

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 70 (2013)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Clytemestra's deception and glory : (Seneca, Agamemnon 108-124)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-358006>

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Clytemestra's deception and glory (Seneca, *Agamemnon* 108–124)

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Abstract: In the following pages I will try to isolate an etymological moment in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, showing how Clytemestra's name in Ag. 108–124 strikingly recalls the same etymology as for Medea. This contributes to bringing the two heroines' ethos closer and to unveiling a complex etymological verbal pun in the queen's name.

CLYTEMESTRA

*Quid, segnis anime, tuta consilia expetis?
quid fluctuaris? clausa iam melior via est.
licuit pudicos coniugis quondam toros* 110
*et sceptrum casta vidua tutari fide;
periere mores ius **decus** pietas fides
et, qui redire cum perit nescit, pudor;
da frena et omnem prona nequitiam incita:
per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter.* 115

*Tecum ipsa nunc evolve femineos **dolos**,
quod ulla coniunx perfida atque impos sui
amore caeco, quod novercales manus
ausae, quod ardens impia **virgo** face
Phasiaca fugiens regna Thessalica trabe:* 120
*ferrum, venena – vel Mycenaeas domos
coniuncta socio profuge furtiva rate.
quid timida loqueris furta et exilium et fugas?
soror ista fecit: **te decet maius nefas**.¹*

The scene of Clytemestra's first appearance in Seneca's *Agamemnon* evokes – at least at the outset – the statutory uncertainty of other mythic heroines who share the commonality of being abandoned or betrayed by a male character: the queen's hesitation expressed by *fluctuaris* at line 109 (and iterated at 138 *fluctibus variis agor*) seems to reflect an emotionality analogous to that of Ariadne in Cat. 64.62 *prospicit et magnis curarum fluctuat undis* and of Dido in Verg. *Aen.* 4.532 *saeuit amor magnoque irarum fluctuat aestu*.

However, amongst the heroines selected as paradigmatic models for her imminent revenge, Medea could obviously not be omitted (*virgo*, 119). The as-

* My thanks go to L. Galli Milić and D. Nelis for offering valuable advice on a previous draft as well as to the editors of *Museum Helveticum*.

1 I print the text established by R.J. Tarrant, *Seneca. Agamemnon* (Cambridge 1977).

sociation of Clytemestra-Medea is fairly predictable in that the perpetration of similar acts of impiety and the characters' savagery bring closer their ethos, especially if one thinks in terms of a 'taxonomy' of familial crimes; moreover, Medea is indeed a very tempting model for heroines², which is also underscored by her epilogic position in Clytemestra's short 'catalogue'. As for the identification of the other characters, the *noverca* might be Phaedra, the *coniunx perfida* is maybe Stheneboea, on which cf. Hor. *Od.* 3.7.13 *mulier perfida* and Tarrant ad loc., although this identification is not strictly necessary, mainly because of *ulla*, which conjures up any and all possible models and gives a general intonation to the *iunctura*.

Nonetheless, it is my belief that in the Senecan passage one can discover more allusions to Medea than those that have already been acknowledged and that drawing further attention to the relation between Medea and Clytemestra may help focus on some broader literary implications.

If one considers for a moment the onomastic valence of 'Clytemestra', it is well known that the queen's name traditionally conveys the idea of 'glory' or 'fame' ('famous for her suitors' is one of the possible interpretations)³, but late-antique grammarians already showed another interest in the name's etymology⁴. In Κλυταιμήστρα they perceived a connection with μήδομαι and the queen's name would therefore mean 'famous for her deception' or 'famous schemer' (παρὰ τὸ κλυτὸν καὶ τὸ μήδω). Such an etymology⁵ appears to be endorsed by Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: at 1100–1102 Cassandra prophetically hints at plots that are about to happen, although the schemer's name is not revealed and, as Fraenkel points out⁶, 'remains concealed until it emerges in the antistrophe (1107f.)':

ΚΑΣ.

ὦ πόποι, τί ποτε **μήδεται**;
τί τόδε νέον ἄχος μέγα
μέγ' ἐν δόμοισι τοῖσδε **μήδεται** κακὸν
ἄφερτον φίλοισιν, δυσίατον; ἄλκὰ δ'
ἐκὰς ἀποστατεῖ.

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- 2 On Medea as a tempting model cf. L. Fulkerson, *The Ovidian Heroine as Author. Reading, Writing, and Community in the Heroides* (Cambridge 2005) 30 and C. Battistella, *Inseguendo Didone* (*Ov. Her.* 7.115–116), «*Philologus*» 151.1, (2007) 184–189.
- 3 Cf. P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris 1968) 541 and 693 and A.H. Sommerstein, *Oresteia* (Cambridge/London 2008) x, n. 4 and 131, n. 237. In general, on puns and etymological wordplays cf. F. Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Cornell 1985); J.J. O'Hara, *True Names. Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Michigan 1996).
- 4 *EM* 521.18; E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus. Agamemnon* II (Oxford 1976) 52; but cf. also Fraenkel's reservations in *Aeschylus. Agamemnon* III (Oxford 1976) 499.
- 5 Cf. J.A. Stevens, *Etymology and Plot in Senecan Tragedy*, «*Syllecta Classica*» 13 (2002) 130.
- 6 Cf. Fraenkel (n. 4) 499.

This deceitful side of Clytemestra reaches back to a Homeric passage, in which μήδομαι actually refers to Aegisthus (*Od.* 3.26):

... μάλα γὰρ μέγα μήσατο ἔργον.

Therefore in the tragic text it is transferred to his accomplice in murder⁷, although Clytemestra herself is described as δολόμητις in *Od.* 11.422 (cf. also Eur. *El.* 9 θνήσκει γυναικὸς πρὸς Κλυταιμνήστρας δόλω, both already quoted by Stevens⁸, and *Od.* 11.429); if in the background of the *Odyssey* the motif of μήτις can even assume a positive connotation in relation to the good cunning of the pair Odysseus-Penelope aimed at preserving their marriage, Clytemestra's character can hardly escape the role of an evil schemer. Hence, in my view, the etymology revolving around the concept of μήδομαι all the more can reanimate a privileged contact with Medea: the derivation of her anthroponym from μήδεα is in fact largely attested in Euripides' (*Med.* 401–402), Apollonius' (3.826 μήδεα κούρης⁹), and Ovid's works (*Her.* 12.212 *nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit*¹⁰). These two female characters have in common a most deceitful ethos in the way they plan their revenge upon their husbands, as in both cases seemingly harmless actions will unveil murderous intentions; their motherly role is also key to their stories, in which, if one recalls them, motherhood and vengeance are, *mutatis mutandis*, conspicuously intertwined (cf. *infra*). Thus, whilst Medea sends irresistible (a pep-lon and a golden crown) but poisoned gifts to Jason's new wife (cf. for example Eur. *Med.* 783), Clytemestra entangles her husband in – again – an apparently innocuous object (Aesch. *Ag.* 1379f.; Sen. *Ag.* 887f.), a mantle which will enshroud his hands and head. In their being, so to speak, deceit-focused, the two heroines strongly display a μήτις with the double function of a *consilium salutis* (or rather 'salutis') and cunning malevolence.

As Apollonius Rhodius' readers may certainly recall, the young Medea, still in her *virgo*-role, is deeply involved in the plot of seduction and ruse in which the gods' intervention sets Jason's voyage to Colchis. Not only does her character, whose story diachronically precedes Euripides' *Medea*, but whose text comes

7 'As elsewhere Aeschylus, while adopting a Homeric expression, slightly modifies it': Fraenkel (n. 4) 499.

8 Cf. Stevens (n. 5) 140–141.

9 Cf. R. Hunter, *Apollonius of Rhodes. Argonautica Book III* (Cambridge 1989) ad loc. who points out that this pun is already in Pind. *Pyth.* 4.27 and that in the relevant line 'marks the men's complete dependence upon the young girl's μήτις'.

10 F. Bessone, *P. Ovidii Nasonis. Heroidum Epistula XII, Medea Iasoni* (Firenze 1997) ad loc. and 90 on the double reference of Medea's name to 'deceits' and 'misdeeds' (*mala*); and cf. incidentally Sen. *Med.* 910 *Medea nunc sum: crevit ingenium malis*. Cf. also A. Traina, *L'antroponimo Medea*, in *Poeti latini (e neolatini): note e saggi filologici*, vol. 2 (Bologna 1991) 123–129; G. Petrone, *Nomen/Omen: poetica e funzione dei nomi (Plauto, Seneca, Petronio)*, «Materiali e Discussioni» 20/21 (1988) 61–62. On the two characters' boldness and deception cf. W.B. Stanford, *Ambiguity in Greek Literature. Studies in Theory and Practice* (Oxford 1939) 138f.

after it, develop by revealing the truth of the etymological derivation of Medea from μήδεα/μήτις prove true; it also significantly relates to the motif of δόλος which is first applied to Aphrodite (2.423–424) and then explicitly transferred to Medea herself in 3.89 (δολόεσσα)¹¹, to which 3.781 τίς δὲ δόλος, τίς μήτις [...] may be added to bring the concourse of the two elements to the fore. This remark, combined with the etymological analysis delineated above, invites us to go back to Clytemestra in Seneca's *Agamemnon*: the queen, whilst spurring herself to female wiles (*femineos dolos*), strikingly grants the term *dolos* (116) a noticeable middle position ('al mezzo') within her speech, not to mention its position at the end of the line as well (δόλος = *dolus*, but the accusative plural effectively brings about a phonic continuity between *dolos* and δόλος).

Therefore Seneca's Clytemestra, via the etymological connection to μήδομαι and *per Homerum* (δολόμητις), further reinforces her proximity to her 'twin' character Medea across the texts by pointing at the distinctive feature of deception: the *femineos dolos* certainly apply to *ulla coniunx perfida*, but it seems to me that the verbal choice lets Apollonius' Medea surface (cf. also the striking use of the term *evolvere*, 'to unroll') and draws attention to the onomastic chain built around ClyteMEstra / MEdomai / MEtis / MEdea and endorsed by the homophonically allusive contribution of δόλος / *dolos*. If Seneca hints, as I believe, at such a 'medeic' presence in Clytemestra's name and ethos, he does so by exploiting the thin line between young Medea's δόλος (inseparable from her later crimes) and Clytemestra's *dolus*, which is crucial to the plot, as shown by Thyestes' prologic and Cassandra's epilogic words in *Ag.* 47 *iam scelera prope sunt, iam dolus caedes cruor* and 1009 *perisse dono, feminae stupro, dolo* (scil. *Agamemnon*)¹².

Nevertheless, in the 'medeic' moments of the passage one may also pin down two further clues that by recalling the first onomastic component of Clytemestra's name, namely the one linked to the idea of 'glory', enrich the etymological interplay under investigation. Κλέος (cf. n. 4) usually oscillates between the meaning of 'glory' and that of 'reputation', not unlike Latin *decus*¹³. Now, *decus* at line 112, although it is certainly tied to the sense of decorum inspired by the context, might also be cunningly playing with the double meaning of 'dignity' and 'glory'. However, *decus* still belongs there, so to speak, to the queen's hesitation

11 On this cf. D.P. Nelis, *Demodocus and the song of Orpheus*, *Ap. Rhod. Arg.* 1, 496–511, «Museum Helveticum» 49.3 (1992) 162–165 and R. Hunter, *The Argonautica of Apollonius. Literary studies* (Cambridge 1993) 63. Cf. also G. Paduano, *Studi su Apollonio Rodio* (Roma 1972) 89–90; Hunter ad 3.89 and M. Campbell, *A Commentary on Apollonius Rhodius. Argonautica III 1–471* (Leiden/New York/Köln 1994) ad loc.

12 To this one may add that the *dol-* stem plays with an ambiguous liminality between *dolor* and *dolus*, in which *dolor* may turn into a *causa doli* and *dolus* into a *causa doloris* (cf. Sen. *Med.* 155–156) with Stevens (n. 5) 146–147 and n. 43. Cf. also *Ag.* 142 *quocumque me ira, quo dolor, quo spes feret* and 579 *utrumne doleam laeter an reducem uirum?*

13 Cf. *OLD* 495, s.v.; with the meaning of 'glory' cf. for example Sen. *Phaedr.* 900 [*ebur*] *gentis Actaeae decus*.

phase¹⁴ and appears to be confined to a rather 'inert' role; on the contrary, the end of her speech, which spots her newly regained sense of courage and her firm intention to behave unlike her sister Helen (123–124), clearly leads to connecting her glory/fame to a murderous action: *te decet maius nefas* (124, 'a greater crime suits you'). As a result, Clytemestra's *decus* ends up coinciding with the *nefas* she is about to commit against Agamemnon and both *decus* and *nefas*, in turn, are contained in the deception (*dolus*) she and Aegisthus are devising.

It is no wonder that almost all Augustan and post-Augustan literary heroines cannot help being repetitively – or rather obsessively – intertextual and that Seneca's Clytemestra too can be traced back to Vergil's Dido, Catullus' Ariadne, Apollonius' and Euripides' Medea, and Aeschylus' forerunner. Reading Seneca's Clytemestra only against Apollonius' Medea is certainly reductive and might even misrepresent the polymorphous construction of her character. Yet, if I have chosen here to give prominence to the Medea *virgo* of line 119 and mainly mobilise Apollonius' text¹⁵, this is motivated by the etymological moment at stake in a quite privileged textual *locus*¹⁶. It also brings to the fore a common 'vocation' to revenge and murder which is deeply connected, as briefly pointed out above, to the motif of motherhood and infanticide. Medea's story – after Apollonius – notoriously ends with the killing of her children: interestingly, in the *Agamemnon* the epilogue too focuses on a similar moment in that it stages the threats of death Clytemestra vehemently addresses to her daughter Electra at line 971 *morieris hodie*¹⁷.

Also, Clytemestra successfully fits into the poetics which permeates Seneca's tragic *corpus* by committing herself to a crime that is destined to increase (124): from being μέγα in Aeschylus' aforementioned passage it now turns into something *maius*, behind which one may easily grasp that device of *grandissement*, a rhetoric of outdoing, that generally makes us feel that Seneca's tragedies are greater and 'gloomier' than his predecessors' (one might even push this further and spot in *maius nefas* an etymological allusion to Agamemnon's name: ἄγαν = 'excessive')¹⁸. At this juncture, Medea becomes again crucial to our analysis and

14 Cf. O. Regenbogen, *Schmerz und Tod bei Seneca*, in F. Dirlmeier (ed.), *Kleine Schriften* (München 1961) 433: 'in einem Zustande des Schwankens und Zweifels'.

15 The Homeric δολόμητις certainly remains the *point de départ*, but perhaps it does not suffice in itself either to account for the etymological wordplay on Clytemestra's name or to understand the potential of Seneca's character.

16 As pointed out by Stevens (n. 5) 136, Seneca usually offers controlling etymologies of the names of the characters at their stage entrances.

17 Clytemestra's menacing tone in Soph. *El.* 626–627 is not as peremptory as in Seneca's text.

18 On this *maius*-motif cf. B. Seidensticker, *Maius solito. Senecas Thyestes und die tragoedia rhetorica*, «Antike und Abendland» 31 (1985) 116–136, especially 125; A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play. Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama* (Cambridge 2003) 31–32: 'any repetition of *nefas* is necessarily worse than its model – more obsessive, more painful, more 'guilty'; n. 16 and p. 130 on *maius* and statements of poetics.

especially the Ovidian heroine in *Her.* 12¹⁹. Unfortunately, Ovid's *Medea* did not survive and we cannot determine to what extent Seneca drew on it; nonetheless, I think that even the last line of *Her.* 12.212 *nescioquid certe mens mea maius agit* may strike up a useful dialogue with line 124 in Seneca. Ovid's heroine is just about to enter her tragic role, Euripidean in ancestry, but because of the generic constraints of elegy she cannot go beyond an unspecified, yet powerfully allusive, *nescioquid maius*²⁰. Seneca's Clytemestra, on the contrary, is in her appropriate generic context and she does not hesitate to name *nefas* the (perfectly tragic) crime she is on the brink of committing *nefas*.

Clytemestra's words at lines 141–143

*proinde omisi regimen e manibus meis:
quocumque me ira, quo dolor, quo spes feret,
hoc ire pergam*

echo those of Medea in Ov. *Her.* 12.209 *quo feret ira sequor*²¹; the addition of *spes*, which is extraneous to Medea's character (cf. Eur. *Med.* 498 and 1032 f.)²², shows that Clytemestra can still cherish some hope, allegedly the hope to spend her future life together with Aegisthus, whilst Medea is deprived of this horizon of expectations and first and foremost focuses on her act of revenge. Furthermore, these two women do have in common suffering and revenge²³, but their different status in society also brings the opposition Greekness/barbarism to the fore: Clytemestra contemptuously condemns Agamemnon's loves for barbaric women in Ag. 184–185 ... *neue desertus foret | a paelice umquam barbara caelebs torus* and 188–191 ... *nunc novum vulnus gerens | amore Phrygiae vatis incensus furit, | et post tropaea Troica ac versum Ilium | captae maritus remeat et Priami gener* and by doing so she clearly situates herself in the non-barbarian world. Yet, Agamemnon's murder will prevent her, as it were, from running into the same miserable fate as for barbarian Medea: if one reads Ag. 193–194 *sce-lus occupandum est. Pigra quem expectas diem? | Pelopia Phrygiae sceptrum dum teneant nurus?* against Eur. *Med.* 255–256 ἐγὼ δ' ἔρημος ἄπολιν οὖς ὑβρίζομαι | πρὸς ἄνδρός, ἐκ γῆς βαρβάρου λελησμένη, Clytemestra's fear that Agamemnon

19 Cf. Bessone (n. 10) ad loc. and 283, where she also quotes various passages from Seneca's *Medea*, all packed with the same idea of something greater, which *in nuce* is already Euripidean, but obviously without the poetological awareness of Seneca's texts. The *Heroides* are a well explored textual repository to Seneca's tragedies, on which cf. S. Hinds, *Seneca's Ovidian Loci*, «Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica», 9.1 (2011) 6.

20 Cf. instead Medea in *Met.* 7.276 *propositum instruxit mortali barbara maius* (Aeson's rejuvenation). Seneca's Medea too, almost by reflex, recurs to the *nescioquid* device (917–919): ... *nescioquid ferox | decrevit animus intus et nondum sibi | audet fateri* ... (cf. also *Thy.* 267–270).

21 With Bessone (n. 10) ad loc.

22 Or, in other words, the only *spes* Medea has is the effectiveness of her revenge (Eur. *Med.* 767).

23 They are both qualified as 'lionesses': cf. Aesch. Ag. 1258 (Clytemestra) and Eur. *Med.* 1358 (Medea). Usually the 'by-name' displays a powerful disposition to revenge.

will put her away in favour of Cassandra²⁴ all the more seems to build a bridge between the two heroines²⁵, emphasising and attenuating at the same time their ethnic and social differences.

In conclusion, the *tutum iter* saturated with crime and leading, in turn, to crime (*per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*, 115) Clytemestra will go through becomes a signal of her intertextual nature: she will embark on an *iter* which also hints at the character's textual 'itinerary' across crimes and texts²⁶ and suggests that she will ultimately succeed, as the way has already been paved for her elsewhere.

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24 Cf. Tarrant (n. 1) ad 193.

25 On Medea's barbarism cf. also 591–592; 1330–1331; 1339–1340 ('no Greek woman would have dared to do this' [Kovacs]), on which cf. especially E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford 1989) 188. Cf. also 252 ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸς πρὸς σὲ κ' ἔμ' ἥκει λόγος (she addresses the women of Corinth who, being Greek-born, cannot obviously share her view as a barbarian). Note that the association Clytemestra-Medea also works the other way around, as at times Euripides' Medea may conjure up Aeschylus' Clytemestra as a model (cf. 1278): cf. D. Boedeker, *Becoming Medea. Assimilation in Euripides*, in J.J. Clauss, S. Iles Johnston (eds.), *Medea. Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (Princeton 1997) 138. In the same volume cf. also M.C. Nussbaum, *A Reading of Seneca's Medea*, 224.

26 Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* included, although it significantly differs from Seneca's *Agamemnon* in content and treatment, cf. Tarrant (n. 1) 10.