

The Velian Medea: Cicero's Citation of Ennius' *Medea* in *Fam.* 7.6

Comic and tragic plays were a popular part of Roman festivals. Roman audiences were discerning and sophisticated, passing judgment on the delivery of an actor or chorus (*De orat.* 1.259, 3.196; *Or.* 173). In Cicero's extant writings, we have colorful descriptions of theater performances attended by his own critique of the show, its actors, staging, and even audience (e.g., *Fam.* 7.1). Cicero was not just a critic. Like many of his contemporaries, Cicero may have written a few of his own tragedies (Beacham 1991, Boyle 2006). Moreover, Cicero drew extensively from both comedy and tragedy for *exempla* in all of his works (Goldberg 2000; Shackleton Bailey 1983). One of his favorites appears to be Ennius' *Medea*. Cicero incorporates references to or direct quotes from Ennius' *Medea* in thirteen passages of his work. In this paper I will focus on Cicero's citation of this play in his letter to C. Trebatius Testa (*Fam.* 7.6). Trebatius is from Velia, hence "Velian Medea." The young jurist is serving Caesar in Gaul. Cicero responds to Trebatius' homesickness with a quote from Ennius' play. Here Medea maintains that service abroad is often more honorable than idleness in one's fatherland. I will argue that, behind Cicero's consolatory example of Medea the exile, there is also motivation to assert his own superiority over Trebatius by implicitly engaging another of her exemplary identities—barbarian.

Cicero's use of drama as a source for examples and proofs should not be surprising as drama was favored by other writers, orators and grammarians (e.g., Nonius, Quintilian, Varro; Goldberg 2000). My title refers to Cicero's defense of Caelius, where he famously calls Clodia the "Palatine Medea" (*Cael.* 18). In this context, Cicero relies on a shared knowledge of the play in order to encourage the jury to see Clodia as the likely poisoner acting out of lover's jealousy, as Medea herself does in Ennius' play. Ennius' tragedy offers a sort of language with which

Cicero may speak to a variety of audiences in as many settings and genres. Everyone attended these performances and could be counted on to recognize a line or scene from which they may find parallels with the issue under consideration. So Cicero claims that the actor Aesopus and his audience applied lines from Accius' tragedies to Cicero's defense of Rome (*Sest.* 56-58, 119-125). Ennius' *Medea* appears in a variety of passages and arguments throughout Cicero's works, employed, for example, in a critique of Stoic philosophy (*Nat. deor.* 3.65-67, 75) and as a demonstration of the importance of delivery (*De orat.* 3.217).

The deployment of Ennius' *Medea*, however, even for the sake of demonstrating false causality (*Her.* 2.34; Cic., *Fat.* 34) contains multiple potential connotations. A citation can remind one familiar with the play of any moment in the story as Ennius tells it—his characters, their actions, and the play's themes and imagery. Such potentiality is increased by the play's popularity. In his letter to Trebatius we may see Cicero's conscious manipulation of the polysemic nature of a dramatic reference. While ostensibly deploying *Medea* as a sympathetic exile like Trebatius himself, his pointed quotation of *Medea* "with hands covered in gypsum" and its contrast to the very Roman sounding "Matronae" of Corinth, draw attention to her foreignness. Jocelyn (1967: 359-60) argues that *manibus gypsatis* is a description from the play of *Medea*'s exotic cosmetic. The cosmetic marks *Medea* as a non-Greek, while the title *Matronae* marks the Greek women as Roman. This contrast activates another aspect of *Medea*'s story—her Corinthian origin—and associates Trebatius, whom Cicero casts as *Medea* in his reference, with *Medea* the powerless non-citizen, not *Medea* the citizen-exile. Such a move allows Cicero to portray Trebatius as the weaker, dependent partner in their friendship, in line with the paternalistic and competitive tone of the letters to Trebatius from Cicero (*Fam.* 7.6-22; Hutchinson 1998, Leach 2006).

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