INTRODUCTION

One of the central themes for scholars, readers, and spectators of Seneca’s Medea is the change of Medea’s various female roles, the crescendo through which the abandoned princess becomes a child-murdering monster. From these different crises of female roles, I would like to examine how Seneca sees Medea, following closely the text of the tragedy and, ultimately, the testimonies of vase-painting that represent her. Both Seneca’s text and the various stratifications of the myth and earlier witnesses, but above all the pictorial representations, help us to understand how a much more positive image of Medea, radically eclipsed by Euripides, was possible, to which Seneca also returns. At the heart of this image is Medea’s ability to govern the passage of time and the limits between life and death. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the arc of the sequence of events through which Medea rejuvenates herself – as she had rejuvenated others before her as if she were simply disassembling herself and putting herself in her own cauldron to be reborn as her younger and stronger self.

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PRETENDING TO BE VULNERABLE?

At the beginning of Seneca’s tragedy, Medea might seem vulnerable in various aspects: because of her status as a woman, because of her social and family status, and because of her current situation. She, however, uses her vulnerability as the source of her strength; in a surprising way, she takes these states off her shoulders and, using her feminine arts, she completes her metamorphosis, her rejuvenation, as if she were in her own cauldron, becoming the Medea of legends.

Before rashly dismissing the theme of vulnerability in the figure of Medea, it is important to draw attention to a phenomenon that Seneca was very fond of and that he used several times in his tragedies: his characters sometimes act opposite each other. On the one hand, this is simply a successful dramaturgical gesture on Seneca’s part; on the other, the theatricality of the work and the play with the spectator-reader are also evident. Thus, Atreus or Clytemnestra play a role in lulling their opponents into suspicion so that their revenge can be carried out even more unrestrainedly. Similarly, Medea pretends to be vulnerable in front of Creon: “Even if I am burdened with misfortune, even if I am wandering, pleading, alone and abandoned, struck on all sides,” *quamvis enim sim clade miseranda obruta / expulsa supplex sola deserta, undique / afflicta* (207–9).

This role-playing is continued, at some point, in front of Jason, with pretending for a moment they are fleeing together. Soon she goes on to play with the idea of revisiting her and their previous dwelling places, before discarding them one after the other. The deceptive characteristic of her role-playing is subsequently revealed not only by the events but also by Medea herself when she says, for instance, in an aside that she has discovered Jason’s vulnerability. In my reading, Medea also uses the mask of vulnerability to prepare for her great revenge, in which she will realize herself and be reborn in the fullness of her power.

Those around her do not seem vulnerable at all: Creon, the mighty king of Corinth; his daughter Creusa, whom Jason describes as powerful and a queen; and even Jason, the most shaken but still the future son-in-law and heir to the throne, in a new country, a new marriage, with new children.

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2 “Fugimus, Iason: fugimus – hoc non est novum, / mutare sedes; causa fugiendi nova est: / pro te solemam fugere, discedo exeo, / penatibus profugere quam cogis tuis: / at quo remittas?” (449–51)
When someone on the outside warns her of her vulnerability, Medea flatly refuses. In the scene in which Medea’s nurse tries to persuade her to take cover and advises her on the conduct befitting a woman – silence, deflating her anger, and the need to adapt to circumstances – the nurse also lists her fragile states:

Abiere Colchi, coniugis nulla est fides
nihilque superest opibus e tantis tibi.

Your people are far away, your husband you cannot trust, of your power, that was great, nothing remains. (164–65)

It is surprising that the nurse herself should say this to her, someone who was surely aware of Medea’s abilities – why does she say that her power has vanished? Could it be for the very same reason that Medea claims her powers have grown because she was already a mother? Medea answers with shocking words:

Medea superest, hic mare et terras vides
ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina.

Medea remains: in her you will see the sea and the earth, the iron and the fire, the gods and the lightning. (166–67)

Character manifestations of Medea, such as this, play a role in the fact that secondary literature writes numerous times that Medea behaves like a man, or at least as an androgyne. Someone sees in her a person who denies her femininity and would like to become a man, interpreting line 984: *rapta virginitas redit*, “my stolen virginity has returned,” as a symbol of Medea’s attempt to become a man, and in a similar way interpreting *Medea nunc sum* (910), as the culmination of the abandonment of all her womanhood. This affirmation means the opposite, just as the famous image of returned virginity: Medea’s

4 “Medea’s metamorphosis is not merely about turning back the clock. Inextricably bound to her restoration of a lost past (and the removal of Jason’s presence in her life) is Medea’s endeavor to masculinize herself over the course of the tragedy, perhaps as a means of asserting an identity when faced with the loss of appropriate gender roles.” Walsh, “The Metamorphoses of Seneca’s Medea,” 81.
5 It “seems to culminate also from the banishment of feminine things.” Walsh, “The Metamorphoses of Seneca’s Medea,” 82.
gestures and actions are by all means feminine. They arise from her deep awareness of being a woman, with a genuinely magical ability to transform her situation, her body, the world, and the people around her.

Where does this wild and masculine image come from? Already, Medea’s cunning intelligence has been interpreted as masculine; it is more often the case that scholars attribute this concept of Medea as a male figure to the extraneous presence of violence, the shedding of blood, and the series of murders.7

VIOLENCE

When reading Seneca’s tragedies, one of the striking features is the meticulous description of bloody events, the brutality, the crude narration of amorous passion, in short, the strong presence of the body, of physicality in the plays. Thyestes’ messenger recounts in detail the horror of Atreus’ cooking, Clytemnestra passionately continues to cut off Agamemnon’s already-dead head, Phaedra’s chorus explains to Theseus which parts of the dismembered body should be placed where, or if a suitable piece is missing, where it fits best.

The strong imagery of physical reality is a natural feature of the genre itself: theater wants us to see through action, vision, and speech. Roman theater is characterized by a more spectacular and raw presentation than Greek theater. Think, for instance, of the Roman comedy, the mimus, the atellana, the gladiator performances.8 We should not see this as a less demanding artistic value but as the need for a community with a different mentality and a different theatrical tradition.9

In addition to violence, in Seneca, the representation of the imaginary and the physical within the plays is an essential element, a pivot point in the relationship between the characters. In his tragedies, the spectacle is an important means of dramatic effect, not only the spectacle seen by the audience but the spectacle that has meaning for the characters, that becomes the basis of the plot or even part of the revenge. This is well illustrated, for example, by Euripides’ famously different final scene: in the Greek drama, the death of the children

6 Griffiths, Medea.
7 For this emotional profile of Medea in relation to the murders, see Battistella, “Medea and the Joy of Killing,” 97–113.
9 With an important caveat – namely, that there is no scholarly consensus whether Seneca’s plays were performed in a theatrical setting; they might have been merely recitative or even intended to be read.
is announced by a herald, and Medea remains a distant and passive character. In the final scene by Seneca, however, Medea acts in the fullness of her power, while Jason remains only a powerless spectator.\(^\text{10}\)

Beyond the physical gestures of revenge and violence, even words brand Medea as masculine: in a Greek context, being a woman equates to pudor, which equates to not acting.

Creon hits the nail on the head when he calls Medea the combination of masculine and feminine properties: *cui feminae nequitia, ad audendum omnia / robur virile est*, “you combine the perfidy of woman with the strength of man” (267–68). In other words, Medea’s femininity has a very wide range.

**FEMALE ROLES**

“Medea represents all women,” wrote Dolores O’Higgins of her figure in Pindar.\(^\text{11}\) The female roles of Medea and her relationship to her femininity have always been the focus of interest, not only in the dramatizations of Seneca or Euripides and not only in the field of classical philology but from modern theater to film and music, through contemporary literature and even politics.\(^\text{12}\)

Strictly in the field of classics, one of the pioneers in this regard, from the 1990s, is Ruby Blondell’s introduction to Euripides’ translation of Medea, in which she offers a balanced discussion of interpretive themes such as Medea “the Other” (where she draws several modern parallels); the marriage of Medea and Jason; and how male/female, Greek/Barbarian, and human/divine are opposed. “Medea represents the threat posed by female subjectivity and independent will, especially the active exercise of women’s erotic desire.”\(^\text{13}\) A series of studies on these themes was subsequently published.\(^\text{14}\) One that stands out is the stunning book by C. E. Luschnig, *The Granddaughter of the Sun*.\(^\text{15}\)

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10 Abrahamsen, *The Tragedy of Identity in Senecan Drama*, 123.


15 Luschnig, *Granddaughter of the Sun*. 
Boyle makes a detailed list of all Medea’s female roles: “naive princess, knowing witch, faithless and devoted daughter, frightened alien, displaced traitor to family and state, helper-maiden, abandoned wife, vengeful lover, caring and filicidal mother, loving and fratricidal sister, oriental ‘other,’ barbarian savior of Greece, rejuvenator of the bodies of animals and men, killer of kings and princesses, destroyer and restorer of kingdoms, poisonous stepmother, paradigm of beauty and horror, demi-goddess, subhuman monster, priestess of Hecate and granddaughter of the sun, bride of dead Achilles and ancestor of the Medes, rider of a serpent-drawn chariot in the sky.”

The many layers of the myth and the richness of the Senecan drama have given rise to interpretations from many different perspectives. Whichever interpretation an analyst chooses, all tacitly agree that Medea’s development throughout the play is a kind of crescendo, whether seen in terms of anger, vengeance, superhumanity, or even the enhancement or loss of her femininity.

Many have also written about how Seneca constructs, step by step, as an excellent dramatist, the final act and the spectacular triumph of the infanticidal mother. Some write about the development of her character, others, on the contrary, about the loss of her character.

Looking at the text itself, Medea expresses, in her very first lines, a precise summary of her female roles up to that day: the very first words of the play invoking the conjugal deities ominously foreground her marriage, naming Lucina to hint at the dramatic role of motherhood, and then gradually move from the present situation (Medea the wife vs. Medea the mother) to the past. With the mention of the Argo, the figure of the acquired stigma for Jason is anticipated, but then also the girl in love, ready to sacrifice everything, the savior of life, and the wise sorceress. That she is a descendant of the Sun is a kind of omen for her marriage, and the reality of this will gradually reveal itself in the text. With the mention of Hecate, Medea’s destructive side emerges: the priestess of Hecate of the Argonautics, who kills or saves at will with her poisons and spells. The past and the future are linked at several points: in the summoning of the goddesses of vengeance.

it is significant that they are the ones who once stood at her nuptial bed (*quaes horridae quandam thamalis meis stetistis* [16–17]), but that at their repeated summoning they are now sent to Creusa's bed *ad novos thalamos* (743). Similarly, the words of the tragedy's prologue and finale resonate in a way that resembles other Seneca's plays: Medea is already asking the Sun for the chariot in which to escape (32–34).

We retrace her past with her, not so much along the events as along her feminine condition; her gestures and actions can be interpreted in relation to them, as Medea suggests, often as a result of her current role as a woman. Before she met Jason, Medea was a loved girl, respected by her people for her healing and magical knowledge; she was also powerful, she was a princess, she had a homeland, she was a sister and most importantly, she was a sought-after girl to marry (217–19):

Generosa, felix, decore regali potens
fulsi: petebant tunc meos thalamos proci,
qui nunc petuntur.

Noble and happy and powerful, I shone with a royal light.
Then I was required to marry princes
who are now required.

For now, she has lost all this, she is a woman alone, without a country, without her family, without her brother, she is a barbarian, a perennial outsider, feared, hated for her fame as a sorceress, powerless, threatened by the king in a hostile city, humiliated in her role as wife, repudiated by her husband, her children taken from her.

On the one hand, it is true that she loses these roles (which is not the same as losing her own identity), but on the other hand, by actively taking control of her own destiny, she liberates herself from it. That is, her self-definition is not that of an exiled poor woman. But being Medea is not taken for granted, one must work for it. That is why she responds to the nurse's soothing words as follows (171):

– Medea …
– Fiam!

– Medea …
– I will become!
THE BODY

To achieve this, to become Medea to the full, Medea largely uses the body as an instrument – she not only uses the bodies of others but also her own female body. The corporeal motifs in Medea are very important, as in the rest of Seneca’s works, not only thinking of the tragedies, for it is enough to recall the well-known parallel between the portrait of Medea (382–96) and the figure in De ira 2.35. Yet this is not only rhetoric but also present already on a more conceptual level in Euripides, especially in the consideration of the woman’s body as a tool: when in Euripides Medea speaks of marriage (233), she calls the husband a “master for the body” and emphasizes the status of a woman’s body as a tool that can be captured and carried off as war booty (256).

Equally strong are the images of the loss of bodily integrity in Medea: abducted virginity, childbirth, sword-piercing bodies, lacerated limbs, and the opportunity to open a wound in Jason’s body.19

Medea’s hands also take on a life of their own, becoming powerful symbols of herself and her actions, identifiable with the sins she has committed: si quod urbes barbarae / novere facinus quod tuae ignorant manus (127–28) and nota fraus, nota est manus (181); and elsewhere thirsting for revenge – like she is: Si posset una caede satiari haec manus … (1009).

From Medea, we hear that the body can be taught, and the hands can be taught to commit new crimes. And one can also learn from the body:

Hoc restat unum, pronubam thalamo feram
ut ipsa pinum postque sacrificas preces
caedam dicatis victimas altaribus.
Per viscera ipsa quaere supplicio viam.

What remains for me, to immolate victims on altars …
sseek it, in the entrails, the way of vengeance. (36–40)

This sentence, very much at the beginning of the tragedy, shows us the body of the sacrificed animal to ask for advice, to read the solution from its entrails – and this Medea says even before she thinks of sacrificing her children as revenge. Yet this image confirms an equally important

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19 See Nussbaum, “Serpents in the Soul,” 231–32.
female characteristic of hers: to be a priestess. Medea invokes Hecate in the Prologue when she recalls her past life, and this also has its symmetrical counterpart at the end of the play, when she offers the serpents to Hecate (773–74). Medea’s role as priestess will be the most relevant in the present analysis while tracking down how she performs on herself the same rituals she had previously performed on others.

**VIRGINITY**

The question of Medea’s virginity has already been once decisive in her legend when the Colchians join them on the island of Corcyra and demand the return of Medea to King Alkinoos, who replies that if Medea is still a virgin, he will return her to her father. Meanwhile, the king’s wife, the queen of the Phaeacians, quickly “marries” Medea off to Jason, whatever that means. In this case, the loss of virginity has become the means of escape and foreshadows the fact that with Seneca, the woman’s body is also a tool. To find confirmation of this in the text, one can mention that at one point the chorus recounts that Jason’s first rejection was of Medea’s body:

Ereptus thalamis Phasisidis horridi,
effrenae solitus pectora coniugis
invita trepidus prendere dextera … (102–104)

You, Jason, who used to caress the breast of a savage female, now torn from her hideous marriage bed, you are reluctant to hold out your hesitant hand [toward her] …

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20 Her role as a priestess is emphasized most in the analyses of Isler-Kerényi, “Immagini di Medea,” 117–38, and in Moreau, Le mythe de Jason et Médée, 191–217.

21 Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 1.9.25: “Having passed by the Island of Thrinacia, where are the kine of the Sun, they came to Corcyra, the island of the Phaeacians, of which Alcinous was king. But when the Colchians could not find the ship, some of them settled at the Ceraunian mountains, and some journeyed to Illyria and colonized the Apsyrtides Islands. But some came to the Phaeacians, and finding the Argo there, they demanded of Alcinous that he should give up Medea. He answered, that if she already knew Jason, he would give her to him, but that if she were still a maid he would send her away to her father. However, Arete, wife of Alcinous, anticipated matters by marrying Medea to Jason; hence the Colchians settled down among the Phaeacians and the Argonauts put to sea with Medea.”
It is noteworthy that a little earlier Medea also speaks of her marriage bed as a *horridus thalamus*. Equally remarkable is the chorus’ repetition: just before they mentioned Diana as the wild virgin, and immediately here is Medea called the wild wife.

After the chorus rejoice that Jason is already horrified at touching Medea’s breast, they add that now he will be cheered by a virgin and say: *felix Aeoliam corripe virginem*, “take happily this virgin!” (105) Moreover, Medea says the same in short order, that the new woman is such a tabula rasa as if these women’s bodies were in some sense interchangeable.

On the other hand, the most important bodily motif in the play is the connection of virginity and motherhood with the ability to act and the ability to commit crimes. At the very beginning, Medea recounts (not yet referring to the murder of her children) how her plan for revenge matured in her, she did not simply plan it, but she gave birth to it. Vengeance is born through a birth canal, coming out of Medea’s body. And vengeance is possible because Medea is a woman who has already given birth to children. The Latin text is skillfully ambivalent:

Parta iam ultio est: peperi. (25–26)

My vengeance is born! I gave birth
[to children or to it, i.e., to vengeance].

Thus, the bodies of the children are the tools of revenge that come to light, and the birth-giving body of the mother is also a tool to act out her plan. The most explicit expression of this is that when Medea is devising a plan, she thinks it out with her body. However, finding this plan to punish Jason is itself a harrowing process. (One cannot but remember Euripides’ Medea saying, “I would rather go to the battlefield three times than give birth once again…” And the result, the “product,” is nothing intellectual, cold-blooded, a cunning move; inversely, just as the result of childbirth, it is full of pain, cries, and blood – and it means the start of a new life for both Medea and Jason.

Right after this phrase, she immediately states in no uncertain terms that as a mother, she can and must commit greater sins than when she was a girl:

Vulnera et caedem et vagum funus per artus …
haec virgo feci, gravior exurgat dolor,
maiora iam me scelera post partus decent. (47–50)
Wounds, massacres, limbs torn to pieces … – I did them as a virgin, those – more heinous are the crimes that are due to me now that I have given birth.

There is no doubt that the growth from girl to woman and mother has multiplied Medea's capacities. It is also in this context that one can interpret Medea's words of her hypothetic behavior of not acting. In the dialogue with Creon, Medea goes back further in time to her childhood and tells how the course of events would have been if she had behaved as expected of a girl: "Behold, [if] I, a virgin, set above all my modesty …" and lists what would have happened if she had not set aside her virginal modesty: all Greek heroes would have died.\textsuperscript{22}

**REGAINING VIRGINITY**

During the process of revenge, Medea also restores her own female status to a new equilibrium: after Jason has deprived Medea of her role as wife, Medea wants to become a virgin again, and for this, she requests Creon and Jason to give her back her sins; the sins that made her a wife and mother. For Medea, it is not impossible for her to become a virgin again, for her virginity or motherhood is not a physical state. If she has lost her virginity by committing crimes for Jason, she can regain it by the same inverted act: by committing crimes against Jason. Bodies killed in the past can be atoned for with future bodies killed, and she reveals that if she had had more children, the more perfect the atonement would be.\textsuperscript{23} Martha Nussbaum also connects a later element to this restored virginity: when Medea speaks of how, if she were unknowingly pregnant, she would cut Jason's fetus with a sword: her desire to uproot him, to destroy the piece of him growing in her image of success is the fantasy of restored virginity.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} “Obici crimen hoc solum potest, / Argo reversa, virgini placeat pudor / paterque placeat: tota cum ducibus ruet / Pelasga tellus, hic tuus primum gener / tauri ferocis ore flammanti occidet” (236–41).

\textsuperscript{23} “Utinam superbae turba Tantalidos meo / exisset utero bisque septenos parens / natos tulissem! sterilis in poenas fui / fratri patrique quod sat est, peperi duos” (954–57).

\textsuperscript{24} “Her desire to root it out, to destroy the piece of him that grows in her … her image of success is the fantasy of restored virginity.” Nussbaum, “Serpents in the Soul,” 232.
The next motif in Medea, besides the female figure regaining her former virginity, is the transformation from virgin to wife, including a certain parallelism between Creusa and Medea.

BECOMING A WIFE

The crimes she had committed as a girl helped to make Medea the wife of Jason, who was the subsequent recipient of the murders and betrayals, while she herself was only the instrument.²⁵

As was already made clear by Medea, the symmetry of the plot comes from restoring the balance of sins: the sins committed for Jason must be balanced by the sins committed against Jason. At the end of this process comes the key scene, the recognition²⁶ that is so important for Medea, and the approval:

Coniugem agnoscis tuam? (1021)

Do you recognize your wife?

The phrase is not only the dramaturgical climax but also an interweaving of the two main motives of revenge: the recovery of a lost identity (Medea as Jason’s wife) and the claim to power (the infamous sorceress, the descendant of the Sun who can give and take life). Identity and power are here naturally intertwined because the role of the wife is inseparable from the power that Medea as a woman has over Jason. This is regardless of the circumstances with which she presents her figure at the beginning of the play and of the way an outsider, who does not know Medea’s power, but only her roles, might see her: the homeless woman, the exiled woman, the barbarian woman, who is not a wife in the Greek sense, who, by helping the Argonauts, has disowned her homeland and her father, is no longer one from Colchis, is no longer the daughter of her father and mother, is no longer a princess and, having killed her brother, is no longer a sister. With Jason’s new marriage, not only would she no longer be a wife, but she would be forced to leave her children, i.e., her role as a mother would also end.


²⁶ On the importance of recognition as confirmation of her self, see Bexley, “Recognition and the Character of Seneca’s Medea,” 31–51.
But for a while, Medea still wants Jason to recognize her as his wife again, even though the frequent use of the word *coniunx* is both threatening and ironic; Medea also calls Creusa *coniunx*. Indeed, with the scrupulousness of a feminine rival, Medea investigates Creusa’s suitability for this role and how well she holds up to Jason’s sexual commitment. She openly asks if his new wife will bear children, to which Jason answers yes, in the future; and elsewhere, in a more desperate dialogue, she forces Jason to reveal that he has not had sexual relations with Creusa until then. Medea confirms her position as a sexually active partner between the roles of wife and mother when she makes it clear that she might even be pregnant, surpassing Creusa in this respect:

> In matre si quod pignus etiamnunc latet, scrutabor ense viscera et ferro extraham. (1012−13)

If there is in my womb, hidden, a seed of life from you, I will frisk my belly with my sword to pluck it out.

In the formulation of the nurse and the chorus, the role of Medea’s wife is ended, while Medea wants to restore this role – by physically destroying her other wife. And when Creusa dies, she succeeds precisely because Jason has no other wife but her. Moreover, killing Creusa and Creon could only have been done by such an infamous woman: only Medea, Jason’s infamous wife, is capable of a Medea-style murder. However, when this happens, this female role is no longer important to her. Instead, a new clash begins within Medea: her mother and non-mother part.

**MOTHER**

It is the image of the child-killing mother that has eventually overwritten almost everything in the afterlife of the Medea myth. But images on vases and the remains of texts predating Euripides illustrate how this image of the monster mother was a one-sided and late development. Little is said as to why this was so. The two very different but pleasingly complementary explanations are that the Persian wars, on the one hand, lacerated the image of Medea and, even more so, the hostilities with Corinth over the island of Corfu in Euripides’ time.28

28 Beltrametti, “Eros e maternità,” 43.
The reason for the degradation of Medea has been interpreted in a broader context by Cornelia Isler-Kerényi: “Medea exhausts her ability to metamorphose from good to bad, from goddess to woman, not with the advent of rational thought but with the definitive establishment of dogmatic thought: with the extinction of ancient religion.”

Medea’s social status as a mother is quite different in Seneca’s tragedy from Euripides’ presentation. This diversity surely also stems from the very different contexts of woman and wife-in-law and in the conception of the family in Rome and classical Greece. According to Roman law, in the event of divorce, the children always had to remain in the father’s house to guarantee their descent, so Medea’s repudiation automatically meant her removal from the house and her separation from her children. This is undoubtedly the case in the social situation of Rome at the time, but in Medea’s words, we have the feeling that having freed herself from the role of wife, she is consciously turning to her motherhood to weigh that too and that the two are well separated for her:

*Materque tota coniuge expulsa redit.* (928)

The mother has all come back, the wife is banished.

Medea sees her motherhood as separate, and for her it is bound only to her children: if they are alive, she is their mother; if they are not alive, she has ceased to be a mother. On a different thread, but with a similar conclusion, Guastella, looking at parental roles, originally in relation to Jason, comes to the same conclusion: he remains a father after the death of his children, an orphan father who mourns his children, but Medea ceases to be a mother when her children die. It is fascinating and ambiguous that, on the one hand, Medea forces Jason to recognize her as his wife by killing his children, and on the other hand, she loses the last thread that binds her to Jason. The killing of her children is Medea’s last gesture to accomplish her great feat: to be herself again.

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31 Guastella writes that the pater remains defeated and alone, the mater, on the other hand, as if she had disappeared, also erased by a crime. “Il destino dei figli,” 162.
KILLING TO BE REBORN OR THE RE-BIRTH OF THE BODY

Medea speaks first of her longing for a return to *vigor antiquus* and her desire to find a way out of impotence – insecurity, just like those who asked her to rejuvenate. She goes much further when in right in front of our eyes she quickly shrugs off the role of the helpless exiled woman, shortly killing the king who is threatening her. By physically destroying her rival, she also strips herself of the role of the rejected woman. Then, she must take her revenge on Jason, namely by hurting him where he is most vulnerable. Jason himself reveals this point: their children. That is why the children become the instruments of revenge, their little bodies, which Medea uses as a means of escape in the same way as the dismembered body of her little brother. To restore the balance, not only in her own person, Medea wants to make Jason exactly as he made her before: to live as an orphan, exiled, deprived of the male roles of prince, husband, and father. On the one hand, the price for this is that Medea also renounces the corresponding female roles and, on the other hand, this renunciation has a new face: it is part of her grand plan to return to her former self, to rejuvenate herself as she did the others in her cauldron. And this she succeeds in achieving:

IAM IAM RECEPI SCEPTRAA GERMANUM PATREM, 
SPOLOMQUE COLCHI PECUDIS AURATAE TENENT; 
REDIERE REGNA, RAPTA VIRGINITAS REDIT. (982–84)

The throne, the father, the brother are mine again. 
The golden fleece is in the hands of the Colchians. 
My homeland has returned, my virginity returns.

The past comes alive and becomes the present. The power of Colchis taken away from her is replaced by Corinth, taken away from Jason; the little man dismembered with the sword of the terrible virgin, *nefandae virginis*, and cut to pieces, thrown one by one, is paid for by the children killed by the *nefanda mater* and the bodies scattered before their father. With this rebirth, this change in her new self, she becomes Medea, the new, preponderant female role: the infamous Medea of the legends.

To achieve this, Seneca makes Medea refer to herself in the third person countless times in the text; in fact, she often jumps between the first-, second-, and third-person singular in a few lines. She can look at herself from the outside. Equally hectic but more exciting is how she jumps into the alleys of her past. However, Medea does not
use this mythical past in the way we know it from tragedies spanning
generations. Drawing strength from her past, Medea consciously sha-
pes herself to be more and more like herself. She does not even want
to draw on other examples, the mythical past or that of her kinship.
This could be why – even if it is present – Seneca does not emphasize
the Sun’s history with the love misfortune associated with her female
descendants. This would create a generational chain of sins under the
influence of the curse, as the Tantalids do. Medea does not need this;
she is enough for herself, consciously using her myth and exploiting
its power. The most significant ability of her past is the rejuvenation
of the body and the use of the body as an instrument. This is one of
Medea’s privileges. But where does this power of hers come from?

The first literary mention of Medea is found in Hesiod (ca. 700 BC),
where she seems to be regarded as a goddess married to the mortal
Jason after completing the tasks imposed on him by Pelias. In an
archaic epic, Medea is said to be the queen of Corinth and Jason the
king, and Medea is said to bury her children in the temple of Hera as
soon as they are born in order to make them immortal – and scholars
agree that such an attempt could only be made by a deity. This seems
to be the first mention of Medea as an infanticide – but, note, unin-
tentional! – which, however, had no counterpart in the testimonies of
vase paintings. The sixth-century lyric poet Ibycus mentions Medea,
and he is the first to tell of Medea’s marriage to Achilles in Elysium. He
is followed by Simonides, in which the scholastics report that Medea
boils Jason to rejuvenate him and is herself queen of Corinth, while
Sophocles’ Rhizotomoi (Rootcutters) also focuses on Medea’s magical
abilities. More telling are the iconographical representations of Me-
dea: in Cornelia Isler-Kerényi’s careful and thoughtful reconstruction,
the chronological stages of Medea’s imagery could be followed. She
points out that the cauldron is part of Medea’s magical equipment in
the Argonautics and is present in all textual witnesses, even fragmen-
tary ones, and especially in her iconography before 430, the date of
Euripides’ tragedy. Starting with the earliest known image of Medea
on the Etruscan olpe of the Villa Julia and later in Athenian cera-

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33 Theogonia 992–1002.
34 See Johnston, “Corinthian Medea,” 44–70; cf. also Harrauer, “Der korinthische
35 For all these mentions and ancient sources see Boyle, “Introduction,” 3.
37 Images available online at the website of Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa
Giulia.
mics, Medea is typically shown with a cauldron, and before Euripides’ tragedy, she is never depicted as infanticidal. After Euripides, this is almost exclusively the case. Medea uses the cauldron to dominate the phases of human life; in a way, she is like Rhea or Demeter – they, too, are capable of rescuing with similar methods.

Medea was the goddess of the good cauldron, Isler-Kerényi writes. In Seneca’s tragedy, her image near the cauldron is referred to in two ways. When Medea confronts Creon, Pelias appears in their speech, and shortly afterward we see Medea picking plants in preparation to kill Creusa, gathering them as if they were spices.

Tradition ascribes to her various rejuvenation spells or events based on her ability to make a human being stronger or even immortal: Jason, Talos, Heson, the ram, Pelias, her children’s temptation, and herself.

THE REJUVENATION OF JASON

In the surviving iconographic evidence, Medea first appears while performing the ritual of rejuvenating a man (probably Jason) in a cauldron (ca. 630 BC). The rejuvenation theme associated with Medea (the rejuvenation of a ram/Jason or the boiling of Pelias) remains in vase paintings until the 5th century. The first representation comes from a funerary context: an Etruscan bucchero vase found in a tomb in Cerveteri. This scene is also described in Simonides (fr. 548) and in Pherecides from the 6th century (3F113). But there are other interesting pictorial testimonies that complement this rejuvenation of Jason. Among the images showing Jason escaping from the jaws of the dragon, there is one that clearly shows a long scar on Jason’s chest, a crater from 470–60 BC. Alain Moreau suggests that this scar is a sign that Medea had previously torn Jason apart and boiled him in her cauldron, rejuvenating and strengthening him. Moreau supports this hypothesis by stating that, on the one hand, Jason is a teenager, but his musculature is not strong, and that the accident may have occurred before he began the tasks assigned to him by Aeetes.

The fact of Jason’s rejuvenation is also mentioned in literary sources: Apollonius says that, on the one hand, Hera made Jason handsome, and on the other hand, Medea made him extraordinarily strong.

38 LIMC “Medeia” fig. 1. For a detailed commentary with many illustrations see Kobakhidze, “Medea in Etruscan Art,” in Preprints, 19.
39 Moreau, Le mythe de Jason et Médée, 33, fig 2.
40 Moreau, Le mythe de Jason et Médée, 35–36.
41 Argonautica 3.1256ff.
confirm that the ritual of making Jason stronger would take place in
the cauldron, Moreau quotes a legendary myth from the enigmatic
words of Lycophron in the *Alexandra* where he places the cauldron
scene between the fight with the fiery bull and the acquisition of the
golden fleece.  

**TALOS**

Another episode is also pertinent here: the story of Talos shows that
although Medea and the Argonauts traveled together for only a short
time, Medea’s reputation at that time certainly included the ability
to reanimate, even render someone immortal. And this must have
been true not only for the Argonauts, who may have witnessed Jason’s
resurrection, but also for Talos himself, for otherwise, he would hardly
have agreed that Medea takes him by the hand:

ἐξαπατηθεὶς δὲ ὑπὸ Μηδείας ἀπέθανεν, ὡς μὲν ἔνιοι λέγουσι, διὰ
φαρμάκων αὐτῷ μανίαν Μηδείας ἐμβαλούσης, ὡς δὲ τινες, ὑποσχομένης
ποιήσειν ἀθάνατον καὶ τὸν ἥλων ἐξελούσης, ἐκρυέντος τοῦ παντὸς
ἱχῶρος αὐτὸν ἀποθανεῖν.

His death was brought about by the wiles of Medea, whether, as some
say, she drove him mad by drugs, or, as others say, she promised to
make him immortal and then drew out the nail, so that all the ichor
gushed out and he died.  

This tale is illustrated by a magnificent painting on a vase, a red-figure
volute krater (dated 425–375 BC), which depicts Talos dying unconscious
in the presence of the Argonauts while the enchantress Medea stands
aside, grimly gazing at her victim and holding in one hand a basket
from which she seems to draw fatal herbs with the other.

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42 Lycophron, *Alexandra* 1.1309–21: “And second they sent the Atracian wolves to
steal for their leader of the single sandal the fleece that was protected by the
watching dragon’s ward. He came to Libyan Cytaea and put to sleep with simples
that four-nostrilled snake, and handled the curved plough of the fire-breathing
bulls, and had his own body cut to pieces in a caldron and, not joyfully, seized
the hide of the ram.”


44 Ruvo, Jatta Museum, 1501; images and bibliography available online at the
Beazley Archive.
THE REJUVENATION OF AESON

According to the author of the *Nostoi* epic, Medea restored Jason’s old father to youth:

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Then she made Aeson a dear young man in the prime of life depriving him of old age with wise deeds, boiling in cauldrons of gold many medicines.\textsuperscript{45}

While according to Ovid Medea restored Aeson to youth, not by boiling him, but by emptying his body of the ephemeral old blood and replacing it with a magical infusion.\textsuperscript{46}

THE REJUVENATION OF PELIAS (AND OF THE RAM, AND ALSO OF MEDEA HERSELF)

On Jason’s return to Iolcos, Pelias, the uncle who had usurped his throne, is now old, and his daughters, the Peliads, are fascinated by the powers of Medea, who assures them that she is able to rejuvenate their father, adopting two subterfuges to convince them: first she simulates her own rejuvenation, perhaps by removing make-up from her face, and then – this being the decisive proof – she has an old ram brought to her, which she tears to pieces and throws the pieces into a cauldron, adding her portentous *phármaka*. Shortly afterward, a young lamb emerges from the cauldron.

The story of Medea’s fraud on Pelias is illustrated by several Greek vases,\textsuperscript{47} and they attest to an ancient story in which Medea was regarded by all as being able to revive and cure in her capacity as a priestess of Hecate. A few examples would be sufficient to exploit the varieties of the scene, with ram or lamb emerging, with Pelias present or absent. For instance, on a black-figure vase, the ram is seen coming out of the boiling cauldron, while Medea and Pelias’ two daughters stand looking at it with gestures of delighted surprise, and the white-haired, aging king himself sits watching expectantly. Or the only two-sided


\textsuperscript{46} Met. 7.251–94.

\textsuperscript{47} Cf. *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*LIMC*), Vol. 7, Peliades.
black-figured vase depicting the scene, without Pelias and with a Medea gesturing toward the cauldron – or even adding her magical ingredients\(^\text{48}\) (see Figure 1).

Similarly, the lekythos by the Beldam Painter depicts a cauldron with an emerging ram in the center, with two women on each side: Medea, administering her magic instructions with her right hand raised, and one of Pelias’s daughters (with no old man present). A recent analysis of the five vases of the Beldam Painter that represent Medea confirms that

the vases show the cauldron placed on the centre of the image with the fire amidst the flaming wood. We can realize that type of cauldron is very ancient, it is large and rustic, and it is known as *empyribete*. Medea shows her expertise at the specific moment when the animal is inside the cauldron in process of being rejuvenated. Crossing the information between the text and the image, we could state that the picture with Medea in these lekythoi vases refer to the remote characteristic of hers, and the pictures of the lekythoi belong to the Iolkus epic cycle. Medea was designed as the young wife of Jason and as a priestess of Hekate with the ability to cure from diseases and to rejuvenate the old and sick people.\(^\text{49}\)

Based on this, Candido arrives at the same conclusion as Cornelia Isler-Kerényi, namely that the predilection for this Medea image in funerary vases was linked to her perception as a magician-reviver who could help the dead. These are only snapshots, while in the extended version, a fresco from Pompeii, one finds Medea dressed as the princess of Artemis.\(^\text{50}\) These images are well-known and well-studied, and they can be paired with the very scarce textual evidence that illustrates the same scenery.

Fragmentary references to Euripides’ lost tragedy *Peliades* describe it in even more detail, surprisingly recounting how Medea first disguised herself, with hair dye and make-up on her face to look older – and when one of the Peliades, Alcestis, is still hesitant to take out her father after the “ordeal” of the rejuvenated ram, the disguised Medea would perform her own rejuvenation (perhaps by removing her make-up) and this final gesture would convince all the daughters

\(^{48}\) Available online at Harvard Art Museums, object 290713.

\(^{49}\) Candido, *Medea and the Rejuvenation of Pelias*.

\(^{50}\) Museo Archeologico Nazionale Napoli, Invent. 111477, dated to 50–63 AD, originally Pompeii VI 13.2 (Casa del Gruppo dei vasi di vetro).
Fig. 1 – Neck Amphora (storage jar): Medea Boiling a Ram, ca. 520 BC, Beazley Archive Database #4798, Harvard Art Museums / Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of David M. Robinson
to proceed. In a medieval Greek work in verse, the *Christus Patiens* (11th–12th c.) by an anonymous author, there are traces of the tales associated with Pelias’ rejuvenation, where one can read the following verses describing Pelias’ disappearances in the first person:

λέβητι χρυσέῳ δὲ πέπτων μοι δέμας,
σοφῇ προμηθείᾳ με ξενίσῃ ξένως:
λυγρὸν γὰρ ἀπὸ γῆρας εὐφυῶς ξέσας
ἀνθρωπολοιγοῦ παμπαλαιὰς μοι λύπης,
κούρον φίλον θήσειεν ἡβόωντα με:
ὡς νῦν κάκιστον γῆρας ἅπαντα τρύχει.

Cooking my body in a cauldron,
cautiously surprising me in an unusual way:
depriving me of the pain of old age
and suffering ever baleful to man,
make me a dear boy in my prime,
for now, a malignant old age wears everything down.

I leave aside here the hypothesis of the attempted and failed rejuvenation of Medea’s children, briefly mentioned earlier, and turn to the final story related to Medea in this context: Aeschylus’ *Trophoi* (Nurses) seems to be about Medea’s rejuvenation of Dionysus’ nurses and their husbands – although it is rather difficult to pinpoint when it might have occurred within her mythological chronology, most likely the event was placed after her flight from Athens. A commentary on Euripides’ *Medea* relates that Aeschylus recounts how Medea “rejuvenated the wet-nurses of Dionysus, together with their husbands, by boiling them” – as she had done to Jason and his father Aeson in other tales, and as she had pretended to do to Pelias.

A scholion to Aristophanes’ *Knights* 1321 refers to Aeschylus and the rejuvenation of the nurses, and cites the fragment from the *Nostoi* about the rejuvenation of Aeson, quoted above:

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52 *Christus Patiens* 933–38. Translation mine.
53 Fragm. Bernabé 6b.
According to Aeschylus, they tell the story about Medea that after boiling the nurses of Dionysus, she rejuvenated them, together with their husbands, and according to the author of the *Nostoi*, also [rejuvenated] Aeson, saying the following words …

A reference to this story by Ovid suggests that Medea did this at the request of Dionysus. Rejuvenation – in any case, successful rejuvenation – is a theme for satyr drama, not a tragedy; Dionysus’ role in the story points in the same direction, and there is virtually no doubt that this drama was indeed a satyr play. A vase painted ca. 460 BC may well have been inspired by this play: it shows a woman leading an elderly satyr toward a cauldron (similar to the various images of Medea with Pelias), and on the other side, the same satyr, now black-haired and vigorous, with his wife and a child.

CONCLUSION

Having seen or read the scenes with Medea and the cauldron, one is reminded of the scene when Pelops was killed by his cruel father Tantalus, cut up into pieces, and served at a banquet of the gods. Out of pity, the gods brought him back to life by boiling him in a cauldron, from which he emerged safe and even with a new shoulder. Cornelia Isler-Kerényi writes that the cauldron evokes fundamental cosmological demarcations: between the primordial age and the present age, between the divine and human worlds, between life and death, and between death and life. Her well-known and well-respected capacities account for the popularity of her images on vases used in a funerary context.

57 Ancona, Museo Nazionale, 3198.
58 Pindar, *Olymp*. 1.26 (40) ss. For similar stories of magical recovery of youth and life, see Frazer: Appendix to Apollodorus, “The Renewal of Youth.”
Seneca turns back to this fearful but potent figure and brings together Medea’s gestures from the past when she returned life and strength to the old and weak – and now, in the drama, turns this practice onto herself. The imagery of the cauldron and her previous acts of murder and rejuvenation, along with the strong body imagery and the use of physical transformations, pave the way for her to perform her physical transformation. It happens at the cost of murder and the annihilation of her own former physical stages. Seneca uses descriptions and allusions of high impact to characterize the visceral, sexual, maternal identity of Medea, to underline that everything that had happened to her and all that she had done to others strongly concerns the body.

Medea wants to start again, from the beginning, the image of her regained virginity is the tabula rasa that will take her out of the drama and into a new life, young, strong, husbandless, and childless, that will lead her into a later story, as the wife of Aegeus and a mother of his child. In the tradition that relates her to Aegeus, she also uses her own body, her female fertility to become his wife and uses in the same way the promised future child to shape her new life and female identity, becoming thus a sought-after woman to marry, just like before meeting Jason, and a giving birth. Medea, in her rejuvenation, is, in fact, realizing what Jason would have wanted: a new beginning. At the same time, Medea does not really masculinize herself; on the contrary, she only shows how much harder it is to do those things as a woman. Despite Seneca’s rather creepy portrayal, his Medea is not the masculine serial killer who denies herself her femininity but rather uses all her strength as a woman, cook, sorceress, virgin, wife, mother, and above all, priestess, and quasi-goddess of the cauldron, to rejuvenate herself and become – Medea.
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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the arc of the sequence of events through which Medea rejuvenates herself – as she has rejuvenated others before her, she does it as if she were simply disassembling herself and putting herself in her own cauldron to be reborn as her younger and stronger self. After describing the different and changing female roles of Seneca’s Medea, the paper gives a close reading of the text to show how Seneca uses images of the body and to underscore the way Medea uses her own body to achieve her transformation: to start a new life by returning to her earlier self, i.e., by rejuvenating herself. To back this argument, the paper also highlights her previous acts of rejuvenation in textual and pictorial testimonies and argues that Seneca presented Medea as a rather positive figure, a deity, a magician, a healer, who is capable of ruling over life and death.

KEYWORDS: Seneca the Younger, Medea, rejuvenation, female roles, body, stages of life

Medeja se pomladi: Ženske vloge in raba telesa v Senekovi Medeji

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek obravnava potek in zaporedje dogodkov, preko katerih se Medeja pomladi – tako kot je pred seboj pomladila druge, to stori, kot bi se preprosto razstavila in se dala v svoj kotel ter se nato prerodila v svoj mlajši in močnejši jaz. Članek najprej predstavi različne in spreminjajoče se ženske vloge pri Senekovi Medeji, nato pa s pomočjo podrobnega branja besedila pokaže, kako Seneka uporablja podobe telesa, in se osredotoči na način, kako Medeja uporablja lastno telo, da bi dosegla svojo preobrazbo: da bi začela novo življenje z vrnitvijo k svojemu prejšnjemu jazu, da bi se torej pomladila. V podporo tej tezi članek izpostavi tudi njena prejšnja pomlajevanja, kot so ohranjena v besedilnih in ikonografskih virih, ter pokaže, kako je Seneca Medejo predstavil kot precej pozitiven lik, kot božanstvo, čarodejko in zdravljko, ki zmore upravljati z življenjem in smrtjo.

KLJUČNE BESEDJE: Seneka, Medeja, pomladitev, ženske vloge, telo, življenjska obdobja