The First Chorus of Seneca's *Phaedra*

The relationship between the choruses of Seneca's tragedies and the action of the plays in which they occur is one of the least understood aspects of the Roman dramatist's work. It is asserted that Seneca is excessively fond of mythological allusion (1), that the content of the choruses is not always consonant with the play's action (2), or, that the choruses merely enunciate the moral of the act which is to follow (3). Each of these views seems to me to be mistaken. In this paper I propose to illustrate the close and complex interconnection between ode and action in Senecan tragedy through an analysis of *Phaedra*, 274-357.

The general theme of this ode, the power of love, is obviously relevant to the drama's subject. What is important to observe is the close integration between the details of the odes and the rest of the play. The manner of address to Venus and the description of Cupid's power are closely linked to the imagery associated with sexual passion :

> *Diua non miti generata ponto,*
> *quam uocat matrem geminus Cupido,*
> *impotens flammis simul et sagittis,*
> *iste lasciuus puer et renidens*
> *tela quam certo moderatur arcu !*
> *habitat totas furor in medullas*
> *igne furtiuo populante uenas.*
> *non habet latam data plaga frontem,*
> *sed uorat tectas penitus medullas.* (274-9)

(1) E. G. R. M. Ogilvie, *Roman Literature and Society*, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 2[illegible] E. F. Watling, *Seneca : Four Tragedies and Octavia*, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 24

(2) O. Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas*, Meisenheim am Glan, 1966, p. [illegible]80. In particular Zwierlein cites *Tro.*, 371 ff., *Thy.*, 336 ff., 789 ff.

(3) J. D. Bishop, *Seneca's Troades : Dissolution of a Way of Life*, in *RhM*, 115 (197[illegible] p. 329-37. He formulates the following principle : 'Now it is characteristic of Seneca tragedy that the philosophy of the tragedy is presented by the choral odes, whereas the acts merely act out the principles laid down by the preceding odes' (331). One difficulty with this thesis is that there are four odes, but five acts in a Senecan tragedy. Of necessity the first act has no preceding ode to expound its philosophy. More importantly, odes do not only look forward to the following act, but Janus-like look backwards and forwards

"Goddess born from the ungentle sea, whom double-natured Cupid calls mother, violent with both flames and arrows, that wanton, smiling boy, with how sure bow does he aim his missiles. Frenzy creeps into all the marrow, with furtive fire he ravages the veins. The wound he gives has no broad front, but devours the deeply hidden marrow" (4).

Even the ode's general theme, reference to the goddess of love is not surprising in this context, however, reference to Venus reminds us that it is Venus' hatred of the Sun god that is the cause of Phaedra's passion (124-7). It is also appropriate that she be addressed as the sea-born goddess, for throughout *Phaedra* water, whether salt or fresh, is associated with sexual passion (5). The chorus' characterisation of Cupid is also closely linked to the rest of the play. This is a work in which the power of the gods is actively called into question. At 185 Phaedra claimed that Cupid controlled her mind and that he had power over even the principal gods (186-94). The nurse, however, denied this (196-203) arguing that guilty human beings are responsible for this fiction. The overall thrust of this ode is to support Phaedra's position and to imply that the force which grips her is indeed irresistible. Cupid is here associated with fire (276, 280) and fire is the dominant image associated with sexual love (6). In particular, the description of Cupid's effect on human beings here foreshadows Phaedra's later account of her condition :

> *Pectus insanum uapor*
> *amorque torret, intimis saeuus furit*
> *penitus medullis atque per uenas meat*
> *uisceribus ignis mersus et uenis latens*
> *ut agilis altas flamma percurrit trabes.* (640-4)

"A burning love scorches my crazed heart. Wildly it rages deep within my innermost marrow and passes through my veins, a hidden fire concealed within my womb, as when a nimble flame darts through lofty beams".

(4) The text that I have used is that of Giardina (Bologna, 1966). All translations are my own.

(5) E.g. 85 (Crete, that home of diseased passions, is *dominatrix freti*), 97-8 (the rape of Proserpine takes place *Acheronte in imo*), 181-3, 580-2, 700-1, 1007 ff. (it is from the sea that Hippolytus' destruction comes), 1159-63 (for the sexual implications of this passage see G. Lawall, *The Hippolytus or Phaedra of Seneca*, Amherst Mass., 1976, Vol. 2, p. 41). [illegible]179-80. The sea is associated with sexual passion in Euripides' *Hippolytus* also. See C. P. Segal, *The Tragedy of the Hippolytus : the Waters of Ocean and the Untouched Meadow*, in *HSCP*, 70 (1965), p. 117-69. There, however, a distinction is drawn between salt water, the realm of Aphrodite, and fresh water, part of the realm of Artemis.

(6) E.g. the following passages relating to Phaedra : 101-3, 120, 131, 165, 173, 359, [illegible]61-4, 415, 615, 700, 1180.

The closeness of the verbal parallels between this part of the description of the effects of Cupid and Phaedra's self-analysis in Act 2 (7) suggests that it is she and not the nurse who is correct on the question of divine involvement in human affairs. The second important aspect of Cupid is his association with the hunt (276-278, 281-2), for his possession of the bow links him to Diana, the *arquitenens dea* ('archer goddess' 709).

At 283-95 the chorus turn from Cupid's qualities to the extent of his power. It is world-wide (*per orbem* 283), bounded in no direction, to neither east (285), nor west (286), nor south (287), nor north (288-89). The emphasis on the universality of Love's power can only remind us of the universal character of Diana's rule, for the power of both Cupid and Diana is expressed in terms of the limitless range of their archery (283-4, 66-72). His power extends over male and female, men and gods.

The chorus now turn from generalisations about Cupid's power to his effect on four individuals (296-329). This is precisely the kind of list that has been censured as an empty parade of mythological learning (8) but in this case each character is of particular relevance. First of all Apollo :

> *Thessali Phoebus pecoris magister*
> *egit armentum positoque plectro*
> *impari tauros calamo uocauit.* (296-8)

> "Phoebus, master of the Thessalian herd, drove cattle, and having laid aside his plectrum, summoned the bulls with unequal reed".

The chorus clearly allude to Apollo's year of servitude to Admetus. Seneca appears to be using an unfamiliar version of the myth whereby Apollo serves because of love for Admetus. If so, Love's power causes Apollo to doff his divinity and to abase himself to the status of the lowliest of mortals and to set aside the noble lyre for the humble pipes of Pan (9). Apollo then, is an instance of Cupid's power to transform and debase. Phaedra too is transformed by love (*mutor* 669). But what is the relevance of Apollo ? This is a play in which considerable emphasis is placed on the role of heredity. After all, Phaedra comes from a house with a tragic sexual history – she is the daughter of Pasiphae (115 ff., 142-4, 174-242) and the sister of Ariadne (245, 661 f.). In his capacity as Sun god (the sun is

(7) *Furor* 279/ *furit* 641 ; *medullas* 279, 282/ *medullis* 642 ; *igne furtiuo* 280/ *igne mersus et ... latens* 643 ; *uenas* 280/ *uenas* 642, *uenis* 643.

(8) Watling (*op. cit.*), for example, writes as follows : 'A traditional farrago of mythology – the labours of Hercules, the loves of Jupiter, escapades of Bacchus, and the torments of the damned in Hades – is served up in slightly varied forms, at more or less appropriate occasions' (p. 24).

(9) We are perhaps intended to recall the familiar myth of the contest between Apollo's lyre and Pan's pipes judged by Midas (Ovid, *Met.*, 11, 146-93).

...ebea fax ['the torch of Phoebus' 379]) Apollo is the ancestor of Pasiphae and therefore of Phaedra. Phaedra's descent from Apollo is mentioned at a number of points (124, 126, 654). Allusion to his love and subjection is therefore an effective means of explicating Phaedra's condition.

The second mythological figure altered by Cupid's power is Jupiter himself. His metamorphoses are even more radical than that endured by Apollo, for he became a swan (301-2) and a young bull (303-8). As in Apollo's case, Jupiter's transformation is analogous with the altered state of Phaedra. In particular, it foreshadows Phaedra's shedding of the clothing and jewellery characteristic of royalty in exchange for the garb of the huntress Antiope (387-403). Her gesture expresses her love for Hippolytus. Again, we may ask what is the particular relevance of Jupiter. The episode from Jupiter's amatory career to which the chorus devote by far the greater number of lines is the seduction of Europa. It is through Europa and her son Minos that Jupiter is an ancestor of Phaedra. Jupiter's blood-relationship with Phaedra is underlined by the nurse's manner of address at 129 : *clara progenies Iouis* ('renowned offspring of Jupiter'). Thus the allusion to Jupiter functions in the same way as the reference to Apollo.

In so far as Diana is altered by passion (309-16) she too resembles Phaedra. However, with the introduction of Hippolytus' patron goddess the focus of the ode shifts from Phaedra to her stepson (10). That she should be thought of as subject to Cupid's dominion is most disturbing, for Diana is usually associated with virginity. In this play, however, considerable emphasis is placed on her love for Endymion (see also 422) and it is even suggested that Hippolytus will become a second Endymion, a second victim of Diana's passion (785-94). The allusion to Diana is important not so much for its relevance to Phaedra's case as for the doubt it casts upon the value of Hippolytus' reliance on Diana. In Euripides' version of the myth his virginity is associated with devotion to Artemis (73-87), but in this play the opening prayer to Diana is of quite a different kind : it is more a hymn to her power than an act of dedication. The reference to Diana then serves the important function of undercutting the claims for her power made by Hippolytus (74-80). The area of Diana's dominion may be co-extensive with that of Cupid, but she is nevertheless subject to his rule.

The example of Hercules (317-29) is still more complex. His chief function in the plot is as liberator of Theseus from the underworld (843, 849, 1217). His donning of female clothes for love of Omphale foreshadows Phaedra's adoption of unfamiliar costume at 387 ff. and his subjection to his lover's whim foreshadows Phaedra's abasement before Hippolytus (esp. 611-2, 617-9). Hercules' principal

(10) Cf. E. Lefèvre, *Quid Ratio Possit ? Senecas Phaedra als Stoisches Drama* in E. Lefèvre (ed.), *Senecas Tragoedien*, Darmstadt, 1972, p. 343-75. Lefèvre sees this ode as dealing only with Phaedra, the second with Hippolytus and the third with Theseus (p. 370).

significance, however, relates not to Theseus or Phaedra, but to Hippolytus. In the ode which follows Act 2 the chorus reflect on Hippolytus' beauty (741-819) and on his manly qualities. Unlike Apollo, Hippolytus has no concern for his hair: 'A hairy brow becomes you, shorter hair lying according to no law' (*te frons hirta decet, te breuior coma / nulla lege iacens* 803-4). Hercules too revealed the same lack of concern for his coiffure but as a result of subjection to Omphale endured that 'law be given to his rough hair' (*et dari legem rudibus capillis* 320). At 807 the chorus actually compare Hippolytus with Hercules: 'for even as a young man you equal the muscle of Hercules' (*aequas Herculeos nam iuuenis toros*). The case of Hercules illustrates that no man, and Hercules differs from the previous examples precisely in that he is human, however heroic his qualities, can escape subjection to Love's power.

To a large extent the effects of Cupid upon the gods and upon Hercules are trivial. At least they are only temporary. In the case of ordinary humans and the lower animals the fire of love is much more ruinous (331-51). The chorus are able to draw attention to themselves as sufferers: 'Believe us who have been harmed' (*credite laesis [sc. nobis]* 330). After restating the universal power of love in terms of land (331-2) reminding us of Phoebus and Hercules, of sky (332-3) recalling Diana, and sea (335-7) recalling Jupiter's abduction of Europa through 'his brother's waves' (305), the chorus depict the effect of passion upon the animals of these three worlds. The stress on the destructiveness of passion foreshadows the disaster which meets all three principal characters. In particular the savagery induced in normally peaceful animals anticipates Phaedra's destruction of Hippolytus.

The chorus' concluding generalisation, *uindicat omnes natura sibi* (352, 'nature claims all for itself') is of the utmost significance for the understanding of the play as a whole (11). In this context *natura* is more or less equivalent to the sexual instinct. In different ways both Phaedra and Hippolytus have perverted sexual instincts. Phaedra through her certainly adulterous and possibly incestuous lust, Hippolytus through his denial of sexuality and misogyny. The nurse actually accuses Phaedra of subverting nature (173-176). Although she does not actually use the word *natura*, the nurse also establishes the unnatural quality of Hippolytus' celibacy by pointing out that the world would be lifeless if all were like Hippolytus (466-74). Sexuality, in fact, is part of the dispensation of the universal father (466). Ironically, Hippolytus sees nature as a possible source of his misogyny (567). Theseus too, by killing his son offends against a natural relationship (note that he himself sees *natura* as the origin of the bond between father and son, 1114-7). Each of the play's principal characters can be viewed as offending against nature's laws and each pays the penalty.

(11) For further discussion of this question see my paper *Vindicat Omnes Natura Sibi: A Reading of Seneca's Phaedra* in *Rannus*, 12 (1983), p. 114 ff.

The chorus' concluding remark *uincit saeuas cura nouercas* (356-7, 'love becomes cruel stepmothers'), though apparently general in application, brings us back abruptly from quasi-philosophical speculations to the play's action, for it states precisely Phaedra's condition. It both reminds us of her passion and reveals its failure, because it is the fact of her being his stepmother that makes Phaedra's advances so loathsome to Hippolytus (684, cf. 558).

This analysis has revealed that this ode is both logical in structure and closely related to the major motifs and themes of *Phaedra*. It puts Phaedra's predicament in a wider context and underlines her helplessness. It also casts doubt upon Hippolytus' ability to escape the power of sexual love for all his misogyny. Moreover, the chorus state a quasi-philosophical principal whereby it is possible to interpret the events of the play.

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