Rhetorical Tragedy: The Logic of Declamation

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In a recent dissertation that takes the form of a commentary on the first 705 verses of the Hercules Oetaeus “attributed to Seneca,” Lucia Degiovanni remarks of the prologue recited by Hercules (more precisely, of the “monologic section,” that is, verses 1–98 addressed to Jupiter or to the cosmos in general): “it has been considered, by those who maintain that the work is not authentic, to be a cento of passages from Seneca’s tragedies (in particular, of the Hercules Furens), bloated and needlessly repetitive,” and she adds: “in fact a certain redundancy is undeniable in Hercules’ boasting about his own labors,” and she notes that he mentions his descent to Hades and the abduction of the dog Cerberus no fewer than four times (13–14, 23–24, 46–48, 79). Nevertheless, Degiovanni argues, “it is possible to identify a coherent rhetorical pattern in Hercules’ speech.” She divides it into four sections, each of which has two parts: first, a recollection of his labors, and second, a demand for his divinization. What is more, the four segments exhibit a progression, according to which the first part, on his merits, expands and becomes more extravagant as his attitude increasingly bears the stamp of hybris.1 This movement is not without a larger purpose, according to Degiovanni. For if Hercules emerges clearly as a benefactor of humanity, his oration nevertheless reveals his arrogance, which is precisely the reason why he cannot yet gain admission to heaven: “Only when, through his struggle with physical pain, he succeeds in acquiring the greatness

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1 Degiovanni (2010): “La sezione monologica (1–98) è stata considerata, da quanti sostengono la non autenticità dell’opera, come un centone di passi di tragedie senecane (in particolare dell’Hercules Furens), ampolloso e inutilmente ripetitivo (cfr. da ultimo ZWIERLEIN 1986, pp. 314–318). In effetti è innegabile una certa ridondanza nel vanto delle proprie imprese, da parte di Ercole: alla sola discesa nell’Ade e al rapimento del cane Cerbero si fa riferimento ben quattro volte (13–14, 23–24, 46–48, 79). È possibile tuttavia individuare uno schema retorico coerente nel discorso di Ercole. La perorazione della sua causa può essere suddivisa in quattro sezioni, ciascuna delle quali s’articola in due momenti consecutivi: (a) rievocazione delle imprese compiute; (b) richiesta di divinizzazione. Queste quattro sequenze sono a loro volta disposte secondo una climax, che procede verso una sempre maggiore espansione della parte dedicata alla rivendicazione dei propri meriti, con un atteggiamento sempre più improntato all’hybris da parte dell’eroe” (129–30). Degiovanni indicates the four sections and their subdivisions are as follows: 1 (a) 1–7a; (b) 7b–13a; 11 (a) 13b–30a; (b) 30b–33: 111 (a) 34–64a; (b) 64b–78: 1v (a) 79–91; (b) 92–99.
and imperturbability of the Stoic sapiens will he be ready for apotheosis,” as happens in the finale of the play.²

Degiovanni’s analysis is ingenious and plausible, and makes good sense of the theme of the play; it exhibits the sophisticated construction of the speech, without regard to whether the tragedy is in fact by Seneca or an imitator (as Degiovanni herself is inclined to believe). I wish here to attend, however, to what we may call the micro-structure of the rhetoric, the small moves and transitions that give the style its coruscating quality. Seneca, as I will call the author (understand “pseudo-Seneca” if you prefer), makes heavy demands on the spectators or readers, who are required to fill in information and make connections on their own. This is in line with the expectations of active reading that was characteristic of classical literature generally, but Seneca is particularly adept at exploiting the technique.³ In what follows, I will take a jeweler’s loupe to the prologue of the play, which runs for some 103 verses.

We may begin by examining the opening verses of the prologue (1–17):⁴

{Herc.} Sator deorum, cuius excussum manu
utraeque Phoebi sentiunt fulmen domus,
secure regna: protuli pacem tibi,
quacumque Nereus porrigi terras vetat.
non est tonandum; perfidi reges iacent,
saevi tyranni. fregimus quidquid fuit
ubi fult pelephantum. sed mihi cœlum, parens,
adhuc negatur. parui certe Ioue
ubique dignus teque testata est meum
patrem noverca. quid tamen nectis moras?
numquid timemur? numquid impositum sibi
non poterit Atlas ferre cum caelo Herculem?
quid astra, genitor, quid negas? mors me tibi
certe remisit, omne concessit malum

² “Ercole è sì il benefattore dell’umanità, ma la perorazione stessa che egli pronuncia per ottenere la divinizzazione mette a nudo la sua arroganza e rivela allo spettatore il motivo per cui egli non può, al momento attuale, essere ammesso in cielo. Solo quando, attraverso la lotta con il dolore fisico, riuscirà ad assumere la grandezza e l’imperturbabilità del sapiens stoico, sarà pronto per l’apoteosi” (130).


⁴ All translations of Senecac are my own, and taken from my forthcoming versions of the two Hercules plays in the Chicago edition of the complete works of Seneca in translation.