

## A Beastly Love Triangle? Seneca, *Agamemnon* 737-40

Cassandra's allusive description of the imminent murder of Agamemnon includes an ambiguous animal allegory (737-40):<sup>1</sup>

quae uersat oculos alia nunc facies meos?  
 uictor ferarum colla sublimis iacet  
 ignobili sub dente Marmaricus leo,  
 morsus cruentos passus audacis leae.

737 alia P CS : alta E 738 uictor E C<sup>ms</sup> V<sup>c</sup> d : uicto P S : uicta C :  
 rector *Bentleius* sublimis E : uexatus P CS : subciscus *Gronouius*  
 740 leae E : dee P CS

Tarrant's note on 739 provides everything needed to understand the problem, though not quite enough to solve it:

A lesser animal seems indicated by *ignobilis*, and this makes it impossible that the phrase simply alludes to the lioness under another aspect: a lioness attacking her mate may be *ferox* or *saeua*, but hardly *ignobilis*. A reference to Aegisthus is the only conceivable alternative, though the vagueness of the line and the absence of a distinct animal-shape for the third character in the vision are disturbing. The action of Aegisthus during Agamemnon's murder could aptly be described as *ignobilis* . . ., and the sequence of actions in these lines corresponds to that in the later scene: Clytemestra attacks first and strikes the decisive blow . . ., and Aegisthus then abuses his helpless opponent.

A second and slighter difficulty concerns the epithet *Marmaricus*; a harmless ornament in another context . . ., its specific character is badly out of place in Cassandra's vision.

The line's combination of obscurity and bombast permits a degree of suspicion concerning its authenticity. It may be observed that lines 738 and 740 cohere without seam, that *uictor ferarum* is a sufficiently clear periphrasis for *leo* in this context, and that deletion of 739 places the responsibility for Agamemnon's death where the last act of the play places it, on Clytemestra. If spurious, the line may have been inserted because of a pedantic insistence that Cassandra's vision should include all the actors who appear in the later scene; if the line is genuine, this pedantry must be laid to Seneca's account.

<sup>1</sup> Text and apparatus are quoted from R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca, Agamemnon* (Cambridge, 1976). O. Zwierlein's Oxford Classical Text (1986) differs only in omitting some of the variants and both of the conjectures, along with the comma in 739. I cannot consider here the problems of *colla sublimis*, which is, as Tarrant notes, a very odd way to describe a dead lion. In the web-text of Senecan tragedy that I am preparing, I will probably print Gronovius' *subciscus*, for lack of a better word. 'Nowak' refers to R. M. Nowak (ed.), *Walker's Mammals of the World* (Baltimore<sup>5</sup>, 2 vols., 1991).

It seems to me that line 739 is neither entirely genuine nor entirely interpolated, that the last two words are corrupt, and that they conceal a reference to the third beast in this erotic triangle, a noun and adjective in the genitive singular: the dead lion lies ‘under the ignoble tooth’ of some beast representing Aegisthus. Either *Marmaricus leo* is an intrusive parallel from the *Hercules Oetaeus*, where the same phrase occurs in 1057,<sup>2</sup> or else *leo* is an intrusive (and misplaced) gloss on *uictor ferarum* and *Marmaricus* the result of assimilation.

The next question to ask is precisely what sort of beast would be most appropriate to signify the third party. As Tarrant notes (on 738ff.), Aegisthus is a wolf in Aeschylus, where Cassandra makes the triangle explicit (*Ag.* 1258-60):

αὕτη δίπους λέαινα συγκοιμωμένη  
 λύκῳ λέοντος εὐγενοῦς ἀπουσία.  
 κτενεῖ με τὴν τάλαιναν.

For our passage, a dog is also a tempting possibility, since it is more ignoble and better known as a scavenger, though without the Aeschylean pedigree.<sup>3</sup> It would be easy enough to introduce one or the other to the text by writing *ignobili sub dente Marmarici lupi* or *Marmarici canis*. Either would have been very vulnerable once *Marmaricus leo*, or just *leo*, had been written in the margin, and *leae* directly beneath will not have helped.

As for the adjective, I suggest that Seneca was not thinking of ordinary wolves or dogs, but has relocated his metaphorical scene to Africa. This is not so much because the Greek lion was extinct when he wrote his play, though it probably was, as because he is thinking of a North African hyena (or possibly a jackal). Transferring the geographic epithet from the victim to the ignoble beast gives *Marmarici* point, since it shows that we are

<sup>2</sup> The chorus describes the effects of Orpheus’ song: *ad cantus ueniunt tuos / ipsis cum latebris ferae / iuxtaque inpauidum pecus / sedit Marmaricus leo / nec dammae trepidant lupos / et serpens latebras fugit / tunc oblita ueneni* (*H.O.* 1054-60). These two passages, along with Silius 3.300ff., have been used as ammunition in the dispute about the authenticity and date of the *Hercules Oetaeus*: cf. most recently R. G. M. Nisbet, ‘The oak and the axe: symbolism in Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus* 1618ff.’, in M. Whitby *et al.* (edd.), *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble* (Bristol, 1987), 243-51, reprinted in *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (Oxford, 1995), 202-12, at 210. If I am right in emending away one of the lions, there is even less evidence for deciding the priority of *Hercules Oetaeus* and Silius.

<sup>3</sup> It is certainly far better known as a scavenger of human corpses, from the fourth line of the *Iliad* on.

dealing with a wild African wolf or dog, that is, a hyena, rather than an ordinary Greek or Roman wolf or a domesticated hunting hound or lapdog.

There are three reasons to prefer the hyena as the third party, though the first also applies to the jackal:

1. It is zoologically more accurate, since hyenas are scavengers, which were (and are) thought to live off the leftovers from the hunting of lions — and lionesses.<sup>4</sup> Wolves find their own food, and domesticated dogs do not mingle with lions.

2. Hyenas were thought to change their gender yearly, and this would suit the unmanly Aegisthus, whom Cassandra later describes as *trementi semiuir dextra* (890). Though firmly rejected by Aristotle (*H.A.* 6.31, 579 b 15), belief in the serial androgyny of hyenas is widespread among the less scientifically-minded ancients.<sup>5</sup> The best-known example is Ovid's Pythagoras (*Met.* 15.409-10):

alternare uices et, quae modo femina tergo  
passa marem est, nunc esse marem miremur hyaenam.      410

The Elder Pliny is, perhaps uncharacteristically, circumspect enough to give both sides of the dispute (*N.H.* 8.105):

hyaenis utramque esse naturam et alternis annis mares, alternis feminas fieri, parere sine mare uulgus credit, Aristoteles negat.

<sup>4</sup> This would be a highly unnatural sort of hunt for a lioness, but the idea that a hyena would dine on the leftovers should raise no eyebrows. They are superb scavengers, and have the ability 'quickly to eat and digest entire carcasses, including skin and bones' (Nowak 2.1179; so also Ctesias, quoted in Diodorus Siculus 3.35.10). I should perhaps note that they are also competent hunters, and their reputation as parasites of the lion is not entirely deserved. As Nowak puts it, '[a]lthough the spotted hyena is sometimes said to be a scavenger of the lion, most dead prey on which both hyenas and lions were seen feeding [in a particular study] had been killed by the hyenas' (2.1180).

<sup>5</sup> There are curious differences between ancient and modern explanations of this belief. Aristotle (*H.A.* 6.31, 579 b 16-27) says that both sexes appear to have female characteristics, while Nowak (2.1179) says that both sexes appear to be male: 'The external genitalia of the female so closely resemble those of the male that the two sexes are practically impossible to distinguish in the field' — I omit the anatomical details. The gender monomorphism of the hyena is no doubt what gave rise to the ancient belief, as apparent males turned up pregnant. Perhaps I should add that only the spotted hyena, *Crocuta crocuta*, appears androgynous, so the *OLD*'s restriction of the definition of Latin *hyaena* to the striped hyena, *Hyaena hyaena*, is at best over-narrow.

Even leaving aside the other ancient references,<sup>6</sup> Seneca surely knew his Ovid better than anyone now living, and Pliny was a contemporary.

3. Most important, hyenas were thought to mate with lionesses. Pliny again (8.107):

huius generis [sc. *hyaenae*] coitu leaena Aethiopica parit corocottam, similiter voces imitantem hominum pecorumque.

Neither Keller nor Pauly-Wissowa nor the Budé Pliny offers any parallel, so I suspect that none exists.<sup>7</sup> The fact that *hyaena* and *corocotta* seem otherwise to refer to the same animal is also disquieting. Three authorities make the *corocotta* a cross between dog and wolf rather than hyena and lioness, and one of them is Pliny himself, whose filing system was obviously inadequate (*crocotas uelut ex cane lupoque conceptos*, 8.72).<sup>8</sup> So much can be said against my hypothesis. On the other side of the scale we may put the precise correspondence with the requirements of our passage (female lion and male hyena) and the fact that the parallel is contemporary.

Unfortunately, my hypothesis about the general sense required provides no further guidance as to the precise text, since either ‘dog’ or ‘wolf’ would be a good metaphorical description of the hyena.<sup>9</sup> Although hyenas are seldom if ever referred to by either name in Greek or Latin,<sup>10</sup> they are sometimes, as we have seen, alleged to be descended from

<sup>6</sup> F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen, Buch XIV-XV* (Heidelberg, 1986), *ad loc.*, cites these two and five others and implies that he might have given more.

<sup>7</sup> These are O. Keller, *Antike Tierwelt* (Leipzig, 2 vols., 1909-13), 1.152xx; *RE Supp.* IV, 762, 53-56; A. Ernout (ed.), *Pline L’Ancien, Histoire naturelle, Livre VIII, ad loc.* It is conceivable that Aeschylus’ wolf (quoted above) is a hyena, though the latter is not actually attested before Herodotus (4.192). It is worth noting that the striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) has a mane, while the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) has none. That might explain what the lioness is doing in the family tree: to the unscientific observer, a maned hyena might be a plausible offspring of a union between a maneless dog-shaped hyena and a maned lion — not that lionesses have manes, of course, but they can presumably pass them on to their sons. The two species are otherwise fairly similar in overall appearance (Nowak provides pictures). If this hypothesis is correct, the names have been reversed, with ancient *hyaena* = modern *Crocuta crocuta* (spotted) and ancient *corocotta* = modern *Hyaena hyaena* (striped).

<sup>8</sup> The others are Ctesias (n. 4) and Artemidorus, quoted in Strabo 16.4.18f.

<sup>9</sup> It is an even better description of the jackal, which is just a smallish wolf. Dogs, wolves, jackals, and coyotes form the genus *Canis* of the family *Canidae*, while hyenas form a separate family (*Hyaenidae*) in the order *Carnivora*, and are thought (Nowak 2.1177) to have evolved from a branch of the *Viverridae* (mongooses and other less familiar animals). Nevertheless, to the unscientific observer, hyenas are just ugly hump-backed scavenger dogs with unusually powerful jaws.

<sup>10</sup> I can quote no parallel, though I have not attempted to examine every instance of *canis* and *lupus* in Latin literature, or of *κύων* and *λύκος* in Greek, to see which might be construed as hyenas or jackals.

both, so the ancients must have noticed the resemblance. Besides, we would expect Cassandra, in prophetic mode, to be allusive rather than literal and not to call animals by their proper names.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, like the proverbial donkey between two bales of hay, I am still torn between *Marmarici lupi* and *Marmarici canis*, though with a slight preference for the latter, as more ignoble. Either would be a great improvement over *Marmaricus leo*.

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<sup>11</sup> The adjective must be specific to give a pointer to the species, but that in itself allows the noun to be more generic.