

Stoic Passions in Seneca's Medea

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1 Introduction

A cognitive account of the passions can be illustrated clearly by tragedies which depict the sufferings and wrongdoings of persons who are not able to control their emotions. Seneca's tragedies also have been regarded regularly as such an exposition of Stoic philosophical viewpoints, being illustrative for the dangers that can be faced through the lack of a Stoic outlook on the passions.

The philosophical contributions of Seneca provide a clear picture of his emotion theory and the way in which it is grounded in Stoic worldview. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the tragedies in recent literature on Seneca, especially in their relation to Stoic emotion theory. Although there have been upheavals in the discussion about the tragedies in the past century, the relation between the Stoic cognitive emotion theory and the tragedies is still has to be elaborated further. This paper aims to contribute to the current viewpoints on this subject, by specifically examining the relation between Stoic philosophy and Seneca's adapted version of Euripides' Medea.

In order to answer the central research question whether the account of the passions in Seneca's philosophical works is consistent with their representation in his tragedies, several aspects have to be elaborated more in detail. First, the conceptualization of the emotions in Stoic philosophy has to be clarified (chapter 2). This will be examined specifically for Seneca's account of *anger*, as elaborated in his work *De Ira*. Second, it has to be determined to what extent a philosophical interpretation of Seneca's tragedies is justified (chapter 3). When Seneca's emotion theory as well as the relation between his tragedies and philosophical writings are clarified, the Stoic elements of the poem can be identified. For this, the differences with Euripides' Medea will be examined from a Stoic perspective (chapter 4). Next, more in detail, the representation of anger in the tragedy will be compared with Seneca's philosophical account of anger (chapter 5). Finally, conclusions will be drawn concerning the extent to what Seneca's Medea can be regarded as a representation of the Stoic theory of emotions (chapter 6).

2 Stoicism, the passions, and anger

2.1 Stoic philosophy and the passions

In this chapter, Seneca's views on the passions will be outlined. After the Stoic account on the passions has been sketched, Seneca's account on anger as expounded in *De Ira* will be examined more in detail.

Chrysippus states: "It is not true that there exists an art that we call medicine, concerning with the diseased body, but no corresponding art concerned with the diseased soul. Nor is it true that the latter is inferior to the former, in its theoretical grasp and therapeutic treatment of individual cases"¹. For the Stoics, just as the Sceptics and the Epicureans, the philosophical art of soul-healing, correctly developed and properly applied, is both necessary and sufficient for attaining the highest ends of human life². Or as mentioned by Cicero: "Unless the soul is cured, which cannot be done without philosophy, there will be no end to our afflictions. Therefore, since we have now begun, let us turn ourselves over to philosophy for treatment; we shall be cured, if we want to be". This view on philosophy, as a therapy which can heal the soul, can also be identified within the Stoic account of emotions. However, before the Stoic ethics and emotion theory will be examined in detail, its relation to the other elements of Stoic philosophy will be elaborated.

According to a favoured Stoic analogy, philosophy can be compared to an orchard in which logic was the protective outer wall, physics the soil and trees, and ethics the fruit³. Stoic ethics presuppose a Stoic account of physics, which provides an understanding of the world's rational structure and goodness, and of the individual's place in it. The world and its contents consist of two principles: passive 'matter' and active 'god'⁴. At the lowest observable level, these consist in the four elements earth, water, air and fire. Air and fire form the life force called *pneuma*, or breath. This *pneuma* originates at birth, when the natural *pneuma* of the embryo solidifies in a psychological *pneuma*. The *pneuma* is not equally refined in all life forms. In general, three levels of *pneuma* can be distinguished: a cohesive *pneuma* (*pneuma hexikon*) in bones, stones, and wood for example; a natural *pneuma* (*pneuma fysikon*) found in flora and vegetative beings, and a psyche or soul (*pneuma psychikon*). Bearing their psychological monism in mind, three aspects of this monistic psyche can be emphasized: perception, conation (*hormè*) and reason. Reason can only be found with adult human beings.

Stoic ethics starts from *oikeiosis*. This is the natural attachment, in the first place to what is appropriate for oneself (*prothe hormè*). Later on, when one becomes rational, one also cares for surrounding persons (for example the family or town). Further, one can also make decisions in accordance to what is appropriate for all rational people (cosmopolitanism), and in the final state also in accordance with god and the cosmic whole. This provides a foundation in nature for an objective ordering of preferences, on a *prima facie* basis⁵. Being rational parts of a rational nature, man's *telos* is rational selection of the things according to this nature, and fitting one's own specific nature into the universal. A rational animal is by nature something that follows reason and acts in accordance with reason as its guide⁶.

¹ PHP 5.2.22, 298D- SVF 3.471

² Nussbaum (1994), p. 317

³ Sedley (1998)

⁴ Sedley (1998)

⁵ Baltzly (2004)

⁶ Gal. PHP.4.2.10-12 (p.240, ll.18-29, SVF 3.462)

Virtue and vices are considered to be intellectual states. Virtue concerns acting in agreement with nature's rational and providential plan⁷, where vice is founded by the passions, which are false judgments on the natural state of the world. Virtue itself suffices for eudaimonia. No matter how disadvantageous the natural circumstances are, as long as this person is virtuous the eudaimonia will not decrease. Virtue is unaffected by external factors, since aspects which are not under control of the agent do not have intrinsic worth, and need to be handled with indifference. This indifference is merely a 'character trait', not considering aspects which can not be controlled as being good or bad. Such a cognitive approach to emotions was very common to the Hellenistic tradition, for example to Epicurean and Aristotelian philosophy. Although external factors have to be considered with indifference, the Stoic sage can prefer external goods *appropriately*. They have some kind of worth, although they are not related to goodness (*to agathon*), this goodness is not related to indifferent elements. Therefore, they are neither part neither necessary for eudaimonia.

With the passions, according to Chrysippus, a double false judgment is involved. The first concerns the judgment that a specific phenomenon is considered good or bad, and the second the opinion that it is appropriate to react because of this judgment. However as mentioned before, the only things that can be considered good or bad concern the soul, all outer aspects have to be considered indifferent. According to the Stoics, attacking the second judgment can be considered as a therapy which can be used on every person; one does not need to be a Stoic in order to be prone to this technique. However, for a true effective therapy, the Stoic doctrine has to be accepted too. Stoic ethics serves to a large extent the control of the passions. Mental techniques and therapy to serve this goal can be found in the works of for example Marcus Aurelius and Seneca.

The Stoics distinguished four basic emotions, each of them having a broad range of subspecies (pity, envy and mourning for example are derivatives of distress). Although all emotions are false judgments and need to be avoided, it is appropriate for the Stoic sage to have affective responses. The appropriate feelings (*eupatheiai*) to be experienced are joy, watchfulness and wishing (for example kindness, generosity and warmth). Being well-reasoned and not excessive, these differ from their counterparts delight, longing and fear.

When Stoic therapy is successfully finished (which would be the case for the Stoic sage, and almost impossible to reach) the passions themselves are extirpated, however according to Zeno scars will remain. Seneca states that due to these scars, one will experience suggestions and shadows of the passions. Although one is freed from the passions, the appropriate affective responses will remain.

		Four basic emotions	
		Presently at hand	In the future
Good		Delight (<i>hêdonê</i>)	Longing (<i>epithumia</i>)
	Bad	Distress (<i>lupê</i>)	Fear (<i>phobos</i>)

		Affective responses	
		Presently at hand	In the future
Good		Rational uplift / Joy (<i>eulogos eparsis</i>)	Rational wish (<i>boulêsis</i>)
	Bad	X	Prudent caution (<i>eulabeia</i>)

2.2 Characteristics of anger

Now the outlines of the Stoic cognitive account on the passions have been sketched, several characteristics of the passions can be examined further. For the philosophical interpretation of Seneca's tragedies, the *De Ira* is especially important, since Seneca's major figures (like Medea or Phaedra) are driven by passionate anger⁸. Of all passions, anger is considered to be the worst⁹. It also is the most prominently stressed passion in the *Medea*. Therefore, anger as illustrated in the *De Ira* will be elaborated more in detail. In order to compare Seneca's philosophical accounts to the representation of the passions in the *Medea*, several main characteristics of the account on anger in the *De Ira* have been identified. These will be compared to the representation of anger in the tragedy in chapter 5.

⁷ Baltzly (2004)

⁸ Dingel (1973), p.100

⁹ Marti (1945), p. 229; cf. *De Ira* 1.1.1: "maxime ex omnibus tatum ac rabidum"

First, like all emotions, anger is considered to be the *result of false judgment*, and therefore cognitive. Anger is the desire to inflict punishment, and can be induced by present or future harm. It is set in motion by an impression received of a wrong¹⁰. Unlike other emotions, anger is all excitement and impulse, and its insanity is visible due to the bodily expression of anger¹¹. As mentioned, anger implies the involvement of reason¹². Animals and children therefore cannot experience anger but are only capable of a kind of quasi-anger, since they are not capable of giving a reason for their passions.

Second, this false judgment consists of a lack of indifference, or *attachment to external things*. Aspects which are not under control of the agent do not have intrinsic worth and need to be considered indifferent. Virtue itself, which is unaffected by external factors, suffices for eudaimonia.

Third, inner conflict consists of alternating judgments. As mentioned, the Stoics can be considered *psychological monists*: the soul is not divided in different faculties, but consists of one, strictly rational part. Therefore, a tension between distinct faculties of the soul is not possible; hesitation and doubt are considered the result of alternating judgments within the soul. These can alternate in such a fast manner, that they can be falsely experienced as two conflicting faculties at work.

Fourth, anger is considered to *develop in three subsequent movements*. The first movement is involuntary, a preparation, or a kind of threat. The second movement is voluntary but not insistent: one might think the emotional reaction is justified or right for oneself. The third movement is out of control. Wanting retribution at all costs, anger has overcome reason. The first movement can not be eliminated by reason, but might be cut back by constant attention. Nevertheless, the second and third movement can be eliminated by decision¹³.

Fifth, anger can be considered as *willful disobedience*¹⁴. It can only exist if it is approved by reason, since impulse never occurs without the mind's assent¹⁵. After being approved, anger itself is uncontrollable. When anger listens to the reason, and therefore accepts a limit, it is no longer considered to be anger in the Stoic sense. Anger is understood as unbridled and ungoverned.

¹⁰ Cooper and Procopé (1995), p.42 (*De Ira*, 1.1.3)

¹¹ Marti (1945), p.243

¹² *ibid*, pp.17-21

¹³ *ibid*, p.45

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 27

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.44

3 Interpretation of Seneca's tragedies

3.1 Is a philosophical interpretation justified?

In order to make a valid comparison between the representation of the passions in Seneca's Medea and the way they are expounded in his philosophical works, it is necessary to consider to what extent it is justified to interpret his tragedies philosophically. It is likely there will be parallels with Seneca's philosophical works when read from a philosophical perspective. However, in order to be able to interpret the outcomes of a philosophical reading correctly, it needs to be examined whether Seneca has written the Medea strictly with a philosophical aim, or whether his goals were for example merely educational or poetical.

3.2 Stoic approach to tragedy

As has been stated in section 2, all the passions are consequences of false judgment and need to be extirpated. Nevertheless theatre or poetry, for example the Medea tragedy, and their induction of emotional response were acceptable from a Stoic point of view. According to the Stoics, tragedies indeed offer the possibility to contemplate on human behavior from a distance by induction of compassion, but the feelings involved are considered quasi-emotions. They are not affections, but preliminaries, the prelude to the affections¹⁶. Since in theatre one does not approve the judgment that something bad happens to oneself, one therefore cannot speak of a false judgment and thus not of an emotion. This Stoic appreciation of theatre as being appropriate, educational and having cognitive importance as mentioned by Chrysippus, Seneca, and Epictetus differs from other Hellenistic schools¹⁷.

Although dramatic poetry can be considered ambiguous, Seneca accepted this ambiguity of poetry. Compared to prose writing, poetry displays the human significance of a philosophical argument is displayed more clearly. Seneca quotes Cleanthes: "As our breath produces a louder sound when it passes through the long and narrow opening of the trumpet and escapes by a hole which widens at the end, even so the fettering rules of poetry clarify our meaning"¹⁸. Being a necessity for education and control of the soul (characterismos¹⁹), it seems likely that a philosophical outlook on Seneca's tragedy is close to Seneca's goals. Nevertheless, although the idea that poetry can be useful might be deduced from his philosophy, Seneca himself has never explicitly mentioned the educational aspect or usefulness of the poetry²⁰. On the contrary, Seneca seems to have applied motives in his poetry, which he rejected from a philosophical point of view.

¹⁶ cf. Cooper & Procopé (1995), p.44 (*De Ira*, 1.2.5)

¹⁷ Nussbaum (1994); p.443

¹⁸ Marti (1945); p. 218

¹⁹ Lefèvre (1972), p.319

²⁰ Dingel (1974), p.39

3.3 The philosophical extent of Seneca's tragedies

Influences of Stoic philosophy on Seneca's tragedies

The fact that Seneca's work exists of both philosophical and poetical writings has lead interpreters since the Middle Ages to regard both kind of writings as a unity²¹. However, who wants to explain the emotions in Seneca's tragedies philosophically, needs to make clear why a poetical origin is out of the question²². The discussion whether Seneca intended political, educational, philosophical or strictly poetical purposes with the tragedies will here be centered around the question, whether their aim is philosophical or not²³.

Several arguments can be made to illustrate that the plays bear characteristics of Stoic thought. Most of the ideas as well as the attitudes in the plays can be regarded as a product or outgrowth of the thought of Seneca as a Stoic, and often concern the large issues which have been illustrated from his essays²⁴. In their presentation of the dramatic themes, the plays embody a both positive and negative application of Stoic thought²⁵. For example, in all the coral passages concerning fate, moderation, fortune, death, love, or endurance the positive or true Stoic aspect is found. These passages, which often seem to lack an organic relation to the dramatic action, appear to be dominated by Stoic thought concerning the causation of evil, and provide a place in the parts for the Stoic doctrine. Although there are also heroines in Seneca's tragedies (like Antigone), the negative or in-Stoic aspect predominates; according to their Stoic moralistic explanation it is weakness of character which causes the catastrophes²⁶.

That Seneca's plays embody principles and attitudes which are the natural product of their author's absorption in Stoicism and which have basically shaped the nature of his drama, can also be illustrated by their depiction of the conflict between reason and passion. This conflict permeates Seneca's reworking of the tragedies and has made a deep imprint upon their nature. The character of the nurse for example, which is developed into a conventional role in Seneca's tragedies, seems primarily to embody the voice of reason raised against passion.

Another Stoic influence can be found in the prevailing tone in Seneca's drama, which concerns violence and emotional intensity. To a certain extent this can be attributed to the tradition of Latin literature in Seneca's own time and before. Nevertheless also this aspect can be explained by the Stoic thought concerning evil: misfortune is intended to test and develop man's spirit. The conflict between endurance and violence which may occur (especially in the conditions of Seneca's lifetime) creates high emotional intensity compounded of hope, desperation, and struggle with extreme forms of violence. The strength of Stoicism is demonstrated by magnifying opposing forces, revealing in horror and torment²⁷.

Limitations to a philosophical reading of Seneca's tragedies

Stoic elements can definitely be found in Seneca's plays, but this does not necessarily imply his tragedies require a philosophical interpretation. Seneca's theoretical statements have often been applied falsely on his poetry²⁸, and by some it is regarded defendable to consider the Seneca's plays even as a negation of Stoic views²⁹, implying they cannot be explained from his philosophy at all. One might for example state that the

²¹ Dingel (1974), p.11

²² Dingel (1974), p.102

²³ Von Albrecht (2004); p.99

²⁴ Pratt (1948). p.7

²⁵ Pratt (1948), p.6

²⁶ Pratt (1948), p.7

²⁷ Pratt (1948), p.9

²⁸ Dingel (1974), p.17

²⁹ cf. Dingel (1974), 'Seneca und die Dichtung'

strong elaboration of the affects can be considered incompatible with the Stoic approach of indifference³⁰. On the other hand, this can be regarded as consistent with the approach to tragedy mentioned above; the tragedy provides insight in the catastrophes to which emotions can lead. It has been suggested that Seneca was using the dramatic form as a vehicle for Stoic moral teaching similar to that of the prose works³¹. But while many Stoic sentiments are present in the tragedies, and Stoic indifference can appear an effective reaction to the blows of fate and moral dilemma's, it is arbitrary to force the Stoic system of teaching on the plays of a whole. Whether Stoic lessons are to be derived from the treatments of individual plots, is also disputable. It is quite possible there was a less elevated motive. Bearing in mind Seneca's preoccupation with language and with the potential range of the declamatory style, Seneca may simply have wanted to present old tales in a new dramatic form.

3.4 Conclusions

The Stoics have a high regard for tragedy, attributing it cognitive importance. Seneca's tragedies do therefore not conflict with the Stoic approach to the emotions. However, Seneca himself has not explicated an educational or philosophical aim for his tragedies, and therefore it is not clear whether the plays can be regarded philosophically or not.

Both drama as the philosophical works of Seneca will not be regarded as necessarily unified. Major Stoic influences on the tragedies concern the distinctive Stoic and non-Stoic positions of the characters, the opposition reason versus the passions, and the approach to misfortune as a challenge to one's character. Nevertheless, it is difficult to find convincing arguments to state that the philosophical element is leading to the dramatic. Philosophical disputes in the tragedies need to be put into perspective in their broader (or narrower) context since political, educational, philosophical and poetical aspects can not be isolated when interpreting the Medea. Also the comparison of drama and philosophical works should not lead to a subordination of the first under the latter; the more since Seneca prefers to use phrases of his poetical context into a philosophical instead of vice versa³². However in general, Senecan tragedy seems to fit the Stoic philosophical viewpoints tightly. In order to study the relation between Senecan philosophy and drama more in detail, Seneca's Medea will be elaborated further. The Medea is one of nine Senecan tragedies, next to *Hercules Furens*, *Troades*, *Phoenissae*, *Phaedra*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*, *Hercules Oetaeus*³³ (The latter is only partly written by Seneca)³⁴. Both the Medea and the Phaedra have protagonists which are driven by a high degree of anger, and contain a detailed description of the psychological aspects. In order to determine Stoic philosophical extent of the tragedy more in detail, the differences between Seneca's and Euripides' Medea will be examined in chapter 4. In chapter 5, the representation of anger in the Medea will be compared with its description in Seneca's *De Ira*.

³⁰ Lefèvre (1972)

³¹ Costa (1973), p.6

³² Dingel (1974), p.47

³³ Costa (1973), p.2

³⁴ Costa (1974), p.97

4 Characteristics of Seneca's Medea

4.1 The Medea tragedy

The story of Medea was very popular with writers before and after Seneca. About six Greek and six Latin Medea plays are known, however apart from Euripides' and Seneca's plays only fragments have survived. Writers include for example Ennius, Accius, and also Ovid, who treated the Medea also in his *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*. Although Euripides' play is considered to be Seneca's chief model³⁵, it is possible that Ovid's Medea also has been of major influence on Seneca. Just like in Ovid's play, Seneca's Medea displays a high degree of frenzy, especially compared with Euripides' Medea. Although the position that Ovid's Medea has stand model is scarcely supported since only two lines from Ovid's Medea have remained³⁶, it is likely that Seneca's depiction of Medea was more close to Ovid's than to Euripides'. However, it is very likely that Seneca was familiar with Ovid's play. Before the characteristics of Seneca's Medea will be examined by comparison to Euripides' version, the storyline of the Medea will be outlined first.

4.2 Seneca's Medea: the storyline and its background

Just like Euripides' play³⁷, Seneca's Medea takes place in Corinth, and is confined in time to the final day, on which the catastrophe takes place. The tragedy is a continuation of the story of the Argonauts. After assisting Jason in obtaining the Golden Fleece at Colchis, Medea fled with Jason and accompanied him back to his native place. To retard her father's pursuit she slew her brother and scattered his remains, whose parts had to be collected by his father in order to give him a proper funeral. She also tricked the daughters of Jason's uncle Pelias to slay their own father. For this, Jason and Medea were exiled from Thessalia and took refuge in Corinth, where they lived in prosperity with their two sons³⁸. But now, Jason is forced by Creon, the king of Corinth, to wed his daughter Creusa. Seneca's Medea commences when the wedding festivities have already begun.

Medea hails to the gods and powers, in order to ask favor for her revenge now Jason has abandoned her for another woman. The choir raises a cheerful wedding song, by which Medea gets furious. She despises Jason's ungrateful attitude for all she has done before, during and after the journey of the Argonauts. Yet she changes her mind and blames Creon, who forced the wedding. Creon, frightened by Medea, wants her to go into exile immediately. However she is allowed one day delay to her children farewell. Despite the efforts of the nurse to calm her down, the outrageous Medea considers how to revenge Jason on this final day. Jason tries to convince Medea that his reason for this marriage is to give their children a fortunate future. However Medea blames Jason for his ingratitude for all she has done for him, and requests him to flee with her. After his denial she requests to keep the children with her, which he refuses too. Now, Medea has discovered Jason's weakness, his attachment to their children. She uses her magic powers to effectuate her wrath, and asks her children to bring an enchanted lethal coat to Creusa. Subsequently, a messenger proclaims the king and his daughter have died under suspicious circumstances. Medea, advised to flee,

³⁵ Costa (1973), p.8

³⁶ However Marti (1945) states that Seneca's conception of her character differs fundamentally from that of Ovid, who makes her say: "video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor" (p.230)

³⁷ Costa (1973), p.7

³⁸ Miller (1968), p.227

hesitates whether to give in to the love for her children or the hatred against Jason. However she realizes the sons contain the ultimate revenge on Jason. To take vengeance on Jason, she kills both children. Finally, the winged chariot of her grandfather Helios arrives, drawn by dragons, and takes her to Aegeus, the king of Athens.

4.3 Comparison to Euripides' Medea

Seneca's Medea can, despite the influences of Euripides' and Ovid's Medea, be considered an original creation. Characteristics of Seneca's tragedies in general have been examined in paragraph 3.3. In order to clarify their Stoic extent further, Seneca's Medea in particular will be elaborated in its differences to Euripides' Medea.

Seneca has made substantial alterations to Euripides' play. For example he eliminated the Aegeus scene, reduced the Jason/Medea scenes, enlarged the Nurse's role³⁹, and reversed the sympathies of the chorus⁴⁰. Although Medea's psychology has a natural basis, her vengeance is portrayed as unnatural violence which produces horror and revulsion. Her rage and magic gifts are emphasized, and the psychological motives are more detailed. As is the case for most Senecan protagonists, Medea's character does not develop. She loses hope and becomes increasingly deranged, with her extraordinary powers she destroys and ruins others as she herself has been ruined. The play is dominated totally by Medea, the other characters are elements in her dialectic. Her desperate gesture, and the aim to achieve some kind of serenity in the face of the catastrophe by throwing themselves in the teeth of violence or by overcoming violence with greater violence, is often found in Senecan characters⁴¹. Stoic dogma concerning evil and the conflict between reason and passion as mentioned before can be recognized in the play on various aspects, like the choral passages, concept of character, introspection, and tone, to a degree distinctive from Euripides play⁴².

A major difference between the Euripides' Medea and the Seneca's can also be found in the different attitude toward the nature of the catastrophes which they treat⁴³. In Seneca's treatment of tragic themes, evil is either externalized as the workings of fate or fortune which can be nullified by reason or endurance, or is thought to be caused by the deterioration of character which results when passion destroys reason. Seneca shows how Medea's rage rises in crescendo to a madness which allies itself to everything evil in nature and destroys all in its path⁴⁴. It can be reduced to the concept that evil is significant only in relation to strength and weakness of character. It is typical for the Greek attitude that the force of evil is recognized as a universal element permeating nature; it is never attributed solely to weakness of human character. Evil cannot be discounted by explaining it solely in terms of human actions or attitudes. However particularly for the Medea this is not commonly recognized.

Basic in the machinery of Senecan drama is, that all good and evil can be reduced to the pre-eminence of reason or passion⁴⁵. Self-control through reason cancels evil, but when reason loses influence, weakness and passion produce disaster. This can be considered the source of the difference between Senecan and Euripidean plays. The conflict of reason and passion can be found in Seneca's powerful portrayal of introspection in his plays. Euripides has a more Aristotelian viewpoint on the relation between reason and passion: "Excessive passions, when they come, bring neither good fame nor virtue to men. But if Aphrodite

³⁹ Bloemendal (2001), p.13

⁴⁰ Costa (1973), p.8

⁴¹ Pratt (1948), p.7

⁴² Costa (1973), p.8

⁴³ Pratt (1948), p.2

⁴⁴ Pratt (1948), p.4

⁴⁵ cf. Cooper & Procopé (1995), p.26 (*De Ira*, 1.8.3)

comes in the right way at the right time, there is no other god who is so delightful". According to Seneca this is impossible. Caring about an external uncontrolled object yields uncontrol in the soul⁴⁶.

Seneca's winged chariot, drawn by dragons, is prominently stressed in his play, but absent from Euripides'. Passionate love is not regarded as a harmonious movement by two powerful horses, which draw a winged chariot steered by a charioteer, like Plato's depiction of the soul. His chariot reveals Seneca's view on the nature of the erotic: the human agent is drawn along toward heat and fire by two scaly serpents. These arguments against an Aristotelian view of balance between reason and passion can be found in Stoic prose works as well, like the *De Ira*.

Seneca's radical reshaping of Euripidean figures of Creon and Jason and his introduction of new themes into the choral odes also contribute to the originality of Euripides' play⁴⁷. Jason seems to be a more appealing figure than he was in Euripides. Seneca stresses that his motive was sincere love for his children and fear for their safety, not greed or callousness. This differs from Euripides' play, in which he is portrayed as obnoxiously egotistic, selfish, and male-chauvinistic⁴⁸. Jason displays sensitivity to morality and fearfulness for moral laws that Medea increasingly loses⁴⁹. This morality concerns gods of morality, moral shame, loyalty, and reasonable discourse⁵⁰. However being attached to the children, Jason does not represent the Stoic ideal. Motivated by (Vergilian) *pietas* towards his children, and being attached to them, he is not able to deal with the passionate Medea. In Seneca's Medea, it is Creon, not Jason, who takes the initiative in arranging and justifying Jason's marriage to Creusa⁵¹.

In Seneca's version, only the nurse shows sympathy for Medea⁵². To the nurse general wisdom can be attributed, which can also be explained Stoically⁵³. In Euripides' play the chorus, which consists of decent Corinthian women, are in favor of Medea too. Seneca's Medea however opens with Medea being opposed to the chorus in their competition for the support of the gods. Medea prays for vengeance against Jason, for the death of his relatives and for the exile of Jason himself, whereas in opposition the chorus prays for a successful, happy marriage. Medea can be considered the winner of her implicit contest with the Chorus⁵⁴. Compared to Euripides' play, there is a strong emphasis on the visibility of emotions in Seneca's Medea. Next to this, there is also a high presence of introspective monologues, which can illustrate a relation between emotions and thought. Also these aspects can be regarded as an exponent of a Stoic outlook⁵⁵.

⁴⁶ Nussbaum (1994), p.442

⁴⁷ Lawall (1979), p. 419

⁴⁸ Lawall (1979), p.424

⁴⁹ Nussbaum (1994), p.453

⁵⁰ cf. *Sen. Medea* respectively 431ff, 1026-1027, 504, 1003, 537, 558-559

⁵¹ Lawall (1979), p.420

⁵² Bloemendal (2001), p.13

⁵³ Bloemendal (2001)

⁵⁴ Hine (1989), p.415

⁵⁵ Bloemendal (2001), p.11

4.4 Conclusions

Despite the fact that Euripides' tragedy can be considered the original model for Seneca's Medea, the latter consists of very distinguishing aspects. Seneca's Medea differs to a large extent both on a general level as well as on the level of the characters. General adaptations, in line with Stoic thought, concern the conceptualization of catastrophe and evil, and reason versus passion. The characters are clearly depicted in a different way than in Euripides' Medea. The chorus comments from a Stoic perspective and is opposed to Medea, Jason is portrayed more appealing and Medea less. The nurse embodies a Stoic voice, and also Creon is portrayed differently. The general Stoic aspects can be interpreted as adaptations to bring the Medea in line with Senecan philosophy, however for the characters this is less obvious, since it is not clear to what extent they are adapted to the different roles in the Seneca's Roman context⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ Lawall (1979), p.419

5 Anger in Seneca's Medea

5.1 The representation of anger in Seneca's Medea

In the previous chapters the Stoic degree of Seneca's tragedy in general and of the Medea in particular has been examined. In order to clarify the extent to which the depiction of the passions in the Medea can be considered in line with Seneca's Stoic thought, the characteristics of anger as stated in paragraph 2.2 will be elaborated in relation to the depiction of anger in Seneca's Medea.

The identity of emotion as a belief or judgment is regularly stressed; the passions in the Medea are accompanied constantly by thought and judgment. A clear example can be found in the introspective monologue, where she, absorbed in her own thoughts⁵⁷, suffers emotional reactions as a result of her reasoning⁵⁸. This can also be illustrated by a number of other fragments, for example when Medea seeks to motivate her revenge against Jason: "Let thine own crimes urge thee on, and let them all return in memory."⁵⁹ Further, when she redirects her anger to Creon, she tries get grip on her grief through reason, in order to convince herself that Jason is not to be punished, "nay, ah nay, mad grief, say not so!"⁶⁰ The nurse tries to convince her that even tranquility will not better her situation, and advises her to postpone her revenge. However, Medea approves with her emotion by stating that grief, which is still reasonable, is light. She considers her ills to be intense enough, to approve her revenge⁶¹. The visibility of this anger is also stressed: "Light is the grief which can take counsel and hide itself; great ills lie not in hiding."⁶² Nussbaum interprets this as grief capable of deliberation, of choice whether to hide or not, and argues grief is depicted as a form of thought⁶³. However an alternative reading might state that prudent deliberation has become impossible, because the emotion has become too intense to be under control of reason.

The visibility of insane anger is expressed on various occasions. "Perplexed, witless, with mind scarce sane, I am tossed to every side"⁶⁴. Also the scene which follows after her conversation with Creon describes the bodily expression of anger vividly, depicting Medea in a state of frenzy. "She runs now here, now there, with frantic rush, marks of distracted passion in her face. Her cheeks aflame, she pants with deep sobs for breath, shouts aloud, weeps floods of tears, beams with joy; she assumes the proof of every passion"⁶⁵, "I see madness in her face"⁶⁶. Another description of her emotion is emphasized when she has used her magic powers: "Her cheeks blaze red, pallor puts red to flight; no color in her changing aspect does she keep long. Hither and thither she wanders, as a tigress, robbed of her cubs, ranges in mad course through the jungles of Ganges"⁶⁷.

The passions Medea copes with, like love, grief and anger, fundamentally involve assigning a high value to external objects and situations. Medea is attached to Jason, her children, and also to her power and

⁵⁷ Miller (1968), p.303

⁵⁸ cf. *Sen. Medea* 893-966

⁵⁹ cf. *Sen. Medea* 129-139

⁶⁰ cf. *Sen. Medea* 139-140

⁶¹ cf. *Sen. Medea* 155

⁶² cf. *Sen. Medea* 155-156

⁶³ Nussbaum (1994), p.449

⁶⁴ cf. *Sen. Medea* 133-134

⁶⁵ cf. *Sen. Medea* 385-389

⁶⁶ cf. *Sen. Medea* 395

⁶⁷ cf. *Sen. Medea* 858-865

position. These are the aspects which provoke her passions. This kind of attachment can also be found with Jason⁶⁸, whose concern for his children is the basis for his ensuing grief: "This is my reason for living, this, my heart's comfort, consumed as it is with cares. Sooner could I part with breath, with limbs, with light⁶⁹, and when Medea realizes Jason's attachment to his children: "'Tis well! I have him! The place to wound him is laid bare"⁷⁰.

The passions in the Seneca's Medea are not shown as induced by a part of her psyche opposed to the rational faculty; they are depicted as the result of her thought or judgment itself⁷¹. Inner conflict is shown in the Chrysippian way: not as a struggle of contending forces, but as an oscillation or fluctuation of the whole personality. This is represented very clear in the end of the tragedy⁷², where she alternates between her position as a mother and as avenger; the children are alternatingly regarded as her dear and wonderful children, and as pieces of their father. When she is about to kill the two children, her hatred against Jason makes place for motherly love⁷³. However this is almost immediately followed by the next fragment: "Let them die, they are none of mine; let them be lost"⁷⁴, after which Medea – crying – concludes the children are innocent. The oscillation of her passions itself is illustrated by her reflection on these positions: "Why do anger and love now hither, now thither draw my changeful heart? A double tide tosses me, uncertain of my course"⁷⁵ But alternation of thoughts is also to be found in other fragments of the Medea, for example in her conversation with Jason, where her initial obedient stance is followed by blaming Jason: "Heap dire penalties upon me; them have I deserved (...) I shall suffer less than I deserve"⁷⁶, "O ungrateful man"⁷⁷.

The development of the passions as well as the conception of anger as wilful disobedience can be illustrated by the fragment in which she is about to kill the children. In the prologue Medea is given the incentive, and she surrenders to her desire to revenge⁷⁸. Her plan of retaliation aroused by anger, is inspired both by fury and an established principle of reciprocity⁷⁹. Medea states that also her grief aggravates⁸⁰, against her will. In the next verse, she approves of the passions and even of further actions: "O wrath, where thou dost lead I follow"⁸¹. After this approval, she is under control of the passions: "Whither hastes that headlong horde of Furies?"⁸². From now on, the emotions aggravate further, and she is unable to control her wrath: "Plunge your brands into my eyes, tear, burn; see, my breast is open to the furies."⁸³

⁶⁸ Nussbaum (1994), p. 449

⁶⁹ Miller (1968), p.227: v.547-549

⁷⁰ Miller (1968), p. 279: v.550

⁷¹ Nussbaum (1994), p.449

⁷² cf. *Sen. Medea* 893ff

⁷³ cf. *Sen. Medea* 927-928

⁷⁴ cf. *Sen. Medea* 934

⁷⁵ cf. *Sen. Medea* 937-939

⁷⁶ cf. *Sen. Medea* 461-464

⁷⁷ cf. *Sen. Medea* 465

⁷⁸ cf. Cooper and Procopé (1995), p. 43 -44 (*De Ira* 2.2.2, 2.3.1)

⁷⁹ Guastella (2001); p. 193

⁸⁰ cf. *Sen. Medea* 951

⁸¹ cf. *Sen. Medea* 953

⁸² cf. *Sen. Medea* 958

⁸³ cf. *Sen. Medea* 965-966

5.2 Conclusions

It has become clear the play conforms closely to the psychological studies found in Seneca's prose works⁸⁴. All particularly Stoic aspects of anger identified in paragraph 2.2 can obviously be found in Seneca's Medea. Therefore the representation of anger in Seneca's Medea can be regarded as very similar to their depiction in the *De Ira*. Although this still does not imply Seneca's Medea can be regarded as an exponent of Stoic philosophy or serving a moral aim, the depiction of emotions in the Medea is almost completely and explicitly in line with the essentials and dynamics of the passions as described in the *De Ira*.

⁸⁴ cf. Marti (1945), p.233

6 Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This paper aimed to clarify to what extent the representation of the passions in the Medea can be considered a representation of Seneca's account on the passions, and of anger in particular. After the description of anger and its position on Stoic philosophy in chapter 2, three levels of analysis have been applied.

First, the significance of a philosophical reading of the Medea has been explored. Stoic influences can be found in central themes in Senecan tragedy, however no indications or tenable arguments have been found which justify a strictly philosophical reading of his tragedies. Second, the differences between Seneca's Medea tragedy in particular and Euripides' Medea have been examined. Several themes stressed by Seneca can also be found as major items in his philosophical essays. Also the depiction of the characters appears to be very different from Euripides' version, however it is not clear to what extent they serve a philosophical or poetical aim. Third, the representation of anger as stated in the Medea has been compared to Seneca's essay *De Ira*, in order to determine whether anger in the Medea is represented according to Stoic theory of the passions. All aspects of anger as summarized in paragraph 2.2 were represented explicitly and frequently in the *De Ira* and seemed to fit Seneca's theoretical account on anger neatly.

Therefore, the representation of the passions in Seneca's Medea to a large extent seems to be consistent with their depiction in Seneca's *De Ira*. However there is no convincing indication that they serve a moralistic or educational aim, especially when possibilities of poetic interpretation are taken into account. Consequently, it does not seem to be justified to regard the Medea as merely an exposition of Stoic emotion theory.

6.2 Recommendations for future research

For examining the representation of Stoic passions, the emotion anger has been taken into account specifically. However, for a thorough and complete insight of the relation between Senecan tragedy and philosophy, other passions as well as other tragedies need to be taken into consideration.

This also counts for the interpretation of Senecan tragedy. Partly this is based on their differences with Euripides', however to a certain extent these differences need to be attributed to the cultural context of Seneca's Rome and the aim of the play. The relation between the cultural context and Seneca's adaptations to the Medea should therefore be examined further, in order to determine to what degree these adaptations can be attributed to the Roman cultural context or to Seneca's philosophical outlook.

7 Epilogue: Interpretation of Seneca's Medea

Sure, the Stoic account of the passions is very recognizable in Seneca's *Medea*, both in its differences with Euripides' tragedy, and in its representation of these passions on a more detailed level. Nevertheless, Seneca's *Medea* cannot be interpreted strictly as an exponent of Stoic philosophy, serving a philosophical or educational aim. On the contrary, many occasions for an alternative reading can be found in the *Medea*. To illustrate this, a specific non-philosophical reading on Seneca's *Medea* will be outlined. This reading will focus on the depiction of the *Medea*'s purification in Seneca's tragedy.

After being abandoned by Jason and having lost all perspective on the future in Corinth, *Medea* states she herself is all that is left to her. Several lines later she mentions: "Medea I will become." Near the end of the tragedy, at the top of her rage and just decided to kill the children, she states: "now I am *Medea*."

Medea desires a retribution for all the crimes she has committed driven by her love for Jason, like the killing her brother and scattering his body parts to delay her father. However, it is not just revenge she is after. She wants to be purified, by correcting her infamous wrongdoings in the name of love. As she states earlier in the poem: it is not the one who committed the crime who is guilty, it is the one who got better of it. Therefore, Jason has to be punished. *Medea* is the killer again, but now she does not kill her brother in front of her father for Jason, but she kills Jason's children in front of their father, for her brother. As she states when his ghost has appeared: "And use this hand brother, which has drawn the sword. With this victim, I appease thy ghost"⁸⁵.

After killing her children, being threatened by a furious crowd, she is taken away by the winged chariot of Helios, the father of her father. Also other fragments indicate a return to her former state, the *Medea* she will become. Her bewildered hair, from this perspective falsely interpreted by Nussbaum as an expression of her uncontrolled anger, can be considered a return to her own roots⁸⁶. She says to Jason: "Though I slay two (children), still is the count too small to appease my grief. If in my womb there still lurk any pledge of thee, I'll search my very vitals with the sword and hale it forth"⁸⁷. She explicitly tries to recover her initial identity. When she appeared on the top of the palace, she mentions: "Now I have regained my regal state, my brother, my sire (..) Restored is my kingdom, my ravished virginity is restored"⁸⁸. To a certain extent *Medea* has won. She has avenged her crimes, and restored her former identity. She has undone her deviation, which started with the Argonauts. When her urge for revenge ascends in the prologue of the play, *Medea* competes with the choir for the favor of the gods⁸⁹. After all, she seems to have won.

These elements of retribution and correction of her former identity which seem to be coherently present in the tragedy, cannot be derived from a strictly philosophical reading. The play itself does not provide an explicit indication that it has to be read in a philosophical way, or that it bears a merely philosophical message, stressing the risks of attachment to external things or lack of self-control. From a Stoic perspective one might conclude, she should never have made the mistake in the first place to commence these impious deeds, and that this piece perfectly illustrates the consequences of a lack of Stoic wisdom and attachment to indifferent things. However it can be interpreted in a Stoic philosophical manner, the tragedy itself does not

⁸⁵ cf. *Sen. Medea* 969-970. Bloemendal (2001) has added in his translation: "This sacrifice will calm your soul" (p.63)

⁸⁶ cf. *Sen. Medea* 752 "For thee, loosing my hair from its bands after the manner of my people"

⁸⁷ cf. *Sen. Medea* 1010-1013

⁸⁸ cf. *Sen. Medea* 981-983

⁸⁹ cf. Guastella (2001), who has expounded the relation between *Medea* and the choir in detail

urge for such an educational or moralistic interpretation. As illustrated in this paper, a justification for a philosophical reading of Senecan tragedy is very hard to find, and often questionable.

It has also been suggested to interpret Seneca's tragedies in a Lucretian manner, serving a philosophical aim. According to this view, Seneca's tragedies can be considered as a honeyed cup: just like a doctor who has to apply a bitter medicine puts honey on the edge the cup in order to sweeten it for the patient, Seneca sweetens the Stoics thought – possible bitter and therefore difficult to swallow - by the choice for a poetical form like tragedy. Seneca's Medea surely is close to the account of emotion in Senecan prose, however it is very unlikely Seneca's goal has been merely illustrative or educational. As the illustrated by the reading above, Medea's urge to restore her old glory and identity can barely be read as merely an illustration of Stoic thought, and her pursuit for purification barely as an illustration of stoic vice. Therefore, it might be considered reductionistic to explain the play fully from a philosophical outlook. To compromise the intrinsic value which can be described in this tragedy, it is important to recognize the play in its full profundity and versatility.

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