

# **Thyestes; Phaedra; the Trojan Women; Oedipus with Octavia Study Guide**

**Thyestes; Phaedra; the Trojan Women; Oedipus with  
Octavia by Seneca the Younger**

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# Plot Summary

"Four Tragedies and Octavia" is a collection of four plays written by Seneca and one play that is debated whether or not it was written by Seneca. These plays focus on stories from Greek mythology and were written previously by other writers. These plays are very interesting reinterpretations by the renown philosopher Seneca.

In "Thyestes," a feud plagues the House of Pelops, which has been cursed after Tantalus serves his son, Pelops, as food to the gods. Atreus recalls Thyestes from banishment under the false promise to rule the kingdom jointly. Atreus kills Thyestes' sons and serves them to Thyestes at a banquet. Atreus reveals his deception, claiming that he owes Thyestes this vengeance.

In "Phaedra," while Theseus is on an expedition to Hades, his wife, Phaedra lusts after her stepson, Hippolytus. Hippolytus angers Phaedra by rejecting her. When Theseus returns, Phaedra claims that Hippolytus attempted to seduce her which causes Theseus to pray to the gods for Hippolytus' death. Neptune sends a sea bull to frighten Hippolytus' horses that kill Hippolytus. Phaedra admits her deception before committing suicide. Theseus mourns for his son and grants him a proper burial which he refuses to Phaedra.

In "Troades," after Troy has fallen, Calchas tells the Greeks that Astyanax must be killed to appease the gods and Polyxena must be sacrificed to Achilles to ensure the Greeks' safe return to Greece. After Hector visits Andromache in a dream, she tries to hide their son, but Ulysses convinces her to summon Astyanax and takes Astyanax away. Helen summons Polyxena under the false pretense of a marriage to Pyrrhus. Astyanax jumps from the tower of Troy, brave and defiant. Pyrrhus stabs the proud, brave, defiant Polyxena, and Achilles' grave soaks up all of her blood. The Trojan women mourn.

In "Oedipus," Oedipus sends Creon to the Oracle of Delphi to learn how to stop the pestilence that plagues Thebes. He learns that he must avenge King Laius' murder and has Tiresias summons King Laius' ghost to learn who murdered him. Creon relays the ghost's message, claiming that Oedipus murdered King Laius and defiles his father's marriage bed. According to King Laius, Oedipus must be expelled from Thebes to stop the plague, but Oedipus does not believe this and imprisons Creon. A messenger from Corinth arrives to announce King Polybus' death and summon Oedipus to the Corinthian throne. Oedipus is frightened to return to Corinth due to Apollo's prophecy which claims he will kill his father and marry his mother. From the messenger and a shepherd from Thebes, Oedipus learns that his birth parents are King Laius and Jocasta who Oedipus is now married to. Oedipus tears out his eyes, and Jocasta commits suicide after they learn that she is actually his mother.

In "Octavia", Octavia mourns Claudius and Britannicus. She hates her husband, Nero, and fears what his mistress, Poppaea, will demand he does to Octavia. Nero and Seneca debate Nero's plan to marry Poppaea and kill Octavia, but Nero chooses to ignore Seneca's advice. Nero marries Poppaea, causing his subjects to rebel. The



subjects want to restore Octavia to her marriage bed. Nero blames Octavia for the rebellion and orders her to be taken to a foreign shore and executed. Octavia is eager for death and the escape from Nero.



# Thyestes

## Thyestes Summary

"Four Tragedies and Octavia" by Seneca is a collection of four plays written by Seneca and one play that is debated whether or not it is written by Seneca. These plays focus on stories from Greek mythology and were written previously by other writers. These plays are very interesting reinterpretations by the renown philosopher Seneca.

The background information tells how the House of Pelops is doomed from the time that Tantalus, a son of Zeus, serves Pelops, his son, as the meal at a banquet of the gods. Zeus restores Pelops to life, and Pelops obtains a wife and kingdom by his treachery. Pelops' crown becomes a source of contention between his two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. At the time the play begins, Atreus reigns as king and plots against Thyestes by the means of a false reconciliation. The curse of the House of Pelops continues.

In the first act, the ghost of Tantalus questions who has summoned him as he mourns the current generation of his family's sins which makes their predecessors' sins appear small. These sins cause even Tantalus to look innocent. The Fury commands Tantalus to loose the Furies on his house as the crimes against Tantalus' family by his family multiply. The Fury predicts horrible things to happen in the House of Pelops and wants to fill the house with the revenge of Tantalus. The fate of Thyestes' children will be to have their bodies boiled in pieces; the Fury has devised a meal so strange that even Tantalus will run from it. Tantalus wants to return to his prison cell and escape the upper world, but the Fury will not allow this until Tantalus places chaos in the House of Pelops and sets its kings at war with one another. Tantalus objects; he is supposed to be punished, not serve as a punishment to others. He laments and warns his grandsons against such sinful slaughter as Atreus plans. At the Fury's bidding, Tantalus' old hunger awakes, and Tantalus agrees to follow the Fury. The Fury commands Tantalus to cast his madness upon the house, and chaos settles in the House of Pelops. The chorus sings of the horrors of the House of Pelops and prays to the gods to have mercy and save them.

In the second act, Atreus rages about his impotence in being unable to avenge the sleights of his brother. He disregards the minister's warnings about his subjects' reactions because Atreus believes that, as king, he is supreme ruler of his realm. He does not see it as sinful to harm this brother because of the many wrongs Thyestes has done to Atreus. Atreus and his minister plot against Thyestes. Atreus plans a vengeance worse than death for Thyestes; he will make a father eat his own children. He lures Thyestes to his castle under the false promise of reconciliation. Atreus decides to leave his own sons unaware and innocent of his black deeds. His minister swears loyalty to Atreus and promises to keep the plot a secret. The chorus laments about the feud between brothers.



In the third act, Thyestes happily travels toward Argos, the home of his fathers, with his three sons, young Tantalus, Plisthenes and a third, unnamed son. Thyestes' steps slow as he grows fearful of Atreus' offer of peace. Thyestes does not know why he is frightened, and young Tantalus urges his father forward. Thyestes suspects a trap in Atreus' offer to rule jointly since no kingdom can be ruled by two kings. Young Tantalus suggests that Atreus' heart has been softened by brotherly love, but Thyestes insists that his brother does not love him. Thyestes reminds his sons that when they meet Atreus, he will lead and they must follow. Atreus enters and, in an aside to the audience, declares his joy that his trap is set for Thyestes. Atreus greets his brother, and Thyestes begs for forgiveness for his crimes against Atreus. Atreus offers forgiveness and half of the crown. Though Thyestes initially refuses the crown, Atreus insists, and Thyestes agrees under the condition that he may devote his arms, power and self to Atreus' service. Atreus agrees and goes with his nephews to offer a sacrifice to the gods. The chorus sings about peace between brothers.

In act four, a messenger tells the chorus about Atreus' horrible deed of sacrificing Thyestes' sons. Atreus acts as a priest and slaughters his nephews upon an altar. Young Tantalus' throat is cut upon the altar first, and then Atreus beheads Plisthenes and drags his corpse onto the altar with his brother's body. Atreus does not spare Thyestes' youngest son but kills him as well and adds his body to the pile of corpses on the altar. Atreus cuts his nephews' bodies into pieces and prepares them as a feast for Thyestes. Thyestes eats heartily, sealing his doom, as the chorus laments this horrible deed.

In the fifth act, Atreus rejoices in his victory over Thyestes; he feels this is the reward for his pains. He laughs as his brother eats his fill. Thyestes rejoices to be reconciled with Atreus, but he wonders why grief sticks in his heart. Thyestes, urging himself to trust Atreus' desire for peace, tells Atreus of his happiness; his only discontent is that he cannot share it with his sons. Atreus assures Thyestes that he will see his sons' faces very soon. Thyestes and Atreus drink a toast to the gods. Again, Thyestes asks to see his children, and Atreus presents the heads of Thyestes' sons. Thyestes laments Atreus' treachery and false reconciliation. Atreus reveals the ingredients for the feast and brags that murdering Thyestes' sons serves as his vengeance upon his brother. Thyestes prays to the gods and asks why Atreus has a cause to hate his sons so much. Atreus hates his three nephews because they are his brother's children. As Thyestes laments, Atreus mockingly claims that Thyestes laments not that he ate the meal but that he did not prepare the same feast for Atreus of Atreus' children. Thyestes will trust the gods to punish Atreus.

## Thyestes Analysis

The background information to this play provides information about similar works that have been completed. A fragment of "Thyestes" by Sophocles has survived the centuries. However, Seneca is primarily indebted to L. Varius Rufus whose "Thyestes" was performed in 29BC to celebrate the victory of Actium. The background information provides basic information about the past that allows the reader to become familiar with



how Thyestes and Atreus find themselves in the predicament they are in. This background information is not provided in the actual play because audiences of the time would have been familiar with this mythological tale.

In the first act, the appearance of Tantalus' ghost combined with the Fury's commands foreshadows the horrible deeds that will occur in the House of Pelops. Although Tantalus objects at first, he cannot resist the Fury's command. The use of Tantalus to unloose chaos upon the House of Pelops, along with the Fury's statement that he has devised a meal so strange that it will repel even Tantalus, suggests that Atreus' crime against Thyestes will be similar to what Tantalus did to Pelops: serving his corpse as food. Tantalus yields to the Fury's demands, foreshadowing the strange events to come. The chorus' lamentations are a repetitive act throughout this play.

In the second act, Atreus reveals his plot to lure Thyestes to Argos, foreshadowing the next act. He also discusses his plot for vengeance upon Thyestes, revealing that his plan is in alignment with the foreshadowing from the first act. Again, the chorus laments. In the third act, Thyestes' misgivings about the reconciliation with Thyestes clarify their fraternal relationship. Thyestes disregards his suggestion that Atreus has softened toward his brother. Thyestes' claim that no kingdom can be ruled by two kings is reminiscent of the Biblical adage: no man can serve two masters. Thyestes apologizes to Atreus for his crimes against his brother; this seems to suggest that Thyestes truly regrets his past actions. This is especially true in consideration of the fact that Atreus must insist that Thyestes accept half of the crown. Atreus departs with his nephews, foreshadowing their murders. Again, the chorus closes the act.

The fourth act fulfills the earlier foreshadowing concerning Atreus murdering his nephews and serving them to Thyestes as dinner. The fact that Atreus does not spare even the youngest child shows his ruthlessness and hate for his brother. In act five, Atreus rejoices in his triumph, demonstrating his cold-heartedness toward Thyestes. Although Thyestes is happy in his reconciliation with Atreus, grief plagues him. This parallels his earlier misgivings about the reconciliation and suggests that Thyestes may have a prophetic nature of sorts. Atreus' promise that Thyestes will see his sons' faces very soon foreshadows Atreus revealing the heads of Thyestes' sons. Atreus does not hate his nephews for their own sake but because they belong to Thyestes; this makes his offense much greater since he slaughters three young men who have done nothing to him in order to injure their father. Atreus' claim that Thyestes laments not that he ate the meal but that he did not prepare the same feast for Atreus of Atreus' children demonstrates the enmity between the brothers and perhaps suggests a valid point. Thyestes' demonstrates his piety in trusting the gods to punish Atreus.



# Phaedra

## Phaedra Summary

In the background information of "Phaedra," Theseus marries Antiope, also known as Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. They have one son, Hippolytus. Theseus murders Antiope and marries Phaedra. During Theseus' expedition to the underworld, Phaedra becomes enamored with her stepson and tries to seduce him. In the preface, Hippolytus distributes the responsibilities of the hunt to his people, telling them where to go and invoking the relief of Diana, goddess of the hunt. In the first act, Phaedra admits to Hippolytus' nurse that she is consumed by love for Hippolytus. Hippolytus' nurse tries to dissuade Phaedra from acting on these feelings, but it is in vain for Phaedra refuses to yield to the nurse's good advice. The chorus sings about how every living thing, men, gods and animals, eventually yields to the pleasures of love.

In the second act, Phaedra's nurse complains about Phaedra's passion and the consequences of her planned actions. Phaedra approaches in hunting garb for Hippolytus' benefit. Phaedra's nurse tries to persuade Hippolytus to consent to the pleasures of love and civilized society for her mistress; however, Hippolytus cannot be persuaded. He prefers the country and hunting to interactions with other people and civilization. Hippolytus is repulsed when he learns of Phaedra's intentions. When Phaedra and her nurse are unable to convince Hippolytus to yield to their desires regardless of the tactics used, they angrily slander his name instead. The chorus prays that Hippolytus will find his beauty to be useful even though many find it to harm them. Theseus returns from Hades.

In the third act, Theseus encounters Phaedra's nurse dressed in mourning. When he asks the cause for mourning in his household, she will only tell him that Phaedra has determined to die. Theseus visits Phaedra who claims that she would rather die than tell him about the evil that someone has done to him. Theseus threatens Phaedra's nurse to learn the truth, and the nurse shows him Hippolytus' sword which Theseus recognizes at once. Phaedra and her nurse leave Theseus alone. Theseus, in a fit of rage, prays for his son's death. The chorus laments that mankind is not governed by justice; the evil are rewarded while the good are punished.

In the fourth act, a messenger tells Theseus that Hippolytus is dead. When Theseus requests details, he learns that Hippolytus' horses pulled him apart when one of Neptune's sea bulls attacked them. Theseus laments the response to his prayer and the death of his son even as he feels that Hippolytus deserves it. The chorus complains of fortune being fickle and laments Hippolytus' death.

In the fifth act, Phaedra mourns Hippolytus' death. When Theseus asks her why she mourns for someone she hates, Phaedra admits her deception and Hippolytus' innocence before committing suicide. Theseus laments his son's death and provides an





extravagant burial for his innocent son while refusing even a proper burial for his deceptive wife.

## Phaedra Analysis

The background information tells that other versions of "Phaedra" have been written by Plutarch, Ovid and Euripides. It also provides background on how Theseus has a son that is not also his wife's son, as well as where Theseus is at the beginning of the play. The preface shows Hippolytus' affinity for hunting and nature, as well as his reverence to the gods. In the first act, Phaedra admits her passion for Hippolytus which foreshadows her attempts to seduce him. The inability of Hippolytus' nurse to dissuade Phaedra shows that Phaedra is stubborn and will not yield to common sense or propriety.

In the second act, Phaedra's nurse's complaints show that she does not agree with her mistress, but her actions show her loyalty. Phaedra appears in hunting garb, showing that her actions are well thought out in advance and she truly plans to seduce her stepson. Hippolytus declares his preference for nature, reinforcing the scene of the preface. He also shows his honor and loyalty to his father by refusing Phaedra's advances. Unfortunately, this injures Phaedra's pride which can be seen when she slanders the young man. Theseus' return, combined with the chorus' mention of the trouble that beauty causes, foreshadows trouble for Hippolytus.

In the third act, Phaedra demonstrates her cunning and deception as she prepares a scene to inspire rage from Theseus against his son. Once again, her actions show that she has plotted in advance. Theseus prays for Hippolytus' death, foreshadowing the granting of his prayer. In the fourth act, this foreshadowing is fulfilled as a messenger reveals the death of Hippolytus. The cause of his death makes it apparent that this was in response to Theseus' prayer, rather than a mere coincidence. Even as Theseus believes that his son deserves his punishment, he laments the death of Hippolytus, showing his paternal affection. Phaedra's lamentations and the confession of her guilt prove her love for Hippolytus and redeem the character from being seen as purely evil. In an honorable act, Phaedra commits suicide. Theseus punishes Phaedra's sins by refusing her proper burial while he tries to reconcile with his son by awarding him the burial he deserves.



# Troades

## Troades Summary

In the background of "Troades," or "The Trojan Women," it is noted that Troy has fallen. Only two acts of the Greeks' vengeance remains incomplete. They must destroy Hector's son, Astyanax, who is the last heir of Troy, and sacrifice Polyxena, Priam's daughter, to Achilles' tomb. Two prominent women play a major role in this play, Hecuba, Priam's widow, and Andromache, Hector's widow.

In the first act, Hecuba laments the fall and raiding of Troy. She complains that her prophesies, like those of Cassandra, were ignored. She mourns Priam, king of Troy and her husband. All of the Trojan widows have been claimed by the Greek conquerors, except for Hecuba. Hecuba urges the chorus of Trojan women to weep for Troy, and the chorus laments. She urges them to weep for Hector; they comply though nothing is sufficient to express the extent of their grief at Hector's death. Hecuba mourns for Hector as her son and claims that Troy died on the same day that Hector was killed. Hecuba commands the chorus to weep for Priam. When the chorus weeps for Priam, Hecuba insists that they must not pity Priam because he is happy. The chorus agrees, claiming that any man who dies in battle is happy with his fate.

In the second act, Talthybius, a Greek herald, complains about the delay in the Greeks departing from Troy. When the chorus asks the cause, Talthybius explains that a prophet saw the earth split in half and the sea stands still in grief for Achilles. Polyxena must be sacrificed to Achilles in order for the Greeks to ensure a safe journey. Pyrrhus, Achilles' son, chides Agamemnon for forgetting Achilles' sacrifice when Achilles gave up his tranquility to fight and win the Trojan War. Pyrrhus praises Achilles' deeds, remaining Agamemnon that he once sacrificed his own daughter for Helen's sake yet refuses to sacrifice Priam's daughter for Achilles' sake. Agamemnon complains that young men, such as Pyrrhus, are inspired by the zeal of youth. Although Agamemnon wanted to see Phrygia conquered and punished, he would spare her ruin if possible and refuses to murder a Trojan princess. Pyrrhus exclaims against Agamemnon's refusal to give Achilles' soul its due. Agamemnon claims that Achilles' soul will have its due through the world's praise throughout the remainder of history.

Pyrrhus accuses Agamemnon of being proud and promises to find a more worthy gift for his father. Agamemnon complains that Achilles acted as a coward on the days that he refused to go to battle as the Greeks died on the battlefield. Pyrrhus rebuts that Hector was more frightened by Achilles' song than all of the other Greeks' armor. Pyrrhus questions Agamemnon about his claim that it is a crime to sacrifice a maiden; Agamemnon claims that shame forbids it. Pyrrhus praises Achilles as Agamemnon mocks the hero and threatens to silence Pyrrhus' insolence. The prophet, Calchas enters, and Agamemnon asks Calchas to share his wisdom. Calchas claims that a young girl must be sacrificed to Achilles and Hector's son must fall to his death from the top of Troy in order for the Greeks to safely return to Greece. The chorus laments.



In the third act, Andromache tells the women of Troy that weeping is not enough; Andromache saw Troy fall when Hector was killed. Hope is gone, and worse will come. Hector visits Andromache in a dream and warns her that the Greeks plan to kill Astyanax. Andromache worries about where to hide her son because any place may be betrayed. An elder suggests telling the Greeks that Astyanax was killed in the fall of Troy. After Andromache hides Astyanax in Hector's tomb, the elder warns her that Ulysses is coming. Ulysses approaches Andromache and demands Astyanax in order to complete the truce with the Trojans. The Greeks worry that the boy will be as fierce as his father. Andromache claims that she does not know where her son is and suggests that perhaps he died in the fall of Troy. Disbelieving Andromache, Ulysses threatens the woman, causing her to claim that Astyanax is dead and entombed. Ulysses has no proof of this for the Greeks and decides that he must be artful with Andromache. He details the plans for Astyanax's death, and Andromache's fear for her son's fate increases his belief that Astyanax is still alive. Andromache claims that her fear results solely from habit. Ulysses relents, insisting that since the Greeks are cheated of Astyanax's death, they must tear down Hector's tomb and spread the ashes across the sea. Andromache objects because the Trojans ransomed Hector's tomb, and she appeals to Pyrrhus to save his father's gift, claiming that to destroy Hector's tomb would be the Greeks' worst sacrilege yet.

Ulysses commands his soldiers to remove Andromache from her position guarding Hector's tomb. Andromache refuses to allow Astyanax to be killed amongst his father's remains and Hector's remains to be desecrated. She admits that Astyanax is still alive and summons her son to her. Andromache bids Astyanax to kneel before Ulysses as she pleads for mercy. Ulysses cannot grant her the mercy of allowing Astyanax to live because Calchas demands the boy's death. Andromache calls Ulysses a coward, but Ulysses has not time for words because the ships are ready to sail. Andromache asks to say goodbye to her son, and Ulysses allows her a few moments. Andromache praises her son as Ulysses tells her that it is time to check her grief. Astyanax cries to his mother for protection, but she admits that she can no longer protect Astyanax. As Andromache laments and the chorus mourns, Ulysses commands his troops to take Astyanax away.

In the fourth act, Helen laments the grief that she has caused the Trojans as well as the part she must play to lure Polyxena to her death with the false promise of a marriage to Pyrrhus. Helen tells Polyxena to prepare for her wedding. Andromache blames Helen for the fall of Troy and commands the chorus to sing a mourning song for Pyrrhus' wedding. Helen claims that her grief is worse since she is hated by the captive and the captor. Andromache tells Helen that the Trojans are prepared to suffer death but a marriage to a Greek is the worst possible insult. Helen admits that Polyxena is to serve as a sacrifice to Achilles. As Polyxena prepares for death, Andromache praises her sister-in-law's bravery. Hecuba laments her daughter's pending death and complains that Achilles still plagues the Trojans from beyond the grave. Andromache is jealous that Polyxena will rest beneath their native soil and claims that they should mourn more for the survivors who will be taken away from Troy. Helen informs the Trojan women that the lots have been drawn to determine which Greeks will obtain which Trojan slaves. The prince of Scyros draws Andromache, and Ulysses draws Hecuba against his will.



Hecuba laments falling to Ulysses' lot as Achilles' spoils did, claiming that this is the last and greatest of her indignities. Hecuba predicts no peace for Ulysses. Pyrrhus approaches, and Hecuba condemns and mocks him. The chorus sings about sorrow finding comfort in companionship.

In the fifth act, a messenger visits the Trojan women and tells them how Astyanax and Polyxena suffer their deaths bravely. Andromache and Hecuba want to hear all of the details. Astyanax is taken to the tower of Troy where his bravery and defiance cause all of the Greeks, even Ulysses, to cry tears of pity. As Ulysses appeals to the gods to accept the sacrifice, Astyanax jumps from the tower. Andromache mourns the death of her son and wonders who will bury the body. The messenger tells her that there is no body left after being mangled by the fall. The Greeks then turn to Achilles' tomb and the second outrage against the Trojans. Helen attends Polyxena in grief as Polyxena is led to her wedding. The Greeks mock Helen even as they admire Polyxena's beauty and courage. Polyxena defiantly faces Pyrrhus as he wields a sword. Even Pyrrhus hesitates in the face of Polyxena's bravery and beauty, but he stabs her, giving her a quick death. With her last breath, Polyxena flings herself to the ground as though attacking Achilles' tomb. Achilles' tomb soaks up all of Polyxena's blood. Outraged, Hecuba bids the Greeks to hurry home since they now have nothing left to fear since they killed a young child and an innocent girl. Hecuba mourns for her daughter and grandson. She prays for death and laments that it has not come. As Hecuba exits, the messenger tells the prisoners that they must hurry to the sea for it is time to depart.

## Troades Analysis

The background information to this play provides information about similar works that have been completed. Seneca's "Troades" is derived from a combination of Euripides' "Hecuba" and "The Trojan Women." The background information only notes that Troy has fallen without providing details because knowledge of the Trojan War is assumed since it is such a popular tale. The two remaining acts of Greek vengeance foreshadows Astyanax and Polyxena's deaths. Hecuba and Andromache are revealed to be the most important Trojans still alive. In the first act, Hecuba alludes to Cassandra's prophecies being ignored when she complained about the fact that her own were treated likewise. The surviving Trojans mourn their city, their king and their hero. The idea that Priam and any other man who dies in battle is happy with his fate is a tradition that reflects the time period and the violent nature of their society.

In the second act, Talthibius' complaint about the delay in sailing reflects the Greeks' desire to return to their homes in Greece. Talthibius explains that the reason that they cannot is because Polyxena must be sacrificed to Achilles and Astyanax must be killed as the last remaining heir of the Trojan dynasty. This foreshadows Astyanax and Polyxena's deaths. Pyrrhus is introduced in the second act as he defends his father's memory and demands that Agamemnon offer his respect to Achilles. Pyrrhus alludes to Agamemnon sacrificing his own daughter to ensure a safe journey to Troy, which contrasts with Agamemnon's refusal to sacrifice Polyxena to Achilles. Agamemnon's refusal initially seems to be kindness, but as he disrespects Achilles, it becomes



apparent that he simply means to dishonor the hero. Pyrrhus defends his father's memory against Agamemnon's accusations, causing Agamemnon to threaten Pyrrhus. Agamemnon relents to Polyxena's murder when Calchas prophesies its necessity.

Hector's importance and renown can be seen in act three when Andromache claims that Troy fell when Hector died. Hector visits Andromache in a dream to warn her about the harm the Greeks intend to do to Astyanax. This prophecy foreshadows Astyanax's death. Andromache shows her bravery and love for her son by trying to hide him from the Greeks. Ulysses distrusts Andromache's claim that Astyanax is dead and shows his cunning in his attempts to induce her to betray her lie. Andromache shows bravery in refusing to allow the Greeks to desecrate Hector's tomb, but she is then forced to make a decision. She summons Astyanax because he would die either way, but by giving him to the Greeks, she at least manages to spare Hector's remains. Andromache mocks Ulysses in an attempt to convince him to spare her son, but her actions are in vain as Ulysses will not relent. Andromache admits that she does not have power to save her son as Astyanax demonstrates his fear for the only time during the play.

In the fourth act, Helen shows her love for the Trojans when she laments the grief she has caused them. She also foreshadows her betrayal as she laments that she must lure Polyxena to her death. Helen defends herself against Andromache by claiming that she is doubly cursed since the Greeks and Trojans hate her; this is because she is the cause of the war. Polyxena displays bravery in her preparations for her death. Andromache's love for Troy is apparent in her jealousy of Polyxena being buried at Troy. Andromache laments more for herself since she will be forced from her home and die in a strange land. Hecuba disdains Ulysses and falling to his lot because Ulysses obtained Achilles' spoils and it seems that Hecuba is being included in Achilles' spoils as Hector's mother. Hecuba's prediction that Ulysses will not find peace foreshadows his ten year venture on his return to Greece.

In the fifth act, a messenger relates the deaths of Polyxena and Astyanax. This fulfills the earlier foreshadowing. It also shows the two youths' bravery which makes the remaining Trojans very proud of Polyxena and Astyanax. Astyanax displays bravery by jumping from the tower rather than waiting to be pushed to his death. Polyxena bravely faces Pyrrhus' sword. The respect for bravery in this time period is seen by the Greeks' tears and awe in the face of these tragedies, despite the fact that the Trojans are their enemies. Pyrrhus demonstrates mercy by killing Polyxena quickly. The truth of the prophecy concerning Achilles and Polyxena is demonstrated by the fact that Achilles' grave soaks up Polyxena's blood. The messenger announces that it is time for the prisoners to leave after Hecuba walks away, suggesting that Hecuba will stay at Troy.



# Oedipus

## Oedipus Summary

The background information tells how Oedipus arrives in Thebes to learn that King Laius has just been murdered. He answers the riddle of the Sphinx, destroys the Sphinx and marries Jocasta, the widowed queen. Years later, Thebes is plagued by pestilence, and in trying to free the city of this plague, Oedipus learns about his past and his fate.

In the first act, the play begins with Oedipus worrying about the pestilence plaguing his city. More people have died than are left living. Oedipus mentions the reason that he leaves Corinth and flees to Thebes years previously. He hears a prophecy from one of Apollo's priests that he will kill his father and marry his mother. His worry about fulfilling the prophecy causes Oedipus to flee Corinth, King Polybus' kingdom. The plague in Thebes bothers Oedipus so much that he considers returning to Corinth, but Jocasta dissuades him. Oedipus stays in Thebes and sends Creon to the Oracle of Delphi to determine how to end the plague.

In the second act, Creon returns from his quest to the Oracle of Delphi where he has learned that the plague will be lifted when Thebes avenges the murder of King Laius. Oedipus curses the unknown murderer and wishes his prophecy upon the murderer. Oedipus summons the prophet Tiresias and asks him to clarify the Oracle of Delphi's prophecy. After Tiresias' initial attempt proves ineffective, he suggests summoning King Laius from the grave to reveal the murderer's name.

In the third act, Creon visits Tiresias after Tiresias speaks to King Laius' ghost. When Creon returns to Oedipus, he is hesitant to tell Oedipus what the ghost said, but he relents when Oedipus threatens him. The ghost of King Laius claims that Oedipus has blood on his hand and has defiled his father's marriage bed. The ghost reveals that the plague will be stopped only when King Oedipus leaves Thebes. Creon suggests that Oedipus renounce his throne, but Oedipus refuses. Oedipus believes that Creon and Tiresias have conspired against him to gain his throne, and Oedipus imprisons Creon.

In the fourth act, Oedipus recalls an arrogant man that he killed on his way to Thebes, and this memory bothers his conscience. A Corinthian messenger arrives with the news that King Polybus has died and summons Oedipus to take his throne. Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth because, though his father is now dead, he still fears fulfilling the second half of the prophecy by marrying his mother. These fears are assuaged and new ones implanted when Oedipus learns that the Corinthian king and queen adopted him. The messenger received the infant Oedipus from an old shepherd from Thebes. Oedipus visits and threatens the shepherd who finally admits that the baby he gave to the old man is Jocasta's son.

In the fifth act, a messenger reveals that Oedipus scorns killing himself because he feels that death is not a sufficient punishment for his crimes and for the plague he has



brought against Thebes by his unwitting actions. Oedipus chooses a slow death which will not allow him to "join the number of the dead nor dwell among the living." Oedipus tears out his eyes using only his own hands as his punishment. The chorus sings, questioning the justice of fate, as Oedipus enters without his eyes. Jocasta confronts Oedipus and learns the truth of their relationship. She decides to punish herself as well and, taking his sword, kills herself.

## Oedipus Analysis

The background information tells that Seneca's play mimics Sophocles' "Oedipus Tyrannus." The information in the background about King Laius' murder foreshadows the revelation that Oedipus is the murderer. Oedipus' arrival in Thebes is explained, and the conflict is introduced by the description of the plague in Thebes. In the first act, Apollo's prophecy is first mentioned which foreshadows the fulfillment of the prophecy in the form of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother. Ironically, this prophecy has already been fulfilled; Oedipus just has not yet realized his actions. The fact that Jocasta dissuades Oedipus from leaving Thebes and returning to Corinth proves her love for her husband. Oedipus sending Creon to the Oracle of Delphi shows the trust that he imposes in Creon. The allusion to the Oracle of Delphi is a common allusion in ancient Greek literature as it was very well known.

The second act contains Oedipus' ironic curse upon the murderer of King Laius. The fact that he wishes Apollo's prophecy upon the murderer is ironic since Oedipus is the murderer and has already fulfilled the prophecy which is the cause of the plague. The reference to Tiresias is common in Greek literature as Tiresias is a very popular prophet in Greek mythology. Creon's hesitance to tell Oedipus what King Laius' ghost says foreshadows that Oedipus will respond poorly. This is fulfilled when Oedipus distrusts Creon's revelation and has Creon imprisoned. The ghost's claim that Oedipus has blood on his hands and has defiled his marriage bed further foreshadows the revelation that Apollo's prophecy has already been fulfilled through Oedipus' unwitting actions.

Oedipus' recollections of killing an arrogant man on his way to Thebes foreshadows the revelation that the man was King Laius, Oedipus' father. The fact that King Polybus dies without Oedipus' interference is not a fulfillment of the prophecy which foreshadows the discovery that King Polybus is not Oedipus' biological father. The messenger reveals that Oedipus was adopted by the Corinthian king and queen, and the shepherd reveals that the baby he gave to the messenger was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta; this revelation fulfills the foreshadowing that appears throughout the play regarding Oedipus' fulfillment of Apollo's prophecy. Oedipus feels guilty about the plague he has caused upon Thebes and punishes himself by removing his eyes with his hands. Jocasta punishes herself by committing suicide. These punishments raise the question of whether punishment is justice when the crime is committed without knowledge of the offense.



# Octavia

## Octavia Summary

In the background information, the reader learns that this play takes place over two days in Rome in the year 62AD as Nero condemns Octavia to exile and death after marrying his mistress, Poppaea. There is a large amount of retrospection in the play concerning Octavia and Nero's pasts. Seneca has been recalled from exile to serve as a tutor to Nero and now acts as one of Nero's principal advisers.

The play opens with Octavia mourning her sorrows. She laments her vile stepmother's plot against her father, Claudius. In another room, Octavia's nurse praises Claudius' deeds, mourns the murder of Britannicus and worries about Octavia's fate. When the nurse hears Octavia's lament, she joins Octavia and comforts her as Octavia expresses her desire for death. Octavia is miserable; she hates her husband, Nero, and rails against his crimes toward her family. She complains that he parades his mistress around, finely arrayed. Octavia believes that her hated rival plots against her and wants her dead. Octavia's nurse complains about Nero's crimes as well. Octavia claims "Let him kill me or I will kill him!" Her nurse advises her to win Nero over with kindness, but Octavia insists that Poppaea will soon be Nero's wife and Nero will order Octavia's death. Regardless, Octavia can never forgive Nero for killing Claudius and Britannicus. Octavia blames her mother's second marriage for her angering the gods and causes her misfortunes, but the nurse remains Octavia that her mother has paid dearly for her mistakes. The chorus sings about Nero's plot to get rid of Octavia and marry Poppaea, as well as his murder of his mother, Agrippina.

Seneca complains to Fate about removing him from the happiness of exile to misery in his high station under an impious emperor. Nero approaches and commands his prefect to bring him the heads of Plautus and Sulla. Seneca counsels Nero to clemency, but Nero objects to clemency in matters of conspiracy against his life. He claims that his wife is also an enemy and must die. Seneca and Nero debate the benefits of peace and clemency. Nero alludes to Julius Caesar's triumvirate and Brutus' betrayal. Nero distrusts Octavia because her mother was an adulteress. He claims that he has been deceived in the extent of Octavia's hatred for him. Nero loves Poppaea and will marry her. Seneca cautions Nero against being ruled by love; his subjects will be upset if Nero kills Octavia and marries Poppaea. Nero refuses to yield to his subjects' desires as Seneca tries in vain to dissuade Nero from his treacherous intentions.

The ghost of Agrippina complains about Nero's treachery in killing her and objects to Nero marrying Poppaea. She foresees Nero being punished for his crimes eventually. On the wedding day of Nero and Poppaea, Octavia tells the chorus not to weep because she is happy to escape the degradation of her marriage bed. Poppaea's nurse asks why Poppaea why she is so upset since she should be happy that she is finally married to Nero. Poppaea dreamed the previous night of seeing her first marriage bed with Crispinus as Nero killed Crispinus. She worries what punishment the dead spirits





have prepared for her. Poppaea's nurse comforts Poppaea who plans to pray to the gods to avert such a menace from her. The chorus sings about the clandestine loves of Jove as a messenger arrives with news of the insurrection at the city gates with the goal of regaining Octavia's rightful place as Nero's wife. The mob demolishes all of the statues of Poppaea. The chorus objects to the violence since it will not prevent Nero from loving Poppaea.

Nero enters and blames his kindness to his subjects for the rebellion. He mentions his plan to kill Octavia. The prefect enters and announces that the mob has been stopped and the ringleaders killed. Nero plans to punish everyone involved, beginning with Octavia. The prefect questions Octavia's guilt, and Nero blames Octavia for the uprising. Nero orders Octavia to be taken to a distant shore and executed. The chorus mourns Octavia's fate. Octavia is arrested and wonders where she will be sent. The chorus sings that fate rules all men and that time is an enemy. The chorus sings about murdered wives. Octavia hopes for a quick death as she prays to the gods of hell since the other gods hate her. She asks the ships to hurry and take her away. The chorus laments Octavia's undeserving fate.

## Octavia Analysis

The introduction to "Octavia" provides part of the background between Nero and Octavia, including his cruelty in executing her father and brother. Seneca is introduced as Nero's advisor, making it apparent that he will act as a character in the play. The play opens with two separate monologues by Octavia and her nurse, and then the two women join to have a discussion about Nero's cruelty. Octavia's comments demonstrate her hatred for Nero and provides the reasons for it. Her suspicion that he will marry Poppaea and murder her foreshadows these events. The fact that she is Claudius' daughter reveals that she is the rightful heir and provides the reason for the subjects' loyalty.

Nero's character is shown by Octavia and the nurse's complaints against him, but it is furthered by his conversation with Seneca in which he seems to disdain clemency. Nero mentions his plot which foreshadows Octavia's death. Seneca's urgings for peace are in vain as Nero refuses to heed the philosopher's warnings. Nero's marriage to Poppaea fulfills the earlier foreshadowing and further foreshadows Octavia's death. Agrippina's appearance adds a supernatural element to the play and also foreshadows Nero's eventual destruction, though it is not seen in this play. The fact that the Roman subjects rebel against Nero's marriage to Poppaea and displacement of Octavia show their loyalty to the rightful heir to the empire. Nero's order for Octavia's death fulfills the earlier foreshadowing, and Octavia is happy to die since it is her only means of escaping from Nero.



# Characters

## Oedipus in Oedipus

Oedipus is the king of Thebes. He arrives in Thebes to learn that King Laius has just been murdered. He answers the riddle of the Sphinx, destroys the Sphinx and marries Jocasta, the widowed queen. Years later, Thebes is plagued by pestilence, and in trying to free the city of this plague, Oedipus learns about his past and his fate. Oedipus worries about the pestilence plaguing his city. Oedipus mentions the reason that he leaves Corinth and flees to Thebes years previously. He hears a prophecy from one of Apollo's priests that he will kill his father and marry his mother. His worry about fulfilling the prophecy causes Oedipus to flee Corinth, King Polybus' kingdom. The plague in Thebes bothers Oedipus so much that he considers returning to Corinth, but Jocasta dissuades him. Oedipus stays in Thebes and sends Creon to the Oracle of Delphi to determine how to end the plague.

When Creon reports that the plague will be lifted when Thebes avenges the murder of King Laius, Oedipus curses the unknown murderer and wishes his prophecy upon the murderer. Oedipus summons the prophet Tiresias and asks him to clarify the Oracle of Delphi's prophecy. When Creon returns to Oedipus, he tells the king how the ghost of King Laius claims that Oedipus has blood on his hand and has defiled his father's marriage bed. The ghost reveals that the plague will be stopped only when King Oedipus leaves Thebes. Creon suggests that Oedipus renounce his throne, but Oedipus refuses. Oedipus believes that Creon and Tiresias have conspired against him to gain his throne, and Oedipus imprisons Creon.

Oedipus recalls an arrogant man that he killed on his way to Thebes, and this memory bothers his conscience. A Corinthian messenger arrives with the news that King Polybus has died and summons Oedipus to take his throne. Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth because, though his father is now dead, he still fears fulfilling the second half of the prophecy by marrying his mother. These fears are assuaged and new ones implanted when Oedipus learns that the Corinthian king and queen adopted him. The messenger received the infant Oedipus from an old shepherd from Thebes. Oedipus visits and threatens the shepherd who finally admits that the baby he gave to the old man is Jocasta's son. Oedipus scorns killing himself because he feels that death is not a sufficient punishment for his crimes and for the plague he has brought against Thebes by his unwitting actions. Oedipus chooses a slow death which will not allow him to "join the number of the dead nor dwell among the living." Oedipus tears out his eyes using only his own hands as his punishment.

## Phaedra in Oedipus

Phaedra is the second wife of Theseus, king of Athens. During Theseus' expedition to the underworld, Phaedra becomes enamored with her stepson, Hippolytus, and tries to



seduce him. Phaedra admits to Hippolytus' nurse that she is consumed by love for Hippolytus. Hippolytus' nurse tries to dissuade Phaedra from acting on these feelings, but it is in vain for Phaedra refuses to yield to the nurse's good advice. Phaedra approaches in hunting garb for Hippolytus' benefit. Phaedra and her nurse try to persuade Hippolytus to consent to the pleasures of love and civilized society for her mistress; however, Hippolytus cannot be persuaded. Hippolytus is repulsed when he learns of Phaedra's intentions. When Phaedra and her nurse are unable to convince Hippolytus to yield to their desires regardless of the tactics used, they angrily slander his name instead.

Phaedra receives Theseus, dressed in mourning. When he asks the cause for mourning in his household, her nurse will only tell him that Phaedra has determined to die. Theseus visits Phaedra who claims that she would rather die than tell him about the evil that someone has done to him. Theseus threatens Phaedra's nurse to learn the truth, and the nurse shows him Hippolytus' sword which Theseus recognizes at once. Phaedra and her nurse leave Theseus alone. After Hippolytus' death, Phaedra mourns and admits her deception and Hippolytus' innocence before committing suicide. Theseus refuses to allow a proper burial for his deceptive wife.

## **Thyestes in Thyestes**

Thyestes is one of Pelops' sons and Atreus' brother. He is banished by Atreus for his crimes against his brother. Although he distrusts Atreus' offer to rule jointly, Thyestes returns to Argos with his sons. Unwittingly, Thyestes eats his sons' corpses. When he learns of Atreus' deceptive attack, Thyestes is enraged and laments his sons.

## **Ghost of Tantalus in Thyestes**

Tantalus kills his son, Pelops, and serves him as food to the gods. Fury summons the ghost of Tantalus to cast his madness on the House of Pelops. The ghost of Tantalus mourns the crimes of his heirs but is unable to resist the Fury's mandate.

## **Atreus in Thyestes**

Atreus is one of Pelops' sons. He feuds with his brother, Thyestes, over the crown to his father's kingdom. Atreus banishes his brother before the play begins, but he recalls Thyestes to enact his vengeance under the false promise to rule jointly. He slaughters Thyestes' sons and serves them to Thyestes as a banquet.

## **Fury in Thyestes**

The Fury summons the ghost of Tantalus to cast his madness on the House of Pelops.



## Young Tantalus in Thyestes

Young Tantalus is one of Thyestes' three sons. He returns to Argos from banishment with his father only to be killed by his uncle, Atreus, and served as dinner to Thyestes.

## Plisthenes in Thyestes

Plisthenes is one of Thyestes' three sons. He returns to Argos from banishment with his father only to be killed by his uncle, Atreus, and served as dinner to Thyestes.

## Theseus in Phaedra

Theseus is the king of Athens. He first marries Antiope and has one son, Hippolytus. He then kills Antiope and marries Phaedra. At the beginning of the play, Theseus is on an expedition to Hades to help his friend, Peirithous, abduct Persephone. He returns to Athens and Phaedra's claims that Hippolytus attempted to seduce her. Theseus prays for his sons death, but when he hears that Hippolytus is dead, he mourns for his son. After learning of Phaedra's lie, Theseus gives Hippolytus a proper burial but refuses the same for Phaedra.

## Hippolytus in Phaedra

Hippolytus is the son of Theseus and Antiope, as well as Phaedra's stepson. He enjoys hunting and nature. He distributes the responsibilities of the hunt to his people and invokes the relief of Diana, goddess of the hunt. Hippolytus refuses Phaedra's lustful advances, angering his stepmother and causing her to lie to his father. Hippolytus dies by being pulled to pieces by his own horses which are terrified by a sea bull that Neptune sends in answer to Theseus' prayer. Hippolytus receives a proper burial after Theseus learns of Phaedra's deception.

## Hecuba in Troades

Hecuba is King Priam's widow and the mother of Paris, Hector and Polyxena. She mourns the fall of Troy, Priam and Hector. Hecuba's lot falls to being Ulysses' captive, a fate she feels is worse than death. She prays for Ulysses' return to Greece to be plagued.

## Andromache in Troades

Andromache is Hector's widow and Astyanax's mother. She tries in vain to hide Astyanax from the Greeks after being warned by Hector in a dream of the Greeks' intent to kill her son. Andromache is very brave when she confronts Ulysses but ultimately



summons her son to prevent the death of Astyanax and the desecration of Hector's remains. She distrusts Helen's announcement that Polyxena is to marry Pyrrhus.

## **Astyanax in Troades**

Astyanax is the son of Hector and Andromache. The Greeks must throw him from the top of Troy as a sacrifice to the gods in order to gain safe passage on their return to Greece. At Andromache's instruction, Astyanax hides in Hector's tomb, but eventually, he must surrender to Ulysses. Astyanax faces death bravely and defiantly, jumping from the tower of Troy rather than waiting to be thrown.

## **Helen in Troades**

Helen is sent to lure Polyxena to her death under the false pretense of a marriage to Pyrrhus. She admits her deception upon Andromache's accusation. The Greeks and the Trojans hate Helen since she is the cause of the Trojan War and the loss of many lives. She fears her trial when she returns to Greece. Helen serves as Polyxena's maiden-in-waiting for her fake marriage to Pyrrhus, and the Greeks heckle Helen as she passes.

## **Polyxena in Troades**

Polyxena is the daughter of King Priam and Hecuba. She is to be sacrificed to Achilles under the pretense of a marriage to Pyrrhus. Polyxena prepares for and meets death bravely and defiantly. The Greeks praise her beauty and bravery as she meets Pyrrhus. With her last breath, Polyxena throws herself upon the ground as though attacking Achilles' tomb which soaks up all of her blood.

## **Agamemnon in Troades**

Agamemnon is the commander of the Greeks. He refuses to kill Polyxena to appease Achilles despite the fact that he killed his own daughter to ensure the Greeks' safe passage to Troy. Agamemnon mocks Achilles' courage and prowess to Pyrrhus.

## **Pyrrhus in Troades**

Pyrrhus is Achilles' son who argues with Agamemnon about the justice of sacrificing Polyxena. He honors his father's memory. Although he hesitates briefly in the face of Polyxena's bravery and beauty, Pyrrhus stabs Polyxena during his false marriage ceremony.



## **Ulysses in Troades**

Ulysses, a Greek, approaches Andromache in his search for Astyanax. He threatens to destroy Hector's tomb and spread the ashes over the sea when Andromache claims that Astyanax is already dead. Ulysses tricks Andromache into summoning Astyanax and takes the boy to the Greeks to be sacrificed. During the sacrifice of Astyanax, Ulysses prays to the gods to bless this sacrifice even as he sheds tears in the face of the boy's bravery and defiance.

## **Calchas in Troades**

Calchas is the prophet who tells the Greeks that Astyanax must be killed by being thrown from the tower of Troy to appease the gods to grant the Greeks a safe return journey to Greece. Likewise, Calchas tells the Greeks the Polyxena must be sacrificed to appease Achilles

## **Jocasta in Oedipus**

Jocasta is the widow of King Laius and Oedipus' mother. She marries Oedipus without knowing his identity since King Laius had ordered the infant's death due to Apollo's prophecy. Jocasta dissuades Oedipus from fleeing Thebes because of the plague, and she kills herself after learning that Oedipus is her son.

## **Creon in Oedipus**

Creon is Jocasta's brother and Oedipus' chief aid in Thebes. He journeys to the Oracle of Delphi and returns Oedipus with the prophecy that Thebes must avenge the death of King Laius for the plague on Thebes to be lifted. Creon talks to Tiresias after the prophet talks to the ghost of King Laius. Oedipus does not believe what Creon relates and has him arrested.

## **Tiresias in Oedipus**

Tiresias is the blind prophet that Oedipus charges to translate the prophecy from the Oracle of Delphi and find the killer of King Laius.

## **Phorbas in Oedipus**

Phorbas is the old shepherd that King Laius charges to dispose of Oedipus as an infant. Instead, Phorbas gives him to the Old Man from Corinth. In the fourth act of the play, Phorbas reveals Oedipus' real parentage to him.



## **Old Man in Oedipus**

The Old Man is a Corinthian messenger who receives Oedipus as a baby from Phorbas and gives him to the king and queen of Corinth. He reveals to Oedipus that he was adopted.

## **Octavia in Octavia**

Octavia is the daughter of Claudius and the sister of Britannicus, both of whom her step-brother and husband, Nero, killed. She hates Nero and is happy that he plans to marry Poppaea, releasing her from her marriage bed. Octavia yearns for death and is happy when Nero sentences her to banishment and death.

## **Octavia's Nurse in Octavia**

Octavia's Nurse comforts Octavia even as she mourns the loss of Claudius and Britannicus.

## **Seneca in Octavia**

Seneca is recalled from exile to tutor Nero and serves Nero as an adviser, even though Nero does not heed the philosopher's advice. Seneca tries in vain to dissuade Nero from killing Octavia.

## **Nero in Octavia**

Nero is the emperor of Rome and Octavia's husband. He murdered Claudius, Britannicus and his mother, Agrippina. Nero wants to marry Poppaea and displace Octavia. He blames Octavia for the subjects' uprising due to his marriage to Poppaea and decides to have her killed, ignoring Seneca's advice.

## **Poppaea in Octavia**

Poppaea is Nero's mistress whom he marries, displacing Octavia. She is upset on her wedding night because she dreams about Nero murdering her first husband. Poppaea prays to the gods to avert such a punishment from her shoulders.



# Objects/Places

## Palace of Mycenae

In "Thyestes," the palace of Mycenae is the setting of the story. This is where Atreus plots against Thyestes.

## House of Pelops

In "Thyestes," the House of Pelops refers to the lineage of Tantalus. They are cursed because Tantalus served Pelops, his son, as food at a banquet for the gods.

## Argos

Argos in Greece is where Atreus rules as king and offers to share the throne with Thyestes in order to lure his brother home so that Atreus can complete his plot against him.

## Athens

In "Phaedra," Athens is Theseus' kingdom and the setting of the play's action. At the beginning of the play, Theseus is away from Athens on a quest to the underworld.

## Palace of Theseus

In "Phaedra," the palace of Theseus serves as the principal setting of the play. This is where Phaedra plots against Hippolytus and where the majority of the action occurs.

## Troy

Troy is the setting of "Troades." The story takes place after the Trojan War, once Troy has been destroyed and the Trojan women are Greek captives.

## Tomb of Hector

In "Troades," Andromache attempts to hide Astyanax from the Greeks in the tomb of Hector. Ulysses threatens to desecrate the tomb when Andromache tells him that Astyanax is already dead, causing Andromache to summon her son and hand him over to the Greeks.





## Greece

In "Troades," Greece is the land that the Trojan's captors are from. The Greeks want to return to their homes but are prevented by the need to appease the gods by killing Astyanax and to appease Achilles by the sacrifice of Polyxena.

## Achilles' Tomb

In "Troades," Achilles' tomb soaks up all of Polyxena's blood as a symbol of accepting the sacrifice of the Trojan princess.

## Thebes

In "Oedipus," Thebes is the city where Oedipus rules as king after fleeing Corinth because of Apollo's prophecy.

## Corinth

In "Oedipus," Corinth is the city where Oedipus is raised. He believes the king and queen of Corinth to be his parents.

## Sphinx

In "Oedipus," Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx, kills the Sphinx and saves the city, becoming the king of Thebes.

## Apollo's Prophecy

In "Oedipus," Apollo's priests prophesy that Oedipus will kill his father and marry his mother. This is foretold at his birth, causing King Laius to order the infant's death; however, a shepherd gives young Oedipus to the Old Man of Corinth, and the king and queen of Corinth adopt the baby boy. Oedipus hears the prophecy once he is an adult, causing him to flee Corinth only to fulfill the prophecy by killing King Laius on the road and marrying Jocasta.

## Plague on Thebes

In "Oedipus," a plague torments Thebes. Oedipus sends Creon to the oracle of Delphi who tells that the plague will be lifted only when the murderer of King Laius is brought to justice. Oedipus promises to fulfill this requirement. Tiresias summons King Laius' ghost who reveals that Oedipus murdered him. Oedipus disbelieves Creon when he tells Oedipus, but after many revelations, Oedipus realizes that King Laius was his



father and the old man that Oedipus killed on his escape from Corinth. Oedipus destroys his eyes to punish himself and lift the plague on Thebes.

## **Rome**

In "Octavia," Nero rules Rome which serves as the setting for the play.

## **Palace of Nero**

In "Octavia," the play's action takes place in the palace of Nero, located in Rome. This is where Nero plots against Octavia, Octavia mourns and Nero's subjects attack when Nero displaces Octavia by marrying Poppaea.



# Themes

## Prophecy and appeals to the gods

A theme that appears throughout all of these plays is that of prophecy and appeals to the gods. The House of Pelops is doomed from the time that Tantalus, a son of Zeus, serves Pelops, his son, as the meal at a banquet of the gods. The ghost of Tantalus mourns the current generation of his family's sins which makes their predecessors' sins appear small. These sins cause even Tantalus to look innocent. The Fury predicts horrible things to happen in the House of Pelops and wants to fill the house with the revenge of Tantalus. The fate of Thyestes' children will be to have their bodies boiled in pieces; the Fury has devised a meal so strange that even Tantalus will run from it. At the Fury's bidding, Tantalus' old hunger awakes, and Tantalus agrees to follow the Fury. The Fury commands Tantalus to cast his madness upon the house, and chaos settles in the House of Pelops. Thyestes' steps slow as he grows fearful of Atreus' offer of peace though he does not know why he is frightened. Thyestes will trust the gods to punish Atreus. In "Phaedra," the chorus prays that Hippolytus will find his beauty to be useful even though many find it to harm them. In a fit of rage after hearing Phaedra's accusations against Hippolytus, Theseus prays for his son's death. A messenger tells Theseus that Hippolytus is dead. When Theseus requests details, he learns that Hippolytus' horses pulled him apart when one of Neptune's sea bulls attacked them.

In "Troades," after Troy has fallen, only two acts of the Greeks' vengeance remains incomplete. They must destroy Hector's son, Astyanax, who is the last heir of Troy, and sacrifice Polyxena, Priam's daughter, to Achilles' tomb. Hecuba complains that her prophesies, like those of Cassandra, were ignored. Talthybius explains that a prophet saw the earth split in half and the sea stands still in grief for Achilles. Polyxena must be sacrificed to Achilles in order for the Greeks to ensure a safe journey. The prophet, Calchas claims that a young girl must be sacrificed to Achilles and Hector's son must fall to his death from the top of Troy in order for the Greeks to safely return to Greece. Hector visits Andromache in a dream and warns her that the Greeks plan to kill Astyanax. Hecuba predicts no peace for Ulysses in his return journey to Greece. Astyanax and Polyxena suffer their deaths bravely. Astyanax is taken to the tower of Troy where his bravery and defiance cause all of the Greeks, even Ulysses, to cry tears of pity. As Ulysses appeals to the gods to accept the sacrifice, Astyanax jumps from the tower. Helen attends Polyxena in grief as Polyxena is led to her wedding. Polyxena defiantly faces Pyrrhus as he wields a sword. Outraged, Hecuba bids the Greeks to hurry home since they now have nothing left to fear since they killed a young child and an innocent girl.

Oedipus hears a prophecy from one of Apollo's priests that he will kill his father and marry his mother. His worry about fulfilling the prophecy causes Oedipus to flee Corinth, King Polybus' kingdom. Creon learns from the Oracle of Delphi that the plague will be lifted when Thebes avenges the murder of King Laius. Oedipus curses the unknown murderer and wishes his prophecy upon the murderer. Oedipus summons the prophet



Tiresias and asks him to clarify the Oracle of Delphi's prophecy. After Tiresias' initial attempt proves ineffective, he suggests summoning King Laius from the grave to reveal the murderer's name. The ghost of King Laius claims that Oedipus has blood on his hand and has defiled his father's marriage bed. The ghost reveals that the plague will be stopped only when King Oedipus leaves Thebes. A Corinthian messenger arrives with the news that King Polybus has died and summons Oedipus to take his throne. Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth because, though his father is now dead, he still fears fulfilling the second half of the prophecy by marrying his mother. These fears are assuaged and new ones implanted when Oedipus learns that the Corinthian king and queen adopted him. The messenger received the infant Oedipus from an old shepherd from Thebes. Oedipus visits and threatens the shepherd who finally admits that the baby he gave to the old man is Jocasta's son.

Octavia believes that her hated rival plots against her and wants her dead. Octavia insists that Poppaea will soon be Nero's wife and Nero will order Octavia's death. Seneca complains to Fate about removing him from the happiness of exile to misery in his high station under an impious emperor. Seneca cautions Nero against being ruled by love; his subjects will be upset if Nero kills Octavia and marries Poppaea. Nero refuses to yield to his subjects' desires as Seneca tries in vain to dissuade Nero from his treacherous intentions. The ghost of Agrippina complains about Nero's treachery in killing her and objects to Nero marrying Poppaea. She foresees Nero being punished for his crimes eventually. Poppaea dreams on her wedding night of seeing her first marriage bed with Crispinus as Nero killed Crispinus. She worries what punishment the dead spirits have prepared for her. Nero orders Octavia to be taken to a distant shore and executed. Octavia hopes for a quick death as she prays to the gods of hell since the other gods hate her.

## Murdering Family

A recurring theme in this collection is that of murdering family. Tantalus, a son of Zeus, serves Pelops, his son, as the meal at a banquet of the gods. At the time the play begins, Atreus reigns as king and plots against Thyestes by the means of a false reconciliation. The ghost of Tantalus mourns the current generation of his family's sins which makes their predecessors' sins appear small. These sins cause even Tantalus to look innocent. At the Fury's bidding, Tantalus' old hunger awakes, and chaos settles in the House of Pelops. Atreus and his minister plot against Thyestes. Atreus plans a vengeance worse than death for Thyestes; he will make a father eat his own children. Atreus acts as a priest and slaughters his nephews upon an altar. Young Tantalus' throat is cut upon the altar first, and then Atreus beheads Plisthenes and drags his corpse onto the altar with his brother's body. Atreus does not spare Thyestes' youngest son but kills him as well and adds his body to the pile of corpses on the altar. Atreus cuts his nephews' bodies into pieces and prepares them as a feast for Thyestes. Thyestes asks to see his children, and Atreus presents the heads of Thyestes' sons. Atreus reveals the ingredients for the feast and brags that murdering Thyestes' sons serves as his vengeance upon his brother. Atreus mockingly claims that Thyestes laments not that he ate the meal but that he did not prepare the same feast for Atreus of Atreus' children.



In "Phaedra," Phaedra lies to Theseus, stating that Hippolytus tried to seduce her. This causes Theseus to pray to the gods for his son's death. Hippolytus' horses pull him apart when one of Neptune's sea bulls attacked them. Phaedra kills herself when she learns of Hippolytus' death. In "Troades," Andromache is forced to decide between yielding her son to be sacrificed by the Greeks or allowing him to die in the destruction of Hector's remains; she yields him to Ulysses. Helen laments the grief that she has caused the Trojans as well as the part she must play to lure Polyxena to her death with the false promise of a marriage to Pyrrhus. Oedipus hears a prophecy from one of Apollo's priests that he will kill his father and marry his mother. A Corinthian messenger arrives with the news that King Polybus has died and summons Oedipus to take his throne. Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth because, though his father is now dead, he still fears fulfilling the second half of the prophecy by marrying his mother. These fears are assuaged and new ones implanted when Oedipus learns that the Corinthian king and queen adopted him. The messenger received the infant Oedipus from an old shepherd from Thebes. Oedipus visits and threatens the shepherd who finally admits that the baby he gave to the old man is Jocasta's son. Oedipus punishes himself by tearing out his own eyes, and Jocasta commits suicide as her form of punishment. In "Octavia," Nero murders Britannicus, his step-brother, and Claudius, his step-father. He also murders his mother, Agrippina. Octavia threatens to murder Nero if he does murder her first. Nero orders Octavia's death.

## Deceit and Betrayal

A theme that underlies another and recurs repeatedly throughout each play is that of deceit and betrayal. In "Thyestes," Tantalus, a son of Zeus, serves Pelops, his son, as the meal at a banquet of the gods. At the time the play begins, Atreus reigns as king and plots against Thyestes by the means of a false reconciliation. Atreus and his minister plot against Thyestes. Atreus plans a vengeance worse than death for Thyestes; he will make a father eat his own children. He lures Thyestes to his castle under the false promise of reconciliation. Thyestes' steps slow as he grows fearful of Atreus' offer of peace. Thyestes does not know why he is frightened, and young Tantalus urges his father forward. Thyestes suspects a trap in Atreus' offer to rule jointly since no kingdom can be ruled by two kings. Atreus acts as a priest and slaughters his nephews upon an altar. Young Tantalus' throat is cut upon the altar first, and then Atreus beheads Plisthenes and drags his corpse onto the altar with his brother's body. Atreus does not spare Thyestes' youngest son but kills him as well and adds his body to the pile of corpses on the altar. Atreus cuts his nephews' bodies into pieces and prepares them as a feast for Thyestes. Thyestes eats heartily, sealing his doom, as the chorus laments this horrible deed. Atreus presents the heads of Thyestes' sons. Thyestes laments Atreus' treachery and false reconciliation. Atreus reveals the ingredients for the feast and brags that murdering Thyestes' sons serves as his vengeance upon his brother.

In "Phaedra," Phaedra's nurse tries to persuade Hippolytus to consent to the pleasures of love and civilized society for her mistress; however, Hippolytus cannot be persuaded. When Phaedra and her nurse are unable to convince Hippolytus to yield to their desires regardless of the tactics used, they angrily slander his name instead. Theseus



encounters Phaedra's nurse dressed in mourning. When he asks the cause for mourning in his household, she will only tell him that Phaedra has determined to die. Theseus visits Phaedra who claims that she would rather die than tell him about the evil that someone has done to him. Theseus threatens Phaedra's nurse to learn the truth, and the nurse shows him Hippolytus' sword which Theseus recognizes at once. Phaedra only confesses to her falsehood after Hippolytus dies.

In "Troades," Agamemnon complains that Achilles acted as a coward on the days that he refused to go to battle as the Greeks died on the battlefield. Pyrrhus rebuts that Hector was more frightened by Achilles' song than all of the other Greeks' armor. Pyrrhus questions Agamemnon about his claim that it is a crime to sacrifice a maiden; Agamemnon claims that shame forbids it. Pyrrhus praises Achilles as Agamemnon mocks the hero and threatens to silence Pyrrhus' insolence. Andromache attempts to deceive Ulysses into believing that Astyanax is dead, but she fails because Ulysses realizes that he must be artful with Hector's widow. Helen laments the grief that she has caused the Trojans as well as the part she must play to lure Polyxena to her death with the false promise of a marriage to Pyrrhus. Helen tells Polyxena to prepare for her wedding. In "Oedipus," Oedipus is deceived into believing that he is the son of the king and queen of Corinth, which leads to the fulfillment of Apollo's prophecy. Oedipus believes that Creon is attempting to deceive him about the words of the ghost of King Laius in order to gain his throne. Oedipus punishes himself after learning that he has been deceiving himself all this time into being unaware that he has fulfilled Apollo's prophecy. In "Octavia," Nero acts treacherously by murdering Claudius, Britannicus and Agrippina. He also plans Octavia's murder, despite the fact that she has not acted as he accuses her.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of all of these plays is third person, limited and reliable. This is proven by the fact that, as plays, these stories only report on the actions and words of the characters, although the addition of soliloquies sometimes helps readers learn about the characters' thought and feelings. This point of view is important because of the format of the stories as plays. As plays, it is impossible for the author to report all of the thoughts and emotions of the characters since it would then be necessary for the characters to actually say them; additionally, if this were attempted, it would become unreliable since the characters' words might not be in complete accordance with their actual thoughts.

These plays contain a minuscule amount of exposition. Instead, they contain mostly dialogue with occasional monologues scattered throughout the plays to reveal the characters' inner thoughts. This method is used because the format of the stories are plays, making exposition difficult since the plays do not include narrators. Additionally, exposition would make the plays more difficult to perform during the time period in which they were written because changes of scenery would be very difficult on stage at that period. Each play encompasses a very small amount of time. The plays are seen objectively with the viewpoints transferring amongst the characters, depending on who is on stage at any particular time.

## Setting

The setting of all of these plays is ancient Greece. This alters the plays because it includes an ancient set of Greek laws, as well as a religion focused on the Greek gods which is modernly viewed as Greek mythology. War and violence is prevalent in all of the plays due to the location and time period. This can be seen in the many betrayals and murders that occur in each of the plays.

The setting of "Thyestes" is Argos in Greece. Specifically, the action occurs in the palace of Mycenae where Atreus currently sits as king. Thyestes is in exile in the beginning of the play; while the land of his exile is not detailed, the second act does show Thyestes on his journey back to Argos as he doubts his brother's intentions. "Phaedra" takes place in Athens in the palace of Theseus. Additionally, Theseus is on a journey to Hades in the first half of the play.

"Troades" occurs in the demolished city of Troy. Andromache tries to hide Astyanax in Hector's tomb. The Greeks' ships are on the beach at Troy where the Greeks await the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena in order to be able to sail back to Greece as their desires dictate. Astyanax jumps from the tower of Troy. In "Oedipus," Oedipus is raised in Corinth but flees to Thebes when he hears Apollo's prophecy. Most of the action of "Oedipus" occurs in the palace of Thebes and nearby. "Octavia" takes place in Nero's



palace in Rome as Octavia laments her past and future and Nero plots against his lawful wife.

## Language and Meaning

The five plays included in this collection were all originally written in Latin but have been translated into English and many other languages. The translation appears to be a semi-formal style of writing. The plays consist primarily of dialogue due to being written in the format of plays. The language spoken by different characters tends to distinguish the differences between classes. The language the royalty speaks differs drastically from the phonetically spelled language of the servants. More so than the actual language is the tone used to differentiate between the classes. Royalty is more likely to speak haughtily and with much demand whereas the lower class' tone is much more subservient and conciliating.

The use of dialogue throughout the plays distinguishes characters and allows the different characters to express their opinions and feelings about things, as opposed to the narrator telling the reader how the characters feel. The language is easy to understand and allows for the readers to imagine the characters' actions since Seneca provides minimal stage directions.

## Structure

This book is composed of five plays, each with a one-page background. "Thyestes" contains five acts and is forty-nine pages long. "Phaedra" is five acts and forty-eight pages long. "Troades" consists of five acts and fifty-two pages. "Oedipus" is five acts and forty-one pages long, and "Octavia" is forty-one pages long but not broken into acts. There is very little action in any of the plays; the plays are composed primarily of dialogue. These plays are quick paced and easy to read and understand. Flashbacks are prevalent in each of them as they provide background information which frequently includes the reason for enmity between characters.

Each play has a plot with no subplots. In "Thyestes," Atreus lures Thyestes out of banishment with false promises in order to kill Thyestes' sons and serve them to their father as dinner. In "Phaedra," Phaedra lusts after Hippolytus, and failing to seduce him, lies to Theseus who prays for his son's death. After Hippolytus dies, Phaedra confesses that she lied and commits suicide as Theseus mourns for his son. In "Troades," the Greeks kill Astyanax to appease the gods and Polyxena as a sacrifice to Achilles. Andromache fails in her attempt to save her son, but Astyanax and Polyxena both die bravely as the Trojan women mourn the deaths. In "Oedipus," the plague on Thebes will only be lifted by avenging King Laius' murder. Oedipus disbelieves his guilt until he learns the truth of his parentage, causing him to dig out his own eyes as punishment for killing his father and marrying his mother, Jocasta. In "Octavia," Octavia hates her husband Nero for killing her father and brother. Nero loves and marries Poppaea. After



a rebellion in support of Octavia, Nero blames Octavia and orders her death which makes Octavia happy.



## Quotes

"For from my loins is sprung A generation whose iniquities, Whose crimes, of horror never known till now, Make all their predecessors' sins look small And me an innocent. Does any place in hell Still lack a tenant? I can furnish one From my posterity." Ghost of Tantalus, "Thyestes," Act I, page 45

"Let every corner of this place Be filled with the revenge of Tantalus!" Fury, "Thyestes," Act I, page 47

"Men compelled by fear To praise, may be by fear compelled to hate. He who desires to win sincere approval Will seek it in the heart, not on the tongue." Minister, "Thyestes," Act II, page 54

"One kingdom cannot have two kings at once." Thyestes, "Thyestes," Act III, page 64

"I know why you are angry; 'tis your grief That you were cheated of the crime you purposed. You weep, not that you ate this loathsome meal, But that you had not cooked it!" Atreus, "Thyestes",,Act V, page 93

"Hark, the dogs are baying; that is the sign That thou art with me, Goddess. Now to the woods; This way will take me quickly to the long road That lies ahead." Hippolytus, "Phaedra," Prelude, page 101

"Oh, by this heart Worn out with age and care, these silvered hairs, This breast you loved, I do implore you, child, To stop this folly. Be your own best friend; The wish for health is half the remedy." Nurse, "Phaedra," Act I, page 108

"There is no other life so free, so pure, So true to man's primeval laws- as this, Life far from city walls, a rustic life." Hippolytus, "Phaedra," Act II, page 117

"Success can justify some evil actions." Phaedra, "Phaedra," Act II, page 121

"So, did I seem fit sport for filthy amours? Was I, of all men, picked by you to be The easy instrument of your foul crime? Is my austerity reward thus? O woman, First of all womankind in wickedness, Worse than your mother!" Hippolytus, "Phaedra," Act II, page 125

"Rare is the man- look in the roll of time- To whom great beauty has not been great cost. May kind gods spare you, that your beauty live To pass into the house of age Where at the end all beauty must be lost." Chorus, "Phaedra," Act II, page 130

"My son is dead, I knew already; now A miscreant has died. Say how he died." Theseus, "Phaedra," Act IV, page 138



"O potent nature, How strong a bond of blood is thine to tie A parent's heart! Even against our will We know and love thee. As my son was guilty, I wished him dead; as he is lost, I mourn him." Theseus, "Phaedra," Act IV, page 142

"For love of one wife, hatred of another, Guilty in both, you have destroyed your house." Phaedra, "Phaedra," Act V, page 145

"The man who puts his trust in kingly power, The potentate wielding authority In his high court, having no fear of gods And their capricious will, the man who takes His happy state for granted- let that man look upon me, and upon thee, O Troy. Here is the proof, the strongest ever given By Fate, to show on what uncertain ground The pomp of power stands." Hecuba, "Troades," Act I, page 155

"Happy is Priam, happy is every man That has died in battle And taken with him his life's fulfillment." Chorus, "Troades," Act I, page 161

"You had forgotten Achilles, it appears. You had no thought for him whose single hand Had so struck Troy, her fall might be delayed But only this remained, to see which way Her towers would fall. Now, willing you may be, And anxious, as you say, to grant his wish- It is too late, already all your chiefs Have claimed their spoils. What lesser prize is left, Fit to be given for such valour as his?" Pyrrhus, "Troades," Act II, page 163

"Power unchecked Has never lasted long; tempered with reason It can endure... Greatness can fall at a touch." Agamemnon, "Troades," Act II, page 165-166

"The songs Achilles sang, you may be sure, Daunted great Hector more than all your armour Which scared him not a jot." Pyrrhus, "Troades," Act II, page 168

"Who has most right, should least indulge his pleasure." Agamemnon, "Troades," Act II, page 169

"When out of danger you can pick and choose; In time of trouble seize what help there is." Elder, "Troades," Act III, page 176

"It shows your breeding; You are ashamed to be afraid." Andromache, "Troades," Act III, page 177

"Ay, where is Hector? Where is Priam? Where are all the Trojan dead? You ask for one; I ask, where are they all?" Andromache, "Troades," Act III, page 179

"If you would rule Andromache by fear, Deny her death, not life: death is my prayer." Andromache, "Troades," Act III, page 179-180

"The famous fighter in the dark has found Courage to dare a deed alone in daylight- Courage enough to kill a child." Andromache, "Troades," Act III, page 187

"Great grief, unchecked, will never make an end." Ulysses, "Troades," Act III, page 188



"By my deceit The sister of Paris must be lured to death." Helen, "Troades," Act IV, page 192

"Yet are not we, We, Hecuba, we rather to be mourned? The fleet will sail and carry us away Each to some different place. This child will rest Beneath the soil of her dear native land." Andromache, "Troades," Act IV, page 196

"Is Hector's mother Included with the armour of Achilles, To be Ulysses' prize? This, then, is conquest, This is captivity indeed, the last Of all indignities. This is my shame- Not slavery itself, but to be slave To him." Hecuba, "Troades," Act IV, page 197

"Ulysses called on the avenging gods To accept the sacrifice, but while he prayed And spoke again the sentence of the prophet, The boy himself leapt from the tower's height To fall, there in the heart of Priam's city." Messenger, "Troades," Act V, page 201-202

"Go now, Go Greeks! Go home, now all is safe for you. You have no more to fear. Now let your fleet Hoist sail and cross the waters that you long for. A young child and an innocent girl have died; The war is over." Hecuba, "Troades," Act V, page 204

"O filial love, doomed love! I am ashamed To utter what has been foretold of me. Apollo bids me fear... my mother's bed (This to her son!), a marriage bed of shame, Unlawful and incestuous matrimony!" Oedipus, "Oedipus," Act I, page 209

"No man can brand me with the name of coward. My heart is innocent of craven fears." Oedipus, "Oedipus," Act I, page 212

"Fear makes me tremble; to what end does fate Now point? Conflicting thoughts divide my heart. When good and evil lie so close together, The doubting mind must fear the truth it seeks." Oedipus, "Oedipus," Act II, page 217

"Evil cannot be cured By ignorance." Oedipus, "Oedipus," Act III, page 229

"Fear chills my body, every bone and limb. Of every act that I have feared to do I am accused." Oedipus, "Oedipus," Act III, page 234

"Our queen Was not in truth your mother." Old Man, "Oedipus," Act IV, page 241

"You wife was that child's mother." Phorbas, "Oedipus," Act IV, page 244

"All's done- well done- my father is repaid. This darkness is my peace. To what god's mercy Owe I this blackness that enshrouds my head? By whose decree are all my sins forgiven? Escaped from your accusing witness, day, Thank not your own hand, slayer of your father; Daylight itself has run away from you; This face is the true face of Oedipus." Oedipus, "Oedipus," Act V, page 249

"Blame Fate; No man is blamed for what Fate does to him." Jocasta, "Oedipus," Act V, page 250



"And thou art dead, my father, Struck down by a wife's wickedness, Thy house and family a tyrant's slaves, A tyrant's prisoners." Octavia, "Octavia," page 258

"Little consolation Can all my duty and devotion bring To her poor soul; her unremitting grief Disdains my counsel; her proud indignation, Beyond control of reason, grows the more The more she suffers. Ah, what evil deeds My fear foresees- which may the gods forbid!" Nurse, "Octavia," page 259

" 'Twere easier to appease A lion's wrath, a tiger's rage, Than my imperious husband's heart." Octavia, "Octavia," page 260

"O Father of mankind! How can your royal hand so heedlessly, So indiscriminately, hurl your weapons Wide of their mark, yet spare a man so guilty?" Octavia, "Octavia," page 266

"Best antidote to fear is clemency." Seneca, "Octavia," page 274

"The more your power, greater your fear should be." Seneca, "Octavia," page 274

"Fortune is fickle; never trust her favours." Seneca, "Octavia," page 274

"If absent outlaws' hopes can be sustained By the enduring favour they command Here in the city, nothing but the sword Can rid me of suspected enemies. My wife is one of them, and she must die, Like her dear brother. What stands high, must fall." Nero, "Octavia," page 275

"A wife's fidelity, honour, purity, And goodness, should be all her husband's joy. Only the virtues of the mind and heart Are everlasting, indestructible. The flower of beauty withers day by day." Seneca, "Octavia," page 278

"Love must be gently humoured, or you lose him." Seneca, "Octavia," page 278

"They mean to win back for Octavia Her place, her right to be her brother's consort And partner of his throne." Messenger, "Octavia," page 288

"But what avails the violence of war? Love's weapons are invincible; His fires will stifle yours, His fires have quenched the lightning And brought Jove captive out of heaven. You will pay dearly with your blood for this. Love has no mercy; rouse to anger He is not patient of restraint. Under his orders bold Achilles Became a minstrel; to his power The Greeks and Agamemnon fell. He broke great Priam's city, overthrew Many a splendid city; and today What harm this ruthless god's fierce rage Will do to us, I dare not guess..." Chorus, "Octavia," page 289

"A woman can, by nature taught deceit And armed with every artifice of evil, But not with strength- so, not invincible, Not proof against the breaking power of fear Or punishment; and punishment, though late, Shall overtake this too long guilty woman Whose crime stands plainly proven. Plead no more; Give me no more advice; obey your orders. Have



her deported to a distant shore By sea, and executed instantly; So that the tumult of my wrath may rest." Nero, "Octavia," page 291-292

"Fate rules all mortal men, not one of us Can count his footing firm and permanent Amid the many accidents that Time, Our enemy, lays in our way. Take courage, then, From the example of the many griefs Already suffered by the women of your name. Yours is no harder fate." Chorus, "Octavia," page 294

"What can I hope for from delay? Take me away to die, You whom the lot of life Has made my masters. Gods in heaven!... O fool! What use to pray To powers that hate you?... Gods of hell, To you I pray, To goddesses of Erebus, whose wrath Can punish sin. I pray to you, my father, Who worthily endured such death and pain: A death I do not shrink from." Octavia, "Octavia," page 295-296

"Kinder than ours are those barbarian lands, Aulis and Tauris; to their gods they bring Tribute of strangers' lives; Rome loves to see The blood of her own children on her hands." Chorus, "Octavia," page 296



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the presence of the Greek gods in all of the plays.

Choose two plays; compare and contrast.

In "Thyestes," how is Atreus' choice of punishment to Thyestes ironic?

In "Phaedra," how does Phaedra act honorably at the end of the play? Contrast this with her dishonorable actions, and give your opinion about her true character.

Compare and contrast Hecuba and Andromache in "Troades."

How does the prophecy about Oedipus come to pass? How is it ironic?

Whether or not Seneca is the author of "Octavia" is a long-standing literary debate. Pick a side of the argument and defend it.