

Zeitschrift: Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique
Herausgeber: Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique
Band: 50 (2004)

Artikel: Interpretatio stoica of Senecan tragedy
Autor: Hine, Harry M.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-660784>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

IV

HARRY M. HINE

INTERPRETATIO STOICA OF SENECA TRAGEDY

I. *Introduction*

The modern debate about the Stoic interpretation of Seneca's tragedies has been going on for well over half a century. The different camps have been wittily labelled by Mayer as: the Broad Church, who accept that Seneca's plays were intended to propagate the author's Stoic faith; the radical Dissenters, who maintain that the plays are nihilistic, even anti-Stoic; and the agnostic Dissenters, who see the plays as essentially being literary or rhetorical show-pieces, with no philosophical intention.¹ This is of course a broad-brush picture, which is quite sufficient for Mayer's purposes, to introduce a discussion of the earliest Stoic interpretations of the plays. He does acknowledge shades of opinion within the Broad Church, for Rosenmeyer offers a more qualified version of the Stoic interpretation than most of his predecessors.² To fill out Mayer's picture further one might add those who have advocated more complex views that straddle or fall between two of his camps — particularly Colakis, who argues that the plays are morally more complex than simply to promote Stoic ideas, for there are questions and challenges for

¹ R.G. MAYER, "Personata stoa. Neostoicism and Senecan Tragedy", in *JWI* 57 (1994), 151-74, at pp.151-2. I exclude the *Hercules Oetaeus* and *OCTAVIA* from the plays discussed in this paper.

² T.G. ROSENMEYER, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1989).

Stoicism within the plays as well as support; and Armisen-Marchetti, who argues that different ancient readers would have read the plays at different, and equally valid, levels, with the more philosophically educated discerning Stoic moral philosophy in them, others seeing only philosophical commonplaces, others again seeing just traditional poetic motifs.³ In this paper I shall differentiate clearly between claims that the plays are meant to propagate Stoicism in some way, and weaker claims about the influence of Stoicism on the plays. One can claim that some aspects of the plays are influenced by Stoicism, and that our understanding of the plays is increased by an awareness of this, without claiming that the plays are meant to propagate Stoic teaching. Such claims — with which I am broadly in sympathy — effectively place the influence of Stoicism on a par with other important influences on Seneca, such as the Greek and Roman poetic traditions, and the social and political context. In this paper I shall focus on the stronger sort of claim, that the plays in some way invite a Stoic interpretation, and convey a Stoic message.

I wish to explore the reasons why there has been such a range of opinion on the Stoic interpretation of the tragedies. The Dissenters (or, as I shall call them, the sceptics) can offer an immediate answer: they will claim that the evidence used by the Broad Church (whom I shall call the Stoic interpreters) is rather slim. Mayer has chosen religious labels rather skilfully, they might say: in the textual universe of Senecan tragedy, some believe they can discern the traces of a Stoic design, others detect the traces of a nihilistic, anti-Stoic world, and some discern no philosophical pattern at all. Mayer himself is inclined to scepticism, which he elsewhere justifies briefly in these terms:

³ M. COLAKIS, *Philosophical Eclecticism and Moral Complexity in Senecan Tragedy* (Diss. Yale 1982); M. ARMISEN-MARCHETTI, "Pour une lecture plurielle des tragédies de Sénèque: l'exemple de *Phèdre*, v. 130-135", in *Pallas* 38 (1992), 379-90. My position is similar to Armisen-Marchetti's, but I shall argue that a richer range of philosophical readings of the plays is available, not just a Stoic reading.

“if [Seneca’s] moral posture in the plays were at all clear there could be no grounds for such a long-standing scholarly dilemma”⁴ — in other words, the evidence cannot be very strong if there is still so much disagreement. This argument reminds me of an argument used by Seneca in Letter 88, in a passage that has some bearing on my topic, for it shows how Seneca was aware that the same poetry could be appropriated for different philosophical schools. That was what had happened to Homer’s poems at the hands of the *grammatici* (*epist.* 88.4-5):

* * * *utrum doceant isti (sc. grammatici⁵) uirtutem an non: si non docent, ne tradunt quidem; si docent, philosophi sunt. Vis scire quam non ad docendam uirtutem consederint? aspice quam dissimilia inter se omnium studia sint: atqui similitudo esset idem docentium. (5) Nisi forte tibi Homerum philosophum fuisse persuadent, cum his ipsis quibus colligunt negent; nam modo Stoicum illum faciunt, uirtutem solam probantem et uoluptates refugientem et ab honesto ne immortalitatis quidem pretio recedentem, modo Epicureum, laudantem statum quietae ciuitatis et inter conuiuia cantusque uitam exigentis, modo Peripateticum, tria bonorum genera inducentem, modo Academicum, omnia incerta dicentem. Apparet nihil horum esse in illo, quia omnia sunt; ista enim inter se dissident. Demus illis Homerum philosophum fuisse: nempe sapiens factus est antequam carmina ulla cognosceret; ergo illa discamus quae Homerum fecere sapientem.*

This passage is part of a broader argument that none of the liberal arts teaches virtue. Seneca here argues that the *grammatici* do not teach virtue because their teachings are so inconsistent, as illustrated by their disagreement about Homer, whom they variously make out to have been a Stoic, an Epicurean, a Peripatetic, or an Academic. The mere fact that they make mutually inconsistent claims proves, as far as Seneca is concerned,

⁴ R. MAYER, in *CR* 38 (1988), 152, in a review of F. GIANCOTTI, *Poesia e filosofia in Seneca tragico. La Fedra, con testo della tragedia criticamente riveduto e annotato* (Torino 1986).

⁵ There is a lacuna at the start of the section quoted. In the manuscripts the immediately preceding sentence is about geometry and music, but it seems to be out of place, and what we have here is a continuation of the discussion of the *grammatici* begun in s.3.

that none of them can be right.⁶ This is similar to Mayer's argument (though the situations differ in a slight but important way, in that Seneca's camps all put forward positive interpretations, whereas Mayer's agnostic Dissenters merely reject any kind of positive philosophical interpretation). Seneca goes on to make the point that even if Homer was a philosopher, his being a philosopher was quite independent of, and prior to, his being a poet.

Let us return to Seneca's tragedies. The sceptic who doubts Stoic interpretations might be inspired by that passage of the letters to wonder whether one could offer Epicurean, Academic and Peripatetic interpretations of the tragedies that are no less plausible than the Stoic interpretations currently on offer.⁷ The Stoic interpreter might at once object that we know that Seneca was a Stoic, so it is worthwhile to ask whether the plays support Stoic philosophy, but it is pointless to ask whether they support the philosophy of schools with whom we know that Seneca disagreed on fundamentals. But the sceptic might persist, and ask us to imagine that the plays had come down to us anonymously,

⁶ Strictly speaking, of course, this fact on its own proves only that no more than one of them can be right. For the sort of evidence that the ancient scholars may have used see: *Select Letters of Seneca*, Edited with Introductions and Explanatory Notes by W.C. SUMMERS (London 1910), 305-6; G. MAZZOLI, *Seneca e la poesia* (Milano 1970), 161 n.11. I take the passage, as they do, to refer to different groups of *grammatici* each claiming a different philosophical affiliation for Homer; then s. 5 follows on closely from, and illustrates, what Seneca has said at the end of s.4 about disagreements between the *grammatici*. It is also possible to interpret s.5 as meaning that the same group of *grammatici* interpreted some passages of Homer as Stoic, other passages as Epicurean, and so on, though then the link with s.4 is less close; and in that case I should have to modify the way I use the passage.

⁷ Another strategy the sceptic might use is to produce Stoic interpretations of works by other authors whom no one suspects of Stoic intentions. There is an argument of this sort in J. BLÄNSDORF, "Stoici a teatro? La Medea di Seneca nell'ambito della teoria della tragedia", in *RIL* 130 (1996), 217-36. He argues that the presence of Stoic maxims does not prove Stoic didactic purpose, because one can find such maxims in Plautus and in mime, for instance (pp.220-1). But Blänsdorf is inclined to label as Stoic what are really more widespread moral sentiments (on this problem see below).

and that none of Seneca's prose works had survived. The sceptic could pose a challenge: in those circumstances, is it likely that anybody would have detected a Stoic purpose in the plays? So the sceptic might attempt to produce an Epicurean or Academic or Peripatetic interpretation of the plays, in an attempt to shake the faith of the Stoic interpreters. Success in the attempt would bolster the sceptic's case, though failure would not necessarily destroy it: the sceptic might, for instance, maintain that the evidence for the other philosophical interpretations is significantly weaker than that for the Stoic interpretation, but the evidence for the latter is still insufficient to prove an intention on Seneca's part to promote Stoicism.

Presumably the sceptic would find it more difficult to produce an Epicurean interpretation of the tragedies than one from the standpoint of the other two schools, because of the wide gap between Epicurean ethics and the other ethical systems: the insistence on pleasure as the ultimate guide to behaviour and ultimate source of happiness set them apart from the others, all of whom assigned a central role to virtue, though they disagreed about the importance of other factors. We may readily concede that if the sceptic can produce a viable Epicurean interpretation, then it should be relatively easy to produce viable Academic or Peripatetic ones. So let us imagine what an Epicurean interpretation of a Senecan tragedy might look like. There would be nothing new in the claim that Epicurean ideas appear occasionally in Seneca's tragedies — such ideas have regularly been seen in the first choral ode of *Hercules Furens* or the second ode of *Troades*, for instance — but an Epicurean interpretation of a whole play is something different. What I shall do in the next section is to imagine, not a modern-day sceptic, but an ancient Epicurean speaking about the *Phaedra*. This will be a Roman Epicurean, who is contemporary with Seneca and knows that he wrote the play. This may at this juncture seem a rather frivolous exercise, but it has the advantage that I shall not be venturing directly into the war-zone of Stoic interpretations where many people already have deeply entrenched positions; and I shall

later try to exploit the exercise to illuminate what I believe are important features of both Stoic and anti-Stoic interpretations of the plays.

II. *An Epicurean interpretation of the Phaedra*

So let us imagine our Roman Epicurean interpreter speaking as follows (the footnotes, except where they are attributed to the Epicurean, are my own comments on what she says):

“The action of the *Phaedra* directs our attention to several issues on which we need to heed the teaching of Epicurus if we wish to live happy lives:

“(a) Love and sex

“At the centre of the play is Phaedra’s passion for Hippolytus. Epicurus differentiated between the passion of love, which is an impediment to pleasure, and hence must be avoided, and the pleasure of sex, which is natural.⁸ The wastefulness and destructiveness of sexual passion, which is eloquently described in the last section of Lucretius book 4, is amply exemplified in the story of Phaedra. There are various parallels between Lucretius’ treatment of passion and Seneca’s play, and I shall mention some of the more important.⁹ First, notice how the Nurse, in urging Phaedra to resist her passion, says several things that Lucretius also says: passion must be resisted the moment it

⁸ On Epicurus’ teaching on love and sex, and Lucretius’ treatment of the topics, see *Lucretius on Love and Sex. A Commentary on De Rerum Natura IV, 1030-1287 with Prolegomena, Text, and Translation* by R.D. BROWN (Leiden 1987), 101-22; M.C. NUSSBAUM, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton 1994), ch. 5.

⁹ [Note by the Epicurean] “Note also a telling verbal parallel which suggests that Seneca may have read Lucretius: the combination *dira libido* of LUCR. 4.1046 recurs at *Phaedr.* 981 (otherwise only at PERS. 3.36, OCTAVIA 299).”

begins, otherwise it will become too powerful (*Phaedr.* 132-5; cf. *Lucr.* 4.1068-72);¹⁰ it is wrong to think that the gods — Venus or Cupid — have anything to do with love (*Phaedr.* 195-203; *Lucr.* 4.1278-9, cf. 1233-8); as the Nurse tries to talk Phaedra out of her passion for Hippolytus, she reminds her of the repellent side of Hippolytus' character, his misogyny — a strategy which conforms to Lucretius' advice that, if in love, one should remember the faults of the beloved (*Phaedr.* 226-40; *Lucr.* 4.1149-54); and she argues like an Epicurean that, even if Phaedra's proposed crime remains undetected by any of her relatives, still she will never be free of the fear of detection (*Phaedr.* 145-64; cf. *Lucr.* 3.1014-22, 5.1151-60, 5.1222-5).¹¹ The consequences of Phaedra's failure to take the Nurse's advice exemplify the destructive potential of sexual passion, on which Epicurus insists.

"Hippolytus on the other hand rejects love and sex. From the Epicurean viewpoint he is quite right to reject sexual *passion*, as we have seen, but quite wrong to treat sexual *pleasure* as something abhorrent; he in fact fails to make this distinction himself. The Nurse rightly urges that sex is natural and contributes to a fulfilled life (*Phaedr.* 435-82). On the other hand, Epicurus recognised that sex can be fraught with anxieties and dangers, and said that abstinence is easy if it is required by health, duty or reputation (*Cic. Tusc.* 5.94: *ab iisque abstinere minime*

¹⁰ [Note by the Epicurean] "Admittedly Lucretius advises the reader to resist the passion by finding alternative sources of sexual gratification (4.1070-1); but here, regrettably, Lucretius is writing as a Roman male citizen for Roman male citizens, and that advice will not do for respectable females whether in Rome or in mythology; though the next line does add, more generally, *aut alio possis animi traducere motus*. Epicurus prohibited sex with women with whom the law forbade it (*DIOG.LAERT.* 10.118 = *Usener Fr.* 583), and said that in such circumstances abstinence was easy (see below)."

¹¹ Cf. *SEN. epist.* 97.13 *Eleganter itaque ab Epicuro dictum puto: "potest nocenti contingere ut lateat, latendi fides non potest", aut si hoc modo melius hunc explicari posse iudicas sensum: "ideo non prodest latere peccantibus quia latendi etiam si felicitatem habent, fiduciam non habent". Ita est, tuta scelera esse possunt, <secura esse non possunt>, verbally close to *Phaedr.* 164 *scelus aliqua tutum, nulla securum tulit*. Also *EPICUR. Sent.* 17,34-5; *Sent. Vat.* 7.*

esse difficile, si aut ualetudo aut officium aut fama postulet). Hippolytus believes, however mistakenly, that he has good grounds for abstinence, and the abstinence in itself is not necessarily an impediment to his happiness and well-being.¹² In fact Epicurus himself sometimes comes close to suggesting that avoidance of sex is the best course (Diog.Laert. 10.118 = Usener *Fr.* 62: "sexual intercourse is never profitable, and one must be content if it does no harm", cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 5.94; Epicur. *Sent. Vat.* 51), so perhaps the spirit, though not the fanatical tone, of Hippolytus' position is not so different from Epicurus'.

"(b) The gods

"Epicurus believed in gods, but they live outside our universe, have no knowledge of us human beings and our world, and do not interact with us in any way. He campaigned against the widespread fear of the gods, and against false beliefs about them.¹³ In the *Phaedra*, I would argue, we find an interesting mixture of sound and unsound belief about, and behaviour towards, the gods. Let us start with the unsound. Several prayers

¹² I here make the Epicurean gloss over an important point on which there is scholarly disagreement. One source says that Epicurus included sex among the pleasures that are natural but not necessary (scholion on ARIST. *EN* 3.13 (1118 b 8), *CAG* XX p.171.23-8 Heylbut, Usener *Fr.*456); if that is correct, then Hippolytus is right that sex is unnecessary, but wrong in his abhorrence of it (though note that he does not actually call it unnatural: he expresses a personal abhorrence, but does not seem to insist that others should share his view). But the authority of this source has been challenged, in the context of wider discussion of Epicurus' categorisation of pleasures (by J. ANNAS, *The Morality of Happiness* [New York/Oxford 1993], 192-3, especially n.29; cf. R.W. SHARPLES, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics. An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* [London 1996], 143 n. 6), and it has been proposed that Epicurus did include sex among the necessary pleasures. If this is right, then Hippolytus is wrong to regard it as unnecessary. But on this interpretation, if sex is a necessary pleasure, we are left wondering how Epicurus could have said that abstinence is easy.

¹³ On Epicurean theology see e.g. A.A. LONG & D.N. SEDLEY (Eds.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers* I (Cambridge 1987), 139-49; SHARPLES (1996), 18-9, 56-8.

are uttered by different characters in the play, prayers that reveal a false conception of the gods, based on the erroneous view that they interact with human beings. But it is striking how most of these prayers are unanswered and futile.¹⁴ For instance, the Nurse's prayer to Diana to soften Hippolytus' heart and aid the Nurse's approach is obviously unsuccessful (*Phaedr.* 406-23). When Hippolytus turns up immediately after this long prayer, the Nurse says *dedit / tempus locumque casus* (425-6); as though her prayer was a formality, and she never supposes that it could be the goddess who has brought Hippolytus along at this very moment. Hence she seems to acknowledge implicitly that things really happen by chance, not by divine agency. The prayer of the chorus for Hippolytus' beauty to be spared and for him to live to old age is equally useless (*Phaedr.* 821-3). In fact sometimes the characters themselves comment on the inactivity or ineffectiveness of the gods. Immediately after Phaedra's attempt to seduce him, Hippolytus protests to Jupiter that he is not using his thunderbolt, and to the sun god that he is still shining instead of hiding (*Phaedr.* 671-84). After Theseus learns the truth of what has happened he wishes and prays for death (1201-42), but concludes the speech with: *non mouent diuos preces; / at si rogarem scelera, quam proni forent!* (1242-3). The play thus illustrates Epicurus' teaching about the futility of conventional prayer.

"The last line just quoted alludes to the one prayer that is answered, in spectacular and disastrous fashion, namely Theseus' prayer to Neptune to destroy Hippolytus. This is incompatible with Epicurus' teaching about the nature of the gods, but we have to recognise, along with philosophers from Xenophanes and Plato onwards, that poetry on traditional mythological themes contains falsehoods about the gods and the underworld. At the same time, Theseus' prayer and Neptune's

¹⁴ Modern interpreters have pointed out that these prayers eventually receive ironic "answers", in ways the speakers do not envisage; but that does not really conflict with the Epicurean's point.

action is a powerful symbol of the harm that conventional religion can cause. The story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia contradicts Epicurean views too, for gods do not manipulate the winds or change their behaviour in response to sacrifices, yet Lucretius used this story as a powerful paradigm of the evils of religion (Lucr. 1.80-101). Similarly Theseus' prayer is another such paradigm.

"So we see the futile, sinister side of conventional religion in the play; but there are other religious elements that, I would argue, resemble the spirit of true, Epicurean worship of the gods. First, look at Hippolytus' prayer to Diana in his opening hunting song (54-84). Taken literally, as we must suppose that Hippolytus intends it, the idea of Artemis as an anthropomorphic god, who travels to every quarter of the inhabited globe hunting exotic animals, is quite beyond the pale for an Epicurean. But the Epicurean could read the prayer rather differently, in the spirit of the invocation to Venus at the start of Lucretius' poem.¹⁵ Venus is that aspect of the elemental forces of nature that animates the animal kingdom and inspires procreation and peace; and Lucretius is willing to include the strongly anthropomorphic description of Mars resting in Venus' lap (Lucr. 1.31-40), knowing that the Epicurean reader will not take it literally. Similarly, the Epicurean reader could understand Hippolytus' prayer to be celebrating, not an anthropomorphic deity, but that aspect of that elemental, animal force that is manifested in the hunt, an activity that (though this is not appreciated by Hippolytus) pervades much of the animal kingdom as well as human society. Similarly, one can have an Epicurean understanding of the first choral ode, celebrating the power of Venus and Cupid (*Phaedr.* 274-357), as a declaration of the universal power of sex in the animal kingdom, and again the anthropomorphic treatment of the gods can be read symbolically. In fact

¹⁵ There is intense scholarly debate about the significance of Lucretius' poem; I make the Epicurean take one particular line. Another ancient Epicurean might have been less sympathetic to Hippolytus' prayer and the first choral ode.

one could read this ode as an elaboration of Lucretius' description of the power of Venus over animals (Lucr. 1.10-20).

“(c) The characters

“For an Epicurean, the most intriguing character is Hippolytus. I have already spoken of his views on love and sex. He expresses other views that an Epicurean can approve. His long speech on the evils of society and the decline from an earlier, more innocent, age (483-564) contains material that parallels what Lucretius said about early human societies (Lucr. 5.925ff.), for example: early humans are described eating berries and other foods that grow naturally (Lucr. 5.937-44, *Phaedr.* 515-7, 537-8), drinking running water (Lucr. 5.945-52, *Phaedr.* 519-20), using caves for shelter (Lucr. 5.953-7, *Phaedr.* 539), and hunting for animals (Lucr. 5.966-9, *Phaedr.* 502-9); there was no organised warfare (Lucr. 5.999-1000, *Phaedr.* 544-52); and the discovery of gold led to corruption (Lucr. 5.1113-6; *Phaedr.* 527-8, 540). An Epicurean can applaud also his rejection of political life because of its ambition, hazardousness, and association with greed (486-93), his approval of the peace of mind of those who do no wrong (494-5, 522-5), and his identification with those who are not interested in excessive luxury (496-8) and do not make extravagant sacrifices to the gods (498-500). But of course in his relatively brief speech Hippolytus makes no mention of many features of the Lucretian account of early society; in particular the sex lives of early humans (Lucr. 5.962-5) do not feature, nor is there the emphasis on the dangers and fragility of early human life that we find in Lucretius (5.988-1010). More generally, Hippolytus is manifestly a young man who enjoys life, as we see in the opening scene as he prepares for the hunt with his companions; and in his long speech to the Nurse he speaks as someone thoroughly content with his lifestyle, in contrast to the lives of city-dwellers who are plagued by dissatisfaction, anxiety and fear. Finally, he is fearless in the face of death, as an Epicurean should be.

“But he also falls short of the Epicurean ideal in various ways. His prayer to Diana has been discussed already; but the Epicurean cannot approve his prayer to Jupiter and the Sun, in which he demands to know why they do not instantly show their outrage at Phaedra’s behaviour, and asks Jupiter to strike him down at once (671-84). I have discussed his abhorrence of sex, and one sees its harmful effects, for it is evident that his passionate outburst at 566-73 disrupts his tranquillity. Note also that, although he does distance himself from the corruption and anxiety of political life, he has not withdrawn from it totally. He still inhabits the town, and acknowledges duties towards his mother and the royal house in the absence of his father. This, I would argue, contributes to his undoing, for he thereby exposes himself to the desires of Phaedra, and to the persuasions and scheming of her and the Nurse, which all contributes to his downfall.

“An Epicurean sees obvious faults in all the other main characters. Phaedra, as I have said, has allowed herself to become entangled in a consuming sexual passion, which she ought to have resisted from the start. Her false accusation against Hippolytus should be condemned, not because it is immoral, but because it carries with it the risk of detection and the shame and possible retribution that entails — and in the drama that risk is realised, though not in a way she can have anticipated, when her false charge leads to the death of Hippolytus. The Nurse is muddled and inconsistent, swayed by affection for her mistress: as I have said, her initial advice to Phaedra contains much that is sound, and so does much of her speech to Hippolytus (435-82); but when she decides to help Phaedra first to pursue her incestuous and adulterous passion, then to spread the false charge that he has tried to rape her, this can only cause suffering to Phaedra, because she will always fear detection even if she is not detected. Theseus demonstrates the sorts of problems and miseries that pursue someone embroiled in political life. He also helps his friend Pirithous in an immoral escapade, which threatens his own and Pirithous’ happiness. His angry

denunciation and cursing of his son, and his grief at his son's death, once he knows the truth, are again un-Epicurean.

"In short, the play shows the results of failing to understand the Epicurean principle that pleasure and pain are the ultimate yardsticks for human action. Hippolytus is the only character who gives some hints of what an Epicurean life could be like. Furthermore, we see different aspects of religion, both the futility of conventional religion and its sometimes catastrophic consequences, and, in contrast, some impression of what Epicurean prayer could be like. Of course I have looked at only one play, but some of the lines of interpretation I have applied to *Phaedra* could obviously be applied to other Senecan tragedies too."

III. *Stoic interpretations of Senecan tragedy*

Let us leave my Epicurean interpreter there, although she would doubtless like to have said more, and we should doubtless like to probe and question her interpretation. I take it that, as an Epicurean analysis of the characters and action of the *Phaedra*, it is broadly valid. Before examining it further, let us return to the sceptic I imagined at the end of section I. He, like Seneca in his discussion of Homer, wishes to exploit the fact that one can produce an Epicurean interpretation of Senecan tragedy as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of attempts at Stoic interpretation; he wishes to argue that the Epicurean interpretation is no more or less plausible than the Stoic interpretations on offer, that they cannot both be true, and so neither of them is true. However, the attentive reader will have observed that my Epicurean interpreter is not going to help the sceptic make this case. Crucially, my interpreter at no point claimed that the author intended to promote Epicurean philosophy, or even to include identifiably Epicurean ideas. Numerous coincidences between the text of the play and Epicurean philosophy were mentioned, there were hints that Seneca had read Lucretius, but no claims were made about the author having any Epicurean

didactic purpose. For the sceptic's argument to work, the Epicurean would have to make such claims. Instead, my Epicurean interpreter offered what I shall call an Epicurean *diagnosis* of the play, by which I mean an analysis, from the standpoint of Epicurean ethics, of the characters of the play, of their intentions and behaviour, and of their beliefs about human nature and the world. An Epicurean diagnosis of this kind is a very different matter from a claim that the author had Epicurean intentions. In fact, my Epicurean knows that the play's author is a Stoic, but that does not deter her from using the play as a case study to illustrate the tenets of Epicureanism. If she had claimed that the author intended to convey an Epicurean message, there would be obvious objections (quite apart from the biographical information that the author was a Stoic). Many of the Epicurean ideas she found in the play, particularly on the damaging nature of sexual passion, or on early human society, are not unique to Epicureanism, and so it would be difficult to show that the author intended them to be perceived as Epicurean doctrines. She passed over in silence a great deal of the play, some of which on the face of it does not fit an Epicurean interpretation, particularly the frequent strong appeals made by various characters to moral values. If she had claimed that the author had Epicurean intentions, these un-Epicurean features could, *prima facie*, at least, count against that claim.

My own strategy is not the same as the sceptic's. I have conjured up an Epicurean interpreter of this particular kind in order to demonstrate (a) that what I call an Epicurean diagnosis of the play is quite distinct from the claim that the play was written to promote Epicureanism, and (b) that the fact one is able to produce a successful Epicurean diagnosis does not prove anything about the author's intentions. I wish now to suggest that this Epicurean diagnosis is remarkably similar, *mutatis mutandis*, to most of the Stoic interpretations of the plays that scholars have produced; in fact I suggest that, where scholars have claimed to find an intended Stoic purpose in the plays, all they have really succeeded in doing is offering Stoic diagnoses

of the plays. I shall also suggest later that those who find an anti-Stoic message in the plays are in fact giving us an anti-Stoic diagnosis.

As I said at the start of this section, I think that the above Epicurean diagnosis is broadly valid and acceptable. Not just Epicureanism, but any moral philosophical system of any merit, will be able to offer such a diagnosis. If a philosophical system can be used to analyse the situations and decisions facing real human beings in their ordinary lives and to offer advice on how they should act and think, it can do the same for any work of fictional literature that portrays more or less life-like human beings in more or less realistic situations. Such an analysis, or diagnosis, does not depend on that particular moral philosophy having had any influence on the writer. One can imagine, for example, a Kantian, or a utilitarian, or a Marxist diagnosis of Seneca's *Phaedra*, and the fact that these philosophies postdate Seneca's lifetime is no objection. But it would be a quite different matter, and manifestly absurd, to claim that Seneca meant to promote, or even to allude to, any of those systems. If any of the ideas of those systems were discovered in his play, we would explain it in other ways: we might say that the anticipation of elements of the later theory showed that the theory corresponded to ordinary moral common sense, or that it had incorporated earlier philosophical ideas, or whatever.

Philosophers from antiquity to the present day have engaged with works of literature to produce such diagnoses. For our purposes it is particularly important that in antiquity the Stoics had their own strategies for the exegesis of literature, particularly poetry. The topic has received a full discussion from Nussbaum.¹⁶ She traces two Stoic strategies for interpreting poetry, one associated with Posidonius in particular, and based on a

¹⁶ M.C. NUSSBAUM, "Poetry and the passions: two Stoic views", in *Passions and Perceptions. Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind. Proceedings of the Fifth Symposium Hellenisticum*, ed. by J. BRUNSCHWIG and M.C. NUSSBAUM (Cambridge 1993), 97-149.

non-cognitive theory of how we are affected by poetry, and another that was based on a cognitive theory, was developed by Chrysippus in particular, and was more widespread than the first. The latter particularly concerns us here. At the heart of this strategy, as Nussbaum shows, is the training of readers in detached, critical spectatorship,¹⁷ which enables them to develop the ability to stand back from the immediate emotional involvement that poetry, and tragedy in particular, encourages, and to submit the action of the drama to detached, rational philosophical analysis. Other tools of Stoic exegesis were allegory, and the rewriting of poetry to make a philosophical point, but Nussbaum argues that these were less significant than the practice of vigilant critical spectatorship.

In reconstructing this strategy she draws on a wide range of ancient sources, including Seneca, but also fragments of Chrysippus, Epictetus, and Plutarch's *Quomodo adulescens poetas audire debeat*, as well as other works. In the case of Seneca, two important questions arise: (a) did he himself espouse and practise this Stoic technique? and (b) did the technique make a difference to the way he wrote his tragedies? As for (a), Nussbaum draws on passages of Seneca in her argument; but it is notoriously difficult to extract a coherent theory of poetry and its exegesis solely on the basis of Seneca's scattered remarks on the subject.¹⁸ A paper by Batinski, published in the same year as Nussbaum's, focuses specifically on Seneca's hermeneutics, and comes to conclusions that overlap with hers: "[t]he privileged reader is the philosopher, and his task is to identify the philosophic content by asking the correct question"; Seneca rejects the traditional Stoic critical tools of allegory and etymology, but is still able to

¹⁷ Her use of the term "spectatorship" does not imply that the plays were performed on stage, for Nussbaum accepts the view that they were probably recitation-dramas (NUSSBAUM (1993), 148).

¹⁸ There are full discussions in MAZZOLI (1970), especially 19-86; J. DINGEL, *Seneca und die Dichtung* (Heidelberg 1974), 20-63; my own views are briefly stated in *Seneca. Medea, with an Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary* by H.M. HINE (Warminster 2000), 4-6.

explain problematic passages that, in Stoic terms, are obviously not true, by “the rationale of aesthetic concerns”.¹⁹ Batinski shares with Nussbaum the idea of the privileged philosophical reader, but I think that they both try to construct a more coherent and systematic hermeneutical system than Seneca’s scattered, and often brief and narrowly focused, statements really permit. It is true that he regards the ethical problems posed by literature as more important than the pedantic questions that interested the *grammatici*, as is shown by the comparison in *epist.* 108.24-34 of how the *grammaticus* and the philosopher approach the same passages of Vergil and Cicero. But that discussion focuses on individual lines or short passages, and gives no indication of whether or not Seneca envisages something like a holistic philosophical interpretation of an entire work. Seneca frequently quotes Vergil, more frequently than he does any other writer, sometimes to make or reinforce a philosophical point, but there is no sign of a consistent, detached Stoic interpretation of the poem.²⁰ Batinski repeats the view that Seneca regards Vergil as a Stoic, for he calls him *noster Vergilius*, and elsewhere he applies *noster* only to Stoics; but it has been pointed out that *noster* could mean “our fellow-countryman”, “Roman”, for Cicero is called *noster* at *epist.* 40.11.²¹ Nevertheless, the fact that Seneca

¹⁹ E. E. BATINSKI, “Seneca’s Response to Stoic Hermeneutics”, in *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993), 69-77; quotations from p.77. I think she does not really establish her further conclusions, that Seneca thought the text reflected the *logos* of the universe, and that he equated the poet’s intention, the text, and the philosopher’s interpretation; but that need not concern us here.

²⁰ See A. SETAIOLI, “Esegesi virgiliana in Seneca”, in *SIFC* 37 (1965), 133-156. C. AUVRAY, “La citation virgilienne dans les *Lettres à Lucilius* de Sénèque. Des *praecepta* aux *decreta* du Stoicisme”, in *BFLM* 15 (1987), 29-34, argues that Seneca did have an overarching philosophical interpretation of the *Aeneid*, but not a moral one: rather he saw in it a reflection of the orderliness of nature. Even if there is some truth in this interpretation (and not all of Seneca’s citations of Vergil fit), this is not the same thing as Nussbaum’s critical spectatorship, which is essentially focused on moral interpretation.

²¹ BATINSKI (1993), 76 and n.18; the point about *noster* meaning “Stoic” was made earlier by H. WIRTH, *De Virgili apud Senecam philosophum usu* (Diss. Freiburg im Br. 1900), 5. For the alternative interpretation see SETAIOLI (1965),

from time to time makes philosophical points about isolated passages shows that sometimes, at least to a limited extent, he does behave as a detached critical spectator.²²

But what about question (b), whether the practice of detached spectatorship affected the way he wrote his tragedies? Nussbaum argues that it did, for, first, "Senecan drama presents Stoic psychology of passion and passionate conflict with greater explicitness and clarity than any non-Stoic poetic text", and, secondly, "the dramatic structure of Senecan drama actively impedes sympathetic identification, promoting critical spectatorship and critical reflection about the passions".²³ I agree with the second point; for the repellent nature of some of Seneca's central characters, and the handling of the Chorus — usually moralising, often lacking sympathy for the central character — can encourage a detached and critical response from the spectator or reader. The trouble is that the detached spectator will not necessarily come to Stoic conclusions: my Epicurean was a detached critical spectator too; some modern spectators have produced anti-Stoic interpretations of the plays; and as Schiesaro has argued, the spectator may even be fascinated and attracted, rather than repelled, by Atreus or Medea.²⁴ So detachment can, from a Stoic viewpoint, be counter-productive.

This therefore places a heavy onus on Nussbaum's other claim, that the Stoic philosophy of the passions is presented with especial clarity and explicitness in the tragedies. As I have argued elsewhere, I think that Nussbaum overstates her case in

155-6; MAZZOLI (1970), 216 n.6; on the "patriotic" use of *noster* see *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. 7. Columella too calls Vergil *noster* (2.2.4, 2.8.1).

²² Cf. e.g. *epist.* 59.3, 66.2, 108.24-9.

²³ NUSSBAUM (1993), 148; these ideas are developed in greater detail with particular reference to the *Medea* in "Serpents in the Soul: A Reading of Seneca's *Medea*", in NUSSBAUM (1994), 439-83; there is an abridged version in *Medea. Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, ed. by J.J. CLAUSS and S.I. JOHNSTON (Princeton 1997), 219-49.

²⁴ A. SCHIESARO, "Passion, reason and knowledge in Seneca's tragedies", in *The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature*, ed. by S.M. BRAUND and Chr. GILL (Cambridge 1997), 89-111.

her analysis of the *Medea*, because for every passage that she adduces to support her analysis, one can find either an alternative explanation of the same passage, or other passages that *prima facie* suggest something different, or both.²⁵ Thus, for instance, to take one of her arguments, she maintains that the identity of emotion with belief is prominent in the play. She points out, for example, that at 155-6 Medea refers to grief being capable of deliberation, *Lewis est dolor qui capere consilium potest / et clepere sese* — commenting “[grief] is not something that stands in a certain relation to thought, it is a form of thought”;²⁶ and at 917-9 Medea’s angry soul decides, *nescioquid ferox / decrevit animus intus et nondum sibi / audet fateri*. But, in response, one may urge that 155-6 can be read as meaning the opposite, that *violent* anguish, unlike *mild* anguish, is incapable of deliberation, which implies that it is distinct from, because beyond the power of, deliberation or reason; and lines 917-9, on the face of it, imply that Medea acknowledges a division between her speaking self and the *animus*, which *prima facie* contradicts another of Nussbaum’s points, that the play displays the Stoic unity of the personality. My contention is that a Stoic reading of such passages depends on the reader being predisposed to interpret them in Stoic terms; or in other words, such a reader is producing a Stoic diagnosis. For the reader not so predisposed, the alleged inducements to a Stoic reading may be ineffective. Nussbaum frankly acknowledges that “the complexities of his dramas make it clear that the tragic genre, even in such careful and sophisticated hands, is not an altogether reliable tool for Stoic moralizing”;²⁷ I believe it is even less reliable than she claims. She is much the most careful and sophisticated advocate of the Stoic interpretation of the plays to date, not least because she recognises, indeed she herself has formulated,

²⁵ HINE (2000), 29, on NUSSBAUM (1994), (1997). I here repeat part of my argument.

²⁶ NUSSBAUM (1994), 449-50, (1997), 226.

²⁷ NUSSBAUM (1993), 148.

the distinction between (a) a Stoic interpretation of a work by a detached, critical Stoic spectator — who, it should be remembered, can interpret any poetic work, however un-Stoic, in a Stoic fashion —, and (b) the claim that a work by a Stoic writer offers positive encouragement to a Stoic interpretation. My conclusion is that although she argues for (b) in relation to Senecan tragedy, all she has really produced is an exemplary case of (a).

I believe that this is true of earlier exponents of Stoic interpretations too: they were not on the whole conscious of the distinction, but although they thought they were arguing for (b), they were really demonstrating only (a). In the early stages people simply took it for granted that the plays demanded a Stoic interpretation. Mayer stresses that the earliest Stoic interpreters in the Renaissance never argued for a Stoic interpretation, but assumed that, if the author was the Stoic philosopher Seneca, then the plays would reflect his Stoicism.²⁸ He is right that more recent Stoic interpreters also tend to take it for granted without argument that the Stoic interpretation is the correct one. Some of them take it as self-evidently true that the plays will reflect the Stoic philosophy. For instance, Egermann's essay "Seneca als Dichterphilosoph" explicitly starts from the assumption that the philosophical works and the tragedies serve the same purpose; what one needs to find is "der gemeinsame geistige Quellpunkt..., dessen Ausfluß die Tragödien ebenso sind wie die philosophischen Prosaschriften, wenn sich beide Arten schriftstellerischer Äußerung als Ausdruck *einer geistigen* Persönlichkeit, eines einheitlichen Gesamtwollens offenbaren". Seneca is fundamentally a Stoic philosopher, and "Es ist ungerechtfertigt, einen prinzipiellen Unterschied zwischen dem Politiker, dem Dichter und dem Philosophen zu machen".²⁹

²⁸ MAYER (1994). At this period, as he shows, there were scholars who did not believe that Seneca the philosopher was author of all the plays.

²⁹ F. EGERMANN, "Seneca als Dichterphilosoph", in *NJAB* N.F. 3 (1940), 18-36, reprinted in *Senecas Tragödien*, hrsg. von E. LEFÈVRE, Wege der Forschung 310 (Darmstadt 1972), 33-57. My quotations are from p.34 of the reprint (original emphasis).

So the possibility that the plays do not reflect Seneca's Stoicism is ruled out of court without a hearing.

Not every proponent of Stoic interpretation just assumes from the start that there is Stoicism in the plays. Sometimes a different principle provides the starting point. For instance, Leeman invoked what he called the "maximalist" working hypothesis, that the plays are dramas and also have a Stoic purpose, because otherwise Seneca would not have wanted to write them: "My 'maximalist' hypothesis rules out from the start the assumption that Senecan drama, in its conception of men and gods, greatness and fall, life and death, merely reproduced traditional literary forms, without any attempt to inform them with the new concepts and the Stoic answers".³⁰ One may agree that the reader has a duty to do his or her best for the writer, but the trouble is that different "maximalist" hypotheses are possible. For instance, though they do not use that term, Motto and Clark in effect offer an alternative: they attack what they call "a kind of unwritten 'law of literary specialization'", which dictates that Seneca can write only philosophy, and so the plays must be philosophy in disguise; and they insist, by contrast, that Seneca was quite capable of writing in two very different genres, philosophical prose and tragic drama.³¹ There are some fundamental and important issues here about what makes literature good and significant, but the fact remains that such Stoic interpretations are inspired by a preconception that the plays are Stoic plays.

Other Stoic interpreters derive their interpretations from close readings of the tragedies, without starting from prior assumptions that the plays are Stoic. However, I believe that in such cases an underlying bias in favour of Stoic interpretations can

³⁰ A.D. LEEMAN, "Seneca's *Phaedra* as a Stoic Tragedy", in *Miscellanea Tragica in honorem J.C. Kamerbeek* collegerunt J.M. BREMER, S.L. RADT, C.J. RUIJGH (Amsterdam 1976), 199-212; quotation from p.201.

³¹ A.L. MOTTO & J.R. CLARK, "Art and Ethics in the Drama. Senecan 'Pseudotragedy' Reconsidered", in *ICS* 7 (1982), 125-40; quotation from p.127. MAYER (1988), 152, remarks that no one thinks that the *Apocolocyntosis* has a clear Stoic bias, and he regards the plays too as having no philosophical message beyond some neutral *sententiae*.

regularly be seen operating in various ways, even if it remains unrecognised by the interpreter. Within the scope of this paper I cannot address all aspects of previous Stoic interpretation in detail; but I shall sketch some of the main problems that such interpretations encounter, with discussion of a few selected examples. One might sum up the problems in one word, "oversimplification": Stoic interpretations are inherently Procrustean, stretching features of the play that loosely resemble Stoicism till they fit the Stoic bed, and amputating or ignoring other features that do not fit. That may be perfectly acceptable in a diagnosis by a detached Stoic critical spectator, but it is a poor way of trying to demonstrate the intentions of the author, and it is not the way to do justice to the dramas as dramas. To put the problem from a different angle, all drama, as is often said, contains a plurality of competing voices, and, in ancient tragedy, none of the voices is the poet's own: so any attempt to identify particular voices, or particular utterances, as reflecting the author's own view, is inherently problematic and always open to challenge.³² Furthermore, claims that particular utterances in Senecan tragedy are Stoic in content can often be contested, either on the grounds that they are not uniquely Stoic, or on the grounds that, if interpreted correctly, they differ significantly from Stoic ideas.

So let me illustrate some problems of Stoic interpretations. The headings I use are not mutually exclusive, for often two or more of these factors are operating at once.

- (i) Within the text, Stoic meanings are preferred to non-Stoic meanings

My earlier remarks about Nussbaum's interpretation of the *Medea* have already touched on this point. To take another

³² The point was made in regard to Senecan tragedy by J.-M. CROISILLE, "Lieux communs, *sententiae* et intentions philosophiques dans la *Phèdre* de Sénèque", in *REL* 42 (1964), 276-301, at p.277.

instance, there are lines of that play that *prima facie* speak in terms of a unitary self (e.g. 928), and other lines that *prima facie* speak in terms of a self with parts (e.g. 917-9, 938-9, 943-4): she interprets the latter so that they harmonise with the former and fit into a Stoic interpretation of the psychology of the play.³³

At the level of the individual word, Stoic interpreters can be tempted to force a word to have its Stoic force even where the context resists. I take an example from the *Phaedra*. Leeman and Lefèvre have both offered Stoic readings of the play in which emphasis is laid on Hippolytus' crucial speech to the Nurse at 566-73:³⁴

*Detestor omnis [sc. feminas], horreo fugio execror.
sit ratio, sit natura, sit dirus furor:
odisse placuit. ignibus iunges aquas
et amica ratibus ante promittet uada
incerta Syrtis, ante ab extremo sinu
Hesperia Tethys lucidum attollet diem
et ora dammis blanda praebebunt lupi,
quam uictus animum feminae mitem geram.*

Leeman says about these lines: "Lefèvre is quite right in making his fierce words in 566ff. the starting point for his interpretation:³⁵ *detestor omnes (feminas), horreo, fugio, exsecror; sit ratio, sit natura, sit durus furor: odisse placuit*. It is *furor* indeed, but it is significant that Hippolytus presents (Stoic) *ratio* and *natura* as alternative explanations. He hopes it is the voice of *logos*, but is afraid it may be *pathos*. *Decipimur specie recti*, says Horace [*ars* 25]".³⁶ Leeman proceeds to develop his interpretation of

³³ NUSSBAUM (1994), 450-1, (1997), 226-8.

³⁴ E. LEFÈVRE, "Quid ratio possit? Senecas *Phaedra* als stoisches Drama", in *WSN.F.* 3 (1969), 131-60, reprinted with some additional notes in *Senecas Tragödien* (1972), 343-75; LEEMAN (1976).

³⁵ Notice how a passage almost halfway through the play is taking as "starting-point", as though it has been forgotten that we are dealing with a drama, which is to be read (or heard or seen) consecutively from beginning to end.

³⁶ LEEMAN (1976), 202-3.

Hippolytus as someone in the grip of *furor*, and tragically self-deceived, mistaking his misogyny for chastity. Notice how Lee-man glosses *ratio* in line 567 as “Stoic”.³⁷ But if you look at the passage in the context of the whole play as it has unfolded and as it continues, the meaning is surely rather different.³⁸ For Hippolytus does have his own reasons for his hatred of women, which we have just heard him outline in his long speech to the Nurse about the decline of human civilisation (483-564). There he charts the stages in that decline, and towards the end, after the improvements in the deadliness of the technology of warfare (544-552) he comes on to murder within the family (553-8), and concludes with the central role of women in this, naming Medea as a prime example (559-64). The Nurse reasonably objects (565) that this is a sweeping generalisation from a few notable cases; but the blaming of women for the world’s ills goes back to Hesiod on Pandora (*Op.* 47-105), such sentiments are not unknown elsewhere in classical literature,³⁹ and Mayer not unreasonably says “he is presented as little more than a

³⁷ One might, in passing, note that he does not do the same for *natura*, another good Stoic word — presumably because there is no function for Stoic *natura* in his exegesis of the play. Others have given *natura* a prominent place in their interpretations, recognising that in the play *natura* is interpreted differently by different characters, none of whom comes close to the Stoic view: see P.J. DAVIS, “*Vindicat omnes natura sibi. A Reading of Seneca’s Phaedra*”, in *Ramus* 12 (1983) = *Seneca tragicus. Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, ed. by A.J. BOYLE (Berwick, Victoria 1983), 114-27; A.J. BOYLE, “In Nature’s Bonds. A Study of Seneca’s ‘Phaedra’”, in *ANRWII* 32.2 (1985), 1284-1347; *Seneca’s Phaedra. Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes* by A.J. BOYLE (Liverpool 1987), 18-37.

³⁸ As recognised, for instance, by R.F. MERZLAK, “*Furor in Seneca’s Phaedra*”, in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, ed. by C. DEROUX, III, Collection Latomus 180 (Bruxelles 1983), 193-210, at p.208: “Hippolytus appears to contemplate *ratio* and *natura* as possibilities for his hatred of women, and perhaps it is true that both his reasoning process and his own nature militate against any interest in women”.

³⁹ *Seneca. Phaedra*, ed. by M. COFFEY and R. MAYER (Cambridge 1990), on 559-62, refer to HOR. *sat.* 1.3.107-8 and Herodotus; the attribution of Seneca *De matrimonio* frg. 67 Haase (= F51 Vottero), there quoted, is not entirely certain (see my general remarks in *Gnomon* 75 [2003], 167-8). In Euripides’ play Hippolytus says similar things in his speech at 616-68.

stereotyped critic of womankind. A male Roman audience might have taken such a traditional posture in its stride, and not regarded it as unusual".⁴⁰ So Hippolytus does have reasons of a sort for his hatred of women, and this exercise of his *ratio* contributes to his misogyny. What is more, his reasons are soundly reinforced by Phaedra's subsequent attempt to seduce him (note how 697 *Colchide nouerca maius hoc, maius malum est* echoes and caps 563-4, where the example of Medea rounded off his case against women). As for *natura* in line 567, the Nurse has already remarked that his devotion to celibacy and avoidance of marriage owe something to his Amazon mother (232 *genus Amazonium scias*), a family trait he himself here implicitly acknowledges as a possibility, as does Theseus later at 909-14. So it will not do to reduce Hippolytus' misogyny to irrational *furor* alone.⁴¹

Furthermore, one should not miss the specificity of this *furor*. Admittedly his words at 566-73, and again at 578-9 (*Solamen unum matris amissae fero, / odisse quod iam feminas omnis licet*), seem to be about womankind quite generally; but the Nurse in 574-7 has no doubts that his preceding comments are about sex, and one word in 573, *uictus*, reveals obliquely that she is right. For *uincō* and derivatives have been used several times earlier in the play of erotic competition and conquest, among other senses: of resistance to love (132-3), but also of love or the lover overpowering a person (239-40, 356-7). Thus his passionate hatred, his *furor*, is directed at women *qua* sexually threatening. There is no inconsistency, I would argue, with his considerate behaviour towards the Nurse at 431ff., and to Phaedra when she comes on stage and swoons at 583ff. (cf. his concern at 608, 630-3), for he does not perceive them, at this stage, as sexually threatening. Or rather, there is an inconsistency, but

⁴⁰ R. MAYER, *Seneca: Phaedra* (London 2002), 55.

⁴¹ The Stoic interpreter will want to explore the relationship between his reasons — his beliefs about women — and his passionate *furor*, but the play itself does not show that the passion is identical with the beliefs.

it is not the product of Seneca's carelessness over characterisation, but rather he deliberately confronts us with the conflicting elements in Hippolytus' character. His attractive, carefree energy in the opening scene, his considerateness to the Nurse and Phaedra, his fearlessness as he faces death (1054ff.), are as important as the *furor* of pathological hatred of women as sexual creatures.⁴² That complexity of character is occluded by any reductive Stoic interpretation that treats Hippolytus as defined by an all-embracing conflict between Stoic *ratio* and Stoic *furor*, and it is wrong to interpret line 567 as straightforwardly supporting such an interpretation.

- (ii) Outside the text, Stoic influences are preferred to non-Stoic influences

Stoic interpreters often produce numerous parallels between the tragedies and Seneca's prose works, but without considering that in many cases parallels can also be found in non-Stoic contexts.⁴³ For instance, the use of *furor* in the plays is commonly explained with reference to Seneca's prose, but the possible influence of earlier poetry, particularly Vergil, should also be considered.⁴⁴ One must not only consider surviving literature, but must never forget about the lost tragedies of the Augustan and later Julio-Claudian period — in particular those of Asinius Pollio, Ovid, Varius and Pomponius Secundus — some, at least, of which one guesses were known to Seneca. One may well

⁴² In my view ROSENMEYER (1989), 26, is right when he refers to Hippolytus as "clearly designed to charm us with his purity and his thoughtfulness" — but these words should be read in their context. It goes without saying that the points I have made above are not meant to be a complete analysis of the complexity of Hippolytus in the play, but they should feature in any analysis.

⁴³ M. CACCIAGLIA, "L'etica stoica nei drammi di Seneca", in *RIL* 108 (1974), 78-104, is a good example of the approach. ARMISEN-MARCHETTI (1992), on the other hand, is a good demonstration of how one should take into account the full range of parallels.

⁴⁴ For a valuable examination of the use of *furor* in the *Phaedra* in relation to its occurrence in earlier Latin poetry, see MERZLAK (1983).

wonder how far their works anticipated the features of Senecan tragedy, particularly the treatment of the passions, that have commonly been used to support Stoic interpretations.

One of the most common moves in Stoic interpretations is to treat as specifically Stoic what was in fact a moral commonplace. Let us think back to our Epicurean interpreter of the *Phaedra*. She regularly appealed to the text of the play, and utterances of different characters were described as consistent with Epicureanism. Had she gone further, and claimed that the author's intentions were Epicurean, then a critic could at once point out that none of the features identified as Epicurean is unique to that philosophy; thus commentators on the *Phaedra* give parallels from Seneca's prose and elsewhere for several of the topics highlighted by the Epicurean. For instance, to take just one example, the Nurse's exhortation to Phaedra to deal with love right at the start, before it gets out of hand (*Phaedr.* 132-5), is certainly found in Lucretius (4.1068-72), but not only there. Seneca gives similar advice on dealing with the passions generally (e.g. *epist.* 85.9, 116.3), Ovid gave the same advice to the lover in *Remedia Amoris* (79-106), and the basic idea of tackling a problem at the start was proverbial.⁴⁵ It is unsafe to claim moral commonplaces like this as evidence either of Epicurean or of Stoic intentions on the author's part.

(iii) The complex moral issues in the plays are simplified in the interests of a Stoic interpretation

The Stoic interpreter of the plays can be tempted to focus on moral issues that preoccupy Seneca in his prose works, and to

⁴⁵ See *P. Ovidi Nasonis Remedia Amoris*. Edited with Introduction and Commentary by A.A.R. HENDERSON (Edinburgh 1979), 51; ARMISEN-MARCHETTI (1992). I fully agree with Armisen-Marchetti's argument that only a reader already familiar with Stoicism will understand the lines in a Stoic way. But she looks at the passage (130-5) in isolation, and I would not agree that the Stoic reader would see the Nurse as a Stoic counsellor: by the end of the scene, when she has changed tack and suggested that Hippolytus be approached, even the Stoic reader might view her advice as homespun wisdom rather than Stoic philosophy.

downgrade other sorts of moral issue. For instance, in several plays there is uncertainty, sometimes debate, about the moral worth of leading characters. I have already spoken about the complexity of Hippolytus. In the *Hercules Furens* there is confrontation between the views of Juno and Lycus on the one hand, and of Megara and Amphitruo on the other, about Hercules. In the *Thyestes* there is contrast between Atreus' memories of Thyestes' wickedness, and the Thyestes we initially see on stage, humbled and at least partly reformed by his exile. But in the prose works of Seneca one hardly finds such uncertainties: moral evaluations are often more black and white, *exempla* are for the most part straightforwardly good or bad. Stoic interpreters have sometimes tried to pigeonhole the characters of the plays in the same way. Hippolytus, as we have seen, has been represented as controlled by *furor*,⁴⁶ but I have argued that the text tells a more complex story. In the *Hercules Furens*, Hercules has been claimed both as a Stoic sage, and as a paradigm of violent *furor* (either view may be enlisted in a Stoic interpretation of the play); but more nuanced interpretations of Hercules as something between saint and sinner are more persuasive because more true to the text.⁴⁷

Stoic interpretation can be reductive in other ways, as can be seen especially in the tendency of some scholars to make tragedies into "single-issue" dramas — about excessive passion, or about anger, or whatever. At its most extreme, in the *Phaedra*, for instance, Hippolytus, Theseus and Phaedra can all be seen as equally guilty of unreasoning passion, as though Phaedra's wilful deception of Theseus, or Hippolytus' innocence of

⁴⁶ Whereas L. HERRMANN, *Le théâtre de Sénèque* (Paris 1924), 441, regarded Hippolytus as flawless.

⁴⁷ So S. TIMPANARO, "Un nuovo commento all'*Hercules furens* di Seneca nel quadro della critica recente", in *A & R* 26 (1981), 113-41; *Seneca. Hercules Furens. Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar* von M. BILLERBECK, Mnemosyne Supplement 187 (Leiden 1999), 30-8. Thyestes too was a Stoic saint according to O. GIGON, "Bemerkungen zu Senecas Thyestes", in *Philologus* 93 (1938), 176-83, though that view has not found favour.

the charge of attempted rape, were of less significance.⁴⁸ Readings that see that there is more than passion at stake in the play are more satisfying.⁴⁹

This discussion has been very selective, but I close this section by suggesting that Stoic interpreters must first ask themselves whether they are offering what I call a Stoic diagnosis, or are additionally claiming that Seneca had Stoic intentions; and if the latter, then the interpreters must demonstrate that they are not oversimplifying in the ways I have described or in other ways. They must themselves expressly recognise (a) when words and phrases that they wish to interpret in a Stoic way can also be interpreted in non-Stoic ways, (b) when ideas that they identify as Stoic were shared by non-Stoics, and (c) when they are ignoring elements in the play that do not fit their interpretation; and in all such cases the onus is on the Stoic interpreter to argue, not merely assume, that the Stoic interpretation is the best one.

IV. *Nihilistic and anti-Stoic interpretations*

I have argued that the plays do not impose their own Stoic interpretation on the reader, but that Stoic interpretations are the work of Stoic interpreters, who, whether they recognise it or not, act like detached, critical, Stoic spectators. But what of nihilistic or anti-Stoic interpreters?⁵⁰ I would claim that they are producing an anti-Stoic or nihilistic diagnosis of the plays that is just

⁴⁸ That is more or less the argument of LEEMAN (1976), in other ways an acute discussion.

⁴⁹ E.g. DAVIS (1983); BOYLE (1985); ID. (1987). There is a useful and wide-ranging discussion of the moral complexity of all the plays in COLAKIS (1982).

⁵⁰ DINGEL (1974) remains the most vigorous and thorough exponent of the anti-Stoic interpretation; earlier J.P. POE, "An Analysis of Seneca's *Thyestes*", in *TAPA* 100 (1969), 355-76, had argued that the *Thyestes* did not have a Stoic message; a year after Dingel, F.H. SANDBACH, *The Stoics* (London 1975), 160-1, briefly challenged the idea that the tragedies are Stoic dramas. Dingel has had various followers, particularly G. BRADEN, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (New Haven/London 1985); T.F. CURLEY, *The Nature of*

as selective and biased in its own way as the Stoic interpreter's diagnosis. Whereas the Stoic interpreter latches on to the features of a play that can be interpreted in a Stoic way, and treats these elements as defining the meaning of the play and the purpose of the author, the anti-Stoic interpreter latches on to elements that can be interpreted so as to make the plays antithetical to Stoicism. The frequent triumph of evil, death, and suffering, the impotence of reason to overcome passion, the characters' expressions of hopelessness — such elements are taken to be central. Inherited tendencies to immoral behaviour and family curses are taken to be real. Above all, the anti-Stoic interpreter assumes that the malevolent divine machinery — the Furies, the ghosts, the jealous, destructive deities, the underworld with its punishments — is all to be taken as true at some level.

But these same features can all be incorporated into a Stoic interpretation. As Rosenmeyer says of Dingel's argument, it seems "to leave the door open for the conclusion that [the tragedies] involve some kind of Stoicism after all. Yet that insight is not developed";⁵¹ and the whole of Rosenmeyer's book is a development of that insight. The detached, critical Stoic spectator can answer the anti-Stoic interpreter in various ways. At the simplest level, the malevolent divine machinery, the inherited curses and evil family traits, can be treated as some of the traditional falsehoods of the poets, just as my Epicurean interpreter treated the underworld and the destructive intervention of Neptune. Seneca himself acknowledged that the poets say misleading things about afterlife, the gods, and other topics (*Marc.* 19.4, *beat.* 26.6, *brev.* 16.5, *epist.* 115.12-15). The bleak atmosphere of the plays can be put down to the traditional form

Senecan Drama, *Instrumentum Criticum* 4 (Roma 1986). MAYER (1994), 151, has some sympathy for Dingel's position, cf. MAYER (2002), 44-5.

⁵¹ ROSENMEYER (1989), 9. In his discussion of moralising Stoic interpretations of the tragedies, he acutely acknowledges that they will never be persuasive to those who do not come to the plays with Stoic sympathies, and the kind of Stoicism that he claims for the plays in his richly argued book is not the sort of moralising didacticism that I am here discussing.

and themes of tragedy. Alternatively, and more positively, these features can be argued to point to the Stoic solution, to encourage us to see that only in Stoicism can we find relief and happiness in the face of the world that is otherwise so bleak (again the Epicurean interpreter adopted a similar strategy at times). Stoicism, after all, does not promise a world in which external events and the moral behaviour of our fellow human beings are organised for our benefit, at least not according to most people's ideas of what is beneficial; but Stoicism does promise that, despite the arbitrariness and unreliability of external events and of other human beings, the Stoic can still achieve tranquillity and happiness, by recognising that virtue is the only good, and that vice is the only evil.

However, the anti-Stoic interpreter may here press for a deeper engagement with the issues. He may argue that the plays map some of the fault lines that run through Stoic terrain, and thus can be used to probe some of the Stoic's claims. How, he may urge, can the claim that the world was created for the sake of gods and humans (Cic. *nat.deor.* 2.133 and Pease *ad loc.*; *SVF* II 1041, 1131, 1162, III 658) be maintained if external events are not organised for the individual's benefit? If the Stoic claims that this world is the best possible (Cic. *nat.deor.* 2.45:... *hunc ipsum mundum, quo nihil excellentius fieri potest...*), then why is there so much moral evil in the world, and, by orthodox Stoic standards, precious little, if any, moral goodness? The anti-Stoic interpreter could exploit the malevolent divine machinery of the tragedies to draw attention to this uncomfortable fact about the Stoic cosmos, that a world supposedly controlled by divine reason contains a preponderance of moral evil at the human level.⁵²

⁵² The Stoics did discuss the social and psychological mechanisms that produce evil behaviour (*SVF* III 228-36), but their discussion of the "problem of evil" was predominantly concerned with non-moral "evil" (which was not really evil in Stoic terms); for some remarks on the topic see my "Seneca, Stoicism, and the Problem of Moral Evil", in *Ethics and Rhetoric — Classical Essays for Donald*

The *Oedipus* is a play that poses various questions for the Stoic: whether the fate of the play is the same as Stoic fate; whether Oedipus' crimes were determined by fate, and, if so, whether that diminished or eliminated his guilt; whether Oedipus could have avoided committing the crimes that the oracle predicted; whether he was strictly guilty of parricide and incest, given that at the time he did not know the true identity of Laius and Jocasta. Scholars have taken various positions on these questions, and have offered Stoic, anti-Stoic, and philosophically neutral interpretations.⁵³ Again it seems to me that the play itself offers no firm answers, but it is "good to think with" on these various questions.

In such cases the play can become an arena for debate between Stoics and non-Stoics. And such debate may focus on other topics too. Earlier I argued that it is an over-simplification to characterise Hippolytus, Phaedra and Theseus as all alike examples of irrational passion, because that obscures both the complexities of each individual character, and the difference in culpability between Phaedra and the other two. But the non-Stoic might argue that the over-simplification lies not just in the inadequate interpretation of the play, but in Stoicism itself. For the traditional Stoic paradoxes, that all except the sage are fools, and all sins are equal, precisely eliminate the kinds of distinction I was insisting on. The play can be used to illustrate what is at stake in adopting the orthodox Stoic scale of moral and non-moral values.

Nussbaum makes a similar sort of point about the *Medea*, that it shows the cost, indeed the tragedy, of adopting the Stoic outlook and Stoic values: "This choice is not simple, but tragic. If we go for *eros* and *audacia*, we get crime and murderous anger; if we go for purity, we get flatness and the death of heroic

Russell on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday, ed. by D. INNES, H. HINE & C. PELLING (Oxford 1995), 93-106.

⁵³ See the recent subtle discussion by C. SZEKERES, "Die Schuld des Oedipus (über Senecas Tragödie *Oedipus*)", in *ACD* 36 (2000), 99-111, with references to earlier literature; also COLAKIS (1982), 36-41, 132-40; CURLEY (1986), 81-130.

virtue. We get the death of tragedy too, since what tragedy is, we recall, is 'the sufferings of human beings who have been wonderstruck by external things.' This play can be a tragedy only by having characters who are not Stoics; and I think we can say that even then it succeeds in being tragic only because it shares to some extent their loves and their wonder — only because it depicts the choice to follow Stoicism as itself a certain sort of tragedy inside of us, brought about by the demand of our moral being for unsullied purity and lives free from harming".⁵⁴ Here I agree with Nussbaum, that the play is neither simply promulgating the Stoic outlook, nor simply ignoring or contradicting it, but rather letting the reader see, if he or she will, exactly how much is at stake in choosing between the Stoic outlook and its rivals.

V. *Should we avoid moral interpretations of the plays?*

So if both Stoic and anti-Stoic interpretations, not to mention Epicurean ones, are inherently partial and tendentious, does that mean we should avoid moral interpretation of the plays altogether? The answer to such a sweeping suggestion must be "no", for in the first place it is impossible completely to avoid making ethical judgements when reading the plays. If somebody watched or heard or read Seneca's *Thyestes* and all the while thought that Atreus was a terribly nice man, we should want to say that they had radically misunderstood the play.⁵⁵ Suppose it

⁵⁴ NUSSBAUM (1994), 470-1 = (1997), 246.

⁵⁵ It has been argued that Atreus and his behaviour in the play is being held up as a positive example of the ruthlessness with which the ruler needs to behave in order to survive (see W.M. CALDER III, "Seneca: Tragedian of Imperial Rome", in *CJ* 72 (1976), 1-11, at p.11; ID., "Secreti loquimur. An Interpretation of Seneca's *Thyestes*", in *Ramus* 12 (1983) = BOYLE (1983), 184-98). But even if this view is misguided in other ways, it does not involve misunderstanding the play in the way I have just described, for it acknowledges that Atreus' behaviour is immoral and objectionable by ordinary standards, but asserts that the ruler is called upon to behave by different standards.

is claimed that a reader has a purely emotional reaction to the plays; perhaps they experience horror, or disgust, or squeamishness, or fascination, or a mixture of these, at the detailed description of Atreus dismembering his nephews in the *Thyestes*. The same reader might experience one or more of the same range of emotions while reading a graphic description of a major surgical operation, or of the injuries sustained by a passenger killed in a horrific road accident, but the experience will not be the same: the emotional reaction to the play will be coloured by the awareness that Atreus is committing a calculated, evil act against innocent and helpless victims. So the question is not whether we should engage in moral interpretation of the plays, but how we should practice it, how far we should take it, and what moral judgements we should form.

To these questions there are no clear answers. Some readers may think that in my previous discussion I have sometimes crossed the boundary between two different activities, on the one hand, interpreting the plays as dramas, on the other hand, doing moral philosophy with the plays as starting-point. But the boundary between these activities is not clearly defined in advance. In the case of Senecan tragedy it is hard for the reader or spectator to resist being drawn into moral considerations, because the plays themselves contain so much moral argument and reflection, in debates between characters, or within monologues and choral odes. The subject-matter of all this debate and reflection is varied: there are judgements about the moral status of particular actions, about the moral worth of individual characters, about how to act in specific situations, about how to react to specific circumstances and events, about the degree of constraint placed on an individual's freedom of choice by ancestry, circumstances, divine agency, or fate; and so on. We are constantly invited to evaluate what is said by each character, as well as what is done; often the plays offer rival opinions, but no resolution — and so, unsurprisingly, different spectators often come to different conclusions.

But there is a different level of ethical engagement that goes beyond evaluating what is done or said within the drama, and

asks questions that are not explicitly raised within it. For instance, one may ask whether Oedipus was guilty of negligence, of an error of omission: for when the oracle said that he would kill his father and marry his mother, should he not have remembered that he lived in a world where babies were exposed to die and foundlings raised, and should he not have investigated his own parentage carefully? Even if he did not do so earlier, should he not have thought about this when he was about to marry a woman old enough to be his mother? Would a Stoic sage not have investigated? Or would a Stoic sage never have received such an oracle, because by definition a Stoic sage could never commit the wrongs that it predicted? But then, could the oracle have been an implicitly conditional prophecy, which in effect said: "You will kill your father and marry your mother unless you take the appropriate steps required to avoid doing so?"⁵⁶ I stop there, though one could go on. Now such questions are taking us beyond anything said in the text, and some will regard this as illegitimate. As Dodds memorably said of such approaches to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, "But we are not entitled to blame Oedipus either for carelessness... or for lack of self-control... For no such possibilities are mentioned in the play, or even hinted at; and it is an essential critical principle that *what is not mentioned in the play does not exist*".⁵⁷ But we may think that the exploration of such questions is one of the things that we can legitimately do with literature, provided that we remain aware of what we are doing, and do not confuse our own ruminations with the intentions of the dramatist.

⁵⁶ Seneca discusses conditional prophecies or omens at *nat.* 2.37. He is there talking specifically about conditional prophecies or omens that allow for prayer or sacrifice to avert what is foretold; but SERV. auct. *Aen.* 4.696 makes a more general distinction between categorical and conditional prophecies (see H.M. HINE, *An Edition with Commentary of Seneca, Natural Questions, Book Two* (New York 1981), 366-71).

⁵⁷ E.R. DODDS, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford 1973), 68 (original emphasis), reprinted from "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*", in *G & R S.S.* 13 (1966), 37-49, at p.40.

Hypothetical questions of that sort, about what might have been done differently, and what could not have been, lie at the heart of Stoic, or Epicurean, or anti-Stoic diagnoses of the plays. Such diagnoses do not merely highlight elements in the text, but go further than that. The Stoic interpreter is essentially optimistic, claiming in effect — though never in these simplistic terms — that in another scenario a Phaedra could have resisted her passion, a Medea could have mastered her anger before it began, a Thyestes would have remained in exile or reacted differently to Atreus, an Atreus would have been persuaded by his attendant to rule more honourably, and so on; an Epicurean interpreter makes different but still optimistic claims; whereas the anti-Stoic interpreter is pessimistic, and thinks that a Phaedra or a Medea or an Oedipus really can be confronted, and have their behaviour determined, by overwhelming, irresistible forces, and so on. The debate between these outlooks is important, but the writer does not provide any answer to the debate, for he gives us no more than what happens within the play, and, sometimes, the often conflicting views of its characters on how things might have been different, or how they could not possibly have been different. The views of the author on these issues remain opaque, and it is a mistake to claim that our diagnosis uncovers them.

So what future do I think there is for Stoic interpretations of the plays? Firstly, it may be useful for various purposes to develop what I have called a Stoic diagnosis, the kind of interpretation that would be given by the educated, detached Stoic reader such as Nussbaum describes. Such a diagnosis need not be accompanied by any claim about Seneca's intentions. The diagnosis may be thought useful for historical reasons, to display the kind of interpretation that could have been given by an ancient Stoic. Some modern interpreters may want to argue that, although the plays do not themselves demand a Stoic diagnosis, Seneca himself hoped for Stoically educated readers who would interpret the plays in that way — but this must be argued, not taken for granted. Other readers may be interested

in a Stoic interpretation because they themselves are sympathetic to certain aspects of Stoic philosophy (such as the cognitive theory of the passions).

Secondly, I am sure that some, rejecting my approach, will still want to argue that Seneca intended the plays to encourage or promote Stoic beliefs and behaviour. They will try to show that certain features of the text itself support, or privilege, or invite a Stoic diagnosis of the plays. I have suggested that the onus must be on them to recognise explicitly where those features could be interpreted in different ways — as not really Stoic at all, or as a product of the poetic tradition, or as ethical commonplaces — and then to show that the Stoic interpretation is superior to any alternative.

Thirdly, and this is where my sympathies lie, one can see the plays as inviting ethical reflection, but not pointing uniquely or mainly to a Stoic diagnosis; for other sorts of diagnosis are equally possible. For those who are interested in the ethical issues, the plays can offer opportunities for exploration of the relative merits of the Stoic world view and its rivals, and for examination of the strengths and weaknesses of Stoic doctrine on particular issues. But not every reader will be particularly interested in the ethical issues, and some, like Dodds, will think that this is in principle a wrong way to handle literature. They are certainly right that there is no need to approach literature in this way; and, since the focus of this paper has been on Stoic and other sorts of philosophical interpretation, I close by stressing that I do not mean to suggest that this is the most important way to approach the tragedies for us today, or that it was for Seneca when he wrote.

DISCUSSION

W.-L. Liebermann: 1) Vor allem im Schlussteil des Vortrags plädieren Sie nachdrücklich für die Freiheit des Lesers, mit der einzigen Einschränkung, dieser müsse sich bewusst sein, was er tut. Andererseits wird aber von einer Steuerung des Rezipienten durch den Autor (bzw. durch den Text) ausgegangen. Wie verhält sich das zueinander, worin genau besteht die Rezipientensteuerung?

2) Wenn ich die Argumentation Ihres sehr interessanten und komplexen Vortrags zu rekonstruieren versuche, so unterscheiden Sie zunächst zwei Ebenen: die der stoischen Beschreibung ("diagnosis") und die der stoisch belehrenden Zwecksetzung, die man vielleicht auch die (appellative) Ebene der Empfehlung und der intendierten Rezeption nennen könnte. Ich halte es für missverständlich, nur in letzterem Fall von "intentions" des Autors oder der Stücke zu sprechen, denn eine solche Intention könnte sich ja auch auf die Beschreibung beschränken. Nun gewinnt man den Eindruck, dass Sie anfangs aus der Separierung der beiden Ebenen die Forderung herleiten, nicht unzulässige Schlüsse von der einen auf die andere Ebene zu ziehen. Der Fortgang zeigt aber, dass Sie, wenn ich richtig sehe, vielmehr die beobachtete Uneindeutigkeit auf der Beschreibungsebene (= Darstellungsebene) nutzen, um eine didaktische stoische Absicht der Senecatragödien abzuweisen. Ich denke, dass Sie recht daran tun, die Differenz der beiden Ebenen nicht in einem radikalen Sinn auszuwerten, denn eine philosophisch fundierte analytische Beschreibung hat tatsächlich systemimmanente Konsequenzen wertender und damit empfehlender Art, zumal im antiken Denken der Schluss von Sein auf Sollen grundlegend ist. Entspricht diese meine Rekonstruktion Ihren Vorstellungen?

H. Hine: On your first point, perhaps I should not have spoken, towards the end of my paper, of the plays as “inviting” ethical reflection; perhaps “allowing” would have been a safer word in that particular context. At the end I was talking about the reader being drawn into the ethical debates and reflections that are going on in the play, meaning that we form our own judgements about the moral arguments and reflections, and the actions, of the characters in the play. I do not think that it is either the particular author or the particular text that is responsible for us “being drawn in”, but it is part of what we have been trained, and are expected, to do as readers or hearers. Compare if we overhear a conversation in a bus or restaurant: we may well make our own judgements about the views expressed as we listen. In drama the author will usually expect us to be drawn in in this manner, and may exploit this expectation in different ways. But I want to distinguish firmly between being drawn in to make *some* moral assessment, and being guided to make a *Stoic* (or any other specific kind of) moral assessment.

As for your second question, if I have understood it correctly, I think I was making a slightly different point. I meant all along that “diagnosis” should have both a descriptive and a prescriptive component. The diagnosis says quite explicitly “If (i) you start from Stoic (or Epicurean, or whatever) principles, and if (ii) you read this play, then (iii) you will arrive at the following Stoic judgements about the play, judgements that have implications for the way we should behave”. Standard Stoic readings of the play omit the first of the above conditions, and say simply, “If you read this play, then you will arrive at the following Stoic judgements about the play”. My argument is that condition (i) is still operating, even if it is not recognised: the argument is partly an *ad hominem* one, that the evidence the Stoic interpreters use can generally be interpreted in other ways that do not support a Stoic interpretation; and partly it rests on a claim that Stoic interpretations generally contain, at least implicitly, counterfactual statements that could not in principle be supported from the text.

J. Luque Moreno: Su conferencia, Prof. Hine, ha sido para mí particularmente clarificadora en varios sentidos. Estoy de acuerdo con usted en que la doctrina filosófica no es el objetivo primario, la primera premisa de este teatro; como ya dije ayer, en mi opinión, el centro es aquí el Hombre, no la doctrina. Estoy también de acuerdo con usted en que el evidente contenido doctrinal que tienen estos dramas no responde a un único y mismo sistema filosófico; más bien se trata a veces de tópicos morales comunes incorporados desde antes por la tradición literaria. Esto quizá explique esa ambigüedad entre estoicismo y epicureísmo que usted nos ha hecho ver en diversos pasajes. Oyéndolo hablar de esta ambigüedad, me he preguntado si, *mutatis mutandis*, no es similar a la que también se puede reconocer en la lírica horaciana.

H. Hine: I think you are quite right to compare the problem of philosophical stance in Horace's *Odes*, and not just the *Odes*, but I also think of the attempts to pin down the philosophical affiliations of the *Epistles*. There is, though, an important difference, that in those poems we do hear an authorial voice or *persona*, but in the tragedies we do not.

J. Dangel: Cet exposé montre parfaitement à quel point, à mon avis, la philosophie — système théorique — ne fonctionne pas comme telle dans les tragédies de Sénèque. Elle n'est qu'un élément d'un ensemble complexe, à réceptions multiples, mais conjointes — en interface. On notera que même dans sa prose philosophique, Sénèque reste éclectique, réfléchissant aussi bien sur le stoïcisme que sur l'épicurisme. Plus précisément, un mot (*furor, malus...*) ne suffit pas à faire le sens. Mieux encore: Sénèque opère des sélections verbales et notionnelles jusqu'à privilégier des idées qui sont non plus spécifiquement philosophiques, mais fondamentalement tragiques: ce sont des *topoi* dont Aristote, Horace font état et que pratique le théâtre républicain. La raison me semble alors être que la tragédie de Sénèque est une 'poétique' littéraire qui repose sur une polyvalence de sens, que permet le choix des sujets: le problème du

Mal est un cas exemplaire. J'ajouterai qu'une scène d'horreur comme la préparation du repas cannibale par Atrée, loin d'être en effet "une chirurgie médicale", véhicule l'horreur sacrée d'un rite sacrificiel, appliqué à l'humain: les membres sont grillés, les viscères bouillis comme dans "la cuisine du sacrifice". L'horreur est dans le caractère inacceptable des victimes, les fils de Thyeste, si bien qu'Atrée est l'un de ces monstres tragiques qu'évoque Cicéron dans le *De legibus*.

H. Hine: You are right that Seneca's philosophical prose is eclectic, combining Epicurean elements with Stoic; though in the prose the Epicurean ideas are normally flagged explicitly as Epicurean (e.g. in the first thirty letters), which is different from the tragedies. I entirely agree that Atreus' actions are quite different from a surgical operation, and I am sympathetic with the rest of what you say about the poetics of Senecan tragedy and the sacral aspects of horror. At the same time, I think that in principle these features are compatible with a philosophical purpose, for, as you say, the plays are polyvalent — it's just that I don't see the evidence of a simple philosophical purpose on Seneca's part.

E. Malaspina: Apprezzo il valore metodologicamente stimolante e provocatorio del (anzi, della) *Epicurean interpreter*, ma una diagnosi non stoica (a maggior ragione epicurea) delle tragedie può funzionare a mio avviso solo a patto di selezionare il materiale in modo parziale e mirato (sfido chiunque ad interpretare in modo diverso da quello stoico ad esempio *Thy.* 344-90). In questo senso la *Phaedra* si adatta meglio di altri drammi e le parole della Sua *Epicurean interpreter* sono senz'altro plausibili. Trovo solo poco lucreziani gli accenni di Ippolito sulle "early human societies": è vero che *Lucr.* 5, 925-1457 riprende alcuni tratti del *locus amoenus* e condanna la brama di ricchezze e di potere, come fa anche Ippolito, ma il tono complessivo è radicalmente diverso, perché come è noto Lucrezio insiste, epicureamente, sulla durezza e sulla ferinità della vita primitiva

(e.g. 925-6; 957-8; 964; 982-97; 1007-10; 1014) e sul lento progresso dell'umanità.

Sono comunque d'accordo con Lei che la validità di una diagnosi stoica da parte del lettore non implica e non prova automaticamente l'intenzione stoica dell'autore. Essa va dimostrata. Io Le domando, però: se Seneca avesse voluto rendere *esplicita, immediata ed evidente* la sua intenzione stoica in termini poetici, che cosa avrebbe dovuto fare? A me vien da rispondere che egli *non* avrebbe dovuto scrivere *cothurnatae*, ma un poema didascalico, una commedia 'a tesi' di tipo terenziano, al massimo una *praetexta*, forse. Il punto è secondo me proprio questo: le intenzioni stoiche (alla cui presenza in Seneca tragico io 'credo' senz'altro) non possono venire a galla perché lo statuto letterario e generico di una tragedia (o almeno della tragedia di Seneca) non lo contempla: sono la letterarietà e la funzione poetica le cifre primarie di Seneca tragico, mentre etica, didattica e politica sono costrette a giocare secondo le regole della poesia. È per questo che fatichiamo a trovare le 'intenzioni'. Mi pare che l'osservazione che Jacqueline Dangel ha appena formulato sul *furor* vada esattamente in questa direzione.

A proposito di quanto si diceva ieri con W.-L. Liebermann, Lei riconosce che "a Stoic reading... depends on the reader being predisposed to interpret... in Stoic terms" e che "such Stoic interpretations are inspired by a preconception that the plays are Stoic plays": eccoci dinuovo al *Vor-Verständnis* ed al circolo ermeneutico, solo che Lei sembra chiamarlo in causa solo per le diagnosi stoiche. Non riguarda esso allo stato attuale della ricerca, come io credo, *tutte* le diagnosi su Seneca tragico?

H. Hine: Thank you for those comments, which I shall take in turn. First, I agree that *Thy.* 344-90 contains ideas on kingship that can clearly be identified as Stoic. But the lines must not be taken out of context: at 391-403 the Chorus goes on to say that it will live a life of plebeian obscurity and *otium*, which is not really a Stoic attitude to involvement in public life. So Stoic insights are in competition with the perspective of the

ordinary citizen. Thus an Epicurean diagnosis of the *Thyestes* would stress lines 391-403, which come close to Epicurus' views on political involvement. As for Hippolytus on early human societies, I agree entirely that what Lucretius says is rather different; and I did make my Epicurean interpreter acknowledge, though very briefly, that there are inadequacies in Hippolytus' treatment of the topic: she presented him as having only an imperfect grasp of Epicurean truth. Then you ask the interesting question, how could Seneca possibly have conveyed an explicitly Stoic intention in a tragic drama. Well, I think that he could at least have presented Stoic ideas more clearly and more prominently. As you mention, he could perhaps have done so in a *praetexta*, where he could have introduced a historical character who expressed Stoic philosophical views — the younger Cato, for example — though then, naturally, the Stoic voice would be in competition with other voices in the play, and would not automatically convey the author's viewpoint. (The author of *Octavia* includes Seneca as a character, but I find it interesting that he is not presented as specifically Stoic. There are strong similarities between what the character of Seneca says in *Octavia* and what Seneca writes in *De clementia*, but the ideas in question are not uniquely Stoic; and the character uses terms like *bonus* and *malus* in ordinary, non-Stoic senses (cf. *Oct.* 381, 563) — though the philosophical writings of Seneca often do the same.) In mythological tragedy a Stoic character would be anachronistic, though one can imagine a play in which the choral odes really were totally detached from the dramatic action and offered a strictly Stoic commentary on the action; though again that would not itself be the author's voice, and it would be very different from Senecan tragedy as we have it. I agree that the literariness and poetic function are prominent in his plays, but nevertheless a greater degree of philosophical content is thinkable in the genre. As for your last point, I spoke only about Stoic readings because that is what I was asked to speak about! But I would not dissent from what you say.

J. Luque Moreno: Quisiera añadir una pequeña observación a propósito de la intervención del Prof. Malaspina sobre la diferencia entre Séneca y, por ejemplo, Lucrecio como poetas 'doctrinales'. Creo que esta diferencia se confirma y se explica de un modo sistemático desde una perspectiva lingüístico-literaria, la perspectiva de las funciones del lenguaje: es evidente que en toda exposición doctrinal en forma literaria hay ante todo una función poética (llamar la atención del receptor sobre el significante lingüístico y, en consecuencia, sobre el significado). Si con esa función poética se combina la función enunciativa, nos acercamos al terreno de la llamada poesía didáctica o científica, un campo apropiado para la exposición sistemática de contenidos doctrinales. Mas, si dicha función poética se combina con la función actuativa o impresiva (poesía dramática) o simplemente con la función sintomática o expresiva (poesía lírica), no ha lugar normalmente para la exposición racional y sistemática de unos contenidos doctrinales sino más bien para la exteriorización emocional, incluso apasionada, de unas convicciones. Este segundo podría ser el caso del teatro de Séneca: una poesía en la que hay un evidente contenido doctrinal pero que no se atiene (no tiene por qué atenerse) a una presentación más o menos sistemática ni se ajusta rigurosamente a una doctrina concreta.

H. Hine: Thank you for that very clear analysis.

W. Schubert: Ich möchte mit meiner Frage bzw. mit meiner kleinen Einlassung anknüpfen an die zweite Frage vom Kollegen Malaspina. Sie mahnen völlig zu Recht mehrfach und vor allem am Ende Ihres Beitrags die Beweispflicht derer an, die eine stoische Interpretation bzw. stoische Interpretationen vertreten. Dennoch hat mich einmal während Ihres Vortrages ein leises Unbehagen beschlichen, wo sie diejenigen stoischen Interpreten in den Blick fassen, die in einem close reading-Verfahren unvoreingenommen an den Text herangehen, denen Sie jedoch unterstellen, dass "an underlying bias in favour of Stoic interpretation can regularly be seen operating... even if it remains

unrecognised by the interpreter". Wird dadurch nicht suggeriert, dass jede stoische Interpretation von vornherein als solche verdächtig ist oder verdächtiger sein muss als andere, da sie niemals unbefangen sein kann? Impliziert dies, dass andere Interpretationen — nicht bei Seneca, sondern bei beliebigen Texten —, sowie sie in irgendeine philosophische Richtung zielen, ebenfalls nie unbefangen sind? Oder ist das ein Spezifikum stoischer Interpretation und ein Spezifikum der Interpretation senecanischer Texte?

H. Hine: Thank you — I think that question helps me to identify more clearly what I am trying to do. I am not making any universal claim that all Stoic interpretations of Seneca or of any other text are biased. I have just said, for example, that a Stoic reading of *Thy.* 344-90 is right. My argument is really an accumulation of pragmatic, *ad hominem* arguments: repeatedly I find that features of the tragedies are claimed as Stoic even when alternative, non-Stoic interpretations are available, and are *prima facie* equally plausible. When interpreters repeatedly fail to look at these alternatives, I describe this as an unconscious bias in favour of the Stoic interpretation. I think the problem is particularly acute with Senecan tragedy, because we know that Seneca was an adherent of Stoicism; but we have already mentioned comparable problems with identifying the philosophical position of some of Horace's poems, and similar questions arise about some epic poetry.

M. Billerbeck: In Ihrem Exposé sprechen Sie vom "Roman reader" von Senecas Tragödien. Wie sehen Sie, im Rahmen von Senecas tragischer Dichtung, das Verhältnis von Stoischem zu Römischem? Nehmen wir beispielsweise *virtus*, worin wir sowohl einen römischen Wertbegriff als auch einen Grundbegriff stoischer Ethik fassen. Einen Sonderfall stellt wohl die Gestalt des Hercules dar, welcher sowohl den Stoikern als grosses moralisches Vorbild dient als auch in der römischen Mythologie und Herrscherideologie einen prominenten

Platz einnimmt. Ich möchte hier auf das Beispiel von Ciceros Reaktion auf Sophokles' *Trachinierinnen* verweisen: In seiner Übersetzung von Hercules' Wehklagen (*Trach.* 1046-1102 = *Tusc.* 2,20-22) kürzt der Römer den plötzlichen Schmerzschub des Helden (1081-89) ab. "Roman decorum forbade", wie L. Holford-Strevens in seinem erhellenden Aufsatz "Sophocles at Rome", in *Sophocles Revisited*, ed. by J. Griffin (Oxford 1999), 219-259, hier 227-229, bemerkt. Wie liesse sich also bei einem "Roman reader" der übrigen Dramen des Seneca eine speziell stoische Einstellung von der römischen unterscheiden?

H. Hine: That is a big question, but I think the answer depends on which Stoic doctrines you are considering. On some important topics there are certainly strong affinities between Stoic and Roman ideas and values; *virtus* is one such area, as you say, and the case of Hercules is a good example of how the relative importance of Roman and Stoic values in Seneca's play becomes a matter for debate among scholars; and there the problem is further complicated because similar debates arise about Seneca's Roman literary predecessors, particularly the *Aeneid*. But *virtus* is not such a prominent theme in most of the other plays. On other topics there is no close overlap between Roman and Stoic ideas: so, for instance, if one claims that the *Medea* exemplifies a Stoic analysis of the emotions, that is not something on which there was a traditional Roman view. On your last point, I would just observe that there are significant differences between Cicero and Seneca in their attitudes to Roman tradition, not least in their senses of literary decorum!

E.A. Schmidt: 1) Bei der Diskussion von *Phaedr.* 567 darf man nach meiner Ansicht v. 568a, *odisse placuit*, das einzige Ziel des ganzen Satzes, nicht ausserachtlassen. Gegenüber der Entscheidung, alle Frauen zu hassen, ist es Hippolytus völlig gleichgültig, was ihn dazu motiviert, und eben dies ist schon ein Zeichen von Irrationalität.

2) Sie hatten gegenüber Herrn Liebermann geglaubt einräumen zu sollen, dass Ihre Aussage “one can see the plays as inviting ethical reflection” vielleicht zu stark sei und es statt “inviting” wohl besser “allowing” heißen müsse. Ich meine im Gegenteil, dass es nicht stark genug sei. Daher stelle ich die Frage, ob das Erlebnis eines senecanischen Dramas (Lektüre, Aufführung) ohne ethische Reaktion und Reflexion überhaupt möglich ist.

H. Hine: On your first point, I was focusing on earlier interpretations of line 567, but you are quite right that one must read to the end of the sentence. But I would analyse the lines slightly differently from you. He does not seem to me to be totally indifferent to the causes of his hatred, for, on my reading, line 567 shows some degree of self-awareness, some attempt to acknowledge different possible causes of his hatred. A Stoic would certainly agree that his behaviour is irrational, but an alternative view is that he gives up too soon on the attempt to understand his own motivation — a common human failing, but not necessarily one to be labelled as irrationality. On your second point, I agree with you entirely that ethical engagement is of the essence in our response to Senecan tragedy or indeed most other literature. The issue is not whether we should be ethically engaged, but whether the text calls for specifically Stoic engagement.

W.-L. Liebermann: Ich bin mir sehr wohl bewusst, dass die “invitation”, allerdings nur teilweise, auf “ethical reflection” allgemein, nicht speziell auf stoische Vorstellungen zielte. Meine Frage ist eine methodische: Worin besteht die Rezipientensteuerung (welche auch immer) angesichts der grundsätzlichen Freiheit des Rezipienten?

Ausserdem will ich die Einlassung von Frau Billerbeck nutzen, um darauf hinzuweisen, wie vieldeutig der Begriff ‘Stoizismus’ gebraucht wird. Frau Billerbeck reklamiert eine (römisch-)stoische Auffassung des Hercules und lehnt (s. ihre kommentierte

Ausgabe) eine psychologische Deutung ab. Andere vertreten bekanntlich die 'stoische' Deutung gerade unter der Perspektive der Psychologie.

H. Hine: Thank you. I agree with what you say; in fact identifying Roman elements in the tragedies can be just as problematic as identifying Stoic elements, but that is another question.