

SENECA'S *MEDEA* AS RECEPTION OF OVID

SENECA'S *MEDEA* AS RECEPTION OF OVID: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF MEDEA
AS MAGICIAN, CRIMINAL, AND COLLECTOR OF MAGICAL MATERIALS

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Lay Abstract

This thesis explores and compares Seneca's characterization of Medea as a magic practitioner in his *Medea* to that of Ovid's *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7. I track Seneca's consistencies with and deviations from Ovid's tradition concerning the characterization of Medea's use of magic. Chapter One, on Medea as magician, compares the ways that Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* 7 differs from the characterizations of Seneca's *Medea* in respect of her use of magic. Chapter Two follows the presentation of Medea's actions in Ovid's *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7 in juxtaposition to those in Seneca's *Medea* and consider how they are variously depicted as *nefas* and/or *scelera*. Chapter Three explores and compares the differing ways in which Ovidian and Senecan Medeae engage with magical landscapes. Comparing characterizations of Medea as magician, criminal, and collector by these authors, I identify the themes through which Ovid and Seneca provide commentary on magical practice.

Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate Seneca's reception of Ovid's Medea of the *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7 in his tragedy *Medea*. While there has been significant attention given to Ovid's description of Medea of the *Metamorphoses* and her use of magic, there has been little comprehensive examination of the ways that Ovid, and in turn, Seneca, characterize and comment on magical practice through the portrayals of their respective Medeae. I compare the various details surrounding Medea's use of magic presented by both authors, which includes Medea's ritual practice as a magician, her actions as a criminal, and her engagement with landscape where magic dwells.

I explore Medea's characterization as a magician by comparing the way in which Ovid describes Medea's reason for using greater magic, her relationship with the gods, and the outcome of her greater magical endeavour in juxtaposition to Seneca's Medea. The criminality of Medea is portrayed variously by Ovid in his *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7 wherein the former emphasizes Medea's criminality and the latter arguably complicates an easy assessment of Medea's actions as simply villainous. I examine Seneca's selective adoptions and inversions of these portrayals of Medea. I also highlight Medea's role for both authors as collector of magical materials, a theme which includes an appraisal of what makes a landscape magical, the importance of boundaries, and the fallout of traversing them, in Seneca's view. By comparing the characterization of Ovidian and Senecan Medeae as magician, criminal, and collector by these authors, I identify the themes through which Ovid and Seneca provide the most commentary on the practice of magic.

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Abbreviations

L&S —Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*.

OLD — *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.

PGM—*Papyri Graecae Magicae*. Translated by Betz, Hans Dieter, 1986. in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*. University of Chicago Press.

SGD— D. R. Jordan, 1985. “A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora.” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 26, 151-197.

Declaration of Academic Achievement

The author declares that the research and writing of this project was conducted and completed by Jordan Cobbett, with contributions from supervisory committee members comprised of Dr. Emily Lamond, Dr. Claude Eilers, and Dr. Martin Beckmann during the research and writing process.

Introduction

Of the literary figures who use magic, Medea is arguably the most famous in ancient Greek and Roman literature.¹ Medea's story as a mythic tradition is first extant in Hesiod's *Theogony* and grows in length and detail in ensuing literary accounts.² The most substantial traditions of Medea's tale are taken up by Euripides, Apollonius of Rhodes, Apollodorus, Diodorus Siculus, Ovid, Seneca, and Valerius Flaccus. Each author gives a similar version of her story.³ Indeed, some basic elements are the same across these stories: Medea is the daughter of the king of Colchis, Aeetes. By extension, she is princess of Colchis, and the granddaughter of the sun-god Helios.⁴ Medea is also the niece of Circe (in most of the traditions), another famous magician of ancient Greek and Roman literature.⁵

As told by Ovid and Seneca, Medea's tale is the story of how a young princess and magician of Colchis falls in love with the Greek hero Jason and flees her homeland while absconding with him and the treasured golden fleece. During their flight from Colchis, Medea commits several crimes along their journey, mostly in the service of Jason's goals. These crimes force Jason and Medea to seek refuge in Corinth as supplicants of King Creon. Jason decides to

¹ See Ogden 2009, 6 for some commentary on the early establishment of Medea's and Circe's myths; see Hine 2000, 11-18 for similar commentary that attests to Medea's early establishment in myth and its evolution. While these two sources indicate that Medea's myth is a very old tradition, it is my own observation that Medea is the most written-about magician of ancient works that are extant.

² For significant coverage of Medea's story, See *Hesiod's Theogony* 960-962; 992-1002; Euripides' *Medea*; Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* 4.46; 4.48.1-6; 4. 50-52; 4.54-56.1-2; Apollodorus' *Library* 1.16; 1.23-28; Ovid's *Heroides* 6; 12; *Metamorphoses* 7.1-425; *Fasti* 2.40-42; *Tristia* 3.9; Seneca's *Medea*; Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*.

³ Manuwald 2013, 115. Also, see Manuwald 2013 for a discussion on both the evolution of Medea's representation from Greek to Roman literature, and the relationship between the Latin and Greek versions of the varying Medae.

⁴ The authors that write the most extensive versions of Medea's story are Diodorus Siculus, Apollodorus, and Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* 7 (cf. footnote 2). NB., there are some minor differences in Medea's escape from Corinth in Diodorus Siculus' account as she flees to Thebes as a supplicant of Heracles instead of Aegeus in Athens (*Library of History* 4.54).

⁵ While Medea's familial relations are almost completely consistent, one account departs from the mainstream tradition in Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* 4.45 which posits that Circe and Medea are siblings rather than aunt and niece.

marry Creusa, the princess of Corinth, and so Medea is cast aside and forced into exile by Creon and Jason. Before she leaves Corinth, however, she takes her revenge on Creon and Creusa, which results in the complete destruction of the Corinthian royal house and their palace. She also takes her revenge on Jason, the filicide of their children. Ovid continues her tale, as Medea marries again and attempts to kill her new stepson. She fails, only to flee away once more.

In this project, I explore and compare Ovid's and Seneca's accounts of Medea and the portrayal of her use of magic. The works I focus on are Ovid's *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7, compared to that of Seneca's tragedy *Medea*. Seneca's approach to magic has received limited scholarly attention until recently. Even in recent scholarship, Seneca's reception of Ovid's descriptions of Medea in his *Metamorphoses* 7 and *Heroides* 6 is underemphasized. My exploration of the ways in which Ovid presents Medea's magic, and how Seneca in turn adopts and inverts Ovid's portrayals of magic, adds important detail to scholarly conversation about Seneca's *Medea* and the role that magic plays in the works of both Seneca and Ovid.

For this project, I define magic in two ways. First, I consider magic as ritual practices which are just one avenue or recourse among many which an ancient Roman may turn to for aid in the face of adversity.⁶ I also define magic as sets of rituals which are not socially sanctioned.⁷

Magic was popular in ancient Rome leading up to and especially under Nero.⁸ Under Augustus, magic was widespread enough for Augustus to have had magical practice censored by

⁶ See Frankfurter 2021 regarding the ritualization of domestic tasks which were considered by Romans to take on sympathetic results (in the magical sense); Rupke 2021, 228-229 for the notion of magic as a recourse to adversity not unlike religion; Wilburn 2018, 103; 2019, 556-557 for the examination of the home as the main striking point for those wishing to harm the family with *veneficium*; and the material means ancient builders took to protect themselves from such malicious magic.

⁷ See Spaeth 2014, 42; Stratton 2018, X-XI for further commentary on how magic is defined by these scholars in response to the stereotypical portrayal of magic in ancient literature. See Frankfurter 2021 and Pliny's *Natural History* 28.28, for Pliny's commentary on one example of an Italian rural activity that was perceived as both magical and socially unsanctioned which is the twirling of loom-spindles which Frankfurter explores.

⁸ See Arampapalis 2019 for one of the most recent treatments of Seneca's *Medea*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and Petronius' *Satyricon* in terms of the characterization of magic under Nero.

several laws and other actions. According to Cassius Dio, Agrippa exiled astrologers and sorcerers from Rome in 33 BCE.⁹ Suetonius records that Augustus ordered the burning of divination manuals in 31 BCE.¹⁰ Then, according to Dio, Augustus censored divination practices pertaining to death and particular individuals in 11CE.¹¹

Suetonius and Pliny the Elder reported the Emperor Nero's fascination with magic.¹² Even Pliny the Elder admits in his *Natural History* that magic (despite his strong view that magic is fraudulent, holding only "shadows of truth") is widespread.¹³ Further attestations to the ubiquity of magic can be seen in the prevalence of *defixiones* amongst other magical practices; their use was a basis for legal action, according to Tacitus, during the Piso conspiracy.¹⁴ Beyond these primarily literary examples, there is other scholarship that suggests that magic was practiced widely based on archaeological remains.¹⁵

The popularity of magic as a literary topic is widely attested, too, during the Augustan Period. Magic and magicians appear in the works of the elegists, Horace, and Ovid, amongst others. During the early Principate, magic remained a popular literary topic as exemplified in at least two works of Seneca, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and Petronius's *Satyricon*, Apuleius'

⁹ Dio 49.43.5.

¹⁰ Suetonius *Augustus* 31.

¹¹ Dio 56. 25.5. See Also Ogden 2009, 277-286 for a brief overview of the evolution of Roman law in response to magical practice.

¹² See Suetonius' *Nero* 34.4; Pliny's *NH* 30.5-6 for testament to Nero's interest in magic. See Pliny's *NH* 30.6 for the author's agnostic evaluation of the validity of magical practice as suitable recourse in life.

¹³ See Pliny's *Natural History* 30.1. for Pliny's view on magic and the reasons that it is widespread.

¹⁴ Tacitus' *Annals* 2.69; Suetonius' *Caligula* 3. See also Tacitus's *Annals* 16.30-33 for one example of the indiscriminate nature of magical charges that Tacitus records. See also Fraser 2015, 129-130 for brief commentary on the ambiguous legal status of magical practice under Nero; Pollard 2014 for an at-length discussion of the use of magical-related charges in Tacitus' record of imperial trials. Cf. Frankfurter 2014, for the role that curse tablets played in the everyday concerns regarding the welfare of marriage and/or intimate relationships within the household.

¹⁵ See Frankfurter 2021 for the potential use of loom spindles in ritual; Parker and McKie 2018, 4-5 for a discussion on Roman archaeological material and magic artifacts in general for the uptick in magical practice during the early principate; Wilburn 2018 for case studies that feature structural warding of the home in Pompeii and Roman Egypt against perceived magical threats; Desan and Nagy 2019 for the use gem stones as magical artifacts.

Metamorphoses and *Apologia*, and Flaccus' *Argonautica*. Thus, Ovid and Seneca write about the figure of Medea in the context of a rich literary tradition.

Ovid, his Life, and Works

Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) was born in Sulmno c.43 BCE and he lived until c.17 CE. Ovid's literary career thrived during the reign of Augustus. The age of Augustus was a time of substantial literary innovation.¹⁶ Ovid was a product of this age, and his works exemplify his love of literary experimentation and his engagement with the Augustan imperial culture and politics of his day.¹⁷ The originality of Ovid is perhaps best demonstrated in his *Heroides* and his *Metamorphoses*.

Ovid's *Heroides* (written c. 16 BCE) is unique because not only does Ovid use fictional letters as the main source for his text, but they are also written from the point of view of mythical heroines. The *Heroides* (alternately known as Ovid's *Epistulae Herodum*) are a series of twenty-one poetic love letters predominantly written to the heroes of myth by their heroine lovers who have been abandoned under varying pretexts.¹⁸ Fifteen of the twenty-one poems are from mythical heroines, one by a pseudo-Sappho, and three are exchanges between famous mythic couples.¹⁹ It is in this work that one of Ovid's more striking presentations of Medea appears.

A different work of Ovid's, the *Metamorphoses*, is notable for its sympathetic and thorough treatment of Medea's story. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tracks more than 250 myths that follow the

¹⁶ See Conte 1994, 252-255 for an overview of works and literary innovations characteristic of the Augustan era.

¹⁷ See Miller 2002, 31 for Ovid's innovations in elegy; Conte 1994, 341-343 for Ovidian innovations more generally. See Knox 1995, 2 for brief commentary on Ovid's imperial context of the Early Principate as he was writing the *Heroides*. See Martin 2004, 3; Conte 1995, 353-354 for some of the ways in which Ovid engages and interacts with Augustan culture like sketching Roman settings or milieus by way of anachronisms within his stories or parodying mytho-historic accounts of early Rome to his present.

¹⁸ See Conte 1994, 342 for a discussion on the alternate name of the *Heroides*. See Knox 1995, 34-35 for more details on the textual tradition and transmission of the *Heroides*.

¹⁹ See Knox 1995, 5-12 for a more complete summery on the structure and composition of the *Heroides*.

same theme from the beginning of the world to Ovid's present.²⁰ Given the volume of the *Metamorphoses*, which features over 12,000 hexametrical lines fit into fifteen books, the *Metamorphoses* is easily Ovid's *magnum opus*.²¹ Ovid's representation of Medea in the *Metamorphoses* pays more attention to Medea as a magician than previous authors in both Greek and Roman literature had done until that point. Ovid emphasizes Medea's magical abilities by extensively describing her ritual preparation and her magical feats and does not necessarily characterize her magic work as "bad" or "evil."

Seneca, his Life, and Works

Seneca, on the other hand, chose to represent Medea as a magician in a different way. Seneca was a statesman, rhetorician, an influential stoic philosopher, and a writer of tragedy. Seneca was born into a well-connected and wealthy equestrian family hailing from Spain (Cordoba) c. 4 BCE.²² Although Seneca's career as a rhetorician was late to start, he excelled under the Julio-Claudian emperors (Caligula, Claudius, and Nero). Under such emperors as Caligula and Claudius, Seneca's all-too-successful rhetorical efforts resulted in his banishment. Eventually, he was recalled to fulfil the office of the personal tutor to a young Nero. This post would later turn into an advisory role to the young emperor which ended shortly before Seneca's death in 65 CE.²³ Seneca's works include topics of stoic philosophy and tragic drama, and Seneca likely meant for his *Medea* to be a popular work.²⁴

²⁰ Knox 2004, XII; Conte 1994, 351.

²¹ Knox 2004, XII.

²² See Conte 1994, 408.

²³ See Conte 1994, 409 for a short summary of Seneca's death. See Tacitus' *ANN* 15.60-64 and Suet. *Nero* 6.35.5 for more specific details surrounding the death of Seneca the Younger.

²⁴ More traditional scholarship like Conte 1994 argues that Seneca's works were more likely recited or meant to be read rather than performed in the traditional sense (418). More recent scholarship proffers that there is no good evidence to suggest that Seneca's tragedies were only read and/or recited given how suitable his meter is for performance (Hine 2000, 9-10). See Trinacty 2015, 32-36; Fitch 2018, xxxii-xxxiv for variations on Hine's argument along with a stronger point that Seneca's tragedies were likely performed.

Seneca's tragic *Medea* covers the most infamous episode of Medea's story as she seeks to take vengeance on the Corinthian royal house and Jason. The tragedy runs for 1027 lines and uses several styles of meter.²⁵ Like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca focuses on Medea's use of her magical expertise, the ingredients that she uses, an ethical evaluation of her reasons for using greater magic, and details about the lands from which she acquires her ingredients.

Despite the play's fantastical plot content, the setting of Corinth is a close substitute for Rome, and Seneca uses the play to represent present dangers to Roman society.²⁶ Regardless of whether Seneca's *Medea* was written during Nero's reign or perhaps Claudius', for Seneca, the dangers of special magical ability were relevant to Roman society. If we are to believe Pliny the Elder's account (in his *Natural History*) that Nero "desired to command the gods," then Seneca might have been concerned about this possibility.²⁷ It is impossible to know whether Seneca truly believed that magicians could control the gods, but his play suggests his possible views about magicians undertaking such an action. While the typical magician in literature could subvert the natural order in smaller ways, as I show in Chapter One, it takes a greater level of proficiency to command the gods: there are only two magicians in literature, Medea and Erichtho, who perform such a feat. Commanding the gods therefore requires an expert knowledge of magic, and, for Seneca, the pursuit of greater magical expertise corrupts the practitioner. As I illustrate in this thesis, Seneca represents magic use in the *Medea* in a consistently negative way.

Ovid's and Seneca's Respective Approaches

²⁵ See Hine 2000, 38-39 for an outline of the varying meters that Seneca uses in his *Medea*.

²⁶ See Slaney 2019 on Senecan stagecraft and the use of the dramatic present to locate Seneca's *Medea* within Roman society; Abrahamsen 1999, 107-108 for a discussion that places Seneca's *Medea* in Rome based on Roman legal terminology which Seneca employs concerning marriage rights that someone like Medea would have (or lack) under Roman law.

²⁷ See Pliny's *NH* 30.14; see also Hine 2000, 177 for further commentary on Medea's command of the gods.

Of the many Medea traditions, Seneca's tragic *Medea* is unique because of how many features from her myth he includes: her past crimes, her references to her own tradition generally, and also his emphasis on Medea's familial relations.²⁸ Seneca's *Medea* also draws special attention to Medea's magic ritual preparation.²⁹ The variety of elements that Seneca incorporates in his tragedy suggests that the inspiration for his *Medea* is principally from another author who writes about her: Ovid.³⁰

Ovid's attention to Medea is exceptional amongst ancient authors before Seneca: many of Ovid's works contain at least one reference to the Colchian magician.³¹ Ovid's works that feature Medea most heavily are the *Heroides* and book 7 of the *Metamorphoses*.³² One possible direct influence on Seneca's *Medea* could have been Ovid's own *Medea*, but this cannot be confirmed because this work is not extant. As the two extant Ovidian works to feature Medea the most, the *Heroides* and the *Metamorphoses*, they appear to influence Seneca's *Medea* the most.³³

²⁸ The degree to which Medea is portrayed as a nefarious magician varies from tradition to tradition. Medea, however, has been firmly associated with the familial complexity and tragedy since Aristotle in his *Poetics* 14. 26-29 used her as the standard par-excellence for inter-family tragedy.

²⁹ Cf. Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* lines 3.844-868 featuring a thorough description of the collection, use, and provenance of the herbs Medea obtained for Jason's aid. Cf. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 217-296 for Medea's extensive herb gathering excursion with her winged chariot and a detailed ritual description of her rejuvenation of Aeson. Likewise, Cf. Seneca's *Medea* 679-739 for a description and provenance of Medea's magical ingredients; 739-816 for Medea's ritual against the Corinthian royal house. NB, a feature that is unique to Seneca's *Medea* is Medea's curation and acquirement of many other magical materials without leaving her house. Not only does Seneca's Medea not appear to leave her property but uses what poisons she has already acquired and the rest she draws and/or summons to her in a somewhat logistically ambiguous fashion. Hine 2000, on page 177 comments that it is not clear exactly where her sanctum is, nor whether it's at her house or elsewhere.

³⁰ See Hine 2000, 4.

³¹ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.1-425 *passim*; *Fasti* 2.40-42; *Tristia* 3.8.1-3, 3.9 *Passim*; *Ex Ponto* 3.3. 79-80; *Ars Amatoria* 2.101-104; 3.33-34; *Heroides* VI *passim* from 6.125; XII *passim*; XVI. 347-348; *Amores* 2.27-30; *Remedia Amores* 261-263 for Ovid's references to Medea. N.B Ovid does not always reference Medea directly by name. Some alternate points of reference Ovid utilizes to indicate Medea include the Colchian maid, Phasian witch, daughter of Aeetes, Phasian princess etc.

³² Ovid's tragedy *Medea* was one of Ovid's earlier works and is no longer extant. The fragments that remain to us can be found in Quintilian's *Inst.* 8.5.6.; Seneca the Elder's *Suasoriae* 3.7. See Nikolaidis 1985 for an overview of what we know about Ovid's lost tragedy.

³³ N.B. while Ovid's characterization of Medea in his *Heroides* 6 is important to Seneca's reception of Ovid's Medea, the *Heroides* 6 is beyond the scope of the present chapter. See forthcoming chapter 2 on the criminality of Medea which will prominently feature Ovid's Medea of the *Heroides* 6.

Both Ovid and Seneca emphasize Medea's engagement with and pursuit of greater magical expertise. These authors demonstrate the expertise of their Medae by showcasing descriptions of the preparation and execution of her rituals, and the successful and fearsome results. More specifically, Medea's magical prowess is demonstrated by both authors in the detailed descriptions of Medea's magical material gathering, the utilization of ingredients with magical properties, Medea's ritual prayers, and the powers that Medea displays in the course of completing her magical enterprise. The characterization of Medea's magical practice by both Ovid and Seneca, however, is not entirely the same. While Ovid presents Medea's pursuit of greater (*maius*) magic in his *Metamorphoses* 7 as ambivalent at worst and benevolent at best (depending on the episode), Seneca presents his Medea's pursuit of a greater or *gravior* magic as an inherently corrupting endeavour.³⁴

In this thesis, I apply comparative reading and some philology to explore how Ovid and Seneca employ and emphasize details of Medea's tradition, and I compare Ovidian characterizations of Medea to her Senecan portrayal. My comparison explores three themes: how, and for what purpose Medea practices magic (Medea the Magician); the effect that magic has on Medea's reputation as a criminal (Medea the Criminal); and how Medea interacts with magical landscapes during the course of her activities as a magician (Magical Landscapes or Medea the Collector).

Chapter One: Medea the Magician

Chapter One, on Medea as magician, is a comparison of the ways that Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* 7 differs from the characterizations of Seneca's *Medea* in respect of her use of magic. The chapter explores Medea's relationship with the gods, how she conducts rituals,

³⁴ I agree with another modern magic scholar Arampapaslīs 2019 who takes this same view of Seneca's characterization of Medea's magical practice.

and how she demonstrates her knowledge of magical practice through the use of magical ingredients. I argue in this chapter that, although Seneca presents a negative portrayal of his Medea, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* demonstrates that Medea's greater magical expertise is not inherently malevolent. Rather, greater magic can be used ambivalently, if not benevolently, as Ovid demonstrates in Medea's elaborate magical ritual to prolong the life of her *pater familias* Aeson.

Chapter Two: Medea the Criminal: Magic as Crime?

In Chapter Two, I focus on each author's depiction of Medea as a criminal. I present Medea's actions in Ovid's *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7 in juxtaposition to those in Seneca's *Medea* and consider how they are variously depicted as *nefas* and/or *scelera*. This chapter compares the Ovidian and Senecan accounts of Medea's most infamous criminal episodes, such as Medea's actions at Corinth, her slaughter of Pelias, and her attempted poisoning of Theseus in Athens. I argue that, wherever Ovid presents a negative characterization of Medea, Seneca adopts it. On the other hand, in any case where Ovid depicts his Medea as a sympathetic character, Seneca inverts Ovid's characterization in favour of a more nefarious portrayal. The result is that for Seneca, unlike Ovid, Medea's engagement with greater magical practice necessitates the disintegration of ethical behaviour, leading to a proclivity for criminality.

Chapter Three: Medea the Collector: The Magical Landscapes of Ovidian and Senecan Medae

Chapter Three explores and compares the differing ways in which the Ovidian and Senecan Medae engage with magical landscapes. This chapter addresses the questions of how Seneca characterizes magical landscapes compared to Ovid. Also, how do Ovid and Seneca paint the picture of their world, where does magic happen in it, and how might that picture respond to

the old question of where magic comes from? In this chapter, I lay out the herbs and other magical material that Medea gathers for her greater magical enterprise, how each Medea acquires these ingredients, and how Ovid and Seneca characterize these magical landscapes as sources of ingredients and power. For this chapter, I argue that the lands and/or realms that Medea gathers materials and aid from are portrayed in accordance with Medea's ethical or unethical reasons for practicing greater magic.

I focus on Medea as a magician, a criminal, and as a collector because it is in these ways of operating that Medea's magical practice is most emphasized by Ovid and Seneca. Subsequently, Medea is characterized by her engagement with the gods through ritual, by her purpose for using magic, and where she gets the materials for her magical endeavour. For Ovid and Seneca, these elements of Medea's character determine Medea's portrayal.

Chapter 1

Medea the Magician: Ovidian Traditions and Senecan Responses

Introduction

Ovid and Seneca both characterize the figure of Medea as an impressive magician. Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, illustrates Medea as magician in the way that she conducts rituals, her purpose for using magic, her relationship with the gods, and how she uses the materials she has obtained. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7 includes and focuses on Medea's use of greater magic to prolong the life of Aeson. This episode is already a departure from the tradition. Seneca, on the other hand, presents Medea's use of magic in her most infamous episode, her murder of Creusa and Creon and subsequent filicide. I suggest that each characterize Medea as a magician with varying degrees of negativity and practicality, as governed by the intent of her magical enterprise in context. Seneca, on the one hand, was generally averse to magic as the archetype of *superstitio*,³⁵ and, although, he may have been tolerant of magical practice to an extent, he was adamantly opposed to the pursuit of greater magical expertise. He exemplifies this attitude in his negative presentation of Medea. For Ovid, on the other hand, magic in *Metamorphoses* 7 is more pragmatic, even potentially beneficial, as the Ovidian Medea's use of magic is characterized by the purpose: she does what she does in the service of the *familia*.

Ovid's Characterization of Medea's Greater Magical Expertise

Ovid does not characterize Medea's magical achievements as villainous. The first extensive description that Ovid gives of Medea's magical prowess is not tainted with any negative characterizations of her practice of magic. Medea's great magical feat in the *Metamorphoses* that Ovid describes at length is unlike most actions of Medea's in other

³⁵ See Arampapalis 2019, 12, 63, 65-68. NB, Arampapalis draws significantly on a fragmentary work of Seneca's *De Superstitione* which is retained in Augustine's *De Ciuitate Dei* (2019, 66).

traditions: ordinarily, Medea either uses her magic principally for destruction, or she spirals from one well intentioned misdeed to another until she has made the transition from hero to villain.³⁶ The first time that Ovid explores Medea's magic use in detail in the *Metamorphoses* is when she performs a laudable deed. Jason asks that Medea use magic to shorten his life span to allow his father Aeson to live a longer life, and Medea replies, "what impious words (*scelus*) have fallen from your lips, my husband? Can I transfer to any man, think you, a portion of your life? Neither would Hecate permit this, nor is the request right (*aequa*)."³⁷ Medea's reply to Jason is indicative of Ovid's intention to complicate an easy characterization of Medea's magical prowess as a negative thing: this version of Medea has rules. In other accounts, she does not shy away from the most despicable of magical practices.³⁸ Yet, for the Medea of the *Metamorphoses*, the mere suggestion of shortening Jason's life is not simply improper but Medea considers Jason's request a criminal offence.³⁹ *Aequa* (fair, or just), has legal implications and indicates that Medea is concerned about justice. The fact that Medea refuses to grant Jason's request, and that she uses *scelus* and *nec aequa* in quick succession to support her argument, demonstrates that Medea is refusing Jason's request because of ethical considerations.

Medea does, however, have an answer to help Aeson, and Ovid describes this feat, his Medea's pursuit of a greater magical enterprise, in a positive light. In lines 173-175, Medea says,

³⁶ Cf. Euripides *Medea*; Apollodorus' *Library*; Ovid's *Heroides* 6; Seneca's *Medea*. NB. Medea does use herbs to heal the Argonauts in Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* 4.48. Medea, however, also uses magic to convince Pelias to allow her to perform a ritual to prolong his life which provides the opportunity for her to kill him (Apollodorus' *Library* 1.9.27).

³⁷ *Excidit ore tuo, coniunx, scelus? Ergo ego cuiquam | Posse tuae videor spatium transcribere vitae? | Nec sinat hoc Hecate, nec tu petis aequa...* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.171-173). Translations for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides*, and Seneca's *Medea* are provided by Miller 1971, Showerman 1977, and Fitch 2018 for this thesis. NB the division and organization of Latin lines throughout this text are based upon the above translators' organization of lines within their respective manuscripts.

³⁸ See Ovid's *Heroides* 6. 89-93; *Tristia* 3.9.; Apollonius' *Argonautica* 4.450-481; Seneca's *Medea Passim* for instances where Medea does not hesitate to commit many villainous actions, several of which involve magic.

³⁹ See Anderson 1972, 264 for commentary on Medea's use of *scelus* to describe Jason's request.

“but a greater boon than what you ask, my Jason will I try to give. By my art and not your years I will try to renew your father’s long span of life, if only the three-formed goddess will help me and grant her present aid in this great deed which I dare to attempt.”⁴⁰ Medea’s approach to using magic here differs from other depictions of Medea’s magical practice. First, she shows a level of humility: instead of asserting that she will absolutely achieve her goals, she emphasizes her uncertainty about the outcome, with “I will attempt” (*experiar*). Second, she states that her success is dependent upon the help of the tri-formed goddess Hecate. Medea’s modest acknowledgement that her success in fact depends upon her amicable relationship with the gods demonstrates that Ovid’s Medea (even as a magician) respects the gods.

The spell not only starts humbly but is also otherwise portrayed as sympathetically as magic could be portrayed at the time. Although Ovid does present Medea’s ritual practice as atypical for *religio*, or proper ritual practice, he does not characterize it as *nefas* nor *illicitum*.⁴¹ Medea’s behavior here even has elements in common with religious ritual. For example, Medea douses her head with water, which is a purification rite necessary to some Roman religious rituals.⁴²

Ovid describes Medea as collaborating with the gods, not seeking to control them as she does in other portrayals.⁴³ Before Medea even begins her prayer to Hecate and other chthonic divinities, she performs a lengthy and detailed pre-ritual preparation which appears to be necessary to appropriately approach the gods for her prayer. Ovid also has Medea kneel before

⁴⁰ *sed isto, | Quod petis, experiar maius dare munus, Iason. | Arte mea soceri longum temptabimus aevum, | Non annis revocare tuis, modo diva triformis | Adiuvet et praesens ingentibus adnuat ausis.* (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7. 174-178).

⁴¹ These words are used for Seneca’s characterization of both knowledge and utilization of knowledge that humans are not supposed to know. E.g., see Seneca’s *Hercules* 595-596; 603-604 for examples of Seneca labelling the knowledge that comes from realms inaccessible by humans like the underworld and/or other places which constitute the kingdoms of the gods as *illicitum* and *nefas*.

⁴² See Anderson 1972, 266.

⁴³ Cf. Seneca’s *Medea* 269-271; 424-425; 985-986.

she names the gods from which she seeks aid. The respect that Medea shows the deities she calls upon is also evident in the end of the prayer, in lines 248-251, when Ovid articulates how, “When she had appeased all these divinities by long, low-muttered prayers, she bade her people bring out under the open sky old Aeson’s body.”⁴⁴ Ovid’s use of *placeo* indicates that his Medea either found favour with the gods or her pre-ritual preparation was otherwise found acceptable by the gods, indicating their willing cooperation. Such a respectful approach is unlike most stereotypical depictions of the relationship between magicians and the gods in the literature of the early Principate: such characters are typically portrayed as commanding the gods rather than seeking their aid.⁴⁵

Some actions of Medea are, however, stereotypical for magicians in Latin literature. Ovid describes how Medea prepares for the ritual by executing some nocturnal activities, that:

“There were yet three nights before the horns of the moon would meet to make a round orb. When the moon shone at her fullest ...Medea went forth from her house clad in flowing robes, barefoot, her hair unadorned and streaming down her shoulders; and all alone she wandered out into the deep stillness of midnight...”⁴⁶

Medea’s nighttime rites in this passage adhere to common tropes of the ancient magician, such as going out in the dark at midnight under a full moon, going barefooted, and wearing her hair down.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Verba simul fudit terrenaque numina civit | Umbrarumque rogat rapta cum coniuge regem | Ne properent artus animus fraudare senili. | Quos ubi pacavit precibusque et murmure longo | Aesonis effetum proferri corpus ad auras | iussit...*(Ovid’s *Met.* 7. 248-253).

⁴⁵ Cf. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.46-47; Pliny’s *Natural History* 30.14; Lucan’s *Pharsalia* 6.440-506 for reference of the ability of the magician to command the gods.

⁴⁶ *Tres aberant noctes, ut cornua tota coirent | Efficerentque orbem; postquam plenissima fulsit | Ac solida terras spectavit imagine luna, | Egreditur tectis vestes induta recinctas, | Nuda pedem, nudos umeris infusa capillos, | Fetque vagos mediae per muta silentia noctis | Incomitata gradus...*(Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.179-185).

⁴⁷ For these stereotypes of the magician with long hair both in ritual and otherwise, going barefooted, and performing nocturnal rites, see Horace’s *Satires* 1.8.19-47; Horace’s *Epode* 5.45-54; Ovid’s *Heroides* 6.83-94; Lucan’s *Pharsalia* 6.515-520.

At the same time, she is also no typical magic user: she is impressively expert in her magical actions. The details Ovid supplies demonstrate Medea's ritual expertise in approaching the gods for their aid and cooperation. For instance, Medea knows that there will be three days before the moon is full.⁴⁸ Ovid is drawing upon the belief that it is under a full moon or "new moon" that magical rituals are at their most auspicious.⁴⁹ Medea's decision to wait for the right time to make her request to the gods indicates that Medea is calculated in her ritual performance. In lines 188-191 Ovid describes how, "Stretching up her arms to these, she turned thrice about, thrice sprinkled water caught up from a stream flowing upon her head and thrice gave tongue to wailing cries. Then she kneeled down upon the hard earth and prayed..."⁵⁰ As Medea wishes to draw the notice of the gods, she makes cries which as a practice has some precedent as a feature of nocturnal rites.⁵¹ All of these ritual actions are designed to gain the favour and cooperation of the gods for Medea's ritual.

The ritual, however, requires more than just correct actions in approaching the gods and acquiring their aid. Medea also knows where rare ingredients are located, how to retrieve them, what the materials do, and how the rare materials may be used within the context of incantations. After telling the gods that she needs the juices of plants for the ritual, and after taking to the sky and collecting herbs from various foreign places for nine days and nights, Medea comes back to execute the rest of the ritual.⁵² It is at this juncture that Ovid provides a description of ingredients that Medea first collects and subsequently adds to her brew to make Aeson young again.

⁴⁸ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.179-181.

⁴⁹ Anderson 1972, 264.

⁵⁰ ...sidera sola micant: ad quae sua bracchia tendens | Ter se convertit, ter sumptis flumine crinem | Inroravit aquis ternisque ululatibus ora | Solvit et in dura submisso poplite terra... (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.188-191).

⁵¹ Anderson 1972, 266 points out this "ritual shriek" can also be found in Vigil's description of Dido's marriage in his *Aeneid* 4.168.

⁵² Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.219-241.

The ingredients Medea gathers are all important for Medea's objective in attempting to extend the life of elderly Aeson. In lines 268-276 Ovid describes Medea using parts of a screech owl, a werewolf, a water-snake, a long-lived stag, and the eggs and head of a crow nine generations old, as well as "a thousand other nameless things."⁵³ The screech owl, or *stryx* in ancient literature, was believed to have the ability to paralyze, which may plausibly allow Aeson to stop aging.⁵⁴ Because the werewolf can change form from beast to man, a part of a werewolf would lend itself well to Medea's transformative incantation that returns elderly Aeson back to the peak of his health. As snakes commonly shed their skin, Medea's inclusion of this ingredient accords with her intention to bring new life to Aeson. In ancient thought, stags are believed to outlive humans, and the liver of such a long-lived creature presumably aided in its long life.⁵⁵ A similar vein of thought applies for Medea's use of the crow that lived through nine generations and its eggs. Medea's greater-than-mortal plan is to overcome death by making a brew with every life-giving, death defying, and/or force preserving ingredient that she knows, so that Aeson might not yet succumb to death from old age. Ovid also suggests that she is even more knowledgeable about magic than the author, because she includes a thousand more things he does not know how to name ("a thousand other nameless things").

Overall, Ovid characterizes the ethical nature of Medea's purpose of using magic positively. Ovid does not allow the reader to forget that magic is still dangerous, but Medea's magical endeavour is nevertheless still positive, and still in the interest of the *familia*, by prolonging the life of Aeson. Even if Medea's actual practice of magic is terrifying, she is using

⁵³ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 271-276.

⁵⁴ See Anderson 1972, 273-274 for commentary on Ovid's catalogue of ingredients that Medea gathers. Anderson also points to Virgil's *Aeneid* 12.862 for the effects of the mythical *stryx*'s ability to paralyze or take the strength from someone as it does Turnus in the final duel with Aeneas.

⁵⁵ Anderson 1972, 273.

it for a good reason. Ovid outlines how Medea opened Aeson's throat and drained his blood so that she could infuse him with her magic brew.⁵⁶ It should be noted, however, that before this terrifying process of infusing Aeson's body with Medea's brew occurs, Medea put Aeson into a deep sleep using her magic herbs and incantations.⁵⁷ It is only after Aeson is put under that Medea begins the transfusion. Medea's performance of this dangerous and terrifying procedure in the most humane way possible also demonstrates that Ovid portrays Medea's magical feat to be in the best interest of the *familia*. In lines 289-293, Ovid describes how Aeson's

“beard and hair lost their hoary grey and quickly became black again; his leanness vanished, away went the pallor and the look of neglect, the deep wrinkles were filled out with new flesh, his limbs had the strength of youth. Aeson was filled in wonder and remembered that this was he forty years ago.”⁵⁸

This is the happy outcome of Medea's magical endeavour. It is notable that Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* accomplishes her greatest magical feat in service to her *familia*. This distinction is a major difference between Medea of the *Metamorphoses* 7 and Seneca's *Medea*: Ovid's Medea is conducting her greater feat to help her *familia* whereas Seneca's Medea sets out to destroy a rival *familia* and destroys her own in the process.

Seneca's Characterization of Medea's Greater Magical Expertise: *Quodcumque Nefas* and *Maiora Scelera*

Senecan Medea carries out a drastically different magical endeavour from Ovid's Medea's respectful bid to extend Aeson's life. Seneca's tragedy opens with Medea's lament that

⁵⁶ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.285-287.

⁵⁷ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.252-254.

⁵⁸ *barbara comaeque | Cantitie posita nigrum rapuere colorem, | Pulsa fugit macies, abeunt pallorque situsque, | Adiectoque cavae suppleantur corpore rugae | Membraque luxuriant: Aeson miratur et olim | Ante quarter denos hunc se reminiscitur annos* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.289-293).

she has been set aside, as Jason has taken another bride. Medea turns her focus to invoking a destructive prayer to the gods, as she wants to perform a magical feat of considerable scale which she has not yet accomplished. She wants to use magic of untold proportions to destroy Creusa and Creon.⁵⁹

Seneca characterizes these greater magical feats as nefarious in the following ways: first, Seneca establishes that Medea's purpose for using magic as a recourse to her situation is self-centered revenge. Seneca presents Medea's magic as greater than anything she has done before by having Medea compare what she is planning to do with her magic to her previous actions. Seneca then describes the deplorable practices that Medea commits in her pursuit of her goal like the exploitive way in which she acquires her ingredients and how she applies them to use. Finally, Seneca places emphasis on Medea's nefarious use of magic by portraying Medea's impious and heavy-handed engagement with gods and other infernal entities. All these portrayals work together to paint Seneca's Medea as a thoroughly reprehensible magician.

As part of this characterization, Medea appeals to gods, entities, and domains of influence suited for an evil task.⁶⁰ This practice of invoking infernal entities is not exclusive to literature. Apart from epigraphical examples of *dis manibus*, most prayers and/or invocations made to underworld entities are seen in the *PGM* and *defixiones*, or curses.⁶¹ The *Greek Magical Papyri* are a corpus of texts including instruction manuals for how to create *defixiones*.⁶² They also provide templates for incantations. Many of the curse tablets are not dissimilar in intent to the plans of Seneca's Medea. For instance, in *PGM* 4.440-445 there is a procedural prayer that

⁵⁹ Seneca's *Medea* 17-18.

⁶⁰ See *PGM IV: 443-445* for one example of underworld deities being summoned.

⁶¹ *Manes* was a "collective term for the spirits of the dead" and they were believed to have the ability to take revenge (Costa 1973, 157).

⁶² See Graf 1997, 118-174 for an overview on the use of curse tablets and voodoo dolls. See especially pages 120-121 of Graf 1997 for categories and/or genres of *defixiones* along with their formulations.

invokes not only Chaos and Hades, but also a daimon (a lesser spirit that still possesses influence and/or the ability to make changes in a situation), to do the bidding of the preparer of the *defixio*. While *PGM* 4.296-466 contains a binding-spell template and invokes infernal entities for the purpose of binding an unrequited lover, there are other *defixiones* like *SGD 21* that also invokes infernal entities like the Furies, Pluto, and “every harmful being” (*kakos*), for the purpose of revenge.⁶³ Notably, daimons according to *PGM* 4.440-445, dwell amongst the dead.⁶⁴ Though Medea does not draw upon any daimons, she does call upon others from the infernal realms.

Seneca also, like Ovid, presents his Medea’s ability to control the natural elements. Seneca, however, portrays his Medea differently: she commands the elements and adheres to the stereotypical depiction of the magician, whose abilities could upset the natural order of things. These include drawing down or stopping the moon, reversing river flow, and the belief that magicians possessed secret knowledge which allowed them to compel both gods and humans to bend to the magician’s will.⁶⁵ Some other examples of this trope, namely that magicians can draw down the moon, stop women from conceiving children and/or are capable of pulling the stars out of order, can be found in Horace’s *Sagana*, *Canidia*, and *Folia*, Propertius’ unnamed magician in *Elegy* 1.2, Lucan’s *Erichtho*, and Apuleius’ *Meroe* amongst others.⁶⁶ For instance,

⁶³ See Gager 1992, 182-183 for more commentary on *SGD 21*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ For examples of stereotypical abilities of witches in Latin literature, see Tibullus 1.2.41-54; Seneca’s *Medea* 269-271; 423-425, 670-675; Ovid’s *Heroides* 6.83-94. This trend that Medea’s magical prowess is enough to even frighten the gods also appears after Seneca in works like Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica* 7.392-394. There is also notable secondary scholarship on the stereotypical power of magicians like Ogden 2009, 20, 124-125; Spaeth 2014, 42.

⁶⁶ See Horace’s *Epode* 5 for the abilities of Horace’s witch trio; Lucan’s *Pharsalia* 6.478-515 for a lengthy description of the nefarious abilities of *Erichtho*; Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* 1.7-10 for a description of *Meroe*’s crass use of magic on the denizens of her village; Tibullus’ *Elegy* 1.2.41-54 describes the magical stunts that Tibullus witnessed his witch perform to qualify the value of her magical charms that she gave to the elegist to aid in his pursuit of *Delia*.

Erichtho and Canidia can draw down the moon and move the stars.⁶⁷ Seneca's characterization of Medea therefore aligns with these earlier and later examples of magicians from literature.

Seneca's first characterization of Medea and her undertaking of a greater magical enterprise present her as a magician from un-Roman origins whose recourse to her situation will necessarily be un-Roman. Medea tries to divine a way in which she can punish Jason for his betrayal using magic in lines 40-45 when she exhorts herself: "Through the very guts find a path to punishment, my spirit, if you are alive, if there is any of your old energy left. Drive out womanish fears and plant the forbidding Caucasus in your mind. Every outrage that Phasis or Pontus saw, the Isthmus will see."⁶⁸ Unlike Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses*, the Senecan Medea's foreignness is emphasized, and her otherness influences her approach to her adverse situation. Seneca is drawing on Greek and Roman stereotypes of otherness in this passage which dictates that barbarians of the north and west are characteristically hyper-masculine and aggressive.⁶⁹ Medea must not only "plant the forbidding Caucasus in her mind," but also "drive out womanish fears."⁷⁰ Moreover, the Caucasus are situated well within regions which are wild and dangerous in the minds of a Roman audience.⁷¹ Therefore, Seneca solidly places Medea as the archetype of the foreign magician, as one who is not only from a landscape where magic seems to thrive but also as an individual who is prone to a wild, aggressive, and masculine

⁶⁷ For Canidia's command of the stars and moon, see Horace's *Epode* 17. For Erichtho's abilities which are many and varied, see Lucan's *Pharsalia* 6.499-505.

⁶⁸ *per viscera ipsa quaere supplico viam, | Si vivis, anime, si quid antiqui tibi | Remanet vigoris. Pelle femineos metus, | Et inhospitalem caucasum nente indue. | Quodcumque vidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas, | vidibit Isthmos* (Seneca's *Medea* 40-45).

⁶⁹ See McCoskey 2012, 153-156 for discussions regarding stereotypes of non-Romans of the northern, southern, and western provinces as depicted by Cicero and Juvenal.

⁷⁰ See Seneca's *Medea* line 43- *Et inhospitalem caucasum nente indue*.

⁷¹ This characterization of non-Romans was established based on a kind of proto environmental determinism was alive and well in Greek literature before it featured in Roman literature. Cf. Hippocrates', *Airs Waters, Places* 22-24 for the majority of what can be considered Hippocrates' discourse on how the environment shapes the behaviour and/or "nature" of various peoples who are uncoincidentally non-Greek. See book 24 subsection 92 for Hippocrates concluding thought on the tough and often violent natures of those who live in northern wilds.

disposition. Seneca posits this negative portrayal of Medea as she reflects on her past responses to adversity and her promise of a future encore of such acts.⁷²

In lines 45-47 Medea states “Savage (*effera*), unheard-of (*ignota*), horrible (*horrida*) things, evils fearful to heaven and earth alike, my mind stirs up within me: wounds and slaughter and death creeping from limb to limb.”⁷³ These *effera*, *ignota*, and *horrida* things are important because they are intensifiers for Medea’s intended *mala*.⁷⁴ *Effera* (meaning savage, cruel, barbarous, very wild, and/or fierce) denotes the intensity in which Medea carried out her past actions and further characterizes her as a foreign and fierce threat.⁷⁵ *Ignota* (meaning unknown, ignorant of, or in some instances distant), plausibly refers to Medea’s escalation of her magic to new and unknown heights of violence, magic, and/or both, and characterizes her as a menace whose attack will not be easily recognized.⁷⁶ *Horrida* (meaning awful, terrible, rough) describes both the outcomes of her previous actions, and the results of her actions yet to be taken, as unmistakably shocking.⁷⁷ For Seneca, these adjectives epitomize the foreign magician’s practice of greater magic.

Also, each author who writes a version of Medea typically focuses on only a segment of her life. The result of this is a consistent pattern wherein Medea becomes more famous because each deed (magical or otherwise) is greater than the previous.⁷⁸ For instance, Apollonius’s

⁷² See Seneca’s *Medea* 44-45- *Quodcumque vidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas, | vidibit Isthmos*.

⁷³ See Seneca’s *Medea* 45-47- *Effera ignota horrida, tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala mens intus agitat...*

⁷⁴ See Costa 1973, 69. NB hyperbole is generally a stylistic trend in the silver age of Latin literature and tragedy in general. See Mayer 2007, 62 for an outline of typical themes and attributes of silver age Latin literature.

⁷⁵ See *Oxford Latin Dictionary* edited by Morwood; Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary* v. “*efferus, a, um; ignotus, a, um; horridus, a, um*” for definitions of these words. Cf. Costa 1973, 69 for some commentary for the use of these adjectives.

⁷⁶ For more definitions and usage, cf. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, v. “*ignotus, a, um*.” NB. according to *L&S*, there are some instances where *ignotus* has been used to denote distance in terms of unknown or distant lands also.

⁷⁷ See Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*; *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, v. “*horridus, a, um*” for more definitions and usages.

⁷⁸ For an overview of various Medea traditions and the evolution of Medea’s representation from Greek to Latin literature, see Manuwald 2013.

Argonautica focuses on the beginnings of Medea's life, her escape from Colchis, and her adventures aboard the Argo with the other Argonauts. While Euripides' *Medea* highlights Medea's Corinthian episode, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7 gives space to several of Medea's more spectacular deeds. Seneca's *Medea* is more aggressive and *furens* than any version before Seneca. Seneca's larger-than-life characterization of Medea means that the scale of her magical enterprise must also be greater than anything described in works produced before his tragedy. For Seneca, however, he not only presents the weightiest and most grievous of her magical feats but also has her reflect on all her most unsympathetic magical actions up to that point.

Seneca's Medea creates a magically potent poison that not only will kill her enemies on contact, but it will also combust and consume the very area in which her victims encounter her fatal wedding gift. The Nurse states that:

"My heart shudders with fear: great devastation is near. It is monstrous how her resentment grows, feeds on its own fires, renews its past violence. I have often seen her raging, assailing the gods, drawing down the heavens; greater than that, greater still is the monstrosity Medea is preparing."⁷⁹

In these lines, Seneca is drawing on stereotypes of foreign behaviour. He does this not simply by having the Nurse say that she has seen the *furor* of Medea, but that she has seen the *furor* often, and frequent *furor* is a stereotype of the barbarian.⁸⁰ A foreign magician may leave the lawless wilds and enter civilized spaces but that does not mean that their behaviour changes: Medea is wild and monstrous and untameable.

⁷⁹ *Pavet animus, horret: magna perniciēs adest. | Immane quantum augescit et semet dolor | Accendit ipse vimque praeteritam intergat. | Vidi furem saepe et aggressam deos, | Caelum trahentem: maius his, maius parat | Medea monstrum...* (Seneca's *Medea* 670-675).

⁸⁰ Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters, Places* 16.

Seneca also has the Nurse describe the ritual of the foreign magician as backward and un-Roman:

“Making prayers at the sinister shrine with her left hand, she summons all plagues produced by the sand of burning Libya, and all those locked in the everlasting snow of the frozen Taurus, frozen by Arctic cold, and all that is monstrous. Hauled out by her magic spells, the scaly throng desert their lairs and approach.”⁸¹

First, Seneca draws attention to the more nefarious means by which the Seneca Medea is practicing magic: proper *religio* typically necessitates the use of the right hand,⁸² but Medea uses her left. Making an offering while proffering the left hand is “ill-omened.”⁸³

Just as Ovid characterizes Medea by her expert collection of many ingredients and ritual preparations, Seneca has Medea acquire substances to utilize for her next magical endeavor. Whereas Ovid illustrates her expertise positively, Seneca’s Medea employs harmful ingredients for destructive purposes. Moreover, Medea uses various nefarious means to obtain her desired ingredients. She also draws these from places that are far and further afield, as would befit Seneca’s view of a foreign magician.

In the lines above, Medea brings plagues from the most extreme environs of the Roman world. In doing this, Medea demonstrates not only her knowledge as a magician, and as a magician knowledgeable about foreign things, but she also showcases that this knowledge is specialized and expert. There is a tradition as far back as Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* that depicts

⁸¹ *Et triste laeva comprecans sacrum manu | Pestes vocat quascumque ferventis creat | Herena Libyae quaeque perpetua nive | Taurus coeret frigore Arctoo rigens, | et Omen monstrum. Tracta magicis cantibus | squamifera latebris turba desertis adest...*(Seneca’s *Medea* 680-685).

⁸² See Hine 2000, 178 for more commentary on the significance of the left-handed prayers.

⁸³ Fitch 2018, 377. It is notable that Tiresias makes a similar left-handed prayer as he conducts a necromancy ritual in Seneca’s *Oedipus* 565-568- *libat et niveum insuper | lactis liquorem, fundit et Bacchum manu | laeva, canitque rursus ac terram intuens | graviores manes voce et attonita citat.*

the desert regions of the Levant and especially Libya as home to various illnesses, plagues, and poisonous snakes. Although this might have been common knowledge for a Roman citizen of Seneca's time, Medea not only seems to know where these places are, but she even knows which elements to use and is able to summon them to her without leaving her abode.⁸⁴

Medea also demonstrates her magical prowess by acquiring and utilizing the most noxious attributes from herbs. In lines 705- 709, Seneca tells how Medea "collects together the poisons of ominous plants: all those engendered on the impassable crags of Mt. Eryx, those borne by the Caucasus, sprinkled with Prometheus' blood[.]"⁸⁵ This is an important passage because it demonstrates more of Medea's magical expertise. The potion made from the extract of Promethean plants would be effective against fire because Prometheus brought fire to humans. This same flower was used by Medea to make the potion for Jason when he had to deal with the fiery bulls.⁸⁶ The implication here is that the plant that was once used for protection against fire-breathing bulls is now being used to create a concoction that will not be affected or eliminated by fire.⁸⁷

Additionally, for Medea to acquire these ingredients, she needed to access many places that are typically inaccessible either due to their location or the knowledge of their locations. For instance, the word *invius* denotes the typically impenetrable geography of Mount Eryx. While the *Caucasus* is in the singular, the word itself refers to the chain of Caucasus mountains.

⁸⁴ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4. 614-620 for the etiology of how the sands of Libya became filled with poisonous serpents due to the blood of Medusa's severed head falling as Perseus traveled across Libya. Seneca's own medical knowledge and disease awareness should also not come as a surprise given that from his own writings (*Epistle* 78.1-2) the reader is told that he himself suffered from illness. Moreover, it has been ascertained that Seneca spent a decade of his early adult life in Alexandria due to his own medical condition (Wilson 2014, 62). See Wilson 2014, 68-72 for some discussion around the effect that illness had on Seneca's career and his time in Egypt.

⁸⁵ *Postquam evocavit omne serpentum genus, | Congerit in unum frugis infaustae mala: | Quaecumque generat invius saxis Eyrx, | ... Quae fert ... Sparsus cruore Caucasus Promethei...* (Seneca's *Medea* 705-709).

⁸⁶ See Hine 2000, 180-181 for commentary on the connection between Prometheus and Mt. Eryx.

⁸⁷ Hine 2000, 181.

Therefore, not only did Medea know the mountains of her home region, but she knew which mountain specifically still held the blood of Prometheus after he was freed by Hercules.

The range of Medea's knowledge does not stop with the locales where rare magical ingredients can be obtained. For her greater magical task, Medea knows which poisons will be ideal based on her knowledge of their use by other peoples. In lines 710-713, Medea gathers "those [poisons] with which the rich Arabs smear their arrows, and the Medes, warlike archers, and fleet Parthians; or those juices collected under the cold pole by Suebian women, famed for their Hercynian forests."⁸⁸ Medea's understanding of the practices of Medes, Arabs, and Parthians is a reminder to the Roman audience of how these herbs are utilized by non-Romans. Not only does Medea know the application of these non-Roman poisons, but her use of those same herbs will also be employed for a hostile purpose within a Roman society.

There is a difference in the caliber of ingredients that Medea is collecting as opposed to Ovid's account. That is, Seneca's Medea goes after materials that necessitate a darker *modus operandi*. In lines 690-693, Medea has examined the snakes of Libya for their potential to poison and declares them to be insufficient for her purposes. Instead, Medea states that "My chants must summon Python, who dared provoke the twin deities; the Hydra must return, with each snake that was cut away by Hercules' hand, renewing itself through its own laceration. You too must leave Colchis and come, unsleeping serpent, lulled for the first time by my chants."⁸⁹ In these lines, Medea has clearly gone beyond the limits of the average magician in her pursuit of the resources she needs. The Python is not only mythical as Medea is, but the Python is also dead.

⁸⁸ *Et sagittas divites Arabes linunt | Pharetraque pugnax Medus aut Parthi leves, | Aut quos sub axe frigido sucos legunt | Lucis Suabae nobiles Hercyniis...* (Seneca's *Medea* 710-713).

⁸⁹ *Seneca's Medea* lines 699-704-...*Adsit ad cantus meos | Lacessere ausus gemina Python numina, | et Hydra et omnis redeat Herculeae manu | succisa serpens, caede se reparans sua. | Tu quoque relictis pervigil Colchis ades, | Sopite primum cantibus, serpens meus.*

To retrieve a viable poison from the Python who was slain by Apollo, Medea needs to bring the mythical serpent back to life and then extract its poisonous properties.⁹⁰

Likewise, Medea harvests the Hydra, a supernatural serpent of mythic proportions that was made into a constellation after being killed by Hercules.⁹¹ Thus, it appears that Medea pulled the Hydra down from a constellation to exploit its venomous properties. Medea then draws poisons from the live and ever-wakeful dragon which guarded the golden fleece.⁹² Medea also shows her command over the last serpent/dragon from Colchis by her use of the vocative case in drawing it to her.⁹³ With such spectacular and terrifying actions, Seneca presents Medea as expanding her skillset.

What is more, the ingredients that Seneca's Medea is going after are not only dead, but they were killed by divine and semi-divine figures. The Medea of Seneca's tragedy does not work in harmony with the gods – she raises their dead enemies instead. Medea is summoning these creatures and exerting her power over them. Although Medea's actions up to this point have been both impressive and nefarious, her capability takes on a new degree of outrage in the religious sense. In summoning these serpents/dragons to her, Medea's magical expertise has moved beyond the subversion of the natural order to subverting the supernatural as well.

Seneca's Presentation of the Magician's Ritual Prayer

Medea goes still further. When the Nurse describes Medea's sorting of the final ingredients, she says, "To her poisons she adds words that are no less fearful."⁹⁴ Medea took the

⁹⁰ See Hine 2000, 180 for further commentary on the Python of myth. Note that the myth of the Python's burial place locates its ashes in Delphi.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Seneca's *Medea* 703-704.

⁹³ See Costa 1973, 131; Hine 2000, 180 for more commentary on Medea's command over these serpentine monsters.

⁹⁴ *Mortifera carpit grammia ac serpentium | Saniem exprimit, ... Haec scelerum artifex | Discreta ponit: his rapax vis ignium | His gelida frigoris glacies inest. | Addit venenis verba non illis minus | metuenda* (Seneca's *Medea* 731-738).

time and effort to acquire all these different harmful ingredients from a myriad of sources to undertake her new magical venture, but these exotic and dangerous ingredients are not enough. Once Medea has collected these ingredients amongst others, she begins an incantation, too.

In this incantation, Seneca shows how Medea's pursuit of greater magical expertise has resulted in her exploitation of the natural world. In lines 759-761 Medea states that "I have changed the pattern of the seasons: the summer earth has frozen under my spells, and Ceres was compelled to see the winter harvest."⁹⁵ Medea has destroyed the summer harvest by changing the seasons and Ceres is forced to attend to the winter harvest instead of that of the summer. In lines 754-759 Medea also states that [she has] "summoned water out of rainless clouds and forced the sea to its depths: Ocean withdrew his heavy waves, as his tides were overpowered. With the laws of heaven confounded, the world has seen both sun and stars together, and the Bears have touched the forbidden sea."⁹⁶ The overall effect is that Medea harnesses the natural world in her pursuit of greater magical expertise. In doing so, Medea caused the little Bear constellations to touch the sea, which would have been a terrifying prospect to those living in the Mediterranean.⁹⁷ Seneca also characterizes Medea's magical handiwork as she accomplishes with magic what Phaeton nearly accomplished by accident with the chariot of the Sun.⁹⁸ The last time the Bear constellations nearly touched the forbidden sea, Phaeton was wreaking havoc with the Sun's chariot and total devastation of the earth was only barely averted.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ *Temporum flexi vices: | Aestiva tellus horrvit cantu meo, | Coacta messem vidit hibernam Ceres...*(Seneca's Medea 759-761).

⁹⁶ *Et evocavi nubibus siccis aquas | Egique ad imum maria, et Oceanus graves | Interius undas aestibus victis dedit; | pariterque mundus lege confusa aetheris | Et solem et astra vidit, et vetitum mare | Tetigistis, Ursae* (Seneca's Medea 754-759).

⁹⁷ See Hine 2000, 156 for more commentary on the constellation movements of the Bears over the Mediterranean.

⁹⁸ See Hine 2000, 156 for some commentary on the descriptions of constellations and the havoc that Medea's magic wrecks on the natural order not so unlike Phaeton fateful ride across the sky.

⁹⁹ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 2.156-328 for the story of Phaeton's ride, the havoc that he wrecks on the Earth, and the subsequent crash of the Sun's chariot after nearly destroying the Earth.

At the beginning of her incantation, after Medea prays to the gods and entities of the dead for their aid in her endeavor, she goes further still. Medea, in lines 749-751, commands the aid of the long-dead and famous kin-slaying daughters of Danaus. In referencing the Danaids, Seneca reminds his audience of who Medea is and signals an interesting subversion of the natural order. Medea, like the daughters of Danaus and/or Danaus himself, are of foreign descent.¹⁰⁰ The Danaids' famous crimes of killing their cousins (who were also their husbands) had taken place long enough ago for them to have earned legendary punishments in the underworld and for Medea to summon them.¹⁰¹ Also, the Danaids are long-term residents of the underworld and famously punished. Medea, who is also a foreign kin-slayer, is compelling the dead Danaids to aid Medea's revenge on Jason.¹⁰²

The effects of Medea's command over nature affects more than just her. In the process of preparing and/or executing her greater magic, Medea does so at the expense of the community. Seneca's reference to the disaster of Phaethon illustrates this, as does Medea's command of the stars to change the seasons. Freezing the summer ground would cause the summer harvest to die. The loss of the summer harvest affects the broader community and would certainly qualify as a disaster. While these events are mythical, Seneca's point is to illustrate through Medea's action that greater magical practice has a direct correlation with the welfare of the broader community.

Conclusions: Ovidian and Senecan Magicians

¹⁰⁰ It depends on the tradition as to where the Danaids come from. Danaus apparently was the King of Libya, then Argos. See Hine 2000, 186 for some commentary on the significance of the Danaids as slayers of their cousin-husbands and by extension kin. Otherwise, Ovid's account of the granddaughters of Belus in his *Metamorphoses* 4.212-13 makes Belus the king of Egypt in some mythical time.

¹⁰¹ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4. 451- 463 for the conclusion and punishment for the crimes of the Danaids or the *Belides* as Ovid refers to them.

¹⁰² See Hine 2000, 186 for more discussion of Seneca's treatment of the Danaids. Hine points out the conceptual play between the famous punishments of the Danaids and the fact that Medea is summoning them to punish Jason.

Both Ovid and Seneca respond to the phenomenon of magical practice in their eras through the characterizations of their respective Medeae. Specifically, magic is evaluated in the presentation of how and why each of the Ovidian and Senecan Medeae perform their greater magical enterprise. Ovid, as a poet with a considerably counter-cultural disposition, wrote his works in a time when magic, while widespread, was often censored by the powerful with varying degrees of success.¹⁰³ Unlike most other literary depictions, Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* reads as significantly more sympathetic to magical practice than other works. The Ovidian Medea's purpose for using magic is to bring Aeson from the brink of death. Such a positive purpose complicates an easy characterization of magic as something that is inherently *nefas*. While Medea's episode of giving new life to Aeson "is Greek and belongs to the epic tradition," according to some scholars, the length and ritual detail Ovid gives to the episode is unmatched in any other mainstream and/or extant Medea traditions before Ovid.¹⁰⁴ From the beginning of Medea's ritual, Ovid characterizes Medea's own notion of her greater magical undertaking as a heartfelt response to Jason's impious request. That is, it is Jason who suggests that magic be used in a way that is considered a *scelus*. The Ovidian Medea's response is that she will not do what he asks, but will do something else – and something that is not only better, in not being *nefas*, but even dutiful (*munus*).

Medea is performing her greater magic as an act of service or duty for her in-laws, and so the preparations she makes, the ingredients she uses, and the landscapes she collects her ingredients from are not characterized negatively. Moreover, the efforts that the Ovidian Medea makes even in approaching the gods, utilizing their aid and their realms of influence for her

¹⁰³ See Introduction 3-4. For discussions on how Ovid and the other elegists were to an extant countercultural, see Luck 2002, 308; Sullivan 2002, 214.

¹⁰⁴ Anderson 1972, 262 insists that the prolonging of Aeson's life by Medea's ritual is part of the Greek epic tradition, but I have seen no evidence to suggest this in any extant works that feature Medea's story.

purposes are as *fas* as possible. Not only does Ovid portray Medea's ritual efforts to appease the gods as humble, but she also makes no effort to command the gods. Ovid's Medea takes on the challenge of a greater magical enterprise than any she has hitherto accomplished by proposing a cooperative undertaking to those gods that are best suited for her task. This kind of godly cooperation is hardly the kind of practice that would be called *nefas*.

Ovid suggests that after Medea successfully returned some forty years of life back to Aeson, "Bacchus had witnessed this marvel from his station in the sky, and learning this that his old nurses might be restored to their youthful years, he obtained this boon from the Colchian woman."¹⁰⁵ It is evident in Ovid's telling that Medea had the approval of the gods and entities that she petitioned for her ritual as evidenced by its success, and also gained the approval of Bacchus who wanted the knowledge for his own reasons. Ultimately, her magic helps a community, unlike the magic of Seneca's Medea.

Ovid's general portrayal of Medea's herb gathering and magical material curation is less insidious than strange. The point that Ovid makes in making references to the ingredients that the Ovidian Medea gathers is that they all have purpose, and their purposes are oriented to restoring the life of Aeson. The overall picture that Ovid presents of his Medea is that she spent nine days and nights relentlessly gathering materials from the farthest reaches of the empire (even beyond its borders) that are required for her to prolong the life of her father-in-law.¹⁰⁶

Because the Senecan *Medea* borrows so much from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's *Medea* could be a response to Ovid's sympathetic portrayal of magical practice by his Medea of the *Metamorphoses* 7. Seneca characterizes magical practice in another text, his *Oedipus*, but

¹⁰⁵ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.294-296- *Viderat ex alto miracula monstri | Liber et admonitus, iuvenes nutricibus annos | posse suis reddi, capit hos a Colchide munus.*

¹⁰⁶ See chapter 3 forthcoming that explores these lands and the material gathering of both Ovidian and Senecan Medea at length.

does not do so negatively: instead, he illustrates the necessity of magic in dire circumstances.

The blind priest and seer Tiresias (after failing to divine the identity of Laius' murderer through the reading of bird signs and augury), summons Laius through necromancy, but not by Oedipus, since "it is taboo for Oedipus... to look upon the shades".¹⁰⁷ Here, Seneca characterized proper *religio* as falling short of finding the answers that acts of *superstitio* could deliver. So why then would Seneca produce such a negative characterization of magic and magicians in his *Medea*?

Seneca does so because Medea is a foreign magician and, specifically, a foreign magician who pursued a greater level of magical proficiency than was usual. Seneca had an agenda for negatively presenting Medea and her endeavours to achieve greater magical abilities as Seneca did, but Seneca showed his audience how the pursuit of greater magical expertise was harmful to society. Perhaps Seneca was inspired to depict its dangers because of the young emperors' frequent interactions with foreign magicians and desire to use magic.¹⁰⁸ Seneca reiterates several themes to achieve this end. Medea is a foreign magician, and her past actions were characterized as violent and terrible.¹⁰⁹ Her abilities are terrifying to behold, especially in the context of stereotypes about magic and magicians.¹¹⁰ The overall result is that, as Medea plans, engages, and executes her next magical accomplishment, her crimes grow in proportion to her expertise.

The harms of a magician like Medea, according to Seneca, are against the community, and partly because of the magician's foreign origin.¹¹¹ The magician is often considered to be a

¹⁰⁷ Fitch 2004, 51-53 Loeb ed.

¹⁰⁸ See Pliny's *Natural History* 30.14-15 for Pliny's descriptions of Nero consulting magicians of various sorts in efforts to utilize magic for both solutions to his problems, and to ambitiously pursue prosperity. This is also the stance that Arampapaslis 2019 takes regarding the overall contextual interpretation of Seneca's *Medea*.

¹⁰⁹ See Seneca's *Medea* lines 125; 272-280; 471-476; 485-489 amongst others that exemplify Medea's reflection on kin slaying.

¹¹⁰ Seneca describes some of Medea's more spectacular magical abilities in his *Medea* lines 699-738.

¹¹¹ I agree with the assessment of Seneca scholar Arampapaslis who in his 2019 study places emphasis on Medea's danger to society as she is considered a foreign threat in opposition to Roman mores. See pages 72-73 specifically for Arampapaslis' commentary on Medea as a foreign threat.

perpetual outsider or located on the periphery of society.¹¹² In Jason's last words to Medea in Seneca's tragedy, he says, "bear witness that where you ride there are no gods."¹¹³ While there are a few interpretations of these last lines in both traditional and modern scholarship, a plausible interpretation could be that since Medea has compelled the gods, where she is present, they will not be. This notion is a terrifying prospect for Seneca and the stability of the Roman state. Should the magician achieve a level of proficiency whereby they are able to command the gods, such an ability puts the state's relationship with the gods in peril. The magician's skill set will become darker and will require a greater level of criminality on the part of the magician.

Although the characterization of Medea's abilities might have been exaggerated for entertainment value, there are very real lessons that Seneca wanted to impart to his readership and/or audience concerning the place of magic in Roman society. Seneca wished to impart to his readership and/or audience that the price of practicing greater magic would inevitably exact a price from the practitioner. For Seneca, the cost of pursuing greater magical expertise is the *familia* and the ability to act ethically. The result, in Seneca's view, is that the magician who seeks to advance their magical prowess becomes inclined toward criminality.

¹¹² Some examples of this trope of the magician located on the periphery of Roman society include the Chaldeans and astrologers who were on more than one occasion exiled from Rome and/or had their divination books burned. There are other poetic examples like Medea, and other outsiders (if not *infamae*) like Canidia, Erichtho, and Dipsas which are situated on the outskirts of Roman society.

¹¹³ Seneca's *Medea* 1027- *testare nullos esse, quo veheris deos.*

Chapter 2

Medea the Criminal: Magic as Crime?

Introduction: The link between crime and the magician.

Magic and magicians have a long history of association with criminal activity in the minds of Roman authors. The perception that magicians and other magic practitioners are likely to engage in criminal activity is featured in the earliest legal references to magic in the Roman law of the *Twelve Tables*.¹¹⁴ The law forbids using magic to harm a person, cursing or enchanting another's fields, and/or using magic to disappear the entirety of your neighbor's harvest.¹¹⁵ Later in the Republic, Cato advises his reader to ensure that their slaves ignore those itinerant shysters called Chaldeans.¹¹⁶ In the Augustan period several laws were passed that restricted the use of magic, given its potential to destabilize social relations. Some astrologers who might predict the deaths of the imperial family were targeted, for example.¹¹⁷ Beyond these historical instances, there are also plenty of examples of literary magicians who are characterized as either truly criminal, wicked, or fraudulent.

Roman literary portrayals of Medea, one of ancient literature's most famous magicians, likewise employ differing degrees of criminality. For his depiction of Medea, Seneca draws heavily on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and his *Heroides* 6. In his adaptation of the story, Seneca

¹¹⁴ See the *Twelve Tables* 8 fr. 1b; 8.8 a-b for the earliest Roman laws that prohibit magical harm to be done to a person and to enchant crops leading to their destruction and/or theft. For some commentary on these early Roman laws on magic see Ogden 2009, 277-278; Beard et al. 1998, 154-155.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* For further commentary on the use of magic and its legality concerning agriculture, see Pliny's *Natural History* 18.41-43 for the trial of Chresimus against the charge of enchanting crops.

¹¹⁶ See Cato *on Agriculture* 5.4 for Cato's advice for landowners concerning Chaldeans and the potential for the steward's waste of money on phony prophecies. See also Dicky 2002, 125-126; Beard et al. 1998, 154-155 for commentary on Cato and early Roman conceptions of magic.

¹¹⁷ See Dio 49. 43.5; 52.36.1-2 for Agrippa's expulsion of astrologers from Rome c. 33 BCE; Suetonius' *Augustus* 31 for Augustus' censoring of divination books to prevent horoscopes pertaining to the deaths of individuals c. 31 BCE. According to Suetonius in *Tiberius* 63.1, Tiberius reenacts Augustus' ban on the divination of individual deaths. See Ogden 2009, 281-282 for more commentary on the ban of individual divination. For a discussion on the use of astrology to provoke social instability in Rome under the Julio-Claudians and Severans, see McMullin 1966, 128-134.

shows that those who utilize greater magical expertise, like Medea, are necessarily liable to engage in criminal activity and that such criminality leads ultimately to the destruction of the *familia*.

For both Ovid and Seneca, Medea has shared traits. One, her magic use and criminal action are linked, and two, her magical actions affect the Roman *familia*. In this chapter, I will examine the crimes of Ovidian Medea of the *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7 in juxtaposition with those of Seneca's tragic Medea. Seneca responds to Ovidian Medea by adopting any negative portrayals at the same time as inverting any sympathetic renderings. Seneca does so to demonstrate that undertaking greater magical practice not only produces a proclivity towards criminal activity but also results in the dissolution of familial relations.

Scelus, Nefas, Illicitus

Because this chapter explores the criminality of Medea, I also explore the Latin terminology that is most used to describe illicit conduct. It is important to distinguish between actions that are simply unfitting or wicked and those that are actual crimes, especially because Medea frequently engages in both. For both Ovid and Seneca, an unfitting or wicked action is often expressed as *nefas*. While Seneca does employ *nefas*, he alternately utilizes the *illicitus* (specifically *illicitum*) which is used predominately (if not entirely) after the Augustan era.¹¹⁸ While both *nefas* and *illicitus* can be used to describe something that is against divine law, forbidden, and/or in transgression of an actual law, they are not always used to describe a criminal offense in the laws of mortals, whereas *scelus* or *scelera* is always used to denote this.

Ovid uses *scelus/scelera* and/or *nefas* to describe things that Medea does, and Seneca, in both his *Medea* and other tragedies, uses not only these words but also *illicitum* (which is akin to

¹¹⁸ See Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, v. "illicitus," for commentary on its use.

nefas). The knowledge that Seneca's Medea has, the aid she acquires, and the actions she takes in pursuit of greater magic are similar to those of other characters from Senecan tragedy. For example, Hercules from Seneca's *Hercules* and Oedipus and Tiresias from his *Oedipus*, like Medea, all engage with rituals and/or actions that defy the natural order. They all gain knowledge that they ought not to have received from hard-to-reach people and places that are unfitting for typical humans to access. Subsequently, these characters all face consequences for their engagement with *nefas* practices and exposure to *nefas/illicitus* knowledge. A pattern emerges: when *nefas* and/or *illicitum* are not used to describe an actual civil crime, they are often used to describe a breach in the natural order, and, in Seneca's view, this comes with a hefty price.

In Seneca's *Oedipus*, Oedipus is so keen to know who the murderer of the former king is that he does not blink at the suggestion of communicating with the dead to ascertain the answer. Tiresias himself explains that for the king to see and/or communicate with the dead is *nefas*. By extension, Tiresias' categorization of the ritual he must perform indicates that the ritual itself is also *nefas*.¹¹⁹ Oedipus nevertheless approves of the *nefas* ritual, and the ritual shows, among other things, that Oedipus is the murderer of the late king. An additional consequence of the ritual is that the knowledge gained also reveals Oedipus to be his own stepfather, and this revelation results in the eventual destruction of his family.

Similarly, in Seneca's *Hercules*, the hero returns from the underworld with Theseus and Cerberus in tow, which is a transgression of the natural order, and the forbidden knowledge that he brings to the surface facilitates the destruction of Hercules' family. In a bid to rescue Theseus, Hercules brings both him and Cerberus to the surface world. Upon doing so, Hercules says that

¹¹⁹ See Seneca's *Oedipus* 397-399- *ede cui mandes sacrum; | nam te, penes quem summa regnorum, nefas | invisere umbras*.

bringing Cerberus to the upper world is *nefas* and that no one should witness it (except Juno, that is, who ordered him to do it).¹²⁰ He says,

“Pardon, Phoebus, if your gaze has beheld what is forbidden. I brought earth’s hidden things into the light under orders. And you, ruler and father of the heavenly gods, hold out your thunderbolt to shield your vision; and you who rule the seas with the second-drawn scepter, make for your deepest waters. All, who look from on high on earthly things, at risk of defilement from this strange sight, should turn their gaze away and lift their eyes to heaven, shunning such a monstrosity. Only two should behold this enormity: he who fetched it and she who ordered it.”¹²¹

In this passage, Hercules also makes apologies to the other gods, should they see anything from the underworld. It is *illicitum* that Cerberus, as a creature of the underworld, is brought to the light of the surface.¹²² In the end, the outcome of Hercules bringing Cerberus to the upper world is that Juno causes Hercules to go mad and to kill his own family. In Seneca’s view, the destruction that follows in the wake of *nefas* actions and/or the utilization of knowledge that originates from *illicitus/nefas* sources is not coincidental but consequential. Three of Seneca’s tragedies feature characters that harness knowledge of and aid from inaccessible places and people and these actions lead to a destructive end. The common theme between Seneca’s Hercules and Oedipus is that they both facilitated and committed *nefas* actions and acquired forbidden knowledge, and this directly led to the destruction of their families.

¹²⁰ Seneca’s *Hercules* 600-604- *Quisquis ex alto aspicit | Terrena, facie pollui metuens nova, | Aciem reflectat oraque in caelum erigat | Portenta fugiens. Hoc nefas cernant duo, | qui advexit et quae quae iussit.* NB, the translations used for Seneca’s *Oedipus* and Seneca’s *Hercules* is Fitch 2002, and Firch 2018 respectively.

¹²¹ *Da, Phoebe, veniam, si quid illicitum tui | Videre vultus; iussus in lucem extuli | Aecana mundi. Tuque, caelestum arbiter | Parensque, visus fulmine opposito tege; | Et tu, secundo maria qui sceptro regis, | imas pete undas. Quisquis ex alto aspicit | terrena, facie pollui metuens nova, | Aciem reflectat oraque in caelum erigat | Portenta fugiens. Hoc nefas cernant duo, | qui advexit et quae quae iussit* (Seneca’s *Hercules* 595-604).

¹²² Seneca’s *Hercules* 595-596- *Da, Phoebe, veniam, si quid illicitum tui | Videre vultus...*

As Medea's magic seems to necessitate *nefas* actions, especially actions necessary to access forbidden realms and shady rituals, it makes sense that Seneca's *Medea* also pays a price for her willing exposure to such things.¹²³ Medea's conscience grows numbed, and this leads to an increased tendency toward wrongdoing, culminating in the destruction of both the Corinthian royal house and her own family.

Ovid's Portrayal of Medea's Criminality: *Heroides* 6

This criminal transformation of Medea arguably has some precedence in Ovid's *Heroides* 6, which Seneca adopts and emphasizes. Ovid also represents Medea as engaging in criminal actions in *Metamorphoses* 7, but there are some issues in easy categorization of Medea as a criminal in his portrayal. Seneca's choices in representing Medea remove such complexities: he presents a more unambiguously criminal character.

The approach Ovid takes toward Medea's criminality differs according to context. Ovid's *Heroides* 6 is occupied with bringing Medea's villainy to the fore, and this negative characterization is to be expected, as the voice of the letter is Hypsipyle, a rival to Medea for Jason's affections. Hypsipyle lists Medea's magical wrongdoings before categorically characterizing Medea as a destroyer of her family. In Hypsipyle's view, Medea's use of magic is emblematic of her character, and this inner character will ultimately destroy her own family. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7, on the other hand, Ovid complicates the easy judgement of Medea as simply the most nefarious magician of ancient literature. When Seneca receives and responds to Ovid's sympathetic portrayal of Medea, he removes complexities introduced by Ovid that would make Medea's moral evaluation ambiguous. Whenever Ovid emphasizes Medea's criminal

¹²³ As the exploration of the role that magical landscapes and otherwise inaccessible realms play in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Medea* is beyond the scope of the present chapter, see the next chapter for a discussion on the Magical Landscapes of Ovidian and Senecan Medeae starting at page 59.

character (as in the case of Ovid's *Heroides* 6), Seneca selectively adopts these negative portrayals while inverting any positive depictions elsewhere in Ovid's works.

Ovid's *Heroides* 6 is an important work to explore because it features the greatest emphasis on Medea's criminal character of Ovid's extant works. It is important, however, to remember that the voice Ovid imagined for this work is a staunch rival of Medea. The protagonist of Ovid's sixth letter is Hypsipyle. Hypsipyle is the queen of Lemnos whom Jason, in Ovid's version of the myth, has married and then abandoned as he continued with his quest for the golden fleece. Hypsipyle writes her letter to Jason when she finds out from a random stranger from Thessaly, who landed on the Lemnian shore, that Jason not only was alive and well, but that he had also managed to acquire the golden fleece through overcoming a set of mortally dangerous trials with the help of a Colchian princess. Moreover, Jason disregarded his marriage vows to Hypsipyle (who now has twin children from Jason), married this magical Colchian princess, Medea, and brought her back to his homeland. Jason is likely never to come back to Lemnos. Thus, Hypsipyle writes her letter to Jason, assassinating Medea's character.

Hypsipyle's diatribe against Medea can be separated into roughly three sections. In the first section of the letter, Hypsipyle writes to Jason about how she heard the news of his exploits and expresses her anger at his broken vows. The second part of the letter is devoted to an attack on Medea's character and Hypsipyle's comparison of herself to her rival. In the last section of the letter, Hypsipyle demonstrates that she is a better match for Jason than Medea is.

In the process of comparing herself to Medea, Hypsipyle characterizes Medea in a few ways. None are positive. Hypsipyle's assailment of Medea's character starts with Medea's predatory use of magic, and this includes more nefarious practices, like bending Jason's will to her own with herbs; necromancy; other sympathetic practices (in the magical sense), like

applying needles to waxen images, and the other standard abilities of magicians like commanding natural elements.¹²⁴ Hypsipyle then attempts to undercut Medea's value to Jason by highlighting Medea's crimes against her family, such as her betrayal of her father and the murder of her brother. She even unwittingly hints at Medea's own eventual filicide.¹²⁵

Beginning in *Heroides* 6.83-94, Hypsipyle's description of Medea and her magic ability are presented in the same negative fashion. She uses actions stereotypical for magicians in Augustan literature, and especially in elegy.¹²⁶ Hypsipyle's catalogue of Medea's magic is illustrative of how Hypsipyle sees Medea as a magician and magic user: as a criminal. Hypsipyle explains in lines 85-88 that Medea "strives with the reluctant moon, to bring it down from its course in the skies, and makes hide away in shadows the steeds of the sun; she reins the waters in, and stays the down-winding stream; she charms life into trees and rocks, and moves them from their place."¹²⁷ These descriptions are standard fare for stereotypes of magicians of Augustan literature. Hypsipyle is not interested, however, in presenting Medea as simply just another magician. Hypsipyle's take on Medea and her use of magic is that Medea presents a special danger. Hypsipyle takes pains to articulate the darker kinds of magic that Medea may apply.

In lines 89-93, Hypsipyle states that "Among sepulchers [Medea] stalks, ungirded, with hair flowing loose, and gathers from the yet warm funeral pyre the appointed bones. She vows to their doom the absent, fashions the waxen image, and into its wretched heart drives the slender

¹²⁴ *Heroides* 6. 83-94.

¹²⁵ *Heroides* 1.27-138.

¹²⁶ See Ogden 2009, 124-125 for an overview of stereotypes of magicians in Latin literature. While magic is popular in Augustan (or the Golden) age of literature, the topic of magic becomes increasingly popular in works of the silver age of literature like in various works of Seneca, Lucan, Petronius; Tacitus; Suetonius; and later Apuleius.

¹²⁷ *Illa reluctantem cursu deducere lunam | Nititur et tenebris abdere solis equos; | Illa refrenat aquas obliquaque flumina sistit; | Illa oco silvas vivaque saxa movet* (Ovid's *Heroides* 6.85-88).

needle – and other deeds it was better not to know.”¹²⁸ These lines play on darker stereotypes of magicians: the figure of the magician living in graveyards to communicate with the dead, defiling the remnants of human remains from the pyres.¹²⁹ Disturbing the bones of the deceased to either commune with them or to interrogate them to ascertain the future is one of the most sacrilegious practices in ancient literature. Ovid would know the miasmic implications of the practice, and that these impugn the character of the magician. Naturally then, he has Hypsipyle accuse Medea of the practice.

Hypsipyle’s last strike at Medea is to accuse her of using magic to seduce and/or force Jason to be with her. In lines 6.83-84, Hypsipyle states to Jason that Medea’s “charm for you is neither in her beauty nor her merit; but you are made hers by the incantations she knows, by the enchanted blade with which she garners the baneful herb.”¹³⁰ By denoting Medea’s ability to use magic criminally, it initially seems as though Hypsipyle is accusing Jason of marrying Medea only for what her abilities as a magician could gain him. This sentiment makes sense given that Jason would not have succeeded in his quest without Medea’s aid.

In lines 93-96 Hypsipyle reflects on Jason and Medea’s relationship and concludes that “Ill sought by herbs is love that should be won by virtue and beauty... Surely, she must have forced you to bear the yoke; just as she forced the bulls, and has you subdued by the same means she uses with fierce dragons.”¹³¹ Hypsipyle here parrots Ovid’s own convictions on the topic of magic being used for love and seduction, because Ovid makes clear that he is opposed to using

¹²⁸ *Per tumulos errat passis discincta capillis | Certaue de tepidis colligit ossa rogis. | Devovet absentis simulacraue cerea figit, | Et miserum tenuis in iecur urget acus- | et quae nescierim Melius* (Ovid’s *Heroides* 6.89-93).

¹²⁹ The reference to this kind of practice also appears quite infamously in Horace’s *Satires* 1.8, and Lucan’s *Pharsalia* book 6. 719-827 which both feature the accounts of magicians’ impious divination practices.

¹³⁰ *Nec facie meritisque placet, sed carmina novit | Diraue cantata pabula falce metit* (Ovid’s *Heroides* 6.83-84).

¹³¹ Ovid’s *Heroides* 6. 93-94; 6.97-98- *Male quaeritur herbis | Moribus et forma conciliandus amor | Scilicet ut tauros, ita te iuga ferre coegit | Quaaue feros anguis, te quoque mulcet ope.*

magic to find a paramour.¹³² He shows this in his *Metamorphoses* through the voice of Circe: in lines 14.25-37, the newly divine Glaucus wishes the magician Circe to make him a potion to give to the sea nymph Scylla. As Scylla has rejected Glaucus' advances, Circe expresses to him that it is much better to obtain the affection from someone who willingly gives it rather than using magic to force it.¹³³ Likewise, Ovid comments in his *Ars Amatoria* 2.99-104 that "Medean herbs will not keep love alive, nor Marsian charm united to magic sounds. The Phasian had kept the son of Aeson, Circe had kept Ulysses, if love could be saved by spells alone."¹³⁴ Similarly, Ovid gives the same advice for one who has just broken up with a lover in his *Remedia Amores* when he explains to his reader that: "No hearts will lay aside their passion by enchantment, nor love flee vanquished by strong sulphur. What availed thee the grasses of thy Phasian land, O Colchian maid, when thou wert fain to stay in thy native home?"¹³⁵ In addition to Hypsipyle's scathing accusation of Medea using magic to seduce Jason in such a negative fashion, these examples above provides a reliable picture of Ovid's negative assessment of mixing love with magic.

As Hypsipyle herself suggests, Jason's decision to marry Medea may have been on account of her magical ability, and Hypsipyle uses the fact of Medea's magic – and her blatant criminal actions with it – to try to convince Jason that she is the more worthy wife. In lines 125-139, Hypsipyle lays out Medea's criminal character. Via foreshadowing or dramatic irony, Ovid

¹³² See the *Ars Amatoria* 2.99-104; *Metamorphoses* 14.25-37; *Remedia Amores* 249-251; 259-264 for reiterations of Ovid's aversion to mixing love with magic.

¹³³ "melius sequerere volentem | optantemque eadem pariliq[ue] cupidine captam. | dignus eras ultro (poteras certeque) rogari, | et, si spem dederis, mihi crede, rogaberis ultro. | neu dubites absitque tuae fiducia formae, | en ego, cum dea sim, nitidi cum filia Solis, | carmine cum tantum, tantum quoque gramine possim, | ut tua sim, voveo. spernentem sperne, sequenti | redde vices, unoque duas ulciscere facto. | talia temptanti "prius" inquit "in aequore frondes" (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 14.25-37).

¹³⁴ Fallitur, Haemonias si quis decurrit ad artes, | Datque quod a teneri fronte revellit equi. | Non facient, ut vivat amor, Medeides herbae | Mixtaque cum magicis nenia Marsa sonis. | Phasias Aesoniden, Circe tenuisset Ulixem, | Si modo servari carmine posset amor (Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* 2.99-104). translated by Mozley 1929.

¹³⁵ Nec fugiet vivo sulpure victus amor. | Quid te Phasiacae iuverunt gramina terrae, | Cum cuperes patria, Colchi, manere domo?" (*Remedia Amoris* 260-262), translated by Mozley 1929.

has Hypsipyle allude to the worst of Medea's *nefas* actions: her murder of her children. As Jason is still with Medea in Hypsipyle's letter, Medea has not yet killed her own children.¹³⁶ Ovid has Hypsipyle express hesitation to send her twins (by Jason) to their father as ambassadors, and in so doing reminds the reader of Medea's ultimate crime.¹³⁷ In lines 125-129, Hypsipyle remarks that "I almost gave them to be carried to you, their mother's ambassadors; but thought of the cruel stepmother turned me from the path I would have trod. It was Medea I feared. Medea is more than a stepmother; the hands of Medea are fitted for any crime."¹³⁸ By having Hypsipyle hold her sons back from acting as her ambassadors, the queen of Lemnos through Ovid is making an intertextual reference to the Medea's story: Medea used her own two sons as envoys, with tragic results for Jason. First, Medea's sons were put to a nefarious purpose in delivering the fatally poisonous dress to Jason's new bride.¹³⁹ By extension, then, Medea's sons were a vehicle by which the royal house of Corinth was destroyed. Medea's destruction of Creon and Creusa produced subsequent instability to Corinth. After Medea's sons fulfilled their mother's wishes, she caused her children to technically kill their new stepmother and thereby commit matricide. Upon completing their task and returning to their mother, Medea murdered them. The dramatic irony that Hypsipyle refuses to send her sons to Jason highlights for the reader Medea's crime of using her own children as ambassadors before murdering them. Medea is at the height of her criminality at Corinth, and by highlighting Medea's worst crime first, Ovid's Hypsipyle – without knowing it – characterizes Medea as permanently beyond sympathy and/or redemption.

¹³⁶ Diodorus Siculus in his *Library of History* 4.54.1 claims that Medea and Jason were together some ten years before the events of the Corinthian episode took place. Ovid may be playing off Siculus' claim.

¹³⁷ See Knox 1995, 18, 23 for commentary on Ovid's use of intertextuality within the *Heroides*.

¹³⁸ See Ovid *Heroides* 6.125-128- *Legatos quos paene dedi pro matre ferendos; | Sed tenuit coeptas saeva noverca vias. | Medeam timui: plus est Medea noverca; | Medea faciunt ad scelus omne manus.*

¹³⁹ Cf. Seneca's *Medea* 843-848.

In Hypsipyle's consideration of sending her sons to their father, she also expands on the pre-Corinth criminal actions of Medea in lines 129-130. Hypsipyle states the question "would she who could tear her brother limb from limb and strew him over thee fields be one to spare my pledges?"¹⁴⁰ By asking this rhetorical question, Hypsipyle brings up the second most indefensible crime that Medea committed. She underscores Medea's disregard for family, as, in lines 135-138 Hypsipyle exclaims that Medea "betrayed her sire...she deserted the Colchians...What matters aught, if sin is to be set before devotion, and she has won her husband with the very crime she brought him as her dower?"¹⁴¹ These last lines bring us to the heart of Hypsipyle's contention with Medea: not only has Medea (in the eyes of Hypsipyle) married Jason when she had no right to, but she essentially bought Jason with illicit action after illicit action.

In the voice of Hypsipyle, Ovid shows that Medea's engagement with magic for malicious purposes leads to crime. In the narrative of *Heroides* 6, Medea's magical malevolence is but the step toward becoming criminal. Thus, Ovid's portrayal of Medea's use of magic through Hypsipyle's diatribe in *Heroides* 6 is a negative assessment of Medea's character as a magician. As a woman scorned, however, and one attempting to berate her former lover for his poor choices, Hypsipyle has every reason to characterize Medea as malevolent.

Ovid's Portrayal of Medea's Criminality: *Metamorphoses* 7

Medea is characterized differently elsewhere in Ovidian tradition. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medea is presented much more sympathetically. Apart from the Pelias episode, the crimes of Medea of the *Metamorphoses* are underemphasized. Medea's wrongdoings are

¹⁴⁰ *Spargare quae fratris potuit lacerata per agros | corpora, pignoribus parceret illa meis?*... (Ovid's *Heroides* 6.129-130).

¹⁴¹ Ovid's *Heroides* 6.135-138- *Perdidit illa patrem... | deseruit Colchos...* | *Quid refert, scelerata piam si vincet et ipso | Crimine dotata est emeruitque virum?*

spread out over her story with few lines given to their description. The crimes of Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7 (if they are not glossed over), are even made ethically complicated by the author. Consequently, Ovid gives Medea's actions a new degree of complexity that departs from other Medea traditions and defies easy categorization of her actions as criminal.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7, the first scene that features Medea comes as Jason and the Argonauts have arrived in Colchis. Upon arriving, Jason makes known his request for the golden fleece of Phrixus to Aeetes, the king of Colchis and Medea's father. Aeetes agrees to give the fleece to Jason should he survive a set of trials. After learning of the trials that Jason must face to receive the golden fleece, Medea is both smitten and concerned for the safety of Jason. Ovid gives Medea a significant soliloquy as she debates with herself concerning the morality of her decision to aid Jason. This portrayal introduces Medea as a nuanced character. Medea is in love with a foreigner, but betraying her father is not presented as an easy decision. Without Medea's help, Jason's attempt to yoke the fire-breathing bulls of Aeetes and to defeat the earthen men born of the dragon's teeth would surely end in Jason's death. After assessing Jason's chances of survival, Medea states that "If I permit this, then I shall confess that I am the child of a tigress and that I have iron and stone in my heart."¹⁴² Medea is smitten and in the initial stages of her relationship with Jason, and so Medea secures Jason's life from the otherwise fatal trials of Aeetes by giving him the magical means to succeed. Upon Jason's success, Medea silently thanks the efficacy of her spells and the gods that gave and/or authored them.¹⁴³ This magical feat is technically a betrayal of her father, but the fact that Medea's power to effect it is sourced

¹⁴² See *Metamorphoses* lines 7.32-33: *hoc ego si patiar, tum de tigride natam | tum ferrum et scopulos gestare in corde fatebor!*.

¹⁴³ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.147-148- *Quod licet, adfectu tacito laeteris agisque | carminibus grates et dis auctoribus horum.*

from the gods provides the reader with the impression that the gods are not offended by Medea's actions in this scenario.

Ovid shows that Medea is, at worst, guilty of aiding and abetting a thief. This betrayal is merely the consequence of Medea's desire to prevent the unnecessary death of one man, pirate (*latronus*) though he may be.¹⁴⁴ There is no attention to Medea's wrongdoing in her departure from Colchis – Ovid only provides lines 7.152-158 concerning the incapacitation of the dragon guarding the golden fleece and the Argonauts' escape back to Thessaly. For Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* 7, Medea is not even the one who makes off with the golden fleece but is the mere facilitator of the theft. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, lines 7.152-158 Ovid outlines Jason's final escapades in Colchis:

“after Jason had sprinkled upon him the Lethean juice of a certain herb and thrice had recited the words that bring peaceful slumber, which stay the swollen sea and swift-flowing rivers, then sleep came to those eyes which had never known sleep before, and the heroic son of Aeson gained the golden fleece.”¹⁴⁵

It is notable that Jason is the one who puts the dragon to sleep. Although Medea made it possible for Jason to incapacitate the dragon, Jason is still the primary agent in the first section of Medea's story within the *Metamorphoses*. This is unlike other traditions such as Hypsipyle's characterization, that make Medea the central malefactor in taking the golden fleece and betraying her father.

¹⁴⁴ See Ovid's *Heroides* 12.111-112 *virginitas facta est peregrini praeda latronis; | optima cum cara matre relicta soror*. While Jason is not called a pirate in most traditions, he is called a pirate (through Medea's voice) in *Heroides* 12.

¹⁴⁵ *Hunc postquam sparsit Lethaei gramine suci | Verbaque ter dixit placidos facientia somnos, | Quae mare turbatum, quae concita flumina sistunt, | Somnus in ignotos oculos sibi venit, et auro | Heros Aesonis potitur spolioque superbus* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 152-156).

Ovid brings more complexity to the fore in the next lines as Medea is credited for getting Jason the golden fleece. Ovid describes in lines 7.157-158 how Jason, “Proud of this spoil and bearing with him the giver of his prize, another spoil, the victor and his wife in due time reached the harbor of Iolchos.”¹⁴⁶ The point here is that Medea did enable Jason to take the golden fleece, and this meant betraying her father in the process. Ovid does not, however, emphasize nefarious intent on Medea’s part, nor are these wrongdoings particularly highlighted as criminal in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7. Moreover, a crucial part of Medea’s tradition from the first third of Medea’s story is uniquely absent in the *Metamorphoses* 7. That is, Medea’s brother Apsyrtus is not murdered by Medea during the Argonauts’ escape. In turn, this means that the most notorious crime after Medea’s filicide is omitted from Ovid’s narrative. This glaring exclusion shows Ovid’s effort to portray a more sympathetic Medea.

Indeed, the only crime of Medea that is significantly covered by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* 7 is Medea’s manipulation and murder of King Pelias.¹⁴⁷ After Medea’s feigned flight as a suppliant to the house of Pelias, she showed the daughters of Pelias her magic ritual to restore life to the aged.¹⁴⁸ The only crime of Medea’s to receive sustained attention in the *Metamorphoses* is described in lines 7.333-352 where, after Medea has convinced Pelias’ daughters to go through with a violent ritual to restore youth to their father, the girls are manipulated into murdering him instead.

After preparing a cauldron of boiling water that was supposed to be filled with the special herbs to make Pelias young again, Medea first persuades the daughters of Pelias to

¹⁴⁶ See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.157-158- *Muneris auctorem secum, spoila altera, portans |Victor Iolciacos tetigit cum coniuge portus*

¹⁴⁷ See Ovid’s *Met.* 7 297-352 for the full Episode of Medea’s murder of Pelias.

¹⁴⁸ See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.297-323 for the account of Medea’s false pretences and manipulation of Pelias daughters into wanting Medea’s help to restore Pelias.

relieve their father of his blood. In lines 7.333-338, “Medea said, ‘Come, draw your swords, and let out his old blood that I may refill his empty veins with young blood again....If you have any filial love, and if the hopes are not vain that you are cherishing, come, do your duty by your father; drive out age at your weapon’s point; let out his enfeebled blood with the stroke of the steel.’”¹⁴⁹ As far as Medea’s crimes go, the murder of Pelias is one of Medea’s more notorious actions. The most nefarious elements of Medea’s measures taken here are seen in Medea’s manipulation of the familial connections between the daughters of Pelias and their father. While Medea secretly plans the death of Pelias, the king’s daughters believe that Medea’s instructions are simply part of the ritual. When Pelias’ daughters hesitate to execute this aggressive stage of the ritual, Medea leverages their filial devotion to persuade them to carry on. Medea’s manipulation pays off and the daughters are convinced to proceed with the ritual.

In lines 339-347, Ovid recounts the actions of the daughters of Pelias:

“Spurred on by these words, as each was filial, she became first in the unfilial act, and that she might not be wicked did the wicked deed...and so with averted faces they blindly struck with cruel hands...[Pelias] half mangled tried to get up from his bed and he said ‘what are you doing, my daughters? What arms you to your father’s death...’”¹⁵⁰

At Pelias’ words, his daughters lose their nerve to finish the fake ritual and Medea is forced to finish the job herself. Ovid showcases the implications of familial duty in Medea’s urging: for the daughters of Pelias, calling off the ritual would mean that they would deny their aged father the opportunity to be young again. To deny Pelias a longer life would then be an act against

¹⁴⁹ ...ait “gladios veteremque haurite crurorem, | Ut repleam vacuas iuvenali sanguine venas! |...Si pietas ulla est nec spes agitatis inanis, | officium praestate patri telisque senectam | exigite, et sanie coniecto emittite ferro!” (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.333-338).

¹⁵⁰ His ut quaeque pia est, hortatibus in pia prima est | et, ne sit scelerata, facit scelus.....oculosque reflectunt, | Caecaque dant saevis aversae vulnera dextris |.... Semilacerque toro temptat consurgere |... “quid facies, gnatae? Quid vos in fata parentis | Armat?” (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.339-34).

pietas, or filial duty. The daughters of course are convinced to commit a crime of which they are unaware, and this realizes Medea's wish to see Pelias dead. This moral manipulation that Medea devises for the daughters is what makes Medea's act here so villainous. This is the one crime of Medea's that Ovid gives ten lines or more to describe in the *Metamorphoses*.

Medea's murder of Pelias is a villainous and manipulative crime, but Ovid's readers could have imagined a plausible and reasonable motivation for it, rooted in love of her own new family. Pelias, in other traditions, is a villainous figure himself and particularly a threat to Jason.¹⁵¹ A notable part of nearly all mainstream Medea traditions is that Jason is sent on a quest to retrieve the golden fleece by King Pelias in the first place. There are variations in the role that Pelias plays relative to Jason depending on the tradition.¹⁵² Ovid's readership would have been familiar with the other versions of Medea's story.¹⁵³ Jason's family by the time the Argo returns to Iolchos (located in Thessaly) includes Medea. Therefore, if Pelias was a threat to Medea and her new family, it could be argued that Medea was pre-emptively defending her new family by orchestrating Pelias' death.¹⁵⁴

The last two mentions of Medea's criminality within *Metamorphoses* 7 include a short few lines featuring little more than a footnote reference to Medea's filicide in Corinth and another couple of lines that refer to her attempted murder of Theseus in Athens. In lines 7.394-

¹⁵¹ Pelias is portrayed as particularly villainous in Apollodorus *Library* 1.9.27; Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* 4.50.

¹⁵² The setting of Diodorus' Siculus' tradition (4.40.2-3) is that king Pelias sends his Jason on his quest for the golden fleece (intending the journey to be a death sentence) due to a suspicion that said that Jason and Aeson would dethrone him. In Apollodorus's version (1.9.16 for the setting of the story), Pelias is the king of Thessaly wherein upon receiving an oracle to beware of a man with a single sandal because he will usurp the throne, Jason is summoned amongst others by chance to attend a festival and loses his sandal crossing the river. Thus, Pelias (with no familial relation to Jason in the *Library*) attempts to dispose of Jason by sending him on a quest.

¹⁵³ See Apollodorus' *Library* 1.9.27 for one version where Pelias forces Aeson to commit suicide, which caused Jason's mother to hang herself, subsequently leaving behind Jason's infant brother. Pelias then killed the infant. Thus, Medea's actions in Apollodorus' version were in fact acts of vengeance.

¹⁵⁴ See Reif 2016, 182 for more commentary on the take that Medea's murder of Pelias is legitimate.

397, shortly upon Medea's arrival at Corinth, Ovid tells how "after the new wife had been burnt by Colchian witchcraft, and the two seas had seen the king's palace aflame, she stained her impious sword in the blood of her sons; and then, after this horrid vengeance, the mother fled Jason's sword."¹⁵⁵ There is no question that Ovid considers Medea's actions in Corinth inexcusable. The brevity of Ovid's attention that he gives to this crime, however, is telling. Ovid is either downplaying this episode or Medea's most infamous crime is not worth exploring for Ovid's purposes in the *Metamorphoses* 7.¹⁵⁶

In a similar vein, Ovid gives very brief attention to the last crime that is typically acknowledged in most versions of Medea's story.¹⁵⁷ Ovid very briefly outlines how Athenian hero Theseus is nearly poisoned by a cup that Medea prepared, and which Aegeus gave to Theseus. Just before Theseus drinks the poison, Aegeus recognizes his old sword on Theseus's belt and recognizes him as his heir.¹⁵⁸ Aegeus realizes that his new wife was attempting to have his son killed, and so he knocks the cup from Theseus' hand and then turns to deal with Medea.¹⁵⁹ Medea then flees his sword by taking to the air in a dark whirlwind produced by her *carmina*.¹⁶⁰ While Ovid does include many details, these pay little attention to Medea's actual criminal actions except for the necessary points that outline where the poison comes from, the

¹⁵⁵ *sed postquam Colchis arsit nova nupta venenis | flagratemque domum regis mare vidit utrumque | sanguine natorum perfunditur inpius ensis | ultraque se male mater Iasonis effugit arma* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 394-397).

¹⁵⁶ Ovid's brevity concerning Medea's filicide may be because he wrote his own tragedy which was likely set within the Medea's Corinthian episode. However, there may be any number of other reasons for Ovid's reduction of the Corinthian debacle to a footnote.

¹⁵⁷ Of the few versions that give a comprehensive story arc for Medea, versions that feature Medea's attempted poisoning of Theseus apart from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* include Apollodorus' *Epitome of the Library* fr. E 5; Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* 4.55.

¹⁵⁸ See Apollodorus' *Epitome of the Library* fr. E.5 for an only slightly less dramatic version of Medea's attempted poisoning of Theseus and subsequent exile from Athens.

¹⁵⁹ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 420-424 for the details of Aegeus' actions in Medea's attempted poisoning of Theseus.

¹⁶⁰ See Ovid's *Met.* lines 7.406-407; 421-24 for a brief account of Medea's nearly poisoning of Theseus and Aegeus' almost bringing Medea to justice for "her" treachery. Medea's departure from Athens is accomplished by a unique means even by the standards of the wider portrayals of magicians in ancient literature.

fact that she makes the brew for Aegeus to give to Theseus, and her spectacular escape. The whole narrative is only twenty lines long.

In short, Ovid has Hypsipyle place a great emphasis on Medea's criminality in *Heroides* 6. Whether Ovid means to present his own view of Medea's actions, or if he means for his readership to consider Medea's crimes critically as presented by Medea's rival, is immaterial: the point is that Medea is presented first and foremost as a criminal by Hypsipyle. In the *Metamorphoses* 7, on the other hand, Ovid underemphasizes Medea's crimes generally, while complicating a convenient assessment of her actions as criminal. That is, Medea's crimes as presented in the *Metamorphoses* 7 barely receive attention, including some of her worst crimes like the murder of Apsyrtus. Although Ovid presents a particularly malicious portrayal of Medea in the Pelias episode, Ovid means for that crime to be defensible when contextualized against the backdrop of other traditions that establish Pelias as a villainous aggressor against the house of Aeson.

Seneca's Criminal Medea

Using Ovid's presentation of Medea, Seneca takes a different view of her criminality. In Seneca's *Medea*, there is a central focus on Medea's portrayal as a villain because Seneca's tragedy focuses on Medea's most notorious episode in Corinth. Although there are similarities to Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's Medea is more straightforwardly characterized as criminal and on a trajectory toward greater moral depravity.

In the tragedy, Medea, upon hearing the wedding hymns of Jason and his new bride, begins to reflect on her relationship with Jason. Seneca has Medea ask herself, "Did he hold my services cheap, though he had seen fire and sea overpowered by my crime [*scelere*]? Is he so

confident that my evil is completely used up?.. Is this sufficient for my wrongs [*nefas*]?”¹⁶¹ The actions that Medea took in the beginning of her relationship with Jason are blatantly called crimes even by Medea herself. Seneca’s Medea does not shy from the fact that she is known for her violent past. Seneca writes his Medea as if she is shocked that Jason would feel so safe and free to abandon her without consequence. Moreover, Seneca suggests that Medea thinks her past crimes can be a means of keeping Jason.

Beyond Medea’s surprise that Jason has confidence in putting her aside in such a cavalier fashion, Seneca makes a reference that resonates with Hypsipyle’s diatribe against Medea in Ovid’s *Heroides* 6. As Hypsipyle says in her letter to Jason in lines 6. 126-127, when she expresses her hesitation about sending her sons, she says specifically that “it was Medea I feared. Medea is more than a stepmother; the hands of Medea are fitted for any crime.”¹⁶² The idea that Medea’s very hands are criminal appears again in Seneca. Seneca has his tragic Medea state to herself in lines 126-129 that “if Pelasgian or barbarian cities have discovered some deed that your hands do [not] know, you must prepare to do it now.”¹⁶³ This sentiment echoes Hypsipyle’s assessment of Medea as a dangerous and criminal character. In lines 914-915, too, Medea states as she is bringing herself to commit filicide, “find a means, my pain: to any crime you will bring a well-trained hand.”¹⁶⁴ These specific examples show that Seneca emphasizes Medea’s criminality and ties them specifically to her criminal hands. Seneca nods to Ovid’s earlier works pertaining to the criminality of Medea, and these go hand in hand with what it means to be Medea.

¹⁶¹ Seneca’s *Medea* 120-122....*merita contempsit mea | qui scelere flammis viderat vinci et mare? | Adeone credit omne consumptum nefas?*

¹⁶² Ovid’s *Heroides* 6.127-128: *Medeam timui: plus est Medea noverca; | Medea faciunt ad scelus omne manus.*

¹⁶³ Seneca’s *Medea* 126-129-.... *hoc meis satis est malis? | Si quod Pelasgae, si quod urbes barbarae | Novere facinus quod tuae ignorent manus, | Nunc est parandum.*

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Seneca’s *Medea* lines 914-915 *quaere materiam, dolor: | ad omne facinus non rudem dextram afferes.*

As Medea chastises Jason for not giving any thought to how she would react or retaliate to his actions, Medea concludes in lines 129-134 that “Your own crimes urge you on, every one of them must return: the famous ornament of my kingdom stolen, the criminal girl’s little companion cut apart with the sword, his death thrust in her father’s face, his body scattered on the sea, the limbs of old Pelias boiled in a cauldron.”¹⁶⁵ These lines are a miniature catalogue of Medea’s past crimes that she intends to bring back to her repertoire in obtaining vengeance on Jason.¹⁶⁶ These crimes mostly mirror Hypsipyle’s account of Medea’s criminal past.¹⁶⁷ Seneca’s Medea plainly considers the nature of her murder of Pelias as criminal, which is arguably underemphasized in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

In Seneca’s *Medea*, much is made of Medea’s villainous actions. The last big crime of Medea’s that Seneca emphasizes is of course filicide, to which the tragedy ultimately leads. In lines 808-811, Medea states her resolve that “My blood must flow onto the altar. Get used, my hands, to drawing steel and enduring the feel of your own dear blood.” These lines are direct foreshadowing for the shape that Medea’s *maior scelerus* will take. As the filicide is the climax of the story, the crime itself stretches over several lines. Medea delivers a lengthy soliloquy over her decision to kill her children, and there is a perversion of familial duty played out by Seneca’s Medea -- not unlike what Medea did to the daughters of Pelias in the *Metamorphoses*. Seneca’s Medea states in lines 904-905 in her reflection of her past actions including her murder of the Corinthian household “Let any deed committed so far be called love of family.”¹⁶⁸ Of course,

¹⁶⁵ *Scelera te hortentur tua | et cuncta redeant: inclitum regni decus | raptum et nefandae virginis parvus comes | divisus ense, finus ingestum patri | sparsumque ponto corpus et Peliae senis | decocta aeno membra* (Seneca’s *Medea* 129-134).

¹⁶⁶ See Costa 1973, 83 for more commentary on lines 127-133.

¹⁶⁷ See *Heroides* 6. 125-136 for Hypsipyle’s catalogue of Medea’s crimes. See *Met.* 7. 155-158; 347-351; 394-397; 406-407; 421-424 for Medea’s crimes in the *Metamorphoses*. There is no straightforward catalogue of Medea’s wrongdoings in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁶⁸ Seneca’s *Medea* 904-905-*quidquid admissum est adhuc, pietas vocetur*.

Medea expresses her sentiment just before she decides to commit filicide. For Seneca, the timing of this sentiment is not coincidental as Medea has been practicing and engaging in greater magic nearly the whole time leading up to this scene and has successfully used her greater magic to destroy Creon and Creusa. By the time that Seneca's Medea has succeeded in at least part of her *maior scelus*, she realizes that the destruction of a rival family is not enough.

Medea concludes that her ultimate crime ought to be the visitation of punishment for Jason's crimes on her own children.¹⁶⁹ As Medea is debating with herself about the importance of her role as a mother and whether she can bring herself to kill her children, she links this action with her past murders. She states in lines 956-957 that "I was barren for revenge. Yet I gave birth to two, enough for my father and brother."¹⁷⁰ Then, in lines 967-971, Medea sees the shade of her brother as she prepares to kill her first son. She says, "Bid the avenging goddesses draw back from me, brother, and return contented to the deep shades. Leave me to myself, and act, brother. Through this hand that has drawn the sword. With this sacrifice I placate your shade."¹⁷¹ In these lines, Medea concludes that the murder of her son serves more than just her vengeance against Jason, but it also provides a way to put the restless shade of her brother to rest. Seneca here opts to use *placo* (*placamus*- meaning to appease or placate) to describe Medea's interaction with the shade of her brother. *Placo* is similar to the word used by Ovid (*placeo*) to describe Medea's favour and cooperation with the gods for the purpose of rejuvenating Aeson in the *Metamorphoses*.¹⁷² Medea, as a magician, has been engaging with various infernal entities

¹⁶⁹ *placuit hoc poenae genus, | meritoque placuit. Ultimum, agnosco, scelus | animo parandum est. liberi quondam mei, | vos pro paternis sceleribus poenas date* (Seneca's *Medea* 922-925).

¹⁷⁰ *sterilis in poenas fui. | Fratri patrique quod sat est, peperit duos* (Seneca's *Medea* lines 956-957).

¹⁷¹ *Discedere a me, frater, ultrices deas | manesque ad imos ire securas iube; | mihi relinque et utere hac, frater, manu | quae strinxit ense. Victima manes tuos | placamus ista* (Seneca's *Medea* 967-971).

¹⁷² See Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, v. "*placo*" for more usages and definitions. Cf. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 248-251.

throughout the play up to this point, and so this makes her meeting with her brother a plausible byproduct of her magical activities. For Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* to approach the pre-ritual stage in which she was able to appease or satisfy the gods, she had to make significant pre-ritual preparations. When Seneca's Medea engages with her brother's shade, Medea has completed the magical half of her enterprise which involved considerable engagement with and exposure to chthonic entities, the dead, and other infernal phenomena. As a plausible byproduct of Medea's actions, one result of her enterprise is that Medea is brought into contact with the shade of her brother. Yet, unlike Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* who used her engagement with the gods to give life to her *pater familias*, Seneca's Medea, when confronted with the shade of her brother, decided that the best course of action was to kill her children to "placate" the shade of Apsyrtus. It is at this juncture where Medea finds herself in a similar position as those other characters from Seneca's tragedies like Hercules and Oedipus. Medea, like Hercules and Oedipus, has directly exposed herself to illicit knowledge and committed *nefas* practices. Also, as it happens for Hercules and Oedipus, the result of Medea's actions is to conclude that her actions are worth destruction of her family.

This is a twisted situation: Medea, in her desire to atone for the gruesome murder of her brother, is willing to kill her sons. Yet, Medea's execution of her so-called familial duty is a contradiction in terms of *pietas*. This contradiction of familial duty is intentional for Seneca. Medea's murder of her children for the sake of her father and murdered brother is a response to the very similar predicament that Medea forced on the daughters of Pelias. Seneca wants to demonstrate Medea's eroded sense of *pietas*.

The Criminality of Ovidian and Senecan *Medeae*

In a similar way to Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's Medea encourages a perversion of familial piety. In lines 40-43, Medea exhorts herself "If you are alive, if there is any of your old energy left. Drive out womanish fears and plant the forbidding Caucasus in your mind."¹⁷³ Although at this point Seneca's Medea has not committed to a specific plan of retribution against Jason, she hesitates because the form of her retribution will likely require *nefas* and *scelera* deeds involving the family. The daughters of Pelias were placed in just such a position by Ovid's Medea. The difference is that Ovid's Medea convinces the daughters of Pelias that to not shed Pelias' blood to prolong his life demonstrates a lack of *pietas*, whereas Seneca's Medea (after performing massive feats of *nefas* magic) has convinced herself that to not kill her sons demonstrates a lack of *pietas* as her crimes against her brother and father must be balanced. Seneca adopts this Ovidian paradox so that he can illustrate the downward spiral of Medea's morals.

There is simply no way that Medea can be right in the scenario of filicide, and she kills her children anyway. The effect is that, while the Ovidian Medea's murder of Pelias can be arguably justified, Seneca's Medea manipulated herself and killed her children, which makes murder in the service of *pietas* indefensible. Seneca's response to and reception of the story of the Ovidian Medea's murder of Pelias and manipulation of his daughters illustrate Seneca's approach to her criminality.

Several Ovidian elements are adopted and adjusted by Seneca to present his own unique Medea. Ovid's portrayal of Medea in the *Heroides* 6 is decidedly hostile, and Seneca adopts these characteristics. Ovid's Hypsipyle presents a Medea that is callous and feels no

¹⁷³ Cf. Seneca's lines 40-43 *si vivis, anime, si quid antique tibi | remanet vigoris. Pelle feminos metus, | et inhospitalem Caucasum mente indue.*

compunction about using her magic and/or violence to bend a person to her own will.¹⁷⁴ When Hypsipyle refers to Medea's filicide and to Medea's criminal tradition generally, in lines 6.151 of Ovid's *Heroides*, she exclaims that "I would be Medea to Medea!"¹⁷⁵ Seneca adopts a similar use of Medea as archetype of magical violence in the dialogue between Medea and her nurse. Medea's Nurse tries to dissuade Medea's spiral into violent action. As part of this plea, the Nurse calls Medea's name, and Medea responds, "I will become her."¹⁷⁶ This pattern continues as the Senecan Medea completes her great magical feat and has used it to destroy the Corinthian household. In line 910 upon hearing of the success of her magically fatal wedding gift destroyed the Corinthian palace, Creon, Creusa, and that the flames cannot be doused by water or any other substance, Medea states, "now I am Medea."¹⁷⁷

In summary, for Seneca and to a lesser extent Ovid, accessing aid, knowledge, and/or engaging with things, practices, and peoples from inaccessible realms is generally considered *nefas* and/or *illicitum*. Consistent exposure leads to the destruction of one's *familia*. Ovid lays much of the groundwork for Seneca as Seneca's *Medea* is a reception and response to the Ovidian *Medeae*. Medea is characterized by her relationship with the *familia*, by her crimes, and how she utilizes her magical powers. In Ovid's *Heroides* 6, Hypsipyle defines Medea first by her corrupt magic use, then by her evildoing, which will end in the destruction of the Colchian's family. While Medea of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is equally malicious toward the victims of her criminal actions, Ovid complicates the easy assessment concerning Medea's elimination of Pelias. The criminality of Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* is underemphasized, whereas the criminality of Seneca's Medea is strongly emphasized.

¹⁷⁴ See Ovid's *Heroides* 6. 83-84, 97-98 for Hypsipyle's charges of Medea using magic to subdue Jason.

¹⁷⁵ See *Heroides* 6.151-"*Medeae Medea forem*"

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Seneca's Medea line 170- *Nutrix: Medea! Medea: Fiam.*

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Seneca's Medea 910 *Medea nunc sum.*

Both authors were writing their Medeae from within the culture of their period. Just as Ovid was meticulous in his crafting of a sympathetic Medea in his *Metamorphoses*, so too was Seneca in creating a tragic Medea that was a rival opposite. Seneca strove to be as innovative as Ovid in compelling his readers to critically consider the price that greater magical practice has on those that engage with it. Seneca responds to Ovidian Medea by retaining her most criminal elements and disregarding ambivalent (if not benevolent) attributes of the Ovidian Medea of the *Metamorphoses*. Seneca presents the *nefas* nature of Medea's magic and her subsequent *scelera* to demonstrate that engagement with pursuing greater magical expertise results in a tendency towards criminal activity, leading ultimately to the destruction of the practitioner's family and community. Both Ovid and Seneca address whether Medea's magical practice as a magician is positive, and whether her actions are uncomplicated villainy or more ambiguously nuanced. The different moral evaluations of Medea's magical practice extend to her use of ingredients from lands at the margins of Roman control.

Chapter 3

Medea the Collector: The Magical Landscapes of Ovidian and Senecan Medeae

Introduction

A common trope of magicians depicted in Greek and Roman literature is that a magician is either not a natural member of the society in which they appear, or they are otherwise located on the periphery.¹⁷⁸ One need only look to various magicians depicted in literature, like Medea who is the constant foreigner wherever she goes; the rebel-rousing astrologers; the itinerant Chaldeans of Cato, Suetonius, and Tacitus, or the infamous women of fiction like Horace's Canidia, Ovid's Dipsas, or Lucan's outcast battlefield bone-scavenger Erichtho. These characters are all on the margins of society in one way or another.¹⁷⁹

Writers like Pliny the Elder and Cicero explain the origins of magical practice and from which lands magicians originate. Pliny, for instance, postulates that magic arose out of Persia.¹⁸⁰ Cicero's primary concern in *De Divinatione* is, of course, the various arts of divination. Cicero

¹⁷⁸ While most ancient authors place magicians of the periphery of society, this does not seem to apply when the society in which the magicians are presented in are not considered to be wholly adherent to Roman mores. In Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* for instance, Meroe is a known witch and local innkeeper in Thessaly (1.7), and everyone who knows her true abilities are terrified to do much to confront her (1.9-1.10). Another example is when the protagonist Lucian finally locates a magician with the aim of learning magic from her, Pamphile (his host's wife) is of high social status (See Apuleius' *Golden Ass* 1.21 for Milo being a foremost citizen of the town of Hypata; see 2.5 for Pamphile being a witch). Similarly, Medea is both magician and the Princess of Colchis.

¹⁷⁹ See Cato *On Agriculture* 5.4.; Tacitus' *Histories* 1.22; Ovid's *Heroides* 6.104-108 for Medea's portrayal as an outsider; *Amores* 1.8.1-30 for Ovid's characterization of the old witch Dipsas who teaches innocent maidens to seduce wealthy men; Horace's *Epode* 5 for Canidia; Lucan's *Pharsalia* 6.434-830 features an episode that portrays Erichtho at length. See also Dickie 2002, for the dispersal of magical practices in pre-empire Italy; See McMullin 1992, 128-162 for a discussion on the role and reputation of the wandering Chaldeans and Astrologers during the Roman imperial period; See Stratton 2022, ix-x for stereotypes of the witch and/or magician as social outcasts. For more commentary on the magician (Medea specifically) as out of place within civil and urbane society, see Reif 2016, 196.

¹⁸⁰ See Pliny's *Natural History* 30.2.

mentions that most Roman diviners require looking to the skies for thunderbolts, augury, and other heavenly signs, whereas those who specifically do astrology (which became largely associated with magic more than the rest) are from Egypt and Babylon.¹⁸¹ The broader Roman fascination with magic's origins manifests in a variety of popular works and forms. For this chapter, I explore this question—namely, where magic comes from – according to the magical landscapes that Ovid and Seneca present in their respective Medea traditions. In examining the Medea of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and her relationship with the magical lands, the products of those lands, and the sources of her magic in general, a very different picture appears than the tragic Medea of Seneca. The differences found prompt the following observations. Seneca emphasizes magical landscapes to a similar degree as Ovid does. At the same time, Seneca's descriptions characterize the land differently. I suggest that, while magical landscapes feature prominently in both Ovid and Seneca's Medea traditions, the extent to which the regions and realms are characterized negatively depends on the ethical nature of Medea's specific magical endeavour while she interacts with the lands in question. In other words, the intention of Medea's magical endeavour determines how the lands and realms from which Medea collects her magical ingredients, draws her magical power, or into which she travels, are evaluated by the author, in terms of varying degrees of suspicion and varying degrees of detail.

In ancient literature, many authors characterize the peoples that dwell within certain lands in accordance with the environment in which they live. Many of these environmentally deterministic portrayals of various peoples feature in both Greek and Roman texts and especially in ancient ethnography, medicine, and geography. Many Ancient Greek characterizations of people who live in the south, east, north, and west grew into stereotypes out of their experiences

¹⁸¹ Cicero's *De Divinatione* 1.91, 1.93, 2.28.

with the Persians, which Roman authors later adopted.¹⁸² The Hippocratic work *Airs, Waters, Places* provides a useful comparandum for many stereotypical portrayals in the ancient Roman perception. For the Greeks, peoples of the south and east like the Libyans, Egyptians, and/or Persians, were portrayed as soft, decadent, pliant, and with a proclivity toward excess, as their regions produce full and consistent harvests, the weather is mild, and they are governed by laws.¹⁸³ For Hippocrates, the opposite is true for peoples of the north and west, who, he posits, are independent, war-like, and hyper-aggressive, with toughened bodies as they come from cold, and rocky regions with little governance and an abundance of wastelands.¹⁸⁴

These kinds of stereotypical characterizations were adopted by authors writing during the Roman empire. For instance, Strabo characterizes all of those living in the north of Britain as completely uncivilized.¹⁸⁵ Likewise, Vitruvius posits that southern peoples have acute minds, but their courage is sapped by the sun, while those of the north are of great courage but possess sluggish minds because of the cold.¹⁸⁶ It is with such frames of reference to peoples and places that both Ovid and Seneca characterize their Medea's magical landscapes.

Both Ovid and Seneca delineate land and peoples whence the wondrous ingredients for magical rituals are collected by Medea. The descriptions and toponyms of the landscape may also evoke Roman attitudes towards both the regions themselves and the people living there. Each author characterizes the land, its people, and their reputation for engaging in certain

¹⁸² See McCoskey 2018, 75-80 for a brief discussion on ancient perceptions of racial formation.

¹⁸³ See Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters, Places* 12 for a description of many stereotypical attributes that Hippocrates assigns to those who live in the south and east as they are shaped by their fair environs.

¹⁸⁴ See Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters, Places* 17-20; 23-24 for a long discourse on Hippocrates' theory on how Europeans are shaped by their harsh environments to be essentially the opposite of those who dwell in the south.

¹⁸⁵ See Strabo's *Geography* 2.5.8.

¹⁸⁶ *Cum sint autem meridiana nationes animis acutissimis infinitaque sollertia consiliorum, simul ad fortitudinem ingrediuntur, ibi succumbunt, quod habent exuctas ab sole animorum virtutes; qui vero refrigeratis nascuntur regionibus, ad armorum vehementiam paratiores sunt; magnis virtutibus sunt sine timore, sed tarditate animi sine considerantia inruentes sine sollertia suis consiliis refragantur* (Vitruvius *On Architecture* 6.1.10)

practices. For instance, both Ovid and Seneca refer to lands within the “Scythian shores” as wild places which are home to “unwed warrior women.”¹⁸⁷ Such a description evokes the fearsome Amazons.¹⁸⁸ The fact that the Scythians are both warriors and women is at complete odds with Roman social mores.

Generally, Seneca characterizes magical landscapes by their barbarian peoples, the herbs and concoctions they use, the monsters or myths associated with the region, and/or other indicators of resistance to civilized *urbanitas*. Peoples or characters from these exterior regions are typically outsiders to Roman society. Although the setting of Ovid’s *Medea* from his *Metamorphoses* is not so easily recognisable as a Roman society as Seneca’s setting of Corinth -- Seneca’s Corinth is Rome in all but name – both authors write for a Roman audience with Roman expectations.¹⁸⁹

The characterization of magic, magicians, and sources of magic as wild and in opposition to *urbanitas* changes as a way of reflecting the acts of Ovid’s and Seneca’s *Medea*. These magical landscapes appear as three types in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Seneca’s *Medea*. Ovid and Seneca both refer to magical lands as the provenance of the catalogues of magical items the *Medeae* collect; as the dwelling places of wild and dangerous people and creatures; or as abstract realms of influence, where natural entities like Death or Eternal Night dwell.

Ovid’s Characterization of Medea’s Collection of Magical Materials

¹⁸⁷ Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.406-407; Seneca’s *Medea* 211-216.

¹⁸⁸ ¹⁸⁸ See Mayor 2014, 37-38. Ovid describes the land within the Scythian shores as a wild place full of poisonous herbs, rocky terrain, and of course the Scythians (*Metamorphoses* 7.406-417). This region is also a dwelling place of monstrous Echidna, who spawned both Cerberus, and the eagle who daily devours the liver of Prometheus in Apollodorus *Library* 2.5.11. Seneca’s *Medea* 211-216 also presents the lands of the Scythians as uncivilized.

¹⁸⁹ See Slaney 2019 on Senecan stagecraft and the use of the dramatic present to locate Seneca’s *Medea* within Roman society. See also Abrahamsen 1999, 107-108 for a discussion that places Seneca’s *Medea* in Rome based on Roman legal terminology which Seneca employs concerning marriage rights that someone like Medea would have (or lack) under Roman law.

Ovid characterizes the many lands from which Medea gathers her ingredients in *Metamorphoses* 7.220-235, where she collects materials for the ritual to revive Aeson, and 7.406-419, where she procures poisons from Scythia to attempt to kill Theseus. For Aeson's revivification, Medea gathers magical materials in the land of Thessaly. This region is significant because, in antiquity, Thessaly was renowned for their witches and magicians.¹⁹⁰

Many of the places Medea travels to in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are in and around the mountains of Thessaly.¹⁹¹ In lines 723-727, Ovid describes how "all the herbs that Ossa bore, and high Pelion, Othrys and Pindus and Olympus, greater than Pindus, she surveyed: and those that pleased her, some she plucked up by the roots and some she cut off with the curved blade of a bronze pruning hook."¹⁹² Ovid was likely writing for a readership with some grasp of geography for this catalogue of places to be relevant. If one were to map the topographical patterns of how these sites are dispersed, as Ovidian scholar Anderson has done, one would find that Medea moves in a clockwise direction to each major landmark in the hinterland of Thessaly.¹⁹³ These prominent landmarks include Ossa, on the northeast coast of Thessaly and Mount Pelion, in the south, towards Lake Boebeis. The Othrys mountains run roughly east-west across the south of Thessaly, while the Pindus range marks the westernmost point of Thessaly.¹⁹⁴ Mount Olympus marks the most northern point of Thessaly. This circular journey through Thessaly ties Ovid's Medea closely to this magical land.

¹⁹⁰ We see this stereotype in the toponym of Haemonian herbs, Thessalian drugs, and in the fact that much of Apuleius' *the Golden Ass* takes place in Thessaly.

¹⁹¹ Anderson 1972, 268.

¹⁹² *Et quas Ossa tulit, quas altum Pelion herbas | Othrysque et Pindus, quas Pindo maior Olympus, | Perspicit et placitas partim radice revellit, | Partim succidit curvamine falcis aenae* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7. 224-227).

¹⁹³ Anderson 1972, 268-269.

¹⁹⁴ Anderson 1972, 269.

Medea first engages with Thessaly while helping her family via magical means. This presentation of Thessaly as a magical landscape that has the potential to provide the magician with tools to save lives runs counter to Thessaly's reputation as it appears in the literary tradition up to Ovid's historical and literary moment.¹⁹⁵ Ovid's characterizes Thessaly ambivalently (if not benevolently), compared to the magical landscapes that are presented by Seneca. I suggest that Ovid's non-negative assessment of Thessaly is based upon an evaluation of Medea's purpose for gathering her magical materials. These curated magical ingredients are all gathered for the purpose of prolonging the life of Aeson. The place is described as mystical rather than maliciously magical. As Medea's collecting is done in the service of the *familia*, Ovid does not describe Thessaly as a landscape suited for arming a malignant magician. Rather, Ovid complicates the reputation of Thessaly as a producer of dangerous magicians by describing a land that is bountiful in ingredients for many magical feats, including those that can save or prolong life. Additionally, while Ovid does show Thessaly as a place where there is much magical potential amongst its rugged landscapes, there is a lack of environmentally deterministic stereotyping of the people and/or significant monsters that may or may not dwell there.

Ovid catalogues Medea's herb-collecting visits to prominent landmarks. In lines 728-731, Ovid describes how "Many grasses also she chose from the banks of the Apidanus, many from the Amphrysus. Nor were you, Enipeus, left without toll; Peneus also, Spercheus gave something, and the reedy banks of Boebe."¹⁹⁶ These locations are mostly rivers, again in Thessaly. While the Enipeus, Peneus, and the Spercheus are rivers that empty out from the

¹⁹⁵ See Horace *Epode* 5. 20-21, 5.45-46 for Horace's negative references to Thessaly regarding its reputation for witchcraft.

¹⁹⁶ *Multa quoque Apidani placuerunt gramina ripis, | Multa quoque Amphrysi, neque eras immunis, Enipeu; | Nec non Peneos non Spercheides undae | Contribuere aliquid iuncosaque litora Boebes...* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.228-231).

mountains from various directions into the Thessalian plains, Boebe was an ancient Thessalian village nestled on a shallow lake.¹⁹⁷ The Apidanus river is often a poetic name for the Eridanus which is confusingly located in two places. One location of the Apidanus river (often confused with the Eridanus by scribes) is another Thessalian river, running from the Othrys range.¹⁹⁸ The Apidanus river is also a poetic name for the Eridanus which is commonly confused by scribes or the poets themselves.¹⁹⁹ That is, the Eridanus in its poetic construction refers to the Po River that flows along the Alps in Italy. The Po River (fittingly for Ovid's purposes) runs past and is fed by the Apennines, another land that was perceived as other and magical in the minds of Romans.²⁰⁰

The peoples of the Apennine mountains, like the Marsi, have a similar reputation to the Thessalians for being considered other and/or a people who dwell in a land of dangerous magicians.²⁰¹ According to Aulus Gellius in his *Attic Nights* 16.11.1, as the Marsian people descended from Circe, they have an inherited ability to control poisonous snakes and induce healings with incantations.²⁰² The Marsi are mentioned in the same breath as the Thessalians in Horace's *Epode* 5. For instance, Horace, in his *Epode* 5. 45-46 and 5.75, makes references to Thessalian and Marsian incantations. Witches Canidia, Sagana, Veia, and Folia prepare a perverse ritual that involves killing a young man (or boy, as he is described as *puer*) for the purpose of making a love potion. Horace references how Folia is known for her "Thessalian

¹⁹⁷ Anderson 1972, 269.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ This confusion is suggested by Anderson 1972, 269 to be due to a topographical knowledge mistake of scribes.

²⁰⁰ See Dench 1995, 154; Dickey 2002, 134-35 for further discussions around the dispersal of magic in Italy and the Roman perception of peoples of the Apennines being magical and, in some periods, other. See Appian's *Bellum Civile* 1.46 for Appian's othering assessment of the Marsi.

²⁰¹ See Dench 1995, for an in-depth study of how the peoples of the Apennines have been perceived through Antiquity into the modern period. See also pages 154-174 for the reputation of the Marsi peoples as magicians.

²⁰² *Gens in Italia Marsorum orta fertur a Circae filio. Propterea Marsis hominibus, quorum dumtaxat familiae cum externis cognationibus nondum etiam permixtae corruptaeque sunt, vi quadam genitali datum ut et serpentium virulentorum domitores sint et inentionibus herbarumque sucis faciant medellarum miracula* (Gellius' *Attic Nights* 16.11.1). Translated by J.C. Rolfe 1927.

incantations” (*excantata voce Thessala*) with which she draws down the moon and stars.²⁰³

Likewise, in lines 5.75-76, Canidia explains what her love potion will do to her intended target when she says “your affections will return, but not because they have been summoned by Marsian incantations.”²⁰⁴ Canidia’s remark about not using Marsian incantations to force Varus’ affection is in reference to the idea that Marsians can not only charm snakes, but their incantations can also “cause a head to split open,” as Horace articulates later in *Epode* 16.27-29.²⁰⁵ Likewise, Pliny the Elder attests to Marsic snake-charming, their charms and incantations, and their possession of valuable flora that have healing properties.²⁰⁶ These portrayals of the Marsi, their lands, and practices, demonstrate that in the minds of the Romans, the Marsi and their country possess a similar reputation to the Thessalians. Therefore, whether Ovid is making reference to the poetic Eridanus, or to the Thessalian river, the land would be a suitable source for Medea’s magical material in the Roman imagination.

Ovid’s Medea of the *Metamorphoses* makes prayers to the gods so that she successfully placates them and receives their aid in lines 7.215-219.²⁰⁷ Her next step is to gather various materials from several different regions so that she might perform her magical endeavour with all success.²⁰⁸ Medea travels for nine days collecting various exotic materials for her upcoming magical feat. Interestingly, Ovid breaks up the description of Medea’s gathering of magical ingredients (7.219-236) from her utilization of ingredients (7.264-2.76). The separation of

²⁰³ *quae sidera excantata voce Thessala | lunamque caelo deripit* (Horace’s *Epode* 5.45-46). Translated by Rudd, 2004.

²⁰⁴ *ad me recurre, nec vocata mens tua | Marsis redibit vocibus* (Horace’s *Epode* 5. 75-76). Translated by Rudd 2004.

²⁰⁵ *ergo negatum vincor ut credam miser; | Sabella pectus macerare carmina | caputque Marsa dissilire nenia* (Horace’s *Epode* 17. 27-29).

²⁰⁶ See Pliny’s *Natural History* 28.30-33 for Marsian invulnerability to snake bites; 25.87 for the Marsian possession of healing herbs; 7.15 for more attestations of Marsian charms being a practice talked about by the ancients.

²⁰⁷ For more on Medea’s pre-ritual preparations, see Ch. 1 of this thesis, 12-16.

²⁰⁸ See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.220-235; 7.264-276 for Medea’s region hopping, material gathering, and a catalogue of the material as she adds it to the pot.

collection and utilization of the magical material from various landscapes shows that for Ovid, where the material comes from is significant in and of itself, distinct from its use.

These places that Ovid's Medea travels to are difficult to reach for the average person. These locales (Apidanus, Amphrysus, Enipeus, Peneus, Spercheus, and banks of the Boebe) are not, however, characterized negatively. I suggest that they are not so characterized precisely because Medea is preparing a ritual that will give life rather than take it. This is even hinted at by Ovid in lines 7.232-233 where he explains how "From Euboean Anthedon she culled a grass that gives long life, a herb not yet made famous by the change which it produced in Glaucus' body."²⁰⁹ In Ovid's version of this tale, the change that took place in Glaucus' body turned him from a mortal fisherman into a divinity of the sea.²¹⁰ There is also, however, a chance that Ovid is making reference to Apollodorus' version of the tale wherein Glaucus (the son of Minos), is brought back to life with herbs from Euboean Anthedon after drowning in a container of honey as a child.²¹¹ Apollodorus' version of the myth is most similar to the ritual Medea will perform on Aeson, because it will bring him to the brink of death before prolonging his life.

Ovid's attitude towards the source locations of magic shift as Medea's magical endeavours take a darker turn. In her final mention in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, after marrying Aegeus, Medea is then threatened by the appearance of Aegeus' long lost son Theseus. Medea decides to prepare for Theseus a cup of special poison.²¹² In describing the ingredients of Medea's poisonous concoction, Ovid picks up in detail as Medea flees to Athens:

²⁰⁹ *Carpit et Euboica vivax Anthedone gramen, | Nondum mutato vulgatum corpore Glauci* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.232-233).

²¹⁰ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 13.905-957 for Glaucus' tale.

²¹¹ See Apollodorus' *Library* 3.3.1-2 for this alternate version of the changes that took place in Glaucus' body as an effect of the herbs from Euboea.

²¹² While practicing magic and poisoning someone are two quite distinct actions for the modern reader, in the ancient mind, even in terms of legal terminology, there is very little that separates the two practices. See Graf 1997,

“Bent on his destruction, Medea mixed in a cup a poison which she had brought long ago from Scythian shores. This poison, they say, came from the mouth of the Echidnean dog. There is a cavern with a dark yawning throat and a way down-sloping, along which Hercules, the hero of Tiryns, dragged Cerberus with chains wrought of adamant, while the great dog fought and turned away his eyes from the light of day. He, goaded on to mad frenzy, filled all the air with his threefold howls, and sprinkled the green fields with white foam. Men think that these flecks of foam grew; drawing nourishment from the rich, rank soil, they gained power to hurt...”²¹³

As Ovid launches into his very brief tale of Medea’s attempted poisoning of Theseus, he presents a more hostile picture of the landscapes that produce material for an unjust purpose. Ovid first talks about the land where Medea’s poison came from, which is so provincial that it is wild. In Ovid’s time, the “Scythian shores” could range from what would be considered today as Romania, Bulgaria, and Russia.²¹⁴ The ancients, however, considered even the shores of the Black Sea to be the territory of the Scythians.²¹⁵ The land of the Scythians was stereotypically considered wild and untamed by Romans as the Scythians were often presented as Amazons, the “unwed warriors with crescent shields.”²¹⁶ As Medea comes from a neighboring region to the Scythians, if one is to follow the same logic put forward by *Airs, Waters, Places*, not only is

46-49 for a brief discussion of the evolution and nuances of the use of *veneficium* and *veneficus* in the Roman legal context.

²¹³ *Huius in exitium miscet Medea, quod olim | Attilerat secum Scythicis aconiton ab oris. | Illud Echidneae memorant e dentibus ortum | Esse canis: specus est tenebroso caecus hiatu | -Est via declivis, per quam Tirynthius heros | Restantem contraque diem radiosque micantes | Obliquantem oculos nexis adamante catenis | Cerberon abstraxit, rabida qui coniectus ira. | Inplevit pariter ternis latratibus auras | Et sparsit virides spumis albetibus agros; | Has concresce putant nactasque alimenta feracis | Fecundique soli vires cepisse nocendi* (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 7.406-417).

²¹⁴ See Anderson 1972, 287 for commentary on the geographical ranges of land considered the Scythian shore.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ While Anderson does comment that the region bound by the Scythian shore could technically include Colchis (1972, 287), Medea herself attests to the claims that her homeland lies with the same boundaries wherein the Scythians frequent in Seneca’s *Medea* 211-216.

Medea also liable to act with aggression as any unwed Scythian warrior woman might, but the proximity between Medea and the Scythians may have allowed Ovid to imply some Scythian influence on Medea herself.

If the land of the Scythians was not hostile enough as the dwelling place of warrior women and technically Medea herself, the land that Medea's poison comes from is the also the same land that saw the birth of the "Echidnean dog." While Ovid's reference to this creature is brief, the Echidnean dog is Cerberus, the offspring of Echidna, the half woman-half serpent.²¹⁷ As Ovid likely assumes that his learned readership is aware of these myths, the details about the landscape that Ovid presents to his readers serve not only to enrich the story, but also to characterize the landscape as a place of danger and hostility, inhabited by hostile peoples and creatures. By providing the details of the provenance of Medea's poison, that it comes from an inhospitable land that hosts an entrance to Hades and further comes from plants that were fertilized by the mouth of an immortal creature of the underworld, Ovid implies already that Medea has no good agenda for using such a potion. Moreover, Ovid's depiction of these lands reflects Medea's unique response to her situation. That is, Medea as a foreigner uses material from uncivilized lands to respond to Theseus' arrival.

Ovid does not stop his characterization there. His reference to Hercules hauling Cerberus out from Hades to the world above through the cave entrance (lines 409-413) is Ovid's attempt to situate this cave somewhere on the Black Sea.²¹⁸ It is fitting that Ovid situates the entrance to the underworld (a realm not in the control of normal humans) in a land that is beyond the control of civilization. Ovid himself later bemoaned his exile to such a place, and he attests to its danger in his own day. In Ovid's *Tristia* 3.11.54-56 and 4.1.77-86, which he wrote in that exile, he

²¹⁷ See Anderson 1972, 287 for some brief commentary on Ovid's brief handling of the myth of Echidna.

²¹⁸ Anderson 1972, 288.

makes several references to the dangers of the wild people who ride sturdy horses across frozen wastes and shoot poison arrows at those who dwell near their territory.²¹⁹

Ovid explains not just the land the poison comes from but also the origin of the poison itself. In lines 413-417, Ovid describes the source of Medea's poison: flowers that were spawned by an immortal monster's foaming mouth (and the immortal monster is, of course, Cerberus.) The flowers are referenced in earlier lines as *aconiton*.²²⁰ The poison that Ovid's Medea chooses to use on Theseus comes from a plant that originated from a monster in a wild land. Moreover, it is appropriate that the flowers originated from saliva of an infernal creature who was drawn to frenzy when he was dragged to the surface. Not only are the flowers born into a hostile land, but they are brought into existence under the auspices of a taboo action: forcing a creature of the underworld to see the light of the sun and be witnessed by the gods from the first kingdom.²²¹

The Magical Materials of Seneca's Medea: The Provenance of Dangerous Materials for Potent Spells

Seneca's Medea follows a similar pattern, using materials from especially wild lands and places whenever she has a malignant purpose in mind. Seneca emphasizes the separation of peoples, lands, and the significance of the provenance of magical ingredients to a much greater degree in his *Medea*. Seneca also provides more details for the provenance of Medea's magical ingredients than Ovid does. Seneca presents all the magical landscapes, peoples, and creatures

²¹⁹ *invehitur celeri barbarus hostis equo; | hostis equo pollens longeque volante sagitta | vicinam late depopulatur humum* (Ovid's *Tristia* 3.10.54-56). See also Ovid's *Tristia* 4.1.77-86- *hostis, habens arcus imbutaque tela venenis, | saevus anhelanti moenia lustrat equo; | utque rapax pecudem, quae se non texit ovili, | per sata, per silvas fertque trahitque lupus, | sic, siquem nondum portarum saepe receptum | barbarus in campis repperit hostis, habet: | aut sequitur captus coniectaque vincula collo | accipit, aut telo virus habente perit. | hic ego sollicitae iaceo novus incola sedis: | heu nimium fati tempora longa mei!*

²²⁰ See Anderson 1972, 287 for commentary on Ovid's use of the word *aconiton* and other supplementary anecdotes on the flower type aconite. It should be noted that aconite has some three hundred species within the genus. See Drobnik 2021, 43-44 for commentary on the recorded use and etymology of *aconiti*.

²²¹ Cf. Seneca's *Hercules* 606-617. For more on this see chapter 2 page 36-37.

that inhabit those regions negatively. Because the greater magical feat that Seneca's Medea is attempting is inherently corrupt, so too are all the ingredients that Medea intends to use, the people who use them in foreign lands, and the foreign lands/magical landscapes which provide access to conducting greater magical endeavours themselves.

Seneca starts out his description of Medea's summoning and gathering of magical and/or poisonous ingredients in lines 703-704 of his tragedy, where Medea addresses the dragon of Colchis from Corinth.²²² The first actual magical landscape that Medea refers to is her home kingdom of Colchis, which is unmistakably a place where magic originates.²²³ It is also no surprise that Colchis is the epitome of a place that produces wild or otherwise hyper aggressive creatures and people like the serpent— or Medea herself.

Seneca is just getting started in his characterization of the magical landscapes in his world. Once Medea has ended her conversation with Jason and has committed to her plan for revenge, she heads to her “inner sanctum” to examine her resources and ascertain the best materials to bring to bear against the royal house of Corinth. In lines 705- 709, Seneca tells how “after summoning the whole league of serpents, [Medea] collects together the poisons of ominous plants: all those engendered on the impassable crags of Mt. Eryx, those borne by the Caucasus, sprinkled with Prometheus' blood[.]”²²⁴ The “impassable crags of Mt. Eryx” refers to

²²² Seneca's *Medea* lines 703-704-*Tu quoque relictis pervigil Colchis ades, | Sopite primum cantibus, serpens meis.* N.B. Seneca's Medea either summons, calls down, or raises up several mythical beasts for their magical properties. Similarly, Medea either has many herbs and poisons from around the world in her collection of ingredients already, or she summons them from across the world to the privacy of her house in Corinth. Unlike Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's Medea does not leave her home in Corinth.

²²³ Most if not all the main works that feature Medea's tradition include the details of the fire-breathing bulls made of bronze, golden fleece, earthborn warriors, the sacred groves of Hecate, and/or the ever-vigilant dragon (*pervigil/pervigilem*) that guards the golden fleece. Also, it is notable that the word *pervigil* as an adjective for the serpent/dragon guarding the golden fleece is a Senecan adoption of an Ovidian phrase. Cf. Ovid's *Heroides* 6.13 and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.149 for Ovid's usages of the word.

²²⁴ *Postquam evocavit omne serpentum genus, | Congerit in unum frugis infaustae mala: | Quaecumque generat invius saxis Eryx, | Quae fert ...Sparsus cruore Caucasus Promethei...*(Seneca's *Medea* 705-709).

the highest peak on Sicily, apart from Etna.²²⁵ At the summit of Eryx, there was a temple to Astarte established by Phoenician settlers, and this later became a temple to Aphrodite under the influence of Greek colonists. It eventually made the transition to a temple to Venus in Roman times.²²⁶ The establishment of the Mt. Eryx temple site indicates that the summit was not entirely “impassable.”²²⁷ That said, Seneca means to articulate that Medea’s access to the poisonous herbs that grow there in mythical times is more impressive, by calling Mt. Eryx “impassable”.²²⁸

The Caucasus range mentioned in these lines has more significance for Seneca: the Caucasus mountains are synonymous with wilderness and hostile peoples in Seneca’s perception. First, the location of the mountains are well within the boundaries of the “Scythian shores,” which as I have explained above, are characterized as wild by Roman authors. Therefore, the Caucasus’ region is home to the uncivil Scythian warrior women whose existence and way of life are very different from Roman societal norms. An account from Hippocrates asserts that these women fight their enemies on horseback, remain unmarried until they have killed at least three of their enemies, have one breast cauterized to prevent its development, and even when they are married, can on occasion continue to ride for some expedition should necessity demand it.²²⁹ Such people, even if mythical, stand in opposition to how traditional Romans view womanhood: the Romans consider the highest aspiration for a Roman woman to become the *mater familias*.²³⁰

²²⁵ See Costa, 1973, 131; Hine 2000, 180.

²²⁶ See Semple 1927, 382-383 for a brief discussion on the establishment and evolution of the sanctuary of Venus on Mt. Eryx.

²²⁷ See Hine 2000, 180.

²²⁸ By Seneca’s, and even Ovid’s time, the sanctuary of Venus on Mt. Eryx was well established and famous. It is suggested that even Octavian may have visited (Semple 1927,373).

²²⁹ See Hippocrates’ *Airs, Waters, Places* 17.

²³⁰ See Saller 1999, 195-196 for a discussion of the Roman ideology and legal discourse regarding the *mater familia*.

It is not only the fact that wild women live in and around the Caucasus that make it a wild place. The Caucasus mountains are in a land where monsters are born. Above, I mentioned the birth of Cerberus by Echidna. Another of Echidna's offspring resides in the Caucasus, the eagle that eats the liver of Prometheus.²³¹ This is significant because not only is there a second infamous creature born of immortals that resides in this inhospitable land, but its sole occupation is to punish Prometheus, who has been chained to the mountain for bringing fire to humanity. That is, Prometheus is being punished because he overstepped a boundary by giving humans the tools that would later allow them to traverse other boundaries. Boundaries are important in Seneca's view.

In lines 42-43 of Medea's speech, she again describes this region as a hostile place when she is encouraging herself toward her crime.²³² There are a couple of reasons why Medea describes this mountainous region as she does. Seneca's Medea characterizes the Caucasus as an inhospitable region because it acts as a natural boundary between the borders of civilized settlements of Europe and the wilderness of Asia.²³³ Medea's use of *indue* (to put on/clothe) is a reference to her intention to revert to her previous wild ways of those regions near her home: she is going to adopt her old habits, imagined via the metaphor of donning old clothes.²³⁴ By extension, the proximity of the Caucasus region to Colchis makes the region a plausible source of magical material. This notion is further demonstrated by Medea's use of plants borne of Prometheus' blood, also to be found in the Caucasus. The poisonous flowers are only in the Caucasus because it was believed to be the location of Zeus' immortal punishment of

²³¹ Apollodorus' *Library* 2.5.11.

²³² Seneca's *Medea* lines 42-43- *Pelle femineos metus, | et inhospitalem Caucasum mente indue*. This passage is also discussed above at page 20 and 55.

²³³ See Hine 2000, 119 for more information on Medea's reference to the Caucasus in lines 42-43. Also See

²³⁴ See Costa 1973, 68 for more commentary on Medea's use of *indue* and *inhospitalem* in line 42-43.

Prometheus.²³⁵ As Medea is returning to her uncivil ways, it is natural that Medea seeks a magic herb from a land which is not only resistant to Roman *urbanitas* but is also home to Zeus' punishment of Prometheus.²³⁶ Therefore, it also makes sense that Medea wishes to use this herb for a hostile magical endeavour as the flower comes from a hostile land. Moreover, it is fitting that Medea wishes to use this Promethean plant as she will traverse many boundaries herself.

The people of the Caucasus are not the only people that Seneca characterizes. In lines 707-727, Seneca also describes the people that use the poisons Medea intends to use and the lands the poisons come from, and colours Medea's magical endeavour in accordance with the lands that she procures her magical material. In lines 710-719, Seneca states:

...“those with which the rich Arabs smear their arrows, and the Medes, warlike archers, and the fleet Parthians; or those juices collected under the cold pole by Suebian women, famed for their Hercynian forests... every plant that bourgeons with deadly flowers, every kind of injurious sap that breeds in twisted roots the sources of harm: all these she handles.”²³⁷

In this passage, Seneca characterizes people and places in some interesting ways as Medea collects the magical and/or noxious plants. Seneca makes a point that despite the wealth of the Arabian people, they (along with the Medes and Parthians) still employ what the Romans consider to be barbarian practices like using poisoned arrows. That Seneca presents Arabian

²³⁵ Apollodorus in his *Library* 1.7.1, directly places Prometheus and the Caucasus Mountain within the “Scythian Shores” by calling the Caucasus a “Scythian mountain” (*Ἡφαίστω τῷ Καυκάσῳ ὄρει τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ προσηλῶσαι· τοῦτο δὲ Σκυθικὸν ὄρος ἐστίν. ἐν δὲ τούτῳ προσηλωθεὶς Προμηθεὺς πολλῶν ἐτῶν ἀριθμὸν ἐδέδετο*).

²³⁶ Hercules rescues Prometheus but Hercules is hardly normal. Also, while mythical time is difficult if not impossible to map in terms of chronology, Prometheus may have still been chained to the mountain rock when Medea acquired the herbs in Seneca's tradition.

²³⁷ *Et quis sagittas divites Arabes linunt | Pharetraque pugnax Medus aut parthi leves, | Aut quos sub axe frigido sucos legunt | Lucis Suebae nobilis Hercyniis; ...[710-713] | quodcumque gramen flore mortifero viret, | Dirusve tortis sucus in radicibus | Causas nocendi gignit attrahat manu* (Seneca's *Medea* 710-719).

people as affluent (*divites Arabes*) makes sense because for the Romans, opulence was often stereotyped as a barbarian trait. From the Roman perception, un-Roman and/or frontier lands are often wild, home to uncivil peoples, and often, rich in materials to be extracted. Other stereotype examples of southern peoples include having sharp minds, prone to cruelty, and a love of material wealth.²³⁸ Southern Arabia could boast of some impressive long-range trade, and this would influence Seneca's worldview.²³⁹ As Seneca would have it, not all things that come from foreign lands are good things.

Seneca then makes a reference to the poisonous plants of Suebian women. The land in which the Suebians dwell is northern rather than southern. The Suebi were a group of Germanic tribes whose territory ranged east of the Elbe River but later migrated west.²⁴⁰ Seneca refers again to the types of harmful plants that come from both northern and southern lands and makes no distinction between them. That is, he presents poisons from the north as just as dangerous as those in the south. Any extreme is dangerous.

Seneca shifts from characterizing the people who use the poisons to personifying the landscapes themselves. In lines 720—722 the Nurse describes how “Some toxic plants were contributed by Haemonian Athos, others by vast Pindus; another yielded up its tender foliage to her bloody sickle on the ridges of Pangaeum.”²⁴¹ The fact that the landscapes themselves are doing the actions means that whatever plants these lands are yielding to Medea are necessarily wild and dangerous also.

²³⁸ Cf. Footnote 182.

²³⁹ See Costa 1973, 132; Hine 2000, 181 for more commentary on Arabia, and typical Roman perceptions of the Medes and the Parthians.

²⁴⁰ See Hine 2000, 181.

²⁴¹ *Haemonius illas contulit pestes Athos, | Has Pindus ingens, illa pangaei iugis | Teneram cruenta falce deposuit comam...* (Seneca's *Medea* 720-722).

Also, in this passage, Seneca's Medea travels to similar places that Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* had searched in her acquisition of magical ingredients to extend the life of Aeson.²⁴² For instance, Haemonian Athos and the Pindus are areas of Thessaly. Seneca's Medea, however, is not focused on obtaining vaguely magical plants (*herbas*) pulled by the root or cut with a "bronze-curved sickle" (*curvamine falcis aenae*) as Ovid's Medea is. Rather, Seneca's Medea searches some of these same regions (and more) for "a death-bringing flower", "diseases," and "grasses" (*mortifero flore, pestes, and coma*) to be cut with a "bloody sickle" (*creunta falce*). That this unsettling ingredient list comes from some of the same lands that Ovid's Medea gathered her herbs demonstrates that the same magical landscapes can be presented differently, depending on the ethical nature of Medea's endeavour.

This pattern can be further observed in the ways Seneca's description of magical landscapes resembles Ovid's but ultimately diverges in significant ways. While Ovid's description primarily rests on the mountain ranges and to a lesser extent, the regions they hem in as regions full of magical materials, Seneca's catalogue of Medea's sources focuses on the rivers/waterways and the regions they run through. Where Ovid's Medea visits mountain ranges that are characterized as ambivalently as the *herbas* she gathers, Seneca's Medea has curated poisonous flora from rivers that are all in some way strange or adverse to the way nature typically works in Seneca's estimation. Seneca's negative depiction of these magical lands (as the home of Medea's poisonous ingredients) makes sense, as Seneca's Medea is intending to utilize these herbs in a magical endeavour which is criminal in nature. Naturally, ingredients employed for such a task as killing off the royal house of Corinth come from a place that is

²⁴² See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.24-27.

strange and adverse to Seneca's perception of order. In lines 723-727 the nurse continues to explain:

“Some [noxious plants] were nurtured by the Tigris, which submerges its deep flood;
some by the Danube, others by the gem-bearing Hydaspes that flows through parched
regions with its tepid waters, and the Baetis that gives its land a name and pushes into the
Hesperian Sea with a sluggish current.”²⁴³

These rivers generally symbolize the farther reaches of Seneca's world, and Seneca's anecdotal descriptions of their strange attributes make them ideal places for magic to dwell.²⁴⁴ They are all located on the edges of Roman control and are therefore located in lands that distinctly lack Roman *urbanitas*. The Tigris River during Seneca's time was predominantly located within the Parthian empire.²⁴⁵ Notably, the Tigris River links some people who were believed to be magic practitioners in the ancient world, including the Chaldeans of Babylon.²⁴⁶ The Tigris River would have experienced relatively little Roman influence.²⁴⁷ Moreover, in Seneca's view, it is suspicious that the Tigris flows in a strange way: the river hides its current.²⁴⁸ It is possible that Seneca makes his comment about the hidden current of the Tigris, likely dangerous to swimmers, to mirror the deceptive danger the drug poses to the unsuspecting.

²⁴³ *Has aluit altum gurgitem Tigres premens, | Danuvius illas, has per arentes plagas | Tepidis Hydaspes gemmifer currens aquis, | Nomenque terris qui dedit Baetis suis | Hesperia pulsans maria languenti vado* (Seneca's *Medea* 723-727).

²⁴⁴ For Seneca's presentation of these rivers and why they represent the corners of the world and/or strangeness, see Costa 1973, 133-134; Hine 2000, 182-183. The Chaldeans and astrologers have a rotating reputation in the Roman perception. Sometimes their advice was sought even by emperors, other times they were exiled from Rome, had their books burned, and/or were labelled as charlatans by others. See Beard et al. 1998, 231-233; McMullin 130-134; Cato *on Agriculture* 5.4. for discussions on the reputation of Chaldeans, Astrologers.

²⁴⁵ See Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* 6.114-134 for Pliny's description of peoples, boundaries, and much other miscellaneous information regarding Mesopotamia and the Parthian territories.

²⁴⁶ See Pliny's *Natural History* 6. 121.

²⁴⁷ See Schlude 2012, 11-12 for a discussion of Roman-Parthian relations after Crassus attempted to take the city Seleucia-on-the-Tigris. The fallout was of course Crassus' death, and an eventual negotiation for the lost Roman standard's return several years later.

²⁴⁸ See Hine 2000, 182 for some commentary on Seneca's reference to the Tigris River.

The Hydaspes flows as a tributary of the Indus, often a poetic byword for the East.²⁴⁹ Not only is the location of the Hydaspes significant for Seneca as it denotes a thoroughly non-Roman place, but he also notes the warm water of the Hydaspes, another strange attribute.²⁵⁰ While most commentators see Seneca's anecdote on how the Hydaspes bears gems to be a comment on the foreign wealth of the region, it is also worth noting that gems were used in certain magical practices and/or were perceived by Romans to contain magical properties.²⁵¹ Some of these practices entailed use as protective amulets or talismans. Among other uses, jewels (not in amulet form) could also act as a magical seal of a god's approval for what the jewel was designed to convey.²⁵²

It is notable that these wild places delineate boundaries to Roman control because Medea comes from beyond those boundaries. The Danube, for example, acted as a natural boundary for the northern frontier of the Roman Empire.²⁵³ Therefore, it was a frontier area where civilization was at its barest when placed up against wilderness. Seneca, therefore, treats the Danube plausibly as a place that holds magical ingredients. Medea summons poisons from those wild lands to her use. The outcome is that Seneca's Medea uses the products native to foreign wilds to destroy the central pillar of her host society.

Medea achieves this destruction, of course, using a poisoned gift. When Medea describes exactly how the gift that she sent Creusa is dangerous, she explains how the provenance of those properties she mixes to make the garment dangerous is subtly understandable in the context of

²⁴⁹ Costa 1973, 134; Hine 2000, 182.

²⁵⁰ A similar observation is made about the Hesperian River as it does not flow quickly enough for Seneca to consider it normal.

²⁵¹ See Costa 1973, 134; Hine 2000, 182 for commentary on the significance of gems as indicative of foreign opulence. See Desan and Nagy 2019 for an exploration of the ways gems were used in various magical practices and how they were perceived in the magical context of the ancient world.

²⁵² See Desan and Nagy 2019, 416, 423-424.

²⁵³ Costa 1973, 133 suggests that these rivers metaphorically function as boundaries between the "known" and/or civilized and uncivilized worlds.

magical landscapes. Medea explains in lines 820-824 how “Enclosed and lurking in the tawny gold is shrouded fire: the one who pays for his theft from heaven with the tissue that grows in him gave it me and taught me to store its power by craft: Prometheus.”²⁵⁴ Notably, as Medea is preparing her fatal present to Creusa, she recalls her instruction regarding how to imbue an item with fire inside it from Prometheus. While mythical chronology is fuzzy, it seems plausible at least in Seneca’s tradition that Medea may have learned from Prometheus while he was yet bound to the Caucasus.²⁵⁵ If this interpretation is what Seneca intended, then it would be fitting that Medea learned a dangerous skill and received a powerful ingredient from an immortal far outside the realm of regular human interaction and interference, and one that she could use for such a despicable endeavour.

It is also not by accident that Seneca’s Medea learns how to use ingredients from one who was severely punished for crossing proverbial boundaries. Prometheus helps Seneca’s Medea to add these dangerous ingredients hailing from hostile lands – and the hard-to-control element of fire – into the robe. It therefore makes sense: because Prometheus crossed a proverbial line or boundary in giving fire to humanity, Medea uses this knowledge for her own ends, to imbue the gift with a deadly fire.

Seneca also has Medea explain that she obtained some materials with especially dangerous properties. In lines 826-832, Medea explains that “I gathered the flashes of living flame from the kindred body of Phaethon. I possess the gifts from the belly of Chimera, I possess flames caught from the scorched throat of the bull, which I compounded with Medusa’s bile and

²⁵⁴ *Ignis fulvo Clausus in auro | Latet obscurus | Quem mihi caeli qui furta luit | Viscere feto Dedit docuit Condere vires arte Prometheus* (Seneca’s *Medea* 820-824).

²⁵⁵ See Hine 2000, 193 for more on the suggestion that Medea receiving knowledge/ fiery poison from Prometheus as a Senecan tradition. On another note, it depends on the tradition whether Herakles frees Prometheus from his punishment before or after the twelve labors, but Apollonius has Herakles join the Argo after the labors were complete.

bade preserve their harm in secret.”²⁵⁶ Technically, Phaethon would be Medea’s uncle as Helios is both his father and Medea’s grandfather. Phaethon, too, crossed a boundary when he attempted to drive Helios’ chariot across the sky and nearly destroyed the earth in the process.²⁵⁷ As a consequence, Phaethon was struck by Jove’s thunderbolt.²⁵⁸ Although he is Medea’s relative, it does not stop her from gathering the flames from his body which, like the Promethean plants, come from an immortal punishment for trespassing boundaries.

Medea then collects extraordinary materials from mythological monsters. First, the “contents of the stomach of the Chimaera” (*Medea* 828), the monster which was said by Apollodorus amongst others to be dispatched by the hero Bellerophon in Lycia.²⁵⁹ Of course, Medea acquires the “fire from the flaming bulls of Colchis” before her departure from her father’s kingdom with the Argonauts.

Then, Medea gains the bile of Medusa (832-833). Medusa was killed in Libya by Perseus.²⁶⁰ Since the time of Ovid, Libya was considered a dangerous place for Romans and Seneca has no qualms about leaning into that stereotype.²⁶¹ According to Ovid, it was the blood from Medusa’s severed head falling in the Libyan desert that made the region so full of diseases and venomous snakes afterward.²⁶² Ovid’s version of the aetiology of the dangerous flora and

²⁵⁶ *Et vivacis fulgura flamme | De cognato Phaethonte tuli. | habeo mediae dona chimaerae, | habeo flammas | usto tauri gutture raptas | quas permixto felle Medusae | tacitum iussi servare malum* (Seneca’s *Medea* 826-832).

²⁵⁷ See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 2.206-300 for a catalogue of catastrophic effects caused by Phaeton’s incapable driving of the Sun’s chariot.

²⁵⁸ See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 2.304-329 for the last segment of Phaethon’s story wherein he and the chariot of the sun are struck from the sky by Jove’s thunderbolt.

²⁵⁹ Apollodorus’ *Library* 2.3 for Bellerophon’s story including his killing of the Chimera.

²⁶⁰ See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 4.615-620. According to Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* 4.614-620, the slaughter of Medusa by Perseus and Perseus’ flight across the sands of Libya is an etiology for all the venomous snakes that dwell in Libya.

²⁶¹ Seneca would not be the last to make use of this story and stereotype of Libya.

²⁶² See Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* lines 4.615-620 *at alter | viperei referens spoliū memorabile monstri | aera carpebat tenerum stridentibus alis, | cumque super Libycas victor penderet harenas, | Gorgonei capitis guttae cecidere cruentae; | quas humus exceptas varios animavit in angues, | unde frequens illa est infestaque terra colubris*. Later Lucan repeats the story in the *Pharsalia* wherein he builds on previous versions by describing Libya

fauna of Libya is echoed by Seneca. Before Seneca's Medea imbued the fatal gift with her poisons, she "summons all plagues produced by the sand of burning Libya."²⁶³ For Seneca's Medea, the more hostile a landscape that provides the magical ingredient, the more effective the material will be for criminal actions. Seneca refers to places that are difficult to access, and most are in regions that are in opposition or are hostile to Roman *urbanitas*.

Magical Landscapes as Boundaries that Should Not Be Crossed

This pattern holds throughout Seneca's *Medea*. Seneca emphasizes the dangers of crossing boundaries, wild lands, and interacting with wild peoples, and he does so predominantly by talking about the first "explorers" aboard the Argo. Seneca relates, through the Chorus, how these heroic adventurers are doomed by the gods and doom the world in the process.²⁶⁴

The Chorus explains how the Argo and its crew, as the first to break these natural boundaries, have doomed both themselves and the world by setting a precedent. It is likely that the sentiments that the Chorus promotes are reflective of Seneca's own concerns over the dangers of foreignness.²⁶⁵ The choral odes claim that there is a price to be paid for traversing natural boundaries. Before the choral ode below, Creon has finished ordering Medea to take her deadly herbs and malicious self and leave his borders. Upon hearing his last order for her to leave the border of Isthmus, the Chorus provides an exposition on the importance of boundaries. More specifically, the Chorus explains why boundaries should not be traversed:

as an even more desolate and dangerous wasteland than Ovid did. Moreover, Lucan emphasizes Libya as the home of many kinds of deadly serpents. To see Lucan's utilization of the story see *Pharsalia* 9. 665-737.

²⁶³ *pestes vocat quascumque ferventis creat harena Libyae...* (Seneca's *Medea* 681-682).

²⁶⁴ See Seneca's *Medea* lines 607-615 for an example of this sentiment. See also Benton 2003 for a further conversation about interpreting Seneca's choral ode as Seneca's anxiety over the imperial expansion of Rome during the reign of Nero.

²⁶⁵ See Benton 2003 for more discussion around the choral odes and Seneca's anxieties over imperial expansion.

“Daring, too daring, the man who first split the treacherous seas with a boat so fragile; who seeing his own land left behind him, committed his life to the fickle breezes, and cutting the seas on an unsure course could put his trust in thin wooden planks; slender, too slender the margin drawn between the paths of life and death. Not yet were the constellations known; there was no use of the stars that embellish the heavens; not yet could a boat avoid the rainy Hyades, nor the gleam of the Olenian Goat, nor the Northern Wain which the slow old man Bootes follows and guides. Not yet did Boreas, not yet did Zephyrus possess a name.”²⁶⁶

The task set before Jason, retrieving the golden fleece, necessitated that he and the Argonauts traverse a hitherto-unconquered kingdom of the gods: the sea. The Argonauts would use the winds to drive the ship across the sea to unknown lands. Not only are the winds “fickle” and the boat fragile but accessing foreign lands is a gamble, in Seneca’s view. This sentiment is emphasized by the Chorus’ point that many of the constellations and winds that guide ships were not yet in existence.²⁶⁷ Seneca scholar Hine convincingly traces Seneca’s reference to unnamed stars to Virgil’s tale in the *Georgics* 1.136-138 wherein the poet tells how the first sailor after starting to become comfortable sailing the rivers then named the stars.²⁶⁸ The Olenian goat is one of the brightest stars in the constellation of Auriga and commonly acts as a proverbial “canary in the coal mine” for bad weather.²⁶⁹ A similar significance is attributed to the Northern Wain and

²⁶⁶ *Audax nimium qui freta primus | rate tam fragili perfida rupit, | terrasque suas post terga videns | animam levibus credidit auris, | dubioque secans aequora cursu | potuit tenui fidere ligno, | inter vitae mortisque vias | nimium gracili limite ducto* (Seneca’s *Medea* 301-308).

²⁶⁷ Seneca’s *Medea* 309-317- *nondum quisquam sidera norat, | stellisque, quibus pingitur aether, | nonerat usus; | nondum pluvias Hyadas poterat | vitare ratis, | non Oleniae lumina carprae, | nec quae sequitur flectique senex | Arctica tardus plaustra Bootes; | nondum Boreas, nondum Zephyrus | nomen habebant.*

²⁶⁸ See Virgil’s *Georgics* 1.136-138- *tunc alnos primum fluvii sensere cavatas; | navita tum stellis numeros et nomina fecit, | Pleiades, Hyadas, claramque Lycaonis Arcton...*

²⁶⁹ See Costa 1973, 100-101, Hine 2000, 148.

Bootes.²⁷⁰ As for the winds Boreas and Zephyrus, apparently, they were not in existence when the Argo set sail even though other authors like Ovid have them in existence in the early stages of the world's creation.²⁷¹ Seneca's aims in referencing these constellations are to articulate two things: first, to showcase his learning of myths,²⁷² and second, to show how dangerous it is to sail the Mediterranean without knowledge of these winds and constellations. To lack these elements is to sail without the benefit of natural warning systems for bad weather, nor reliable stars nor clear names for winds by which to guide their ship. To take such a risk for the sake of spoil can only lead to destruction.

The Chorus (and Seneca) see Jason's venture aboard the Argo as a challenge to the natural order. Indeed, the Chorus points out that merely daring and succeeding in traversing "landscapes" or, perhaps more accurately, realms that humans had not conquered until the Argo, amounts to an invasion of godly kingdoms. Much later, in lines 595-602, the Chorus makes a prayer to the gods (especially those of the sea) for forgiveness for the Argo's transgression.²⁷³ This prayer takes place when Medea is readying her altar to make her deadly gifts for Creusa and Creon. The timing is significant for Seneca's audience because as the chorus are singing their ode and expressing their fears of crossed boundaries, Medea (who represents the manifestation of their fears of a foreign threat) is in the process of creating a fatal gift that will tear apart the Corinthian community.

In lines 318-328 the Chorus also exclaim that:

²⁷⁰ See Costa 1973, 100-101.

²⁷¹ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1. 61-66.

²⁷² I agree with Hine's assessment, see 148.

²⁷³ *Parcite, o divi, veniam precamur; | vivat ut tutus mare qui subegit. | sed furit vinci dominus profundi | regna secunda. | ... constit nulli via nota magno: | vade qua tutum populo priori, | rumpe nec sacro violente sancta | foedera mundi* (Seneca's *Medea* 595-606).

“Tiphys dared to spread his canvas on the vast waste of sea and write new laws for the winds: now to strain the ropes with sails full-bellied, now to advance one sheet to catch the crosswinds... when the sailor, all too greedy, is hoping to catch the full gusts, and above the lofty sail the scarlet topsails tremble.”²⁷⁴

These lines demonstrate that, to the Chorus, the Argo completed the crossing with arrogance and greed. That Tiphys “dared” to undertake these things and that the sailors were “all too greedy” indicate this. What is more, the very act of the crossing of the sea and “writing new laws for the winds” would have significant fallout for the Argonauts, but also for their respective communities and the wider world.

As the Chorus describes the times before the Argo made its fateful journey, they highlight the idyllic way of life they enjoyed, free from foreign complications. In lines 329-334, the Chorus lament how “Bright were the eras our forefathers saw with crime and deceit far distant. Homely, touching no shores but their own, they grew to old age on their father’s lands, and rich with little, beyond what their native soil had yielded they knew no wealth.”²⁷⁵ The Chorus reminisces about earlier Roman conceptions of rustic virtues.²⁷⁶ In the Chorus’ view, the voyage of the Argo occurred for the sake of wealth and opened the doors for crime to take place on their shores. Moreover, after the Argonauts’ journey, the Chorus laments that the “covenants of this well-separated world were dragged together by Thessaly’s pine, which bade the deep suffer lashes, and bade the sea, once alien, become part of our fears.”²⁷⁷ The chorus goes on to

²⁷⁴ Seneca’s *Medea* 318-328-*Ausus Tiphys | Pandere vasto carbasa ponto | legesque novas scribere ventis: | Nunc lina sinu tendere toto, | Nunc prolato pede transversos | captare notos, | ...cum iam totos | Avidus nimium navita flatus | optet et alto | rubicunda tremunt sipara velo.*

²⁷⁵ See Seneca’s *Medea* 329-334- *Candida nostri saecula patres | Videre, procul fraude remota. | Sua quisque piger litora tangens | Patrioque senex factus in arvo, | Parvo dives | Nisi quas tulerat natale solum | Non norat opes.*

²⁷⁶ For other presentations of the virtuous rustic life of early Romans, cf. Virgil’s *Georgics* 2.513-540.

²⁷⁷ *Bene dissaepi foedera mundi | Traxit in unum Thessala pinus | Iussitque pati verbera pontum | Partemque metus fieri nostri | Mare sepositum* (Seneca’s *Medea* 335-339).

describe how during this voyage into the unknown, the Argonauts faced monsters like Scylla, clashing mountains, and sirens.²⁷⁸ These are the creatures one can expect to find beyond the known and mapped boundaries of the world. For the Chorus and Seneca, it is only natural that any cargo or people that are brought from such realms and/or landscapes share the same uncivil elements. For Seneca, sailing is the main vehicle through which one (especially if not a magician) crosses boundaries that ought not to be crossed.

The tragic fates of the Argonauts prove this. Once the Argo set the precedent of crossing such a significant boundary, Seneca and the Chorus suggests this event leads to more crossings and ultimately more unpleasant encounters with creatures and people whose existence and/or ways of life are in opposition to Roman mores. It is par for the course that these magical landscapes and the people that come from them are not only uncivil, but they are also potentially magicians of ill temperament and prone to violence. In lines 361-363 the Chorus exclaim “What was the prize gained by this voyage? The Golden Fleece and Medea, an evil worse than the sea, fit merchandise for the first vessel.”²⁷⁹ Medea is a suitable result of the avaricious journey of the Argo, a fitting punishment.

Seneca characterizes the wilds, especially the sea, as boundaries that ought not to be crossed, and shows that they pose a danger to Roman society. Moreover, even the things that can be exploited and extracted from these lands can have dire consequences for those who have done the reaping. Through Medea, and, by extension, the boundaries the Argonauts crossed to reach her, Seneca expresses his concerns about Roman society’s fascination with the foreign. For Seneca, the natural boundaries of his world are there for the purpose of keeping order. While the

²⁷⁸ See Seneca’s *Medea* 354-360 for the Choral reference to both the episode of the Argonauts’ encounter with Scylla, clashing mountains, and the sirens.

²⁷⁹ *Quod fuit huius pretium cursus? | Aurea pellis | Maiusque mari Medea malum, | merces prima digna carina* (Seneca’s *Medea* 361-364).

sailing of the Argo may not constitute an exact fracturing of Seneca's imagined natural order, Seneca certainly depicts it as a catalyst for change to an idyllic order, or a first step on the way toward the Roman society of Seneca's day.

Although the chorus in the play complains about the natural boundaries that are broken, the lands they talk about do not necessarily reflect mythical time but are more indicative of Seneca's own time, as Hine has observed.²⁸⁰ The Chorus describes the new relationship to the sea: "These days the sea has yielded, and endures all laws. No need of a boat framed by Pallas, bringing back princely rowers, a famous Argo: any little rowboat wanders over the deep. All boundaries are removed, and cities have established their walls in new lands."²⁸¹ For Hine, the idea of opening of the world to everyone, allowing the "knowledge" of the world to be expressed for all, is presented more positively than the other consequences of conquering the sea.²⁸² I agree with Hine that the odes reflect ideas in Seneca's own day, but I am unconvinced of Hine's argument that Seneca approves of the open world of knowledge. Seneca places a strong emphasis on the dangers of obtaining knowledge from other realms and places that ought not to be traversed. In Seneca's view, as more boundaries are removed and Rome's reach extends further, it becomes more likely that Rome will make contact with lands and people that will prove a detriment to society. It is not only an issue that more people are sanctioned by this god or another to traverse boundaries, but anyone with access to boats can do this: there is an unregulated bridge between potential magical landscapes and the Roman empire.

²⁸⁰ See Hine 2000, 152 for more commentary on Seneca's Choral ode as a reflection on Roman geopolitics of Seneca's day.

²⁸¹ *Nunc iam cessit pontus et omnes | patitur leges. | non Palladia compacta manu | Regum referens inclita remos | quaeritur Argo: | quaelibet altum cumba pererrat. | Terminus omnis motis et urbes, | muros terra posuere nova* (Seneca's *Medea* 364-370).

²⁸² Ibid.

The Chorus continues their lament, providing examples of phenomena they are witnessing that they had deemed impossible before the Argo.²⁸³ In lines 371-374 they state that “nothing is left where it once belonged by a world open to access. The Indian drinks from the cold Araxes, Persians the Albis and the Rhine.”²⁸⁴ The Indian and Persian that are drinking from liminal rivers hail from beyond Roman boundaries in opposite directions from the Albis, Rhine and the Araxes. The Indian drinking from the Araxes River is a reference to the reality that someone could travel a long-distance trade route from India to the Caspian Sea and Asia Minor.²⁸⁵ Similarly, the Araxes itself flows into the Caspian Sea which locates the region on the very edge of Roman control.²⁸⁶ The Elbe and Rhine rivers border Eastern Gaul and were not successfully pacified by Rome with any permanence.²⁸⁷ The Persian drinking from the Albis and the Rhine has likewise traveled from a land on the southeastern extremity of the Roman empire, which is a land beyond Roman control, and has plausibly traveled to the northwestern edge of Roman control. The fact that these peoples can travel so far signals a disruption of the idyllic natural order of separate communities that Seneca imagines existed before the sailing of the Argo.

Notably, the locations of these rivers, the Araxes, the Albis, and the Rhine, are significant for Seneca because, for him, they are boundaries that separated the civilized, Roman world from the wilderness beyond. It bears noting that all these rivers are on the periphery of Rome’s control, and they were also important for trade.²⁸⁸ These rivers serve not just boundaries of

²⁸³ See Hine 2000, 153-154 for commentary as to why foreign peoples drinking from foreign rivers not their own was framed as an impossibility to Roman thinking. The notion is not unlike the expressions “when hell freezes over” or “when pigs fly.”

²⁸⁴ *nil qua fuerat sede reliquit | pervius orbis; | Indus gelidum potat Araxen, | Albin Persae Rhenumque bibunt* (Seneca’s *Medea* 371-374).

²⁸⁵ Hine 2000, 153.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ See Hine 2000, 153-154.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

potential magical landscapes, but also as entrepôts between Roman territory and those “uncivil” people from wild places. In the Chorus’ view, those who engage with these peoples and traverse these spaces run considerable risks and set a precedent of traversing boundaries – and that such daring explorers do not escape punishment.

The cost to traversing natural boundaries is dire. The Chorus outlines the fates of all the Argonauts, beginning with a summary of their collective demise:

“all who touched the famous oars of that daring ship and stripped Mt. Pelion of the dense shade of its sacred wood, all who entered the drifting crags and after traversing such toils at sea berthed against a barbaric coast to return as plunderers of foreign gold, atoned with a dreadful death for the trespass on the rights of the deep.”²⁸⁹

The following lines 616-669 form a catalogue of all the tragic fates of the Argonauts, their recompense to the gods for overstepping and breaking down boundaries. The thing that most of these Argonauts had in common however, is that most died in other foreign and wild places or in realms over which they had little control. This seems a fitting payment for their transgressions in Seneca’s view. As Jason was the leader of the Argo, he was not exempt from tragic punishment. For Seneca, Medea as a magician from a wild land is an apt punishment for both Jason’s shameless ambition and his arrogant disruption of natural boundaries.

Realms Beyond Access and Control for Most Mortals

The magical landscapes that Medea retrieves her ingredients from and the primordial boundaries that the Argonauts traversed are not the only magical landscapes that matter to Seneca. In her ritual prayers and incantations, Medea also appeals to abstract spaces or realms.

²⁸⁹ *Quisquis audacis tetigit carinae | Nobiles remos, nemorisque sacri | Pelion densa spoliavit umbra, | Quisquis intravit scopulos vagentes | Et tot emensus pelagi labores | Barbara funem religavit ora | raptor externi rediturus auri, | Exitu diro temerata ponti | iura piavit* (Seneca’s *Medea* 607-615).

These places are where gods and entities, sources of Medea's power, dwell. References to these places showcase Medea's command over nature, as she accesses realms where other humans cannot reach. Even if humans have entered such realms, they cannot command or conquer them. The only ones who can access these places like the Shades, or the Grave, the heavens, the deep, are generally either magicians or those who have received aid from a magician or a god.

Whereas Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* cooperates with other entities and their respective realms of influence, Seneca's Medea summons and commands her chosen entities and their dwelling places. These places do not seem to be entirely abstract for Seneca, as they are realms Medea seeks to draw power and/or influence from. Medea not only calls on several entities, but she also rallies the influence of their respective realms of influence like "lord and lady of the sad or gloomy realm," "chaos of eternal night," or the "realm hidden from the light of day" amongst others.²⁹⁰ Medea calls on the both the gods and the power of their dwelling places.

These realms are even more inaccessible than those above ground and are significant for Seneca because Seneca's Medea is planning on using these entities and their dwelling places to aid her in her magical endeavours. As with other references to magical landscapes, the depiction of the place is tied to the endeavour that it is associated with. For example, when Medea first learns that Jason is leaving her for Creusa, she is distraught and calls on the gods and their respective realms to witness the injustice of Jason's broken oaths.²⁹¹ She makes a prayer in anger that ends with the desire for the death of Creusa, Creon, and endless exile for Jason and so invokes chthonic and underworld forces. These are laid out in a similar fashion to, and share a

²⁹⁰ See Seneca's *Medea* 6-19. Some of the terms used for these entities include *noctis aeternae chaos*; | *aversa superis regna*; *manesque impios* | *dominumque regni tristis et dominam fide meliore raptam sceleris ultrices deae* (*Medea* 9-13).

²⁹¹ Seneca's *Medea* 6-12.

pattern with, Medea's curation of ingredients from other landscapes. Medea calls upon each entity and their respective realms or the realm itself for aid – as if the place itself is an accomplice to her plan. Indeed, she addresses the Chaos of Eternal Night for help.²⁹² While there is some discussion over whether Chaos of Eternal Night ought to be capitalized as an independent entity, I suggest that it should because it is often featured as an entity when invoked in a prayer and/or in magical contexts, as in the creation of *defixiones* and/or Greek curse tablets.²⁹³

Medea appeals to dead and wicked residents of the shades who would have no problem aiding her in her nefarious task.²⁹⁴ As happens with Seneca's stereotyping of an entire place based upon its uncivil inhabitants, the impious residents of the shades are meant to represent that realm. There are of course the lord and lady of the gloomy and/or sad realm, Hades and Persephone, and these figures are arguably the most important of those mentioned here: if Medea has their aid in her task, then she has the authority of the underworld at her command. These infernal entities are particularly fitting for Medea's prayer for destruction.

While Medea's first invocations of these entities and their realms are not explicit about the kind of task that she is undertaking, as she is vague in her wish of destruction against the royal house, she enjoins the magical landscapes and the entities that dwell within them more precisely to specific tasks later in the play. Medea begins her ritual to create a fatal gift for

²⁹² Seneca's *Medea* 9-12.

²⁹³ Chaos as an entity has differing interpretations amongst commentators regarding whether Chaos should be capitalized or not. See Costa 1973, 63 for commentary on why it is probable that Medea is simply referencing the realm itself. See Hine 2000, 113 for a more balanced view wherein he does point out however, that there is precedence for Chaos as an entity in the literature as far back as Hesiod's *Theogony* 116. Chaos as an entity is especially likely when referenced in a prayer or magic rituals. In this instance, because Seneca is arguably hinting at Medea's plans, it might be appropriate to consider Chaos as an entity given that there are examples of Chaos as an entity invoked in both *defixiones* and the *PGM*. See *PGM IV*, 443 in Betz's 1986 *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*.

²⁹⁴ See Costa 1973, 63; Hine 2000, 114 for some commentary on who exactly is meant by the unholy of the dead.

Creusa with a prayer, wherein she says, “I invoke the thronging silent dead, and you gods of the grave, and sightless Chaos, and the shadowy home of dark-enshrouded Dis, the cavernous halls of squalid Death, enclosed by Tartarus’ streams.”²⁹⁵ Medea summons these deities and the influence of their realms to prepare a gift designed to send whoever touches it to the underworld. For this purpose, Medea summons the aid of the silent dead who are shades of their former selves. The gods of the grave are taken to be a reference to the same gods that nearly every Latin funerary inscription are made out to; namely, the *di manes*.²⁹⁶ Thus, it is fitting that, as Medea wishes to send people to the grave, she should make efforts to ensure that the gods of the grave should be ready to receive her targets. Of course, Chaos is again invoked and the entire *domum* of Dis is likewise summoned to the aid of Medea’s quest. Medea also summons Death himself to attend to her enterprise. In these ways, Medea has ensured that every significant aspect of death and the underworld is prepared to or has aided her in her objective. As Medea moves on with her prayer, she even stops the day-to-day function of the shades to recruit Tantalus, Ixion, and the Danaids to attend this event.²⁹⁷

Medea also summons the aid of other various aspects of nature. These realms that Medea commands include not only the sky but also the seas, as she forces rain from rainless clouds, confuses the laws of heaven, and overpowers the tides of Oceanus.²⁹⁸ The point Seneca is attempting to demonstrate is that, just as the ingredients that Medea harnesses come from lands

²⁹⁵ *Comprecor vulgus silentum vosque ferales deos | Et Chaos caecum atque opacam Ditis umbrosi domum, | Tartari ripis ligatos squalidae Mortis specus* (Seneca’s *Medea* 740-742).

²⁹⁶ See Hine 2000, 185 for more commentary on the interpretations on the *ferales deos*.

²⁹⁷ See lines Seneca’s *Medea* lines 743-749 for a description of the shades to stop working at Medea’s insistence, thus allowing these canonical impious characters to Medea’s perverse wedding wherein she sends Creon and Creusa to the underworld with her gift.

²⁹⁸ *Et evocavi nubibus siccis aquas | Egique ad imum maria, et Oceanus graves | Interius undas aestibus victis dedit; | pariterque mundus lege confusa aetheris | Et solem et astra vidit, et vetitum mare | tetigistis, Ursae. temporum flexi vices...* (Seneca’s *Medea* lines 754-759).

that are wild and beyond the norm, so too are the abilities that Medea gains as she sources her help from inaccessible entities and realms of influence accessible only to magicians. Seneca repeats the theme that things taken from inaccessible places can be dangerous because they are inaccessible for a reason.

Seneca also makes this point clearly in his tragedy *Hercules*. In this play, when Hercules emerges from Tartarus with Cerberus and Theseus in tow, and Seneca makes clear that traversing realms that are typically inaccessible to humans is monstrous.²⁹⁹ As I explored earlier on page 36, Hercules asks for a godly pardon as the thing that he has brought from the underworld is *illicitum*. Even for the gods of the sky, things that are hidden in the third kingdom are not to be known or seen by just anybody, in Seneca's view – not even by Jove himself. Just as Seneca characterizes Medea as upsetting the natural order, as I discuss in chapter one, so too does Seneca voice through Hercules that it is *nefas* for one yet living to have both knowledge of the underworld and to bring something born of that kingdom (Cerberus) to the surface. When Theseus, whom Hercules rescued, is asked about the journey from the underworld, he makes his response in lines 658-661 only after he makes a quick prayer or invocation of the entities of those realms he is about to describe. Specifically, he requests no retaliation for the “things rightly hidden” that he is about to reveal. He says, “I pray to the whole order of the universe, and to you who rule the capacious kingdom...may I speak with impunity of things rightly hidden and buried in the earth.”³⁰⁰ Seneca characterizes the possession of specialized knowledge of and aid from inaccessible realms as *nefas*.

Magical Landscapes for Ovid's and Seneca's *Medeae*

²⁹⁹ An episode I explored briefly in Chapter 2. See pages 35-36.

³⁰⁰ *Fas omne mundi teque dominantem precor | regno Capaci teque quam tota irrita | quaesivit Aetna mater; ut iure abdita | et operta terris liceat impune eloqui* (Seneca's *Hercules* 658-661).

Both Ovid and Seneca write about magical landscapes with a view to characterizing the enterprise Medea has in mind. For instance, while Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* travels for days collecting magical herbs from various wild areas about Thessaly, she is gathering them for a good purpose and the lands and herbs are not negative themselves. When Ovid's Medea of the *Metamorphoses* gathers aconite to mix a cup of poison for her new stepson Theseus, however, Ovid notes that Medea brought this poison from somewhere untamable to the Roman mind (Scythian shores). Even the same lands can be reimagined by Ovid, depending on the endeavour they are being sourced for. Because the magical endeavour that Seneca's Medea undertakes is a crime, the ingredients and aid that Medea receives from her choice of magical landscapes necessitates that they come from characteristically dangerous and shady sources. While all of Seneca's magical landscapes are in opposition to civilization, they are especially stereotypically characterized when they are utilized for criminal intent.

Seneca also takes pains to show is that boundaries are part of the natural order and that therefore, there are consequences to challenging the natural order. This notion is especially true in Seneca's view when it comes to those who set the precedent of breaking a natural boundary and conquering a kingdom of the gods, like the Argonauts did by sailing the seas in the first ship.

For both Ovid and Seneca, magical landscapes are not simply geographic locations, but they also include superhuman realms, such as the kingdoms of the gods. These realms include the underworld, the seas, and the sky. Given that Ovid's Medea has undertaken a magical feat in the service of the *familia*, extending the life of her father-in-law, it is perhaps not surprising that Medea respectfully cooperates with these entities and their realms with an attitude of something

bordering on *religio*.³⁰¹ Following this same logic, the reverse is true: it is not surprising that the Senecan Medea does not cooperate with these abstract realms so much as summon and command them to do her bidding. Moreover, as can be observed from Seneca's other play *Hercules*, enlisting the aid and using knowledge from inaccessible realms is impious and improper for Seneca. It is hardly surprising then, that Seneca's Medea utilizes all the unsuitable knowledge and resources from those inaccessible landscapes and realms at her disposal to carry out her criminal act.

In sum, magical landscapes are considered by both Ovid and Seneca to include abstract realms and actual geographical locations. Regions that are thought to contain the potential of magic are on the periphery of Roman society and are characterized based on widespread Roman attitudes towards the peoples that dwell within them. For the Romans, lands that hold magical potential are in opposition to civil *urbanitas*, and, by extension, this implies that magic tends to be more prominent in "under-policed areas" on the periphery.³⁰² These landscapes and realms function as natural boundaries in the Roman perception and there will be a reckoning for those who break those boundaries. Likewise, for Seneca, there are considerable risks to bringing things and people from those lands and integrating them into civilized society. For both the Ovidian and Senecan Medae, the characterization of magical landscapes that the magician utilizes, however, are still almost entirely dependent upon the moral nature of magical feat that the magician is undertaking.

³⁰¹ *verba simul fudit terrenaque numina civit | umbrarumque rogat rapta cum coniuge regem, | ne properent artus anima fraudare senili. | Quos ubi placavit precibusque et murmure longo, | Aesonis effetum proferri corpus ad auras | iussit* (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.248-253).

³⁰² See Gager 1992, 176.

Conclusions

Over the course of the thesis, I have explored the ways in which both Ovid and Seneca have engaged with magic through their presentations of their respective Medeae. Both authors were writing during times when magical practice was a prevalent phenomenon in Roman society. Seneca and Ovid were interested in the role that magic played in Roman society and they demonstrated their own worldviews concerning the practice of magic through their portrayals of Medea.

The technical means by which the Medeae of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7, *Heroides* 6, and Seneca's *Medea* are depicted is similar. These works feature detailed descriptions of magic ritual, Medea's criminal behaviour, and her engagement with lands and realms where magic originates. Each of these elements represent the role of magic in Medea's story. First, Seneca and Ovid's characterizations of Medea as a magician address whether the magician is inherently menacing or if their abilities can also be beneficial. Second, as these authors explore the criminal actions of Medea. Ovid and Seneca portray Medea differently in their works as they depict the magician as a criminal, a detriment to the *familia*, and/or a magic practitioner capable of using their magic for some measure of good. When Ovid and Seneca engage with the question of where magic comes from, those lands and realms are again depicted differently as their respective Medeae engage with magical landscapes for ethically opposite reasons.

In chapter one, I explore how both Seneca and Ovid focus on Medea's approach to performing magical rituals and her reasons for doing so. In *Metamorphoses* 7, Ovid depicts Medea sympathetically by outlining Medea's reasons for using greater magic, how she practices magic, and the result of her magical endeavour. For instance, Medea's reason for conducting magic in the *Metamorphoses* is to prolong the life or otherwise rejuvenate Jason's father Aeson.

Medea uses her greater magical expertise to give forty years of life to Aeson who is her *pater familias*. A crucial part of Medea's success in conducting this ritual is her pre-ritual preparation. Medea's approach to the gods is calculated and humble which results in her successful appeasement of the gods. Medea's relationship with the gods in this ritual is cooperative, which ultimately allows her both great magical power and the ability to successfully make Aeson young again. Therefore, Medea's reason for using greater magic is to perform a service to the *familia*. Medea's pre-ritual preparation is closer to true *religio* than other depictions of magical practice like those seen in Horace's *epode* 5, 17, Seneca's *Medea*, or Lucan's *Pharsalia*. As the outcome of the magical endeavour is successful, Ovid demonstrates that, at a practical level, it is possible for greater magical expertise to be ethically ambiguous or and even beneficial rather than corruptive.

Seneca in his *Medea*, however, demonstrates a different worldview on the ethical nature of greater magical expertise. He articulates in his characterization of Medea that greater magical practice is unambiguously corrosive. Seneca takes the same tools that Ovid did (to show Medea's magic practice sympathetically), to show just how destructive, dangerous, and malevolent the practice of greater magic is. Like Ovid, Seneca centers his characterization of magical practice around an extensive ritual description, Medea's reasons for utilizing her greater magic, and the outcome of her magical endeavour to demonstrate the negative characteristics of magic.

Because Seneca focuses on Medea's most infamous episode in her tradition, the events at Corinth, wherein Medea uses her greater magical expertise to destroy the Corinthian royal house and her own *familia* in the process, Medea's reasons for utilizing greater magic are necessarily malicious in Seneca's view. In other words, Medea's reason for using greater magic is not in service of the *familia* but for selfish revenge in Seneca's view. When Medea practices her magic

rituals, she does not cooperate with the gods.³⁰³ Rather, Medea harasses the gods into service, brings back to life creatures that were slain by the gods to use them for their magical properties, and utilizes all manner of magical materials to create a fatal gift.³⁰⁴ Seneca demonstrates that Medea's reasons for using greater magic are self-indulgent, her practice of greater magic is exploitive, by extension her relationship with the gods is strained at best, and her use of magic culminated in the destruction of her own *familia*. Seneca demonstrates his aversion to greater magical expertise by receiving Ovid's depiction of Medea of the *Metamorphoses* and depicting Medea's magical practice as ethically and unambiguously depraved.

In chapter two, I explored the ways in which Medea's criminality is portrayed by Ovid in his *Heroides* 6 and *Metamorphoses* 7 compared with Seneca. Ovid and Seneca both approach the criminality of Medea in a similar fashion. That is, like their exploration of greater magic, Ovid and Seneca give ample attention to Medea's criminal activity. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* focuses less on all of Medea's crimes in favour of focusing on two in particular: namely, Medea's betrayal of her father and theft of the golden fleece, and Medea's killing of Pelias. While Ovid does mention some of Medea's other crimes, the murder of Apsyrtus is omitted from the *Metamorphoses*. The rest of Medea's crimes, like the attempted poisoning of Theseus and the Corinthian episode, are little more than footnotes in his narrative compared to the other central plot points. As Ovid depicted Medea's magic use, so too he presents Medea as sympathetic by complicating her criminal behaviour.

The *Metamorphoses* is not Ovid's only depiction of Medea's criminal actions. Ovid's *Heroides* 6 also focuses considerably on Medea's predatory magic use and her subsequent

³⁰³ Notable exceptions include Hecate in *Medea* 576-578, and while not a shade, Medea does cooperate with the shade of Apsyrtus in lines 970-971.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Seneca's *Medea* 699-702 for Medea's reanimation of Python and the Hydra.

criminal actions. Ovid in his *Heroides* 6 has Hypsipyle negatively characterize Medea in two ways. One, Medea's malicious magic use is used as a foundation to attack Medea's value as a suitable partner to Jason. The second way in which Ovid (through Hypsipyle's voice) characterizes Medea is how he has Hypsipyle define Medea by her crimes, which are all crimes against her *familia*. For instance, Hypsipyle focuses on Medea's betrayal of her father, her murder of Apsyrtus, and alludes to Medea's filicide (amongst others). She does so in order to demonstrate that Medea and her use of magic are criminal in nature, and that this makes Medea an unsuitable partner to Jason. Many of these aspects of Medea's criminality that Ovid presents in *Heroides* 6 are adopted by Seneca in his depiction of the criminality of Medea.

Seneca focuses heavily on the criminality of Medea in his tragedy. Seneca does this by first setting his tragedy within Corinth to show the events that make Medea most notoriously known. Seneca's goal in focusing on Medea's criminality is to present the Colchian magician unequivocally as a malefactor. Medea's entire magical endeavour in Seneca's tragedy is oriented towards committing an even greater crime that she has hitherto committed. To illustrate that Medea's crime in Corinth is in fact greater than anything she has carried out up to this point, Seneca's Medea is consistently recalling her past crimes throughout the play. Once Medea has successfully carried out her revenge against the Corinthian royal house – a revenge which involved a considerable amount of *illicitus* knowledge and exposure to *nefas* practices – her next crime is once again perpetrated against her own family. Seneca wishes to depict Medea straightforwardly as both criminal and a detriment to the *familia*.

Chapter Three addresses the ways in which Ovid and Seneca, through their depictions of Medea, engage with the question of where magic originates and how to characterize it. For both Ovid and Seneca, magical landscapes are places and realms that typical humans do not have

access to. These landscapes are wild, dangerous, inhabited by equally dangerous barbarians, they are beyond the borders of civilization, and consequently, they are often in opposition to Roman mores. These lands and realms are important for the characterization of Medea because it is from these places that Medea collects her magical materials and from which she draws her power. One of the most famous magical landscapes in Antiquity is Thessaly, which features prominently in both Ovid and Seneca's Medea traditions.

As Thessaly has a reputation as a magical landscape by Ovid's time and is often presented negatively as a toponym to characterize a dangerous drug and/or malicious incantation, Ovid seeks to rehabilitate Thessaly's negative reputation as a magical landscape. Ovid accomplishes this task by building on the tradition of Aeson's rejuvenation by Medea's magic. More specifically, Ovid puts the prolonging of Aeson's life first, instead of describing the Corinthian episode. Ovid's organization of Medea's story in this way means that the lands and realms that Medea scours in her material collecting journey takes place for the purpose of saving Aeson and not the destruction of the Corinthian royal family and her own. Ovid attempts to reinvent the origins of Thessaly as a magical landscape by having Medea perform her first greater magical feat using the materials from these lands in service of the *familia*.

Ovid's description of the lands from which Medea collects her magical materials in preparation for Aeson's rejuvenation, while wild, are not negatively characterized in any environmentally deterministic fashion. The characterization changes, however, when Medea describes the lands from which she has obtained poisonous herbs for the purpose of killing Theseus. Ovid makes plenty of references to the wildness of the landscape, the peoples, and monsters that are bred and dwell there. Ovid describes the land where Medea acquired her poisonous plants which furthermore have a taboo aetiology on account that the flowers come

from the froth of Cerberus who was dragged to the upper world by Hercules.³⁰⁵ By presenting these differing descriptions of these magical landscapes, Ovid means to articulate that how a magical landscape is characterized depends on the purpose for which the magician utilizes the land.

Seneca, as ever, has a different opinion on the nature of magical landscapes compared to Ovid. Even though Seneca presents magical landscapes in the context of Medea's primarily destructive use of greater magic, Seneca presents magical landscapes as lands and realms to avoid altogether. Seneca goes to exceptional lengths to articulate that the lands and realms from which Medea acquires magical materials and/or draws power from are dangerous, filled with dangerous people, creatures, diseases, and that there is a price for entering and engaging with these lands and realms. Seneca describes the dangers of going to these places at the borders of civilization by describing the voyage of the Argo (the world's first ship) and the fates of many of the Argonauts in his choral odes. For Seneca, all those who crossed natural boundaries risked invading kingdoms that ought not to be engaged with. Consequently, the gods sent their own punishments for these insults to their previously untrodden domains.

This theme also includes those abstract realms of the underworld and the dwelling places of entities from which Seneca's Medea draws power and aid. That is, travelling to and/or gathering knowledge about realms that are not accessible is both *illicitus* and *nefas* for Seneca. Seneca articulates the price of such a trespass in the tragic fates of Oedipus, Hercules, and Medea, as all these characters saw the destruction of their families. For Seneca, practising greater magic necessitates engaging with magical landscapes and the people, monsters, dangerous flora,

³⁰⁵ See pages 35-36 of this thesis for a brief account of Seneca's episode of Hercules hauling Cerberus from the underworld to the surface in his *Hercules*. Cf. pages 67-68 of this thesis for Ovid's description of the same event in his *Metamorphoses*.

and the entities that dwell within. Seneca's response to Ovid's more pragmatic characterization of magical landscapes is to express that such engagement with magical landscapes, be they land or realm, comes with a price.

In this thesis, I have explored the ways in which Seneca responds to Ovid's characterization of magic through their respective representations of the magician Medea. I have contributed to the discussion surrounding the ways that both Ovid and Seneca engage with magic as a cultural and literary topic in their respective historical periods, as well as how Seneca writes his Medea in conversation with Ovid's version of Medea. Seneca's reception of Ovid's Medea arguably stems from his desire to engage with and comment on the place that magic held in Roman society. Seneca also wanted to articulate his commentary on magic with the same enthusiasm that Ovid did, albeit with a completely opposite point of view. This thesis took into consideration the ways in which Seneca accomplished his commentary on magic and Medea. Seneca accomplished his reception of Ovid's Medea and his further commentary on magic by borrowing many technical constructions that Ovid employed, like the focus on ritual detail, criminality and its complications, the characterization of places where magic resides, and his complete inversion of Ovid's worldview concerning magic as presented through the Medea of the *Metamorphoses*.

The research conducted in this thesis can also lend itself to further commentary on how magic was depicted and perceived in the ancient world by considering some alternate patterns of how Medea as foreign magician is perpetually characterized as an outsider within the society in which she is portrayed. That is, there are several examples of magicians like Medea, Circe, Dipsas, Canidia, Erichtho amongst others that are located on the periphery of Roman society. A possible direction for applying the research of this thesis to further studies on the perceptions of

the role of magicians within society is to consider the magician's status and by extension, the status of their magical expertise, outside of Roman society. For instance, in areas where there seems to be little Roman control, the status of magicians, and of magic itself, seems to be higher than when they are situated within the Roman context. Some examples include the fact that before Medea is placed within a Roman context in the works of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Medea*, she is a princess. Likewise, in some traditions, Circe is only exiled to Aeaea after her husband, king of the Scythians, dies.³⁰⁶ Similarly, the witches of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* (Meroe and Pamphile) are depicted as holding positions of significant status within their communities. Using some of the same techniques that I have applied in this thesis, and shifting focus onto the magician outside of contexts controlled by Rome, could plausibly yield insightful results for the study of ancient Roman perceptions of magic and magicians.

³⁰⁶ Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* 4.45 for this account of Circe's story.

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