Seneca's tragedies and the aesthetics of pantomime

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Chapter 4

Monologues of self-analysis

4 Introduction: monologues of self-analysis

In Seneca's tragedies, monologues are numerous. As has been discussed in Chapter 2,

the preponderantly monologic nature of Seneca's tragedy is a feature possibly prompted

by pantomime, which, as the evidence suggests, was a performance of a predominantly

soloistic nature and favoured the dramatisation of emotional dilemmas. Grysar has

suggested that pantomimic libretti contained a high proportion of monologues.[1] Thus

the influence of the aesthetics of pantomime on Seneca's tragedies can be seen working

at the level of structure, since the plays are built along an alternation of monologues,

and in one category of monologues in particular, i.e. monologues of self-analysis in

which a character gives an extended and detailed self-description of the divided feelings

he is experiencing.[2]

Monologues of self-analysis are to be found already in Euripides, but, as Gill has

argued, there is a substantial difference between the handling of this type of monologue

in Euripides and Seneca; in Euripides monologues retain the character of a dialogue (i.e.

they are addressed to others), while in Seneca monologues have a "soliloquizing" and

"self-related (even solipsistic) character".[3] Gill has further argued that the "the

obsessively interior character of the Senecan monologue constitutes a deliberate

realization of a certain kind of figure in a distinctive dramatic style, and not a failed

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[1] Grysar (1834) 56; Sargent (1996) 89-90; Hall (2008) 277.

[2] Tarrant (1976) 199-200 has remarked that Seneca borrows a technique deriving in part from Ovid and in part from Virgil; the dramatisation of emotional dilemmas is Ovidian (Ovid's heroines often describe themselves as caught between conflicting forces, especially in the *Heroides* and in the *Metamorphoses*); as Tarrant has observed, the feelings involved in Ovid's descriptions are often more schematic and involve less complex feelings than Seneca's ones. The lengthier narration of more complex emotional situations is Virgilian, as, for example, in the description of Turnus (*Aen.* 12, 665-671) or of Lavinia's blush (*Aen.* 12, 64-70).

[3] Gill (1987) 26.

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attempt to create a real character who interacts with other such characters".[4]

I would suggest that monologues of self-analysis recall closely, share common stylistic features of, and have the same function as running commentaries. The most important element which connects them with running commentaries is namely the fact that they seem uttered by an external narrator (running commentaries are actually pronounced by other characters). In addition to this, the monologues, as well as the running commentaries, have no real dramatic function but to portray, often redundantly, emotional dilemmas (as in the case of the *Phaedra*) in which the pathetic element is over-emphasized.

As observed by Tarrant, a striking feature of Seneca's monologues involving self-description is that they feature a "combination of emotional chaos and detached intellectual analysis".[5] The fact that a character in a frantic state describes his/her inner turmoil in a detailed and analytic manner produces the impression that the character becomes virtually an external narrator of his/her own psychic state. On the same line of thought, Gill claims that in monologues of self-analysis "the immediate effect is of a narrator's voice over, analysing the psychological conflict of the figure involved".[6]

The impression of a narrator's voice is strengthened by the use of a peculiar stylistic device, namely a shift from first-person to narrative self-description in third-person form; the impression of an external narrator's voice is further enhanced by the use of epic similes and of a large number of personified abstractions.[7]

As to similes, their use is usually circumscribed in dramatic speech; for example, Euripides employs very carefully just brief similes.[8]

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[4] *Ibidem* 37.
[5] Tarrant (1976) 199.
[6] Gill (1987) 33.
[7] For example, see the shift at *Phae* lines 177 ff.
[8] See Barlow (1971): similes in messenger speeches: *Hipp.* 1201 and 1221; in lyric and monody: *Hipp.* 564 and 828; *Med.* 1279; in dialogue: *Hipp.* 429; *Med.* 523.

Seneca's characters, on the contrary, employ extended and artificial similes;[9] in addition to this, similes are not only used by a character describing the attitudes of another one, but, most awkwardly, also in the case of a character describing himself/herself. A good example of extended similes used by a character to describe another one is in the *Agamemnon* (892-96) where Cassandra employs it to describe Agamemnon: *at ille, ut altis hispidus silvis aper/cum casse vinctus temptat egressus tamen/artatque motu vincla et in cassum furit,/cupit fluentes undique et caecos sinus/dissicere et hostem quaerit implicitus suum.*

As discussed above, Seneca heavily strains psychological realism by putting similes in the mouth of a character who uses them to describe himself/herself; for instance, in the *Trojan Women* (672-77), Andromache uses an extended simile to describe herself:

> qualis Argolicas ferox
> turmas Amazon stravit, aut qualis deo
> percussa Maenas entheo silvas gradu
> armata thyrso terret atque expers sui   675
> vulnus dedit nec sensit, in medios ruam
> tumuloque cineris socia defenso cadam.

In the *Thyestes*, Atreus employs an extended simile in his self-description (497-505):

> sic, cum feras vestigat et longo sagax
> loro tenetur Umber ac presso vias
> scrutatur ore, dum procul lento suem
> odore sentit, paret et tacito locum   500
> rostro pererrat; praeda cum propior fuit,
> cervice tota pugnat et gemitu vocat

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[9] Pratt (1963) 233-34 has remarked that in Greek drama images tend to be intrinsic; they are designed "to be a natural expression of the thoughts and feelings associated with the dynamics of the action as a living phenomenon"; on the contrary, "Seneca's whole dramaturgy is a system of commentary upon the action".

dominum morantem seque retinenti eripit.

cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi

tamen tegatur.   505

As to the use of abstracts (such as *dolor, furor, pudor, amor, timor, ira*), they are usually described as personified thus becoming external and active forces outside the character; stylistically, such an impression is provided by the fact that the abstracts are actually subjects of active verbs.

An example of this feature is to be found in the *Thyestes*, in a passage in which Thyestes is describing his feeling (942-44): *quid me revocas/festumque vetas celebrare diem,/quid flere iubes,/nulla surgens dolor ex causa?*. A similar case features in the *Agamemnon* (288-90 Clytemnestra): *Surgit residuus pristinae mentis pudor;/quid obstrepis?quid voce blandiloqua mala/consilia dictas?*; in the *Phaedra* (99 Phaedra): *Sed maior alius incubat maestae dolor*; in the *Trojan Women* (642 Andromache): *Quid agimus?animum distrahit geminus timor*; and in the *Medea* (916-17 Medea): *Quo te igitur, ira, mittis, aut quae perfido/intendis hosti tela?*.[10]

Furthermore, the fact that the characters describe the symptomatic reactions the feelings provoke in their bodies sharpens the impression that they are external spectators of what is happening; for example, in the *Hercules furens* (1298-99 Amphitryon): *Ecce quam miserum metu/ cor palpitat pectusque sollicitum ferit*; or in the *Trojan Women* (623-24 Andromache): *Reliquit animus membra, quatiuntur, labant,/torpetque vinctus frigido sanguis gelu*; or in the *Medea* (926-28 Medea): *Cor pepulit horror, membra torpescunt gelu/pectusque tremuit*.

All these features have as a result that the protagonist "has become the narrator of her experiences instead of a speaking character", since the voices of speaking character and

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[10] See Henry and Walker (1985) 141-45.

narrator tend to merge.[11]

Unlike running commentaries, the fact that the monologues are uttered by the character himself/herself may be accounted as a variation between speaking voices which might have been rendered with different intonations from the part of the singer of the tragic libretto.

For example, in the case of the *Phaedra*, we have a running commentary pronounced by the nurse (360-86) followed suit by a monologue of Phaedra (387-403). Even in the *Medea* we have a similar handling; a running commentary pronounced by the nurse (670-739) and a following monologue by Medea (740-848). Interestingly, the nurse describes Medea's preparation of the poison and then Medea describes it again. Basically, the two speeches describe and expand on the same theme: Medea's witchcraft. The theme itself is very suitable for pantomime; first of all because it is spectacular and offers potential for virtuoso display. Dramatically, the length of the scene and the tangential relevance of the events for the advancement of the plot points suggestively in this direction. Here the change of voices may have been made clearer by the fact that Medea's utterance happens in lyric metre, while that of the nurse is in the dialogic one. The different metrical pattern is quite suggestive; since lyric delivery is often associated with a state of mental turmoil (as, for example, in Euripides, *Alc* 244-72 and *Hipp* 208-39; Aeschylus *Ag* 1085 ff.), the metrical shift may have the purpose to underline the mood of Medea's utterance.

This interpretation better explains the function of the recurring use of monologues often dismissively labelled as mere rhetorical expansion.

As we have seen, the monologues primarily deal with a dramatisation of emotions like running commentaries do. However, unlike running commentaries, which usually

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[11] Gill (1987) 33 gives as examples of this one passage in Virgil (*Aen.* 4, 15-23) and two in Ovid (*Met.* 7, 18-21; 8, 506-11).

describe the effect of a single emotion experienced by the characters, monologues tend to deal with a dramatisation of conflicting emotions: for example, in the *Phaedra* the conflict between Phaedra's illicit passion for her step-son and her *pudor*; in the *Agamemnon*, the conflict between Clytemnestra's passion for her new lover, jealousy of her unfaithful husband and bridal *pudor* (Clytemnestra's conflict is the one which involves several different feelings and not just the more frequent emotional dichotomy); in the *Thyestes*, the conflict portrayed is between fear and joy; in the *Trojan Women*, the conflict at play is between bridal and maternal love.

It is easy to understand that monologues are the most suitable means to portray such conflicts, which are more plausibly narrated by the same characters that experience them. Running commentaries are best suited to describe the effect of a single emotion which expresses itself in its outward physical manifestation and can thus be described also by an external narrator.

Nonetheless, as we have seen, the two dramatic devices perform the same function, especially because monologues tend to be delivered as if by the voice of an external narrator.

Stylistically, the monologues present features similar to those of running commentaries, such as the tendency to externalise the emotions by using several abstracts as subjects of active verbs, to refer constantly to bodily parts, and to make large use of extended epic similes. In relation to similes, the limited variety of comparisons which occurred in the running commentaries is further reduced in the monologues; basically one comparison is employed and adapted with slight variations on the same theme, namely that between a character and a ship swept by the force of a stormy sea:

Phae (181-84) *sic, cum gravatam navita adversa ratem/propellit unda, cedit in vanum labor/et victa prono puppis aufertur vado./quid ratio possit?*; **Ag** (138-40) *Fluctibus variis agor,/ut, cum hinc profundum ventus, hinc aestus rapit,/incerta dubitat unda cui*

cedat malo. **Med** (939-43) *anceps aestus incertam rapit;/ ut saeva rapidi bella cum venti gerunt,/utrimque fluctus maria discordes agunt/dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum/cor fluctuatur;* **Thy** (438-39) *sic concitatam remige et velo ratem/ aestus resistens remigi et velo refert.*

The simile is well suited to portray in a dynamic way the pulling in different directions of the emotional conflicts undergone by the characters. As in the running commentaries, the linguistic register is stereotyped and repetitious and the syntax adopts a staccato mode produced by rare use of connectives, preference for paratactic and asyndetic constructions, and limited use of subordinate clauses. The overall impression produced by these devices is that of a *sermo praeruptus*, which matches the mental turmoil suffered by the characters.

The passages are the following and it is worth analysing them in detail.

_ *Phaedra* 99-144; 177-94: Phaedra's self-analysis

_ *Agamemnon* 131-44: Clytemnestra's self-analysis

_ *Medea* 926-28; 937-44; 951-53: Medea's self-analysis

_ *Thyestes* 434-39; 496-505; 920-69: Thyestes' self-analysis

_ *Trojan Women* 642-62: Andromache's self-analysis

4.1   *Phaedra* 99-144; 177 -94: Phaedra's self-analysis

The first act of the *Phaedra* contains two passages in which Phaedra gives a lengthy narrative self-analysis of her emotional feelings (99-114; 177-94):

Lines 99-113:

        Sed maior alius incubat maestae dolor.

        non me quies nocturna, non altus sopor   100

solvere curis. alitur et crescit malum

et ardet intus, qualis Aetnaeo vapor

exundat antro. Palladis telae vacant

et inter ipsas pensa labuntur manus;

non colere donis templa votivis libet,   105

non inter aras, Atthidum mixtam choris,

iactare tacitis conscias sacris faces,

nec adire castis precibus aut ritu pio

adiudicatae praesidem terrae deam:

iuvat excitatas consequi cursu feras   110

et rigida molli gaesa iaculari manu.

Quo tendis, anime?quid furens saltus amas?

fatale miserae matris agnosco malum;

Lines 177-85:

...Quae memoras scio

vera esse, nutrix; sed furor cogit sequi

peiora. vadit animus in praeceps sciens

remeatque frustra sana consilia appetens.   180

sic, cum gravatam navita adversa ratem

propellit unda, cedit in vanum labor

et victa prono puppis aufertur vado.

quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor,

potensque tota mente dominatur deus.   185

The first passage (85-128) falls in the category of entrance monologues; Phaedra's

emotional speech begins *in medias res* and does not provide any information about the

facts which caused it. It does not address anyone in particular, so that the speech is

delivered in a void. We learn by her words that she is afflicted by a fierce and

tormenting love. She does not even mention the name of her beloved in all the passage.

We implicitly infer that he must be Hippolytus because she affirms that she forgot about

all her female duties and lists what her preferred pursuits are now (110-111 *iuvat*

excitatas consequi cursu feras/et rigida molli gaesa iaculari manu), namely her desire to hunt.[12] As Coffey and Mayer have observed "Seneca takes the mythical basis of his story for granted."[13]

The two passages belong to the category of "passion-restraint" act which is a recurrently dramatic situation adopted by Seneca.[14] Usually, a subordinate character (the nurse or the *satelles*) is in charge to mitigate and restraint the destructive and foolish emotions and desires of a major character.

The passages are heavily modelled on and reminiscent of Virgil (*Aen.* 4) and Ovid (*Heroides,* 4). Seneca actually blended Virgilian and Ovidian motifs and poetic colouring.[15] The first passage is much indebted to Virgil's description of Dido.[16]

The two passages feature two similes; the one in the first passage is short, while that in the second is extended. The first simile (102-03 *qualis Aetnaeo vapor/exundat antro*) compares the fire of love to that of Etna; the fire as imagery of love had a long literary tradition and is adopted repeatedly in the passages; the simile is borrowed from two Ovidian ones and reworked (*Her.* 15, 12 *me calor Aetnaeo non minor igne tenet*; and *Met.* 13, 867-69 *uror enim, laesusque exaestuat acrius ignis,/cumque suis videor translatam viribus Aetnen/pectore ferre meo*). Seneca's simile does not contain any reference to Phaedra experiencing a personal emotion; on the contrary, it is the *malum* itself which overflows as the fire of Etna.

The extended simile (181-3) in the second passage is closely modelled on Virgil (*Geor.* 1, 201-03): *non aliter quam qui adverso vix flumine lembum/remigiis subigit, si bracchia forte remisit,/ atque illum in praeceps prono rapit alveus amni*. As Fantham

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[12] Compare Ovid, *Her.* 4, 41-44: *in nemus ire libet pressisque in retia cervis/hortari celeris per iuga summa canes,/aut tremulum excusso iaculum vibrare lacerto,/aut in graminea ponere corpus humo.*
[13] Coffey and Mayer (1990) 107.
[14] *Med* 115-78; 382-430; *Ag* 108-225; *Thy* 176-335.
[15] See Fantham (1975) 1-10.
[16] Virgil, *Aen.* 4, 1-5: *At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura/ vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni/. Multa viri virtus animo multusque recursat/ gentis honos; haerent infixi pectore vultus/ verbaque, nec placidam membris dat cura quietem.*

has pointed out, Seneca adhered closely in syntax and word sequence to the Virgilian model. There is also an echoing of words as *adverso...flumine* corresponds with *adversa...unda* and *prono...amni* with *prono...vado*. Nonetheless, the linguistic register chosen by Seneca avoids elevated or rare words (such as the Virgilian *lembum* where Seneca uses the more common *ratem*) and prefers simple and plain ones, as, for example, *navita, ratem, puppis, vado*.[17] There is also an echo of Ovid (*Am.* 2, 4, 8: *auferor ut rapida concita puppis aqua*); interestingly, Seneca substitutes the first person singular verb (*auferor*) with the third person (*aufert* whose subject is in Seneca *puppis*), so that the comparison set out by the simile remains impersonal.

Several abstracts feature in the two passages. In the first one we find, *dolor* (*dolor...incubat*) and *malum* (*non me quies nocturna, non altus sopor/solvere curis*; *malum...alitur, crescit, ardet*).[18] In the second passage, *furor* is the active force which takes hold of Phaedra (*furor...cogit sequi/peiora*; *vadit animus in praeceps*; *vicit ac regnat furor,/potensque tota mente dominatur deus*).[19]

The abstracts are always subjects of active verbs, apart from one instance in which the passive *alitur* is used, but with a reflexive meaning.

4.2 *Agamemnon* 131-44: Clytemnestra's self-analysis

Clytemnestra's self-analysis takes place in the second act of the *Agamemnon* which features a confrontation between Clytemnestra and the nurse who attempts to restrain the queen (a passion –restrain scene).

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[17] Seneca is particularly found of nautical similes compare: *Ag* 138-40; *Med* 939-43; *Thy* 438-39; the image of rowing against the normal flow of the water is also metaphorically used in *Epistle* 122, 19: *contra illam nitentibus non alia vita est quam contra aquam remigantibus.*

[18] Compare with Virgil (*Aen.* 4, 2) *vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni* where Dido is the subject experiencing the fire of love.

[19] Compare with Ovid (*Met.* 7, 19-21): *aliudque cupido,/mens aliud suadet: video meliora proboque,/deteriora sequor.*

Maiora cruciant quam ut moras possim pati.

flammae medullas et cor exurunt meum;

mixtus dolori subdidit stimulos timor;

invidia pulsat pectus, hinc animum iugo

premit cupido turpis et vinci vetat;   135

et inter istas mentis obsessae faces

fessus quidem et devictus et pessumdatus

pudor rebellat. fluctibus variis agor,

ut, cum hinc profundum ventus, hinc aestus rapit,

incerta dubitat unda cui cedat malo.   140

proinde omisi regimen e manibus meis:

quocumque me ira, quo dolor, quo spes feret,

hoc ire pergam; fluctibus dedimus ratem.

ubi animus errat, optimum est casum sequi.

According with Senecan practise, Clytemnestra adopts an epic simile to describe the contrasting feelings she is experiencing (139 *ut, cum hinc profundum ventus, hinc aestus rapit,/ incerta dubitat unda cui cedat malo*).[20] The nautical metaphor, which is one of the most favoured by Seneca, is employed again at 141 *proinde omisi regimen e manibus meis* and at 143 *fluctibus dedimus ratem*.

Clytemnestra's self-analysis is particularly rich in abstracts, which contributes to give to the description what Tarrant has defined as a "combination of emotional chaos and detached intellectual analysis":[21] *timor* (*subdidit*) 133; *invidia* (*pulsat*) 134; *cupido* (*premit*)135; *pudor* (*rebellat*) 138 with three adjectives *fessus, devictus, pessumdatus*; *ira, dolor, spes* (*feret*) 142; *animus* (*errat*) 144.

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[20] The simile is borrowed from Ovid (*Met.* 8, 470-72): *utque carina,/quam ventus ventoque rapit contrarius aestus,/vim geminam sentit paretque incerta duobus.*
[21] Tarrant (1976) 199.

4.3 *Medea* 926-28; 937-44; 951-53: Medea's self-analysis

926-28:

> Cor pepulit horror, membra torpescunt gelu
> pectusque tremuit. ira discessit loco
> materque tota coniuge expulsa redit.

937-44:

> quid, anime, titubas? ora quid lacrimae rigant
> variamque nunc huc ira, nunc illuc amor
> diducit? anceps aestus incertam rapit;
> ut saeva rapidi bella cum venti gerunt,   940
> utrimque fluctus maria discordes agunt
> dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum
> cor fluctuatur: ira pietatem fugat
> iramque pietas. cede pietati, dolor.

951-53:

> ...rursus increscit dolor
> et fervet odium, repetit invitam manum
> antiqua Erinys. ira, qua ducis, sequor.

In the final act of the *Medea*, the protagonist delivers an extremely long monologue (893-977), which has its culminating point in the killing of one of her sons (970-71); the monologue dramatises the conflict between Medea's maternal feelings and her desire to take revenge on Jason's betrayal and emphasises the "quick swerving of her thoughts into opposite directions".[22]

At the end of her speech, the hatred for Jason prevails and Medea accomplishes her

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[22] Costa (1973) 151-52.

revenge. Strangely, the climax of the scene is not made clear by the words (at lines 970-71 *victima manes tuos/placamus ista* she here refers to the shadow of her brother Absyrtus); only at line 974, the words explicitly provide a clue that Medea has perpetrated the *scelus*, since she claims that the killing has begun (*caede incohata*).[23]As to dramatic technique, the fact that Medea kills the sons on stage has raised a huge debate among scholars; according to the practise in Greek theatre and to the precepts of Aristotle and Horace, death ought not to be shown on stage. If we think that Seneca may have been influenced by pantomimic performances, which emphasised and gave central place to such displays, the difficulty may be easily resolved. A dancer may have mimed such a scene in a more allusive way than an actor on stage; the allusiveness of the art of the dancer would have added even more pathos to the scene.[24]

Stylistically, the monologue is characterised by shifts between the first, second, and third-person form: the speech is addressed to herself, to her children, or to her soul and emotions (895 *anime*; 914 *dolor*; 916 *ira*; 930 *furor*; 937 *anime*; 938 *ira, amor*; 944 *dolor*). As usual, the emotions are portrayed as external forces possessing Medea, as for example, at lines 916-17: *Quo te igitur, ira, mittis, aut quae perfido/intendis hosti tela?*; or 927-28: *ira discessit loco/materque tota coniuge expulsa redit*; or 943-44: *ira pietatem fugat/iramque pietas.*

Epic phrasing is recurrently employed, as, for example, at lines 926-27: *Cor pepulit horror, membra torpescunt gelu/pectusque tremuit*, including an extended epic simile 939-43: *anceps aestus incertam rapit;/ut saeva rapidi bella cum venti gerunt,/utrimque fluctus maria discordes agunt/dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum/cor*

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[23] See Braun (1982) 49: "Da in den Tragödien Senecas aber die Handlung, auch die entscheidende Handlung, oftmals nicht unmittelbar in den Worten des Textes greifbar wird, kann der Autor diese Dramen nur für eine Aufführung auf der Bühne geschrieben haben. Erst wenn sie gespielt werden, begreift man, was geschieht".

[24] See also Phaedra's final monologue which involves her committing suicide on stage.

fluctuatur.[25]

4.4 *Thyestes* 434-39; 496-505; 920-69: Thyestes' self-analysis

The third act of the *Thyestes* features a dialogue between Thyestes and his son Tantalus

who spurs his father to rejoice over the reconciliation offered by his brother Atreus;

Thyestes replies to his son describing the inexplicable fear which he is not able to

overcome 434-39:

> Causam timoris ipse quam ignoro exigis.
> nihil timendum video, sed timeo tamen.   435
> placet ire, pigris membra sed genibus labant,
> alioque quam quo nitor abductus feror.
> sic concitatam remige et velo ratem
> aestus resistens remigi et velo refert.

Thyestes' self-analysis of his fear employs the common nautical simile (see

Agamemnon, *Medea*, and *Phaedra*); the simile, which does not aim at any kind of

linguistic variety (see the close repetition of *remige/remigi* and *velo/velo* at lines 438-

39), simply expands on the preceding line *alioque quam quo nitor abductus feror* (437);

the simile thus recasts the image of the movement of two opposite forces moving

Thyestes in different direction.

496-505:

Later on in the act, Atreus provides a self-description comparing himself to a hunting

dog chasing after a prey:

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[25] The simile is borrowed from Ovid *Met.* 8, 470-72; see above on Clytemnestra's self-description.

vix tempero animo, vix dolor frenos capit.

sic, cum feras vestigat et longo sagax

loro tenetur Umber ac presso vias

scrutatur **ore**, dum procul lento suem

odore sentit, paret et tacito locum   500

rostro pererrat; praeda cum propior fuit,

cervice tota pugnat et gemitu vocat

dominum morantem seque retinenti eripit.

cum sperat ira sanguinem, nescit tegi

tamen tegatur.   505

This simile featuring in Atreus' self-analysis is the most extended one in the Senecan *corpus* and heavily strains psychological realism. The simile echoes Virgil (*Aen.* 12, 749-57 describing Aeneas fighting with Turnus) and Ovid (*Met.* 1, 533-38 Apollo chasing after Daphne); nonetheless, while Virgil and Ovid describe the entire process involved in the hunting (the seeing of the prey, the chase, and the capture), Seneca concentrates on a detailed and climactic description of the dog carefully and silently tracking the beast (497 *vestigat*; 498-99 *presso vias/scrutatur ore*; 500-1 *paret et tacito locum/rostro pererrat*), then sensing it closer (501 *praeda cum propior fuit*), and becoming more and more impatient (502 *cervice tota pugnat*) up to the point to breaking from restraint (503 *seque retinenti eripit*). Thus, the smile conveys a crescendo in the movements of the dog. Interestingly, Seneca provides concreteness to the description of the dog by enumerating the bodily parts of it (499 *ore*, 501 *rostro*, 502 *cervice*) which is paralleled by the use of a descriptive and vivid linguistic register (497 *vestigat*; 499 *scrutatur*; 500 *sentit, paret*; 501 *pererrat*; 502 *pugnat*; 503 *eripit*).

Thyestes' lyric monody 920-69:[26]

Fitch	Zwierlein
Pectora longis hebetata malis,	Pectora longis hebetata malis,
iam sollicitas ponite curas.	iam sollicitas ponite curas.
fugiat maeror fugiatque pavor,	fugiat maeror fugiatque pauor,
fugiat trepidi comes exilii	fugiat trepidi comes exilii
tristis egestas	tristis egestas
rebusque gravis pudor afflictis.	rebusque grauis pudor afflictis:
magis unde cadas quam quo refert.	magis unde cadas quam quo refert.
magnum, ex alto culmine lapsum	Magnum, ex alto culmine lapsum
stabilem in plano figere gressum;	stabilem in plano figere gressum;
magnum, ingenti strage malorum	magnum, ingenti strage malorum
pressum fracti pondera regni	pressum fracti pondera regni
non inflexa cervice pati,	non inflexa ceruice pati,
nec degenerem victumque malis	nec degenerem uictumque malis
rectum impositas ferre ruinas.	rectum impositas ferre ruinas.
sed iam saevi nubila fati	Sed iam saeui nubila fati
pelle ac miseri temporis omnes	pelle ac miseri temporis omnes
dimitte notas;	dimitte notas;
redeant vultus ad laeta boni,	redeant uultus ad laeta boni,
veterem ex animo mitte Thyesten.	ueterem ex animo mitte Thyesten.
Proprium hoc miseros sequitur vitium,	Proprium hoc miseros sequitur uitium,
numquam rebus credere laetis;	numquam rebus credere laetis:
redeat felix fortuna licet,	redeat felix fortuna licet,
tamen afflictos gaudere piget.	tamen afflictos gaudere piget.
quid me revocas	Quid me reuocas festumque uetas
festumque vetas celebrare diem,	celebrare diem, quid flere iubes,
quid flere iubes,	nulla surgens dolor ex causa?
nulla surgens dolor ex causa?	quis me prohibet flore decenti
quis me prohibet	uincire comam, prohibet, prohibet?
flore decenti vincire comam,	Vernae capiti fluxere rosae,
prohibet, prohibet?	pingui madidus crinis amomo
vernae capiti fluxere rosae,	inter subitos stetit horrores,
pingui madidus crinis amomo	imber uultu nolente cadit,
inter subitos stetit horrores,	uenit in medias uoces gemitus.
imber vultu nolente cadit,	Maeror lacrimas amat assuetas,
venit in medias voces gemitus.	flendi miseris dira cupido est.
maeror lacrimas amat assuetas,	libet infaustos mittere questus,

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[26] Fitch (2002-2004) 306-10 and Zwierlein (1986) 327-28 print a different colometry of the anapaestic lines.

flendi miseris dira cupido est.

libet infaustos mittere questus,

libet et Tyrio

saturas ostro rumpere vestes,

ululare libet.

Mittit luctus signa futuri

mens ante sui praesaga mali:

instat nautis fera tempestas,

cum sine vento tranquilla tument.

_ Quos tibi luctus quosve tumultus

fingis, demens?

credula praesta pectora fratri:

iam, quidquid id est,

vel sine causa vel sero times.

_ Nolo infelix,

sed vagus intra terror oberrat,

subitos fundunt oculi fletus,

nec causa subest.

dolor an metus est?

an habet lacrimas magna voluptas?

libet et Tyrio saturas ostro

rumpere uestes, ululare libet.

Mittit luctus signa futuri

mens ante sui praesaga mali:

instat nautis fera tempestas,

cum sine uento tranquilla tument.

Quos tibi luctus quosue tumultus

fingis, demens?

credula praesta pectora fratri:

iam, quidquid id est, uel sine causa

uel sero times.

Nolo infelix, sed uagus intra

terror oberrat, subitos fundunt

oculi fletus, nec causa subest.

dolor an metus est? an habet lacrimas

magna uoluptas?

The first scene of the fifth act of the *Thyestes* features a monologue by Atreus (885-919) and most probably a monologue (in lyric metre 920-69) by Thyestes; in fact, the manuscript tradition is not in agreement in the assignment of lines 920-69. In the E tradition the lines occur as an antiphonal song between Thyestes and the chorus (920-37 chorus; 938-42 Thyestes; 942-44 chorus; 945-60 Thyestes; 961-64 chorus; 965-69 Thyestes); in the A tradition all the lines are assigned to Thyestes. Zwierlein and Fitch follow the A tradition and print the lines as an interrupted *canticum* by Thyestes.[27] Bishop, on the contrary, defends the reading of the E tradition on the basis of marked shifts between third-person and second-person speech. That the lines are to be assigned to Thyestes seems to be confirmed by Atreus' words at lines 918-19 (*ecce, iam cantus ciet/festasque voces, nec satis menti imperat*) and by a parallel passage in the *Medea*

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[27] Zwierlein (1986) 327-28; Fitch (2002-2004) 306-10. See Bishop (1988) 392-412 for a defence of the reading of the E tradition.

where the nurse announces Medea's entrance on stage with similar words (738-39 *Sonuit ecce vesano gradu/canitque. mundus vocibus primis tremit*); even in Medea's case the speech delivered by the protagonist is a lyric monody; it is worth noting that both Atreus and the nurse remark with the use of the verb *cieo* and *cano* respectively that Medea and Thyestes are actually singing (namely delivering their lines in lyric metre); thus the lyric metre is used to convey the impression of an altered frame of mind: in fact Medea is about to use her magic power and Thyestes is heavily drunk.

In relation to the emotional climate provided by the lyric metre, Fitch's arrangement of the colometry of the anapaestic lines, which features a larger number of monometers than Zwierlein (namely 12 to 5), better underlines the heightened emotional part of the speech; in fact, the monometers come to coincide with Thyestes' self-apostrophe or direct address.[28] Furthermore, Fitch observes that "the broken rhythm created by the monometers in 942-46 matches the impassioned outburst of the lines, in contrast to the more controlled utterance which precedes and follows".[29]

Thyestes' entrance on stage is announced by Atreus at lines 901-2 (*Turba famularis, fores/ templi relaxa, festa patefiat domus*) who then gives a description of Thyestes inside the palace at 908-11 (*Aperta multa tecta conlucent face./resupinus ipse purpurae atque auro incubat,/vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput./ eructat*).[30]

Thyestes' monologue is better seen as a soliloquy since it does not address or come as a reply to Atreus or any other character on stage. Tarrant has described Thyestes' monologue as a "harrowing portrayal of psychological disintegration, unique in ancient literature and, for all its grotesque exaggeration, uncomfortably real".[31]

For what concerns the shifts from the third to the second person (self-address), this device is a recurring and constant technique of Seneca's dramatic writing (see the

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[28] Compare the similar case of Andromache's lyric monody in the *Trojan Women* (705-35).
[29] Fitch (1987b) 75.
[30] Compare *Phaedra* 384-86 and *Hercules furens* 999-1053 for similar handling of an interior scene.
[31] Tarrant (1985) 221.

monologues described above) and thus the monologue can be accounted as a further example of it.

The first 17 lines (920-37) are delivered in the third-person form and the speech is constituted by two self-exhortation (920-25; 933-37) and a more generalising section (925-33); in the first self-exhortation, Thyestes addresses his *pectora* 920 to release negative emotions, namely *maeror, pavor* (922 grief, fear), *egestas* (924 misery), *pudor* (925 shame), which are presented all the way through as active agents.[32] In the second, the same idea of releasing past misery and sorrow is stated further; here Thyestes does not address his emotions, but rather describes the symptoms associated with the negative emotions which must be abandoned (935-36 *pelle ac miseri temporis omnes/dimitte notas*) and those which must be subsumed for the new and positive situation (937-38 *redeant vultus ad laeta boni,/veterem ex animo mitte Thyesten*).

The central part (926-33) deals with a more general description of how to withstand negative events in a dignified way; this section is remarkable from a stylistic and metrical point of view:

> magis unde cadas **quam quo refert**.
> **magnum, ex alto** culmine **lapsum**
> stabilem **in plano** figere **gressum**;
> **magnum, ingenti** strage mal**orum**
> **pressum fracti** pondera **regni**   930
> **non inflexa cerv**ice pati,
> **nec d**egenerem **victum**que malis
> **rectum imp**ositas ferre **ruinas**.

Stylistically, the passage features a large use of alliteration (especially of the sound *m*); metrically, the passage employs a frequent use of spondees which "convey not only physical but also emotional heaviness, and are therefore particularly appropriate for

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[32] Bishop (1988) 394-96 claims that *pectora* is never used in self-address.

sorrow";[33] in addition to this, the sense of heaviness conveyed by the metre could match the sense of fatigue produced by the long struggle against misfortunes. The sense of heaviness is then expressly made clear by the text itself at lines 929-30 (*magnum, ingenti strage malorum/pressum fracti pondera regni*) and at line 933 (*rectum impositas ferre ruinas*); thus, misfortunes metaphorically become a weight which physically pulls down and makes human beings bend; in front of such misfortunes, Thyestes has managed to keep standing straight (931 *non inflexa cervice pati*; 933 *rectum*) and yet stable (927-28 *magnum ex alto culmine lapsum/stabilem in plano figere gressum*). The struggle is visually depicted by the play of two opposite forces producing on the one side a pulling down movement and on the other a standing up one.

The generalising and gnomic tone of this section is resumed again at lines 938-41; afterwards a sudden shift of tone comes about and Thyestes' speech (942-46) becomes personal and heavily emotional (see especially the emphatic series of interrogative sentences and the repetition of the verb *prohibet* thrice): Thyestes addresses his *dolor* (pain) complaining that it forbids him to rejoice over the change of situation; the *dolor* is experienced here as an external force which compels him to weep (*quid flere iubes?*); similarly, in the following self-description, which is cast in the third-person form, the symptoms through which Thyestes' *dolor* expresses itself are treated as external entities; it is notable that in this long descriptive section there is careful avoidance of any kind of personal pronoun which could refer to Thyestes as experiencing the emotion; even the *maeror* (sorrow), the *cupido flendi* (desire to weep), and the *mens* (mind) seem not to belong to the character and have a life on their own: 952 *maeror lacrimas amat assuetas*; 953 *flendi miseris dira cupido est*; 958 *mittit luctus signa futuri/mens ante sui praesaga mali*.

The bodily effects produced by the emotion contain a familiar repertoire of symptoms:

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[33] Fitch (1987b) 79.

the hair bristles in fear (948-49 *pingui madidus crinis amomo/inter subitos stetit horrores*), tears fall from the unwilling eyes (950 *imber vultu nolente cadit*), a groan comes amidst the words (951 *venit in medias voces gemitus*); the pain longs to lament (954 *libet infaustos mittere questus*), to tear the garments (955-56 *libet et Tyrio/saturas ostro rumpere vestes*), and to howl (957 *ululare libet*; note the emphatic position of the verb at the beginning of the line and the repetition of the verb *libet* thrice in 4 lines). The section is rounded off by a nautical simile which compares Thyestes's inexplicable foreboding of future misfortunes to the sailors on a calm sea threatened by an unpredictable storm (959-60).[34]

At lines 965-69, after an interruption containing self-exhortation (961-64), Thyestes provides another list of symptoms of his distress; the use of the first-person (965 *nolo)*, with which the section opens, is followed again by a sudden shift from first-person to third-person form and this final section repeats the content and matches in tone the preceding more extended passage;[35] again, psychological and physical symptoms are described as external entities (966 *sed vagus intra terror oberrat*; 967 *subitos fundunt oculi fletus*).

4.5   *Trojan Women* 642-62: Andromache's self-analysis

Quid agimus? animum distrahit geminus timor:
hinc natus, illinc coniugis cari cinis.
pars utra vincet? testor immites deos,
deosque veros coniugis manes mei: 645
non aliud, Hector, in meo nato mihi
placere quam te. vivat, ut possit tuos
referre vultus. -prorutus tumulo cinis

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[34] For the recurrent use of nautical imagery see this chapter n. 17 p. 195.
[35] This is the only occurrence of a verb used in the first-person form.

mergetur? ossa fluctibus spargi sinam

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 poenae extrahas.

ingrata, dubitas? Hector est illinc tuus-

erras, utrimque est Hector: hic sensus potens,

forsan futurus ultor extincti patris-   660

utrique parci non potest: quidnam facis?

serva e duobus, anime, quem Danai timent.

Andromache's monologue features in the third act of the *Trojan Women* and deals with

the attempt to conceal Astyanax from the Greeks (namely in the person of Ulysses).

Andromache's monologue is delivered as a long aside (20 lines); in fact, her thoughts

are not meant to be heard by Ulysses. Such an extended aside does not feature as a

dramatic device in Greek tragedy, but they are well attested in New Comedy.[36]

However, Seneca's asides present a length which is unparalleled even in New Comedy.

Usually, asides are employed when a character is planning deception in relation to

another one, as, for example in the *Medea* (549-50: *Sic natos amat?/bene est, tenetur,*

vulneri patuit locus), where Medea's words are clearly not meant to be heard by Jason;

a similar occurrence is to be found in the *Trojan Women* during the confrontation

between Ulysses and Andromache; as soon as the cunning hero detects Andromache's

fear, which reveals her lie about Astyanax, he delivers a brief aside (625-26: *Intremuit:*

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[36] See Bain (1977) 105-34; Tarrant (1978) 242-46; in Euripides there are four instances which can be accounted as in fieri development of the convention (*Hecuba* 726 ff., *Philoctetes* 572 ff., *Orestes* 669 ff. *Medea* 277-280); New Comedy, instead, offers many examples of the technique: Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusai* (603, 604, 609); *Plutus* 365 ff.; Plautus, *Cas.* 685 ff.; *Poen.* 647 ff. 653 ff; Terentius, *Ad.* 548.

hac, hac parte quaerenda est mihi./ matrem timor detexit: iterabo metum).

However, Andromache's lengthy aside monologue in the *Trojan Women* is not unparalleled, since a similar one occurs in the *Thyestes* (491-507); Atreus actually delivers an extended monologue aside in which he first catches sight of Thyestes and his sons and then pours out his feelings of happiness since he has almost accomplished his revenge.[37]

Andromache's monologue deals with an emotional dilemma on the course of action she should choose; her dilemma concerns the choice between saving Hector's tomb (Ulysses threatened to destroy it if she does not reveal where Astyanax is hidden) or the life of his little son. The dilemma appears to be totally incongruous, since the destruction of Hector's tomb will cause also the death of the boy who is hidden there. In addition to this, Andromache's "hesitancy is psychologically absurd by any canon of maternal instinct".[38] Despite the incongruity, Andromache's speech is highly emotional and pathetic; it is different from those of Phaedra, Medea, and Clytemnestra in which the heroines analyse mainly their feelings and the symptoms produced by them. Here, Andromache's self-analysis is more concerned with portraying a conflicting choice between her maternal instinct and her bridal devotion to her husband (or better, his tomb!).

Stylistically, the passage gives the impression of two voices speaking in Andromache; in fact, she addresses herself either in the first and in the second person (649 *sinam*; 651 *poteris*; 652 *poteris*; 653 *potero, perpetiar, feram* in asyndeton; 657 *fluctuaris, statue, extrahas*; 658 *dubitas*; 659 *erras*; 661 *facis*; 662 *serva* where she addresses her *animus*).

The passage includes several demonstrative pronouns relating to Astyanax and Hector

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[37] See Tarrant (1985) 161.
[38] Owen (1969) 119 defines the monologue a "dramatic conundrum"; Fantham (1982a) 302; Pratt (1983) 110; pace Boyle (1994) 192.

(643 *hinc, illinc*; 650 *hic*; 655 *hic*; 656 *illum*; 658 *illinc*; 659 *hic*); the first two

occurrences of the demonstrative pronouns seems to provide and set out a concrete

space for the metaphorical interior feeling that on one side there is her son and on the

other the ashes of her husband (643-44 *hinc natus, illinc coniugis cari cinis./pars utra*

vincet?). Later on in her speech, she again asks herself whether it is preferable to see the

profanation of Hector's ashes (649-50 *ossa fluctibus spargi sinam/disiecta vastis?*) or

the death of her son (652-53 *poteris celsa per fastigia/missum rotari?*); in this case, she

vividly portrays the two concrete outcomes her choice would produce. Remarkably,

both of them are quite awkward. In the case of Hector's ashes, she fears that the Greeks

will throw them into the sea. In the case of Astyanax, Andromache foreshadows that

Astyanax will be thrown from the walls of Troy; how does she know the exact type of

death the small boy will endure? In relation to the last point, it seems that Andromache

is aware of her own mythological story and uses it to add pathos to her speech, with no

concern for dramatic illusion. Furthermore, why are the outcomes described in such

way? They clearly provide and strengthen the pathetic and emotional effect of her

speech. In addition to this, the facts portrayed are strikingly visual. She again employs a

similar visual effect when she claims that she will be able to endure Astyanax's death as

long as her Hector will not be tossed about by the hand of the enemy (654-55 *dum non*

meus post fata victoris manu/iactetur Hector).

Chapter 5

Pantomime and descriptive narrative set-pieces of Seneca's tragedies

5.1   Introduction: general features of narrative set-pieces

Lengthy narratives occur in almost every tragedy of the Senecan *corpus* with the exceptions of *Medea* and *Phoenissae*. They are developed as independent set-pieces which have little or no importance for the advancement of the plot.

I list them as follows:

- Theseus' description of the descent to the Underworld of Hercules in the *Hercules furens* (act III: 662-827);

- the messenger's description of the sea-monster in the *Phaedra* (act V: 1000-1114);

- the messenger's description of Atreus' murder and dismemberment of Thyestes' sons in the *Thyestes* (act IV: 641-782);

- the messenger's description of Polyxena's and Astyanax's deaths in the *Trojan Women* (act V: 1056-1179);

- Creon' s description of the necromancy in the *Oedipus* (act III: 509-708);

- Eurybates' description of the sea-storm in the *Agamemnon* (act III: 421-578).

5.1.1 Formal frame

These narratives take the form of speeches in which a character brings information of some preceding action occurring off-stage to the characters on-stage. The speeches are either delivered by 'true' messengers or by characters who perform the same dramatic

function.[1] As Larson states, it is legitimate to classify them as messenger speeches since they display some of the conventional formal features of messenger speeches of Greek tragedy, and especially Euripidean tragedy.[2] Senecan messenger speeches, however, differ from their Greek counterparts in many respects. First, while the Greek messenger speech is employed to narrate events which are strictly connected and needed for the advancement of the plot, or which are not conventionally shown on stage (such as death and violence), Seneca's messenger-speeches expand and elaborate on episodes and themes which, albeit belonging to the myth in question, are needed neither to advance the plot nor to overcome difficulties conventionally connected with the representation of bloodshed on stage. Furthermore, while the Greek messenger delivers a speech implicitly expressing his emotions, thoughts and perspective on the events, the Senecan messenger "excludes himself completely from the story he tells".[3] The Senecan messenger represents thus more an epic narrator or a "medium" (to use Larson's term) than a dramatic character.

Since Seneca knew his Greek models, from which he could draw well established and more obviously economical dramatic conventions, we have to interpret his different use of the messenger as a dramatic device intended for a highly specific purpose other than a means for rhetorical display or to replace stage performance. Their occurrence in almost every tragedy makes them a regularly recurrent tool whose adoption should be interpreted and not simplistically dismissed as ornamental.

According to Garelli, "the tendency to develop these scenes well beyond the dramatic necessities is a clear evidence of a choice which is fully conscious and literary, a choice of theatrical writing".[4] She points out three aspects of the set-pieces which

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[1] Larson (1994) 67 states that "the consequence for the extension of the messenger-role to characters involved in the action of the tragedy, is that there are more opportunities for messenger-speeches".
[2] *Ibidem* 31.
[3] *Ibidem* 65. See also Garelli (1998a) 25 for a similar interpretation.
[4] Garelli (1998a) 20-21.

show Seneca's different aesthetic perspective on the material. First, the extreme length of the set-pieces indicates that their role is intended to be pivotal; in the structure of the play, in fact, they actually acquire the status of an episode in itself which often occupies a whole act.[5] According to Garelli, these pieces are not conceived as elements of the drama, but as *equivalents* of it.[6] Furthermore, the narratives dramatise epic poetry, and the characters are depicted by Seneca in the most theatrical attitude offered by the epic text.[7] Finally, Seneca tends to simplify the dramatic structure of the set-pieces and develop and elaborate, instead, the narrative element in it. Thus, the structural frame is reduced to a minimum and the development of the action is not linear; on the contrary, the narrative seems to proceed by leaps. This is due to the fact that Seneca tends to elaborate secondary elements at the expense of the coherence of the whole.

Garelli exemplifies this tendency to simplify the action and to elaborate secondary elements by comparing the description of the storm in Aeschylus' (636-80) and Seneca's *Agamemnon* (421-578): in Aeschylus the description of the storm is brief and the return of the Greek fleet, which the messenger comes to announce, remains the most important fact in relation to the further development of the plot; in Seneca the narration of the storm is so long and its details so prominent that the return of Agamemnon and the Greek fleet is neglected. The Senecan narratives thus show clearly that he neglected structural unity, temporal and spatial continuity, as well as verisimilitude in favour of an accumulation and expansion of baroque descriptions.

This point of view is shared by Larson as well, who describes the Senecan messenger speech as dealing with a limited scope of time and action, that is, with just one event, which it "describes in elaborate details". This tendency becomes even more evident when the Senecan messenger-speech and the Greek one are compared; in fact the latter

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[5] See Henry and Walker (1965) 12 in relation to Theseus' description of the Underworld in the *Hercules furens*.
[6] Garelli (1998a) 26.
[7] *Ibidem* 27.

"is generally more concerned to present a chain of events in chronological perspective, that is, to compose a narrative", while the Senecan messenger speech "concentrates rather on accumulating details to make a picture of one stage in this chain of events".[8]

As to the themes, the narratives usually deal with literary *topoi* typical of the epic tradition where descriptions of events of such a kind are employed to arouse emotional effects; the secondary episodes treated in Seneca's narratives tend either to deal, generally speaking, with a sort of performance of wonders (as for example, the description of the descent to the Underworld, the necromancy, the appearance of shades, descriptions of storms and shipwrecks, sacrifices and invocation to the souls of the dead), or with a dramatisation of death and murder, especially of children (as the description of the killing of Thyestes' sons or of Polyxena and Astyanax in the *Trojan Women*). Seneca's fondness for the treatment of supernatural and horrific events seems designed to create theatrical and spectacular effects reminiscent of pantomime.

Seneca's narrative set-pieces tend to feature the same structure; in particular, narrative set-pieces are constituted by the following three elements:

1) introductory *ecphrasis*;

2) description of characters, humanlike figures, mythical animals/monsters;

3) reactions of the natural elements to the character's deeds (in the case of the *Trojan Women* the reactions of the natural elements are substituted by the reactions of a crowd gathered to assist in Astyanax's and Polyxena's deaths).

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[8] Larson (1994) 34.

5.1.2 Ecphrasis: imaginary landscape

Seneca's set-pieces invariably open with an *ecphrasis topou*; the position of the lengthy *ecphrasis* at the beginning of the speech "gives it the status of an entertaining opening to a story" and provides a background for the figures or characters.[9]

This background is described in a detailed and often graphic way, but, at the same time, the mode of depiction does not aim at being accurate or realistic (for example, it does not provide spatial or temporal coordinates); it pictures a scenario which is more imagined than real and thus quite fluid. The details also aim more at creating the general atmosphere of the place rather than defining a spatial framework. Seneca's *ecphraseis* seem a deliberate attempt to create an 'imaginary frame', within which his characters move. It is, of course, obvious that such a landscape - an imaginary and often phantasmagorical atmosphere - may not be portrayed as materially evident by means of theatrical business; but such a background or "verbal scenery", which sidesteps the "realistic" constraints imposed by the theatrical conditions, would have been extremely suitable for pantomimic performances;[10] in fact, the very nature of these performances allowed (if not required) an expansion of the scenic space, indeed an imaginary one. The mime or pantomime that was performed could move in a fluid imaginary setting, more evocative than concrete, and created by the words of the libretti. Moreover, the verbal scenery portrayed in the libretti could have been translated from verbal into bodily images by means of allusive gestures and movements by the skilful dancer.

As seen in Chapter 1, Libanius (*Orations* 64, 116) attests that the dancer was able to convey pastoral landscapes.[11] The picture evoked by Libanius is a complex one since in it natural elements, animals, and human beings feature and such a complexity is typical of Seneca's narrative set-pieces.

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[9] *Ibidem* 68.
[10] The expression "verbal scenery" is Lada-Richards' (2007).
[11] See Chapter 1 pp. 25-26.

5.1.3 Mimetic present

Besides spatial coordinates, time becomes rather vague as well. In fact, narrative set-pieces are usually couched in the present tense which "establishes the place in permanency".[12] The past tense is seldom employed and never to describe a proper past action. For example, in the case of the narrative set-pieces in the *Hercules furens* (658-829), the narration consistently adopts the present, while the past tense features only scantily.[13] The past tense is used mainly in the perfect and is either employed to describe an instantaneous action or to convey temporal relationships between two actions swiftly taking place in close succession. The instantaneous perfect, which describes a sudden and thus frozen action, may be used to convey a static pose.[14]

As a consequence, even though the messenger is reporting actions that happened in the past, the use of the present does not make the narration seem to describe a past event, but one simultaneously taking place as the narration proceeds.[15]

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[12] Larson (1994) 68.

[13] I give here a list of the occurrences of the present and the past tense respectively in the narrative set-piece of the *Hercules furens* (the verb count does not include Amphitryon's interventions). A detailed analysis of the issue will be provided *ad locum* for each of the six narratives. **Present**: 662 *attollit*; 663 *premit*; 664 *solvit*; 665 *hiat*; 666 *patet*; 667 *pandit*; 668 *incipit*; 670 *cadit*; 671 *ludit*; *solet*; 673 *laxantur*; 674 *pergat*; 675 *est*; *deducit*; 676 *rapit*; 677 *urget*; 678 *sinunt*; 680 *labitur*; 681 *demit*; 682 *pateat*; 683 *involvit*; 684 *ludit*; *cedit*; 685 *instat*; *petat*; 686 *iacet*; 687 *gemit*; 688 *resonat*; 689 *horrent*; 690 *tenet*; 691 *iacet*; 692 *tegit*; 694 *sequitur*; 696 *adiuvat*; 698 *germinant*; 700 *habet*; 701 *squalet*; 702 *torpet*; 704 *haeret*; *sedet*; 706 *est*; 709 *est*; 710 *alligat*; 711 *manat*; 713 *iurant*; 714 *rapitur*; 715 *volvit*; 716 *cingitur*; 718 *tegitur*; 719 *pendent*; 720 *iacet*; 721 *digerit*; 723 *gerat*; 724 *est*; 726 *timet*; 727 *timetur*; 732 *sortitur*; 733 *aditur*; 734 *audit*; 735 *patitur*; 736 *repetit*; *premitur*; 739 *est*; 740 *servat*; 741 *regit*; 742 *parcit*; 743 *petit*; 745 *abstine*; 746 *regnas*; *taxantur*; 750 *rapitur*; 751 *sedet*; 753 *sectatur*; *alluit*; 755 *perit*; *destituunt*; 756 *praebet*; 757 *gerunt*; 757 *errant*; 758 *terret*; 762 *imminet*; 763 *torpescit*; 764 *servat*; 765 *gestat*; 766 *pendet*; 767 *coercet*; *lucent*; 768 *regit*; 770 *poscit*; 771 *exclamat*; 772 *pergis*; *siste*; 774 *domat*; 775 *scandit*; 781 *mergit*; 782 *apparet*; 783 *territat*; 785 *tuetur*; 786 *lambunt*; *horrent*; 787 *sibilat* ; 789 *attollit*; 790 *captat*; 794 *terret*; *sibilat*; 797 *exterret*; 799 *opponit*; *tegit*; 801 *rotat*; 802 *ingeminat*; 805 *iubet*; 808 *vincit*; 810 *componit*; 812 *pulsat*; 813 *est*; 815 *resumit*; 816 *quassat*; 827 *abscondit*. **Past** : 735 *fecit*; 737 *vidi*; 754 *dedit*; 770 *repetebat*; 776 *succubuit*; *sedit*; 777 *bibit*; 788 *sensit*; 791 *stetit*; 792 *sedit*; 793 *timuit*; 802 *infregit*; 803 *summisit*; 804 *cessit*; *extimuit*; 806 *dedit*; 814 *percussit*; 816 *abstulit*; 817 *vexit*; 818 *respexit*; 821 *intulimus*; *vidit*; 822 *conspexit*; 824 *compressit*; *expulit*; 825 *flexit*; *petit*.

[14] As seen in Chapter 1, pantomime was characterised by the alternation of static poses and swift movements; I give some examples: *Thy* 720 *stetit sui securus*; *Thy* 723-24 *stetit...cadaver*; *Hf* 458 *mox fulminanti proximus patri stetit*; *Phae* 1063 *currus ante trepidantes stetit*; *Phae* 1100 *paulumque domino currus affixo stetit*; *Thy* 697 *nutavit aula*; *Phae* 1031 *inhorruit concussus undarum globus*; *Oed* 576-77 *terra...gemuitque penitus*.

[15] Examples are provided later in this chapter.

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The adoption of the present tense on Seneca's part seems to be a device chosen to provide immediacy and to reinforce the impression of vividness of the messenger's account.

This immediacy is further reinforced by the extensive use of demonstrative and adjective pronouns to point to different directions, or objects, or group of people. For example, the narrative set-pieces of the *Hercules furens* are punctuated by deictic pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs.[16]

The combined use of the present tense and of demonstrative adjectives and pronouns enhances the impression that the messenger or the character in charge of the speech is describing an action or a place or a character in front of his eyes.

Now, since the events, places, and characters that are the subjects of the narratives are away from the scene of the action and since the messenger is reporting actions which took place in the past, no matter how recent, the fact that Seneca's narrative set-pieces strive for immediacy sharply contrasts with these very premises.

Seneca seems to have adopted a well established device of the tragic genre and reshaped it. Thus the tendency to present the events as if taking place at the moment and describe the characters as if acting conterminously with the narration may be the sign of the influence of pantomime, in which the temporal dimension was somehow irrelevant and the actions enacted by the dancer were taking place in a timeless present.

5.1.4 Running commentaries: characters, animated natural elements, and personified abstractions

In narrative set-pieces several different figures make their appearance: there are proper characters, humanlike figures (such as personifications of abstractions like Grief, Dolor, Disease, Death), but also monsters (such as the sea monster in the *Phaedra*), or

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[16] 664 *hic*; 687 *hic*; *illic*; 711 *hinc*; 712 *hunc*; 714 *hic*; 718 *hic*; 719 *hoc*; 720 *haec*; *hanc*; 733 *illo*; 734 *illo*; *hoc*; 764 *hunc*; 769 *hic*; 783 *hic*; 801 *huc*; *illuc*.

mythological animals (such as Cerberus in the *Hercules furens*). Usually, the attitudes or physical appearances or actions of all these figures populating the narrative are described in detail. For example, in the *Trojan Women*'s narrative set-piece, Astyanax and Polyxena are described; in that of *Phaedra*, there is a minute description of Hippolytus and the sea monster. In that of the *Hercules furens*, a plethora of different figures appears: the personified abstractions (*Fames*, *Pudor*, *Senectus*), Dis, Charon, and Cerberus.

Similarly to the *Hercules furens*, in the *Oedipus* first Tiresias, then the personified abstractions such as *Luctus* (Grief) and *Morbus* (Disease), then Laius' ghost are described; in the *Thyestes*, Atreus and Thyestes, while in the *Agamemnon*, Ajax and Nauplius.

When characters are described, the descriptions differ in no way from those found in "running commentaries" and can be interpreted accordingly; for instance, the description of Tiresias in the *Oedipus* presents all the typical features outlined in the case of "running commentaries":[17]

Lines 548-55:

> Huc ut sacerdos intulit senior gradum,
> haud est moratus: praestitit noctem locus.
> tum effossa tellus, et super rapti rogis   550
> iaciuntur ignes. ipse funesto integit
> vates amictu corpus et frondem quatit;
> squalente cultu maestus ingreditur senex,
> lugubris imos palla perfundit pedes,
> mortifera canam taxus astringit comam.   555

Lines (559-568):

> Vocat inde manes teque qui manes regis

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[17] See Chapter 3.

et obsidentem claustra letalis lacus,   560
carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax
decantat ore quidquid aut placat leves
aut cogit umbras; sanguinem libat focis
solidasque pecudes urit et multo specum
saturat cruore; libat et niveum insuper   565
lactis liquorem, fundit et Bacchum manu
laeva, canitque rursus ac terram intuens
graviore manes voce et attonita citat.

Tiresias' entrance is shaped as that of a character entering on stage and closely resembles the conventional entrances of characters found in the acts (lines 548-49 *Huc ut sacerdos intulit senior gradum,/haud est moratus*;[18] the instance in the *Oedipus* is not an isolated case, since the entrance of Atreus (*Thy* 682-83 *Quo postquam furens/intravit Atreus liberos fratris trahens*) and the entrance of Hippolytus (*Phae* 1000-01: *ut profugus urbem liquit infesto gradu*) are handled in the same way; such a handling, which is common in the acts, is awkward in the case of a messenger's narration in which the entrance of a character does not need to be announced nor his movements minutely described since the messenger usually reports past events or events occurring off-stage. Such a handling seems thus an additional device adopted to provide immediacy to the narrative.

As we have said above, Seneca tends to populate his narratives with personified abstracts portrayed as humanlike figures. The personification of abstracts is a common feature in poetry, but while in the poetic representation the personifications are like posing in instant images, Seneca's personifications are performing actions. For instance, if in Virgil *Senectus* (Old Age) is simply described as sad (*tristis*), in Seneca it is

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[18] Compare e.g. *Med* 675-76: *namque ut attonito gradu/evasit et penetrale funestum attigit.*

described as supporting its steps with a stick (*iners Senectus adiuvat baculo gradum*);[19] in this way, the personified abstracts acquire an even more pronounced humanlike nature becoming similar to proper characters as described in "running commentaries".

In the case of the monster featuring in the narrative set-pieces, Seneca provides such a long and detailed description of its bodily parts that it acquires a humanlike, although phantasmagorical, appearance: the monster has body (*corporis*), neck (*colla; cervix*), forehead (*fronte*), ears (*aures*), eyes (*orbibus; oculi*), muscles (*toros*); nostrils (*nares*), chest (*pectus*), flanks (*latus*). A similar description of Cerberus is found in the narrative set-piece of the *Hercules furens*.

Now, all these figures, either human, vegetal, animal, or simply imaginary which accumulate in Seneca's narrative, contribute to provide the impression of a humanlike polymorphism expressed by a realm of figures continuously changing shapes and transforming from one to the other. Thus, this protean nature of Seneca's narratives seems to parallel that of the pantomime dancer who, as the mythical Proteus, was mostly praised for his ability to metamorphose into, imitate, and embody everything he wished to.[20]

Another recurrent element of narrative set-pieces is the description of transient aspects of environmental change which usually take place in the form of the reactions of natural elements to the character's deeds. As Larson has shown, descriptions dealing with transient aspects of environmental disturbances are almost totally absent in Greek tragedy.[21] Such disturbances usually take place in correspondence to the characters'

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[19] A detailed analysis of the handling of personifications of abstracts in comparison to Virgil is provided in the chapter on the narrative set-piece in the *Hercules furens*. The tendency to endow personified abstractions with a humanlike nature is to be found already in Ovid: Envy (*Invidia*): *Met.* 2, 760-96; Grief (*Luctus*), Terror (*Pavor*), Dread (*Terror*); Madness (*Insania*): *Met.* 4, 484-85; Hunger (*Fames*): *Met.* 8 799-822; Sleep (*Somnus*): 11, 592-649; Rumor (*Fama*): *Met.* 12, 39-63). See Miller (1916) 516-34 for a discussion of this feature of Ovid's style.

[20] Lucian (19): δοκεῖ γάρ μοι ὁ παλαιὸς μῦθος καὶ Πρωτέα τὸν Αἰγύπτιον οὐκ ἄλλο τι ἢ ὀρχηστήν τινα γενέσθαι λέγειν, μιμητικὸν ἄνθρωπον καὶ πρὸς πάντα σχηματίζεσθαι καὶ μεταβάλλεσθαι δυνάμενον.

[21] Larson (1999).

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misdeeds or misfortunes, thus the landscape usually tends to mirror or respond to the characters' states of mind; as Herington has argued, the description of external landscape serves as the "amplifying medium which conveys the state of the subject's soul".[22] Because of this, natural phenomena are presented as being animated and possessing a sentient nature and thus even these descriptions, not differently from those depicting characters undergoing emotional strain, portray a landscape which is emotional more than naturalistic.[23]

The landscape and natural elements are often portrayed as if animated or as sentient beings through the use of a metaphorical language; the most explicit example of this tendency is found at *Oedipus* (574-77).[24]

More generally, grove, trees, and earth tremble and shake in fear and fire burns unwillingly.[25] The prominent role given to inanimate objects and their reactions together with the tendency to present them as personified seems a tool intended to translate as much as possible in a language suitable for being performed in actions; this tendency may stand also as a sign of the influence of pantomime in Seneca's tragedies (no matter here whether Seneca consciously and purposely chose these stylistic devices to write a script suitable for pantomime, or adopted the language of pantomime for other reasons).[26]

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[22] Herington (1966) 451; this feature, among others, has prompted a psychoanalytical (namely Lacanian) interpretation of the tragedies; such an approach has been first pioneered by Segal (1986), followed by Littlewood (1997), Fitch and McElduff (2002) and Schiesaro (2003).

[23] Pratt (1963) 233 has claimed that Seneca's tendency to present inanimate objects as sentient beings was prompted by the desire to provide "large graphic effect and vivid animation" to his tragedies and that this attitude was "dramatic and poetic rather than philosophical". See *Thy* 262-65; 990-95; 103-121; *Ag* 53-56; *Oed* 1-5; 37-51; 225-29; 569-85; *Hf* 692-702; 939-952; *Phae* 1007-54.

[24] *subsedit omnis silva et erexit comas,/duxere rimas robora et totum nemus/concussit horror; terra se retro dedit/gemuitque penitus.*

[25] *Thy* 696 *Lucus tremescit; Hf* 689-90 *horrent opaca fronde nigrantes comae/taxo imminente; Phae* 1050 *Tremuere terrae; Phae* 1031 *inhorruit concussus undarum globus; Thy* 768-70 *ignis...invitus ardet.*

[26] In relation to this, it is worth quoting a passage in Lucian (19) which attests that the art of the dancer was able to imitate inanimate things such as "the liquidity of water, the sharpness of fire in the liveliness of his movements, and the quivering of a tree" (ὡς καὶ ὕδατος ὑγρότητα μιμεῖσθαι καὶ πυρὸς ὀξύτητα ἐν τῇ τῆς κινήσεως σφοδρότητι καὶ λέοντος ἀγριότητα καὶ παρδάλεως θυμὸν καὶ δένδρου δόνημα, καὶ ὅλως ὅ τι καὶ θελήσειεν).

5.1.5 Sight and sound effects

Another characteristic reaction of the landscape and natural elements is the production of human or animal-like sounds such as the bellowing of the sea (*Phae* 1025-26 *totum en mare/immugit*), the groaning of the flames (*Thy* 771-72 *flammae...gemuere*), and the roaring of the cliffs (*Phae* 1026 *omnes undique scopuli astrepunt*). This emphasis on sound effects is also peculiar; since sounds, like a scream or a groan, can be transformed into a gesture such as, for example, a mute cry, I would suggest that sound effects produced by the animated landscape or natural elements may be another compositional device borrowed from pantomime. Even more importantly, since pantomime performances were characterised by a loud instrumental accompaniment and heavily relied on musical effects, especially to raise emotions in the audience, sounds of an expressionistic nature (as sudden laments, groans, and the like) were then a very prominent ingredient of the genre.

From a stylistic point of view, the narrative combines two different qualities; in fact, some descriptions have an almost scientific nature because of the precision of the details provided, while some others have an imaginary, baroque, and totally unrealistic one. I would suggest that these opposite and contrasting qualities have a specific function connected with the different purposes they were meant to achieve. These qualities find a correspondence in pantomime where a dancer would embody quite literally a character's action, while suggesting an imaginary landscape, monsters, and phantasmagorical animals by means of more symbolic gestures.

Scholars tend to relate the distinctive aesthetic techniques of the Senecan set pieces to his integration of epic forms into the tragic genre and dismiss them as bombastic, excessive, and redundant. Alternatively, they could be interpreted as a sign of Seneca's creative engagement with the aesthetics of pantomime.

5.2.1 *Hercules furens* 662-827: the descent to the Underworld

Theseus' description of the Underworld is the lengthiest one of the numerous set-pieces in Seneca's tragedies.

Shelton states that "in its function as a rhetorical showpiece, the scene gives Seneca an opportunity to exhibit his skills at descriptions".[27] Fitch's interpretation is that "undeniably such scenes have a considerable degree of independence from the body of the play, and offer an opportunity for display of rhetorical-poetic technique and in particular for δείνωσις, that is, treatment of the gruesome and horrific".[28] Henry and Walker rightly claim that "the long central scene of the play, by its position, length, and impressive power is clearly intended to be pivotal" and further "a scene whose verse is of such compelling and astonishing power cannot be dismissed as merely an interruption of the dramatic development".[29] In addition to this, since the narrative develops for almost 200 lines and thus forms a whole act, it seems hard to believe that Seneca built it up just to display his rhetorical skills and ability in dealing with a topic, which had a very famous antecedent in Aeneas' descent to the Underworld in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. I submit that the conspicuous prominence of the set-piece begins to make more sense if we suppose that Seneca, no matter whether he envisaged his tragedies to be performed or to be recited, wrote the piece in dialogue with pantomime and the formal and stylistic features of the genre. From a formal point of view, three features may be ascribed to the influence of pantomime: the fact that the set piece has a self-contained character; the role of Theseus as a speaking voice rather than a character involved in the action and the bipartite arrangement of the narrative. From the point of view of stylistic composition, two features may be ascribed to the influence of

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[27] Shelton (1978) 50.
[28] Fitch (1987a) 275.
[29] Henry and Walker (1965) 12.

pantomime: the recurring use of *ecphraseis topou* and description of physical appearance of the mythical and hellish figures (the personified abstractions, Dis 721-27; Charon 764-67; the sinners in the increased number of seven, and Cerberus 783-97; and also the lengthy description of the fight between Hercules and Cerberus). The *ecphraseis topou* create the background where the characters move which is, however, not static, but a realm swarming with polymorphic shapes in constant movement. Theseus' speech is basically a monologue interrupted by brief questions asked by Amphitryon which Seneca introduced mainly to avoid the necessity of providing linking transitions between the parts of the narrative. Despite Amphitryon's brief interventions, Theseus' speech is basically a soliloquy.

Impersonality of the narrator and dramatic inconsistency of the character

Theseus' narration of the Underworld is totally impersonal and there is almost no hint (apart from the very last part of his speech 821 *intulimus orbi*) of his own personal feeling or experience of the Underworld; even in replying to Amphitryon's questions, Theseus never reveals his point of view or his direct participation. On the contrary, all his replies begin with a new *ecphrasis topou*, which, does not reflect or is meant to delimit the initial position of the characters (namely Theseus or Hercules) in the space. As rightly pointed out by Larson, the position of the lengthy *ecphrasis* at the beginning of the speech "gives it the status of an entertaining opening to a story" and "the present tense in which it is couched establishes the place in permanency and makes a background for the figures".[30]

As Henry and Walker have rightly pointed out "the character of Theseus remains resolutely undeveloped";[31] in fact, Theseus performs the function of an impersonal narrator or a speaking voice rather than a character directly engaged in the action. His

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[30] Larson (1994) 68
[31] Henry and Walker (1965) 19.

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figure has basically no dramatic reality and consistency: he is just a mouthpiece for a story.

In the economy of the play the figure of Theseus seems purposely and almost uniquely introduced to narrate Hercules' labour in the Underworld. In fact, Theseus' first appearance occurs in the third act where he and Hercules arrive at Thebes directly from the Underworld. As soon as Hercules is informed by Amphitryon about Lycus' threat towards them, he quickly decides to face Lycus and compels Theseus to remain with his family while he is away. At this point, Amphitryon asks Theseus to narrate Hercules' exploit in the Underworld. After the narration is concluded, Theseus leaves the stage and appears again only in the last act of the play to offer to Hercules purification and a home in Athens. Despite the importance of his role in relation to Hercules' future after the killing of his family, Theseus' final intervention is concentrated in three lines and a half (1341-46).[32] In Euripides' *Heracles*, Theseus appears much later in the play, but Seneca needs to have him on stage earlier because Theseus is the only character who can be in charge of the description of the Underworld.

Lack of concern for dramatic illusion

From the point of view of dramatic illusion, Theseus' speech is highly implausible. This is because Theseus' long narration of Hercules' quest for Cerberus takes place at a moment in which the life of Hercules and his family is in danger because of Lycus' threat. In fact, Amphitryon asks Theseus to narrate Hercules' deed in the Underworld while Hercules is fighting with Lycus. Now, in such a moment of crisis, such a request, especially from Amphitryon's part, seems awkward at the very least; Theseus' reply is not less awkward since his speech starts off with an *ecphrasis topou* of the Underworld which lasts approximately for 100 lines (662-696; 698-706 709-727 731-747 750-59)

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[32] *Nostra te tellus manet./illic solutam caede Gradivus manum/restituit armis; illa te, Alcide, vocat,/facere innocentes terra quae superos solet.*

and will be followed by the proper narration of Hercules' deed (at line 762). Now, this apparent lack of concern for dramatic illusion, which is an overall characteristic of this piece in many respects, is due to the fact that the scene is a combination of elements typical of a tragic messenger-like *rhesis* and an epic *ecphrastic* set-piece told by an external narrator. This mixed character of the piece, which seems to cross the boundaries of tragedy and epic, may be evidence of pantomime's free appropriation and fusion of both tragic and epic elements in pursuit of its own goal.[33] Furthermore, the pantomimic libretti may have been composed by assembling elements typical of different literary genres in the well established literary tradition. Tragedy and epic were possibly the main poetic resources from which the pantomime librettist could draw this new type of mythological verse, although they were by no means the only ones.

Structure: juxtaposition of two tableaux

The narrative is sharply divided into two parts, the first one being concerned with a description of the geography of the Underworld (662-759) and the second one with the last of Hercules' labours: the conquest of Cerberus (760-827). This sharp division arises mainly from the fact that Hercules makes his appearance only very late in the narrative, right after Theseus has introduced Cerberus. Because of this, Theseus' description of the Underworld is not arranged in order to narrate, for example, how Hercules made his way into the Underworld, what he encountered and experienced there. Hercules' last labour, i.e. the capture of Cerberus, which was accomplished in the Underworld, allowed Seneca to deal with the theme of the Underworld at large. This being the case, the impression we get from the bipartite arrangement of the narrative is that Seneca aimed at treating somehow separately the Underworld at large and the labour. The two parts, although thematically unified, are, in fact, not structurally integrated; they rather

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[33] See Chapter 1 pp. 23-28.

consist of two separate tabelaux, each of which develops independently from the other and elaborates its own theme.

The extant sources on pantomime attest that pantomimic performances featured themes such as those connected with the realm of Hades, as, for example, the descent to the Underworld of Theseus and Peirithous (Lucian, 60).[34] For what concerns Hercules' labours, we know from Lucian (41) and Libanius (70) that the hero's exploits were very popular in pantomime.

Now, I would argue that the two sections of the narrative stand as two tableaux and, although they are different in tone and content, they share common stylistic features which suggest the influence of pantomime.

Ecphrasis of the Underworld: imaginary background and animated landscape

The first tableau consists basically of a long *ecphrasis topou* of the Underworld (662-696) in which numerous mythical figures move and whose physical appearance is described at length. From a stylistic point of view, as aptly pointed out by Henry and Walker, "the description of Hell is written in verse which is precise and effective; so that so far from being composed in the abstract, often generalizing way which Roman poets conventionally use for such scenes, the detail is particular and selective".[35] In fact, even though the depiction of the hellish landscape exhibits all the sinister elements topically associated with it such as deep woods, rocks, and darkness, the imaginary landscape tends to be presented as if animated and not in abstract terms; thus the opening (lines 662-7):

> Spartana tellus nobile attollit iugum,

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[34] Augustine, *Sermones*, 241.5 =PL 38, 1135-6 claims that his contemporaries used to know the Virgilian episode of Aeneas' descent to the Underworld more because of the theatre than because they actually read it.
[35] Henry and Walker (1965) 12.

densis ubi aequor Taenarus silvis premit.

hic ora solvit Ditis invisi domus

hiatque rupes **alta** et **immenso** specu   665

ingens vorago faucibus **vastis** patet

latumque pandit omnibus populis iter.

Seneca combines here two Virgilian passages (*Aen.* 6, 237: *spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu*; 7, 569-70 *ruptoque ingens Acheronte vorago/pestiferas aperit fauces*). The Senecan picture is vivid and atmospheric but impressionistic rather than precise, and the heavy presence of pleonasm (*alta, immenso, ingens, vastis*; *ora solvit, hiat, patet, pandit*) conveys the image of a rapaciously threatening *locus* which resembles the embodiment of the devouring rapaciousness of death itself.

The description of the path to the Underworld (675-79) is handled in a similar way; Seneca here aims at portraying the actual agents or forces which make the way back from the Underworld irretrievably impossible: *nec ire labor est: ipsa deducit via./**ut saepe puppes aestus invitas rapit**,/sic pronus aer urget atque avidum chaos,/**gradumque retro flectere** haud umquam sinunt/umbrae tenaces*. The passage is modelled on Virgil (*Aen.* 6, 126-29): *facilis descensus Averno:/...sed **revocare gradum** superasque evadere ad auras,/hoc opus, hic labor est*. In Virgil the Sybil states that the way down to the Underworld is easy to cover, while the difficult toil for Aeneas is to retrace his steps; but while the Sybil's statement is purposely addressed to the difficulties Aeneas could face in leaving the Underworld, Theseus' one is more generalizing and does not refer to the actual difficulties Hercules and he himself could face in returning from the Underworld. Seneca reworks the Virgilian model by adding and emphasising the concrete agents which make the way down easy (the void and the breeze) and those which make the way backwards difficult (the clutching shadows). Thus we get the image of two forces, one which pulls down and the other which

clutches firmly. The presence of an irresistible force is then already presented in the almost formulaic simile of the current which sweeps ships off course. Reactions to concrete agents would be much easier to dance mimetically in an attempt to create a supernatural atmosphere than abstract statements of the kind Virgil's Sybil makes.

Another detail added by Seneca in the hellish landscape serves to animate the landscape, namely the presence of "ill-boding birds at large in the Underworld" (a vulture, an owl, and a screech-owl).[36]

Yet another good example is the description of the sterility of the Underworld (698-705), which is conveyed through negative clauses that evoke vividly the fertility missing from the Underworld; the construction allows the narrator to describe actions which are normally associated with fertility such as the sprouting forth of the fields and the fluctuation of the cornfield;[37] the natural elements of the landscape presented as active agents and abstractions (as, for example, in the case of *vastitas*) tend to be personified; the natural elements have a human-like nature since anthropomorphic adjectives are employed to describe them (*prata...laeta facie*; *pigro...mundo*):

> Non prata viridi laeta facie germinant,
> nec adulta leni fluctuat Zephyro seges;
> non ulla ramos silva pomiferos habet;   700
> sterilis profundi **vastitas** squalet soli
> et foeda tellus torpet aeterno situ...
> immotus aer haeret et pigro sedet
> nox atra mundo;   705

Running commentary

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[36] Fitch (1987a) 299.
[37] *Ibidem* 302. Fitch notes that this is the first instance of an intransitive use of the verb *germinare*, which is generally "used of the place rather than plants".

As we have previously said, Seneca includes numerous descriptions of physical appearance, namely Dis (721-25), the great sinners (750-59), and Charon (764-67); the descriptions, to a greater or lesser extent, are modelled on Virgil's corresponding ones and a comparison between the two is revealing of how Seneca reworked his models for his own purposes.

Here is the description of Charon and of the personified abstractions in Seneca and Virgil respectively:

Seneca (764-67)	Virgil (*Aen.* 6, 298-301)
hunc servat amnem cultu et aspectu horridus	portitor has horrendus aquas et flumina servat
pavidosque manes squalidus gestat senex.	terribili squalore Charon, cui plurima mento
impexa pendet barba, deformem sinum	canities inculta iacet, stant lumina flamma,
nodus coercet, concavae lucent genae;	sordidus ex umeris nodo dependet amictus.

The first remark to make is that, as Fitch has rightly pointed out, "the tendency of Seneca's reworking is toward a simple, direct, less elevated (and less evocative) style".[38] Secondly, Seneca tends to present pictures in clipped segments rather than as a continuous sequence, so that each line presents a single image; since the image is self-contained in one line, it can be more easily conveyed by means of gestures.

For what concerns the personified abstractions, Seneca has as many as eleven, whereas Virgil lists seven of them (*Aen.* 6, 274-77). The number of adjectives applied by Seneca to them in comparison to Virgil where they have just a single one or none is also higher. Furthermore, Seneca's description tends to be more concrete and to be conveyed by a portrayal of the characteristic activity of the personified abstractions (which can be quite simple or more elaborated), while in Virgil the description is conveyed by emphasising the more abstract qualities connected with them.

According to Fitch, "Seneca adds more *color* by describing a characteristic activity of three of his figures, *Fames*, *Pudor*, and *Senectus*". In fact Hunger (*Fames*) "lies with

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[38] *Ibidem* 320.

wasted jaws" (691 *Famesque maesta tabido rictu iacet*), Shame (*Pudor*) "covers its guilty face" (692 *Pudorque serus conscios vultus tegit*), and Old Age (*Senectus*) "supports its steps with a stick" (696 *iners Senectus adiuvat baculo gradum*). Similarly, the other personified abstractions are accompanied by graphic adjectives which describe the negative and concrete effects associated with them: Sleep (*Sopor*) is "sluggish" (*segnis*), Resentment (*Dolor*) is "gnashing" (*frendens*), Disease (*Morbus*) is "trembling" (*tremens*); Virgil, instead, uses adjectives which describe the negative and more abstract qualities associated with them: thus Diseases (*Morbi*) are pale (*pallentes*), Old Age (*Senectus*) is sad (*tristis*), Hunger (*Fames*) is temptress to sin (*malesuada*), Want (*Egestas*) is loathsome (*turpis*). All these "action" details are highly suggestive of an imagination producing verse with gestural and choreographical accompaniment in mind.

When it comes to the second tableau, the capture of Cerberus, we find that the Senecan tragedy provides the fullest extant treatment of this episode. It opens with a brief *ecphrasis topou* which "has no functional purpose but helps to create a grim, oppressive atmosphere".[39] As we have previously seen, in the first part of the narrative the description of the landscape played a major role; quite differently, instead, the atmospheric landscape in the second part is just briefly sketched and the description of Cerberus and of the fight between Hercules and the watchdog of the Underworld is prominent. Even the tone of Theseus' speech, which was solemn in the description of the Underworld and becomes rhetoric-comical as soon as Hercules makes its appearance at line 770, is consistently different.[40] Shelton and Fitch state that the whole aim of the scene is to provide a negative characterisation of Hercules; then the "comical" character of it purposely aims at providing a negative portrayal of Hercules

[39] *Ibidem* 319.
[40] Henry and Walker (1965) 18.

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by presenting him as a heroic-comic character whose achievements against monsters are not morally valuable and by emphasising his attitude of always resorting to violence and brutal force. A different interpretation is however possible, since its character is markedly mimic, concentrated as it is on fully describing at length and with graphic and pictorial details each stage of Hercules' and Cerberus' fight. The stages of the encounter almost stand as vivid pictures in motion which follow one after the other.

The first picture presents Cerberus' physical appearance and him sensing the approaching of Hercules (783-93):

> hic saevus umbras territat Stygius canis,
> qui trina vasto capita concutiens sono
> regnum tuetur. sordidum tabo caput   785
> lambunt colubrae, viperis horrent iubae
> longusque torta sibilat cauda draco.
> par ira formae: sensit ut motus pedum,
> attollit hirtas angue vibrato comas
> missumque captat aure subrecta sonum,   790
> sentire et umbras solitus. ut propior stetit
> Iove natus antro, sedit incertus canis
> et uterque timuit.

The second one (793-827) presents the fight between Hercules and Cerberus and the hero's victory over the monstrous creature (797-802):

>   solvit a laeva feros
> tunc ipse rictus et Cleonaeum caput
> opponit ac se tegmine ingenti tegit,
> victrice magnum dextera robur gerens   800
> huc nunc et illuc verbere assiduo rotat,
> ingeminat ictus.

Cerberus immediately resigns himself and lowers its head (802-3): *domitus infregit minas/et cuncta lassus capita summisit canis.*

The third one presents the detailed description of Cerberus' transformation after its capture (808-812): *oblitus sui/custos opaci pervigil regni canis/componit aures timidus et patiens trahi,/erumque fassus, ore summisso obsequens,/utrumque cauda pulsat anguifera latus.*

In fact, once captured, Cerberus undergoes a quite comical transformation from the fearful watchdog of the Underworld (793-802) into a remissive pet which drops its ears and wags its tail.

The last picture presents Hercules dragging Cerberus away from the Underworld (813-27). As soon as Cerberus sees the light of the day, it becomes so scared and frightened that it pulls Hercules violently backward (just a few lines previously Hercules' strength overwhelmed the dog very easily) and the dog can be dragged further only with the additional help of Theseus. Finally, Cerberus must yield and finds shelter from the light of the day under Hercules's shadow. In relation to the final part of Cerberus' capture, Shelton rightly observed that "at the end of the scene we are left with the puzzling picture of a frightened dog and two men dragging it towards the light it fears".[41]

5.2.2 *Phaedra* 989-1122: the sea-monster

The fourth act of the play deals with the messenger's narration of Hippolytus' death. The *rhesis* is a patchwork of different models freely adapted by Seneca, namely Euripides' treatment of the same episode in the *Hippolytus* (1173-1248), Ovid (*Met.* 15, 497-529), and Virgil (*Aen.* 2, the description of Laocoon's death). However, the closest parallel to the Senecan *rhesis* is to be found in Petronius (*Sat.* 89) which features a similar reworking of epic material (Eumolpus delivers a messenger-like *rhesis* in *senarii*

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[41] Shelton (1978) 55.

about the Virgilian episode of Laocoon). The *rhesis* is preceded by an introductory dialogue between Theseus and the *nuntius* (991-99) and closed by a dialogue between the two characters (1114-22); the speech of the messenger (1000-1114) runs uninterrupted for 114 lines.[42] In the Euripidean model the messenger's *rhesis* runs for 76 lines, thus Seneca almost doubled the length of his primary model. The conspicuous length of the passage in Seneca results from a specific interest in "developing narrative into description".[43] In relation to this tendency, it is worth noticing that Seneca includes five similes (1011-14; 1029-30; 1048-9; 1072-75; 1090-2), whereas Euripides has just two brief ones (1201 and 1221). As Coffey and Mayer have observed "these similes increase the bulk of the speech but not its impact";[44] for example, the comparison of Hippolytus' death to that of Phaethon is not particularly fitting and it provides a redundant image to the description (1090-92 *talis per auras non suum agnoscens onus/Solique falso creditum indignans diem/Phaethonta currus devium excussit polo*).[45]

Impersonality of the narrator

Furthermore, compared with the Euripidean messenger speech, the Senecan *nuntius* reports the fact in the utmost impersonal way. There are just two hints to the messenger's reaction to what he is reporting: the first one at line 1025 (*haec dum stupentes quaerimus*), but the hint remains vague since it is made in the first person plural and it is not really clear to whom this "we" refers; the second one at line 1034 (*os quassat tremor*).[46] He resembles more an external narrator than a character involved in

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[42] In the *Agamemnon* and the *Oedipus* as well the messenger's *rheseis* flow without interruption.
[43] Larson (1994) 42.
[44] Coffey and Mayer (1990) 176.
[45] The simile is borrowed from Ovid (*Met.* 2, 161-62): *sed leve pondus erat nec quod cognoscere possent/Solis equi, solitaque iugum gravitate carebat.*
[46] The text presents a difficulty here; the manuscripts have two different readings; E has *quaerimus*, while A has *querimur*. Scholars have objected to the A reading that it is not possible to be amazed and lamenting at the same time. The E reading seems better in terms of meaning, but it presents a metrical difficulty which can be overcome by transposing *en* to achieve correct scansion. Zwierlein accepts Axelson's conjecture *sequimur*.

the action. In Euripides, on the contrary, the *nuntius* repeatedly alludes to his actual presence and emotional participation in the event (1173; 1187; 1195-97; 1198; 1204; 1206; 1208; 1216; 1240). The Euripidean messenger thus provides the reason why he assisted in the event (he is one of Hippolytus' servants since he calls him master thrice 1187, 1196, 1219) and objective spatial coordinates of the place where it took place (namely the shore 1173, 1179, 1199; 1209 where Hippolytus and his servants happened to be combing and scraping the horses; there Hippolytus came to know about Theseus' decree of exile). In Seneca all these details are missing; the messenger's speech begins with a description of Hippolytus in flight from his fatherland (1000-05 the reason for him to flee is not, as in Euripides, caused by Theseus' decree since he did not come to know about it); the messenger does not provide any explanation for his presence there and does not mention that Hippolytus is accompanied by his servants or companions.

Mimetic present

In addition to this, it is worth noting that the Senecan messenger's speech is delivered in the present tense (in the Euripidean model, the messenger relates the facts in the past tense); when the perfect is employed, it describes an instantaneous action (1007 *tonuit*; 1008 *crevitque*; 1022 *latuere*; 1031 *inhorruit*; 1032 *solvit, invexit*; 1050 *tremuere*; 1069 *rapuere*; 1088 *sensere*; 1101 *haesere*; usually in the first foot of the iambic metre for emphasis);[47] moreover, the perfect is also employed to provide the temporal escalation in a series of action, as, for example: at lines 1000-03: *Ut profugus urbem* **liquit** *infesto gradu/celerem citatis passibus cursum explicans,/celso sonipedes ocius* **subigit** *iugo/et ora frenis domita substrictis* **ligat**.[48] The function of the present tense is to provide immediacy which, in turn, reinforces the impression of vividness of the messenger's

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[47] Coffey and Mayer (1990) 178; see Austin on Virgil (*Aen.* 1, 90: *intonuere poli*).
[48] See also 1060-64; 1085-87.

account; furthermore, the narration does not seem to describe a past event, but one simultaneously taking place as the narration proceeds.

Running commentary

A remarkable structural feature of the speech is that it involves a large number of changes of subjects, namely the shift between Hippolytus and the monster. The alternations can be summarised as follows:

1) Description of Hippolytus (1000-06);

2) Description of a sudden turbulence of the sea and the appearance of the sea-monster (1007-1049);

3) Description of the reaction of animals, men, and Hippolytus to the monster (1050-56);

4) Description of the monster chasing after Hippolytus introduced by a brief *ecphrasis topou* (1057-1063);

5) Description of Hippolytus' and the horses' reactions to the monster (1064-1075);

6) Description of a second attack of the monster (1077-1081);

7) Description of the horses' flinging Hippolytus from the chariot (1082-1104);

8) Description of the *famuli* gathering Hippolytus' dismembered body (1105-1114);

Each of the eight stages described above feature a running commentary. In more detail: The first running commentary describes Hippolytus hastening to yoke his horses to flee from the city (1000-06):

> Ut profugus urbem liquit infesto gradu   1000
> celerem citatis passibus cursum explicans,
> celso sonipedes ocius subigit iugo
> et ora frenis domita substrictis ligat.

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tum multa secum effatus et patrium solum

abominatus saepe genitorem ciet,   1005

acerque habenis lora permissis quatit

in the second one, the running commentary describes at length the sea-monster (1035-48);[49] in the third one, the running commentary deals with a description of Hippolytus trying to hold his horses (1054-56 *Hippolytus artis continet frenis equos*); the fourth describes the monster preparing to attack Hippolytus (1060-63)[50]; the fifth deals again with Hippolytus trying to maintain the control of his horses crazed with fear (1072-77); Seneca uses a long epic simile which compares Hippolytus' efforts to those of a helmsman holding a ship steady in the sea (1072-75):

at ille, qualis turbido rector mari

ratem retentat, ne det obliquum latus,

et arte fluctum fallit, haud aliter citos

currus gubernat...   1075

the sixth describes a second attack of the monster (1077-81):

sequitur assiduus comes,

nunc aequa carpens spatia, nunc contra obvius

oberrat, omni parte terrorem movens.

non licuit ultra fugere: nam toto obvius   1080

incurrit ore corniger ponti horridus.

the seventh describes the horses flinging down Hippolytus and Hippolytus' entangling in the reins of his chariot (1082-1114). Suggestively, the description of Hippolytus'

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[49] See below for a more detailed analysis. Compare the description of the sea-monster in the *Phaedra* with that of Cerberus (783-797) in the *Hercules furens*.
[50] See below for a more detailed analysis.

entanglement features a "rapid alternation from excited movements to sudden halt ...then back to energetic movement";[51] for example, the quick movement described at line 1097 (*celeres...pervolvunt rotae*) comes to a stop at line 1100 (*domino currus affixo stetit*); the fast speed is resumed at line 1101-02 (*et pariter moram/dominumque rumpunt*); at lines 1085-87 (*Praeceps in ora fusus implicuit cadens/laqueo tenaci corpus, et quanto magis/pugnat, sequaces hoc magis nodos ligat*), Seneca plays again with the contrast between movement (*praeceps, cadens, pugnat*) and stasis (*implicuit...laqueo tenaci, nodos ligat*).

The final one depicts the slaves gathering Hippolytus' dismembered body (1105-1114):

1105-08 *Errant per agros funebris famuli manus,.../maestaeque domini membra vestigant canes*; 1113-14 *passim ad supremos ille colligitur rogos/et funeri confertur.*

In comparison with his models, it is evident that Seneca aims at emphasising the supernatural and phantasmagorical elements of the event, so that the human scale, which is carefully looked after in Euripides, is here completely left beyond. Thus the human boundaries are consciously and on purpose overtaken and, as Segal has brilliantly argued, Seneca's description "shifts from a more or less realistic human setting to a fantastic realm of changing shapes" aimed at producing "an interiorized atmosphere of nightmarish terror".[52] For instance, while Euripides does not describe the sea-monster at all, Seneca devotes 14 lines (1035-49) to a detailed and colourful description of it:[53]

quis habitus ille **corporis** vasti fuit!   1035
caerulea taurus **colla** sublimis gerens

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[51] Segal (1984) 323-24.
[52] *Ibidem* 314, 316.
[53] See Barlow (1971) 71-73 for a comparison between Euripides' sea-monster in the *Hippolytus* and Seneca's.

erexit altam **fronte** viridanti iubam.

stant hispidae **aures**, **orbibus** varius color,

et quem feri dominator habuisset gregis

et quem sub undis natus: hinc flammam vomunt   1040

oculi, hinc relucent caerula insignes nota.

opima **cervix** arduos tollit **toros**

naresque hiulcis haustibus patulae fremunt.

musco tenaci **pectus** ac palear viret,

longum rubenti spargitur fuco **latus**;   1045

tum pone **tergus** ultima in monstrum coit

facies et ingens belua immensam trahit

squamosa partem. talis extremo mari

pistrix citatas sorbet aut frangit rates.[54]

Interestingly, even though the monster described is an imaginary beast, Seneca makes a detailed reference to the bodily parts of it: 1035 *corporis*; 1036 *colla*; 1037 *fronte*; 1038 *aures*; 1041 *oculi*; 1042 *cervix*; *toros*; 1043 *nares*; 1044 *pectus*; 1045 *latus*; 1046 *tergus*; in comparison with the Ovidian model, "Seneca stresses the separately masses of the flesh, the massive heavy neck and the bulging hard muscles".[55] Furthermore, lines 1036-37 (*caerulea taurus colla sublimis gerens/erexit altam fronte viridanti iubam*) and 1046-48 (*tum pone tergus ultima in monstrum coit/facies et ingens belua immensam trahit/squamosa partem*) recall closely Virgil (*Aen.* 2, 206-8: *pectora quorum inter fluctus arrecta iubaeque/sanguineae superant undas, pars cetera pontum/pone legit sinuatque immensa volumine terga*); from the comparison it emerges that Seneca "stresses metamorphosis and fusion of shape" (especially line 1046-47 *ultima in monstrum coit/facies*).[56] Seneca adapts another Virgilian passage (*Georgics* 3, 232-34:

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[54] For the closing position of the simile see *Phaedra* (382-83).
[55] Segal (1984) 320. Compare: Ovid, *Met.* 15, 511-13: *corniger hinc taurus ruptis expellitur undis/pectoribusque tenus molles erectus in auras/naribus et patulo partem maris evomit ore.*
[56] *Ibidem.*

et temptat sese atque irasci in cornua discit/arboris obnixus trunco, ventosque lacessit/ictibus, et sparsa ad pugnam proludit harena) at lines 1059-63:

> hic se illa moles acuit atque iras parat.
> ut cepit animos seque praetemptans satis   1060
> prolusit irae, praepeti cursu evolat,
> summam citato vix gradu tangens humum,
> et torva currus ante trepidantes stetit.

The monster is called *illa moles* (1059), an indefinite mass, which awkwardly becomes animated with anger (1059 *iras parat*, 1060 *cepit animos*, 1061 *prolusit irae*). Moreover, the juxtaposition of *moles* (1059) and *animos* (1060) produces a "baroque fluidity between animate and inanimate, reality and fantasy, movement and stasis".[57] In addition to this, Seneca tends to "blur the division between realistic and fantastic details".[58]

A good example of this feature is the intentional portrayal of the sea and the monster as virtually one (1031-34):

> inhorruit concussus undarum globus
> solvitque sese et litori invexit malum
> maius timore; pontus in terras ruit
> suumque monstrum sequitur.[59]

In the passage, the monster and the wave are blended at 1032 (*solvitque sese*) and at 1034 (*suumque monstrum sequitur*). The use of the verb *inhorruit* provides "a sinister

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[57] Segal (1984) 321.
[58] *Ibidem* 317.
[59] *Ibidem* 319.

quasi-personification on the mass of water" (*inhorruit concussus undarum globus* 1031).[60]

Lack of advancement of the plot

In terms of the advancement of the plot, the actions involved in the eight stages tend to repeatedly expand and recast the same issues, mostly the disturbance of the sea caused by the monster and Hippolytus' fight to control his horses terrified by the monstrous creature. As Segal has observed, while the Euripidean and Ovidian narration of the same event proceed in a "linear and distinctly articulated progression", the Senecan one moves in "a succession of stages" which are repeated over and over again producing a series of "individual climaxes".[61] For example, the sea turbulence in the Senecan narrative occurs at 1007 (*cum subito vastum tonuit ex alto mare/crevitque in astra*), is repeated at 1015 (*consurgit ingens pontus in vastum aggerem*), and again at 1025-26 (*totum en mare immugit*) producing three climaxes; the fight of Hippolytus with his horses and the fact that the hero does not fear the monster is stated at 1054-56 (*solus immunis metus/Hippolytus artis continet frenis equos/pavidosque notae vocis hortatu ciet*), at 1064-77, and at 1082-84 (*Tum vero pavida sonipedes mente exciti/imperia solvunt seque luctantur iugo/eripere rectique in pedes iactant onus*), where Hippolytus is finally entangled in the reins.

From the analysis proposed above, it emerges that Seneca tries to create the impression of "an unstable shifting between the real and the imaginary". This shifting is produced by a constant contrast between two opposite features: on the one side, the striving for vividness and immediacy (especially in the use of the present tense, of detailed

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[60] Compare with Ovid *Met.* 15, 508-11: *cum mare surrexit, cumulusque inmanis aquarum/in montis speciem curvari et crescere visus/et dare mugitus summoque cacumine findi./corniger hinc taurus ruptis expellitur undis.*
[61] Segal (1984) 321-23.

descriptions which provide an almost concrete physical and bodily reality to imaginary creatures and natural elements as well as the tendency to personify inanimate elements); on the other, the striving for emphasising and piling up as many supernatural and phantasmagorical elements as possible. This tension (which Segal defines as the eminently peculiar feature of baroque style), in my opinion, finds a plausible explanation if we think that the aesthetics of pantomime may have been in Seneca's mind when composing the passage. In fact immediacy and vividness would have been needed in pantomime since the dancer was enacting the story of the libretto as the singer was singing it; but, at the same time, pantomimic performances would have allowed room for fantastic depictions of events and creatures since the gestural art of the dancer could allude freely to imaginary elements as he was not constrained by the protocols of more conventional theatrical performances.

5.2.3 *Thyestes* 623-788: Thyestes' banquet

The fourth act of the *Thyestes* features a long messenger *rhesis* (147 lines) which narrates to the chorus Atreus' killing and dismemberment of Thyestes' sons; the messenger's report is basically a monologue, since the chorus, besides the usual introductory dialogue with the messenger (623-640), is in charge of just seven brief interventions (690; 715; 719; 730-31; 743; 745-46; 747-48). The dialogue deals primarily with the chorus trying to overcome the conventional unwillingness on the messenger's part to reveal the terrible events which he has witnessed (lines 633: chorus: *Effare, et istud pande, quodcumque est, malum*; lines 634-36: messenger: *Si steterit animus, si metu corpus rigens/remittet artus. haeret in vultu trucis/imago facti*).

Despite his reluctance in relating the dreadful news, the messenger is then persuaded to speak and opens his speech with an extremely long and accurate *ecphrasis topou* (641-

82);[62] the messenger's repeated unwillingness to speak as well as his worried attitude oddly turns into a speech starting with a detailed landscape digression. In relation to this, it is worth remembering that messengers in Greek tragedies tend to provide just limited spatial coordinates, which only have the function to either define the setting of the narration or their position in it. In relation to dramatic illusion, it is similarly awkward that the messenger is able to assist Atreus' actions, since Atreus is performing them in the innermost part of the royal palace (652 *penetrale regni*), inaccessible to a messenger; [63] even more importantly, even if present at the cruel killings, he did not make any attempt at restraining Atreus.[64]

Impersonality of the narrator

Here as in all the other instances of the Senecan messenger *rheseis*, the messenger has the role of an external narrator detached from the actions he is describing. In fact, he makes no hints at his position in the action and the reason why he happened to assist Atreus' inhuman and bestial slaughters. More importantly, even though at the very beginning of his speech the messenger shows fear, horror, and disgust for what he saw, as his speech moves forward all the signs of his initial frightened attitude have disappeared and he has become just a mouthpiece of the story so much so that he can reply with irony and black humour to the worried questions of the chorus (718 *avo dicatur: Tantalus prima hostia est*).[65]

The speech can be divided into 5 main sections:

1) *Ecphrasis* (641-682);

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[62] See the *Hercules furens*, where Theseus' speech opens in the same way.

[63] For the *penetrale* as a favoured setting for exceptional actions, compare *Med* 676 (*penetrale funestum*) which is the setting of the incantation scene.

[64] In the *Hercules furens*, a similar passivity in front of an action which would require intervention on the part of the speaking character is shown by Amphitryon, who describes in detail Hercules' killings of his family without making any attempt at stopping his furious son.

[65] See Tarrant (1985) 193-94.

2) description of the killings (682-729);

3) Atreus' extispicium (748-78);

4) Thyestes' feast (779-83);

5) The reversal of the course of the sun (784-88);

Ecphrasis: imaginary background and animated landscape

As we have mentioned above, the messenger's speech opens with a long *ecphrasis topou* describing the palace of Pelops and its innermost part where Atreus is going to perform his dreadful and sacrilegious misdeed. The description of the royal house and of the *nemus* enclosed in its interior emphasises the darkness and hostility of the place, elements which provide an overall threatening and sinister atmosphere to the scene. The description tends to be hyperbolic, as, for example, in depicting the house of the Pelopidai as rising up high as a mountain (643 *aequale monti crescit*) and shares common elements with the description of the house of Dis in the *Hercules furens* (662-67) and of the sacred grove where Laius' ghost is raised from the Underworld (530-47) in the *Oedipus*.[66] For instance, the threatening nature of the royal palace in the *Thyestes* (643-45 *atque urbem **premit**/et contumacem regibus populum suis/habet sub ictu*) closely resembles the similar oppressive environment surrounding the house of Dis in the *Hercules furens* (662-63 *Spartana tellus nobile attollit iugum,/densis ubi aequor Taenarus silvis **premit***), where the sense of oppressiveness is conveyed by the verb *premere* used in both contexts. The description of the grove (650-58) inside the palace has also parallels in the *Oedipus* and in the *Hercules furens*, as, for example, in the presence of a set of ill-omened trees (*taxus, cupressus*, and *ilex*) above which an high oak towers; in the *Oedipus*, a more varied number of trees makes its appearance, but we

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[66] The major model influencing the Senecan royal palace of Pelops is Virgil's description of the palace of Latinus in *Aen.* (7, 170-91). For further discussion of Virgilian borrowings in Seneca's piece see Tarrant (1985) 183.

find again a massive tree (542 *ingens arbor*) oppressing (543 *urget*) the smaller ones. Similarly, in the *Hercules furens* (689-90) a yew tree (*taxo*) hangs menacingly over the lower ones (690 *imminente*). Another common element is the presence of sluggish waters, a stagnant spring ending up in a black swamp in the *Thyestes* (665-66 *fons stat sub umbra tristis et nigra piger/haeret palude*), again a spring surrounded by a muddy swamp in the *Oedipus* (547 *limosa pigrum circumit fontem palus*), and the sluggish river of the Underworld which grows torpid with languid waters in the *Hercules furens* (763 *stupente ubi unda segne torpescit fretum*). Furthermore, the grove is characterised by the absence of light (678 *nox propria luco est*) as in the *Oedipus* (549 *praestitit noctem locus*) and in the *Hercules furens* (704-05 *et pigro sedet/nox atra mundo*). Finally, Seneca tends to personify the inanimate trees and plants of the grove; in relation to this, Seneca's choice of verbs in the description of it is remarkable: *nutat, eminens* (655), and *despectat* (656) strongly convey the impression that the grove is actually animated.[67] Similarly, the description of the fearful reactions of nature caused by Atreus' plans of revenge (696-702) tends to present inanimate objects as animated: the grove trembles in fear (696 *Lucus tremescit*), the palace sways and seems to waver (696-98 *tota succusso solo/nutavit aula, dubia quo pondus daret/ac fluctuanti similis*; it is interesting that Seneca uses here again the verb *nutare* as in 655), and ivory weeps in the temples (702 *flevit in templis ebur*).[68]

Sight and sound effects

The description of the grove is also characterised by a repeated interplay between sight (678 the appearance of a crowd of shades) and sound effects (668 *gemere*; 669 *catenis excussis, sonat*; 670 *ululant*; 675 *latratu*; 676 *remugit*; 681 *immugit*) which is

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[67] See also the discussion about this feature in relation to the *Hercules furens*.

[68] The comparison proposed here is mainly meant to show how the descriptions of the *loci horridi* in Senecan tragedy tend to be stereotyped similarly to the repetitive and unvaried depictions of characters driven by extreme passions in the running commentaries.

introduced by the awkward statement that "anything fearful to *hear* can be *seen* there" (670-71 *quidquid audire est metus/illic videtur*); Tarrant has remarked that the line stresses "the progression upward in terror, from sound to sight", but the progression is not a linear one, going from sight to sound; on the contrary, the two different senses of perception are treated as a single one; more precisely, the effects of sound tend to become effects of sight. In relation to this, it is worth noticing that some effects of sounds can be easily transformed into gestures; for instance, a mute cry could mime the verbs *gemere, ululant, latratu, remugit, immugit*. That Seneca wants particularly to stress the effects of sound here is confirmed by the way he reworked a Virgilian line describing Tartarus (*Aen.* 6, 557-58 *hinc exaudiri gemitus, et saeva sonare/verbera, tum stridor ferri tractaeque catenae*): Seneca transforms the Virgilian *tractaeque catenae* into *catenis...excussis* as if the ghosts were actually shaking their chains.

Running commentary

In the next section of the narrative, the messenger describes at length Atreus' slaughtering of Thyestes' sons. Atreus is described entering in frenzy (682-83 *Quo postquam furens/intravit Atreus liberos fratris trahens*) and dragging Thyestes' sons.[69] As observed by Tarrant, Atreus "plays all the parts in his sacrificial drama";[70] Atreus acts as if he were a *sacerdos* making a sacrificial rite: all the elements of the sacrifice are present: the altars, the incense, wine, the knife, and the *mola salsa*, a mixture of wheat and salt which was used to sprinkle the victims; he also utters the formula required by the rite (691-92 *ipse funesta prece/letale carmen ore violento canit*).[71] Even more importantly, Atreus is the only character described in action, while the other characters involved, Thyestes' sons, are just passive victims who strangely do not even

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[69] Compare here the seemliness of language used in the *Medea* (675-76) and the *Oedipus* (918-19) to announce, in this case, the exits of the protagonists.

[70] Tarrant (1985) 190 at 691-95.

[71] Compare here with *Medea* (739 *canitque. mundus vocibus primis tremit*).

attempt the smallest resistance when he drags them, binds their hands behind their back and wraps their heads with a purple band (683 *liberos fratris trahens*; 685-86 *post terga iuvenum nobiles revocat manus/et maesta vitta capita purpurea ligat*); then, he handles, arranges, and readies them for the knife (693-94 *ipse devotos neci/contrectat et componit et ferro apparat*). Even though the killings of the three young men are described as a slaughter, it is remarkable that just in one case, more specifically that of Tantalus, the narrator hints at the way in which the young boy faced death (720-21: *Stetit sui securus et non est preces/perire frustra passus*); the brief remark is followed by the crude description of the way Atreus kills Tantalus; thus, the narrative focuses primarily on giving a detailed account of the most gruesome aspects of the killing, indulging in the description of severed body parts, spray of gore, and the like (e.g. lines 727-29 in relation to Plisthenes' death: *colla percussa amputat;/cervice caesa truncus in pronum ruit,/querulum cucurrit murmure incerto caput*). To a certain extent, Thyestes' sons are already presented as simple pieces of flesh, thus foreshadowing the end their corpses will undergo.

It is worth singling out the language chosen by Seneca to depict quite pictorially Tantalus' bravery in facing death by means of his bodily attitude: his steadiness is conveyed by the use of the verb *stetit*, which is remarkably common in such descriptions; for example, just a few lines before and after, the verb is used twice for Atreus (693 *stat ipse ad aras*; 704 *immotus Atreus constat*) and for the corpse of Tantalus (723-24 *educto stetit/ferro cadaver*). The verb produces a freezing of the action in which the character assumes a sort of statuary pose.[72] Usually, a new and sudden acceleration of the action follows the picture-like preceding moment; in the specific case examined here, the description of Tantalus' inner strength, translated in the image of physical immobility, is followed by the description of a quickly resuming of

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[72] See Chapter 1 pp. 18-19: features such as sudden halts and accelerations are said by extant sources to be characteristic constitutive elements of pantomime.

the action on the part of Atreus, who all of a sudden buries his sword in Tantalus' throat (721-23 *ast illi ferus/in vulnere ensem abscondit, et penitus premens/iugulo manum commisit*). Tarrant has singled out the "grotesque juxtaposition of Atreus' hand and Tantalus' throat", where the insistence on the single parts of the body of the two characters is remarkable;[73] the same insistence characterises also the descriptions of Plisthenes and of the third unnamed child of Thyestes: 727-28 *colla, cervice, truncus, caput*; 740-41 *corpus, pectore, tergo*. After the sword has been pulled out from Tantalus' body, the corpse hesitates on where to follow resulting in a "depiction of a macabre mime of hesitation" (723-25: *educto stetit/ferro cadaver, cumque dubitasset diu/hac parte an illa caderet, in patruum cadit*).[74]

As we have previously said, the scene is really completely dominated by Atreus whose actions are the main centre of focus; to describe him Seneca also employs two extended similes, which very closely recall the type of similes also found in running commentaries used to describe the characters in violent action. In the first simile (707-14) Atreus is compared to a tiger, in the second one (732-40) to a lion.

> ieiuna silvis qualis in Gangeticis
> inter iuvencos tigris erravit duos,
> utriusque praedae cupida, quo primum ferat
> incerta **morsus**; flectit hoc **rictus** suos,   710
> illo reflectit et famem dubiam tenet:
> sic dirus Atreus **capita** devota impiae
> speculatur irae. quem prius mactet sibi,
> dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet.

> Silva iubatus qualis Armenia leo
> in caede multa victor armento incubat;

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[73] Tarrant (1985) 194 n.722-23.
[74] *Ibidem* 194 n.723-24.

cruore **rictus** madidus et pulsa fame

non ponit iras: hinc et hinc tauros premens   735

vitulis minatur, **dente** iam lasso piger:

non aliter Atreus saevit atque ira tumet.

ferrumque gemina caede perfusum tenens,

oblitus in quem fureret, infesta manu

exegit ultra corpus.   740

As we have seen in relation to the similes in running commentaries, the comparison with an animal is common and used over and over again (*Med* 863 *tigris*; *HO* 241-42 *Armenia...tigris*; *Oed* 919 *Libycus...leo*; *Ag* 892 *hispidus...aper*; *Tro* 795 *iuvencus*; 1093-94 *fetus ingentis ferae*). The emphasis in the two similes on dynamic elements such as anger, more specifically the outcome produced by anger and the uncertainty on which course of action to choose, can be considered standard motifs. The first simile is modelled on Ovid (*Met.* 5, 164-67: *tigris ut auditis diversa valle duorum/exstimulata fame mugitibus armentorum/nescit, utro potius ruat, et ruere ardet utroque, sic dubius Perseus, dextra laevane feratur*). Here as elsewhere, Seneca's reworking effects a simplification in the choice of the range of the linguistic register and in the image conveyed. It is remarkable how the language is repetitious and unvaried (710 *flectit*, 711 *reflectit*; 710 *morsus* and *rictus* in the same line and *rictus* again in the second simile 734). Furthermore, Seneca appropriates the Ovidian idea of the tiger wavering between two preys, but this uncertainty is conveyed by the image of the jaws and teeth of the wild beast not knowing where to bite first, while in Ovid the animal is uncertain as to which prey to direct its assault. The emphasis on jaws and teeth is also present in the second Senecan simile (734 *rictus*; 736 *dente*). There is also a difference in length between the Ovidian and the Senecan simile; the former is two lines long, while the latter is expanded by a "loosely set of phrases elaborating the general description of the

scene" (lines 710-11); the same is also true for the second simile at lines 734-36.[75] This

tendency of elaborating and expanding on the same theme redundantly combined with

the repetitious character of the linguistic register is also true for the simile of the lion.

In the third section of the narrative, Atreus performs an *extispicium* (748-78): he looks

into destiny through the entrails of Thyestes' sons, he dismembers their limbs, and then

cooks them. The single steps of the gruesome operation are described in detail: the

organs torn from the living chests tremble (755 *erepta vivis exta pectoribus tremunt*);

the veins pulse and the heart throbs in terror (756 *spirantque venae corque adhuc*

pavidum salit); he handles the entrails and takes note of the still hot veins on the viscera

(757-58 *at ille fibras tractat.../et adhuc calentes viscerum venas notat*). Then he cuts

the body limb by limb (760-61 *ipse divisum secat/in membra corpus*); he chops away

from the trunk the broad shoulder and the sinews of the arms (761-62 *amputat trunco*

tenus/umeros patentes et lacertorum moras); he lays bare the joints and bones (763

denudat artus durus atque ossa amputat); he keeps just the faces and the hands given in

trust (764 *tantum ora servat et datas fidei manus*).

The dismemberment is followed by the cooking: some bits of flesh are roasted on spits,

while some others are boiled (765-67). Seneca ends this section of the narrative with the

description of the reaction of the natural elements such as fire, flames, and smoke to

Atreus' misdeed. Once again, the natural elements are animated as if personified; for

instance, the fire leaps and refuses to burn (768 *transiluit ignis*; 770 *invitus ardet*) ; the

flames tremble (768 *trepidantes focos*); the bodies and the flames groan (771-72 *nec*

facile dicam corpora an flammae magis/gemuere); the smoke does not go straight or

rise into the air, but it smothers the household gods in a dense cloud (773-75 *et ipse*

fumus, tristis ac nebula gravis,/non rectus exit seque in excelsum levat:/ipsos penates

nube deformi obsidet).

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[75] Tarrant (1985) 195.

At this point in the narrative, all of a sudden the messenger abandons Atreus and moves to Thyestes; in fact the last lines of the act describe Thyestes' banquet (778-84), thus anticipating what is "the starting-point in both time and setting for the next act".[76] For what concerns dramatic illusion, the narrative requires that the messenger moves from the innermost part of the royal palace where Atreus performed the killings to the dining room where Thyestes' feast takes place to describe Thyestes in such a close focus (778-84):

> ...lancinat natos pater
> artusque mandit ore funesto suos.
> nitet fluente madidus unguento comam   780
> gravisque vino est; saepe praeclusae cibum
> tenuere fauces. in malis unum hoc tuis
> bonum est, Thyesta, quod mala ignoras tua.
> sed et hoc peribit...

The description of Thyestes will continue then in the following act (908-19):

Lines (908-11):

> Aperta multa tecta conlucent face.
> resupinus ipse purpurae atque auro incubat,
> vino gravatum fulciens laeva caput.   910
> eructat.

Lines (913-19):

> satur est; capaci ducit argento merum-
> ne parce potu: restat etiamnunc cruor
> tot hostiarum; veteris hunc Bacchi color   915
> abscondet. hoc, hoc mensa claudatur scypho.
> mixtum suorum sanguinem genitor bibat:

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[76] Tarrant (1985) 202 n. 778.

meum bibisset. ecce, iam cantus ciet

festasque voces, nec satis menti imperat.

It is worth noting that the description of Thyestes in either passage echoes the Virgilian

description of the Cyclops (*Aen.* 3, 626-27; 630-32):

vidi atro cum membra fluentia tabo

manderet et tepidi tremerent sub dentibus artus.

nam simul expletus dapibus vinoque sepultus

cervicem inflexam posuit, iacuitque per antrum

immensus, saniem **eructans**.

In relation to Virgil, Lobe has suggested that the description of the Cyclops eating

Ulysses' fellows was inspired by one of the stock characters of the Atellane,

Dossenus;[77] Dossenus was a glutton and was alternatively named *manducus*.[78]

Thus, Manducus, the Virgilian Cyclops, and the Senecan Thyestes share features in

common; they all eat as animals would. The verb *mandere*, in fact, describes the way

animals eat and it strongly suggests an unnatural behaviour when used of men. In

addition to this, the word suggests that the eater's teeth make a lot of noise while biting

the food. This characteristic belongs to Atreus as well; in fact, in the two similes

discussed above, the vengeful king is compared to a hungry animal tusking his preys

with his jaws (710-11 *flectit hoc rictus suos,/illo reflectit*) and the "repeated ct sound

may suggest the gnashing of teeth".[79]

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[77] Lobe (1999) 102-08. See Horace (*Serm.* 1, 5, 63: *pastorem uti saltaret Cyclopa*).

[78] Lowe (1989) 169 who quotes a passage in Varro (*Ling.* 7, 95): *dictum mandier a mandendo, unde manducari, a quo et in Atellanis Dossenum vocant Manducum.*

[79] Tarrant (1985) 193 n. 710.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the story of Atreus and Thyestes was a very popular subject in pantomimic performances.[80] It is possible to suggest that in the story of Atreus and Thyestes, the theme of dismemberment (*sparagmos*) and cannibalism was what pantomime was most interested in. More generally, both themes were very popular and occur repeatedly in the sources.[81] Suggestively, the body itself of the dancer is said to be sinewless and fragmented by the ancient writers. Libanius (103), in describing the training of the dancer, claims that the training master actually dismembers the body of his pupil in order for him to achieve the suppleness and ability to move in isolation the single parts of the body. It is thus possible to suggest that the body of the dancer was "equipped" to portray such a phenomenon.

In Seneca's tragedies too the theme of dismemberment recurs several times: in the case of the death of Hippolytus, Seneca describes in detail the dismemberment of Hippolytus' body which is emphasised to the point that the severed pieces of it are scattered in different and far-reaching directions.[82] Similarly, in the description of the death of Astyanax (1110-17), the messenger provides a detailed account of Astyanax's dismembered body after he has been hurled from the tower of Troy.

Most has underlined the importance of the theme of dismemberment in Neronian poetry and has suggested that one of the reasons for its presence in authors such as Seneca and Lucan may derive from the cruel spectacles of the circus where criminals, playing the roles of mythical characters such as Orpheus or Attis, were torn to pieces by animals.[83] I

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[80] Lucian, *De Saltatione*, 43, 67; Thyestes' banquet in scholia ad Lucan 1, 543-44 (*Commenta Bernensia* edited by Usener [1967] 35-6): *Atreus Thyestis fratris sui filios ob adulterium Aeropae uxoris suae ad aram mactavit simulato sacrificio. Vinum sanguine mixtum visceraque filiorum eius pro epulis Thyesti adposuisse dicitur. Quod nefas ne sol aspiceret, nubibus se abscondit hoc est eclipsin passus est, Mycenisque nox fuit. Sed hoc fabulosum esse inveni in libro Catulli †quis cribitur permimologiarum†*; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, 23, 277-80: *sive prandia quis refert Thyestae/seu vestros, Philomela torva, planctus,/discerptum aut puerum cibumque factum/iamiam coniugis innocentioris.*

[81] Sparagmos: Lucian 39 (Iacchus); 51 (Orpheus); 53 (Apsyrtus); Cannibalism: Lucian, 80 (Cronus and Thyestes).

[82] See above for the analysis of the narrative.

[83] Most (1992) 391-419.

would suggest that the theme may also derive from pantomime, where, as we have seen, it was widely popular.

5.2.4 *Trojan Women* 1056-1179: the death of Astyanax and Polyxena

The fifth act of the *Trojan Women* features a long narrative recounting the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena. In the whole *corpus* of Senecan tragedies this is the only play which presents a messenger's speech in the last act (usually final acts are devoted to a confrontation between the two major characters of the play). In some sense, the fact that the play ends with a description of Astyanax's and Polyxena's deaths is an unambiguous sign that they can be considered the two major characters, albeit silent, of Seneca's *Trojan Women*. Hecuba and Andromache play also a major role in the play and in this last act their presence justifies the messenger's narration.

The most striking feature of the narrative resides in the original and untraditional union of two events, namely Astyanax's and Polyxena's deaths, which were previously never combined together as a single episode. In Euripides' *Hecuba* (523-79), which was the major inspiring model for Seneca's narrative, the messenger *rhesis* narrates Polyxena's death; Astyanax's burial (and not death) was instead treated in Euripides' *Trojan Women* (1117-24).[84] The combination of the two events is thus most probably Seneca's own invention which seems mainly motivated by the spectacular opportunities offered by the double dramatisation of death.

The comparison between Seneca's narrative and Euripides' one in the *Hecuba* is worthy of a scrutiny aiming at outlining similarities and differences, since it can enable us to better evaluate Seneca's own purposes as compared to the Greek tragedian. The most substantial difference between the two narratives is primarily structural. In fact, the scene set up by Seneca is reduced to the minimum compared to the articulate and

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[84] Ovid (*Met.* 13, 449-82) who dealt also with the episode of Polyxena's death does not include the account of Astyanax's one.

complex structure of the Euripidean one made up of blocks of narration developing a linear action. In Seneca, spatial and temporal coordinates are overlooked or unevenly treated; characters make sudden appearances and disappearance; lines and lines are devoted to describe a place but never to provide concrete spatial coordinates relative to the positions of the characters in the scene. For example, Seneca devotes several lines to the description of the place surrounding Achilles' tomb, but where is the crowd exactly positioned? Then, when Helen enters at the head leading the procession and Polyxena, where do they come from and where do they stop?[85] The handling of Pyrrhus' presence is similar; was he waiting for Polyxena by the tomb or was he in the procession as well?[86] In Euripides, the messenger says that he is standing by Achilles' tomb where also the Greek army as well as Pyrrhus and Polyxena are.

From a general point of view, this tendency to overlook a congruent structural development of the scene in the acts parallel the same tendency of structural looseness in the construction of the play as a whole, which has been discussed in Chapter 2.

The final act of the *Trojan Women* shows clearly that Seneca neglected structural unity, temporal and spatial continuity, as well as verisimilitude in favour of an accumulation and expansion of baroque descriptions juxtaposed one to the other.

Monologic and impersonal nature of the speech

The narrative opens with a brief dialogue between the messenger, Andromache, and Hecuba (1056-68) and closes with Hecuba's lamentation over Troy's destiny (1165-77). The narration runs almost uninterrupted apart from two interventions of Andromache (1104-1110; 1117).[87]

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[85] It is also remarkable that Helen's appearance is really shaped as that of a character entering on stage, which is an awkward feature since we are in a messenger *rhesis*.

[86] A sign of the confusing and unclear handling of Pyrrhus' presence in the scene may be the interpolation at line 1147 *Pyrrhum antecedit* deleted by Zwierlein (1976).

[87] Schiesaro (2003) 238 defines Andromache's interjection (1104-10) as a histrionic lament.

The messenger in charge of the narration, as in the other Senecan messenger's *rheseis*, fulfils the function of an external narrator who has somehow witnessed the facts he reports, but without taking a direct part in it. He does not give any information about his physical position in the event or his emotional reaction to it; only at the very beginning of the speech the messenger traditionally expresses his horror for the facts (1056 *O dura fata, saeva miseranda horrida!*; 1058-59 *quid prius referens gemam, tuosne potius, an tuos luctus, anus?*), but after this no other hints are made.[88]

Mimetic present

The narrative is couched in the present tense (e.g. 1077 *cingitur*; *coit*; 1082 *gerit*; 1089 *incedit*; 1091 *pergit*; 1123 *cingit*; 1129 *odit*; *spectat*; 1131 *vident*; 1143 *stupet*; 1147 *antecedit*) which provides immediacy and vividness to the account (qualities which are further enhanced through the use of demonstrative adjectives or pronouns: 1071 *turre in hac*; 1075 *haec nota quondam turris*; 1078 *his*; 1080 *his*; 1082 *hunc*; *illum*; *hunc*; 1126 *hi*; 1127 *hi*; 1144 *hos*; 1145 *hos*).

The perfect is used to convey an instantaneous action (1158 *cecidit*; 1160 *flevit*; 1162-64 *non stetit fusus cruor/humove summa fluxit: obduxit statim/saevusque totum sanguinem tumulus bibit*) or with *ut* in order to convey temporal relationships between two actions; the *ut* plus perfect construction is used to indicate that an action closely precedes the main one; thus it also conveys the sense of a rapid succession of two actions (1091-93 *ut summa stetit/pro turre, vultus huc et huc acres tulit/intrepidus animo*; 1118-21 *Praeceps ut altis cecidit e muris puer./flevitque Achivum turba quod fecit nefas,/idem ille populus aliud ad facinus redit/tumulumque Achillis*; 1148-51 *Ut primum ardui/sublime montis tetigit, atque alte edito/iuvenis paterni vertice in busti*

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[88] Compare e.g. Euripides' *Hecuba* (524) where the messenger gives his position in the events (he says that he stood by Polyxena and Pyrrhus) and actively participates in them being in charge of the speech to silence the Greek army (529-31).

stetit,/audax virago non tulit retro gradum; lines 1155-58 *ut dextra ferrum penitus exactum abdidit,/subitus recepta morte prorupit cruor/per vulnus ingens*).

Structure

The narrative can be divided into ten sections, the first five devoted to Astyanax and the last five to Polyxena:

1) opening *ecphrasis* describing the tower of Troy (1168-74);

2) description of the crowd gathering around the tower to assist Astyanax's death (1075-87);

3) description of Astyanax's death (1088-1103);

4) description of Astyanax's dismembered body after the fall from the tower (110-17);

5) description of the reactions of the crowd of Trojans and Greeks to Astyanax's death (1118-1121);

6) *ecphrasis* describing Achilles' tomb (1121-25);

7) description of the crowd gathering around Achilles' tomb in assist to Polyxena's death (1125-31);

8) description of Polyxena's death (1132-59);

9) description of the reactions of the crowd of Trojans and Greeks to Polyxena's death (1160-61);

10) description of Polyxena's blood swallowed by Achilles' tomb (1162-64);

As is apparent from the above schematisation, the sections of the narrative show that the narration is characterised by a re-iterated structure which performs the function of

presenting the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena in a similar way. [89] In addition to this, it

emerges that the main protagonists of the narrative are not just the two young Trojans

condemned to death, but also the crowd watching the event. The physical location of the

crowd in the space as well as its attitude and reaction to the sorrowful deaths play a

major role in the narrative. The overall impression produced by the narrative is thus that

Astyanax's and Polyxena's deaths are a sort of theatrical attractions in which the crowd

is eager to participate, similar to an audience taking part in a show.

The fact that the deaths of the two young Trojans are treated as spectacle is confirmed

by the fact that the crowd/audience sits in a location closely recalling an amphitheatre in

Astyanax's case (lines 1076-77 *(turris)...undique adfusa ducum/plebisque turba*

cingitur) and a theatre in Polyxena's one (1123-25 *adversa cingit campus, et clivo*

levi/erecta medium vallis includens locum/crescit theatri more). In addition to this, the

impression that the crowd is an audience is enhanced by the use of the word *spectator*

(1087) and of the verb *spectare* (1129 *spectat*) which are technical terms used for

describing an audience looking at theatrical performances of different kinds. [90]

To shift from the two different locations of Astyanax's death and Polyxena's, Seneca

also needs to introduce a sudden change of setting, since the messenger and the crowd

need to move from the tower where Astyanax is killed to Achilles' tomb by the shore

where Polyxena is sacrificed (1118-21 *Praeceps ut altis cecidit e muris puer,/flevitque*

Achivum turba quod fecit nefas,/idem ille populus aliud ad facinus redit/tumulumque

Achillis). With reference to dramatic illusion, the change of setting can still be

acceptable since in a messenger speech a freer handling of either space or time are

traditionally accepted. Nonetheless, the movement of the crowd from one place to the

other gives the impression that the crowd is taking part in a sort of publicly organised

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[89] Owen (1969) 121 has noted the "structural and thematic parallelism of the Astyanax and Polyxena sequences".

[90] See Schiesaro (2003) 237-43 for a discussion of the layers of spectatorship present in the *Trojan Women*'s narrative.

event. In addition to this, in the case of Polyxena, it was established by tradition that her ritual killing was performed in front of the Greek army (although no mention was made of any Trojan participation in it); in fact, her killing was meant to be a sacrifice to Achilles thus justifying a public dimension. On the contrary, the decision to kill Astyanax was motivated more as a precautionary measure in order to avoid a future war and not as a ritual sacrifice.

Seneca seems here to be manipulating his sources in order to construct a narrative which, by combining Astyanax's and Polyxena's deaths (1065 *duplex nefas*) in a single act, allows him plenty of spectacular as well as pathetic possibilities.

Ecphrasis

Conventionally, the proper narration begins with an *ecphrasis topou* (1068-74) which sets the scene for Astyanax's death; that is the tower of Troy enclosed within the city walls from which Astyanax was hurled according to the literary tradition (e.g. Euripides' *Trojan Women* 1119-22; 1133-35); the messenger describes first the tower as it was before the war and as it is at the present moment after the conclusion of it. The tower was the place where Priam used to direct the war from (1068-71 *Est una magna turris e Troia super,/assueta Priamo, cuius e fastigio/summisque pinnis arbiter belli sedens/regebat acies*) and also the place where grandfather and son used to meet and watch Hector's victories over the Greeks (1071-74 *turre in hac blando sinu/fovens nepotem, cum metu versos gravi/Danaos fugaret Hector et ferro et face,/paterna puero bella monstrabat senex*).[91]

The *ecphrasis* is followed by the description of the gathering of a crowd to watch Astyanax's death-fall (1075-87). The messenger provides a detailed account of the different locations chosen by the crowd to watch the event: some prefer a distant but

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[91] Compare Ovid *Met.* 13, 415-17: *mittitur Astyanax illis de turribus, unde/pugnantem pro se proavitaque regna tuentem/saepe videre patrem monstratum a matre solebat.*

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clear view provided by a hill (1078-79 *his collis procul/aciem patenti liberam praebet loco*); others choose a high cliff and stand on tip toe to get a better view (1080-81 *his alta rupes, cuius in cacumine/erecta summos turba libravit pedes*); another group climbs on different trees so that the wood trembles because of their weight (1082-83 *hunc pinus, illum laurus, hunc fagus gerit/et tota populo silva suspenso tremit*); someone chooses the edge of a sheer scarp (1084 *extrema montis ille praerupti petit*); someone else put his weight on a half-burnt roof or a rock jutting from the collapsing wall (1085-86 *semusta at ille tecta vel saxum imminens/muri cadentis pressit*), and one cruel spectator sits even on Hector's tomb (lines 1086-87 *atque aliquis (nefas)/tumulo ferus spectator Hectoreo sedet*).

The question arises of what Seneca wanted to achieve with such a description, whose character is more hilarious than tragic? First, the description does not have a pronounced ornamental nature, since the landscape portrayed does not produce an impression either of beauty or of fearful desolation. Secondly, the description does not aim at being functional (i.e. it does not provide verisimilar and economical spatial coordinates of the crowd in the space; on the contrary, the mob is scattered in locations quite distant from one another and some of them are quite unlikely since people even sit in trees). The description portrays rather a scene suitable to be mimetically enacted especially through the concentration of two contrastive qualities, which are height and weight; lines 1078-81 are concerned with height (*collis*; *alta*; *cacumine*; *erecta*; *summos*; *libravit*); lines 1082-87 are concerned with weight (*gerit*; *suspenso*; *imminens*; *pressit*; *sedet*).

Running commentary

The subsequent section of the narrative (1088-1103) concentrating on Astyanax's death opens with the description of Ulysses' and Astyanax's entrance, who are both

characterised by their respective manner of walking: grand in the case of Ulysses (1088-89 *sublimi gradu/incedit Ithacus parvulum dextra trahens*), not lagging in that of Astyanax (1090 *nec gradu segni puer/ad alta pergit moenia*). The following description of Astyanax is similar in content and style to those found in "running commentaries":

Lines 1091-98:

> ...ut summa stetit
> pro turre, vultus huc et huc acres tulit
> intrepidus animo. qualis ingentis ferae
> parvus tenerque fetus et nondum potens
> saevire dente iam tamen tollit minas   1095
> morsusque inanes temptat atque animis tumet:
> sic ille dextra prensus hostili puer
> ferox superbit...

The description is conventional in several respects ; first of all, the use of the verb *stetit* as soon as a character makes his/her entrance is conventional; the gazing around is also a recurring feature (e.g. *Tro* 458 *oculosque nunc huc pavida, nunc illuc ferens*). Also, the extended simile which compares Astyanax to the cub of a wild animal is quite standard; already in the third act of the same play, Astyanax was compared to a young calf attacked by a lion whose mother tries to defend in vain (794-98 *fremitu leonis qualis audito tener/timidum iuvencus applicat matri latus,/at ille saevus matre summota leo/praedam minorem morsibus vastis premens/frangit vehitque*).

In addition to this, Seneca tends to accumulate synonyms to convey the idea of Astyanax's bravery in facing death (1090-98 *nec gradu segni, acres, intrepidus, animis tumet, ferox, superbit*);[92] the boy's courage is stressed again a few lines later by the remark that he, who is wept for, is the only one who does not cry (1099-1100 *non flet e*

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[92] Fantham (1982a) 371.

turba omnium/qui fletur);[93] his heroic attitude has moved even Ulysses (1098-99 *moverat vulgum ac duces/ipsumque Ulixem*). The accumulation of pathetic elements reaches its climax with Astyanax's voluntary leap to death (1100-03 *ac, dum verba fatidici et preces concipit Ulixes vatis et saevos ciet/ad sacra superos, sponte desiluit sua/in media Priami regna*).

The next section of the narrative describes at length Astyanax's dismembered body after the fall from the tower (1110-17):

> Quos enim praeceps locus   1110
>   reliquit artus? ossa disiecta et gravi
>   elisa casu; signa clari corporis,
>   et ora et illas nobiles patris notas,
>   confudit imam pondus ad terram datum;
>   soluta cervix silicis impulsu, caput   1115
>   ruptum cerebro penitus expresso: iacet
>   deforme corpus.

Seneca's report echoes Euripides' parallel passage in the *Trojan Women* where Hecuba hints at the pitiful state of the boy's body after the fall (lines 1173-74; 1176-77). Nonetheless, the precision and length of the physical detail provided by the Roman writer is not found in his Greek antecedents. The description parallels those of Hippolytus and of Thyestes' sons, whose dismembered bodies are graphically portrayed.[94] It is indeed remarkable that the passage opens with an awkward rhetorical question about what kind of body the steep place left (1110-11 *Quos enim praeceps locus/reliquit artus?*). After this question, the messenger gives an explicit and almost scientific account of the dismembered body, which in Euripides is only hinted at in

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[93] Compare Ovid (*Met.* 13, 474-75): *at populus lacrimas, quas illa tenebat,/non tenet.*

[94] See also *Hercules furens* (1006-7): *ast illi caput/sonuit, cerebro tecta disperso madent*; and (1025-26) *perfregit ossa, corpori trunco caput/abest nec usquam est.*

Hecuba's words. In this way, the explicit account of the dismemberment, purposely framed as it is, seems to stand for itself and to have its own role in the passage.

Ecphrasis

The account of the dismembered body of the Trojan young boy closes the section on Astyanax. The transition between the two sections of the narrative is abrupt and the connection is awkward (1118-21 *Praeceps ut altis cecidit e muris puer,/flevitque Achivum turba quod fecit nefas,/idem ille populus aliud ad facinus redit/tumulumque Achillis*).The transition provides the new setting of the scene: Achilles' tomb, to which is devoted the second *ecphrasis topou* of the narrative (1121-25):

<blockquote>

...cuius extremum latus

Rhoetea leni verberant fluctu vada;

adversa cingit campus, et clivo levi

erecta medium vallis includens locum

crescit theatri more...   1125

</blockquote>

The following section describes the gathering of the crowd which parallels the same description in Astyanax's narrative:

Lines 1125-31

<blockquote>

...concursus frequens   1125

implevit omne litus. hi classis moras

hac morte solvi rentur, hi stirpem hostium

gaudent recidi; magna pars vulgi levis

odit scelus spectatque. nec Troes minus

suum frequentant funus et pavidi metu   1130

partem ruentis ultimam Troiae vident

</blockquote>

Unlike the parallel section on the gathering for Astyanax's death, where the locations chosen by the crowd are described, the description here addresses the different reactions provoked in the crowd of Greeks and Trojans by Polyxena's death;[95] some rejoice (line 1127-28 *hi stirpem hostium/gaudent recidi*); others are horrified by the crime but eager to watch (lines 1128-29 *magna pars vulgi levis/odit scelus spectatque*); the Trojans are frightened and full of sorrow since they are assisting the final act of Troy's destruction (lines 1129-31 *nec Troes minus/suum frequentant funus et pavidi metu/partem ruentis ultimam Troiae vident*).

Similar to the Astyanax section is, instead, the use of demonstrative pronouns (1126 *hi*; 1127 *hi*) as well as other distinguishing nouns (*magna pars*; *Troes*) employed to differentiate the groups in the crowd reacting in different ways. Indeed the reactions of the crowd play a major role across all the sections relative to Polyxena. As she enters, both Greeks and Trojans are held paralysed by terror (1136-37 *terror attonitos tenet/utrosque populos*). At her sight the people are astonished for different reasons (1143 *stupet omne vulgus*); some are moved by her beauty (1144 *hos movet formae decus*); some by her tender age (1145 *hos mollis aetas*); some others by the inconstant alternation of human life (1145 *hos vagae rerum vices*); but all of them were moved by the braveness of her spirit in facing death head-on (1146 *movet animus omnes fortis et leto obvius;* 1153 *tam fortis animus omnium mentes ferit*) and they admire as well as feel pity for her (1148 *mirantur ac miserantur*). The climax in the description of the reactions is reached after Polyxena has received the fatal blow, when the entire crowd literally weeps (1160 *uterque flevit coetus*). The climax is built up through the increasing of sound effects produced by the Greeks and Trojans: in fact, the Trojans just

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[95] The reactions of the crowd are similarly subjected to a detailed description in the narrative set-pieces of the *Hercules Oetaeus* (1666-1690) where the crowd bursts into tears at Hercules' death.

utter timid laments (1160-61 *et timidum Phryges/misere gemitum*), while the Greeks

lament loudly (1161 *clarius victor gemit*).

The description of the popular reactions in both passages dealing with Astyanax and

Polyxena closely parallels the reactions of the natural elements caused by the

perpetuation of evil actions found in the other narrative set-pieces and can be thus

interpreted accordingly.

Running commentary

The next section of the narrative deals with Polyxena's sacrifice (lines 1132-59); Helen

is the character in charge to lead the Trojan girl to Achilles' tomb where she will be

sacrificed (1132-34):

> cum subito thalami more praecedunt faces
> et pronuba illi Tyndaris, maestum caput
> demissa.

Helen is characterised as the bride woman (*pronuba*) who leads the wedding

procession; this would imply that the deception of the marriage has not yet been

uncovered. Nonetheless, this is not the case, since not only Polyxena but even the crowd

already know what her destiny is about to be. This kind of incongruence is not isolated

in the Senecan *corpus*; on the contrary, Seneca often overlooks details of this kind. In

this specific case, I think Seneca's neglect for an obvious contradiction may be

explained by the fact that presenting Polyxena in bridal dress while led by Helen to her

execution was visually a spectacular *coup de theatre* to exploit.

The description of Polyxena is divided in two parts; the first one describes her physical

appearance characterised by her shining beauty (1137-42), while the second one

involves a long account of the heroic way in which she faces death (1147-59).

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Lines 1137-42:

> ...Ipsa deiectos gerit
>
> vultus pudore, sed tamen fulgent genae
>
> magisque solito splendet extremus decor,
>
> ut esse Phoebi dulcius lumen solet   1140
>
> iamiam cadentis, astra cum repetunt vices
>
> premiturque dubius nocte vicina dies.

The description insists on Polyxena's modesty which is conveyed by the fact that she

lowers her gaze (1137-38 *ipsa deiectos gerit/vultus pudore*) and her attitude is

contrasted to that of Helen who also lowers her eyes but, in her case, (1133-34 *maestum*

caput/demissa) it is shame and not modesty the feeling which causes her attitude.[96]

The description employs as usual an extended simile which compares Polyxena's

glimmering beauty to heavenly bodies; the comparison has a long tradition especially in

the elegiac genre where Seneca most probably appropriated it from.[97]

Lines 1148-59:

> ...Ut primum ardui
>
> sublime montis tetigit, atque alte edito
>
> iuvenis paterni vertice in busti stetit,   1150
>
> audax virago non tulit retro gradum;
>
> conversa ad ictum stat truci vultu ferox.
>
> tam fortis animus omnium mentes ferit,
>
> novumque monstrum est Pyrrhus ad caedem piger.
>
> ut dextra ferrum penitus exactum abdidit,   1155

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[96] Fantham (1982a) 379 has pointed out that a passage in Seneca's letters (11, 7) describes how the lowering of the gaze was the device used by actors to convey modesty: *Artifices scaenici, qui imitantur adfectus, qui metum et trepidationem exprimunt, qui tristitiam repraesentant, hoc indicio imitantur verecundiam. Deiciunt enim vultum, verba summittunt, figunt in terram oculos et deprimunt: ruborem sibi exprimere non possunt; nec prohibetur hic nec adducitur.*

[97] Compare the description of Creusa's beauty in the *Medea* (93-101) and that of Hippolytus in the *Phaedra* (743-52).

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subitus recepta morte prorupit cruor

per vulnus ingens. nec tamen moriens adhuc

deponit animos: cecidit, ut Achilli gravem

factura terram, prona et irato impetu.

Differently from the Astyanax's death-narrative, Seneca could rely on Euripides' and

Ovid's treatment of Polyxena's death to shape his own account; even though the

narration bears similarities with its models, nonetheless, differences are far more

conspicuous.

One of the substantial divergences is Polyxena's silence, which some scholars have

argued Seneca took over from Sophocles' *Polyxena*.[98] However, Polyxena's silence

ensures that the image of her moral attitude in facing death is conveyed through her

physical attitude: she does not step back in front of her executioner and she faces the

blow frowning in defiance (1151-52 *audax virago non tulit retro gradum;/conversa ad*

ictum stat truci vultu ferox). The description of the fatal blow also deserves a close

reading. Seneca describes almost scientifically and in a sort of slow motion the starting

and the finishing movement of the striking hand (*dextra*) plunging the sword in

Polyxena's body;[99] the gesture's path is from the outside to the inside beginning with

the unsheathing of the sword (*exactum*) and ending with the plunging of it deeply in the

body (*penitus*). The juxtaposition of *penitus* and *exactum* emphasises the two relevant

moments (1155-57 *ut dextra ferrum penitus exactum abdidit,/subitus recepta morte*

prorupit cruor/per vulnus ingens).

The description in Euripides, instead, employs a metaphor and carefully avoids

providing too precise details (566-68); similarly, Ovid briefly hints at the blow and

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[98] See Fantham (1982a) 376.

[99] See also *Thy* 721-23: *ast illi ferus/in vulnere ensem abscondit, et penitus premens/iugulo manum*
commisit; and 738-41 *ferrumque.../infesta manu/exegit ultra corpus; ac pueri statim/pectore receptus*
ensis e tergo exstitit; in relation to the second passage, Tarrant (1985) 196 has remarked that the awkward
subordinate syntactical position of the child shifts "the attention on the progress of the sword through the
body".

portrays it through a poetic and elusive image (*Met.* 13, 476 *praebita coniecto rupit praecordia ferro*).

In the description of Polyxena's fall after she has been struck, Seneca insists again on her fierce resistance and hatred towards her enemies. The verb *cecidit*, usually used to describe the fall of trees after they have been cut or uprooted, gives the impression of a weighty and massive fall suggesting also the noise produced by it.[100] The heavy and violent fall matches Polyxena's angry force (*irato impetu*) she imposes upon Achilles' tomb. In Euripides and Ovid, on the contrary, Polyxena falls composedly down to the earth taking care to cover her body and guarding the honour of her modesty (Euripides 568-70; Ovid 479-80).

The narration ends with the tragic and violent image of Achilles' tomb greedily drinking Polyxena's blood (1162-64 *non stetit fusus cruor/humove summa fluxit: obduxit statim/saevusque totum sanguinem tumulus bibit*); the close position of the verb *fluxit* and *obduxit* in the line is remarkable especially because of the sound produced by the repetition of the same ending (-xit) which seems to match the noise produced by the mound swallowing the blood.

5.2.5 *Oedipus* 509-708: the necromancy of Laius'ghost

The third act of the *Oedipus* features a long narrative dealing with the account of the necromancy of Laius' ghost.[101] Creon is in charge of the narrative, since Oedipus needed to raise Laius' ghost to come to know the reasons why Thebes is afflicted by a devastating and long-lasting plague. The narrative does not have parallels in any extant tragic antecedents and may have been Seneca's own invention; in Sophocles' *Oedipus*

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[100] Compare e.g. *Thy* 1082-83: *montium/tergemina moles cecidit*; *Ag* 921: *cecidit decenni marte concussum Ilium.*

[101] The necromancy scene has no counterpart in Sophocles'*Oedipus.*

there are no elements which may be remotely flagged out as precedents for Seneca's motif.

However, the tendency to linger in the treatment of events of a supernatural and wondrous nature is at any rate a peculiar mark of Seneca's tragedies. We have already mentioned the incantation scene in the *Medea*, the descent to the Underworld in the *Hercules furens*, the several apparitions of ghosts and shadowy figures. As has been discussed in Chapter 1, pantomime seems to have been particularly fond of such supernatural themes.[102]

Impersonality of the narrator

The role of Creon is here equivalent to that of a messenger, who is usually in charge of relating off-stage actions. The account is as impersonal as an account can be and just three hints are made by Creon to his personal reactions to the events he is describing (595 *nos liquit animus*; 583-86 *ipse pallentes deos/vidi inter umbras, ipse torpentes lacus/noctemque veram: gelidus in venis stetit/haesitque sanguis*; 623 *fari horreo*). No spatial coordinates are provided for Creon's positions within the narrative, or for that of Manto who is also present, as we infer from the only remark made in the narrative about her (595-6 *ipsa quae ritus senis/artesque norat stupuit*). Creon does not describe how Tiresias, Manto, and he himself reached the grove, since his speech begins in the most impersonal way possible with the traditional epic formula *est locus*. Because of this, Creon does not even seem to have taken part in the rite; in the case of Tiresias, instead, his initial position is provided (548 *huc ut sacerdos intulit senior gradum*); but, since no mention of him has been made in the narrative so far (530-47), his appearance comes not only suddenly but is also shaped as that of a character entering on stage; afterwards,

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[102] The theme was also popular in mimes; the Roman Grammarian Aulus Gellius (16, 7, 17; 20, 6, 6) reports that Laberius, a distinguished writer of mimes, composed a *Necyomantia*.

in the same way the seer suddenly appeared, he simply disappears after he has performed the rite and Laius' ghost has been raised.

As to the location of the rite, Creon sets the scene in two different places: firstly under the huge tree in the grove of the Dircean valley (530-31 *est procul ab urbe lucus ilicibus niger/Dircaea circa vallis inriguae loca*; 542-47 *medio stat ingens arbor atque umbra gravi/silvas minores urget et magno ambitu/diffusa ramos una defendit nemus./tristis sub illa, lucis et Phoebi inscius,/restagnat umor frigore aeterno rigens;/limosa pigrum circumit fontem palus*); then, inside a cave (556-57 *nigro bidentes vellere atque atrae boves/antro trahuntur*; 564-65 *multo specum/saturat cruore*). The fluidity of the location contrasts with the presence of the deictic adverb (*huc*) which points to a precise location. In summary, the spatial coordinates of the narrative are neither consistently nor accurately provided and are not aimed at giving a clear and fixed setting for the scene. Seneca seems thus interested just in sketching an atmospheric location in which a traditional threatening grove and a conventional dark cave are.

Mimetic present

As to temporal coordinates, the narrative is couched in the present tense and the perfect tense is used either to convey the temporal coordinates to the actions performed or to describe instantaneous actions.[103] Thus, temporal coordinates mirror the function of spatial ones in terms of fluidity and vagueness, so they convey an invariably present and depthless time. The present in permanency gives the impression that the action unfolds along a timelessly flat surface and the vague space the impression of characters moving in a fluidly atmospheric vacuum.

The narrative is open and closed by two dialogues between Oedipus and Creon (511-29; 659-708), while in the central part (530-658) the account of Creon runs uninterrupted.

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[103] E.g. line 548: *Huc ut sacerdos intulit senior gradum*; 551-52 *ipse funesto integit/vates amictu corpus et frondem quatit*; e.g. line 569-70: *latravit Hecates turba*; *ter valles cavae/sonuere maestum*.

The narrative is divided into 5 main sections:

1) *ecphrasis topou* (529-47);

2) description of Tiresias performing the rite to raise Laius' ghost (549-569);

3) reactions of the natural elements (569-581);

4) opening of the earth and appearance of the creatures of the Underworld (582-619);

5) appearance of Laius' ghost (619-658);

Ecphrasis

The narrative opens with the standard *ecphrasis topou*. The description portrays the Theban grove where Tiresias performs his magical rite (530-47) and is heavily indebted to the Virgilian description of the Underworld, thus sharing several features in common with the *ecphraseis* in the *Hercules furens* and *Thyestes*. As the *ecphraseis* of the *locus horridus* in the *Hercules furens* and *Thyestes*, the one in the *Oedipus* is conventional in many respects: the grove is characterised by darkness and absence of light which does not filter because of the density of the trees (530 *Est procul ab urbe lucus ilicibus niger*; 545 *lucis et Phoebi inscius*; 549 *praestitit noctem locus*);[104] the traditional set of ill-omened trees associated with death such as hoalm-oaks (*ilicibus* 530) and cypresses (532 *cupressus*) is present as well as sluggish waters (546-47 *restagnat umor frigore aeterno rigens; limosa pigrum circumit fontem palus*).[105]

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[104] Compare Virgil (*Aen.* 6, 237-38): *spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu,/scrupea, tuta lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris.*

[105] In addition to this, in Senecan descriptions of *loci horridi*, there is always a tree which dominates the grove: *Oed* 542-44: *medio stat ingens arbor atque umbra gravi/silvas minores urget et magno ambitu/diffusa ramos una defendit nemus*; *Thy* 655-57: *quam supra eminens/despectat alte quercus et vincit nemus*; *Hf* 689-90: *horrent opaca fronde nigrantes comae/taxo imminente.* The image of the dominating tree is derived from the Virgilian description of the tree of false dreams (*Aen.* 6, 282-84): *In*

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Here as in the parallel *ecphraseis topou*, the landscape tends to be presented as if animated by the use of dynamic active verbs that capture the activities of the several kinds of trees which feature in the narrative: a cypress, lifting its head above the lofty wood, holds the grove in its evergreen embrace (532 *cupressus altis exerens silvis caput/virente semper alligat trunco nemus*);[106] an ancient oak spreads its gnarled branches crumbling in decay (534-35 *curvosque tendit quercus et putres situ/ annosa ramos*); a pine-tree, facing the sun, lifts its knotless bole to front the winds (540-41 *et Phoebo obvia/enode Zephyris pinus opponens latus*); a huge tree overwhelms and defends the smaller ones (542-44 *medio stat ingens arbor atque umbra gravi/silvas minores urget et magno ambitu/diffusa ramos una defendit nemus*).

Running commentary

The landscape digression is followed by the description of Tiresias attending the rite of raising the spirit of Laius from the Underworld. The second part of the narrative deals with a description of the ritual performed by Tiresias (559-568) and is modelled on the Virgilian parallel sacrificial scene (*Aen.* 6, 243 ff.). Töchterle has remarked that the structure of this section does not have a clear, logic sequence, but is built up through a repetitious doubling of recurrent elements.[107] For example, Tiresias' entrance (548; 554) and his attire (550-54) are described twice; the sacrifice of the animals is performed first at 558 and again at 564; the libation of blood occurs two times (563; 564); Tiresias sings twice the magical formula (561-62; 567-68); the splitting of the earth occurs first at 570-71 and again at 582-83.

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medio ramos annosaque bracchia pandit/ulmus opaca, ingens, quam sedem Somnia vulgo/vana tenere ferunt, foliisque sub omnibus haerent.
[106] The line echoes Virgil, *Egl.* 1, 24-25: *(Roma)...alias inter caput extulit urbes,/quantum lenta solent inter viburna cupressi.*
[107] Töchterle (1994) 429.

Lines (548-55):

> Huc ut sacerdos intulit senior gradum,
> haud est moratus: praestitit noctem locus.
> tum effossa tellus, et super rapti rogis   550
> iaciuntur ignes. ipse funesto integit
> vates amictu corpus et frondem quatit;
> squalente cultu maestus ingreditur senex,
> lugubris imos palla perfundit pedes,
> mortifera canam taxus astringit comam.   555

In this first part of the description, the narrative focuses on repetitiously portraying the physical appearance of the old seer: as he enters the grove, he covers his body with a funeral vestment (551-52 *ipse funesto integit/vates amictu corpus*); he then advances in a squalid garb of mourning (554 *squalente cultu maestus ingreditur senex*) and wears a mantle (*palla*) which sweeps over his feet (553 *lugubris imos palla perfundit pedes*);[108] his white hair is bound with a wreath of death-dealing yew.

Lines (559-68):

> Vocat inde manes teque qui manes regis
> et obsidentem claustra letalis lacus,   560
> carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax
> decantat ore quidquid aut placat leves
> aut cogit umbras; sanguinem libat focis
> solidasque pecudes urit et multo specum
> saturat cruore; libat et niveum insuper   565
> lactis liquorem, fundit et Bacchum manu
> laeva, canitque rursus ac terram intuens
> graviore manes voce et attonita citat.

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[108] Töchterle (1994) 442 has observed that the p-alliteration (*palla, perfundit, pedes*) at line 553 matches the sound of the impact of the fabric of the dress on the feet.

The second part of the description deals properly with the sacrificial rite. The actions performed by Tiresias recall closely those of Medea in the incantation scene (*Med* 670-843) and of Atreus' killings of Thyestes' sons which configures itself as a sacrificial rite (*Thy* 623-788); for instance, both Tiresias and Medea wave branches (*Oed* 552 *et frondem quatit*; *Med* 804-5 *tibi iactatur/tristis Stygia ramus ab unda*), perform the rite with their left hand (*Oed* 566-67 *fundit et Bacchum manu/laeva*; *Med* 680 *et triste laeva comprecans sacrum manu*), prepare the fire on which to burn the sacrificial victims (*Oed* 550 *et super rapti rogis/iaciuntur ignes*; *Med* 799- 800 *tibi de medio rapta sepulcro/ fax nocturnos sustulit ignes*), and make libation of blood (*Oed* 563 *sanguinem libat focis*; *Med* 811 *sacrum laticem percussa dedi*). Tiresias, Medea, and Atreus sing the ritual formula (*Oed* 561 *carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax/decantat ore*; 567-68 *canitque rursus ac terram intuens/graviore manes voce et attonita citat*; *Med* 738-39 *Sonuit ecce vesano gradu/canitque*; *Thy* 691-92 *Ipse est sacerdos, ipse funesta prece/letale carmen ore violento canit*).

As in the case of Seneca's *ecphraseis*, repetitiousness and unvaried handling are present in sacrificial scenes, which, no matter what type of rite is described, all recast the same set of stereotyped elements.

The following section (569-81) deals with a detailed description of the reactions of the natural elements to Tiresias' rite:

Lines (569-71)

> latravit Hecates turba; ter valles cavae
> sonuere maestum, tota succusso solo
> pulsata tellus...

Lines (574-81)

subsedit omnis silva et erexit comas,

duxere rimas robora et totum nemus   575

concussit horror; terra se retro dedit

gemuitque penitus, sive temptari abditum

Acheron profundum mente non aequa tulit,

sive ipsa tellus, ut daret functis viam,

compage rupta sonuit, aut ira furens   580

triceps catenas Cerberus movit graves.

The description of the reactions of the natural elements is extremely extended especially

when we compare it with its Virgilian model (*Aen.* 6, 255-58 *ecce autem primi sub*

lumina solis et ortus/sub pedibus mugire solum et iuga coepta moveri/silvarum,

visaeque canes ululare per umbram/adventante dea). But the description is

conventional in the set of phenomena portrayed, in the animated nature of the reactions

of inanimate objects, and in the linguistic register adopted to describe them.

As to the phenomena described, traditionally the reactions of the natural elements are

characterised by the production of trembling, laments, bays, mournful noises (569-80

latravit; *sonuere*; *concussit*; *gemuitque penitus*; *sonuit*). Thus, the reactions

metamorphose themselves into sound effects, of which the shaking of the chains is one

of the most peculiar, though not unparalleled (580-81 *aut ira furens/triceps catenas*

Cerberus movit graves).[109]

Here as in the *ecphraseis*, the impression that the reactions of the natural elements are of

animate beings is produced by the use of active verbs which have as subjects inanimate

objects: thrice the deep valley gave out a mournful noise (569-70 *ter valles*

cavae/sonuere maestum); the wood shrank down and bristled its foliage/hair (574

subsedit omnis silva et erexit comas); the trunks split open, (575 *duxere rimas robora*);

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[109] Compare *Thy* 669 (*catenis lucus excussis sonat*), where the shadows shake their chains; *Hf* 784-85 (*qui trina vasto capita concutiens sono/regnum tuetur*), where the noise is produced by the shaking of Cerberus' three heads; *Hf* 815-16 (*et vastas furens/quassat catenas*), where Cerberus shakes its chains.

horror shook the whole wood (575-76 *et totum nemus/concussit horror*); the earth also shrank back and gave a groan from her depths (576-77 *terra se retro dedit/gemuitque penitus*).

As to the linguistic register, the language adopted is almost formulaic; compare for example the barking of Hecate's dogs in *Oed* (569-70 *latravit Hecates turba; ter valles cavae/sonuere maestum*) with *Med* (840-41 *ter latratus audax Hecate/dedit*) and *Med* (765 *sonuere fluctus*); *Oed* (570-71 *tota succusso solo/pulsata tellus*) with *Thy* (696-97 *tota succusso solo/nutavit aula*); *Oed* (574 *subsedit omnis silva et erexit comas*) with *Tro* (173 *movere silvae capita*); *Oed* (575-76 *totum nemus/concussit horror*) with *Med* (926 *Cor pepulit horror*), *Tro* (168 *artus horridus quassat tremor*), and *Phae* (1034 *Os quassat tremor*); *Oed* (576-77 *terra.../gemuitque penitus*) with *Phae* (350 *tum silva gemit murmure saevo*) and *Ag* (468 *tractuque longo litus ac petrae gemunt*); *Oed* (579-80 *sive ipsa tellus, ut daret functis viam,/compage rupta sonuit*) with *Tro* (173-74 *excelsum nemus/fragore vasto tonuit*), *Tro* (171-72 *cum subito caeco terra mugitu fremens/concussa totos traxit ex imo sinus*), and *Phae* (1007 *cum subito vastum tonuit ex alto mare*).

The following section (582-619) describes the splitting of the earth and the appearance of the hellish creatures. As we have said above, the opening of the earth first happens at 579-80 and again at 582-83 (*Subito dehiscit terra et immenso sinu/laxata patuit*);[110] the presence of the adverb *subito* (suddenly, even though contrasting with the fact that the earth has already opened) and the emphasis on the width of the cavity (*immenso sinu*) are recurrent features which aim at providing pathos to the description. The hellish creatures appeared in two groups; in the first one mythical figures such as the whole

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[110] Compare with *Hf* 665-66: *hiatque rupes alta et immenso specu/ingens vorago faucibus vastis patet*; and with *Tro* 178-80: *Tum scissa vallis aperit immensos specus,/et hiatus Erebi pervium ad superos iter/tellure fracta praebet*.

snaky brood (586-88 *saeva prosiluit cohors/et stetit in armis omne vipereum genus*), the

armed men sown from Dircean teeth (588 *fratrum catervae dente Dircaeo satae*), the

Erinys (590 *tum torva Erinys sonuit*), and personified abstractions such as Rage, Horror,

Grief, Disease, Old Age, Fear, and Plague (590-95) make their parade.[111]

Here as in the *Hercules furens*, the peculiar activity of some of the personified

abstractions is described: Grief tears away its hair (592 *Luctus avellens comam*);[112]

Disease barely supports its weary head (593 *aegreque lassum sustinens Morbus caput*),

Plague is hungry for the Ogygian people (589 *avidumque populi Pestis Ogygii malum*).

The second group of creatures is summoned by Tiresias's further utterance (597

convocat, 607 *vatis eduxit sonus*) which brings forth the bloodless multitude of cruel

Dis;[113] the parade features Zethus, Amphion, Niobe, Agave, and Pentheus. Here as in

the case of the personified abstractions, the individual activity of the mythical figures is

described: Zethus restrains with his right hand a fierce bull by the horns (609-11 *primus*

emergit solo,/dextra ferocem cornibus taurum premens,/Zethus); Amphion holds with

his left hand the lyre (611-12 *manuque sustinet laeva chelyn/qui saxa dulci traxit*

Amphion sono);[114] Niobe carries her head high in arrogance and counts her ghosts (613-

15 *interque natos Tantalis tandem suos/tuto superba fert caput fastu grave/et numerat*

umbras);[115] Agave is frenzied (615-17 *peior hac genetrix adest/furibunda Agave, tota*

quam sequitur manus/partita regem); Pentheus fiercely continues his threats (617-18

sequitur et Bacchas lacer/Pentheus tenetque saevus etiamnunc minas).

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[111] Compare the analogous troupe of personified abstractions in the *Hf* (689-96).

[112] The gesture is extremely common in Seneca's tragedies.

[113] The *exangue vulgus* is introduced through a comparison with leaves, flowers, swarms, waves, and birds (600-07). The simile is modelled on two Virgilian passages: *Aen.* (6, 309-12) and *Georg.* (4, 471-74).

[114] The emphasis given to the hands in the description of Zethus and Amphion is remarkable.

[115] Töchterle (1994) 467 has observed that the phrase *caput fastu grave* (614) actually describes a type; compare *Ag* 305 *pectus aerumnis grave*; *Phoe* 233 *caput tenebris grave*.

The last section of the narrative deals with the emerging of Laius' shade (619-658); the section first provides a description of Laius' physical appearance (619-21; 624-23) and a report of his words delivered in direct speech:

Lines 624-26:

> stetit per artus sanguine effuso horridus,
> paedore foedo squalidam obtentus comam,
> et ore rabido fatur...

The description of Laius is conventional; the verb *stetit* is widely employed in these kinds of descriptions;[116] from a stylistic point of view, I would suggest that the instantaneous perfect *stetit* may perform the function of depicting a static and tableau-like pose which strongly contributes to add fear and surprise, in this case, to Laius' ghostly appearance.

The hair or the hairstyle is also a constant feature; the expression employed is almost the same (*Tro* 450 *squalida obtectus coma*) as the one used of Hector in the *Trojan Women*;[117] similarly, the phrase employed to describe the way the character speaks (*ore rabido*) is recurrently used;[118] since the first meaning of the word *os* is mouth/face, but the word can be used as a metonym for voice, there is an ambiguity whether Seneca is describing, here as well as in the other instances of the occurrence of the phrase, the expression of the face or the tone of voice of the character.

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[116] Compare *Tro* 443 *cum subito nostros Hector ante oculos stetit*; *Tro* 188 (Achilles) *cum superbo victor in curru stetit*; *Ag* 166 (Agamemnon) *cum stetit ad aras ore sacrifico pater*; *Thy* 720 (Tantalus) *stetit sui securus*.

[117] Compare *Phae* 833 *staretque recta squalor incultus coma*; *Thy* 780 *nitet fluente madidus unguento comam*; 948 *pingui madidus crinis amomo*; *HO* 120 *crinis patrio pulvere sordidus*; 376 *hirtam Sabaea marcidus myrrha comam*.

[118] Compare *Oed* 480 *ore deiecto*; 561-62 *rabido...ore*; *Ag* 166 *ore sacrifico*; *Thy* 2 *avido...ore*; 692 *ore violento*; 779 *ore funesto*; 988 *ore decepto*; *Tro* 34 *ore lymphato*; *Hf* 811 *ore summisso*; 902 *ore saxifico*; 947-48 *ingenti...ore*; 1059 *ore decoro*; *Phoe* 119-20 *semifero...ore*; 220 *ore pestifero*; *Med* 241 *ore flagranti*.

Laius' appearance shares several features in common with the appearance of Achilles'

ghost in the *Trojan Women* (164-202), even though the shade of Achilles is not raised

from the dead by an appropriately organised ritual, but just happens to appear of its own

accord to demand Polyxena's sacrifice. First of all, since the Achilles' scene has the

shape of an abridged version of the conventional Senecan messenger's scene, the two

narratives seem to be equivalent also from a formal point of view.

Even in the case of Achilles' ghost, its appearance is preceded by a series of similar

supernatural events which closely recalls those in the *Oedipus*.[119]

Furthermore, either the shade of Laius or that of Achilles delivers their

accusations/requests which are reported in direct speech.[120]

Now both the recurrence of ghostly travesties in Seneca's tragedies and the stereotyped

handling of their appearances enhance the impression that these supernatural figures

played a prominent role and had a specific function in the tragedies.[121] The horrific

though spectacular presence of such supernatural figures may have been again a sign of

the influence of pantomime which heavily relied on such means to impress its audience.

5.2.6 *Agamemnon* 421-578: the sea-storm

The third act of Seneca's *Agamemnon* is devoted to the messenger's long description of

the storm which wrecked the Greek fleet. In the tragic tradition the first treatment of this

episode is found in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, but Seneca's treatment of the storm seems

to owe very little to its Greek predecessor.[122] For instance, the extremely broad length

of the Senecan messenger's narration of the storm (157 lines: 421-578) appears as the

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[119] The earth groans and bellows at: *Tro* 171-74; *Oed* 569-70; 571; the earth splits open at: *Tro* 172; *Oed* 582-83; the trees are disturbed at: *Tro* 173-74; *Oed* 574-76; the ghost emerges at: *Tro* 179 ff.; *Oed* 586-88.

[120] To Achilles' and Laius' shadowy appearances may be added that of Hector's ghost in the *Trojan Women* (443-56).

[121] In Greek tragedy, only two ghosts make their appearance, namely Darius' ghost in Aeschylus' *Persians* (619-84) and Polydorus' one in the Euripides' *Hecuba*.

[122] See Tarrant (1976) 248 for a fuller discussion on the sources.

most conspicuous difference when compared with the length of Aeschylus' treatment of the same topic in his *Agamemnon* (56 lines: 636-680).

In the context of Latin literature, descriptions of storms held a long and well-established tradition.[123] In tragedy, Pacuvius' storm in the *Teucer* was most celebrated. In epic, Virgil's and Ovid's storms (*Aen.* 1, 81-156; 3, 192-208; *Met.* 11, 474-572) are the closest models from which Seneca drew the material for his account. The mythological arrangement given to it by Seneca, which combines three distinct episodes, namely the sea storm which destroys the Greek fleet on its way home, the death of Ajax Oileus, and Nauplius' treachery, is peculiar. Tarrant regards as possible sources for Seneca's storm Lycophron's *Alexandra* and a five act mechanical puppet-show on Nauplius as referred to by Hero of Alexandria. Both Lycophron and Hero of Alexandria present the three episodes but in a slightly different order than Seneca, i.e. storm, Nauplius, and death of Ajax. In pantomime, Lucian's catalogue of pantomimic themes (46) attests that the episode of the storm shipwrecking the Greek fleet was performed in this medium. In Lucian's list, the same three distinct episodes are connected as in Seneca's passage, but again in a different order: the wrath of Nauplius and the death of Ajax between the rocks. That these episodes take place during the sea storm in which the Greek fleet was destroyed can be inferred from the context of the Lucianic passage. Besides, that shipwreck featured as a theme of pantomimic performances seems to find support in Seneca's *De Ira* (2, 2, 5): *Quae non sunt irae, non magis quam tristitia est, quae ad conspectum **mimici naufragii** contrahit frontem.*[124]

Impersonality of the narrator

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[123] See Morford (1967) 20-36.

[124] Since Seneca's words imply a tragic and not a comic treatment of the topic, I assume that the term "mimicus" is equivalent to and stands for "pantomimicus". It is possible that Seneca is using the word "mimici" in a general and broad sense which would include pantomime, since mime and pantomime were sister arts which shared many features in common and the boundaries between the two of them were not sharply marked.

The narrative set-piece of the *Agamemnon* is conventionally constituted by an introductory dialogue between Clytemnestra and the messenger (394-420) and closed by a monologue of Clytemnestra (579-88) in which the queen does not even utter a single comment on the event narrated at length by Talthybius, but debate with herself about what her course of action should be in relation to the return of her husband Agamemnon. The proper narrative of the storm thus runs completely uninterrupted. The messenger's speech in the *Agamemnon* is characterised thus by an even greater degree of impersonality than the other *rheseis* within the *corpus* and, aside from the initial and conventional reluctance to relate unfortunate events (416-18 *Acerba fatu poscis, infaustum iubes/miscere laeto nuntium. refugit loqui/mens aegra tantis atque inhorrescit malis*), no personal hints are made by Talthybius; he basically tells the event as if he did not take part in it, since he uses the first person plural only on one occasion (557 *Nos alia maior naufragos pestis vocat*) and the third one all the way through.[125]

Mimetic present

The narrative is couched in the present and the perfect is employed just to provide the temporal sequence of consequent actions.[126] The high number of active verbs describing actions which occur in the passage is also remarkable.[127]

Non-linear progression of the narration

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[125] In Aeschylus'*Agamemnon*, the herald uses the first person plural (e.g. lines 659; 660; 672; 673).

[126] Perfect: 421 *cecidit*; 422 *divisa est*; 427 *fulsit*; 428 *monuit*; 443 *posuere, credita est*; 460 *relevabat*; 464 *fecit*; 465 *sparserat*; 498 *nocuit*; 507 *cessit*; 515 *meruit*; 534 *perstrinxit*; 536 *excussit*; 538 *tulit*; 542 *traxit*; 547 *fugavit*; 549 *pepulerunt*; 550 *vicimus*; 555 *tulit*. Compare Aeschylus' narration of the storm which is couched in the past.

[127] In 157 lines, only twelve verbs in the passive occur: 422 *divisa est*; 425 *aptatur*; 456 *tegitur*; 470 *conditur*; 485 *revelli*; 487 *induci*; 471 *tollitur*; 491 *datur*; 515 *vocatur*; 535 *libratur*; 548 *tuli*; 573 *vehitur*.

The narrative of the storm progresses through a succession of stages, rather than in a linear manner. Tarrant has divided the narrative into seven major sections:

1) departure from Troy with favourable winds (421-48);

2) appearance of dolphins (449-55);

3) nightfall (456-66);

4) storm (466-527);

5) punishment of Ajax (528-56);

6) treachery of Nauplius (557- 576a);

7) dawn and subsiding of the storm (576b-578);

Each section of the narrative is somehow juxtaposed to the proceeding and following ones and develops in detail a single event. Thus, the forward movement of the narration is quite slowed down by the expansion of the single units. If the overall movement of the narration is static, the single units depict a series of vignettes which include a large amount of action portrayed in a moving picture.

The first section of the narration describes the departure from Troy and the activities of the soldiers preparing for the sea-faring are mimetically portrayed: they unbuckle their weary sides from the swords (423 *iamque ense fessum miles exonerat latus*), abandon their shields on the ship's desks (424 *neglecta summas scuta per puppes iacent*), and the oars are fitted to their military hands (425 *ad militares remus aptatur manus*). Then, as soon as the sign of the departure has been given (428 *et clara laetum remigem monuit tuba*), the oarsmen prepare to leave: the whole army hastens in bending the oars and pulling them together (437-38 *properat iuventus omnis adductos simul/lentare remos*), helps the winds with its hand (438 *adiuvat ventos manu*), and moves the strong arms with rhythmical effort (439 *et valida nisu bracchia alterno movet*). After the ships are being moved and the favourable wind makes the sailing easy, the oarsmen can abandon

the oars and look at the landscape or recall the most memorable events of the war (442-48). The description of the activities of the army is interwoven with the description of the favourability of the winds and of the effects produced by the ships on the sea; as in the case of the *ecphraseis*, the watery elements tend to be described as personified; for instance, the calm wave trembles for the gentle breath of Zephyr (432-33 *unda vix actu levi/tranquilla Zephyri mollis afflatu tremit*); it is possible that Seneca was inspired by Ovid (*Heroides* 11, 75 *ut mare fit tremulum/tenui cum stringitur aura*) and Virgil (*Aen*, 7, 9 *splendet tremulo sub lumine pontus*), though in Seneca's description the grammatical construction (in which the wave is the subject of the active verb *tremit*) underscores the animated nature of the wave; furthermore, the phrase recalls very closely the description of the bristling of Cassandra's hair (*Ag* 712 *mollis horrescit coma*). The grammatical construction of line 440 (*sulcata vibrant aequora et latera increpant*), with the presence of active verbs and the absence of the agents producing the glistening and the hissing, gives the impression that both the waters and the sides of the ships are agents voluntarily acting; in Ovid there are similar descriptions of the noise produced by the water hitting the sides of ship (*Met.* 11, 507 *saepe dat ingentem fluctu latus icta fragorem*; *Tr.* 14, 24 *increpuit...unda latus*), but the grammatical constructions always specify the agents producing the noise.[128] In addition to this, the use of *vibrare* for the glistening of the water is rare. Usually, Seneca uses the verb to indicate the brandishing of a weapon.[129] The meaning "shimmer" is attested by Cicero and Lucan;[130] Claudian employs it for the shimmering of silk tunics in a breeze.[131]Thus, the glistening of the waters may have been mimed through an appropriate movement of

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[128] The verb *increpere* is used only twice in the tragic *corpus*: here and at *Tro* 302 *timide, cum increpuit metus*.

[129] e.g. *Hf* 473-74 *nec manu molli levem/vibrare thyrsum*; *Oed* 441 *thyrsumque levem vibrante manu*; *Phoe* 439 *vibrat in fratrum manu*.

[130] Cicero, *Acad*. 2, 105 *[mare] qua a sole collucet, albescit et vibrat*; Lucan, 5, 446 *[pontus] non horrore tremit, non solis imagine vibrat*.

[131] Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2, 355-57: *hinc alii saevum cristato vertice nutant/et tremulos umeris gaudent vibrare colores,/quos operit formatque chalybs*.

the silk tunic which we know was the versatile costume worn by the pantomime dancer. Similarly, line 442 (*aura plenos fortior tendit sinus*) may be mimed through the use of the tunica or of the mantel. The high occurrence of the word *sinus* in Seneca's tragedies is remarkable (in the storm narrative the word is employed here and at 483 *quatiens sinus*).

The second section of the narrative deals with a description of the traditional appearance of dolphins. Seneca's description echoes the Ovidian metamorphosis of the Tyrrhenian sailors.[132] In the *Oedipus* (449-67), the metamorphosis of pirates into dolphins employs again the same material.

This specific passage is remarkable for the amount of mimetic movements it contains: the dolphin weaves, jumps, leaps with arching backs, dashes about in circles, (449 *ludit*, 450 *pando transilit dorso*; 451 *exultat*; 452 *agitat gyros*; 454 *lascivit*; 455 *ambit*; *lustrat*). The linguistic register used deserves closer scrutiny, since it is recurrent especially in narrative set-pieces to describe a set of movements; the verb *ludit* is used also at *Hf* 684-85 (*incerta vagus/Maeander unda ludit*) to describe a serpentine movement; the verb *transilit* at *Thy* 767-68 (*impositas dapes/transiluit ignis*) to describe the leaps of the fire; the verb *exultat at Ag* 773-74 (*exultat et ponit gradus/pater decoros Dardanus*) to describe Dardanus' dance; the verb *ambit* at *Tro* 16 (*regiam flammae ambiunt*), *Oed* 325 (*ambitque densus regium fumus caput*), and *Oed* 543-44 (*magno ambitu/ diffusa ramos una defendit nemus*) to describe a circular movement.

The section dealing with the effects of the storm on the ships is striking for the motion picture it provides (497-506):

Ipsa se classis premit

et prora prorae nocuit et lateri latus.

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[132] *Met.* 3, 683-86: *undique dant saltus multaque adspergine rorant/emerguntque iterum redeuntque sub aequora rursus/inque chori ludunt speciem lascivaque iactant/corpora et acceptum patulis mare naribus efflant.* See Tarrant (1976) 259 for a full discussion of the Ovidian borrowings.

illam dehiscens pontus in praeceps rapit

hauritque et alto redditam revomit mari;   500

haec onere sidit, illa convulsum latus

summittit undis, fluctus hanc decimus tegit;

haec lacera et omni decore populato levis

fluitat, nec illi vela nec tonsae manent

nec rectus altas malus antemnas ferens,   505

sed trunca toto puppis Ionio natat.

The description of the effects of the storm on the ships is already in Virgil (*Aen.* 1, 104-17) and Ovid (11, 501-15) and Seneca is clearly indebted to their treatment. Unlike his predecessors, Seneca adopts a predominantly paratactic and simple style of diction in which to couch its hyperbolic description; the hyperbolic nature of the depiction of the ships is again reminiscent of Virgil and Ovid; still the Senecan description remains easy to visualise and to convey through gestures. In Ovid, the hyperbolic content is somehow paralleled by the highly complex and hypotactic syntax in which the description is couched.[133]

Thus whereas Virgil's and Ovid's descriptions are grandiose in content and style, the Senecan one is rather prosaic and schematic. The presentation of the ships as sentient beings is crafted in a way which verges on the trivial more than on the sublime.[134] Galinsky has remarked that Ovid's storm stands as a "virtuoso play on the literary conventions and precedents";[135] unlike Ovid, Seneca's combination of hyperbolic imagery with a rather simple and paratactic style does not seem to be meant as an improvement on his predecessors; the combination of Virgilian and Ovidian elements

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[133] For an analysis of Virgil's and Ovid's storms see Otis (1966) 238-46; Solodow (1988) 119-25.

[134] The description of the destruction of the ships is cast here and at lines 571-76. Line 504 *nec illi vela nec tonsae manent* recalls the Virgilian *non comptae mansere comae* (*Aen.* 6, 48). In the second instance the ships are treated as sentient beings even more forcefully (575-76 *iam timent terram rates/et maria malunt*).

[135] Galinsky (1975) 145.

seems rather to be interpreted as a means to adapt a conventional literary *topos* to the requirements of the new aesthetics of pantomime.

Personified natural phenomena

The natural phenomena which accompany the storm are, according to Senecan practise, portrayed in a personified way (466-90): first a murmur falls from the high hills and the shore and the rocks moan (466-68 *tum murmur grave,/maiora minitans, collibus summis cadit/tractuque longo litus ac petrae gemunt*); the wave, roused by the approaching winds, swells (469 *agitata ventis unda venturis tumet*).[136] The action of the winds on the sea is mimetically described as a struggle between Zephyrus against Eurus and Notus against Boreas (474-76 *incumbunt, rapiunt, mittunt tela*).

Even though the fight of the wind is a traditional theme, Seneca portrays the struggle of the winds as one between personified entities. In Virgil, the struggle of the wind features as well, but he maintains the simile-form (*Aen*. 1, 82-83 *ac venti, velut agmine facto,/ quo data porta, ruunt et terras turbine perflant*):

Lines 474-84:

<div style="text-align:center">

undique incumbunt simul

</div>

rapiuntque pelagus infimo eversum solo	475
adversus Euro Zephyrus et Boreae Notus.	
sua quisque mittunt tela et infesti fretum	
emoliuntur, turbo convolvit mare:	
Strymonius altas Aquilo contorquet nives	
Libycusque harenas Auster ac Syrtes agit	480
[nec manet in Austro; fit gravis nimbis Notus]	
imbre auget undas; Eurus orientem movet	
Nabataea quatiens regna et Eoos sinus;	

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[136] Compare Virgil, *Georgics* 1, 356-59: *continuo ventis surgentibus aut freta ponti/incipiunt agitata tumescere et aridus altis/montibus audiri fragor, aut resonantia longe/litora misceri et nemorum increbrescere murmur*. It is remarkable that the verb *tumere* and the adjective *tumidus* are either used in the tragedies to describe the swelling of the sea or the swelling of an emotion, usually *ira*.

quid rabidus ora Corus Oceano exerens?

In addition to this, Seneca expands the description of the struggle of the winds by
depicting the single activity of each wind, whereas Virgil provides a briefer and
summary account of the effects of the winds on the sea.[137]

From a stylistic point of view, the description is remarkable for the use of a repetitive
linguistic register.[138] In this respect, as Pratt has remarked, it is noteworthy that the
language employed to describe the actual storm in the *Agamemnon* parallels that used as
a metaphor to portray the figurative emotional storm experienced by the characters in
such a way that they become basically indistinguishable.[139]

For instance, lines 488-89 (*vento resistit aestus, et ventus retro/aestum revolvit. non
capit sese mare*) are worth comparing with the description of Clytemnestra (*Ag* 138-40):

> ...fluctibus variis agor,
> ut, cum hinc profundum ventus, hinc aestus rapit,
> incerta dubitat unda cui cedat malo.

The description of the ships swept away by the current at lines (499-502)

> illam dehiscens pontus in praeceps rapit
> hauritque et alto redditam revomit mari;   500
> haec onere sidit, illa convulsum latus
> summittit undis, fluctus hanc decimus tegit;

can be compared with the description of Medea's inner fluctuations (939-43):

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[137] Compare Virgil, *Aen.* 1, 82-86 and Ovid, *Met.* 11, 490-91: *omnique e parte feroces/ bella gerunt venti fretaque indignantia miscent.*

[138] The stereotyped nature of the language employed by Seneca can be well exemplified by e.g. line 484: *quid rabidus ora Corus Oceano exerens*; the same image is used at *Ag* 554 *Neptunus imis exerens undis caput* and *Oed* 532 *cupressus altis exerens silvis caput*; the adjective *rabidus* is both employed for inanimate beings as here and at *Thy* 360-62 (*non Eurus rapiens mare/aut saevo rabidus freto/ventosi tumor Hadriae*) and for animate ones as at *Thy* 254 (*Quid novi rabidus struis?*), at *Oed* 561-62 (*rabido minax/decantat ore*), and at *Oed* 626 (*et ore rabido fatur*).

[139] See Pratt (1963) 225-26.

..anceps aestus incertam rapit;

ut saeva rapidi bella cum venti gerunt,   940

utrimque fluctus maria discordes agunt

dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum

cor fluctuatur...[140]

Similarly, the boiling of the sea (*Ag* 560 *aestuat scopulis fretum*) can be compared with the boiling of the character's passions (e.g. *Med* 390 *haeret minatur* **aestuat** *queritur gemit*) and the burning of the wave (*Ag* 561 *fervetque semper fluctus*) with the boiling of the character's feelings (*Phoe* 352 *fervet immensum dolor*; *Med* 942 *dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum/cor fluctuatur*; 952 *fervet odium*; *Hf* 946-47 *Leo/ iraque totus fervet*; *Phae* 362 *torretur aestu tacito...furor*; 641 *pectus insanum vapor/amorque torret*). The whirling of the winds heaves the sea (478 *turbo convolvit mare*) as the whirling of the emotions heaves the hearts of the characters (*Thy* 260-61 *tumultus pectora attonitus quatit/penitusque volvit*; *Thy* 1041 *volvuntur intus viscera*).

If we go back now to Seneca's reference to the "mimicum naufragium", it is possible to suggest that the adjective "mimic" does not refer strictly to the type of performance, but rather means "mimetically enacted". This mimetic representation of a shipwreck together with the fact that it produces saddening effects on the audience seems to point to a pantomimic more than a mimic performance. If Seneca is then referring to an actual shipwreck or to a metaphoric shipwreck of the soul, such as the one undergone by his tragic characters, is not possible to establish. However, the actual and the figurative shipwreck would not have entailed a sharply different enactment since, according to

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[140] See also *Thy* 438-9: *Sic concitatam remige et velo ratem/ aestus resistens remigi et velo refert; Phae 181-84: Sic, cum gravatam navita adversa ratem/propellit unda, cedit in vanum labor/et victa prono puppis aufertur vado./quid ratio possit?; Hf 676-79: ut saepe puppes aestus invitas rapit,/sic pronus aer urget atque avidum chaos,/gradumque retro flectere haud umquam sinunt/umbrae tenaces.*

Nonnus, pantomime consisted in a symbolic rendition of the myth or plot enacted.[141]

For instance, such a symbolic representation can be inferred from Nonnus' account of

the performance of the pantomimic dancer Silenus who mimed the flowing water of a

river *Dionysiaca* (19, 288-95) and from Lucian's (19) claim that the dancer can even

imitate "the liquidity of water" (ὕδατος ὑγρότητα).[142]

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[141] Nonnus (*Dionysiaca* 19, 226) says that the dancer used *symbola*, this meaning that the pantomimic performance was of a symbolic nature: πολυστρέπτοιο δὲ τέχνης σύμβολα τεχνήεντα κατέγραφε σιγαλέῃ χείρ.

[142] See Chapter 1 p. 8. See also Nonnus *(Dionysiaca* 1, 29-30): εἰ δὲ πέλοι μιμηλὸν ὕδωρ, Διόνυσον ἀείσω/κόλπον ἁλὸς δύνοντα κορυσσομένοιο Λυκούργου.

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Conclusion

Viewed as dramatic texts, Seneca's tragedies are controversial. This is largely due to the fact that some formal characteristics of his tragic *corpus* diverge from the theatrical conventions of tragedy as exemplified in the classical Greek plays of the fifth century BC.

Taking into account that the theatrical landscape in the Imperial age was extremely varied, I have argued that some of the controversial features of Seneca's tragedies are to be ascribed to the influence of one of them in particular, i.e. pantomime, which was an extremely popular genre of performance in his time. Since Seneca must have been well aware of this popularity, he may have included pantomimic elements to make his tragedies more appealing to his audience. The popularity of pantomime would have encouraged poets and writers either to write texts suitable for this genre or to experiment with the generic enrichment of more traditional literary genres through the aesthetics of this type of performance. We know, for instance, that authors such as Silo, Statius, and Lucan composed pantomimic libretti.[1] Still several centuries later the Archbishop Isidore of Seville (560-636) attests the practice of poets of composing *fabulae* suitable to be enacted through the movement of the body.[2] As to generic enrichment, the cross-fertilization of tragedy through the aesthetics of pantomime ought not to surprise given the contiguity of these two theatrical genres. Seneca's adoption of compositional devices typical of pantomime is in keeping with the attested process of dialogue between sub-literary and literary genres in Latin culture at large, which I survey in chapter 1.

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[1] Elder Seneca, *Suasoriae* 2.19 about Silo: *qui pantomimis fabulas scripsit*; Juvenal, *Satire* 7, 86-87 about Statius: *sed cum fregit subsellia versu/esurit, intactam Paridi nisi vendit Agaven*; Lucan, see Lada-Richards (2003) 39: according to the so-called "Vacca" life, XIV *salticae fabulae* are attributed to him.

[2] Isidore of Seville, 18, 49: *Nam fabulae ita componebantur a poetis ut aptissimae essent motui corporis.*

The idea that pantomime played a part in the performance of the problematic scripts that have come down to us as "Seneca's tragedies" can help to solve many of the problems associated with envisaging their performance as stage plays, such as unexplained references, un-cued exits and entrances, and extended descriptions.

In this work, I therefore explored the possibility that it is to the influence of pantomime that we may ascribe the singular medley of dramatic and narrative (or epic) features in Seneca's tragedies. With pantomime's aesthetics in mind, the highly descriptive character of Seneca's tragedies can be accounted for as a strategy of writing that enables us to achieve a novel and perhaps better understanding of his tragic *corpus*; alternatively, it is possible that the language of pantomime, which was so widespread, familiar and thus influential, may have affected Seneca's writing, no matter what destination for his tragedies he envisaged.

The influence of the aesthetics of pantomime can also explain four distinctive features of Seneca's plays, all of which have been found particularly troublesome by scholars assessing them as dramatic texts and evaluating their aesthetic value; these controversial features of Seneca's dramaturgy are the loose dramatic structure, the presence of "running commentaries", monologues of self-analysis, and lengthy narrative set-pieces.

Even more importantly, pantomime can reconcile a dichotomy existing in Seneca's tragedies between the constant engagement in the portrayal of the emotions of the characters and the nature of such emotions, which are, surprisingly, far from being personal (i.e. based on individual experience); in fact, the emotions are rather objective, they stand as "performed emotions". Seneca's tragedies thus present an apparent incongruity between the emphasis on emotional responses and lack of a psychological dimension of the characters.[3] Despite this, Seneca's characters do not have a real

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[3] Segal (1983 repr. 2008) 140 has remarked that "emotional responses are magnified to a new level" and Seneca even created an apposite language capable to portray them in "a new pictorial expressiveness", or, as Regenbogen (1927-28) 207 has called it, a "psychoplastic portrait of emotional affect".

psychological dimension, they "do not express a human intelligibility...they are all of one piece; there is not that something within";[4] they lack a psychological interiority, even though they speak such a vocabulary.

This dichotomy can be explained if we think that pantomime consisted primarily in the display of the emotional life of the characters enacted and relied on a set of stylised conventions to do so. In this medium, the different emotions were to a high extent portrayed in a stylised form; this semiotic system was needed both to express and make the different emotions intelligible to the audience.

Moreover, the performative quality of the emotions of Seneca's characters is accompanied by a novel linguistic register adopted to shape them in a plastic way; these two features can be traced back to the influence of the aesthetics of pantomime, especially if we think about pantomime's engagement with the representation of emotions and the fact that its medium of expression was the plastic language of the body.

It is then precisely this engagement with the emotions which made the aesthetics of pantomime an attractive and apt means of expression for Seneca.

It is important to clarify at this point that I am not suggesting that the influence of pantomime on Seneca's conception of mythical narrative, which seems virtually inevitable given the cultural environment in which the plays came into being, necessarily bears the implication that Seneca intended his tragedies to be performed as pantomime or with pantomimic sequences. In fact, it is unnecessary to assume that he wrote them in a way that excluded the possibility of any of the forms of performance, whether rhetorical or theatrical, with or without elements of mimetic dance, that were popular in the mid-first century AD. My point is rather that Seneca wrote them 'with pantomime in mind', and that both the formal structure of the tragedies and the details

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[4] Hook (2000) 55.

of the verse they contain reveal characteristics which he took over from the pantomimic

genre. They certainly reflect a familiar cultural language which had been well

established by Seneca's day through the traditions of tragic pantomime.

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