

A metatheatrical perspective on the *Medea* of Seneca*

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Abstract

The article focuses on some of the rhetorical aspects of tragedy in order to provide a *metatheatrical* reading of Seneca's *Medea*. To do so, it analyzes the character of Medea as playing the role of the poet's *alter ego*. This analysis makes the division of the plot in two levels possible: on the one hand, there is the play of the poet, i.e. the *Medea* of Seneca; on the other, there is the play of Medea within the play of Seneca, i.e. the play within the play. This approach should offer the reader some meaningful reflections on the rhetorical nature of the play.

Keywords: Seneca, *Medea*, rhetorics, roman tragedy.

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Una perspectiva *metateatral* de la *Medea* de Séneca*

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Resumen

El presente artículo se centra en algunos de los aspectos retóricos de la *Medea* de Séneca, para ofrecer una lectura *metateatral* de la misma. Con este objetivo, se reflexiona sobre el personaje de Medea, que representaría el rol del *alter ego* del poeta. Este análisis permite dividir la obra en dos niveles: el primero consistiría en la composición del poeta, a saber, la *Medea* de Séneca; el segundo, en cambio, sería la representación de Medea dentro de la representación de Séneca, es decir, el teatro dentro del teatro. Como resultado de esta clave de lectura, se ofrecen al lector algunas consideraciones significativas acerca de la naturaleza retórica de la tragedia.

Palabras clave: Séneca, *Medea*, retórica, tragedia romana.

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Une lecture *méta-théâtrale* de la *Médée* de Sénèque*

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Résumé

Cet article se centre sur quelques-uns des aspects rhétoriques de la *Médée* de Sénèque, pour offrir une lecture *méta-théâtrale* de celle-ci. Avec cet objectif, on réfléchit au sujet du personnage de Médée, qui représenterait le rôle de l'*alter ego* du poète. Cette analyse permet de diviser l'œuvre en deux niveaux: le premier consisterait en la composition du poète, c'est-à-dire, la *Médée* de Sénèque; le deuxième en revanche serait la représentation de Médée dans la représentation de Sénèque, c'est-à-dire, le théâtre dans le théâtre. Comme résultat de ce mode de lecture, le lecteur a accès à quelques considérations significatives au sujet de la nature rhétorique de la tragédie.

Mots clés: Sénèque, *Médée*, rhétorique, tragédie romaine.

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Introduction: the main aim of the paper

The main aim of the current paper is to neither offer an exhaustive analysis of the *Medea* nor analyze all the significant issues developed by the author, but to proffer a possible reading. We will focus on the *metatheatrical* elements of the play, i.e. we will try to show how by means of one of the characters –precisely by means of Medea, the main character– the author represents his own work in the *play*. Thus, the proposal is to discuss about the play performed by Medea within the *play* of Seneca.

Several reasons make this hermeneutic approach especially relevant. Dealing with the issue of the *theater within the theater* will allow us to consider some general aspects of the role of the (tragic) author. The *poet* (ποιητής) does not merely “do” or “produce” the drama; he is fully aware of his role as creator (ποιητής / δημιουργός). Seneca’s *Medea* makes this through the use of an alter ego. By doing so, the play achieves a great depth, as it is split into two levels: on the one hand, the literal reading offers us Seneca’s play, i.e. the drama performed by Medea, the nurse, Creon, Jason, the messenger and the chorus; on the other hand, the *metatheatrical* reading shows Medea’s *play* within the *Medea* of Seneca, i.e. the play within the play. The second level shows off a great *reflexivity*, as Medea’s play *represents* the play of Seneca himself. Viewed from another perspective, it could be asserted that Seneca represents his own activity as a poet by means of his alter ego, Medea.

As stated by Aristotle¹, tragic theater constitutes a kind of representation (μίμησις). Even if this tragedy is not an exception, the two afore-mentioned reading levels make the nature of this tragedy much more complex; its nature becomes more abstract. Showing a profound reflexivity, Seneca makes Medea represent the tragic representation itself. Seneca represents Medea in such a way that she is representing Seneca’s poetic activity. In this way, the meta-dramatical dimension contained within the play, i.e. the representation of the representation, confers a rich and sophisticated nature to this work.

To a certain extent, we could say that the *sophisticated* nature of *Medea* deserves to be regarded as the creature of a clever sophist or rhetorician. Indeed, our approach will lead us to discuss the rhetorical nature of this tragedy in a favorable way as opposed to the often pejorative manner in which the rhetorical nature of Senecan theater has long been dealt with by some scholars. A sophist or a rhetorician is first of all someone formidable with speaking (δεινὸς λέγειν) and particularly, someone terrific with *logos*. Chiefly, the poet produces discursive

1 Arist. Po. 1449b24-28: ἔστιν οὖν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἔχουσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἑκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι’ ἀπαγγελίας, δι’ ἑλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν [“A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions”. Translated by Ingram Bywater] Cf. also Arist. Po. 1447a13-16; 1452b.

creatures². Seneca was entirely conscious of this fact and his plays not only do represent human action by means of words, demonstrating a great mastery of language, but they also reflect on the discursive creation of the poet. In other words, Seneca's discursive artefact talks about the discursive creation itself. We should not be surprised by this fact, bearing in mind the enormous influence of rhetoric on early Imperial Rome literature and the fact that Seneca was the son of a renowned rhetorician. The following words by Boyle (1997) distinctly manifest how *metatheatrical* elements of Senecan theater are closely bound to its *discursive* and *reflexive* nature:

In Seneca theatrical form self-consciously structures the presentation of human action. His tragedies point to themselves as verbal and performative constructs of the theatrical imagination. They are language theatricalised. The theatricalised word has ramifications beyond itself (p. 114).

Seneca does not only represent the myth of Medea, but also, the theater! Within *Medea*, both the tragic poet and the spectators are being represented. In addition, all this representation is a *verbal* creature. The tools and the creatures created by Seneca are discursive. Thus, this paper will refer to Seneca's excellent mastery of language, pinpointing how his *alter ego* in the play also proves that she is terrific with *logos*. If his theater is *rhetorical* and Medea is his *alter ego*, she must be a good rhetorician too! In some way, both Seneca and Medea have full control of their world –i.e. their creation– since they shape it with their crafty speech.

These considerations will lead us to infer some general remarks about literature itself. It seems that in the Vth century B.C. Greek tragedy played a significant socio-political role in the city, but the role Seneca's theater played in Roman society is uncertain, which means we do not exactly know whether these rhetorical pieces were just mere literature, i.e. a discursive entertainment isolated from reality, or if they had some connection with reality. We will not attempt to resolve such a thorny question, but solely provide some considerations by analyzing *Medea's words*. In an extremely suggestive book about the sophistic movement and its relation with philosophy, literature and reality, Cassin (cf. 1995) explores the theories of the sophists and analyzes the relation between *logos* and reality. She states that those masters of *logos* were aware that the language is not exactly a tool to represent the world, but an instrument that makes it possible to affect (persuade) people and, in that sense, it *produces* reality. Similarly, Medea, a clever speaker, will change her world by means of words. Or is it merely a dream –i.e. literature, fiction–?

2 This assertion could be imprecise somehow, as the Greek theater was not merely discursive. It was *drama*, that is, in Greek theater action and words worked together. In any case, we think that it is worth expressing it in this way in the current paper, as we want to stress the *discursive* nature of the work of the poet. Even if the Greek theater is essentially *δρᾶμα*, the linguistic nature of these plays cannot be denied. Additionally, this problem might not affect the theater of the philosopher born in Cordoba. We will avoid discussing whether the tragedies by Seneca were performed in a stage or not, as it is not a key point for our scope. However, many authors believe that they were not produced to be performed in a theater. Cf. Rostagni (1962: 250); Luque Moreno (1979a: 44-50); Erasmo (2004). For a different point of view cf. Kragelund (2008).

A precedent: Euripides' *Helen*

The *metadramatical* dimension of Seneca's theater is not a novelty of its author. In order to prove precisely that, we will shortly refer to the myth of Helen, including some brief remarks on the *Helen* of Euripides. This procedure will grant us the possibility to highlight some similarities in both plays. We are of the opinion that this is noteworthy, especially since Euripides is said to have been strongly influenced by the sophistic movement, or that he was a crafty sophist³ himself.

Before focusing on the text of the *Helen*, it is worth pointing out that Euripides chose a character with a *poetic inclination*. In two passages of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Helen can be regarded as the *alter ego* of the epic poet himself. In Hom. Il. 3.125-128, Helen is said to be weaving a great purple web, in which she is embroidering various representations of the battles of the Trojans and the Achaeans, i.e. she was representing the Trojan War, as Homer himself does. Similarly, in Hom. Od. 4.235-264, on the occasion of the banquet arranged in honor of Menelaus' son's marriage and being fully aware of Thelemacus' presence, Helen recalls some of Ulysses's feats, just as the author of the epic poem does.

Euripides seems to proceed and go a step further in the depiction of Helen as the author's *alter ego*. A detailed analysis of these metatheatrical elements would avert this paper from its main scope. Hence, we will simply concentrate on the most significant passage concerning the issue at hand so as to submit a few remarks⁴.

After having recognized each other, Helen and Menelaus agree that in their *aporia*, they need some artefact (μηχανή, cf. E. *Hel.* 1032-1034) to save themselves. As Menelaus does not manage to come up with any ruse to escape from Egypt, Helen herself finds the way: they will represent a play for Theoclymenus⁵. Helen envisions the scene, the argument and the *dénouement* of the plot (cf. E. *Hel.* 1053-1054; 1057-1058; 1061-1062); she chooses the cast (cf. E. *Hel.* 1069-1070); she teaches one of the main characters –i.e. Menelaus– the role he is required to play (cf. E. *Hel.* 1076-1078); she decorates the scenery (cf. E. *Hel.* 1087-1089). In short, she prepares everything for the *drama* that the Greeks will perform before the Egyptian king. In E. *Hel.* 1165-1300 and 1369-1450 Helen's theater is performed. If Theoclymenus realizes that the *action* is a play, namely a fiction, Helen and Menelaus will die. However, if the play is performed in such a way that Theoclymenus does not realize it, they will escape. It could be said that Theoclymenus is a character, a spectator and the judge of Helen's play within Euripides' play.

3 For further information about this topic, cf. Conacher (1998).

4 For a *metadramatical* reading of the *Helen*, cf. Almirall Sardà (2014); Lavilla de Lera (2013).

5 The situation is even more complex: in addition to being the spectator, Theoclymenus himself will take part in the play; analogously, Helen does not only produce the play, she also plays a role in it.

Euripides' *alter ego* is so terrific with the words and with the *drama* as he himself was that she and the Greeks deceive Theoclymenus. Only the arrival of a messenger in E. Hel. 1512 allows Theoclymenus to realize that he was in the midst of sheer *fiction*. Only from that moment on is Theoclymenus aware that Helen is a poet and that he has been tricked by her theater. Thus, the *artefact* designed by Helen, i.e. the play (within the play), works as expected and she wins the best possible *tripod*: the escape. By the time Theoclymenus realizes that he was dealing with a play, it is too late.

Medea, master of words

Clearly enough, Medea is the main character of the play. As stated by Hine (2000, p. 18), "Medea dominates Seneca's play, appearing on stage in every act, and speaking more than half the lines of the play". In addition, Medea is depicted as the most powerful character. She does not only execute the revenge she announces in the prologue –even if with some substantial differences–, but she also shows a great superiority concerning language (cf. Liebermann, 2014, p. 463). When she is arguing with Creon and Jason, Seneca portrays her as a superior speaker. Liebermann (cf. 2014, pp. 464-466) calls this prominence in the *rhetorical* ability "Medea's dialectic force". As he points out, "the question is not who is right or wrong, but who wins" (Liebermann, 2014, p. 464). It is exactly what a *rhetor* would explain to someone dealing with a trial and, in general, it is what any teacher of oratory would teach his students. As Medea herself states, Creon is the king of Corinth (cf. 194). If he wants Medea out, he has the power to give orders and banish her from the city. At first, when she goes towards him, he endeavors to avoid her speech (cf. 186-191). However, he finally allows her to speak (cf. 202). This constitutes a key passage for the development of the play. Creon allows Medea's dialectical force to be displayed and by doing so he himself will permit her to impose her will⁶. By giving Medea the *sophist* the chance to speak, he is enabling her to impose herself by means of her language's power. Several characters strive to silence her voice (cf., e.g. pp. 150-158; p. 174; pp. 187-190), but unsuccessfully. They finally consent to Medea's speaking and this very fact allows her to rule everything through her dialectical force, as stated by Boyle (1997):

The power of Medea's language has dominated the play. The chorus, Creon, Jason (113 f., 189, 530), have all tried to silence her, fearing that language's power. Their fear was justified. Medea's language is used in the play not only to evoke the powers of darkness but to realise Medea's own dramatic myth. As Medea's power in

6 Creon has not planned to concede any time to Medea before expelling her from the city. However, when he allows her to speak, he will change his mind and by doing so he will lose his country: "Creon had dimly foreseen the truth: giving Medea time, even a little time, means giving her the very weapon she needs" (Schiesaro, 2003, p. 212). Indeed, permitting her to speak means equipping her with the weapons she needs. In relation to this, it is worth pointing out that Creon gives Medea *one day* (cf. 295), exactly the time during which the tragic plays are staged. Thus, he gives Medea the appropriate amount of time to play her *drama*, as she realizes it: "Nimis est, recidas aliquid ex isto licet: et ipsa propero" (p. 296).

the play has grown, so has her domination of the play's language. Domination of the theatrical world and word are the same. In the linguistic reverie above the power of theatrical language to rewrite reality is openly displayed (pp. 131-132).

Not only the rhetorician, but also the writer take advantage of the language and his success depends on how good his language is. Thus, Seneca's success depends on his virtuosity to use the language. The success of the author is determined by his ability to re-explain the myth of Medea. If he is *terrific with logos* his work will be accepted by the audience and will be remembered. If he is not, no one will remember⁷ it and it will be lost in oblivion. Of course, Seneca did master the language and his works were not forgotten⁸. Accordingly, his Medea is a master of language and by means of it, she will dominate the whole play.

Medea needs to be heard –or read– in order to succeed, irrespective of whether she is a rhetorician or a writer. Being a terrific speaker is not enough; she also needs an audience. We must bear in mind that the main aim of rhetoric is always to affect –i.e. to persuade or to delight– the audience. Thus, the good *rhetor*, or the good writer, is always supposed to take into consideration the people being addressed. He must *construct* his work in such a way that it will affect them in the expected way. Having said that Medea plays the role of Seneca's *alter ego*, the fact that Medea is obsessed with the hope that their deeds are not passed over in silence or forgotten makes complete sense (cf. Schiesaro, 2003, p. 43). It is noteworthy to mention that in order to accomplish her revenge⁹, she needs the *spectator* Jason to watch how she kills the child that is still alive. Just as the tragic poet requires spectators for his play¹⁰, so too does she –since the play itself is the discursive creature of the poet–. She wants to be remembered.

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- 7 Meaningfully, her revenge consists in leaving alive Jason. Killing him would merely be a light punishment; she wants him to remain alive for as long as he can remember the play –i.e. the crimes- of his wife. As indicated previously, Jason is playing the role of Medea's *audience* throughout several passages of the play –especially from 971 on-. Cf. Erasmo (2004, p. 8); Boyle (1997, pp. 131-132).
- 8 The words addressed to Jason in 553-557 are entirely ironical, since Medea intends exactly the opposite. It is interesting to notice how, once more, Medea is playing with the meaning of the words and with the importance of being remembered. Once Jason refuses to act as Medea wishes, she condemns him to play the role of the audience so that she will not fall into oblivion. Indeed, she had already announced this for Jason's fate, even if in a veiled way –since in its context the following words seem to have a different meaning–: "si potest, vivat meus, ut fuit, Jason; si minus, vivat tamen memorque nostri muneris parcat mihi" ["If he can, let him live as he was, as my Jason; if not, still let him alive". Translated by Hine (cf. 2000)] (140-142). As the paper defends in the fifth chapter, Medea's main goal is to preserve her identity as Jason's *wife*; if it is otherwise, he will pay for his disloyalty.
- 9 Boyle (1997, p. 132): "To Medea the lack of audience nullifies revenge".
- 10 It is interesting how Medea, as a Greek tragic poet and as any Greek from the Ancient and Classical period in general, seems to be into the logic of an "agonistic society". As Fitch and McElduff (2008, p. 158) point out, "Medea's recognition of her own strength (*Medea nunc sum*) co-exists with a need to have it 'recognized' by others (*coniugem agnoscis tuam?* 1021, 'Do you recognize your wife?')". She is fully influenced by a logic of rivalry, as so happens in a world where rhetoric is central, that is to say in a world full of discursive struggles. Moreover, the passage in which she suggests that all her previous crimes were just the products of a girl and that now that she is a mother / woman she must do something bigger could be read according to the same logic (cf. 45-50). The professional rhetorician –or the professional writer- seeks to produce greater works each time. "Medea thinks of her former crimes as 'training' for a greater crime which will top them (907-13)" Fitch & McElduff (2008, p. 167).

Muses for the poet

The current chapter attempts to reveal some of the tools used by Seneca to depict his *Medea* as a poet. Following a traditional resource from archaic Greek poets that later on became a poetic topic, *Medea* asks for divine inspiration in order to be able to impose her *logos* from the very beginning, that is, in order to be able to perform her play, i.e. to revenge. By doing so, she seems fully aware of her literary nature, with full knowledge that her sung words constitute her acts, as asserted by Schiesaro (2003):

In search of inspiration for her actions *Medea* invokes divine powers ‘with an ominous voice’, *voce non fausta* (12). The invocation to her idiosyncratic Muses follows the regular form of *klēsis* (13-17). [...] Now, while she prays that the Furies approach with their dirty hair and black torches, she echoes the poet’s invocations for divine inspiration and concludes her proem, some thirty lines later, with a clear indication of the forces she intends to rely on. *Ira* and *furor*, *Medea* claims, will drive her actions, and the plot with them (45-52). [...] *Medea* seems to be aware of the essentially literary nature of her pursuit. Not only in the sense captured by Wilamowitz’s dictum that she must have read Euripides’ tragedy about herself¹¹, but also because she explicitly hopes for *literary* recognition of her deeds. Directly after the invocation to her ‘Muses’ which we have just read, she goads herself by saying ‘let your repudiation be told as equal to your wedding’ (*paria narrentur tua | repudia thalamis*, 52-3). The tragedy we are watching fulfils this wish (17-18).

Medea does not just invoke the “Muses” and other gods in the beginning of the play and in other key passages (cf., e.g. pp. 740-743). The tragic theater, at least in its origins, was devoted to Dionysus. According to the *metatheatrical* nature of the play analyzed and the way through which *Medea* acts in some passages, it is worth noting that all her vengeance could be understood as a *sacrifice* for Bacchus. After having searched for divine inspiration, *Medea* acts as a maenad on several occasions, namely as a follower of Dionysus. In some passages she dances and acts like a follower of Bacchus, as the chorus demonstrates (cf. 849-878). Seneca’s tragedy is written with a noteworthy irony and *reflexivity*. His *Medea* does not only know that her acts *represent* the play of the poet¹², but she is also aware that she is playing a role in the theater devoted to Bacchus and behaves like a maenad (cf. Luque Moreno, 1979b, p. 282).

11 Although we are unable to develop this matter, owing to the main aim and length limits of the present paper, it is interesting to note how *Medea* seems to know her own tradition –i.e. the existing poetic tradition about her– (cf., e.g. pp. 129-136). *Medea* knows her own fate and attempts to emulate or accomplish it. As announced in 171 (*fiam*), *Medea* seeks throughout the play to achieve her identity or fate and finally she achieves it: *Medea nunc sum* (910). *Medea* already knew her fate. Creon, Jason and the others cannot stop her since “they have not read” about *Medea*’s tradition –but also because that is their own fate, even if they are not aware of it–.

12 As previously stated, “Seneca’s *Medea* and *Medea* are self-consciously theatrical” (Boyle, 2014: cvii).

Boyle (1997, p. 113) has insightfully pointed out that in the dithyrambic chorus of *Oedipus* (403–508), Seneca depicts the god of the theater, Bacchus, “as an unpredictable and ambivalent god of fantastic, even grotesque, transformative power”. The theater is the place of the *mask* and the Dionysus myth is always related to the transformative power. Analogously, Medea, a maenad possessed by the god in the theater of Bacchus, will transform the situation through her *play*. Dionysus is ambiguous; on the one hand he symbolizes the sap of the plants and the blood of the animals, meaning that when he is recognized he represents the life-force and the harmony of nature. On the other hand, when he is not recognized, he is the destructive power of nature, a wild power that only seeks destruction. Not unlike wine, he is able to rejuvenate the elders, but he is also able to drive people crazy. This ambiguous nature of the god is well exemplified by the maenads in the *Bacchae* of Euripides. In the following chapter our focus will be on the *transformative* power wielded by Medea. Significantly enough, the revenge –i.e. the play– of Medea is described by her as the child that she will give birth to¹³ (cf., e.g. p. 25). On the one hand, Medea’s revenge *produces* a new reality; on the other hand, it destroys reality. The ποιητής –on this occasion Seneca– is producing a creature, namely, his tragedy. However, this tragedy demonstrates Medea’s destructiveness¹⁴ –what is more, death and destruction are generally key concepts in tragic theater–.

The poet as δημιουργός

The *metatheatrical* nature of this play¹⁵ makes Medea play both the role of the *dramaturge* and also the main character of her own drama. Thus, as a ποιητής she is a *producer* or creator in some way and therefore it is worth endeavoring to grasp the nature of her product.

Just as a *dramaturge* keeps the drama in mind and gives birth to it by means of *logos* –in a written way or orally–, Medea gives birth to her revenge. First, up to verse 838, Medea announces her creature and manages the situation in such a way that it is advantageous to her plans. Then, from verse 839 onwards, Medea materializes her revenge, i.e. she gives birth to her revenge –to her play within the play–:

13 Hine (2000, p. 35) has accurately pointed out the relevance of the concept of birth: “In this play, whose climax is the murder of Medea’s children, the imagery of birth is prominent in Medea’s opening speech. At 25-6 she envisages her vengeance being born metaphorically and literally, for her children will provide it [...]; at 50 she sees the birth of her children as a crucial step in her life, after which she must be capable of greater wickedness; at 55 the home she has shared with Jason was “born through wickedness”.

14 The following statement from Boyle (1997, pp. 112-113) is noteworthy: “Similarly introspective is Seneca’s preoccupation with the death-from-life paradox- what creates destroys, the origin of life is the origin of death- a paradox which he pursues dramatically in figures such as Hercules, Thyestes, Theseus and most particularly Medea, and which in *Medea* itself he enlarges into the socio-moral thesis, that what creates civilization destroys it. Seneca’s preoccupation with this paradox reflects critically on his own created work. Literary form gives life; it also gives death”.

15 We should draw attention to the fact that even if we are highlighting the metadramatical nature of the *Medea*, it is not exclusive of this plot, as some other plays by Seneca, such as the *Oedipus* or the *Thyestes*, share this very nature.

In the prologue Medea seeks to transform the storm of her emotions (*mens intus agitat*, 47) into a revenge-plot. In doing this she is the prime mover of the play, and thus already close to embodying a quasi-authorial function. Medea's decision to find a 'way' (*viam*, 40) for her revenge and, later, her selection of the most appropriate means to do so, and her careful realization of her plans—all constitute the decision to create and represent a tragedy. In this respect, Medea is similar to other characters who occupy a central position in Senecan plays (Schiesaro, 2003, pp. 16-17).

Medea *represents* her own drama and by doing so she is *transforming* her world. Her logos—in contrast to the sterility of the other voices of the play (*cf.*, e.g. the wishes of the Chorus in 56-115)—is fertile. The dramaturge gives birth to his creatures from his inner self, just as a mother gives birth from her womb¹⁶ (*cf.* 1012-103).

Similarly, Medea constructs herself by means of her own *drama*. Medea strives to become Medea (*cf.* 171) and she will achieve it (*cf.* 910). In an interesting text, Fitch and McElduff (*cf.* 2008) ponder over the relevance of Medea's self-construction in this tragedy. First of all, Medea wants to be recognized as *wife*, namely as Jason's wife. Since she left her home city, Medea has lost many things. Nevertheless, it is not the loss of her virginity, her royal status, her home city, her father or her brother which triggers off Medea's reaction. What is more, when she is taking revenge and she realizes that she must kill her own children if she is to accomplish it fully, she will go ahead. In other words, when she is forced to choose between her identity as *mother* or as *wife*, she will opt for the latter. Medea wants to be Jason's wife and she requires that the others recognize her as such. Just after having fully accomplished her revenge, she asks Jason: *coniugem agnoscis tuam?* (1021). Medea has willingly renounced her virginity, family and city, just because she *wishes* to be Jason's wife. She is ready for such a big sacrifice in order to reach this identity. Thus, after having paid such a high price for it, she will not allow the others to suddenly deny it, as Dionysus¹⁷ does with those who do not recognize him¹⁸. Medea will destroy those who do not accept her as the *wife* of Jason. Therefore, the new crimes—not the former ones—constitute a retribution (*cf.* 982-986) for not having recognized her as what she thinks she deserves. Creon and Creusa are obstacles in her quest to affirm her identity, but ultimately, it is the acknowledgment of her husband which is crucial for a *wife*. As Jason does not intend to escape with her but prefers Creon's kingdom, Creusa and his children instead, Medea will destroy all of them—even her own child—, simply to take revenge owing to Jason's refusal to recognize her as his spouse.

16 Due to its ability to give birth and to produce destructive plans, it metaphorically represents both creation and destruction.

17 *The Bacchae* by Euripides is one of the pieces that depicts better this characteristic of Dionysus.

18 Medea's self-construction is not merely related with the destruction of those who do not recognize her as *wife*. She also destroys some of her distinctive traits, such as her status as *mother*. By choosing the identity of *wife*, she is destroying other possible Medeas. The ambivalence of Dionysus is fully present in her character: "Alienation is built into the process of self-construction, especially through language; the more obsessive the effort, the greater the degree of self-destruction. Because identity is reciprocal, destruction of the self also involves destruction of the others. Self-construction is closely associated with the tragic outcomes of the Senecan dramas" Fitch & McElduff (2008, p. 174).

Schiesaro (*cf.* 2003, pp. 208-209) has argued that Medea has a determined desire to go back to the past. In this sense, her drama would not be constructing a new reality, but would be an effort to prevent the development of events. She would symbolize the wish to go against the existing reality –and against its logic–, or put differently, she would represent the idealization of the past and the wish for its return (*cf.* 2003, pp. 211-213). Schiesaro’s suggestion is alluring and allows us to connect Medea with the imagery of the *Argo* –quoted in the play (*cf.* 12; 30-32; 112; 123; 146-147; 151; 153)–, which would symbolize civilization and technical power (*cf.* Boyle, 1997, pp. 126-127). Thus, Seneca would be playing with “the notion of ‘Medea as payment’” (Boyle, 1997, p. 127). She would represent the demanded payment of human beings for the birth of civilization –she would symbolize the punishment associated with the original sin of the human culture-. *Argo*’s trip would represent the first time human went against nature by means of technological resources, which has led humanity to a decline from a Golden age (*cf.* Boyle, 1997, pp. 127-128; Boyle, 2014: lxxxvi). Medea punishes humans and makes them remember their fault. According to this reading, she represents the nature itself¹⁹ punishing the humans’ sin.

Even if this reading is suggestive, if we remain close to the text, it is unclear that Medea aspires to go back to her past or, more particularly, to her origins. When she seems proud to have regained all she has lost in the past (*cf.*, e.g. 982-986), what she really means in fact is that she has taken revenge for the sacrifices she has willingly made. She is neither getting back her virginity, nor her family. In the dialogue between Jason and Medea in 431-567, the latter tries to go against the development of the present events. However, by acting in this way, she seeks to preserve her status as *wife*. This is why she is ready to assassinate her children; this is also the reason why at the very end of the dialogue she asks Jason if he recognizes his wife. She is not willing to erase all her experiences as an *adult*. She solely wishes to *affirm* her identity as Jason’s wife. Consequently, this commentary prefers to present her as a *creator*, even if her *play* is full of destruction, as it is common in tragedies. Medea aims to preserve her identity as Jason’s wife. Her whole play represents the attempt to regain this identity and the punishment inflicted on those who prevent her from accomplishing her goal.

As we considered previously, Medea plays a special role within this tragedy. She is not a mere character, but the *alter ego* of the poet himself. Hence, her *logos* is the most powerful one among all the characters and that is why she can *transform* the reality according to her plans.

Medea and Atrous act within the plots they have constructed, while remaining unchallenged masters of their plans. Their authorial function is always foregrounded and never challenged (Schiesaro, 2003, p. 19).

19 Many commentaries have suggested that Medea represents the forces of nature. Cf., e.g. Liebermann (2014, p. 465).

Commentators have usually outlined that *Medea* shows off her superhuman powers in the play. She can employ her *magical powers* to attain her revenge. As it has been stated by Hine (2000, p. 22), “quite literally, she can move heaven and earth to get what she wants”. As pointed out in the first chapters of the current paper, *Medea’s* role as a *tragic poet* enables her to display everything as she intends to. Fully aware of the fact that the words do not just represent the world –i.e. that they can serve to *construct* a new one–, the poet *produces* his creature with freedom. There is a limit, nonetheless. Seneca cannot surpass the limits of *Medea’s* mythical tradition. *Medea*, conscious of her fate and her history, cannot play another story, i.e. an entirely different tale. However, within these limits she can play and transform reality as deems fit. No one can stop her revenge. She controls the dialogues and the actions entirely. She uses her magical powers and at the end of the plot she escapes to the sky by means of her chariot.

The tragedy commences and finishes with the same word, namely *deus* (cf. 1; 1027). Despite this fact, the relevance of the gods in this play is scarce. Comparing *Medea’s* portrayal in this play with those elaborated by Pindar and others, Hine (2000, p. 15) states that Seneca “presents a more independent *Medea* who is not subject to the power of any god”. *Medea* is depicted as superior to the rest of the characters. There is a wide gap between them. She resorts to magical resources and she flees by flying in a chariot without the intervention of any deity. Indeed, this is fully consequential with the fact that she has been portrayed as the poet’s *alter ego*. We must consider that the *author* holds the entire control of his creatures, i.e. of his *fiction*. With the *logos* he can depict any reality that he longs for –even if, as stated previously, the tragic poet is subject to the limits of the myth he is *representing*–. Analogously, within the boundaries of her myth, *Medea* is somehow *omnipotent* when she represents her own drama. In short, she is almost like a god. The last scene of her plot exemplifies it in an appropriate way: “at the end *Medea* escapes on her serpent-drawn chariot, and this gives her the status like that of a god” (Hine, 2000, p. 24). Just as Seneca is the absolute master of his work, *Medea* has full control over her play²⁰. The poet is a *δημιουργός* and he produces his *creature* according to his will²¹.

20 The following words by *Medea* are entirely meaningful: “Fortuna semper omnis infra me stetit” (520).

21 The perspective of this paper attempts to underline Seneca’s effort to depict *Medea* as the *alter ego* of the dramatist in general. However, it could of interest to consider why Seneca chooses *Medea* –and also some other similar characters– to do so. If we bear in mind that *Medea* has been described by some commentaries to represent the opposite character of the stoic wise man (cf. f. ex. Luque Moreno, 1979b, p. 282), the heroine could be interpreted also as the *alter ego* of Seneca himself, but this time “alter ego” should not be understood as *the other I* that is identical to me, but as *the other I* that is totally different from me. If this were right, *Medea* would not be solely the *alter ego* –the other that is identical to me– of the dramatist in general, but also the concrete *alter ego* –the other that is completely different from me– of Seneca himself. This reading could be of the utmost interest to analyse the nature, meaning and main scope of senecan theatre in general. Could be interpreted the tragedies of Seneca as representations of the path of those who do not behave as the stoic wise man? Certainly, the problem posed is of maximum relevance, since knowing its answer would mean understanding the connection between the dramatic creations of Seneca and the rest of his *corpus*. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that can yield an unquestionable answer and therefore the matter remains unclear. Thus, even if we consider it pertinent to contemplate the other sense in which *Medea* could be understood as Seneca’s *alter ego*, we avoid reflecting on this issue more in depth, as it is extremely complex and it is not the main aim of the current paper.

Just a dream?

The poet has utter control over his production, i.e. he is the omniscient²² and omnipotent god of his play. Nonetheless, we might wonder about the status of this power. In the Classical Greek Period as well as in Republican Rome, the products of the rhetoric ability have a great political impact. The *fiction* represented by an advocate or citizen in the assembly *produces* (socio-political) reality, whereas rhetoric loses its politically key relevance within the Macedonian and Roman Empires. It continues developing itself, but mostly as a scholastic activity –like *controversiae* and *suasoriae*– and stylistics, that is as mere literature / fiction, far away from the *Forum*.

Medea's play within the play is an impressive exemplification of this development. In its progress, rhetoric becomes more subtle each time and in Medea the poet considers his own rhetorical skills by means of an *alter ego*. Not only the author but also Medea demonstrate a great *reflexivity*. They are both masters of their words and of their products, which leads them to "success". However, when we consider this fact, we could ask ourselves about the status of the play within the play, namely about the nature of the *fiction* within the *fiction*. On the one hand, Medea appears like a god who can do almost everything. However, on the other hand it seems as if all the play –i.e. all her revenge– were just a dream, namely Medea's dream. Seneca's *reflexivity* and subtlety is so great that he represents the dream within the dream, the fiction within the fiction. This approach would assist us to consider Medea not as an omniscient and omnipotent god, but as *Alice in Wonderland*. With its *reflexivity*, Seneca's theater appears to be fully aware of its literary nature. It opens up the door to a parallel world, in which logos and imagination are the gods who can achieve anything. Obviously, the socio-political function of such a *creature* is far distant from Greek tragedy. Undoubtedly, Seneca's *Medea* is literature.

πολλαὶ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων,
 πολλὰ δ' ἄελλπτως κραίνουσι θεοί:
 καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἔτελέσθη,
 τῶν δ' ἄδοκῆτων πόρον ἤϊρε θεός.
 τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε προᾶγμα.

(E. *Hel.* 1688-1692)

22 The "Pankorrelationismus" or "intellectual *Pankorrelationismus*" of this play has been pointed out. Cf., e.g. Liebermann (2014). Seneca's *Medea* is so full of internal references that all the texts are meticulously interconnected. This only proves the great *reflexivity* with which Seneca constructed his *fictions*.

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