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 damned 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:

\[ \text{nullum scelus} \]

irata feci: Saevit infelix amor.

Quid tamen Iason potuit, alieni arbitri
iurisque factus? debuit ferro obvium
offerre pectus. Melius, a melius, dolor
furose, loquere. Si potest, vivat meus,
ut fuit, Iason; si minus, vivat tamen
memorique nostri muneri parcat meo.

Culpa est Creontis tota, qui sceptro impotens
coniugia solvit quique genetricem abstrahit.

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

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

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**Notes:**

- *irata* – Adj. describes Medea, subject of *feci*
- *saevio, -ire, -ivi, -itus* – to rage, rave
- *alieni…factus* – Take *factus* with an impled *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.
- *coniugia* - “husband and wife”
- *abstrahe, -ere, -asi, -actus* – “to drag off”

- *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 *vindicat* is feminine, perhaps a reference to the female Medea. How do you interpret this poetical phrase?

- *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. *luteo* – “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 fortis metuit, ignavos premit. 
**Nvt.** Tunc est probanda, si locum virtus habet.  
**Me.** Numquam potest non esse virtutis locus. 
**Nvt.** Spes nulla rebus monstrat adflictis viam. 
**Me.** Qui nil potest sperare, desperet nihil. 
**Nvt.** Abiere Colchi, coniugis nulla est fides 
nihique superest opibus et tantis tibi.  
**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.  

**Nvt.** Medea 
**Me.** Fiam. 

**Nvt.** Mater es. 
**Me.** Cui sim vide. 

**Nvt.** Profugere dubitas? 

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

**Nvt.** Vindex sequitur. 

**Me.** Forsan inveniam moras.

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*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 afflicitis* – “vexing affairs”; abl. of separation
*abiere* – “be gone!”
*Colchi* – locative, the city where Medea was from.
*ops, opis* – “wealth” (pl.) “treasures, riches”
*sint licer* – “let them (the arms) be *ejecta* from the *terra*”
*moriere = morieris*, 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. 175

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

tempori aptari 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.

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, 375
quibus Oceanus vincula rerum
laxet et ingens pateat tellus
Tethysque novos detegat orbes
nec sit terris ultima Thule.

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 immittis fugae
genero licebat. Liberis unus dies
datus est duobus. Non queror tempus breve:
multum patebit. Faciet hic, faciet dies,
quo nullus umquam taceat--invadam deos
et cuncta quatiam.

(notes on next page)
Jason arrives and encourages her to take Creon’s offer of exile:

Ia. Perimere cum te vellet infestus Creo, lacrimis meis evictus exilium dedit.  
Me. Poenam putabam: munus, ut uideo, est fuga.

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: 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 whos behalf X is done.  
coniugem infamen – this is the fact that omnes arguant  

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 – “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”.  
invado, -ere, -asi, -asus – “to invade, take possession of”  
quatio, -ire, --, quassus – “to shake”
Lucius Annaeus Seneca – Medea

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 fatoe tuis;
pietas uetat: namque istud ut possim pati,
non ipse memet cogat et rex et socer.
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 – fatoe – “I confess” opens an accusative w.
infinitive construction. Try the following word order: fatoe 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, memberis, 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.
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, -ae – 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 pernicies adest! Immune quantum augescit et semet dolor accendit ipse uimque praeteritam integrat.

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, attrectat 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.

She speaks to the dark forces she has conjured

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

fallant visus tactusque ferant, meet in pectus uenasque calor, stillent artus ossaque fument vincatque suas flagrante coma nova nupta faces.
She gives the cursed gift to her sons for delivery to the wedding:

Ite, ite, nati, matris infaustae genus, 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”
fruor, -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, 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. 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 Our Grecian shores
for Colchis’ strand,
And free our kingdom from its fear?
Now, Phoebus, hasten on thy course
With no retarding rein.
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.

The messenger tells how the fire is magical: *alit unda flammas* – “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

**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? Sceius est Jason genitor et maius scelus Medea mater. Occidant, non sunt mei, pereant; mei sunt, crimin et culpa carent, sunt innocents. Fateor: et frater fuit.  
Quid, anime, titubas? Ora quid lacrimae rigant variamque nunc huc ira, nunc illuc amor diducit? 935

(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”
sceus, -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”
variam – assume a word like sententiam – “thought”; this is the direct object of diducit
huc...ille – “to here...to there”

She is conflicted by the forces around her, driving her madness—“urguet exilium ac fuga”...“rursus increscit dolor et fer vet 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.….  

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

JASON

Huc rapiat ignes aliquis, ut flammis cadat suis perusta. 

Me. Congere extremum tuis natis, Iason, funus ac tumulum strue: 
Conjunx socerque justa functis habent
a me seulti; gnatus hic fatum tulit, 
hic te vidente dabitur exitio pari. 

En – “Lo!”
preecep, -itis – “steep”
Huc – “Here!”
perustas, -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”
exito 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! 

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 5th century BCE. The main dialogue is in the *iambic trimeter*; scansion of the “pure” trimeter is as follows:

```
x ˘ ˘ | x ˘ ˘ | x ˘ ˘
```

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 (˘ ˘ ˘), anapest (˘ ˘), or (even more rarely) a proceleusmatic (˘ ˘ ˘ ˘).

Two simple examples:

```
амор тиме | ре нейминем | верус потест (416)
Parantur ар | ма, межу в ех | итим петунт (972) – Anapest in 5th foot.
```

And two that are more complicated:

```
Parere preci | бус капере мэ | fateor puis (544) – Tribach in 2nd, dactyl; in 3rd, anapest in 5th foot.
Pavet animus, хор | рет: Магна пер | niciес ades! (670) – Proceleusmatic in 1st, anapest in 5th 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 ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ scansion pattern, e.g.:

```
Тетыхскё новос детгат obrёs (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*).