

Tragic Disclosure: Stoic Diagnostics in Senecan Drama

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I set out to render Seneca's ostensibly anti-Stoic tragedies consistent with the practical ends of Senecan Stoicism. I do this by reconstructing Seneca's approach to poetics and by situating this approach within a longer tradition of philosophical criticism hospitable to poetry. I then apply this hermeneutic approach to Seneca's paradigmatic tragedy, *Medea*.

On my view, the Stoicism of Senecan drama lies in the meta-reflexivity Seneca invests within the phenomenon of aesthetic response. Through engagement with tragedy, the reader/auditor acquires self-knowledge instrumental to progressing along the Stoic path. Spectator response serves as a kind of diagnostic tool through which the subject learns about their disposition to allocate their care in the world, and against which they determine their alignment with Stoic doctrine.

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Preface

Much of my thesis arose from competing intuitions I have about Stoicism. I am irresistibly attracted to Stoic esteem for rational agency, where rational agency is understood to be the ability to correctly interpret life, to appropriately judge which things have value, and correspondingly, judge how the presence or absence of these things can disrupt your capacity to live well. Here is a philosophy that is promising you that no matter what happens in life, no matter who you are, where you come from, nothing but your own judgement has the power to threaten your dignity and happiness. A big promise, but possibly, an empty one.

I cannot help thinking that human experience gives us reason to be skeptical of this optimistic picture. Stoic or not, life events have the power to invade us in terrible ways, so much so that they can impair our capacity to judge and evaluate events correctly. Some traumas are so abrupt and intense that there is no way that the agent can experience them with the equanimity Stoic rational agency promises. I could not imagine, for example, a bereaved parent standing over the body of their child, thinking that this loss is not so great, after all; that this loss serves a purpose in the unfolding of the universe, and that they can simply carry on with their lives, undisturbed and tranquil. *Contra* the dictates of Stoic theory of value then, I am convinced that there are some events in life which we cannot face with ethical indifference. More strongly, I think that to do anything but feel invaded, powerless and sad in such situations seems to token an inappropriate, even pathological understanding of the world and human vulnerability. For the same reasons then that Stoicism is attractive, Stoicism becomes repulsive. Being Stoic

seems to constitute an extreme violence against the self, against truth, and our common sense understanding of what really matters in life.

I thought there is no better place to start examining this tension than in the corpus of the most eclectic Stoic philosopher: Lucius Annaeus Seneca. As a Stoic, Seneca is weird. Beyond his appeals to Epicurean thought in his letters and moral discourses; beyond his self deprecating confessions of moral weakness—particularly with respect to his proclivity towards the anti-Stoic passion of anger, and beyond his dissonant attachments to the accumulation of external wealth in his aristocratic life, Seneca wrote eight tragedies, all of which appear to challenge the Stoic vision of a providential rational universe, depicting the triumph of passion towards indifferent things, chaos, revenge and evil. Perhaps, I thought, Senecan tragedy has something important to tell me about my conflicting intuitions about Stoicism. I had hoped that a project on Stoic tragedy could resolve this tension in some way, such that I could have the best of both worlds. Stoic invulnerability on one hand, and the reality of human experience on the other. This is not quite what happened. Yet, following the spirit of my project as it has unfolded, I leave it to the reader to decide for themselves whether such a reconciliation is possible.

Picking up on my conflicting intuitions about Stoicism, my thesis examines the compatibility of Senecan Stoicism with the tacit ethical content contained in tragedy and the tacit ethical content contained in Senecan tragedy proper. I attempt to develop a framework for thinking about Senecan aesthetics which could render these anti-Stoic tragedies coherent with the practical and ethical ends of Seneca Stoicism. I argue that

aesthetic exposure to the tragedies served in some ways to the edify their audience and creator, ultimately contributing to a critical theorizing of the passions in human life.

1. Introduction

Theseus gathers the scraps of Hippolytus's body for burial. He weeps over the bloody husk of his son, longing to join him in death, but resolves to live with his guilt as punishment for the hand he played in murdering him. Queen Hecuba stands helpless on the scorched beaches of Troy; the ruins of her city smoulder behind as she listens to a messenger recount the death of her daughter, put to the sword to appease the supernatural wrath of Achilles, and the death of her grandson, thrown from the city walls. Jason falls to his knees amongst the scattered limbs of his children, and watches the cosmic ascent of the mother who murdered them. He calls out to Medea on her serpent chariot. Let her existence bear testament to the godlessness of the universe.

Murder, helplessness, revenge, despair, godlessness and evil: so end the best three of Seneca's eight tragedies.¹ And so begins a long tradition of scholarship attempting to account for or reconcile the gaps between Senecan philosophy and Senecan tragedy; between the optimistic aspirant of an austere Stoicism, and the grim poet of gratuitous violence and passion. In this thesis, I aim to add my voice to this debate, developing a position on Senecan aesthetics that could render Seneca's tragedies coherent with Seneca's practical Stoic commitments.

In this introductory chapter, I reconstruct the central debate stemming from the interpretive problem posed by Senecan tragedy, outlining the standard views within the literature and the historical evidence evoked to support them. I situate my own view within this constellation of perspectives, outlining what it assumes and what it *does not*

¹ By title, Seneca's tragic corpus includes: *Hercules Furens*, *Medea*, *Troades*, *Phaedra*, *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus*, *Thyestes*, and the fragmentary *Phoenissae*. Two other dramas are attributed to Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus* and *Octavia*, but scholars have reached a consensus that they are the work of an imitator.

commit me to. Last, I offer some preliminary remarks on chapter trajectories and the use of sources.

1.1 Two Debates

Two debates arise in the literature on Senecan tragedy. First, there is the question whether Seneca the Stoic philosopher and Seneca the tragedian share the same authorial intent and consciousness in the execution of their work. The nuances of this inquiry typically target the compatibility or lack thereof between philosophical and literary modes of expression. Interpreters ask whether we must treat these two forms of expression as connected, tragedy somehow being in service to Seneca's philosophical ends, or as fundamentally disconnected, tragedy standing as an independent response to the aesthetic and political culture of the period. Depending on the position one takes on this question, another line of inquiry immediately follows, what I perceive to be the subject of the second, derivative debate.

If it is the case that Seneca's tragedies are imbued with philosophical concern, what is the nature of this concern? Do the tragedies cohere with or critique Seneca's Stoicism? If it is the case that Seneca wrote his tragedies as a Stoic, with Stoic initiatives in mind, what role did he expect such aesthetic exposure to accomplish? What is his position on poetics? What tradition of poetics does he align himself with, and what does this alignment say about his orthodoxy as a Stoic and Stoicism's resolution of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry? Is Seneca reinforcing Plato's theoretical rift between poetic and philosophical expression, simply switching from a philosophical medium to an aesthetic medium to explore and express things the former cannot convey?

If it is not the case that Seneca's tragedies are philosophically informed, then what is he responding to by writing them? Here the possibilities are endless. Do they critique the Julio-Claudian political context? Are they an extension of the ongoing Roman effort to colonize and outcompete Greek culture? In what follows, I will try to briefly construct the positions and arguments subsumed under these related debates.

a. The First Debate: Senecan Tragedy as Philosophical Tragedy or Roman Tragedy?

Crudely put, there are only two possible positions on this first question. Seneca either wrote his tragedies as a philosopher, or he wrote them as *something else*. There are good textual reasons for holding either position, rendering one's interpretive situation in the debate more a matter of subjective and disciplinary preference than a matter of following fact. Unsurprisingly, scholars trained in the Classics tradition tend to favor what I call the skeptical position, while scholars trained in philosophy favor the affirmationist position. The skeptical position holds that it is *not* the case that Seneca wrote his tragedies with a philosophical motivation in mind. Richard Tarrant (1976), John Fitch (1987), Elaine Fantham (1982), Gregory Hine (2000), A. J. Boyle (1997) and Roland Mayer (1983, 2002) are all current representatives of this school of thought. Though they are wildly divergent in their cares and approaches, they all tend to focus their inquiries on the cultural side of the continuum.²

² Tarrant has concerned himself with studying the continuities and differences between Roman theatre and Greek drama (1995). Fitch has focused on dating the tragedies based on their diverging rhetorical forms (1981). Fantham has written on Seneca's continuities with the Virgilian Epic and their significance for the definition of Roman political consciousness (1982). Both Boyle (1997) and Mayer (1982) have situated Seneca in the aesthetic and rhetorical culture of the Julio-Claudian period drama, with the former extending the scope of his analysis to include Seneca's influence on Elizabethan drama.

The focus of these skeptical studies is usually justified in adversarial language. Part of the reason Seneca writes tragedies as *something else* is because he could not have written them as a philosopher, or more accurately, from a Stoic point of view. Elaine Fantham offers a typical articulation of this attitude in her critical introduction to *Seneca's Troades*:

Judged by traditional criteria, the writing of tragedies and of moral treatises seem far apart, and to the Roman's of Cicero's time also they must have seemed different pursuits, of different order and seriousness; the wise and mature thinker would compose philosophical treatises, and would surely have no use of tragedy (Fantham, 15).

According to Fantham, the cultural morass of the period separated the two pursuits, and its representative philosophy, Stoicism, depreciated the value and consistency of such aesthetic forms. In addition to such cultural insights, skeptical interpreters also find support in problems internal to Seneca's prose and tragic corpuses alike. Specifically, in defence of their position, they usually evoke the following facts:

1. Seneca's silence about his theoretical poetics in his philosophical prose (Hine, 23).
2. Seneca's ambivalence to poetry as a part of a humane education in his prose (Hine, 5).
3. The extreme incongruity between the content of the plays themselves and the Stoic doctrine Seneca explicitly identifies with in his prose (Dingle qtt. Boyle 33; qtt Nussbaum 1994, 449; Fitch, 43).

Many interpreters argue that if the tragedies did cohere with Stoic doctrine, then they would not emphasize the triumph of evil over good; they would not present protagonists overcome with passion, express truth in an emotionally laden medium, nor present such

upheavals of emotion as legitimate responses to worldly misfortune. Since all the tragedies do, they are not Stoic.

The affirmationist position holds that Seneca wrote his tragedies as a philosopher, though not necessarily a Stoic. The representative thinkers in this camp are subject to another division, between those who hold that the tragedies are consistent with Seneca's Stoicism, and those who think the tragedies are consistent with philosophical aspiration and method, but do not reflect Stoic philosophy proper. Marti (1945), Staley (2010), and Nussbaum (1994, 1993) are recent representatives of the former category, while Dingel (1974), Segal (2008) and Schiesaro (2003) assume the later position. For now, I will suspend concrete analysis of the differences between these perspectives and focus on the reasons supporting and unifying the general philosophical interpretation.

Affirmationists share a similar rationale for their philosophical interpretations. The historical reasons they cite for their position are in part a problematization of the evidence cited by the skeptical camp, as well as a consideration of Seneca's historical and philosophical situation. These reasons are as follows:

1. Affirmationists argue that Seneca's silence about his poetics in prose is a historical accident. The prefaces to his plays are lost. Staley reports that it was the custom of Roman poets to include a theoretical preface to their plays, discussing their position and innovations on their formal content. It is possible that the omission of this preface presents us with a distorted picture of Seneca's position on aesthetics, especially considering Quintilian's reported debate between Seneca and a contemporary on tragic diction. This anecdote tells us that Seneca did think

about tragedy, and opens a possibility for a philosophical theorization of this thinking (Staley, 5; Fitch 1987, 47).

2. With respect to Seneca's manifest hostility to the role poetry plays in education in his prose, affirmationists suggest that Seneca's criticisms in them are genre specific within the category of poetry, such that his hostility is manifest towards some forms of poetry, but not tragic drama (Staley, 7, 48).
3. With respect to the last criticism—that Seneca's tragedies are decidedly un-Stoic in content—the response is that what constitutes Stoic content on this picture is unfairly presupposed. Skeptical interpreters expect Stoic aesthetic works to convey sages and saints, and close with a positive affirmation of doctrine. This assumption does not take into account the possibility of reading the tragedies as negative *exempla* of the bad life; as case studies in pathological psychology antagonistic to their conception of the good life (Staley, 9, 34; Nussbaum 1993, 48).
4. To re-enforce this third response, affirmationists point to the role traditionally assigned to aesthetics, and specifically tragedy, by the Greek founders of the school, and later Roman sources. Chrysippus, a third-generation founder of the school wrote a discourse on philosophical dimensions of poetry; Epictetus makes frequent reference to Greek tragedies for illustrative purposes (Nussbaum 1993, 99). The general idea here is that poetry and tragedy provide a venue for Stoic philosophers to dramatize elements of their moral psychology, while problematizing the conventional attachments which lead to the presented emotional upheavals in tragedy. Historically, aesthetic texts have been used by

Stoics as a tool for teaching purposes, and conceived as such, could be rendered consistent with Stoic philosophy in general.

Faced with a choice between the skeptical and affirmationist strain of interpretation, I am sympathetic to the latter. I find in the affirmationist evidence—particularly in points two through four—forceful and compelling ground to justify my own interests. Since I have already asserted my own preference for reading Seneca’s tragedies as philosophical, it is not necessary, except by explicit omission, to address the set of questions that would follow the first debate’s second disjunct. I pass over in silence the positions and objections advanced by classicists then, knowing that with this evidence, I have sufficient arguments to concentrate on affirmationist positions.

b. The Second Debate: competing philosophical motivations

Four questions follow from the assertion that Seneca tragedies are philosophically motivated. First, how do we reconcile the apparently anti-Stoic content of the tragedies with Senecan Stoicism? Second, what philosophical role did Seneca expect aesthetic exposure to accomplish, where aesthetic exposure is understood to exhaustively include: a) the writing of the tragedies, b) the reading of the tragedies and, c) somewhat contentiously, the recitation-performance of the tragedies? Third, what kind of poetics can we infer from the answer to the first question? What poetic tradition can we situate Seneca in? And last, given the answers to the above questions, what conclusions can we infer about the orthodoxy of Seneca’s Stoicism and the Stoicism of Seneca’s tragedies? Different thinkers emphasize different questions in their own work, sometimes favoring one question over others.

In this project, I emphasize questions one and two, targeting the problems for Stoic coherence that arise from both within the formal literary structures of tragedy, and from within the content of Senecan tragedy itself. With respect to the first aim, I want to come to terms with the phenomenon of aesthetic emotions; explaining how an aesthetic spectator's emotional attunement to a tragic text can be considered consistent with Stoic normative views on the passions. With respect to the second aim, I want to come to terms with the apparent lack of Stoic ethical content contained within Senecan tragedy. Though I separate both questions here for the sake of clarity, as we shall see, these concerns are hopelessly enmeshed; for the emotional response to tragedy is a product of the content of tragedy. But to say this is to anticipate.

While a systematic review of all the works concerned with these questions is well beyond the purview of an introductory chapter, in what follows, I will explicate the main conclusions of three of the major contributors who have influenced my position on the debate.

Among the thinkers who favor a Stoic reading of the tragedies, who argue that their content and form are in *some way* continuous and compatible with the ends of Senecan Stoicism, I have been influenced by the work of Staley (2010) and Nussbaum (1994, 1993).³ Among the thinkers who favor an Anti-Stoic, philosophical reading, I have been influenced by Schiesaro (2003, 1997). I will begin this literature review with the latter thinker, whose claims have informed the scope of my aesthetic targets on this debate.

³ Nussbaum's view, as we will see, is a subtle mix of affirmationist and skeptical positions. She believes that Seneca did write the tragedies with a Stoic didactic end in mind, but that he failed to achieve this end.

In his *Passions in the play, Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (2003), Schiesaro argues that Seneca's tragedies are philosophically motivated, but not from a Stoic point of view. They do not dramatize or reinforce the Stoic ethical principles of Seneca's prose works, but serve instead as a safe space for Seneca to unleash repressed passions in his authorial consciousness. Relying on the psychoanalytic tradition of literary criticism, he argues that each protagonist within the plays demonstrates an awareness of their powers as causal agents, capable of constructing and controlling events. This manifestation of the authorial consciousness, coupled with Seneca's frequent use of the meta-theatrical device of the play within a play, demonstrates for Schiesaro a tendency of Seneca to project aspects of himself into his tragedies, while distancing himself from them. These aspects can be reduced to his repressed passions, antagonistic to the optimistic assertions of Stoic ethical principles we find in his prose works. On this interpretation, tragedy becomes a vehicle for Seneca to criticize and question his ethical convictions.

Though this reading is marked by originality, I largely reject the methodology Schiesaro employs to reach his conclusions. The psychoanalytic reading tends to be blindly ahistorical, reading hidden contemporary motivations and concerns into the production of ancient texts. I am simply not convinced that Seneca would waste his time writing meticulously crafted dramas as a form of semi-conscious psychological experimentation and projection. As he often stresses, his time was too precious for that; his theoretical commitments to Stoicism as a way of life too strong. Nevertheless, the distinction the psychoanalytic lens employs between author and spectator response to aesthetic texts is compelling, and complements the positions of coherence affirmationists

like Staley and Nussbaum. While the tragedies might not be a venue for Seneca to unleash his unconscious, anti-Stoic impulses, Seneca, not his readers, might remain their prime therapeutic target.

In *Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy* (2010), Staley argues that Seneca's tragedies were not written with a simple didactic end in mind. Their content is so egregiously non-Stoic from an evaluative point of view that their writing could not have been motivated by a desire to moralize. The tragedies are not sermons. For Staley, this does not preclude the possibility that the plays are Stoic. While they do not present the paradigmatic picture of the Stoic good life, that they do convey pictures of life in is sufficient for him to present them as elaborations of Stoic discourse on moral psychology. He argues that Seneca's tragedies contain descriptive, not normative Stoic content. Seneca is utilizing the tragic genre to illustrate the Stoic account of judgement, wherein a person perceives an appearance and gives or withholds their assent to its propositional value. For Staley, taking villains as the subjects of this psychological depiction adds levity and magnitude to the description, inspiring within the audience a form of *catharsis*, which inspires mindfulness of this cognitive process in their own life.

For Staley, this reading places Senecan tragedy squarely in the Aristotelian poetical tradition. It does so because it conforms to the structural constituents of tragedy articulated in the *Poetics*. That is, in poetry's imitation of life, "there is potential for truth and in its emotions, a tool for understanding" (Staley 136). This Aristotelian inheritance does not undermine Seneca's Stoic orthodoxy, but instead lends to our understanding of the Stoic aesthetic position. From a pedagogic point of view, for the Stoics, tragedy is valuable not for the schemes of evaluation presented within its action, but for its

descriptive power, for its capacity to imitate and elucidate human life and the human mind.

Nussbaum's position on Senecan tragedy, articulated in two separate works, is a subtle mix of affirmationist and skeptical views. In her earlier "Poetry and the Passions: two Stoic views" (1993), she argues that Senecan drama is fundamentally contrived to serve a Stoic didactic end. This pedagogic approach is indicated by the dramatic structures internal to the tragedies themselves. Specifically, the Stoic coherence is found within the descriptive and normative content of Seneca's dramas. From a descriptive point of view, like Staley, Nussbaum thinks that the plays primarily depict the Stoic account of moral psychology. These descriptions are coloured by Stoic normative views on the passions, which simultaneously offer the spectator arguments against the life of passion while actively flattening the spectator's range of emotional affectedness. She says,

The dramatic structure of Senecan tragedy actively impedes sympathetic identification, promoting critical spectatorship and critical reflection about the passions. For the central characters repel the spectator, making it very "difficult" to be infected by their passions, difficult to view them as anything but diseased (Nussbaum 1993, 148).

In other words, because Seneca's normative representations of passionate vice are so extreme (if not caricatural), Seneca's readership is prevented from emotionally investing in the fate of his central protagonists. This emotional distance from the drama then makes the Senecan spectator more critical of the drama's referents, in a sense, maximizing their receptivity to the Stoic normative arguments presented within.

Later, in her "Serpents in the Soul: a reading of Seneca's *Medea*" (1994) Nussbaum adopts a more nuanced view. While still proposing that Seneca's dramas are

intended to function as pedagogic texts in the aforementioned ways, she suggests that they ultimately fail to do so. This failure amounts to a negation of her prior claim that Seneca's protagonists repulse sympathetic identification. For Nussbaum, *Medea* is a sympathetic figure. She is sympathetic in the sense that she represents a particular case of a universal phenomenon we all must come to grips with in human life: the potential degeneration of erotic love into jealous rage. For Nussbaum, Seneca's tragedies then become deeply ambivalent explorations of the choices we make about what is valuable in life and how we ought to live. She writes,

The [play succeeds] in being tragic only because it shares to some extent [Medea and Jason's] loves and wonders, only because it depicts the choice to follow Stoicism as a certain sort of tragedy inside of us, brought about by the demand of our moral being for unsullied purity and lives free of harming. [...] it is no accident that it was in tragedy that this critique should have been made. [...] for the very act of turning tragedy into a Stoic argument, Stoicism has bitten itself (Nussbaum 1994, 471).

In sum then, Nussbaum sees a continuity between Senecan tragedy and Senecan Stoicism. However, the play's failures indicate for Nussbaum that Seneca's tragic philosophical intent might have been marked by deep ambivalences to his larger philosophical commitments.

The position I adopt in this thesis fuses different aspects of these views together. First, on the philosophical content of Senecan drama, I am in agreement with both Nussbaum and Staley. I believe the plays primarily illustrate the Stoic account of moral psychology. Specifically, they do dramatize the Stoic account of passion, taking special care to depict both the cognitive conditions and phenomenological aspects of emotional response. In agreement with Nussbaum, I also see Stoic normative content nested within the descriptive content of the dramas. In Seneca's consistent correlation of passion with

cruelty, I detect a negative form of argument—negative *exemplum* —against the non-Stoic psychological life. I believe that through tragedy, Seneca is engaging in a subtle form of moralizing, and that this moralizing is designed to motivate the spectator to live a better life.

With respect to the apparent paradox of Stoic emotional aesthetic response, like the earlier Nussbaum (and against the latter Nussbaum), I argue that Seneca engages in a flattening of the cathartic response to tragedy. However, like Staley, I do not locate this flattening within the content of Senecan drama itself—within the caricatural moral despicability of Senecan protagonists as such. Instead this flattening is a consequence of Seneca's views on the psychology of aesthetic exposure. As I will demonstrate later, a close reading of Seneca's prose works on aesthetics reveals that Seneca did not consider aesthetic emotions full-fledged cases of emotion, and as such, did not worry about the toxicity of tragic *catharsis*. When I suggest that Senecan drama is designed to motivate the spectator to live a better life then, this motivational content is not contained in a *catharsis*-like experience, but within the elucidation of the subject's disposition to assent to value impressions created by and contained within the drama.

On my view, the Stoic pedagogic value of Senecan drama lies in the meta-reflexivity Seneca legislates into the phenomenon of spectator response. Through engagement with tragedy, the spectator acquires self-knowledge instrumental to progressing along the Stoic path. This progress is measured by the distance between the subject's cares (as they are disclosed in their aesthetic responses) and orthodox points of doctrine. In this sense, aesthetic exposure to tragedy functions like a diagnostic tool for the soul. For example, my pseudo-joy at Medea's triumph tells me, without fully

experiencing emotion, that I care a lot about the political status of women. And, still caring in this intense way, that I have a lot of work to do from a Stoic point of view. I have to revise my cares, practice with-holding assent to impressions and so on.

Conversely, my repugnance at Medea's extreme cruelty tells me that I care a great deal for virtue, and am doing well with the fundamental orientation of my care in the world.

Schiesaro's position exerts a more diffuse influence on my position, introducing a speculative distinction between the authorial and spectator response to aesthetic creation. While not central to the body of my analysis, I explore historically cogent possibilities for an account of authorial benefit, proposing ways Seneca might have philosophically profited from the *act of writing* the tragedy. This then is my precise aim in the chapters that follow. I attempt to render Seneca's ostensibly anti-Stoic tragedies coherent with the practical ends of Senecan Stoicism. I attempt to show how aesthetic exposure to Seneca's tragedies served in some ways to edify their audience and possibly, their creator.

1.2 Chapter Trajectories

Following the larger cosmos of affirmationist literature behind Nussbaum and Staley, I take Seneca's prose reflections on aesthetics and ethics as my point of departure for this argument. The bulk of the work done in this thesis, then, orients less towards a comprehensive reading of Seneca's tragic corpus than towards developing Seneca's poetics and applying it to one tragedy representative of the whole corpus. This means that my motivating problem in this thesis resides in reconciling Senecan Stoicism with the form and content of the tragic genre. This is no small task, as we will see, for Stoic tragedy in many ways represents a contradiction in terms, the norms and affective

responses proper to tragedy undermining the norms and affective responses prescribed by Stoic doctrine.

In chapter two, with reference to Stoic doctrine, I explain the precise terms of this tension, exploring what is enigmatic in the case of a Stoic philosopher writing tragedies. I situate Seneca within the Stoic philosophical tradition, laying emphasis on his expression of Stoic attitudes towards fate and theory of value. I then measure these attitudes against the ethical paradigm of tragedy set out in Aristotle's *Poetics*. There is an enormous disparity between Seneca's philosophical approach to the world articulated in his prose, and the extremes of human life depicted in the tragedies, leading us to question the orthodoxy of Seneca's Stoicism and the Stoicism of Seneca's tragedies.

In chapter three, I lay out the conditions of historical plausibility for a resolution to the apparent enigma. I explicate Stoic attitudes towards poetry and tragedy, and situate Seneca within this surprisingly hospitable tradition. I then go on to clarify Seneca's approach to poetics, abstracting two hermeneutic principles from his aesthetic letters which informed his approach to poetry and tragedy.

Chapter four is concerned with extending these principles of Senecan ethical criticism into the realm of Senecan ethical creation. Using evidence from Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* and *De Ira*, I argue that we have sufficient reason to believe all of Seneca's writings are in some way philosophically informed. I then go on to apply this approach to writing to Seneca's *Medea*. I show how the tragedy is Stoic in form and content, arguing that *Medea* dramatizes Stoic impulse theory, and that this presentation implicitly contains a negative argument against the non-Stoic psychological life.

My conclusive chapter five addresses the philosophical benefit Seneca might have derived from an authorial point of view. I suggest that thinking from the authorial vantage point creates a new and interesting possibility for interpreting Seneca's tragic corpus.

1.3 Note on Sources

The scope of this project demands the use of many Ancient sources. For Seneca's prose works, I have used the translations contained in *The Complete Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, published by the University of Chicago Press, and edited by Elizabeth Asmis, Shadi Bartsch, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Throughout, I make extensive use of Margaret Graver and A.A. Long's translation of Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, Robert A. Kaster's translation of *De Ira* in *Anger, Mercy, Revenge* and last, James Ker's translation of *De Providentia* in *Hardship and Happiness*. I have favored these works over the more traditional translations retained in the Loeb Classical Library for their quality and currency. Published within the last decade and vetted by outside scholars and translators, these capture Seneca in idiomatic English, and in contrast to older translations, are completely free of Christian anachronism.

For Senecan Tragedy, I have taken a different route, favoring recent translations and commentaries by Latinists working in the field. I use Emily Wilson's 2010 translation of *Troades* and Harry Hine's 2000 translation of *Medea*. Both texts privilege clarity of meaning over literary content. This stylistic choice complements my philosophical investigation of the play's ideas more than other translations would. Last, for Aristotle, I have worked from Johnathan Barnes edition of the *Complete Works*,

relying on Ingram Bywater's translation of the *Poetics* and W.D. Ross's *Nicomachean Ethics*. I have chosen to refer to Seneca's letters with the English rendering of their titles, but have kept the standard abbreviations for parenthetical citation.

1.4 Abbreviations of Ancient Sources

Aristotle (Ar.):

NE *Nicomachean Ethics*

Poetics *Poetics*

Seneca:

Clem. *On Mercy (De Clementia)*

Ep. *Moral Epistles (Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales)*

Ir. *On Anger (De Ira)*

Prov. *On Providence (De Providentia)*

Bv. *On Shortness of Life (De Brevitate Vitae)*

Tragedies:

Med. *Medea*

Troa. *The Trojan Women (Troades)*

2. The Enigma of Stoic Tragedy

Many interpreters resist a Stoic reading of Senecan tragedy. While reasons for this rejection vary across thinkers and disciplines, the typical account offered in support of this position evokes the incompatibility of the meta-ethical structures presumed in tragedy and the meta-ethical structures promoted by Stoicism. So the story goes, a Stoic could not write tragedy as philosophy, because tragedy undermines the essence of his philosophy. In this chapter, I do some descriptive work, framing what I take to be the precise terms of this problem. First, I set out the conceptions of self and cosmos operative within Seneca's Stoic doctrine, and the conceptions of self and cosmos implicit in the idea of tragedy. From there, I identify and substantiate the critical claims I will be resisting throughout the course of this thesis. Specifically, I look at the ways the philosophical content of tragedy can be considered inseparable from the literary form in which it is presented, and the corresponding suggestion that, for Seneca to write in the tragic form is for Seneca to promote the tragic outlook. I then close this chapter with an illustration of this alleged tension as it manifests in Seneca's prose and tragic writings on grief.

2. 1. Stoicism: a doctrinal overview⁴

⁴ While this information is general enough to be covered in any monograph on Stoicism, I draw on two main sources for my account here. I have taken Tad Brennan's *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate* (2005) as a structural guide into the complexities of Stoic ethics and epistemology. Where necessary, I substantiate his claims with specialized information found in the more topical essays contained in Inwood's *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (2003).

Stoic philosophy is divided into three parts: a study of physics, logic, and ethics (White, 124). The Roman Stoics were mostly concerned with the latter ethical category, especially in relation to the first. While logic and physics were a preoccupation of the Imperial period, Stoic doctrine on these topics was typically seen as complete, meriting neither commentary nor expansion (Sedley, 29). Logic was openly scorned by Seneca⁵, and as such, can be eschewed within this exposition in favor of the ethical writings. To get a sense of Seneca's contribution, I must first take a detour through general Stoic cosmological and ethical doctrine.

The Stoic cosmos is frequently referred to as nature in the literature. Nature is materialistic and deterministic. It is materialistic in the sense that it is constituted by only one type of substance, *pneuma*, fine particles of fire and air, which make up everything. This substance is imbued with rational laws (White, 134). These laws are necessitarian, meaning that they posit a necessary cause for all events, such that nothing which happens in the world could have been otherwise (White, 139). This extreme form of determinism constitutes the physical doctrine of providence in Stoicism, and forms the basis of their corresponding ethical doctrine (White, 137).

Human beings are a part of nature, both subject to its law and imbued with a fraction of the rationality pervading its laws. These laws determine everything from human primitive psychological drives to their other-regarding comportment. Among the former category is the impulse towards self-preservation, which the Stoics hold to be the most basic motivation for human action (Brennan 2005, 86). This means that the basic

⁵ The Stoic conception of Logic is much more expansive than our contemporary understanding of logic as dialectics, inference and argument. In addition to dialectics, they included philosophy of language and epistemology. Seneca is particularly dismissive of early Stoic endeavors in language. See letters 45 and 48 for Seneca's hostility to this discipline.

goal of human life is self-care, the actualization of one's human essence, not the acquisition and use of certain goods. By extension, the claim is that human beings will instinctively seek their own flourishing at the cost of pain, physical or otherwise, rather than pursue a life of pleasure (Brennan 2005, 35). When this instinct is coupled with the proposal that human beings share in the cosmic rationality, a normative conception of selfhood emerges, which associates the rational law with human flourishing.

The basic instinct towards self-preservation grows nuanced over time. As people mature, their self-conception expands outward to include the ends of their broader communities. Such other-regarding comportment is learned gradually. It typically starts within the family. This experience of our primary community fosters an initial other-regarding concern, where the good of separate individuals is identified with the good of the self (Brennan 2005, 158). This initial association of self with-and-as other is then applied and translated into broader human and non-human relationships. With each relational translation and repetition, two transformations occur. First, the sharp distinction between the subject and everything outside the subject collapses in on itself, as the subject comes to understand their self as the world. Second, the intensity of the subject's care is reoriented. Objects previously meriting weaker concern are regarded with an intensity approximating the objects of their primary care. The agent learns to respect and act towards each community: their friends, their city, their nation, and the entire cosmos as they would their family, taking the world's flourishing as their own project.⁶ This

⁶ This is the normative description of the process. While the Stoics posited this final end as the goal of every human being, they thought very few people could achieve its final manifestation. In an ordinary human life then, the process is more a matter of degree than of completion.

process is called *oikeiosis* (familiarization) and its realization is the eudemonic end of Stoic philosophy.⁷

While this conception of self as cosmos is expansive and abstract, it does not change the fact of the subject's highly particular situation within the world. On the contrary, it heightens the subject's awareness of their communal participation by making their role within any relationship indispensable to the necessary functioning of the rational whole. Such indispensability translates into a set of duties, the appropriate interpretation and satisfaction of which serve as the model for all virtue in Stoic ethics.⁸ To follow nature, the central precept of Stoic ethics, then means to know what one is meant to do within the context of any relationship, and to perform these tasks uncomplaining, seeing them as part of the necessary unfolding of the universe (Brennan 2005, 158). A doctor heals, attuned to the specific needs of her patients; a teacher teaches, catering the presentation of her knowledge to suit the needs of her students, and

⁷ While our Ancient sources skimp in their exegetical treatment of this idea, one fragment from Hierocles' treatise on the doctrine survives. This fragment, reproduced in Brennan (2005), captures the rational consolidation of the self and other regarding impulses by evoking the image of concentric circles. Here, when the subject takes something as *oikeion*, this object's welfare gives them reasons to act: "Each one of us is as it were entirely encompassed by many circles, smaller circles enclosed by larger ones, based on our different and unequal dispositions relative to each other. The first and closest circle is the one in which the person has drawn as though around a center, his own mind. This circle encloses the body and anything taken for the sake of the body. For it is virtually the smallest circle, and almost touches the center itself. Next, the second one further removed from the center but enclosing the first circle, this contains parents, siblings, wife, and children. The third one has in it uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, and cousins. The next circle includes other relatives, and this is followed by the circle of local residents, then the circle of fellow tribesmen, next that of fellow citizens, and then in the same way the circle of people from neighbouring towns, and the circle of fellow country men. The outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race. Once these have all been surveyed, it is the task of a well tempered man, in his proper treatment of each group, to draw the circles together somehow towards the center, and to keep zealously transferring those from the enclosing circles into the enclosed ones [...] It is incumbent on us to respect people from the third circle as if they were those from the second, and again to respect our other relatives as if they were those from the third circle (Brennan 158).

⁸ However, it is far from clear how a Stoic interprets their own situation within nature, nor how they distinguish between true and false duties. For possible resolutions of this ambiguity in Stoicism, see Brennan (2005), pages 175-136.

so on. Conversely, vice on this picture becomes anything which hinders subjective concern for virtue, be it false beliefs about what is good in a human life, or a false interpretation of one's situation within nature. The doctor renounces medicine in favor of professional cycling, the teacher becomes a chef, preferring cupcakes to lecture. Understood as such, virtue becomes as much a set of practices as it is a way of knowing and judging.

As a form of knowledge, virtue is understood and articulated in the language of epistemology, and specifically in the language of beliefs. According to the Stoics, beliefs are formed through a three-step process. First, the mind is confronted with an impression of the world. This impression presents it with information about the way things are. The mind then adopts a propositional attitude towards this impression as a whole, considering the truth relations between the impression's content and the world. From there, the mind either assents, suspends belief, or withholds assent to the truth of the impression's content. If the agent assents to the impression, the impression becomes a belief, which will shape the individual's action towards the object of their belief in determinant ways (Brennan 2005, 65).

There are two categories of belief in Stoic epistemology: opinions (*doxai*), which can be false or true, and knowledge, which involves strong assent to practical *kataleptic* impressions. Here *practical* expresses an impulse towards a perceptual object, and *kataleptic* means in conformity with the world (Brennan 2005, 69).⁹ Only judgements of

⁹ In a case of practical *katalepsis*, I would have to meet the following criteria: 1) I would have to have a practical impression about an object in my perceptual field, expressed propositionally in the mind. Say, I see a coffee on my desk, and think, "it is good that I sip this coffee"; 2) I would have to assent to the truth value of this proposition, thinking something along the lines of "yes, it is the case that it is good that I sip this coffee"; and last, 3) it must actually be true that it is good that I sip this coffee. For the Stoics, this example would not truly constitute a case of *katalepsis*, since the judgement that "it is good to sip the

value can belong to the latter category of knowledge, where value is understood to be nothing other than rational selection of the workings of cosmological law as it is instantiated in the subject's life (Brennan 2005, 76). This attitudinal preference for the necessary workings of nature is held to be the only unqualified good in human life. Only this knowledge, and whatever is shared in it, is good without qualification. Only a lack of this knowledge, and whatever is shared in it, is bad without qualification. Everything else in life is considered to be indifferent, where indifference means neither harmful nor beneficial to the subject's flourishing. In other words, the only true good in human life lies in the subject's capacity to assent—to choose the will of nature.

This belief in the sufficiency of virtue for the subject's flourishing attracts much positive and negative attention. On the one hand, the doctrine makes the good life accessible to every human being. For if the only thing in life which ensures happiness is a correct interpretation of life, and if every person is endowed with the mental equipment requisite to achieve this interpretation, then happiness is within everyone's reach. This is the greatest promise of Stoic philosophy: no matter who you are or what happens to you in life, nothing has the power to disturb you, or prevent you from living well. Your happiness depends on your understanding. It is always in your control.

On the other hand, to laud virtue as the only good in human life seems to entail a depreciation of external goods antagonistic to a common-sense view of human nature and human need. While it is fine to say that the tranquility of rational selection is open to everyone, the doctrine does not recognize that such selection might have its own material

coffee" is false, indicative of a disproportionate investment in an indifferent item. Rather, what would be appropriate to say of this impression is that, given I am exhausted, and given coffee's property of waking me up, it would be rational to select the act of drinking coffee. This expresses a preference in accord with my nature at the moment, but does not invest the act of drinking coffee with false value.

conditions. Perhaps you do not need to be wealthy or renowned to live a good life, but chronic illness, destitution and loneliness seem to be important detriments to one's capacity to reason well. What then is the Stoic position on goods like friendship, family, and health, things which come from outside ourselves and appear to be necessary for the subject's flourishing?

While still holding virtue in its own category of goodness, and vice in its own category of badness, the Stoics posit a subcategory of values classifying indifferent things. Among all possibilities for human life, indifferent things fall into the class of happenings which neither harm nor hinder virtue. Given the narrow definition of virtue, this list of indifferents includes every event that we culturally understand to be desirable or undesirable, good, or bad. On this list they include sickness, poverty, low birth, solitude, ugliness; health, wealth, status, company, beauty and so on (Brennan 2005, qtt. Diogenes Laertius 122). While they insist that the possession or absence of these goods does not affect one's ability to live a good life, they do grant that some goods are natural objects of pursuit, and as such, that it is acceptable for the individual to seek them. Friendship and health then are considered *preferable* states of affairs; things which should be actively pursued and chosen provided the subject does so with an attitude of indifference towards their outcome, provided the subject does not mistake their dispensable value for intrinsic value.¹⁰

¹⁰ An example of this rational selection would be the following. After some thought, I arrive at the belief that it is natural that I live under sociable conditions. I notice that my specific nature is hospitable to friendship and then, on the basis of this observation, actively seek out friends and companions. This pursuit is good, but only in a qualified way. Friends are good only in so far as they benefit my natural constitution. If I embrace this belief, lucidly investing my friends with proper and proportionate value, I will not be upset if they fall out of my life or die. They are, after all, things that are good with qualification, not complete and unconditional goods on their own.

Unfortunately, people are wont to make this error. Guided by a life time of habituation within their culture, they consistently misjudge indifferent things as important, on the Stoic view, opening their lives up to the tyranny of the passions. Emotions for the Stoics amount precisely to this. They are false judgements of value, which impel the subject to act contrary to their nature. So understood, much of Stoic practical philosophy is concerned with providing the aspirant with arguments and spiritual exercises to extirpate these socially constructed, individually assimilated false beliefs; trading judgements about the indispensable value of external things with judgements about their appropriate, conditional worth; trading a concern for family, friends, political community and the like with a concern for acting virtuously within all of these relationships. Ridding the individual of false perceptions of evil, they open up a space for the dispassionate and tranquil pursuit of good action.

2.2 Senecan Stoicism

All of the doctrines mentioned above appear in Seneca's prose writings in some capacity. Though it is well beyond the limits of this chapter to explore each in thematic detail, at least two merit closer attention. These are the doctrines of providence and the sufficiency of virtue. These doctrines crop up consistently, in overlapping ways, in Seneca's prose works, and serve to structure his larger philosophical project.

The doctrine of providence was read as the doctrine of fate in Latin philosophy. It was considerably tweaked by the Roman Stoics, changed to accommodate the social and political morass of the period. Though the essentials of the doctrine stayed the same, fate being value neutral and necessary, it was construed by Seneca as something which at the

worst of times had to be vanquished, and at the best of times, as something which has no legitimate bearing on one's happiness. Both construals are connected to Stoic value theory, to the doctrines of the sufficiency of virtue and preferred indifferents, for one's acceptance of the former leads to a transcending of all fate-based happenings. Consider the following passages, taken from the *Epistulae Morales* and *De Providentia*.

The first comes at the end of *Letter 59*, on the joys of the wise man. Seneca has just spent 17 paragraphs explaining how the pleasures of the hedonist are of little worth compared to the joyful tranquility of a man purged of extraneous desire. He closes the letter, contrasting the transient joys of a pleasure seeker with the constancy of the wise man. For Seneca, what makes the difference between these two analogous states is their relation to fortune. He writes:

Indulging themselves, they spend every night amid deceiving joys, as if it were indeed their last. But the joy that attends on the gods has not intermission and no end. It would have an end if its source were from elsewhere; but it is not for anyone else to bestow, and for that reason it is not for anyone else to decide whether they shall have it. What fortune did not grant, fortune does not take away (*Ep.* 59. 18).

Pleasures derived from external goods are given by fortune. Because this is the case, they are unstable, yielding a vulnerable and transient psychological state. Typically, our delight in them lulls us into having illusions about their security and permanence. When fortune takes them away, these illusions are shattered, leaving us with pains of deprivation or pains of exhaustion following excess. Anything subject to such reversals cannot be called good. True security and joy, in contrast, fall among the category of things that are only given by the subject to the subject. They represent the rational powers of the mind, and they are attained through choice, through the subject's willing submission to nature.

Seneca holds out this hope of a secure state of mind, but is careful to emphasize the effort involved in realizing it. After all, it is one thing to remain unmoved in the face of good fortune. It is another thing to struggle against misfortune—to come to grips with the seeming purposelessness of pain in human life. In a latter letter on overcoming illness, he likens such adversity to a boxer’s training:

Boxers take many blows to the face and to the entire body; yet in their desire for glory they endure pain, not only in competition but also in order to compete. Even their training inflicts pain. Let victory be our aim too in every contest. For us too there is a prize: not in the garland, not the palm, not some trumpet heralding the announcement of our names, but excellence, firmness of mind, and the peace that is gained from then on once we make conquest of fortune in any trial of strength (*Ep.* 78. 16).

Befitting the theme of the letter, fortune, far from being a benign happening, is presented as a violent force to be endured. Virtue requires that we suffer great pain. Instead of being purposeless however, this pain, like the blows a boxer receives in training, serves to make us mentally stronger. In *De Providentia*, Seneca extends this thought, arguing that an adverse life is indicative of divine benevolence: “With good men, the gods follow the same reasoning that instructors follow with their pupils: they demand more work of those who give them reason to hope. [...] Why is it strange if a god puts noble spirits through hard tests?” (*Prov.* 4. 11).

A harsh life then is a good life, in the sense that it grants every subject with the opportunity to develop their character. It is a sign that the rational cosmos is concerned with our virtue. Through exposure to suffering, we learn to transcend suffering. Transcending suffering, we become brave, poised to face whatever the world throws at us. Seneca sums up this attitude in a passage at the beginning of the discourse, insisting: “It is not what you face that counts, but how you face it” (*Prov.* 2. 4).

In these passages, we see the two faces of fortune and the appropriate attitudes to adopt with respect to them. Consistent with Stoic doctrine, fortune is something external to the subject, which determines the material conditions of their life. It gives and takes away things which are conventionally seen to be constitutive of a human good life. Construed as such, it is presented as something which must be overcome through trials and austerity. There is only one domain of human existence it cannot touch: the rational mind, which is the only thing requisite for liberating the subject from investments in all external fate-based happenings. The subject must learn to care about their mind, purging their self of excessive desires and attachments and instead focus exclusively on their moral choices and worth. To think otherwise is to be dependent on forces outside of subjective control, ultimately leaving one's self vulnerable to emotional distress and suffering.

A striking feature of these passages is the absence of rigorous argument provided for each thesis. Far from being strange in his prose writings, this tendency to exalt and assume rather than argue is typical Senecan fare. For this reason, he has long been reproved as the least original thinker of the Stoic school (Inwood 2005, 5). Suspending judgement on the soundness of this criticism, it misses what is genuinely unique about Seneca. His contribution to the Stoic canon lies less in the content of his thought than in its therapeutic fervor.¹¹ Seneca was less concerned with the finer points of doctrine than healing the sicknesses of soul, the diseased and violent passions he perceived in himself

¹¹ I acknowledge, though pass over, questions of Seneca's local influence as one of the two great Latinizers of Greek philosophy. For more on this theme, see "Seneca in His Philosophical Milieu" in Inwood (2005).

and the people around him.¹² This belief was so entrenched, he thought this spiritual treatment was the only true task of philosophy. He reminds us of this fact repeatedly.

Consider the following passages:

In *Letter 16*, where Seneca encourages his friend to keep his resolutions before making new ones, he writes:

Philosophy is not tricks before an audience, nor is it a thing set up for display. It consists not in words but in actions. One does not take it up just to have an amusing pastime, a remedy for boredom. It moulds and shapes the mind, gives order to life and discipline to action, shows what to do and what not to do. It sits the helm and steers a course for us who are tossed in waves of uncertainty. Without it, there is no life that is not full of care and anxiety. For countless things happen every hour that need the advice philosophy alone can give (*Ep. 16. 3*).

In *Letter 49*, on the proper role of the philosopher, he chastises contemporary members of the school for devoting their energies to solving logic puzzles. He writes:

Would you like to know what philosophy has to offer the human race? Advice! One person is summoned by death, another burned up by poverty, and another tormented by wealth — other's wealth or his own. This one shrinks from misfortune; that one wants to sneak away from his prosperity. This one is mistreated by other people; that one by the gods. What are you making up little games? You have no time for joking around; you have been summoned to help those in need. You have promised to aid the shipwrecked, the captive, the sick, the impoverished, and those who must stretch out their neck for the axe. Where are you wandering off to? What are you doing? (*Ep. 49. 10*).

In the next paragraph:

This person you are playing with is frightened: help him. He is in suspense: break through the snares that hold him. All those around you are reaching their hands in your direction, imploring you for aid in lives that are ruined or are going to ruin. You are their hope, their succor. They are asking you to rescue them from

¹² This ethical reading of Seneca's philosophical project is standard among specialists, but most pronounced in the work of Nussbaum (1994). Gill offers good historical reasons for this medico-practical emphasis in Inwood (2003). Specifically, Gill argues that this emphasis on the application of theory rather than its augmentation is a characteristic of the Imperial period, where pervasive decentralization necessitated each school's organization around a group of canonical texts. In short, since most thinkers perceived that doctrine was complete, they sought to apply it. See "The School in the Roman Period" on pages 34-50.

turmoil; scattered and wandering, they need you to show them the bright light of truth. Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; how easy are the laws nature has established, and how pleasant and unencumbered life is for those who follow them, how bitter and heavy-laden for those who have placed their trust in opinion rather than in nature (*Ep.* 49.12)

Seneca perceived the urgencies of human life around him, and oriented his efforts towards removing them. He is more a practical than theoretical philosopher; an aspirant trained in rhetoric with a background in theory he applied with the aim of encouraging people along the Stoic path. If we take this reading seriously, it colours the bulk of his prose writings, structuring them as attempts to treat the spiritual ills of specific individuals. Hence the thematic variety and apparent un-systematic nature of his prose works. In *De Clementia*, he writes a treatise urging an unstable emperor Nero towards clemency. In *De Ira*¹³, he counsels his elder brother on the extirpation of rage within political life. In *De Brevitate Vitae*, he urges his friend to abandon long term desires he has for his retirement and focus on making the best use of his life now. In *De Consolatione ad Helviam*, he attempts to comfort his mother over the anguish of his political exile. And the list goes on.

In this section I have described the processes through which the subject becomes invulnerable within the Stoic account of the good life, and some of the ways these processes manifest in Seneca's prose writings. For the Stoics virtue is the only unconditional good. Because all other external goods: friendship, family, health and the like are only conditional; that is, things which are preferable to have, but indifferent to virtue, no external happening can rob an agent of their capacity to pursue *eudaimonia*. This renders all the forces of luck irrelevant from a moral point of view, for external

¹³ For a concrete articulation of Seneca's approach, *Ir.* 3.2. Here Seneca states that different individuals will require different remedies for the extirpation of rage in their lives.

events bear no significance in distinguishing what is praiseworthy and possible in a human life from what is not. In fact, no such conception of luck is possible within the Stoic ethical universe. All events are necessary, providential. All events are instrumental to the subject's flourishing, and as such, nothing outside the subject can cause the subject harm.

Tragedy, as we shall see, resists this interpretation, revealing a picture of human life and world different from the Stoic outlook. In the next section, I substantiate the intuitions expressed in the anti-Stoic literature on Senecan tragedy by developing the idea of tragedy. I present the ethical structures inherent in tragedy, as well as the account of human selfhood corresponding to that conception.

2.3 The Ethics of Tragedy

It is worth noting that my subsequent discussion will be grounded in Aristotle's *Poetics* and, where necessary, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* (1986), I aim to show how the structural elements outlined in Aristotle's discussion of tragedy assume and promote an ethical outlook divergent from the Stoic view. It may be considered odd, even anachronistic, to evoke Aristotle's conception of tragedy within a broader discussion of the work of Seneca who lived centuries after him. While it is known that the *Poetics* was not in circulation at the time Seneca wrote his tragedies, Staley has convincingly argued that the ideas internal to the text would have been in circulation through secondary authors; passed down to the Romans through various texts by members of the Aristotelian school (Staley, 2). I am then relying on three assumptions going forward. First that we can point to Aristotle as

the originator of the ethical systematization of tragedy. Second, that his conceptualization of tragedy was ultimately the one indirectly inherited by poets and philosophers in the Imperial Period.¹⁴ And last, that Seneca would have at least had some familiarity with Aristotle's idea of tragedy, such that he would be aware of the tensions of writing tragedy as an aspiring Stoic.

The question I raise in this section is to what extent we can regard the formal structures of tragedy as they are outlined in the *Poetics* as assuming an Aristotelian ethical view. To explore the question, we must visit two passages of the *Poetics*: Aristotle's discussion of tragic action at section 1450a15, and his appeal to *catharsis* within his definition of tragedy at 1449b25¹⁵. Together these passages tell us two interconnected things. First, that a good state of character is insufficient for a good life. And second, that our emotional response to this insufficiency as it plays out in any given drama reveal to an attendant spectator certain truths about human life in the world.

In chapter six of the *Poetics*, Aristotle enumerates the six parts of tragedy, and begins to order them with respect to their importance to the execution of a successful drama. Of the six parts: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song, he finds character and plot the most essential parts. Plot refers to the arrangement of the incidents in the story told, the actions undertaken by the characters which bring about their happiness or misery (1450a5). Character refers to the personal qualities emerging from

¹⁴ This view is also endorsed by Will Tarrant in his introduction to his translation and commentary of Seneca's *Agamemnon* (1976), as well as his essential "Greek and Roman in Senecan Tragedy" (1995). In the former he writes: "Even if the Romans did not use Hellenistic plays as models for thought, they could hardly have escaped the influence of Hellenistic literary criticism and attitudes; what they imitated and adapted was not fifth century tragedy itself, but classical tragedy as understood in the Hellenistic world" (12). This understanding originates with Aristotle, whose *Poetics* still stands as the first work of literary criticism.

¹⁵ This analysis is indebted to Martha Nussbaum's reading of Aristotle's philosophy of value, presented in chapters 11-13 of her *Fragility of Goodness* (1986).

the choices we see protagonists make within the drama (1450a5). At 1450a15, Aristotle presents the hierarchical relation between these two structural elements, arguing that plot is more basic, and hence more important to the end of tragedy. He writes:

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing (1450a15).

Character is the content of a subject's personality we extrapolate from their choices. It shows us psychological dispositions towards kinds of action, and is included in drama not for the sake of showing us the qualities of persons, but for the sake of motivating actions. Actions which found the ultimate mimetic object of tragedy: the happiness or misery, goodness or badness of human life.

Nussbaum interprets this passage ethically. For in staking the good life in activity rather than character, Aristotle is assuming a view of human flourishing which privileges the practice of excellences and the consequences following those actions, over the possession of excellent qualities, the possession of excellent psychological dispositions or habits (Nussbaum 1986, 322).

The nuances of Aristotle's position come into relief if we consider it alongside two analogies Aristotle makes in book one of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, between sleepers and actors, and Olympians in and outside of competition. He writes,

But it makes perhaps no small difference whether we place the chief good in possession or in use, in state or activity. For the state may exist without producing any good result, as in a man who is asleep or in some other way quite inactive, but the activity can't; for one who had the activity will be of necessity acting, and acting well. And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are

victorious), so those who act rightly win the noble and good things in life (*EN* 1098b30-1099a5).

If character alone was the locus of human happiness, then we could predicate that happiness of people who sleep through their life. The constraints put on their capacity to act well would not influence our evaluations of their life. Provided that such people were inclined to select goodness and virtue, that inclination would be sufficient to judge that they live well. But this repulses our common sense. In effect, these inclinations to virtue resemble the physical qualities of Olympians. These athletes are beautiful and strong, but their strength and beauty alone do not compel us to honor them. Only when these physical qualities are instantiated in action do they merit praise. In the same way then, we do not ascribe happiness to people of a good character alone or to people with good habits, but to people who actively perform such habits, and who produce and reap the benefits of their actions.

For Aristotle then, the actions of people determine whether they flourish in life. Since no activity happens in a vacuum, this commits him to a view on the importance of external goods, especially as they stand in relation to motivation and activity. This means that the good life requires certain things. Minimally, it requires the means of physical sustenance and bodily health, food, shelter, hygiene and so on; it requires relational attachments, friends and family who people our life and support and participate in our life projects, and it requires education, a working acquaintance with certain bodies of practical and theoretical knowledge which compel us undertake certain activities over others. The very postulation of such conditions admits a degree of vulnerability into human life, for it makes the good life a contingent phenomenon. It is something subject

to forces of luck, deprivation and disaster, to misfortune and reversal—what Aristotle takes to be the stuff of the best plot lines at *Poetics* 1453a.¹⁶

Without getting too deep into exegesis, we can see how this would work. If living well means acting well, and someone lacked the means of action, then they could not live well. Like a person in coma, or the athlete on the sidelines of a competition, their potential for excellence would remain just that: dormant, unused, potential. Moreover, denied action, no consequences could be effected in the world, depriving the subject of the extraneous benefits of activity. Perhaps the worst possibility arising from such situations of neglect would be the deprivation of education requisite for discriminating between and performing kinds of activities. If a subject is never taught how to appropriately interpret a situation, or which activities are merited in response to specific circumstances—courage in the face of fearful events, for example, or anger in response to injustice, then in life they are wont to err in action. They respond to events in inappropriate ways and bring about bad consequences in the world.

What is striking here are the relations of ontological priority implied by this account of flourishing. Goods are prior to activities insofar as they are instruments: things which make it possible to be good. The question becomes to what extent the subject's experience of misfortune so understood can influence their life and their prospects for

¹⁶ In chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the most effective plot devices used by the Greek tragedians: "There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some fault, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity[...]The perfect plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the subject's fortunes must not be from bad to good, but on the contrary from good to bad; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great fault on his part; the man either being such that we have described, or better, not worse than that" (1453a10-20). Note here the emphasis laid on error as a catalyst for reversal. For Aristotle, human imperfection and ignorance about what would constitute good action produces negative consequences in the life of the individual.

flourishing. For Aristotle, this is a matter of degree. It depends on the size of the misfortunes experienced, as well as the habits the subject has already acquired at the moment of misfortune. Some calamities can hinder your capacity to act well if you have not acquired the skills requisite for comporting yourself well towards them. Children are especially susceptible to this absence, for in their lack of training, they adopt a passive rather than active attitude towards them. This is why Aristotle says children cannot live well:

For this reason also a boy is not happy; for he is not yet capable of such [noble] acts, owing to his age; and boys who are called happy are being congratulated by reason of the hopes we have for them. For there I required, as we have said, not only complete excellence but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy (*EN*:1100a5).

Other calamities, like the totalizing losses suffered by Priam, are of such a magnitude that there is little that can be done to salvage the goodness in such lives. Irrespective of one's attitude towards fortune, Aristotle believes that nobody can live entirely well if they are alone and childless, if they are cursed with poor children and friends, or outlive the good people in their lives (*EN*:1099b5).

However subtle, these qualifications on the influences of misfortune in human life serve to sharply distinguish Aristotle's view on the status of value from the Stoic view. The Stoic view agrees with the Aristotelian view in the sense that people are endowed with innate equipment sufficient to cope in the face of misfortune. That is, they possess a rational faculty which enables them to deliberate on, and plan good action in response to their life circumstances. However, in contrast to the Stoic view, Aristotle does not think that these faculties are enough to secure flourishing in all cases.

People can be “stoic” in the right way at the right time, and in the right way, and at the right time, this tokens greatness of soul. But this response is contingent on circumstances beyond subjective control: whether the subject received a proper education and the scope and trauma of their present losses. The fact of the matter *is* tragic. For Aristotle, we may aim to act well, but might lack the material conditions of acting. We may misjudge the moral properties of a prospective action, and begin a chain of reactions in the world which harm rather than benefit ourselves and our communities. And, at any moment, a disaster can strike, limiting our choices and actions, rendering our plans and attachments either inaccessible or impossible. Tragic action then shows us that we are vulnerable to forces beyond our control, so much so that, at any point in time, our self-sufficiency can be shattered.¹⁷

In tragedy, Aristotle suggests that the response to this construal of the human condition is a *catharsis* of pity and fear (1449b). Against the background of his view of emotions as semi cognitive states consisting of a judgement about something and a corresponding feeling of either pleasure or pain¹⁸, this claim is pedagogically salient. For if the very purpose of tragedy is to produce a certain emotional feeling in the audience, and emotions are concurrent with beliefs, then tragic exposure can be said to foster certain kinds of judgements in the audience. These judgements are of a specific sort, proper to each emotion. Pity, Nussbaum reports, has four conditions, outlined in the *Rhetoric*. First, it involves a belief that someone is suffering. This belief is supplemented with three others, each qualifying the kind of suffering perceived. The suffering must be

¹⁷ Nussbaum discusses this view against its historical antecedents in her *Love's Knowledge* (1990). See pages 43-45.

¹⁸ See also Nussbaum (2001), pages 33-40, and 56-64.

of a sufficient magnitude. It must be undeserved and last, it must fall within the realm of plausibility for your own life (Nussbaum 1986, 384). These last two conditions are of great importance with respect to tragedy, for they intimate the about-ness of the beliefs underscoring the cathartic reaction.

What people emotionally respond to in tragedy is an imitation of human life. If this imitation includes undeserved, plausible suffering, then life can be said to include this suffering. What we experience then in *catharsis* is a profound response to our own helplessness before the world. Hence the second cathartic emotion of fear. Pity discloses an understanding of the human condition as one which is ultimately subject to luck. Fear compounds this self-understanding, containing within its cognitive structure the beliefs of pity with the addition of an expectation of future harm or pain (Nussbaum 1986, 385). Fear then turns the pity reaction we feel towards others inwards towards the self. Taken together, tragedy discloses to the audience real possibilities for being; it reminds us of the role fortune and luck play in demarcating good human lives from bad ones, leading us to a *catharsis* of fear and pity over the ultimate vulnerability of our human condition. In sharp contrast to the Stoic view, in tragedy, we learn that good character is insufficient for a good life and respond with horror at the helplessness and ignorance of our condition.

2.4 A Problem of Content and Form

We are now in a position to spell out the stakes of the apparent interpretive problem posed by the existence of Senecan tragedy. On this construal, it looks like ethical content cannot be separated from the tragic form. If a creator, let alone a philosopher,

chooses to write in the tragic genre, they are promoting a conception of human nature as vulnerable. This vulnerability is symptomatic of the human relationship to the cosmos, characterized by the conflict between rational agency, which seeks to control external circumstances, and the forces of luck and disaster which can divorce the subject from *eudaimonia*. The crux of the problem posed by Stoic tragedy lays in the case of a Stoic philosopher who urges us to abandon certain judgements about what is valuable in life, writing in a genre which structurally affirms those value judgements. Moreover, a genre which is designed to affirm these judgements through a toxic, emotional, cathartic response. The philosopher promises tranquil invulnerability. The playwright promises vulnerability, reversal and pain. To illustrate these tensions, compare what Seneca has to say about grief within the competing genres of expression.

a. Prose

In *Letter 63*, Seneca counsels Lucilius after the death of a friend. He aims less to console him in his grief than to coach him through the process. He admits that while it is unrealistic not to feel a twinge of pain over the loss of a loved one, giving way to excessive despair is not the best way to cope (*Ep.* 63.1). Throughout the letter, he intermittently switches from negative condemnations of impassioned sadness to prescriptions for resilience.¹⁹ In a more defamatory passage, Seneca uses shame to goad Lucilius to adopt an indifferent attitude towards his loss. He argues that pining after an

¹⁹ My reading is indebted to Marcus Wilson's comparative analysis of Seneca's extant consolation letters in chapter three of Braund and Gill's (1997) *Passions in Roman Thought in Literature*. Unlike my analysis, itself exclusively focused on one letter, Wilson is attentive to the particularity of Seneca's therapeutic targets. He notes that Seneca's strategy for the extirpation of grief in each is determined by the needs of his subject. I pass over these important subtleties below, emphasizing the revision of a general category of belief as the general aim of Seneca's consolations.

impossible state of affairs is beneath the dignity of our rational faculty. It is a waste of both the internal and external resources still available to us:

If we have other friends, we give them little credit and hardly merit their esteem if we do not find in them a valuable consolation for the one who has passed away. If, on the other hand, we have no other friends, then we are doing a worse injury to ourselves than fortune has done us: fortune took one person from us, but we are taking from ourselves every person we do not make our friend. Moreover, anyone who cannot make friends with more than one person does not love even that one very much. If someone who had lost his only tunic were to weep and wail, rather than look about for something to put over his shoulders to keep himself warm, wouldn't you think he was an idiot? The one you have loved has passed away: find someone else to love. Replacing a friend is better than crying (*Ep.* 63. 9-11).

While asserting the preferable value of friendship in human life, this passage does a lot to efface the particularity of any attachment we may have. In a strong analogy, Seneca equates a human being with a garment. Both are instrumental for living a good life, but both are capable of being replaced. Extending the thought, he suggests that the onus is on us to pursue these indifferent things. We always have a choice to make the most of loss by replacing what we have lost. We bear the responsibility for any negative feeling we perpetuate through false interpretation of our circumstances.

This sentiment indicates an orthodox position on the value of external goods. Grief, however inevitable, need not be a totalizing feature of our existence. Since it emerges in proportion to our investments in external things, it can be avoided and resolved by actively diminishing our investments in these things. To care about more people with less dependency is to undo patterns of attachment which threaten our virtuous self-sufficiency. Tragic Seneca gives us a radically different picture of loss in his play *The Trojan Women*.

b. Tragedy

The Trojan Women follows the story of the regal women of Troy after their city has been sacked. Set post conflict, the play already assumes the Aristotelian structures of tragedy discussed above, confronting the reader from the start with lives devastated by circumstances beyond subjective control. As such, the thematic heart of the play lies less in the presentation of an event of tragic reversal, than the small scale psychological dissolutions of Hecuba and Andromache as they confront their post war reality. In particular, it takes as its subject the helplessness of the vanquished as they fight and ultimately fail to save their children from death.

The action of the play takes place over the course of a single afternoon, over five acts, which alternate between two parallel plot lines. The first revolves around the efforts of Agamemnon to save Polyxena from the wrath of Pyrrhus, who demands that she be sacrificed as spoil to the ghost of Achilles. The second portrays the protracted attempts of Andromache to save her son Astyanax from the Greeks, who with his murder aim to annihilate all traces of Hector's bloodline. Both efforts to save the innocent end in futility, with an oracle confirming the righteousness of Pyrrhus's claim to Polyxena, and Andromache revealing her son's hiding place.

The fruition of both plot lines exaggerates the tragic presentation of self already suggested by the setting. Bereft of her city, her husband and political status Andromache clings to the illusion of control she has over the destiny of her son. She hides him in Hector's tomb, assuming the Greeks will maintain basic reverence for the dead. This illusion is shattered when, in the third act, Ulysses threatens to level the tomb, forcing her to reveal Astyanax's hiding place. Once discovered, he is seized. He cries for his mother's help, and she responds:

Why do you cling to my breast
 and grab your mother's arms? They cannot help you.
 A baby calf, when it hears the lion's roar,
 huddles its trembling body against its mother;
 but that fierce lion hurls the mother away
 seizes the smaller prey in its huge jaws,
 crunches it, carries it off. So will our enemy
 carry you from my arms (*Troa.* 792-802).

These statements reveal Andromache's abdication of belief in her agential capacities as a mother, and, more profoundly, as a human being. It is significant that she couches her reply in the language of nature, seeing in her situation an analogy between the animal and human world. Just as a lion seizes upon its helpless prey, the Greeks will seize her son. Regardless of the actions she undertakes to protect him—the actions she *has* undertaken to protect him, the world will always have a final say in their outcome. And as Aristotle suggested in his *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b5, this intervention will devastate her capacity to live well.

Though much of the plot displays a preoccupation with the wrenching plight of Andromache, the play is unified by the figure of Hecuba. Hecuba both opens and closes the tragedy, acting as witness to and commentator on the general defeat of the Trojan people in act one, and on the particular defeat of her family in act five. In the final act, she receives an account of the deaths of Astyanax, thrown from the city walls, and Polyxena, slaughtered on Achilles' grave. Standing on the hot sand before her ruined city, she responds to the messenger:

Go home, go home, you Greeks; you are safe now
 to go home.
 Your fleet may safely spread its sails and set to sea,
 just as you wished. The boy and girl are dead.
 The war is over. Where can I go to cry?
 Where can this old woman vomit out the rest of her days?
 Should I weep for my daughter and grandson, should

I weep for my husband,
 or my country? For everything, or for myself?
 Only death can answer my prayers. Death comes roughly to babies and
 virgins,
 always pouncing, wild thing. I am the only one
 feared and avoided by death. When swords and spears
 and torches
 surrounded me, and I spent the night in search of death,
 death fled from me. No enemy, no city's sack, no fire
 could kill me, though I stood so near to Priam (*Troa*. 1165-1175).

This final lament poses a complex challenge to the Stoic position on virtue. It's almost as if Hecuba calls out to us, confronting us with the realities of a life stripped to its naked essentials. Cut off from her fellow captives by age and status, alone and enslaved, she asks us what a life is worth when it is bereft of all our attachments; what virtue is worth when the fate it would have us accept is littered with the corpses of children, the rape of women, demolished cities, revenge and murder. These atrocities are no matters of indifference. These wrongs are not trials to test one's character. Each represents a totalizing loss, cutting her off from the good life. Such a life, she concludes, is not worth anything but "vomit" and death.

Death however will not come to her in spite of her searching. Her suicide, understood by the Stoics²⁰, Seneca²¹ and Hecuba²² to be the final act of freedom, is thwarted by bad luck. “Death fled from me”, she says. “No city’s sack, no fire could kill me, though I stood so near Priam” (*Troa*. 1168). In a ruthless repetition of his position in prior acts, Seneca insists that we cannot even stake the goodness of our death, let alone the goodness of our life in our intention towards it. Even the material conditions of suicide can be frustrated by external happenings, robbing the agent of a dignified escape from their suffering. This lack of escape is the final word on the world’s capacity to harm us.

This scene raises the question of Hecuba’s evaluative justification, and by extension, cannot help but problematize the Stoic position on grief. While there is no argument but our own cathartic response to go on, it is very hard not to sympathize with and fear Hecuba’s lot. Her loss of home, identity, family, freedom and ultimately, her future, arrest our attention, orienting it toward the vulnerability of our own homes, identities and families. Within the tragic theory of value, this response is justified. She

²⁰ The Stoics regarded suicide as an appropriate exit from life. It is an appropriate and correct act under many circumstances, particularly when the subject has good reasons to believe that a life in accordance with nature is no longer possible for them. If a person suffers from extreme chronic pain—physical or emotional; if they are diagnosed with a terminal illness, or they lack the necessary material conditions of life, suicide is a dignified and virtuous exit from this suffering. See Cooper (1999) for a fuller account of the Stoic position.

²¹ Seneca says as much in book three of *De Ira*: “I’ll not palliate with consolation a chain-gang way of life—so grim—I’ll not urge you to bear the commands of butchers: I’ll demonstrate that in every form of slavery the path to freedom lies open. [...] Wherever you look, there’s the end of your woes. See that cliff? The way down is the way to freedom. See that sea, that river, that well? Freedom abides there, in its depths. See that tree, stumpy, shriveled, barren? Freedom hangs from it. See your own neck, your own throat, your own heart? They’re the escape routes from slavery. Are the exits I’m showing you too toilsome? Do they demand too much strength of mind? Do you ask what path leads to freedom? Any vein in your body (*Ir*.3.15).

²² Marianthe Colakis scrutinizes the conception of death as liberator in her “Life after Death in Seneca’s Troades” (1985), page 149. Drawing on the work of W. Steidle, she locates this motif in the first choral ode, where Hecuba, and the Trojan women deny mourning Trojan heroes because, through death, they have escaped a life of slavery.

has sufficient reason to lament, since the loss of her husband, her children, grandchild and home cause her to be irrecoverably divorced from flourishing. Yet, on the Stoic account, Hecuba's grief is the result of a pathological attachment to her country, her husband, children and grandson. Even now, the Stoics hold, she can live a good life. Her grief simply reflects a false appraisal of the situation.

Herein lies the first enigma of Senecan tragedy. The formal structures of tragedy are ultimately ethical structures, structures opposed to those found within Stoic ethics and theory of value. The tragic self is vulnerable; its prospects for the good life are subject to cosmological forces of luck. The Stoic self is invulnerable; it stakes its conception of the good life firmly within the subject's own active attitude towards the world. The end of tragedy is to bring about an emotional response in the audience; the end of Stoic therapy is to bring about the extirpation of toxic (cathartic and non-cathartic) emotions. If it is the case that Seneca identified himself as a Stoic, one who embraced that philosophy as a way of life, as a set of guiding principles for thought and action, then it is puzzling that he would choose to produce tragedies. What was Seneca's purpose in writing them? Can we construe this purpose as philosophical? Is there any way his tragic corpus can be reconciled with his Stoic practical commitments? And if so, how can we make sense of his tragedies within that framework? Such are the first set of questions I raise and address in the forthcoming chapters.

2. 5. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have laid out the enigma posed by Senecan tragedy. It emerges in the case of a professed Stoic philosopher writing in a genre of literature which

structurally undermines the ethical commitments of his philosophy. What Seneca the philosopher thinks about the aims and content of philosophy seems to be at odds with the actions of Seneca the poet. Ostensibly, Seneca's Stoicism seems to commit him to a world view and set of practices which would aggressively exclude the writing of tragedies. My aim in the following chapters is to reconcile that world view and its corresponding set of practices with the existence of Seneca's tragedies. These problems, I believe, can be resolved in a way that renders the tragedies consistent with Seneca's Stoic commitments. This resolution is complex, requiring a historical survey of historical attitudes towards poetry within the Stoic school, as well as an account of the relationship between Seneca's poetry to Stoic moral psychology. To which I now turn.

3. Stoic Hermeneutics and Senecan Ethical Criticism

Can we reconcile the ethical structures contained in tragedy with the practical goals and methods of Senecan Stoicism? My aim in this chapter is to sketch the conditions of historical possibility for a positive resolution to this question. Specifically, I aim to situate Seneca within the Stoic tradition of literary interpretation, which, rather surprisingly, embraced poetry as a form of philosophical expression²³. I do this in three sections. First, drawing on the work of Phillip De Lacy (1948) and Emily Batinsky (1993), I survey the attitudes early Stoic scholars adopted towards poetry. Then, in the second section, with reference to the work of Emily Batinsky (1993), I situate Seneca within this tradition. Using evidence from the *Epistulae Morales*, I identify Seneca's points of disagreement and agreement with the orthodox views on poetry outlined in section one. In the last section, I sketch two main features of Seneca's approach to textual criticism. This sketch then sets the terrain for me to postulate a plausible reading of Seneca's tragic intent in chapter four.

3.1 Stoics on Poetry²⁴

²³ I say rather surprisingly in light of Plato's legacy. I am referring to here Plato's antecedent and foundational views on poetry articulated in the *Republic* (595b). Sensitive to the emotional properties of aesthetic response, Plato famously qualified the philosophical appropriation and uses of poetic and rhetorical forms of expression. Unlike Plato, who wants to write in a medium that levels our emotional response, the Stoics do not seem to care so much about phenomenon.

²⁴ The ambition of my project in this chapter compels a brief note on my main sources. I draw upon three secondary authors for the following exegesis, all of whom stand in historical relation with each other in terms of this debate. De Lacy's *Stoic Views of Poetry* (1948) is the earliest scholarly attempt to reconstruct a Stoic poetics. While the most thorough of my main sources, he is also the least reliable in terms of adducing the general principles of a Stoic poetics. This owes less to his scholarly capabilities—which are formidable—than the desperate nature of our Ancient sources. Problematically, he draws upon and conflates Stoic and non-Stoic sources across centuries. While this provides a significant base from which to generalize, his work does more to clarify the contributions of individual Stoics than to construct a

The Stoic attitude towards poetry did not emerge in a vacuum. Early Scholarchs developed their views against a backdrop influenced by the aesthetic and philosophical culture of Athens. As inheritors of and participants in this rich culture, the Stoics shared two common axioms about poetry which they assimilated into their critical approach. First, in agreement with Aristotle, they believed that all poetry is a form of *mimesis*. It is an imitation of human life and action, which aims to instruct and please the auditor (De Lacy, 250-251, 255-256). Second, they believe that this aesthetic affect is achieved through the combination of formal linguistic and literary structures. They defined poetry as any work which utilizes meter, figure and metaphor. As such, for the Stoics, poetry was constituted by language and as language Stoic hermeneutics approached the study of poetry through the logical division of their philosophical system (De Lacy, 243). Specifically, the Stoics analyzed the grammatical and rhetorical content of poems. This analysis then served to clarify the thought-content of poems, which in turn informed Stoic estimations of a given text's ethical value. In this section, I present Batinsky's construal of the basic features of Stoic criticism, then briefly discuss their implications for the philosophical significance the school ascribed to poetry.²⁵

The four features which Batinsky identifies as characterizing the Stoic logical and ethical analysis of poetry are as follows: 1) a preoccupation with linguistic interpretation; 2) a preoccupation with etymology and allegory as tools of analysis; 3) the belief that

doctrinal orthodoxy. Batinsky (1993) whom I heavily rely on in sections one and two of this chapter accepts the general observations of De Lacy's analysis, while narrowing her discursive target to Seneca's views on poetry. Last, Nussbaum (1993) demarcates the Stoic poetic tradition into two camps, each reflecting position on moral psychology. From there, she aims to reconstruct Chrysippian poetics. While the targets of each scholar differ, many of their observations overlap. I take this consensus to mean that we are standing on reliable ground with respect to the propositions proposed and reported from the primary sources, and have made happy use of this material.

²⁵ These principles are abstracted from the minutia of De Lacy's analysis.

poetry should serve an instrumental function; and 4) the promotion of the poet to the status of philosopher (Batinsky, 70). As we will see, each preoccupation informed the others in intersecting ways, while all contributing to a critical approach hospitable to poetic exposure.

i. Linguistics

Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was the first to develop a philosophical concern with poetry. His interests were linguistically charged. He was interested in identifying the relationship between signs and their signification, as well as the affective properties of different syllabic combinations (Batinsky, 71; De Lacy, 247) This latter study focused on the diction of written sentences, and how it affected physiological changes in the state of their auditor. On their most general level, all the relations he noted were imitative in nature. Words were artificial copies of objects in the world, used to construct impressions of their corresponding referents (De Lacy, 258). Cleanthes, Zeno's successor, took up this Zenian project, augmenting this antecedent analysis by scrutinizing the relations between words and the objects they imitate, and how this relationship functioned in the context of specific sentences. This was particularly useful in identifying the meaning of metaphors within texts, which in turn aided the classification of texts in accord with culturally given genres (De Lacy, 258-259).

Unfortunately, owing to the limitations of the extant sources, it is hard to distinguish the contributions of each philosopher from the other. What we lack in particularity however, we can compensate with a general statement of the intellectual orientation of the period. That is this. Early scholars mined poetry to develop and

clarify their philosophy of language. Work done at this time did not reflect a preoccupation with the thought communicated in poetry as such, but with clarifying the relations within language: language which happened to be most frequently instantiated in culturally celebrated works of poetry.²⁶

As is the case with most of their philosophy, Stoic linguistic analysis later benefited from Chrysippus' systematizing intellect. His contribution to linguistic analysis brought about a semantic turn in the Stoic hermeneutic approach hitherto neglected, and consequentially, brought criticism within the horizon of Stoic ethics. Chrysippus innovated upon the prior discussions of sign and signification by concentrating on the relationship between a word and its own meaning (Batinsky, 71). Granting that words are names for objects existing in the world, he realized three things. As imitations of things in the world, he thought words typically evoked a quality—primary or otherwise, of the denoted object. Second, he noticed that these original denotations became obscure over time. Either through shifting patterns of cultural evaluation, or changes in colloquial usage, word meanings changed or were lost. This led to the postulation of eight kinds of ambiguity that complicated the relationship between words and their meanings (Batinsky, 71; De Lacy, 258). On the basis of these observations, conjoined with the kinds of ambiguity he postulated, he made part of the task of interpreting poetry the task of disclosing possible and original meanings of words. Hence the second preoccupation of Stoic poetic criticism: etymology.

²⁶ Both Long and Allen in Frede and Inwood (2005) make this point. Early attempts at the Stoic interpretation of poetry deal less with the thought content of poems than with attempts at deciphering the linguistic rationale for the word choices and meanings persons from the Golden Age ascribed to the gods. For an articulation of this view, and its connection to extant works of poetry, see Long "Stoic Linguistics, Plato's *Cratylus*, and Augustine's *De dialectica* on page 39 of the same volume.

ii. Etymology and allegory

Chrysippian poetic analysis oriented itself towards uncovering the plausible connotation of words and phrases on the basis of their etymology. The Stoics would study the history of a word in order to disclose the qualities of the imitated object it evoked. These disclosed qualities would then constitute possible connotations of the word, and elucidate the word's contextual function and meaning within the poem. Specifically, etymology clarified the literal or figurative use of words in a poem. This functional demarcation would then serve as the basis for allegorical interpretation of mythological content within poems (Batinsky, 71).

Allegorical interpretation was generally favoured as a hermeneutic tool by the early Stoics. This is because it allowed the Stoics to assimilate what was said in poems with the particulars of their ethical and cosmological doctrine. This was indispensable as an interpretive strategy for the Stoics, since it opened up a space for them to read texts as metaphysical expressions of cosmological reason: a move necessitated by their physical philosophy. If a text could not be said to exemplify philosophical concepts, the reader salvaged this greater meaning with allegory (Batinsky, 72). In this violent way, allegory forced the text to cohere with Stoic philosophy.²⁷

²⁷ Nussbaum, in Nussbaum and Brunschwig (1993) offers the best illustration of this extreme form of analysis. In her "Poetry and the Passions: two Stoic views" she writes: "To the persistent charge that the artists are liars, Chrysippus replied by showing that any work, however apparently false and even morally pernicious, can be a source of truth about the universe, if only one follows suggestions (*huponoiai*) and does not stop with the first apparent meaning. The most notorious and, in many ways, most revealing example of this technique concerns not a literary text but a painting. To the considerable disgust and amusement of later thinkers, Chrysippus produced a very serious explication of a painting that apparently showed Hera fellating Zeus. Obviously this painting is a paradigm of what would have been banned in Plato's ideal city, and it doesn't even meet the approval of the various people who narrate the story (SV2:107.1-4). Chrysippus not only refuses to condemn it, but actually draws attention to it as a source of insight. What he apparently said is that the painting represents the matter of the universe receiving the

iii. Instrumentalist poetry

This disposition to render the thought content of poems coherent with doctrine was not only instrumental to the coherence of Stoic physics. It was also a pedagogic practice. Since the early Stoics thought that truth could be communicated in poems—stronger, that it had to be communicated in poems—the study of poetry became the study of knowledge. Because knowledge was construed as assent to *kataleptic* impressions, and *kataleptic* impressions were explicitly constituted by true beliefs about practical value, the interpretation of the thought content of poems became a vehicle through which aspirants and philosophers could familiarize and habituate themselves with Stoic theory of value. The study of poetry then served a pedagogic function in two possible ways.

First, the process of evaluating the thought content of poems became an opportunity to apply Stoic epistemological doctrine to extant poetic examples. Second, in applying doctrine, interpreters received the benefit of acting virtuously towards the text. This was possible because their interpretive preoccupation displayed a comportment towards a good in the text (knowledge conveyed in the text), which conferred the benefit of rational selection (De Lacy, 249-253). In this sense then, poetry became a vehicle through which students could actively aspire towards virtue. The process of uncovering truth in poems familiarized aspirants with philosophical method, while cultivating receptivity to truth (Batinsky, 72).

iv. Poet as philosopher

spermatikoi logoi” (133). That is, the matter of the universe becoming animate with cosmological reason, or *logos*.

Two implications follow from the above interpretive dispositions. First, if a poem is to confer benefit at all, the Stoics assumed an ideal reader. This was no one other than the philosopher, who, competent in discriminating what is valuable from what is indifferent, would be able to discriminate between knowledge and opinion in a text (Batinsky, 72). This led to the idealization of the poet as philosopher, too. For, if the only person who possessed the knowledge of truth and goodness is the philosopher, then the philosopher is the only one capable of deliberately communicating it (Batinsky, 73). Both moves meant that the early Stoics did not distinguish between text and authorial intent. When they studied a text, they promoted the author to the rank of philosopher, scrutinizing his work's philosophical content. Historically, this tendency was most evident in their criticism of Homer and Hesiod, whom the early Stoics regarded as Sages (Batinsky, 73).²⁸

Taken together, these features construct a hermeneutic approach ultimately sympathetic to poetry as a form of philosophical study and expression. As an expression of thought, poetry was a vehicle for truth. As a vehicle for truth, its use was justified in the teaching *curricula* of later Stoics²⁹, and even as medium to communicate doctrine.³⁰ Depending on the truth conveyed in a text, the text could be construed as beneficial.

²⁸ Our prime source for this historical attribution of sagehood comes from Strabo, the Greek geographer, philosopher and Historian. Batinsky locates these attributions in volume one of his *Geographica*.

²⁹ Epictetus quotes extensively from Euripides in the *Discourses*, primarily as a means to illustrate Stoic epistemology. See *Discourses* 1. 28 for a concrete example. He reads Medea as a prime example of someone valuing the wrong things in human life, with disastrous consequences. In this case, he identifies and clarifies false beliefs within the text, as well as proposes appropriate Stoic alternatives. Interestingly enough, he is not the only Stoic to be enamoured with Medea. We also have evidence that Chrysippus read and taught with Medea. Gill addresses the soundness of his interpretation in "Did Chrysippus understand Medea?" (1983).

³⁰ See Cleanthes *Hymn to Zeus* as the paradigmatic example, quoted and so preserved in maxim 53 of Epictetus's *Handbook* (304).

From the point of reading, it was an opportunity to exercise judgement wisely, and as such, was an opportunity to exercise virtue.

On a general level, this shows that it is at least not historically inconsistent for Stoics to engage with poetry as a form of philosophical expression, nor as an aid to philosophical analysis. On the contrary, the early Stoics were much preoccupied with assimilating the thought content of poems with their philosophy. They embraced the art as an expression of cosmological *logos*, and worked painstakingly (and sometimes quite counter intuitively) to show precisely where and how this reason manifested in poems. Such positions demystify several Stoic practices evident in the canonical literature. Because poetry could convey truth, it was acceptable to quote verses that illustrated or stated doctrinal precepts; because poetry could instantiate doctrinal precepts, it could be discussed in curricular contexts, and could even be used as an appropriate vehicle for philosophical expression. The next question to address is to what extent Seneca embraced this hermeneutic approach.

3.2 Seneca's Response

It is no small task to piece together a systematic account of Seneca's views on Poetry. Consistently inconsistent, at times he condemns the appreciation of poetry, arguing that such aesthetic engagements are egregious wastes of time, detrimental and distracting pursuits in a life that ought to be devoted to virtue (*Bv.* 13.1). At other times, he recommends poetry's consumption on therapeutic grounds. The public recitation of poetry has the power to soothe the soul gripped by rage (*Ir.* 3.9). And throughout his prose works, Seneca quotes extensively from Homer, Virgil, Horace and other lost

contemporary poets a total of 483 times (Dueck, 315). Surely if poetry threatened the health of the aspirant's soul, he would not have imbued his work with so much poison.

We can make sense of these inconsistencies in light of the hermeneutic approach laid out in section one. For all of these attitudes respond to these orthodox preoccupations (Batinsky, 69). In what follows, I identify and explicate Seneca's points of departure from this tradition. In the process, I begin a tentative construction of Senecan ethical criticism. By clarifying what Seneca rejected in Stoic orthodoxy, I show what assumptions he shared with it, ultimately explaining what he cared about from the point of view of someone who read philosophy into poetry, and ostensibly, someone who wrote poetry as philosophy.

Consistent with the thematic gravitation towards the ethical evidenced in the Imperial Period, Seneca abandoned Chrysippian emphasis on linguistic interpretation. He rejected both allegory and etymology as tools of analysis, and as such, rejected the theoretical commitments underpinning them. This means two things. Contrary to earlier Stoics, Seneca did not idealize the poet as philosopher, and consequently, he did not think that poetry necessarily conveyed knowledge (Batinsky, 73). Let's examine each attitude in turn. This takes us to two main sources³¹, *Letters 88* and *108*, both of which reinforce the positions expressed in the other.

Letter 88 is an attack on the traditional modes of education given to freeborn men in preparation for their political life. This education covered vast domains of intellectual

³¹ The core of my argument here is indebted to Batinsky's reading of Seneca's attitudes to poetry. In particular, I appropriate and substantiate her passing comments on letter's 88 and 108 (74). These regard Seneca's tendency to conflate philosophical and literary interpretation, as well as his normatively charged juxtaposition of proper and improper analysis in *Letter 108*. I depart from her reading when I turn to the construction of Seneca's ethical criticism, favoring my own emphasis on Seneca's tacit stipulation of the motivational properties of aesthetic forms.

territory, encompassing the study of grammar, mathematics, geometry, astrology, music, history, literature, philosophy and rhetoric (Gwyn 84). It was understood to equip men with the skills requisite for successful engagement in life within the Roman Empire, furnishing the adept with scholarly positions, and aiding others in money making pursuits, property management and political oratory. Recalling Stoic theory of value, these activities are neither good nor bad. But it is precisely the correlation of value neutral activities with a culturally endorsed conception of the good life that Seneca finds problematic within the letter.

Lucilius asks Seneca what he thinks is the value of this liberal education. Insofar as it promotes the facile attachments of human life, the ambitions of office, love of money making, and other idle curiosities, Seneca argues that it has none. Liberal studies do not teach a man virtue. There is only one education that is worthy of free men, and that is the education which frees men from their attachments: philosophy (*Ep* 88.2). He spends the bulk of the letter systematically analysing each subject subsumed under the liberal curriculum, rejecting each on the same terms. Geometricians teach us about shapes and volumes, numbers and measurement; scholars of music teach us about harmony and tones; literary scholars teach us about language, none of which “paves the road towards virtue” (*Ep*.88.3). None of which teaches moral excellence.

Seneca’s treatment of this latter field of study is especially salient for my project. It is significant, for it is clear that he conflates the linguistic preoccupations of early Stoics with the theoretical preoccupations of the literary scholar. Not only does he subsume the features of Stoic linguistic analysis under the domain of literary scholarship

(*Ep.* 88.1).³² In some passages, the conflation is so strong that it is hard to tell whether he truly distinguished between the two forms of interpretation (Batinsky, 75). Consider, for example, this perplexing passage on Homeric criticism.

Seneca has just asserted the constancy of truth across all disciplines. He says, if all liberal studies were exploring truth, they would eventually express the same things. But they don't, and nowhere is this diversity of opinion more rampant than in attempts at the philosophical appreciation of poetry:

If they were all teaching the same thing, there should be some similarity among them. Unless they manage to persuade you that Homer was a philosopher! But they invalidate their own arguments: at one moment they make him a Stoic, who gives his approval to virtue alone and will not shirk from what is honorable even to gain immortal life; at another Epicurean, who praises civic repose while living amid songs and parties; at another a Peripatetic, who posits three types of goods; at another, an Academic, who says there is no certainty about anything. It just goes to show that not one of these philosophies is his, since they all are—for they are not compatible. But suppose that we grant that Homer was a philosopher: surely he must have become one before he ever learned any poems. In that case, let's learn the things that made Homer wise (*Ep.* 88.5).

If we were to find philosophy in poetry, presumably that philosophy would be coherent with itself. The fact that so many interpreters see different schools reflected in Homeric epic suggests that this is not the case. The text is less a repository of truth than interpreters are sources of partiality. Not only does this concession target philosophers, it construes their activity in a particular light. It is a distortion of what it should be. Instead of wasting time concentrating on the tentative philosophical content of poems, philosophers should be engaging with philosophical content directly. Instead of studying

³² The passage is worth quoting in full: "literary studies are concerned with linguistic purity and, if carried further, with narratives; at most, they extend to the study of poetry. Which of these subjects paves the road towards virtue? The attention of syllables, the close attention to words and phrases, the memorization of stories, the rules of versification, the alteration of meters—which of these calms our fears, removes our greed, curbs our desire?" (*Ep.* 88.1).

what is wise in Homer's writing, we should concentrate on the path that led him to wisdom. For Seneca, this does not require reading Homer at all.

This distinction between appropriate and inappropriate targets of study surfaces again in *Letter 108* on the ethical uses of literature. Here Seneca contrasts the proper mode of philosophical analysis with lesser studies. Again, he conflates what his contemporaries would have accepted as philosophical training with literary studies, both of which are then contrasted with the proper objects of study:

But there is also some wrong doing, both on the part of instructors, when they teach us how to argue a point and not how to live, and on the part of students, when their purpose in attending is not to improve their minds but to develop their rhetorical talent. Hence what used to be philosophy has now become mere philology. It matters a great deal what one's purpose is in approaching any field of study. When the prospective literary scholar examines his copy of Virgil, and reads that exceptional line, 'Time flies on irretrievable', his thought is not, "we must take care—if we do not make haste, we will be left behind—the deleting moment hurries on, and hurries us—heedlessly are we swept along—we are always procrastinating—opportunity hurtles by and we still make delays. No he reads it just so that he can observe that every time Virgil speaks about the rapid movement of time, he uses the word flies (*fugit*)... (*Ep.* 108. 24).

When philosophers emphasize word use over word meaning, they become literary scholars. This does a great violence to all parties involved. It does a violence to the text, which is suddenly reduced to language without practical value; and it does a violence to the students of philosophers, who would profit from the clarification of its practical value. What is lost then when philosophers absorb themselves with the trivialities of language is the ability to lead souls—their own as well as the souls of others.

While both letters are clear on the status of linguistic interpretation, they seem to be at odds with respect to a critical Stoic assumption—the assumption that poems convey truth. On one hand, *Letter 88* posits an un-necessary relation between truth and poetic expression. Seneca consistently and aggressively denies that truth is an essential property

of literature (*Ep.* 88. 20). *Letter 108* complicates this denial, for in asserting that a soul leading function is lost when the wrong form of analysis is deployed, Seneca implicitly suggests that a text could potentially confer such benefit. Recalling that all benefit in Stoic philosophy is couched in the language of evaluative belief and knowledge, there is a suggestion here that poetic texts can convey knowledge. There is something there that can be of practical use to the transformation of the aspirant's soul.³³ The resolution of this tension highlights Seneca's positive and negative responses to the orthodox tradition.

The resolution is this. While truth is not an essential property of poetry, its absence is not an essential property either. Nothing stops a poet from expressing ethical truth in their work. Nothing stops them from expressing falsehoods either. As such, for Seneca, the philosophical merit of aesthetic engagement rests less with the poet's articulation than with the interpreter and their interpretive gaze. Seeing truth in a text is just a matter of asking the right questions of it. The only person equipped to ask such questions is the philosopher, who, attentive to the distinctions between heroes and villains, good and bad, passion and tranquility is well equipped to clarify all these relations in the text in a pragmatic language of positive and negative moral *exempla* (Batinsky, 74).³⁴

What does all this tell us about Seneca's deviations from and convergences with Stoic hermeneutics? Three things. First, linguistic analysis is off the table as a worthwhile

³³ This resolution is evocative of Epictetus' approach to tragic interpretation discussed briefly on page 50. For Seneca, the ethical merit of poetry can only be disclosed by distinguishing what is virtuous and vicious within its content. This approach divests the poet of philosophical status, rendering any incidence of truth within his work accidental.

³⁴ Roland Mayer, in Fitch (2008) extends this interpretive disposition into Seneca's reading and presentation of Roman History in his prose works. Mayer suggests this recourse to learning through moral *exempla* was not restricted to history, but pervaded all genres of cultural and especially literary production (300-303). This practice was typical of the Roman context, which, in an effort to distinguish itself from Greek culture, focused on local and competitive examples of excellence.

hermeneutic enterprise. Since it teaches us more about language than virtue, it lacks practical value and is best set aside. The construal of the poet as a philosopher is gone, too. Indeed, Seneca evokes the assumption that Homer was a philosopher for the sake of mocking it. The wisdom in his epics is contradictory, and in virtue of the fact, is not truly wisdom. Anything of use in his work is there by way of accident and interpretive tenacity, reinforcing the conclusion that Homer was unenlightened in matters of great importance. But this concession means that the idealized reader remains, and with this philosopher reader, Seneca salvages the assumption that texts are to be read for their ethical benefit (Batinsky, 77). Indeed, for him, such benefit is the only justification for engaging in any activity, textual interpretation included.

What objects constitute this benefit, and which questions ought the philosopher ask to receive it? I explore these questions in the next section. This takes us back to the aforementioned passage from *Letter 108*, which, when quoted in full, offers a typical illustration of Senecan ethical criticism.

3.3 Senecan Ethical Criticism

In *Letter 108*, Seneca juxtaposes philosophical analysis proper against its literary and historical bastardizations. While offering his account of the wrong approach, he clarifies the features of the proper philosophical approach. Unsurprisingly, these features all reduce to a blunt evaluation of the ethical dimensions of a given text. While reading, the typical set of questions Seneca poses to a text are “how do you teach me how to live?”; “what are you saying, and why is this valuable?” Such questions are naturally asked from within the perspective of Stoic doctrine, with a mind to naturalizing Stoic

moral truths, and so furnishing the reader with the psychological motivation to aspire towards living a life of Stoic virtue³⁵. Such an agenda is evident in Seneca's exegesis of Virgil in the following passage that I now quote in full:

When the prospective literary scholar examines his copy of Virgil, and reads that exceptional line, 'Time flies on irretrievable', his thought is not, "we must take care—if we do not make haste, we will be left behind—the deleting moment hurries on, and hurries us—heedlessly are we swept along—we are always procrastinating—opportunity hurtles by and we still make delays. No he reads it just so that he can observe that every time Virgil speaks about the rapid movement of time, he uses the word flies (*fugit*) as follows:

The best times of our lives, poor mortal creatures,
fly first away, and in their place comes illness
And sad old age and suffering and pain,
Until hard pitiless death takes us away.

The person who looks to philosophy takes these same lines and applies them as he ought. "The reason Virgil never says that time 'passes' but always that it 'flies' is that flying is the quickest kind of movement, and his point is that the best people are the first to be taken away. Why not quicken our own steps to match the pace of that swiftest of all runners? (*Ep.* 108.25).

In contrast with the hermeneutic approach which asks what words are used and how often, Seneca asks why the relevant words are used. This is an important difference, for inquiring about the why gives him licence to project the particulars of his philosophical system into thought content of the text in question. The reason Virgil uses "flies" is because he is a Stoic, expressing a Stoic idea. Beyond the confirmation and expression of ethical precepts, this censure of a text serves to motivate the individual reading it. "Flies" imbues time with an appropriate sense of urgency, an urgency derivable from Stoic subjective aspiration towards moral perfection in a mortal life. If one truly understands the urgency with which Virgil imbues time, then they are prompted to become better: to

³⁵ It is unclear whether this is an intellectualist approach to interpretation or not. If the motivational content relied on emotional shock value, there would be room to question whether Seneca believed understanding the thought content of poems would be sufficient to motivate virtuous action. I withhold taking a position on this issue until chapter three, where I consider Seneca's authorial intent.

act in a way that reinforces the Stoic way of life by dying along with the best moral exemplars (*Ep.*88.27).

This tendency to read motivational content in poems is not limited to *Letter 108*. In the letters, it is such a frequent practice that Seneca hardly quotes a poet before launching into an enthusiastic tirade on virtue or a condemnation of vice.³⁶ Consider the next paragraph:

Keep these lines always in mind; let them be an oracular response:
The best times of our lives, poor mortal creatures, first fly away.
Why the best? Because what remains is uncertain. Why the best? Because when we are young, we are able to learn, since our minds are still flexible and can be turned towards better things; because this is the time of life that is suited to strenuous effort, to exercising the mind with study and the body with work (*Ep.* 108. 27).

For Seneca, this one line of poetry has enough motivational force to structure one's entire disposition to act in their life. If the aspirant keeps this line's implied thought-content ready to hand, they will be compelled to live well.

The frequency with which Seneca uses poetry to motivate reveals as much of Seneca's interpretive disposition as it does raise questions about his approach to writing. Presumably, since both writers and readers deal in understanding, their aims ought to overlap, even if their tools differ. This raises another question indispensable to the forthcoming analysis: to what extent can we extend the ethical and motivational aims and content of Senecan ethical criticism into the realm of Senecan creation? That is, to what extent can we conflate Seneca's approach to reading with Seneca's approach to writing? If we have reason to believe he approached the writing in similar ways, then we have good reason to believe that he was philosophically motivated while writing tragedies.

³⁶ For more examples, see letters 8, 9, 14, 18, 21, 28, 106, 110, among others.

This speculation takes us away from questions of historical cogency to the heart of my next chapter.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have situated Seneca within a tradition of ethical criticism that was hospitable to poetry as a form of philosophical expression. In explicating the four features of Stoic hermeneutics, I have shown that it is not historically inconsistent for a Stoic to engage with poetic texts. Contrary to the supposition animating chapter one, the Stoics were avid readers of poetry, which they regarded not only as expressing Stoic precepts, but as metaphysical expressions of cosmological *logos*. In context of the history of the school, it was not that strange that a Stoic would utilize tragedy as a mode of philosophical expression. I have also situated Seneca within this hermeneutic tradition, which, far from complicating the historical plausibility of Stoic tragedy, strengthens the case for it by elucidating the possible concerns animating it. If Seneca was obsessed with extracting moral lessons from poetic texts, and these moral *exempla* could be derived as much from depictions of vice as virtue, then tragedy could be furnishing him with rich material for the analysis of vice. Chapter three picks up on this intuition about authorial intent. First, I explore Seneca's attitude towards writing as it is articulated in *Epistulae Morales*, and then with reference to his psychological prose and *Medea*, present one possible reading of his authorial intent.

4. Senecan Ethical Creation and Tragic Intent

Last chapter addressed the historical cogency of Stoic tragedy. I showed, *contra* the arguments and assumptions of chapter one, that it is more than consistent for a Stoic to engage with poetic texts. While the ethical structures of tragedy run contrary to Stoic theory of value, this does not preclude a Stoic interpretation of tragic texts. In this chapter, I enter more speculative territory. My aims here are twofold. First, I extend the principles animating Senecan ethical criticism into the realm of Senecan ethical creation. Using evidence from Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* and *De Ira*, I argue that we have sufficient reason to believe all of Seneca's writings are philosophically informed. I then go on to show how this philosophical intent is especially discernable in one of Seneca's extant tragic works, *Medea*. I show how this tragedy contains both descriptive and normative Stoic content, and how this content demonstrates the congruity between Senecan tragedy and Senecan Stoicism.

4. 1. Senecan Ethical Creation

Two general principles animate Senecan ethical criticism. First, Seneca is concerned with reading Stoic ethical doctrine into poetic texts. For him, this takes a positive and negative form, with the positive orienting itself towards extracting Stoic moral precepts from the text, and the negative orienting itself towards the identification and problematization of vicious content within the text. For example, reading through a doctrinal lens in order to problematize false conceptions of good presented within the text. Second, Seneca wants to ensure that these precepts and moral lessons are not divorced from the spiritual progress of the aspirant. Aesthetic engagement must inspire

the subject to live a better life, and as such, must contain motivational content. This content is typically derivative of the first branch of ethical criticism, where the force of textual moral *exempla* and the repetition of the extracted precepts goad the aspirant to change their behaviour in relevant ways.

In this section, I want to extend these hermeneutic principles into the realm of aesthetic creation. I do this in two ways, with one route corresponding to each principle. First: exegesis. I mine Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* on aesthetics to construct his general attitude towards writing. Second, I have to come to terms with the phenomenon of aesthetic emotions hitherto neglected in the early phases of my general argument. For, if as I believe, Seneca makes concessions to the motivational force of poetic modes of expression, I have to address what in these expressions is doing the motivating. This is traditionally construed as an emotional response, the product of spectator's attunement to a referent in the text. If Seneca relies on emotional response as a persuasive force in his writing, then it looks like his writing is decidedly non-Stoic, specifically in light of the Stoic view on emotions. After all, how could a text disseminate Stoic ethical doctrine while producing toxic emotions in its audience? As we will see, Seneca resolves this problem in his *De Ira*, and in so doing, furnishes us with an argument for the harmonization of his philosophical and tragic works. But to say this is to anticipate.

a. Seneca on writing

Seneca conflates his approaches to reading and writing in *Letters 8, 108, 115* and *84*. Though the content of each is limited by its contextual situation, when the relevant

passages are examined separately and combined, they disclose a coherent approach to writing.

In *Letter 8*, Seneca justifies his present retirement to Lucilius. He is eager to describe his mode of life within this state of social withdrawal, which he reports, is far from idle. He is working, writing an untitled work. He describes the work in the medical terms of Stoic practical ethics. It is a series of admonitions for soul-healing, not unlike the recipes for salves doctors use to treat cancerous sores (*Ep.* 8.2). This work, Seneca stresses, is not being written for his own sake. He labours on behalf of future generations, saying, the work “is for posterity: it is they who can benefit from what I write” (*Ep.* 8. 2).

While it is certain that he is speaking of his prose rather than his poetry, what is striking in this section is the demonstration of a well thought out authorial consciousness in Seneca’s works. At the very least, we can infer that Seneca wrote with a well-defined purpose in mind, a method he probably carried into the creation of all his extant works. In this case, through his writing, Seneca wanted to leave behind a series of precepts for the extirpation of false beliefs, sicknesses of soul. But this is not all the letter tells us.

After offering his customary close to the early letters—a quote often taken from Seneca’s present reading which he calls the ‘daily allowance’— Seneca offers Lucilius a justification for his chosen quote’s eclecticism. He writes,

Perhaps you will ask me why I mention so many fine sayings from Epicurus rather than from our own school. But is there any reason why you should consider them to belong to Epicurus rather than to the public? So many poets say things that philosophers have said, or that they ought to have said! I need not refer to the tragedians or to the authors of our *fabulae togatae* (for those plays too have a serious element; they are in between tragedy and comedy). Plenty of highly eloquent verses are to be found even in mime. Many lines of Publilius are such as would benefit not only the writer of comedy but even the tragedian. (*Ep.* 8.8).

It is not inconsequential that, in a letter outlining his authorial intent for his present ethical project, Seneca makes a connection between aesthetic modes of expression and philosophical truth. If we abstract this passage from its immediate context and couple it with the main theme of the letter, Seneca seems to be saying an important thing about the range and means of philosophical expression. If philosophy does concern itself with truth, our appreciation of all truths ought not to be hindered by doctrinal prejudices, nor opinions about the form in which truths are presented. Not only does the thought content of poetry often coincide with the teachings of philosophers, he tells us, philosophers can and perhaps ought to express themselves in the manner of poets. Since truth is a property of both genres of expression, it is permissible, perhaps even recommended, that it is voiced in all media. This is just one articulation of Seneca's positive attitude towards aesthetic expression in in subsequent letters.

Letter 108, already given a substantial hearing in chapter two, offers a much less subtle articulation of the merits of aesthetic forms of philosophical expression. Within the context of a discussion on the rules of protreptic discourse³⁷, Seneca famously cites and explicates Cleanthes. Reflecting on the enthusiastic reception philosophical truths have when they are “imbued with poetic rhythms” which “drive deeper into the minds of the uneducated,” he says,

For, as Cleanthes used to say,
Just as the sound of our breath is amplified when driven through a trumpet with its narrow windings, declared at the end, so our thoughts are amplified by the stringent requirements of verse. [...] The same points are attended to less carefully and make less of an impact when expressed in plain speech. When meter, with its specified pattern of long and short syllables is added to an excellent idea, that same sentiment is hurled, as it were, by a stronger arm (*Ep.*108.10).

³⁷ I am referring here to the genre of discourse devoted to teaching and persuasion.

Philosophy can be written as poetry, and more significantly, is more effectively written as poetry when it plays a soul-leading function. If you want to motivate the uneducated to live a better life, Seneca suggests you must write in a medium which arrests their attention.

Letters 115 and 84 cement the connection on an intellectual level. Here, while giving advice to Lucilius on the appropriate forms of philosophical expression, Seneca presents the act of writing as a means of intellectually assimilating philosophical content: “your aim should be not to write it but to feel it, and to take those thoughts and impress them more deeply upon yourself, like a seal” (*Ep.* 115. 1). This sentiment is repeated and expanded in the earlier letter, where Seneca establishes a relationship of mutual benefit between the act of reading and writing. He understands the former to refresh one’s capacity for the latter, while also furnishing the latter with proper, inspirational subjects (*Ep.* 84.5). In the letter, he likens this process to a bee producing honey from pollen:

We also must imitate these bees, and taking the things we have gathered from diverse reading, first separate them (for things are better preserved when they are kept distinct), then, applying the care and ability of our own talent, conjoin these various samples into one savor, so that even if it is apparent where a thing has been taken from, it may yet appear to be different from that from which it was taken[...] a greatly talented man stamps his own form upon all the elements that he draws from his chosen model so that they all fit together into a unity (*Ep.* 84. 5-7).

Writing for Seneca then not only is a way of expressing philosophical truth, it is a means through which we assimilate and refine our understanding of these truths. In the writing process, we take the truth into the self and make it a part of our cognitive landscape, internal, but ready to be externalized (like honey say) on hand for use and nourishment in life situations.

This position, combined with the three aforementioned insights that: a) Seneca's writings are suffused with authorial intention; b) Seneca thought truth could be expressed in all genres of expression, and c) Seneca thought that truth could find its best pedagogic expression in poetic form, suggest that Seneca carried the ethical preoccupations of his hermeneutic approach into the realm of writing. He sought to write philosophy in order to assimilate and express doctrine, and he often did this in an aesthetic form. Far from complicating the clarity of this expression however, it appears his stylistic decisions were informed by philosophical deliberations on the pedagogic value of the mode of expression: its capacity to reach and turn the souls of an uneducated public.

When this attitude towards writing is coupled with the insight that Seneca embraced Stoicism as a rule of life³⁸—as something which organized and determined all his life activities— we have good reason to believe that his tragic corpus is as philosophically motivated as his prose works. Before we can fully subscribe to this conclusion however, we must come to terms with a problem of aesthetic motivation.

b. Aesthetic emotions, *eupatheiai*, *propatheia*, and self knowledge

In *Letter* 108, Seneca writes that when truth is articulated in rhythmic meter, it has a greater impact on the auditor, compelling them to act upon their understanding. Strikingly, he describes this intellectual impact in emotional language. When the right words are hurled at their target audience, this audience “cries aloud” in affirmation and “cheers” (*Ep.* 108.12). In a later paragraph, he reports having a similar experience in his

³⁸ See Chapter two, pages 10-11 for an elaboration of this reading. Pierre Hadot, influenced by the original work of Ilsetraut Hadot, also develops this view at length in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), especially Chapters 1-4.

youth. When he attended philosophical lectures as a young man, he says he emerged from them “feeling pity for the human race” and desirous to live a certain way (*Ep.* 108.13). Both statements articulate a connection between an emotional aesthetic response and philosophical understanding, and hence, between an emotional aesthetic response and spiritual progress. But the precise nature of this connection is unclear. Seneca seems to suggest that emotions constitute the motivational aspect of philosophical understanding. Emotions are the affections of soul which compel the aspirant to live a certain way. On the surface, this presents a problem for the coherence of Seneca’s prose and tragic corpuses alike. For in relying on the motivational force of emotions to persuade and guide his audience, Seneca undermines the general Stoic project of extirpating emotions.

³⁹ Ostensibly, he attempts to cure spiritual ills with spiritual poison.

In this section, I do two things. First I show how this form of response is consistent with Stoic theory of emotions. And second, building off that consistency, I problematize and later resolve the phenomenon of aesthetic emotions we encounter through the experience of tragedy. Both projects necessitate a brief review of Stoic philosophy of emotions, to which I now turn.

In chapter one, I construed the Stoic account of emotions in the following terms: “Emotions are false judgements of value, which compel the subject to act in ways contrary to their nature.” While fundamentally accurate, this was a simplification appropriate to the task of the chapter. The reality of the Stoic view on emotions is more complex, encompassing the postulation of positive and negative emotional states,

³⁹ See Inwood (2005), chapter 2 “Seneca and Psychological Dualism” for a discussion of the consistency of Senecan moral psychology with orthodox moral psychology, and the connection between literary form and moral psychology, see page 34-46. For a discussion of emotion in relation to intention and activity, see Nussbaum (2001), chapter one, page 135.

themselves the product of three overlapping areas of their philosophy: their view of mind, their epistemology, and their philosophy of value.

The Stoic view of mind is the consequence of their materialism in physics. Since everything in Stoic physics is constituted by matter, this constitution holds for the mind too. The Stoics located the mind or *psyche* in the chest and referred to it as the central directive faculty or *hegemonikon*. The most basic capacity of this directive faculty is its capacity for perception. It is the thing to which all sensations from the external world are directed, and from which all agential behaviours are initiated (Graver 21). This mind formulates all of its perceptions, called impressions (*phantasia*) in propositional form, implying that they resemble the meaning of sentences. This stipulation of impressions as linguistically formable propositions is important for the normative view the Stoics posit later on, for it enables judgements we make about the impressions we receive to have propositional value. In other words, it enables them to turn out to be true or false, appropriate or inappropriate (Graver 24). This legislates normativity into the affective realm, targeting false judgements as those things which merit correction, and ultimately, extirpation. Before this evaluative work happens however, the mind simply receives and formulates the propositional content of impressions.

Impressions can be considered mere thoughts—that is, linguistically formable notions that one entertains without being committed to them. As thoughts, they are distinguished from beliefs. All impressions however have the capacity to become beliefs. This transformation is dependant upon a further motion of the mind, what the Stoics call “assent” (*sunkaththesis*), “judgement” (*krisis*), or “forming an opinion” (*doxazein*).

Assent is that event in which one either embraces the truth or falsity of the impression (Graver 26).

As a species of judgement, emotions are beliefs with specific kinds of propositional content. Unlike my rather ordinary belief that there is a dog on the street, they contain temporally qualified beliefs about value. That is, beliefs about goods and evils the subject perceives as being present, or which the subject projects into a future state.⁴⁰ So understood, the Stoics posit four main types of emotions, with sub-species subsumed under each. The emotions pertaining to present perceptions are delight and pain, while emotions pertaining to future states of affairs fall under the categories of desire and fear. Delight refers to the belief that a good is present. Pain refers to the belief that an evil is present. Desire, to the belief that the subject will have a good in the future, and fear, that the subject will experience evil in the future (Graver 42).

Recalling that for the Stoics virtue alone constitutes good and vice evil while all other happenings fall under the category of indifferent things, the only cases where it would be appropriate to experience good and bad emotions would be those cases in which my virtue is exercised or threatened. Since most of our experiences of passion fall outside of these narrow criteria, all passions involve false value judgements for the Stoics. In so far as I mistake indifferents for true objects of value—that, for example, I feel a surge of delight in my lover's arms, embracing the belief that some good is present, or that I am weighed down with sorrow over a friend's illness, embracing the belief that some evil is immanent— I err. For the Stoics, in such states, I become passive, forgoing an

⁴⁰ The Stoics do not have much to say about past oriented emotions. The best way to theorize this regrettable absence in their theory is to see all past oriented passions as being contingent on present experiences. For example, a bad memory is just a present proposition that contains past content. For this reading, I am indebted to a series of discussions with Annie Larivée and Michael Tremblay.

active use of my rational faculty to become subject to forces beyond my control. My lover and I are parted and I become vulnerable to sorrow; my friend dies and I become vulnerable to grief. It is precisely these judgments which merit revision on the Stoic view, for their experience is so intense and excessive that they are beyond the revision of rational deliberation. They initiate a motion of the soul that cannot be undone, or checked. So understood, they incapacitate the subject, alienating them from their human ability to live well.

These petitions to revise our value judgements presume that there is a norm they ought to aspire towards. This norm is set by nature, and assenting to it produces a different species of emotions that are appropriate to have and feel. These are called *eupatheiai*, which cover the emotions the sage will experience.⁴¹ Like passions, *eupatheiai* are temporally qualified judgements. They include rational joy (*chara*), when the subject delights in the execution of virtue, wish (*boulesis*), where the subject aligns their desire with appropriate objects, and caution (*eulabeia*), where the subject experiences reservations about situations which might threaten their virtue (Graver 53; Annas, 114). There is no eupathic counterpoint to present pain category of regular passions, for this category necessitates an erroneous interpretation of a present situation.

⁴¹ The Stoics presented the sage as the model of their account of virtue. This person was fully wise, meaning that they were always in a position to correctly interpret and judge life events. Such a person, they conceded, seldom existed, meaning that the bulk of humanity is in a state of viciousness. However, the Stoics do admit degrees of viciousness. Cicero, in *De Finibus* (3.14), likens this spectrum to drowning. In the same way that a man can drown one foot below the surface of water, once one is ignorant, one is vicious. But there is a difference among the drowning, between those who truly are only a foot from the surface and those who are eight feet, 15 feet, 20 and so on. Understood in this light, the figure of the Sage functions more as a target towards which all aspirants can aim, and from which their ethical progress is measured. I understand *eupatheiai* in this spirit, granting that though no person will ever truly experience them, some aspirants might approximate them. Hence, for my reading here, eupathic emotions are more like eupathic oriented emotions. That is, feelings and judgements which correspond or are motivated by school prescriptions. This reading is my own, but is influenced by Cooper (2005) and De Lacy (1948).

Because the Sage does not judge anything evil, they are spared the possibility of experiencing this form of pain.

This framework sheds some light on the problem at hand, for the eupathic response gives us a key for salvaging the pedagogic merit of aesthetic forms of expression. When Seneca offers an account of his experience of being inspired as a youth, or describes an audience's enthusiasm in emotional language, we can read this enthusiasm virtuously. Ostensibly, the emotions he experienced and aims to produce in his present audience aim at *eupatheiai*. In so far as they disclose appropriate judgements about virtue and other philosophical objects, they encourage spiritual progress towards rational selection in life. They indicate receptivity to philosophical truth and sediment resolve in the soul of the aspirant. As such, they can be construed as beneficial to the process of soul leading.

While it is consistent for an aspirant to experience *eupathic* emotions towards appropriate philosophical objects, this does not carry over into all cases of aesthetic response. Affective response is still problematic when applied to aesthetic contexts where the response elicited in the spectator does not clearly re-enforce virtuous resolve. There is a big difference, after all, between an aspirant's enthusiasm after hearing a philosophical lecture, and the terror I feel while watching a horror flick. In the first case, the emotions elicited correspond to proper judgements about the value of relevant textual referents. I am told to exchange my care for worldly goods with an exclusive care for virtue and give my assent to the truth of this prescription. Something like rational elevation constitutes the judgement I make, along with an impulse to act on the basis of it. In the second case, the emotion elicited does not correspond to a proper judgement. I see a severed head on

screen and shiver with fear. The film in question then compels me to make false judgments of value, exchanging the judgement “Death is nothing to me” with things like “life is very important, attacks from psychopaths are to be avoided” and so on. These judgements are in turn accompanied by other actions: I purchase another lock for my door, or start carrying around pepper spray. This suggests that the experience of aesthetic emotions, themselves the product of cognitive attunement to the evaluative objects of differing genres of aesthetic expression, produce and re-enforce false judgments. On this understanding, reading and watching tragedy, with tragedy’s formal pretensions to a *catharsis* of pity and fear would be a hindrance to the spiritual progress of a Stoic aspirant.

Or it would be, if we assume that such aesthetic responses actually constitute genuine cases of emotion. But this is not Seneca’s position. In book two of *De Ira*, Seneca makes a critical distinction between passions and physical events leading up to passions, classifying the aesthetic responses under the latter category. He writes:

This sensation comes upon us even when we’re watching shows at theatrical games and reading ancient history: we often seem to become angry with Claudius as he drives Cicero into exile, or with Antony as he orders his death. Who’s not stirred when faced with Marius’ arms or Sulla’s proscriptions? Who doesn’t hate Theodotus and Achilles and the actual child who dared a grown-up crime? Sometimes a song sets us on edge, a double-time tune, the martial sound of war trumpets; a horrific picture stirs our minds, or the grim sight of punishments, however justly meted out. For the same reason, we answer others’ smiles with our own and grow sad in a crowd of mourners and feel the blood tingle while watching other men in competition. Such responses aren’t forms of anger, any more than what causes us to frown as we watch a staged shipwreck is true sadness, or fear that flashes through people’s minds as they read of Hannibal’s laying siege to Rome after Cannae. These are all movements of minds stirred despite themselves; they’re not passions but the first preludes to passion (*Ir.* 2.3).

The phenomenon Seneca refers to here is that of *propatheia* or pre-emotions. This phenomenon refers to involuntary feelings we experience prior to genuine cases of

emotion. They belong to a class of bodily response, covering physical events like trembling, turning pale, a pounding heart, and a sudden feeling of pensiveness (among other things) all of which are associated with affective response, but do not meet the criteria for emotions (Annas, 110). Critically, unlike passions proper, such phenomena do not involve subjective assent to relevant impressions, but rather constitute the physical event of having such impressions. As such, they are ‘preludes to passion’. That is, things which indicate the event of an impression and the evaluative content of that impression, but do not compel subjective assent or action based on that phenomenon.

The classification of aesthetic response as a class of *propatheia* is significant if we understand it in *De Ira*’s Book two’s thematic context. Seneca’s project in the book is to describe the steps through which we become enraged. He introduces the discussion of *propatheia* to do two things. First, to clarify the first phase in which impressions transform into passions. And second, to clarify the degrees of self-control the subject possesses within each stage. Both intentions are connected, for in positing *propatheia* as the first passive stage in the escalation towards a state of passion, Seneca opens up a space for regarding them as things which indicate the subject’s dispositions to assent. Understood as such, *propatheia* can play a meta-reflexive role in preventing passions:

We cannot avoid that first mental jolt with reason’s help, just as we cannot avoid the other movements that (as I’ve mentioned) befall our bodies, just as we cannot avoid having another’s yawn provoke our own, or avoid closing our eyes at the sudden poke of another’s fingers. Reason cannot overcome those movements, though perhaps their force can be lessened if we become used to them and constantly keep a watch for them. That second movement, which is born from deliberation, is eradicated by deliberation (*Ir.* 2.4).

If you notice that you are in a pre-emotional state —note that you are shaking for example—and, on the basis of prior fear experiences remember that you shake before you

are afraid, then you are in a better position to resist giving positive assent to the propositional content of fear once the fear impression is fully formed.

Seneca seems to be proposing a primitive model of exposure therapy, where, in the act of exposing oneself to adverse stimuli, the subject learns to suspend judgment about the value of those stimuli. This suspension of judgement then places a deliberative distance between the subject and the value judgement which would produce the relevant emotion, ultimately contributing to the prevention of the potential emotional state. If the subject uses their response as a tool for self-understanding, then aesthetic response becomes a tool of self transformation. This connection, coupled with Seneca's lengthily subsumption of different types of aesthetic response under the pre-emotion category above, suggest that aesthetic affect, for Seneca, might have provided the ideal venue for such exposure therapy. It is ideal, because exposure to various aesthetic productions offer the subject an opportunity to observe their dispositions to assent without putting them in real danger of assenting to beliefs about concrete life situations.⁴² It gives them practice in suspending judgement without running the risk of actually investing a worldly referent with real false value.

This move saves tragedy from being written off as a genre of expression which disseminates evaluative beliefs opposed to the ones promoted by Stoic theory of value. If the responses aesthetic media evoked were genuine cases of emotion, we could see a problem in the case of a Stoic writing in an affective genre. But, on closer analysis there isn't a problem here. On the contrary, by correlating aesthetic response with *propathēia*,

⁴² Seneca subsumes many aesthetic engagements under the same affective phenomenon in *lr.* 2.3. he includes textual engagement with history, theatrical enactments of historical episodes, music, visual art and representation, real-life demonstrations of cruelty, athletic prowess in competition, and presence within a crowd of mourners.

and *propatheia* with the beginnings of ethical deliberation, Seneca offers us strong reasons to think that the affective response produced by aesthetic media is conducive to a Stoic training regimen. By experiencing pre-emotional aesthetic responses, we gain the benefit of learning that we have certain dispositions to assent to various impressions without actually assenting to such impressions. In this process, we clarify targets for Stoic therapy and begin to practice evaluative deliberation before assent, which, with enough repetition we can then carry into our life practice.

Assimilating this interpretation into the construction of Seneca's approach to ethical creation, we can now say that we have good enough reasons to see consistency in Seneca's authorial intent across all genres of expression. All his writings were designed to motivate people towards ethical understanding, either by inspiring critical reflection about the value of textual referents, or by making those textual referents express doctrinal precepts. This former intent could be expressed in one of two ways, either by inspiring an eupathic oriented emotion in the spectator, or by disclosing dispositions to assent contained in their propathic response to the text. This position in place, we can now apply this analysis to Seneca's *Medea*.

4. 2. Preliminary Discussions

Before I launch into my positive proposals, two methodological notes are warranted. In the following sections, I limit myself to the analysis of one tragedy: Seneca's *Medea*. In light of the scope of my project, this selection is necessary, albeit regrettable. There is no way to apply my analysis to Seneca's extant tragic corpus without extending the length of my project beyond the limits set by reason and redundancy. I

have chosen to work on *Medea* for two reasons. First, *Medea*'s story is accessible to contemporary audiences. The themes evoked in Seneca's play, *Medea*'s rage, the product of betrayed love and abandonment, resonate well in a world of messy divorce proceedings, infanticide and domestic abuse, more so than the passions preoccupying Seneca's other plays; the struggle for kingly power, competition for honors among siblings, and so on. Second, the tragedy offers a paradigmatic illustration of Stoic impulse theory. Since the plot is preoccupied with the conflict between individuals rather than the conflict between an individual and a group, the cognitive conditions for anger are easier to isolate and articulate within the body of the text. That said, I do believe the following proposals would hold true for the other seven tragedies, for all of them, upon close reading, exhibit a preoccupation with the Stoic impulse theory on the normative and presentative level.⁴³

Medea is about anger and revenge and I will be looking at the play in these terms. As such, it is necessary to examine Seneca's account of this passion as it is presented in *De Ira*. Particularly important for this aim is the explication of three arguments Seneca lays out against cultural conceptions of its value, as well as the general thread of reasoning supporting his argument for its extirpation. For both aspects of this project, I defer to Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* (1994), which, in favoring a therapeutic reading of *De Ira*, imposes a compelling and coherent structure on an otherwise disorganized text.

Of the four basic types of passion posited by Stoic theory of emotions, anger falls under the category of future desire. It is a complex desire, constituted by two judgements:

⁴³ Marti (1945) offers a good sample of the work done in this vein, though her proposal that the plays are meant to be read as moral cycle does not correspond to Fitch's (1987) dating of the tragedies.

1) that the subject has been harmed, and 2) that the subject ought to avenge themselves on the basis of this harm. Somewhat counter intuitively, anger is construed as a pleasurable emotion, aiming at subjective delight one experiences in the act of revenge. Like any passion, the Stoics slated anger for total extirpation. Canonical arguments for its extirpation focus less on the destructive consequences following from acts of revenge than on the errors of judgement this passionate state entails. Nothing that happens to the subject can truly be bad unless it hinders their capacity to pursue virtue. But since nothing can hinder this capacity, the judgements present in anger are false. For the Stoics, the subject cannot be harmed this way. In all cases, to believe that you have been wronged is to assent to an improper view of externals, investing one's physical or mental being one's bodily health, or one's pride with disproportionate worth.

Seneca's treatment of the passion is at times orthodox and unorthodox. His theoretical treatment of the passion in Books one and two accord with the view discussed above: in Book one, he defines anger as the "desire to take vengeance for a wrong" (*Ir.* 1.2.), and in Book two, he offers a conventional description of the cognitive phases through which it comes about, positing first the physical jolt of an impression, then assent, and then action (*Ir.* 2.4). He departs from orthodoxy in the middle of Book two to the end of Book three, where he changes focus from the theory undercutting the emotion to arguments for its extirpation. Sensitive to the epistemic obstinacy of his interlocutor—his brother Novatus, who has largely assimilated and embraced the emotive morass of Roman culture—he targets less the falsity of the beliefs underlying anger judgements than the cultural objections Novatus expresses about the passion's value (Nussbaum 1994, 407). That is, its correlation with courage in warfare (*Ir.* 1.7); its

capacity to be rationally restrained (*Ir.* 3.25), its apparent motivational force in satisfying just demands for retribution and punishment (*Ir.* 3.26).

Seneca's central line of argument against these assertions of anger's value has three parts. First, he offers an account of anger that shows it to be non-natural and non-necessary. This argument, given in Book one relies on the rejection of the claim that human nature is fundamentally aggressive at heart. Reconstructed, Seneca's line of thought runs thus: 1) Anger is an appropriate and essential response to life events if human nature is aggressive at its core; 2) Human nature is not aggressive at its core; 3) As such, anger is neither appropriate nor essential. He writes,

Now let's consider whether anger is in accord with nature, and whether it's useful and thus should be retained to some degree. Whether it is in accord with nature will be evident if we consider the human person closely. What is milder, when its mental condition is not warped? What, on the other hand, is crueller than anger? What is more inclined to love others than a human? What is more hostile than anger? The human is born to give and receive assistance—anger, to destroy. The one wants to form associations, the other, to secede; the one wants to be of benefit, the other, to do harm; the one wants to aid even strangers, the other, to assault even the nearest and dearest. Human beings are prepared even to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others' advantage; anger is prepared to plunge into danger, provided it drags the other down. Does anyone, then, show greater ignorance of the nature of things than the person who ascribes this bestial, destructive vice to nature's best and most polished creation? (*Ir.* 1.5).

Seneca negates and counters the aggressive interpretation of human nature with the Stoic conception. Contrary to the postulate of human animality, he claims people are designed to be *oikeion* (partial to one's self) towards each other. We are gentle, rational beings, mild before we are corrupted; helpful and other-regarding before we are destructive and selfish. Here, the presentation of anger as a perversion of our natural state gestures to the Stoic criticism of culture. Nussbaum takes this to mean that Seneca is in some way

suggesting that “anger is a social artifact, a product of what we are taught to believe and judge.” (Nussbaum 1994, 412)

The second argument Seneca offers against the passion target’s Novatus’s Aristotelian assertion that anger is in some way useful as a motivation for virtuous conduct. It is good in the context of warfare, or necessary for defending the honor of one’s family in their private life. Novatus’s proposal looks something like this: when we are wronged or threatened, anger necessarily helps us avenge our wrongs and stave off external threats. Again, Seneca’s strategy for its refutation is a negation of the consequent, and the proposal of a distinctly Stoic alternative. He says repeatedly in the dialogue that there is nothing that anger can accomplish which detached reason can’t accomplish better, with less mess for all parties involved (*Ir.* 1.8; 1.9, 1.11). When your family is murdered, for example, a sense of duty alone is sufficient for pursuing the perpetrator and bringing them to justice. He supports these claims with positive exempla drawn from Roman history (1.11; 1.23; 3.23), all of which illustrate the superior dignity of the rational approach over the impassioned one.⁴⁴

This second strain of argument is closely connected to the third, what Nussbaum calls the argument from excess (Nussbaum 1994, 410). For one of the reasons Seneca offers for rejecting anger as a motivational response is that it is prone to exceed the boundaries set upon it by reason. Once one gives their assent to the vengeful impulse, they are prone to acts of cruelty which irredeemably debase the subject and their intended object of violence (Nussbaum 1994, 410). It dehumanizes both parties, for every violence is a violence against their innate nature. In this sense, anger alienates us from our innate

⁴⁴ All passages are flagged by Nussbaum 1994 on page 413.

gentleness, producing a cycle of retribution and counter retribution. When combined, all three arguments promote the conclusion that anger is wholly superfluous as an affective response. It does not help to accomplish what rational deliberation could do on its own, and necessarily alienates the subject from their original nature. I emphasize these dimensions of Seneca's view, for it furnishes us with a key to the philosophical reading of *Medea* I present below.

4.3 Authorial Intent

What are the minimal criteria for a philosophical reading of Seneca's *Medea*? In accord with first principle of Senecan ethical creation outlined above, the tragedy must contain elements of Stoic philosophical doctrine. These elements must be expressed in a clear way, such that a reader could easily decipher, assimilate, and engage with them. In accord with the second principle, the understanding produced by these doctrinal elements must contain motivational force. That is, the intellectual grasp of the doctrine presented must be of such a quality that it motivates the reader to live a certain way, strengthening their resolve to follow the Stoic path. This motivational aspect can manifest as a strong propathic positive (eupathic) or negative response to the text. This response can do two things. Because the subject's response clarifies the degree of their personal alignment with Stoic doctrine, subjective response can clarify the subject's targets for Stoic therapy while creating a critical distance between their aesthetic impression and their assent. Or subjective response can serve as a positive repetition of doctrinal precepts, confirming the subject's intellectual agreement with points of doctrine.

I believe *Medea* fulfills both criteria. The tragedy is a venue for Seneca to

dramatize Stoic impulse theory. This dramatization presents the psychological processes in which anger comes about, and within this presentation, correlates rage with atrocity, furnishing the attentive reader with an emotionally laden argument against and response to the excesses of the non-Stoic psychological life. In what follows, I present both aspects of this reading.

In one sense, Seneca's *Medea* is less complex than the *Medea* of Euripides. Though both tragedies depict the same episode in Medea's biography, in contrast to the latter's psychological subtleties, Seneca's Medea is pure rage. She does not waver between possible courses of action, but is set on one: revenge. From line one onward, she is determined to revenge herself against Jason and Creon for their shared complicity in the dissolution of her marriage. She opens the play evoking Furies and marriage gods to assist her in this act, imploring them to help her kill Jason's new family while reserving for Jason a life worse than death (*Med.* 15-25). She then unambiguously and unapologetically goes about this task, driving the action of the drama. In acts two and three, we see her alternate between premeditation and confrontation with the objects of her rage, before finally carrying out her plans in acts four and five. The final scene is the stuff of myth. Framed by tongues of unquenchable magic fire, Medea stands on the roof of the palace at Corinth and pitches the corpses of her children at Jason's feet. She wishes that she had borne him more children, if only for the pleasure of depriving him of them again and again (*Med.* 955).

Because Seneca's *Medea* is already set on a course of revenge, the drama of the play lies less in the presentation of Medea's decline into desperate infanticide than in the horrifying presentation of her triumph—the success of her madness and passion. This

emphasis on the possibilities and, in one sense, the inevitabilities of anger, supplies Seneca with a vehicle through which to dramatize three critical features of the Stoic view on anger, especially as he articulates them in *De Ira*. Concretely, Medea's infanticide offers Seneca a fertile subject to explore the extremes of the passion, depicting the cognitive structure of anger, the physical manifestation of anger, and from a normative view, the cruel and dehumanizing consequences of the emotion. I will now examine each in turn.

a. The cognitive structure of anger

While the mere fact of Medea's revenge-fuelled infanticide makes it clear that she is angry, her reasons for rage are nested in the details of her longer mythological biography. A reading sensitive to the passion of anger in the play, then, and specifically a reading oriented towards identifying the cognitive structure of her anger judgements, must be sensitive to events in her life that are alluded to, but not explicitly contained within the action of the tragedy.⁴⁵ Suspending judgement on the quality of her justifications, Medea's mythological record shows that she has reasons to be angry.

By the time Seneca's tragedy begins, she has shown Jason a morbid degree of devotion and sacrifice. By helping him win the golden fleece from her father, she earned exile for herself and Jason fame. With her act of fratricide in their escape, she permanently estranged herself from her old life of royal privilege in Kolchis. After this renunciation of family and home, she rescued the Argonauts from a deadly confrontation

⁴⁵ These biographical details would have been much more accessible to Seneca's intended readership, but might prove more obscure to modern audiences more familiar with the myth's transmission through tragedy. For my account here I am indebted to Emma Griffiths (2006) and Fritz Graf in Claus and Johnston (1997).

with a Titan and secured the material conditions for Jason's return to Iokolos. There she restored his father's health and disposed of his usurping uncle Pelias. Pursued by the Pallinades, who sought vengeance for the murder of their father, the couple were exiled again. In this period, Medea bore Jason two children, whose radical dependency must have complicated the urgency of their exile. In short, after rescuing Jason's life and the lives of his ship members, after taking life, and bearing him life in Corinth, Medea's acts of love and devotion are requited with abandonment. Impressed by Jason's fame, King Creon offers him an opportunity to settle in his kingdom on the condition he weds his daughter Kreousa. Jason accepts Creon's offer, divorcing Medea, who is then banished from the land.

Seneca's Medea is well aware of these events in her life. In act two, while appealing to Creon to defer her departure from Corinth, she alludes to them, offering him an interpretation of her situation. Significantly, she construes herself as a victim, identifying as someone who renounced a life of great privilege and renown to commit crimes on behalf of someone she loved:

For although I am crushed by pitiable catastrophe,
 Driven out, a suppliant, alone, abandoned, oppressed
 From every side, once I radiated glory, thanks to my noble father,
 and traced my resplendent family from my grandfather the Sun.
 All the lands that Phasis waters with its gentle meanders,
 the lands that the Scythian Pontus sees stretching behind it,
 the lands where the sea grows fresh with marshy waters,
 and those that are terrorized by that regiment armed with crescent
 shields,
 husbandless, fenced in by the banks of the Thermodon:
 I was noble, wealthy, endowed with royal splendor,
 I radiated glory: at that time suitors looked to marry me,
 But now I am looking for suitors. Fortune—quick, fickle,
 Precipitate—wrenched me from my kingdom into exile. (*Med.* 205-
 220)

More significantly, she makes a connection between these crimes and the king's new fortune, regarding herself as an instrument not only of Jason's success, but the success of Greece and Corinth. For by saving the crew members of the Argo, she saved the leaders of Greece. While these actions implicated her in fratricide and murder, she argues they were essential for everyone's survival.

Attack me now and accuse me of all my immoral deeds:
I shall admit them. Yet the charge against me is summed up in this:
that the Argo returned. Suppose the girl should opt for decency,
Opt for her father: along with its leaders, the whole,
Pelasgian land will fall; first of all this son in law of yours
Will be killed by the blazing mouth of the vicious bull (*Med.* 235-240).

Prominent in Medea's interpretation of her situation is the overwhelming judgment that she has been wronged. She believes that she is being punished for actions that were necessary, which cost her life, honor and privilege at home. The salt in this wound is the belief that she is being deprived of the fruits of her only selfish act. Speaking of her encounter with the Argonauts Medea says, "I brought the rest of them back for you, but him alone for myself" (*Med.* 235). With his proposal to Jason, Creon is taking away the primary object of her care, leaving her alone in the world, cut from the source of her happiness. On the Stoic view, this interpretation covers the first belief constitutive of an anger response, demonstrating Medea's perception of her own victimhood. The second belief sufficient for anger—that the subject ought to avenge themselves on the basis of this harm—swiftly follows the above exchange. After presenting the interpretation of this situation, she begs for a day's deferral of her exile, which she ominously says she will officially use to say good bye to her children, and which she really uses to prepare her revenge (*Med.* 280-295).

b. The physical manifestation of anger⁴⁶

The first dimension of passion examined dealt with the manifestation of the intellectual conditions for anger Medea exhibits in the play. By examining her defence of her actions, we see that Medea regards herself as someone who is wronged, and see through her speeches in act one as well as in her subsequent actions throughout the play, that she is set on a course for revenge. The second dimension of the passions dramatized in the play merits the least attention, since it is the most obvious. This focuses on the imitation and exaggeration of anger's phenomenological aspects. Seneca offers his readers a description of anger's physical characteristics as they manifest in Medea's impassioned deliberations. Significantly, he dresses her in language almost identical to the language he ascribes to the angry in his psychological tract. Like those gripped by rage, Medea cannot conceal her psychological state (*Med.* 380-390; *Ir.* 1.5); her anger is visible in her physical features and body language (*Med.* 380-390; *Ir.* 1.4), and this physicality accentuates and forebodes the escalation of her rage (*Med.* 380-390 ;*Ir.* 1.5).

Compare the relevant passages from the prose and tragedy.

First, *De Ira*:

Some wise men have said that anger is a brief madness: for it's no less lacking in self-control, forgetful of decency, unmindful of personal ties, unrelentingly intent on its goal, shut off from rational deliberation, stirred for no substantial reason, unsuited to discerning what's fair and true, just like a collapsing building that's reduced to rubble even as it crushes what it falls upon. Moreover, you can tell that the people whom anger seizes aren't sane by considering their very demeanor. As madmen exhibit specific symptoms—a bold and threatening expression, a knitted brow, a fierce set of the features, a quickened step, restless hands, a changed complexion, frequent, very forceful sighing—so do angry people show the same symptoms: their eyes blaze and flicker, their faces flush deeply as the blood surges up from the depths of the heart, their lips quiver and their teeth grind, their hair bristles and stands on end, their breathing is forced and ragged, their joints

⁴⁶ I am indebted to Hine's commentary (2002) for the parallel drawn between these two texts, though the argument remains my own.

crack as they're wrenched, they groan and bellow, their speech is inarticulate and halting, they repeatedly clap their hands together and stamp the ground, their entire bodies are aroused as they "act out anger's massive menace," they have the repellent and terrifying features of people who are deformed and bloated—it would be hard to say whether the vice is more abhorrent or disfiguring. (*Ir.* 1. 2).

This is very close to the Nurse's description of Medea at 380:

Just as a Maenad moves distractedly with inspired steps
 once she has let the god possess her, and she raves
 on the summit of snowy Pindus or the ridges of Nysa—
 so Medea keeps running to and fro with frantic movement,
 displaying the signs of frenzied madness in her features.
 Her face is ablaze, she forces her breath out from deep inside her,
 She cries out, she floods her eyes with copious weeping,
 She smiles, she demonstrates every kind of emotion;
 She hesitates, threatens, seethes, protests, groans.
 Which way will her heart's heaviness sink? Where will she send her
 Menaces?
 Where will that wave break? Her madness is overflowing.
 She is pondering no simple or moderate wickedness;
 She will surpass herself; I recognize in her the signs of her old rage.
 Something great, wild, terrible, impious is looming:
 I see the face of Madness. May the gods prove my fears unfounded! (*Med.* 380-395).

Medea literally acts out anger's "massive menace" as it is described in Seneca's prose work. She displays some of the symptoms of physical agitation Seneca evokes in the first passage. Her complexion is distorted by her emotional tumult; her speech comes in fits and bursts. And she moves with sweeping animalistic gestures. She paces, stoops and rises like a predatory beast poised to attack her victim. Importantly, the nurse correlates this animal behaviour with the threat of revenge, and by proximation, correlates revenge with inhumanity. This connection echoes Seneca's prime argument for the extirpation of rage in *De Ira*, which presents the passion as a perversion of the subject's innate rationality and gentleness. With this physical description, Seneca is suggesting that Medea's passion has, in some sense, debased her. She has become less than human. This

observation takes us away from the descriptive elements of Stoic passion theory present in the play, towards the question of the play's normative content.

Admittingly, here the Stoic interpretation of Medea falters, for Seneca does not offer us much by way of explicit moralizing in any of his tragedies. We must cope with the question of the plot itself. The fact of the matter is that Medea has her revenge. She slays her children in front of Jason (*Med.* 1000), burns Corinth to the ground (*Med.* 885), and escapes on her serpent chariot (*Med.* 1025)—all without apparent repercussion or punishment. If the second principle of Senecan ethical creation is to be fulfilled, then Medea's triumph must be rendered somehow consistent with typical sources of Stoic motivation. Since there is no way to read Medea as a paragon of Stoic virtue—a positive example which goads the reader to live a better life, the only recourse to consistency is to present her as a paragon of Stoic vice. She must inspire a fear-like propathic impression in the reader, one which implicitly turns them away from the bad life. Happily, the text provides us with ample evidence to this effect, emphasizing in acts four and five the connection between Medea's rage and her subversion of natural norms, and this natural subversion with atrocity. These connections constitute a sort of hypothetical syllogism, the conclusion for which is an indictment of the non-Stoic psychological life.

c. Anger and monstrosity

We don't have to probe Seneca's text deeply to find presentations of Medea as unnatural, both from Stoic and non-Stoic points of view. Beyond the "hallmarks of rage" that distort her physical appearance and the toxic evaluative beliefs she harbours towards Jason and her own life, the episode of Medea's revenge is rife with the subversion of

natural norms. Not only is her revenge against Corinth accomplished with assistance of supernatural forces and magic, the act itself is perfected by infanticide. In this section, I will focus on this subversion of parenthood, specifically targeting Medea's deliberations leading up to and after her child killing, for they offer the clearest example of a non-Stoic, non-natural life leading to alienation and atrocity.

Infamously, in act five of Seneca's tragedy, Medea declares that she will take revenge on Jason by murdering their children. As she turns this possibility over in her mind, she suffers pangs of contradiction, apparently torn between competing impulses. On one hand, her rage compels her to hurt Jason. She knows from their confrontation (in act four) that his love for their children is his weakness, and hopes to strike him there. Her rage compels her then to murder her children. At the same time, her motherly impulses complicate and advise her against this course of action. She says,

I have decided on this form of punishment,
 and decided rightly; I must plan the ultimate crime
 with courageous heart: children, once mine,
 you must pay the penalty for your father's crimes.
 Shudders have rocked my heart, my limbs grow numb with cold,
 my breast has been trembling. Anger has deserted her post,
 the wife in me is driven out, the mother is completely reinstated.
 Should I spill the blood of my children,
 of my offspring? Ah, insane madness, better to
 let that unheard-of crime and terrible wickedness
 remain remote even from me. For what crime will the poor boys atone?
 The crime is having Jason as a father, and a greater crime is
 having Medea for mother—if they are not mine, let them die;
 if they are mine, let them perish. They are without guilt,
 they are innocent, I admit: so was my brother.
 Why, soul, do you vacillate? Why do tears water my cheeks
 And, as I waver, why does anger now drag me off in one direction, love
 In another? An undecided tide sweeps me along in my uncertainty;
 just as, when violent winds wage cruel war,
 the quarreling billows drive the sea water in two directions at once,
 and the swell seethes indecisively, just so my
 heart is surging: anger banishes love,

love anger—anguish, surrender to love (*Med.* 930-945).

Here Medea is struggling not only with her motherly feelings directed towards her innocent children, but with the more basic psychological impulse Seneca thinks is instantiated in those feelings. This impulse is towards self preservation, a basic property of human nature which initiates and sustains the teleological motions of *oikeiosis*. When Medea asks herself then, “Should I spill the blood of my children, of my offspring?” she is as much asserting the immorality of infanticide as she is painfully resisting a fundamental aspect of her own nature. For, by having children she has already expanded the domain of her ethical concern. Being a mother, she takes things outside of herself as *oikeion* to her—as part of herself. By making her children instruments of her revenge, she regresses, doing a greater violence to herself. For to betray her mother-love is to betray her teleological progression. In this sense, Medea’s infanticide is as much a subversion of parenthood as it is a betrayal of her enlarged self.

Such observations account for Medea’s fixedness on her children’s innocence, for in a proximate way, she is identifying their qualities with herself. The apparent purity and blamelessness of mother-child relationship offer her the most forceful arguments against infanticide. But often the most persuasive force fosters the most virulent, irrational, rejections. In the lines preceding the quoted passage, Medea embraces her anger, articulating the reasons which she will ultimately embrace as justification for the act. These reasons evoke her earlier fratricide and suggest that, for Medea, that act forever estranged her from a gentle nature, and that, as such, her only moral development can occur in the other direction. In spite of the last gasps of her mother feeling that follow,

she understands the perfectibility of her own nature within the context of infanticide, and confesses to herself that she has already decided on her course of action:

Come on, I shall make them recognise
 How trifling and how commonplace are
 The crimes I have committed to oblige others. My anguish has been
 practicing on those crimes: what mighty deed could unskilled hands,
 could the madness of a *girl* dare achieve?
 Now I am Medea; evils have increased my talent,
 I'm glad I tore off my brother's head,
 Glad I cut up his limbs, and robbed my father of his secret relic...
 Look for your opportunity anguish:
 for every crime you will have hands that are well trained (*Med.* 910-915).

After this deliberation, she hallucinates the ghost of her brother, whom, possessed by the gods of revenge, she commands to leave her alone. For she wants to kill of her own volition, without possession. "Leave me to myself," she says, and slaughters her first son (*Med.* 970). Medea then embraces the pleasure derivative of the act. This latter scene merits closer attention, for it, more than other episodes in the drama, evokes Seneca's normatively based argument from excess presented in *De Ira*.

At this point in act five, Medea has slit her first child's throat. Though her mother impulse is not completely erased by her passion, she reports feeling a subtle sense of pleasure along side her remorse. As her dialogue progresses, and the pleasure sinks in, the target of this remorse transforms completely. It moves from a deeply disturbed reflection on the loss of her child to a wistful regret that she did not maximize the revenge value of her child's death. She notes the pleasure she feels in her cruelty,

What, wretched woman, have I done? Wretched? Even if I feel regret,
 I have done it. Great pleasure is stealing over me against my will,
 and, see, it is increasing. This is the one thing that I lacked,
 to have him watching me. I think nothing has yet been achieved:
 every crime I have committed without him was wasted (*Med.* 990).

Without submitting Jason to the spectacle of her infanticide, Medea deems the act an incomplete waste. Following this reflection, Medea sets on a course to gratify her intensifying revenge impulse. She climbs to the top of the palace with both children and waits for a confrontation with Jason (*Med.* 975). When he arrives on the scene, she waits for him to beg for the surviving child's life before killing him (*Med.* 995-1015).

The cruelty of this last act is brought into relief by these pre-meditations. While Jason is ignorant of the impossibility of his hopes for sparing innocent life, Medea is not. She knows that she has gone too far in the direction of anger to be satisfied with one child. "If my hand could have been satisfied with just one slaughter, I would not have sought any" (*Med.* 1005). Indeed, in an astonishing act of instrumentalization, she suggests the murder of the first child was wholly superfluous without an audience. In this passage, this first child is reduced to a unessential object—their death did not even serve its intended function. Yet, despite the knowledge of her own intentions, Medea allows Jason to maintain the illusions of control he has over the destiny of his son. She maintains this suspense to wound him with the combination of the final spectacle and dissolution of his last desperate assumption.

This scene illustrates all the requisite aspects of Seneca's argument from excess explicated earlier in this chapter. Medea's revenge contains it all: assent, vengeance, and the corresponding processes of subjective dehumanization, victimization, and last, the escalation of indignation into cruelty. Medea assents to her anger judgements, and is compelled to revenge. This course is purchased at the cost of alienation from her innate ethical nature in the role of mother. She embraces monstrosity and goads herself to infanticide. But this impulse cannot be controlled by rational argument or appeal. She

wrestles with herself, with guilt, to no avail. Her dissatisfaction grows. Destroying the city was not enough; killing Jason's new family was not enough, killing one child was not enough, killing both children without audience was not enough to satisfy Medea's outrage. With his presentation of Medea, Seneca is suggesting that anger necessarily leads to cruelty, and that cruelty benefits no one.

He has Jason say as much at the end of the play. As Medea ascends into the heavens on her serpent chariot, he calls out to her: "Travel up above through the high expanses of the heavens; bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods" (*Med.* 1020). These lines, more prophetic and metaphorical than literal, foreshadow the kind of life available to those who relinquish basic humanity for passion and revenge. When passion renders all acts equal, all acts of cruelty possible, those capable of such deeds are condemned to suffer a horrifying solitude. Cut off from the human community, they will wander endless space in a universe devoid of good, order, control and company. Seneca submits us to this bleak vision of isolation and leaves us to meditate on our own pre-emotional reactions.

4. 4. Concluding Remarks

The argumentative work done in this chapter resolves part of the tension presented in chapter two, showing us how Seneca's tragedies could be read as coherent with the ends of Senecan Stoicism. I showed how Seneca's own views on writing suggest that all his works, prose and tragedy alike, are imbued with philosophical concern. I showed how Seneca himself resolves the apparent problem of aesthetic emotions raised in chapter two. Since he does not regard aesthetic emotions as full-fledged cases of

emotion, he invests in their experience some pedagogic value. These experiences disclose the subject's dispositions to assent, which either instantiate eupathic responses that affirm doctrine or clarify subjective beliefs for modification. Both options demonstrate how the formal structures of the tragic genre are compatible with Senecan Stoicism.

I then offered a Stoic interpretation of Seneca's *Medea*. I argued that the tragedy contains Stoic descriptive and normative content. *Medea* dramatizes Stoic moral psychology. Within the descriptive, psychological content of the play, Seneca nests a version of his argument from excess, correlating *Medea*'s rage with alienation, and alienation with excessive cruelty.

Thus far I have pursued this inquiry with a limited aesthetic vantage point in mind. I have considered the Stoic coherence mostly from the perspective of an aesthetic spectator's point of view. In the next and final chapter, I delve further into the speculative realm, considering what philosophical merit Seneca might have derived from an authorial perspective. I ask if there is anything in the act of writing itself which might have reinforced Seneca's Stoic practice.

5. Conclusions and Speculations

Last chapter presented spectator response to Senecan tragedy as an evaluative, critical and ethical phenomenon, one that is ultimately consistent with the aims of Senecan Stoicism. Tragedy offers us an imitation of human life. This imitation inspires aesthetic emotions—*propathia* on Seneca's account, which disclose our own evaluative dispositions in life without instantiating them. This evaluative disclosure is an important part of Stoic ethical experience, for it gets the more honest among us thinking about what we care about, why we care about these things, and whether, in truth, we ought to continue to do so.

Presented with Medea's dreadful revenge, with the descriptive correlation between her passion and atrocity, a Stoic reader might have a eupathic/propathic response to the tragedy. Following Medea's hypothetical syllogism, I might reflect that our perceptions of worth, and our attachments to our life plans come at too high a price. And finally, based on these conclusions, I might be less inclined to indulge in value judgements like hers, concluding that it does no one good to live in a world consumed by revenge and hatred.

A non-Stoic reader might feel a propathic response coloured by the joy at Medea's triumph. In this case, this reader would benefit from the self knowledge, seeing within her aesthetic response a constellation of cares and evaluative choices she has made about life and what is imitated in the text. The righteous pleasure I feel when Medea soars into the sky then tells me that I care so very much about the situation of like women across time; that it is important to me that the powerless are not silent, and so on. Either

route, and any response, on the spectrum between the two responses tells us that, for Seneca, spectator response to tragedy is as much an exercise in self-recognition as it is an exercise in self-censure and criticism. This is how his appropriation and expression through the tragic genre coheres with his Stoic commitments.

In these closing speculations, I want to shift focus, turning away from conclusions about spectator response towards the question of authorial benefit. For it is one thing to read tragedy and reflect on the philosophical implications of one's aesthetic response. It is quite another to write one, let alone eight. At the end of this thesis, I am struck by another possibility for interpreting Seneca's tragic corpus, one intimated by Schiesaro (2003), but neglected from a concrete historical point of view. I want to explore whether the act of writing tragedy served some psychological function for Seneca, one which, *contra* the proposals of Schiesaro, might have reinforced his understanding and commitments to Stoicism.

Specifically, I open the question whether the act of writing tragedy was a spiritual exercise for Seneca. That is, a deliberate, philosophical practice, aiming at the assimilation and articulation of the Stoic rule of life. I fill out the contours of these speculations in two brief sections. In the first, I define spiritual exercises and organize them into two broad groups. In section two, I articulate a partial identity relation between the exercises evoked in section one and the two principles of Senecan ethical creation developed in chapter four.

5.1. Spiritual Exercises

One of the main aims of Stoic practical ethics is to get the aspirant to change their false beliefs about value. Specifically, for spiritual progress to occur, aspirants must exchange their beliefs about what is good and bad in life, targeting two types of proposition. First, they must stop thinking that conditionally worthwhile things are unconditionally good. This amounts to modifying one's attitudes towards external goods, exchanging perceptions of their importance for constant perceptions of their utility or disutility in relation to virtue. Second, they must revise their beliefs about unconditional goods, trading their beliefs about what is valuable in life for an exclusive concern for virtue. In short, part of the project of Stoic therapy is to drastically revise the locus of value in our interpretive scheme of the world. This is a tall order, for it requires overcoming a life time of toxic socialization within a given culture. This is precisely where spiritual exercises become relevant.

Pierre Hadot defines spiritual exercises as practices of self shaping designed to discipline the subject's judgement, inclinations, and desires such that they are coherent with school doctrine, and such that the aspirant's self becomes coherent with the school conceptions of universal order (Hadot, 59, 83). While no treatise codifies their use within Ancient texts, Hadot reports that we have two main sources for them. First, Roman and Hellenistic writings and second, Philo of Alexandria, who left two lists of such exercises practiced both by Stoics and Platonists of the period. For Hadot, both sources suggest that even very late in the history of respective schools, spiritual exercises were well known parts of practical dogma, and a part of daily life for philosophical aspirants (Hadot, 84). There are two broad categories of such exercises we can abstract from the sources.

First, there are practical exercises which aim to bring the subject's conscious thought into conformity with doctrinal picture of the world. Two examples of this type, themselves ubiquitous across Stoic texts, are memorization (*mneme*) and meditation (*melete*). Memorization, according to Hadot, is an exercise designed to keep the essential features of doctrine ready to hand in the subject's consciousness, such that they can be called to mind and use in tough life situations. This practice happens through great subjective expenditure, utilizing all psychological resources—imagination, affectivity, rhetorical methods of amplification and psychagogic techniques to formulate the rule of life in striking ways (Hadot, 85). Essentially, aspirants convert the elemental features of doctrine into beautifully crafted, rhetorically sensitive, and affective maxims, which they repeat to themselves and so sear into the fabric of their memory. This process makes doctrine easier to practice by making its content easily recalled when needed.

In contrast to memorization, which involves a reaching back into one's memory, meditation exercises encourage the subject to project themselves into the future and so imagine how they might deal with unexpected life situations. The subject imagines what illness might feel like, and work at rendering their internal discourse within the projected phenomenon coherent with doctrine (Hadot, 86). The classic example of this exercise has to do with projection towards death, *melete thanatou*. I imagine what my death will be like and attempt, through the lens of doctrine, to make my thoughts and fears correspond to Stoic theory of value. On a good day, I think that it is nothing to me. On a bad day, I learn that I still suffer mortal fear. Seneca is particularly fond of this type of spiritual exercise. He frequently evokes the inevitability of death and illness in his prose writings.

The second type of spiritual exercise abstracted from the sources is intellectual in nature. These intellectual exercises attempt to familiarize the subject with the nuances of their theoretical commitments, either by providing them with fodder for the application and clarification of doctrine or meditation on doctrine itself. Intellectual exercises involved critical reading, listening, research and investigation (Hadot, 86). Hadot construes each in the following terms.

Reading as a spiritual exercise involved applying the Stoic rule of life to what the subject read, or engaging with specialized and technical philosophical texts. The prime aim of reading was to familiarize the subject with Stoic doctrine by engaging with the comprehensive and canonical texts articulating it (Hadot, 86). Listening involved attending lectures or readings given by teachers, particularly before the period of decentralization in the middle Stoa. Last, research involved the application of doctrine to areas of life and experience hitherto neglected by canonical texts or necessitated by the subject's personal struggles with doctrinal application. Of this latter category, Hadot offers the example of the subject defining objects and events from a physical point of view, such that they are situated within the cosmological picture held by doctrine (Hadot, 86).⁴⁷

Both practical and intellectual exercises maintain the consistency of subjective discourse with doctrinal commitments. Significant for my intuitions in this chapter, both

⁴⁷ The most vivid illustration of this type of exercise comes from Marcus Aurelius, not Seneca. Checking his toxic interpretive pretensions, he describes ordinary experiences through the lens of doctrine: "Like seeing roasted meat and other dishes in front of you and suddenly realizing: This is a dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig. Or that this noble vintage is grape juice, and the purple robes are sheep wool dyed with shellfish blood. Or making love—something rubbing against your penis, a brief seizure and a little cloudy liquid. Perceptions like that—latching on to things and piercing through them, so we see what they really are. That's what we need to do all the time—all through our lives when things lay claim to our trust—to lay them bare and see how pointless they are, to strip away the legend that encrusts them" (*Meditations* 6. 13).

types utilize diverse forms of expression. Practical spiritual exercises can be practiced in writing, speech or private thought. Similarly, intellectual exercises can be practiced with the use of diverse aesthetic media, both with and through written word, observation, thought, and speech.

5.2. Creation as Spiritual Exercise?

In chapter four, I identified two principles of Senecan ethical creation which offered us with the minimal conditions for a philosophical reading of Seneca's *Medea*. I argued that tragedy must contain clear elements of Stoic philosophical doctrine, and that these doctrinal elements be expressed in such a way that motivates their reader to live a certain way, strengthening their resolve to follow the Stoic path. I then read *Medea* in light of these principles, arguing that the play is a vehicle through which Seneca could present the descriptive and normative aspects of Stoic psychological doctrine. The tragedy constitutes a sustained argument from excess offered repeatedly throughout Seneca's prose corpus.

Granting this understanding and setting it in comparison with the paradigm of spiritual exercises briefly discussed above, I propose that *writing* the tragedies for Seneca might have been a mix of practical and intellectual exercises, all non-exhaustedly oriented towards improving his own spiritual health. *Prima facie*, the act of writing tragedy seems to share a partial identity relation with two of the above exercises. In virtue of their attention to Stoic moral psychology, the tragedies could constitute a sustained attempt at Stoic research, Seneca assimilating Stoic theory of passions with the aid of culturally given myths and stories. Following that vein, and from a more practical point

of view, the tragedies could be read as sustained and elaborate memorization exercises, where Seneca fixed the drama of moral psychology in his mind through the presentation and meditation upon the psychology of monsters. This perspective opens up a new possibility for interpreting Senecan tragedy for coherence-affirmationists, raising questions about the psychological processes involved in the act of writing and whether such processes lend themselves towards memorization, doctrinal coherence and so on.

5.3 Summary

In this thesis, I set out to render Seneca's ostensibly anti-Stoic tragedies with the practical ends of Senecan Stoicism. In chapter two, I articulated the concrete terms of the interpretive problem posed by Senecan tragedy, seeing within tragedy ideas and forms of expression antagonistic to Stoicism. In chapter three, I problematized this enigma, situating Seneca within a poetic tradition compatible with poetry. In chapter four, I developed two philosophically informed principles that guided Seneca in the creation of all of his works, and then applied them to one of his tragedies. This sustained interpretation of Seneca's *Medea* resolved the tension elaborated in chapter two, demonstrating how the form and content of Senecan tragedies can be read as congruent with Senecan Stoicism.

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