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INTRODUCTION

Seneca, the author of *Phaedra* and seven other tragedies on Greek mythological subjects, was a man of many aptitudes and attainments. He had an important place in Roman politics as the tutor of the future emperor Nero and on Nero's accession for at least five years his chief adviser. He was also an influential rhetorician and, as an adherent of the Stoic sect, composed in the contemporary declamatory manner a number of works on various aspects of moral philosophy, the most important of which were *De brevitate vitae*, a mordant analysis of the inane frivolities of an indolent society, *De clementia*, on mercy, a discreet warning against tyranny, dedicated to the young emperor Nero, *De tranquillitate animi*, on participation in public life, and the protreptic *Epistulae morales* written in the last years of his life.[1] He also wrote *Naturales quaestiones*, a work on terrestrial and atmospheric phenomena, and *Apocolocyntosis* (Pumpkinification), a vindictive but masterly satire on the deification of the recently deceased emperor Claudius.[2] No aspect of Seneca's writings should be interpreted in isolation from the rest, for wide personal experience in addition to deep knowledge of literary traditions inspired both the tragedies and the prose works of this versatile man.

1. THE LIFE OF SENECA

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born shortly before the beginning of the Christian era at Corduba (mod. Córdoba) in Baetica, the highly Romanized province of S. Spain. He was the second son of a wealthy knight of the same name, a man of Italian extraction.[3] Brought to Rome at an early age with a view to a political career and that of advocate in the courts, he was educated by teachers who for the most part combined

[1] In addition to Griffin (1976) on the moral essays see D. A. Russell, 'Letters to Lucilius', in Costa (1974) 70–95 and H. MacL. Currie, 'Seneca the philosopher', in Dudley (1972) 24–61.

[2] On *Apocolocyntosis* see P. T. Eden, ed., Seneca *Apocolocyntosis* (Cambridge 1984) and Coffey 165–77.

[3] On the Spanish background of the elder Seneca see Miriam T. Griffin, *J.R.S.* 62 (1972) 1–12; on his rhetorical influence see p. 18 and nn. 66–7 below.

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declamatory rhetoric with philosophy.[4] He became *quaestor*, the first important magistracy of the *cursus honorum*, at some time late in the reign of Tiberius or during that of Gaius (Caligula).[5]

In the first year of the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41) Seneca, probably at the instigation of the emperor's wife Messalina, was condemned to death by the senate on the charge of having committed adultery with Julia Livilla, Claudius' niece. The death penalty was commuted by Claudius to banishment. Seneca's relegation to Corsica for eight years of the prime of his life deprived him of any place at the centre of the Roman world but gave him much time for reflection.[6] He was recalled early in A.D. 49 through the contriving of Claudius' niece and new wife Agrippina in order to become the preceptor and tutor of her son Nero and was immediately nominated for a praetorship.[7] His responsibilities became graver when in A.D. 50 Claudius set aside his own son Britannicus and adopted Nero as his successor. In October A.D. 54 Nero became emperor after the sudden death of Claudius by poison that, as was generally agreed, was instigated by Agrippina. The close collaboration of Seneca and Burrus, the sole prefect of the praetorian guard, was the fundamental basis for the stability in the government of the Roman world for the first five years at least of the reign of Nero.

In A.D. 59 Nero, in order to free himself from the suffocating importunities of his mother, had her murdered. Seneca composed the letter sent by the emperor to the senate accusing her of conspiracy and alleging that she had committed suicide. As the truth was widely known his reputation was shattered, but he retained some influence with Nero until the death of Burrus in A.D. 62 finally broke his power.[8] He withdrew from public life, and though possibly privy to the Pisonian conspiracy of A.D. 65, was not, unlike his nephew the poet Lucan, an active

[4] Notably Papirius Fabianus, on whose style see Sen. *Epist.* 100; E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (Leipzig 1923[4]) 308 'philosophizing declaimer or declaiming philosopher'.

[5] On all aspects of Seneca's career see Griffin (1976); on his quaestorship 43–51.

[6] On Seneca's exile see Griffin (1976) 59–62 and 288. Caligula had all exiles executed (Suet. *Calig.* 28).

[7] On Agrippina's motives see Tac. *Ann.* 12.8, 13.2.

[8] The narrative of Books 13–15 of the *Annals* of Tacitus, unlike that of Cassius Dio, is generally sympathetic to Seneca. See Griffin (1976) esp. ch. 3, 67–128, also M. T. Griffin, *Nero: the end of a dynasty* (London 1984) esp. 50–87 and Syme 550–2 and 591.

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participant. Nero, however, as part of a savage purge demanded his suicide. Seneca, in an elaborately arranged death scene that was, as Tacitus narrates it, in many ways a deliberate imitation of that of Socrates, met his end in tranquillity and without fear.[9]

Seneca has been accused of hypocrisy, both in his lifetime and in later ages, because of the discrepancy between writings that proclaimed modest self-sufficiency in a way of life committed to philosophy and his public career as Nero's political adviser, who connived at the gravest crimes and became inordinately wealthy.[10] Seneca experienced the allure of wealth but also its hazards, for a plutocrat was at risk when the emperor was jealous and avaricious. Hence his sincere desire to return to Nero a large part of his wealth when he wished to withdraw from court life. No one could survive long as Nero's grey eminence with his moral reputation untarnished. To condemn Seneca is easy; to assess some of his dilemmas requires an unprejudiced understanding of the age of Claudius and Nero.[11]

2. THE DATING OF SENECA'S TRAGEDIES

There is positive evidence that shortly after his return from exile Seneca was actively concerned with problems of tragic drama. In the early fifties of the first century there took place in the prefaces that preceded the recitation of tragedy a learned dispute on a point of propriety in tragic diction between Seneca and the distinguished consular and tragedian Pomponius Secundus. It is likely that Seneca also wrote tragedies during the same period and possibly in later years, when it was said by his enemies that he composed poetry with greater assiduity at a time when Nero as emperor was captivated by the art.[12]

[9] Tac. *Ann* 15.60.3–64.6 and Griffin (1976) 367–88.

[10] The prejudiced attack in A.D. 58 reported by Tacitus at *Ann.* 13.42 and extended by Dio (see Griffin (1976) 428–33) is echoed uncritically by H. J. Rose, *A handbook of Latin literature* (London 1966[3]) 359–60; see also F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics* (London 1975) 160–2.

[11] See J. Ferguson in Dudley (1972) 1–23, Syme 551–2 and Tarrant (1985) 8.

[12] On the literary dispute see Quint. *Inst.* 8.3.31 and for its probable date of A.D. 52 C. Cichorius, *Römische Studien* (Leipzig 1922) 426–9. Reporting the attacks on Seneca's verse-making Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.52.2–3) uses the word *carmina*, a term used in the singular by himself (*ibid.* 11.13.1) and by Cicero (*Sen.* 22) of a tragedy.

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On the dating of individual plays it may be noted that late in the reign of Tiberius a man of distinguished birth and eloquence was driven to suicide because it was alleged that sentiments in his *Atreus* play betokened disloyalty to Tiberius.[13] Seneca was therefore aware that the Greek myth could be applied to a Roman political context with perilous results and is unlikely to have written his *Thyestes* until after his return from exile as tutor of a prince or adviser to a young emperor.[14] If, as is widely accepted, Seneca parodies his own *Hercules Furens* at *Apocolocyntosis* 7, a date *ante quem* of late A.D. 54 may be suggested.[15]

A recently propounded stylistic approach demands attention. The demonstration that in the genuine Senecan corpus the sense-pause in a mid-line position designated by any strong punctuation mark or change of speaker increases proportionately in a sequence in which *Agamemnon*, *Phaedra* and *Oedipus* have the fewest, *Medea*, *Troades* and *Hercules Furens* a greater number and *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* the most, suggests that *Phaedra* is early in relation to most of the other plays. This criterion, though interesting, is in itself inconclusive. Far more compelling is the argument based on the collection of data whereby final *-o,* in certain classes of word, shows a pattern of development in which the proportion of long final *-o* is approximately equal with minor fluctuations in all the plays except *Thyestes*, and still more *Phoenissae*, where there is a great preponderance of the shortened vowel. It may be concluded that *Thyestes* was Seneca's last complete tragedy and the plays were written over a period of some years.[16] The metrical evidence suggests that *Phaedra* had an early place in Seneca's sequence and, if a date of about

[13] Tac. *Ann.* 6.29.4–7.

[14] Note Sen. *De ira* 1.20.4. See further M. Coffey, 'Notes on the history of Augustan and early imperial tragedy', in J. H. Betts, J. T. Hooker, J. R. Green, edd., *Studies in honour of T.B.L. Webster* I (Bristol 1986) 47–9. Seneca's possible family connection with that of Sejanus (see P. Oxy. 55 (1988) 3807 pp. 183–7) will have increased his caution.

[15] On self-parody see O. Weinreich, *Senecas Apocolocyntosis* (Berlin 1923) 62–8 and on the date of *Apocolocyntosis*, Coffey 168–9 and F.R.D. Goodyear, *CHCL* II 633–4.

[16] J. G. Fitch, *A. J. Ph.* 102 (1981) 289–307, uses sense-pauses within the line in Sophocles and Shakespeare as control. For data in shortening of final *-o* he is concerned mainly with nom. sing. of third decl. nouns, first pers. sing. of present and future tenses, gerunds and pronouns and refers to R. G. Austin on Virg. *Aen.* 2.735. Chronology is also discussed by Zwierlein (1984) 233–48.

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A.D. 54 or earlier be accepted for *Hercules Furens*, it would seem to belong to the later years of the reign of Claudius.

3. THE BACKGROUND OF THE MYTH

The motif of the lecherous stepmother and that of Potiphar's wife, the woman who makes advances to a man and on being rejected accuses him of actual or intended rape, is widely spread in myth, folk tales and early literature. The lustful stepmother is found in Irish and Icelandic myths and the Italian novella as well as in Greek stories about Hippolytus.[17] The best example of the Potiphar's wife motif in the Greek tradition is the myth of Bellerophon, who while staying with Proetus rebuffed the amatory proposals of his wife Stheneboea and in consequence was falsely accused by her.[18] The tales of Phaedra and Stheneboea were linked by Aristophanes, who in his *Frogs* puts into the mouth of Aeschylus an indictment of the dramatic portrayal of these wicked women by Euripides (1043–53).

The story of Hippolytus, son of Theseus by an Amazon mother, formed part of the corpus of myths concerning Theseus, who though widely interpreted in archaic tradition as an archetypal hero of Athens was connected with the mythology of Trozen, a small city state in north-eastern Peloponnese, as well as of Attica. The tale of Hippolytus, his stepmother Phaedra and his father Theseus was localized in both Athens and Trozen.

Euripides wrote two tragedies on the story of Hippolytus. The first, which has been referred to since early Alexandrian times as *Hippolytos Kalyptomenos* (Hippolytus who covered his head), was written probably about the mid thirties of the fifth century B.C. and is known to us from some twenty short fragments and *testimonia*.[19] The action takes place in Athens. The prologue is delivered either by Phaedra or as in the *Medea* (431 B.C.) by the Nurse. In the earlier part of the play

[17] Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of folk literature* (Bloomington, Indiana 1932–6) v 386.

[18] Stith Thompson (n. 17) IV 474, referring to J. G. Frazer, ed., Apollodorus, *The Library* (Loeb Classical Library 1921) I 151 and II 63 n. 4.

[19] On the dating of the first Hippolytus play see Lesky 459 n. 45. The fragments are quoted and analysed systematically by Barrett 10–45 and discussed by Webster 64–9. On the title see Barrett 10 n. 1 and 37 n. 1.

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Hippolytus learns on the stage either from Phaedra herself, as is widely assumed, or through some intermediary such as the Nurse, of her passion for him. Hence he covers his head to protect himself from the pollutions of her incestuous desire. It may also have been suggested that he should attempt to seize the throne. By whatever means a vow of silence is extorted from him. There is a scene of angry confrontation between Theseus and Hippolytus, who is prevented by his oath from defending himself fairly. Theseus will have used one of the protective prayers granted him by Poseidon to curse his son, who is mortally injured when a monstrous bull from the sea drives his horses to uncontrolled panic and disaster. It is not known whether the truth of Hippolytus' innocence was revealed to Theseus by a messenger, by the Nurse or by Phaedra herself. Her suicide probably took place after the truth had become known. At the end of the play there was a prophecy, probably by a *deus ex machina*, that there would be a cult in honour of Hippolytus. Much is uncertain about the first Hippolytus play and it is not permissible to use Seneca's play as a means of reconstructing it.[20]

We are told that the play caused serious offence to the Athenian public for its portrayal of what was judged according to the ancient 'Hypothesis' to the play to be 'unseemly and worthy of condemnation'. A few years later in 428 B.C., contrary to normal procedure, Euripides produced a second Hippolytus play, from which the more objectionable elements had been removed. This is the extant play, referred to by the commentators and scholars as *Hippolytos Stephanephoros*, Hippolytus who offers a garland, i.e. in fealty to his patroness Artemis. The play took the first prize and has ever since been judged a masterpiece.[21]

The prologue of Euripides' second Hippolytus play is spoken by Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sex, who will bring vengeance on Hippolytus for showing contempt for her and an exclusive devotion to Artemis the virgin goddess of the hunt: she has chosen to make Phaedra

[20] Barrett, though willing to admit the possibility that Seneca was to some extent influenced by Euripides' earlier Hippolytus play, is rightly sceptical of all attempts to use Seneca to reconstruct Euripides (30–45); see also H. Lloyd-Jones, *J.H.S.* 85 (1965) 164–71 and *Gnomon* 38 (1966) 14–15. Seneca's possible originality is explored by U. Moricca, *S.I.F.C.* 21 (1915) 158–224 and Grimal (1963). See also J. Dingel, *Hermes* 98 (1970) 44–56.

[21] See the ancient hypothesis to the *Hippolytus*, Barrett 96, ll. 25–30 = *Euripidis Fabulae*, J. Diggle, ed., (Oxford 1984) 1 205, ll. 25–30.

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the instrument of his destruction. Phaedra is presented as a virtuous queen, loyal to her family, who is reduced to an extreme of physical weakness and mental instability by a malady the nature of which she conceals. After the Nurse has wrested from her the confession that she has a passion for her stepson Hippolytus, she explains that after deliberation she has decided that her own honour and that of her family demands her suicide. The Nurse, who had previously censured Phaedra's passion, now counsels her to accept it and enters the palace having made evasive promises to secure some artificial remedy and to refrain from informing Hippolytus. But off-stage she extracts an oath of silence from him before confiding to him the guilty secret of her mistress. Phaedra overhears that she has been betrayed before the entry of Hippolytus, who utters a tirade on women in general and Phaedra in particular for the licentious desires which have tainted him. She sends the Nurse away and hangs herself. Theseus on his return from Delphi finds a writing tablet hanging from the hand of Phaedra which accuses Hippolytus of rape. Accepting the truth of the accusation without further enquiry he curses his son and reviles him. Hippolytus, trapped by his vow of silence, pleads in vain his virginal innocence and lack of motive. After his departure into exile a messenger brings news of the disaster caused by the bull, and the dying Hippolytus is brought on. Theseus is about to revile him again, but Artemis appears and condemns Theseus for taking pleasure in the death of his son and for his misuse of one of Poseidon's curses, intended for an enemy, without first seeking any corroboration. There is a final reconciliation between Theseus and Hippolytus, who before his death absolves his father from the pollution of blood guilt.[22]

In Euripides' *Hippolytus* there is a complex and sometimes uneasy interaction between divine intervention and human action and moral responsibility. The action takes place within the framework of the intrusion into human affairs of two goddesses. Aphrodite presents herself as willing to cause evil in order to further her malice and is condemned by Artemis in the concluding scene of the play for her hatred of Hippolytus' self-control and purity. Artemis, to whom Hippolytus was the dearest of mankind, states that she had been unable to interfere with an initiative taken by another deity, reveals to Theseus and Hippolytus

[22] The exposition of the play by Lesky 229–35 is exemplary. See also P.E. Easterling, *CHCL* 1 318–29.

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the reasons for Phaedra's actions, and foretells that in compensation for the injustice of his fate and his atrocious sufferings Hippolytus will be commemorated by a permanent ritual in Trozen in which Phaedra also will receive a share of the honours. As a result of the epiphany of Artemis, father and son, while expressing their abhorrence of the treatment of innocent human beings by divine powers, are fully reconciled to each other in understanding and affection.[23] The play ends in deep sadness but without strident rancour.

In addition to the supernatural aspect of *Hippolytus* there is in strictly human terms a conflict between overwhelming passion and the power of the intellect to choose and to accept moral responsibility. The play explores areas of irrational, intense, emotional disturbance. Phaedra's malaise is described first as an illness of both body and mind. The topic of physical disorders is treated subtly and with great delicacy, and an element of delirium is displayed in her restless urge to escape from her surroundings. But, after the revelation of her love for Hippolytus, there follows a speech in which Phaedra expounds dispassionately to the chorus the stages of her thinking in her attempts to thwart the effects of her infatuation. Having deemed silence and self-control ineffective, she decides that suicide alone is her wise course of action, demonstrating implicitly that the power of her will and her ability to choose now have the mastery, but her firm resolution is eroded by the argument of the Nurse that suicide is a high-minded but futile gesture. In the anguish of her indecision Phaedra tacitly capitulates. However, as soon as she hears of Hippolytus' knowledge of her passion, she decides on immediate death for herself. Her attitude hardens when after listening to Hippolytus' tirade she believes that in spite of his oath he may betray her, and having blamed the Nurse in bitter anger for revealing her secret, in order to secure the good name of her family she makes the further decision to bring disaster to Hippolytus as well as death to herself.

As a devotee of Artemis Hippolytus is morally pure but his pleas of

[23] The status of the gods is sometimes ambiguous, e.g. Kypris (i.e. Aphrodite) is at one point described as not a goddess but a greater destructive force (359–61). On the gods in *Hippolytus* see B.M.W. Knox, *Y.C.S.* 13 (1952) 27–9 (= *Word and action* (Baltimore 1979) 226–8), R.P. Winnington-Ingram in *Euripide* (*Entretiens Fondation Hardt* VI, 1960) 171–91, H. Lloyd-Jones, *The justice of Zeus* (Berkeley 1971) 147–53 and K. J. Dover, *Greek popular morality* (Oxford 1974) 77.

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innocence are of no avail against the immovable prejudice of Theseus. Yet the fiery rhetoric of his general condemnation of women and his flaunting of his own virtue will have suggested to the audience a hybristic priggishness, together with a measure of prurience, as will his disdain and contemptuous gesture towards the goddess Aphrodite. Theseus, though important for the action of the play, is not of interest as a dramatic character. Of greater dramatic potential is the role of the Nurse, something more varied and wide-ranging than that usually accorded to a minor character in an ancient tragedy. The part played by the Chorus is distinguished both for its rapport with the action and also for the lyrical splendour of the odes, notably the depiction of love as a power of sweetness and also of terrible destruction (525–64).[24]

Fragments of Sophocles' *Phaedra* are fewer than those of Euripides' *Hippolytus* I and our knowledge of the piece more exiguous.[25] It is certain that in Sophocles Theseus returns not from an embassy but from the Underworld. His absence, if protracted, may have convinced Phaedra that he was dead and thus be important for her conduct. She regards her passion as a disease sent by Zeus.[26] The tragic events concerning Phaedra and Hippolytus are so intertwined that Sophocles' choice of *Phaedra* rather than *Hippolytus* for his title may have had little significance.[27] It is widely assumed, perhaps rightly, that Sophocles produced his play as a corrective to the offensive depiction of Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus* I.[28] It is also possible that in *Hippolytus* I Euripides attempted to modify what he might have considered an unreal handling of the theme by Sophocles. But it is unlikely that Sophocles turned to the story as long as the successful second Hippolytus play was fresh in the memory of the theatre-going public.[29]

Asclepiades of Tragilos, a fourth-century pupil of the orator Isocrates,

[24] R. Lattimore, *The poetry of Greek tragedy* (Baltimore 1958) 110–20, discusses the notions of relief and escape in the poetry of *Hippolytus*.

[25] See S. Radt, ed., *Trag. Graec. Frag.* IV: *Sophocles* (Göttingen 1977) 475–81, and A. C. Pearson, ed., *Sophocles' fragments* (Cambridge 1917) II pp. 294–305. Barrett 22–6 discusses the fragments with acumen; see also Webster 75–6.

[26] F 680 (Radt) = 680 (Pearson) (See n. 25). The lines on Love (Eros) are rightly attributed to Sophocles by Radt (F 684) and Pearson (684); cf. Barrett 23.

[27] But see Barrett 12–13 and Webster 76.

[28] Lesky 187 and Webster 75.

[29] Such however is the view of U. von Wilamowitz, *Euripides Hippolytos* (Berlin 1891) 57.

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in his work on the subjects used in tragedy gives a version of the story in which Theseus, wishing to protect Hippolytus from possible harm done to him by Phaedra, sent him to govern Trozen. Phaedra, having already fallen in love with Hippolytus and built a temple to Aphrodite in Athens, on arrival in Trozen intended to persuade Hippolytus to succumb to her passion. As he rejected her she accused him falsely of rape. Theseus accepted her story and invoked one of the solemn prayers given him by Poseidon. Hippolytus was riding his chariot by the shore when the bull came from the sea and caused his agonizing destruction. When the truth was revealed, Phaedra hanged herself.[30] It is noteworthy that, as is widely assumed in *Hippolytus* I, Phaedra made a direct approach to her stepson and that she committed suicide after the detection of her calumny.

The only mention of a dramatic version of the Hippolytus story from the Alexandrian period is the *Hippolytus* of Lycophron. The work is known to us only as a title; there is no indication that Roman writers of the early empire showed any interest in Hellenistic drama.[31] For Seneca Euripides seems to have been the Greek dramatist *par excellence*.[32]

4. ROMAN LITERARY INFLUENCES

The fragmentary remains of the plays of the three major tragedians of the Roman republic, Ennius (239–169 B.C.), Pacuvius (220–*c.* 140 B.C.) and Accius (170–*c.* 90 B.C.) are a wretchedly imperfect guide to their intrinsic qualities and their influence on subsequent literature, but our defective knowledge can be supplemented from the numerous comments and judgements on them by other writers, particularly Cicero. The Roman tragedians based their work on Greek originals, but how closely they were indebted to their models is uncertain. Cicero describes Ennius' *Medea* as a close rendering (*ad verbum*) of Euripides' drama on

[30] On Asclepiades see Barrett 26–7, quoting *Frag. Gr. hist.* 12 F 28 cited by schol. V on Hom. *Od.* 11.321. Asclepiades was the author of *Tragodoumena*, the subjects of tragedy. There is a similar version of the story with minor variants in Paus. 1.22.2 and Apollod. *Epit.* 1.18–19.

[31] On Lycophron see Pfeiffer (1968) 119–20 and for the *testimonia* on his *Hippolytus* see B. Snell, ed., *Trag. Graec. Frag.* 1 (Göttingen 1971) 174–5.

[32] See for example *Epist.* 115. 14–15 and W. S. Maguinness, *Hermathena* 87 (1956) 90–1.

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