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Autor: Watt, W.S.

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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. 14f.

The metre of line 20 (trochaic third foot) can easily be mended by changing sparsa to aspersa, but against this solution Zw. 15f. (cf. Zw. 282f.) 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 sould 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 abbrevations:

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

Zw. = id., Kritischer Kommentar zu den Tragödien Senecas (Stuttgart 1986).

Zw.² = id., "Senecas Phaedra und ihre Vorbilder", AbhMainz 1987, No. 5, pp. 81-93.

Delz = J. Delz, review of Zwierlein'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 *pereat* several verbs of motion have been suggested: *pergat* (Peiper; *pergit* is a much older conjecture), $\langle pro \rangle perat$ (Leo), *penetrat* (another suggestion of Peiper). Of these the real choice is between *pergat* and *properat*, both palaeographically acceptable (Zw. 56 points to the *pereat/pergat* variation at *Herc. f.* 408). In view of *Herc. f.* 873, *Oed.* 127, and other passages collected by Zw. 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

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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 prise; e.g. Cael. 63 quam uelit sit potens; ib. 67 quam uolent in conuiuiis 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.¹ 164 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" Hectate 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 tenus 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.

Axelson'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. 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.

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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. 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, non melior Aiax 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. 1 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.² 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 major 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 Tantalo 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 $\langle a \rangle$ 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

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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. 1 347 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 auidis, auidis 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 *auidis* seems unjustified. For these two reasons I wonder whether the author wrote *auidis 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 maestas speculare 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*.