

## Dramatizing Generic Constraints: Seneca and His Tragic Surrogates

### 1) Romans and the Greeks

Cf. e.g. Conte (1985). Hinds (1998), Hunter (2006)

### 2) Self-reflective nature of Senecan tragic poetry

Cf. e.g. Littlewood (2004) and Schiesaro, (2003), Trinacty (2014), Boyle (2011)

### 3) Ovid on Tragic Poetry.

Ov. Rem. 375.

Grande sonant tragici; tragicos decet ira cothurnos

*Tragedians sound a noble strain; anger becomes the tragic buskin*

### 4) Enthusiastic poetry and enthusiastic poets

#### a) Hor. Ars, 295-301

ingenium misera quia fortunatius arte  
credit et excludit sanos Helicone poetas  
*Democritus, bona pars non unguis ponere curat,  
non barbam, secreta petit loca, balnea vitat.  
nanciscetur enim pretium nomenque poetae,  
si tribus Anticyris caput insanabile numquam  
tonsori Licino commiserit.*

Because Democritus believes that native talent is a greater boon than wretched art, and shuts out from Helicon poets in their sober senses, a goodly number take no pains to pare their nails or to shave their beards; they haunt lonely places and shun the baths—for surely one will win the esteem and name of poet if he never entrusts to the barber Licinus a head that three Anticyras cannot cure.

#### b) Sen. Tranq. 17. 10-11.

*Nam siue Graeco poetae credimus  
“aliquando et insanire iucundum est,” siue  
Platoni “frustra poeticas fores  
compos sui pepulit,” siue Aristoteli  
“nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura  
dementiae fuit.” non potest grande  
aliquid et super ceteros loqui nisi mota  
mens. Cum uulgaria et solita contempsit  
instinctuque sacro surrexit excelsior, tunc  
demum aliquid cecinit grandius ore  
mortali. Non potest sublime quicquam et in  
arduo positum contingere quam diu apud  
se est: desciscat oportet a solito et  
efferatur et mordeat frenos et rectorem  
rapiat suum eoque ferat quo per se  
timuisset escendere.*

For whether we believe with the Greek poet that “sometimes it is a pleasure also to rave,” or with Plato that “the sane mind knocks in vain at the door of poetry,” or with Aristotle that “no great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness”—be that as it may, the lofty utterance that rises above the attempts of others is impossible unless the mind is excited. When it has scorned the vulgar and the commonplace, and has soared far aloft fired by divine inspiration, then alone it chants a strain too lofty for mortal lips. So long as it is left to itself, it is impossible for it to reach any sublime and difficult height; it must forsake the common track and be driven to frenzy and champ the bit and run away with its rider and rush to a height that it would have feared to climb by itself.

### 5) Bacchus and high poetry

Nisbet and Rudd (2004), “Bacchus was the patron of dithyramb and drama, and his status as a poetic god was enhanced in the Hellenistic and Roman periods”

a) Hor. Carm. 3.25

Quo me, Bacche, rapis tui  
plenum? quae nemora aut quos agor in  
specus velox mente nova?

[...]

non secus in iugis  
exsomnia stupet Euhias

[...]ac mihi devio  
rupis et vacuum nemus  
mirari libet.

[...]

nil parvum aut humili modo,  
nil mortale loquar. dulce periculum est,  
o Lenae, sequi deum  
cingentem viridi tempora pampino.

Where are you hurrying me, Bacchus, full as I am of  
you? Into what woods, what caves, am I being driven at  
such speed in a strange state of mind?

[...]

Just as the Maenad,  
unsleeping on the mountaintops,

[...] so I in this lonely place  
delight in marvelling  
at the rocks and deserted woods.

[...]

nothing small or in a low style, nothing mortal, shall I  
sing. It is an intoxicating danger, o God of the wine  
press, to follow your divinity, wreathing my temples  
with green vine leaves.

6) Apollo as god of lighter genres

Prop. 3.3. 13

cum me Castalia specularans ex arbore Phoebus  
sic ait aurata nixus ad antra lyra:  
'quid tibi cum tali, demens, est flumine? quis te  
carminis heroi tangere iussit opus?  
non hinc ulla tibi sperandast fama, Properti.

when Phoebus observed me from the Castalian 8 wood,  
and said, as he leaned upon his golden lyre beside the  
cave:

'Madman, what business have you at such a stream?  
Who bade you touch the task of heroic song? Not from  
here, Propertius, may you hope for any fame.

7) Cupid as god of elegiac poetry

a) Ov. Am. 1.1.1-4

Arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam  
edere, materia conveniente modis.  
par erat inferior versus—rissime Cupido  
dicitur atque unum surripuisse pedem.

Arms, and the violent deeds of war, I was making ready  
to sound forth—in weighty numbers, with matter suited  
to the measure. The second verse was equal to the  
first—but Cupid, they say, with a laugh stole away one  
foot.

8) Poet as a religious servant/priest

a) Prop. 3.1.1-9

Callimachi Manes et Coi sacra Philitae,  
in vestrum, quaeso, me sinite ire nemus  
primus ego ingredior puro de fonte sacerdos  
Itala per Graios orgia ferre choros.  
dicite, quo pariter carmen tenuastis in antro  
quove pede ingressi? quamve bibistis aquam?  
ah valeat, Phoebum quicumque moratur in  
armis! exactus tenui pumice versus eat  
quo me Fama levat terra sublimis

Shade of Callimachus and rites of Coan Philitas, suffer  
me, I pray, to come into your grove. I am the first to  
enter, priest from an unsullied spring, bringing Italy's  
mystic emblems in dances of Greece. Say, in what  
grotto did ye together spin the delicate thread of your  
song? With what foot I enter? What water drink?  
Begone the man who detains Phoebus with themes of  
war! Let my verse run smoothly, perfected with fine  
pumice, whereby soaring Fame uplifts me from the earth

b) Ov. Am. 3.8. 23

*ille ego Musarum purus Phoebique sacerdos  
ad rigidas canto carmen inane fores?*

do I, the unstained priest of Phoebus and the Muses,  
sing verses all in vain before your unyielding doors?

c) Poet as *vates* see e.g. Hor. *Odes*, 1.1. 35 and 1.31.1; Prop. 2.10. 19, 4.6.1

## 9) Poetic and metapoetic pathways

a) Prop. 3.1.14.

*non datur ad Musas currere lata via.*

No broad way is appointed for the race to the Muses.

b) Prop. 3.3.25-26.

*dixerat, et plectro sedem mihi monstrat eburno,  
quo nova muscoso semita facta solo est.*

So spoke he, and with his ivory quill he directed me to a  
place where a new path had been made along the mossy  
floor.

c) Virg. *Georg.* 3.8-9.

*Temptanda via est qua me quoque possim  
tollere humo, victorque virum volitare per ora.  
primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit,  
Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas;*

I must essay a path whereby I, too, may rise from earth  
and fly victorious on the lips of men. I first, if life but  
remain, will return to my country, bringing the Muses  
with me in triumph from the Aonian peak;

Cf. also Pindar (*O.*6.23, *I.*5.23, *Paean* 7b.11)

## 10) Tiresias & Cassandra = enthusiastic poets?

a) Sen. *Oed.* 288-289

*In tempore ipso sorte Phoebea excitus  
Tiresia tremulo tardus accelerat genu*

But just in time, summoned by Phoebus' prophecy,  
Tiresias hurries here, though slowed by palsied limbs,

b) Sen. *Oed.* 296-297

*sed quo vocat me patria, quo Phoebus, sequar:  
fata eruantur;*

But where my country and where Phoebus call me, I  
shall follow; we must root out what fate has decreed.

c) Sen. *Oed.* 559-573

*Vocat inde manes teque qui manes regis  
et obsidentem claustra letalis lacus,  
carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax  
decantat ore quidquid aut placat leves  
aut cogit umbras; [...]  
libat et niveum insuper  
lactis liquorem, fundit et Bacchum manu  
laeva, canitque rursus ac terram intuens  
graviore manes voce et attonita citat.  
latravit Hecates turba; ter valles cavae  
sonuere maestum, tota succusso solo  
pulsata tellus. "Audior," vates ait,  
"rata verba fudi: rumpitur caecum chaos,  
iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur."*

Next, he summons the shades, and you who rule the  
shades, and the one who holds access to the lake of the  
dead; he reels off a magic chant, and in a threatening,  
frenzied tone he recites whatever placates or else  
coerces the insubstantial ghosts. He pours a libation of  
blood on the altar, burns the carcasses whole, and  
drenches the pit in copious blood. In addition, he makes  
a libation of snowy milk, and pours wine with his left  
hand, chants once more, and gazing at the earth  
summons the shades in a deeper, frenzied voice.  
Howling came from the pack of Hecate; thrice the  
hollow chasms groaned, the ground was jolted from  
below and the whole earth shook. "I have been heard,"  
said the priest, "the spells I uttered were valid: blind  
chaos bursts open, and the throngs of Dis are granted a  
path to the upper world."

- d) Sen. *Ag.* 724  
*cui nunc vagor vesana, cui bacchor furens* For whom do I now wonder in my madness? For whom do I rage as a Bacchante
- e) Trinacty, (2014), p. 200 “By incorporating intertexts from Horace as well as Virgil,” [...] “her (i.e. Cassandra’s) different renditions of this single event (i.e Seneca’s death) reveal Seneca’s exploration of varying poetic registers and source material for his tragedies.”

### 11) Oedipus’ authorial persona

- a) Seneca, *Oed.* 15-21, 28  
*infanda timeo, ne mea genitor manu perimatur; hoc me Delphicae laurus monent, aliudque nobis maius indicunt scelus. est maius aliquod patre mactato nefas? pro misera pietas! eloqui fatum pudet: thalamos parentis Phoebus et diros toros nato minatur impia incestos face.*  
 [...] *Iam iam aliquid in nos fata moliri parant.*  
*What I fear is unspeakable; that I may kill my father with my own hand. The Delphic laurels warn me of this, and decree another, greater crime for me. Is any iniquity greater than a father’s murder? Unhappy ties of kinship! I am ashamed to utter my fate. Phoebus threatens the son with his parent’s bed, a monstrous marriage, an unnatural, incestuous union.*  
 [...] At this very moment fate is preparing some device against me.
- b) Virg. *Buc.* 6.3-5.  
*cum canerem reges et proelia, Cynthius aurem uellit et admonuit: 'pastorem, Tityre, pinguis pascere oportet ouis, deductum dicere carmen.'*  
 When I was fain to sing of kings and battles, the Cynthian plucked my ear and warned me: “A shepherd, Tityrus, should feed sheep that are fat, but sing a lay fine-spun.”
- c) Prop. 3.3. 13  
*cum me Castalia speculans ex arbore Phoebus sic ait aurata nixus ad antra lyra: quid tibi cum tali, demens, est flumine? quis te carminis heroi tangere iussit opus? non hinc ulla tibi sperandast fama, Properti.*  
 when Phoebus observed me from the Castalian 8 wood, and said, as he leaned upon his golden lyre beside the cave: ‘Madman, what business have you at such a stream? Who bade you touch the task of heroic song? Not from here, Propertius, may you hope for any fame. (LOEB)
- d) Ovid, *Am.* 1.2.  
*Cedimus, an subitum luctando accendimus ignem?*  
 [...] *cedamus! leve fit, quod bene fertur, onus. acrius invitos multoque ferocius urget quam qui servitium ferre fatentur Amor. En ego confiteor! tua sum nova praeda, Cupido; porrigimus victas ad tua iura manus.*  
 Shall I yield? or by resisting kindle still more the inward-stealing flame that has me? Let me yield! light grows the burden that is well borne.  
 [...] More bitterly far and fiercely are the unwilling assailed by Love than those who own their servitude. Look, I confess! I am new prey of thine, O Cupid; I stretch forth my hands to be bound, submissive to thy laws.

### 12) *Fatum* and *Fata*: a metapoetic interpretation

- a) *Fatum* = what has been said (*for, fari, fatus sum* and *fabula*)/ what has been said within the boundaries of the tragic literary tradition?

- a) Sen. *Oed.* 75:  
*o saeva nimium numina, o fatum grave!*

The gods are too cruel, fate too harsh!

13) *Oedipus furiosus* = enthusiastic poet?

- a) Sen. *Oed.* 919-926  
*qualis per arva Libycus insanit leo,  
fulvam minaci fronte concutiens iubam.  
vultus furore torvus atque oculi truces,  
gemitus et altum murmur, et gelidus volat  
sudor per artus, spumat et volvitur minas  
ac mersus alte magnus exundat dolor.  
secum ipse saevus grande nescioquid parat  
suisque fatis simile. "Quid poenas moror?"*

as a Libyan lion rages through the countryside with a menacing glare, shaking its tawny mane. His face was wild with fury, his eyes savage, there were groans and deep mutterings, cold sweat ran over his limbs, he spilled threats from his foaming mouth, as his great pain poured from deep within him. In his mind he fiercely planned some mighty deed to match his destiny. "Why delay punishment?"

- b) Sen. *Med.* 674.  
*maius his, maius parat/Medea monstrum.*

greater than that, greater still is the monstrosity Medea is preparing.

- c) Sen. *Thy.* 267-8.  
*Nescioquid animus maius et solito amplius  
supraque fines moris humani tumet  
instatque pigris manibus.*

Something more, greater than the commonplace, beyond normal human limits, is swelling in my spirit and jolting my sluggish hands.

- d) Sen. *Oed.* 942-951  
*solvendo non es! illa quae leges ratas  
Natura in uno vertit Oedipoda, novos  
commenta partus, supplicis eadem meis  
novetur. iterum vivere atque iterum mori  
liceat, renasci semper ut totiens nova  
supplicia pendas.—utere ingenio, miser!  
quod saepe fieri non potest fiat diu;  
mors eligatur longa. quaeratur via  
qua nec sepultis mixtus et vivis tamen  
exemptus erres: morere, sed citra patrem.*

That Nature who altered her fixed laws in regard to Oedipus alone, by inventing novel births, must innovate once more for my punishment. You must be allowed to live once more and die once more, to be reborn repeatedly so you can pay a new penalty each time. Wretched man, use your cleverness! What cannot happen often must happen slowly; pick out a lingering death. Search for a way to wander without mixing with the dead, and yet removed from the living. Die, but stop short of your father.

- e) Sen. *Oed.* 974-977  
*et victor deos  
conclamat omnes: "Parcite en patriae, precor:  
iam iusta feci, debitas poenas tuli;  
inventam thalamis digna nox tandem meis."*

and in triumph called on all the gods: "Look, spare my fatherland, I pray you: I have done justice, have taken the penalty owed. At last I have found a night suited to my marriage chamber."

- f) Sen. *Oed.* 980  
*Fatis agimur: cedite fatis.*

We are driven by fate, and must yield to fate.

- g) Sen. *Oed.* 998.  
*vultus Oedipodam hic decet*

This face befits an Oedipus (Boyle 2012)

- a) Sen. *Oed.* 998  
*Bene habet, peractum est: iusta persolvi patri.  
iuvant tenebrae.*

Good, the task is done: I have paid my father his last rites.  
I cherish my darkness.

- b) Sen. *Med.* 1019.  
*Bene est, peractum est. Plura non habui, dolor, quae tibi litarem.* Good, it is finished. I had no more to offer you, my pain, in atonement.
- c) Sen. *Thy.* 889.  
*Bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi.* This is good, this is ample, this is enough now, even for me.

14) **Jocasta**

- a) Sen. *Oed.* 1005-1006  
*Jocasta vecors, qualis attonita and furens Cadmea mater* Jocasta, like the frenzied Cadmean mother (Translated by Boyle, 2011)
- b) Sen. *Oed.* 103  
*Mors placet: mortis via quaeratur – agedum, commode matri manum, si parricida es: restat hoc operi ultimum.* Death is resolved; I must find a way.  
 Come, lend mother a hand, if you're a parricide - finish your work. (lit. "this is the last thing that remains to do in this work")

15) **Oedipus' bitter victory**

- Sen. Oed. 1042-1045*  
*Fatidice te, te praesidem veri deum compello: solum debui fatis patrem; bis parricida plusque quam timui nocens matrem peremi: scelere confecta est meo.* Fate-speaking god, guardian of truth, I reproach you. My only debt to fate was my father. I am twice a parricide, more guilty than I feared, in having killed my mother: she was destroyed by my crime. Phoebus, you lied! I have surpassed my sacrilegious fate.

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\*Translations are from LOEB unless otherwise specified.