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UNSETTLING THE SENECAN FIRST ACT

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Beginnings matter. In tragedy, specifically, the first act is the initial tableau in a larger composition, introducing the raw material—themes, characters, and mythological crisis—whose development and consequences will comprise the poetic action. Seneca's are a case in point: although scholars have noted that his first acts can be 'somewhat separate' from the main action of the plot and overly general or preliminary in character,[1] this is only true in dramatic terms; a holistic approach to Senecan tragedy regularly reveals the artistry of a first act in retrospect, from the standpoint of a play's conclusion. The scattering of Hippolytus' companions (*Pha.* 1-30), for example, foreshadows his eventual dismemberment; and the extent of his patron's Diana's dominion (54-72) is ultimately dwarfed and subsumed by that of Amor.[2] Echoes of the ghost of *Thyestes*' prologue in Cassandra's final speech (*Ag.* 1004-11), similarly, approximate the epic technique of ring-composition, with supernatural voices of authority replacing that of epic's third-person narrator at the bookends of the drama.[3] However dramatically detached a first act might appear, Senecan technique prioritizes the establishment of thematic, intellectual, and lexical foundations for what follows.[4]

Yet tidiness is far from the be-all and end-all of Seneca's poetics. As my co-editor will argue at the end of this volume, the conclusions to his plays often beguile and retrospectively recast the drama in a new light, and a similar phenomenon appears in the first acts, as well: despite their foundational character, they frequently unsettle in subtle ways, as Seneca manipulates his material and challenges his audiences' expectations. This is true internally (since *dramatis personae* challenge or defy convention in their actions),[5] but applies as well to matters thematic, generic, and mythological. Littlewood's analysis of the conflict of elegy and pastoral in *Phaedra*, for example, pinpoints a generic antagonism that is announced right at the start of the play; Trinacty, similarly, discusses the curious reception of the *Aeneid* in the prologue of *Hercules Furens*.[6] Yet the discomfiture extends beyond intertextuality and the '*Kreuzung der*

1. Fitch (1987), 115. Tarrant (1976), 157, remarks that 'only in *Phaedra* does the action proper begin before the first choral song' but cf. the criticisms of Zwierlein (1987), 104f.
2. *Pha.* 185-94, 274-357; cf. the remarks of the preface in this volume.
3. See Trinacty in this volume.
4. So also Mastronarde (1970), 291.
5. Medea, Atreus, and Hercules, for example, all assert their own realities.
6. Littlewood (2004), 259-301; Trinacty (2014), 130-38. Morelli (2007) discusses the latter prologue's relationship to the *Aeneid*, as well.

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Gattungen,'[7] for not even a play's temporal confines are safe: the ghosts who begin *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon* effectively introduce the past as a character into those plays, a blurring of dramatic *incipit* discernible elsewhere in the poet's tendency to begin his plots at an emotional fever pitch, with the dramatic crisis well under way.[8]

That his technique unsettles is perhaps a reflection of the poet's own anxieties. Seneca's tragedies are famously self-aware, not only of their status as tragedies, but also of their place in a larger poetic and mythological tradition. The ghosts haunting the plays are as figurative as they are literal,[9] and the raw material for the tragedies is always already compromised.[10] As such, the compositional technique on display in the first acts, I would argue, juggles a trio of objectives: introducing the myth at stake (i.e. the dramatic aim); establishing the terms in which Seneca will treat it (i.e. his poetical aim); and, thereby, pruning the forest of pertinent tradition (an aim best classified as reception). This essay's interest lies primarily with the second aim (which in Seneca's case is so bound up with the third as to be inextricable): its principal concern is how Seneca's manipulations of myth, themes, setting, time,[11] character, and meter in the first acts lay familiar groundwork even as they discomfit.

A brief example helps to illustrate how such tensions are integral to Seneca's poetry. Although a familiarity with Sophoclean themes might raise the expectation that the dawn with which *Oedipus* begins is a harbinger of the knowledge, clarity, and paradoxical blindness/sight in which the play will conclude, in Seneca's treatment it serves instead as the first of several metaphors for Oedipus' present condition.[12] The protagonist's opening monologue makes the sun's murkiness representative of his own metapoetic guilt, both a symptom and a cause of the putrefaction plaguing Thebes.[13] In addition to acknowledging and manipulating a rich tradition of plague-narratives, the metaphor liberates

7. For the latter, see Kroll (1924), 202-24.

8. The same can be achieved at plays' conclusions: in *Agamemnon*, for example, Cassandra brings the curtain down with an ominous prediction of future events: *ueniet et uobis furor* ('to you, as well, will madness come', *Ag.* 1012). Given how Cassandra echoes Thyestes' ghost, as well, the tragedy's temporal boundaries are obscured both at the start and conclusion of the dramatic action. On prologue-ghosts and structural return, see Gunderson in this volume. *Troades* reveals something entirely different: it begins at an end-point, and pointedly limits its temporal scope to the events of the play itself (see further, *infra*).

9. So also Littlewood (2004), 260, responding to Segal (1986), 203.

10. As Gunderson discusses in this volume, Seneca's poetics are catalyzed by the (im)possibility of originality. The idea of renewal in the face of exhaustion informs Kroll's notion of generic enrichment as well: Kroll (1924), 202-24. For Seneca's reception of Augustan poetry, see, most recently, Trinacty (2014).

11. See, for example, Shelton (1978), 17-25.

12. Anliker (1960), 30. The Sphinx (*Oed.* 87-109) and, subsequently, Manto's exstipicy (*Oed.* 314-83), serve much the same purpose.

13. By the time he contemplates absconding, Oedipus himself makes the connection forcefully: *[sperne] tabifica caeli uitia quae tecum inuehis / infaustus hospes* ('[spurn] the contaminating vices of heaven which you introduce with yourself as an unlucky stranger', *Oed.* 79f.). The putrefaction, of course, is also a metapoetic comment on the myth's need for rehabilitation and freshening up.

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Seneca, both reassuring the audience with its familiarity and unsettling by way of its novelty: Oedipus will ultimately end up exactly where he (and the audience) dreads,[14] but Seneca asserts, from the beginning, his freedom to handle themes and plot as he pleases. Unlike his Sophoclean counterpart, for example, Seneca's Oedipus is from the start 'supremely aware of his status as king'.[15] Seneca's trick is to link kingship, the sun, and suffering: *regnum*, as Oedipus conceives of it, is no boon, but rather a 'false good' (*fallax bonum*) that conceals misfortune (*quantum malorum…tegis*, 6f.) and is itself subject to fortune (11). So, when he notes that he is unique in being spared (29-31), this only prompts the conclusion that he is responsible (*fecimus caelum nocens*, 36), which is followed by a survey of Titan's destructive effects (37-51), including a black vapor (*ater… uapor*, 47) upon earth—a 'hellish vista' which 'has concealed the citadels and lofty homes of the gods' (*obtexit arces caelitum ac summas domos / inferna facies*, 48f.).[16] This language recurs after Oedipus has blinded himself: he notes the 'black cloud' (*atra nube*, 1000) upon his head, his flight from daylight (1001—or vice-versa, 1003), and the new 'visage' (*uultus*) which befits him (1003). His downfall, furthermore, confirms the opening remarks on the vagaries of kingship.[17]

These are not the sole respects in which the first act lays the foundation for the rest of Seneca's play,[18] but the course of the drama is neither direct nor without surprise: Oedipus' self-awareness no more entails omniscience than the unprecedented *extispicium* and necromancy belong to the traditional (and, one might admit, rather stale) murder-mystery plot. Poetic technique engages the audience while putting it off balance, and the resulting dance—defying and yielding to expectation and convention by turns—establishes the poet's agenda.[19] Different plays, as we will observe, are similarly concerned with a totalizing poetic rigor and a vitality characterized by subtle discomfiture.

Cosmic and Familial Disorder

Hercules Furens is an ideal starting point for a study of the Senecan first act, as it makes the disruption of order—domestic and cosmic (and therefore, dramatic)—the central theme of Juno's opening soliloquy. This simple theme and its manipulation animate the drama as a whole, drawing the audience's attention to the paradoxical relationship of Juno's actions and Hercules' disruptive potential: in the past, the

14. Cf. Trinacty and DeBrohun in this volume.

15. Boyle (2011), *ad* 6f.

16. The gods are also implicated in the theme of confusion: Creon notes the ambiguity of Delphic responses (214f.), and Tiresias notes how divine anger is usually unmistakable (332f.).

17. See Cowan in this volume on the link between *Oed.* 14 and 1051.

18. On the unity of *Oedipus*, based in the vocabulary and themes established in the prologue, see Mastronarde (1970).

19. See further DeBrohun, in this volume.

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former both provoked and failed to check the latter,[20] and in the dramatic present, Juno not only anticipates his crimes against his family but also fears a future attempt to overthrow his father Jupiter. The idea that these anticipated achievements will stem from her personal campaign against the protagonist complicates both the situation and any assumption of a stable order or *status quo*.[21]

The cause of Juno's anger is, at first glance, straightforward: thrust from her proper place in the heavens as Jupiter's wife, she laments how she has been replaced by *paelices* ('mistresses') and resents her exile to earth (*HF* 1-5). Her arrival and survey of the pre-dawn sky, whose constellations immortalize Jupiter's infidelities (6-18), indicate that her anger is at least in part directed against a cosmos she finds out of order, an idea made manifest by her extraordinary advent in Thebes, home to several of the paramours and bastards of Jupiter that have displaced her.[22] Immediately at the onset of the action, things are unsettled: human beings occupy divine territory, while divinities are relegated to an unfamiliar, terrestrial realm. The dissolution of Juno's domestic situation, in other words, is mirrored by a cosmic disturbance, which renders her anomalous dramatic appearance programmatic: Seneca engages his audience initially not via some dramatic concern for establishing the myth or plot at stake, but, rather, via the immediacy of Juno's anger, from which will stem the entire tragedy.[23] This anger, and the intertwined disorders of family and cosmos, dominate the prologue.

Juno's complaints are quickly crystallized in the figure of Hercules, who is also promised a place in the sky and whose mother Alcmene, Juno fears,[24] will claim '[her] own position' (*meumque…locum*, 21-23). The past (infidelity), present (exile), and future are dissolved in her anger, a temporal upheaval evident in the cosmos, as well: the nighttime sky which Juno surveyed in anger upon entering, for example, evokes the unusual circumstances in which Hercules was conceived,[25] and anticipates his promised destination in the stars. His origins in such circumstances gel with the trajectory of his life and accomplishments, and the main question is whether his place in heaven will be gained peacefully or violently. Juno suspects the latter; his achievements shock

20. The impetus for Hercules' labors (traditionally performed in atonement for the murder of his family) is, as in Euripides' *Heracles*, confused: Seneca's Juno takes personal responsibility for commanding him (*HF* 33-36).

21. On the compression of time and the confusion of causality in the prologue, see Shelton (1978), 18; Anliker (1960), 46-48.

22. *HF* 19-21: Semele, Antiope, and (most recently) Alcmene are the women Juno has in mind.

23. So Billerbeck and Guex (2002), 123: 'Le rôle de ces personnages [in a Senecan prologue] ne consiste pas seulement à exposer les antécédents de l'histoire, mais aussi à lancer l'action dramatique, comme nous le voyons ici avec Junon.' Fitch (1987), 115, concurs: 'Background information emerges incidentally…and it is limited to the point that interests her, namely Hercules' return from the underworld…'

24. Alcmene, as Fitch notes (1987), *ad* 21f., is not typically catasterized: this is Juno's supposition.

25. The night of his conception was unnaturally long, she reports, since Phoebus had been ordered to restrain the daylight (*HF* 24-26; cf. *Ag.* 813-26).

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for how they defy both nature and her expectations. Hercules tames whatever is hostile (30-33), thrives in turning a challenging labor into a personal victory, and, most crucially, transforms Juno's hatred into his own glory (33-35).[26]

Juno's anger in the face of cosmic and domestic disorder complicates the play's representation of a *status quo* and the causes by which it is overturned. Because it is prompted by disturbance, her *furor* ('rage') might appear to stand for some traditional order of things—cosmic stability, the sanctity of the family, etc. She is, after all, the goddess of marriage and childbirth.[27] But the Juno Seneca inherits from literary tradition is on the other hand an agent of turmoil, and the plot that she motivates will culminate in the destruction of Hercules' nuclear family. *Furor*, the tragedy demonstrates, infects everything it encounters: her displacement and madness provokes that of Hercules. So too, in other words, is the assumption that the *status quo* is one of stability or order unsteady: so familiar is the persona of Juno *nouerca* and so pervasive the monologue's intertextual ties to Virgil and Ovid's *Iunones furentes* that madness and disorder are thoroughly normalized.[28] Seneca's audience finds little stable ground in the goddess's contradictory aspects: if, conservatively, the violation of a cosmic and domestic *status quo* inspires her anger, then Juno might be expected to act for its restoration. She does not. If *furor* and the intertwined dissolution of cosmic and domestic order, conversely, constitute the *status quo*, one expects the play to climax in the conquest of Jupiter's regime, the logical conclusion of Hercules' labors. (Juno would then, perversely, be responsible for her continuing exile from heaven—precisely that which provoked her initially!) In Seneca's dramatization, the latter possibility remains tantalizing, but unrealized. Juno's plan for Hercules' self-destruction will be achieved with the murder of his family, but that is not entirely clear from the first act alone: her fear (and the logic that underpins it) reveals a sly bit of misdirection on the poet's part, prodding the audience to contemplate where Hercules' madness might lead, in defiance of its expectations.[29]

Like Juno herself, the Hercules she describes is an agent of disorder, whose actions have long threatened a new, inverted celestial order: over whatever terrain the sun rises and sets, he is victorious and celebrated as a god (*HF* 37-40). Celestial phenomena and the geographical range of his activity are intertwined: like the sky whose occupation by *paelices* ('mistresses') Juno resents for exiling her, she cannot

26. The idea expressed in an etymological play: the Greek Ἡρακλῆς ('Hera's glory') is transformed: as she puts it, ***in laudes suas / mea*** *uertit* ***odia*** ('he turns **my** hatred into **his glory**', *HF* 34f.), though she later hints that her role in his achievements is essential too—*gloriae feci locum* ('I've set the stage for glory', *HF* 36).

27. The tragedy, interestingly, downplays the version of the myth in which Juno inhibits Alcmene's labor so as for Eurystheus to be born first.

28. Hinds (2011), 14f.; Trinacty (2014), 130-38. See also Littlewood in this volume.

29. The idea is not unprecedented: in the *Iliad*, Heracles' attacks on individual gods are described (Hom. *Il.* 5.392-404). Morelli (2007), 32-34, notes the prologue's emphasis on Hercules' assault, as well.

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abide the tamed earth transforming *her* anger into *his* glory. Her perspective dominates and startles: he is already celebrated as a god (39f.); the world's supply of *monstra* ('monsters', 40) is exhausted; his completion of her orders takes less effort than their bestowal (41f.); no tyrant's laws injure him; and his conquered foes are repurposed into his armaments. As far as life on earth is concerned, the inversions appear total, and Juno is exasperated and exhausted in addition to being exiled. The labor she has currently assigned indicates that it's happened *again*; Hercules now breaks into the underworld and conquers Dis, bringing Cerberus back to the world of the living (47-61). The violence of his forced entry,[30] as well as the disruption of natural order that it achieves, echoes Juno's earlier complaints. Just as she lamented losing her proper place in heaven to Jupiter's mistresses, so now has Hercules displaced Dis and opened a path of regress from the underworld for the shades (55f.); and just as the sun was held back on the occasion of his conception, so now does it shrink to behold Cerberus brought up from below (60f.). Shades displaced from the underworld, gods displaced from the heavens, day and night out of kilter, tyrants' authority displaced from the civilized world—Juno's focalizing perspective presents Hercules as a unique and irrepressible agent of disorder. The *hapax* 'acting arrogantly' (*superbifica*, 58) is fully appropriate for mirroring poetically the unique character whose might it describes.[31] However much they might civilize a wild nature or render the world safe for human inhabitation, his labors disrupt.[32] Even Juno shudders at her role in his accomplishments (61-63), which have left her and other divinities banished: she is both foe and, paradoxically, the patron of his activities.

Hercules' conquest and triumph over the underworld prompts Juno to contemplate a further point on the trajectory of his labors: the heavens. In reiteration of the motifs with which she began her monologue, the disruptive potential of Hercules appears in its most threatening form. Instead of the promised place in the stars to which she referred earlier on (*HF* 23), heaven is now at risk of violent assault. Indeed, precedent is such that Juno envisions the assault as already under way (74).[33] It will not be gradual, she fears (66): he will overthrow Jupiter and claim his father's scepter (65), as he did Dis and other human tyrants. Such an outcome, crucially, would entail a climactic upheaval of cosmic and domestic order: the usurpation of Jupiter entails not simply a change in regime, but also a categorical breach of filial piety. The paradox of such an event, that a human being could be capable of cosmic rule, is reinforced

30. *effregit…limen* ('he has broken the gate', *HF* 48); *Dite domito* ('with Dis overwhelmed', *HF* 51); *Ereboque capto* ('Erebus conquered', *HF* 54); *rupto carcere umbrarum* ('the prison of shades ruptured', *HF* 57); *terna monstri colla deuicti* ('the threefold necks of the defeated monster', *HF* 62).

31. Billerbeck and Guex (2002), 153, *ad* 58.

32. For the conflicting views of Hercules in the play, as well as the similarity of his sanity and insanity, Fitch (1987), 21-33, is classic; see also Shelton (1978), 58-73.

33. Anliker (1960), 47, describes the product of the change from future tense (*quaeret*, *HF* 67) to present (*quaerit*, *HF* 74) as reflecting a 'causal anachronism' (*kausaler 'Anachronismus'*).

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by the description of Hercules with the world on his shoulders: there, Juno claims, it rested more securely than before (72)!

Such is the stage set for the final portion of her monologue, in which Juno's thinking circles back on all that has transpired, not so much to express her exasperation as to inspire her ultimate, maddened retribution. Surveying other figures of cosmic disorder—the Titans and Typhoeus (79-82)—and remarking that Hercules has already defeated them,[34] Juno draws the logical (and paradoxical) conclusion that Hercules' only equal is himself (84f.). His various achievements shall be turned against him: the underworld forces which he conquered will be unleashed in retribution (104). For a human so mad as to seek heaven and resent his humanity (89f.), the only response is more madness. And so the Furies are summoned, and so the confusion and chaos that have already been wrought are intensified. Neither Juno nor the Furies are to be exempt (108-12): to defeat Hercules, Juno must be his ally (118-21) in addition to being his antagonist, and harmony the means to victory.[35] Paradox is the *status quo*: the world, in Littlewood's terms, is 'broken'.[36]

The disorder and chaos wrought by Hercules draws Juno's prologue to a conclusion. As Fitch puts it, 'the audience observes the process of thought by which she arrives at [her plan of campaign against Hercules'.[37] Juno contemplates the kind of action she should take as a stepmother (111f.),[38] and utters a prayer whose intentions are only thinly disguised:

> natos reuersus uideat incolumes precor
> manuque fortis redeat.
>
> (Sen. *HF* 113f.)

> I pray that he look upon his children secure upon return,
> and that he return strong in hand.

She aims to turn his valor against him, but will stand by his side (as though he needed the help!), guiding his hand as he achieves her goals. So well established are the themes of coextensive cosmic and familial disorder that it is clear what *scelus* ('crime') she has in mind—one whose reward will be his *genitor* ('father') admitting him into heaven (121f.),[39] though he would wish to return

34. Fitch (1987), *ad* 79, notes that, after Hesiod, the Gigantomachy and Titanomachy are conflated: in the former, traditionally, Hercules assisted the Olympians. See Pindar *Nem.* 1.61-72; Diod. Sic. 4.15, 4.21.

35. Seneca would well appreciate the words of Publilius Syrus: *ibi semper est uictoria ubi concordia est* ('victory is always where harmony is', *Sententiae* 327).

36. Littlewood (2004), 15-102, esp. 72-81.

37. Fitch (1987), 115.

38. Cf. her complaint (*HF* 19-21) that she has too often been made a stepmother.

39. So Fitch (1987), 116: '[I]t is clear in her own mind, but is revealed to the audience only incidentally, through allusive hints.' The idea of the allusive and dim revelation is an old one, going back to Leo (1908), 91.

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to the underworld.[40] Yet by the same token, the trajectory of his career, as she has herself described, hints that this admission will be similarly violent. The first act simultaneously confirms and misdirects expectations: Juno will turn out to be both right and wrong.[41]

Juno will not appear again in the play, but the events and themes that are variously described, lamented or predicted recur or reverberate in subsequent episodes. The exceptional character of Hercules—whom no tyrant's laws can constrain (43f.)—anticipates not only the struggle with Lycus but also the pleas of Amphitryon and Theseus (*HF* 1246-50),[42] the latter of which returns in conclusion to the ideas of filial piety and domestic order. One could go on: her account of Hercules' exploits in the underworld anticipates his dramatic return and Theseus' ecphrasis in the third act, not to mention the second choral ode's comparison with Orpheus; the predicted assault on heaven as well as the themes of cosmic and domestic disorder all reverberate richly in the fourth act's madness (926-52; 955-73); even Juno's pledge to guide Hercules' arrows is acknowledged later (1297). The shifting connotations of the solar imagery—particularly the arrival or departure of daylight—also link individual episodes into a cohesive whole:[43] it describes the birth of Hercules, the perversion of natural order, and applies as well to the constellations which remind Juno of her husband's affairs (and, therefore, to the anger she feels). The first act is the kernel of the play as a whole, but through its fantasy of an assault on heaven (not to mention its *contaminatio* of *Iunones furentes*), it puts the audience somewhat off balance, suggesting causes and conclusions outside the drama that are unsettling. Any notion of a stable *status quo* or tragic universe is replaced instead by one of paradox and disorder.

Medeas, Marriages, Murder

As in *Hercules*, the first act of *Medea* puts the themes of convention and the *status quo* under a spotlight. In both plays, the prologue speaker challenges

40. Fitch (1987), *ad* 116f., notes Hercules' last words at 1338-41: Juno has succeeded. That longing is inherited: Juno's wish—'may he long for death' (*et cupiat mori*, *HF* 116)—recalls that of Ovid's persecuted and laboring Alcmena: 'and I longed for death' (*cupioque mori*, Ov. *Met.* 9.303).

41. Hercules will not turn his sights to heaven after killing his family, but in his madness, he hallucinates that he is assaulting heaven and Juno herself (*HF* 939-1020).

42. Commands are also thematized in the play: Hercules' commands from Juno/Eurystheus (41; 211; 213; 235; 604; 830-33; 1268); those of the violent tyrant (43); of Phoebus restraining the day for the purpose of Hercules' conception (26); the certainty of death and the Parcae's cut (189); the perversion that good people are ordered by the wicked (253); Hercules' exposing things from below to the light under orders (596; cf. 660).

43. The theme relates variously to Juno's displacement from heaven and the conception of Hercules (4-26), his violation of the underworld and retrieval of Cerberus (50-61; 821-27); Juno's retribution (123f.); the first choral 'dawn song'; Amphitryon's grief (207-09); Hercules' anticipated arrival (279-83); Megara's rejection of Lycus (373f.); Hercules' thanks upon arrival (593-97); entry to the underworld (669-72); Hercules' madness (939-42); Hercules as sun (1057-63); Hercules' reawakening (1138-41); Hercules' infamy and lack of asylum (1329-34).

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expectations, only to be followed by a choral song in which convention is a theme.[44] But while *Hercules* surprises by anticipating a possible assault on heaven, the conflict of convention and innovation is in *Medea* thoroughly integrated into the play's poetic and metapoetic fabric.[45] In the latter play, the conventionality of the chorus provides dramatic and poetic counterpoint to Medea's (meta)poetic quest to break new ground in both realizing and surpassing herself.[46] More so than in *Hercules Furens*, structure reflects the play's thematic content: Medea's self-aware and passionate opening soliloquy generates a plethora of dualities—of marriages, of crimes, of (groups of) divinities, of Medeas—and the ode that answers it is apt because it *re*iterates, but with a different valence, many of those ideas. The doubling motif focuses and enriches the play's conflict and crisis, emphasizing how, for Seneca as much as for his protagonist, traditions and conventions—mythological, dramatic, and poetical—are at issue and subject to both challenge and variation. For these reasons, I will discuss both the prologue and the ode that proceeds from it.[47]

The *kletic* prayer with which Medea opens the play establishes the dichotomies on which her existence hinges and which her subsequent dramatic actions will also contest. She refers to the various gods who witnessed the wedding vows she extracted from Jason: Lucina, Minerva, Neptune, Titan, and Hecate (*Med.* 1-9). The first three names include divinities responsible for the voyage of the Argo (and therefore, for their very union),[48] the latter two reflect aspects of Medea herself.[49] There is a second group of gods, however, to whom Medea more appropriately prays (9-18), namely the nether-forces of chaos, night, *manes*, Dis and Proserpine, and the Furies. With these latter forces, Medea conjures another kind of marriage, one which is distinct from (and which retorts) the problematic 'bridling' (*frenare*, 3) of Argo in which Minerva instructed Tiphys or Neptune's 'harsh taming of the sea' (*saeue dominator maris*, 4). From Medea's shocking and novel perspective, this second kind of marriage is retributive, a reality most clearly indicated by her own marriage bed, which was attended by

44. Contrast is essential to Seneca's poetic point: in response to the exceptionalism of Hercules and the bedlam surrounding him (and Juno), the dawn-song and its juxtaposition of rustic and urban life reassert a *status quo* that is absent or undermined in the prologue. Fitch (1987), 161-63, shows how the ode is both integrated into the play to an unusual degree and indebted to numerous models; see also Billerbeck and Guex (2002), 173-75. Littlewood (2004), 81, notes that this ode 'suggests a secure resolution of the drama'. The case of *Medea* I turn to currently.

45. Boyle (1997), 122, praises the structure of the play as well.

46. So also Hine (1989); Trinacty (2014), 188-90.

47. On the first ode of *Hercules Furens*, see Littlewood in this volume.

48. As Littlewood (2004), 148, notes the voyage of the Argo is thereby presented as a breach of natural order.

49. Medea is a granddaughter of the sun (28f.), and will call upon Hecate in preparation of her rites (577, 833, 839-42). I would go further and posit that they represent her family's acknowledgement of the union: Németi (2003), 131, *ad* 6-7, notes the tradition traced to Dionysius Scytobrachion in which Hecate is Aeëtes' wife (and mother of Medea): Diod. Sic. 4.45.1-3; Σ Apoll. Rhod. 3.200b; 3.240. Such an admission makes their reappearance in the play's climax and denouement all the more appropriate.

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Furies with their 'snaky hair loose' and 'unkempt' (*solutis…serpentibus*, 14; *horridae*, 16). The way that she reminisces about their presence at the wedding in appealing to them as 'avenger-goddesses of (a) crime' (*sceleris ultrices deae*, 13) traces the imperative for vengeance all the way back to the moment of her union with Jason.[50] The paradox, that a wedding is not always what it appears and can necessitate violent retribution as much as it can bring two individuals together, is captured succinctly in her exhortation to the Furies: *coniugi letum nouae…date* ('bring death to the new bride', 17f.).[51] The marriage she would grant her rival is not so different from her own.

The references to Jason's new wife, father-in-law, and their royal stock (17f.) are sufficient to establish the myth at stake,[52] and as her prayer proceeds, Medea increasingly asserts her own agency.[53] Intensifying her manipulation and redefinition of marriage, its norms, and its meaning, Medea turns her attention to the bridegroom, and curses him to go without in terms that also reflect her current state. She prays he will be 'poor' (*egens*, 20), an 'exile' (*exul*, 21), 'afraid' (*pauens*, 21), 'hated' (*inuisus*, 21), 'homeless' (*incerti laris*, 21), and a 'known alien' (*notus hospes*, 22). In contrast to the death she wishes upon his bride (17f.), the state she has in mind for him is an anti-marriage resembling the union and woman on which he is turning his back. It is appropriate, then, for her to pray that he long for her as a wife (22) and that his children resemble their parents (24f.; cf. 933f.). The first hint of her plan is conceived in this negated marriage, for the product of their union will be both the instrument of her revenge and the realization of the new marriage she would allow him:

> parta iam, parta ultio est:
> peperi
>
> (Sen. *Med.* 25f.)

> Already born—my vengeance is already born:
> I have given birth.

50. Boyle (2014), *ad* 16-17, argues that the Furies' presence was to punish her for her murder of Absyrtus: this is not made clear, however, until 967-71, regarding which he notes (2014), *ad* 967-71, that 'In Apollonius (4.476) a Fury actually witnesses the murder.' I incline toward Littlewood (2004), 152: 'A feature of the avenging Fury is its tendency to re-stage the crime it punishes.'

51. The *atram facem* ('black torch', *Med.* 15) carried by the Furies resemble the torches that Furies use to inspire madness more than the *iugales faces* ('conjugal torches') of marriage, which can also be ominous (as at Sen. *Ag.*158). Boyle (1997), 113, has the play's socio-moral thesis as 'what creates civilisation destroys it'.

52. As in other plays, Seneca eschews entirely the kind of expository prologue one finds in Euripides' *Medea*: there is no need to do so when the plot at stake is obvious. See Costa (1973), 61; Biondi (1984), 16-22; Németi (2003), 127f.

53. Boyle (2014), 98.

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The distinctions between marriage, childbearing, divorce, remarriage, and violence are obliterated in the alliteration and elision: in her vengeance they are all radically commingled.

With her plan already conceived—nay, engendered—Medea's animated musings continue to undo familiar distinctions and to attack convention.[54] Although Jason swore wedding vows by Titan, she now invokes her status as the sun's granddaughter (28f.), complaining about the orderliness of his course in response to Jason's abuse, and envisioning herself piloting his chariot so as to consume Corinth with flames (32-36). In her mind, Medea will become a second Phaëthon, though, in defiance of mythological convention, her control will be flawless even as it wreaks similar destruction.[55] Where previously the Furies stood as bridesmaids at her wedding chamber (13-17), she now proposes to perform personally the same task for Jason's new bride (37f.). As in her role as a new Phaëthon, however, she will surpass her models: the ritual sacrifice she intends will provide the raw material and 'path' for an even more innovative punishment-cum-composition (*supplicio uiam* 40). Medea is inspired by the past, but seeks something novel and 'more serious' (*grauior* 49):[56] no longer appropriate are the works of a virgin; since she is now a 'mother'—a *matrona*—the tale of her divorce must match that of her marriage (52-54; cf. 1006-08). Both figuratively and literally, marriage has brought her to this point: the crime which begat it requires a further crime to end it (55). Marriage, that most conventional and basic of human ties and affections, becomes for Medea the locus for innovation, violence, and retribution.

The song that follows the first act reveals Seneca exploiting structure in the service of his themes of dichotomy, antithesis, and the surmounting of convention.[57] For where Medea aimed to put the drama on a particular trajectory in her monologue by juxtaposing the Argo's voyage with her marriage, the dissolution of that marriage, and a novel form of retribution,[58] the chorus enters singing a polymetric wedding song of a very traditional sort.[59] Its verses track many of the themes and motifs to which Medea has just given voice, but its conventional

54. As Boyle (1997), 128-33, and Schiesaro (2003), 17f., note, the realization of Medea's revenge is framed as poetic or dramatic inspiration.

55. Cf. Littlewood (2004), 148, who sees Phaëthon instead as a paradigm for Argonautic transgression, which is certainly true later in the play: see Costa (1973), *ad* 599-602; Biondi (1984), 152, *ad* 599sg. But Medea, although inspired by Phaëthon (i.e. *Med.* 826f.), will nonetheless surpass her predecessor and succeed.

56. For the 'heavier' deeds of Medea as a departure from Ovid and elegiac constraints, see Trinacty (2007), 67-69. On the *maius*-motif in Seneca more broadly, cf. Cowan's essay in this volume.

57. My analysis of *Hercules Furens* and, subsequently, *Troades* would benefit no less from an analysis of the choral song that follows those first acts, but for reasons of space I have limited myself to *Medea*, regarding which I hope to demonstrate that the dualities in theme and structure are essential to Seneca's poetic point.

58. Given her innovative ambitions, I'm tempted to coin her vengeance a 'dysthanization'.

59. As Biondi puts it, 'Il monologo di Medea, nonostante il metro "dialogato", ha connotazioni stilistiche decisamente innologiche: il suo discourse è una preghiera "nera" cui si opporrà quella "bianca" del coro': Biondi and Traina (1989), 91.

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sentiments are entirely antithetical to hers.[60] The result, as Hine notes, is conflict.[61] Echoing the gods whom Medea summoned to witness Jason's broken vows, the chorus sings instead of divine support (56-60), including that of Lucina herself (61). Instead of Furies holding a black torch, Hymen is summoned to carry torches which dispel darkness (67f.): the latter's inebriated gait and garlanded brow (69f.), additionally, tempers the image of a maddened Fury's raging manner and unkempt hair. In the appeal to Hesperus, furthermore, one detects the negation or rejection of daylight: his *lucidos radios* ('bright rays', 74), to whose scattering the chorus refers, are gentle and beneficent in contrast to the *flagrantibus…loris* ('fiery reins', 33f.) of the solar chariot which Medea hopes to drive. The ode's thrust runs counter to that of Medea's prayer, deepening by way of reiteration the central poetic conflict in which convention is at stake.

In the middle portion of the hymn, the conflict becomes more serious and its outcome ominously augured, as though the chorus' sentiments are weighed down by their own conventionality. The admiration of the bride's *uirgineus decor* ('virgin beauty', 75) stands in emphatic contrast to Medea's exhortation to surpass the crimes she committed as a 'maiden' (*uirgo*, 48f.). Subsequently, it utters a serious of κληδόνες ('ominous utterances') whose momentum and the extent of whose irony is chilling: while the chorus claims that the bride surpasses other Greek maidens (*uincit*, lit: 'is victorious', 75), the idea, which is expressed in thoroughly conventional terms, anticipates instead the *victory* of Medean novelty and invention. For, the prayer that, in marriage, this 'woman may outdo wives' (*uincat femina coniuges*, 91) is ominous in the wake of the 'greater crimes' (*maiora scelera*, 50) plotted by the play's preeminent wife and mother. In remarking that this bride will outshine others just as stars are obscured by the sun and the Pleiades by the moon (93-98), the chorus fatally invokes Medea's solar lineage and kinship with Hecate *triformis*—kin before whom, one must recall, Jason swore his original wedding vows (5-8).[62] Although the chorus may be correct that the Corinthian princess will burn brightest, it will be on Medea's terms; she has, after all, already fantasized about driving her grandfather's chariot (33f.). Even the novel consent of Jason's Corinthian in-laws is ominous: it not only recalls the historical unwillingness of Medea's family, but thereby invites retribution for the violation (105f.; cf. 29f.). The hymn's κληδόνες doom the marriage and suggest that the *deductio* it enacts will be diverted to an alternative destination: an audience which can accurately 'read' Seneca's composition appreciates all the more the unfolding of the dramatic action in accordance with mythological tradition,[63] even as the play makes the poetic point of defying and redefining convention and the *status quo*.

60. So Biondi (1984), 25, refers to 'la tragedia come antitesi'.
61. Hine (1989), 413.
62. See above pp. 9f.
63. That such ominous prayers are only thinly disguised is important: it is a principle of Roman divination that a sign must be noticed and accepted before it is effective or significant, but in the case of unfavorable utterances—κληδόνες—this is not necessarily the case. See Liebeschuetz (1979), 24f.

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In the final portion of the hymn, the chorus turns topical: Jason is exhorted to enjoy his new bride, liberated from a union whose failure (or futility) is variously expressed by the references to Medea as *effrenae* ('unbridled', 103) and her homeland as 'horrid' (*horridi*, 102).[64] Such descriptions continue to recall Medea's prayer, in which the Argo's voyage represented one kind of marriage (*qua* subordination) and necessitated another (*qua* retribution). The two scenes stand in juxtaposition to one another—the conventional praise of two partners in marriage on the one hand, and the dismantling of such norms, against all convention, on the other. And it is already clear where victory will lie.[65]

Hecuba and 'What Next?' *in Troades*

Where *Hercules Furens* unsettled by looking to the future and hinting that the instability of cosmic and domestic order might lead to an assault on heaven, and where *Medea* unsettled by redefining marriage as a locus for and the origin of violence, as well as by staging the conquest of convention by innovation in the dramatic present, *Troades* reveals a third poetical approach to discomfiture: over-determination. Its prologue-speaker, unusually, is initially passive: Hecuba suffers. Like a spectator, she will experience the dramatic action as it unfolds, a perspective for which Seneca lays the groundwork by beginning the tragedy at a mythological endpoint—the destruction of Troy.[66] One branch of the manuscript tradition (A) even preserves the title *Troas* for the play.[67] The poet then plays up the curiosity of his chosen *incipit*; implicit in Hecuba's extended lament for the downfall of her city and family are the questions 'is that all? Is this it? What next? What more?' Such rhetoric, so typical of Seneca, animates the prologue, but where the play discomfits is its overwhelming multiplicity of answers—for Troy, for its goods, for its women, for Hecuba herself, for her descendants, for the Greeks—an overabundance that is further represented by the cast, which parades no fewer than twelve characters across the stage.[68] But the answers and outcomes are disguised and unclear: despite the cast's size, Cassandra does not number among the *dramatis personae*, and though Astyanax and Polyxena will subsequently answer the question 'what more?' (i.e. *Tr.* 427), Hecuba does not mention them in the prologue. And unlike its Euripidean model, whose prologue predicts divine retribution for Greek atrocities, the sole hint of what is to come is Hecuba's prediction that

64. Cf. *frenare* (4), *horridae* (16), *horrida* (45).

65. Boyle (2014), lxxix, views the finale as the 'imagery of its prologue realized.'

66. As Boyle notes (1994), 1-6, the opening rewrites the conclusion of Hecuba's lament over Astyanax in Euripides (*Tro.* 1203-06). Seneca also eschews the anapaests of Hecuba's first speech in Euripides in favor of more stately trimeters.

67. On the title and its implications, see Wilson (1983), 27f.

68. Calder (1970), 75f.

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the Trojan women will be allotted to individual Greeks (57-62).[69] Otherwise, she has little sense of the future—for good reason, as we will observe. Like the fall of the city itself, which not even the victorious Greek believed (22-26), the dramatic action will come as a surprise to the shattered women of Troy, whatever their expectations of further suffering. But despite the waves of grief with which the dramatic action overwhelms, there is remarkable design amidst the shocking events; all the while the plot remains the most tightly structured of Seneca's tragedies.[70]

An audience is left on particularly unstable footing in the first act of *Troades* because Hecuba, in the course of recounting the travails of Troy and her family, repeatedly shifts. This is true not simply with respect to her addressee,[71] but also with respect to her own position. Unstable footing is straightaway made a theme:

> me uideat et te, Troia: non umquam tulit
> documenta fors maiora, quam fragili loco
> starent superbi.
>
> (Sen. *Tro*. 4-6)

> Let him look upon me and you, Troy: chance has never brought
> greater evidence of how precarious a position
> the mighty stand upon.

The first of her several guises is one of solemn, Stoic reflection:[72] via her moralizing maxim on Troy as a paradigm for the instability of power and the fickleness of fortune, Hecuba links her own situation and that of her home. Troy's fall represents her own, and she both casts herself as an icon for the sacked city and invites the audience to contemplate the vicissitudes of fortune.[73] But the analogy is odd: though the city has been 'carved by the sword' (*excisa ferro,* 14), though its 'walls lie in piles' (*muri…congesti iacent,* 15), though 'flames encircle the palace' (*regiam flammae ambiunt,* 16), and in contrast to her dead husband and son, she has survived to tell the tale, to lament her misfortunes, and to await further suffering.[74] What that suffering will entail provides the play's dramatic suspense.

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69. So also Fantham (1982), 203-05, comments on the lack of foreboding.

70. See Wilson (1983), 40-43; Boyle (1994), 33f.

71. Fantham (1982), *ad* 1-4, remarks on the variety of apostrophes and self-address (e.g. *Tro.* 4, 28-33, 41, 61). Cf. Wilson (1983), 48, who holds that she 'is talking to herself.'

72. So Fantham (1982), *ad* 1-4.

73. Her sentiment is echoed internally by Agamemnon, who applies it to the Greeks, as well: *stamus hoc Danai loco, / unde illa cecidit* ('we Danaans stand upon the same position from which that city has fallen', *Tro.* 265f.).

74. Littlewood (2004), 242 n.127, detects allusions to the *Aeneid*, particularly the account of Dido's temple, in Hecuba's appeal to a powerful audience. But despite their common widowhood, Hecuba is no Dido; the latter died before ever witnessing the destruction of Carthage.

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The guise of Stoic reflection is only the first that Hecuba models in the prologue, and as her speech proceeds, she adopts a series of perspectives from which her situation could be viewed—a multiplicity of Hecubas. After lamenting the city's conflagration, for example, she notes that fire does not restrain the victor's greed: 'As she burns,' Hecuba reports, 'Troy is plundered' (*diripitur ardens Troia,* 19). Distinguishing the loot claimed by the victorious army from the ruined city undoes the metaphor by which Hecuba initially identified herself with the razed city. The hyperbolic estimation of *spolia…Dardania* ('Dardanian spoils') and *praedam* ('plunder') too vast for the victor's thousand ships (26f.) distinguishes sharply between the marred kingdom and its portable spoils, implicitly classifying herself (and the other survivors) in new terms.[75] Her exchange value persists amidst the ruins.

In addition to the two Hecubas representing the physical city and its material wealth, respectively, further guises loom: in the central portion of her monologue —an oath to the gods, Priam, and Hector—Hecuba presents herself as queen, wife, and mother in rapid succession.[76] More curiously, however, she then claims foreknowledge of the city's destruction, casting herself as a failed prophet, too—a first Cassandra (33-37).[77] Yet the blame she assumes is not limited to the futility of her warning and a her failure to prevent disaster: Hecuba goes so far as to deny Greek agency in the sack, taking personal responsibility for the conflagration of the city and thereby absolving the victor from blame (or glory). Troy burns, she claims, *facibus…meis* ('with my torches', 40). Both claims are hyperbolic in how they relate Hecuba to the fall of the city, and both claims complicate the audience's perspective on the dramatic past: the gods, the Greeks, and now Hecuba herself have all been implicated in the sack. Such over-determination is compounded by the number of roles that Hecuba plays *vis-à-vis* Troy: prophet, arsonist, mother, plunder incarnate, queen, victim of fortune, and sage. Her struggle to process what has happened strips away the various identities she tries on as quickly as she can articulate them.

The final portions of her prologue narrate further details of the fall, continuing the process of repositioning and over-determining her character. For as she moves on to describe Priam's murder (41-56), it quickly emerges that the personal responsibility she took for the sack of the city is not absolute. Priam's murder at Pyrrhus' hands is an *execrandum…nefas* ('accursed sacrilege', 44), a label justified by its execution at the altars (45), by the scanty flow of blood produced from the old king's wound (49f.), and by the presence of the gods who witness

75. She will return to her status and value for the Greeks toward the end of the monologue, where she claims that she is a 'cheap prize' (*praedaque uilis*, *Tro.* 58). See further Littlewood (2004), 251-54, on the contrast in first and final acts between the ugliness of Troy and the beauty of its executed youth.

76. So also Wilson (1983), 48f. These dead men embody the fall of the city more fully than she.

77. While pregnant, Hecuba dreamed that she gave birth to a fiery torch (i.e. Paris). See Apollod. *bibl.* 3.12.5; Hygin. *fab.* 91. The myth of the dream was familiar to Roman audiences; so, for example, the prophecy typically assigned to Cassandra and frequently ascribed to Ennius' *Alexandros* (*TrRF* II 151.10f. = fr. XVIII.41f Jocelyn).

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it (53f.). All of a sudden, the villainy of the Greeks and the vagaries of divine fortune reappear as themes, and that they do so on the heels of Hecuba's assumption of responsibility is jarring, no matter how fine a distinction she tries to make between *uetus…malum* ('old misfortune') and *luctus recentes* ('new calamities', 43). Where the gods were previously fickle (*leues,* 2), now they appear wanton and vindictive. Even after the sacrilegious slaughter of Priam, she dreads what is to come: *non tamen superis sat est* ('But it's not enough for the gods', 56).

The last Hecubas glimpsed in the prologue take up what has come before and overturn the *status quo*. As she imagines the sortition by which the Trojan women will be distributed as booty to the victors, Hecuba both recalls her previous reference to portable Trojan 'spoils' (*praedam*, 27) and redefines her status: *praedaque en uilis sequar* ('and lo, I'll follow as a worthless prize', 57f.). Coming as it does amidst a brief catalogue of Trojan women (and Greek desire), the implication of the claim is that Hecuba's age makes her a less attractive prize: she is not one of the *Priami nuribus et natis* ('daughters and daughters-in-law of Priam', 57). But her final guise calls even that assumption into question, for, as if rejecting the passivity which might see her handed over to some new lord, she asserts herself as active and agent: *mea sors timetur, sola sum Danais metus* ('My lot is feared; I am the Danaans' only terror', 62).[78] Instead of the reflective dread of fickle divinities with which she began (1-4), Hecuba's conclusion recasts the situation such that she herself becomes a figure of ill omen amidst a 'captive crowd' (*turba captiuae mea*, 63). Coming as it does at the end of a first act that is remarkable for establishing so little about the drama's direction, it is fitting that the fulfillment of her threat ultimately lies outside the plot.

Hecuba's shifting panoply of guises and addressees do not (and should not) cohere: *Troades*' overdetermination goes beyond the doubling motif of *Medea*. But her guises are also more than a sign of Seneca's fondness for rhetorical excess and hyperbole. The contradictions they generate, rather, serve to conjure a variety of perspectives on the destruction of the city,[79] a poetically appropriate beginning for a drama with so extensive a cast and so nebulous a future. It matters how the drama, its *dramatis personae*, and the demise of Troy and her people are perceived—both by the play's internal and external audiences: *Troades* is obsessed both with its own theatricality as well as with the meaning and interpretation of death,[80] and the first act points in that poetic direction even as it does remarkably little to establish the dramatic plot that will follow. Given the Trojan saga's familiarity, these are no small poetic achievements!

78. Wilson (1983), 48, notes Hecuba's resilience, as well, but comes to different conclusions (see n. XX below). Fantham (1982), *ad* 62, compares *me mea sequentur fata* ('my fates will follow me', *Tro.* 994) which positions Hecuba as 'a powerful instrument of divine Nemesis'.

79. Cf. Wilson (1983), 49, who argues that Hecuba clutches to 'a perspective on events which restores to her a sense of control'.

80. On theatricality, see Boyle (1994), 36f. On death, see Wilson (1983), 50f.; Boyle (1994), 18-26, 31-33.

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Conclusion

At the start of this essay, I introduced a trio of objectives that inform the composition of a tragic prologue: establishing the mythological subject, indicating the dramatic poetic agenda, and clarifying its reception of the subject's tradition. It's helpful to revisit these objectives by way of conclusion, since the last one, in particular, has been given relatively short shrift. For the most part, this paper has analyzed the poetic agenda of Seneca's prologues largely from the perspective of an audience, interpreting what we might call their centripetal and centrifugal forces, which draw an audience in with their familiarity on the one hand while also keeping it at arm's length by means of novelty and nuance on the other. Establishing a distinct poetic agenda requires Seneca neither to cleave too closely to tradition nor to depart from it entirely, a relationship which was characterized as one of discomfiture.

But one need not limit an analysis of Seneca's prologue-technique to its reception by an external audience. There is an additional perspective on the poetics of (what I've called) discomfiture that sheds light on Seneca as a reader, independent of either production or performance contexts. In the plays on which this paper has focused—*Oedipus*, *Hercules Furens*, *Medea*, and *Troades*—Seneca's reception of poetic tradition is also discernible. In all four plays, one detects correction of a very sensitive sort. Consider the case of *Oedipus*: its familiarity with Sophocles is clear, not only because of its adoption of sunlight/darkness and vision/blindness as themes, but also because it similarly motivates the plot by means of a plague at Thebes. But Seneca's interpretation, which associates sunlight principally with the putrefaction afflicting Thebes, and also with Oedipus' *regnum* as well as the guilt that burdens him, compounds the themes differently. Seneca recognizes the destructive potential of kingship (in general), an insight which shows a sensitive reading of what Sophocles' play lacks (and which reflects uniquely Roman, first-century anxieties). By establishing aspects of his reception immediately in the prologue, Seneca paves the way for his play's richer, more layered treatment of ostensibly familiar themes.

Similar insights distinguish Seneca's *Medea* and *Hercules Furens* from their Euripidean predecessors. In *Medea*, the destructive potential of marriage *as an institution* stands out, a novelty which—appropriately for a play in which doubling is structurally and thematically prominent—produces an almost entirely new Medea. Euripides, for his part, also acknowledges the Argo's voyage in his prologue, but by making it a metaphor for the kind of criminal (i.e. matrimonial) subjugation that necessitates violent retribution,[81] Seneca gives the Argo greater thematic heft. From the beginning, the domestic dispute at the heart of his tragedy goes far beyond forsworn wedding vows. *Hercules Furens* is similarly

81. For control of the sea as an image of dominion and subjugation (marital or otherwise), cf. *Med.* 2-4 and *Pha.* 85-91.

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sensitive: Seneca's handling of his protagonist's famed labors (and especially their trajectory) is catalyzed by a typically Roman Juno and set against the thematic backdrop of disorder, both cosmic and domestic. The novel prologue, delivered by Juno, raises the possibility of a novel climax—an assault on Jupiter and heaven—which appears more than plausible given Hercules' achievements to date. The use of Juno enables a further, important insight, namely, that the familiar theme of domestic disorder extends to Hercules' divine family as well. Where the protagonist in Euripides fantasizes about killing Eurystheus' family in Mycenae, the hallucination in Seneca involves heaven and theomachy (*HF* 958-67), and climaxes in the delusion that Megara is in fact Juno. The family drama is certainly important to Euripides, but Seneca is unique in exploiting the trajectory of the hero's labors for dramatic as well as poetic effect: both plays end with Hercules led back from the verge of suicide by Theseus and Amphitryon, but because of the cosmic and divine implications of Hercules' personal drama, the human element—friendship and family—of his resolution is more satisfying and resounds more richly.

In contrast to *Hercules Furens*, the prologue of *Troades* largely dispenses with the gods. Seneca puts Hecuba and her grief front and center, overdetermining her character and the possible directions for a play beginning at a mythological endpoint. Gone are the Poseidon and Athena from Euripides' prologue, and with them the possibility of divine retribution—outside the drama—for Greek sacrilege. Seneca's focus on the here and now as well as the totality of Trojan misfortune are reinforced by the subsequently conspicuous absence of Cassandra amongst the extensive *dramatis personae*. In Euripides, she predicts the death of Agamemnon (*Tr.* 364-70), but such a prediction does not suit Seneca's poetic aims. The future in *Troades* is initially unclear and ultimately confined to the drama itself; Trojan grief will culminate in the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena (Act 5), and the sole prediction of Hecuba's prologue—that Trojan women will be allotted to the Greek army—comes true in the fourth Act. Her final speech contains a conclusion and a question: 'the war is over; where shall I take my tears?' (*bellum peractum est. quo meas lacrimas feram?*, *Tr.* 1168). The realization validates Seneca's focus on the dramatic present, *contra* Euripides: if Hecuba began by wondering 'is that all?' or 'what more?', she now has her answer. And questions about the future are similarly addressed in the messenger's concluding couplet, which defines the Trojan women once and for all as captives: 'head to the sea with swift steps, captive women; ships already unfurl their sails, and the fleet is in motion' (*repetite celeri maria, captiuae, gradu: / iam uela puppis laxat et classis mouet*, *Tr.* 1178f.). The play's meticulous structure reinforces the finality and demarcates the confines of the tragedy where Euripides did not.

Seneca's first acts are complicated: though the myths and themes at stake in the dramas may be familiar, they are regularly handled in subtly unsettling ways. Whether it is by challenging convention and traditional ideas or by misdirecting and diverting an audience's expectations, a first act reveals how Seneca's

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poetic concerns go far beyond establishing the plot: given the extensive baggage of the literary and mythological traditions he inherits, it is imperative that he stake out his own territory and poetic approach. The coincidence of novelty and tradition is like a balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces: an audience is simultaneously held close and at a distance.

I hope to have outlined a few examples of how Seneca can discomfit: Hercules will not end up usurping Jupiter, Medea will (*contra* convention) successfully redefine marriage as retribution, Hecuba will discover what is next for the Trojan women within the confines of the drama itself, and the prologues that problematize such futures invite the audience to consider alternatives or to check their expectations. How individual characters perceive of past and present (as well as envision a future that may be unclear to them) leads them to attempt to shape or control the drama. They are not always successful, but their actions reflect aspects of Seneca's own poetic project. He too is a reader of literary and mythological traditions, and his prologues also lay out his particular adjustments and poetic agenda, setting the stage for the tragedies that follow them, but in ways typically unexpected.*

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