

Reading Latin Literature – Beyond A-level
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Seneca the Younger, better known as the tutor of the emperor Nero, is an enigmatic literary figure. As well as writing our most comprehensive body of Roman philosophical work exploring Stoicism, he also wrote our best collection of complete Roman tragic plays. Otherwise, we only have fragments of Roman tragedy that survive – a rather peculiar state of affairs given how important the theatre was for Roman culture, as part of a wider obsession with spectacle that plays out in other events like the military triumph, public funerary rituals, games, races and so on.

Roman tragedy interacts with its Greek predecessors, as well as finding its own path. The case study I use here, Seneca's *Medea*, interacts with Euripides' *Medea* but makes very different choices about how to tell the same story. One of those decisions is to put an act of magic on stage. The Romans viewed magic as part of everyday life – they had a particular interest in love magic, but also believed (for instance) in the possibility of putting people under curses. Examples include the death of Germanicus, full of threats and mysterious horrors found in his home, or the story that Tacitus tells of a man who threw his wife out of a window and claimed he did so because he was under the control of witchcraft. The Romans drew a distinction between malevolent and beneficial or harmless spells – but *Medea* is definitely malicious.

In Seneca's *Medea*, the witch Medea is coming to terms with her abandonment by the hero Jason; she had helped him to win the golden fleece from the protection of her father in her homeland of Colchis before fleeing with him to Greece, killing her own brother as they fled. She has also by this stage conned the daughters of King Pelias into killing him with false promises of rejuvenating him; Pelias was the man who had usurped Jason's throne and sent him questing for the Golden Fleece in the first place, so this certainly counted as revenge on Jason's behalf. Now Jason and Medea have fled to Corinth, Jason intends to marry the daughter of King Creon and abandon Medea; Creon has also exiled her from the city, giving her one day to prepare herself.

The passage I include here comes at the middle of a very long speech when Medea has come on stage to pray to Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, and make the poison that she will use to kill Creon's daughter, the princess Creusa. In Euripides, Medea simply produces a poisoned gown and crown, with the implication being that she has prepared them for their murderous duty off-stage. Seneca instead decides to stage Medea's dramatic ritual, probably drawing on the Roman theatrical tradition of pantomime, where a single performer used stylized movements and gestures to express its meaning alongside a musical accompaniment.

Take a minute to read through the passage on the next page, and see what jumps out at you. What words or images are powerful? Are there any themes that strike you? How does the passage develop Medea's character and portray the magic she is about to put into action?

With just that pallid face, pour grim light out through the air,
frighten the people with a new source of terror,
and let the precious cymbals of bronze ring out,
to help you, Diana.

For you, Diana, we offer the holy rite
on the bloody turf,
for you the torch is seized from the midst of a pyre,
to burn for you with fires in the night-time,
for you I toss my head and twist my neck
and chant my spells,
for you I have tied up my flowing hair
in a headband like corpses wear,
for you I shake the gloomy branch from the waters of Styx.
For you, bare-breasted, like a Maenad,
I slash my arms with a holy knife.
My own blood drips on the altar:
hands, get used to unsheathing the blade,
and submit to shed your own dear blood.
I have struck myself! The sacred fluid flows.
But if you do not like the frequent summons
of my prayers, please forgive me.

Hecate, I call so many times
for your arrows
for just one reason, always the same. Jason.
Now anoint Creusa's clothes,
and as soon as she puts them on, let a snaky flame
burn up the very marrow of her bones.
Let the fire lie in yellow gold,
in darkness. He who robbed heaven for fire,
and paid with ever-growing liver for his theft,
gave me this flame, and taught me how to hide
power by art: Prometheus. Mulciber gave
flames hidden in delicate sulphur,
and I got from my cousin Phaethon
the thunder of living flame.

I have the flames stolen from the scorched throats
Of the bulls,
Which mixed with the gall of Medusa,
I have ordered to create a secret venom.

Hecate, whip up my poisons,
and keep secret the seeds of flame in my gifts:
may they deceive the eyes, submit to touch,
but may the heat swim to the heart and veins,
make melt the limbs and smoke the bones
and may that newly wedded bride outdo her marriage torch
with her own smoking hair.

While you may have come up with several ideas of your own, I want to point out three big patterns or ideas which emerge here:

❖ **Fire and flame**

Fire imagery is impossible to escape in this passage - the torch seized from a pyre, fires burning in the night-time, fire burning up Creusa's bone marrow, the various types of fire Medea steals.

The imagery works as an ironic parallel with a trope in Roman love poetry, where flame is often used to describe the emotions of the lover, burning with a flame.

Medea is thus taking the metaphorical flame of love literally, and making Creusa burn not with deep emotion for her new husband, but with actual fire.

❖ **Foreshadowing**

When Medea cuts her own arms, she already gives her audience a shock – however, she compounds it by instructing her hands to get used to shedding her own blood.

For those of us who know the Medea myth, this is an obvious cue not that Medea will continue to further hurt herself, but that her intention to kill her children as the final way to hurt their father Jason is already forming itself at this stage in the play.

It also invites us to reflect on the harm Medea may or may not be doing to herself by committing infanticide later in the play – something that Seneca leaves open for the reader to interpret themselves.

❖ **Beyond the bounds**

This passage makes every effort to associate Medea with things that are somehow hidden, mystical and divine. She is comfortable with the rituals she describes, and her direct address of the goddess makes our attendance weirdly and uncomfortably intimate. She also emphasises her links to great figures of mythology like Prometheus, Mulciber (Vulcan), Phaethon and Medusa. Her access to the ingredients for her poison and her knowledge of the rituals she needs to perform mark her as a figure with dark and dangerous knowledge.

What makes this particular moment in the play hideous is the way that Seneca compounds all the wrong things into one – he gives us wrong-sacrifice, wrong-gods, wrong-desires, and the inversion of a familiar romantic trope to instead bring us doom and destruction.

Further Reading

- ❖ Emily Wilson's translation of Seneca's *Medea* is a great place to start.
- ❖ Erica Bexley has a piece in Omnibus – "[Revenge served hot: Seneca's Thyestes](#)"
- ❖ Charlotte Higgins gives an introduction to Roman love poetry – "[Love lessons](#)"
- ❖ Another perspective on witches and magic in literature – Pauline Ripat, "[Roman women, wise women, and witches](#)"