Seneca's position in politics ranged from the dismal depths of a seven-year exile in Corsica to the heights of close association with several of the early Roman emperors. Recalled from exile by Agrippina to act as tutor for her son, he from then on remained an important member of the emperor's inner circle and was privy to the imperial household's public and private affairs. The philosopher-tutor certainly understood them well enough to occasionally act as their speechwriter, as in Nero's oration upon Claudius' death.[i] Seneca's firsthand experience with the issues of Claudius' reign, and particularly with these private affairs, would naturally have influenced him as he wrote about the mythical kings that fill his tragedies. Of these works, *Medea* in particular is noteworthy for its prevalence of relevant diction, lack of a clearly tyrannical figure, and frequent generalized statements about rulers. Examining issues of ruling in the play to see how they correlate to Claudius' own reign, and especially where Seneca has altered the tale's traditional storyline, can identify issues that Seneca particularly viewed as noteworthy or challenging for rulers of his own time and the dangers such problems posed if not dealt with properly. Perhaps the most blatant similarity between Jason and Claudius—the political nature of their family relationships and the personal struggles they face in handling them—will be examined here, with special reference to Jason's opening speech.

Jason's first appearance in *Medea* provides a glimpse into the inner workings of his mind as he debates with himself the decisions he has had to make regarding Medea and his sons. By exposing Jason's inner thoughts, Seneca allows him a chance to defend his choices and reveals the personal impact such politically-motivated decisions can have. As emperors in Seneca's time were often honored with the title *pater patriae*, Jason too acts as a "father" to the city, taking as much (if not more) care of it as of his own family. Jason must deal with this decision and its consequences appropriately if he is to be considered a worthy leader. Should he and Medea not work out their differences, not only they but all of Corinth could end up suffering for it. Although Jason here displays leadership qualities like a willingness to sacrifice and an ability to mediate, if he cannot

control his own household, the Corinthians will doubt his ability to control the whole city. Jason must now balance his political needs with his attachment to his wife and children, revealing the interconnectedness of the personal and public spheres for mythical and Roman rulers and the dilemmas posed by such connections.

In this opening passage, Jason emphasizes the difficulty of his choice and the fact that he had no good option. The crux of his dilemma appears in lines 434-7: "If I wanted to maintain my faithfulness as befits the merits of my wife, I had to offer myself to death; if I did not want to die, I had to be found lacking in wretched faithfulness." Jason rightly laments the difficulty of his choice; his *fatum* and *sors*, terms that already denote unchangeable situations, are here described as "harsh" and "cruel," reiterating that he is stuck in a situation with no clear solution.[ii] Jason even calls on a personified Justice to approve his choice, seeking divine approval to soothe his frenzied mind and acknowledging his inability to truly deal with the situation "justly." Nevertheless, Jason treats his abandoned wife quite kindly here, admitting that she deserves better (*meritis*) and beseeching her (*precibus*) to let go of her anger even though she can be difficult to deal with (*ferox, nec patiens, iratam*). Yet Jason also attempts to cast much of the blame from himself. He claims that he has been conquered (*vicere*)—but by his sons and his own piety. Moreover, he has maintained his *pietas* and *fides* (both family-centered virtues) throughout his trials. Jason's inner debate and uncertainty give the audience a glimpse into the tempest of his mind as he balances his familial duty, sense of honor, and political necessity to devise a solution that will be both privately and publicly viable.

Such familial difficulties are a driving force in both Claudius' and Jason's reigns: *Medea* is essentially about familial uproar provoked by political action, and Claudius' reign begins, ends, and is shot through with such family concerns. Before their present situation, Jason relied on Medea immensely: without her help, he could never have survived her father Aeëtes' tasks, retrieved the Golden Fleece, or returned to Iolcus safely. Jason's problem now, though, is that after being forced

to flee Iolcus again he needs a new kingdom and alliances. Staying with Medea makes no political sense. She has no allies, her only friend in Corinth is her husband, and her flame-retardant potions are no longer in high demand. Staying with his children makes more sense; they can remain his heirs until he and Creusa have children of their own. As a good politician, Jason accepts Creon's generous offer despite the obvious mental anguish his opening remarks reveal. Jason spends much of the play convincing his wife, and perhaps himself too, that her past help means nothing to him, that he is not guilty of these earlier crimes, and that he never asked her to commit them in the first place. But in reality, he is just moving from one opportunistic marriage to another.

Added to Jason's internal conflict is external pressure from both Creon and the chorus of Corinthians to leave Medea. During the chorus' wedding hymn, the Corinthians sneer, "If any runaway girl be wed to a foreign husband, let her go away in silent shadows."[iii] Creon, no less harshly, first addresses Medea as "noxious offspring of Colchian Aeëtes,"[iv] emphasizing her foreignness and the poisonous effect her presence has on his citizens. In addition, the chorus presents Jason's earlier marriage as a forced matter: they say he was "frightened," that his right hand was "unwilling," and that only this time does he act with his father-in-law's consent.[v] Awareness of his wife's unpopularity no doubt causes Jason further distress, since his new allies' hatred for her would further necessitate choosing politics over emotion and breaking faith with Medea.

Jason's attitude toward his wife can be contrasted with his treatment of their children. For rulers both real and mythical, having legitimate male heirs was of the utmost importance. Euripides' Medea finds a new refuge by helping a childless neighboring king, and early emperors also took having male heirs very seriously and adopted worthy replacements if their own sons could not rule. Unlike in Euripides, where Medea decides early on to kill her children, in Seneca it is Jason's own expression of his sons' dearness that inspires Medea to her crime. Though Jason and his children never appear onstage together until the final death scene, his words clearly express his affection for

them. In this passage, Jason notes that he made his final decision based on what was best for his children, avoiding his own death only for their benefit (338-9). Shortly thereafter, he seals their fate by warning Medea that separation from his sons is something "not even my king and father-in-law himself could force me to endure."[vi] And at the end of the play, he ineffectually begs Medea to take his own life rather than execute their second son. Though in more positive ways, his political situation also dictates Jason's relationship to his sons, and Medea's fears that Creusa's children will eventually be preferred to hers seem valid. Like his feelings for his wife, Jason's attachment to his children can only be sustained if it does not impede his position of power in Corinth.

Issues like these—where rulers are compelled to treat personal relationships as political tools and struggle to control their relatives—must also have appeared in the drama of Seneca's everyday life. Relationships between Claudius and the two wives of his imperial reign, Messalina and Agrippina, were just as complicated as Jason's with Medea. Claudius' marriage to Messalina and the birth of their son Britannicus occurred around the same time as Claudius' ascent to power. As the great-granddaughter of Augustus' sister Octavia, Messalina brought political influence to her husband and was later favored with a variety of honors, even riding with Claudius in his British triumph. However, Claudius apparently found these benefits too insignificant as his career progressed. Scholarship now suggests that Messalina's secretive marriage to Silius might have been politically motivated as she sought protection for herself and her son against an emperor who was already considering a new marriage.[vii] Regardless of her intentions, Claudius chose to have her eliminated at this point in his career. Messalina could no longer adequately fulfill Claudius' needs for political support, and, as a good politician Claudius understood the importance of both being well connected and not allowing his family to negatively affect his public image. Faced with a situation much like Jason's, Claudius too decided that it was time for change.

Claudius' subsequent marriage to Agrippina, though intended to strengthen his position, brought even more problems. Offered three choices for a new wife, Claudius selected Agrippina for the significant political and social advancement she could provide, rather than other women's riches or stability. Agrippina was both the great-granddaughter of Augustus and the daughter of the much-beloved Germanicus, Claudius' brother; she also already had a son, whose age (three years older than Britannicus) would leave him in an opportune position to take over the role of heir in place of the disgraced Messalina's son. This new wife brought clients from the provinces and connections to the Jewish court, widening her husband's influence substantially.[viii] As empress, she became the first living imperial wife to be called "Augusta" during her husband's reign[ix] and also assumed many of Messalina's honors, returning Claudius to a distinguished position.[x]

As Jason's political necessities were complicated by his desire not to mistreat Medea, Claudius' were complicated by the trouble he faced at the hands of overpowering wives. Although his previous wife would not be seeking revenge, Agrippina seems to have caused her husband difficulty by overshadowing him with her own influence and authority. Ancient historians claim that Claudius "became a slave" to his wife (ἐδεδούλωτο)[xi] and that, through fear and favors, she gained complete control over her husband and wielded his power and influence, upsetting the entire imperial household with her scheming.[xii] Claudius also faced public disapproval for his marriage to Agrippina: the pair first had to rewrite Roman law regarding uncle-niece marriages, and even then risked condemnation for this "incest."[xiii] Even before they are married, Claudius seems to have had second thoughts about his actions—according to Suetonius, he constantly referred to Agrippina as his "daughter and nursling" (*filiam et alumnam*).[xiv] In the end, it is Agrippina who is accused of capping off her husband's reign with his mushroom fiasco. Though modern scholars accept this story less readily than the ancient sources do, even rumors can inform on a troubled relationship.[xv]

Overall, Claudius' relationships to his family were every bit as chaotic, troublesome, and opportunistic as Jason's were.

These relationships with his wives are, as in Jason's case, contrasted with Claudius' devotion to his heirs. When Britannicus is born, Claudius takes him "in his hands" and "keeps him constantly before him," proudly displaying him to the applauding crowds.[xvi] Besides this simple fatherly love, Claudius also shows interest in his son's advancement. Despite Britannicus' technically insufficient age, Claudius intends to honor him with the *toga virilis* to jumpstart his political career. Although Claudius' adopted son Nero does not appear as frequently, it is likely that later authors, aware of how terrible an emperor Nero became, suppressed any positive stories about him. But some affection from Claudius is still discernible in Suetonius, whose account closes with the emperor exhorting Britannicus and Nero to make peace between themselves and begging the Senate to oversee both youths without regard for their age or parentage (46). However, these close relationships with his heirs only create further tension between Claudius and Agrippina, who attempts to undermine Britannicus' position lest he overshadow her own son. She robs Britannicus of his status by keeping him away from his own father and starting rumors that he is insane or epileptic,[xvii] generally ensuring that he receives "neither any honor nor attention."[xviii] Her plans for the boys are on display at some circus games, where Nero wears triumphal robes but Britannicus remains in his *toga praetexta*.[xix] Claudius' plan to support both his sons in the face of his wife's disapproval and his willingness to put another's son on the same level as his own again reveals the political scheming and difficulties necessary for those in positions of power.

The extent to which Seneca's personal experience with rulers has molded this story is clear from how much his Jason views his family as a political tool and agonizes over his betrayal as compared to earlier versions of this myth. Though this Jason frets about the injustice of his betrayal, his literary predecessors are freed from this moral burden by their indifference to Medea's plight.

Euripides' Jason has fallen in love with the idea of a royal marriage, so much so that it has banished his love for the family he has.[xx] He blames Medea for her troubles and denies that she was helpful to him in the past, seeming largely unconcerned that his wife and children will be reduced to wandering beggars.[xxi] In Ovid, the audience witnesses Jason's false oath in Colchis, one that he nonchalantly breaks despite his wife's warning about treachery.[xxii] On the contrary, Seneca's Jason pities Medea and admits that she does not deserve to be abandoned; political necessity and concern for his children compelled his betrayal. The political nature of Jason and Medea's relationship also appears in others' acceptance of Jason's wife. Although Euripides' chorus is supportive of Medea, Seneca's has shifted its alliance to Creon and his new heir, reinforcing the necessity of Medea's abandonment. This increased political motivation for relationships is even more apparent in Jason's behavior toward Medea's children. In Euripides, Jason is oblivious to his children's potential for strengthening his political situation. Instead, he agrees to Creon's plan to exile the children with their mother and refers to them not as παῖδες but merely as τέκνα, a term whose neuter gender and special reference to the mother dissociate the children from the likelihood of ruling.[xxiii] Medea must argue with Jason to convince him that his sons will make good temporary heirs. The *Heroides* recounts Jason's relationship with Hypsipyle and their children, who confront a fate very similar that that of Medea and her sons. Again, Jason ignores her pleas to return to them or concern himself with their children, foreshadowing his likely treatment of Medea's sons. Having seen Claudius' own difficulties with issues like these, Seneca may have reinterpreted Jason's story to reflect these experiences.

Even the most private, personal decisions leaders make can lead to serious consequences for those they rule. Jason's led to the death of the Corinthian king and his daughter, the loss of his immediate heirs (his sons), and the destruction of the palace, if not more of Corinth as well (887). Claudius' decisions may have led to an even more corrupt imperial household, and eventually his

own death and the accession of Nero instead of his original heir Britannicus. However, these decisions were much more than merely personal: they were enacted for a very public and political agenda of getting or strengthening power. In *Medea*, Seneca allows his audience to consider the personal implications that these very political decisions may have had for the rulers themselves. Like Claudius, Jason is a "prisoner of his position," compelled to make choices regardless of his feelings.[xxiv] Part of the tragedy in the play arises from this increased sympathy with Jason as he makes his choices. Examination of such sentiments, and not the dry historical accounts, reveals the personal toll that such decisions could exact from leaders.

Seneca's *Medea* is a reinterpretation of an old myth shaped to suit its author's own time. The remarkable similarities between the circumstances of Jason and Claudius suggest that Seneca wanted to draw attention to the ruler's struggle to control his own family. These two rulers' difficulties elucidate the political advantages and pitfalls of marriage—the benefits inherent in marrying the right person, balanced precariously against the separation of one's public and private lives. As the period of Claudius' principate attests, decisive resolution of intrafamily struggles was part and parcel of the successful acquisition and maintenance of imperial power. Seneca's position in relation to this power offered him a front row seat to the *fata dura* and *sors aspera* faced by leaders of his own time.

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[i] Dio 61.3.1
[ii] See OLD *sors* s.v. 8 and *fatum* s.v. 5. Hine (2000) 158 discusses Jason's use of these terms as opposed to Medea's use of more flexible terms for "fortune" and "chance."
[iii] *Tacitis eat illa tenebris,/si qua peregrino nubit fugitiva marito*, 114-5. All translations in this paper are my own.
[iv] *Colchi noxium Aeetae genus*, 179.
[v] *Trepidus,* 104; *invita*, 104; *soceris...volentibus,* 106.
[vi] *Pati,/non ipse memet cogat et rex et socer*, 545-6.
[vii] Osgood (2010) 211 unites similar theories from earlier authors in presenting this argument.
[viii] For further information on Agrippina and her foreign connections, see Wood (2000) 250-1.
[ix] Osgood (2010) 216 explores several of Agrippina's honors and their precedents.
[x] Dio 60.33.2
[xi] Ibid. 60.31.8
[xii] Tac. *Ann.* 12.65
[xiii] Ibid. 12.5
[xiv] Suet. *Claudius* 39.2
[xv] Barrett (1996) 140-2 examines accounts of Claudius' death in the primary sources and argues that Agrippina's guilt cannot be concluded from them.
[xvi] *In manibus; ante se retinens assidue;* Suet. *Clau.* 27.2
[xvii] Dio 60.34.1, 33.10
[xviii] Οὔτε τινὰ τιμὴν οὔτε ἐπιμέλειαν, Dio 61.32.5
[xix] Tac. *Ann.* 12.41
[xx] Eur. *Medea* 76-77, 700
[xxi] Ibid. 514-5
[xxii] Ovid *Heroides* 12.77-88, *Metamorphoses* 7.93-7
[xxiii] See LSJ s.v. A.
[xxiv] Osgood (2010) 223 uses this quote and argues similar sentiments.