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Chiara Battistella

**Seneca *tragicus* and the scholia to Euripides. Some case studies from the *Medea*\***

Is there any evidence that would suggest that tragic Seneca was familiar with the ancient scholia, that is the exegetical material, with which Euripides' tragedies have come down to us? To the best of my knowledge, this kind of inquiry does not appear to have attracted the attention of scholars so far. Although Seneca never cites his tragedies in his prose works nor offers a unified theory of literary composition, he nonetheless demonstrates sensitivity towards issues of the writing process and of poetic creativity, especially in *Ep.* 79 and 84<sup>1</sup>. The gist of the arguments presented therein is that it is always possible to inject novelty into worn-out subjects or mythological topics so as to confer a *nova facies* upon them (*Ep.* 79.6). Moreover, in *Ep.* 84.3, Seneca employs the bee metaphor to describe imitation as a transformative activity: the writer, like the bee, gathers, through a process of miscellaneous reading, his material from a variety of sources, creating his own product. Keeping to the bee analogy and focusing specifically on the *Medea*, I aim to show that Seneca's miscellaneous reading, underlying his tragic writing, may have conceivably included both Greek plays and their ancient commentaries, thus a variety of source-texts.

Euripides' homonymous play, which survives in its entirety, plausibly represents the chief Greek source text for Seneca's tragedy. The main problem with the *uetera scholia* to Euripides' plays is that, as is well known, a reliable edition is to date still lacking<sup>2</sup>. However, there is evidence that Ennius was acquainted with the scholia to Euripides' plays, which must have circulated in the Roman world in the second century BCE, equipped with annotations.

As far as Ennius' *Medea* is concerned, a volume by K. Lennartz and a recent article by G. Bitto<sup>3</sup> demonstrate that, despite the heavily fragmentary condition of the play, Ennius clearly drew on the scholiastic commentaries to Euripides' play, producing a very erudite and carefully crafted piece of work from the Greek model.

One can have only a vague idea of what Ennius' *Medea* may have looked like, and yet the scant surviving fragments suffice to allow a conception of it as being quite different from Seneca's play. Admittedly, the attitude of Latin writers towards Greek sources radically changed over time,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Trinacty 2014, 9-16.

<sup>2</sup> On this cf. Dickey 2007, 31-4.

<sup>3</sup> Lennartz 1994; Bitto, 2013.

in that they started to replay their models not so much as translations *stricto sensu* but as rewritings<sup>4</sup>.

In this paper, I shall look specifically at two case studies from Seneca's *Medea* in order to provide evidence that during Seneca's time Euripides' text may have circulated accompanied by the same commentaries that were read in the second century BCE. In the first example, in particular, I attempt to show how such material may contribute to the appreciation of a precise aural feature in Seneca's text, despite the presence of multiple sources (Seneca's *Medea* must have massively drawn on both Greek and Latin models<sup>5</sup>, some of which are unfortunately lost to us, such as Ovid's tragedy). I will start with a passage from Euripides and its relevant scholia and subsequently turn to Seneca. In the second example, moving to the epilogue of the plays, I will reverse the process and start with Seneca's text to trace back to Euripides and his ancient commentators. Two further examples, revolving around the end of the Seneca's play, will be also discussed.

Since I have not conducted a systematic and exhaustive analysis of Seneca's text alongside the scholia to Euripides, which would have been beyond the scope of this article, the present study will be able to offer only some tentative thoughts on Seneca's acquaintance with the scholia to Euripides' *Medea* in the hope of stimulating future interest in the topic

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### **Medea's *seruatric* and the issue of sigmatism**

Line 476 of Euripides' *Medea* attracted the attention of commentators already in antiquity owing to the presence of marked sound effects, famously labelled as "sigmatism"<sup>6</sup>:

ἔσωσά σ', ὡς ἴσασιν Ἑλλήνων ὄσοι

ταύτων συνεισέβησαν Ἀργῶν σκάφος

'I saved your life – as witness all the Greeks who went on board the Argo with you' (Kovacs)

Indeed, it contains several hissing sigmas (7x), as pointed out by the scholion ad loc.<sup>7</sup>: *πλεονάζει ὁ στίχος τῷ σ*. ('the line is packed with s's', transl. mine). Further information is then provided by the scholion, which mentions the reuse of this Euripidean verse by the comic playwright Plato in the *Heortai* (ἔσωσας ἐκ τῶν σῖγμα τῶν Εὐριπίδου, fr. 29 K.-A.: 'you saved [us] from the sigmas of

<sup>4</sup> For Johnson 1988, 85 Seneca's plays look like 'malicious subversions of Euripides' tragedies'.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. recently Boyle 2014, lxiii-lxxviii.

<sup>6</sup> Based on quantity rather than on arrangement only (cf. Clayman 1987, 70ff.).

<sup>7</sup> The standard edition is Schwartz, 1887-91. On scholiasts' attention to sound effects cf. e.g. Meijering 1987, 42.

Euripides’) and by Eubulus in the *Dionysius* (fr. 26 K.-A.)<sup>8</sup>. Both rewrote line 476, alerting their audiences to their parodic intent and thus showing that the verse had become in short time the subject of comic lampoon because of its aural features.

This line belongs to the *rhexis* that Medea delivers in front of Jason upon their first on-stage encounter after she has learned that Creon intends to expel her from Corinth. She attacks Jason verbally and then reminds him of the events that took place back in Colchis and in which she had a decisive role in saving his life. The line under consideration emphatically introduces such a list of events. Modern commentators offer the following insights into this verse: Page (107) points out that ‘it is perverse to suppose that what is so effective can be accidental’; Mastronarde (252) notes that ‘the alliteration seems to reflect vehemence or exasperation’; Mossman (266) does not tackle the issue of hissing sounds in the line; however, she observes that in the immediately subsequent verses Medea’s language is ‘ornate and impressive’<sup>9</sup>.

A standard reference for sigmatism in Greek poetry is an article by D.L. Clayman<sup>10</sup>, in which the phenomenon is statistically surveyed. The author reaches the conclusion that harshness of content is by no means the only cause of heavily sigmatic lines (77) and that Euripides indeed proves to be more sigmatic than the other tragedians (78). Sigmatism – and especially word-initial sigmas – is a distinctive feature of his tragic style, but it is also consistent with contemporary practice. She also points out that, despite statistics, the difference in sigmatism between Euripides and the other tragedians must have been ‘both perceivable and meaningful’ to their audiences (73, n. 20), as proved by Plato’s and Eubulus’ parody (cf. above).

From the aesthetic standpoint, the sound ‘s’ was perceived as rather unpleasant in antiquity, as stated by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *de comp. verb.* 14.80: ‘σ is neither charming nor pleasant and is very offensive when used to excess, for a hiss is felt to be a sound more closely associated with an irrational beast (θηριώδους γὰρ καὶ ἀλόγου) than with a rational being’ (Usher)<sup>11</sup>. As W.B. Stanford observes, ‘poets choose words that inherently and intrinsically promote the desired emotional effects’; the heavy sibilance exploited by Euripides in *Med.* 476 most likely points thus to hostility<sup>12</sup>, also given that those words are spoken by a barbarian character.

Since Seneca’s plays, as already noted, are far from being faithful translations of Greek originals and offer instead powerful rewritings of their models<sup>13</sup>, one may wonder what has become

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hunter 2004, 119-20.

<sup>9</sup> Page 1938; Mastronarde 2002; Mossman 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Clayman 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Conte 1988, 69 ad Luc. 6.151 *inpius et cunctis ignotus Caesaris armis*? He points out that Roman poets are generally keener on soundplay than Greek poets. Cf. also Cronin 1970, who has recourse to statistics without however touching on the semantic effects of sigmatism.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Stanford 1981, 137; cf. also Cyrino 1996, 5: ‘the Greek hisses out her bitterness and outrage’.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g. Buckley 2013, 205-6.

of Euripides' line 476 in Seneca's text. The passage that shows more thematic or conceptual resemblance with our Euripidean *locus* is represented by lines 225ff., in which Medea addresses Creon before encountering Jason<sup>14</sup>:

[...] *Solum hoc Colchico regno extuli,  
decus illud ingens Graeciae et florem inclitum,  
praesidia Achiuae gentis et prolem deum  
seruasse memet. munus est Orpheus meum,* 228  
*qui saxa cantu mulcet et siluas trahit*

[a catalogue of the Argonauts she has saved follows; Jason is referred to in 233 *nam ducum taceo ducem*]

‘[...] The only thing I brought from the kingdom of Colchis was this:

the great glory of Greece, its celebrated flower,

the bulwark of the Achean race and the offspring of the gods –

I saved them. Orpheus is a gift from me,

he who charms rocks and transports forests with his singing’ (Hine)

Line 228 *seruasse memet. munus est Orpheus meum* is obviously no literal translation of Eur. *Med.* 476; it appears, however, situationally close to our target line, in that it has an "incipitary" *seruasse* and mentions one of the Argonauts, Orpheus<sup>15</sup>. A.J. Boyle, the latest commentator, observes that Euripides' Medea makes a more restricted claim, as she is interested in recalling only the rescuing of Jason<sup>16</sup>.

Commentators do not seem to have paid much attention to line 228<sup>17</sup>, but I was personally struck by its phonetic effects produced by a six-time repetition of "s"<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, this is a very sigmatic chunk of text, whose sibillancy may perhaps also be an attempt to reproduce the enticing effects of Orpheus' music (229)<sup>19</sup>. Nonetheless, the key motif remains undoubtedly Jason's, or rather, the Argonauts' rescue thanks to Medea's intervention (one may also note that line 228 offers another alliterative pattern, "m": *memet, munus, meum*).

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<sup>14</sup> 'In Seneca's play, Medea's saving of the Argonautic crew is an important motif in the scene with Creon' (Boyle, 2006, 168). Cleasby 1907, 50 already cites Seneca's lines 225-8 as mapping onto Euripides' lines 476-7.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Costa 1973, ad 228: 'M. now names some of the more distinguished Argonauts'.

<sup>16</sup> Boyle 2014, ad loc.

<sup>17</sup> Boyle has a very informative note on 228, which however does not touch on the issue of sigmatism.

<sup>18</sup> On Medea *seruatric* Hine 2000, ad loc. references some of the *loci paralleli* that are also discussed here (Eur. *Med.* 476-85; 515; Ov. *Her.* 12.173; 203; *Met.* 7.55-61; Ov. *Med.* fr. 1 Ribbeck). Cf. also Jacobi 1988, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Eur. *Alc.* 357-9 εἰ δ' Ὀρφέως μοι γλῶσσο καὶ μέλος παρῆν, / ὅστ' ἡ κόρην Δήμητρος ἢ κείνης πόσιν / ὕμνοισι κηλήσαντά σ' ἐξ Ἄιδου λαβεῖν. Sigmatism is also present in Verg. *Georg.* 4.509-10 *flesse sibi et gelidis haec euoluisse sub antris [astris : Rrv] / mulcentem tigres et agentem carmine quercus*, in which Orpheus laments the second loss of Eurydice.

There are certainly other examples of sigmatism in extant Latin texts that ideally may bridge the gap between Euripides' *Medea* and Seneca's *Medea*. A fragment from Ennius' *Medea* (107 Jocelyn), centred on the same theme of Jason's rescue, can be brought into the picture:

*tu me amoris magis quam honoris seruauisti gratia* (5x)  
'you saved me for love more than as a favour' (transl. mine)

Apart from some sigmatic effects, the verb *seruare* also occurs here.

Amazingly enough, of the two lines that survive from Ovid's *Medea*, one of them reads as follows (fr. 1 Ribbeck):

*seruare potui: perdere an possim, rogas?* (4x)  
'I could save. You ask if I can destroy?' (Boyle)

There is consensus that this line was spoken by Medea in response to Jason. Because of its menacing tone, it may belong to a confrontation scene between the two characters. Boyle has some interesting remarks on it, which I quote: 'Note the rhythmic alliteration of "p"s and nuanced repetition of "r"s, making it a forceful and speakable line reflective of Medea's contempt and strength of will. Quintilian (*Inst.* 8.5.6) cites the line for its force, *uis*, which he attributes to its particularity' (168). As a matter of fact, sigmatism is also audible, but it goes unnoticed in Boyle's observations.

Medea's saga is also recounted elsewhere in Ovid and sigmatism, again, strikingly characterises the verse's 'sound profile' in those passages focusing on her saving of Jason:

Ov. *Her.* 12.203  
*dos mea tu sospes, dos est mea Graia iuuentus* (7x)  
'my dowry is yourself – saved; my dowry is the band of Grecian youth!' (Showerman)

12.127  
*sospes ad Haemonias victorque reverteris urbes* (6x)  
'yet unharmed and victorious you return to Haemonia's towns'<sup>20</sup>

*Met.* 7.93-4

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<sup>20</sup> McKeown 1998 states that 'Medea was the most celebrated exponent of sigmatism, a feature which enhances the magnificent vehemence of the line so splendidly', scil. Ov. *Her.* 12.121 *compressos utinam Symplegades elisissent*); cf. also Bessone 1997, 190 and 270. Ov. *Her.* 6.147 (*Hypsipyle Iasoni*) is also heavily sigmatic: *ipse quidem per me tutus sospesque fuisses*.

... *seruabere munere nostro,*

*seruatus promissa dato!*

‘you will be saved by my favour: when you are saved give me what you have promised’ (Hill)

Given the sustained popularity of her myth in antiquity, the motif of Medea *seruatricis* is to be acknowledged as a topical pattern in the saga; as a result, source hunting inevitably has its limits. As underlined by scholars such as Cleasby and Tarrant, Seneca’s *Medea* looks back to both Euripides and Ovid, so that it would certainly be misguided to downplay the importance of Roman sources and, above all, that of Augustan tragedy<sup>21</sup>. However, owing to the much regrettable loss of Ovid’s tragedy, Euripides remains the chief tragic source text to work with. The force of Euripides’ line and its intrinsic phonetic capacity to influence Seneca’s re-appropriation of it may seem sufficient to rule out mediation by the scholion. Nevertheless, in my view, Seneca’s choice to mobilise the perfect infinitive *seruasse* points to some degree of intentionality in the rewriting: in picking up the sigmatism of the corresponding Greek form ἔσφσα, he gives prominence to a distinctive feature that is also interestingly retained in and replayed by the comic playwrights cited by the scholia. By claiming her role of helper-maiden<sup>22</sup>, Medea not only reproduces a topical moment of the story, she also phonically hints at it, positing sigmatism as a salient element already brought to the fore by ancient commentaries.

Moreover, another Ennian fragment, 274-5 Vahlen, which is usually, although not unanimously, attributed to Ennius’ *Medea*, deserves brief attention here. G. Bitto, in his Hermes article, observes that one may relate these lines to Eur. *Med.* 476-7 because of similarity of content:

*non commemoro quod draconis saeui sopiui impetum,*

*non quod domui uim taurorum et segetis armatae manus*

‘I don’t mention that I put to sleep the savage serpent’s assault,

nor that I tamed the bulls’ strength and the power of the armed crop’ (Boyle)

Now, if one adds to Euripides’ line 476 lines 480-1, it may immediately be noticed that they are also highly sigmatic, as they are meant to recall the serpent’s hissing:

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Tarrant 1978, in part. 261 and 263. Cf. also Pratt 1983, 27, who keeps Accius and Ennius apart from Seneca’s plays, in that archaic examples of Roman tragedy can be considered free translations or adaptations of Greek originals, a far cry from Seneca’s tragic composition. He also notices that, had Seneca written as Ennius did, the question of sources would never have arisen and it is therefore quite irrelevant to pin down parallels between Ennius and Seneca or Accius and Seneca, since they result merely from the common subject matter.

<sup>22</sup> This is, incidentally, the function she is predominantly invested with by Apollonius of Rhodes in his deliberate inversion of Euripides’ depiction of her character (cf. Boyle 2014, lxviii); cf. Apoll. Rh. 4.195ff.

δράκοντά θ', ὃς πάγγρυσον ἀμπέχων δέροϛ

σπείραιϛ ἔσφριζε πολυπλόκοιϛ ἄυπνοϛ ὄν

'[I killed] the dragon who kept watch over the Golden Fleece, sleeplessly guarding it with his sinous coils' (Kovacs)

Bitto states that Ennius, as far as one can tell, drastically reduces the sigmatism of the Euripidean model, perceived as unpleasant, and confines it to the alliteration of *saeui sopiui* to imitate the serpent's hissing, thus giving it less visibility. Hence, if this is true, Seneca's lines are even more indicative of a "sigmatism-oriented" rewriting of the Greek model. Seneca seems to have looked back to it alongside his exegetical material with an erudite interest so as to bring to the fore, intentionally (and provocatively), the feature of sigmatism criticised by the scholia<sup>23</sup>.

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### Where is Seneca's Medea headed?

My second case study deals with Sen. *Med.* 891-2 (near the end of the play), lines which are usually assigned to Medea's nurse, although manuscript *E* has the messenger voicing them after Creon and his daughter have been killed by Medea's poison and while the palace is burning. Nonetheless, it seems less problematic, also from a dramaturgical perspective, to assign them to the nurse (cf. Boyle ad loc.):

NUTRIX

*Effer citatum sede Pelopea gradum,*

*Medea, praeceps **quaslibet** terras pete*

'Depart with all speed from Pelops' home,

Medea, and make haste for whatever lands you choose' (Hine)

These lines can be related to Eur. *Med.* 1122-3:

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<sup>23</sup> Bitto (forthcoming) discusses an example from Statius' *Silvae*, in which the poet gives prominence to aspects that both ancient scholia and Augustan poets considered as violating an allegedly shared notion of *prepon*. Interestingly, there seems to be a general tendency on the part of post-Augustan poets to retrieve and bring to the forefront elements criticised by ancient commentators and predecessors.



ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ

Μήδεια, φεῦγε φεῦγε, μήτε ναῖαν

λιποῦσ' ἀπήνην μήτ' ὄχον πεδοστιβῆ

‘Medea, run for your life! The sea vessel and the chariot that threads the ground – do not refuse them!’ (Kovacs)

Again, Seneca’s rewriting does not imitate the Greek model slavishly. Euripides’ messenger is not interested in Medea’s ultimate destination, as long as she flees from her enemies. However, the readers already know from 757ff. where she is headed, since in those lines she formally accepts Aegeus’ offer to join him in Athens (‘I shall come to your city as soon as I can, when I have accomplished what I intend and gained what I wish’). Besides, in the close she will also overtly announce that she will go to Athens (1384-5: ‘As for myself, I shall go to the land of Erechtheus to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion’).

By contrast, Medea’s final destination in Seneca is completely unknown. Her aerial flight leaves the reader wondering where she might be going, as she literally disappears in mid-air (1022 *patuit in caelum via* ‘a path to the heavens has opened up’; 1025 *ego inter auras aliti curru vehar* ‘I shall ride on my winged chariot among the winds’). Jason too is left wondering about her final destination and delivers a trenchant commentary: *per alta vade spatia sublime aetheris, / testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos* (1026-7 ‘travel up above through the high expanses of the heavens; bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods’). Seneca’s plot, therefore, remains silent on this, not to mention that Aegeus’ scene has been entirely removed from this play, which can be seen as indicative of Medea’s transformation into a more powerful and autonomous figure than her Euripidean counterpart<sup>24</sup>. Although the nurse’s warning that Medea must flee to *quaslibet terras* appears obscure or even elusive, *quaslibet* does not seem to have received attention from commentators.

Now, if we turn to the scholion to Eur. *Med.* 1122, it posits a rather descriptive and almost pedantic commentary, which, however, might help shed light on Seneca’s apparently colourless *quaslibet*. The scholion comments thus on the vehicles Medea will employ:

καταχρηστικῶς τὴν ναῦν ἀπήνην ὠνόμασεν· ἀπήνη γὰρ κυρίως ἡ ἄμαξα. ὄχον δὲ λέγει τὸ ὄχημα. ὁ δὲ νοῦς· εἴτε διὰ νεῶς εἴτε δι’ ὀρήματος εἶθ’ ὀπωσοῦν φεῦγε<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Boyle 2014, cxv: ‘Seneca’s Medea needs no Aegeus to ensure safe passage from Corinth’. Seneca is clearly not interested in representing a realistic escape at the end of the play. Also, in Euripides, Aegeus’ scene is clearly aimed at praising Athens.

<sup>25</sup> The standard vocabulary of exegetical commentaries occurs here, cf. for example καταχρηστικῶς, κυρίως, νοῦς, on which cf. Lachenaud 2010, xxxii-xxxiii. They are also recorded in Erbse 1983 and Nünlist 2009. As Dickey 2007, 219 points out, ‘there is a great need for a thorough, accurate study of this vocabulary’.

the term 'chariot' is misapplied (= is applied by extension) to 'ship'; ἀπήνη is, to use plain language (= precisely), the 'chariot' (ἄμαξα = four-wheeled wagon). He [scil. the messenger] names ὄχος the ὄχημα. The meaning is: 'run away either on a ship or on a chariot or **in any way whatsoever**' (transl. mine)

Mastrorade's commentary to Eur. *Med.* 1122-3 is in line with the scholion's interpretation: 'a grandiloquent circumlocution for "whether by sea or by land" or "by any available means"'.

Owing to the fragmentary condition of sources on Medea in the Latin world before Seneca, one cannot tell whether the indeterminacy of *quaslibet terras* comes from a Roman source text (Ovid?) or is genuinely Senecan. As already pointed out, there is no exact correspondence with the equivalent speech delivered by the messenger in Euripides apart from context. Despite this, if one adds to this picture the relevant scholion to Euripides, the expression *quaslibet terras*, by gesturing towards ὀπωσοῦν, may be explained from a different angle. In Euripides, the messenger is not aware that Medea will soon take off on a flying chariot sent by the sun god and points to more conventional, "human", means of escape, *whatever* they are (no matter how). In Seneca, the nurse warns Medea to leave as soon as she can (*praeceps*), *wherever* she might go (no matter where). The scholion appears to situate itself halfway between the two texts and connect them lexically by means of ὀπωσοῦν<sup>26</sup>, whose meaning remains latent in Euripides' passage, but fully emerges in *quaslibet*, although with a new meaning, in a sort of translation *cum uariatione*. *Quaslibet* also introduces an element of novelty into Seneca's epilogue, pointing to the mystery of Medea's final destination, which remains unnamed. The value of *quaslibet* is thus not merely cosmetic or colourless, as may be that of ὀπωσοῦν in the pedantic note of the scholia, but functional. Once more, Seneca seems to combine erudition with innovation, by drawing on ancient material to adapt it to new content.

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### **The infanticide scene**

My last two examples revolve around the final moments of Medea's tragedy, that is the infanticide and, again, her own flight. Let us start with the latter.

The very last words in Seneca's play are uttered by Jason and addressed to Medea. They are concise and trenchant (1026-7):

IASON

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<sup>26</sup> A search in the *TLG-Corpus* proves that ὀπωσοῦν is a relatively frequent term in prose, especially in enumerations.

*Per alta uade spatia sublime aetheris,  
testare nullos esse, qua ueheris, deos.*

‘Travel up above through the high expanses of the heavens;  
bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods’ (Hine)

In Jason’s view, Medea is so wicked as to cancel the presence of the gods wherever she flies on her aerial journey. These brilliant lines, a sort of atheistic and un-Stoic proclamation on Jason’s part<sup>27</sup>, do not have an equivalent in the Greek model. However, in turning to the scholia to the end of Euripides’ *Medea*, I was struck by the narrative variant I came across in the commentary to Eur. *Med.* 1386. It is a passage coming from another tragedy about Medea, written by the poet Neophron, whose relation to Euripides’ chronology is still debated (ancient sources report that Euripides plagiarised the *Medea* from Neophron’s work)<sup>28</sup>: the lines cited by the scholion contain Medea’s prophecy on Jason’s death, who will die by hanging, whereas, according to Euripides’ version, Medea predicts that Jason will be hit by a fragment of the ship Argo (1386-7). In Neophron’s play Medea speaks thus:

τέλος φθερεῖς γὰρ αὐτὸν αἰσχίστῳ μόρῳ,  
δέρη βροχωτὸν ἀγχόνην ἐπισπάσας.  
τοῖα σε μοῖρα σῶν κακῶν ἔργων μένει

‘In the end you will do away with yourself in a most shameful death  
drawing a noose for hanging about your neck  
Such a destiny awaits you for your evil deeds’ (Luschnig)<sup>29</sup>

Medea’s prophecy is rounded off by a pointed remark, whose content is highly didascalical (cf. δίδαξις):

δίδαξις ἄλλοις μυρίας ἐφ’ ἡμέρας  
**θεῶν ὑπερθε μήποτ’ αἰρεσθαι βροτούς**

‘instruction to others for countless days  
telling mortals never to exalt themselves above the gods’

Although in Seneca’s time Neophron’s tragedy is not likely to have circulated, Seneca may have encountered these lines in the scholia to Euripides’ play and hence reworked them consistently with his own treatment of Medea’s story. I would like, therefore, to suggest that there may be a lexical

<sup>27</sup> T.S. Eliot judged unique Jason’s final cry, on which cf. Costa 1973, 160. Cf. also Boyle 2014, ad loc. and cxvii.

<sup>28</sup> On this cf. e.g. McDermott 1989, 20-24.

<sup>29</sup> For fragments of Neophron’s *Medea* see <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/neophron.shtml>.

and conceptual connection between Neophron's and Seneca's lines, for which no correspondence is to be found in Euripides's play.

In Neophron, Medea warns Jason (and mortals in general) not to rise above the gods. Her words, resolute and menacing, shed negative light on Jason, represented as an evil and arrogant man who does not fear the gods. Given the fragmentary status of Neophron's play, one may wonder to what extent Jason dared rise above the gods with his behaviour. In Euripides' play, Medea violently accuses Jason of perjury (493-4; 1391-2), so that his violation of the oaths they swore upon their elopement (160-2) becomes one of the distinctive features of his character. Neophron's Jason, arguably, has in common with the Euripidean counterpart the same ethos of perjurer, due to which he does not respect the gods.

By contrast, in Seneca, Jason's final shocking words, indicating that wherever Medea flies there can be no gods, place her character as the true villain of the play, for whom no redemption whatsoever is contemplated. She is pure evil and her actions are completely beyond morality, for they subvert both human and divine rules<sup>30</sup>. Since she can get away with such a hideous murder, Jason's outcry seems to imply that Medea's presence suffices to trigger the absence of gods.

*Testare* (1027) is likely to gesture intertextually towards Jason's final words in Eur. *Med.* 1405-14, when he calls on the gods to bear witness to Medea's killing of their children (cf. 1410 μαρτυρόμενος), but it also appears to be endowed with didascalical content. As a matter of fact, the imperative 'bear witness' hints that Medea is the living proof that there exist no gods, in the same way as Neophron's Jason serves as proof (δίδαξις) that the gods punish those who rise above them. Their respective behaviours both have instructive value. Thus, if one brings the two passages closer together, also thanks to the lexical similarity shown in bold type above, Medea's escape *per alta spatia*, read against Neophron's metaphorical line θεῶν ὑπερθε μήποτ' αἴρεσθαι βροτούς, points to a flight during which she will overstep all boundaries, both physical (*qua veheris*) and moral, as suggested by comparison with the fragment. In fact, she will not only rise above the gods in her aerial flight, she will also end up annihilating them by means of her potency.

My last example sets out to suggest that the scene in Seneca's play representing Medea and the children together after the infanticide may be related once again to an observation from the scholia to Euripides. As is well known, dramatic scholia, being particularly attentive to questions of staging and dramaturgy, often attempt to provide the kind of information spectators in the theatre would have immediately obtained from watching the play<sup>31</sup>. The commentators' efforts, therefore,

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. 414 ... *sternam et evertam omnia*.

<sup>31</sup> On this cf. Nünlist 2009, 338-65; cf. also Trendelenburg 1867, in part. 135-7.

may also reside in helping ancient readers visualise the play, the acting of a particular scene being amongst their main exegetical priorities.

In Euripides' play, Medea kills her children inside the house and then appears with their corpses aboard the sun's chariot (no mention of a serpentine chariot is made in the text). She announces that she will take the children's bodies with her and bury them in the *temenos* of Hera Akraia before flying off to Athens (1317-85). The scholion ad Eur. *Med.* 1320 reads as follows:

ἐπὶ ὕψους γὰρ παραφαίνεται ἡ Μήδεια, ὀχουμένη δρακοντίοις ἄρμασι καὶ **βαστάζουσα** τοὺς παῖδας

'Medea appears on top [of the house], boarding her serpent-drawn chariot and taking the children on board' (transl. mine)

The scholion clarifies, by making it explicit, a dramaturgic moment that in the text may only be inferred from Medea's words, when she speaks thus in lines 1321-2: 'such is the chariot Helios my grandfather has given me to ward off a hostile hand' (Kovacs). Therefore, after killing the children, Medea must have taken them safely on board out of Jason's reach before appearing aloft on top of the house. Modern editions of the play, for clarity's sake, introduce into the text stage directions<sup>32</sup> to help readers better understand the progress of action, as for example Kovacs does right before line 1317: 'Medea appears aloft in a winged chariot upon the *mechane*, which rises from behind the *skene*'. Although no explicit mention of the children's corpses has been made so far, we may assume that Medea has already taken them on board, as becomes clear later in the final exchange between her and Jason (1317-1404).

Seneca opts for a different version of the infanticide: Medea kills the first child in the house in full view of the audience. Immediately afterwards, when she hears the noise of Jason's armed attendants approaching, she speaks thus (973-4):

*excelsa nostrae tecta conscendam domus*

*caede incohata ...*

'I shall climb the lofty roof of our house –  
the slaughter is unfinished ...' (Hine)

Hence she addresses the still living child (974-5):

... *perge tu mecum comes.*

*tuum quoque ipsa corpus hinc mecum **auham***

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<sup>32</sup> The reference book on this is Taplin 1978.

‘... you go on, keep next to me.

Your body too, I shall carry off with me’ (Hine)<sup>33</sup>

The second killing takes place on top of the house and, again, is not concealed, as in Euripides’ play. Yet, before leaving aboard her famous chariot<sup>34</sup>, she gets rid of her children’s corpses, thereby introducing a powerful element of novelty into Seneca’s plot (1024-6):

*squamosa gemini colla serpentes iugo*

*summissa praebent. Recipe iam gnatos, parens;*

*ego inter auras aliti curru uehar.*

‘twin serpents offer their scaly necks

in submission to the yoke. Now take your sons back, parent;

I shall ride on my winged chariot among the winds’ (Hine)

The imperative *recipe*, expressing a deictic gesture, serves as a signal of stage directions. Medea first takes the children with her to the top of the house (*aeuham*) and then, instead of loading their corpses into the chariot, hands them to Jason (*recipe*), boarding alone the serpentine chariot to flee. Boyle ad loc. comments thus: ‘Seneca is the first dramatist whom we know to have diverged from Euripides’ ending by having Medea leave the children’s corpses behind’. Such an innovation is perhaps worth reading alongside the aforementioned scholion to Euripides (1320), which also shares with Seneca’s play the detail of the serpentine chariot<sup>35</sup>. The scholion explains that Euripides’ Medea is about to take the children with her (βαστάζω means ‘to load’, ‘to lift’); on the contrary, as noted, Seneca’s Medea returns them to Jason (*recipe*; it does not really matter how: some scholars assume that she may have thrown them from the top at Jason’s feet; she may also have left them on the roof of her house<sup>36</sup>; what counts is that she is not taking them with her in the chariot). I believe that looking at the relevant note in the scholia to Euripides may help better appreciate the differences between Seneca and his Greek model in the last scene. Seneca incorporates into his own text the stage directions he likely read in the scholia to Euripides’ passage, again with a view to innovating by inverting Medea’s action: whereas the scholion makes

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<sup>33</sup> Jason, upon arrival, points at Medea (995): *en ipsa tecti parte praecipiti imminet.*

<sup>34</sup> 1022-24 *sic fugere soleo. Patuit in caelum via: / squamosa gemini colla serpentes iugo / summissa praebent ...*

<sup>35</sup> I do not intend to claim that Seneca took it directly from the scholia to Euripides. Seneca plausibly drew it from Ovid (cf. *Met.* 7.218-404). Although in Euripides’ play the chariot is not said to be drawn by serpents, this detail is attested by the iconographic tradition at least from the fourth century BCE and is also found in authors like Pacuvius and Horace (cf. Boyle 2014, ad loc.).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Boyle 2014, ad loc. Cf. also Gatti 2014, 78-81, who discusses a new fragment from Ovid’s *Medea*, in which Vulcanus is said to have been hurled down from Olympus by Juno (fr. 18 Osann *Vulcanus [...] praecipitatus est a Iove de coelo [...] At Ovidius in Medea a Iunone*). This version, which is less common than the one having Zeus hurl down Vulcanus, fits well into the episode of brutality against children of Medea’s story. Hence, Hera’s act in Ovid may have represented a model for Medea in throwing her children from the top of the house.

explicit that Medea boards the children's bodies, Seneca has Medea return them to their father. This also raises a correlated question concerning the visual impact of Senecan tragedy. While there is no doubt that absence of stage directions in Euripides' text might have been compensated by actual representation, it is still uncertain whether Seneca's plays were put on stage, were offered as *Rezitationsdramen*, or were meant for private reading<sup>37</sup>. In my view, the greater abundance of *pathos* in Seneca's plays establishes the priority of text over action, making up for the visual lacuna deriving from the circumstance that his tragedies were not represented in a traditional way: in Seneca the drama is to be placed first and foremost in the word, as also suggested in the title of an article by D. Mastronarde, in which the author brings to the fore the power of Senecan tragic *lexis*<sup>38</sup>. In Seneca the word comes first, before gesture and scenic apparatus. Medea says '*aeueham*' and '*recipe*', when she takes the children with her and then hands them back to Jason. Euripides' Medea does not have to explain her actions: they were expressly meant to be seen on stage and, only later, commentators began to clarify them for the readers' sake.

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<sup>37</sup> On this cf. Kohn 2013 and Zanobi 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Mastronarde 1970; cf. also Barchiesi 1988, 16-17 on the 'patetizzazione della parola'.

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