THE MACABRE IN SENECA’S TRAGEDIES*

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The purpose of this investigation is inter alia to try and find an explanation for the presence of the macabre in Senecan tragedy. We shall concentrate mainly on his Medea, Agamemnon, Phaedra and Oedipus. In order to put the problem of blood and violence in his tragedies in the right perspective cognizance should first of all be taken of some scholars’ views on this matter. Subsequently the role will be indicated of the dramatic and rhetorical techniques Seneca used to stress the macabre in his plays. A few possible explanations are suggested for the emphasis on gruesome descriptions and finally some conclusions are set out.

By way of introduction a brief discussion of the word ‘macabre’ and its meaning is called for. According to the dictionaries it is connected with death or the sphere of death but then more specifically with its horrible and gruesome aspects. It can therefore mean ‘horrible’ or ‘ghastly’.

Seneca’s constant obsession with guilt, death, violence and fear is conspicuous, says Atkinson. Some critics hold that the occurrence of violence and horrors in Seneca’s dramas is exaggerated or that his tragedies are too bloody and gruesome. Motto even calls his dramas ‘Tragedies of Blood’. According to Conradie the poet apparently takes delight in describing atrocities in the finest detail. He was, as Godley puts it, fond of ‘gross physical horrors’. Consequently several critics have deprecated the recurrent scenes of blood and horror. The tragedies are furthermore censured for their rhetorical style, for the long didactic ‘speeches’ and the apparent ostentation of mythological lore, qualities which give free rein to the abominable and the sinister.

J.P. Poe has shown conclusively that the obsession with death and massacre was characteristic of the literature of the early Empire. It appears in one form or another in the works of Lucan, Statius, Petronius, Tibullus, Propertius, and in Seneca’s tragedies and prose work. Yet, in spite of the general frequency of this interest in murder and slaughter appearing in Silver Age Latin literature, the critics have until recently failed in the main to notice its occurrence in these tragedies.

Those who did try to account for this literary feature saw in it an attempt to arouse the reader’s attention by shocking him, or sometimes a perverse Roman blood-thirstiness was stated as its reason. Perhaps the ordinary Roman preferred something acceptable and realistic, says Godley, e.g. the killing of people. According to Watling the tragic violence and the intrigues of real life as well as the organized slaughter in the amphitheatres (against which Seneca

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objected)\textsuperscript{12} seem to have blunted the Romans' taste for tragedy as dramatic art.\textsuperscript{13} The information drawn from Seneca's tragedies will serve to test these views.

It is generally acknowledged that in his plays Seneca makes use of dramatic and rhetorical techniques. Our research is, however, not focused merely on the manifest presence of such techniques but rather on the way in which these means are applied in order to stress the macabre elements with greater effect.

Let us begin by concentrating on the dramatic techniques. A fundamental problem in dramaturgy is the stimulation and maintenance of the audience's interest in the denouement. The dramatist must therefore ensure that his audience remains attentive and absorbed, as well as in a state of continuous suspense regarding the final unravelling of the plot. And since Seneca's gruesome scenes usually appear in the denouement he must constantly keep the attention of the audience focused on the final scene; this he succeeds in doing by foreshadowing the macabre close. Thus Medea already in line 25 of his play alludes to the nature of her intended vengeance:

\begin{quote}
parta iam, parta ultio est: peperi.\textsuperscript{(25–26)} i.e. — infanticide.
\end{quote}

The image used of the wave about to break is a beautiful adumbration and pictorial representation of Medea's emotions erupting in catastrophe: 'Ubi se iste fluctus franget?' (392). The approaching disaster which by its nature strengthens the macabre and increases suspense is announced by the 'nutrix' in line 395: 'magnum aliqaud instat, efferum immane impium' and is alluded to by the chorus in 851: 'quod impotenti / facinus parat furore?' Medea gives a significant but ambiguous indication of the children's death when she tells Iason: 'te novi nati manent' (543). In the first place she hints at the fact that after the atrocious deed he will be without sons, and in the second place she alludes to sons his new wife Creusa will bear him.

Within the very first fifty lines of the \textit{Agamemnon} we already know who will be the King's murderers, how he will die and what type of weapon is going to be used for the deed. Thyestes' ghost pronounces as it were Agamemnon's death sentence with the words 'daturus coniugi iugulum suae' (43). Only two lines further the actual weapons are mentioned: 'enses secures tela, divisum gravi / ictu bipennis regium video caput'; (45). In spite of the foreknowledge it now has, the audience is still kept in a state of expectation and uncertainty as to the exact nature of the crime: 'te decet maius nefas'. By means of the storm which overwhelmed Agamemnon's ships (462–578) Seneca introduces the overture to the murder of the King. The imminent disaster can be clearly detected in Cassandra's prophetic words (732–35) which contain not only a vague reference to Aegisthus, the abettor in the conspiracy, but also the name of Clytaemnestra and the weapons.

Reference to Hippolytus' gruesome death in the \textit{Phaedra} differs from the description in the \textit{Medea} and especially in the \textit{Agamemnon}, in that mention of it is made not as early, nor as frequently, nor yet in such macabre detail as in the
Agamemnon. Besides, we have no clear indication of the way in which he will come to his end. This ensures a mounting tension. The first vague reference to the various ways of dying occurs in line 475. Subsequently Hippolytus significantly refers to family murders in 553, and in 558 even alludes to a stepmother who 'mitior nil est feris'. Although the chorus prays in vain that Hippolytus be spared (821–22) it states his inevitable lot in no uncertain terms: beauty offers no guarantee for safety even if one finds oneself in remote places (778–94). A further ominous remark is uttered by the chorus: in the past beauty has brought punishment on many a man (820–21). But it is Hippolytus’ own father, who finally condemns him to death by his credulous acceptance of Phaedra’s false accusations: ‘you shall pay for your sins’ (932). Scarcely has Theseus in 945 pronounced the death sentence in the form of a wish when a messenger brings news of Hippolytus’ gruesome death.

In the Oedipus, the protagonist as early as the 31st line has a presentiment of some imminent disaster: ‘cui reservamur malo?’ It is, however, not until line 656 that Laius’ ghost vaguely prophesies his horrible end when Oedipus’ self-inflicted blindness is alluded to. Meanwhile, the audience is kept in suspense until Oedipus in 957 pronounces the awesome sentence: ‘fodiantur oculi’ — my eyes shall be gouged out.

Foreshadowing is a method used to prepare the audience for the macabre denouement. This foreknowledge is either gained during the course of events in the tragedy or has been acquired before the commencement of the play. When Seneca so repeatedly foreshadows the macabre unravelling, e.g. in the Medea and Agamemnon, does he presume that his audience possesses no foreknowledge of coming events? Or is he using his audience’s mythological knowledge to stimulate co-operation? In order to maintain and intensify suspense Seneca continuously reinforce this allusion to coming events. Why then does he thus constantly remind his audience of the characters’ destiny? Pratt argues that the poet wants to offer it the opportunity of entering into the spirit of the player. He suggests that Seneca transferred this rhetorical concept to his tragedies. Surely the constant direct or indirect reference to the horrible closing scene must blunt the feelings of the audience rendering it less sensitive or even immune to shock by the time the scene is eventually reached. On the other hand such allusions may serve as evidence that the tragedian has no intention of shocking his audience but that he rather, simultaneously with the horrible events, conveys a more profound message to his already primed audience.

Creation of atmosphere plays a very important role in Seneca’s tragedies: it merely serves to accentuate the macabre. In only a few tragedies is the proper atmosphere for atrocities created at a much later stage and shortly before the actual horrors. In the majority, however, this occurs much earlier, or even at the very outset. It is not until line 1008, i.e. just before Hippolytus’ death, that in the Phaedra a purposeful and clear attempt is made to create the right atmosphere for the impending disaster. At first a storm breaks loose in all its violence (1009). Then the monstrous bull appears which will be the cause of Hippolytus’ ghastly
death (1036). The earth trembles with terror and flocks of livestock stampede (1050–52). The stage is set and the audience is in the proper mood for the distressing and macabre scene in which Hippolytus is mutilated (1085–1113).

Seneca undoubtedly made use of sinister and supernatural elements to support and to bring out to the full the horrible events of his dramas. This may be illustrated from his Medea. In preparation for Creon’s and Creusa’s death Medea displays all her evil powers and musters her mystical and secret forces (678–79). She even calls in the aid of poisonous snakes like Python and Hydra (684–704) and gathers all sorts of toxic plants (705–30). Then follows her performance of the ritual (740–842) in preparation for the lethal garments. The yew-tree and the Styx river referred to in 804 are naturally associated with death. Just before Medea kills her own sons a number of Furies appear; and to round off this sinister scene Seneca adds a hissing snake and another fury, Megaera. Immediately after the infanticide Medea is carried off by two scaly serpents.

In the very first line of the Agamemnon we find ourselves in the presence of death when Thyestes’ ghost appears from the underworld. A sinister atmosphere is palpable in Seneca’s description of the priestess Cassandra’s swoon. Once again the audience is in the shadow of death as Cassandra prophesies Agamemnon’s death as well as her own. She employs the familiar symbols: Styx, Tartarus’ dog, Dis and the dark Phlegethon river (750–53). She is blinded by a deep darkness (726). Seneca calls Aegisthus a ‘semivir’ when the latter stabs Agamemnon in his side thus implying something sinister namely that such a grim deed may be expected of someone born in incest.

The most striking creation of atmosphere would seem to appear in the first five lines of Seneca’s Oedipus:

‘Iam nocte Titan dubius explusa redit
et nube maestus squalida exoritur iubar,
lumenque flamma triste lucitica gerens
prospiciet avida peste solatas domos,
stragemque quam nox fecit ostendet dies.’ (1–5)

Here Seneca by a pathetic fallacy makes dexterous use of the moods of nature in order to evoke a suitable mood in his audience. Troubled and depressed on account of the inexplicable plague afflicting his kingdom and because of the prophecy that he would murder his father and marry his mother Oedipus awaits the oracle’s answer and solution which Creon is about to convey to him. Gloomily and hesitantly the morning sun breaks through while dark clouds subdue its rays. The same ominous atmosphere prevails even on clear nights since the brightness of the stars is bedimmed by black fog (44–49). Equally sinister is Seneca’s depiction of the symptoms of the ghastly plague: the black blood flowing from the nose (189), the peculiar phenomenon while the offering takes place of blood flowing back through the mouth and eyes of the victims (347–50). Tiresias commented that these portentous offerings brought frightful forebodings (351). The sinister oak forest and the evocation of the dead (e.g. of Laius in 623) contribute greatly to the creation of an atmosphere in which the macabre can
thrive. These ominous references to the realm of the dead (869–70), ghosts that are evoked and monsters so typical of Seneca, are lacking in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles. Even the creation of atmosphere at the beginning (in the descriptive form as we find it in Seneca) is absent in the latter tragedy.

It was inevitable that Seneca would employ rhetorical techniques in his tragedies. He was a product of his time, though: ‘in him we find that tendency after effect, which is the inevitable outcome of rhetorical schools’, says Godley. Above all Seneca is a tragedian and rhetorician. His rhetorical background always shows in his tragedies: ‘We find him always doing the same thing, — given a situation, trying to say the most brilliant, the most erudite, the most generally striking things about it’ according to Godley. Garton expresses the same idea: ‘To a man brought up as Seneca was, rhetoric is the whole formal art of composition: it guides the intelligence and controls the imagination at every stage.

In the light of the evidence thus far offered I made an analysis of only the ghastly scenes in order to establish the effect of rhetorical elements on the portrayal of the macabre events. From this investigation it appeared that in these scenes various rhetorical elements were utilized by Seneca, viz. description, chiasmus, ‘exclamatio’, synecdoche, anaphora, rhetorical question, hyperbole, alliteration, antithesis and asyndeton. For lack of time and space only the most striking figures are here dealt with.

One of the most important rhetorical techniques, and one with a very high frequency, employed by Seneca in the scenes of violence is surely the ‘descriptio’. In this connection Godley declares: ‘There must be descriptive passages to show off your erudition.’ Canter holds the following opinion: ‘Description considered as the portrayal of objects, physical or spiritual, real or imaginary, through the medium of language constitutes a very considerable part of Seneca’s means for rhetorical ornamentation.’ Hence this element effectively appeals to the imagination and is primarily emotional by nature.

On account of Seneca’s rhetorical background the occurrence of description is naturally more frequent in his tragedies than in the corresponding Greek tragedies. It is conspicuous and significant that especially in the murder scene of the *Medea* no description as such occurs but by way of dialogue every bit of information is subtly conveyed to the audience. Does not Seneca here conform more accurately to real dramatic art? Moreover, closer analysis reveals no so-called ‘structure’, and more important still, not a drop of blood is described by the poet. Besides, unlike the descriptions in the *Agamemnon* and *Hippolytus* Seneca offers absolutely no particulars of what is surely an extremely repugnant deed: Medea refers to it only indirectly. Could the absence of the typical bloody details which occur so frequently elsewhere, have any relevance to the absence of the usual rhetorical description? Did Seneca really let slip this golden opportunity to describe the infanticide (and the death of Creon and his daughter) in the same gruesome terms as in his other tragedies? It would seem that the actual macabre element lies in the type of deed itself and in the fact that Medea (before the eyes of her husband) first murders one child and then at a later stage the other. For this
view we find support in Seneca's *De Beneficiis* 2.5.3. where he argues that the most cruel way of punishing a victim consists in postponing and protracting the act of vengeance.

However, justice is done to the macabre in Cassandra's version of the murder of Agamemnon: an exceptionally realistic description of his severed head is offered to the reader. Seneca's version comprises 16 lines compared with only 8 in Aeschylus' tragedy with the same title. Over and above the fact that Seneca's rendering is twice the length of its Greek counterpart vastly more blood-curdling details and a greater intensity appear in the Latin work. An analysis of lines 881–907 reveals some conscious structure. (See diagram A.) Lines 881–889 deal with the 'amictus' which Agamemnon wears at Clytaemnestra's request. Seeing that this mantle impedes the free movement of his hands and even covers his head it is really nothing but a mere pall, thus foreshadowing how he will be firmly caught in death's snares (diagram A). Aegisthus strikes the first blow in lines 890–91 (diagram A) but without killing Agamemnon: Clytaemnestra must indeed have her turn also. In 892–96 the 'amictus' is again in the limelight: the King's struggle to free himself from its folds symbolizes his death-struggle: the prophecy of 881–889 thus comes true. See diagram A. (Compare Hippolytus' vain attempt to wriggle himself free from the ever tightening reins (1085–86, diagram B).) Then Clytaemnestra in 897–901 (diagram A) with an axe takes a hand in the killing, just like a priest about to slaughter the sacrificial victim, says Seneca. As a result of her frenzied chopping with the axe in 901–903 her husband's severed head hangs only by a thin piece of skin. The grand finale comes when (in 904–907) Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra run riot and jointly mutilate the lifeless body of the King.

Of the four tragedies under discussion the description of Hippolytus' horrible end is undoubtedly the longest, most exhaustive and, save the *Oedipus* episode, the most realistic scene. Consequently Seneca here availed himself of the opportunity of displaying the macabre in all its horror. The ghastly mutilation of the once beautiful Hippolytus is described in such telling detail that the macabre in all its naked reality appeals loudly and clearly to the audience. No wonder that in a closer analysis of the scene, a distinct structure comes to light. According to diagram B five principal moments can be observed: in line 1085 we find the attractive body of the youthful Hippolytus still perfect and intact. The next section (lines 1086 to 1097) relentlessly depicts the sanguinary and systematic but swift dismemberment of the body. A sharp stump leads to the turning point of the whole scene when it pierces the youth's groin and jerks everything to a standstill. During the fourth phase the mutilation is continued, again bit by bit, until the collection of his scattered limbs is described in the fifth and last section (1105–1114).

This section forms a ring composition with the first (1085) with which Seneca emphasizes the irreversibility of Hippolytus' death and lacerated body by strongly contrasting his still intact body before the gruesome accident with the corpse torn to pieces and mutilated after the accident. By way of completing the
ring composition, a futile attempt is made by his companions to mend his body. ‘But alas, (according to Lucas) their efforts are in vain as those of the king’s horses and the king’s men to do the like service for Humpty-Dumpty’. Theseus’ overhasty judgement resulted in the cruel destruction of Hippolytus without a word being spoken between father and son; by contrast the corresponding scene in Euripides’ tragedy in which father and son quarrel violently therefore does not have the same terrifyingaugustness and pathos as Seneca’s version.24

Seneca’s description of the scene (952–79) in which Oedipus gouges out his eyes with his fingers instead of blinding himself with Iocasta’s brooch, as is done in the Greek tragedy, teems with gory realism. Rhetorically speaking a structure can well be drawn from this description although it is not as clearly perceptible as in the Hippolytus scene. In the abhorrent Oedipus scene Seneca also employs a structure (diagram C) in order to accentuate the macabre aspects e.g. the tears of blood, bloody eye-sockets etc. In 952–53 Seneca describes Oedipus’ tears. Oedipus consequently passes judgement on himself in 954–57: his eyes must be removed! Then follows Oedipus’ macabre frenzy (957–975) when he himself executes his sentence. From lines 975–77 it is evident that he has settled his debt. A realistic description of the tears of blood flowing from his empty eye-sockets concludes this ghastly scene (978–79). Thus Seneca creates a ring composition from the ordinary tears that Oedipus sheds at the beginning of this scene to the blood flowing from his empty eye-sockets. He thus pertinently draws the attention of the audience to the macabre aspects of Oedipus’ self-inflicted punishment.

A few other rhetorical elements occurring in the death scenes and gruesome descriptions remain to be discussed. The chiasmus is an inversion of the normal order in the form of corresponding pairs e.g. a b b a. Seneca attempts to corroborate his description and to create a more striking contrast which originates from the inversion of the normal word order. With clear rhetorical precision Seneca in the Medea places the following chiasmus between the two murders:

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a
Congere extremum tuis
b b a
natis, Jason, funus, ac tumulum strue;’ (977–98).
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In other words he accentuates Medea’s relentless resoluteness in her desire to kill her other son as well. Moreover, it also serves as a warning to Jason to prepare his sons’ graves. A splendid example of the force of a chiasmus occurs in his Agamemnon, strategically placed, just before Clytaemnestra’s final and fatal blow:

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a b b a
designat oculis antequam ferro petat’ (899 diagram A).
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At an equally critical moment in the death scene of the Hippolytus, with the horrible mutilation of Hippolytus’ beautiful body, Seneca also applies a striking chiasmus (in line 1095):
'et ora durus pulchra populatur lapis' (diagram B).

A choice example of how an 'exclamatio' is used at the correct psychological moment we find in line 901 of the *Agamemnon*:

'habet! peractum est!' (Diagram A).

Immediately after the final blow. Likewise the macabre sentence that Oedipus passes over himself is strengthened and finalized with an 'exclamatio': 'fodiantur oculi!' (*Oed.* 957, diagram C).

In the actual scenes of violence the rhetorical question is sparingly but effectively employed, as Oedipus puts it to himself as an incitement to gouge out his own eyes: 'et flere satis est?' (*Oed.* 954, diagram C). It is likewise clear from the messenger's words in the *Phaedra* (1110) that Seneca employs the rhetorical question in order to strengthen the macabre aspects of his scenes of violence. For, the answer to the question, as the audience already knows, points directly to Hippolytus' horribly mutilated body and blemished beauty: 'hocine est formae decus?' We may conclude with an example of alliteration from the dementia scene. It appears in the final line and forms part of the description of the tears of blood. Listen to the sombre and sorrowful music resounding from it: 'revulsis sanguinem venis vomit.' (979, diagram C).

I am only in qualified agreement with Van Zyl Smit's view of Seneca's purpose with violence. I quote: 'Sy doel in die tragedie is juuis ook nie om geweld aantreklik te maak nie maar om die verskriklike aspekte van die menslike lot treffend oor te dra.' However, she fails to carry through to its full consequence this idea of 'verskriklike aspekte van die menslike lot'. What Regenbogen has to say in this regard is of capital importance. He shows that Seneca's obsession with violence, suffering and death is by no means artificial or sensational but that it is entirely compatible with views expressed in his philosophical writings. Regenbogen also holds the acceptable view that Seneca's tragedies are products not only of the Stoic school but also of the social and political situation in which they were written. Atkinson quite rightly shows that Seneca's tragedies are not mere reflections of contemporary fashion, as is apparent from a similar obsession with violence in a totally different genre, namely in his *De Clementia*. Regenbogen's view is therefore sound that the atrocities of Seneca's time to a great extent contributed to the morbidity of his thoughts. But, says Poe, Regenbogen does not go far enough: his explanation is but a 'social' explanation. For he considers Seneca's morbidity as a symptom of, or perhaps as a reaction against, the social and political circumstances under which he lived, but no satisfactory explanations are offered for the poet's protracted preoccupation with such ominous and macabre descriptions.

The detailed account of deaths and atrocities in which Seneca apparently took such delight, is according to Conradie 'die noodwendige gevolg daarvan dat hy uitsluitend op die beskrywing as sodanig konsentreer en dit so effektief moontlik probeer maak, sonder om hom aan enige ander oorweging te steur.' An outright and sound conclusion in the light of the evidence above.
Seneca's obsession with death is not artificial nor is it a craving for sensation since there is conclusive evidence in his prose works that death was ever present in his thoughts. He also points out the importance of always being prepared for death and of not dreading it. In many of his contemporaries he discerns a 'libido moriendi', a longing for death which Poe formulates as follows: 'This necrophilia, I believe, is inspired by the feeling that life is unwholesome, a death-thing, a dealer and receiver of death. This idea is an oxymoron. But necrophilia is itself a psychological oxymoron. It is a perversion of normal instincts, a love of what is beautiful in its repulsiveness, desirable in its horror.' I shall proceed to indicate that this longing for death occurs in his tragedies likewise. The atrocities of Seneca's age no doubt contributed considerably to the morbidity of his thoughts, but it offers no satisfactory explanation for the generally macabre descriptions in his tragedies. We must therefore look for other possible solutions.

Closer examination of the tragedies reveals that emotions there play a very important role. The possibility that such reactions account for the prominent role of violence and death in his dramas should not therefore be discounted. But we should begin by taking note of a few scholars' views in this connection. Conradie declares, correctly to my mind, that 'Seneca teen die hartstogte wou waarsku deur aan te toon hoe gevaarlik dit is om daaraan toe te gee.' Seneca succeeds in warning against the latter danger without pointing the lesson — a dramatic technique par excellence, says Conradie. The examination of man's conscience intensely interested Seneca, as stated by Watling in his introduction to *Four Tragedies and Octavia*. In this connection a second view of his is as apposite: 'With the 'Roman' plays came perhaps a deeper understanding of the stoic attitude of self-questioning and the search for a solution of the conflict between reason and passion.' Curry concurs with Watling in his view that man in the eyes of a Stoic is a rational being and is responsible for his deeds but that his reason can be deranged by uncontrolled emotions. However, man can still decide for himself whether he is for example going to allow his emotions to be stirred by anger. 'The passions were for the Stoics foes that had to be ruthlessly beaten down in order that rational stability might be achieved.' Moricca offers a startling but nevertheless acceptable theory that Seneca deliberately chose those characters and mythological legends which provided him with the most suitable material for an intensive study of human passions in their different forms. According to Canter Seneca went further than any Roman predecessor in his choice of topics: he chose cruelty, the abominable, and the lively description of the terrifying consequences of wild emotions like despair, torture, hatred, anger and revenge.

Without mincing matters Seneca in his *De Brevitate Vitae* states that passions must be curbed. Exactly the same admonition is given by the 'nutrix' to Medea, Phaedra and Clytaemnestra in the tragedies *Medea, Phaedra and Agamemnon*. She beseeches Medea as follows: 'iras comprime' (381). In the *Phaedra* she warns her mistress: 'animos coerce' (256). Just as strong is her warning to Clytaemnestra in the *Agamemnon*: 'Comprime affectus truces' (224). In all three cases the plea of the 'nutrix' fell on deaf ears for it has become evident that anger once stirred up
is irrepressible: this we experience together with Medea in 203: 'Difficile quam sit animum ab ira flectere iam concitatum.' Later the chorus informs us that Medea is unable to check her anger and emotions:

'Frenare nescit iras
Medea, non amores' (Med. 866).

In the Agamemnon (141–45) Clytaemnestra admits that she has lost control of her emotions: 'proinde omisi regimen e manibus meis.'

Seneca's eighteenth 'epistula' states the view that anger originates from love and hatred. This point of view finds a response in the frustrated love of Medea (Med. 130), Phaedra (Ph. 824) and Clytaemnestra (Ag. 897–99), one and all taking vengeance in such a way that the consequences are almost unbearably frightening. In his De Ira our author defines anger as the desire to mete out punishment, a desire also burning in the furious Medea: 'Unde ulcisci queam?' (Med. 124). We likewise find evidence in the Agamemnon that Clytaemnestra cherishes the desire to punish Agamemnon by killing him (Ag. 192 and 201). Furthermore, in the De Ira 1.1.2 the view is stated that anger can be regarded as temporary madness. We similarly read in his Epistula 18 that unrestrained anger causes madness.

Seneca's description of the physically perceptible signs of anger in his De Ira 1.1.4 bears a remarkable resemblance to Medea's physical symptoms of anger (Med. 853 and 858). Even verbal similarities can be pointed out e.g. 'flagrant' (Ira) = 'flagrant' (Med.), 'rubor' (Ira) = 'rubentes' (Med.), 'color versus' (Ira) = 'nullum servat diu colorem' (Med.). Atrocities can therefore be expected of a person who is at a given moment overpowered by emotion: think of Medea, Clytaemnestra and last but not the least of Oedipus.

Atreus' statement in 252–54 of Seneca's Thyestes typifies a virtually insatiable lust for vengeance which finds expression everywhere in the main characters of his other tragedies. He states it as follows: 'non satis magno meum I ardet furore pectus; impleri iuvat maiore monstro'. The desire for violence can only be satisfied by an unrivalled deed of violence. With the death of one son on her conscience and that of the second imminent Medea confesses that her lust for vengeance cannot be satisfied as yet: 'ut duos perimam, tamen I nimium est dolori numerus angustus meo' (Med. 1010–1011). In his Troades (279–285) we learn that madness tends to lead to still greater frenzy: 'per quas ipse se irritat furor' (Tr. 283). Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus for example continue with their revenge like demons by futher mutilating the lifeless and decapitated body of Agamemnon (Ag. 897–905). Possessed by fury and vindictiveness Senecan characters consequently commit unprecedented atrocities. The realistic portrayal of uncontrollable madness and revenge and of its awful consequences does not at all imply approval. As a matter of fact he condemns it as appears from his De Ira and De Clementia. Of special importance in this context is the author's view that frenzy exists in all human beings and that people stir one another to abnormality and a state of mind that has emotional conflict as concomitant.

The prime purpose of the macabre scenes in the tragedies, and in my opinion a
very important one, is the sharp accentuation of the appalling consequences and destructive power of uncontrollable emotions. Fully conscious of the consequences of her conduct Phaedra nevertheless moves in the direction of the precipice: 'sed furor cogit sequi / peiora. Vadit animus in praeceps scient' (Ph. 179–180). Because she cannot keep her passion in check, partly as a result of her frustrated love for Agamemnon, partly because of her gratuitous confession of her forbidden love for Hippolytus, the latter, emotionally disrupted, storms away (718 and 902) thus forfeiting the opportunity of defending himself when Theseus comes home. The false charge made by Phaedra against Hippolytus on account of her uncontrollable rage and her injured ego (in lines 896–97) as well as the curse overhastily uttered against him by Theseus (in 945–47) lead to his horrible death. The destructive violence in the characters of Medea and Clytaemnestra calls for a remark here. To assert herself Medea shocks the world by murdering Jason’s two children, his most vulnerable and precious possessions (Med. 424, 531, 550 et seq.); Clytaemnestra, again, cunningly plans the horrible murder of her husband, Agamemnon (Ag. 199–200 and 43–48): ‘per tuum, si aliter nequit, / latus exigatur ensis et perimat duos’ (199–200).

Of primary importance is our author’s conviction expressed in the De Tran-quilitate Animi (2.10–14) i.e. that if one cannot control one’s mind (viz. one’s emotions) a masochistic delight in pain and exertion can easily result and eventually a sadistic pleasure may even be derived from violence and bloodshed. This idea is developed in the tragedies. The craving for destruction manifests itself in Seneca’s main characters, an urge of a binary nature, i.e. on the one hand the impulse towards self-destruction and on the other a craving for the destruction of everything and everybody around one.

First, a few examples (taken from the tragedies) of this urge towards self-destruction. Although Medea does not turn to actual suicide she nevertheless clearly expresses the desire to die:

Nut. : ‘Moriere’

Beholding her beloved Hippolytus’ mutilated body and his blemished beauty Phaedra expresses not only her intention to commit suicide (Ph. 1176), but also her yearning for death — a cathartic process clearly brought out in her own words:

‘Morere, si casta es, viro;
Si inestia, amori’ (Ph. 1184).

We notice the very same necrophilia in Theseus after the deaths of his son and wife (Ph. 1201–1204). After Phaedra’s declaration of love to Hippolytus the latter desires to purify himself by suicide (Ph. 682 et seq.). There is furthermore ample proof that Oedipus (Oed. 868, 871, 915) and Clytaemnestra (Ag. 199–200) too cherished a ‘libido moriendi’.

Secondly, let us briefly consider the obsession to destroy everything and everyone around one. It is Medea’s intention to shake the universe by means of her horrible deeds: ‘invadam deos / et cuncta quattiam’ (Med. 424–25). She
wishes to pull down with her into perdition everything and everyone: ‘Sola est quies, / mecum ruina cuncta si video obruta; / mecum omnia abeant. trahere, cum pereas, libet.’ (Med. 437–39). In the Agamemnon (199–200) Clytaemnestra expresses her determination, if need be, to kill Agamemnon and herself: ‘perde pereundo virum.’ Regenbogen in this connection rightly draws attention to the Stoic view that each and every human action finds a response in the universe by virtue of the συμπάθεια τῶν διόν. From the De Tranquillitate Animi 2.10–12 we may infer that self-destruction and the destruction of others are both inspired by uncontrolled passion.

It is significant and clearly not merely coincidental that Seneca in his De Ira pertinently attributes to anger those urges towards destruction, that are so strikingly illustrated in his tragedies: ‘hic totus concitatus . . . dum alteri noceat sui neglegens, in ipsa inruens tela et ultionis secum tracturae avidus.’ The avenger has no consideration for himself as long as he can do violence to his victim, even if it is tantamount to self-destruction. The parallel between the latter viewpoint and the craving for destruction in Medea and Clytaemnestra is striking. For our purpose, however, the paramount significance of this reference is the fact that Seneca here mentions these consequences of anger. He is firmly convinced that anger is nothing but a cruel desire for weapons, blood and punishment: ‘hic totus concitatus et in impetu doloris est armorum, sanguinis, suppliciorum minime humana furens cupiditate’

This murderous desire is certainly manifested by Seneca’s characters in his tragedies. In the Agamemnon for instance we perceive, through the eyes of Cassandra, the grim consequences of Clytaemnestra’s jealousy, offended honour and frustrated love. Her anger changes into madness and her inability to control her intense passion and feeling of revenge ends in the horrible decapitation of Agamemnon. Medea follows the same road as Clytaemnestra: her unbridled fury prompts her to the most ghastly deed that a mother can commit, the murder of her own children as retribution for Iason’s unfaithfulness (Med. 51, 130, 203, 382, 392, 406, 411, 866). Likewise Phaedra permits her intense passion to get the better of her. Humiliated, dismayed and frustrated by Hippolytus’ rejection of her love she hardens her heart and her false accusation leads to his shocking end (Ph. 824–28, 896–97). Beside himself with rage and intense emotion Oedipus executes his self-imposed sentence by gouging out his eyes with his fingers (Oed. 915–979).

The development of events and situations in Seneca’s tragedies can be divided into three major phases or movements as is indicated by C.J. Herington: first the cloud of evil, second the victory that the emotions gain over reason and third the explosion of the evil. In the light of the evidence adduced the third major movement may be given a more suitable title: the eruption of uncontrolled emotions.

In three of the four tragedies under discussion, namely the Agamemnon, Medea and Oedipus, the dark cloud of evil appears as early as in the prologue: the mind of the character or landscape is shrouded in the cloud of evil, in
a curse resting on the family or in presentiments suggesting imminent deeds of horror. But as far as the *Phaedra* is concerned, the tragic figure, caught in the pang and the pain of the conflict between passion and reason, appears only in the scene immediately after the prologue: from the mouth of Phaedra the audience, during the next three scenes (*Ph.* 85–185), is apprised not only of the evil and of the curse from the past uttered against her and her family but also of the impending tragedy.

Since we have already discussed the victory gained by the turbulent emotions of Seneca's characters over reason, there is no need for us at this second stage to go into the matter once again. Medea personally confesses that her reason was overcome by her passion: 'incerta vaccaors mente vaesana feror/ partes in omnes.' (*Med.* 123 et seq.). Likewise Phaedra (184) frankly admits reason's defeat in its struggle against passion: 'Quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor.' In the *Agamemnon* Clytaemnestra implies that her reason has failed: 'ubi animus errat' (141–45).

A direct outcome of this conflict in which emotion gains the upper hand over reason, is therefore the eruption of uncontrolled emotions which we find in the third main phase. This is an emotional explosion that can happen in two ways, namely implosively and explosively: the emotional eruption which finds physical expression inwards and outwards has already been touched upon in the discussion of the two types of desires for destruction in Seneca's characters. The now well-known horrid consequences which directly emanate from the defeat of reason by emotion are disastrous and catastrophic.

Finally a few general observations followed by some conclusions. It seems as though Seneca in his tragedies wants to demonstrate bloodshed as the satisfaction of man's natural desire for violence and for the ultimate destruction of others and of himself. In the violent conduct of his characters the poet observes an instinct which is rooted in man's nature; he consequently universalizes violence. This trait of his characters is not an isolated phenomenon but is on the one hand a manifestation of their innate 'furor', and on the other the realization of the curse which has been uttered against them and their families. Seneca thus wants to bring over the message that fury is peculiar to mankind. Moreover, he compels us to turn our attention inwards in order to do some soul-searching. Poe reaches the following conclusion: 'Senecan drama is not just second-rate Greek tragedy at all, but literature of an entirely different kind. It is not drama of the citizen concerned with his relative position in his society or above his society, but of man looking at the beast in himself.'

From the evidence we have adduced certain conclusions may now be drawn. It would appear that Seneca has no intention of merely claiming the audience's attention by means of shocking events and macabre scenes. Nor can a perverse Roman blood-thirstiness be brought forward as the only reason for the role of bloodshed and violence. The Romans were used to sanguinary violence and, according to Conradie, apparently had strong nerves.

By means of dramatic techniques like foreshadowing, foreknowledge, sus-
pense and the creation of atmosphere (in which the sinister and supernatural elements also play a part) Seneca succeeds in constantly keeping the macabre final scenes in the limelight but he also arouses the interest of the audience to anticipate how he is going to bring on the gruesome denouement.

In Seneca's portrayal of the macabre scenes rhetoric clearly played a very important role. The detailed descriptions of terrifying deaths and atrocities accounted for as a tour de force to show off the author's rhetorical dexterity. Faithful to the tradition of this genre he applied himself to the effective description of macabre scenes. Evidence of this is the employment of rhetorical techniques and elements which were strategically and psychologically applied in order to emphasize, supplement and reinforce the grim aspects of the death scenes. The fulness of detail in such descriptions is due to the fact that Seneca discerned in the 'furor' of his characters the fruit of individual wickedness, which merited objective censure of moralization, but also of an instinct that he himself in a certain sense shares and expects his audience to share.63

Medea's 'bloodless' child-murders are an indication that Seneca does not always need blood and the physically spectacular consequences of violence in order to express the macabre results of unrestrained emotions. He therefore confines the macabre to the repugnant deed itself.

The message that emotions must be controlled to prevent instability of character comes from Seneca's Stoic background.

We have shown that uncontrolled emotions primarily cause bloodshed, violence and death in Seneca's tragedies. Furthermore, in accordance with a thesis in his De Ira and examples from his tragedies, it was demonstrated that anger is the source of the desire for weapons, blood and the infliction of punishment. The defeat that reason suffers in its struggle against the emotions brings about the macabre scenes. Thus Seneca wants to warn his audience and readers against the dreadful consequences of an explosive as well as an implosive emotional eruption. His aim with the macabre therefore is in a certain sense still a didactic one: the uplifting and not the demoralization of his audience.
AGAMEMNON (881–907)
(A microdrama. Events worked up to a climax)

Amictus: pall.
Foreshadowing of death-struggle in 881–889.

Prediction:

Aegisthus: first stab doesn’t kill.
Foreshadowing of Clytaemestra’s death-blow in 900–901.

Amictus: struggle to set himself free from folds; symbolizes death-struggle: prediction in 881–889 comes true.

Frenzied Clytaemestra’s death-blow

Heinous consequences of uncontrolled emotions


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>881</th>
<th>885</th>
<th>887</th>
<th>890</th>
<th>895</th>
<th>900</th>
<th>905</th>
<th>907</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detraction</td>
<td>detrahere cultus uxor hostiles iubet,</td>
<td>induere potius coniugis fidae manu</td>
<td>textos amictus — horreo atque animo tremo!</td>
<td>regemne perim et crux et adulter virum?</td>
<td>venere fata. Sanguinem extremae dapes</td>
<td>domini videbunt et crux Baccho incident.</td>
<td>mortifera vinctum perfide tradit neci</td>
<td>induta vestis; exitum manibus negant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prediction:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Habent! peractum est! pendet exigua male

Caput amputatum parte et hinc trunco cruo

Exundat, illic ora cum fremitu iacent.

Nondum recedunt; ille iam examinem petit

Laceratque corpus, illa fodiendem aduvat.

Uterque tanto scelere respondet suis —

Est hic Thyeste natus, haec Helenae soror.

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HIPPOLYTUS (1085–1114)

1085

The hitherto INTACT and WHOLE Hippolytus falls. 
Entwined reins: death-snare. 

(Cf. Agamemnon: amictus).

1086–1097

MACABRE, systematic, rapid dismemberment of his body: Result of Phaedra's and Hippolytus' unrestrained emotions.

chiasmus: mutilation of his beauty.

1098–1101

TURNING-POINT: (Exactly in the middle). Everything jerks to a standstill.

1102–1104

Continuation of MACABRE dismemberment.

1105–1114

MACABRE collection of scat- 
lytus' GRUESOME death- 
tered limbs. and lacerated body. Futile attempt to restore WHOOLENESS of body.

praeceps in ora fusus implicuit cadens

laqueo tenaci corpus et quanto magis

pugnat, sequaces hoc magis nodos ligat

sensere pecudes facinus — et curru levi,
dominante nullo, qua timor iussit ruunt.
talis per auras non suum agnoscent onus

Solique false creditum indignans diem

Phaethonta currus devio excussit polo.
tale cruentat arva et inlimum caput

scopulis resultat; auferunt dum comas,
et ora durus pulchra populatur lapis

perique multo vulnere infelix decor.
moribunda celeres membra provolvunt rotae;
tandumque raptum truncus ambusta sude

medium per inguen stipite erecto tenet,
paulumque domino currus affixo stetit.

haesere biuges vulnere — et pariter moram

dominumque rumpunt. inde semanimem secant

virgulta, acutis asperi Vepres rubis

omnisque truncus corporis partem tulit.

errant per agros funebris famuli manus,

per illa qua distractus Hippolytus loca

longum cruenta tramitem signat nota,

maestaeque domini membra vestigant canes.
necdum dolentum sedulus potuit labor

explere corpus. hocine est formae decus?

qui modo paterni clarus imperii comes

et certus heres siderum fulsit modo,

passim ad supremos ille colligitur rogos

et funeri confertur.

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Diagram C

**OEDIPUS** (952–979)

- **Tears (profusus imber)**.
- Eruption of **UNCONTROLLED EMOTION**

**Rhetorical questions:**
- 'et flere satis est? hactenus fundent levem oculi liquorem? sedibus pulsis suis
- lacrimas sequantur. di maritales, satin?
- fodiantur oculi!' *dixit auge ira furit*;
- ardent minaces igne truculento genae
- oculique vix se sedibus retinent suis;
- violentus audax vultus, iratus ferox,
- tantum furentis; gemuit et dirum fremens

**Result:** UNCONTROLLED EMOTION finds physical expression in gruesome deed.

**FRENZY:**
- Physically perceivable signs of frenzy

**Factum est periculum lucis; attollit caput**

- *Factum est periculum lucis; attollit caput*

- cavisque lustrans orbibus caeli plagas
- noctem experitur. quidquid effossis male
- dependet oculis rumpit, et vic'or deos
- conclamat omnes: 'parcite, en, patriae precor;'
- iam iusta feci, debitas poenas tuli?
- inventa thalamis digna nox tandem meis,' *rigat or foedus imber et lacerum caput*
- largum revulsis sanguinem venis vomit.*
NOTES

An Afrikaans version of this paper was read at the Conference of the Classical Association of South Africa in Pretoria in January, 1983.

5. Conradie, op. cit. 37.
8. Miller, op. cit. x.
10. Id. 356.
15. Id. 54–56.
18. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Watling, op. cit. 25.
27. Poe, op.cit. 357.
29. Poe, op. cit. 357.
30. Ibid.
32. Op. cit. 37. Translation: it follows as a matter of course that he concentrates only on the description as such to render it as effective as possible to the exclusion of any other consideration.
33. Ep. 26.5–7; 49.9–10; 54.7; 61.2–4; 63.7; 68.12; 93.6.
34. Ep. 26.8–10; 30.18; 69.6; 70.17; 91.7; 101.7–8; 114.26–27; Tranq. 11.6; Ira 3.42.2–4; N.Q. 6.32.12.
35. Ep. 4.3, 24.11–14; 30.5–10; 36.8,12; 78.5; 80.5.
38. Op. cit. 34. Translation: Conradie holds . . . that Seneca set out to caution against human passions by showing how dangerous it is to yield to them.
40. Id. 38.
43. Canter, op. cit. 22.
44. Brev. Vit. 10.1.
45. Ep. 18.15.
46. Ira. 1.3.1–3; 1.5.3.
47. *Ep.* 18.15.
49. *Ira* 3.5.8; 2.32.1–3; 3.27.1.
54. *Ira* 1.1.1.
55. *Ibid.*