

University of Kentucky

UKnowledge

---

Lewis Honors College Thesis Collection

Lewis Honors College

---

2023

## Born from Myth, Built Anew: Seneca's Medea as a Stoic Cautionary Tale

Rebekah Dyche

University of Kentucky, rddyche@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/honors\\_theses](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#)

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dyche, Rebekah, "Born from Myth, Built Anew: Seneca's Medea as a Stoic Cautionary Tale" (2023). *Lewis Honors College Thesis Collection*. 15.

[https://uknowledge.uky.edu/honors\\_theses/15](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/honors_theses/15)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lewis Honors College at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lewis Honors College Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY  
LEWIS HONORS COLLEGE

**Born from Myth, Built Anew: Seneca's *Medea* as a Stoic Cautionary  
Tale**

by

**Rebekah Dyche**

AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DISTINCTION OF UNIVERSITY HONORS

Approved by the following:

Dr. Milena Minkova  
Faculty Advisor, Professor of Classics

Dr. Ryan Voogt,  
Lewis Honors College  
Director of Undergraduate Studies

LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY  
December 2022

In Seneca's *Medea*, there are two distinct "Medeas" to be examined – Medea the character, who has been built up out of mythical and literary tradition, and Medea as a human individual. By dividing her in this way Seneca opens the door to reimagine an already extant figure through a Stoic lens. He exaggerates the negative portrayal of Medea in her traditional role to draw in the audience and to emphasize the disastrous outcome of the individual Medea's failure to moderate her human passions – in so doing, he first engages the audience with a familiar character and then challenges them to question what the outcome might have been if the individual Medea were truly separate from her traditional role.

Medea the character is a figure that has been in the popular imagination for centuries by the time Seneca writes his *Medea* – a name that is easily recognized as referring to someone that is unquestionably untrustworthy, unquestionably dangerous, and unquestionably evil. There are several aspects of her identity – a woman, a foreigner, a witch – that are inextricably wrapped up in the construction of this character, and in fact contribute to the evilness of it, as dictated by the cultural context in which it came to be. Seneca is clearly conscious of the mythical and literary tradition that he is building upon in his *Medea*,<sup>1</sup> as is evidenced by his acknowledgement and exaggeration of these aspects and Medea's accompanying villainy. He does so particularly through the view of the play's other *dramatis personae*, as well as by amplifying the onstage horror of Medea's actions. This awareness is the reason the other characters behave as they do in attributing Medea's actions to her identity as a woman, a foreigner, and a semi-divine sorceress; states of being that, in the generally understood social structures of the world in which Medea came to be, predispose her to irrationality, barbarity, and inhumanity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Manuwald (2013), 130-31.

The play's embrace of the traditional idea of Medea is made evident from its outset, as it begins with Medea's invocation of numerous divine entities, including the "gods who couple men and women",<sup>2</sup> entreating them to exact brutal punishment upon Creon, Creusa, and Jason as repayment for their treatment and betrayal of her; at the end of this prayer, she begins talking to herself instead of the gods, saying "If, my soul, you have some force of life, if traces of your fabled energy still linger on, seek out an opening so you can penalize them [...] you must banish from yourself all fears a woman has. Take on your native mind, your Cossack mind, that hates all foreigners".<sup>3</sup> By opening the play in this manner, Seneca establishes numerous premises upon which the rest of the play builds.

The first is that Medea is conscious of her "fabled energy" and has a metatextual awareness of the traditional role that she is set to occupy. Second, by having her call upon this role, he establishes that it is neither the entirety of who she is, nor who she is by default, but rather a persona that she must entreat herself to pick up. Third, the text is picking up the disdain toward women that the contemporary audience would expect from the story by implying that fear is a negative, female trait, therefore leaning into traditional ideas of what makes Medea evil, and treating women as inferior by having her reject fear on the basis that it is feminine. However, in introducing it in such close proximity to Medea's entreaty to herself, Seneca is integrating it specifically as a characteristic of the Medea persona. Finally, the same phenomenon occurs in establishing Medea as foreign – when she tells herself to "take on" her "native mind [...] that hates all foreigners", she is establishing a dislike of foreigners as something else integral to the traditional idea of Medea. Though she applies it backwards – rather than being the foreigner

---

<sup>2</sup> Seneca, trans. Ahl (1986), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Seneca, 115-17.

hated, she is the one hating the foreigner – it still indicates the idea that nationality is something of import in the realm of literary tradition as well as the cultural context in which the tradition came to be.

Medea's identity as a witch is also hyper-exaggerated by Seneca, with the addition of a dark, drawn-out, and bloody magical ritual Medea conducts as she poisons the robe to kill Creusa and Creon,<sup>4</sup> thus even further emphasizing the distinction he is drawing between the traditional figure of Medea and the human one, through the incorporation of new supernatural, inhuman elements.

Though the *dramatis personae* of Seneca's play *Medea* focus on aspects such as these in attempting to determine the driving force of Medea's actions, that does not seem to be the prevailing message of the play; rather, the root problem is demonstrated to be her lack of Stoic virtue. Many of Seneca's narrative choices in retelling the story of Medea indicate that he does not share in his characters' disdain and hatred of her on the basis of her social identity. Rather, the Stoic basis of his own philosophy precludes him from doing so, instead mandating a cosmopolitan attitude that suggests the equality of all humanity regardless of aspects such as gender or nationality. This does not mean that he defends or dismisses her choices or her actions – he certainly does not. Instead, he implies that it is the disruption of her understanding of who she is on an individual level that triggers an emotional response that, in turn, causes her to act as she does – irrationally and immorally – and it is that irrationality that also ultimately allows her to step into the dramatic role that tradition demands. By incorporating multiple conversations Medea has with herself, Seneca separates the Medea of tradition from Medea as an individual at the outset of the play. Such conversations show that Seneca allows for her social identity to be

---

<sup>4</sup> Seneca, 154; 160.

decentered and indicated as a compounding factor rather than the primary cause, highlighting her disrupted understanding of herself as the underlying motivation for her actions. This motivation is in turn fueled by a failure or inability to keep her anger in check, which is that characteristically human flaw that Seneca uses Medea to caution his audience against. For example, after the wedding of Jason and Creusa, she says, “I’m sick at heart; I can’t see what to do. My mind is ravaged by insanity, I’m torn to pieces, scattered everywhere”.<sup>5</sup> In making this statement Medea clearly demonstrates an un-Stoic lack of control over her passions – she is so distraught by Jason’s betrayal that she cannot think clearly. This is made even plainer a few lines later, when she says to herself, “[Jason] owed it to you to steel himself for death”,<sup>6</sup> immediately followed by “Don’t say that [...] raging voice of my pain, Jason must live [...] I don’t want him to hurt the gift of life I gave him once”.<sup>7</sup> As she oscillates dramatically between calling for Jason’s death, and begging that he be allowed to live, the conversation takes on an almost schizophrenic quality, highlighting both the separation of her two personas, as well as the instability of her emotions. Guastella describes her as being “thrown into disarray by her separation from Jason”,<sup>8</sup> and this disarray and neglect in moderating her emotions is the main source of her villainy, in Seneca’s view. It demonstrates a moral failure on her part that is entirely incongruous with Seneca’s ideals as a Stoic philosopher, as she is entirely governed by her passions and negative emotions throughout the duration of the play, so blinded by her rage that she acts in inconceivably irrational and evil ways, all the while believing wholeheartedly that she is entirely justified. Examining the emotions that Medea feels and acts upon throughout

---

<sup>5</sup> Seneca, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Seneca, 122.

<sup>7</sup> Seneca, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Guastella, 198.

the play is the key to recognizing Seneca's intimations toward Stoicism and the perils of unbridled passions. Pratt examines this Stoic foundation of Seneca's *Medea* in more detail,<sup>9</sup> stating "the conflict between reason and passion, so fundamental in Stoicism, permeates the [play] and has made a deep imprint on [its] nature".<sup>10</sup> Medea's passions are clearly in conflict with reason, as she rationalizes her plot to right the wrong that has been done to her by Jason by means of murdering four people that he loved. The chorus provides further evidence of this idea that Medea's behavior serves as an example of Seneca's Stoic viewpoint, as Bishop indicates, "[In Ode 4] she exemplifies Stoic doctrine in that her full-blown *furor*, her madness, which is based on *amor* and *ira*, affects her physical attitudes".<sup>11</sup> Such excessive, uncontrolled emotion is dangerous when present in the human Medea, but catastrophic when she acts in her capacity as the dramatic Medea.<sup>12</sup> Guastella sums up Seneca's own definition of revenge, that "the basic idea is that *ira* is a passion that has gotten out of control, causing a sort of madness in the injured party. The resulting desire for vengeance lacks any sense of justice and instead seeks to repay the original injury with a crime that is entirely disproportionate to the initial offense."<sup>13</sup> This is precisely the case with Medea; while an objective witness could recognize that the murder of four people is not a proportionate response to the wrong that has been done to her, to Medea in her passion, this seems to be an entirely logical response.

Medea shares her flawed logic when she indicates that she views these murders as a kind of restitution for all that she has lost for Jason's benefit, telling him "I gave up brother, father, fatherland, and my virginity. This was my dowry when I married you. I want it back now that

---

<sup>9</sup> Pratt (1948), 1-11.

<sup>10</sup> Pratt, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Bishop (1965), 315.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, 316.

<sup>13</sup> Guastella, 197.

you run me out”.<sup>14</sup> She draws a false equivalency when she conceptualizes what exactly it is she is taking revenge on him for, as Winter states, “Although Jason is her intended victim because he left her for another woman, Medea does not relate her revenge to his infidelity, but to the sacrifices she has made for him”.<sup>15</sup> This faulty logic is not an aberration, but the natural consequence of succumbing to passion to the extent that Medea has. Regardless of its logic, however, this “eye for an eye” approach that Medea sees herself taking in her revenge is enacted by Medea the witch, the monster, the divine – Medea in her traditional capacity – but it is desired by Medea as an individual, as an irrational human overcome by her own passions. She loses herself when she loses Jason, for she has given everything to him; therefore without him she has nothing, and she tells him as much when he goes to her to ask that she accept her exile willingly, for the sake of their children,<sup>16</sup> declaring, “Everywhere I’ve opened up a door for you, I’ve closed one for myself [...] You order an exile into exile and don’t provide her anywhere to go”<sup>17</sup> and “In seeking power for others, I threw my own away”.<sup>18</sup> Guastella explores how this relates particularly to the relationship between Medea as *virgo* and Medea as *coniunx/mater*, as the actions that Medea took as *virgo* – the actions that indeed stripped her of her identity as such – are the actions that allowed her to become *coniunx/mater*.<sup>19</sup> If Jason then rejects her as *coniunx*, Medea the individual is left as nothing.

This is the Nurse’s evaluation of the situation as well, when she says to Medea, “You once had everything, but nothing now survives to stand by you”.<sup>20</sup> Medea’s response: “Medea

---

<sup>14</sup> Seneca, 143. See also 165; 167.

<sup>15</sup> Winter (2018), 101.

<sup>16</sup> Seneca, 140.

<sup>17</sup> Seneca, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Seneca, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Guastella, 200.

<sup>20</sup> Seneca, 123.



still stands. In me you see the energy of earth and water, fire, steel, the gods, and heaven's vengeance".<sup>21</sup> So though the human Medea, the individual Medea is left with nothing, she begins to make the choice to step into her traditional role, stating boldly, "I shall become Medea".<sup>22</sup> The differentiation between the two aspects becomes evident even as it is diminished. Though the human Medea is, in a way, destitute, the mythical Medea is just beginning to come into her own because the human Medea has made the choice to give into passion and actualize her. Further, because the individual human Medea is occupying the same space as the mythical Medea, her actions are amplified beyond merely immoral and irrational – they become inhuman.

As she steps into her traditional role, Medea becomes even bolder in claiming responsibility for her past actions – she argues against Creon's sentence of banishment and demands that he restore Jason to her, declaring,

I saved the glory of your race of Greeks [...]
 I saved the lives of all the Argo's crew.
 Their king of kings I now omit. For him
 you owe me nothing. I set no price on him.
 The others I brought back all for you;
 this one alone I brought back for myself [...]
 A good girl's
 pleasure should be in her virginity
 and in her father's love. But let us see
 what happens to The Past if I am good.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage, she acknowledges and defends the villainy upon which Creon is basing her banishment, by claiming that through it she saved the entirety of the race of Greeks – Creon included – through her actions, and she is owed Jason as thanks. She challenges Creon's criticism of her actions by almost daring him to consider what life would be like if she had been

---

<sup>21</sup> Seneca, 123.

<sup>22</sup> Seneca, 124.

<sup>23</sup> Seneca, 128.

“good” and refused to give up her virginity to Jason or betray her father. This elevation of herself to an almost god-like level of influence is yet another indicator of her increasing comfort in her dramatic role as Medea.

This twisted deification becomes increasingly evident as the play progresses; though Medea’s divine heritage has been mentioned throughout,<sup>24</sup> such as when Medea entreats Helios as “shining father” to allow her use of the chariot of the Sun,<sup>25</sup> or in her argument to Creon, “I derive the brightness of my origin from my grandfather, Sol, the Sun itself”,<sup>26</sup> it becomes most clearly and literally evident at the climax of the play. After the deaths of Creon and Creusa, Medea has yet another extended conversation with herself, in which she castigates her soul for recoiling from fully realizing the revenge-plot that she has devised; in this speech, she powerfully states, “Now I’m indeed Medea. My genius has grown with all these evils I’ve done.”<sup>27</sup> She revels in the crimes that she has committed and uses the memory of them to spur herself on to commit the most heinous acts yet. However, though she has declared herself Medea – traditional Medea, dramatic Medea, divine Medea – she is still battling with Medea the individual, and in particular, the maternal aspect of the individual Medea.<sup>28</sup> “The mother has returned,” she laments to herself, “How can I shed the blood of my children, my own flesh? Anger and madness must not come to this! This is a hideous and unnatural act”<sup>29</sup> – even though there is a part of her that recognizes the utter irrationality of the revenge she intends to exact, the

---

<sup>24</sup> Campbell (2019), 29-31. See full article for Campbell’s analysis of Seneca’s use of patterned syllabic fragments to underscore various aspects of Medea’s identity.

<sup>25</sup> Seneca, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Seneca, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Seneca, 163.

<sup>28</sup> See Winter (2018) for a more complete analysis of Medea’s use of maternal and birth imagery throughout the play.

<sup>29</sup> Seneca, 164.

passion she has succumbed to is far too great and that “pain grows once again, my hatred boils [...] Anger, I follow your lead.”<sup>30</sup> At last, she commits to the act, verbalizing her capitulation to her *ira* before she murders the first of her sons. This action fully reifies the dramatic, divine Medea as she comes into her own as the filicidal character the audience has been expecting all along; mounting the chariot of Helios, she murders her second son in full view of Jason, taking “a pathway into the hidden sky that [her] paternal ancestry reveals”.<sup>31</sup> The climax of the play is thus the climax of the dramatic Medea’s rebirth, occurring simultaneously with the utter destruction of the human, individual Medea – there is now no distinction between the two, and Medea seems to have taken on an almost entirely divine persona. However, in allowing her one final adversarial conversation with herself,<sup>32</sup> Seneca urges the audience to recall the individual Medea and to be appalled at her total abandon of virtue and reason, even though they are aware, and have always been aware, of Medea’s literary inheritance, knowing that she has no choice but to step into her predetermined role.

The traditional Medea wins out, because the individual Medea that Seneca teases out in the play is not there to abolish the literary and mythical convention of the story of Medea, but rather as a challenge to the audience to question what the outcome might have been if the individual Medea could ever be entirely disentangled from her traditional role. Would she have conquered her *ira* and avoided the tragic outcome, or would she still be overpowered by its strength, unable to realize the Stoic virtue of self-control after all? Taken as such, Seneca’s *Medea* thus serves as an exploration of human vice – and by extension, virtue – through this distinctly Stoic depiction of Medea’s emotions, behaviors, and actions. Seneca repurposes the

---

<sup>30</sup> Seneca, 165.

<sup>31</sup> Seneca, 169.

<sup>32</sup> See notes 29 and 30, above.

character of Medea, using his audiences' familiarity with her immoral behavior to redirect their ire away from her social identity and towards human vice, indirectly urging them to consider the Stoic conception of virtue – that the true source of conflict is Medea's failure to act in accordance with nature, instead choosing to take offense and exact revenge over something that was, ultimately, out of her control.

## Bibliography

- Bishop, J. David. "The Choral Odes of Seneca's 'Medea.'" *The Classical Journal* 60, no. 7 (1965): 313–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3294549>.
- Campbell, Celia Mitchell. "Medea's Sol-Ipsism: Language, Power and Identity in Seneca's Medea." *Ramus* 48, no. 1 (2019): 22–53. doi:10.1017/rmu.2019.7.
- Guastella, Gianni. "Virgo, Coniunx, Mater: The Wrath of Seneca's Medea." *Classical Antiquity* 20, no. 2 (2001): 197–219. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ca.2001.20.2.197>.
- Manuwald, Gesine. "Medea: Transformations of a Greek Figure in Latin Literature." *Greece & Rome* 60, no. 1 (2013): 114–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43298107>.
- Pratt, Norman T. "The Stoic Base of Senecan Drama." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 79 (1948): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/283349>.
- Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. "Medea." Essay. In *Three Tragedies*, translated by Frederick Ahl, 107–69. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Winter, Kathrin. "'Now I Am Medea': Gender, Identity and the Birth of Revenge in Seneca's Medea." Chapter. In *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, edited by Lesel Dawson and Fiona McHardy, 97–110. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.