

Self-Construction in Senecan Tragedy, with Special Reference to *Medea*
and *Phaedra*

by

Siobhan Rachel McElduff
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to the required standard



Dr. J.G. Fitch, Supervisor (Department of Classics)



Dr P.L. Smith, Departmental Member (Department of Classics)



Dr. A. W. Jenkins, Outside Member (Department of English)



Dr. A. Hughes, External Examiner (Department of Theatre)

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University of Victoria

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Supervisor: Dr. J. G. Fitch.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate a particular and prominent element in Senecan tragedy, the element of self-construction. By discussing the characters in relation to their process of self-construction (the process by which a character attempts to create a secure and independent identity in the course of a drama), I hope to illuminate a hitherto largely ignored feature of Seneca's dramaturgy.

Chapter one focuses on former scholarly critiques of Senecan tragedy and shows that there is a Renaissance in the field of Senecan drama and an increasing number of favourable critical studies available to the reader. It discusses both those who believe that the plays are important as Stoic dramas or historical documents, and those who have more literary concerns (such as an interest in the self-reflexive nature of Seneca's characters). It concludes with the assertion that the plays are extremely concerned with the establishment and maintenance of a secure, self-assured *persona*, which is constructed in the course of the drama and whose function is to enable the characters to obtain their deepest wishes and to protect themselves against the claims of society.

Chapter two lists and illustrates the materials of self-construction and shows how they are utilized throughout Seneca's dramatic corpus. The materials of self-construction are often such things as the emotions, the soul, or the name (often used as shorthand to represent an entire literary-mythological tradition) and precedents in the history of the family or the individual which are used self-consciously by the characters to build a powerful identity that can withstand the claims of others.

Next the thesis turns to *Medea* and *Phaedra* (in chapters three and four respectively) to portray how the process of self-construction works in two specific characters. Phaedra, because of her inability to fashion herself on any single model for a continuous time, is weak and ineffective and unable to consummate her desire for her stepson Hippolytus. She attempts to employ the materials of self-construction outlined in chapter two but is unable to use them to create a coherent identity. Medea fashions herself primarily on her monstrous literary-mythological tradition and, using this as her model, constructs an identity.

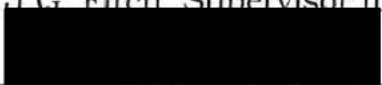
Chapter five looks briefly at Seneca's Stoicism to see if there is any common ground between the philosophy and the plays. His Stoicism is seen to be concerned mainly with the individual and the care of the self, which should be shaped and trained into the correct mold: the wise man is one who looks inwards and finds satisfaction inside himself and who is indifferent to the world. Despite some surface similarity between the sage and the dramatic characters, it is likely that all the tragedies and the philosophy share is an extreme concentration on self and the belief that the self can be shaped into whatever form we wish.

Finally, I conclude with a summary and some suggestions on the meaning of self-construction. Self-construction rests upon a belief in the importance of the self and assumes that the needs of the self are more important than the claims of society. In addition, I argue it is a heroic pose and should be recognized as such; it inspires admiration as well as abhorrence. However, despite its heroic nature, self-construction is doomed to failure because the self cannot live up to all the demands made of it, and, most importantly, the self is not a perfectible object.

Examiners:



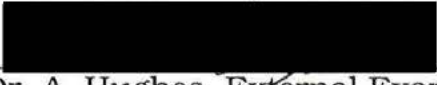
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Dr. A. J. Jenkins, Outside Member (Department of English)



Dr. A. Hughes, ~~External~~ Examiner (Department of Theatre)

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.

This thesis is an examination of a feature of character in Senecan tragedy, an investigation into the tendency of characters to construct an identity during the process of the drama, rather than appearing with ready made personalities that are then exposed to us through dramatic action and interaction. Senecan characters, I wish to argue, fight for selfhood rather than reveal it.

Of late there has been a considerable revival of interest in the dramatic corpus of Seneca. This is partially because the tragedies of Seneca appear to have a unique resonance and peculiarly modern feel to them. Their insistence on the essentially bestial and savage nature of man, a nature that lurks just beneath the restraining veneer of civilized behaviour, seems to reflect and predict our own modern experience. Their baroque language, their strangeness and unfamiliarity, their difference from the accepted canon of classical works now seem an advantage rather than the opposite. Ted Hughes' translation of *Oedipus*¹ expands on the extravagance and violence of Senecan language rather than recoiling from it:

his fingers had stabbed deep into his eyesockets
he
hooked them gripping the eyeballs and he
tugged
twisting and dragging with all his strength
till they
gave way and he flung them from him his
fingers dug back into his sockets he could not
stop

¹ London 1969.

he was gibbering and moaning insane with his
 fury
 against himself gouging scabbling with his
 nails²

These words form a savage celebration of the possibilities inherent in the fierce rhetoric of the playwright. The recent commentaries on the plays no longer apologize for the eccentric nature of their subject, but instead appreciate Seneca for being Seneca, rather than calling him a third-rate Euripides. As this felicitous state of affairs has been developing for more than thirty years now, it remains to explain how this thesis hopes to provide something new. Recent critical works (and older studies -- but more of those later) have tended to ignore the significance and importance of Senecan character. By rarely addressing the issue of character in the dramas, they suggest, by default almost, that it is an irrelevant element in understanding the plays.

This may be a reflection of current trends in critical theory. The study of character is no longer fashionable in literary circles, but has given way to other, more modern ways of approaching texts. In part this is a reaction to the nineteenth-century critics who spilt rivers of ink on the *minutiae* of the 'personal' (and often extra-textual) lives of literary entities. We are no longer interested in the childhood of Shakespeare's heroines, or the children that Lady Macbeth may or may not have produced, nor do we consider that the creation of life-histories for what are, after all, fictional beings forever confined to a certain amount of lines, is an appropriate goal for the scholar. Realism in character is not the sought after ideal that it once was, nor is character itself considered

² Hughes, (1969) 51.

central to critical theory. In addition to this we are suspicious of those who insist on the importance of the character within the text, believing that such critics ignore the interrelationship of all the elements in favour of just one aspect. While one can accept the dangers of a character-based approach, it is always wise to be aware that

Character, in itself, is no more dangerous an abstraction than any other critical term; we are just as liable to compromise our critical well-being in the name of *symbol* or *vision* or *theme* [Harvey's own italics].³

Character, in other words, is one of the many aspects of a text that deserves to be examined; the danger lies not in the examination but in the misuse and misinterpretation of that examination. This thesis will attempt to study the dramas through the framework of how the characters evolve throughout the text, rather than insisting that we must remove them from their context and analyze them as if they were autonomous units, independent of the other textual elements.

As I wrote above, the subject of Senecan character does not appear to have been fully discussed in modern criticism of the tragedies. Dryden's approving comment on the naturalness of Seneca's *Andromache*⁴ was supplanted by T.S. Eliot's assertions that

The characters in a play of Seneca behave more like members of a minstrel troop [than dramatic

³ W.J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London 1965) 209.

⁴ "The masterpiece of Seneca I hold to be that scene in the *Troades* where Ulysses is seeking for Astyanax to kill him; there you see the tenderness of a mother so represented in *Andromache* that it raises compassion to a high degree in the reader." J. Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy: and Other Critical Essays*, Ed. G. Watson (London 1962) 40.

characters].....The characters of Seneca have no subtlety and no 'private life'.⁵

The long acceptance of these plays as rhetorical declamatory 'set-pieces' spoken by one or two readers has diverted attention from their dramatic features.⁶ Instead of a discussion of character or action we tend to find debates about themes, philosophies, and Greek originals. This is not in itself a problem, but becomes one when most critics show a continuing tendency to linger on such issues, exiling Senecan tragedy to the realm of the non-dramatic, ignoring the unity of each play for a comparative or thematic approach. From O. Regenbogen's *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas* of 1927 to Pratt's *Seneca's Drama* of 1983 one can see a continuing insistence on the episodic and mechanical nature of Senecan characterization. Characters are said to reveal more about theme and Senecan concerns than about themselves, or simply to function as moral oracles. Some scholarship has become mainly concerned with the central meaning behind the dramas, assuming that their author wrote them with a specific purpose in mind.⁷

The Stoicizing approach, for example, seeks to read the plays as literary illustrations of Stoic philosophy, the expression of which is often seen as the sole merit of the dramas. N. Pratt can write an entire volume on the plays while declaring

⁵ *Selected Essays* (London 1954) 69, 70. One could counter with the statement that a literary creation cannot have any private life, that the existence of a fictional character is all in the public's (or reader's) eye.

⁶ On the question of stage production see footnote 31 below.

⁷ For one example see "Lieux communs: sententiae et intentions philosophiques dans le Phèdre de Sénèque" (*REL* 42 (1964) 276-301) where J.M. Croisille concludes with a section entitled *Enseignement de la pièce*, which argues for a Stoic meaning behind the drama.

The poetic style of the dramas is even more monotonous than the prose works because it is less varied,⁸

while Tietze also believes that Seneca's drive to represent his characters as models of *inconstantia* reduces their literary effectiveness and dramatic merit.⁹ The single-mindedness of this approach can also lead to an emphasizing of the influence of Stoic values and literature and a resultant devaluing of the effect of non-Stoic modes of thought. This leads Rosenmeyer to write

The reason [that Seneca shows influence of Virgil, Ovid, and Horace] is often that all of them are indebted to Stoic ways of looking at the world.¹⁰

In other words, not only does Seneca really only have one idea to express, but he is only interested in other writers for how they also express that idea. The tragic form becomes a mere mechanical device used to express certain specific philosophical truths and meanings. This effectively ignores the powerful demands of form and genre in the Classical world and espouses a simplistic approach to the choice of literary format. The various genres are not simply a shopping list for the aspiring poet. The epistle or moral essay does not automatically translate into tragedy. Nor does it appear that the plays present Stoic values as useful or desirable.

⁸ N.T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill 1983) 30. See also the review of this by G. Staley (*Phoenix* 41 (1987) 81-84) where he takes it as given that Senecan tragedy lacks the highest literary merit.

⁹ V.S. Tietze, "The Psychology of Uncertainty in Senecan Tragedy", *ICL* 12 (1987) 133-41. Tietze argues that these figures are barely characters because their function is not to act in characteristic manners and express themselves in a different mode to other elements in the drama, but to express by means of *exempla* the moral message of the playwright -- just as the chorus or prologue might do.

¹⁰ T.G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (California 1989) xvi.

Instead they seem to posit a world where anger, hate, and fury are the 'goods' that men strive for. Stoicism seems to provide some generalities but few specifics. However, it is possible to argue that

Seneca's Stoic convictions may have led him to probe the extremes of human behavior, but his artistic response to that challenge contains more than was dreamed of in his philosophy.¹¹

Or as Aristotle wrote:

correctness in poetry is not the same as correctness in morals, nor yet is it the same as correctness in any other art.¹²

Critics such as Pratt often seek to establish authorial intent rather than expressing a particular interpretation. They would appear to deny that a text may contain many more meanings than a writer intends, and that the writer's intention may be impossible to recover -- especially if some two thousand years and a multiplicity of cultural changes have intervened in the meantime. Pratt argues that the purpose of the dramas is to express moral philosophy, that they hold tragic explanations of the theories found in Seneca's prose works. This assumes that the writer was interested in conversion of others to Stoicism by means of "semi popular exhortations of Neo-Stoicism".¹³ If, indeed, Seneca's purpose is really to show "the horror of human degeneracy", this does not necessarily indicate that he was driven by a 'Stoicizing' urge.¹⁴ The Stoic meaning

¹¹ R.J. Tarrant, *Thyestes* (Atlanta 1985) 25.

¹² *Poetics* 24.4.

¹³ Pratt, (1983) 30.

¹⁴ Indeed, both Tacitus and Lucan devote a great deal of their respective literary output to the theme of the decline of the Roman nobility and character. In Lucan the civil war is the external sign of that decline, being a time when normal moral behaviour (reverence for country and respect for family bonds) are inverted. Tacitus similarly sees

that Pratt finds is often so vague that it could apply to any writer with an interest in violent emotions. His approach favours clear Stoic meaning over good drama: the wretched *Hercules Oetaeus* (a play of exceedingly doubtful parentage) thus becomes “the culmination of Senecan drama”,¹⁵ less for any inherent value it may hold (and without any proof that it is later than the rest of the corpus) than because it most fully elucidates the ideal of the Stoic man who rises above the world and its emotions. Writing character is seen as the same as writing moral epistles and essays; it becomes another way for expressing opinion, less a part of the tissue of drama than the expression of an idea imposed from the outside.¹⁶

The result of such attitudes has been an abandonment of the study of the plays' literary features, and the continuing insistence by some people that any such features are there to serve the god of philosophy or political rhetoric. Rosenmeyer displaces the catalogue from its literary context and sees it as reflecting not so much literary fashion as the desire of the Stoic to classify and control nature. While detaching the list from specific dramatic context and making it a vehicle for an unrelated message from the author, he insists that “Senecan dramatic language reveals itself most fully in the catalogue”,¹⁷ despite the fact he

the craven behaviour of the senators under Nero and Caligula as indicative of their descent into slavishness.

¹⁵ Pratt, (1983) 228. For the supposed primacy and lateness of the *Hercules Oetaeus* see also B. Marti, “Seneca’s Tragedies: a New Interpretation” *TAPA* 76 (1945) 216-45.

¹⁶ This results in acceptance of many speeches at face value: for instance Thyestes is seen as a Stoic because he expresses some traditional Stoic *sententiae* on the virtues of the simple life. However, it is clear that these comments are not to be taken at face value, for later on he expresses contempt for poverty and its exigencies -- and he is, in fact, hardly committed to a life of obscurity if he is willing to become co-regent.

¹⁷ Rosenmeyer, (1989) 168.

has defined it as an essentially non-dramatic element. Rosenmeyer argues that the plays' mechanics are expositions of Stoic natural philosophy and, as such, come primarily from Seneca's own prose works rather than the world of Roman literature.¹⁸

This approach considers that the important aspects of Senecan tragedy are not the actual literary elements in the works but the features that have nothing whatsoever to do with drama. Such attitudes are not confined to the branch of criticism discussed above but can be found also in those who value the plays for their illustration of Seneca's opinion and attitude to the principate. Obviously, it is impossible to ignore the fact that these are imperial tragedies written by a man who became the first minister of an infamous emperor, but it is reductionist to insist that they must then reflect his own political experience in clear and minute detail. For J. Bishop the characters are important only insofar as they are part of the alleged political code of the drama.¹⁹ Different literary features of the plays become indistinguishable from each other because (as with the 'Stoic' critics) they all reveal the same information equally. Bishop's assumption that every single word in the tragedies refers to some event or feature of Roman political life is bizarre, yet he shares with other critics his assumption that the plays should be understood as relating primarily to something outside themselves, rather than as

¹⁸ This fuels his insistence that Seneca's prologues pre-empt the events they describe and thus must arise from a specific Stoic source and intent. Such an attitude ignores both the fact that sometimes a Senecan prologue will simply set the scene (as in *Thyestes*) and that the prologues of Roman comedy often reveal the entire plot.

¹⁹ *Seneca's Daggered Stylus* (Hain 1985). Such authors often forget that we do not know when these thespian endeavors were actually penned -- with the sole exception of *Hercules Furens* which was very probably written sometime before the demise of Claudius (in A.D.54) as it appears to be parodied in the *Apoc.*

literary units. For instance, W. Calder III argues that the figure of Atreus in *Thyestes* is constructed not as an effective element in the drama but as an admirable example for Nero to follow.²⁰ Character (or any other element) in the play cannot be important for its role in the drama but must be seen as serving some greater purpose. This insists that tragedy is nothing more than political propaganda in literary form, rather than literature with a political element, and refuses to realize that

Background, biography, and historical setting can take us -- unless we are utterly simple-minded determinists -- only so far in understanding the constellations produced in each fiction.²¹

If one compares the attitude of Calder with that of G. Braden in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition*,²² it appears quite crude and mechanistic. The 'Roman question' cannot really be answered just by reading the plays as documentation, or as illustration of specific instances in Roman history (for one thing, we know too little of what actually occurred), an approach that is analogous to a literary critic reducing Dickens' novels to the status of evidence for the poverty of particular classes in London and ignoring their status as fictional interpretation.²³ A less mechanical approach is to see the works as

²⁰ Calder justifies this by an appeal to Stoic philosophy, declaring that Atreus "wins his *libertas*, freedom from the fear that is constituent of the human condition. In the Stoic sense all else becomes indifferent" ("*Secreti Loquimur*" in *Seneca Tragicus* Ed. A.J. Boyle (Berwick 1983) 184-98, 189). This would appear a serious misreading of such texts as *De Ira* and *De Clementia* where Seneca recoils from Atrean behaviour and counsels firm control of the emotions, something which Atreus clearly lacks. Besides, only a fool or a madman would suggest to his Imperial charge that the way to a higher freedom was to kill and/or degrade anyone perceived to be in his path.

²¹ A. Weinstein, *Fictions of the Self 1500-1800* (New Jersey 1981) 13.

²² New Haven 1985.

²³ This is not an argument that historical background should not be taken into account by a critic, but an assertion that one would be foolish only to take this into

reflecting partially the social ethos of the time. The topic of Imperial power and privilege is obviously of supreme importance to Seneca and his compatriots. The Emperor is the centre of the Roman world, just as his palace is the nexus of all political life in Rome. As Braden and others have indicated, Stoicism adapted itself well to the tenets of sole rule:

Stoicism's deference to fate is ultimately consistent with the exercise of monarchic power.²⁴

This is a philosophy that moves very easily from the acceptance of one supreme power (Fate) in the universe to the embracing of another (The Emperor). The Roman (and Greek) image of the great man as continually acting and outdoing his countrymen reappears in the monarch's impulse to be the best individual in the race.

Imperial derangement is in great part the derangement of the competitive classical ethos with nowhere to go.²⁵

This madness for competition is reflected in Seneca and the literary sources of the period;²⁶ Atreus creates a false picture of his brother in *Thyestes* in order to explain to himself his own need for competition. The logic of royal excess (I rule therefore I dominate through action)²⁷ may

consideration. Cf. A. Motto and J. Clark's assertion that "attention to single, isolated "questions" and "problems" in Senecan drama has tended to fracture and fragment the criticism, seemingly reducing the plays to illustrative bits and parts". (*Senecan Tragedy* (Amsterdam 1985) 28)

²⁴ Braden, (1985) 18

²⁵ *ibid.*, 14.

²⁶ Lucan's civil war epic *Pharsalia* portrays Caesar as motivated almost completely by his desire for complete dominance and as competing in the end as much with his own self image as with his real opponents. Nero made sure, through judicious use of bribery and intimidation, that he always won the first prize in the 'competitions' he entered.

²⁷ Even Seneca's *De Clementia* (addressed to Nero) speaks of mercy in terms of constant action on the part of the ruler.

motivate the portrait of characters driven to indulge in insane vengeance or obsessed by the need to continually conquer.²⁸ However, it must be remembered that while the house of the Caesars could represent the image of power grown beyond control, imperial power also represented civilized order and government. Thus the madness of Caligula or Nero does not so much raise hopes for a return to republican control, as it creates fears of a descent into anarchy.

Men of Seneca's generation saw that order could not be sustained as a vision of known truth, that disintegration was not remote but actual, and that once set in motion it would irresistibly spread.²⁹

Loss of sole rule translates into loss of social order, while sole rule itself becomes a threat to the continuance of that order. The tragedies, it is argued, take these fears and integrate them into structure and patterns of behaviour, interpreting experience rather than reporting it.³⁰

²⁸ For the former see Atreus, Medea, Clytemnestra, for the latter Hercules.

²⁹ D. and E. Henry, *The Mask of Power: Seneca's Tragedies and Imperial Rome* (Chicago 1985) 54.

³⁰ A note of caution: it must be remembered that Seneca had a variety of different experiences of Imperial rule. He was tolerated under Caligula, exiled under Claudius, and a favourite for a good deal of Nero's reign. Nor should we be too quick to declare that the Neronian era was an "age dominated by the principate and the nullity of political freedom, an age characterized by servility, hypocrisy, self interest, self-abasement, abnormal cruelty, extravagant vice, violent death, and most especially by the public inversion and perversion of Rome's efforming values and institutions in the service of power, a theatricalized, in the strongest sense hypocritical age, in which inevitably sensitive men and women turned inwardly to find the meaning of self in life" (A.J. Boyle, "Senecan Tragedies: Twelve Propositions" *Ramus* 16(1987) 78-102, 96). This smacks more of Hollywood than history. Considering the anti-Neronian and pro-senatorial slant of our sources, it is a mistake to take their accusations at their face value. F. Ahl has argued that in fact, Nero, as an artist, accorded singular freedom for artistic expression ("Power and Politics in Roman Poetry" *ANRW* II.32.1, 40-124). The problems mentioned by Boyle were certainly not confined to Nero's reign or even to the principate: the last century of the republic provides a wealth of examples of savage treatment of enemies, not to mention political corruption at Rome. For two examples of this see Plutarch *Lives* Tiberius Gracchus 9-10, 19.4-20.4 etc., and Gaius Gracchus 16-17, Sallust *Bellum Jugurthinum* 8.1-2, 15.1-16.

However, the remnants of Republican tragedy that we still retain show a close connection to Senecan tragedy in theme and content, indicating that it may not be possible to approach these dramas from a solely Imperial context. What we have is certainly Roman drama, but can we be sure what manner of Roman drama it is ?

It would seem that to see the plays as philosophical tracts or historical documents is to run the risk of ignoring the fact that these are literary and dramatic creations. One should not ignore their essentially theatrical form, and the demands that this places on the playwright. Whether or not they were ever staged (and I agree with D. Sutton and L. Herrmann³¹ that they are perfectly stagable as long as we do not demand cinematic realism), they still conform to the demands and discipline of the dramatic genre. The essentially theatrical nature of Seneca's characters (they delight to parade their inner thoughts and dramatize each experience) complements the nature of the text they occupy. Seneca in his plays would appear to speak the language of the theatre far more than the words of philosophy.

There are other methods of criticism that depend less on social and philosophical context and more on contemporary critical techniques. These seek to interpret the plays primarily as literary works rather than dogma or biography. C. Segal works through the framework of Freudian theory in his study *Language and Desire in Seneca's Phaedra*.³² This volume focuses on the theme of desire that powers the play and the imagery and poetry it generates. Characters are not personalities, but

³¹ *Seneca on the Stage* (Leiden 1986), *La Théâtre de Sénèque* (Paris 1924).

³² New Jersey (1986).

emblematic, emotionalized focal points for ethical conflicts that are crystallized into highly elaborate imagistic language.³³

Segal (despite some intimation to the contrary in his introduction) often seems to imply that Seneca consciously created characters to reveal a modern psycho-analytical understanding of lust. It is hard to believe that he actually intended to describe an Oedipal struggle between son and father -- even if we can read it as such.³⁴ (This interpretation does ignore the fact that it is a mother figure that begins the cycle of desire and destruction, not the son -- a sort of reverse Oedipal cycle.) Segal is the most radical and intensive of the recent critics in his approach to character in the tragedies. While his work does take a psychological and linguistic turn, he is extremely interested in moving to a new and concerted interpretation of character in the plays, seeing it partially as an outward manifestation of certain deep symbolic currents in the dramas. However, in his interpretation, characters are not totally confined to existing as stylized symbols; they also function as literary constructs according to the needs of the text.

An analysis of all the recent scholarship would be impossible in this introduction. There are no definite trends truly identifiable in the

³³ *ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ The dangers of projecting Freudian theory backwards are illustrated by S. Rice when she insists that Artemidoros (unlike Freud) believed that dreams function mainly as predictions not as expositions of the unconscious mind and that "dreamed acts and objects signify social events rather than private, sexual vicissitudes". Our misinterpretation of his interest (he has been taken as a sort of precursor to Freud's theory of dreams) stems from a projection of our concerns onto the past ("The Future of Dreams: From Freud to Artemidoros" in *Before Sexuality* Ed. D. Halperin, Princeton 1990). The quotation is from Page 17 of Halperin's introduction). For a discussion of the difference between our own and the ancients' meaning of sexuality (it is argued that they lacked a notion of "sexuality", but instead thought in terms of the act rather than the actor) see Halperin's *100 Years of Homosexuality* (New York 1990).

more literary (as opposed to philosophical or historical) critics. Most of the former have tended to concentrate either on short articles on various aspects of the plays (which makes it difficult to exhibit a consistent attitude) or to produce commentaries,³⁵ where the necessity of explaining a multiplicity of concerns (from Latin grammar to mythological background) tends to prohibit the development of a single critical approach. As the focus of this thesis is on a feature of Senecan character, it appears more useful to turn from general trends in order to concentrate specifically on scholars' views of character in particular.

Senecan character has never held a 'privileged' position in scholarship. Certainly no-one ever dreamed of asking a question equivalent to 'how many children had Lady Macbeth?',³⁶ because very few scholars have argued that the plays deal with characters rather than types. Critics have seen little unity or development of character in Seneca. C. Costa comments on the "overriding importance of the individual scene",³⁷ and this refrain is picked up by others:

In an Imperial play, what is enacted in one scene hardly ever leads onto what we see or hear about in the next, either as a causal or even temporal sequence.³⁸

³⁵ Such as J. Fitch, *Hercules Furens* (Ithaca 1987), E. Fantham, *Troades* (Princeton 1982), R. Tarrant, *Thyestes* (Atlanta 1985).

³⁶ I should make it clear that I do not think that we should ask such a question, but am merely indicating how criticism of Senecan characters has never really followed a consistent character based approach. C. Garton's "The Background to Character Portrayal in Seneca" (*CPH* 54 (1959) 1-9), G. Barthouil's "Cohérence psychologique de la Médée de Sénèque" (*Dionisio* 52 (1981) 477-13), C. Gill's "Two Monologues of Self-division: Euripides, *Medea* 1021-86 and Seneca *Medea* 893-977 (in *Homo Viator* Ed M. Whitby, P. Hardies (Bristol 1987)), and Fitch *Character in Senecan Tragedy* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1974) are some of the exceptions.

³⁷ *Medea* (London 1973) 5.

³⁸ Henry and Henry, (1985) 5.

But Senecan drama is not quite as disjointed as some have assumed. In both *Medea* and *Thyestes*, there is a clear development of plot and a well-defined sequence of action. The same is true of *Hercules Furens*, *Troades*, and *Phaedra*. In most of these dramas, attention is focused on one or two major characters who accompany the play through to its end. Certainly, Seneca's *Phaedra* is no more dislocated than Euripides' *Hippolytus*, where the heroine disappears abruptly halfway through the plot, leaving us to concentrate on the previously underdeveloped Theseus and Hippolytus. This does not mean that Seneca is a better or worse playwright than Euripides, but merely one with a different focus. Attention is often focused by critics on themes rather than characters as unifying forces for the drama.³⁹ Mans believes that what is important is the "message that the emotions must be controlled to prevent instability of character"⁴⁰ rather than the instability of character itself. None of the contributors to *Seneca Tragicus* (a collection of essays on the plays) attempts to posit a theory of character for Senecan tragedy, preferring a focus on individual features in the plays. However there is a growing consensus on the essentially self-reflexive nature of dramatic identity in the plays: self relates to self rather than to others. W.R. Johnson says of *Medea* that she is

from the first obsessed with her freedom, with
the constraints on her freedom, with her

³⁹ E.g. "The theme of death unifies *Troades*" G. Lawall, "Death and Perspective in Seneca's *Troades*" *CJ* 78 (1982) 244-52, 244. A thematic approach can be useful at times - it is obvious that certain themes are important in Senecan tragedy, but it also can be distorting if it relegates character to the role of a mere carrier of thematic material.

⁴⁰ "The Macabre in Seneca's Tragedies" *AClass* 27 (1984) 101-19, the quotation is from page 114.

bondage to the disorders outside and inside her.⁴¹

For C. Gill the central monologue in *Medea* 893-977 operates in a different mode from that of Euripides' heroine, and indicates a shift in dramatic discourse and concerns. It is

much more a soliloquy [than Euripides 1021-86]:the pattern of motivation for infanticide articulated in the speech is one in which Medea responds to herself (especially to her character, and her past) rather than the others immediately concerned, her children and Jason.⁴²

Senecan characters are described as indulging in constant public discourse with their internal faculties. The self splits between its own needs and that of its context:

Senecan dramatic speech works rather than mediates that split; the speaker does not so much address that situation as go beyond it into an area all his own.⁴³

It is this area of a character's public discourse with him/herself that my thesis intends to explore, for this appears to be an unusually prominent feature of Senecan dramaturgy. The construction of identity during the process of the drama is a recurring feature of how the author treats character. For certain figures, nothing is treated as a given save the implied basics of the mythical tradition -- and elements in that tradition are often reinforced by the characters themselves, who make references to their own literary heritage. Character is created through the

⁴¹ "Medea Nunc Sum: The Close of Seneca's Version." in *Language and the Tragic Hero, Essays on Greek Tragedy in Honor of Gordon M. Kirkwood* Ed P. Pucci (Atlanta 1988) 87.

⁴² (1987) 31.

⁴³ Braden, (1985) 47.

language and efforts of the protagonist as scene follows scene: it is not revealed.

There appears to me no insurmountable problem in saying that Senecan drama shows an extreme interest in character, spending more time on the issue of establishing a distinct self and identity in each play than on formulating action -- even in the light of Aristotle's advice to authors.⁴⁴ Of course, any distinction between character and action must be tentative since the two are interdependent features of stagecraft: one cannot really divide what the character is from what he does. However, I feel that Senecan character demands attention, drawing the mind of the viewer away from what is happening to why it is occurring. To appropriate a comment of C. Glicksberg regarding Pirandello's dramas,

It is not the action itself, whatever it may be, that is the focus of interest but the interpretation of the action by those involved in it.⁴⁵

The playwright, then, creates individuals who employ certain literary devices and materials (which are outlined in my chapter on the 'The materials of self-construction') to establish and embellish identity . In Seneca's tragedies, character is not "a more or less irrelevant figment of the reader's imagination, inimical to adequate perception of the work in which it figures",⁴⁶ but rather is an essential feature of dramatic structure. I intend to concentrate on the ways characters constantly

⁴⁴ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that action, not character, should be a dramatist's prime concern, and that the main purpose of character was to create action rather than being a source of interest in its own right.

⁴⁵ *The Self in Modern Literature* (Pennsylvania 1963) 76.

⁴⁶ B. Hochman, (writing on New Criticism's theory of character) *Character in Literature* (Ithaca 1985) 18.

attempt to push themselves to the foreground of our attention, and most especially on how this peculiarly Senecan trait manifests itself in two individual plays, *Medea* and *Phaedra*. The mannerisms of self-construction may be similar in both dramas, but the end results are antithetical. However, before proceeding, I would like to clarify my view of the importance of character somewhat. In arguing that we should pay more attention to Senecan characterization, I am not arguing that these *dramatis personae* are realistic characters that we can know “in the round”. They are, very definitely, literary constructs, that move, speak and act as the author wills and according to the needs of the text. Thus, although I will employ critical shorthand and often speak as them as real people (e.g. “Medea acts” rather than “the author depicts Medea as acting”) this is only for the sake of brevity and conciseness rather than from a belief that Medea actually has an autonomous will and an existence like that of an actual individual. Furthermore, I merely wish to take a character-based approach to the plays, rather than insisting that characters are the only element of importance that can be discussed with reference to the dramas.

I would like to suggest that these characters’ struggles with self-construction are battles for a *persona* that does not depend on others’ approval or agreement to function: Atreus willingly pursues his own selfish pleasures against the will of the people, Medea breaks from society completely with the murder of her children (a murder whose main purpose is to give her personal satisfaction), and Phaedra’s inability to fashion a secure identity for herself ends in her suicide -- a last

attempt to adopt the role that society set out for her. On the subject of identity in Shakespearean drama, J.P. Driscoll wrote

poses and role performance shape the *persona*, which expresses the image of real identity that the conscious ego tries to project into its social context. The function: to make specific impressions on others, and to clothe and protect.⁴⁷

Similarly, a completed *persona* in Senecan Tragedy will function as a sort of defense mechanism against others and society. Identity is social only insofar as it seeks to impress others in the public sphere. It makes few concessions to the values and functions of organized society. In this fictional universe, concern with the self has eroded concern for others.

To depict fully the process of self-construction, it is first necessary to look at the materials that the characters employ in their relentless drive to fashion a perfect self; thus the next chapter turns to the plays to illustrate the elemental substances used in a character's process of creating a *persona*.

⁴⁷ *Identity in Shakespearean Drama* (Lewisberg 1983) 23.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE MATERIALS OF SELF-CONSTRUCTION.

Out of talk, appearance, and manners
I'll make an excellent suit of armor;
and in this way I'll face malicious people
without the slightest fear of weakness.

They'll try to injure me. But of those
who come near me none will know
where to find my wounds, my vulnerable places,
under the deceptions that will cover me.¹

Most Senecan characters are not born but give themselves birth. From the moment of their entry into the drama they are supremely self-aware and concerned with the establishment and the maintenance of an identity. The real concern of the plays might be said not to be the actions accomplished by the characters, but the creation of the proper self-image through action.² This is especially true of those dramas that focus on a single personality: *Medea*, *Hercules Furens*, *Thyestes*, *Agamemnon*, and *Phaedra*. Identity, in these dramas, is not something to be revealed, but an object to be built out of certain materials. What follows in this short chapter is a survey of the basic materials used in founding *personae* and the manner in which they are used in various plays and by different personalities.

The process of self-construction can occur mainly within the time frame of the play or it may have been completed at an earlier stage,

¹From "Aimilianos Monai, Alexandrian, A.D. 628-655." in C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. Trans. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, Ed. G. Sardis, (New Jersey 1975) 173.

² To phrase it differently: "The play, then, . . . is about the violent creation of an unreal identity, a mask of limitless freedom that will be proof against the realities of brutal and unintelligible powers" (Johnson, (1988) 87).

before the drama opens. The former is the case in *Phaedra* and *Medea*. In *Phaedra* the heroine seeks from the start to establish a *persona* that is at odds with the nurse's definition of her character,³ while Medea makes repeated references both to her process of becoming and finally to her state of being: [*Medea*] *fiam* (171), *Medea nunc sum* (910). In *Hercules Furens* the opposite is true; the hero has already fashioned a secure identity before the action of the drama starts. The characters in the play make constant references regarding the foundations of Hercules' personality (his knowledge of his descent from Jupiter which lends legitimacy and meaning to his labours, his supreme reliance on his own strength in all situations)⁴ which elucidate the prior process that made a man into a Hercules. In the construction of an identity the desired end is often a monolithic character like an Atreus or a Medea (these are, after all, the ones who obtain their heart's desire): a static individual state that has no chinks or weaknesses or any possibility of change.

Before I begin enumerating the materials involved in self-construction, I should note a difference between the process of self-construction and the result of that construction. The audience for the fashioning of identity is often nothing other than the self that is being manipulated: "The Senecan hero offers a challenge not to his fellow soldiers or to the enemy but to his own reluctant self".⁵ In other words,

³ She insists that she is doomed through her heritage, cast off by her husband, the occupant of the unhappiest situation possible; the nurse declares that she is in fact *Thesea coniunx, clara progenies Jovis* (*Phaedra* 129).

⁴ E.g. 439-48, 462-62, 207-48, 782-829 (compare his behaviour in the underworld with that of Orpheus at 569-90).

⁵ R.A. Brower, *Hero and Saint; Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (Oxford 1971) 163.

Medea and Phaedra (and other Senecan characters also) are trying to act out and establish a role for themselves, before themselves, prior to performing that role for others. Medea largely ignores the relevance of others to herself (dismissing her nurse's advice, turning her scenes with Creon and Jason into opportunities to expound on her own situation and brushing aside their questions) until she requires them as spectators of her finished *persona*. Similarly, Atreus ignores the frightened squeakings of his attendant and the claims of his brother, focusing inwards on himself, until he uses Thyestes as an audience for the revenge achieved by an *effectus Atreus*.⁶ Others may view the process of self-construction, but it is not until its completion that they are required by the self in question.

On returning to the elements of self-fashioning one finds that in Senecan drama the emotions tend to be described in impersonal absolute terms. They seem to exist not to be felt but to be used. Phaedra uses *Furor* (in this case the fury of love) as an excuse to paint herself as a victim of, rather than an active participant in, her emotions for Hippolytus: *Sed furor cogit sequi/peiora* (*Phaedra* 178). Instead of being part of a character's being, emotion is made into an impersonal entity that can be persuaded to enter into (or leave) a body to obtain a required result. Medea can then work herself into a frenzy by incantations and appeals to the frenzied powers of the underworld, using these forces to

⁶ I.e. a fully formed effective Atreus, as distinct from a merely *iratus* one (see *Thyestes* 180). There is often a distinctly theatrical element at the close of these plays, sometimes there is even a full-scale theatrical performance on the part of a character: witness Medea's stage-managing of the death of her final child, the arrangement of the soldiers as an audience to the demise of Astyanax and Polyxena in *Troades* (1068-1103, 1118-1164), Atreus' elaborate arrangement of the stage before he reveals the death of his (Thyestes) sons to his brother.

create in herself a state of passion rather than allowing that condition to develop naturally (*Medea* 740-849). Atreus expels *Pietas* at will:

*Excede, Pietas, si modo in nostra domo
umquam fuisti*

(*Thyestes* 249-50).

Passions are all seen as absolutes -- one cannot be part modesty and part love;⁷ in this dramatic universe there is continual internal war until one quality drives the other out -- or at least that is the basis that the characters found their emotional states on. If the emotions are exterior forces that seek to command the soul, the soul is also addressed as though it were no part of an organic whole with the physical self. The self address that is a constant feature in the drive to self-construction begins often by an address to the *animus* as if it were an extra-personal other.⁸ The soul is another material to be manipulated rather than part of the self to be treated with care. The *accingere anime* of Clytemnestra and Thyestes' *Quid anime pendes*⁹ occur in similar dramatic moments where the protagonists feel a faltering in purpose and wish to encourage themselves by goading their external spirit. By addressing the 'I' as an 'other' a degree of dispassionate control can be obtained over one's identity, which can then be shaped more at will.

⁷ Cf. *Phaedra* 428-30, also *Agamemnon* 109-13. Where a character remains in a compound state of emotion (such as is the case with the miserably confused *Phaedra* in *Phaedra* 1175-90) the result is an incomplete process of self-construction. *Phaedra*'s inability to fashion a personality around her desire for Hippolytus, and to ignore the claims of other emotions (such as *pudor*) leaves her bewildered and ineffectual as a self-willed character.

⁸ There are 25 uses of the form *anime* in the tragedies (excluding *Hercules Oetaeus*); none of these appear in *Hercules Furens* where the character is so sure of his own identity and purpose that he feels no need to exhort himself or encourage a faltering spirit.

⁹ *Agamemnon* 192, *Thyestes* 423. "His [Seneca's] heroes address their 'great souls' in the ebb and flow of moral and emotional debate" (Brower, (1971) 168).

Another material of self-construction is the name, which is used in self-address or in self-reference to an unusual extent in Seneca. Names are used in etymological word-play¹⁰ at times to illuminate a character's real ignorance of the situation, as in Oedipus' comment that

*ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur:*¹¹

an obvious ironical undercutting of the hero's own self-image and public face. In general, the name is used in a more calculated and unusual fashion. It is used not only to identify a character (though in general characters tend to identify themselves by their relationships to others -- as Juno, Thyestes, and Phaedra all do in their first moments on the stage)¹² but also as a type of shorthand in establishing personality. By referring to a fixed mythic persona, as Medea does with her [*Medea*] *fiam, Medea nunc sum* (171, 910), a character declares the model she/he is going to fashion her/himself on. Our heroine is not going to be Medea but a Medea; she is not becoming herself but a type -- the type of evil woman Hippolytus lists her as in *Phaedra* (*Phaedra* 563). The name as representing a model of behaviour is also used in *Thyestes* where Atreus rebukes himself as being nothing other than an *iratus Atreus* (*Thyestes* 180).¹³

¹⁰ This also appears in Greek tragedy, the most famous example being Ajax's play on the supposed derivation of his name (from *aiai*, the cry of pain or grief) in the Sophoclean drama bearing his name (*Ajax* 430).

¹¹ (*Oedipus* 216). The word play here is the supposed derivation of Oedipus from the greek verb 'oida' (to know). Oedipus's intention here is to stress the knowledge implied by his name, but ironically, he only manages to reveal his very real ignorance. The gods have fashioned a more complex riddle than the Sphinx's.

¹² *Hercules Furens* 1, *Thyestes* 404, *Phaedra* 85-92.

¹³ Regarding Atreus' speech at 176-80, Braden writes: "The speech is essentially self-address, a rousing of oneself to action. The past figures only insofar as it supplies motive for response, but the real business is Atreus' confrontation with a self image to live up to

The literary-mythical tradition supplies *exempla* that can be stepped into like a suit of clothes. In a stage beyond these examples, Hercules uses his own name as a yardstick of value, so caught up in being Hercules, the demigod, he can only discuss everything else in relation to himself.¹⁴ Repetition of his name reinforces his own sense of importance and shores up a personality offended by the fact that someone lifted his hand against his family.¹⁵ This use of the name is only found in the plays that concentrate on the creation or exposition of one forceful personality.

Other mythical materials for self-construction are not one's own tradition but the examples of one's family. Phaedra makes repeated reference to her own heritage and lineage. The deeds of her own mother are used in debate with the nurse not only as excuses but also as a pattern of behaviour that she is somehow forced to copy. Because Phaedra wants to be seen (and to see herself) as passive victim rather than active adulteress, she uses the love affairs of her family as reasons for her own passion and as examples that she 'must' follow:

.....*nulla Minois levi*
defuncta amore est, iungitur semper nefas
(*Phaedra* 127-8)

. . . part of what he sets before himself -- like Nero and Medea -- is his own name; the phrase *iratus Atreus* is offered as a reproach but it resonates in its isolation as something a bit more impressive; a play title, maybe, like *Hercules Furens*. (1985) 42.

¹⁴ Cf. *Hercules Furens* 631-41.

¹⁵ Hercules uses his own name twelve times in all (counting both Alcides and Hercules), a remarkable amount considering that he does not enter the action until the play is half over. Four of his uses of his name come at the moment when he realizes his own vulnerability and is trying to defend himself from the knowledge of his failure to protect his family (1143-85).

Similarly, Atreus points to the cannibalistic history of his house, and argues that this has imbued the whole family with a pre-disposition to crime:

*Tantalum et Pelopem aspice
ad haec manus exempla poscuntur meae
(Thyestes 242-3)*

However, he does not use this as an example but as a goad, which stimulates his competitive ethos and provides his already excessive character with another reason why it must go beyond the bounds of common human criminality. Whereas Medea decides to compete with her own past actions,¹⁶ he plans to outshine his entire family. The use of precedents as an urge to extremes is not confined to these characters: Hercules, not content with plundering the underworld, in madness seeks to conquer the sky; Oedipus wants to commit a worse crime on himself than he committed on his father and mother.¹⁷ Clytemnestra is jealous of her sister's sins and wants to overshadow them with some of her own: *Soror ista fecit: te decet maius nefas (Agamemnon 124)*. Unrelated mythical *exempla* can also provide convenient models to copy and outdo: Procne and Philomena become allies and competitors in Atreus' mind (*Thyestes 275-6*), Phaedra wants to be an Amazon (*Phaedra 387-403*), but almost everyone wants to go one better than their relations. The past is seen as a static representation of the present, its deeds are felt to be examples of how those in the present should behave: everyone learns from history but no one benefits from it.

¹⁶ *Medea* 48-50, 129-35, 905-10.

¹⁷ *Hercules Furens* 955-73, *Oedipus* 935-42.

As can be seen from the above, previous actions are of the gravest importance in Senecan drama. Not only do they provide a way to behave that is incorporated in the patterns of the characters' actions, but they also provide the self with an image to surpass. However if the past feeds one's power in the present, the present also gives one the illusion of power over the past. For characters to avenge wrongs may not be enough: they may want to wipe them out as well. Medea and Atreus claim they have altered the past in the final stages of their dramas:

*liberos nasci mihi
nunc credo, castis nunc fidem reddi toris.*¹⁸

Family and social role also come into play in the establishment of identity (despite the fact that many characters concentrate on themselves as individuals with autonomous rights). Some roles which carry important symbolic and social meaning for the audience are utilized more than others in the aggressive drive to self-definition. A character may seek to use her motherhood as a motivation, a way of explaining the impetus to crime -- as Clytemnestra uses the death of Iphigenia to partly excuse her murder of her husband.¹⁹ This is a pretense, as we well know from her relationship with Aegisthus and her later treatment of her children; it may have been the original factor in her enmity, but now her fear of discovery has swamped her desire for revenge. Medea uses her motherhood as symbol both of shame and of Jason's total betrayal of her and the children.²⁰ Her offspring are not

¹⁸ *Thyestes* 1098-99, see also *Medea* 982.

¹⁹ *Agamemnon* 162-70 - she speaks of her 'concern' for her family in 193-200.

²⁰ *Medea* 171, 507-8.

depicted as secure and beloved children but as objects to be used as she sees fit (*Medea* 27). She moves from regarding her children as something foreign and abhorrent to her to believing that she must cast off and destroy the civilized society of Corinth in order to realize her godlike potential: their deaths cut the cord that connects her to humanity. Maternity can also be used as a means of social control; Clytemnestra attempts to subdue Electra by insinuating the poses they both should adopt :

*Hostis parentis, impium atque audax caput,
quo more coetus publicos virgo petis?* ²¹

This is an obvious rebuke of the daughter's rebellion.

The significance of the way these characters behave in such roles extends into other aspects of their identities. If a figure decides to exploit her motherhood in a certain way and to portray her maternity in a particular manner to audience and self, then it is likely that this attitude will spill over into her other actions. Social roles function as a type of self-projection; how Medea behaves as a mother is her model for behaviour in society; she does not act against her children but against Jason and the Corinthian society which rejected her. Abandoning restraint in one's social behaviour²² is an important factor in the establishment of an unrestrained self; it is what Phaedra first seeks to do

²¹*Agamemnon* 953-4. One can see a continuation of this attempt a few lines later when Clytemnestra orders *Modestius cum matre!* Electra rightly is having none of this social pretense and replies *Pietatem doces?*

²² Hercules' immense *hubris* leads him to sacrifice to Jove with hands dripping with human blood (918-24); moments later he is consumed by madness. Unrestrained action in the opening section of a drama is likely to snowball into madness in the end (regard Medea's increasingly demented behaviour as her drama proceeds).

in her attempt to refashion herself and abandon normal behaviour,²³ and Juno similarly speaks of her alienation from Jove before she tells us of her plans to destroy his son (*Hercules Furens* 1-4). Male characters are not immune to manipulating a family role to their own advantage. Atreus significantly redefines the notion of brotherhood by depicting it in purely competitive terms as a state of constant enmity, and Jocasta's two sons in the *Phoenissae* use their fraternal link as an opportunity for civil war (e.g. 586-98).

Not only are family roles used to establish and confirm identity, but also public political images are appropriated for use as avenues of self-expression. The concept of kingship/tyranny is admirably suited to the type of ego-maniacal character that Seneca uses in his plays. With its freedom from normal social controls and restraints, this monarchical image allows a personality to explore his/her full potential for expansion. For a character such as Atreus, being a tyrant is not just a passive role as head of state but involves the active imposition of his will on the populace. The notion of constant action that is an inherent feature in his image of kingship is also integrated in his identity. In the mind of Atreus,²⁴ power is an entity that only exists when it is being imposed; at the same time, he decides that his own character is impotent unless it is active, thus deciding that in order to be happy he must be

²³ This is clear in her address to Hippolytus (609-12) where she attempts to persuade Hippolytus to accompany her in the abandonment of propriety, and in debate with the nurse where she inverts all the nurse's mentions of family roles(242-46). As Braden writes " Social bonds are at best ploys to be cynically manipulated" (1985) 35.

²⁴He says that inaction in revenge is *Quod maximum/ probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor* (*Thyestes* 176).

tyrannical.²⁵ The model of kingship he adopts is one which reflects his personality -- or has royal power produced his personality? Constructing an identity around a public political status is a trait that is found also in other characters: Oedipus first plays a good king concerned for the welfare of his people and then switches into repressive mode when faced with a recalcitrant Creon, while Creon in *Medea* talks like a man who has been reading too many character studies of tyrants.²⁶ Royal power -- like motherhood or family role -- is simply another identity to be added to a character's wardrobe; this explains why an individual can easily slip from one mode to another (like Oedipus above, or Thyestes who begins by shunning power and position and ends up looking down on poverty and mean estate).

The conventional image of the tyrant is the one that predominates throughout the plays; even when a character sees power as a 'good', it is still seen in almost clichéd terms. However, this is not the only literary convention that is used by the players to express their personalities. Hippolytus uses the imagery of the pure Golden Age as metaphor for his own personal purity.²⁷ He has taken a literary ideal and fashioned himself after it. His nemesis, Phaedra, also brings another cliché to 'life' by casting herself as the slave-lover²⁸ who is constrained to be the servant of the loved one:

²⁵ When he has completed his crime he is *regumque regum* and at that moment also declares that he has transcended his private hopes for revenge (912).

²⁶ Cf. *Medea* 195 *Aequum atque iniquum regis imperium feras*.

²⁷ *Phaedra* 482-564. The entire speech is imbued with the belief that because Hippolytus is living in an 'ancient' way he is partaking in the ancient virtues.

²⁸ Though, of course, the Latin love elegists claimed to have lived their literary roles out in real society by languishing at the feet of their beloveds.

...*Hippolyte, vel famulam voca,
famulamque potius; omne servitium feram.*
(611-2)

she begs at one point, groveling before her more than reluctant lover. Her rhetoric (and that of Hippolytus) builds the image of an identity that she (and he) want to believe in. It is (as with other materials of self-construction) easier to adopt a line of thought that already exists rather than think one out for oneself.

Reactions can also slip into formulaic patterns. As the constituent elements of the personality are standardized so are the methods of dealing with situations. Characters react similarly to certain situations; an individual who (or whose family) has sinned in the past will consciously attempt to match or surpass those sins.²⁹ Simple punishment is not enough; it must match the crime. *Decet*, the ghost of Thyestes says of his son's plans for revenge in *Agamemnon*; *Decet*, repeats Clytemnestra in the throes of planning the same crime only a few lines later.³⁰ It must be fitting or it is nothing.

Finally, we come to the issue of inheritance and ancestry. This is important to the characters, not only for the sake of precedents but also for the inherent value with which it imbues them .

*Non veniat umquam tam malus miseris dies
qui prole foeda misceat prolem inclitam,
Phoebi nepotes Sisyphi nepotibus,*³¹

²⁹ Compare the logic of Clytemnestra (*Ag.* 116-124) and that of Atreus (*Thy.* 271-9) - it is practically identical.

³⁰*Agamemnon* 52, 124.

³¹*Medea* 510-13.

declares Medea in debate with Jason. Her heritage is that of Hecate and magic -- but she is also a descendant of the Sun and the daughter of a great king.³² She chooses to gain strength from her ancestry; as Phaedra chooses to claim weakness from her equally noble one. In exile from her home the latter cannot import witchcraft, just despair. It is interesting to note that her first mention of Crete is of its power: *O magni vasti Creta dominatrix freti* (85), but her first description of herself is as sick and beset by troubles. Both Pyrrhus and Hercules claim to gain status and honour from (and for) their fathers.³³ Their ancestry is their excuse for actions that might otherwise be seen as cruel and hubristic; Pyrrhus, especially, uses it consciously to explain his actions and motivation.

Many of the above elements can be used by a single character in order to build identity and hence to obtain power (for it is the well-fashioned and monolithic personality that is the strongest); some such as Medea utilize them all. More often these features are used as a giant smorgasbord to be chosen from at will; the playwright bows out of the drama, leaving us with the illusion that his characters are selecting and perfecting their own dramatic identities. While their frenetic attempts to build up powerful *personae* may appear at times to be successful (especially in the case of Atreus or Medea), one could argue that, in the end, their search for the perfect identity leaves them with

³² *ibid.*, 29-36, 209-20, etc.

³³ In reply to the slur cast on his birth by Agamemnon, Pyrrhus states that he is

*Illo ex Achille, genere qui mundum suo
sparsus per omne caelitem regnum tenet:
Thetide aequor, umbras Aeaco, caelum Jove.
(Troades 344-6).*

Hercules ranks himself with the gods (907) and in his madness speaks of being *returned* to heaven (961).

no essential 'I', only a body that is the container of a restless and perhaps deceptive consciousness; ... introspection, in the form of the interior monologue, becomes an obsession.³⁴

Exactly how that obsession functions may be seen when we turn next to *Medea* and *Phaedra*.

³⁴ Glicksberg, (1963) 179 (writing on Beckett's characters).

CHAPTER THREE:**PHAEDRA.**

Phaedra is a study of the abortion of personality (or, rather, of the abortion of several different personalities), of the failure to create the type of complete and monolithic identity that Medea and Atreus enjoy. While its heroine passes through the same stages in self-creation as some of the other tragic figures, she never succeeds in banishing the hesitancy and self-doubt that cause her downfall. For Phaedra, while she uses much of the same technique to build an on-stage identity that Medea does, is a totally different character. Her method of self-construction involves personification of the emotions besetting her, appeal to her ancestry, self-address and exhortation, and imitation of roles. Yet in the end there is no triumphant ascension into the heavens, no gloating over the defeat of the gods, nor even a temporary victory; just a miserable descent into the underworld loaded down with the heavy dust of Athens.

From the start Phaedra seeks to create for herself a personality that will answer her needs and desires, rather than attempting to suppress her illicit passion. However, she picks a multiplicity of identities as models rather than just one. She constructs herself (or attempts to) around several conventional images; the deserted wife, the enslaved lover, the honourable woman, the virtuous wife. All of these images are used by her for a period and then discarded. While she is indulging in her playacting of a particular role, her adherence to its demands is

complete, yet this does not mean that she cannot change roles with astounding rapidity -- almost in mid-sentence at times.¹

At the opening of the play she presents herself as the enslaved lover, as, sleepless in the conventional manner, she expresses her discontent with traditional feminine activities (99-111). Her description of herself focuses on her weakness, her sickness, and her lack of control over her situation. A reference to her own formidable ancestry merely serves to feed her consciousness of her present wretchedness;

*cur me in penates obsidem invisos datam
hostisque nuptam degere aetatem in malis
lacrimisque cogis?*

(88-90)

This line is all the more startling because it arrives after Phaedra has been boasting of the power of Crete.² The queen is not above manipulating facts if that allows her to ignore details that would prevent her from evading guilt and building a stainless identity.

Slightly later, the desire to escape responsibility leads her to paint a completely personified portrait of *Amor*. Not only does this emotion have force in her eyes, it also behaves with active malice:

*hic volucer omni pollet in terra impotens
ipsumque flammis torret indomitis Jovem*

(185-6).

¹ This is true of the astonishing speed with which she chooses suicide at the end of her first conversation with the nurse (cf. 250).

² M. Coffey and R. Mayer note the use of the elevated terms of *vasti* and *magna* in conjunction (*Phaedra* (Cambridge 1990) 97). This switching of mood is representative of the uncertainty of mind that is shot through Phaedra's character. The alternative view of the situation is given by the nurse who addresses her lady as *clara progenies Jovis* (129) in connection with her title of "wife of Theseus" at the very opening of her address -- it would seem she sees them both as honourable epithets.

Giving consciousness to the force of passion bolsters her argument that, as a member of the house of Minos, she is cursed by the power of Venus. However, Phaedra makes no actual appeal to Cupid; rather, by acknowledging his power, she seeks to evade moral responsibility for her actions. Her copious references to the compulsive nature of the force that (she argues) besets her has led some critics to agree that Seneca has portrayed her character as driven by ungovernable forces.³ Such an opinion takes no account of the difference between ungovernable and ungoverned emotions. Phaedra is certainly racked by a force that rides havoc over her sensibility, but this does not mean that she could not gain control over it. Her acquiescence in her passion is recognized by her nurse, who seeks to force her to come to a realization of the reality of the situation and her own responsibilities:

*Deum esse amorem turpis et vitio favens
finxit libido, quoque liberior foret
titulum furori numinis falsi addidit*
(195-98).

Unlike other attendants,⁴ Phaedra's nurse is successful in her attempt to suggest alternative models of behaviour. However, her mistress, while resolving on behaving decently, still acts in the same manner. Whereas, before she was prepared to act the role of the lover up the hilt, now she is determined to play the ideal chaste woman who is sexually threatened:

haec sola ratio est, unicum effugium mali:

³ See R. Merzlak, "Furor in Seneca's *Phaedra*" *Stud. in Latin Lit.* 3 (1983) 193-210, and P.J. Davis, "Vindicat Omnes Natura Sibi A Reading of Seneca's *Phaedra*" 114-127 (especially 120-124) in *Seneca Tragicus*.

⁴ The *satelles* in *Thyestes* is one example of the unsuccessful type, Clytemnestra's nurse another.

*virum sequamur, morte praevertam nefas.*⁵

Before this resolution to put a period to her life is reached, Phaedra eagerly pursues her bid to construct a powerful identity that will override her morality, despite the nurse's protestations. Yet in the midst of her defense she still acknowledges the truthfulness of her servant's objections. This is a good indication of her vacillating personality, for while she seeks to abandon the constraints that the nurse mentions, she feels she must acknowledge them. If one compares her reaction to the nurse's advice to Hippolytus' later on (483-564), it is possible to see that the secure fanaticism of her step-son will not countenance the validity of the old woman's advice in any degree. Phaedra is less comfortable with her self-constructed image of herself as victim than Hippolytus is with his vision of himself as a pure hunter.⁶ Unlike Medea or Atreus, she needs to have her arguments accepted by others, for the success of her desire depends on her ability to persuade. Thus the debate that follows her initial confrontation with the nurse is exactly that -- a debate, and not just a show of power.⁷ First, Phaedra defends her weakness by

⁵ This role has both Roman and Greek echoes: it is most obviously modeled on the decision of Euripides' heroine to commit suicide to protect her reputation (Eur. *Hipp.* 400ff.) but also brings to mind the decision of Lucretia to commit suicide (admittedly under very different circumstances) for her honour's sake (Livy 1.58.7-12).

⁶ The dubiousness of this vision has been pointed out; F. Ahl writes of the close of Hippolytus' first speech that "the final vision in that speech is curiously suggestive of a primitive and gory triumph, celebrating man the killer, man the *organized* killer" [Ahl's own italics] (*Three Tragedies; Trojan Women, Medea, Phaedra*, (Ithaca 1986)176. The self-deluded quality of Hippolytus' character has also been emphasized (e.g. Segal, (1986) 60-97).

⁷ As distinct from the way Atreus crushes his courtier in their 'debate' scene (*Thyestes* 204-335). This debate (in *Phaedra*) is in the form of a *controversia*, a rhetorical exercise, but it is "in substance a highly charged exploration of Phaedra's predicament, in which she analyses her intellectual and emotional state with alert self-awareness" (Coffey and Mayer, (1990) 27).

declaring the power of love (as I mentioned briefly above): *Amoris in me maximum regnum reor* (218). Yet, shortly after using this well-trying argument, she employs an unreal version of the world to support her in her stance; Theseus will forgive her, her father will ignore her moral transgression, and, most incredibly, Hippolytus will love her in return. This lapse into daydreaming is a constant feature of Phaedra's character. When constructing an image of herself, she relies to a large degree on an unreal portrayal of her situation. Her lapses into an unrealistic view of her situation help support the belief that she can bend Hippolytus to her will.⁸ Faced with the destruction of this fanciful picture by the nurse's common sense, Phaedra turns to another image to fashion herself on; that of the virtuous woman who commits suicide rather than be dishonoured (250-60). This escape from an untenable situation is eagerly sketched out by Phaedra, just as her Amazonian romp through the woods will be, later on. There appears to be no difference in intensity between her enthusiasm for death and her equally strong lust for Hippolytus a few minutes before. The phantasy of her image of herself as Amazon (and thus the ideal companion for her lover) seen in her opening speech and in her delirium at the beginning of the second Act are also part of her improvident outlook on the situation. These dreams also function as an outlet for her emotion; before she has a chance to confess all to the horrified Hippolytus, her mental enactment of her desire to romp at his side through the woods releases some of the sexual energy

⁸ Ahl suggests that she is actually aware of this: "Phaedra seems more obviously aware of her capacity for self-delusion than anyone else in the play" ((1986) 177). Her consciousness of the falsity of the images that she has built up might explain why they are so susceptible to attack by other characters, and why, in the end, they are too weak to be effective aids in her self-construction.

she has repressed.⁹ The image of herself as a sexually-charged Amazon, and the contradiction that this implies, provides another example both of the confusion in her mind and the visually extreme manner in which she thinks.

Her constant changes of mood would seem to indicate that her sudden threat to kill herself (at 254ff.) is not simply a rhetorical gambit. Her resolve to commit suicide is very probably genuine and not just a clever attempt to manipulate the nurse's emotions. This action fits in with her other patterns of conduct in the play, for when faced with a disagreeable situation she merely switches behaviour. Playing roles would seem to feed a real need in her extremely vacillating character -- just as her stepson's adoption of the woodland life appears to be his substitute for a normal family life.¹⁰ Indeed this adoption and changing of roles seems to be indicative of her tragic universe; Hippolytus is vehement in his hatred of women, despite the fact that he plays the ideal son only moments later with Phaedra, while Theseus is the very model of the stern *Paterfamilias* when he punishes his son for his 'wrongdoing', despite the fact that he has been debauching himself in the underworld. However, unlike the male characters, Phaedra alternates between roles, rather than adopting one model of behaviour and firmly adhering to it. This oscillation from model to model is so extreme as to render her dysfunctional.

⁹ Her descriptions of the luxury which surrounds her in 388-402 bring a note of eastern sensuality to the scene, while her reference to the garb and free behaviour of the Amazons recalls a bacchic revel rather than a warlike expedition.

¹⁰ The Amazon life filling in for the dead Amazon mother.

An additional contradictory aspect of the queen's character is the confused nature of the forces which assail her. While love finally gains control over her character, overcoming her moral sense and discretion, on the other side of the equation is the personified concept *pudor*, which fights against the insidious influence of love:

Non omnis animo cessit ingenuo pudor (250).

Unlike Medea or Clytemnestra (who beseech various equally destructive emotions to assail them), Phaedra does not invite *Amor* into her heart: she merely acknowledges its superior power. Her passivity so far is reinforced by her lack of direct address to the god; instead, she describes his nature in an attempt to convince the nurse of his potency (177-194). The nurse immediately tries to oppose this with an equally convincing image:

*vana ista demens animus ascivit sibi
Venerisque numen finxit atque arcus dei*
(202-3).

The appeal of *pudor* is still powerful, however, as (along with her confusion of mind) it is a strong factor in her first decision to commit suicide and so regain for herself the reputation of honour.¹¹

Phaedra's self-construction fails in part because she has no constant view of what model she should use. Once the nurse has persuaded her out of her intention to play Lucretia, she then desires the role of an Amazon. In her next appearance she is adroit in imitating the weak woman who falters under the responsibilities of a ruler. (It should be remembered that in this scene she is acting somewhat more self-

¹¹ *Non omnis animo cessit ingenuo pudor* (250), is the imagery she employs, visualizing shame as an entity fleeing a depersonalized soul.

consciously, as her intention is the entrapment of Hippolytus.) However, she is not just acting for her step-son, but also playing out a 'type'; the lascivious stepmother/woman who will stop at no trick to seduce the innocent. Her behaviour in part springs from a literary tradition that goes back to Potiphar's wife.¹² To play this part she must convince herself of her basically sinful nature (as she attempted to convince us and herself that her family history left her little choice in her actions). This she manages by presenting the deed as already committed, as existing in the past and thus immutable;

*magna pars scela mei
olim peracta est ; serus est nobis pudor
admovimus nefanda*

(594-6).

The sense of fatality in this line recalls her earlier attempt to present the 'fatal' curse on Minos's house as a reality rather than her own wishful interpretation of the past. There is no appeal to her own myth (as infamous in Seneca's day as Medea's) nor any confident affirmation of her name. (In fact, she doesn't play upon her own literary-mythical tradition, but rather attempts to use her family's in order to excuse her actions and give her courage.) In dealing with Hippolytus, she attempts to portray herself as weak and powerless, just as she did to the nurse and audience at the start of the drama. This is shown unmistakably in her endeavor to rename herself before him. She rejects the name *mater* (608) in favour of *famulam* (611) and, only lines later, turns herself from a wife into a widow. However Hippolytus rejects that attempt: *te merebor esse ne viduam putes* (632) is his reply. At this moment she fits

¹² For an interesting (and brief) discussion of this theme in Classical antiquity, see R. Lattimore, "Phaedra and Hippolytus" *Arion* 1.3 (1962) 5-18.

Merzlak's description of her as "distraught, reduced to tears, weak and staggering."¹³

The difficulty is to know if this is her 'real' nature, any more than her bold lies to Theseus on his arrival are proofs of her true spirit. It has been said of Seneca's Medea that she has been reading her Ovid; no less is true of his Phaedra. Her scene with Hippolytus (but little else in the play) is linked to her literary image in *Heroides* 4. Her pretense at coyness (*Sed ora coeptis transitum verbis negant* in 602) and her careful manipulation of language to entice Hippolytus into a sense of closeness with her (by her mention of her 'dependent' relation to him and by subtly describing his beauty as that of Theseus in his youth)¹⁴ mark a new sophistication in her behaviour -- even if her attempt is desperate. So also her continuation in one manner for so long a time expresses her renewed enthusiasm.

Here, in the tensest moment of the drama, where Phaedra is most self-conscious of her actions, we find the boldest addresses of the *animus*. Her *Aude, anime*, (892) parallels the exhortations of other, more concentrated Senecan characters.¹⁵ This desire to encourage her hesitant character causes her to stand outside her own spirit and urge herself on as if she were a member of the audience looking in at the play. The triumphant final *incipit anime* (899) is her farewell to her previously

¹³ Merzlak, (1983) 193.

¹⁴ Her hearty appreciation of his not inconsiderable charms also imitates *Heroides* 4.67-84.

¹⁵ E.g. *Agamemnon* 192, *Medea* 895. It is also (according to P. Grimal) a moment at which she accepts responsibility for her actions: *En ce moment décisif, Phèdre commence par revendiquer la responsabilité démarche; elle décide d'accomplir elle-meme la mission qu'elle acceptée, par faiblesse, de confier à la Nourrice.* ("L'originalité de Sénèque dans la tragédie de Phèdre" *Rev. Ét. Lat.* 41(1963) 297-314, 312.

confused roles. At that moment she mentally transforms her hopes and ambitions into reality, moving from a desire to have a relationship with Hippolytus to a belief that the relationship actually exists. This 'knowledge' of her own criminality gives her the final impetus to address him as a lover. Hiding herself from the truth allows her deliberately to deceive herself: *O spes amantum credula* (634) is her reaction to Hippolytus' promise to act as a substitute for his father. With the failure of her attempt to seduce the boy comes a temporary collapse in her personality. The closing moments of her scene with Hippolytus are a reenactment of her earlier debate with the nurse. She repeats the stages she went through then, in fast forward: the essentially sinful nature of her house, the desire to pursue her beloved no matter what the consequences, and the wish for death that she expressed then are all related again.¹⁶ There is something especially grotesque about the end of this scene; Phaedra kneeling at Hippolytus' feet, reviewing her life at the moment of her death, and turning her stepson's murderous intention into a parody of sacrifice and a culmination of desire:

At one level her lines are a request for death; at another they are a continuation of the seductive discourse she has been addressing to Hippolytus since the beginning of the scene.¹⁷

The defeat of all her hopes, the collapse of her contrived dream of Hippolytus favouring her suit, is paradoxically the point at which she controls the situation, turning a punishment into a longed-for pleasure.

¹⁶ *Phaedra* 698-703, 710-712.

¹⁷ Segal, (1986) 133.

Phantasy and reality merge once more in Phaedra's mind; all Hippolytus can do is flee from her encompassing rhetoric.

It is fitting that we leave Phaedra turning a real moment of danger into a fabricated chance of sexual fulfillment and then see her next acting out for Theseus the fiction of Hippolytus' rape. This role is different from all the others, for now she is being stage-managed by another -- it is the nurse who has set the scene and created a false reality. The queen is no longer creating a role from her own book of desires and images but following the nurse's lead. The attendant has urged her own soul on to action,¹⁸ leaving her passive mistress to copy her example. Her pretended suicide is the servant's version of Phaedra's original intention. This again raises the question of Phaedra's sincerity; is her attempt at silence genuine, or an attempt to convince Theseus of the truth of her statement? The theatrical nature of this scene (and of the heroine's protestations) would seem to correspond with Seneca's previous portrayals of Phaedra's character. The nurse certainly controlled the initial momentum of this miniature drama, but it is possible that her mistress, with her capacity for self-delusion, is convincing herself of the reality of her accusation (which is couched in ambiguous terms).

The heroine's last entrance, with its repeated invocation of *me, me* (1159), indicates another change in character. The confused ideas and motivations that have been part of her identity all along are no longer channeled into one role or another; instead, there is the utter confusion of soul that imbues her last speech. Phaedra herself is such a mess of conflicting emotions that it is hard to place her in one category -- even at

¹⁸ *Phaedra* 719 : *anime, quid segnīs stupēs?*

the moment of her death she expresses clashing reasons for suicide.¹⁹ One motivation for her action is the chance to wipe out her shame, yet her other reason is to pursue the fleeing shade of Hippolytus in the bowels of Hades (1184-90). The latter is hardly an effective way to obliterate dishonour. Some commentators have seen a change in Phaedra's character at the close of the play, arguing that she becomes less deluded, more aware of the truth. M. Ruch writes of her language that

*à l'approche de la mort, il s'ennoblit et, inspiré
par les sentiments vrais, devient d'une suprême
simplicité.*²⁰

This somewhat dubious assertion enables him to argue that, at the end of the drama, what we see is the essential nature of the character of Phaedra, the character of a woman caught between desire and honour. However, it is clear that Phaedra has no better grasp of reality at the end of the play than she had at the beginning. Her belief that she and Hippolytus will have some union in the underworld (1183-4) is surely as phantastical as her earlier conviction that he would love her (240); and her planned pursuit of his shade specifically recalls her earlier intention to follow him (233-5). She also continues her habit of switching behaviour and roles in an uncomfortable situation for, once she realizes the death of Hippolytus and the loss of the object of meaning in her life, she moves from being cold accuser to repentant lover.

¹⁹ "Phaedra's condition can be described as one of fragmented consciousness" Fitch, (1974) 44.

²⁰ "La Langue de la psychologie amoureuse dans La Phèdre de Sénèque" *LEL* 32 (1962) 356-363, 358.

It is obvious from the above that Phaedra is a failure in the process of self-construction. Instead of managing to build herself a secure and powerful *persona*, she is inconsistent, weak, and unable to maintain any identity for a prolonged period of time. Throughout the play she is consistently inconsistent, moving from role to role in order to pursue her desire. If self-construction is in part the ability to put self-delusion into action,²¹ then it is not her deluded nature that prevents her from being a cohesive and effective character. It is her multiplicity of phantasies, her desire to adopt a variety of roles, that ensures her downfall. In this regard she somewhat resembles Shakespeare's Richard II of whom Driscoll wrote that

Disaster finds Richard, who has so often lived like a child enacting a fantasy, still playing so many different people that he cannot establish a coherent identity as a king or a man.²²

Phaedra, likewise, is seduced and betrayed by her constant impersonations.

²¹ As we see with Medea (her claims at *Medea* 163-78 reek of bombast) who puts her delusions of grandeur (delusions her nurse is at pains to quash) into effect.

²² Writing on act 5, sc. 5 31-41, (1983) 33.

CHAPTER FOUR:

MEDEA.

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
like a colossus, and we petty men
walk under his huge legs and peep about
to find ourselves dishonourable graves.¹

Medea as a character is self-fulfilling and self-fueling.² Unlike Shakespeare's Caesar, she does not depend on the adulation of the mob or the admiration of the Senate to bolster her own sense of identity. She is a complete individual, containing within her own frame the materials necessary to establish and maintain individuality and control:

*Medea superest: hic mare et terras vides
ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina.*
(166-7).

With this phrase, she "opposes her own spirit as the sole and sufficient resource against a sea of troubles".³ Not only is she independent of external interference and assistance (unlike Phaedra who is constantly looking outward for approval and sustenance); she herself is more than an individual; she is the entire cosmos gathered into one heartbeat; she is *proficiens* becoming *perfectus*.⁴ This self-sufficiency enables her

¹ Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* Act 1 sc. 2.

² " She looks not to others think and say about her, but to what she finds inside her at any given moment" (Johnson, (1988) 92).

³ Garton, (1959) 6.

⁴ *Proficiens* is Senecan terminology for one striving (in philosophical terms) for perfection (when he will be *perfectus*). For an explanation of this concept, see Johnson, (1986). Whether we can take Medea at her word is another matter; Johnson suggests that Medea at the end of the drama " steps from her balcony out into a chariot that exists only in her mind and plummets to the ground" (*ibid.*, 86). He raises the intriguing possibility that the entire action of the play could be seen as taking place only

finally to step outside the human boundary of the drama into the sphere of the unreal and the divine.⁵ By making herself more than human, she frees herself from the common condition and unleashes her own barbarity :

*La femme refusant les règles de la nature et de la
vie civile est un monstre déchaîné.*⁶

The play charts the drive to become complete and absolute; an urge to construct an identity that will be impervious to the outside world and so untouched by the actions of others. Until the start of the play, her entire energy has been subsumed by her relationship with Jason; with the end of that association comes an explosion of force and a movement towards a revised self. She desires to die in her present form (“*Mortiere*” “*cupio*” 170); she will be reborn as a *cruenta maenas* (849). Barhouil conceives the play in terms of the rise of one power and the fall of another:

*Comme elle a sacrifié le plus précieux au dieux
Jason, maintenant déchu, elle va sacrifier le plus
précieux au dieu naissant, Médée.*⁷

The children are offerings to her godhead, just as her virginity and her brother were to Jason's.⁸ The destructive pattern of the past is repeated,

in Medea's mind. While this is an extreme reading, it does support the view that there is a certain amount of both phantasy and wish-fulfillment in the play.

⁵ She will travel *in caelum* (1022), *inter auras* (1025): contrast this with Euripides' *Medea*, where the heroine merely utilizes the dragon chariot to move from one kingdom to another.

⁶ Barhouil, (1981) 491.

⁷ *ibid.*, 503.

⁸ For her argument that her crimes were committed for her husband's sake, see 276-80, 465-89 etc.

only this time there is a different altar. The recurrent nature of her crimes worries her not at all -- in fact she seems comfortable with a life of endlessly recurring violence: *quae scelere parta est, scelere linquenda est domus* (55). The transgressions of the past appear (to her) to lend the authority of precedent to the future.

Medea's identity has been tied for so long to Jason's that her separation from him creates the frenzied attempts at self-construction that occupy the whole play.⁹ As soon as her love has gone, she turns to anger: anger that manifests itself in action (866, 897). Once her paramour relegates her to the past, she moves straight into realizing her destructive potential:

*iam, iam, tempus est
aliquid movere fraude vulgari altius
(692-3).*

While she still has hope of a continued association with him (as evidenced by her opening speech) her anger is still only verbal and disseminated, her personality confused. After she has been totally rejected,¹⁰ she moves into a long scene of self-affirmation (as witch, barbarian and demigod) and also into action: *hoc age, omnes advoca/ vires et artes* (562-3). Jason's rebuff is her impetus towards revenge and an exploration of her power and identity, for "Medea's purpose in revenge

⁹ For her assurance of the close connection between her and her husband see especially her debate with him (447-559) -- even her crimes have dual responsibility:

*Tua illa, tua sunt illa; cui prodest scelus
is fecit*

(500-1).

¹⁰ Until Jason talks with her she is still willing to be continue being a wife and mother and to direct her energies towards maintaining her family (cf. 137-149).

is partly to establish her identity".¹¹ Her final actions are a manifestation of her inward success at self-construction. *Quis credat exulem?* (857), ask the chorus, once she has triumphantly affirmed her new, self-centered personality.

The isolation of the heroine enables us to focus more closely on the matter of her identity.¹² Furthermore, this isolation does not weaken her sense of self; it merely feeds it by reinforcing her sense of uniqueness. The fact that she is spurned by the Corinthians¹³ as a barbarian allows her to realize fully her own savage heritage and to live up to the name of Colchian. The outsider becomes not just separate from the city but superior to it. This is augmented by the fact that all the characters save Medea are downplayed by Seneca while she is magnified in importance. Indeed,

The other characters are in effect foils to her passionate dialectic: she dominates the play totally.¹⁴

Individuals are relegated to being spectators of Medea's magnificence: she refers to Jason¹⁵ as *spectator iste* (993), before moving on to treat

¹¹ Fitch, (1974) 153.

¹² Seneca's heroine is more isolated than in Euripides' play, where the chorus is initially sympathetic towards Medea.

¹³ Cf. 102-105, 179. Her response to this treatment is to glory in her heritage (207-220), or, as she says in her opening speech, to desire to *Inhospitale Caucasum mente induere* (43).

¹⁴ Costa, (1973) 9. He also notes a reduction in the Jason/Medea scenes. As there is an increase in the number of lines given over to the heroine (not to mention the fact that one long speech of the nurse's is given over to merely reporting her actions and words), perhaps we should see a swing in the play away from confrontation between Medea and others, to confrontation between Medea and her own unruly soul.

¹⁵ Henry and B. Walker are right when they refer to Jason as a "victim not an agent" ("Loss of Identity: *Medea Superest?*" CP 62 (1967) 169-181, 170). However, while it is

the entire Corinthian nation (but still most especially Jason) as her own personal theatre audience -- one is reminded of the performances of Caligula and Nero for which applause was mandatory. The other characters in the drama become a sort of homogenous backdrop against which Medea can play her part. They are the burning Rome she fiddles to:

*non in occulto tibi est
perdenda virtus; approba populo manum
(977-8).*

The Corinthians have no function except to be awed by her extraordinary power. If Medea is going to be an actor (that is to play Medea) she must have an audience whose revulsion and actions stimulate her to greater heights of brutality:¹⁶ *Hac qua recusas, qua doles, ferrum exigam* (1006).

This habit of regarding people as mere tools for her self-construction and gratification allows her to manipulate them more readily; for example, her children can represent whatever she wishes them to be. At times they are *meorum liberum* (929), but, when she wants to escape her ties with Jason and society, they rapidly turn into their father's or Creusa's offspring (1024, 921-2). They no longer are part of her essence but emblems of her past weakness. Their death removes this reminder by restoring her virginity and obliterating her marriage to Jason.¹⁷ In fact their destruction is not enough; she must seek out all possible remembrances of her husband:

true that Seneca has gone a long way to turning him to a feeble figure this does not mean that we should excuse him of all responsibility.

¹⁶ In Senecan tragedy, often "characters become actors before other characters as audience" (Boyle, (1987) 95).

¹⁷ Cf. 983: *rapta virginitas redit*.

*in matre si quod pignus etiamnunc latet,
scrutabor ense viscera et ferro extraham
(1012-3).*

Existence as an object implies passivity; when Medea debates with Creon for the privilege of keeping Jason for herself, she treats him (Jason) as a prize that she has won: *vobis revexi ceteros, unum mihi* (235). Even in conversation with the man himself, she refers to him as a *pretium* (518). He is less important in himself than as what he has cost her. He is the external sign of her past triumph, just as the death of her children and the destruction of the palace are to become the symbols of her new success.¹⁸

This objectification of others spills over into her own treatment of herself (or is it *vice-versa* ?). Indeed, it is the primary way that she constructs her identity,¹⁹ at times even becoming “virtually a narrator of her own psychic state”.²⁰ Most of her time is not given up to planning her revenge but to deciding how she can build the type of personality that can obtain vengeance; Henry and Walker write that she is given more “to proclaiming rather than plotting”.²¹ If Medea is to destroy

¹⁸ Success in self-construction as well as revenge; it is only with their death that she can totally abandon her past identity and step onto the celestial chariot. Her final moment of reprisal is the first point at which she can truly ask Jason *coniugem agnoscis tuam?* (1021)

¹⁹ Sometimes others even fall into the habit of addressing her in the third person while she is face to face with them. Jason and Creon do so in their only uses of her name (496,179). It as if they were accepting her as something extraordinary, which must be treated in a particular way. She herself, while speaking to Jason, says,

*non ut in socerum manus
armes nec ut te caede cognata inquines
Medea cogit* (522-4)

²⁰ Gill, (1987) 30.

²¹ (1967) 175. They see Medea as a figure so consumed with her own search for identity that she is unlikely ever to act at all. While one can agree with this up to a point, it is necessary to emphasize that she does in fact act with terrible consequences and that her past is one long series of actions without thought. It is obvious that this is

Jason, it is clear that she must build an identity that is not dependent on the traditional image of a married woman as supporter of and secondary to her husband,²² so that she can strive for something other than his needs. This is essential if she is to alter her focus inwards, instead of outwards, assisting and drawing attention to herself rather than others. Thus, instead of being concerned with the legend of the Argonauts, she must concern herself with the myth of Medea. She not only responds to her immediate situation but also to her own sense of private wrong²³ (as deserted wife, grieving mother) and also to her own literary image which shores up her confidence and stimulates her to greater crime. The phrase *Medea nunc sum* (910)

resonates with the force of earlier, significant uses of the name in the play, as well as with the force of the literary tradition in which that image has come to be shaped.²⁴

In other words, Medea's power not only comes from the past but from the potential of in her own being:

Medea, knowing she is Medea, can assert the radical independence that is the common goal of the powerless and their oppressors.²⁵

not self-construction without a real end in sight (as Phaedra's is): her rebuilt personality reaches its target

²² There is a continued move in Medea's rhetoric from the language of conjugal relationships (*genialis tori* (1), *thalamis ...meis* (16), *coniugia* (144), *maritus* (279), *coniugem* (418) to kinship (especially after her scene with Jason); *frater* (936, 967, 969) *germanum patrem* (982). This may symbolize her breakaway from her marriage to Jason to a new understanding of different loyalties.

²³ Cf. Gill, (1987) 31.

²⁴ Gill, (1987) 32.

²⁵ Braden, (1985) 34.

That not only allows her to design her character after a larger-than-life literary tradition but also to compete with her own notorious image.²⁶ Medea, unlike Phaedra, does not commit crimes because she thinks she is doomed to (*Phaedra* 112-128), but because she feels that, being Medea, she *ought* to. She only periodically exists in the present:²⁷ the past (witness her constant references to her previous crimes and status) and the future (symbolized by her *fiam* at 171) are of equal importance for her personality. Indeed, she works to bring them together, until both the past and the legend are fulfilled in the final cataclysm. In her mind,

as *Virgo*, the genuine, the complete and perfected Medea existed only in embryo: what obsesses Medea as she confronts her alienation, her sufferings, her prison, is the process of becoming, the progress towards being Medea.²⁸

She wishes to step into the skin of the 'completed' Medea -- the Medea of legend and literature -- and so escape from the control of others;

*Perge nunc, aude, incipe,
quidquid potest Medea, quidquid non potest
(566-7).*

Jason has cut off the acceptable avenues of social expression (wife, mother, supporter of her family), so she utilizes the only other outlet left:

²⁶ It also places her centre-stage by bringing her story into the public realm out of the back alley into which Creon and the Corinthians want to shunt her (114-5,179-8). Legend (as can be seen by the chorus' relation of the tale of the Argo (329-63)) imposes itself on the social conscience.

²⁷ At one point she confuses previous time with current events, places the rescue of the Argo in the past at one moment and then suddenly imagines those events are occurring in the here and now (236-241). Additionally, like many Senecan characters, she feels a need to outdo past crimes (as do Atreus, Phaedra, Oedipus etc.) but also (as these are her own sins) to expiate them (cf. 959-971). However, it should be noted that she surpasses her own crimes and not another's.

²⁸ Johnson,(1988) 93-4. Paradoxically, she not only draws strength from her past and seeks to fulfill its promise but also to expiate it. This is especially true in relation to her previous treatment of her brother.

Medea monstrum.²⁹ Medea's monstrosity is intellectual as well as physical (her name in Greek was believed to mean 'the cunning one'): *crevit ingenium malis* (910). Her intelligence is actively applied to enable her to follow the *Cursus scelerum* rather than the *Cursus honorum*.

Not only does Medea call on her heroic image to stimulate herself to action;³⁰ but she also conjures her own present spirit. She again acts as a type of narrator (or spectator -- for, like the spectator, she employs a great deal of urging and 'outside' encouragement) by objectifying her *animus* and calling on it as if it were an unconnected entity.³¹ The *animus* not only represents her spirit but, in part, her past; in line 41, it is the soul that gave her force in her earlier years. Unlike the figure of the mythological heroine, it is neutral; it forms part of the human qualities that she possesses; it can falter as it does in 895. It must be animated by continual appeal (whereas the literary figure remains constant throughout the drama, unchanging in its absoluteness) and 'convinced' by the necessity for action. It is motivated in part by being combined with the destructive passion, *Ira*. This immutable emotion is personified as a force that batters at the soul until it becomes the primary goad of her actions; *Ira, qua ducis, sequor*. (953). It not only

²⁹ Segal believes that Seneca has established a tension between the terms *Medea mater* and *Medea monstrum* a tension which is symbolic of the greater conflict between the maternal and monstrous within her character ("*Nomen Sacrum: Medea and other Names in Senecan Tragedy*", *Mata* 34, (1982) 241).

³⁰ Braden sees the this rhetoric as an attempt to shame the speaker into action by "erecting a self-image somewhat greater than he is quite capable of being" ("*The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca*" *Arion* 9 (1971) 37).

³¹ All five examples of the vocative case of *animus* in the play are used by Medea in self address (41, 895, 937, 976, 988). The frequency of this form of the word increases as her character moves to its final stages of construction at the close of the drama. She also employs the term almost twice as much as all the other characters combined (12 out of 19 times).

impels her to crime; but in its manifestation of *Furor*, it is the state in which she works her will: it is both agent and condition. While we recognize the power of these forces, it must also be remembered that Medea is not just their helpless victim. She invites these emotions into her soul in a voluntary act and, to a certain degree, commands them in order to achieve her wishes. It is true that she is never very calm, but it is in a moment of cold lucidity that she decides that the best way to wound Jason is to kill his offspring.

*Sic natos amat?
bene est, tenetur, vulneri patuit locus.
(549-50)*

is not said in madness, even if *victima manes tuos/placamus ista* (970-1) is.

Playing the madwoman may well be just another role (albeit one she gets trapped in), for, from the start, she has been carving out several parts for herself. First, it is the ill-used wife who projects her complaints onto to a cosmic scale with her appeal to the *Di coniugales* (1), whose ravings seem to be the product of a mind in disarray, rather than musings on a carefully concerted strategy, but whose schemes are eventually completed.³² After this, we see her consciously acting out the character of a pitiful, weak exile before Creon in order to force him to give her time for revenge.³³ Her ability to mold herself into whatever convenient shape she has in mind must make us suspicious of her later 'possession' by the spirit of the furies. The ghosts of the underworld do

³² Her scheme to revenge herself on Jason by means of his children (25-26) and to destroy the wedding with fire (37-39) is deftly realized by the end of the drama.

³³ Cf. 207-10.

not appear unsummoned: in fact, she spends some hundred lines attempting to call them from their realm (740-842). The emotions she calls on are personified as entities with will and powers of their own so that they are seen to have at times the driving force; *incumbe in iras.....prolusit dolor /per ista noster*. (902, 907-8). As Medea subsumes these passions into herself, an increasing connection rises between her own personality and these personified emotions;

*Quo te igitur, ira, mittis, aut quae perfido
intendis hosti tela?*

(916)

is addressed both to herself and to anger. The figures of her brother and the furies that finally drive her to the slaughter of her first son are another manifestation of *ira* that she summons. The calling of her enraged relation from the underworld is particularly appropriate for Medea's character, given the significance that his murder has for her personality. Not only does she describe and use his dismemberment as a sort of dry run for killing her children,³⁴ but that also motivates their death: *frater est, poenas petit* (964). At a moment of crisis, Medea, like Phaedra, seeks to evade the ultimate responsibility for the death of her offspring by presenting herself as a woman driven to crime by these apparitions from hell. The appearance of her brother is also part of Medea's attempt to insist that she has control over the past and that the

³⁴ *Ad omne facinus non rudem dextram offeres* (915). If this seems tortured and masochistic, one can see her infanticide as *un acte d'autopunition, d'autodesruccion* (G. Rambeaux "Le mythe de Médée d'Euripide à Anouilh ou l'originalité psychologique de la *Médée* de Sénèque" *Latomus* 31 (1972) 1010-39, 1022). Such an analysis recognizes the fact that it is this act which finally destroys her human character as mother and wife (Jason becomes the sole *parens* - cf. 1024) and also the supreme egotism of her final character, which sees the entire closing scene less as way to get vengeance on her husband than to glorify herself: *meus dies est*, so that every deed is made to relate to her character rather than the supposed recipient of her anger

past has continuing significance for the present. This fiction is best expressed by 982-4:

*iam iam recepi scepra germanum patrem,
spoliumque Colchi pecudis auratae tenent;
rediere regna, rapta virginitas redit.*

In addition, by calling on these elemental forces, she hopes to feed on their potency and bolster her character as savage Medea. This is essential because her power is totally a creature of her will -- unlike Atreus in the *Thyestes* she has no position, no status in society to aid her. Her crimes are not "a public demonstration of her social role",³⁵ but a negation of that role: a triumph of her new self over society, of individual disorder over collective order. Thus her symbolic wish to destroy the wedding celebrations (37-39, an emblem of civilized society as compared to her own shady elopement) is paralleled and completed by the fire that destroys another badge of organized community, the palace. The symbolism of the fire extends even beyond its destruction of human order; fire overcomes water (889-90), indicating that the cosmic order has also been breached.³⁶ The conflagration, it appears, spreads outwards both to the rest of Greece and, possibly, to the entire universe: *Quis cladis modus* (884)? So she is revenged not only on Jason but also on those who denied her a place in the fellowship of Corinth and thus forced her to look elsewhere for models of behaviour. Yet, once she has left that society, there is nothing else to flee to; both men and gods are put to flight by her fury. This is a sort of freedom, for she is released from the 'bondage' of her prior relationship, but it is likewise a trap, for she is no

³⁵ Henry and Henry, (1985) 167.

³⁶ Her witchcraft also has the intention of overturning the divinely appointed patterns of things (752-69).

more able to be free as MEDEA than she was as Medea. The dragon-drawn chariot may well be as much beyond her control as was her previous life; in the end, she perhaps will loathe it as much as the man who carried her off from her former existence. Once her original impetus (her desire to hurt Jason and defy his world) is gone there is nothing for her in the isolation of space -- save disintegration; heaven, minus gods, is an echoing void. Self-construction without self-control is madness, pure and simple.

testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos; (1026)

CHAPTER FIVE:

STOICISM AND THE MANIPULATION OF SELF.

Stoicism is a philosophy directed primarily towards the needs and morals of the individual. It rose to prominence in the Hellenistic age, an age when the position of the individual within the community of the city-state was undermined by the collapse of the *polis*, the rise of the Hellenistic monarchies, and the subsequent expansion of individual horizons. With the appearance of the great world beyond the traditional boundaries of Greece came the onset of insecurity in the face of a seemingly limitless cosmos. In order

to reduce the imbalance between the little man and the huge world, to restore dignity to the little man, one of two paths could be taken; either man could be made more important or the world less important.¹

Stoicism took both routes, insisting that the true nature of a man was not dependent on the externals of place and possessions, but on the internal health of his soul.

*L'homme, aidé de sa raison, doit se libérer du monde extérieur; il doit se rendre insensible à ses faveurs aussi bien qu'à ses coups.*²

Self sufficiency was no longer sought in the *polis* but in the individual, the self³ could be fully realized in isolation from the things of men: "the

¹ M. Hadas, *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965) 20.

² Etienne Evrard, "Animus" et "Fortuna" dans Les Trois Consolations de Sénèque" in *Actas Del Congresso Internacional de Filosofia* (Madrid 1966) 154.

³ This essay will treat the notions of self and of soul as being synonymous. Care of the self, is, as will become apparent, care of the soul/*animus*.

individual remains the principle, even when he acts in the world".⁴ The soul was regarded as a corporeal and mortal unit and a microcosmic reflection of the cosmos. It was controlled by the *hegemonikon*, a guiding principle analogous to the divine will which moved in the universe. This ruling principle had either to assent to or reject the impulses that entered the soul: thus anger affects an individual not because the irrational part of the soul has overwhelmed the rational, but because s/he has allowed an impulse from outside to affect his/her naturally reasonable soul. The spirit was not intrinsically faulty and contradictory, but the will and the individual's reason could be weak or ill-taught. This concentration on the correct way to educate the individual to use his or her will in a manner more consistent with reason than passion, may be why the Stoics concentrated less and less on logic and physics and more and more on ethical concerns.

The above is true of the early and middle Stoa (and to some degree of the late). However, here we are concerned only with the Roman branch of Stoicism and, in particular, with Seneca's own homegrown version of this philosophy.⁵ Seneca's version is a sort of cynicized Stoicism (to use Braden's phrase),⁶ with healthy dashes of Epicureanism

⁴ L. Dumont, "A Modified View of Our Origins: The Christian Beginnings of Modern Individualism" in *The Category of The Person* (Cambridge 1985) 97.

⁵ That Seneca differed from his Greek predecessors cannot be doubted. For instance, he seems to hold that soul rather than being one unit is made up of two parts, the rational and the irrational (*Ep. Mor.* 92.1). He also seems to hold contradictory views on the nature of the soul, for while he insists that the soul is the divine part of the body (*Ep. Mor.* 78.10) and is of divine origin (*Ep. Mor.* 41.5), and that in fact it is the body that is a corrupting element (*Ep. Mor.* 92.10), he also argues the soul is unruly and intrinsically difficult to manage (*Ep. Mor.* 94.13, *De Clem.* 1.24.2).

⁶ Braden describes Cynicism as an "attempt in the decline of the *polets* to affirm, as it were, a post political conception of the self" (1986 16). Roman Stoicism is attracted (in his view) to the Cynic's independence from society, and also wishes to affirm an identity that is not dependent on the recognition of one's virtues by another.

and anything else he found attractive. He is interested mainly in that branch of philosophy which deals expressly with moral advice, which formulates rules for the one rather than the many. For him, like his philosophical forefathers, Stoicism is to be used as a technology of the self (Foucault's term),

which permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls' thoughts, conducts, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁷

In other words, the self is an object to be constantly manipulated in accordance with the tenets of philosophy -- which alone can make the soul perfect:

una re consummatur animus, scientia bonorum ac malorum inmutabili; nihil autem ulla ars alia de bonis ac malis quaerit

(Ep. Mor. 88.28).

"Know thyself" is not enough: one must constantly care for the self and remain concerned with it throughout life.⁸ External society is dangerous⁹ -- *homini perdere hominem libet* (Ep. Mor. 103.2) -- and operates in a manner alien to reason and *logos*.

*Le contact des hommes, l'exemple, est l'element le plus dangereux de notre vie, et ce qui contribue le plus à pervertir notre raison naturelle.*¹⁰

⁷ M. Foucault, "The Technologies of the Self" in *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst 1988) 18.

⁸ Even in old age cf. *Ep. Mor.* 68.4.

⁹ *Inimica est multorum conversatio; nemo non aliquod nobis vitium aut commendat aut imprimat aut nescientibus adlinat. Utique quo maior est populus cui miscemur, hoc periculi plus est.* *Ep. Mor.* 7.2. Cf. also 94.53-54, 68-71; 103.1-3.

¹⁰ P. Grimal, *Sénèque: sa vie, son oeuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie* (Paris 1966) 54/55.

Society is unnatural: that is, it does not exist in a manner consistent with the natural state of the universe and God's divine reason. The Stoic sage cuts himself off from the crowd and consciously eschews normative values and beliefs in favour of his own private 'true' values and reasoning.

There is an inherent tension between this belief and the conviction that, despite the dangers that others pose to the equilibrium of the sage (which is always under threat), one has a duty to perform the roles that fellowship in the human race entails.¹¹ Despite assertions to the contrary, the sage to some extent depends on the external world because that is the only place in which he can prove himself (cf. *Ep. Mor.* 9.8). The Senecan Stoic is often a dramatic¹² creature who requires something tangible to grapple with in order to prove to himself his own indifference or goodness.¹³ A Good such as courage gains strength from being challenged, courage *quae periculum facere debet sui*.¹⁴ Without the

¹¹ On the duty of the Stoic see *De Ira* 28.2, *De Tranq. An.* 4.2-8 etc. The wise man can act as doctor to the crowd: *De Cons.* 13.1-3, *De Ira* 2.10.7-8.

¹² A wise man's actions are meant to be recreated in the minds of his friends even after his death. Seneca leaves his friends with the *imago vitae suae* (Tacitus *Ann.* 15.62.1). In his writings he also extols the notion of acting or putting on a front for others -- witness his approving attitude to the one who not only endures his torture but smiles at it, denying the torturer the pleasure of relishing his suffering (*Ep. Mor.* 78.18-20).

¹³ *non potest athleta magnos spiritus ad certamen adferre qui numquam suggillatus est.* *Ep. Mor.* 13.2. It is interesting to note that he is fond of using dramatic and military imagery to describe the sage's behaviour and character, while trying to insist that the true Stoic ought not to seek traditional *Gloria* in the conventional manner (cf. his description of Cato as a gladiator battling against fate *De Prov.* 2.9). Indifference is the ideal condition for the sage, as it is a condition in which he is involved in the world outside, but his equilibrium remains unaffected by its vagaries and weakness. It is this condition which enables a Stoic to be happy no matter what his personal state is, for he recognizes the essential unimportance of objects outside the self, and is thus indifferent to their possession or loss.

¹⁴ *Ep. Mor.* 74.13. See also *Ep. Mor.* 13.3, *De Clem.* 1.12.5.

tyrant who tortures him, or the 'friend' who tempts him, a man's philosophy would be less efficacious. Philosophy's existence is dependent on there being a choice between the right and the wrong: if there were no choice available, men would have no need to train themselves to make correct decisions.¹⁵

However, despite such anomalies in his thinking, there can be no doubt of the importance Seneca places on withdrawal from company and a subsequent self-examination which counteracts the harm of outside influences.¹⁶ One should set aside a certain section of the day for this purpose, a time which should be maintained regularly.¹⁷ Seneca does not consider that the daily task ends with self-examination, but that this process should continue with self-manipulation. One is not just trying to understand the self/soul but also to restore it to the health it naturally had before contact with the vices of men. Like the body, the soul is a corporeal entity that can sicken and which eventually must die (though this issue is somewhat fudged in Seneca's writings),¹⁸ and so must be tended constantly:

The practice of the self implies that one should form the image of oneself not simply as an imperfect, ignorant individual who requires correction, training, and instructing, but as one who suffers from certain ills and who needs to

¹⁵ Seneca believes that wisdom/philosophy was unknown in the Golden Age, when men were good through ignorance of the wrong (*Ep. Mor.* 90.35-37.).

¹⁶ *multum et in se recedendum est* (*De Tranq. An.* 17.3). On the importance of self-examination also see *Ep. Mor.* 16.2, *De Vita Be.* 2.3-4 etc.

¹⁷ *Quicquam ergo pulchrius hac consuetudine excutiendi totum diem?* (*De Ira* 3.36.2)

¹⁸ Compare his certain belief in the immortality of the wise man's soul in *Ep. Mor.* 92.31,33-34 with his uncertainty in *Ep. Mor.* 63.16, 76.25, *De Brev. Vit.* 18.

have them treated, either by oneself or by someone who has the necessary competence.¹⁹

This continual action on the part of the wise man (or more importantly on the part of one who is striving towards wisdom) instills into the unruly soul the memory of certain actions and patterns of behaviour which are to be adopted or avoided. It is less an attempt to discover deep feelings and faults than a “mnemotechnical formula”.²⁰

The soul, because it is perfectible, should be purged of exterior contaminants²¹ (i.e. the passions) or at least should be rendered indifferent to them. The will (*voluntas*, an important concept in Seneca)²² ought to be trained so that it will not assent to outside impulses or to the soul's irrational agreement with them. The wise man is self-sufficient and self-contained; *Se contentus est sapiens* (*Ep. Mor.* 9.13), all things to himself.²³ According to Seneca, he is a facsimile of God in all things, save immortality:

*eandem naturam habent, illo diversa sunt quod
alterum immortale, alterum mortale est
(Ep. Mor. 124.14).*

Such a view seems like egotism and narcissism run wild: the wise man, continually contemplating himself, perfects his soul so that it

¹⁹ M. Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (New York 1986) 57.

²⁰ Foucault, (1988) 34.

²¹ Cf. Persius' advice that one should *Respue quod non es, tollat sua munera cerdo.* (4.51). For Seneca the sage is one who feels not emotions, but their shadows: *sentiet itaque suspiciones quasdam et umbras adfectuum, ipsis quidem carebit* (*De Ira* 1.16.7, also 2.16.3, 2.7.1-2.).

²² For more on this topic see the chapter on Seneca in A.J. Voelke's *L'ideé de volonté dans Le Stoicisme* (Paris 1973).

²³ On the self-sufficient and self-contained nature of the wise man see also *Ep. Mor.* 59.8, 14; 79.26; *De Ben.* 7.2.4-5.

reflects the very essence of divinity.²⁴ Seneca's philosophical writings seem to depict the secretive world of the Stoic's soul wherein he hides himself, only to emerge perfect and inviolable:

in se reconditur, secum est. Quamdiu quidem illi licet suo arbitrio res suas ordinare, se contentus est et ducit uxorem; se contentus [est] et liberos tollit...

(*Ep. Mor.* 9.16-17).

This is the side of Stoicism that Braden chooses to emphasize, seeing this school of thought as primarily a philosophy of the will, the will to define and control the boundaries of the self:

*we restrict our desires less because they are bad in themselves than in order to create a zone in which we know no contradiction.*²⁵

This would allow us to argue that what Stoicism contributed to the tragedies was a potential for caring for the self in a moral vacuum, and that the struggles of the sage towards self-realization are savagely reflected in the dramatic characters' battles for self-construction. However, when we examine the evidence again, this issue appears more complicated. Seneca finishes the above passage from letter 9 with the words*se contentus est et tamen non viveret, si foret sine homine victurus*. The object of the Stoic's manipulation and education of the self is to achieve internal unity and strength and yet remain part of the world.

²⁴ This seems to give the sage a conceit of his own importance that is similar to some Senecan dramatic characters' rampant egoism. However, it should be remembered that there an essential difference between a figure such as Atreus or Medea, who displaces god, and the sage, who reflects god's image.

²⁵ (1986) 20.

Philosophy, the process of shaping self, cannot be separated from virtue (and *vice-versa*); *nam nec philosophia sine virtute est nec sine philosophia virtus*.²⁶ The sage, while he withdraws frequently into himself and concentrates on his own soul, is naturally the best friend and helper to others: *solus sapiens scit amare. solus sapiens amicus est*.²⁷ He lives in accordance with the true rule of Nature²⁸ (while the tragic characters, in comparison, often seek to act in ways which they know to be unnatural and disruptive). Virtue is not something man can shed at will, once he has reached his goal of security; it is the very substance and essence of that security: *neminem bonum esse nisi sapientem* (*De Cons.* 2.7.2).

With this in mind, it appears at first difficult to find a common ground between the tragedies and the philosophy. There is certainly no easy route to understanding how the latter informs the former (or the reverse). It is too simple to say that the plays are examples of what occurs when one abandons the path of philosophy, ignores the needs and concerns of the self for external pleasures and indulges in self-willed vice.²⁹ If this were so, then, according to Seneca's own tenets, we should

²⁶*Ep. Mor.* 89.8, also 90.3

²⁷*Ep. Mor.* 81.12. Seneca places great importance on the notion of reciprocity in friendship (cf. *Ep. Mor.* 94.26), spending a great deal of time and energy on the virtue of gratitude and the vice of ingratitude. Companionship should be a state of continuous interaction between two individuals, as Seneca's own letters to Lucilius show.

²⁸.....*naturae autem se sapiens accommodat. Ep. Mor.* 17.9.

²⁹ Surprisingly Seneca spends comparatively little time writing on the individual nature of the evil man -- even though he is willing to talk about the nature of vice and the vices of the crowd in general. In his prose works, it would appear, he is more interested with projecting and describing the image of the sage rather than his opposite. If he describes the wise man being attacked by the evil man then he is far more likely to concentrate on the correct way to respond to such behaviour than on the reason for or the behaviour itself.

find in all of these wicked individuals constant fickleness and changeability.³⁰ While this may be true of Phaedra (ironically the only character with developed evil tendencies who has any moral shading), it scarcely applies to many of the other sinister characters in the dramatic corpus. Atreus, Medea, Hercules, and Ulysses,³¹ to name but a few, are very models of *constantia* in vice.

What Seneca's Stoicism may share with the tragedies is the belief that one can alter an unsatisfactory self and mold the soul into something other than its present state. The immense concentration of Seneca's philosophy on the question of self and how to model the self (as wise/good/happy man) spills over into his dramatic characters in the form of a complete awareness of self and the soul's boundaries. These characters express the possibility of caring for the self without morality or philosophy (an impossibility in the prose works) but reinforce themselves with their own tremendous egotism rather than by the principle of living in harmony with God/Nature. The concept of a self jealously guarded against the encroachment of others³² is a Stoic image with an especially potent force in the plays; however, this should not lead us to see the plays as a development of the prose works. They do not constitute an expansion of Stoicism but a reflection on its dark possibilities. Where the Stoic has the will of God and reason/philosophy

³⁰ Cf. *Ep. Mor.* 120.20-22.

³¹ Ironically a Stoic hero in Seneca's prose writings (*De Cons.* 2.1, *Ep. Mor.* 123.12) -- something which should warn us against transposing the values of the philosophy onto the plays.

³² It is also a self subsumed to a single end: "The end is that towards which all one's efforts should be directed and also the supreme good. It was assumed that a man's activities should be so integrated and subordinated to a single end." (F. Sandbach *The Stoics* (London 1975) 52/53.

to guide him/her, the dramatic characters insist that they alone set the rules of conduct for themselves and others, and that the drive of ego alone can help them achieve their goals. In their world, philosophy, like morality, becomes irrelevant; all that matters is their tremendous drive towards self-completion. The sage is the antithesis of the dramatic characters ; while both look inwards to themselves, the sage does so that he may look out again on the world in a composed and reasonable manner; the dramatic character does that in order to understand how better to impose his/her wishes on the universe.

CONCLUSION.

At the opening of this thesis I indicated that, traditionally, Senecan tragedy has been judged by external criteria: criticized for its failure to live up to the Classical model of Greek tragedy, or interpreted as Stoic philosophy in dramatic form or as a coded historical document. Recently, however, there has been a new movement in Senecan scholarship, a movement which recognizes the special qualities of the tragedies themselves, rather than insisting that everything in the dramas must be continually reduced to philosophical or historical comment. This awareness of the special features of Seneca's dramatic works has contributed to a growing acknowledgement of the self-reflexive and self-concerned nature of his characters. This thesis hopes to contribute to this new interpretation of the plays by analyzing a feature which is unique in degree, if not in kind, to Senecan drama. This is the tendency of the *personae* to fashion themselves self-reflexively through language. This fashioning of identity is of great importance in the plays and largely determines the way the characters function and move as literary entities.

Self-construction, is, as I pointed out earlier, the process by which a character deliberately builds (or attempts to build) an identity from certain materials during the action of the drama. I pointed out and classified these elements in my chapter "The materials of self-construction". These materials are used self-consciously in most of the plays by the major characters in order to strengthen or create a new powerful identity.

I have chosen two different characters in Senecan tragedy as case studies for the way in which this process of self-construction/self-fashioning works. Both characters had similar aims and came from a similar literary-historical tradition: both were female, portrayed as isolated from the central values and beliefs of the society they were located in, estranged from their husbands, and desiring something outside the bounds of normal human morality. Phaedra wished to commit an act of incest with her puritanical stepson; Medea desired to destroy her errant spouse by slaughtering their children. The former attempted to construct an identity which would enable her to ignore the moral and social demands of society (as expressed by her nurse) by establishing a secure and depraved *persona*. Her attempt failed because of her inability to fasten onto any model for self-construction for any length of time; instead, she flitted from *persona* to *persona*, undecided whether to play wicked stepmother, languishing lover, or devoted wife. Medea, on the other hand, had a clear and consistent vision of her exemplar; she established her identity around her own future literary-mythological image: *Medea monstrum*.

When I examined Seneca's Stoic convictions (especially those regarding the habits and nature of the Stoic sage), I found something similar. The Sage is often construed as a man who withdraws into himself, away from the claims and values of the outside world, in order to concentrate on and form his philosophical self. However, I indicated that this did not mean that we could take the characters in Senecan tragedy either as expositions of the ways in which Stoic disciples should behave or as moral examples of those who have become base and evil because they have abandoned the true path of philosophy. Neither definition of

the purpose and meaning of these dramas seemed adequate, since both take as their starting point the assumption that Senecan tragedy has a single overriding purpose. Rather, I sought to argue that what the tragedies and the philosophy share is an extreme concentration on the question of self, and a belief that the self can be shaped at will into whatever form one wishes.

Finally, I should like to close with some tentative suggestions on how one could interpret this self-construction of Senecan heroes. I think one could argue that in the world of Senecan tragedy there is an enormous fear of dissolution and weakness. I mean by this that there is a general dread that the self, if left unformed and unmanaged, will not be adequate to the needs of its possessor. There is, in addition to this, a desire to protect the self from the claims of others, a wish to create a *persona* that is not dependent on another's approval or acquiescence. This assumes that the demands of self are more important than the claims of the social collective:

Senecan "self dramatization" for all its literary artifice, rests upon.... a view of the importance of the self. It is, among other things, an expression of individual alienation from the central values of the culture.¹

The isolation of Senecan characters is enormous, since they recoil from having to accept social and moral limitations on their behaviour. This is best expressed by Atreus when he declares,.

*Maximum hoc regni bonum est,
quod facta domini cogitur populus sui
tam ferre quam laudare*

¹ Segal, "Boundary Violation and the Landscape of the Self in Senecan Tragedy," in *Interpreting Greek Tragedy; Myth, Poetry, Text*, (Ithaca 1986) 316.

(*Thyestes* 205-7).

The narcissistic tendencies of the playwright's heroes are likewise extreme. They appear to be concerned only with the furtherance of their own desires and the glorification of their own identities. The process of self-construction is a process by which they hope to ward off the disintegration (and thus debilitation) of self and to create a *persona* that will adequately protect the self from social demands and enable its possessor to trample the wishes of others as it gains its selfish desires. Fear of disintegration and the arrogant assumption that one can ward off the self-negating and confining influences of society by constructing an impregnable self is an explosive mixture, bound to result in terrible consequences.

However, before we are led to condemn the self-oriented desires of Senecan characters, I think we could re-consider this question of self-construction:

A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the creator's role, according to one way of seeing things; he's unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle, in his willingness to risk: not all mutants survive.....

A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he's managed it.²

In other words, the pose of self-construction is heroic as well as demonic. There is always something awe-inspiring about an individual's desire to re-create and re-configure him/herself in the face of both the heavens and humanity. The heroism of Seneca's characters ought not to

² Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (London 1988) 49.

be ignored, as the author is working from, and expanding on, a centuries-old tradition that goes back to the Greeks. It is incumbent upon the reader to realize the heroic element in the drive to self-construction, and also to recognize the inevitable failure of such an attempt.

Self-construction is doomed to failure because of two inherent flaws: the belief that the self can be created as an isolated monolith and the assumption that the self is perfectible, and that, instead of endlessly recreating ourselves, we will eventually arrive at some terminal point at which the process of self-construction is complete. To indicate the weakness of the first assertion (the conviction that the self can exist totally removed from others), one could point out the essential dependence of the Senecan character on the recognition of his/her awesome quality by others. Medea's impulse to self-construction not only derives from outside (Jason's treatment of her), she also requires Jason to become a spectator of her magnificence before she can kill her final child, and, satisfied, depart the scene. I have already argued that once her reason (the desire to destroy her husband) for re-fashioning herself has vanished, it is likely that her new self will crumble in the vastness of the heavens. Secondly, it is likely (as is revealed in the tragedies) that a belief in a perfectible self is a defective concept:

since the ideal of perfection is, by definition, unattainable by human efforts, the hero who acts on the principle of all or nothing must perish.³

Self-construction is a process without end.

³ As Glicksberg, in another context, comments ((1963), 18).

Furthermore, the self is not always capable of meeting the demands placed upon it: witness Phaedra's attempts to make it stretch over several different models, until ultimately she is left with nothing. The human Medea is destroyed by the demonic identity she has created: she is forced out of the circle of mankind into the realm of the divine. The identity realized during this self-construction, may, in the end, be seen as inadequate for the character's needs; for example, Hercules discovers that the heroic *persona* he has been at pains to maintain does not enable him to face the deaths of his wife and children (*Hercules Furens* 1228-29).

One question that remains to be asked (especially as we have seen that the combative stance of self-construction is doomed to failure) is whether there are any alternatives to the competitive urge to impose oneself on others. Such alternatives are scarce in *Medea* and *Phaedra*: Hippolytus' image of himself as a pure hunter, akin to the citizens of the Golden age (*Phaedra* 482-539), while it seems an alternative, is in fact a phantasm of Hippolytus' own desires and wishes. It is no more real than Phaedra's own dream that her stepson will love her: this is underlined by the fact that Hippolytus shows himself as bloody and violent -- witness his opening hunting song which is full of imagery that shatters the pastoral notion and his outburst regarding women (1-80, 559-64)-- and by the way this image collapses before Theseus' wrath (when Hippolytus is revealed as hunted rather than hunter). There are other models for existence suggested by Senecan tragedy, however; two such appear in *Thyestes* 344-90 and 391-403. In the former the chorus suggest a philosophical (specifically a Stoic) model for kingship, a model that is the antithesis of the one Atreus fashions himself on. The true king is not

politically powerful or materially wealthy; he has full control over himself rather than others. If one shaped oneself after this image then one would be truly regal: *hoc regnum sibi quisque dat* (390). Finally, the chorus conclude with the assertion that one can only come to real self-knowledge and be oneself when one removes and separates oneself from others (both intellectually and physically). They argue that both of the above ideals, will, if copied, lead to a secure self that is not dependent upon others' acquiescence. Both these models offer something similar to what the process of self-construction does: security of self, independence from the whims of others. In other words, Atreus and the chorus seem to desire something similar in nature. However, both may be equally self-deceived: the chorus' ideal life seems to be only capable of producing someone such as Thyestes (who has been off living the simple life, controlling himself), an individual whose identity cannot deal with the challenges that external society and his brother throw at him. Atreus only succeeds in becoming independent of everyone else's (god's, subjects' *et al*) approval to become dependent on his brother's anguish to provide some meaning for his actions (see his reaction at 1096-99). Absolute security of self may not be obtainable, but grail-like, is still eagerly sought after.

Senecan tragedy, it appears, raises serious questions about the nature of self and the limits and powers of identity -- whether constructed or unconstructed. If the unformed self cannot lead to the fulfillment of hubristic and individualistic desires, so also the constructed self appears to be a dangerous and deficient model to live by. Seneca's characters are not Everyman; not for them the tragedy of the ordinary; instead, they make themselves extraordinary. Whether one

admires or abhors those attempts, their quest is heroic, their goals reprehensible, their effect tragic.

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Vita

Surname: McElduff Given Names: Siobhan Rachel

Place of Birth: Colchester, England Date of Birth: 7 June 1970

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1991 to 1993
Trinity College, Dublin	1987 to 1991

Degrees Awarded:

B.A. (Honours)	Trinity College Dublin	1991
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Honours and Awards:

Carson Biblical Studies Prize	1987
University of Victoria Fellowship	1991 to 1993

Publications:

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Author



SIOBHAN McELDOFF
(Name in Block Letters)

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