

SYMBOLAE PHILOLOGORUM POSNANIENSIVM GRAECAE ET LATINAE XXII/2 • 2012
pp. 61–73. ISBN 978-83-7654-139-6. ISSN 0302-7384

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VISITORS FROM THE REALM OF DEATH

ABSTRACT: Pyplacz Joanna, Visitors from the realm of death.

Ghosts play a very important role in Seneca's tragedies. They either appear on stage and deliver the prologue, or influence events from backstage. Sometimes they suddenly come to haunt living relatives as phantoms or hallucinations. Their influence on the actions of the *dramatis personae* is considerable and, in most cases, negative or even destructive. Thanks to the fact that Seneca chose to unleash his imagination rather than cling to the technical requirements of the ancient theatre, he could permit himself the luxury of filling his plays with supernatural beings who contribute to the atmosphere of metaphysical awe that makes Seneca's tragedies so unique and that has become their hallmark.

Keywords: Seneca, tragedy, ghost, supernatural, spectre, dream, epic, hallucination, haunt, dead.

Después de besar a su cuñada, Férula pasó por su lado y salió por donde mismo había entrado, cerrando la puerta a sus espaldas con suavidad. En el comedor quedó la familia inmóvil, como en una pesadilla. [...] Clara abrió los ojos. Seguía respirando con dificultad y le caían lágrimas silenciosas por las mejillas y el cuello, manchándole la blusa.

— *Férula ha muerto* — anunció.
(Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus*)

Ghosts have always played an important role in both Greek and Roman tragedies. In the works of Aeschylus they performed a dual function: firstly, they helped to shape the plot; secondly – in the case of Darius' ghost¹ – they frightened the audience.²

¹Clytemnestra's ghost is a very special case. The ghost's interaction with the drunken Erinyes makes it very difficult for Clytemnestra to excite *phobos*. Cf. O. Taplin, *Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy*, [in:] *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*, ed. E. Segal, Oxford 1996, p. 25; J. Pyplacz, *Los elementos cómicos en la Orestía de Esquilo*, [in:] *Cuadernos de filología clásica, Estudios griegos e indoeuropeos*, 2009, 19, pp. 111–112.

²Cf. T. Rosenmeyer, *The Art of Aeschylus*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1982, p. 266.

The main task of the ghost of Polydorus in Euripides' *Hecabe* is therefore to make the audience familiar with the *Vorgeschichte* of that play, but also – as the ghost of a brutally murdered boy – to excite pity (ἔλεος), and, of course, fear (φόβος).

A good example of a ghost shaping the plot of a tragedy is Sophocles' lost play entitled *Polyxene*, in which the ghost of Achilles appears on stage demanding that the title heroine be sacrificed, thus laying the ground for Polyxene's murder at the end of the play.³

Roman Republican tragedy was rooted in the tradition forged by the Athenian tragedians and their Hellenistic successors.⁴ It had maintained the basic classical form and numerous motifs, especially those connected with the supernatural world. In Pacuvius' *Iliona*, for example, the ghost of the murdered Deiphilus begs his mother to bury him.⁵

Ghosts are also frequent guests in Seneca's tragedies, where they appear in many different forms and in many different circumstances: sometimes they appear on stage (e.g. when they deliver the prologue), while at other times they visit the *dramatis personae* in the form of vague apparitions and hallucinations, their arrival being communicated to the audience by the particular character who has seen them.⁶

Let us begin with the so-called prologue ghosts. They deliver the prologues of two of Seneca's plays – *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes* – whose plots are connected with each other. The prologue of *Agamemnon* is delivered by the ghost of Thyestes, while that of *Thyestes* is delivered by the ghost of Tantalus.

The ghost of Thyestes has knowledge of future events that will complete the circle of macabre murders in the palace of Atreus (*Ag.* 1–11). Its basic task is to acquaint the audience with the *Vorgeschichte* and to give a brief outline of the plot of the play.⁷ It recalls its own crimes and the horrible events that took place during the reign of Tantalus and then foretells the violent death of Agamemnon.

Thyestes portrays himself as having been an abhorrent person who is guilty of having eaten his own sons and of having had incestuous intercourse with his own daughter:

A fratre vincar? Liberis plenus tribus
in me sepultis? Viscera exedi mea.

³Cf. A. J. Keulen, *L. Annaeus Seneca "Troades"*, introd. and comm., Leiden 2001, p. 11.

⁴Cf. M. Erasmio, *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality*, Austin 2004, p. 2; J. Hesk, *The Socio-Political Dimension of Ancient Tragedy*, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. by M. McDonald, J. M. Walton, Cambridge 2007, p. 86.

⁵Cf. M. Braginton, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁶Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 39–40.

⁷Cf. *ibidem*, p. 30.

Nec hactenus Fortuna maculavit patrem,
sed maius aliud ausa commisso scelus
gnatae nefandos petere concubitus iubet. (*Ag.* 26–30)

The ghost of Thyestes is therefore something more than a ghost – it is an infernal spectre which has come from hell. Its role in the tragedy is therefore not restricted to *putting the audience in possession of certain necessary data*⁸ (like that of Polydorus in Euripides' *Hecuba*); it is also endowed with the task of immersing the audience in the gloomy atmosphere of the ancient palace.

In the prologue of *Thyestes* Seneca uses the same idea⁹ in a slightly modified form. This time it is the infernal spectre of Tantalus which appears, having been brought up from the depths of hell by the Fury:

[...] Perge, detestabilis
umbra, et penates impios furiis age.
Certetur omni scelere et alterna vice
stringatur ensis; nec sit irarum modus
pudorve, mentes caecus instiget furor,
rabies parentum duret et longum nefas
eat in nepotes; nec vacet cuiquam vetus
odisse crimen: semper oriatur novum,
nec unum in uno, dumque punitur scelus,
crescat. [...]
Nox alta fiat, excidat caelo dies.
Misce penates, odia caedes funera
arcesse et imple Tantalos totam domum. (*Thy.* 23–32; 51–53)

Several scholars have remarked that this scene has strong connections with Virgil's *Aeneid* – and in particular with that episode in which Allecto urges Turnus to take revenge on the Trojans (*Verg. Aen.* 7. 447–457).¹⁰ In *Thyestes*, however, the Fury compels Tantalus to fill (literally: *imple Tantalos*) the entire palace with his evil spirit and to inflame the minds of its inhabitants with fratricidal madness.

Virgil's Allecto merely incites Turnus to vengeance, whereas Seneca's Fury orders Tantalus to spread the deadly pestilence of evil over the whole family residence. Moreover, while Turnus belongs to the world of the living and the Fury belongs to the Underworld, Seneca brings two inhabitants of the realm of the

⁸Cf. M. Hadas, *A History of Roman Literature*, New York 1952, p. 247.

⁹William M. Calder III discusses the similarities between these prologues (cf. *Seneca's "Agamemnon"*, CPh, vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan. 1976, p. 29 ff).

¹⁰Cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., p. 51; R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca's "Thyestes"*, ed. with a comm., Atlanta 1985, pp. 85–86; A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play. "Thyestes" and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Cambridge 2003, p. 34 ff.; P. Mantovanelli, *Il prologo del „Tieste” di Seneca. Strutture spazio-temporali e intertestualità*, QCTC, 10, 1992, p. 203; M. C. J. Putnam, *Virgil's Aeneid: interpretation and influence*, Chapel Hill 1995, p. 273.

dead together on stage.¹¹ Furthermore, Turnus is a generous young man, while Tantalus is a “detestable shade” (*detestabilis umbra*). This scene, therefore, is clearly a travesty of a similar passage in the *Aeneid*.¹²

Virgil contents himself with creating a “supernatural” atmosphere by enriching the aforementioned passage with a guest from the Underworld, whereas Seneca does everything he can to shock and shake his audience. One infernal spectre such as Tantalus is quite enough to incite fear, but its appearance in the company of an enraged Fury leads to an escalation of horror.

The dark shadow that is cast over the entire play by the spectre’s monstrosity remains even after the spectre’s departure.¹³ The knowledge that such abominable beings can influence the actions of living people heightens the atmosphere of terror that has already been created by the portrayal of the inhabitants of Tartarus. By means of such special techniques as the contrasting of light and darkness (a Senecan favourite), the author intensifies this effect still further (*nox alta fiat, excidat caelo dies*).

The prediction that night will conquer day is a fairly clear metaphor for the future victory of evil over good.¹⁴ The words of the Fury anticipate the final part of the play, in which the drunken Thyestes will consume the flesh of his own sons and the palace will be plunged into utter darkness:

Vix lucet ignis; ipse quin aether gravis
inter diem noctemque desertus stupet.
Quid hoc? Magis magisque concussi labant
convexa caeli; spissior densis coit
caligo tenebris noxque se in noctem abdidit:
fugit omne sidus. [...] (*Thy.* 990–995)

In Seneca’s tragedies night stands between the material and the spiritual world.¹⁵ The sudden onset of darkness in the final scene of *Thyestes* marks the reaction of the supernatural world to the act of cannibalism that takes place in the palace of Atreus. Seneca uses darkness as a symbol of the powers of evil.¹⁶ The spectre of Tantalus and the Fury also belong to the terrible realm of night.

Another category of spirits are those which reveal themselves to the *dramatis personae*. Although they do not take part in the action of the plays, their ap-

¹¹ Cf. J. Pyplacz, op. cit., p. 54.

¹² Cf. ibidem, p. 54.

¹³ Cf. E. Wesołowska, *Prologi tragedii Seneki w świetle komunikacji literackiej*, Poznań 1998, p. 79.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Pyplacz, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁵ William H. Owen remarks that in this and in other Senecan tragedies darkness is the symbol of hell (cf. *Commonplace and Dramatic Symbol in Seneca’s Tragedies*, TAPhA, vol. 99, 1968, p. 307).

¹⁶ Cf. ibidem, p. 300.

pearance is always related by an eyewitness who has been in direct contact with them. In Seneca's tragedies there are two such spirits: the ghost of Achilles in *Troades* and the ghost of Laius in *Oedipus*.

The appearance of the ghost of Achilles in *Troades* is not an original idea of Seneca's. It is a constant motif in a play that has *Ilioupersis* as its subject. I have already mentioned Sophocles' *Polyxene* and the ghost of Achilles which appears in that play. In the *Hecuba* of Euripides, whose plot appears to resemble that of Sophocles' *Polyxene*, the ghost is equally important, but never appears on stage. We may therefore surmise that Seneca has followed Euripides.

The account of the appearance of the ghost in Seneca's *Troades* is, however, much more complex than that of its Greek prototype. Seneca has enhanced Euripides' simple account with the description of a series of strange *prodigia*.¹⁷ At the beginning of his narration the news bearer Talthybius stresses the fact that he has seen the ghost with his own eyes and that he has never witnessed anything so terrible:

Pavet animus, artus horridus quassat tremor,
maiora veris monstra (vix capiunt fidem)
Vidi ipse, vidi. [...] (*Tro.* 168–170)

Atze J. Keulen has remarked that by means of the repetition *vidi ipse, vidi* Seneca emphasizes *Talthybius' emotional state of mind*.¹⁸ By nervously repeating the words he has just said, Talthybius makes it clear that he has witnessed something awesome and terrifying. The beginning of his account may therefore be intended to increase dramatic tension to the highest degree.

The account proper begins with the description of an earthquake that occurs just before the ghost's appearance and which Talthybius describes as *maiora veris monstra* (w. 169):

[...] Summa iam Titan iuga
stringebat ortu, vicerat noctem dies,
cum subito caeco terra mugitu fremens
concussa totos traxit ex imo sinus;
movere silvae capita et excelsum nemus
fragore vasto tonuit et lucus sacer:
Idaea ruptis saxa ceciderunt iugis.
Nec terra solum tremuit: et pontus suum
adesse Achillen sensit ac stravit vada.
Tum scissa vallis aperit immensos specus
et hiatus Erebi pervium ad superos iter
tellure fracta praebet ac tumulum levat. (*Tro.* 170–180)

¹⁷ Cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., p. 54.

¹⁸ Cf. A. J. Keulen, op. cit., p. 170.

In this connection it is worth noting that Seneca, like the other philosophers of his times (both Stoics and Epicureans), had a scientific interest in earthquakes. He tried to explain them in a rational manner in order to dispel the various superstitions that were associated with them.¹⁹ In writing his *Troades*, however, he was acting not as a philosopher, but as an artist, and therefore quite consciously embraced the magic of the ancient beliefs, attributing responsibility for the earthquake to a supernatural being:

Emicuit ingens umbra Thessalici ducis:
[...]
Implevit omne litus irati sonus (*Tro.* 181, 190).

The ghost of Achilles does not look very different from the hero when he was alive (*Threicia qualis arma...*), apart from the fact that it is unnaturally large (*ingens umbra*). Its general appearance is not as terrifying as its words, for it demands the blood of Polyxene (191–196) before returning to the Underworld:

Haec fatus alta nocte demisit diem
repetensque Ditem mersus ingentem specum
coeunte terra iunxit. [...] (*Tro.* 197–199).

As in *Thyestes*, Seneca here also uses his favourite motif of *lux /tenebrae*.²⁰ When the ghost of Achilles returns to the Underworld the Earth is plunged into darkness (*nocte demersit diem*). This phenomenon enhances the sublimity of the scene, as it is not only a “special effect”, but also a portent of approaching disaster.

Seneca’s *Oedipus* is very different from the *Oedipus tyrannos* of Sophocles, which is a possible Greek point of reference (being the only one that has come down to us). The main difference between these two tragedies is that – unlike Sophocles, who keeps the intervention of the supernatural world to an absolute minimum – Seneca allows it to dominate the entire plot.²¹

After the *extispicio* brings forth an ominous result, Tiresias sees that the only way to find out who murdered Laius is to invoke the ghost of the deceased king himself:

[...] alia temptanda est via:
ipse evocandus noctis aeternae plagis,
emissus Erebo ut caedis auctorem indicet.
Reseranda tellus, Ditis implacabile

¹⁹Cf. G. D. Williams, *Graeco-Roman Seismology and Seneca on Earthquakes in “Natural Questions”* 6, JRS 96, 2006, p. 125.

²⁰Cf. J. Pyplacz, op. cit., pp. 66–69.

²¹Cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., p. 64.

numen precandum, populus infernae Stygis
huc extrahendus: [...] (*Oed.* 392–397)

Like the Achilles scene in *Troades*, the necromancy scene in *Oedipus* is not acted out (or at least recited)²² on stage, but is related to the audience by Creon, who himself has witnessed the appearance of the ghost (530 ff.). By means of such quasi-epic narration Seneca was able to enhance certain episodes with various “special effects” that could never have been performed owing to the technical limitations of the ancient theatre.²³

The account of the appearance of the ghost is preceded by a description of the grove where Tiresias performs the ritual of necromancy (*Oed.* 530–547). The grove is a typical *locus horridus*.²⁴ It is worth noting that Seneca was particularly fond of descriptions of this kind,²⁵ which are also to be found in *Hercules furens* (662–696), *Thyestes* (641–682) and *Hercules Oetaeus* (1618–1636).

In *Thyestes* the description of the *locus horridus* directly precedes the account of a horrifying, quasi-religious rite in which Atreus first murders the three sons of Thyestes and then uses their flesh to prepare a supper for his brother. In *Oedipus* and in *Thyestes*, therefore, the *locus horridus* is a venue for the performance of occult rituals involving the shedding of animal or human blood.²⁶

In accordance with the requirements of the ritual of necromancy, Tiresias performs a series of initial acts before he calls forth the ghost of Laius: he strikes the ground (*effosa tellus*, 550), sets fire to a pyre (*super rapti rogis*²⁷ / *iaciuntur ignes*, 550–551), brings black animals to the cave (*nigro bidentes vellere atque*

²² Although the question as to whether Seneca’s tragedies were or were not intended to be staged remains unsolved, there are many reasons to believe that they were never performed as normal plays. Cf. Ovid. *Trist.* 5, 7, 25–28; Plin. *Epist.* 7, 17; F. Ahl, *Seneca: Medea*, introd. and transl., New York 1986, p. 18; E. Wesołowska, *Postaci w „Medei” i „Fedrze” Seneki*, Poznań 1991, p. 7; E. Fantham, *Literary Culture From Cicero to Apuleius*, London 1999, p. 151; J. Fitch, *Playing Seneca?*, [in:] *Seneca in performance*, ed. by G. W. M. Harrison, London 2000, p. 11; R. Stamm, *The Mirror Technique in Senecan and Pre-Shakespearean Tragedy*, Bern 1975, p. 36.

²³ Cf. J. Pyplacz, op. cit., p. 15

²⁴ Cf. D. Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, Princeton 2001, p. 27.

²⁵ Cf. A. Schiesaro, op. cit., p. 127.

²⁶ Lucan makes the most of this strategy in his *Pharsalia*, where the description of a barbaric rite practiced by the Massiliotes is directly preceded by the description of the terrifying grove where those rituals were performed (Luc. *Phars.* 3. 399 ff.).

²⁷ It is worth noting that Lucan uses the same original combination of the verb *rapiō* with the noun *rogus* in the account of Erietto’s practice of necromancy:

“Fumantes iuvenum cineres ardentiaque ossa
e mediis rapit illa rogis ipsamque, parentes
quam tenere, facem, nigroque volantia fumo
feralis fragmenta tori vestesque fluentes
colligit in cineres et olentis membra favillas”. (Luc. *Phars.* 6, 533–537)

atrae boves / antro trahuntur, 556–557), invokes the ghosts of the dead (*vocat inde manes*, 559) and finally sacrifices blood (*multo specum / saturat cruore*, 564–565), milk and wine (*niveum insuper / lactis liquorem, fundit et Bacchum manu / laeva*, 565–567).

Ludwig Fahz has reconstructed the ancient ritual of necromancy by comparing various Greek and Latin texts.²⁸ His comparison of various texts of a similar nature shows just how precise the description of the ritual of necromancy in Seneca's *Oedipus* is – and also that Seneca himself had an extensive knowledge of the subject. After Tiresias performs all the necessary ritual acts, the earth finally opens up:

Subsedit omnis silva et erexit comas,
duxere rimas robora et totum nemus
concussit horror, terra se retro dedit
gemuitque penitus: sive temptari abditum
Acheron profundum mente non aequa tulit,
sive ipsa tellus, ut daret functis viam,
compage rupta sonuit, aut ira furens
triceps catenas Cerberus movit graves.
Subito dehiscit terra et immenso sinu
laxata patuit – ipse pallentes deos
vidi inter umbras, ipse torpentes lacus
noctemque veram; gelidus in venis stetit
haesitque sanguis. [...] (*Oed.* 574–586)

As in *Troades*, here too the appearance of the ghost is preceded by an earthquake (*concussit, ipsa tellus ... rupta sonuit*). Even the clanking of Cerberus' chains can be heard and Creon's blood runs cold in his veins *gelidus in venis stetit / haesitque sanguis*). This short introduction is followed by a quasi-epic catalogue of the inhabitants of Hades (586–618), partly fashioned after a similar catalogue in Virgil's *Aeneid* (*Verg. Aen.* 6, 273–289), which Seneca is probably emulating.²⁹ Then the ghost of Laius appears:

Tandem vocatus saepe pudibundum extulit
caput atque ab omni dissidet turba procul
celatque semet (instat et Stygias preces
geminat sacerdos, donec in apertum efferat
vultus opertos) Laius – fari horreo:
stetit per artus sanguine effuso horridus,
paedore foedo squalidam obtentus comam,
et ore rabido fatur: [...] (*Oed.* 619–626).

²⁸ Cf. L. Fahz, *De poetarum Romanorum doctrina magica quaestiones selectae*, Gissae 1904, pp. 110–115.

²⁹ Cf. J. Pyplacz, op. cit., pp. 48–52.

This ghost is very different from the ghost of Achilles in *Troades*: it is brutally disfigured and dripping with blood. The language which Creon uses to describe it is charged with strong emotions (*horreo, horridus*). Seneca has therefore gone a step further than in *Troades*.

In *Oedipus*, however, the *locus horridus* and the *prodigia* are not the only sources of terror, nor the most powerful. Mary Braginton has remarked that the speech of the ghost of Laius is filled with a *desire for revenge*.³⁰ What makes the ghost of Laius much more terrifying is its consuming passion for vengeance:

Te, te cruenta sceptrā qui dextra geris,
 te pater inultus urbe cum tota petam
 et mecum Erinyn pronubam thalami traham,
 traham sonantis verbera, incestam domum
 vertam et penates impio Marte obteram.
 [...]
 et ipse rapidis gressibus sedes volet
 effugere nostras, sed graves pedibus moras
 addam et tenebo: reptet incertus viae,
 baculo senili triste praetemptans iter:
 eripite terras, auferam caelum pater. (*Oed.* 642–646; 654–658)

Under Seneca's pen the story of Oedipus has undergone a tremendous evolution. Although the post-Sophoclean tragedies about the unhappy life of the Theban king have not come down to us, we can be fairly certain that Seneca had read the *Oedipus tyrannos* of Sophocles very carefully.³¹

There is, however, a crucial difference between these two plays: whereas in Sophocles' tragedy the "crime story" prevails over the supernatural factor, which is almost absent (apart from the fact that Tiresias is in possession of prophetic knowledge), in Seneca's *Oedipus* it is the supernatural "fireworks" that dominate the entire play.³²

Yet another class of ghost in Senecan tragedies comprises phantoms and hallucinations.³³ These ghosts show themselves all of a sudden to one of the characters, but are invisible to the other *dramatis personae*. According to Braginton, these ghosts are nothing else but *visions resulting from intense excitement*.³⁴ Let us begin with the *Phoenissae*, where the old Oedipus suddenly sees the ghost of his dead father while in conversation with Antigone:

[...] Genitor vocat.
 Sequor, sequor, iam parce – sanguineum gerens

³⁰ Cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., p. 32.

³¹ Cf. ibidem, p. 61.

³² Cf. ibidem, p. 64.

³³ This category of ghosts has been singled out by Braginton (cf. op. cit., p. 40).

³⁴ Cf. ibidem, p. 40.

insigne regni Laius rapti furit;
 en ecce, inanes manibus infestis petit
 foditque vultus. Nata, genitorem vides?
 Ego video. [...] (*Phoe.* 39–44)

As in *Oedipus*, here too the ghost of Laius is covered in blood. Seneca depicts Laius holding the “bloodstained insignia of the stolen kingdom” (*sanguineum gerens insigne regni... rapti*).³⁵ As if this were not enough, the ghost is enraged (*furit*) and its dead fingers reach for Oedipus’ hollow eye sockets (*inanes manibus infestis petit / foditque vultus*)³⁶. This vision brings to mind images from horror films.³⁷

Another Senecan character who experiences such a hallucination is Medea, who suddenly sees the ghost of her brother Apsyrtus, accompanied by the Furies:

Quonam ista tendit turba Furiarum impotens?
 Quem quaerit aut quo flammeos ictus parat,
 aut cui cruentas agmen infernum faces
 intentat? Ingens anguis excusso sonat
 tortus flagello. Quem trabe infesta petit
 Megaera? Cuius umbra dispersis venit
 incerta membris? Frater est, poenas petit:
 dabimus, sed omnes. Fige luminibus faces,
 lania, pervre, pectus en Furiis patet. (*Med.* 958–966)

Armed with a living serpent, the Fury is not nearly as terrifying as the ghost of Apsyrtus, whose body is so disfigured that it is scarcely recognizable even to Medea – his sister and murderer (*umbra dispersis ... incerta membris*). According to C. D. N. Costa, the word *incerta* probably means “faltering” or “dimly seen”.³⁸ However, given the context of Apsyrtus’ horrible death (the ghost appears with severed limbs, *dispersis membris*), the adjective *incerta* might better be understood as “barely recognizable.”³⁹

This explanation is even more plausible if we compare this scene with a similar scene in Seneca’s *Agamemnon*, in which Cassandra has a vision of the mutilated corpse of Deiphobus (*incertos geris, / Deiphobe, vultus, coniugis munus novae, Agam.* 748–749). She also calls him *incertus*, which Richard John Tarrant – mindful of the aforementioned passage from *Medea* – translates as “unrecognizable”.⁴⁰

³⁵ According to Marica Frank, the object is probably a sceptre or a crown (cf. *Seneca’s „Phoenissae”*, introd. and comm., Leiden 1995, p. 90).

³⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 90–91.

³⁷ Cf. R. Stamm, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³⁸ Cf. C. D. N. Costa, *Seneca, “Medea”*, ed. with an introd. and comm., Oxford 1989, p. 156.

³⁹ Cf. R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca, Agamemnon*, ed. with a comm., Cambridge 1976, p. 311.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibidem*.

Unlike Medea's vision, that of Cassandra is not the result of a guilty conscience, but of her extraordinary gift of clairvoyance. Tarrant compares Cassandra's vision with that of Medea and with the description of the ghost of Deiphobus in Virgil's *Aeneid* (6. 494 ff.), this being the common source of both passages.⁴¹

Let us now take a closer look at the descriptions of Deiphobus in Seneca's *Agamemnon* and in the *Aeneid*:

Atque hic Priamiden **laniatum corpore toto**
 Deiphobum vidit **et lacerum crudeliter ora,**
ora manusque ambas, populataque tempora raptis
auribus et truncas inhoneste vulnere naris.
vix adeo agnovit pavitantem ac dira tegentem
 supplicia, et notis compellat vocibus ultro: (Verg. *Aen.* 6. 494–499)

Quid me vocatis sospitem solam e meis,
 umbrae meorum? Te sequor, tota pater
 Troia sepulte; frater, auxilium Phrygum
 terrorque Danaum, non ego antiquum decus
 video aut calentes ratibus exustis manus,
 sed lacera membra et saucios vinco graui
 illos lacertos. Te sequor, nimium cito
 congesse Achilli Troile; **incertos** geris,
 Deiphobe, **vultus**, coniugis munus novae. (*Ag.* 741–749)

In Seneca's *Agamemnon* the terrifying ghost of Deiphobus (which in the *Aeneid* appears to Aeneas in the Underworld) shows itself to Cassandra in the form of a vision, while in *Medea* it undergoes a peculiar literary metamorphosis during which it is transformed into the nightmarish spectre of a brother who haunts the sister who has murdered him.

Another such ghost is the shade of Hector, who appears to Andromache in *Troades*. Although Braginton has classified this ghost separately as a "dream",⁴² it can equally well be included in the category of ghostly apparitions that comprises phantoms and hallucinations:

Partes fere nox alma transierat duas
 clarumque septem verterant stellae iugum;
 ignota tandem venit afflictae quies
 brevisque fessis somnus obrepsit genis,
 si somnus ille est mentis attonitae stupor:
 cum subito nostros Hector ante oculos stetit,
 non qualis ultro bella in Argivos ferens
 Graias petebat facibus Idaeis rates,

⁴¹ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁴² Cf. M. Braginton, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 41.

[...]

sed fessus ac deiectus et fletu gravis
 similisque nostro, squalida obiectus coma.

[...]

Mihi gelidus horror ac tremor somnum excutit,
 oculosque nunc huc pavida, nunc illuc ferens
 oblita nati misera quaesivi Hectorem:
 fallax per ipsos umbra complexus abit. (*Tro.* 438–445; 449–450; 457–460)

Andromache describes the ghost of her husband as being “weary and overwhelmed by mourning” (*fessus ac deiectus et fletu gravis*). It is neither as aggressive as the ghost of Laius in *Phoenissae*, nor as horribly mutilated as that of Deiphobus in *Agamemnon* and that of Apsyrtus in *Medea*. Andromache is nevertheless extremely disturbed by this vision (*mihi gelidus horror ac tremor somnum excutit*).⁴³ Despite her fear, however, Andromache is so desperate to embrace her dead husband that for a moment she even forgets about her son (*oblita nati*).

The fact that Seneca is more than willing to introduce phantoms that are invisible to the audience is a consequence of the immanent poetic of his tragedies – a poetic that veers towards the epic genre.⁴⁴ Instead of worrying about the technical limitations of the theatre, Seneca simply lets himself be carried away by his imagination – thus enriching his plays at will with all manner of “irrational” things (i.e. that which Aristotle calls τὰ ἄλογα⁴⁵). In this way, despite being a writer of tragedies, Seneca could enjoy the freedom of an epic poet.⁴⁶

In modern times Seneca’s tragedies bring to mind the disturbing atmosphere of the works of authors such as Matthew Gregory Lewis, Charles Robert Maturing and Edgar Allan Poe. His plays abound in spectres, hallucinations and phantoms as do no other ancient works of literature (with the exception, of course, of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*). The atmosphere of mystery and metaphysical awe that has become the hallmark of these plays results from the fact that their action often balances on the borderline between the natural and the supernatural.

In Seneca’s plays the influence of ghosts on the lives of their living relatives is mostly negative or even destructive. Some of them, such as the infernal spectres of Tantalus in *Thyestes* and of Thyestes in *Agamemnon*, which deliberately

⁴³ Such descriptions of physical effects of emotions are typical of Seneca (cf. V. Tietze Larson, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 99).

⁴⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Cf.: Δεῖ μὲν οὖν ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις ποιεῖν τὸ θαυμαστόν, μᾶλλον δ’ ἐνδέχεται ἐν τῇ ἐποποιίᾳ τὸ ἄλογον, δι’ ὃ συμβαίνει μάλιστα τὸ θαυμαστόν, διὰ τὸ μὴ ὄραν εἰς τὸν πρῶτοντα· (Arist. *Poet.* 1460a).

⁴⁶ Cf. J. Pyplacz, *op. cit.*, p. 29 ff.

infect the dwellings of the living with the contagion of their own particular evil, deserve to be called demons rather than ghosts.

Others come either to haunt the relatives who have wronged them during their lives (like the ghost of Apsyrtus) or even attempt to attack their former oppressors (like the ghost of Laius in the *Phoenissae*). Their sudden visits and their aggressive thirst for retribution (in the case of Laius) symbolise the pangs of conscience that their murderers are condemned to suffer.

By transforming the convention of having ghosts on stage – and by drawing on his extensive knowledge of epic poetry – Seneca created a frightening gallery of characters who are literally “out of this world”. It is in large measure thanks to these visitors from the realm of death that Seneca freed himself from the influence of his literary predecessors and created his own “Gothic” aesthetic, which is so close to that of many a modern author.

ADVENAE DE REGNO MORTIS

S u m m a r i u m

Constat manes mortuorum in tragoediis antiquis saepe apparuisse. Poetis tragicis Graecis necessarii erant ut fabulam formarent spectatoresque exterrerent. Seneca manibus ad eadem aliaque peragenda utitur, nam quasi omnes eius tragoediae phantasmatis abundant.

Manes prologos dicentes, ut Thyestis umbra in *Agamemnone* Tantalique in *Thyeste* non solum historiam Tantalidarum in memoriam revocant, sed etiam, ante omnia, nequitiam suam ut pestilentiam in regia propagant. Non manes igitur, sed spectra infernalina appellandi sunt.

Alii manes, ut Achillis umbra in *Troadibus* Laiique in *Oedipo*, ex Erebo ad terram adeunt, sed auditoribus invisibiles sunt. Crudeles, implacabiles poenaeque avidissimi, vitam dramatis personarum male influunt. Adventus eorum a nuntiis quasi epico modo narrantur.

Nonnullam dramatis personae in Senecae tragoediis visiones repentinas familiarium mortuorum habent, qui aliis personis invisibiles sunt, ut Laius, cuius spectrum horribile Oedipum in *Phoenissis* aggredit, Apsyrtusve, qui Medae se ostendit. Haec malae conscientiae deliramenta sunt.

Alii autem manes simpliciter familiares suos, quibus desunt, visitant, ut Deiphobi umbra quam Cassandra in *Agamemnone* vidit. Simili modo Hectoris umbra Andromachae uxori quasi somnium se ostendit in tragoedia quae *Troades* inscribitur.

Ex his omnibus constat Senecam plus ingenium suum quam conditiones theatri antiqui secutum esse quam ob rem tragoedias suas spectris, phantasmatis et prodigiis sine ullis obstaculis implevisse. Constat etiam manes mortuorum his in tragoediis magno munere fungi, nam eas unicis aliisque antiquis poematibus tam epicis quam dramaticis dissimiliores reddunt.