The Dramatic Incarnation of Will in Seneca's *Medea*

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I.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca's Latin *Medea* is a problematic play, standing on the periphery of the Western canon of dramatic literature for several important reasons. First, it remains one of the few extant instances of Latin Silver Tragedy. Another eight instances are also attributed to Seneca, with a ninth, *Octavia,* of dubious parentage. Second, this *Medea* follows sufficiently after that of Euripides in its superficial *plot* yet diverges substantially enough from its Euripidean "model" in *form* to afford a worthy literary foil to its predecessor: serving as a catalyst for a fruitful discussion of the excellence of Greek form and substance. Third, the piece is exceptionally well-wrought—itself an excellent model of Roman "maximum language." Yet the play does remain on the periphery; for on the stage or in the virtual production of the mind's eye, this *Medea* has been ungainly. Even Seneca's most enthusiastic champions, the Elizabethan English with their voracious appetites for fresh dramatic material, spurned the pessimistic substance of Seneca's tragedies and used them instead as models for linguistic amplification. Even the eclectic twentieth century, with its polar tastes and its own rebirth of pessimism and skepticism does not stage Seneca. Perhaps the most succinct criticism of Senecan tragedy was uttered by August Wilhelm Schlegel mid-way between the Elizabethans and the present when he characterized the plays as "beyond all description bombastic and frigid, utterly devoid of nature in character and action . . . and so barren in theatrical effect that I verily believe they were never meant to leave the schools of the rhetoricians for the stage."[1] Schlegel's statement still rings true for both the academic who cannot find the theatre in the poetry and for the director who cannot place the poetry in the theatre. In its two-thousand year history, Seneca's *Medea* has overwhelmed us with its Latin verse and left us cold.

Yet there is something theatrical to this text that haunts the literature. In Seneca's *Medea*, we have a piece that is grudging in scenography, stripped of what we have come to expect as the physical stage, at the same time that we have a piece that is aggressively *physical.* This physicality permeates the drama

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in its imagery, in its possession of mind by body in theme, in its grip of character in an animal/earth matrix. I halt the list only briefly here; for up to this point, the physicality of imagery, theme and character could just as well be imbedded in a literary text, a novel or a poem. But the physicality of this text moves beyond the *representational* action of the drama to live as well in the *presentational* aspect of performance. The theme and the form of the performance are inextricably wed. One finds on close inspection that Seneca's *Medea* is unrelentingly physical in its linguistic onslaught which uses vocality as an act of violence. Moreover, the text asks the auditor to become engaged in the play in a way that a private reading will not allow; for the text relies on Medea's physical presence and corporeality to bring dimension to her violent vocality and to extend into the air of the theatre space the threat and horror of a monstrous action. As we shall see, the text of the play also requires that Medea undergo what the Sanskrit theatre calls a dramatic incarnation for the theme to work on all of its levels.

In this way, the physicality of *Medea* draws the text to the stage—a stage which may only superficially resemble the familiar Western paradigm. If Peter Brook's description of an essential act of theatre holds true—that all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged is that "A man walks across [an] empty space whilst someone else is watching him"[2]—then the fact of Medea's presence even in a simple reading urges the play beyond the schools of the rhetoricians. If Ferdinand Brunetière's one essential law of the drama holds true—that, "In drama or farce, what we ask of the theatre is the spectacle of a *will* striving towards a goal, and conscious of the means which it employs"[3]—then Seneca's *Medea* may very well be the quintessential drama. Here, we have the spectacle of a will with little else to obscure it. For Seneca, in setting his Medea off in high relief, has reduced what we have come to know as the Aristotelian elements of drama to their barest essentials. Plot, character, thought, music and spectacle barely serve diction in its sweeping narration of an exercise of will.

By these two definitions, *Medea* is both a drama of a high order and at least a minimal act of theatre. Yet a minimal act of theatre cannot long survive before an audience. That an act of theatre is engaged is no substitute for an engaging act of theatre. That a conscious will strives toward a goal does not necessarily imply vertebrate locomotion, much less a passionate, engaged, human action. But we return here to a very basic set of theatre definitions in order to strip away the rules, commandments, programmes, conceits and "isms" of two milennia of Western theatre, and to begin again. Perhaps, when we follow Schlegel, we are searching too deeply for recognizable elements of traditional Western theatre: for the raising of the siparium in the foreground or the folds of

the auleum in the background. We see none. Indications of entrances and exits, though they exist, are spare; and the litany of scenic indications detailed recently by Dana Sutton[4] only beg for signs of traditional performance that may, for all intents and purposes, remain moot. The object of this brief exploration of *Medea* is not to prove that the play was meant to be staged, but to hypothesize a staging of *Medea* that allows the play its full voice.

While it may at first appear that this *Medea* has sacrificed her theatrical body for her poetic soul, there remains both a tension and a balance between the two. Following Brook, the "scenic" indication of this act of theatre is the presence of the actress before an audience in space: a presence which attaches to itself all scenic meaning in the play, a presence beyond which the eye, the ear and the mind can only discern empty space. This extreme focus on Medea as not only the central character in this play but as the play's central scenic icon is important to the theme and to the stagecraft which must bear out that theme. To achieve such focus, Seneca does not so much ignore dramatic action, dramatic characterization, and theatrical effect as he does redefine them.

The first redefinition begins with plot. In terms of traditional Western action, what Seneca takes from Euripides (*all* that Seneca takes from Euripides) is the barest outline of an exposition. Time and space in the representational framework are the same. The exposition informs us that Medea and Jason have made their home in Corinth for some years and that Jason is to set aside Medea and to marry King Creon's daughter Creüsa. Creon has banished Medea; and, as the play gets under way, Medea protests her banishment to Creon and gains the extension of a single day. She then attempts to recall Jason to his husbandly and paternal obligations and, failing in this, plots her revenge, murders Creon and Creüsa, kills her own children, and flies off in a chariot pulled by dragons.

While this description of action seems dramatic enough, the focus of the play is narrowed to its Senecan essence—that is, to the naked passion of Medea herself. The bulk of the play is spent *beneath* the plot in the fermentation of the physical actions that begin in the play's final moments. While these consummating actions are, in themselves, violent and horrible, in the wake of Medea's passion, they are little more than after-effects. If the metaphor may be allowed, Medea does not simply spew hate in this play, she gives birth to it. It is in the gestation of this hate and in the labor that brings it shrieking into the world that Seneca and his audience are interested. When, in Euripides, Medea is met with a declaration of banishment and with the impending marriage of her mate to his new bride, she quickly determines her course of action and orchestrates the incidents of the drama into a plot. The chorus and the auditor bear witness as this mounting action unfolds in a rapid cause-to-effect chain reaction rushing toward closure. In Seneca, however, as Medea is met with the

same situation, the action of the plot all but *stops* at the point of attack. Nothing moves forward. No outward chemical explosion launches the characters in a traditional pattern toward fate. Yet in the vacuum of this inaction, the auditor is swept into the internal struggle of Medea where one experiences the foment of will and the powerful subjugation of the rational (mind) by the irrational (body). A decision is made in this moment to allow the irrational its freedom. But to say that the play stops at the moment of "decision" is slightly misleading. A decision is made not in the conscious layers of the cerebrum but in the equally conscious depths of the viscera. The movement that the auditor experiences in this play is not the mechanical unwinding of the clock of plot but an organic welling up, a surge felt from beneath the surface, a great heave of emotional magma. Medea makes a conscious decision, but the consciousness that we witness is one that resides *behind* the rational mind.

Elsewhere, Seneca is specific as to the direction of the *balanced* human mind in such a crisis:

> What kind of life will a wise man have if he is abandoned by his friends and hurled into prison or isolated in some foreign country or detained on a long voyage or cast out onto a desert shore? It will be like the life of Zeus, at the time when the world is dissolved and the gods have been blended into one, when nature comes to a stop for a while; he reposes in himself given over to his thoughts. The wise man's behavior is just like this: he retires into himself and is with himself.[5]

As Medea's world is dissolved, she herself turns inward. Yet Medea, unruled by reason, is not wise; and the isolation and rejection that drives her inward will, in the end, have fearful outward consequences. She retires into herself but *deep* into herself. She gives herself over to passionate thought driven up by mood. She renews herself in the irrational passion of her blood and body. As it follows Medea to the heights and depths of her emotional storm, the play turns inward with her; and the interiorization of thought in this play plunges a dynamic catalyst into a volatile chemistry (*our* chemistry as well as Medea's) of blood, passion, muscle, and bone that understands its own power. The world is dissolved around Medea in this theatrical moment, and the gods are dissolved into one.

Thus, the auditor is drawn within Medea. Here, the play acts much more like literature than drama: for drama moves from the inside out—manifesting a character in real space and time that began in imagination or gestus, while literature moves from the outside in—bringing time and space within the frame of the reader. "To read," says Cary Nelson, "is to fold the world into the body's

house."[6] The actress who "reads" Medea to us draws us in and folds us into her own body. It is from here in the womb of emotion that confusion begets hate and anger and power. Somewhere deep within Medea, somewhere close to where the lungs fuel the blood and the diaphragm heaves that fire up as voice, this play is played.

The more powerful drama that unfolds, at this level, is therefore not of what Medea will *do* but of what Medea *is*. In Seneca's "plot," verbs of action are at first replaced by verbs of being. Medea goes nowhere and does nothing. But Medea *is* angry; Medea *is* powerful; Medea *is* dangerous. Through the bulk of the play, what Medea *is* is played out. Thus, in the same instant that we discover Seneca's plot of being, we broach the subject of a redefinition of dramatic character. For in this play, character and structure are so closely united that they are two dimensions of the same thing. Even more, the blend of plot and character in the plot of being illuminates Seneca's "non-traditional" use of theatrical effect. Here, rhetoric—the syntaxis of verbal language rather than that of action—becomes the principle vehicle of movement. The organ of voice is loosed. The enormous scope of emotional upheaval is translated into vocal range and duration. With a masterful agility in language, Seneca's splendid rhetoric reifies Medea's passion through the grandeur of its sound and the magnificent architectonics of what Norman Pratt has termed Seneca's "massive verbal systems."[7] Language used in this way is both diction and music. It is, like both Medea and music, powerful, dangerous and expressive. It moves and surges, erupts and flows, rises and falls, attacks and retreats. It has the capacity to drive toward musical rather than rhetorical resolutions. It convinces and persuades the senses rather than the mind. It is a force united with Medea and created by her. Important to this act of theatre, Medea's use of language, like music, creates an acoustic space which enlarges Medea's person and her world without proliferating icons that would compete with her for focus. This musical quality of language and space fully engages the auditor on other than mimetic levels.

There is a power in this vocal explosion as there is a power in storm, in flood, in volcanic eruption. There is a beauty in this explosion as there is a beauty in a force of Nature controlled by the hand of a god. Mood, music, rhythm, tempo and the immense power of vocal patterning shape and are shaped by Medea's reaction and reinforce the sense that Medea is the shaping, unifying god of the event both within the drama and upon the stage. Once the auditor experiences what Medea *is*, the threat of her promised action becomes even more terrifying. The audience witnesses with a growing horror as Medea determinedly concretizes her prophecy, consciously shaping herself as an instrument of destruction, in an environment she fully controls.

Perhaps, through the years, we have missed this sonic physicality—this architecture of acoustic space—because we have been too intent on finding (or not finding) visual indications of a normal scenic environment. If we *listen* to Medea's creative/destructive power rather than simply watch for it, we will have found the staging of this play. Fixed to the simple, uncluttered image of a passionate, expressive body in space, the auditor is surrounded by voice: brought within Medea's sphere. It is only here that the auditor will be capable of experiencing what is intended to be experienced. As well, it may prove advantageous, in our technically sophisticated age, to unite ephemeral voice with ephemeral environment—that is, to utilize sound, light and near-cinematic techniques (although sparingly) to help Medea (in translation and in a new age) to create her environment as she creates her musical language. We can allow sound and Medea to control the scenographic space without the scene upstaging the interior action. One should remember, however, that the ear suggests while the eye makes concrete. The stagecraft of this play relies strongly on the suggestive, and shuns the concrete.

Keying on this wave of sound, fury and sense, the producer and the actress might overcome what has been seen as the improbability of the role: that bombast outlives psychological motivation. How else but to think of this play as near operatic does one *use* the largeness of the role? How else, when Medea's passion peaks in the early part of Act I, does the actress sustain, through a trajectory of five acts, both the sheer intensity of this mind and heart torn loose and the sheer intensity of the attendant verbal storm? Medea is simply too large to be confined in the minute detail of modern realism, too unrestrained for the dramé of Schlegel. Like Schlegel, the modern/postmodern theatre finds her "utterly devoid of nature" in character. Like Schlegel, we Western moderns—children much more of the Greek mind than of the Roman—want character replete with psychological probability, nuance, the evidence of warm blood in the voice and a living eye behind the mask. Medea, however, is in many ways less character than role, less flesh-and-blood than an abstract storm of will in a moment of theatre, less graceful than stark, less eloquent than magniloquent, less vulnerable than insuperable. From his cultural and artistic bias, Schlegel could find no humanity in Medea. But even while she is less of the finer points of humanity (Hugo's sublime element in character and theme), she is *more* of the grotesque. Medea outhumanizes all others in violence and passion. She takes natural human characteristics and enlarges them to god-like stature.

Moses Hadas observes, in this connection, that "In *Medea*, as in his other tragedies, Seneca's prime object seems to be to create huge figures capable of transcendent intensity; and to communicate their extraordinary quality he endows

them with power over nature itself and lavishes on them all the distinction his splendid rhetoric is capable of."[8] Pared, then, of almost every attribute of character that would mute her intense animal passion or temper her enormous, godlike will, and then inflated to suprahuman power, Medea is at once left bereft of human quality and raised above it. She is central, monstrous and extreme. Hers is the focal role and primary viewpoint in what the German expressionist Yvan Goll has termed the modern "superdrama." Like Goll's or Sorge's or many other expressionistic and post-expressionistic characters, Medea is thrown into a very ancient and very modern conflict. Goll, writing about the *new* dramatist in 1918, could not more clearly describe the vision of Seneca: "Now the new dramatist feels that the final struggle is imminent: Man's struggle with all that is thinglike and beastlike around him and within him."[9] Seneca's *Medea* is a drama of this "final struggle" which, in a remarkable way, is even more satisfying than its expressionistic children. For unlike even the most extreme of modern characters, this Medea lacks vulnerability. Her sickness is her strength; her madness is her power; and she is unencumbered by a modern materialism or an aesthetic isolation in a Freudian or Jungian psychology. Her struggle with the internal beast is more a struggle to unleash it than to harness it; and what she will unleash is not a figment of her tortured mind but is as real as she.

This struggle is central to Seneca's work as both philosopher and playwright and is far more than a theatrical exercise designed to create the utmost in dramatic effect. A pragmatic Stoic, Seneca was above all else bent on the study and acquisition of virtue; and almost all of his writings are therefore explorations of ethical questions. *Medea* is among these writings; and if Medea's intensity is in some way inhuman, if, even at the height of her passion, there is something cold and bloodless about her, then it may be fruitful to allow these feelings to undergird a sense of Medea's subhumanity. Superhuman in power, subhuman in cruelty, Medea makes her unbalanced way in the world. As large and as terrifying as Medea is, however, a sense is created that something, some shape, some force or power presses from behind her and through her that is infinitely larger and more terrifying than she. It is precisely to this sense that Seneca brings his auditor.

On his way to revealing the ethical core of the drama in Medea's unbalanced and uncompromising will to vengeance, Seneca first creates a tight focus on Medea herself. He redefines plot to focus on interior action. He redefines character to concentrate on the physical "vessel" and emotional "setting" of Medea. He submerges thought (in favor of sense) beneath the glare of Medea's incandescent rage. He blends diction with music and weds musical language to Medea's physical vocality, blending both into an acoustic space that all but supplants the iconic. Finally, Seneca allows a subdued iconic spectacle.

Spectacle is utilized only inasmuch as it realizes—makes crystalline—the flight of language in the person of Medea. In this near monodrama, movement, action, entrances and exits are diminished until they are mere aids to the central spectacle: the physical presence of this one, focal will. Like the actress in a Sanskrit drama, or the *jaraja* (staff) upon the Sanskrit stage, Medea is the open conduit for Shiva: the creator/destroyer goddess, the dramatic incarnation of Will. The effect of the performance, then, is to first experience what Medea is—a powerful, dangerous, creative/destructive force; then to experience an alarming enlargement of Medea as she fills, before our eyes, with an even more powerful Will now incarnate in her body.

As in more modern "symbolist" plays such as Maeterlinck's *Intruder*, Seneca has moved beyond the primitive depiction of a god or force of nature anthropopathized on the stage. Such depictions by impersonation do not realize as much as caricature the deity before a sophisticated audience, and Seneca sought the full power of truth through suggestion rather than illusion. He therefore found a way for Nature to play its own role upon the stage: hidden, mysterious, but horrifyingly present in its possession of the human medium Medea. This dramatic incarnation serves playwright and audience well. For, in this way, the magniloquence of Medea rings with the force and voice of Nature. The cruelty of Medea shadows the amorality of Nature. The calculation of Medea limns the consciousness and logic of Nature. Something of Nature is seen in all her parts; and one is brought to see through *her* the awesome size and omnipotence of *it*. Here the drama lives.

II.

In the following brief analysis/narration, a return to the text reveals the stages of Nature's possession of Medea and the importance of the play's suggestive stagecraft to theme. Here, one does not witness, as has been the Greek tradition, the impersonation of the will of a character in the face of Fate but, rather, the incarnation of the character of a Will which *is* Fate.

The Greek concept of Fate was always somewhat foreign to the Roman who, although an avowed citizen of both the universe and the state and thus obliged to both, held tenaciously to an unswerving allegiance to personal freedom. As a Roman Stoic, Seneca's own belief in the sovereignty of the individual free will led him to emphasize the importance of that will in the development of individual fortune. In terms of moral growth, the will serves the rational mind; and both evil and virtue are entirely dependent on its exercise. Both Roman and Stoic held that each person owned the capacity to shape his or her own life; for, as Appius Claudius was to remark, "Each man is his own fortune's architect."[10]

With individual fortune in the hands of each Roman, the danger of both anarchy and tyrrany was extreme; and the potential for evil was real. For the greater fortune belonged to the most powerful—that is, to the strongest of will and to the quickest in action who had come to know that language and oratory could sway the lesser will as surely as the sword and the cross could break it, and who had further come to know that the human will is even a match for the gods.

Thus it is that Medea assumes the role of the gods even as she invokes them in Act I. She begins to call them, as if from the Senate floor, down to mete out justice on the nuptial party. But then, in a countermand which banishes justice in favor of vengeance and usurps the function of the gods, Medea says,

> But no, this course alone remains, that I myself
> Shall bear the wedding torch, with acquiescent prayers,
> And slay the victims on the altars consecrate.[11]

With her isolation complete, Medea has only herself at the center of her universe: "Though Fate may strip me of my all," she exclaims, "myself am left." Her will is sovereign; and Medea seizes power and will rule on the divine right of her unyielding anger. At this point in the play, however, Medea has said much but has proved nothing. She remains, for the auditor, a mad, impassioned woman alone and outside of society. One may recall how Euripides' chorus befriended Medea. She is rejected by Jason and by the reigning society; but she is not rejected by the people who affirm the rightness of her position. Here, no one stands by her. Medea *is* alone. She begins the play beyond the the edge of the social order.

However, while Medea remains outside of society's center, she is, as character and actress, at the center of the drama. With the extreme focus afforded her by Seneca's stagecraft, she pulls the focus of the auditor away from the *human* center of society to her own center beyond it. It is from this base, that she will work to make her position central in *all* spheres. In the first moments of the play, she has already moved to center stage and has taken sole possession of it. As she sets herself at the center, blends the gods into her self, and seeks to make her own prophecy come true, the map of relationships will change. First, however, she must stoke the fires of her anger—her primary weapon and the source of her power. She launches into an oratorical fanning of the flames.

Norman Pratt observes in this connection that "in the case of *Medea*, there is a clear parallel with [Seneca's] essay *De ira*. Comparison of the two shows the same conception of *ira* [—that is, *anger*—] and its progression from the initial sense of being offended to the ultimate stage of insanity."[12] Yet there is method in this madness; for nowhere is Medea unconscious of the goal or the

means of her insane drive. Nowhere and at no time does she appear out-of-control, pulled unwillingly along by the riptide of emotion. It is through her urging and her approval that this Will assumes an intense life of its own. "Anger," writes Seneca, "is an impulse, and impulse never exists without the mind's assent. For it is impossible that any action concerning revenge and punishment should take place without the mind's awareness."[13] Medea is frightfully aware and frightfully in control. The playwright's use of metaphors such as eruptions, wild beasts, flood, and fire, even his insistence elsewhere that love and anger are insanities, does not bear with it the modern belief that a person (or thing) acting outside the guidance of reason is less aware of the consequences of the action. Medea is fully conscious. She gives passion license and, in return, gains power.

In this way, the Will that Medea urges on as an arson urges a flame is at once her own and, very soon, something larger. For if there is, in this play, a progression in anger from the "initial sense of being offended to the ultimate stage of insanity," there is also an evolution of will from its beginnings in Medea's private lust for revenge to its consummation in a union with a larger, more pervasive, but equally conscious will with a drive of its own. Brunetiére's single will "striving towards a goal and conscious of the means which it employs" is Medea's. But in the darkened void of the stage, behind the solid, lighted presence of Medea, the auditor catches the first real glimpse of the shadow of the larger Will—its shape and mass not yet fully discernable except that it works to enlarge the woman before it. We feel it in the air; and we hear it in Medea's voice.

The person of Medea is more than a *metaphor* for evil or cruelty. She is Medea, daughter of Aeëtes, dark priestess of Colchis, heiress to the lands of the Unfriendly Sea, common-law wife of Jason, magus, barbarian, and now a self-empowered Titan Fortuna weaving a pattern of death. She is, because she is barbarian, a human window on man's mordant, animal past. Hers are the ancient laws, the ancient medicine, the ancient ways that are linked in the stars and the planets, in the mysteries of plants and in the entrails of beasts. She has power beyond Reason: she has command over earth, fire, water and air—the very keystones and cornerblocks of physical existence. Hers is a magical, non-rational, cruel, violent and metaphysical world. She is linked to nature. She is outside civilization. The shadow of nature behind her is her own, and yet there is something about it which she cannot fully contain but merely lens.

Here, the pattern of relationships shifts: The nucleus of civilization holds tightly against the intrusion of the barbarian Medea and against greater Nature. Jason once knew this woman in his days on the Argo. But he has evolved from the warrior/adventurer of legend to the Euripidean strong-souled Greek to the

Senecan statesman. Medea has *not* evolved. Her *natural* humanity is undiluted by civilized progress; and her presence in the heart of the civilized world—be it in Thebes or Corinth or Rome (or, for that matter, in any crumbling city of our contemporary world)—is not merely an affront to taste but a threat to the rather recent and fragile experiment in human civilization. For the Stoic, Medea's world is as real as his own; and the artificial tool or weapon of human reason is civilization's only defense against being overrun and destroyed. Creon does not order Medea into exile simply because she is foreign or even because she is an embarrassment to Jason's rise to authority. Creon banishes Medea because he and his people *fear* her:

> No thought of reputation dwells to check thy hand.
> Then go thou hence and purge our kingdom of its stain;
> Bear hence thy deadly poisons; free the citizens from
> Fear; abiding in some other land than this,
> Outwear the patience of the gods.

Explicit in this edict/plea is that Creon sees Medea as outside of civilization. Also explicit is Creon's fear of Medea's unchecked power—his fear that the gods will *not* bring Medea down and that he and his people are isolated and vulnerable to her power. The gods, if gods there are, *have* been patient. Medea *has* been left to work her violence in the world unabated by personal scruple or divine intervention. Medea reigns supreme and reflects Seneca's own experience with evil behavior. According to William Anderson, Seneca pictures the degenerate state of the world, especially of Rome, as a perpetuation of the state of evil in which the evil-doer enjoys general and prolonged success.[14] No thought of reputation, nor god, nor potent human force dwells to check Medea's hand. She is impervious to arguments of reason wielded by Creon and Jason; and she is fast becoming uncontrollable by main force. In stature and in the effect of her power, she is more like a god than the mortals who oppose her. In the absence of other gods, her will is absolute. Creon knows this; and he knows as well that Medea's power is growing by the hour.

This engorgement of will, in Medea, has outgrown the simple fact of her jealous rage. Although Creon appears to see dimly beyond Medea as the first and only source of this conflict, there exist other cues in the drama that Medea's behavior is no longer entirely an exercise of her personal will. F. L. Lucas has claimed that the chorus of *Medea*, as of all Seneca's tragedies, is irrelevant to the action.[15] A careful reading, however, shows that while the chorus interrupts the thin, foreground action, it supplies a vital link to the historical and thus causal background of Medea's rage and hence to the theme of the play. In the Senecan

plot of being, the exposition of the chorus does not so much illuminate action as enlarge our picture of what Medea is and is becoming.

In the chorus of Act II, the voyage of the Argo is retold. But mid-way through the story, the chorus shifts from its lilting voice of adventure. In this retelling, the Argo has violated the natural order of things, disrupting the former life of humankind and affronting the seas:

> The guiltless golden age our fathers saw
> When youth and age the same horizons bounded;
> No greed of gain their simple hearts confounded;
> Their native wealth enough 'twas all they knew.
>
> But lo, the severed worlds have been brought near
> And linked in one by Argo's hand uniting;
> While seas endure the oar's unwonted smiting,
> And add their fury to the primal fear.

Paradoxically, the revolution of sea-faring commerce and the leap in knowledge that brought Greece and Rome their wealth and underwrote the construction of a state of humanistic brilliance and an empire of civilization is the same revolution, for the stoic, that spread culture thin, allowed the rape of commerce and of warfare to endure, and diluted morality by opening the gates of Rome to savage influences. In the same way, the optimistic Elizabethan voyages of discovery have begun to stale, over the intervening centuries, into voyages of marauding capitalism. We have begun to look at our own culture through Senecan eyes.

To the stoic, therefore, the Argo's contribution to civilization is two-edged. The Argo first brought humanity closer to a single commonwealth of human beings. According to Robert Hicks, central to Seneca's philosophy is the belief that "Every human being is a member of a rational system, an all-embracing commonwealth, the city of Zeus, the community of gods and men. It is to this, primarily, that he owes his allegiance, and the isolated communities which pass for states are only imperfect and reduced copies of it."[16] There is, in the final choric passage of Act II, the hope of the stoic for a wider and more open world:

> The time will come as lapsing ages flee,
> When every land shall yield its hidden treasure;
> When men no more shall unknown courses measure,
> For round the world no "farthest land" shall be.

The distinction between citizen and barbarian, then, is dissolved by the Argo in matters of race. But the distinction between the virtuous and the evil is muddied in the process. Medea cannot be evil simply by virtue of her place of origin; for her place of origin, in the new scheme, is as much a part of the stoic "new world order" as is Rome itself. Yet Medea is a foreign influence *ideologically*. In this respect, she threatens Rome less than she threatens the City of Zeus. If civilization could travel out into the far reaches of the world, then barbarity could travel back by the same route. Jason went out and returned with Medea. Rome went out and returned with countless barbarian gods and cults and an appetite for the "quaintness" of foreign ways. Interestingly, the identities of the conqueror and the conquered are reversed. The problem of the Stoic is to conquer and control the non-rational (the barbarian) without being contaminated by reverse influence. But Seneca is too much a realist to accept that this is possible. There is a risk to crossing the "seas" which separate continents, minds, or schools of thought. Worse, there is a risk to crossing the boundary seas which separate rational mind from irrational body—in recognizing the two-fold nature of human consciousness.

There may come a time, for Seneca, when the seas would be conquered. Perhaps there is, in the lines quoted above, an allusion to the contemporary belief that Rome had conquered at least the physical seas. Yet at the point at which the chorus speaks, the conquering of the seas is far in the future; and the action is haunted by the intimation, "While seas endure the oar's unwonted smiting, / And add their fury to the primal fear." Civilization has opened itself up in order to sally out and defeat Nature. But Nature has entered, and civilization is left vulnerable.

This theme is again taken up by the chorus in Act III, but the mood is more anxious and ominous as it reflects Medea's growing urge to action. The Argo's story—this time of the violent end of each of her heroes—is told with urgency. The theoretical wonder of the city of Zeus stretches across the earth only at the expense of the boundary seas; and it is the seas which first rise up in vengeance. Every hero who had sailed with Jason has met with violent death. The Argo will rot in ignominy on dry land—a ship without purpose; and Jason will suffer the same fate. He will be forced to live a wreck: a former hero, a former statesman, a former father, a man without purpose. Jason will fade and die even over the protestations of the chorus: "Enough, O gods, have ye avenged the seas: / Spare him, we pray, who did but go on ordered ways." Medea's vengeance is here solidly linked with that of the seas; and the chorus bids the gods (who are also party to this vengeance) to show mercy. But the gods that foster human progress are silent. Mercy, after all, is a civilized, human construction.

Creon and Jason have enumerated Medea's sins against civilized law. Yet in the *natural* order of things, it is Jason who must bear the heavier curse; for Jason has violated Nature itself. The will that hunts Jason, that has destroyed his comrades, that is conscious of its own ends and means is the will of the seas and of the gods and of the earth and of the whole cosmic chaos. The bark of civilization bobs and shifts like the Argo on the surface of this will; and it is into *this* will that Medea has tapped. What began in the plot of this *Medea* as Medea's personal revenge is enlarged through exposition. She is an agent and a willing partner in a greater revenge. Each agent will serve the other's purpose. Each action is woven into the other. Medea has become the arm and the sword of Nature, and Nature has become Medea's strength. The incarnation of the Will of Nature in Medea is now complete. The shaping of self, the enlargement of purpose, the summoning of power, the entire definition of Medea's being is finished; and physical action is engaged.

The ghost of her murdered brother, the Furies, the spirits of Nature which all lay claim to Jason's life urge Medea to action in the final Acts. Here, Medea calls the heavens down to earth. The outer realms of Nature constrict upon the inner. She combines exotic herbs from exotic lands and welcomes gods and shades from outside life, from beyond it and beneath it. Then to this teeming orgy of Nature, Medea adds her own blood—hot with passion, one with Nature, the wills united. "Give passion fullest sway!" she cries. "Exhaust thy ancient powers!" It is not only Jason who must quail at this battle cry but every human being who has dared to control Nature and to erect the fortress of reason and of civilization to oppose it. The fortress walls are down: Nature and Medea have breached them.

Death follows swiftly. To appease her own anger, Medea has murdered Creon and Creüsa: the ruling class, the leaders, are gone. To appease her brother's ghost, she kills her first son: the future of the hierarchy is destroyed. To avenge both her violated love and the violation of the seas, she kills her second son in the sight of Jason, whom she lets live with the memory: hope is dead, rebuilding is impossible. As a civilized human being, Jason is finished. He has no king and no kingdom. He has no bride and no family. With Medea at liberty, he has no hope for the future, no society and no peace. In fear, the world of mankind will shun him. Medea lets his mind live, conscious of its utter isolation and feeding on itself until it might find mercy in death. As a wholly-evolved Everyman, Jason stands alone in a wash of disconnected humanity.

Medea, the Will triumphant, escapes into the air. She escapes but does not evaporate. She is a continued presence in Nature, cause of civilization's decay. In the Elizabethan translation of Thomas Newton, Jason and Seneca exhale a final, hopeless cry in the wake of a prevalent evil:

Go thou, through high aetherial stages post,
And *prove* there are no gods where e'er thou go'st![17]

The fear that shudders through this final cry is not simply a personal or political fear. Nor is this a fear of the deviant individual driven by passion, insane, out of control: the Medea of Freud or Euripides. It is a fear, rather, of the individual *in control* and acting willingly as an instrument of a conscious, counter-rational, ancient, and powerful "otherness." Henry and Walker have observed that "the primitiveness, barbarity and scarcely veiled terror in this play have their counterpoise in the anonymity of civilized progress and achievement."[18] It is civilization itself and cohesive humanity that is at risk; for Medea's barbarity, in the end, is the barbarity of the natural will triumphant, unfettered by the civilizing rational mind. Medea's barbarity is a power capable of dragging humanity back to its primitive roots or of annihilating it altogether. Although foreign to rational precepts, Medea's barbarity is as common as human anger or unrestrained emotion—windows owned by each of us that look upon the natural soul.

The fear expressed in the play, therefore, is not of a disruption of life by an alien force but by the resurgence of a familiar power: of the mother of human history, drive and will; of the internal state whose law is instinct, ambition, and survival; of the empire of the self without scruple in which violent reactions are catalyzed by petty injury; of the world of Nature which surged centimeters below the rotting hull of Roman civic life, and of, perhaps, our own. It is the fear that once the human will is reunited with the will of Nature, we have at last entered, and must lose, Goll's "final struggle."

As happens in the cycles of human history, such themes are once again timely. But even more than his themes, Seneca's dramaturgy and stagecraft offer the contemporary theatre a timely model for new work. From the icon-based pieces of Robert Wilson or Suzanne Lori Parks, to the minimism of individuated experience in Beckett's last works, to the renewed interest in symbolist stasis and Noh interiorization, the contemporary theatre is rediscovering a non-illusionistic language of theatre. As interest in staging the dusky or bright hemispheres of human spirituality grows as well, this language will afford us the means to present the "other" (the non-rational, the non-material, the supra real) on its own terms through suggestive incarnation rather than through illusionistic impersonation. Seneca shows us in his *Medea* that the metaphysical can be grippingly physical, and that, by so many means available to us, the non-corporeal may have access to the stage.

Notes

1. August Wilhelm Schlegel, quoted in E. F. Watling, *Seneca: Four Tragedies and Octavia* (London: Penguin Books, Inc., 1966) 9.

2. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

3. Ferdinand Brunetière, *The Law of the Drama*, trans. Philip M. Hayden (New York: The Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, 1914), in Bernard Dukore, ed., *Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) 723.

4. Dana Ferrin Sutton, *Seneca on the Stage* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1986).

5. Seneca, *Epistulae* 9.16, quoted in translation in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenic Philosophers*, V. I (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 277.

6. Cary Nelson, *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1973) 6.

7. Norman Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1983) 90.

8. Moses Hadas, *A History of Latin Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1952) 7.

9. Yvan Goll, "Preface to *The Immortals*, 1918," trans. Walter Sokel in *An Anthology of German Expressionistic Drama* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1963) 9.

10. Attributed to Appius Claudius by F. L. Lucas in his *Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1922) 19.

11. All quotations from the *Medea* are from the translation of Frank Justice Miller, *The Tragedies of Seneca* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1907).

12. Pratt 90.

13. Seneca, *De Ira* 2.4.2., in Long and Sedley 419.

14. William S. Anderson, *Anger in Juvenal and Seneca* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1964) 152. Anderson makes particular reference to *De Ira* 2.7.2-3.

15. Lucas 13.

16. Robert D. Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962) 142-43.

17. Seneca, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, trans. Thomas Newton, T.S. Eliot, ed. (London: Constable and Company, 1927).

18. Denis Henry and B. Walker, "Loss of Identity: *Medea Superest*?" *Classical Philology*, No. 62 (July, 1967) 180.