

1. Prof. dr hab. Elżbieta Wesołowska

Institute of Classical Philology

ul. Fredry 10

61-701 Poznań

POLAND

2. Preferable Panel: Language of the Body

3. duration: 20 min

Arcete tactu, famuli, accessu procul...
Body distance in Seneca's tragedies
(on the particular example of the "Medea")

Elżbieta Wesołowska (Poznań)

ABSTRACT

In the general opinion of scholars Seneca's tragedies are rather deprived of the theatrical character as they are static and there is hardly any scenic movement. Nevertheless, the mode of closeness is highly important in the extant Roman tragedies as far as the following two aspects are concerned: desirable and undesirable physical contact, and the psychological one as well. This is not surprising, if we recall the fact, that Seneca as a Stoic had an ambivalent attitude towards the closeness between two human beings in both the physical and psychological dimension.

I would like to elucidate this complicated problem on the example of Senecan "Medea", being aware that his other tragedies are also worthy of being investigated.

Both the desire of attaining closeness and that of retaining distance, are frequently and ambiguously portrayed in the above mentioned tragedies. "Medea" seems to be sincere in her desire to embrace and kiss the children when saying goodbye to them. This verbalised desire helps her to persuade Creon, who eventually decides to allow her to stay in town for one more day. This fear, however, remains until the very end. The king is so frightened that he tries to keep her at a distance, even forbidding her to make an utterance. In the end Medea hugs the children affectionately, however only to eventually kill them!

Her relationship with Jason is rather different. She avoids any contact with him. She delivers the final monologue from a roof and kills the second child in his presence. Her gesture should be treated as an extremely ironical one, as she throws her husband their children's dead corpses before she flies away.

Medea's touch is generally of maternal or cruel nature. Yet, in relation to Jason the situation becomes more complicated, due to the fact that she would

like him to come back to her, and we are shocked by the drastical contrast between her confession and the Chorus' statement concerning Jason's erotic gesture which was interpreted as an unwilling sexual act. Undoubtedly though, Jason should have died because of his infidelity, however it was Creon who lost his life and the mutual relationship with his daughter in the face of mortal danger.