Oratio Recta in Senecan Tragedy

Oratio recta, or quoted direct speech, is often used in ancient drama. Bers examines this technique in some detail, showing that the Attic playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and even Aristophanes employ it in a variety of contexts and for a variety of reasons. Euripides, for example, uses oratio recta to report colloquialisms (71), foreign languages (72), and the words of indefinite speakers (96-99), among other things. And direct speech can occur in Messenger Speeches (72-94), in dialogue (99-102), and even in lyric passages (102-115). Seneca tragicus also uses oratio recta often enough to be significant, including it at least once, and sometimes more, in every one of the complete genuine plays except for the Thyestes. There are four examples each in the Troades and in the Oedipus, two each in the Hercules Furens and in the Agamemnon, and one each in the Medea and in the Phaedra. But in a divergence from the practice of his Greek predecessors, the Roman playwright employs direct speech exclusively in Messenger Speeches, passages in which characters give an account of events which happened off-stage. This article investigates Seneca's use of

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3 There is also no oratio recta in the unfinished Phoenissae. This study focuses on the genuine tragedies; but the pseudo-Senecan Hercules Oetaeus and the Octavia will be touched upon briefly at the end.
oratio recta in Messenger Speeches, examining each example in some detail. It will show that, although Senecan usage is a bit more limited than the Athenian, our playwright still uses direct speech to great dramatic effect.

We must first, however, determine what 'Messenger Speech' means in the context of Senecan drama. Strictly speaking, the Roman playwright's practice is somewhat different from the standard report by an anonymous character of some action which cannot be represented on stage, as found in Attic tragedy. Certainly, such speeches do occur in the plays of Seneca. For example, at *Oedipus* 915-979 a Messenger tells about Oedipus' self-blinding; at *Troades* 1068-1164 a Messenger tells about the deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax; at *Phaedra* 1000-1114 a Messenger tells about the death of Hippolytus; and at *Thyestes* 623-788 a Messenger tells about the slaughter of the sons of Thyestes. All of these examples feature unnamed men, sometimes identified as servants, sometimes not, whose only purpose is to describe horrific events, usually deaths, which have just taken place off-stage.

But the Messenger is not always anonymous. At *Agamemnon* 421-585, the character who tells about the storms which buffeted the Mycenaean fleet is named Eurybates. This seems to be an innovation, since the Messenger who serves the same function in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* has no name. Seneca did not just pull this name out of thin air, however. In Homer, the name Eurybates is applied to a herald and companion of Odysseus (*II. 1.320, 2.184, 9.170* and *Od. 19.247*). There may also be some wordplay involved, since the Chorus at his entrance says he possesses a 'broad step' (*vasto gradu*, 388), clearly a learned reference to the man's name in Greek. But whatever the source and motivation, this Messenger is distinct for having a name. Similarly, the Messenger at *Troades* 164-

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4 Throughout this article, I refer to Otto Zwierlein's 1986 OCT of Seneca's tragedies. All translations and paraphrases from the Latin and Greek are my own.

5 At his entrance, the Chorus states *Eurybates adest*, 'Eurybates is here', 391.

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202, who tells that the Ghost of Achilles has demanded Polyxena be sacrificed at his tomb, is named by the manuscripts as Talthybius. This name is likewise present in Homer, belonging to Agamemnon's herald (II. 1.320, 3.118, 4.192, 193, 7.276, 19.196, 250, 267, 23.897); but more importantly, the name is given to the herald in Euripides' *Troades.* But the character in the Attic play is much more important, returning to the stage several times and serving as a sympathetic foil to Hecuba. In both of these Roman plays, however, neither of the characters appear again, nor do they fulfill any other dramatic function. Their sole purpose is to tell about an event that cannot be performed on stage. Both also share another distinction from the traditional anonymous Messenger. Eurybates and Talthybius relate events which happened prior to their respective dramas: the misfortunes of the fleet of Achilles and the appearance of the Ghost of Achilles. These are not, however, extraneous stories. Eurybates gives an explanation for Agamemnon's delay, and provides a metaphor for Clytemnestra's mental state; and Talthybius' words set up the sacrifice of Polyxena.

In other instances, more significant characters take on the role of Messenger. The Nurse plays a key part in the *Medea,* appearing in every act and functioning as confidante to our title character. At lines 670-738, she tells about the feats of magic her mistress has just performed off-stage. While the Nurse is not actually 'named,' she is a much more significant character than either Talthybius or the anonymous servant in the *Oedipus.* Creon, who functions as foil to the king in the *Oedipus,* and as his representative at sacred rites, reports on Tiresias' necromancy at 530-658. Further, both of these

6 On the lack of internal identifications and possible alternatives, see Atze J. Keulen (2001), *L. Annaeus Seneca: Troades,* Leiden, 165.
7 The man says, upon his entrance, Ταλθύβιος ήκω καὶνόν ἀγγέλων λόγον, 'I, Talthybius, have come, bearing news,' Euripides, *Troades* 238.
8 The names mainly serve as window dressing, although they also would evoke Homer and epic in general.
9 See Thomas D. Kohn (2004-05), 'Seneca's Use of Four Speaking Actors,' *CJ* 100.2, 169.
examples are accounts of magical activities which occur within the tragedy.

At other times, important characters report on events that happen prior to the play. At *Troades* 438-60, Andromache tells about a dream she had the previous night which featured the Ghost of Hector. Theseus, at *Hercules Furens* 662-827, tells about the exploits of Hercules in the Underworld. And Creon, at *Oedipus* 223-38, tells about his trip to Delphi to consult the oracle. Andromache's account has direct impact on the play because Hector's ghost tells her to hide Astyanax from Ulysses, thus leading to the events of Act 3. Theseus' report gives the audience insight into the headstrong nature of Hercules, and takes up time while the hero is off-stage killing the evil tyrant, Lycus. And Creon's words set Oedipus on the path to discovering Laius' killer.\(^1\) All three of these examples show significant, named characters reporting on things that occurred before the tragedy, but still affect the action.

Finally, there is Andromache at *Troades* 718-35, a significant, named character, who tells about the sack of Troy by Hercules, an event which occurred many years before the start of the play, and which, although an analogue to Andromache's current situation, otherwise at first glance has very little direct bearing on the present circumstances of the tragedy. This speech could be paired with the choral ode at *Hercules Furens* 569-89,\(^1\) where the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is related. Again, the tale is interesting, but its direct relevance is not immediately clear. We can see, then, that Senecan dramaturgy has an expanded definition of the 'Messenger Speech.' It is not simply a speech by a nameless character who reports on

\(^{10}\) The results of Creon's account in Seneca's play coincide with those in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

\(^{11}\) If we consider the Chorus a 'significant, named character'. See also *Troades* 1042-55, where the Chorus foretells what will happen to it as its members are scattered throughout Greece. At 1053-4, the future exiles are quoted: *Ilium est ilic, ubi fumus alte serpit in caelum nebulaeque turpes*, 'There is Troy, where smoke and disgraceful clouds creep into the sky.'

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something that happened off-stage, but within the scope of the play. It can now be presented by anyone, even the Chorus, and the described event can have occurred prior to the tragedy, and even be only tangentially relevant to the matter at hand.

One common feature of the Senecan Messenger Speech is the inclusion of oratio recta. In general, Seneca uses direct speech to describe four categories of events:

dead and/or mutilation: the self-blinding of Oedipus (Oedipus 926-34, 936-57, 975-7), the death of Polyxena (Troades 1134-6), and the death of Hippolytus (Phaedra 1066-7).

ghosts: Achilles (Troades 191-6), Hector (Troades 452-6), and Laius (Oedipus 626-58).

off-stage magical rites: the spell of Medea (Medea 690-704), and the necromancy of Tiresias (Oedipus 571-3).12

Exotic locations: the storm at sea (Agamemnon 517-26 and 545-52), Hercules in the Underworld (Hercules Furens 771-2), Delphi (Oedipus 233-8), Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld (Hercules Furens 583-8), and the sack of Troy by Hercules (Troades 726-8).13

It would appear that Seneca’s first category follows the tradition of the Greek tragedians, who often use oratio recta when Messengers tell about off-stage deaths. A cursory look at the extant Attic versions of Seneca’s plays shows that Euripides used direct speech often to enliven the accounts of death: of Hippolytus in the Hippolytus, of Polyxena in the Hecuba,14 of Creusa in the Medea, and of the children of Herakles in Herakles. But some differences do emerge.

12 Note that the extispicium in the Oedipus is not performed off-stage, and so does not need to be described using oratio recta.

13 This last example may be a stretch. It occurred not far away physically, but temporally.

14 The death of Polyxena is not related in Euripides’ Troades, but in the Hecuba.
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While Seneca does seem to follow Euripides in quoting Hippolytus and Polyxena, there is no direct speech when the Roman Messenger relates the death of Jason's bride; and instead of a Messenger speech, both Hercules and Megara speak from off-stage during the slaughter. Instead, the oratio recta in the Medea and in the Hercules Furens is used to describe magic and the Underworld. Sophocles did not use any direct speech in the Oedipus Tyrannus, although he certainly had the opportunity. The Chorus of Aeschylus' Agamemnon quotes Agamemnon, Calchas, and some unidentified observers while recounting the events surrounding the departure of the Achaean fleet, which could fit under category 4; but Seneca has diverged by inserting oratio recta into the account of Agamemnon's herald. Bers (1997) 225, generalizes that Attic drama follows the traditions of lyric and epic in 'assign[ing] OR an important role in the presentation of language that is solemn, portentous, or in some other sense carries great weight in accomplishing the poems' business. Seneca, on the other hand, uses direct speech for more exotic purposes; and while he can adopt it for significant quotations (i.e. the deliberations of Oedipus), he can likewise employ it for the incidental words of Ajax or the Achaean sailors. It is, of course, difficult to tell how much of Seneca's practice was an innovation, and how much he followed his Roman predecessors. In the fragments of early Latin tragedy, I have been able to spot only three instances of oratio recta. In the Alexander of Ennius, a Messenger states

hominem appellat: 'quid lascivis stolide?' non intelligit

He calls the man: 'What are you playing at, Idiot?' He does not understand.16

This usage would seem to match with that of Seneca: an unnamed Messenger reports an event that happened off-stage, and uses direct

15 Bers (1997), 45-7 expresses shock at this lack, but believes it is part of Sophocles' deliberate strategy of creating ambiguity.
speech to liven his account. But Naevius, in *Romulus sive Lupus*,
does something slightly different. Again, a presumably anonymous
Messenger says

Rex Veiens regem salutat Viba Albanum Amulium
comiter senem sapientem: 'Contra redhostis?'

The Veian King, Viba, courteously greets Amulius, the
Alban King, aged and wise: 'Do you, in turn, return the
favor?'

Here, instead of reporting what has happened, the Messenger
conveys the verbatim words from one king to another. Finally,
Pacuvius uses *oratio recta* in the *Teucer*. A character, possibly
Telamon, states

profusus gemitu murmuro 'occisti' antruans.

Downcast, responding, I murmur 'You have killed me,' with
a groan.

In this example, the speaker reports his own speech. So, all that can
be definitely stated is that Seneca's Latin predecessors did, in fact,
employ *oratio recta*. But they did not, as Seneca seems to, limit that
use to Messenger Speeches.

The question is, then, what is Seneca's purpose for employing
direct speech. One explanation is that *oratio recta* makes the
accounts of Messengers more vivid and exciting. Horace, when
discussing these types of speeches in the *Ars Poetica*, states that
*segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem quam quae sunt oculis
subiecta fidelibus et quae ipse sibi tradit spectator* ('things received
through the ear move the mind more sluggishly than those
submitted to the trustworthy eyes, and which the observer himself
presents to himself,' *AP* 180-2). Seneca, however, has a number

18 This is the suggestion of Warmington (1982), 298-9.
of techniques to enliven these accounts. He often includes a great deal of descriptive detail, along with the emotional response of the Messenger. Another technique involves interrupting the Messenger with questions, instead of just letting the poor man get on with his account. And, at least once in almost every play, the Messenger employs direct speech. One purpose for oratio recta, then, is to add spice to what could otherwise be excessively dry. But there is often more to it than that.

Sometimes, the oratio recta works to reinforce or emphasize an important thought or theme. For example, at Hercules Furens, 662-827, Theseus recounts the adventures of Hercules in the Underworld. While describing Charon the boatman, Theseus provides direct quotation:

\[20\] This passage is not the only instance in ancient literature where Charon’s direct speech is reported. In Book 6 of the Aeneid, the boatman’s exact words are heard, as he tells Aeneas that the Underworld is no place for the living:

\[\text{‘quisquis es, armatus qui nostra ad flumina tendis,}
\text{fare age, quid uenias, iam istinc et comprime gressum.}
\text{umbrarum hic locus est, somni noctisque soporae:}
\text{corpora uiua nefas Stygia uectare carina.}
\text{nec uero Alciden me sum laetatus euentem}
\text{accepisse lacu, nec Thesea Pirithoumque,}
\text{dis quamquam geniti atque inuicti uiribus essent.}
\text{Tartareum ille manu custodem in uincla petiuit}
\text{ipsius a solio regis traxitque trementem;}
\text{hi dominam Ditis thalamo deducere adorti.’ (Vergil, Aeneid 6.388-97)}\]

And while Alcestis lies on her death-bed, Euripides has her report Charon’s speech:

\[\text{وي} \text{διώκων όρω σχάφος ἐν}
\text{λίμνα: νεξύων δὲ πορθμεῖς}
\text{ἐχων χέρ’ ἐπὶ κοντῷ Χάρων}
\text{μ’ ἴθη κάλει: Τί μέλλεις;}
\text{ἐπείγου: σὺ κατείργεις. Τάδε τοί}
\text{με στερχόμενος ταχύνει. (Euripides, Alcestis 252-7)}\]

I see, I see the double-oared ship
on the lake; and Charon, the ferryman of the dead
holding his hand on the pole,
Horrific Charon exclaims:

‘Where are you going, Bold One? Stop your hastening pace!’

(Hercules Furens 771-2)

In general, Theseus’ story does not do much to advance the plot of the Hercules Furens. It does, however, reinforce the play’s depiction of Hercules as a rash hero who does not think before acting. The words of Charon certainly function as yet another detail to enliven the account, along with the description of the old man’s beard and eyes at lines 766-7. But clearly they also add to the image of the hero as a brash intruder. Even in the Underworld, Hercules rushed past everything and everyone while pursuing his goal, not even stopping for the immortal ferryman. Thus, it will come as no surprise to the audience later when Hercules first rushes off to kill the tyrant Lycus immediately upon returning to the surface world, and then murders his own family without thinking.

Earlier in the Hercules Furens 569-89, the Chorus sings the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.21 Pluto is quoted directly:22

even now calls to me: ‘Why do you delay?
Hurry! You hinder me.’ Hastening,
he urges me on with these words.

Although Margarethe Billerbeck (1999), Seneca: Hercules Furens, Leiden, ad 771 and 772, believes that Seneca was influenced by the Vergilian passage, the two do not seem to have much in common. Vergil’s boat-man apparently does not know who Aeneas is, but gives him the compliment of comparing him to Hercules and Theseus while telling him to go back where he came from. Seneca’s Charon merely tells the rushing hero to slow down, but not to stop or return to the land of the living; and he takes only 1 ½ lines to do it, in contrast to Vergil’s 10. On the other hand, Seneca’s character seems to be a direct reaction to Euripides’. The Greek ferryman encourages Alcestis to make haste and cease delaying, making the Latin counterpart appear the exact opposite. In this particular instance, the Greek tragedian shows more of an influence on Seneca than the Roman writer of epic.

21 The Chorus uses minor Asclepiadians.
22 For precedents of direct speech in choral passages, see Billerbeck (1999), ad 582-87.
tandem mortis ait 'vincimur,' arbiter,
'evade ad superos, lege tamen data:
tu post terga tui perge viri comes,
tu non ante tuam respice coniugem,
quam cum clara deos obtulerit dies
Spartanique aderit ianua Taenari.'

At last, the Judge of the Dead stated, 'We are subdued!
Go to the Upper World. But take these conditions:
You, (Eurydice) proceed as the companion of your husband,
behind his back.
And you, (Orpheus), do not look at your wife before
bright day exposes the gods
and the door of Spartan Taenarus is present.' (Hercules Furens 582-7)

Fitch notes that the story is greatly influenced by Vergil (Georgics 4.467-503) and Ovid (Metamorphoses 10.11-63); but the direct quotation is a Senecan innovation. The Chorus' intention is to describe another time when a mortal returned safely from the Underworld. The difference is that Orpheus conquered Pluto with music, while Hercules will do it with brute strength. But there are more similarities. Orpheus proves himself to be just as rash and unthinking as Hercules, when he is unable to wait until reaching the surface before looking at Eurydice. In both this section and the previously discussed passage where Theseus quotes the words which Charon spoke to Hercules, an Underworld character addresses a demi-god, and challenges him. The Chorus goes on with the story, and reminds the audience that Orpheus was ultimately unsuccessful in regaining his wife, and that he eventually went mad. The parallel direct quotations would provide foreshadowing, suggesting that Hercules will suffer the same fates. Again, the effect of the oratio recta is to emphasize an important theme of the play.

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At Agamemnon 421-585, when Eurybates describes the storms encountered by the Achaean fleet, he gives the exact words of Ajax:24

[Ajax] intonat:
'superasse nunc pelagus atque ignes iuvat,
vicisse caelum Palladem fulmen mare!
non me fugavit bellici terror dei.
et Hectorem una solus et Martem tuli,
Phoebae nec me tela pepulerunt gradu,
cum Phrygibus istos vicimus, tene horream
aliena inerti tela iaculantem manu?
quid si ipse mittat!'

Ajax thunders,
'Now I am glad to have overcome the sea and fire,
to have conquered the heavens, Minerva, lightning and the sea!
Fright of the warlike god has not put me to flight.
I, unaided, endured both Hector and Mars together,
nor did the arrows of Phoebus push me from my position,
when we conquered them along with the Phrygians. Shall I fear
you
throwing another's weapons with your clumsy hand?
Indeed, let he, himself, hurl them!' (Agamemnon 545-52)

The unnamed Messenger in Aeschylus' Agamemnon mentions only Agamemnon and Menelaus, and the latter reluctantly in response to questioning from the Chorus, in his description of the events following the destruction of Troy. Seneca must have some reason for inserting the words of Ajax into the speech of his Eurybates. The Roman Messenger's main dramatic purpose is to explain Agamemnon's delay; but he also metaphorically illustrates Clytemnestra's mental uncertainty, which plays out literally in her scenes with the Nurse (107-225), and then with Aegisthus (226-309). Seneca is not concerned with the foreshadowing of impending doom or the warnings not to overstep one's bounds that are found

24 On the textual difficulties of these lines, see R. J. Tarrant (1976), Seneca: Agamemnon, Cambridge, ad 545ff. For the purposes of this article, I simply reproduce Zwierlein's text.
in the Attic play. The story of Ajax, then, must do more than provide a largely extraneous warning to not defy the gods. Rather, the depiction of the hero contributes to the overall picture of the storm. Not only are the elements raging, but the men themselves are acting like the storm. We are told, in fact, that Ajax ‘makes a noise like thunder’ (intonat). His words combine with the wind and the rain to portray a situation truly out of control, much like Clytemnestra herself. The oratio recta, then, serves as another mirror for the queen’s own state of mind and emphasizes her uncertainty.

Earlier in the same speech, Eurybates gives the exact words of the Greek sailors, with similar results:

‘nil nobile ausos pontus atque undae ferent?
ignava fortes fata consument viros?
perdenda mors est? quisquis es, nondum malis
satiate tantis, caelitum, tandem tuum
numen serena, cladibus nostris daret
uel Troia lacrimas. odia si durant tua
placetque mitti Doricum exitio genus,
quid hos simul perire nobiscum iuvat,
quibus perimus? sistite infestum mare.
vehit ista Danaos classis? et Troas vehit!’
nec plura possunt.

‘Will the sea and the waves carry us away, having dared nothing noble?
Will the cowardly Fates consume brave men?
Must our deaths be squandered? Whoever of the gods you are, not yet satisfied by such evils, at last calm your divinity, or else Troy would add tears to our defeat. If your hatred endures and it is pleasing that ruin is sent to the Doric race, how is it beneficial that they, for whom we are dying, die with us? Calm the dangerous sea! Does this fleet carry Danaans? It also carries Trojans!’ They are not able to say more. (Agamemnon 517-26)
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The oratio recta here lets Clytemnestra and the audience know the storms were so terrible that even the masses were driven to argue with the gods. We can see the sailors before us and sympathize with their despair. But more than that, we can see that the situation is completely out of control. The poor men are battered and borne this way and that, just as Clytemnestra's thoughts are. When the queen first appears on stage, she asks her spirit why it wavers, as if being driven by waves (quid fluctaris? line 109). Later, she inquires of Aegisthus, quid me rursus in praeceps agis? ('why do you drive me back, headlong?' line 260). She, like the sailors, is helplessly driven by forces beyond her control. By employing the oratio recta of the anonymous crowd, Seneca, through Eurybates, is able to vividly illustrate Clytemnestra's misfortunes, making the metaphor more effective and reinforcing the idea that she is figuratively at sea.

In other passages, the oratio recta helps to establish the credibility of the Messenger. Bers (1977) 1-3, discusses the ambiguity of oratio recta. Direct speech gives the impression that we are hearing The Truth, and so anything that is quoted has an authenticity that ordinary narration does not. And yet, we tend to overlook the fact that the tragedy itself is a fiction. But for that reason, both the audience and the characters inside the drama are more willing to believe anything accompanied by an inquit or dixit. At Troades 1068-1164, an anonymous Messenger tells the captive Trojan women about the deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax which have just taken place. Towards the end, the words of Trojan spectators are related.

'tali nubat Hermione modo'
Phryges precantur, 'sic viro turpis suo
reddatur Helena.'

'Let Hermione be married in such a way,'
the Trojans pray. 'Thus, may disgraceful Helen be returned
to her own husband.' (Troades 1134-6)
Thomas Kohn

Just as with the example of the sailors in the Agamemnon, it is interesting to know the reaction of the crowd to Polyxena's death. But it is hard to know exactly why the Messenger includes this detail, as well as what reaction he expects of the captive women. He may intend it as consolation, letting them know that others sympathize with their situation. When he first arrives on stage, his words indicate that he regards the events he is about to relate as horrific: o dura fata, saeva miseranda horrida! quod tam ferum, tam triste bis quinis scelus Mars vidit annis? ('O harsh Fates, savage, pitiable, horrible! What villainy so wild, so sad has Mars seen in these twice five years?' lines 1056-8). But as the account goes on, he clearly pities both Astyanax and Polyxena, and admires their deeds: sed uterque letum mente generosa tuli ('But each bore death with a noble mind,' line 1064). It is not just the Messenger, however, who feels for the children. Astyanax is said to have moved the crowd (moverat vulgum, line 1098). And we are told that most of the crowd watching the sacrifice of Polyxena hated the deed (magna pars vulgi levis odit scelus spectatque, lines 1128-9). But up until now, we and the captive women had to take the Messenger's word for it. Did the crowd really empathize with the slain children, or was the Messenger distorting the event? By providing the actual words of the observers, the man adds credibility to his account. The women can believe, and take some little solace that the deaths were at least highly regarded by the on-lookers.

Earlier in the Troades (718-35), Andromache tells about the sack of Troy by Hercules. The widow of Hector provides the exact words of the conquering hero:

'suscipe,' dixit, 'rector habenas patrioque sede celsus solio.
    sed sceptra fide meliore tene.'

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25 In this example, the Messenger delivers her message in anapaests, and not iambic trimeter.

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'Take up,' [Hercules] said, 'the reins of power and sit confident on your father's throne. But hold your sceptre with greater sense of honor.' (Troades 726-8)

Keulen comments that the oratio recta does little more than provide extra detail to make the story more interesting. But surely the passage is more significant. The point of Andromache's story is to convince Ulysses to show lenience to Astyanax. Previously, when Hercules sacked the city of Troy, he too was on the verge of slaughtering a young prince. The Theban hero, however, was swayed by Priam's tears. Andromache tries several strategies to evoke pity from Ulysses. One involves praising Hercules' achievements (ille, ille ferox, cuius vastis viribus omnes cessere ferae, qui perfracto limine Ditis caecum retro patefecit iter, 'That one, that fierce one, by whose enormous strength all wild beasts have perished, and who opened up a path back to the sky once the threshold of Dis had been broken,' lines 721-4), with the implicit comparison that if so great a man as Hercules could show mercy, then certainly the equally great Ulysses can do the same. But it is not enough to simply invoke Hercules. If possible, Andromache would bring Troy's previous conqueror before the Ithacan. Quoting him directly accomplishes that. And at the same time, Ulysses could doubt whether Hercules really showed mercy to Priam. By invoking his words, by supplying an eye-witness as it were, Andromache can gain credibility. Thus, the oratio recta of Hercules serves to support the Trojan mother's pleas for compassion. The fact that the ploy is unsuccessful merely reinforces the idea, recurring throughout the play, that Ulysses is no Hercules.

Direct quotation can also be used to shield the Messenger. At Phaedra 1000-1114, the unnamed Messenger tells Theseus about the death of his son. We hear the exact words of the youth as he confronts the bull sent by Neptune:

26 Keulen (2001), ad 728.
et [Hippolytus] magnum intonat:
'haud frangit animum vanus hic terror meum
nam mihi paternus vincere est tauros labor!'

and Hippolytus thunders greatly,
'This empty terror does not break my spirit,
for I have inherited from my father the labor of breaking bulls!'
(Phaedra 1065-7)

The Messenger's intent is uncertain. Should Theseus be flattered that his son was emulating him with his final words? At this point in the play, Phaedra has not confessed Hippolytus' innocence. Theseus still thinks the youth is guilty and deserving of punishment, although he also laments his death. The Messenger could not be sure of the king's feelings; and so what could, in other circumstances, be seen as flattery, could just as easily cause outrage. There is, however, an avenue for escape. If Theseus is flattered, then the account can stand as it is. But if he takes offense, the Messenger can take refuge in the fact that he himself was not comparing the two men: it was Hippolytus. Thus, the direct quotation is a device used to deflect blame.

Many of the examples of oratio recta provide extra details to make the Messenger's account more interesting; and as we have seen, some provide reinforcement of a central idea, while others give credibility to the Messenger, and still others shield the Messenger from punishment. But sometimes oratio recta has a combination of functions. At Oedipus 530-658, Creon tells Oedipus about the necromancy which Tiresias has just performed. Towards the end of the account, Creon introduces the ghost of Laius:

Laius - fari horreo!
stetit per artus sanguine effuso horridus
paedore foedo squalidam obtentus comam
et ore rabido fatur:

Laius... I shudder to say it...
stood, horrible with blood spreading over his body,
displaying hair, neglected and covered in foul filth, and spoke with raving words: \((Oedipus 623-6)\)

In his introduction, there is already a great deal of detail concerning Laius. His own words will add more; but the sheer length of the direct quotation and its content suggest that this is more than just an interesting extra tidbit. I will only summarize and not reproduce and translate the passage here, because it is 32.5 lines long, spanning lines 626-658 – longer than any other example of direct speech in Senecan tragedy. And the words of the ghost are equally monumental. Laius begins with general exclamations against the royal house of Thebes:

\[
\text{O Cadmi effera . . . domus!}
\]

‘O savage house of Cadmus!’ \((Oedipus 626-7)\)

But he quickly turns to specific accusations that the present king has killed his own father, seized his throne, and produced horrific offspring with his own mother. The ghost concludes with a command that Thebes drive the monster out and a promise that he himself will pursue the wretched man wherever he goes. Clearly, this news is terrible and surprising for Oedipus; but its mode of delivery is both significant and consistent.

Throughout the play, Creon has habitually been reluctant to recount his findings to Oedipus. He dragged his feet while reporting the news of the Delphic oracle (lines 212-20).\(^{27}\) And, in fact, when he did reveal the message from the god, he did not paraphrase, as Sophocles’ Kreon did.\(^{28}\) Instead, Seneca’s Creon recites the verses of dactylic hexameter verbatim:

\[
\text{mitia Cadmeis remeabunt sidera Thebis,}
\]

\(^{27}\) Karlheinz Töchterle (1994), \textit{Lucius Annaeus Seneca: Oedipus}, Heidelberg, \textit{ad} 626b-658, notes the parallel structure that includes \textit{oratio recta} in the report of both the Delphic oracle and the necromancy.

\(^{28}\) Sophocles, \textit{Oedipus Tyrannus} 95-8.
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si profugus Dircen Ismenida liquerit hospes,
regis caede nocens, Phoebo iam notus et infans.
nec tibi longa manent sceleratae gaudia caedis.
tecum bella geres, natis quoque bella relinques,
turpis maternos iterum revolutus in ortus'.

‘Favorable stars will return to Cadmean Thebes,
if the fugitive guest leaves Ismenian Dirce,
guilty of the murder of the king, known even as an infant to
Phoebus.
The enjoyments of villainous slaughter will not remain long to
you.
You will wage war with yourself; you will leave war to your sons
also,
Disgraceful one, having returned once more into your maternal
beginnings.’ (Oedipus 233-8)

The result of directly quoting the oracle is two-fold. It allows Creon
to dodge responsibility for his report. ‘I didn’t say it. The god did.’
And at the same time, it gives the report more credibility, since
Oedipus is virtually getting the news right from the oracle’s mouth.
The direct quotation of Laius in the report of the necromancy has
the same effect. Creon can claim ‘I didn’t call you a patricide, and
worse. It was the ghost of Laius.’ And the accusation has merit
because the actual words of the dead king have been heard. In
fact, Oedipus does not immediately reject the notion of his guilt.
Rather, he is confused, since he knows that he never raised a hand,
or anything else, against those whom he incorrectly assumes to
be his parents. It is only after he dispels the charges with logic,
admittedly spurious, that he moves on to counter-charges against
Creon and Tiresias. But only because Creon directly quoted Laius
in the first place does Oedipus give the accusation even a moment’s
consideration.

Further, Creon has laid the groundwork for this oratio recta with
his previous quotation of Tiresias. At the beginning of the account
of the necromancy, we hear the exact words of the blind seer:

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‘audior,’ vates ait.
‘rata verba fudi. rumpitur caecum chaos
iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur.’

‘I am heard,’ said the prophet.
‘I have poured forth the established words. Dark Chaos has been broken
and a path to the heavens is given to the denizens of the Underworld.’ (Oedipus 571-3)

As we have seen, Creon reports some awfully peculiar things in his speech, not the least of which are the words of Laius. But by giving the quotation from Tiresias, he establishes his credentials as an eye witness, and makes the subsequent revelations more acceptable.

Similarly, Talthybius’ direct quotation of the ghost of Achilles in the Troades also serves both to remove culpability from the Messenger and to provide credibility for the message. Agamemnon’s herald announces to the captive Trojan women that the dead hero demands Polyxena as his wife (Troades 164-202). But in addition to describing the arisen spectre, Talthybius provides his exact words:29

implevit omne litus irati sonus:
‘ite, ite, inertes. debitos manibus meis
auferte honores. soluite ingratas rates
per nostra ituri maria. non parvo luit
iras Achillis Graecia, et magno luet!
desponsa nostris cineribus Polyxene
Pyrrhi manu mactetur et tumulum riget.’

The words of the angry [Achilles] filled the whole shore:
‘Go, go, oh lazy men! Carry away the honors owed to my hands. Loose the thankless ships about to sail across our sea. Greece has not repaid a little bit the rages of Achilles, and it will repay more! Polyxena, promised to our ashes, let her be slain by the hand of Pyrrhus, and let her drench my tomb.’ (Troades 190-6)

29 It is interesting to note that Ovid at Metamorphoses 13.445-8 similarly gives the direct words of the Ghost of Achilles.

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This oratio recta certainly makes the account more vivid. But when we recall that Talthybius is addressing the Trojan women who have already suffered so much, we can see more behind the Messenger’s motives. He may be afraid that they will turn on him. Or, more likely, he may feel the same kind of pity that Euripides’ herald felt. The direct quotation of Achilles allows him to claim credibility for his actions. ‘Look,’ he could say, ‘we have to kill her. The Ghost said so.’ And at the same time, he distances himself, implying ‘I don’t want to do it. It wasn’t my idea. It was the Ghost.’

Andromache’s direct quotation of the Ghost of Hector has the same effect. While explaining why she is hiding her son, she recounts her nocturnal visitation (Troades 438-60). Not content with describing his appearance and mood, she provides his exact words:

‘dispelle somnos,’ inquit, ‘et natum eripe,
o fida coniunx. lateat! haec una est salus.
omittte fletus. Troia quod cecidit gemis?
utinam iaceret tota! festina! amove
quocumque nostrae parvulam stirpem domus!’

‘Put away sleep,’ he said, ‘and rescue our son,
oh faithful wife. Let him hide! This is the only salvation.
Leave off crying. Do you weep because Troy has fallen?
If only it had fallen completely! Hurry up! Take away
to wherever you can the too small offshoot of our house?’ (Troades 452-6)

Again, the words add detail and texture to Andromache’s account. But in a play where women are portrayed as helpless pawns of Fate, the quotation does more. The widow of Hector has to explain why

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30 Keulen (2001), ad 191-6, states ‘[t]his insertion of Achilles’ direct lines in Talthybius’ report is clearly meant to enliven it and to increase its dramatic impact; Seneca will apply the device again below 452-6.’

31 It is sensible that these two examples produce similar results, since in both cases Messengers report the demands of ghosts. Note also the similarity to Aeneid 2.289-95, where Aeneas reports the direct words of the Ghost of Hector.

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she is acting to save her son, while the rest of the Trojan women have given in to despair. Providing the exact words of her husband allows her to give credibility to her actions: ‘It was all Hector’s idea!’ Simultaneously, she can deny responsibility: ‘I don’t want to do this. I’d rather be weeping and beating my breast with the others. But Hector insisted.’ And so we see that Seneca employs oratio recta in the Oedipus, in the Agamemnon, and in the Troades to give credibility to the Messenger, while at the same time removing responsibility.

It cannot be coincidence that three of these examples involve the words of ghosts. Dead spirits do appear on stage twice in the tragedies: the Ghost of Thyestes in Act I of the Agamemnon (lines 1-56), and the Ghost of Tantalus in Act I of the Thyestes (lines 1-121). But these are Prologues, where we can also see the goddess, Juno (Hercules Furens 1-124), and a Fury (silent in the Hercules Furens, but with quite a bit to say in the Thyestes). If a supernatural being is to be physically present, it must be in the beginning of a play. Otherwise, it can only ‘appear’ in a Messenger Speech.32

And there are other occasions where oratio recta can be used to present acts on-stage which should not be brought before the audience. In Act V of the Oedipus, the unnamed Messenger uses vivid details, simile, and extensive oratio recta to describe Oedipus’ self-blinding.33 The speech itself is 65 lines long,34 containing three passages of direct quotation of the king: 8.5 lines (926-34), 21 lines (936-57), and 2.5 lines (975-7). That comes out to almost half of the speech. And the content is truly terrifying. The Chorus and the audience hear as Oedipus more or less rationally deliberates with himself. He quickly finds himself guilty and searches for an appropriate penalty:

32 Cf. the non-Senecan Octavia (593-645), where the Ghost of Agrippina appears on stage in the middle of the play.
33 Töchterle (1994), ad 915-979, notes that ‘[d]ann öffnet die direkte Wiedergabe seiner Rede den Blick auf sien Inneres.’
34 Again, this is too long to quote and translate fully here.
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‘quid poenas moror?’
ait. ‘hoc scelestum pectus aut ferro petat,
aut fervido aliquis igne uel saxo domet?’35

‘Why do I delay my punishment?’
he says. ‘Shall someone make a stab at this villainous heart,
or else subdue it with fire or stone?’ (Oedipus 926-8).

Eventually, Oedipus settles upon putting out his eyes. The Messenger recounts the procedure in vivid detail, before supplying the king’s final words: a prayer that his self-mutilation is appropriate.

conclamat omnis: ‘parcite en patriae, precor!
iam iusta feci, debitas poenas tuli.
inventa thalamis digna nox tandem meis.’

He shouts to all [the gods]: ‘Behold! Spare my fatherland, I pray!
Now I have done just deeds; I have suffered my deserved penalties.
At last, a night has been found, worthy of my wedding-bed.’
(Oedipus 975-7)

The effect of the oratio recta is striking. It certainly does increase the Messenger’s credibility and remove any blame for the horrific events that may be attached to him. But there is more than that. Oedipus is on-stage for most of the play, entering at line 1, leaving at line 1061, and only exiting twice within the drama; but he himself cannot be on stage for this scene. Even if it would not be unbearable to watch, it would be difficult to portray. Seneca has done the next best thing: he has brought Oedipus’ words on stage. By quoting him directly and extensively, the Messenger creates the illusion that the king is present, mutilating himself in front of the audience, without having to clean up the blood later.

Medea’s Nurse achieves a similar effect. At Medea 670-738, she describes the magic her mistress has just been performing off-stage.

35 I diverge from Zweirlein’s reading here, providing a question mark instead of a period.

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But as we have seen, simple description is not enough. The Nurse provides *oratio recta*:

> 'parva sunt' inquit, 'mala
et vile telum est, ima quod tellus creat.
caelo petam venena! iam iam tempus est
aliquid movere fraude vulgari altius.
huc ille vasti more torrentis iacens
descendat anguis, cuius immensos duae,
maior minorque, sentiunt nodos ferae
(maior Pelasgis apta Sidoniis minor),
pressasque tandem solvat Ophiuchus manus
virusque fundat. adsit ad cantus meos
lacessere ausus gemina Python numina.
et Hydra et omnis redeat Herculea manu
succisa serpens caede se reparans sua.
tu quoque relictis pervigil Colchis ades,
sopite primum cantibus, serpens, meis.'

>'The evils are insignificant,' she said,
'and the weapon is worthless, which the deepest earth creates.
I will seek poisons from the sky! Now, now is the time
to put in motion some harm higher than the ordinary.
Let that snake, lying like a vast torrent,
come down here, whose huge coils the two
wild beasts, the Greater and the Lesser, perceive
(the Greater is useful to the Pelasgians, the Lesser to the
Sidonians),
and at last let Ophiuchus free his oppressed hands
and pour forth his venoms. Let Python, having dared
to provoke the twin divinities, attend to my songs.
Let both Hydra and every serpent cut off by Herculean
hand return, restoring itself by its own gore.
You also are present now that Colchis has been abandoned,
oh watchful serpent, first put to sleep by my songs.' (*Medea* 690-704)

Though not quite as long as the rant of Laius or the deliberations
of Oedipus, this passage of direct quotation is quite lengthy. It does
not add much to the plot, nor does it increase the credibility of
the Nurse. But it does make the description so vivid that Medea seems to be standing in front of us, performing her magic for all to see. Similar to the blinding scene in the Oedipus, such unholy rites should not be acted out on stage. And so, again, Seneca has brought a horrific act before the audience, while at the same time keeping them far away. Hine points out that it is unusual for the Nurse to report Medea's exact words when the witch will enter soon after. Seneca knew he could not show the act of magic on stage. And so, he did the next best thing: presented her words, with her actual physical presence shortly to follow. Thus, an important function of oratio recta is to present otherwise distasteful off-stage actions on the stage while still ostensibly sticking with dramatic propriety.

It is difficult to determine exactly why Seneca chose to use oratio recta for these Messenger Speeches, and not for others. In the Thyestes, for example, the unnamed Messenger who tells about the slaughter of the sons of Thyestes (Thyestes 641-788) does not employ a single word of direct quotation. We are told, however, that Atreus sings and prays (ipse funesta prece letale carmen ore violento canit, 691-2). This would be an ideal situation to cite the king's exact words. But this, in fact, is the lone opportunity. Throughout the rest of the account, speech is noticeably absent. Atreus never gives orders, but seems to do everything, including dragging his victims to the altar (intravit Atreus liberos fratris trahens, 683). We are specifically told that the first youth remained silent (non est preces perire frustra passus, 720-1), and the second only made a sound after his head was chopped off (querulum cucurrit murmure incerto caput, 729). So, the lack of words in this particular speech is quite deliberate and appropriate.

Later Roman playwrights similarly enjoyed oratio recta, and seem to have followed Seneca in using it exclusively in Messenger Speeches. The Hercules Oetaeus contains five such speeches which include a total of thirteen sets of direct quotation. When Deianera

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tells about the adventure with Nessus the evil centaur (485-534), she quotes Nessus (511-2), Hercules (514-6), and Nessus again (523-33).\textsuperscript{37} When Hyllas narrates the results of Hercules putting on the poisoned cloak (775-841), he quotes the stricken hero three times (790-6, 813-6, and 823-5). The Chorus tells the story of Orpheus (1031-1127), and provides the words of the legendary poet (1093-9).\textsuperscript{38} Hercules himself tells about an oracle he once received (1472-80), giving the exact words (1476-8), much like Creon in the \textit{Oedipus}. Finally, when Philoctetes gives an account of the death of Hercules (1618-1755), he quotes the demi-god four times (1648-64, 1696-1715, 1717-26, and 1738-9), and Alcmena once (1673-9). Many of these accounts contribute directly to the plot of the play, and the \textit{oratio recta} enlivens the narration and helps to bring the action to the audience. The \textit{Octavia} has just one Messenger Speech with direct quotation. In its first song, the Chorus tells about the death of Agrippina (309-76). The exact words of Nero's mother are heard twice (332-44, and 371-2). Again, the direct speech serves to make more vivid an account of events which cannot be shown on stage. Seneca, then, fits in with the practices of his fellow Roman tragedians in taking the Attic tradition of direct speech and using it for his own purposes.

The appeal of \textit{oratio recta} is hard to pinpoint exactly. Perhaps, as Bers would maintain, direct quotation makes the illusory world of tragedy more real and accurate. Or perhaps something more generic is operating here. Herington asserts that Greek tragedy is a mixture of different genres;\textsuperscript{39} Barrett follows him in claiming that the Messenger

\textsuperscript{37} The author of the \textit{HO} diverges from Senecan practice of including only one marker (i.e., \textit{inquit}, \textit{ait}, etc.) per quotation. The second quote of Nessus is interrupted twice by \textit{inquit}, as are the words of Hercules at 790-6. The quotation from Hercules at 1648-64 has \textit{inquit} twice, and \textit{ait} once.

\textsuperscript{38} Cf., \textit{Hercules Furens} 569-89, when the Chorus also tells the same story; however, in the \textit{HF}, the direct quotation is of Pluto, not Orpheus.

\textsuperscript{39} C.J. Herington (1985), \textit{Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition}, Berkeley.
Speech is particularly epic. It is easy to notice that direct quotation is a particularly common occurrence in both Homer and Vergil. I would suggest that Seneca, either deliberately or intuitively, noticed the connection between epic and tragedy, and so employed oratio recta frequently to reflect the generic kinship. It may support this suggestion to note that both Seneca and Vergil provide direct quotation of Charon when their hero visits the Underworld.

Seneca, then, used passages of oratio recta with some regularity for several purposes. In part, they are another detail to enliven the account. Sometimes, they give emphasis to an important idea or theme of the play; sometimes they lend credibility to the Messenger, while shielding him or her from the acts he or she reports. And sometimes, they enable Seneca to bring a distasteful act on stage, without really doing so. The blinding of Oedipus is not performed on-stage, nor is the action merely described. By allowing the Messenger to recite the king's words verbatim, the playwright can have his cake and eat it too. Similarly, he can permit various ghosts and oracles to speak without causing discomfort. Horrific Charon need not actually horrify; but the audience will remember him, as if he did.

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41 For this practice in Vergil, see, just for example, Gilbert Highet (1972), *The Speeches in Vergil's Aeneid*, Princeton.