

Medea nunc sum: Staging, Ekphrasis, and Identity in Seneca's Medea

By

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in Classics and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Defended: March 21, 2016

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Date Approved: March 21, 2016

Abstract

This thesis analyzes the use of vivid descriptive language in Seneca's tragedy *Medea*, with an emphasis on the fourth act of the play. I argue that the nurse's speech in this act functions as an ekphrasis, a term commonly used to refer to the verbal description of visual art. The nurse's ekphrasis emphasizes Medea's magical prowess and her alarming refusal to conform to social norms, and the following speech delivered by Medea herself responds to the nurse's ekphrasis and overturns its stylistic conventions. This "ekphrastic collapse," I argue, occurs when Medea's magical performance—the visual art component of the ekphrasis—coexists onstage with her own verbal description of her work. In order to fully examine the "ekphrastic collapse" of Medea's monologue, I engage with the current scholarly debate over the intended medium of Senecan tragedy, and ultimately argue that Seneca's plays were intended for the stage, not for a reading or recitation. It is on the stage that Medea must kill her children in order for the fifth act of Seneca's play to maintain the dramatic momentum of the first four acts, and it is on the stage that Medea delivers the ekphrasis of her own performative ritual act. The collapse of ekphrastic convention that results from Medea's assumption of the dual roles of art object and narrator allows her to realize her own mythical and dramatic potential as a violator of societal and literary boundaries.

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Introduction

An energetic debate has arisen within the past century on the question of whether Seneca's tragedies were intended for the stage or for recitation, but no clear consensus seems forthcoming. Both literary forms—staged dramas and recited texts—were relatively common in Rome in the first century C.E.;¹ the nine or perhaps ten plays attributed to Seneca, the only Roman tragedies that survive complete, are unfortunately passed down to us without any external indication of which function their author intended them to fill. But the prominence of visual and descriptive language within the plays, especially language which describes characters who would have been visible in costume and acting freely during a stage production, has led many scholars to conclude that the plays could not have been seriously intended for the stage; the tragedies, one commentator remarks, are more likely to have been recited due to their “detailed circumstantial descriptions.”²

The main difference between these two modes of representation, namely, that recited tragedy relies mainly on verbal cues while staged tragedy relies on visual as well as verbal cues, provides us with two opportunities, which are the two aims of this thesis. I intend both to contribute to the larger debate on Senecan tragedy by furthering the argument for staged performance and against recitation, and to examine the interplay between the verbal and the visual in these tragedies as they would have appeared on the stage, had Seneca had occasion to produce them. I do not, of course, intend to argue that Seneca's tragedies were certainly performed onstage as intended, since the historical record shows no evidence either way. I contend only that Seneca wrote his tragedies with the stage in mind.

¹ Useful explanations of the ancient mode of recitational poetry can be found in S.F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1949); Anthony Hollingsworth, “Recitational Poetry and Senecan Tragedy: Is There a Similarity?” *The Classical World* 94 (2001): 135-44; Sander M. Goldberg, “The Fall and Rise of Roman Tragedy,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 126 (1996): 265-86; and Otto Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas, Mit einem kritisch-exegetischen Anhang* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1966).

² C.D.N. Costa, *Seneca: Medea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 5.

The major focus of this thesis is on the fourth act of Seneca's *Medea*, one of the longest continuous descriptive passages in Seneca's corpus. This act is unique in all of extant ancient tragedy in that it consists entirely of two monologues. The first monologue, given by Medea's elderly nurse, describes in detail Medea's offstage actions as she performs a magic ritual; the nurse's monologue, I will argue, is an ekphrasis (that is, a vivid description, often of a piece of visual art) with Medea's ritual (a form of performance art) as its object. The second monologue is Medea's own. Her ritual, originally an offstage act described by the nurse, becomes an *onstage* act described by the ritual performer herself. Medea continues the ekphrastic description of the ritual on her own terms as she performs it. It will become clear that this second monologue purposely violates some of the usual conventions of ekphrasis by bringing the object of the ekphrasis literally before the audience's eyes, and that the presence of this and similar descriptive passages in Seneca's tragedies is thus no impediment to the intended staging of the plays.

The first chapter of this thesis attempts to reconcile the varied and often convoluted modern definitions of ekphrasis, in order to find a definition that can explain the stylistic abnormality of Act 4 of *Medea*. The second chapter delves into the paired monologues of Act 4 in depth; I will argue that the nurse's speech is a relatively traditional ekphrasis which sets the audience up to view Medea's own speech as an all-consuming ekphrasis of her own ritual performance. The third chapter addresses the question of staging throughout Seneca's tragic corpus, and examines the effects of Act 4 on the ending of *Medea* within the context of staged performance.

Chapter 1: Ekphrastic Collapse

Several possible definitions for ekphrasis have been put forth by modern scholars, the most common shared component of which is that ekphrasis is verbal representation of a visual art object. But even this simple definition differs wildly from the ancient conception of ekphrasis as a rhetorical technique involving intensely vivid description. Modern definitions are at once more specific and more expansive than those found in the *progymnasmata*, the ancient handbooks of rhetorical exercises; these modern definitions often narrow the set of objects eligible for ekphrasis to forms of visual art, while simultaneously doing away with the specifications of rhetorical technique found in the *progymnasmata*. Thus there seem to be two distinct definitions of ekphrasis, as Shadi Bartsch and Jaś Elsner observe in their introduction to *Classical Philology*'s special issue on ekphrasis: “purists would limit it to the definition of the ancient *progymnasmata*, while modernity tends to think first of its applicability to the visual arts.”³

The *progymnasmata*, of which four handbooks by four different authors survive, give a unified definition of ekphrasis (referred to as ἔκφρασις by all). These authors, as Frank J. D’Angelo succinctly puts it, define ekphrasis as “a rhetorical strategy, a rhetorical prose description of a work of art, and a poetic or literary genre.”⁴ Aphthonius provides clear guidelines for the descriptive technique required of an ekphrasis:

Ἐκφρασίς ἐστι λόγος περιηγηματικὸς ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἄγων ἐναργῶς τὸ δηλούμενον.
 ἐκφραστέον δὲ πρόσωπα τε καὶ πράγματα, καιρούς τε καὶ τόπους, ἄλογα ζῶα καὶ
 πρὸς τούτοις φυτά· πρόσωπα μὲν ὡσπερ Ὅμηρος
 γυρὸς ἔην ὅμοισι, μελάγχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος.
 (Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata* 12)

A description is a speech that carefully reveals in narration what is put forth, bringing it palpably before the eyes. Moreover, people, things, times, places, brute

³ Shadi Bartsch and Jaś Elsner, “Introduction: Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis,” *Classical Philology* 102 (2007): i.

⁴ Frank J. D’Angelo, “The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis,” *JAC* 18 (1998): 440.

animals, and plants are described. People [are described], as Homer [says], “He was broad of shoulder, dark-skinned, and curly-haired.”⁵

Clearly, Aphthonius sees no need to restrict his definition to verbal representations of visual art objects—an ekphrasis, for him, is simply a vivid verbal representation. And the authors of the other surviving handbooks are in agreement. Aelius Theon, for example, provides examples of ekphrases that include descriptions of battles, places, seasons, people and animals, and natural disasters (Theon, *Progymnasmata* 11).⁶

It does, however, appear that even some ancient authors considered the mode of ekphrasis especially appropriate for descriptions of works of visual art. Nicolaus the Sophist notes that his recommended techniques are best suited to ekphrases describing “especially statues or paintings, or anything else of that kind” (Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 69.4-5; μάλιστα ἀγάλματα τυχὸν ἢ εἰκόνας ἢ εἴ τι ἄλλο τοιοῦτον).⁷ He does allow for other types of ekphrasis, but these are his focus, and the Greek ἐκφράζειν seems to denote descriptions of visual art in particular. But of the four authors of the *progymnasmata*, Nicolaus is the only one who explicitly mentions works of visual art (with the exception of architectural works) as a category of ekphrastic object. As Ruth Webb points out, “Such subjects may not have been central to the ancient definition of ekphrasis, but nor were they ever excluded, as Theon’s reference to the Shield of Achilles suggests.”⁸ Thus, while all four authors of the *progymnasmata* share a common definition of ekphrasis (or *descriptio*), the handbooks themselves prove that this ancient definition was versatile and could easily be applied to different situations.

⁵ For the Greek text of Aphthonius, see Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, in Leonhard von Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci*, vol. 2, 21-56 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1854). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁶ For the Greek text of Theon, see Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata*, ed. Christopher Finckh (Stuttgart: C.G. Loeflund, 1834).

⁷ For the Greek text of Nicolaus, see Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata*, ed. J. Felten (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913).

⁸ Ruth Webb, “The Subjects of Ekphrasis,” in *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 81.

The moderns, like the ancients, often stretch their contemporary definition of ekphrasis in different directions. James A.W. Heffernan wants to define ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of graphic representation,”⁹ in order to exclude verbal descriptions of written texts. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Mai Al-Nakib wants to expand the definition of ekphrasis to explicitly include verbal descriptions of texts, music, and other forms of performance art; she contends that ekphrasis is simply “the expression of one form of representation in terms of another.”¹⁰ By her standards, performance art would be an appropriate ekphrastic object; a verbal description of a piece of music, a staged play, or an interpretive dance would all be ekphrases. It will become clear that Al-Nakib’s definition is best suited to my purposes, but first there is an oft-cited effect of ekphrasis to consider: that of narrative pause.

In his article “Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis,” D.P. Fowler contends with narrative pause, often seen as a function of ekphrasis, at least under the modern definition, wherein ekphrasis is seen as part of a larger narrative. Fowler presents several theories on ekphrasis, from the idea that ekphrasis is pure narrative pause to the idea that ekphrasis acts as a microcosm of the larger narrative. Fowler aptly denounces both of these positions as too extreme; he suggests instead that we consider “the relation of description to narrative on a psychological level.”¹¹ For Fowler, ekphrasis serves the purpose of enhancing the audience’s emotional and thematic connection to the text through description that viscerally affects its audience. This usually results in narrative pause, or at least deceleration, but narrative pause is not an end in and of itself.

Ancient sources such as the *progymnasmata* and Quintilian’s *De Institutione Oratoria*, all written during the first several centuries C.E., have nothing to say on narrative pause, but they do

⁹ James A.W. Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 299.

¹⁰ Mai Al-Nakib, “Assia Djebar’s Musical Ekphrasis,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 42 (2005): 253.

¹¹ D.P. Fowler, “Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991): 27.

provide valuable insight into what ekphrasis would have meant to Seneca and his audience. And to the ancients, emotional provocation is the primary goal of ekphrasis. Quintilian does not deal directly with ekphrasis, but does speak on *enargeia*, which he defines as clarity, and the use of what he calls “the ornate” in rhetoric:

Ornatum est, quod perspicuo ac probabili plus est. Eius primi sunt gradus in eo, quod velis concipiendo et exprimendo, tertius, qui haec nitidiora faciat, quod proprie dixeris cultum. Itaque ἐνάργειαν, cuius in praeceptis narrationis feci mentionem, quia plus est evidentia vel, ut alii dicunt, repraesentatio quam perspicuitas, et illud patet, hoc se quodammodo ostendit, inter ornamenta ponamus. (Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* 8.3.61)

The *ornate* is what is more than evident and plausible. Its first [and second] steps are in understanding and expressing what we wish [to say]; thirdly, that which makes these [i.e. comprehension and expression] more attractive; which you would be right to call *elegance*. Therefore let us place among the ornaments *enargeia*, of which I made mention in my earlier discussion, because *vividness*, or, as others call it, *representation*, is more than *clarity*, for the latter is merely accessible, but the former actively offers itself.¹²

It is clear that the definition of ekphrasis put forth in the *progymnasmata* is connected to Quintilian’s *enargeia*, the use of attractive and vivid language to evoke a mental image in the mind of the reader. As Simon Goldhill puts it, ekphrasis, in all of its forms, is meant to captivate the reader: “Rhetoric is a guide for the perplexed. That is why there is such a focus in the ancient sources on the power of the word to astonish, confuse, and enslave.”¹³

In his study of rhetoric and ekphrasis, Frank D’Angelo makes the important point that the structure of the *progymnasmata* places ekphrasis “after the commonplace, the encomium, the vituperation, and the comparison, suggesting that it has something in common with the rhetoric of

¹² For the Latin text of Quintilian, see Quintilian, *De Institutione Oratoria*, vol. 3, ed. H.E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

¹³ Simon Goldhill, “What is Ekphrasis For?” *Classical Philology* 102 (2007): 7.

praise and blame.”¹⁴ Once again, Nicolaus can confirm this, since he recommends that ekphrases give subjective and emotionally stimulating information about their subjects:

Δεῖ δέ, ἤνίκα ἂν ἐκφράζωμεν καὶ μάλιστα ἀγάλματα τυχὸν ἢ εἰκόνας ἢ εἴ τι ἄλλο τοιοῦτον, πειρᾶσθαι λογισμοῦς προστιθέναι τοῦ τοιοῦδε ἢ τοιοῦδε παρὰ τοῦ γραφέως ἢ πλάστου σχήματος, οἷον τυχὸν ἢ ὅτι ὀργιζόμενον ἔγραψε διὰ τήνδε τὴν αἰτίαν ἢ ἠδόμενον, ἢ ἄλλοτι πάθος ἐροῦμεν συμβαῖνον τῇ περὶ τοῦ ἐκφραζομένου ἱστορίᾳ· καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων δὲ ὁμοίως πλεῖστα οἱ λογισμοὶ συντελοῦσιν εἰς ἐνάργειαν. (Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 69.4-11)

We must, whenever we compose an ekphrasis, and especially of statues or paintings, or anything else of that kind, attempt to add an explanation of some characteristic or other of the painter or sculptor’s, such as that he painted his subject angry or happy for this particular reason, or we should speak of some other expression occurring because of the history of the thing described; and similarly for other cases, explanations aim mostly at *enargeia*.

According to Nicolaus, ekphrases of works of art should interpret the viewpoint of the artist in question, and attempt to convey this viewpoint to the audience of the ekphrasis. Value judgments are therefore to be expected, and a good ekphrasis—at least, according to Nicolaus—should contain information that encourages such judgments. This close reading of the *progymnasmata* causes D’Angelo to take issue with many modern definitions of ekphrasis, including Heffernan’s: “The problem with these definitions ... is that they neglect the role of narration and of praising and blaming in the conception of *ekphrasis* as the rhetorical description of a work of art.”¹⁵

We thus have two working definitions of ekphrasis: one a modern definition, and one an ancient definition. Ekphrasis, in ancient terms, is a rhetorical or poetic technique or mode that describes and evaluates an object or living being so vividly that the object seems almost to be present before the audience’s eyes, with the intent to evoke emotions in the audience. In modern terms, it is a literary technique or mode that describes an art object. It is this last criterion of the

¹⁴ D’Angelo, “The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis,” 440. The four exercises of commonplace, encomium, vituperation, and comparison are themselves heavily involved in praise (a necessary part of the definition of *encomium*) and blame (*vituperation*). For more information on these four evaluative exercises, see Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 35.5-63.9.

¹⁵ D’Angelo, “The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis,” 441-42.

modern definition that the rest of this section is concerned with, whether the object of ekphrasis must be stationary visual art, or whether the modern definition can be broadened to include performance art, including the sort of ritual art Medea performs in Seneca's play. In order to answer this question, I return to Al-Nakib's defense of performance art as the object of ekphrasis.

Al-Nakib is concerned with the work of Assia Djebar, an Algerian novelist and non-fiction writer whose thematic focus is on decolonization and sociopolitical divides such as those between male/female and French/Algerian. Several of Djebar's works include what Al-Nakib calls "musical ekphrases," apparently a relatively common technique in postcolonial Algerian literature.¹⁶ Al-Nakib focuses on one novel in particular, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, in which Djebar uses the mode of ekphrasis in two unusual ways. First, she describes a catalogue of French documents concerned with an invasion of the French into Algeria; parts of the catalogue described are themselves descriptions of paintings; for example:

Le chef de bataillon Langlois, peintre de batailles, au lendemain du choc décisif de Staouéli, s'arrêtera pour dessiner des Turcs morts, «la rage de la bravoure» imprimée encore sur leur visage ... «Le public amateur en aura des lithographies», note ce même jour Matterer.

Langlois, leader of the battalion and painter of battles, on the day after the decisive battle at Staouéli, will stop to draw the dead Turks, "the frenzy of their valor" still imprinted on their faces ... On the same day, Matterer notes, "The public will be fans of the lithographs."¹⁷

Djebar thus creates an ekphrasis of an ekphrasis; in other words, she is verbally describing Matterer's verbal description of Langlois' drawings. Additionally, she spends much of the novel describing sounds and making references to pieces of music, such as the following:

Mais, sur ce seuil d'émotions criardes, je ne me sens pas saisie d'exaltation mystique; de ces récriminations des fidèles voilées (à peine si elles ouvrent l'échancrure du drap sur leur face tuméfiée), je sentais l'âcreté des plaintes, l'air de victime des chanteuses ...

¹⁶ Al-Nakib, "Assia Djebar's Musical Ekphrasis," 254.

¹⁷ Assia Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 27.

But, on the brink of the piercing sentiments, I do not feel swept up in mystical exaltation; from the recriminations of the veiled worshipers (they barely leave an opening in the cloth over their swollen faces), I sense the potency of their complaints, the singers' air of victimhood ...¹⁸

Djebar's text reflects the emotional power of music on the level of word and syllable, which in turn reflects her ideas about decolonization; she "transmutes the conventional cadence and sound of French by intersecting it with Arabic and Berber."¹⁹ Just as Quintilian and D.P. Fowler suggest an ekphrasis should work, Djebar's musical ekphrasis connects to larger themes in her works through vivid and emotion-provoking description and language.

Because she sees Djebar's descriptions of verbal and performance art, and even of other texts, as a form of ekphrasis, Al-Nakib disagrees with the modern definition of ekphrasis as "verbal representation of physical representation."²⁰ This definition is accepted by many modern scholars because the spatial nature of visual art automatically alienates it from the more temporal and immersive nature of verbal representation, and ekphrasis can be seen to close the resulting gap. But Al-Nakib denies that any such clear-cut boundary exists. On the contrary, she argues that "any ekphrastic representation presumes an irreducible formal or material difference between itself and whatever representation it attempts to re-present."²¹ Why, then, should music or any other type of performance art be disqualified as a potential object of ekphrasis, even by narrow modern definitions of the word? The difference in form between music and a *description* of music, or of theatre and a *description* of theatre, is not a trivial one. Describing a work of music, a person's voice, or the choreography of a dance, in such a way that an audience can appreciate both the description and its object, is no easy task. And this task requires the writer to use the same skills

¹⁸ Assia Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 192.

¹⁹ Al-Nakib, "Assia Djebar's Musical Ekphrasis," 268.

²⁰ Al-Nakib, "Assia Djebar's Musical Ekphrasis," 254.

²¹ Al-Nakib, "Assia Djebar's Musical Ekphrasis," 256.

and techniques as she or he might in an ekphrasis of stationary visual art; as Djebbar's work proves, *enargeia* can be used to describe performance art as readily as stationary visual art.

Neither does a definition of ekphrasis as the verbal representation of any artistic representation disqualify the possibility of what we might call a "dramatic ekphrasis," or an ekphrasis spoken by a character onstage during a play. A character's declamation of an ekphrasis onstage is, after all, not too much different from an ancient orator's rhetorical use of ekphrasis to sway a jury. Indeed, the presence of ekphrasis in one of Seneca's other plays, *Thyestes*, has already been suggested by Riemer A. Faber. Faber sees the description of Atreus' palace (Seneca, *Thyestes* 641-82) in the messenger-speech of Act 4 as an ekphrasis, and argues that the figurative language used to describe the palace drives the action by echoing major themes of the play. The ekphrasis reinforces the instability and wildness of the Atreidae "by the personification of the house (641-9), the portrayal of the grove and especially the oak-tree as a tyrant (650-6), and the confusion of the natural order within the grove (668-82)."²²

It is difficult to read the scene from *Thyestes* as an ekphrasis on Al-Nakib's more modern terms, as a representation of a representation, for we would then have to pinpoint what exactly the architect of the palace meant to represent through his craft. But *Thyestes* 668-82 does fit the definition of ekphrasis found in the *progymnasmata*; it is clear from Faber's article and from the text of *Thyestes* itself that Seneca does include the rhetorical techniques of *enargeia* and the ornate in his description, and that the messenger-speech follows Fowler's theory on "the relation of description to narrative on a psychological level."²³ From here, it is not a stretch to argue that Seneca might include in his dramatic works ekphrases that more closely fit the modern definition

²² Riemer A. Faber, "The Description of the Palace in Seneca's *Thyestes* 641-82 and the Literary Unity of the Play," *Mnemosyne* 60 (2007): 431.

²³ Fowler, "Narrate and Describe," 27.

sketched out above—ekphrases which have as their object works of art. All that we have left to decide is whether the scene of ritual magic in Seneca's *Medea* is a viable candidate for the object of ekphrasis, as I believe it is.

Medea's magic ritual, described first by the nurse while Medea is offstage (670-739), and then by Medea herself as she completes the ritual actions onstage (740-848), contains visual, kinetic, and aural components. Medea dances, mixes ingredients, makes offerings to the gods, sings, and chants invocations. Already it is clear that her ritual is an art form, since singing and dancing are both forms of performance art. Her use of magical ingredients also requires a great degree of skill. Whether we would call this artistic or culinary skill is debatable, but either way it requires Medea to use her creative abilities. But the greatest argument for Medea's ritual as art form is this: Medea the character, within the confines of the play, is performing for an audience of the gods. Her ritual has no purpose if it does not catch and hold the attention of the gods, most importantly the goddess Hecate; she must impress the gods with her skills in order for her ritual to achieve its desired result. Performance art falls flat without the approval of its audience, and Medea's ritual follows this rule to the letter.

Medea's performance is thus more appropriate as an object of ekphrasis, at least under the modern definition of ekphrasis, than is the palace of Atreus. Architecture, while it is a stationary form of visual art that can be described evocatively, is not a form of representation in the same way that painting or sculpting is. But Medea's performance is representative on two different levels. On the first, more obvious level, Medea describes her own actions in speech; the aural component of her performance represents the somatic and visual components of her performance. Medea does this both during the nurse's speech, as the nurse relays Medea's song to the audience, and during her own monologue while she is onstage:

tibi nudato pectore maenas
sacro feriam bracchia cultro.
manet noster sanguis ad aras. (Seneca, *Medea* 806-08)

For you I will strike my arms with the sacred knife, acting as a maenad with bared breast. My blood remains on the altar.²⁴

Despite the future tense of *feriam*, Medea's self-mutilation can be assumed to occur at more or less the same time as she speaks the words, since we are to believe that her blood has already been poured upon the altar a mere one line later (*manet* is present tense). Medea thus represents her own actions and appearance in real time.

But less obviously—and more importantly—Medea's performance represents her *desires*. In order to be effective, Medea's ritual actions must correlate in some manner to her intentions and to the outcome she wishes to achieve. In lines 690-93, the nurse quotes Medea as she lays out her intentions:

'Parua sunt' inquit 'mala
et vile telum est, ima quod tellus creat:
caelo petam uenena. iam iam tempus est
aliquid mouere fraude uulgari altius. (Seneca, *Medea* 690-93)

'The evils,' she says, 'are paltry, and it is a common weapon that the depths of the earth produce: I will seek poisons from heaven. Now, now is the time to set in motion something deeper than common trickery.'

Here, the nurse describes Medea's expression of her intentions. And later, at lines 806-8, Medea spills her blood upon the altar and dances in the manner of a Maenad in hopes of achieving slaughter through divine provenance; her methods correspond with her intentions. As fits Djebbar's definition, the two narrators of Act 4 of Seneca's *Medea*—first the nurse, and then Medea herself—provide us with a verbal representation of a piece of representative performance art.

²⁴ For the Latin text of *Medea*, see Seneca, *Tragoediae*, ed. Otto Zwierlein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Other criteria of ekphrasis, in both the ancient and the modern sense of the word, also fall into place during Act 4 of Seneca's *Medea*. Medea's nurse engages with the technique of narrative enhancement through thematic connection, as outlined by Fowler; the nurse's speech is a thematic (but not narrative) microcosm for the entire play, in that it focuses on the expression of awe at Medea's fearful and mysterious power. This speech also fulfills D'Angelo's criterion of value judgment. The nurse begins her speech with a value judgment of the quality and moral character of Medea's work—"My soul fears, it trembles" (Seneca, *Medea* 670; *pauet animus, horret*)—and ends with the equally chilling, "The world trembles at her first words" (Seneca, *Medea* 739; *mundus uocibus primis tremit*). Medea's speech, too, enhances the narrative of the play both indirectly, through engagement with major themes of excess, pride, and bloodshed, and directly, because her ritual leads to the death of Creusa. Medea also praises her own actions as she completes them. These aspects of the two speeches will be further explicated in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

According to the criteria presented above, the two monologues of Act 4 appear to be dramatic ekphrases, in both the modern and the ancient sense. But there is an important difference between these monologues: the former describes a work of performance art that takes place offstage, and the latter describes a work of performance art that is present onstage—indeed, the speaker of this second monologue is also the performer. This is a somewhat unusual circumstance in ancient drama, where characters are not prone to describing their own movements. In medical and magical rituals outside of theatrical contexts, however, as Anthony Corbeill has observed through his study of Roman gestures, it was not uncommon for the performer of the ritual to narrate her or his own gestures.²⁵ Among early Christian rituals, for example, Corbeill finds the following:

²⁵ Anthony Corbeill, "Participatory Gestures in Roman Religious Ritual and Medicine," in *Nature Embodied*, 12-40 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). I am indebted to Dr. Corbeill for further discussion of the matter and of this section of my thesis.

terram teneo, herbam lego, in nomine Christi prosit ad quod te colligo. (Marcell.
Med. 25.13)

I hold the earth, I pluck the herb; in the name of Christ may the purpose for which
I collect you be advantageous.²⁶

The incantation here presumably describes the actions of the performer as they take place. But while it is true that this sort of self-description is common to offstage ritual, whose purpose is not to entertain but to achieve a practical result, the fact remains that it is uncommon for this sort of ritual self-description to take place on a stage.²⁷ The dramatic context of Medea's monologue would not lead an audience to expect a lengthy ritual performance, complete with all the trappings of self-described gesture, onstage.

From the viewpoint of W.J.T. Mitchell, who attempts to impose specific limits on the relationship between an ekphrasis' audience and its subject in his chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other," the coincidence of the ekphrastic object with its description is highly irregular. Mitchell's theory of ekphrasis and the expectations set up by usual ekphrastic conventions may help to shed some light on Medea's self-described gestures in this context.

An ekphrasis, Mitchell claims, cannot function properly when the audience can simultaneously view (or hear, or read, or examine tangibly) its object. To Mitchell, the ekphrastic object is the natural "other" of verbal description.²⁸ Mitchell cites what he calls "ekphrastic fear," or "the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually."²⁹ The audience desires the absent art object,

²⁶ Corbeill, "Participatory Gestures in Roman Religious Ritual and Medicine," 24. This translation is Corbeill's.

²⁷ For example, in Euripides' *Medea*, the magic ritual involving the robe is only briefly mentioned onstage. Even in Seneca's *Oedipus*, in which a divination ritual takes place onstage, Manto describes the death and entrails of a sacrificial victim, but never describes her own actions or her physical part in the ritual, if she even has one.

²⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151-81.

²⁹ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 154.

but knows that if the object were to be placed before them, it might overwhelm, or make the ekphrasis itself obsolete. An ekphrastic object must therefore be the textual “other”: absent, with no voice of its own, but talked about and even given a voice by the ekphrasis’ narrator.³⁰

Mitchell’s theory seems to hold up for those ancient texts most often cited as ekphrases: The shields of Achilles (in Homer’s *Iliad*), Heracles (often attributed to Hesiod), and Aeneas (in Vergil’s *Aeneid*), for example, are fictional objects and therefore cannot be viewed by the reader or listener. This also holds true for descriptive passages that are not strictly ekphrastic in the modern sense, such as the typical messenger speech in Greek and Roman drama: A significant event—usually a death—has taken place offstage, and the event is relayed in gory detail through the eyes of a messenger, rather than shown visually to the play’s audience. Once again, the ekphrastic object does not coincide with its description.

This has particular significance for ancient tragedy, which attempts to provoke emotional responses from its audience through both verbal and visual cues. There is an interplay between showing and telling—between what the audience sees onstage and what the characters say. Speech, in tragedy, expresses characters’ opinions, reveals secrets, and describes events that occurred in the past or offstage; the visual cues of costume, setting, movement, and action provide very different information than what we would glean from listening alone. In Greek tragedy, it is unheard of for a character to spend a great amount of time describing some readily apparent visual aspect of the drama. Greek tragedy, typically, has two modes: There are sections that are primarily concerned with action, and sections that are primarily concerned with narration. The messenger-speech and the choral ode are separated from the main action of the play.

³⁰ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 157.

Tragedy operates, Aristotle tells us, “through [people] acting and not through narration, accomplishing, through pity and fear, the purging of such emotions” (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b26-28; δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι’ ἀπαγγελίας, δι’ ἔλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν).³¹ Tragedy evokes emotion through visual cues—the audience sees actors performing actions that stir up pity and fear. But what should we make of Aristotle’s pronouncement that tragedy does not provoke these emotions through narration? At first glance, he seems to be saying that the trope of the messenger-speech is inappropriate to tragedy.³² Aristotle’s corpus is, of course, full of unexplained statements, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to try to solve this particular difficulty. However, it is worth noting that Aristotle does list “enhanced language” among his requirements for tragedy (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b25; ἠδουμένῳ λόγῳ). Even if Aristotle does not believe in the effectiveness of on-stage narration, he must concede that the effect of tragedy is partly produced by its use of language. That this ἠδόμενος λόγος can be connected with Quintilian’s *ornatum* and Nicolaus’ ἐνάργεια indicates a common thread between tragic language and ekphrasis. If “enhanced language” can evoke the same emotions as dramatic action, then why should a dramatist not add ekphrasis to his repertoire?

While Aristotle is far removed from Seneca, and despite the self-contradictions inherent in his *Poetics*, his most basic observations on how tragedy functions are still applicable. The distinction he proposes between narration and action echoes in Mitchell’s analysis. Mitchell argues that “the textual other must remain completely alien; it can never be present, but must be conjured up as a potent absence or a fictive, figural presence.”³³ Ancient sources on ekphrasis—indeed, on any sort of rhetorical description—say nothing explicitly of this requirement, but Mitchell clearly

³¹ For the Greek text of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, see Aristotle, *Ars Poetica*, ed. R. Kassel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

³² This is especially concerning because the word Aristotle uses, ἀπαγγελίας, is related to ἄγγελος, the Greek word for messenger.

³³ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 158.

finds this stipulation obvious, and he hints that the absence of the ekphrastic object has always been a concrete, if unspoken, rule for the writer of an ekphrasis. His ideas about ekphrastic fear do hold true for many texts, and the *progymnasmata* do seem to assume that in the case of a typical ekphrasis, the ekphrastic object is absent. Indeed, Aphthonius's definition of ekphrasis as "a speech ... bringing [an object] palpably before the eyes" implies that the object is not *physically* brought before the audience's eyes, but instead is brought *linguistically* before the mind's eye (Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata* 12; λόγος ... ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγων ἐναργῶς). But Seneca's *Medea* seems to be an exception to Mitchell's proposed rule. If Mitchell's criterion that *Medea* must be absent from the stage during an ekphrasis of her performance is the only reason her speech at lines 740-848 cannot be considered an ekphrasis, then I suggest that Mitchell's paradigm be altered to fit the evidence. While it makes sense that in most cases an ekphrasis' purpose is better served by the absence of its object, there may be exceptions to this rule. *Medea*'s speech is one such exception.

Why *Medea*? If Seneca is to break the convention of verbal/visual separation espoused by Aristotle, implied by Quintilian and the authors of the *progymnasmata*, and later noticed and codified by Mitchell, then he must do so for a reason. *Medea*'s presence onstage in Act 4 crosses the line of "ekphrastic fear" and breaks the tradition of the isolated messenger-speech. This seems appropriate to *Medea*'s character and her particular excesses. *Medea* is already known as a crosser of boundaries. Hesiod lists *Medea* among the goddesses who married mortals:

νῦν δὲ θεάων φύλον ἀείσατε, ἠδυέπειαι
Μοῦσαι Ὀλυμπιάδες, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,
ὄσσαι δὴ θνητοῖσι παρ' ἀνδράσιν εὐνηθεῖσαι
ἀθάναται γείναντο θεοῖς ἐπιείκελα τέκνα ...

τοὺς τελέσας Ἰαωλκὸν ἀφίκετο, πολλὰ μογήσας,
ὠκείης ἐπὶ νηὸς ἄγων ἐλικώπιδα κούρην
Αἰσονίδης, καὶ μιν θαλερὴν ποιήσατ' ἄκοιτιν.
καὶ ῥ' ἦ γε δηθεῖσ' ὑπ' Ἰήσονι, ποιμένι λαῶν,
Μήδειον τέκε παῖδα ... (Hesiod, *Theogony* 965-68, 997-1001)

And now, sweet-singing Olympian muses, daughters of Aegis-bearing Zeus, sing the race of goddesses, immortals who bedded down with mortal men and bore children like gods ... The son of Aeson, having finished them off and having suffered much himself, arrived at Iolkos, bringing the quick-glancing girl on his swift ship, and made her his sturdy wife. And she was overpowered by Jason, shepherd of his people, and bore the child Medeus ...³⁴

This is a boundary violation, even if it is presented in a positive light. A goddess cannot marry a mortal without crossing a line, and the child that results from this union must be semi-divine like the other children of gods and mortals mentioned in the *Theogony*, born right on the divide between mortal and immortal.

In the later legend, as innovated by Euripides and picked up by Seneca and his contemporaries, Medea the mortal woman is not only a traveler across the physical boundaries between Colchis and Greece, but a violator of family ties. She straddles the line of marriage, married to Jason in a sense but single in another sense; and she is the murderer of her brother Apsyrtus, of her husband's new wife, and of her own children. Her infanticide is the ultimate boundary violation, and she gets away with it by crossing yet another line: She ascends into the clouds on the chariot of Helios, a mortal woman in the place of a male god.³⁵ It is not surprising, then, that Seneca should provide Medea with yet another boundary to cross. She is already a foreigner, a criminal, a divorcee, an infanticide, and a traveler across human/divine boundaries; now Seneca will make her the narrator of the ekphrasis that describes her own actions.

³⁴ For the Greek text of Hesiod's *Theogony*, see Hugh G. Evelyn-White, ed. *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

³⁵ Numerous scholars have made admirable attempts to examine Medea's role as a pre-Greek goddess, on the limited amount of evidence available; one in particular, Nancy Tuana, has suggested that Medea might be "connected to the ancient goddess Demeter, perhaps as an aspect of the goddess herself." If these scholars' suggestions are correct, or if we can rely on Hesiod's placement of Medea among the goddesses who married mortals, then Medea can be seen as beginning her career as a goddess and then slipping into the role of mortal woman; the final scene of Euripides' play then figuratively re-deifies her. Medea is in this sense the ultimate "double-crosser." See Nancy Tuana, "Medea: With the Eyes of the Lost Goddess," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 68 (1985): 253-72.

In addition to enhancing Medea's reputation as a violator of boundaries, Medea's ekphrasis of her own ritual in Act 4 emphasizes her persistence. As a lover of Jason, she is insistent, obsessed; she refuses to leave him even when he begs her to. In both Euripides and Seneca, Medea cannot be expelled, as she herself points out:

Discessit. Itane est? uadis oblitus mei
 et tot meorum facinorum? excidimus tibi?
 numquam excidemus. (Seneca, *Medea* 560-62)

He has gone. Is that how it is? You're leaving, having forgotten me and all my crimes? Have I departed from you? I will never depart.

Earlier in the play, Medea is exiled, but she begs one day's reprieve off Creon, pushing the argument until he gives in. She is divorced, but will not leave her husband's side, and obstinately refers to herself as his wife. Even at the end of Seneca's play, Medea will not let the marriage go: "Don't you recognize your wife?" she asks Jason (Seneca, *Medea* 1021; *coniugem agnoscis tuam?*). Medea stubbornly clings to her place in the world, even when it is impractical to do so; she is present when she should be absent. She even calls attention to her own persistence when she appeals to the offstage Jason: "Do you think I have left you? I will never leave" (Seneca, *Medea* 561-62; *excidimus tibi? numquam excidemus*).

Medea's speech in Act 4, then, reinforces this idea. As the object of ekphrasis, Medea should be absent from the stage, but she refuses the role of passive art object and takes over the ekphrasis from her trembling nurse. If Mitchell is correct that "ekphrastic fear" is rooted in the desire for an absent art object and the conflicting worry that the object's presence would negate the text of the ekphrasis, then Medea's persistent presence brings the audience's fears to life at the same time as it fulfills their desire.

Mitchell's chapter is focused on the divide between "ekphrastic fear" and what he calls "ekphrastic hope ... when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor,

when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: ‘to make us see.’”³⁶ There is a tension between the reader’s desire to see the ekphrastic object and the knowledge that if she *were* able to see the ekphrastic object, the ekphrasis itself would become superfluous. However, this tension may not be as alarming for the audience as Mitchell makes it out to be. I submit Act 4 of Seneca’s *Medea* as evidence that there may be another ekphrastic “moment” that Mitchell has not considered: a moment when an ekphrasis and its object purposefully coincide, producing not a failure of language but a successful enhancement of art through language. What Mitchell anxiously calls a “collapse” might thus be viewed in a more positive light. In Seneca’s *Medea*, this would be the moment when, after the nurse finishes her monologue, Medea arrives onstage and picks up where the nurse left off, becoming both object and observer, performer and narrator. Medea, I will argue, takes upon herself a convergence of roles in the fourth act of *Medea*. Through this purposeful ekphrastic collapse, Seneca amplifies his heroine’s dramatic power during the latter half of Act 4.

Analysis of Medea’s ekphrastic collapse will benefit from the input of Andrew Sprague Becker, who can help us answer the question of what exactly is collapsing during the transition between the nurse’s monologue and Medea’s. Becker proposes a system of elements, four categories into which we might divide ekphrastic literary techniques:

From reading ekphrases, especially the Shield of Achilles, I have derived a paradigm that separates the different levels of response to which the description calls attention. Ekphrases describe not only the referent of the image, but also the relationship of that referent to the medium of worked metal, to the manufacture of the image, to the artisan and artistry, and the effect of all this on the viewer of the image (usually the bard); the bard, in turn, acts as our guide as we imagine the images.³⁷

³⁶ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 152.

³⁷ Andrew Sprague Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 41.

Because Becker is mainly interested in Homer's depiction of the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18, his language in the above quote assumes that the ekphrastic object is a work of visual art; however, his categories could easily be applied to other types of ekphrasis.

Becker divides pictorial ekphrasis into four elements. There is the *animadversor*, the narrator who reacts to the ekphrastic object, and anticipates the reaction of the audience.³⁸ Becker's *animadversor* might be said to cover D'Angelo's stipulation that an ekphrasis should make a value judgment on its object. Then there is the *ars et artifex*, the artist who creates the ekphrastic object, and any skill, technique, or material used in the creation.³⁹ The third category, *opus ipsum*, describes the work of art itself—the shape of Achilles' shield, for example, or the border of the coverlet described in Catullus 64.⁴⁰ Finally, there are the *res ipsae*, “the things themselves,” which Becker uses to refer to what is represented by the ekphrastic object.⁴¹ On Achilles' shield, the *res ipsae* are the two cities and their citizens; on the coverlet in Catullus 64, Ariadne is the *res ipsa*. We might say that Becker defines ekphrasis as an *animadversor* describing an *artifex*-crafted *opus ipsum*, which in turn depicts the *res ipsae*. As previously mentioned, these terms can be applied to any ekphrasis; Becker himself applies them to the first lines of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively, implying that these are microcosmic ekphrases that adhere to the four categories listed above, with song (*Iliad* 1.1; ἄειδε) and declamation (*Odyssey* 1.1; ἔννεπε) as their ekphrastic objects.⁴² Like Medea's performance in Seneca's play, Homer's Muses are described as singers and creators.

³⁸ Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 43.

³⁹ Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 43.

⁴⁰ Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 42-43.

⁴¹ Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 42.

⁴² Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 44-47. Becker suggests that the first three words of the *Iliad* (Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά) and the first four words of the *Odyssey* (ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα) each contain the four elements that he outlines in this chapter of his monograph. In each case, the poet asserts his own point of view as *animadversor* through use of the imperative (and, in the *Odyssey*, through use of the pronoun μοι); the *artifex* (θεά, Μοῦσα) is instructed to create a work of performance art in the form of poetry (ἄειδε, ἔννεπε); and the Muse's poem—the *opus ipsum*—depicts a *res ipsa* (Μῆνιν, ἄνδρα).

An understanding of Becker's categories is especially relevant to Act 4 of Seneca's *Medea*, both as an extended ekphrasis whose object is a work of performance art, and as an instance of ekphrastic collapse. Performance art naturally rounds the corners on several of Becker's categories, for the performer is both *artifex* and, through her actions, *opus ipsum*. In the case of a magic ritual such as Medea's, the *res ipsae* are also contained within the performer; they are projections of her psyche. Seneca's Medea thus takes on three different roles during the nurse's description of her performance. Insofar as she is a skilled performer, she is the *artifex*; insofar as her body and voice act as vehicles for her art, she is the *opus ipsum*; insofar as her will commands the ritual, she contains the *res ipsae* within her in the form of intentions, and projects them into the audience's view through her art.

In her monologue at lines 670-739, Medea's nurse acts as *animadversor*, providing a degree of separation between the art object and the audience. But when Medea enters the stage at line 740 and begins to speak, she takes on the role of *animadversor* in addition to the other categories she already embodies. The ekphrastic collapse is thus complete. Medea has not only brought the ekphrastic object before the eyes of the ekphrasis' audience; she has elided Becker's four categories, and leaves no role unclaimed.

Medea's violation of the usual boundaries of ekphrasis and drama is in some ways an act of destruction, of elevating herself above the world and rendering whatever is left over obsolete. Even during her act of creation, as she employs her *ars* to infuse a robe with divine magic, she destroys the agency of the other characters: She leaves no room for anyone else to take part in the action except as a silent extra. From the time Medea begins speaking at line 740 to the time she finishes at line 848, no other character takes action of her or his own volition. Both nurse and children receive orders from Medea (817-19 and 843-48), and since Medea does not complain

about their insubordination, we can assume that they act as she commands them. The gods, too, receive their orders from Medea, and twice provide her with signs of their obedience:

sonuistis, arae, tripodas agnosco meos
fauente commotos dea. (Seneca, *Medea* 785-86)

You have sounded, o altars; I see that my tripods have been moved by the acquiescing goddess.

Vota tenentur: ter latratus
audax Hecate dedit et sacros
edidit ignes face luctifera. (Seneca, *Medea* 840-42)

My prayers are answered: Three times bold Hecate barked, and put forth sacred fires from her baneful torch.

Every other character who is either mentioned or present onstage during Medea's monologue is her subordinate. The nurse aids her in poisoning the robe and in summoning her sons; the gods grant her prayers; the boys hug their mother goodbye and deliver her gift to the princess as she instructs them; and the princess is destined to burn to death, just as Medea predicts.

But Medea's violation of ekphrastic conventions and of other characters' agency is not the only destructive act she performs during her monologue. Indeed, throughout the play Medea conflates creation and destruction. During her first appearance onstage, she proclaims, "My vengeance is born, it is born: I have given birth to it" (Seneca, *Medea* 25-26; *parta iam, parta ultio est: / peperit*). Her planned destruction of Jason will depend on an act of birth. But this line has the added effect of mirroring Euripides' Medea's proclamation, "what I bore, I will destroy" (Euripides, *Medea* 792-93; τέκνα γὰρ κατακτενῶ | τᾶμ').⁴³ Not only has Medea given birth to a

⁴³ For the Greek text of Euripides' *Medea*, see Euripides, *Medea*, ed. Donald J. Mastronarde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). I translate τέκνα as "what I bore" because, in contrast to the Greek παῖδες, τέκνα is neuter and bears a more impersonal connotation. Throughout the play, Medea and Jason are prone to calling their children τέκνα, while others call them παῖδες; for the unhappy couple, the children are objects over which they struggle, and which Medea regards as her own creation.

plan of revenge; she has given birth to children. The implication, though Medea herself may not realize it yet, is that the children will ultimately be the means through which she takes her revenge.

Medea's ultimate creative project is also a project of destruction. In Act 4, her creation of both a unique ritual performance and a magical robe results in the death of Creusa and Creon. This, in turn, allows her to construct her own identity through destruction. Only after her ritual and the death of her enemies can Medea declare, "Now I am Medea; my nature is increased by evil deeds" (Seneca, *Medea* 910; *Medea nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis*).

The remainder of this thesis will be focused on the conflation of creative and destructive acts in Seneca's *Medea*, both in relation to Medea's transgression of the boundaries of ekphrasis and mortality, and in her creation of her own identity through destructive actions. In Chapter 2, I will demonstrate how Seneca's use of ekphrastic collapse in Act 4 of *Medea* works to empower Medea on her own terms, and how this contributes to her self-definition. By the end of Chapter 3, it will be clear exactly how Medea arrives at her declaration: *Medea nunc sum*.

Chapter 2: Two Monologues in Seneca's *Medea*, Act 4

Act 4 of Seneca's *Medea* is unique in Senecan tragedy (and in extant ancient tragedy as a whole) in that the entirety of the episode is comprised of two monologues. From lines 670 to 739, Medea's nurse delivers a speech that prefaces Medea's entrance; Medea then delivers a monologue of over a hundred lines, during which she performs the magic ritual that will seal the fate of Creusa, daughter of Creon. Discounting prologues, no other known scene in ancient tragedy contains only a pair of monologues with no dialogue or speech-contest between characters; even lengthy messenger speeches are typically followed by a dialogue in which the chorus or another character asks the messenger follow-up questions.⁴⁴ This scene, then, should be striking to even the most casual of observers. And because it involves one monologue which closely follows both modern and ancient definitions of and assumptions about ekphrasis, and one monologue that deviates from the norms of ekphrasis as laid out by W.J.T. Mitchell, the scene provides a unique opportunity to study the parameters of ekphrasis and the ways in which Medea transgresses literary, as well as mortal and moral, boundaries.

During her sixty-line monologue, the nurse describes Medea's preparations for the ritual. This speech fits Mitchell's specific definition of ekphrasis, which is described in the previous chapter, in three ways: that Medea is not physically present onstage during the speech; that Medea is "othered" not only as the object of an ekphrasis, but also as a foreigner on Greek soil; and that the nurse gives Medea a voice both by relaying one of her incantations and by preparing the audience for Medea's appearance.

⁴⁴ Of those Senecan tragedies that have long messenger-speeches, the messenger-scenes of *Thyestes*, *Phaedra*, and *Trojan Women* both begin and end with dialogue between the messenger and chorus or characters; *Oedipus'* messenger-speech is followed by a dialogue between Oedipus and Jocasta; and *Agamemnon's* messenger Eurybates is ushered in by a dialogue between himself and Clytaemnestra.

Medea is conspicuous by her absence during the nurse's speech. It is through the nurse's vivid descriptions, and through the speech within a speech, that she becomes Mitchell's "fictive, figural presence."⁴⁵ This fictive presence is increased through the speech-within-a-speech, during which the nurse relays Medea's words to the audience, making sure that Medea's voice is heard and her presence felt even while she is absent from the stage. As Mitchell notes, a chief function of ekphrasis is to bring the absent art object to life, and it is not unheard of for the figures depicted on or by this object to speak, quite literally, through the verbal medium of ekphrasis. The figure of a boy on the shield of Achilles is said to "play a lovely song on his clear lyre, and sing the pretty lay of Linos with his delicate voice" (Homer, *Iliad* 18.569-71; φόρμιγγι λιγείη | ἱμερόεν κιθάριζε, λίνον δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄειδε | λεπταλέη φωνῆ);⁴⁶ Theocritus describes a cup on which a painted woman is "laughing" at two men who "strive in turns with words, one with the other" (Theocritus, *Idyll* 1.34-36; ἀμοιβαδὶς ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος | νεικειουσ' ἐπέεσσι ... γέλαισα).⁴⁷ And Ariadne speaks directly from the coverlet of Thetis and Peleus' couch in Catullus 64, her words relayed so precisely by the narrator that Ariadne briefly becomes a narrator herself:

atque haec extremis maestam dixisse querellis,
 frigidulos udo singultus ore cientem:
 'sicine me patriis auectam, perfide, ab aris,
 perfide, deserto liquisti in litore, Theseu?' (Catullus 64.130-33)

... and the sad girl spoke these words with the greatest complaints, calling forth faint sobs from her wet mouth: "So, traitor, have you left me, stolen from my paternal gods, upon this deserted shore, traitor—Theseus?"⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 158.

⁴⁶ For the Greek text of Homer's *Iliad*, see Homer, *Homeri Opera*, vol. 2: *Iliad, Books 13-24*, ed. D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920).

⁴⁷ For the Greek text of Theocritus, see Theocritus, *A Selection: Idylls 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, and 13*, ed. Richard Hunter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ For the Latin text of Catullus, see Gaius Valerius Catullus, *Carmina*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

Ariadne's speech continues for nearly seventy lines, over a quarter of the full length of the ekphrasis. As Andrew Laird observes in his study of Catullus 64, "[Ariadne] is heard, in a sense, by the poem's audience."⁴⁹

The transformation of ekphrastic object into speaking subject also takes place in Seneca, where the nurse spends exactly one quarter of her sixty-line monologue relaying Medea's words:

'Parua sunt' inquit 'mala
et vile telum est, ima quod tellus creat:
caelo petam uenena. iam iam tempus est
aliquid mouere fraude uulgari altius.
huc ille uasti more torrentis iacens
descendat anguis, cuius immensos duae,
maior minorque, sentiunt nodos ferae
(maior Pelasgis apta, Sidoniis minor),
pressasque tandem soluat Ophiuchus manus
uirusque fundat; adsit ad cantus meos
laccessere ausus gemina Python numina,
et Hydra et omnis redeat Herculea manu
succisa serpens caede se reparans sua.
tu quoque relictis pervigil Colchis ades,
sopite primum cantibus, serpens, meis.' (Seneca, *Medea* 690-704)

'The evils,' she says, 'are paltry, and it is a common weapon that the depths of the earth produce: I will seek poisons from heaven. Now, now is the time to set in motion something deeper than common trickery. Let the snake that lies like a vast, rushing stream descend here, whose immense knots the two beasts, greater and smaller, feel (the greater is joined to the Pelasgians, the smaller to the Sidonians). And let Ophiuchus finally loose his hands and pour out his venoms; let Python, who dared to challenge the twin gods, be present at my songs; so too Hydra and every serpent cut off by Hercules' hand, repairing itself by its own death. You also, always-watchful serpent, lulled first by my songs, come to me and leave the Colchians behind.

Medea's speech, presented to the audience through the conduit of the nurse, brings Medea's unique voice, her confidence and continuous uses of divine imagery, onto the stage. The words themselves also suggest presence: Medea says that she is acting in the here (Seneca, *Medea* 694, 699, and 703;

⁴⁹ Andrew Laird, "Sounding Out Ekphrasis: Art and Text in Catullus 64," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993): 29.

huc, adsit, and ades) and now (Seneca, *Medea* 692; *iam iam tempus est*). But in the nurse's mouth, the *magicis cantibus* (684) with which Medea is now beginning to cast her spell are stripped of their power to do harm. Thus, not only does the nurse give voice to Medea's offstage actions; she serves as a buffer between Medea and the audience, at least for the moment.

The nurse gives voice to Medea in more ways than one. We cannot forget that Medea will appear onstage directly after the nurse finishes speaking. The nurse, then, acts not only as go-between but as a master of ceremonies who introduces an upcoming performer. And Medea is about to perform in more ways than one: She will not only perform her magic ritual for the gods' viewing pleasure; she will also recite her ekphrasis for the theatre audience. The nurse's purpose here is to give the audience a context in which to hear (or read) Medea's following speech and view her actions. She sets up Medea's entrance first through a personal statement of emotion (670-75), then by relaying Medea's words (690-704) and providing a list of Medea's ingredients (675-90, 705-36), and finally with a three-line proclamation of Medea's approach and her impending monologue:

addit uenenis uerba non illis minus
metuenda. —Sonuit ecce uaesano gradu
canitque. mundus uocibus primis tremit. (Seneca, *Medea* 737-39)

To her poisons she adds words, no less to be feared than poison. Look! She sounds with frenzied step, and sings. The world trembles at her first words.

These final lines of the nurse's speech preface Medea's entrance. The nurse provides the audience's emotional response for them. With the gerundive *metuenda*, she implies a command; the exclamation *ecce*, too, is a command, also implying vision, on the part of both audience and nurse: The nurse implies that she is able to see Medea already, perhaps waiting in the wings; once she enters the stage, the audience is told, she is to be regarded with fear and awe. The nurse also informs us that Medea will deliver a speech when she arrives onstage; nothing could conceivably

follow the nurse's final line but Medea's *prima vox*. Through the nurse's instructions to the audience, Medea's soon-to-be-heard voice gains potency and legitimacy. The nurse alerts the audience members that they themselves are a part of the *mundus* Medea awes with her voice; thus, they have a compelling reason to listen to what she has to say.

Though Mitchell's implied mistrust of the unfiltered voices he deems "other" in his chapter on ekphrasis is outdated, it is worth noting that Seneca's Roman audience would have shared his sentiments. Medea is the consummate foreigner in Greek and Roman mythology; she hails from the edge of the known world and poses unknown dangers to its civilized inhabitants. The action that Medea takes in this passage—her magical attack on the princess, and, indirectly, on the king of Corinth—does nothing to refute her status as "other." By contrast, the nurse, though she is herself a foreigner by birth, spends the play providing Medea with counsel that is much friendlier to the Greek *polis* and to Roman society (and, it should be noted, to Seneca's own Stoic views). It is likely, then, that the focalization of this prologue through the eyes of the nurse is meant in part to bridge the gap between the barbarian Medea and the Roman audience. Throughout the play, Medea's nurse has attempted to act as her voice of reason, a sympathetic figure whose words are often in keeping with Seneca's own Stoic philosophy. Here, she provides the audience with a way of connecting with Medea despite her perceived otherness. Because the nurse is nominally on Medea's side in this matter, the audience can use this lens to regard Medea's words with some measure of sympathy, or at least avoid disregarding them out of hand.

Again, we must engage with Becker, this time on the issue of focalization. Of Becker's four constituent parts of ekphrasis—*opus ipsum*, *res ipsae*, *ars et artifex*, and *animadversor*—the *animadversor* is the agent through whom the ekphrasis is focalized.⁵⁰ Since ekphrasis, by the

⁵⁰ Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 42-43. Becker's categories can be translated as *the work itself*, *the subjects themselves*, *craftsman*, and *contemplator* (or, more literally, *the one who turns the work over in her or his mind*).

modern definition outlined in Chapter 1 of this thesis, describes a work of art (*opus ipsum*), it is common to see ekphrases focalized through a narrator (*animadversor*) whose subjective response influences the description, in addition to the opinions and perceptions of any other onlookers who may be mentioned in the ekphrasis. In the case of Medea's magical performance, the initial *animadversor* of her work is the nurse; she is cast, in the first half of Act 4, as the go-between for the audience and Medea, providing a subjective interpretation of Medea's work calculated to influence the audience's emotional response. And her influence is considerable. Becker's *animadversor* can be seen in the same light as the "focal character" of Gérard Genette's "internal focalization;" such a character shares her thoughts openly with the audience, and the narration—or in this case the monologue—"is content to describe what its [focal character] sees" and how she feels about it.⁵¹

In the first chapter of this thesis, I briefly outlined the two monologues of Act 4 in conjunction with Becker's four categories. It is necessary to expand upon this idea here. If the most basic modern definition of ekphrasis is, as Mai Al-Nakib suggests, "the expression of one form of representation in terms of another," then we must ask what Medea's ritual performance represents; this will be the *res ipsa* of any ekphrasis of the ritual.⁵² It seems clear that Medea's ritual does not represent a place, character, or event in the way that the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18 represents cities, dancers, and herdsmen (among other things). Nevertheless, like arguably all forms of performance art, Medea's ritual does have a representative function; it is not simply a rote series of gestures and words. Instead, what Medea is representing during this ritual is her own intentions: She uses the ritual to express her desired outcome—the death of Creusa, and, later, the

⁵¹ Gérard Genette, "Mood," in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 189-92.

⁵² Al-Nakib, "Assia Djebar's Musical Ekphrasis," 253.

death of her own sons—in terms that the gods can understand and will approve of. The spell Medea puts on the robe requires not only poisons (690-92, 821-32) and relics of famous mythological fires (771-76), but also verbal *descriptions* of these ingredients, in meter and in Medea’s own words. Her desires are echoed (*re-presented*) both verbally and visually by her art.

Becker provides the caveat that “*res ipsae, opus ipsum, ars et artifex, and animadversor* are not mutually exclusive categories, and their easy combination in the ekphrasis leads us to admire both visual and verbal representation.”⁵³ An element of a given ekphrasis might fit into more than one of Becker’s categories; ekphrasis is not an exact science, but an art. The nurse’s speech in Seneca’s *Medea* is extraordinary in that it combines three of Becker’s categories (*ars et artifex, opus ipsum, and res ipsae*): Medea is the skilled performer, and her actions the performance; her intentions, which she depicts in a manner through her physical and verbal act of magic, are a sort of *res ipsa*.

If Medea and her actions make up three of Becker’s categories, then the nurse belongs to the fourth. She relays the beginning of Medea’s ritual as if she is watching (and listening to) Medea’s performance herself. But far from simply reciting a litany of Medea’s actions, the nurse contributes her own point of view and subjective response to the ekphrasis. The nurse’s views on the performance, and the views she implies that the audience should take, momentarily call the focus of her speech away from Medea’s offstage actions and provide an evaluation of Medea’s artistic work. The nurse’s views as *animadversor* bookend her speech; just as she ends with the suggestion that the audience should regard Medea’s impending presence with fear (Seneca, *Medea* 737-39; *addit uenenis uerba non illis minus metuenda ... mundus vocibus primis tremit*), she begins by calling on her own fears, born of experience:

⁵³ Becker, *The Shield of Achilles*, 95.

pauet animus, horret: magna pernicies adest.
 immane quantum augescit et semet dolor
 accendit ipse uimque praeteritam integrat.
 uidi furem saepe et aggressam deos,
 caelum trahentem: maius his, maius parat
 Medea monstrum. (Seneca, *Medea* 670-75)

My soul fears, it trembles; great destruction is at hand. So greatly does her grief grow and burn itself up, and refresh its former vigor. Often have I seen her raging and assailing the gods, drawing down the sky: Greater than these, greater is the wonder Medea is preparing.

The nurse begins her speech with *pauet*, and the first line of her speech contains three words related to fear and danger: *pauet*, *horret*, and *pernicies*. In one line, the nurse both identifies herself with the viewpoint of her “civilized” audience, who, one might expect, would find a display of murderous magic frightening, and instructs them as to how to react to what is to come. To return to Mitchell, the focalization of this ekphrasis gives the audience a full experience of the situation, not just a clinical explanation of what is happening: One function of ekphrasis is to “discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted to do: ‘to make us see.’”⁵⁴

D.P. Fowler suggests that in some cases the focalization of ekphrasis may constitute “an instance of pathetic fallacy, however we wish to define that: the storm outside reflects the storm inside.”⁵⁵ Whether the nurse’s speech contains elements of pathetic fallacy or not is left open to interpretation; her ascription of human emotion to a snake (Seneca, *Medea* 688; *carmine audito stupet*) and her exaggerated assertion that “the world trembles at her first words” (Seneca, *Medea* 739; *mundus uocibus primis tremit*) are questionable at best. The nurse’s inner conflict between her loyalty to Medea and a civilized revulsion and horror at Medea’s schemes informs her descriptions of others’ reactions. But this is exactly what makes her a fit mouthpiece for the ekphrasis. Torn between righteousness and compassion, the nurse embodies the conflict at the very

⁵⁴ Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 152.

⁵⁵ D.P. Fowler, “Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis,” 27.

heart of the play. Medea's choice of righteous anger over motherly love is here echoed in a less extreme version by her nurse, who chooses (at least for the present moment) moral terror over loyalty, and brings the *mundus* along with her.

The nurse, though she is the main *animadversor* of the passage, is not the only *animadversor*. The snake that answers Medea's call (first mentioned at line 686) demonstrates the versatility of Seneca's ekphrasis as it makes the transition from one of Medea's ingredients (part of her *ars*) to an *animadversor* of her song:

hic saeua serpens corpus immensum trahit
trifidamque linguam exertat et quaerit quibus
mortifera ueniat: carmine audito stupet
tumidumque nodis corpus aggestis plicat
cogitque in orbes. (Seneca, *Medea* 686-90)

Here a savage serpent drags its enormous body and flicks out its forked tongue, and looks for someone to whom it might deal death. On hearing her song it stops, amazed, and twists its puffed-up body into swelling knots and coils itself in rings.

It is Medea's *carmen* that causes the snake to stop and listen, transforming it from part of Medea's recipe into a point of focalization, whose amazed response the audience might be expected to imitate. The verb *stupet* also carries the connotation of response to a visual cue (as in *Aeneid* 1.495, when Aeneas is struck with emotion on seeing the Trojan War frieze at the temple of Juno);⁵⁶ this verb and the participle *audito* indicate that the snake has momentarily stepped outside of Medea's *ars* and become an audience member in its own right, seeing and hearing Medea's performance in much the same way that the nurse does. The snake both receives detailed description from the nurse's point of view—lines 689-90 are dense with *enargeia*—and interprets Medea's song from its own viewpoint.

⁵⁶ "He stops and clings with his gaze, fixed in one place" (*stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno*). For the Latin text of Vergil's *Aeneid*, see Vergil, *Opera*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

Medea may have an audience and require the interpretation of a narrator during the first portion of her ritual, but she refuses to simply be an object to be viewed. During the nurse's speech, Medea's physical appearance is downplayed entirely; the focus is on her voice, her skills, and the ingredients she uses in the ritual. The closest the nurse comes to describing Medea's body is in one mention of her "left hand" (Seneca, *Medea* 680; *laeva manu*) and two of her "frenzied footsteps" (Seneca, *Medea* 675 and 738; *attonito gradu ... uaesano gradu*). This lack of attention to Medea's appearance is strange for two reasons: first, considering that the nurse's speech is an ekphrasis, descriptive by its very nature; and second, considering the sheer amount of attention that is paid to Medea's appearance throughout the rest of the play.

In her article, "A Stoic Aspect of Senecan Drama: Portraiture," Elizabeth C. Evans identifies three types of physical description used by rhetoricians and dramatists: the quick and general description of two or three words, the description of facial expression, and the sustained description of the entire body.⁵⁷ All three types are used to describe Seneca's Medea. In Act 2 Creon briefly describes Medea's appearance as she approaches, providing only a little more detail than the nurse does during Act 4: "She approaches, ferocious; and, threatening, searches for something to say as she comes closer" (Seneca, *Medea* 186-87; *fert gradum contra ferox / minaxque nostros propius affatus petit*). In Act 3, Jason remarks on Medea's rage and her posture: "And look! She's seen me, she springs forth, she rages, she shows her hatred: All her resentment is in her face" (Seneca, *Medea* 445-46; *atque ecce, uiso memet exiluit, furit, / fert odia prae se: totus in uultu est dolor*). The nurse also focuses on Medea's expression in Act 3:

flammata facies, spiritum ex alto citat,
proclamat, oculos uberi fletu rigat,
renidet: omnis specimen affectus capit. (Seneca, *Medea* 387-89)

⁵⁷ Elizabeth C. Evans, "A Stoic Aspect of Senecan Drama: Portraiture," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 81 (1950): 170.

Her face is aflame, she urges her breath from her breast, she shouts, she moistens her eyes with abundant weeping, she smiles: She seizes the appearance of every emotion.

Additionally, seventeen lines of the fourth choral ode are dedicated to Medea's appearance, both that of her body and of her face (849-65). The chorus describes Medea as "a bloody Maenad, carried off headlong by savage love" (Seneca, *Medea* 849-51; *Quonam cruenta maenas / praeceps amore saeuo / rapitur?*) and describes her "shaking her head" (Seneca, *Medea* 856-57; *caput ... quatiens*). That Medea's appearance, especially her facial expressions, should receive so much attention during the greater part of the play but be almost entirely absent from the language of Act 4's ekphrasis indicates something very important about the ekphrasis. Medea herself is not the object of description during Act 4; she is not a passive or static object, like a painting or shield that can be described simply based on appearance. Medea is active, dynamic; her body is in flux, always moving as she calls the gods to witness her power. She is the object of ekphrasis only insofar as she acts as *artifex*, creates the *opus ipsum*, and expresses the *res ipsae*. Her physical appearance is largely unimportant to her role in the ritual.⁵⁸ When her appearance is important, it is only in terms of the *manner* of her performance (for example, she binds her hair "with a band in the manner of my people" [Seneca, *Medea* 752; *more gentis uinculo soluens comam*], and bares her breast "like a Maenad" [Seneca, *Medea* 806; *nudato pectore maenas*]).

⁵⁸ Compare Seneca's description of Medea as *maenas* with Catullus 64.60-65, where Ariadne's appearance, evident in Catullus' use of adjectives and careful description of her clothing, or lack thereof, is at least as important as her actions. Indeed, she stands as unmoving as a mere object:

quem procul ex alga maestis Minois ocellis,
saxea ut effigies bacchantis, prospicit, eheu,
prospicit et magnis curarum fluctuat undis,
non flauo retinens subtilem uertice mitram,
non contacta leui uelatum pectus amictu,
non tereti strophio lactentis uincta papillas ...

[Theseus] whom the Minoan girl watches from the far-off seaweed with her *sad* eyes, *like a stone effigy* of a Maenad, alas, she watches and whirls with great waves of sorrow, *no thin hairband* binding her *golden* hair, *no light cloak* covering her chest, *no smooth breastband* binding her *milk-white* breasts ... [Emphasis mine.]

Like Mitchell's conception of the ekphrastic object as "the textual other,"⁵⁹ Medea is offstage during the nurse's speech; so far the audience has experienced her performance only through the verbal medium of the nurse's narration. But Medea is not quite "a seen and silent object."⁶⁰ She is more heard than seen even during the nurse's description of her actions; she is not, as she has been elsewhere in the play, presented as an object of someone else's gaze. Even in the nurse's speech, we get the sense that we are observing Medea on her own terms. The nurse is horror-struck by Medea's voice, as much in Medea's power as is the snake of lines 686-90, and a quarter of her speech is dedicated to relaying Medea's words verbatim. It is Medea, not the nurse, who ultimately controls who is allowed to look, and in what way. The nurse is, after all, Medea's slave; Medea *allows* the nurse to speak for her.

From here, Medea makes a pivotal transition. During the nurse's speech, Medea initially fills three of Becker's four categories; she is the *artifex*, her actions are the *opus ipsum*, and her intentions are the *res ipsae*. But when she begins her own monologue and begins to describe her own artistic performance, she takes on in addition the role of *animadversor*. Medea focalizes her own continuing ekphrasis, combining all of Becker's categories and violating Mitchell's condition that an ekphrasis cannot coexist with its object. Medea describes her own actions as she completes them; she combines craftsmanship, performance, and narration. Her combined role as *artifex*, *res ipsa*, *opus ipsum*, and *animadversor* is apparent throughout the 109 lines of her speech, but it is especially apparent during lines 797-811, as we shall see.

Broadly speaking, the first 103 lines of Medea's monologue, which constitute the magic ritual, can be broken up into three sections: lines 730-86, during which Medea calls on certain gods and lists her qualifications and the ingredients she uses; lines 787-816, during which Medea

⁵⁹ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 158.

⁶⁰ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 162.

describes a scene in the heavens, her own current actions, and her motivations for these actions; and lines 817-42, during which Medea instructs the assisting nurse, lists the sources of her fiery powers, and asks for and receives Hecate's blessing. That the main body of Medea's speech can be broken down into three sections that, in turn, can each be broken into three sub-sections, of which the central sub-section is always the most elaborate, is neither coincidental nor surprising; both in his tragedies and in his philosophical treatises, Seneca is fond of composing in triads.⁶¹

Additionally, ancient Roman culture often associated the numbers three and nine with magic, for example in the three faces of the goddess Hecate.⁶² This triple tripling adds mystique to the ritual, and is echoed in the sign that Hecate gives of Medea's success, a triple bark and a triple flame:

Vota tenentur: ter latratus
audax Hecate dedit et sacros
edidit ignes face luctifera. (Seneca, *Medea* 840-42)

My prayers are answered: Three times bold Hecate barked, and put forth sacred fires from her baneful torch.

Emory B. Lease, in his article "The Number Three: Mysterious, Mystic, Magic," lists dozens of instances of the number three in Greek and Latin literature, all connected with mythology, ritual, or cult.⁶³ He calls special attention to three-faced Hecate, and to Ovid's Medea, whose particular ritual he summarizes helpfully:

⁶¹ See, for example, *De Providentia* 1.2.1: "Just as so many rivers, so much rain cast down from on high, so great a force of mineral springs do not change the flavor of the sea ..." (*Quemadmodum tot amnes, tantum superne deiectorum imbrium, tanta medicatorum vis fontium non mutant saporem maris ...*). For the Latin text of *De Providentia*, see Seneca, *Moral Essays: Volume 1*, ed. John W. Basore (London: Heinemann, 1928).

⁶² Additionally, Eugene Tavenner suggests that the Romans believed that the number three could aid them in "farm practice, the control of noxious animals, the averting of the evil eye, love magic, and the prevention and cure of disease." Serpents, in particular, could be controlled by proper use of the number three, as Pliny the Elder and pseudo-Apuleius tell us (Pliny, *Natural History* 20.171; Apuleius, *De Virtute Herbarum*, 91.2). See Eugene Tavenner, "Three as a Magic Number in Latin Literature," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 47 (1916): 117.

⁶³ Emory B. Lease, "The Number Three: Mysterious, Mystic, Magic," *Classical Philology* 14 (1919): 56-73.

So also the enchantress, Medea, indulges in a 3-fold incantation in order to put to sleep the dragon of the 3-forked tongue, and, as a preliminary step to invoking divine aid, “3 nights before the full moon thrice turns about and thrice sprinkles water on her head before crying out a 3-fold supplication to Hecate of the 3 forms” (Ovid, *Metamorph.* Vii.153; 190).⁶⁴

Medea and the goddess to whom she chooses to dedicate herself thus both have a traditional connection with the number three, and Seneca’s Medea continues that tradition with her ritual monologue. In any case, Medea’s ritual is made up of nine distinct subdivisions; Medea’s instructions for and about her sons (843-48) constitutes the tenth and final portion of her monologue, though it is not part of her ritual.

Of the three main divisions of Medea’s monologue, the second is the natural continuation of the nurse’s ekphrastic prologue. Medea here describes in sensory detail both her vision and her actions. But the first section of Medea’s monologue also contains some elements of ekphrasis, as well as elements that recall the nurse’s speech. In some places, Medea’s speech is almost a reiteration of the nurse’s—with the critical difference that Medea herself is present onstage this time, and that she acts as her own interpreter to both the audience and the gods. With no buffer between herself and the audience, Medea is free to construct her own identity, and she does so with an intensely dramatic, violent, and self-aggrandizing ritual act.

Before we turn to the self-definition that Medea puts forth during her monologue in Act 4, it may be helpful to examine comments made by John G. Fitch, Siobhan McElduff, and Gianni Guastella on the subject of identity. Guastella addresses Seneca’s *Medea* directly, and he sees Medea’s identity as tripartite: *virgo*, the girl she was before she met Jason; *coniunx*, the wife; and *mater*, the mother of her two sons. This identity, he argues, is beginning to come apart at the beginning of Seneca’s play: “The divorce strips away the meaning of everything that the *virgo*

⁶⁴ Lease, “The Number Three,” 62.

Medea did in order to become the *coniunx/mater*.⁶⁵ The actions Medea takes during the play are an attempt to regain her sense of self and to reconstruct her fractured identity. During the prologue of the play, Guastella argues, “Seneca’s Medea declares that *scelus*, crime, has been the guiding thread of her life, and so it will supply the means by which she can attempt to reconstruct her own identity.”⁶⁶ This promise is ultimately fulfilled with the murder of the children.

Fitch and McElduff, in their joint article, “The Construction of the Self in Senecan Drama,” argue that “Senecan tragedy is centrally concerned with the processes by which its *dramatis personae* construct, adopt and reinforce identities for themselves.”⁶⁷ Medea certainly fits this model, and Act 4 is a pivotal point in her process of self-definition. Though Guastella glosses over the ritual of Act 4, and Fitch and McElduff do not mention it at all, this act is undoubtedly important to the construction of Medea’s identity. The ritual is what stands in between Medea’s concept of her potential self, “I will become Medea,” (Seneca, *Medea* 171; *Medea fiam*), to her claim of self-actualization in the declaration, “Now I am Medea” (Seneca, *Medea* 910; *Medea nunc sum*). Ironically—or perhaps intentionally—the declaration *Medea fiam* directly precedes the nurse’s reminder of another facet of Medea’s identity: “You are a mother” (Seneca, *Medea* 171; *Mater es*). Later in the play, Medea’s declaration *Medea nunc sum* marks her fully resolved decision to kill her children, and thus remove the part of herself that is a mother. Medea makes this transition from mother to murderer during her monologue in Act 4, where she prays for the death of Jason’s innocent new bride, setting her up to kill her even more innocent children at the play’s climax. Act 4 also displays the conflation of Medea’s creative and destructive powers in its full glory; later, she will kill the children she created, another conflation of creation and destruction.

⁶⁵ Gianni Guastella, “*Virgo, Coniunx, Mater*: The Wrath of Seneca’s Medea,” *Classical Antiquity* 20 (2001): 200.

⁶⁶ Guastella, “*Virgo, Coniunx, Mater*,” 201.

⁶⁷ John J. Fitch and Siobhan McElduff, “Construction of the Self in Senecan Drama,” *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002): 18.

The first section of Medea's speech can be divided into three parts: her invocation to the gods (740-51), her enumeration of her own past deeds (752-70), and her list of magical ingredients (771-86). Just as the nurse begins her speech with a personal appeal, Medea begins with the personal *comprecor* (740). Just as the nurse calls on the audience's knowledge of her own character as the never-heeded voice of reason, Medea reinforces her own persona in the first few lines of her speech. This is not the first time that Seneca's Medea has called on the gods; indeed, in her opening monologue, Medea calls on gods "to whom it is more appropriate for Medea to pray" (Seneca, *Medea* 8-9; *quosque Medeae magis fas est precari*). The opening line of her monologue at 740, especially with its use of *comprecor*, recalls not only the prologue-speech of the play but also the nurse's self-definition—including the determination to separate herself from her charge—at lines 670-75. The point comes across: Medea is taking her identity into her own hands.

The two following subsections—the list of deeds (752-70) and the list of ingredients (771-86)—further recall the nurse's speech. The first of these subsections echoes the lines in which the nurse attempted to define Medea for the audience: "Often I have seen her raging and threatening the gods, dragging down the sky" (Seneca, *Medea* 673-74; *vidi furem saepe et aggressam deos, / caelum trahentem*); Medea says that "with heaven's law thrown into chaos, the world saw the sun and stars together, and you, bears, have touched the forbidden sea" at her command (Seneca, *Medea* 757-59; *pariterque mundus lege confusa aetheris / et solem et astra vidit et vetitum mare / tetigistis, ursae*). The second sub-section, the list of ingredients, also continues the list of ingredients that the nurse provided at lines 705-36.

Medea's description of her own past actions begins as follows:

Tibi more gentis uinculo soluens comam
 secreta nudo nemora lustravi pede
 et euocavi nubibus siccis aquas
 etique ad imum maria ... (Seneca, *Medea* 752-55)

[Phoebe], for your sake, loosening my hair from its band in the way of my people,
I have wandered barefoot through hidden groves and called rain from dry clouds,
and driven the sea back to its depths ...

Medea's description in the lines above is detailed, and fits the mode of ekphrasis in that it describes a form of visual art: Medea's prior performances of ritual acts, which would have had the same aims as her current performance (namely, to express her intentions to the gods and impress them with her *ars*). Since Medea was, at the time, the *artifex* of these performances, and is now the *animadversor*, this toes the line that Mitchell draws between narrator and ekphrastic object. But it does not explicitly cross the line; Medea is describing a *past* work of performance art, not a present work. She is defining her past self, the Medea that existed before the divorce splintered her identity. In the central (fifth) subsection of her monologue, from lines 797-811, Medea will bring the skills she exhibited in the past to bear on the present, and thus reclaim her identity as sorceress, devotee of Hecate, and powerful granddaughter of the Sun.

Medea's monologue, like the nurse's, progresses from past deeds to the present ritual.

Medea describes her own current actions in detail, presumably as she performs them onstage:

Tibi sanguineo caespite sacrum
sollemne damus,
tibi de medio rapta sepulcro
fax nocturnos sustulit ignes,
tibi mota caput flexa uoces
ceruice dedi,
tibi funereo de more iacens
passos cingit uitta capillos,
tibi iactatur tristis Stygia
ramus ab unda,
tibi nudato pectore maenas
sacro feriam bracchia cultro.
manet noster sanguis ad aras:
assuesce, manus, stringere ferrum
carosque pati posse cruores –
sacrum laticem percussa dedi. (Seneca, *Medea* 797-811)

To you I give solemn sacrament on bloody ground; for you the torch snatched from the midst of the altar bears nocturnal fires; to you I have given my voice, tossing my head with my neck bent; for you a fillet binds my loose hair, lying in a funereal manner; for you the sad branch is waved from the Stygian water; for you I will strike my arms with the sacred knife, acting as a Maenad with bared breast. My blood remains on the altar: Get used, my hand, to drawing steel and being able to suffer [your own] dear blood—I offered the sacred liquid when I was struck.

Medea now takes her description of her own actions one step farther. Where earlier she toed the line that Mitchell draws, she crosses it outright in the above passage. By simultaneously performing and describing her performance, Medea completely embodies the roles of both *artifex* and *animadversor*. Because the performance is made up of her actions and performed by and upon her body, she is also the *opus ipsum*; and the *res ipsae* that Medea symbolically depicts through her performance originate from within her mind. She snatches up a torch, which represents the wedding night she is about to desecrate; she lies down “in a funereal manner” in anticipation of Creusa’s death. By spilling blood upon the altar, she symbolically prepares herself for the murder of Creusa; the fact that it is her *own* blood prepares her for the later death of her sons.

That this section of Medea’s speech is as ekphrastic as the nurse’s monologue is undeniable. Special attention is paid to the way (Seneca, *Medea* 802; *more*) in which Medea performs her actions; she provides a detailed step-by-step description of her performance. Like the nurse, Medea describes her actions, hints at their causes, and notes their immediate visible outcome: Her blood remains on the altar as part of her ritual (Seneca, *Medea* 808; *manet noster sanguis ad aras*). And, ratcheting up the intensity from the nurse’s speech-within-a-speech, Medea makes perhaps the ultimate self-referential gesture: She uses her voice to describe her voice (Seneca, *Medea* 802-03; *voces ... dedi*).

As the narrator and main focus of this descriptive monologue, Medea is the all-consuming center of the scene. She is attended for at least part of the monologue’s duration by several other

figures: her nurse, whom she instructs to help her to stain the robe (Seneca, *Medea* 817; *tu nunc vestes tinge Creusae*); the two children (Seneca, *Medea* 845; *ite, ite, nati*); and an attendant, who may still be the nurse, who is to summon the children (Seneca, *Medea* 843; *huc gnatos voca*). The secondary characters, however, are silent, and no attention is focused on them except as the objects of Medea's commands. Medea reigns supreme during her monologue—and from this point until the end of the play.

Medea's words in line 750 attest to her supremacy. Two sentences placed in close proximity in Medea's monologue contain the word *sacris* with an appended possessive adjective: lines 750 and 770. Line 770 seems fairly typical: Medea invokes Phoebe with the words, "now is the time to attend your sacraments" (Seneca, *Medea* 770; *adesse sacris tempus est, Phoebe, tuis*). But we have seen a similar, and less expected, expression twenty lines previous:

nunc meis uocata sacris, noctium sidus, ueni
pessimos induta uultus, fronte non una minax. (Seneca, *Medea* 750-51)

Now, [Hecate,] star of the night, come, called by my sacraments—wearing your vilest expressions, threatening with your several faces.

The use of the possessive with *sacris*, and combined in a line with a command to attend Medea's ritual—*vocata* and *veni* in line 750, *adesse* in line 770—strongly connects the two lines. When Medea uses *meis ... sacris* and *sacris ... tuis* in such close proximity, and in a similar context, she implies that her own power is on the same level as a goddess'.

Far from the usual result of hubris, however, Medea's comparison of her own sacraments to Phoebe's do not result in a divine attack on her well-being. Instead, Phoebe gives a favorable sign: "The altar has creaked; I [Medea] recognize that my tripods have been moved by the sympathetic goddess" (Seneca, *Medea* 785-86; *sonuistis, arae, tripodas agnosco meos favente commotos dea*). Not long afterward, the very end of the ritual sees Medea's prayers granted.

Medea's forcefulness and self-assuredness result in her success, granted by the goddesses who favor her. Thus, it seems that she is justified in her confidence—Medea's words above are not a display of hubris at all, because her power truly is godlike. Medea, as a character, has transcended the limits of normal human ability, while, on a metatextual level, she also transcends the limits of ekphrasis and dramatic speech. Medea's monologue is, in a figurative sense, a step toward apotheosis, a sacred rite that celebrates her ability to surpass the abilities of other tragic heroes.

The multi-part ekphrasis delivered by Medea and her nurse during this act relies partly on visual imagery to create an experience of Medea's power for the theatrical audience. When the speakers describe offstage events—the nurse's description of the snake's coils, for example, or Medea's description of Trivia's chariot at lines 787-96—the text is dense with visual language. But Seneca also stresses the verbal and aural nature of the ekphrasis' transmission. The dramatic medium makes Medea's ritual a performance within a performance, much as her act of snake-charming is transmitted by a speech within a speech. Seneca takes full advantage of this medium. The two monologues function not only as standard textual ekphrases, which are meant to be read or orally recited, but as specifically *dramatic* ekphrases. Medea's performance could of course not coincide with the delivery of her ekphrasis without the medium of staged drama. In addition, and perhaps to highlight this fact, Seneca makes an overwhelming number of references to voice and sound during the two monologues.

Lines 670-843 contain a total of 34 words referring to speech, noise, or silence; this is, on average, one such word per five lines (though these words are by no means evenly distributed throughout the speech). This is an unusually high concentration of sound-words for this play; on average, the remaining text of the play contains one sound-word per seven and a half lines. The verb *voco* and its variants *invoco* and *evoco* are used seven times in this passage (681, 705, 750,

754, 812, 814, 843); the nurse uses *inquit* once at line 690, as well as forms of *audio* (688), *canto* (730), and *cano* (739). *Sono* appears four times in the passage (738, 765, 785, 796). Medea uses *comprecor* (740) and *precor* (813), both in the first person. The passage is rife with mentions of voice and song: *cantus* is used five times (684, 699, 704, 760, 769) and *vox* three times (739, 767, 801); the speakers also use *carmen* (688), *nomen* (726), *verba* (737), *votum* (840), and *imperium* (767). In addition, Hecate “barks” (Seneca, *Medea* 840-41; *latratus* | ... *dedit*), the shades are euphemized as *vulgus silentum* (740), and the wind is *tacente* (766). Of these 34 words, 26 are attributed either to Medea or (in the case of participles) to direct results of her vocalizations.

Though most of these monologues rely on visual imagery, Seneca does not call nearly as much attention to visualization with his use of vocabulary. *Video*, for example, is the only verb of seeing present in the passage, and is used only four times (673, 758, 761, 787). This is understandable, however, in a staged drama during which the actor playing Medea enters the stage during the ekphrasis and acts the visual imagery out directly in front of the audience. For an audience present at the staging of *Medea*, this spectacle would combine with the spoken monologues, vocabulary relating to sound, and visual imagery within the speeches to produce a balance between sight and sound that is impossible to ignore; this balance serves to emphasize Medea’s all-powerful and all-consuming role in this act.

The first couplet that Medea speaks upon her entrance to the stage captures this balance well. Line 740 relies on aural imagery and vocabulary, while line 741 relies on visual imagery and vocabulary:

comprecor uulgus silentum uosque ferales deos
et Chaos caecum atque opacam Ditis umbrosi domum ... (Seneca, *Medea* 740-41)

I beseech the crowd of silent [shades] and you, funereal gods, and blind Chaos and the dark home of shadowy Dis ...

Medea begins her speech with *comprecor* and describes the shades as *silentes*; in the following line, Chaos is *caecus* and Dis and his kingdom are *umbrosus* and *opaca*. Aural and visual imagery are presented side by side in these two lines. But perhaps the most important aspect of the couplet is that most of this imagery is both negative and suggestive of absence. Line 740 negates hearing with mention of the “silent” shades; line 741 negates sight with words for “blind,” “dark,” and “shadowy.” Alone of the entities mentioned in these two lines, Medea can be heard, and she can simultaneously be seen onstage. *Comprecor*, “I pray,” is the only complete image in this declaration that does not negate. And it is no coincidence that this image is attributed to Medea. Alone of the characters present either literally or figuratively during Act 4, Medea’s agency is not negated; her presence alone is persistent.

Chapter 3: Medea Onstage

I would like to turn now to the question of staging, since the idea of ekphrastic collapse relies on Medea's physical presence onstage, before the audience's eyes. Without Medea's presence onstage and the resulting ekphrastic collapse, we can have little hope of understanding how Seneca bridges the gap between his heroine's two most potent statements about her own identity: "I will become Medea" (Seneca, *Medea* 171; *Medea —Fiam*), and "Now I am Medea" (Seneca, *Medea* 910; *Medea nunc sum*). The general lack of a consensus on the issue of staging thus might explain why some scholars have until now seen *Medea* as an illogical play, or its heroine as a static and lifeless character, as does Harold Loomis Cleasby when he claims that "the workmanship [of Medea's character] is rough, and the coloring, although brilliant, is crude and monotonous."⁶⁸

The issue of the staging of Seneca's tragedies has been hotly contested for nearly a century; the more traditional view seems to be that Seneca's tragedies were meant to be recited, but several scholars have argued convincingly that Seneca intended his tragedies to be staged.⁶⁹ I believe that there is sufficient evidence in the text of Seneca's tragedies—indeed, in *Medea* itself—to suggest that the tragedies were intended for the stage. Whether or not the tragedies were ever actually performed as intended is a different matter, and, I believe, is irrelevant to the interpretation of the text itself.

Much of the controversy in the debate over whether Seneca meant his tragedies to be recited or staged stems from the fact that scholars sometimes use the same evidence to argue

⁶⁸ Harold Loomis Cleasby, "The *Medea* of Seneca," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 18 (1907), 65.

⁶⁹ For arguments in favor of recitation, see Beare 1945, Coffey and Mayer 1990, Costa 1973, Duff 1964, Fantham 1983, Goldberg 1996, Marti 1945, Pratt 1983, and Zwierlein 1966. For arguments in favor of staging, see Davis 1993, Grant 1999, Herrmann 1924, Hollingsworth 2001, and Hill 2000. Hadas 1939, Kohn 2005, and Kohn 2013 provide commentary on the dramaturgy of the tragedies, assuming that they were meant for performance. Calder 1976, in contrast to all of the above, provides us with the gem: "An inordinate amount of attention, largely from persons who believe that Indians in Westerns are really shot, has been devoted to the problem" of staging (Calder 1976: 4).

different points, or refer to seemingly contradictory evidence to argue the same points. Beare, for example, argues that the text of Seneca's plays contains too little detail for the plays to have been staged;⁷⁰ Grant argues that the texts are quite detailed, and that this is no obstacle to performance.⁷¹ Specifically in the context of *Medea*, scholars disagree about descriptions of Medea's face and movements. Costa argues that these descriptions indicate that the plays were meant for recitation.⁷² Hollingsworth uses the same evidence to argue in favor of staging,⁷³ and Zwierlein contends that extended similes and poetic speeches indicate that the dramas were intended to be recited piecemeal, with the reciter choosing passages from multiple plays.⁷⁴ Further, Henry and Walker, writing jointly, argue that the death of Medea's children is not gory at all, a view that seems to indicate that they see the play as a recitation piece, with no visual representation of the deaths in evidence.⁷⁵ Both Grant and Beare, however, argue that the death of the children would have shock value, but that this is not an obstacle to performance.

Clearly, at least some of the scholars mentioned here have taken questionable leaps from Seneca's text; there does not seem to be a consensus on what the evidence *is*, much less what it means. Specious arguments, too, are in evidence: Hollingsworth, arguing in favor of staging, turns to accounts in Martial, Pliny the Younger, and Juvenal that describe the length of recitational works as (presumably) much longer than the tragedies of Seneca:

Semper ego auditor tantum? numquamne reponam
 uexatus totiens rauci Theseide Cordi?
 inpune ergo mihi recitauerit ille togatas,
 hic elegos? inpune diem consumpserit ingens
 Telephus aut summi plena iam margine libri
 scriptus et in tergo necdum finitus Orestes? (Juvenal, *Satires* 1.1-6)

⁷⁰ W. Beare, "Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation: A Roman Contrast," *Hermathena* 65 (1945): 8-19.

⁷¹ M.D. Grant, "Plautus and Seneca: Acting in Nero's Rome," *Greece & Rome* 46 (1999): 27-33.

⁷² Costa, *Seneca: Medea*, 108.

⁷³ Hollingsworth, "Recitational Poetry and Senecan Tragedy," 135-44.

⁷⁴ Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas*, 156-66.

⁷⁵ Denis Henry and B. Walker, "Loss of Identity: *Medea Superest?*: A Study of Seneca's *Medea*," *Classical Philology* 62 (1967): 170-71.

Shall I always only be a listener? Will I never get a word in edgewise, imposed upon so many times by ranting Cordus' *Theseid*? Will this man have recited to me his comedies, that one his love poems—and go unpunished? Will an ungainly Telephus or an Orestes, already filling up the margin at the top of the scroll, and spilling over on the back as well, consume my day with impunity?⁷⁶

Because Seneca's tragedies are comparable in length to Greek tragedies, which were performed three at a time and followed by satyr plays, Hollingsworth argues that Seneca's plays are unlikely to be of the type that Juvenal complains often last "all day."⁷⁷ But this point of view does not take into account Juvenal's tendency toward exaggeration, or for the possibility that the interminable performances he complains of might have consisted of multiple plays.

On the other hand, there are several arguments in favor of recitation that can be immediately discounted. W. Beare, in "Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation: A Roman Contrast," argues that the entrance cues and hints of stage direction found in the text of Seneca's plays are too vague to lend themselves to the stage:

There is a general vagueness about detail which a genuine play would have to make clear. On the stage a character must either be there or not; his arrival and his departure must alike be visible, and while he is present his presence cannot be forgotten. Now Seneca's characters often make their exits and entrance in the orthodox way. But there remain many instances in which our only indication that a character has arrived is that he commences to speak; again, our only indication that a character has retired is often the fact that no more words are attributed to him.⁷⁸

Beare is correct in his observation that Seneca's texts do not readily lend themselves to visualization, for an audience reading or listening to them. Characters begin speaking without warning; they stop speaking without warning and leave the reader uncertain as to whether they are still present onstage. Seneca's choruses, too, are vague when they are experienced only verbally—

⁷⁶ For the Latin text of Juvenal's *Satires*, see W.V. Clausen, ed., *A. Persi Flacci et D. Iuni Iuvenalis Saturae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

⁷⁷ Hollingsworth, "Recitational Poetry and Senecan Tragedy," 135-44.

⁷⁸ Beare, "Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation," 14.

their identities, as well as the timing of their entrances and exits, is often unclear from the text alone. *Medea* is no exception. Medea's nurse arrives unannounced at line 150, and the first lines of her speech do not immediately make her identity clear. Jason's first entrance, at line 431, is similarly unannounced, though his speech does indicate that he must be Jason. The messenger comes without warning at line 879, and his (or, quite possibly, her) identity, as well as the identity of the chorus, does not seem clearly defined at all.

While Beare's observations are accurate, the conclusion he draws from them is less so. He argues that the tragedies would make less sense on the stage than as recitation pieces, but the vagueness of the stage cues seems to suggest the opposite. If the audience sees an actor enter the stage in costume and in character, then there is hardly a need for a verbal cue to make the audience aware that the character has entered, or for any verbal indication of the character's identity. Presumably, Seneca would not expect his theatre audience to be so dense as to need verbal confirmation that someone new has entered the stage, and the old woman costume the nurse wears would tip the audience off as to her identity. Nor should a theatre audience need to be told aloud when a character leaves the stage, or which characters remain present in order to hear another character's words. As Peter J. Davis puts it in his examination of Seneca's choruses onstage, arguments for recitation stand on "an *a priori* principle which, though not often stated, is regularly assumed, the principle that 'all stage action must be verbally signalled'."⁷⁹

The text of the plays, with no performance notes or stage directions attached, leave many aspects of the drama in doubt: Is the nurse present during Medea's initial monologue? Does Medea remain onstage during the play's four choral odes, and does she hear the chorus' words? Do the chorus and messenger stay to watch the deaths of the children in Act 5? And what about silent

⁷⁹ Peter J. Davis, *Shifting Song: The Chorus in Seneca's Tragedies* (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1993), 6.

attendants—is it the nurse Medea commands to “call the children here” at the close of Act 4 (Seneca, *Medea* 843; *huc gnatos voca*), or is it someone else? These questions would be left unanswered in a recitation; as Beare himself reasonably points out, “tragic dignity would perhaps prescribe limits to the extent to which the reciter could change his intonation,” and presumably would not allow the reciter to enter and exit multiple times in order to indicate which characters remain onstage.⁸⁰ But again, Beare has used some observable evidence to draw an inappropriate conclusion. He goes on to claim that there could be no confusion among the audience of a recitation; this, for the reasons previously discussed, is patently untrue. The truth is that in a stage performance, or a “genuine play,” entrances and exits would be perfectly clear to a viewing audience;⁸¹ speech would not be “the only indication” of a character’s presence—her or his physical presence onstage would be indication enough.

Thus, a lack of clear verbal descriptions of the stage direction does not seem to be an indication that Seneca’s tragedies were for recitation only; rather, it seems to point toward staging. But other scholars have argued the opposite: that the amount of description in Seneca’s plays is too great for the stage. While Seneca’s texts are often vague about which characters are onstage during a given scene, Seneca’s characters do not hesitate to describe everything else in sight and out of it: setting, props, offstage events, and even his characters’ appearances. In *Medea*, as I have already discussed, this is apparent in the magic ritual of Act 4, as well as in earlier descriptions of Medea’s appearance. Riemer A. Faber, writing on Seneca’s *Thyestes*, finds a similarly drawn out description of the palace of Atreus;⁸² the *Oedipus* contains a memorable scene in which Manto

⁸⁰ Beare, “Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation,” 15.

⁸¹ Additionally, if “the only indication [in the text] that a character has arrived is that he commences to speak” is grounds for disqualification as a “genuine play,” as Beare contends that it is, then Euripides’ *Medea* would be no more eligible for performance than Seneca’s. Euripides has the tutor arrive unannounced at line 49 to berate the nurse; Jason arrives unexpectedly at line 446; Aegeus, of all people, appears without warning at 663. Yet no one doubts that Euripides’ plays were intended for the stage.

⁸² Faber, “The Description of the Palace in Seneca, *Thyestes* 641-82 and the Literary Unity of the Play.”

describes a slaughtered cow's insides for the blind Tiresias' benefit, as well as Creon's lengthy description of the grove to which Tiresias summons the shade of Laius. C.D.N. Costa, in his commentary on Seneca's *Medea*, argues that such descriptions clearly indicate that Seneca intended his tragedies as recitation pieces: "the speech [at lines 382-96] with its vivid account of M.'s physical movements (which would have been visible to an audience at a stage production) is one of those which point firmly to recitation of the tragedies."⁸³ In other words, description cannot coexist with performance without becoming redundant.

Anthony Hollingsworth, however, convincingly refutes Costa's claim that verbal description and physical representation are mutually exclusive. The two modes of representation, he argues, have different effects; in such cases, the verbal description "complements the staged event."⁸⁴ Hollingsworth mentions examples from both Greek and Roman staged drama as evidence that verbal description does not preclude a character's presence on the stage. In Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*, for example, Periplectomenus describes Palaestrio's worried gesturing onstage in an aside to the audience (202-209). Euripides' *Bacchae* contains a scene where Pentheus describes Dionysos' appearance:

ἀτὰρ τὸ μὲν σῶμ' οὐκ ἄμορφος εἶ, ξένε,
 ὡς ἐς γυναικας, ἐφ' ὅπερ ἐς Θήβας πάρει·
 πλόκαμός τε γάρ σου ταναός, οὐ πάλης ὕπο,
 γέννυν παρ' αὐτὴν κεχυμένος, πόθου πλέως·
 λευκὴν δὲ χροιάν ἐκ παρασκευῆς ἔχεις,
 οὐχ ἡλίου βολαῖσιν, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ σκιᾶς,
 τὴν Ἀφροδίτην καλλονῇ θηρώμενος. (Euripides, *Bacchae* 453-59)

Your body is not misshapen, stranger, for women's needs, which is why you are in Thebes; for your hair is long, not because of wrestling, scattered over your cheeks, full of yearning; and you have skin white from your ministrations, rivaling Aphrodite with beauty untouched by the sun, but kept in the shade.⁸⁵

⁸³ Costa, *Seneca: Medea*, 108.

⁸⁴ Hollingsworth, "Recitational Poetry and Senecan Tragedy," 139.

⁸⁵ For the Greek text of Euripides' *Bacchae*, see Euripides, *Fabulae*, vol. 3, ed. Gilbert Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

The passages that Hollingsworth cites both describe characters who are present onstage, much as Seneca has the nurse, Creon, and Jason describe Medea while she is visible. Yet in neither of these cases is the verbal description redundant. Periplectomenus describes what the audience can already see (Palaestrio's gestures), but adds a dimension of interpretation and comic wordplay: "He taps at his breast with his fingers; I believe he will summon his heart outside" (Plautus, *Miles Gloriosus* 202; *pectus digitis pultat, cor credo evocaturus foras*).⁸⁶ Pentheus' speech, by contrast, describes what the audience cannot see clearly. From a distance, the features of Dionysos' tragic mask, as well as the shape of his body beneath the costume, would not be terribly striking. Both descriptions thus enhance their respective scenes without becoming redundant.

Seneca's verbal portraits of Medea, mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, generally serve both functions. Like Periplectomenus, Jason interprets Medea's onstage actions when he says, "She's seen me, she springs forth, she rages ..." (Seneca, *Medea* 445; *atque ecce, uiso memet exiluit, furit*). Aspects of Medea's appearance that might not have been visible to a theatre audience are also common; the nurse describes how Medea "moistens her eyes with abundant weeping" (Seneca, *Medea* 388; *oculos uberi fletu rigat*), and Creon describes her as "ferocious and threatening ... she searches for something to say" (Seneca, *Medea* 186-87; *ferox | minaque ... affatus petit*). These descriptions are not simply stand-ins for the audience's visual impression of Medea; instead, they complement Medea's presence onstage. Thus, Hollingsworth's contention that "nowhere do we find lengthy descriptive passages that would exclude the tragedies from the stage and point to a similarity between them and recitational poetry" holds true for *Medea*.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ For the Latin text of Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*, see Titus Maccius Plautus, *Comoediae*, ed. F. Leo (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895).

⁸⁷ Hollingsworth, "Recitational Poetry and Senecan Tragedy," 138; see also Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas*, 157-58.

There are several other arguments for staging that are applicable here. M.D. Grant, in “Plautus and Seneca: Acting in Nero’s Rome,” cites similarities between the text of Plautus’ plays and the text of Seneca’s plays, which he argues make it likely that Seneca, like Plautus, intended his plays for the stage. Grant observes that both authors write dramatic asides that may be overheard by other characters, often include “stock” characters who lack motivation, and that their plays often lack continuity.⁸⁸

Those who argue that Seneca’s plays were intended for recitation sometimes cite the death of Medea’s children as evidence for the unlikelihood of performance; supposedly, “It was one thing for Seneca merely to imagine Medea slaying her children in public, but another thing to have this shown before actual Roman audiences.”⁸⁹ Other sources, however, assert that the deaths of the children, no matter how gory or shocking they might seem, are no obstacle to performance. Grant provides strong textual evidence for the general Roman (and Senecan) acceptance of death, real or fictional, as public spectacle: “Seneca writes elsewhere that public executions educated through their force of deterrence ... Plutarch lends support to this claim when he suggests that an audience will find pleasure in seeing actors depict pain.”⁹⁰

K.M. Coleman, in her article “Fatal Charades,” examines the Roman practice of executing criminals onstage in the guises of mythological characters.⁹¹ Coleman argues that the audience at such executions would not find this punishment disproportionate or off-putting: “condemned criminals ‘deserved’ a harsh fate, and so the display put on by the magistrates served a worthy end in the eyes of the spectators.”⁹² As Tertullian observes in the *Apologeticum*:

⁸⁸ Grant, “Plautus and Seneca,” 28-31.

⁸⁹ J. Wight Duff, “Senecan Satire and Poetry: Drama of the Age,” in *A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age*, 3rd ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), 201.

⁹⁰ Grant, “Plautus and Seneca,” 31.

⁹¹ K.M. Coleman, “Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 44-73.

⁹² Coleman, “Fatal Charades,” 58.

Plane religiosiores estis in cavea, ubi super sanguinem humanum, super inquinamenta poenarum proinde saltant dei vestri argumenta et historias noxiis ministrantes, nisi quod et ipsos deos vestros saepe noxii induunt, vidimus aliquando castratum Attin, illum deum ex Pessinunte, et qui vivus ardebat, Herculem induerat. (Tert. *Apol.* 15.4)

Clearly you [pagans] are more religious in the theatre, where your gods dance upon human blood and the gore of punishments—the gods who furnish plots and stories to criminals, unless it is that criminals often act as your gods themselves. At one time we have seen Attis, that god from Pessinus, castrated; and a living man burning, playing Hercules.⁹³

It seems, then, that it was not uncommon for Roman executions to be staged as “mythological enactments,” to use Coleman’s term, potentially even during the course of a tragic performance. It thus requires no stretch of the imagination to see that gore would have placed no prohibition on the staging of Seneca’s tragedies; an audience who could tolerate seeing a man burned alive in the guise of Hercules should not be expected to balk at the “deaths” of two child actors accomplished by special effects.

Even Beare, who argues in favor of recitation, admits that a Roman theatre audience would not have frowned on such a spectacle.⁹⁴ Rather, Beare’s objections to the potential performance of Seneca’s plays are often couched in terms of his own low opinion of Seneca’s style; he contends that “the endless hyperbole would have bewildered or bored the crowd, or occasionally moved it to mockery.”⁹⁵

Whatever one’s personal opinion of Seneca’s writing style, it is hard to deny that Seneca is not one to shy away from “endless hyperbole.” His characters are prone to dramatic deeds and grand proclamations. It is precisely because of this tendency of Seneca’s that I want to go one step further than those scholars who argue that the gory onstage deaths of the children are not useful as

⁹³ For the Latin text of the *Apologeticum*, see Tertullian, *Apology and De Spectaculis*, ed. T.R. Glover (London: William Heinemann, 1931).

⁹⁴ Beare, “Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation,” 13.

⁹⁵ Beare, “Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation,” 15-16.

evidence against performance. Instead, I suggest that Seneca's handling of the death scene is some of the strongest evidence present in the text for the intended performance of the plays.

As it appears on the page—and as it would come across in recitation, where spoken words, facial expressions, and limited gesturing would be the only methods of representation available⁹⁶ – the deaths of Medea's two sons are somewhat underwhelming. They are, in fact, the most underwhelming part of a highly dramatic moment of which they should be the focal point. Medea argues with herself; she spars verbally with Jason; she rebukes her nurse. The final act is replete with dramatic language, from Medea's monologue on her inner chaos to Jason's final line, "bear witness, wherever you are borne, that there are no gods" (Seneca, *Medea* 1027; *testare nullos esse, qua ueheris, deos*). In stark contrast to the language used of Medea's inner landscape and to Act 4's imagery of blood, fire, and poison, the two deaths go almost unremarked. The first murder, executed in the middle of line 970, is spoken of in terms of sacrifice and inner conflict:

Discedere a me, frater, ultrices deas
manesque ad imos ire secures iube:
mihi me relinque et utere hac, frater, manu
quae strinxit ensem—uictima manes tuos
placamus ista. (Seneca, *Medea* 967-71)

Brother, order the avenging goddesses to depart from me, and to go peacefully to the deep shades: leave me to myself and use this hand, brother, which has drawn the sword – [*She kills the first child.*] I have appeased your ghost with this victim.

There are no fountains of blood here, no description of serrated flesh or dying eyes; the child goes apparently silently, without much attention paid to the actual manner of his death beyond the single word *uictima* (970). So, too, with the second child:

IA. Infesta, memet perime. ME. Misereri iubes. —
bene est, peractum est. plura non habui, dolor,
quae tibi litarem. (Seneca, *Medea* 1018-20)

⁹⁶ Beare, "Plays for Performance and Plays for Recitation," 15; see also Elaine Fantham, *Roman Literary Culture: From Cicero to Apuleius* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 42.

JAS. Tainted one, kill me too. MED. You ask me to have pity. —[*She kills the second child.*] It is well; it is done. I had nothing more to offer you, grief.

Though this is the only place in the text that it makes sense for the second child's death to occur, the event goes almost unremarked in the text. An audience attending a recitation, in fact, might miss the murder altogether. Medea's proclamation that Jason's plea for pity has been answered might lead an audience operating on textual cues alone to assume – momentarily—that Medea had spared the second son, or even that she had killed Jason, as he had asked in the previous line (Seneca, *Medea* 1018-19; *memet perime ... peractum est*).

The verbal focus of the last act of Seneca's *Medea* is not on the children as they die, but on the emotions of their parents. One who assumes that Seneca meant his tragedies to be recited rather than staged might thus come to the conclusion that Seneca wished to downplay the murders, as do Henry and Walker: "the almost casual nature of the murders ... indicates a desire on the part of the writer to distance and minimize the effect."⁹⁷ The assumption that words are the only medium that Seneca has at his disposal makes for a very two-dimensional view of the death scene. In Henry and Walker's view, the murders should practically slip by the audience's notice—but for an audience viewing *Medea* on the stage, the deaths of the children could not go unnoticed.

It seems much more clearly in the vein of Senecan hyperbole for the children to die in front of the audience, while Medea and Jason both neglect to comment on the goriness of the act, the cruelty exhibited not just toward Jason but toward the hapless boys. If Seneca means to emphasize Medea's power, both parents' single-mindedness, and the monstrosity of the situation, there can be no more effective tool than to call the audience's attention to the murders while simultaneously allowing their parents to skirt around them, focusing more on their marital spat than on the well-being of their children. Medea puts the end before the means; the addition of the visual medium to

⁹⁷ Henry and Walker, "Loss of Identity," 170-71.

the verbal would conclusively prevent the audience from being swept up in her single-minded righteousness, allowing them to see what Medea cannot: that the means she has chosen have become an end of their own, and that there are real material consequences to her chosen manner of revenge.

Medea's filicide can be contrasted with a similar revenge-murder in Seneca's *Thyestes*, that of Thyestes' sons by their uncle, Atreus. To these crimes, which take place offstage, Seneca dedicates a messenger scene of over 140 lines, during which the chorus asks and receives answers to several questions about the specific manner of the children's deaths. The audience hears not only that the children are *going* to die, which is all we hear explicitly from Medea, but that "with the neck cut, the trunk falls prone; the head, complaining with an unintelligible murmur, rolls off" (Seneca, *Thyestes* 728-29; *ceruice caesa truncus in pronum ruit, / querulum cucurrit murmure incerto caput*).⁹⁸ If, as those in favor of recitation suppose, both the messenger speech of the *Thyestes* and the murder scene of *Medea* are presented to the audience verbally rather than visually, why this difference between them? Has Seneca simply passed up an opportunity for drama in *Medea*? Certainly there is no reason for him to purposely downplay the deaths of the children in this case, as these murders are the culmination of Medea's revenge, just as the murders in *Thyestes* and the subsequent feast of gore are the culmination of Atreus'; and it cannot be mere squeamishness that prevents him from describing them explicitly, as *Thyestes*' messenger speech proves. Thus, I suggest that the reason for the difference is simple: the offstage murder of Thyestes' children is presented only in the verbal medium, while the murder of Medea's children is presented visually, onstage before the audience. The disparity between what the audience sees and the

⁹⁸ For the Latin text of Seneca's *Thyestes*, see Seneca, *Tragoediae*. Later in the play, the audience is treated to even more gore—for example, a description of the children's meat leaping about in their father's stomach.

subjects that Medea and Jason choose to focus on—the divide between visual and verbal—can thus be used to great dramatic effect.

Like the murder of the children, the ekphrastic collapse of Act 4, as I have already mentioned, relies on staging for its effectiveness. If the plays were not meant to be staged, the ekphrastic collapse might still be called up in the imagination, through *phantasia*; after all, as C.A.J. Littlewood points out in his *Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy*, “Whether or not the plays were staged they have the literary form of theatrical events.”⁹⁹ Written in dramatic meters, with speeches and dialogue delivered by a cast of characters, and with interludes from a chorus, Seneca’s tragedies are composed in dramatic form, and are thus impossible to consume without visualizing the characters speaking and events taking place in real time. The audience of a recitation of *Medea* would still be able to see a representation of Medea delivering an ekphrasis of her own ritual performance onstage—but without the full visual effect of Medea’s staged, costumed, and mobile ritual, this would not be a true ekphrastic collapse. If Medea’s ritual movements are left up to the audience’s imagination, then Mitchell’s moment of “ekphrastic fear” can never be brought to a head. The intended performance of the plays has great bearing on how we read Act 4 of *Medea*; we must move forward with the understanding that Seneca intended his plays for the stage.

In a staged production of *Medea*, Medea’s all-consuming presence onstage during her Act 4 monologue can leave little doubt that she is the epicenter of the play. But her presence is followed by a curious absence at the beginning of Act 5. Until now, Medea has rarely been absent from the stage both visually and verbally. We can pinpoint one instance in the play where Medea is certainly not present onstage (the nurse’s Act 4 monologue [670-739]), and another two short speeches

⁹⁹ C.A.J. Littlewood, *Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 173.

during which Medea is either absent or stands off to the side (Creon's entrance in the second act [179-91] and Jason's in the third [431-46], where both men describe Medea coming to meet them). In all of these cases, whether she is onstage or off, Medea's "fictive, figural presence" can always be felt; the other characters' descriptions summon up a verbal *figura* of Medea.¹⁰⁰ The speeches made during Medea's absences during the first four acts of the play are explicitly, and exclusively, about her. Creon worries aloud that Medea is plotting against him, and this is why she has not left his realm. Jason bemoans his wife's reaction to his new marriage, and resolves to stand up to her. And we have already seen that the nurse devotes her entire 70-line speech to describing Medea's actions and relaying her words. When Medea speaks, the audience must acknowledge her presence; when Medea leaves the stage and another character speaks, she or he speaks *about Medea*, so that the audience must acknowledge her even in her absence. Whatever happens onstage or in speech during the first four acts of the play revolves around Medea; she is the center of the dramatic universe.

The choral odes are a different story. Whether Medea remains onstage during the first two odes is debateable, though it seems likely that she is absent for the third (579-669), which directly precedes the nurse's speech, and the fourth (849-78), which follows the ritual. Even if she is present onstage during some or all of the choral odes, the chorus mentions Medea as little as possible. The chorus' first ode is a marriage hymn for Jason and Creusa's wedding; the second and third expound on the events of Jason's past and the *hubris* of the first sailors. Medea is mentioned only once by name in these three odes; the chorus' references to her are usually oblique and always brief. When the chorus alludes to Jason's first marriage at the end of their first ode, they say only, "Let the woman who secretly marries a foreign husband depart in silent shadow" (Seneca, *Medea*

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 158.

114-15; *tacitis eat illa tenebris, / si qua peregrino nubit furtiua marito*). Buried in the second ode is a single mention of “the golden fleece and Medea, greater evil than the sea” (Seneca, *Medea* 362-64; *aurea pellis / maiusque mari Medea malum*), and in the third ode, Medea is only a *coniunx* who, “devoid of her marriage torches, burns and hates” (Seneca, *Medea* 581-82; *uiduata taedis / ardet et odit*). If Medea is the verbal center of the universe during the play’s acts, she is de-centered during the choral odes. It is as if reality does indeed revolve around Medea, but the chorus, thematic commentators of the play, have not yet caught up to this fact. The chorus’ attempt to make Medea disappear does more to illuminate their ignorance of Medea’s than it does to remove that power.

Even during their early odes, the chorus is not as readily able to dismiss Medea as it might like. Hints of her presence remain, both in the second and third odes, which describe Jason’s journey to her homeland, and in the marriage hymn, which subtly recalls Medea’s opening speech. The *thalamus* of the chorus’ first line recalls Medea’s invocation of “marriage-gods and you of the marriage bed,” (Seneca, *Medea* 1; *Di coniugales tuque genialis tori*). The chorus then invokes a catalogue of gods similar to the one Medea enumerated in the first eighteen lines of the play:

Ad regum thalamos numine prospero
 qui caelum superi quique regunt fretum
 adsint cum populis rite fauentibus.
 Primum sceptriferis colla Tonantibus
 Taurus celsa ferat tergore candido;
 Lucinam niuei femina corporis
 intemptata iugo placet ...
 Et tu, qui facibus legitimis ades,
 noctem discutiens auspice dextera
 huc incende gradu marcidus ebrio,
 praecingens roseo tempora uinculo. (Seneca, *Medea* 56-62, 67-70)

Let the gods who rule the sky and those who rule the sea attend the bedrooms of kings with propitious will, with the peoples worshiping them properly. First let a bull carry his neck high on his white back for the scepter-bearing Thunderers; let a cow, white of body and untested by the yoke, please Lucina ... And you, who attend legitimate unions, waving off the night with auspicious hand, approach here languid with drunken footsteps, crowning your temples with a rosy garland.

Both the chorus and Medea invoke Lucina and the gods of the heavens and the sea; Medea's "wedding gods" (Seneca, *Medea* 1; *Di coniugales*) presumably correspond to Hymen and Hesperus, whom the chorus invokes, and her plea to "the gods by whom Jason swore to me" (Seneca, *Medea* 8-9; *quosque iuravit mihi / deos Iason*) is likely directed at Jupiter and Juno, gods of guest-friendship, oaths, and marriage, referred to as *Tonantes* by the chorus. Ironically, though the chorus relegates Medea to only a few lines of its speeches in an attempt to erase her and downplay her power, they end up echoing her.

So the play has a clear pattern, at least for the first 848 lines: each act that centers on Medea and her concerns is followed by an ode that de-centers Medea and intentionally downplays her power. But the fourth act of the play marks a radical shift in this pattern. For immediately after Medea's monologue ends at line 848, the chorus picks up with their fourth ode:

Quonam cruenta maenas
 praeceps amore saeuo
 rapitur? quod impotenti
 facinus parat furore?
 uultus citatus ira
 riget et caput feroci
 quatiens superba motu
 regi minatur ultro. (Seneca, *Medea* 849-56)

Where is the bloody maenad borne headlong by savage love? What crime does she prepare with wild fury? Her excited face grows rigid with rage, and, haughty, tossing her head with ferocious motion she threatens even the king.

Now Medea is the focus of the chorus' attention; the entire fourth ode is devoted to her, as previous monologues during Medea's absence have been, and as the choral odes so far have not. They refer to her explicitly by name at line 867, and as *maenas* (849); she is also *Colchis* (871) by metonymy. The chorus describes her as frightening, dangerous, and emotional; they are aware of the effect she has on them personally, and her potential effect on the world around her. Clearly Medea's

magic ritual has made an impression; rather than throwing her the occasional, disdainful and de-centering reference, the chorus now assents to Medea's place at the center of the plot, and acknowledges her power. Where before her ritual they looked down on her, they now fear her.

This progression of events creates a curious paradox. If the chorus hears Medea perform her ritual, then they must know what she is plotting—but clearly they do not. If they have not heard Medea's ritual, then they have no reason to suddenly focus on her during the fourth ode. There are two coherent solutions to this paradox. First, the chorus may hear the tone of Medea's ritual or of the nurse's preceding speech, but not the actual words, or they may be present only for the last line or so of Medea's monologue. Second, Seneca may simply intend to do away with logic. As Kohn points out, "The fact that [the chorus] does not overhear her plans is more a problem for those who demand excessive realism," and Seneca does not usually seem to be one of those people.¹⁰¹ Either way, it is apparent that Seneca is not so much concerned with logic as he is with theme; the play crescendos toward Medea's final act of revenge, and the fourth choral ode is a demonstration of her growing power.

If Medea's ritual breaks the pattern of Medea-focused acts and de-centralizing odes by forcing the chorus to acknowledge her as more than a misfortune of Jason's past, it breaks this pattern doubly by making her temporarily invisible during the messenger scene. Prior to the fourth choral ode, all of Seneca's characters—excepting the chorus—were fixated on Medea. Medea was all anyone could talk about. But Act 5 begins with the following exchange between messenger and chorus:

NVN. Periere cuncta, concidit regni status;
 nata atque genitor cinere permixto iacent.
 CHO. Qua fraude capti? NVN. Qua solent reges capi:
 donis. CHO. In illis esse quis potuit dolus?

¹⁰¹ Thomas D. Kohn, "Medea," in *The Dramaturgy of Senecan Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 82.

NVN. Et ipse miror uixque iam facto malo
 potuisse fieri credo. CHO. Quis cladis modus?
 NVN. Auidus per omnem regiae partem furit
 immissus ignis: iam domus tota occidit,
 urbi timetur. CHO. Vnda flammas opprimat.
 NVN. Et hoc in ista clade mirandum accidit:
 alit unda flammas, quoque prohibetur magis,
 magis ardet ignis; ipsa praesidia occupat. (Seneca, *Medea* 879-90)

MES. All is lost, the prosperity of the kingdom is ruined; daughter and father lie with mingled ashes. CHO. By what trick were they taken? MES. In the way in which kings are always taken: gifts. CHO. What trick could have been in these [gifts]? MES. Even I myself am amazed, and scarcely, though the evil has been done, can I believe it was done. CHO. What is the manner of the disaster? MES. Greedy flame rages through every part of the palace, as it was sent to do. Already the whole house has fallen; the city is to be feared for. CHO. Let water quench the flames. MES. This wonder, too, has occurred in this disaster: Water feeds the flames, and the more the fire is fought the greater it burns; it overtakes the defenses themselves.

Medea is mentioned not once during these lines, during which she must also be absent from the stage. If the messenger knows of her existence, he doesn't see fit to mention it; and despite the soliloquy on Medea's fearsomeness that they have just finished, the chorus seems too shocked to suspect her. *Qua fraude?* they ask, but they do not think to mention by *whose* trick the king and princess have died. For the twelve lines that begin Act 5, Medea and her impact on the world of the play go entirely unremarked. This is an inversion of the typical messenger-scene of ancient tragedy; the messenger typically gives a long monologue, and typically knows all of the details of the situation he reports.

Why this sudden reversal? We come again to the problem of the chorus, which has clearly not heard Medea's speech but has nevertheless become attentive to her at some point between the third and fourth odes, which seems to conveniently forget its suspicions of her the moment the palace begins to burn. This prompts the question of why Seneca chooses to make Medea conspicuous and then inconspicuous, rather than the other way around. Why not continue the

pattern, with a choral ode that de-centers Medea and a messenger speech that returns the focus to her? Certainly this would be more logical—if the chorus has not heard the details of Medea’s ritual, then they have no more reason to fear her now than they did during their previous odes.

The answer, I think, is that Seneca means to center Medea to the exclusion of all else, even logic. This sort of disregard for logic is not uncommon in Senecan tragedy. His characters are prone to unprovoked changes of heart (Oedipus, who has just spent several hundred lines accusing Tiresias and his trusted friend Creon of conspiracy against him, instantly believes a stranger’s declaration of his true parentage at *Oedipus* 803); his messengers and choruses have access to information they should not (the messenger in Act 4 of *Phaedra* relays the exact words and expressions of Hippolytus, who had driven off quickly and alone; the third choral ode of *Oedipus* makes reference to “Hercules’ Thebes,” though Hercules will not come to live in Thebes until after Oedipus’ exile, as Seneca himself acknowledges in his *Hercules Furens*). For good reason, Seneca’s tragedies are not known for their airtight plots or logical consistency; rather, they are tragedies of mood and theme. So, too, with Seneca’s *Medea*. The progression of external events comes second to Medea’s own internal transformation. As Denis Henry and B. Walker assert when comparing Seneca’s *Medea* to Euripides’ play, “In a dramatic sense then there is no extension and development of Medea’s character in relation to the other characters . . . Seneca’s Medea is isolated, self-centered, brooding, given to proclaiming rather than plotting.”¹⁰²

Gordon Braden, in his article “The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca,” concurs. Braden sees Senecan tragedy as concerned with the inner journey of particular characters, a collection of megalomaniac villain-heroes who project their inner realities on the outside world.¹⁰³ He sees Medea’s speeches in particular as “a succession of verbal rituals which

¹⁰² Henry and Walker, “Loss of Identity,” 175.

¹⁰³ Gordon Braden, “The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca,” *Arion* 9 (1970): 28.

eventually convince the universe.”¹⁰⁴ Braden sees Seneca’s Medea as a sort of imperialist, seeking absolute control over her own universe through great deeds and speeches; she seeks to transcend mortal limits and achieve the power of a god, as the nurse relays in Act 4:

‘Parua sunt’ inquit ‘mala
et vile telum est, ima quod tellus creat:
caelo petam uenena. iam iam tempus est
aliquid mouere fraude uulgari altius. (Seneca, *Medea* 690-93)

‘The evils,’ she says, ‘are paltry, and it is a common weapon that the depths of the earth produce: I will seek poisons from heaven. Now, now is the time to set in motion something deeper than common trickery.’

Through willpower and ritual, Medea forces her magic to manifest itself, and is thus able to directly manipulate the world around her; the ritual is “a direct attempt to hypnotize Medea, the audience, and the universe at large into believing that what she imagines will actually take place.”¹⁰⁵ Her words have the power to “draw down the sky” and “assail the gods” (Seneca, *Medea* 673; *furentem ... et aggressam deos*), and she uses them to great effect in the fourth act of Seneca’s play. If she wants a poisoned robe, she simply has to chant it into being. And in so doing, she gains the attention of the chorus—a chorus that was deaf to her ritual, and perhaps does not know why it now feels compelled to speak explicitly of Medea.

Thus, it is clear that Seneca had good reason for making the chorus switch gears so suddenly, acknowledging Medea, and even adding its own description of her appearance to that of the nurse and of Medea herself, where before it did its best to relegate her to the sidelines of Jason’s story. But in the fourth ode, the chorus is not only convinced of Medea’s power; it is now an active contributor to the audience’s awareness of her, and to a continuation of the visual language emphasized in Act 4, even as she exits the stage in anticipation of the palace fire.

¹⁰⁴ Braden, “The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca,” 30.

¹⁰⁵ Braden, “The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca,” 27.

Like previous portraits of Medea, such as Creon and Jason's descriptions of her in Acts 2 and 3 respectively, the fourth choral ode is an ekphrasis in the ancient sense of the word: They describe Medea using strong emotional language. But Creon and Jason's descriptions are only a few lines each; the chorus now expounds on Medea's frightening appearance and its emotional effect for thirty (albeit short) lines. This thirty-line ode not only demonstrates the power Medea has amassed for herself over the course of Act 4; it also has the effect of extending Act 4. The ekphrasis continues, even after its "collapse," though it has now shifted focus from a description of Medea's performance to a description of Medea herself—or perhaps, in a meta-theatrical gesture, to a description of Medea's *actor's* performance in the previous act. The ekphrastic collapse of Act 4 could thus be said to collapse reality and fiction on several levels. Within the frame of the play, the mortal character Medea brings an ideal, omnipotent Medea from her imagination into being; at the same time, on a meta-theatrical level, the actor playing Medea has, momentarily, transcended fiction and entered so completely into the character of Medea as to stun both the chorus and the audience; and the mode of ekphrasis used throughout Act 4 has broken through the established pattern of the drama and imposed itself on the choral ode.

We return, then, to the "fictive, figurative presence" that Mitchell describes.¹⁰⁶ Unlike her muted presence in the first three odes, the fourth choral ode will not allow the audience to forget Medea and her performance in the previous act. She has achieved a persistent presence that lasts throughout a choral ode even after she has exited the stage, and returns full force when, after a short exchange with the nurse, she begins yet another monologue: "Should *I* go away?" (Seneca, *Medea* 893; *Egone ut recedam?*). But what of the twelve lines between these two moments of presence, where neither Medea nor any discourse about her is present onstage? I would argue that

¹⁰⁶ Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," 158.

both the events described and the language of the lines themselves discreetly evoke a shadow of Medea's presence, which pervades the scene. Seneca here calls attention to Medea's absence both from the stage and from the minds of the other characters. After all, the audience knows that she is the cause of the palace fire and of the deaths of Creon and Creusa; mention of these events, and the chorus' questions about what has happened, could easily be expected to conjure the correct answers in the minds of those watching. The image of the burning palace recalls the imagery of fire and water that Medea has used to refer to her own power and revenge several times throughout the play:

... quae ferarum immanitas,
 quae Scylla, quae Charybdis Ausonium mare
 Siculumque sorbens quaeue anhelantem premens
 Titana tantis Aetna feruebit minis?
 non rapidus amnis, non procellosum mare
 pontusue coro saeuus aut uis ignium
 adiuta flatu possit inhibere impetum
 irasque nostras: sternam et euertam omnia. (Seneca, *Medea* 407-14)

What cruelty of beasts, what Scylla, what Charybdis drinking the Ausonian and Sicilian seas, what Aetna pressing upon panting Titan will burn with such threats? No swift river, no stormy ocean or sea savage with the north-west wind or force of fire, increased by the wind, could restrain my attack and my wrath; I will lay low and destroy everything.

Medea conflates fire and water when she includes *rapidus amnis* and *uis ignium* in the same list; her *immanitas ... feruebit* gives us a burning rage that drinks the seas, as the messenger later reports that "water feeds the flames" (Seneca, *Medea* 889; *alit unda flammas*). Additionally, the messenger scene recalls Medea's speech in Act 4: Medea uses *cinere* at line 777 and *permixto* at 831, and the messenger echoes these precise forms (Seneca, *Medea* 880; *nata atque genitor cinere permixto iacent*).

Rather than have the messenger or chorus explicitly mention Medea, Seneca chooses to let her go unmentioned during the messenger speech, a dramatic device that typically recounts the

demise (or, in the case of *Thyestes*), the misdeeds of a tragic figure. Internally, within the world of the play, this temporary anonymity perhaps grants Medea time to complete her crime without being caught. Thematically, the messenger scene demonstrates that even without any mention of her name Medea still retains a presence in the play, and the ability to affect the world around her. It no longer matters whether Medea is acknowledged aloud; her attack on Creusa has made her the epicenter of disastrous events, all-powerful within the confines of the play, and even, to some extent, on a meta-theatrical level. This is what it means to “be Medea”—and what it has meant since Hesiod named Medea as a goddess, or Euripides first placed her in the chariot of the Sun. And Medea, meta-theatrical hero that she is, knows her own myth even before she has achieved its completion.

Conclusion: *Medea Nunc Sum*

In the previous pages of this thesis, I have endeavored to demonstrate the relationship between the verbal and visual elements of Seneca's *Medea*, as it would have been performed onstage. Much of my argument has involved Act 4 of *Medea*, the action of which leads the heroine to declare, "Now I am Medea" (Seneca, *Medea* 910; *Medea nunc sum*), and so I would like to offer a final comment on the progression of Medea's self-conception throughout the play.

Throughout Seneca's *Medea*, the title character says her own name seven times, and once latches onto the nurse's use of her name and completes the sentence for her. Eight instances of overt self-reference is not a tremendously unusual number for Seneca, whose most megalomaniacal characters often refer to themselves by name (Ulysses four times in *Troades*, Atreus thrice in *Thyestes*, Oedipus twice in *Oedipus* and thrice in *Phoenissae*, and Heracles ten times in the *Furens*).¹⁰⁷ But they do mark her as among Seneca's most self-focused characters.

Despite the frequency of such self-referential statements throughout Seneca's tragic corpus, Medea's self-references are striking in their content. Often, the Medea she refers to seems not quite to be herself, but seems to be a preformed, godlike identity toward which the character Medea is striving. Several times, she refers to "Medea" as a third-person entity:

Medea superest: hic mare et terras uides
ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina. (Seneca, *Medea* 166-67)

Medea remains: here you see the sea and the lands, and iron and flames and gods
and thunderbolts.

... Est et his maior metus
Medea. (Seneca, *Medea* 516-17)

And there is a greater terror even than these: Medea.

¹⁰⁷ In the *Oetaeus*, which is generally agreed to have been written by a different author in Seneca's style, Hercules speaks his own name a whopping twenty-three times: four times in the prologue, and nineteen times during the second half of the same play.

The character also refers to herself as an incomplete version of this preformed concept of Medea. Shortly after her declaration that “Medea remains” in line 166, she responds to the nurse’s use of her name by proclaiming that she “will become” Medea (Seneca, *Medea* 171; *Fiam*). Medea’s proclamation here implies that she already has a perfectly clear picture of what a “Medea” is; “Medea” already exists (*superest*) independently of the character who happens to be called Medea, residing in some conceptual dimension with flames, gods, and thunderbolts. And her shift from the third person in line 166 to the first person in line 171 indicates that she is in the process of internalizing, or “becoming,” this conception of Medea. The human Medea’s task throughout the rest of the play will be to fully embody this superhuman identity, and in so doing give the audience a glimpse of the complete “Medea.” Only at line 910, when she declares, “Now I am Medea” (*Medea nunc sum*) is she satisfied that she has succeeded in taking on the identity she has sought; only now does she see herself as a complete person.

What bridges the divide between the human Medea, whom we meet at the beginning of the play, and the superhuman Medea, who completes her revenge in Act 5, is the magic ritual of Act 4. Just before the ritual begins, Medea makes a proclamation about her identity, issuing herself a challenge:

... hoc age, omnis aduoca
 uires et artes. fructus est scelerum tibi
 nullum scelus putare. uix fraudi est locus:
 timemur. hac aggredere, qua nemo potest
 quicquam timere. perge, nunc aude, incipe
 quidquid potest Medea, quidquid non potest. (Seneca, *Medea* 562-67)

Come now, summon all your forces and arts. The fruit of your crimes is to think nothing a crime. Scarcely is there room for tricks: I am feared. Attack here, where no one can fear anything. Make haste, dare, undertake whatever Medea can do, whatever she cannot.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, the single instance in Euripides of Medea speaking her own name is in a line similar to Seneca 566-67: “But come, Medea—hold back none of the things you know, deliberating and scheming” (Euripides, *Medea* 401-02; ἀλλ’ εἴα φείδου μηδὲν ὧν ἐπίστασαι, | Μήδεια, βουλευούσα καὶ τεχνωμένη).

The human Medea orders herself to take on the power of the superhuman Medea, the identity she has been striving toward throughout the play. The upcoming ritual will be a test of her own abilities, and of those of her mythical Medea; by attempting to do “whatever Medea can do, whatever she cannot,” she will prove once and for all what exactly it is that Medea *can* do; she will discover where to draw the line between what is possible and what is not. The monologue which comprises the latter half of Act 4 is an act of construction, not only of a ritual and a magically venomous robe, but also of Medea’s identity. By pleasing the gods with her art and achieving her murderous objective, Medea proves her power to herself. By appropriating the nurse’s ekphrasis and drawing all attention to herself, she proves her power to the theatre audience. By transgressing the conventional boundaries of ekphrasis to which the nurse’s monologue adhered, she prepares the audience for her ultimate act of transgression: the death of her sons.

Braden links Medea’s determination to prove herself to herself to her ability to prove her power to the world at large, and thus complete the process of imposing her inner reality on the outside world: “The process is not merely magic; when the Chorus remarks of Medea’s appearance, ‘Who would think she was an exile?’ (857) they are testifying to the ability of a suitably self-determined psychology to alter its situation by sheer presence; and that is perhaps the main thing going on in a Senecan play—intimidation.”¹⁰⁹ Medea, according to Braden, uses her newly-forming sense of self to intimidate the world into going along with her plans. She accomplishes this through her ritual in Act 4.

By internalizing the power of the mythical Medea, the human Medea gains the ability to use that power to impose her will on the world—thus allowing her to become Medea outwardly as well as inwardly. Her transformation is a feedback loop; it propagates itself. Only by seeking to

¹⁰⁹ Braden, “The Rhetoric and Psychology of Power in the Dramas of Seneca,” 28.

become Medea in her own mind can she hope to complete the ritual which will convince the gods that she is worthy of Medea's power; only by completing this ritual and the resulting murder can she convince *herself* that she is Medea; only by convincing herself that she is Medea can she convince herself to kill her children. And the death of the children, to an audience versed in Greek and Roman tragedy, is what truly makes a *Medea*.

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