

We're All Mad Here: The Role of *Nutrix* as Stoic Philosopher Against Madness
in Seneca's *Medea*

Theatre and performance in Imperial Rome certainly had a dual reputation, on the one hand it was looked down upon by the elite and considered a low form of entertainment, while on the other hand, it permeated Roman culture and civic life and was often sponsored and even enjoyed by the imperial family. Actors were often used by Roman authors as paradigms of the low, and Seneca was no exception (Herington 1966). In his *Epistles*, Seneca discusses drama outside of his written tragedies, which proposes the argument that Seneca could be both playwright and philosopher simultaneously, each of his literary interests influencing one another. Several Senecan tragedies explore Stoic beliefs concerning topics such as anger, grief, death, agency, *virtus*, and *pietas* which have surfaced through his character portraits in his tragedies. Nevertheless, in Seneca's *Medea*, *ira*, *dolor*, and *demens* are reoccurring themes which lead Medea down the path of revenge and destruction, ultimately to her destined fate, the heinous crime of killing her own children. In this paper, I propose that a philosophical debate over the nature of unrestrained anger and madness occurs between the character of the *Nutrix* and Medea throughout the play, with the *Nutrix* as a mouthpiece for Seneca's own stoic beliefs.

Although contention between nurse or servant figures and their masters or mistresses is common throughout both Greek and Roman tragedy, this debate is evidence that some of Seneca's philosophical opinions about anger exist in his tragedies through the voices of the *Nutrix* and Medea, two women who have differing opinions on the consequences of unrestrained anger (Hershkowitz 1998). The *Nutrix* not only represents a check on Medea's violent wrath, but also the opinion of Seneca himself which can also be found in his treatise *De Ira*. I not only hope to prove that the debate between the tragic nurse and Medea represent a philosophical dialogue

similar to Seneca's treatise, but also to ultimately show that the Nutrix served as an ineffective advisor, guide, and voice of reason for Medea on account of her inability to curb Medea's madness, just as Seneca was a futile Stoic tutor on account of his failure at taming his pupil Nero and his madness.

I also argue that Seneca's inclusion of Stoicism, whether consciously or unconsciously, in *Medea* is a reflection of the blurred lines between reality and theatre that existed in Neronian Rome (Nussbaum 1993). The fluidity between the historical reality of Neronian Rome and the mythology of the characters in Senecan tragedy becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish when historical events match up or align with what is happening in a somewhat established mythological tradition. Acting, role-playing, and dissembling are central metaphors in ancient representations of Nero for Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio, and also, though more discretely, for Seneca (Elsner 1994). If the perspective that Seneca connects himself with his Nutrix character is valid, then the assumption that Medea's madness similarly aligns with Nero's is not so inconceivable, which supports that the lines between reality and the stage truly are blurred. Seneca believed that we were all actors and under Stoicism everyone to some degree was possessed by madness as stated in his *Epistles*. Therefore, under an actor-emperor who exhibited madness on a large scale, appearance and reality were confused and these categories were no longer isolated. Within Seneca's *Medea*, this mixture of reality and appearance greatly affected Medea, despite her Nutrix's best efforts to curb her madness.

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