

### *Medea Parthenos*: Virginity, Power and the Constraint of the Abject in Seneca's *Medea*

Convention dictates that a woman's body is infinitely more porous and penetrable than a man's; as it ages, authors portray it as enduring a type of dissolution that increasingly renders it vulnerable to intrusion. The very processes that define adult womanhood testify to this porosity - a woman sheds vital, abject fluid, and the boundaries of her skin seemingly are broken on a regular basis as evidenced by menstruation, intercourse and child-birth. Moreover, a woman in the ancient world is more likely to come into contact with abject substances than men, for she must care for infants, tend to the sick and prepare the dead for burial. Yet, this very dissolution and vulnerability makes her valuable to society: if a woman does not have children, care for the sick and tend to the dead, the state, at the very least, is crippled, and, at the very worst, is doomed to extinction. It is therefore essential to the 'common good' that women embrace their bodily 'weaknesses' and perform the duties society has assigned them.

Interestingly, that which makes women weak and vulnerable, when controlled and staunched, makes them so much more powerful than their husbands, fathers and brothers. The only women who achieve that coveted status, though, are labelled aberrations of nature, who, by not following the path prescribed by society, become threats to the established patriarchal order. Seneca's Medea is one such monstrous woman. She possesses a dynamic power to control her own bodily chaos and disintegration as well as others'. She sheds her identity as wife and mother and becomes the powerful, dangerous virgin she once was through absolute control over her fertility and legacy, ultimately by killing her own children. These abominable acts paradoxically bring her closer to divinity and enlightenment. The woman who controls the abject can achieve transcendence, a transcendence that resembles that of the Stoic *Sapiens*.

Existing scholarship concerning the abject in Neronian literature suffers a gap that this paper hopes to partially fill: an investigation of the abject's effect on gender and identity politics. Bartsch (1997) has examined the abject in the *Bellum Civile* in her book, *Ideology in Cold Blood*, while Guastella (2001) and Gill (1987) have investigated how Medea's disparate identities of maiden, wife and mother are reconciled in Seneca's tragedy. None of these works, however, examines women's control of abject substances and the power that control affords them.

To become an inviolate *parthenos*, Medea must accomplish two supernatural feats: reverse time and reconstruct the integrity of her body that puberty, sex and child-birth have compromised. Through a set of sacrifices directly related to her fertility and role as mother and wife, the witch successfully transforms herself into an invulnerable virgin goddess-like entity. She sacrifices herself by spilling her own blood for Hecate, a perversion and redefinition, I argue, of the blood shed during a woman's monthly cycle (806-16). On the other, she sacrifices her children (967-78) and threatens to destroy the child that may be in her womb (1009-13). By performing these acts, the witch takes control of the seemingly uncontrollable, a woman's monthly cycle, pregnancy and childbirth, and frees herself from any obligations to her husband and the state. She mimics, in a way, the epic hero who experiences a metaphorical death and rebirth. Medea, however, sacrifices only parts of herself that shackle her to the constraints of societal expectation - Medea as wife and Medea as mother both die. Medea as dangerous virgin is reborn.

As such, Medea prohibits the intrusion of any outside influence into her mind and body and becomes pure and incorruptible. Because of her inviolate nature, she can continue to grow stronger through the protection of her vital fluids. By achieving virgin status and preventing penetration and loss of power because of such penetration, the witch curiously comes to embody

the Stoic *Sapiens*. Medea as *Sapiens*, however, presents a crisis of seemingly incompatible characteristics: it is impossible to reconcile the malignancy of the witch, the weakness of women, the innocence and immaturity of the virgin and the purity and power of the Stoic Sapiens. This very well may be Seneca's point: human beings are incapable of achieving enlightenment. We, however, can struggle to achieve *virtus* in our lifetimes, despite our vulnerability and powerlessness. Fear and desire relentlessly work to defeat our resolve and integrity, and, more often than not, we fail.

- Bartsch, Shadi. 1997. *Ideology in cold blood: a reading of Lucan's Civil War*. Harvard University Press.
- Gill, Christopher. 1997. "Passion, Reason, and Knowledge in Seneca's Tragedies." In *The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature*, ed. Susanna Morton Braund and Christopher Gill , 89–111. Cambridge University Press.
- Guastella, (2001). "Virgo, Coniunx, Mater: The Wrath of Seneca's Medea" in *Classical Antiquity* 20 (2):197-220.