A Comparison of The Medee of Corneille With The Medea of Seneca

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A COMPARISON OF THE MÉDÉE OF CORNEILLE WITH THE MEDEA OF SENECAL

BY

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THESIS

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A COMPARISON OF THE MÉDÉE OF CORNEILLE
WITH THE MEDEA OF SENECAS.

I. INTRODUCTION.

The Médée was the first real tragedy of Corneille, and the first of his plays which gave a hint as to what the later Corneille was to be. His half-dozen earlier comedies were influenced by the tastes of his time, and were intended to please the populace. In Médée we first of the great poet who was to reform and fix French tragedy. The Médée was played for the first time in 1635, shortly after Corneille's break with Cardinal Richelieu, and was the last tragedy that he wrote before his famous Cid. The Médée is not, however, classed among the masterpieces of Corneille, and yet it far surpassed anything else of its time. It had a rather mediocre success on the contemporary stage and soon ceased to be played altogether, this being due partly to the nature of the piece itself, little adapted to Cornelian tragedy. But the Médée contains some wonderful beauties of style. Voltaire said, speaking of the Médée: "Corneille was the first to have elevation in in his style as well as in his sentiment. One already sees several examples of it in this piece."

The subject of the Médée was borrowed from the Medea of Seneca, with occasional hints from Euripides. Many of the long declamations are modeled closely after those of Seneca, and many of the sententious speeches so characteristic of Seneca are actually translated. During the Renaissance, and at the time of the dramatic revival which followed, the influence of Seneca in Europe was tremendous. Scholars did not hesitate to rank him above Euripides. We know that Seneca and Lucan were among Corneille's favorite Latin authors.

The Medea is one of the ten tragedies that have come down to us from the first century A.D. under the name of Seneca, the only extant representatives of Roman tragedy. The plot was borrowed either directly or indirectly from Euripides. The story of Medea was an extremely popular one in classical antiquity and was treated by numerous Greek and Latin poets. The story of the terrible sorceress however lent itself especially to tragedy, and we know that the classic literatures once contained numerous tragedies on this subject, which have not come down to us. Among the Romans there were Medeas by Accius, Ennius, Lucan, and Ovid. It is possible that the Medea of Seneca was strongly influenced by that of Ovid, but we have now no means of knowing. At any rate his tragedy is by no means a slavish imitation of Euripides, but shows a good deal of originality. Seneca saw the possibilities of the subject, and gave his whole attention to their development, for which his talent seemed to fit him exactly. He made the play one long passionate declamation interspersed with beautiful lyrical choruses. He cut the dramatis personae down to five, and cut out every incident not directly contributing to the development of the plot. In fact he simplified the play to a remarkable degree, making the Medea one of the simplest dramas in literature. By this simplification he made the tragedy more direct, and made the character of Medea stand out sharply. While the Medea of Euripides is a human being, that of Seneca is a terrible sorceress. The magic element, and the supernatural are much more prominent in Seneca than in Euripides.

The episode in the life of Medea treated by Euripides and Seneca is the tragic story of her stay at Corinth and of the terrible vengeance she took upon King Creon and his daughter, Creusa, and upon Jason, her ungrateful husband. The argument of the tragedy
is briefly as follows:

After the murder of Pelias, Jason's enemy, by Medea, Jason fled from Iolcos with Medea and his children and sought refuge at Corinth. Here he was received by the king, Creon, who wished to make him his son-in-law and to give him his daughter Creusa. The ungrateful Jason repudiated Medea and Creon ordered her to leave Corinth. Medea vowed revenge, and begging a day's delay to prepare her departure, sent as a gift to the bride, Creusa, a robe and a necklace infected with horrible poisons by means of her magic arts. Creusa put on these fatal presents which took fire and she was burned to death in horrible agony, together with her father who rushed to her assistance. Medea, to complete her revenge, killed her two children in the sight of their father and fled away through the air upon a chariot drawn by winged dragons.

The purpose of this paper is to show how Corneille adapted the tragedy of Seneca, to notice the changes he made in it, and to compare the merits of both model and imitation. To do this it will be useful to begin by giving brief synopses of the two tragedies, first of the Medea of Seneca, and then of the Médée of Corneille.

II. SYNOPSIS OF THE MEDEA OF SENECA.

ACT I.

Scene 1. Medea rushes upon the stage and in a wild, passionate monolog calls upon the gods above and beneath to avenge her upon King Creon and his daughter, and to punish her faithless husband, and vows that her repudiation shall be attended by horrors even greater than those which accompanied her flight from Colchis.

Scene 2. A chorus of Corinthian women enters singing the epithalamion, or marriage song of Jason and Creusa, which begins by invoking the gods, mentions the sacrifices made, prays the beauty
bride and groom, encourages the populace to take advantage of the unusual liberties granted upon this joyous occasion, and ends by flinging a parting taunt at the rejected wife.

ACT II.

Scene 1. Medea, hearing the marriage hymn, realizes that she has actually been deserted, calls to mind her claims on Jason's gratitude, and repeats her vow to take a terrible revenge. Her old nurse cautions her against speaking too freely, but in vain.

Scene 2. The door of the palace opens and Creon comes out. He is angry to see that Medea is still in his dominions. She complains of his injustice and tries to reason with him, but he is inflexible in his decree of exile. Medea begs a brief delay that she may bid a last farewell to her children, and the King, touched, by her entreaties, at last grants her this one day.

Scene 3. The chorus sings of the daring of him who first sailed the seas, the bliss of the Golden Age, the perils of the Argo's voyage, and the final conquest of the ocean. (This chorus contains the famous prophesy which seems to refer to the discovery of America: Venient annis etc.)

ACT III.

Scene 1. The nurse describes Medea's behavior and fears that she is planning some new and terrible crime. Medea expresses her contempt for Jason's cowardice and renews her threats. The nurse's timid protests are of no avail.

Scene 2. Jason enters complaining of his hard lot which makes it necessary either to desert Medea or lose his own life. Medea urges him to fly with her, reminds him of her services and sacrifices for him, and tells him that he shares her guilt. Jason confesses his fear of the king. Medea sees through his hypocrisy and accuses him of
desiring the marriage. Jason leaves her, and Medea then indulges in a wild outburst of passion, and conceives the plan of sending the poisoned robe and necklace to Creusa.

Scene 3. The chorus tells us that the fiercest forces of nature cannot compare with the fury of a jealous woman, and prays the gods to protect Jason. The fate of many of the other Argonauts is recounted. The wrong Neptune suffered at the hands of the Argonauts who braved his kingdom, the sea, has been sufficiently avenged, let him spare Jason.

ACT IV.

Scene 1. The nurse describes Medea's magic charms, and tells of the deadly herbs and serpents' venom gathered from heaven, earth, and hell, used in the concoction of this terrible poison with which her gifts are to be impregnated.

Scene 2. Medea finishes her incantations upon the stage, invokes the aid of the infernal gods, the shades of the wicked dead, and Hecate, the patroness of magic arts, in a frenzied monolog, until she is assured by certain signs that Hecate has heard her, then sends her two children to take the presents to their new stepmother, telling them to return quickly that she may give them a last embrace.

Scene 3. The chorus describes the wild frenzy of Medea and prays to Apollo to speedily end this fearful day.

ACT V.

Scene 1. A nuntius tells of the destruction of Creon and Creusa through Medea's fatal gifts.

Scene 2. The nurse urges Medea to fly for her life, but Medea exults over the success of her magic, recalls with frenzied satisfaction her past deeds, hesitates in her resolve to kill her children, sees the furies and the apparition of her murdered brother, kills one
of her children, and hearing the approach of her enemies retreats to her housetop to finish her work.

Scene 3. Jason enters calling upon all loyal subjects to aid in avenging the murder of their king and princess. Medea from her housetop taunts him with the loss of his bride and his helplessness to save his sons, and killing the second of them before his eyes, throws their bodies down to him and flies away through the air on a chariot drawn by winged dragons.

The foregoing is a brief synopsis of the Medea. The extreme simplicity and directness of the piece may be seen by summing it up briefly.


III. SYNOPSIS OF THE MÉDÉE OF CORNEILLE.

We shall now summarize the Médée, indicating what scenes Corneille took over from Seneca practically unchanged.

ACT I.

Scene 1. Jason meets Pollux, a companion of the Argonautic expedition, who has just returned from a voyage to Asia. He tells him of his approaching marriage with Créuse and of the events leading up to
his flight from Iolcos. He speaks lightly of his rejection of Médée, and tries to justify his action on the grounds of necessity. Pollux goes to congratulate the king on his good fortune, and Jason waits for Créuse to come out of the temple.

Scene 2. While waiting for Créuse, Jason, in a monolog, discloses the troubled state of his conscience and tries to justify himself.

Scene 3. Créuse with her nurse Cléone comes out of the temple. Jason asks her to intercede with her father in favor of his two children, and to save them from sharing their mother's exile. She promises to do what she can, and speaks of a favor from Jason which, if she succeeds, she will name later. Médée's door opens and the three leave the stage in order to avoid her.

Scene 4. Médée delivers a long declamation modeled closely after Act I. Scene 1. of Seneca's Medea.

Scene 5. Médée and Nérine, her "gouvernante." Modeled after Act II. Scene 1. of Seneca's Medea.

ACT II.

Scene 1. Nérine declares her readiness to aid Médée in her plans for revenge, but begs her to spare Jason. Médée declares that she will destroy only Créon and Créuse, and will win back Jason if possible.


Scene 3. Jason and Créuse again come out of the palace. Créon tells Créuse that she is now without a rival, that Médée is to leave the next day. He also speaks of another of Créuse's suitors, Aegée, King of Athens, but is sure that matters can be arranged with him.

Scene 4. Créuse tells Jason that as a reward for her interces-
sion in favor of his children she would like a certain wonderful robe belonging to Médée. Jason promises it and goes to find Nérine, hoping to be able to obtain it by craft.

Scene 5. King Aégée enters. Créuse tries to justify her preference for Jason by patriotic and other reasons. Aégée vows that he will avenge himself.

ACT III.

Scene 1. Nérine in a monolog expresses her pity for Créuse whose destruction she is powerless to prevent.

Scene 2. Jason enquires of Nérine how Médée takes her banishment and is told that she is somewhat resigned. He suggests that she could win the favor of Créon by making Créuse a present of her robe.

Scene 3. Médée and Jason. This scene follows closely Act III.

Scene 2. of Seneca.

Scene 4. Jason has expressed his great attachment for his children. Médée declares that she will punish him through them. Nérine pleads for them and tells Médée that she has learned of another means of vengeance which she will not disclose in so public a place.

ACT IV.

Scene 1. Médée is seen finishing her incantations in her magic grotto. She calls Nérine and describes the different things that make up the poison with which she has poisoned the robe. A clamor is heard. Nérine tells Médée that the old king, Aégée, has made an unsuccessful attempt to carry off Créuse and is now a prisoner. Médée gives the robe to Nérine, telling her to have her children take it to Créuse, and assuring her that it can harm only Créuse and her father.

Scene 2. Créon thanks Pollux for his part in rescuing Créuse from Aégée. Pollux disclaims having done anything worthy of thanks, and cautions Créon against Médée.
Scene 3. Cléone enters and tells of Médée's present. Pollux is very suspicious of such a gift, and the King, to satisfy him, agrees to have it tried first upon a criminal.

Scene 4. The old king, Aegée, in his prison, laments over his disgrace.

Scene 5. Médée with her magic wand opens the door of his prison, frees him from his fetters, and demands as a reward a place of refuge at Athens, which he gladly promises.

ACT V.

Scene 1. Theudas, a servant of Créon, enters. Médée charms him with a stroke of her wand, and makes him tell of the result of Créuse putting on the poisoned robe. Jason is away conducting his friend Pollux to the city gate, and Theudas is going to inform him of the calamity. Médée gives him another stroke with her wand and allows him to go.

Scene 2. Médée exults at the success of her magic, but she is not yet satisfied. She wavers in her plan to destroy her children, but at last enters her house determined to do so.

Scene 3. Créon rushes out of the palace followed by servants who try to free him from his clothing which the poisonous fire causes to stick to his flesh. He drives them away with his sword.

Scene 4. Créuse and Cléone also rush out of the palace. Créon stabs himself with his dagger in order not to see his daughter die. Créuse wants to follow his example but Jason is seen approaching.

Scene 5. Créuse begs Jason not to touch her. He eagerly seizes upon the idea of dying the same death, but the charm of Médée refuses to harm him. He wishes to stab himself, but Créuse begs him first to avenge her, and dies in his arms. Jason orders the servants to carry away the two bodies, and goes toward the house of Médée,
swearing to sacrifice her to the manes of the dead Créon and Créuse, and then himself, or better, his two children who carried the fatal gift of their mother.

Scene 6. Médée calls to him from her balcony that he is already avenged upon his sons, taunts him as in Seneca, and flies away upon her winged chariot.

Scene 7. Jason in a long declamation first swears that he will follow Médée to the ends of the earth to take vengeance upon her, but finally in his despair, realizing the impossibility of this, he kills himself.

IV. COMPARISON OF THE TWO TRAGEDIES.

After reading the two tragedies one notices at once that the French work is much longer than its Latin model, that the beautiful lyrical choruses of Seneca are not to be found in Corneille, that the Médée is not nearly so simple and direct as the Medea, that the former contains more characters, and minor incidents not to be found in the latter.

The Latin Medea contains only 1027 lines, of which 260 are sung by the chorus. It is a little shorter than the average of the Sene-can tragedies, of which the longest, the Hercules in Oeta, contains 1998 lines. The Médée of Corneille has 1628 lines, and is perhaps a little shorter than the average of his tragedies; the Cid, for example, has 1840 lines.

Corneille has entirely dispensed with the choruses, which in Seneca contain many of the most beautiful passages of the tragedy and serve to mark the close of each act, as well as to relieve the strain of the tragedy. The chorus at the end of the second act is especially interesting for its prophesy of the discovery of America.
Only in one place in this play, in the first scene of the last act, does the chorus take any part in the dialogue. Here it prompts with questions the nuntius who tells of the destruction of Creon and Creusa.

As we have already noticed, the Medea of Seneca is extremely simple. The omission of the chorus simplified it still more. Corneille then took what was left and lengthened it out to the standard length of a French tragedy. This naturally necessitated the invention of new scenes, the introduction of new characters, the production upon the stage of scenes simply reported in Seneca. The requirements of the French theater, Corneille thought, necessitated a few other changes, some of which he mentions in his "examen" prefixed to the Médée. We shall notice briefly some of these changes.

The Médée has, outside of the chorus and servants, five roles: Medea, the nurse, Creon, Jason, and the nuntius. The Médée has the additional characters: Aegée, Pollux, Créuse, and Cléone, making nine in all. The nuntius becomes Theudas, a domestic of the King. Creusa, who does not appear at all in Seneca, has quite an important role. Cléone, her "gouvernante," is an altogether new creation, and Aegée, the king of Athens, is borrowed from Euripides, although his role in the two plays is entirely different. Pollux, as may be seen in the synopsis, is a sort of superfluous personage who in the first scene serves to give Jason a chance to tell the situation at the beginning of the play. In classical times however the story was sufficiently familiar to make this unnecessary. Later Pollux is used to caution the King against Médée, and finally, Corneille clumsily enough uses his departure as a means of getting Jason out of the way at the time of the horrible punishment of Créon and Créuse. It is to Pollux also that the trial of the robe upon a criminal is due. Créuse's desire for Médée's
robe and Jason's scheme to get it are innovations, as is also the whole role of Aegée. In the Medea the scene remains the same throughout. Corneille shows us Médée's magic grotto and Aegée's dungeon. In Seneca Medea's incantations are related by the nurse; in Corneille we see Médée in her grotto finishing her magic. The death of Creon and Creusa, merely narrated in Seneca, is put upon the stage in Corneille, while on the other hand, in Corneille, Médée does not kill her children on the stage as she does in Seneca. Jason, who in the final scene in Seneca is left looking after the disappearing Medea and denying the existence of the gods in his dispair, in Corneille stabs himself and goes to join Créuse in the land of the shades. Jason's intention of killing his sons himself is an innovation of Corneille, while the effective scene where the frenzied Medea sees a vision of the furies and the apparition of her murdered brother is omitted.

All of these changes seem to be worked out rather arbitrarily, and not very consistently, and seem to show poverty of invention. One feels, especially after studying Corneille's model, that they were made mainly to fill out the five acts of the play. In fact Corneille himself admits* that he put the death of Créon and Créuse upon the stage merely to give his fifth act its proper length.

The characters of Seneca have also suffered some changes in being transplanted into the tragedy of Corneille. As we have observed, Medea in Seneca is much more of a sorceress than in Euripides. She boasts of her power over the elements; she can concoct terrible charms and has a winged chariot and a team of dragons at her command. Nevertheless she is human enough to awaken our sympathies. She does not constantly make use of her supernatural powers for every trifle. In Corneille she uses her magic wand to free Aegée from his

*In the "examen" prefixed to the Médée.
prison and his fetters, thus assuring herself a refuge in Athens; she
charms the servant, Theudas, and makes him tell his errand. These extra
manifestations of her powers go toward making her less human. Why
should such an accomplished witch need a place of refuge? She does
not in Seneca. And further, why should she not be able by some charm
to retain the love of Jason? Such things, it seems, do not fall out-
side of the range of a witch’s power. Seneca has given as much pro-
minence as he dared to the magic powers of Medea, but he stopped
within bounds. Corneille carried them too far and spoiled the effect.
The character of Jason has also suffered some changes. In Seneca
Jason is nothing but a faithless, ungrateful coward. In Corneille his
color is to a certain extent ennobled; at least he can act as a
man in the last scenes, and gives us a better opinion of himself by
committing suicide. The character in itself may be somewhat improved,
but not in relation to the rest of the play as we shall notice later.
Créon, in Corneille, is puffed up with the dignity of his divine rank
and makes somewhat of a ridiculous impression. Perhaps there is a
little satire intended in this character, but this is hard to deter-
mine. The other characters are much the same as in Seneca.

We shall now notice briefly the style of the two plays. Seneca
was formerly much admired, and his tragedies were looked upon as
models of style. Now critics like to characterize him as declamatory,
sententious, and bombastic. He is undoubtedly rather declamatory and
sententious, and these very qualities Corneille seems to have care-
fully imitated. His Médée is full of long declamations. Good examples
are Médée’s monolog in Act I. Scene 1., closely imitated from Seneca;
Médée’s account of her services to Jason in Act II. Scene 2.; Jason’s
last monolog. Corneille has however avoided the display of erudition
in the long series of classical allusions found in Seneca, especially
in the choruses. Some of the declamations in the Médée are admirable from the artistic point of view. Voltaire said of the verses:

Souverains protecteurs des lois de l'hyménée,
Dieux garants de la foi que Jason m'a donnée, etc.

"Voici des vers qui annonçaient Corneille."*

Voltaire however criticizes certain phrases which he calls comic, such as: the mille et mille malheurs, Créuse, autant vaut, possédée, the flamme accommodée au bien des affaires, Act I. Scene 1. He excuses them however as due to the bad taste of the time: "C'est le malheureux style d'une nation qui ne savait pas encore parler."*

Corneille has carefully taken over, or actually translated, many of the sententiae and epigrammatic speeches of Seneca, and in some cases rivals or even surpasses Seneca in his rendering of them. The following are a few examples:

Médée, Act I. Scene 5.

Nérine.

Dans un si grand revers que vous reste-t-il?

Médée.

Moi!

Moi, dis-je, et c'est assez!

Medea, Act II. Scene 1.

Nutrix.

Nihil superest opibus e tantis tibi.

Medea.

Medea superest!

Médée, Act II. Scene 2.
Médée.
Celui-la fait le crime à qui le crime sert.

Medea, Act III. Scene 2.
Tua illa sunt: cui prodest scelus is fecit.

Médée, Act III. Scene 3.
Médée.
Accoutumée à fuir, l'exil est peu de chose.

Medea, Act III. Scene 2.
Medea.
Hoc non est novum mutare sedes.

The verse form of the Medea of Seneca is for the most part the standard iambic senarius with some variety of meter in the choruses. The verse of the Médée is the standard alexandrine with the exception of the soliloquy of Aegée in Act IV. Scene 4., where there are six stanzas, each consisting of four verses of eight syllables and four alexandrines. The smooth, polished alexandrines of Corneille are beautiful and harmonious, but do not seem to be as well adapted to the furious declamations of Medea as the unrimed, somewhat ruder verses of the Latin tragedy.

Now for the success of the two plays on the stage. So far as I can find, we know nothing of the theatrical success of the Medea of Seneca; I believe that we have no record of its ever having been played. In fact some authorities claim that the Senecan tragedy was not meant for regular presentation in a theatre. We know that tragedy was not very popular among the Romans, a people accustomed to the more
real tragedy of the gladiatorial combats. The Senecan tragedies, and
the Medea especially, have been accused of being too filled with hor-
ror. We must take into consideration that they had to compete with
the horrors of the arena. Although this is one of the objections to
them now, it could not have been so in the time of Seneca.

The Médée of Corneille was played, but met with little success,
and finally disappeared from the stage altogether. It did not please
the public. Voltaire ascribes this lack of success to the declama-
tory nature and horror of the piece, and to the fact that none of the
characters interest us.

These objections undoubtedly hold against Corneille's Médée; but
are these criticisms equally true of the Medea of Seneca? Declamatory
it certainly is, and it has its share of horror. Horror however was
one of the requisites of Roman tragedy. But Corneille has exaggerated
the horror of his model. He has brought upon the stage two suicides
and the death of Créuse. He makes Jason wish to kill his own children
until he finds that Médée has already anticipated him in this horri-
ble deed, and finally, although he does not actually have Médée stab
her two children before the eyes of the spectators, he does not seem
to have in any way lessened the horror of her crime. Voltaire's cri-
ticism that Corneille has not succeeded in interesting us in a sin-
gle character in his play is perfectly true. Créon and Créuse deserve
all the punishment they receive, and we have no sympathy for them. Nor
does the unnatural witch, Médée, interest us. She is less human than
in Seneca, and less entitled to our sympathy. And further, Corneille
has divided the interest that we should feel for Médée by trying to
give more prominence to characters kept in the background by Seneca,
and hence we have no interest in any character in the play. On the
other hand, in Seneca, although Medea is terrible in her fury, although
she commits crimes that we cannot approve of, the other weak, detestable characters are subordinated to her; no attempt whatever is made to interest us in them, so that all our interest is centered in Medea, and we thoroughly sympathize with her in her vengeance taken for the great wrongs that she has suffered at the hands of Creon, Creusa, and her miserable husband. The tragedy is direct and powerful; there is nothing to distract us from the main theme, Medea's wrongs and her terrible revenge.

V. CONCLUSION.

To conclude, the Medea is a good example of Senecan tragedy, somewhat declamatory, but on the whole a masterful treatment of the subject, especially remarkable for its simplicity, directness, concision and force. The action starts in medias res, presenting Medea to us in the very first scene in a wild declamation, then passing directly through the following scenes with their wild tirades and epigrammatic dialogue, relieved occasionally by a pleasing chorus, to the climax, where Medea, after killing her two children, flies triumphantly away upon her winged chariot, leaving Jason upon the stage looking after her, the picture of utter despair, and most overwhelmingly punished for his faithlessness. The vigor and sustained intensity of the piece carry the reader away and hold his interest from the first scene to the last, and students of classical literature still read the Medea with enjoyment.

The Médée of Corneille is an adaptation of the Senecan tragedy, complicated and weakened by the addition of new characters and new scenes, having no interest and no value in themselves, and serving only to destroy the simplicity and force characteristic of the model.
As a drama it was more or less of a failure. Its main interest lies in the style. Not only has Corneille very skillfully rendered many of the most beautiful passages of Seneca, but passages that are entirely his own show remarkable poetic power. As Voltaire says: "On peut déjà entrevoir dans ce poème le germe des grandes beautés qui brillent dans les autres pièces."
