

*A Handbook of*  
CLASSICAL  
DRAMA

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Usually at the beginning of the second act the dramatic action is initiated. Frequently this takes the form of a subaltern's attempting to deter the main character from crime. Such a scene is designed, of course, to bring out the criminal determination of the main character. The entrance of a new character may develop a complication. The act usually ends with the formation of a definite criminal plan.

The third act, as in the *Thyestes*, may be given over to the presentation of the victim and may end with his entrapment. The fourth act may give a description of the catastrophe and the fifth a vivid illustration of it. Normally there is no sharply marked peripety or any strong emotional contrast between the opening and the close of the action. The situation is very bad at the beginning, and it rapidly becomes much worse.

Seneca uses no *deus ex machina*, unless the appearance of Hercules at the end of the *Hercules on Oeta* can be called such. Far from having any prejudice against violent deeds on stage, he delights in making his finale fantastically horrible and bloody. So we see Jocasta stab herself in her "capacious womb," and so we hear the thud of the bodies of Medea's children as she flings them from the housetop.

### 1. MAD HERCULES (*HERCULES FURENS*)

The *Mad Hercules* shows many dramatic faults and much overdone rhetoric, but individual scenes in it are very impressive. The subject doubtless made a strong appeal to Seneca for several reasons. It is perfectly adapted to the themes of the stepmother and the tyrant. Both these were dear to his heart, and they furnish some of his finest rhetorical effects. "No greater victim can be sacrificed to Jupiter and no richer one than a king who is unjust," says Hercules as he is about to sacrifice while his hands still drip the blood of Lycus.<sup>23</sup> Effective also is Hercules' apostrophe to his own hands as the tools of his stepmother (1236). The fantastic exaggeration of his labors also must have teased the imagination of Seneca, and the long description of the underworld is well fitted to serve both moralist and rhetorician. Seneca obviously took delight also in depicting the growing frenzy of Juno and especially the seizure of Hercules—a magnificent scene. Still more attractive perhaps was the contemplation of the sufferings of this Stoic saint which so clearly emphasize Fortune's envy of virtue and her ironic fickleness in bestowing her favors (esp. 524–32).

Sources.—Euripides introduced this subject into tragedy in his still extant *Heracles*; and, though there were later Greek versions and perhaps one Roman adaptation, Seneca seems to have followed the original

play.<sup>24</sup> The incidents, at least, are the same, but fundamental changes in treatment and interpretation have been made. Since these affected every part of the play they may best be noted in the general consideration.

Discussion.—Seneca has added a conventional prologue spoken by Juno. Her catalogue of the various loves of Jupiter and their mementos in the sky seems a little ridiculous but is a part of the stepmother theme. More important is her recitation of the great accomplishments of Hercules and her great anger at his success.<sup>25</sup> Finally, raising her voice to the screech of hysteria, she foretells his madness and adumbrates its results. Thus the loud note of horror which usually characterizes the opening of a Senecan tragedy is here clearly sounded.

Another effect of the prologue is even more important.<sup>26</sup> The foreknowledge here imparted casts a shade of irony upon the glory of Hercules' return, and thus Euripides' magnificent contrast between the returning hero and the murderer of wife and children is largely lost. No such contrast really exists in the life of Hercules as Seneca presents it. All has been and still remains a titanic struggle against a superior power.<sup>27</sup> The climax of this struggle and Hercules' inevitable ruin is the subject of Seneca's tragedy. In the prologue and throughout the play the fantastic exaggeration of Hercules' accomplishments raises the hero so far above human accomplishment that he loses much of his human appeal. But he gains the superhuman stature requisite for contest with divinity. Juno's prologue, therefore, serves the Senecan interpretation of Hercules well, however far this may be from the Aristotelian concept of the most effective tragic character. The prologue also concentrates attention upon Hercules alone, whereas the opening of Euripides' play emphasizes the plight of his family.

As an explanation of Hercules' madness, Juno's conventional prologue replaces the very unconventional scene of Iris and Lyssa in the center of Euripides' play. The elimination of that scene allows the gradual seizure of Hercules to be depicted on stage without supernatural interference in its presentation. But while Iris and Lyssa poetically symbolize the madness which at that moment is at work within the palace, Juno's prologue, though ending on the pitch of frenzy, comes long before the actual madness and is immediately followed by the chorus' idyllic description of dawn and Stoic praise of the simple life!

The second act begins in no less declamatory fashion than the prologue. Amphytrion now prays for relief from misfortune and holds forth on the eleven previous labors—the securing of Cerberus is still in progress—for some seventy-five verses, and Megara closes the series with a mere thirty on much the same subject. Both invoke Hercules as if he were a god. Thus the first three hundred and eight verses pass



in only four units. This disturbingly awkward opening is caused by Seneca's failure to recast the first of his play—or rather the first of Euripides' play—after he has added the prologue by Juno. The endless repetition of the labors has its justification—emphasis on the endless struggle which Hercules' life has been. The effect is well designed, therefore, but it is not well executed. The repetition is too monotonous and boring.

The scene with Lycus, except for the further intrusion of the labors, is far better. Seneca gives the tyrant the very plausible motivation of wishing to marry Megara in order to make his reign a more legitimate one. This is an improvement over Euripides, designed no doubt to facilitate Seneca's theme of the tyrant. If the play was written during the reign of Nero, however, it was an obvious motivation; for Nero himself had a somewhat similar reason for marrying Octavia, the daughter of Claudius. Nero's relation to Octavia also was somewhat similar, for Claudius and his son were to be or had been murdered for the benefit of Nero, and according to Seneca he who derives the benefit from a crime is the guilty party.<sup>28</sup> After Lycus has withdrawn, Amphytrion at the end of the scene foresees the return of Hercules.

The labors are now once more attempted, this time by the chorus, and special emphasis is given the return from the underworld. Following their fanfare, Hercules appears. After an entrance monologue in which he boasts of his triumph over death, he hears of Lycus' outrages and immediately goes off to slay him. He has shown no tenderness in greeting wife and children; and, since Theseus has entered with him as a speaking character, Megara can say nothing if the rule of three speaking actors is to be maintained. Thus one of the most pathetic episodes of Euripides' play is eliminated. But this is consistent with Seneca's procedure; for he makes no effort to humanize Hercules, at least before the climax, and Megara and the children are carefully kept in the background throughout.

Theseus has been brought on with Hercules in order, no doubt, that he may declaim on the underworld and Hercules' accomplishments there. This description enables the author to bring out the Stoic conception of retribution after death and to apply it especially to the tyrant. Such a conception is a natural counterpart or consolation for a view of life as a laborious and finally unsuccessful struggle, but no effort is made to bring out this connection with the theme of the play and so to justify the inclusion of the scene. Theseus' description itself, of course, is sensational and colorful.

Dramatically Theseus' entrance with Hercules is very plausible and avoids the abruptness of his appearance later, as in Euripides. But this

advantage is small gain and apparently involves the extreme inconvenience of removing him at the climax when Hercules is about to slaughter wife and children.

After a choral song contemplating the underworld and death but ending on an ironically joyful note concerning the success of Hercules, the hero returns with the blood of Lycus upon his hands. As he prepares to sacrifice in spite of this defilement, the madness gradually comes over him. The actual presentation of this scene has been made possible by having Lycus slain somewhere off stage and not trapped within the palace as in Euripides. This, too, is a distinct gain for Seneca, but precisely how the following carnage could have been portrayed in the theater is quite uncertain.<sup>29</sup> Some assume that it was not designed ever to be portrayed, others that the carnage takes place behind the scenes while Amphytrion views and reports it. Amphytrion's detailed description does not necessarily decide the matter, for contemporary action on stage is often so described in Seneca. The seizure itself is plausibly managed and does not include those manifestations which the comic poets considered a little puerile and ridiculous in Euripides.<sup>30</sup>

After a choral lyric of grief that is too rhetorical to be very effective, Hercules awakens, and through his own deductions he is made to realize what he has done. His gradual enlightenment and his desire to die are depicted with genuine pathos. He is finally persuaded to live, not so much by Theseus' exhortation to withstand adversity, the prime consideration in Euripides, as by Amphytrion's appeal to filial piety. This, too, is as we should expect in Seneca, where suicide is often praised as the one escape from misfortune.

## 2. TROJAN WOMEN (TROADES)

The *Trojan Women* has often been considered the best of Seneca's plays. It is certainly an impressive spectacle of the mutability of fortune, the woes of the vanquished, and the insolence of the victorious. The whole is overcast by the irony of the victors' own coming destruction. The outlook of the play, then, is similar to that of the *Trojan Women* of Euripides; so is the structure, which achieves a certain unity of tone and theme even though the two main incidents of the play are only superficially connected. The scene between Andromache and Ulysses, an important source for Racine, is brilliantly written and would doubtless be very effective in any theater. On the whole, however, the play lacks that consummate finish of dramatic technique which usually characterizes Greek tragedies.

Sources.—The murder of Astyanax and the grief of Andromache



form one of the main episodes in Euripides' *Trojan Women*. The death of Polyxena is an important part of his *Hecuba*. Seneca follows the main outlines of Euripides in relating these events, and distinct echoes of both plays are found; but major changes have been made. The question of sacrificing Polyxena is here made the subject of a spirited and dramatic debate; Andromache has a premonition of the danger and hides Astyanax in Hector's tomb, but eventually she is forced by the crafty Ulysses to reveal his whereabouts. This hiding of Astyanax occurred also in a Latin tragedy of Accius entitled *Astyanax*, in which also Calchas seems to have motivated the murder.<sup>81</sup> But the use of the tomb of Hector for this, considered fantastic by some critics,<sup>82</sup> may be original with Seneca.

Various other important changes have been made: Hecuba is not the center of Seneca's play; more speaking characters are brought on stage; the choral songs though effective do not have the beauty or depth of pathos of those in Euripides. Seneca's play may well be the product of contamination, since this combination of Astyanax and Polyxena is not known to have occurred in any previous play.

Various other plays may have been drawn upon for details. Sophocles wrote a *Polyxena* and also a *Captive Women* (*Aichmalotides*), which may possibly have covered some of the same material as Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Accius wrote a *Hecuba* and apparently a *Trojan Women* besides the *Astyanax* just mentioned. Still other plays had been written on these subjects in both Greek and Latin.

**Discussion.**—Hecuba, at once the most venerable and the most pathetic survivor of the destruction of Troy, opens and closes the play. Her prologue emphasizes the mutability of fortune, the sacrilegious violence of the conquerors, and the enslavement awaiting the women. These thoughts very naturally develop into an antiphony between her and the chorus, which contains genuine tears for the dead and for the even more unfortunate living. Emotionally, this is an effective opening of the play. From the dramatic point of view, however, we should have expected some significant reference to Polyxena, Andromache, and Astyanax, the characters about whom the main incidents of the play devolve. Actually Hecuba twice refers to Cassandra, who does not appear as a character in the play. At the end of this lyric exchange, furthermore, Hecuba very ineffectively withdraws (or becomes silent).

The Herald now comes on for a more typical Senecan prologue of horror reporting the appearance of the ghost of Achilles. Since the Herald immediately departs when his report is given, his speech also has that detachment which usually characterizes a Senecan prologue. The creation of Senecan atmosphere is doubtless the main purpose of

this sensational speech, for the information which it gives could easily have been worked into the conversation between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon.

Agamemnon here, reminiscent of the Agamemnon of Euripides' *Hecuba*, is a very cautious and restrained conqueror. He is keenly aware that the Greeks have gone to excesses and that the momentary whim of fortune is just as formidable as an armada of a thousand ships or a struggle of ten long years. Indeed he forebodes the disasters which actually overtake the Greeks and himself. Thus the ominous theme of Hecuba's prologue is elaborated to cast a grim irony over the present insolence of the victors. With such farsighted Stoic characters, Seneca's play has no need of a divine prelude like that of Euripides' *Trojan Women*. This substitution of vague human foreboding for supernatural explicitness might be considered a distinct improvement.

The quarrel between Pyrrhus and Agamemnon over the sacrifice of Polyxena begins with long and comparatively restrained speeches. But it soon develops into a rapid and excited contest of abuse which is one of the most dramatic dialogues in Seneca. Finally Calchas is called in to settle the matter like a *deus ex machina*. All critics have laid the severest strictures upon the abruptness here, and perhaps this, like the appearance of the children in the *Medea* (845), is another example of that dramatic awkwardness which is not infrequent in Seneca. Still this scene could be staged very effectively by having Calchas and various other figures enter along with Pyrrhus and Agamemnon at the beginning of the scene. The sacred insignia would clearly mark out the priest who sacrificed Iphigenia. He would stand by ominously silent and contemptuously superior to this futile logomachy over reason and justice—the priest waiting for the kings to appeal to him as he knows they eventually must. The end of this act is admittedly abrupt, but Agamemnon can say nothing after Calchas' pronouncement *ex cathedra*.

The pronouncement of Calchas not only settles the dispute over Polyxena; the fate of Astyanax, also, is brusquely determined in three short lines.<sup>83</sup> Thus the action of the remainder of the play is foretold. The following chorus on death as the end of all is not inapposite, and this pagan conviction is here expressed with depressing certainty.

The third act is masterly. The appearance of the ghost of Hector to Andromache, corresponding to that of the ghost of Achilles to the Greeks, is well conceived. Andromache's finding the features of her dead husband in the face of her son is both moving and significant for the dilemma which she is soon to have thrust upon her.<sup>84</sup> The genuine pathos here and the obviously inevitable tragic outcome prevent any semblance of melodrama in the spectacular scene with Ulysses. An-



dromache's turmoil of spirit is depicted with keen psychological insight, though the incoherency of her lines is sometimes destroyed by benighted modern editors. In these scenes, furthermore, Seneca has placed at least some restraint upon his inveterate fondness for rhetorical effect.<sup>85</sup>

In the ensuing lyric the chorus contemplate to what homes they may be taken in Greece. This adaptation of a Euripidean choral theme is not well done, but the suggestion of imminent departure is effective.

The fourth act moves rapidly but lacks the brilliance of the third. Andromache's wrangling with Helen immediately after Astyanax has been taken off to die detracts from the pathos of her suffering. Euripides chose the wiser course when he allowed her to make her final exit along with Astyanax, for anything that she can say after this must appear anticlimactic. Nor is the defense of Helen really pertinent to this scene, although the pity of an enemy adds to the pathetic tragedy of Polyxena. Significant for the play as a whole, however, is the resumption of the theme of the destruction to be visited upon the Greeks. Hecuba prophesies woes for Ulysses (994), and prays that the seas may be as savage to the Greeks as the Greeks are to their suppliants (1006).

The fifth act combines the stories of Astyanax and Polyxena, but only in an external fashion. The speech of the Messenger must be divided between these two unrelated events—a division not characteristic of messenger speeches in Greek tragedy—and the resultant awkwardness is aggravated by the Messenger's offering a choice as to whose misfortune he should relate first. Incidentally both Astyanax and Polyxena die like Stoics. The play ends effectively with Hecuba's ironic *propempticon* to the Greeks amounting to a curse and a prophecy that the sea will give them the welcome which they deserve.

### 3. PHOENICIAN WOMEN (PHOENISSAE)

Scholars have not agreed on an explanation of the scenes preserved under this title. Perhaps they are mere independent studies; perhaps they are parts of a complete or projected tragedy.

Doubtless Euripides' *Phoenissae* was Seneca's chief model. That play was one of the most famous of all Greek tragedies and contained perhaps the most widely known discussion of tyranny in classical literature. It was a dangerous play during Seneca's day, as Mamercus Scaurus, his contemporary and one of his rhetorical models, had discovered under Tiberius.<sup>86</sup> The general subject had been treated in various other Greek and Roman tragedies, including Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and in epic verse. The Roman historical legend of Coriolanus

as related in Livy (2. 39–40) may well have contributed to the scene with Jocasta.<sup>87</sup>

The first scene is one between Oedipus and Antigone. Oedipus asks that he be allowed to go the way which, even in his blindness, he will find more easily alone—the way of death. But Antigone replies that she will never leave him. Incidentally she reveals that Polynices is leading his army against Thebes, and that Jocasta is still alive.<sup>88</sup> This conversation develops into a Senecan discussion of suicide somewhat like that in the *Mad Hercules*.

The scenes with Jocasta either include a change of locale from Thebes to the battleground or else Jocasta leads the brothers on stage in a unique manner. Here Jocasta does most of the talking, making a passionate appeal especially to Polynices and ending on the Senecan theme of the folly of kingship. The attitudes of the two brothers are much the same as in Euripides.

### 4. MEDEA

This is a tragedy of revenge written with special emphasis upon the inhuman fury and weird sorcery of a barbaric Medea. Indeed this play is an important source of knowledge of ancient magic, and a comparison with the witches' scenes in *Macbeth* is sufficient to prove that in literature, at least, ancient magic was not so very different from modern.

**Sources.**—The story of Medea was one of the most popular among both Greek and Latin dramatists, and it was treated in various other genres as well. Especially famous in Latin literature was the tragedy which the brilliant young Ovid wrote. Seneca, an admirer of Ovid,<sup>89</sup> seems to have been influenced considerably by that play as he doubtless was by still other treatments.<sup>40</sup>

The plot of Seneca's play, however, is essentially that of the *Medea* of Euripides; and doubtless this famous masterpiece was his chief source and model. But fundamental changes, as usually in Seneca, have been made in the characters and tone of the play, and much of its dramatic action has been deleted. *Aegeus* and the *Paedagogus* are eliminated. Jason appears only twice; and he is very different from the Jason of Euripides. Here he is weaker, more ingenuous, and more appealing. He has been forced into the marriage; and his entreaties alone, as Creon himself reveals, have saved Medea from being put to death. Jason here is also extremely fond of his children. Indeed, he insists that he chose submission to Creon rather than death only in order to save his sons. In part this more human portrayal of Jason is designed to bring out the inhumanity of Seneca's Medea; for whereas



Euripides' great achievement had been to make Medea entirely human and understandable, Seneca deliberately presents her as a fantastic exaggeration of that barbaric sorceress which she is normally represented as being in ancient literature.

**Discussion.**—Medea herself opens the play with a hysterical monologue. She screeches for vengeance. She prays that death may come upon Creon and his daughter and that life may be made a miserable burden for Jason. She flagellates herself and casts about for a crime worthy of her maturity. Thus is sounded the usual Senecan note of horror. Entirely gone is the careful emotional preparation for the appearance of Medea which the prologue of Euripides' play contains, as well as its vague and uncertain forebodings. Gone too is the effective scene with the children, who do not appear in Seneca's play until they are sent with the poisoned gifts, when they are present for only four lines. All this, of course, is in strict accord with Seneca's desire to present Medea in a very unfavorable but very intense light.

Seneca's chorus, as might be expected, is bitterly opposed to Medea and sympathetic with Jason and their king. So the first choral lyric is a gay song in honor of the marriage which is now to be consummated.

Naturally the strains of this festive song gall Medea and stimulate her to greater fury. She recalls in detail the crimes which she has committed for Jason's sake. Still she is obviously in love with him, as she reveals by her conviction that Creon alone is responsible and by her momentary resolve to take vengeance only upon him. The Nurse makes a desperate attempt to curb Medea's wrath, but this serves merely to reveal her determination more sharply. The next scene with the imperious Creon allows Medea a spirited defense. It also adds direct description of her character and her witchcraft. She is one, says Creon, who combines the natural deceit of a woman with the aggressiveness of a man (267-68). After finally granting her one more day within the realm, Creon hastens off to the marriage—an effective detail.

The chorus deprecates the impious boldness of man in inventing ships and overcoming those barriers which the gods placed between the lands. Medea was worthy freight for the first vessel! Then, by a shocking anachronism, Seneca marvels at the vast extent to which man's ingenuity has expanded the world of his own day, and predicts that in a day to come new continents will be revealed—his famous prediction of the discovery of America.<sup>41</sup>

After her Nurse has described her utter madness, Medea comes on again for more self-flagellation. This soliloquy reveals a hardening of her attitude toward Jason and prepares for his entrance just as her former soliloquy has prepared for the entrance of Creon. The scene

with Jason gives Medea another opportunity for a brilliant speech justifying her position and incriminating Jason. But Jason stands up well against all her charges, and the sincerity of his defense has been carefully guaranteed by his entrance monologue as well as by the previous statements of Creon and by the free admissions of Medea. Jason resolutely refuses Medea's plea to return to her and seek life elsewhere. Only at this point does Medea, who has never shown much regard for her children,<sup>42</sup> give up hope of recovering him and begin definitely to plot for a vengeance upon him far worse than that upon Creon. In the course of this scene, when Medea asks that the children be allowed to go with her Jason very naturally reveals his great love for them. Medea immediately realizes where her vengeance upon him can strike deepest. Thus Seneca skillfully works into this scene the main function of Euripides' scene of Medea and Aegeus. Seneca has no other use for that scene, for he is wholly unconcerned with any semblance of a realistic escape at the end of the play. As soon as Jason departs, Medea plunges into a tantrum and announces her plan to send the poisoned gifts.

Remarking the limitless fury of a woman spurned, the chorus ponder the ill fate of those who sailed on the first ship and pray that Jason, their leader, may be spared. So this lyric harks back to the previous choral song and sounds an effectively ominous note.

The scenes of witchery, like the sacrifice and the raising of the ghost in Seneca's *Oedipus*, are essentially a digression. Still they are not so very much out of place here, since Medea's sorcery has been emphasized from the first and an atmosphere of horror and diabolical crime has been consistently maintained.<sup>43</sup> The metrical variation in this scene is noteworthy. She enters with excited trochaics, lists her magical accomplishments in staid iambics (well suited to the realm of facts!), shifts to lyric iambics in making her offerings, and then to anapests for her "prayers." At the end of the scene, which reaches its climax with Medea's barbaric gashing of her own arms, the children are abruptly dispatched with the gifts.

After a short choral lyric describing Medea's fury, a messenger reports the catastrophe. For once Seneca rejects the opportunity of making a long glowing description of horror. Indeed, so short a report is unique in ancient tragedy; but the innovation is as welcome as it has been long awaited. A conventional messenger's speech here, furthermore, would be quite useless, for Medea in her incantation has directed with revolting detail the effects which the gifts are to have upon the bride.<sup>44</sup>

Medea's last soliloquy, in which she finally determines upon the slaughter of her children, is an amazing confusion of natural human



emotions, including even remorse, of the mysticism of madness, and of sophistry strained almost to the ridiculous. She wishes that she, like Niobe, had borne fourteen children instead of two in order that her vengeance might be greater! There is here no thought of saving the children from destruction at the hands of her enemies, as in Euripides. Here all is vengeance.

Jason enters with soldiers, coming not so save his children primarily, as in Euripides, but to punish Medea. As Medea has just slain one of her children before the eyes of the audience in order to satisfy the Avenging Furies of her brother, so now, having mounted to the roof of her dwelling, she slays the other before Jason and despite his most abject entreaties. Then she apparently flings the bodies down to him. This ghastly scene is most dramatic and is a fitting climax to a play that from the very first has sounded the note of horror. It is less effective than the final scene in Euripides, because Medea is less human and the children here have never been effectively presented. It is less tragic, too, because the heavy grief that falls upon life, which must go on even after such a catastrophe, is really more tragic than the catastrophe itself. But Seneca has undeniably achieved a harrowing and spectacular finale.

### 5. \*PHAEDRA (HIPPOLYTUS)<sup>46</sup>

The *Phaedra* is one of Seneca's best plays. His interpretation is very different from that of Euripides in his extant *Hippolytus*. No effort is made to soften the character of Phaedra. This villainess plays the main role of the tragedy, and perhaps Seneca's primary interest lay in the study of her character. There is nothing mystical about Seneca's Hippolytus, who worships Diana as any other huntsman would and who is a more normal human being than the Hippolytus of Euripides, though he does hate women and civilization for various philosophical reasons. The theme of the stepmother is prominent in the play,<sup>46</sup> and it is conceivable that certain passages are directed toward the imperial family.<sup>47</sup>

Source.—Euripides wrote two plays on the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, of which only the later *Hippolytus Crowned* has been preserved. Seneca's *Phaedra* shows certain similarities to this play but in the main appears to be an adaptation of Euripides' earlier *Hippolytus Veiled*. Several other dramatists, however, are known to have treated the subject. Various lines in Seneca's play, especially in the first scene between Phaedra and her Nurse, loosely correspond to certain fragments of Euripides' earlier play, although it is sometimes assumed that

there was no Nurse in that play. Seneca's treatment has many points in common with an imaginary love letter of Phaedra written by Ovid. We know that on some points Ovid is following Euripides' earlier play, and it may be that both Seneca and Ovid are independently following Euripides rather than that Seneca is following Ovid.<sup>48</sup>

Influence.—In his *Phèdre* (1677) Racine used to the best advantage not only Seneca's *Phaedra* but Euripides' extant *Hippolytus* as well. A complete analysis of Racine's indebtedness is beyond the limits of the present consideration,<sup>49</sup> but the following motives may be mentioned as due to Seneca: *Phèdre* dominates the action throughout the play; the infidelity of Theseus is stressed; *Phèdre* confesses her love to Hippolytus in person, and her words are at times very close to those of Seneca; *Phèdre* beseeches the contemptuous Hippolytus to slay her and retains his sword; *Phèdre* dies on stage after confessing the truth.

The subject has been dramatized also by Gabriele d'Annunzio (*Fedra*, 1909).

Structure.—The play opens with a long passage in anapestic recitative by Hippolytus. Although his catalogues of places, dogs, and animals are elaborated with brilliant pedantry—witness the inclusion of the bison—still this scene could be staged as a colorful and spectacular extravaganza. It is more proper to the pageantry of modern opera, however, than it is to an exposition scene in serious drama. It is wholly a prelude. The lines of Hippolytus do end with a prayer to Diana; but this prayer is no more than that of an ordinary huntsman, and there is not, as in Euripides, any suggestion that Hippolytus is guilty of sacrilege toward Venus. After this prelude, Phaedra comes on with her Nurse. Her languishing complaints strongly contrast with the animal exuberance of Hippolytus and emphasize the gulf between these two. The conversation between Phaedra and the Nurse furnishes the real exposition of the play. Here the Nurse is already acquainted with Phaedra's passion, and the scene consists not of the Nurse's seducing Phaedra, as in Euripides, but of Phaedra's seducing the Nurse.<sup>50</sup> Like a Stoic philosopher the Nurse preaches restraint and continency. She inveighs against royal license. She systematically eliminates every possibility of committing such a crime successfully. But Phaedra will not hear her, and by artfully threatening suicide, mistress bends servant to her will. The Nurse agrees to approach Hippolytus—the first step in the complication—and here the act ends (first act, 273 lines).

The subsequent choral song (84 lines) is strictly pertinent to the situation: love is supreme master of all the world. The poetry of the song is spoiled by the epigram at the end—love overcomes even the savage stepmother.



The second act (378 lines) opens with a realistic description of the manifestations of Phaedra's passion by the Nurse. Phaedra herself comes on, and her words and actions corroborate the description. This scene is reminiscent of the scene between Phaedra and the Nurse in Euripides' extant play; but its function here is somewhat different, for it is preparing for Phaedra's madly throwing herself at Hippolytus and perhaps for her madly taking revenge upon him. The action moves into new ground with the entrance of Hippolytus, who comes on at precisely the most convenient moment. The gross efforts of the Nurse to seduce him to a life of luxurious wantonness only offend him. After the Nurse has failed, Phaedra rushes up to faint in Hippolytus' arms. As she is revived, or pretends to be so, she steels her determination and makes her confession in a brilliantly written scene. She begs Hippolytus not to call her by the name of mother but rather by that of slave. She urges him to take her royal power—and herself. She tries to convince him that his father is dead. In Hippolytus she sees the more ideal Theseus. Finally she throws herself at his feet; but he is frightened and revolted by her crude advances. He abandons his sword and flees as Phaedra pretends to swoon and the Nurse comes to her rescue and calls for help in an effort to save her mistress by indicting Hippolytus.

The second choral song (88 lines) describes the flight of Hippolytus, dwells upon his beauty, and forebodingly suggests that flight will not bring him safety.

The leader of the chorus denounces Phaedra for her false charge and her base artifice. He then introduces Theseus. Theseus enters expressing his great relief at having escaped from Tartarus. He is startled by the sounds of grief. The Nurse appears and abruptly warns him that Phaedra is on the point of suicide. At the command of Theseus the doors of the palace are opened and Phaedra is revealed. But she artfully refuses to confess her secret until Theseus threatens to put the Nurse to torture. Refusing to name Hippolytus, Phaedra indicts him by means of his sword—an effective dramatic gesture. In a long monologue Theseus then calls upon his father Neptune to destroy Hippolytus. This short third act (135 lines) constitutes the climax of the play and practically the reversal of fortune for Hippolytus.

The choral song which follows (30 lines) loftily ponders why the universe is so marvelously controlled but mankind is left to the mere whims of chance. This is a not unnatural reaction to the apparent triumph of the wicked Phaedra and to the ruin of the innocent Hippolytus.

The fourth act (134 lines) consists of the Messenger's report of the destruction of Hippolytus. This strikes the modern reader as too long and too much concerned with the miraculous. Significant descrip-

tion of Hippolytus himself and of the reaction of friends and servants is not as effectively emphasized as in Euripides; but occasional phrases (1005, 1067) do reveal Hippolytus' pathetic admiration for his father.

The last choral song (31 lines) opines that Fortune is most likely to strike down the great, as it has struck down Theseus. He has returned from the underworld only to meet even worse calamity in his own house.

The fifth act (127 lines) begins with the appearance of Phaedra. She calls down imprecations upon herself; but her dominant emotion is grief at the death of her beloved Hippolytus. She confesses her guilt and commits suicide. In excited trochaic meter Theseus, overwhelmed with remorse, curses himself in the most extravagant manner. He finally attempts to compose the mangled body of his son and with his last words curses Phaedra.

**Discussion.**—Structurally Seneca's play is not very different from Euripides' extant *Hippolytus*. Some scenes in the Greek play, however, have no equivalent in the Latin. The divinities of prologue and epilogue have been entirely eliminated. Seneca's play develops wholly on the human level, and he manages to reveal the truth to Theseus without divine revelation—a weak and often criticized device in Euripides' play. In Seneca, furthermore, there is no choral song between the opening scene with Hippolytus and the first appearance of Phaedra. This is awkward. Indeed the whole beginning of this play with its interminable speeches is very poorly managed.

Seneca has added some excellent scenes. That between Phaedra and Hippolytus is the best of these. Its psychology is keen and subtle. Its theatrical effectiveness is equal to almost anything in ancient drama. The scene wherein Phaedra indicts Hippolytus, furthermore, is a brilliant one. Lastly, the scene of Phaedra's confession and suicide is spectacular, though the lack of any effective exchange between Phaedra and Theseus perhaps robs this scene of the dramatic effectiveness which it might be made to possess.<sup>51</sup>

But Seneca has suffered the very serious loss of the scenes between Hippolytus and Theseus which play so important a part in Euripides.

A comparison of one other item of structure in each play is very significant—the "curtain" of the second act. In Euripides' extant play, when Hippolytus denounces Phaedra and flees the scene, Phaedra bursts into a short lyric lament, and this is immediately followed by the scene in which Phaedra dismisses the Nurse as her bane and determines to die in a last resort to save her good name and the honor of her children, and also to punish Hippolytus for his haughty disdain. Thus Euripides at the exit of Hippolytus refuses a spectacular curtain and its consequent



suspense. He prefers to end the episode with ominous foreshadowing of the tragedy, but not before he has thoroughly motivated the most dreadful of Phaedra's actions—her denunciation of Hippolytus. Seneca omits this motivation. Here the Nurse hastily forms the plan for denouncing Hippolytus. His act ends so quickly after the departure of Hippolytus that his curtain is a spectacular one, though the suspense has been spoiled by the Nurse's announcement of her plan. Racine, as we might expect, has this spectacular curtain; but he also maintains the greatest suspense by ending his second act before Phaedra has had time to consider her future course.

Phaedra is drawn with great skill.<sup>52</sup> Forced into marriage with a man notorious for mistreatment of his wives, and now deserted and betrayed, she is intensely miserable in her solitude. Small wonder is it, then, that this Phaedra, the undisciplined child of a royal house whose women were distinguished for their worse than licentious conduct, should fall in love with her beautiful stepson. Almost incredibly selfish, this Phaedra shows no hesitation in making known her passion to the Nurse, and she complains only that she does not, like her mother, have the inventive genius of a Daedalus to pander to her desires. She freely admits the criminal nature of such a union, but her moral consciousness is so obtuse that she feels no obligation to struggle against her passion or even to rationalize away its criminal aspect. Madness rules over her, as she herself expresses it (184). She cannot bring herself rationally to consider the possibility of her husband's return or the impossibility of seducing Hippolytus. She is driven by a passion that is reckless of everything but its own desire.

Still, Phaedra maintains enough equilibrium to practice deceit most artfully. She wins over the Nurse to her aid by an apparently insincere resolve to commit suicide. She faints most opportunely in the arms of Hippolytus (cf. 426). She begs Hippolytus to slay her, but this device—if it is device—is unfortunately without result. Seneca has not given Phaedra any expressed motivation for denouncing Hippolytus to Theseus. The Nurse in first suggesting such a course is motivated by the desire to cover their guilt. Perhaps Seneca felt that Phaedra's selfishness and her passionate weakness make further motivation unnecessary, or perhaps this is another instance of Seneca's tendency to write a collection of scenes and not a dramatically articulated play. But Phaedra goes to such extremes of artfulness in her deception of Theseus (cf. 826–28) that she must be considered morally responsible for this course of action even though the Nurse has been the first to suggest it.

In her final scene Phaedra is still the same. She taunts Theseus with his guilt, though this guilt is very slight compared to her own. She

commits suicide not so much because of remorse as in a last desperate effort to be with Hippolytus and satisfy her insatiable passion.

The final scene has been severely condemned as an atrocious violation of propriety. This gory handling of the limbs of Hippolytus, however, seems to be not so very different externally from the original final scene of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Such matters are largely governed by superficial convention, though it must be admitted that for the modern reader Seneca's scene, far from achieving any great pathos, is revolting.

## 6. OEDIPUS

In his *Oedipus* Seneca appears most interested in presenting the portrait of a tyrant who from first to last was a curse upon his people and who himself was strangely obsessed with a premonition of his dreadful guilt.<sup>53</sup> As a background for this mystic consciousness of sin, all the horror of the play is apposite, and even the callous sensibilities of one who has seen the slaughter of war or gladiatorial combats must be stimulated by this remarkable display. Those of more delicate sensibilities are likely to be repelled by it.

Source.—Seneca follows the main lines of Sophocles' famous tragedy, but his purpose is so very different that the two plays are hardly comparable. His minor details may come from other sources. A host of Greek dramatists had treated the subject, and the young Julius Caesar, also, had taken a fling at it.<sup>54</sup>

Discussion.—Seneca has not only exhausted the natural possibilities of the subject for sensational and dreadful effects. He has introduced extraneous scenes, also, and germane and extraneous alike are strung together by the flimsiest dialogue in order to retain the semblance of a drama. Seneca makes no attempt to construct a logical and inevitable progression of events or to individualize the characters into something more than puppets of fate. Since the career of Oedipus is to be interpreted as an illustration of determinism (980–94), portrayal of character is superfluous for Seneca except that he wishes to present Oedipus as a tyrant obsessed with a consciousness of his guilt. Only the curtest respects, furthermore, are paid to details of dramatic technique. The most difficult problem in dramatizing the material is to avoid the embarrassment of two discoveries. Sophocles accomplished this only by the implausible expedient of identifying the shepherd who exposed Oedipus with the one survivor of Laius' struggle with the "robbers." Seneca has eliminated this implausibility, but he has two discoveries.<sup>55</sup> Jocasta's revelation of the nature of Laius' death convinces Oedipus that he is the murderer.<sup>56</sup> Mechanical haste in bringing



on the Corinthian, however, prevents this untimely climax from becoming disturbingly obvious. But smooth articulation of the dramatic action also appears to be of little concern for Seneca; it is hardly pertinent to his chief interests.

"Seneca . . .," we read in the preface of the *Oedipus* of Dryden and Lee, "as if there were no such thing as nature to be minded in a play, is always running after pompous expression, pointed sentences, and philosophical notions, more proper for the study than the stage: the Frenchman followed a wrong scent; and the Roman was absolutely at cold hunting." Certainly the material furnishes Seneca an excellent excuse for delivering Stoic sermons on several of his favorite subjects, especially the principle that a king who inspires fear must himself be subject to it—a good theme for Seneca's pupil Nero. The quarrel of Oedipus and Creon, so nicely prepared for and worked into the progression of events in Sophocles, is here used for this sermon and has no important effect upon the action.

The play opens with a long soliloquy—though Jocasta may be present—in which Oedipus reveals the horror of his own conscience and his dark past. The consumption of the plague, also, is dwelt upon. Finally, another harrowing picture out of Oedipus' past, his clash with the Sphinx, is presented.

The chorus now continue with a depressingly vivid description of the plague.

Creon's chilling account of receiving the oracle brings more horror, and the oracle itself is all too plain. Like several other references, the oracle foretells the misfortunes of Oedipus' sons as well as those of the king himself. These references contribute to the general gloom of the play, but being extraneous they tend to disrupt its logical unity. The fearful curse which Oedipus pronounces upon the murderer is no less obvious than the oracle, thus losing the simple and effective irony of the curse in Sophocles. But the revolting details of an unnatural marriage have been added.

At this point the Sophoclean tradition of events is abandoned in order to insert the account of the sacrifice. This is gory in the extreme and doubtless original with Seneca. The bull's fleeing the light of day, of course, suggests Oedipus' blinding himself, as the manner of the heifer's death suggests the suicide of Jocasta. The splanchnology, too, is painfully clear in its application to the house of Oedipus.

Here, perhaps as temporary relief, Seneca has kindly introduced a choral dithyramb to Bacchus, which constitutes a fine display of geographical erudition.<sup>57</sup>

The dreadful sacrifice leads only to a still more harrowing episode,

the exorcism of the ghost of Laius. Returning from this ordeal, Creon is very loath to reveal its results to Oedipus. His reluctance is nicely brought out in the assignment of lines. Oedipus is given precisely two lines and Creon precisely one during several exchanges—a dramatic subtlety used in the opening scene of Aeschylus' *Prometheus*. But of course Creon is eventually brought to his gruesome description. It begins in the best classic manner with an account of the place where the rite was performed. But the best classic manner quickly gives way to more of the magic, the supernatural, and the horrible.

At first glance Seneca would appear to have lost an opportunity for exploiting the horrible by not having Jocasta on stage when the discovery of Oedipus' identity is made, or at least by not portraying her reactions when this point is being approached. In Seneca's version, it is the Corinthian who tries to deter Oedipus from pursuing this knowledge. In Sophocles the Corinthian is characterized by optimistic eagerness, which effectively contrasts with Jocasta's efforts to deter Oedipus and with the reluctance of the shepherd of Laius. In Seneca the loss of Jocasta's reactions is a serious one; but it is apparently necessary, for they must be reserved intact for the final scene.

The Messenger's description of Oedipus' blinding himself is another masterpiece in depicting the horrible. It is almost forgotten, however, after we have seen what Seneca has in store for us and what he can accomplish when he extends himself; for the final scene is horrible beyond all words. Jocasta commits suicide by plunging Oedipus' sword into her "capacious womb,"<sup>58</sup> and the blinded Oedipus seems to stumble over her corpse as he shuffles off into miserable exile.

## 7. *THYESTES*

The *Thyestes* in its own crude way is a powerful tragedy of revenge. A secondary theme, crime's perpetuation of crime, is given strong emphasis especially in the opening scenes and at the very close of the play. This theme is carried on in the *Agamemnon*, where vengeance for vengeance is foreshadowed. Such a theme was a timely one for the court of Nero. That Emperor had murdered or was soon to murder his stepbrother Britannicus and his own mother, who incidentally had murdered her husband, the Emperor Claudius. Uncertainty as to the dates of these plays, however, precludes any assumption of a definite reference to these contemporary events.

The *Thyestes* surpasses many of Seneca's plays in its technical execution and theatrical qualities. Dramatic dialogue is maintained throughout. Only one iambic speech extends to fifty lines. The dramatic action



is straightforward, though it could hardly be otherwise in a plot of such simplicity. The tone, as usually in Seneca, is dire and unrelieved. Great care has been taken to integrate the choral lyrics with the dramatic action, but these are somewhat too long and at times too boring.

**Source and influence.**—The story of Atreus and Thyestes was one of the most frequently dramatized Greek legends. Sophocles wrote an *Atreus*. We know of some nine Greek plays entitled *Thyestes*, including one tragedy by Euripides and perhaps two by Sophocles. Still other titles were used, such as Euripides' *Cretan Women*, and various phases of this complicated story were covered; but the banquet was its most famous event. Among the Romans this story was easily the most popular for tragedy. Four tragedies entitled *Atreus* and perhaps seven entitled *Thyestes* are known to have been written. These included plays by the masters Ennius and Accius, but most famous of all was the *Thyestes* of Lucius Varius Rufus, the intimate friend of Vergil and Horace, which Quintilian (10. 1. 98) thought comparable to any Greek tragedy.

Only fragments of a few of these Greek and Latin plays have been preserved, however, and they furnish little of interest in connection with Seneca's play. One point is noteworthy: in some versions Thyestes returned of his own accord. Hence Atreus might well be afraid of him and thus be driven to crime. In Seneca, however, Atreus invites the return in order to obtain his vengeance. In any treatment the banquet must have been gory and dreadful.

The *Thyestes*, a model play of revenge, has exerted more influence on English drama than any other play of Seneca.

**Discussion.**—In form the prelude between Tantalus and the Fury is somewhat reminiscent of various scenes in Greek tragedy, such as the prelude of the *Alcestis* or that of the *Trojan Women* and the scene between Iris and Lyssa in the *Heracles* of Euripides. In content, however, this scene is typically Senecan. The Fury lays grim stress on crime's passing from one generation to another in this house, and her words foreshadow every remarkable event and every dreadful future crime in the whole saga; but her most vivid prediction is reserved for the coming feast of Thyestes. After this it is small wonder that the ghost of Tantalus prefers his Hell.

The first choral song completes the saga by dwelling upon the past atrocities of Pelops and Tantalus and Tantalus' punishment in the underworld. Thus this lyric is bound to the previous scene. Cessation of the house's perpetual crime is the theme of the chorus' prayer.

Atreus now comes on to flagellate himself to fury and revenge. The efforts of his subaltern to deter him bring out his determination and the

viciousness of tyranny—a favorite theme with Seneca—and again the inevitable progression from crime to greater crime. Finally, Atreus forms his plan: Thyestes will be lured into his clutches by his own desire for revenge. The prospect of return to power and escape from poverty will overcome all scruples if not of the father at least of his sons!

The chorus, who have apparently not been present during this scene, note the renewed harmony of the house. The main theme of their lyric, however, is the Stoic principle that the true king is he who has no fear and who rules his own soul—a theme that has real significance for the subsequent episode.

True to the prediction of Atreus, Thyestes does return. But he seems to have no desire to harm Atreus. His extreme reluctance to entrust himself to his brother and his desire to go back to the simple life of the free exile give him the Stoic virtue of which the chorus have just sung.<sup>69</sup> Like them, Thyestes preaches against the life of the tyrant. The palace and the customs which he describes are those of the Palatine and the Roman emperors, especially Nero (455–67). Thyestes as a Stoic philosopher is hardly consistent with his actual return or with the motives predicted by Atreus; but this characterization does facilitate an excellent scene of irony when his son pleads with Thyestes to trust Atreus and restore them to wealth and power. Such a retiring Thyestes, furthermore, causes Atreus by contrast to appear all the more monstrous.

Irony plays a still more important role in the reunion of the two brothers, neither of whom can restrain his hatred without a great effort, as we observe in their grim asides. The innocent children of Thyestes are given as pledges of his faith, and Atreus in his last line promises to offer the destined victims to the gods! This last is reminiscent of Electra's similarly appalling line as she receives Clytemnestra in Euripides' play (1141).

The irony continues as the chorus celebrate the strength of family ties and the wonder of concord after war. But, as an introduction to the peripety, their lyric ends on the mutability of fortune. Afterward, the Messenger enters to give a gruesome description of this palace and a harrowing account of the "sacrifice." The chorus respond with a description of the turning aside of the sun and the apparently imminent destruction of the world—a strange motive in classical poetry, but a favorite one with Seneca.

Like Aeschylus' Clytemnestra after the murder of Agamemnon, Atreus appears to gloat over his deed. An interior scene, a rarity in Roman tragedy, now reveals the lonely Thyestes trying to drown his



years of grief in the joys of the banquet. But strange misgivings rise up to choke his pleasure. Throughout he sings his lines in lyric anapests. The effect of this eerie scene is very powerful.

Atrous comes up to mock Thyestes and finally presents the heads of his sons for the ghastly climax of the play. The one defense of Atrous is that moderation should be shown in crime and not in revenge. Thus again the theme of perpetuation of crime is emphasized, and the play ends with Thyestes' resigned prediction of vengeance.

#### 8. *AGAMEMNON*<sup>60</sup>

The story of the *Agamemnon* is a continuation of that of the *Thyestes*. Like the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, this play deals mainly with the return and murder of Agamemnon. Many other Greek and early Roman tragedies dramatized the fate of the house of Atrous, however, and Seneca seems to have been influenced by some of these.<sup>61</sup> Noteworthy points of difference from Aeschylus are found in the introduction of the ghost of Thyestes for the prologue and the escape of Orestes at the end of the play. Besides suggesting the larger framework of the action, these innovations stress the perpetuation of crime in this royal house. The central section of Seneca's play is given over to the messenger's speech and to Cassandra. The first brings out the destruction of the sacrilegious Greeks by the storm, the second the destruction of the victor himself by his wife and her paramour. The play lacks a central figure; but again Seneca shows little interest in character. The action progresses naturally, and there is more dramatic dialogue than usually in Seneca.

A few words from this play (line 730) are scratched on a wall in Pompeii,<sup>62</sup> and it is not impossible that the play was produced in one of the two theaters there. But Seneca had sojourned at Pompeii in his youth and visited there later in life; it was the home of his great friend Lucilius.<sup>63</sup>

**Discussion.**—As the *Thyestes* opens with the ghost of Tantalus, so the *Agamemnon* opens with the ghost of Thyestes, and this ghost like that one would prefer its place in Hell to this palace of dreadful crimes. The whole series is again recounted, and the coming slaughter of Agamemnon is foretold. Finally the ghost encourages his wavering son Aegisthus, though later in the play no reference is made to the ghost and Aegisthus seems never to have heard it.

Clytemnestra's wavering, the ominous admonitions of the Nurse, and the bickerings with Aegisthus—all these have distinct dramatic possibilities. They suggest a new and interesting approach to this old

material. Properly they belong to a treatment which makes Clytemnestra a very ordinary human being caught in the trap of adultery and forced to murder her husband. Seneca's primary interest seems to lie not in a study of her character but in the moral theme that one crime must inevitably lead to another and that any woman caught in this situation must act in similar fashion. The alternative for Clytemnestra here, as Atrous claims in the *Thyestes* (203), also, is to kill or be killed. When Aegisthus enters, Clytemnestra plays the foil for him as the Nurse has earlier done for her in order that the inevitability of this crime may be further emphasized with rhetorical point and cogency. Any emphasis on her vacillation would be wholly pointless in view of her minor role in the remainder of the play; and the question whether her sudden change is genuine or pretended, long debated among critics, is not, therefore, of any real importance.

Disregard for character, however, has involved Seneca in certain inconsistencies. Aegisthus is craven and base. He can plausibly become extremely cruel to Electra after the murder. But his Stoic readiness to commit suicide (304–5) certainly does not seem consistent with such a character. Clytemnestra's talk of saving her children from a mad stepmother (198–99), furthermore, seems ridiculous in the light of her later desire to put Orestes and Electra out of the way.

At the mid-point of the play, the rhetorical fury of the messenger's storm is unleashed and threatens to blow the dramatic action quite away. Aeschylus had the natural elements run their course in some twenty lines; but Seneca, challenged also by Vergil's famous storm in the first book of the *Aeneid* and by many another such tour de force, adds a hundred to this score.<sup>64</sup>

Cassandra's scenes are effective, and the use of a second chorus of Trojan captives is noteworthy.<sup>65</sup> Madness is realistically suggested by the speeches of Cassandra—German scholars' complaints of illogicality and their tamperings with the text are sufficient proof of this.<sup>66</sup> In her repartee with Agamemnon, however, Cassandra is much too smart for Greek or modern taste. The king himself, on stage for only a few lines, plays a very minor role in the action. After he has gone into the palace, the chorus sing a long interlude on the labors of Hercules. Although, at the end, a reference to Hercules' taking Troy in ten days brings this into superficial connection with Agamemnon, this distant subject may have been chosen in order not to jeopardize the suspense at the climax of the play—a Euripidean technique.

After the murder Strophius appears "pat . . . like the catastrophe of the old comedy." Thus Orestes is spirited away, but Electra is left to the fury of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.<sup>67</sup> Forced by one crime to



another, they are now utterly heartless villains. But Cassandra's final prediction, the last words of the play, is one of vengeance and more crime to come with the return of Orestes.

### 9. HERCULES ON OETA

Like the earliest dithyrambic tragedy, perhaps, the *Hercules on Oeta* glorifies the passion of a divinity—the death and rebirth of Hercules. But the moral spirit of this play looks to the Christian future rather than to the Greek past. The triumph of this laboring Stoic over suffering and death, the feeling that the world should end with his destruction, and his epiphany to his mother—all this breathes a mystical allegory not unlike that of the story of Seneca's contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth. Hercules furnished the outstanding example of persecuted virtue in Greek legend. Long before the origin of formal Stoicism, he was the ideal Stoic hero. It is not surprising, then, that the Stoic Seneca reworked both of the plays on Hercules known to have been written by the leading Greek tragic poets. The very features which made Hercules a poor subject for Greek tragedy made him a splendid one for Seneca.

The shortcomings of the play are typically Senecan.<sup>68</sup> One needs the devotion of a saint and the endurance of a martyr to bear up under the endless repetition of Hercules' toils. Every section of the play is too lengthy, and the whole is over two hundred verses longer than any other ancient drama. It has been called the most formless product having the pretense of art which has been preserved from ancient times.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, its formlessness, like its change of scene and length, is almost Elizabethan. Still, the play, though as crude and rough as Hercules himself, has its virtues. The description of Hercules' death, however extravagant, is imaginative and powerful. One may recall the magnificent description of the death of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Hercules' epiphany, last of all, and the chorus' invocation of the new divinity furnish a glorious finale.

**Sources.**—The main source of the play is doubtless Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, although plays on Hercules were written by minor Greek dramatists. The story was told also in other genres, and the influence of Ovid seems to be undeniable. He had treated the subject in his *Metamorphoses* (9. 134–272) and in his *Heroides* (9). So much of Seneca's play is original, however, that these dependencies are of little significance.

**Discussion.**—The *Hercules on Oeta* opens apparently in Euboea. Hercules declares that he has fulfilled his mission on earth, and for his

reward he now asks Jupiter to raise him to the stars. Other than this prayer, there is no indication, such as the oracle in Sophocles, that a crisis in his life has been reached. At the end of his monologue-prologue, the chorus of captives are driven off singing of their fallen city, of death, and of the might of Hercules. Iole follows with a monody which incidentally gives some exposition and thus prepares for the coming scene. This prelude fixes attention upon Hercules and also prepares for the sacrifice at which the poisoned robe will do its work.

The locale now apparently shifts from Euboea to Trachis. Deianira, "like a mother tigress," rages with jealous wrath against Iole and Hercules. Nothing that the Nurse can say consoles her. Seneca has made no effort to exalt the character of Deianira. His interest, as we should expect, lies rather in depicting her in violent emotional upheavals. Seneca also emphasizes the irony of Deianira's being able to cause the death of Hercules, a thing which all the monsters and Juno herself have so far failed to do.<sup>70</sup> The Nurse, however, finally prevails upon her mistress to resort to the use of magic to regain the love of Hercules. Deianira then abandons any intention of harming Hercules and determines, as in Sophocles, to anoint a robe with the blood of Nessus.

After a lyric of Horatian praise of the simple life sung by the chorus of handmaidens, Deianira enters in great consternation. The idea that Nessus could wish Hercules no good has occurred to her, and she has observed the consuming effect of the blood upon the fleece.<sup>71</sup> Hyllus appears and describes the destruction of his father. He does not, however, upbraid his mother, nor does she without a word retire—we might forgive her more readily if she did! Indeed her remorse now becomes as insanely violent as her jealous wrath has formerly been. Hyllus, of course, must play the foil and attempt to dissuade her from her lengthily avowed purpose of suicide. Her fate is left uncertain at the end of the act, when she rushes off and Hyllus follows to prevent her.

The choral song does not jeopardize this suspense, though it dwells on mortality and predicts the end of the world now that Hercules has been destroyed. Hercules upon his entrance continues this same theme and bemoans the irony of his dying at the hands of a mortal woman. The chorus express their sympathy in short verses. Alcmena, his mother, now appears to console him. In Sophocles, it will be remembered, the hero called for his mother but was told that she was not in Trachis (*Trachiniae* 1148–54). She is essentially an extraneous figure, but her wild grief nicely plays the foil for the Stoic heroism of Hercules and effectively motivates his final epiphany. At Hyllus' an-



nouncement of the innocence of Deianira, Hercules recognizes his fate. The theme of the irony of his downfall is now dropped. His mystical triumph over death begins.

After the chorus initiates the crescendo of Hercules' apotheosis, a Messenger enters to report the majestic end of the hero. Alcmena follows to bewail the small compass of the ashes of her colossal son. Even these ashes, however, will protect her and terrify kings.<sup>72</sup> Her hymn of mourning is ended by the epiphany of her son. His virtue has again conquered death; the prayer of his first lines in the play has been answered.

## 10. OCTAVIA

(Authorship uncertain.)

The *Octavia* is the only Roman tragedy on a historical subject that has been preserved, although this type of play had occasionally been written since the time of Naevius. The language, style, outlook, and general structure of the *Octavia* seem to justify its inclusion among Seneca's plays, and some scholars accept its traditional assignment to him.<sup>73</sup> Other scholars see in the play a work by an unknown author shortly after the death of Nero. Seneca himself takes part in the play; some details of the manner of Nero's actual death, which occurred in A.D. 68, three years after the death of Seneca, are foretold; reference is made to events, such as the burning of Rome in 64, which occurred only shortly before Seneca's death; and certain metrical peculiarities are sometimes alleged to indicate that Seneca did not write the play. The composition or possession of such a document during the later years of Nero, of course, would have constituted a certain death warrant if known, whereas immediately after the revolution it would have done honor to its author.

**Discussion.**—This play appears to be an important historical document. It records events with accuracy as well as with monotonous repetition.<sup>74</sup> Chronology has been telescoped primarily in order to secure unity of time. Thus in the play Nero marries Poppaea on the day after his divorce, whereas actually he waited until several days afterward.<sup>75</sup> In order further to vilify Nero, the house of Claudius, especially Octavia herself, is presented somewhat more favorably than historical accuracy warrants, though sooner or later most of the crimes of the women of the whole Julian line are adequately covered.

As drama the *Octavia* suffers from a too close adherence to historical fact. Doubtless the events were too well known to be distorted. Perhaps also it was the tradition in Roman historical plays to adhere

very strictly to the known facts, especially since such plays had often been written on contemporary events.<sup>76</sup> The author of the *Octavia*, furthermore, is obviously desirous of painting Nero in colors as black as possible. Dramatic effects are not his primary concern. The play lacks action and an integral plot. Poppaea's misgivings, though historically significant, lead to nothing in the play; the civil strife introduces an exciting complication, but it is quickly resolved; Octavia is wholly passive and is never brought face to face with Nero. For a contemporary Roman, reading or viewing historical events, however, the play must have had a powerful effect.

Noteworthy is the emphasis placed upon the theme of the stepmother in reference to Agrippina's crimes. This suggests but does not prove that the theme of the stepmother in so many of Seneca's plays may have been something more than a rhetorical commonplace. The tendency of the chorus to break up into mere groups of followers, also, is striking. Their songs are invariably written in simple anapests. Indeed, of all classical tragedies this play perhaps shows the most informal handling of the chorus. From this it is only a short step to the modern form of tragedy.

Octavia opens the play with her mourning anapests, reviewing the crimes of the house and bewailing her fate very much like the Electra of Sophocles. She wanders off as the Nurse comes on with staid iambics to tell again the story of criminal deeds. Octavia returns with more anapests. She now likens herself to Electra—Electra without a brother and avenger. The Nurse tries in vain to console her. As the conversation develops into iambics, Octavia relates her dreams of Nero's slaughtering both her brother and herself. The theme of Poppaea is now brought in, and Nero's crimes are repeated. Again like Electra, Octavia thinks of attempting herself to slay Nero, but the Nurse reminds her that she does not have the strength (174–75).

A chorus of Octavia's partisans deprecate the rumor of her divorce and vilify Nero. A new character, identified as Seneca by an early reference to his exile on Corsica, now enters to deplore his high fortune and ruminate on the corruption of man. Nero makes his entrance, deftly characterized by his ordering the death of two famous kinsmen in his first lines. Seneca protests, only to bring out the tyrannical cruelty of Nero. The tyrant claims the divine right of kings (492). A contention over his proposal to marry Poppaea ensues. The scene closes with Nero's imperiously commanding silence and announcing his wedding on the morrow.

As if in response to this announcement, the ghost of Agrippina appears with an ominous torch for the accursed marriage. After a



gruesome reference to her murder, she effectively predicts the miserable death of Nero. This appearance of a ghost nicely symbolizes the passage of a night.

Octavia comes on to caution her partisans, but they as chorus respond by calling on the people to rise against the Emperor. A short scene between Poppaea and her Nurse follows. Instead of happiness in the arms of Nero, Poppaea has found dreadful apparitions of Agrippina, of her own former husband, and of her son—all of whom had already met or were soon to meet violent death, as was Poppaea herself.

After a choral lyric by those who praise Poppaea, the Messenger hastens in to report a popular uprising in favor of Octavia. The same chorus responds with a lyric on the invincibility of Love. Nero appears in a rage. He will slay Octavia and burn Rome.

After the chorus of the partisans of Octavia remark the irony of popular favor's bringing ruin, citing examples from Roman history, the play ends as it began with a lyric lament of Octavia. In the concluding lines her partisans, with annihilating bitterness, denounce the barbarism of Rome and its delight in the blood of citizens.