

SENECA, THYESTES 593
A DEFENCE OF THE ELIZABETHAN
TRANSLATION

The text is not disputed. Leo and Zwierlein agree¹):

et uacat mersos numerare pisces.

The meaning is.

R. J. Tarrant in his standard modern commentary extols the verse²): “a charming detail, implying both the clarity of the unruffled water and the leisure of the boatman who does not have to watch the sea for storms . . . the storm no longer threatens to engulf the land, and only the sea’s natural inhabitants are covered by its water.” Indeed Tarrant when listing “the ode’s best things” concludes: “and – perhaps most memorable – counting the fish that swim in the clear water beneath one’s idling boat (593)³.” He approves the Loeb. Frank Justus Miller rendered⁴): “and you may now count the fish swimming far below”⁵). Moses Hadas followed Miller⁶): “it is now possible to count the fish deep down.” So did E. F. Watling, whose Penguin version is⁷): “So clear, the eye can count the fishes / Swimming

1) F. Leo, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae II* (Berlin 1879; repr. 1963) 257; O. Zwierlein, *L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae Incertorum Auctorum Hercules [Oetaeus] Octavia* (Oxford 1986) 316.

2) R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca’s Thyestes* edited with Introduction and Commentary (Atlanta 1985) 175 *ad* 593. See my review of the volume at *CJ* 83 (1987/88) 341–342.

3) Tarrant, *op. cit.*, 169.

4) F. J. Miller, *Seneca’s Tragedies II* (London/New York 1917) 141.

5) Compare his earlier verse version: „And one may count the very fish / Deep down within the peaceful caves“ at F. J. Miller, *The Tragedies of Seneca* (Chicago 1907) 312. Certainly when applied to sea-creatures the word need not require their death: see Plin., *Ep.* 9.33.5 (dolphin); Manilius 4.898; Cic. *ND* 2.100. The point is that here the use is daring just because applied to fish.

6) M. Hadas, *Seneca, Thyestes* (Indianapolis/New York 1957) 19. Oddly Tarrant, *op. cit.*, 255, does not know the translation.

7) E. F. Watling, *Seneca, Thyestes, Phaedra, The Trojan Women, Oedipus with Octavia*, translated with an introduction (Harmondsworth 1966 and later reprints) 70–71.

beneath the waters.“ Even Theodor Thomann did⁸⁾: „...und ungefährdet kannst du die tauchenden Fische zählen.“

Miller's version of *mersos*, preserved by Hadas, Watling, Thomann and Tarrant has become orthodoxy. *Mergo* may mean *dive or plunge* as birds into water, a constellation below the horizon, or a knife into flesh. It must not mean *swim* as fish do in water. That is *nato*. I should render Thy. 593: „and there is time to count the drowned fishes.“ For *mergo*, *drown* see OLD s. v., 2b. A revealing parallel is Sen. Phoen. 24–25: *mater insiluit freto / mersura natum seque*, where Marica Frank observes⁹⁾: „*Mergo* not infrequently has the sense of ‚drown‘ and *mersura natum* is thus not remarkable.“ See TLL 8.832.3 ff. Seven verses earlier at Thy. 586 Laertes fears his kingdom will be submerged (*mergi*) and so destroyed. At HF 422 and Pha. 220 *mersus* modifies a man who has *plunged* to Hades and is thought permanently dead. Senecan usage does not presume survival.

The Elizabethan Jesuit, Jasper Heywood (1535–1598), who spoke and thought Latin as well as translated it, got the word right in 1560¹⁰⁾: „And leisure is to view the fishes *dead*.“ Seneca describes the dead fishes that often after a storm float on the water's surface, „where but a little while ago beneath a mighty storm the shaken Cyclades trembled at the sea“ (594–95). His dead fish recall the war dead in the conflict just ended. Rather than Tarrant's „charming detail,“ we have something more Senecan, a macabre one.

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8) Th. Thomann, *Seneca Sämtliche Tragödien Lateinisch und Deutsch II* (Zürich/Stuttgart 1969) 147.

9) M. Frank, *Seneca's Phoenissae: Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden 1995) 85 *ad loc.*

10) J. Daalder, ed., *Thyestes Lucius Annaeus Seneca*. Translated by Jasper Heywood (1560) (London 1982) 56. See further J. J. O'Keefe, *An Analysis of Jasper Heywood's Translations of Seneca's Troas, Thyestes, and Hercules Furens* (Diss. Chicago 1974).