

Re-enacting Sophocles' *Ajax*: Ulysses as a metaliterary character in Seneca's *Troades*

In Seneca's *Troades*, Ulyxes faces Andromache to explain the motives for Astyanax's death (*Troad.* 524-622). Mazzoli 2016 recognizes in Ulysses his unscrupulous behavior from Greek tragedy (Stanford 1953, Montiglio 2011), whereas Boyle 1994 and Keulen 2001 deem Ulysses a sympathetic character, modeled on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 13. For Fantham 1982, the exchange recalls the opening of Euripides' *Andromache*, while Perutelli 2006 compares its political undertones to Odysseus' formulations in Euripides' *Hecuba* (*Hec.* 218-331). In this paper, I argue that Seneca rewrites crucial scenes of Sophocles' *Ajax*, demonstrating that Stanford's description of Seneca as a "Janus-like figure" (1953: 145) applies to Ulysses, whose speech alternates between the Greek play's different viewpoints.

First, I suggest that Seneca models Ulysses' entrance after the prologue of Sophocles' *Ajax*. In *Troades*, Andromache describes him approaching with "hesitant gait and expression" (*dubio gradu et vultu*, *Troad.* 522-523), a mirror image of Sophocles' Odysseus, who tells Athena that the Greeks are doubtful (*Aj.* 23: ἴσμεν γὰρ οὐδὲν τρανές, ἀλλ' ἀλώμεθα) on who initiated the night ambush and the trickster is investigating with no success (*Aj.* 32-33: κατ' ἔχνοσ ἀσσω, καὶ τὰ μὲν σημαίνομαι, / τὰ δ' ἐκπέπληγμαὶ κοῦκ ἔχω μαθεῖν ὄτου). Ulyxes stresses that he acts as a spokesman of the Greek leaders (*Troad.* 526-527: *Graiorum omnium/ procerumque vox est.*). I contend that Ulyxes' self-identification as the *Graiorum omnium...vox* recalls Athena's request that Odysseus share with the Argives the news of Ajax's frenzy (*Aj.* 66-67: δείξω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τήνδε περιφανῆ νόσον, / ὡς πᾶσιν Ἀργείοισιν εἰσιδὼν θροῆς.); his intervention to scrutinize Andromache (*Troad.* 615: *scrutare matrem*) likewise adapts Odysseus' call by Athena to witness Ajax (*Aj.* 118: ὄρᾳς, Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὴν θεῶν ἰσχὺν ὄση;).

Next, I contend that Ulysses' argument for the Greeks killing Astyanax (*Troad.* 535-555) repurposes Ajax's speech to Eurysaces in the *Ajax*. After establishing the general principle of inherited excellence (*Troad.* 536: *generosa in ortus semina exsurgunt suos*), Ulysses compares

Astyanax specifically to a little calf (*Troad.* 537: *magni parvus armenti comes*). By employing a simile of animal husbandry, Seneca's Ulysses exemplifies Ajax's vision for Eurysaces to be tamed according to his father's manners, as a horse would be (*Aj.* 548-549: ὁμοῖς αὐτὸν ἐννόμοις πατρὸς/ δεῖ πωλοδαμνεῖν κάξομοιοῦσθαι φύσιν.). Ulysses' presentation of Astyanax as *futurus Hector* (*Troad.* 551) matches Ajax's desire that Eurysaces mirror his father in every respect (*Aj.* 550-551: ὃ παῖ, γένοιο πατρὸς εὐτυχέστερος, /τὰδ' ἄλλ' ὅμοιος), so that their enemies would notice the resemblance (*Aj.* 558-559: πατρὸς/ δείξεις ἐν ἐχθροῖς οἷος ἐξ οἴου 'τράφης.). Seneca reclaims the Sophoclean link between Hector and Ajax in the *Troades*, foregrounding the expectation for sons (Eurysaces, Astyanax) to follow in the footsteps of their fathers.

I conclude by showing that these intertexts with the Sophoclean play are instrumental to Seneca's *Troades*. The Senecan trickster recapitulates the *Ajax* in its entirety, blending its prologue (the blatant deception of an enemy) with its finale (the discussion over heroic burial). Through these subtle references to Sophocles, Seneca allows his Ulysses to become at last *totum Ulixem* (*Troad.* 614). The trickster, then, emerges as a meta-literarily conscious character and the spokesperson of Seneca's own metapoetic reflections. In the *Troades*, the cyclical nature of family history goes hand in hand with Seneca's point on drama as a polyphonic discourse, where the literary past is always visible in the contours of the present.

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