ORPHEUS IN SENECA'S *MEDEA*[*]

LISL WALSH
University of Southern California

Seneca's *Medea* is haunted by the specter of the Argonautic voyage, which exists as a metaphor for the turning point in the technological development of mankind, and the end of an innocent age.[1] While the journey of the Argonauts is directly narrated in the central two choral odes, the incumbent themes of technology, progress, and decline permeate the entirety of the play. This paper begins by examining Medea's self-perception as participant in the success of the Argonautic voyage, one to whom Greece owes its thanks for helping to bring the Argonauts home alive. Medea's self-presentation as Argonaut invites comparison with another key figure on the voyage, namely Orpheus, who shares the Argonautic journey with Medea and parallels her both as singer and magician.[2] Looking at direct and indirect allusions to prior versions of the Orpheus myth, we find that Seneca uses references which point to the Orpheus of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Orpheus of Vergil's *Georgics*, both of which narrate the episode of Orpheus' loss of Eurydice and his subsequent death. It is my contention that, by referring to these literary precedents, Seneca's tragedy creates a unification of the lover-Orpheus and the Argonaut-Orpheus, and that Seneca's Orpheus thus exists as cohesion of parallel micro- and macro-cosmic roles. The *Metamorphoses* and the *Georgics* also, however, offer disparate presentations of the Orpheus character, specifically with regard to his attitude towards women. Because Seneca's allusions purposely overlap between Ovid and Vergil, the reader is forced to question their assumptions about Orpheus' relationship to women and how those assumptions affect their interpretation of the tragedy. Ultimately, we find that including an Ovidian Orpheus in an analysis of the tragedy also imports a gendered reading of the Argonautic voyage and, by extension, Medea's marital experience.

Medea the Argonaut

The voyage of the Argo and her passengers functions as a parallel plotline for Medea's personal narrative. Though direct commentary on the voyage is found in the two central choral odes, it is clearly a subtext of the entire narrative of Medea's thoughts and actions while at Corinth. Medea considers herself to be a product of the Argonautic voyage—as much as the fleece, the advent of technology, and the loss of the golden age.[3]

Medea's self-conception is not based solely on her relationship with Jason; she does not see herself merely as his wife, tied to him. It is clear from the beginning of the tragedy that Medea also sees herself as deeply connected to the larger project of the Argonautic voyage. It signifies for Medea a cause of her present strife (i.e., in a foreign country with a husband about to abandon her and marry someone else), as well as a source of pride (since she feels that her magic was necessary for the Greeks' safe return). She considers herself inextricably tied to the Argonauts and their quest. In her first words, Medea signals this connection by invoking the deities she considers responsible for her current situation: Hecate, the patrons of the Argonautic voyage, and the gods of marriage:

Di coniugales tuque genialis tori,
Lucina, custos quaeque domituram freta
Tiphyn novam frenare docuisti ratem,
et tu, profundi saeve dominator maris,
clarumque Titan dividens orbi diem,
tacitisque praebens conscium sacris iubar
Hecate triformis,….

(*Med*. 1–7)

Marriage deities and you, the guardian of the nuptial bed, Lucina, and the one who taught Tiphys to rein in the new ship intending to rule the sea, and you, raging ruler of the deep sea, and Titan dividing the bright day of the world, and Hecate Triformis offering a knowing splendour to the silent rites,….

These deities are responsible for Medea's current predicament (i.e., in Corinth with Jason)—the gods of marriage and Lucina because of her marriage to Jason, Minerva because of her role in building the ship (and, as Medea states, teaching Tiphys to sail it), Neptune as the sea which allowed the Argonauts to sail, Titan (the sun) as her divine grandfather, and Hecate as the patron goddess of the magic arts which made it possible for Jason and the Argonauts to return home safely and successfully. The deities and individuals responsible for the expedition are invoked equally alongside those relating to Medea's marriage,[4] implying that they are both accountable as factors contributing to her plight.

The survival of the Argonauts is also Medea's main source of leverage with Creon when the two of them debate whether she deserves to be exiled from Corinth. Without her aid in Colchis and on the ship, she claims, the best men of Greece would have all died:

solum hoc Colchico regno extuli,
decus illud ingens Graeciae et florem inclitum,
praesidia Achivae gentis et prolem deum
servasse memet. munus est Orpheus meum,
qui saxa cantu mulcet et silvas trahit,
geminumque munus Castor et Pollux meum est
satique Borea quique trans Pontum quoque
summota Lynceus lumine immisso videt,
omnesque Minyae: nam ducum taceo ducem,
pro quo nihil debetur: hunc nulli imputo;
vobis revexi ceteros, unum mihi.
Incesse nunc et cuncta flagitia ingere:
fatebor; obici crimen hoc solum potest,
Argo reversa. virgini placeat pudor
paterque placeat: tota cum ducibus ruet
Pelasga tellus, hic tuus primum gener
tauri ferocis ore flagranti occidet.

(*Med*. 225–41)

> I carried back this alone from the Colchian kingdom, that the great honor of Greece and celebrated progeny, the bulwark of the Achaean race and stock of the gods I myself saved. Orpheus is my gift,[5] who softens rocks with his song and draws the forests, and the twin gift Castor and Pollux is mine, and the sons of Boreas, and Lynceus who with glancing eye sees things removed even across the Pontus, and all the Minyans: but I am silent about the leader of leaders, for whom nothing is owed: this man I charge to no one; I carried back the rest for you, one for myself. Now proceed and heap on every disgrace: I confess; this one crime is able to be pinned on me, an Argo returned. If shame had been pleasing to me when I was a virgin, and if my father had been pleasing: the whole Pelasgian land would have gone to ruin along with her leaders, and this your son-in-law would first have died by the flaming mouth of a fierce bull.

Medea cites the safe return of the Argonauts as her own doing, her own gift. She also states that, had she not helped, the Argonauts would not have returned (which, she implies, may have also led to the downfall of the entire Greek race). At this point in the tragedy, of course, Medea would have a greater claim to social legitimacy (and acquittal) if Creon were to accept that she and the Argonauts are tied together, that she and Jason are tied together, and that Greece itself owes a debt to her (*debetur*). Medea thus argues the Argonauts' dependence on her and claims the returned men as her own doing in an effort to persuade Creon that she does not deserve exile or punishment.[6]

Likewise in her exchange with Jason, Medea implies that she is responsible for the safe return of the Argo. She asks Jason where she ought to go, if she obeys Creon's order of exile.

> *quae maria monstras? Pontici fauces freti*
> *per quas revexi nobilem regum manum*
> *adulterum secuta per Symplegadas?*
>
> (*Med*. 454–56)

> What seas do you show? The jaws of the Pontic sea, through which I carried back the high-born band of kings, having followed an adulterer through the Symplegades?

In addition to the various deeds she performed specifically for Jason (for which see *Med*. 466–76), Medea directly imputes the success of the sea voyage to her own work.[7] Medea believes that she was necessary for the Argo to return safely, that the Argonauts could not have survived the dangers of their return trip without her. In this, she creates a direct parallel between herself and another Argonaut whose magical skills were needed for the Argo to sail successfully: Orpheus, who uses his song to save the Argonauts from the Sirens.

As much as the Argonautic voyage serves as a subtext of the tragedy, Orpheus also exists throughout the tragedy as a counterpoint to Medea herself. On the surface, Orpheus features in the two central choral odes of Seneca's *Medea*; in the first, along with Tiphys, Orpheus is frightened by the dangerous sea and saves the Argonauts from the Sirens. In the second ode, Orpheus is one of the Argonauts who is punished with death for breaching the covenants of nature in their voyage. Aside from Tiphys, the steersman of the ship, Orpheus is the only character mentioned in both Argonautic odes. Several critics have found the presence of Orpheus' character in the odes noteworthy, though they have generally failed to assess the importance of the intertextual allusions presented within the Orpheus passages.[8]

Orpheus: The Disparate Characterizations of Vergil and Ovid

Precisely who is the Orpheus referred to in Seneca's play? Although he never explicitly mentions Orpheus' relationship with Eurydice in the Medea, Seneca draws mainly on two Latin versions of the Orpheus and Eurydice story for his depiction of Orpheus: at the end of Vergil's *Georgics* 4 and in books 10 and 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Both Vergil and Ovid tell the story of Orpheus' loss of Eurydice, his period of mourning, and his subsequent death. There is no mention in either of these texts of Orpheus' involvement in the Argonautic voyage, and, as we shall see, it is significant that Seneca imports the Eurydice story into a narrative about Orpheus' role as Argonaut. But first, let us examine the disparate treatments of Orpheus given by Vergil and Ovid.

Vergil's Orpheus, for our purposes, seems to be authentic and benevolent in his love for Eurydice. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is presented in Vergil when Proteus explains to Aristaeus why his bees will not reproduce: Aristaeus, through amorous advances, caused the death of Eurydice (and, by extension, the death of Orpheus). The Orpheus presented by Vergil (via Proteus) is an honorable man: after Eurydice dies, he mourns her with his music (4.464–66). Orpheus goes to Hades to get Eurydice back, and we do not hear his song to the underworld, only the reactions among the dead. As he climbs out of the underworld, he breaks the laws (*foedera*) given by Proserpina—he looks back accidentally, *immemor*,[9] *victus animi*, and when Eurydice is lost to him a second time, he remains celibate and mourns her even after his own death:

> *tum quoque marmorea caput a cervice revulsum*
> *gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus*
> *volveret, Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua,*
> *a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:*
> *Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae.*
>
> (*G*. 4.523–27)

> Even then the Thracian Hebrus rolled his head along in the middle of its flood, carrying it torn off from a neck like marble, and the voice itself and the frozen tongue, though his spirit was fleeing, called out, 'Eurydice, o poor Eurydice': the shores resounded 'Eurydice' on every wave.

Critics disagree on the intensity of Orpheus' grief: some view it as excessive, a breach of "natural law", and a partial cause of his death,[10] while others argue that Orpheus maintains his harmony with nature and the readers' sympathies throughout.[11] Regardless of the extent of his lamentation, we cannot say that Orpheus' reaction to loss is malevolent; Orpheus has actual love for his wife, and actual grief when she dies. His lack of remarriage, moreover, is attributed to his love for Eurydice, and not a dislike of women in general.[12]

The gender bias of Orpheus plays a much more significant role in Ovid's presentation of the myth, and his Orpheus does not seem to be as redeemable as his Vergilian counterpart; the love for Eurydice

seems disingenuous, and he has a problematic relationship with women generally. Ovid changes the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in such a way as to discredit any claim his character might have to moral inculpability.[13] When Eurydice dies, Ovid's Orpheus goes to Hades as a matter of daring, not out of love.

> *ne non temptaret et umbras,*
> *ad Styga Taenaria est ausus descendere porta.*
> (*Met*. 10.12–13)

> Lest he not test even the shades, he dared to descend to the Styx from the Taenarian gate.

Ovid gives us Orpheus' song to Proserpina, which lacks any reliable emotion: though he pinpoints *amor* as the cause of his descent, Orpheus then equates *amor* (10.28–29) to Proserpina's rape. He reasons that Proserpina should give Eurydice back using financial language: *pro munere poscimus usum* ("we ask for a loan in place of a gift," 10.37). He waits until the last line to offer, finally and indirectly, his own life, if the underworld should refuse his request: *certum est/ nolle redire mihi: leto gaudete duorum* ("to wish not to return is certain for me: rejoice in the death of two," 10.38–39).[14] Ovid then follows this ineloquent song of loaning and lackluster self-sacrifice with a hyperbolic and unbelievable reaction among Hades' inhabitants—the Eumenides are said to weep for the first time ever (10.45–46). Syllepsis calls to the reader's attention the *lex* that Orpheus accepts along with his bride: he must not look back (10.50). Orpheus breaks the law out of fear (lest Eurydice fall behind) and greed—he is described as *avidus videndi*.[15] He is "stupefied" at Eurydice's second death,[16] but mourns her only for seven days (as opposed to Vergil's seven months). He shuns any subsequent relations with women, though he does partake of relations with men, and teaches the Thracian men to do so too:

> *omnemque refugerat Orpheus*
> *femineam Venerem, seu quod male cesserat illi,*
> *sive fidem dederat;…*
> *ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem*
> *in teneros transferre mares citraque iuventam*
> *aetatis breve ver et primos carpere flores.*
> (*Met*. 10.79–85)

> Orpheus rejected every female love, whether because it had gone badly for him, or because he had given a pledge;… that man also was the founder for the people of Thrace of transferring love to young males and plucking the short springtime of age and the first flowers on the nearside of youth.

The rest of book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* is sung by Orpheus himself, and we continue to see especially the hatred of women that Orpheus has adopted (if he didn't have it already).[17] He begins from Jove at the beginning of his song: *ab Iove, Musa parens, (cedunt Iovis omnia regno)/ carmina nostra move* ("from Jove, Musa my parent, [for everything yields to the kingdom of Jove], move my song," 10.148–49). He states his intended subjects: *puerosque canamus/ dilectos superis inconcessisque puellas/ ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam* ("let us sing of boys loved by the gods, and let us sing that girls who are struck by forbidden fires have earned punishment for their lust," 10.152–54). His song includes the origin of female prostitutes, the Propoetides, and the story of Pygmalion, who gets disgusted by the prostitutes and has to create his own woman because he is *offensus vitiis quae plurima menti/ femineae natura dedit* ("offended by the very many faults which nature gave to the female mind," 10.244–45). Orpheus also sings of Myrrha, who wants to have sex with her father and succeeds with the help of her nurse's devious plots. In short, Orpheus' song is a series of episodes describing the dangers of women, and the successes of men who reject or conquer them.

Orpheus' death in Ovid, at the hands of the Ciconian women, is a similarly gendered interaction. They attack him as their *contemptor*, the one who has eschewed their sex.[18]

> *ecce nurus Ciconum tectae lymphata ferinis*
> *pectora velleribus tumuli de vertice cernunt*
> *Orphea percussis sociantem carmina nervis.*
> *e quibus una leves iactato crine per auras*
> *'en,' ait, 'en, hic est nostri contemptor!' et hastam*
> *vatis Apollinei vocalia misit in ora…*
> (*Met*. 11.3–8)

> Behold the Ciconian young women, having covered their maddened breasts with wild animal skins, saw from the top of a hill Orpheus, fitting his song with struck strings. Out of which one of them, with her hair blown through the light breeze, said 'Look, look, here is our disparager!' and she sent a spear into the tuneful mouth of Apollo's priest.

For a while Orpheus is able to fend off the women with his power of song, but the women's weapons eventually overpower and silence him (11.3–19). The women avenge themselves on Orpheus for his hatred of them. Regardless of the validity of their justification for killing him,[19] the cause of their anger—Orpheus' misogyny—cannot be disputed.[20]

Orpheus in the *Medea*: A Vergilian and Ovidian character

We turn now to an examination of Orpheus in Seneca's *Medea*. Segal (1989) argues that Orpheus is meant to represent a parallel of Medea: they share "power over beasts," "songs" that produce "stupefaction," and "magic" (107). He goes on to argue that Seneca's Medea should be read as an "anti-Orpheus."

> Like Orpheus [Medea and Atreus] place themselves at the center of the chords of sympathy that their artfulness creates between man and the world around him. But the energies that they thereby release, far from creating a new accord between man and nature, disrupt the peace of the world and of the soul. (103)

So according to Segal, Orpheus is there to present a character opposite to Medea, which "creates a new accord between man and nature."[21]

Segal errs in his interpretation of Orpheus in the Medea because he fails to address the numerous allusions to the Orpheuses of Ovid and Vergil in the tragedy. What also lies within Seneca's text (but is never stated outright) is Orpheus' treatment of Eurydice. While both Vergil and Ovid draw a direct connection between Orpheus'

loss of Eurydice and his death, they ignore his role as Argonaut completely. Similarly, while Apollonius portrays Orpheus as the artist-Argonaut, the *Argonautica* makes no mention of Eurydice or Orpheus' death. Seneca, we shall find, is the first to connect all three elements of Orpheus' story.

The most obvious intertext between Seneca's Orpheus and the Orpheus of Vergil or Ovid occurs in the second Argonautic ode (*Med*. 579–669), which describes nature's punishments against the various Argonauts for their breach of *foedus*. In the description of Orpheus' death, Seneca incorporates both Ovidian[22] and Vergilian intertexts.

> *Ille vocali genitus Camena,*
> *cuius ad chordas modulante plectro*
> *restitit torrens, siluere venti,*
> *cui suo cantu volucris relicto*
> *adfuit tota comitante silva,*
> *Thracios sparsus iacuit per agros,*
> *at caput tristi fluitavit Hebro:*
> *contigit notam Styga Tartarumque,*
> *non rediturus.*
>
> (*Med*. 625–33)

> That one, born of the tuneful Camena, at whose strings the torrent stood still while the lyre was playing, the winds grew silent, for whom the birds were present, with their own songs left behind, and with the whole forest coming along, he lay scattered through the Thracian fields, yet his head floated along on the sad Hebrus: he reached the famous Styx and Tartarus, never to return.

We see initially, apart from any obvious textual references, verbal markers of intertextuality in Seneca's passage—*restitit*, *relicto*, *silva*, *notam*, *rediturus*.[23] The repeated "re-" prefix implies that this has happened already. *Nota* and *rediturus* (in the context of Hades) especially invite a meta-textual reading of the passage: the Styx is "known" because in the quest for Eurydice both Orpheus and the reader have been there before, but this time (i.e., dying) Orpheus will not return. From the *Metamorphoses*, Jakobi cites, among other things, the description of Orpheus' dead body:

> *membra iacent diversa locis; caput, Hebre, lyramque*
> *excipis*
>
> (*Met*. 11.50–51)

> The limbs lie scattered in places; Hebrus, you receive the head and lyre.

The head and the river Hebrus both have a clear source in Ovid's own description of Orpheus' death.[24]

It must be noted, however, that the above intertexts are themselves pieces of Vergil's *Georgics* used by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, and that Seneca also uses Vergil's *sparsere per agros* in his passage.

> *spretae Ciconum quo munere matres*
> *inter sacra deum nocturnique orgia Bacchi*
> *discerptum latos iuvenem sparsere per agros.*
> *tum quoque marmorea caput a cervice revulsum*
> *gurgite cum medio portans Oeagrius Hebrus*
> *volveret*....
>
> (*G*. 4.520–25)

> The Ciconian mothers, having been spurned at this offer, during the sacred rites of the gods and the celebrations of nocturnal Bacchus, scattered the youth torn into pieces through the wide fields. Even then the Thracian Hebrus rolled his head along in the middle of its flood, carrying it torn off from a neck like marble.

It is unclear from this initial observation, then, whether Seneca intends to invoke Ovid's Orpheus or Vergil's, since the passage contains references to both. I would like to posit, though, that perhaps Seneca uses these particular phrases precisely because they are used both by Ovid and by Vergil. That is, perhaps the point is to create confusion by highlighting both versions of Orpheus' story. This confusion, in turn, makes the reader question which version is relevant here, and how the interpretation changes depending on whether one imports Vergil's or Ovid's version.

Another piece of this choral passage presents a similarly mixed allusion:

> *te maestae volucres, Orpheu, te turba ferarum,*
> *te rigidi silices, tua carmina saepe secutae*
> *fleverunt silvae, positis te frondibus arbor*
> *tonsa comas luxit; lacrimis quoque flumina dicunt*
> *increvisse suis,…*
>
> (*Met*. 11.44–48)

> You the mourning birds wept, Orpheus, you the crowd of beasts wept, you the hard stones wept, the forests which often followed your songs wept, the tree, with branches put down, having shorn its hair mourned; they say that the rivers also grew with their own tears,….

Seneca echoes this sentiment in his explanation of Orpheus' powers in the above passage (*Med*. 626–29). Orpheus' effect on the songs of birds is such that they leave their own songs behind; in Ovid, the birds turn toward mourning (presumably turning away form their usual sounds). In the *Medea*, the forests accompany Orpheus; Ovid also describes the proclivity of the forest to follow Orpheus around.[25] Although Vergil never goes into such detail about Orpheus' effects on the natural world, this passage in Ovid is itself a very clear allusion to Vergil's *Georgics*: the repetition of *te* at *G*. 4.465–66, which in Vergil refers to Eurydice. With an allusion to Ovid (which is an allusion to Vergil), Seneca is clearly building upon the nexus of these two accounts.

In the first Argonautic ode of the *Medea*, where the chorus narrates Orpheus' defeat of the Sirens (and where the tone of the ode overall seems to look positively on the Argonautic voyage), we also find references to the *Metamorphoses* and the *Georgics*.

> *Quid cum Ausonium dirae pestes*
> *voce canora mare mulcerent,*
> *cum Pieria resonans cithara*
> *Thracius Orpheus*
> *solitam cantu retinere rates*
> *paene coegit Sirena sequi?*
>
> (*Med*. 355–60)

> What about when those harsh plagues delighted the Ausonian sea with a melodious voice, when Thracian Orpheus, resounding with the Pierian cithara, nearly compelled the Siren (accustomed to holding ships back with their song) to follow him?

The passage is presented so as to highlight the switched roles of Orpheus and the Sirens; the Sirens want to follow him, instead of the usual way around. But the delayed *sequi*, in addition to heightening the hyperbolic scenario,[26] also serves to remind us of another woman who did follow Orpheus: Eurydice. The wording of the last line (*paene…sequi*) signals an allusion to Vergil's *Georgics*, when Eurydice is following Orpheus out of Hades:

> *redditaque Eurydice superas veniebat ad auras*
> *pone sequens (namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem)....*
> (*G*. 4.486–87)

> Having been given back, Eurydice was going towards the upper air, following behind (for Proserpina had given this law)….

Seneca compares Orpheus' effect on the Sirens to his rescue of Eurydice from Hades. As we already know, however, Orpheus fails in his attempt to save Eurydice; in Vergil Orpheus is immediately seized by *dementia* and looks back at her (4.488ff). Similarly, Seneca uses this reference to Eurydice to belie Orpheus' true lack of power over nature and foreshadow his inevitable failure/death. Despite Orpheus' achievement of overpowering nature (in the form of the Sirens), the second Argonautic ode (*Med*. 630–33) tells us that nature is responsible for Orpheus' death, as part of the punishment granted to all the Argonauts. Like his apparent success in persuading the underworld to release Eurydice, Orpheus' defeat of the Sirens is not an ultimate victory over nature.

In hyperbolizing Orpheus' ability to conquer nature with his music, Seneca also refers to Ovid's description of Orpheus' death. Here, there is a drawn-out and detailed narration of the failure of Orpheus' musical ability.

> *cunctaque tela forent cantu mollita, sed ingens*
> *clamor et infracto Berecyntia tibia cornu*
> *tympanaque et plausus et Bacchei ululatus*
> *obstrepuere sono citharae; tum denique saxa*
> *non exauditi rubuerunt sanguine vatis.*
> (*Met*. 11.15–19)

> All the weapons would have been mitigated by his song, but a great shout and a Berecyntian trumpet with broken horn and tambourines and clapping and Bacchic ululations made noise against the sound of the cithara; then finally the rocks reddened with the blood of the priest who could not be heard clearly.

Orpheus' power over the rocks and sticks eventually fails when the sound of the women screaming is enough to contaminate (*obstrepuere*—literally, "create noise-obstruction") his song. His voice becomes indistinguishable (*non exauditus*). Much like the Sirens in Apollonius (see n. 26), Orpheus is disabled by the creation of cacophony rather than a direct overpowering.

In the *Medea*, Seneca has altered the account to express Orpheus' relationship to the Sirens as one of control and manipulation. The hyperbolic scenario of Orpheus' effect on the Sirens (especially with the delayed *sequi*) makes us very aware of Orpheus' power over heretofore unconquerable things. We see that not only does Orpheus neutralize the threat of the Sirens, he even goes so far as to usurp the position of Siren himself; they want to follow the ship. Orpheus' power is to subsume and outperform nature in an effort to make it ineffectual. Instead of a sympathy with nature,[27] the text presents rather a forced coercion.

Orpheus in the *Medea*: less obvious allusions

The story of Orpheus also lingers in the larger context of both Argonautic odes, as the chorus narrates and assesses the Argonautic voyage. As one of the Argonauts mentioned in the choral odes, Orpheus is implicated in the crimes committed by the Argonauts against nature. We find, however, that these crimes have precedence in the earlier versions of Orpheus' myth. While the first Argonautic ode generally expresses ambivalence towards the voyage, the chorus begins with a strongly negative statement about the first sailor:[28]

> *Audax nimium qui freta primus*
> *rate tam fragili perfida rupit…*
> (*Med*. 301–02)

> Too bold the man who first broke the untrustworthy waves with such a fragile ship...

This sentiment (i.e., that the Argonauts exceeded their appropriate bounds by sailing to Colchis) flows through much of the first and second Argonautic odes.[29] In the first Argoanutic ode, only Tiphys and Orpheus are named as part of the expedition; these two, as the only Argonauts present, share the chorus' accusation of boldness. Tiphys is called *ausus* at 318, *avidus nimium* at 326, *audax* at 346. In the second ode, the chorus implicates all of the Argonauts equally: *quisquis* ("each one") of the Argonauts in the *audax* ship broke the covenants and merited punishment (607ff.). Compare, however, Ovid's Orpheus, who is also "daring" (*ausus)* (10.13) and "greedy" (*avidus)* (10.56), and who travels to Hades as if he were a Hercules.[30] The brashness of Ovid's Orpheus resonates in the Argonautic narrative of the chorus.

We also notice that the sailor is said to burst through the waves. These themes of violence and the breaking of laws carry through both choral odes. Moreover, the breaking of nature's law is the primary crime indicated by chorus, the very crime for which all the Argonauts eventually suffer punishment at the hands of nature.

In both Argonautic odes, the language resonates with semantics of penetration and manipulation on the part of the Argonauts—*rumpere* (302, 605), *secare* (305), *captare* (323), *religare* (325, 612), *iubere* (337), *intrare* (610), *spoliare* (609), *subigere* (596). The chorus describes nature as having to "suffer" the "laws" created by the Argonauts, and the Argonauts having to atone for the broken "laws" of nature: (320: *legesque novas scribere ventis*; 337: *iussitque pati verbera pontum*; 364: *cessit pontus*; 364–65: [*pontus*] *omnes/ patitur leges*; 335–36: *bene dissaepti foedera mundi/ traxit*; 596: *mare qui subegit*; 614–15: *exitu diro temerata ponti/ iura piavit*; 616: *exigit poenas mare provocatum*). In the second

Argonautic ode, the Argonauts are compared to Phaethon,[31] who *ausus aeternos agitare currus* ("dared to drive the eternal chariot," 599). The chorus sums up the message of the comparison: *rumpe nec … sancta/ foedera mundi* ("don't break the sacred agreements of the world," 605–06). It is significant to note that the text creates a purposeful confusion of terms; *foedus*, *lex*, *ius*, and *fides* are almost interchangeable in the tragedy.[32]

The Argonauts are indicted for breaking the *foedera* between man and nature—but we find precedent for this as well in the previous versions of Orpheus' myth. Orpheus, in Vergil, breaks the law of Proserpina when he looks back at Eurydice.[33] Compare the passage in Vergil following Orpheus' backward glance and Eurydice's second disappearance:

> *immitis rupta tyranni*
> *foedera terque fragor stagnis auditus Averni*
>
> (*G*. 4.492–93)

> The laws of the mean tyrant were broken and three times a crash was heard in the swamps of Avernus.

In the choral characterizations of the Argonauts (especially *rupta foedera*; cf. *Med*. 605–06 above), Seneca has provided a link to Orpheus—as breaker of heaven's laws. Note also that the *foedera* broken by Orpheus are also referred to as *lex*: *namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem* ("for Proserpina had given this law," 4.487). Seneca imports Vergil's Orpheus, who breaks laws in his attempted rescue of Eurydice, as one of many Argonauts, who rupture the divine separation between land and sea. The failure of Orpheus' personal endeavor parallels the failure of the Argonauts to uphold the sacred covenants[34].

Perhaps with a play on *G*. 4.487, Ovid's Orpheus also accepts the *lex* given by Proserpina:

> *hanc simul et legem Rhodopeius accipit Orpheus*
>
> (*Met*. 10.50)

> Rhodopeian Orpheus received her and, at the same time, the law.

In keeping with the disingenuousness of Orpheus' feelings toward Eurydice in Ovid, there is but a brief mention of *fides*, which Ovid suggests is one of the reasons why Orpheus would shun all relationships with women after Eurydice's second death (10.80–81: *seu quod male cesserat illi,/ sive fidem dederat*).[35] As Makowski explains, "Ovid unsettles our belief in Orpheus' devotion by arousing our cynicism with the disjunctive alternatives in the *seu … sive* clauses, which leave us to question the operative motivation here…" (29). Ovid presents us with options to dissuade us from viewing Orpheus' behavior in an honorable light: there is actually no *fides* in his relationship with Eurydice.

The problem of *fides* brings us to another interesting nexus of allusion between Seneca's tragedy and Orpheus: Medea's invocation of Proserpina. Medea invokes Proserpina early in the tragedy, as one of the deities suitable (*fas*) to her own needs. Medea does not address her by name; rather, she makes mention of her alongside her husband:

> *dominumque regni tristis et dominam fide*
> *meliore raptam*
>
> (*Med*. 11–12)

> master of the sad kingdom and mistress stolen with a better pledge

Mythologically, Proserpina is the archetypal example of the experience of marriage for women in the ancient world (and, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Proserpina's story is used to explore the potential problems of marriage for young women); she embodies forced penetration, forced separation from home, and the isolating condition of the wife. Medea's specific reference highlights precisely problems in her own marriage. She points to the forced nature of Proserpina's position (*rapta*), but the instrument of the snatching/raping is a *melior fides*. Better than what? Better than Jason's own *fides* with Medea, which he had broken. Unlike other rape victims of mythology, Proserpina continues to cohabit with her husband for eternity. Medea compares herself to someone who, though unwillingly forced to transition to a different life status, manages to gain stability and recognition as part of this transition. The comparison highlights Medea's lack of stability and recognition.

This jarring representation of Proserpina (i.e., as secured in a better relationship) reminds us of another jarring representation of Proserpina's rape: the one presented by Orpheus in the *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus states that, though he tried to cope with Eurydice's death, his love for her was too powerful—just as powerful, in fact, as the love between Proserpina and Hades.

> *posse pati volui nec me temptasse negabo;*
> *vicit Amor. supera deus hic bene notus in ora est;*
> *an sit et hic dubito. sed hic tamen auguror esse,*
> *famaque si veteris non est mentita rapinae,*
> *vos quoque iunxit Amor.*
>
> (*Met*. 10.25–29)

> I wished to be able to suffer, and I do not deny that I tried; love conquered. This god is well-known in the heavenly region; whether he is also here I doubt. But, I divine that he is here, and if the story is not made up—of the old rape, love also joined you.

That Orpheus assesses Proserpina's forced marriage as love, and that he compares his own relationship with Eurydice to the one between Proserpina and Hades is disturbing, albeit not unexpected (given Orpheus' later statements and actions concerning women). Medea's reference, also disturbing, calls to mind Ovid's Orpheus and his speech[36] because of the unexpectedly positive characterization of Proserpina's rape.

But it also calls to mind Vergil's narrative of Orpheus and Eurydice, encouraging us to include yet another version of Orpheus in our analysis. In Vergil, Proserpina specifically grants the "law" which Orpheus breaks:

> *namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem*
>
> (*G*. 4.487)

Within 50 lines, Eurydice is thrice referred to as *raptam* (4.456, 4.504, and 4.519). And because Seneca links in his tragedy the semantic ranges of *fides*, *foedus*, *lex*, and *ius*, the reader immediately also connects Medea's poignant statement about Proserpina to Vergil's Orpheus and Eurydice.

Overlapping Orpheuses and Gendered Consequences

What has Seneca accomplished, then, in the various references to Orpheus in this tragedy? And why choose references of ambiguous provenance? Why create such confusion between various parts and versions of the Orpheus character?

I would like to posit two things: first, that Seneca has effected a connection between three different episodes of Orpheus' myth (Argo, Eurydice, and death) and created thereby a unified vision of Orpheus—an Orpheus in whom the macrocosmic action (i.e., the socio-political level: Orpheus qua Argonaut) parallels the microcosmic action (i.e., the individual level: Orpheus qua failed lover of Eurydice).

There is no mention of Orpheus' death in the *Argonautica*, nor is there any mention of Eurydice. Vergil is the first to connect the death of Orpheus with the death of Eurydice (at the hands of the Ciconian women, who take revenge because Orpheus spurns their advances).[37] Ovid keeps the connection between Orpheus' death and the death of Eurydice, but in his version, "… Ovid changes the ending and makes the bard die not for love of his wife but from his hatred of women" (Anderson 43). The Ciconian women kill Orpheus because of his refusal to have relationships with women (and, presumably, his instruction to the other men of Thrace that they should also only have relations with boys).

Seneca, who refers in his account of Orpheus' death to both Vergil and Ovid, is the first to connect Orpheus' death with the Argonautic voyage itself: the Ciconian women who, in Ovid, rip Orpheus apart because they are angry at his rejection of women, become in Seneca the Ciconian women who are agents of nature, taking revenge for Orpheus' assault against it. They are but one manifestation of nature's revenge, killing Orpheus as other agents of nature (or nature herself) kill the other Argonauts as punishment for their voyage.[38]

From the intertextual references in Seneca's account, therefore, we cannot help but read Seneca's Orpheus as a unified character —simultaneously the lover/loser of Eurydice and the poet/Argonaut. In this, Seneca creates yet another mirror between Orpheus and Medea: like Medea, Orpheus' personal narrative bleeds into his larger social narrative. As Medea's affair with Jason parallels the *foedus*-breaking Argonautic voyage, so this Argonautic voyage, for Orpheus, also brings with it his personal experience with Eurydice.

The second thing I would like to propose addresses the fact that the *Medea*, while alluding to Orpheus, alludes to passages which are present both in Vergil and in Ovid. Despite the multitude of references that could have been made to one version specifically over another, instead we find a multitude of references which specifically overlap between the Vergilian and Ovidian accounts. I would argue that these allusions are meant to confuse the reader, to draw the reader's attention to the differences between Vergil's and Ovid's accounts of the Orpheus myth, to reflect on the difference in interpretation of Seneca's tragedy when one imports one version of the Orpheus character over another. Specifically, I think critics have thus far failed to take into account the significance of importing an Ovidian Orpheus into the *Medea*—an Orpheus-Argonaut who is also a misogynist. Our interpretation of the Argonautic voyage is enhanced when we import a gender bias into the Argonauts themselves.

On the microcosmic level of the tragedy—the marriage of Medea and Jason—a broken *fides*[39] parallels the broken *foedera* of the Argonauts.[40] Accepting the nexus between *foedus* and *fides*, between the macrocosmic Argonautic voyage and the microcosmic marriage of Medea, we see Medea as parallel to nature. Moreover, since we know that Orpheus is an important character of comparison to Medea, and since Seneca has gone to the trouble of unifying the Eurydice-Orpheus with the Argonaut-Orpheus, we cannot help but also see Medea as parallel to Eurydice, who, in both Vergil and Ovid, loses her chance at a second life through the failure of her husband. So Medea loses her chance at a viable marriage due to Jason's failure to trust in her abilities and to maintain his fidelity.[41] By importing a misogynistic Orpheus into our interpretation of the tragedy, we see more clearly that nature and Medea are both victims of a pro-masculine enterprise, both betrayed by the men who cannot keep their promises, and both justified in their revenge.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, W. S. "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid: *flebile nescio quid.*" In John Warden, ed. *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), 25–50.

Biondi, Giuseppe Gilberto. *Il Nefas Argonautico: Mythos e Logos nella Medea di Seneca*. Bologna: Patron, 1984.

Boyd, B. W. "Diventare Medea: Ovidio e i confini dei generi." (unpublished manuscript).

Boyle, A. J. *The Chaonian Dove: Studies in the Eclogues, Georgics, and the Aeneid of Virgil*. Berlin: Brill, 1986.

_____. *Roman Tragedy*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Costa, C. D. N. *Seneca Medea*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973.

Feeney, D. C. *Caesar's Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2007.

Gaisser, J. H. "Threads in the Labyrinth: Competing Views and Voices in Catullus 64." *AJP* 116.4 (1995): 579–616.

Heath, J. "The Stupor of Orpheus: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10.64–71." *CJ* 91.4 (1996): 353–70.

Hinds, S. "Medea in Ovid: Scenes from the Life of an Intertextual Heroine." *MD* 30 (1993): 9–47.

Jakobi, R. *Der Einfluss Ovids auf den Tragiker Seneca*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988.

Littlewood, C. A. J. *Self-representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004.

Makowski, J. F. "Bisexual Orpheus: Pederasty and Parody in Ovid." *CJ* 92.1 (1996): 25–38.

Nussbaum, Martha. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994.

Robbins, E. "Famous Orpheus." In John Warden, ed. *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982), 3–24.

Segal, C. *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 1989.

Warden, John, ed. *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982.

ENDNOTES

[*]I would like to thank A.J. Boyle, Thomas Habinek, James Collins III, and Matthew Taylor for reading drafts and providing most helpful suggestions. Also, thanks to Mary English and Barbara Boyd for pointing out some crucial errors to me. All remaining inadequacies are my own.

[1]Imperial Roman authors generally avoid the term "golden" when referring to an old "ideal" time period; they rather equate metals with corruption. See, e.g., Feeney (2007): 133ff. For a general commentary and discussion about the Argonautic voyage in the *Medea*, see Biondi (1984).

[2]Most significant are Charles Segal's essays on Orpheus in Roman literature (1989), and specifically the essay "Dissonant Sympathy." My conclusions, however, differ from Segal's.

[3]This sentiment is conveyed also in the first Argonautic ode: *quod fuit huius pretium cursus?/ aurea pellis/ maiusque mari Medea malum,/ merces prima digna carina* (361–63).

[4]The similarity to the introduction of Euripides' *Medea* (and Ennius' *Medea exul*) is purposeful—and supports the notion that Seneca's Medea is (and considers herself to be) intricately tied to the Argo. The makeup of the deities in general is noted by Littlewood (2004): 148, who also infers from this that the Argonautic voyage is just as important for the play as Medea's relationship with Jason.

[5]It is significant that Medea leads with Orpheus. Since he is theoretically meant to be on a par with her in power over nature, Medea here immediately implies that her abilities are superior.

[6]Medea also accomplishes this by presenting a passivity to Creon, as if she could not be held truly responsible for whatever deeds she performed on Jason's behalf: e.g., *non est meum:/ totiens nocens sum facta, sed numquam mihi* (279–80).

[7]It is notable that Seneca has altered the mythical tradition here; in Apollonius, the Argo only passes through the Symplegades on the way to Colchis. They return from Colchis by a different route—thus in Apollonius, Medea is technically not on the ship when it meets the wandering rocks (2.549ff; 4.250ff).

[8]On Orpheus in Seneca's *Medea*, see Biondi (1984): 121; Segal (1989): 103–09; Littlewood (2004): 148–71.

[9]This *immemor* is significant—a likely reference to Catullus 64 (see Gaisser 1995, who discusses the subtext of Medea and Jason in Catullus 64, though she does not deal with Seneca); in the second Argonautic ode of the *Medea*, the Argonauts are compared to Phaethon, who is called *immemor* (600).

[10]Segal (1989): 61.

[11]Boyle (1986): 71, especially n.75.

[12]See Makowski (1996): 28, who argues that Vergil is the outlier in Orpheus' mythical tradition when he downplays "the specifics of homosexuality and misogyny."

[13]In my reading of Ovid's Orpheus, I largely agree with and am very much indebted to the analysis of W.S. Anderson's essay "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid."

[14]See Heath (1996), who calls Orpheus' offer to die "sophistic posturing" (366).

[15]Sight, of course, has heavy connotations of power and dominance in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, e.g., Medea's love for Jason in book 7, or Tereus for Philomela in book 6.

[16]See Heath (1996) for an analysis of the two similes at this point in the narrative.

[17]For an analysis of the misogyny of Orpheus' song (and the song's failed attempt to champion homosexuality), see Anderson (1982) and Makowski (1996).

[18]Here I completely disagree with Segal (1989), who argues that there is no connection between Orpheus' 'homosexuality' and his death (57).

[19]Although it lies outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that, in Ovid's version of the tale, the Ciconian women are explicitly acting against the wishes of Bacchus (a divergence from previous versions of Orpheus' myth), and Bacchus eventually punishes them for Orpheus' murder. See Robbins (1982): 13 for earlier motivations for Orpheus' death.

[20]Makowski (1996): 25, 36, and Anderson (1982): "Orpheus' love lacks *furor* because it lacks genuine commitment; it is a self-indulgent masculine love that cannot perceive or feel the woman as a person, that blames Eurydice for dying, and that gives up women because they aren't worth the inconvenience" (47).

[21]While I agree that Orpheus is meant to be a parallel character for Medea, I find a problem with Segal's conclusions: the main problem, I think, is that he takes the figure of Orpheus and traces his meaning through all of Senecan tragedy. He assumes that Orpheus must be a consistent character throughout, and does not allow for the possibility that the individual tragedies might use different versions of Orpheus to fit individual contexts.

[22]For an extensive citation and some discussion of the Ovidian intertexts in Senecan tragedy, see Jakobi (1988). Specifically addressing the death of Orpheus, Jakobi states, "Seneca orientiert sich an der Beschreibung Ovids" (56). For a discussion of the various "Medeas" of Ovid, see Hinds (1993) and Boyd (unpublished manuscript).

[23]Both Costa (1973: 124) and Segal (1989: 106) gloss over this "hidden" reference to Orpheus' previous *katabasis* to rescue Eurydice, but it is significant: Seneca is guiding the reader to think about the Eurydice episode! Also, M. P. Taylor points out to me that the *non rediturus* of Orpheus' passage reflects and negates the chorus' earlier description of each of the Argonauts at 613: *raptor externi rediturus auri*, further implicating Orpheus specifically as *raptor*.

[24]Jakobi also includes Ovid's description of the farm tools used by the Ciconian women to kill Orpheus: *vacuosque iacent dispersa per agros/ sarculaque rastrique graves longique ligones* ("They lie scattered through the empty fields—light hoes and heavy hoes and long mattocks," *Met*. 11.35–36), which would further support a particular connection between Seneca's ode and Ovid and Vergil.

[25]cf. also *Met*. 10.86ff., the catalogue of trees, and 10.143–44, the summary of the birds, beasts, and flora surrounding Orpheus as he begins to sing.

[26]The exaggeration of Orpheus' ability also becomes evident when one compares Seneca's passage to its contextual equivalent in Apollonius' *Argonautica* (4.903–16), where Orpheus uses his music to create a confusion of sound (4.908–09) and does not even save all the Argonauts (4.912–16).

[27]Segal (1989) suggests that Orpheus in Seneca represents the "pastoral peace and musical calm that symbolize a potential harmony between man and nature" (115).

[28]Presumably Tiphys, though not initially identified as such.

[29]As T. Habinek reminds me, the themes of this passage also allude to Catullus 64 and its portrayal of the Argonautic voyage juxtaposed with the personal relationship of Theseus and Ariadne. Though it lies outside the scope of this paper, a comparison of Seneca's *Medea* and Catullus 64 would prove very fruitful. See also Gaisser (1995) for a discussion of Medea in Catullus 64.

[30]Three things here: Ovid's comment *ne non temptaret et umbras* (10.12) and Orpheus' own self-comparison to Hercules at 10.21–22 (*nec [descendi] uti villosa colubris/ terna Medusaei vincirem guttura monstri*), along with the *est ausus descendere* (13) create an atmosphere

of heroic quest. The comparison to Hercules itself should be suspect, with his well-known status as hero and his predilection for violence. See also Heath (1996) for a more extensive comparison between Orpheus (in Ovid) and Hercules (356ff).

[31]This may also be a significant connection between the Argonauts and Medea, who resembles Phaethon as she flies away. See Nussbaum (1996): 443ff. for a discussion of Phaethon in Plato and this tragedy, and Littlewood (2004): 156ff. for Medea as Phaethon.

[32]*fatum*, though one of the most prevalent words in Senecan tragedy (and one we would expect to see alongside the above terms), is notably scarce in the *Medea*.

[33]Segal (1989): "Orpheus loses Eurydice when his love leads him to yield to *dementia* and *furor* (488, 495): he disobeys Proserpina's "law" (487) and makes the fateful backward glance. Virgil is sympathetic toward Orpheus but at the same time leaves it clear that Orpheus' passion is culpable and his suffering merited" (55–56).

[34]See also Boyle (1986): 70ff. on the role of *furor* in Vergil's Orpheus; he fails because he cannot "subdue the passional constituents of his own humanity" (70).

[35]*dederat* here is in the same metrical position as the *dederat* in *G*. 4.487. The forgotten *lex* of Vergil's Proserpina becomes the forgotten *fides* of Orpheus' marriage.

[36]Also significant, though perhaps outside the scope of this paper, is the episode of Poserpina's rape in the *Metamorphoses*: Dis is called a *raptor* (5.402), and he drives his chariot into the *rupta tella* (5.406; Arethusa also intimates that Dis raped the earth when he did this: *terra nihil meruit patuitque invita rapinae* 5.492; see also 5.423, 501 for the broken earth). Proserpina is often called *rapta* (5.395, 416, 425, 471, 520), and Jupiter states that her rape is not an assault (*iniuria)* but a manisfestation of love *(amor)* (5.525–26). Jupiter's condition that Proserpina could return if she does not eat anything in the underworld is called both a *lex* and a *foedus* (5.531–32).

[37]Robbins (1982): "The story of Orpheus' extreme devotion to his wife was what the Romans best liked, and they combined it with the mysterious story, at least as old as Aeschylus, of his being rent asunder by Thracian women" (15). For a deeper interpretation of the Ciconian matres and their just anger against Orpheus, see Segal (1989): 47–48ff., who argues that the Ciconian women "vindicate nature's laws."

[38]For more on nature, Medea, and revenge in the tragedy, see Littlewood (2004): 148–71.

[39]*fides*: 11, 145, 164, 224, 248, 306, 434, 436, 437, 568, 978, 1003; *multifida*: 111 (singular in Senecan tragedy); *perfidus*: 302, 775, 916; *confide*: 221.

[40]Boyle (2006): 199.

[41]And here, perhaps, there is a stronger connection between Seneca's Medea and Ovid's Eurydice; Ovid's Orpheus glances back in part because he is afraid that Eurydice cannot make the steep climb (10.56). Compare the exchange between Jason and Medea, where Jason fears social retribution and fails to trust Medea's promise that she is able to destroy all opponents (516–29).

Lisl Walsh received a B.A. in Latin from Oberlin College in 2003, and is currently dissertating at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Her thesis, "Seneca's Medea and the Tragic Self," discusses how Medea sees and represents different aspects of her selfhood, and the mechanisms by which she attempts to alter her character to suit the particular environment created within Seneca's tragedy. Walsh's other professional interests include imperial Roman poetry, Greek tragedy, third-wave feminist theory, and creative pedagogy.