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EVIL GODDESSES, FLAWED HEROES.
DIVINE WRATH AND HUMAN ERROR
IN SENECA'S *HERCULES FURENS* AND *PHAEDRA*

ABSTRACT. Pyplacz Joanna, Evil Goddesses, Flawed Heroes. Divine Wrath and Human Error in Seneca's *Hercules furens* and *Phaedra*.

The present article discusses the relationship between deities and human beings in Seneca's tragedies. Only in two of them – *Hercules furens* and *Phaedra* – do gods significantly influence the plot. Holding personal grudges against the main characters of these plays, the goddesses Juno and Venus set out to destroy Hercules and Hippolytus respectively by exploiting significant flaws in their characters.

Keywords: Seneca, tragedy, goddesses, revenge, Venus, Juno, Hercules, Phaedra, Hippolytus, destruction.

The role of the supernatural world in Seneca's tragedies is quite considerable. Its several components – ghosts, magic and dreams – were widely discussed by Charles Whitmore¹ and subsequently neatly classified and further analysed by Mary Braginton,² whose study clearly shows that it is the ghosts who constitute the most numerous and powerful group of supernatural entities in these plays.³

The gods themselves are rare guests in Seneca's tragedies, which differ from the tragedies of the Greeks in this respect. Their role is similar to that of magic or divination. In fact only two goddesses are present in these plays: Juno in *Hercules furens* and Venus in *Phaedra*⁴ – and of these only Juno appears on stage.

Although Juno only comes to deliver the prologue and is not seen again, studies have shown that her actual role in the play is much more significant

¹Cf. Ch. Whitmore, *The Supernatural in Tragedy* (1915), electronic version – Kessinger Publishing, LLC (2007), pp. 97–109.

²Cf. M. Braginton, *The Supernatural in Seneca's Tragedies*, Menasha, Wisconsin 1933.

³Cf. *ibidem*.

⁴Braginton also counts the Furia from Thyestes deified Hercules from Hercules Oetaeus as divinities (cf. *ibidem*, p. 33–34; J. Shelton, *Seneca's "Hercules Furens": Theme, Structure and Style*, Göttingen 1978, p. 22).

than might appear at first sight.⁵ At the very beginning of *Hercules furens* Juno declares that her status as Jupiter's wife is now a thing of the distant past and proceeds to enumerate all of Jupiter's earthly lovers, together with the bastard offspring who – like Hercules, whom Juno mentions last – have now acquired godly status themselves.

It is Hercules, who so far has contrived to turn all the dangers and obstacles sent by her into personal triumphs (*in laudes suas / mea vertit odia*, 34–35), that Juno detests most. Furious, she decides to put an end to the young hero's incessant victories. She devises a perfidious plan: if Hercules has never been defeated by either man or god, then this means that so far none of his adversaries has proved to be his equal. If that be the case, then the only person who can defeat Hercules is ... Hercules himself:

[...] Quaeris Alcidae parem?

Nemo est nisi ipse: bella iam secum gerat. (*HerF.* 79–85)

Juno resolves to exploit the young hero's impetuosity and violent disposition in order to use it as a powerful weapon against him.⁶ First she deprives him of his sanity by clouding his mind with visions of creatures from the underworld (*emitte ...*, 75–77)⁷ and other strange hallucinations (“Discedant ferae, / ipse imperando fessus Eurystheus vacet”, 72–73). In this she is also aided by the Moon (*sublimis alias Luna concipiat feras*, 83).⁸

The motif of a deity intoxicating the human mind with strong passions (or delusions) is very old. In Homer's *Iliad* Apollo deprives Patroclus of his senses so that he might more easily be defeated by Hector (*Il.* 16. 715 ff.). In Sophocles' *Aiix* Athena sends a fit of madness to assail Aiix (Soph. *Aiix* 65 ff.) who, under the influence of hallucinations, makes a laughing stock of himself and is subsequently so ashamed that he commits suicide.

In Euripides' play *Herakles*, which was one of the possible sources of Seneca's play, Hera orders Lyssa to obscure the mind of the main character (Eur. *Her.* 831 nn.). Many years later, this version of the motif returned in the seventh book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where Juno sends Allecto to goad Turnus into launching an attack against the Trojans (Verg. *Aen.* 7. 445–457).

⁵ Cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., p. 34.

⁶ Cf. C. Zintzen, *Alte virtus animosa cadit. Gedanken zur Darstellungen des Tragischen in Senecas "Hercules Furens"*, [in:] *Senecas Tragödien*, ed. by E. Lefèvre, Darmstadt 1972, pp. 149–209, at 168; C. González Vázquez, *Dos protagonistas en conflicto: Análisis del "Hercules furens" de Séneca*, Cuadernos de Filología Clásica. Estudios latinos 8, pp. 143–155, at 145, 148.

⁷ Cf. M. Billerbeck, *Seneca. "Hercules furens". Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung & Kommentar*, Leiden 1999, p. 224.

⁸ Margarethe Billerbeck connects this passage with the presocratic philosophy of nature – cf. M. Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 225.

According to some scholars it was this particular passage of the *Aeneid* that served as the main model for the prologue to Seneca's tragedy *Hercules furens*.⁹ This hypothesis seems even more plausible when we consider that in all probability this particular passage of Virgil's poem was also the hypotext of the prologue to Seneca's other tragedy – *Thyestes*.¹⁰

In Euripides' *Herakles* Hera never appears on stage and we learn about her plan from the conversation between Lyssa and Iris. In the *Aeneid*, on the contrary, not only does she pull the strings of the action "from backstage", but her actual words are quoted by the narrator. She does not visit Turnus herself, however, but instead sends the Fury Allecto to talk to him. Seneca clearly emulates this scene in his *Thyestes*, where the Fury urges the ghost of Tantalus to fly to the palace of Atreus and poison its inhabitants with a plague of evil:

[...] Furia: Perge, detestabilis
umbra, et penates impios furiis age. (*Thy.* 23–24)

In the dramatised prologue of *Thyestes* Seneca has transformed the Virgilian hypotext in accordance with his own lurid aesthetic.¹¹ In *Hercules furens* he uses the same model, but goes one step further: instead of the Fury, Juno herself appears on stage and reveals her evil plan to the audience. Juno uses the personification of wrath – *ira* – for the very same purpose that she sends the Fury in the *Aeneid* (pulling the strings "from backstage"):

Perge ira, perge et magna meditantem opprime,
congrederere, manibus ipsa dilacera tuis:
quid tanta mandas odia? [...] (*HerF.* 70–72)

Here a small digression will be necessary. In *Thyestes* Seneca invented yet another way of altering his Virgilian hypotext and it is the Fury alone ("behind" whom stands no other supernatural being) who sends the ghost of Tantalus to the palace of Atreus. Tantalus therefore plays two roles at the same time: (1) that of the Fury (he is sent to perform an evil action on Earth) and (2) that of Turnus (he is incited by a supernatural being). These transformations can be illustrated by means of the following scheme:

⁹ Cf. A. J. Boyle, *Tragic Seneca: an Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*, London 1997, p. 107; J. Shelton, op. cit., p. 22; G. A. Staley, *Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy*, Oxford 2010, pp. 98–100.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., p. 51; R. J. Tarrant, *Seneca, "Thyestes"*, ed. with a comm., Atlanta 1985, pp. 85–86; A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play. "Thyestes" and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Cambridge 2003, p. 34 ff.; P. Mantovanelli, *Il prologo del "Tieste" di Seneca. Strutture spazio-temporali e intertestualità*, QCTC 10, 1992, pp. 201–216, at 203; J. Pyłacz, *The Aesthetics of Senecan Tragedy*, Kraków 2010, pp. 53–55.

¹¹ Cf. J. Pyłacz, op. cit., pp. 53–55.

<i>The Aeneid</i> :	[JUNO] → Fury (sent to influence)	→ Turnus (influenced to perform a task)
<i>Hercules furens</i> :	JUNO → Ira (sent to influence)	→ Hercules (influenced to perform a task)
<i>Thyestes</i> :	Fury → Tantalus (sent to influence / influenced to perform a task)	→ the palace / Atreus (influenced)

This scheme shows that in *Thyestes* Seneca modified the Virgilian pattern which he used in *Hercules furens* by simply eliminating the first element of the chain (i.e. Juno), which he substituted with the next one (i.e. the Fury). Tantalus is sent both to influence Atreus (and Thyestes) and to perform the task of infecting the palace with evil. At the end of the chain there is the palace, whose inhabitants, namely Atreus, are to be infected and therefore influenced by the evil spirit. Atreus also has a task to perform – that of murdering his brother's sons. The difference between *Thyestes* and the two previous texts is that the characters who are induced to perform a task endure suffering after doing so, while Atreus rejoices.

Let us now return to *Hercules furens* and to Juno's prologue. Jo-Ann Shelton has rightly observed that "at the beginning of the scene [...] she appears as a divine personality, the jealous goddess of myth [...]. As the scene progresses, however, she emerges more as an evil force than a personality, as Vergil's Juno similarly appears on one level as a divine personality and on another level as the force of disorder and irrationality."¹²

The enraged Juno has at her disposal a frightful collection of hellish monsters (86 ff.), which include the personifications of vice and crime:

[...] veniet invisum Scelus
 suumque lambens sanguinem Impietas ferox
 Errorque et in se semper armatus Furor –
 hoc hoc ministro noster utatur dolor. (*HerF.* 96–99)

Juno's most powerful weapons are the dangerous passions that dwell in the souls of all human beings – and also in that of Hercules. Shelton rightly calls Juno "a vivid dramatization of the disorder in the human mind."¹³

Like the Fury in *Thyestes* ("en ipse Titan dubitat an iubeat sequi / cogatque habenis ire periturum diem", 120–121), Juno leaves the stage when the Sun rises ("clarescit dies / ortuque Titan lucidus croceo subit", 123–124). Being an evil goddess, she shuns the light of day. In Senecan tragedies evil is typically associated with night and darkness.¹⁴

¹² J. Shelton, op. cit., p. 22.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 23.

¹⁴ Cf. N. Frye, *Collected Works on Renaissance Literature*, ed. M. Dolzani, Toronto 2006, p. 17; idem, *Fearful Symmetry*, Princeton 1969, p. 278; J. Pyplacz, op. cit., p. 68.

Juno's role in the play does not end with the prologue. Her name hangs over the action like an ominous cloud. The *dramatis personae* often mention her old grudge against Hercules ("infesta Juno", 215; "Iunonis odio crede", 447; "hoc nulla Iuno, nullus Eurystheus iubet", 479; "Hoc Iuno telum manibus immisit tuis", 1297). Indeed, Hercules himself gives expression to his awareness of the goddess's wrath ("Iunonis odio", 606; "iam diu pateris manus / cessare nostras", Iuno 614–615). His attitude to Juno changes diametrically, however, after he goes mad and murders his wife and sons. After this terrible deed he suddenly begins to address the cruel goddess with blind devotion. This is because the madness is Juno's "present" for Hercules:

Bene habet, pudendi regis excisa est domus.
Tibi hunc dicatum, maximi coniunx Iovis,
gregem cecidi; vota persolvi libens
te digna, et Argos victimas alias dabit. (*HerF.* 1035–1038)

Seneca's portrait of Juno as a savage and malicious deity may possibly be modelled on Virgil's depiction of her in the *Aeneid* – where, driven by her hatred of the Trojans, she constantly plots to harm them and often succeeds in doing so by inflicting madness on particular people (as, for example, when she inspires the Trojan women to set fire to the ships, *Aen.* 5. 604 ff.).¹⁵

In *Hercules furens* Seneca has gone further than his hypotext. His Juno symbolizes the mysterious forces of evil that visit madness on people and drive them to commit terrible deeds. She also personifies *furor*, which in the eyes of the Stoics was a terrible sin. Her acts are more those of an evil spirit than those of a divine being.¹⁶

The other Senecan goddess who tampers with the lives of characters is Venus in *Phaedra*. Although this tragedy was probably modelled on one of Euripides' two tragedies about Hippolytus,¹⁷ Venus does not appear on stage. Neither does Diana, who plays an important part in both of Seneca's Euripidean hypotexts (*Hippolytus* and *Hippolytus velatus*).

The first person to mention Venus is Phaedra, the title heroine of the play:

Stirpem perosa Solis invisi Venus
per nos catenas vindicat Martis sui
suasque, probris omne Phoebeum genus

¹⁵ Cf. R. Coleman, *The Gods in the "Aeneid"*, G&R 29, 2 (Oct.) 1982, pp. 143–168, at 150–151.

¹⁶ Norman Pratt has also connected the image of Juno in *Hercules furens* with the Stoic view of madness (cf. N. Pratt, *The Stoic Base of Senecan Drama*, TAPA 79, 1948, pp. 1–11, at 8). Cf. B. Marti, *Seneca's Tragedies. A New Interpretation*, TAPA 76 (1945), pp. 216–245, at 225.

¹⁷ According to Braginton the main source of Seneca's *Phaedra* was not *Hippolytus*, but Euripides' lost play *Hippolytus velatus* – cf. M. Braginton, op. cit., pp. 58–59.

onerat nefandis: nulla Minois levi
defuncta amore est, iungitur semper nefas. (*Phae.* 124–128)

Phaedra has fallen in love with her stepson Hippolytus. She suspects that her incestuous passion is part of the ancient curse that has hung over her family for generations: when Phaedra's grandfather Helios exposed Venus's love affair with Mars the goddess swore to take vengeance on all his descendants.

Phaedra is perfectly aware that her present woes may well have been caused by Venus's desire for revenge. Yet despite this awareness she yields to her sinful passion to such an extent that she cannot resist it any longer ("sed fuoror cogit sequi / peiora", 178–179).¹⁸ During a long conversation her nurse appeals to her to give up this fatal infatuation. She also mocks Phaedra's "divine" explanation of her emotional state:

vana ista demens animus ascivit sibi
Venerisque numen finxit atque arcus dei. (*Phae.* 202–203)

However, Phaedra eventually forces the reluctant old woman to assume the role of intermediary between herself and Hippolytus (271–273).

Michael Coffey and Roland Mayer convincingly argue that in the passage quoted above the nurse "does not question Venus' divinity [...], but she uses her name by metonymy to refer to sexual activity."¹⁹ The most plausible interpretation of lines 202–203 would seem to be that the nurse attacks the view – commonly held by wealthy people such as Phaedra – that Venus is to blame for uncontrolled desire, which in actual fact is merely the result of material prosperity (204 ff.).²⁰ She makes a distinction between this false image of the goddess and what she believes to be her true nature (211–215).

The nurse approaches Hippolytus and attempts to persuade him to abandon the solitary life of a hunter and instead to enjoy the life of a young man (i.e. to discover physical love). Although she encourages him to seek pleasure in the arms of a woman (*grata nunc iuveni Venus*, 447), she makes no mention of Phaedra. Thus she fulfils her mistress's wish that she talk to Hippolytus, while at the same time carefully avoiding any incitement to incest, which would be to act against the dictates of her own conscience.

The nurse gives a frightening description of what the Earth would look like if Venus stopped caring about it even for a moment (469–474). Hippolytus, however, is unmoved by this terrible vision and in reply extols a life of solitude in the lap of nature (483 nn.). His speech ends with a harsh critique of women, whom

¹⁸ Cf. D. Henry, B. Walker, *Phantasmagoria and Idyll: An Element of Seneca's "Phaedra"*, G&R 13, 2 (Oct.) 1966, pp. 223–239, at 225–226.

¹⁹ Cf. M. Coffey, R. Mayer, *Seneca, "Phaedra"*, ed. with a comm., Cambridge 1990, p.110.

²⁰ Cf. *ibidem*.

he blames for all the misfortunes of the human race (559 nn.). In a sudden burst of uncontrolled emotion²¹ he declares his hatred²² of women:

Detestor omnis, horreo fugio execror.
sit ratio, sit natura, sit dirus furor:
odisse placuit. [...] (*Phae.* 566–568)

These words belie his previous expressions of love for nature in all its forms, as he seems to be oblivious to the fact that women are as much an integral part of nature as men. This irrational hatred (*odisse placuit*)²³ could be understood as the hero's tragic *hamartia*. According to Stoic doctrine – which is constantly present in Seneca's tragedies – Hippolytus has sinned by acting against nature in rejecting one of its (major) components.²⁴

This *hamartia* makes Hippolytus Phaedra's equal.²⁵ D. Henry and B. Walker remind us that Theseus applies the word *furor* to the Amazons, whose queen was none other than the mother of Hippolytus himself.²⁶

Est prorsus iste gentis armiferae furor,
odisse Veneris foedera et castum diu
vulgare populis corpus. O taetrum genus
nullaque victum lege melioris soli! (*Phae.* 909–912)

On the other hand, Eckard Lefèvre argues that Hippolytus has inherited the impetuous character of his father.²⁷

Theseus has never understood Hippolytus's contempt for physical love and he considers it to be sheer madness. His words therefore fit in perfectly with those of the nurse – who warns Hippolytus against Venus's desire for revenge – and also, ironically enough, with those of Hippolytus himself ("sit dirus furor", 567).

²¹ Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 142–143.

²² Coffey and Mayer stipulate that *odisse* does not necessarily mean *to hate*, but can also be used in the meaning "to have nothing to do with" – cf. *ibidem*, p. 143.

²³ Cf. E. Lefèvre, *Quid ratio possit? Senecas Phaedra als stoisches Drama*, [in:] *Senecas Tragödien*, ed. by E. Lefèvre, Darmstadt 1972, pp. 324–375, at 350. On Hippolytus' *furor* see: H. Hine, *Interpretatio Stoica of Senecan Tragedy*, [in:] *Sénèque le tragique*, ed. M. Billerbeck, E. Schmidt, Genève 2004, pp. 173–209, at 197.

²⁴ *From the Epicurean viewpoint he is quite right to reject sexual passion* (cf. *Lucr.* 4. 1063–1067, *Verg. Georg.* 209–211), *as we have seen, but quite wrong to treat sexual pleasure as something abhorrent; he in fact fails to make this distinction himself.* (H. Hine, *op. cit.*, at 179).

²⁵ As Phaedra has also acted against nature. Cf. Ch. Schmitz, *Die Kosmische Dimension in den Tragödien Senecas*, Berlin – New York 1993, p. 150.

²⁶ D. Henry, B. Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 226–227. Cf.:

"Exosus omne feminae nomen fugit,
immitis annos caelibis vitae dicat,
conubia vitat: genus Amazonium scias." (*Phae.* 230–232)

²⁷ Cf. E. Lefèvre, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

Hippolytus's confused idea of chastity²⁸ and Phaedra's corrupt idea of love ("titulum furori numinis falsi addidit", 197)²⁹ lead them both to calamity. Hippolytus is punished for his negative attitude to physical love and his hatred of women by means of Phaedra's *furor*³⁰ and *ira*.³¹ Thus – as in *Hercules furens* – madness is used by a hostile deity as a means to exact malicious revenge on human beings. Venus, however, is not the direct agent of Hippolytus's punishment. When the enraged Theseus casts Hippolytus out of Athens, he prays that the youth's life be put to an end not by Venus, but by Neptune:

En perage donum triste, regnator freti!
Non cernat ultra lucidum Hippolytus diem
adeatque manes iuvenis iratos patri. (*Phae.* 945–947)

His prayer is answered almost instantly.³² a giant monster emerges from the sea and frightens Hippolytus's horses. It is clear that this monster has been sent by Neptune, who would appear to personify the powerful and destructive force of outraged nature.

In the final act of the play the messenger relates Hippolytus's last moments. The youth has been exiled from Athens by his father. His fate is now sealed. Like Euripides, Seneca also uses the *est locus* motif, but – as Charles Segal has observed – he *transforms Euripides' objective spatial coordinates into a more interiorized atmosphere of nightmarish terror*.³³

Segal points out that in Euripides' play Hippolytus has numerous companions (Eur. *Hipp.* 1187, 1196, 1219), while in that of Seneca he is completely alone (1066 ff.).³⁴ As regards the place of the hero's death, in Euripides' tragedy it is deserted from the very beginning (ἐρημον χώρον, Eur. *Hipp.* 1198), while in Seneca's the landscape is initially peopled³⁵ and becomes deserted only after the giant sea monster³⁶ emerges from the sea.

Tremuere terrae, fugit attonitum pecus
passim per agros, nec suos pastor sequi
meminit iuencos; omnis e saltu fera
diffugit, omnis frigidus exsanguis metu

²⁸ Cf. R. Mayer, *Seneca: Phaedra*, London 2002, p. 38.

²⁹ Cf. D. Henry, B. Walker, op. cit., pp. 229–230.

³⁰ Cf. R. Mayer, op. cit., pp. 42–44.

³¹ "Als ein anderes Beispiel der tragischen Bühne nennt Seneca den rasenden Aias: Aiacem in mortem egit furor, in furorem ira (de ira 2, 36, 5)". (E. Lefèvre, op. cit., p. 353).

³² Cf. R. Mayer, op. cit., p. 29.

³³ Cf. Ch. Segal, *Senecan baroque: the death of Hippolytus in Seneca, Ovid and Euripides*, TAPA 114, 1984, pp. 311–325, at 316.

³⁴ Cf. ibidem, pp. 315–316.

³⁵ Cf. M. Coffey, R. Mayer, op. cit., p. 181.

³⁶ For a discussion of the nature of the monster see: Ch. Segal, op. cit., p. 318.

venator horret. Solus immunis metu
 Hippolytus artis continet frenis equos
 pavidosque notae vocis hortatu ciet. (*Phae.* 1050–1056)

This sudden depopulation fits in with the nurse's description of the Earth in the event that it should ever be abandoned in anger by Venus:

Excedat agedum rebus humanis Venus,
 quae supplet ac restituit exhaustum genus:
 orbis iacebit squalido turpis situ,
 vacuum sine ullis piscibus stabit mare,
 alesque caelo derit et silvis fera,
 solis et aer pervius ventis erit. (*Phae.* 469–474)

Hippolytus ignored these words and, in reply, extolled a life of solitude in a desolate place:

sed rure vacuo potitur et aperto aethere
 innocuus errat. [...] (*Phae.* 501–502)

As Victoria Tietze Larson has remarked, a desolate location was an important constituent of both the motif of a *locus amoenus* and that of a *locus horridus*.³⁷ Thus Hippolytus's idyllic dreamland – the *locus amoenus* where he planned to spend the rest of his life – turns into a *locus horridus* where he is going to die. Moreover, as he has always yearned for a peaceful existence, he is now compelled to die in a phantasmagoric atmosphere of anxiety and horror.³⁸

Segal has also pointed out that – unlike similar passages in Euripides (*Eur. Hipp.* 1236–1239) and Ovid (*Ovid. Met.* 15. 524–528), where the hero dies as soon as he becomes entangled in the reins – Seneca's Hippolytus does not die instantly, but struggles with his frightened horses for a much longer time (1088–1104).³⁹ According to Segal, “the reins which Hippolytus pulled tight to control the horses at the beginning [...] now mark his total loss of control as they immobilize him for a horrible death.”⁴⁰

Similarly, the hunter's “snare” in the wild where Hippolytus roamed free at the beginning of the play (*laqueos*, 46) now become the “clinging noose” (*laqueus tenax*, 1096) that imprisons the rider even as he hurtles among the rocks (1093 ff.).⁴¹ In other words, all the things that Hippolytus found pleasant at the beginning of the play are ultimately substituted by their exact opposite.

³⁷ Cf. V. Tietze Larson, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 88.

³⁸ Cf. Ch. Segal, op. cit., p. 318.

³⁹ Cf. ibidem, pp. 323–324.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 324.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

The wishes that he has expressed during his lifetime are “anti-fulfilled” in the hour of his death. Moreover, the woman to whose desire he falls prey is his own stepmother – a circumstance which adds insult to injury.

The motif of control also appears in *Hercules furens*. At the beginning of the play Juno enumerates Hercules’ conquests and victories. What infuriates her even more than the fact that Hercules is her husband’s bastard son is the fact that he is invincible and has no equal (*quaeris Alcidae parem?*, 84). The only way to put an end to his constant successes is to take advantage of his bellicose character (“*nemo est nisi ipse: bella iam secum gerat*”, 85).

Seneca’s goddesses have only one effective weapon that they can use against their human adversaries: uncontrolled emotion. In *Hercules furens* Juno drives Hercules mad by using his own wild temper against him. In *Phaedra* Venus uses Phaedra’s uncontrolled passion – which (as Phaedra suspects at the beginning of the play) she may well have triggered herself – in order to destroy Hippolytus.

In both these tragedies Seneca uses a different method to show the fatal impact of divine forces on human beings. In *Hercules furens* Juno comes on stage in person to inform the audience of her perfidious plan. She also lays bare the weak point that she is going to attack in order to bring about Hercules’ downfall. In *Phaedra*, however, Seneca has chosen a much more sophisticated method: the goddess does not appear directly, but her actions are foreseen by the *dramatis personae* and the flaw in the hero’s character is exposed by Hippolytus himself.

Both Juno and Venus use the same, paradoxically infallible weapon: madness (*furor*). In *Hercules furens* Juno inflicts insanity on Hercules so that he can be destroyed by his own impetuosity and violent disposition. In *Phaedra* Venus makes use of Phaedra’s madness – or, perhaps, actually drives her to insanity – in order to punish Hippolytus for his reluctance to worship her. The flaw that leads to his calamity is his obsessive hatred of women, which is also a kind of madness.

Although Seneca has depicted Juno and Venus using different literary techniques, their import in both tragedies is similar. They are depicted more as destructive spirits than as traditional Graeco-Roman goddesses. As we have seen, such a depiction of Juno is partly the result of Seneca’s fascination for (and emulation of) Virgil. Although much more complex, Venus seems to have been depicted in accordance with the same concept.

DE DEIS NEFARIIS HEROIBUSQUE VITIOSIS

S u m m a r i u m

In duabus Senecae tragoediis, *Hercule furenti* et *Phaedra*, dearum vindicum contra heroes quos oderunt actiones hostiles ostenduntur. Hercules a Iunone invida persequitur, quoniam filius

illegitimus Iovis mortalisque mulieris est. Hippolytus autem, qui Venerem sprevisset ferasque in silvis venari quam amoris corporalis deliciis perfrui maluisset, vindictam huius deae nolens sibi attraxit. Ambo heroes vitiis non carent, uterque aliam culpam habens: Herculi animus violentus et impetuosus est, quod Iuno iam in principio tragoediae animadvertit. Hoc vitium Iunoni invidiae magno usui est. Hippolyti autem muliebris sexus odium amorisque corporei fortissima detestatio Veneri gravem contumeliam infert, sed simul iram eius satisfaciendam adiuvat.

Iuno, quae aliquem modum Herculis affligendi diu quaesivit, naturam eius violentam unicuique instrumentum efficax vindictae suae terribilis peragendae putat. Igitur visionibus falsis Luna adiuvante Herculis mentem opprimit, quibus deceptus uxorem suam filiosque parvos occidat. Ita heroem sibi invisum vincit vindictamque propositam perpetrat.

Venus autem ad Hippolytum affligendum Phaedrae novercae incesto eius amore ipsiusque sexus feminini odio irrationali ingeniose utitur. Hippolytus Phaedrae amorem asperere repellit, quod eam ad vindictam callidam parandam excitat. Mox a noverca false ante Theseum patrem accusatus, iuvenis Athenis expellitur et deserto in loco violenter moritur ex curru ab equis pavefactis raptus excussus.

Constat Senecam in *Hercule furenti* Vergilii *Aeneidem* aemulare. In *Phaedra* autem quasi eadem formula argumenti utitur, nam Iuno et Venus simili modo contra heroes sibi invisos agunt, ad quos perdendos ipsorum vitiis, una Herculis iracundia aliaque Hippolyti mulierum detestatione irrationali, quae ambae furoris formae sunt, quasi armis potentissimis utuntur. Igitur in his duabus tragoediis deae non ut numina benevola, sed potius ut spiritus maligni a Seneca depinguntur.