

TENEBRAE AND THE WANDERING SPOUSE

Irony in Seneca, *Medea* 114–115

At its very outset, Seneca's *Medea* leaps off to a bad start. For the initial *prologos* or soliloquy (1–55) is presented by a *Medea* already appealing to the shades and powers of the underworld:

... *noctis aeternae chaos,*
aversa superis regna manesque impios
*dominumque regni tristis. . .*¹⁾

It is an ill-omened series of prayers, imprecations, and curses upon the new bride *Creusa* and her bridegroom *Jason*. Even her plans for *effera ignota horrida* (45) she dismisses as being too tepid, as having been already performed in her childhood; now she requires more grown-up and more dastardly crimes.

Juxtaposed immediately with such an ominous onset is the initial Choral Ode (56–115), ironically in a great many ways its opposite. For it is a cheerful *epithalamium* or song of wedding celebration, light and lively, uttered in genial tones, yet ironically the two utterances may be taken as being “parallel passages”²⁾ because both invoke (with the exception of the underworld deities) the same gods, and both are a species of prayer; both speak of the forthcoming marriage, and both are filled with images of torches and of light. In contrast, to be sure, the Chorus sounds more jejune than did the *gravior Medea*. Such an ill-matched pair of songs appropriately set the stage for tension, irony, and shock that will be the drama's dominant and repeated strategies.

Most childish and innocent, perhaps, – and anticlimactic – in the naive Choral Ode are its last two lines: almost an afterthought, an aside, and a digression, addressed to *Medea*:

tacitis eat illa tenebris,
si qua peregrino nubit fugitiva marito. (114–115)

1) *Med.* 9–11, in L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae, ed. Ioannes Carolus Giardina, Studi Pubblicati dall'Istituto Filologia Classica, 20 (Bologna 1966), I, 181. The Giardina edition is used throughout.

2) Vid. R. M. Krill, Allusions in Seneca's *Medea* 56–74, *CJ* 68 (1972–1973) 202.

‘let her enter silent gloom
who steals away to wed with a foreign husband.’

Carol Blitzen asserts that these lines simply reveal the Chorus’s “sympathies for Jason”³). Since this Chorus consists of a brace of loyal Corinthian women dutifully hymning the wedding of their princess with Jason, they can hardly be expected to adopt any other attitude, Jason basking currently in favor with the crown. But it is almost humorous how childish they are about Jason’s “questionable” background and his “unsavory” past attachments. They seem to tack onto the love-poem, as an afterthought, the reference to the barbarian Medea. They talk of love and celebration of the nuptials, of licence and joy. But they suddenly and sulkily append: “And let that other disappear, or go on home.” Presumably Medea, defeated and rebuked, is to take up her toys and retire. Doesn’t she know when she’s no longer wanted? Present as well in these lines, is the undercurrent and darker implication of “Let her go to hell,” but it is nonetheless naively pronounced as if by a clique of young girls against a newcomer, an interloper, and an outsider.

Yet a ruthless point is here implied: Medea is *not* a child, and this is assuredly *not* a birthday party of some thirteen-year-old whereat infantile love attachments have undergone some youthful and kittenish revision and realignment. After having heard Medea’s opening storm, we are surely prodded to feel that the Chorus is hopelessly ingenuous; more accurately, Medea is akin to lions and wizards, to fiends and furies; it is almost criminally laughable to think of her in any trifling or infantine light. And, indeed, the entire Corinthian society will pay dearly for this simple misapprehension.

Gordon Braden is doubtless right in considering the lengthy marriage-hymn as a ceremonial means of expressing (and reassuring) “a concept of order, of human reciprocity with the divine, by which the community acquires definition and legitimacy.” But Braden then cites line 114, *tacita eat illa tenebris*, (“let her go quietly into the dark”), claiming that by these words the Chorus means “I don’t want to see her⁴.” In other words, Braden believes (and to some extent it is certainly true) that the Chorus is like the ostrich that mindlessly buries its head in the sand, hoping that the

3) The Senecan and Euripidean Medea: A Comparison, CB 52 (1976) 87.

4) G. Braden, The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca, Arion 9 (1970) 5–41, esp. 33.

world (and any and all problems) will go away. Later, Braden generalizes upon this theme of the Argonautic Discoveries of Angry Sea and Colchian Witch in just such a way: “On one level, the *Medea* is about a society that does something new and then tries to avoid even knowing the consequences”⁵).

If Braden means by “society” all of Greek culture, then there is a modicum of truth in the assertion that the Voyage of the Argonauts is somehow a voyage of Initiation and Discovery. But it is not some new discovery made by the Corinthians in particular, and, indeed, the usurping tyrant Pelias had mandated such a quest, and he had perhaps not need be considered as a Columbus of any kind whatsoever. Furthermore, the entire voyage undermines the usual superheroes (as they are humorously and mildly undercut in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius), exposing man’s petty search for Gold and for Short Cuts to Difficult Problems. If the Voyage indeed has unleashed a curse (Neptune’s) upon the sailors (most have already perished at the time of this drama’s action) and the long Ordeal and Reconnaissance could only produce a maniacal barbarian witch for its pains, then doubtless the society is quite justified in attempting “to avoid even knowing the consequences” of its discoveries. Medea, in this case, is akin to a hydrogen bomb; who would ever fully want to “know” the consequences of her detonation in downtown Corinth? One legitimately wonders if we might designate that Argonautic discovery as new knowledge when it provides little else but the potential destruction of the entire planet. No one will be left to be cognizant of anything at all. (That, as a matter of fact, is the promise of the fire Medea has ignited which, as the Nuntius explains [888–90], is aggravated by water and therefore unquenchable.)

One further point should be emphasized with reference to lines 114–115. The Chorus is pathetic, childish, and naive in wishing Medea would evaporate and go away – preferably to the underworld (*tenebris*). Yet unknowingly, the Chorus generates in these lines some very caustic irony indeed. For, by play’s end, their wish has come true: Medea does indeed steal away among the serpentine creatures of the nether world – but silent gloom is what she leaves behind! However, the irony is still more severe than that. The Chorus had in essence enunciated its prayer thus:

5) Braden (above, n. 4), p. 35.

*tacitis eat illa tenebris,
si qua peregrino nubit fugitiva marito.* (114–115)

‘If any fugitive weds a foreign husband,
let her go into gloomy silence.’

What the Chorus did not recognize was that these lines apply not merely to Medea, but to Creusa as well! For it is Creon and Creusa who sneakily hasten to this wedding, who seek to mandate it, as it were, behind Medea’s back. And thus it is Creusa herself who weds the “foreign” or “meandering” husband. Therefore, the Chorus has unwittingly condemned its own princess to the shades of the underworld – where very patently, before play’s end, she has been irrevocably transported.

Moreover, there is additional irony in lines 114–115. Jason himself is in fact “foreign” as a husband to either woman, and moreso than merely in the sense that he hails from Iolcus in Thes-saly. For we must note that the word *peregrinus* employed to describe him also suggests wandering, roaming, and even phi-landering. Jason, having just dropped his first wife, is very much indeed the husband in transit, in migration.

Here are but further instances of Seneca’s penchant for black humor and corrosive irony⁶), a practice of his that helped endear him to the dark wits of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater. Nor is such irony merely decorative or “morbid” in some simplistic sense⁷). Its bitter realities serve to render the chauvinistic Chorus more ignorant and pathetic, and heighten the pity and particularly the fearfulness of our response to the unfolding action. For in the midst of a busy workaday imperial world of exiles, commands, arranged marriages, and political machinations, suddenly the rulers, the citizenry, and even the audience (this latter Baudelaire sarcastically terms “Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!”⁸)) are implicated. The worst species of Provincialism is that sort which would condemn in outsiders what it would condone in

6) Consult our earlier study of such irony: *Senecan Tragedy: Patterns of Irony and Art*, CB 48 (1972) 69–77. See also our discussion of irony in Seneca’s prose: *Senecan Irony*, CB 45 (1968) 6–11.

7) For instance, W. C. Summers, like many a critic, too lightly and hastily dismisses Senecan drama as “contemptible” and “full of morbid craving for the horrible and disgusting” (*The Silver Age of Latin Literature from Tiberius to Trajan* [London 1920], p. 58).

8) *Au Lecteur*, line 40, in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, ed. E. Raynaud (Paris 1952), p. 6.

its own. For a moment, the Corinthian Chorus is caught in just such a posture, and the irony sparked at that instant might be discomfoting, but it is very telling indeed.

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SECUNDUS IM DIALOGUS DE ORATORIBUS DES TACITUS

I

Der Gang der Forschung zum *Dialogus de oratoribus* des Tacitus hat es mit sich gebracht, daß die Untersuchung zweier an sich getrennter Probleme miteinander verknüpft worden ist¹⁾. Einerseits findet sich im überlieferten Text des *Dialogus* nach Kapitel 35 eine Lücke; die Angaben über den Umfang dieser Lücke in den erhaltenen Handschriften und in den Beschreibungen des Hersfeldensis schienen bislang so sehr zu divergieren, daß entweder der Verlust von einem Zwölftel („kleine Lücke“) oder von fast einem Drittel („große Lücke“) des Gesamtwerkes konstatiert werden mußte. Andererseits fehlt in dem erhaltenen Teil des *Dialogus* eine Rede des Secundus, des vierten Teilnehmers des Gesprächs. Man verband nun die Frage nach dem Umfang der Lücke und nach einer Rede des Secundus in der Weise, daß man eine Secundusrede nur bei Nachweis einer großen Lücke für möglich hielt, eine solche aber bei Nachweis einer kleinen Lücke für ausgeschlossen erklärte. Dabei kam es zu einer merkwürdigen Verquickung der

1) Über den Gang der Forschung informieren die Literaturberichte, zuletzt: R. Hanslik, AAHG 13, 1960, 65–102. 20, 1967, 1–37. 27, 1974, 129–166. Lustrum 16, 1971/72, 143–304. 17, 1973/74, 71–266. – H. W. Benario, CW 71, 1977, 1–32. – E. Mastellone Jovane, BStudLat 8, 1978, 95–119. – E. Cizek, Latomus 40, 1981, 21–36. – F. Römer, AAHG 37, 1984, 153–208. 38, 1985, 129–204.