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## INTRODUCTION

## THEME AND STRUCTURE

Modern criticism of Senecan tragedy has produced two sharply distinct approaches to the fundamental question of unity. The harsh, but not baseless verdict of Leo, 'istae uero non sunt tragoediae, sed declamationes . . . in actus deductae',<sup>1</sup> has found more moderate and refined restatement in the work of Friedrich<sup>2</sup> and Zwierlein,<sup>3</sup> who have acutely demonstrated Seneca's lack of interest in organic structure and his subordination of large-scale unity to the interest of the individual scene. The majority of recent writers on Seneca, however, find a unity in recurrent themes or images and minimise the diversity of the episodes.<sup>4</sup> The unitarian and analyst positions need not exclude each other, and the debate between them has at times proceeded at cross-purposes; in discussing *Agamemnon*, which has attracted much unitarian<sup>5</sup> and little analyst<sup>6</sup> criticism, I shall try to indicate the proper sphere of each.

The play lacks the most obvious agent of unity, a dominant central figure or pair (compare *Medea* and to some extent *Oedipus*, *Phaedra* and *Thyestes*). Indeed, no character dominates even two consecutive acts; Cassandra's tenure of centre stage is the longest (659–807, 868–909). The title character is the most shadowy of all, visible only long enough to suggest a pious but fatally dim-witted *imperator*. One should not attempt to fill out his characterisation by adding to his one brief scene all references

<sup>1</sup> *Obs.* 158.

<sup>2</sup> *Untersuchungen zu Senecas dramatischer Technik* (1933).

<sup>3</sup> *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (1966), also *GGA* ccxxii (1970) 196ff.

<sup>4</sup> Among representatives of this approach may be named G. Müller, E. Lefèvre, W. Steidle, B. Seidensticker; for the 'imagist' interpretation cf. N. T. Pratt, *TAPA* xciii (1963) 199ff., D. J. Mastronarde, *TAPA* ci (1971) 291ff.

<sup>5</sup> E. Lefèvre, *Hermes* xciv (1966) 482ff.; G. Streubel, *Senecas Agamemnon* (diss. Wien, 1963); Seidensticker 119ff.

<sup>6</sup> Zwierlein, *Rezitationsdramen* 105–7 treats points of detail. An extensive account of earlier criticism (of both types) is now available in Liebermann 207–31.

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made to him by other persons of the drama;<sup>1</sup> these opinions are shaped by the *affectus* of the speaker, and characterise their source more than their object.

The insignificance of Agamemnon is striking. If it is taken as part of Seneca's design, important consequences follow, for it is clear that, on a notional rather than a theatrical level, Agamemnon (or, more precisely, his death) is the central and unifying point of the drama. Every figure in the play is affected by it and reacts to it, each from a distinct and personal point of view: Thyestes looks forward to Agamemnon's murder as his revenge on Atreus; Clytemestra plots the deed to avenge Iphigenia and to satisfy her own sexual vanity; Aegisthus aims solely for power, using Clytemestra as his instrument; Cassandra welcomes the event as a recompense for Troy's sufferings; Electra can see only the momentary triumph of evil; Strophius (928) and the Chorus (57ff.) recognise implied moral lessons about the impermanence of human happiness and the risks of power. These attitudes are presented *seriatim* and largely in isolation; the autonomous outlook of each character is carefully preserved, and the play does not compel choice among them. Only the moral seriousness and prominent place of the first chorus suggest that its implied response to the action is meant to be the most valid.

On a larger scale, these varied approaches to the central event are presented within a bipartite structure. The first two acts present Agamemnon's murder in a familial setting; the themes stressed, known to us from Aeschylus, are the self-perpetuation of crime<sup>2</sup> and the danger of high position. The second part of the play, from the entrance of the Trojan chorus (589), places the murder against the background of Troy's fall, developing a Euripidean equation of conqueror and conquered<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As is done, for example, by Lefèvre, who makes Clytemestra's description of Agamemnon in 162ff. the basis of his reading.

<sup>2</sup> Note *sanguine alterno* (44), *scelus alternum* (77), *scelera semper sceleribus uincens domus* (169).

<sup>3</sup> Most notably in 752ff. *haec hodie ratis* | *Phlegethontis atri regias animas uehet*, | *uictamque uictricemque*, 870f. *resurgis*, *Troia: traxisti iacens* | *pares Mycenae*; also 730ff., 791ff., 1007ff.

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and so demonstrating the emptiness of power under another aspect. Between these main sections comes the narrative of Eurybates describing Agamemnon's return from Troy to Greece (421–578); since it has no close connection with the action in either of its phases, it is an apt transitional element.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that Seneca does not use it in Aeschylean fashion to involve the gods in Agamemnon's death; the only prominent appearance of a god is connected with the death of Ajax (527ff.).<sup>2</sup> Gods matter less in the play as a whole than *fortuna* and *fatum*: *fortuna* afflicts the exalted, including both Agamemnon (57ff.) and the Trojans (589ff.), while the action of a symmetrical, if not just, fate is a subsidiary theme in the 'Trojan' scenes.<sup>3</sup>

A unity of theme, then, is evident, to which almost every part of the play can be significantly related.<sup>4</sup> But this thematic consistency must not be mistaken for organic structure, nor must mere complexity be confused with success. Each part of the play is developed more for its own interest than for the light it casts on the central themes; a good example is the last choral song (808ff.), whose relation to the central action (Hercules the blameless captor of Troy as a foil to Agamemnon) is only an occasion for a colourful excursus on a congenial mythic *topos*. Seneca is equally unconcerned to produce close connections between scenes or to maintain tension: witness the separation of the prologue from its natural sequel (226ff.) and the resulting division of the second act into two unconnected episodes (108–225, 226–309), the presence of Eurybates' leisurely narrative in the central act,<sup>5</sup> the space given Cassandra's fevered visions in the fourth act, and the fragmented action of the finale.

<sup>1</sup> It introduces the equality of Greeks and Trojans in 511, 521ff.

<sup>2</sup> The allusive phrase *postquam litatum est Ilio* (577) cannot be compared with Aesch. *Ag.* 650ff.

<sup>3</sup> Note *fata se uertunt retro* (758), *uenere fata* (885), *ut paria fata Troicis lueret malis* (1008).

<sup>4</sup> Only 310–411 seem entirely ornamental (*pace* Seidensticker 131 n.163).

<sup>5</sup> Described by M. Coffey (*PACA* 1960, 16) as 'an enormous rhetorical cadenza, intrinsically brilliant, but too long to be accommodated to a dramatic structure'.

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Seneca seems in fact most successful when his imagination is engaged by a thematically irrelevant aspect of the plot: the tormented self-awareness of Thyestes, the conflicting emotions of Clytemestra and their cool manipulation by Aegisthus, the rhetorical possibilities of the storm-narrative. By contrast, where theme is close to the surface, most notably in the dialogue between Agamemnon and Cassandra (791ff.),<sup>1</sup> the writing is both dramatically and rhetorically threadbare.

The combination of thematic unity with episodic structure may be paralleled in certain plays of Euripides,<sup>2</sup> and may indeed be one of Seneca's many indirect legacies from that dramatist. The result for *Agamemnon* is that the parts are of considerably greater interest than the whole, and that dramatic coherence and tension are relatively slight. The play is also curiously restrained; it cannot match the gross excesses of, for example, *Medea* and *Thyestes*, but as a consequence it does not arouse the revulsion characteristic of Senecan drama at its most effective.

## DATE

Nothing useful can be said about the date of *Agamemnon*, and very little about that of the tragedies in general.<sup>3</sup> The genuine fixed points are few, and give only *termini ante quos*: 54 for *HF*, parodied in the *Apocolocyntosis*, and the early sixties for all the plays, imitated by Lucan, the writer of the *Einsiedeln Eclogues*, and perhaps Petronius.

The other evidence that has been adduced will not bear inspection: *Medea* 364ff. need not refer specifically to the conquest of Britain under Claudius and, even if it did, might be a later insertion; the controversy between Seneca and Pomponius Secundus over Pomponius's tragic diction (dated by

<sup>1</sup> Made the basis of his interpretation by Seidensticker (119ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Notably the *Phoenissae*; see the thematic analysis by E. Rawson, *GRBS* xi (1970) 109–27.

<sup>3</sup> Bibliography and short discussion in M. Coffey, *Lustrum* ii (1957) 149–51.

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Quintilian to his own youth, therefore *ca.* 50)<sup>1</sup> need not have been simultaneous with the composition of Seneca's own tragedies; the gibe reported by Tacitus<sup>2</sup> that Seneca *carmina crebrius factitavit* after Nero had developed a fondness for them would better fit the epigrams attributed to Seneca in the Latin Anthology than the plays. *Agamemnon* contains no visible allusions to contemporary events; it is surely misguided to suggest that the plot of regicide by a queen could only have occurred to Seneca after similar events had taken place in the Julio-Claudian house.<sup>3</sup> Parallels with Seneca's other works, though ubiquitous, are not close or specific enough to permit conclusions about priority.

Two of the most perceptive modern students of Seneca, Leo and Stuart, thought the plays were youthful productions; this is inherently plausible, and nothing speaks against it, though it cannot be proven. What should be clear, however, is that the fashionable interpretation of these works as 'Neronian' has no secure basis in fact; they could with equal justification be regarded as Claudian, Gaian, or even Tiberian.<sup>4</sup>

## PRODUCTION

In interpreting *Agamemnon* I have assumed that Seneca wrote with recitation, not stage-production, in mind; by 'recitation' I mean public reading either by one person or by several persons dividing the roles among themselves. This is, I think, the most probable view, but its truth cannot be demonstrated. The most recent and best treatment of this old question<sup>5</sup> makes

<sup>1</sup> *Inst.* 8.3.31; Cichorius (*Römische Studien* (1922) 426–9) suggested a date shortly after 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ann.* 14.52.

<sup>3</sup> The approach is exemplified by O. Herzog, *Rh. Mus.* lxxvii (1928) 51–104.

<sup>4</sup> 'In general the tragedies may have belonged to any stage of Seneca's literary career' (Coffey 150).

<sup>5</sup> O. Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (1966). Although some of Zwierlein's arguments and assumptions have been rightly criticised (cf. for example E. Lefèvre, *Gnomon* lx (1968) 782–9), attempts to refute his

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it clear that Seneca deviates in many ways from the dramatic technique of fifth-century Greek tragedy, and that some Senecan scenes would be difficult or even impossible to stage within classical Greek conventions.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, dangerous to assume that notions of acceptable theatrical technique remained static between Euripides and Seneca; no complete tragedy survives from the Hellenistic, Republican, or Augustan period, and the pronouncements of theorists cannot compensate for this lack of evidence. I think it likely that Seneca followed the example of Ovid, and not that of his contemporary Pomponius Secundus,<sup>2</sup> in abandoning the theatre for the more refined atmosphere of the reciting hall.<sup>3</sup> His tragedies, however, even if not meant for the stage, have at least the appearance of drama, and at times its spirit as well. They require dramatic analysis, and I have on occasion used language appropriate to the theatre in speaking of events on Seneca's 'pseudo-stage'.<sup>4</sup>

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A series of accidents has preserved some of the works of three Greek dramatists of the fifth century B.C. and ten plays written in the first century A.D., while no complete tragedy from the intervening half-millennium survives.<sup>5</sup> This coincidence, combined with Seneca's use of the same mythic plots as the Attic tragedians, helps to account for the widespread belief that

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central positions have been unavailing (cf. B. Walker, *CP* lxiv (1969) 183–7). Discussion of the matter is not advanced by W. M. Calder III, *CP* lxx (1975) 32–5.

<sup>1</sup> A stage-production of *Agamemnon* would expose *lacunae* in the action at 108ff./125ff., between 225 and 226, at 780f. and after 909.

<sup>2</sup> It seems clear from Tac. *Ann.* 11.13 (*is carmina scaenae dabat*) that Pomponius composed for the theatre at least on occasion; for his probable involvement in recitation cf. p. 7 n.1.

<sup>3</sup> It is, of course, quite possible that Seneca's plays were given performances of some sort in or shortly after his own time, just as they are on occasion performed in theatres today.

<sup>4</sup> This useful term is that of W. S. Barrett (*Hippolytus*, p. 44 n.4).

<sup>5</sup> With the possible exception of the *Rhesus*.

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fifth-century tragedy was Seneca's primary model and source of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Even where the influence of a later writer must be admitted (as in the case of Ovid's *Medea*), it is often treated as a secondary source to be placed beside the Attic original.<sup>2</sup> Manifest differences between Seneca's plays and their putative models are at times implausibly explained as the result of contamination of more than one Greek source, even when this postulates an almost Alexandrian learning on Seneca's part.<sup>3</sup> Such knowledge of Greek tragedy would not have been typical for an educated Roman of the time;<sup>4</sup> it is, furthermore, nowhere displayed in Seneca's voluminous prose writings, where citations from tragedy are generally restricted to well-known *sententiae*.<sup>5</sup> A similar reticence is found in Quintilian, most of whose Euripidean citations are taken at second hand from Cicero,<sup>6</sup> and in Pliny the Younger, who mentions the tragedians not at all and Menander only once;<sup>7</sup> even Statius, well versed

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Coffey, *Lustrum* ii (1957) 144–9, H. J. Mette, *Lustrum* ix (1964) 183–5; e.g. C. Zintzen, *Analytisches Hypomnema zu Senecas Phaedra* (1960), B. Snell, *Scenes from Greek Tragedy* (1965) 23ff., Mazzoli 172 (with bibliography).

<sup>2</sup> The most recent editor of *Medea* remarks that 'so far as we can judge, Seneca's chief model was Euripides' play' (p. 8).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Q. Cataudella, *REG* xciii (1966) 38–63; W. Braun, *de Senecae fabulae quae inscribitur Troades* (1870); C. K. Kaprukajas, *Die Nachahmungstechnik Senecas* (1930) 3ff.

<sup>4</sup> H.-I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*<sup>6</sup> (1965) 404–6, 248, 566. Ovid's list of tragic love-plots (*Tr.* 2.381ff.) might suggest that a learned Roman of his time had access to a large body of tragic texts, but his catalogue might also derive from an anthology, such as those of Timon of Phlius (Diog. Laert. 9.113). On Cicero's use and knowledge of Greek tragedy cf. H. D. Jocelyn, *JCS* xxiii (1973) 61–111.

<sup>5</sup> *Clem.* 2.2 (*adesp.* 513.1 N<sup>2</sup>), *Epist.* 31.11 (Eur. 1018 N<sup>2</sup>), 49.12 (Eur. *Phoen.* 469), 115.14 (*adesp.* 181.1, 461 N<sup>2</sup>; Eur. 324 N<sup>2</sup>), *Apocol.* 4.2 (Eur. 449 N<sup>2</sup>). The *Realien* in *NQ* 4.2.16 presumably derive from indirect tradition.

<sup>6</sup> *Inst.* 1.12.18 (from Cic. *de Or.* 2.187, *Tusc.* 2.47), 5.10.31; also 3.1.14 (Eur. 796 N<sup>2</sup>), in Aristotle's paraphrase, probably from Cic. *de Or.* 3.141; cf. A. Gwynn, *Roman education from Cicero to Quintilian* (1926) 226ff., A. Vergeest, *Poetarum Enarratio* (1950) 62.

<sup>7</sup> *Epist.* 6.21. The *Graeca tragoedia* written by Pliny at fourteen (7.4.2) may have had little relation to Attic tragedy (note the depreciatory phrase *tragoedia uocabatur*); there is no reason to accept Sherwin-White's suggestion that Pliny wrote a tragedy in the Senecan manner.



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at Naples in Menander and the lyric poets, is silent concerning tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Ovid is perhaps the last Roman poet with a wide and deep knowledge of Greek tragedy.

In the case of *Agamemnon*, at least, no fifth-century play can be shown to have served as Seneca's model. Perhaps because of the prestige of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, there is evidence of only two other *Agamemnon*-plays before 400, one by Ion of Chios and the other a work by an unknown poet perhaps produced at the Lenaea for 420/19.<sup>2</sup>

It seems incredible that the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus could ever have been thought Seneca's source.<sup>3</sup> The basic outline of the plot is similar, but this Seneca need not have derived from Aeschylus; on the other hand, characterisation, structure, and themes are all quite unrelated. The only parts of Aeschylus' play which find a parallel in Seneca are the arrival of a herald with the news of the storm and a scene in which Cassandra foresees the murder of Agamemnon and herself; even here the similarity of situation is heavily outweighed by diversity of content and treatment. Nothing in Seneca's play requires direct knowledge of Aeschylus.<sup>4</sup>

The *Agamemnon* of Ion of Chios has received less attention in this context than it deserves;<sup>5</sup> it was famous enough in later centuries to elicit a commentary from Didymus,<sup>6</sup> and Ion him-

<sup>1</sup> *Silu.* 2.1.113f., 5.3.151ff. The *Thebais* contains no certain Aeschylean or Sophoclean influence (cf. D. W. T. C. Vessey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (1973) 69f.).

<sup>2</sup> *IG*<sup>2</sup> II.972 (Kohler); only ΑΓΑ is preserved. For the prestige of Aeschylus' play, cf. Pearson, *Fragments of Sophocles* I.219.

<sup>3</sup> As maintained or implied by (e.g.) Buecheler, *Zentralblatt für Deutschland* xxx (1879) 965f.; Strauss (36); E. Paratore, *Dioniso* xv (1952) 210; Giomini (7); Runchina (192); Mette, *Lustrum* ix (1964) 183; Heldmann (2); Liebermann (216). See now W. M. Calder III, *CP* 71 (1976) 27ff.

<sup>4</sup> The 'fast wörtliche Übereinstimmungen' adduced by Buecheler, e.g. Seneca 83ff. and 96ff. with Aeschylus 461ff. and 470ff., do not bear inspection.

<sup>5</sup> For Ion cf. Bentley, *Epist. ad Jo. Millium* (304ff. Dyce), Diehl, *RE* ix.1861-8, T. B. L. Webster, *Hermes* lxiv (1936) 263ff. His *Agamemnon* was produced between 452/49 (Ion's first competition) and 421 (when he is spoken of as dead in Arist. *Pax* 835ff.).

<sup>6</sup> Athenaeus 468d.

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self enjoyed high regard among the Alexandrian critics, who ranked him (and Achaëus) with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The fragments support the following inferences: a messenger entered in haste to inform Clytaemestra that Agamemnon had arrived;<sup>1</sup> Agamemnon himself probably entered on a *ἄμαξα*;<sup>2</sup> Ion seems to have returned to the Homeric account of Agamemnon's death;<sup>3</sup> finally, a verse of uncertain meaning<sup>4</sup> has been referred to a scene in which Aegisthus and Clytaemestra plot the death of Agamemnon<sup>5</sup> and to a scene after the murder in which Aegisthus (or Clytaemestra) threatens a recalcitrant Electra with protracted torment;<sup>6</sup> either suggestion, if true, would establish an important link between Ion and a non-Aeschylean element of Seneca's treatment. Direct imitation of Ion by Seneca is extremely unlikely, but Ion's play should be taken seriously as a potential influence on later Greek (and, conceivably, early Roman) treatments of the myth.

No positive evidence connects a post-classical Greek tragedy with a play of Seneca, and it is unlikely that the productions of this period were widely known at Rome at any time later than the second century B.C.<sup>7</sup> In many aspects of dramatic economy and technique, however, Senecan tragedy is the heir and only surviving exemplar of innovations which seem to have become canonical between the death of Euripides and the introduction of tragedy at Rome.<sup>8</sup> Among these developments are a five-act

<sup>1</sup> Fr. 1 N<sup>2</sup>, perhaps also fr. 60 N<sup>2</sup>; the character who enters may be the watchman stationed by Aegisthus in *Od.* 4.524f. (The fragments have been collected and commented on by A. von Blumenthal (Stuttgart, 1939).)

<sup>2</sup> Fr. 3 N<sup>2</sup> ἱππικὸν χλίδος.

<sup>3</sup> Phot. *Lex.* p. 143.26 Reitzenstein: ἀπροσδοκῆτως [γάρ] καὶ ἄνοπλοι πορθούμεθα (κἄνοπλοι Reitzenstein).

<sup>4</sup> Fr. 2 N<sup>2</sup> κακῶν ἀπέστω θάνατος ὡς ἴδη κακά (κακῶν) ἐν κακόν Nauck).

<sup>5</sup> So von Blumenthal, Webster (266).

<sup>6</sup> K. Stackmann, *Class. et Med.* xi (1950) 219.

<sup>7</sup> Fragments and *testimonia*, cf. F. Schramm, *Tragoediae Graecae Aetatis Hellenisticae Fragmenta* (diss. Münster, 1929), B. Snell, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* I (1971) 259ff.; survey, K. Ziegler, *RE* s.u. 'Tragoedia', VI.A.1971ff.

<sup>8</sup> The following paragraphs present the conclusions of an argument I hope to develop in another place; the discussion must be conducted with