

## Narrative Thinking and the Traumatic Past in Seneca's *Medea*

The philosopher Peter Goldie has persuasively argued that as individuals, we come to peace with traumatic events in our past through an “art of recollection” that consists of internally crafting a narrative that achieves a perspective “external to the remembered events,” a perspective that enables us to evaluate our actions and to emotionally respond to our account of them in a way that we believe appropriate.<sup>1</sup> Goldie notes that a successful narrative is likely to include what he calls “emotions of self-assessment” such as “shame, regret, guilt or pride.” Conversely, a narrator may be able to report a series of causally linked events from his or her life, but because evaluation and the right sort of emotional response are lacking, the report of the event gives the narrator no sense of relief, release, or closure. The desire for emotional closure, which Goldie seems to consider innate, is “the desire to achieve a successful narrative by having the right sort of emotional response to what happened,” where “the right sort of emotional response” is an intuition that a person only arrives at with the achievement of the proper, external perspective.

This paper applies Goldie's notions of narrative thinking and the art of recollection to the speeches of Seneca's tragic character Medea, to show that as Medea relates events from her past to successive interlocutors—first to herself, then to Creon, Jason, and finally to herself again--she is unable to craft a narrative that sustains an external perspective, thus she cannot arrive at a stable assessment of her past, thus she

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<sup>1</sup> Goldie, Peter. 2003. “One's Remembered Past: Narrative Thinking, Emotion, and the External Perspective.” *Philosophical Papers* 32: 301-319.

cannot achieve emotional closure. However, Medea does articulate a stark inventory of her past deeds at lines 911-14, immediately following her declaration *Medea nunc sum*, and her report includes an evaluative element, to wit, her crimes have given pleasure: *Iuvat, iuvat rapuisse fraternal caput;/artus iuvat secuisse et arcano patrem/spoliassae sacro, iuvat in exitium senis armass natas.*

Medea's opening prayer (1-36), as she invokes first the gods of legitimate marriage, then Hecate and infernal powers, and finally her grandfather, the Sun, establishes beyond any doubt that her status and her capacities are extraordinary. So it is all the more striking to find her in dialogue with herself, caught up in trying to recollect her past crimes as vindication (129-136), then attempting to manipulate first Creon (203-251, 272-280) and then Jason (447-489) by offering up self-pitying, self-justifying, self-serving representations of her past, cunningly tailored to her hearers. Instead of using recollection to come to terms with her past, Medea crafts narratives of the past that will enable her simultaneously to claim revenge for present injustices, and to elude culpability and the consequences of the wrong actions she has already committed. By the end of the play, Medea has succeeded in forging a sort of narrative self, but at the cost of denying, and ultimately destroying, the human desire for emotional closure. The toll this denial takes on Medea is evidenced by the radical dis-integration of her character. In her first speech she addresses her soul (*anime*, 41), but after her final perversely "successful" narrative, she addresses her *dolor* (913) and *ira* (915). When Medea sees the vengeful shade of her brother approach her (964), it is plain that maintaining an external perspective on past trauma is no longer possible for her. Instead, her frame of reference

for past and present events collapses irretrievably into one, as Medea attempts to appease her brother by killing her child (969-971).

Medea's attempts at narrating her past reveal tragic dimensions of her character that can easily be overlooked. Her tendency to recall the past unreasonably, in a way that justifies or excuses her past wrongdoing and vindicates further misdeeds is not extraordinary, but all too human. Thankfully, her total, successful denial of the desire for emotional closure, and the fragmentation of self that attends it, is not an ordinary human outcome. Many critics have written admirably about the inhuman or superhuman character of Medea, but readings that emphasize Medea's exceptionalism can run the risk of obscuring her human traits. While her failure to master the "art of recollection" is pathological, it is also recognizably and tragically human.