Theatrical Language and Philosophical Issues in Seneca’s Tragedies: Cued and Unannounced Entrances (Especially *Oedipus* 81 and 784)

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Many questions still remain unresolved about the relationship between Seneca’s tragedies and the author’s stoicism.¹ This paper demonstrates that when we pay attention to the dramatic nature of these texts, we uncover productive arguments on this issue. Even if these tragedies had never been put into performance on a formal stage and even if they had been written to be read and not performed, matters I do not propose to discuss in this contribution,² we must not forget that the readers of dramatic texts in Graeco-roman antiquity tried to imagine the staging of the plays. Two witnesses are very clear on this point: Dio of Prusa, a close contemporary of Plutarch, wrote after reading the versions of *Philoctetes* by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that he had taken great pleasure in the spectacle (εὐωχούμην τῆς θέας, 52.2.3). Donatus, the fourth century AD grammarian, stated that while reading the texts of comedies one must imagine in his mind precisely the gestures of the actors: *et simul gestum considera loquentis ex uerbis* (ad Ad. 265.4).³

This contribution focuses on the different forms of stage entrance as an element of the dramatic language. This subject has been precisely studied by Taplin for Attic dramas,⁴ but the importance of Seneca’s innovations have not been given enough weight. Sutton methodically listed entrance cues, among

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¹ For the recent *status quaestionis*, cf. Schiesaro 2003; Staley 2010; Aygon forthcoming.
² On these questions, cf. Harrison (ed.) 2000a; Kugelmeier 2007; Aygon 2006 and forthcoming, chap. 5.
³ Cf. Bureau and Nicolas (2014: 281): “Donat n’a pas d’autre matériau que le texte de Térence, auquel il se montre très attentif. Il en fait d’ailleurs un dogme méthodologique: Ad. 265.4 (*et simul gestum considera loquentis ex uerbis*), en même temps qu’on lit les mots du personnage qui parle, il faut se représenter sa gestuelle.”
⁴ Taplin’s complex analysis can be resumed roughly in two observations:

1. entrances are not always announced, cf. [1977] ²1989: 71 “Entrance announcements are, of course, common in Greek tragedy. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that they are almost invariably used: in fact just only under half of all entries are announced.”

2. But, as he proved with his systematic study of Aeschylus’ tragedies, there is generally very few uncertainty about entrances, cf. [1977] ²1989: 8 “Many arrivals are clearly marked […]. Even when they are not [my emphasis] their occurrence is nearly always clear”. See also studies of selected exits or entrances in Taplin [1978] ²1989: 31–57.
other aspects, noting that “it is characteristic of Senecan technique that not all entrances or exits are textually cued.” But he limited his observations to concerns over the staging of these tragedies, arriving at the conclusion that “Seneca intended his plays for production in a normal Roman theater”. More recently, Kohn tried to interpret further Seneca’s use of announced entrances (or not), and offered interesting insights, but his conclusions are sometimes too quickly “argumented”. I think that we need to classify different types of entrances (or exits), to construct Seneca’s “grammar” on this point, to fix standards and determine the role of conventions, in order to analyse some “écarts” in comparison to the “rule”. This article is an essay in this direction.

Therefore, I will restrict my attention to entrances within a scene, or actus, and also entries within prologues. Choral entrances will not be included in this discussion as also what happens on stage at the conclusion of a choral ode. Further, I will only consider the seven complete plays which are attributed with certainty to Seneca (Hercules Furens, Troades, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon and Thyestes), in order to establish some commonalities or dominant tendencies in the working methods of the dramatist and to underline by contrast some peculiar cases or exceptions.

Stage entrances can be divided into two types: 1. when one character enters (or speaks) after the entrance monologue of another character or 2. when a character’s entry cuts into or follows a dialogue.

1 Character B Enters or Speaks after Character A’s Monologue (12)

1.1 Textually Cued Entrances of a Character after a Monologue (3)

There are only two examples of cued entrances that are clear. At the end of her monologue, the nutrix announces Medea’s arrival (Medea 738–739):


6 For example, it is very contestable to link the fact that many of the entrances and exits are uncertain in Hercules Furens with the madness of Hercules (2013: 108). Besides, if in Medea “Jason’s movements on and off the stage are never announced”, is it evident to conclude that “this fits in nicely with Medea’s own perceptions of the man” (92)? Comparaisons with Hellenistic theater (in the limit of possibilities) and Roman comedy woud also be necesssary.

7 Concerning the notion of actus, I follow Anlker (1960) and François-Garelli (in Dumont & François-Garelli 1998: 155–57) that the chorus divides the drama into different acts.

8 I do not take into account monologues that are isolated where one character arrives on stage, then goes out alone, before the entrance of a new persona (as in some prologues), nor monologues that are followed by a dialogue with the chorus.