

## THE *HERCULES OETAEUS* AND THE PICTURE OF THE *SAPIENS* IN SENECAN PROSE

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BOTH THE PROSE WORKS of Seneca and his tragedies are striking for their imagistic or graphic language.<sup>1</sup> Just as Seneca the philosopher often uses a metaphor, simile, or analogy from everyday life to "concretize" a philosophical abstraction, so the dramatic characters of his tragedies will often elaborate a description of their emotions, or of what they see going on around them, with metaphor or simile, so that the literal picture is overlaid with a metaphorical one.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere I have shown that if we read the images of the tragedies in the light of the moral connotations they carry in the prose works, then the *ecphraseis* of the tragedies can be seen as vehicles for didactic authorial comment<sup>3</sup> which underlies, and sometimes even counters, the speeches' ostensible message.<sup>4</sup>

The use of description elaborated by figurative language is one of the many features of the *Hercules Oetaeus* which give it an air of authenticity when set beside the other tragedies of the Senecan dramatic corpus. In what follows, I would like to draw attention to the way in which descriptions of Hercules by the chorus and a messenger in the *Hercules Oetaeus* contain many echoes of the imagery with which the *sapiens* and *sapientia* are described by Seneca in his prose works, and to the way in which this imagery contributes towards an interpretation of Hercules as a Stoic *sapiens*.

Hercules' behavior, including specific details of his physical appearance, is described in two passages of the *Hercules Oetaeus*: once, in general terms, by the chorus of Oechalian maidens (143-161), and once in a messenger-speech, by Philoctetes, who describes Hercules' behavior as he burns to death on a pyre on Oeta (1618 ff.). This second picture is preceded by Philoctetes' description of the felling of a grove to make a pyre for Hercules (1618 ff.), with particular emphasis on the resistance of

<sup>1</sup>See V. S. Tietze, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy* (Diss., M. Litt., University of Oxford, 1982) and *The Imagery of Morality in Seneca's Prose-Works* (Diss., Ph.D., McMaster University, 1985), also D. Steyns, *Étude sur les métaphores et les comparaisons dans les oeuvres en prose de Sénèque le philosophe* (Ghent 1907), and M. Armisen-Marchetti, *Sapientiae facies: Étude sur les images de Sénèque* (Paris 1989).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Tietze, *The Role of Description*. . . , 21 f. and O. Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas* (Meisenheim am Glan 1966, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 20) 117 ff.

<sup>3</sup>V. S. Tietze, "Seneca's Tragic Description: A 'Point of View'," *EMC/CV* NS 7 (1988) 23-49.

<sup>4</sup>V. S. Tietze, "The Psychology of Uncertainty in Senecan Tragedy," *Illinois Classical Studies* 12 (1987) 135-141, at 140.

one large oak-tree to the axe. As I shall show, these three descriptions present as actuality (i.e., denote) images which, in Seneca's prose works, signify virtue. Simultaneously, the language of the descriptions makes reference figuratively to (i.e., connotes)<sup>5</sup> other images which, in the Senecan prose works, also relate to virtue. Hercules' demeanor is thus described in such a way as to characterize it at this point as that of the Stoic wise man or *sapiens*, while the oak-tree's resistance to felling (which precedes the description of his death on Oeta) becomes a symbol of his death on Oeta.<sup>6</sup>

At *Hercules Oetaeus* 151-164 the chorus of Oechalian maidens describes Hercules as an invulnerable soldier:

*nullis vulneribus pervia membra sunt:  
ferrum sentit hebes, lentior est chalybs;  
in nudo gladius corpore frangitur  
et saxum resilit, fataque neglegit  
et mortem indomito corpore provocat.  
non illum poterant figere cuspides,  
non arcus Scythica tensus harundine,  
non quae tela gerit Sarmata frigidus  
aut qui soliferae suppositus plagae  
vicino Nabatae vulnera dirigit  
Parthus Gnosiaci certior ictibus  
muros Oechaliae corpore propulit;  
nil obstare valet; vincere quod parat  
iam victum est. quota pars vulnere concidit.*

In his prose works Seneca very often employs military imagery to characterize virtue and vice.<sup>7</sup> While the unvirtuous is the cowardly soldier, the *sapiens* is pictured on the battle-field maintaining his stand against the enemy no matter what missiles are hurled against him (*Vit. Beat.* 15.5). Like

<sup>5</sup>For "denotation" and "connotation" see R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*<sup>3</sup> (New York 1952) 22 f.

<sup>6</sup>At other points in the *Hercules Oetaeus*, as in the *Hercules Furens*, however, Hercules' actions and words seem to remove him from the Stoic ideal, causing one scholar to see him as "the study of a passion figure ..." (J. Fitch, *Seneca's Hercules Furens: A Critical Text with Introduction and Commentary* [Ithaca, N.Y. 1987] 38 f.) "whose ungoverned emotional impulses lead to catastrophe" (39). It is true that both the *Hercules Oetaeus* and *Hercules Furens* leave us with conflicting views of the moral status of Hercules (Fitch 21 ff.), as Seneca also does in the prose works (Fitch 43 f.). However, this conflict is, to a large extent, inherent in the mythology of Hercules and does not militate against my thesis, which is not to prove that Hercules acts as a *sapiens* throughout the *Hercules Oetaeus*, but rather that he is to be seen as such at this point in the play.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., *Ep.* 36.9, 45.9, 53.12, 59.8, 66.13, 67.15, 74.19, 82.5, 104.22; *Constant.* 1.1, 4.1 ff., 5.4, 6.4, 8, 19.3; *Ira* 3.5.8; *Vit. Beat.* 5.3, 15.5; *Tranq.* 8.9; *Ben.* 5.2, 3 f.

the Hercules pictured by our chorus here, the *sapiens*, Seneca tells us, is in the true sense invulnerable: *hoc . . . dico, sapientem nulli esse iniuriae obnoxium; itaque non refert quam multa in illum coiciantur tela, cum sit nulli penetrabilis* (Constant. 3.5). The same idea is expressed at Vit. Beat. 5.3:

*beata . . . vita est in recto certoque iudicio stabilita et immutabilis. tunc enim pura mens est et soluta omnibus malis, quae non tantum lacerationes sed etiam vellicationes effugerit, statura semper ubi constitit ac sedem suam etiam irata et infestante fortuna vindicata.*

In the dramatic context, however, the intention of the maidens is clearly to criticize Hercules' harsh treatment of the Oechalians. Thus to argue that the image of invulnerability has the positive connotation of Stoic *constantia* is only tenable if this speech is read, as I have suggested the speeches of Senecan tragedy often should be read, where the dramatic characters are treated as mouthpieces for the author's viewpoint, rather than what could be imagined to be their own (see above, notes 3 and 4). In fact, Hercules' invulnerability as described by the chorus at *Herc. Oet.* 151 ff. is attributed by Seneca in the prose works to the very embodiment of virtue—*Philosophia* herself. Whereas Hercules repels weapons with his naked body, *Philosophia* does so with the folds of her gown:

*incredibilis philosophiae vis est ad omnem fortuitam vim retundendam. nullum telum in corpore eius sedet; munita est, solida; quaedam defetigat et velut levia tela laxo sinu eludit, quaedam discutit et in eum usque qui miserat respuit.* (Ep. 53.12)

This prose image, like the one used by the chorus to describe Hercules, illustrates in military terms a paradoxical point of doctrine recurrent in Seneca's prose works to which I shall return. It is the idea that the *sapiens*, by showing *constantia* in the face of adversity, triumphs over it—to quote Seneca's own sententious expression of it, the *sapiens* "conquers his enemy's conquest" (*ipsam hostis sui victoriam vicit*, Ep. 9.19).

Turning to Philoctetes' messenger-speech at the end of the play (1618 ff.) we find that Hercules continues to be described in colors which are those of the *sapiens* in the Senecan prose works. Philoctetes' description of Hercules on the pyre on Oeta pictures a Hercules quite undaunted by fire, even eager to confront it, facing death by burning without sign of fear or suffering. We are reminded of a dominant theme of Seneca's prose works, that *calamitas virtutis occasio est* (Prov. 4.6). Torture by fire provides, of course, a fine opportunity to demonstrate this, and Seneca cites Mucius Scaevola as an *exemplum* (Ep. 66.53), while we are told that the *sapiens*, who was burnt to death in the bull of Phalaris, cried out *dulce est et ad me nihil pertinet* (Ep. 66.18).

Whatever the trial to which the *sapiens* is subjected, he will, according to Seneca, exhibit certain behavioral traits. Inspection of Philoctetes' description of Hercules on the pyre shows that it incorporates all the essential behavioral traits of the *sapiens* in adversity, as described by Seneca in the prose works. Philoctetes describes Hercules amidst the flames as

*immutus, inconcussus, in neutrum latus  
corrupta torquens membra*

1741-42

This recalls for us the *sapiens* as he is described at *Ep.* 45.9: a man *qui mala in bonum vertit, certus iudicii, inconcussus, intrepidus; quem aliqua vis movet, nulla perturbat*.<sup>8</sup> Hercules' deportment is completely placid and even joyful: *quis sic triumphans laetus in curru stetit / victor?* (1683-84); *quanta pax habitum tulit!* (1685); *tam placida frons est, tanta maiestas viro* (1746); *iacuit sui securus* (1693). Hercules' placidity is the *tranquillitas* of the *sapiens*, akin to joyfulness, which is the subject of Seneca's ninth dialogue.

At line 1736 we are told that Hercules rises from his prone position to sit up amidst the flames. This detail brings to mind the imagery of elevation with which Seneca illustrates the *sapiens* in his prose works. It occurs at *Ep.* 71.26, for example, where Seneca contrasts the sagging mind of the unvirtuous, when confronted with torture, with the upright mind of the *sapiens*: *quid est in tormentis, quid est in aliis quae adversa appellamus mali? hoc, ut opinor, succidere mentem et incurvari et subcumbere. quorum nihil sapienti viro potest evenire: stat rectus sub quolibet pondere*. An upright posture is often a detail of Seneca's images of *constantia*, where the *sapiens* is pictured as threatened by physical aggression. He is depicted, for example, as a wrestler who leaps up as soon as he is knocked down (*Ep.* 13.2 f., 80.3).

Hercules does not even close his eyes as he is burned:

*tunc ora flammis implet: ast illi graves  
luxere barbae; cumque iam vultum minax  
appeteret ignis, lamberent flammae caput,  
non pressit oculos.*

1752-55

Hercules thus exemplifies Virtue who *adversus apparatus terribilium rectos oculos tenet, nihil ex vultu mutat sive illi dura sive secunda ostentantur* (*Constant.* 5.4).<sup>9</sup> At 1693-95 we are told by Philoctetes that Hercules gazed for a time towards the heavens, looking to see if his father was observing him. From the very beginning of the *Hercules Oetaeus* (7 ff.) we have known that it is Hercules' desire to be received into Heaven,

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also *Ep.* 59.14: *sapiens ille plenus est gaudio, hilaris et placidus, inconcussus*, and *Clem.* 2.5.5: [sc. *sapiens*] *eandem semper faciem servabit, placidam, inconcussus*.

<sup>9</sup> For this reason, Heinsius' emendation at line 1737 of the traditional readings of *intrepidus ruens* (E) and *rubens* (A) to *intrepidum tuens* is obviously correct.

and, by the end of the play, Hercules will speak down from Heaven, his wish fulfilled (1940 ff.). Hercules' yearning for Heaven can be seen as another sign of the Stoic *sapiens* who longs to leave the prison of his body and go, or rather return, to God.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, both Hercules' upright posture and his upturned eyes are symptomatic of his status as a *sapiens*: in the prose works, Seneca states that the upright posture of man, and his capacity to turn his eyes up towards the sky are signs of his potential for emulation of God, that is, of his potential for virtue or *sapientia*:

*totum hoc quo continemur et unum est et deus; et socii sumus eius et membra. capax est noster animus, perfertur illo si vitia non deprimant. quemadmodum corporum nostrorum habitus erigitur et spectat in caelum, ita animus, cui in quantum vult licet porrigi, in hoc a natura rerum formatus est, ut paria dis vellet.* (Ep. 92.30)

Furthermore, the eyes of the *sapiens* figure in the prose works as an image of his extraordinary perspicacity and privileged perception of the truth, contrasting with the dull eyes and obtuseness of the morally imperfect.<sup>11</sup>

At line 1747, we are told that Hercules was in no hurry to burn (*nec properat uri*). This is not simply a pun on *ardere* (cf. *urere ardentem putes*, 1743). It is another sign of Hercules' status as a *sapiens*. In the Senecan prose works, excessive haste, like excessive inertia, is a sign of vice.<sup>12</sup> Thus at *Ira* 2.35.2, for example, Seneca tells us:

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Ep. 92.30 f. and 41.5: *quemadmodum radii solis contingunt quidem terram sed ibi sunt unde mittuntur, sic animus magnus ac sacer et in hoc demissus, ut proprius [quidem] divina nossemus, conversatur quidem nobiscum sed haeret origini suae; illinc pendet, illuc spectat ac nititur, nostris tamquam melior interest.* It is true that in the *Hercules Furens* (cf. Fitch [above, n. 6] 22 ff.) and at other points in the *Hercules Oetaeus* (e.g. 40 ff.), Hercules' aspirations to Heaven read more like *hubris*, but, as I have noted (above, n. 6) judgment of the status of Hercules' actions traditionally oscillates between praise and blame.

<sup>11</sup>Cf., e.g., Ep. 90.34: *quid sapiens investigaverit, quid in lucem protraxerit quaeris? primum verum naturamque, quam non ut cetera animalia oculis secutus est, tardis ad divina.* The vision of the *sapiens* is mainly suggested by contrast with the poor sight of the morally imperfect, who are often described as blind or as afflicted with eye-disease, e.g., Ep. 50.3, 64.8, 85.5, 94.5, 18 ff., 115.6 f. Darkness is associated with the world of the human race in general, contrasting with the light of Heaven (Ep. 79.11 f., Marc. 24.5). The body is, as it were, a dark prison for the soul from which complete release will only be obtained at the moment of death (Marc. 24.5). The *sapiens*, however, is able to obtain partial release from it during his life-time through contemplation of nature, as though refreshing his eyes with light after confinement in gloom (Ep. 65.17).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Ep. 3.5. For the virtuous *impetus ex dignitate rei cuiusque concipitur, proinde remissus <aut> acrior prout illa digna est peti* (Ep. 89.15). Thus haste may be condoned with respect to the endeavor to attain virtue; cf., e.g., Ep. 27.4, 35.2 ff., 49.6, 68.13, 71.36, 76.5. Uncontrollable speed is undesirable for Seneca because it characterizes the inherent instability of the human condition, particularly with respect to its brevity: *Brev. Vit.* 1.1, 8.5, 9.5, 10.6; Ep. 49.2.

*ea demum velocitas placet quae ubi iussa est vestigium sistit nec ultra destinata procurrit flectique et cursu ad gradum reduci potest; aegros scimus nervos esse, ubi invitis nobis moventur; senex aut infirmi corporis est qui cum ambulare vult currit: animi motus eos putemus sanissimos validissimosque qui nostro arbitrio ibunt, non suo ferentur.*

So, at *Ira* 3.13.2 Seneca recommends that "the countenance be relaxed, the voice rather gentle, the step rather slow."

Hercules does not cry out as he is burned. Indeed, the flames themselves, Philoctetes says, seemed to groan, but Hercules did not:

*Caucasum aut Pindum aut Athon  
ardere credas; nullus erumpit sonus  
tantum ingemiscit ignis. o durum iecur!  
Typhon in illo positus immanis rogo  
gemuisset ipse quique convulsam solo  
imposuit umeris Ossan Enceladus ferox.* 1730-35

Hercules' silence in suffering is, of course, indicative of his courage and invulnerability. Again, consultation of the Senecan prose works shows that silence may be identified specifically as a characteristic of the Stoic *sapiens*. Seneca frequently associates noisiness with the unrighteous: they are the madding crowd whose occupations and interests produce the noise and bustle with which the *sapiens* has to contend.<sup>13</sup> The *sapiens*, who shuns the crowd, is not a noise-maker. His voice, as recommended in the passage already cited at *Ira* 3.13.2, will be quiet, and, when lecturing on philosophy, he will do so in a quiet fashion, in contrast to the loud bombast of the popular lecturer (*Ep.* 38.1).<sup>14</sup>

So, when we compare Hercules' behavior on the pyre here with Seneca's images of the Stoic *sapiens* and his *constantia* in the prose works, the similarity between them is striking. Hercules' bravery on the pyre is a concrete demonstration, as it were, of the Stoic *constantia* with which, I argued, the chorus unwittingly invested him in their characterization of him at the beginning of the play. As such, the Hercules portrayed at this point in the

<sup>13</sup>Cf. *Vit. Beat.* 1.2 where Seneca warns Gallio not to follow the noisy unrighteous on the journey of life: *quam diu quidem passim vagamur non ducem secuti sed fremitum et clamorem dissonum in diversa vocantium, conteretur vita inter errores, brevis etiam si dies noctesque bonae menti laboremus.* Cf. also *Ep.* 94.59, where the necessity of having a moral guide through life is again emphasized. His quiet voice (*insusurret*) will contrast with the noise of the unvirtuous: *necessarium . . . admoneri est, habere aliquem advocatum bonae mentis et in tanto fremitu tumultuque falsorum unam denique audire vocem.* Specifically mentioned noisy activities of the unvirtuous are setting sail (*Ep.* 17.3), attending the baths (*Ep.* 56.1 f.), the games (*Ep.* 80.2), making money (*Ira* 3.33.2), and various other "arts" of luxury (*Ep.* 90.19).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Seneca's criticism of an undesirable philosophical style at *Ep.* 40.5: *multum praeterea habet inanitatis et vani, plus sonat quam valet.*

*Hercules Oetaeus* embodies the heroic figure recognized as a *sapiens* by the Stoic school in general. As Seneca himself tells us: *hos* [sc. *Herculem et Ulixem*] . . . *Stoici nostri sapientes pronuntiaverunt, invictos laboribus et contemptores voluptatis et victores omnium terrorum* (*Constant.* 2.1).

Moreover, inspection of the actual language in which these two descriptions of Hercules in the *Hercules Oetaeus* are couched shows that, while denoting phenomena which signify virtue in the Senecan prose works, they also connote virtue metaphorically, by means of a further set of images also illustrative of virtue in the Senecan prose works. The metaphorical language of the two descriptions is based mainly on the imagery of a soldier and a rock.

The chorus of Oechalian maidens, as we have seen, describes Hercules as an invulnerable soldier. Since they are there bewailing Hercules' sacking of their city, the image is primarily literal, although obviously hyperbolic. Clearly metaphorical, however, is the implied comparison between Hercules and rock:

*quae cautes Scythicae, quis genuit lapis?*  
*num Titana ferum te Rhodope tulit,*  
*te praeruptus Athos, te fera Caspias?*

143-145

In suggesting that Hercules' obduracy is inherited from parents of stone, the chorus makes use of a common poetic image.<sup>15</sup> It is clear from the dramatic context that the chorus intends the rock/mountain image to illustrate emotional hardness. At the same time, however, the image's positive moral connotation of *constantia*—which it has in the Senecan prose works—is also present, just as the positive connotation of the image of the invulnerable soldier seems to undermine the negative spirit in which the chorus uses it a few lines later. The dramatic medium does not allow the author to interject passages of authorial comment between characters' speeches in the way that epic does.<sup>16</sup> It is as though here in one speech both a positive (the author's) and a negative (the chorus's) judgment of Hercules attempt to find a voice. The hard rock which resists cutting (*Constant.* 3.5) or erosion by the sea

<sup>15</sup>Many of the images of Seneca's prose works are of long tradition and are found in a wide variety of genres, being almost proverbial in character. Some of these may have acquired doctrinal associations in Stoicism; see Tietze, *The Image of Morality*. . . (above, n. 1) 224 ff. Rhodope is also mentioned as a possible parent of hard-hearted Amor by Virgil *Ecl.* 8.43 ff.:

*nunc scio quid sit Amor: duris in cotibus illum*  
*aut Tmaros aut Rhodope aut extremi Garamantes*  
*nec generis nostri puerum nec sanguinis edunt.*

Cf. also *Aen.* 4.365 ff. where Dido accuses Aeneas of hard-heartedness.

<sup>16</sup>I have developed this thesis in *The Role of Description*. . . (above, n. 1) 56 ff., and in "Seneca's Epic Theatre," in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 5 (Brussels 1989, Collection Latomus 206) 279-304.

(*Vit. Beat.* 27.3) is used by Seneca as an image of the *constantia* of the *sapiens* in the face of adversity. Although the rock and mountains alluded to in 143–145 are clearly meant to suggest primarily an idea of hardness, the idea of height evoked by the mountain-image also reminds us that in the Senecan prose works the image of a lofty mountain serves to illustrate the moral elevation and superiority of the *sapiens*, his constancy, and the difficulty of attaining virtue. This connotation is probably also present when Philoctetes describes Hercules' *apatheia* with similar reference to rock at 1730–32 (quoted above, 44). The idea of elevation would be an appropriate secondary connotation here, in view of the emphasis, already discussed, on Hercules' upright posture and upturned eyes.

A second metaphorical image present in the language with which Philoctetes describes Hercules here is a military one. It inheres, in part, in the quasi-personification of the flames.<sup>17</sup> Hercules and the flames are described as though they were adversaries in battle. This idea is first introduced in the interchange which takes place before Philoctetes launches into a detailed account of his news, telling the chorus that the fire has been "conquered" by Hercules (*flamma victa est*, 1615).<sup>18</sup> When Philoctetes applied the burning brand to Hercules, he tells them, "the fire fled and the brand struggled and avoided the limbs, but Hercules pursued the retreating fire" (1728–30). Hercules did not cry out as he burned, but only the fire "groaned out" (*ingemiscit*, 1732). Philoctetes' description of the fire is such that the fire seems to be animate and personal, and engaged in a losing battle with Hercules. Hercules, on the other hand, by putting up a brave resistance to his assailants, the flames, succeeds in conquering them, just as he breaks the branches of the pyre which burns him (1647). What we have here is another sample of Seneca's favorite paradox, which I have pointed out in the chorus's description of Hercules, that *constantia* in the face of external aggression constitutes a spiritual, if not a physical, victory.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Hercules' appearance as he lies down on the pyre is that of a general celebrating a triumph:

*et dirum fremens,  
qualis per urbes duxit Argolicas canem,  
cum victor Erebi Dite contempto redit  
tremante fato, talis incubuit rogo.*

1679–82

<sup>17</sup>For the personification of flames, cf. Seneca *Thy.* 767 ff., and *Oed.* 309 ff. (*incertus*, 312; *pugnax*, 321).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Ovid *Met.* 9.250, where Hercules on the pyre cries out *omnia qui vicit, vincet, quos cernitis, ignes*. For similarities between Ovid's treatment of the Hercules myth and that of the *Hercules Oetaeus*, cf. F. Stoessl, *Der Tod des Herakles: Arbeitsweise und Formen der antiken Sagendichtung* (Zurich 1945) 97 ff.

<sup>19</sup>It is also, perhaps, a reference to the cult of Hercules Victor or Invictus; cf. F. Bömer in his commentary on Ovid *Met.* 9.250, *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen. Kommentar*, 5 vols. (Heidelberg 1969–80).



It is particularly fitting that we should be reminded here of Hercules' victory over the gods of the Underworld, a subject of the *Hercules Furens*, for here on the pyre Hercules will conquer death a second time and in another way.

The third description in the *Hercules Oetaeus* with which I am concerned is a description of the natural setting in which Hercules' death takes place. It is Philoctetes' description of the felling of the grove, which prefaces his description of Hercules on the pyre:

*ut omnis Oeten maesta corripuit manus,  
huic fagus umbras perdit et toto iacet  
succisa trunco, flectit hic pinum ferox  
astris minantem et nube de media vocat:  
ruitura caute movit et silvam tulit  
secum minorem. Chaonis quondam loquax  
stat vasta late quercus et Phoebum vetat  
ultraque totos porrigit ramos nemus;  
gemit illa multo vulnere impresso minax  
frangitque cuneos, resilit incussus chalybs  
volnusque ferrum patitur et rigidum est parum.  
commota tandem est. cum cadens latam sui  
duxit ruinam, protinus radios locus  
admisit omnes: sedibus pulsae suis  
volucres pererrant nemore succiso diem  
quaeruntque lassae garrulae pinnis nemus.  
iamque omnis arbor sonuit et sacrae quoque  
sensere quercus horridam ferro manum  
nullique priscum profuit luco nemus.*

1618-36

That the oak-tree, which occupies the center of attention in this description, is a symbol of Hercules, and, more particularly, that its resistance to the felling implements symbolizes Hercules' *constantia* when tortured by fire in the scene described immediately after it, has been suggested by Robin Nisbet.<sup>20</sup> The suggestion is a good one because, again, in the light of Senecan prose imagery, this description represents virtue both by denotation and by connotation. Exceptionally large trees are mentioned by Seneca at *Ep.* 41.3 f. as inspiring in us an awareness of divinity, and he proceeds to ask *si hominem videris interritum periculis, intactum cupiditatibus, inter adversa felicem, in mediis tempestatibus placidum, ex superiore loco homines videntem, ex aequo deos, non subibit te veneratio eius?* This same association between the tenacity of a sturdy tree and the *constantia* of the *sapiens* is made by Seneca at *Prov.* 4.16:

<sup>20</sup>I am indebted to Professor R. G. M. Nisbet for a seminar on the *Hercules Oetaeus*, where I first heard the suggestion that the oak-tree symbolizes Hercules here. Cf. now, also, his essay "The Oak and the Axe: Symbolism in Seneca *Hercules Oetaeus* 1618 ff." in *Homo viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, ed. M. Whitby, P. Hardie, M. Whitby (Bristol 1987) 243-251.

*quid miraris bonos viros, ut confirmentur, concuti? non est arbor solida nec fortis nisi in quam frequens ventus incursat; ipsa enim vexatione constringitur et radices certius figit: fragiles sunt quae in aprica valle creverunt. pro ipsis ergo bonis viris est, ut esse interriti possint, multum inter formidolosa versari et aequo animo ferre quae non sunt mala nisi male sustinenti.*

The oak-tree described by Philoctetes resists felling, only falling at last after many blows. It is a scene of physical aggression stoutly withstood, and, as such, its kinship with Senecan prose images of Stoic *constantia*, in the form of resistance to physical aggression, is immediately apparent.<sup>21</sup> In the *Hercules Oetaeus* itself, it recalls Hercules' resistance to military attack described by the chorus (143 ff.) and it prefigures Hercules' resistance to fire (1642 ff.). The emphatic position of *stat* at the beginning of line 1624 brings into prominence the stillness of the oak-tree, even under repeated blows, prefiguring Hercules' stillness on the pyre—a sign, as I have shown, of Stoic *constantia* according to the Senecan prose works. Just as Hercules is described both by the chorus and Philoctetes as bringing about greater damage to his assailants than he himself receives, so, here, the oak-tree breaks the implements which strike it (1626–28), once more illustrating the adage of the Senecan prose works that the *sapiens* “conquers his enemy's conquest.” In particular, we are reminded of the image with which Seneca illustrates Stoic *constantia* at *Constant*. 3.5 of stone and adamant which cannot be cut, but rather blunt the knife:

*quomodo quorundam lapidum inexpugnabilis ferro duritia est nec secari adamas aut caedi vel deteri potest sed incurrentia ultro retundit . . . ita sapientis animus solidus est et id roboris collegit ut tam tutus sit ab iniuria quam illa quae rettuli.*

The similarity between the oak-tree and Hercules as he is described at *Hercules Oetaeus* 143 ff. and 1642 ff. is enhanced when we appreciate the military image at work in the description of the oak's resistance to the felling implements. The military image arises out of the general personification of the trees of the grove and of the felling implements. Personification of the trees is suggested by the emotive adjectives with which they are described: the pine-tree is *ferox* (1620) and threatening (*minantem*, 1621), while the oak-tree is also *minax* (1626). The personification of the trees is furthered by the suggestion of their anatomy (cf. Nisbet [above, note 20] 243 f., 247).

<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to Professor F. Ahl for pointing out to me that Hercules is also represented by a tree at *Herc. Fur.* 1047. It is fitting (and typical of both the Senecan tragedies and prose works) that opposing aspects of the same image should be used to illustrate the poles of virtue and vice. Whereas Hercules, overcome by insanity, is compared to *caesa silvis ornus*, so, at the moment of his attainment of full virtue, he is compared to a tree which resists this felling. The comparison of man's *constantia*, mental or physical, to a stout tree's resistance to the blows of an axe or buffeting of the wind is not uncommon; cf., e.g., Homer *Il.* 12.132 ff., Virgil *Aen.* 4.441 ff., Lucan 1.136 ff. Cf. also Nisbet (above, n. 20) 243 ff.

With obvious Virgilian reminiscence, the oak-tree is said to groan (*gemit*, 1626) as it is inflicted with many a wound (*multo vulnere impresso*, 1626). The anatomical metaphor is heightened further if we accept E's reading of *manus* at 1625 instead of A's *nemus*. In *iunctura* with *porrigit* (1625) the word would suggest that the oak-tree is a person stretching out his hands. In the neighborhood of such a phrase, the anatomical sense of *truncus* (1620), besides its literal meaning here as tree-trunk, is suggested. Hence a battle between the oak-tree and the felling implements is implied. The oak-tree puts up such a resistance that these, too, are "wounded" (*volnusque ferrum patitur*, 1628). This military metaphor heightens the resemblance between the oak-tree and the *sapiens* who "conquers his enemy's conquest." In particular, however, we are reminded of the military image with which the chorus describes Hercules at *Hercules Oetaeus* 151 ff. If we regard the felling implements as the "weapons" of the wood-cutters in a battle between man and tree, then the similarity between the oak-tree, whose hard trunk dulls and breaks the implements, and Hercules, whose hard body dulls and breaks the weapons, is unmistakable.<sup>22</sup>

The resemblance of Hercules in the *Hercules Oetaeus* to the Stoic conception of a *sapiens* was pointed out long ago and has been seen by some scholars, who accept the play's authenticity, as serving an exemplary function in the Senecan dramatic corpus.<sup>23</sup> This discussion of the description of the *sapiens* in the *Hercules Oetaeus* will not, of course, help to resolve the question of the play's authorship, but is offered as a contribution to the long list of similarities in thought, expression, and style which have already been detected between the writing of the author of the *Hercules Oetaeus* and that of Seneca himself.

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<sup>22</sup>For the paradoxical notion of a weapon being "wounded," cf. Ovid *Pont.* 4.7.38: *parsque fere scuti vulnere nulla vacat.*

<sup>23</sup>For Hercules as the Stoic *sapiens* see E. Ackerman, "Der leidende Hercules des Seneca," *RhM* 67 (1912) 425-471 (see 451 for the death-scene in particular). As serving an exemplary function, see B. Marti, "Seneca's Tragedies. A New Interpretation," *TAPA* 76 (1945) 216-245.