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## Seneca and Alfieri

In the long reception history of Seneca's tragedies, one of the most fruitful episodes is the encounter of Seneca and Vittorio Alfieri. Seneca furnished Alfieri with plots, themes, and a distinctive tragic style, and Alfieri made brilliant use of his Senecan inheritance.

Seneca needs no introduction to the members of this conference, but a short account of the life and career of Alfieri may be useful.

Vittorio Alfieri was one of the most remarkable figures of the second half of the Settecento. He was born in 1749 in Asti to a wealthy aristocratic family, and his youth was spent in ways typical of his class: he received a military education, traveled extensively throughout Europe, and contracted *liaisons* with several aristocratic women, one of which ended in a duel with the lady's husband. In the censorious words of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, «thus he spent his best years in disreputable intrigues, profitless roving, and the promiscuous reading of unworthy literature»<sup>1</sup>.

In 1775, when he was in his mid-twenties, Alfieri underwent a conversion: not a religious conversion, but a conversion to literature, to which he began to devote himself in earnest. He resumed his studies of Latin and spent time in Tuscany to improve his knowledge of Italian. (It is amazing to me that Alfieri, a master of Italian prose and poetry, grew up speaking mainly French and a form of Piedmontese dialect. His first tragedies were originally drafted in French prose.) From this point in the mid-1770s until his death in 1803 at the age of fifty-four, a stream of literary works in a wide range of genres poured from him, among them

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 1, 1907.

no fewer than 22 tragedies. In the late 1770s his personal life also found a new stability, in the form of a lasting relationship with Louisa von Stolberg-Gedern, Countess of Albany. (Louisa herself had led a somewhat colorful life: for a dozen years she was the wife of Charles Edward Stuart, the pretender to the throne of England, who is fondly remembered in Scotland as 'Bonnie Prince Charlie'.) After her husband's death in 1788 Alfieri and Louise lived together in Florence without ever marrying. When Alfieri died, she arranged for him to be buried in Santa Croce near the tomb of Machiavelli, and she commissioned a monument for him from the leading neoclassical sculptor of the day, Antonio Canova.

Next to his devotion to literature and his love for Louisa, Alfieri's other driving passion was his detestation of despotism, which found expression in his treatises *Della tirannide* and *Del principe e delle lettere*; in the latter treatise he argued that the man of letters was inevitably opposed to an absolute ruler, who as a result felt obliged either to suppress him by physical means or to coopt him as a courtier. One of Alfieri's most curious productions was a panegyric to the Roman emperor Trajan, partly intended as a response to the panegyric of the younger Pliny, in which he proposed the paradox that the ideal ruler would voluntarily renounce his position. His political views made him a natural supporter of movements for independence. He had great admiration for the American revolution: he dedicated his tragedy *Bruto primo* to George Washington, and wrote a series of odes on the theme of *America libera*. He was at first also sympathetic to the revolution in France, but was alienated by the excesses of the Jacobins. His vision of a united and independent Italy qualifies him as a literary precursor of the Risorgimento.

Although in chronological terms Alfieri was a child of the Enlightenment, in many ways he more closely resembles an early Romantic figure such as Lord Byron – also a fierce supporter of liberty, a prolific writer, and a lover of aristocratic women. Benedetto Croce aptly described Alfieri as a 'protoromantic'.

It would be hard to imagine a stronger contrast in personalities than the one between Alfieri the passionate opponent of despots and the circumspect Seneca, adviser, apologist, and speech writer to Nero. But however different they may have been in their outlook, they resemble each other in their literary versatility. Each produced a substantial body of work in both prose and poetry, each wrote tragedy as well as satire, each took on themes of statecraft in political treatises, each wrote a biography (Seneca, of his father; Alfieri, of himself). My focus today will be on Alfieri the writer of tragedy in relation to Seneca.

It would not be an exaggeration to describe Seneca as Alfieri's mentor in the art of tragedy. Between 1776 and 1778, when Alfieri was making his first forays into tragedy, he copied out extensive extracts from eight plays of the Senecan corpus, intending to translate the extracts into Italian (he managed to translate three of the eight plays)<sup>2</sup>. He chose Seneca for this exercise because he lacked Italian models for the kind of tragedy he wanted to write, and because he had resolved not to look at French models in order not to interfere with his acquisition of Italian. In his autobiography Alfieri recalled his youthful apprenticeship to Seneca and explained how the close study of Seneca's iambic meter had influenced his formation of a similar blank verse line as the medium for his own tragic writing. In describing the effect of the Senecan iambic, he contrasted a line of the *Aeneid* (8.596), *quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum*, with a line of Seneca's *Agamemnon* (994): *ELECTRA concede mortem. AEGISTHUS si recusares, darem*. According to Alfieri, the Virgilian hexameter is meant to delight the reader and carry him along («che vuol dilettere e rapire il lettore»), whereas the Senecan iambic amazes and terrifies the listener («che vuole stupire, e atterrir l'uditore»)<sup>3</sup>. Alfieri's study of Seneca was therefore foundational for his entire career as a tragedian.

<sup>2</sup> The extracts and translations have been edited by PERDICHIZZI 2015.

<sup>3</sup> ALFIERI 1977, IV, 2.

But if we can call the youthful Alfieri a student of Seneca, he was a student not afraid to criticize what he saw as the faults of his teacher. Alfieri appended notes in Latin to his excerpts from Senecan tragedy; they have been meticulously analyzed by Clara Domenici. The majority are simple glosses, but a substantial number of them express negative judgments, in particular of passages that Alfieri judged unnecessary or in some way inappropriate. Of the fourth act of *Thyestes*, for example, Alfieri wrote «actus quartus inutilis sicut primus, et non minus ridiculus». The adverbs *inepte* and *stultissime* recur often, along with the verb *insanire*. Domenici plausibly suggests that Alfieri's critique of Seneca was heavily influenced by his prior study of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which he had translated into Italian, and indeed Alfieri specifically noted that Seneca's plays differ greatly from what Horace had prescribed. Twenty years later, in 1796, Alfieri reread all of Seneca, studying each play alongside its putative Greek model (he had learned Greek in the intervening years). Seneca does not come well out of the comparison: with the exception of a few isolated scenes, each of the Senecan tragedies is judged inferior to its Greek counterpart. It would seem, therefore, that Alfieri forged his own form of tragedy as much through opposition to Seneca as through imitation of him.

To see how Alfieri put his criticism of Senecan dramaturgy into practice, it will be useful to compare one of his tragedies, his *Agamennone*, with the Senecan treatment of the same subject, his *Agamemnon*. Alfieri maintained that he had composed his play «without even opening Seneca's» – a statement that Giorgio Pasquali ingeniously took as an indication that Alfieri was actually so familiar with the play that he did not need to consult a text.

The most substantial comparison of the two plays that I know is a paper by Ettore Paratore, first published in a *Festschrift* in 1975 and reprinted in 2010 in a collection of his writings on Senecan tragedy<sup>4</sup>. Paratore's scholarship did not receive the recognition it deserved during his lifetime, particularly among Anglophone

<sup>4</sup> PARATORE 1975; then PARATORE 2011, 211-51.

classicists, but in retrospect he appears as a pioneer in the study of what has come to be called reception.

In an interesting article published in 2019, Giovanna Di Martino makes a case for the influence of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* alongside that of Seneca, especially in the characterization of Agamemnon<sup>5</sup>. (Alfieri did not know Greek at the time he composed the play, but he could have encountered Aeschylus in the French translation-cum-paraphrase of the Jesuit Pierre Brumoy in his work *Théâtre des Grecs*, published in 1730.) Even if one accepts Di Martino's arguments, the comparison with Seneca remains instructive.

Seneca's play opens with a monologue by the shade of Thyestes, who calls on his son Aegisthus to exact revenge for the crimes of Atreus by murdering Agamemnon, whose return from Troy is imminent. The second act consists of two scenes: in the first, Clytemnestra vents her grievances against her husband and girds herself for murder, rejecting the advice of her Nurse who counsels restraint. In the second, Clytemnestra tells Aegisthus that she has changed her mind and that marital love has won; for a time she resists his attempts at persuasion but in the end yields to him. The third act is almost entirely taken up by an enormous messenger speech that narrates the voyage of the Greek fleet from Troy to Greece and the storm that overtook the ships on their homeward journey. The fourth act is dominated by the figure of Cassandra, who leads a chorus of Trojan captives in lamenting the loss of their homeland. Cassandra has a prophetic vision of Agamemnon's coming death. At the end of the act Agamemnon himself appears. In a brief exchange Cassandra cryptically warns him of the danger that awaits him, but is, of course, not believed. In the swiftly paced final act Cassandra narrates the murder of Agamemnon, Electra sends the infant Orestes to safety and defies the threats of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and Cassandra goes gladly to her death with a prediction of the fate that is in store for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

<sup>5</sup> DI MARTINO 2019.

As that brief sketch indicates, the play is remarkable above all for its dual focus, on events developing in Argos and on the aftermath of the fall of Troy. That dual focus is manifested at the level of dramaturgy by the introduction of a second chorus of Trojan women who accompany Cassandra. Seeing the play in those terms helps to account for Seneca's choice to devote the central act to the messenger speech, a choice that might otherwise seem strange or even bizarre. The speech of Eurybates, by narrating the return of the Greeks from Troy, prepares for the infiltration of Argos by Trojans; it thus serves as a hinge between the play's Argive and Trojan elements.

I must confess that, when I wrote my commentary on the *Agamemnon*, I did not have a high opinion of it as a play. My views have become more moderate in the intervening years, but I still believe that the play suffers from some serious defects, which are in large part the consequence of the dual focus I have described. The benefit of that duality is that the central action, the murder of Agamemnon, acquires a richer and more complex significance: in addition to an act of revenge on Clytemnestra's part for the sacrifice of Iphigenia or for the assumed role of Cassandra as Agamemnon's mistress, his death also functions as a recompense on the part of fate for the destruction of Troy. The main drawback is a loss of dramatic unity: the Argive and Trojan elements coexist but are not fully integrated. Something similar can be observed in Seneca's treatment of Clytemnestra, the only character in the play that is more than a one-dimensional figure. Seneca wanted to portray her as a conflicted woman, torn between love for Aegisthus and resentment of Agamemnon on one hand and a lingering attachment to the ideals of *fides* and *boni mores* on the other. But his way of doing so, by dramatizing the opposing viewpoints in separate scenes, produces the effect of a debate *in utramque partem* rather than a portrait of a woman struggling to resolve an inner conflict. Alfieri was aware of that problem: when Clytemnestra abruptly gives in to Aegisthus after resisting his arguments for a whole scene, Alfieri's note offers the crisp (and fair) judgment «nimis cito».

Some of those shortcomings may have been the result of inexperience. It is now generally agreed that the *Agamemnon* belongs to the earliest group of Seneca's tragedies (along with *Oedipus* and *Phaedra*), and it could even be his first attempt at tragedy.

One of the rewards of the study of classical reception is that the works of classical literature are themselves illuminated when they are set against later adaptations and responses. Certainly, my sense of Seneca's *Agamemnon* – in both positive and negative respects – has been greatly enhanced by reading it in conjunction with Alfieri's *Agamennone*. I will not attempt a scene-by-scene analysis of Alfieri's play. Instead, I will discuss the most significant alterations Alfieri made to Seneca's treatment, his handling of the characters, and his use of allusions to other Senecan tragedies.

Alfieri's most drastic departure from Seneca is the almost total elimination of the Trojan element. Cassandra is understood to be returning with Agamennone, and Egisto inflames Clitennestra with the suggestion that Agamennone plans to install Cassandra as his mistress, but she does not appear on stage. Nor does the fall of Troy carry the significance that it bears in Seneca; there is no hint that it calls for some sort of recompense; instead, it figures simply as a triumph for the Greeks and for Agamennone in particular as their leader. That single move yields an enormous gain in cohesion and concentration; the focus is now firmly fixed on the palace of Argos and the intrigue that unfolds within it. Alfieri's second most conspicuous alteration has a similar result. He pruned Seneca's cast of characters to the bare minimum. In addition to the absence of Cassandra, there is no ghost of Thyestes, no messenger, no Nurse, no kindly visitor willing to carry Orestes to safety—and, of course, no chorus, Argive or Trojan. What remains are just four characters: Egisto, Clitennestra, Agamennone, and Elettra. Alfieri also radically adjusted the prominence of these characters. Agamennone first appears in the middle of Act 2, rather than at the end of Act 4 as in Seneca, and Elettra makes her first appearance in the third scene of Act 1 rather than in the last 50 lines of the play, as in Seneca. As a

result of those changes, Alfieri can depict a far greater degree of interaction among the characters, and he enjoys much greater opportunities for exploring their individual psychologies. As we will now see, Alfieri took full advantage of those opportunities.

The greatest strength of Alfieri's play is its characters. His *Clitennestra* is, as Paratore observes, widely regarded as among his finest achievements, but to my mind each of the four is a masterpiece, and *Clitennestra*, while impressive, is in a way the least original of them. In her Alfieri has succeeded in dramatizing the inner conflict that Seneca had only schematically depicted. Her overriding emotion is her love for Egisto, which makes her repeatedly vulnerable to his manipulations. She also harbors outrage at Agamennone for the sacrifice of Ifigenia, and reacts with fury when Egisto intimates that Agamennone has taken Cassandra as his mistress (that, in fact, is the point at which she takes the decisive step toward killing her husband). But at the same time she is racked by feelings of guilt, and is acutely sensitive to her daughter Elettra's criticisms of her liaison with Egisto. Finally, she feels her role as a mother deeply and is fiercely protective of her son Oreste; her realization in the last moments of the play that Egisto means to kill him finally allows her to see Egisto for what he is (maternal affection is an emotion that Alfieri consistently depicts with great sympathy).

In the characterization of Agamennone Seneca left Alfieri almost nothing to work with: he appears in only one scene and speaks fewer than twenty lines. He is solicitous of Cassandra but seems incapable of understanding why she might not be eager to celebrate his return to Argos or to embrace her new role as a servant. Alfieri's character is therefore almost entirely his own creation (it seems possible that he drew on Seneca's other portrayal of Agamemnon, in the *Troades*, but I have not identified any verbal parallels). Given Alfieri's well-documented abhorrence of despotism, both in his other plays and in his political treatises, it is nothing short of astonishing that his Agamennone is an ideal ruler, who holds himself to the strictest rules of conduct and cannot countenance abusing his power. Indeed, his high-minded-

ness is the cause of his doom. When he discovers that the exiled Egisto, the son of Tieste, is residing in Argos, instead of ordering his death he summons him to an interview in which he offers to restore him to his hereditary kingdom on condition that he leave Argos the following day. He does so against his better judgment, apparently because he has never before refused a request for assistance. At one point he says, speaking more truthfully than he knows, «in you I see Tieste and his furies», «Tieste io veggo, / e le sue furie, in te» (3.188-9). When Elettra, who is suspicious of Egisto but who does not know of the plan to kill Agamennone, pleads with her father to hasten his departure from Argos, Agamennone replies that it would be «viltade» to deport him sooner based solely on suspicion.

Alfieri's positive portrayal of Agamennone also manifests itself in the way he handles the two charges against him, the sacrifice of Ifigenia and his relationship with Cassandra. Agamennone brings up the first accusation himself upon his arrival in Argos. While he rejoices to embrace Elettra, he laments that he has been deprived («orbato») of his other daughter by the will of heaven. In a later scene he tells Clitennestra that he would understand if she still hated him for his action. When he is confronted by her with the accusation of having taken Cassandra as his mistress, he protests (in a highly plausible speech) that he was simply following the *ius belli* in accepting her as his captive. He then offers to give her to Clitennestra as her personal handmaid (developing a hint in Seneca, where Agamemnon tells Cassandra «do not fear your mistress, you who are her servant», *ne metue dominam famula*, Ag. 796). As he assures his wife, «I feel compassion for Cassandra's fate, but I love only you», «io di Cassandra / ben compiangio il destino; ma te sola / amo» (4.276-8).

Elettra is another character for whom Seneca offered only the barest outline of a portrayal. She appears after the murder to denounce her mother's action, and she refuses to reveal the whereabouts of Orestes even when threatened with torture and death. Alfieri took this germ of a depiction and produced a fully-formed character, endowed with the fortitude of her Senecan

ancestor but also possessing gentler, more loving features (I must warn you that I am more than a little in love with Elettra myself). Her strongest bond is with her father, whom she clearly idolizes. In a touching speech upon his return she recalls how she kissed his hand as he departed for Troy and now plants «even more fervent grown-up kisses» («adulti imprimo / or più fervidi baci», 2.214-5). Toward her mother her attitude is more complex. While she never wavers in her condemnation of Clitennestra's connection to Egisto, she has pity for her mother's wretched condition. In an early scene she promises Clitennestra that she will not reveal her affair, and she keeps that promise at some cost to herself throughout the play. She is also protective of her mother. When Agamennone notices that Clitennestra shows no signs of happiness at his return, Elettra interjects that she is overcome with joy, which can be as debilitating as grief. When Agamennone inquires about Oreste, Clitennestra can make only incoherent noises and Elettra again rushes in with a charming picture of the boy's eagerness to see his father again. Alfieri gives Elettra the last word, the hope that Oreste will live and one day return to avenge his father's death. Her words correspond to the more elliptical prediction uttered by Cassandra in Seneca.

In both Agamennone and Elettra, Alfieri displays one of his most remarkable strengths as a playwright, the ability to make goodness and nobility dramatically interesting. It is a gift not bestowed on all dramatists, and one certainly not granted to Seneca.

Finally, there is Egisto. Here Seneca provided a somewhat more solid basis for a characterization. His manipulative skills are demonstrated in the scene in which in the end he overcomes Clytemnestra's resistance by feigning to commit suicide, and his tyrannical nature emerges after Agamemnon's death in his treatment of Electra. Even so, Alfieri has vastly expanded the Senecan portrayal. His Egisto is a figure who presides over the entire action. He opens the play with a soliloquy which is essentially a response to Seneca's prologue, in which he assures his father that he will carry out the longed-for revenge. That opening is

essential to understanding his subsequent behavior, because it puts the audience on notice that almost every word Egisto will utter or every pose that he will strike is a lie meant to further his design of revenge. A lesser dramatist would have punctuated Egisto's professions of devotion to Clitennestra with asides that made his true feelings clear, but Alfieri trusts his audience to see through Egisto's posturing. His command of sophistic argument is impressive. In his conversation with Agamennone he has the audacity to assert that Atreus' revenge on his own father Tieste was «horrible, but just», «orrida ... / ma giusta» (3.195-6) because Tieste had committed the first offense in seducing Atreus' wife. In his several scenes with Clitennestra he consistently maneuvers her into asking for what he actually wishes but pretends not to desire, and so it is with the plan to murder Agamennone: he leads her there but allows her to put the thought into words. Then when she has second thoughts he can with some justice say «wasn't it your idea?», «e tuo non fu il consiglio?» (5.41).

I want now to consider some places where Alfieri has enriched his adaptation of Seneca's *Agamemnon* with motifs or passages from other Senecan tragedies. In the first of several scenes involving Clitennestra and Egisto, Egisto announces his intention to leave Argos before Agamennone returns. Clitennestra begs him to put off his departure for one day. It seems highly likely that the idea of a one-day delay was suggested by Seneca's *Medea*, in which Creon orders Medea to leave Corinth but is persuaded to give her one day to take her leave. Alfieri will make good use of the 'one day' motif as the play progresses, but when Clitennestra first proposes it she has no clear idea of its purpose, no plan that she hopes to execute in that time, which makes the hypothesis that it is borrowed from the *Medea* more plausible. But the play on which Alfieri drew most heavily is the *Thyestes*, to which the action of both Seneca's *Agamemnon* and his *Agamennone* is a sequel. At a critical moment in the last act of *Thyestes*, when Atreus shows Thyestes the heads of his murdered children, he asks «do you recognize your children?» and Thyestes answers «I recognize my brother», *natos ecquid agnoscis*

*tuos? / Agnosco fratrem* (1005-6). This moment of literal recognition seems to have made a powerful impression on Alfieri. Versions of it can be found in several of his plays, and it appears twice in *Agamennone*, both times in the mouth of Clitennestra and situated symmetrically. Early in the play Elettra says that she wishes her mother loved Agamennone as much as she does, to which Clitennestra responds «I know him too well», «troppo il conosco» (1.184). In the play's final moments, when Clitennestra realizes that Egisto intends to kill Oreste, she exclaims «now I know you, Egisto», «or ti conosco, Egisto» (5.172). Alfieri deploys other echoes of the *Thyestes* to connect the characters and events of the play with those of its prior history. It has often been noted that the first words of Alfieri's *Agamennone* on his return to Argos evoke the opening words of Seneca's *Thyestes* in the same circumstances. Here is Alfieri: «at last I see the longed-for walls of my Argos», «riveggo al fin le sospirate mura / d'Argomia» (2.180-1). And here is Seneca: «I see the hoped-for homes of my fatherland and wealthy Argos», *optata patriae tecta et Argolicas opes [...] cerno* (404-7). I note in passing that Alfieri, in accordance with his positive portrayal of Agamennone, removes the suggestion in Seneca's line that Thyestes is attracted to Argos for its wealth, *Argolicas opes*. The echo establishes a parallelism between Agamennone and Thyestes: the newly returned Agamennone will fall a victim as did Thyestes before him. If that is so, it follows that the new embodiment of Atreus will be Egisto. Alfieri reinforces that parallelism by means of another allusion to the *Thyestes*, less than twenty lines earlier. Left alone for a moment, Egisto rejoices that Agamennone has not in fact been drowned at sea, as had been feared. He says «hated race, you have at last fallen into my hands, and indeed all of you», «abbominevol stirpe, al fin caduta / sei fra mie man pur tutta» (163-4). His words are almost a translation of Atreus' words at his first sight of Thyestes and his two children: «Thyestes has at last come into my hands, he has come, and all of him», *uenit in nostras manus / tandem Thyestes, uenit, et totus quidem* (494-5). A moment earlier Atreus had referred to Thyestes' «hated race» (492, *genus inuisum*), a close

equivalent of Egisto's «abbominevol stirpe». Alfieri caps those allusions to the *Thyestes* with another one at the critical moment when Clitennestra stabs Agamennone to death. Egisto hears Agamennone's cry of «tradimento» from within the palace, and urges Clitennestra to complete the deed. «Shed all the blood of that impious man: the cruel one would have wished to bathe in our blood», «di quell'empio il sangue / tutto spandi: bagnar voleasi il crudo / nel sangue nostro». In the same terms spoke Atreus, as he watched Thyestes drain the goblet of wine mixed with the blood of his children: «let the father drink the mingled blood of his own: he would have drunk mine», *mixtum suorum sanguinem genitor bibit: / meum bibisset* (*Thy.* 917-8). By means of these allusions Alfieri underscores the way in which the death of Agamennone avenges Atreus' crime against Thyestes by re-enacting it, with Egisto as avenger assuming the role originally played by Atreus. The notion of an Atreus reincarnated actually appears in the text of Alfieri's play. In his conversation with Egisto Agamennone, conscious of the inherited hatreds of their families, remarks that Egisto must see him, Agamennone, as the living image of Atreus: «do I not represent to you the living image of bloodthirsty Atreus?», «del sanguinario Atrèo / non rappresento io a te la imagin viva?» (3.190-1). Agamennone's ingrained virtue does not allow him to see that the embodiment of Atreus is actually in front of him.

Subtle intertextual connections of this kind are characteristic of classical poetry at its most sophisticated; it is extraordinary to find them in Alfieri's interaction with Seneca.

By way of conclusion, I would like to mention two themes that are prominent in the tragedies of Alfieri and that resonate with the drama of Seneca. One is the theme of tyranny. Several of Alfieri's tragedies prominently feature characters who behave tyrannically, and some of these are generally accounted among Alfieri's most successful portrayals, such as Filippo (Philip II of Spain) and the biblical king Saul. In fact the opposition between a tyrannical ruler and a fearless fighter for freedom has sometimes been regarded as the quintessentially Alfierian trag-

ic subject. Tyranny also plays a significant part in the Senecan tragic corpus: all but one of the eight genuine Senecan tragedies contain a figure who acts in a tyrannical fashion or who aspires to tyrannical power (the one exception is the *Phaedra*, where Theseus is portrayed as a father and husband rather than as a ruler). These Senecan tyrant figures share a conception of how an all-powerful ruler is expected to act; they might all seem to have consulted the same handbook of tyrannical statecraft—a work perhaps not unlike Alfieri's *Della tirannide*. It is interesting that, in spite of his obvious interest in tyrannical behavior, Seneca never made it the central element of a tragedy (it was left to the author of the *Octavia* to do so). It seems to me possible that Seneca regarded tyranny as a constant fact of life rather than as a problem or issue to be given dramatic treatment in its own right. The other theme is that of death. Death is, of course, no stranger to tragedy, but Alfieri's many references to it have a tonality that closely parallels its appearances in Seneca. In both writers death is not seen as a misfortune to be endured, but as a release to be desired, an escape from an intolerable existence and an assertion of independence. Alfieri's *Mirra*, for example, spends almost the entire play longing for death rather than reveal her incestuous passion for her father. Shortly before the end, she voices her frustration at her failure to find this release: «O death, death, that I invoke so much, will you always be deaf to my suffering?», «o Morte, Morte, / cui tanto invoco, al mio dolor tu sorda / sempre sarai?» (5.131-3). Earlier in the play *Mirra* had asked her nurse Euryclea to kill her, arguing that «to hasten my death would be an act of love, of true pity», «amor, pietà verace, / fia l' procacciarmi morte» (2.298-9). The paradoxical redefinition of terms, in which killing becomes an act of *pietas*, is strongly reminiscent of Seneca.

As it happens, the two themes of tyranny and death come together in the one line of Seneca's *Agamemnon* that Alfieri cited as an example of the power of Seneca's iambic meter. Electra begs Aegisthus for death, *concede mortem*, and he, slipping easily into his new role as tyrant, responds «if you were refusing, I would

grant it» (*si recusares, darem*). It seems probable that this line, which encapsulates so much of both Senecan and Alfierian tragedy, impressed itself on Alfieri's memory for more than metrical reasons.

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses one of the most prominent receptions of Seneca's tragedies, Vittorio Alfieri's *Agamemnon*. By means of a close reading of Alfieri's rewriting of Seneca's *Agamemnon*, the paper argues that Alfieri fixed some of Seneca's problems in the characterisations of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Electra, and Aegisthus. Also, it deals with two themes of Alfieri's tragedy, death and tyranny.

#### KEYWORDS

Seneca — Vittorio Alfieri — Agamemnon — Agamennone — Tragedy — Reception

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