



Delacroix, *Medea about To Kill her Children* (1834)

Seneca’s *Medea* is a drama in five acts. It is set ten years after Jason and the Argonauts completed the quest of the golden fleece. Medea had been the sorceress daughter of the king who guarded the fleece; she and Jason fell in love during the quest and were married on their return to Greece.

Medea had done terrible things to help Jason. She killed her brother, cut up his body and scattered the parts on the ocean to delay her father’s pursuing ship. She then tricked the daughters of the Thessalian king Pelias—who had sent Jason on the quest—into murdering him. Pelias’ son Acastus assumed the throne and his vow of vengeance drove the couple off to Corinth.

As a woman from the “barbaric” East, Medea was never really accepted by the Greeks, and Jason fears both his social standing and the lingering threat of Acastus. So Jason has been courting the Corinthian princess Creusa, daughter of King Creon, and now is about to leave Medea. The play begins in Jason’s house the day before he is to marry Creusa. Medea is cursing the situation:

*Ye gods of wedlock, guards of the nuptial couch,  
 Lucina, thou from whom that tamer of the deep,  
 The Argo's pilot, learned to guide his pristine bark,  
 And Neptune, thou stern ruler of the ocean's depths,  
 And Titan, by whose rays the shining day is born,  
 Thou triformed maiden Hecate, whose conscious beams  
 With splendor shine upon the mystic worshipers --  
 Upon ye all I call, the powers of heaven, the gods  
 By whose divinity false Jason swore; and ye  
 Whose aid Medea may more boldly claim, thou world  
 Of endless night, th' antipodes of heavenly realms,  
 Ye damnéd ghosts, thou lord of hades' dark domain,  
 Whose mistress was with trustier pledge won to thy side --  
 Before ye all this baleful prayer I bring.*

The first act continues with Medea fantasizing a twisted revenge, some of which foreshadows the action to come. The act concludes with a passing chorus’ wedding song in anticipation of Jason and Creusa’s nuptials.

In Act II, Medea confides in her nurse, saying that whatever evil things she has done in the past, she did them for Jason. She doesn't completely blame her husband for her woes, but has nothing but contempt for King Creon:

...nullum scelus  
irata feci: Saevit infelix amor. 135

Quid tamen Iason potuit, alieni arbitri  
iurisque factus? debuit ferro obvium  
offerre pectus. Melius, a melius, dolor  
furiose, loquere. Si potest, vivat meus,  
ut fuit, Iason; si minus, vivat tamen  
memorque nostri muneri parcat meo. 140  
Culpa est Creontis tota, qui sceptro impotens  
coniugia solvit quique genetricem abstrahit.

*irata* – Adj. describes Medea, subject of *feci*  
*saevio, -ire, -ivi, -itus* – to rage, rave  
*alieni...factus* – Take *factus* with an implied *esse*, and take the  
genitives as a kind of object; the sentence is similar to the English  
construction “what’s to become of X?”  
*ferro* – “iron”; metonymy for “a sword”  
*obvium* – “exposed”, modifying *pectus*. What is the intended  
meaning of this sentence?

*meus* – “as mine”, i.e. as her husband  
*minus* – poetic for *non*  
*parco, -ere, peperci, parsus* – “spare, be without”; this verb takes  
a dative for a direct object.  
*conjugia* - “husband and wife”  
*abstraho, -ere, -axi, -actus* – “to drag off”

Medea goes on: “*Let him alone sustain my wrath; let Creon pay the debt of guilt he owes! His palace will I bring to utter desolation; and the whirling fire to far-off Malea's crags shall send its lurid glare* (Malea is a cape on the southern tip of the Greek Peloponnesus). The nurse responds:

**Nutrix** Sile, obsecro, questusque secreto abditos 150  
manda dolori. gravia quisquis uulnera  
patiente et aequo mutus animo pertulit,  
referre potuit: ira quae tegitur nocet;  
professa perdunt odia vindictae locum.

*sile* – imperative from *sileo, -ere*  
*manda* – imperative form of *mando, -are* – “entreat”. the  
entreaty is being made to *secreto...dolori*. What is being  
requested: *questus...abditos*.  
*quisquis* – “whosoever”, subject of *pertulit*  
*mutus* – the key word, describing *quisquis*.

*referre* – “to gain, win back”  
*vindicatae locum* – direct object of *perdunt*. Note that *vindicate*  
is feminine, perhaps a reference to the female Medea. How do  
you interpret this poetical phrase?

**Me.** Levis est dolor, qui capere consilium potest 155  
et clepere sese: magna non latitant mala.  
libet ire contra.

*clepo, -ere, -psi, -ptus* – “to steal” (cf. English “kleptomania”);  
with *sese* this means “to steal oneself, hide”

*latito, -are, -avi, -atus* – “to keep hiding”. Verbs that end in *-ito*  
often are formed from another verb (e.g. *lateo* – “to hide”) and  
add this ending to indicate the continuous nature of the action.  
*libet* – “it pleases”; impersonal verb like *licet*.

The next lines alternate back-and-forth between the nurse and Medea. Note in particular that the nurse starts with *Siste...* in the middle of a line, and how later the pair go back and forth twice in the same line. This technique—known as *stichomythia*—is fairly common in Seneca’s plays; what effect does it have?

**Nvt.** Siste furialem impetum,  
alumna: vix te tacita defendit quies.

**Me.** Fortuna fortes metuit, ignavos premit.

**Nvt.** Tunc est probanda, si locum virtus habet. 160

**Me.** Numquam potest non esse virtuti locus.

**Nvt.** Spes nulla rebus monstrat adflictis viam.

**Me.** Qui nil potest sperare, desperet nihil.

**Nvt.** Abiere Colchi, coniugis nulla est fides  
nihilque superest opibus e tantis tibi. 165

**Me.** Medea superest: hic mare et terras vides  
ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina.

**Nvt.** Rex est timendus.

**Me.** Rex meus fuerat pater.

**Nvt.** Non metuis arma?

**Me.** Sint licet terra edita.

**Nvt.** Moriere.

**Me.** Cupio.

**Nvt.** Profuge.

**Me.** Paenituit fugae. 170

**Nvt.** Medea

**Me.** Fiam.

**Nvt.** Mater es.

**Me.** Cui sim vide.

**Nvt.** Profugere dubitas?

**Me.** Fugiam, at ulciscar prius.

**Nvt.** Vindex sequetur.

**Me.** Forsan inveniam moras.

*sisto, -ere, stiti, status* – “to cease, quit”  
*tacita...quies* – the subject of *defendit*. The two terms seem redundant; what do you think?  
*ignavus, -a, -um* – “lazy, cowardly”  
*numquam* – part of a double negative with *non*: “Never can there not be...” The rhetorical term for this is *litotes*.  
*rebus afflictis* – “vexing affairs”; abl. of separation  
*abiere* – “be gone!”  
*Colchi* – locative, the city where Medea was from.  
*ops, opis* – “wealth” (pl.) “treasures, riches”  
*sint licet* – “let them (the arms) be *ejecta* from the *terra*”  
*moriere* = *moreris*, from *morior, -I, mortus* – “to die”  
*paenituit* – “it displeased” (dat. of thing that displeases; this is an impersonal verb).  
*ulciscor, -i, ultus* – “to avenge”  
*vindex, -icis* – “The avenger”  
*mora, -ae* – “a delay, block, impediment”

**Nvt.** Compesce verba, parce iam, demens, minis  
animosque minue: tempori aptari decet.

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**Me.** Fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest.  
Sed cuius ictu regius cardo strepit?  
ipse est Pelasgo tumidus imperio Creon.

*mina, -ae* – “threat”; this is dative because it is the object of *parco*, which takes the dative.  
*tempori aptari decet* – *decet* – “it is proper” is impersonal, taking the infinitive *aptari* – “to be adapted, to accommodate”, which takes the dative *tempori*.  
*Fortuna opes auferre, non animum potest* – Try this order:  
*Fortuna potest auferre opes, non animum.*

*cardo, -inis* – “doorhinge”  
*strepo, -ere, -ui, -itus* – “sound loudly, screech”  
*Pelasgus, -a, um* – “Pelasgian, Greek”, modifies *imperio*  
*Creo* – “Creon”; this is the Latin nominative form of this Greek name, in opposition with *ipse*.

Creon has decreed that Medea go into exile immediately. Medea begs for mercy, and is granted a single day’s reprieve. Act II closes with a choral song about seafaring and how the ability to cross great distances has brought only new terrors to overcome, new wars to fight, new riches to covet. The song closes with the following lines:

Venient annis saecula seris,  
quibus Oceanus vincula rerum  
laxet et ingens pateat tellus  
Tethysque novos detegat orbes  
nec sit terris ultima Thule.

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*serus, -a, -um* – “late”, but here more like “future”  
*quibus* – refers back to *annis*; abl. of time when.  
*pateo, -ere, -ui, --* – “to stand/lie open, be well-known”  
*Tethys* – a sea-goddess, here used to personify the ocean  
*terries* – here equivalent to *in mundo*

*ultima Thule* – “far-off Thule” Much has been written about this supposed land. According to ancient geographers, it was a six-day sail from Britain and the northernmost island known in the world. Several attempts have been made to connect it to a real place, but Thule is most probably mythical.

Act III begins with Medea swearing complete revenge: *Sternam et evertam omnia* – “let me scatter and overturn everything.” Her thoughts then turn to Jason:

Timuit Creontem ac bella Thessalici ducis?  
amor timere neminem verus potest.  
sed cesserit coactus et dederit manus:  
adire certe et coniugem extremo alloqui  
sermone potuit. Hoc quoque extimuit ferox;  
laxare certe tempus immitis fugae  
genero licebat. Liberis unus dies  
datus est duobus. Non queror tempus breve:  
multum patebit. Faciet hic, faciet dies,  
quod nullus umquam taceat--invadam deos  
et cuncta quatiam.

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(notes on next page)

*timuit* – The subject here is Jason.

*Thessalici ducis* – The “Thessalian leader” is Pelias’ son Acastus, who drove Jason from the kingdom after Medea murdered his father.

*cesserit* – “grant that”;

*coactus* – “he was coerced”; with *cesserit*, Medea is supposing this to be true.

*extremo sermone* – “with one last talk/discussion”; Jason didn’t even do this before Medea learned he was marrying Creusa.

*extimuit ferox* – A classic oxymoron; though Jason was *ferox* (Medea is using this term sarcastically), he *extimuit*.

*laxare...licebat* – Try this order: *certe licebat* (it was permitted) *genero laxare tempus immitis fugae*.

*genero* – “son-in-law”; so Medea bitterly refers to Jason.

*Liberis...doubus* – “for the two children”, i.e. to say goodbye.

*queror, -i, questus* – “to complain”

*faciet* – “do” in the sense of the expression “this will do”.

*taceo, -ere, -ui, -itus* – “to be silent, keep secret”

*invado, -ere, -asi, -asus* – “to invade, take possession of”

*quatio, -ire, --, quassus* – “to shake”

Jason arrives and encourages her to take Creon’s offer of exile:

**Ia.** Perimere cum te vellet infestus Creo,  
lacrimis meis evictus exilium dedit.

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**Me.** Poenam putabam: munus, ut uideo, est fuga.

*Perimere* – “to kill”; for these lines, try the following word order:  
Cum *Creo, infestus, vellet perimere te, evictus meis lacrimis dedit exilium*.

*evictus* – “won over”

*poenam putabat* – i.e. she thought the exile was a punishment.  
The rest of the line is completely ironic.

Jason says he has in no way sought to harm her, and that he bears no guilt. Medea calls him a liar, saying he is guilty of many crimes:

**Ia.** Obicere crimen quod potes tandem mihi?

**Me.** Quodcumque feci.

**Ia.** Restat hoc unum insuper,

tuis ut etiam sceleribus fiam nocens.

**Me.** Tua illa, tua sunt illa: cui prodest scelus,  
is fecit. Omnes coniugem infamem arguant,  
solus tuere, solus insontem uoca:

500

tibi innocens sit quisquis est pro te nocens.

**Ia.** Ingrata uita est cuius acceptae pudet.

**Me.** Retinenda non est cuius acceptae pudet.

*Obicere* – “to cast/hurl before”; try the following word order for this line: *Tandem, quod crimen potes obicere mihi?*

*Restat...insuper* – “there then remains this one thing in addition”

*etiam* – “also”; *fiam nocens* – “that I be found guilty”

*cui* – dative of reference, the person on whose behalf X is done.

*coniugem infamem* – this is the fact that *omnes arguant*

*tuere* – Imperative form of *tueor, -eri, tutus* – “to keep safe, protect”

*insons* (gen *insontis*) – “innocent”

*cuius acceptae pudet* – This pithy phrase is difficult to translate adequately. *pudet* – “it shames” is an impersonal verb which takes the genitive of the cause of shame (*cuius acceptae* – “that which has been accepted”). *cuius* refers back to *vita*.

Jason goes on to say he has no choice, and urges her to think of the children. Medea replies “*But let me have my little ones as comrades of my flight, that in their childish breasts their mother’s tears may flow. New sons await thy home.*” Jason refuses:

**Ia.** Parere precibus cupere me fateor tuis;  
pietas uetat: namque istud ut possim pati,  
non ipse memet cogat et rex et socer. 545  
Haec causa uitae est, hoc perusti pectoris  
curis levamen. Spiritu citius queam  
carere, membris, luce.

**Me.** Sic natos amat?  
bene est, tenetur, uulneri patuit locus...

*Parere...tuis – fateor* – “I confess” opens an accusative w. infinitive construction. Try the following word order: *fateor me cupere parere tuis precibus* (dat. of purpose “for the sake of...”).  
*ut...pati* – “so/such that I could endure” Take as a clause describing *istud* – “that”  
*memet* – Intensive form of *me*

*socer* – “father-in-law”  
*hoc...levamen* – “a solace for the cares of a worried heart”  
*citius queam carere* – “I would rather be deprived”, followed by abl. of separation in *Spiritu, membris, and luce*  
*tenetur* – “he is held/trapped”  
*patuit* – perfect tense of *pateo*; *vulneri* is dative of purpose.

Jason’s visit has only infuriated Medea more. After he leaves, she finds a regal robe and orders her nurse to prepare it as a wedding gift for Jason and Creusa. But first:

sed ante diris inlita ac tincta artibus. 576  
Vocetur Hecate. Sacra letifica appara:  
statuantur arae, flamma iam tectis sonet.

*inlita* – “smeared”  
*diris...artibus* – abl. of means after *inlita* and *tincta*.  
*Hecate* – The goddess of magic.  
*letifica* – “death-dealing”  
*sacrum, -i* – technically a “religious rite”, but given what Medea is planning, perhaps more like “spell, curse”

*ara, -ae* – “altar”; again a religious word, but Medea’s purpose is not religious.  
*tectis* – From *tectum*; plural for singular here. The dative is used to show the direction to where the *flamma sonet*; this use of the dative is strictly poetic.



The act concludes with another choral song, this time describing the fury of a woman scorned and of the sad end met by many of the Argonauts (Ajax, Peleus, Typhis, and Orpheus). One particular example is Hercules, who after completing numerous labors was accidentally poisoned by his jealous wife Deianira after giving him a cloak smeared with toxic centaur’s blood. The chorus prays that the gods find these punishment enough, and that Jason at least—leader of the Argonauts—will be spared.

John William Waterhouse, *Jason and Medea* (1907)

Act IV:

**Nutrix:** Pavet animus, horret: Magna perniciēs adest!

670

Immane quantum augescit et semet dolor  
accendit ipse uimque praeteritam integrat.

*perniciēs, -ei* – “disaster”  
*immanis, -e* – “vast, savage”  
*augeo, -ere* – “to increase, augment”  
*semet* = *se*; the *-met* is an intensifier

*vim* – acc. of *vis* – “power, strength”  
*praeteritus, -a, -um* – “past, earlier”  
*integro, -are* – “to renew, make whole”

So begins the fourth act, as the terrified nurse describes the dark magic spells of Medea; snake-blood, obscure poisons, pestilent herbs--*Quodcumque gramen flore mortifero uiret dirusve tortis sucus in radicibus causas nocendi gignit, atrectat manu* – “Whatever herb thrives with deadly flower, or dire juice begets harm in its twisted roots, she handles.” Medea then makes her incantation, calling on all the gods of the underworld to curse her deadly potion, punctuating the scene with a final act:

...sacro feriam bracchia cultro.  
manet noster sanguis ad aras:  
Assuesce, manus, stringere ferrum  
carosque pati posse cruores!  
Sacrum laticem percussa dedi.

810

*ferio, -ire* – “to strike”  
*culter, -tri* – “knife”  
*assuesco, -ere* – “to sweeten toward, accustom”  
*stringere ferrum* – “to draw iron/sword”

*sacrum laticem* – Ancient practice was to pour water on the altar for sacrifices, so “sacred water” here is metonymy for a sacrifice.  
*percussa* – past participle of *percutio, -ere* – “strike, pierce” and modifying the subject.

She speaks to the dark forces she has conjured

Tu nunc vestes tinge Creusae,  
quas cum primum sumpserit, imas  
urat serpens flamma medullas.

816

...  
fallant visus tactusque ferant,  
meet in pectus uenasque calor,  
stillent artus ossaque fument  
vincatque suas flagrante coma  
nova nupta faces.

835

*tingo, -ere* – “to imbue, tinge”  
*serpens* – from *serpo, -ere* – “crawl”, with an obvious connotation  
*medulla, -ae* – “marrow”  
*meet* – from *meo, -are* – “to go along”  
*stillent artus* – “let (her) arms drip away”

*vincat...faces* – Order: *Nova nupta vincat suas faces flagrante coma*. *Vincat* – here means “outstrip”.  
*coma, -ae* – “hair”; it is abl. here.  
*fax, facis* – “torch”; Roman wedding customs included the carrying of lit torches.

She gives the cursed gift to her sons for delivery to the wedding:

Ite, ite, nati, matris infaustae genus, 845  
 placate vobis munere et multa prece  
 dominam ac novercam. vadite et celeres domum  
 referte gressus, ultimo amplexu ut fruar.

*infaustus, -a, -um* – “unlucky”  
*placate vobis* – “placate for yourselves”, i.e. “win over”  
*multa prece* – singular for plural here; Medea is being ironic in referring to her own spell as a “prayer”.

*noverca, -ae* – “stepmother”  
*referte gressus* – “bear back steps”, i.e. “return”  
*amplexus, -us* – “hug, embrace”  
*fruar, -ari* – “enjoy”, takes an object in the abl.

The chorus closes this bleak scene with the chorus wondering how far Medea’s fury will go:

Her cheeks anon with anger flush,  
 And now a deadly pallor show;  
 Each feeling quick succeeds to each, 860  
 While all the passions of her heart  
 Her changing aspect testifies.  
 She wanders restless here and there,  
 As a tigress, of her young bereft,  
 In frantic grief the jungle scours. 865  
 Medea knows not how in check  
 To hold her wrath nor yet her love;  
 If love and wrath make common cause,  
 What dire results will come?  
 When will this scourge of Corinth leave 870  
 Our Grecian shores  
 for Colchis' strand,  
 And free our kingdom from its fear?  
 Now, Phoebus, hasten on thy course  
 With no retarding rein. 875  
 Let friendly darkness quickly veil the light,  
 And this dread day be buried deep in night.

A messenger arrives at the start of Act V reporting to the chorus of a catastrophe at the palace:

**Nuntivs** Periere cuncta, concidit regni status;  
nata atque genitor cinere permixto iacent. 880

**Cho.** Qua fraude capti?

**Nun.** Qua solent reges capi:

donis.

*Periere = Perierunt*, poetic 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural form.  
*cinus, -eris* – “ash”

*soleo, -ere* – “to be accustomed”  
*capi* - passive infinitive form from *capio* – “take”

The messenger tells how the fire is magical: *alit unda flammam* – “Water feeds the flames”.  
Medea hears all this and is pleased, but feels her resolve weakening:

Quid, anime, cessas? Sequere felicem impetum. 895  
pars ultionis ista, qua gaudes, quota est?  
Amas adhuc, furiose, si satis est tibi  
caelebs Iason.

...

Medea nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis. 910

*Quid* – better translated here as “why”  
*Sequere = Sequeris*  
*impetus, -us* – “start, beginning”  
*ultio, -onis* – “revenge”  
*quota est?* – This is a rhetorical question

*adhuc* – “still”  
*furiose* – Vocative; Medea is speaking to herself  
*caelebs, -bis* – “widower”  
*malis* – “evil deeds”; abl. of means

*Medea furiose* flies into full-blown madness, as she imagines all the people she has killed in the thrall of Jason, and swings wildly between her plan to harm Jason and the love of her children:

Cor pepulit horror, membra torpescunt gelu  
pectusque tremuit. Ira discessit loco  
materque tota coniuge expulsa redit.  
Egone ut meorum liberum ac prolis meae  
fundam cruorem? Melius, a, demens furor! 930  
incognitum istud facinus ac dirum nefas  
a me quoque absit; quod scelus miseri luent?  
Scelus est Iason genitor et maius scelus  
Medea mater. Occidant, non sunt mei,  
pereant; mei sunt, crimine et culpa carent, 935  
sunt innocents. Fateor: et frater fuit.  
Quid, anime, titubas? Ora quid lacrimae rigant  
variamque nunc huc ira, nunc illuc amor  
diducit?

(Notes on following page)

*torpesco, -ere* – “to grow sluggish”  
*gelu, -us* – “chill”  
*dicesso, -ere* – “to give up”  
*conjuge expulsa* – Abl. absolute; Medea is speaking metaphorically of her conjugal feelings toward her husband—whom she wants revenge against. These have been *expulse* by her other role as *mater tota*.  
*egone* – The *-ne* is added when asking a question  
*liberi, -orum* – “children”, a common synonym that indicated a father had “freely” accepted them.  
*proles, -is* – “offspring”  
*facinus, -oris* – “outrage”  
*nefas (indecl.)* – “sacrilege”

*scelus, -eris (n.)* – “crime”  
*miseri* – referring to the children, “poor souls”  
*luo, -ere* – “to atone for, pay for”  
*Occidant...innocentes* – Medea swings wildly here in her feelings toward the children  
*frater* – Medea killed her innocent brother to aid in Jason’s escape with the Golden Fleece.  
*titubo, -are* – “to stagger, totter, falter”  
*Ora* – literally “mouths”, but poetic for one’s “face”  
*rigo, -are* – “to wet, moisten”  
*variā* – assume a word like *sententiam* – “thought”; this is the direct object of *diducit*  
*huc...illuc* – “to here...to there”

She is conflicted by the forces around her, driving her madness—“*urguet exilium ac fuga*”... “*rursus increscit dolor et fervet odium*”... “*fratri patrique quod sat est*” To these final visions of her dead brother she offers one son as a sacrifice, then is startled by the clamor outside:

... Quid repens affert sonus?  
 Parantur arma, meque in exitium petunt.  
 Excelsa nostrae tecta conscendam domus  
 caede incohata....

971

*repens, -ntis* – “sudden”  
*exitium, -i* – here not “exile”, but “death”

*conscendo, -ere* – “to ascend”  
*inchoo, -are* – “to begin”; here an abl. abs. with *caede*

Jason spots her on the roof of the house:

**Ia.** En ipsa tecti parte praecipiti imminet!  
 Huc rapiat ignes aliquis, ut flammis cadat  
 suis perusta. **Me.** Congere extremum tuis  
 natis, Iason, funus ac tumulum strue:  
 Conjuncti socerque justa jam functis habent  
 a me sepulti; gnatus hic fatum tulit,  
 hic te vidente dabitur exitio pari.

995

*En* – “Lo!”  
*praecipiti, -itis* – “steep”  
*Huc* – “Here!”  
*perustus, -a, -um* – “burned up”  
*congero, -ere* – “heap up, collect”  
*tumulus, -i* – “tomb”  
*struo, -ere* – “build”  
*socer, -eri* – “father-in-law”

*justa functis habent* – “have the rights due the dead”; Roman custom required certain actions be performed for the sake of the deceased, but Medea is using the term simply to indicate that Creusa and Creon are dead.  
*gnatus = natus*  
*fatum tulit* – “met (his) fate”  
*exitio pari* – “(to) an equal end”; dative after the passive *dabitur*

Jason pleads with her to spare the boy—“*Infesta, memet perime.*” —but Medea answers “*Misereri jubes? Bene est, peractum est!*” slaying the boy immediately. A dragon-pulled chariot appears and grants her escape: “*Recipe iam gnatos, parens!*” she cries as she hurls the bodies down to Jason and flies off. The last lines in the play belong to Jason:

Per alta vade spatia sublime aetheris,  
 Testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos!

1026

*vade* – “wander”; *aether, -eris* – “the ether,” the rarefied air of the gods; *testor* – “testify,” followed by acc. w. inf.; *qua veheris* – “wherever you go”

Metrical Notes:

The meter in Seneca’s plays mimics the forms of dramatic poetry laid down by the Athenian playwrights of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The main dialogue is in the *iambic trimeter*; scansion of the “pure” trimeter is as follows:

$$\mathbf{x} \text{ } ^- \text{ } \sim \text{ } ^- \text{ } | \mathbf{x} \text{ } ^- \text{ } \sim \text{ } ^- \text{ } | \mathbf{x} \text{ } ^- \text{ } \sim \text{ } ^-$$

The line is divided into three *dipodes*, each of which consists of two iambic feet. However a variety of substitutions were allowed:

- Any long syllable except the last can be resolved into two short syllables (tribach).
- A long syllable can be substituted for the opening syllable of each dipod, essentially making the odd iambic feet into spondees.
- The potentially-spondaic foot can occasionally be resolved into a dactyl (  $\text{ } ^- \text{ } \sim \text{ } \sim$  ), anapest (  $\sim \text{ } \sim \text{ } ^-$  ), or (even more rarely) a proceleusmatic (  $\sim \text{ } \sim \text{ } \sim$  ).

Two simple examples:

*amōr timē | re nēminēm | vērūs potēst (416)*

*Parāntur ār | ma, mēque in ēx | itiūm petūnt (972)* – Anapest in 5<sup>th</sup> foot.

And two that are more complicated:

*Parēre preci | būs cupere mē | fateōr tuīs (544)* – Tribach in 2<sup>nd</sup>, dactyl; in 3<sup>rd</sup>, anapest in 5<sup>th</sup> foot.

*Pavet animus, hōr | rēt: Māgna pēr | niciēs adēst! (670)* – Proceleusmatic in 1<sup>st</sup>, anapest in 5<sup>th</sup> foot.

At certain places in the play the meter will change to a *choriambic* form (usually when the chorus comments on the action). There are many varieties of choriambic meter, but all are based on repeating or adding to a  $\text{ } ^- \text{ } \sim \text{ } \sim \text{ } ^-$  scansion pattern, e.g.:

*Tēthysquē nōvōs dētēgāt ōrbēs (378)*

These choral songs often commented on the previous action or provided a point of reflection. They were understood by the Elizabethans to signal the end of an “act”, and so the songs divided the play into five separate acts. Section 375-9 above is one part of a choral interlude. Sometimes a main character will deliver the song or use the meter to express a change of character. Section 807-839 above is a good example, where a lyric meter is used to lend an other-worldliness to Medea’s incantation (much like the witches’ trochaic meter in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*).