

# Notes on Seneca's tragedies and the Octavia

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## Notes on Seneca's Tragedies and the *Octavia*

By W. S. Watt, Aberdeen

*Herc. f.* 19–21

*una me dira ac fera*

*Thebana tellus †nuribus† sparsa impiis  
quotiens nouercam fecit!*

Juno complains about the Theban women (Alcmene, Antiopa, Semele) who had borne children to Jupiter. I assume that these lines, omitted in the A branch of the tradition, are genuine; for the problem presented by the immediately preceding context see the discussion in Zw.<sup>1</sup> 14f.

The metre of line 20 (trochaic third foot) can easily be mended by changing *sparsa* to *aspersa*, but against this solution Zw.<sup>1</sup> 15f. (cf. Zw.<sup>2</sup> 82f.) makes two irrefragable points: (a) the women in question were not “scattered over the land of Thebes” but were located in the royal palace there; (b) not even Juno could call these women *impiae* for their failure to reject Jupiter’s advances. He therefore adopts Axelson’s view that *sparsa* means *sparsa cruore*, the reference being to the *impiae Cadmeides* (*Herc. f.* 758), Agave and her sisters, who tore Pentheus to pieces; in consequence, *nuribus* should be changed to *matribus*, and the meaning is that the land of Thebes is “blood-sprinkled by wicked mothers”. He quotes parallels for the omission of *cruore*, but in none of them is the omission so awkward and so misleading as it is in our passage, where the natural meaning of *matribus sparsa* is “sprinkled with mothers”. No reason is suggested for the corruption of *matribus* to *nuribus*.

I think it probable that *nuribus* is a guess which has supplanted another word ending in *-us* omitted because of homoeoteleuton. There is no reason why the omitted word should have been one (like *nuribus* or *matribus*) denoting women; I think it may well have been *caedibus*. Then *impiae caedes* would refer not only to Pentheus’s death but also possibly to Oedipus’s killing of his father (*Phoen.* 260 *impia nece*) and to the mutual killings of Eteocles and Polynices. It could also (and perhaps primarily) refer to the deaths of the γηγενεῖς or *terrigenae* who sprang from the dragon’s teeth sown by Cadmus and who killed one another *suo Marte per mutua uulnera fratres* (*Ov. Met.* 3.123); Seneca uses *impius* of them at *Oed.* 731f. *feta tellus impio partu / effudit*

\* I have used the following abbreviations:

Zw. = O. Zwielerin, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* (Oxford 1986).

Zw.<sup>1</sup> = id., *Kritischer Kommentar zu den Tragödien Senecas* (Stuttgart 1986).

Zw.<sup>2</sup> = id., “Senecas Phaedra und ihre Vorbilder”, *AbhMainz* 1987, No. 5, pp. 81–93.

Delz = J. Delz, review of Zwielerin’s edition in *Gnomon* 61 (1989) 501–507.

I am very grateful to Professor Delz for commenting on an earlier version of these notes.

*arma*; cf. also (of the battle between the gods and the giants) *Herc. f.* 444f. *Phlegram impio / sparsam cruore*. On this interpretation both *dira ac fera* and *Thebana tellus* gain in significance.

*Herc. f.* 673–675 *hinc ampla uacuis spatia laxantur locis  
in quae omne †uersum pereat† humanum genus.  
nec ire labor est: ipsa deducit uia.*

674. *uersum* E: *mersum* A

Theseus describes the way to the underworld.

To replace *percat* several verbs of motion have been suggested: *pergat* (Peiper; *pergit* is a much older conjecture), *⟨pro⟩perat* (Leo), *penetrat* (another suggestion of Peiper). Of these the real choice is between *pergat* and *properat*, both palaeographically acceptable (Zw.<sup>1</sup> 56 points to the *percat/pergat* variation at *Herc. f.* 408). In view of *Herc. f.* 873, *Oed.* 127, and other passages collected by Zw.<sup>1</sup> 42f. (note on *Herc. f.* 188), in which the human race is said to “hasten” to death, the preference should probably go to *properat*.

The editors, like the manuscripts, are divided between *uersum* (“turned” towards the nether regions) and *mersum* (“plunged” into the nether regions), but neither of these really sits comfortably in the line: *uersum* is intolerably flat; *mersum* is indeed appropriate of the inhabitants of the underworld (cf. *Herc. f.* 422 *mersus* and *ThLL* VIII 833,65ff.), but makes any verb of motion seem superfluous (*in quae* would presumably be construed with *mersum*, as *ad infernam Styga* is with *mergis* at *Thy.* 1007f.). I suggest that *omne uersum* may conceal *uniuersum* (*unus* and *omnis* are variants at *Ov. Ars* 3.188 and *Quint. Decl.* 306.16). It is true that *uniuersus* is seldom found in verse (it does not occur elsewhere in the tragedies), but that may be because it cannot be accommodated in dactylic metre.

*Phoen.* 141–143 *hoc animo sedet,  
effundere hanc cum morte luctantem diu  
animam et tenebras petere.*

Modern editors unwisely omit the comma which their predecessors printed after *sedet*; they thus obscure the fact that *hoc* is prospective, as at *Phoen.* 188 and 527, *Herc. f.* 832, *Med.* 447. The latest editor of this play, M. Frank (Leiden 1995), has apparently been misled; she has a note on *hoc animo* followed by *hanc ... animam*.

*Med.* 242f. *fortuna causam quae uolet nostram premat,  
non paenitet seruasse tot regum decus.*

Medea in altercation with Creon. Zw. marks these two lines as spurious, a judgment which he attempts to justify in *WüJbb* 2 (1976) 192ff.

In 242 he rightly objects both to the manuscript reading *quae uolet* and to Avantius’s *qua uolet*, but proposes no alternative of his own. I am surprised

that no one has suggested *quam uolet*, equivalent to *quamuis*; this usage, in which the *uis* part of *quamuis* is adapted to suit the subject of its clause, is well attested in Ciceronian prose; e.g. *Cael.* 63 *quam uelit sit potens*; *ib.* 67 *quam uolent in conuiuuiis faceti ... sint*; *Phil.* 2.113 *quam uolent illi cedant*; *Nat. deor.* 2.46 *quam uolet Epicurus iocetur* (other instances in Pease's note ad loc. and in Kühner-Stegmann II 443, Anm. 1). The usage is not common outside Cicero, but I think that it should be accepted here because it gives such excellent sense. With this reading *Fortuna* should have a capital letter.

In 243 Zwierlein objects to *decus* in the singular combined with *regum* in the plural, but adequate parallels for this are Catull. 64.78 *decus innuptarum* and Sil. 10.399 *cristarum decus*.

Finally Zwierlein argues that the two lines interrupt the sequence of thought. This argument is rejected by Delz 507, who points out in favour of their genuineness that *tuam causam* in Creon's answer (262) picks up Medea's *causam nostram* in 242.

*Med.* 840–843                    *uota tenentur: ter latratus*  
    *audax Hecate dedit et sacros*  
    *edidit ignes face luctifera.*  
    *Peracta uis est omnis.*

Medea concludes her invocation of Hecate, the moon-goddess.

Zw.<sup>1</sup> 164 points out that *audax* is apparently not elsewhere used of Hecate. This would not be sufficient reason for suspecting the word if it had any obvious relevance to the context, but it has none. So perhaps it should be *uindex*; for "avenging" Hecate see Verg. *Aen.* 4.609, where Hecate is coupled with *Dirae ultrices* (Servius ad loc.: *Hecaten ... causa inuocat ultionis*).

*Vis omnis* means all her magic powers, but what does *peracta* mean? In what sense have her powers been "completed"? I suggest that we should read *parata* (the same corruption has occurred in A at *Ag.* 976); for *parare* used of making preparations for religious or magic rites see the passages adduced by Zwierlein in *WüJbb* 2 (1976) 206 (including *Med.* 577).

*Phaedr.* 85–88                *o magna uasti Creta dominatrix freti,*  
    *cuius per omne litus innumerae rates*  
    *tenuere pontum, quidquid Assyria tenuis*  
    *tellure Nereus peruium rostris secat, ...*  
    88 *peruium* A: *peruius* E

In *WüJbb* 3 (1977) 162f. Zwierlein states his view of this "locus conclamatus"; he takes *quidquid* (sc. *ponti*) as "effiziertes, resultatives Object zu *secat*", and *peruium rostris* as "proleptisch". This interpretation strains credulity: how can Nereus produce navigable sea by a process of cutting? Already Heinsius (as reported by Farnaby) professed "se non capere quid secet Nereus, qui et ipse nauium rostris secatur". *Secat* has been altered to *secas* (sc. *Creta*) and *secant*

(sc. *homines*), in both cases with the change of *Nereus* to *Nerea*; other conjectures are *sinit* and *regit*, but a really satisfactory solution is still to seek. If the first letter of *secat* is a dittography of the last letter of *rostris*, the remaining *ecat* could convincingly be emended to *iacet*, and the genitive dependent on *quidquid* which Leo (p. 380) desiderated could be obtained by changing *Nereus* to *Nerei* (the Virgilian form: *Aen.* 8.383, 10.764). I compare *Herc. O.* 1105f. *quidquid per Libyam iacet / et sparsus Garamas tenet*; Lucan 8.812f. [*subactum*] *quidquid in Euro / regnorum Boreaque iacet*; Sen. *Nat.* 1, pr. 13 *quantum est enim quod ab ultimis litoribus Hispaniae usque ad Indos iacet?* (here *iacet* was unwisely altered to *patet* by Zwierlein in *WüJbb* 6a, 1980, 190); Mela 1.8 *quod terrarum iacet a freto ad ea flumina*; cf. *ThLL* VII 1, 22,65ff.

*Phaedr.* 236–240

NVT. *resistet ille seque mulcendum dabit  
castosque ritus Venere non casta exuet?  
tibi ponet odium, cuius odio forsitan  
persequitur omnes?*

PH. *precibus haud uinci potest?*

NVT. *ferus est.*

PH. *amore didicimus uinci feros.*

Editors differ about the assignment of lines 239–240 between Phaedra and the nurse. The text given above is that of Zw., which is certainly wrong in making *haud* introduce a question (cf. Kühner-Stegmann I 814, Hofmann-Szantyr 453). I agree with those editors who assign both *precibus ... potest* (as a statement) and *ferus est* to the nurse.

*Phaedr.* 594–597

*magna pars sceleris mei  
olim peracta est; serus est nobis pudor:  
amauimus nefanda. si coepta exequor,  
forsan iugali crimen abscondam face.*

Phaedra to herself, just before making her proposition to Hippolytus.

Axelsson's suspicion of *amauimus* seems justified. His conjecture *admouimus* is adopted by Zw., who supports it by quoting various passages in which "der Begriff der Nähe" occurs "im Zusammenhang mit einer unabwendbaren Katastrophe" (Zw.<sup>1</sup> 198). But surely by *nefanda* Phaedra means the wicked things she has already done (falling in love with Hippolytus and resolving to do all she can to win him), not some inevitable catastrophe in the future. I suggest *iam mouimus*, "I have already set in motion", "initiated" (cf. *Med.* 693 *aliquid mouere*; *OLD* sense 17); *iam* goes well with *serus*, and *mouimus* is picked up by *coepta*.

*Phaedr.* 725–727

*adeste, Athenae! fida famulorum manus,  
fer opem! nefandi raptor Hippolytus stupri  
instat premitque.*

The nurse accuses Hippolytus of attempting to rape her mistress.

“The transmitted *nefandi ... stupri* does not yield acceptable Latin” is the note in the most recent edition of this play (by M. Coffey and R. Mayer, Cambridge 1990), which therefore reads *nefando ... stupro* (dative with *instat*). But the genitive is sound; it is an objective genitive: *raptor stupri* = “is qui stuprum rapit”, “a man who hastily commits rape”, just like *uenerem rapere* in Hor. *Sat.* 1.3.109. Of this quite common use of *rapere* some examples will be found under *OLD* sense 10, but the best collections (which include *Phaedr.* 449 and 738 *cursum rapere*) are in Langen’s notes (Berlin 1896–1897) on Val. Fl. 3.341 (where our passage is correctly explained) and 5.271.

*Oed.* 899–905      *callidus medium senex*  
                          900 *Daedalus librans iter*  
                               *nube sub media stetit*  
                               *alitem expectans suam*  
                               (*qualis accipitris minas*  
                               *fugit et sparsos metu*  
                          905 *conligit fetus auis*).

Zw.<sup>1</sup> 254f. argues that, since 903–905 develop an explicit comparison with a bird, this comparison ought not to be anticipated in 902 by taking *alitem* to mean a bird: he therefore follows Ascensius in changing *suam* to *suum*, “his flying son”, the emphatic *suum* conveying the sense “a se edoctum”. I should turn this argument on its head and say that *alitem* “bird” in 902 is quite properly used to prepare for the comparison which follows. But in that case *suam* has no obvious point. I should read *nouam*, noting that *nouus ales* is used of Daedalus himself at Sil. 12.95 *superosque nouus conterruit ales* and *Anth.* 415.48R. *noua mirantes terruit ales aues*. At *Phoen.* 23 *nouum* is a generally accepted emendation of *suum* (but at *Herc. O.* 1418 Axelson’s *nouas*, adopted by Zw., is much less certain). Seneca has *nouus* “unprecedented” at *Tro.* 900, *Med.* 743 and 894, *Phaedr.* 170, *Oed.* 943.

*Ag.* 207–211      *hunc fraude nunc conaris et furto aggredi,*  
                          *quem non Achilles ense uiolauit fero,*  
                          *quamuis procacem toruus armasset manum,*  
                          210 *non melior Ajax morte decreta furens,*  
                          *non sola Danais Hector et bello mora, ...?*

The nurse recounts to Clytaemestra the dangers which Agamemnon had successfully overcome at Troy, from Achilles, from Ajax, and from Hector. Each of these three was a formidable opponent: Achilles uncontrollable and savage with his sword, Ajax a madman after he had resolved to die, Hector by himself the sole bulwark of Troy against the Greeks. The only difficulty which the passage presents is the meaning of *melior*. Tarrant (ad loc., Cambridge 1976) takes it with *morte decreta*, “a better man once he had decided to die”. In what

sense was he a “better” man after this decision? Zw.<sup>1</sup> 266f. attempted to elucidate this point: “durch den mannhaften Entschluss zum Selbstmord hat Aias die entehrende, schmachvolle Handlung, die er als *furens* begangen hat ..., beglichen, sich moralisch erhoben und seine Ehre wieder hergestellt.” Later this view was abjured (as “kompliziert”) by its own author (Zw.<sup>2</sup> 89), who proceeded to replace the fantastic with the impossible: *morte decreta furens* is now taken to refer to the mad attack of Ajax on the cattle after he had resolved on the death of the *Atridae* (there is nothing whatever in the Latin to suggest this) and *melior* means “a superior warrior” (superior to whom?). By comparison with these notions the traditional view, that *melior* is intended to distinguish “great” Ajax the son of Telamon from “lesser” Ajax the son of Oileus, is simple and straightforward; only, as I proposed in *Phoenix* 39 (1985) 162, *melior* should be emended to *maior*. These two words are variants at Ov. *Met.* 9.269 and Sil. 4.822, and forms of *maior* should (I think) replace the corresponding forms of *melior* at Cic. *Fam.* 15.21.4 *melioribus laudibus*, Cic. *Phil.* 8.17 *melior fiat*, Liv. 8.21.6 *pars melior senatus*, *Anth.* 21.17R. *meliorque deo.*

*Thy.* 1–4            *Quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit*  
                          *auido fugaces ore captantem cibos?*  
                          *quis male deorum Tantalos uisas domos*  
                          *ostendit iterum?*

3 *uisas* E: *uiuas* A

The ghost of Tantalus emerges from the underworld.

The latest discussion of the disputed line 3 is that of A. Hudson-Williams in *ClQu* 41 (1991) 433. I agree with him on two points: (a) that *deorum* is more naturally construed with *quis* than with *domos* (for examples of *quis deorum* see his note 32), (b) that *male* goes with *ostendit*, not with *uisas* (“which he previously saw to his misfortune” is very feeble). On the other hand his attempt to resuscitate *uiuas domos* in the sense of “the land of the living” is unconvincing: *uiuas* looks like a deliberate alteration of *uisas* by someone who wished to obtain that sense, and it is from *uisas* that emendation should start. I suggest <a>*missas*; Tantalus “lost” the upper world in the same sense as Pluto, on being assigned the nether regions as his kingdom, *amisit diem* (*Stat. Theb.* 8.46), and the exile Ovid complains about having “lost” his *patria* and his *Vrbs* (*Trist.* 3.2.22, 3.3.53, 5.9.6).

*Herc. O.* 121–125    *nos non flamma rapax, non fragor obruit:*  
                          *felices sequeris, mors, miseros fugis.*  
                          †*stamus nec† patriae messibus heu locus*  
                          *et siluis dabitur, lapsaque sordidae*  
                          *fient templa casae.*

123 *patrie* A: *patriis* E            *messibus* E: *menibus* A

The chorus of captive Oechalian women lament that the site of their native city (*patriae locus* recurs at 132) will now be given over to crops and woods.

Both *stamus* and *nec* must be corrupt. For *stamus* Zw.<sup>1</sup> 347 refers to 353 *cum staret parens*, “when her (Iole’s) father was standing firm” (i.e. before he was overthrown and killed by Hercules), but it is inconceivable that *stamus* here could have this sense; the chorus of captive women, Iole’s compatriots, could not possibly have said of themselves, in their present plight in which death would be a boon (122), that they were “standing firm”. As for *nec*, it gives the opposite of the sense required: the obvious correction is not Gronovius’s *sed* but (so Delz 506) the old conjecture *nunc* (the two words are variants at *Tro.* 246). The best replacement for *stamus*, I think, is not an adjective agreeing with *locus* (*sanctus* and *maestus* have been suggested) but the verb *flemus*, which the chorus uses of itself again at 583 and 585 (also at *Tro.* 98 and 116); the corruption which this assumes is found again at 1739 (*fleri* A: *stare* E) and at Prop. 2.7.2 (where *flemus* is generally accepted for *stamus*). After *flemus* I should punctuate with a colon; what follows (*nunc patriae* etc.) gives the reason for their weeping.

*Herc. O.* 631        *avidis, avidis natura parum est.*

Greed is never satisfied.

In this play, as in the others, there is plenty of gemination, but this instance appears to be unique in that it is gemination of a substantive (or adjective) in a case other than the vocative or nominative, a type which is comparatively uncommon according to Ed. Woelfflin, *Ausg. Schr.* (Leipzig 1933) 290. Moreover the emphasis on *avidis* seems unjustified. For these two reasons I wonder whether the author wrote *avidis animis*; this should perhaps not be ruled out because of the homoeoteleuton, since the incidence of homoeoteleuta in this play is “significantly higher than in any of the genuine plays” (D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *RivFil* 120, 1992, 68).

*Herc. O.* 1528–1530    *sume quos nubes radios sequantur,*  
                              *pallidus maestus speculari terras*  
                              *et caput turpes nebulae pererrent.*

The chorus asks the Sun to go into mourning for Hercules.

Line 1528 can only mean “take upon thyself rays for the clouds to follow”. Although this text has been almost always accepted, I doubt whether the sense is satisfactory. Perhaps *sume quos* conceals *fumidos*; Seneca uses *fumidus* (contrasting with *lucidus*) of celestial lights at *Nat.* 1.15.5 *caeli ardor ... parum lucidus, crassi fumidique ignis* and 7.17.3 (of a type of comet) *multum circa se uoluens fumidi ardoris*; so does Pliny at *Nat.* 2.90 (likewise of a type of comet) *fumidae lucis*.



Oct. 359f.            *cuius facinus uix posteritas,  
tarde semper saecula credent.*

On Nero's murder of his mother.

With the text given above, which is that of the manuscripts (except that they are divided between *credent* and *credunt*) and modern editions, the thought is exactly repeated: *tarde* corresponds to *uix*, *saecula* to *posteritas*. But Farnaby and older editors generally have another reading (presumably a humanist conjecture), *uix posteritas, / tarde semper credula, credet*. This replaces the tautology with an appropriate *sententia*, and assumes a corruption which is very easy to explain; it deserves to be right. For the idea that future generations naturally tend to incredulity see the passages adduced in Nisbet-Hubbard's note on Hor. *Carm.* 2.19.2 *credite posteri*.

Oct. 740–742        *quaecumque mentis agitat †infestus† uigor,  
ea per quietem sacer et arcanus refert  
ueloxque sensus.*

For *infestus* it is usual to accept Gronovius's *intentus*. This may well be right, but equally good, both palaeographically and in point of sense, would be *impensus*.