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Senecan Paratragoedia

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RESUMEN

No obstante que el interés y el reconocimiento de la importancia de las obras teatrales de Séneca han crecido sin interrupción desde el siglo XIX, a algunos críticos todavía les perturba cierto exceso que existe en estas obras —los personajes son frecuentemente retóricos, tiesos, histriónicos, histéricos. Muy a menudo este tipo de exceso incitaba el desdén durante el siglo XIX. Se argumentaba que los protagonistas de Séneca, como Medea, eran meras versiones derivadas e incluso dobles paródicos de sus predecesores griegos. No obstante, es esta cuestión de «parodia» la que ofrece una nueva perspectiva en las tragedias de Séneca. A diferencia de los héroes y las heroínas de la tragedia griega, los personajes de Séneca provocan temor en lugar de piedad. Pues estos personajes del primer siglo romano son meras caricaturas de los grandes líderes de un período anterior. Ellos pueden ser comprendidos como una mera parodia de antiguas figuras de dignidad y de honor.

SUMMARY

Although interest in and recognition of the importance of the Senecan plays have been, since the nineteenth century, steadily on the rise, nevertheless critics are still disturbed by certain excesses in these plays — the characters are often rhetorical, stilted, histrionic, hysterical. Just such excesses fre-

quently prompted much of the nineteenth-century's scorn. It was argued that the Senecan protagonists, like Medea, were mere derivative versions and even parodic doubles of their Greek predecessors. Yet it is precisely this matter of «parody» that offers a new perspective on Seneca's tragedies. Unlike the heroes and heroines of Greek tragedy, Seneca's characters elicit fear rather tran pity. For these First-Century Roman *personae* are merely caricatures of the giant leaders of an earlier era. They can thus be understood to be mere parodies of ancient figures of dignity and honor.

After experiencing a low-point of esteem in the criticism of the nineteenth century, Senecan tragedy has undergone a reversal of fortune; interest in and recognition of the importance of the Senecan plays have been steadily on the rise, as recent book-length studies testify [1]. Nonetheless, scholars understandably are still disturbed by certain excesses in these selfsame plays—the characters are often rhetorical, stilted, histrionic, near to hysterical. Just such excesses frequently prompted much of the nineteenth-century's scorn. Wilamowitz, for example, deprecated one of Seneca's plays with a sarcastic witticism:

> *Diese Medea hat offenbar die* ***Medea*** *des Euripides gelesen* [2].

One recent commentator has elaborated upon this remark:

> That Seneca himself has studied Euripides with great care is indisputable and hardly an occasion for complaint, but that his character should seem to share the benefits of that study is considered ample evidence of an artistic failure. Taken literally such an interpretation would open the possibility of the Latín Medea appearing not as a vitiated, derivative version of her Greek predecessor but rather as her parodic double, reenacting a role she has memorized but adding the surplus of an ironic self-consciousness brought about precisely by her familiarity with an already scripted part [3].

Concurring with Wilamowitz, this critic adds that his own comments are «scarcely intended as a perverse argument for a new perspective on Senecan

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[1] Studies appearing within the last decade include: Margarethe Billerbeck, *Senecas Tragödien. Sprachliche und Stilistische Untersuchungen,* Leiden & New York, 1988; A. J. Boyle, ed. *Seneca Tragicus. Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama,* Maryborough, Aus., 1983; Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition,* New Haven, 1985; Denis and Elisabeth Henry, *The Mask of Power: Seneca's Tragedies and Imperial Rome,* Chicago, 1985; Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, *Senecan Tragedy,* Amsterdam, 1988; Norman T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama,* Chapel Hill, N.C., 1983; and Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan, Drama and Stoic Cosmology* Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1989.

[2] Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, «Einleitung» to Euripides' *Medea,* in *Griechische Tragoedien,* 3 vols., Berlin 1906, vol. 3, p. 162.

[3] Michael André Bernstein, «When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections Upon the Abject Hero», *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983) 287.

tragedy.» Yet it is precisely the matter of «parody» and of «self-consciousness» that can indeed offer just such a new perspective on the Senecan plays, and that possibility will be seriously entertained in these pages.

First of all, it should be observed that most of Seneca's evil characters are adept actors, capable of donning masks, feigning attitudes, and playing roles. Despite her outbursts throughout the drama, Medea is able to play before King Creon the role of a weak and helpless woman, a grieving suppliant, solitary and distraught; despite his legitimate fears (Medea is, after all, a very dangerous witch), she manages to win from Creon a twenty-four hour reprieve before being exiled–and that provides her with ample time to work out her terrible vengeance, a vengeance that includes the destruction of this selfsame King. In the scene with her husband Jason, she is able to assume some self-control, to conduct rational discourse, and to request of him a «boon»–that she be allowed to give her children one last farewell embrace. She is also able to allay many of Jason's fears and to extract from him important information about his own weaknesses.

Atreus, in the *Thyestes*, is equally the masterful actor; he suavely feigns being a forgiving and loving sovereign who longs to share the throne with his exiled brother. The gage of his performance is his utter success in deceiving Thyestes and the Chorus of Mycenaeans. And Atreus-as-actor is doubtless at his worst when he assumes the mantle of priest and conducts an elaborate «black mass», where Thyestes' sons are ritually slaughtered at a mock-altar [4]. As usual, he conducts himself in his role with zest and aplomb.

In the *Agamemnon*, Clytaemestra similarly acts a convincing part: she feigns love and welcome and wifely fidelity that convinces the messenger Eurybates and her own returning Lord–until he is entrapped and subsequently slain. Phaedra likewise, in the *Phaedra*, is capable of winning the pity and compliance of her Nutrix, of playing the coy and fainting damsel-in-distress before Hippolytus, and of assuming before her husband Theseus the role of a chaste maiden wrongfully ravished by her ruthless step-son. Even minor but nasty characters undertake to play new parts; in the *Troades*, the wily Ulysses acts as if Astyanax has been captured and completely succeeds in having Andromache taken in by this ruse. Helen similarly pretends to bring «good news» to Polyxena, when in fact the girl is to be a blood sacrifice upon Achilles' tomb.

Such play-acting is characteristic of New Comedy–employed to emphasize the fertility of a tricky slave's wits and to vindicate the love-sick protagonist by revealing his dedication and sincerity, his inventiveness and flexibility. It is, therefore, unexpected when this self-same play-acting flourishes in Senecan theatre, in the so-called «tragedies of blood», where it serves as the vehicle for a villain's or a criminal's triumph. Furthermore, such role-playing ren-

[4] *Thyestes*, 627-758.

ders the principle actors in Senecan drama more theatrical and self-conscious; they are the successful «makers» of their cruel plots, the choreographers and manipulators of their own harsh and bloodstained destinies.

Indeed, it is just this *mixtus* of play-acting and villainy which renders Seneca's plays so unusual as «tragedies.» The central characters tend to be rash, rabid, villainous. As concerns the likes of an Atreus, a Clytaemestra, an Oedipus, or a Medea, there is little for an audience to pity about them, and rather too much to fear. One recent critic has noted that Romans were the inventors of purely «evil» characters [5]; Seneca does indeed stand foremost among them. Furthermore, it is Seneca who moves such characters to stage-center, giving them the dominant protagonist's role. The cruel Mezentius, for example, is peripheral to Vergil's epic, but an Atreus, a Clytaemestra, a Medea play the lead role. In addition, these characters are strikingly self-conscious.

It is little wonder that Wilamowitz singles out Seneca's Medea for his remark; she is acutely self-aware. «*Medea superest*» [6], she tells us, and «*Est (et hic maior metus)/ Medea*» [7]. Her own name, her talents, her plans, her threats, her past are forever upon her lips.

In addition to that, she is almost a travesty of extravagant emotion and changeableness:

> Incerta qualis entheos gressus tulit
> cum iam recepto maenas insanit deo
> Pindi nivalis vertice aut Nysae iugis,
> talis recursat huc et huc motu effero,
> furoris ore signa lymphati gerens.
> flammata facies spiritum ex alto citat,
> proclamat, oculos uberi fletu rigat,
> renidet; omnis specimen affectus capit.
> (*Medea*, 382-389) [8].
>
> (Just as a maenad, when the deity inhabits
> her body, totters unsteadily with inspired
> steps and runs mad along the top
> of snowy Pindus or upon the ridges of
> Nysa, so Medea dashes about, here and there,
> with wild motions, revealing in her face
> the signs of frantic madness. Her cheeks
> are inflamed, she gasps for breath, she
> cries aloud, her eyes overflowing with
> tears, she is radiant...)

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[5] Consult S. G. Farron, «The Roman Invention of Evil», *Studies in Antiquity* 1 (1979-1980, 13-46.

[6] *Medea*, 166.

[7] *Medea*, 516-517.

[8] All translations are our own.

This rabidity and oscillation on Medea's part are only exacerbated by her persistent hyperbole and bombast, her propensity to over-state her profound conviction of self-importance.

> dum terra caelum media libratum feret
> nitidusque certas mundus evolvet vices
> numerusque harenis derit et solem dies,
> noctem sequentur astra, dum siccas polus
> versabit Arctos, flumina in pontum cadent,
> numquam meus cessabit in poenas furor
> crescetque semper. quae ferarum immanitas,
> quae Scylla, quae Charybdis Ausonium mare
> Siculumque sorbens quaeve anhelantem premens
> Titana tantis Aetna fervebit minis?
> non rapidus amnis, non procellosum mare
> Pontusve Coro saevus aut vis ignium
> adiuta flatu possit imitari impetum
> irasque nostras; sternam et evertam omnia.
> (*Medea*, 401-414)
>
> (As long as middle earth shall support the
> balanced heavens, and the shining universe
> continue its ceaseless changes, so long as
> sands be numberless, and day accompany the sun,
> and stars attend the night, so long as the
> constellations revolve in the heavens, so
> long as rivers run down into the sea, just so
> long will my rage for vengeance never cease
> and shall swell forever. What savagery of wild
> beasts, what Scylla, what Charybdis, swallowing
> the Ausonian and Sicilian sea, what Aetna oppressing
> the roaring Titan, shall rage with such
> threats as I? No rapid stream, no stormy
> sea or Pontis raging with the northwest
> wind, or force of fire driven by the gale
> can match the impetus of my wrath! I shall
> violently overthrow and destroy everything!)

Such boastful exaggeration verges upon bathos and, as we have noted elsewhere about another Senecan play, undiluted melodrama [9]. For such a play is overfull with the paeans and arias of an anguished but hyperdramatic performing self [10]. Small wonder that Medea strikes us at times as being puppet-like

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[9] Consult Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, «Seneca's *Thyestes* as Melodrama», *RSC* 26 (1978) 363-78.

[10] Glorious allusive and self-assertive rhetoric of this sort gave strong impetus to the Re-

and parodic. As a matter of fact, such a character, with her rapid changes of mood, her emotional ups and downs, and her outpourings of rhetoric at times surprisingly reminds us of the similar excesses so deftly mocked by Petronius, in figures like Encolpius, the perennially distraught lover, and Eumolpus, the perpetually declaiming bard [11].

To complement the hyperbolic voice and the copious figures of rhetoric, we encounter throughout Seneca's plays an accelerating criminal action.

> per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter
> (*Agamemnon*, 115)
>
> (The safe way for crime is always through crime)

is the clarion call of Clytaemestra in the *Agamemnon*. There is a powerful force in the plays that presses for the advancement of crime in greater and greater proportions. The same tendency spurs each generation on. As Clytaemestra explains about her own House of Pelops and Tyndarus,

> O scelera semper sceleribus vincens domus!
> (*Agamemnon*, 169)
>
> (O House, always overcoming crime with crime!)

We thus encounter in Senecan tragedy a kind of perverse «idea of progress»: things must inevitably get worse and worse! [12] Medea even notes that her own earlier criminal acts cry out for and function as catalysts in instigating fresh crime:

> scelera te hortentur tua
> et cuncta redeant...
> (*Medea*, 129-130)
>
> (Let your own crimes urge you on and
> let them all return...)

naissance theatre; one need recollect what was known as «Marlowe's might line» and some of his most notorious ranting figures, Tamburlaine and Barabas.

[11] Needless to say, Petronius achieves powerful irony also, by having diminutive fools and toadies bear the names of once-grand epical heroes, Agamemnon and Menelaus. These moderns are mere husks, shells, and caricatures of the original mythic and heroic figures.

[12] A modern comic work postulates with mock-scientific seriousness that, in the world, if things can possibly go wrong, they assuredly will; see Arthur Bloch, *Murphy's Law and Other Reasons Why Things Go Wrong!*, Los Angeles 1977.

For such crimes are consistently represented as part of an ordained, on-going, and accelerating process. Note the exchange in the *Thyestes* between the horrified Chorus and the Nuntius who reports Atreus' dreadful deeds:

CHORVS

O saeuum scelus!

NUNTIVS

Exhorruistis? hactenus si stat nefas,
pius est.

CHORVS

An ultra maius aut atrocius
natura recipit?

NUNTIVS

Sceleris hunc finem putas?
gradus est.
(*Thyestes*, 743-747)

(CHORUS

O savage crime!

MESSENGER

Does this horrify you? If that's his only
crime, he is pious.

CHORUS

Does nature know of any crime
greater or more atrocious than this?

MESSENGER

Do you think this is the limit?
It's merely the first step.)

There is, distinctly in these plays, a *gradus ad nefanda*, a *gradus ad inferna.* In a way, these vicious characters are the reverse of the Stoic *proficientes* who strove for moral progress, for wisdom. Unlike them, these vile manipulators are journeying toward *scelera,* seeking not the *summum bonum,* but rather the *summum malum.* Hence, behaving like a competitor, Atreus views himself as some sort of regal Olympic athlete who, by a series of unspeakable crimes, has deservedly won the «palm» of victory [13].

Thus it is that such characters are portrayed as travelling upon a prescribed course, imitating a known action, being hoisted by an automated fork-lift, and trundled along upon a conveyor belt to a foregone conclusion. Needless to say, such a mechanical portrayal of evil undermines the very concept of the tragic hero for whom, in spite of his flaws, the reader feels pathos.

Moreover, there is another sense in which these vicious characters may be understood as enacting a burlesque imitation of humanistic values. A fundamental *credo* of Western Civilization has been the *translatio studii,* a conception that understands the growth of civilizations and the amalgamation, transfer, and integration of cumulative knowledge over vast periods of time—from Egypt to Crete to Greece and onward to Rome. Ancestors were worshipped and «patterns» from the past discerned, exalted, and imitated, finally attaining decorum and the status of the «classic».

Particularly was this means of transmission idolized in primitive «shame cultures», where whole tribes worshipped, revered, and almost unconsciously imitated role-models and ideal patterns of behavior from the past.

> Das antike Ich und sein
> Bewusstsein von sich war ein
> anderes als das unsere, weniger
> ausschliesslich, weniger scharf
> umgrenzt. Es stand gleichsam
> nach hinten offen und nahm vom
> Gewesenen vieles mit auf, was es
> gegenwärtig wiederholte, und was
> mit ihm 'wieder da' war. Der
> spanische Kulturphilosoph Ortega
> y Gasset drückt das so aus, dass
> der antike Mensch, ehe er etwas
> tue, einen Schritt zurücktrete,
> gleich dem Torero, der zum Todesstoss
> aushole. Er suche in der Vergangenheit
> ein Vorbild, in das er wie in
> eine Taucherglocke schlüpfe, um sich
> so, zugleich geschützt und entstellt,

[13] *Cf. Medea* 1017: «Meus dies est.»

in das gegenwärtige Problem hineinzustürzen.
Darum sei sein Leben in gewisser Weise
ein Beleben, ein archaisierendes Verhalten [14].

(The ego of antiquity and its consciousness
of itself was different from
ours, less exclusive, less sharply limited.
It was, so to speak, open-ended and took
much from the past which it repeated in
the present, reanimating it. The learned
Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset
states that man in antiquity, before
doing anything, took a step backwards,
like the bull-fighter who steps back before
delivering the death blow. He searches
the past for a pattern, into
which he might slip as into a diving-bell
so that, being thus protected and
situated, he might plunge into his
present problem. As a result, his life
was in a certain way a reanimation, and
archaizing posture.)

Even in later ages was this custom of imitating the great men of earlier ages sustained. Thus, Jonathan Swift in the eighteenth century still looks back to the wise men of yore for guidance and direction:

In Points of Honour to be try'd,
All Passions must be laid aside:
Ask no Advice, but think alone,
Suppose the Question not your own:
How shall I act? is not the Case,
But how would *Brutus* in my Place?
In such a Cause would *Cato* bleed?
And how would *Socrates* proceed? [15].

In his prose, Seneca himself frequently extolled the use of the ancients as models, patterns, and guides [16].

In the arts, especially, was this transmission of genres, techniques, and ta-

[14] Thomas Mann, «Freud und die Zukunft», *Gesammelte Werke*, 12 vols., Oldenburg 1960, 9.494-95.

[15] «To Stella, Visiting me in my Sickness» (1720), lines 35-42, in *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 3 vols., Oxford, 1937, p. 724.

[16] For Senecan passages on choosing a model or guide, see *Ep.* 6.5-6; 11.8-10; 25.5-6; 57.7-8; 64.7-10; 94.40-41, 55; 102.30; 104.21-22; *De Brev. Vit.* 14.5-15.5; *De Otio* 1.1; and *De Vita Beata* 1.2.

lents considered a sacrosanct means for the establishment of literary tradition. One imitated the past to secure and sustain one's identity, and only then did one acquire the confidence to advance beyond one's mentors and proceed upon one's own. That had been Horace's goal:

> dicar . . . .
> . . . .
> . . . .
> princeps Aeolium carmen ad Italos
> deduxisse modos [17].
>
> (I shall be hailed...
> the first to have fitted Aeolian song
> to Italian measures.)

When Milton speaks boldly in his verse of his own new creative endeavors, of his attempting to accomplish

> Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime,» [18]

he is making clear his position *within* the tradition. For him to know what has been «unattempted yet» signifies that he is entirely familiar with the literary past that he has traced and followed [19]. Only thereafter, under the aegis of these figures from the past, can one then hope to advance. Thus, too, did Dante require the succor and guidance of the poet Vergil, as he commenced to investigate a whole new literary world–and Vergil, with the help of Homer, had done very much the same.

What we encounter in Senecan tragedy is virtually an imitation and mockery of this tradition. Characters like Phaedra perceive a perverse family «tradition» to which they belong:

> Et ipsa nostrae fata cognosco domus:
> fugienda petimus...
> (*Phaedra*, 698-699)
>
> (I myself recognize the fate of my House:
> we seek what should be avoided...)

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[17] Horace, *Carm.* 3.30.10, 13-14.

[18] *Paradise Lost*, Bk. I, line 16, in *Milton's Complete Poems*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson, New York 1936, p. 160.

[19] Milton is in fact echoing Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* I, 2: «Cosa non detta mai in prosa nè in rima.»

As Cassandra observes concerning Aegisthus and Clytaemestra, such characters are slaves to their kin, to their ancestry:

> uterque tanto scelere respondet suis–
> est hic Thyeste natus, haec Helenae soror.
> (*Agamemnon*, 906-907)
>
> (In so great a crime, each responds to his own
> background–this man born of Thyestes, she,
> Helen's sister.)

In fact, these villains turn to their savage ancestors as models. Atreus actively invokes his progenitors as exemplars.

> quid stupes: tandem incipe
> animosque sume; Tantalum et Pelopem – aspice;
> ad haec manus exempla poscuntur meae.
> (*Thyestes*, 241-243) [20]
>
> (What are you waiting for? Begin at last
> and take courage; look to Tantalus and
> Pelops; my hands are summoned to imitate
> such examples.)

Furthermore, such Senecan villains even invoke themselves! Their earlier crimes are called upon to serve as guides for further and future crime:

> scelera te hortentur tua
> et cuncta redeant...
> (*Medea*, 129-130)
>
> (Let your own crimes urge you
> on...)
>
> nunc aliquid aude sceleribus dignum tuis.
> (*Oedipus*, 879)
>
> (now dare some deed worthy of your crimes.)

And added to this drive to outdo oneself is the almost pathological urge to outdo one's predecessors. The ghost of Tantalus in the *Thyestes* affirms this:

[20] The aged Oedipus in the *Phoenissae* understands that his murderous sons Eteocles and Polynices imitate their cursed father: «meorum facinorum exempla appetunt,/me nunc secuntur» (lines 331-32).

iam nostra subit
e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus
ac me innocentem faciat et inausa audeat.
(*Thyestes*, 18-20)

(Now from my stock a multitude is
coming forth which shall surpass its
own race, daring deeds as yet undared,
and making me look innocent.)

And the Fury concurs; let novelty and criminal invention be fruitful and multiply:

...nec vacet cuiquam vetus
odisse crimen—semper oriatur novum,
nec unum in uno, dumque punitur scelus,
crescat.
(*Thyestes*, 29-32)

(...let no one have free time to hate old
crime; let new crime always arise...)

That is certainly Medea's aim: to employ unique and unaccustomed punishments, to outdo one's self and accomplish unheard-of deeds.

effera ignota horrida,
tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala
mens intus agitat – vulnera et caedem et...
funus... levia memoravi nimis;
haec virgo feci. gravior exurgat dolor;
maiora iam me scelera post partus decent.
(*Medea*, 45-50)

(Deep within, my evil mind is stirring up
wild deeds, unknown, horrid, deeds to be
trembled at both on earth and in heaven –
wounds, and slaughter, and death...
I have recollected deeds too trivial,
deeds committed when I was a girl. Let
a heavier resentment urge me on. Now
greater crimes become me...)

Atreus achieves the *reductio ad absurdum* in this same strain of thinking, for he yearns and pines to be filled with a frenzy more vast than even he can imagine:

...impleri iuvat
maiore monstro.
(*Thyestes*, 253-254)

(...it delights me to be filled
with greater monstrosity.)

He requires emotions and deeds beyond all human bounds.

Nescio quid animo maius et solito amplius
supraque fines moris humani tumet...
(*Thyestes*, 267-268) [21]

(Something greater and larger than usual
and beyond the bounds of human custom is
swelling in my soul...)

Surely this state of mind achieves what can truly be termed the «unnatural», since it aspires to accomplish feelings and actions quite unavailable to anyone living in the real world. Such a state of mind, of course, indicates the abandonment of reason. Clytaemestra in the tumult of her own rage observes that she is so beset by various floodwaters (*fluctibus variis agor*, line 138) that she has cast all regulation to the winds:

proinde omisi regimen e manibus meis—
quocumque me ira, quo dolor, quo spes feret,
huc ire pergam; fluctibus dedimus ratem.
ubi animus errat, optimum est casum sequi.
(*Agamemnon*, 141-144)

(Consequently, I have let the rudder go from
my hands —wherever wrath, wherever grief,
wherever hope shall carry me, there will I
go; I have surrendered my ship to the waves.
Where reason errs, it is best to follow chance.)

Yet, at other times, Clytaemestra's thoughts run in an altogether different channel:

tecum ipsa nunc evolve femineos dolos,—
quod ulla coniunx perfida atque impos sui
amore caeco, quod novercales manus

[21] *Cf. Thyestes* 195-96: «...scelera non ulcisceris,/nisi vincis» (You do not avenge crimes unless you outdo them).

ausae, quod ardens impia virgo face,
Phasiaca fugiens regna Thessalica trabe;
ferrum, venena; vel Mycenaeas domos
coniuncta socio profuge furtiva rate.
quid timida loqueris furta et exilium et fugas?
soror ista fecit; te decet maius nefas.
(*Agamemnon*, 116-124)

(Now evolve in your own heart a woman's
deceits – what any treacherous wife, one
powerless with blind love, what the hands of
stepmothers have dared, what the maiden
burning with wicked flame fleeing her
Phasian kingdom in a Thessalian boat
have dared; sword, poison; or flee the
Mycenean home with your partner in a furtive
bark. But, why are you talking timidly of
stealth, of exile, of flight? Your
sister did these things; a greater crime
is suitable for you.)

Far from abandoning reason, Clytaemestra here rehearses to herself the «patterns» of those women –unfaithful wives (such as the Danaïdes), the treacherous step-dame (Phaedra), the barbarian maid (Medea), and the guilty sister (Helen)– all who have committed notorious crimes in the past [22]. These Clytaemestra chooses as her patrons and guides, as her very source of inspiration. Only at the last moment does she abandon such patterns and exemplars, and dream feverishly, like Atreus, of dispensing with models and outdoing them all.

Clytaemestra's soliloquy brings us full circle, back to Wilamowitz's slighting remark that Seneca's Medea must have been reading the Medea of Euripides. Medea and these other monstrous Senecan protagonists might not specifically have «read» Euripides; but they are acutely myth-conscious; and they are fully imbued with an historical sense. For they know all too well what foul deeds their ancestors and other maleficent avatars have committed, and they meditate upon these «patterns» of negative thinking. Hence, they are parodic characters, for they imitate one another, and even childishly long to compete with and to «outdo» their own vicious culture heroes and heroines. In the most turbulent stages of their delusions, they strive to commit deeds and to dream dreams altogether impossible of human attainment.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Seneca the dramatist accomplishes a higher

[22] In his commentary, Tarrant identifies Phaedra as the *noverca* and Medea as the *virgo*, but conjectures that the *coniunx* might be generalized and «generic»; Seneca, *Agamemnon*, ed. R. J. Tarrant, Cambridge 1976, p. 196.

order of parody than these mad vice figures. For, in Seneca's deft hands, the protagonists of Greek tragedy have been reduced to modern little men-spiteful, furious, faltering, and insecure, incapable of self-sacrifice or self-regulation. They contemplate with sullen envy [23] the wicked acts of their ancestors and long to outstrip their vile behavior. Such contemptible characters are what one recent critic, speaking of our own era, terms «abject heroes» [24] – debased castaways from civilization, filled with spite and malice.

As one critic has observed, «Senecan drama enacts discontinuity and breakdown...» [25]. The irony of Senecan theater is that his characters, though based upon those of Athenian drama, have been transformed into stunted and fallen personalities of the romantic cast –egocentric, restless, irrational, evil, guilt-ridden, imitative, and unheroic. The very fact that «classic» tales are thus «deformed» gives Seneca's drama its meaning. For such First-Century Roman personae are merely caricatures of the giant leaders of an earlier era. They can be understood to be mere parodies of ancient figures of dignity and honor. Next to Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragic figures, Seneca's diminutive characters are indeed no more –and no less– than their parodic doubles. –And so they were intended to be.

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[23] *Vid.* Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, New York 1973. Bloom posits that poets suffer from a type of Oedipus complex, each nervously struggling to defeat and surpass his influential progenitors in the tradition.

[24] Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: 'Ressentiment' and the Abject Hero*, Princeton 1992.

[25] Robert Welch, «Seneca and the English Renaissance: The Old World and the New», in *Literature and the Art of Creation*, ed. Robert Welch and Suheil Badi Bushrui, Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire and Totowa, New Jersey 1988, p. 208.