

## Modern English Versions of Senecan Tragedy

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### 1 : Introduction – the rebirth of Senecan tragedy in 20C

#### General

F.Citti and C.Neri, *Seneca nel Novecento* (2001), 81-148

S.J.Harrison, 'Modern Versions of Senecan Tragedy', *Trends in Classics* 1 (2009) 148-70.

#### (a) 1920s

L.Herrmann, *Le théâtre de Sénèque* (1924) [performance]

O.Regenbogen, 'Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas' 1928

[psychology and pathos of pain and death, culturally specific to Roman imperial literature]

F.L.Lucas, *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy* (1922) [influence but poor style]

T.S.Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation' (1927) [Seneca and Shakespeare]

'We must admit, first, that the tragedies of Seneca deserve the censure that has been directed upon them'

'In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it. His

characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it; they recite in turn.'

#### (b) 1960s

Interest in Senecan bimillennium in 1965.

C.J.Herington, 'Senecan Tragedy', *Arion* 5 (1966), 422-71

O.Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (1966)

### 2: Ted Hughes' *Oedipus* (1968)

A.Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* (1970): Theatre of Cruelty 'using primitive and ritualistic frameworks to return to the primal human elements of 'love, crime, war and madness', trying 'to revert through theatre by present-day means to the higher idea of poetry underlying the Myths told by the great tragedians of ancient times, with theatre able once more to sustain a religious concept'. Used by director Peter Brook for Hughes' version – Hughes' preface:

'I was in complete sympathy with Peter Brook's guiding idea, which was to make a text that would release whatever inner power this story, in its plainest, bluntest form, still has, and to unearth, if we could, the ritual possibilities within it. ... The figures in Seneca's *Oedipus* are Greek only by convention; by nature they are more primitive than aboriginals. ... In Seneca's hands ... this story becomes something close to the scenario of a mystery play, in the religious sense.'

*Oed.*980-97:

<i>Fatis agimur: cedit fatis;</i>	980
<i>non sollicitae possunt curae</i>	
<i>mutare rati stamina fusi.</i>	
<i>quidquid patimur mortale genus,</i>	
<i>quidquid facimus uenit ex alto,</i>	
<i>seruatque suae decreta colus</i>	985
<i>Lachesis dura reuoluta manu.</i>	
<i>omnia certo tramite uadunt</i>	
<i>primusque dies dedit extremum:</i>	
<i>non illa deo uertisse licet,</i>	
<i>quae nexa suis currunt causis.</i>	990
<i>it cuique ratus prece non ulla</i>	
<i>    mobilis ordo:</i>	
<i>multis ipsum metuisse nocet,</i>	
<i>multi ad fatum uenere suum</i>	
<i>    dum fata timent.</i>	
<i>    Sonuere fores atque ipse suum</i>	995
<i>duce non ullo molitur iter</i>	
<i>    luminis orbus.</i>	

Fate is the master of everything it is vain to fight against fate  
 from the beginning to the end the road is laid down human  
 scheming is futile worries are futile prayers are futile  
 sometimes a man wins sometimes he loses  
 it has all been decided long ago elsewhere  
 it is destiny  
 not a single man can alter it  
 all he can do is let it happen

the good luck the bad luck everything that happens  
 everything that seems to toss our days up and down  
 it is all there from the first moment  
 it is all there tangled in the knotted mesh of causes  
 helpless to change itself  
 even the great god lies there entangled  
 helpless in the mesh of causes  
 and the last day lies there tangled with the first  
 a man's life is a pattern on the floor like a maze  
 it is all fixed he wanders in the pattern  
 no prayer can alter it  
 or help him to escape it nothing

then fear can be the end of him  
 a man's fear of his fate is often his fate  
 leaping to avoid it he meets it

*Oed.*403-508 (completely rewritten by Hughes as CHORUS TO BACCHUS)

OO-AI-EE ...KA  
 CHANT 3 times  
 REPLY 3 times

DANCE DEATH INTO ITS HOLE  
 DANCE DEATH INTO ITS HOLE  
 INTO ITS HOLE  
 ITS HOLE

ITS HOLE

ITS HOLE

HOLE

LET IT CLIMB  
 LET IT COME UP  
 LET IT COME UP  
 LET IT CLIMB  
 LET IT LIVE  
 OPEN THE GATE  
 OPEN THE GATE  
 LET IT LIVE  
 TEAR THE BLOOD  
 OPEN ITS MOUTH  
 LET IT CRY

WHILE THE WIND  
 CROSSES THE STONES

WHILE THE STARS TURN  
 WHILE THE MOON TURNS  
 WHILE THE SEA TURNS

WHILE THE SUN STANDS AT THE  
 DOORWAY  
 YOU YOU YOU

YOU UNDER THE THE YOU UNDER

YOU UNDER THE LEAF  
 YOU UNDER THE STONE  
 YOU UNDER BLOOD  
 UNDER THE SEA  
 YOU UNDER THE EARTH

YOU UNDER THE LEAF  
 YOU UNDER THE STONE  
 YOU UNDER BLOOD  
 UNDER THE SEA  
 YOU UNDER THE EARTH

UNDER THE LEAF  
 UNDER THE STONE  
 UNDER BLOOD  
 UNDER THE SEA  
 UNDER THE EARTH

UNDER THE LEAF  
 UNDER THE STONE  
 UNDER BLOOD  
 UNDER THE SEA  
 UNDER THE EARTH

YOU YOU YOU YOU  
 YOU YOU YOU YOU  
 YOU

UNDER BLOOD  
 UNDER THE EARTH

YOU



### 3 : Other Versions : 1980's and 1990's

F.Ahl, *Seneca : Medea* (1986) - *Medea* 740-52 (Medea's prayer to the world of the dead):

*comprecor vulgus silentum vosque ferales deos  
et Chaos caecum atque opacam Ditis umbrosi domum,  
Tartari ripis ligatos squalidae Mortis specus.  
suppliciis, animae, remissis currite ad thalamos novos:  
rota resistat membra torquens, tangat Ixion humum, 745  
Tantalus securus undas hauriat Pirenidam,  
gravior uni poena sedeat coniugis socero mei:  
lubricus per saxa retro Sisyphum solvat lapis.  
vos quoque, urnis quas foratis inritus ludit labor,  
Danaides, coite: vestras hic dies quaerit manus. - 750  
nunc meis vocata sacris, noctium sidus, veni  
pessimos induta vultus, fronte non una minax.*

Silent hordes and gods of death, I call upon you all in prayer :  
Chaos – unseeing and unseen abyss – dark home of ghastly Dis,  
caverns of decomposing Death, dungeoned by Tartarus' steep slopes,  
tormented souls, take respite, run and see this novel wedding night.  
The limb-wrenching wheel must stop, and Ixion must touch the ground;  
Tantalus must slake his thirst at Corinth, fearing no deceit:  
one exception : Sisyphus, forebear of Jason's new in-laws,  
increase his torment, let the slipping stone roll him across the crags.  
You Danaids, whose leaking urns mock your attempts to fill them up,  
Come, be fulfilled together. This day needs your husband-killing hands.

Hecate, star of night, I call you to my ritual. Come now,  
you have three faces you can threaten vengeance with; put on your worst.

A.J.Boyle, *Seneca: Troades* (1994) - *Troades* 229-249 (speech of Pyrrhus):

*Haec tanta clades gentium ac tantus pauor,  
sparsae tot urbes turbinis uasti modo, 230  
alterius esset gloria ac summum decus:  
iter est Achillis. sic meus uenit pater  
et tanta gessit bella, dum bellum parat.  
ut alia sileam merita, non unus satis  
Hector fuisset? Ilium uicit pater, 235  
uos diruistis. inclitas laudes iuuat  
et clara magni facta genitoris sequi:  
iacuit peremptus Hector ante oculos patris  
patruisque Memnon, cuius ob luctum parens  
pallente maestum protulit uultu diem; 240  
suique uictor operis exemplum horruit  
didicitque Achilles et dea natos mori.  
tum saeua Amazon ultimus cecidit metus.  
debes Achilli, merita si digne aestimas,  
et si ex Mycenis uirginem atque Argis petat. 245  
dubitatur etiam? placida nunc subito probas  
Priamique natam Pelei gnato ferum  
mactare credis? at tuam gnatam parens  
Helenae immolasti: solita iam et facta expeto.*

This havoc of nations, this holocaust,  
These cities razed as by a hurricane,  
For other men would be fame's pinnacle:

For Achilles – his journey. My father  
 Arrived waging great wars in practice for war.  
 Forget his other deeds, wouldn't Hector alone  
 Have been enough ? My father conquered Troy,  
 You sacked it. It gives me pleasure to pursue  
 Great father's famed heroics and brilliant deeds.  
 Hector lay dead, killed before his father's eyes,  
 Memnon before his uncle's; his grieving  
 Mother brought in the doleful day ashen-faced.  
 The victor shuddered at what his action meant:  
 Achilles learnt even a goddess' sons die.  
 Then the savage Amazon fell, our last fear.

You owe Achilles by his deserts a girl  
 From Mycenae or Argos if he asked.  
 Still unsure ? You now dispute our ways and think  
 It brutal to sacrifice Priam's daughter  
 To Peleus' son ? You, father, killed your daughter  
 For Helen. What I claim has precedent.

David Slavitt, *Seneca: Thyestes* (1992) - Thyestes, taunted by Atreus, realises that he has eaten his children (999-1022) :

*THY. Quis hic tumultus uiscera exagitat mea?  
 quid tremuit intus? sentio impatiens onus* 1000  
*meumque gemitu non meo pectus gemit.  
 adeste, nati, genitor infelix uocat,  
 adeste. Visis fugiet hic uobis dolor -  
 unde obloquuntur? ATR. Expedi amplexus, pater;  
 uenere. - natos ecquid agnoscis tuos?*  
*THY. Agnosco fratrem. Sustines tantum nefas  
 gestare, Tellus? non ad infernam Styga  
 tenebrasque mergis rupta et ingenti uia  
 ad chaos inane regna cum rege abripis?*  
*non tota ab imo tecta conuellens solo* 1010  
*uertis Mycenae? stare circa Tantalum  
 uterque iam debuimus. Hinc compagibus  
 et hinc reuulsis, si quid infra Tartara est  
 auosque nostros, hoc tuam immani sinu  
 demitte uallem nosque defossos tege  
 Acheronte toto. Noxiae supra caput  
 animae uagentur nostrum et ardenti freto  
 Phlegethon harenas igneus totas agens  
 exilia supra nostra uiolentus fluat -*  
*immota tellus pondus ignauum iacet,* 1020  
*fugere superi. ATR. Iam accipe hos potius libens  
 diu expetitos: nulla per fratrem est mora;  
 frueri, osculare, diuide amplexus tribus.*

THYESTES : I tremble ! I'm feeling sick. My heart is beating  
 fast, in terror. Are they all right ? My children !  
 If they are well, I do not fear for myself.  
 Where are they ?

(ATREUS returns with a large salver)

You said you'd bring them. Are they safe ?

ATREUS : Open your arms to receive them. Here they are.

(ATREUS removes the cover)

You recognize your sons' adoring faces ?

THYESTES : I recognize my brother ! Oh, gods !

How can the earth endure so vile a crime !  
Crack, and let him fall into hell. Chaos  
must snatch him away, the king and kingdom with him.  
The whole damned palace, let it be razed,  
and all of Mycenae. You and I should be dead,  
should have died long ago. This accursèd house  
ought to have exterminated like vermin,  
or thrown into some abyss, some bottomless pit  
where souls guilty of crimes less heinous than ours  
could tread on our heads with their filthy feet. Gods !  
But there are no gods ! The earth lies there, like  
lump of stupid rock. And the gods have all gone away,  
leaving us here abandoned, like little children  
suddenly orphaned. We call out, and our voices  
echo in emptiness and mock our grief.

Caryl Churchill, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca : Thyestes* (1995) – again lines 999-1022:

THYESTES : What's this uproar churning  
my stomach ? what's this  
shaking inside ? I can't  
bear the load I feel  
and my chest groans with a  
Children, come here, your  
unhappy father's  
calling you, come here. This  
pain will go when I  
see your faces. Do I  
hear their voices ? where ?

ATREUS : Open your arms, father,  
they're coming now.  
Do you by any chance  
Recognise your sons ?

ATREUS *shows* THYESTES *their heads*.

THYESTES : I recognise my  
brother. Earth how can you  
bear all this evil ?  
Aren't you bursting open  
and plunging to the  
underworld and snatching  
kingdom and king down  
a vast road to chaos ?  
smashing the palace  
and turning Mycenae  
upside down ? By now  
both of us should be with  
Tantalus. And there  
and there break it open,  
if there's anything  
lower than hell and our  
grandfather make a  
huge chasm and hide us,  
buried under the

river. Guilty souls can  
wander over our  
heads and the fiery flood  
pour lava over  
our exile. But earth is  
unmoved. Heavy and  
still. The gods have left.

ATREUS : You should be happy  
to see them, you kept on  
asking for them. Your  
brother's not stopping you.  
Enjoy, kiss, embrace.

Michael Eliot Rutenberg, *Oedipus of Lucius Annaeus Seneca* (1998):

Each age has found its own reflection in his plays. Our era is no exception. We now understand the meaning of plague in a way that was impossible before AIDS. Moreover, we have suffered two devastating World Wars, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and the continued threat of nuclear annihilation. We can identify with those whose lives are filled with bitterness, despair, cynicism and loss of faith. It is also not difficult to understand classical tragedy as a fall from a high place, because we have witnessed the tragic fall of one American president who suffered from the sin of pride.

*Oedipus* 567-581 (Creon reports Tiresias' ceremony):

*ac terram intuens*  
*graviore manes uoce et attonita citat.*  
*latrauit Hecates turba; ter ualles cauae*  
*sonuere maestum, tota succusso solo* 570  
*pulsata tellus. 'audior' uates ait,*  
*'rata uerba fudi: rumpitur caecum chaos*  
*iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur.'*  
*Subsedit omnis silua et erexit comas,*  
*duxere rimas robora et totum nemus* 575  
*concussit horror, terra se retro dedit*  
*gemuitque penitus: siue temptari abditum*  
*Acheron profundum mente non aequa tulit,*  
*siue ipsa tellus, ut daret functis uiam,*  
*compage rupta sonuit, aut ira furens* 580  
*triceps catenas Cerberus mouit graues.*

His sightless eyes fixed steadily on the ground,  
once more he called upon the earth  
to vomit up its buried dead.  
A tremor shook the ground beneath our feet.

Trees began to bow,  
trunks suddenly split apart,  
and the whole forest seemed to quake.  
"They hear me," the old man shouted,  
And with that,  
the ground cracked open beneath the funeral pyre,  
and those charred, sacrificial beasts disappeared  
into some bottomless pit,  
some empty sickly void,  
and in their place stood the viper's brood.

A horrible roar rose up from what seemed to be  
the very bowels of Hades  
as if Cerberus, that triple-headed hound of Hell,  
had angered at our intrusion.

#### **4 : Conclusion.**

This paper began from the two revivals of interest in Senecan drama over the last century, that of the 1920's and that of the 1960's, and has showed that concern with the capacity of Seneca's extreme plots to express the monstrosities of modern life and with the scholarly debate over the performance and stageability of his plays ensured that the 1960's revival continued for the rest of the twentieth century. Ted Hughes' version of *Oedipus* clearly acted as a catalyst for other translations produced for performance, and the association of versions of Senecan tragedy with avant-garde and 'shocking' theatrical movements is striking, from the Artaudian Hughes *Oedipus* to Caryl Churchill. The extreme emotions and uncompromising plots of Senecan tragedy lend themselves well to the obsessions with violence, horror and passion in the post-modern world..