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Tragic Language and Successful Spectatorship in Seneca's Tragedies

A. Tragic language according to the plays.

1. Oedipus

a. l. 212

Responsa dubia sorte perplexa latent.

The oracle's tangled, its response dubious.

b. ll. 214-215

*Ambage flexa Delphico mos est deo
arcana tegere.*

The Delphic god hides his secrets in twisting Ambiguities.

c. ll. 216 and 292

- *Ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur*
- *Sacrate diuis, proximum Phoebo caput,
responsa solue.*

Only an Oedipus knows ambiguities.
Priest of the gods, most beloved of Phoebus,
Solve the oracle.

d. ll. 92 ff.

*Nec Sphinga caecis uerba nectentem modis
fugi: cruentos uatis infandae tuli
rictus et albens ossibus sparsis solum;
cumque e superna rupe iam praedae imminens
aptaret alas uerbera et caudae mouens
saeui leonis more conciperet minas,
carmen poposci: sonuit horrendum insuper,
crepuere malae, saxaque impatiens morae
reuulsit unguis uiscera expectans mea;
nodosa sortis uerba et implexos dolos
ac triste carmen alitis solui ferae.*

I did not run from the Sphinx' blinding mesh
Of words. I braved those vatic jaws of blood –
unspeakable – the dirt blanched with scattered
bones. When she flexed her wings on that soaring
crag Poised over her prey and lashed her tail
Hurling her threats like some savage lion,
I demanded the riddle. Above she shrieked
Her horror, snapped her jaws, and Claude the cliff
With talons, impatient for my flesh.
I untied the oracle's knot of words
And tangled net, the rabid bird's grim riddle.

2. Phaedra

a. ll. 639-640

*Ambigua uoce uerba perplexa iacis: effare
aperte.*

You are talking in a strange, ambiguous way;
explain it clearly.

b. ll. 857-8

*Perplexa magnum uerba nescioquid tegunt. Effare
aperte.*

Your puzzling words must hide some
mystery. Reveal the truth.

3. Agamemnon

a. ll. 728 ff.

*Sed ecce gemino sole praeifulget dies
geminumque duplices Argos attollit domus.
Idaea cerno nemora: fatalis sedet
inter potentes arbiter pastor deas.
timete, reges, moneo, furtiuum genus:
agrestis iste alumnus euertet domum.
Quid ista uecors tela feminea manu
dstricta praefert? quem petit dextra uirum
Lacaena cultu, ferrum Amazonium gerens?
quae uersat oculos alia nunc facies meos?
uictor ferarum colla sublimis iacet
ignobili sub dente Marmaricus leo,
morsus cruentos passus audacis leae.*

But see! with double sun the day gleams forth,
and double Argos lifts up twin palaces! Ida's
groves I see; there sits the shepherd, fateful
judge midst mighty goddesses. – Fear him, ye
kings, I warn you, fear the child of stolen love;
that rustic foundling shall overturn your house.
What means that mad woman with drawn
sword in hand? What hero seeks she with her
right hand, a Spartan in her garb, but carrying
an Amazonian axe? – What sight is that other
which now employs mine eyes? The king of
beasts with his proud neck, by a base fang lies
low, an Afric lion, suffering the bloody bites of
his bold lioness.

b. ll. 724-5

*Cui nunc uagor uesana? cui bacchor furens?
iam Troia cecidit—falsa quid uates agor?*

For whose sake wander I now in madness?
for whose sake in frenzy rave? Now Troy has
fallen – what have I, false prophetess, to do?

B. Tragic characters are literary fabrications.

1. Medea

a. ll. 44 ff

*Quodcumque uidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas,
uidebit Isthmos. effera ignota horrida,
tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala
mens intus agitat: uulnera et caedem et uagum
funus per artus++leuia memorauit nimis:
haec uirgo feci; grauior exurgat dolor:
maiora iam me scelera post partus decent.
accingere ira teque in exitium para
furore toto. paria narrentur tua
repudia thalamis:*

All the evil seen by Phasis and Pontus
Will be seen by the Isthmus. My mind urges
things wild, unknown, horrible, evil, dreadful to
sky and earth: ruins and slaughter and death
limb by limb. My list is too trivial; these were
my virgin deeds. Let heavier pain surge;
Greater crimes become me as a mother.
Arm yourself with wrath and prepare to kill
with full frenzy. The tale of your divorce must
match your marriage.

b. Hor. Ars 80 and Ov. Rem. Am. 375

- *Grandesque cothurni.*
- *Grande sonant tragici. Tragicos decet
ira cothurnos.*

Grand buskins.
Tragedians sound sublimely: rage suits the tragic
heights.

c. ll. 170-1

Nutrix Moriere. *Medea* Cupio.
Nutrix Profuge. *Medea* Paenituit fugae
Nutrix Medea *Medea* Fiam.

Nurse You'll die! **Medea** I long to
Nurse Run! **Medea** I've run enough
Nurse Medea **Medea** Will I be.

d. ll. 905 ff.

*Hoc age! en faxo sciant
quam leuia fuerint quamque uulgaris notae
quae commodauit scelera. prolusit dolor
per ista noster: quid manus poterant rudes
audere magnum, quid puellaris furor?
Medea nunc sum; creuit ingenium malis.*

Do your work; I'll make them know
How trivial and common were the crimes
I did for others. They were but practice
For my pain. How could my novice hands
Have dared great things? Or my girlish rage?
Now I am Medea. My nature bloomed in sin.

e. ll. 1021-1022

*Ingrate Iason. coniugem agnoscis tuam?
sic fugere soleo.*

"Ungrateful Jason. Recognize your wife?
I always flee like this.

C. Critical spectators in the plays.

1. *Troades*

a. 371-408

*Verum est an timidos fabula decipit
umbras corporibus uiuere conditis,
cum coniunx oculis imposuit manum
supremusque dies solibus obstitit
et tristis cineres urna coarctat?
non prodest animam tradere funeri,
sed restat miseris uiuere longius?
an toti morimur nullaque pars manet
nostri, cum profugo spiritus halitu
immixtus nebulis cessit in aera
et nudum tetigit subdita fax latus?
[...]
Post mortem nihil est ipsaque mors nihil,
uelocis spatii meta nouissima;
spem ponant auidi, solliciti metum:
tempus nos auidum deuorat et chaos.
mors indiuidua est, noxia corpori
nec parcens animae: Taenara et aspero
regnum sub domino limen et obsidens
custos non facili Cerberus ostio*

[371] Is it true, or does the tale cheat timid souls, that spirits live on when bodies have been buried, when the wife has closed her husband's eyes, when the last day has blotted out the sun, when the mournful urn holds fast our dust? Profits it not to give up the soul to death, but remains it for wretched mortals to live still longer? Or do we wholly die and does no part of us remain, when with the fleeting breath the spirit, mingling with vapours, has passed into the air, and the lighted fire has touched the naked body?

[...]

There is nothing after death, and death itself is nothing, the final goal of a course full swiftly run. Let the eager give up their hopes; their fears, the anxious; greedy time and chaos engulf us altogether. Death is a something that admits no cleavage, destructive to the body and unsparing of the soul. Taenarus and the cruel tyrant's

rumores uacui uerbaque inania
et par sollicito fabula somnio.
quaeris quo iaceas post obitum loco?
quo non nata iacent.

b. ll. 568 ff..

Simulata, remove verba. Non facile est tibi decipere
Ulixen: vicinus matrum dolos
etiam dearum. Cassa consilia amove.

c. ll. 615 ff.

Scrutare matrem: maeret, illacrimat, gemit;
sed huc et illuc anxios gressus refert
missasque uoces aure sollicita excipit:
magis haec timet, quam maeret. ingenio est opus.

kingdom and Cerberus, guarding the portal of no
easy passage – all are but idle rumours, empty
words, a tale light as a troubled dream. Dost
ask where thou shalt lie when death has claimed
thee? Where they lie who were never born.

Drop this pretense. You won't find it easy
To fool Ulysses. I've beaten mothers' tricks,
goddesses too. Forget your futile play.

Examine the mother. She moans, weeps, groans,
but paces her anxious steps up and down, And
strains her troubled ears to pick up sounds. She
is more afraid than grieving. We need our wits.

2. Phaedra

a. ll. 195-207

Deum esse amorem turpis et uitio fauens
finxit libido, quoque liberior foret
titulum furori numinis falsi addidit.
natum per omnis scilicet terras uagum
Erycina mittit, ille per caelum uolans
proterua tenera tela molitur manu
regnumque tantum minimus e superis habet:
uana ista demens animus asciuit sibi
Venerisque numen finxit atque arcus dei.

The fiction that love is a god was created by
base lust, yielding to degradation. To give
more license to sin, the false name of god
was given to burning desire. You think that
Venus sends her son to wonder through all
the world, and fly through the sky, lurch
savage weapons from his delicate hands, and
though he is the youngest, he has all this
power from the gods? These are silly myths,
phantasies of a madman, who invented
Venus' son, the god of sex, and his bow.

➤ **The translations are not mine. They come from the books cited in the bibliography.**

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