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THE INCANTATION IN SENECA'S *MEDEA* AND ITS DRAMATIC TIME



ABSTRACT: This paper examines the incantation scene in Seneca's *Medea* in correlation with the *epithalamium*, against the background of the homonymous Euripidean tragedy. Though downplayed by the Greek tragedian, magic becomes the focus of the Latin play. Seneca's *Medea* sings the incantation as the reverse of the wedding song, in what may be seen as an attempt to cancel out the nuptials with magic spells. On another level, the study proposes a new solution to the thorny issue of timing, with regard both to the ritualistic incantation and to the overall plot of the Senecan play.

THIS PAPER COMPARES the incantation of Seneca's *Medea* with the first choral ode, and also places her magic song within the context of witchcraft pervading the play. Despite being downplayed by Euripides, magic is strongly associated with the tragic heroine in Seneca's version of the tragedy, and is central to its thematic. The Roman playwright chooses to underscore an element that his Greek predecessor exploited only minimally, so as to create a darker work. This approach is entirely consistent with Seneca's personal preference for tragedies highlighting the supernatural, the terrifying and all that lies beyond the limits of the human world. Part of this study is devoted to examining the debate about the performance time of both the *epithalamium* and the incantation, and also over the dramatic time of the entire plot in which the songs are incorporated; a new suggestion is advanced regarding this vexed issue.

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* I wish to express my thanks to the anonymous reader of *Logeion* for his/her useful comments.

The first choral ode (lines 56-115) is a processional hymn known as an *epithalamium* or wedding song, sung by a group of Corinthians as they escort the bride Creusa and her groom to the palace. The content has been seen as tying in with the preceding scene, i.e. the prologue in which Medea invokes the gods who blessed her own wedding, but curses the newly-weds in their name, focusing on Jason for deserting her and on the city of Corinth for proving inimical to her.¹ Of course, the gods in the *epithalamium* itself are invoked in a joyful, celebratory mood.

The first ode has also been compared to the magical incantation sung by Medea later on in the play (lines 740-848).² Although the sequences in question are placed rather far apart, I agree with Heil that the playwright's intention is to create a contrast between the two.³ My intention is to pursue this idea further, so as to show that Medea's aim is to undo the wedding hymn. The core of my analysis will then move to focus on how both sequences are incorporated into the broader theme of the play, which centers on the way magic prevails over vulnerable, unsuspecting individuals.

The first ode is performed by an undefined number of Corinthians.⁴ In festive mood, the participants in the procession pray to the gods of the

1. See Hine (1989) 413-15.

2. Fyfe (1983) 83 notes: "Medea's magical incantation (740-848) is a dark parody of the *epithalamium*; she invokes the same gods (61, 750 f., 840-42), and her prayer that the burning Creusa outshine her marriage-torch (835-39) grimly echoes the Chorus' hopes for the bride and groom (75, 90-92)". Cf. Boyle (2014) 314, 335. More recently Heil (2013) 191-99 has examined the incantation's allusions to the *epithalamium* in more detail.

3. See previous note.

4. According to Sutton (1986) 36 the chorus is composed of local citizenry and more probably local women. Davis (1993) 49-51 holds that the chorus is split into two separate groups of men and women. Hine (2000) 122 says that the identity of the chorus is uncertain, but that it speaks with the civic voice of Corinth (cf. Kohn [2013] 81); and that the crowd mentioned in line 114 is distinct from the chorus, and is possibly the whole citizen body. Boyle (2014) 95, 134-36 considers the members of the chorus to be Corinthians who are supportive of Creon and his daughter; he also believes that the *epithalamium* is sung during a wedding procession that may include the bride and the groom, as well as the crowd. We can corroborate Boyle's idea with the end of Menander's *Samia*, which features a wedding procession in which *epithalamia* are about to be heard, in a procession including both men and women, i.e. the relatives of the young couple and the slaves of their parents; in line 459 the father of the groom Demeas declares his wish to sing the wedding hymn, despite all the problems impeding the wedding. Regardless of how one interprets Seneca's *iuvenes*, whether as chorus members or as a crowd addressed by the chorus, the overall idea is the same: Seneca presents all the people of Corinth as participating in the joy and festivities of the royal wedding, which means that Medea finds herself completely isolated, surrounded by people who hate her. The only exception is her nurse, who has obviously followed her from Colchis. Medea is indeed isolated, opening

sky and sea to favor the new wedding. They later make more specific reference to the Thunderers (i.e. Jupiter and Juno), as well as to Lucina, to an unnamed goddess who stops Mars from fighting (possibly Pax), to Hymen and to Hesperus. On the other hand, in her incantation Medea offers an on-stage sacrifice to Hecate, the goddess of witches.⁵ This is actually an indoor scene, which, according to the convention of ancient drama, Seneca is obliged to present outside in the street so as to take advantage of the altar.⁶ In the Euripidean version of the play, Medea relates that the interior of her house contains an altar devoted not to Vestes but to Hecate, signaling both her magical powers⁷ and her exoticism and personal intimacy with the goddess.⁸ In Seneca, Medea is probably alone on stage⁹ when she sings death psalms and invokes the gods of the underworld, inviting the souls of the dead and most especially sinners to attend the new wedding. Furthermore, she invokes Hecate not as Diana, the bright goddess of the night, but in her lurid and grim form (*facie lurida maesta*, 790).¹⁰ Here we should recall that in the Prologue she invoked Diana along with the gods of wedlock—most probably Jupiter, Juno, Hymen, and possibly also Venus. In the incantation, Medea asks for the assistance of other deities in destroying the wedding between Jason and Creusa.

Seneca constructed the Corinthian *epithalamium* and Medea's incantation (the central episode in the play¹¹) as two comparable yet contrasting scenes, so that when spectators see the latter they are automatically led to recall and reevaluate the former. One might say that they form a pair of mir-

the play all alone on stage. She is even more cut off from those around her than her Greek counterpart, who is at least given her children as followers, and can count on Aegeus' help and shelter in Athens. Furthermore, any Corinthian men and women participating in the festivities will be displaying their hatred of Medea, which motivates her fury against their city.

5. On the on-stage sacrifice see Sutton (1986) 19.
6. See Fitch (2004) 91-92. Cf. Boyle (2014) 296, who assumes that "a platform (*exostra* or *eccyclema*) is wheeled onto the stage and the scene shifts to an interior courtyard of Medea's house, where Medea performs her 'black mass' at a turf altar directly in front of the audience"; see also his page 312.
7. See Page (1971) 102, who, however, speaks of an altar located in the *penetralia* of a palace.
8. See Mastronarde (2002) 236.
9. Even if we assume that the nurse is still on stage, she remains silent and entirely unobtrusive.
10. Latin text and translations from Boyle (2014).
11. Nussbaum (1977) 235 notes: "The play's central episode is the long scene of incantation, in which Medea calls forth all the snakes on earth and in heavens".

ror scenes¹², albeit involving different persons: the people of Corinth in the first instance and Medea in the second. There are several similarities and inversions at work here. Besides the fact that the *epithalamium* and the incantation are songs, when referring to the wedding both the Corinthians and Medea invoke the gods, plan sacrifices, define the ritual and, in short, appear keen to stage manage the entire event. Of course, the choristers' intention is to celebrate the wedding and pray for its blessing, while Medea's aim is to destroy it.

As a witch, Medea is an extremely menacing character, and one far more terrifying and powerful than common witches. She has her prayers answered by the gods, can enter the realm of Hades and proves just as capable of harnessing the forces of nature in the present as she was in the past. She is a barbarian who combines foreign origin (see the rivers Phasis and Danube) with profound knowledge of the Greek myths (e.g. the Centaur Nessus, Mt. Oeta, Althaea's torch, the Harpies, the Stymphalian birds and the Lernaean Hydra). By contrast, in the *epithalamium* Creusa's beauty is measured in an exclusively Greek environment: the chorus declares her to be fairer than brides from Athens, Sparta, Thebes and Olympia, implying that she is a representative beauty who surpasses all those of her own race, to say nothing of barbaric Medea. The latter is, however, far superior in strength and will prove lethal not only to her rival, but also to the inhabitants of Corinth, who have turned their back on her.

We should note that both the *epithalamium* and the incantation appear to have been invented by Seneca, since there are no comparable scenes in Euripides. Other scenes were clearly adapted from the Greek *Medea*, such as those involving Jason, Creon and the Nurse, with numerous changes being made.¹³ What is more, while the Greek tragedian makes little of Medea's magical powers,¹⁴ Seneca clearly emphasizes them, as they effectively cancel out the positive wishes expressed in the wedding hymn. We also see that

12. On the theory of mirror scenes in Greek tragedy see Taplin (1977) 100-3 and Taplin (1978) 122-39.

13. Euripides' *Medea* is considered to be the model for Seneca's play; see for instance Boyle (1997) 122 & Boyle (2014) lxxx.

14. See Mastronarde (2002) 24-26, Mossman (2011) 15, 18, 31. Euripides reduces the significance of magic in his tragedy to such an extent that there is philological debate as to whether Medea leaves the stage to prepare the poison or not, since there is no textual evidence for such an exit; see the discussion in Mastronarde (2002) 298-99, 304, who assumes that Euripides neglected to prepare his heroine's exit to poison the gifts. Mossman (2011) 296-97, on the other hand, believes that such an action is too important to have been omitted — Medea must be absent from the stage throughout the third *stasimon* or

literary narrations prior to Seneca devote relatively few lines to the supernatural powers of witches who hold sway over the forces of heaven and earth (see e.g. Horace's *Epodes* 5 or Ovid's *Amores* 1.8.). In Seneca's *Medea*, by contrast, sorcery and descriptions of it extend over two consecutive scenes: prior to the incantation, Seneca adds an extensive monologue by the nurse (lines 740-849), in which she tells the audience of the magic spells that Medea performs off-stage, inside her house.

One might argue that the incantation would have sufficed, and that the nurse's monologue is largely redundant,¹⁵ but this is far from the truth. The monologue does add considerably to the atmosphere of sinister magic surrounding Medea's song. The witchcraft wrought off-stage culminates in the magical on-stage incantation. We should bear in mind that the practice of magic during the song is what the audience sees, whereas the poison and fire that consume Creusa and her father occur out of sight. In this respect the incantation is more dramatically powerful than its outcome.¹⁶

Exactly how the nurse lays the groundwork for what follows is of great interest. Thus in the first part of her monologue we learn of how Seneca's Medea chants spells at her house altar to summon up *pestes* (681), *omne monstrum* (684), and *omne serpentum genus* (705). Various supernatural snakes answer her calling. Medea's words are conveyed in direct speech (690-704): with regard to stage performance, it would be difficult for an actor to imitate the voice of an elderly woman imitating the voice of a younger one uttering powerful spells.¹⁷ Thus in the incantation scene we seem to have a reiteration of off-stage activities, yet in an intensified manner.¹⁸ Medea is again by an altar, this time on stage, surrounded by

even for part of it, in order to be able to anoint the presents. Euripides also downplays Medea's earlier sorcery.

15. According to Boyle (2014) 313: "Medea's appearance on the *exostra/eccyclema* is a theatrical shock. The nurse's messenger-style speech would have led the audience to think that the Nurse's account of the magical rites inside the house was, as was customary with messenger-speeches, the complete account of the event in question".
16. Friedrich (see Rosenmeyer [1989] 97) sees a striking disparity between Medea's colossal abilities and the relatively run-of-the-mill murder she commits: "ein leider ziemlich alltäglicher Giftmord".
17. An analogous situation is described in Menander's *Samia* (245-61), for instance, where an old man, Demeas, imitates first the voice of an elderly woman and then that of a young maid.
18. A similar technique, i.e. narration of off-stage action by a quasi-messenger followed by a re-run of the action on stage, is found in Plautus' *Rudens*: the slave Trachalio relates how the pimp has violently removed two suppliants from the statue of Venus off-stage. When

poisonous plants, serpents and bird innards, chanting more spells, invoking more dark creatures and deities.

In the second part of her monologue the nurse describes in detail how Medea has gathered animal parts and plants, some obviously in the past and others more recently. She has visited various sites inaccessible to ordinary people, as if to stress her incredible powers.¹⁹ Suspense is thus created regarding the time of the witch's actual appearance and the use of all the magical ingredients she has assembled. When Medea does enter she exceeds audience expectations by means of an astonishing device: an incantation designed to cancel out the *epithalamium*.

Right from the Prologue, the audience is made aware that Medea's immense power as a witch far exceeds that of a simple sorceress. In the opening lines she promises to destroy Corinth by fire and unite its two seas. This threat is indeed realized at the end, when the supernatural fire caused by the poison hangs menacingly over the entire city (883-90).²⁰ So while Euripides' Medea limits herself to murdering the members of Jason's two families (Creusa, Creon and the children), Seneca's heroine utters threats beyond the capabilities of ordinary mortals, and can provoke destruction unimaginable to her Euripidean counterpart. Far more than merely being a force of nature, the Roman tragedian's Medea is a witch who can harness and exploit nature for her own evil ends.²¹

Let us now turn to a co-examination of the two songs, the *epithalamium* and the incantation, relating to the upper and nether worlds respectively. The two domains differ radically as regards their inhabitants, their gods, the props seen in each, etc. The following table shows the contrast of words and phrases arising from binary oppositions between the scenes at ten different points. Comparisons already noted by Heil are A, B, D and J.

all of them subsequently appear on stage, the pimp threatens to remove the girls from an altar dedicated to the same goddess.

19. As Rosenmeyer argues (1989) 167: "reaching into the furthest corners of the known world for the horrors of a witch's brew is indeed a greater achievement than the mere act of joining heaven and earth, a juncture given in the very premises of Stoic cosmology".
20. Cf. also Medea's lines 426-27: *Sola est quies, / mecum ruina cuncta si uideo obruta. / mecum omnia abeant. trahere, cum pereas, libet* (Tranquility only comes if I see the world ruined with me. Let all things fall with me. It's sweet to destroy as you die).
21. Lines 166-67 point to a witch who can even control the gods: *Medea superest: hic mare et terras uidet / ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina* (Medea is left. Here you can see ocean and land, iron and fire, gods and thunderbolts).

<i>Epithalamium</i>	Incantation
A. The gods of the sky and sea (<i>qui caelum superi quiue regunt fretum</i> , 57).	The <i>di manes</i> and the dark chaos of Hades' realm (<i>ferales deos / et chaos caecum atque opacam Ditis umbrosi domum / Tartari ripis ligatos squalidae Mortis specus</i> , 740-42).
B. The sacrifices of the white-backed bull (<i>taurus...tergore candido</i> , 60), the snow-white heifer (<i>niuei femina corporis</i> , 61) and the delicate victim (<i>tenera...hostia</i> , 66).	Medea's libation from her own blood (<i>Maenas...manet noster sanguis ad aras</i> , 806-08) or the sad owl and the screech-owl (<i>maestique cor bubonis et raucae strigis... uiscera</i> , 733-34), whose innards are removed while still alive.
C. The languid, garlanded Hymen (<i>huc incede gradu marcidus ebrio, / praecingens roseo tempora uinculo</i> , 69-70).	Hecate bloody garlanded with nine serpents (<i>Tibi haec cruenta sarta texuntur manu, / nouena quae serpens ligat</i> , 771-72).
D. The invocation to Hesperus to scatter his lucent light (<i>radios spargere lucidos</i> , 74).	The invocation to death's blind chaos and dark house (<i>chaos caecum atque opacam Ditis umbrosi domum</i> , 741), or the appeal to pale Hecate to shed her torch's tearful light (<i>face tristem pallida lucem</i> , 793). ²²
E. The conspicuous glow of Creusa's beauty, which eclipses all women (<i>unius facies praenitet omnibus</i> , 94), including Medea.	The golden necklace (<i>fuluo...auro</i> , 820) which encloses the dark poisonous fire, or the dark seeds of flame themselves, concealed inside Medea's gifts (<i>donisque meis semina flammae / condita</i> , 834), which will burn Creusa.
F. The joyful participants in the procession who dance and sing and crack playful, insulting jokes (<i>Concesso, iuuenes, ludite iurgio, / hinc illinc, iuuenes, mittite carmina</i> , 107-08).	The silent throng of the dead (<i>uulgus silentum</i> , 740), and the tortured souls of Hades who are summoned as guests to the same new wedding (<i>supplicis, animae, remissis currite ad thalamos nouos</i> , 743), such as Ixion, Tantalus, Sisyphus and the Danaids (744-51).

22. Seneca contrasts the light of Hecate's torch with the light of Hesperus (and later of Hymen). Torch-bearing Hecate occurs in many Greek poetic texts. See, for instance, Heckenbach (1912), col. 2777-78.

<p>G. Hymen, who contributes to the joyful festivities by shaking his pine torch and making the crowd laugh at obscene jokes (<i>multifidam iam tempus erat succendere pinum: excute sollemnem digitis marcentibus ignem. festa dicax fundat conuicia fescenninus, soluat turba iocos</i>, 111-14).</p>	<p>Hecate, who terrifies nations with the light of her torch (<i>horrore nouo terre populos</i>, 794).²³</p>
<p>H. The wedding torches (<i>sollemnem...ignem</i>, 112).</p>	<p>The torch Medea snatches from a pyre (<i>de medio rapta sepulcro fax</i>, 799-800) or the bride's blazing hair, which will surpass her torches (<i>uincatque suas flagrante coma noua nupta faces</i>, 838-39), when she is set on fire.</p>
<p>I. The ritual blaze of these wedding torches ignited by Hymen (<i>solemnem...ignem</i>, 112).</p>	<p>The sacred flames of Hecate's torch (<i>sacros...ignes</i>, 841-42).</p>
<p>J. The arrival of Hymen, who garlands his temples with roses (69-70) or lights splintered pine (110-11).</p>	<p>The epiphany of Hecate, who howls three times and shoots sacred flames from her shining torch (<i>ter latratus audax Hecate dedit et sacros edidit ignes face lucifera</i>, 840-42).</p>

In the closing lines of the *epithalamium* the focus moves from Creusa to Medea: Jason will no longer have to contend with an untamed wife, but will live with an Aeolian girl offered in marriage with her father's blessing. Indeed, the second wedding is valid by Greek standards. But it is not accepted

23. In E. *Tr.* 315-26 Cassandra, forcibly following Agamemnon to Argos, sings a sinister wedding song in which she lights the wedding torch in honor both of Hymenaios and Hecate. On the connection between wedding and death see schol. *Tr.* 323 Schwartz: *τὴν Ἐκάτην παρέμειξεν διὰ τὸ μετ' ὀλίγον ἀποθνήσκειν. χθονία γὰρ ἡ θεός. ἢ ὅτι γαμήλιος ἡ Ἐκάτη.* The last part of this comment probably refers to the experience of the loss of virginity and the ritual concept of "death as marriage"; see S. *Ant.* 1199-1205, E. *Hec.* 416, 418, Paus. 1.43.1. However, whereas Cassandra connects Hymenaios and Hecate in her own song, in Seneca Hymenaios is invoked by the participants of Creusa's wedding procession and Hecate by Medea in her magical incantation.

by Medea, who will again prove uncontrollable. The wedding hymn closes with the wish that Jason's foreign wife should leave in silent darkness. She will in fact vanish into the night, under the threatening flame of the soldiers' torches, as if she were a sinister bride. However, far from remaining silent, she will later speak in a commanding manner, leaving the final two lines of the play to Jason. And she will show herself to be a powerful persecutor: having killed Creusa and Creon, she will murder her two sons on stage. Her escape into the sky signals her apotheosis,²⁴ as also indicated by the *mechane* that lifts the chariot onto the roof.

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Seneca has changed the dramatic time of *Medea* chosen by his Greek predecessor. Euripides places the facts of the plot in an undefined period after the new wedding, and his entire plot unfolds over the course of a single day, in broad daylight. We shall now turn to examining the scholarly debate over the dramatic time of the incantation and *epithalamium* in Seneca's *Medea*, as well as the time span covered by the play in general.

A variety of opinions have been expressed on this matter. With respect to the *epithalamium*, Hine states that there is no clear timing for the wedding ceremony, and that wedding songs were sung at various stages during the ritual.²⁵ Boyle contends that the play begins in the late afternoon and lasts for a few hours, and adds that the timing of the wedding procession in the late afternoon is evident from the choral invocations to *Esperus*, the evening star; this is in accordance with the fact that in antiquity the procession from the bride's father's home to that of the groom usually took place in the evening.²⁶ Heil maintains that the wedding song takes place in the morning, since the *deductio* of the bride is not represented on stage, and argues that the play covers one whole day.²⁷ Zwierlein suggests that the action begins at around sunset (as can be deduced from the *epithalamium* invocations), and continues on into the next day; he argues convincingly that Creon gives Medea one day to leave Corinth, and that this period of grace can only commence on the morning of the day following the wedding

24. See Boyle (2014) 385, 388.

25. Hine (2000) 121.

26. Boyle (2014) 96, 131, 141.

27. Heil (2013) 178.

ceremony.²⁸ Indeed, this time shift is found in other plays such as Terence's *Adelphoe* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

I would like to put forward another suggestion regarding the play's dramatic time. The choral invocations to the evening star to scatter its light and to Hymen to shake the pine torch are confusing to the audience or even listeners to Seneca if they are to be taken as void, unfulfilled time indicators. If we accept the suggestion that the *epithalamium* is sung in the morning, then we have to wait until Creon grants Medea one day to remain in Corinth (line 295) to grasp that the play actually begins in the morning, having previously labored under the mistaken impression that the wedding ceremony has happened in the evening, as was customary in the Greek world. But the *deductio* of the bride does not necessarily occur; the fact that Creusa is a princess means that Jason has no need to transfer her from the palace to his house, where Medea still lives. Besides, we know that the new couple will live in the palace.

That being said, the suggestion that Creon should grant Medea a deadline that expires at the end of a whole day later is convincing, as noted earlier.²⁹ This same interval subsequently recurs as the day of revenge. For instance, Medea will cry out that her pain should not be hastened along: *meus dies est: tempore accepto utimur* (1017, 'It is my day: I use the time agreed').³⁰ Creon exits to participate in celebrations for Hymen's sacred day (*festus Hymenaeo dies*, 300). To my mind, this is not to be taken as denoting morning or noon, but whatever remains of the day that has already dawned long before the play begins. Consequently, I propose that Creon does not meet Medea the next morning, but in the night, after the *epithalamium* has been sung; Medea is reacting to this song and nothing else.³¹ In lines 116-20 Medea is distraught on hearing the song, and reaches the conclusion that *hoc facere Iason potuit*, i.e. that Jason has actually *gone through* with the wedding, leaving her all alone.

Nevertheless, Creon has granted Medea one day. I find it more plausible that he means the day following the night of the festivities. Thus, after Creon's exit at line 300, the second choral ode covers the dramatic time of the night. At line 380 Medea rushes on stage — the following morning, in

28. Zwierlein (1986) 161-62, n. 70.

29. This is an obvious imitation of the analogous Euripidean request.

30. From a metadramatic point of view, Schiesaro (2003) 212 briefly notes that Medea "wants to control the time in order to bend it backwards...she has altered the regularity of time".

31. Zwierlein (*ibidem*) suggests Medea's reference to the wedding song is no more than a Senecan trick for dramatic effect.

my reading — furious after having spent the night full of negative thoughts. She first meets the Nurse and then Jason, and seeing that she cannot convince him to run away from Corinth with her, she contemplates her revenge in greater detail. The third choral ode covers more dramatic time, and Act IV features Medea spending the rest of the day preparing her horrific vengeance. She needs time to collect her thoughts and strength, as well as some of the herbs and insects and birds she will offer to Hecate. In actual fact, the poisonous presents Medea sends to Creusa with her children correspond to the presents offered to the bride on the day after a Greek wedding, the *epaulia*, which follows the *deductio* of the bride to her new home.

During the incantation scene Medea invokes Hecate, who appears as the moon goddess. What we have here is a phenomenon already described in the magical song (cf. 757-58: *mundus lege confuse aetheris / et solem et astra uidit*: The world has seen sun and stars together). Hecate's arrival is most probably signaled by the not entirely rare phenomenon of an evening sky in which the moon appears while the sun has not yet set. Indeed, in their closing address the chorus ask Phoebus to speed up his chariot, the gentle night, to bury the light, and Hesperus, lord of the night, to sink the frightful day (874-78). Although it is true that Medea describes the magical distortion of natural phenomena in her incantation (754-770), we do not have necessarily to infer that she has provoked a solar eclipse when she says that Phoebus *in medio stetit / Hyadesque nostris cantibus motae labant*.³² If the sky did suddenly darken, the chorus would definitely have had something to say about such an extraordinary event in their final ode.³³ Besides, the verb denoting a solar eclipse at midday is in a perfect tense (*stetit*), in accordance with a series of such verbs in the same tense that precede it, all denoting past events which Medea controlled with her magical powers. The verb *labant* is the last of such miracles and should be taken as a historical present.³⁴

A few scholars also believe that in her incantation Medea causes a lunar eclipse, because the light of the moon is pale yellow.³⁵ But let us take a closer look at the relevant lines: *Video Triuiiae currus agiles, / non quos pleno lucida uultu / pernox agitat, / sed quos facie lurida maesta, / cum Thessalicis uexata*

32. The claim that Medea brings about a solar eclipse is made by Zwierlein (1986) 161-63.

33. See Hine (2000) 189; Boyle (2014) 322-23. Costa (1973) 142 claims that Medea caused the sun to shine at night, but as Boyle (*o.c.*) correctly remarks, in their final ode the chorus appeal to Phoebus to speed up his chariot so that night will come; the day has not ended yet.

34. See Hine (2000) 189.

35. See Costa (1973) 144, Hine (2000) 191, Heil (2013) 193-97.

minis / caelum freno propiore legit (787-92). What Seneca is probably saying here is that Medea does not see the arrival of the full moon (*pleno... uultu*), but only a crescent moon, whose light is pale yellow, and thus grim; by appealing to Hecate, Medea has shaken her (*uexata*)³⁶ from her normal position in the sky, and made her come closer (*freno propiore*), as happens when the Thessalian witches call on the moon goddess. Whereas in Theocritus' *Idyll 2* (10-11), for instance, the witch alludes to a full moon, asking it to shine, Seneca has here chosen the fading light of a crescent moon as the suitable time for the practice of witchcraft.

The play thus most probably begins in the evening and extends over the whole of the following day up to nightfall. Both the *epithalamium* and the incantation scene are consequently sung in the twilight, and this is another point of comparison between them. That Medea performs her magic rituals in the fading light serves to underline the dark forces involved in her destructive witchcraft. Magical rites are in any case generally performed in the darkness, and, as said earlier, Medea invokes Hecate, the Moon goddess. The miraculous events following the incantation also happen in the evening. So while Euripides attaches very little weight to Medea's powers as a sorceress, Seneca has devised a play in which magic prevails, adjusting the dramatic time accordingly.

At this point it is worth briefly examining the possible performance conditions. If we agree that Seneca's dramas were presented on stage or were at least composed with a view to being performed some day, and also bear in mind that the *palliata* and tragedies under the *Respublica* were performed in broad daylight, then staging what is largely a nighttime plot would have presented a challenge. In such cases, playwrights would necessarily have relied on textual devices to create the illusion that the audience were witnessing events enacted mainly in the fading light. In the introductory scene to *Curculio*, for example, Plautus has his actors carry torches. In this play, too, Seneca has choristers carrying torches in the *epithalamium* procession, while Medea carries her own light and speaks of torch-bearing Hecate during the incantation. Both lyric songs also contain references to gods of the night.

The focus of the play's peculiar dramatic time on darkness is also indicated by the scenes and creatures appearing after the incantation scene. Night facilitates the appearance of supernatural beings, which exhort Medea to make up her mind and commit filicide. The Furies appear from

36. For this meaning see Lewis & Short s.v. *uexo*.

the nether world, along with an enormous serpent, Megaera, carrying a pale torch (once again stressing the antithesis between darkness and light), and the *umbra* of Medea's brother, Absyrtus; Medea asks Absyrtus to order the goddesses of revenge to return to their abode, the darkest of all places. Ghosts appear in the night. Here we should bear in mind that two further ghosts in Senecan drama delay the breaking of dawn: the *umbra* of Thyestes in *Agamemnon* and of Tantalus in *Thyestes* both enter the land of the living as miasmatic creatures from the nether world. In both cases the figures voluntarily return to their abode, whereas in *Medea* Absyrtus remains on earth for some time, mingling with the living and directing his sister's hand towards murder; there can thus be no change of the dramatic time to morning. Absyrtus was probably distinguished from the living characters on stage (Medea, her children and the nurse³⁷) by being made to resemble the other ghosts appearing in Seneca, but younger looking and perhaps with blood still on his costume, as he was slaughtered by his sister.³⁸

It has been argued that Medea either sees the supernatural beings she has summoned up or thinks that she sees them.³⁹ Their arrival on stage would undoubtedly have been of major dramatic potential in any performance. Besides, Medea has already employed magic to open the gates of the underworld and invite all of its denizens to witness her doings. The arrival of all manner of ghosts contributes to the impression that Medea can move in different worlds beyond ordinary human experience.

* * *

A final point can be made here with regard to darkness and light. If we bear in mind that the last Act is enacted in the hours before dawn, but suppose that the chariot with which Medea escapes in the closing scene emits or reflects light⁴⁰, then a contrast is created. The only relevant information ex-

37. On the nurse's appearance on stage in this scene and the line when she may exit see Boyle (2014) 349.

38. In Vergil's *Aen.* 6, 494-97, for example, the spirit of Deiphobus still carries the wounds inflicted on him at the time of his death.

39. Boyle (2014) 350, 366-68. Cf. Heil (2013) 204.

40. Nussbaum (1997) 237 notes: "We are, I think, to imagine it as brilliantly colored, gleaming in the sun". Despite the lack of any textual evidence, the same scholar assumes that at that specific moment the dramatic time is day. I examine the light from the carriage further below.

plicitly mentioned in the text is that Jason orders his soldiers to bring fire and burn Medea, which would serve to intensify the antithesis between night and day. The command is yet another device apparently invented by Seneca, given that there is nothing comparable at the end of the Euripidean *Medea*, in which Jason most probably appears on stage unaccompanied.⁴¹ Yet Seneca does not simply want to draw attention to the opposition between night and day. What we have here is a hint of something we have evidence of much later, in the Dark Ages: the horrible burning of witches.

The general consensus among scholars is that Medea escapes in the chariot belonging to her grandfather the Sun, as implied in the prologue, where she prays for permission to guide his fiery team of horses through the air (32-34). Seneca stresses Medea's ties to magic by presenting a vehicle drawn by serpents, i.e. chthonic beasts, whereas in Euripides the heroine clearly does escape in the chariot driven by the Sun; no mention is made of whether it is drawn by winged horses, which would make more sense, or snakes.⁴² In any case, in Senecan tragedies the sun suffers an eclipse at the sight of hideous crimes. In *Thyest.* (776-78) Phoebus-sun turns his face away in disgust from the Thyestean banquet. In *Agam.* (295-97) Clytemnestra tells Aegisthus that in the past Phoebus-sun was eclipsed because of the abominable intercourse of Thyestes with his daughter, and in the same tragedy Cassandra reports (908-9) that Titan-sun has faltered in his daily course, owing to the dismemberment of Agamemnon's corpse by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Thus, Sun is hardly the proper god to send Seneca's Medea her escape-chariot after she has slaughtered her children. Another god is more fitting.

We recall that earlier on in the incantation scene, the witch-goddess Hecate also appears in a chariot, howling and brandishing her torch. In a

41. The sword regularly appears even on vases which might represent the final scene in Euripides' *Medea*. In particular, an Apulian amphora dated ca. 330 B.C. and possibly related to the play shows an armed man on horseback, with others on foot pursuing Medea, while an Erinys figure holds a torch and a sword (see Taplin [2007] 124); a Lucanian calyx-Krater dated ca. 400 B.C. and more than likely related to the play has Jason holding a staff, not a sword (see Taplin [2007] 122-23); and a Lucanian hydria dated ca. 400 B.C. depicts Jason brandishing his sword (Taplin [2007] 117-18).

42. Taplin (2007) 119 wonders whether in Euripides "Medeia's chariot is drawn by snakes or snaky dragons—as it is, indeed, in all fourth-century and many later representations, and also in many later literary sources. There is no indication of this in our text; there is nothing to contradict it, but there is also nothing to corroborate it. One might expect the chariot of the Sun to be drawn by horses (which would be pretty difficult to stage), but snakes are especially appropriate for the magical Medeia".

performance, the same *mechane* could raise Medea's chariot up onto the roof. Again, the question whether Seneca's plays were actually performed is pertinent here. But Roman tragedies had been staged before or during his time, and setting up a *mechane* was technically possible then, especially in the permanent theaters in Rome.⁴³ Whatever the case may be, Hecate's arrival prepares the audience for Medea's mode of departure in the finale: her role is rounded off in the manner of another Hecate, rather than that of any benign god. Or to put it more precisely, Medea leaves the stage not as granddaughter of the bright sun, but as daughter of the pale Hecate.

* * *

Seneca made numerous changes when adapting Euripides' *Medea* for his own purposes. One highly significant example involved the addition of the scenes examined above. The *epithalamium* and the incantation added to the Latin play are correlated: the latter provides an ironic inversion of the former and are both enacted in corresponding periods of time, which serves to further underscore their mirroring qualities. The wedding of Creusa and Jason in Seneca takes place the night before the revenge plot, rather than at some indeterminate time a day earlier on. Thus, rather than patiently waiting for revenge, Seneca's Medea almost immediately sets to work on her spells the following evening. It is this magical element which the Latin poet chooses to foreground in his play, just as he chooses to highlight necromancy in *Oedipus*, and the slaughter of children and cannibalism in *Thyestes*. Dark rituals all of them, which impress the audience with their element of the supernatural and the pushing of tragedy to its limits.

43. In *B.C.* 2.147 Appian reports the use of a *mechane* not in the theater, but in a funerary spectacle in the *forum*: a rotating *mechane* was used at Julius Caesar's funeral service to present a blood-stained wax effigy of him to the crowd. Dupont (1985) 73 states that the Romans adopted the theater techniques of their Greek predecessors, e.g. cranes, which had been greatly improved during the Hellenistic period. Beacham (1991) 182-83 observes that the cranes are listed by Pollux among the scenic devices, though it is not always evident whether the ancient writer is referring to contemporaneous theater practices (2nd century A.D.) or possibly to Greek and Hellenistic ones.

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