

Seneca's *Agamemnon*: the Entropy of Tragedy¹

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1. *Agamemnon* is arguably the most experimental of all of Seneca's tragedies. It displays a fragmented and elusive structure, an array of characters, two choruses, an extravagantly long central narrative. For all these reasons its paternity has occasionally come under suspicion even after scholars finally accepted that one and only one Seneca was the author of both the tragedies and the philosophical corpus. Authorship is no longer in any doubt, but earlier misgivings persist, as do strictures directed at the play's coherence, effectiveness, and dramatic credibility. Perhaps the (diminishing) reluctance to establish a direct connection between this *Agamemnon* and its Aeschylean namesake could also be regarded as a symptom of this uneasiness.²

In this paper I want to address –briefly– the issue of the play's dramatic structure and develop some considerations on its relationship with epic models. There is no question that the structure is unusual even by Senecan standards. No main character provides a unifying link between various acts and scenes. Famously, we see very little of Agamemnon himself, who commands less scenic presence than in Aeschylus, and is deprived even of his dying words. Clytemestra dominates act 2, alone at first, with the nurse and Aegisthus later, but her presence becomes significantly less important in subsequent acts. If there is a protagonist at all in the second half of the tragedy it is Cassandra, not the queen. As it lacks a main character, the play also lacks a main opponent. Indeed act 3, which Seneca normally devotes to a powerful exchange in which the two protagonists set out the terms of engagement, is devoted here to Eurybates' long narrative of the storm.

The second part of the play is even more fragmented. Exit the chorus of Micenean women who sung the first two odes, enter one of Trojan prisoners who chant the third chorus and dialogue with Cassandra in the ensuing act 4, which contains a choral *threnos*, a possession scene, and the *antilabai* between Agamemnon and Cassandra. The fifth act introduces an altogether

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- 1 I am very grateful to Jean-Pierre Aygon for his kind invitation to take part in the Parisian table-ronde and for his comments on this paper. My essay should be read alongside his own and Gregory Staley's in this collection, with which it shares several common themes and approaches. Many thanks are also due to Francesca Romana Berno for her useful criticism.
 - 2 Recent work on this issue includes Marcucci, 1996, Lavery, 2004 and esp. Degiovanni, 2004. On the play in general, in addition to Tarrant's ground-breaking 1976 commentary, see esp. Caviglia, 1986-87, and Mazzoli, 1993.

new set of characters, Orestes, Strophius and Electra, who bring the play to a close, violating in the process the three-actor rule.

The strongly bipartite structure of the play is not wholly without precedent: Aeschylus' play, too, is broadly divided into two parts, with Cassandra at the heart of the second. But Seneca goes well beyond in the entropic dissolution of the play's structure. Even more than in other plays Seneca seems to relinquish, here, any illusion that stories can be told in a reassuring Aristotelian pattern. The mythic universe where tragedy finds its subject matter is too complex, too rich, and especially too closely knit together to allow for the neat culling of this or that narrative segment. The play opens with a stifling sense of *déjà vu*. Thyestes, now a ghost, comes back from the Underworld to welcome a new phase in the bloody history of his family. The mythical sufferers he considers at 15-21 –Tityos, Sisypheos, Tantalus, Ixion– are all instances of unrelieved, punishing repetition. Each generation of his family is doomed to repeat the curse of its original sin: incest, murder, fatal banquets. *Hic epulis locus* (11): it's a family tradition.

Agamemnon also shatters the illusion that different characters, each with his or her point of view, may be able to advance a univocal interpretation of events. Agamemnon's murder is for Clytemnestra a wholly personal affair, the just retribution for the death of Iphigenia and his infatuation with Cassandra, while the captive prophetess sees his demise as punishment for Troy's destruction. These two different takes on the same event coexist side by side throughout the play, and never confront each other dialectically.

Signs of this fragmentation of irreconcilable points of view emerge in connection with other characters as well. In act 2 we witness a predictable exchange between the queen and her nurse, just as Atreus meets his courtier at the same point in *Thyestes* or Phedra and Medea confide in their own nurses. Significantly, however, the dialogue in *Agamemnon* ends without any agreement between the two characters. We would not expect Clytemnestra to yield –neither do Atreus, Medea or Phedra, to be sure– but in all those cases the junior character comes around, either out of affection or fear or both, to accepting the master's point of view and pledging support. The nurse, though, ends on a defiant note –*comprime affectus truces/ mentemque tibimet ipsa pacifica tuam*, “then check your fierce passions, and reconcile your mind to yourself”³– (224-25) which closely resembles her initial exhortation to wait and calm down: *da tempus ac spatium tibi:/ quod ratio non quit, saepe sanavit mora*, “give yourself time and space: delay often cures what reason cannot” (129-30). The act had opened with another marker of isolation and fragmentation: unlike its parallel scenes in other plays, here Clytemnestra comes onto the stage alone and utters her initial words (108-24) before the entrance of the nurse. Surprisingly, after a dialogue in which no change of position has been put on record, Clytemnestra reappears in the following scene declaring that she has indeed decided against killing her unfaithful husband, thus attracting Aegisthus' impassioned and oddly subverted criticism, as if her change of mind, tacitly set in motion by the nurse, were an act of sheer folly.⁴

All these features are common currency in Seneca's plays, where lack of effective communication and understanding abound. What singles out *Agamemnon* is the complexity

3 I adopt Zwierlein's OCT text; translations are by J. G. Fitch in the Loeb Classical Library, with occasional modifications.

4 At 244 *quo raperis amens?* employs the language of Bacchic inspiration to describe Clytemnestra's decision not to murder Agamemnon.

of the dramatic structure that this tension precipitates. Confronted with this array of inconsistencies and contradictions, we could concentrate our efforts on the pre-history of the play, and assign most if not all of these features to Seneca's imperfect handling of disparate sources. This option is made more attractive by the possibility –hardly the certainty– that *Agamemnon* could be one of the author's earlier plays⁵. On the other hand, we could focus on the dramatic logic and effect of the play as it stands. Here a different risk is in store. *Vis à vis* the claim that *Agamemnon* is structurally weak it is tempting to restore a semblance of order and coherence by establishing connections between various parts of the tragedy at the level of imagery, characters, or allusions. As Tarrant points out, however, one should not mistake these connections for unity, or “complexity for excellence”.⁶

Behind this search for connections and internal echoes it is easy to discern the hope that a centripetal interpretation of the play may after all be possible. Options vary. For instance, Giomini declares unequivocally that “this is the tragedy of Clytemestra”⁷, a statement true, at best, only in part. Calder sees the core of the drama in the contrasting attitudes to death displayed by the Greeks, especially Ajax, on the one hand, and Cassandra on the other⁸. She is truly free because she has given up the *vitae dirus amor* and, like Hecuba, can no longer suffer. This is certainly an important theme, but again it would be strained to claim that it ranks as the thematic and emotional core of the play as a whole, even if we do accept that there is indeed one.

But we should not necessarily have to choose between second rate disorder and artificial unity. Connections and similarities cannot make up for the play's untameable disorder, nor should they be expected to. The strength of this tragedy (artistic quality is another matter) lies precisely in its reluctance to provide a unified view of events, a comforting internal structure, the usual, implicit assurance that the artist's absolute craftsmanship can ultimately contain the most upsetting contents. Judged against the criteria of classical Greek tragedy, and even those of more organic Senecan plays such as *Medea* or *Thyestes*, *Agamemnon* is bound to emerge as a failure. Taken on its own terms it may offer rewards of a different kind.

2. The harshest testing ground for such an approach is surely the 158-line long description of the tempest which Eurybates delivers in the middle of the play. There appears to be little connection between its contents and the rest of the drama, while Aeschylus' much shorter counterpart is clearly motivated by Clytemestra's anxious questions about her husband. The conclusion that the speech could have been written only in disregard for the demands of the stage has been inescapable. But arguing for recitation does not resolve the issue: this is a long interruption anyway, and its function in the overall economy of the tragedy remains puzzling even in concert-form.

5 According to Fitch, 1981, metrical features point to an early date for *Agamemnon* (a conclusion reached on different grounds by Leo, 1878-79, p. 133 n.), but Lefèvre, 1966, Calder, 1976, and Fantham, 1981-82, all argue for the priority of other plays such as *Thyestes* and *Troades*. Lefèvre believes that this could well be Seneca's penultimate play, before *Hercules Oetaeus*.

6 Tarrant, 1972, p. 198.

7 Giomini, 1956, p. 1.

8 Calder, 1976.

I would argue that the long speech achieves precisely what it has always been suspected of: a brusque, extended interruption of the dramatic sequence centred on Clytemestra which we witness in the previous act. Eurybates suddenly introduces a different perspective: Agamemnon and his fellow Greek leaders are punished for the atrocity of the sack of Troy. His speech is effectively a prologue for the tragedy of Cassandra which will shortly follow, and as a prologue its dimensions are not intolerable – in *Hercules furens* Juno's opening monologue spans 124 lines. Note, moreover, that here as elsewhere Seneca's *logoi* are less static than they might appear at first: the use of direct speech – the Greeks and Ajax have 16 lines between them – provokes an effective change of focalization, a change of scenery, and “an expansion of the scenic space”.⁹

Long and detailed, Eurybates' *Tempest* offers the opportunity to introduce a new set of thematic *foci*, and precipitates a confrontation with traditional epic themes. One of the most far-reaching thematic developments Seneca introduces in his play vis à vis Aeschylus is the insisted parallelism between Argos and Troy¹⁰. This tale of two cities is adumbrated in the prologue, where Thyestes' ghost observes in suitably neutral terms that Agamemnon *devicto Ilio/ adest daturus coniugi iugulum suum*, “he has conquered Ilium, and is here –doomed to offer his throat to his own wife” (42-43), but is fully developed in the second part of the play. Cassandra harbours no doubt that the death of Agamemnon comes in retribution for Priam's murder, and in general for the destruction of Troy. In her admittedly partial view, Agamemnon is a novel Priamus who will be slaughtered by Clytemestra, not for nothing Helen's sister.¹¹ From the beginning of her vision Troy and Argos are intertwined. She does not know where she is (726 *ubi sum?*), and her mind is occupied by two cities and two suns (728-33)¹²:

*sed ecce gemino sole praeifulget dies
geminumque duplices Argos attollit domus.
Idaea cerno nemora: fatalis sedet
inter potentes arbiter pastor deas.
timete, reges, moneo, furtivum genus:
agrestis ille alumnus evertet domum.*

[...] but see now, daylight shines from twofold suns, Argos is twofold and raises up double homes. I see the groves of Ida: the fatal herdsman sits as judge between powerful goddesses. You kings, I warn you, fear the clandestine breed: though raised in the backcountry, he will overthrow your house! [...]

Cassandra is following in Dido's footsteps, the deserted queen whose dreams are full of anxious images. Here, though, Cassandra's seing double is not just a sign of deranged frenzy: she juxtaposes images of the past and of the future and sees both Argos and Troy, both Paris and Aegisthus (both have been raised in the countryside and belong to the *furtivum genus* of

9 Lanza, 1981, p. 466-67.

10 Lohikoski, 1966.

11 On the connection Agamemnon/Priam see now Berno, 2004.

12 Leo deletes 730-33, which were vindicated by Housman, see Tarrant *ad loc.*

adulterers).¹³ At the end of her frenzied monologue, Cassandra visualises Priamus' dead body washed ashore by the waves (766-68), a foreboding of Agamemnon's fate¹⁴.

The parallelism is made explicit immediately afterwards in her dialogue with Agamemnon, who tries in vain to involve her in the festive atmosphere of his return and invites her to praise the gods together (792-95):

*AG. Veneremur aras. CA. Cecidit ante aras pater.
AG. Iovem precemur pariter. CA. Herceum Iovem?
AG. Credis videre te Ilium? CA. Et Priamum simul.
AG. Hic Troia non est. CA. Ubi Helena est, Troiam puta.*¹⁵

[...] AG. Let us do reverence at the altar. CA. Father fell before an altar. AG. Let us pray Jove together. CA. Hercean Jove? AG. You think you see Ilium? CA. Yes, and Priam as well. AG. Here is not Troy. CA. Where Helen is, do think it's Troy. [...]

At this stage the terms of the comparison are all fully developed, but the action is interrupted by the entrance of the main chorus, composed of Argive women, who extol Hercules' deeds. It is particularly awkward to argue for the thematic relevance of this ode, but to think of it as simply irrelevant is to miss an important point. From a dramatic point of view the interruption is hardly useless. After Cassandra's prophecy and her exchange with the king we know that a terrible deed is imminent: the choral ode suitably freezes the plot in a moment of heightened suspense. The delay in the action also makes the next scene follow more credibly: Agamemnon has entered the house and taken his place in the dining room where he will be attacked. The chorus is important from a thematic point of view as well, precisely because it shows that the Argive women are blind to the tragedy overshadowing the royal house. Just as Agamemnon had failed to read any meaning in Cassandra's obsessive reevocation of Troy, these women find it wholly appropriate to celebrate the city's most famous hero and his victorious deeds, a good precedent for the victory of their present king. The final, almost incidental remark about Troy is significant for all its brevity (862-66):

*te duce succidit
mendax Dardanidae domus
et sensit arcus iterum timendos;
te duce concidit totidem diebus
Troia quot annis.*

[...] when you led the attack, the Dardanid's perjured house collapsed, and felt the arrows that would threaten again; when you led the attack, it fell in as many days as Troy took years to fall. [...]

Unlike Canter and Tarrant I am inclined to consider this passing reference as more than a means Seneca finds to "[attach] an essentially irrelevant ode to its surrounding by linking passages

13 Lohikoski, 1966, p. 66.

14 Calder, 1974; contra Tarrant, 1976, p. 316.

15 The analogy between the sisters is remarked upon by Aesch. *Ag.* 1468-70: cf. Lohikoski, 1966, p. 63.

at beginning and end"¹⁶. The brevity of the chorus' reference to Hercules' Trojan success rather highlights its cognitive dissonance: while their king is nearing death they celebrate the historical genealogy of Argos' power. But the reference to Troy's past is also double-edged, because after Hercules' attack against Laomedon the city resurged, even if to be destroyed *iterum* (864). Thus the chorus also unwittingly introduces into the play the notion that history can be repeated but can also be undone, the very notion that Cassandra will triumphantly voice when she sees Agamemnon's death as a belated resurgence of her city – *bene est, resurgis Troia* "good, you are rising again, Troy" – at line 870.

As Cassandra reappears on the scene after the choral ode, the parallelism between Troy and Argos reaches its peak. Now every detail reminds her of Troy's fatal night. The banquet taking place in the palace reenacts the last banquet held in Troy; Agamemnon is robed in "purple cloths from Ilium" (877 *ostro...Iliaco*), and drinks from a cup belonging to Assaracus. His robe used to belong to Priam. Her conclusion is unequivocal: *vicimus victi Phryges*, "we have conquered, we conquered Phrygians!" (869).

Cassandra's focus on the death of Agamemnon as a reversal of Troy's fate casts Eurybates' description of the storm in its proper light. Eurybates attempts to offer within the body of the tragedy an epic reading of the aftermath of the defeat of Troy which the rest of the play will call into question.¹⁷ The scope of the narrative is clear from his first line: *ut Pergamum omne Dorica cecidit face...*, "once all of Pergamum fell to Dorian fire..." (421) announces with Virgilian emphasis¹⁸ nothing short of a post-Homeric *Nostos*, complete with a retrospective narrative, albeit implicit, of the war's main events.¹⁹ At 446, in fact, a *miles* is described as telling two crucial episodes of the conflict, Hector's fate and Priam's death (446-48):

*aut bella narrat: Hectoris fortis minas
currusque et empto redditum corpus rogo,
sparsum cruore regis Herceum Iovem.*

[...] or told stories of the war – the threat posed by brave Hector, the chariot, the return of his body for cremation at a price, the bespattering of Hercean Jove with the king's blood. [...]

After a vivid description of the dark night and the enormity of the physical forces at work in the storm (460-505), the narrative is divided into three distinct episodes. All three focus on the reversal of fortune which the Greek fleet experiences after the victory. In the renewed primeval chaos (486-87) which the storm has caused Greeks and Trojans face the same destiny and share their invocations to the gods (511 *eademque superos Troes et Danaï rogant*, "Trojans and Danaans make the same request of the gods"). Explicitly focalising his narrative from the point of view of the Greeks, however, Eurybates implies that their fate is worse than that of the defeated Trojans.

16 Tarrant, 1976, p. 324 with further references.

17 See Caviglia, 1986-87, for an enlightening discussion of the epic elements in this part of the play.

18 Allusion to *Aen.* 3.1-2 *postquam res Asiae Priamique evertere gentem/ immeritam visum superis...*, "after it pleased the gods above to overthrow the power of Asia and Priam's guiltless race", sets the connection in motion.

19 Aygon, 2004, p. 132-139, 366-372 offers an insightful analysis of this section.

Indeed, *quisquis ad Troiam iacet/ felix vocatur*, “all who lie at Troy are called fortunate” (514-15), and Agamemnon, extraordinarily, envies the dead Priamus (514). The reversal of fortune is now apparently complete. In a pathetic crescendo Eurybates claims that even the Trojans would now commiserate the Greeks (521-22), and it is in their name –they, too, are on board– that the Greeks invoke the gods for reprieve (525-26). Two details incidentally mentioned in the narrative will become more meaningful in retrospect once Cassandra and Agamemnon repeat them in their dialogue. At line 447 Eurybates specifically mentions the altar of Iuppiter Herceus, the protector of the household; in the *antilabai*, Cassandra will ask whether Agamemnon is inviting her to pray for Iuppiter Herceus, the protector of the household. In the same scene Agamemnon suggests that they pray together –*pariter* (794)– just as the Trojans and Greeks did during the storm (511), completely impervious to the notion that there may be little reason for Cassandra to praise the gods alongside her captor²⁰.

In the second main episode (528-557) we witness the death of Ajax Oileus. This short section is important in several respects. To begin with, it picks up and develops the theme of the storm as punishment for the crimes that the Greeks have committed at Troy. Ajax’ fault was well-known, having been told in the *Iliupersis*, and represented on numerous vases, where he can be seen as he drags Cassandra to Athena’s temple²¹. There can be no uncertainty about Ajax’ fault, and both Seneca and Virgil feel no need to elaborate on it. At *Aen.* 1.41 Iuno simply refers to *unius ob noxam et furias Aiakis Oilei*, “because of a single man’s guilt, and thye fury of Ajax Oileus”, a line which may be behind Seneca’s *solus invictus malis...* (532), very differently focalised through Eurybates’ eyes. Clearly the specific focus on the rape of Cassandra invites a comparison between Ajax and Agamemnon.

This section also shows just how deep Seneca’s engagement with epic models is. Direct allusions to Homer seem generally ruled out, but I am inclined to believe that lines 544-46:

*tandem occupata rupe furibundum intonat:
‘superasse saevum pelagus atque ignes iuvat,
vicisse caelum Palladem fulmen mare.’*²²

Finally, taking his stand on a rock, he thundered in fury: “I glory in having overcome flood and fire, in having conquered heaven, Pallas, lightning, sea.” [...]

are directly related to *Odyssey* 4.502-4:

καί νύ κεν ἔκφυγε κῆρα, καὶ ἐχθόμενός περ’ Ἀθήνη,
εἰ μὴ ὑπερφίαλον ἔπος ἐκβάλε καὶ μέγ’ ἄασθη.
φῆ ῥ’ ἄεκητι θεῶν φυγέειν μέγα λαΐτμα θαλάσσης

[...] and he escaped death, even if Athena hated him, had he not uttered arrogant words (that much he was blind); he said he had escaped the great abyss of the sea in spite of the gods... [...]

20 Tarrant, 1976, p. 320 argues that “In *Agamemnon*’s mouth *pariter* appears to lack point”.

21 See *LIMC* s.v. Aias.

22 At 545 the manuscript offer the unacceptable *superasse* + *nunc pelagus*, feebly emended by Peiper (*nunc iam*) and Richter (*cuncta*). Delz, 1987, proposes the much more attractive *saevum*. In light of the discussion above in the text I wonder whether *vastum* should not also be considered.

The notion of *hybris* conveyed by ὑπερφιάλον ἔπος / φῆ is picked up by *intonare*, which in poetry is usually referred to gods.²³ The infinitive φυγέειν becomes *superasse*, and the allusive tone of the line is clinched by the fact that Ajax' words are reported in direct speech – a quote, as it were, from the Homeric mastertext. Echoes of the same passage emerge shortly later, as Ajax is finally overcome by the fury of the elements. Lines 552-56:

*plura cum auderet furens,
tridente rupem subruit pulsam pater
Neptunus imis exerens undis caput
soluitque montem; quem cadens secum tulit
terraque et igne victus et pelago iacet.*

[...] as he dared say more in rage, father Neptune raised his head from the depths of the waves, struck and dislodged the rock with his trident, and toppled the crag. He carried it with him in his fall, and lies conquered by earth and fire and sea. [...]

hark back to specific elements from *Odyssey* 4.505-7:

τοῦ δὲ Ποσειδάων μεγάλ' ἔκλυεν αὐδῆσαντος.
αὐτίκ' ἔπειτα τρίαينαν ἑλών χερσὶ στιβαρῆσιν
ἤλασε Γυραίνην πέτρην, ἀπὸ δ' ἔσχισεν αὐτήν.

[...] Poseidon heard his arrogant talk; and immediately, grasping the trident with his massive hands, he struck the Gyrean rock and broke it in two [...]

3. Towards the end of his *rhesis* Eurybates presents the storm as a sacrificial offering to Troy: the new day dawns “after atonement had been made for Ilium” (577 *postquam litatum est Ilio*). In his view the excesses of the Greeks have been thoroughly vindicated, and Agamemnon is able at last to return home and enjoy his victory.

Against this background we should read Cassandra's insistence on the shared destiny of Argos and Troy. Contrary to Eurybates' ultimately optimistic point of view she does not believe that a sufficient revenge has been exacted of the Greek leaders. They should suffer more. The death of Ajax does not erase the memory of Priam's death, for which Agamemnon himself will have to pay a price. In truly tragic fashion Cassandra argues for the inevitability of repetition and the need for ever stronger revenges. In turn, her claim that Agamemnon's death is a victory for the defeated Trojans is true only momentarily. The reversal of history she hopes for is more apparent than real (752-58):²⁴

*haec hodie ratis
Phlegetontis atri regias animas vehet,
victamque victricemque. vos, umbrae, precor,
iurata superis unda, te pariter precor:
reserate paulum terga nigrantis poli,*

23 OLD 1b. cf. Cic.*Mar.fr.*2, Virg.*Aen.*7.142.

24 I develop these themes further in Schiesaro, 2003, 177-220. The following paragraphs are reworked from 202-203.

*levis ut Mycenae turba prospiciat Phrygum.
spectate, miseri: fata se vertunt retro.*

[...] today this boat in black Phlegethon will carry royal souls, conquered and conqueror. You spirits, I pray you; you waters that the gods swear by, I pray you as well: draw back a little the covering of the dark world, so the insubstantial throng of Phrygians can look out at Mycenae. Watch, you poor folk: fate is reversing itself. [...]

Here, the extraordinary opening of the gates of Acheron portends Cassandra's desire that her fellow Trojans (although it is difficult to overlook the metadramatic impact of *spectate*) see the overturning of historical progression which had determined their demise: the decrees of fate seem to be turning backwards, and now it is time for the Greeks to suffer. Paradoxically, the prophetess is able to image the future course of events precisely because her eyes are turned backwards,²⁵ in more senses than one (712-15):

*stetere vittae, mollis horrescit coma,
anhela corda murmure incluso fremunt,
incerta nutant lumina et versi retro
torquentur oculi, rursus immoti rigent.*

[...] the holy ribbons stand out, her soft hair bristles. Her panting breast is loud with pent-up utterance; her gaze is unsteady and drooping; her eyes roll backwards, then again are fixed and rigid. [...]

She looks back and she looks down, just as she hopes that dead Trojans will be allowed to look up from the Underworld, another form of vision which is exceptional and unnatural. The messenger had poignantly remarked that as the victorious fleet was leaving Troy faded in the background, and the fire of the burning city could be made out only by a very acute eye: *et iam, quod unum pervicax acies videt, Iliacus atra fumus apparet nota*, "and now, the one thing visible even to a steadfast gaze was the smoke from Ilium, showing as a black trace" (458-89).²⁶ Cassandra's eyesight is indeed *pervicax*.

By looking back, and down, Cassandra signals the arrival on stage of a reversal of fortune which transforms winners into losers, but does not really manage to accomplish the opposite feat. Inspired by her underworldly *furor* Cassandra sees more and better than anybody else, but the price to pay for her epistemological prowess is inscribed in her power's dark, chthonic origin. The movement backwards, accordingly, has none of the empowering overtones that connote the reversal of the Trojans' defeat elaborated in the *Aeneid*. Cassandra's own death, pointedly linked to Agamemnon's in the *iunctura victamque victricemque* (754), denies the possibility of escaping from the web of the past. Dying together, as the inhabitants of the Underworld express their impotent, purely negative joy at Agamemnon's demise, signals the regressive nature of this inverted repetition of the past. As Cassandra herself had desperately acknowledged, Troy is forever destroyed, and her prophetic abilities seem utterly pointless, since they have not been

25 See Tarrant, 1976, p. 306 for parallel descriptions of frenzied ecstasy.

26 I print, with Fitch, *iam* (A) instead of Zwierlein's conjecture *vix*.

heeded when they should have been: *iam Troia cecidit -falsa quid vates ago?*, “now Troy has fallen, what business have I as a failed prophet?” (725).

At the very beginning of *Agamemnon* Thyestes testifies to the regressive quality of backwards movements as he reflects on the subversion of natural rules which he has caused with his incest (34-6):

*versa natura est retro:
avo parentem, pro nefas, patri virum,
natis nepotes miscui -nocti diem.*

[...] nature has been inverted: I have confused parent with grandparent (oh outrage!), husband with father, grandchildren with children – day with night. [...]

Incest provokes a repulsive mixing of different generations, and perturbs their natural motion forward. As unnatural as streams rushing back towards their sources,²⁷ incestuous offspring move in the wrong direction: they look at the past, not at the future.

Cassandra’s desire to even the score with her Greek foes is predicated on a violent reversal of history which is geared to annihilation of the past even more than a simple reversal of fortune. Cassandra is ready to die provided she can see the death of Agamemnon, and the dead Trojans can briefly ascend from the Underworld in order to see what *could have happened*, but didn’t, and can no longer happen.

At the very core of the *Aeneid* stands the complex, often obsessive elaboration of the relationship between past and present, and the *Aeneid*, too, foregrounds the temptations and dangers inherent in the desire simply to return to an unattainable *status quo ante*. But there are conspicuous differences between the way in which the poem negotiates these opposite trends and Seneca’s own approach to the same critical theme. The battle between past and future which dominates the first part of the *Aeneid* finds a resolution, albeit a painful and uncertain one, in the ultimate predominance of a teleological solution of the plot which breaks with the repetitive, ineffectual compulsions displayed by the Trojans in the earlier phases of their wanderings. In its forward movement, the epic ultimately reasserts the rights of a political teleology so far questioned in vain.²⁸

In *Agamemnon*, but for that matter also in *Oedipus* and *Thyestes*, any such attempt at ultimate resolution is conspicuously absent. Regression and return impose seriality as the dominant organizing principle of the plays, and there seems to be no counterbalancing force which might eventually displace them. There is, in effect, no *clinamen* which may lead to a future significantly different from the masterplot of the past. Looking back, and obsessively insisting on the repetition of a past *nefas*, prevents the successful repression of *nefas* which many characters in these tragedies advocate. While there is no guarantee that looking to the future will bring no new crimes, there is a virtual certainty that further engagement with old crimes will only perpetuate the spiral of revenge and counterrevenge.

27 Cf. *Th.* 115 (*iam Lerna retro cessit*), and, somewhat differently, *Th.* 459 (the unnaturallness of ‘pushing back’ the sea by building in it). Similarly, of blood flowing backwards, in the sacrifice at *Oed.* 349.

28 See esp. Quint, 1993, p. 50-96.

Seneca's sustained dialogue with epic models, Virgil's second book of the *Aeneid* first of all, but the *Nostoi* tradition and Homer as well, points to a central concern of *Agamemnon* as a whole. Seneca's obsession with revenge, repetition and circularity becomes here a reflection on history and its representation in epic poetry. Taking on epic on its own terms Seneca shows the illusory nature of teleology and its poetic counterpart, poetic linearity. The storm has no cathartic or redeeming value, it is only one of the many ways, all partial, all temporary, in which Troy will be avenged. But Cassandra is no Aeneas, and there is no promised land in wait for her – just death. The *Aeneid* is programmatically intent on reversing the fate of the Trojans, while Seneca's *Agamemnon* gloomily equates the fate of winners and losers. They both must die.

This critique goes to the heart of the Augustan myth of renewal, and the illusion that the destructive cycle of history may have come to an end. At least two generations of Augustan writers had, with different degrees of conviction, nurtured the consoling paradigm of Rome as a second Troy. After death, renewal, and after that renewal, no more death. Manilius puts it candidly: *satis hoc fatis fuerit* (1.922). As several Senecan characters show, though, *satis* is never an option – *maius* is.

In its deconstruction of reassuring hopes of renewal, too, *Agamemnon* displays emphatically its own 'coming after'. If Aeschylus' plays open with a mixture of trepidation hope and fear, this tragedy sounds from the very beginning a note of doom and disaster: we all know what will happen, what indeed has already happened in the Greek mastertext, just as – famously – Seneca's *Oedipus* comes onto the stage fully aware of his own guilt.²⁹ I would be inclined to read in this context a significant characteristic of the play: both the chorus of victorious Argives and that of Trojan victims are female. This shift in emphasis is momentous, because in spite of the joyous exploits of the second choral odes it reinforces the play's elegiac tone. Even victory – seen from a female point of view, and seen 'after' – appears as a limited, fragile and ultimately doomed achievement. Witness – again – the fourth chorus, quoted above, which after praising Hercules ends with a slightly puzzling chronological detail note: *te duce concidit totidem diebus / Troia quot annis*, "when you led the attack, it fell in as many days as Troy took years to fall" (865–66). At first sight, it is not altogether evident why the chorus should draw attention to this neat, if slightly irrelevant, chronological detail. But on further consideration there emerges a coherence with the relativizing attitude that the chorus, even the Argive one, has displayed all along. Agamemnon's deeds, heroic as they may appear, are measurably limited. And as the first chorus already warned, victory itself can be easily overturned into disaster.

Both choruses – in varying degrees – signal a definite trend towards introspection, and the privileging of a personal, affective point of view. Whereas Aeschylus' play ends with a power struggle between Aegisthus and Clytemnestra on the one hand and the Argive elders on the other, Seneca's curtain falls on the parallel, insuperable contrast between the queen and Cassandra – *furor*, not 'law and order'³⁰ are the operative concepts here. (Similarly, *Oedipus* underlays the political nature of the conflict which in Sophocles pitches the king against Creon). After its

29 Paduano, 1994, p. 249–66.

30 Contrast *Ag.*1012: CL. *furiosa, morere*. CA: *veniet et vobis furor*, "CL. Die in your madness! CA. Madness will come upon you too", with Aesch. *Ag.* 1672–73 <ἐγὼ> / καὶ σὺ θήσομεν κρατοῦντε τῶνδε δωμάτων <καλῶς>, "you and I, lording over this house, will put everything in order."

rueful reference to Agamemnon's 'victory' the Argive chorus has nothing left to contribute, least of all a display of political determination.

The Trojan chorus, needless to say, is even more focused on the private, affective dimension of the tragedy which unfolds in front of them. Indeed, it is more focused than even Cassandra, who is keenly aware of the political, historical significance of the events. In act 4 the choral *threnos* reviews several mythical characters whose sorrows and tears are comparable to those of Cassandra. Philomela and Procne have, unsurprisingly, pride of place. Less clear is the choice of the following three *exempla*: Cycnus, Alcyon and Attis. How are they comparable to Cassandra, or in any other way relevant to the context? Significantly, they are all instances of intense, but doomed, love for a partner who dies. None laments a political defeat –indeed Cycnus is a king ready to die when his beloved Phaeton is killed³¹.

4. The last act of the play very nearly breaks down the boundaries of the tragic form. Cassandra is alone on stage at first. In her frenzied vision she sees Agamemnon's death while it unfolds. There is no denying the scene's power. Seneca is looking at Aeschylus, but the modifications he introduces are revealing. The Greek play has two distinct moments. First, at 1072-1342, Cassandra engages in a lyric dialogue with the chorus; from 1343 onwards the king appears, mortally wounded. Seneca compresses the two moments in a single scene: Cassandra describes the murder while it happens³². Present and future have fused.

What follows is 'an influx of new characters and situations...without parallel in Seneca'.³³ Electra appears with a silent Orestes, and they are unexpectedly joined by king Strophius on his way home. He is the closest thing to a *deus ex machina* that we have in the plays, where gods are notoriously disinclined to play the part. In a short dialogue he accepts Electra's entreaty to take Orestes away, and they depart, at 952, just before Clytemestra's return.

This last part of the tragedy is conspicuously absent in Aeschylus, whose *Agamemnon* comes to an end with the contrast between Aegisthus' self-assertive stance and the chorus' reproach. Seneca's model is to be found, rather, in Sophocles' *Electra*, an intertext which may be evoked in the initial lines of the scene, 953-54.³⁴ But what is the effect of this after-tragedy attached at the end of Agamemnon's story? Here we face again Seneca's obsession with beginnings and ends, or rather their elusiveness. The prologue of the play evokes a previous episode in the doomed royal house, and indeed in the author's tragic corpus, and ends with developments further down the road. It begins by recapitulating *Thyestes*, and ends with a compact *Electra*, not to mention the announcement of a forthcoming *Orestes*. In Seneca, the Aeschylean focus on *genos* and its destiny metamorphoses into a reflection on the interconnectedness of mythical plots and their dramatic versions. The traditional tragic form

31 Virg. *Aen.* 10.189 with Harrison ad loc., cf. Ov. *Met.* 2.367

32 For a possibly similar scene in a IVth century fragment see Coles, 1968.

33 Tarrant, 1976, p. 333.

34 Cf. CL. *hostis parentis, impium atque audax caput, / quo more coetus publicos uirgo petis?*, "enemy of your mother, unnatural, brazen creature: what behavior is this, to seek public converse as a virgin girl?" (953-54) with Soph. El. 516 ἀνειμένη μὲν, ὡς ἔοικας, αὐ στρέφῃ, "you are still wandering free, it seems" (*hostis parentis* and *impium atque audax* may pick up on line 518 αἰσχύνειν φίλους, "dishonouring those close to you").

with its reliable sequences effectively breaks up, and gives way to a less coherent and organic shape which appropriately mirrors the metaphysical disorder of Seneca's world.

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