

## Seneca as Stoic

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In his 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism', Nietzsche defines the condition of the Hellenes as a 'neurosis of health'.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this paper will be on examining the Stoics' conception of health of mind, and their ideas about the appropriate treatment of sickness. This diagnosis of Stoic moral philosophy will be given in relation to the one offered by Martha Nussbaum in her book *The Therapy of Desire*. Her assessment involves looking at differences in the therapies endorsed by orthodox Stoicism and by Seneca in his presentation of *Medea*. In order to establish whether Nussbaum's assessment is accurate, there will need to be investigation of the Stoic's basic assumption about reality, and of the account of perception and health which follows on from this. I will argue that there are tensions in the accounts given by the Stoics, Seneca, and Nussbaum, but that these tensions, while in conflict, are not beyond a therapy of desire.

The focus of Nussbaum's book is on approaches to ethics in Hellenistic philosophy. Three of the major schools of this period – Epicurean, Sceptic, and Stoic – are linked by their 'practical and compassionate' approaches to philosophy, driven by a common ethical aim of addressing human problems. The kinds of issues primarily concerning them were, she thinks, those bound up with people's emotions (*pathe*) – issues including 'the fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression'. In dealing with the sorts of troubles these can pose, philosophy is seen to require techniques and strategies other than those traditionally used for more detached and intellectual pursuits. Unlike the Platonists, whom Nussbaum portrays as 'calm' dialecticians, with their descriptions of how the good is distant from people and their philosophical procedures 'suited to the good rather

than to human beings', these other thinkers are likened to physicians embracing a 'newly complex understanding of human psychology' that is committed to making people good. Through the use of 'interactive, rhetorical, [and] literary' devices, they sought to address and treat people's deepest, most disturbing emotions.<sup>2</sup>

In the writings of the Epicureans, Sceptics, and Stoics, there is an appeal to an analogy between philosophy and medicine. Corresponding to medicine's concern with sickness and disease of the body is philosophy's concern with sickness and disease of the soul, and corresponding to the doctor's remedies are the philosopher's 'therapeutic' arguments, specifically prescribed to heal the soul's ailments. These ailments of the soul are held to be produced by false beliefs which are somehow tied up with feelings and desires.<sup>3</sup> As Nussbaum notes, the Stoics developed the medical analogy in most detail. In their case, health is the condition of the good soul while sickness is the condition of the bad. Their concept of the good or wise man (the Stoic sage) whose soul is in an ideal state of virtue was, according to A. A. Long, heralded as a paradigm arrived at through the Stoic's inference about the ultimate rationality of the universe.<sup>4</sup>

The Stoics, Long continues, developed a theory of reality in terms of two basic principles: the 'active principle', which is variously referred to as Nature, God, and *Logos* (reason); and the 'passive principle' – matter, which is 'substance without qualitative determinism'. Chrysippus identified *logos* with *pneuma* (a compound of fire and air, literally 'breath'), a dynamic source 'shaping' matter by thoroughly pervading it and being completely interpenetrated with it. By identifying the human soul with *pneuma* (pervading the more physically dense frame of the body's flesh, blood, and sinews), the Stoics were able to describe it as rational 'through and through'. This 'vehicle of *logos*' connects individuals to the intelligent and life-giving force of the cosmos, being the means by which 'the universal causal principle takes on particular identity within each individual man'. The Stoics could then provide an account of the

function of human beings in terms of their part in fulfilling Nature's rational purpose of creating and maintaining the harmony and equilibrium of the whole. The human soul, being endowed with the faculty of speech and a 'governing principle' (*hegemonikon*) which houses powers of the mind (though identified with the region of the heart), is uniquely placed to take part consciously and actively in the rational processes of the universe. Through their *logos*, a person can 'formulate statements which mirror cosmic events'. 'Language', for the Stoics, 'is a part of nature and provides man with the medium to express his relationship with the world'.<sup>5</sup>

In turning one's thoughts to the workings of nature by studying the three inter-related 'parts' of the Stoic corpus – ethics, physics, and logic – a person engages in active perception of the external world which is at the very same time the active and articulate perception of the inter-related aspects of self. Humans and animals were both thought to possess souls, and the rationality of adult humans was explained by the higher degree of complexity and flexibility in the *pneumatic* tension of their souls. But the Stoics also talk of weaker and stronger tensions in the souls of men. Seneca speaks of the virtuous man's soul as displaying 'orderliness', 'consistency' and 'harmony', as his 'happy life ... flows on smoothly, complete in its own self-mastery' (*Seneca Letters* 120.3-5). With knowledge as his very disposition, the Stoic sage has the tension of his soul mirroring the right attunement of cosmic *Logos* which can be understood in terms of *symphonia* – the four primary virtues and their constituents inter-related in a structure analogous to that of the four tetrachords and their constituents in music.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the Stoics describe phenomenologically the physical movement and disposition of the vicious and inferior soul, which is 'sickly' in tenor and has its flow impeded by excessive 'contraction ... shrinkage ... stretching ... [and] swelling', distinctive of the 'flutterings' of passion (SVF 3.391).<sup>7</sup>

Passion or emotion is, for the Stoics, a form of impulse, with impulse being viewed as an 'act of assent' and defined as a 'movement of the mind towards something involved in action' (*Aetius* 4.21.1-2). Impulse is described as being 'directed at' predicates which are in a sense contained in the propositions assented to. Emotion is understood as 'impulse which is excessive' (SVF 3.479), involving 'an irrational movement of the soul' (SVF 2.899). The differences between the perception of the wise and the perception of the foolish stem largely from the fact that the latter is characterised by these excessive impulses, and by looking at the Stoic's anatomization of the passions it can be shown how they were construed as being intimately connected.

Stobaeus and Andronicus classify the passions under four genera: appetite, fear, pleasure, and distress. Each of these in turn receives a definition characterising its excess in terms of both a false judgement containing a predicate of very good or very bad (SVF 3.466;480), and a 'concomitant psychosomatic' movement. Stobaeus speaks of pleasure and distress as resulting from appetite and fear, with the latter two being in relation to things in the future, and the former two being in relation to things at hand which were formerly impending. According to their definitions, appetite is or involves a judgement that something in the future is good or valuable, concomitant with a movement of irrational 'stretching [desire], or pursuit'; fear is or involves a judgement that something in the future is bad, characterised by an irrational 'shrinking [aversion] or avoidance'; pleasure is or involves a judgement that something in the present is good or valuable, accompanied by an irrational 'swelling' or elation; and distress is or involves a judgement that something at hand is bad, along with an irrational 'contraction' or depression.<sup>8</sup> In all four cases, the persons experiencing the emotion are prompted to believe that they are right in their perception.

Along with the four basic genera, the Stoics also recognised species belonging to these. Anger, for instance, is held to be a species of appetite and is defined in terms of 'intense sexual desires, cravings and yearnings, love of pleasures and

riches and honours, and the like' (SVF 3.394). As can be seen from the last of these manifestations, anger is associated with another category of emotion, namely pleasure. Chrysippus presents anger (and each of the other passions) as a judgment that is 'fresh' (that is, very recent), 'false, bad, and contrary to reason' (SVF 3.459, 481).<sup>9</sup> He refers to the Medea of Euripides' play in order to illustrate the way anger is bound up with false belief or judgement about the value of an external uncontrolled object. In ascribing inappropriately high and non-replaceable value to her husband, Medea is seen to have a false belief. And the badness of this belief is demonstrated when, in losing him, it gives rise to an alternative belief that coincides with anger and the decision to avenge her betrayal.<sup>10</sup>

In discussing Chrysippus on the identification of false beliefs with emotions, Nussbaum focusses attention on his account of the 'disorderly kinetic element' being contained in the belief (SVF 3.394), rather than resulting from it (as Zeno held). She insists that this 'dynamic conception of practical knowing or judging' radically distinguishes the Stoics' account from the prior tradition of viewing judgement as the 'cool inert act of intellect set over against a proposition'<sup>11</sup>. Departing from this 'static' conception, thought to be endorsed by the same tradition that adopts a tripartite model of the soul, Nussbaum points to the way Chrysippus describes the oscillation of the whole soul when literally in the 'throes' of passions. He speaks of the soul as 'turning and shifting as a whole', 'not the conflict and civil war of two parts, but the turning of a single reason in two different directions, which escape our notice on account of the sharpness and swiftness of the change' (SVF 3.459). By equating belief and desire, Chrysippus illustrates how the inter-related passions can be housed in a thoroughly rational soul. In articulating a proposition, an excessive impulse involves reason. And the shifting of passions, as exhibited by Medea's oscillating between anger, grief, and malicious pleasure, is explained in Nussbaum by the claim that all of these are 'identical with judgements that ascribe high and non-replaceable value to Jason'.<sup>12</sup> On Nussbaum's account,

Medea's judgement about the importance of her husband is 'one basic condition ... [which] naturally takes on a kaleidoscopic multiplicity, as she goes through the various judgements that are part of this condition'. Medea's passions differ only in the precise content of the proposition. There is the 'generic' evaluative belief that certain external unstable items are highly valuable, the more 'concrete' one that Jason is highly valuable, and then a further 'specific occurrent belief' that he has wronged her. The different passions which characterise this latter belief (and which in turn give expression to the earlier ones) are then viewed as almost synonymous, being simply different ways of articulating a single judgement in a range of circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

From here it requires only a small step for Nussbaum to account for the Stoic belief that having just one of the passions entails acquiring many (and perhaps all), and her belief that this position led the Stoics to practise a therapy of desire directed at the extirpation of all passions. Whereas she reports Diogenes Laertius as saying 'Wise men are harmless: for they do no harm, either to others or to themselves' (her translation of *Diogenes Laertius* 7.123), persons who allow themselves to have even apparently mild emotions like pity are seen to be unable to guarantee that these will not lead on to stronger and more violent ones. Fate might reverse the situation, making the pitier into the pitied, a *turn* of events likely to trigger off such emotions as astonishment, envy, grief, and even murderous anger. The Stoics' interest in *Medea* lay in its presentation of motives and movements which drive an escalation of passions to a tragic climax. According to Nussbaum, such interest (or rather, concern) persuaded them of the need actively to '*root out*' the passions.

In order to explain the different ways in which the perception of the wise and the foolish related to reason, the Stoics distinguished between 'right' and 'wrong' reason. Using the sage as the criterion of rationality, being the paradigm of 'right reason' (SVF 3.560), the Stoics went on to link the 'unsound *logos*' of the foolish with the weakness

of tension in their souls. The weak reason and 'assent' of excessive impulse is a manifestation of the uncontrolled and unlimited turnings of a soul lacking tension to restrain and moderate. Lloyd emphasises this idea by referring to emotion as misdescription, where 'describing is how the agent's reason manifests itself'. And he also considers the way a person's description is bound up with their action.<sup>14</sup> In her analysis of Seneca's *Medea*, Fyfe observes that the protagonist's language is 'a catalyst for her actions', while also 'direct(ing) her emotions'.<sup>15</sup> Deliberation about killing her children persuades her to the act (ll.937ff),<sup>16</sup> a decision further encouraged by Medea's belief that the way to get at her husband is *through* their children. Using the analogy of a *hole* in having Medea speak of 'the tender place where I shall wound him, the perfect spot to strike' (ll.570-1), Seneca's language is figuratively suggestive; the metaphor, as Nussbaum points out, later metamorphoses into the gaping wound felt by Jason once the two children are murdered and a third is struck out of Medea's womb.<sup>17</sup> If a Stoic were to try to help Medea, he or she would need to make her see that the judgements she has used in apprehending her situation are false and indicative of weak reasoning. In order to 'tone up' her *logos*, a Stoic would have her exercise it and so attune it to accord with sound and fit reason.

As mentioned above, the Stoics sought to improve the health of a patient's soul by having them actively engage in self-perception. This involves (rational) perception of the external world through synthesising appearances by use of analogy, magnification, diminution, transposition, combination, transition, privation, and *nature* (in the case of forming the idea of something just and good) (SVF 2.87). These are what make possible knowledge of the four basic virtues: practical wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage (SVF 3.26). And, as noted by Long, each of the virtues was understood in terms of knowledge: courage, for instance, being 'knowledge of things which should be endured' (SVF 3.285).

The virtues were characterised in terms of theorems (principles of conduct) common to them all, leading Stobaeus to remark that 'whoever has one has all, and whoever acts in accordance with one acts in accordance with all' (SVF 3.280). A just action, for instance, while not (perhaps) properly describable as brave, must not be performed with cowardice, immoderation, or folly. And, to ensure this, the Stoics argued that the person acting justly (or courageously, or moderately, or prudently) must have grasped the theorems proper to the other virtues as well. In the case of justice, the primary perspective is of the theory of 'individual deserts', and the secondary perspective is of the theory of what falls under the other virtues (SVF 3.280).

Regarding 'observation' and 'comparison' of repeated acts as antecedents of the knowledge of virtue, Cicero and Seneca both speak of analogy as the means of its realisation (SVF 3.72; *Seneca Letters* 120.3-5). Cicero writes that 'when the mind by means of analogy has climbed up from those things which are in accordance with nature, it then arrives at the conception of the good' (that is, the knowledge of virtue) (SVF 3.72). He then goes on to *liken* apprehending the good through its 'own specific nature' to apprehending the sweetness of honey through its own specific kind of flavour, and not by comparison with other things (SVF 3.72). And in Cicero there is discussion of how the analogy with bodily health teaches us of the existence of health of mind, without showing us what health of mind is. Content is given to this abstract conception by 'observing and comparing the behaviours of individual men' – those who seem to display virtue in one area but vice in another, and those who are seen to exhibit virtue consistently in all circumstances and at all times (*Seneca Letters* 120.3-5, 8-11). The Stoics' veneration of Socrates (though not specifically the Socrates of Plato's dialogues), with his dispassionate demeanour and mastery of virtue, suggests that they may have regarded him as sage material.

Looking through the surviving fragments of the three parts of the Stoic corpus, it becomes clear that these philosophers

made every effort to apply the principles they espoused to their own activity of writing. In speaking of the soul they sought to demonstrate its dynamic nature by using phenomenological descriptions. In discussing how knowledge of the good is arrived at through the persistent observation and processing of rational appearances, they would give copious examples and think up vivid and illuminating analogies and metaphors. While in trying to convey the interconnections between ethics, physics, and logic, they even managed to enliven philosophy into an organic unity. Diogenes Laertius, for instance, tells of how they compared philosophy to a living being, 'likening logic to bones and sinews, ethics to fleshier parts, and physics to the soul' (*Diogenes Laertius* 7.39-41). But perhaps most striking of all is the fact that this thorough-going energy and devotion to presenting definitions, descriptions, divisions, and even derivations (the Stoics were keen etymologists), were directed at promoting the critical need to restrain the passions by straining towards right reason. Dialectic and rhetoric are used as a means of persuading an audience of the importance of a given set of values, methods designed to bring consensus through offering the level of specificity gauged as sufficient to convince a particular type of audience. In the Stoics' case, as Nussbaum notes, their attempts to convince people of the need to be critical of their judgements crucially depended on the use of 'concrete' narratives and examples.<sup>18</sup>

It is possible to demonstrate further how such strategies are closely in line with the Stoics' view of right action by highlighting the emphasis they placed, not only on the general content of an acceptable act, but on how (or why) that act is performed. Nussbaum explains this by referring to the Stoics' claim that 'an action must be done as the wise person would do it, with the thoughts and feelings appropriate to virtue'.<sup>19</sup> Being a 'highly contextual and particular matter', this is seen to require more than 'general content rules' containing 'what a person ought to do'. What is needed is a set of procedures 'guaranteeing' that, 'whatever the particular situation', a person could 'fulfil the whole gamut of appropriate acts' (Nussbaum's translation of

*Epictetus* 95.5). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato investigates the issues relating to practical skills (especially at 271d-272a), and there are analogies with practical skills in the writings of the Stoics.<sup>20</sup> Both teacher and pupil, doctor and patient, require practical skills (though whether the same or different skills is a moot point). And in the Stoic practitioner's laying out of procedures for subscribers, 'philosophical explication' is always accompanied by example.

At this point, however, there is a tension in the Stoic profession. The Stoic professes to provide arguments suited to a therapy for strong passions, like desire. The various procedures, strategies, and techniques they offer are all geared to healing those suffering from the illness that is passion. And yet the vigour and determination with which they throw themselves at this project cannot properly be described as objective or dispassionate. Nussbaum points to this in her discussion of the Stoics on anger and on the need for a 'we-them mentality' which sees the angry persons distance themselves from the object of rage. 'Greek Stoic harshness' is, she argues, 'strangely like a kind of anger: an aggression against the defects and passions of human beings, born of the exalted hope of perfect blameless virtue'.<sup>21</sup> Given that Nussbaum so closely identifies the different emotions, it is natural for her to speak of anger and aggression interchangeably. But even if this were objected to, it is still the case that the Stoics display a genuine desire for virtue – a desire based on their judgements of value. Through the use of analogies and other exempla – their means of demonstrating while also assuaging the viciousness of passion – the Stoic cure looks to be treating vice with vice. There appears to be a crucial ambiguity in the meaning of the therapy of desire.

In response to the question of whether the treatment of the passions ought to involve their extirpation or merely their moderation, Nussbaum points to Seneca as saying that 'our people drive out the passions altogether [*expellunt*]; [whereas] the Peripatetics moderate them' (Nussbaum translation of *Epictetus* 116.1; SVF 3.443). The violent

image of having them 'pulled out root and branch' is invoked (*Lanctantius*, SVF 3.444, 447). But Nussbaum wishes to distinguish Seneca's own position from this impassioned extreme. She argues that his attitude towards healing is one indicative of mercy, not anger. By presenting his philosophical ideas in the context of tragic plays and letters, Seneca is able to focus on and depict more keenly the particularity of the thoughts and feelings tied up with human perception and action. And from this vantage point Nussbaum maintains that he is better able to construe, and therefore judge, the tensions in the Stoics' account of reality.

Seneca, in re-telling the Greek tragedy of *Medea*, departed from the orthodox Stoic's writing of philosophical treatises. Chrysippus had alluded to the original play of Euripides, as we saw, and he and Cleanthes are known for their fondness for quoting from the ancient Greek poets. And Chrysippus and Cleanthes are only two of a number of Stoics who devoted whole treatises to the subject of poetry. Nussbaum, in her article, 'Poetry and Passion: two Stoic views', discusses the apparent paradox this presents in the Stoa.<sup>22</sup> How can the Stoic attitude towards the passions be reconciled with their affection for poetry?<sup>23</sup> She offers two possible answers: first, that those like Chrysippus, Zeno, Seneca, and Epictetus held that poetry could educate the rational faculty of soul (the *hegemonikon*) and, second, that those like Posidonius and Diogenes of Babylon – defenders of the tripartite model of the soul – thought that the irrational part could not be 'modified by modification of judgements', but must instead be 'harmonized' and balanced through non-rational means (with poetry and music being regarded as those means).

These two reasons are convincingly argued by Nussbaum, but in considering whether they provide the whole explanation for the Stoics' use of poetry it will be necessary to think about their conception of what counts as poetry. This issue will be looked at after giving some assessment of Seneca's *Medea* in terms of the notion of a therapy of desire.

The chapter in Nussbaum focussing on this drama is entitled 'Serpents of the Soul', and the snake is the play's central image. They are 'emblems of Medea' – of her erotic love, of her hideous sins, of her charms and powers of magic, and of her connection with death and renewal. Of these snakes, Nussbaum draws attention to one that is 'lethal and erotic', while also having an 'affinity for poetry or song'.<sup>24</sup> Darting his 'forked' tongue, this snake 'seeks those to whom he can come bringing death' (ll.687-8). And yet, on hearing Medea's song, he is transfixed and, enchanted, twines his 'swollen body' into circling coils (ll.686-90). Having been lured away from other 'scaly creatures in chaotic mass' (l.688), this serpent winds itself into *orbes*, reflecting the creative intelligence of the cosmos (ll.689-696). In drawing the connection between the serpent's movement and that of the heavens, the serpent is seen as enacting the creation of a world by 'compelling fluid matter to take on form'.<sup>25</sup>

For the Stoics, the world was created through the interpenetration of dynamic *pneuma* and passive matter. This was also how they conceived of the formation of new worlds. Zeno refers to *pneuma* as a vital fluid spreading through living organisms and providing the means by which *logos* is transmitted by parent to offspring. The Stoics, furthermore, associated *logos* with fire, regarding both as basic elements of the universe (*Diogenes Laertius* 7.136). In discussing the significance of fire in Seneca's play, Nussbaum notes that, like the snake, it is a symbol relating to Medea. Her grandfather is the Sun who sowed her family's seed, and is the one who will watch as Corinth is consumed by flames – its 'double boundaries of land dividing seas being joined', no longer to delay passing ships (ll.30-36). The images of both flame and snake, with their 'lethal suddenness' and 'fluid supple shape' are primarily identified with Medea's passion and desire.<sup>26</sup>

What have these images got to do with the therapy of desire? Again, Nussbaum provides the clue. In considering the serpent with an affinity for poetry, she alludes to the fact that 'Seneca's alliterative poetry has, too, an affinity for

him'. And in a later section she speaks of how Seneca's play takes on the 'suddenness' and 'passion' of the snake. Assuming a 'serpentine doubleness', it twines its way 'between the moral world and the world of love', forked tongue flickering and wondering whom to kill. Like the snake, 'both hideous and wonderful', Seneca weaves his narrative between passion and morality, displaying the ambiguities and tensions in both.<sup>27</sup>

The Senecan Chorus, taken by Nussbaum to be the mouthpiece of Stoic morality, dreams of 'unlimited progress and harmony between man and nature' (ll.364-379). But its telling of the unhappy fate met by the Argonauts – punished for their daring and progress in the conquest of the sea – suggests a vindictive Nature jealous of man's advances and encroachments. And paralleling this is the blind hope – not only of the Chorus, but of Jason, Creon, and the Nurse – that Medea's passion will not unleash destruction. Blind, because each expresses the conviction that she *will* take horrifying revenge, but each fails to act on this. Creon, for instance, declares 'she is plotting mischief, I have no doubt. She wants revenge, will stop at nothing' (l.180). And, even once he has granted Medea the short reprieve, says to her 'I don't trust you. You'll use the time for mischief' (l.294).

The Stoic test of human power is 'deliberate' action (SVF 2.984). But in what sense are these characters acting deliberately when they give Medea the reprieve they know will end in disaster? Is their compassion for the woman (at least in Creon's and Jason's cases) stronger than their concern for their own lives and for those of their loved ones? Like those people whom Seneca speaks of in the *Letters* whose 'badness sometimes takes the appearance of rectitude' (*Seneca Letters* 120.5), these characters are *prima facie* more reasonable and more stoical than Medea, but could also be seen as more foolish. Medea is, after all, in both Euripides and Seneca, depicted as acting deliberately, albeit deliberately against reason. Like a good rhetor, she has the practical skills to sway and persuade the judgements of others, being able to prostitute her reason and emotions in order to convince and,

in so doing, advance her cause. The Stoics themselves may be thought of as doing the same thing in their use of dialectical arguments and phenomenological descriptions – though, it would be hoped, in a different cause.

And yet Seneca in his play portrays what looks to be a causal connection between ‘hope-in-fear’ and hope frustrated.<sup>28</sup> All of the characters have hopes and fears, and all of them employ techniques of rhetoric to try and secure the former and evade the latter.<sup>29</sup> In Medea’s case, her project of revenge, though sinister, is not without justification. And it is her passionate appeal which solicits our sympathy, as it does the sympathy of the poetic serpent. We, like Epictetus, admire her for her greatness of spirit, the very thing displayed through these appeals. But it would be disturbing for a Stoic to hear Medea proclaiming that her ‘spirit’ and ‘rage’ are the two things that nobody can take from her (ll.178-9), for the Stoics held the opposite view of virtue.<sup>30</sup> And equally if not more disturbing would be their hearing her speak of having ‘reached a truth, a terrible and incontrovertible truth’ from which she takes ‘a kind of joy’ (ll.1010-12), when this joy and truth are brought about by her multiple killings. It is joy that they upheld as the most cherished of the Stoic ‘good feelings’, while terror, being a species of fear, was held to be very far from grasping at truth.

What is this truth? Is it the discovery that her beliefs were in error? On Nussbaum’s reading of the Stoics (but not of Seneca), this would appear to be the only explanation. A Stoic would have it that Medea’s actions are motivated by false beliefs – a false belief in the ‘high and non-replaceable’ value of her husband and the false belief that she has been wronged by him. But is it solely a love for Jason that influences her actions? In Euripides especially, but also in Seneca, Medea expresses concern for reputation and renown.<sup>31</sup> Seneca has her boast that she shall ‘devastate, [and] wreak such havoc as men and women shall speak of for a thousand years’ (ll.336-8). Like Neptune’s wrath at the seafarers’ mastery, Medea’s rage at having yielded to an unfaithful mortal explodes into a retaliation aimed at showing

him, and everyone else, the immensity and greatness of her powers. And, like the ocean's oscillation between beckoning smoothness and unrelenting wildness (ll.367-8;334-7), Medea's passions swing to and fro, in the manner depicted by the Stoic's phenomenological descriptions. Medea turns from wishing to devise the most savage vengeance imaginable, for example, to hoping that Jason may live on to remember her (ll.115-50).

Nussbaum makes reference to this tender wish for Jason's well being in her discussion of Seneca's play as an argument against love. She provides arguments to illustrate that Seneca's fear derives, not from the idea that Medea has a false belief about Jason, but from the idea that love can itself turn violent, given that it involves passions.<sup>32</sup> And yet despite arguing that his driving concern rests with the potential violence bound up with love, Nussbaum thinks that Seneca endorses an attitude of mercy and acceptance of imperfection rather than a harsh and 'tireless insistence on perfect moral health'. The ambivalence towards Stoicism expressed in this play indicates, she thinks, understanding of and empathy with the difficulties involved in trying to live well. Nussbaum points to Seneca's ambivalence about the Stoic ideal of rooting out the passions and about living a life 'without the false belief in the value of externals'. The demands of the former are seen as obsessive and unrealistic, while Nussbaum sees Seneca's depiction of the Stoic ideal of existence as one of self-centred, inactive 'sluggishness' (among the very qualities admonished as 'morally vicious' [*Epictetus* 74.30]). And, while she then goes on to say that spectators would be 'erotically drawn to Medea's greatness of soul', she does not focus on Seneca's ambivalence toward the attitude of mercy, or on the related matter of his ambiguous presentation of characters.<sup>33</sup>

Turning to the latter issue first: as suggested earlier, Seneca sometimes endows Medea with Stoic deliberateness and rhetorical prowess while lading other characters with a weak capacity to reason, leaving them unable to confront and see through Medea's supplications. Yet it would be misleading to

assert that, in spite of appearances, Seneca views Medea as almost Stoic, and the others as false imposters. It cannot, for example, be asserted that the Nurse's expressions of Stoic sentiment in counselling her mistress to gain self-control and calmness of mind (ll.406;453) are merely a cover for the *nursing* of her mistress's ailment, as seems more clearly evident in her earlier prompting. 'Hide your grievances', she initially advises, 'Mute them to fury held within yourself. Endure without a sound wounds that cut deep, and bide your time. Maintain a level head; then you will have the power to repay. Your anger hurts when it is camouflaged; if you proclaim your hatred, it will lose the space it needs for vengeance, and the time' (l.150). For all the heart-wrenching soul searching that characterises this ailment – soul searching that involves the very skills in rhetoric outlined above – Medea, like the others, displays self-delusion and a lack of self-awareness. Christopher Gill speaks of how she deliberately rejects reason, but having given herself over to a state of pathos, is unable to choose 'not to disobey reason'.<sup>34</sup> In fact, each of the characters can be seen to display very many of the Stoic vices and very many of the virtues.<sup>35</sup>

Nussbaum writes of Seneca's uncertainty about the merits of Stoic aims and practices, but in depicting Medea as the anti-Stoical hero and the Chorus as the voice of Stoic orthodoxy she fails to account for an even deeper ambivalence. Seneca's paradoxical portrayal of each character evidences the paradoxical nature of Stoic aims and practices themselves. The conflict is not one between Stoic and anti-Stoic, but is rather within Stoicism itself. It is unclear who is virtuous and who vicious, nor is it clear that virtue does not serve vice, and vice versa. As Plato demonstrates the difficulty in distinguishing the lover from the non-lover in the *Phaedrus*, it is here shown that no sure marks exist to determine the good from the bad, and on the Stoic's own terms. Nussbaum states that Seneca calls for mercy rather than strict severity in healing the afflicted. But this principle of conduct, treated by Nussbaum as the mark of the Stoic practitioner, is along with their other practices a questionable one. Jason pleads with Creon to keep Medea alive and the

king is 'moved to mercy' by his tears (ll.498-9). And, having been 'merely banished', Medea pleads for mercy in staving this off (ll.286,498). Yet it is the mercy granted her that enables her to go on to act without mercy.

'How can we tell which are the blessings and which are the curses?' (l.684). In meditating on this question, the Chorus expresses the uncertainty and vexation involved in establishing moral values in a tumultuous world. Ambivalence about the Stoic conception of a rational universe weaves its path between the perspective of the cosmos and that of the 'citizen'.<sup>36</sup>

The medical analogy, which goes through only if this conception of a rational universe is accepted, is employed by the Stoic philosophers who themselves acknowledge a distance from wisdom. Seneca tells us that analogy is the means by which a conception of the good arises, and that its antecedents are the 'observation' and 'combination' of repeated acts. And so, in order to get from the inference that there is such a thing as health of mind to the discovery of what health of mind *is*, observation and combination are required. But, given that the Stoics failed to locate concrete examples of wise men (with the possible exception of Epictetus on Socrates), it seems to follow that their criterion of moral perfection falls short of itself, both at the universal level and at the particular. It begins to look as if the Stoics have been bitten by the poetic snake of encircling coils.

This is Nussbaum's verdict of what happens 'in the very act of turning tragedy into a Stoic argument'. By characterising the Senecan outlook in terms of a 'moral asceticism' and a 'realistic humanity', she argues that it is in conflict with Stoic purity and detachment. Seneca's 'intense interest in progress and striving' led him, she thinks, to 'attach to the work and effort of philosophy a value hard to reconcile with Stoicism'. And, she adds, it is by expressing his ideas in the medium of poetry that Seneca is able to characterise the ambivalence felt towards this work and this effort.<sup>37</sup> However, on top of the fact that the Stoics display a vigour comparable with Seneca's own, it can be shown that the paradoxical

character of Seneca's depiction already pervades their work. By embracing Heraclitus's concept of a *logos* 'which directs all things and which is shared by all things' and identifying this as 'artistic' fire or 'intelligent pneuma', the Stoics already sow the seeds for a marriage between reason and passion. They would have been quite aware that their desire to extirpate the passions was a desire for an ideal, and one that is practically unrealisable. Their statements, like the statements of Seneca's characters, require qualification.

Nussbaum is, I think, right in saying that Seneca questions the excellence of such an ideal existence. But, in treating especially Medea's statements about herself as reliable and transparent accounts of her own character, Nussbaum fails to account for the uncertainty Seneca expresses about the possibility of distinguishing between the Stoic and anti-Stoic. It is this tendency to accept unqualifiedly the statements of others that leads Nussbaum to adopt a narrow intellectualist analysis of the Stoics, and also of Plato. Nussbaum points to the Stoics' interest in quoting from and discoursing on poetry, but she thinks that Stoicism bites itself once it uses poetry to present its own arguments. And it is the danger of stirring up the emotions that she thinks prompts Plato to ban tragedy, and the poets, from the Republic. But must Socrates' expressions of fear be taken at face value? In the *Symposium*, he speaks of the way people make the mistake of giving the name poetry to 'what is only one single aspect of it' (205b). He expresses the notion that poetry 'in the true sense of the word' involves 'calling something into existence that was not there before, so that every artist is a poet' (205b-c).

For the Stoics, a rational being is able to depict the creative and artistic intelligence of the cosmos through the observation and combination of repeated acts. And their writings are filled with analogies, similies, metaphors, and other exempla required to gain and express an understanding of the unified and dynamic nature of the individual and universal soul. Without this use of concrete narrative and exempla – the tools of poetry – their account of the human soul in terms of reason and passion would no doubt be

mistaken for a parts model. Plato makes ample use of this tool as well, and it is through this and other tools of dialectic (poetry being a species of dialectic for the Stoics<sup>38</sup>) that his tripartite model of the soul can be made to look closer to the Stoic one. But Nussbaum does not view it as such, and she does not think of the writings of either Plato or the Stoics as poetry.

What does this mean for the Stoic therapy of desire? One thing it means is that the Stoic practitioner's diagnosis and descriptions cannot be regarded as completely reliable or transparent. In discussing the treatment of sickness and disease, Nussbaum expresses the same caution, but in relation to the patient's self-analysis. She observes that there are many reasons for caution,<sup>39</sup> and yet when it comes to assessing Seneca's suffering protagonist, she seems to overlook these. Medea is a woman afflicted by strong and violent passions that drive her to perform acts of murder. And yet Nussbaum states that Seneca's use of her in his case against love does not rest on falsity. Is Seneca to be read as depicting the passions as true judgements? Would Nussbaum endorse this reading? It looks as though Medea is not the only one who is inconsistent with herself. And the way to establish where other inconsistencies lie is through being watchful (one of the Stoic virtues) of the accounts of both doctor and patient. In fact, Nussbaum points out that the Stoics encouraged a relationship of symmetry between doctor and patient, with each being able to question the other's accounts. And this would be absolutely indispensable if it were to turn out that the doctor was also in need of treatment. This was the Stoics' belief, and it suggests that they were aware of the paradoxical nature of their therapy. If there is some confusion between who is doctor and who is patient, there will be inevitable confusion about what judgements are true and false, especially once it is granted that reason and passion exist in such close proximity.

Seneca's *Medea* vividly depicts these Stoic paradoxes, and in doing so expresses ambivalence towards both the Stoics' ideal of health, and the methods used in aiming for this. But

this is not the moment when Stoicism bites itself, since this ambiguity was always already there. In contrasting 'myth' and 'psychology' as the difference between 'genuine tragedy and its counterfeit', Nietzsche might even have suggested that Seneca was the paradigmatic Stoic.<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum's account both does and does not point to this.

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. S. Whiteside and ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), p.7.
- 2 Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), Introduction; pp.3;16;4.
- 3 *The Therapy of Desire*, pp.13-14.
- 4 A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, second ed. (London: Duckworth, 1996), p.170.
- 5 *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp.156;159;168;125.
- 6 See A. A. Long, 'The Harmonics of Stoic Virtue', in his *Stoic Studies* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p.218.
- 7 I use the *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. Hans Friedrich August von Arnim, in 3 vols (Lipsiae : Teubner, 1903-5) [SVF], as my main source of Stoic philosophy.
- 8 Chrysippus defined emotions as judgements, while (according to Galen) Zeno described emotions as the irrational contractions, elations, depressions, and so on which were the effects of judgements. See A. Lloyd, 'Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology', *The Stoics*, ed. John M. Rist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
- 9 See Lloyd, 'Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology', p.237.
- 10 'Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology', pp.235-42.
- 11 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.385.
- 12 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.367.
- 13 *The Therapy of Desire*, p. 452;371-2 (and see ch.12 in general).
- 14 'Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology', p.241.
- 15 H. Fyfe, 'An Analysis of Seneca's *Medea*', *Seneca Tragicus: Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, ed. A. J. Boyle (Berwick: Aureal Publications, 1983), pp.83;85.
- 16 Line references to Seneca's *Medea* given here and subsequently (and by Martha Nussbaum in her account of the play) do not

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- agree with all translations, but are generally consistent with those given in *Seneca: The Tragedies*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. David Slavitt (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- 17 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.456.
  - 18 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.339.
  - 19 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.339. The Stoics distinguished the feelings accompanying virtuous actions from emotions.
  - 20 See, for example, Cicero, *De fin.* 3.24 and *Seneca Letters* 94.51.
  - 21 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.427.
  - 22 Martha Nussbaum, 'Poetry and the passions: two Stoic views', in *Passions and Perceptions: Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Jacques Brunschwig and Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).
  - 23 Affection was one of the Stoic 'good feelings', which were distinguished from the passions and which contributed to the living of a good life. See *Diogenes Laertius* 7.116 (SVF 3.431).
  - 24 *The Therapy of Desire*, pp.458;462.
  - 25 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.462.
  - 26 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.459
  - 27 *The Therapy of Desire*, pp.462;464ff.
  - 28 J. Henderson, 'Poetic Tension and Rhetorical Amplification: Seneca Medea 579-699', in *Seneca Tragicus*, p.108.
  - 29 See, for example, the hopes (59-60) and fears (663) of the Chorus, Jason's hopes (508-9) and fears (172-4), and the Nurse's hopes (150-4), and fears (165).
  - 30 See Section 61 on virtue and vice in *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol.1, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (Cambridge: CUP, 1987).
  - 31 Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. and ed. J. Morwood (Oxford: OUP, 1998), ll.236-7;809-10.
  - 32 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.453.
  - 33 *The Therapy of Desire*, pp.481;471ff.;467;468.
  - 34 Christopher Gill, 'Did Chrysippus Understand Medea?', *Phronesis* 28 (1983), p.143.
  - 35 See, for example, the Chorus's cheerfulness, joy, and well wishing (ll.58-64;98-99), its sorrow (ll.626-34), dread (l.663), superstition (ll.340-4), malice, and annoyance (ll.107-10); see

Creon's justness (ll.252f.), annoyance (l.282), dread and worry (l.290); see Jason's mental pain, vexation, grief, and confusion (ll.459-467), his malice (l.175), warmth, affection, and kindness (l.577), his courage (ll.619-22) and moderation (ll. 523-4), and his attachment to unstable externals (ll.568-9); see the Nurse's terror (ll.690ff.) and moderation (l.454).

36 Arius Didymus refers to human beings as citizens inhabiting a city, where this city is the world (Eusebius, *Evangelical preparation*, 15.15.3-5).

37 *The Therapy of Desire*, p.471.

38 *Diogenes Laertius* 7.41.1

39 *The Therapy of Desire*, pp.20f.

40 *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.xiv.