KATERINA PHILIPPIDES

ON THE FOURTH CHORAL SONG OF
SENECA'S *AGAMEMNON**

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Seneca's tragedy *Agamemnon* enacts the well known myth of the titular hero's murder by his wife, Clytemestra, and his cousin, Aegisthus, immediately after his return to Argos. The fourth choral song glorifies Hercules, who is not one of the characters in the play.

Ode IV has attracted scholarly interest due to the various problems it presents. Its thematic relation to the context and dramatic function have both been seriously questioned[1]: some have considered the song no more than an interlude covering the passage of time between Agamemnon's entry into the palace and Cassandra's vision of his murder.[2] On the other hand, Davis has attempted to defend it by showing its relation to some of the wider context, especially with regard to Agamemnon.[3]

Different interpretations have also been advanced concerning the identity of the chorus who sing the ode: are its members Mycenaean maidens, Mycenaeans in general or the Trojan captives who make up the second chorus in the play? The identity problem necessitates a discussion of entrances and exits by both choruses in Acts III and IV.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the connection between the ode and its broader context through the juxtaposition of Hercules and Aegisthus. Moreover, the way in which disruptions of the natural order recur

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1.   See Tarrant (1976) 323-24 who, following Canter, speaks of an "essentially irrelevant ode" to the context of the play with minor "linking passages". Kugelmeier (2013) 494 holds that "the praise of Hercules … is unmotivated by what precedes it".
2.   See Tarrant (1976) 323-24, and Pratt (at Davis [1993] 115).
3.   Davis (1993) 115-18; Seidensticker (1969) 132 note 163 makes an attractive comparison between Hercules and Agamemnon in relation to the specifics of their death, which Davis quite reasonably rejects.

as a motif will be traced in the ode and the rest of the tragedy. Comparison of Aegisthus with Hercules will also reveal the sexual reversal of the former. Together with the disordering of familial relations, this issue pervades the text and concerns other characters, as is evident from previous studies. The ultimate purpose of my analysis is to argue that Ode IV is a bright exception in a dark play, yet at the same time an integral part of the tragedy by virtue of its thematic contrast to the context. Finally, I will attempt to solve the enigma of the chorus's identity and shed light on the related issue of performances by the two choruses.

A short summary of Ode IV is here in order. The song opens with a eulogy to Hercules (*nobilibus…ciuibus*, 808, *ingentes…alumnos*, 810, *magnus Alcides*, 813) as a mighty son of Argos.[4] The somewhat surprising link between the hero and the city is established via his grandfather Helectrion, a former king of Argos. The eulogy includes the deification of Hercules as the twelfth Olympian god (811-13), before moving on to a lengthy description of how the night of his conception was prolonged (815-29); his father Jupiter entangled Phoebus, Diana-Luna, Hesperus-Lucifer and Aurora in this supernatural incident. Seneca views the disruption of nature as entirely necessary, since it led to the birth of a mighty man (*uiolentus*, 825). The speech then offers a detailed list of the twelve labors, in which the conquest of Troy takes the place of the last feat (the Augean stables). Finally, a comparison is made between Hercules and Agamemnon. This turns out to be pejorative for the latter, since the task which took him ten years was accomplished by the hero in a mere ten days.

At this point it is worth noting that the ode has all the characteristics of a conventional hymn.[5] If, for instance, we compare Ode IV to the fifteenth Homeric hymn Εἰς Ἡρακλέα λεοντόθυμον, we will see that Seneca's song develops all the elements included in the Homeric hymn: Hercules' relationship to Jupiter, his conception, the labors imposed by Eurystheus (reported succinctly, not named) and finally his blissful life on Mount Olympus. Ode IV stresses Hercules' connection with Mycenae rather than Thebes, as is to be expected given the play's setting; the prolongation of night during his conception and the taking of Troy are also added.

Examination of the differences between the two hymns may throw light on the tragedian's choices. As Tarrant remarks,[6] Hercules' labors are presented as triumphs rather than trials, and the prolongation of the night adds

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4.   For the text of Seneca's *Agamemnon* I use the edition of Tarrant (1976).
5.   Tarrant (1976) 324 believes that the song only possesses a few conventional hymnic elements.
6.   Tarrant (1976) 324.

to his stature as a hero. We could add that the adjectives ascribed to Hercules are confirmed by the success of his labors. He is brave, the paradigm of a warrior and a man.

In the Ode devoted to Hercules there are positive elements which differentiate him from men in the house of Atreides. As Davis has pointed out, Hercules is compared to Agamemnon who, however, succeeded in taking Troy after a lengthy struggle ending in a ruse. There is a second, marked, contrast between Hercules and Aegisthus as regards the disruption of time occurring during their conception. The only breakdown of the natural order portrayed in a positive light is that concerning the conception of Hercules. *Agamemnon*, however, is full of negative time disruptions, which will be dealt with later. The only negative disorder associated with conception is that relating to Aegisthus: Phoebus / sun was so repelled by Thyestes sleeping with his daughter to conceive Aegisthus that he changed course, resulting in an eclipse (*Phoebum nefandae stirpis auctorem uocas, | quem nocte subita frena reuocantem sua | caelo expulistis?*, 295-97).

There are further reasons why Aegisthus is Hercules' opposite. Although his father was expelled from Argos by his brother, Atreus, Aegisthus is still a son of the city. Yet, he did not participate in the great war against Troy. He stayed behind along with the old men, the women and the children. When she feels short-lived remorse over committing adultery, Clytemestra calls him a "man" ironically, only in reference to their affair (*quem Venere tantum scimus illicita uirum*, 299), and adds that Aegisthus must now leave, since her palace awaits its king and man (*haec uacat regi ac uiro*, 301), meaning Agamemnon. As Tarrant correctly observes, "the implication is that Aegisthus is neither *rex* nor *vir*".[7] In addition, Aegisthus' reaction to Clytemestra's remorse is far from flattering for a man. He threatens to commit suicide – not out of any sense of honor, but because he faces the prospect of being abandoned by his lover.

Above all, the reversal of Aegisthus' gender identity is confirmed by his part in Agamemnon's murder. At the very beginning of the play Aegisthus appears to vacillate over the duty imposed on him by his own birth: the ghost of Thyestes who has a vision of Agamemnon's imminent murder describes Aegisthus as a person tormented, ashamed and filled with doubt as to whether the murder is justifiable (v. 48-52):

> *causa natalis tui,*
> *Aegisthe, uenit. quid pudor uultus grauat?*

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7.   See Tarrant (1976) 229.

> *quid dextra dubio trepida consilio labat?*
> *quid ipse temet consulis torques rogas*
> *an deceat hoc te? respice ad matrem: decet.*

When Aegisthus appears on stage for the first time, he proves his father's concern to be well-founded, since he reveals to both Clytemestra and the spectators that deep down he has always dreaded the task, and that his soul is now "laying down arms" (v. 226-29):

> *Quod tempus animo semper ac mente horrui*
> *adest profecto, rebus extremum meis.*
> *quid terga uertis, anime? quid primo impetu*
> *deponis arma?*

The military metaphor for cowardice is here combined with the verb *horrui* to create an unflattering portrait of a man.[8]

When Agamemnon's murder is enacted, the two lovers immobilize their victim by deceit; Aegisthus does not confront his rival honestly, man to man. Clytemestra has weaved a mantle that leaves no way out for Agamemnon's hands, which she commands him to put on.[9] Early in the play, the murder plot has been characterized by Clytemestra herself as a feminine intrigue (*femineos dolos*, 116). Electra later calls Aegisthus the perpetrator of the hideous crime (*sceleris infandi artifex*, 983). This does not contradict Clytemestra's perspective, since Electra tends to attribute less responsibility to her mother. Clytemestra's point of view is corroborated by the stand taken by Cassandra. On describing her vision of the murder, she shudders at the idea of an outcast and adulterer killing a man (*regemne perimet exul et adulter uirum?*, 884). She adds that Aegisthus, a half-man, stabs first with his right hand trembling, but not deeply enough; in the middle of the action he is left stunned (*haurit trementi semiuir dextra latus, | nec penitus egit*: *uulnere in medio stupet*, 890-91). It is up to a woman, Clytemestra, to deal the fatal blow with an axe. In the end the two lovers dismember the corpse, with Aegisthus taking the initiative.

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8. Despite her initial resistance to Aegisthus' arguments for the murder, in this scene Clytemestra finally succumbs (see Schenkeveld [1976] 400). The same scholar (1976) 399-403 notices that Seneca underlines Aegisthus' incestuous origin, which predetermines his role as murderer: five different characters emphasize or allude to this immoral birth, including Aegisthus himself.

9. Seneca may here be alluding to and inverting the image of the Homeric Penelope via the textile and Clytemestra's characterization as a faithful wife (*iubet, | induere potius coniugis fidae manu | textos amictus,* 881-83).

The term *semiuir* used by Cassandra is a blunt verbal complement to Clytemestra's earlier challenge of Aegisthus' manhood. Although the two women adopt an almost identical stance towards him, they are of different nationality and social status: the one is Greek and wife to the king, whereas the other is the Trojan king's daughter, who has become a captive and mistress. It is interesting to note that even though Cassandra does not know Aegisthus in person, she reaches the same conclusion as Clytemestra regarding his manhood. Only at the play's end does Aegisthus issue orders as a tyrant, thus displaying a manly side to his character. Yet even then his decisions concern two defenceless women, Electra and Cassandra, and a little child, Orestes.

The irony is that Aegisthus — Hercules' opposite — manages to perform a "heroic" deed, killing the conqueror of Troy, captain of the fleet of a thousand ships and king of glorious Mycenae. The irony is even greater if we think of all those who failed in their attempts to kill Agamemnon during the war. In fact, Clytemestra's nurse gives a long list of would-be murderers of Agamemnon: the heroes Achilles, Ajax of Telamon, Hector, Paris, Memnon, Cycnus, and Rhesus; two rivers, the Xanthus and the Simois; and an Amazon (v. 203-25). Agamemnon eluded all of the above only to meet his end in his allegedly secure palace, at the hands of an effeminate man and a woman. The list of would-be killers could also be extended to include the plague that brought death on many soldiers (though according to Clytemestra this did not make her husband's morale yield), and the tempest that destroyed many Achaean ships on the return journey, as reported by the messenger Eurybates. For all his womanly nature, Aegisthus eventually performs a deed comparable to Hercules' labors, though the murder is committed in an underhand manner by one of the victim's blood relatives.[10]

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10. It is worth noting that Seneca's Agamemnon does not suffer death at the hands of a manlike Clytemestra reminiscent of her counterpart in Aeschylus. According to Calder (1976) 31, she has lost the ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ; in contrast, Electra is presented as having *animos uiriles* (958). Aeschylus' Clytemestra has no scruples, but is firm in her decision to kill her husband. By contrast, Clytemestra in Seneca vacillates a great deal before making up her mind. When discussing the lack of manhood shown by the two lovers, Motto and Clark (1988) 169 remark: "Clytaemnestra is no mannish butcher, bold hypocrite, and brazen liar here. She is more faltering and insecure. And Aegisthus too appears more riddled with doubt and incertitude". On Aegisthus see also Motto and Clark (1988) 191. Hall (2005) 66-67 argues that Seneca's Clytemestra is apolitical, amoral and amorous; she also sees Aegisthus as the main perpetrator of the crime. Seneca's Cassandra, according to Motto and Clark (1988) 196, emerges among the other debilitated characters as one possessed of "dignity and esprit". On Cassandra's *furor* see Paschalis (2010) 210-26. Electra too, displays mannish bravery. However,

The lengthening of the night during Hercules' conception connects the ode not only with Aegisthus, but also with the broader context of the tragedy, which makes repeated reference to other unnatural solar or night conditions. Beyond the cases noted by Davis, i.e. the inability of the sun to rise because of the presence of Thyestes' *umbra* on the ground and the eclipse of the sun during his cannibalistic dinner,[11] time disorder and its negative connotations are exploited in two further instances. The first one occurs in Eurybates' description of the fate suffered by the Achaean fleet. The herald first describes a starry night (*nox prima caelum sparserat stellis*, 465), which, however, was later enveloped in an inky darkness that blotted out every trace of the moon and stars, making the night double its normal length (v. 470-74):

> *cum subito luna conditur, stellae latent;*
> *nec una nox est: densa tenebras obruit*
> *caligo et omni luce subducta fretum*
> *caelumque miscet.*

What follows is a disaster of epic proportions,[12] led by vehement winds blowing from all directions, a tempest and gods revengeful towards the sacrilegious Greeks. This is yet another natural disaster,[13] as the sky is united with the sea and the night of Styx reigns supreme.

The sun also behaves in an irregular way when, in her Apollonian frenzy, Cassandra sees the light of day fading, suddenly giving way to a double sun that illuminates the twin palaces of a double Argos (v. 726-29):

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neither Cassandra nor Electra can hurt the two lovers on their own. Electra can only hope for her brother Orestes to grow up and avenge their father's murder. Nevertheless, Cassandra is fearless in the face of her own death and malicious towards the dead Agamemnon, whose death she sees as revenge for Troy, in sharp contrast to Aeschylus' Cassandra, who feels sorry for Agamemnon, perceiving her death as one more calamity in her life.

11. See Davis (1993) 115-18.
12. For epic intertextuality see for instance Tarrant (1976) 248, 268 ff. and Schindler (2000) 136-49.
13. According to Henry and Walker (1963) 6, the tempest manifests "cosmic confusion". Shelton (1983) 169 calls the storm a "disorder in the universe." See also Kirichenko (2013) 64-69 who finds the horror images of the "kosmische Katastrophe" inferior to these of Agamemnon's murder. Tola (2009) 87-92 associates the cosmic disorder in the *nostos* of the Greek fleet with the familiar disorder of Aegisthus' origin and the emotional disorder of Clytemestra; a common imagery employing various words, for instance the verb *misceo*, stresses the ambiguity and uncertainty in each case.

> *fugit lux alma et obscurat genas*
> *nox alta et aether abditus tenebris latet.*
> *sed ecce, gemino sole praefulget dies*
> *geminumque duplices Argos attollit domus.*

This is a prologue to the gloomy prediction of Agamemnon's murder. The difference between this passage and the previous ones lies in the fact that the double sun is typical of Cassandra's divine frenzy.

All of the above mentioned time irregularities share a common characteristic: they pertain to one day or night and not a series of them. Among all the negative time disorders, a bright exception is the one concerning Hercules' conception in Ode IV, which predetermines a uniquely remarkable life on the earth. If we consider the other negative passages, this Ode functions as a relaxation before the imminent catastrophe. The context corroborates this Sophoclean dimension to the Ode, which is a hymn of joy before disaster. Argos, glorified through its most admirable son, is about to fall thanks to the plotting of another son who is stigmatized by his immoral conception.

The disordering of ties between members of the house of Atreides could also be seen in opposition to the family of Hercules, as a further point linking Ode IV to the broader context of *Agamemnon*. The illustrious, direct descent of Hercules from Jupiter can be compared to the family of Aegisthus, whose lineage also begins with Jupiter, since Aegisthus' great grandfather Tantalus was Jupiter's son. Yet, Aegisthus' descent from his father Thyestes is shameful, being the result of an incestuous sexual union (*nefandae stirpis*, 295). Needless to say, the cursed family of the Atreides is further stigmatized by adultery between relatives, infanticide, cannibalistic dinners and spouse murder. The blood does not stop with this tragedy;[14] as informed spectators know, it continues to flow when Orestes commits matricide. Even in the play itself, the lives of the young Orestes and his sister Electra are put at risk. In general, familial relations are distorted.[15] The *umbra* of Thyestes confesses to the audience that when he slept with his daughter, nature was confounded: *uersa natura est retro* (34), thus establishing a link between nature and family. The phrase could be a motto for the entire play.

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14. Boyle (1997) 34 integrates the alternating cycle of blood of the play in the frame of history repeated, of past becoming present.

15. For the familial disorder of the house of Atreides see the detailed discussion by Shelton (1983) 177.

As was noted in the introduction to this paper, the identity of the chorus members who sing Ode IV and how they appear on stage both present something of a conundrum. In addition to the Mycenaeans, the play features a second chorus comprised of Trojan women captives accompanying Cassandra. These women deliver Ode III, in which they bewail their lost homeland and their misfortune. According to the predominant interpretation, this second chorus does not sing Hercules' Ode, which is delivered by Mycenaean maidens.[16] One recent view argues that Ode IV is sung by the Trojans, who are the only chorus on stage from the time the Mycenaeans leave, i.e. a few verses after the entrance of Eurybates (389-91). According to this view, the Mycenaeans change costumes and masks and reappear as the Trojan women escorting Cassandra.[17]

The predominant argument holds that it would be inappropriate for Trojan women to glorify Argos, which is praised indirectly through the hymn to Hercules. This argument seems valid, especially since the word Argos is emphatically placed at the beginning of the first and the second verses of the ode (808, 809). Furthermore, Ode IV is preceded by Cassandra's vision of the fall of Argos brought on by regicide, as well as by the prophetess' subsequent call to the Trojan dead to lift the cover of dark Hades so they can witness the collapse of the city. The vengeful mood created by Cassandra and her dead Trojan relatives would seem to preclude any glorification of Argos by her companions in the chorus.

On the other hand, the argument that Ode IV is sung by the Trojan chorus is based on the fact that the same women have already named Hercules as a conqueror of Troy (Ode III, 614-15), and that Mycenaeans are unlikely to make the comparison with Hercules that is so pejorative for Agamemnon. That being said, Hercules' conquest of Troy is included in Ode III as just one of a series of misfortunes bewailed by the Trojan women. Furthermore, in Seneca's tragedy Agamemnon only appears in a few verses, and the report by Eurybates compromises his victory, since he is presented as the captain of a shipwrecked fleet; Seneca's Agamemnon does not emerge as a hero of the stature accorded to him by Aeschylus. The demeaning comparison with Hercules in Ode IV can be seen within the wider context of Agamem-

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16. See for example Calder (1976) 34, Tarrant (1976) 324, Sutton (1986) 54 and Davis (1993) 57. Aricò (1996) 131 believes the Trojan chorus that delivers Ode III might withdraw during the dialogue of Agamemnon and Cassandra, and reappear at v. 808 dressed as women of Mycenae. Kugelmeier (2013) 494-95 also believes that the ode is sung by Mycenaeans.
17. Kohn (2013) 52-53.

non's inferior position in the play,[18] which is only to be expected given that the tragedy was composed by a Roman descendant of the defeated Trojans.

There is a further view which accepts that Ode IV is sung by the Mycenaean chorus, but claims that both choruses appear together on stage, taking turns to sing.[19] The view that the Trojan women sing the ode uses the argument that the simultaneous presence of two choruses would lead to overcrowding on stage.[20] My opinion is that the two choruses do not appear simultaneously; moreover, the Mycenaean chorus does not exit and then reappear in the guise of captive Trojans. Frequent chorus exits and entrances seem to be common in Seneca's tragedies, as opposed to the norm in Greek tragedies, where the chorus remains on the orchestra throughout. One should also consider that Seneca's choruses may only have consisted of a few members.[21]

The Mycenaean chorus may not exit at verse 396, as has been assumed,[22] but much later, at verse 585, immediately after Clytemestra has given orders for every citizen to be crowned with festal wreaths, while music is played and a sacrifice offered. Since these instructions are obviously addressed to a crowd, it makes much more sense for the Mycenaean chorus to be on stage. The Mycenaeans' compliance with these orders also motivates their exit at the end of Act III. Immediately thereafter, Clytemestra announces the arrival of Cassandra and the Trojan women. The instant entrance of the Trojan chorus does not leave the time necessary for the Mycenaeans to change guise. It would thus seem more likely that a new, different chorus enters the stage. Small Senecan choruses make it easy for a second, different group to be employed here.

The assignment of Ode IV to the Mycenaean chorus is corroborated by further textual evidence. It seems likely that the Trojan captives exit along with Agamemnon at verse 807, i.e. at the end of Act IV, immediately before the performance of Ode IV. Before entering the palace, Agamemnon announces that he intends to offer the spoils of triumph (*triumphi spolia*,

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18. Even the joyful atmosphere created upon the return of Agamemnon, which is celebrated with a hymn of thanksgiving to several gods in Ode II, is undermined through the negative connection of these gods to Agamemnon (see Davis [1993] 209-11).

19. See Sutton (1986) 54 and Davis (1993) 23. On the different view of Aricò see my note 16. According to Kugelmeier (2013) 495 "the side-by-side presence of two choruses on the stage remains unclear".

20. Kohn (2013) 52-53.

21. See Calder (1975) 32-35 who, however, holds that the Mycenaean chorus exit and reenter disguised as the Trojan chorus.

22. See Calder (1975) 34.

804) to Jupiter, in what is an anachronism of Roman customs.[23] As is known, in Roman triumphs the captives were paraded together with the carriers of the spoils. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that Agamemnon intends to present the Trojan women to Jupiter alongside material objects. Once the Trojan captives withdraw, the Mycenaean chorus can enter.

Allowing for the above there is one matter for further elucidation: the identity of members in the Mycenaean chorus. In order to address this problem we must consult the second choral song, which is a collective hymn to Phoebus, Juno, Pallas, Diana and Jupiter. The predominant view is that this ode is sung by Mycenaean maidens, because they say that the descendants of Inachus, a river in the Argive plain, spread forth their virgin locks (310-15).[24] The view holding that the group is of indeterminate age, gender and marital status is based on references in the same ode to married Greek women who honor Juno (350) or Pallas (362-63), and to aged and exhausted men who offer libations to Pallas (378-81). According to this interpretation, the rituals described are not performed at the same time as the song.[25]

Although there is no definite answer to the question of who the chorus members are, reasons of symmetry argue in favor of the assumption that the play has two all-female choruses, one of Mycenaean maidens and another of Trojan women. Furthermore, the verb *fudit* (314) used to describe the spreading of the locks is in a past tense, i.e. defining an action that has already occurred, in contrast to all the verbs describing the actions of other people, which are in present tenses (*colimus*, 350, *iactant*, 363, *reddunt*, 380, *libant*, 380). The verbs in present tense probably point to ceremonies customarily held in Argos on various religious occasions.[26] These are about to be combined with the ritual in honor of Phoebus, so as to celebrate the long-awaited return of the king. Thus, it seems that the past tense *fudit* is a more reliable indicator of the chorus' identity.

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From the above discussion we have concluded that Ode IV is not a mere interlude in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, but forms an integral part of the wider context. The glorified Hercules is not simply juxtaposed to Agamemnon, but also to Aegisthus: Hercules is the paradigm of a true man, as opposed to

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23. This is not the only anachronism in the play. Thyestes' ghost identifies the council-chamber (*curiae*, 11) depicted on stage.
24. See for instance Tarrant (1976) 231.
25. See Kohn (2013) 51-52.
26. The verb *iactant* is a frequentative form of *iacio*.

the effeminate Aegisthus. The latter's status as a man is called into question in verses spoken by other characters, especially with regard to his participation in Agamemnon's murder. Nevertheless, Aegisthus performs one admirable deed (albeit in a sly manner and with the help of a woman): he kills the king of the kings, the captain of the thousand ships. In addition, the prolongation of night during Hercules' conception is brought into sharp contrast with the corresponding time disorder during Aegisthus' conception, being the only bright exception in a broader framework of negative time disorders presented in the tragedy. Finally, an attempt has been made to address the thorny problem of the identity of the chorus who sing Ode IV. From our examination it would appear that the ode is sung by the chorus of Mycenaean maidens rather than the Trojan women. It is also probable that there are two distinct choruses in the play, which do not change costumes and masks, and that the Trojan captives exit before the Mycenaean maidens enter and sing Ode IV.

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UNIVERSITY OF PATRAS
philippides@upatras.gr

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Abstract

The paper argues that in Seneca's *Agamemnon* Ode IV is not an interlude but is thematically associated with its wider context. The glorified Hercules is implicitly presented as the opposite of Aegisthus: the hero is a fearless man, as opposed to Agamemnon's effeminate cousin (Aegisthus has a hand in murdering the mighty king, but even then he is surpassed by a woman). Furthermore, the prolongation of night during Hercules' conception can be compared to the eclipse of the sun at the time Aegisthus is conceived; actually, the myth surrounding Hercules' conception is the only bright incident in a tragedy abundant with negative time irregularities. Another problem raised by Ode IV concerns the identity of the chorus that sings it. The paper argues in favor of the view that the ode is sung by the chorus of Mycenaean maidens rather than the second chorus in the play, the Trojan captive women; in this case, it is probable that the two choruses do not exchange costumes and masks, but that the Mycenaeans enter to sing Ode IV immediately after the Trojan captives exit along with Agamemnon.