BRINGING THE OTHER TO CENTER STAGE: SENECA'S *MEDEA* AND THE ANXIETIES OF IMPERIALISM

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The myth of Medea and the voyage of the Argo provided Seneca a context in which to explore Roman anxieties about the relationships between Rome and its borderlands. In his *Medea*, Seneca continues the Roman literary tradition that depicted the Argo as the first ship to cross the natural boundaries of the known world. Like Catullus and Virgil before him,[1] Seneca characterizes the Argo's voyage as the catalyst for the end of the Golden Age,[2] defined in *Medea* as a time when everything was in its place and everyone lived in their native lands, content with what they had and not desiring the excesses and luxuries of far away places (329–36). Such natural harmony, as Seneca depicts it, was broken by Jason's desire for power and foreign gold (604–15). Jason is literally willing to go to the ends of the earth for an opportunity to gain a kingdom. However, rather than placing him on the throne and restoring order to Iolchus, the voyage only brings devastation to Colchis and Greece and anguish to Jason and Medea.[3]

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1 Catullus 64 and Virgil's *Eclogues* 4.31ff. and 6.42ff.

2 Also see Fyfe 1983.86, Davis 1993.81–84, Boyle 1997.126, and Hine 2000.47. Fyfe 1983.86–91 notes that the Argo's voyage is associated with the destruction, rather than the spread, of civilization in the two Argonautic odes. Davis 1993.82 suggests that the chorus is ambivalent, seeing the journey as both "criminal and heroic."

3 Seneca says that the sailors also paid a heavy penalty for this voyage, listing Medea herself as one of the consequences of the journey (340–64). At 597, the chorus again raises the issue of punishment for the transgressions of the Argo and asks that Jason be spared the horrible fates of the other Argonauts.

Arethusa 36 (2003) 271–284 © 2003 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

The chorus, in particular, complains that, as a result of the Argo's voyage, all boundaries have been moved and nothing is as it was in the good old days. Everyone is out of place and walks in foreign lands (369–74). Here we can see concerns about imperialism reflected in anxieties about encounters with the Other and the consequences of cultural conflict. In his *Medea*, Seneca emphasizes the Corinthians' view of Medea as a barbarian, as well as the culture shock Medea herself has experienced since leaving her native land. The play opens with two different perceptions of the nature of the relationship between Jason and Medea. In the first scene, Medea enters calling on the gods of marriage and motherhood to help her bring destruction to Creon and his daughter for their role in destroying her family (1–55). She sees herself as a loyal, legitimate wife who has been cast aside for a more convenient marriage (143–46, 494–95). Clearly, Medea does not perceive herself as a barbarian. She descends from a noble, divine lineage. Her father was a powerful man with a vast empire, and many suitors sought to marry her before she left Colchis with Jason (207–10, 217–18):

> quamvis enim sim clade miseranda obruta,
> expulsa supplex sola deserta, undique
> afflicta, quondam nobili fulsi patre
> avoque clarum Sole deduxi genus . . .
> generosa, felix, decore regali potens
> fulsi: petebant tunc meos thalamos proci.
>
> For although I might be destroyed by pitiful disaster, driven out, a suppliant, alone, deserted, afflicted from all sides, once I shone because of my noble father and traced my illustrious family from my grandfather the Sun . . . noble, fortunate, powerful, I shone with royal beauty: then suitors sought my marriage bed.[4]

This passage, along with the plethora of adjectives such as *nobili*, *generosa*, and *clarum*,[5] imply that Jason should feel lucky to have her as a wife. In addition, she left everything behind and dedicated her life solely to him. Yet

4 All translations are my own.

5 Medea's use of *clarum genus* here contrasts significantly with Creon's use of *noxium genus* to describe her family at 179.

despite all that Medea has given up for him, Jason does not appreciate her status and has treated her badly. As a result, she has been completely alienated from her natal culture.

Throughout the play, Medea emphasizes what she had to give up to become a part of Jason's life: country, family, status, and power.[6] She also makes it clear how her crimes have always cost her more than they have cost him. When she asks him where she should go now that she has been exiled, she reminds him that, by helping him, she has destroyed her own family. Having made many enemies, she now has nowhere to turn (449–58):

> discedo, exeo,
> penatibus profugere quam cogis tuis.
> at quos remittis? Phasin et Colchos petam
> patriumque regnum quaeque fraternus cruor
> perfudit arva? quas peti terras iubes?
> quae maria monstras? Pontici fauces freti
> per quas revexi nobilem regum manum
> adulterum secuta per Symplegadas?
> parvamne Iolcon, Thessala an Tempe petam?
> quascumque aperui tibi vias, clausi mihi.
>
> I'm leaving, I'm going away, I, whom you compel to flee from your own home. But where do you send me back to? Should I seek Phasis and Colchis, my father's kingdom and the fields steeped in my brother's blood? What lands do you suggest I seek? What seas do you show me? The jaws of the Pontic sea through which I brought back a band of noble kings following an adulterer through the Symplegades? Or is it little Iolchus or Thessalian Tempe I should seek? Whatever paths I've opened up for you, I've closed for myself.

As she sees it, it was Jason's act of imperialist aggression, his desire to take the wealth of her country, that destroyed both her and her homeland. She asks: "hoc facere Iason potuit, erepto patre / patria atque regno?" ("Is Jason

6 Lines 118–24, 134–36, 207–20, 274–80, 451–89, and 982–86.

able to do this after robbing my father, my homeland, my kingdom?" 118–19). Her outrage and anger come from the fact that she has been completely devoted and faithful to him, yet Jason is willing to put all of these things aside for a more profitable marriage with a Greek woman who can provide his family with the stability, wealth, and legitimacy he desires. As a result, Medea is completely isolated, with nowhere to turn. She cannot return home and has been marginalized within the Greek community for acts that she committed on her husband's behalf. Even the structure of the play, as Peter Davis notes (1993.61), emphasizes Medea's isolation from the Corinthian community. Throughout the performance, the chorus is frequently absent, while Medea is often on stage alone. Davis states: "In *Medea*, the alternation between action and lyric ode reflects a constant shifting of the audience's attention back and forth between the solitary Medea and the hostile Corinthian community" (1993.225).

Medea's exile is also made worse by her gender. As a woman, she has no place to go. Her children are too young to take care of her, and, unlike a Greek woman, she cannot return to her natal family nor can her dowry be returned. The life of Jason, as she says, was her dowry, a dowry of blood obtained at the expense of her own family, chastity, and homeland (487–89). Her connection to Jason and their children is the only relationship that she has left, and this has been severed with Jason's new marriage and his desire to keep the children with him. Unlike Euripides' Medea, there is no Aegeus to come and offer her assistance. She is an exile without any resources in a country where people are suspicious of her. Indeed, her perceived barbarian nature makes the prospects of finding a new home and family more difficult.[7] While Medea has lost much in the process of becoming Jason's wife, true assimilation into Greek society was never really possible for her. Now that she has left her homeland and committed these crimes, she will always be seen as a barbarian, and, as a result of her attempts to help Jason, people will always be afraid of her.

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7 Hine 2000.131 suggests that "the barbarian origin of Medea is not prominent in Seneca's play" and notes that Medea sees herself "in civilized terms." While Medea does not see herself initially as a barbarian, Seneca's Corinthian characters, unlike those in Euripides' *Medea*, repeatedly emphasize her barbarian nature. See, especially, the chorus at 103–15 and 849–78 and Creon's speech at 179–91. Boyle 1997.125–26 also notes the "limited view of Jason and the Corinthians," which points toward the two radically different worldviews of Medea and the Greeks.

In her desire for vengeance, Medea wants Jason to understand her position, to experience firsthand the difficulties of being a refugee (20–22):

> per urbes erret ignotas egens
> exul pavens invisus incerti laris,
> iam notus hospes limen alienum expetat;
>
> May he wander through unknown cities destitute, an exile, fearful, hated, and homeless, already a notorious suppliant searching out foreign doorsteps.

However, it is easier for Jason to be accepted because he is both Greek and male. He is not completely outside society. In fact, Creon and the chorus of Corinthian citizens see Jason as the one who has suffered misfortune, characterizing him as the reluctant and fearful husband of a barbarous wife (102–06):

> ereptus thalamis Phasidis horridi,
> effrenae solitus pectora coniugis
> invita trepidus prendere dextera
> felix Aeoliam corripe virginem
> nunc primum soceris sponse volentibus.
>
> Snatched from the marriage bed of wild Phasis, accustomed to grasping your wife's unbridled breast anxiously with unwilling right hand; fortunate man, seize the Aeolian virgin now, for the first time engaged with willing in-laws.

Now that Jason has reached Corinth, he can be free from the terrors of living with Medea and enjoy his new union with a lovely Greek bride. The mention of parental consent for the new marriage (106) contrasts with the lack of consent in his first marriage, and thus raises the question of Medea's status as a legitimate wife.[8] The emphasis on her position as a foreign fugitive also

8 For a discussion of Roman marital legislation and language in Seneca's *Medea*, see Abrahamsen 1999.

suggests that she does not have the same marital rights as a citizen.[9] The chorus repeatedly emphasizes Medea's Otherness, consistently commenting on her status as an exile, comparing her to wild beasts and blood-stained maenads, and characterizing her as barbarous, ferocious, noxious, unruly, and dangerous (103–15, 849–78). In addition, they say that any fugitive who sneaks away without familial consent to marry a foreign husband should go away into silent darkness: "tacitis eat illa tenebris, / si qua peregrino nubit fugitiva marito" (114–15). From their perspective, it is Medea who disrupts the social order and degrades cultural institutions. She has betrayed her family, chosen her own husband, and then refused to concede that her relationship with Jason has no legal basis. Creon himself, of course, argues that Jason's hands are clean of any crime; no blood has stained his sword (263–65):

> nullus innocuum cruor
> contaminavit, afuit ferro manus
> proculque vestro purus a coetu stetit.
>
> No blood has polluted him, he is innocent, his hand was away from the sword and he stood, pure, far from your union.

However, as Medea sees it, it is Creon and his lack of respect for the sacred bonds of family that cause disruption in the social order. He is the one who dissolves marriages, tears mothers from children, and breaks pledges bound by the strictest oaths ("culpa est Creontis tota, qui sceptro impotens / coniugia solvit quique genetricem abstrahit / gnatis et arto pignore astrictam fidem / dirimit," 143–46). Medea can see that the only way for the Corinthians to accept Jason is to make her the scapegoat. In the previous line, Creon, in fact, says: "potest Iason, si tuam causam amoves, / suam tueri" ("Jason can defend his own case, if you separate it from yours," 262–63). Yet Medea says she only committed these acts of violence out of devotion to her husband (276–80):

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9 For the rights of foreigners to enter into recognized marriages, see Ulpian: "conubium habent cives Romani cum civibus Romanis: cum Latinis autem et peregrinis ita, si concessum sit" (*Tituli Ulpiani* 5.3–5).

> illi Pelia, non nobis iacet;
> fugam, rapinas adice, desertum patrem
> lacerumque fratrem, quidquid etiam nunc novas
> docet maritus coniuges, non est meum.
> totiens nocens sum facta, sed numquam mihi.
>
> For him, not for me, Pelias lies dead; add flight, theft, a deserted father, and mutilated brother, whatever the husband even now teaches new wives, it is not my fault. So many times I have been made a criminal, but never for myself.

Her use of the passive voice here suggests that being a criminal is not in her nature; it is something Jason has taught her.

It is only after Medea realizes the essential difference between the ways she and Jason are viewed, and after she recognizes that her attempts at assimilation are futile, that she decides to embrace the identity thrust on her as a barbaric foreigner. When the nurse suggests that her desire for revenge is hopeless, that she has lost everything and nothing is left, Medea responds: *Medea superest* (166). It is significant that she refers to herself in the third person here. She sees herself through the gaze of the Corinthians at this point and decides to recreate herself in that very image, stating a few lines later: *Medea fiam* (171).[10] She understands the way that others relate to her and knows that their image of Medea is terrifying to them. Thus she will exploit the Otherness imposed on her and use this difference as a means of gaining power. She now calls upon the cities *she* perceives as barbaric for inspiration (127–29):

> si quod Pelasgae, si quod urbes barbarae
> novere facinus quod tuae ignorent manus,
> nunc est parandum.
>
> If there is any crime that Pelasgian and barbarian cities know, which your own hands do not know, now it must be prepared.

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10 Fyfe 1983.78 sees Medea as creating a "mythic reputation for herself" rather than viewing Medea's refashioning of herself as a way of accepting and manipulating a stereotype forced on her by the Greeks.

As she begins to adopt this persona, she becomes increasingly cruel and terrifying. As she thinks about ways to achieve her revenge, Medea feels the need to invent new, more horrific crimes that will cause the Greeks to tell stories about her divorce that will rival those told about her marriage (51–53):

> accingere ira teque in exitium para
> furore toto. paria narrentur tua
> repudia thalamis:
>
> Gird yourself with wrath and prepare to enact destruction with complete rage. Let your divorce be told in such a way that it equals your marriage.

She wants her crimes to be so shocking that she will be remembered for what she has done, stating: "faciet hic faciet dies / quod nullus umquam taceat—invadam deos / et cuncta quatiam" ("This day will do, will do what no day will ever be silent about. I will attack the gods and shake the universe," 423–25).

It is with this process of exacting revenge, and playing the part of Medea,[11] that she becomes truly barbaric, reveling in her past crimes and plotting even more horrific ones. Once her plans for revenge have been set in motion, she gets increasing pleasure out of them. After she hears that her first step is successful, that Creon and his daughter are dead and the whole palace is on fire, her pleasure grows. Even the acts that troubled her before, now cause her delight (911–13):

> iuvat, iuvat rapuisse fraternum caput;
> artus iuvat secuisse et arcano patrem
> spoliasse sacro, iuvat in exitum senis
> armasse natas.
>
> It gives me pleasure, pleasure to have torn off my brother's head, pleasure to have carved up his limbs and to have

11 On Medea's use of the third person as a means of "self-theatricalization," see Boyle 1997.30. Hine, too, comments on the metatheatrical nature of the play and Medea's awareness of the stories told about her (2000.36).

> robbed my father of a hidden relic, and pleasure to have
> armed daughters for the death of their aged father.

Indeed, a few moments later, as she stands on the rooftop watching Jason and the crowd of soldiers gather below, one child already dead and a knife in her hand ready to kill the other, she is again overcome with uncontrollable pleasure: "voluptas magna me invitam subit, / et ecce crescit" (991–92). Her role as Medea has now taken on a life of its own, as indicated by the use of *invitam*. It is precisely the excessive nature of these last crimes that she sees as defining her identity now (905–10):

> hoc age et faxo sciant
> quam levia fuerint quamque vulgaris notae
> quae commodavi scelera. prolusit dolor
> per ista noster; quid manus poterant rudes
> audere magnum? quid puellaris furor?
> Medea nunc sum.
>
> Come now and let them know how frivolous and how
> common the crimes were that I committed to please him.
> In them my grief was practicing; what great things were
> unskilled hands able to dare? What could a girlish rage
> do? Now I am Medea!

Her previous crimes were committed out of love for and loyalty to Jason, which justifies them in her mind; these new crimes are committed purely for her own pleasure in vengeance.[12] She has, at last, become the barbaric woman the Corinthians saw her as: *Medea nunc sum*.

When killing the first child begins this chain reaction of uncontrollable pleasure, she realizes that the ultimate combination of pleasure, cruelty, and power would be to make Jason watch those he loves die right in

12 Seneca's concern over the role of anger and vengeance in the development of cruel behavior can be seen throughout his philosophical writings; see, for example, *de Ira* 4.2.1 and 2.5.3. While many such as Pratt 1983, Nussbaum 1997, and Hine 2000 have read this play as a meditation on the dangers and consequences of excessive anger, it is important to note that Medea's feelings of anger and betrayal have led her to seek vengeance in ways that would meet the Corinthians' expectations.

front of his eyes,[13] and she laments the fact that Jason did not see the first child murdered (992–94):

> derat hoc unum mihi,
> spectator iste. nil adhuc facti reor:
> quidquid sine isto fecimus sceleris perit.
>
> This one thing I lacked, that he should be a spectator. I have done nothing yet, whatever crime I have done is wasted without him.

Thus when she kills her second son in front of Jason, she tries to make it as painful as possible, savoring Jason's suffering. Standing on the roof, out of his reach, she reminds him that she caused the deaths of Creon and his daughter and reveals the body of their dead son. Then to prolong the pain, she announces her intention to kill the other one right before his eyes (999–1001):

> coniunx socerque iusta iam functis habent,
> a me sepulti; natus hic fatum tulit,
> hic te vidente dabitur exitio pari.
>
> Your wife and father-in-law already have the funeral rites for the dead, buried by me; this son has borne his fate, and this one will be given a similar fate as you watch.

Jason, horrified, pleads for the boy's life, saying that the death of one son is surely enough punishment (1008). She responds by saying that two sons are still not enough to appease her grief and threatens any unborn child that might be growing in her womb (1013–14). By engaging in such a debate

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13 Medea's pleasure in watching Jason's reactions as his son dies is reminiscent of Seneca's story about Caligula, who invited a man to dinner while his son was being executed just to watch his reaction (*de Ira* 2.33.3–4). Also see *de Brevitate Vitae* 13.7 and *de Beneficiis* 2.5.1. The staging of violent spectacles is often connected to tyranny. See *de Ira* 2.5.4 and 2.5.5 regarding Hannibal and Volesus respectively, along with 3.18, on Sulla and Caligula, and 3.20, on the king of the Persians. By drawing parallels between Medea and the Romans' desire to stage violent spectacles as signs of power, Seneca suggests that some elements of Roman society are not so different from barbarians. See Boyle 1997.132 on the use of gladiatorial language in the children's death scene.

with him and drawing out the death scene, she prolongs Jason's pain as he helplessly watches her continue to threaten their child, the dead body of his other son continually in view. Jason is unable to do anything to intervene. Finally, he is no longer able to take this torture and asks her to end it: "iam perage coeptum facinus—haut ultra precor, / moramque saltem supplicis dona meis" ("Now go through with the crime you have begun—I beg you no longer, at least spare my sufferings the suspense,"[14] 1014–15). However, she is savoring the suspense and tells herself not to hurry, a slow revenge is more pleasurable: "perfruere lento scelere, ne propera, dolor" (1016).[15] Her pain is appeased and her pleasure increased by watching Jason suffer as he is forced to endure the horrible spectacle she has created for him. Finally, in his desire to end the torture, he asks her to slay him instead: *Infesta, memet perime* (1018). Once she has finally wrung the last drop of hope and despair from Jason, she kills the remaining child and then makes Jason look once again at the horrible sight of his dead children and their blood-stained mother: "lumina huc tumida alleva, / ingrate Iason. coniugem agnoscis tuam?" ("Raise your swollen eyes, ungrateful Jason. Do you recognize your wife?" 1020–21).

In this process of recreating herself, Medea has consciously brought a bit of Colchis to Corinth. Earlier in the play she stated: "quodcumque vidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas, / videbit Isthmos. effera ignota horrida / tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala" ("Whatever crimes Phasis or Pontus have seen, Isthmus will see. Savage, unknown, horrible evils to make heaven and earth shudder equally," 44–46). However, it is not the Colchis of her childhood that she brings to Corinth, but the bloody Colchis that was created after the arrival of the Argonauts, the Colchis the Greeks invented.[16]

Some of the anxiety over cultural conflict in this play is revealed by the consequences of bringing the Other from the periphery to the center. While leaving the periphery clearly changes the emigrant, as we have seen with Medea's changing perceptions of her own character, bringing the periphery to the center also changes the nature of the center.[17] The penalties

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14 Following Costa's 1973.159 suggested translation of line 1015.

15 See *de Beneficiis* 2.5.3, on Seneca's view that suspense is the cruelest form of torture.

16 The use of *rudes* at 908 also suggests that she was a different person before she met Jason.

17 Commenting on the last lines of the play, Hine 2000.32 notes that Jason's experiences with Medea have caused him to question everything he believed in: "One might go on to say that the ultimate triumph of Medea's revenge is to rob Jason not just of his new wife and his sons, but also of his metaphysical and religious certainties."

for the Argo's voyage include not only Medea but also the erasure of boundaries between countries. In the second ode, the chorus of Corinthians laments that (369–74):

> terminus omnis motus et urbes
> muros terra posuere nova;
> nil qua fuerat sede reliquit
> pervius orbis:
> Indus gelidum potat Araxen,
> Albin Persae Rhenumque bibunt.
>
> Every boundary marker has been moved, and cities have
> put walls in new lands; no home is left where it had been,
> the world is traversable. Indians drink of cold Araxes,
> Persians now drink from the Elbe and Rhine.

Here Seneca suggests parallels between the consequences of the Argo's first voyage and Roman imperialism. These parallels can be seen in the references to the reaches of Roman rule (372–79).[18] Both have resulted in the dissolving of borders and the mixing of cultures.

Such permeability of boundaries, Seneca argues in his philosophical works, has had a negative effect on Rome. Seneca's concerns about foreign conquest and trade can be seen most clearly in his criticisms of the delight in exotic spectacles and of the foreign luxuries that were popular in his time. In particular, Seneca is critical of the desire to display such forms of excess and luxury as a sign of prestige.[19] Part of his concern is that such urges are insatiable, leading to a desire for increasingly expensive and exotic things.[20] The prevalence of such excessive levels of consumption can be seen as further justification for the exploitation and appropriation of foreign resources, fueling the continued expansion of the empire in a quest for ever

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18 Boyle 1997.128 suggests that this passage would have called to mind Virgil's description of *imperium sine fine* at *Aeneid* 1.279ff. Hine 2000.152 also notes that this passage would have reminded the audience of Roman imperialism, but thinks that the audience may not have seen it as a negative reference.

19 See, for example, *de Vita Beata* 12.4, *Naturales Quaestiones* 3.17.2–18.1, *de Tranquillitate Animi* 7.2, and *Epistles* 7 and 95.

20 On the need for increased novelty in order to stimulate Roman desires, see Barton 1993.51–53.

new delicacies. In the process, Romans become indistinguishable from barbarians swathed in eastern luxury and move further from the traditional Roman frugality and simplicity that Seneca so frequently praises. Thus while the ability to import and display exotic treasures from foreign lands ostensibly emphasizes Roman power over the borderlands, it also runs the risk of blurring the lines between Romans and Others.[21]

It seems that Seneca wishes to reestablish the boundaries between cultures as he exhibits anxiety about the loss of a true Roman identity. The concern is that Rome has lost its sense of self in its encounters with its Others. In the desire to bring the luxuries of the periphery back to the center, Rome's national identity is in danger of being eroded. Such criticisms gesture toward a desire to recover the lost Golden Age of Rome and to remind Romans of their true character by emphasizing what is being lost in the quest for imperial power and the desire for the exoticism and wealth of peripheral lands.

Like the chorus of Corinthians, Seneca seems to be lamenting the loss of the good old days when Rome was a community of farmers content to live off the land (329–36):

> Candida nostri saecula patres
> videre, procul fraude remota.
> sua quisque piger litora tangens
> patrioque senex factus in arvo,
> parvo dives, nisi quas tulerat
> natale solum, non norat opes.
> bene dissaepti foedera mundi
> traxit in unum Thessala pinus.
>
> Our fathers saw a bright age when treachery was far off. Each man lazily living within his own shores became an old man in his native land, rich on little, not knowing wealth except that which his native soil had borne. The

21 Similarly, Wiedemann 1992.3 comments on the ways in which *ludi* provided Rome an opportunity to display its wealth and power by putting strange beasts from the far reaches of the empire on display. Seneca censures such displays in *de Brevitate Vitae* 13.7 as he criticizes Pompey for staging extravagant and exotic games as a way of emphasizing his own power. Again, the connection to Medea's desire to stage her own violent spectacle emphasizes the "barbarian" nature of such practices.

> Thessalian ship dragged into one the treaties of a well-divided world.

In those days, everything was in its place and everyone lived in their native lands, working the fields, content with what they provided, and not desiring the excesses and luxuries of faraway places. Though imperialism and expansion were perceived by those in power as a way of creating wealth and stability, in reality, Seneca suggests, they only sparked moral and social decline.

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