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SENECA

HERCULES • TROJAN WOMEN

PHOENICIAN WOMEN

MEDEA • PHAEDRA



*Edited and Translated by*

JOHN G. FITCH

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HERCULES • TROJAN WOMEN

PHOENICIAN WOMEN

MEDAE PLAEADNA

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藏书章  
JOHN G. FITCH



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SENECA

VIII

TRAGEDIES

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**For Linda**  
*comes comis*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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J.G.F.

### Senecan Plays:

<i>Ag = Agamemnon</i>	<i>Pha = Phaedra</i>
<i>Herc = Hercules</i>	<i>Phoen = Phoenician Women</i>
<i>Med = Medea</i>	<i>Thy = Thyestes</i>
<i>Oed = Oedipus</i>	<i>Tro = Trojan Women</i>

### Probably Not By Seneca:

<i>HO = Hercules on Oeta</i>	<i>Oct = Octavia</i>
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# CONTENTS

General Introduction	1
<b>HERCULES</b>	
Introduction	36
Text and Translation	48
<b>TROJAN WOMEN</b>	
Introduction	163
Text and Translation	174
<b>PHOENICIAN WOMEN</b>	
Introduction	275
Text and Translation	282
<b>MEDEA</b>	
Introduction	334
Text and Translation	344
<b>PHAEDRA</b>	
Introduction	437
Text and Translation	448



## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### *Rhetoric*

Senecan drama is a drama of the word. Its speeches are eloquent, forceful, delighting in the language and in the poetic medium. Their fluency reflects the rhetorical training which Seneca received, and which had become established as the standard form of higher education at Rome in the second half of the first century B.C.—so much so that all Roman writers from Ovid on reflect its influence in varied ways. Seneca's interest in powerful utterance does not, of course, exclude an interest in other things, in action and character, but they are mediated through the rhetoric. He is a master of pace and diction: a master at contrasting long, flowing sentences with brief pithy ones, and at varying high-flown poetic language with simple direct speech. Such verbal energy is highly theatrical, in all senses; it invites comparison immediately with the verve of blank verse in the hands of Marlowe or Shakespeare. Often, too, Senecan rhetoric, like that of the Elizabethan dramatists, makes a virtue of excess, in the sense that its excesses match excesses of emotion and attitude in the *dramatis personae*. Above all, the script of Seneca's dramas demands performance, as much as a musical score does. At the very least, the reader needs to imagine this poetry spo-

## INTRODUCTION

ken on the living voice, in order to gain some sense of its intoxicating richness.

The flow of Seneca's rhetoric carries one soon to a list or catalogue. Such lists were a constituent of eloquence long before the systematisation of rhetoric (witness Clytemnestra's account of the beacon relay in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*), but in Seneca they become an important resource in *inventio*, the development of material. He gives us memorable lists of constellations in the night sky (*Herc* 6–18), of kingdoms in Asia Minor (*Phoen* 602–13), of places in the countryside of Attica (*Pha* 1–30), of the far-ranging exploits of Bacchus (*Oed* 413–505). One deployment of a list is to give definition first by multiple negations and then by affirmation: not A, not B, not C, but D. So the famous passage in *Thyestes* on gaining kingship declares that one does not need to use horses, nor weapons, nor arrows such as those shot by the Parthians, nor siege engines: true kingship is self-bestowed (381–89). Just the same pattern appears in Hamlet's eloquent distinction between outward and inward grief:

"Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected 'haviour of the visage,  
Together with all forms, modes, shows of grief,  
That can denote me truly; these indeed seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play;  
But I have that within which passeth show.

(I.2.77–85)

## INTRODUCTION

The Senecan list in *Thyestes* gains Roman colouring from its reference to ballistae, and from its allusion to Parthians, Rome's longstanding enemy on the eastern border. In fact Seneca has just earlier mentioned the nomadic Dahae, and peoples on the coast of the Indian Ocean, and others to the south and east of the Black Sea, and dwellers by the Danube, and the Chinese (369–79). Such imaginative ranging across far-flung places and peoples is characteristic of Senecan drama, a rhetorical expansiveness inseparable from the geopolitical expansiveness of the Roman empire.

Another rhetorical aspect of the dramas is their delight in pointed, epigrammatic statement. Seneca's interest in epigram was so great that his father, himself a keen amateur of rhetoric, gathered examples which he remembered hearing from leading rhetoricians at Rome, and published them for his sons' use in a handbook which is our chief source for the rhetorical training of the period.<sup>1</sup> What appealed to Seneca about the epigram was no doubt that it displays the mind at the moment of capturing verbally some unusual or paradoxical aspect of a situation: "if they call him uncle, he is their father"; "for such suffering, we need Thyestes sober" (*Thy* 329, 900). Paradox in particular is a verbal register of the dark vision of these plays, in which so much is awry in human nature and the nature of the world. King Priam lacks a pyre though Troy is burning; humans are never wretched except by comparison; the Greeks weep for the crime they have committed (*Tro* 55, 1023, 1119).

<sup>1</sup> *The Elder Seneca: Declamations*, transl. M. Winterbottom (Loeb Classical Library), 2 vols.

## INTRODUCTION

Closely allied to epigrams are *sententiae* or brief general statements, such as were eagerly collected in countless Renaissance commonplace books (including no doubt Hamlet's). "In desperate times the headlong way is best." "Where only honest deeds to kings are free, / It is no empire, but a beggary." "Who would not fall with all the world around him?" These are Elizabethan dramatists' adaptations of Senecan originals.<sup>2</sup> Seneca uses epigrams and *sententiae* to punctuate and point the longer speeches, by rounding off each movement of thought with a flourish (e.g. Ag 4, 11, 27, 36, 43, 52, 56). In dialogue there is verbal point of many kinds, as the characters compete in turning each others' words against them. Here the challenge for the reader, as in a coded conversation in a Jane Austen novel, is to appreciate both the verbal brilliance and the reality of emotion, motive, and situation which it expresses or masks. (These realities would be more evident to an audience, who would have the speaker's tone of voice for guidance.) The prophet Cassandra's responses to Agamemnon at Ag 791-99 are not simply repartee, but reflect her deeper insight into past and future. Pyrrhus' *sententia* "Often a compassionate man will grant death rather than life" (*Tro* 329) sounds humane but is unmasked by the context as a hypocritical pretext for sacrificing a young woman's life.

Rhetorical training, especially for the lawcourts, involved arguing from the known facts of a case by inference and extension—often, too, by exaggeration. This practice

<sup>2</sup> Respectively Ag 154 in Thomas Hughes, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*; *Thy* 214-15 in John Marston, *Antonio and Mellida Part II*; *Thy* 886-87 in Ben Jonson, *Catiline*.

## INTRODUCTION

is reflected in Seneca's dramas in the frequency with which characters make inferences from previous events concerning themselves or their families or other mythical figures; the past is constantly invoked as a paradigm for the present and future. "What I am demanding is now custom and practice," claims Pyrrhus (*Tro* 249), arguing that Agamemnon's earlier sacrifice of Iphigenia justifies his present intention to sacrifice Polyxena. Medea calibrates the scale of her revenge by a desire to match her former crimes or even to outdo them (49–54). Particularly when their social identities collapse, Seneca's characters understand and define themselves in terms of their childhood or family history. Medea, set aside as Jason's wife, reverts to her earlier identity as a "barbarian" princess. Phaedra, abandoned by Theseus, sees herself as cursed to repeat the self-destructive behaviour of her mother Pasiphae, though her nurse argues vigorously that reason and willpower offer freedom from the past. The Oedipus of the first part of *Phoenician Women*, his kingship lost, insists on identifying with the evil of his conception and birth, though his daughter Antigone holds out to him another kind of self-understanding based on his innocence of intention. In such fixation with the past, rhetoric becomes inseparable from the psychology of the self.

### *The Self and the World*

In comparison with the Greek tragedies of the fifth century B.C., Seneca's dramas have a greater inwardness, a greater focus on the individual and the psychology of the self. Many of the longer speeches, particularly in the earlier Acts of individual plays, depict the characters thinking

## INTRODUCTION

aloud, proceeding by association of idea, scolding or cajoling themselves, discarding one possibility and seizing on another (e.g. *Herc* 1–124, *Pha* 85–128, *Thy* 176–204, cf. *Hamlet* II.2.550–604 beginning “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”). Inner thoughts are revealed through dramatic techniques rarely found in fifth-century drama but developed thereafter, the aside, the soliloquy, and the entrance monologue, in which an entering character voices his thoughts before interacting with others (e.g. *Med* 431–46). Together with this increased introspection comes an increased isolation of the individual. Not only is the amount of dialogue reduced in comparison with fifth-century drama, but the pointed quality of the dialogue in Seneca lessens the sense of real interaction between the characters. Furthermore the convention that the chorus represents a community has largely disappeared, so that individuals are as distanced from society at large as from each other.

Within these isolated individuals we watch the development of obsessive emotions, emotions so powerful that they can only be called passions. There may be a single overriding passion (anger in Atreus) or an interaction between passions (love and anger in Medea, guilt and fear in Oedipus), or a conflict between two emotional forces (desire and modesty in Phaedra). The characters, lacking a secure sense of self, ally themselves with their passions and find identity in them. Atreus calls himself *iratus Atreus*, “an angry Atreus” (*Thy* 180), implying that his name, which is indeed almost an anagram of *iratus*, casts him as a man of anger. Phaedra “recognises” her mother’s perverse passion in herself (*Pha* 113), and simultaneously recognises herself (or rather, a version of herself) in that

## INTRODUCTION

supposed resemblance to her mother. Hence the eagerness with which the passion figures drive themselves on even when the emotional tide of their passion ebbs (e.g. *Med* 895ff., 988ff.).

Pervasive insecurity about the self in Senecan drama is reflected in fierce but desperate assertions of selfhood. Hercules refers to himself by name twelve times in *Hercules*, as if reminding himself of his identity as "Hercules the mighty conqueror." Inevitably this version of himself displaces other aspects of a fuller identity, for example as a father. Even after the murder of his family, his chief concern is what action is appropriate to his heroic persona. Other figures, as we have seen, identify with passion, or with precedents from the past of themselves or their families. Such identifications are always misidentifications because they represent only one aspect or version of the self; the full self is fragmented in this way. Medea reifies two versions of herself, "wife" and "mother," and is torn between them (*Med* 928).

These insecure individuals need to assert power over others to assure themselves of their selfhood. Almost every dialogue in these dramas can be read as a power struggle: the debate in Act 2 of *Trojan Women*, supposedly about principles, comes down to the question who has the stronger will, who will blink first. Even Phaedra's supposed love for Hippolytus comes to look, in light of her imagery of hunting, more like a desire to capture and dominate him. For Lycus might is right, and for Atreus supreme power is amoral by nature, exempt from "private" virtues such as loyalty (*Herc* 400-01, *Thy* 217-18). Successful revenge is an ultimate assertion of power over others, convincing Atreus that he is "king of kings," and deluding Medea that

## INTRODUCTION

she has recovered her royal sceptre (*Thy* 912, *Med* 982). When Polynices asks his brother whether he would sacrifice country, housegods, and wife for the sake of power, Eteocles responds, "Power is well purchased at any price" (*Phoen* 664). This power lust finds a deep resonance in Elizabethan drama: in addition to the passages cited in the footnote on *Phoenician Women* 664, compare the words of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*:

A God is not as glorious as a King:  
I think the pleasure they enjoy in heaven  
Cannot compare with kingly joys on earth  
(1 *Tamburlaine* II.5.57-59)

—a passage which, despite its blasphemy, is less stark and chilling than Eteocles' words.

Power is asserted not only over other humans but also over the natural world. Cosmic imagery is familiar in poetry ("Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament / And only herald to the gaudy spring"), but in Seneca such language goes beyond imagery, for his characters claim, and sometimes possess, actual dominance over the physical world. Seneca's Hercules is like Lady Macbeth in believing that his bloody hands will stain the whole ocean; but his belief that the whole world shuns his guilt has a deeper resonance just because he is a world conqueror: "By being known everywhere, I have forfeited a place for exile" (*Herc* 1323-31). Oedipus' guilt similarly pollutes the whole of Thebes. Those lists so characteristic of Senecan rhetoric extend the individual's power over the world. Hippolytus is able to organise a hunt covering all of Attica. Medea can command destructive forces from all over the world, even from the heavens; not only that, but she seems



## INTRODUCTION

to embody in herself the destructive forces of sea and fire. Such a world picture has analogues in Greek myth, where Agamemnon's actions can bring plague on the army, and the actions of Atreus can turn back the sun in his course. But it also has an unmistakable resonance with the Roman world of Seneca's day, in which the actions of one man, the emperor, could indeed affect the known world. The global perspective in Seneca's catalogues of far-flung places implies a world that has become globalised, a world such as that described in the second choral ode of *Medea* (364–74), where one can speak in one breath of Indians and Persians, of the Araxes and the Rhine.

Human power over the world appears all the greater because the gods (if they exist) seem supine or powerless. Gods never intervene in these play to prevent an atrocity or to correct one. Neptune acts in a mechanical way to carry out Theseus' curse on his son, but he will not act to redress matters, as Theseus pointedly notes (*Pha* 1242–43). The chorus of that play contrasts Jove's ordering of the heavens with his indifference to moral chaos on earth (959–88). Juno in *Hercules* paints a picture of moral chaos in the heavens as well, as she descends to earth with the purpose of destroying the source of law and order there. Atreus claims, with apparent justification, to have frightened the gods from the heavens; *he* is the most exalted of gods, peer of the stars (*Thy* 885, 911).

The self-assertiveness of the Senecan figures derives ultimately from that of the old Homeric heroes such as Achilles and Ajax. Ajax displays it in his competitive desire to inherit Achilles' prestigious weapons, in his mad rage when they are denied him, in his brusque rejection of others' concern in Sophocles' play, in his assertion of