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The Chorus as a downgraded protagonist. Some remarks on Seneca's employment of the choral odes in the *Agamemnon*

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Abstract

Seneca's *Agamemnon* represents one of the most well-known poetic reinterpretations of Aeschylus' drama. Unlike the original Greek, however, the Latin revision of the myth presents a number of features that often fragment the plot's unfolding. The employment of the Chorus, in particular, strongly contributes to the text's narrative fragmentation and testifies to Seneca's deprioritization of cohesion in favor of single, dramatic episodes. By relating to the Aeschylean text, this article provides a first compared and analytical reading of the choral songs in the Seneca's play. The lack of organic integration of the four choral odes, along with further textual evidence bring the reader to question the *Agamemnon*'s state of accomplished and rhetorically refined theatrical play.

Preliminary notes

In conducting a comparative analysis of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Seneca's poetic reinterpretation of the relevant myth, the authors' dissimilar treatment of the chorus immediately strikes the reader as one of the most outstanding and significant points of divergence between the two dramas. Among the brilliant analyses of the plays' protagonists that have been, even recently, made by scholars, a comprehensive study of the Senecan choruses in the *Agamemnon* has not yet been attempted: this constitutes the aim of the present work.[1] Through a close reading of the text, this study seeks to analyse the four Latin choral odes in order to show the progressive decentralization of the Senecan chorus along with the loss of its prerogatives. To better investigate the nature of this process, each of the four odes has been analysed in a separate paragraph. The conclusive section of this work will also argue that the elements of discontinuity in the choruses, along with further textual evidence, bring the reader to believe that Seneca's *Agamemnon* might have never been properly completed.

In the Aeschylean original play, the chorus not only constitutes a figure whose presence is always easily detectable, it also represents a connective tissue that ensures the overall cohesion of the entire drama.[2] The elders' function in the Latin revision of the myth loses this principal function entirely. Seneca deprives the play of a character originally rich in nuance and poetic undertones as his chorus represents instead an element of discontinuity that frequently – if not always – fragments the plot's unfolding.[3]

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[1] For a more general introduction to Seneca's reinterpretation of classical dramas, cfr. Damschen and Heil 2014, in particular Kugelmeier, as well as Mazzoli, G. 2016. For Seneca's treatment of the chorus cfr., in particular, Hill 2000; Davis 1993 and Calder 1975. On the *Agamemnon*, as well as on Seneca's revival of Greek epic models, cfr. Schiesaro 2014 and Lavery 2004.

[2] 'un fortissimo tessuto connettivo' as Perutelli brilliantly defines the importance of the chorus in Aeschylus' trilogy, 1995: 7.

[3] A chorus more *Euripidean* than *Aeschylian*, as Henry and Walker defines it in their analysis of the critical reception of Seneca's play: 'The chorus (...) is employed more in imitation of Euripides than Aeschylus to provide interludes or breaks in the dramatic inaction.' 1963: 1.

The disengaging feature of the Senecan chorus appears also in the *social* composition of the chorus itself. While the second and third choral odes are, respectively, recited by the Argive and captive Trojan women,[4] the identity of the first and fourth choruses' members is not specified and the content of their odes is, as will be shown later, partially unrelated to the context.[5]

What this work uncovers is not the lack of homogeneity within Senecan choruses, as Aeschylus himself, in his *Agamemnon*, had already shown an unprecedented dismemberment of his chorus into single voices.[6] Rather it draws the readers' attention to the resulting fragmentation of narrative action that apparently shows Seneca's deprioritization of cohesion in favour of single episodes rich with dramatic tension.[7]

First choral ode

In spite of the four choral odes being employed in the revision of the myth, Seneca's chorus is never directly involved in a dialogue with the protagonists: this aspect is already traceable in the first choral ode. In line 56, Thyestes' shadow concludes his funereal monologue, but the following chorus' *parodos* presents a remarkable topic shift, as the theme of damnation over Tantalus' descendants and the consequent murder of Agamemnon is suddenly abandoned.

The entire ode pivots on the fate's fallacy when it comes to excessive richness, power and wealth. This theme was developed at length by Aeschylus, and the influence exerted by the Greek version of the *Agamemnon* is here easy to detect, as the moral precepts stated by the Aeschylean chorus are echoed in Seneca's version.[8] Nonetheless, the unceasing references to the guilt and punishment of rulers

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4   Respectively lines 310-91 and 589-658.

5   Respectively lines 57-107 and 866.

6   Lines 1346-71.

7   See Perutelli 1995: 5-29.

8   Lines 374-80 (*πέφανται δ᾽ +ἐκτίνουσ᾽/ ἀτολμήτων ἀρὴ+/ πνεόντων μεῖζον ἢ δικαίως/ φλεόντων*

and political figures is emphasised to the point that the entire ode appears barely connected and integrated with the context; there is, indeed, no reference to Thyestes' speech nor to what follows the *parodos* of the chorus. The unrelatedness of a choral song to the context in which it is set is certainly not infrequent in Seneca's tragedies, still, what really strikes the attention here is the *episodical* nature of the ode itself.[9] The main theme being delivered is first explicitly stated,[10] then reaffirmed twice[11] and ultimately presented as a metaphor with an explicit reference to Agamemnon's slaughter.[12] Yet, the same theme – the congenital sin in royal families – is completely abandoned as soon as Clytemnestra takes the floor and concludes the choral ode in line 108. A linguistic analysis of Seneca exclusively based upon a compared reading of his drama and Aeschylus' original text would represent a critical approach now considered obsolete,[13] yet, as a choral *parodos*, the first ode in Seneca's text is in too sharp contrast with the Greek one. In Aeschylus, indeed, the intervention of the old men of Argos helps contextualise the watchman's monologue, which would otherwise be difficult to frame.[14]

δωμάτων ὑπέρφευ/ ὑπὲρ τὸ βέλτιστον. ἔστω δ᾽ ἀπή-/ μαντον, ὥστ᾽ ἀπαρκεῖν/ εὖ πραπίδων λαχόντα) are recalled and paraphrased in lines 56-9 (*O regnorum magnis fallax/ Fortuna bonis/ in praecipiti dubioque locas/ excelsa nimis*). The two versions also share the same consideration of royal families as lacking of any form of equality and justice. Such assertion is presented in lines 774-5 in Aeschylus (Δίκα δὲ λάμπει μὲν ἐν δυσκάπνοις/ δώμασιν τὸν δ᾽ ἐναίσιμον τίει/ βίον) and in lines 78-81 in Seneca (*impia quas non/ arma fatigant? iura pudorque/ et coniugii sacrata fides/ fugiunt aulas*). The Latin text is quoted from Tarrant 1976. The Greek text is quoted from Fraenkel 1950.

[9] Tarrant rightly underlines that only three plays present a choral *parodos* fully integrated in their respective contexts: *Troades* (67 f.), *Medea* (56 f.), *Oedipus* (110 f.). See Tarrant 1976: 180-1.

[10] *praecipites regum casus/ Fortuna rotat*. *Agamemnon*, 71-2.

[11] Lines 78-81 and lines 87-8 (*Licet arma uacent cessentque doli/ sidunt ipso pondere magna*).

[12] Such a metaphor is twofold, as it describes the high, imposing hills as an easy target for thunders (*feriunt celsos fulmina colles*, line 96), but it also presents an allusion to the neck wound that will kill Agamemnon (*placet in uulnus maxima ceruix*, line 100).

[13] Cfr., in this regard, Martina 1981: 139. And yet, according to the Italian scholar, Seneca's drafting of the *Agamemnon* presupposes a deep knowledge of Aeschylus: 'La presenza e la tecnica di elaborazione delle fonti, per lo più latine, non esclude ma implica la conoscenza da parte di Seneca dell'*Agamennone* di Eschilo. Le tracce di questa conoscenza, anostro parere incontrovertibili, non diminuiscono ma accrescono la novità della tragedia senecana.'

[14] 'In this process, the "thematic" role of the Chorus immense. First of all, it is used to light up the crucial moments in the past, not simply to "give antecedent material" (for the audience knows that, or most of it) but to highlight them in such a way that the audience feels their presence at the

It is while describing the Greek military expedition to Troy that the Aeschylean elders emphatically affirm their pre-eminence as a principal character within the drama. In line 104 the chorus defines itself as the only entity with the "power to tell of the auspicious authority of well-grown men."[15] The old men of Argos were, in fact, eyewitnesses of the events and their thorough awareness of what has happened brings them to underline their authority (*κύριός εἰμι*) with a remarkably elusive language.[16] Both the Aeschylean elders' display of strong authority and their function to contextualise the beginning scene are lacking in Seneca's first choral ode. The dramatic nature of the play – that well permeates the chorus' words at the beginning of the Aeschylean version –[17] is already spoiled by the time the Senecan elders enter the scene.[18] The only function left to Seneca's chorus is that of disclosing the final outcome of the play by presenting Agamemnon's fall as a direct consequence of his *hubris*.[19] If the lack of emotional involvement on the part of the chorus allows it to lucidly forecast the tragic epilogue of the play, this detachment also confines the chorus into a marginal position within the narration.

The elders' significance within the first ode is that of an ancillary character, as their main function is emphatically asserting the congenital presence of sin in royal

appropriate moments in the play.' Conacher 1975: 82. In the Aeschylian text, the first choral song provides important information about the period in which the present events are set, the reasons that brought the Greeks to the war, as well as Calchas's omen about the final outcome of the conflict itself. Cfr. respectively *Agamemnon*, 40-7, 60-2 and 126-9

[15] The translation is by Fraenkel 1950: 97. The original Greek text reads as follows: *κύριός εἰμι θροεῖν ὅδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν/ ἐκτελέων. Agamemnon*, 104-5.

[16] The interpretation of the syntagm *ὅδιον κράτος αἴσιον* has not met unanimous consent among scholars, since the noun *κράτος*–which implicitly refers to a power holder (*ἄναξ*)–cannot agree with *ὅδιον* and *αἴσιον*, two adjectives which are 'applicable to portents, not to those who receive portents'. Denniston and Page 1957: 77.

[17] The chorus' recurrent lament of line 120 (*αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω*) well summarizes this aspect.

[18] *Agamemnon*, 39-43.

[19] 'A set of reflection which permits the audience to comprehend the events of the drama at a level inaccessible to the emotionally involved participants. (…) The impersonal tone adopted by this and other Senecan choruses suits their function: not to offer sympathy (and thus additional *affectus*) but enlightenment, not to render the individual case intelligible by describing the moral facts of which it is a demonstration'. Tarrant 1976: 180-1.

families. Moreover, the chorus' appearance on the scene is not only brief, but also marginal and ephemeral, as it does not establish any interaction with the protagonists nor it contributes anything to the narration. Far from enhancing the play's dramatic tension, this first ode marginalizes the chorus and preludes to a thorough detachment of the elders from the narration; such detachment becomes apparent as the plot unfolds.

Second choral ode

The second choral song is longer than the first one (eighty-nine lines) and differs profoundly from it. It constitutes a cletic hymn, a thanksgiving invocation addressed to the gods for the military victory at Troy.[20] Diversely from the Greek drama, where the first thanksgiving ode by the elders is addressed to Zeus and Night,[21] Seneca presents Apollo as the addressee of his choral ode.[22] This choice leaves the reader frankly dumbfound, as the two figures with which the god can be associated – Cassandra and Aegisthus – are not Argive, they are rather directly involved in the murder of Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greek army. Apollo represents a deity hostile to the Greek army and therefore unsuitable for the Greeks' triumph celebration.[23] Furthermore, the invocation of the god marks a notable switch in the ode's narrative tone, as it presents an improved degree of linguistic refinement which is aimed at underlying Apollo' sacrality. The list of traditional attributes employed in the epiclesis to introduce the god is enhanced by the assonance *relata–relaxa* and the alliteration *pone–pharetras*.[24] This rhetorical elaboration deepens the reader in a dimension of religious anachronism, as the centrality of Apollo within a poetic text was testified by archaic texts such as the Homeric Hymns and the Theogony.[25] If

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[20] The definition of *κλητικός ὕμνος* as an ode of invocation is given by Menander in III. 333. 8 Russel Wilson (*κλῆσιν ἔχοντες πολλῶν θεῶν*).

[21] ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ καὶ νὺξ φιλία. *Agamemnon*, 355.

[22] *Canite, o pubes inclita, Phoebum! Agamemnon*, 310.

[23] 'Phoebus seems an odd choice, since he is after all a pro-Trojan deity'. Davis 1993: 209.

[24] *Arcus, uictor, pace relata,/ Phoebe, relaxa/ umeroque graues leuibus telis/ pone pharetras/ resonetque manu pulsa citata/ uocale chelys. Agamemnon*, 322-7. Cfr. also Aduano 1998: 3-8.

[25] *Σὲ δ᾿ ἀοιδὸς ἔχων φόρμιγγα λίγειαν/ ἡδυεπὴς πρῶτόν τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν ἀείδει. XXI, 3-4. Cfr. also the Theogony, lines 33-4: καί μ᾿ ἐκέλονθ᾿ ὑμνεῖν μακάρων γένος αἰὲν ἐόντων / σφᾶς δ᾿ αὐτὰς*

these rhetorical devices constitute the author's intention to adorn the ode, it should also be noticed that the figure of Apollo as the addressee of the choral song finds no logical explanation within the text.[26]

The recurrent theme of tragic irony cannot suffice to explain an eighty-nine line choral ode that by no means contributes to the plot's unfolding nor to the characterization of any of its protagonists. It seems as if the extensive description of an *elegiac* Apollo, in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, simply falls out of any narrative necessities; the god is abruptly introduced with the second ode and abandoned right after it, as no reference is thereafter made to Apollo nor to the ode as a whole. In spite of its length and linguistic refinement, the second choral song does not seem to belong to the context in which it is set, it rather affects the drama's inner cohesion and strongly contributes to its ultimate fragmentation.

Third choral ode

Unlike the first and second, the third choral ode is deeply involved in the action; it is sung by Trojan women – as Clytemnestra herself explicitly says – and it is led by Cassandra as chorus leader.[27] What we find in lines 589–658 is, without a doubt, "the most consistently personal of the odes".[28] The Trojan women recall the fall of Troy, drafting a poetical image that shares more than one characteristic with book two of the *Aeneid.* Unlike the Virgilian text, however, the third choral ode not only

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πρῶτόν τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν ἀείδειν.

[26] See Aduano 1998: 8.

[27] *Sed ecce, turba tristis incomptae comas/   Iliades adsunt. Agamemnon*, 586-7.

[28] As Tarrant 1976: 285, calls it. Also of note are Davis' remarks on this second ode: 'The relevance of Ode three to the play's action is obvious and Seneca ensures that the chorus's reflections will have the greatest emotional impact by having them presented by a group of characters personally acquainted with Troy's fall and to this end he employs (uniquely in the authentic plays) a subsidiary chorus, for the Argive elders are replaced by Cassandra and her fellow Trojan women for this ode only.' Davis 1993: 107.

describes the macabre consequences of the sack of the city,[29] it also casts light on the idyllic and moving description that precedes it.[30] In their ode, the Trojan women do not lament the fall of Troy as such, they rather deplore the fact that the city was taken by treachery and not defeated in the battlefield.[31] Troy is indeed described as conquered by *fraus* (*ut ipsi/ fraude sua caderent Pelasgi*, lines 631–2) and by means of a gift (*vidimus simulata dona/* […] *Danaumque/ fatale munus*, lines 625–7). Such a description draws a parallel between the conquest of the city and Agamemnon's destiny,[32] as the king himself is said to be killed by treachery and by means of a gift.[33]

Unlike the previous two odes, the third one offers the perspective of the defeated Trojans, and it describes a scene – the fall of Troy – that by overlapping with the plot, foreshadows the cruel outcome of the play.[34] As sung by the Trojans, this ode presents the enemies' viewpoint and Seneca frames it both with an introduction pronounced by Clytemnestra (*Sed ecce, turba tristis incomptae comas / Iliades adsunt.* Lines 586–7) and with an explicit reference to the Trojan women made by Cassandra (*Cohibete lacrimas omne quas tempus petet/ Troades*, lines 659–60). This framing is not uncommon in Seneca's plays,[35] but it becomes profoundly

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[29] As, for instance, the description of Priam's slaughter, in lines 557-8.

[30] As for the image of Hecuba, portrayed as joyful as ever since Hector's death: *quod numquam post Hectoreos/ uidimus ignes, laeta est Hecabe. Agamemnon*, 647-8.

[31] *non illa bello uicta, non armis/ ut quondam Herculea cecidit pharetra* (…) *perdidit in malis extremum decus/ fortiter uinci: restitit annis/ Troia bis quinis unius noctis/ peritura furto. Agamemnon*, 613-24. Giuseppe Aricò 1996: 133-45, finds 'obsessive' the insistence on the theme of treachery as testified in line 624 (*furto*), line 625 (*simulata dona*), line 627 (*fatale munus*), line 632 (*fraude sua*) and line 635 (*subdolo*).

[32] As it has been noticed by Davis 1993: 111.

[33] *mille ductorem ducum/ ut paria fata Troicis lueret malis/ perisse dono, feminae stupro, dolo. Agamemnon*, 1007-9. This text has already been quoted by Davis 1993: 111.

[34] Cfr. Perutelli 1995: 13. Also of interest is the parallel established between *festae matres*, *festi patres* (lines 643, 645) and *festus dies est*, pronounced by Agamemnon in line 791. Cfr. Aricò 1996: 140.

[35] A similar instance can be found only in *Hercules furens* (lines 827 and followings) as Tarrant 1976: 285 points out. Cfr. also the linguistic analysis made by Aricò 1996: 136.

significant in the *Agamemnon*; it indeed establishes Cassandra's estrangement from the chorus. By saying "restrain from crying" (*Cohibete lacrimas*, line 659) Cassandra prevents the Trojan women from sharing their pains: such a detachment preludes to the scene of Cassandra's prophecy which markedly diverges from the Aeschylean one. Although invited to enter the palace,[36] in the Greek version Cassandra appears hesitating before bursting into her frenetic prophecy, which she pronounces alone, in the form of a monologue as the chorus's questions are ignored until line 1178.[37] In Seneca's play, the dialogue between Cassandra and the chorus is never interrupted; still, her prophecy leaves the chorus in a marked state of isolation.[38]

When the chorus reaches the peak of its anguish (*non est lacrimis, Cassandra, modus/ quia quae patimur uicere modum*, lines 691–2), Cassandra pronounces her prophecy, and she does so without dialoging with the Trojan women. The prophetess' isolation is implied from the beginning of the dialogue, but becomes irreversible in line 710 when the use of the third person (*Silet*) on the part of the Trojan women instead of the second – much more appropriate for a dialogue – imposes it as a matter of fact.[39] By comparing Aeschylus' and the Latin tragedy, it seems as if the Senecan chorus of the third ode is not only segregated but also downgraded from the prominence it held in the Greek text. While in Aeschylus the chorus becomes involved in Cassandra's scene and directly informed by her on what is about to happen, in Seneca's drama, it is only asked to frame the scene by describing the prophetess falling on her knees in front of the altar and by introducing the upcoming speech by Agamemnon (*En deos tandem suos/ uictrice lauru cinctus Agamemnon adit*, lines 778–9). The subsequent intervention of the king prevents the chorus from developing a stronger emphatic bond with Cassandra. When the Aeschylean elders realize that she will die along with Agamemnon, they express

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[36] As Clytemnestra asks her to enter the palace: εἴσω κομίζου καὶ σύ, Κασάνδραν λέγω. *Agamemnon*, 1035.

[37] When Cassandra finally addresses the chorus: καὶ μὴν ὁ χρησμὸς οὐκέτ᾽ ἐκ καλυμμάτων/ ἔσται δεδορκὼς νεογάμου νύμφης δίκην/ λαμπρὸς δ᾽ ἔοικεν ἡλίου πρὸς ἀντολὰς/ πνέων ἐσάξειν. *Agamemnon*, 1178-81.

[38] Aricò 1996: 142.

[39] *Agamemnon*, 710. Cfr. also Aricò 1996: 143.

their sincere admiration for her determination in refusing any attempt to escape her destiny.[40] Cassandra's heroism is an aspect of the original text that Seneca refrains from presenting in his drama. The Latin version does not even portray the prophetess' murder. This brings Seneca to disregard one of the most suitable opportunities to better integrate the chorus as a dramatic character in the text.

Although presenting a chorus significantly degraded from the Aeschylus' original, the third ode does not show marked aspects of incongruity with the rest of the text. As such, however, it also sharpens the contrast with the decontextualisation of the first and second choral odes, and preludes to the fourth song, an ode where the chorus' condition of neglected figure within the play is even further emphasised.

Fourth choral ode

The fourth and last choral ode of the *Agamemnon* has been traditionally considered the most decontextualised of the entire play.[41] Seneca does not give any hints as to the members of the chorus' identity. Nevertheless, it seems quite unlikely that the Trojan captives might have sung it given the contextual frame in which it is set.[42] The tone of sincere religious gratitude has encouraged scholars to ascribe it to an Argive chorus that would be much more inclined to rejoice for Agamemnon's return. Yet, the ode is not addressed to the king. It consists rather of a glorification of Hercules, whose mythical figure is celebrated for the twelve labours, which are carefully listed and described in lines 829–66.

Seneca's description of Hercules in the *Agamemnon* is markedly divergent from the same figure as portrayed in his *Hercules furens*. The Greek hero is here depicted as

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[40] *τλήσομαι τὸ κατθανεῖν* (line 1289), *σμικρὰ κερδανῶ φυγῇ* (line 1301)

[41] 'The only connection between the deaths of Hercules and Agamemnon is a robe (Agamemnon is bound by a robe, but we are told nothing of Hercules' dying) and that connection is not made explicit'. Davis 1993:118.

[42] 'The ode is sung by the Argive chorus; the chorus of Trojan captives would hardly choose this moment to glorify Hercules and, through him, Argos'. Cfr. Tarrant 1976: 324. Cfr. also Zwierlein 1966: 84.

a god gloriously ascended to the sky,[43] in harsh contrast with the anguished and ambiguous protagonist of the homonymous play.[44] The reason by which Hercules is presented as the protagonist of the choral ode cannot be linked to the twelve labours as they are described in the *Hercules furens*, it is rather connected to his legendary conquest of Troy. The fall of the city is only briefly alluded to, but this short aside allows Seneca to explicitly refer to Agamemnon's military endeavour: *Te duce succidit/ mendax Dardanidae domus/ et sensit arcus iterum timendos/ te duce concidit totidem diebus/ Troia quot annis.* (lines 863–6). In the *Agamemnon*, Hercules is presented as Argos' most illustrious son,[45] thereby emphasising a strong connection between the hero and the city that seems to be aimed at comparing Hercules with Agamemnon in the light of the only element that these two figures share: the sack of Troy.

However, if the glorification of Hercules implies a very vague and elusive reference to the king of the Greeks – as both Argives and destroyers of Troy – this ode would assume an ambiguous tone of macabre irony. The fourth choral song preludes to Cassandra's prophesy, where the murder of Agamemnon is carefully described in vivid details. The religious gratitude with which the chorus addresses a hero associated with the Greek king creates a contrast with the scene of Agamemnon's cruel murder that appears to be out-of-context in a choral song where the tone is markedly pro-Greeks. Furthermore, the fourth ode presents one more clue that shows Seneca's deliberate degradation and negligence of the chorus as a *dramatis persona.* In lines 1343 and 1345 of the Aeschylean text, the king's shouts of pain are heard by the elders.[46] Instead of a unified and cohesive reaction, the Aeschylean chorus is locked at an impasse. Between lines 1346 and 1372, the twelve elders in

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[43] Although on the exact meaning of line 811 (*imparem aequasti numerum deorum*) scholars have not yet reached an agreement. Tarrant 1976: 325.

[44] Cfr. also Perutelli 1995: 14.

[45] *Argos nobilibus nobile ciuibus/ Argos iratae carum nouercae/ semper ingentes educas alumnos. Agamemnon*, 808-9.

[46] 'As a Chorus of old men, who tend among our extant tragedies to play advisory roles, the Argive elders are, one imagines, rhetorically equipped and experienced to deliberate politically and to make decisions on behalf of the citizenry. Dhuga 2011: 103.

succession express their confusion as to what to do.[47] The poetic technique of dismembering a chorus into single voices is unprecedented in Greek drama; although the reason it is employed in this particular instance is still unclear, what emerges from the passage is Aeschylus' wish to enrich the dramatic depth of the chorus.[48]

Seneca refrains from dismembering his choral song into a myriad of voices, but he also totally excludes the chorus from the drama's development after Agamemnon's murder. The scene of the king's slaughter, in its macabre details, is described by Cassandra while the chorus has already left the scene and is not even mentioned nor referred to from line 867 to the end of the play, in line 1012. If the disappearance of the chorus by the time the dramatic tension reaches its peak relegates it to a secondary figure within the play, it also imposes a number of reflections on Seneca's odes and their particular employment in the *Agamemnon.*

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[47] Of the twelve different opinions, two suggest an immediate intervention (speaker 2 and 3) one asks for backup (speaker 1), three describe a future scenario of Mycenae ruled by tyrants (speaker 4, 8 and 9), while the majority of them–six speakers–share considerations and concerns that have in common a remarkable degree of irresolution (speaker 5-7 and 10-12). In the Greek play, the elders are not conceived as a passive entity, but as a dynamic assembly who rather than being overwhelmed by events, strive to make their voice matter and express a wish for a suffrage that preludes to the first democratic vote in the *Eumenides*. 'I would argue that the function of these elders goes far beyond simple inquiry into dramatic action or their use as foils for Clytemnestra's contrivances. From the moment they step into the circle of the orchestra, their thoughts are dominated by questions of right and wrong, and by the desire to evaluate in legal terms whatever transpires.' Gantz 1983: 65-86.

[48] Fraenkel's comment on the passage is remarkably concise and illuminating: 'In this scene, then, Aeschylus has preferred complete inactivity on the part of the Chorus to the show of an initiative which would anyway have come too late. Effectual interference was of course impossible; the groundwork of the story had long ago been fixed. We may, however, ask: Why did the poet at this fatal moment present the Elders in helpless torpor instead of allowing them at least the modest gesture of determination which many of his modern readers have interpolated? The question cannot be answered with confidence. It may be assumed that Aeschylus and his audience did not care for the belated display of an energy which could not have the faintest influence on the course of events. It is also conceivable that the inactivity of the Elders in this scene is meant to set off the surprising vigor with which they rise against the insolence of Aegystus at the end of the play.' 1950: 643.

Conclusive remarks

What is, indeed, the reason for such a disparity of treatment of the chorus between Aeschylus and Seneca? It seems clear that one fundamental aspect that deeply differentiates the two versions of the myth is the staging as the ultimate goal of the play. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* was meant to be performed in theatres, as recently reaffirmed by Howard Rubenstein, while Seneca's Latin version presents more than one piece of evidence supporting the thesis that his play was meant to be read only.[49] The narrative fragmentation itself, which so deeply characterizes the unfolding of the drama, might indeed be related to the Latin author's alleged pseudo-staging[50] and to his propensity for the more sophisticated atmosphere of a reciting hall over theatrical stages.[51]

Had it been staged, Seneca's *Agamemnon* would have presented a number of flaws in the *mise-en-scène*, mostly related to the abrupt appearance of the main characters, always – with the notable exception of Agamemnon in line 782 – lacking introductions.[52] In addition to the lack of proper presentation of the play's protagonists, there are reasons to argue that Seneca's play has never been properly revised and made ready for publication. How can a modern, attentive reader contextually account for the explicit foreshadowing of the final tragic epilogue of ode one, for the apparently idyllic picture in ode two and for the decontextualisation of Hercules' glorification in ode four? The only choral ode to be partially integrated into its immediate context is that sung by the Trojan women (third ode, lines 589–658), yet, this ode too presents elements of incompleteness. The chorus' sudden disappearance from the scene in concomitance with Agamemnon's slaughter is not

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[49] Rubenstein 2003.

[50] The term, quoted by Tarrant, was originally employed by Barret 1964: 44.

[51] As Tarrant brilliantly notes: 'In interpreting *Agamemnon* I have assumed that Seneca wrote with recitation, not stage- production, in mind; by "recitation" I mean public reading either by one person or by several persons dividing the roles among themselves. This is, I think, the most probable view, but its truth cannot be demonstrated.' 1976: 7-8. For the staging of Seneca's tragedies cfr. also Henry and Walker 1963: 1-10.

[52] Potential hurdles in the staging are to be found in lines 108 ff., 125 ff., 225–6, 780 ff. And 909 ff. Cfr. Martina 1981: 137.

only in too sharp contrast with the key role it played toward the end of the Aeschylian drama, it is also detrimental to the text's overall dramatic cohesion. Such an abrupt disappearance of the chorus, as well as the lack of integration of odes one, two and four seem to serve as stopgaps meant to be reviewed, modified and appropriately contextualised within the text at a later stage.

The thesis of the Senecan *Agamemnon*'s unrefinement is also supported by Eurybates' intervention. The Greek character, secondary in term of plot's unfolding, becomes a main figure for the length of his descriptive *rhesis* (lines 421–578) and for its centrality within the drama. No other character is allowed to pronounce such a long monologue. This is particularly odd if we consider that Eurybates does not even appear in the previous nor in the following re-elaborations of the myth. It becomes quite hard to explain why the author has left the entire narration of the storm as well as that of the king's return to a single, secondary character. Also, the fact that characters are suddenly put on scene and that the author shifts from one scene to another simply by interrupting the first one with a resolutive assertion,[53] gives the play the semblance of an outline that still needs to be developed rather than that of a refined literary work. What lacks the most in Seneca is narrative cohesion, an aspect that is not to be found in an allegedly superficial characterization of the protagonists, but rather due to the marginal role played by the chorus.

If the pseudo-staging of the Latin author is the correct explanation for *Agamemnon*'s narrative fragmentation, I also argue that its rough state goes beyond the ultimate purpose of the play and deeply affects the tragedy as a whole. Evidence to support this statement can be traced in the brusque interruption of a number of scenes, in the sudden appearance of the characters and in the employment of the chorus. The choral odes of the tragedy are not simply detached from the context: they present a hidden system of echoes that establishes an inner symmetrical structure. The invective against power and wealth in ode one is aimed at demolishing the *heroic*

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[53] As it happens in line 226, where the scene of Aegisthus' monologue follows the dialogue between Clytemnestra and her nurse, lacks any introductions.

social status later presented by Hercules in ode four, while a marked specularity can be found between the pro-Greeks second ode and the pro-Trojans third.[54] These hidden, yet still detectable symmetrical structures reveal a process of refinement at its early stages and far from complete. It is not unlikely that these rhetorical devices constituted the first attempt on the author's part to better integrate the choral odes in the play; an organic integration that finally remained unaccomplished, but that constituted the author's intention.[55] A parallel analysis of the chorus as it has been employed in the *Agamemnon* and in a play sharing a similar content and time of composition, *Thyestes*, emphasises even more sharply a different consideration of the chorus as a dramatic tool.[56] Despite the apparent structural homology with the *Agamemnon* – both tragedies contain, conventionally,[57] four choral odes – the narrative function carried out by the elders before and after the butchering of Thyestes' sons is organically integrated in the text and constantly contributes to the dramatic tension that pervades the narration.

In conclusion, although the drama itself provides no incontestable textual evidence in this regard, there are grounds to question Senecan *Agamemnon*'s state of accomplished and rhetorically refined theatrical play. Along with the abrupt presentation of the protagonists and with Eurybates' *rhesis*, the four choral odes constitute one of the most relevant clues suggesting that the text might have been left unfinished. The lack of linguistic elegance and organic contextualization show indeed its state as a work-in-progress rather than that of a refined and polished theatrical play. This ultimate lack of refinement partly compromises the artistic value of the play as a whole and is to be held largely responsible for the marginal position in which modern scholarship has segregated this Senecan play.[58]

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[54] Mazzoli 1996: 3-16.

[55] Perutelli 1995: 16.

[56] Tarrant 1985.

[57] With the only exception of *Oedipus*, a drama containing five choral odes. In this regard cfr. the aforementioned Mazzoli 1996: 3-16.

[58] Seneca's *Agamemnon* has often been criticized by modern scholars and playwrights. Vittorio Alfieri's inclement judgement of the play ('pessimo Agamennone di Seneca' *Vita*, IV, 5) has

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exerted a remarkable influence on the reception of the play up to the second half of the twentieth century, as the groundbreaking contribution by Henry and Walker shows a first, moderate, yet clear appreciation of the text: 'This is not the best and certainly not the worst of Seneca's play; it provides a representative example of his very real merits as a writer together with some of his worst rhetorical vices.' Henry and Walker 1963: 3-4. For Alfieri's interpretation of the myth, cfr. Paratore 1974: 517-56.

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