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# HEAR NO EVIL, SEE NO EVIL

## *The Infanticide of Seneca's Medea on Stage and in Recitation*

Maria Haley

*University of Leeds*

1. Scholars from the nineteenth century to the present day have channeled most of their rhetorical and analytical efforts into convincing readers that Seneca's tragedies were intended for recitation and, too often, for recitation alone.<sup>1</sup>

Yet given the progressive case for the staging of tragic episodes, based on Nero's relationship with the theatre and the performative potential of some Senecan scenes,<sup>2</sup> it seems more fruitful to pick up where Fitch and Boyle have left off: to consider how Seneca's *Medea* may have been performed in either mode and how this could have affected the reception of the play amongst a contemporary audience.<sup>3</sup> After all, recitation and performance provided two different ways in which the Roman audience could experience Seneca's tragedy and thus enhance its popularity, in turn, ensuring its textual reproduction and survival.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, this study will consider how the infanticide scene in Seneca's *Medea* may have been produced in both a full spoken recitation in private and as staged episodes for public performance in the Neronian era.<sup>5</sup> For not only do these modes seem the most likely forms of performance, but they are also the most disparate, and thus will best demonstrate how the different modes could have altered reception of the tragedy overall. Particular attention will be paid to Medea's infanticide monologue and the infanticide dialogue between Medea and Jason, because they were the best-established features of Medea's iconography by Seneca's time, so how these scenes were represented would have been crucial to conveying the character of Seneca's Medea (for scenes resembling the infanticide monologue see Figs. 1–3, which are roughly contemporary with Seneca). Moreover, each passage relates Medea's state of mind and suggests visual details which might serve both

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<sup>1</sup> Zwierlein (1966). Pratt (1983) 132–50. Edwards even considers Seneca's purported distaste for actors, in contrast to the authority of orators, as an indication that his tragedies were to be recited, *Sen. Ep.* 11,7. (1994 p. 84). Cf. Fitch (2000) 1–3 for full outline of this tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Suet. *Nero* 11; 12; 20; 21; Tac. *Ann.* 16,4–5; Dio 61,20,3–5; Suet. *Vesp.* 4,4; Plin. *Pan.* 46,4; Philostr. *Vit. Apoll.* 5,7; 2,7–21; 3,14–20. Cf. Bartsch (1994) 4–6, Hollingsworth (2001) 137 and Fantham (1982) 48–9.

<sup>3</sup> Fitch (2003) 11; Boyle (2006) 192.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hine (2000) p. 43 on manuscript tradition, Harrison (2000) 138 on private reading and performance and Batsone (2009) on oration and stage performance in Roman society.

<sup>5</sup> *Sen. Med.* 740–848, 893ff.

to build tension and to characterise Medea as an avenger; they can therefore provide useful examples within the scope of this study.

2. Let us first look at the infanticide monologue (Sen. *Med.* 893–977). Creon has ordered Medea into exile, Jason has supported this decision in a heated exchange with Medea and she has sent her sons with a poisoned mantle for Creusa, their stepmother and Jason’s new wife. Medea’s sense of betrayal reaches fever pitch and, understanding her husband’s love for their children, as he refuses to let her take them into exile, she contemplates the ultimate form of revenge and self-destruction: the infanticide.

The infanticide scene opens in a monologue that could be represented well either in recitation, to emphasise how Medea articulates the thought process behind her imminent crime, or in performance, to present key visual cues such as her interaction with her sons and her tormented reaction to the Furies.

Seneca writes Medea’s speech almost entirely as a soliloquy, allowing the listener an insight into Medea’s state of mind as she contemplates killing her children. Here Seneca’s Medea summons, not the chthonic powers, but rather her own emotions: her *anima* and *ira*.<sup>6</sup> She strikingly addresses these emotions as separate agents with rhetorical questions and imperatives: *quid anime cessas? sequere felicem impetum [...] quaere poenarum genus.* (“Why are you slacking, my spirit? Follow up our successful attack [...] search out some exceptional kind of punishment.”)<sup>7</sup>

So as with the *thumos* faced by Euripides’ Medea, Seneca’s Medea also disassociates herself from the emotions that drive her revenge.<sup>8</sup> This becomes central to her *psychomachia* as she begins to condemn the *demens furor* that creates her self-division.<sup>9</sup>

In performance this monologue would be filtered through production and gesture to fulfil or deny the audience’s expectations of Medea’s character from preceding versions of the myth, which would be less easily manipulated were Seneca’s *Medea* simply read.

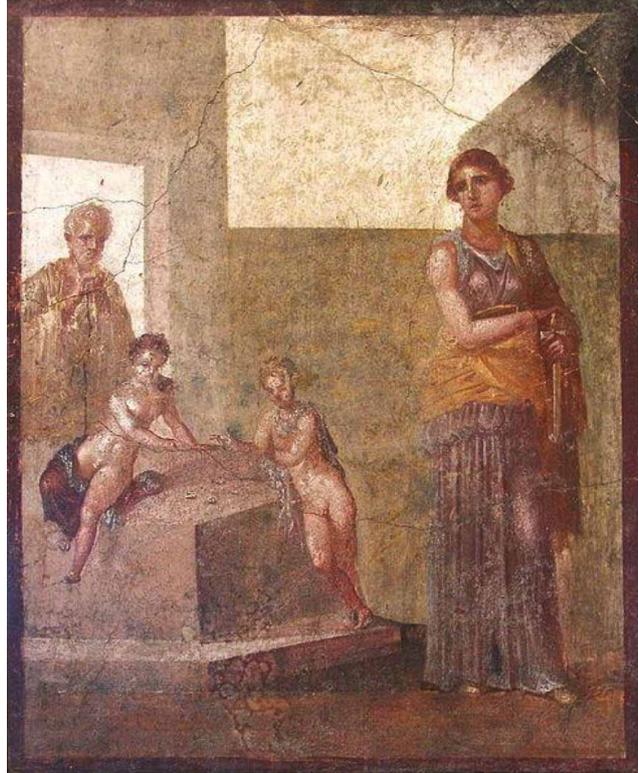


Figure 1: Medea contemplates killing her sons, as we can see she is concealing a sword and looking on anxiously (Braganti (2009) 316–7).

<sup>6</sup> Sen. *Med.* 916 and 918.

<sup>7</sup> Sen. *Med.* 895 and 898.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gill (1987) 25.

<sup>9</sup> Sen. *Med.* 930.

Therefore, reciting this initial monologue would allow the audience to focus on Medea's submission to her emotions, whereas staging her alongside other characters, even if stood aside from her silent children, could detract from Medea's internal conflict by implicating the consequences for others rather than for her and her alone. So were Medea's soliloquy recited by a single orator this would emphasise her *psychomachia* as she cries: *variamque nunc huc ira, nunc illuc amor diducit?* ("Why is anger leading me one way, love another?")<sup>10</sup> In so doing, the recitation would emphasise Medea's role as an anti-Stoic character destroyed by her own anger. Thus in recitation, the focus on Medea's psychology would draw attention to Seneca's Stoicism, which leads him to rebuke those who submit to their emotions.<sup>11</sup>

The power of Medea's anger leads her to engage with the Furies both as agents of her own revenge and agents avenging her previous fratricide. Gill's description of this scene as a "hallucination" seems viable, because an orator could certainly present Medea's reaction through gesture.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Cicero suggests in his treatise *De oratore* that an orator should perform the same skills as an actor, but to a higher standard,<sup>13</sup> whilst Tacitus suggests that under Nero, professional orators would also recite poetry.<sup>14</sup> So contemporary evidence suggests a single speaker would be able to convey Medea's reaction to the Furies.

Alternatively, were Medea's monologue staged, the Furies may have entered the stage to tip the scale of Medea's *psychomachia*.<sup>15</sup> As Goldberg points out, staging the Furies is common in Senecan tragedy; both spirits and Furies speak in *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*.<sup>16</sup> But in *Medea* both the Furies and Apsyrtus' ghost do not speak, whilst they could have simply arrived silently, the timing of their physical interjection seems inappropriate. For whereas in *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon* the Furies appear at the outset and establish the revenge motif, the Furies in *Medea* arrive in the midst of the protagonist's psychological monologue.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Cicero's description suggests that Romans were familiar with both the Furies physical and psychological intervention, as products of a guilty conscience.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Apsyrtus and the Furies seem to appear in Medea's mind alone, as seen in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*.<sup>19</sup> So Seneca's audience would witness Medea recoiling back on stage whilst grasping her sons, as the dialogue demands their presence in a stage performance.<sup>20</sup>

This would allow Medea to be staged with her sons alone, which in comparison to the

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<sup>10</sup> Sen. *Med.* 937–9.

<sup>11</sup> Sen. *De ir.* 1,9,3; Sen. *De ben.* 7,20,3. Cf. Epict. *Dial.* 2,17,19–23.

<sup>12</sup> Gill (1987) 36.

<sup>13</sup> Cic. *De. or.* 1,124–5. 156. 251.

<sup>14</sup> Tac. *Dial.* 11.

<sup>15</sup> Sen. *Med.* 952; 958–71.

<sup>16</sup> Goldberg (2000) 211; Sen. *Thy.* 1–121; Sen. *Ag.* 1–56.

<sup>17</sup> Sen. *Med.* 952–76.

<sup>18</sup> Cic. *Pis.* 46; 365; 44–6.

<sup>19</sup> Aesch. *Cho.* 1049–50.

<sup>20</sup> Sen. *Med.* 945. Cf. Eur. *Ba.* 576 for reaction displaying action.

recitation would balance Medea's pain against her sons' innocence. This seems particularly poignant because, unlike Euripides, Seneca does not indicate the presence of the children earlier in the play except to deliver the poisoned mantle.<sup>21</sup> Whilst Aristotle had criticised Karkinos' lost *Medea* as lacking pathos for not featuring the children,<sup>22</sup> it seems that Jason has assumed paternal custody, because when Medea asks his permission to take the children with her into exile, Jason's love for them forbids it (*pietas vetat*), suggesting that he has the children in his care.<sup>23</sup> As such, critics such as Guastella and Abrahamsen have argued convincingly that the absence of the children is an anachronistic use of Roman divorce law, whereby Jason would have primary custody, were the marriage legitimate.<sup>24</sup> Jason seems to break this concord by taking the illegitimate children due to his love for them, which in turn provides the perfect revenge plan for Medea. So the impact of the sons' presence is heightened by their previous absence and juxtaposed with the madness of their mother as she talks to her internal Furies.

Ultimately, this monologue could effectively be presented either in recitation or in stage performance. Recitation would emphasise Medea's isolation and her tragic determination to kill her sons, exposing her character in a full recitation of the play in which she is centred. On stage, this episode would isolate a tragic climax that would appeal to contemporary tastes for spectacle, whilst also providing a psychologically complex character through Medea's speech, throughout which an actor might demonstrate his skills.

Overall, each performance mode would filter the audiences' perception of Medea through speech, gesture and context, be it part of the whole narrative or staged alone, be it an isolated speech or witnessed by the children. Were this play read privately, Medea's character would become an issue of reader reception, which would be shaped wholly by each individual's prior knowledge of her character in myth, rather than how a performer is presenting her in this particular adaptation.

An orator, for example, could dictate whether Medea would weep, whether she would look down in shame, reel in anger, or do both intermittently, dictating the emphasis of Medea's dilemma. An actor could alienate Medea in a barbarian costume, or don an anachronistic Roman costume to make her appear more sympathetic to a contemporary audience, allowing this scene to be yet further manipulated by costume and staging. A reader, however, could dictate any or all of these things in their conceptualisation of Medea.

But although Fantham prefers reading as an optimal way to experience Senecan language, it is difficult to suppose that reading would isolate this language aside from the

<sup>21</sup> Sen. *Med.* 843–5.

<sup>22</sup> Aristot. *Rh.* 2,23,28.

<sup>23</sup> Sen. *Med.* 544.

<sup>24</sup> Guastella (2001) 212. N. b. Abrahamsen (2014) 116, notes the perversity of this arrangement, given that Medea and Jason's marriage is not legitimate by the standards of contemporary Rome, so the illegitimate children would be with the *barbara*, i.e. Medea.

trappings of performance, given the thriving performance culture of the time and the reader's invitation to imagine this speech, presented as it is, in a dramatic manuscript.<sup>25</sup> Yet the process of reading detracts from the force and immediacy we could expect of a spoken or staged performance, despite their different dramatic emphases.

3. Unlike Medea's monologue, her ensuing dialogue with Jason (*Sen. Med.* 977–1027) would have been harder to represent in recitation. In order to distinguish the dialogue and Medea's asides, this issue could be alleviated were there a second speaker to enable a dramatic reading of this dialogue. But both Pliny and Juvenal suggest a single speaker would deliver a recitation, typically the author, thus it may be the case that various gestures, stance and intonation were used to distinguish different characters, as in the *libretti* of contemporary pantomime performance.<sup>26</sup> There is no reason to suppose that a single orator would not be theatrical in his reading, particularly as Cicero aligned his skills with those of an actor.<sup>27</sup> However, reciting these interactions would surely garner less pathos than staging the interaction of a cowering nurse, a scornful Jason and a resolute Medea shown by several actors.

The dramatic timing of the murders is also tricky to convey in recitation. Fitch's suggestion that the first son is killed when Medea promises to appease her brother's shade *victima manes tuos placamus ista* (with this sacrifice I placate your shade)<sup>28</sup> seems accurate, not least because the boy's death is confirmed at 974, as she declares *caede incohata* (now the killing has begun).<sup>29</sup> It seems the second son is alive up until line 1008 as Jason protests *unus est poenae satis* (one boy is enough to punish me), and at line 1018 seems to be offering himself in exchange for the remaining son: *Infesta, memet perime!* (Kill me, violent woman!).<sup>30</sup> Therefore Fitch's placement of the second murder at 1019 after Medea states *misereris iubes* (you bid me have pity) would amplify the cruelty, but also the defiance of the act itself, here before the father, as Medea concludes *bene est, peractum est* (Good, it is finished.).<sup>31</sup>

Whilst the timing is implicit in the dialogue it could have been made clearer through pauses and gesture in recitation to maximise dramatic timing. Cicero suggests that orators should have *gestus paene summorum actum* (the bearing of the most consummate

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<sup>25</sup> Though Fantham favours reading Seneca's plays as the most satisfactory mode, there is no evidence to suggest that the manuscripts available would clarify the entrances, exits and the distribution of dialogue that are at issue in performance; this is not the case in the 'codex Etruscus' of c. 1093 AD. Falkner discusses how the purpose of copying tragic manuscripts shapes the way they are written and transmitted effectively, though her discussion focuses on Greek tragedies scribed in the Hellenistic period. (2002 pp. 344 ff.) For embedded stage directions in Roman comedy consult Brown (2007) 175–82, Frost (1988), Reynolds (1983) 378–9 and Bain (1977) 156–171.

<sup>26</sup> *Juv. Sat.* 1,1–6; *Plin. Ep.* 3,18,4. Cf. Zanobi (2008) 229.

<sup>27</sup> *Cic. De or.* 1,124–5; 156; 251. Cf. Quint. *Inst.* 10,5,6 where Quintilian speculates on the potential limitations of oratory in comparison to acting.

<sup>28</sup> *Sen. Med.* 970–1. Fitch (2003) 431.

<sup>29</sup> *Sen. Med.* 970–4. N. b. this timing is also affirmed in Boyle's (2014) translation.

<sup>30</sup> *Sen. Med.* 1008 and 1018.

<sup>31</sup> *Sen. Med.* 1019.

actor), but Quintilian specifies that an orator should use only natural gestures rather than gestures imitative of action.<sup>32</sup> Thus, if recited in accordance with these contemporary conventions, an orator would not mime Medea’s stabbing of her children as a pantomime actor may have done, which may blunt the dramatic force of the infanticide.<sup>33</sup>

Yet visually, the potential dramaturgy of this scene may well have been imagined amongst an elite audience attending a recitation, as frescoes of Medea’s contemplation have been found in Pompeii and Herculaneum (see Figs. 1–3<sup>34</sup>). Within the dialogue of the play itself Jason suggests Medea’s elevation onto the *frons scaenae*: *en ipsa tecti parte praecipiti imminet* (look there she is, leaning over us from the edge of the roof).<sup>35</sup> So although recitation lacks the visual impact of a theatre performance, the audience would be able to visualise key aspects such as Medea’s dominant, elevated position based on the dialogue and thus appreciate the metatheatrical nature of the murder. Indeed, when Medea climbs atop the roof the most important audience is not Seneca’s listener, but Jason, as Medea realises on his arrival: *derat hoc unum mihi, spectator iste* (such crime as I did without him was lost).<sup>36</sup>



Figure 2: Medea contemplates killing her sons, she may be holding a dagger her left hand, but the image somewhat is distorted by her blue shawl (Braganti (2009) 239).

Thus, as Erasmo suggests “theatricality replaces theatre as characters become their own audience.”<sup>37</sup> The dialogue between Medea and Jason could also convey this power dichotomy and distinguish the change in speaker were it performed by a single narrator—particularly if, like the performers of Roman pantomime, he changed position to indicate

<sup>32</sup> Cic. *De or.* 1,128; Quint. *Inst. orat.* 11,3,88. Cf. Dutsch (2002) 260.

<sup>33</sup> Zanobi (2014) 137 goes as far as to suggest that miming the infanticide, as a pantomime performance would garner more *pathos* than a staged slaughter. Whilst considering the influence of contemporary pantomime helps to contextualise Roman tragedy, the physical presence of the sons seems an important contrast to the imagined Furies were this scene staged thus, in this case, mimicry seems deficient.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Vout (2012) for full discussion on Medea in Roman artwork.

<sup>35</sup> Sen. *Med.* 995.

<sup>36</sup> Sen. *Med.* 992–3.

<sup>37</sup> Erasmo (2004) 121.

a new speaker.<sup>38</sup> Jason's strained weeping voice as he pleads with Medea to spare their second son could easily be contrasted against Medea's frenzied cries of triumph.<sup>39</sup> Thus Medea's position in literary tradition is brought to the fore and she becomes the canonical witch of tragedy in anticipation for her defining *scelus*—the infanticide itself.<sup>40</sup>

This theatricality is again reflected in Medea's infamous self-assertion *Medea nunc sum: crevit ingenium malis* (now I am Medea: my genius has grown through evils).<sup>41</sup> In this respect, Seneca's Medea seems to become her own canonical character, and much of this metatheatrical role-play is elicited in her dialogue. Tarrant suggests that this kind of intertextual role-play "was probably suggested to Seneca by Ovid," as Hypsipyle vows *Medeae Medea forem*, (I will be Medea to Medea) in Ovid's epistle to Jason.<sup>42</sup> However this seems reductive, because when Seneca's Medea asserts her character it is not just a role to be played, as seems to be the case with Ovid's Hypsipyle, but it is a point of no return in her characterisation.<sup>43</sup> Not only does Medea become the Euripidean version of herself, she becomes the villain Jason has forced her to be. Seneca has made this clear in Medea's aside as Jason approaches: infanticide is a recovery of all he had taken from her.<sup>44</sup> So, as Medea has it, all that remains is for Jason to witness the monster he has made.<sup>45</sup>

Overall, in recitation the emphasis of these scenes is on Medea's self-identification through language; as Motto and Clark suggest, Seneca's tragedy is closer "to declamations, to elegiac laments," in this case because Medea's monologues "develop and explore the theme of a single mood."<sup>46</sup> Recitation places emphasis on Medea's oscillation between *amor* and *ira* as an anti-Stoic tragic heroine and the power of her language to explore and satisfy these passions.<sup>47</sup> However, the effectiveness of the infanticide dialogue in recitation relies on the audience's ability to imagine it by recalling contemporary artwork and the orator's ability to communicate the dramatic timing of the boys' murders and the change of speaker in the ensuing dialogue.

Alternatively, in order to consider the staging of the infanticides this potential display of onstage slaughter must be reconciled with Seneca's own views on public displays of slaughter on the gladiatorial games. Only then can we consider staging to have been a viable concern for Seneca when he wrote the infanticide scene. As Wistrand points out, Seneca's accounts of spectacles in the arena are ambivalent.<sup>48</sup> In Seneca's *Seventh Epistle*,

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<sup>38</sup> Zanolini (2008) 119.

<sup>39</sup> Sen. *Med.* 1002–5; 1008; 1018–21.

<sup>40</sup> Sen. *Med.* 907, 932–3.

<sup>41</sup> Sen. *Med.* 910.

<sup>42</sup> Tarrant (1995) 222 on Ov. *Her.* 6,151.

<sup>43</sup> Sen. *Med.* 923; 933–4; 1016.

<sup>44</sup> Sen. *Med.* 982–94.

<sup>45</sup> Sen. *Med.* 994.

<sup>46</sup> Clark / Motto (1988) 72.

<sup>47</sup> Sen. *Med.* 868.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Wistrand (1990) 2.

for example, we see distaste for the spectacle of death at the games, yet more particularly for the negative impact it has on the spectator claiming *Nihil vero tam damnosum bonis moribus quam in aliquo spectaculo desiderare* (nothing is more damaging to good character as the habit of lounging at the games).<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Seneca seems to have been unimpressed by gratuitous horror in the arena and the relish it was met with by the audience. But the idiosyncratic horror of Seneca's tragedy is a fictitious warning against the dangers of submitting to anti-Stoic emotion and it is, as we shall see, performable on the Roman stage.

Were the infanticide staged, the first child seems to be killed on the *pulpitum* as Medea cries *victim manes tuos placamus ista* (with this sacrifice I placate your shade), suggesting a sacrificial slaughter on the altar.<sup>50</sup> Having restrained her living son, most likely now holding him at sword point, Medea would then have dragged the body to the *scaenae* roof, as suggested by Jason's claim that she leans over a *praecipiti*.<sup>51</sup> Though Fantham finds this logistically unlikely, we should remember the actor need only drag the body into the *scaenae*, wherein both sons could ascend unseen and be brought out again for her final confrontation with Jason.<sup>52</sup> However the staging of Medea throwing down the body of her second son seems less likely, as this would presumably require the substitution of a dummy, as seen in Greek tragedy.<sup>53</sup> But for a Neronian audience accustomed to seeing the mutilation and torment of *real* bodies and the discarding of *real* corpses in the arena, this substitution would be obvious and might jeopardise the tension of the scene. Yet if we look at the Latin more closely, the imperative Medea uses when compelling Jason *recipe iam natos, parens*, can be translated as "accept," "receive," or as in the Loeb, "recover" which rather suggests Medea simply leaves the children behind to be retrieved.<sup>54</sup>

As Beacham argues, Medea would have been able to exit the roof of the public theatre on a *pegma*, a suspended wooden platform, to recall Medea's chariot, as such a device is attested in contemporary literature.<sup>55</sup> What Beacham fails to explain is just how different the use of the *pegma* would have been from Euripides' use of the *mechanē*. In contrast to the function of *deus ex machina*, which assimilates Medea with divine power in Euripides' tragedy, the *pegma* was typically used for gladiatorial triumph in Roman spectacle.<sup>56</sup> Thus this staging would elicit Boyle's theory on the performative duality of infanticide "as a gladiatorial slaughter before Jason and a sacrificial slaughter to placate her own anger,"

<sup>49</sup> Sen. *Epist.* 7,2,5.

<sup>50</sup> Sen. *Med.* 971–2.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Bieber (1961) 151ff.

<sup>52</sup> Fantham (1982) 36.

<sup>53</sup> Mastronarde (1990) 265 suggests dummies were most likely used on the chariot of Euripides' Medea, but this seems less likely for a Roman production given that the audience is accustomed to seeing corpses.

<sup>54</sup> Sen. *Med.* 1024. See *OLD* s. v. "recipere." Fitch 2002 Loeb translation: "Now recover your sons as their parent."

<sup>55</sup> Juv. *Sat.* 4,121–2; Suet. *Nero* 12. Cf. Beacham (1992) 180.

<sup>56</sup> Suet. *Claud.* 34; Suet. *Calig.* 26.

because of the location of the murders.<sup>57</sup> But above all, this form of staging would also incorporate the metatheatrical outlook of Seneca's day: Medea performs a sacrifice for Apsyrtus' shade, she performs a gladiatorial triumph before Jason and she performs a dire warning on the excesses of passion to Seneca's audience when placed onstage.

Staging the infanticide in this way would also clear up the issue of dramatic timing which seems to blunt the impact of a recitational performance. Although, as discussed above, gesture and dramatic pause could have been used to indicate the timing of the sons' deaths, this could not replace the dramatic effect of seeing them killed onstage: a distinct digression from Euripides' off-stage violence.<sup>58</sup> The duality of the sacrifice is also underscored by the first person plural *placamus*, which suggests that, through infanticide, Medea destroys both her sons and *herself* in order to avenge the wrongs she has done and the wrongs done to her. By staging Medea alone with her sons as she slays one at the altar, the force of this address to her unseen brother is heightened; not only does Medea sacrifice her son, she sacrifices her role as a mother to her role as a sister.

On the whole, staging this extract of Medea in the public theatre would have increased remarkably the tension created by the dramatic timing of the infanticide. In recitation, capturing the heat of Medea and Jason's exchange might have been possible; but this mode may not have produced the same impact as seeing the actors engaging in stichomythia face-to-face, and the logistics of representing the murders would also be difficult. This could also be the case were the scene read, as there is no evidence to suggest that the change of speaker would be altogether clear, nor that there would be any directions as to where and when the boys are killed. Thus, if read, this extract would lack the immediacy of recitation and the vocal delivery of the characters' pain, without necessarily clarifying the logistical issues that would be a problem in recitation.

But staging these episodes, either separately or as a whole, would allow the audience to see Medea's wild appearance, her gestures of pain and her supremacy over Jason as she ascends the *skēnē*. Most importantly, the dramaturgy of the infanticide that is suggested in the dialogue would amplify Medea's motivation for the infanticide as a sacrificial retribution on the one hand and a gladiatorial coup on the other: as an offering to redeem her role as the daughter and sister, and as a severance of her role as the *coniunx* (wife) and the *mater* (mother).<sup>59</sup>

4. The duration and intensity of these scenes reflects Medea's transformation as she washes away crimes against her paternal family with the blood of her own family. Whether staged together as an infanticide episode, or delivered in full in recitation of the play, within the infanticide scenes Medea herself undertakes a performance before Jason to fulfil her role as avenger.

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<sup>57</sup> Boyle (1997) 132.

<sup>58</sup> Eur. *Med.* 1236; 1294.

<sup>59</sup> Sen. *Med.* 982–5; 1009–13.

It seems that scholars are justified in promoting recitation as a performance mode in so much as Medea's 'Roman' rhetoric is comfortably embedded into the plot. But recitation would struggle to convey the tragic timing of the infanticide which would reduce the impact of Medea's speech; the performative gestures attested by Cicero and Quintilian could only do so much to convey these horrors in comparison to the advantages of staging. So although a recitation would relate the intricacies of Medea's motivation for revenge, her *psychomachia*, without visual distraction, it would fall short of fully emphasising the symbolic nature of the infanticide that could be represented on stage.



Figure 3: Medea contemplating the murder of her sons.

Though we cannot provide concrete evidence for the staging of Seneca's tragedies, neither can we definitively rule them out on the basis that recitation was popular. Nor can we ignore the fact that, as tragedies, they demand some contextualisation by the actor, orator and the reader; thus, championing reading as the ultimate way of experiencing Seneca is misleading, and as we have seen, reading seems ineffectual in comparison with performance. The contemporary evidence suggests that episodes of Seneca's *Medea* could have feasibly and effectively been presented as a tragic spectacle: not simply of murder and malice, but as spectacles of Medea's passion, incorporating the fury and the filicide that preoccupied the Neronian era.

In recitation the monologues of Seneca's tragedy provide opportunities for himself, or perhaps other reciters, to show their proficiency in Roman oratory by displaying Seneca's rhetorical structure and arguing from another's perspective convincingly, whilst presenting an adaptation of the play in full for more general critique. However, scenes that demonstrate fast-paced action and intense debate between characters, such as the infanticide dialogue, would lack the necessary visual tension in a full recitation and appear as a consequence of the climactic *psychomachia*, rather than the climax of the tragedy itself.

Yet in performance, the spectacle of Medea's *psychomachia* as it anticipates her infanticidal crescendo appeals to the theory of this scene being staged as an episode from the infanticidal monologue to the end, that the visual significance of the sacrificial killing to come may be emphasised by Medea's interaction with her children. In a staged episode of the infanticide, from conception to execution,<sup>60</sup> Medea's battle with her family is the climax as she looks down on Jason and kills her sons; by contrast, Medea's battle with her emotions would

<sup>60</sup> Sen. *Med.* 893–1027.

appear as the climax in a full spoken recitation.

The work of a writer praised by his contemporaries,<sup>61</sup> Seneca's tragedy can only be fully appreciated by considering how the influence of contemporary pantomime and spectacle enhanced its versatility, rather than simply equating rhetoric to recitation. For although, as we have seen, recitation and staging each alter the presentation of Medea, they both fulfil the purpose of Roman performance in Nero's era by providing opportunities for the performer to showcase his talent, be it spoken or staged, and in turn shape the audience's reception of the *Medea*.

c111mh@leeds.ac.uk

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** Maria Haley is a Ph.D. candidate in Classical Studies at the University of Leeds, specializing in Greek and Roman tragedy, with particular attention to how performance culture shapes presentations of classical myth. Maria's previous projects included an examination of kindred curses and contamination in Sophocles' Theban tragedies, and a comparative thesis on *The Death of Agamemnon* in Aeschylean and Senecan tragedy. She is currently developing this comparative approach to uncover how Greek and Roman tragedies presented revenge, taking the feast of Thyestes as a case study. In addition to her academic work, Maria is also developing and delivering outreach workshops to implement in schools that do not offer classics, in order to increase the uptake of classics at university level.

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<sup>61</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13,3.

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#### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii, VI, 9, 6-7, Peristilium, wall painting, 1c AD, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy.

Figure 2: House of Jason, Pompeii, IX, 5, 18, Cubiculum, wall painting, 1c AD, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy.

Figure 3: Herculaneum, Fresco, late 1c AD, copy of a work by Timomachus of Byzantium. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy.