Emotion and wordplay in Seneca's Medea

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EMOTION AND WORDPLAY IN SENECA'S *MEDEA*

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In a short article published in 2007, D. Konstan has argued for the presence of massive sound play on the name of the tragedy's heroine in the opening lines of the *Medea* of Euripides[1]. While refusing to accept fully that his arguments support the thesis of those who see Medea as a quasi-divine figure in the play's closing scene, Konstan states that the exceptional emphasis laid on her name certainly hints at the extraordinary role she will play in the drama[2]. In all, he finds five examples of verbal play on Medea's name in the opening six verses, before the actual name appears for the first time in line seven:

> Εἴθ' ὤφελ' Ἀργοῦς **μὴ δια**πτάσθαι σκάφος
> Κόλχων ἐς αἶαν κυανέας Συμπληγάδας,
> **μηδ**' ἐν νάπαισι Πηλίου πεσεῖν ποτε
> **τμη**θεῖσα πεύκη, **μηδ**' ἐρετμῶσαι χέρας
> ἀνδρῶν ἀρίστων. οἳ τὸ πάγχρυσον δέρας
> Πελίᾳ μετῆλθον. οὐ γὰρ ἂν δέσποιν' **ἐμὴ**
> **Μήδεια** πύργους γῆς ἔπλευσ' Ἰωλκίας
> ἔρωτι θυμὸν ἐκπλαγεῖσ' Ἰάσονος.

Konstan could also have quoted lines 401-402 in support of his contention. There too it seems likely that Euripides is indulging in some kind of verbal play:

> ἀλλ' **εἶα**· φείδου **μηδ**ὲν ὧν ἐπίστασαι,
> **Μήδεια**, βουλεύουσα καὶ τεχνωμένη.

This is the only occasion in the play that Medea refers to herself by name. It has also been suggested that the two participles in line 402, meaning "planning and plotting", as translated by J. Mossman, hint that Medea's name is to be etymologically connected with the verb μήδομαι, which also means "I plot, I plan"[3].

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[1] D. Konstan, *A Hint of Divinity*, «Class. World» 101 (2007), pp. 93-94.

[2] On Medea's divinity Konstan refers to B.M.W. Knox, *The* Medea *of Euripides*, «Yale Class. St.» 25 (1977), pp. 193-225 and E. Griffiths, *Medea*, London 2006, p. 77. He notes also the negative reaction to this idea by S. Scullion, *Trick Questions*, «Times Lit. Suppl.» 5400 (Sept. 29, 2006), p. 28, in a review of Griffiths. On Medea's divinity since the appearance of Konstan's article, see D.J. Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides. Dramatic Technique and Social Context*, Cambridge 2010, p. 186; J. Mossman (ed.), Euripides, *Medea*, Oxford 2011, on 1389-1414.

[3] See J. Mossman, Euripides, *Medea*, cit.; D.J. Mastronarde (ed.), Euripides, *Medea*, Cambridge

Reactions to this kind of argument, whether positive or negative, are often highly subjective; scholars either instinctively accept or reject them. One way of applying some kind of test to the reactions of modern readers is to see if there is any trace in a surviving ancient text that might betray awareness of the presence of verbal play. It is potentially useful, therefore, to consider whether Seneca, when composing his tragic version of the story of Medea, may have read Euripides in a manner similar to Konstan's[4].

In the Latin version, Seneca accords the opening speech to Medea rather than to the nurse. This striking variation on the model means that any sound play on her name will come from the mouth of Medea herself, as is the case in the Euripidean speech of lines 364-409. The first possible example comes in lines 7b-9a, which, standing in the middle of a list of gods and goddesses, read thus:

> quosque iuravit mihi
> **deos** Iason, quosque **Medeae** magis
> fas est precari.

Medea here names herself for the first time, while referring to several deities, both those Jason prays to and those she invokes. The *deos* at the start of line 8, picking up the play's very first word, *Di*, raises the possibility of taking the name *Medeae* as formed from *Me+deae*. If there is anything to this suggestion, it may support the idea that Seneca is indeed thinking about the relationship between Medea and the divine right from the outset[5]. Certainly, line 8 is recalled in the play's final verse (1027), when Jason famously denies the possibility of contact between Medea and the gods:

> testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos.

It is clear that Seneca has deliberately linked the play's close to its opening, with the final word, *deos*, recalling its first word, *Di*. Whereas Medea initially invoked the gods, Jason denies her any possible connection with them. Intriguingly, Konstan records in a footnote that one of the anonymous readers of his article had pointed out that the repeated use of μὴ and μηδ' may hint at negated divinity, if we read Medea's name thus: μὴ+δ(ε)ια. Seneca's concluding *nullos ... deos* may be a possible reference to this reading, if we are prepared to see *nullos+deos* as a Latin

2002, and D.L. Page (ed.), Euripides, *Medea*, Oxford 1938, on line 402. As pointed out by commentators, the combination φείδου μηδὲν recurs elsewhere (Sophocles, *Ai*. 115; Euripides, *Hec*. 1044 and *Her*. 1400), but it is preceded only here by the interjection ἀλλ' εἶα.

[4] R. Tarrant, *Senecan Drama and Its Antecedents*, «Harv. St. Class. Philol.» 82 (1978), pp. 213-263 argues that Greek plays are to be considered as remote or proximate sources for Seneca. Augustan drama must have represented an important model for him. Cfr. also R. Tarrant, *Greek and Roman in Seneca's Tragedies*, «Harv. St. Class. Philol.» 97 (1995), pp. 215-230. W.R. Johnson, Medea Nunc Sum. *The Close of Seneca's Version*, in P. Pucci (ed.), *Language and The Tragic Hero. Essays on Greek Tragedy in Honor of Gordon M. Kirkwood*, Atlanta 1988, pp. 85-101 defines Seneca's drama as «malicious subversions of Euripides' tragedy», p. 85.

[5] The presence of the word *deae* just five lines later (where Medea invokes the Furies as *sceleris ultrices deae*) may strengthen the possibility of a reader seeing the *deae* in *Medeae*.

play on Greek μὴ+δ(ε)ια. For Jason, Medea's very name means that she cannot be associated with the divine.

It is the second half of Medea's speech that seems to contain more intensive play on her own name, after the manner of Euripides in his opening lines. It is interesting to compare Seneca's technique in lines 37-49 with that of his Greek model:

> hoc restat unum, pronubam thalamo feram
> ut ipsa pinum postque sacrificas preces
> caedam dicatis uictimas altaribus.
> Per uiscera ipsa quaere supplicio uiam,
> si uiuis, ani**me**, si quid antiqui tibi
> remanet uigoris; pelle femineos **me**tus
> et inhospitalem Caucasum **me**nte indue.
> quodcumque uidit Phasis aut Pontus nefas,
> uidebit Isthmos. effera ignota horrida,
> tre**me**nda caelo pariter ac terris mala
> **me**ns intus agitat: uulnera et caedem et uagum
> funus per artus – leuia **me**moraui nimis:
> haec uirgo feci.

It is of course perfectly possible that it is misguided to attach importance to the recurrence of the sound *me* in these lines[6]. However, given Euripidean precedent and the probability that Seneca will have read the opening of his Greek model with particular care, it seems worth taking the time to ask whether there is indeed here conscious verbal play on the name of Medea[7].

The first point to be made about the passage as a whole is that Medea is here defining herself, her life history and her highly emotional character, and to do so she uses words and themes that will feature prominently through out the rest of the dra-

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[6] In *anime*, *metus* and *memoravi*, the syllable *me* scans as short or light, whereas in *mente*, *tremenda* and *mens* it scans as long or heavy. It is generally accepted that distinctions between short/light and long/heavy syllables are ignored by Latin writers in word play of this kind; see for example F. Ahl, *Metaformations. Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets*, Ithaca-London 1985, p. 56 and J.J. O'Hara, *True Names. Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay*, Ann Arbor 1996, pp. 61-62. In this respect, Latin offers a wider range of semantic possibilities than Greek, where punning on the name of Medea is tied to the long vowel of the μη- prefix.

[7] Sound plays on the name of Medea in Seneca's tragedy have long attracted the attention of scholars. A. Traina (*Due note a Seneca tragico*. 1. *L'antroponimo Medea*, in Id., *Poeti latini (e neolatini) II*, Bologna 1991, pp. 123-129) focuses on the effects created by the alliteration (cfr. *e.g.* 362 ***m**aiusque **m**ari **M**edea **m**alum*), showing how it establishes a connection between the character's identity and her roles as *mater*, *malum*, and *monstrum* in the play, so that meaning is effectively brought about by sound. On the tension between Medea's monstrosity and maternity reinforced by alliterative plays on her name see also C. Segal, Nomen sacrum. *Medea and Other Names in Senecan Tragedy*, «Maia» 34 (1982), pp. 241-246 and G. Petrone, *Nomen/Omen. Poetica e funzione dei nomi (Plauto, Seneca, Petronio)*, «Mat. Disc.» 20/21 (1988), pp. 33-70. For further punning on the name of Medea in Greek see for example R.L. Hunter (ed.), Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, Book 3, Cambridge 1989, on 825-827, 1133-1136. At the start of Corneille's *Médée*, Act 1, scene 1, 6-7 one encounters this word play: (Jason) «Préparez-vous à voir mon second hy**ménée**. (Pollux) "Quoi! **Mé**d**ée** est donc morte, ami?"».

ma. Words such as *animus*, *metus* and *mens* will recur again and again in connection with her throughout the play. Medea is the person whose emotionality (*ani**me***), fear (***me**tus*) and mind (***me**ns*) dominate the drama. In addition, it is her memories (***me**moravi*) of the dreadful deeds (*tre**me**nda*; which can be read anagrammatically as *tr**emenda***) committed in the past that in great part dictate her vision of the future. In as much then as these verses define the character of Medea, it does not seem too far-fetched to imagine that Seneca is indulging here in sound play on her name similar to that employed by Euripides. Some verses later in the play seem to offer support to this suggestion. For play on *metus*, compare, for example, 517b-518a: *Est et his maior **me**tus*/***Me**dea*. In addition, Medea is twice described as *metuenda* (once by the chorus, 580, once by her Nurse, 738) a word, like *tremenda*, that contains her name with in it (***metuenda***). For play on *mens*, compare *melius, **a, deme**ns furor!* (930), and perhaps also *parce i**am, deme**ns, minis* (174). Finally, one would love to know whether any ancient reader ever noted that one of the frightful deeds (*tremenda*, 46) stirring in Medea's mind (*mens*) is slaughter (*caedem*, 47; cfr. 496), a word that contains the heroine's name when read in reverse. If Seneca's Medea is defined by her actions and if a major theme in the play is the way in which she becomes Medea by conforming to her traditional role and going through with the killing of her children[8], then what more tragic word than ***caedem*** could she use of her capacity for emotions and actions of the most extreme kind?

Abstract: In this paper I argue for the presence of striking and significant word play at the beginning of Seneca's *Medea*, suggesting also that the presence of similar word play at the opening of Euripides' play of the same name may have provided the direct model for the Latin poet.

Keywords: Seneca, Euripides, Medea, Word play, Emotions.

[8] See for example C. Star, *The Empire of the Self. Self-command and Political Speech in Seneca and Petronius*, Baltimore 2012, pp. 76-83.