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COMMONPLACE AND DRAMATIC SYMBOL IN SENECA'S TRAGEDIES

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That the critical study of Seneca's tragic poetry should be dominated by two primary areas of investigation, the influence of rhetoric and the influence of Stoicism, is hardly surprising. Surely both are primary facets of his poetics and must be accepted and assessed before any genuine evaluation of the plays as literary works can be undertaken. Yet caught between these two forces, both looking toward a strong tradition outside the poet, Seneca himself as a creative writer seems often to vanish among his influences. The surface of verbal style has so bemused many critics that they assume a fundamental emptiness in content,[1] while for others these curious plays have seemed merely a pseudo-dramatic camouflage disguising unashamedly prosaic, philosophic, pedagogic, or historical impulses.[2] These approaches, therefore, in attempting to relate Seneca to his tradition, may easily lose

[1] Cf. T. Birt, "Was hat Seneca mit seinen Tragödien gewollt?" *NJbb* 27 (1911) 336, note 1, *et passim:* A. Balsamo, "De Senecae fabula quae Troades inscribitur," *SIFC* 10 (1902) 44 *et passim*; H. V. Canter, *Rhetorical Elements in the Tragedies of Seneca* (Urbana 1925); A. Lesky, "Die griechischen Pelopidendramen und Senecas Thyestes," *WS* 43 (1922–23) 185–86 *et passim*; F. Leo, *Der Monolog im Drama* (Berlin 1908) 89–94; *De Senecae Tragödiis Observationes Criticae* (Berlin 1878) 146–59; F. L. Lucas, *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge 1922); M. W. Mendell, *Our Seneca* (New Haven 1941); R. Schreiner, *Seneca als Tragödiendichter* (Diss. Munich 1909); R. Werner, *De L. A. Senecae Herc. Tro. et Phoen. Quaestiones* (Leipzig 1888).

[2] E. Ackermann, "Der Leidende Hercules des Seneca," *RhM* n.s. 47 (1919) 460; T. Birt (above, note 1) *passim* and "Seneca," *Preuss. Jahrbücher* 144 (1911) 282–83; O. Herzog, "Datierung der Tragödien des Seneca," *RhM* 77 (1928) 54–104; I. Lana, "L'Atreo di Accio e la leggende di Atreo e Tieste nel teatro tragico romano," *Atti Accad. Scienze di Torino* 93 (1958–59) 335–36 and "Seneca e la poesia," *Rivista di Estetica* 6 (1961) 377–96; B. Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies, A New Interpretation," *TAPA*, 76 (1945) 216–45 and "The Prototypes of Seneca's Tragedy," *CP* 42 (1947) 1–16.

sight of the remarkable individuality with which he approached both conventional diction and Stoicism. Thus both Seneca's motivation and his accomplishments as an artist have commonly been severely judged. The relatively few, though often acute, studies[3] by critics openly partisan to the plays have therefore failed to obtain for Seneca a more generous reception, whether in the classroom or in scholarly circles.

In the case of diction, at least, one cannot help feel that the causes of this underevaluation lie in the recent unpopularity of rhetorical style, coupled with what is a peculiarly modern disassociation of rhetoric from what we consider poetic creativity. Many questions are involved in this latter problem. How, for instance, can we even speak of "poetic creativity" in regard to Seneca's figurative language, when that language is drawn from such a heavily traditional reservoir? When does a figure shed its commonplace origins and mature into a unique and creative expression? Must passages such as Juno's extensive catalogue of the constellations or Theseus' guided tour of the Underworld be regarded as decorative but otiose amplifications intruding on the action of the plays, or is there artistic justification for them in their own terms? If some answer to such questions can be discovered, we shall have at least won a foothold toward a more sympathetic understanding of the plays. Let us then formulate the problem as follows: choosing one commonplace theme, we shall attempt to differentiate occasions on which the motif becomes poetically more than the sum of its commonplace associations, where, in fact, it becomes a dominant influence on the meaning of the play at large. Here, if anywhere, one should be able to distinguish the artist from the rhetorician and to appreciate the relation between them.

[3] E.g. F. Egermann, "Seneca als Dichterphilosoph," *NJbb* 3 (1940) 18–36; G. Müller, "Senecas Oedipus als Drama," *Hermes* 81 (1953) 447–64; E. Paratore, "La Poesia nell' Oedipus di Seneca," *GIF* 9 (1956) 97–132; N. T. Pratt, *Dramatic Suspense in Seneca and his Greek Precursors* (Princeton 1939); "The Stoic Basis of Senecan Drama," *TAPA* 79 (1948) 1–11; "Tragedy and Moralism, Euripides and Seneca," *Comparative Literature: Method and Prospective*, ed. N. P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Carbondale, Ill., 1961) 189–203; "Major Systems of Figurative Language in Senecan Melodrama," *TAPA* 94 (1963) 199–234; O. Regenbogen, *Schmerz und Tod in der Tragödien Senecas = Vortr. Bibl. Warburg* 7 (1927–28); R. W. Tobin, "Tragedy and Catastrophe in Seneca's Theatre," *CJ* 62 (1966) 64–70.

In this analysis, I shall concentrate on the theme of stellar activity, the turning of the stars, sky, day, and night. The first step will be to establish, by a survey of typical occurrences throughout the corpus of the plays, the standard commonplace meanings, and therefore the nature of such passing references to astronomical phenomena as are likely to occur. This will furnish us a control, a standard of normal use within Seneca's rhetorical repertory, with which to compare several occasions of special development of the theme. It will obviously also define the least creative, the most rhetorical (in the pejorative sense) level of Seneca's writing. In contrast to this, we will see that in some plays the author has so developed the motif in accord with the exigencies of his own interpretation of the subject that its commonplace meanings are significantly expanded and changed. Midway between these extremes will be plays in which the accentuation of the motif, without major change in meaning, has proceeded to the point that the commonplace itself becomes a major symbol.

The simplest conventional use of the stars, sky, day, or night, is as a periphrasis for such general words as "anyone," "everyone," "anywhere," and "everywhere." The form is regularly something of this sort: "Whoever sees the day," or "whomever the sun sees," etc.[4]

More complex, though quite as conventional, is the use of the heavens as a reflection of moral order or disorder in the world of man. This may take several forms. Heavenly bodies may simply be affected with shame or grief at human events, and thus turn from their customary habits, as Aurora hides her face in grief for Memnon dead (*Troades* 239–40), or Phoebus hides his in horror at the deeds of Thyestes

[4] *Troades* 382–90 will serve as a typical example:

> Quidquid sol oriens, quidquid et occidens
> novit, caeruleis Oceanus fretis
> quidquid bis veniens et fugiens lavat,
> aetas Pegaseo corripiet gradu.
> quo bis sena volant sidera turbine,
> quo cursu properat volvere saecula
> astrorum dominus, quo properat modo
> obliquis Hecate currere flexibus:
> hoc omnes petimus fata . . . .

Cf. *Tro.* 10–11; *Phaed.* 285–90, 331–34; *H.O.* 40–41; *Thy.* 613–14, etc. All quotes and line references in this manuscript are from I. Viansino, *L. A. Senecae Tragoediae*, 2 vols. (Torino 1965).

(*Agamemnon* 36, 53–56; *Thyestes, passim*).[5] More subjectively, disruption of natural celestial order may indicate the state of mental aberration of the character perceiving it, as in the madness of Cassandra (*Agamemnon* 726–28). Finally, the security of stellar order may offer surety that some untoward, unlikely, or undesired event will never take place, as in the numerous *adynata* developing the *topos* that before, for example, Atreus loves Thyestes or Megara loves Lycus (*Thyestes* 476–82; *Hercules Furens* 372 ff.), the heavens will reverse themselves.[6]

A third conventional use associates the stars with the process of deification. It is not common in these plays, but because of the extraordinary development which it receives in the *Hercules Furens*, it is well to note here that ambitions to join the constellations, gratified in fact in the case of Ariadne (*Phaedra* 663), and metaphorically in that of Atreus (*Thyestes* 885 ff.), are also developed in the *Hercules Oeteus* at length as the proper and deserved fruition of extraordinary life.

In addition, we must also note the conventional use of the heavenly bodies, usually in passing references, as analogies for beauty (*H.O.* 238; *Tro.* 1140; *Med.* 95 ff., 101; *Phaed.* 770 ff.), distance (*H.O.* 817), or time (*Phaed.* 835 ff., *Tro.* 438–39; *Thy.* 613–14; *Agam.* 42), and their frequent appearance as objects or victims of magic rites (*H.O.* 525–27; *Tro.* 354 ff.; *Phaed.* 785–92). Also, of course, the traditional identification of day with life and night with death or other malignant and dangerous phenomena (*Tro.* 171, 282, 755; *Phoen.* 143 ff.; *Oed.* 5; *Agam.* 577–78; *Thy.* 677–79) occurs in a host of places. These are very elemental forms of conventional motif; yet even their simplest application within a play may expand and enlarge their importance beyond the conventional.

As a prime instance of this, let us take a fairly mechanical phenomenon, the frequent opening of the plays at dawn. Some scholars have

[5] So, too, the night of Hercules' engendering is doubled to reflect the superior, nearly superhuman qualities of the hero himself (*Agam.* 814–26; *H.F. passim*) rather than the superior lustiness of his divine sire. But the doubling may even be denied when the actions of the hero do not live up to the standard which such a celestial disordering would presuppose (e.g. *H.O.* 147–50). Similarly the chorus of the *Phaedra* may hold it as a reproach against Natura that, in spite of the exemplary order of the cosmos, the moral life of man is chaotic (*Phaed.* 959–75). Cf. *Ag.* 296–97, 908–9; *Phoen.* 84–87; *Phaed.* 955–56; *Med.* 28–31.

[6] Cf. *H.O.* 280–81, 335–39, 467–71; *Phaed.* 570–71.

seen in this phenomenon an example of Seneca's care to observe the traditional stage unity of time. Yet it is curious, if this is Seneca's aim, that he shows so little interest in developing the plays along a tight time-scheme. It is true that most of the events of most of the plays can be, with some good will, confined to a time span of twenty-four hours or less. Yet for all the indication that the author gives, they may well extend far longer. What, for instance, is the duration of Creon's journey *procul ab urbe* (*Oed.* 530) where Teiresias exorcises the dead? What is the temporal connection of the fragments of the *Phoenissae*? What is the time span of the disparate actions of the *Hercules Oeteus*?

Seneca's frequent opening of the plays at dawn is in fact less convincingly explained as a mechanical adherence to rules, than as a desire for the kind of atmosphere which such an opening afforded. The murky qualities of half-light would in themselves predispose an author with Seneca's notorious predilection for the grotesque and vaguely portentous to choose the hour of dawn.[7] Seneca's repertory, moreover, includes one commonplace which defines dawn as the point of revelation, the moment at which the horrors of night begin to resolve themselves into clarity and action:

> Stragemque quam nox fecit ostendet dies. (*Oed.* 5)
>
> Cecidit in lucem furor:
> postquam litatum est Ilio, Phoebus redit
> et damna noctis tristis ostendit dies. (*Agam.* 576–78)
>
> Phoebique fugit reditura soror.
> Labor exoritur durus et omnis
> agitat curas aperitque domos. (*H.F.* 136–38)

In a very real sense, the lack of action or plot-development which has disturbed many critics of these plays results from Seneca's interest not in the structuring of a tragic situation, but in its collapse.[8] His plays begin at the dawning, both literally and metaphorically, at the *anagnorisis*. Their action is an amplification of denouement; and, more often than not, it demonstrates the impossibility of genuine

[7] Cf. M. V. Braginton, *The Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies* (Menasha, Wisc., 1933) 44.

[8] Cf. C. Lindskog, *Studien zu Antiken Drama* (Lund 1897) 2.15; E. Paratore, "Originalità del teatro di Seneca," *Dioniso* 20 (1957) 68 *et passim*; and more generally, F. Dürrenmatt, *Theaterprobleme* (Zurich 1955) 10–14.

resolution of a situation which developed long before the opening of the play.

Dawn is the moment as well when those potent spirits neither of this world nor of the next—Achilles (*Tro.* 170–71), Thyestes (*Agam.* 53 ff.), Tantalus (*Thy.* 120–21) and even the more demonic than celestial Juno (*H.F.* 123–24)—are wont to intrude themselves into the events of the world. Such figures, however, serve less to motivate events than to reveal emblematic situations which epitomize the inevitable catastrophes graphically represented in the plays proper.[9] As such, dawn is appropriately Seneca's regular point of departure.

But as dawn itself is a convention which has more significance for Seneca than is immediately obvious or implicit in its traditional associations, so other common themes, by expansion or adaptation to special interpretative circumstances, move from the category of decorative commonplace to that of dramatic or poetic symbol. Perhaps the most obvious instance of this forthright expansion is in the *Thyestes*, where the reversal of heavenly processes is not only a common theme, but develops into a major fact of the play's "action" as well, when "on stage" the sky does reverse itself to compensate for the horrors perpetrated by Atreus.[10] Let us follow the motif through the play. The image is established in the prologue spoken by Tantalus and the Fury. Himself a standing example of the ability of men to pollute the very gods by their sin, Tantalus must inspire his descendants to similar atrocities.[11] The Fury, as she rehearses the impending horrors, pauses midway in her speech to discuss the astral effects of their crimes (48–51):

> non sit a vestris malis
> immune caelum: cur micant stellae polo
> flammaeque servant debitum mundo decus?
> nox alia fiat, excidat caelo dies.

The very prospect prompts Tantalus to flight—back to his regular tortures, even to the fires of Phlegython (71 ff.). For the furies' torches that terrify the charred dead are lovable (78–82) in comparison

[9] Cf. Braginton (above, note 7) 31, 33; F. Freznel, *Die Prologe der Senecatragödien* (Diss. Leipzig 1914) 65; G. Müller (above, note 3) 448; N. T. Pratt, "Senecan Dramaturgy and the Familiar Tradition of Dramatic Myth," abstract, *TAPA* 66 (1935) xxxiii.

[10] Cf. Regenbogen (above, note 3) 32.

[11] Cf. Braginton (above, note 7) 25.

to the prospect of returning among the *superi* (83). Thus, in an intricate perversion of the conventional deification motif, a translation to the stars *in verso*, Seneca sets up a counterpoint between the skies of the living tainted with their crime and the fires of Hell. This is amplified at the scene's end; as the Fury observes the hideous effects of Tantalus' even unwilling presence (106–21), the landscape withers and the sun itself falters at the prospect of leading day to its death—a neat conversion of the commonplace of the sun bringing in dawn, to an image in which the very day becomes mortal and corruptible:

> en ipse Titan dubitat an iubeat sequi
> cogatque habenis ire periturum diem.

For the moment, then, the astronomical motif slips from sight, leaving only a slight echo in the early scenes. As Atreus prepares his revenge, the universe prepares its conventional reaction—the ground rumbles and the clear sky thunders (263–64: *tonat dies serenus*). The suspicious Thyestes, too, in a traditional astronomical *adynaton*, ruminates on the prospects of his brother's love (476–82)!

The motif returns to dominate the play as the denouement approaches. With the arrival of the messenger to narrate Atreus' revenge, we are immediately involved in the crime and its astral reflection. The sun indeed goes out. What is remarkable, however, is not the stage fact itself, but the fact that the audience experiences the phenomenon not once but repeatedly;[12] the implications of the eclipse and the intensity of the characters' reactions mount together as we see first the messenger, then the chorus, then Atreus, and finally Thyestes himself confronted with the black-out, each time as if the event were repeating itself. Time and action in the last part of this play are no longer sequential, but become multi-dimensional, and the audience is confronted with facet after facet of the same event. Let us observe the process.

The messenger begins his narrative in retrospect—i.e. he speaks of events in the past, in realistic time—and is relatively less concerned with the eclipse than its sinful cause. Thus we meet the theme only obliquely at first in the messenger's unamplified wish, shortly after his entrance, to be carried "whither the day, seized from here, is borne"

[12] Cf. O. Gigon, "Bemerkungen zu Senecas Thyestes," *Philologus* 93 (1938–39) 179.

(637–38, "ferte, quo fertur dies / hinc raptus"). For the main part, his narrative concentrates on the unholy gloom of the secret grove where the crime took place (650–83), on the ritual used in the crime (684–729), even on the ominous shooting star which the sky, already feeling the effects of Atreus' intentions, provided at the initiation of the murder rites (698–99). Only at the conclusion of his speech does he clearly speak of eclipse; for him in his simplicity, it is merely doubly paradoxical—too late to hide the horrible feast (776 ff.) and too weak to guarantee that the crime will remain hidden (784–88):

> verterit currus licet
> sibi ipse Titan obvium ducens iter
> tenebrisque facinus obruat tetrum novis
> nox missa ab ortu tempore alieno gravis:
> tamen videndum est, tota patefient mala.

The chorus, though thus ably provided with an explanation of the sun's behavior, reacts in fear and confusion, not to Atreus' crime, which they omit entirely, but to the eclipse itself, as if it were in progress. They address a series of questions to the fleeing sun—in the present tense not merely for the sake of vividness—wondering why he disappears at such an unconventional hour. Then follows a series of suggestions about the confusion among the heavenly bodies, especially Aurora, which such behavior is occasioning. Their extensive and terrified conclusion dwells on the total destruction of the universe which they believe in progress—the end of the world. Thus, oblivious to the messenger's explanation, they react exactly as one would expect of a typical cross-section of the populace, generally unskilled in astronomy and prone to endow strange events with interpretations of the worst foreboding. Seneca has thus, by allowing the eclipse to repeat itself for a different character's viewing, doubled his gain. He has in the messenger-scene established a causal relationship between the moral condition of the house of Atreus and the chaos of the sky, while allowing the imaginings of the chorus to amplify both facts with all the horror of universal cataclysm. He will repeat the process, now focusing his attention on the characters intimately involved.

Atreus enters. His opening line, following as it does directly upon the chorus' vivid description of the collapse of sky, star, and constellation, is spectacular if nothing else (885–86):

Aequalis astris gradior et cuncta super
altum superbo vertice attingens polum.

We are back in realistic time; the eclipse is in the past and the sky untenanted for the moment; for it is in the darkness of the eclipse that Atreus will rejoice (891–95)! The perverse deification begun by Tantalus' flight back to Phlegethon's fires fulfills itself as Atreus drags down the stars to his own abysmal level. But it is not sufficient to him that he equals the stars and walks in the abyss of a darkened heaven —he will himself supply the light (896 ff.). If we recall the commonplace in the *Hercules Furens* for the approach of dawn—"omnis / agitat curas aperitque domos"—it is a grisly dawning indeed as he orders the slaves to open the door of the banquet hall.

The eclipse must take place once more, for Thyestes' sake, before Atreus is finished with it, revenge, and us. For the moment the host of banquet torches, conventional attributes of the scenes of criminal indulgence and luxury, supply an artificial and fitful light for Thyestes' ignorant but disturbed revel. Real light and false; real joy and false; as suspicion seizes fully on him, Thyestes will see the sky, accompanied now even by the torches, for the last time, go dark, and remain so (985–95):

sed quid hoc? . . .
vix lucet ignis; ipsa quin aether gravis
inter diem noctemque desertus stupet.
quid hoc? magis magisque concussi labant
convexa caeli; spissior densis coit
caligo tenebris noxque se in noctem abdidit:
fugit omne sidus.

Confronted by a partial truth, his sons' deaths, he seeks flight from the tainted world to Hell, where he and his family rightly belong (1011–19):

stare circa Tantalum
uterque iam debuimus: hinc compagibus
et hinc revulsis, si quid infra Tartara est
avosque nostros, hoc tuam immani sinu
demitte vallem nosque defossos tege
Acheronte toto. noxiae supra caput

animae vagentur nostrum et ardenti freto
Phlegethon harenas igneus tortas agens
exilia supra nostra violentus fluat.

The themes of Tantalus, Tartarus, and fiery Phlegethon echo from the distant prologue.[13] Only after Thyestes has learned of his feast does their full implication emerge. Seeing the moral cause for the sun's flight (1035), Thyestes subsequently develops the full identification of Tartarus with himself—both abandoned by the stars (1074)—of Hell with life. He prays that Jove compensate for the lost day by filling the skies with thunder and lightning directed at himself and Atreus. When his prayers go unheard, he is left with no hope but the one already denied by the messenger—that the abnormal darkness should remain to hide in its immensity such vast crime. This final and pervasive darkness resolves the counterpoint of Hell and Earth established in the prologue. In it the moral depravity of the House of Tantalus and its insatiate blood-lust find an appropriate symbol. The celestial commonplace has been enlarged into the dominating force of the end of the play; before its expansion and intrusion on the several characters, even realistic time and consecutive dramatic action give way. Its basic meaning remains unchanged, but Seneca has contrived a skillful and dramatic manner of exploring that meaning.

This is, as we have suggested, an intermediate stage in the development of the commonplace, involving little alteration of the concept regularly associated with the motif—the reciprocal links of moral and celestial order—while it explores the possibilities for the expansion of its expression. The poet's creation is largely a revelation of the strength latent in a thoroughly conventional image. In this regard it is instructive to compare the comments of Donald Davies on the diction of 18th century poetry:

> Poets who use diction engage themselves not to extend meaning, but to work over areas already explored. Their principal object is the recreation of metaphors which have ossified into meanings, rubbed smooth by too much handling.[14]

[13] Cf. E. Cesareo, *Le Tragedie di Seneca* (Palermo 1932) 79–82.

[14] Donald Davies, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London 1952) 33, 29–61 *passim*; cf. Regenbogen (above, note 3) 55.

In a similar manner, Seneca's dramatic expansion of the commonplace revitalizes a moribund trope. One example will suffice to demonstrate the degree to which this revivification extends beyond such monumental scenes as the final section of the *Thyestes* even to minutiae. Megara (in *H.F.* 372 ff.), faced with the proffered reconciliation with Lycus, allows herself the luxury of a fairly extensive *adynaton* in which the reliability of day and night, fire and snow, Scylla and Euripus act as guarantee for the consistency of her hate (372–78):

> egone ut parentis sanguine aspersam manum
> fratrumque gemina caeda contingam? prius
> extinguet ortus, referet occasus diem,
> pax ante fida nivibus et flammis erit
> et Scylla Siculum iunget Ausonio latus,
> priusque multo vicibus alternis fuga
> Euripus unda stabit Euboica piger.

If either her pathos or her fidelity depended for expression on such conventional phrases as these, she would be a paltry character indeed. In contrast, Thyestes, moving suspiciously toward a similar reconciliation with his brother, voices his fears in terms whose very similarity to Megara's speech emphasizes the difference produced by the dramatic extension of the theme (*Thy.* 476–82):

> amat Thyesten frater? aetherias prius
> perfundet Arctos pontus et Siculi rapax
> consistet aestus unda et Ionio seges
> maturo pelago surget et lucem dabit
> nox atra terris, ante cum flammis aquae,
> cum morte vita, cum mari ventus fidem
> foedusque iungent.

Thyestes speaks in ignorance and conventionally. But we have met Tantalus and heard the Fury out. Eclipse and astral chaos, vivid still from the prologue, provide a grisly irony to the first section (*aetherias prius . . . terris*) which begins with the fall of the constellations into the sea and closes with *nox atra* as the light-bearer; while the coda (*ante . . . iungent*) slips from convention into horror by the simple intrusion of the phrase *cum morte vita*—at once astringently prosaic and almost scientifically precise as a description both of Thyestes' physical and of his moral condition after the feast.

The process of dramatic extension, moreover, as this reading of the *Thyestes* may have suggested, also involves another change in the nature, not of the meaning, but of the mode of expression of the motif. This change may best be characterized as a progression toward systematic allegorization. Herrmann has noted the fondness of Seneca for allegorical imagery, particularly in the *Oedipus*.[15] Such allegory regularly settles around those paradoxes of life and death, crime and punishment, guilt and innocence, which are the stuff of all serious literature.

We come finally to plays in which the astronomical motifs have become so integrally associated with the poet's larger aims as to develop new meanings under the influence of the drama which they dominate. A prime example of this technique is the *Hercules Furens*. A just evaluation of this play must, it seems to me, begin with the astute critical position recently expressed by Walker and Henry, who treat it not as a development of the conventional Stoic Hercules laboring for the deification which is his just reward, but as an attack upon the very concept of what we may call "justification by works," the brawny life with aspirations beyond the modest limits of a healthy mortality.[16]

[15] L. Herrmann, *Le Théâtre de Sénèque* (Paris 1924) 542–43; cf. W. S. J. Knight, "Magical Motives in Seneca's *Troades*," *TAPA* 63 (1932) 21; for Seneca's propensity in his prose works to treat poetry allegorically, cf. W. S. Maguinness, "Seneca and the Poets," *Hermathena* 88 (1956) 97.

[16] B. Walker and D. Henry, "The Futility of Action, A Study of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*," *CP* 60 (1965) 11–22. I would differ from Walker and Henry on the point of the alleged "comic" effect of the bombast in the *H.F.* A satiric element is certainly present, but it is the dry satire of Persius or Juvenal, not the humor of Horace or even the buffoonery of the *Apocolocyntosis*, where the historical figure of Claudius makes all the difference (on satirical elements in the plays cf. Mendell [above, note 1] 164–65). Moreover, the question of bombast deserves further comment, since it is largely with rhetorical expansion that this paper deals. F. I. Merchant, "Seneca and his Theory of Style," *AJP* (1905) 44–59, has attempted to show that Seneca in his prose espoused, as prime stylistic virtues, naturalness and simplicity. This he did for the very good reason that the style is a mirror of the man, and simplicity a reflection of sanity. If we transfer this principle to the tragedies, where little is natural and precious little simple, we can only conclude that Seneca intended extravagance of diction as a facet of character-drawing. Too many critics have discussed, from the point of view of both philosophy and psychology, the pathological element of Seneca's protagonists for the point to need laboring. Thus the extravagant diction of these plays should be attributed exlusively neither to the author's "rhetorical taste" nor to the stylistic vices of his age. Like his careful descriptions of gesture, physique, and expression (cf. K. H. Trabert, *Studien zur Darstellung des Pathologischen in der Tragödien des Seneca* [Diss. Erlangen 1953] 14–20; E. Evans, "A Stoic Aspect of Senecan Drama, Portraiture," *TAPA* 81 [1950] 169–84)

A richly complex system of imagery is used by Seneca to launch this attack; dominant among these images are the astrological motifs in which we are interested. This allegory of mad ambitions to divinity which are ultimately frustrated by the nature of madness herself, Juno, develops extensively the *topos* of the stars as symbols of deification, in conjunction with the idea of the heavens as mirrors of the moral atmosphere on earth. Juno's opening *katabasis*[17] from heaven to earth and to madness sets the tone for this inverted rendering of the theme. It is provoked by a moral disintegration so pervasive as to make the heavens themselves uninhabitable, springing as it does from Zeus' marital delicts. Thus Juno delivers herself of an extended astronomical catalogue of her husband's deified paramours (6–18). The stars are all in their quite traditional and proper places, but rather than reflecting by that order a moral economy, they provoke—i.e. introduce into the mortal sphere—Juno's *aeterna bella*, her insatiate desire for revenge, and lead to her ultimate renunciation (109 ff.) of all personality except Madness. Thus Juno's revenge offers the proof of Hercules' alleged divine paternity, of the pretensions of his own "insanity" (35–36). And this paternity, to which the hero also owes his prodigious amorous predilections, serves throughout the subsequent portions of the play to justify Hercules' adventures as beneficent action motivated externally rather than as wilfully brutal castigation. It is this paternity which leads Hercules himself, Megara, Amphitryon, and even Juno, to assume Heaven as the hero's birthright.

Hercules' labors demonstrate his *virtus* because they are the product of benign intelligence, which endures for the common good externally imposed burdens by controlling its own extraordinary physical and passionate powers. Because of this *virtus*, however, Hercules would not so much *inherit* as *earn* celestial privileges—which, of course, is the canonical interpretation of the myth. Yet Juno fears neither his inheritance nor his just merits; she fears that the celebrated *virtus* which her labors have only exercised (33–46) will lead to the *forceful*

his diction is a consciously Stoic method of externalizing character. Perhaps the technique is best compared to the imitative diction which James Joyce frequently uses as a facet of characterization. For a more conventional view of Hercules, cf. Cesareo (above, note 13) 4; M. Piot, "Hercule chez les Poètes du 1er Siècle après Jésus-Christ," *REL* 43 (1965) 342–58.

[17] As in the case of Tantalus and Thyestes, Seneca gains this effect by inverting the traditional deification process. Cf. above, p. 297.

conquest of the skies (47–48, 64–65) and the universal chaos attendant upon such an event. Thus the ambiguity, both moral and metaphysical, which characterizes the celestial imagery of Juno's prologue, is a corollary of Seneca's particular interpretation of Hercules himself—a figure in which madness and sanity, overreaching willfulness and sober responsibility lose all viable distinction except through the final humanization of the hero and the breach of his cosmic *Weltbild.*

Lest either the *virtus*-theme or the paternity-theme be taken at their conventional value, Seneca has then created, in the figure of Lycus, a careful *Doppelgänger* of the hero, a man of deeds, brutal, a master of *bella.* Lycus differs from the hero only in his candor in recognizing his lack of birthright (337–39) and his reliance not on right but on force —which he, too, calls *clara virtus* (340). All of these themes finally coalesce in the mad-scene, in which the major vehicle for expression of Heracles' delusions is again a vision of the heavens.[18] Hercules' prayer for cosmic and especially celestial order (927 ff.), the most eloquent expression of the Hercules/savior theme, is significantly belied by his refusal to purify himself for the ceremony and by his brusque dismissal of Amphitryon's suggestion that he pray for *release* from labor. As if in answer to his prayer, the heavens run wild and, deified before him in the figure of Leo, he sees his own labor threatening the stars. His subsequent vacillation between the notion of violent overthrow of the heavens which seem to deny his rights (965–69) and of saving the skies from the Giants (976–77), brings up again the paradox of Herculean *labor* as brutality, confusing itself with benefaction. All of this Amphitryon has wisely characterized at the outset (954):

acieque falsum turbida caelum vides.

But what is madness in it, what *infandum* (973), that was not implied in Hercules' previous "sane" boast about Hades, "et, si placerent tertiae sortis loca, / regnare potui" (609–10)? In fact, in devoting himself to meriting his supposed divine heritage, Hercules has looked to a *falsum caelum.* His immolation of his family, his mortal connections, is only the logical result of his immortal aspirations, as Juno had forecast (89–90): "i nunc, superbe, caelitum sedes pete, / humana temne."

[18] Cf. Trabert (above, note 16) 28–30.

His madness is merely an extension of his sanity. Thus Juno's prologue and the mad-scene establish a counterpoint between the actual violence of Hercules' life and its so-called beneficience, which is grounded in astronomical delusions of birth and ambition. This ultimately is resolved when Hercules renounces the entire immortal fabric of illusion, the convenient moral escape of having been ordered (1200, 1237, 1297), and accepts both responsibility (1238, 1261–62, 1278) and the genuine paternity of Amphitryon (1315). The traditional deification theme has been altered by Seneca to imply a faulty comprehension of reality which substitutes for healthy human aspirations delusions of celestial grandeur.

Supporting this major symbol throughout the play are several related themes. Most obvious and frequent is the conscious ambiguity in such phrases as *ad astra*, *ad superos*, *caelum petere*,[19] which now refer to Hercules' search for the heavens, for immortality, now to his return to earth from Hades, and to genuine mortality.

Similar to this is the recurrent use of the astronomical figure which conventionally serves as a periphrasis for everyone, everywhere, etc. It is in the opening associated with the vastness of Hercules' accomplishments, the pervasiveness of his efforts toward the skies. Thus Juno evaluates the hero (37–40):

> qua sol reducens quaque deponens diem
> binos propinqua tinguit Aethiopas face,
> indomita virtus colitur et toto deus
> narratur orbe.

Amphitryon argues in a similar vein (442 ff.): "postque pacatum manu / quodcumque Titan ortus et labens videt . . . nondum liquet de patre?" A sobering contrast to this claim is raised, however, by the chorus, speaking of death at the very hour of Hercules' most recent victory (870 ff.):

> tibi crescet omne,
> et quod occasus videt et quod ortus.
> parce venturis: tibi, mors, paramur.

[19] Cf. Walker and Henry (above, note 16) 16.

The semichorus which accompanies the hero in triumph quickly returns the theme to Hercules' credit, however (882–85):

> Pax est Herculea manu
> Auroram inter et Hesperum,
> et qua sol medium tenens
> umbras corporibus negat.

In contrast to Hercules' expansive topos, Lycus, in presenting his own claims to eminence, begins with the same figure, shorn of its astronomical language and realistically tailored to his power (332–38):

> Urbis regens opulenta Thebanae loca
> et omne quidquid uberi cingit solo
> obliqua Phocis, quidquid Ismenos rigat,
> quidquid Cithaeron vertice excelso videt
> et bina findens Isthmos exilis freta,
> non vetera patriae iura possideo domus
> ignavus heres.

After Hercules' mad murders, but before the relinquishment of his divine ambitions, it is hardly surprising that the chorus expect a cosmic expansion of Hercules' grief (1054–62):

> Lugeat aether magnusque parens
> aetheris alti tellusque ferax
> et vaga ponti mobilis unda,
> tuque ante omnis, qui per terras
> tractusque maris fundis radios
> noctemque fugas ore decoro,
> fervide Titan: obitus pariter
> tecum Alcides vidit et ortus
> novitque tuas utrasque domos.[20]

With Hercules' recovery the figure is transformed into a series of questions: Hercules, who has known all places, no longer knows where he is (1138–41):

> Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plagas?
> ubi sum? sub ortu solis, an sub cardine
> glacialis ursae? numquid Hesperii maris
> extrema tellus hunc dat Oceano modum?

[20] Cf. 1103–5 for a similarly cosmic expectancy: "gemitus vastos / audiet aether, audiet atri / regina poli."

As guilt approaches, cosmic extensions wither; thus Hercules, now much more human, seeks aid from a terrain as modest and unastronomical as that which Lycus had claimed (1163–66):

> Quisquis Ismeni loca,
> Actaea quisquis arva, qui gemino mari
> pulsata Pelopis regna Dardanii colis,
> succurre, saevae cladis auctorem indica.

The motif finally resolves in Hercules' final speech, which it fills. The expansive terrain has now, with pathetic irony, become the guarantor of the hero's contamination and concomitant humanization (1321–41). The very lands and stars that knew his fame now, by that knowledge, prevent him from hiding himself and his guilt.[21] Thus, a figure which seems at the outset no more than a rhetorical exaggeration has, through the broader working of the celestial references which it conventionally contained, significantly changed and been revitalized. It has become a vivid symbol for the overreaching which is the key to Hercules' personality and his tragedy.

There is one final aspect of the celestial imagery of the *Hercules Furens* which we must note: Hell. As consistently and significantly characterized by its murk and starlessness as by its natural inevitability and finality for all mortals, it offers still the only real hint of salvation, even of deification. Although the good and bad alike must die, that inevitable path leads, for the good at least, to the stars (742–43): "longa permensus diu / felicis aevi spatia vel caelum petit." Thus the true realization of Hercules' ambitions is not apparently to be found in the main conquest of Hades but in the mortal subjection to it. If Hell lacks stars, it is the only route to them. A similar perception of real philanthropy appears in Hercules' final recognition that Theseus' contemplative approach to sin, and not his own violent and purgative way, holds the only promise (1336–38):

> quoniamque semper *sceleris* alieni *arbiter*
> *amas nocentes*, gratiam meritis refer
> vicemque nostris: *redde me infernis*, precor.[22]

[21] Cf. W. Schulze, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart der Tragödien Senecas* (Diss. Halle 1937) 49.

[22] Cf. Walker and Henry (above, note 16) 14. For Seneca's interest in limiting the scope of retributive punishment such as that in which Hercules engaged, cf. *De clementia*, 2.4.1–4, in a fragment preserved in Hildebert of Tours, *Epistle* 1.3.

This is certainly not an exhaustive survey of everything that this remarkable play contains. However, it does, I think, indicate fairly clearly the breadth of imagination and the poetic creativity with which Seneca approached a thoroughly conventional motif and built it into a serious and thoughtful literary fabric.

The *Oedipus* demonstrates a similar power. Its astronomical imagery is, as we may readily suspect at this point, based upon the commonplace of the celestial phenomena as guarantors and reflections of moral order. Thus, on those few occasions on which anything like normalcy is predicted or supposed, traditional astronomy makes its appearance. Creon and Apollo both predict an end to the plague and the restoration of order as, metaphorically, a celestial event: 219–20, "Non ante caelo lucidus curret dies / haustusque tutos aetheris puri dabit"; 233, "mitia Cadmais remeabunt sidera Thebis." Similarly, Oedipus himself opens the decree promising vengeance for Laius and a return to stability for Thebes with an invocation to the gods who shall witness his intention: Jupiter, Phoebus, Phoebe, Neptune, and even Pluto. Each is associated where possible with the functions of an orderly universe.[23] Bacchus, too, who replaces Sophocles' Apollo as protector of Thebes, dispeller of the plague, and—for this must be the dramatic intent of the dithyrambic ode to Bacchus—as the guarantor of the information through which the ultimate solution comes, becomes a celestial potentate. The chorus invokes him as (405) "lucidum caeli decus," an epithet which would apply more readily to Apollo than to Bacchus. They guarantee their fidelity in his worship by an extensive appeal to orderly celestial workings (503–8). Where normalcy may be hoped for, therefore, Seneca observes conventional skies. Normalcy, however, is an infrequent phenomenon in this play, which at its most fundamental is a character study of fear and the moral debilitation which it causes. The crux of its psychology is the paradox that fear of such intensity is tantamount to acceptance of the object feared:[24] as the chorus' summary indicates (992–95),

[23] This is difficult, of course, in the case of Neptune and Pluto, who are associated with the sky-motif rather left-handedly by an appeal to their powers respectively over the "winds" and the "houses reft of skylight."

[24] Cf. K. von Fritz, *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin 1962) 27–29; Lindskog (above, note 8) 38; Müller (above, note 3) 448; Paratore (above, note 3).

multis ipsum
metuisse nocet, multi ad fatum
venere suum dum fata timent.

Lucretius had seen death as the perfect *Vorbild* of this general paradox in the personal psyche (3.79–82):

et saepe usque adeo mortis formidine vitae
percipit humanos odium lucisque videndae,
ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum
obliti fontem curarum hunc esse timorem.

Seneca discovers it, with perhaps more acute perception, in the complex of psycho-sexual tensions which we would gather under the term "Oedipus complex." Thus the question which is a marginal concern in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, viz. whether Oedipus genuinely suffers from an Oedipus complex, becomes the central issue and principal symbol of Seneca's play. It is a play about this psychotic Oedipus, and by definition, therefore, fraught with abnormality. As Phorbas suggests, with more insight than he would dare suspect (854): "non potuit ille luce, non caelo frui." Oedipus' days will be abnormal, ridden with fear and a consequently massive sense of guilt. Such days will show themselves in an appropriate celestial garment.

Because Oedipus perceives the plague as somehow a punishment for guilt which he accepts in spite of his objective belief in his innocence (22 ff.),[25] the dawn which opens the play reveals at once an aspect of the plague unknown to Sophocles and equally strange to the plagues of Thucydides and Vergil—air-pollution. This heavenly disintegration reflects Oedipus' abnormal moral state (1–5):

Iam nocte Titan dubius expulsa redit
et nube maestum squalida exoritur iubar,
lumenque flamma triste luctifica gerens
prospiciet avida peste solutas domus,
stragemque quam nox fecit ostendet dies.[26]

[25] Cf. Lindskog (above, note 8) 24.

[26] Seneca's inspiration for this atmosphere may have been Lucretius' discussion of disease and atmosphere, which precedes the plague of Athens in Book 6, or it may have been the frequent Roman difficulties with malarial swamps. Cf. Paratore (above, note 3) 118–19.

This is clearly a development of the moral commonplace, as Oedipus himself suggests (35–36): "sperare poteras sceleribus tantis dari / regnum salubre: fecimus caelum nocens." The very massiveness of his fear leads him to discount his conscious innocence and to assume guilt tantamount to intention. Thus speaking of the disease, Oedipus concentrates on two aspects, the atmospheric contamination (37–49) and the hysteria and moral collapse throughout the citizenry (57–70).

This psychic-moral dimension of the distorted heavens is reinforced by two events in the grotesquerie which Manto and Teiresias perform. First (325–27),

> ambitque densus regium fumus caput
> ipsosque circa spissior vultus sedet
> et nube densa sordidam lucem abdidit;

and then (337–39),

> Altum taurus attollens caput
> primos ad ortus positus expavit diem
> trepidusque vultum obliquat et radios fugit.

These surrealistic details shadow out both the monarch's corrupted skies and their ultimate resolution, his cowardly self-blinding.[27] Similarly in the following scene, Laius denies air-pollution as a causal factor of the plague and transfers the onus to the king himself (631–34):

> non gravi flatu tibi
> luctificus Auster nec parum pluvio aethere
> satiata tellus halitu sicco nocet,
> sed rex cruentus . . .

In consequence, Laius himself will undertake to clear Oedipus' skies (658): "eripite terras, auferam caelum pater." The images of the sky, therefore, work via a contrast between a supposed or desired normal daylight and the abnormal atmosphere of guilt which Oedipus provokes.

Both of these scenes, moreover, the "sacrificial masque" and the narrative *katabasis*, are clear examples of the tendency toward allegorization which we have previously noted. Although neither con-

[27] Cf. Cesareo (above, note 13) 110–11 for a much more "realistic" reading of the scene.

tributes to the development of plot or action to a degree commensurate with its size, both are in a sense expository; this exposition is concerned not with dramatic situation or action, but with the sketching in of psychic state. The former draws in graphic terms an almost too obvious paradigm of Oedipus' real situation and his blindness to it. The latter focuses on his irrational guilt and fear. Seneca seems to have recognized clearly, though hardly as analytically as Freud, the role of the father-son conflict in such a psychotic situation. Thus the *katabasis* is absolutely germane, for the attack must come from the father. Perhaps the most astounding facet of the scene is the assumption on Laius' part (629 ff.) of wilful guilt on Oedipus' part. Viewed as realistic theater, this is preposterous. We expect of Laius not ugly bloodthirstiness, but a tragic sense of shame and sorrow. Only when we recognize that the starless landscape of Hell is a psychic one and that Laius' actions are allegorical reflections of Oedipus' own guilt and fear of his father, does the scene become viable theater. Then it is very interesting theater indeed. For Hell becomes the bleak and squalid realm of the psychic deformity which tortures Oedipus; its tenants (586–94), as unmercifully grotesque as Oedipus himself; its darkness, as impervious as his fear.[28]

Yet a contrast between normal and abnormal exists in darkness and death as well as under the skies of the living. There is normal and true night representing both the natural conclusion of life and, allegorically, the full awareness of guilt (583–85):

> ipse torpentes lacus
> vidi inter umbras, ipse pallentes deos
> noctemque veram.[29]

The character of Jocasta is developed as an example of the Stoic normalcy which finds its refuge there. From her courage at the play's opening to her suicidal conclusion, she is an emblem of the opposition to Fate's importunities which Oedipus proposes for himself (933–34): "anime, quid mortem times? mors innocentem sola Fortunae eripit," but has not the courage to execute (951): "morere, sed citra patrem."

[28] Cf. Cesareo (above, note 13) 92, for the inexorable paternal figure in the *Phaedra*; Paratore (above, note 3) 112, 119–20, 126–28; Herrmann (above, note 15) 404, note 5.

[29] Cf. 393, 540, 545, 549, 572.

Instead, he opts for a sham death, which releases him from light indeed but furnishes no real refuge, no genuine solution (1012 ff.): "Quis frui tenebris vetat? Quis reddit oculos? matris, en matris sonus... perdidimus operam." Blindness is no longer the symbol of superior insight, as it had been for Sophocles, but merely one more false refuge from the *periculum lucis* (971).

To establish this, even Teiresias must be stripped of the dignity of his blindness (295): "visu carenti magna pars veri latet"; (301) "tu lucis inopem, gnata, genitorem regens." The night of blindness is an infirmity which infects even the old seer's powers, and serves him to advantage only in so far as it protects him from a real perception of the habitants of Dis (596–98):

> intrepidus parens
> audaxque damno convocat Ditis feri
> exsangue vulgus.

Does it not offer Oedipus the same illusory refuge?[30]

Thus Oedipus, fearful by day and night, wanders off in the end, having gathered the worst of both worlds, a sham night and a polluted day, plus the *mortifera vitia terrarum* (1058–61), his comrades. Still he is haunted by his grotesque fears (1051): "i, profuge, vade... siste, ne in matrem incidas." What an extraordinary transformation Seneca has achieved of a story which surely had, after Sophocles, "ossified" in meaning.[31] He has done this, not by attempting plot innovation along the lines of Euripides' *Phoenissae*, but by attacking the heart of the myth, the images and the symbolism which are the character of Oedipus. Several of these symbols—the moral commonplace of the skies, the *katabasis*—are familiar from the *Hercules Furens*; others, prophetic Teiresias, the blindness, even the Oedipal wish, from Sophocles himself. But within their charted and traditional definitions Seneca has discovered uncharted areas of extraordinary creative breadth.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to demonstrate the diversity of meaning which Seneca found within the extensions of his admittedly "rhetorical," i.e. commonplace, repertory of images, and the relation

[30] Cf. Paratore (above, note 3) 110.
[31] Paratore (above, note 3) 111–12.

of these special meanings to his particular interpretation of the several myths. In the light of such extensions of meaning, we must be careful to recognize that the only thing necessarily common about rhetorical commonplaces is their availability. When their special potentiality is sighted in terms of the recreation and revivification of equally conventional mythic materials, we are likely to find that a very special kind of creative expression results. Seneca himself, speaking theoretically of eclecticism, has given us the key to this process in *Epistle* 84.5 ff.:

> sed ne ad aliud quam de quo agitur, abducar, nos quoque has apes debemus imitari et quaecumque ex diversa lectione congessimus, separare. melius enim distincta servantur. Deinde adhibita ingenii nostri cura et facultate in unum saporem varia illa libamenta confundere, ut, etiamsi adparuerit, unde sumptum sit, aliud tamen esse quam unde sumptum est, adpareat . . . .[32]

We have observed one aspect of this process. By the expansion of conventional usage into dramatic symbol, by the investigation of new innuendos within conventional meanings, Seneca can achieve not only the revitalization of the metaphors and symbols themselves, but substantial new interpretations of the myths as well. In this facility, as in many others, notably his experimental approach to dramatic form, Seneca stands in a much more significant relationship to contemporary experimental and absurd theater,[33] than even to the Renaissance.

[32] Cf. Schulze (above, note 23) 1–2.
[33] Cf. Paratore (above, note 8) 59; (above, note 3) 125.