## XVII.—Seneca's Tragedies. A New Interpretation

BERTHE MARTI

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

Seneca's aim in the tragedies as well as in the prose works was to teach Neo-Stoicism. Ms E has preserved the order in which he intended the tragedies to be read. They form a series, introduced and concluded by a play on Hercules; within that frame the plays, each one illustrating some Stoic idea in dramatic form, are arranged according to a deliberate order. The *Troades* and *Phoenissae*, named after the chorus, are centered upon the problems of life, death and destiny. The *Medea* and *Phaedra*, named after the heroines, provide exemplars for a Treatise of the Passions. The last group (*Agamemnon, Oedipus, Thyestes*), named after the heroes, deals with the problem of free choice in life and of sin and retribution.

Perhaps no ancient writings have suffered more from the changing tastes of succeeding generations than Seneca's tragedies. Scaliger's extravagant praise of them, "Seneca . . . quem nullo Graecorum maiestate inferiorem existimo, cultu vero ac nitore etiam Euripide maiorem," is echoed by many of his contemporaries. Modern critics in general find themselves in agreement with Nisard's acid comments on Seneca's "tragédie de recette" and the ingredients of which it is composed. In both periods these extreme positions are due in part to a wrong estimate of Seneca's relation to Greek drama. In their almost complete ignorance of the tragedies of ancient Greece, the Elizabethans saw in his plays perfect examples of the dramatic technique of antiquity. To modern readers they appear as debased imitations of Greek drama. Recently, however, the Senecan tragedies have been reexamined in an attempt to arrive at a fairer estimate of their literary value.[1] What in my opinion is lacking in most of these studies is an effort to determine Seneca's object in writing the plays, for while from a purely aesthetic point of view much in them deserves the most severe strictures, the critics who blame them for lacking the qualities of Euripides' or Sophocles' drama are guilty of one of the cardinal sins of criticism.

[1] Léon Herrmann, *Le Théâtre de Sénèque* (Paris, 1924); C. W. Mendell, *Our Seneca* (New Haven, 1941). See also T. S. Eliot's introduction to *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies Translated into English* (Tudor Translations ed. by C. Whibley, London, 1927); H. W. Wells, "Senecan Influence on Elizabethan Tragedy: A re-estimation," *Shakesp. Ass. Bull.* 19 (1944) 71–84; M. T. Herrick, "Senecan Influence in *Gorboduc*," *Studies in Speech and Drama in Honor of A. M. Drummond* (Ithaca, 1944) 78–104.

The discussion of any literary work should start with an enquiry into the writer's aim and the measure of success he has attained in achieving his aim.

Seneca repeatedly expresses his convictions as to the value and aim of literature. Life is too short, he says, to be wasted in such superfluous occupations as the study of philology, of dialectic, or the reading of the lyric poets (*Ep.* 49.5 ff.). Literature must be the interpreter of life and should teach justice, moral duty, abstinence and purity. Let the writer therefore give lessons in virtue, let him show by the example of Ulysses how to love one's country, one's wife, one's father, and how after shipwreck to sail on to honorable ends (*Ep.* 88, *passim*). Literature is to be judged from the quality of its ethical content; its one purpose is to teach. This is of course the orthodox Stoic doctrine,[2] an echo of which is found in the *Praefatio* of the fifth book of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*. There Quintilian criticizes the writers who hold that the sole duty of the orator is to instruct and who think that appeals to the emotions are to be avoided because all disturbance of the mind is a fault. These writers think, he says, that the attempt to charm is not only superfluous in a pleader but unworthy of a self-respecting man.[3]

What then was Seneca's conception of the drama? Moses Hadas[4] assumes that Seneca, like most Roman playwrights, wrote tragedies for the sole purpose of entertaining a Roman audience used to spectacular and often violent shows and fond of virtuosity and rhetoric. But this is contrary to Seneca's idea of literature. To go to the theatre merely to be entertained by dramatic representations of mythological tales would be as frivolous a waste of time as to read the lyric poets. In the *De Brevitate Vitae* Seneca attacks the poets for "fostering human frailties by the tales in which they represent that Jupiter, under the enticement of the pleasures of a lover, doubled the length of the night. For what is

[2] C. N. Smiley, "Latinitas and Ἑλληνισμός, The Influence of the Stoic Theory of Style," *Bull. U. Wisc., Phil. and Lit. Series* 3 (1903–07) 211 ff.

[3] *Prooemium:* Fuerunt et clari quidem auctores, quibus solum videretur oratoris officium docere; namque et affectus duplici ratione excludendos putabant, primum quia vitium esset omnis animi perturbatio, deinde quia iudicem a veritate pelli misericordia, gratia, similibusque non oporteret, et voluptatem audientium petere, cum vincendi tantum gratia diceretur, non modo agenti supervacuum sed vix etiam viro dignum arbitrabantur.

[4] "The Roman Stamp of Seneca's Tragedies," *AJPh* 60 (1939) 220–231.

it but to inflame our vices to inscribe the name of the gods as their sponsors, and to represent the excused indulgence of divinity as an example to our own weakness?" (16.5).[5] "Veritatis simplex oratio est," he says (*Ep.* 49.12), quoting Euripides. Yet he must acknowledge the power of poetry. "The same words are listened to with less attention and affect us less when they are expressed in prose. When rhythm and regular metres are added and compress a lofty thought, this same idea is as if hurtled with a fuller fling" (*Ep.* 108.10). But poetry must have a moral purpose and, moreover, must be interpreted not as the scholar does when he deals only with the use and meaning of words, but as the philosopher who explains the ethical meaning and extracts the moral (*Ep.* 108.24 ff.). In this Seneca echoes the traditional theories of the Stoics, who even saw advantages in having the philosophers themselves use verse. "As our breath produces a louder sound when it passes through the long and narrow opening of the trumpet and escapes by a hole which widens at the end," Seneca quotes Cleanthes as stating, "even so the fettering rules of poetry clarify our meaning" (*Ep.* 108.10).

Just as poetry is more powerful than prose in rousing men, so the theatre could be a powerful inspiration: "Have you noticed how the theatre reechoes whenever any words are spoken whose truth we appreciate generally and confirm unanimously?" (*Ep.* 108.9). Seneca's frequent quotations from the dramatists show that he fully realised the didactic possibilities of drama.[6] He also knew that the theatre with its mimes and dramatic recitations was more attractive to his contemporaries than any other genre:

> Privatum urbe tota sonat pulpitum. In hoc viri, in hoc feminae tripudiant. Mares inter se uxoresque contendunt uter det latus illis. Deinde sub persona cum diu trita frons est, transitur ad galeam: philosophiae nulla cura est (*Nat. Quaest.* 7.32).[7]

[5] On the attempt made to use this passage to date the plays see O. Herzog, "Datierung der Tragödien des Seneca," *RhM* 77 (1928) 55–59.

[6] Cf. for instance *Ep.* 115.16 about one of Euripides' plays: dabat in illa fabula poenas Bellerophontes, quas in sua quisque dat. Nulla enim avaritia sine poena est, quamvis satis sit ipsa poenarum.

[7] Cf. also *Ira* 2.2.4 f.: Cantus nos nonnumquam et citata modulatio instigat Martiusque ille tubarum sonus; movet mentes et atrox pictura et iustissimorum suppliciorum tristis adspectus; inde est quod adridemus ridentibus et contristat nos turba maerentium et effervescimus ad aliena certamina. Quae non sunt irae, non magis quam tristitia est, quae ad conspectum mimici naufragii contrahit non magis quam timor, qui Hannibale post Cannas moenia circumsidente lectorum percurrit animos, sed omnia ista motus sunt animorum moveri nolentium nec adfectus sed principia proludentia adfectibus.

While deploring this fact Seneca realised that drama, with its vivid representation of men struggling against destiny, might become a useful illustration of what he taught in the less popular *Moral Essays* and *Moral Epistles*. His aim always remained the teaching of philosophy, but since it was proving a bitter pill for his contemporaries to swallow, he used the dramatic form as sugarcoating, somewhat as Lucretius before him had used poetry to make Epicureanism more palatable. His readers would be interested in any new handling of the traditional themes of Greek drama. This would insure him large audiences for the public readings of the plays and wide circulation. Since drama wields such power of inspiration "how much more do you think this holds true when such things are uttered by a philosopher, when he introduces verses among his wholesome precepts, that he may thus make those verses sink more effectively into the mind of the novice?" (*Ep.* 108.9).

It is my purpose to show in this paper that Seneca did not intend to write plays after the manner of the Greek dramatists but that he adapted the technique of drama to the teaching of philosophy. For as Livy had observed of history that its great value consists in floodlighting the examples of the past by placing them for our instruction as if on a bright monument, so tragedy, dealing as it does with universals, with grave events and symbolic figures, might profitably be used as another vehicle to demonstrate the great ethical truths of Stoicism. In order to do so he did not simply translate Greek plays and adapt them to his purpose by stuffing them with Stoic *sententiae*, but instead composed philosophical propaganda-plays. He did not mean to have these pseudo-tragedies acted,[8] for in his mind the individual plays were but parts of the whole series; he merely made use of the methods of the dramatists for the purpose of spreading his particular brand of eclectic Stoicism. In them he combined elements of the diatribe, satire and versified dialogue with those of drama, and he emphasised ethics and philosophy at the expense of plot and action. Thus his tragedies did not conform to the rules laid down by Aristotle, nor did Seneca intend them to. "Istae vero non sunt tragoediae,"

[8] G. Boissier, "Les tragédies de Sénèque ont-elles été représentées?" *Journal de l'Inst. Pub.* (1861) 1–23; Th. Birt, "Was hat Seneca mit seinen Tragödien gewollt?" *NJA* 27 (1911) 336–364; C. Lindskog, *Studien z. Antiken Drama* (Lund, 1897) 48–63; J. Hippler, *Annaeanae Quaestiones Scaenicae* (Darmstadt, 1926); Léon Herrmann, "Les tragédies de Sénèque étaient-elles destinées au théâtre?" *RBPh* 3 (1924) 841–846. See also ch. 2 of his *Le Théâtre de Sénèque*.

says Leo in the preface to his edition, "sed declamationes ad tragoediae amussim compositae et in actus deductae. . . . Itaque non comparabimus cum graecis has tragoedias ut artis opera, sed earum argumenta tantum et argumentorum tractationem."[9] His characters remind T. S. Eliot of the "members of a minstrel troupe sitting in a semi-circle, rising in turn each to do his 'number' or varying their recitations by a song or a little back-chat."[10] Seneca's drama is something entirely different from the conventional imitations of the great Greek dramatists by his Roman precedessors.

This fact explains Quintilian's silence concerning Seneca's plays. While he quotes Seneca about the propriety of using a certain expression in tragedy (*Inst. Or.* 3.8.31), and states that Seneca had dealt with almost all the fields of knowledge (*ibid.* 10.1.128), he does not mention him in his catalogue of the Roman successors of the Greek playwrights. Yet he knew Seneca's *Medea* and quoted from that play. He included in his review of Roman tragedy Ovid's *Medea* and Varius' *Thyestes* but left out Seneca's *Medea* and his *Thyestes* as well as the remaining seven plays. The conclusion seems to me clear: Quintilian did not consider them real tragedies; his omission of Seneca's name from the review of the Roman dramatists was deliberate and justified. This omission has baffled many scholars and led some to argue against the authenticity of the plays, but the arguments against Seneca's authorship are far too slight to outweigh the manuscript evidence.[11]

Ever since Leo's work on the text of Seneca's tragedies, editors have agreed that of the two recensions known as traditions A and E, E, represented by Codex Etruscus (Laurentianus 37, 13), should be the basis on which to establish the text of the plays. One of the differences between the two traditions is the inclusion in A of the *Octavia* and the different order in which the plays are given in A and E. Whether Seneca published his own edition of the tragedies

[9] Vol. I, p. 158. Leo adds that Seneca's inspiration in the plays was not the tragic but the scholastic Muse. In his view rhetoric and declamation were Seneca's aim in writing the tragedies, and he classified them as *Tragoediae Rhetoricae* along with Ovid's *Medea*, Asinius Pollio's drama etc.

[10] Eliot comes close to a true conception of Seneca's drama when he states (xviii f.) that Seneca "created his own genre," that of plays intended for recitation.

[11] Bibliography in Münscher, *JAW* 192 (1922) 109–214 and in Herrmann, *op. cit.* (see note 1) ch. 1. The contents of the *Octavia* as well as its omission from E have led the majority of scholars to regard it as the work of some later writer. The fact that it does not fit into the scheme suggested in this paper may provide an additional argument against Seneca's authorship.

or left them for his executor to edit, I am convinced that E has preserved the order planned by Seneca: *Hercules*, *Troades*, *Phoenissae*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Oedipus*, *Agamennon* (sic), *Thyestes*, *Hercules*.[12] I do not mean to imply that this is the order in which he wrote the plays, for this to my mind cannot be determined in the present state of our knowledge.[13] But that he had a definite pattern in mind, that the nine plays form one whole and that Seneca intended them to be read in the order preserved by E can I think be proved.

Upon reading the titles of the plays in E, one fact is immediately obvious: they form a series, introduced and concluded by a play on Hercules, and within that frame the plays are arranged according to a deliberate order, the first two being named after the chorus (*Troades*, *Phoenissae*), the next two after the heroines (*Medea*, *Phaedra*), the next three after the heroes (*Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*). Birt, who noticed this, does not seem to have fully realised the significance of his observation.[14] The fact that in the first tragedy Seneca has represented the passion and in the last the apotheosis of the patron saint of Stoicism, Hercules, is an indication that the series forms a philosophical whole, and that Seneca intended it to be, like all his other works, a piece of neo-Stoic propaganda. It is my belief that Stoic readers would, upon seeing the titles of the plays, realise that in them dramatic treatment was to be given to the sins and passions which prevent the attainment of virtue and wisdom. Even a cursory reading would show them the principles underlying Seneca's choice of subject-matter and his arrangement of the plays. The first group (*Troades*, *Phoenissae*) seems to be primarily centered upon the religious problems of life, death and destiny. The two plays represent men and women who, in their rebellion against the injustice of their fate, question the goodness of Providence. The next group (*Medea*,

[12] The order of A is as follows: *Hercules Furens*, *Thyestes*, *Thebais*, *Hippolytus*, *Oedipus*, *Troas*, *Medea*, *Agamemnon*, *Octavia*, *Hercules Oetaeus*.

[13] C. Cichorius ("Pomponius Secundus und Senecas Tragödien," *Röm. Studien* [Berlin, 1922] 426–429) shows that some must have been read publicly soon after 51 A.D.; K. Münscher ("Senecas Werke, Untersuchungen zur Abfassungszeit und Echtheit," *Ph* Supplbd. 16, 1 [1922]) attempts to settle the chronology of the plays almost entirely on metrical grounds. As in the case of Plautus' plays, however, I do not believe that the order of growing metrical complexity is necessarily equivalent to the chronological order. Nor does it seem sound to assume that Seneca had to wait for the publication of Caesius Bassus' treatise on versification to learn the metrical theory of the *Derivata*.

[14] "Zu Seneca's Tragödien," *RhM* 34 (1879) 531 f. Cf. also his "Was hat Seneca mit seinen Tragödien gewollt?" (see note 8).

*Phaedra*) is a study of character and emphasises the effect of strong emotions, specifically passionate love, upon the lives of a group of human beings. These two plays illustrate the most significant contribution of the Stoics to psychology, the analysis of the effect of emotional impulses upon the struggle between vice and virtue.[15] They provide *exempla* for a Treatise of the Passions. The last group (*Agamemnon*, *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*) deals with ethics and is focussed primarily upon the problem of free choice in life, and of sin and retribution. This does not mean that Fate, Fortune and Destiny are not involved in all the plays or that the passions of the main characters are not an important element in every one of the plays. Seneca was haunted by the thought of death and its shadow is seen on almost every page he wrote, in verse as well as in prose.[16] He was passionately interested in the problems of Justice and Providence, and also in the study of the perturbations and vices of human nature. These constant preoccupations of a philosophical mind form therefore the background of all the plays. Nevertheless each reading strengthens my conviction that Seneca systematically ordered the tragedies according to their principal theme and adopted an arrangement (religion, psychology, ethics) which is more akin to a Stoic treatise than to a set of plays.[17] A German dissertation provides a very useful compilation of parallel passages from the plays and the essays, and the comparison of these quotations shows the extraordinarily close similarity in thought and expression between the two sets of works.[18] But the tragedies represent his most ambitious literary effort. Nowhere does he come to grips more earnestly with the supreme problems of philosophy, and he seems to have conceived his set of tragedies as a sort

[15] E. Vernon Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (Cambridge, 1911) ch. xi; xiv.

[16] O. Regenbogen, "Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas," *Vortr. Bib. Warburg* 7.

[17] Even if it could be shown that Seneca wrote the plays in a different order this would not interfere with my contention. We are told definitely that Vergil's method was to write a prose sketch of the *Aeneid* and then to compose parts in verse as he pleased without paying attention to the order of the books, *Vit. Don.* 23.

[18] Paul Schaefer, *De Philosophiae Annaeanae in Senecae Tragoediis Vestigiis* (Weida, 1909). The compilation is badly organised and lacks an index but the most significant passages are brought together and compared. They show that Mendell is wrong in suggesting that Seneca is a more orthodox Stoic in his prose works than in the plays (*op. cit.* [see note 1] 153). The picture of death, nature, fate and fortune is the same in both sets of works. Many passages in the essays provide very close parallels to the passages in which Mendell sees evidence in the plays of popular beliefs divergent from the Stoic creed of Seneca the philosopher.

of glorified Essay on Man. He lacked the dramatic and poetic qualities which might have given them real life and power, but as illustrations of his thought and as symbols of his beliefs they are of the utmost interest.[19]

Others have suggested before this that Seneca's aim in writing the plays was primarily philosophical or pedagogical.[20] They did not, however, realise that each tragedy is but a part of one whole and that apparent variations in some of them from Seneca's eclectic Stoicism, deliberate contradictions and unsolved problems, are removed in the final conclusion. Thus they failed to see that the individual plays, being the constituent parts of one set, present only partial solutions to the problems they raise, and that Seneca's ultimate aim can only be judged from the total effect of all the tragedies.

The story of Hercules had been allegorised ever since the time of Socrates.[21] Prodicus the Sophist represented in a famous debate Hercules' choice between Vice and Virtue, a paraphrase of which is found in Xenophon.[22] In the Cynic, and later in the Stoic schools, Hercules became the symbol of what is noblest in man, the incarnation of wisdom and virtue. Thus Antisthenes the Cynic, a friend of Prodicus, wrote a dialogue in which the hero Hercules represented the Cynic sage of mythical times.[23] Cicero pictures him as the benefactor of the entire human race (*Fin.* 3.66), who is always bringing aid to the distressed (*Fin.* 2.119), denying himself everything and undergoing toil and tribulation to save the world (*Off.* 3.25), fighting evil without anger (*Tusc.* 4.50). Heraclitus the Stoic, writing during the early Empire, added details to the symbolical explanation of Hercules' labors,[24] and Cornutus, a contem-

[19] I am not here concerned with Seneca's handling of his Greek sources, for which see F. Wolf-Hartmut, *Untersuchungen zu Senecas dramatischer Technik* (Freiburg, 1933). For further bibliography see Herrmann, *op. cit.* (see note 1) ch. 3.

[20] For a summary of their views, see Herrmann, *op. cit.* 240–245. In order to avoid all danger of letting my theory influence the translation I have throughout used the renderings of the Loeb Classical Library (John W. Basore's for the *Moral Essays;* R. M. Gummere's for the *Epistles;* F. J. Miller's for the *Tragedies*).

[21] Wilamowitz, *Euripides Herakles* 2.101 ff.; cf. Welcker, *Kl. Schr.* 2, 470; R. Hirzel, *Untersuchungen zu Cicero's Philosophischen Schriften* 3, 875 note 2.

[22] *Mem.* 2.1.21–34; cf. Cicero, *Off.* 1.118 etc.

[23] Diog. Laert. 6.2; 6.16; cf. R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog* (Leipzig, 1895) 120 f.

[24] Heracl. *Alleg. Hom.* 33: the three-headed Cerberus which Hercules dragged into the light of day, for instance, represents philosophy and its three parts: *τὸ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῆς λογικόν, τὸ δὲ φυσικόν, τὸ δὲ ἠδικὸν ὀνομάζεται· ταῦτα δ', ὥσπερ ἀφ' ἑνὸς αὐχένος ἐκπεφυκότα, τριχῇ κατὰ τὴν κεφαλὴν μερίζεται.*

porary of Seneca's, allegorised the myths of Homer in much the same vein.[25] What Hercules meant to the neo-Stoics may be seen in the works of Seneca, Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus and others. Hercules has been called wise by the Stoics, says Seneca, because he was never subdued by hardships, because he despised pleasure and conquered all terrors (*Const.* 2.2.1). He conquered nothing for himself, but travelled over the whole world, an enemy of the wicked, a defender of the good, a peace-maker on land and sea (*Ben.* 1.13.2–3). His fortune did not match his virtue, but he bore his fate with wisdom and courage, and when his work was done discovered how to become immortal (*Tranq. An.* 16.4). The manner of his death by fire added symbolic meaning to his labors, for the Stoics believed that Fire was the creative god who, at the end of each cycle, destroyed all things in the general conflagration (Herculem, quia vis eius invicta sit quandoque lassata fuerit, operibus editis, in ignem recessura, *Ben.* 4.8.1).

There is religious fervor as well as poetic beauty in the parable of Hercules' choice between Justice and Tyranny, told by Dio Chrysostom (*Orat.* 1.49–84). For Epictetus too, Hercules is a divine Savior whom God disciplined through suffering and who purged the world from injustice and lawlessness (Arr. *Epict.* 3.24.17, 22.57, 26.31 f., etc.).

Although Seneca did not believe in an exaggerated use of the allegorical method (*Ep.* 88.5), he, like other Stoic teachers, attributed great moral value to the ancient myths and often pointed out their deep ethical meaning. No wonder, therefore, that he exploited the dramatic possibilities of the story of Hercules. No better symbol of man's struggle against fate and adversity could be found than the tale of Juno's unjust persecution of the hero, the subject of Seneca's first tragedy, no greater allegory of the triumph of man's soul than Hercules' final vindication, the victory and immortality he gained through the Stoic purification by fire. Juno, unable to crush the hero who "thrives on trouble, enjoys her wrath and turns her hate to his own credit" (*Herc. Fur.* 33–35),[26] drives him to madness and makes him kill his sons and wife during a fit of insanity.[27] Though his hands are guilty he is of course

[25] Cornut. *Theol. Comp.* 31 (ed. Lang).

[26] For the sake of clarity I follow ms A in giving the full titles *Hercules Furens* and *Hercules Oetaeus*.

[27] I do not entirely agree with Haywood's view that Seneca takes pain to make the madness of Hercules appear to be a natural phenomenon, "Note on Seneca's *Hercules*

innocent (1098–99). The tone of this first play is one of unrelieved horror, of bitter indignation at the injustice of the gods. If we were to take this play as a separate unit we could not reconcile its mood of harsh pessimism with the fundamental optimism of the Stoic doctrine. But the nine plays form a set, and the *Hercules Oetaeus* is a necessary complement of the *Hercules Furens*. Only in this last tragedy does Seneca justify the divine power, when he shows the justification for the trials Hercules has undergone so serenely. This technique of posing problems in the tragedies to which only partial solutions are given, the complete answer being reserved for the concluding play, is reminiscent of Seneca's method of asking rhetorical questions in his prose works. There he writes abstractly about universal problems and after he has questioned the justice of the gods and their management of the world he gives his solution immediately. In the tragedies the problems become alive, and the sight of the apparently undeserved agonies of symbolic human beings forces the reader to ask himself questions. The final solution, through a skilful use of dramatic suspense, is only foreshadowed, until we come to the last play, where the reader is at last made to see clearly the purpose of the divine wisdom.

Let us now turn to the plays inserted between the two on Hercules. I have said that in the first group Seneca considers the problems of fate, life and death. In the *Troades* he has combined the plots of two of Euripides' most harrowing tragedies, the *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women*. He has made of it what at first seems to be an indictment of Fate and Providence. The relentless persecution of Hecuba, Andromache and the other innocent captives outrages the reader's sense of justice. The gods seem as vindictive against them as Juno was in her hatred of the hero Hercules in the preceding play. Their fate condemns the women to be stripped of everything they hold dear; no glimmer of hope lightens the blackness of their mourning. In their utter destitution they question the beneficence of providence (981 ff.). Hecuba, who typifies their grim tragedy, has lost Troy and Priam, Hector and a happy throng of children and grandchildren; she sees Cassandra, Andromache and her sorrowing comrades given by lot to the victors, and in the final disaster her only remaining daughter, Polyxena, is sacrificed to the shades of Achilles while her grandson, Astyanax, is hurled

*Furens*," *CJ* 37 (1941–42) 421–424. Juno is meant to represent Fate and the external powers which seem unjustly to persecute mankind.

by the Greeks from a lofty watch-tower. It is clear that the main interest of the play is centered upon the scene in which the death of Polyxena and Astyanax is described.[28] For the child and the maid have faced their fate boldly and bravely, undaunted in spirit and with a sternness worthy of the greatest Stoic heroes. In the midst of the wretched captives they alone are free, for death has brought them release.

The chorus expresses the traditional Stoic view (a view not consistently held by Seneca in all his prose works) that death is complete annihilation:

> post mortem nihil est ipsaque mors nihil,
> velocis spatii meta novissima . . .
> mors individua est, noxia corpori
> nec parcens animae . . .
> quaeris quo iaceas post obitum loco?
> quo non nata iacent. (397 ff.)[29]

The theme that death alone brings release and freedom, that only the dead are secure, recurs throughout the play and is accompanied by another Stoic commonplace, that of the fickleness of Fortune and the danger inherent in high rank and earthly felicity. A passage of the *Quaestiones Naturales* (6.2.1–2) seems to me one of the best commentaries on the *Troades*. After discussing the calamities which overtake cities and the very earth as well as men, and the impermanence of all things including life, Seneca says that fear is folly when there is no escape, and that philosophy delivers the wise from terror. He adds that Vergil's words, una salus victis nullam sperare salutem, addressed to those overwhelmed with sudden captivity amid fire and foe, should be regarded as applying to the whole human race. Over and over in his prose works, Seneca teaches that life is small but the contempt of it is great (*Ep.* 32.3), that the Stoic considers all things which make men cry and groan as unimportant and not worth noticing (*Ep.* 13.4), for death is ever near to set the unfortunate free (*Ep.* 110.4) and deliver them from fear (*Ep.* 24.11). Since death must come to all "let courage be derived from our very despair" (*N.Q.* 2.59.5). What matters is the

[28] Münscher, *op. cit.* (see note 13) 98: Astyanax' und Polyxenas heldenhaftes Sterben, Hecubas abgeklärte Trauer, das ists, was der Dichter zeigen will.

[29] L. von Ranke ("Die Tragödien Seneca's," *Abhandlungen und Versuche* [Leipzig, 1888] 34) compares this passage with *Ad Marc.* 19.5: mors . . . quae nos in illam tranquillitatem, in qua antequam nasceremur, iacuimus, reponit . . . mortuorum . . . et non natorum . . . mors . . . nihil est et omnia in nihilum redigit.

human spirit, which can only be known after it has grappled with fortune (*Ep.* 13.1: sic verus ille animus et in alienum non venturus arbitrium probatur).[30]

Andromache recognises this spirit in her little son:

> quid retro fugis
> tutasque latebras spernis? agnosco indolem;
> pudet timere. (503 ff.)

She, fearing for the child, knows that the worst evil is to fear without hope (miserrimum est timere cum speres nihil, 425). She also knows that one who has lost everything is no longer vulnerable. There is dignity and noble Stoic resignation in her words:

> hic mihi malorum maximum fructum abstulit,
> nihil timere. (422)

The second play of this group, the *Phoenissae*, is so incomplete that it is difficult to make any certain statement about its purpose.[31] The first fragment represents the wanderings of blind Oedipus and his daughter Antigone, the second the feud of his two sons and their mother's intercession. Both fragments are in the form of debates. In the first, Antigone, who is filled not only with filial devotion but also with Stoic wisdom, attempts to convince her father of three truths; first that only deliberate crimes can be called sinful and that men are not guilty who have sinned unconsciously:

> non es nec ulla pectus hoc culpa attigit.
> et hoc magis te, genitor, insontem voca,
> quod innocens es dis quoque invitis. (203 ff.)

The second truth she comes back to repeatedly. Death should not be sought as an escape from trouble, for only the coward yearns for it:

> resiste; tantis in malis vinci mori est . . . (79)
> quare ille mortem cupiat aut quare petat?
> utrumque timidi est; nemo contempsit mori
> qui concupivit. (196 ff.)

Thus Seneca, who in the first play had shown death as the deliverer, now clarifies his thought. There are two kinds of suicide, that

[30] Cf. *Prov.* 4.6: calamitas virtutis occasio est.

[31] For a good summary of the arguments in favor of the theory that the three fragments belong to one play, see C. Lindskog, *op. cit.* (see note 8) 63–79; cf. Herrmann, *op. cit.* (see note 1) 275–280.

resorted to by the weak who foolishly choose escape and defeat, and that wisely settled upon by the philosopher who has met and conquered his fate. In the third place, she shows him that only those who have thrown away life's blessings and trodden destiny underfoot are safe from the attacks of fate:

> cuius haut ultra mala
> exire possunt, in loco tuto est situs. (199 f.)

The theme of the second debate is more difficult to determine because the fragment breaks off just before the climax. But the trend of Jocasta's message to her sons seems to be similar to that of Antigone to Oedipus: where fate and fortune drive men they need not feel guilty for their actions, since guilt depends upon the possibility of choice. Her sons, however, are now planning deliberately to break the law of nature, and if they do they will have to pay the penalty:

> error invitos adhuc
> fecit nocentes, omne Fortunae fuit
> peccantis in nos crimen: hoc primum nefas
> inter scientes geritur. (451 ff.)

She adds that wealth and royal authority are nothing without peace and justice, and seems to be leading to some statement that will vindicate providence:

> ne metue. poenas et quidem solvet graves:
> regnabit. est haec poena . . . (645 f.)
> invisa nunquam imperia retinentur diu. (660)

The two fragments seem in their present form to have little in common, yet both contain discussions of the meaning of life, power and death; they emphasise at the same time man's subjection to fate and fortune and his independence from them. In both fragments two attitudes are represented in sharp opposition. Oedipus' wretched lamentations are contrasted with his daughter's sense of duty and with her serene acceptance of destiny. Eteocles' cynical reliance upon brutal force and the value he puts upon earthly sovereignty are opposed on the one hand by the weakness of his fearful and foolish brother and on the other by the prophetic wisdom of his mother.

These are clearly problem-plays written to force the reader to think about life and death, for like G. B. Shaw, Seneca used drama

to preach and to prove his theses. The plots may have been borrowed from Euripides or others, but the technique is that of the Stoic teacher who has asked searching questions and so far has only hinted at the solution.

The second group of plays (*Medea*, *Phaedra*) form what might be called *exempla* for a treatise on the passions. Seneca's debt to the Middle Stoa, his adaptations of what he found in his predecessors as to the divisions of the soul and the relationship of the rational and the irrational, have frequently been studied.[32] His psychological system is illustrated in these two tragedies. The highest wisdom, according to him, is the ability to distinguish clearly between good and evil (*Ep.* 71.7); virtue is the only good and consists in a true and steadfast judgment, "ab hoc enim impetus venient mentis, ab hoc omnis species, quae impetum movet, redigetur ad liquidum" (*ibid.* 32). Since man's soul is composed of a rational and an irrational part (*ibid.* 27) he progresses only by checking all impulses arising from the irrational part and by consistently following the guidance of reason.[33] The Stoics never tired of discussing the effects of emotional impulses. "Ex perturbationibus autem primum morbi conficiuntur. . . . Hoc loco nimium operae consumitur a Stoicis," says Cicero (*Tusc.* 4.10). Seneca shows much penetration in his analyses of the first symptoms of passion: "Imbecillus est primo omnis adfectus. Deinde ipse se concitat et vires, dum procedit, parat; excluditur facilius quam expellitur . . . ergo intrantibus resistamus" (*Ep.* 116.3). Reason must remain aloof and uncontaminated in order to deny admission to the passions (*Ira* 1.7.2), for it is easier to remove wrong impulses than to control them if you once permit them to get a start; they will increase along with their causes (*Ep.* 85.10 f.). The ideal condition is soberness, the state of a soul uncontaminated by emotions or perturbations. *Securitas* and *perpetua tranquillitas* (*Ep.* 92.3) are essential to a happy life and depend on a sound judgement and a firm will. While all passions are bad, Seneca considered anger the worst of all, "maxime ex omnibus taetrum ac rabidum" (*Ira* 1.1.1). Now the passion of love which gives rise to the four sinful conditions described by the Stoics (fear, desire, grief, excite-

[32] E. Holler, *Seneca und die Seelenteilungslehre und Affektpsychologie der Mittelstoa* (Kallmünz, 1934); R. Philippson, "Zur Psychologie der Stoa," *RhM* 68 (1937) 140–179.

[33] T. S. Eliot, *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca* (London, 1927) 17: Roman Stoicism was in its own time a development in self-consciousness.

ment) is, when spurned, likely to stir the most violent anger. I believe that Seneca chose Medea and Phaedra for the heroines of his psychological plays not only because they had been the prey of an overwhelming passion but also because, through the helplessness of their injured pride, they had become *exempla* of the most annihilating effects of anger. Seneca's description of anger in the beginning of the *De Ira* provides a very vivid commentary on the actions of the two women:

> Ceteris enim aliquid quieti placidique inest, hic totus concitatus et in impetu doloris est, armorum sanguinis suppliciorum minime humana furens cupiditate, dum alteri noceat sui neglegens, in ipsa irruens tela et ultionis secum ultorem tracturae avidus. Quidam itaque e sapientibus viris iram dixerunt brevem insaniam; aeque enim impotens sui est, decoris oblita, necessitudinum immemor, in quod coepit pertinax et intenta, rationi consiliisque praeclusa, vanis agitata causis, ad dispectum aequi verique inhabilis, ruinis simillima, quae super id quod oppressere franguntur.

No other two heroines of mythology could better have served as illustrations for this and other similar passages. Both act as if possessed by a fit of temporary madness, both are equally devoid of self-control and decency, both are eager for revenge and give no thought to their own safety provided they can hurt and drag down in the ruin that overwhelms them the man against whom their resentment is so violent. But there is a great difference between them. Phaedra's judgement is clear, she knows what is right but deliberately chooses evil. Medea, on the other hand, for all her physical strength (268), is weak, irrational, ignorant of wisdom, impulsive and completely blinded by her passion.[34]

Medea's actions have always been motivated by her passions and are therefore all wicked, all harmful (trahere cum pereas libet, 428). In her self-pity she does not blame herself for any of the crimes committed because of her love but considers that the end amply justifies the means (241 ff.):

[34] Seneca's conception of her character differs fundamentally, therefore, from that of Ovid, who makes her say: video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor. Jason's passionate love for his children provides another significant theme: haec causa vitae est, hoc perusti pectoris curis levamen. spiritu citius queam carere, membris, luce (547 ff.). The intensity of his paternal affection is the cause of his ruin (949 ff.), for Medea knows that in disclosing his love of the boys he has shown where he is most vulnerable (549 ff.).

iuvat, iuvat rapuisse fraternum caput;
artus iuvat secuisse et arcano patrem
spoliasse sacro, iuvat in exitium senis
armasse natas. (911 ff.)

From the beginning her one thought is vengeance; she utters a terrible curse against her faithless husband and vows destruction upon his new wife and her whole family. She plans "wild deeds, unheard of, horrible calamities, at which heaven and earth alike shall tremble . . . wounds, slaughter, death creeping from limb to limb" (45–48). She laughs and cries hysterically and her nurse compares her to a maenad raving at the coming of the god, showing the symptoms of every passion, with madness marked upon her face (382 ff.): irae novimus veteris notas (394). The theme that her hatred is a frenzy and a fit of madness recurs at intervals throughout the play, and the chorus watching her exclaims:

quonam cruenta maenas
praeceps amore saevo
rapitur? quod impotenti
facinus parat furore? . . .
frenare nescit iras
Medea, non amores. (849 ff.)

Phaedra is a far more complex character and is more subtly drawn. She knows her passion to be a grave illness (100 ff.), but does not even wish to be well.[35] The rational part of her soul sees clearly the wise and virtuous path: quae memoras scio vera esse, nutrix (177); but she has allowed passion to enter, and now, fully conscious of the wrongness of her choice, she moves on to her own ruin:

sed furor cogit sequi
peiora. vadit animus in praeceps sciens
remeatque frustra sana consilia appetens. (178 ff.)

Since passion rules supreme what can reason do? (quid ratio possit? 184). Her nurse considers her mad (361), and she herself calls her infatuation *furor*. At the end of the play she confesses that

[35] Seneca's characterisation of Phaedra provides a concrete illustration for numerous discussions on the passion of love in his prose works; see for instance a quotation from Panaetius in the *Epistles* (116.5): aeque facilitas amoris quam difficultas nocet; facilitate capimur, cum difficultate certamus. . . . Non est committendum ut incidamus in rem commotam, inpotentem, vilem sibi.

she has been insane: quod ipsa demens pectore insano hauseram (1193). She is a terrible proof of what Seneca repeats so often in his prose works, that the time for drastic action is the moment when the first symptoms of a passion are felt: facilius est enim initia illorum prohibere quam impetum regere . . . facilius sustuleris illa quam rexeris (*Ep.* 85.9 f.). Once indulged in, her passion is like a fire which cannot be quenched (186 ff.).

During the first part of the play, Seneca uses the nurse as an exponent of his own philosophy and seems to have meant her to personify the rational part of Phaedra's soul. She insists upon the necessity of quickly putting out the fire before it is too late:

> nefanda casto pectore exturba ocius,
> extingue flammas neve te dirae spei
> praebe obsequentem. quisquis in primo obstitit
> pepulitque amorem, tutus ac victor fuit;
> qui blandiendo dulce nutrivit malum,
> sero recusat ferre quod subiit iugum. (130–135)

Cicero says that for the Stoics *honestum* constituted the *summum bonum* (*Off.* 3.11) and Seneca constantly repeats this: summum bonum est quod honestum est (*Ep.* 71.4). The nurse echoes this thought when she states: honesta primum est velle nec labi via (140), and she adds that even if Phaedra should escape punishment for her sins she could not escape from the judgement of her own conscience (162). The wise man, she says, must ever be ready to endure his fate; he is self-sufficient, for freedom is near at hand (139).

Later, when no rational argument can break the queen's resolve to die, the nurse yields in order to avoid that evil and approaches Hippolytus. From that moment the nurse's attitude changes completely, and Seneca means by this, I think, to show concretely and symbolically the contagion with which the irrational part of the soul can infect the rational part. The character of the nurse is considered one of Seneca's original creations; it seems to me that she serves to embody the conflict within Phaedra's soul and to show the deterioration of her judgement. As for Hippolytus, who at no point seems really alive, he is the mouthpiece of the Stoic philosopher advocating the simple, natural life, one of the commonplaces of the creed.

I have only indicated, without attempting a detailed analysis,

how closely these two plays conform to the psychological studies found in many of Seneca's prose works, especially the *De Ira.* I might point out, in addition, how exactly the physical descriptions of Medea and Phaedra fit the concrete descriptions of the symptoms of the harmful passions in Seneca's treatise:

> Ut scias autem non esse sanos quos ira possedit, ipsum illorum habitum intuere; nam ut furentium certa indicia sunt audax et minax vultus, tristis frons, torva facies, citatus gradus, inquietae manus, color versus, crebra et vehementius acta suspiria, ita irascentium eadem signa sunt: flagrant ac micant oculi, multus ore toto rubor exaestuante ab imis praecordiis sanguine, labra quatiuntur, dentes comprimuntur, horrent ac surriguntur capilli, spiritus coactus ac stridens, articulorum se ipsos torquentium sonus, gemitus mugitusque et parum explanatis vocibus sermo praeruptus et complosae saepius manus et pulsata humus pedibus, et totum concitum corpus "magnasque irae minas agens," foeda visu et horrenda facies depravantium se atque intumescentium — nescias utrum magis detestabile vitium sit an deforme (1.1.3–5).

Compare with this Medea, "perplexed, witless, with mind scarce sane, tossed to every side" (123 f.). A *monstrum saevum horribile,* she approaches Creon boldly, with threatening countenance (191 f.);

> talis recursat huc et huc motu effero,
> furoris ore signa lymphati gerens.
> flammata facies spiritum ex alto citat,
> proclamat, oculos uberi fletu rigat,
> renidet; omnis specimen affectus capit.
> quo pondus animi vergat, ubi ponat minas,
> haeret; minatur aestuat queritur gemit.
> ubi se iste fluctus franget? exundat furor. (385 ff.)

All her anguish showing in her face, she starts at the sight of Jason, bursts into a passion, displays her hate (444 ff.), and later:

> flagrant genae rubentes,
> pallor fugat ruborem,
> nullum vagante forma
> servat diu colorem.
> huc fert pedes et illuc,
> ut tigris orba natis
> cursu furente lustrat
> Gangeticum nemus. (858–865)

Phaedra also shows all the conventional symptoms of a mind disordered by passion:

torretur aestu tacito et inclusus quoque,
quamvis tegatur, proditur vultu furor;
erumpit oculis ignis et lassae genae
lucem recusant, nil idem dubiae placet
artusque varie iactat incertus dolor.
nunc ut soluto labitur moriens gradu
et vix labante sustinet collo caput,
nunc se quieti reddit et, somni immemor,
noctem querelis ducit; attoli iubet
iterumque poni corpus et solvi comas
rursusque fingi; semper impatiens sui
mutatur habitus. nulla iam Cereris subit
cura aut salutis; vadit incerto pede,
iam viribus defecta. non idem vigor,
non ora tinguens nitida purpureus rubor;
populatur artus cura, iam gressus tremunt
tenerque nitidi corporis cecidit decor.
et qui ferebant signa Phoebeae facis
oculi nihil gentile nec patrium micant.
lacrimae cadunt per ora et assiduo genae
rore irrigantur, qualiter Tauri iugis
tepido madescunt imbre percussae nives. (362–383)

The change from these two psychological plays is very abrupt, both in tone and treatment, when we take up the next group, the *Oedipus*, the *Agamemnon* and the *Thyestes*. As usual the opening speech of the first play sets the theme: quisquamne regno gaudet? (6). Oedipus has "happily escaped the sceptre of his father" (12) only to receive another from Chance and Fortune. He is now struck with a blind terror of what the Fates have in store for him, since he knows the curse which threatens him (cuncta expavesco meque non credo mihi, 27). The hero of all three plays is a king threatened with ruin or murder by an inherited curse and whose terrible punishment is represented in the course of the action. Three heroes who seem to be innocent appear to be led by a predetermined fate to ruin and self-destruction. Upon reading the plays, however, we see that predestination is by no means the only agent, that the heroes are actually responsible for their fate, since each one has made the wrong choice of life in order either to acquire or to preserve a royal throne. Thus ethical problems are handled in this group, and particularly that of retribution. It is also clear that there is a gradation in the heroes' responsibility, and equally a crescendo of horror in their suffering, from Oedipus' self-inflicted

blindness to the murder of Agamemnon by his wife and finally to the unspeakable banquet of Thyestes.

The clue to Seneca's aim in this group is found, not in the Greek dramatists, but in a passage of Plato's *Republic* (618A–619C). Toward the end of his tale, Er the Armenian explains how the souls who are about to start another course of earthly existence are given their choice of lives:

> And after this again the prophet placed the patterns of lives before them on the ground, far more numerous than the assembly. They were of every variety, for there were lives of all kinds of animals and all sorts of human lives, for there were tyrannies among them, some uninterrupted till the end and others destroyed midway and issuing in penuries and exiles and beggaries. . . . When the prophet had thus spoken he said that the drawer of the first lot at once sprang to seize the greatest tyranny, and that in his folly and greed he chose it without sufficient examination, and failed to observe that it involved the fate of eating his own children, and other horrors, and that when he inspected it at leisure he beat his breast and bewailed his choice, not abiding by the forewarning of the prophet. For he did not blame himself for his woes, but fortune and the gods and anything except himself.[36]

Plato in this passage describes a man's prenatal choice of the greatest kingship, *τὴν μεγίστην τυραννίδα*, but this man's soul does not realise that his choice determines for him a life filled with evils and dooms him to eat his own children. Thus Plato by way of a myth attempts to reconcile Necessity with Free Will.[37] Each individual is "free to choose the life unto which he shall be bound by Necessity . . . Virtue is her own mistress" (617E); once the choice is made it is irrevocable; "the blame is his who chooses, God is blameless" (*ibid.*).

This must have made a great impression upon Seneca, who had thought and written a great deal about Fate and freedom of choice: Fata nos ducunt et quantum cuique temporis restat prima nascentium hora disposuit. Causa pendet ex causa, privata ac publica longus ordo rerum trahit. . . . Quid est boni viri? Praebere se fato. . . . Irrevocabilis humana pariter ac divina cursus vehit. Ille ipse omnium conditor et rector scripsit quidem fata, sed sequitur; semper paret, semel iussit (*Prov.* 5.7–8). I suspect that this

[36] Paul Shorey's translation (Loeb Class. Lib. 2.507 ff.). I am indebted to my colleague Professor Erich Frank for calling this passage to my attention.

[37] Cf. Plutarch, *Symp.* 9.5.2: *ἔφη πολλαχοῦ μὲν ἡμῖν τὸν Πλάτωνα προσπαίζειν διὰ τῶν ὀνομάτων· ὅπου δὲ μῦθόν τινα τῷ περὶ ψυχῆς λόγῳ μίγνυσι, χρῆσθαι μάλιστα τῷ νῷ.*

passage of the myth of Er, which not only deals with the great problems of predestination and retribution but also emphasises the dangers of the exalted position of kings (one of Seneca's favorite themes) may have inspired him to write his trilogy of the *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon* and *Thyestes*. For it seems obvious that Plato must be referring to a prototype of Thyestes in his description of the incipient tyrant who condemns himself to eat his own children.

A chapter from Epictetus also throws light upon the Stoic ideas behind Seneca's three ethical tragedies. Epictetus contrasts our judgements on material things and ethical questions: "In a case where we wish to judge of weights we do not judge at haphazard; where we wish to judge what is straight and what is crooked we do not judge at haphazard; in short where it makes any difference to us to know the truth in the case, no one of us will do anything at haphazard. Yet where there is involved the first and only cause of acting aright or erring . . . I have nothing like a balance, nothing like a standard, but some sense-impression comes and immediately I go and act upon it" (Arr. 1.28.29 f.). He goes on to say that because of this lack of a standard measure of right and wrong many characters of tragedy have had to suffer evil.[38] That is to say, what has caused Oedipus', Agamemnon's and Thyestes' downfall is that they made the wrong choice and valued the wrong thing. Instead of having a moral purpose in life, instead of pursuing what reason shows to be the highest good, they have been ambitious and have treasured a throne.[39]

Oedipus, the hero of the first tragedy, is by far the weakest character. He is blind long before he has deprived himself of the use of his eyes. Moreover he is proud of his strength and wisdom and utters vain boasts of his victory over the sphinx (87–102). His pride in having solved the riddle would at the outset seem suspicious to the Stoics, who tended to distrust any claim of intellectual superiority. Where Sophocles had created a determined, stern and self-assured Oedipus, Seneca's is a weaker and smaller human being, who worries, hesitates and scolds. In Seneca his behavior is the very opposite of that of the Stoic sage; he is vain

[38] *Ibid.* 1.28.32 f.: *καὶ ποία τραγῳδία ἄλλην ἀρχὴν ἔχει; Ἀτρεὺς Εὐριπίδου τί ἐστιν; τὸ φαινόμενον. Οἰδίπους Σοφοκλέους τί ἐστιν; τὸ φαινόμενον. Φοῖνιξ; τὸ φαινόμενον. Ἱππόλυτος; τὸ φαινόμενον. τούτου οὖν μηδεμίαν ἐπιμέλειαν ποιεῖσθαι τίνος ὑμῖν δοκεῖ; τίνες δὲ λέγονται οἱ παντὶ τῷ φαινομένῳ ἀκολουθοῦντες;*—Μαινόμενοι.

[39] Aristotle (*Met.* 2, 1004b25–26) states that the basis of the dramatic conflicts in Plato's dialogues consists in different choices of lives (*τοῦ βίου τῇ προαιρέσει*).

and impulsive, and because of his exalted position behaves like an autocrat and a tyrant. In his prologue, Sophocles stresses Oedipus' wisdom, his paternal beneficence, his thoughtfulness toward his people. Seneca's prologue is a complaint of the danger of royalty and the recital of Oedipus' terrors, a clear statement of his feeling of insecurity. He has a premonition that he is the cause of the pestilence that is ruining Thebes ("Couldst thou hope that to crimes like thine a whole kingdom would be granted? I have made heaven pestilent." 35 f.). He is cast down with grief (75) and deplores the fact that he has not left the land sooner. Jocasta speaks the words of Stoicism, that courage in the face of adversity is manly and regal and that lamentations make woe heavier (81 ff.). Oedipus' answer reveals his real weakness: he is, he says, no coward and would gladly face war. But he is afraid of his destiny, not knowing that a wise man triumphs over his fate by willingly surrendering to it. He has physical but no moral courage (87 ff.; 206 ff.).

Both Sophocles and Seneca show him quick to anger. In the Greek play this anger is regal and dignified, but in Seneca it is impetuous and completely lacking in self-control. He is unjust to Tiresias, Creon and his own sons, not because he is wicked but because he lacks wisdom and feels insecure. Until the final catastrophe, when he is maddened with grief and bitterness, he shows in Sophocles' play the nobility and the bearing of a king. In Seneca's, his complaints against fortune are abject (786 ff. etc.), and one remembers Cicero's statement that distress must be avoided because it is loathsome, wretched, execrable (*Tusc.* 3.25). He lacks the spirit of Sophocles' hero, is instead pusillanimous, querulous and jealous of his own position, as the following utterances show: Hortaris etiam, sponte deponam ut mea tam gravia regna? (678); dubia pro certis solent timere reges (699); quisquis in culpa fuit dimissus odit, omne quod dubium est cadat (702); odia qui nimium timet regnare nescit; regna custodit metus (704).

Where Sophocles uses dramatic irony to represent the inevitable unfolding of the tragedy, without attempting to draw from it any ethical conclusion, Seneca points out the Stoic moral. For him, Oedipus may be the victim of a curse, but he has chosen his present exalted position without realising that he was thereby condemning himself. He is blind as well as weak, an *exemplum* of what the Stoics called foolishness, a ruler incessantly complain-

ing of the instability of fortune, suspicious of the fate for which his own ignorance is responsible. The story of Oedipus was frequently used by the philosophers to illustrate discussions of predestination. Oenomaus the Cynic, discussing Chrysippus' statement that Laius could have refused to beget children, contended that Oedipus was free to choose whether or not he would murder his own father and that his decision depended on too many factors to make prediction possible.[40] The stress on Oedipus' freedom of choice in such discussions is significant and may have been a commonplace of the Schools, in which case Seneca's intention in his tragedy would have been immediately clear to his readers.

Agamemnon is more obviously guilty and therefore more responsible than Oedipus, though he is equally unaware of the fact. He need not have sacrificed his own daughter and thereby earned his wife's hatred (158 ff., etc.) if he had not desired to be the king of kings, as he is constantly called in the tragedy[41] and if he had not had the ambition to lead "a thousand ships spreading sail together" (171). Moreover, he is a tyrant rather than a king, and the first chorus emphasizes the danger of his exalted position:

> ut praecipites regum casus
> Fortuna rotat. metui cupiunt
> metuique timent. (71 ff.)

We do not have to believe Aegisthus, who accuses him of tyranny, of being harsh to his allies, fierce by nature, with a pride swollen by prosperity (248 ff.). Agamemnon's own actions prove the right of this accusation. In his arrogance he has refused to let Apollo's priest ransom his daughter. When obliged to give her up, he has carried off Briseis, Achilles' captive maid, although he was warned against this by the very seer whom he had believed and obeyed when he was ordered to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia. He has made Cassandra, Apollo's bride, his mistress and brought her home, utterly disregarding his wife's pride and jealousy.

Here again Seneca intends to show that although Clytemnestra's crime is in no way justified, for she too will have to pay the penalty, Agamemnon by his actions, by his pride and ambition, has condemned himself to the death that awaits him at Mycenae. Though as the son of Atreus he was fated to perish at the hand of Thyestes'

[40] D. R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism* (London, 1937) 169.
[41] Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 9.14.2.

son, he is in spite of this predetermined necessity responsible for his own fate.

The manner in which Seneca has handled in this play a situation resulting partly from actions represented in the next and last play of the group reminds one of some of Seneca's more artificial rhetorical devices. By having Thyestes' ghost introduce the *Agamemnon*, he not only emphasises the connection between the two plays but, using the device of tragic irony, gives the reader the clue to the events which are to follow. Having thus clearly indicated Thyestes' guilt at this point, he is able in the next play to stress the wisdom and magnanimity Thyestes has acquired in exile after he has lost the power he had wickedly schemed to obtain.

Before I indicate how, to my mind, Thyestes fits in with this group of heroes who, in spite of appearances, are responsible for their fate, I must say a few words about a recent interpretation of the play. Olof Gigon[42] has argued that Thyestes is not only an innocent man unjustly punished but represents Seneca's highest ideal of the Sage. While this interpretation of Thyestes' character contradicts the conventional story of the two brothers, it is also contradicted by the text of Seneca's tragedy. For in spite of Gigon's comments many passages seem to me to show that Thyestes both realises and confesses his guilt. When his brother welcomes him home, he exclaims that now indeed is his case proved most wrong:

> diluere possem cuncta, nisi talis fores.
> sed fateor, Atreu, fateor, admisi omnia
> quae credidisti. pessimam causam meam
> hodierna pietas fecit. est prorsus nocens
> quicumque visus tam bono fratri est nocens . . .
> ponatur omnis ira et ex animo tumor
> erasus abeat. obsides fidei accipe
> hos innocentes, frater. (512–521)

When Thyestes complains of Atreus' revenge upon his sons and calls upon the gods (piorum praesides deos) Atreus taunts him with the retort, "quin coniugales?" Whereupon Thyestes answers with a clear admission of his former guilt: scelere quis pensat scelus? (1103).

Moreover, the reader has just finished the *Agamemnon*. There he has already seen, and this was deliberate on Seneca's part, the

[42] "Bemerkungen zu Senecas Thyestes," *Ph* 93 (1938–39) 176–183.

results of Thyestes' former ambition and the feud between the two brothers. He has watched Aegisthus, the offspring of Thyestes' incestuous union with his daughter, avenge him by murdering Agamemnon, Atreus' son. He has also read, and this is a passage which he could not easily forget, Thyestes' ghost loudly proclaiming himself more impious and more guilty than the great criminals who suffer torture in Tartarus: vincam Thyestes sceleribus cunctos meis (*Agam.* 25). Only his brother's crimes, he says, surpass his own.

Indeed, what seems to me remarkable about this play is that Thyestes has been made truly humble by the consciousness of his guilt. His suffering in exile has taught him much. He realises, as neither Oedipus nor Agamemnon do, that his wretchedness has been caused by his desire for power:

> clarus hic regni nitor
> fulgore non est quod oculos falso auferat;
> cum quod datur spectabis, et dantem aspice.
> modo inter illa, quae putant cuncti aspera,
> fortis fui laetusque; nunc contra in metus
> revolvor. (414 ff.)

He explains to his sons that greatness attracts with false pretences, that fear is the lot of those in exalted positions, that crimes belong to the throne: immane regnum est posse sine regno pati (470). Seneca clearly intends to show that Thyestes' wisdom, his humility, his generosity have been acquired through suffering and exile, thus again foreshadowing the conclusion of the *Hercules Oetaeus*. Through suffering he has come to understand the cause of his crimes and to abhor them, and also to accept retribution. His only complaint is that innocent children should have been made to pay.

Epictetus often discusses the fatal effects of a mistake in judgement. Eteocles and Polynices, he says, were enemies because of their mistaken opinion that royal power is a good thing (*Encheir.* 31.4). "That which made Eteocles and Polynices what they were was nothing else but this — their judgement about a throne, and their judgement about exile, namely, that one was the greatest of evils, the other the greatest of goods" (Arr. *Epict.* 4.5.29). In this group of plays, Seneca shows that this is also true of Oedipus, Agamemnon and Thyestes.[43] A seemingly endless chain of crimes

[43] See also Epictetus (Arr. 1.4.25): Who says such things? . . . Does not Priam say it? Does not Oedipus? Nay more all kings say it. For what are tragedies but

seems to be the curse of the house of Tantalus, and the ghosts and furies of the play symbolise this. But Atreus, Thyestes and Agamemnon are all, through their characters and actions, the architects of their fate. Ambition is the worst counsellor; the only true sovereignty is the kingdom which each man bestows upon himself (*Thyest.* 389 ff.).[44]

As *Hercules Furens* introduces the series so *Hercules Oetaeus* concludes it. The remark has often been made that the *Hercules Oetaeus* is filled with reminiscences and borrowings from the previous plays and this has been used by some as an argument against the authenticity of the play.[45] Summers believed[46] that the numerous parallel passages between this and the other tragedies were due to the fact that a rough draft of the *Hercules Oetaeus* was left by Seneca and was supplemented by an amplifier who sometimes wrote original lines, sometimes simply introduced a patchwork of tags from other plays. But if my interpretation of the tragedies is correct, the reason for these reminiscences and borrowings from the other plays is now obvious. Seneca has gathered together in the *Hercules Oetaeus* all the threads left loose in the preceding plays and has given us an epitome of the Stoics' creed and an abstract of their wisdom. Up to this point he has shown Fortune fickle and vengeful, "something halfway between blind chance and canny Nemesis,"[47] attacking the great in preference to the humble. He

the portrayal in tragic verse of the sufferings of men who have admired things external? *Ibid.* 1.24.16 ff.: [Remember] that tragedies find a place among the rich and among kings and tyrants but no poor man fills a tragic rôle except as a member of the chorus. Now the kings commence in a state of prosperity . . . then about the third or fourth act [fall]. . . . When, therefore, you approach one of these great men, remember all this — you are approaching a tragic character, not the actor, but Oedipus himself. (W. A. Oldfather's translation, Loeb Class. Lib.)

[44] Note also that the heroes are all involved in the most unnatural crimes. Oedipus' incest is paralleled by Thyestes' union with his daughter; their offspring is destined to murder his uncle. Thyestes has seduced his sister-in-law and this was also considered a form of incest (Quint. *Decl.* 286.15). Subjects like these were favorite themes of *declamationes* in the schools (Quint. *Inst.* 5.10.19). The allusions to the story of Procne and Philomela in the *Agamemnon* (670–677) further stress the theme of incest. Moreover, Oedipus has killed his father, Agamemnon his daughter, Atreus his nephews, while Thyestes' ghost inspires his son to murder Atreus. Thus all three heroes have broken the law of nature in similar ways.

[45] K. Münscher, *op. cit.* (see note 11) 196: An der Echtheit der *Herc. O.* kann nach den eingehenden Untersuchungen Ackermanns . . . und A. St. Peases . . . kein Zweifel mehr aufkommen; cf. A. S. Pease, "On the Authenticity of the *Hercules Oetaeus*," *TAPhA* 49 (1918) 3–26.

[46] "The Authorship of the *Hercules Oetaeus*," *CR* 19 (1905) 40–54.

[47] Mendell, *op. cit.* (see note 1) 158.

has shown innocent victims paying for crimes they have not committed, men and women who think that happiness consists in the satisfaction of their desires, ambitions and passions. He has shown that the Fates are harsh and that the righteous are made to suffer. But since we cannot change them we must adjust to the eternal order of nature and bring ourselves into harmony with the divine will. In the *Hercules Oetaeus* as in the prose works, Seneca shows how man is to make this adjustment. He must rely upon himself alone and only take counsel of his rational soul. He must forever struggle on toward new victories over his lower self and over external obstacles until in death he finds deliverance and everlasting rest. As a Stoic, Seneca stresses individualism and self-confidence. Thus he provided the dramatic literature of Rome with the super-man, with new types of heroes and heroines who stand alone and "dwell on colder, lonelier heights than their Greek antecedents."[48]

First he takes up again some of the questions that had been left unanswered and the problems that were incompletely solved. A pathetic chorus of captive maidens is the exact replica of the *Troades*, but here, without any softening through pity, the chorus criticises the maidens' complaint according to the stern teaching of the school:

> quid regna tui clara parentis
> casusque tuos respicis amens?
> fugiat vultus fortuna prior.
> felix quisquis novit famulum
> regemque pati vultusque suos
> variare potest. rapuit vires
> pondusque malis casus animo
> qui tulit aequo. (225 ff.)

Moreover, Alcmena becomes the great symbol of all sorrowing mothers, grieving like Hecuba and Andromache, but for a loss greater than that of any woman. The parallel of Alcmena watching her divine son's passion and mourning by his pyre with Mary at the Cross has often been made[49] and the passage in Seneca is so forceful that the comparison between the two situations is inescapable. That Alcmena is a symbol like the other characters in Seneca's plays, he has stressed by calling her an *exemplar* of bereaved mothers: matribus miseris adhuc exemplar ingens derat —

[48] H. W. Wells, *op. cit.* (see note 1) 79.

[49] Em. Ackermann, "De Senecae Hercule Oetaeo," *Ph* Supplbd. 10 (1907) 410 ff.; H. W. Wells, *op. cit.* 74.

Alcmene dabo (1852 f.).[50] She is comforted by the knowledge that her son will live in his heroic deeds (1498 f.). She knows that he is not to be mourned, that he is invincible and that only cowards deserve our tears (1374–1376):

> virtute quisquis abstulit fatis iter;
> aeterna virtus Herculem fleri vetat.
> fortes vetant maerere, degeneres iubent. (1834 ff.)

In Dejanira, Seneca has pictured a woman as passionate as Medea and Phaedra, and has almost duplicated in her case the tale of their mad fury and of their conflicts between love, jealousy and anger, and also the description of the physical symptoms of their passion. But she is made to realise that while in her blind passion she has sought to subdue Hercules, she has, through her impulsive actions, unwittingly brought about his death and her own destruction. More clearly even than in the two psychological plays Seneca stresses here the fatal results of unreasoning passions and lack of sound judgement. Ackermann (see note 49) has pointed out so many parallels between this play and Seneca's prose works that it is useless to review them here. The tragedy is full of philosophical digressions, of considerations about law and order (1094) and about the general conflagration by which the final destruction of our present world will be accomplished (1110 ff.). There are also in this play striking correspondences with the tirades on kings and on the love of power in the group of the ethical plays. This is particularly true of a very long sermon by the chorus (583–690):

> tu quicumque es qui sceptra tenes,
> licet omne tua vulgus in aula
> centum pariter limina pulset;
> cum tot populis stipatus eas,
> in tot populis vix una fides . . .
> colit hic reges regumque lares,
> non ut presso vomere semper
> numquam cesset curvus arator
> vel mille secent arva coloni;
> solas optat quas ponat opes.
> colit hic reges, calcet ut omnes
> perdatque aliquos nullumque levet;
> tantum ut noceat, cupit esse potens. (603–639)

[50] Cf. *Ep.* 95.66: Nam qui praecipit dicit: "illa facies, si voles temperans esse." Qui describit, ait: "temperans est, qui illa facit, qui illis abstinet." Quaeris quid intersit? Alter praecepta virtutis dat, alter exemplar.

Some lines in this song even seem to refer specifically to the plays of that group: "aurea miscet pocula sanguis" (657) is probably an allusion to the banquet of Thyestes (satur est, capaci ducit argento merum, ne parce potu . . . mixtum suorum sanguinem genitor bibat, *Thyest.* 913 ff.). The contrast between the faithful wife of the poor man and the wealthy bride pursued by Erinys seems to be a reference to Clytemnestra or to Jocasta's tragic marriage. But the climax of the play is Hercules' self-imposed death by fire — the purification of the Stoics — and his apotheosis. Hercules has ever been seeking the skies, and now that his heroic struggle for virtue is to have its reward, the pessimism of some of the characters in the previous plays will be proved to have shown their foolish lack of faith. What Seneca said elsewhere of the wise man is true of Hercules: exemplar boni viri posuit, qualis quantusque esset ostendit (*Ep.* 93.8). He knows that his fate is now unfolding itself. His madness has been overcome, he has crushed kings and cruel tyrants and brought peace to the whole world (3–6). All the obstacles put in his way by Juno and the gods he has conquered without complaint:

> quidquid est iussum leve est,
> nec ulla nobis segnis illuxit dies.
> o quanta fudi monstra quae nullus mihi
> rex imperavit! institit virtus mihi
> Iunone peior. (59 ff.)

Defiant and unafraid he has met his fate, and now faces his end with majestic calm (1746), for he knows that he has triumphed over life and death (1610 ff.; 1834 ff.): quanta pax habitum tulit (1685). Such is his assurance that none can mourn, not even Alcmena, "a mother almost equal to her son":

> haesere lacrimae, cecidit impulsus dolor
> nobis quoque ipsis, nemo periturum ingemit.
> iam flere pudor est; ipsa quam sexus iubet
> maerere, siccis haesit Alcmene genis
> stetitque nato paene iam similis parens. (1686 ff.)

And now from the sky above Hercules declares his triumph:

> quidquid in nobis tui
> mortale fuerat, ignis evictus tulit;
> paterna caelo, pars data est flammis tua . . .
> virtus in astra tendit, in mortem timor.
> praesens ab astris, mater, Alcides cano . . .
> me iam decet subire caelestem plagam;
> inferna vici rursus Alcides loca. (1966 ff.)

The conflicts are resolved. The chorus affirms that virtue and valor are borne to heaven and that the brave live on: iter ad superos gloria pandet. Those who are inspired by the example of his heroic life now pray to him for protection. Seneca's conclusion to the set of tragedies might appropriately be expressed in the words of a far greater poet:

> His servants he, with new acquist
> Of true experience, from this great event
> With peace and consolation hath dismissed
> And, calm of mind, all passion spent.