

Two Notes on Seneca's *Phaedra*¹

1

In answer to a question from the chorus, the nurse provides a description of Phaedra's inconsistent symptoms (365-80, too long to quote here), beginning with a fire metaphor for passion (360-65) and ending with a melting-snow simile for tears (381-83). The last is my subject:

lacrimae cadunt per ora et assiduo genae
rore irrigantur, qualiter Tauri iugis
tepido madescunt imbre percussae niues.

382 irrigantur E : nigran- A 383 percussae E : -fuse A

Though uncommon, the phenomenon described, warm rain coming down on a layer of fallen snow, is not meteorologically impossible, given a sudden change of weather. However, it seems inappropriate in several ways. First, though conventional, the geographical specification in 382 is troubling: rain falling on the peaks of Taurus would not be at all easy to see from the valleys below, where the implied observer must be situated.² Second, the adjectives in 383 do not cohere, since driving rain (implied by *percussae*) is usually cold, while warm rain (*tepido . . . imbre*) tends to drizzle: it looks as if A's *perfusae* was interpolated to make the rain warm and drizzly and the snow soft and squishy.³ So far, these are perhaps mere quibbles. A third, stronger, objection is that the simile does not fit Phaedra's situation. Her weeping is interminable (*assiduo . . . rore*, 381-82),

¹ Text and apparatus are quoted from O. ZWIERLEIN, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae* (Oxford 1986), including only the most pertinent variants. Other editors referred to by surname are R. GIOMINI, *L. Annaei Senecae Phaedra* (Rome 1955), and M. COFFEY and R. MAYER, *Seneca, Phaedra* (Cambridge 1990). All references are *ad loc.* except as specified.

² As COFFEY and MAYER note, '[t]he simile is Ovidian . . . but S. adds the soaking rains of spring to the melting snows.' However, though warm rain and melting snows often occur at the same time, they do not do so in the same place except on very rare occasions, and that is what Seneca describes.

³ Two of GIOMINI's three parallels refer to hail (H. C. 3.1.29, *uerberatae grandine uineae* in a very stormy context) or cold driving winter rains (Tib. 1.2.7-8, *ianua difficilis domini, te uerberet imber / te Iouis imperio fulmina missa petant*). The third is Vergil's description (A. 4.249-51) of Mount Atlas: *piniferum caput et uento pulsatur et imbri, / nix umeros infusa tegit, tum flumina mento / praecipitant senis, et glacie riget horrida barba*. Even here, the rain and melting snow are not combined, and in none of the three passages is the verb *percutere*.

but rain falling on snow cannot last long. Either the temperature will drop and the rain will turn to snow and add to the accumulation, or it will remain above the freezing point and the fallen snow will be washed away: in either case, we will soon be left with rain or snow, but not the combination of the two. A fourth objection, perhaps the strongest, is that the figure is unnecessarily and inappropriately complex in this context. A mixed simile such as this would suit someone who was struck down by successive disasters, like Hecuba, in Euripides' play and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIII, robbed of Polydorus and Polyxena in quick succession. Phaedra has only one sorrow, though that one will be more than enough to destroy her. The point of Seneca's simile is surely to illustrate the constant and copious and long-lasting flow of Phaedra's tears, rather than any nonexistent double motivation for them. For that the rain is a distraction: we need only the snow melting in the spring thaw.

This is one of the many cases where diagnosis is easier than prescription.⁴ I would like to believe that Seneca wrote

qualiter Tauri iugis
tepido madescunt **iubare** percussae niues.

This would simplify the simile by eliminating the rain and introducing the rays of the sun as the melting agent. The spring thaw would have been — no doubt still is — a spectacular annual event in Cilicia, easy to see from the valleys below the Taurus, and would have lasted for many weeks. The sun's rays are warmer than any rain and can be said to 'strike' the snow more easily than rain.⁵ The sense of *iubar* is also perfect: though by Seneca's time (and with Seneca's help) it had been extended to include various heavenly bodies,⁶ its primary meaning is 'the first light of day' (*OLD* s.v. *iubar* 1), and that is just what would have resumed or accelerated the melting process each morning after the previous night's lull.⁷ Finally, the fact that the sun is mentioned (or alluded to)

⁴ Perhaps we should prefer **pro**scription, and insert some daggers.

⁵ To judge from the quotations in the *OLD* s.v. *percutio* and *uerbero*¹, the former is standard for sunlight (3.b), while the latter is used for rain and hail (3.b) and for sights and sounds that 'assail the senses' (4).

⁶ For an outline of the gradual extension in meaning of *iubar*, cf. R. J. TARRANT, *Seneca, Agamemnon* (Cambridge 1976), ad 463.

⁷ As COFFEY and MAYER note, Seneca himself attests (*Medea* 682-83) that the Taurus is perpetually snowcapped. I have not seen it.

in the preceding lines, the last of the nurse's list of symptoms, would have helped the original audience (whether sitting together in the theatre or bent over papyrus rolls at home) to make the connection:

et qui ferebant signa Phoebae facis
oculi nihil gentile nec patrium micant. 380

The error posited would have been easy enough, and could have come from miscounting of minims (*iubare* > *imbare* > *imbre*), or substitution of a commoner word for a rarer, or association of ideas,⁸ or some combination of the three.

So much is attractive about *iubare*. I see only one objection, but it is a heavy one: although the meaning is perfect, the form is unparalleled.⁹ The word is not attested in verse except in the nominative and accusative singular (ten times in Seneca) and in the phrase *exorto iubare*, devised by Pacuvius (*Fr.* 347 R²) and imitated by Vergil (*iubare exorto*, *A.* 4.130) and others.¹⁰ Of course, my conjecture, though it lacks a participle, is at least ablative singular, and so less bold than a genitive or dative. In any case, it seems less difficult than the transmitted text. As often happens, we are faced with a choice between a lexicographic singularity and nonsense. Many of the former must have disappeared over the years, either because one would not be missed if corrupted, or because one was itself prone to be deliberately changed by early practitioners of 'einmals heißt nimmer' scholarship.

2

The nurse declaims against celibacy in her advice to Hippolytus (475-482):

quam uaria leti genera mortalem trahunt 475
carpuntque turbam, pontus et ferrum et doli —
sed fata credas desse: sic atram Styga
iam petimus ultro. caelibem uitam probet
sterilis iuuentus: hoc erit, quidquid uides,

⁸ Falling rain and melting snow are not the same thing, but the context is very soggy, and the mind of an inattentive scribe might easily have jumped from the one to the other.

⁹ I owe this objection to Stephen HEYWORTH, *per litteras*.

¹⁰ Exceptions are all prose, and even then the earliest are not found until roughly a century later: three instances of *iubaris* and one of *iubare* (without *exorto*) in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*TLL* VII,2, 571.62-68).

unius aeui turba et in semet ruet. 480
 Proinde uitae sequere naturam ducem:
 urbem frequenta, ciuium coetum cole.

Since recent commentators do not mention the fact, I begin by observing that the three forms of death mentioned in 476, *pontus et ferrum et doli*, are all peculiarly and paradoxically appropriate to Hippolytus.¹¹ He is killed by the sea, though without drowning or even getting wet. He is killed by a sword, but not at the hands of an enemy soldier, as we might expect from his age and gender. Nor is his death suicide, though the sword is his own: the weapon of violence is used only as a passive piece of false evidence against him. Finally, he is killed by deceit, not in a wartime ambush, but by a woman, though he has had little to do with women hitherto.

However, my main point here is to suggest that *turba* in 480 should perhaps be emended to *turbo*. This would remove the awkward repetition of *turbam* in 476, while preserving the ‘seething mass’ imagery, since a *turbo* is in several of its senses even more turbulent than a *turba*: ‘hurly-burly’ might be a suitably vague translation.¹² My conjecture also introduces a hint of a child’s top (*OLD* s.v. *turbo* 1.a), an appropriate metaphor for a passage about the *sterilis iuuentus* who take no interest in love or marriage. This particular sense of *turbo* fits the predicate very precisely: if left alone, a top will collapse on itself (*in semet ruet*) soon enough.¹³ Shackleton Bailey has proposed the same error in Martial 5.24.4.

¹¹ It is surely not coincidental that COFFEY and MAYER’s parallel from the elder Seneca includes two forms of death (*laqueus* and *praeceps locus*) not mentioned here. It may or may not be significant — one must draw the line somewhere — that the next sentence (*atram Styga / iam petimus ultro*, 477-78) suits Phaedra as well as this one suits Hippolytus.

¹² Pertinent senses are *OLD* s.v. *turbo* 2.a (‘whirlwind, tornado’) and the metaphorical extension 2.b (‘w. ref. to sudden violent disturbances of affairs’), 3 (‘eddy’ or ‘whirlpool’), and perhaps 4.a (‘spinning or whirling motion, gyration’).

¹³ So will a whirlwind, though not so literally.