

**TWO TRAGEDIES OF  
SENECA. MEDEA AND THE  
DAUGHTERS OF TROY**

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Two Tragedies of Seneca. Medea and the Daughters of Troy by Lucius Annaeus Seneca & Ella Isabel Harris

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**LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA & ELLA ISABEL HARRIS**

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# Two Tragedies of Seneca

Medea and The Daughters  
of Troy

Rendered into English Verse, with an Introduction

By

Ella Isabel Harris



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## INTRODUCTION

## I

### SOURCES OF SENECA INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH DRAMA

THE interest of English students in the dramas of Seneca lies in the powerful influence exerted by them upon the evolution of the English drama, and these translations have been undertaken in the hope that they may be found useful to English students of English drama.

Though all the tragedies ascribed to Seneca are not by the same hand, yet they are so far homogeneous that in considering them as a literary influence, one is not inclined to quarrel with the classification that unites them under a single name. For the present purpose, therefore, no time need be spent in the discussion of their authorship or exact date, but we may turn at once to look for their appearance as agents in the development of the modern, serious drama. In this relation it is hardly possible to overestimate their determining influence throughout Europe. Perhaps it may have been owing to the closer racial bond between the Romans and the French that while the Senecan influence upon the drama in France was so overmastering and tyrannical, in England the



native spirit was stronger to resist it, and the English drama at its best remained distinctively English, the influence exercised over it by the Senecan tragedies being rather formative than dominant.

Before the time of Marlowe and Shakespeare the forces that determined the development of the serious drama in England were practically twofold: one native, emanating from the moralities and miracle plays; the other classic, and found in the tragedies long ascribed to Seneca. These remnants of the Roman drama were known to the English at a very early date, were valued by the learned as the embodiment of what was best in ancient art and thought, and were studied in the Latin originals by pupils in the schools even while the schools were still wholly monastic. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, separate plays of Seneca were translated into English by various authors, and in 1581 Thomas Newton collected these translations into one volume, under the title of "Seneca his Ten Tragedies, Translated into English." After an examination of these translations one can readily understand why Elizabeth felt the need of an English translation of the Latin favorite, and herself essayed to turn them into English verse. In 1702 Sir Edward Sherburne published translations of three of the plays, but the edition of 1581 still remains the only complete English translation. From the edition of 1581 I quote a part

of the translation of the beautiful lines on the future life, Troades, Act II., Scene iv. :—

“ May this be true, or doth the Fable fayne,  
 When corps is deade the Sprite to live as yet?  
 When Death our eies with heavy hand doth strain,  
 And fatall day our leames of light hath shet,  
 And in the Tombe our ashes once be sat,  
 Hath not the soule likewyse his funerall,  
 But stil (alas) do wretches live in thrall?

“ Or els doth all at once together die?  
 And may no part his fatal howre delay,  
 But with the breath the Soule from hence doth fie?  
 And eke the Cloudes to vanish quite awaye,  
 As danky shade fleeth from the poale by day?  
 And may no iote escape from desteny,  
 When once the brand hath burned the body?”

In Sherburne's translation of 1702 the same lines are rendered as follows :—

“ Is it a Truth? or Fiction blinds  
 Our fearful Minds?  
 That when to Earth we Bodies give,  
 Souls yet do live?  
 That when the Wife hath clos'd with Cries  
 The Husband's Eyes,  
 When the last fatal Day of Light,  
 Hath spoil'd our Sight  
 And when to Dust and Ashes turn'd  
 Our Bones are urn'd;  
 Souls stand yet in need at all  
 Of Funeral,  
 But that a longer Life with Pain  
 They still retain?  
 Or dye we quite? Nor ought we have  
 Survives the Grave?  
 When like to Smoake immixed with skies,  
 The Spirit flies,  
 And Funeral Tapers are apply'd  
 To th' naked Side,  
 Whateere Sol rising does disclose  
 Or setting shows,” etc.

It is also interesting to compare Sherburne's version with the earlier one in the famous passage which closes the chorus at the end of the second act of the *Medea*; Newton's edition gives the lines as follows:—

“Now seas controulde doe suffer passage free,  
 The Argo proude erected by the hand  
 Of Pallas first, doth not complayne that shee,  
 Conveyde hath back, the kynges unto theyr land.  
 Eche whirry boate now scuddes about the deepe  
 All stynts and warres are taken cleane away,  
 The Cities frame new walles themselves to keepe,  
 The open worlde lettes nought rest where it lay;  
 The Hoyes of Ind Araxis lukewarme leake,  
 The Persians stout in Rhene and Albis streame  
 Doth bath their Barkes, time shall in fine outbreake  
 When Ocean wave shall open every Realme,  
 The Wandering World at Will shall open lye,  
 And Typhis will some newe founde Land surway  
 Some travelers shall the Countreys farre escrye,  
 Beyonde small Thule, knowen furthest at this day.”

As given by Sherburne these lines are:—

“The passive Main  
 Now yields, and does all Laws sustain,  
 Nor the fam'd Argo, by the hand  
 Of Pallas built, by Heroes mann'd,  
 Does now alone complain she 's forc'd  
 To Sea; each petty Boat 's now cours'd  
 About the Deep; no Boundure stands,  
 New Walls by Towns in foreign Lands  
 Are rais'd; the pervious World in 'ts old  
 Place, leaves nothing. Indians the cold  
 Araxis drink, Albis, and Rhine the Persians.  
 Th' Age shall come, in fine  
 Of many years, wherein the Main  
 M' unloose the universal Chain;  
 And mighty Tracts of Land be shown,  
 To Search of Elder Days unknown,  
 New Worlds by some new Typhys found,  
 Nor Thule be Earth's farthest Bound.”