in *Aeneid* 2 (*‘fuge, nate dea, teque his,’* ait, *‘eripe flammis,’* Verg. *A.2.289*), so here in Seneca he commands his wife to rescue their son (*natum eripe*, 452) by hiding him (*lateat*, 453). Thus Hector acts according to the principles articulated by Alexander Polyhistor (D.L. 8.31), as a ghost who sends people dreams of future calamity.362

Andromache calls the ghost delusive (*fallax*, 460) not only because it slips from her embrace (as Creusa’s did from Aeneas, *A. 2.791-794*), but perhaps because she realizes it has given her the deceptive hope that she could save her son. Braginton calls Hector a “friendly ghost”363 as his intention toward Andromache is kindly. However, his visit does not meet with the same success as it does in the *Aeneid* (2.804) where Aeneas (eventually) manages to flee as the ghost instructed. In Seneca, however, Hector is a harbinger of evil and his appearance is futile and tragic: he motivates Andromache’s concealment of Astyanax, but her ruse is doomed to failure. By following Hector’s commands, she ensures an even more evil outcome from the Greeks, the execution of their son. Hickman suggests that Seneca wished to draw a sharp

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362 cf. Ov. *Met*. 11.653-655, where Morpheus, the god of dreams, assumes the form of the dead Ceyx and appears in a dream to his wife Aleyone to announce his death.

363 Braginton (1933) 32.
contrast between the savage cruelty of the Greek Achilles and the kindly solicitude of the Trojan Hector.  

When Andromache realizes that she has failed, she calls upon Hector and again sees him, but only in her own hallucination (681-685):

\[
\text{rumpe fatorum moras,} \\
\text{molire terras, Hector! ut Ulixem domes} \\
\text{vel umbra satis es. arma concussit manu,} \\
\text{iaculatur ignes! cernitis, Danai, Hectorem?} \\
\text{an sola video?}
\]

Fantham notes that the command \textit{rumpe fatorum moras} recalls Vergil’s cry to the shade of Marcellus (\textit{A}. 6.882-883). Andromache believes that Hector’s ghost has enough strength to kill Ulysses, and her belief accords with the strength Seneca attributed to the tomb in his \textit{Epigram} 4.5. She even imagines that Hector tosses torches, as he did in the \textit{Aeneid} (2.276). But we do not see Hector’s ghost even though Andromache appeals to him; this is a bereavement vision, which occurs when grief-stricken survivors imagine that their dead loved ones appear to them. The longing of the bereft conjures her vision of Hector, but its hallucinatory quality indicates to the audience that she herself is fading away ontologically.

\[\footnotesize{364} \text{Hickman (1938) 94.} \]

\[\footnotesize{365} \text{Fantham (1982) 306-307.} \]

\[\footnotesize{366} \text{M. Casey (2010) 493. Andromache exhibits the same behaviour as the Vergilian Andromache at \textit{Aeneid} 3.309-313: there she faints when she sees Aeneas; she does not know whether he is living or is a ghost.} \]
4.2.1 Phoenissae

Seneca includes a similar vision in the Phoenissae, when Oedipus hallucinates and sees the threatening father figure of Laius (39-44).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{genitor vocat.} \\
\text{sequor, sequor, iam parce! sanguineum gerens} & \quad 40 \\
\text{insigne regni Laius rapti furit;} \\
\text{en ecce, inanes manibus infestis petit} \\
\text{foditque vultus. nata, genitorem vides?} \\
\text{ego video.}
\end{align*}
\]

Oedipus tells Antigone that Laius’ ghost calls him, is angry (furit, 41) and wears the bloody symbol of his kingship (likely a crown).\(^{367}\) He thus symbolically accuses Oedipus both of murder and of stealing the kingship. It is, of course, highly ironic that the blind Oedipus should see his father’s ghost and communicate his vision to his sighted daughter. He now has the inner sight that not he but Tiresias had in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus.\(^{368}\) The Senecan Oedipus imagines that his father’s ghost attacks his son’s eye sockets and digs in them as he himself had once done (\textit{inanes manibus infestis petit / foditque vultus,} 42-43, cf. \textit{Oedip.} 968-9: \textit{lacerat/...inan\U{E2}e sinus}).

Frank suggests that the image of Laius attacking Oedipus’ sightless eyes symbolises Oedipus’ feeling that he has to inflict upon himself a more drastic punishment than he has already done. On this interpretation, Laius’ introduction would thus constitute a symptom of

\(^{367}\) Frank (1995) 90.

\(^{368}\) Τε. λεληθέναι σε φημι συν τοις φιλτάτοις / αίσχισθ’ ὁμιλοῦντ’, οὐδ’ ὀράν ἵν’ εἰ κακοῦ (S. \textit{OT} 366-367). “I say that without knowing it you are most shamefully consorting with those dearest to you, nor do you see where you are in evil.”
Oedipus’ extreme guilt, for Seneca’s characters often see visions when they are in the grip of strong emotion. For example, Medea in her madness sees the ghost of Apsyrtus, her brother whom she killed, although he is invisible to the audience, before she kills one of her sons (Med. 963-971), and she invokes the ghost to kill by employing her hand:

\[
\text{cuius umbra dispersis venit} \\
\text{incerta membris? frater est, poenas petit.} \\
dabimus, sed omnes (963-965).
\]

In her paroxysm of anger, Medea describes for us the mangled form of the ghost of her brother whom she dismembered. His ghost comes seeking revenge (poenas petit, 964).

\[
\text{fige luminibus faces,} \\
\text{lania, perure, pectus en Furis patet.} \\
\text{Discedere a me, frater, ultrices deas} \\
\text{manesque ad imos ire securas iube (965-968).}
\]

She invites him to torture her with fire and to mutilate her as she had once done to him.

\[
\text{mihi me relinque et utere hac, frater, manu} \\
\text{quae strinxit ensem. victima manes tuos} \\
\text{placamus ista (969-971).}
\]

She commands him to use her hand and punish her by taking his vengeance out on her son.

\[
\text{We have already mentioned that Andromache sees Hector’s ghost in the grip of grief and } \\
\text{fear (Troad. 683-8), although the audience does not see him, and Medea sees the Furies before } \\
\text{the ghost of her brother (Med. 958-66). Thus Seneca does not have to be consistent from play to}
\]

\[
\text{369 Frank (1995) 91.}
\]
play: in the *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes*, the ghosts speak on stage, but in the other plays they do not. Moreover, there could have been a difference between recitations and performances: whereas the text of the *Phoenissae* calls to the minds of the listeners of a recitation that a character such as Oedipus has a vision of the ghost of his father, it would be effective in a performance to have a silent actor representing the ghost appear as Banquo’s ghost did in *Macbeth* (3.4.87).

4.2.2 Oedipus

In the *Oedipus*, Seneca differs from Sophocles in his introduction of both Roman religious practices and a Tiresias who is not all knowing—he cannot answer by divination Oedipus’ question about who murdered Laius (390-392). Oedipus fears that he himself may be guilty of the crime of parricide: *infanda timeo, ne mea genitor manu / perimatur* (15-16). He realizes that the murder of Laius is evil as he calls it *scelus* and *nefas* (17-18). Unable to divine Laius’ murderer, Tiresias decides that Laius himself must be summoned from the underworld (*ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis*, 393). Because Oedipus as king cannot pollute himself by looking on the shades (*te, penes quem summa regnorum, nefas / invisere umbras*, 398-399),

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370 Homer and Seneca establish the ghost as an archtype which later authors take up. Shakespeare, too, employs a ghost invisible to other characters when the guilt-ridden Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo at a banquet after ordering his execution (*Macbeth* 3.4.92-106). Again with the *Phoenissae*, we can compare Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* where Caesar’s ghost appears to his murderer Brutus and threatens revenge (4.3.281): “Thou shalt see me at Philippi.” Brutus, like Oedipus, alone sees the spirit (4.3.301: Varrus. “No, my lord, I saw nothing.” Claudio. “Nor I, my lord.”). The ancient source for Shakespeare’s scene with Caesar’s ghost is Plutarch’s *Life of Julius Caesar* 69.6-8 (Daniell [1998] 296 on *JC* 4.3.272.1). Daniell also cites Valerius Maximus (1.8.8) who writes that Caesar’s ghost haunted Cassius before the battle of Philippi. Shakespeare employs a procession of ghosts of people whom Richard III murdered to reveal his guilt (*R3* 5.3.204-6: “Methought the souls of all that I had murther’d / Came to my tent, and every one did threat / To-morrow’s vengeance on the head of Richard”). Shakespeare achieves another spectacular effect in *Cymbeline* by employing a family of ghosts, the parents and brothers of Posthumus, who (acting like the protective *daemones* of Alexander Polyhistor, D. L. 8.31-32) appear to Posthumus in a dream and complain to Jupiter about Posthumus’ fate before Jupiter appears and presents Posthumus with a prophecy about his future (*Cym*. 5.4.30-144).
he assigns the task to Creon and in the central act of the play Creon reports raising Laius’ ghost by necromancy.

The ceremony takes place far from the city and civilization in a grove that is dark—like the underworld (procul ab urbe lucus ilicibus niger, 530), or the central precinct of Atreus’ palace in the Thyestes (650-656). Cypresses, the tree sacred to Pluto and conventionally planted on tombs in Roman funerary practice, are personified, as were the trees in the Troades (173-174): they thrust their heads above the other high trees (cupressus altis exerens silvis caput, 532). Fantham notes the similarity between this passage and the appearance of Achilles in the Troades: the earth groans (Tro. 171-74 = Oed. 569-70, 577) as it splits open (Tro. 172 = Oed. 582-83); the trees are disturbed (Tro. 173-74 = Oed. 574-76) and the ghosts emerge (Tro. 179-180 = Oed. 586-88). The trees’ leaves stand on end like hair in fear (erexit comas, 574). One huge tree dominates and defends the grove (una defendit nemus, 544). But the scene is redolent of decay and putrifaction (putres, 534; huius abrupit latus / edax vetustas, 535-536). The earth rumbles as it quakes (compage rupta sonuit, 580) and gapes (dehiscit terra, 582) like an animal such as the angry Cerberus (ira furens / triceps catenas Cerberus movit graves, 580-581). In another correspondence with his scientific descriptions of earthquakes, Seneca employs compages (580) and dehiscere (582) together again, when a Stoic sage keeps his composure even in the face of external bad things such as an earthquake that uncovers the kingdoms of the dead (Nat. 6.32.4): securus aspiciet ruptis compagibus dehiscens solum, illa licet inferorum regna retegantur. Berno notes that the lexical reference (dehiscens) and the

371 TLL s.v., Serv. ad Aen. 2.714 funebrem arborem; ad 6.216 cupressus adhibetur ad funera vel quod caesa non repullulat vel quod per eam funestata ostenditur domus. Cypresses were planted on the mausoleum of Augustus.


373 Seneca borrows una nemus from Ovid, Met. 8.744, the story of Erysichthon.
thematic allusion (inferorum regna) to the tragedies adds dramatic force and stature to the figure of the heroic sapiens in Naturales Quaestiones, who goes so far as to provoke death. He thereby assumes an attitude analogous to that of Oedipus, who, in a moment of greatest tension, when he realizes his guilt, wishes that an earthquake would swallow him (868-870): Dehisce, tellus, tuque tenebrarum potens, / in Tartara ima, rector umbrarum, rape / retro reversas generis ac stirpis vices! But, here as elsewhere in Senecan tragedy, the purpose is to determine the morality of an action, which, if the Naturales Quaestiones presents it as heroic, the tragedies show as a consequence of the rule of anger. The dramatic amplification thus serves as well to deepen a fundamental aspect of Senecan ethics.

Seneca emphasizes Creon’s autopsy of the gods of the underworld among the shades (ipse pallentes deos / vidi inter umbras, 583-584) to attest to the veracity of his account, as Talthybius emphasized his eyewitness vantage in the Troades (170). The dramatist establishes Creon’s feeling of horror by having him observe his reaction, namely that his blood stopped cold in his veins (gelidus in venis stetit / haesitque sanguis, 585-586) at the sight of the whole snaky brood (omne vipereum genus, 587) of the band of brothers sown by Cadmus that killed each other. He then enumerates all the evils that come out of the underworld—personifications of anger (Erinys, Furor, 590) and fear (Horror, 591; Metus, 594), mourning (Luctus, 592),

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374 Berno (2003) 282. She argues (281) that the protagonists are guilty of atrocious crimes, citing Tro. 519-521. But Andromache is not guilty of any crime; she wishes that the earth might open (Dehisce tellus, 519) in a moment of great tension when she sees Odysseus approaching. She also prays to her ghostly husband to cleave (scinde, 520) the earth and hide their son in the underworld.

375 Phaed. 1238-1239 where Theseus realizes that he is guilty of causing his son’s death and wishes that the earth swallow him: Dehisce tellus, recipe me dirum chaos, / recipe, haec ad umbras iustior nobis via est.


377 Hamlet also feels cold before the ghost of his father appears (Ham. 1.4.1: “The air bites shrowdly, it is very cold”).
disease (Morbus, 593), old age (Senectus, 594), and plague (Pestis, 589). He describes the ghosts in traditional terms, comparing them to light mists (ut nebulae leves, 598) and creatures that fly (volitant, 599, the same word that Vergil employs of souls of the dead at Aeneid 6.329).

The ghosts of Laius’ ancestors precede him; they are Thebans whose royal family shares a history of evil that is repeatedly elaborated in classical tragedy. The mention of Zethus restraining a bull by the horns (610) invites us to recall his and his brother Amphion’s murder of their stepmother Dirce for maltreating their mother Antiope (Eur. Antiope; Ovid, Met. 6.110-111). The patronymic of Amphion’s wife, Niobe, Tantalis (613), recalls both Tantalus’ crime of feeding his son Pelops to the gods and Niobe’s arrogance in bragging that she had more children than Latona (Hom. Il. 24.602-617; S. Ant. 822-832, El. 150-152; Ov. Met. 6.148-312). Seneca portrays Niobe as unrepentantly arrogant even in the underworld, but he characteristically indicates that she now displays her pride in the safety of death where she can suffer no more (tuto superba fert caput fastu grave, 614). By employing the comparative peior (615), Seneca strives to outdo Ovid and introduces a worse mother than Niobe, the mad Agave (furibunda Agave, 616) who with her sisters tore apart her son Pentheus, when he committed the crime of spying with profane eyes upon sacred rites (Ov. Met. 3.710-731). This review of the crimes of the house of Thebes suggests that Oedipus’ guilt is inherited from his ancestors just as elements of Seneca’s dramatic narrative are derived from Ovid’s Theban narrative and other literary sources. They are literary ghosts, too. As Keith argues in connection with Statius’ account of Thebes’ history in the Thebaid, the city’s relentless return to origins extends to the

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378 Several of these personifications (Luctus, Morbus, Senectus, Metus) also inhabit Vergil’s underworld (A. 6.274-276).
literary level. Ovid’s mythological characters also enjoy a ‘palimpsestic afterlife’ in Seneca’s tragedies.\(^{379}\)

When Laius appears, he first tries to conceal himself (621), which may symbolize the hidden truths which Tiresias wants him to reveal.\(^{380}\) Laius is bristling (\textit{horridus}, 624) with blood poured over his body and his hair is covered with filth (624-625). He speaks in a rage (\textit{ore rabido fatur}, 626). He characterizes the house of Cadmus as savage (\textit{effera}, 626) because it always delights in kindred bloodshed (\textit{cruore semper laeta cognato domus}, 627). He considers that even the murder of Pentheus was less terrible than Oedipus’ deeds.\(^{381}\) Laius asserts that Thebes is not suffering from the anger of the gods, but because of a crime (\textit{patria, non ira deum, / sed scelere raperis}, 630-631). Thus Seneca emphasizes Oedipus’ crime as the cause of his and his city’s ills, in contrast to Sophocles’ emphasis on Apollo (\textit{OT} 377).

Laius argues that Oedipus’ behaviour is worse than that of wild beasts (638-641):

\begin{quote}
\textit{egitque in ortus semet et matri impios}
\textit{fetus regessit, quique vix mos est feris,}
\textit{fratres sibi ipse genuit—implicitum malum,}
\textit{magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua.}
\end{quote}

Laius observes that incest is rare among wild animals, but Oedipus has behaved worse than they in siring brothers for himself. Alliteration and consonance of m’s and p’s throughout the passage may express the monstrosity of Oedipus’ evil (\textit{implicitum malum, / magisque monstrum Sphinge...})

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perplexum sua, 640-641). We have already seen the alliteration of m’s conveying the evil of Medea (Med. 363: maiusque mari Medea malum) and Achilles (Troad. 169: maiora veris monstra). Oedipus has proved to be more of a monster than the Sphinx, literally a monster in her combination of animals, for he has produced relationships in his family more complex than the Sphinx’ riddle.

Te, te cruenta sceptrum qui dextra geris,
te pater inultus urbe cum tota petam
et mecum Erinyn pronubam thalami traham,
traham sonantes verbera, incestam domum
vertam et penates impio marte obteram (642-646).

Laius, with anaphora of te, curses his son with a father’s vengeance. Thus the situation is more menacing than in Hamlet where the ghost demands vengeance from his son (Shakespeare, Ham. 1.5.7): in Seneca, the ghost will wreak vengeance on his son (te pater inultus urbe cum tota petam, 643).

The ghost will bring the Fury that attended Oedipus’ wedding (mecum Erinyn pronubam thalami traham, 644) as well as the other Furies with their snapping whips (traham sonantes verbera, 645). Laius prophesies that he will bring about the obliteration of the house in impious warfare, an allusion to the mutual fratricide of Eteocles and Polyneices (incestam domum / vertam et penates impio marte obteram, 645-646). Moreover, Laius instructs Creon to punish Oedipus with exile (pulsum finibus regem ocius / agite exulem, 647-648). In addition, Laius foretells that Oedipus will take as his companions the personifications of evils: death (Letum, Mors), plague (Lues), trouble (Labor), decay (Tabes), and pain (Dolor, 652). The ghost

382 These are the goddesses who cause anger. See chapter 2.
designs that Oedipus will act as a scapegoat and draw out a train of evils from the city (1058-1060). Laius’ last threat is to deprive Oedipus of the sky (auferam caelum pater, 658), a reference to Oedipus’ self-blinding. Thus in the Phoenissae, the ghost of Laius works through Oedipus to exact his revenge upon him. Oedipus then passes on the familial curse to his sons when he wishes that they destroy each other and Thebes (urbs concremetur, 346; non satis est adhuc / civile bellum: frater in fratrem ruat, 355).\(^{383}\)

4.2.3 Thyestes

The ghost of Tantalus in the Thyestes is another father who sets in motion the evil of the play: the insatiable hunger of Atreus for power and that of Thyestes for meat and drink. Both produce disastrous results. A conversation between Tantalus and a Fury occupies the first act of the play, in which Tantalus speaks the prologue.

Quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit
avidus fugaces ore captantem cibos? (Thy. 1-2)

Tantalus portrays himself as a ghost which a Fury drags out of the underworld against his will (extrahit, 1). In performance, the Fury could drag him onstage by a chain or rope. Tantalus introduces the theme of hunger by alluding to his famous punishment of trying to grasp food that flies out of his reach (Hom. Od. 11.582-592). Tantalus’ self-naming in line 3 invites us to recall that he killed and cooked his son Pelops for the gods to eat (Thy. 144-151). Because they punished him, he calls their homes hateful (invisas domos, 3) and considers being shown them

\(^{383}\) However, Frank (1995) 173-4 argues that this is not an imprecatio (since Seneca does not employ the word) like the ἀραίί of Greek drama (e.g. S. OC 1372-6) but a hereditary compulsion for evil, which manifests itself in each generation.
again a further punishment (*quis male.../ ostendit*, 3-4). Tantalus also alludes to thirst and hunger, the central aspects of his eternal punishment (4-6):

peius inventum est siti
arente in undis aliquid et peius fame
hiante semper?

The comparative *peius* introduces the theme of Atreus’ finding a greater punishment for Thyestes than has ever been inflicted. Tantalus passes on his appetites of thirst and hunger to his grandson Thyestes as a family characteristic and prophesies that the crimes of his descendants will surpass his own (18-20):

iam nostra subit
e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus
ac me innocentem faciat et inausa audeat.

His use of *stirpe* and *genus* stresses the fact that this will become a family renowned for crime in tragedy. His descendants will inherit his excessive appetite for evil.

Even the Fury regards the ghost as hateful (*detestabilis / umbra*, 23-24) and instructs him to drive his family to anger (*penates impios fueris age*, 24), which will motivate evil. Among her many commands, she wills that heaven not be immune to his evil (*non sit a vestris malis / immune caelum*, 48-49). This will result in the sun withdrawing from the sky after Atreus kills and cooks his nephews (892). She commands Tantalus to infect the whole house with himself (53): *imple Tantalo totam domum*. Here his name stands by metonymy for his characteristic passions of hunger and thirst. She specifies the crime he is to inspire (56): *Thracium fiat nefas /

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384 At the same time, Seneca signals that he will surpass his predecessors with this drama.
Seneca’s audience would recognize the *Thracium nefas* as the serving up of Itys to his father Tereus in revenge for the latter’s infidelity with his sister-in-law (Ov. *Met.* 6.424-674). Seneca signals his rhetorical intensification of the theme in the comparative degree of *maiore numero*, as we saw in the *Medea* (*maiusque mari Medea malum*, 362). The comparative will come into play again when Atreus wants to outdo all earlier crimes (*maius hoc aliquid dolor / inveniat*, *Thy.* 274-275), as Seneca strives to outdo all previous versions of the drama when the Fury commands Tantalus to be present at Thyestes’ banquet as a guest (62-63: *non novi sceleris tibi / conviva venies*), she implies that this will be a crime familiar to Tantalus because he had served his own son Pelops to the gods.

In a metatheatrical comment, the Fury prophesies (65-67):

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mixtus in Bacchum cruor
spectante te potetur. inveni dapes
quas ipse fugeres. siste, quo praeceps ruis?
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She makes Tantalus a spectator to the play which is about to unfold. Her observation in line 67 that he is fleeing is an embedded stage direction for Tantalus to start to run offstage to indicate that he is reluctant to pollute his own house. His attempt to extricate himself from the Fury’s power indicates that he knows how evil a sequence of events she is asking him to initiate. Davis argues that Tantalus tries to escape and block the Fury’s entry into the house, resisting until the Fury lashes him into submission. In performance, the Fury could even snap her whip to make him stop when she says, *siste* (67).

It has not generally been noticed that Tantalus is a comic figure, but in running from punishment, he resembles a cowardly slave like Tranio in Plautus’ *Mostellaria* (TH. *Quo te agis?* 385

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TR. *Nequoquam abeo.*—*Ne ego sum miser,* 562).\(^{386}\) In Plautus’ play, a cowardly slave makes up a story about a ghost (*Mos.* 496-505) while in Seneca’s, a ghost plays a cowardly slave. In lines 67-72 he uses the same three words in the same sequence that Plautus uses: *quo, abire, miser.*

The Senecan Tantalus feels the punishment he knows in the underworld is preferable and longs for the security of his own bedroom even if it is in prison (70-73):

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abire in atrum carceris liceat mei
cubile; liceat, si parum videor miser,
mutare ripas: alveo medius tuo,
Phlegethon, relinquar igneo cinctus freto.
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He even consigns himself to a different river, the Phlegethon, in which fire will torment him. In his following lines, he appears to be addressing tragic heroes who suffer various punishments (74-75): *Quicumque poenas lege fatorum datas / pati iuberis.* To these heroes, Tantalus offers the comic advice (82): *amate poenas!* That is, they should be happy with their lot.

Tantalus’ next statement is characteristic of Seneca the philosopher (82-83): *quando continget mihi / effugere superos?* We can read this speech two ways: Tantalus asks either, “When can I escape the gods?” or “When can I find safety in death?” On the first reading, Tantalus expresses a wish to be like Medea when she escapes to where there are no gods (*Med.* 1027); on the second, he expresses a Stoic principle (*Tuta est, perire quae potest debet cupit, Troad.* 574). When the Fury commands him to fill his descendants with the evil love of the sword (*ferri malum / regibus amorem*, 84-85), Tantalus protests in a metatheatrical comment: *Me pati poenas decet, / non esse poenam!* (87-88). Tantalus recognizes that it is his traditional

\(^{386}\) Ovid also has Alcyone ask the ghost of Ceyx, ‘*quo te rapis?*’ (*Met.* 11.676). This may be a way of addressing ghosts.
role to suffer punishments rather than to be one. But he also alludes to another reason for his punishment: *ingenti licet / taxata poena lingua crucietur loquax, / nec hoc tacebo* (91-93). For a variant of the myth has Tantalus earlier divulge the secrets of the gods to humans.\(^{387}\)

He warns his descendants not to give in to evil (93-95): *Moneo, ne sacra manus / violate caede neve furiali malo / aspergite aras*. The bloodshed will bring a curse on the family (*sacra, 93*) and the evil of an avenging fury (*furiali malo, 94*). Thus Tantalus tries to defy the commands of the Fury. He then utters another series of embedded stage directions (96-100):

    Quid ora terres verbere et tortos ferox
    minaris angues? quid famem infixam intimis
    agitas medullis? flagrat incensum siti
    cor et perustis flamma visceribus micat.
    sequor.

The Fury employs her whip and snakes to intimidate Tantalus (96-97). She inflames his hunger and thirst. He acquiesces with the same word (*sequor, 100*) that Thyestes will later use with his sons (*ego vos sequor, 489*). In behaviour, he is as malleable as his grandfather Tantalus. Atreus will persuade him in Act 3, just as the Fury persuades Tantalus in Act 1. Thus evil does not always take the form of initiative, which Atreus has, but can also appear as passivity, as in Thyestes’ case.

The Fury employs anaphora which may indicate that she continues to crack her whip to instill her characteristic anger in Tantalus (101-103): *Hunc, hunc furorem divide in totam domum. / sic, sic ferantur et suum infensi invicem / sitiant cruorem*. The Fury describes

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\(^{387}\) Apollodorus, *Ep.* 2.1: κολάξεσθαι δὲ αὐτὸν οὕτως λέγουσι τίνες, ὅτι τὰ τῶν θεῶν ἔξελάλησεν ἄνθρωποις μυστήρια. “Some say that he was thus punished because he divulged the secrets of the gods to men.”
Tantalus’ infecting his house with frenzy and personifies the house as bristling in horror at the contact (*sentit introitus tuos / domus et nefando tota contactu horruit*, 103-104). She adds a metatheatrical comment that Tantalus has performed the evil deed abundantly (*actum est abunde*, 105). With this phrase, she signals that the action of the first act has come to an end. Atreus will repeat the adverb in Act 5 when he is momentarily satisfied with his revenge (889).

In this way, driven by a Fury the goddess of anger, the ghost as a vehicle of vengeance causes the disaster to unfold in this play. When the chorus prays that the gods will end the sequence of evildoing among Tantalus’ descendants (132-135), therefore, the audience suspects that not even the actions of this play will fulfill that prayer. Indeed, at the play’s close, Atreus and Thyestes curse one another (1110-1112) with the result that the cycle of crime continues.

### 4.2.4 Agamemnon

Seneca draws on this inheritance of guilt in the *Agamemnon*, as the family curse recurs with the ghost of Thyestes speaking the prologue instead of Aeschylus’ watchman. When Thyestes calls the throne room *hic epulis locus* (11), he alludes to Atreus’ provision of a feast of the flesh of his own sons (26-27). Thyestes is thus fully aware of his literary heritage. Like the ghost of Tantalus in *Thyestes* (68-83), however, the grandson is reluctant to fulfil his orders and wants to return to the underworld (*libet reverti*, 12). Thyestes reveals his further crime of

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388 OLD s. ago 25; *fabula haec est acta*, Pl. Mos. 1181.

389 Fitch (1981) 289-307 and (2002) 12 concludes from his study of sense-pauses that Seneca composed the *Agamemnon* before the *Thyestes*. Tarrant (1985) 11 concludes that the *Thyestes* dates from AD 60-62, the Neronian period. The Greek models for the *Thyestes* would have included Sophocles’ *Atreus* and Euripides’ *Thyestes*. Among Roman models were Ennius’ and Varius Rufus’ *Thyestes*, and Accius’ and Mamerus Aemilius Scaurus’ *Atreus*. Roman models for the *Agamemnon* include Livius Andronicus’ *Aegisthus* (Warmington [1936] vol. 2, p. 3) and perhaps Accius’ *Aegisthus* and *Clytemnestra*. 
committing incest with his daughter Pelopia to father an avenger (28-31).\(^{390}\) Thyestes himself 

has a vision (46) of their son, Aegisthus, the product of perverted nature, killing the king at 

another feast (**parantur epulae!** 48). Thyestes acts here as a father figure who encourages his 

son not to hesitate (**quid ipse temet consulis torques rogas, / an deceat hoc te?** 51-52).

The ghost’s presence delays the rising of the sun (**Phoebum moramur**, 56). It is a topos 

of Senecan tragedy that the sun does not want to look on evil, particularly Thyestean evil.\(^{391}\) 

The sun hesitates to rise in the **Thyestes** (**en ipse Titan dubitat**, 120) after the ghost of Tantalus 

has infected his house with evil; and again the sun flees backward at the sight of Thyestes eating 

his sons (**O Phoebe patiens, fugeris retro licet / medioque raptum merseris caelo diem, / sero 

occidisti!** 776-778). As Braden observes, the motif has resonance with Stoic cosmology, where a 

principle of universal sympatheia transmits moral action into physical consequences.\(^{392}\) 

Tarrant 

notes that ghosts are conventionally released for limited periods of time (**Aesch. Persians** 693), 

and often must leave at dawn. But with Thyestes, the pattern is reversed: day refuses to begin 

until the ghost departs.\(^{393}\) In fact, the ghost is impious enough to command the god to restore the 

daylight (**redde iam mundo diem**, **Ag.** 56). The ghost’s appearance and encouragement to his son 

initiates the action which will lead to disaster.

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\(^{390}\) Tarrant (1976) 173.

\(^{391}\) e.g. **Phaed.** 678-679, **Med.** 29-31, and **Thy.** 120-121, 776-778, 892.

\(^{392}\) Braden (1985) 55.

\(^{393}\) Tarrant (1976) 180.
4.3 Curses

Like ghosts, curses are at the heart of revenge drama. Curses structure Aeschylus’ earliest tragedies. His *Seven against Thebes* is the third play of a Theban tetralogy, which shows the destructive effects of a family curse worked out on the third generation. Curses were typical in concluding tragedies. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is a revenge drama that involves the working out of a familial curse. Aegisthus explains how his father Thyestes, when he realized that he had been served his sons, uttered the curse: “So perish all the race of Pleisthenes.” Thus Aegisthus justifies his plotting to kill his cousin Agamemnon.

Seneca supersedes earlier tragedians. In the *Troades*, Hecuba curses the Greek fleet in revenge for Pyrrhus’ sacrifice of her daughter Polyxena (*Tro. 1005-1008*):

\[ quid precer vobis? precor \]
\[ his digna sacris aequora: hoc classi accidat \]
\[ toti Pelasgae, ratibus hoc mille accidat \]
\[ meae precabor, cum vehar, quidquid rati. \]

Her use of *adnominatio* in anaphora of *precer...precor...precabor* emphasizes that she is pronouncing an *imprecatio*, a calling down of curses, upon the Greek fleet.

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394 Storey and Allan (2005) 244.

395 Aesch. *Ag*. 1598-1599, 1601-1602: κἂπειτ’ ἑπιγνοὺς ἑργὸν οὐ καταίσιον / ὡμωξέν, ἀμπίπτει δ’ ἀπὸ σφαγῆν ἔρων, / ...λακτίσμα δείπνου ξυνδίκως τιθείς ἀραί, / οὕτως ὀλέσθαι πάν τὸ Πλεισθένους γένος. “And then, when he perceived the monstrous thing that had been done, he shrieked, and fell backward spewing out the butchery, kicking over the table and making this act of equal right with the curse he uttered: ‘so perish all the race of Pleisthenes.’” (trans. Fraenkel).

396 *OLD* s.v.
Hecuba’s statement is of the sort that the modern philosopher J. L. Austin calls a “performative utterance,” in which the speaker is doing something rather than merely saying something.\textsuperscript{397} This is a particularly appropriate analysis of curses; for when a character says what she is doing, she is actually performing that action. Such statements begin with the verb in the first person singular, usually present indicative active.\textsuperscript{398} Hence Medea begins her magic spell, aimed at the destruction of her rival Creusa, with the words (Med. 740): \textit{Comprecor vulgus silentum vosque ferales deos}. She invokes the help of the infernal gods in casting her spell. Likewise Hecuba here invokes the help of the gods in exacting revenge on the Greeks, praying for stormy seas that will sink the Greek fleet and going so far as to include her own destruction by the same means. This disaster will overtake many of the Greek heroes, such as the lesser Ajax (Sen. Ag. 532-556, modelled after Verg. A. 1.39-45).\textsuperscript{399} But Hecuba’s lines invite us to remember the accounts of Euripides and Ovid who relate that she herself will be spared shipwreck only to suffer the loss of yet another son, Polydorus, and take vengeance on Polymestor before she is turned into a dog (Eur. Hecuba 1132-1265; Ov. Met. 13.533-575).

There are several Latin words for “curse”, including \textit{imprecatio}, \textit{exsecratio} and \textit{devotio}. Roman authors at first employed the latter as a religious term to signify a general’s ‘devotion’ of himself to the infernal gods on his country’s behalf.\textsuperscript{400} Seneca employs \textit{devotio} in this technical sense when he writes about the Decii, the most famous practitioners of \textit{devotio}, in \textit{de beneficiis} (6.36.2):

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{397} J. L. Austin (1979) 235.
  \item \textsuperscript{398} Ibid. 240.
  \item \textsuperscript{399} Tarrant (1976) 275-278.
  \item \textsuperscript{400} \textit{OLD} s.v. 1; cf. \textit{TLL} s.v.
\end{itemize}
Nihil debet Scipioni Roma, si Punicum bellum, ut finiret, aluit; nihil Deciis, quod morte patriam servaverunt, si prius optaverant, ut devotioni fortissimae locum ultima rerum necessitas faceret.

Publius Decius Mus\textsuperscript{401} was frequently employed in the rhetorical tradition an example of a general who sacrificed himself for the safety of his country, as he did in a battle against the Latins in 340 BC. His son later followed his example of self-sacrifice at Sentinum in the decisive battle for the supremacy of Italy in 295 BC and was likewise commemorated in the Roman rhetorical tradition (Cic. \textit{Rab. Post.} 2, \textit{N.D.} 3.15; Livy 9.10.3; Val. Max. 5.6.6).\textsuperscript{402}

Versnel explains that at the moment when defeat in battle was imminent, these Roman generals resorted to the ultimate means to save the situation by ‘devoting’ themselves, together with the enemy troops, to the gods of the underworld.\textsuperscript{403} Fowler stresses the magical aspect of their devotiones when he writes that by the act of self-sacrifice, which is the potent element in the spell, Decius exercises magical power over the enemy, and ‘devotes’ them, along with himself to death.\textsuperscript{404}

In the imperial period, however, devotio takes on the meaning of a formal curse or execration,\textsuperscript{405} which Versnel calls a later degeneration of the meaning of the word.\textsuperscript{406} Petronius, Seneca’s contemporary, employs devotio in this sense of cursing at a bad omen (103.5-6):

\textsuperscript{401} \textit{RE} 15.

\textsuperscript{402} \textit{RE} 16.

\textsuperscript{403} H. Versnel (1976) 365 who argues that the proper term for the self-sacrifice of the general is consecratio (p. 410).

\textsuperscript{404} W. W. Fowler (1933) 208, quoted by H. Versnel (1976) 365.

\textsuperscript{405} \textit{OLD} s.v. 2.

A passenger on board the ship on which Encolpius and his friends are travelling sees Eumolpus’
slave shaving them and mistakes the act for the last offering of shipwrecked sailors; so the
passenger curses the omen (execratusque omen), but the friends pretend not to hear his curses
(dissimulata...devotione). Here too Petronius employs the verb execror, which also means “to
curse” and appears in this sense much earlier in the Roman tragic tradition. Thus Cicero
employs this verb when he refers to Ennius’ tragedy, Thyestes, in his treatise on the nature of the
soul, Tusculan Disputations (1.44.107): exsecratur luculentis sane versibus apud Ennium
Thyestes primum ut naufragio pereat Atreus. durum hoc sane; talis enim interitus non est sine
gravi sensu. This testimony allows us to infer that in Ennius’ version of the drama, Thyestes
cursed Atreus with dying by shipwreck. Cicero comments that this is a cruel prayer as such an
end involves grievous consciousness of death. But we may also see that curses are typical in
Roman, as well as Greek, tragedy.

Seneca himself employs imprecatio to signify the calling down of curses in his moral
epistles (Ep. 94.53): nocent qui execrantur. nam et horum imprecatio falsos nobis metus inserit.
Indeed, the Stoic Seneca observes that our enemies’ cursing us instills fears in us that we should
not regard as important and he illustrates this view throughout his own tragedies. Vergil provides
an illustrious model in Dido’s curse (A.4.628-629): litora litoribus contraria, fluctibus undas /
imprecor, arma armis; pugnent ipsique nepotesque. Dido invokes from heaven cataclysms to
destroy Aeneas’ fleet and wars to plague generations of his descendants to come, viz. the Punic wars. The Elder Seneca also employs the verb in his rhetorical writings (Con. 7.1.5, *si aliter sentiret, infelicia sibi imprecatus est maria*) in the sense of calling down evils upon oneself. His son follows his example in his treatise on anger, *de ira* (2.36.5): *mortem liberis, egestatem sibi, ruinam domui imprecantur et irasci se negant non minus quam insanire furiosi*. Angry people pray for the ruin of themselves and their house, even as they deny that they are angry.

In *de beneficiis*, Seneca explains that one does not wish a friend ill just so that one may have the glory of doing him the favour of helping him in adversity (6.35.4):

> Hoc, quod optas, iniquius est; *exsecraris* enim illum et caput sanctum tibi dira *precatione defigis*. Nemo, ut existimo, de immanitate animi tui dubitaret, si aperte illi paupertatem, si captivitatem, si famem ac metum *imprecareris*; at quid interest, utrum vox ista sit *voti* tui an vis?

In this passage he employs several terms for cursing: the verbs *exsecraris* and *imprecareris*. To the noun *precatione*, which signifies a prayer, he gives a negative connotation with the addition of the adjective *dira*, which, as we have seen, implies the dreadful anger of the gods. He employs another noun for a prayer, *voti*, which, as this context shows, can be a request for something bad. Also interesting is his use of the verb *defigis*, which basically means “to fix”, but in this context means “to bind with a spell” or “bewitch.” As such it is a technical term of

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408 *OLD s.v., TLL s.v.*

409 See chapter 2.

410 *OLD s.v. 2.*

411 *OLD s.v. 6, TLL s.v.*
religion because in making imprecations, the waxen image of the person for whom destruction was to be prepared, or his name written in wax, was stuck through with a needle.\footnote{OLD s.v. 6.}

Curses animate the action of two Senecan tragedies, \textit{Phoenissae} and \textit{Oedipus}. Oedipus’ life is blighted by the prophecy that he shall kill his father and lie with his mother (\textit{Oed}. 15-16): \textit{infanda timeo, ne mea genitor manu / perimatur}. The Delphic oracle warns him (\textit{monent}, 16) and predicts that he will commit two crimes (\textit{indicunt}, 17): \textit{hoc me Delphicae laurus monent, / aliudque nobis maius indicunt scelus} (16-17). Again Seneca employs the comparative degree to signal a greater crime: \textit{est maius aliquod patre mactato nefas} (18)? Oedipus can imagine no worse crime than parricide—except incest (19-21):

\begin{quote}
pro misera pietas! eloqui fatum pudet:
thalamos parentis Phoebus et diros toros
nato minatur impia incestos face.
\end{quote}

Moreover, he unknowingly curses himself when he curses the murderer of Laius (257-259):

\begin{quote}
cuius Laius dextra occidit,
hunc non quieta tecta, non fidi lares,
non hospitalis exulem tellus ferat.
\end{quote}

Oedipus thus condemns himself to exile (\textit{exulem}, 259).

The chorus, however, believes that the cause of the plague lies elsewhere. They sing of the approach of the Furies (\textit{Rupere Erebi claustra profundi / turba sororum face Tartarea}, 160-161) and believe the cause of the plague to be the gods’ longstanding anger against Thebes (709-712):
Non tu tantis causa periclis,
non haec Labdacidas petunt
fata, sed veteres deum
irae sequuntur.

The phrase *deum irae* suggests the Dirae, the triad of Furies who cause anger and traditionally motivate tragic action. The chorus cannot see that both statements are true: there is a double motivation in Oedipus’ fate and the history of the anger of the gods against Thebes.

The chorus goes on to recall that when Cadmus sowed the serpent’s teeth, he harvested armed men who fought Thebes’ first civil war (*civile nefas*, 748), in a conflict that foreshadows the civil war of Oedipus’ sons (*illa Herculeae norint Thebae / proelia fratrum*, 749-750).

Oedipus too sees himself as inheriting the tragic tradition of Theban mythical figures (930-933):

sacer Cithaeron, vel feras in me tuis
emitte silvis, mitte vel rabidos canes—
nunc redde Agaven.

He calls Cithaeron *sacer* (930), that is, as an accursed site, the location of repeated familial disasters, as e.g. the fate of Actaeon, torn apart by his hunting dogs, to which he refers in *rabidos canes* (932), alludes to a myth famously recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (3.174-252). Moreover, Seneca’s mention of Pentheus’ mother Agave (933) recalls his violent death, also narrated by Ovid in his Theban narrative (*Met*. 3.708-733), though the *locus classicus* is the account of Euripides in his *Bacchae* (1043-1143). Oedipus thus calls upon Cithaeron to send him a death such as these tragic figures suffered.

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With this pair of plays, the chronology of composition mirrors the chronology of mythological action. As in *Oedipus*, so in the *Phoenissae*, Oedipus knows that he is cursed (277-280):

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fatum ipse novi: nemo sine sacro feret
illud cruore. magna praesagit mala
paternus animus. iacta iam sunt semina
cladis futurae.
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He acknowledges his accursed blood (*sacro...cruore*, 277-278) and accepts this as the cause of future disaster (*cladis futurae*, 280). Frank takes *sacro...cruore* to allude to the blood of a kinsman, considered sacred because of the religious bond of *pietas* linking members of a family to one another and to the gods; but she concedes that it may be a veiled reference to the mutual slaughter of the brothers. Each curse leads, apparently inexorably, to another in this family.

In Senecan drama, vengeance typically motivates not only cruelty towards non-kin, but especially cruelty towards kin in the form of intergenerational family curses. Phaedra feels driven by a family curse that causes the women of her family to make bad choices in love (*Phaed*., 124-28):

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stirpem perosa Solis invis Venu
per nos catenas vindicat Martis sui
suaque, probris omne Phoebeum genus
onerat nefandis: nulla Minois levi
defuncta amore est, iungitur semper nefas.
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Seneca’s choice of the terms *perosa* and *invisi* convey the strong hatred that Venus has for the descendants of the Sun, who betrayed her dalliance with Mars as was first told by the Homeric

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bard Demodocus in the *Odyssey* (8.266-366), and twice treated by Ovid (*A.A. 2.561-588, Met. 4.171-192). Seneca takes his cue from Ovid (*Her. 4.53-62*) in having Venus’ revenge (*vindicat, 125*) cause evil deeds of indecency (*probris...nefandis, 126-127*) among the descendants of Phoebus. This curse includes wrongs (*nefas, 128*) committed by every woman of Minos’ family, an allusion to Europa’s admiration for Jupiter in the form of a bull (Ov. *Met. 2.858*), the Sun’s daughter Pasiphae’s mating with a bull (Ov. *Her. 4.57-58*), Ariadne’s betrayal of her father when she assisted Theseus in killing her half-brother, the Minotaur (Ov. *Met. 8.172-175*), Phaedra’s passion for her stepson Hippolytus (Ov. *Her. 4 passim*; Sen. *Phaed. 169-172*), and Aërope’s adultery with Thyestes (Apollod. *Ep. 2.13*; Ov. *Tr. 2.391*).

Phaedra’s Cretan familial curse proves contagious in Athens. Phaedra’s reference to Hippolytus’ sword leads Theseus to assume that his son violated Phaedra (*Phaed. 896-900*). Theseus therefore invokes the help of Neptune to bring destruction to Hippolytus (*Phaed. 941-944*):

> tela quo mitti haud queunt,  
> huc *vota* mittam. genitor aequoreus dedit  
> ut *vota* prono terna concipiam deo,  
> et invocata munus hoc sanxit Styge.

Theseus’ anaphora of *vota* (942-943) underlines his conscious decision to deploy his final curse as a weapon (*tela, 941*) in order to do harm to his son. In calling upon the supernatural with his prayer to his divine father Neptune, the Earthshaker, who granted Theseus three wishes and swore by the river of the underworld, the Styx (944), Theseus not only plans Hippolytus’ death, but consigns him to face the shades that he himself had lately angered by his successful descent
and return from the underworld (*adeatque manes iuvenis iratos patri*, 947). Hippolytus will therefore be made to pay for his father’s sin of breaking the natural law that forbids a living person to enter the underworld.

Theseus elaborates his curse (948-950):

> fer abominandam nunc opem nato, parens.  
> numquam supremum numinis munus tui consumeremus, magna ni premerent *mala*.

Theseus mistakenly assumes that great evils are pressing him (*magna ni premerent mala*, 950) when he is the one inflicting evil on his son since he believes that Hippolytus has made advances to Phaedra; for this reason he uses his last wish to curse his son (949-950).

> inter profunda Tartara et Ditem horridum  
> et imminentes regis inferni minas,  
> *voto* peperci: *redde nunc pactam fidem.—*  
> genitor, moraris? cur adhuc undae silent?  
> nunc atra ventis nubila impellentibus  
> subtexe noctem, sidera et caelum eripe (951-956).

By having Theseus say that he has refrained from using a wish to protect him in the underworld (*voto peperci*, 953), Seneca departs from the traditional form of the curse to show that Theseus is more upset now than he was in the underworld. Theseus’ request is so heinous that the god hesitates to fulfill his evil request (*genitor, moraris? cur adhuc undae silent?*, 954). Theseus recognizes the evil of his request when he continues by asking Neptune to cause an unnatural

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415 Coffey and Mayer (1990) 171.

416 Ibid., 172.
night (*subtexe noctem*, 956) and even to remove the stars and heaven (*sidera et caelum eripe*, 956) so that darkness may conceal the crime. This phenomenon recalls the Sun’s withdrawing from Atreus’ crime in the *Thyestes* (776-778).

There, the Messenger relates how Atreus acts as a priest as if trying to impart sanctity to a grisly human sacrifice (*Thy*. 691-697):

> Ipse est sacerdos, ipse funesta **prece**
> letale carmen ore violento canit.
> stat ipse ad aras, ipse **devotos neci**
> contractat et componit et ferro apparat;
> attendit ipse: nulla pars sacri perit.
> lucus tremescit, tota successo solo
> nutavit aula, dubia quo pondus daret.

Atreus utters a deadly prayer (*funesta prece*, 691) and arranges the boys as if they are sacrificial animals, cursed to die (*devotos neci*, 693) through no fault of their own. In reaction to Atreus’ horrible crime, several supernatural events occur, all of which the Romans considered bad omens. The sacred grove shudders as if human (*lucus tremescit*, 696). Again there is an earthquake (*nutavit aula*, 697), which, as we have seen, Seneca calls an evil in his *Naturales Quaestiones* (6.1.7). A comet, unlucky in itself, also appears from the unlucky left side. In the *Naturales Quaestiones*, Seneca explains that comets portend bloodshed (*Nat*. 7.17.3):

*Cruenti quidam, minaces, qui omen praefuturi sanguinis ferunt.* In the *Thyestes*, Seneca seems to allude to this when he represents wine changing to blood (*vina mutato fluunt / cruenta*

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417 Ovid uses *subtexere* in a similar supernatural context of darkening the sun when Circe is using her witchcraft in an attempt to gain the love of Picus: *patrio capiti* (i.e. *Solis* *bibulas subtexere nubes* (*Met*. 14.368).

Baccho, 700-701) as a precursor of the wine mixed with blood which Thyestes will drink, and ivory statues weeping in the temples (flevit in templis ebur, 702). As Tarrant notes, the dynastic aspect of Atreus’ crime may explain why several of the portents correspond to signs observed before the death of a ruler.\textsuperscript{419} The portent of ivory statues weeping in the temples particularly recalls an omen of the death of Julius Caesar (Verg. G. 1.480: maestum inlacrimat templis ebur).\textsuperscript{420} These prodigies move all present, with the notable exception of Atreus: he frightens even the gods themselves (deos/terret minantes, 704-705).

The messenger refers to the sons of Thyestes a second time as cursed heads (712-716):

\textit{sic dirus} Atreus capita \textbf{devota} impiae
speculatur irae. quem prius mactet sibi
dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet.
nec interest, sed dubitat et saevum scelus
iuvat ordinare.

The sons inherit the guilt of their father, which according to Solon is unjust (poem 1.31-32), a concept which Senecan tragedy takes over from Attic drama. The boys are consecrated to Atreus’ anger (\textit{devota}, 712).\textsuperscript{421} Seneca characterizes Atreus as \textit{dirus} (712); the anger of the gods possesses him.\textsuperscript{422} Atreus’ \textit{ira} is the deity to whom the boys are offered, taking the place of the

\textsuperscript{419} Tarrant (1985) 191.
\textsuperscript{420} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{421} TLL 3.416.49-74.
Di Manes who would normally receive a *devotio*. He sacrifices the boys to his own godhead (*mactet sibi*, 713). As a god, he has rewritten the laws of justice and does what pleases him (*saevum scelus/ iuvat ordinare*, 715-716).

In the *Thyestes*, Atreus commits terrible crimes, but he justifies them on the grounds of vengeance for Thyestes’ adultery with his wife Aërope and attempt to steal his throne: *Sceleri modus debetur ubi facias scelus, / non ubi reponas* (1052-3). The play ends with the brothers hurling curses at each other. Thyestes invokes divine vengeance (*Vindices aderunt dei: / his puniendum vota te tradunt mea*, 1110-1111) and curses Atreus with being punished by the very nephews whom he has killed. Atreus caps that curse with another: *Te puniendum liberis trando tuis* (1112). Atreus turns the tables on Thyestes and leaves him to be punished by his dead sons, who paid for their father’s adultery with their lives. The play shocks as it ends with Atreus’ triumph, with no prospect of his punishment. Atreus is Seneca’s supreme example of the ruler who delights in his own evil.

We have seen that Seneca employs ghosts and curses in his tragedies as literary devices that precipitate disaster. Moreover, there was a rich social script for such supernatural phenomena in contemporary Rome. In his *Naturales Quaestiones*, Seneca records the sighting of a comet in AD 60 (7.17.2). Hine notes that comets were widely believed to portend the death of a ruler. Seneca dramatizes such a ceremony of necromancy to bring down a homicidal and incestuous king in his *Oedipus*. Ogden observes that Roman emperors were particularly anxious

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424 The *Medea* also ends with the heroine’s apparent escape with impunity.

that others should not use necromancy to ask about their death. Indeed, they may have
considered such inquiries tantamount to cursing.\textsuperscript{426} In the Conclusion, we shall therefore
consider how the tragedies of Seneca may reflect the political and social context of Neronian Rome.

\textsuperscript{426} Ogden (2001) 257.
Seneca’s tragedies reflect the philosophical tenets which he prescribes in his treatises. In *Epistle* 80.7, moreover, Seneca draws a comparison between life and theatre, and argues that nothing is more effective than this comparison: *Saepius hoc exemplo mihi utendum est, nec enim ullo efficacios exprimitur hic humanae vitae mimus, qui nobis partes, quas *male* agamus, adsignat.* This farce of human life assigns us parts which we play badly.\(^{427}\) Seneca follows this statement with a description of an actor who speaks the opening lines of Accius’ *Atreus*: *En impero Argis; regna mihi liquit Pelops, / Qua ponto ab Helles atque ab Ionio mari / Urgetur Isthmos.* Nero may have enjoyed playing the part of Thyestes (Juv. 8.228; Dio 63.22.6), but he acted like Atreus, performing acts of evil.

*Saevitia* or savagery is κακία, a vice. *Saevitia* transgresses all customary, human limits. As Seneca writes in *de clementia* (1.25.1), it is bestial madness to rejoice in wounds and blood, to cast off the man and turn into an animal of the forest. Hippolytus understands that crime between family members is a symptom of moral decline (*Phaed*. 553-554). Phaedra inherits the vice of lust from her grandmother Europa and her mother Pasiphae. On the other hand, the Nurse acts like a Stoic in advising her to check her passion (165-167).\(^{428}\) Phaedra is the antithesis to the Stoic *sapiens* when she says *quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor* (184).

\(^{427}\) Staley (2010) 123 has also noted the importance of this passage.

\(^{428}\) The Nurse in *Medea*, Amphitryon in *Her. F.* and Agamemnon in *Troades* also act as a Stoic adviser to one bent on acts of evil. Tarrant (1976) 212 on *Ag.* 203 cites *Med.* 174 *compesce verba*, *Her. F.* 975 *compesce dementem impetum*, but does not include *Tro.* 250 *juvenile vitium est regere non posse impetum*. On this passage Fantham (1982) 241 notes that Seneca, requiring a mouthpiece for his own values, has had to impose the Stoic mask upon Agamemnon.
Thyestes behaved like a Stoic during his exile when he renounced the value of material goods and revelled in hardship (*Thy.* 417-418: *modo inter illa, quae putant cuncti aspera, / fortis fui laetusque*, cf. *Ep.* 73.14). Living a simple life among the beasts (*mixtam feris / similemque vitam*, 413-414), he achieved the Stoic ideal of *virtus* and the happiness it brings. However, when he returns to the city, he succumbs to fear of evils (*metuis mala*, 425). In *Thyestes*, there is no *pietas* for familial ties or institutions of civilization. Thyestes’ incest with his sister-in-law in an unlawful attempt to wrest the kingship from his brother causes Atreus’ bestial delight in killing his nephews and making his brother a cannibal.

The Chorus’ statement that roof beams gleaming with gold (*Thy.* 347: *non auro nitidae trabes*) do not make a king suggests criticism of Nero who was building his *Domus Transitoria* at the time Seneca was composing the play *circa* 62 (and before the great fire of 64, Suet. *Nero* 31.2). Their following lines may be read as criticism of Nero’s behaviour (*Thy.* 348-352):

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rex est qui posuit metus
et diri mala pectoris;
quem non ambitio impotens
et numquam stabilis favor
vulgi praecipitis movet.
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The Chorus urges a king to be a Stoic sage in abandoning fear. Atreus, like Nero, is not free of the evils of a dreadful heart (*diri mala pectoris*). The Chorus’ lines seem prophetic as to the end of his life Nero would be paranoid about the fickle favour of the people (Suet. *Nero* 46.1, *Terrebatur ad hoc evidentibus portentis somniorum et auspiciorium et ominum*).
In *Hercules Furens*, Hercules civilizes the world by killing monsters, but acts like a beast when he kills Lycus (636): *ad hauriendum sanguinem inimicum feror*.\(^{429}\) Hercules wishes that no savage and cruel tyrants might reign (936-938). This is a statement that resonates with the savage and cruel behaviour of Gaius, Claudius and Nero that we discussed in the Introduction. Yet in his madness, Hercules slays his own wife and children. Champlin draws a comparison between Hercules and Nero, who portrayed Hercules on stage (Suet. *Nero* 21.3): like the hero, Nero killed his wife Poppaea, the woman he loved, and the child who was to succeed him. According to Champlin, Nero consciously presented versions of myth on stage before an audience eager to discover the slightest nuance of contemporary relevance.\(^{430}\) In tragedy, Seneca found a medium for writing cautionary tales of savage behaviours that should be avoided by civilized Romans.

Seneca identified one of the passions, anger, as the greatest evil (*de ira* 2.12.6). Medea shows herself to be the opposite of a Stoic sage when she says *rumpe iam segnes moras* (54), for it is precisely delay that Seneca counsels to diffuse anger (*de ira* 1.11.5). Medea observes, *fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest* (176), expressing the Stoic ideal that the external world is of secondary importance to one’s state of mind. However, Medea feels pleasure in killing her sons (991). She displays the character of the anti-Stoic, for Seneca writes that the good man does not rejoice in punishment (*de ira* 1.6.5). We have seen that many points from Seneca’s discussion of anger in his treatise are dramatized in his tragedy *Medea*. He has shown in both works that anger is the most powerful emotion and the greatest evil. Moreover, there is a close correspondence in the language and the philosophical points between the play and the treatise.


Cruelty is another evil and can be practiced as policy without anger (*de clem*. 2.4.1-2). Cruelty involves the infliction of suffering and death as in the *Troades*, where the Greeks complete their genocide of the Trojans by killing two children of the royal family. Ulysses performs cruel acts, not out of anger but out of policy, deliberately and with cold calculation as a result of Calchas’ proclamation that Astyanax must die so that the Greek ships may sail (368-369). However, Astyanax robs Ulysses of the satisfaction of killing him, by leaping willingly to his death (1102), like a Stoic *sapiens* (*de prov*. 5.8). Priam and Polyxena also accept death like a Stoic *sapiens*, as Seneca would do to escape the tyranny of Nero (Tac. *Ann*. 15.61-64; Suet. *Nero* 35.5).431

As Buchan suggests,432 humans invent monsters as symptoms of their own monstrous desires. So Seneca employs the supernatural to represent externally the evil within people. Ghosts are a product of an aberrant psychology.433 The angry and cruel ghost of Achilles in *Troades* represents the evil of the Greeks that will require the death of Polyxena. Andromache’s desperate situation, as she tries to save her son’s life, causes her to have a vision of her dead husband. The sighting of a ghost can function as a symptom of the guilt of a character as in the case of Medea for killing her brother Apsyrtus or Oedipus in the *Phoenissae* for killing his father Laius. This tragic theme resonates with Nero sighting of his mother’s ghost after her death (Suet. *Nero* 34.4):434 *Neque tamen conscientiam sceleris...aut statim aut umquam postea ferre potuit, saepe confessus exagitari se materna specie verberibusque Furiarum ac taedis*.

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ardentibus. Suetonius writes his biography in tragic terms by casting Nero as Orestes pursued by his mother’s ghost and her Furies with their whips and torches. Ghosts such as Tantalus in *Thyestes* and Thyestes in *Agamemnon* incite the continuing cycle of evil that will be practiced by their descendants, according to and following the examples of the acts of evil they committed when they were alive.

The tragedies of Seneca thus invite our interpretation as documents obsessed with the evil arising from our passions, especially in the highest circles of imperial governance. For this reason, tragedy’s floruit in the early empire is significant to Seneca’s use of the form. In her biography of Seneca, Griffin observes that for Romans interested in criticizing individuals, history and tragedy were the normal literary forms. Csapo and Slater observe that the theatre was the only place where the loss of political liberty under the empire was not complete. Indeed, tragedy, with its often-sensational depictions of bloody tyrants, could lend itself as easily to an anti-imperial interpretation as it had displayed political antagonism to the military dynasts of the Republic. Coffey and Mayer note that in AD 34, during the reign of Tiberius, Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus, a man of distinguished birth and eloquence, was driven to suicide because it was alleged that sentiments in his *Atreus* signified disloyalty to the emperor (Tac. *Ann.* 6.29.4-7). Accordingly they conclude that Seneca too was well aware that Greek myth could be applied to a Roman political context with perilous results.

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Republican drama had already set politics at its centre. There was an intimate connection between tragedy and leaders (i.e. principes) in the Republic as dramatic performances were part of public festivals organized by the presiding magistrates (curule aediles, plebeian aediles or praetor); these were political and religious events, consisting of sacrifices as well as a variety of entertainments.\textsuperscript{438} In the second and first centuries BC, it is reported that tragedians were already surreptitiously criticizing politicians in their writing. Thus Accius dramatized the tyrannical deeds of Tarquiniius Superbus in his \textit{Brutus}, perhaps in order to criticize the ambitions of the Gracchi.\textsuperscript{439} In his youth Julius Caesar wrote an \textit{Oedipus} (Suet. \textit{Iul.} 56.7); we may wonder whether through it he was criticizing the tyranny of Cinna or Sulla. Cicero testifies to contemporary political criticism of Pompey when he describes a performance of the tragedian Diphilus at the \textit{Ludi Apollinares} of 59 BC (\textit{ad Att.} 2.19.3): \textit{ludis Apollinaribus Diphilus tragoedus in nostrum Pompeium petulantur invectus est: ‘Nostra miseria tu es magnus.’} By \textit{invectus est}, Cicero means “attacked with words.”\textsuperscript{440} Later in the same letter, he writes, \textit{Nam et eius modi sunt ii versus uti in tempus ab inimico Pompei scripti esse videantur.} Although he does not name the author, the line seemed to Cicero as if written for the occasion by an enemy of Pompey. Champlin observes that from the late Republic onward, an abundance of evidence shows that Roman theatrical audiences were extraordinarily quick to hear the words spoken and to see the actions presented on stage as offering pointed commentary on contemporary public life.\textsuperscript{441}

\textsuperscript{438} Manuwald (2010) 15.
\textsuperscript{440} OLD s.v. 6.
\textsuperscript{441} Champlin (2003) 95.
A forerunner of the Julio-Claudian *principes*, Pompey enjoyed the political clout to build the first permanent theatre in Rome, as a gift to the Roman people.\textsuperscript{442} At the opening of his theatre in 55 BC, Cicero reports that Accius’ *Clytemnestra* was performed (Cic. *Fam.* 7.1). When Agamemnon entered, six hundred mules preceded him. Boyle notes that the production values were those of triumphal display, in which Agamemnon’s entrance dramatically mirrored Pompey’s triumphal procession of 61 BC and Agamemnon’s conquest of Troy emblematized Pompey’s conquest of the East.\textsuperscript{443} Pompey himself is known to have embraced the role of Agamemnon in another context: because Caesar had seduced Pompey’s wife Mucia, Pompey even referred to Caesar in tragic terms as an Aegisthus (Suet. *Iul.* 50.1): *quem gemens Aegisthum appellare consuesset*.

Cicero’s brother Quintus wrote four tragedies in sixteen days in 54 BC while he was serving as Caesar’s legate in Gaul (Cic. *QFr.* 3.5.7), and we know the subjects of two—an *Electra* and an *Erigona*. The younger L. Cornelius Balbus wrote *Iter*, a *fabula praetexta*, about the secret journey he made shortly before the battle of Pharsalia into Pompey’s camp to bribe L. Lentulus Crus to come over to Caesar’s side.\textsuperscript{444} In 43 BC at public games in Cadiz, Balbus produced the play, in which he, a living person, appears as a character. Vergil’s first patron, C.

\textsuperscript{442} Gruen (1992) 209 suggests that the ritual of erecting and then dismantling temporary theatres gave annual notice that the ruling class held decisive authority in the artistic sphere.

\textsuperscript{443} Boyle (2006) 156.

\textsuperscript{444} Cic. *ad Att.* 8.9a.2 and *ad fam.* 10.32.3 and 5 where Asinius Pollio reports that his friend Cornelius Gallus has in his possession this play written by the younger Balbus. cf. Vell. 2.51.3. (W. G. Williams [1929] 406, n. a; Syme [1939] 75, n. 2; Shackelton Bailey [1977] 558-559; Barbera [2000] 10-11). CCorelli (1984) 254 identifies the Theatre of Balbus, dedicated by the younger Balbus in 13 BC, in the Campus Martius to the south of the via delle Botteghe Oscure. Beacham (1992) 126 notes that it was Rome’s second permanent theatre.
Asinius Pollio wrote tragedy and history, as well as organizing the first public recitations.\textsuperscript{445} The literary activity of these men shows that there was sustained interest in tragedy among Roman statesmen in the turbulent period in which the principate was established.

In 29 BC, Octavian commissioned L. Varius Rufus to write and produce his tragedy *Thyestes* for the *ludi Actiaci* held to celebrate his victory over Antony and Cleopatra, and paid him a million sesterces.\textsuperscript{446} Boyle notes that the future Augustus decided to subsume this potentially most damning critique of the tyranny of Atreus, and thus Antony, within a triumph to glorify himself, thereby making the play a negative paradigm which his own hegemony disavowed.\textsuperscript{447} Thus there is a precedent at the very moment of the establishment of the principate for the potential use of tragedy as a negative exemplar of behaviour. Leigh argues that Roman tragedies centred on characters such as Atreus or Tereus engage with the idea of the Greek tyrant and presuppose an ideological connection between the cannibalistic violation of the civilized convention of commensality and the disastrous appetites which tyrants display.\textsuperscript{448} In 44 BC, Cicero quotes Accius’ Atreus in his political invective against Antony (*Phil*. 1.34): *oderint dum metuant*. The orator charges Antony with tyrannical atrocities and an appetite for blood.\textsuperscript{449} Indeed Cicero uses the imagery of cannibalism to characterize Antony’s behaviour at Pharsalia (*Phil*. 2.71): *gustaras civilem sanguinem vel potius exsorbueras*. He portrays Antony

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{447} Boyle (2006) 161-162.
\item \textsuperscript{448} Leigh (1996) 186.
\item \textsuperscript{449} Cic. *Phil*. 2.59, 71; 3.4; 5.22; 13.18.
\end{itemize}
drinking blood as he cruelly pursued and killed many men, including L. Domitius, whom the
clement Caesar would perhaps have saved.

Seneca also observes Antony’s appetites for wine, sex and blood (Ep. 83.25):^{450}

M. Antonium, magnum virum et ingenii nobilis, quae alia res perdidit et in externos mores ac vitia non Romana traiecit quam ebrietas nec minor vino Cleopatrace amor? Haec illum res hostem rei publicae, haec hostibus suis imparem reddidit; haec crudelem fecit, cum capita principum civitatis cenanti referrentur, cum inter apparatissimas epulas luxusque regales ora ac manus proscriptorum recognosceret, cum vino gravis sitiret tamen sanguinem.

Seneca characterizes drunkenness and sexual debauchery as two “foreign habits and un-Roman
vices” (externos mores ac vitia non Romana), which recall his wish in de ira that such savagery
had remained among foreigners rather than passing into Roman customs with other vices
(3.18.1): utinam ista saevitia intra peregrina exempla mansisset nec in Romanos mores cum aliis adventiciis vitiis etiam suppliciorum irarumque barbaria transisset! For Antony’s
drunkenness makes him so cruel (crudelem) that he wished to drink in the view of the heads of
the leading citizens whom he had proscribed when he was dining. Here Seneca uses the same
word for banquets, epulas, which the ghost of Thyestes will employ in his tragedy Agamemnon
(11). Antony is heavy with wine, like Thyestes (vino gravatum, Thy. 910); but Antony still
thirsts for blood (vino gravis sitiret tamen sanguinem). Thus both Cicero and Seneca use the
language of the Thyestean banquet^{451} to vilify Antony.^{452} Syme observes that a tragedy about
Thyestes was useful invective against palace and dynasty, for maxims of subversive statecraft.^{453}

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^{453} Syme (1958) 362.
Seneca’s interest in the relationship between Antony and the Julio-Claudians ran deep, for Antony and Octavia had had two daughters named Antonia: the elder was Nero’s grandmother, the younger the mother of Claudius and grandmother of Gaius. Thus it is not surprising that Seneca also represents Gaius as a cruel tyrant in Thyestean terms when he considers why Providence made Gaius the ruler of the world (de ben. 4.31.2): *Quare C. Caesarem orbi terrarum praefecit, hominem sanguinis humani avidissimum, quem non aliter fluere in conspectu suo iubebat, quam si ore excepturus esset?* He employs the same word (avidissimum) that Seneca used of anger in the *de ira* 1.5.3: *ira, ut diximus, avida poenae est.* Like Atreus (Thy. 903-907), Gaius wants to be a spectator of the punishment of his victims, and like Thyestes (Thy. 985), he intends to catch the stream of blood in his mouth.

Seneca may have written *Oedipus* during his Corsican exile (as Fitch has argued), but the themes of the play would also have resonated with the acts of the homicidal and incestuous emperor Nero, one of whose favourite roles Suetonius reports was Oedipus (Nero 21.3). Although it was his mother who killed his adoptive father Claudius, Nero, like Oedipus, gained the throne as a result of his father’s murder. Indeed, according to Suetonius, Nero was conscious of the plot (Nero 33.1). Furthermore, the emperor is reported to have committed incest with his mother,\(^{454}\) and, like the sons of Oedipus, he was guilty of fratricide. Nero was already playing parts as if in a tragedy and the biographical tradition exploits this similarity to impart tragic colour to Nero’s life. The themes of both fratricide and incest are found in the *Phoenissae,* where Seneca may be warning of the civil war which will inevitably follow the death of Nero.

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\(^{454}\) Nero was reputed to have had incest with his mother (Tac. *Ann.* 14.2; Suet. *Nero* 28.2; Dio 63.22.3).
Nero, who married his stepsister Octavia, added to his crimes when he unjustly banished her and had her put to death (Tac. *Ann.* 12.58.1, 14.59.4, 14.63.1, 14.64; Suet. *Nero* 7.2, 35.1-2).

Seneca seems to be writing about Nero when he writes in the *de beneficiis* that if the tyrant were to ask for artists of the stage, prostitutes and things which will soften his fierce nature, Seneca would gladly give them (7.20.3): *Si pro magno petet munere artifices scaenae et scorta et quae feritatem eius emollient, libens offeram.* Composed after 56 but during the first half of Nero’s reign, this passage accords with Tacitus’ report that Seneca tried to limit Nero to pleasures that public opinion allowed (*Ann.* 13.2.2), but Seneca adds the interesting evidence that he supplied stage actors to Nero. Seneca may have written the following passage of the *de beneficiis* while he was thinking of the plot of the *Thyestes*, for in this passage he employs once again the language of the Thyestean feast (*de ben.* 7.19.8):

> Si vero sanguine humano non tantum gaudet, sed pascitur, sed et suppliciis omnium aetatum *crudelitatem* insatiabilem exercet nec *ira* sed *aviditate* quadam *saeviendi furit*, si in ore parentium liberos iugulat, si non contentus simplici morte distorquet nec urit solum perituros, sed excoquit, si arx eius cruore semper recenti madet, parum est huic beneficium non reddere!

Here, Seneca employs several of the key terms that we have explored in this study: *crudelitatem*, *ira*, *aviditate*, *saeviendi* and *furit*. The tyrant in question does not just enjoy the sight of human blood, but feeds on it (*pascitur*). Seneca may mean *pascitur* metaphorically, but the image of cannibalism is striking. Like Atreus (*Thy.* 255-257), the tyrant suffers from an insatiable cruelty (*crudelitatem insatiabilem*). He does not rage with a normal anger but with greediness for savagery (*nec ira sed aviditate quadam saeviendi furit*). He makes the parents spectators when he strangles their children, as Nero made Agrippina a spectator to Britannicus’ death (Tac. *Ann.* 13.16.6) and as Medea makes Jason a spectator to his son’s death (*Med.* 992-1019). The tyrant
not only burns those about to die but cooks them (*excoquit*), as Atreus did to Thyestes’ sons (*Thy. 765-775*).

Scholarly consensus holds that the *Phoenissae* is Seneca’s last play,455 left incomplete without choral odes; in it, we may divine many references to Nero and his family. Suetonius (*Nero* 33.1) calls Nero a *parricida* like Oedipus who killed his father, for Nero was aware of the plot against Claudius and thereby gained the throne. Oedipus in *Phoenissae* (50) resembles Nero, when he tells Antigone to leave because he had incest with his mother and fears that he may do the same to Antigone: *timeo post matrem omnia*. This statement recalls the rumours of Nero’s incest with Agrippina (*Tac. Ann. 14.2; Suet. Nero 28.2; Dio 63.22.3*).

The brothers Polynices and Eteocles fight for their father’s kingdom, a situation that recalls the rivalry between Britannicus and Nero. Britannicus sang of his expulsion from his father’s house and from supreme power (*evolutum eum sede patria rebusque summis*, *Tac. Ann. 13.15.3*), and in this regard Polynices resembles him as an exile (*Phoen. 372*): *exul errat natus et patria caret*. Eteocles seized the throne (*rapto regno, Phoen. 57*) as Nero did by treachery when Claudius was killed. When Oedipus offers to commit suicide (90-92), a contemporary audience might have seen Seneca urging Nero to do the same. But there is no one-to-one correspondence of the characters to historical people, since not only Oedipus but also his two sons display characteristics of Nero at various times. Oedipus, like Nero, is a *monstrum maius*.

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(122)—greater than the Sphinx. In larger terms Thebes represents Rome;\textsuperscript{456} could Seneca imply that civil war will follow the rule of both Oedipus and Nero (284-286)?

Jocasta resembles Agrippina in not knowing which son to back (\textit{Phoen.} 380-382):

\begin{quote}
\textit{utrimque natum video. nil possum pie pietate salva facere; quocumque alteri optabo nato fiet alterius malo.}
\end{quote}

As Frank notes,\textsuperscript{457} Jocasta employs sexual imagery to offer her body to Polynices to persuade him to lay down his arms (467-471):

\begin{quote}
\textit{claude vagina impium ensem et trementem iamque cupientem excuti hastam solo defige.}
\end{quote}

She looks for kisses from Eteocles (486) for the same purpose. Jocasta’s line (458), \textit{proinde bellum tollite aut belli moram}, can be read as a reference to Nero’s matricide and his disposal of her as a hindrance (\textit{moram}) to his crimes.\textsuperscript{458} Through Polynices, Seneca seems to predict that Nero’s reign will soon come to an end (660): \textit{invisa numquam imperia retinentur diu}. Polynices asks Eteocles if for the sake of being king, he is willing to give his country, gods and wife to the flames (663): \textit{patriam penates coniugem flammis dare}? Not only did Nero consign his wives Octavia and Poppaea to the flames in cremation, but he was accused of burning his city in the

\textsuperscript{456} Braund (2006) 259-271 observes that Statius has Thebes represent Rome in the \textit{Thebaid}. She (267) also cites Seneca’s nephew Lucan 1.550-552 for the precedent: \textit{ostendens confercas flamma Latinas / scinditur in partes gemonique cacumine surgit \textit{Thebanos imitata rogos}; and 4.549-551: sic semine Cadmi / emicuit Dircaea cohors ceciditique suorum / volneribus, dirum Thebanis fratribus omen.}

\textsuperscript{457} Frank (1995) 204.

\textsuperscript{458} cf. Tac. \textit{Ann.} 14.13.3: \textit{seque in omnis libidines effudit quas male coercitas qualiscumque matris reverentia tardaverat.}
great fire of 64 (Tac. Ann. 15.44.2), a recent event if Seneca was writing the *Phoenissae* in 65, the last year of his life.

The Romans read history and biography for exemplars. Historians such as Tacitus and biographers such as Suetonius seem to read Nero’s life as a tragedy and the contemporary author of the *Octavia*, whether Galban or Flavian, recognized the relevance of tragedy to Roman political history. Seneca’s tragedies and treatises so profoundly influenced him that he combined elements of both *Thyestes* and *de clementia*. So it is useful for us to illustrate from the *Octavia* both echoes of Senecan tragedy and reminiscences of Nero’s (actual or alleged) behaviour. For example, the chorus sings about the murder of Agrippina (*Oct. 358-60*):

ferro es nati moritura tui,
cuius facinus vix posteritas,
tarde semper saecula credent.

Williams notes that the thought that posterity will never believe such horror echoes both Atreus’ preface to his crime (*Thy. 192-193*) and Oedipus’ acknowledgement of future notoriety (*Phoen. 264-267*). Nero’s agitated steps and fierce expression (*gressu fertur attonito Nero / trucique vultu, Oct. 435-436*) characterize the angry man’s loss of self-control and reason in Stoic thought (*de ira* 1.1.3). In his debate with Seneca (*Oct. 440-589*), Nero repeatedly departs from the principles of the *de clementia*. Thus, for example, to Seneca’s statement that mercy is a great remedy of fear, Nero retorts that to kill an enemy is the greatest virtue of a leader: Sen. *Magnum

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461 G. Williams (1994b) 179, 182.
Although we do not know who the author of the *Octavia* was, he was a very good reader of Seneca and offers an early example of the receptions of his works.

As Boyle writes,⁴⁶² Octavia reprises the role of Seneca’s Phaedra, whose opening speech represents her evils as inherited from her mother (*Phaed.* 113). Octavia calls Agrippina a *saevae novercae* (21), as *saeva* seems to be the defining adjective of stepmothers (cf. *Phaed.* 356-357),⁴⁶³ but she also calls her stepmother/mother-in-law a Fury (*Erinys, Oct.* 23 and 161) who served as *pronuba* at an ill-fated marriage, as all the Furies did at the marriage of Medea and Jason (*Med.* 16-17).⁴⁶⁴ Octavia’s address to her father as *miserande pater* (25) recalls the many appeals to compassion in Senecan tragedy (e.g. *Tro.* 694, 703, 792; *Phaed.* 623, 636, 671)—all of which go unanswered. Her lines on Claudius’ conquest of Britain, however, seem primarily indebted to *Apoc.* 12.3.13-18. The focus on Agrippina’s treachery underscores the analogy between the empress and Clytemnestra (*Soph. El.* 125) and thus between Octavia and Electra.

The analogy between Claudius and Agamemnon continues overtly in Octavia’s monody (57-64, especially 61): *caesum licuit flere parentem*.⁴⁶⁵ This series of analogies retrospectively provides a key for Seneca’s *Agamemnon*, where the king may correspond to Claudius, Clytemnestra to Agrippina, Aegisthus to Pallas and Electra to Octavia. *Octavia* 60-64 summarizes the subject matter of the *Agamemnon*. Another allusion to a Senecan play occurs when Octavia has a premonition about her future (*Oct.* 663-664): *hos ad thalamos servata diu / victima tandem*

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⁴⁶² Boyle (2008) 100.


funesta cades. Octavia foresees that if she stays in Rome, she will die, like Polyxena in Troades, as a sacrifice at a wedding (361-2): *mactanda virgo est Thessali busto ducis; / sed quo iugari* Thessalae cultu solent.

Octavia ends her first speech by explicitly calling Nero a tyrant, which she does six times (33, 87, 110, 250, 899, 959); the ghost of Agrippina also calls him that twice (610, 620). Both women (609, 959) add the adjective *ferus*, which we have seen Seneca use to characterize the tyrant Atreus as a wild beast (*Thy.* 546, 721). The Nurse describes Nero as *crudelis viri* (48), the epithet which Seneca advises Nero not to gain in *de clem*. 1.25. Nero is motivated by *ira* in forcing Octavia to conceal her grief at Britannicus’ death, as Atreus is motivated by anger in killing Thyestes’ sons (*Thy.* 737: *ira tumet*). The prohibition of tears (*prohibet lugere timor*, 66) is the mark of a tyrant (Sen. *de ira* 2.33.2-6). Octavia further characterizes Nero as a tyrant who looks down on the gods (*spernit superos*, 89) as Atreus dismisses them (*dimitto superos*, *Thy.* 888). As a matricide, Nero is more savage than the sea (*saevior pelagi fretis*, 129), just as Medea, the infanticide, is a greater evil than the sea (*maiusque mari Medea malum*, Med. 362). Nero is described as *capaxque scelerum* (*Oct*. 153), an Oedipal phrase (*Oed.* 930, *Pho.* 159). It has not generally been recognized that Octavia metaphorically employs the language of the Thyestean feast when she reports that Nero drank the blood of his mother (*Oct*. 243): *hausit cruorem matris*. Moreover, his first speech on stage reveals him to be a bloodthirsty tyrant


He gives orders for heads to be brought to him: like Atreus and Antony, he wants to view them.

As in Seneca’s plays, Agamemnon, Phaedra and Medea, a nurse tries to restrain her female ward (Oct. 51-54); but the woman’s emotions accept no rule (Ag. 203, Med. 591-592, 866-867). The Nurse calls Octavia Nero’s soror / eademque coniunx (46-47), a regular title of Egyptian queens. To Roman ears it would have resonated of eastern decadence and incest. The Romans interdicted marriage between siblings, even siblings by adoption (Dig. 23.2.17). To the Nurse’s question about what could free Octavia from her sorrows, the unhappy bride answers the day that sends her to the Stygian shades (77-79). In this way, the play’s author recalls the theme of death as freedom from tyrants, which occurs in Seneca’s de ira (3.15.4) and in Troades (1102).

The author of Octavia employs a satelles ‘Seneca’ who attempts to restrain the passion of the tyrant as Seneca the tragedian had invented such a counsellor for Atreus in Thyestes. In Seneca’s play, the satelles tries to teach Atreus pudor, cura iuris, sanctitas, pietas, fides (Thy. 215-216). In Octavia (547), ‘Seneca’ tries to teach Nero about probitas fidesque coniugis, mores, pudor and the Stoic principle that the only goods that last forever are those of the mind and spirit, which are under no external control (448-449): sola perpetuo manent / subiecta nulli mentis atque animi bona. As in Seneca’s plays, ‘Seneca’s’ failure to change Nero does not indicate the failure of Stoicism, but rather the failure of Nero to live up to the principles of Stoicism.

The author of the *Octavia* employs ghosts both reported and on stage, just as Seneca does in his tragedies. Octavia reports that Britannicus’ ghost appears in her dreams (115-119). While Medea’s brother Apsyrtus accompanies a Fury (*Med. 962*), Octavia conflates the two and imagines her brother as his own avenging Fury (*Oct. 118-119*):\footnote{Whitman (1978) 59; Boyle (2008) 124.} *facibus abris armat infirmas manus / oculosque et ora fratris infestus petit.* The ghost of Agrippina even appears on stage as a harbinger that Nero’s wedding to Poppaea is doomed to disaster. Like the ghosts of Thyestes (*Ag. 1*) and Tantalus (*Thy. 1*), Agrippina’s ascends from Tartarus and, like the ghost of Achilles (*Tro. 180*), bursts through the earth (593): *Tellura rupta Tartaro gressum extuli.* She resembles a Fury, bearing a Stygian torch in her bloody hand (*Stygiam cruenta praefers dextra facem*, 594) and uttering a curse upon the bride (*nubat his flammis*, 595). Describing her hand as *vindex* (596), she indicates that she is exacting vengeance for her murder. Anger motivates her (597): *dolorque matris vertet ad tristes rogos.* Her anger as a mother will turn the nuptial torches to funeral pyres as Medea did to Creon and his daughter after the wedding of Jason and Creusa. Her thought, that even among the dead memory of her impious murder remains (*manet inter umbras impiae caedis mihi / semper memoria*, 598-599), recalls Seneca’s *Epigram 4.6: tumulos vindicat umbra suos.* Agrippina’s ghost still has force enough to avenge her murder. Her complaint that her memory is *manibus nostris gravis / adhuc inultis* (599-600) recalls the threat of Laius (*Oed. 643*: *te pater inultus urbe cum tota petam*).\footnote{Whitman (1978) *ad loc.* observes the debt to Lucan 9.63-64 *manus hoc Aegyptia forsan / obtulit officium grave manibus* (of the burial of Pompey). cf. Boyle (2008) 221.} Like Medea seeing her brother’s ghost (*Med. 958-966*), ‘Agrippina’ reports that she sees another ghost—Claudius’—demanding his murderer (*Oct. 617*: *poscit auctorem necis.* She imagines herself as an avenging Fury who,
in Senecan manner (*dignum est Thyeste facinus et dignum Atreo, Thy. 271*), is planning a death worthy of the impious tyrant (*Oct. 619-621*):

> ultrix Erinys impio dignum parat
> letum tyranno. verbera et turpem fugam
> poenasque quis et Tantali vincat sitim.

She foresees Nero suffering the torments of the underworld, and the first mentioned has particular importance for a contemporary Atreus: in typical Senecan fashion of outdoing past punishments (*Thy. 195-196*), ‘Nero’ will endure a thirst that exceeds that of Tantalus, the ghost that began the evil in Seneca’s *Thyestes*.

Allusions to Seneca’s works continue when the Messenger reports that the people plan to give back to Octavia her rightful share of the throne (*Oct. 789-790*):  *Reddere penates Claudiae divi parant / torosque fratris, debitam partem imperi.* These lines recall young Tantalus’ speech to Thyestes returning from exile that Atreus is returning part of the kingdom (*Thy. 432*):

> partemque regni reddit.  When Nero grows nervous at the mob’s unrest, he claims that he has adopted Seneca’s policy of clemency (*Oct. 834-836*):

> Exultat ingens saeculi nostri bonis
corrupta turba, nec capit clementiam
ingrata nostram.

Nero’s professed *clementiam* recalls Seneca’s counsel that he be merciful to his people (*Oct. 442*, *Magnum timoris remedium clementia est*) and clearly refers to Seneca’s treatise *de clementia* (1.5.4). When the Prefect reports that his guards have killed a few of the insurgents, ‘Nero’ behaves like Atreus (*Thy. 890*) in asking if this vengeance is enough (*Oct. 848*, *Et hoc sat est?*)
and in demanding Octavia’s head to expiate his anger (*Oct*. 861, *Caedem sororis poscit et dirum caput*). As Boyle notes, the word *sororis* keeps the incest theme to the fore.\(^{472}\) The phrase *dirum caput* recalls Atreus’ request to his *satelles* to tell him how to kill his brother (*Thy*. 244): *Profare, dirum qua caput mactem via.* ‘Nero’ makes the people watch ‘Octavia’ as she is dragged away to suffering and death (*Oct*. 894-895): *nunc ad poenam letumque trahi / flentem miseram cernere possunt.* This passage recalls the behaviour of tyrants toward their dinner guests in Seneca’s *de ira* (3.15). Octavia’s statement that there are no gods (912, *nec sunt superi*) recalls Thyestes’ declaration that the gods have fled (*Thy*. 1021, *fugere superi*) and Jason’s conviction that wherever Medea travels, there are no gods (*Med*. 1027, *testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos*).

At the end of *Octavia*, the author brings us back to the theme of savagery with which we began this study. The Chorus comments that Agrippina died as a sacrifice to her savage son (956): *saevi iacuit victima nati.* Even Aulis and the barbaric land of the Tauri are kinder than Rome (978-982):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{urbe est nostra mitior Aulis} \\
\text{et Taurorum barbar a tellus:} \\
\text{hospitis illic caede litatur} \\
\text{numen superum;} \\
\text{civis gaudet Roma cruore.}
\end{align*}
\]

At Aulis, Atreus’ son Agamemnon was about to sacrifice his daughter, but she was replaced at the last moment by a deer (*Eur. IA*). The Taurians (*inhospitalis Taurus, Phaed*. 168) practiced human sacrifice on strangers (*Eur. IT*); however, like Nero (*de clem. 1.25.1, ferina ista rabies est*

\(^{472}\) Boyle (2008) 269.
sanguine gaudere) and Atreus (Thy. 715-716, saevum scelus / iuvat ordinare), Rome rejoices in the blood of her own citizens.

We have seen that Seneca employs necromancy as a dramatic device in his Oedipus (530-658). Ogden observes that in the imperial period, necromancy was particularly associated with the emperors themselves. The attribution of necromancy to them was a convenient way of maligning them with insanity, for it was a bizarre un-Roman custom and underlined their abuse of wealth and power, their anxiety about their own position, their homicidal cruelty and ensuing guilt, and their desire to compete with gods. Senecan characters such as Oedipus and Atreus display all these traits; the latter especially recalls Nero in showing no guilt concerning the killing of his nephews just as the last of the Julio-Claudians showed none about the death of his brother Britannicus (Tac. Ann. 13.16).

Seneca’s philosophy informs his tragedies. We noted that Schiesaro (2009, 222) urged a study of the similarities of the forms of expression which connect the two sides of Seneca’s production and this thesis has documented the tragedies as representations of “negative exemplars designed to warn of the dangers of passion” (Fitch [2002] 22). Cancik is of the opinion that it has proved impossible as yet to give a philosophical interpretation of the tragedies of Seneca. I hope that this dissertation has shown that the two halves of Seneca’s output do complement and illuminate each other, and that Seneca’s Stoic interpretation of human behaviour can be seen throughout his tragedies.

473 Ogden (2001) 152.

474 Cancik (2008) 274.
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