

Seneca's *Medea*. A Performance of the Macabre

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Abstract:

From a stoical perspective, the Senecan tragedies are the field on which man confronts his destiny in a battle between *ira* and *furor*, on the one hand, and reason on the other. Seneca's plays focus on extreme circumstances and pathological characters. From a visual, macabre viewpoint, Senecan characters belong to the category of the monstrous. They are actors in a lugubrious performance and should be analysed not based on the criteria of sanity, but those of insanity that goes beyond the limits of a troubled human mind. Seneca creates an astounding aesthetic category of diabolical male and female prototypes. His characters gradually give up their human features and culminate in a terrifying demonic representation for which both the playwright and his audience had a peculiar kind of admiration.

The shocking macabre side of Seneca's tragedies intensifies the act of killing, the symbol of revenge and the concepts of *dolor*, *ira*, *furor*, *nefas* and *fatum* with which murder blends naturally and indissolubly and which are embodied in emblematic characters like Medea and Thyestes. The feast of male cruelty follows the fascinating female demonic performance ending with the metamorphosis of the witch. In opposition to the blood that boils in the characters' mind and soul, *sanguis*, the blood that will flow too slowly from Seneca's veins, will become the symbol of death seen not as a tragic end, but moral and spiritual emancipation.

Keywords: Senecan tragedies, anger, revenge, good/bad blood

The Senecan Tragedies

A comparison of the interpretations of Seneca's work reveals that the debates concerning his philosophical works prevail over the critical approaches of his tragedies. This does not mean that the philosopher, thus favoured over the centuries, eclipsed the most important dramatist since the ancient Greek tragedy, which he reinterpreted, to the Renaissance playwrights, who took him as their model. Seneca's tragedies borrow enough ideas from his philosophical work to be considered their most adequate, if not necessary, illustration, a modality

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to assert their validity and viability. It is common knowledge that the tragedies, which are based on a solid philosophical system, influenced both the French Neoclassical tragedy that reached its climax with Corneille and Racine, and the Elizabethan drama that Shakespeare brought to excellence. The French dramatists, who preferred the grandiose form and style, adopted Seneca's elevated philosophical language typical of characters tormented by tragic guilt and destined to commit suicide or be killed. The Elizabethan playwrights borrowed Seneca's strong inclination for exteriorised passions, a perfect fit for the taste of the 17th-century English audience that loved to watch blood being shed on the stage. The premature denouement is the same both for classical characters like Hercules (the only Senecan hero who dies an apothotic, Stoic death) and those who anticipate the later Romantic tumult, like Medea, Phaedra or Deianira. Only their path to death is different: Stoic characters recite long, moralizing monologues, they die slowly, first spiritually and only then physically, while Renaissance-like heroes scream "Death!" and do not hesitate to draw the sword (Jocasta), choosing a brutal end either for revenge or the purification of the bloody hand that murdered innocent or not so innocent victims.

Seneca is famous for his violent, terrifying scenes that his Greek predecessors avoided on purpose. Medea is among the cruellest heroes in literature, the banquet that Atreus prepares for his twin brother Thyestes is frightening, to say the least, and the ritual that Tiresias and Manto perform in *Oedipus* is nothing less than macabre. The Latin tragedian has a predilection for magic, the supernatural and the macabre. His nine plays have Greek themes, but they follow the canons of Latin tragedies and include Roman realities subtly infiltrated in stoic conceptions. *Agamemnon* is adapted after Aeschylus, *Oedipus* draws inspiration from Sophocles, and the others are modelled on Euripides. Only *Thyestes*, Seneca's masterpiece, does not follow a pattern. All plays are "stained" with blood. *Hercules Oetaeus*, though stoic, is not an exception.

Seneca's tragedies can be classified after the themes they deal with: The Trojan War, its heroes and victims: *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes* and *Troades*; incest: *Phaedra* (stepmother-son), *Thyestes* (father-daughter), *Oedipus* and *Phoenissae* (mother-son), the last two focused on the king of Thebes and his descendants; two dramatic episodes in the life of the hero with twelve lives (*Hercules furens* and *Hercules Oetaeus*); revenge: in all plays, best expressed in *Medea*, in which the woman-mother-wife abandoned by her husband for another woman and glory gives an exceptional performance from beginning to end. Medea and Phaedra represent the female diabolical side (Clytemnestra proves to be

as evil as them), while Atreus and Aegisthus are symbols of the male demonic nature.

No matter whether Seneca wrote his plays to be read, recited or staged, they would definitely lose their dark charm if they had only readers and no audience. The horror-impregnated facts, the macabre episodes are full of tragism and... blood. Medea kills her children on the stage, which is considered a serious breach of the classical rules, especially Horace's direction in *Art of Poetry*, which demands that Medea should not murder her children in front of the audience. Seneca's characters embody psychic maladies that win the battle against virtue. By virtue of the role of catharsis in tragedy, which requires the experience of horror, the viewer becomes aware of the heroes' passions, as well as their moral uprightness. Reading the tragedies means frustrating the viewers who need to see in order to grasp the demonic side and its sense. It is not the very popular Greek myths used by Seneca that attracts an audience. People do not go to the theatre to see how a generally weak conflict ends; they want to watch the evolution of the wild, out-of-control impulses. The purpose of the tragedies is to present "the stages of crisis when the human soul is revealed in its own truth" (Grimal, 1992: 384). In Seneca's plays, there are no characters, but exacerbated feelings. The visual performance, no matter how lugubrious, must be preserved: the tragedies must be performed. They are lessons about how sins should be assumed. The sins are terrible, but they have a moralizing, cathartic effect. If retold or read, the magical ritual is diluted. The Senecan tragedies of cruelty *per se* are genuine masterpieces, a feast of horror, the visceral triumph of the pathological over the rational. It would be a great loss to "hear" a sacrifice instead of seeing it, no matter how rich your imagination may be. Seneca's characters' passion for murder through the torture of the victims and the people who are about to eat them is too strong – as the Elizabethan passion will be centuries later – to be perceived only through hearing, depriving the viewer of unique terrifying sensations. "The paroxystic phases are studied thoroughly, as if filmed in slow motion, right in front of the spectators' or readers' eyes" (Cizek, 1972: 161). Murder, like revenge, should be watched at leisure: "Enjoy a slow revenge" as Medea said.

"Deliberately teratological" (Grimal, 1992: 384), Senecan tragedies deal with extreme situations and pathological heroes who, once they have gone beyond paroxysm, fall into the category of the monstrous. And if the characters engage in endless monologues, they do it only to try to define themselves, to justify themselves, to teach a lesson about morality. Seneca is "a pathologist endowed with the gift of writing"

(Cizek, 1972: 161) who writes reports on psychological and behavioural abnormalities that cause terrible pains in his heroes. He may have intended to turn his plays into *exempla* (Grimal, 1992: 384), but what he actually conveys are examples that should *not* be followed. Only Hercules may be seen as a model, not when he is struck with fury, but when he lies in agony on Mount Oeta. Not even the nurses in *Medea* and *Phaedra* are completely positive characters, as one might expect. They do not fight with the characters to stop them from committing an abominable act, what the Romans called *nefas*; all they do is try to talk them out of it – a weak, useless attempt. Through concealment, they become their accessories.

Critics are concerned mostly with Seneca's deep female characters, *Medea* and *Phaedra*, although all his tragedies defy the classical tradition and not just because of their bloody episodes. But if one is to judge the plays strictly after the criterion of blood as the symbol of cruelty and revenge, of the nine titles mentioned above, four contain the most horrifying "live" scenes that are described in detail for a maximum terrifying effect: *Medea*, *Thyestes*, *Oedipus* and *Hercules furens*. Medea and Hercules kill their own children, while Thyestes eats his own sons, killed and cooked by his own twin brother. In *Oedipus*, Manto performs a ghastly sacrifice and towards the end of the play, the main hero tears out his eyes with his own hand. In *Agamemnon*, the king of Argos is killed by his wife and her lover, and in *Phaedra*, a stepmother takes her own life after causing an innocent young man's death. *Troades*, *Phoenissae* and *Hercules Oetaeus* are less "brutal" plays in which the bloody episodes do not occur in front of the audience.

When Sanguis Becomes Cruor

Essentially, stoicism means to bear one's misfortunes bravely, to live a moderate, reasonable life and to control one's impulses to annihilation. One has two possibilities: to resign oneself to fate – a reprehensible act – or to face its inevitable blows without complaining. Destiny, *fatum*, cannot be changed (this is the message that *Oedipus* conveys): no matter how hard the king of Thebes tried to fight against fate, he still ended up killing his father and marrying his mother. Nevertheless, fate can be defeated by fighting against oneself. To lose one's temper means to surrender to destiny, to give in to hardships and fatal events. When staged, such an event that causes unbearable spiritual torment is named tragedy, with all its accessories: anger, insanity, hate, torture, premeditated murder, suicide – all covered in *sanguis*, the sacred fluid that once flowing from the body becomes *cruor*, the sign of death.

From a stoical perspective, the Senecan tragedies are the field on which man confronts his destiny in a battle between *ira* and *furor*, on the one hand (“Gird thyself with *wrath*, and prepare thee for deadly deeds with the full force of *madness*” [emphasis added]) and reason, *mens bona* (“Ah, mad rage, say not so! Far, even from me, be that unheard-of deed, that accursed guilt!” [emphasis added]) on the other.

Ira, anger, is the crime committed by a *mens vitiata*. At first just a state, it is prolonged and becomes an attitude contrary to human nature. It is the second phase of the metamorphosis of the character into a “monstrous creature” (Cizek, 1994: 463), following *dolor*, the pain that is present at the beginning of the play. Dominated by *dolor*, man either surrenders to his merciless fate or chooses the path of anger.

What can be crueller than anger? wonders Seneca the philosopher. Should man’s desire to punish as a result of anger find a place in his heart is against his own nature (Seneca, *On Anger*, Book I, V, VII). Other passions take possession of the mind gradually. Anger conquers it suddenly and completely and will inhibit the pain that makes people weak. All the other feelings are subordinated to anger. And after *ira sanguinis* becomes manifest, follows *furor*, madness, the third phase of the metamorphosis that makes stronger only those individuals who, when calm, are also cowards. Therefore *ira* is a malady of the blood boiling in the veins. It culminates, through *furor*, in an atrocious, bloody crime, a deed forbidden by gods, committed by characters who, once they have killed, should be weighed not after the criteria of normality, but those of a madness that goes beyond any human limits: let their *passions* know no bounds, no shame; let *blind fury* prick on their souls [emphasis added], says the Fury in Thyestes.

Seneca matches the four classical elements – air, water, earth and fire – with what he calls the four “powers”: dry, moist, cold and hot. Geographically, these “powers” characterise various climate types on earth. Anatomically, they identify man’s chief temperamental attributes. Man will be influenced by that element that prevails in him. A hot-tempered individual is always prone to anger, as fire generates energy and dynamism, while a cold-natured person is a coward, for cold causes lethargy. Stoics believe that anger is stirred in man’s breast by the blood that boils in the heart, since the heart is the warmest place in the body, the perfect nest for anger to make. Moist temperaments grow angry progressively, while women’s anger bites and is easy to provoke. In dry natures, i.e. the sick or the elderly, anger is aggressive but constant, because heat is consumed due to disease or loss of blood (Seneca, *On Anger*, Book II, XIX). In other words, when *sanguis*, the sign of life, leaves the body, it becomes *cruor*, the sign of death.

Cruor, Not Sanguis!

This Senecan tragedy focuses on the mythological episode in which Medea the witch and her husband Jason, leader of the Argonauts, both fugitives from Iolcos, where they were left without the Golden Fleece and the throne Jason coveted, have taken refuge in Corinth. Here Jason decides to leave Medea and marry Creusa, King Creon's daughter. In the day she is given before her forced exile, Medea kills Creusa and her father with poisoned gifts and puts fire to the fortress. In the end, to punish her husband even more, she also kills their children and seeks refuge in the skies.

By virtue of the above-mentioned connections established between the primordial elements and the categories of human nature, Medea was born under the sign of heat, the fire that makes blood boil, as wine does to the mind. In her, anger bursts with an inhuman thirst of blood that must be shed in order to cool the too-hot blood boiling in her own veins. The cruel daughter of the Phasis does not care that she hurts herself as long as Jason suffers. A true paranoid nature, when anger strikes her she experiences hallucinations. She believes she sees her dead brother Absyrtus: "the wicked girl's little comrade hewn in pieces with the sword". As a gesture of symbolic compensation, Medea tells Jason that of all the gifts he may receive at his wedding with Creusa, all she wants back is her brother's limbs, which she scattered on an island (in other myth variants, into the sea) after killing him with her own hands, for Jason's sake.

Medea admits she is struck with insanity: "Perplexed, witless, with mind scarce sane, I am tossed to every side". Moreover, she is the victim of "mad grief" that tells her it's time she struck again, as she did when she committed the "impious crime" against Pelias or planned other abominable acts to help and protect Jason. The King of Corinth calls her a "contriver of wickedness, who combinest woman's wanton recklessness and man's strength" and employs "deadly herbs". Medea warns him that it is hard "to turn away from wrath the spirit when once aroused". She knows very well that anger knows no compromise and once you have taken its path, there is no way back. Medea can't put an end to her hate, as she could not put an end to her love. When she learns that her husband is going to leave her and steal her children and the king intends to force her into exile, both hate and love will have the same purpose, because "Anger puts love to flight, and love, anger".

Before committing the murders, Medea proclaims her "bloody" identity with great pride: "Now I am Medea; my wit has grown through suffering". Consequently, she is ready to go on with her killings. As her rival Creusa does not have children, she imagines that her own children

are the offsprings of Jason and Creusa, the soon to be married couple, so that she can kill them without remorse. They should be the ones to pay for their father's crime of abandoning her. Just as she called her first murders "too trivial", so she denies her children, only to take revenge as she pleases: "Let them die, they are none of mine".

Medea feels betrayed. It is her blood that talks and urges her to avenge herself on the betrayer. She declares she is happy that she killed her brother and chopped up his body, that she fooled Pelias's daughters into cutting their father into pieces and throwing his remains in boiling water, in the hope of making him younger. Although she hesitates before taking the life of her children, her hesitations are short-lived and push her into carrying out her cruel plans: "Can I shed my children's, my own offspring's blood?" "My grief grows again and my hate burns hot". Medea oscillates throughout the play. Sometimes her murders are unimportant, other times she seems to count them ("crime not done once alone in one act of crime") and mourns her murders and "impious" blood she shed with the same hand that makes the wreaths for Phoebus when she poisons the garment for her rival.

"Whose shade comes there dimly seen, its limbs all scattered? It is my brother, and 'tis punishment he seeks. We'll pay, yes, all the debt" – this is how one of the most violent Senecan scenes starts. A victim of hallucinations caused by her anger, Medea will sacrifice her first son to pay for the sin of killing Absyrtus. Her children, she says, are without guilt, as her brother was. Blood washes the stage. Medea goes into the house dragging her first victim after her and pushing her second son from behind. "The crime is accomplished; but vengeance is not yet complete", she announces, and then she kills her second son, this time with even greater satisfaction, because Jason, a cold temperament guilty of violating the sacred laws of nature, is also present. Jason is a cold temperament, an example of latent wrath. Medea is still not satisfied. She would have liked to have fourteen children, like Tantalus's daughter, so that she could make fourteen victims. She would kill even what would have been hers. Can a mother have more terrifying thoughts? Yes, answers Medea, who would have thrust the sword into her womb, had she been carrying another child by Jason. She wants to remove Jason from her mind, so she will wash his life in blood: his father-in-law and his bride already lie dead under the ruins of the burning fortress and he has to prepare his sons' funeral pyre. She throws him the little bodies down from the roof and then runs in the sky, in a snake-drawn chariot. It is the end of her revenge, as there is no more dear blood to shed. It is the end of the tragedy, the triumph of *cruor*.

The Aesthetics of the Diabolical

In the first two scenes of Act IV, Medea keeps the promises she makes at the beginning of Act I, when she invokes the gods, asking them to kill Jason's soon-to-be bride and father-in-law. "let Corinth... be consumed by flames and bring the two seas together". What she wants to do is to "slay victims on consecrated altars", because the path to revenge is revealed in their entrails. She demands a punishment crueller than death for Jason: he shall never sit on the long-coveted throne, he shall be hated and homeless. (According to the myth, her wish will come true.)

Seneca warns us that right before killing her first son, Medea has a weird glint in her eyes and after murdering the second her face undergoes a strange metamorphosis. This exterior transformation must be overwhelming, as Medea herself asks her husband if he recognizes her. However, Seneca chose not to give any other visual details. The viewers, already shocked with so much blood flowing from the house roof, have the opportunity to add whatever gory details they may like to the picture.

Thanks to his fascination for demonic characters, Seneca creates an astonishing aesthetics of the diabolical in women. If in Phaedra the diabolical is particularly an inward attribute, Medea undergoes physical changes that cannot be ignored. King Creon sees her as an "abominable presence, dire, horrible". The murders she committed leave awful scars on her face, betraying her evil nature. In time, Helios's granddaughter becomes uglier and uglier and Jason's feelings for her start to dissipate, although not necessarily because she is disfigured. What they had was neither true love, nor wild passion, since for Jason Medea was only a killing tool, the agent who killed so that he can fulfil his desire for revenge and inherit a throne, no matter whose throne.

Seneca was interested in the physiognomy changes that occur after spiritual mutations. His interest becomes obvious after one reads *On Anger*, his dialogue on anger, addressed to Novatus. The human face reflects the moral and spiritual features. No other passion has a more terrifying exterior manifestation than anger. As expected, Medea's "cheeks blaze red, pallor puts red to flight; no colour in her changing aspect does she keep long".

Seneca the philosopher insists on the physical aspect of the mentally disturbed and describes their clinical picture. Insane individuals show clear symptoms of their disease, such as:

a bold and threatening mien, a gloomy brow, a fierce expression, a hurried step, restless hands, an altered colour, a quick and more violent

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breathing – so likewise are the marks of the angry man; his eyes blaze and sparkle, his whole face is crimson with the blood that surges from the lowest depths of the heart, his lips quiver, his teeth are clenched, his hair bristles and stands on end, his breathing is forced and harsh, his joints crack from writhing, he groans and bellows, bursts out into speech with scarcely intelligible words, strikes his hands together continually, and stamps the ground with his feet; his whole body is excited...; it is an ugly and horrible picture of distorted and swollen frenzy – you cannot tell whether this vice is more execrable or more hideous (Seneca, *On Anger*, Book I, I).

The above passage anticipates Medea's portrait that her nurse describes in detail and to which the chorus, Jason and Creon add their own views:

- facial expression: “marks of distracted passion in her face” “she starts up, bursts into a passion, displays her hate; all her anguish is in her face”; “Her distraught face is hard set in anger”;
- cheeks: „her cheeks aflame”;
- breathing: „she pants with deep sobs for breath”;
- oral manifestations: “shouts aloud”;
- gait: “As a maenad uncertainly directs her frenzied steps”; “Hither and thither she wanders, as a tigress, robbed of her cubs, ranges in mad course through the jungles of Ganges”;
- sudden change from one extreme to another: “weeps floods of tears, beams with joy; she assumes the proof of every passion”; “Whither the weight of her wrath inclines, where it aims its threats, hangs still in doubt; she threatens, seethes with rage, complains, groans aloud”; “Why do anger and love now hither, now thither draw my changeful heart? A double tide tosses me, uncertain of my course; as when rushing winds wage mad warfare, and from both sides conflicting floods lash the seas and the fluctuating waters boil, even so is my heart tossed.”

The sorceress bears the traits that Seneca presented in great detail in *On Anger* and illustrated in his tragedies. She is as mad as Mars, the god of war “thirsting for fresh-flowing blood”, as the chorus in *Thyestes* sings.

Medea is the reverse female variant of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The witch does not make a pact with the devil, but she invokes what in those times was equivalent of the devil, namely “the throng of the silent”, the “funereal gods, murky Chaos and shadowy Dis' dark dwelling-place, the abysses of dismal Death, girt by the banks of Tartarus.” She does not ask for eternal youth and beauty, which Wilde's hero seeks as the only things that matter in life. She does not

even want to win Jason's love back, though she curses him to grow so desperate as to beg for her affection. All she wants is the cruellest revenge possible. She is not the female correspondent of Dorian Gray, who never ages and remains beautiful; she is the picture itself that records and displays all the ugly visual manifestations of her wicked nature. In the end, when her appearance undergoes a fearsome metamorphosis, both her physiognomy and her soul become, indeed, ugly as sin.

Medea is the facial composite of the murderer of all times. She is what today is called a serial killer and, like Jack the Ripper (if one takes for granted all that has been written about him), manages to escape punishment every time she takes a life. Both assassins take extreme pleasure in what they do. Blood never fails to fascinate them. They have turned it into a cult, with a minor distinction in their *modus operandi*: Jack the Ripper likes the act of killing, Medea enjoys the preparation of the act. The major difference between them is that the former kills strictly out of pleasure, while the latter does it for revenge and believes that her murders are perfectly justified.

Good Blood, Bad Blood: A Performance of the Macabre

The cause of Medea's monstrous mutation is precisely the too great satisfaction she derives from shedding good blood — that of her brother and her two sons. Highly skilled in the act of murder, she kills consciously, thoroughly, with passion and premeditation. At first, as she confesses, when she was only a girl, she was just practising and her "prentice hands" had little power. In time, she became knowledgeable and experienced: "with bared breast will I as a maenad smite my arms with the sacrificial knife. Let my blood flow upon the altars; accustom thyself, my hand, to draw the sword and endure the sight of beloved blood [...] Self-smitten have I poured forth the sacred stream".

The altar is the place that Medea chooses for the sacrificial ritual she is about to complete. A sacrifice, even if performed for a malefic purpose, is a solemn act and requires a gloomy, sinister environment. It is at the sanctuary of the "three-formed Hecate", her protector, that she learnt how to hold the blade, to suppress her feelings towards her victims, so that she can see them strictly as necessary sacrifices, recipients of the good blood that must be shed to soothe the bad blood. Consequently, she will choose the same altar to perform, in Act IV, the thing that is even more frightening than the promised confrontation with the gods: the magical ritual of revenge materialised in poisoning the robe for Creusa and burning the city of Corinth.

Seneca dedicates a whole act to this ritual. The first part is described in Scene I by Medea's very worried nurse. To start with, the witch touches the altar with her left hand. A justified gesture, as for the Romans the left hand symbolised the dark gods of the underworld (Terentiu. Seneca, 1966: 259). The left hand is probably the "bloody hand" that Seneca mentions so often in his plays. It is "insolent", "accursed", "impious", "miscreant" or "mocking" (in *Agamemnon*), "arrogant", "savage", "baleful", "deep-stained in blood" and "plague-dealing" (in *Hercules furens*) and is opposed to the right hand that is supposed to be "pure" and taught "to refrain from the blood of the loved ones" (in *Phoenissae*).

In the beginning, Medea calls earthly monsters to her aid: "scaly brood leave their lairs and come to her. Here a savage serpent drags its huge length along, darts out its forked tongue, and seeks against whom it is to come death-dealing". However, she is not pleased with them, so she summons the evil creatures from the sky, who spit *sanies*, the killing snake venom: "let Python come, who dared to attack the twin divinities. Let Hydra return and every serpent cut off by the hand of Hercules, restoring itself by its own destruction. Thou, too, ever-watchful dragon, quitting the Colchians, come thou to my aid". Then the witch touches her, probably with her left hand again, her collection of fragile plants that the sickle has "killed" and roots that produce deadly juices collected from several different parts like the Caucasus, "spattered with Prometheus' gore".

Wicked Medea prefers natural fluid poisons that impregnate easily in the robe that is to become the hidden agent of death, as she wants to deceive Creusa by sending her a treacherous wedding gift. The fact that she uses the gore streaming out of the titan's liver is very interesting, even though some may find it striking. Prometheus embodies the idea of the individual sacrifice made for the collective good: he stole the seeds of fire from the gods and gave it to the humble people, so his blood should never be allowed to cause the death of a human. Nevertheless, Medea takes his gore, *cruor*, and mixes it with herbal juices and *sanies*. Good blood becomes bad blood. This may be part of the titan's punishment, as Medea is the granddaughter of Helios, the god of sun, himself a child of two titans. Eventually, her lethal potion will consist of three types of non-human fluid, of bad blood: Titan blood, plant juice and animal poison, but not good blood, not *sanguis*. To this she adds bird entrails and the most powerful poison on earth, her words, her incantation that makes all nature shudder.

The second part of the ritual is a "live event". Medea describes the offer she has prepared for the Hecate: the wreath she made herself, the

limbs of Typhoeus the giant, the bad blood of Nessus, the centaur that Hercules killed, feathers left by the Harpy in its nest and quills of the Stymphalian birds, also killed by Hercules. The witch then asks Hecate to help her and slashes her arm. The “sacred stream” that flows on the altar completes the solemn, macabre ritual. Hecate answers her prayers: the robe for Creusa is impregnated with poison and the golden casket Medea received from Prometheus contains the seeds of fire that will destroy Corinth. Indirectly, the titan becomes the agent of death once again.

“Now all my power is marshalled”, announces Medea happily. She calls her sons, who are supposed to carry the lethal gifts to their future stepmother. In this way, her innocent offsprings are also touched by guilt. Nothing can escape the blood Medea is determined to shed: the earth, the herbs, the animals, even the fields that are “drenched with my brother’s blood” – a metaphor for Colchis, her place of birth.

The Triumph of Anger

Medea does not end in the death of the hero, as the canons of tragedy require. It ends only when and how the terrifying female character decides. She is convinced that her only fault is that she loved Jason, therefore the murders she commits are nothing but reasonable punishments: “Whatever horror Pontus has beheld, or Phasis, Isthmus shall behold. Wild deeds, unheard-of, horrible, calamities at which heaven and earth alike shall tremble, my heart deep within is planning – wounds, slaughter, death, creeping from limb to limb”. The killings of her youth, which she considers trivial, were done only to serve another. But the pain she feels now, as an abandoned wife and mother, must “rise to more deadly strength; greater crimes become me, now that I am a mother. Gird thyself with wrath, and prepare thee for deadly deeds with the full force of madness”. Medea has reached the ultimate stage of anger, the last before spiritual dissolution.

Dolor, the terrible pain she can neither face, nor control, will evolve steadily in her. Eventually, when her mind is troubled enough, she will grow to believe that shedding blood is, in her case, legitimate homicide justified by self-defence. Consequently, she kills **to revenge** the harm done to her in the past and *to protect* herself from future misfortunes.

Yet what she calls justifiable murder is not *fas*, the opposite of *nefas*. *Fas* means morally or legally allowed. What she does is permitted neither by the human, nor by the divine law. It is quite intriguing that the witch escapes gods’ punishment so many times, since gods are usually determined and very skilled in sentencing sinful mortals. But she is the granddaughter of Helios, who provides her with the means to escape.

Consequently, despite her despicable acts, Medea finds refuge in the sky, her grandfather's kingdom. It is the end of the tragedy, but not of Medea. Legends give different variants of her life after fleeing from Corinth. She goes to Thebes to remove the curse Juno put on Hercules. In Athens, she married king Aegeus, whom she tries to convince that his son Theseus is a threat to the throne and should be killed. She fails in her attempt and returns to Colchis, her birthplace, where she kills her uncle and has her father back on the throne. In Book VII of the History by Herodotus, she is mentioned as living among the Arians, who changed their name after her and became the Medes.

In legends, Medea remains an unfinished character, an itinerant serial killer who defiles every place she visits. Her victims' blood has a double symbol, that of unjust revenge and the triumph of the evil.

"This blood-stained maenad borne headlong by mad passion", as the Chorus calls her, refuses to accept that life is predetermined to follow a certain course. She always wins through abominable murders and sacrilege, through *nefas*, which she employs to defy *fatum*, destiny. What makes her even more hideous is that she not only takes so many lives, but also watches the sacred crimson fluid leaving the body drop by drop, while the victim's soul starts its journey towards Hades or the legendary Greek paradise, the Champs-Élysées.

Sanguis, life, is defeated gradually and painfully by *cruor*, death. It is the same fate that Seneca himself had to face. He was forced to commit suicide, but he anticipated it. He never felt defeated, although he knew his life on earth was ending too soon. He died a very slow death, one that Medea would have enjoyed watching. He cut his veins, but death was cruel and took its time, in the same way the Stoics chose to live. He asked for poison, which he drank in vain. He sank into heated water, where the steams finally killed him. He was buried according to his wish, without funeral rites. The blood that flew so slowly from Seneca's veins became the symbol of death seen not as a tragic end, but moral and spiritual emancipation.

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