

## Reading Ovid's Medea: Complexity, Unity, and Humour

# Reading Ovid's Medea: Complexity, Unity, and Humour

By

STEPHEN CLARK RUSSELL, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

© Copyright by Stephen Russell, May, 2011

Doctor of Philosophy (2011)  
University  
(Classics)

McMaster  
  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE:      Reading Ovid's Medea: Complexity, Unity, and Humour

AUTHOR:   Stephen Russell, B.A., M.A.

SUPERVISOR:   Professor Paul Murgatroyd

NUMBER OF PAGES: iv, 368

## Abstract

This thesis offers a consideration of Ovid's portrayal of Medea - in *Heroides* 6 and 12, *Metamorphoses* 7, and in *Tristia* 3.9. Although several scholars have examined the myth as Ovid presents it, no one has yet offered a literary appreciation of Ovid's various accounts of the myth – one that examines his use of characterization, humour, audience response, and one that treats his Medea as a consistent, albeit complex, character.

The first chapter focuses on the sources for Ovid's Medea, the ways he makes changes and, as far as we can tell, innovations to his predecessors. The second begins with a general introduction to the *Heroides*, followed by a close reading of *Heroides* 6, showing how this letter is an oblique reference to Medea's letter and myth, and I point out the links between the two poems, arguing that Hypsipyle's letter must be read as a foreshadowing of Medea's. The third chapter examines *Heroides* 12 – Medea's letter - where I concentrate on Ovid's characterization of Medea and specifically look at elements of black humour and foreshadowing. The fourth – and longest – chapter deals with the Medea of the *Metamorphoses*, where I propose that the real metamorphosis of this story is Medea herself, who moves from the state of an innocent young girl to that of a witch, yet noting that all of the changes take place within a work that is marked by its sense of playfulness – its *perpetua festivitas* – and note Ovid's use of wit and irony even as his characterization appears to grow dark. The fifth and final chapter deals with the Medea in Ovid's *Tristia*, where I place the Medea of this work within the context of Ovid's exile poetry, while showing that he is working with a complex character and is in no way contradicting himself.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Paul Murgatroyd, for his guidance and support. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Howard Jones and Dr. Daniel McLean, both of whom have been very helpful.

To those institutions which have supported me with funding I am deeply grateful: SSHRC, the Department of Classics, Faculty of Humanities, and the School of Graduate Studies at McMaster University.

Among the many people who have been helpful and encouraging at McMaster University, I would like to thank Dr. Claude Eilers and Dr. Evan Haley; Dr. Michael Snowden, *recens doctus*, provided great friendship along this journey; and Carmen Camilleri, the department's administrative assistant, helped me significantly as well.

I would like to thank especially my family, and, above all, I would like to dedicate this to Toulouse, *sine quo vita mihi non tam beata fuisset*.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1: The Sources for Ovid's Medea	1
Chapter 2: <i>Heroides</i> 6 – From Hypsipyle to Medea	36
Chapter 3: <i>Heroides</i> 12 – Medea's Letter to Jason	98
Chapter 4: Medea in the <i>Metamorphoses</i>	165
Chapter 5: Medea in <i>Tristia</i> 3.9	317
Conclusion	336
Bibliography	346

## **Chapter 1: Ovid's Sources for Medea**

This chapter will concentrate on the sources for Ovid's Medea. I shall examine his main literary models, his use of the tradition, the changes he makes and, as far as we can tell, the innovations that he applies to the depictions of his predecessors. In order to do this, I shall present an overview of the Medea story as a whole (concentrating on what sets the various depictions apart from one another), then I shall place Ovid's version against them and thus see what aspects he plays up, plays down, adds, and omits. The chapter starts with a summary of the different literary references and the various attitudes expressed toward the Medea myth,<sup>1</sup> her genealogy, and includes a brief overview as to how her story has evolved and been interpreted differently during the course of the classical period throughout the different genres in which she appears. Since this project is strictly focussed on Ovid's presentation, I will only examine these texts insofar as there is evidence that they help sharpen the perception of what Ovid is doing. Although Medea first appears in Hesiod, the main sources used for this will be Pindar, Euripides, and Apollonius, since they offer the most substantial extant evidence. As well, I consider both later versions of the myth and those that are difficult to attach a date – such as in Apollodorus, Seneca, Valerius Flaccus, Hosidius Geta, and Dracontius – that may highlight specific details of the story that are present in Ovid's version but are not found in versions prior to that of Ovid and therefore which help to provide an overview of the myth that he had at his disposal. In addition to this, I briefly examine artistic representations of the Medea story, exploring the possible connections to parts of her

---

<sup>1</sup> See p.2ff.

myth that are only depicted in Ovid. The intricate play with his literary models causes Ovid's Medea to be a much more complex character, one that requires a reader who is both conscious of those other texts as well as the tradition that exists beyond those models. By looking back to the main sources we can better appreciate the striking originality of the Medea he portrays.

**The Myth of Medea: an Overview of the Literary Attitudes toward her from Hesiod to Dracontius.**

Medea makes various appearances throughout classical literature, from her first emergence in Hesiod in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC to that in Dracontius in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. Before looking specifically at what Ovid has done with her story and where he has made changes, it is important to look at the prior tradition and variations on her myth that the poet would have certainly had at his disposal, along with other versions from later antiquity which contain details which are found in Ovid and may have been influenced by his presentation or have come from (now lost) sources that were available to him. To start, we need to consider the attitudes of the authors toward her in the extant sources.

While the later references to Medea tend to present her in a very negative light, the earlier ones either present her in a slightly positive way or in one that is neutral and therefore neither positive nor negative. In his *Theogony*, Hesiod mentions that Medea was taken by Jason to be his wife, but adds little else to his description other than to say that she produced a son, Medus.<sup>2</sup> Her next two appearances, in Pindar and Herodotus,

---

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 956-62, 993-1002.



continue to foster this positive image. In two of his odes Pindar alludes to Medea.<sup>3</sup> In the lengthier poem, *Pythian* 4, she acts as a prophetess<sup>4</sup> who foretells how the Argonaut Euphamus will receive a clod of earth which will one day lead him to found Thera (and, from there, Cyrene). The remainder of the poem mostly concerns the adventures of the Argonauts, and specifically concentrates on the meeting of Jason and Pelias in Iolcus.<sup>5</sup> Herodotus also offers an earlier and less complex version of Medea, beginning his narrative on the origins of the Persian-Greek conflict with the story of how Medea was stolen from Colchis by the Greeks in response to the earlier theft of Io from Argos by certain Phoenician sailors, and Herodotus later makes a remark about how she came from Athens and eventually gave her name to the Medes.<sup>6</sup>

Euripides' tragedy seems to have changed the course of the myth, as it is the first extant account which presents a more detailed portrait of her story and, more

---

<sup>3</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 4, *Olympian* 13.53-54.

<sup>4</sup> O'Higgins (1997) makes an interesting argument on the dual nature of Medea as prophetess and magical priestess. She makes a valid comparison (p. 115) between the song Medea sings to the Argonauts and the song that Circe sings to Odysseus in book 12 of the *Odyssey*. However, this comparison also highlights the major weakness of the essay, as it assumes a connection between Medea and Circe. Granted, it is extremely probable that by this time the relationship between these two figures had been established and was understood by the readers of the poem, but there is no extant evidence for this tradition. Equally, O'Higgins' paper presupposes that Pindar was working with a tradition of the Medea story for which the only extant evidence that we have comes after him, since the essay interprets (too strenuously, in my opinion) Pindar's words as having a double meaning that imply Medea's power as a destructive force. This is a reading which I do not support, since it forces us to read Pindar through Euripides, which is a backward approach.

<sup>5</sup> Curiously, the ode, dedicated to Arcesilas IV of Cyrene, was commissioned by an exile from Cyrene in an attempt to make an opening for that exile's return. In Pindar's version, the commissioner of the ode is essential in understanding Medea's role in the poem; for the exiled commissioner, just like Jason and Medea in the story, wants to return home. Moreover, if the story of Medea and Jason is to act as a plea to be allowed to return and through this representation of a returning exile (Jason), then there should not be any obvious presence of the more ominous parts of Medea's character – other than the subtle hints at the vengeance they will seek against Pelias – and the poem thus points to an earlier, less complicated and more heroic presentation of Medea's story. O'Higgins (p.125) thinks that Pindar is suggesting that Arcesilas will have to be prepared for this "hint of future disaster" with the exile's return. Again, this reading presupposes subsequent Medeas, for which there is no direct evidence in Pindar.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus 1.2, 7.62.

significantly, although the presentation is initially sympathetic, it is nevertheless the first source which also included a predominantly negative portrait of Medea, as it mentions her role in the murders of both her brother and Pelias and, furthermore, gives a detailed and vivid portrait of her role in the deaths of Creon/Creusa and that of her own children as well. By the end Euripides paints Medea as chilling, fierce, vengeful, deceptive and murderous.

Apollonius, writing in Alexandria, certainly had Euripides as a reference when writing his *Argonautica* – as well as most likely other lost tragedies by Sophocles and Euripides based on the events in Colchis.<sup>7</sup> Yet his epic does not dwell on the less savoury aspects to her story and character, and instead creates a more personal and sympathetic picture of her as a young girl who has fallen in love. However, in the power and force of her speeches – notably when she fears that Jason will hand her over to her brother Absyrtus<sup>8</sup> – Apollonius' Medea does show a form of rhetoric that strongly links her to Euripides' powerful and conniving witch. The extent to which Apollonius wished his story to anticipate the murderous deeds that follow Medea's arrival in Greece is debatable, yet there are distinct hints as to what she will become, and we can say with assurance that he expected his reader to be well aware of them, since he clearly alludes to her role in the death of Pelias.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, his Medea openly betrays both her father and

---

<sup>7</sup> Fragmentary evidence is very uncertain and the surviving evidence is well summarized by Mastronarde (2002: 44-70). I shall mention certain fragments – from Pherecydes, Eumelus, Simonides, and Ibycus – at the appropriate points in this chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Apollonius 4.354-90, 4.1031-52.

<sup>9</sup> Apollonius 3.1135-36.

brother – whom she lured to his death<sup>10</sup> – as well as contriving a plan for the Argonauts to defeat the Talos, the man of bronze,<sup>11</sup> showing that she is potentially much more than an innocent young girl in love.

The historical and mythographic accounts of Medea add more information to the story of her arrival in Greece. Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century BC, attempts to take much of the magic out of the story – indeed, he accuses the tragic poets of giving out “marvellous and inconsistent” accounts of Medea (ποικίλη τις καὶ διάφορος ἱστορία, 4.56.1) – and paints neither a sympathetic nor a hostile portrait of her but presents her actions in terms of understandable human passions. When the Argonauts arrive she is being held under protective custody (ἀποθέσθαι φυλακὴν, 4.46.2) because she opposes her father’s penchant for killing strangers, and her revenge in Corinth, which he describes as being precipitated by Jason’s becoming enamoured with Glauce (Γλαύκης ἔρασθέντα, 4.53.2), comes to fruition by means of a fire to the palace rather than by the poisoned dress.

Apollodorus, who is drawing on earlier authors and whose precise timeframe is uncertain, although he is most usually placed in the first or second century AD,<sup>12</sup> casts Medea in a decidedly negative light, since in a few short pages he makes her the sole murderer of her younger brother as well as being responsible for the deaths of Pelias, Talos, Glauce, her own children Memerus and Pheres, and finally, that of her uncle Perses

---

<sup>10</sup> Apollonius 4.452-81.

<sup>11</sup> Apollonius 4.1653-88.

<sup>12</sup> In his introduction to his translation, Robin Hard (1997: ix-xiii) concludes that we cannot really tell much about either the real author or the exact date of publication. He postulates that it was likely written in the first or second century AD, but is by no means certain that this has to be the case.

when she eventually returns home to her father.<sup>13</sup> Hyginus, omitting many of the details for the sake of brevity, in many ways follows Apollodorus' version,<sup>14</sup> but he does add an interesting aspect to Medea's characterization in that all of her actions appear to be presented as quite justifiable, including the death of her adult brother Absyrtus, who dies while waging a battle against them (*Fab.* 23). Even when Jason ultimately betrays her by abandoning her because of the opinion of others who look down upon her due to her status as a foreigner (*Fab.* 35), Hyginus refrains from making any comment on the murders, and Jason is presented in just as negative a light as Medea, if not more so.

The versions of Medea which definitely appear after that of Ovid tend to emphasize her malevolence. Seneca, in his tragedy, which relentlessly portrays her as an evil witch and a character who is driven chiefly by her passions, contains many of the darker elements of her character; Valerius Flaccus, in his uncompleted *Argonautica* in the first century AD, provides a more sympathetic portrait of her, nevertheless makes occasional allusions to the trouble she will eventually bring to her marriage as well as to other Greek cities.<sup>15</sup> The tragedy by Hosidius Geta, usually dated to the second century AD, also contains many of the less savoury elements to her story, including her deception

---

<sup>13</sup> Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 1.9.24-28.

<sup>14</sup> Neither Apollodorus nor Diodorus specifically mention their sources in their narratives on Medea. In his mythological account, Apollodorus adds details to the death of Pelias and writes about the gruesome murder of her younger brother Absyrtus as well as her divinely inspired escape after murdering her children. Diodorus' history includes a digression on Medea and the Argonauts that starts with the origins of killing strangers (4.45.1-4.56.2). His tale nevertheless contains a great deal of drama and he changes a number of details, including both the number and names of Medea's children and he omits Absyrtus altogether. Hyginus, with his *Fabulae*, constructed a popular history of mythological stories in Latin which included the Medea myth.

<sup>15</sup> e.g.: *nescius heu quanti thalamos ascendere monstri/ arserit atque urbes maneat qui terror Achaeas/ gratior ipse deis orbaque beatior aula* (6.45-47).

of both Creon and Jason, and culminating with the visit from the ghost of her dead brother Absyrtus when she moves to kill her children.<sup>16</sup>

Writing in the second century AD, Plutarch, in his *Life of Theseus*, refers to the cruel plot in which Medea tried to kill her son-in-law when he arrived in Athens,<sup>17</sup> which again presents her in a negative light, and Pausanias makes several digressive references to the Medea story in his second century AD geography of Greece.<sup>18</sup> Dracontius, a Christian poet in the fifth century, wrote a 601-line hexameter epyllion in which he presents a version of the story that appears to be very different from all of the other extant sources. She is at first presented as Jason's executioner in Colchis, but Cupid thwarts his death, forcefully compelling Medea to save him at the last moment, and then the two of them marry and stay in Colchis, where their children are born. Bright says that Dracontius' version can be divided into two parts: the events in Colchis are akin to a fairy-tale, or pantomime, and what follows after they flee is like a tragedy.<sup>19</sup> The final half, strangely, does not take place in Corinth but in Thebes, and their sudden flight from Colchis is precipitated by Medea overhearing Jason as he murmurs in his sleep about wanting to go home to Greece in order to (as he says) display both the Golden Fleece and his wife to his fellow countrymen.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Hosidius Geta's tragedy is difficult to date, and was once even attributed to Ovid, but is now considered to contain many borrowings from Virgil.

<sup>17</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 12.

<sup>18</sup> Pausanias 2.3.6-11, 2.12.1, 5.18.3, 9.11.2-3.

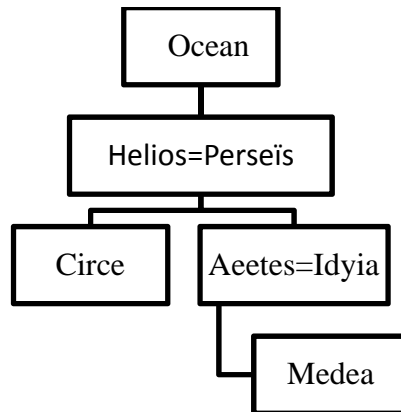
<sup>19</sup> Bright (1987: 60).

<sup>20</sup> The subsequent action upon arriving in Thebes happens very quickly: Jason is immediately offered a royal marriage, Medea takes severe and immediate revenge and, as Bright points out (1987: 76-77), Dracontius' debt to Hyginus is made clear by the fact that Dracontius has Medea kill Jason along with Creon and Glauce.

Having traced the basic literary attitude toward Medea, I shall now examine the basic outline of her story and look at how and where the various depictions differ, starting with her family tree and going as far as her death and arrival in the Isles of the Blessed.

### Genealogy

Medea's genealogy is not overly complicated, but there are a few notable variants. In every account her father is presented as Aeetes, king of the Colchians.<sup>21</sup> Aeetes' father, in turn, is Helios, the sun god, Medea's grandfather. The paternal lineage is established in Hesiod (*Theog.* 956-62) and no text makes any attempt to alter it. However, certain relations are inconsistent from author to author, starting with Medea's mother and aunt. Hesiod claims that Helios marries Perseis (a daughter of Ocean), who gives birth to Circe and Aeetes. Aeetes then marries Idyia, another daughter of Ocean, and they produce Medea. **Figure 1.1** provides a diagram of Hesiod's version:<sup>22</sup>

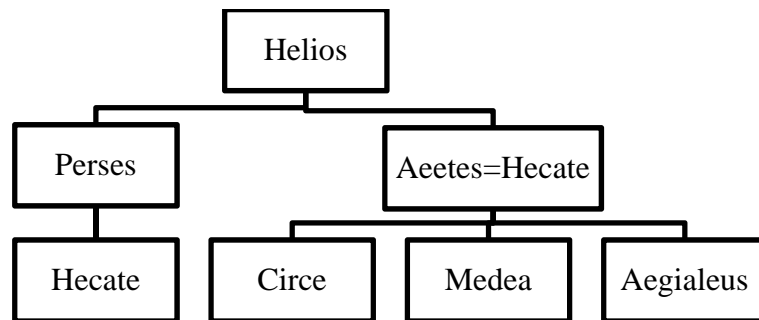


<sup>21</sup> Using fragments from Eumelus (fr.5) and Simonides (*PMG* 545), Mastronarde (2002: 49) points out that Aeetes had a claim to the throne in Corinth and that Medea was eventually summoned there to rule along with Jason “after the royal line had died out.”

<sup>22</sup> No other names are added to the extant lineage until we reach Apollonius, where we learn that Medea has a half-brother named Absyrtus (also called Phaethon), who is son of Aeetes and the nymph Asterodeia, and that she has an older sister named Chalciope, whose children are roughly the same age as Medea.

Apollonius twice mentions the Titan Perses and his daughter Hecate (3.467-78), but no familial connection is established between Medea and these two figures until Diodorus (4.45.1) offers a completely different genealogical table (**Figure 1.2**). In his version Aeetes and Perses are brothers and are both the sons of Helios (mother unknown). Perses is killed by his daughter, the witch Hecate, who then marries her uncle Aeetes and with him has two daughters – Circe and Medea – and a son – Aegialeus.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 1.2**



However, in all other accounts which trace Medea's lineage and mention her siblings, Absyrtus is clearly presented as her brother and Chalciope as her sister, while Circe, when mentioned, is said to be her aunt. Diodorus' version is the only extant source which does not represent Hecate as a goddess.

We have numerous variations on both the names and the number of the children that Medea has with Jason. Hesiod writes that they had a son, named Medeus (*Theog.* 1001), who eventually lent his name to the Medes.<sup>24</sup> Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.28) names

<sup>23</sup> Diodorus makes no mention of Absyrtus and is notable because he is the only author who attempts to trace Medea's genealogy who purposely leaves him out.

<sup>24</sup> Herodotus, making no mention of any Medeus, later says that Medea herself is the one responsible for the name of the Medes by giving her own name to them (7.62). As is shown later in discussing Medea's departure from Corinth, several writers introduce the idea of another son, Medus, whom she possibly has with Aegeus.

two sons (Mermerus and Pheres); Diodorus names three sons: the two oldest are twins, Thessalus and Alcimenes, and the youngest is named Tisandrus; and Pausanias introduces a verse report (2.3.9) from the poet Cinaethon in which he writes that they had a son and a daughter, named Medeus and Eriopis respectively. She is also reported by many texts to have had a son named Medus with Aegeus in Athens.<sup>25</sup>

### **Medea before Jason**

Although most of the sources that come prior to Ovid do not give many details of Medea's early life in Colchis before the Argonauts arrived, she is generally considered to be still a young girl when she first encounters Jason. Hesiod twice refers to her as a κούρη (992, 998) whom Jason takes from Colchis; neither Pindar nor Herodotus adds any information; and Euripides' version only goes back as far as Medea's own memory of how she saved Jason (476). Early fragmentary evidence also fails to provide any adjectives which might be helpful in developing a picture of Medea as a young girl.

Apollonius presents the first extant developed portrait of a young Medea. His account is quite sympathetic, showing her to be a young virgin who is very much torn between her passion for Jason and her desire to be a good daughter.<sup>26</sup> Yet the *Argonautica* still presents this young innocent girl within the context of her later more violent actions. She is introduced into the story as a witch (κούρη Αἰήτεω πολυφάρμακον, 3.27) and a priestess of Hecate and, although there is no apparent tradition which says that she is not a witch/priestess, throughout books 3 and 4 the

---

<sup>25</sup> Apollodorus *Bibl.* 1.9.28; Hyginus *Fab.* 26; Strabo 11.13.10; curiously, Diodorus (4.55.7) writes that she gives birth to Medus after she flees Athens and that the father is a Phoenician king.

<sup>26</sup> Apollonius 3.463-71; 3.616-44; 3.771-824.



*Argonautica* subtly plays her appearance as a vulnerable young girl against her role as a witch. Diodorus, however, while still asserting that Medea was a powerful sorceress, asserts that she used the powers of her magic drugs to help people (4.46.1-3), for he writes that she was in the habit of rescuing foreigners whom her father Aeetes had condemned to death. Interestingly, Diodorus' story presents Medea as already being at odds with her father by the time the Argonauts arrive, and he adds that she had just escaped from being placed under guard (ἀποθέσθαι φυλακὴν) when they meet her on an island just outside of Colchis.

Ovid concentrates a great deal on Medea's role as an impressionable young girl. Interestingly, not many other texts address this part of her story – especially those coming after Ovid – although there are some versions which are worth noting: Apollodorus and his sources eschew a romantic portrait of Medea and instead imply negative qualities, as he plainly says that she was a witch (φάρμακίς, *Bibl.* 1.9.23); Valerius Flaccus casts her more as an innocent girl than as a powerful witch, and he adds an interesting new twist to the story in the form of her fiancé Styrrus;<sup>27</sup> Dracontius, possibly following another tradition, presents the young Medea as the cruel priestess who is responsible for killing of strangers and who is only thwarted from slaying Jason by the repeated arrows of Cupid.<sup>28</sup>

### **Meeting and Helping Jason**

Euripides' account of the interaction between Medea and Jason in Colchis is brief, as Medea instead merely lists all that she did to help Jason in obtaining the Golden Fleece

---

<sup>27</sup> Valerius Flaccus 3.497; 5.459; 6.266, 275; 8.299, 329, 335.

<sup>28</sup> Dracontius 177-224.

(476-82) and Jason, in turn, blames sexual passion as the motivating factor behind her actions (526-28). Apollonius gives us a detailed description of Medea's first sight of Jason and how she is smitten with him after having been struck by Cupid's arrow,<sup>29</sup> which makes her appear to be an innocent and love-struck young girl. He also elaborates on her sister's work as a go-between, their secret meeting in Hecate's temple, and the labours which she helps him endure. Apollonius' account is also the first extant text to offer portrayals of both the marriage proposal, which he places as coming from the mouth of Jason (3.1128-30), and the theft of the Golden Fleece, after Medea compels Jason to repeat his promise of marriage (4.92-182). Diodorus presents the marriage as a type of mutually beneficial contract, one in which the entire plan – from the marriage to the theft of the Fleece – seemed to be advantageous to both of them (κοινοῦ δὲ τοῦ συμφέροντος φανέντος, 4.46.4).<sup>30</sup>

The gods play an important part in the romance between Jason and Medea. Most writers clearly include the gods as catalysts in bringing the two characters together. However, while Hesiod, Euripides, Apollonius, Hyginus, Valerius Flaccus, Dracontius, and even Pausanias clearly do make room for the function that Hera, Aphrodite, and Eros have in fostering the relationship,<sup>31</sup> neither Diodorus nor Apollodorus ascribe roles to the

---

<sup>29</sup> Apollonius 3.275-98.

<sup>30</sup> Diodorus' account (4.47.1-6) also attempts to take much of the magic away from the trials of Jason, claiming that the names commonly used for dragons and bulls were actually epithets given to real men in Colchis due to their cruel nature in their treatment of foreigners. Medea's role, he writes, was in leading Jason to the Fleece, and there is no overt display of magic in his account of Medea's story until the murder of Pelias (4.52.2), where she produces an image of a lamb out of the cauldron to make the daughters of Pelias think that she has restored its youth.

<sup>31</sup> Hesiod writes that Jason led Medea away by will of the gods (βουλήσι θεῶν, *Theog.* 992-3). Apollodorus, in his account, writes that Medea is the one who first makes Jason swear to have her as a wife (ἐὰν ὁμόσῃ αὐτὴν ἔξειν γυναῖκα, *Bibl.* 1.9.23). Interestingly, in Flaccus' account the first appearance of the marriage proposal comes to Medea through Venus, who is disguised as Circe and brings Medea the

gods in their versions of the romance. What makes this especially curious is the fact that Ovid also does not specifically mention the gods as an active force in his presentation of the blossoming romance between Medea and Jason, although he does make many possible allusions to versions of the story in which the gods do play a significant role.

### **The Flight from Colchis and the Murder of Absyrtus**

There are many variants in connection with Medea's flight from Colchis and the murder of her brother Absyrtus. The major difference is related to the age of her brother – whether he is a child or a man. Euripides makes the first references to the murder,<sup>32</sup> where his Medea admits to being the perpetrator of the felony (167) and Jason later says that she began her life upon the Argo by killing her own brother (1334). While Euripides does not weigh in on his age or the circumstances of the murder, Apollonius makes the story very explicit, saying that Jason does the killing of the adult Absyrtus (4.338-481), which, according to Röscher, is the first extant instance of this strand of the story.<sup>33</sup> This is notable, because in many of the subsequent versions, including that of Ovid, Absyrtus is once again portrayed as a child.<sup>34</sup>

---

rumoured news of Jason's plea for help (6.277-78); Pausanias (5.18.3) mentions an inscription which reads Μήδειαν ἰάσων γάμει, κέλεται δ' Ἀφροδίτα (Jason marries Medea, as Aphrodite bids).

<sup>32</sup> Mastronarde (2002: 48) mentions a fifth century fragment from Pherecydes (FGrHist 3 F 32a-c) that also mentions the murder of Absyrtus.

<sup>33</sup> Röscher (1887: 2448). In Apollonius' version, the Colchians have the Argonauts surrounded on an island; Jason is prepared to surrender Medea to them but will keep the Fleece. Medea is enraged at this idea and confronts Jason. He says that it was just a trick to lure the Colchians into a trap, and adds that he will instead kill her brother. Then they plot the murder together, with Medea luring her brother to a shrine of Artemis with the promise that she will steal back the Fleece as well. When Absyrtus arrives, Jason sneaks up on him and kills him, cutting off his limbs in the process.

<sup>34</sup> Diodorus, in fact, does not even mention Absyrtus, but instead writes (4.48.1-5) that the Argonauts killed Aeetes in a land-based battle that took place near the sea. In a now lost tragedy from Sophocles, *Kolchides*, a fragment survives (fr. 343, Stefan Radt, ed.) which points to Absyrtus dying at home before the hearth, although we can glean nothing about how he died or even his age from this fragment.

Following Ovid, there continues to be disagreement over the age of Absyrtus. According to Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.24), an author whose date once again is uncertain, Medea brings her younger brother along with her when she flees and thus delays her father's pursuit by throwing the chopped-up limbs into the sea for Aeetes to pick up. Apollodorus adds that Medea's father stopped his pursuit and buried the limbs of his son at Tomi, where we can see a firm connection to Ovid's presentation in the *Tristia* 3.9; Hyginus (*Fabulae* 23) and Flaccus (5.457) write versions that are based upon Apollonius and present Absyrtus as an adult;<sup>35</sup> in Seneca's version we are never explicitly told whether Absyrtus is a child or an adult, but the use of *parvus* on line 133 promotes a reading in which her brother is a child, and by the time Medea implies (474) that she played the largest role in his death, that she threw his scattered limbs into the sea for Aeetes to pick up, we easily think of her doing this to a brother who is *parvus*.

Throughout all of these accounts, although Medea is indeed very much involved (especially in Apollonius' version), we notice that Jason is the person who is responsible for the murder in every narrative in which Absyrtus is portrayed as an adult, but in the cases where he is still a child, then Medea takes the blame.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Hyginus presents a portrait of the murder of Absyrtus which is remarkably similar to an otherwise unrelated scene in book 4 of Apollonius (4.452-551). According to Hyginus, the adult Absyrtus pursues Medea as far as the court of Alcinous and Arete at Histria. There Jason is secretly told that he can keep Medea only if she is found not to be a virgin. Thus he consummates the marriage and, on next day when they come to court and Medea is found to be his wife (i.e. no longer a virgin), she is then given to Jason. When they leave from Alcinous' court, Absyrtus, fearing his father's commands, pursues them to the island of Minerva. While Jason is sacrificing there to Minerva, Absyrtus happens upon him and is killed by Jason. Medea gives him a burial and they depart. The Colchians who came with Absyrtus, fearing Aeetes, remain there and establish a town which, from Absyrtus' name, they call Absoros. In Apollonius' version, Absyrtus is already dead when this conflict happens at the court of Alcinous.

<sup>36</sup> In the version by Valerius Flaccus the manuscript is abruptly cut off before we can witness the battle between the adult Absyrtus and Medea and Jason.

Apollonius provides the most expansive account of the return journey, and both he (4.1638-1697) and Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.26) relate the story of how Medea helps to defeat the bronze-age giant Talos. In Apollonius' account Medea prays to Zeus for assistance and thus bewitches Talos with phantoms, but Apollodorus' sources offer a plethora of different possibilities to explain how she defeats him – from drugs to deceitful promises of immortality – before the mythographer wryly concludes with the remark that perhaps Poeas killed him by shooting him in the ankle (which would thus cause all of his ichor to rush out).

### **The Rejuvenation of Aeson**

Interestingly, almost no mention at all is made of the rejuvenation of Jason's father Aeson in any extant literature prior to Ovid.<sup>37</sup> Anderson says that it belongs to epic tradition, but agrees that it is attested nowhere else prior to *Metamorphoses* 7.<sup>38</sup> In fact, in several sources Aeson and his wife actually die (either they are killed or through suicide) right before Jason and Medea reach Iolcus.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Murder of Pelias and the Flight from Iolcus**

Hesiod (*Theog.* 996) makes the first allusion to Pelias, but the reference is not related to his death at the hands of his daughters nor does it mention Medea's role in the murder, but he does present Pelias in a negative light, calling him ὑβριστῆς,

---

<sup>37</sup> Only one fragment has been found that refers to the rejuvenation of Aeson – in this fragment it happens thanks to drugs placed in a golden bowl (fr. 7, *Poetae Epici Graecae*, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Anderson (1972: 262).

<sup>39</sup> In Diodorus 4.50.1-2, Pelias thinks that Jason would have already been killed and he thus kills Jason's father, whom he forces to drink bull's blood. He also kills Jason's brother (Promachus), and his mother Amphinome, who passes a curse on Pelias before she is killed. In Apollodorus' account (*Bibl.* 1.9.27) Aeson kills himself before Medea and Jason arrive, as does his mother as well, and Pelias in turn kills their other child, the infant Promachus.

ἀτάσθαλος, and ὀβριμοεργός. Even though from the negative words he uses to characterize Pelias we might wish to infer that Hesiod is working from a tradition in which Jason and Medea seek revenge on Pelias when they return, we should be wary of reading anything beyond those three adjectives, for he says nothing else on the subject other than to add that they arrived at Iolcus and there Jason made Medea his wife. Pindar makes the first extant reference to Pelias' death, where he tells us a bit more than Hesiod but only insofar as he remarks that the addressee must know how Jason stole away Medea as the agent of death (murderess) of Pelias.<sup>40</sup> Thus, we still fail to learn what Medea's responsibility in the death is, and even the first extant allusions to her role, in Euripides' *Medea* (9, 486-87, 504-505) and in Apollonius (3.1134-36), only state that she was deeply involved, but add no other details.<sup>41</sup>

Diodorus Siculus adds a great deal to this part of the story (4.50.5-4.52.5), writing that Medea actively encourages Jason to allow her to kill Pelias by herself using deceitful means (ἀποκτενεῖν δόλῳ), and he describes at length how she disguises herself as an old priestess of Artemis. In this version she rejuvenates a ram, but Diodorus comments that it was not brought back to life by means of drugs but that she merely creates an optical allusion (εἶδωλον) through those drugs (διὰ τινῶν φαρμάκων) to make it appear that the ram has been brought back to life. Moreover, he adds that, before placing the ram in the boiling water, she first rejuvenates herself (from an old woman to her normal self) and even makes other shapes of dragons appear (εἶδωλα φαντασθῆναι τῶν δρακόντων).

<sup>40</sup> Pindar, *Pythian* 4.250: ὦ Ἀρκεσίλα, κλέψεν τε Μήδειαν σὺν αὐτῇ, τὰν Πελλίαν φόνον.

<sup>41</sup> Anderson (1972, p.276) suggests that lost tragedies by both Sophocles and Euripides highlight this aspect of the story.

Ovid's version of the tale, as we shall see, bears little resemblance to the story that Diodorus tells, but we find greater similarities to Ovid in the mythography of Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.27). In his account he writes that Jason comes up with the original idea for the murder in order to seek vengeance on Pelias for being responsible for the suicides of his father and mother, and also for killing his brother Promachus. However, in this account Jason is the one who asks Medea to come up with the plan for Pelias' death, which she does, using drugs that will change a ram into a baby lamb when she removes it from a boiling pot, and thus getting his daughters to chop him up.

As for authors who definitely appear subsequent to Ovid, Hyginus roughly follows the same plot line as Diodorus;<sup>42</sup> Seneca makes Medea solely responsible for the murder of Pelias;<sup>43</sup> and Pausanias (9.11.2), referring to the graves of the daughters of Pelias, relates an account which seems similar to that of Ovid when he narrates how Medea plotted with Jason against Pelias, adding that she went to the daughters while pretending to be in a fight with Jason (τῷ ἐργῷ μὲν συμπράσσοιτο τῷ Ἰασονί), which is strikingly comparable with how Ovid (7.296-298) describes the scene in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>44</sup>

Although most of the early sources are vague on the subject of the flight to Corinth, Medea's laments in Euripides lead us to believe that she and Jason were driven

---

<sup>42</sup> Hyginus, *Fab.*24.

<sup>43</sup> She admits it herself (133, 476), excusing the act because it was made for reasons of love. In turn Creon (254-65) makes the argument that the only way Jason can be protected from the vengeance of Acastus (Pelias' son) is by dissociating himself from Medea.

<sup>44</sup> The murder of Pelias is one of the many scenes that are absent in Dracontius' narrative, as the scene moves abruptly from Colchis to Thebes.

out from Iolcus.<sup>45</sup> In later sources there are two major reasons given for their flight, both of which involve returning the throne to Pelias' son Acastus, and the differences lie with respect to whether Jason and Medea in fact engineer the return of the crown or indeed whether that act runs counter to their wishes. Diodorus (along with Hyginus)<sup>46</sup> writes that Jason and Medea willingly depart after giving the throne back to Acastus who, as Hyginus points out, himself was an original Argonaut who had gone to Colchis along with Jason. On the other hand, Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.27) notes in his mythography that Acastus drives them out of Iolcus, an explanation which is similar to Euripides' description of the flight, and is moreover consistent with Ovid's presentation.

### **Life at Corinth**

Pindar makes the first connection between Medea and Corinth, explaining how she went there against the wishes of her father, saving the Argo and its crew.<sup>47</sup> Unsurprisingly, Euripides supplies us with the first extant overview of her life in Corinth, and Diodorus fixes the period of time that they are there at ten years (4.54.1) as well as supplying a concrete reason for the royal marriage, for he notes that Jason had fallen in love with Glauce (ἐρασθέντα).

In accounts subsequent to Ovid, Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.28) notes that the wedding to Glauce is made for political reasons and Hyginus (*Fab.* 25) adds as another motivating

---

<sup>45</sup> Euripides: 9-10, 484-87, 504-5.

<sup>46</sup> Diodorus 4.53.1-4; Hyginus 24.

<sup>47</sup> Pindar, *Olympian* 13.53-54.



factor for the wedding: the shame that Jason felt at having both a foreigner and sorceress as a wife.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Murders of Creon, Glaucē/Creusa, and the Children**

There are a surprising number of small variations on the death of Creon and his daughter. Euripides is the first extant source to describe how Medea imbues or smears the poison into the “delicate robe and plaited wreath” (λεπτὸν τε πέπλον καὶ πλόκον χρυσήλατον, 786, 949) which she then gives to Glaucē via her children, while Diodorus (4.54.5) claims that Medea sneaks into the palace at night and thus sets all the buildings on fire along with all those inside. Apollodorus’ sources (*Bibl.* 1.9.28) state Medea kills them by means of a poisoned robe alone. As for authors who come after Ovid, Hyginus (*Fab.* 25) writes that it was a poisoned crown and not a robe that induced a fatal amount of heat in its victim,<sup>49</sup> and Seneca, who does not dwell too long on these details, combines the strands of clothes and fire by having the robes themselves produce a fire that causes the palace to burn to the ground as well (816, 889-90).

Although Mastronarde<sup>50</sup> wisely points out that we cannot be certain if there were texts prior to Euripides that made Medea responsible for the murder of the children, his tragedy is undoubtedly the first extant source to do so. Since this part of her story – the infanticide – has taken on such significance, it is not surprising that many different renditions have appeared. Diodorus (4.54.2) notes that she kills only two of her three

---

<sup>48</sup> The period of ten years is respected by most texts, with the exception of Dracontius, who arranges for the new wedding shortly after their arrival in Thebes (their children having already been born in Colchis).

<sup>49</sup> Hyginus also claims that Jason dies in the fire along with Creon and Glaucē, a claim that Dracontius makes as well.

<sup>50</sup> Mastronarde (2002: 52).

sons - Alcimenes and the youngest, Tisandrus – but says that Alcimenes' twin, Thessalus, manages to escape and eventually lends his name to the Thessalians.

Post-Ovidian descriptions – and those that we believe are post-Ovidian – of the murder of the children are also quite varied. Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.28) offers a reading that is similar to that of Euripides (and Hyginus and Dracontius are in accord),<sup>51</sup> for he writes that she kills her sons – Mermeres and Pheres – before getting into a chariot destined for Athens. However, Apollodorus also offers an alternative account in which she leaves the children behind and the Corinthians kill them. Pausanias (2.3.6) has something very like this second story from Apollodorus when he writes that Medea did not kill the children, but claims instead that the Corinthians stoned them to death and threw them down the same well into which Glauce had just thrown herself in a bid to cure herself of Medea's burning drugs. However, Pausanias also relates yet another story (2.3.10-11) in which Medea's children have two new names – a son, Medeus, and a daughter, Eriopis. In this other account, Medea and Jason inherit the throne of Corinth but Medea is sent away into exile by Jason after he discovers that she is concealing (κατακρύπτειν) the children in order to make them immortal, a word which in its ambiguity leads us to wonder whether she murdered them in the process of this attempt to immortalize them. As for the infanticide itself, the only accounts in which Medea's method is described involve a sword or knife. Euripides makes one of the children cry out that their mother is holding a sword (ξίφους, 1278); Seneca (969, 1019) adds particular savagery to the act by having her kill her two sons on the stage, leading us to

---

<sup>51</sup> Huginus, *Fab.* 25; Dracontius 547-48.

believe she is using a knife or a sword; and Dracontius in his account says that the children were about to endure death by the blade of their parent (*passura necem mucrone parentis*, 535).

### **Medea after Corinth**

Herodotus (7.62), although never mentioning Corinth, provides the first extant reference to this next stage of Medea's life when he describes a group of Persians travelling in Xerxes' army as Medes, claiming that they originally took their name from Medea when she came from Athens.<sup>52</sup> Euripides uses the meeting with Aegeus (663-758) and her proclamation to Jason at the end of the play (1378-85) to establish that Medea will flee to Athens. However, although his Medea promises that she will help Aegeus bear children if he gives her a refuge in Athens (717-718), Euripides makes her say that she will help him by means of drugs (φάρμακα, 718), which does not necessarily suggest that she will be the actual mother of his children.

Diodorus (4.54.7), who remains sceptical about many of the details of Medea's life after Colchis,<sup>53</sup> writes that, upon killing the children, she first flees to Heracles in Thebes before arriving in Athens, where she then marries Aegeus and gives birth to the son Medus. However, he then adds a possible alternative strand to the story in which Aegeus gives her an escort out of Athens after she unsuccessfully tries to poison his son Theseus, and she subsequently goes to Phoenicia, marries a king, and with her new husband there she then produces Medus.

---

<sup>52</sup> Although Hesiod (*Theog.* 1001) mentions a child that Jason and Medea have by the name of Μηδεῖος, he does not suggest anything else about the birth, such as its circumstances, when that birth took place, or aftermath, other than writing that the child was raised by Chiron in the mountains.

<sup>53</sup> Diodorus 4.56.1-2.

Using the sources at his disposal, Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.28) also refers to Medea's son Medus, whom she bears after marrying Aegeus in Athens, and also notes that she has to flee Athens with her son for plotting to kill Theseus. (In later versions both Plutarch and Pausanias describe the attempted murder of Theseus, although they make no mention of the son Medus.)<sup>54</sup> Much like Herodotus, Apollodorus writes that the name of the Medes comes from Medea's son,<sup>55</sup> who conquers them, and he also contributes a fuller picture of Medea's final years, describing how she eventually returns to Colchis, kills her uncle Perses and returns the kingdom to her father Aeetes, who had been deposed.

Hyginus (*Fabulae* 26-27) describes the events in many ways similar to Apollodorus, but also adds a trip that Medea makes to visit the tomb of her brother at Absoros, where she helps the local population deal with a snake infestation by driving the serpents into her brother's tomb. Moreover, his account of Medea's return to Colchis also has more intrigue, drama, and comedy than that of Apollodorus, since both Medea and Medus arrive in Colchis incognito, which causes a series of (slightly humorous) mistaken identities to occur before they are finally able finally seek their revenge upon Perses. Valerius Flaccus' account (5.681-87) also implies her return to Colchis, when Jupiter predicts the eventual homecoming of Medea and her Greek son Medus, whose return, Flaccus writes, will bring a great deal of harm to Perses since they will restore the throne to Aeetes.

---

<sup>54</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 12; Pausanias 2.3.8.

<sup>55</sup> Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 1.9.28. In his commentary notes on Apollodorus, Frazier (1921: 124-25, n.2-4) notes other references to Medus.

As for the accounts of Medea's posthumous life, Apollodorus reports a story saying that after her death she lives on as the bride of Achilles in the Isles of the Blessed.<sup>56</sup> Having established the various strands of her myth, we can now look at how Ovid deals with the events of her tale.

### **What Ovid does with Medea's Story**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the noticeable changes and additions that Ovid makes to the literary schema of Medea's story, as far as we can tell from extant literature (although much has been lost), and to consider why Ovid would make such changes.

### **Absyrtus**

The murder of Absyrtus figures prominently in Ovid's version of the tale. Hypsipyle mentions it at *Her.* 6.129-30, Medea takes up the theme in *Her.* 12.115-16 and 160, and *Tristia* 3.9 is a concentrated look at the act. Interestingly, Ovid leaves this episode out in the *Metamorphoses*, which is in not altogether surprising, since he is wont to avoid such scenes that he or others have thoroughly described elsewhere. In the extant versions that clearly predate Ovid, Absyrtus is either portrayed as an adult or, as in the case of Diodorus (see note 34), he is not mentioned at all.<sup>57</sup> That Absyrtus is still a child Ovid makes clear in the *Metamorphoses* when Medea laments *frater adhuc infans* (*Met.* 7.54), and not only do his other references not contradict this reading, but his portrayal of the scene in the *Tristia* also appears to lend credence to the understanding that her brother

---

<sup>56</sup> Apollodorus, *Epitome* V.5. According to Frazier (1921: 217), the post mortem marriage between Achilles and Medea goes back as far as Ibycus, and this story was mentioned again by Simonides.

<sup>57</sup> The only source which says that Absyrtus is still a child is Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.24), whose date and sources are uncertain (and for all we know could even include Ovid).

is still a child. For when Ovid writes *protinus ignari nec quicquam tale timentis/innocuum rigido perforat ense latus* (*Trist.* 3.9.25-26) the reader is led to picture an innocent youth, one who may have been taken along by force but who is nevertheless so young as to be left unbound, and who is being suddenly attacked while he sits and innocently watches all the events that are unfolding around him.<sup>58</sup>

While in many ways Ovid's portrayal of Absyrtus' murder shares many consistent elements with that the extant tradition which Apollodorus is following, he makes some distinct yet consistent changes in the way he describes the scene. For while Apollodorus recounts that Medea, in order to ward off her approaching father when she flees Colchis, grabs her younger brother, cuts up his limbs and scatters them into the sea, one of the most interesting changes that Ovid makes to the literary schema regarding the murder is that, according to him, the murder takes place on land, and he writes that Medea throws his limbs not on the sea, but throughout fields. Apollodorus' account states further that Aeetes retrieves the child's scattered limbs from the sea, where he takes them to Tomis to be buried, but Ovid's version has the events actually take place in Tomis and the murder appears to be what allows them to escape from the harbour there.<sup>59</sup> Hypsipyle makes the comment that *Medeae faciunt ad scelus omne manus/ spargere quae fratris potuit lacerata per agros/ corpora* (*Her.* 6.128-30), indicating that the body is strewn over fields to distract Aeetes, and Ovid later reasserts this in the *Tristia* when he again writes how she scattered them throughout the fields (*atque ita diuellit diuulsaque membra per agros/*

---

<sup>58</sup> This unexpected attack on her innocent brother in the *Tristia* undoubtedly has connections to her surprise attack on her children, a point which I shall make later.

<sup>59</sup> *Tristia* 3.9.13-14 (*dum trepidant Minyae, dum soluitur aggere funis, dum sequitur celeres ancora tracta manus*) suggests that the Argonauts are preparing to leave the shore when they see Aeetes approaching and thus need to create some type of diversionary tactic that might keep him from pursuing them.

*dissipat in multis inuenienda locis*, *Trist.* 3.9.27-28). He follows this by describing how she places his hands and head on a high crag in order to guide her father toward the body (*neu pater ignoret, scopulo proponit in alto/ pallentesque manus sanguineumque caput*, *Trist.* 3.9.29-30).

The effect of moving the scene of the murder to the land, especially in the case of the *Tristia*, is that it adds to Ovid's grim and graphic description of his life in Tomis. However, we must remember that *Heroides* 6 would have been written well before Ovid was even sent to Tomis, so he is instead facilitating a grim picture of Medea (and the murder) rather than of the place itself. We can more readily picture Medea placing the limbs throughout the fields as markers intended to distract and slow down her pursuing father because things which are placed on land tend to be more visible than those on the wide sea. Also, unlike throwing them into the sea, where she could simply toss them overboard at any point, the act of scattering Absyrtus' limbs over the fields would take significantly more time, effort, and planning on Medea's behalf, since she would have to carry them to wherever she was going to set them, and this has the result of making both Medea and the scene itself appear more nefarious and dark. Moreover, the ominous and foreboding marker that she makes with his head and hands on the rock could never be duplicated on the sea, and all of this extra work and symbolism that she creates helps establish a deeply disturbing portrait of her.

### **The Rejuvenation of Aeson**

The scene involving the rejuvenation of Aeson appears to be unique to Ovid in terms of its literary appearance, although there are Attic vases which also display the

scene.<sup>60</sup> However, Ovid goes into the kind of detail that we cannot witness in art. He only mentions this event in the *Metamorphoses* where, although the actual rejuvenation is presented as Jason's idea (7.164-68), Medea rejects his idea of transferring his own remaining years to those of his father and instead proposes a plan of her own. Ovid not only devotes a great deal of space to the rejuvenation (7.162-293), but he also uses it as an excuse for a lengthy excursus in which he describes how Medea summons up her grandfather's chariot and the shades of night as well as her subsequent travels for nine days and nights to various parts of the known world in order to find the plants that will help rejuvenate Aeson (7.178-237). There are many reasons as to why Ovid adds this digression, since Medea is presented in a more forceful, independent, and perhaps even darker light when she scolds Jason and assumes control of the situation herself, and at the same time she also appears more mysterious when she calls on the nocturnal forces to help her and thus wanders off to strange lands to find her charms. At this point the reader has sensed that a shift has taken place in how Medea is being portrayed, that she is no longer the innocent young Colchian girl in love.

The scene showing the rejuvenation itself (7.238-93) is quite detailed, as Ovid relates how she builds twin altars to Hecate and Youth (7.241), and he vividly narrates the rituals and ingredients involved in creating Medea's elixir, before she finally tests the mixture with an old twig from a tree (*ecce vetus calido versatus stipes aeno/ fit viridis primo*, 7.729-80). At this point the reader witnesses Medea's skill and knowledge as a sorceress and we feel anxious at the delay because we know what will take place. Yet

---

<sup>60</sup> Neils (1990: 634-35).



Medea waits until she sees that the elixir works before cutting Aeson's throat with a sword (*quae simul ac vidit, stricto Medea recludit/ ense senis iugulum*, 7.285-86), and thus return him to his younger years, which adds a novel twist to the tale, since it suggests that either Medea is not altogether confident in her arts, or, which is the more likely scenario, that she is very careful, scientific, and methodical with her poisons. In either case she is presented as a character who is determined to get her poisons correct, and this remarkable focus reminds us of how she will be so single-minded in her later actions.

### **The Death of Pelias**

Ovid seems to make a few innovations to the story when Medea goes to Pelias. He sets the scene in the *Metamorphoses* by relating how she travels to Iolcus while pretending to be at odds with Jason (*neve doli cessent, odium cum coniuge falsum/ Phasias adsimulat Peliaeque ad limina supplex/ confugit*, 7.297-99), which is something that does not happen in the other sources, where she is portrayed as disguising herself as an old woman and tricking Pelias' daughters while pretending to be a priestess of Artemis.<sup>61</sup> Ovid's is the first version to say that Medea journeys there under her own name, and it also suggests that the responsibility for the act lies with her alone, since she is the subject of the lines here. That is, she is the one who is feigning enmity with Jason and she is the one who does not want to cease in the deceptions.<sup>62</sup> Jason would undoubtedly be pleased with Pelias' death, but we have no evidence from Ovid that he

---

<sup>61</sup> Diodorus 4.51, whose version of the events appear to be mirrored by Hyginus (*Fabulae* 24). Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.27) passes over the events very quickly and does not mention whether Medea disguises herself or not, although one could make a case either way.

<sup>62</sup> Diodorus has Medea say that she will kill Pelias by means of deception (τόν τε Πελίαν ἀποκτενεῖν δόλω, 4.50.5), but the deception here is meant to be her disguise, which Ovid's Medea clearly does not have. Moreover, Ovid's presentation of Medea's deception suggests that it is a continual act (*neve doli cessent*), which indeed implies a much darker picture of her than any previous known version.

took part in its planning or execution. In fact, from the way he portrays his Medea as an independent agent when she decides to rejuvenate Aeson, it is easy to see her conducting her campaign against Pelias completely on her own. Indeed, based upon how she helped Aeson, it would be hard to imagine that Medea would allow Jason to plan this with her. All of this serves to showcase Medea's now independent, mysterious, and more sinister nature.

Aside from Medea's vigorous role in planning the murder, which casts her in a more active and darker light, an aspect which sets Ovid's version apart from his known predecessors is the fact that his Medea does not persuade the daughters of Pelias to let her help their father. Rather, in relating to them how she recently returned Aeson to a younger state, she waits until they beg her to help them (*idque petunt pretiumque iubent sine fine pacisci*, *Met.* 7.306), which has the effect of making Medea seem more cruel than necessary, as if she is getting deep pleasure from her trickery. Indeed, once they plead with her to help their father, Medea still toys with them further, as she feigns being deeply reluctant to do this favour, which leaves them guessing whether she will actually decide to help them or not (*illa brevi spatio silet et dubitare videtur/ suspenditque animos ficta gravitate rogantum*, *Met.* 7.307-8). Unlike in the other versions, when the time finally arrives to actually kill their own father, Ovid presents Pelias' daughters as uniquely reluctant to strike the first blow, and they only eventually do so in response to Medea's insistent urging (*Met.* 7.332-38), which makes her appear to be even more cruel and vicious. This is in stark contrast to Diodorus' account, where the daughters of Pelias

are so overcome by Medea's trick with the lamb that they carry out her orders right away.<sup>63</sup>

Of course, Ovid adds extra novelty – and vividness – to the end of this scene by having Pelias actually awaken to the sight of being slaughtered by his own children (*Met.* 7.343-347) and, in another apparently new twist to the tale, he suggests that Pelias may have survived if Medea herself had not taken up a knife to finish the job herself (*plura locuturo cum verbis guttura Colchis/ abstulit et calidis laniatum mersit in undis*, *Met.* 7.348-49). Thus Ovid presents a Medea who is ultimately the one who actually kills Pelias, and not his daughters, and the result of this is that the reader sees Medea as a cruel and sadistic murderess – one who gets satisfaction out of tricking others, one who is not afraid to trick others into enacting a murder on her behalf (as she will later enlist her children to do in Corinth), yet one who is not afraid to do her own work if there is no one else at hand whom she can use.<sup>64</sup>

In what may be one of the more innovative aspects to Ovid's schema, after the death of Pelias, Medea appears to escape punishment due to her winged dragons (*pennatis serpentibus*, *Met.* 7.350). Ovid already introduced Medea's chariot at an earlier stage than any extant text prior to him when she went searching for the herbs that would restore Aeson. Here, in another event that is unique to Ovid, while escaping Iolcus she appears again in the chariot, where, after a rather lengthy mythological excursus of her travels

---

<sup>63</sup> Diodorus 4.52.2.

<sup>64</sup> When Medea recalls the scene herself in the *Heroides*, she tactfully fails to mention that she had to finish the job that Pelias' daughters started (*Quid referam Peliae natas pietate nocentes/ caesaque virginea membra paterna manu?* *Her.* 12.129-30).

(*Met.* 7.351-90), she finally lands in Corinth.<sup>65</sup> While the appearance of the chariot at this stage has the effect of emphasizing her control and power over events, an interesting question that also arises from this episode is how Jason travelled from Iolcus to Corinth. There are a few plausible options that could offer an answer: he may have escaped in advance and was already in Corinth awaiting her there when Medea killed Pelias, or he could have made his way to Corinth independently following the murder, or, and this is the most unlikely option, he could have actually rode in the chariot along with her. Any of these possibilities present us with new innovations and, in the case of the idea that he rode in the chariot along with Medea, potentially disturbing twists to the story. The likely answer is that Ovid does not wish us to know the precise details, since the result from the quick turn of events here is to leave us uncertain as to who or what Medea has become.

### **Medea in Corinth**

Ovid's version provides an innovative way of looking at the how the events in Corinth transpire. Having his Medea discover Jason's betrayal by means of actually watching Jason's wedding procession (*Her.* 12.137-54) is a novel approach, and one that also makes us feel a great deal of sympathy for Medea. While other texts suggest that Medea's threats against the royal house of Corinth and Jason come prior to the wedding,<sup>66</sup> Ovid clearly implies that she does this after the wedding. In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid quickly passes over this part of the story, but in the *Heroides* this event takes place the precise time in which Medea is composing her letter, so it not

---

<sup>65</sup> This movement is consistent with Medea's letter in the *Heroides*, since as soon as she passes over the death of Pelias she then quickly recalls how Jason threw her out of the house (*Her.* 12.129-34).

<sup>66</sup> Euripides' *Medea* 287-89, 453-54; Diodorus 4.54.3-4; Apollodorus *Bibl.* 1.9.28.

without significance. Moreover, according to what she writes in the *Heroides*, Medea could barely hold herself back from rushing at Jason and laying claim of him when she sees him in the wedding march (*vix me continui, quin sic laniata capillos/ clamarem "meus est!" iniceremque manus*, 12.157-58). Yet she does hold herself back, and the only evidence of threats or reproaches against Jason from Ovid's Medea is *in the letter itself* (180, 207), which she writes after Jason has already been married. Before the wedding takes place we have no evidence at all that Medea acted in any way that was malicious or harmful to Creon or Creusa, which runs contrary to the tradition. The effects are twofold: Medea does seem sympathetic, but it is also an ominous sign of the control she has over herself because of the fact that, even though she admits that she is not strong enough to flee her own flames (*non valeo flammas effugere ipsa meas*, 12.166), she nevertheless does hold back. And this mixture, of a Medea who is overcome with passion yet who is able to show very subtle evidence that she can still retain control over herself, is paradigmatic of how Ovid points to her darker nature and introduces her into the tragic realm.

Ovid briefly skims over the events that actually take place while Medea is in Corinth yet appears to make an innovation to the previous tradition in the aftermath of the murders, for even though his Medea is again transported by the dragons (*ablata draconibus*, *Met.* 7.398) following the deaths of Creusa and the children, she does not ride away like a powerful goddess, but instead is portrayed as fleeing from a vengeful Jason (*ultraque se male mater Iasonis effugit arma*, *Met.* 7.397). That is, she is fleeing retribution and not merely leaving triumphant in her vengeance. This flight from an

angry Jason is a version of the story that appears nowhere in extant literature prior to Ovid and serves to portray Medea as potentially still vulnerable to harm, which creates a paradoxical situation, since this is the point of the story where she is traditionally revealed to be much stronger than him and seemingly close to the gods in status. In this case, because it showcases her as a human fleeing another human, Ovid's version brings out more strongly that she has got to him, and it represents her as superior to the male warrior because she has escaped him so easily. What is more, Medea's last-minute exit strategy – flight from hostile pursuers – is a constant motif in Ovid's account, for his Medea unfailingly flees punishment on her chariot, whether it be from Iolcus (*Met.* 7.350-51), from Jason (*Met.* 7.397), or later from Aegeus and Athens (*Met.* 7.424), and the result is that the reader can never be certain whether she is more of a divinely inspired witch or a crafty brewer of poisons who can only fight through trickery.

### **Medea beyond Corinth**

Regarding Medea's life after fleeing Corinth, unlike all of the other sources which mention the episode with Aegeus in Athens,<sup>67</sup> Ovid notably does not suggest that she has a child while she is there, instead concentrating on her attempt to destroy his son Theseus (*huius in exitium miscet Medea*, 7.406), for which the poet never supplies a motive.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Diodorus 4.55.4; Apollodorus *Bibl.* 1.9.28.

<sup>68</sup> Although this omission of any offspring with Aegeus may constitute Ovid's last novel contribution to Medea's story, there are still a few points worth mentioning. Namely, in the *Heroides* Hypsipyle finishes her angry letter with what appear to be a combination of wishes and predictions about Medea's future. Certain events, such as when she hopes that Medea will be bereft of an equal number of children as she herself has already produced (*a totidem natis orba sit aque viro*, *Her.* 6.156), seem to have a foreshadowing power. Yet some of her later predictions or wishes, that Medea should wander as an exile throughout the entire world (*exulet et toto quaerat in orbe fugam*, 158) and that she will eventually turn to the air in helpless wandering (*cum mare, cum terras consumpserit, aera temptet/erret inops, exspes, caede cruenta sua*, 160-61) lose their predicative power since they seem to leave out her journey to Athens, which Ovid himself clearly mentions. These themes will be addressed in the following chapter.

And Ovid's final vision of Medea's future remains very mysterious, for he portrays her in the *Metamorphoses* as a witch flying away to live a life that, since he supplies no specific details, we can only imagine (*Met.* 7.424). The effect is to leave the reader unsure of what will eventually happen to her and also to create a state of wonder and uncertainty as to what we have just read.

### **Artistic Representations of Medea**

Medea has a rich history of appearances in classical art.<sup>69</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood writes that the parts of her story for which we have the strongest visual evidence prior to the production of Euripides' *Medea* tend to display her power as a witch and status as a foreigner – namely, those pieces that highlight her roles in the murder of Pelias as well as the attempted murder of Theseus.<sup>70</sup> Following Euripides, however, there is a great shift in the subject matter, as she is most often depicted as either in the act of killing her children or riding away in her grandfather's chariot, scenes which, although definitely important to Ovid, are by no means exclusive to his narratives. The earlier Hellenic works tend to be on amphorae, Attic vases, and craters, but the modes of representation expanded significantly during the Hellenistic period and beyond, and Schmidt points to

---

<sup>69</sup> For a closer look at Medea in art, see Sourvinou-Inwood (1997), who provides a solid overview, but discusses the history of Medea images mostly with respect to its relationship to Euripides; Zinserling-Paul's (1979) essay gives the most comprehensive examination and is therefore cited the most; M. Schmidt (1992) and Neils (1990), in the *LIMC*, provide brief yet thorough summaries of the surviving works that highlight aspects of the Medea and Jason stories respectively; Schefold (1989) and Vojatzi (1982) both look at the history of Argonaut-related art; Schefold (1966, 1992) also contributes two other helpful general works about myth in ancient Greek art, as does Henley (1973).

<sup>70</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1997: 279-93) makes an interesting argument concerning how, after 430 BC, Medea's clothing began to emphasize her Persian, or foreign, origins, especially in pieces that focus on the attempted murder of Theseus, a fact that she writes was related to the desire to connect Medea with the Persia of the Persian Wars. She also comments (p.262) that the earliest known artistic representation of Medea is accessible to us now only through a literary source – that is, Pausanias' description (5.18.3), mentioned earlier (note 31), of the image of Medea and Jason being united by the will of Aphrodite.

various statues and gems, as well as the Roman sarcophagi and wall paintings found in Pompeii, most of which emphasize Medea's murder of the children.<sup>71</sup>

There are several problems that arise in discussing the relationship between Medea's portrayal in art and Ovid's presentation of her story. First of all, we first have to establish those parts of the myth which in literature appear to be either depicted first in Ovid or even seem to be described only by him. Second, we must always be wary of assuming too readily that there are firm connections between works of art that depict parts of the myth and Ovid's poetry, especially since there are numerous texts that are no longer extant which perhaps describe scenes that are similar to those in Ovid, along with perhaps still other long-lost oral sources which may have influenced both those artistic versions and Ovid as well. Thus, since we unfortunately find ourselves on very unstable ground if we do anything more than point out similarities, such a comparison is all we can make.

Scenes which appear to be distinctive to Ovid in literature are the rejuvenation of Aeson and the attempted murder of Theseus. The rejuvenation of Jason's father Aeson can be seen on a number of fifth century Attic vases (Neils, 1990: 634, vases 58-61). This scene has no obvious literary antecedents to Ovid, but from its more than random appearance as a motif in art, we can say with certainty that Ovid is working from some form of tradition when he describes this scene at length in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>72</sup> The same can be said of the murder of Theseus, since we have evidence of various vases and

---

<sup>71</sup> M. Schmidt (1992: 388-98).

<sup>72</sup> As I shall argue later, the scenes in the *Metamorphoses*, while not without precedent, Ovid highlights specifically because they have been neglected in literature previously, which is a part of the literary goal of the poem as a whole.



kraters that show Medea, Aegeus, and Theseus together.<sup>73</sup> However, and what creates a problem in examining the works of art, we cannot really judge the context of what is happening in these pieces and how they might differ from the narratives of Ovid. That is, we can only tell that these events did have antecedents, but we cannot decipher whether Ovid altered them in any way.<sup>74</sup> It is also worth noting that other scenes which Ovid especially highlights (but are not exclusive to him), such as the presentation of Medea as a young girl and the murder of Absyrtus, stand out for their lack of artistic representations and they therefore add more weight to the idea that Ovid is truly doing something unique with his portrait of Medea.<sup>75</sup>

Thus it appears that we cannot draw any firm conclusions – either to affirm or deny – regarding the possible connections between Ovid’s rendition of the Medea story and the artistic representations of that same tale.

At this point we can safely turn to firmer ground – Ovid’s poetry.

---

<sup>73</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1997: 267-69). As she points out, complicating the matter of the murder of Theseus is the fact that the artistic works could also be traced to the missing Aegeus tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides.

<sup>74</sup> Ovid also spends a great deal of time on the murder of Pelias, a scene which is greatly represented in Attic art. [See Sourvinou-Inwood (1997: 263, n.23), who points to the various studies that have been made of how the Peliades scene has been treated in art.] Yet, since both Sophocles and Euripides also wrote lost tragedies about this scene, we can not say for certain that they shed any light on what Ovid does.

<sup>75</sup> M. Schmidt (1992: 386-91) displays the various examples of early European Medeas and “Medeia vor dem Kindermord.” The early-European versions – which appear in the sixth and seventh centuries BC, tend to show Medea as witch who is surrounded by snakes (figures 1-6, p.388), and the scenes that depict her life prior to the murder of the children invariably foreshadow what she is about to do (figures 7-28, pp.388-90.) As for the murder of Absyrtus, there are no artistic depictions.

## **Chapter 2: *Heroides* 6 – From Hypsipyle to Medea**

### **Introduction**<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will begin with a general introduction to recent criticism surrounding the *Heroides*, and then I will discuss the purpose and point to this collection of epistles, taking into consideration feminist scholarship surrounding the letters. Following this I shall offer a close reading of *Heroides* 6, Hypsipyle's letter to Jason, which will examine its intertextual nature, focus on the characterization and its foreshadowing of Medea, its subtle humour, as well as the role of the reader in appreciating all of these qualities.

### **Recent Criticism of the *Heroides***<sup>2</sup>

Two texts stand out as opening the door to current criticism of the *Heroides*. In 1974 Jacobson's book *Ovid's Heroides* offered the first serious appreciation of this collection of poems. His goal was to study the poems for their literary merits and offer interpretations rather than to discuss potential interpolations, which had been the trend of previous scholarship toward the collection.<sup>3</sup> Despite his great efforts at offering a literary study, he nevertheless cannot resist making subjective judgments on the overall quality of each poem, labelling many successes and some failures. The areas where he contributes greatly, such as in the examination of the possible literary background to each poem, their links to one another, the treatment of the heroines as complex psychological creatures – along with Ovid's characterization of them – are often obscured by the judgmental nature of his criticism. Anderson's article (1973) on the *Heroides* is particularly helpful because

---

<sup>1</sup> The text I am using for *Heroides* 6 is that of Knox (1995), which is based on an unpublished apparatus of E.J. Kenney.

<sup>2</sup> Myers (1999) and Kennedy (2002) also provide succinct overviews of the recent critical receptions to Ovid's whole body of poetry.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this debate, see Knox (1995: 5-14).

he focuses on the qualities that make the letters interesting and innovative – such as Ovid’s use of character development, his treatment of his heroines in human terms, and the wit that he employs – and he addresses why previous generations have failed to acknowledge the positive qualities – one might even say the charm – of this collection of epistles.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, his reading is also holistic, since he incorporates the final six double letters into his account, arguing that they show a progression toward the end, where the three women involved (Hero, Helen, and Cydippe) all display a greater level of strength and maturity compared to the heroines of the first fifteen letters.

One area that has received not nearly enough attention has been the field of humour and irony. Verducci (1985) offers the only real look at the theme of humour in the *Heroides*,<sup>5</sup> and her book examining how the wit and comic irreverence of these poems enhance their reading is still quite useful.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the more interesting work that has been done recently has been in the field of allusion, or, as it is also known, intertextuality. There have been numerous recent articles which approach the notion of intertextuality in order to either prove or disprove Ovidian authorship,<sup>7</sup> which, as Jacobson long ago argued, is ultimately an impossible and

---

<sup>4</sup> He distinguishes himself from Jacobson by pointedly referring to the letter from Dido as a classic case of this misreading, where he argues that, because Ovid is not trying to write like Virgil, this poem presents a much deeper and more complex character than the one Virgil originally sketches. Thus Anderson sees in Dido a success where Jacobson sees a failure.

<sup>5</sup> Vessey (1976) also writes a short article on the use of humour in the collection, but Verducci’s book is the only one which attempts to address the poems exclusively through that theme.

<sup>6</sup> Ultimately Verducci’s book is not so much a discussion of the use of wit as it is a consideration of how Ovid mixes his emotions together – the word she uses for this is “coenaesthesia” (p.84), which refers to the mixture of different emotional responses to the same thing and how these emotions overlap one another.

<sup>7</sup> Heinze (1993) and Knox (1986) stand out as examples of scholars trying to prove or disprove the authenticity of the poems through references to previous texts or other works of Ovid. Knox (1995) contributes once again to this mode of debate with his commentary on the *Heroides* that only includes the poems he judges to be clearly Ovidian.

fruitless endeavour.<sup>8</sup> Other more helpful works try to examine the relationship between the individual letters and their respective literary models. In this way Bloch (2000), Desmond (1993), and Hinds (1993) all speak about the possible sources which may have influenced Ovid in specific letters. In another recent work, Jolivet (2001) looks at the allusive nature of the collection as a whole, and his greatest contribution, aside from an extremely detailed study of the literary associations for three of Ovid's heroines, is his argument that the women in these poems have often been called psychologically authentic when their authenticity in fact is completely dependent on the reader's knowledge of the previous sources.

Another area that has received a great deal of attention is genre studies, particularly related to Ovid's use and invention of the mythological/fictional epistle as a new literary form. Farrell (1998) addresses the various roles that the reader, writers and the texts play in forming the multiple meanings of the work. Kennedy (2002) examines how this new form of letter writing is "not reducible to formal elements of style or generic category"<sup>9</sup> and primarily considers the relationship between Ovid and the heroine, the addressee, and the reader.

Yet the final, and perhaps most popular, area of recent study has involved a combination of genre and gender studies, where much of this scholarship has been aimed at looking at the position or status of the letter-writers themselves as women. Three recent books that deal with the role of the women in the poems stand out as notable, but two of them prove to be of little use due to the position they take toward Ovid. Spentzou

---

<sup>8</sup> Jacobson (1974: 3-4, 9).

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy (2000: 220)

(2003) is easily the most disappointing and offers surprisingly very little of value since, in making a firm effort to establish the idea of the gendered writer in the letters, she considers the writers of the letters as actual people who are writing to one another rather than as creations of an author, and the book even makes the point that a “furtive” reading is required in order to fit the role of the female between the gazes of “the historical male writer’s and the dominant male Augustan reader’s.”<sup>10</sup> Fulkerson (2005) continues this trend of looking at the characters as actual authors and indeed it is very hard to distinguish her book from that of Spentzou.<sup>11</sup> Troublingly, the view of *intra textuality* presented in her book does not refer to any existing literary or mythological tradition per se, but rather means that the heroines in the collection are talking to one another. Moreover, Fulkerson claims to present a reading that is “post-feminist” and “metapoetic,”<sup>12</sup> and her idea that the writers are making choices that are independent of Ovid brings attention to the overall problem with her book and that of Spentzou: they are treating the work as if it were written by an modern author and written for a modern audience, and they therefore willingly omit Ovid’s role as the poet along with the milieu in which he wrote.

Yet there have also been works that do account for Ovid’s role since, in another recent work, Lindheim (2003) examines the use of the female voice in its relationship to what it can tell us about the poet. Although she firmly attempts to place her reading within the framework of the psychoanalytic approach of Lacan, her reading, which

---

<sup>10</sup> Spentzou (2003: 40).

<sup>11</sup> Even Fulkerson (2005: 15-16) cannot effectively distinguish her book from that of Spentzou, claiming that they both “share similar theoretical underpinnings.”

<sup>12</sup> Fulkerson (2005: 5-6).

focuses primarily on the desires of the heroines, does aid in understanding how they construct themselves in their letters, as well as the role that Ovid plays in shaping their voices. While it is a bit of a trope to discuss how well Ovid could write like a woman, nevertheless Lindheim's view that the nature of the letter-writing genre allows for self-(re)creation is indeed helpful in considering how Ovid builds his complex narratives.

### **Feminist Criticism**

One cannot approach a reading of either *Medea* or the *Heroides* without acknowledging the amount of feminist scholarship that has recently been done on the role of women in ancient culture and, in particular, in literature. Rather than comment on what I have found to be unhelpful or disagreeable, I would rather like to note those works that have been extremely useful in forging my reading of Ovid's *Medea*.

Pomeroy (1975) provides the seminal work that shows the background to the life women led in the ancient world. Collins (1988) writes specifically about characterization and, more specifically still, applies this notion to a reading of the *Iliad*, yet her approach is very helpful in approaching a reading of female characters. The main conflict that she observes is the paradoxical interplay between character and ethics, and this is shown through the extended focus on Helen and how she both represents the positive traits of war – such as κλέος and τιμή – as well as well being trivialized for her connection to Aphrodite and thus receiving the blame for the war. This reading, which offers an approach that views the uncomfortable relationship between praise and blame, sympathy and hostility, is very useful in looking at Ovid's treatment of *Medea*, who also straddles a divide between sympathy and blame.

Felson-Rubin (1994), in her literary study of Penelope, utilizes a form of analysis which examines the many different aspects to her characterization – wife, mother, siren, to name a few – and examines her various roles within the narrative to see how she in turn exerts an influence upon it. Her argument accepts that Penelope can indeed have many different roles while still playing a traditional one, and that she can influence the story while still staying within the predetermined female role. While this approach in feminist criticism – looking at the female character from the perspective of her role in the narrative – is not so radical, it is nevertheless quite engaging simply because it stays within the scope of the narrative and, what is more, it does not stray beyond what we can say with any certainty.<sup>13</sup>

### **What Hypsipyle is Doing with Her Letter**

In considering Hypsipyle's function as an author of this letter, although her ultimate aim is to convince Jason to return to her, we are, however, more concerned with the methods through which she carries out this plan. The letter starts with rather mild language – she repeatedly rebukes Jason for not writing her – and moves toward an impassioned anger that is directed solely at Medea, where she tends to portray Jason as a

---

<sup>13</sup> Keith (2000) also provides an interesting background to the role of women in Latin epic, one that appreciates how women were represented in terms of their place in society as well as how they were perceived. Ultimately she suggests that the relationship between the female characters and the masculine world is complicated, since female characters do have an influence on the male epic world, one that is not always easy to categorize.

In a series of collected essays Wyke (2002) discusses the role of the elegiac poet in relation to his female creation, where, although taking a critical view of how the male constructs the female, she nevertheless argues that certain female characters, rather than being reflections of personal experiences on behalf of the poet, are instead presented more as literary characters from within a generic tradition and cannot necessarily be assumed to represent real people. Interestingly, although Wyke sees the representation in the *Heroides* as being contrary to the pattern of using a male voice and representing male desires (172-73, 186-187), she does not elaborate on this collection and its possible effects on undermining the elegiac genre.

type of victim to her rival's dark arts, thereby opening up an opportunity for him to return to her.

Her opening admonishment of Jason can be characterized as both mildly sarcastic and flattering, since she follows her critique of his inability to write her with the information that she herself has heard from a Thessalian stranger regarding his great exploits in Colchis (10-14, 32-37). Clearly such lines are intended to compliment Jason, since he is more likely to be willing to continue reading a letter about his own heroic exploits than one that lists his shortcomings.<sup>14</sup> Yet Hypsipyle unfortunately cannot stay true to this ploy and each instance in which she mentions Jason's great accomplishments is abruptly undercut with the subtle mention of her rival Medea (19, 40).

The second stage of the letter revolves around her memory of their time together in Lemnos and Jason's tearful departure from the island (55-74). This recollection, filled as it is with mention of Jason's own promises as well as the reminder that she has made him a father, is nevertheless equally cut short by the thought that Medea is now enjoying the fruits of her votive offerings (75). Indeed each time that she seems to move the letter toward a type of narrative that might be effective in luring Jason back to her she eventually undercuts her own rational and emotional appeal by returning to the theme of Medea. And yet, even though Medea noticeably becomes the focus of the letter (from

---

<sup>14</sup> Jacobson (1974: 102) appears to reject the idea that Hypsipyle flatters Jason. However, he later provides the very reasons why we can accept that she is doing this when he talks about the many divergent emotional levels to the letter, asserting that her "psychological factor" (p.106) is what makes this Hypsipyle so unique. That is, she may be overcome with wrath by the end of the letter, but it is by no means a straightforward diatribe. The reader does sense very early on that she wants Jason to come back and that she does balance her chastisement with flattery. For why would she then bother to talk about her own attributes if she did not want to entice him back? Indeed the letter does not break down from a lack of desire to bring Jason back, but rather from her inability to control her own emotional responses to the news of her rival.



line 75 onward), Hypsipyle can still retain some traces of her original hope to win Jason back, for she engages in a lengthy discussion of her rival's more sinister attributes and deeds in order to juxtapose them with her own gentle nature and positive attributes (85-92, 113-20, 129-40). In the midst of this comparison she unleashes her most persuasive argument against Medea: that she, and not Jason, is the real force behind his heroic deeds. In fact Hypsipyle even implies that Medea has not only supplanted Jason, but is leading him around as if he were an animal (97-8).

Ultimately Hypsipyle's desire to attract Jason back to her is frustrated by the force of the letter itself, since her anger against Medea undermines her own self-presentation. And it is anger which permeates the letter – along with resentment, jealousy, fear, hatred, and other negative emotions – for at any chance she can find she speaks of Medea's bloody deeds and her fears that Medea might harm her children. Even when she tries to offer Jason the comforting notion that she would still accept him back in spite of all that has happened, she undermines the beauty of that sentiment with her next assertion that she would cover Medea's (and Jason's) face with Medea's blood (147-50).<sup>15</sup> The letter finishes in a crescendo of rage, and Hypsipyle no longer appears to remember the original

---

<sup>15</sup> Verducci (1985: 64) reaches too far in her assessment of this scene, for she claims that Hypsipyle would let Jason "go unharmed – not, as she claims, because she is gentle, but because he is immaterial to her true concern, a desire for retribution against Medea..." This reading of the scene is false on many levels. First of all, rather than implying the negative idea that Jason would "go unharmed," Hypsipyle says that he would "be safe through her" (*per me tutus sospesque fuisses*, 147), which is not at all the same thing. Next, nowhere does she suggest that he is "immaterial to her true concern." To make such a suggestion is to posit that Hypsipyle is creating a logically consistent argument, when she is clearly in the throes of instability. Although the image is rather macabre, it is possible that Hypsipyle is offering – in her crazed state – what could be read as a slightly romantic notion; for she says that she will fill both her face and Jason's face with Medea's blood. This, admittedly, is a stretch just as great as Verducci's. Yet we must acknowledge that her claim that Jason would be safe through her is genuine, however quickly she may jump to another mode of thought.

reason for the letter, because she condemns the new couple to live in their accursed bed (164), and thus the original aim of the letter – to cause Jason to return – is now untenable.

### **How Medea Fits into the Letter**

As we have just seen, Medea is the central focus of the letter. Every moment that Hypsipyle writes about an aspect of her connection to Jason – his heroism, their time together in Lemnos, and their children – the course of her narrative abruptly ends with the thought of Medea. The letter, which is ostensibly an attempt to entice Jason to return, highlighting Hypsipyle's good qualities and Jason's familial obligations, instead unravels in a torrent of abuse directed at Medea. In effect, Medea has the force of destabilizing the letter. In using Medea she tries to do a number of things: to point out the inappropriateness of the foreigner Medea as his wife, to remind Jason of his previous promises to her, as well as to reflect on Medea's own character and juxtapose it with her own, emphasizing that Medea is someone who is both repellant and dangerous. Yet every time she conjures up the name or the image of Medea her level of anger rises measurably and the tone and the mood of the letter becomes emotional and erratic. Hypsipyle sums up her use of Medea quite nicely herself when she says that she would "be a Medea to Medea" (*Medeae Medea forem*, 151), for by the end of this epistle she has become a Medea, allowing the emotions that the reader traditionally associates with Medea to take over and thereby creating a letter that is counterproductive to her original intention.

### **Hypsipyle's Portrayal of Medea**

In this letter Hypsipyle forces Medea into the dual role as both a tool to win Jason back as well as an object of attack. In each case the portrait she paints of Medea is

completely negative, where even the help she gave Jason is presented in an off-putting light (97-100, 128-30, 135-36). At this point we should examine how Hypsipyle depicts her rival, ever remaining mindful that the only information she has received of Medea is through the words of the messenger, of whose Medea-related speech she gives no details other than to say that he told her certain details unconsciously (*detegit ingenio vulnera nostra suo*, 40). Furthermore, we must remember that the depiction of Medea is coloured and skewed because it is aimed at Jason.

**Nouns, Adjectives, Pronouns:** From the start of the letter we notice that Hypsipyle would prefer to not mention Medea by her proper name. On eight occasions she refers to her rival as “that one” (*illa* – 86, 87, 88, 107, 130, 133, 135, 150) and twice she presents her in the accusative as “this one” (*hanc* – 95, 131).<sup>16</sup> The predominance of these words, instead of her name, is consistent with her overall desire to compare Medea unfavorably with herself.

The first mention of Medea does not arrive until line 19, where Hypsipyle calls her both a *barbara* and a *venefica*, where both words seemingly modify the other. Immediately she is cast in the light as someone who should not be there, and Hypsipyle takes this idea to heart at the start of the letter because she does not mention Medea again for some time. In fact, the second explicit mention of her, and the first time that Hypsipyle actually writes Medea’s name, does not arrive until nearly the halfway point of the poem, when she indignantly remarks that Medea will enjoy the vows that she herself

---

<sup>16</sup> Jacobson (1974: 99).

has made (*votis Medea fruetur*, 75).<sup>17</sup> Although Medea is mentioned by name on six occasions, these appearances take place in three distinct parts of the letter. The first one we have just seen, which serves to end her retelling of Jason's departure from Lemnos. The second grouping of "Medeas" can appropriately be called a cluster, since she repeats the name three times in the span of just two lines (127-28), when she links Medea's name to infanticide. This occurrence is also notable for the other words with which she associates Medea's name, where, fearing the fate of her children, she refers to her as a *saeva noverca* (126), only to insist that Medea is more than a *noverca* (*plus est Medea noverca*, 127). The last time Medea's name appears is in Hypsipyle's comment that she would be a Medea to Medea (151), which clearly implies that her rival's name has now become a powerful generic noun in its own right.

Because of Hypsipyle's tendency to use *illa* and *hanc* when speaking of Medea, the other words that she uses to describe her become more especially notable due to their paucity. She starts the second half of the letter with surprise that a *barbara paelex* (81) has suddenly come forth as an unexpected enemy (*non exspectata...ab hoste*, 82). Later in the letter she again refers to Medea as a *paelex* (*paelicis*, 149), and the force of this word makes the few times that she actually applies a variant of the term "wife" to Medea seem heavily laden with irony and sarcasm: she calls Medea the *uxor* who has obscured the name of her husband (100); she is the *adultera virgo* who knew her husband in a shameful way (133); she then becomes the rival again near the end (*subnuba*, 153) – as

---

<sup>17</sup> Jacobson (1974: 101) writes that the name of Medea only first appears at a time of anger, but is otherwise replaced by "pejorative epithets."

one who supplants, just as she was back at line 19, and Medea is finally cursed as the *nupta* on the poem's very last line (164).

Worthy of special note is Hypsipyle's treatment of Medea in relation to her own family near the end of the letter, where she talks about Medea as a *germana* and a *filia* only to very forcefully attach the word *acerba* to those roles (159-60). The only other time she mentions Medea in relation to her father (*Phasias Aeetine*, 103) is done with the dual intention of reminding Jason of how his new bride has obscured his own deeds as well as pointing out how she has betrayed her own father. Yet Hypsipyle seems more intent on describing Medea through her deeds than through straightforward nouns, adjectives, and pronouns.

**Medea's Actions:** The deeds that Hypsipyle assigns to Medea can be comfortably divided into two categories – those which reflect Medea's real actions and others that, although not necessarily wrong, are nevertheless tied to Hypsipyle's rhetorical presentation of her rival. Interestingly, the first actions that she ascribes to Medea stem from her own imagination, for she claims that Medea will enjoy the fruits of her prayers (*fruetur*, 75) and that she has borne a wound from this unexpected rival (*vulnus...tuli*, 82) – both of which are deeds that she sees as directed at herself.

Lines 83-94 offer a list of deeds of which she claims Medea to be capable, such as leading down the moon from its course (85-6) and stopping the flow of rivers (87), all of which associate Medea with the dark arts. However, she does not present these actions as if they are actual events that have taken place within a specific place and time; rather, she has most likely merely heard from the messenger that she is a witch and has therefore

added her own rhetorical flourishes to her attack here on Medea. The rhetorical thrust of her statements is confirmed when she concludes her list by implying that Medea has sought Jason's love with (magical) herbs and not in the proper ways (93-4). Moreover, the rhetoric continues when she claims that Medea has yoked Jason just as she did the bulls (*ut tauros ita te iuga ferre coegit*, 97), and she follows this by stating that she has overstepped her bounds and obscured his heroic deeds (99-100).

Not until line 104 does Hypsipyle make mention of any concrete deeds, where, speaking in the voice of a partisan of Pelias, she says that Medea – and not Jason – took the fleece. From this point onward the deeds that she mentions appear for the most part to have a factual basis: in emphasizing the fear she has for her own children, she mentions that Medea has torn her brother apart limb from limb (127-30), and she relates how Medea has both betrayed her father and abandoned her homeland (135-36). Yet in the midst of reminding Jason of these facts, she makes room for still more rhetoric when she suggests that Jason has been carried off by (presumably Medea's) Colchian poisons (131).

For the most part the actions in Hypsipyle's presentation naturally lack context, since context would likely offer a different explanation than the simple one she provides. She only connects Medea to four concrete actions – stealing the fleece, killing her brother, abandoning her homeland, and betraying her father – but by surrounding these deeds within the framework of her extrapolated rhetorical attack against Medea, the actions take on a deeply sinister hue, and the latter half of the letter implies a Medea who is capable of accomplishing any evil that she chooses.

**Qualities and Attributes Given to Medea and Qualities Denied:** The attributes that Hypsipyle grants to Medea naturally tend to portray her in a negative light, which suits her purpose. She suggests that Medea is a witch (*venefica*, 19) who has the power to change nature (84-88), walks among graves with loosened clothing looking for warm bones (89-90), and practices a form of voodoo against her enemies (91-92). We cannot be certain whether the messenger told her these things or whether they are merely her own extrapolations from the word *venefica*. Nevertheless, she goes further by granting Medea the power of controlling Jason's thoughts as well, for she repeatedly suggests that Medea has used spells and poisons to bewitch him (83-4, 93, 131, 150). Above all, the greatest attribute that she gives to her rival is the implication that Medea is the active and plotting participant in the relationship: she is the one who seduced Jason, who stole the fleece (103-4), who killed her brother (129-30, 160) and would likely harm Hypsipyle's children (125-28).

In turn, Hypsipyle's portrayal of Medea denies as many qualities to her rival as she grants her. She explicitly suggests that Medea is not beautiful, for she twice points out that Medea did not win Jason's affections due to her beauty (83, 94), and by this Hypsipyle would hope to remind Jason of her own beauty. Since she so strongly characterizes Medea as an active figure, the implication follows that she cannot be passive and that Jason therefore could not have seduced Medea – for, if he had seduced Medea, then both Hypsipyle and Medea would be on an equal footing, since Hypsipyle has already characterized herself as the passive victim to Jason's charms (55). In creating her caricature of Medea there are many characteristics that Hypsipyle implicitly denies

her as well. She assumes that Medea has no emotions other than the most base – such as the lust for Jason and the penchant for harming others. She also assumes that Medea has no thoughts or complexity, that she is a creature who is constantly plotting, and also that she is devoid of tenderness and naiveté, characteristics of Medea which are bounteous in *Met.* 7. But the greatest characteristics that she utterly denies Medea are the senses of moral certainty and virtue. The Medea she describes appears to have no moral centre, to hold nothing sacred, and to be a person who will stop at nothing to achieve her aims. Virtue is an important aspect that Hypsipyle overlooks as well because she never considers that Medea might not know about her, for if Medea does not know that Jason is already married – if she assumes that he is single – then she can hardly be an adulteress, and the portrait that she paints of Medea would then start to become suspect.

**Contrast:** Hypsipyle makes some definite contrasts between herself and Medea. The first distinction she points out is not a quality, but an action – Medea will enjoy the results of the vows that Hypsipyle has made (75), and this naturally implies that Hypsipyle in contrast will not enjoy the product of her own vows. She insinuates that Medea is not as attractive as she is by saying that Medea does not please with beauty nor merits (*nec facie meritisque placet*, 84) and repeats a variation of the very theme a few lines later (93-4) where she says that love should be won by a combination of virtue and beauty, and she even goes so far to suggest that Medea is repellant (95). In anticipating the negative reaction that Jason would receive from his mother and father upon presenting Medea to them (105-6), Hypsipyle implies that she would be viewed more favourably. She also implicitly contrasts her *dos* (117) with the wasteland that Medea would be able



to offer him (107) even if she had not renounced her ties to Colchis (136). In order to lure him back she points out that she is royalty and has her own divine connection to Bacchus (113-16), a move which directly counters Medea's own royal heritage and divine connections, and the implied conclusion from her declaration is that she is *still* royalty whereas Medea has abandoned her royal position.<sup>18</sup>

She also implies a comparison between the children that she and Jason have together with the lack of offspring that Medea has produced for him thus far (121-22). But the real comparative value of the children lies in how she uses them to contrast her own tender feelings toward her offspring with the fear that stems from the knowledge of what Medea has done to her own child brother (127-30). More pointedly, she contrasts the chasteness of her own marriage bond to Jason with the shameful way the adulteress Medea has gained her husband (133-34). On the whole, the distinctions she makes between herself and Medea are clear and forceful: she compares proper marriage to shameful adultery, love won by virtue to love that is won by trickery, her beauty to Medea's implied ugliness, her Greekness to Medea's foreign status, her nurturing thoughts about her children to Medea's penchant for killing children, and, finally, she compares her fidelity to her father, homeland, and to Jason with Medea's betrayal of her homeland, father, and, by extension, her implied future betrayal of Jason. The

---

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in mentioning Bacchus, Hypsipyle does not merely make a comparison between her own grandfather and Medea's grandfather Helios, for she does not really refer to Bacchus as much as she mentions how the wife of Bacchus – Ariadne – outshines the other stars (*Bacchi coniunx redimita corona/ praeradiat stellis signa minora suis*, 115-16). This clearly connects Hypsipyle to Ariadne, whom Bacchus rescued from Naxos, and by inference she is drawing a link between Jason and Bacchus, building him up and possibly implying that he can rescue her. Of course, the irony of this inference is that Jason is rescuing Medea from Colchis, while Hypsipyle is asking him to settle on Lemnos

comparisons are deeply effective and are only undermined by the hostility of the tone of the presentation.

**Selectiveness:** In order to make a convincing case against Medea, Hypsipyle naturally chooses the facts and attributes which are most likely going to help her cause, and she leaves out – consciously or otherwise – the details that would undermine her portrait of Medea. Often what she omits can be seen in what she chooses to write. As a case in point, she writes that people are saying that Medea – and not Jason – has taken the fleece (101-4). Although by this statement Hypsipyle is trying to point out that Medea is undermining Jason's status as a hero, nevertheless the alternative implication is that Medea has taken the fleece for him and he should therefore be grateful to her. Equally, when she talks about Lemnos as her dowry gift to Jason (117) and compares her gift of Lemnos to Medea's betrayal of her father and Colchis (135-36) she fails to see the other side of that same argument; namely, that Medea has given him a greater dowry with her gift of the fleece – the dowry being Iolcus, his homeland – and Medea's sacrifices can just as easily be thought of as tokens of her love for Jason as they can be presented as acts of impiety toward her own homeland.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there are many things about Medea and her connection to Jason which she chooses not to mention. Nowhere in the letter does she remember that Medea is, just like Hypsipyle, a princess – in spite of the fact that she openly grants that Aeetes is a king (50) and subsequently clearly refers to Medea as his daughter (103). To admit to Medea's royalty would be to grant the relationship some validity, which she will not do. As well, she omits the possibility that Jason could have seduced Medea, consistently implying that Medea has charmed him with her poisons (83-4, 93, 131, 151). When we consider this interpretation of Medea the seductress in light of Hypsipyle's constant criticism of Jason – where she claims that he is reluctant (17), fickle (109), and a shame-faced liar (67, 110, 124, 145) – we can see the possible holes in her argument that he was the passive victim of Medea's charms, especially considering how she herself admits that Jason seduced her immediately upon his arrival at Lemnos (55). But, according to Hypsipyle's intention, Medea must be nothing like her. Otherwise, she would begin to become a sympathetic figure, which is untenable.

**Iteration:** Repetition of themes – iteration – is very important in depicting a character. Hypsipyle manages to repeat a few distinct themes about Medea in an effort to discredit her in Jason's eyes. Twice she introduces the theme of how Jason's parents will react to their new *nurus* (80, 106), with the aim of causing Jason to worry about how smooth their future life in Greece will be. Another repeated theme is with respect to how Medea, whom she repeatedly characterizes as a frightening and repellent witch, has taken control of their relationship and drawn Jason to her by means of magic spells (83-4, 93, 131, 151), suggesting that she leads him around as if he were cattle (97). While this reflects badly on Jason's claims to heroic behaviour, Hypsipyle does not set the blame on his shoulders. Rather, she slightly absolves him of his own responsibility by suggesting that Medea has him wrapped up in her charms, which thereby allows him the chance to break free of Medea and return to her.

The children that she and Jason had together are a theme which she mentions three times (62, 119-28, 155-56). The first time that she mentions them, she quotes Jason when he acknowledges their mutual bond; the second time they are used to distinguish her own maternal fears from Medea's sisterly brutality, and the third time she prays that Medea will be left alone one day just as she herself has been abandoned. Her repeated use of the children in fact offers a slight *précis* to the letter's argumentative flow: it starts with the appeal to old ties and promises, then we find a criticism of Medea, and finally we see a curse against Medea. By the end we have a picture of a Medea who is dangerous to children, although Hypsipyle only means to imply that Medea would be harmful to her children.

But the theme that she repeats the most often is that she is rightfully connected to Jason. Curiously, although she places great emphasis on the theme, she never quite says that she is Jason's wife.<sup>20</sup> Instead she refers to Jason as hers (*quid agit meus?*, 25), she draws attention to their marriage (41-4, 134), and she pays particular attention to his role as her husband (18, 60, 111, 163). Yet all of these methods do imply that she is Jason's wife, and they work hand in hand with her repeated attempts to cast Medea as his unlawful wife. Throughout the letter she mentions Medea as a *barbara* (19, 81, cf.107f.) and a *paelex* (cf.19, 81, 149), as well as giving her the epithets *adultera* (133) and *subnuba* (153). All of these terms, when balanced against how she refers to herself, stress that she, and not Medea, is Jason's rightful wife. Moreover, the four instances where she does use marriage-like words to describe Medea's relationship to Jason are all imbued with bitter irony: the two times that she calls Medea a *nurus* (80, 106) are intended to show how untenable this situation will be once they return to Greece; the repeated use of *noverca* (126-27) highlights that she cannot be a *noverca* to their children; and, finally, when she refers to both Medea and Jason in the final line as *nuptaque virque* (164), the meaning is so wrapped up in bitter sarcastic anger that the reader – and Jason – can in no way think that she is being sincere.

Of course, the greatest form of iteration in the letter is its angry tone, which serves to undermine any rhetorical gains that she tries to make, and makes her characterization of Medea appear to be altogether suspect and unreasonable. If her tone were calmer, then

---

<sup>20</sup> Jacobson (1974: 97) talks about how “the whole concept of marriage has no place in Apollonius,” thereby implying that Ovid was making a conscious change from this model.

many of her methods in portraying Medea would be much more greatly effective. She is not a trustworthy narrator and we cannot see her portrait of Medea as truthful.

### **Innovations in the form of the Medea-Narrative in *Heroides* 6**

Before moving to the more subtle (and intertextual) aspects of humour, wit, and irony that are associated with Hypsipyle's letter, we should examine some of the innovations and formal changes that Ovid introduced in this version of narrative concerning Medea.

It is the first known occurrence in which Medea has been used as the basis for an attack.<sup>21</sup> Hypsipyle's notable line that she will be "a Medea to Medea" (151) cleverly packages the vicious characterization into a tangible whole at the end, where the term Medea has developed into an indefinite noun denoting evil. But this letter is not merely an attack; it is also a way for the poet to tell Medea's story from a different, and altogether slanted, point of view. More significantly, this is the first time that we have Hypsipyle as a narrator, and the first time we have such a hostile narrator, presenting an altogether new point of view and using Medea as the basis for her attack. The narrative medium used to present Medea is also novel, since this is the first time that Medea's story has been told by means of a letter. It is also the first time that Medea has been used as a tool in order to win someone over, since Hypsipyle attempts to lure Jason back by continuously juxtaposing herself with her rival.

While this poem does not tell Medea's story in the third person for the first time, since Pindar, Herodotus, and Apollonius have already done that, it nevertheless is the first

---

<sup>21</sup> See chapter 1 for a list of all the extant texts on Medea that were produced prior to Ovid. Worth noting is the brief reference to Medea in Virgil's *Eclogue* 8.47-50; however, it is not used as the basis for an attack.

attempt that appears to encapsulate – through hints and allusion – her whole story, from her early life in Colchis through to her flights from Corinth and Athens. Nevertheless, although it seems to cover a greater extent of her story than any previous version, this is the first time that we have a Medea-narrative that is so oblique, dislocated, partial and fragmentary, which is done via hints, allusions, twists, foreshadowing and irony – and sometimes the narrative presented here is dubious and even incorrect.

Interestingly, although the crux of both Hypsipyle's and Medea's arguments are their respective problems with Jason, the point of distinction between these two poems actually becomes how they treat Medea herself.<sup>22</sup> For while Jason plays the same role in each poem – the husband who has betrayed his respective wife – the notable connection between the poems is the change in the characterization of Medea; for we can in no way claim that Creusa plays a similar role in *Her.* 12 to the one Medea plays in *Her.* 6.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in *Her.* 12 Medea will have an opportunity to tell her own version of her

---

<sup>22</sup> We encounter a problem if we attempt to classify Hypsipyle's narrative role. According to Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 95-97) a character can be considered either *extradiegetic* or *intradiegetic* depending on her level of knowledge of the story she describes. Extending the classification, if a narrator participates within the story she narrates she can be classified as *homodiegetic*, but if she is absent from the story she is then considered *heterodiegetic*. In terms of this letter, when the narrative revolves around Medea we would expect Hypsipyle to be a *heterodiegetic* narrator, because she is not involved in that part of the story, but the aims of her letter effectively make her a *homodiegetic* narrator. The lines are equally blurred when we examine *extradiegetic* and *intradiegetic* qualities because we cannot determine how much she really knows and how much she predicts from her standpoint as the embittered or scorned wife.

<sup>23</sup> Bloch (2000: 206-7) tries to make the case that Hypsipyle and Medea do find themselves in the same predicament. This is only true insofar as Hypsipyle's plight foreshadows the one in which Medea herself will be – that is, having lost her husband. However, since we are all aware that Medea will trick and kill her frail rival Creusa, we would be rather foolish to suppose, as Bloch does, a real connection between the Medea-figure of *Her.* 6 and the Creusa figure of *Her.* 12. In another strange comment regarding innovations, Bloch says that theme of magic spells of love and the question of who seduced/controlled whom is an Ovidian innovation to the story, because it was never really broached in Euripides or Apollonius (p.202). This is indeed an odd comment, since the theme is omnipresent in book 3 of Apollonius and is also very much a part of Jason's accusations against Medea in Euripides (522-75).

story, while this version anticipates Medea's defence and, in a way, acts as a type of argument for the prosecution.

Clearly Hypsipyle has her reasons for the way she treats Medea in the letter – she wants Jason to return, after all – but her outsider's perspective of Medea is a noteworthy innovation to Medea's story. Jacobson closes his chapter on Hypsipyle's letter with the mention that her poem grants “a completely novel insight into the myth of Jason and Medea.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed it does, and, since Jacobson does not say anything further on the matter, it is our task to comment on just what that new outlook might be. However, in the case of this poem, we do not glean as much insight concerning Jason and Medea as we do exclusively with respect to Medea; for we learn nothing new at all about Jason from this letter save for the fact that he has a habit of acting badly toward women and forgetting his promises. That is, this letter does not in any way change Jason's portrait – but it does change the way we look at Medea, because, again for the first time, we see her from the perspective of someone who considers her an enemy and who attacks her at any and every opportunity, casting all of her actions in a negative light.

This also highlights another way in which Hypsipyle's poem stands out among all the other narratives in the *Heroides*, since it is the only poem in which the focus is absolutely on creating a negative characterization of another rival figure.<sup>25</sup> Keeping this

---

<sup>24</sup> Jacobson (1974: 108).

<sup>25</sup> Although *Her.* 5, Oenone's letter to Paris, may seem to be similar, it is not an attack that focuses exclusively on Helen, for she spends very little time in criticizing Helen, instead focusing on herself, the narrative surrounding Paris' departure and arrival, and making moralistic comments on the nature of monogamous love. Moreover, it is worth noting that all of the other poems in the *Heroides* firmly place their writers within the narratives, but the focus of this particular letter quickly becomes the events that are happening which are external to the letter.

in mind, the greatest innovation that Ovid adds to Medea's story from this letter is that it is the first time that Medea has been portrayed in an altogether unsympathetic light. By all accounts Euripides' version portrays her as both a sympathetic victim and an aggressor – but here she is exclusively an evil witch. Of course, the basis for this negative characterization is the brief story that Hypsipyle has heard from the messenger and, although her extrapolations do have a factual basis, however slanted they may be, they nevertheless introduce the idea that we should not necessarily consider her a reliable narrator, since she has a vested interest in presenting a Medea in the most negative light possible.<sup>26</sup>

These narrative innovations that Ovid makes to the Medea story with *Heroides* 6, which have thus far received no scholarly comment, are not mere novelties, but they are instead intriguing, entertaining, clever, and engaging (for the reader is presented with a whole new way of looking at Medea), and Hypsipyle's words have several layers of meaning to them which demand a close examination on our part if we are to appreciate everything that Ovid is doing with this poem.

### **(Black) Humour, Irony and Wit in *Heroides* 6**

Humour is omnipresent throughout the poem's 164 lines. Ovid often toys with the ironies that Hypsipyle implies but cannot see herself (or fully understand). There is also a great amount of black humour at play in the poem, since Hypsipyle complains of many of the same things that Medea will when she is in Corinth, and the dark quality is evident as

---

<sup>26</sup> Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 101-4) talks about personal involvement as one of the greatest causes in rendering a character unreliable, and Hypsipyle is just as personally involved as Medea is. The reliability of the writer-speaker is a permanent problem with the two Medea-related epistles.



well through the macabre and oblique references to Medea's infanticide. All of the humour in this poem, we should note, is unintentional – Ovid expects the reader to see greater implications to Hypsipyle's words than she intends. The humorous and witty aspects to the letter are significant in trying to understand how Ovid characterizes Medea.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, Hypsipyle sees Medea as a rival and an evil witch; on the other, we can see Medea's own future complaints embedded in what Hypsipyle says, and we can feel sympathy for her. But looming over everything is the shadow of what Medea will become, and this is where the darkest part of the humour in the epistle lies. Others have seen that this poem has humorous qualities,<sup>28</sup> but no-one has recognized that the humour plays an important role in developing a picture of Medea. The following sections display where Ovid is employing humorous devices and for what reasons and to what effect he is doing this.

**Lines 1-40:** Hypsipyle's clear aim with this letter is to convince Jason to return. However, the irony lies in the appropriateness of such a desire for such a husband. She paints a picture of a Jason who would likely flee again, and we can see that she would probably be better off without him.

When she writes *diceris* (2), we note two layers to the meaning. She is at once referring to what she has heard from the messenger, but this is also an erudite joke from

---

<sup>27</sup> Verducci (1985: 62), in writing about the letter's irony, states that "the sacrifice of psychological plausibility, moreover, seems doubly excessive when it deflects our attention away from an entirely novel Hypsipyle and, at the same time, diverts our attention toward a heroine all too notorious." Although she criticizes this view by saying that it is "the traditional censure of the poem," Verducci falls into a similar trap because she also assumes that our attention should be on Hypsipyle and not on Medea.

<sup>28</sup> Jacobson (1974: 102) writes that "one is almost inclined to suggest that the poem exists for the irony in it." This is an apt description, but Jacobson's brief look at irony in this poem concentrates mostly on what it tells us about Hypsipyle and her characterization, where I argue that the humour really points toward Medea.

Ovid, who is pointing to the other versions of the narrative in which Jason is said to have returned to Iolcus.

She describes Jason as being *dives* (2) with the Golden Fleece. The irony here is that he is not rich at all. In fact, he has hardly any wealth, and, according to the narrative that Ovid relates, the fleece does not bring him any special welcome or position when he arrives in Iolcus. In fact, his poverty is the very reason that he and Medea will eventually flee to Corinth.

On a similar note, Hypsipyle congratulates Jason for being safe (*incolumi*, 3), but, at the time of her writing, Jason (and Medea) are very likely going through some very rough experiences. Time has passed since they arrived in Iolcus and the messenger, who reports to Hypsipyle on the details of their arrival, would not know the events that will have started to develop in Iolcus while he himself was making his way toward Lemnos. By this time Medea may have already tricked the daughters of Pelias into killing their father, and Jason would then be far from safe.<sup>29</sup> However sarcastic Hypsipyle's intention may be, the irony is compounded because Jason would certainly not read these congratulatory words with a sense of pride at his accomplishments, since he would likely be very worried about his safety at this time.

Hypsipyle asks Jason why he could not tell her in a letter that he has arrived back safely (*debueram scripto certior esse tuo*, 4). The irony in her statement, that she will

---

<sup>29</sup> I differ with Verducci (1985: 58-9) here, who writes that “Medea is still the romantic adolescent girl of Apollonius’ epic” when Hypsipyle writes the poem. While Medea likely still has traces of that character inside of her, since the messenger has come from Thessaly and we therefore know that Jason and Medea have already arrived at Iolcus, then Medea is clearly already operating outside of Apollonius’ epic – yet to what extent she has changed, however, is left for the reader to infer.

soon reveal, is that she already knows about Medea and therefore knows why he would not wish to write her, but the deeper irony to this letter is that her own complaint prefigures the same lament that her rival will offer to Jason. For Hypsipyle complains that Jason did not bother to write her, and Medea will later plea to Jason (in Euripides' version, 586-87) that he should have told her about his new bride. While Hypsipyle complains about her rival, the rival will often suffer in the same way, which creates an amusing tit-for-tat, or parallel.<sup>30</sup>

Equally, she complains that a messenger (or rumour) arrived before a note from Jason (*cur mihi fama prior quam littera nuntia venit*, 9), and we can deduce that Medea will complain of the same thing, for she has this lament both in Euripides and in her own letter, when she later notes that the wedding song telling her of Jason's new marriage comes to her ears before any form of personal communication from him (12.137). She is suffering the same thing that will happen to her rival, which again creates a tit-for-tat situation. Such comic foreshadowing is also evident in her reference to Jason as an indifferent husband who has failed his duty (*quid queror officium lenti cessasse mariti*, 17), for Medea will have the same experience with Jason.

In her first brief account of Jason's deeds (11-14) two specific remarks that Hypsipyle makes about Jason's actions have a double meaning and are barbed because they offer hints that his great accomplishments were not the result of his own work.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Jacobson (1974: 98) writes that Hypsipyle's tone at the start of the letter shows that she has been insulted and that her pride has been hurt. Furthermore, he also says that what will hurt her pride the most is that she has lost Jason to "this kind of rival," and, as I shall show, this underestimation of Medea is another sign of humour.

<sup>31</sup> Jacobson (1974: 99-100) points out how sections 11-14 and 31-48 (the reports on how Jason stole the Golden Fleece) work together because neither of them imply a specific agent who is doing these things.

Her first statement, when she points out that his hand was not needed in defeating the earthborn soldiers (*inque necem dextra non eguisse tua*, 12), appears on one level within a flattering context as she recalls his great deeds. However, the line directly says that these soldiers died not by *his* hand. Of course, they died by their own hands – through their internecine strife – but we are reminded that Medea is the one who taught him how to ward these creatures off, that he tricked them by means of her stratagem, and we see the underlying irony because his hand was not needed while Medea's hand (figuratively) was. She offers a more pointed remark in a similar vein a few lines later when she draws attention to the fleece which, she writes, was stolen by a strong hand (*rapta tamen forti vellera fulva manu*, 14). Note that Hypsipyle does not say exactly *whose* strong hand stole the fleece. From this part of the letter we are prepared to assume that she means Jason, but our outside knowledge reminds us of Medea's role in the theft. Moreover, Hypsipyle later reveals that she knows the extent of Medea's involvement in his heroic deeds (97, when she suggests that Medea subdued the bulls), which means that she herself very likely understands the dual layer to her remark.

In her first direct reference to Medea, Hypsipyle calls her a *venefica* (18), which is a term that has two meanings – both witch and poisoner. From all that she knows about Medea at this point we can comfortably infer that she means that her rival is a witch, but Ovid is also clearly aware of the other meaning of the word that involves poison. The irony in the use of the word lies in the fact that it is more fitting than Hypsipyle realizes, and Ovid is playing upon its dual meaning.

After mentioning that Medea is a witch, she adds that this *venefica* has now supplanted her in Jason's bed (*in mihi promissi parte recepta tori*, 20). The cruel humour in this statement stems from its amusing connection to Medea's future grievance against Creusa, and we see Medea's future complaints within the framework of Hypsipyle's laments. Her objection almost makes us feel that Medea deserves what happens to her, and the poetic justice is darkly humorous.

When the letter turns to the *hospes...Thessalus* (23), a striking irony we immediately note is that Hypsipyle has welcomed a stranger from abroad when previously the women of Lemnos had been wary of strange men who land on their shores. In this way the very mention of the stranger arriving there seems both incongruous and yet peculiarly apt, for his arrival slightly imitates that of Jason. Later she will make the comment that her first impulse was to resist the Argonauts when they arrived (52-55). We note here that she has had no such impulse with this stranger, when it probably would have been in her (psychological) interest to have turned him away, and not to have found out the information about Jason and, more pointedly, Medea. Had she turned the strange man away, as the Lemnians used to do, then she would not have received such harmful news.

Again, the messenger's position lends a certain amount humour to the scene, for the only information we know about him is that he comes from Thessaly, yet in the way Hypsipyle interacts with him, this faceless stranger seems to briefly enact the part of the absent Jason. For he looks at the ground in shame when she asks him about Jason (26), which is an action that seems more fitting for Jason himself to do and is rather

incongruous with his role as a messenger. Similarly, Hypsipyle's reaction to the messenger's hesitation – tearing her clothes (27) – projects Medea's own reaction to the news of Jason's marriage, for she rends her garments in the same way that Medea describes in her letter (12.153). The dark amusement to the scene shines through because Hypsipyle mirrors her rival's reactions, while the messenger briefly plays the part of Jason. Even Hypsipyle's act of compelling the messenger to swear an oath compares to Medea's demand that Jason swear a promise to the gods that he will marry her (Apollonius 4.83-91; *Met.* 7.94-97), so the appearance of the messenger presents us with a brief microcosm of Medea's problem with Jason.

When Hypsipyle is listening to the messenger's story and she relates how *alternant spesque timorque vices* (38), we note several humorous aspects to this line, for we see irony in the way that her original, proximate, and altruistic hope and fear (for Jason's life) has essentially been answered, yet the real, ultimate, and selfish hope and fear (that Medea exists) is now about to come to the forefront. This line contains elements of dark humour as well, since again Hypsipyle is suffering the same emotional strain that her rival will feel, and we see not only that they are indeed quite alike, but that Medea will suffer in the same way that Hypsipyle now suffers, thereby fulfilling Hypsipyle's stated desire for revenge.<sup>32</sup>

When she reveals the wounds that the messenger reveals with his speech (*detegit ingenio vulnera nostra suo*, 40), Hypsipyle is referring to the figurative wounds in her

---

<sup>32</sup> Medea's first fears are associated with whether Jason will survive his meeting with the earthborn men and what might happen to her afterward (Apollonius 4.11-25; *Her.* 12.61, 12.97-100; *Met.* 7.134-38) but she also expresses fears that Jason will betray her once they are away from Colchis (Apollonius 3.1111-17; *Her.* 12.135-42; *Met.* 7.20-21; 7.70-71).

heart. But the wounds he is uncovering are more than those that Hypsipyle feels, for the word has a dual and more literal connotation in this context – the real wounds that others will suffer at the hands of Medea. Thus Hypsipyle’s accusation that Medea is inflicting metaphorical wounds against her pales in comparison to the real wounds her rival has inflicted (on Absyrtus) and will inflict on others, and in this way her charge becomes altogether laughable. To a certain degree Hypsipyle may even understand the more literal meaning, since she later mentions that Medea has killed her own brother (129-30). Yet she nevertheless appears to be sincere in believing that Medea is wounding her, and the double meaning of this word creates irony, however bleak that irony may seem.

**Lines 41-60 – Memories of the Argo’s Arrival at Lemnos:** Hypsipyle’s remembrances of her two years with Jason are never free from the shadow of Medea, and her complaints about how Jason seduced her are the same complaints that her rival will offer, making them yet again appear to be more alike. With her first objection, when she rhetorically asks what happened to the ties of wedlock that bound her and Jason (41), we are reminded of how Euripides’ Medea chastises Jason for his betrayal in her speech to him (465-519), and the scene becomes darkly humorous because she laments the same things that Medea will also lament.

The following line, when she posits that her wedding torch is more deserving to serve as a funeral torch (*faxque sub arsueros dignior ire rogos*, 42), is biting irony on Ovid’s behalf, since this picture conjures up other images in our mind that Hypsipyle cannot predict. While she may be talking about the futility of her wedding, and perhaps implying her own potential suicide, we instead think of how the wedding torch of Creusa

will indeed also be her funeral torch. We see the other – and future – meaning to this phrase but Hypsipyle only speaks in terms of her own well-being. Also, and undoubtedly more significantly, we see that Medea's wedding to Jason will be a funeral torch as well, since it will lead to the deaths of many other people, just not the bride and groom.

Her next comment implies that she and Jason were openly and formally married (*non ego sum furto tibi cognita*, 43) and thus appears to be a direct attack on how Jason and Medea could not be married openly in Colchis but first had to sneak away. But the statement also has a great deal of bitter humour as well, since Jason's wives all have a tendency to believe that only their marriage alone is of the real and formal variety and to thereby downplay the legitimacy of the weddings that their respective rivals have with him, which has the effect of making them seem alike in their outlook.<sup>33</sup>

The Fury who is covered in blood and who she postulates must have appeared at their wedding as a bad omen (*sed tristis Erinys/ praetulit infaustas sanguinolenta faces*, 45-6) is intended by Hypsipyle as a type of metaphorical observation. However, there are deeper ironic nuances to this Fury. For it causes us to think of Medea and of the vengeful and furious murders that she herself will commit. The Fury also provides another ironic allusion to the wedding of Jason and Creusa, where we shall truly witness unlucky wedding torches, leaving Hypsipyle's wedding to seem rather fortunate by comparison.

The comment about how the Lemnian women know how to defeat men (53) and therefore should have stood up to the Argonauts (54) is rather humorous, since the

---

<sup>33</sup> Medea makes the same grievance regarding Jason's new marriage in Euripides' *Medea* (585-87), that he marries Creusa in a sneaky manner, which is a theme Ovid will also have Medea take up again in her own letter (12.137-52) when she complains that she hears about his wedding to Creusa through the shouts in the street and through her children's watchful eyes. Again, they suffer the same fate – throwing blame at the secret marriage to the rival.



prospect that she raises of the Argonauts beaten in a direct assault by the Lemnian women is *per se* comic, for we know that the Lemnian women could not have stood up to the Argonauts, having killed their men only by means of deception and not in straight warfare.<sup>34</sup> What makes the prospect even less plausible is the fact that Hypsipyle avoided participating in this massacre, and we see a grimmer irony in her boast about the ability of the Lemnian women to beat men, since we know that she is rather tame compared to the fierceness of the Colchians – especially of a certain Colchian princess named Medea. That is, this line points forward to Medea’s ability to defeat men, but Hypsipyle does not appreciate the ironic double meaning.

Upon Jason’s appearance Hypsipyle takes him immediately into both her city and heart (*urbe virum vidua tectoque animoque recepi*, 55), which makes it appear to be a type of love-at-first-sight, and this draws our minds to Jason’s appearance in Colchis and how Medea will also suffer the same fate, rendering their experiences similar and comic. Moreover, this version of love-at-first-sight with Jason and the yoking together of heart and home reminds the reader of what will happen when he arrives in Colchis and Creusa as well takes him into her heart and palace. When he is finally compelled (*coactus*, 57) to leave Hypsipyle, she reports his promise to her that he will always be her husband (*virtuus hinc abeo, vir tibi semper ero*, 60) and we are explicitly reminded of his similar promises to Medea (Apollonius 3.1127-30) making the two enemies seem eerily related,

---

<sup>34</sup> Knox (1995: 182) notes another irony: “Jason is apparently unaware of earlier events, and these lines would be understood by him as something of empty bluster: the irony is for third parties to this correspondence.”

and, what is more, we also appreciate that he will be a husband to both Medea and Creusa. Paradoxically he will always be the husband of a number of different women.

**Lines 61-82 – Jason’s Departure from Lemnos:** Jason’s final statement to Hypsipyle, in which he points to the child that is in her womb (61-2), has numerous layers of humour to it. Clearly the pregnancy foreshadows the children that Medea will have with Jason, which again creates a type of symbiotic experience between the two women, and the effect is bleakly comic since Medea will eventually undergo the same experiences with Jason and she will suffer for it in a tit-for-tat manner. And yet there is also more dark humour in Jason’s wish that their child should live (*vivat et eiusdem simus uterque parens*, 62), since we know that this is the only child (although it, in fact, turns out to be twins) who does live, because Medea will eventually kill the offspring that she produces. Neither Jason, whom she is quoting here, nor Hypsipyle, of course, has any way of predicting that this will happen, so Ovid cleverly places this prayer of Jason with the aim that we may notice the uncomfortable juxtaposition.

In one of the wittiest remarks in the letter, Hypsipyle finishes her narrative of Jason’s departure scene and of how she fled to a tower in order to watch him sail away (65-70) with the comment that (at that time) her eyes saw farther than they were accustomed to seeing (*longius adsueto lumina nostra vident*, 72). Again the wit here is on several levels. The most significant aspect is the double-play between the two meanings in what she says, for she is ostensibly making a reference to her ability to see the departing ship from her position on the tower. However, the line carries with it a certain transitional weight, and we can read *video* as if she were saying *cerno*, since from

this point in the letter forward Hypsipyle does try to look into the future, to perceive and predict what will happen, effectively trying to see more than she is accustomed to seeing. That is, from this moment forward the letter will no longer concentrate on her relationship with Jason, but rather on Medea, and on Medea's relationship with Jason, along with all of the negative aspects that Hypsipyle can associate with her as well – where she tries to look into the future.

When she is at the tower, she repeatedly mentions the tears that she sheds for the departing Jason (70-71). This is yet another case of situational irony, since from all that both Hypsipyle and we know about him, tears are really an inappropriate response. She should instead be rather pleased – perhaps even relieved – at his departure.

The first reason she gives as to why she needs to fulfill her vows is to point out that Jason is now safe (*te salvo*, 74), which she phrases circumstantially – “since” Jason is safe, (therefore) the vows must be fulfilled. However, as we already noted from line 3, at this moment Jason is probably not in a very safe position, since he is likely at this moment in flight from Iolcus, which creates an ironic relationship between what Hypsipyle imagines to be the case and the probable reality. But even though she acknowledges that the promised vows should be carried out, she wonders why she should even bother, since Medea alone will enjoy the fruits of her prayers (75). The humour in this comment is again dark, since Medea will not get to enjoy Hypsipyle's prayers for Jason's well-being and she will find herself in similar straits as her Lemnian predecessor.

With the name of Medea first making its appearance on line 75, she then becomes a conscious reference point and constant source for allusion, and we therefore do not need

to read the lines too closely in order to notice the connections to her, humorous or otherwise. When Hypsipyle asks if she should bring gifts to the temples because she has lost a living Jason (77), we can see dark humour, because apparently she means that she has lost Jason (to Medea) and we can see that Medea will also lose a living Jason – to Creusa.<sup>35</sup> Equally, when she asks whether a victim (*hostia*, 78) should fall for her losses, she appears to be quite negative toward the gods, which is the complete opposite state of mind that she no doubt held when she first made the pledge that she would do this if Jason arrived back safely, showing a twist to her previous attitude, and, furthermore, showing that she fails to realize that she should be happy that Jason has not returned to her. Perhaps the gods were indeed helping her by letting him continue his life without her, and she is not able to appreciate that this fact is to her benefit.

When she turns to the fears she once held that Jason would eventually find a Greek wife (79-80), the humorous connection to Medea is evident because this is clearly what Medea should fear. In a way, because this is the very bug that will bite Medea, what this statement foreshadows acts as a type of unconscious revenge on Hypsipyle's part – and is thus a sign of black comedy – since her rival will eventually suffer from what she once feared the most. And when she follows this line with the comment *nocuit mihi barbara paelex* (81) there is irony because this barbarian *paelex* has done her very little harm indeed in comparison to the harm that she will instead do to Creusa and many

---

<sup>35</sup> There may also be a dual use of the word *perdo* at play with this remark. Hypsipyle means that she has lost Jason. Knox (1995: 187) says that “this is a paradox, since *perdere* suggests loss by death (*OLD* s.v. 3c).” Two lines previously Medea becomes the focus of the letter, and, when we see the line from her perspective, we can infer a new meaning from *perdere* that means “to destroy.” We notice that Medea does destroy Jason while he is alive – *vivum quod Iasona perdo* – but kills all those around him, and we can see Ovid's possible double play on the meaning of *perdo* in this line, based on who we imagine may be speaking the line.

others. While the harm that Hypsipyle speaks of in terms of herself is figurative or emotional, the real harm that Medea will cause is physical and altogether real – but Hypsipyle does not appreciate how Medea’s real harm will become manifest.

The comic juxtaposition continues in the next line when she admits that her wound has come from an unexpected enemy (82). Yes, although her wound may be small in comparison, she certainly did not expect it to come from Medea. However, since the previous line alludes to the harm that Medea will inflict on Creusa, this line can also be read from Creusa’s perspective, where we note that, because Medea will try to pretend to be reconciled with her marriage to Jason, Creusa’s wound will therefore come from quite a non-expected enemy, since she has been taken in and thinks that Medea is no threat at all to her. Also, we can easily think of others for whom Medea at this point has already acted as a *non expectata* enemy – namely, Absyrtus and Pelias – and she will also even be less expected by her children when she murders them.<sup>36</sup>

**Lines 83-104:** Over the next five couplets Hypsipyle gives a summary of Medea’s negative magical qualities, ones that associate her with witchcraft. Her first remark is perhaps the strangest when she says that Medea *nec facie meritisque placet* (83). The first part is plain enough to understand: she is casting aspersions on Medea’s physical appearance, making her seem ugly. But the second comment, that Medea is not pleasing with *meritis*, requires our attention. We can duly understand her to mean that

---

<sup>36</sup> One area where Hypsipyle perhaps inadvertently and tangentially hits the nail on the head with her statement about being wounded by an unexpected source is that she appears to be the only person who is harmed unintentionally by Medea, for it seems that in all of Medea’s other actions the wounds that she makes are completely intentional. Thus, in terms of Hypsipyle, Medea is striking her in way that she herself is not conscious of, or does not expect, and she therefore knows nothing about the blows that she is inflicting.

Medea does not please with just or proper things, that she does not please with ‘meritorious actions.’ This would appear to a proper reading of what she intends, since Hypsipyle will later soon mention several of Medea’s rather improper actions. Yet while Hypsipyle is leaning toward a negative reading of *meritum*, because she considers Medea’s favours to be rather evil, ironically Jason would likely view Medea’s favours – the theft of the Fleece, the murders of both her brother and Pelias – as essentially positive actions because she helped him by doing these things. In Jason’s eyes, Medea would therefore be very pleasing in her *meritis*, which is an irony Hypsipyle fails to recognize.

We also notice another tangible irony as to why Medea would not likely be pleasing to Jason because her comment that Medea *nec facie meritisque placet* is something that we later find out to be completely true, but not in the manner that Hypsipyle suggests. For while she suggests that Medea has seduced him with magic potions, in reality we later discover that Medea simply has not pleased Jason enough with either her beauty or through her favours to make him remain with her. We can see the irony as Ovid presents it here – that she does not please Jason – but we see it in a way that Hypsipyle cannot.

Her very reason that Medea is not pleasing contains even more irony, since she says that her rival knows spells and gathers dreadful herbs with her enchanted blade (83-4) in her attempt to suggest that Medea has drugged Jason into marrying her.<sup>37</sup> We know that Medea does no such thing to bring about the marriage (or, at least, according to Ovid,

---

<sup>37</sup> Knox (1995: 188) notes that “Hypsipyle does not yet say that Medea has bewitched Jason, but her words (83, 93-4) make it very easy to draw that inference.” Indeed, from this letter no other inference about Hypsipyle’s viewpoint is possible.

she does not),<sup>38</sup> but Hypsipyle's warning about and criticism of Medea's use of magic charms works on another level that Hypsipyle does not anticipate. Jason, although not trapped into love by Medea's magic as a victim of it, has by this time nevertheless seen her use it on a number of occasions. She has helped him defeat the oxen, steal the Fleece from the serpent, and she has probably even by now rejuvenated his father Aeson as well. So, from Jason's perspective at this point, most, if not all of the things that she has done for him involving magic would appear to be quite good and altogether to his benefit. And then we come to another layer of the irony, because the herbs that she once used to help him she will eventually use to harm him in Corinth. Or, more precisely, she will use such drugs to harm his new bride Creusa along with her father Creon. We can trace the layers to Hypsipyle's remark thus: she thinks that Medea has cast Jason under a love-spell, but her magic in fact has been helpful to him so far, although it will eventually prove to be harmful. What starts as a criticism – that Jason has been tricked by Medea's drugs – holds within it a buried warning, one which Ovid plants for us to notice, but one that Hypsipyle does not see.

As just noted, one of the strangest oddities of Hypsipyle's description of Medea here is that Jason will have already known about Medea's capabilities. Most of her accusations are of a very general nature and appear to be merely a part of her rhetorical project to discredit her rival. We would not expect Jason to care about any of these other

---

<sup>38</sup> Although Jacobson (1974: 99, n.12) claims that there "evidently was a tradition of Medea winning his love through her magic," the reference that he makes to show this – Valerius Flaccus – appears well after Ovid. He also admits that the only possible evidence of Medea doing this to Jason in texts that appear prior to Ovid is "doubtful." Therefore, since there is no concrete evidence of Medea seducing Jason with her magic – and certainly none in Ovid – then we can not say that Hypsipyle's point here is anything other than angry rhetoric.

aspects, as long as Medea was still his friend. And this serves as the greatest irony of her digressive description of Medea: while Hypsipyle is warning that the witch Medea has trapped him by her drugs, Jason, while clearly not trapped and very much enjoying the fruits of Medea's witchcraft, should heed Hypsipyle's advice in that he should be wary of turning Medea into his enemy. At the moment she is of a benefit to him. Later, when he betrays her, she will become this dire creature whom Hypsipyle describes. The Medea whom Hypsipyle describes only shows herself to enemies.

The accusation that Medea strives to hide the chariot of the Sun in the shades (86) directly leads us to think of how she will use her grandfather's chariot as means of transportation when she either searches for herbs or is in flight.<sup>39</sup> But Hypsipyle merely is trying to say that Medea, as a witch, causes solar eclipses to happen. The greater meaning of what we know that Medea will do with her grandfather's chariot is beyond Hypsipyle, and the horrific picture that we have of her riding away with the dead bodies of her children in that very chariot is far worse than the mere image of a witch creating an eclipse of the sun.

We have no strong evidence in Ovid, or in other accounts, of Medea practicing witchcraft by throwing curses at the absent, or driving needles in the heart of waxen images of her enemies who are not in the same room (91-2). Rather, although Medea can achieve her vengeance through trickery – the robe that she sends to Creusa is a good case in point – her tendency, however, is to be present when exacting her revenge. Curiously, in the way she attacks Medea here (and especially at 155ff.) Hypsipyle is herself cursing

---

<sup>39</sup> As she does in *Met.* 7.219-36; 350-91; 398-401; 424.



the absent Medea and, in this case the black humour is turned backward, since Hypsipyle is doing the very thing of which she is accusing her rival.<sup>40</sup> That is, in lines 91-2 she essentially accuses Medea of attacking others who are unaware of the attack, and here she is launching just such an attack on Medea.

After ascribing a number of standard witch-like attributes to Medea, most of which appear to be false, she sums up her description with the apropos and evasive et cetera, saying that Medea does other things *quae nescierim melius* (93). The humour in this line is that, although many of the accusations that she makes are likely false, if she did know these other things of which Medea is capable, then she truly would rather not know them.

Her description of Medea ends with the gnomic line *male quaeritur herbis/moribus et forma conciliandus amor* (93-4). This is interesting since neither she nor Medea won Jason by the improper method – that is, through magic herbs. Granted, Medea has sought Jason's love through her use of witchcraft – but she used it in carrying out favours for him rather than, as Hypsipyle suggests, as a tool to manipulate his affections. More precisely, the humour is present because it points to the problem that Medea will have with Jason, for in her more violent deeds – the murder of her brother and tricking the daughters of Pelias – drugs are really not involved. The death of Pelias happens, in fact, because she cleverly decides not to use any drugs at all. And when she does use drugs on his behalf the actions are not so violent at all, since through her spells she helps him obtain the Fleece and restores his father Aeson to a more youthful state.

---

<sup>40</sup> Jacobson (1974: 104) briefly mentions this as well.

And yet in spite of all this Jason will still reject Medea, thereby rendering this statement a bit more practical in its meaning – and in its relevance to Medea – than Hypsipyle would intend. For she suggests a proper way that love should be won, and Medea will later realize that she should not have done these favours for Jason – the ones she carried out with her drugs.

We wonder if perhaps the exact opposite to what Hypsipyle suggests should be true when applied to Jason. That is, perhaps a type of love magic *should* be used on him. After all, the two women who do not have access to magic in order to woo him – Hypsipyle and Creusa – eventually suffer for it. And Medea suffers too, because she uses her magic to help him but does not use it as the agent of her seduction. The twisted irony in this comment is that Jason's love probably should be sought via love magic – for otherwise he is completely inconstant. Moreover, in this statement we can even see an unconscious and therefore ironic criticism of Jason's methods, since his meetings with Hypsipyle and Medea are both prefaced by visits from Hera, Aphrodite, and Eros, who lend their respective divine power to his *forma*.<sup>41</sup> As we can see, there are many levels of irony to this one comment.

Upon finishing her unflattering portrait of Medea, Hypsipyle then asks Jason how he can lie next to her (*hanc*) in the night without fear (95-6). Once again, several layers

---

<sup>41</sup> When Jason arrives on Lemnos Apollonius never explicitly says that Aphrodite made him appear beautiful. Rather, he writes only that Jason was beautiful when he entered the city (1.773-82); he also later adds that Aphrodite placed a γλυκὺν ἵμερον but he does not clarify who is the recipient of this sweet desire, so we can infer that they both felt it. The history of Jason's meeting with Medea, however, consistently makes Jason appear to have the aid of the gods in appearing beautiful. Pindar (*Pyth.* 4.216-20) writes that Aphrodite taught him the potions that would set Medea's heart alight; in Euripides Jason says that Medea was overcome by Aphrodite (526-31), who was his real saviour; finally, in Apollonius (3.280-98) Eros is sent by his mother (and Hera) to inflict Medea with longing for Jason.

of humour are present in this question. First of all, Jason will in fact not lie next to Medea for very long, since he is going to leave her in Corinth. Just as he left Hypsipyle he will also leave Medea, so her rival will suffer similar circumstances, creating a type of poetic revenge. Moreover, her mention of *thalamoque...uno* (95) is quite droll, since Jason has difficulties staying in one bedroom, which is one of the very reasons for so many of his troubles. A deeper irony also appears with the word *impavidus*, since Jason can feel safe and secure *as long as he is within* Medea's bed. But, when he leaves Medea, then he should feel nervous. On this level the word has the same type of irony as Hypsipyle's previous comment about how Medea deals with herbs: in both cases Medea does these things for Jason's protection but, when he betrays her, then he should watch out.

The use of the expressions *mulcet* (98) and *te iuga ferre coegit* (97) in her metaphor comparing how Medea soothes and tames Jason to how she beguiled the fierce snake that guarded the Fleece and how he yoked the bulls of Mars is interesting. Ultimately Medea both fails and succeeds in both soothing and taming Jason. At first, because he will eventually leave her, Medea appears to exemplify the exact opposite of Hypsipyle's accusation – she fails to soothe or tame him. However, after Jason leaves Medea and moves from the position of her friend to that of her enemy, she then does soothe him when she tricks him into allowing their children bring the poisoned dress to Creusa. In Euripides, immediately after completing her pact with Aegeus she then makes a well-known speech to the chorus (776-88) in which she describes how she will use soft words to Jason (μαλθακούς λέξω λόγους, 776) as a part of her trickery (δόλοισι, 783)

against Creusa. Thus, in a roundabout and ironic way Medea will both soothe and tame Jason, but not in the same manner that Hypsipyle believes she has done. Instead Medea has to accomplish this through trickery since, as she will admit in her own letter, she is not powerful enough to overcome this one man (*unum non potui perdomuisse virum*, 12.144).

The next accusation that she levels at Medea (99-104) has distinct traces of a scholarly joke on Ovid's behalf. Her argument, in short, is that Medea is stealing his glory, his reputation as a hero, as well as the reputation of his Argonauts. The humour in this line is directly related to the fact that by Ovid's time her memory, her name, is greater than that of Jason, and through her infanticidal vengeance, she has become the most important player in their collective narrative. Indeed the wife has obscured the claim to fame of the husband (*titulo coniugis uxor obest*, 100). Even her remark that there is a partisan of Pelias who claims that she is the real author of Jason's deeds (101-2) also has distinct traces of such an erudite joke from Ovid, because Hypsipyle makes the additional observation that this person has an audience who believes him. The people she means are the other people in Iolcus and Greece, but we would not be bending logic if we infer that the audience could also be us, since we already know that Jason accomplishes these deeds through the auspices of Medea's poisons, and we thus see how she has obscured his deed with her own. We know that Jason could not be Jason without Medea – and the slight metatextual reference does not elude the alert reader.

**Lines 105-128:** The next tactic that Hypsipyle employs with Jason, imagining what his mother and father may think of his new Colchian bride (105-6), has varying

levels of irony. Regarding her command that Jason ask his mother (*consule matrem*, 105) what she thinks of Medea, the situational irony results from the fact that, by most accounts, Jason's mother Alcimede would have already died by the time her son arrives back in Iolcus.<sup>42</sup> Therefore Jason could obviously not ask his mother for any advice and, even if he were to actually read such a suggestion from Hypsipyle, who would evidently not know that she has died, it would likely only make him feel more distant from his Lemnian wife. However, we cannot speculate on how Jason might react to this suggestion, since we only know that his mother has probably died by the time Hypsipyle is writing it.

The reference to Jason's father Aeson is even more ironic, because by this time Medea will have already worked her magic on him (*Met.* 7.262-93) and have restored him to a youthful state. It appears likely that Jason's father in fact would likely approve of Medea because of her actions in rejuvenating him. Moreover, his mother, if by some chance Ovid were using some alternate traditions and she were still alive, would likely approve as well, since she would no doubt be happy with her husband's new youth. In asking Jason to consult his parents, Hypsipyle unwittingly reminds him that his mother is dead and that his new bride helped his father. The advice that she gives Jason completely backfires, since, should both his parents be alive at this point, then they likely would both be happy with their new daughter-in-law.

Her claim that Medea should seek a husband from her own region (107-8) is ironic because we realize that Medea would be better off if she were to follow

---

<sup>42</sup> See chapter 1 and Knox (1995: 192-3).

Hypsipyle's sarcastic advice and find a spouse from her own region.<sup>43</sup> But the comment becomes more biting if we instead apply it to Hypsipyle herself. By all accounts she is more Greek than Medea, yet if we take her comment for its core meaning – “let her find a husband from her own land” – and direct it back toward Hypsipyle, we notice that Jason does not come from her *patria* either, showing us that she herself has a foreign husband.<sup>44</sup> Probably Hypsipyle does not fully realize that, if Jason were to search among Greeks for a bride, then she too would not be a candidate. That is, his mother and father would likely not approve of her either. Ultimately Jason does find the proper type of Greek bride in Creusa, one whom his parents would likely approve, at least according to Hypsipyle's criteria of Greekness. However, even though Creusa might meet the proper ethnic specifications, it turns out that she may just be the worst possible choice for him, since she will unleash Medea's fury. His choice of a bride from among his own people is therefore a tragic one, and Hypsipyle does not realize what the eventual results of his choice will be.

The appeal to Jason's pleasure at hearing about *nobilitas generosaeque nomina* (113) has an ironic twist to it. She is explicitly drawing attention to Jason's trip to Colchis, his visit with the king there and, more importantly, the princess Medea, in order to juxtapose herself with Medea (and the fact that Medea has abandoned her status as a princess.) But the remark truly gains in meaning and irony when we realize that her appeal to these *generosaeque nomina* applies in a different way, since when the pair arrive

---

<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, the only evidence of Medea being engaged to anyone in Colchis appears in Valerius Flaccus (6.44), whose *Argonautica* was written well after Ovid.

<sup>44</sup> In another irony, there is no way that she herself could find a husband on Lemnos, the Lemnians having killed all the possible candidates. And we see yet another humorous parallel between the heroines, since neither of them could find a husband from their own lands.

in Corinth Jason reaches for another connection to a high-born name and seeks a pact that would unite him with the house of Creon. She turns out to be quite prescient in understanding that lofty names will appeal to Jason – a man who marries a queen and two princesses, after all – but wrong in associating that appeal with his trip to Colchis.

In one of the more subtle juxtapositions that Hypsipyle offers with her rival, she talks about her family origins (her *generosaque nomina*) and eventually traces her name back to Bacchus and Ariadne (114-16). This draws attention to a very great irony in her letter, because it suggests that her connection to the gods places her on a higher level than Medea – which, in turn, leads us to understand that she does not know that Medea also has a connection to the gods. As a matter of a straightforward parallel, this is another example of the two women appearing surprisingly similar, although Hypsipyle fails to recognize that similarity.

The reappearance of the children in her letter (119) forces us to think about Medea. Two layers of humour appear when she posits that Jason's role as the father made the pregnancy a *dulce...onus* (120). While the pregnancy itself may have been sweet, the fact of Jason's paternity has by the time of this letter made their births quite the opposite of *dulce*, creating an ironic double-play between what she says and the reality. In addition, Medea will find herself in a similar position, because her children will also be the bitter products of their marriage, the ones she chooses to use for her revenge, creating yet another dark parallel between the two women.

In comparing her children to their father Jason, Hypsipyle attempts to strike a blow at him by saying that the single way in which they differ is that the children *fallere*

*non norunt* (124). On one level this is quite a well-aimed attack at her husband, but the comment has another allusive element as well, since Ovid is inviting us to think of how Medea will manipulate this quality of innocence in her children when she sends them bearing the poisoned robe to Creusa. What makes this implication more apparent to us is the very next line where Hypsipyle writes that she nearly sent her children as legates on her behalf (125), thus yoking together the concepts of the innocent children being sent as pawns. Where Hypsipyle would exploit the innocence of her children to win Jason back, Medea exploits the innocence of her children to strike a blow against him, and we cannot help seeing each woman in the other.

She makes the point of saying that she almost (*paene*, 125) sent her children to see their father, and the reasons she gives for holding them back are that she feared what Medea might do to them (126-30), offering as evidence for her fear her knowledge of what Medea did to her own younger brother Absyrtus. Her anxiety is probably justified, given what Medea does with children, for we can see a clear allusion to what Medea will do to *her own* children, and the situation has a macabre quality since Medea will eventually do to her own children what Hypsipyle fears she may do to hers. On Hypsipyle's behalf Medea will avenge herself against herself.

The strangest twist to this comment is her repeated reference to Medea as the *noverca* (126), one who is *saeva* and indeed more than a *noverca* (126-7). She makes a valid point, since Medea is more than a *noverca* – she is mother who kills her own children and not a step-mother who murders the offspring of others – but yet again Hypsipyle fails to see the extra meaning in her words. By saying that Medea is more than



a *noverca*, she implies that her rival is merely *worse than* a step-mother, but we know that she will be dangerous *in her role as a mother*, which is indeed more than a step-mother – and this unrecognized Freudian slip of hers presents the reader with a rather ominous comparison. Medea is more than a *noverca*, and she is worse than a *noverca*, but even Hypsipyle cannot fathom how much worse she is. Moreover, we generally do not think of Medea as a step-mother. Instead the *noverca* in her story is Creusa, who is the one to whom Medea dispatches her children as legates when she sends the poisoned robe – and who is the opposite of *saeva* in accepting the gifts that lead to her death. We thus notice another connection between the two and at this point the line between Hypsipyle's and Medea's story starts to become blurred in black comedy.

Returning to the theme of what Medea might do to her children, she backs up her fear by pointing out what she did to her brother (129-30). The reason that she warns Jason that Medea's hands *faciunt ad scelus omne* (128) is to demonstrate that the *scelus omne* of which she claims Medea's hands to be capable is the harm she might inflict on the children of her Lemnain equal. The remark is altogether appropriate, but in an even more horrifying way than she means, since Medea's hands are truly ready for every and any crime: however, it is an even worse crime than Hypsipyle can imagine. Her warning turns out to be valid, although the victims of the crime turn out to be worse than the ones she posits, and we can clearly see the irony.

**Lines 131-150:** In her direct accusation to Jason – *Colchisque ablate venenis* (131) – we note that Jason has not been carried off at all by the poisons – at least in the same way that Hypsipyle means, that is. Her use of *aufero* here implies that Jason has

been abducted by Medea – which portrays him as a victim and that he should thus feel uncomfortable with this situation. However, *aufero* can simply be interpreted as meaning that he has been carried off – as in *saved – thanks to* her poisons,<sup>45</sup> which is what Jason and all of us know to be quite true, and, moreover, which is something for which he feels grateful – an ironic twist that Hypsipyle would not expect. While she uses the phrase *ablate* to promote the idea that Medea has been harmful to Jason, he could easily read such a comment and wholeheartedly agree that Medea’s poisons have been quite helpful. The irony is compounded with dark humour in the next line when she adds, incredulously, that Jason is said to have preferred the bed of that woman (*hanc*, 131) to her own. We know that this will eventually prove to be false – that Jason will not prefer Medea’s bed – and that Medea will level the same accusations at Jason that his Lemnian wife is now using. Of course, the term *aufero* also makes us picture Medea being whisked away by the dragons leading her chariot, which is a reference that Hypsipyle would not intend.

Her quip referring to Medea as the *adultera virgo* (133), which is clearly an oxymoron,<sup>46</sup> is the most evident instance in which Hypsipyle herself consciously employs a humorous device, however cruelly she may use her humour. But she fails to see another layer to her own wit, however, because we know that Medea will feel the same way about Creusa – that the virgin about to marry her husband is an adulteress. Thus we correspondingly see Medea’s future position in Hypsipyle’s current attitude, and a part of her own bitter joke eludes even Hypsipyle.

---

<sup>45</sup> See *OLD*, s.v. *aufero* 3b [“to rescue (from)”].

<sup>46</sup> Knox (1995: 197) calls her tone “bitingly sarcastic.”

The direct contrast that she offers between Medea's familial impiety and her own more pious action in saving her father's life (135-6) works against her. Her intention is to show that Medea is not trustworthy to those whom she should be reliable, but her argument backfires for a number of reasons. Yes, Medea did betray her father and did abandon Colchis, but she committed all of these actions entirely for Jason's benefit, and he would never have obtained the Fleece without her help. Therefore, she chose him *over her father and her homeland*, and, in his reaction to the letter, Jason would likely note this piece of evidence with pride. Furthermore, she adds the comparison that, unlike the vagabond Medea, *me mea Lemnos habet* (136). Once more we wonder why Jason would find the fact that she is held in Lemnos to be attractive. After all, his aim is to return to Greece with the Fleece, since he is Greek, and Medea is the one who is willing to go there with him. From all that we know of Jason, he would likely not want to be stuck on Lemnos, making the comment have an effect that is opposite to its original intention.

According to the tradition Hypsipyle eventually is forced into exile when the women of Lemnos discover that she secretly rescued her father Thoas.<sup>47</sup> Knox wisely points out that the reader would know this and see the irony in that Hypsipyle would soon be an exile herself,<sup>48</sup> and we might add that this point would be reinforced on line 139 when she criticizes her people for the slaughter of the men.

A more subtle layer of humour shines through in the next few lines. First she dismisses Medea as *scelerata* and says that her dowry came along with her crime (137-8).

---

<sup>47</sup> See Grimal (1986: 222-23).

<sup>48</sup> Knox (1995: 198); Jacobson (1974: 103); Verducci (1985: 60).

She says this about Medea's crimes in order to lay her own claim that she did not support the actions of her own countrywomen when they killed their husbands (139). All of this seems straightforward enough, but she completes her reference to the massacre of the Lemnian men with the comment that she is not amazed because *quamlibet ignavis iste dat arma dolor* (140). The observation seems to come out of nowhere – is she saying that she could take up arms just like her own people did? Perhaps we ought to wonder, as others have, if lines 139-40 should be expunged due to their incongruity.<sup>49</sup> But, if we allow them to remain and accept what they appear to imply – a connection to the deeds of the Lemnian women – we can notice an interesting parallel. For the *dolor* that she says can give arms to the *ignavis* is the lack of sexual relations, of sexual betrayal, which caused the women of Lemnos to turn against their husbands. We know that Jason will commit this very type of betrayal against Medea in Corinth, and the line serves as an unexpected and oblique warning that Medea will become dangerous if Jason betrays her. If Hypsipyle is referring to herself by the analogy, she is obviously using hyperbole, but the comment can easily be connected to Medea and the vengeance that she will wreak – although the author of the remark does not see the irony.

Her image of confronting the pair starts with the premise that chance and, more importantly, *ventis/...iniquis/* (141), might drive the pair to her harbour. From the state of mind in which Hypsipyle now finds herself – embittered jealousy – she naturally thinks such an arrival would be unfavourable for Jason and, as Knox points out, she does intend

---

<sup>49</sup> In his edition Peters (1882) removed lines 139-40 on the grounds that *culpo* and *mirror* do not work together coherently, an opinion with which Knox (1995: 198) agrees. A problem inherently associated with expunging the lines for this reason, however, is that we have to assume that the poet expects his character to make logical sense. Obviously we cannot and do not expect Hypsipyle to follow a rational order in composing her thoughts, and therefore we would be rash in removing lines on such grounds.

the comment to have traces of bitter irony.<sup>50</sup> But what she sees as irony is not the true irony associated with the scene. From her state of sexual jealousy she thinks that Lemnos would be the last place that Jason would want to land because she places herself on an equal footing with Medea. However, other and more interesting ironic aspects to her use of *iniquus* are present here. First of all, from what we know of the rest of the story, arriving back in Lemnos would likely be a good thing for Jason, because he could then avoid most of the hardships that are going to happen to him. And perhaps such an arrival would be favourable even for Medea as well, since she would see the type of husband she has acquired and thus be forewarned that he collects wives and children wherever he travels. Both of these ideas suggest that there might be some positive aspects for Jason and Medea if they were to arrive in Lemnos, and they run contrary to what Hypsipyle means. Nevertheless, she may be correct in implying that the winds driving them there would be *iniquus*, but, rather than being unfavourable for Jason and Medea (whom she imagines she will bludgeon, 149-51), their arrival would, if they are adverse for anyone, likely turn out badly for Hypsipyle herself. In spite of her dreams of grandeur, she would not wish to run into an enraged Medea, since she would not come out well from such an experience. So in many ways those *ventis...iniquis* would be more hostile to her than they would be to Jason, who, if anything, would only feel slightly awkward at the scene – while Hypsipyle would likely be in real danger from Medea.

When Hypsipyle imagines going out to meet Jason and Medea with *fetu comitante gemello* (143) we see that her actions are just like that of Medea in Corinth, who tries to

---

<sup>50</sup> Knox (1995: 198).

use the children to drive home the principle that Jason is bound to her. Hypsipyle's idea is to embarrass Jason if he were to arrive on her shore, but we recognize that this embarrassment – this shame that she would inflict – is a far cry from the infanticidal way Medea will inflict shame on him. This comes across more forcefully when she asks with what kind of expression he would look on his living children (145), where we are brutally reminded of the end of Euripides' *Medea* when he looks on the dead bodies of his children with Medea as she carries them off. And when she claims that Jason is worthy of death for his treachery (146) we can see that deaths will arise because of his treachery against Medea, although it is an allusion to another kind of death.

She suggests that Jason would have been safe and sound (*tutus sospesque fuisses*, 147) if he were to arrive in Lemnos right now with Medea in tow. While we can acknowledge that he would be safe if he had never left Lemnos, a more obvious situational irony stemming from this comment is that Jason thus far has been kept safe through the work of Medea, whose protection has been more important than Hypsipyle's ever could be. In addition, we can infer from what she says that she promises to keep him safe from her own attack against Medea – in essence, that she would keep him safe from herself. The comment invites the incongruous reading that Jason would need to be protected from Hypsipyle – against whom he surely would be able to defend himself.

The reason that she offers for keeping him safe reminds us of Medea, for she says it is because she is *mitis* (148). If she is talking about why she kept him safe when he was in Lemnos the first time, this would have to be dependent on the idea that the other women wanted or intended to kill the other Argonauts after they arrived and were

welcomed into the city, which did not happen. Rather, her softness is the reason that she always wants to help him – and this reminds us of how Medea will trick Jason (and Creusa) by *pretending to be soft*. As for Hypsipyle, she claims to be *mitis* toward the undeserving Jason, but the very next line (149) makes her seem the farthest thing from gentle, for she describes how she would fill her sight with the blood of Jason’s mistress. This reminds us of how Medea can also at one moment appear to be soft and gentle, and at the next moment becomes deeply vicious. With Hypsipyle the gentleness that she feels toward Jason is perhaps not an act – unlike the softness that Medea feigns in Euripides – but the bloody attack she proposes, centred as it is on the rival rather than on Jason, foreshadows Medea’s own method of attack on Creusa, making the women appear eerily similar.

Curiously, she refers to Jason’s face as one that has been carried off by Medea’s poisons or sorcery (150). We know that Jason is the one person with whom she never uses magic and, in fact, it may have been the other way around, since the goddesses aided him in seducing Medea. Equally, a lament that Medea will make in her own letter is that she was not powerful enough to defeat Jason or to defeat her passion for Jason (12.163-66), so she clearly has not been able to rule him by means of her drugs. But we can find more humour in this line if we examine the meaning of *aufero*. Hypsipyle implies that Medea has inflicted her poison on Jason – “the features which that (woman) has swept off with her poisons” – arguing that the poisons were used as her means of *seducing Jason*.<sup>51</sup> Yet a slightly different approach to the reading – and similar to our reading of *aufero* in

---

<sup>51</sup> Knox (1995: 199-200) talks about how the verb *aufero* is appropriated here for the “familiar amatory topos that love can capture another’s sight.”

line 132 – allows us to see another sense to the verb here, where we note that the poisons have indeed *led away* Jason (and his *vultus*), since we know that, rather than seducing him, Medea’s poisons have instead cleared a path for him and helped him on his adventures. Hypsipyle thinks that the poisons have done great damage to Jason, but they have instead been of a great assistance to him – so far, at any rate. The irony represented in this different meaning of *aufero* would become manifest in the reception of the letter, since Jason would feel rather strange in reading it, knowing that Medea’s poisons have been more helpful than harmful to him and that she has not tricked him at all. If anything, ironically enough, he seduced her, and this tactic of Hypsipyle in fact would probably drive him closer to Medea.

**Lines 150-64:** In the letter’s most famous line, Hypsipyle says that she would be *a Medea* to Medea (*Medeae Medea forem*, 151). Certain layers of humour here are patently obvious, because the name Medea has turned into a symbol for something horrible and menacing, which we know will soon turn out to be true. Yet, although the reader knows what Ovid means when he makes Hypsipyle write this, the characters within the letter may not yet know or, as we shall see, have a different idea of what it exactly means to be *a Medea*.

A problem at first stems from Jason’s reaction to this declaration. That is, he may very well be confused when he reads that she would be *a Medea* to Medea. While throughout the letter Hypsipyle focuses on the negative characteristics of Medea, she never mentions all of the positive actions that she has accomplished on Jason’s behalf, which – and even the murder of Absyrtus was carried out in order to help him – are the



only deeds that he has seen so far. Therefore Jason could put an amusingly different interpretation on the phrase and could assert, at this point, that Hypsipyle does not understand what it means to be *a Medea*. In his eyes a Medea is helpful and positive, and he would argue that Hypsipyle is making an improper generic noun from Medea's name.

Returning to the image of what it means to be *a Medea* in Hypsipyle's eyes, we can also see another layer of black humour. To both characters it equates to making a specific attack against their respective rivals – and this is a clear parallel between them, for, in response to being betrayed, they will both lash out at Jason's new bride. But what shows that Hypsipyle really fails to understand what it means to be *a Medea*, we know Medea will use her children to carry out the deed (killing both Creusa and Creon), and, following this, she will then in turn kill them upon their return. Undoubtedly Hypsipyle does not have any of this in mind with her suggestion that she would be *a Medea* and the irony shines through in her misreading. While she paints an image of what it means to be *a Medea* in a deeply negative light, she clearly fails to recognize how dark it really can be.

For the most part her biggest misunderstanding in what it means to be *a Medea* results from failing to comprehend why a Medea would strike out at her rival in the first place. Hypsipyle is seeking her revenge against Medea alone, and we assume, from the start of the letter onward, that her goal would still be to win Jason back (16-17, 112, 120). However, while the *proximate* aim of both women is both similar and clear – they want to kill Medea and Creusa, respectively – their *ultimate* aims are nevertheless decidedly opposite, since Hypsipyle wants the murder to result in Jason's return, but Medea kills

Creusa with the intent of striking a blow *against Jason*.<sup>52</sup> If Hypsipyle knew what it would mean to be *a Medea*, she would therefore not commit her act in the hopes of bringing Jason back to her, but she would instead mark out Jason as her real enemy and acknowledge her rival as merely the tool with which she can punish him. The irony is that, in waging the form of attack she imagines, Hypsipyle would not really be *a Medea* at all to Medea, but rather *a Hypsipyle*: a jealous woman who still wants her husband back.

Her wish that Medea feel her own laws/terms (*leges sentiat ipsa suas*, 154) very obviously predicts Jason's marriage to Creusa, but it also shows us that Hypsipyle misreads what Medea's principles or terms are. She implies that Medea's principles allowed her to knowingly steal Hypsipyle's husband, the father of her children, so she should therefore suffer the same fate. Yet, although she thinks Medea sees the world in a different way than she does and would therefore condone her own adultery, they both very strongly cling to the oaths that Jason gave them and in fact ironically believe in the same principles (in the sanctity of their respective marriages), the same laws, but the only difference is that Medea is able to present her response in an altogether more manifest way than Hypsipyle can.

Line 156 showcases Ovid at his playful best. The line *cum totidem natis orba sit illa viro* has also been rendered by most manuscripts as *a totidem natis orba sit aque viro* along with a few other minor variations as well.<sup>53</sup> From the context of the preceding line, Hypsipyle is asking that Medea suffer the same misfortunes that she has had to endure –

---

<sup>52</sup> In fact, she decides to strike Creusa instead of Jason because she judges that this would cause *him* the maximum harm – which is the very same reason that also inspires her to kill their children.

<sup>53</sup> See Knox (1995: 200).

namely, that she find herself bereft of her husband and be left with two children. She cannot be hoping that Medea lose as many children as she herself has lost, because Hypsipyle's offspring are obviously still alive. The irony is that Hypsipyle does not pitch it high enough. Medea will lose her children as well as Jason, and *cum* alludes to that on Ovid's part, since it could attach *natis* to *viro* ("may she be bereft of Jason and her children").

Her next wish is that she not hold things badly gained for long (*nec male parta diu teneat*, 157). By *male parta* she means Jason, the only thing she thinks Jason has gained thus far. But we can also infer that with *parta* Ovid could be referring to the children that Medea will have with Jason, whom she will certainly not hold for very long and will also leave behind in worse straits (157), and this allows for a macabre allusion that Hypsipyle does not mean to make. Curiously, her suggestion that Medea leave Jason behind in a worse condition reminds us of all those people whom Medea really will harm – Creusa, Creon, her children – in order to complete her vengeance against Jason. And, if she did not leave them behind worse, then it would look badly on her, since she would not have completed her plans for revenge against him. Hypsipyle's wish thus in the end refers to Medea's success in her vengeance and, rather than work against Medea, it is ironically somewhat of a curse against those who come into contact with her.

In perhaps her strangest prediction or wish, Hypsipyle says that Medea should *exulet et toto quaerat in orbe fugam* (158). In the first place, her hope is deeply bizarre, because Medea is already an exile from Colchis, and she will continue to be so anywhere she settles that is outside of Colchis. If her marriage to Jason is a successful one, after all,

she will then by necessity always be an exile and together they will both have to seek a refuge. Furthermore, Medea chose to be an exile, so at this point it seems that Hypsipyle is wishing for something to happen to Medea that Hypsipyle would not want to happen to herself rather than something that Medea would fear. Compounding the irony is our knowledge that Hypsipyle will eventually herself suffer the same fate of exile that she wishes upon Medea.<sup>54</sup> Her blatant manipulation of Medea's story is humorous to the reader who realizes that she is attempting to project her own fears onto her enemy along with cursing her to be in a state in which she already finds herself.

Lines 159-60 set up an interesting form of parallelism that Hypsipyle does not even recognize. She hopes that Medea will be just as bitter to her (future) children and to her husband as she has been to her brother and father. On first glance, and probably as she intends from her letter, we merely think that she wants Medea to be a curse to Jason and to the children that she may have with him. However, if we examine the order in which she presents the objects that Medea has harmed or will harm, we notice that distinct pairs can be formed. That is, she starts each line by mentioning her brother and her children and finishes each with her father and her husband Jason. We notice that her wrath toward her children – resulting in their deaths – will equal the way she treated her

---

<sup>54</sup> Just as Knox and noted concerning line 136, Hypsipyle becomes an exile in most of the mythological accounts (see again Grimal, 1986: 222-3; c.f. also Jacobson 1974: 103, and Verducci 1985: 60). However, we should be wary of forcing too many details of her exile into this letter, since much of the information concerning what happens to her during that time is incomplete and from this context it is hard to assess how Ovid's audience would understand the details of her exile. For example, in his *Hypsipyle*, Euripides has Jason take his two sons from Hypsipyle along with him as he sails to Colchis. If Ovid were inspired by this tragedy, and if the audience had it in mind as well, too many questions and problems would then arise. We would have to account for how Medea might have reacted to these children on the journey away from Colchis, as well as why Ovid's Hypsipyle says that her children are still on Lemnos with her. Therefore it should suffice to acknowledge that she sends a curse on Medea – that of exile - which will eventually happen to her.

brother, and her treatment of her father and Jason will also be comparable, since she will harm them both, betraying them and, what is more, destroying their respective sons. Undoubtedly Hypsipyle does not see this parallel, but upon closer examination we can indeed see the irony of her word order.

The next couplet (161-2) displays why we cannot assume that Hypsipyle's wishes will accord with the actual results of Medea's story, and instead why we can read them as merely angry curses. In conjunction with this, the astute reader, noticing the various mistakes, can see some interesting and humorous points to them. She says that Medea should try the air after having used up the sea and land (as a means of flight). Granted, this points toward Medea's resort to her grandfather's chariot at the end of Euripides' tragedy. But it does not agree with Ovid's own chronology of events (in *Met.* 7), since he will later write that she uses the chariot shortly after arriving in Iolcus when she leaves to find the herbs that will help rejuvenate Aeson (*Met.* 7.219-23). In fact, she has likely already used this chariot to get to Corinth by the time Hypsipyle is writing her letter, before she has used up the *mare* and the *terras* (161). But such inconsistencies can only be noticed by the scholar who has the advantage of the whole corpus of Ovid's poetry at his fingertips.

Furthermore, her hope that Medea wander *inops* and *exspes* (162) does not accord with reality and we can see the irony in the falseness of this "prediction," since Medea is the farthest thing from helpless, because she generally controls her own actions and defeats her enemies. Additionally, when she writes on that same line that Medea should wander *caede cruenta sua* we need not assume that she is saying that she, Medea, will kill

her own children. Rather, the death that she is stained by, according to Hypsipyle here, is that of her brother, and she wants Medea to carry the stain of the violence that she has already committed – against her brother. We, on the other hand, can see the irony in that she will be *cruenta* in a greatly different way than the one Hypsipyle imagines.

Hypsipyle ties together her list of curses against Medea with the observation that she herself has been *coniugio fraudata* (163). In stating that she has been cheated of her husband, we look ahead and see that, if not everything that Hypsipyle asks for comes true, then at least this very thing will happen to Medea as well – and the tit-for-tat connection is bleakly humorous.

The letter ends with her prayer that Medea and Jason live in their *devoto...toro* (164), but her exclamation *vivite* is clearly dismissive, showing that she does not want them to enjoy themselves. And her wish here will unexpectedly (for Hypsipyle) come true, since Medea and Jason will not inhabit a bed together (as husband and wife) for very long. Knox writes that there is “irony in the conclusion that the witch Medea and her husband now lie under a curse.”<sup>55</sup> Whether Hypsipyle’s curse carries any weight and has any effect upon what happens to Jason and Medea or not is hard to prove, but it does not have to have any practical results or connections, since it offers us enough humour and irony on its own terms. As a slight variation on Knox’s remark we might well add that the witch Medea has been cursed by the non-witch Hypsipyle – that Hypsipyle has developed the tactics for which she previously cursed Medea. The ironies thus become compounded and we see a type of black humour, since Hypsipyle is behaving like Medea

---

<sup>55</sup> Knox (1995: 201).

in order to get back at both her rival and husband. In fact, this curse even presupposes that she does not want Jason back anymore – that she wants to harm him as well, which makes her seem much closer to Medea now in her motivations. And this is the similarity that shines through at the end of the letter – that Hypsipyle is acting like Medea even though she claims they are different.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Hypsipyle and Medea are inseparable in this poem – we are forced to think of Medea in almost every line that Hypsipyle writes. While reading we recognize that Hypsipyle has often mischaracterized her rival, because they are in fact very much alike, and we can develop sympathy for both women, especially for Medea. But, even in attempting to emphasize how much she and Medea differ, she also fails to realize how great a gap there is between the Medea she describes and the Medea we know. That is, Hypsipyle tries to present Medea in the worst possible light but does not make a convincing argument. However, where she does succeed is through her letter's unintentional use of humour, because in this oblique way we can see how truly dangerous Medea will become, and the play between our sympathy for and fear of Medea that we experience with this letter is paradigmatic of how we shall respond to her in *Heroides* 12 as well, where Ovid does not wish us to think of Medea as either absolute good or evil. She has instead a mixture of both qualities, as we shall see.

### **Chapter 3: *Heroides* 12 – Medea’s Letter to Jason**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I offer a close reading of *Heroides* 12, where I shall concentrate on Ovid’s characterization of Medea, and specifically look at elements of black humour and foreshadowing. Each epistle in the collection contains underlying themes, and Medea’s letter, while appearing to evoke the reader’s sympathy, also slyly appeals to the reader’s knowledge of the macabre and tragic events that will follow, hinting at them so as to produce black comedy. I shall place this letter within the context of *Heroides* 6, showing where Ovid creates links to and contrasts with Hypsipyle’s letter. Epistle 12 does look back at 6, but Ovid rings the changes and adds clever and ironic twists to Medea’s letter in such a way that prevents it from being pale repetition. I shall focus on how Ovid has his Medea present herself, noting how her letter noticeably refuses to dwell on the murder of her brother Absyrtus and is full of numerous references that point toward the murder of her children.

Although this letter is an attempt by Medea to characterize herself, it is nevertheless formally connected to many other direct (through Hypsipyle) and indirect (through references to other literary sources) characterizations that work to undermine her story. Moreover, in this epistle, Medea’s plaintive narrative tone comes as a surprise to the type of reader that Ovid expects to be confronting her – a learned one who is altogether aware of the ominous implications of her words. Medea may beg for sympathy, but the literary and mythic allusions point to the much more dark and sinister aspects of the myth. Thus my contribution shall be to show how the letter becomes an



uncomfortable play with form – uncomfortable, because Medea wishes to evoke sympathy and, while the reader finds deep irony in her words, the allusions themselves point to an even greater tragedy than her own lament, creating a threefold movement from pathos to comedy to tragedy.

In *Heroides* 12 humour plays an important role. The poem is on the surface pathetic in tone, but a close reading beneath the surface reveals much of what is so typical of Ovid – comic undercutting, irony, and black humour. Until now the significance of humour and irony in this letter has not been properly understood, and this means that the whole epistle has not been suitably appreciated. This letter has long been considered rather dull by those critics who fail to see how the Ovidian sparkle adds life and complexity to both the epistle as well as the Medea we see here. They argue that the epistle is monotonous and that Medea is either not sympathetic or too sympathetic. While I do not wish to argue that humour is the only aspect of this letter, or even the predominant one, I do aim to show that the layers of comedy are what give it meaning – or life, point, and bite – and that they are what, ultimately, make it a success.

### **Critical Reception**

Jacobson rightly points out that the Medea who comes out of this poem is entirely Ovid's own creation<sup>1</sup> and also makes the point that this Medea is not painted in the most favourable light. However, his analysis goes too far since his interpretation of Ovid's Medea is so extreme – he writes, “There is little good to be said for Ovid's Medea”<sup>2</sup> – that he ultimately sees the poem as a failure in character development. This is due to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacobson (1974: 110).

<sup>2</sup> Jacobson (1974: 119).

fact that Jacobson does not read this poem in connection with the one from Hypsipyle and because he sees everything that Medea writes through the lens of the evil that her words portend. The dark and hostile witch into whom Medea is turning is present, this is true, but we see this through the juxtaposition with the innocent figure that she tries to show herself to be.<sup>3</sup> Jacobson views her as a completely unsympathetic figure yet does not acknowledge that her self-portrayal is undercut by dark humour. We do have sympathy for Medea in this letter, but our feelings are complicated in slightly different ways than we are used to.

Rather than discuss the merits of poem *per se*, the debate for a time became centred on whether the poem was an authentic work of Ovid. Knox (1986), starting from the premise that this poem was not mentioned in Ovid's list of epistles in *Amores* 2.18.19-26, attempts to make the case that Ovid did not compose the letter, which is the main reason he omits this letter from his commentary a few years later (1995). However, there are many flaws in Knox's approach, not the least of which is that he starts his argument with the presumption and desire to disprove the poem's authenticity and therefore seems to have already found the answer that he is looking for before he asks any questions – and

---

<sup>3</sup> Two points about Jacobson's dismissal of this poem are worth noting for their improper focus. First, he writes that Ovid ignores the conflict between reason and passion in his portrayal of Medea (p.119), which he claims was elementary to other portrayals of Medea (namely that of Euripides). However, the argument between reason and passion only appears in the Euripides story at the point when she considers killing the children, and the only hints that we have of the infanticide here are through our own knowledge of what will happen and through the otherwise unobtrusive comment that she makes about being touched by how similar they are to Jason (12.189). Secondly, Jacobson says that "Ovid's Medea has no thoughts of suicide" (p.121), which leads him to his belief that she shows no real signs of character development but is instead prepared to take violent action without remorse. One wonders if Jacobson missed the very start of the poem where Medea says that it would have been better for her to die rather than to have met Jason (3-4). To repeat the theme of suicide after this would be tedious, because it is already present. Furthermore, at this point Medea presents her meeting with Jason as a kind of death (32-3), and throughout the letter we can look back through her eyes and discover how she has come to this determination.

his exploration thus becomes only as convincing as the rhetoric from a debater who is obliged to take up a case with which he may or may not agree. In turn, Hinds (1993) breaks Knox's argument down quite methodically, showing how every piece of Knox's position can be turned on its head to provide evidence that *Heroides* 12 is in fact a legitimate Ovidian poem. Heinze (1993), focusing on lines 12.121-6, also shows that this poem should be attributed to Ovid.

The comic aspects to the letter have escaped the notice of most critical scholarship and only Verducci (1985) has attempted a discussion on how these features are intrinsic to the *Heroides*, where she rightly points out that both this letter and its counterpart number 6 (from Hypsipyle) "leave us both moved and amused" by their uses of wit and parody.<sup>4</sup> However, although she sees the humour of this epistle in a positive light, as something that is important to the poem, Verducci never specifically discusses what makes it funny, what makes it work, instead saying only that the poem makes the reader aware "how near to a monstrous pathos we have strayed."<sup>5</sup>

While Verducci's treatment of Medea's letter appears to be more centred on defending it against charges of poor character development, my aim is to talk about the amusing elements that she fails to mention – such as irony, black humour, and the specific comic links to *Heroides* 6 – in order to show how this poem is truly Ovidian.

Medea's letter presents a picture of Medea that is more complex than people have

---

<sup>4</sup> Verducci (1985: 83). The humorous interplay between the two epistles has been noted by Verducci and Bloch (2000: 199). Bloch states that "The existence of *Heroides* 12 in the collection creates irony and intertextual meaning in *Heroides* 6 that would not otherwise be present," yet, not unlike Verducci, he also does not offer up any ideas on what those ironies might be or why they might be significant. Jacobson (1974: 102) found elements of humour in every other poem in the collection with the sole exception being *Heroides* 12. This chapter, in a way, will show the many aspects that he missed.

<sup>5</sup> Verducci (1985: 81).

realized so far: one in which we feel at once sympathy for her plight, horror at what she is about to become, and amused pleasure at the various layers of irony and black humour that are present. This is neither a simple letter from a woman who has been wronged, nor one from one who is about to do (and has done) certain evil deeds, nor is it merely a comic tour-de-force in which Ovid asks the reader to appreciate all of his cleverness. Rather, the letter presents both sides of Medea – the abandoned spouse and the evil witch – while undercutting each presentation at the same time. Thus, an appreciation of the humour allows us to have a much more nuanced reading of the letter.

More recently, Heinze (1997) has published an extensive commentary on this poem, which is mostly philological in orientation, yet is very helpful in showing where Ovid may be alluding with his Medea references in this poem.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of feminist criticism directly related to this poem,<sup>7</sup> Lindheim (2003) finishes her analysis of poems 6 and 12 with an examination of how Medea, just like Hypsipyle, creates a split characterization of herself, portraying herself as both a helpless young girl and a forceful, almost male, figure. Although this dual representation is at the heart of the poem, Lindheim never fully investigates how this makes the reader appreciate Medea, and she also makes the mistake of assuming that Medea is writing the letter with Hypsipyle in mind, saying, “Medea has carefully studied *Heroides* 6.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly Ovid, who wrote both poems, studied what he already wrote, and the reader, who will have already read Hypsipyle’s poem, will see the links. That is, the connections that Medea

---

<sup>6</sup> I will be using Heinze’s text of *Heroides* 12 (1997) throughout this chapter and in subsequent allusions to the poem.

<sup>7</sup> The feminist position with respect to the role of female characters and female voices in classical literature in general has been well covered and my aim is to build upon that.

<sup>8</sup> Lindheim (2003: 132).

makes are not conscious, since there is no possible way that she could know about Jason's earlier wife or, even if she did, we cannot believe that she would have access to Hypsipyle's letter. For, if she did have access to such a letter, then we would have to believe that she would offer more of a response to it than that which she has given us here.<sup>9</sup>

In the following chapter I shall be using many of the same approaches as Felson-Rubin (1994) and Ginsburg (2006) as I consider how Medea moves within and outside of her predetermined roles, as both a female character and as the character Medea, whom we anticipate will behave in a specific way but whom Ovid can still force to act contrary to our expectations of her. As well, just as Ginsburg writes about the negative stereotype which Tacitus placed upon Agrippina, we can miss much of the charm in Ovid's presentation of Medea if we focus too much on the intertextual references to what she becomes. Granted, Ovid does have a teleological approach to Medea – she finally becomes an evil witch. Yet he shows a process in which she moves from one stage to the other and, in the *Heroides* especially, we see many different aspects of her personality at play simultaneously. Her complexity here allows her to evade easy characterization.

### **Notable Changes to the Medea Narrative**

This letter is the first extant evidence of Medea as the narrator. In Euripides' tragedy she makes quite a few speeches – as she also does in Apollonius – but in each of

---

<sup>9</sup> Fulkerson (2005: 43-55) also draws numerous parallels between letters 6 and 12, but takes her interpretation a step beyond Lindheim by suggesting that we are supposed to believe that Medea and Hypsipyle are reading one another's letters, as if this collection is a form of epistolary interplay between the heroines. Spentzou (2003), whom I shall also cite, presents a look at how the women in the *Heroides* present themselves in a male-dominated society. Although Spentzou's work is by far the most valuable of the three (for my purposes), she still omits the role of Ovid in creating these women and instead assumes that they are creating themselves, from thin air as it were.

those cases she is directing her speeches to someone who is capable of responding to her (and who do respond to her) – such as the Nurse, Jason, or Creon – and our impression of Medea is formed from her interaction with those other characters. *Heroides* 12 offers no such counterbalance and Medea is free to tell her own story without contradiction. This allows her to present her own point of view in a way that is very different from any versions that are prior to Ovid.

Only in Euripides does Medea appear to be close to offering a full picture of her own life. However, the tragedy focuses on Medea's claim that Jason has betrayed the promises that he made to her in marrying her and it does not describe the passion that she once felt for him as young girl, which is a theme that runs throughout the letter.

This is also the first extant version which both accounts for Medea's less than savoury deeds while simultaneously presenting a seemingly positive view of her. In Euripides, Medea also tries to defend her actions, but her defence is ultimately compromised – if not outright undermined – by the infanticidal revenge at the end of the play. In her letter Medea takes an overview of her situation – and all of the things she did on Jason's behalf – and attempts to portray herself in a sympathetic light. An indiscriminating reader, one who is willing to accept at face value everything that Medea claims, would have sympathy for Medea upon reading her letter. And, although the links to *Heroides* 6 are the first clue that leads us to believe Ovid does not wish us to accept all that Medea writes without question – for we can certainly imagine how Jason might respond to her as well as juxtapose the narrative she provides with our knowledge of what has happened and what is about to happen – we should allow ourselves to be just such an

undiscriminating reader in order to appreciate the letter's various levels. That is, we should be wary of falling into a critical trap of avoiding the text while searching for the subtext.

Most critics interpret what Medea writes as a type of “spin” on the events, one in which she is both trying to cover up for her own guilty activities and where she is also attempting to hide those actions which she is about to commit, and they argue that all of this results in a very ugly and unflattering portrait of her.<sup>10</sup> I cannot agree with this view, for the conclusion presupposes that this letter presents a completely negative portrait of Medea. Granted, much of what Medea writes is indeed undermined by ironic allusion – and we shall delve into this in great detail – but we should be wary of joining the chorus who claim that this poem ultimately showcases another unfavourable description of Medea. For, if Ovid wanted to make Medea appear to be completely unsympathetic, why would he then bother allowing her to try to win our sympathy?

The fact is that the letter itself does evoke a certain degree of sympathy and only an appeal to outside knowledge – along with a close reading – allows the reader to appreciate the bitter ironies behind what she writes. The problem is not that we can see a dark side of Medea through this letter, but it is related to how we reach that darker

---

<sup>10</sup> Jacobson (1974) most notably considered Medea an ugly caricature, and few commentators have strayed from his reading. Worth special mention are Verducci's remarks (1985: 81-5) about *coenaesthesia*, which is the ability to have different (and conflicting) emotional responses from the same source. This is what Ovid's Medea provides us, and several layers of reading brings us tragedy, sympathy, irony, wit, and black humour. But I would like to go further than Verducci and argue that this mixture becomes richer only through a slow and close reading of Medea's words. We do have a sense of both a sympathy for and fear of Medea when we read her letter merely as the letter it is, for we cannot help but think of what she is about to do in Corinth. However, an attentive study of the lines will also reveal the comic touches that Ovid adds, and only through this close reading can we appreciate the complexity of all these conflicting responses. The careless reader may easily perceive the passion and fear in Medea, but only studious examination yields the comedy.

portrait. That is, in our attempt to find the deeper ironic allusions – which are plentiful, once again – we often forget to read what is on the surface. And what Medea writes on the surface does evoke sympathy, where only a reader who is unwilling to let a chair be merely a chair for a moment will fail to appreciate and have sympathy for Medea's plight. It is this very sympathy, coupled with everything that undermines it, that works to create a *complex* portrait of Medea in this letter rather than merely a *negative* one. A negative portrayal is too easy, and to argue that this letter is completely off-putting is to say that Ovid did not do a very good job with this poem, when the exact opposite is the case. This letter works hand-in-hand with Hypsipyle's letter in such a way that they both undermine one another, leaving us with mixed feelings about Medea and our reaction to her words.

Also, to suggest that Medea is unsympathetic in this letter is to argue that she is not telling the truth, yet she appears to be absolutely genuine in her expressions.<sup>11</sup> She may be about to become manipulative, but she has not yet developed (or is only now doing so) her plans to avenge herself on Jason.

There are many flaws in Medea's argumentative strategy, which makes her effort less than convincing. Yet she clearly tries to create a sympathetic picture of herself and the major flaws in her approach are not due to her lack of rhetorical ability but rather to the reader's ability to notice the sly allusions that Ovid adds. Medea herself is uniquely sympathetic, and also unique is the subtle way in which Ovid – unbeknownst to Medea – connects with the reader to suggest that all is perhaps not what it might seem to be, even though Medea may both present it and believe it to be so.

---

<sup>11</sup> Farrell (1998), examining Ovid's advice to women about sincerity in letter writing in the *Ars Amatoria*, makes a very strong case that the characters in the *Heroides* are writing the truth as they perceive it.



### **The Purpose of Medea's Letter and her Self-Characterization**

Ostensibly the reason behind Medea's letter is to convince Jason to return to her and the entire epistle appears to lead up to this plea (193-4). But the journey toward her supplication is neither an easy nor an even one – she spends the majority of her energy on reproaching him – and what follows the plea also does not comfortably conform to the idea that she wants him back.

In essence Medea's letter offers her the chance to tell her own story, to characterize herself and her experiences, and this is her first opportunity to present an extended look at her life in her own voice up until their arrival in Corinth.<sup>12</sup> Yet we must recognize first of all how this letter fits within the collection of *Heroides* letters. That is, it follows the epistle from Hypsipyle, and Medea in a great way answers many of the charges that Hypsipyle has made against her. In terms of their respective aims, Medea's letter appears to have a lot in common with the one from Hypsipyle. Where they differ is in their treatment of Medea herself, for Hypsipyle juxtaposes her own virtue with what she considers the evil deeds of her rival, while Medea seeks to defend herself and characterize her actions as beneficial for Jason. But the interaction between the two letters is not so simple, since as much as Medea tries to describe herself in a positive light, everything she says is either compromised or undermined by what Hypsipyle has already written about her. This technique, in which we witness or experience a changing viewpoint toward a certain situation or character, is typical of Ovid, and is especially

---

<sup>12</sup> Verducci (1985: 71) writes that there is “no other letter in the *Heroides* whose organization is so dominated by the narrative of past events recalled from the vantage of the present.”

interesting in the case of Medea, since she is writing to Jason without the knowledge that this other letter has been written. We, the readers, have already read Hypsipyle's words, so our attitude toward Medea's epistle is tainted from the outset. On one hand we may be surprised to find her so sympathetic, but on the other hand we realize that she can be crafty and devious, and we are thereby suspicious of her words while we are simultaneously taken in by them.

Medea uses the majority of the letter to reproach Jason for having abandoned her even though she has done so much to help him and after he promised that he would never leave her for anyone else (85-8). By quoting verbatim the speech that he made to her at the shrine in Colchis (73-88) she takes direct aim at Jason's character, showing that he has been untrue and, in effect, attempts to lure him back by means of guilt. Interestingly, if she really wanted Jason to return to her, we would expect Medea to use flattery, as Hypsipyle seems to do at the start of her letter when she recalls his glorious deeds (6.9-14). This would make her appear to be a person to whom he would want to return rather than an obligation with which he must comply. Her strategy is curious, since Jason, who has already abandoned Hypsipyle, would not likely be the type of person who would be willing to go back to her merely due to a guilty conscience. The clever reader will note the great subtlety that she uses in making her point that, since he has broken his oath, all bets are now off and she is free to break hers.

She characterizes herself as powerful and helpful to him on their previous adventures, but weak when it comes to Jason and her passion for him (163-6). By the time she figuratively lays down before his feet and begs him to return (183-6), she

effectively reverses their status and gives him the opportunity to make a choice as the stronger person in their relationship, but she does not fail to point out that this begging is beneath her (*nunc animis audi verba minora meis*, 184), which is a clever reminder to us that the whole of this letter is somewhat beneath her as well.

The letter is not so much effective as a form of persuasion as it is useful both as a reflection on all that she has done for him thus far and as an ominous portent of what will ensue if he fails to return to her. She finishes the letter with a series of veiled threats about what might happen to Creusa and any other enemy of hers (181-2). She has moved from the point of begging for Jason's return to demonstrating what lies ahead if he fails to come back to her. Here Ovid offers us a unique view of Medea: even though she appears to be sincere in her desire for Jason to return, her attempts to lure him back cannot be successful since they are written as reproaches, and they are crafted to make her look completely powerless with him in matters of love (which might lead Jason to believe that he has power over her in other matters as well). Knowing the type of man he is, she is, in effect, asking him to reject her. The end of the letter, in which Medea tries to control her rage, hints that, while not powerful in matters of love, she is very potent in hate, and that Jason should make a careful and wise decision because she is about to undergo a metamorphosis. The letter thus moves from reproachful plea to ominous warning.

**Words Medea Uses to Describe Herself:** Although this letter is clearly about Medea, she uses a paucity of nouns in her self-description. She only refers to herself by name three times, but these moments also highlight the transformation that has taken place within her. Her name first appears (5) at the start of the letter, when she is at the

point of despair and wants to die; it next appears (25) when she juxtaposes herself with Creusa and prepares to tell her story about how she first fell in love with Jason; it finally appears (*hostis Medeae nullus inultus erit*, 182) to emphasize that she has become a destructive force and something entirely different from the girl at the start of the letter.

Again, she offers few other nouns to characterize herself, but she does make an effort to point out that she was a young Colchian princess (1, 9) who was merely a girl and a virgin (81, 89, 111) when she met Jason, and that she later became a parent (198) with him. There are slightly more adjectives than nouns, and she uses these to paint a picture of herself as she moves from the state of an innocent girl to a woman who has been wounded by her lover's betrayal. When she met Jason she describes herself as rich (26) and simple (90), and one who has been wounded by love (57). She comments that meeting Jason and returning to Greece with him made her into a barbarian (105) and that if she now appears to be harmful (106, 118) it is because she was compelled to be so on his behalf (132), and she later says that she was *insana* (193) to have done all these things for him.<sup>13</sup> Now living in Greece, and now scorned, she describes herself as poor (106), sad and wretched (148, 170), and as a suppliant to her own husband (185). For the most part she paints a consistent and pathetic portrait of herself, even though she employs very few nouns and adjectives to do so.

---

<sup>13</sup> Jacobson (1974: 113) remarks that Medea is "self-incriminating." This is true if we were merely assessing whether she admits her involvement in her actions. However, holding onto the modern legal metaphor, she confesses to her guilt only so far as she claims that she had a reason for her actions – which was either obedience and loyalty to Jason or love. Contrary to what Jacobson writes, Medea's words themselves do not make Medea appear to be guilty in the modern sense of the word. If anything, they make her appear gullible, naïve, and, as she describes herself, simple. Outside knowledge and unconscious allusion eventually reveal to us Medea's dark side – the letter itself, on the surface, is sympathetic.

However, there is a reason why Medea does not use many nouns and adjectives in her letter: she does not have to. The few that she uses decidedly represent her in a sympathetic manner, but the greatest impression that we receive about her from the words she uses to describe herself is not related to any particular or specific qualities that she may have but is rather focused on her omnipresence throughout the letter. That is, on 67 occasions she uses pronouns to refer to herself, never letting Jason forget that she is the subject of the letter. Wherever we turn she refers to “me” or “my” in an effort to constantly remind the reader (Jason) on whom the focus of this letter lies. Since she uses such a tremendous amount of pronouns to indicate that she is at the centre of the letter and that she is telling her own story, and nobody else’s, we truly never overlook that she is the focal point of the letter.

**Characteristics, Qualities, and Actions Emphasized:** Medea naturally emphasizes qualities and activities that portray her in a favourable and sympathetic light. The first thing she does is point out that she is a Queen and a helper (1, 25-6), both of which are attributes that Jason would find attractive. Also placed in the letter’s foreground is the knowledge that she is miserable and filled with regret (3), and we later learn that her magic is no longer of any use to her (163) in pleasing Jason. Another quality that she repeatedly mentions is her innocent and trusting nature when she first met Jason (33, 73-88, 90, 120), which she complements by mentioning how she been helpful to him from that point onward (2, 15-18, 97, 107, 118, 173, 197) and how badly, in turn, she has been treated by him (19, 21, 37, 72, 91-2, 105-6, 111, 120, 134, 161-2, 173-4, 193, 197-8). With respect to her family, even though she betrays them, she nevertheless

portrays herself as a pious daughter who helps her sister (65) and regrets having left her mother and father behind. Overall, she paints herself as an innocent girl (57, 111) who excuses all of her reprehensible actions with the caveat that they were done to help Jason (131-2).

The characterization changes when she reaches Corinth, where she plays on her trusting nature to portray herself as a passive victim to Jason's ill-treatment (135, 163-6, 185, 192), which has ultimately left her in a state of despair (161). However, at the end of the letter she signals that she is about to move away from her role as a victim, as she starts to point to her rights more emphatically by alluding to the potential danger that she may pose to those who stand against her (179-82, 184, 207-8, 212). Thus she embodies most of the traditional qualities associated with good women – passive, pious, helpful, maternal – and each of those qualities in turn leads to the revelation that she may be about to show some more forceful characteristics.

**Characteristics and Actions Not Mentioned:** Medea does not often dwell on anything that would present her in a negative light, and, during those rare moments when she does, she turns her argument into blaming Jason. She refuses to go into detail and completely passes over her own role in the deaths of both Absyrtus (113-16) and Pelias (129-30). Moreover, she also excuses her betrayal against her father as an act of love for Jason (61). All of these negatives she tries to spin into positives, saying that Jason should praise her for what she did (131) because she did all of it to help him. But she never speaks to her actual role in the murders, and never really states whether Jason asked her to commit these crimes – rather, she only makes the claim that she acted with the

intention of helping him, which is not at all the same thing as saying that he asked her to do these things.

Curiously she also omits mentioning how she revived Jason's father, a scene which will be quite prominent in the *Metamorphoses* (7.159-293). This would have made her argument stronger – Jason would likely remember it fondly, after all – but in this letter she tends to remember only the bad things that she has done on his behalf, such as betraying her homeland, and committing murder, whereas the rejuvenation of Aeson is the only action she commits for which there is no negative side. Perhaps in her frenzied and violent state she does not recall such a virtuous act – nevertheless it is still an odd omission, especially since it is linked so closely to the death of Pelias, which she does mention, albeit briefly.

If we are to believe Medea's words, she does not really hold any negative qualities, for she excuses all of her bad actions with the disclaimer that she acted for Jason, and she equally accounts for her future actions by saying the Jason is in debt to her (203-6). Furthermore, she plays down the characteristics that make us most wary of her – her magic powers (163-6) and desire for revenge, the latter of which she does not fully reveal until the very end (180-2, 207-8). If anything, Medea would say that her only fault lies in the fact that she loves Jason too much, which is a farcical response one might respect from a political orator when asked to name his flaws.

**Tone:** The letter is primarily serious, grim, and tragic, but the greatest emotion that stands out is anger. Throughout the course of her narrative we sense that Medea is seething with rage and hatred toward Jason in response to the position in which he has put

her. She also suffers latent shame at being in the state of a beggar now to the one who once begged for her help (185-6), and admits to feeling guilt about having abandoned her family (109-10, 159-60) only to be repaid in such a humiliating way. Yet she gathers all of her emotions and lets them coalesce into her hostility toward Jason. He is the one who used her to get the fleece; he is the one who made promises to her; he is the one who – according to Medea, at any rate - forced her to kill, and he is the one who abandoned her when he no longer needed her. She regrets her actions, even regrets her life (3-5), and sarcastically wishes she had never helped him, that left to his own devices he had died (13-20) – a thought which, she admits, gives her great pleasure (21).

With all of this bitter anger, we could easily wonder if she is sincere when she asks him to return to her at the end of the letter. On the surface, we can accept that she may seriously still want him to return. She is undoubtedly despondent because she has given up everything for his sake and has received his thanks by being abandoned by him. Painting the picture of her life in ruins, she appears to be in a condition of despair, being completely alone and having nowhere to turn. Jason, on whose behalf she has done so many things, is the only one who can offer her any sort of vindication. Therefore, in the face of all that she has been through, and especially since, as she writes herself, he has been everything for her (162), it might be perfectly rational for her to still want him to return. However, we should realize that Medea never actually says that she *still* has feelings for him, *that she still loves him*. She says she wants him back, but the emotions may be different.



We may also wish to compare this letter to the one from Hypsipyle and note how the earlier one becomes angrier and less emotionally controlled near the end. That is, we may be asking too much if we wish the writers of the *Heroides* to present logical and consistent arguments. Since Medea's life is in ruins, we would be foolish to expect her to exhibit poise, restraint, and consistency in her letter to Jason. Approached in this light, her seemingly incredible desire to have Jason back then becomes tenable. People do have a tendency to return to abusive situations, after all.

Yet the likelihood equally exists that she does not want Jason back at all. After all, she never says that she is *still* in love with him, only stating that when he left the house her love for him left as well (136). Then at the end of the letter Medea becomes openly hostile toward both Jason and Creusa, toward whom she displays fierce and bitter jealousy (175-82). Following her pleas for him to return she becomes more forceful in her attitude and tone, for she now claims that Jason owes her and is *obliged* to come back to her (197-206). Along with this more focussed rage, she also becomes rather circumspect, refusing to say what she may be planning. The tone thus changes somewhat – it is still tragic, but we can sense the revenge in the air – and where Jason might read her final words as the last gasp of a desperate woman we instead read them as a warning that there will be blood. She has already freely admitted that she is powerless with respect to her ability to win Jason's love, so he might finish this letter and, thinking that she cannot hurt him, ignore her implicit warning. The advice that she offers is that she may not have the muscle to lure Jason back to her, but she is not helpless in causing harm to him. The letter could just as easily be a ruse that she lays for him, inviting him to think

that she is helpless against him and asking him to walk all over her one more time before she strikes her vengeance. In this way her actions recall those of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra when she asks Agamemnon to walk on the tapestries before entering the house – wanting her husband to hurt her once more before she strikes back, the fresh insult giving her new impetus for her act of vengeance.

This partially hints at the comic aspects that lie beneath the surface of the rest of the letter. While Medea may be painting her story as sad and tragic, we are aware that there is an even greater tragedy associated with her tale. Some of these horrible events have happened prior to the letter's composition, but most of them are still to come. And the comedy is unequivocally dark: for it tends to refer to Medea's darker nature and her cruel actions, playing them off against the sympathetic way in which she tries to characterize herself in this epistle. The story, we know, is more awful than Medea writes, and the comedy is in part connected to this realization.

### **Irony**

To start, let us consider the various uses of irony in this epistle. At the start of the letter Medea emphasizes the help (*opem*, 2) that she brought to Jason. By this statement she is trying to remind him of all the favours that she did for him. However, from his perspective Jason could easily remember the less savoury aspects of her assistance – such as the death of Absyrtus and Pelias – and this reminder might serve to reinforce his decision to leave her. She sees her help as exclusively positive, while Jason might well ironically infer the negative aspects as well.

Medea's next lines speak about how it would have been better if she had died when she first met Jason (*tum potui Medea mori bene*, 5). The irony here is that her death would have been better, but definitely not in the same way that she means. While she suggests that it would be better for herself if she had not lived past that point, we see that, rather than for herself, her death would have been much better for the people she kills. Later when she writes that the Fates should have unwound her thread of life (*fusos...meos*, 4), we think of the others whose thread of life Medea plays a great part in unwinding, and we may add the thought of her children to this image as well. The words *Medea*, *mori*, and *bene*, are also yoked together in a strange way. Granted, although her name does attach itself quite nicely to the spirit of the verb *mori*, we also realize that she is more appropriately the cause of others' deaths and that a more apt verb to place next to Medea would be *neco*. Furthermore, the adverb *bene* here carries the double-edged implication that Medea could then *die easily or thoroughly*, which is ironic since she later seems so difficult to kill or even harm. That is, Medea does not die well – and many mythological accounts, Ovid's included, do not go into any detail about her death. She is a good agent of death – she kills well – but in no way does she die well.

Equally strange is her declaration that whatever (*quidquid*, 6) her life brought forth from that time onward was a punishment. Yes, very many *poenae* did follow that time, but while Medea sees the punishments as directed at her, we in turn see the punishments that she has inflicted on others along with the ones she is about to inflict.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> I take issue with what Jacobson (1974: 112) says of this line: "For the crimes that she has perpetrated she recognizes the misery that she has experienced as deserved consequence." He is conflating what she says here with her wish to die later in the poem after she mentions the death of Absyrtus (116). However, such a proleptic reading is a bit out of place at this point, since Medea is clearly indicating here that everything that

Her life has indeed been, and will continue to be, a punishment since she first met Jason – but she is usually the one exacting the punishment rather than the one who is being punished. She concludes her death wish and talk of her own castigation with the exasperated burst *ei mihi* (7), but we would be more inclined to say *ei eis* – alas for them – because the people who should worry are those she harms.

Medea finishes her series of why-based questions (7-12) by asking why Jason's lying tongue was so fascinating to her (*linguae gratia ficta tuae*, 12). The most surprising aspect of this line is related to the fact that she herself will soon use lies to trick Jason. She is accusing him of an activity that she is about to employ with him, since she will prey on his own gullibility by promising him that she will obey his wishes and leave Corinth without incident. She speaks of Jason's pleasing lies, but her own pleasing lies stand out just as much.<sup>15</sup>

Anger at Jason may be the focal point of Medea's letter, but most of the humour involved appears because it reflects back on her, and this is especially true when she says that much *perfidiae* (19) would have died along with him. We realize that her statement is misdirected and that more *perfidiae* would not die *tecum*, as Medea suggests, but instead *mecum*, since she has been, and will be, the agent of so much treachery herself. Similarly, the *mala multa* which she then exclaims would be removed from her head

---

has happened has been a punishment to her. She has not mentioned anyone else yet, and she is very much wrapped up in her own misery.

<sup>15</sup> A curious irony also arises with her use of the repeated question why (*cur*, 7, 9, 11). In order she asks why they (and the boat) came for the Golden Fleece, why the Colchians were the ones who saw them when they arrived, and finally why Jason was so appealing to her. As indicated by her use of *iussus* (23), she likely already knows the answers to at least one of her questions. Nevertheless her questions ask why all of these things had to happen *to her*, while we think of all the bad things that will happen *to other people* from Medea.

should Jason have died back in Colchis (20) also refers to the very *mala* that she has caused and will cause. She means to say that she would not have suffered so much and is referring to the specific misery that she feels now in Corinth, but we realize that the *mala multa* can also signify the many bad deeds that have been done and will soon be accomplished – by Medea. In fact, Medea is the real *malum* here and, in a way, we see that the best way to have removed, as she suggests, the evils from her head would be to remove her head from her head, for she is the cause of a great many of these bad things. The irony is compounded by her exclamation of *scelerate* (19) toward Jason, when such an epithet seems more appropriate if directed back at her.

Her memories of Jason's arrival and reflections of her home life in Colchis attempt to create the impression that life there was wonderful. It may have been that way *for her* before she met Jason – and if that is what she means, then this is a counter-productive point to make in such a letter, since it certainly was not that way *for Jason and his crew*: for them there was no opportunity to stay and the only wealth that they received from Colchis is what they stole.<sup>16</sup> A factor which undermines her reflection upon the wondrous past is the introduction of the *pater* (26) as a means to compare her wealth to that of Creusa. The obvious flaw here is that Jason had no claim to the wealth in Colchis because he had to flee from Aeetes with both Medea and the Golden Fleece, whereas his marriage to Creusa will also wed him with the riches of Corinth, since

---

<sup>16</sup> There is more irony associated with this comparison to the past when, in the following lines (25-6), Medea juxtaposes her status back in Colchis with that of Jason's *nova nupta* in Corinth. She undermines her own argument here, because Jason would certainly agree that back there (*illic*) she was similar to that which his *nova nupta* is now. However, Jason could point out a number of problems with that comparison. First of all, they are no longer *illic*, but are instead *hic*, and the here and now has much more force than the past, especially in terms of wealth (*dives*, 26), which is the basis of Medea's argument here.

Creusa's father Creon actually wants the wedding. Medea effectively no longer has a father, and no longer has riches, while Creusa has both. In her inept attempt to weave an argument, she does not anticipate that her endeavour to remind Jason of her impressive origins would only remind him that she no longer has the same status that she once held and that she would be the last one to whom Aeetes might grant any of his riches.

At this point some bitter ironies come fast and furious. Medea tells Jason that the moment her father accepted him and his Argonauts so "hospitably" was the very same instant that *coepi scire, quid esses* (31). Her words imply that this is where she began to fall in love with him, but they also suggest that this is the point where she recognized that Jason was a perfidious danger to her – ideas which are mutually exclusive. What is more, Jason could equally note with bitter irony that it would have been nice if he had discovered what she really was when he arrived in Colchis.

Her supposed realization as to what Jason was or represented she calls the *mentis prima ruina meae* (32). By this she simply means that she fell in love with a man who would eventually betray her even though she had given up so much for him. To Medea the *ruina* is the collection of sacrifices that she will make for a man who will end up betraying her, but we have an alternate reading of this line, where we note that the *ruina* that infects Medea's *mens* are the deeds that she will do to others – namely, the destruction that she will bring about. In fact, it is bitingly ironic that she places so much emphasis on this as the first *ruina* of "my" heart/mind, since so much destruction is aimed at others and not her, and since she is the direct cause of these *ruinae*. The irony is intensified when she follows this comment with the assertion that she says *perii* (33)

when she first saw him. When applied to herself the comment is pure hyperbole; when considered with respect to her effect on others – that she brought about so many deaths – the two-fold and alternative effect is chilling.

According to Medea, Jason easily recognized that she was burning with love for him, which she backs up with the question *quis enim bene celat amorem?* (37).<sup>17</sup> Leaving aside the fact that we do not have any real evidence that Jason sees Medea's passion (which is doubtable), we are drawn to the inherent ironies involved in Medea's question, because this tale has plenty of evidence of people who can conceal love. First of all, and contrary to what a few scholars say,<sup>18</sup> from all that we know Jason conceals the existence of Hypsipyle from Medea. More importantly, from what we discover later in this letter, Jason hides his upcoming marriage to Creusa from Medea up until the wedding day itself. But Jason is not the only one who can keep silent about love, because Medea herself does not tell her sister about her feelings for Jason, making her think that she will help the Argonauts for the sake of Chalciope's children (65). And she also conceals these feelings from her father, whom she will betray, and her brother, whom she will kill. The question thus appears to be completely opposite – *who cannot conceal love?* - since both Jason and Medea are rather adept at concealing their passions.

Medea makes an effort to emphasize how much help she was to Jason when he was in Colchis by asking rhetorically how much his dowry from his new wedding in

---

<sup>17</sup> She introduces this comment with another accusation directed at Jason – *perfide* (37) – that is better suited to how *she* treats others, since she will betray more people than Jason does. This is similar to her use of *scelerate* on line 19. Other accusations in this letter that also have this double-edged effect: *infido...ore* (72), *tu fraudis poenas* (120), *improbe* (204).

<sup>18</sup> On this point Lindheim (2003: 116) is consistent with the readings of Spetzou (2003) and Fulkerson (2005), for she posits that Medea knows about Hypsipyle, even though no evidence exists to prove this.

Corinth was of assistance to him back then (53-4). Even though by contrast Medea suggests that Creon and Creusa are of help to Jason *now*, we know that his *socer* and the *magni nata Creontis* will soon be in Hades and therefore quite far away and unable to aid him. Medea was helpful back then and his new family will not be of much assistance in the near future – since they will be dead.

Remembering how she was lying on her bed in Colchis after she first set eyes on Jason, Medea describes herself as *male saucia* (57). This is reminiscent of Hypsipyle's description of how the messenger exposed *vulnera nostra* (6.40) with his news of Medea. In Hypsipyle's case, any talk of the wounds she suffers from Medea becomes mute in the face of the real wounds that will give others; for Medea, her wounds of love are not real wounds and they pale in comparison to the wounds that she herself will inflict on others. Holding onto Medea's idea of being wounded by love, we note another irony in that the real wounds she will create are usually given to people who are gullible enough to either trust or love her – Absyrtus, Pelias, Creusa, and her children: she harms them all, and they do not expect it from her. Perhaps we should infer that she is really *male saucia* in terms of her soul or character – that her formerly innocent soul is changing into something vicious. Medea clearly does not mean this, but we can see this ironic aspect to her wounds nevertheless. She is wounded internally, but only insofar as she will soon wound others externally.

In the same scene, when her sister finds her in her bedroom lying face downward, Medea comments that *lacrimis omnia plea meis* (64), which elicits a different response from us than the one she intends. For she is trying to make a point about how wretched



she is feeling because of her love for Jason, and the tears she mentions come from her eyes. However, we picture the later version of Medea, for whom all things are also filled with her tears. But in this later case she will be the cause of others' tears – their deaths – rather than the one who does the actual crying. Also, the tears she cries right now for Jason are not very appropriate, since she is feeling *sympathy* for him, but she will later realize that she should not have felt this way at all when he brings her different tears – ones that are instead caused by his betrayal.

Medea quotes Jason's speech to her at the shrine of Hecate and from its very start we view double-edged words from Jason's own mouth. He tells Medea that *fortuna* has given her the *ius* and *arbitrium* for his safety (73-4), that life and death is within her hands. She is throwing his quote back at him in order to emphasize how much she helped him – and to make him feel guilty for what he is doing now. But this quote also reminds us that Medea still has this very authority and judgment and that she is about to use her advantage to pay him back for his ingratitude. She is placing her power within the past tense but we see it as a present threat, and we know that she has the lives and deaths *of others* in her hands as well.

Jason tells Medea that *perdere posse sat est* (75) and we think that this is the kind of advice that he should throw at her with respect to later events as well, since she will prove that it will clearly not be enough for her merely *to be able* to do bad things, but that she will actually try to do them as well.

He begs Medea in the name of his troubles (*per mala nostra*, 77) – at least, what his troubles were then – but the problems that he has now are all related to Medea, and

where he once asked her to be a *levamen* (77) for his problems, she is about to play the reverse role, causing him more *mala* than he could ever imagine.<sup>19</sup> And when he asks her to make him hers *tempus in omne* (82) we notice another ironic double meaning. Medea recalls that Jason is saying that he will be eternally grateful to her and she probably extrapolates from there that he will love her eternally as well. But we also glean another layer of wit that Ovid implies here, since Jason will be Medea's for all time in the sense that he will always be remembered for how Medea eventually brings him to ruin. While both Jason and Medea attach positive implications to the remark, we see that he will always remain associated with Medea in a completely infamous way.

Vividly recalling how Jason overcame his three tasks, Medea presents an image of herself as a girl who is not certain of the powers of her own *medicamina* (97) to save Jason.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, it is strange for us to picture the woman who will so confidently murder her enemies as sitting *pallida* (97) when she watches the earthborn men engage in battle, nervous that Jason will be killed by them. More significantly, just as we feel with Hypsipyle's comments, we are struck by the irony that Medea's life – and

---

<sup>19</sup> Several ironic points also stand out when, turning to the gods that Medea worships, in order to win her sympathy Jason invokes her grandfather Helios, Diana, and any other gods recognized in Colchis (78-80). First, Jason recognizes that Medea has a connection to the gods, and thereby possibly has a strength, one to which he fails to pay enough heed in Corinth. Second, since Medea was already struck by Cupid's arrow, Jason does not have to make any promises at all, or to invoke the gods. According to Medea's description of her own passion, making promises in the name of the gods was not even necessary. Rather, he merely had to ask her for help and that would have been more than enough. Asking the gods to witness his plight and promise (87-8) only creates problems for him and, in a way, he creates his own downfall. Finally, he appeals to Medea *per triplicis vultus...Dianae* (79). This points to Diana's three manifestations, and as a worshipper of Diana, we can also see that Medea herself has many *vultus*, and that Jason should watch out for the scorned and enraged *vultus* that he is forcing on her.

<sup>20</sup> Worth noting, however, the only other occurrence in Ovid where Medea appears, if not nervous, then extra meticulous about her use of magic, happens in the *Metamorphoses* (7.238-93), when she rejuvenates Aeson and is very cautious before actually applying her cure. That is, when she saves lives she is portrayed as careful; when she murders, she is a bit more self-assured.

the lives of a few other people as well – likely would have been much better if Jason had died there, and we have the impression that she is expressing the entirely wrong type of emotion when he is fighting. That is, she should want him to fail.

In a direct attack on Jason's newly changed attitude toward her, she says *tibi sum nunc denique barbara facta* (105). In essence, she claims that she now finally has become a barbarian in Jason's eyes. We should place emphasis on the word *tibi*, for she does not deny that she has already acted in a barbarian (i.e. brutal)<sup>21</sup> fashion – killing her brother and Pelias; rather, she only affirms that Jason finally views her as *nocens* (106). There is irony because, although Medea suggests that this brutal aspect of her character is not true and that she is not a barbarian, Jason in fact does finally see her according to her true light – at least partially. But a compounded irony in her comment is connected to the fact that Jason does not fully know how harmful Medea can be. Rather than making a comment on her previous murderous actions, most likely she merely means that, because she is his ex-wife, she is thus *nocens* to his future plans and happiness in Corinth. If so, he does not fully appreciate how harmful she is going to be to his life in Corinth – nor does he know just how *barbara* (cruel) she will be - for she is not *nocens* merely because of her status as an ex-wife, but she will instead be *nocens* to him for what she will do in Corinth.

The reward that Medea rather sarcastically claims for having helped Jason and betraying her father is a life of exile (110). However, she does not realize that she is just about to be exiled yet again. Ovid positions the letter right at the moment before Creon

---

<sup>21</sup> OLD, s.v. *barbarus* 3.

visits her and commands her to leave Corinth, so at this point she is not yet aware that she is about to face an additional exile – one from Corinth – which will be even worse than the exile that she mentions here from Colchis, since she will now be completely on her own.

When she characterizes Jason as a wandering bandit (*peregrini latronis*, 111) who stole her *virginitas*, she says that her virginity is the *praeda* which he carried off with him. By this term she implies that her virginity, as a *praeda*, is a valuable commodity. However, Medea's *virginitas* is hardly the kind of *praeda* that any pirate would wish to carry off, considering how much danger she brings with her. Thus Jason would be advised to recognize that she is the type of *praeda* best left untaken.

There is an ironic double meaning when Medea yet again refers to herself as now a *femina nocens* (118), since she most directly means that she is now *guilty* of having killed her brother. But the word also means *harmful*,<sup>22</sup> which is how she used it back on line 106.<sup>23</sup> As well as being guilty she was essentially harmful, and we see how the two meanings of this one word play against one another. More importantly, we know that she will be both more guilty and more harmful in the future, which undermines her admission about her previous guilt and harm. We see the double meaning of *nocens* – guilty and

---

<sup>22</sup> OLD, s.v. *nocens* 1 (“injurious, noxious”) and 2a (“stained with crime, guilty”).

<sup>23</sup> Lindheim (2003: 125) cites Medea's odd pairing of the terms *femina nocens* on line 118 in order to back up her point that Medea provides “a sharply divided self-depiction” and thus “two incongruous self-portraits.” While Lindheim clearly recognizes the trouble Medea has with building these opposing self-portraits, she overstates her argument when she writes that “she [Medea] seems to have read Hypsipyle's self-construction in *Heroides* 6” and that “Medea also seems to be aware of the literary tradition.” Such conjectures are unnecessary and only harm Lindheim's otherwise solid argument, since we – the readers – are aware of what Hypsipyle wrote and we are also aware of the literary tradition. Medea's awareness is not at issue, and cannot be without any evidence showing that she actually does know this, of which there is none.

harmful – while both Jason and Medea fail to notice the alternative reading, and we also apply it to what is about to happen rather than what has happened.

Following the death of her brother, Medea asserts that Jason should have been punished at that time for his *fraus* (120). The immediate irony we notice is that Medea is accusing Jason of treachery, which is odd since she has just been so perfidious to her father and will herself soon be so treacherous in her dealings with Jason. Adding to this irony, she uses her indictment of treachery to imply that Jason should have been punished for his behaviour, so she is therefore making a claim that she should be punished as well for her own future actions. Along with Jason's *fraus* she also says that *she* was guilty and deserved punishment for her own *credulitas*. Yet the word *credulitas* brings to mind how Medea tricks others – such as the daughters of Pelias, Creon, and Jason – and how she plays off their gullibility in order to destroy them. That is, we do not think of Medea's *credulitas* when we see the word, but instead we are reminded of how she exploits this quality in her enemies. This line, and the relationship between *fraus* and *credulitas* has been the subject of much comment,<sup>24</sup> but most scholars miss the basic irony: Medea is the

---

<sup>24</sup> Most commentators have concentrated on the appropriateness of Medea's use of *fraus* and *credulitas* in this line. Palmer (1967: 395) calls the line "laughable," but in a negative way, for he suggests that this was not paying attention to what he was writing ("Verily bonus Ovidius dormitat"). Jacobson (1974: 112-13) argues that Ovid knew exactly what he was doing and finds another level of humour to the line, where he writes that "the very triviality of the remark following hard upon her admission of fratricide that makes the juxtaposition so horrifying." Verducci (1985: 69-71) calls Medea's use of *credulitas* here a form of "diseased self-humiliation" and extreme litotes which will later be balanced off with her comparable hyperbole in lines 141. (Verducci reaches a similar conclusion through the odd comparison to remarks made by Miss Havisham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, which makes her point rather suspect.) I am very sympathetic to Jacobson's reading, since Medea's words do create an odd juxtaposition to what she has just revealed, yet I also see that Ovid's use of *fraus* and *credulitas* in this line is not out of place because they will be involved in the harm that they will inflict on one another. Rather than being punished by the gods, as Medea wishes, they will punish one another due to the nature of their respective characters. In fact the terms are quite appropriate, but not in the way that Medea means, which helps create the irony.

treacherous one and Jason will be the gullible one. Medea perhaps makes a sloppy argument here, but Ovid presents an amusing reversal.

Following her dream that both she and Jason had died on the journey away from Colchis, Medea cuts short the talk about their trip to Greece by saying that Jason returned back the *victor* (127). Maybe he seemed to be so at the time, but shortly after Medea finishes writing this letter we realize that she will prove Jason to be the very opposite of a *victor*. If he is the *victor*, we think, he is not going to be so for very long, and anyone should be wary in thinking that he is one. We can retain the theme of time for the next instance of irony, for when Medea writes Jason *ut culpent alii, tibi me laudare necesse est* (131) we can easily remark that, even if he should praise her for her previous actions (which is debatable), then it will *not* be necessary for Jason to praise her for very much longer. In fact, the necessity for his praise is just about to end, and it will soon be time to blame her. The reason why she says Jason should praise her, she writes, is because she has so often been *coacta* to be *nocens* on his behalf (132). We just visited the ironies inherent in Medea's use of *nocens*, but in saying that she was compelled to be harmful or guilty, we are instead reminded of how she will compel others to die through her harmful and guilty nature. She may have previously been compelled by her love of Jason to do such things, but soon she will compel (or trick) others to act because of their own love – Creon for his daughter, Creusa for Jason, and Jason for his children – so rather than having been compelled we can also see how she, *nocens*, compels others to do things for reasons of love.

Medea places a great deal of dramatic build-up into her discovery of the wedding, and she says that the nearer the shouts of “hymen” came to her, *hoc mihi peius erat* (144). While it was evidently not a good thing that they approached Medea’s house, we have to believe that, rather than it being worse for Medea, the nearer they came to the house the worse it was instead for Jason, Creusa, Creon, and the children. Medea’s fate at this point is already sealed – she has been dismissed from Jason’s house (and will soon be exiled) – and, although she is bitter, she does not yet have a concentrated focus for her attack. By coming nearer to her and revealing the truth, they actually present Medea with a bit of relief, because she will know who it is that she can both blame and assail. Moreover, even though her servants knew what was coming – apparently Medea was the last to find out – they tried to cover their tears (145) for, she asks, *quis vellet tanti nuntius esse mali?* (146). This question has another ironic layer to it since, more specifically, we wonder who would want to be the one to tell *Medea* any bad news. She asks the question in a more general and axiomatic way – who would wish to be the messenger *of such an evil thing?* – while we see that it can apply more directly to Medea: who would want to be the messenger *to such a(n) (evil) woman?* Clearly none of her servants would want to tell her this news, since the thought of what she might do in the response it makes everyone shudder, the reader included.

In commenting upon Jason’s new wedding, Medea says that it would have been better off not knowing about it (147), but she does not directly say *for whom* it would be better not to know. We naturally assume that she is referring to herself, but if this is the case then we notice another irony in that, rather than just Medea, it would have instead

been better for everyone else if Medea had not found out. If anything, the discovery turns out to be a bit of a boon for Medea, since it allows her to *become Medea*; the others, on the other hand, get to die.

Medea laments that she was not strong enough to defeat one man (164). With this comment she is referring to her inability to make Jason love her and she compares her strengths in other matters to her failure in this matter of the heart. However, this line also draws attention to the fact that she will indeed soon defeat Jason – and defeat him rather handily. Of course, she will not be victorious in the sense that he will love her – quite the opposite in fact. Nevertheless, this line shares certain similarities to line 127, where she refers to Jason as *victor*, for here we recognize that Medea may claim that Jason has defeated her, but we are aware that she will eventually conquer him.

Entreating Jason to return to her, Medea says that he has an iron heart (*praecordia ferrea*, 183) that cannot be touched by her entreaties. This description, however, will soon be much more applicable to Medea than it is to Jason, since she is hard-hearted in setting up the murders and will be called as much by Jason when he begs her to return the bodies of their children. From this accusation she asks Jason to listen to her *verba minora* (184), by which she means that the words are too humble for her pride. These words are indeed too humble for her, and we sense the awkwardness in her position as she then becomes a *supplex* to Jason *quam tu mihi saepe fuisti* (185). The irony that she herself claims in this situation is that she is now in playing the same role that Jason played with her, and that he should realize this and thus feel compassion for her. But there is a deeper irony, for in acquiescing to Medea's prayers here, Jason is essentially saving himself as



well, and more significantly, he is saving those around him. Medea appears to be asking Jason to help her – and this is indeed what she means – but we know that, in helping Medea, Jason would be wisely saving himself.

Medea makes reference to Creusa as the *dira noverca* (188), employing the adjective *dira* to mean *awful* and that she is a bad person,<sup>25</sup> yet we also know that Creusa is a person who is going to be harmed by Medea, and that Medea is really the evil, or *dira* one, in this encounter. Interestingly, if Jason understood the dangers that were implicit in Medea's *verba minora*, he would then wisely look to the safety of their *communes...natos* (187) just as Medea suggests. However, although she wants him to consider the welfare of their children with the result that he returns to her, he would be better advised to do this by ensuring that they move away from Medea as quickly as possible and move toward the supposed *dira noverca* whom Medea mentions, for we know that he needs to worry about the *dira mater* rather than any *dira noverca*. Furthermore, he needs to consider the children only so far as to ensure their safety, while the person he really needs to watch is Medea, who argues that she now appears *vilis* (187) to Jason – implying that she should not be thought so at all – yet whose actions will prove that she is just as *vilis* as she supposes Jason thinks her to be. This is made clear when she says how the children seem to resemble their father so much (189) and that her eyes are made wet whenever she looks at them (190). Indeed everyone's eyes should be made wet just a little when Medea glances at her children, but for different reasons than hers, for we know what will happen

---

<sup>25</sup> *OLD*, s.v. *dirus* 2b (“inspiring terror - of persons”).

to them, since the longer she looks at them the more convinced she will become that this would be the best method to inflict vengeance upon Jason.

Medea begs Jason to give up the wedding to Creusa and return to her bed and be her husband (*redde torum*, 193). However, her reproaches to him would not make her a very welcoming sight to him and, even when she begs Jason to return their marriage to its previous state she emphasizes the very reason that he would feel reluctant to do so, for she writes that, in leaving behind so many things for the sake of the marriage, she acted insanely (*insana*, 193). For us, only the underlying threat of what is about to happen would make the prospect of returning to Medea seem to be a good (and safe) idea, while Jason, if he were to notice this at all, would rather see it as evidence as to why he might want to keep away from her. Even if he does sense the implicit threat that she will continue to be *insana* and is using this knowledge as a reason to keep his distance from her, there is irony in our knowledge that her level of *insania* is far worse than he could ever imagine. He thinks she can only make his new life uncomfortable in Corinth, but fails to see the worse potentialities, in which *Medea insana* will leave behind many other things, such as the dead bodies of Creusa, Creon, along with the living body of her defeated husband Jason. In the past Medea helped Jason with deaths, and in the future Medea will harm Jason with deaths. Also, we note another irony in that, just as she left behind so many things due to her love for Jason (193), the most precious things that she will kill and supposedly leave behind – her children – she will actually carry away with her. Figuratively they will be left behind, but literally she will keep them beside her as she rides away in her chariot, an irony which only a clever reader might notice.

She closes the letter by saying that she will perhaps regret what she is about to do (*pigebit*, 209), and she compares that regret with how sorry she feels for having helped out her *infido...viro* (210) in the first place. Two ironic points stand out: first, once again she accuses Jason of not being trustworthy, which reminds us of how she herself will soon tell quite a big lie to him. Second, although we cannot be certain whether Medea will regret any of this or not – frankly, it does not matter to us – we are more certain that Jason, and not Medea, will regret the deed very much, and there is no *fortasse* at all in that.

Now that we have examined some of the main ironies involved in the letter, it is time to look at how Ovid uses black humour in creating a complex portrait of Medea.

### **Black Humour**

Although no-one has as of yet studied the role of black humour in the *Heroides*, Peek (2001) has offered a recent essay on the use of black humour in the *Metamorphoses*, in which he divides the theme into three distinct categories: parodic undercutting, incongruity, and grotesquerie.<sup>26</sup> Ovid's use of this device in *Heroides* 12 contains certain elements from all three of these categories, yet I am not so readily inclined to divide each instance into such straightforward and exclusive groupings. Rather, not unlike Peek, I shall start from the premise that Pratt (1993) offers in the introduction to the book of collected essays which he edits on the subject of black humour:

---

<sup>26</sup> Peek (2001: 128) begins his essay with a rather long yet helpful definition of black humour: “[Black humour] may include the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, terrifying, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, ironic, satirical, absurd; and may include detachment, irony, a mocking, apocalyptic tone, parodic undercutting of all systems, one-dimensional characters, wasteland settings, disjunctive structure, self-conscious delight in artistry – a refusal to treat what one might regard as tragic materials tragically.” This last line appears to be the most apt – the refusal to treat tragic material tragically.

Black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses.<sup>27</sup>

To this I might add that black humour is fundamentally amoral, which is how we must view it when considering its appearance throughout Medea's letter. Essentially, anything that hints at Medea's role as a killer, that anticipates the deaths that will come, or that undermines (even slightly) the sympathetic self-portrait that she tries to create for herself amounts to black humour. We all know what is going to happen, and we cannot change it, so while Ovid is inviting us to feel horrified at what we see, he is also asking us to laugh as well.

Instead of dividing my examination into types of black humour, I think it is more practical to look at the various elements and themes that are used in Medea's letter, each of which brings its own type of amoral and dark humour with it, and most of which *anticipate future actions*. Where appropriate, I shall examine the type, or category, of black humour involved, but on the whole the reason why his allusions are comical is fairly self-evident in this letter, for they tend to lead to a macabre conclusion. For example, when Medea looks to the children and notices that they are eerily similar to Jason (189) we can see that this predicts how she will seek her revenge on him through those same children. We expect this to happen, but we are nevertheless still shocked, amused, and perhaps even delighted by it.

---

<sup>27</sup> Pratt (1993: xix).

**Fire:** Fire imagery runs rampant throughout the letter and is significant because it points forward to the way that Medea will kill both her rival Creusa and Creon, and, according to some strands of the myth, how she will set fire to the palace in Corinth. In her letter Medea typically uses fire to illustrate either the depths of her passion (33, 38, 166) or the dangers that Jason once avoided (15, 42, 44, 107). Although there are still a few other examples, each use of fire in this letter nevertheless points toward death by fire and, more significantly, *future death by fire*.

In her remembrance of how she first fell in love with Jason, Medea once more uses fire metaphors, saying that she burned with *nec notis ignibus* (33). If we merely read her words as saying that she burned with the kind of passion that no one else feels or passion that was unknown to her before, then we can wholeheartedly agree, and we might want to add that her *passion* was of the variety that is *so strong* that it would lead her to abandon her country and kill her own brother. The burning image also reminds us of the havoc that she will soon cause in Corinth by sending the robe steeped in fiery poisons – where, just like Medea, Creusa and Creon will also burn with such unknown (or unexpected) fires. What is more, although the statement is a kind of belated warning or reminder of the things that have already happened due to her fiery passions (the death of Absyrtus), it also points to the deaths of the children, because no one else would feel such passion – *such fire* – as to destroy her own children.

Medea nevertheless concedes that in this one circumstance she could not conceal her love, for she says that the *prodita flamma* (38) gave evidence of her passion. Later, however, she will learn to conceal such strong passions – her anger – when she plots her

fiery revenge. Jason may be able to see her flames of love now, but he will fail to see her flames of vengeance.

On line 107 Medea recalls how she closed the *flammea lumina* of the snake guarding the fleece, and it does not require an imaginative leap to foresee in this reference how she will soon close Creusa's *flammea lumina* as well – although Medea will be the cause of these new flames.

Medea's lament about how she was unable to overcome Jason in love (163-72) anticipates that she will only be able overcome – or defeat – him in anger, *and through fire*. When she says that she could not subjugate (*perdomuisse*, 164) this one man, she means that she could not do this by means of passion or love. Although this is contrary to what Hypsipyle argues about Medea in *Heroides* 6 (where she writes that Medea must have seduced or tricked him with her poisons), Medea's remarks nevertheless highlight her driving need to win, and that she will still try to subdue Jason, but that she will now do this in a much less pleasant manner – through her hatred. Furthermore, the references to *feros...ignes*, *doctis medicatibus*, and *flammas...meas* all serve to remind us that Medea cannot escape her own *flammas* (of love), and that Creusa in turn will not be able to escape Medea's (magical) *flammas*.

On two occasions Medea makes explicit mention to weddings (34, 138-40) and each instance incorporates the idea of fire and death along with it. Searching for a metaphor to describe how passionately she fell in love with Jason, she compares her feelings to how a *pineae taeda* burns to the gods (34). We may be tempted to think of this as a happy image – a young girl in love and dreaming of her wedding – but the *pineae*

*taeda* comparison reinforces the image we have of a Medea who is burning in love (33), and just as we see Medea as a potential burning *pineae tarda*, we also see Creusa as the potential burning *pineae tarda*. Furthermore, this reminds us that Medea's wedding to Jason will in fact lead to many deaths in its own right, such as those of Absyrtus and Pelias. Medea, it seems, is not a good luck charm at any of Jason's marriages – even her own, for the *pineae taeae* start to symbolize funeral torches in our minds as much as they signify marriage.

Later, in describing the wedding of Jason and Creusa, she recalls how their wedding song comes to her ears and how the torches shone with blazing fire (137-8), but we can also imagine how the bride – Creusa – will soon be burning like the torches at her wedding. In fact these wedding *lampades* indicate the upcoming funerals much more than they make us think of anything nice, which becomes obvious when Medea reports on the wedding song and how she received it *funerea flebiliora tuba* (140). This is clearly macabre, since the wedding will lead to deaths, but there are also traces of bitter irony, since by this comment Medea means that the wedding was more mournful than a funeral dirge *for her*, when in fact the wedding will lead to real funeral dirges that will be sung *for others*, such as the bride. The juxtaposition between the wedding and a funeral is apt, but it is not Medea's funeral that comes to mind.

**The Deaths of Creusa and Creon:** Just as fire points to the method that Medea will use in killing Creusa and Creon, she also makes direct references to both of these characters, and these allusions offer varying degrees of hints about how she will avenge herself on them.

When Medea asks the question *quam tibi nunc longe regnum dotale Creusae?* (53), we realize that Creon's wealth will soon be far away from Jason yet again – when he and Creusa are dead. At the end of the letter she writes that Jason has a powerful *socer* (205), but we know that Creon's power will last only for a few more hours.

The first explicit allusion to Creusa's upcoming murder comes from Jason's own mouth, when Medea recalls how he hoped to die before a wife other than Medea would share his bed (86). Everyone reading this line is aware that he is very close to being correct, but with certain qualifications, since in a grimly comic twist Jason's new wife will be the one to die in his place. The proximity of this upcoming death is apparent when Medea remarks that Jason and Creusa's wedding song was for her more mournful than a funeral dirge (140), which, since it comes from the mouth of a murderer, reminds us that someone in the wedding party is indeed about to die. During the same wedding ceremony we catch another glimpse of the murder-to-be when Medea writes that she was so enraged that she thought about running out and snatching off the garlands from Creusa's hair (156). The dark humour in this line is connected to our knowledge that she will not need to snatch away the garlands in order to punish Creusa; rather, to avenge herself she will instead only have to send her something new – and poisoned – for her to wear,<sup>28</sup> and we think of Creusa unable to snatch that away from her head.

Medea becomes enraged yet again when she imagines what Jason might say about her to Creusa (175-7), and the first adjective she uses to describe Creusa is to call her

---

<sup>28</sup> Medea also says that she almost threw her hands out and cried that Jason was hers (158). Since there is no direct object indicating whom she planned to grab, and since Jason is introduced here in the third person – *meus est* – we can just as reasonably infer that rather than throwing her hands on Jason, instead she almost reached out *to attack Creusa*, which points toward her eventual oblique attack on Jason *through Creusa*.



stupid (*stultae*, 175), which prefigures how Medea will prey upon her gullibility when she sends the poisoned wedding gifts to her. She imagines that Jason is boasting about his own deeds along with her many bad qualities to Creusa and, she says, even laying *nova crimina* (177) at her. But we know that any *new charges* that Jason may lay against Medea in talking to Creusa will pale in comparison to the charge of murder that he will be forced to make – and her reference to the *nova crimina* remind us of what she is about to do.

Medea continues by insisting that Creusa should laugh and be happy at hearing about her *vitiis* (178), but we know that, in another grim twist, she will be very unhappy with Medea's faults, since her *vitiis* tend toward the macabre – such as Creusa's death – which she proves via her double entendre where she wishes that Creusa lie aloft on Tyrian purple (179). Ostensibly this is a reference to royal clothing, but the colour purple is also a very similar shade to red, which is a colour that signifies strong emotion, and can represent blood – or even fire. Thus Medea is obliquely suggesting that Creusa will lie on her royal deathbed, and we do not have to reach too far to come to this conclusion, since she follows this line with the comments that Creusa will soon be the one to cry (*flebit*, 180) and that her burning body (*adusta*, 180) will surpass Medea's own fires of passion or anger. Line 180 also offers us another bleak pun, as we see the fire of love on the surface, but actual flames beneath.

**Death and the Children:** Allusions to the children point toward two events – either to their own deaths by the hand of their mother or to their unwitting murder of Creusa, when they act as instruments of Medea's revenge. Toward the end of the letter,

when Medea becomes more violently angry and actually begins to plot her revenge, the references become more overt. Earlier on, the allusions require a closer reading, since they are perhaps a bit more obscure. However, because the themes of death and children are vitally important to the Medea narrative, and because the infanticide is perhaps the most crucial aspect in determining Medea's character (we must not forget that Hypsipyle explicitly points toward it in *Heroides* 6), we would be remiss in passing over these earlier references.

The first suggestion of the murders to come is rather obscure. At the start of the letter Medea looks back on her life with Jason and comments that *quidquid ab illo/ produxi vitam tempore poena fuit* (5-6). Two things that she certainly did *bring forth* from that time were her sons, and these two sons will indeed be a punishment shortly, for they will not only be innocuous instruments of punishments when they carry the poisoned gift to Creusa, but Medea will also turn them into more formal *poena* when she kills them to avenge herself on Jason.

The report of Jason's new marriage and wedding procession brings its own hints of the coming infanticide with it, mostly because Medea's youngest child is the first to see the scene (149). Ironically he points out to his mother the very thing that Medea's servants are scared to tell her (146-7). We assume that they are afraid of telling her such news for fear of what she might do to them in response, and this fear is partially validated when we note that the person who eventually does tell her – her youngest son – is in fact murdered in response to Jason's new marriage. If anything, he should not be telling her about what he sees.

However, he does tell her and, when the child calls his mother to see what is happening outside, we notice his unfortunate decision in asking Medea to come toward him (*mater adi*, 151). This is a bad move, for if he knew what would soon transpire, then he would not call her at all but would instead run out toward Jason as fast as he could. Even referring to her as mother is a bit of a stretch at this point, since she will soon exchange that nurturing role for a more murderous one.

Medea mixes her prayers at the end of the letter with some more obvious and ominous predictions. She says that Creusa will be a *dira noverca* (188) and savage to her children, indicating that they should stay by her own side where they are safe. We have no idea whether Creusa would not be a harsh step-mother to them. Yet we do know that the children and Jason should be more worried about the *dira mater*, who will indeed be very savage *against her own offspring*. In fact, this couplet acts as a slight warning to Jason about the potential danger his sons will face at the hands of their mother, since she specifically asks him to consider their fate rather than her own (187). Even if Jason cannot see the implicit threat, the reader can see a clear connection between Medea and the danger that she herself poses to the children, especially when she draws attention to the remarkable resemblance between them and their father (189).

In her plea for Jason to return, she makes the case to him that *cum quo sum pariter facta parente parens* (198), a train of thought which also brings with it the counter-argument that *equally with him she will soon become a non-parent*. Yet even Medea holds herself back from expressing her plan too blatantly, for she asks *quid praedicere poenam/ attinet?* (207-8), which, although indicating quite openly that she is going to

strike back at him somehow, shows us that she still keeps her plans hidden. However, she does hint at certain elements of that threat by using a verb – *parturio* (208) – that is also associated with giving birth. Thus, when she writes that her anger *gives birth to* many threats we think of the looming threat that she will kill off the children *to whom she has already given birth*, the offspring of her marriage to Jason.

### **Other Appearances of Black Humour and Wit**

**Dark Humour:** Dark humour is evident in ways throughout the letter that are not directly associated with the deaths of Creusa, Creon, and the children. Most of it still looks forward to her less than sympathetic deeds. She opens her letter by pointing out that she once found time for Jason (*vacavi*, 1) when he needed her help, and we know that she is about to find time for him again, but that this time it will be to harm him. Wishing that she had died, she expresses regret that the sisters *quae dispensant mortalia fila* (3-4) did not end her life, and we think of the people whom she kills and how they might wish that this were true as well.

One subtle point that appears throughout the letter is the question of Medea's honesty. She appears to be genuinely angry, and yet we know that she will soon deceive Jason, Creon, and Creusa. We first see evidence of this in the *linguae gratia ficta* (12) that she attributes to Jason, which reminds us that Medea will also use some pleasing lies to Jason when she convinces him to let the children bring the gifts to Creusa. This comment, coming at the beginning of the letter, may also be read as a signpost advising the reader to be on guard against Medea's other possible *gratia ficta*. In fact, Medea, speaking of how Jason recognized that she had fallen for him, will later ask rhetorically

*quis enim bene celat amorem?* (37). This will remind us that Medea may not have been able to conceal love, but she will learn how to conceal her anger, her hatred, quite effectively.<sup>29</sup>

In her attempt to make the case that Jason led to *her* ruin, Medea says that when she saw him *et perii* (33). She is arguing that she fell in love with him at first sight yet wants to couple this thought with the contrary idea that her passion for Jason also brought along with it her own *metaphorical death*.<sup>30</sup> Her attempt at wit falls short because we infer that the person and number of the verb *perii* should clearly be supplanted by *perierunt*, for we do not think of Medea who dies as a result of falling for Jason, but rather the many others will die as a consequence both of this romance and, more importantly, of its bitter dissolution.

While remembering the tasks that Aeetes gave to Jason, she mentions that the final assignment he had to accomplish was to elude the eyes of the guard who does not know sleep (49-50). The key words here are *aliqua decipere arte*: Jason was told that he had to deceive the snake who protects the fleece with some skill. However, Medea must

---

<sup>29</sup> We see more evidence of her deceptive nature when, back in Colchis, Medea agrees to help Jason on the pretence of assisting Chalciope's children (65-6), never admitting to her sister that she herself wanted to help him for her own reasons. What is noteworthy about this scene is that Medea deceives her sister and conceals her desire to help the Argonauts under the guise of familial obligation. At this point she is capable of playing her *cara...soror* in order to get what she wants. It just happens to be convenient that they want the same thing. This shows us that Medea knows how to deceive people in order to achieve her aim, a tactic which she will master in Corinth.

<sup>30</sup> Knox (1986: 220) notes an irony in Medea's comment that she fell in love with Jason at first sight because, he writes, this contradicts the idea [on line 31] "that she perceived his nature from the very beginning." One could merely interpret Medea's comment that she began to know what he was as another way of saying that she fell in love with him. However, if we are to accept Knox' reading of the line, we do not have to come to the conclusion, as Knox does, that this is a sign of poetic weakness and that the poem is a cheap forgery. Rather, we may also wish to note that Medea had an inkling of what Jason was about, yet still felt compelled to follow her desires. And we can parallel this to their current situation, where Jason is beginning to note what Medea is as well, but that he also fails to perceive how much she can really hurt him.

teach him *the art of deception* – it is not something that he knows how to do on his own - and we are aware that she will soon use this power of deception against him and others.<sup>31</sup>

When Jason leaves the dinner table Medea secretly whispers the word *vale* to him (56). Although this is a very sad and sympathetic scene, we nevertheless juxtapose her sad farewell here with the way she will say goodbye to him shortly in Corinth, where her *vale* will be the very opposite of a whisper and will be a far cry from sad as well, for she will shout at him in triumph from her chariot, carrying the dead bodies of their children. This *vale* prefigures the coming one.<sup>32</sup>

Her description of the *nemus* where she met Jason is greatly filled with ominous foreshadowing (67-8). The overwhelming mood that she conveys is that the place was dark – *atrum* – which she emphasizes by relating that the rays of the sun could scarcely enter there.<sup>33</sup> A marriage is usually something that is filled with light, but we note that their relationship thus began under a cloud of darkness and can also see this darkness in terms of the evil – namely, the deaths – that their union will bring. Since their nuptials

---

<sup>31</sup> Later in the letter Medea explicitly forges the very apt comparison between herself and the snake when she mentions that while in Corinth she spends her bitter nights awake (*noctes vigilantur amarae*, 169) and subsequently says that she could defeat a dragon/snake but can not overcome her own passions (170), thereby linking her own image with that of the wakeful snake guarding the fleece – except that she is the bitter snake guarding Jason, and we see a new meaning to her acknowledgment that *ante meos oculos pervigil anguis erat* (61), for that sleepless snake was herself. Looking forward, we note that if Jason is to safely get away with what he does in Corinth – marrying Creusa – he has to deceive Medea, but only Medea can deceive Medea, so unfortunately, since he lacks that kind of *ars*, he will be unable to *decipere* her; but she in turn, who knows the art of deception, will trick him, Creusa, and Creon.

The snake imagery returns again in connection to Medea when at the end of the letter, where she, while attempting to point out the simplicity and moral obligation of the task that she is begging Jason to do, reminds him that she is not asking him to go out *contra taurosque virosque* (195) nor that he put to rest a *serpens victa* (196). Yet this is also an implicit warning that, if he does not return to her, then he can expect much worse trials ahead for himself, and that she will not lie as a *serpens victa* after he betrays her.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobson (1974: 116-17) writes that Ovid's Medea does not wrestle enough with her moral dilemma, that "she is unable to glimpse the ethics of the situation" when she betrays her homeland. While I think this is a rather harsh reading, his characterization of Medea nevertheless shows that we can see hints of her power and willingness to deceive her own family, which points toward how she will do the same to Jason.

<sup>33</sup> Jacobson (1974: 117) comments that "the locale is described in sinister tones."

bring nothing but misery to those who come close to them, the *atrum nemus* thus becomes a very appropriate place for their first date.

When Jason finishes his speech to her (73-88), Medea comments that his words moved her (89-90), and she characterizes herself as a simple girl, implying that she had a gullible mind.<sup>34</sup> That may have been so, but this reminds us that she is now far from simple, but is rather the one who preys upon the gullibility of others – from her younger brother to the daughters of Pelias – and we know that she is about to prey on the simple mind of her rival Creusa, to whom she gives a nasty wedding present.<sup>35</sup> The false characterization continues when she mentions how she, as a simple *puella*, was *capta* by his fraudulent words (91-2). Again, this was the past, and we know that she is no longer an innocent young girl but a woman who fully capable of ensnaring others with her own lies, which she has already done and is about to do.

That she betrayed her father (109) points to more bitter irony and black humour, as Medea will attack Jason for having betrayed her, and we note a bit of poetic justice, since she is betrayed by the new man in her life much in the same way that she herself betrayed the old man in her life. It is almost as if Jason's betrayal of Medea acts as a form of punishment on behalf of Aeetes. Moreover, in order to keep her old lord – Aeetes – from pursuing her (and possibly to punish him), she admits that she killed her

---

<sup>34</sup> Jacobson (1974: 118) writes that in Medea we see “a villainous creature, a fratricide, a corruptor of the innocent, about to become a child-murderer, who, though always aware of her crimes and her guilt, seeks to represent herself as a girl, once innocent and pure, corrupted by a treacherous criminal.” But, not acknowledging the dark comedy, Jacobson sees this as a sign of poetic weakness, because, he argues, we can never really develop any strong sympathies for Medea.

<sup>35</sup> As well, the imagery that she offers of her own hand joined to Jason in marriage (90) brings to mind the picture of the bodies of Creusa and Creon melting together flesh to flesh, bone to bone – an image which will be repeated on line 122, where she imagines how she should have died with Jason in the Symplagades.

brother Absyrtus, of which she reminds us herself with her clever *praeteritio* in line 113 where she tells her dead brother *non te...reliqui* even though she clearly did leave him behind – *in bits*.<sup>36</sup>

Medea does not wish to recall the death of Pelias and the reason is obvious: she did this on her own and it was quite a vicious act. She would not want to remember it because it would destroy her attempt to characterize herself as an innocent young girl. Yet from the little information that she offers we can still note how she plays on the daughters, who are *pietate nocentes* (129), because this anticipates how she will use her children in a similar way when she gets them to unknowingly bring the poisoned gifts to Creusa, thinking that they are doing a good service on behalf of their mother. Medea, it seems, likes to prey on others' dutifulness. Moreover, the reference to death *by virgin hand* (130) also draws our mind both backward to the death of Absyrtus (by her *virgin* or *girlish hand*) as well as forward to both the death of Creusa (through the package delivered *by the virgin hands* of her young sons) as well as the death of Creon, who is killed by his unwitting and *virgineus* daughter. The real key to the death of Pelias, however, is its hint to *death by deception*, and how Medea is about to use deception on Creon, Jason, and Creusa to complete her vengeance.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> This comment also reminds us that in punishing Jason for his betrayal, she will also kill *his children*, the bodies of whom she will carry with her on the chariot to keep Jason from pursuing her. The theme of betrayal and punishment is constantly interwoven between Medea, Aeetes and Jason, and we see a tit-for-tat quality both in how Jason betrays Medea who once betrayed her father and in the death and punishment by means of children. More pointedly, we see that Medea kills children in order to strike at men who are pursuing her: first her brother Absyrtus, then her own two children.

<sup>37</sup> Verducci (1985: 80) writes that "Medea does not seem to lie." This is true only if we read this letter in isolation. However, we have already read the letter from Hypsipyle, which counters Medea's self-presentation, as well as the traditional Medea narratives, which prepare us for a Medea who is capable of deception. And we must be conscious of this letter's dual purpose: while she claims that she wants to get



Twice she repeats that Jason dared (*ausus es*, 133-4) to speak words to her telling her to leave his house, and we note the oddness that Medea is complaining of someone else's daring, since she will be much more daring in her deadly actions. She also makes a reference to her deceptive nature when she says that the appropriate words fail her just pain (133). This is actually quite a good thing for her, since she will soon dare to use *inappropriate words*, or lies, in order to succeed with what she regards as her appropriate revenge, words which will make Jason – along with Creon and Creusa – believe that she is reconciled with her new status. She uses words to trick her enemies, thus it is a boon for her that her words would fail to show what she is really feeling, for then she would not be able to succeed in her plans.<sup>38</sup>

Medea's lament about how she was unable to overcome Jason in love (163-72), that she could not subjugate (*perdomuisse*, 164) one man, anticipates that the only way she will only be able overcome – or defeat – him will be through anger, and it will be in a much less pleasant manner than love.<sup>39</sup> She says that her powers are no longer of any use to her (167), but once more she means that they do nothing to help bring Jason back. However, they will serve her well in causing him misery. Her drugs are not love potions;

---

Jason back, we also note that she might wish to deceive Jason in order to destroy his happiness. While we may have sympathy for Medea here, it is a very guarded sympathy.

<sup>38</sup> In another sign of her deceptive nature, when she hears the wedding procession, she says that she could scarcely hold herself back from rushing into the crowd (157) and expressing her anger openly. Yet we note that she does indeed hold herself back from such a show of emotional weakness, which is an ominous sign of the control that she has over herself, which will allow her to trick Creon, Jason, and Creusa.

<sup>39</sup> She says that she could repulse *feros...ignes* with her *doctis medicatibus* (165), and we are reminded that she will work toward Jason's destruction (via Creusa) through the use of such *doctis medicatibus* which will create *feros ignes* in his new bride. Her implicit purpose in alluding to those learned magic charms is to compare her previous powers over fire with her current incapacity to overcome *flammas...meas* (166). By flames she means her flames of passionate desire or love, but we nevertheless infer that she cannot overcome her flames of hatred against Jason, those flames which will drive her to kill her own children in revenge. Thus we see two meanings to Medea's use of *flammas* here, and, rather than focussing exclusively on Medea, we also note that others will not be strong enough to escape her flames either.

rather, they either offer protection from harm – as they protected Jason in Colchis – or they cause harm, which is how she will soon use them to strike a blow at Jason.<sup>40</sup>

That Medea is actually begging Jason (*oro*, 191) to return is rather odd, since we know that she will soon beg others as a ruse to help her seek revenge: she gets one more day out of Creon by playing upon his sympathy and she tricks Jason into letting their children bring the presents to Creusa by pretending to be at peace with his decision. Moreover, many of the items she uses in her plea have an ominous double-edge, hinting at the trouble she is about to bring Jason. She invokes the eyes of her grandfather's flame (191), which also hints at the burning destruction that she will bring with her own flames. As well, she also returns to the theme of the favours (*meritum*, 192) she has done for Jason, where she explicitly connects this *meritum* with their children (*natos pignora nostra duos*, 192), where we appreciate the dark comedy in which she begs in the name of the children and calls them *pignora* at the same time. Since we know what will happen, for us this gives the concept of begging in the name of their children – these *pignora* – a new and very macabre meaning.

The letter finishes by portending the evil that is about to happen, with Medea's comment that her mind is planning *nescio quid...maius* (212). Her language here reminds us of Jason's remark in Colchis that he will be a *gloria maior* (76) if he is saved by Medea. What she plans now will indeed be something *maius*, but what it will bring her

---

<sup>40</sup> Lindheim (2003: 127) notes how Medea “consciously [she] manipulates her self-representation so as to highlight her capacity to undertake forceful, even criminal, action without fear.”

will not be *gloria*, but rather infamy, since Jason will not be *servatus* – or, if one argues that he is saved, then he is the only one.<sup>41</sup>

**Wit – Medea and Ovid:** In its simplest terms, we shall define the wit of the poem as a way of contrasting ideas or expressions in a humorous way. This is a type of erudite humour which is often a play on words or themes that affects the way we read the poem.<sup>42</sup> Although this epistle is by its nature tragic, Ovid's Medea nevertheless makes numerous witty comments throughout that would cause a perceptive reader to pause and smile, however slightly. As we encounter each one, we must consider how it affects both the tone of the letter and our attitude toward Medea. If we view her as intelligent enough to make double entendres and clever asides, then it changes the way we perceive her as a potentially menacing figure and, I argue, it adds another dimension of depth to her. While we often focus on the continual flux between our feelings of sympathy for Medea and our horror in response to her actions, these remarks add a degree of light humour, which gives the poem – and Medea herself – more character than earlier critics such as Jacobson originally attributed to it.

The first evidence of such wordplay comes when she ponders what would have happened to Jason if she did not help him, and she says *ut caderet cultu cultor ab ipse suo* (18). The idea of the farmer being cut down by his own crop is both amusing and macabre, and this picture does reinforce the potential savage creature that Medea will

---

<sup>41</sup> Hinds (1993: 41-3) also sees Ovidian wit in the *nescio quid...maius* ending, which, he argues, refers to Ovid's forthcoming (and lost) *Medea* tragedy.

<sup>42</sup> In her look at humour in the *Heroides*, Verducci (1985: 81) writes that wit is "a medium of disclosure, and it occurs, more often than not, at his heroines' expense." Unfortunately, this broad definition – "a medium of disclosure" – allows Verducci to place every type of humour under the label "wit." This is not very helpful, since wit is only one type of humour involved in appreciating the poem, and I argue that it is in no way on par with the irony and the black humour that are present.

become. This image is later repeated when, referring to how Jason learned of the trials that he would have to endure and, more specifically, the planting of the teeth from which will grow the earthborn men, she writes that of them that *illa est agricolae messis iniqua suo* (48). While the earlier remark on line 18 had a greater sense of levity – it is a pun, after all – this latter comment by Medea, although a witty aside, also much more of a grim flavour (to remind Jason of what he owes her).<sup>43</sup>

Later, talking about how she fell in love with Jason at first sight, she says to him *abstulerant oculi lumina nostra tui* (36), which is a surprisingly rather sweet and witty image, for she is succinctly comparing the beauty of his eyes to the response of her own eyes, who was watching Jason. This remark changes the pace momentarily from her other comments about their first encounter in which she speaks about her burning passion and *fata* (33-35) as well as Jason's treachery (37) and it lends a bit of elegance that would otherwise be lacking to the scene in which she falls in love, allowing us to feel a touch of sympathy for Medea, a woman who can remember the innocence and poignancy of *eyes meeting eyes, eyes carrying off eyes*.

Regarding the murder of Absyrtus, she says *quod facere ausa mea est non audet scribere dextra* (115), where she makes a very clear argument that she killed her brother with her own right hand, the same hand which will not write about the deed. In this context the play on words seems deeply uncomfortable, since she ominously associates

---

<sup>43</sup> If the idea of a *mensis iniqua* is formed in a tongue in cheek manner by anyone, then we could perhaps lay the blame at the feet of Aeetes, whom Medea here seems to be quoting at the start while he recites Jason's future trials. Although this comment is indeed rather droll, it does not fully detract from the poignant tone of Medea's sentiments, for she herself is sad, while her father is the one who clearly enjoys the idea of Jason's *mensis iniqua*. Perhaps Aeetes even taught Medea her earlier expression of *caderet cultu cultor*. In any case, we learn that macabre wordplay is for Medea likely an inherited trait.

that hand that enacted the horrid deed with the same hand that is writing this letter, the one that asks for sympathy. Even though such a clever remark about such a dreadful theme may seem untenable and very harsh to us, we need only look back as far as lines 18 and 48 – the farmer who is cut down by his own crop – to see where she learned such a detached way of looking at death. And, if we need to find further examples of this mean-spirited comedy, we might note that the humour here is rather similar to Ovid's description of Philomela's tongue racing back to her mouth in the *Metamorphoses*,<sup>44</sup> where we may appreciate the craft behind the comment yet are still taken aback how this horrid act can be presented almost as whimsy – both by Medea and the poet. We laugh, but question our act of laughing.

Ovid even adds underlying wit to Medea when she is wishing that she and Jason had both perished as a consequence of Aabyrtus' murder, for she confuses the two Scyllas in lines 123-4. The conscious mixing of these two women happens quite often in ancient literature – and it appears to have been done consciously<sup>45</sup> – with the result that, in reading Medea's references to these two Scyllas, we are left wondering whether she herself is knowingly having sport with the two different names, or whether Ovid is asking us to see Medea's mistake. I attribute the Scylla remarks to Ovid, since it would add very little to Medea's character here if she were to make this comment consciously; it would merely offer a distraction from her main point, which is that she and Jason should have died. Rather, Ovid appears to be sharing a learned joke with the reader – perhaps asking

---

<sup>44</sup> *Met.* 6.557-60.

<sup>45</sup> Hinds (1995: 15, n.14) gives a list of other authors, including Ovid, who played on the fact that these two distinct mythological women shared the same name.

us either to spot the mistake or even slyly alluding to connections between these two Scyllas and Medea herself.

An example which does show Medea making a conscious remark, however, is her description of the death of Pelias, where she writes *caesaque virginea membra paterna manu* (130). This is yet another episode which she passes over very briefly, and here she places the image of a father cut down by his daughters in such a careful and striking way that we feel uncomfortable with the wording. These are not the kind of hands that should strike down their father, which is a fact Medea knows, and we can see her own sense of malicious irony at work as she briefly touches upon the paradox inherent in this event – the same sardonic attitude which will later allow her to use her own children as her instruments of revenge upon Jason.

We can even see another link to the death of Absyrtus, an infanticide which makes us think of Medea's future infanticides,<sup>46</sup> in the way that she describes the death of Pelias as *caesaque virginea membra paterna manu* (130). In this case we note that Pelias is killed by the hands of *his own children*, and we can also connect this to our knowledge that she will trick *her own children* into delivering the poisoned gifts to Creusa, thus cementing the image children and death. Just as they were with Pelias, children will be used to bring about the death of Creusa and another king (Creon).

At this point we can pause and notice the significant – and bleak – role that children play in Medea's deadly destruction. Normally thought of as signs of hope, in this narrative they become instruments of death – and in this we see extremely dark wit.

---

<sup>46</sup> In *Met.* 7.54 (*frater adhuc infans*) Ovid clearly states that Absyrtus was a child.

Medea's first murder was against her *child* brother. Her second murder – Pelias – was enacted by the hands of *his own children*. Her next major murder – against both Creusa, Creon's child, and against Creusa's father Creon – is carried out again *by the hands of her children* (in a method very reminiscent to the death of Pelias, for her children believe they are performing a pious act); and Medea's final murder – *against her children* - is carried out by her own hands.<sup>47</sup> In Medea's world murder is an act best kept in the family and *always* involves children.

We could even chart the deaths (with the children in bold):

<u>Death</u>	<u>Killer</u>
<b>Absyrtus</b>	Medea (sister)
Pelias	<b>His Daughters</b>
Creusa (Creon's child)	<b>Medea's Children</b>
Creon	<b>His Daughter/ Medea's Children</b>
<b>Medea's Children</b>	Medea

What this shows us is that every reference to murder within the framework of the Medea narrative includes not only a family member but a child, and therefore, because each murder involves children in some central way, therefore most references to death in her story invariably hint at the final infanticide at the end.

The last notable use of wit which Medea employs comes in her moment of despair at realizing that she can defeat neither Jason nor her own passion. Of Jason she writes that she can overcome snakes and mad bulls but *unum non potui perdomuisse virum* (163-4), and of herself she remarks *quae me non possum potui sopire draconem* (171). We know that she will eventually be able to defeat Jason, but that it will not be in a nice way.

---

<sup>47</sup> This list could be extended to include Medea's attempted murder of Theseus, who, although clearly an adult at the time that Medea attempts to trick his father into killing him, is nevertheless Aegeus' child.

Yet the real cleverness to these lines lies in Medea's ability to perceive the bleak humour in her own situation and to bring it out in the midst of her tragic anger. Basically, she laughs at herself. Comments like these give her an added dimension of character and do for Medea what Anderson says the epistle from Dido does for her.<sup>48</sup> That is, these observations make her more human and believable, and less of a caricature, even though we are still fully aware of what she is about to do.

### **Humour in Relation to *Heroides* 6**

In examining the relationship between Medea's letter and Hypsipyle's earlier one, we should revisit Jacobson's quote about *Heroides* 6, where he writes: "Irony is so pervasive, so informing a factor that one is almost inclined to suggest that the poem exists for the irony in it."<sup>49</sup> If this is the case, and I believe that it is, it is surprising that Jacobson and others have found so little irony in the letter that Medea writes, whose words often recall those from Hypsipyle.<sup>50</sup> In the case of these two letters, the

---

<sup>48</sup> Anderson (1973: 49-83) The first point of separation that he notes between Ovid's Dido epistle and Virgil's version is through Ovid's use of self-consciousness in letting the queen dramatize her own situation, one that is separate from the overriding narrative frame in which Virgil's Dido must dwell. In the *Aeneid*, Dido's character seems the archetype of a broken woman, and the audience does not see any psychological reason to expect any other response from her other than suicide. Ovid's character, however, is psychologically more complex, since she combines wit, charm, pathos, and cleverness. We are invited to think about this character, to acknowledge her as being self-conscious, and to engage ourselves as sophisticated readers so that we may view the personality that the poet is presenting rather than searching for the epic caricature that Virgil has given us.

Anderson argues that the first fifteen letters are Ovid's attempt to turn these female heroes into human beings, saying that what he does with Virgil's model of Dido he does to the model of all the other fourteen heroines he uses. He never tries to rewrite their stories; rather, he is playing with the genre of elegiac poetry by making these heroic figures serviceable to it without intentionally trying to undermine them. In these fifteen letters Ovid modernizes heroic action – and grants it more feeling, wit, and charm.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobson (1974: 102).

<sup>50</sup> As mentioned in note 4, Verducci (1985) and Bloch (2000: 199) have talked about the humorous connection between the two poems. Curiously, however, Verducci purports to talk about humour and wit yet never actually states with clarity just what is funny about the interaction between these two poems and to what effect, and Bloch states that "The existence of *Heroides* 12 in the collection creates irony and



relationship is two-way. Hypsipyle's letter predicts, casts doubt upon, and even undermines what Medea will write, and Medea's letter also has distinct connections to *Heroides* 6 that force us to look back at what Hypsipyle has written in a way we would not have done without having read Hypsipyle's letter first.<sup>51</sup> In terms of humour, Medea's letter offers us examples of history repeating itself, inversions, along with cleverness and irony through its use of verbal reminders, each of which I shall address separately.

**History Repeating Itself:** Medea's situation is eerily similar to the one that Hypsipyle has already described. They are both abandoned spouses, each of them has two children, and they are angry at Jason for having abandoned them for someone else. We cannot help but see these two letters in tandem and note the humour in that, while Jason is once again just being Jason, the circumstances of Medea and Hypsipyle are almost interchangeable as well.<sup>52</sup>

---

intertextual meaning in *Heroides* 6 that would not otherwise be present," yet he also does not offer up any ideas on what those ironies might be or why they might be significant.

<sup>51</sup> Worth noting at this point is the argument made by Newlands (1997: 180-81) that Ovid "offers not one Medea but different figures of a single type." I thoroughly disagree with this comment, because Ovid does not offer an inconsistent portrait of Medea's actions, and the differences that we notice in Medea's character are related entirely to the theme of the work and the nature of the narrator. Hypsipyle is naturally going to say something different from what Medea says precisely *because she is a different person* and has a different opinion of her. Medea in *Heroides* 12 is going to be different from the Medea in the *Metamorphoses* because this is a letter written directly from Medea's hand, and we are invited to compare it with what Hypsipyle has already written. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid leaves out many details in the Medea narrative that have been told elsewhere and instead plays up those scenes which have been passed over, also highlighting the transformation of Medea from a young girl to a plotting witch. I fail to see, as Newlands argues, "different figures" in Ovid's Medeas. Rather, I see different perspectives, which is not the same thing at all.

<sup>52</sup> Bloch (2000: 205) writes, "Hypsipyle and Medea unknowingly evoke one another for the external reader." Later he writes that "future-reflexive irony" (p.207) plays a vital role in the relationship between these two letters, but does not fully address the textual and ironic connections; instead he talks about the metapoetic links (p.205) without really explaining what this means, and even suggests that the curses Hypsipyle throws at Medea at the end of her letter must be "heard by a god" (p.207) while failing to recognize that certain curses which she shouts fail to come true.

Regarding Jason, we hear him described as a liar yet again, one who is at once both forgetful and who has broken his marriage vows.<sup>53</sup> To that end each woman tells at length the tale of how Jason seduced her using false words, and both make the claim that they saved Jason, either by providing shelter for him (in the case of Hypsipyle) or (in the case of Medea) by helping him face the trials in Colchis.

The news that each of them receives of Jason's betrayal comes from a messenger – and for Medea, the messenger is her youngest child. They both fear their rivals and make bitter and hateful remarks about Jason's *paelex* when comparing themselves to his new wife. The fact of having been displaced from their rightful position in the bed and marriage is a main concern to both of them, and their two children become a major part of their respective pleas for Jason to return. The children are also used as a weapon against the new *noverca*, since each woman charges that Jason's new bride will be harmful to those children.<sup>54</sup> Finally, they each close their letters with predictions and prayers as to what might happen to their rival and they each desire vengeance against the other woman. Not all of what they hope for necessarily comes true, yet their claims nevertheless portend a disastrous end for many of those involved in their respective narratives.

The humour in all of this stems from the fact that, as the popular malapropism goes, the two narratives are an example of “déjà vu all over again.” These princesses never learn. Just as Hypsipyle did in letter 6, in this letter another character has fallen for Jason's charm, tears, and lying assurances – and another woman once again makes a futile attempt to get him back. Now, let us look at how they differ.

---

<sup>53</sup> *Her.* 6.43-44, 63, 109-110, 124; *Her.* 12.12, 16, 19, 37, 72, 91, 120, 141, 210.

<sup>54</sup> *Her.* 6.125-30; *Her.* 12.188.

**Inversions:** As much as Medea's narrative repeats what Hypsipyle has already gone through, certain elements are different, and these changes add irony to the way these letters stand in relation to one another. First of all, we note that Hypsipyle is writing to a distant Jason, while Medea is sending her letter to a Jason that she will soon be able to address face-to-face, which makes a lot of what she writes – especially the threats – all the more pertinent. That is, Hypsipyle threatens to harm Medea (6.149-50), but she will be unable to carry through on her threats; Medea, in turn, also makes many implicit threats, but she, unlike Hypsipyle, will be close enough to actually see her vengeance come to fruition. In fact, Jason and Creon would like to turn Medea into a type of Hypsipyle-figure as soon as possible, since they are about to try to throw her out of Corinth, where her threats will no longer carry as much weight. But, at the time of writing, Medea does pose a danger, and the humour here is all black: she is no Hypsipyle.

Next, in her letter Hypsipyle was jealous of Medea, and now Medea is in turn jealous of someone else. This is consistent in terms of Jason's behaviour, but Medea has moved from being the object of jealousy to being the one who suffers from that emotion. Moreover, Hypsipyle feared that Jason would fall for a Greek wife (6.79-82) and Medea, when Jason rejects her, discovers that Jason actually does fall for such a mainland Greek woman. Hypsipyle's worst fear becomes Medea's reality. The attitude that each one of them projects toward Jason's new bride also emphasizes this inversion, since Hypsipyle talks about Medea as being unworthy of Jason, giving her rival all kinds of unflattering

characteristics,<sup>55</sup> but Medea, in a seemingly desperate attempt to prove that she too is royalty, presents herself as Creusa's equal,<sup>56</sup> and the only point where she claims to trump the Corinthian princess is in the role of the proper (i.e. original) spouse. That is, Hypsipyle puts Medea down, claiming that her status is unworthy of Jason, while Medea instead does not focus on Creusa as much as she tries to build herself up, showing that she is just as worthy and, in fact, more worthy than Jason's new bride. As well, Hypsipyle warns Jason against Medea's crafty ways, while Medea thinks that her new rival is stupid and gullible<sup>57</sup> – characteristics which will both ultimately prove to be true.

Both women spend a great deal of time talking about Medea's use of magic, a theme which Hypsipyle uses to characterize Medea in a very negative way and which Medea employs to defend her own actions. Looking back at their descriptions of Jason's trials in Colchis and beyond, Hypsipyle implies that Medea's use of magic makes him appear to be less of a hero, while Medea says that she saved him with it.<sup>58</sup> Later, Hypsipyle will go further and describe all of the negative things that she hears with respect to Medea and her potions,<sup>59</sup> but the greatest argument she makes is that Medea seduced Jason with drugs, while Medea claims that Jason seduced her, and that she only used magic in order to do his bidding – *because her magic did not work on him* (12.164). Medea turns Hypsipyle's argument on its head, because she evidently did not trick Jason

---

<sup>55</sup> *Her.* 6.19, 81-100, 105-6, 125-30, 133, 137-38, 159-60.

<sup>56</sup> *Her.* 12.25-28, 53-54. Indeed Medea seems to spend most of her time trying to make her case that she is equal to Creusa. In this way, Medea portrays Creusa as being at least worthy of Jason, while Hypsipyle claims that Medea is beneath him in status.

<sup>57</sup> *Her.* 12.175-82.

<sup>58</sup> *Her.* 6.12, 100; *Her.* 12.15-18, 107-8, 173, 199-200.

<sup>59</sup> See especially *Her.* 6.83-94.

into falling in love with her, but this presents little consolation to her because she also cannot trick him into coming back to her either.

Ultimately the most humorous inversion in the letter is the one that remains unspoken – the progression from the harmless letter-writer (Hypsipyle) to the one who will cause serious harm (Medea). Hypsipyle claims that she would hypothetically love to attack Medea should she and Jason ever show up in Lemnos, but we know that will never transpire; conversely, when Medea shouts her dire warnings, we know that something bad is indeed coming. Hypsipyle is no real threat while Medea does pose a clear and present danger to Jason's security and happiness in Corinth. This is not the most pleasant type of humour, but, as we have seen, the Medea narrative does not provide us with the lightest of material.

**Irony, Cleverness, and Verbal Reminders:** Certain events to which Medea refers, or which she avoids, along with some words she uses, remind the reader very clearly of what Hypsipyle wrote in her earlier letter. What makes the connections humorous is that they undermine – or poke holes in – Medea's attempt to characterize herself as a harmless victim of Jason's betrayal. What we are looking at here are not similarities, but rather what makes Medea appear to be different from Hypsipyle, and hence different from the character she claims to be.

The first overt reference to Hypsipyle's letter appears when Medea finishes her reproach against Jason – and her dream of how nice it would have been for her if he had died (7-20) – with a gnomic statement about how she receives pleasure in throwing back a *meritum*, a favour, at an ungrateful man (21-2). This couplet refers directly to the

language that Hypsipyle used in her letter when speaking about Medea, and Ovid is indeed playing on the connection between what the two women are saying. Hypsipyle uses *meritum* and the related *emereo* in an utterly dismissive way of Medea's actions – claiming that Medea won him in an undeserving and negative way.<sup>60</sup> Yet through Medea's letter we realize that she has really done quite a lot to try to help him, and has in fact *deserved* him – which is quite ironic because it is contrary to the point that Hypsipyle wants to make. However, Medea's use of *meritum* becomes ominous and risible because we know what will happen – that, just as Hypsipyle warns, she will in fact eventually not be pleasing with her *meritis* when she kills their children as well as his new bride.<sup>61</sup> Hypsipyle is thus both right and wrong in her letter: she is wrong because Jason would *be pleased* with all of the things that Medea has done thus far for him, but Hypsipyle is correct from the perspective of what is about to happen now with Medea in Corinth, where her words take on an entirely new and disturbing meaning, since the favours that Medea will soon grant him will not be pleasing at all. So their respective intentions behind their use of the word *meritum* hold greater and darker meaning when the letters are combined. The favours to which they refer are either misunderstood (in the case of Hypsipyle) or morbidly proleptic (as with Medea) and, combining them, we see the hidden darkness to Medea's use of the word *meritum*, as well as the very unpleasant

---

<sup>60</sup> She writes that Medea is not pleasing with her looks or her favours (*nec facie meritisque placet*, 6.83), where she is attempting to take a shot at Medea's inability to help Jason, and she later writes that Medea earned her husband (*emeruitque*, 6.138) by an act of crime.

<sup>61</sup> Bloch (2000: 208) says that Medea's use of *meritum* serves a "therapeutic" function for her. While this may be true, we could also note that the whole letter might just play such a therapeutic role for her, and, more significantly, her eventual revenge on Jason, to which her use of *meritum* implies, will also have such a therapeutic function. Yet we need not concern ourselves with methods Medea uses to calm herself; rather, we should look at the implied meaning to her words.

*merita* that are still to come. And Hypsipyle helps us take a different view of what Medea might mean when she writes of this *meritum*.

Medea follows her comment about the *meritum* with the observation that she will enjoy (*fruar*, 22) throwing back this favour on Jason, which reminds us of Hypsipyle's worry that Medea may enjoy (*fruetur*, 6.75) the fruits of her prayers. This is darkly comic since, contrary to what Hypsipyle imagines, Medea does not really achieve any enjoyment at all, except for the macabre pleasure that she gets from punishing Jason, and in this we can see the sly connection between Hypsipyle and Medea, for their use of the verb *fruor* hints at Medea's greatest pleasure, which is the misery of others.

Medea writes that Jason's eyes *abstulerant* her eyes (36). What is so remarkable about this line is the use of the verb *aufero*, which is the exact same verb that Hypsipyle twice employs to describe how Medea stole away Jason by means of her poisons (6.131,150). Although Hypsipyle makes the initial claim that Medea stole Jason away by magic, Medea here contradicts the allegations of her rival when she notes that he stole her eyes away (36) and that her power over Jason has been futile (12.163f.).

Medea does not want to speak of Absyrtus' death, although she points to her own hand as causing the deed (115). However, Hypsipyle has already primed us by recalling how Medea killed him and scattered his limbs throughout the fields (6.129-30)<sup>62</sup> – so as much as Medea would like to avoid the theme, we have already heard a version of the tale where her actions are presented in a most unfavourable way.

---

<sup>62</sup> Hypsipyle also mentions his murder again at 6.159-60.

The numerous references that Medea makes to her children in the latter half of the letter<sup>63</sup> remind us of how Hypsipyle also invoked the twins that she herself bore Jason. More specifically, Medea's warning about their *dira noverca* Creusa (188) harks back to Hypsipyle's fear about Medea, where she says *plus est Medea noverca* (6.127), which helps us appreciate the absurdity of Medea's warning and also taints the sympathy that we have for Medea, for we are aware that she will act in a way that is quite obviously less than maternal.

Medea's reaction to the news of Jason's new wedding is interesting, because at first she acts in the typical manner of mourning, tearing her clothes and finally digging at her own face (153-4). Oddly, she does to herself exactly what Hypsipyle writes that she would like to do to her (6.149), and we see that Hypsipyle's revenge comes partially through Creusa but also partially through Medea herself.

The comment Medea makes at lines 173-4 forcefully reminds us of Hypsipyle's letter in two ways. First, she refers to Creusa as the *paelex*, which is a favourite term that Hypsipyle uses to describe Medea (6.81, 149), and we note the irony now in that the woman whom Hypsipyle referred to as Jason's *paelex* now has a *paelex* of her own who occupies her thoughts. Secondly, she laments that Creusa now holds the fruits of her labour, which recalls Hypsipyle's own frustration (which we saw earlier) that Medea will enjoy (6.75) the fruits of her prayers, which creates an amusing tit-for-tat connection.

---

<sup>63</sup> *Her.* 12.135, 149, 187, 193, 198.



She then dreams that Jason will make fun of how she looks (177) to his new bride, which reminds us of what Hypsipyle says about Medea's physical appearance (6.84) and makes Medea herself seem a tad sensitive about the issue.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the predictions that Hypsipyle makes about Medea at the end of her letter (6.153ff.) may not all come true, but many of them are nevertheless in accord with how things turn out for Medea in her letter. She is the mother of two and is abandoned by her husband (6.155-6) and she will be just as bitter to her children and husband as she was to her brother and father respectively (6.159-60), whom she kills and betrays, in that order. Hypsipyle's final prayers point out to us forcefully the ultimate difference between the two women: Medea is in a position in which she can still – and does – cause harm. She is the story that Hypsipyle can only foreshadow.

### **Conclusion**

Medea's letter presents a complex picture of Medea: one in which we feel at once sympathy for her plight, horror at what she is about to become, and pleasure at the various layers of irony and black humour that are present. This is neither a simple letter from a woman who has been wronged, nor from one who is about to do (and has done) certain evil deeds, nor is it merely a comic tour-de-force in which Ovid asks the reader to appreciate all of his cleverness. Rather, the letter presents both sides of Medea, while undercutting each presentation at the same time. That is, Ovid paints a portrait of her while simultaneously painting the opposite picture as well. That a reader might not

---

<sup>64</sup> A few lines later Medea accepts that Jason may not want to look at her, that he may now find her *vilis* (187), which again legitimizes Hypsipyle's point about Medea's less than pleasing countenance.

appreciate the many aspects of Medea in this letter would not show any weakness or failing on Ovid's part; rather it would only reflect on the shallowness of the reader.

## **Chapter 4: Medea in the *Metamorphoses***

### **Introduction**<sup>1</sup>

Galinsky writes that Ovid's primary goal in the *Metamorphoses* is to tell the myths in a different manner (*aliter*) than they had been told previously, whether by Callimachus or others, including himself.<sup>2</sup> In this way the poet varies the tone and content of his myths much more than the other known versions, he plays a great deal with narrative forms and also presents his tales in a way that avoids moral solutions or metaphysical questions; metamorphosis was not as interesting to him in terms of subject matter as what it could allow him to do in terms of narrative possibilities. And the story of Medea, I shall argue, allows Ovid to explore many such narrative possibilities.

The Medea whom we see in the *Metamorphoses* has not been the focal point of a great deal of study, no doubt due to the fact that Ovid makes her so hard to define in this section, and also because Ovid treats several parts of her story for which we do not have clear antecedents, such as the rejuvenation of Aeson and the murder of Pelias. When people do talk about her appearance in this text, they all too often try to see her in the light of the other stories that surround her in the *Metamorphoses* rather than in the context of her own narrative and how Ovid has previously described her,<sup>3</sup> which is what Galinsky's interpretation of the poem so helpfully invites us to consider.

---

<sup>1</sup> For *Metamorphoses* 7, I am using R.J. Tarrant's (2004) recent OCT version.

<sup>2</sup> Galinsky (1975: 4).

<sup>3</sup> Of the few scholars who have treated Medea's appearance in the *Metamorphoses*, the most notable are Newlands (1997), Segal (2001-2), Rosner-Siegel (1982), Frécault (1989), Larmour (1990), and Schubert (1989). None of these readings, however, attempt to connect the Medea in this poem with the Medeas from the *Heroides*, as I do.

The assessment that Newlands makes of Ovid's Medea provides the most apt example to which I can offer a different reading. In comparing the Medea in *Heroides* 12 to the one we see in *Metamorphoses* 7, Newlands writes favourably of the former: "By giving Medea control over the narrative [in *Her.*12], Ovid is able to smooth over the inconsistencies in her character. The few hints of Medea's dreadful powers in *Heroides* 12 do little to detract from her self-representation as an unjustly injured wife and lover, the victim of an ungrateful Jason."<sup>4</sup> There are several reasons why I choose to start with this quote. First, Newlands' sympathetic reading of *Heroides* 12 is itself inconsistent with many others – such as Jacobson and Verducci – who find it the very opposite of sympathetic. And the polarities in the various responses provide evidence for one of the biggest flaws in her reading of Medea's letter. That is, the letter is not one-dimensional, but it is in fact both sympathetic and horrific. To claim there is only one reading is to ignore the letter's complexity and, as many scholars do, it leads one to miss the point entirely.

Second, Newlands moves from a rather warm reading of Medea's letter to a far from sympathetic response to the version of Medea that Ovid gives us in the *Metamorphoses*. She writes that "The Medea of *Metamorphoses* 7 is not a coherent, rounded character. Her role as Jason's wife and the mother of his children is traditionally a powerful and complex one. But the young Medea who bares her soul at the start of Ovid's narrative becomes in her maturity a one-dimensional figure of evil that arouses

---

<sup>4</sup> Newlands (1997: 179).

neither sympathy nor revulsion.”<sup>5</sup> This shows another flaw in Newlands’ approach, for she implies that a problem exists because we do not see the same portrait of Medea that we do in the two earlier epistles from Ovid, as if Ovid were not aware what he was doing. As well, she sees her Medeas in black and white terms, where there is little room for nuance. Such a reading might be plausible if she did then not try to show how the Medea of *Metamorphoses* 7 does, in fact, have nuance and depth when compared with four other “marriage tales” from books 6-8. A similar flaw becomes apparent in her claim that Ovid’s Medea is at once an inconsistent character, but gains credibility when placed within the context of Procne, Scylla, Procris, and Orythia. I shall discuss the tenuous connection to the “marriage tales” shortly but, suffice it to say, Medea cannot be both inconsistent and consistent at the same time.

In direct opposition to Newlands, I argue that the Medea we see in the *Metamorphoses* is indeed connected to the ones Ovid gave us in the *Heroides*. Newlands herself explains why – and destroys her own argument in the process – when she writes that the portrait we have in book 7 “is neither predictable nor uniform.”<sup>6</sup> The matter of Medea’s predictability is easy to address, since one of Ovid’s guiding principles in composing the *Metamorphoses* appears to be avoiding predictability. As for uniformity, it appears that Newlands interprets this word to mean consistency, yet where she sees none I see plenty. I suggest that Ovid’s Medea is a complex character who develops in the course of the narrative and the lack of “uniformity” that we see between her various depictions serves to emphasize her complexity. Moreover, as I noted, Newlands does

---

<sup>5</sup> Newlands (1997: 178-9).

<sup>6</sup> Newlands (1997: 178).

find a type of consistency when she compares Medea to what she calls the other “marriage tales” in books 6-8. Such links, I believe, are specious at best; at worst they are deleterious to an understanding of Medea. Granted, we can look to other stories in the *Metamorphoses* to find what Ovid thinks of Medea. However, we need not do that, since Ovid has already provided us with several versions – or angles – with which we might view her narrative, to which we might also add the numerous versions Ovid’s reader might have in his memory as well. Therefore, in searching for this Medea, we need look no farther than the Medeas we already have, rather than at the other narratives in the epic.

In this chapter I shall examine the apparent changes and innovations that Ovid makes to his version of the story in the poem. He focuses on details of the myth which, as far as we can tell from what has survived, receive scant attention elsewhere – the rejuvenation of Aeson, the revenge on Pelias, and the attempted murder of Theseus – and passes over some of the more well-documented parts of the tale, such as the murders of both Absyrtus and the children. Moreover, since the binding theme of the poem is change, I shall propose that the real metamorphosis of this story is Medea herself, who moves from the state of an innocent young girl to that of an evil witch. Yet all of the changes take place within a work that is marked by its sense of playfulness – its *perpetua festivitas*, or joy<sup>7</sup> – and I shall take care not to overlook Ovid’s use of wit and irony even as his characterization appears to grow dark.

The section is also marked by its changes in tone and drama. In the beginning, Medea appears to be an innocent young girl much as she presents herself in the *Heroides*.

---

<sup>7</sup> Galinsky (1975: 159).

Later, after Jason obtains the Golden Fleece, she becomes a more forceful and imposing character. Finally, after attempting to murder Theseus, she abruptly disappears from the poem. In spite of her seemingly innocent appearance at the start, there are also plenty of darker allusions to the power that she will later display (and the murders which she will commit), which work, if not to undercut, then to add a slight counterbalance to that initial portrayal. Later, as Medea the witch begins to take over, the reader begins to feel a mixture of sympathy for her victims, while still appreciating the earlier innocent Medea. And touches of the macabre are thrown in that toy with the reader's reactions, such as in her scene with the daughters of Pelias, which is gruesome and cruel, yet is also comic in the same way that many of the other tales in the *Metamorphoses* tend to delight in gore. Nevertheless, in the course of this narrative the reader loses emotional contact with Medea. We start with an internal view of her that is akin to her letter in the *Heroides*, but we finish with an external description that only tells about her deeds, as frightful as they are, and the poem does not attempt to clarify her motives.

Just as Ovid plays with our emotional connection to Medea, he also uses her narrative to debunk the notion of Jason as an epic hero, for he appears to be weak and completely dependent on Medea within these episodes. The pace of the narrative is also highly important, since it moves from a rather slow and deliberate one at the start (as we witness her gathering herbs to rejuvenate Aeson), in which we can still appreciate both Medea's state of mind and feelings, to finally a rapid one in which the events happen very quickly and the reader is expected to fill in the parts that Ovid briefly passes over, including Medea's feelings and attitudes.

An important question to consider is how the Medea of the *Metamorphoses* relates to the one(s) we see in the *Heroides* and, more significantly, how the Medea of *Met.7* is both internally consistent as well as consistent with his other two Medeas. The answer will lie in her character development. In both *Her.12* and *Met.7* Medea begins her appearance as a naïve young girl, and in no way is the reader challenged to question the validity of that early presentation. Yet throughout her story, via allusions to the previous models, we are constantly aware of what she will become. In fact, if we are not keen enough to decipher the double meanings of Medea's words in the *Heroides*, Hypsipyle even tells us what she is capable of doing. In other words, Medea *becomes something* in both stories. Yet while *Her.12* only reveals Medea's motives from the perspective of a betrayed wife who has already killed her brother and does not otherwise wish to talk about it, *Met. 7* appears to hide her motives. Ovid never really explains what happens to Medea – what makes her cross the line, so to speak – and thus asks his readers to apply their own imaginations to his presentation and, in many ways, she develops only so far as we let her develop.

After she leaves Colchis Medea no longer behaves like a naïve girl but rather like a witch who controls the action, and appears eerily similar to some of the gods and goddesses in the epic, since, like so many of the gods, she fails at love and, just like them as well, she is capable of mighty revenge. While we cannot gauge her motivations from the text, we are still aware of them from other sources. I shall address Medea's dual nature – woman and witch/goddess, oppressed and omnipotent – and how Ovid exploits this paradox in creating a complex heroine.



### **An Introduction to Medea the Character**

Before we examine the finer points of the text, for each section we should look the role Medea plays and what likeness Ovid expects the reader to see on the surface.

In her first appearance we see three aspects to her character that are repeated throughout the segment: she is emotional/vulnerable, unreasonable, and, above all, she is passionate.<sup>8</sup> These aspects have an impact on us since they are the first ones that are brought to our attention – and they are more than a bit ominous.

Most of what we see after that is in the form of a monologue, which gives us a real insight into her character (an inner view), and through this speech we see many items – such as nouns and adjectives – that point toward Medea’s amorous side, that show her to be a sympathetic young girl in love, that reinforce the passion we have seen (9), and the overwhelming repetition of which shows that this – her love, her passion – is her predominant characteristic at this stage.<sup>9</sup> Her passion is also brought out in the simile (79-82) where, upon catching sight again of Jason, she is vividly compared to a resurgent flame.

Her youth and vulnerability are evident in her naïveté and the excessive amount of trust that she places in Jason, to the point where her faith in him – and her daydreams about her life with him – becomes almost silly.<sup>10</sup> That she is behaving irrationally we see right away when we learn that her passion overcomes her reason (10-11), which is a

---

<sup>8</sup> *luctata diu* and *frustra...repugnas* (10-11) emphasize her vulnerable and conflicted side; *ratione furorem/vincere non poterat* (10-11) shows her lack of reason; and the *ignes* and *furorem* (9-10) place her passion at the front and centre of the narrative. And this also looks forward to the disquieting way in which her passion will work hand-in-hand with her anger later in the story.

<sup>9</sup> Nouns and adjectives related to her passion: 9,10,17,19,22,25,28,48,49,60,61,73,76,77,78,82,85,87,91.

<sup>10</sup> See 16,17,22,33,27-8,44-5,49,50,55,61,68,73,77,78,85,96.

theme that is also repeated throughout the section.<sup>11</sup> These three elements – passion, youth/naïveté, and lack of reason – all coalesce to make Medea a very conflicted character here, and most of the section focuses on how she wavers between what she should and should not do.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of her actions – and in keeping with the nature of the monologue – Medea does not do much at all,<sup>13</sup> and most of the verbs are either in the passive voice or are directly related to her internal struggle and are indicative of her fluctuating emotional state.<sup>14</sup> Her role at this point is that of a helper and, as such, she is subordinate to Jason. She has not yet become the dynamic protagonist into which she soon will grow.

Another point we notice is contrast. Although she is definitely contrasted with her family,<sup>15</sup> the main distinction is with Jason. While she is vulnerable, naïve, and torn, he is cool, collected, and in no way conflicted.<sup>16</sup> And we might note the ironic antithesis in that Jason appears calm and confident yet needs Medea's help, while Medea is the opposite of confident even though she is the one with the real power to save him. We also note that Ovid has a decidedly sympathetic approach to Medea, for he tells the reader *posses ignoscere amanti* (85), a reaction that is also encouraged through her tears (91) – which contributes to our feeling sympathetic toward her as well at this point.

---

<sup>11</sup> See 16,19,20,28,91.

<sup>12</sup> See 10,11,19-20,24,37-40,42-3,44-68,69-72.

<sup>13</sup> Aside from her struggle, the only things that Medea actually does: she goes (*ibat* 74) to meet him, she speaks (72) to him, she cries (91), and she makes Jason promise (93).

<sup>14</sup> She struggles and fights with herself (10-11), she fears (16), she persuades herself (20), she burns for Jason (22), she suffers (32), she imagines that she is holding him (*tenens/haerens* 66) and she eventually stares at him when they meet (*videt* 77, *vidit* 83). Also see 50,51,67,68. Additionally, there are actions which she tells herself to do: to shake off her desire (17), later she tells herself not to hesitate and prepare to help him (47-8), and she finally tells herself to flee the crime she will commit (71).

<sup>15</sup> See 14,38,53.

<sup>16</sup> Medea's contrast with Jason: 21-2,39,26-8,39,42-4,59-68 (in which she believes that she will be safe in his arms), 84-8.

### **1-73: Jason's Arrival and Medea's Monologue**

**Medea's Character:** When the book begins the image we receive of Medea is conveyed primarily through her own voice and, although she attempts to portray herself in a positive light, many other darker aspects are also apparent, which are often the flip-side of what she is trying to say. For the most part she is initially innocent, naïve, loving, and appealing, yet each character trait carries with it distinct complications. My aim is to show how the characteristics we see in Medea also have negative sides as well, ones that will eventually contribute to her degeneration under the influence of Jason and, in turn, which will make what happens to her throughout book 7 logical and credible.

One aspect that stands out from the start, and one that makes the version of Medea that we see in lines 11-71 – during her monologue – distinct from the ones in *Heroides* 6 and 12, is that here she is talking to herself and therefore has no real reason either to conceal anything or to lie. That is, she appears to be completely raw and genuine here and, if she is bending the truth anywhere – a theme which I shall address shortly – then she is only doing so in order to trick herself into believing what she is about to do is right.<sup>17</sup>

Medea appears to be completely innocent from the way she describes herself, where she seems to be merely a young girl in the throes of her first love and therefore is impressionable and vulnerable to persuasion. This becomes clear when she comments at

---

<sup>17</sup> Newlands (1997: 183) makes a minor mistake here, but not an insignificant one, in saying that “in speaking to herself, Medea is also speaking directly to her readers, who are thus invited to engage in her personal dilemma.” That would be the case if this were an epistle, but it is instead a monologue within an epic poem, and a rather subversive epic at that, so we should therefore say that Ovid – and not Medea – is talking to his readers. In this speech he is merely letting the reader see what is happening in her interior and raw world, and letting the reader balance that with what we already know. As for Medea, she is only communicating with herself.

the outset that what she is experiencing is *aliquid certe simile huic, quod amare vocatur* (13). Yet, although she is innocent to the powers of passionate love, she is evidently not a stranger to the way that the people of Colchis greet newcomers, because she reacts so strongly to the *lex* (8) that her father gives to Jason. This reaction alone does not by necessity imply that she has either seen or been a part of such hostile treatment of foreigners before, but considering that she asks herself why her father's orders seem so harsh (13), we can reasonably infer that this may have been a standard welcome and one which she was in the habit of viewing. Thus her innocence extends only as far as this is her first real love. It does not extend to the opposite of love, for like many Colchians she is well-schooled in the world of pain and punishment, which anticipates how she will treat her brother when she flees Colchis and, moreover, how she will react when Jason betrays her love. In addition, there are still more factors which undermine her otherwise pretence of purity, for she comments that she alone will be able to save Jason from his predicament (29), which implies that she is not so innocent and naïve as to be unskilled in the magic arts.<sup>18</sup>

Because she is so innocent to the world of passionate love, we find it not so surprising that she expresses her desire for Jason in such an overwhelming way. But this passion does not merely have the innocent nature of a normal first love, and Ovid emphasizes this right from the start when he writes that she *ratione furorem/ vincere non poterat* (10-11). Her desire is a type of madness, the kind of which we know will

---

<sup>18</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 235) says that it “would be ludicrous were we forced to characterize her at this early stage as an all-powerful witch who can overcome all odds.” I cannot agree with this, for it might be ludicrous if line 29 were not staring at us and suggesting that Medea knows that she has magic that can help him. Just because Medea is young and overcome with love does not mean that the other (and later) aspects of her character do not exist at this point.

eventually cause her to act either very irrationally or even in an evil way. For a moment she refers to her madness in terms of a fear for what might befall Jason (16), but she quickly overturns this description by describing her longings as *flammas* for which she would be better off (*sanior*, 18) if only she could rid herself of them. She goes so far as to say that this madness is a *nova vis* that drags her unwilling (19), by which she means that she has no control over what she is doing.

Evidence of her lack of reason appears when we examine how she describes Jason throughout the speech. Although he never appears – and she still has yet to meet him formally – she manages to give him numerous positive and negative qualities that are merely consistent with the mood that she happens to be in while she debates what she should do. He is at once an innocent victim who is helpless (25-9) and a foreigner (21, 39); he will one day be ungrateful (43) although – no – he is honest and noble (44); he is rich, famous (50) and cultured (57-8); and everywhere throughout the passage we hear how handsome he is. What we learn of Medea from her view of Jason is that Medea really does not know herself. She is a confused girl, one who is not satisfied with her life in Colchis and who perhaps dreams of a better life in Greece (56-60). The most appropriate adjective to apply to her seems to be *impressionable*, for Jason has made a huge mark on her, and her world has been turned upside-down.

As she finishes her monologue, Medea finally decides that she will be able to withstand Jason's charms and do the right thing by rejecting him. Ovid tells us that *rectum pietasque pudorque* (72) stand before her eyes, implying that she has rejected Cupid (73). At this point we realize that all of these waves of emotion have been going

on inside of Medea *even though she still has not yet met Jason*. That is, all of this has come from merely looking at him from across a room. As strong as she appears to be at the end of her speech, we have to acknowledge that her supposed firmness at this point will only likely be very short-lived, since she is able to be swayed so easily and dramatically. In effect, we note that she is putty to her emotions and that Jason will easily change her mind.

Another quality that appears as a concomitant to the surrendering of her reason to passion is her naïveté and the excessive amount of trust that she places in Jason. However, we might wish to note that her sense of naïveté and trust does not show itself at the start of her speech. Rather, she quite wisely notes that she would be better off if she could rid herself of her passion and that what she is about to do will be *deteriora* (18-21). She also cautiously – and emotionally – predicts that Jason will likely deceive her if she helps him (40-43), an idea she immediately rejects when she contemplates his beauty (44-5).<sup>19</sup> Although she is shrewdly not so trusting that she will fail to call the gods to witness their prospective union (46-7), the thought of Jason once again does indeed cause her to cast off all delay (48) and finally become completely naïve with respect to what will happen to her. Once again, her passion defeats her mind.

Her naïveté and trust in Jason have certain daydream-like qualities, since she imagines the wondrous reception she will receive in Greece for having saved him (49-50). But the daydream does not stop there, for she also dreams of the Greek cities she will see

---

<sup>19</sup> Anderson (1972: 246) points to lines 27-8 (*quem non, ut cetera desint/ ore movere potest*) as evidence that Medea is struck exclusively by his beauty to the exclusion of any of his other possibly favourable qualities.

(57-8), claims that her head will touch the stars (61) merely because she enjoys Jason's love, and imagines that he will keep her safe as they pass through the dangers at sea, such as those posed by Scylla and Charybdis (62-67). The dreamworld in which she lives predicts her own inability to see Jason for what he really is, and even how she fails to foresee that Jason has betrayed her when they are in Corinth until after he becomes engaged to Creusa.

Her passion for Jason also leads her to become a kind of sophist as she tries to rationalize her desires.<sup>20</sup> The first words that we hear from her, after Ovid tells us that she could not defeat her passion with reason, are when she tells herself '*frustra, Medea, repugnas/ nescio quis deus obstat*' (11-12), in which she is evidently laying the blame for her desires on a divine source, a claim she later repeats in line 55, although no such divine source ever appears in Ovid's rendering of the Medea narrative.<sup>21</sup> Her attempts to make the worse case seem better continue when, desiring to save Jason, she will ask herself rhetorically, *quid enim commisit Iason?* (25). Of course she implies that the answer is "nothing at all" and, due to his youth, character and beauty (26-7), she argues that she would have to have to have been born from a tigress or to have an iron heart were she not to help him (31-2). Her arguments are very convincing, especially since the only person whom she has to persuade is herself.

---

<sup>20</sup> This is ironic because it is the same quality – sophistry – that Medea traditionally throws at Jason when she confronts him in Corinth.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson (1972: 244) makes the point that Medea's resistance to her passions makes her – along with others in the *Metamorphoses* who do the same – "much more sympathetic than the lustful, uncomplicated gods, who gratify their passions without a moment's hesitation, without the slightest moral concern." By laying the blame for her passion at the feet of a god, Medea is more openly emphasizing her own human nature.

Her sophistry – her desire to convince herself of the rightness of her wrong actions – is a potentially negative trait, for nothing good comes out of it. It appears later when she tells herself that she will call the gods to witness this very union between herself and Jason (46-7) – no doubt including the very same god whom she earlier said was causing her to feel this passion in the first place – in an attempt to assure herself that their union will be everlasting. She convinces herself that Jason will always be faithful to her and that she will be celebrated among the Greek matrons for having saved him (47-50), which are parts of the story that we know will not turn out to be true at all. All of the arguments that she employs serve one purpose: to help her sway herself into believing that her effort to help Jason is in fact a good decision and therefore has reason on its side. Some of her arguments do have more weight than others, yet the point we note is that Medea is trying to justify and rationalize an act that she knows to be wrong and against the wishes of her father.

Other potentially negative characteristics that Medea shows in this section include her murderous rage, which appears on line 42. Also, when she dreams that she will be safe with Jason (62-7), we see signs of such determination and boldness that she will later use in ways that will be decidedly negative. In a third example, Medea clearly shows the great deal of pride that she has in her status as a princess in this section, where she juxtaposes her status as a *regia virgo* (21) with Jason's as a foreigner when she asks herself how she, as a princess, can burn for such a stranger. Yet we know that her regal pride will be useless to her later on when Jason will divorce her due to her foreign status



upon finding his own *regia virgo* to marry in Corinth. In fact, her regal pride will cause a great deal of trouble then.

Not only does Medea think very highly of herself in terms of her own regal status, but she even shows a tremendous sense of pride in commenting upon how important she will be in helping Jason. She tells herself that Jason will not escape death *nisi opem tulero* (29) where we should place special emphasis on her use of the first person singular aspect of *tulero*. When she compares herself to the spawn of a tigress should she allow this to happen to Jason (32-33) we note that she sees her actions in saving him to be heroic, and definitely not those of a weak female. She further convinces herself of her excessive importance in Jason's future life when she imagines that she will be received as a *servatrix* (50) in Greece. Her pride approaches the realm of hubris when she notes that *maximus intra me deus est* (55). This in itself may be nothing more than the words of a girl who claims that Cupid is playing with her emotions, but she follows the remark by saying that *non magna relinquam, magna sequar* (55-6), which implies that she is fated to follow greater adventures by saving Jason.

Her belief in her own self-importance points to another odd aspect to Medea's self-characterization – her weakness. She presents herself as too weak to resist her own passions (18), a comment which seems fair enough. Yet she follows this by saying that she alone is strong enough to save Jason, which she even seems to turn around later when she says that she will be kept safe *gremioque in Iasonis haerens* (66), at which point we

might start to wonder about her passive-aggressive approach.<sup>22</sup> She portrays herself as a weak victim to her passions, but one who is capable of great bravery, yet one again who will need to be protected by Jason after they leave Colchis. She claims both the traditional active male role and the passive female role at the same time, and somehow the fears that she expresses just do not ring as true as they might if she did not claim such an important role in saving Jason.

Part of the picture that we see of Medea in her monologue is that of a girl whose desires are in direct conflict with her mind, which she directly says with the comment *aliudque cupido/ mens aliud suadet* (20). On the one hand, this image is particularly charming, because it is one that is easily understandable in terms of a young person in love, one whose wishes – both emotional and sexual – are in a constant state of rebellion against what she knows to be right or proper. In her favour, we can say that Medea clearly knows what she is doing is wrong (71) and this positive characteristic does shine through. But Medea is not merely suffering from an ancient form of what Phillip Roth referred to as “Portnoy’s Complaint”: the desire to behave properly that is directly opposed by one’s sexual longings. Rather, her passions are compelling her to act in an impious way *even though* she still holds onto the idea that she is a good and respectful daughter. In essence, she wants to behave properly, and her love for Jason is forcing her to re-examine her definition of altruism. In fact, it is her *pietas* – and its redirection

---

<sup>22</sup> Newlands (1997: 182) comments on the incongruity of Medea’s comment on line 66: “This from a woman whose task it will be to keep Jason safe from terrors as great or greater than the Argonauts encountered on their voyage!”

toward Jason and the excessive amounts she feels of it toward what she feels to be just – that will eventually cause her to commit so many of her well-known actions.<sup>23</sup>

Her *pietas* comes into question right away when she asks *cur iussa patris nimium mihi dura videntur?* (13) In this case we realize that she is much more faithful to her idea of right – and also to her passion – than she is to obeying her father. Later she realizes that she has to do the thing that she should not do – that is, save Jason – when she says *quamquam non ista precanda/ sed facienda mihi* (37-8), and we know that she is redefining for herself what it means to behave properly. More than that, we know that her new form of *pietas* will not be obedience to the wishes of her father, because she follows up her question of what *facienda mihi* with the rather rhetorical question as to whether she should betray her father (38).<sup>24</sup> A few lines later she lists a series of things about her life in Colchis that might excuse her act of betrayal and allow for her new definition of *pietas* (54-5): her father she calls *saevus*, her country is *barbara*, her actions toward saving Jason she says stem from the *vota sororis*, and, most curiously of all, the fact that her brother is *adhuc infans* she uses as a factor to defend her actions – but whether she means that his youth might allow her to take him with her as a hostage to live with both her and Jason in Greece or whether she means this as an excuse for murdering him we

---

<sup>23</sup> Again I take issue with Rosner-Siegel (1982: 235), who says that Medea’s “conflict is entirely human and quite natural.” To a certain extent this is correct, but only so far as all love stories are to a certain extent human and natural. That is, we as readers can relate to this emotion. However, we must also recognize that Medea’s conflict is not very natural at all in many ways, because it is rather outside the norm for a girl in love to employ her magic in rescuing her beloved from the deadly trap that her father hatched for him and to consider stealing off with her younger brother as a hostage. We can relate to the emotion, but not the situation; and, with Medea, we cannot really separate the emotion from the circumstance.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed Anderson (1972: 248) even argues that the purpose clause on line 40 shows that Medea does not hesitate “so much over duty to her father as over her suspicions that she would get nothing out of her action: she would be merely saving Jason for another woman in Greece!”

cannot be certain. The only thing we can tell is that the sight of Jason has brought her to a completely new connotation of the word *pietas*.

Nevertheless she still knows that what she is doing is wrong, and finishes her monologue by regaining control and chastising herself, referring to her actions as *culpa*, *nefas*, and *crimen* (69-71). This shows us that she still has a great deal of the old *pietas* and that her newer – and more dangerous – interpretations can only be brought to the surface through Jason's influence, which in this case merely means his presence.

**Grim Irony and Foreshadowing:** We have just seen that Medea is a primarily sympathetic character (in lines 1-73), but that many of her more noble traits also have aspects to them which can be completely negative. Here I shall show how certain words and phrases in the opening section anticipate some of the more ominous actions that will happen in Medea's future and how Ovid is appealing to an audience that is very familiar with the story. Unlike the previous examinations of irony in the *Heroides*, at this point in the *Metamorphoses* these aspects are presented in a manner that is darker rather than humorous.

The last section dealt with Medea's portrayal when she first meets Jason, and it is worth noting that many of the ways in which she characterizes herself are either the reverse of what she will become or they play off how she will treat others. First of all, I argued that she is rather honest at this stage; later on in this passage, when she is in Iolcus and Athens, Medea will dishonestly prey on the gullibility of others when she tries, respectively, to induce the daughters of Pelias to kill their father and Aegeus to murder his son Theseus. Of course, the reader will also think of how she lies by tricking Creusa,

Creon, and Jason, all in her effort to achieve vengeance against her husband. Secondly, as innocent and naïve as she seems now, after she gets involved with Jason we know that she will exploit the innocence and naïveté of her enemies, including, we might add, her own brother. The idea that we have of Medea here is that she is trusting and will be affected by the manipulation of Jason, but we know that she will in the end become the one who manipulates others. Thirdly, she mentions how she is afraid for Jason (16) and we have the picture of a young girl who is scared for the fate of her beloved, yet we know that she will soon be the one who is the cause of fear rather than the one who feels that emotion. And, as much as she seems to be more feminine than masculine, we know that she will reveal her strengths eventually in a way that will make her look much more heroic – and masculine – than Jason.

Some of the ways in which she characterizes herself are true, but nevertheless carry with them their own forms of bleak irony. That she cannot defeat her passion with reason (10-11), points to the way she will react against Jason in Corinth and, albeit obliquely, how she launches her attack against Theseus in Athens. Her comment about Jason on line 43 – *occidat ingratus!* – prefigures how she will react in such a violent and emotional way when Jason actually does betray her. Medea's monologue also ends with the explicit suggestion that she knows what proper action is, yet she still is going to choose to commit the worst action possible. From her comment *effuge crimen* (71) we infer a reference to her future crimes as much as to the act of betraying her father, for we know that shortly she will realize that murdering her children is also not the noblest action she can take, but it is still the option that she will choose. We also note how, at the

start of her monologue, she speaks about her love and passion using the imagery of fire (9, 17) and that this, of course, predicts her future use of fire in attacking her rival Creusa.

At several points Medea predicts that their relationship will come to a bad end. Even though she sees the right action that she should follow, she nevertheless notes that what she is about to do will be *deteriora* (18-21),<sup>25</sup> and we are rather all-too aware that the events to follow will be quite bad for everyone involved. She also ironically predicts that Jason will likely deceive her if she helps him (40-43), which comes true enough in Corinth. A question that Medea asks herself is also pertinent to her failed relationship with Jason story, when she says *thalamos alieni concipis orbis?* (22), by which we can easily also imagine either Medea shouting this accusation at Jason when they are in Corinth, or we can imagine the less than enthusiastic Greek reaction to Jason's new foreign wife Medea. She also, however, makes definite mistakes in her assessment of Jason, for she tells herself that he does not have the type of nobility in his soul and grace in his form *ut timeam fraudem meritique oblivia nostri* (44-5). Unfortunately she is so blinded by love that she does not see that she should fear a *fraus* and that, on his part, there will in fact be *oblivia* of her in the near future.

There are more examples of Medea not catching the underlying irony in what she says. One of the ways that she describes her emotion – as a burning fire (9, 22) – reminds

---

<sup>25</sup> Newlands (1997: 182-3) connects Medea's use of *deteriora* here with Medea's impiety in helping Jason when this action will be against the will of her father. She writes: "Her irrational passion drives her to help, not to harm." My reading of this line is more nuanced than that of Newlands, for in *deteriora* I see all of the bad things that are going to happen to Medea and not just merely the act of impiety toward her father. However, Newlands helps us by pointing out that this line is borrowed from Euripides 1078-79, when Medea is about to attack the children. But while Newlands sees the words as out of place here, I see the reference as encompassing all of Medea's future activities, and I suggest that is what Ovid wants the reader to think of as well.

us of how she will use fire against her enemies. Her emotional state is fiery, and it will also be a weapon of choice. We witness how she makes note of her own regal status (21) and calls Jason a foreigner, by which she is asserting to herself that she will be very important to him. When they arrive in Greece, however, Jason will be tempted by Creusa's regal status and Medea will be thought of as the foreigner, and the tables will be turned in a most unfavourable way for Medea. As well, while she daydreams about how she will be received in Greece, she claims that she will be called a *servatrix* (50) for having saved Jason. This word is biting irony, because she will eventually win renown (*celabrabere*, 50) for being the very opposite of a saviour – a murderess – when she is in Greece, which contradicts her pleasant fantasy of how lovely it will be for her when she arrives there (55-61).

A number of lines in this section also stand out for the grim foreshadowing that they offer and we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge them. When she tells herself that she would be better off if she could shake free of her passion (17-8), we realize that a lot of people whom she harms would be equally better off. Knowing what will happen as a result of her life with Jason, we may have the same reaction when she says that Colchis has its own supply of suitors for her to love (23), agreeing it would be better if she were to stay and marry one of them. A slight inversion comes into our minds when she asks *quid enim commisit Iason?* (25), for we know he has really done nothing at this point, but we are very conscious that eventually Jason will do some very bad things. That is, he will betray Medea, an action which will lead to her paying him back by killing all those whom he loves in Corinth.

In trying to convince herself of the human need to save Jason, Medea says that she would have to have iron or rocks in her heart to endure it (33-4), but this line makes us think of the accusation that we could throw at Medea for killing her children.<sup>26</sup> Equally her choice of verb – *conscelero* (35) – in asking herself why she hesitates to defile her eyes in watching Jason's death reminds us that she will defile her eyes in causing the deaths of both her brother and children, among others.

We have already addressed how Medea's exclamation on line 43 – *occidat ingratus!* – looks forward to how she herself will become violent in response to Jason's betrayal. An ironic aspect to this line is that in Corinth, in order to harm Jason, Medea will attack everyone except for Jason, which is a fact that does not escape the reader's notice. Also, claiming that she will call on the gods to witness their marriage serves to remind us of how strongly Medea will view that bond – and how serious she will respond when she considers that bond broken.

More allusions to her future actions appear when she asks herself if, among the other members of her family, she should leave her brother behind (51). The reader knows that Absyrtus will not be left behind, that she will instead take him with her and that this event will lead to his death. The horror related to the reference to Absyrtus is compounded when she states 3 lines later that he is *adhuc infans* (54), for we are not only forced to come to grips with the idea that she will kill her child brother – which is inconsistent with Apollonius' version, in which Absyrtus leads an army against the

---

<sup>26</sup> These same accusations are thrown at Medea in Euripides' version – both by the chorus (1279-80) and by Jason (1407), when he reproaches her for what she has done.



Argonauts as they flee – but we also see the seeds of her infanticide in Corinth in the reference to this child whom we know she will slay.

One of the reasons that Medea offers herself in favour of abandoning Colchis is that her father is *saevus* (53), but the reader, thinking of Medea's future actions, will immediately think that this particular characteristic could just as easily be applied to Medea herself. A twist on her yet-to-be-seen hostile nature becomes manifest when she mentions the first of the *magna* (56) that she will pursue, for she says that she will receive the *titulum servatae pubis Achivae* (56), when we know that she will eventually receive, if anything, a completely contrary epithet.

Returning to the fantasy life that she projects about Greece, we note that Medea dreams that her world will be better when she has left Colchis (59-61) but we realize that her life would be undoubtedly much easier if she were to choose to remain. She says *nihil illum amplexa verebor* (67) and we think of the very things that she does not fear to do in helping Jason – killing her brother and setting in motion Pelias' murder – along with other things she will not fear to do in response to no longer being able to embrace Jason. Medea will truly fear nothing, but instead of the implied meaning - that she will fear that nothing will harm her – we infer that *she will fear to do nothing*. Ultimately the grimmest form of foreshadowing comes from Medea's own realization that what she is about to do is improper, yet she still plans to embark on her plans anyway.

### **74-99: Jason Seduces Medea**

**Medea and Jason: Contrasting Characters:** When Medea greets Jason in the temple of Hecate, the reader may be surprised because we continue to see a favourable picture of Medea. In fact, our sympathies for Medea indeed grow stronger because we notice that she is now completely under the influence of her passion for Jason, and that he is going to be the key influence in leading her toward becoming the person we know so well.

The central aspect that we notice about Medea is how her feelings change at the mere sight of Jason. Ovid establishes that the ardour which she has just successfully pushed away (76) returns as soon as she sees Jason. The poet describes her passions at length, using a wide variety of fire imagery to emphasize how intensely she is moved by his presence. We start to feel that Medea is justifiably no longer in control of herself, and we can lay special emphasis on the word *justifiably* here, since Ovid himself tells us that Jason was *casu solito formosior* (84) and he clearly guides how his readers should feel about Medea when he tells us: *posses ignoscere amanti* (85).<sup>27</sup> And we do forgive her at this point – the tears she produces on line 91 help us in doing this – even though we are still aware that she will likely do many horrible things for which we will not feel so inclined to grant her exculpation.

---

<sup>27</sup> Newlands (1997: 185) writes that line 84 points to the absence of the gods in Ovid's text. Yet one could easily argue, as I do, that the words *casu solito formosior* are delivered in a firmly tongue-in-cheek manner by Ovid, since he expects the reader to be aware of the tradition that emphasizes how Venus and Cupid helped Jason in his seduction of Medea. In this way Ovid is making a sly allusion to the tradition for the learned reader without becoming bogged down by the details. We can compare this to the way that he quickly skips the murder of Absyrtus and the infanticide although, as we shall see, he does make certain comments which a literate audience would appreciate. So to say there is an absence of the gods, as Newlands does, would force us to consider everything that Ovid writes a factual and straightforward narrative, when it is anything but that.

That Medea is acting irrationally Ovid shows us by applying the epithet *demens* to her (87). We have the sense that she is an innocent young girl who is completely under that spell of a handsome stranger, one whom she views as almost a god in appearance (87-8).<sup>28</sup> Therefore it is not surprising to us that she jumps at his offer and immediately agrees to help Jason right upon hearing him put forth the promise of marriage to her (91). She may know that what she is about to do is wrong (92-3), in the sense that she is about to betray both her father and homeland, but she believes that saving Jason somehow serves as a greater good, because she is being true to her passion and love for him. Nevertheless, her enthusiasm does not blind her so much that she forgets to make Jason repeat his promise, which in turn casts Medea in an even more sympathetic light in the eyes of the reader, since she is placing herself completely in his hands, ready to be remade by her trustworthy new husband.

One of the most interesting aspects about the Medea we see in Colchis is that for a moment we get a glimpse of the Medea who might have been if she had not met Jason. She appears to be innocent, kind, and an otherwise good daughter who is brought down by her one overwhelming flaw: her passion for Jason that is so strong it leads her to trust him unequivocally.

Since Ovid very clearly states that Medea is so blinded by love that the reader can forgive her for what she does, then a reasonable question to ask might be whether the reader can forgive Jason as well, since he is the one who influences Medea to betray her father and homeland. Jason makes his appearance in this part as a man on a mission, an

---

<sup>28</sup> Anderson (1972: 253) points out how Ovid uses the epic formula *Aesone natus* (84) in referring to Jason, which thereby makes him seem even more understandably god-like to Medea.

operator who wants to trick the rather innocent Medea into helping him. While we might be reaching too far to say that he is a malevolent character here – since he is trying to save himself, after all – the sense we have of him is that he is aware of the power that he has over this young girl and uses this power to trick her into helping him. More pointedly, Ovid portrays Medea’s passion as being both overwhelming and genuine, but he portrays Jason as being rather shrewd and calculating.<sup>29</sup>

We have already seen the effect that Jason’s appearance has had on Medea, and Ovid leads us to believe that Jason is aware of this, for he wastes no time in telling us how Jason takes her right hand (89) and asks for her help in a lowered voice (90). These actions in and of themselves do not appear to be any more than forms of supplication and, as such, could be thought of as rather virtuous of Jason. However, Ovid adds a third action from Jason, when he tells us that he *promisitque torum* (91), which is something that indeed makes his plea much greater than simple supplication, since he is promising her marriage.<sup>30</sup> And this is the promise that Jason must have known would seal the deal with Medea, for Ovid then immediately turns to Medea’s reaction, who, while crying profusely (91), makes Jason repeat the promise of marriage that he has just made (92-4).

---

<sup>29</sup> Newlands (1997: 184-5) notices that there is a lack of focus on Medea’s magic arts here, but again we cannot say that her magic is therefore missing, for this episode has two distinct references to it, which act as bookends for the episode. First, the meeting takes place in Hecate’s shrine (74) and, second, their meeting ends with Medea teaching Jason how to use her magic herbs (98-9). Again, this is an appeal to the audience’s knowledge of the story, and the irony comes from this. We could also note another irony here: that Medea will soon use her herbs in a way that will make Jason the opposite of *laetus* (99). Segal (2001-2: 12-13) notes those undertones of magic and comments that Medea’s earlier use of magic in this narrative is to help, but that later on her magic will be used to cause harm.

<sup>30</sup> Glenn (1986: 88) comments: “Jason seems to have scouted out the situation, determined who was the likeliest to give the kind of assistance needed, made up his mind to offer himself in return, and found the proper occasion. Hence, one may conclude that Jason is no romantic teenager, but a man on the lookout for the main chance.”

Of his own volition Jason quickly swears by two gods (as well as by his own successes and dangers), and his choice of deities confirms for Medea his trustworthiness and, for us, his shrewdness. That the two gods he mentions are so dear to Medea is no coincidence, nor should we imagine it to be. Jason is an operator and he is aware that she would be more likely to help him if he were to mention her gods rather than his.

Although we might feel rash in criticizing Jason at this point, we should note that nowhere does Ovid let us know his feelings. That is, while we are presented with overwhelming evidence of Medea's passion for Jason, we nevertheless are never told how Jason really feels about her in return, other than hearing that he rather unromantically promises her the *torus* when he thinks it will convince her to help him. And our suspicion that he is indeed more calculating than romantic in his promises to Medea is confirmed by Ovid at the end of Jason's list of promises when the poet adds the summarizing transition word *creditus* (98).<sup>31</sup> By saying that he is believed, Ovid is implying that Jason's primary purpose in making the offer of marriage to her, and in swearing all of his oaths, was done in an effort to convince Medea of his sincerity – and we might even say in order to trick Medea into believing that he is being honest. Once he is in fact *creditus* by Medea, Ovid wastes no time in letting us know that he takes the magic herbs and then rushes off on his merry way (*laetusque*, 99), having successfully extracted exactly what he wanted from Medea with the only cost to himself having been what appears to be a rather flippant promise of marriage, the sincerity of which we can only guess at.

---

<sup>31</sup> The alternate reading – *creditur* – actually makes Jason appear more conniving than this version.

The most disturbing aspect about this episode is not that Jason is necessarily lying to Medea, for we cannot know that for certain. The worst that we can say with confidence is that he himself is a young man who likes to make big promises, many of which he may eventually forget. But, while we cannot know for certain that he does not intend to keep his promise, we can with assurance say that his highest priority is that Medea believes him, which does not seem like something that an honest man would worry about. Thus, the most disturbing aspect is that we have Medea on one side, who is passionately in love with Jason, and, on the other side, we have Jason, who is very shrewdly utilizing her passion to his advantage. If this is a romance, then it is decidedly one-sided, and Jason, while not completely evil, does appear to be using Medea to a great deal here and consequently makes himself seem deeply unsympathetic and makes us feel even more for Medea.

**Hints and Foreshadowing:** For the most part the references to future events in this section can be divided into two parts, for they tend to anticipate either Medea's mad fury or Jason's eventual betrayal – providing us again with another unsettling undercurrent.

The signs that point toward Medea's frenzied rage almost overwhelm us, for over a span of seven lines (77-83), Ovid finds multiple ways to describe her passion as a flame that reappears with the sight of Jason.<sup>32</sup> We find out that she is lit up when she sees Jason and are reminded of how she will be lit up with rage when she sees that Jason has taken a

---

<sup>32</sup> Newlands (1997: 183) notes the importance of fire in describing Medea's passions and notes both its psychological significance as well as the connection to the fire-breathing bulls. However, she does not point out the greater irony here: that fire will become a weapon for Medea as much as it a curse for her now.

new wife. But the flame itself does more than look forward to her eventual anger, which is the opposite of love; rather it also anticipates how she will deal with Creusa and Creon in Corinth – by sending a crown/robe that fills the wearer with flames. Ovid illustrates Medea’s rising passion by means of an epic simile (79-81), one which we might more appropriately associate with warfare, and in this case the subtle allusion to combat is right on the mark when we realize that Medea’s passion will eventually lead to such a battle.

Ovid emphasizes that Medea is not herself when he calls her *demens* (87), which is used here to explain how strong her love is for Jason. Yet this also reminds us that she will soon be *demens* with respect to Jason, but the emotion will be one of hate rather than love. That her madness now is intended to be viewed as somewhat sweet and endearing we discover when the poet tells us that we could forgive her for loving Jason so strongly (85). Yet this line also reminds us of the action – and the hatred – for which we will not be able to forgive Medea so easily.

Medea herself prepares us for the irony in Jason’s words, for she writes *nec me ignorantia veri/ decipiet, sed amor* (92-3). On one level she is right, because she is being deceived by love, but not in the way that she thinks, for we cannot imagine that she anticipates that Jason is eventually going to betray her.<sup>33</sup> Rather, she is merely talking about how her love for Jason is compelling her to act in a way that is harmful both to her

---

<sup>33</sup> This is contrary to Newlands (1997: 184), who says of this line that Medea “is frankly aware of the power of her own self-deception, which she is helpless to stop.” I think in this case Newlands is confusing the ironic double-meaning that Ovid expects the reader to have with Medea’s own intention. We cannot imagine that Medea actually imagines that her relationship with Jason will turn out so badly; rather, she just realizes that she is about to do something dangerous by leaving her homeland and throwing her lot in with this handsome stranger. What makes Medea so endearing, in fact, is that she does not see what is going to happen to her. She is still very much in a hopeful state of mind. Anderson (1972: 254) offers an insightful interpretation of Medea’s comment, pointing out that she essentially saying that her *amor* has defeated her *ratio*, which seems to be more in line with what Medea means.

father and homeland. Thus we note the irony in that love will deceive her, but it will be in a manner that she does not yet realize. Of course, a second layer of irony is present as well – and one which we can easily surmise – since Medea herself will soon employ her own mask of love and friendship, as well as play off others' ignorance of truth, when she commits her murderous campaign against the likes of Absyrtus, Pelias, Creusa, Creon, her children, and Theseus.

As we just noted, in this case what deceives Medea is not her love of Jason but rather Jason himself. And Jason forcefully brings forth the fact that he will eventually betray her by asserting how faithful he plans to be to her. The saddest irony perhaps is that he does not have to make many of these promises to Medea, for we are led to believe from Ovid's description of her passion that she will help him even without the guarantee of marriage. So, in effect, Jason, willingly and unprovoked by Medea, of his own accord makes the promise that he will eventually break and inadvertently traps himself. Of course, once he tells her that he will marry her, Medea then wisely makes him swear to it, and the oaths that he swears just serve to remind us of how bitter Medea will feel when he does break his promise to her. Curiously the final item by which he swears is his own dangers (*tanta pericula*, 97), and this is a fitting way for him to end, because we note that Medea will be the cause for so many of his *pericula* once he turns away from her.

#### **100-158: Jason's Trials and Medea's Help**

During Jason's trials in Colchis (100-48) and while he steals the Golden Fleece (149-58), we still retain a sympathetic image of Medea, and one that undercuts Jason's heroism. Along the way, we begin to understand the vital importance of Medea's help,



but the powers that Ovid gives her are unsettling at the same time, because we know how angry she will feel when Jason eventually forgets about all that she did to help him. This also brings out his later ingratitude and provides logical motivation for her violent reaction to it. Moreover, this passage highlights her transition from an innocent young girl to that of a powerful, albeit as-of-yet good, witch. Her magic powers, which are only briefly and occasionally mentioned at 1-99, are now developed and are seen actually in action and against formidable opponents – which is all a part of the transition. It will be more helpful if we look at how Ovid treats these two episodes separately.

**Medea the Character:** While Jason appeared to be the one who held sway over Medea in the first part, here Medea is presented as the silent force who determines the actions as Jason goes out to meet his trials. After she gives Jason the herbs (98) no direct mention is made of her again until line 134. She appears only in two blocks in the middle of the trials<sup>34</sup> – but controls the eventual outcome. However, the *medicamina* (116) that she gives Jason provide an indirect reference to her power. Otherwise she acts by watching, ensuring that everything runs according to plan, and only resurfaces in the story when she fears that Jason may be in trouble (134), at which point she prays to the gods that they lend him some extra help (138), for which she thanks them after the trials are over (147). Thus we are made aware of her role as a witch (and her vital contribution) at several points.

The main features that we see from the presentation of Medea here are that she is a powerful witch and yet still a completely sympathetic character. The nouns directly

---

<sup>34</sup> See 134-38: 144-48.

related to her emphasize either her essential goodness (toward Jason) or her magical powers,<sup>35</sup> which also holds true for the adjectives.<sup>36</sup> As for her actions, the verbs that describe her in a passive way present her as a young girl in love, while the more active ones point to her role as an emerging witch.<sup>37</sup> She is very much a part of the action, yet she is somehow above it and, although she is very emotionally involved with what happens, she is forced to be aloof from its eventual outcome. We are made to feel for her twice, and we are impressed by her twice as well. We are also made to understand that Medea saves Jason and, now that she has become more noticeably a witch, we are impressed by her and her achievements, which, at this point, are completely benevolent.

In taking the Fleece (149-58), Medea is not mentioned as the subject, but she is the only person who could be capable of carrying out the series of verbs (152-3), especially since these words are described in a way that make their speaker seem especially powerful (154). In this was she is foregrounded as the one doing things (as a witch). And yet, even though she is built up so strongly as the one who steals the Fleece, the passage ends with Medea back in a submissive role as one of Jason's *spolia altera* (157).

### **100-148: The Trials in Colchis**

An important distinction between this version of the trials and the ones in Pindar (*Pyth.* 4.224-27) and Apollonius (3.1246-1407) is that Ovid simultaneously plays up

---

<sup>35</sup> Medea's power: 116,136,137,138,148 (2),149,152,153; her innocent side: 145,146. We can note that the epithet *barbara* (144) somehow evades both categories.

<sup>36</sup> Only one adjective (*frigida*, 136) plays up her innocent side, while the others all show her strength or that of her magical powers: 134,137,146.

<sup>37</sup> Passive verbs (in the sense that Medea does not move the action): 134,135,136,144,145,146); active verbs: 134,137,138,148.

Medea's growing importance in the narrative (and her role as a powerful witch) while playing down Jason's role in the trials. The two earlier accounts portray Jason as heroic in accomplishing his tasks. Pindar paints Jason as sincere and fair in his dealings, one who may have seduced Medea yet one who also makes her an honest offer of marriage. Rather than being rescued by a heroic Medea, Pindar's Jason listens to her sage advice (4.233), then he accomplishes his tasks as a βιατὰς ἄνθρω (4.236), and we are left with the impression that he behaves heroically even though Medea tells him what to do.<sup>38</sup> Equally, in Apollonius we witness a lengthy scene in which Jason alone performs the rituals that Medea recommends (3.1163-1224) before the spotlight is placed exclusively on him as he overcomes all of the trials himself (3.1225-1407), again having listened to Medea's advice. Jason is diminished a bit in Apollonius, as is shown through how Medea's charm makes him strong and dauntless (3.1256ff.) and her brief advice regarding the earth-born men (3.1364) – yet the main focus is on Jason and his deeds. Clauss writes that the Medea of the *Argonautica* is somewhere between a helper-maiden and a hero,<sup>39</sup> but we can say with confidence that the Jason we see there is definitely portrayed heroically – he is just the type of hero who is as good at resolving conflicts as he is at behaving heroically.

But Ovid's Jason is almost non-existent in the trials, merely the instrument who carries out what Medea's magic allows him to do, and we feel almost as if anyone, with her help, could accomplish what he does. Moreover, unlike the two previous versions,

---

<sup>38</sup> We may note how O'Higgins (1997) treats Pindar's Medea: since she is writing principally about Medea, she thus gives her a much more prominent place in the poem than the text implies she deserves.

<sup>39</sup> Clauss (1997: 151).

Ovid uses this part of the story as a type of transition in Medea's character development, where he emphasizes the connection between her budding role as a powerful witch and the fundamental importance of her assistance in saving him. We may see Jason at work, but we see really Medea's hand guiding everything.

Jason is mentioned very sparsely throughout the section and most of the time he seems to be a cardboard cut-out, for we never see that he is either doing anything heroic or even that he believes he is doing anything heroic. After the bulls are described at length (104-10) we learn that *Aesone natus* (110) goes out to meet them. This patronymic might seem to give him the aura of an epic hero,<sup>40</sup> and the continued fearsome description of the bulls (111-14) would help foster the idea that he is someone who does not back down from such impossible tasks. Yet following the juxtaposition between the fear the Argonauts have for his safety and the description of how Jason does not feel the bulls' fiery breath (115) any sense of Jason's heroism abruptly falls away, because we learn that the reason why he can so easily do these things without fear is that *tantum medicamina possunt* (116). That is, Medea's magic has paved the way for him to succeed and everything is thus arranged ahead of time; which is why the line about how Jason soothes the bulls with his *audaci...dextra* (117) is tinged with such biting irony, since his *audacia* springs directly from her helping *medicamina*, and it hardly takes a hero to win a match that is fixed. On the contrary: he is only heroic in the sense that he looks the part to others – but playing a hero is not the same as being one.

---

<sup>40</sup> Anderson (1972: 256) says of the scene: [Ovid's] "flamboyant use of 'epic' vocabulary gives the whole scene a melodramatic quality." He also makes the case that the allusions to "humble occupations" in the similes in 106-7 "raise questions about the poet's tone: is he being slyly irreverent toward the myth or is he attempting to be vivid? One suspects the former."

Right after Jason sows the seeds and the earthborn men spring up (121-30) we witness the only moment in this section which contains any type of either doubt or genuine amazement – other than that expressed by the onlookers. This happens, curiously enough, through Medea's eyes, and her worry that her spells will not be strong enough to help her lover (136). This line itself helps explain our ambivalence toward Jason's heroic deeds, since we learn that Medea *tutum fecerat illum* (134) – which again reaffirms for us that Medea is the author of his success, thereby undercutting his heroism. Medea's reaction in this section is significant, for her doubts about the efficacy of her potions helps achieve two points: first, it reinforces the idea that Jason is only able to succeed due to her aid and, secondly, it helps make her appear to be even more sympathetic and appealing in our eyes, since she is so worried by what is happening that she adds extra protection for Jason as he fights against the earth-born men.

Although several scholars have argued that Jason comes up with the idea to throw the rock on his own – that this is a sign of him doing something heroic independent of Medea – we need only look at the stark juxtaposition between Medea's fear and prayer to the gods (135-38), where she calls on *secretasque...artes* (138), and Jason's sudden ability and decision to throw the stone (139-40) to realize that Medea is the one who brings this about.<sup>41</sup> This is not a mere coincidence and Ovid does not expect us to see it as one. At the end of the scene the poet even gives extra evidence to discredit the theory that Jason may have done something heroic here when he writes how Medea secretly

---

<sup>41</sup> Glenn (1986: 89) and Rosner-Siegel (237) argue that Jason throws the stone through his own cleverness and not through Medea's help. Not only is there no evidence of this in Ovid's text, but Rosner-Siegel destroys her own argument by mentioning that Apollonius clearly has Medea tell Jason to do this (3.1056ff.).

gives *carminibus grates et dis auctoribus horum* (148) for supporting her in her efforts to help Jason including, we can infer, the rock that Jason suddenly throws. By this Ovid is telling us that the gods were involved in the rock incident, that Medea asked them to do it, and that Jason in fact did nothing except play the role of a hero.

Ovid does not ascribe many qualities to Jason– he goes out to meet the bulls (111,115) when he knows that they will be easily subdued by him and he is finally granted the title victor (143) by his crew – and, oddly enough, by Medea too – even though by then we realize that this title cannot be taken seriously. Our attitude toward him is partially formed by the reaction of the crowd watching the trials, since Ovid never lets us inside Jason’s head during these events nor does he address any thoughts or fears that he might have. We are told, for example, how Jason’s crew look on in fear at what is happening (115,120,133,142) and eventually congratulate him for his work (142),<sup>42</sup> and we also hear how the Colchians marvel (120) at how he subdues the bulls. But our sense of amazement is always cut short by the knowledge that all of this has been arranged to turn out the way it does.

And we are not led to marvel at Jason’s deeds per se, but rather at the magic that allows him to do these things so easily,<sup>43</sup> and Ovid guides us very clearly with the comment *tantum medicamina possunt*. In fact, Jason appears to be secondary in importance to Medea’s magic, since, after receiving his instructions from her (99), he

---

<sup>42</sup> Anderson (1972: 258-9), noting Ovid’s clever use of zeugma in line 133, which he calls “improbable,” says that it is intended “to keep his audience amused and free from the slightest trace of involvement in the story.”

<sup>43</sup> Anderson (1972: 258) writes that “Ovid focuses on the marvelous throughout this scene, setting it off sharply from the pathos of Medea’s tortured passion.”

merely carries out the tasks that are given him.<sup>44</sup> The reason that Jason stays in the background, we discover, is that this section is intended to showcase Medea's burgeoning powers. She helps him at every moment he might appear to be heroic, thereby effectively undermining his heroism.

Instead of building up Jason, one thing that this section highlights is the marvellous aspects of the monsters that Jason must face, which instead showcases Medea's strength in subduing them, and it also emphasizes how much Jason will owe Medea in the future. The appearance and characteristics of the bulls is described at length (104-10,11-14) and they are portrayed in a way to make them seem undefeatable. But they are then quickly and effortlessly defeated – by Medea's magic (116). The same applies to the earthborn men (121-30), who are also meant to be perceived as an unstoppable force – until Medea's prayer forces them to be stopped, that is. These deeds are not human in orientation, but rather miraculous, and this is ominous foreshadowing because it reminds us that Medea is very powerful and should not be crossed.

As for Medea, in this section she herself does not appear until the very end (134-38,144-48), but we know that she has been controlling the events from a distance throughout (116,134), and this is further confirmed by the prayer she makes which conjures forth the trick to dispel the earth-born men. She is still very much in love with

---

<sup>44</sup> Newlands (1997: 185-6) and Rosner-Siegel (1982: 236) both think that the role of Medea's magic is downplayed in this section, which I argue is a complete misreading of the scene. We are told that Jason cannot survive these trials without Medea's magic (116) and Ovid later refers to her as the *muneris auctorem* (157), which leads to the logical conclusion that he accomplished these things only thanks to Medea. Rosner-Siegel is correct in saying that Medea's human side is put on display here – along with “the supernatural aspects of Aeetes' challenge” (p.236) – but no-one can make an effective argument that Jason does anything special. In fact, the very opposite occurs. We know that he is never in danger and our attention is turned to Medea and her reaction to what happens.

Jason – we know this because she is afraid for him – but she also appears to be a competent and aloof operator, one who knows her powers and her connection to the gods. Rather than join in the festivities in the end – an act which could only lead to trouble for her – she stays quietly in the background and thanks the gods, which indicates a type of confidence, patience, and single-mindedness in her magical arts that should strike us as disturbing. She is most unlike a girl in the throes of first love but instead has the happiness of a witch who secretly shares the delights of her success with the gods who helped her.

The placement of Medea at the very end of the trials is very important in this scene, for just as the trials began with Medea's advice to Jason (98-99), the fact that they end with her appearance highlights her prominence, and her emphatic position at 144-8 is yet another reminder that her magic has been of such a vital help to Jason, which also serves to completely undercut his heroism. We leave the trials with these thoughts uppermost in our minds.

Yet in spite of an otherwise positive characterization of Medea, there are still more distinct dark undercurrents, which lead us to anticipate how she will react in the future, and we can witness Medea's potential change in character if we examine the ironies and foreshadowing present in this scene, which come rather fast and furious at the end of the trials. In terms of foreshadowing, as much as Medea is afraid for Jason, she is ultimately a confident and detached manipulator of events here who stays in the background after having achieved her aims. The reason for this is that she does not want her family to know what she has done – in effect, she lies to them – which leads us to



think about how easily she can trick people into overlooking her treacheries. She is betraying her family and playing a dangerous game, much as she will do with others in the future. Also, Jason may appear to be the victor, but it is really Medea who wins, and we know that winning – defeating her enemies – will be very important to her in the near future, which anticipates how she likes to fix her contests ahead of time and create her own rules. Even more foreshadowing appears when she elicits the gods to help her in her plans, which makes us think of how she will use them to assist her when she needs a chariot to make her many escapes.

Medea's apparent humility and Jason's arrogance in accepting the title victor both show elements of irony. As we noted, Medea is content here to let Jason be called victor, and she does not wish or need to have the recognition for saving him but is pleased just to thank the gods for their help when all is over. This is the case because she knows that she has been so powerful and, as such, she has earned Jason. But when Jason celebrates with his crew – thereby ignoring Medea's role – we are easily reminded that he will soon forget how responsible she was in saving him, and also that Medea will in turn demand that Jason acknowledge that she was the one who was in charge of all this. At this moment the lack of acknowledgment of Medea's role is not important, but the irony is that it later will be deathly important.

Ovid's sudden reference to Medea as *barbara* (144) also has layers of foreshadowing and irony. In this instance he means that she is foreigner and should therefore be wary of showing her joy at the Greek victory – especially to her parents. Yet, as a *foreigner*, the term *barbara* also anticipates how Medea will stand in relation to

the Greeks – in particular, Creusa – when they later arrive in Greece, where she will eventually be scorned for her foreign ways. Thus the epithet foreshadows how Medea and her magic will be thought of as an “other” and she will face a different type of awkwardness at being called a *barbara* than the kind she faces now in Colchis. However, we also sense the other potential meaning of the word *barbara* – ‘barbarian, savage’ – for we think about her future actions, which will be things that a humane being would not commit. Yes, she is a foreigner, and this will eventually turn out to be sore point for her in Greece, and she will indeed eventually become a barbarian as well. None of these readings are obvious to the actors here, but the reader senses them all the same.<sup>45</sup>

One final irony appears when we learn that Medea was hindered by her sense of *pudor* and her *reverentia famae* (145-46) in not coming forward to show that she helped Jason. This is a clear reminder that after these events she will feel no such modesty or shame in demanding what she sees as her rightful compensation, and it also reminds us that one of the reasons Medea eventually wants to strike back at Jason is related to her own *fama* in that she does not want to let her enemy go unpunished. Later Medea’s sense of these two terms will be deeply altered, and they will cause her to strike out rather than keep operating from the shadows.

Finally, reflecting upon Medea’s silent nature we might realize that, in not going forward to embrace Jason, she is emphasizing the control she has over herself. In a way,

---

<sup>45</sup> Anderson (1972: 260) raises another explanation for the term *barbara*, saying that Ovid does this “only to mark the contrast between the natural loyalty of Jason’s men and the guilty, even treacherous passion linking this woman and the Greek.” Unfortunately, I cannot agree with this, for the very reason that Medea’s help and love here is entirely appropriate – because she saves the man she loves. No-one is accusing her of any improper deeds or passion here. If anything, she is behaving quite properly, since her father is trying to kill Jason. Yes, there is a contrast implied with this word, but it forces us to think forward to when they are together in Corinth.

by giving her family the appearance of still being a good daughter, she is providing evidence of how she can manipulate people and lie, for this scene shows how she lies to everyone save herself and Jason, and Jason himself does not even seem to appreciate how she is lying here. Ultimately we are conditioned to expect the worst from Medea, but her almost total control, and the way she exercises that control from the shadows, makes us wary of her future role as an operator of events that will show her to be far from endearing. Jason may be playing her now, but we know that Medea will be the one who plays people and moves events in the future. We see a Medea who can use people at will, just as she will do in Corinth and other places. Newlands says that the first half of the narrative does not prepare us for the Medea of the second half who “appears as an accomplished witch and scant attention is paid to her feelings or to motives for her deeds.”<sup>46</sup> This idea is far from the truth. Granted, Ovid is not writing a standard narrative but, in his own way, he is giving us plenty of hints – he is just asking us to meet him half-way.

#### **149-158: Stealing the Fleece**

This section further highlights the growing transition of Medea from the young girl that she was into the powerful witch that she becomes, and the role of Jason is further diminished. As the Fleece is removed we begin to see traces of the Medea who will appear throughout the second half, as Ovid makes her the active agent in taking it, which

---

<sup>46</sup> Newlands (1997: 186).

again strengthens her important role in saving Jason and emphasizes her transition from a young girl into a powerful witch.<sup>47</sup>

The scene opens with a vivid description of the snake that guards the Fleece (149-51), which builds up the significance of Medea's magic and helps us understand why she will be so angry at him later for his ingratitude. We know that she is the one who puts the snake to sleep because the poet gives us two verbs – *sparsit* (152) and *dixit* (153) – to which he does not affix subjects. However, the actions that he describes - in particular, how this person *said* words which brought peaceful sleep and how this person provided magical *sucus* – all lead toward the conclusion that Medea is the only one who could be lulling the snake to sleep. Such a conclusion is confirmed by Ovid's description of these words as *quae mare turbatum, quae concita flumina sistunt* (154), results that are so awe-inspiring that we can only believe they are spoken by someone who is well-versed in such matters. Thus once again Medea controls the action and Jason comes in to take the credit for doing something that is far from heroic.<sup>48</sup>

Jason may appear to be significant because Ovid describes him as both *heros* *Aesonius* (156) and *victor* (158), but we know that it is really Medea's magic that has

---

<sup>47</sup> Pindar (*Pyth.* 4.249-50) makes Jason explicitly responsible for stealing the Fleece, since the poet has the same subject perform the act of killing the snake and stealing Medea, which means that Medea cannot be the one who kills the serpent. Apollonius plays up Medea's importance in this adventure, since we learn that she is the one who puts the serpent to sleep (4.145-61) and also that Jason was frightened as he followed her (πεφοβημένος, 4.149). Ovid appears to be following the tradition of the *Argonautica*, since Jason plays a subordinate role here as well, yet Ovid's version diminishes him still further.

<sup>48</sup> Both Glenn (1986: 89) and Rosner-Siegel (1982: 237) argue that Jason takes the Fleece and does all of these magical acts on his own. Rosner-Siegel's reasoning is that the epithet *heros* implies that Jason could be strong enough to this. However, she misses the ironic aspect to this word, since we are meant to think of Jason as distinctly less than heroic, in that he is snatching something that Medea has allowed him to take away. This exemplifies an ever-present danger involved in irony: it can only be effective if the reader appreciates it. Rosner-Siegel, it appears, misses it completely.

done all of the work and that Jason's job is effectively not important. A *heros* is one who does heroic things, a man who acts heroically or bravely, also a noble who usually has divine parentage to some degree,<sup>49</sup> and a *victor* is one who defeats an enemy in a conquest – and Jason has done neither of those actions here. Aside from our knowledge that Medea alone is responsible for the theft, the irony in these epithets is further emphasized in a number of ways. First of all, Ovid grants a great deal of textual prominence to the snake (149-51) and the powerful magic that Medea uses to subdue it (152-54), and in turn he gives precious little prominence to Jason. Instead we just learn that he takes possession of the Fleece when all is safe and after *somnus in ignotos oculos ubi venit* (155), which does not make him appear to be heroic at all. This once more presents a picture of an action that could be accomplished by anyone, thereby completely negating the impact of the epithet *heros*.

Secondly, connected to the theme of textual prominence is the pace at which Jason takes the Fleece. The theft happens so quickly – in just four words (*auro/ heros Aesonius potitur*, 155-56) – that the action seems rather anticlimactic. What makes this particularly odd is that the whole purpose of Jason's journey is to obtain this Fleece and yet the theft happens with such little fanfare or heroic descriptions. He takes it because Medea paves the way for him to do it, and Ovid does not provide any special adjectives to describe either him or his achievement other than the ironic epithet *heros*. Also, the verb Ovid chooses to describe Jason's heroic achievement – *potitur* – undermines and minimizes

---

<sup>49</sup> *OLD*, s.v. *heros* 2 (“a man with heroic qualities, hero”).

any claim to heroism, since he does not do anything other than *take possession of* the thing which Medea has provided for him.

While the words *heros* and *victor* point out that Jason's behaviour was far from that of a heroic victor, we notice other ironies when we hear that he left *superbus* with his spoil, which is the Golden Fleece. *Superbus*, of course, has various meanings. We have to assume that Ovid means that Jason was 'exultant' and 'glorying' in his spoil of war.<sup>50</sup> But if this is so, we know that he is exultant for the wrong reason, since he himself in fact did so little.<sup>51</sup> Instead he should be expressing gratitude for Medea's help, because she did everything for him. Another potential meaning of *superbus* shows us predominantly negative connotations, where the implied meaning is to have *an excessive amount of pride*, which we might call *arrogant*.<sup>52</sup> And we realize that Jason is rather arrogant in believing that he achieved anything in taking the Fleece, so we see that *superbus* ironically implies 'arrogant' even though Ovid also means that he is 'glorying.' There is also another layer of bitter irony to the use of the word *superbus*, since Jason's foolish pride in his own abilities will lead him to eventual ruin. He forgets that Medea saved him, and this is a fact that he would be wise to remember – since the woman who had the power to save him also has the power to ruin him.

Returning to the pace of the narrative, we also note that Ovid quickly skims over the issue of their marriage with the two words *cum coniunge* (158) as if the wedding was not very significant. These lines would seem to reflect Jason's point of view – since he is

---

<sup>50</sup> OLD, s.v. *superbus* 1d.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson (1972: 261) says of *superbus*: "inasmuch as Jason himself has accomplished so little, the adjective *superbus* causes smiles."

<sup>52</sup> OLD, s.v. *superbus* 1a.

the one who is taking all of the *spolia* as he leaves – and we note that the wedding is also not given much elaboration or description, which suggests how little weight Jason gives the whole matter. But the wedding is very significant in Medea’s eyes. It means the world to her, yet is a mere trifle to him. And we also know that Medea will soon show us how seriously she takes the matter – when Jason tries to leave her – and in turn we recognize that Jason should be giving much more consideration to his marriage than he is doing, for we know that his cavalier attitude will eventually come back to haunt him.

Jason’s lack of regard for Medea is brought out in the stark juxtaposition between the brief description of Medea as a *coniunx* and the way she is mentioned on the previous line as *spolia altera* (157). Clearly this is a sign that he does not recognize how powerful she can be, that he is not as grateful as he should be, since he treats her like a *spolium* which he obtained in combat.<sup>53</sup> All of this might make us wonder what kind of *spolium* he thinks she is, and that he believes he has more power over her than she does over him. From the very next scene in which he asks her to save his father, we learn that he apparently thinks she is the kind of *spolium* who is supposed to perform magic for him. Interestingly, Medea, as we know, will be quite happy to use her magic to assist him – she is an altogether willing *spolium* – but she will feel this way only so long as he continues to recognize her as his *coniunx*.<sup>54</sup> These two terms in this case are deeply intertwined, for when Jason dismisses Medea as his wife he will also find out how dangerous it is to lose her as a *spolium*, and that she is the one with the real power. This reminds us of the

---

<sup>53</sup> OLD, s.v. *spolium* 2.

<sup>54</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 237) says that by calling Medea both the *muneris auctorem* and *spolia* “Jason’s materialistic evaluation of Medea’s worth is brought to the fore.” Citing the lack of love present in the lines, she also dismisses the words *cum coniuge* as “quasi formular” and therefore lacking weight. Thus, she argues, Jason does not properly value all that Medea has done for him.

grim irony in that Medea is not the kind of *spolium* that Jason should be taking with him in the first place. When he rejects her as a *coniunx* she will give him nothing but trouble, and she will do the same to anyone she meets in the Greek world.

Just as Jason will soon find out that he does not have the kind of possession over Medea that the verb *potior* or the term *spolia* might suggest, we also realize that the term *spolium* when used in reference to the Fleece contains its own element of humour. It may be the very definition of a spoil, which is a skin, hide or fleece,<sup>55</sup> yet spoils in epic are the kinds of things that heroes bring back after they complete heroic actions. And we know that Jason has done nothing at all heroic, and therefore his very *spolia* work to further undercut his heroism and show us that Ovid hardly thinks that he is a *victor* who is returning to Iolcus. Once again Medea's magic has paved the way for him and we see her developing into the scary creature that we know so well.

### **159-296: Medea's Changing Character – Overview of the Rejuvenation**

At the start of book 7 we noted that Medea's three most prominent characteristics were that she was emotional/vulnerable, unreasonable, and passionate. Although there are still traces of all those characteristics when she arrives in Greece (especially in her reaction to Jason's plea at 171-78), the Medea who eventually emerges at the end of the rejuvenation of Aeson appears to be the very opposite: she has become rational (even calculating), dispassionate, and, most significant of all, she is not at all vulnerable, but strong. The acts that she proceeds to carry out she does with a clear and direct mind – as

---

<sup>55</sup> OLD, s.v. *spolium* 1.



far as we can tell, since it is hard to judge what she is thinking – and she is portrayed as ultimately powerful, the one who controls the action.

Having been asked to save Aeson, Medea immediately acts, applying her rational side to figure out how to do this, showing that she knows what to do, that she is in control of the situation and her feelings, that she is not unreasonable. Although her speech to the gods of night is decidedly intense, her passion – if we can call it that – is directed toward performing her ritual, not toward her relationship with Jason, and we later see her unemotional and detached side through the meticulous way in which she gathers the ingredients and then makes the potion.

Her strength is evident from the very start of this section, when she upbraids Jason for his request, and we continue to see confirmation of it in every scene, from the way that she implores her gods while standing apart from the people around her, to how she flies off on the chariot alone, to her refusal to engage with anyone upon her return until the ritual is performed, to the ultimate rejuvenation itself.

While the Medea in Colchis displayed more inner feelings than actions, in this section we see Medea engaged in a flurry of activity – we see her as constantly in motion, and we can easily forget that she is still essentially a helper to Jason because her actions appear to have a logic of their own, rendering Jason as almost a footnote to the story.

**Nouns/Pronouns used to describe her:** At the start of the section the only noun that is associated with Medea appears when both she and Jason addresses one another as *coniunx* (165,172) and right through her soliloquy there is nothing else in the way of nouns or pronouns which refer directly to Medea, although Jason does mention her

*carmina* (167) and Medea also refers to the *munus* (175) she will provide. At the time of rejuvenation her name appears only twice (257,285) and she is once mentioned as a *barbara* (276), and we learn that Bacchus received his *munus* “*a Colchide*” (296). This shows that her name is curiously given equal, if not less, prominence to that of Aeson (252,255,287,292), because any kind of designation of her is infrequent. The reason for this is that it is understood that she is the subject of every verb and, more significantly, we are aware that she is the centre of the action. All of this gives the impression that Ovid is trying to avoid using her name. Since she is still behaving in a helpful manner, Ovid is letting us see the ominous hints in the kinds of magic she performs – and the kind of power she yields – without clouding the picture with a name that we know will bring with it a terrifying image. The name Medea is still in our minds while we read this narrative and Ovid does not need to say it, letting us supply our own emotional response.

**Adjectives:** Just as with the nouns, there are very few adjectives which refer directly to Medea at the start of this section – and no adverbs that comment on her anywhere throughout the section. In the dialogue with Jason we see a couple of possessive adjectives (166,176) that refer directly to her, and there are also a few in her soliloquy as well (194,208,209). There are many adjectives that refer to the objects Medea uses or has power over, but, aside from the speeches, the only adjectives that are intimately connected with Medea herself appear in lines 182-85, where her wild manner of dress is described, the purpose of which is to show that she is different and strange. At the time of the rejuvenation there are no adjectives which refer directly to Medea; instead

we see her through her actions, *which are so forceful and potentially frightening* that Ovid does not need to use any epithets.

**Verbs:** Mostly all of the verbs refer to Medea's actions. At the very start we see a number of verbs which are unconnected to Medea (160-62) where the people of Iolcus are giving thanks for the return of their sons. The dialogue between Jason and Medea is made up of a number of verbs that focus on Medea's power, her shock at what Jason has asked him, and what Hecate will allow, where the strength of Medea's language in her response to Jason allows her to come into her own as a strong character, one who is independent of him. Medea's soliloquy continues to focus on what the power of the gods has allowed her to accomplish. Following the speech acts,<sup>56</sup> all of the other finite verbs and participles are directly connected to Medea. Following Jason's request, she is the only person who is the subject of a finite verb until the very end, when Aeson sees the changes that she has made (287-93) and Bacchus approves her plans (294-96), activities that are shown to be clearly associated with Medea. Since no-one else does anything, she is the main person, the main actor, by far, but her activities are immense: from line 237 onward she is the subject of 29 finite verbs and participles, all of which indicate her industriousness. She is active, moving events, and dominating the scene.

**Perspective:** For the most part this scene shows us Medea through the use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective. At the start Jason says how valuable she has been (164-68) and then we have the only 3<sup>rd</sup> person glimpse inside Medea's thoughts when she is moved by

---

<sup>56</sup> In this I include: the dialogue that takes place between Jason and Medea (164-78), which is essentially about Medea's abilities; Medea's speech (192-219), where she wavers between a flurry of first-person singular verbs and ones that point out *what the gods have done to help her*; and the verbs that set the stage for the speech, describing the dark night and the ominous surroundings (179-88) as she wanders out to address the gods.

his *pietas* (169). The description of her travels and even her plea to the gods (192-219) really does not allow us into her thought process as much as it strengthens the notion that she is powerful. However, her speech allows us to deduce quite a bit about her emotions and thoughts. We learn that she is proud, obsessive, serious, and both respectful of and thankful to her gods for all of the help that they have given her.

During the rejuvenation itself we have no speech or thoughts of Medea, but rather we learn about her only through Ovid's description and, finally, through the reactions of both Aeson and Bacchus. The effect is that she has become very distant from us, very mysterious, and the result is that the reader cannot easily identify and sympathize with her.

**Contrast:** We often see Medea through comparison to and contrast with others. Even though both she and Jason address one another as *coniunx* (165,172), we learn that she thinks differently than he does (170), and his request inherently makes her appear to be the stronger one of the two. This subservience is later confirmed in the way that he appears to give way to her orders (253-55), which can also be connected to his effective disappearance from the narrative, highlighting his irrelevance from this point onward. Furthermore, Medea's activities are implicitly contrasted to the adventures of her husband, who completed an amazing journey to Colchis. Clearly her adventures, accomplishments, and powers are just as great, if not greater, than his, and we might also note that she has now supplanted him as the confident one, so much so that she can easily make all the others – Jason included – do her bidding while she performs this ritual. Although not quite the operator Jason was, Medea is unquestionably in charge now.

As she steps out in the middle of the night, she is compared to a wild woman and wild nature, and this image is later completed when Ovid compares her to a Bacchante (258), which makes her look frightening and daunting. Her prayer (192-219) compares her favourably to the gods, and it makes her seem to be almost one of them, which contrasts her with those who do not have such divine connections. To the other people in Iolcus she is inherently juxtaposed, since she stays apart from them to perform her ritual (238), and she is shown to be more powerful than them as well, since she orders them to bring out the body (253) and then she tells them just as abruptly to leave (255). Furthermore, we see Aeson as a weak old man, while she is a strong, vibrant, and powerful magician, one who is capable of saving such an old and feeble man. She is a leader, while they are followers. At the end she is also compared favourably to Bacchus, who admires her work, which makes her appear even more impressive and daunting.

**Medea's Prominence:** At the start of the section Jason establishes her prominence (164-68) and she remains the centre of the action the rest of the way, where her journey at night and her address to the gods both work to stress her importance. We can see this first of all through the **allocation of speech**, since only Jason and Medea use direct speech – with Jason speaking a mere 5 lines (164-68) while Medea has two speeches amounting to a total of 36 lines (171-78, 192-219); secondly, through her **textual prominence**, since she is the centre of the action from lines 164-287, with only the very start (159-63) and the end of the scene (287-96) focussing on the activities and

reactions of people who are not Medea<sup>57</sup> – where, we might note, the placement of the admiration of both Aeson and Bacchus at the end makes her deeds even more impressive. The significance of this is that it shows us that the tale is about no-one else save Medea. It is her story. Simply put, she is the rejuvenation, and the importance of making her so prominent now is that her benevolent actions anticipate how great a change she will undergo when she soon behaves malevolently. More significantly, however, it also shows us how much Jason owes her, how much she has helped him, and this in turn leads us to understand how much her assistance now will motivate her anger when he betrays her.

**Qualities or Characteristics Granted:** She is shown to be skilled, efficient, and effective – since everything she does eventually works. There are a number of characteristics which shine through: she is respected by the gods, for they help her; she is intelligent, since she knows what to do; careful, since she measures her ingredients out and tests her mixture; focussed, determined and, *above all, obsessive*, for she is very attentive to detail and will not allow herself to become distracted by anything; serious, since she treats her ritual very earnestly; domineering, since she clearly takes charge of the ritual, telling others exactly what to do and when to leave. Moreover, in spite of her initial reaction to Jason's request, she is not emotional, she is dispassionate and rational in how she carries out her activities – and she is not at all vulnerable.

**Qualities or Characteristics Denied:** Obviously, many of the characteristics that are affirmed naturally deny the opposite characteristics. What are chiefly denied her are

---

<sup>57</sup> Bacchus, however, does focus on Medea's gift (296), so we could easily say that this still places Medea in a position of prominence.

any weakness – including weak emotions, like romantic love – and anything that might interrupt her ritual. The only thoughts that appear to enter her world are related to her task at hand, which denies her any of the romantic, youthful, and daydream quality that she had back in Colchis. She is not at all light and trivial.

**Length:** This section lasts for 138 lines, which is a very long treatment for an episode that did not have such great prominence in the literary versions prior to Ovid. Although there are many reasons for its length, it is effectively a transition scene, one that allows us to see her awesome powers and obsessive nature – all the while she is still performing a completely good deed. And the altruism of that deed should not be overlooked, for we may expect Medea to behave badly at any instant – and we see ominous hints of it via the dark allusions to magic and poisons, and Ovid even shows us still more reasons why Medea will be mad at Jason when he betrays her. That is, we expect to be repelled by her, we expect that she will change into the evil killer, *but here no such change occurs*. Nevertheless, this good deed also foreshadows her maleficent side as well, for we see her as a dominating figure, one who holds the centre of the narrative, and one who is better to have as a friend than as an enemy. In this scene she acts as a friend, but in future scenes, as we know, her more hostile side will shine through – and, even though later we still may be surprised by the ferocity of her anger, the way Ovid builds up her strengths conditions us to be ready for her more forceful and violent nature that will soon become manifest.

On a more basic level, such a long section in which Medea dominates affects both her standing, because it builds her up as a witch, and also our perception of her, because it forces us to accept her as a witch.

**Retardation:** At several points we expect certain events to happen that do not arrive. We might expect Medea to be more welcoming to Jason's request, and then are equally surprised that she agrees to help after reacting in such a hostile fashion. The retardation affects our perception of the rejuvenation in that it builds it up, forcing it to become more important. Also of significance, we note that the amount of time that is spent on her preparations for the rejuvenation – and, more specifically, the ominous hints – leave us surprised that nothing negative comes from her adventures. We clearly know that she is going to help Aeson, but we are led to believe that she could bring some form of harm as well – to someone. However, this prepares us for the harm that will come in the next section.

**Aperture and Closure:** The scene opens with the arrival of Jason and his Argonauts back in Greece (159-62) to the great fanfare of their parents, and we might assume that the gifts that they bear are to thank Medea.<sup>58</sup> Jason then asks her to help rejuvenate his father, which brings her into the scene as a helper, even though she will assume absolute control of the activities. Thus the scene begins with a great deal of praise for Medea, followed by the request for another favour. The scene closes on a similar note, with Aeson watching his own rejuvenation in amazement and Bacchus

---

<sup>58</sup> Anderson (1972: 262) says that they are praising Medea: "Just as Medea had predicted in 49-50, the *matres* assemble to do her honor for saving their sons. *pro gnatis receptis*: this sounds like the official *titulus* to which Medea alluded in 56."



sending down his approval of her magic (292-96), which he takes as a gift *from her*. While both the opening and the closing of the scenes portray Medea in a favourable light, the end of the scene more closely aligns her with the gods, and makes her appear more daunting, almost as if her powers could rival theirs.

**Sympathy:** At the start of this narrative, Ovid showed great sympathy for Medea, and, while we cannot say that he no longer shows any sympathy for her at this stage, the attitude that he expresses most predominantly is one of awe for her amazing deeds and capabilities. She is powerful, and her strength is the greatest characteristic that shines through, which, coupled together with the dark allusions, allows Ovid to prepare us to view her as ultimately frightening. If anything, Ovid, in his role as the poet, has become a neutral observer, but one who still holds respect for his protagonist.

#### **159-178: Arrival in Greece and Jason's Plea**

In this section Medea, now a fully realized witch, receives her due recognition as such from Jason. In fact, this is the spot where Jason completely fades away and Medea takes control – in effect, she becomes the protagonist, the heroine. This is noteworthy for a couple of reasons: first, it is odd for a woman to play the role of an epic hero, and secondly, Medea is decidedly not the kind of hero we might expect, since we all know the type of character into which she is about to transform. Thus Medea, *the anti-heroine*, becomes paradigmatic of the *anti-epic* which Ovid is writing.

Moreover, since we are aware that her darker side will soon become manifest, we are quite surprised that her actions here, which are intended to help Jason's father, are still altogether benevolent, and we are impressed by her seemingly almost omnipotent powers.

Medea's assistance further calls attention to how much she did to help Jason – that she saved him – and the theme of Jason's father reminds us of all that she has given up to help him: namely, her own family and life in Colchis. All of these circumstances anticipate and help explain Medea's subsequent anger when Jason attempts to leave her.

The Medea in this episode is still characterized in a positive manner, for her motive in helping Jason's father is to – yet again – do something which will please her beloved Jason. But Jason's references to his own familial loyalty nevertheless remind her of what she did to her own, specifically her father – which appears to fill her with guilt.<sup>59</sup> So, in an attempt to impress and please Jason, she decides to do him an even greater favour than the one which he asks. Acting independently, she turns to her goddess and plans to save Aeson without taking away any years from Jason – which shows that she is now a mover of events, a controlling force.<sup>60</sup>

Before noting all of the ironies and hidden allusions, we should examine what we learn about Medea in this section – and we learn a great deal, even though Ovid passes over the scene very quickly. First of all, we hear that the Greeks bear presents to celebrate the return and, since the gifts are most likely directed toward Jason (as the

---

<sup>59</sup> Ovid rather scrupulously, and noticeably, omits overt mention here of the fact that Medea also killed her young brother Absyrtus. And it is not a small detail, since he brings up Medea's central role in his murder in every one of his other treatments of the Medea narrative. The reason for this omission, it seems, is rather simple and is not necessarily similar to the reason why he later forgets to dwell on the death of the children. That is, Medea is portrayed in a positive light in this part of the story, and the Absyrtus episode would only undermine that portrayal. We certainly know that it happened, but its inclusion here would be inconsistent with Ovid's surprisingly favourable – and sympathetic – picture of Medea thus far.

<sup>60</sup> Medea appears to embody the spirit of the Greek heroic code, where the basic tenet is helping friends and harming enemies. Blundell (1989: 26-59) addresses this in relation to Sophoclean tragedy, but it is also quite applicable to Medea, and Bongie (1977) takes this up in a study of Euripides' *Medea*. This is true insofar as Medea is assisting Jason by helping *his* friends (Aeson) and harming *his* perceived enemies (Pelias, for example). But in this version of her story she has also supplanted Jason as the hero, and Ovid is not as much interested in how she represents the heroic code as in how she behaves wickedly.

saviour), we cannot therefore be certain that Medea is also welcomed just as warmly.<sup>61</sup> However, what truly builds up her importance in this scene is Jason's speech to her (164-67), in which he makes her appear very powerful and indispensable in order to convince her to help rejuvenate his father. He even butters her up by addressing her as his *coniunx* (165), which firmly establishes in our minds that their marriage is legitimate and causes us to feel more sympathy for her in view of our knowledge of what will happen to her.<sup>62</sup> As well, Jason's reference to the omnipotence of her magic spells (167) helps us realize that she is the most powerful one among his crew.

We also learn a bit from Medea's reaction to Jason's request. She appears to be shocked and we never find out why exactly, except from Ovid's oblique (and disputed) comment that Medea's *animus* is *dissimilis* (170) to that of Jason,<sup>63</sup> which contributes to the negative undertone inherent to the scene. Yet even though her mind is much different from that of Jason – or perhaps because of that reason – she will not tell him why she reacts in such a terse manner to his question, and we learn that she purposefully leaves him in the dark (171), which makes her seem *deceptive* in our eyes.

---

<sup>61</sup> Glenn (1986: 90) and Anderson (1972: 262) both agree that Medea receives these honours, and Rosner-Siegel (1982: 237) takes a more neutral position, saying that “the couple is received joyfully by the Greeks.”

<sup>62</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 238) writes that Medea “is coerced, as it were, to assume a role which she had until now tried to repress.” There are two problems with this reading. First of all, it is not true, since Medea willingly used her magic already in Colchis. Secondly, Rosner-Siegel is also wrong in suggesting that Medea here acts “neither wickedly nor independently.” In fact, her actions are very independent, since she asserts that she can rejuvenate Aeson without taking anything away from Jason, and we are meant to see the wicked possibilities in Medea's actions and be frightened by them. The key to this scene, then, is its allusion Medea's more dominant and wicked side.

<sup>63</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 238) claims that Medea “recognizes Jason's act as *pietas*, a quality that she herself had abandoned on his behalf.” But she also makes the comment that “by pointing out this [Jason's] filial devotion, Ovid creates a marked contrast between it and his lack of feeling towards Medea.” This is a rather incredible observation, since there is no substantial evidence as to what Jason's feelings for Medea are. On the surface, he simply asks for a favour from her and does not think about how this question might affect his *coniunx*.

We obviously cannot get inside of the head of Medea, but we notice that she is at once flattered and built up by Jason, quick to respond to a perceived injustice, then deceptive and, finally, when she decides to help him after all, we are both touched and disturbed by the odd combination of love that she shows for him and the forceful way in which she is willing to showcase her own powers. We note that her plan to help Aeson is something she comes up with on her own, and it is a way of asserting to us that she works best alone. With her gods on her side Medea is capable of great things, which makes her appear ominous and simultaneously makes Jason become much less prominent.<sup>64</sup> She may refer to him as her *coniunx* as well (172), but we know that their relationship is not a power-sharing one. She is in charge, as Jason will see.

Medea's character in this scene is also brought out through the use of irony and foreshadowing. Perhaps the greatest irony in this scene is that here we see a Medea who is trying to please Jason, and yet we know that later she will do her utmost to cause him harm. We see her as good here but are simultaneously given hints about what she will become.

The first mention of *Haemoniae matres* and *grandaevique patres* (159-60) carries with it distinct macabre allusions to both past and future events, and right away we note that Medea and Jason will not be such parents themselves, since Medea herself will not be accepted as a *Greek* mother and Jason will not become an *old* father, for his children will die long before he does. This allusion to mothers and fathers also reminds us that Medea has just betrayed her own family and, more importantly, that she will soon cause so much

---

<sup>64</sup> Newlands (1997: 187) writes that "Medea wants to test her powers as a witch," which is a reading that definitely places her in a position of control.

pain for other families in the future, including her own. What is more, these and other Greek mothers and fathers will soon learn to regret that she has arrived along with the Argonauts – *they should not be happy*, if they know what is good for them. Equally the reference to the *natis...receptis* (159) looks forward to those sons that Medea will eventually take away from Jason.

Perhaps the greatest irony of this scene is that Jason asks Medea to take his father, who is *iam propior leto* (163), away from death, because she will become more well-known (by us) for bringing people closer to death. The paradox here is deeply connected with her characterization, since we are continually surprised that she is so nice, and this image is so starkly opposed to the evil witch that we expect her to become. But that evil witch is not so far off, and we see hints of it when Jason tells his wife that he owes his *salutem* (164) to her, which makes us think of all the *periculum* that she will cause him. A further allusion is evident in Jason's comment that she has given him *cuncta* (165), where the irony is not lost on us that she will soon take away *cuncta* from him.

In asking Medea for her help in this matter Jason asks rhetorically *quid enim non carmina possunt?* (167). It is a legitimate question, but in this case he is thinking of all the possibilities that her magic can be used *to help* him, all of the good that can come out of it, but we know that Medea will later use her magic *to cause so much harm* (even to Jason himself). He may be amazed at all of the possible good that can come from her spells, but we instead think of the destruction.

Jason's tears achieve success, we discover, because Medea *mota est pietate rogantis* (169). Any mention of the word *pietas* is imbued with irony<sup>65</sup> and, while Medea may be moved by Jason's current *pietas*, we are aware that she will later be so moved by his lack of *pietas* that she will seek to harm him by killing all those around him. That is, she will be just as moved by the disappearance of his *pietas* as she is by its appearance.

The description of Medea's motivation for helping Jason also gives us great hints in seeing how she will become the person she does. Ovid adds that, in being moved by Jason's *pietas*, the thought of the father she left behind entered Medea's *dissimilem...animum* (170). We may note how the adjective *dissimilis* can extend beyond the implied meaning here, for Medea's mind is indeed *nothing at all* like Jason's,<sup>66</sup> and his lack of understanding in what motivates her will partially lead to his downfall. That is, he will not realize that her form of *pietas* – toward their marriage and him – is just as strong as the one he shows for his father. This deeper meaning to *dissimilis* – that *she does not think the same way that he does* – highlights how Medea's mind works in an unexpected way, and we know that in the end she will prove to be so unlike the good wife that she is now. Thus, *dissimilis* points to Medea's continual act of metamorphosis.

Medea's act of concealing her true thoughts (171) ominously points toward how she will deceive others in the future.<sup>67</sup> We know that she has already deceived her father, but this is the first open reference to Medea's dishonesty that does not appear to have a

---

<sup>65</sup> Anderson (1972: 263) even notes that Medea “had defined herself as *impia* by betraying her father.”

<sup>66</sup> *OLD*, s.v. *dissimilis* 1a.

<sup>67</sup> Glenn (1986: 90) says that “Ovid does not tell us what Medea thinks; once again the reader can decide for himself.” Rosner-Siegel (1982: 238), in talking about Medea's reasoning, writes that “once again, she is motivated by misguided love,” but she fails to articulate what is exactly so misguided about Jason's request. Clearly betraying her family back in Colchis was something that tested her, but there appears to be no real ethical debate in Aeson's rejuvenation per se, except for ones that we may invent from thin air.

significant reason. We cannot say for certain why she will not tell Jason<sup>68</sup> – perhaps shame of herself, perhaps anger at him – we are only told that her *animus* is very *dissimilis* to his. In a very strong way, it is a sign of a schism between herself and Jason – that they both speak different languages, so to speak – one that will become more evident throughout their collective narrative and one that culminates in the secret plans that Medea will make to destroy Jason in Corinth. But Medea’s penchant for secrecy is also portentously related to other future events, since we can also think of how she plots Pelias’ death all by herself, as well as the trick she plans against Theseus by not telling Aegeus what she already knows (419-20).

Her attempt to cover up the awkwardness she feels at Jason’s implicit allusion to paternal *pietas* leads Medea to accuse Jason of committing a *scelus* (172) in asking her to help rejuvenate his father. The use of the word *scelus* forces us to think about what she will soon do. That is, it is completely wrong *for Medea* to charge anyone else with having committed a *scelus*, since she herself is usually associated with the term.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, this reminds us of Jason’s future *scelus* against Medea – his betrayal of her – and the rapid way in which she tosses out the charge makes us think about how quick she will be to seek vengeance against people who have slighted her.

---

<sup>68</sup> Perhaps, as Anderson suggests (1972: 263), the immediate thought of her own father is what causes Medea to cut Jason off abruptly and wonder at how he could even ask such a thing from her. In turn, when she begins to focus again on her own strengths – and the power of her magic to impress Jason – then this may provide a reason as to why she just as quickly forgets her objection and offers to provide a more straightforward way of helping Aeson.

<sup>69</sup> Anderson (1972: 264) offers a unique interpretation of *scelus*: “Medea is so deeply in love with Jason that she regards as a ‘sin’ the very suggestion that he diminish his lifespan.” This does make sense, since the thought of losing Jason, after all that she has done for him, would seem devastating to Medea. According to this scenario, she then comes up with a plan in which Jason does not have to lose any of his own years. Yet we have no reason to doubt her reasoning at this point – that she is just not permitted to do what Jason asks. She may not be telling Jason about how his devotion to his father is affecting her, but we have no compelling reason to assume that she is lying about this.

Finally, Medea also tells him *nec tu petis aequa* (174). This anticipates another request in which Jason will ask Medea for things that are, in her view, completely non-*aequa* – namely, that she look favourably on his new marriage in Corinth, which is an even more unfair request than this one here. Unfortunately Medea does not explain the problem with what he asks, but instead then offers her own more daring plan, her *maius...munus* (175). But any gift from Medea makes us justifiably wary – especially ones that involve *arte mea*, for we think of the future gift that she will give Creusa, and we see the irony in that many others – including Jason – would be best advised to accept a gift from Medea with caution.

#### **179-191 – Medea and the Full Moon**

Medea's actions in preparing to save Aeson are still virtuous, yet we are torn because the scene points to a darker, more magical, and more mysterious Medea, and we know that she will eventually use her magic to bad ends, even though at this point she is using it for such a well-intentioned favour. We sense that this is not the same Medea we met back in Colchis.

On the positive side, we see a Medea who is serious and fastidious in observing ritual, which is important because she is carrying out a task that is of such vital magnitude to her husband. Essentially she is doing something good, and we cannot forget this fact. Nevertheless, Ovid undercuts this portrait of the good wife with a host of disturbing images, ones that anticipate her darker and more sinister traits. In short, Medea waits three nights until there is a full moon, then, when everything else is silent and sleeping, she goes out alone into the dark night dressed as a powerful foreign priestess, where she



raises her arms and invokes the stars, goes down on bended knees and purifies herself before making her speech. What makes this scene so disquieting is that Ovid is starting to play down her naïveté by pointing away from the innocent young Medea whom we have already seen and instead points us toward the evil and murderous Medea whom we expect will soon emerge,<sup>70</sup> and where she was once a follower of Jason, she has now become a mover of events in her own right.

First of all, we must consider the purpose of these 13 lines. Although this section functions partly as a transition, it acts mostly as a preamble, or prologue, to Medea's speech at 192-219. In the previous sections we have seen only allusions to her powers as a witch, but here Ovid does not hold back: he clearly lets the reader know that she is potent and, furthermore, that she is the hero of this tale. The preparation that she makes, the clothing she wears, the darkness, and the silence, all prime us for the dominating, authoritative, and disturbing speech which she is about to deliver. Furthermore, prior to this Medea's magical activities were firmly in the background, but Ovid is now placing them at the forefront of the narrative, and we may find it disconcerting to discover that the focus appears to be no longer about Jason and Medea but rather about Medea's relationship to her own magic.

The tone changes dramatically in this scene as well, for it has moved from the more welcoming air of their arrival in Greece to become suddenly solemn and sombre, where everything is dark, silent, and takes on a mysterious – perhaps even ominous – air. Medea goes out alone under a full moon, clad in garments that show she is ready to

---

<sup>70</sup> Anderson (1972: 265) notes of this scene: "The adjectives establish a mood; then the nouns specify its application."

practice a ritual that no-one may see, since everyone and everything is asleep – even the very foliage around her (187). This significantly prepares the reader for the Medea who will later emerge, for we no longer see her as a young girl in love, but as a witch who practices her rites alone and under the veil of darkness and secrecy, and we easily anticipate how she will behave in such a dark, determined, and secretive manner in the future, when she will plot the deaths of Creusa, Creon and the children. She is presented as a creature of darkness and we see her as someone apart from others.

Both the visual and aural aspects to this scene are important as well. If we are to imagine this as a film sequence, we see a great deal of darkness and notice the eerie silence, with Medea as the only creature who is stirring under the full moon. This is a striking image, since we are clearly forced to see her as someone who is not like anyone else, and definitely not like the innocent young girl whom we saw earlier. Although the darkness, the silence, and Medea's attire all may be necessary for the ritual,<sup>71</sup> they nevertheless make the scene seem very eerie. Also, this scene is curiously the first one which actually focuses on and describes Medea: although it is shrouded in darkness, we can see her – at least how she is dressed - more clearly than we could before. The only previous direct descriptions of Medea as a person are limited to mentioning how her cheeks turned red (78) at the sight of Jason and how she became pale (136) when she feared for his safety, both of which are very generic descriptions of reactions and are therefore limited in how they present us with a picture of her. In this scene, however, for the first time we have a visual representation of Medea, and we do not see her as the

---

<sup>71</sup> See Anderson (1972: 264-5).

young girl who may have appeared in our imaginations. Instead, she is built up in an impressive way as a priestess who is clad in foreign ritualistic garments and is prepared to initiate rites that are beyond the powers of a simple girl in love. She may be performing a good deed here, but we see the forceful and frightful Medea who will perform the evil deeds.

Finally, through the changed tone and dark visuals we see a different Medea here, or at least one who is in the process of changing. She is more controlled, confident, and independent. Not only is her power reinforced, but it is built up as well, and with it her secrecy is also developed. She is no longer a young girl who is easily influenced by the trickery of her beloved; rather, she is the mover of these events.<sup>72</sup> This is her plan, and she has become the protagonist – but one who moves in darkness.

One curious aspect to this preamble is that Ovid is now actively describing the same type of rituals that he willingly passed over back in Colchis. That he focuses on those rituals right now is a hint that the reader should start to become rather suspicious of her activities, and that perhaps now the darker, more mysterious, and maleficent Medea may be set to appear. With respect to her function in the narrative, if she has truly become the epic-hero of this tale (and she has), then Ovid is making us wary of what this hero may do – adding more weight to her role as *the anti-hero*: for a hero who acts alone and in darkness is hardly the type of hero whom the reader may be conditioned to expect.

---

<sup>72</sup> Newlands (1997: 187) writes: “Here, where we see Medea for the first time practicing her supernatural craft, Ovid plays up her new appearance as a witch. The previously fearful maiden now shows no fear of the dark and silent woods, and she reveals her distance from the world of ordinary mortals by filling the nocturnal silences with ritualistic triple howlings, *ternisque ululatibus* (190).”

**192-219: Medea's Prayer**

This speech does two things in particular – it reveals a lot more about Medea's personality (i.e. as a person) and strongly reinforces that she has become a powerful witch – both of which affect our perception of her. The references to her power, the deities, and the chariot, all serve to make her appear more frightening and formidable. Moreover, both her actions and the control she assumes cement her status as the 'hero,' which is the role she firmly takes on following the speech, adding a more ominous tone to the narrative.

**Character/Personality:** The characteristics about her that are emphasized the most are her mental strength, determination, magical abilities, single-mindedness, and her *pietas* toward her gods – all shrouded under sinister and foreboding imagery – while the main one that is played down or denied is weakness. She is a strong, knowledgeable about her own powers, and she is determined to use those powers to achieve her aims. While she once appeared in Colchis to be a wallflower who operated quietly in the background (144-6), here she demands our attention as well as our respect. Instead of being naive and hardly able to control her emotions, she is here knowing and in control of nature.

One aspect of Medea that becomes evident from this speech is her pride. After mentioning how she drags *Luna* down from her course (207) she claims that *pallet nostris Aurora venenis* (209), which of one of many deeds that she is proud to have accomplished. Her sense of superiority is very important, because it shines forth in her description of how she herself, with the aid of the gods and her magical powers, did

everything for Jason when he faced the trials in Colchis (210-14). This indicates her growing assertion of how important she really was in saving Jason, and it portentously hints at her anger when he will no longer recognize that fact in return. Also, the sheer length and detail of the speech emphasize her obsessive nature and her tendency to be excessive, which are two characteristics that point very directly toward her murderous vengeance in Corinth.

**The Witch:** Yet this speech does much more to establish that Medea is someone who has superhuman abilities, a witch.<sup>73</sup> For the most part the character traits that we see are shown through her actions rather than through her emotions, and the very structure, or ordering, of these deeds boldly states that she is a frightening witch: she starts her address to the gods by affirming that she is very close to them; next we learn that she herself has accomplished many amazing – and disturbing – things (199-209)<sup>74</sup> before she finishes by describing the other remarkable deeds that she performed when she helped Jason steal the fleece (210-14). We are overwhelmed by the powers that she lists at the start, and that impression stays with us through the entire speech.

Medea's close relationship to the gods, and her attitude toward them, suggest that she is a frightening creature who should not be crossed. She is very respectful toward them, and lines 207-9 even suggest that she sees herself as almost an equal to some of them. Clearly, if we start to envision her as almost approaching divine status, we then see her as someone who will never be willing to give in without a fight.

---

<sup>73</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 240) writes of what Medea achieves in restoring Aeson: "The now barbarous Medea has achieved something not only more than mortal (*mortali...maius*, 276), but more, too, than what a god can do."

<sup>74</sup> Anderson (1972: 266), while considering line 199, argues that Medea has actually performed these miraculous deeds, saying "she [Medea] records how these deities have helped her."

This whole scene has one main plot function: Medea wants the support of the gods so that she can find the relevant *suci* that will save Aeson, and the chariot is just a part of that support. Obviously, since Ovid could have brought the chariot to Medea in one line, we have to consider why he would spend so much time on the speech. The short answer is that he wants to plant the image of the soon-to-be evil Medea firmly in our minds, to prepare us for what will come. And *the very length of the speech* helps to reinforce this, for we see her as someone who is committed to the tasks at hand, as someone who takes herself very seriously, and we picture how she will take her vengeance very seriously as well.

As much as the speech is an example of a prayer, it is also a *suasio*, for she is trying to persuade the gods – her gods – to help her by bringing her grandfather’s chariot to her and to stand by her in her search for *suci*. As an act of persuasion it is clearly successful – for she does get the chariot, and she will find the desired herbs – and it also shows Medea in a most honest light, since she would undoubtedly not say anything to her gods that would be inappropriate, deceptive, or be mere flattery. Most importantly, *their rapid response to her request* on line 219 makes us feel that everything she has just claimed is valid – and it makes us wary, even afraid, of her.

The imagery and the tone of her speech are again dark and foreboding.<sup>75</sup> The first deity she invokes is *Nox* (192), and this is followed by appeals to the *astra* (192-3) which,

---

<sup>75</sup> Her speech can be comfortably divided into four parts: invocation of the deities (192-8), representation of her own awesome (and frightening) power (199-209), the things Medea has already accomplished with the help of the gods (210-14), and the good deed which will be accomplished by the use of her grandfather’s chariot (215-9). Rosner-Siegel (1982: 239-40) points out the four stages of Medea’s ritual – from purification at 179-191 to the actual rejuvenation at 238-93 – and she comments on the changed perspective of Medea we see: “This changed perception marks, too, a shift in Medea’s character.”

although bright, only appear at night, *through the darkness*. Since her magical power is derived from dark sources, we therefore are prepared to see her magic in a negative light. While the gods in and of themselves do not make her appear frightening, the whole picture of her forcefully calling on these rather grim deities in the blackness of a silent night, and under a full moon, is intended to send shivers down our spines.

And our discomfort is confirmed in the next section, for Medea does not disappoint in presenting her achievements in a frightening way, claiming that she has the power to do many of the same things that Hypsipyle warned Jason of in *Heroides* 6.<sup>76</sup> In a series of eerie assertions, she says that thanks to her gods she can perform miracles whenever she wants (199), such as stopping rivers, moving trees, leading down the moon, and even calling up the dead. All of her accomplishments compel us to be wary of her, and this in turn makes her seem to be a very powerful and dread witch – one whom Jason (or anyone) would be best advised not to cross. More pointedly, Medea is in control, she is the ‘hero,’ and this section leads us to understand that everyone should be wary of her powers and the potential harm she can cause. She is a hero to be feared.

These lines allow us to anticipate Medea’s use of magic for nefarious purposes even though she has not yet exploited them in such a manner. Most of the items she lists are startling, yet some make us especially wary: that she can lead the dead out from their graves (206) and can make Aurora turn white with her magic potions (209) associate Medea clearly with both the dead and grim magic – a combination which reminds us of her future murders. Specifically, the verb *pallet* (209) reminds us of how she will make

---

<sup>76</sup> *Her.* 6.85-93.

Creusa turn white with death. To this notion we might even add the chariot itself, which anticipates Medea's flight away from Corinth while carrying the dead bodies of her children. Here we have the real beginning of her dark magic, the beginning of the *dark Medea*. Nevertheless, although her prayer to these nocturnal deities has ominous undertones, the ostensible purpose of this disturbing speech is to acquire divine support in order that she may go off in search of herbs that will *help* rejuvenate Aeson. That is, although this dark and disconcerting speech has the kind of tone that prepares us for what Medea eventually will do, here she is actually planning to do something nice – so the ominous speech counteracts the part of the narrative in which it appears. It plays against the proximate narrative but fits nicely into the ultimate narrative, for it makes us think of the evil Medea, the *future Medea*, even though the *old* (and innocent) *Medea* is still very much present in the favour she is doing.<sup>77</sup>

Yet we can also note that this scene emphasizes her complexity and shows that she is not the bi-polar (or one-dimensional) creature Newlands describes. For in this speech she is both the good wife and the dark witch – we see the latter in lines 199-209 – and the combination is decidedly disturbing. We appreciate the complexity when she finishes up by asking for the chariot of Helios so that she may rejuvenate Aeson (215-19),

---

<sup>77</sup> In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero (5.1-33-57) recites Medea's speech almost word-for-word and invokes the very same divinities. However, other than being a curious case of borrowing, there are distinct subtle connections and inversions between these two texts that help show what Ovid is doing. First, while the tenor of Prospero's speech may make us believe that he is angry and wishes once again to use his magic to bad ends, this scene in fact signals the very end of his magic. He says "But this rough magic/ here I abjure" (50-51), and the play in fact ends quite happily: Prospero is welcomed back into society and everyone returns to the mainland in good spirits. So the speech in fact plays against the narrative: it is a statement of his magical powers right before he gives them up – it reminds us of the *old Prospero* but leads to a happy end – while Medea's speech reminds us of the evil use of magic even though she is otherwise performing a good deed. See Lyne (2000: 150-64) for a useful essay comparing the magic and witchcraft in *The Tempest* with Ovid's *Medea*.



where we are abruptly reminded that so far in the narrative (from Colchis to here) she has been praying to her darker powers only so that they may help her do good deeds, such as saving Jason and helping an old man live a longer life. We know that Medea will do many bad things shortly involving those magic powers, but at this stage Ovid is yet again having fun with the readers by making us wait, because Medea here introduces so many dark possibilities merely in order to summon the chariot and to become the mythological equivalent of a homeopathic doctor. Indeed Ovid is toying with our expectations, creating a very ominous scene before finally returning to Medea's more humane mission (to acquire the chariot and save Aeson). Yet he is nevertheless setting the stage for future events at the same time, allowing us to see a Medea who is not as innocent as she once was.

### **220-233: The First Journey**

This scene has often been overlooked since, in the eyes of many, it appears to be merely a digressive travelogue that does little to enhance or advance the narrative. Once she climbs into the chariot and steers the dragons, one might argue, the only thing we witness is her flight throughout Greece, where she looks down at the lands about her, eventually descends to carefully pluck and cut some plants, before she finally returns to Greece. The descriptions that we receive of Medea only come through verbs and one participle, all of which show her steering, moving, watching, or plucking.<sup>78</sup> The most dominant feature that is granted to her in all of this is control: she is very purposeful, she knows what she is doing, and looks down from a divinely-acquired chariot.

---

<sup>78</sup> See 220,221,223,226,232,235,236.

But there is much more to the journey, for it further highlights her serious and obsessive personality, along with her role as a powerful witch, and, underneath it all, we also begin to see her as the hero/anti-hero.

We should note that Ovid makes the appearance of the chariot – and hence her divine connection – come at a point much earlier than any version prior to his, and a number of problematic questions arise because of this. First of all, we wonder why and for what she has been so reliant on Jason when she can summon this chariot whenever she needs. Second, since Medea is decidedly not helpless, we might ask ourselves why Jason does not recognize this and take this to heart in his future dealings with her. One answer could be that he does not see her do this – nobody does, for all that we know. Another likely response would be that Jason, in his arrogance, later still believes that Medea's passion for him is so strong that he can trick her into doing anything – even letting him marry someone else.

**Personality:** In this scene Medea is very confident, independent, powerful, and exotic – yet we also note that she is determined and meticulous. The purpose of her journey is to find the herbs that will revive Aeson, so she spends nine days and nights (234) flying around Thessaly on the chariot looking for the right kinds of plants, which shows us that she is quite serious and methodical about using the proper materials. In spite of the scene's appearance as a digressive travelogue,<sup>79</sup> we note that she does not consider this a trivial task at all. Far from it – Medea takes her job of witchcraft very

---

<sup>79</sup> Although Glenn (1986: 90) writes that “the itinerary makes Thessaly seem a most salubrious country,” there is no real evidence for such an opinion. She merely finds herbs there, and the fact that she has to travel so extensively to find the appropriate herbs ironically suggests that the place may not be so lush after all. Segal (2001:15) points out that “the sinister touches, like the blood and the screech-owl wings, are relatively few,” which in the future will make the place look salubrious by contrast.

seriously, since she is very selective about what plants she uses, and we should find it ominous to realize a few things about her personality: she is very obsessive and does not like to make mistakes, which will point to her obsessiveness in getting her way in other events as well.

**Witch:** Everything that we learn about Medea here makes her appear strong and powerful. First, she strokes the necks of the dragons driving the chariot and then steers them where she likes (221). This, the reader should remember, is the same chariot that Phaethon – much to his regret – could not control back in book 2, and Medea’s ease in controlling these dragons suggests that she, although definitely not a goddess, is still *no ordinary person*.<sup>80</sup>

Clearly this scene builds on the speech that Medea has just made, and the claims she recently put forward about her powers (199-209) become more believable, for Ovid quickly tells us that she soothes the *frenataque colla* (220) of the dragons and she guides them quite easily to where she wants (223), which gives the impression to us that this is an action that is not entirely unfamiliar to her and that her authority is indeed quite potent.

She is a witch, and we see her now as much more awe-inspiring than we might have imagined her back in Colchis. We see her as close to the gods, fastidious in executing her plans, unrestrained, and independent from other people – notably Jason. Moreover, the gods may be the ones who are guiding her to find the appropriate herbs,

---

<sup>80</sup> Phaethon had never driven the chariot before but we cannot be certain whether this is true or not of Medea, for just because the episode begins with a ritual does not mean that she has never summoned the chariot before. However, the ease with which she drives it does not indicate that either she has driven it before or that she is very skilled in such matters. And she clearly has much more skill than Phaethon had, who was warned off doing this by Helios who said “*sors tua mortalis, non est mortale, quod optas*” (*Met.* 2.56) – a quote that, since Medea can drive the chariot with such ease, adds further credence to the notion that Medea is somehow much more than a normal person.

but she knows exactly what kinds of herbs she will need and is comfortable flying around Greece in the chariot, which makes her seem resourceful and accustomed to travel, and this adds to the ominous tone, for we know how she will be resourceful in finding poisons to punish her enemies, and we also know how she will fly away on the chariot after having done so.

The visual imagery in this passage is conspicuous, and we receive some striking impressions in this section. First, we have the picture of Medea taming, and driving, fierce dragons. Second, we have the image of her flying over Thessaly, which is far from the most wondrous part of Greece. We see a rather rough landscape and its magic herbs – and we also see a determined witch flying overhead, making her appear eminent, formidable, and also close to both Olympus and the gods.

The tone in this scene is remarkably similar to the previous one in which she asks for the chariot, for it yet again plays against our expectations. That is, the darkness of the scene and our previous knowledge make us prepared for something negative to happen, yet we know that she is searching for herbs that will be helpful to Aeson. And we are left to wonder who this Medea is whom we are watching.

**Anti-Hero:** The most remarkable feature of this section, however, is how it adds, changes, and clarifies Medea's role in the narrative. In the previous section we came to terms with the idea that she has become a dark and mysterious figure, one whose magic is so powerful that Jason (or anyone) would be foolish to betray her. Nevertheless, even though his success in the trials and the theft of the fleece was due solely to Medea, we still assumed that Jason played a type of prominent role, however diminished that may be

– that he was still somehow the hero, the male, of the story. But this scene makes Medea assume the traditional male role of the adventurer, *the Argonaut of the air*, and she unmistakably forms a deflating contrast with Jason, for she flies around the coast of Greece on her magic chariot, visiting whatever lands have what she is looking for. In a way, she is on her own Argo and looking for her own Golden Fleece: she is the ‘hero.’

But Medea’s chariot is much more than an Argo, which was, according to the presentation of Ovid, just a boat. The chariot, however, is magnificent and awesome and, unlike Jason, who needs a whole crew to help him journey on his Argo, Medea travels alone on *her Argo*. In this sense she once again tops Jason, showing herself to be a much greater adventurer than him, who was the mere captain of a boat.

Yet Medea’s status as a ‘hero’ requires clarification. Yes, she becomes the adventurer and the central mover of this narrative, but we still know that she is not the kind of hero we expect. She is not at all like a Jason-type heroic figure who travels to unknown lands, asks for help honourably, and fights with evil monsters; rather, she will be deceptive, will fight with magic, and she herself will use monsters to her own advantage, as she does in this very scene. She is an anti-hero in the same way that the *Metamorphoses* is an anti-epic. Just as we originally expect the entire work to follow the standard conventions of epic, and in turn are surprised and unsure how we should react when Ovid creates his own rules, we are equally puzzled in response to Medea, who is not the type of person who should be a hero. Her methods and status (woman, foreigner) make her an odd choice from the outset, and we know that, through her malicious and

murderous acts, she will completely undermine the notion of what it means to be a hero: she will be repulsive to us, and become the archetypal *anti-hero*.

An interesting aspect to her burgeoning role as an *anti-hero* is the question of where and how this change takes place. We must admit that Ovid never gives us one specific moment in which we see this new evil Medea emerge and the older, more sympathetic Medea recede. Such a singular moment never arrives – and we can even say, contrary to Newlands, that it is *an acceptably gradual and smooth process*. The poet gives us hints throughout that such a change will take place, where he uses the information that is already inside of us – the knowledge that we bring to the narrative – in order to prime us for the emergence of the more audacious Medea. This scene is paradigmatic of this preparation, for we see Medea travelling around like a determined witch – and we know what will happen – yet we also know that she is still behaving quite humanely.

There are also certain notable elements of grim foreshadowing in this scene that point to the more evil Medea, the *anti-hero*. The ride in the chariot prefigures her later ride away from Corinth with the dead bodies of her children, as any reader would see. Additionally the references to Medea cutting and plucking the herbs (227,32) – especially with the *curvamine falcis aenae* – make us uncomfortable, for the vision of Medea cutting things with a sharp blade prefigures the infanticides to come.

We may even perceive a certain irony in this travelogue since Medea is searching for life-giving plants, yet she will soon be known as someone who brings death through magic herbs. That is, she is becoming the Medea we all know her to be: someone who is

an active witch, who is dark and mysterious, and someone who is separate from Jason. In fact this journey may in a way be a journey of self-realization for Medea, since it gives special emphasis to her role as the *anti-hero*. She goes out in search of drugs that will bring life, yet comes back having discovered her real nature – and her role as the murderous centre of this narrative. And all of this is wrapped up into what is for many a minor and digressive journey throughout Thessaly. At this point Ovid is truly having fun with how the audience perceives Medea.

The travelogue ends with the mention of Glaucus and the grasses that changed his form (233-34), and a perceptive reader will see the sharp parallels between his story and that of Medea. Bridging books 13 and 14 of the *Metamorphoses*, Glaucus' tale is one that involves both poison and betrayal, and we know that Medea's narrative will soon highlight these elements as well. Moreover, the poison in Glaucus' story comes from none other than Medea's aunt – Circe – who, out of jealousy, brews a magic poison that transforms Glaucus' beloved Scylla into the creature we know so well from the *Odyssey*, which reminds us both of the potency of Medea's magic as well the strength of her anger.

But the most curious connection between the two narratives is that the Glaucus story starts out with a positive view of magic – he is transformed into a god – but then it descends into a tale of bitter jealousy and death.<sup>81</sup> We see that Medea's narrative follows a similar path, for she is about to use magic in just such a positive fashion, but she will soon take on a role that is similar to that of her aunt Circe in striking at her own rival – Creusa – with her own poison. Thus the reference to Glaucus signals a positive view of

---

<sup>81</sup> Segal (2001: 21) also notes: "As in the case of Medea in book 7, Circe's magic initially has a calmer and quieter tone."

magic, but it also anticipates the death to come, and the reference's prominent position – at the very end of the travelogue – forces us to see its implications: Medea will kill.

### **234-61: Return and Sacrifice**

When Medea arrives back after nine days and nights we have a very different and more developed picture of her than the one we had before Jason asked her to do this favour for him. One of the most obvious things that we might notice is that she is now the centre of the action and that Jason is in fact nowhere to be found, except for the moment in which she tells him to leave so that she can perform the ritual in rejuvenating his father (255). This scene completely asserts her independence from him and her role as the protagonist, or “*hero*.” Moreover, as a magician she no longer seems to be the same innocent girl who was led by her passion for Jason. Rather, her powers now seem to be the driving force behind all the actions, and the story is now centred on her strength, self-assertiveness, and magical abilities – most of which remind us of a more evil Medea. Thus, in supplanting Jason, she has fully become the “*hero*,” yet the hints toward her darker use of magic allow us to see her as a burgeoning “*anti-hero*.”

**Personality: Magical and Non-Magical Aspects:** We now find it hard to separate those characteristics which speak to her magical powers from those that reflect on her non-magical side. The two images – magical and non-magical – seem to be forming a type of unified character, and the one that emerges is deeply complex and troubling.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 239) writes that this section is the one in which “she forgoes her human nature and changes into a witch, albeit one still concerned with a beneficial act.” This comment falsely suggests that



This scene, like the journey beforehand, shows her to be very active. She is a “doer,” and we do not have a real glimpse into her emotional state. Rather, we see a series of actions that are forceful, determined, and focussed: she stands apart, avoids human contact, builds a sacrifice, prays to the gods, orders humans about, and sacrifices a black sheep, among other things. All of these activities point to someone who is energetic and dynamic, yet the counter impression we also have of her is of someone who is potentially very frightening and intimidating, for she has no use for the people around her and she prays to the gods of death for help. Furthermore, the control that she shows over her emotions during the scene is eerie, since it makes her appear disturbingly comfortable in her role as a witch.

Regarding her personality, we learn that she is still completely independent and distant from the others, since she refuses to enter the house upon her return (238). Moreover, she is very much the opposite of the young girl in love whom we first met in Colchis, for we see her self-control on display when she refuses the touch of her husband until she can complete the ritual (239-40), which is completely contrary to the woman in Euripides whom Jason chastises as a clinging sex-starved creature.

This scene emphasizes that she knows what she is doing and that she does not really need the help of other *people*. And this leads us to consider the elements which

---

she was not a witch back in Colchis, which is contradicted by all that she did to help him escape. Moreover, the argument suggests that there is a definitive moment when Medea changes – one decisive point – and I fail to see it. Rather, I argue that the later and more evil Medea becomes more prominent from this point onward, yet we still see the remnants of her less-magical side through our knowledge of the story. (This is in keeping with how, at the start, we could see many hints at the evil Medea even though we heard the words of an innocent young girl in love.) The principle at work here is simple: Medea’s actions can only look truly horrific if we believe that she is still partially sympathetic and responsive. Otherwise, if she simply becomes an evil witch and nothing more, the events with Pelias lose their drama and those in Corinth appear to lack logic, for why would she follow Jason there if she did not have a benign side – one that could love?

show us how she functions as a witch. Her dealings with other humans are very forceful in this scene: she dismisses them; they are somehow less than her. She decides exactly what *she* is going to do, completely avoids other people (239) and, when she must communicate with them, she either orders them about (255) or just as abruptly advises the *profanos* (256) to remove themselves from her presence. Yet while she is strong and determined with people – treating them almost as if they were children – we notice that she is rather gentle and placatory to the gods who will help her: she asks Pluto for help (249) and sends pleasing words to the other gods along with Pluto (251). This clearly indicates that her affiliations lie more strongly with the gods, which makes her appear deeply formidable.

Since this is a religious ritual that she must perform, the tone is indisputably solemn and serious. Yet we note that not only is Medea particularly industrious and dedicated – not wasting any time along the way – but also her brisk activity emphasizes her obsessive nature in completing her tasks, and her single-mindedness in pursuing her craft makes the reader anticipate how she will later use that magic to kill, just as her obsessive behaviour looks forward to her furious and unrestrainable attempts at vengeance.

Equally, that she sacrifices the black sheep without any assistance or hesitation shows that she is not reluctant to do this kind of deadly work all by herself, that she is the very priestess that we learned she was back in Colchis. Although women could be priestesses, this sacrifice, coupled with her otherwise forceful behaviour in this scene,

strengthens our feeling that she is both a powerful magician and a woman who is obsessed with completing a ritual that must exclude all other mortals.

**Foreshadowing:** Aside from the overall ominous tone of the section, there are many hints at the dangerous Medea who will emerge, all of which cause us to be more wary – and even frightened – of her, and they also emphasize that she will turn out to be the wrong kind of “*hero*.”

The chariot (234) once again reminds us of her flight away from Colchis with the dead bodies of her children, where the image of her arriving *tantum caelo tegitur* (239) reminds us of that same journey away from Corinth when she will again be covered by the sky alone. When we see her standing *citra limenque foresque* (238) we recognize that she is refusing to enter, *which is her choice*, but this may remind us of how she will soon be forced out of Corinth – when she will not have such a choice – and how she will respond to that exile with murderous rage. And the twin altars and ditches that she digs (240-43) look forward to the twin death of her children, especially since she uses this very spot for taking her knife to the throat of the *velleris atri* (244), and this ritual slaughter – along with the two altars and two ditches – makes us think of the two deaths of the children.

We may notice a subtle irony when she returns, for Ovid writes that she *refugitque viriles/ contactus* (239-40), which is the very thing – avoiding the bed of the spouse, rejecting Jason’s touch – that she will be so angry about Jason doing *to her* when they are

in Corinth.<sup>83</sup> In a similar manner, when Medea orders Jason and his *ministros* to depart (255), we are reminded that Medea will soon be on the receiving ends of such orders in Corinth, where we also note that she will not be very pleased to receive such orders. What is more, we are also reminded of how Medea will eventually *flee* Jason's *hostile* touch, when she flies away from Corinth with the bodies of their children.

Even her prayer to the gods contains black and sinister foreshadowing, for we note that she begs Pluto and Proserpina, the gods of the dead, for help, and we naturally think that, even though her appeal may be completely appropriate and benevolent, these are the kinds of gods who are more associated with dark imagery and death.<sup>84</sup> Also, the reference to Proserpina – *rapta cum coniuge* (249) – may remind us that Medea herself is a stolen bride, and it also anticipates that Medea will steal Jason's new bride away from

---

<sup>83</sup> Of course, she is not leaving him for another man here, but merely in the act of performing an austere ritual. Nevertheless she is still keeping her distance from him, and a wise reader will note how this will become a problem for Medea later when Jason will do this to her. Rosner-Siegel (1982: 240) reads a lot into Medea's treatment of Jason in this scene, for she claims that the two occasions in which she avoids Jason or tells his *ministros* to leave (239,255) indicate "Medea's abandonment of her relationship with Jason." This, I fear, misses the point, for why would Medea later attempt to kill Pelias (and revive Aeson now) if she had abandoned her love for Jason? On one level, Rosner-Siegel overlooks the juicy irony in that it is Medea who rejects Jason's touch here, and, on another level, she goes too far in her assertions. The point is that Medea is now independent from Jason, that he is in the background, that she has supplanted him as the "*hero/anti-hero*"; but there is no evidence that she has stopped loving him. That event will still happen in Corinth, and Ovid will leave it up to the reader to add the details.

<sup>84</sup> For the most part this section is rather serious and solemn, for Ovid is showing Medea performing – in its fullness – a serious ritual which will allow her to revive Aeson. There are certain moments of irony – such as Medea's rejection of Jason in lines 239-40 – but it is very hard to make the case that these occasions are actually humorous at this stage. That is, they appear to strengthen the foreboding image we have of Medea (and of what will happen) rather than evoke subtle laughter.

A slight linguistic irony appears when Medea spreads out the body of Aeson and tells the *profanos* (256) to remove their eyes from her rites. She clearly means that the others are unconsecrated, but just as we find it ironic that Medea would accuse anyone else of committing a *scelus* (on line 172), the idea that Medea refers to others as *profani* is equally ironic, since an unintended double-meaning is "impious," and we are all conditioned to see Medea as the one who will commit truly *profana* deeds.

Any other layers of humour in this scene are decidedly very dark and macabre, and what makes them funny is that they are completely incongruous with her current actions: she is about to help Aeson yet she fills us with dread. For a brief overview of how Ovid uses the incongruous to express black humour see Peek (2001: 132-41).

him – and bring her to death. Furthermore, what she asks those gods to do – that they not hurry to rob the old limbs from life (250) – anticipates how she will soon hurry to rob Pelias of the remainder of his life.

The body of Aeson, we learn, is brought out in a state *exanimi similem* (254), which looks forward to the bodies *that really will be dead*. Furthermore, in her preparations and purification of Aeson (259-61) we may even see traces of way she will prepare the poison crown and robes which she will present to Creusa. What is more, the fire imagery that comes at the end of this section (260-61) also stands as a further reminder of what Medea will do when she burns Creusa with her poisons.

Although she is presented in the role of a priestess, Ovid gives us another image of Medea in this section when he describes the rituals that she performs in front of the altars as *bacchantum ritu* (258).<sup>85</sup> This is clearly meant to sound horrifying, because we immediately think of the main characteristic of bacchantes – *sparagmos*, or the tearing apart of live flesh. And this type of behaviour reminds us of how vile and disturbing Medea will become, for she will later kill people.<sup>86</sup> The rejuvenation episode even ends quite jarringly with Bacchus himself looking down and being impressed by Medea's actions (294-96), which is as clear an indication as any that we are supposed to see Medea as somehow connected to the bacchantes: wild, dark, uncontrollable, and strong. In

---

<sup>85</sup> Anderson (1972: 272) writes that these are “women who epitomize wildness, not only by their loosened locks, but also by their swift and passionate movements.”

<sup>86</sup> Her ritual sacrifice of the *velleris atri* (244) also contains another interesting aspect, since it may very well be a “proper victim for a subterranean deity” (Anderson 1972: 271), yet it is noticeably and eerily the very opposite of the Golden Fleece which they stole: she has moved from gold to black, from light to dark.

certain ways she has the ominous presence of Dionysus in *The Bacchae*. That is, if she is not taken into the society and embraced, she has the power to destroy that society.

Although we know that she is about to save Aeson, this scene leaves us with more fear of Medea than admiration.

### **262-84: Remaking Aeson**

Medea's revival of Aeson starts with a particularly grim horror show of the many exotic ingredients that she throws into her magic brew, creating yet another ominous image that seems incongruous with her known purpose – saving Aeson. The pace is very slow and deliberate and, even though we know that she is about to do such a good deed, we begin to feel very wary of this Medea all the same. The end of the scene, which showcases the life-giving powers of the potion, quickly returns us to her stated purpose, yet also strengthens our image of a powerful Medea.

**Character:** The Medea we see in this section continues to be distant, determined and terrifying. All of her attention – and ours as well – is placed on the exotic and gruesome materials that she throws in the pot (262-78), until we finally learn that the brew makes everything it touches flourish (279-84). The main things that are yet again confirmed about her in this section are that she is measured, methodical and serious, and that she is knowledgeable in making an effective magical spell. The long list also emphasizes that she is thorough, obsessive, and has a one-track mind. This may be a good deed, but the slow, cautious pace, and the strange catalogue of what she throws in the pot combine to make us suspicious of a more dreadful Medea and, at the very least, make her look even more formidable.

Several points stand out in this scene. First, the lengthy list of further ingredients is completely unexpected, has no antecedent in the narrative, and so is used by Ovid to build up our anticipation. We have already seen her travel to find all of the plants, yet Ovid chooses to tell us about so many other things which she throws into the brew as well – such as the *strigis infames...alas* (269) and the *ambigui prosecta lupi* (271) – so many of which appear to come from places other than her recently-completed journey, and the effect is that Medea becomes even more mysterious and daunting. On the one hand, this again emphasizes her excessive nature, since she has gone to the ends of the known world to find these ingredients and, on the other hand, these extreme distances work to show that she is an even greater traveller and adventurer than Jason. Once again, she looks more heroic than he does. As well, when the scene changes to focus on all of the growth that comes from the potion (279-84), we are reminded that she is still engaged in positive magic, even though the list toys with our expectations, since it offers many hints of her darker side, and the narrative thus becomes a bit of a game, which becomes evident when we look at the foreshadowing and humour that are present.

**Foreshadowing:** The renewal that occurs at the end of the scene looks forward to the upcoming rejuvenation, building it up, but, more significantly, the brew that she makes also anticipates the later poisonous potions that she will make – specifically, the ones she prepares for Creusa (via the poisoned gifts she sends her) and Theseus, respectively.<sup>87</sup> A great deal of what she adds to her potion makes us think of destruction

---

<sup>87</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 240) rather strangely describes this brew as “noxious” even though it makes old things young again, which one would think to be the very opposite of “noxious.”

– from the *sucos...atros* (265) to the many various parts of animals she uses.<sup>88</sup> Even the very animals themselves – the *strix*, the werewolf, the snake, and the crow – are ominous because they are unpleasant and point to a dire future. To this image Ovid also tells us that she is a *barbara* and that she is creating a scheme that is *mortali...maius* (276) and, when we think of a barbarian who is doing things that an ordinary human being should not, we are inclined to think of the murders that she will soon contrive from her poisons.

The foreshadowing in this scene is also connected to Ovid's use of retardation, for he is purposefully leaving us in suspense, holding back, and the list builds-up the rejuvenation, making us aware of its importance as much as it prefigures the ominous future.

**Humour, Grand Guignol, Anti-Hero:** The only visible element of humour in this scene, as exemplified in the catalogue of striking ingredients that she puts into her brew, is black. Ovid tells us that she adds *exceptas luna pernocte pruinas* (268), the wings of the screech owl,<sup>89</sup> the cut-up bits of the werewolf, the *squamea...membrana* of the water snake (272), the liver of the old stag (273), as well as the head and eggs of an old crow (274). This excessively long and over-the-top list of things that are hideously strange acts as a kind of comic horror show for the reader<sup>90</sup> – the ingredients she uses still have the same effect today – and Ovid even completes the list by pointing to its desired effect when he writes *propositum instruxit mortali barbara maius* (276). She is, he tells us, a barbarian, and that she is concocting a scheme that is supernatural and more than a

---

<sup>88</sup> Anderson (1972: 273) comments that the *sucos atros* are “black for ‘atmosphere,’” showing that the atmosphere is sombre.

<sup>89</sup> Anderson (1972: 273) writes that “the screech owl forms a standard element of bad omens at night.”

<sup>90</sup> Newlands (1997: 187) writes: “The excess of detail is part of the humor of Ovid’s portrayal of Medea as a witch.”



mortal should create. Peek refers to as this type of black humour as “grotesquerie,”<sup>91</sup> which we might also call *grand guignol*, where Ovid’s excessive description of the materials that she places in her magical brew (264-81) makes the audience both squeamish and amused, much in the same way that a modern audience might react to a horror film. We are repelled and fascinated at the same time.

There is also humour in the sheer incongruity in showing Medea prepare such a dark and ominous potion in order to save a life, where many of the magical ingredients she uses instead once again remind us of the dark witch that we expect her to become. She clearly does all of this to save him, and the various examples of rebirth that result from the herbs and potions – from the dragons who become younger when they breathe in the plants on the way back (236-7) to the stir-stick which produces olives at the touch of the potion (279-81) – point out that she is doing him a favour, yet the brew’s contents – and the atmosphere – hint at something more evil. She looks like a priestess of death, but here she produces life, and she does so through the use of dark magic – making it, in effect, *white magic*<sup>92</sup> – all the while we clearly begin to anticipate the way she will use her magic to more tragic ends, creating a complex and rather incongruous relationship between her deeds and our expectations. The miracles we witness at 279 and 284, where we suddenly see the positive and transformative power of the potion, build up the rejuvenation and convince us that that the negative connotations belong to the Medea’s future. Interestingly, Ovid will soon replay this story in reverse when he describes the

---

<sup>91</sup> Peek (2001: 141-45) draws reference to a number of stories in the *Metamorphoses* that emphasize the grotesque, but takes a special look at its various uses in the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela 6.424-676).

<sup>92</sup> Segal (2001: 14) writes: “We must remember, however, that up to this point Medea is exercising that magic for the life-preserving task of rejuvenating Aeson and has not yet committed a crime.”

death of Pelias, a scene in which an unconscious reader may be prepared for a more positive outcome before the poet pulls the rug out from under those expectations.

The black humour that specifically focuses on Medea's ultra-dark deeds is quickly reversed at the end of the scene in which we see the effective and life-giving nature of her potion. Very suddenly our expectations are put on hold and we become prepared to witness the benevolent Medea whom we have known from the beginning. She is still good, although we know that she will soon behave quite viciously. In this sense, she is a mystery to us, and Ovid is toying with how we view her: he does not allow us to have full sympathy for her in the places where we might wish to feel that sympathy, nor does he let us fear her in an appropriate manner either. Nevertheless we can still appreciate what he is doing with her as he plays with both her characterization and our reaction to her: destroying the notion of Medea as the traditional epic hero, since Jason can in no way compare with her.

#### **285-96: Aeson Rejuvenated, Bacchus Impressed**

This scene showcases a fast-acting Medea who impresses a god, and we witness a phenomenal change in the transformation of Aeson. What happens, we learn, are *miracula* (294), and we see Medea as a worker of miraculous deeds at the very moment before she turns into the maleficent character we have been expecting.

As soon as she notices that her potion is ready (279-94), she speeds into action and cuts up Aeson, pouring the brew into both his mouth and open wounds (285-88), after which Aeson views himself getting younger (288-93), and the scene closes with Bacchus showing his endorsement of her potion from his lofty perch (293-96). The quick revival

and the subsequent admiration of Bacchus firmly establishes Medea's power and, because the overwhelming emphasis of the scene is placed on the miraculous nature of Aeson's transformation, we are thus forced to recognize how powerful she is, for she is directly responsible for all of it. In fact, the majority of the lines in the scene are centred either on Aeson (287-93) or on Bacchus' response, which makes the reader part of a greater audience, all of whom are duly awed by Medea's magic.<sup>93</sup>

The scene continues Ovid's playful relationship with the tone, for we see both the good and the evil Medea revealed in this one episode where, even though she does an incredibly helpful act, the way in which the rejuvenation is performed and her subsequent connection to another god – one who is wild and untamed – remind us that she is about to cross her Rubicon and become the wicked Medea. Curiously enough, Bacchus' approval marks the point at which she moves from helpful to harmful, from light to dark, since this is the last time in the narrative in which her actions can be considered anything less than horrific.

Once again, Medea is brisk and businesslike in her activity. We have just seen her methodical and fanatical preparations, but here we learn that she is also fast-acting, which Ovid brings out through her quick use of the sword on Aeson's throat once she sees that the concoction is working. She knows how to make an effective magical spell, and she does not delay when she thinks the moment is right to strike. The abrupt change in pace

---

<sup>93</sup> Anderson (1972: 274) is of two minds on the horror of this scene, which effectively illustrates my point about the fluctuating tone. Of Medea's quick attack on Aeson he writes: "Although the action potentially could horrify an audience, Ovid sweeps through the description in a few rapid lines," which suggests that the reader is quickly drawn away from the horror and instead focuses on the miraculous change, yet he also notes that Ovid "permits us to imagine the far more grotesque scene of Aeson drinking through his slit throat," which affirms the presence of that horror.

reminds us of the frightening Medea, the one who does not doubt, the one who plans and plots, and who quickly enacts her vengeance when she spies the appropriate opportunity – and the prominent use of the sword only enhances her fearsome image. By themselves her quick – and effective – actions make her seem frightening enough, but the appearance of Bacchus at the end, the god who is impressed by her activities, makes her even more terrifying.<sup>94</sup>

**Foreshadowing:** Although there is a noticeable level of *grotesquerie* (and, hence, black humour) in this scene – since we witness Medea cutting Aeson’s throat and making the dead man drink her potion through his open wounds<sup>95</sup> – the greater impact of the scene is felt through the many elements of foreshadowing, all of which point to Medea’s destructive behaviour.

The sword that she uses to cut Aeson’s throat (285-86) looks forward to how she will murder her children – as well as to the murder of Pelias – for which knives will be used. Also, the notion that Aeson drinks the potion (287) anticipates the poisonous potion that she will make for Theseus.

Even Aeson’s transformation looks forward to Medea’s other murders, for the state of his aged and tired body (290) reminds us of Pelias, whom she will soon kill, and we see another reminder of this in the *membra* (292) that grow strong, for we know that

---

<sup>94</sup> Glenn (1986: 91) writes that “Medea is again shown, as with Jason, superior to the gods and Fates in power.” While I think this comment is a bit extreme – because I do not think that Medea is *superior* to the gods either here or anywhere else – nevertheless Glenn inadvertently hits upon a good point in comparing Medea to Jason, for this scene shows yet again that she is more powerful than her pseudo-adventurer husband, for the respect that she receives from Bacchus, *who learns from her*, is much more than Jason would ever receive from a god. Granted, Jason is the favourite of and is protected by many gods, but here Bacchus learns from Medea and takes a gift from her. In this sense, Medea trumps Jason once more.

<sup>95</sup> Anderson (1972: 274) writes that “Aeson cannot be said to be actively engaged in ‘drinking the juices down,’ for Medea has temporarily killed him.

she will throw Pelias' *membra* into a boiling cauldron.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the *pallor* that leaves Aeson's flesh (290-91) brings to mind the very *pallor* and destruction that Medea's poison will bring to Creusa's flesh. Even the youthful years (293) that Aeson sees in himself now remind us a bit of Medea's youthful children and brother – and especially their deaths, thus clouding this pleasant scene with ominous imagery.

The reference to Bacchus at the end and, more specifically, his nurses (295), makes us think of their main activity – *sparagmos* – which once again lends a distinct deadly quality to Medea's *munus*, and this very *munus* reminds us of the deadly gift that she will send to Creusa, as well as the deadly gift (or service) that she offers the daughters of Pelias. Combining all these references with the allusions to her future poisons that we saw via the potion (mentioned in the previous section), we can see that there are numerous hints to her deadly side, even in the midst of such a benevolent action.<sup>97</sup> Ovid places so much foreshadowing in this section because this is where Medea changes from good to evil, and we are just as repulsed by the image we see of the future Medea as we are amazed by the actual rejuvenation, which points toward the purpose of this scene: we are both repelled and awed by Medea at the same time – amazed at her power yet frightened by what she will still do.

### **297-349: Introduction**

The impact of the scene in Iolcus is intentionally disturbing. Medea acts in a way which is vicious beyond our expectations and we feel horrified at what happens.

---

<sup>96</sup> The reference to the *membra* may also remind the reader of how Medea recently scattered Absyrtus' limbs, which is yet another horrific image.

<sup>97</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 240) writes: "Her more savage nature manifests itself even further in the actual rejuvenation of Aeson as she slits his throat, drains his blood, and replaces it with her powerful drugs (253-293)."

Nevertheless, this episode, in Ovid's hands, proves to be so much more than one-dimensional, for, along with Medea's craftiness and malice, we also see a great variety of irony and dark humour in evidence, along with certain degree of sympathy for the Peliades. This episode is much more than a horror show – and, in fact, Ovid's rendition is the first extant version which plays the scene for comic effect. It changes our perception of Medea, but it also toys with our attitude toward her because she becomes much more sadistic than we expect her to be at this point in the narrative. The Medea we see in Iolcus anticipates the Medea we will see in Corinth – or, better yet, the Medea whom Ovid skips over in Corinth.

This particular episode is so rich in dark humour and irony that I propose to cover it in a line-by-line basis, where we must always consider the impact of what Ovid is doing, and ask why his characterization of Medea in this scene is so over-the-top. Clearly we expect her to become dangerous and frightening, but not to this degree, and Ovid makes Medea much more frightening than the audience would expect her to become – which is, in itself, quite a feat. The poet makes a figure of horror even worse, and yet so much so that she becomes comic, like a figure from a nightmare, almost unreal.

**297-308 – Medea “Flees” Jason:** At the start of this section we learn a great deal about Medea in a few short lines – and none of it is flattering. In the first few lines Ovid quite strongly emphasizes a few details about her character: she is crafty (*neve doli cessant* 297, *adsimulat* 298, *mendacis* 301), clever (*callida* 300), and powerful (which we see from the *merita* she recalls on 302). All of these deceptive and strong characteristics from the outset lead us to believe that Medea has thoroughly planned out the whole

encounter with the Peliades in advance, which makes her seem even more daunting and formidable.

The section begins with a strange motivation, for we learn that Medea travels to the home of Pelias *neve doli cessent* (297). Extant versions prior to Ovid say that she sought out Pelias in order to seek vengeance on behalf of Jason, but the purpose of this journey – *lest the trickery cease* – makes her appear to be disturbingly malevolent and evil.<sup>98</sup> As I mentioned in the first chapter, this is the first time in extant literature that Medea travels to see Pelias under her own name, and this openness creates an especially frightening picture, for here she is flaunting her craftiness by preying upon the better natures of the Peliades. That same line, however, perhaps suggests to us why Ovid may have wished to make such an innovation in the story, for he tells us that she pretends to be a suppliant who is in flight from Jason, with who she claims an *odium...falsum* (297-99). From this we learn that Medea is lying to them, yet Ovid is also reminding us of the very real hatred that Medea will soon feel for her husband. To put it another way, Ovid's innovation in this story reminds us of how she will later act in Corinth – where she will be cruel and deceptive – and these overt allusions help explain why he can so easily pass over those later, more famous events.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> See chapter 1 for a discussion of the Pelias scene that appeared prior to Ovid and the ones the poet may have had at his disposal. Although other versions do briefly mention the death of Pelias, Ovid is the first to ascribe the causation to *neve doli cessent*, which makes her seem dangerous and frightening.

<sup>99</sup> An obvious omission in this story is any mention of the Golden Fleece and what may have happened when Jason returned it to Pelias. Clearly Ovid wants to make us wonder what happened to it, and we can only deduce that Pelias took it back but failed to give Jason his proper due when he brought it to him. Sensing that this is what likely happened, and knowing that Jason and Pelias were enemies, the reader thus becomes less sympathetic toward Pelias and his daughters and more understanding of Medea's desire to punish them. However, Ovid, as is his wont, paints a Medea who goes to extreme lengths in her desire for vengeance.

More dark allusions to the events in Corinth are evident in how Medea presents herself to her hosts, for we learn that she arrives at the doors of Pelias pretending to be a *supplex* (298). This reminds us of how she will soon pretend to be a suppliant to both Creon and Jason before she tricks them in Corinth, so through this trick we foresee another equally vicious bit of mischief that she will achieve. Again, this shows us a Medea who is all-too happy to lie in order to get what she wants (301,308), and we know that she will soon be quite proficient in turning such lies on her other enemies.

The presentation of Medea does not exclusively look forward to Corinth, for we also have a picture of her in the current moment, and the woman we see in these lines is frightening. She may be a suppliant, but Ovid tells us that she is *callida* (300) and adds that she couples her false fight with Jason with a false friendship with the daughters of Pelias (301). All of this is intended to show us that what will happen in this scene will not turn out well for the Peliades and that Medea will act in a very harmful way toward them. We are thus prepared for what we shall see.

Pelias does not appear until the end of the scene, but we learn that he is *gravis...senecta* (299), which reminds us of Aeson (and the comparison continues at 305 when the daughters hope that Medea can rejuvenate Pelias just as she did for Aeson). Pelias seems old and helpless, unable to fight physically against Medea. Perhaps he would be clever enough to see through her trick – and that, in turn would be a reason for Medea to deal exclusively with his daughters – but we merely think of him as a vulnerable old man, much like Aeson had been. He does not appear to be a formidable



foe, and Medea appears cruel in attacking this old man, for we justifiably feel traces of sympathy for him.

The Peliades, in turn, are portrayed as laughably naïve, targets for Medea who are almost too easy. The one thing in their actions that makes them seem so naïve is that they trust Medea and her story far too easily. Indeed, Ovid makes us appreciate their naïveté because he gives us so much evidence of how she is tricking them. That is, without Ovid's authorial guidance and all of his signposts, we would feel a certain degree of sympathy for them. Their father is old and, just like Jason with his own father, they merely want to help Pelias. And, just like Jason, they beg this favour of Medea, which makes them seem very trusting and, in this way, undeserving of what she does to them. Yet our sympathies only extend so far; Ovid's verbal clues indicate that a disaster is coming but that they are too silly and stupid to recognize it. And this adds to the essential – and uncomfortable – humour of the scene. We laugh at how Medea plays the Peliades, yet we know that we should feel bad about how she will trick them. As I pointed out, Ovid is the first extant source to approach this scene in a humorous manner, but the comedy is viciously dark.

Part of the humour is evident in the fact that the Peliades hold the same kind of naïveté that Medea used to hold when we first met her in Colchis. In a way, they show us how far Medea has moved away from the girl she was at the start of the narrative. This change is exemplified in the role that we see Medea take on. She acts like a suppliant to the Peliades, which places her in a lower position, even though we know that she is by far

the stronger character.<sup>100</sup> In a way, she is pretending to be the younger and honest/ingenuous Medea, when we really know that she has vastly changed. In an ironic twist, they take her in (*excipiunt*, 300) when we know that this is the last thing they should do, for Ovid uses the same language one line later to tell us how Medea takes (*cepit*, 301) them with her trick of friendship, and we see that Ovid's use of the verb *cipio* with respect to Medea has more of a deceptive and dark nature than the way he uses the compound in conjunction with the Peliades.

In order to win their trust, Medea tells the Peliades about what she just accomplished with Aeson, and Ovid refers to it as *meritorum maxima* (302). As we saw in *Heroides* 6, *meritum* is a word that can have many meanings, but we can be certain that Medea is using it in a positive light here, considering that her goal is to ingratiate herself with these daughters. Yet, although many of her previous *merita* speak to the potential power of her magic, we can also be certain that the daughters would be shocked to hear about certain other examples of Medea's *merita*, such as killing her brother as well as her stealthy plan to kill their father. Of these accomplishments Medea wisely does not tell them, yet they are the ones we note as well.

In fact, the rejuvenation itself should give them pause for thought, for she is telling them that she has just slit the throat of Aeson (285-6) in order to make him younger. Her magic involves death as much as it involves life – and this should make them wary.

---

<sup>100</sup> Lines 299-300 appear to indicate that the daughters hold some kind of authority, since their father is too old; but this is an authority that Medea will exploit.

Yet everything that she tells them makes her seem more powerful and convinces them to trust her. She shows a great degree of cleverness and cruelty when she delays (*moratur*, 303) in telling them how she helped Aeson, for she is doing this to grab their attention and to make them beg the same of her. She knows that this is the most interesting part of her story for them, so she slows down and reels in the Peliades as her prey. We can how easily she traps them through the rhythm of the lines, for from line 305 to 307 Ovid uses five dactyls<sup>101</sup> in order allow the speed of the words to show how Medea is grabbing their attention and making them excited – an excitement which the poet also brings out by means of the alliteration on lines 305-6. Ovid tells us that they have hope (*spes*, 304), but we know that Medea’s plan will in reality put an end to their hopes, then they tell her to name her price and ask her to do an action when she intends to do an entirely different one. Simply put, they ask for something (*petunt*, 306) that they should really endeavour to avoid. In their naïveté they are actually (and unwittingly, of course) negotiating to pay a reward to Medea for killing their father. Yet perhaps the greatest irony of this scene lies on its very surface: as Glenn notes, in an effort to show their *pietas*, “Pelias’ daughters commit he worst act of filial impiety, patricide, out of filial loyalty.”<sup>102</sup>

Medea is confident and strong, and also knows how to work a crowd. But she is nevertheless highly cruel in the way she treats the Peliades, for, after they offer to let her name her own price, she then hesitates more before she answers with her *ficta gravitate* (308), which may remind us of Ovid’s attitude to the entire scene, and his own *false*

---

<sup>101</sup> Anderson (1972: 277).

<sup>102</sup> Glenn (1986: 91).

*seriousness*. Again, the delay makes Medea seem more cruel, the Peliades more naïve, and leaves the reader somewhere uncomfortably caught between the humour of the scene and its impending horror. We understand that she is thoroughly enjoying the malicious game that she is playing – she likes making them (and us) wait, increasing the suspense – and the idea that she can so easily deceive such simple-minded girls absolutely delights her, making her seem extremely sadistic. We are not supposed to like her – she is horrific. She appears to be at once deeply cruel, crafty, and thoroughly unsympathetic. The Peliades, on the other hand, appear to be comically simple-minded, and we can therefore detach ourselves from much of the sympathy that we might otherwise have for them. There are no heroes in this section: just an evil witch and some gullible victims.

We do feel bad for what happens to the Peliades, this much is certain. And we are horrified by Medea's cruelty. Nevertheless this is a tragedy that is played out in a comic way, since we feel for the young women who are so cruelly tricked into killing their father, yet we cannot fail to appreciate the irony, black humour, and the sheer sense of over-the-top pleasure that Ovid expresses in describing how Medea tricks them. Somehow the scene has a certain dreamlike, or nightmarish, quality – for we might think that no one can be so cruel and deceptive, and that no one can be so foolish as to be taken in by such a person.<sup>103</sup> And this scene is supposed to be shocking, for it is supposed to look forward to the Medea we know from Corinth.

---

<sup>103</sup> Newlands (1997: 189) writes that “because of their [the Peliades'] grimly comic folly in trusting Medea, the story lacks a tragic dimension and moral complexity.” Of course, the hidden assumption in this remark is that the story wants to – or should have – such obvious moral complexity, when Ovid appears not to aim for that at all.

**309-321: A Ram Made into a Lamb:** The rejuvenation of the old ram is quite vivid and points specifically to Medea's cruelty, for it is an excessive and malicious display whose main intention is to make the Peliades more eager to stab their own father. In this scene Ovid describes in detail how Medea cuts the ram's throat and throws it into a pot of boiling water. Although the segment ends on a pleasant note, with a young lamb emerging from the pot and searching for its mother's milk (*lactantiaque ubera*, 321), the sacrifice reminds us of the murders that are about to take place, and we are forced to juxtapose the real innocence of lamb with the feigned innocence of Medea. The rejuvenation of the lamb also proves that she can easily save their father, and, unbeknownst to the Peliades at this point, the demonstration eventually serves as a hateful taunt, since Medea is showing them (and us) what she can so easily do, and what she might have done.

The scene starts with the notion that Medea has made a promise (*pollicita est*, 309), but we know that she will not keep this promise, so we are on permanent guard as we watch her actions. Her sadism is reinforced by the fact that she decides to give the Peliades more reason to trust her powers (*sit fiducia maior*, 309) even though they have already begged her to help their father. By showing them how she can turn the aged ram into a young lamb, Medea heightens their anticipation of what will come, which will make the horrible events at the end seem even worse. At this stage Ovid even grants her the epithet *venefica* (316) for the first time in the *Metamorphoses*, which allows us to recognize that she is now a witch, someone who brews magic potions, but we also sense that she will soon merit the other meaning of that word as well and become *a poisoner*.

And we realize that these young women should not place any faith at all in Medea, since their *fiducia* would become worse if they knew her real intentions.

The implicit comparison of Pelias to an old ram, especially one who is too feeble to do anything, is not very complimentary. The ram is not merely similar to Pelias in terms of age (*effetus...annis*, 312), but, just like Pelias as well, he is also the *dux gregis inter oves* (311) – a king. However, neither king nor ram seems to be an effective ruler, since both of them have a tenuous hold on life. Moreover, although the ram is a leader, we note that he is merely a leader among the sheep, and this is a slight way of suggesting that his daughters are akin to gullible sheep and, even more biting, that Medea will lead them like a senseless flock of sheep when she convinces them to attack their father, since none of them has the intelligence, thought, or strength to oppose her.<sup>104</sup>

The choice of the ram also serves to remind us of the Golden Fleece. Ovid never mentions what happens with this item once they leave Colchis but a part of the tradition that Ovid had at his disposal suggests that they gave the Fleece back to Pelias, since that was Jason's commission at the outset of his journey. The poet was likely aware that his reader would be wondering whether this item has been returned or not, and when we suddenly then witness Medea sacrificing a ram, we are thus reminded of the ram that bore the Golden Fleece.

The connections to the Golden Fleece run deeper, for Pelias thought that the mission he originally assigned to Jason, to retrieve the Fleece, would be impossible, that Jason would die along the way, yet the journey nevertheless ended in improbable success

---

<sup>104</sup> It is worth noting that Pelias never sees Medea. He does not know that she is there and, perhaps if he did know, then he would suspect something and protect himself from her.

for Jason. Equally, this current task involving a fleece – the rejuvenation of the old ram and, subsequently, Pelias – although just as improbable, also promises success: but *for Medea*, not for Pelias. This sacrifice of the ram brings to mind the other mission, both of which involve fleeces and result in surprising, and negative, outcomes for Pelias. While his original goal was to use the Golden Fleece as a pretext to get rid of Jason, Medea's trick involving this new fleece serves to help her get rid of Pelias. Thus, the sacrifice of the ram reminds us of the other plan that did not turn out as Pelias expected.

The length and attention paid to the ram's sacrifice (310-21) give time for both the Peliades and the reader to feel impressed by Medea while at the same time it postpones the inevitable. We already know that she is going to do something harmful, and the slow build-up makes us ever more anxious for the dark deeds that will come, forcing us to see the pleasant act of rejuvenating the ram through the anticipatory and frightening lens of the slaughter that is about to come. We may even note the odd comic touches at the end, where Ovid describes the bleating of the lamb (*balatum*, 320) as it frisks about looking for milk: this is odd mainly because the tone appears to be light even though we sense that darker events that are about to transpire. Moreover, the lightness of the humour affects our appreciation of the darker events to follow, since the abrupt change of tone will make the horror look even grimmer.

At its essence the scene brings out how effectively Medea plays the Peliades, how cunning and persuasive she is. We have already established that she is clever (*callida*, 300), but this scene takes her ingenuity into the realm of cruelty, for effectively she is putting on a performance for them (and us). We see her leading them along *and also*

*planning ahead*, for her aim is ultimately to convince them to stab their own father. To this end Ovid lets her take her time, and the sacrifice of the ram points to her brutality because Medea's purpose is *to show them* how uncomplicated it is for her to rejuvenate their father. She uses the ram as a type of visual-aid – the sacrifice is altogether quick and uncomplicated – for her aim is *to show them* rather than merely tell them how easily this can be accomplished. Most importantly, since the sacrifice is shown to be apparently *painless* for the ram (after all, he does not bleat in agony), she hopes this performance will make them all the more willing, not merely to let her do this to their father, but rather to attack him themselves, all the while believing that they are not hurting him at all. The ram thus shows us that she is planning to convince them to slay their own father, which emphasizes her cruelty.

Indeed, although she is doing this ostensibly in order that their *fiducia* might become *maior* (309), curiously, while their faith in her grows, ours in turn diminishes. That is, she seems even crueller for performing a completely unnecessary action,<sup>105</sup> for we later discover that the use of the ram is functionally superfluous – that is, her plan could succeed without it – since she will not even make the proper “rejuvenation brew” into order to slay Pelias. Thus, the ram only serves a performative role: Medea uses it in order to cause the Peliades to believe her all the more, and this in turn makes her seem especially malicious, for the real reason that she is leading them on, that she is taking her time, is that she hopes that this needless rejuvenation of the ram, and their subsequent

---

<sup>105</sup> Rosner-Siegel (1982: 241) writes that her “love is transformed to cruelty and hate.”



optimism and expectation, will make the final result – the death of their father – even more traumatic for them, since they will be the agents of their father’s death.<sup>106</sup>

**322-338 – Medea’s Finest Hour:** Once Medea wins the trust of the Peliades, the rest of the encounter with them works to reinforce the impression that she has become the embodiment of pure evil – and completely malicious. The great amount of time that Ovid spends on the actual murder is intended to paint her in a frightening light. Moreover, there is also a distinct layer of dark comedy to the scene, for here Ovid is displaying a type of *excessiveness* in his description of Medea’s sadistic trick that is similar in nature to his lengthy description of Leto’s murder of the Niobides (6.218-301). In this way Ovid is trying to show us that he is not upset by what happens, that instead he finds it wickedly funny, and that we should appreciate the humour as well. That is, the scene is macabre and cruel and, even though Ovid concentrates a great number of lines on it, the horrific act nevertheless becomes suffused with comedy due to Ovid’s over-the-top presentation and the humour that he himself seems to find in it – all of this to guarantee that we are not greatly upset by what happens.

Medea’s cruelty and craft are brought out in a number of ways. First, let us consider the tone. Although everything appears to be very serious and sombre, eventually we realize that Ovid finds the whole episode humorous, thus undercutting Medea’s feigned gravity. On the surface she is extremely imperious both in her role as a witch and in the way she treats the Peliades, which works to expose her craftiness. She treats this as

---

<sup>106</sup> Glenn (1986: 91) says of the change between the rejuvenation of Aeson and the murder of Pelias: “Success merely allows her to be vindictive.” Although my first reaction is to think that this comment is a bit too glib, it nevertheless sums up the relationship quite succinctly: Medea’s success with Aeson allows her to thus show her crueller side.

a momentous ritual and waits the magical number of three days (324) before carrying out her plans – even though we soon discover that she does not even use any magic this time but instead fills the pot with *purum laticem et sine viribus herbas* (327).<sup>107</sup> She portrays this as a solemn rite, to which they respond appropriately, but this makes us recoil in horror since we know that she is manipulating their trust in the gravity of her countenance. We start to recognize that the purpose of this entire ritual, as far as Medea is concerned, just like the rejuvenation of the lamb (309), is to increase their faith and to make them ask *impensius* (323) – which shows that she is toying with them, having sport by encouraging them to have so much faith in both her abilities and, what is worse for them, *in her honesty*. Thus she is using false solemnity; for her it is nothing but an act, which exposes her cleverness, her craft, and also undercuts the outward seriousness.

In conjunction with the underlying comic tone, we also see Medea's viciousness and cunning on display in making the Peliades wait the three days before she prepares the ritual. She does this to make them still more anxious and trusting, *to hold them – and us – in suspense*, but, more importantly, she wants to make them *more willing to obey her commands* when she tells them to stab their father. Medea yet again is playing with their anticipation by means of this delaying tactic, since she cruelly convinces them that she is offering a dream rather than a nightmare. Obviously she does not have to wait the three days, so she must be enjoying what she is doing, enjoying *the presentation* and the cruel build-up, and this makes the scene – and Medea – appear even more vicious, especially in

---

<sup>107</sup> Anderson (1972: 278) writes: “We are meant to contrast this brief description of the useless potion with the elaborate list of ingredients for Aeson's rejuvenation, 264 ff.”

the eyes of the reader, since we anticipate the evil deed that is about to come, and here Ovid gives us another clue of what that deed will be by calling her *fallax* (326).

Directly next to the epithet *fallax* we see that Medea is also referred to as *Aeetias* (326), which reminds us quite forcefully of her connection to Aeetes. At the start of this book we learned that her father treats his enemies in an excessively harsh way (14-15), and this reminder of Medea's connection to him also brings to mind how he planned *to deceive* his enemy Jason. Thus the title *Aeetias* makes us think that Medea is just like her father and will also horribly trick her enemies. Of course, this also reminds us that Medea *betrayed her father*, that she was *fallax* to Aeetes. Furthermore, it is worth noting that last noun or pronoun to have made direct reference to her was *venefica* (316) and the next one will be *Colchide* (331). In fact, the last time she was signified by the name Medea was at the end of Aeson's rejuvenation scene (285) and, following that, Ovid continually draws attention to her by using names that exploit her relationship with Aeetes, as well as her foreign origins, until he finally calls her Medea once again when she plots to kill Theseus (406). Over this huge expanse of lines – from the point where Bacchus is impressed by her skills until her arrival in Athens (286-405) – we are constantly reminded of her Colchian origins.<sup>108</sup> All of these epithets are clearly intended to show that she is from Colchis and, as is the case with Ovid, the way he describes Medea in these lines is not accidental, for he wants us to see her as foreign, as dangerous and deceptive, and as someone who can potentially do harm. By pointing out her Pontic connections to such a

---

<sup>108</sup> From the penultimate time that Ovid refers to her by her name Medea on line 285 until the last time he does this on line 406 – throughout the murder of Pelias through the infanticide – we have 9 direct references to Medea that point exclusively to her foreign origins or murderous qualities: *Colchide* (296,331), *Phasias* (298), *Colchis* (301,348,394), *venefica* (316), *Aeetias* (326), and *male mater* (397).

degree, Ovid is trying to show us that she will behave in ways that are frightening and that we should see her as terrifying and conniving.<sup>109</sup>

The title *fallax* clearly informs us that Medea is waiting the three days solely to impress the others rather than out of any religious need: the delay merely allows her to make the scene look more like a ritual or a rite. Choosing to do the deed at night is another indication of her cleverness and craft: it completes the faux-ritualistic and solemn atmosphere, since all of her other magical preparations were performed at night and with the aid of her gods of darkness (192-93).<sup>110</sup> We learn that she leaves nothing to chance, for she is responsible for the *cantus magicaeque potentia linguae* (330) that cause everyone else in the palace to be asleep, which in turn will allow her and the daughters to so easily enter Pelias' bedroom. We should note the emphatic position of *regem* (327), and how Ovid repeats that the king is held by sleep on the very next line (*cum rege suo*, 328). It is important for Medea to put the king to sleep since this will allow her to convince his daughters to stab him themselves – he will not be able to object – and, of course, it will also likely allow for an easier escape as well.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, performing the act in the dead of night, with no-one else awake to spoil the show, leaves the daughters more apt to follow Medea's brusque orders to stab their father, since she can more easily convince them that what she says is true. Thus Medea is in fact using her magic here –

---

<sup>109</sup> We might also note that Ovid refers to the daughters exclusively as *daughters of Pelias* (300,304,322,331,346) and we can see that the poet is juxtaposing the daughter from Aeetes, from Colchis, with these daughters from Pelias: the daughter from Colchis is much craftier, and certainly more evil, than these naïve daughters in Iolcus.

<sup>110</sup> Throughout this book, Medea's magic seems to be performed in or around darkness: Jason visits her, and learns how to overcome the trials, in the *nemus umbrosum* (75) at night (100); Medea goes out into the night and prays to the gods of night to help her rejuvenate Aeson (179-93); and the *faces* (259) that are present at the actual rejuvenation make us believe that it took place at night.

<sup>111</sup> We have to assume that Medea must have told them not to tell their father or anyone else about what was about to happen, showing how she further entangles the young women in her web of lies.

she is leaving nothing to chance – but is employing that magic to ensure that no-one will interrupt her as she convinces the Peliades to kill their own father. She has planned this out very well and is extremely meticulous, thorough, cunning, shrewd, and frightening.

The height of Medea's malice is shown in the way that she tries to convince the daughters to kill their own father. They feel a natural reluctance to stab him themselves – and they are undoubtedly surprised when Medea tells them that they will be the ones to do this instead of her – so she needs to entice them with quite a long speech (332-38) in which she plies them by appealing to their hopes and their desire for *pietas* (336), emphasizing that the life of their father will be in their hands (335). The quick pace of the scene makes her seem even crueller – she does not even allow them time to think but instead seems to almost bully them into stabbing Pelias. They simply did not foresee that Medea would demand that they do this themselves. In a way, we are as shocked by Medea's speech as much as the Peliades are, not knowing how to respond, amazed at this powerful and forceful creature before us.<sup>112</sup> They had been prepared to *let her* do this to their father, but that is not enough for Medea, for she must make them *kill* their own father.

There is also a great deal of comedy attached to this scene, such as the irony at hand when the Peliades see the lamb and ask her more urgently (*impensius*, 323) to do the very thing that they should want to avoid. After all, they are placing their trust in an enemy – which is something no sensible person would do. And they seem altogether

---

<sup>112</sup> We still have the memory of Aeson's rejuvenation with us, and how Medea ordered everyone away (255-56) so that she could perform the rite alone. That she would ask them to stab their father seems incongruous with the ritual we just witnessed – and it is supposed to be incongruous, for Ovid is not hiding *from us* what Medea is about to do.

comically gullible because they do not even bother to ask Medea *why they are the ones who have to kill Pelias*, especially since Medea is present and armed, just as she was with the ram.<sup>113</sup> But most of the humour is otherwise extremely dark and cruel. Ovid points the way to the coming murder with the quip that a sleep similar to death held the king (328-29), which, since Pelias will soon be dead, indicates that the poet wants us to find irony in this otherwise horrific scene. In a way, the humour makes the scene more even more vicious, since we realize that Medea has likely thought of this aspect of the plan as well. She has probably recognized the biting wit with respect to the sleep *neci similis* (328), since she has induced the sleep herself.

Ovid mentions the power of the magic tongue (330). Ostensibly he is referring to the magic that caused everyone to fall asleep in the palace, but we can also see a double meaning through an allusion to the power of Medea's tongue – and the lies that she tells to the Peliades.

Medea herself is aware of the irony of the situation – that they are going to kill Pelias when they think that they will save him. Many of the expressions that she herself uses have double meanings, and her cleverness and wit is once again connected to her essential cruelty. Ovid has Medea make a number of ironic comments, such as her first hurried remark to the daughters, asking why they hesitate unmoving (*inertes*, 332). They should not move, they should be *inertes*, if they know what is good for their father, and

---

<sup>113</sup> Newlands (1997: 188-89), citing Frécaut (1989), says much of the story focuses on the gullibility of the daughters of Pelias, not on the moral failings of Medea.” I cannot fully agree with this, for Medea has given the Peliades every reason to believe her – that was the purpose of the ram's sacrifice, after all. We, the readers, do not believe her, but we see her for what she has become – a conniving and murderous witch. As we see, the Peliades are very gullible, and we do laugh at their overly-trusting behaviour, yet we are nevertheless horrified by how viciously Medea treats them. That is, the story does indeed focus on Medea's moral failings, because she has no scruples.

Ovid is allowing Medea to make a bit of an in-joke with this question that only someone with a taste for dark humour might appreciate. An even more obviously macabre line appears when she says that their father's life is *in manibus vestris* (335). But his life in their hands only in so far that Medea is concocting a scheme in which *his death* will come through the work of their hands, since they are the ones who will be stabbing him.<sup>114</sup> This is indeed a cruel joke, yet thoroughly in keeping with the way Medea is portrayed in the section.

Her rather sick sense of humour does not stop, for she urges them to strike their father by suggesting that doing so would prove that their hopes are not *inanes* (336), even though she knows very well that by doing so those hopes will become completely empty.<sup>115</sup> When, at Medea's insistence, they finally apply the blows to their father, the instructions that she gives to the Peliades are – to both Medea and the reader – as ridiculous as they sound, for she tells them if they have any *pietas* (336) then they will not refuse to offer this *officium* (337) to their father. The humour stems from the clever way that Medea plays with the notion of *pietas* in this scene, for she tells them that they will do this if they have any *pietas*, and that they should be at hand to perform the *officium* for their father, but she knows that she is actually urging them to do a deed that would completely contradict any notion of *pietas* and one that would be the exact opposite of an *officium*. Her humour is that of a sadist.

---

<sup>114</sup> Anderson (1972: 279) writes: "There is grim irony in what Medea says, as Ovid intended. They think that they can extend, whereas they are actually going to end, Pelias' life."

<sup>115</sup> Anderson (1972: 279) say of *spes inanes* (336): "another bit of irony."

Finally, Medea demands that they drive out his old age (*senectam*, 337-38) with their swords, but she wants them to drive it out toward his death even though they think they are driving it out to be replaced by a more youthful version of him. Medea ends her speech with this final play on words, since she has primed them to do her bidding.

Through all of the double entendres that she uses we come to understand that Medea has planned this all along, that every event thus far – including especially the rejuvenation of the ram – has served the purpose of convincing the Peliades to kill their own father. We can imagine her rehearsing these lines to herself in the days leading up to the event, plotting her revenge with malicious exactitude. She has left nothing to chance, and we, like the Peliades, are in awe of what she does.

**339-349 – A Rude Awakening:** The final scene in the death of Pelias is filled with dark humour and completes a picture of a Medea who has become a typical figure of horror. The humour in this section can be divided into two broad categories: the type that directly or indirectly refers to other events in the Medea narrative, and the humour that is centred on this scene alone. Let us start with the second, more localized, variety.

First, we can easily see the playful – yet macabre – irony that Ovid takes up from the previous lines, where Medea has just made the speech in which she tells the Peliades to strike at their father. As we have seen, her speech is brimming with irony, and Ovid continues to add a few of his own double entendres, for he writes *his ut quaeque pia est hortatibus impia prima est* (339), by which he means that the daughter with the greatest amount of *pietas* is ironically the first one to act in a way that displays the opposite of *pietas*. It is a very amusing reversal, and Ovid clearly delights in what he has written,



since he begins the next line by noting that *ne sit scelerata, facit scelus* (340): lest she sin, each one commits a sin. Thus we have the daughters hurrying to commit a crime lest they appear to be lacking in devotion.<sup>116</sup> The murder scene is a constant play on the notion of *pietas* and how Medea uses it against the Peliades, and Ovid finds the notion devilishly funny.

Next we learn that they can scarcely look at the blows they give their father (340-41). The reason that they are unable to do this is that they do not want to view the gruesome method they must employ to rejuvenate him, yet we know that the real reason why they should turn their eyes away (*oculosque reflectunt*, 341) is because they are doing something that has no redeeming quality. Still another ironic play on words appears with the mention of the *caecaque...vulnera* (342), where Ovid is trying to say that they give blows without looking at the body they are striking, which conjures up a comic image of them striking wildly, not certain whether they hit the mark or not. But we can also note that the blows – and the daughters who are striking those blows – are blind in the sense that they are undiscerning, even stupid, with respect to what they really doing: they are *unaware* that Medea is tricking them into killing him.<sup>117</sup> Of course, we must not forget that Pelias himself is blind to the blows as well – and only Medea has sight of this attack for what it really is.

From irony we quickly move to the macabre, to *grand guignol*, when we suddenly witness the grotesque image of Pelias waking up in the midst of the attack with blood

---

<sup>116</sup> Glenn (1986: 91) writes: “Pelias’ daughters commit the worst kind of filial impiety, patricide, out of filial loyalty.”

<sup>117</sup> *OLD*, s.v. *caecus* 2.

flowing out (*cruore fluens*, 343) of his half-mangled body (344). In this scene Ovid paints a disturbingly vivid picture of the king as he tries to lift himself onto his elbow and stretches out his white arms amid so many blows – all of which builds up the *grand guignol* effect, since the poet is having sport with all of its bloody, gruesome, and sensational aspects.<sup>118</sup> This scene is clearly disturbing, and Ovid wants us to find it shocking, but he combines the macabre imagery with a touch of incongruity – even absurdity – at the very end when Pelias wakes up and asks *quid facitis, natae? quis vos in fata parentis/ armat?* (346-47). In the midst of such a horrific scene the questions come across as rather inappropriate – even silly – for he would be far better off just to tell them to stop. The comic nature of the questions really becomes clear when we imagine what the answers would be: Pelias’ daughters would tell him that they are stabbing him, and that they are doing that because his enemy Medea told them to do so. Indeed, his comments seem rather out of place, almost farcical, and we may be tempted to laugh in response.

We may feel revulsion at what Medea does, yet her actions are so well defined and cruel that we cannot help but offer a guilty laugh at this horror show.<sup>119</sup> She is so evil that all of these events feel both nightmarish and comic. The ghastly yet humorous nature of this scene is completed when Medea finishes the task herself by dumping Pelias’ body into the hot water before he – and presumably, his daughters as well – can

---

<sup>118</sup> Words that point the blood, savagery, and wounds: *scelus, ictus* (340); *saevis, vulnera* (342); *cruore fluens* (343); *semilacer* (344); *gladios* (345).

<sup>119</sup> Anderson (1972: 280) writes of the humorous use of the *animique manusque* on line 347: “the use of zeugma at this potentially tragic moment again shows us how we are to take the scene.”

say anything more (348-49), and here we can even imagine the Peliades looking on mutely and impotently, not realizing that they should try to stop her.

Of course, as I mentioned, there are also allusions to other aspects of the Medea narrative, especially with respect to how Medea manipulates the *pietas* of the Peliades. In this scene we see how she tricks them into committing murder when they otherwise believe that they are doing something altruistic, and we are thus reminded of how she will soon trick others in much the same way. Let us consider two well-known examples that are not mentioned in the *Metamorphoses* but are still central to the Medea narrative. First, she will prey upon Creon when she convinces him to let her stay one more day in Corinth, a day she will use to plot her revenge. Second, and in a similar way, this manipulation of others' *pietas* also reminds us of how she will trick her children to bring the gifts to her rival – they think they are doing a good deed – as well as how Creusa accepts those gifts, believing that perhaps she and her enemy Medea can be reconciled.

It is not accidental that the murder of Pelias is introduced with the digression about Bacchus (294-96), since Medea seems almost godlike in this section both in the way that she is able to turn the daughters into her own army of bacchantes and in how she tricks them into the frenzy in which they hurriedly try to kill their father. Indeed this scene is very reminiscent of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, especially when Pelias wakes up, where we are reminded of how Pentheus begs his mother not to kill him and how she, in turn, does not see him. Medea, however, is not quite Bacchus, and these women are not quite bacchantes, and thus they immediately stop what they are doing once their father

wakes up in the middle of their attack.<sup>120</sup> In this way alone they seem deeply human, but their humanity costs them in the end, since Medea takes complete advantage of it.

Curiously, we do not know whether the Peliades ever learn that Medea is tricking them – it happens all too fast for them (and us), and the rapid pace of the scene is intrinsic to its humour. At the end they appear to be like deer who are caught in the headlights of a car, since they are unable to do anything at all in response. For all that they know Medea's original design, *to help their father*, is working according to schedule, yet by stopping the slaughter – and helping their father – they are paradoxically behaving in a way that contradicts their original intention. When Pelias wakes up they falter in their trust of Medea – and of her plan – and so she quickly finishes the job herself by cutting his throat and throwing his mangled body into the boiling waters. The ending here is deeply abrupt and, for all intents and purposes, the Peliades most likely once again believe that their father will jump out of the pot just as the lamb did previously. In fact Medea throws him into the pot so that *they will expect him to jump out*. This action shows even greater cruelty on Medea's behalf, since their hopes will again be raised in vain, and it also shows her cleverness, since it buys time for her to escape while they are waiting for a younger version of their father to leap out of the pot. Of course, we know that is not going to happen, and we also realize that Medea has arranged this perfectly, for she is easily able to kill Pelias herself when they lack the courage to finish the job themselves, and she escapes while they are still staring into the cauldron of boiling

---

<sup>120</sup> Glenn (1986: 91) sees a further connection between Medea and Bacchus, for he writes that she “stands out as an individual beyond the restraints of nature and the gods, a law unto herself.”

water.<sup>121</sup> The comedy comes from the rapid pace of the scene, their utter confusion, and Medea's perfect escape.

In the end we have to believe that Medea both wants and ensures that Pelias will wake up in the middle of this massacre, that she wants him to see his daughters killing him, just as she wants his daughters to live with the memory that they killed their own father. In fact, Medea must be the one who causes him to wake up, since she is the one who put him to sleep with her supernatural spell (330). Thus she wants the Peliades to be forever reminded of their father waking up seeing – as his last sight – that his own daughters killed him. Indeed, this has turned out exactly as Medea had planned, and it makes her seem ever the more vicious and frightening.

The Medea we see with the murder of Pelias is so dark and evil that it is almost like a nightmare, and we are stuck by many contrasting emotions throughout: horror at her actions, marvel at the change in her, and laughter at the sheer macabre quality of both what happens and of Ovid's wit. Our anticipation of the evil to come at the start of the book has been confirmed, but in a way that is much greater than the one we imagined.

### **350-390 – Medea's Flight to Corinth: Overview**

Just as she did in Iolcus, in the travelogue Medea continues to go rogue: she begins to fly off course, to wander, and she does not take a direct route to Corinth.<sup>122</sup> This is significant because it shows us her very odd state of mind following the murder of Pelias. That is, she is in no hurry to reach Corinth, has become a bit of a sightseer, and

---

<sup>121</sup> Anderson (1972: 280) notes how Ovid “quickly moves away and so prevents us from becoming emotionally engaged.”

<sup>122</sup> Anderson (1972: 282).

we are struck by the unusual juxtaposition of her recent murder with her current effort at tourism – this is not what a murderer should be doing. She appears to be unfeeling and insouciant – and Jason is nowhere in sight.

In this section we do learn certain things about **Medea's character**. First of all, Ovid tells us in 350-51 that she would have been punished had she not escaped. This reconfirms for us that, although she has become quite a powerful witch, Medea is nevertheless *not impervious* to punishment.<sup>123</sup> The journey itself depicts Medea as *strong* and *wise* – for she knows just when to leave Iolcus; it shows us that she is an *inquisitive* traveller, one who is curious about the world around her; that she is *independent*; and, since we do not foresee this digressive journey, that she is a woman who is just as *unpredictable* in her actions as she is in her travel plans.

Ovid is clearly playing with the metamorphosis that has taken place in Medea – from helper maiden to harmful witch. Furthermore, by focusing stories that are similar to Medea's in this travelogue – ones that arise from the places that Medea sees beneath her – Ovid thus places her tale within the context of other changes. The vast majority of the stories in this section, which I number at sixteen, appear to involve a transformation of some kind. Change is the theme of the *Metamorphoses*, it is its very title and, moreover, it is also the theme of the Medea story. At first it appeared that Medea was the agent of change – since she rejuvenated both Aeson and the ram – but we soon learn that a very real change has taken place within her: she has moved from an innocent young girl into a

---

<sup>123</sup> And we might note that – just as she did at 7.220ff. – she is yet again travelling on *pennatis serpentibus* much earlier than most readers would expect her to be.

powerful witch. And thus we see a paradox in the metamorphosis of Medea: she is the one who causes transformations, yet she also endures a great change herself.

The concept of metamorphosis is certainly the most obvious connection between the travelogue tales and the Medea narrative and, even though these new stories force the reader to look at Medea's tale as one in which *her own transformation* is the focus, they also help dispel the notion that Medea's situation is somehow unique. As the centre of attention is directed away from Medea and instead placed on the world below, we are also compelled to consider the kind of world that she sees: one of killing, family problems, escape from punishment, and scorned love. All of these tales have varying links to that of Medea and they showcase a world in which people behave quite badly, which to a certain extent gives a context for her own behaviour. By looking at the world around Medea, instead of at her, we see a strong connection: it is a frightening world *and she is a part of it*.

These mythological references, in many ways, force us to reflect on similar aspects in the Medea story. We witness allusions to **scorned love, betrayals, and vengeance** (5,9,10),<sup>124</sup> which point to how Medea will soon be rejected by Jason. There is evidence of **tragic family relations** (1,9,11,13), which makes us think of how Medea betrays her father, how she will kill her own children, and how Creusa and her father will also die. We see references to **dying parents** (4,5,11,12), which remind us of her recent visit to Pelias as well as the upcoming death of Creon. If not exactly infanticides, there are also numerous references to the **deaths of children** (9,10,15,16). Finally, we see a

---

<sup>124</sup> The numbered references correspond to the following allusions in this section.

great many allusions that remind us of **Medea's growing power** (2,3,6,7,8) and to her current state of **flying through the air** (2,10,12,15,16).

In terms of the section's narratological function, the travelogue provides a lengthy bridge from Medea's murder of Pelias to her brief stay in Corinth. Even though Medea passes over many of these places very quickly, the reader is forced to consider each reference very meticulously, and the effect is that the travelogue presents us not only with a change in the plot but also a distinct change in **pace** because we are forced to consider the allusions so closely. The events with Pelias happened so quickly, this journey has a distinctly less hurried quality, and this different pace is rather surprising, since it causes a **retardation** in the action while we eagerly await the events in Corinth. While we read of these other stories we are also anticipating Medea's upcoming revenge on Jason, which leaves us in **suspense**, waiting for her to arrive in Corinth. He spends so many lines on her journey to Corinth that we expect at least as many lines on the murders there. In effect, Ovid is toying with us – creating a playful and elaborate hoax.

This is a very long section, one that is very intellectual and engaging, forcing the reader to think about each allusion. The allusions themselves are very complex and they serve to showcase how multifaceted – and unpredictable – that Medea herself has become. The places and changes she witnesses below are extraordinary, reminding us of Medea's own extraordinary world and making us aware that hers is a tale in which anything could happen. As readers we are filled with awe and apprehension about Medea, because we know what she has done *and what she will do*, but we are also aware of how much she has changed herself. Once again, they also remind us of how complex



Medea's story has become, which is an important fact, since many critics claim that Ovid's Medea has by this time merely become a caricature of evil. The allusions prove otherwise. She may be evil, but her story is not simple.

There is not one consistent theme among these various metamorphoses. Some of them involve innocents who are saved and changed into birds (while running from their own murderous children); some are changed into animals, such as seals, cows, or dogs; some of the tales involve comic trickery (Bacchus) or retribution by the divine. Also, the Paris reference (361) even seems to offer more of an ironic comment than a change *per se*. Nevertheless this complicated mixture of allusions is also reflective of Ovid's presentation of Medea: she has changed and the reasons for her change are legion. Ovid does not tell us how to interpret Medea's actions or force us to have any one specific reaction to her metamorphoses. We are meant to enjoy – and appreciate – her actions as much as we are expected to examine her causes.

Once again, we cannot forget the learnedness of Ovid's audience and must remember that they would know all of these stories and, in most cases, recognize the clever links to the Medea narrative. To that end every reference is tinged with a certain amount of subtle humour, even if that comedy is black. In fact, even the truly most "horrible" acts, such as Menephron's incest (386-87), can, oddly enough, be the most darkly comic as well, since he is characterized as a beast and not a human being. The understated comic nature of certain stories fits very well with the fact that Medea's tale, as the reader has just witnessed in the death of Pelias, has itself become both horrific and humorous at the same time.

Anderson says that this passage has little to do with Medea's story at all, but rather is merely a chance for Ovid to display his own cleverness. He writes: "In this section we are not interested in Medea as a dramatic character at all. She merely serves as a vehicle for the amusing display of Ovid's erudition."<sup>125</sup> Such a statement, I think, is too dismissive of all the connections that exist between this mythological travelogue and the story into which it is inserted. Granted, the allusions do show a great deal of cleverness – this is Ovid, after all – but I argue that there are indeed many tangible links and legitimate reasons for this digression. It is no more "Ovid just being Ovid" than Hamlet's soliloquy is merely "Shakespeare just being Shakespeare." Here I will examine some of the more obvious connections.<sup>126</sup>

The major effect of this travelogue, after having read about all of these various transgressions, is that these tales not only help to explain Medea's behaviour and show us that she is multi-dimensional, but they also prepare us for how Ovid will soon skip over the events in Corinth – since we will have, in fact, just seen those actions through the lens of these other transgressions. The travelogue is thus a bridge that lets Ovid skip over the more well-known aspects of her tale. As well, we might also note the absence of any reference to Jason in this section. It is as if he has ceased to exist.

**350-370:** Starting with the first nine allusions, let us then examine all sixteen references in order of their appearance, considering their respective links to the Medea

---

<sup>125</sup> Anderson (1972: 281).

<sup>126</sup> Schubert (1989) writes a brief essay in which he discusses the topographical and mythological importance of each of the places and stories Medea encounters in this section. Some of Schubert's points are quite valid and some I find rather tangential; however, I note that he has also missed quite a few links to the Medea story. Moreover, while his essay is helpful in showing how some of these places and events connect to the Medea narrative, we need to consider *why* these aspects of the travelogue are important.

narrative. Of course, often we cannot be certain which version of a story Ovid has in mind, so inherently this task involves a degree of speculation:

1. The first place that we see, Mount Pelion (352) involves a distinct yet subtle change, for Ovid tells us that Medea looks down on the Philyrian home, and this adjective not only draws attention both to the type of wood that is used to make the home but also to the woman who was the mother to the centaur Chiron. Philyra, we learn, was changed by Zeus into a horse so that he might avoid being seen while he was making love to her – and from this equine union Chiron was produced.<sup>127</sup> We know that Chiron will later become Jason's teacher and that Mt. Pelion is the place where he grew up. From this allusion we can compare the horror that Philyra feels – for she prays that she will be turned into the plant called Philyra because she is so appalled by the sight of her centaur son – with the horror Medea will soon feel at the sight of her own sons, after Jason betrays her (*Her.*12.189-90). Chiron frightens his mother so much that she prays for her death, and Chiron's pupil – Jason – will also lead a woman to be repulsed by their offspring.
2. As Medea passes over Othrys (353-56), Ovid sketches the metamorphosis of Cerambus, who was saved by the nymphs prior to the flood (which refers back to the story of Deucalion in book 1) when they turned him into a bird. This is a twist

---

<sup>127</sup> *New Pauly* (2007: Philyra 1), citing Apollonius of Rhodes (2,1231-1241) and Hyginus (*Fab.* 138).

to the more well-known tale of Cerambus,<sup>128</sup> and by this allusion Ovid is inviting the reader to see another creature who – just like Medea – is protected (and flies away) due to a connection with the gods.<sup>129</sup>

3. In Pitane she sees a snake that has been turned to stone – *longi simulacra draconis* (358). We have learned that Medea has the power to defeat snakes (7.149), to reduce creatures that at once seem threatening into harmless nothings. We may be reminded of the snake that Medea put to sleep in order to steal the Golden Fleece (the one that she essentially turned to stone) and perhaps even the dragons/snakes that are currently pulling her chariot (the ones she has tamed). But we can also see how Medea has defeated – and will defeat – all those things which once looked so formidable. Looking down, seeing a conquered serpent, we are reminded that Medea herself has become so powerful that she could do something so bold – that she can conquer seemingly formidable creatures – such as Pelias, Creon, and Jason.

Significantly, Bömer and others connect this snake with the one that Ovid mentions in 11.56-60,<sup>130</sup> which was changed into stone by Apollo after it tried to bite the god. Here we might also note how that very serpent imagery neatly encircles the story of Orpheus, and several links to Medea are present in this

---

<sup>128</sup> Bömer (1976: 287) and Anderson (1972: 281), pointing to Nicander and Antoninus Liberalis (22), tell us that Cerambus was a shepherd who ignored the advice of Pan and was both saved from death and punished by being turned into a beetle; they also say that Ovid's version is altogether different, since he makes Cerambus escape with *pennis* (354).

<sup>129</sup> We would do well to also note Ovid's play on words with *obruta/inobrutus* (355-56)– for the clever twist on the use of the words points to another reason why Ovid might wish to include this story here, for the latter term, as Anderson notes (1972: 281), is an entirely Ovidian invention.

<sup>130</sup> Bömer (1976: 288).

allusion to Apollo and Orpheus. First, the snake was punished by a divine force, since it went too far, and Medea, although not a goddess, will soon punish Jason for going too far. Second, the snake completes the Orpheus narrative, and we are reaching the end of Medea's story, for she has truly been transformed.

4. On Mount Ida (359-60) the story is centred on how Bacchus protected his son by changing a calf that he had stolen into the form of a stag.<sup>131</sup> Bacchus has already appeared in this Medea narrative (294-96), where he learned the art of rejuvenation from Medea, and we can see the important role that deception and craft play in both of these tales (*furta*, 360). Moreover, this story is about Liber protecting his child, and we can see similarities between Jason and how he protects his father. Mostly, however, there are contrasts, for we are also reminded of how the Peliades are tricked into killing their father, and we can see a clear contrast with Medea because she will obviously not protect her children.
5. Still on Ida, we have a short reference to Paris (*pater Corythi*, 361), who is the father of this Corythus, and we are suddenly reminded of all the other father figures in the Medea narrative. Most of all, however, this reminds us of Jason, for, just like Paris, he is a lover whose heroism is eventually undermined by the significance of his spouse: Helen forces the Achaeans to attack Troy and Medea strikes her revenge at Jason. But the mother of Corythus is apparently not Helen,

---

<sup>131</sup> Bömer (1976: 289) says of this story: "Die Sage ist unbekannt," a comment which leads us to understand why Ovid may have included such rare and novel stories it in the first place, for he is forcing the reader to think about the potential connections, especially when he is dealing with tales that may not have been treated elsewhere.

for Parthenius (24) suggests that it is rather the nymph Oenone,<sup>132</sup> and Ovid covers the affair between Paris and Oenone in *Heroides* 5 (which comes, interestingly enough, right before the first mention of Medea, by Hypsipyle). From this link we can see some more connections between Oenone and Medea, as well as between Paris and Jason. First, just as Jason abandons Medea, Paris does the same to Oenone, for he, unlike his wife, did not consider their marriage to be genuine. Next, both Oenone and Medea have connections to the gods – Oenone is the daughter of the river-god Cebren and Medea is a descendant of Helios – even though they are not gods themselves. Third, both men leave their “wives” for queens who might bring them great fame (Helen and Creusa, respectively), but who inadvertently end up giving them infamy. I suggest infamy because this allusion points to a once-great Paris who died in disgrace, who is covered by a meagre grave (*parva tumulatus harena*, 361), and whose son, Corythus, scarcely appears in any remaining tales, leading us to assume that Paris did not produce a heroic offspring. We can compare this to the once-great Jason’s demise, for we know that he will die an inglorious death, and that his children will not outlive him. Just as Paris dies forgotten, so will Jason.<sup>133</sup>

6. There is one final metamorphosis on Ida, for we hear about a woman named Maera who Anderson says appears to have been changed into a barking dog

---

<sup>132</sup> Bömer (1976: 289).

<sup>133</sup> Schubert (1989: 180-81), citing the end of Euripides’ *Medea* (1386-88), notes, “Ähnlich wie bei Paris ist von Jasons Ende nichts bekannt. Eine Tradition berichtet von einem ruhmlosen Tod des Jason: er wird am Strand von einem morschen Wrackteil der Argo erschlagen.”

(362).<sup>134</sup> But Anderson is likely wrong in this case, for it appears that the Maera here was originally a dog who was instead changed into a star.<sup>135</sup> Hyginus (130) tells us how Icarius gives the gift of Bacchus to his shepherds and, after drinking too much and believing it to be poison, they then kill Icarius, and his daughter Erigone is only able to find the body due to the barking of their dog Maera. According to the fable, the three of them – father, daughter, and dog – are all rewarded by being turned into stars. Hyginus describes Maera as *ululans* (Hyg. 130) to draw attention to the slain body of her master, which is not the same thing as Ovid's *novo latratu terruit agros* (362) – which is a bit incongruous, since loud barking would not likely terrify the lands. However, this reference does provide a link to Ovid's Medea, for Ovid presents Maera as angry about the injustice that has been done to Icarius and she thus barks as loudly as she can. In the case of Medea, we see how *she is genuinely terrifying* (and calls upon the gods) when she perceives that she has been mistreated (by Jason). Moreover, both Maera and Medea warn/bark of murder. One reports that it has been committed, the other offers a portent of its impending arrival. Finally, both Maera and Medea are aided by the gods, since Maera is turned into a star, and Medea flies around on the chariot of Helios. In this allusion we have betrayal, vengeance, and loyalty – all of which are represented in the Medea narrative, for Medea is in many ways loyal (to Jason) and she enlists the gods to punish those people who are her enemies.

---

<sup>134</sup> Anderson (1972: 282).

<sup>135</sup> Bömer (1976: 289-90).

7. Medea passes over the island of Cos (363-64), where Ovid writes that it is the *Eurypylique urbem* (363). We note that Heracles killed king Eurypylus when he was on his way back from sacking Troy and the latter tried to stop him from landing there.<sup>136</sup> In this way Eurypylus reminds us of kings who have tried and will try to stop Medea – from Aeetes, to Pelias, to Creon, a king who will try to stop Medea from staying in Corinth while she is on her way back from Iolcus (and the punishment that she has inflicted there). Furthermore, Apollodorus tells us that Hercules killed Eurypylus, which forges a link between Medea and Hercules, between whom we can see a disturbing link, since the reader is aware of how Hercules killed his own children in a fit of rage, and Medea will do the same thing, although her rage is more focussed than his was. As well, the mothers who are forced to wear horns (363-64) may remind us of the women Medea defeats along the way – from the Peliades to Creusa.<sup>137</sup>
8. In Rhodes Medea sees the Telchines (365-67) who, we learn, are so frightening with their magic (*ipso vitiantes omnia visu*, 366) that Jupiter sinks them below the sea. Just like Medea they are “magicians who cause harm,”<sup>138</sup> and clearly Medea has also become frightening and harmful with her magic. But, unlike the Telchines, Medea is not hateful to the gods. In fact, the opposite is the case, for we learn from Ovid that Medea has enlisted her own gods (albeit not Jupiter) to

---

<sup>136</sup> Apollodorus, *Library* 2.7.1.

<sup>137</sup> Anderson (1972: 282) points out that we know of these women “from Ovid alone.”

<sup>138</sup> *Brill's New Pauly* (2009: v.14, p.219).



help her save Aeson, and she seems to strike at others who are *vitiantes omnia*: namely, Jason, Creon, and Creusa.

9. On the island of Ceos, Alcidas is amazed to see his daughter changed into a peaceful dove (369-70). Contrary to appearances, this is not a pleasant allusion, for we have strife when Alcidas goes back on his word, his oath, to give his daughter Ctesylla in marriage to her suitor Hermochares.<sup>139</sup> This itself reminds us of the betrayals that are present throughout the Medea narrative: namely, how Aeetes does not honestly reward Jason for accomplishing the tasks and, the biggest betrayal of all, how Jason leaves Medea. Furthermore, Ctesylla's suitor, Hermochares, eventually turns to the gods in order to help her fall in love with him, which reminds us of how the gods helped Jason seduce Medea.<sup>140</sup> Still another connection between Medea and Ctesylla appears when we note that Ctesylla, even though, just like Medea, gives birth while she and her husband are in flight, [she] nevertheless "bei der Geburt des ersten Kindes sterben muss."<sup>141</sup> Ctesylla's death is supposed to act as a punishment for her father, and we can see many parallels in the Medea narrative, where characters are killed as punishment for fathers. The word *miraturus* (370) also provides links to Medea, since Jason will be about to be amazed at what she will do.

However, a contrast also appears between Ctesylla and Medea, since Medea will not die; rather she is the one who will later kill her children, and she is

---

<sup>139</sup> The story is preserved in Antoninus Liberalis (*Met.* 1) and Nicander (*Heteroeiomena* 3).

<sup>140</sup> See *Met* 7.11-12, where Medea's first words are that a god must have made Jason look so handsome, and Ovid is clearly playing with the involvement that is shown in Apollonius.

<sup>141</sup> Bömer (1976: 292).

not transformed into a *placidam...columbam* – but she does fly away...as a harmful witch.

**Lines 371-390:**

10. The next two metamorphoses (371-81) are connected with one another and contain many thematic parallels and ironic twists to the Jason and Medea story. In the first, Ovid tells of how Cynus, a boy loved by Phylus, is turned into a swan. Cynus gives his lover three difficult tasks to do and, on accomplishing the third, Phylus is so angry at the fact that his own love has been scorned (*spreto totiens iratus amore*, 375) that he refuses to hand over the bull that he has defeated.<sup>142</sup> In response to this, Cynus, in order to punish his lover (*ille indignatus “cupies dare,”* 377), then jumps from a high rock and is thus made into a swan.<sup>143</sup>

We can see a number of parallels to the Medea narrative. First, Phylus has to go off on a series of arduous quests (including controlling a bull) at the command of an unpleasant person, who then scorns the questor when he returns with the object of his quest. In this we can see an allusion to how Pelias has treated Jason when he set out for the Golden Fleece – and, in this way, Jason reminds us of Phylus.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> According to Anderson (1972: 283), those three tasks were: “(1) to kill a lion without a sword; (2) to capture alive some man-eating vultures; (3) to lead a wild bull from its herd by hand.”

<sup>143</sup> Ovid appears to have based his account on the story of Cynus in Antoninus Liberalis 12, who takes this account from Nicander III.

<sup>144</sup> Schubert (1989: 180) writes: “Wie dem Jason das Vlies, so soll dem Cygnus der Stier als Preis vorenthalten werden.”

But we should not forget that Jason himself seduces, or tricks, Medea into helping him,<sup>145</sup> and how, just as in the case of Cynus and Phylus, there are a number of tasks involved in their relationship that Medea performs as proof of her love for Jason, such as in 7.89-91, where Jason begs her to help him in Colchis, in 7.164-68, where he asks Medea to help rejuvenate his father and, finally, Medea's encounter with Pelias is, we know, motivated by Pelias' treatment of Jason. In the end, of course, Jason also scorns Medea when he marries Creusa,<sup>146</sup> all of which make Medea seem like the Phylus to Jason's Cynus.

Holding on to the Phylus-Medea parallel for a moment, we also note that Phylus eventually succeeds in his quests, then becomes forceful and disenchanted with his beloved; here, in Ovid's version of the Medea narrative (in the *Metamorphoses* especially), both Jason and Medea become rather disenchanted with one another. For his part Jason will leave Medea, and Medea appears to become more forceful herself when she starts doing things on her own, and when her love for Jason – and Jason himself – is no longer the focus of the story.

However, the parallels then become reversed and Cynus reminds us more of Medea, for he punishes Phylus by attempting to kill himself, which would deprive Phylus of the love he desired (375). In Medea's anger at Jason, she will strike their children, which are precious items to him. And the story ends with Cynus flying away as a swan, while the final image that Ovid gives us of Medea is one in which she is transformed into a *bird-like* creature, as she flies away on a

---

<sup>145</sup> *Her.* 12.37,72-90.

<sup>146</sup> *Her.* 12.134.

chariot pulled by dragons – an action she is performing *at the very moment*, we might note. Of course, the bird imagery at the end also reminds us of the flying ram in the Golden Fleece story.

11. In the related metamorphosis, at the end of the Cynus tale we hear about his mother Hyrie who, because of the tears that she sheds for her supposedly dead son, dissolves into a pool of water (380-81). By the reference to death and we may be reminded of Pelias and how he is drowned in boiling water. What is more, the transformed child Cynus and the parent who mourns his supposed death both end their human existence, and so remind us of how Creon will soon die along with his daughter when he mourns the sight of her struggling with the poison that has infected her.<sup>147</sup>

12. In Pleuron (382-83), close to lake Hyrie, Combe provides another direct link to Medea (in another story for which we have scant surviving evidence).<sup>148</sup> In this reference we see a woman who is changed into a bird when her children try to kill her. Interestingly, this episode points both forward and backward, for it reminds us of the scene we just witnessed in Iolcus, where Pelias' daughters unwittingly just tried to kill their father. Moreover, and looking forward, the Medea story will offer a reversal of this tale, since Medea will soon move away like a bird (on her chariot) after *she kills* her own children. In both cases the reason for Medea's flight is that she is trying *to escape* – which is where we see the link.

---

<sup>147</sup> Hyrie's morning even points toward the death of Medea's own children that is soon to take place.

<sup>148</sup> Bömer (1976: 294) suggests that we do not have any solid evidence about Combe's narrative, but he and Schubert (1989: 181) both see this story as a way to prefigure the coming infanticide.

13. In what appears to be a reference to a myth that has been otherwise lost (save for Ovid), on the island of Calauria, which is under Leto's protection, Medea looks down on fields that have seen their own king and queen turned into birds (384-85). This prefigures her arrival in Corinth, where she will cause the king and his daughter there to be transformed – albeit not into birds. In a way this image also slightly turns on itself, since the fields are also now looking on a woman (Medea) who has been made to seem a bird herself, flying high above them.
14. She next sees Mt. Cyllene (386-87), where Ovid tells us that Menephron committed incest with his mother.<sup>149</sup> While the poet does not tell us about any apparent transformation, obviously incest is something that is considered repulsive. The act is, Ovid tells us, in the habit of savage beasts (*saevarum more ferarum*, 387) – which is a sign of parental misconduct. In this way, the scene reminds us of other acts that are taboo for families yet that are integral to the Medea narrative: namely, Medea's betrayal of her father, the murder of her brother Absyrtus,<sup>150</sup> the death of Pelias, and, of course, the upcoming infanticide.
15. In the distance she catches sight of Cephisos (388-89), the river god, who mourns for his grandson who was changed into a seal by Apollo. The reasons are unknown to us, but the point of reference is that it points to a grieving parent, which anticipates Medea's experience in Corinth, where she will leave Jason behind, pathetically mourning the fate of his children when she flies away with

---

<sup>149</sup> Hyginus 253 mentions the incest of Menephron with both his daughter and mother, although Ovid only refers to the mother here.

<sup>150</sup> Schubert (1989: 181) makes a brief mention of the connection to Absyrtus.

their dead bodies. It might even remind us of Aeetes, who suffers the fate of his son Absyrtus, after Medea places her brother's scattered limbs for him to retrieve.

16. The final metamorphosis (390) in the travelogue is important, since it is directly relevant to the infanticide in Corinth – the one which Ovid will soon quickly pass over. Here Medea spots the home of a certain Eumelus, and we read that she sees 'the home of Eumelus mourning his son in the air' (*Eumelique domum lugentis in aere natum*, 390). We cannot be certain that Ovid is following the version of Antoninus Liberalis (who himself is summarizing Boios),<sup>151</sup> but the Medea narrative has offered us much evidence of homes that mourn their children: Aeetes mourns Absyrtus, and the Peliades mourn the death of their father. More significantly, this allusion also looks forward to how Jason will soon mourn his own children when Medea flies away from Corinth – while they are in the chariot with her.

After having read about all of these various transgressions and subsequent metamorphoses, Medea's actions no longer seem so out of the ordinary to us. They all have links to her situation, and they make her transformation seem more acceptable and understandable, if still horrific. She is still frightening, but Ovid is telling us that she lives within a frightening world.

---

<sup>151</sup> Antoninus Liberalis 18, summarizing Boios' Origin of Birds II, writes that Eumelus kills his son Botres because his son committed an act of disrespect toward Apollo. However, Apollo felt bad about the death and eventually changed the boy into a bird.

### **391-397: Burying the Lede**

In this section Ovid frustrates the reader's desire to hear about the events in Corinth, for we expect so much more about those things which are so central to Medea's narrative, having read almost 400 lines to reach this point, only to find that the poet provides us with almost nothing substantive. Newspapers refer to this as "burying the lede": not focussing on the most important part of the story. However, literature is not journalism, and it is not a failure on Ovid's part to skip these events, especially since he is doing so on purpose. Glenn suggests that, by spending just four lines on Medea's sojourn in Corinth, "Ovid is playing games with his audience," and I tend to agree.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of these games, the Medea who appears here has grown both in prominence and in horror.

When Medea lands in Corinth, Ovid introduces the section by telling the tale of how men were first produced there from rain-soaked mushrooms (*hic aevo veteres mortalia primo/ corpora vulgarunt pluvialibus edita fungis*, 392-93). The function of this piece of information is to provide a setting, an atmosphere, for all that is to take place in Corinth. It builds up our anticipation, delaying the events and making us more anxious for what is to come, for we believe that such an introduction will be followed by more details. It makes us believe that Ovid is going to give substantial space to her stay in Corinth, which he will not do. This anecdote also provides Corinth with a pleasant

---

<sup>152</sup> Glenn (1986: 93). However, Glenn also raises the question as to whether the readers would know about the details of this story, but, considering all of the earlier hints in this narrative – and in the *Heroides* – it appears we can be fairly certain that the reader would know what happened in Corinth.

atmosphere, and there is irony in this setting, since it presents Corinth as a place of growth and life, but we know that it will soon become known for death.<sup>153</sup>

Then, in four rapid lines (394-97), Ovid describes the death of Creusa, that of Creon (in his burning home), the murder of the children, and Medea's flight from Jason. He passes over these stories so quickly that we hardly have time to realize what has happened. This is strange because these actions are generally considered to be the most noteworthy events of her story, particularly the infanticide. In part Ovid does this to tease the reader, for we expect a lot more – it is what we have been waiting for, after all. But the pace of the scene also showcases how quickly Medea works: that these actions happen so swiftly implies that Medea is speedy and does not waste time in accomplishing her goals.

We learn a lot about Medea in these four lines, since she is very active and accomplishes a great deal. First, she burns Creusa with her poisons, she burns the palace down,<sup>154</sup> she kills her children with a sword, and then she finally flees the arms of Jason. We see that she is still very efficient and dangerous – but we also learn that her focus is expanding, for she is killing many more people than she has previously. In fact, this is the first time in which she has committed *multiple crimes* – and these victims are, of course, *her own children* – and the images of these deaths are so rapid and striking that the horror becomes overwhelming. In terms of her state mind, unlike the Medea of Euripides, Ovid's Medea displays no emotional reaction at all to everything that takes

---

<sup>153</sup> Glenn (1986: 93), citing Pliny, discusses the possibility that mushrooms could be a slight reference to Medea's poison, but then he dismisses the idea as both "tantalizingly obscure and also superfluous."

<sup>154</sup> As noted in chapter one, Diodorus (4.54.5) mentions the fire of the palace, so we cannot assume that its burning is an Ovidian invention.



place in Corinth – she merely carries out the tasks and then flies off. This has the effect of making her seem even more terrible and, not only does Ovid not express any sympathy for her, but he also even adds that she acted *badly/excessively* in her revenge (*ultaque se male mater*, 397), which is a firm condemnation of her actions. This is not the same old Medea – she has become much worse.

The horror of this scene is revealed in its very brevity and focus. Interestingly, Ovid never directly says that Medea is the cause of these deaths – because he wants to concentrate on the terrible acts themselves rather than on Medea. He writes that the new bride burns from Colchian poisons (*arsit nova nupta*, 394), and we know that those poisons are clearly from Medea; next, he says that each sea views the burning house of the king (395); then, rather than simply stating that Medea killed her children, Ovid writes that the *impius ensis* (396) is stained with the blood of the children, even though we know that Medea is the one who was holding the sword; finally, Ovid concludes by noting that the avenging mother (397) fled the arms of Jason. The effect of this approach is to place the focus *on what is being done* rather than on Medea herself – we think about her accomplishments rather than about her: and the impression we have of her achievements is one of horror. Ovid presents a scene for us to visualize – Medea killing her own children – and we are horrified by the image.

Ovid does not concentrate on the reasons for the dissolution of Medea's marriage to Jason and how she responds to his betrayal – for he expects us to know all of this. And this is another reason why the scene is so brief: he does not need to write about things about which the audience already knows so much, and by skimming over them so quickly

he actually draws more attention to them. Medea has already changed into a frightening witch, so we already have a sense as to how Ovid would portray the scene: *his Medea* is firmly in our imagination and we can fill in the blanks. She is frightening and unsympathetic and, even though Medea has to flee Jason at the end – her flight indicates that he could harm her – her status is not diminished. In fact, just as she arrived by air, she leaves by air, victorious and unconquered.

Medea is the cause of all of these deaths, and we know it. However, the poet wants to spend more time on another aspect of Medea's story, one that received scant attention elsewhere: the attack on Theseus.

#### **398-403: Medea Arrives in Athens**

When Medea flees Corinth, the story then turns to, and ends in, Athens, with Medea's plot against Theseus. However, before we meet Theseus Ovid first accounts for her arrival by alluding to two rather obscure metamorphoses then adding a comment on the doomed nature of her relationship to Aegeus. These references prefigure what is about to happen in Athens.

Ovid connects Medea's flight from Corinth to her arrival in Athens by mentioning three brief transformations in Attica, all of which involve humans becoming birds (398-401). We do not have much surviving evidence about these characters and therefore cannot be certain how much Ovid would expect his readers to know about their respective details. The first two characters – Periphas, a king of Athens, and his queen Phene – were saved/transformed by Apollo when a vengeful Zeus tried to kill Periphas, and the third – Alcyone – was transformed when her father threw her off a cliff because she had an

affair. These allusions may, on the surface, seem unrelated to the Medea narrative, but the characters and their respective situations in fact set the stage for Medea's upcoming attempt to kill Theseus.<sup>155</sup>

In the first reference, Ovid speaks of a Periphas and a “very just” (*iustissima*, 399) Phene who were both transformed into birds. What we know of Periphas comes to us through Antoninus Liberalis (*Met.* 6.), who tells us that Periphas was a just king of Athens who was honoured so highly by men that Zeus saw him as a rival and therefore wanted to punish him by killing him.<sup>156</sup> However, the murder is stopped at the last minute by Apollo, who intercedes and turns Periphas into an eagle, and Liberalis writes that his (unnamed) wife, seeing Periphas thus changed, asks to be transformed along with him. While this allusion slightly reminds us of how Medea has just been deeply jealous of a king and princess (Creon and Creusa – whom she has just harmed), more importantly, this attempted murder – *this attempted murder that fails* – anticipates what is about to happen in Athens when Medea will fail in her attempt to kill Theseus. To a certain degree the king Periphas also looks forward to Aegeus and how he will treat Medea kindly only to be harmed by her in return when she tries to kill his son. Thus Periphas reminds us of both how Medea will attempt to cause undeserved harm to both Theseus and Aegeus, just as Periphas was to be harmed undeservedly by Zeus, and also how Medea's murderous attempt will equally be frustrated before it comes to fruition.

---

<sup>155</sup> Glenn (1986: 93) argues that the references to Periphas, Phene, and Alcyone are intended to show “fliers of greater purity” and that the citizens of Athens “need not always be afraid of fliers.” There is a bit of truth to this, but I would point out that, while these characters may be virtuous on the surface, some troubling aspects to their stories are revealed when we look closer at their narratives – much like Medea herself will seem good to Aegeus when he takes her in.

<sup>156</sup> Bömer (1976: 298) suspects that Antoninus Liberalis borrowed this tale from either Nicander or Boios.

Also worth noting is the rather Ovidian comic twist regarding Periphas' queen Phene – for the word φήνη in Greek means vulture, and it is very possible that Ovid invented the name here to add a playful twist to the story.<sup>157</sup>

The next allusion tells us about a granddaughter of Polypemon. Pausanias (1.38.5) says that Polypemon and Procrustes are the same person, and Bacchylides (18.26-30) does nothing to dissuade us from taking this opinion.<sup>158</sup> Bömer points out that Ovid himself writes that Polypemon was the father of Sciron (*Ibis* 407) and that Sciron was the father of the woman mentioned here: Alcyone (7.443-44).<sup>159</sup> The only clear ancient reference to this Alcyone is Probus (1.399),<sup>160</sup> who connects her to both the father Sciron and the grandfather Polypemon. Probus writes that her father tried to kill her because of an affair she was having, but that she was saved at the last minute by being transformed into a sea-bird. The precise connections to Medea are rather tenuous, but we can see some distinct links to her upcoming narrative in Athens. First, the reference to Polypemon/Procrustes points to Theseus, because we know that Theseus will defeat this character on his way to Athens. Next, if the suppositions are correct that the granddaughter of Polypemon was transformed into a bird when her father threw her from a cliff, then this allusion, just like that of Periphas, shows us another example of *an*

---

<sup>157</sup> Anderson (1972: 286) and Bömer (1976: 298) both point out that the name Phene is unattested and show its relation to the Greek word φήνη. However, it is curious that neither of them notice that Ovid could have been having a spot of fun with the name.

<sup>158</sup> Apollodorus (*Ep.* 1.4), in his discussion of the labours of Theseus, also conflates the name of Polypemon with that of Procrustes.

<sup>159</sup> Bömer (1976: 298).

<sup>160</sup> In his account Probus is relating the origins of the sea bird halcyon (*dilectae Thetidi alcyones*) and tells of two possible origins for this “Alcyone,” the latter of which refers to Polypemon, but for which Probus cites a non-extant text from Theodorus as his source.

*attempt to kill that is frustrated* – and this prefigures how Medea’s attempt to kill Theseus will also be frustrated.

Immediately after these allusions, Ovid then comments that Aegeus accepts Medea but that he is *damnandus* (402) by that deed. By this the poet is telling us that Medea will treat him very badly in return for his hospitality, that she will bring him more harm than good. Ovid follows this by pointing out that Aegeus not only received her by way of *hospitium* (403), but that he also married her. The function of this line is to prepare us for the trouble Medea is about to cause, for we see that Aegeus has done a great deal to help Medea – he takes her in, he marries her – but we will soon see that she will treat him in a way that is opposed to both *hospitium* and marriage, and her actions will prove that he is indeed *damnandus* for having helped her. We cannot forget that she has just left behind her last husband – Jason – after a horrific act of vengeance against him regarding his betrayal of their *thalami foedus*, and this point, that Aegeus is *damnandus* for having helped Medea, is intended to prepare us for what she is about to do to her next unlucky spouse, making us see her upcoming actions as particularly heinous, as a two-fold betrayal: of both *hospitium* and marriage.

In these few lines Ovid reminds us that Medea has betrayed her family, has harmed (and will harm) a king, but more importantly, these lines set the stage for Medea’s attack on Theseus, hint at how it will be thwarted in the end, and they show us that Aegeus makes a horrible mistake in letting Medea enter his life. The statement that Aegeus is *damnandus* for helping Medea makes her actions now seem even more malicious, for in the past she appeared to have reasons for harming her enemies, while

now she we learn that she will harm the man who has helped and married her, compelling us to see her attack on Theseus as a double betrayal.<sup>161</sup>

#### **404-424 – Medea and Theseus: Overview**

In this section Medea has very little textual prominence. She does not speak here (no one does) and, in fact, only four of the twenty-one lines directly refer to her: there are just two nouns, a pronoun, and three verbs that point to Medea. The scene opens with the arrival of Theseus, not Medea, after which we discover that she plans his death (*miscet Medea*, 406) with the herb that she has brought (*attulerat*, 407). Ovid then offers a lengthy digression on the origin of the poison that will be used on Theseus (408-19) before finally returning to the outer narrative with the note that these poisons were supplied by the trick of the wife (*coniugis astu*, 419). Nevertheless the focus at the very end is on Aegeus and Theseus, not Medea, and she only appears again on the very last line when Ovid tells us how she fled (*effugit illa*, 424) after this failed attempt to kill her step-son. The reason for Medea's lack of prominence is that it parallels how far she has fallen in our estimation. All of the characteristics that were once so evident about her have now been overturned: she was once so powerful, so central, but now she has become a seemingly peripheral character – one who is no longer sympathetic nor as potent. In underplaying Medea's importance and in making her take a back-seat to the other characters in this scene, Ovid not only provides a transition both to these new characters and to a new narrative, but he also sets the stage for Medea's departure as well.

---

<sup>161</sup> Although Diodorus (4.55.4), Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.9.28) and Hyginus (26) make reference to the son (Medus) whom Medea supposedly bore Aegeus, Ovid distinctly never mentions any child, so we should not assume that this child plays any part in motivating her actions in Athens.

However, in spite of her lack of textual prominence, we still learn a great deal about Medea in this final scene; for we can nevertheless see an extensive contrast between the Medea who appears at the narrative's closure and the one we saw at its beginning. At the start of the book we learned a lot about Medea's internal world and character, where Ovid presented her through a monologue (11-71), and we saw a Medea whose thoughts and emotions were clear to us, one who was vulnerable, trusting, caring, and helpful. Moreover, at the start she did good deeds and, for that, she also held our sympathy. But here at the end of the narrative we are given scant information about her, find precious few attributes or characteristics granted to her, and see only a brief mention of her few basic activities: she mixes a poison, plays a trick on her spouse, and then flies away after she fails. This sparse presentation stands in stark contrast to the much richer one we read at the start. Moreover, in this final scene she merely preys on the vulnerability of others (and we do not know why) and has thus become the polar opposite of what she once was, for she is now detached, cold, ruthless, and harmful – and where she once held our sympathy, she now holds our antipathy. She is now completely evil. An even bigger contrast appears when we recognize that where she was once effective in the earlier parts of the narrative, where she had a great deal of influence on others and on the outcome of events, she has now been rendered ineffective, for her current actions reveal her to be a diminished force, because she fails in her attempt to kill Theseus and, in fact, has to flee for her life.

In this section Medea's character is also brought out through contrast to the other characters mentioned in this section, for her actions are implicitly compared to those of

Hercules, as well as those of Aegeus and Theseus. In comparison to each of these characters Medea also comes out looking even more diminished: Hercules makes Medea's heroism and daring appear lessened and Aegeus' kind-hearted treatment of both his wife (Medea) and his son (Theseus) make her betrayal of their marriage bond seem more heinous. Furthermore, while she may be trying to do a great deed in killing the hero Theseus, we must not forget that she fails, while the other three characters all ultimately succeed in their missions: Hercules tames Cerberus, Aegeus welcomes his son, and Theseus has fought his way home. By making Medea seem ineffectual and diminished Ovid provides the greatest contrast of all – for this emphasizes that she is reduced not only in comparison to her old self, but also to the other characters in this section as well. Everything about her has been turned upside-down, metamorphosed.

Interestingly, the ending shows us that Medea has developed as a character, but just not in the traditional way. Her transformation seems to be in reverse, for she has become more opaque and harder for us to interpret. The reasons for this inscrutability may be due to the fact that her actions are simply beyond belief, for Ovid does not even try to provide an explanation for this senseless attempt at murder.

This is the final section of the Medea narrative and therefore we are forced to consider how it functions as an ending. Newlands writes that “the Medea in *Metamorphoses* 7 does not come to a definitive conclusion.”<sup>162</sup> In some ways this is a valid remark, for the story appears to break the rules of a proper narrative, and instead seems at first glance to be open-ended. However, I think Ovid gives us plenty of

---

<sup>162</sup> Newlands (1997: 192).



indication that this scene is the ending, and this is no more apparent than on the final line (424), where our final picture of Medea, one showing her failure and her use of magic to escape punishment, offers an ending to the narrative that is apt in a number of ways. First of all, it adds to Medea's mystery, for she departs in a new and unexpected way: through mists (*nebulis*) that she herself has raised. Previously we have only seen her travel with her chariot, so the vagueness of this line reinforces both that she is a witch and that she is mysterious, since her departure through *nebulae* makes her exit both ambiguous and enigmatic. Clouds cause mystery, and Medea thus leaves in a mysterious fashion. Next, within this line we see some of the most essential themes of her narrative: there is mention of death, magic, a mysterious escape/flight and, most important of all, we have Medea. We relive her whole story on this last line – and see a complex character disappearing in an inexplicable and mysterious way.

In his own way Ovid is tying up the narrative in a fitting manner, and one that is appropriate for the *Metamorphoses*. It has a pace that is fast and abrupt, startling the reader because we immediately realize that within the blink of an eye Medea has departed and that she will not return. The climax we have been waiting for has not emerged, and we see that Ovid has pulled the wool over our eyes yet again. We expected a more dramatic ending to Medea's narrative – we expected a bang of sorts – but Ovid has given us the equivalent of a whimper. It is an unheroic ending to an unheroic character: Ovid cuts her down to size, making her look ineffective as she disappears within the blink of an eye. In many ways this unheroic ending completes the unheroic portrait of Medea – Ovid has built her up as a powerful anti-hero only to tear her down as ineffective at the end.

And, just as he does with the other tales within this poem, with his presentation of Medea Ovid has been toying with us all along.

#### **404-424: Medea and Theseus**

In this final section of the Medea narrative, in which Medea tries to kill Theseus, Ovid really brings out her evil nature – indeed, he appears to revel in her villainy and does not seem upset at all that she escapes punishment yet again. Killing is what she does and she is simply too clever to be caught. Nevertheless, in spite of the horror-show that Medea’s life has become, this seems to be a fitting point for Ovid to end her story because this is the first time in which *Medea fails* in her plots. By ending the narrative with Medea’s failure, Ovid undermines her effectiveness as an evil character. In many ways this failure allows for a tidier ending, since it appears she has been outwitted and that, having sunk as low as she could (in betraying her husband), she is lucky to escape. What is more, her failure provides an effective contrast to her earlier success, which works to highlight that failure. Finally, as will be discussed below, in this section we also see allusions to her previous actions, since there are links between Theseus and Jason, the inset reference to Hercules and Cerberus reminds us of the outer narrative, and her attempt to murder the son of her husband Aegeus reminds us of the deaths of Pelias,<sup>163</sup> Creon/Creusa, as well as the infanticide that Ovid has just skipped over.

We learn right from the start that Medea is planning to kill Theseus, that the father and son are unaware of their connection (404), and that she is mixing poison for him

---

<sup>163</sup> Anderson (1972: 287) writes: “As she had used the daughters of Pelias to commit her crime, so she persuaded Aegeus to hand Theseus the poisoned cup on the pretext that the young man was plotting against his throne.”

(406). Ovid provides absolutely no motivation for her actions,<sup>164</sup> which makes this act appear even more malicious and wicked than her previous murders. Since we know that she is planning to murder her step-son (or, more specifically, that she will try to trick Aegeus into killing his own son),<sup>165</sup> the surprise for the reader will not be what she does, but rather it will lie in the fact that she attempts *to trick her husband into killing his own son* and, just as significantly, the fact that her plans will be foiled at the end of the section. In tricking the father into killing his own son, Medea is following a pattern of murder that she established with the Peliades, but this one is much worse, for she has no reason to do harm to these men; rather, in this case she should be grateful to Aegeus and thus be kind to her step-son. Her murderous rampage has become arbitrary and this pushes her completely beyond our sympathies.

At the start of this final episode of the Medea narrative we might notice some links and contrasts between Theseus and Jason. First, both Jason and Theseus are separated from their respective fathers and both are forced to go on heroic journeys.<sup>166</sup> Curiously, Apollodorus even suggests that Theseus was one of the Argonauts,<sup>167</sup> which makes the connection even stronger. We have just seen Medea surpass Jason's heroism, and this meeting would afford her the opportunity to defeat another, perhaps even greater, hero, and, since Theseus has just arrived after having completed his many labours, his defeat would be quite the feather in Medea's cap. Of course, she fails in this attempt –

---

<sup>164</sup> Glenn (1986: 93) writes: "Medea, whose son by Aegeus is not mentioned and who, therefore, has no ostensible motive for her crime, tries to dupe Aegeus into poisoning his son, Theseus."

<sup>165</sup> We must remember that the Medea's attack on Theseus does not appear in any extant work prior to that of Ovid (see chapter 1).

<sup>166</sup> We learn at the outset that Theseus quelled the isthmus by means of *virtute sua* (405).

<sup>167</sup> Apollodorus, *Lib.* 9.16.

and this failed attempt to usurp his heroism provides another implicit reason as to why her narrative should end at this point.

But a more significant contrast appears when we turn to the lengthy digression (408-19) that describes how Medea obtained the poison (“aconite”) that she will use, where Ovid informs us about how this poison originated with Hercules’ abduction of Cerberus. This digression does more than show how accomplished Medea is as a poisoner. Since the story tells us about how Hercules journeyed to the underworld, we are invariably forced to contrast this *hero* (*Tirynthius heros*, 410) with Medea, and this contrast will affect our estimation of Medea, for she will emerge looking much less heroic than she has previously.

Medea’s previous likenesses to Jason effectively showed how she supplanted his claim to heroism, but the implicit juxtaposition to Hercules helps us redefine her once again, for here she seems much less heroic, and much less favourable, than does Hercules. In the first place, we learn about how Hercules had to wrestle Cerberus and bring him all the way to the world above. What Hercules accomplished was overt and required a great deal of strength; Medea, on the other hand, here merely collects the plants that were touched by Cerberus’ poisons (415). This shows that she is clever, but that her actions are hardly heroic, especially since she is going to use this poison to kill by stealth, which is not a very noble action. Next, Hercules went to retrieve Cerberus as a part of his Labours, and thus his actions seem comprehensible, but Medea wants to use this poison for reasons that seem inexplicable to us, for we do not know why she wants to kill Theseus. Of course, Hercules also succeeds against a formidable opponent, which

reminds us that Medea will completely fail in her attempt, which emphasizes their differences yet again.

Moreover, while Hercules took Cerberus from the land of the dead to the one of the living, Medea will use the poison derived from Cerberus in an attempt to take another hero *back to the land of the dead*. That is, the reference to Hercules gives us a story in which a hero *triumphs over death*, but we can contrast this with Medea, who will try to *take another hero to death*. In fact, when Ovid refers to Cerberus as a dog who was stirred to mad frenzy (*rabida qui concitus ira*, 413) we may even be tempted to think of the Medea who is now stirred by a frenzy to kill Theseus. In this way Medea looks more like Cerberus than Hercules, which is quite a fitting form of foreshadowing, since she will also be defeated in her attempt to bring down the hero Theseus.

This link between Medea and Cerberus helps us view the purpose of this inset-narrative and how it parallels the outer one. The story of Hercules and Cerberus shows a journey in which a Greek hero takes a dangerous and deadly creature – one that spits out poison (415-17) – back to the land of the living, while the outer narrative tells us that Aegeus has married Medea – an equally deadly creature – and has tried to settle her in the civilized land of Greece. We already know that Medea is planning to kill Theseus (406), but the implicit comparison to Cerberus – and how that creature failed to defeat Hercules – helps predict that Medea will also fail in her attempt to kill Theseus. With respect to our attitude toward Medea, the parallel to Cerberus makes her appear more vicious, deadly, and alien, but it also makes her seem less omnipotent, since the creature described in the story is eventually defeated.

In fact, the inset narrative helps guide us toward the closure of the Medea narrative. On a broader level, the entire Medea narrative in the *Metamorphoses* is one in which Medea is brought back to Greece by a hero (Jason), where her wilder nature appears to be tamed initially. However, at the point where she, just like Cerberus and the poison, becomes known for her own power to cause harm (*vires...nocendi*, 417), then we finally recognize that she is too uncontrollable to remain in this land that is alien to her. Just as Cerberus cannot remain in the upper world, Medea proves that she too must return from whence she came. Cerberus belongs to the underworld, and Medea's attempt on Theseus, using Cerberus' poison, reminds us that she does not belong in Greece. Cerberus is not a pet and neither is Medea: and thus the ending of the inset narrative guides us toward the closure of the outer narrative. She has to leave; her time in Greece is finished.

When we return to the outer narrative (419-24) Medea immediately tries to bring her murderous plans to fruition, and here Ovid does a great deal to bring out the heinousness of her crime. In a few brief lines we learn that Medea is manipulative (*coniugis astu*, 419), that Theseus (and Aegeus) were the unknowing and most likely innocent victims of her plot (*ignara*, 421),<sup>168</sup> and Ovid suggests that what she did was evil (*facinus*, 423). Moreover, Ovid repeatedly stresses the familial ties that Medea is

---

<sup>168</sup> Twice in this section Ovid uses the word *ignara* – the first time it is to stress the Aegeus does not know that Theseus is his son (404) and the second time to show that Theseus does not recognize that he is about to drink poison (421). The purpose of this word is also to show that, while these two men are ignorant of what is happening, Medea, on the other hand, knows exactly what she is doing, and this makes her actions seem even worse.

betraying by her act (419,420,422,423),<sup>169</sup> and the very repetition of these themes reinforces how wrong and horrifying her actions are. Once again we see the vicious side of Medea, and we cannot but help notice the comparisons with her previous attack on Pelias, where she tricked the Peliades into murdering their father. Of course, the role is reversed here, for in this scene the father Aegeus is unwittingly plotting against his son. Nevertheless what truly separates this scene from the one with Pelias is that this is her own family, her own husband, and her own step-son that she is destroying. All of her previous actions were somehow explainable, but here Medea finally appears to be acting evilly merely for the sake of being evil. With Pelias we had the belief that she was avenging wrongs that were done *to Jason*, with her actions in Corinth she was avenging wrongs done *to her*, but in this scene Medea is the one who tries to do wrong. In this way the scene with Aegeus and Theseus is more horrific than the one Ovid skipped in Corinth.

The motivation for Medea's attempt to kill Theseus is never explained, but we do know that she fails, and this, her first and only failure in the narrative, is perhaps the reason why this episode serves as a fitting point of departure for Medea in the *Metamorphoses*. She has become a vicious killer but is eventually thwarted in her plans, and we learn in the last line that she herself must escape death (*effugit illa necem*, 424). This is our final picture of Medea: one of failure and one in which she uses her magic to escape punishment.

---

<sup>169</sup> *coniugis astu* (419), *ipse parens Aegeus nato* (420), *pater* (422), *signa sui generis* (423).

### **Comparison to the Medeas in the *Heroides***

The Medeas we see in the *Heroides* focus on her relationship with Jason, her love for him, and her anger at having been betrayed by him – in these letters we see *Medea the lover*. In the *Metamorphoses*, however, Ovid goes far beyond her role as a lover. Indeed, although such emotions and fears are present at the start of the book – while we are in Colchis – the narrative then shifts and instead concentrates on Medea's active role in the rejuvenation of Aeson, the death of Pelias, and the attempted murder of Theseus, episodes which are not treated in either of the *Heroides* poems. In fact, Jason disappears in the latter half of the *Metamorphoses*, and the focus now becomes Medea alone, along with her nefarious activities.

The *Heroides*, of course, are letters and, as such, the point of view is that of involved and internal narrators – they are told by characters within the narrative – while the *Metamorphoses* offers us a narrator, Ovid, who is external to the story. What is more, the form changes from that of epistles to epic narrative and, in keeping with the shift in both narrative perspective and style, we also note that the metre has changed as well – from the elegiac of the *Heroides* to the epic hexameters of the *Metamorphoses*. Both letters in the *Heroides* are essentially plaintive in tone, with Hypsipyle and Medea each offering laments in which their ultimate goal is to convince Jason to return. In doing so, and because both texts are first-person letters written by the characters, the epistles let us into the interior world of these women: we know what they are thinking, for they are trying to win our (and Jason's) sympathy. In the latter half of the *Metamorphoses*, we no longer know what Medea is thinking and Ovid is no longer concerned with making



Medea appear intelligible or sympathetic. Indeed the opposite appears to be the case, and we begin to feel antipathy toward her at the end of the *Metamorphoses*.

As I noted, all of these narratives deal with the events in Colchis, but following that they tell widely different parts of Medea's narrative. Hypsipyle talks about her own affair with Jason, but both her letter and the one from Medea mostly concentrate on the upcoming events in Corinth, where they predict the infanticide. In terms of what is told, the letters of the *Heroides* tell us only a part of her tale, but the *Metamorphoses* tells us much more, moving all the way from Colchis to the point where she flees Athens. Interestingly, and showing us how Ovid does not wish to repeat himself, we note that Medea's letter (*Her.* 12) takes place during a period of time that the *Metamorphoses* quickly passes over – the events in Corinth – and that this is also in the part of the *Metamorphoses* where Ovid no longer lets us inside Medea's head. In this way, we can see how Ovid is playing with the way he represents Medea in the *Metamorphoses*, for he uses the latter half of the story to tell what appears to have been some previously untold – or under-represented – parts of her narrative, and in doing this he utilises a different form, mock-epic, while playing up her strengths and playing down any attempt to make her look sympathetic.

Both letters of the *Heroides* essentially show us a static Medea, while the *Metamorphoses* gives us a Medea who is dynamic and changes. And we can see an interesting reversal in the way these two texts approach Medea in terms of sympathy, for Hypsipyle's letter presents Medea as dark and evil, but Medea uses her own letter to make herself look sympathetic. However, we can see a turnaround of this dynamic in the

*Metamorphoses*, where Medea starts off looking sympathetic but soon transforms into a frightening and vicious witch toward the end.

In essence, the two letters are very much concentrated on Medea's role as a wife, mother, and child-murderer, while the *Metamorphoses* is much more interested in her role as a powerful witch, effectively leaving her relationship with, and love for, Jason back in Colchis. The *Metamorphoses* gives us more of Medea the powerful witch and little of Medea the scorned wife.

### **Chapter 5: Medea in *Tristia* 3.9<sup>1</sup>**

Ovid's version of Medea in the *Tristia* shows that he is working with a complex character and is in no way contradicting himself. Like his other portraits, his final Medea mirrors the art or genre of the poem in which she appears, and we read about a disturbing scene that his other Medea narratives only hint at: the death of Absyrtus. This stark portrait of a completely nefarious Medea works in tandem with the severe tone of the exile poetry to reinforce the negative mood of the poet toward his exile in Tomis. Ovid's other versions could pass over this scene because it was so barbaric, but he now finds himself in a land where such subtleties are unnecessary – he wants the Medea in Tomis to look barbaric. Thus his Medea in the *Tristia* is closely related to both his own self-presentation and the dark state of his own mind that he wishes to project, while not undermining Medea's complexity as a character.

In fact, this poem appreciates Medea's complexity and does more than merely offer a barbaric witch; rather, it presents us with a piece of her story that has been thus far missing in the Ovidian oeuvre as well as a valuable piece of information about her character. This is the scene where Medea changes the most, and the tale here is thus both an aition and a tale of metamorphosis. Indeed, this story would probably fit quite nicely in the *Metamorphoses*, for not only does this anecdote explain the beginning of Tomis (the aition), but it also shows us Medea's great moment of change – where she becomes the darker Medea, and this episode would comfortably explain how Medea becomes so domineering and important in the *Metamorphoses* once she and Jason leave Colchis

---

<sup>1</sup> For *Tristia* 3.9 I am using J.B. Hall's (1995) Teubner version.

(7.159ff.) As for this scene, here we see her in full panic and also in full evil, but mostly we see the darker side of her character emerge in this one short narrative, and we recognize that this is the part that was left out of the *Metamorphoses*: this is her turning point.

### **Tristia and Ex Ponto – Scholarship**

Until relatively recently, the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto* received scant critical attention, since most critics had long accepted Ovid's own characterization of himself in his exile poetry as that of a poet in decline. But the critics of late have taken a different approach. Evans was one of the first (1983) to take a new look at the arrangement of the poems, arguing that the books have a specific and "deliberate artistic structure."<sup>2</sup> Williams (1994) points out that the exile poems deserve to be read with the same critical appreciation that Ovid's earlier works are, positing that the prevailing view of these poems (re: Ovid as a poet in decline) is instead merely a literary topos that Ovid uses, and he writes that the poet shows evidence of the same elusive and learned complexity in his exile poetry that he does in his earlier works. Classen (2008) has recently added to this view with a detailed study of how "Ovid's 'myth of exile' is essentially a literary creation."<sup>3</sup>

In terms of *Tristia* 3.9 – the letter featuring Medea – Schubert (1990) and Green (1994) suggest that the Medea in this poem could be a reference to the brutality of Augustus (and Livia), and that, by means of Medea and Absyrtus, Ovid is alluding to his own fractured relationship with Augustan Rome. Huskey (2004), in considering why

---

<sup>2</sup> Evans (1983: 3).

<sup>3</sup> Classen (2008: 185).

Ovid only ever mentions Absyrtus' name in this one poem, debates whether Ovid is identifying himself more with Medea or Absyrtus here, and he also points out some intertextual links between the Medea in this poem and the ones in Ovid's other works. However, Huskey (who suggests that Ovid "aligns himself with Hypsipyle"<sup>4</sup> of *Heroides* 6) and Schubert appear to reach too far in believing that Ovid actually identifies with any of the characters.<sup>5</sup> Rather, I think this poem tells us as much about Medea as it tells us about Ovid. Yes, Ovid wants to go home – this much is clear. In this poem we see that Medea commits a horrible act at Tomis, and her actions give the place its name and make it seem even more barbaric. But we cannot say any more than this about how Ovid sees himself in relation to the characters. Instead, it seems more appropriate to consider the Medea of this poem and how she functions as a character on her own, after which we shall then examine how she stands in relation to the other Medeas Ovid has offered us.

### **Medea's Character**

The Medea of this poem is dark and barbaric, and Ovid wants to make her appear to be as non-Greek as possible. The reason for this is that he is using her to emphasize how horrific his life in Tomis is.<sup>170</sup> Thus, all of the descriptions of her as a character lead to this negative reading.

---

<sup>4</sup> Huskey (2004: 287).

<sup>5</sup> Huskey is rather pre-occupied in considering why Ovid only mentions Absyrtus by name in this last poem. The omission is a valid point, yet I do not think that the suppression of the name is as significant as Huskey suggests. For example, he suggests that Hypsipyle avoids mentioning Absyrtus' name as a form of strategy, to emphasize "the most important detail, the familial tie between Medea and her victim" (p.277). However, while it may be a strategy on Ovid's part to leave his name unmentioned in *Her.* 6, we can equally posit that Hypsipyle does not mention Absyrtus' name because she does not know it.

<sup>170</sup> Evans (1983: 62) writes that "we are asked to associate Tomis with cruel, inhuman deeds and death."

**Nouns, Pronouns, Adjectives:** Most of the words that point directly to Medea – such as *audacia* (17)<sup>6</sup> – are overtly negative. The final nouns in the poem that are related to Medea are focussed on her familial relations; namely, those relations which she will destroy by killing her younger brother.<sup>7</sup> By placing special attention on her familial relations (29, 31, 34) – the ones that she has just destroyed – we are compelled to see her in an extremely negative light. We also see a similar pattern in the adjectives, for Medea is described as evil and conscious of her wrong-doings (*impia*, 9; *conscia...meritorum*, 15),<sup>8</sup> we hear about how she is frantic (*attonito...ore*, 18) at the sight of her father, and then, finally, we see how she plunges the sword into the innocent side of her brother (*innocuum...latus*, 26), which, by contrast, makes Medea look guilty.

What is so interesting about the words at the start that paint Medea in an unfavourable light (9,15,16) is that thus far in the Medea narrative she does not really seem to have done anything so terrible at all, other than disobeying her father, which she did to help Jason escape and, moreover, live. The effect of these negative words is two-fold: not only do they force us to think of Medea in terms of what she is about to do, but these loaded words – which make her seem already tainted – also lead us to think that it is Ovid who *sees her* as *impia* at this stage, that he is the one who sees her actions back in Colchis as *nefanda* (16) and that he thinks of those things as *merita* (15) for which – as is implied – she should be punished. Ovid is clearly presenting her as already defiled, or

---

<sup>6</sup> Even though there are two nouns in the middle of the poem that do not appear to paint her in an exclusively negative light – *pallor* (18) and *virginis* (18) – we see that these two nouns are juxtaposed with her *ingens audacia* of the previous line, and we realize that she is turning white because she is afraid of her father, because she betrayed him, which actually works to supply another negative connection to Medea and, hence, Tomis.

<sup>7</sup> *fratrem* (22), *morte...salutis* (24), *pater* (29), *genitor* (31), *soror fratris...sui* (34).

<sup>8</sup> For the negative reading of *meritum*, see *OLD* 3b.

evil, at this stage. In certain ways this allows us to understand how she can take the very next step, for, in our minds, she has already been transformed – but, for us, she is about to be transformed into a picture of greater evil.

**Verbs/What Medea Does:** Other than beating her breast (15), which emphasizes her feelings of guilt, we are struck by the series of verbs at the end of the poem which point to Medea's vicious deeds, since they focus on how she cuts up her brother and places the pieces in order to delay her father (26, 27, 28, 29, 34).

**Characteristics Emphasized:** This scene plays up certain aspects that we associate with the more evil Medea in the *Metamorphoses* – she is crafty, plotting, clever, violent, determined, wicked, and even hard-hearted (9, 15, 16), since we have no sense that she regrets what she does to her brother either when or after she kills him. Moreover, even though this scene also slightly emphasizes some characteristics that remind us of the earlier, more vulnerable, Medea – for she is still quite nervous at the sight of the approaching ship of her father (18), and Ovid even suggests that she is aware of her own guilt (15) – we must remember that she is only vulnerable in the sense that she does not wish to be caught, and thus we do not see her as sympathetic.

**Characteristics Denied (or not shown):** We do not see any real regret in Medea's actions. Even though she hesitates at the sight of her father, thinking what to do (19-21), she immediately acts without hesitation when her eyes light upon her younger brother (25-26). Not only is there no sense of sadness on her part for the murder of her brother, but we also notice that there is no trace of love for either her family or Jason. She is in survival mode, she feels no sympathy for others, and we do not see any

emotions other than those that will aid her in escaping punishment. Along those same lines, we also do not see any traces of anger toward her father, for she knows full well why he is chasing her. Rather, her only emotion involves self-preservation. Ovid makes Medea appear to care only about herself, which is in itself a frightening idea, and which should make the Argonauts (and Jason) pause and consider what she might do if he were to cross her.

**Prominence:** The Argonauts do not play a great part in this scene, other than being nervous (13), and Jason is conspicuously absent. Rather, Medea is the centre, and we notice how she controls the action, where she dominates the Greeks, and we see Absyrtus and Aeetes only through the perspective of their relation to her. In showing us how *the barbarian witch dominates the civilized Greeks*, Ovid draws another negative connection between Medea and Tomis – for Medea, just like Tomis itself, defeats those who bear signs of civilization. We also see her importance through the **allocation of speech**, for, other than a few words from the lookout (12), Medea is the only one who speaks, which emphasizes that she is the centre of this narrative.

**Contrast:** Medea is contrasted with both the Argonauts and her family. The Argonauts look weak and ineffective compared to Medea. Although she is at first scared, she nevertheless makes a decision, takes charge, and solves the problem, albeit in a horrific manner. But it is the comparison to her brother and father that truly makes her look evil, for she murders her innocent (26) brother, and then places the pieces about because she knows that her pious father will actually stop to pick them up. The effect is to make her look calculating and unscrupulous.



**Aperture and Closure:** The poem opens with a reference to how the Greek colonists lived among the *inhumanae...barbariae* (2), and then Ovid explains why these barbarians were so inhumane, referring to the death of Absyrtus, who we all know was murdered by Medea. The poem opens with barbarian savagery, a barbarity that will soon be represented by Medea's cruel act, and it also closes with a reflection on the horror of what she does, since Ovid points out that the sister has cut up her own brother (34).

From all that he witnesses here, Jason should note what Medea is capable of, and this should make him wary. This passage makes Medea look vicious, cold, and calculating, but it also makes us wonder why Jason could see this murder and be so willing to betray her later on. Even though he is not present, it makes Jason's future actions seem deeply naive, for he will apparently believe that he can abandon Medea without recrimination. If a woman will not hesitate to kill her brother to escape punishment, might she not also be willing to kill her own children to avenge a wrong? This is the warning Jason should receive from this action, but one he will fail to heed.

### **Medea and Tomis – a Double Negative**

**The Purpose of this Poem/Letter:** Clearly Ovid wants to make Tomis look terrible, and he does so by focussing on the horrific origins of that name, where he shows that Medea has become a fratricidal killer, and he suggests that her barbarian behaviour was even so powerful that the Greeks who were with her (i.e. the Argonauts) were subservient to her.

In this poem, Ovid goes out of his way to portray Medea in a negative light. The reason for this is that he is using this poem to show how horrible a place Tomis is. The

poem functions as an appeal for him to be allowed to go home, and he therefore wants to take any opportunity to mention the worst aspects of Medea and her story so that he can use them to his advantage.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Ovid exploits Medea in a completely novel fashion in this poem, for here he is utilizing her negative qualities to help win the reader's sympathy for his own plight. In essence, he is using Medea as a tool to lead to his homecoming, and for this to succeed effectively he needs to play up her most negative qualities – which he does full-heartedly.

The murder of Absyrtus is the first truly horrific act of the Medea narrative, and one in which Ovid makes Medea completely heartless and vile, for in carrying out the fratricide she only thinks about her own survival, which makes her appear unfeeling and pitiless. The poem starts with a rhetorical question from Ovid (*quis crederet*, 1) in which he shows how hard it is to believe that there are actually Greek cities among the barbarians of this region.<sup>10</sup> In this description we can see that Ovid is clearly playing down the Greek connection, which aids the bleak description of the region. What is more, he is also making the subtle argument that the civilized Greek world is not strong enough to overcome the barbarity of the people, the place, and the environment. The first four lines of the poem thus introduce the barbaric nature of the area, showing how the Greeks cannot even tame it, and then Ovid then uses Medea to strengthen his point about how horrific and barbaric its nature has been from early on.

---

<sup>9</sup> Green (2005: 244) writes that Ovid “regards himself as dead from the moment he left Rome (III.2.23-4)” and that “it is not perhaps surprising that the first poem concentrate on Tomis itself, a brief aetiological excursus in the Callimachean mode, should dwell with what seems uncommonly like morbid relish on Medea’s dismemberment of her brother Absyrtus.”

<sup>10</sup> Amann (2006: 168) writes: “die Barbarei ist total.”

We must also remember that Medea is travelling with the Argonauts in this poem, who are Greek – and heroes at that. Yet in this poem they play no central role, for Medea is instead responsible for all of the events in the poem – and the Argonauts are forced to take a background role to her evil plans. This is intentional, since Ovid wants to show that even Greek heroes are not strong enough to stand up to this barbarian witch. Here he is implying that Medea, *just like the place he is in*, does harm the civilized world and civilized people. In many ways Ovid is even drawing a parallel between his own situation and that of the Greek Argonauts, for their heroism is effectively undermined by Medea's barbaric act and, with this, Ovid is suggesting that his own civilized nature is also being challenged by the barbarity of the region. If the Argonauts could not be heroes here, we might wonder, then how could Ovid retain his own nature and be a civilized poet?

Ovid assigns only negative qualities and actions to Medea in this poem, and he does so in an unambiguous manner. He introduces Medea to us by saying that she is *impia* (9). The emphatic placement of this word at the start of the line is significant because Ovid is stylistically highlighting what he wants our *first impression* of her to be – that of an *impia* girl. The reason that he establishes her wrongdoing from the outset is that he wants us to see her as *impia* when he concludes the line by explaining that she is fleeing her father. Ovid does not want us to mistakenly have any sympathy for Medea: instead, we are supposed to think that she was *impia* in fleeing her father. He also brings this idea out in the very arrangement of the words, for *impia* is placed right next to

*desertum*, and *Medea* is directly beside *parentem*, and this word order acts to emphasize exactly why Medea is so *impia*: she has deserted her father.

After the watchman reports that he sees the ship from Colchis approaching (11-12) we receive our *second impression* of Medea, where we learn that she is aware of her own wrongdoings (15)<sup>11</sup> and that she has done and will continue to do *multa nefanda* (16). These comments serve to reinforce our first impression of her as a negative character, and again we see that Ovid is strongly pushing this negative characterization. We can also note the way he uses the sounds on these lines to support this evil image of Medea, for on line 15 (*conscia percussit meritorum pectora Colchis*) we have a run of harsh cacophonous sounds which, in my opinion, imitate the sound of Medea beating her chest in fear,<sup>12</sup> allowing us to hear (and even visualize) the guilty girl striking herself in panic. However, line 16 (*ausa atque ausura multa nefanda manu*) provides us with some sounds that are the opposite of cacophony, and the contrast between line 15 and this run of diphthongs and elisions (in 16) allows us to see the abrupt transition from her guilty blows to her unspeakable actions. The euphony of this line (16) stands in stark contrast to the evil that it portends – and Ovid uses the repetition of *ausa... ausura* to highlight her negative aspects. Moreover, the quick transition from guilty blows to *multa nefanda* predicts how quickly she herself is about to make such a transition – from panic to action – in a short moment.

---

<sup>11</sup> Evans (1983: 62).

<sup>12</sup> We would do well to also note the repetition of *Colchide* (12) and *Colchis* (15), where Ovid is once more reinforcing the notion that these people are not Greek and are therefore not civilized.

Ovid presents one small moment of uncertainty, where he points out the juxtaposition between the *ingens audacia* (17) of her mind and the *pallor* (18) of her face at the approaching ship. However, her *audacia* clearly wins out over her nervousness, for she rapidly decides that the only way to defeat her father is by some form of treachery (*aliqua fraude*, 20). Her hesitation at this point is not whether she should behave badly, but rather what sort of evil action she should employ to stop her father. When her eyes light on her brother (22) her reaction is merely to say *vicimus* (23) and to horrifically declare that her brother's death will lead to her own salvation (24). The sheer brevity of her declaration – the one word *vicimus* – is disturbing because it shows that she is prepared to make snap judgements involving the deaths of others. The disturbing speed with which she comes to this decision is reflected in the dactylic nature of line 24, for its fast and flowing rhythm stands in sharp distinction to the depravity of the decision itself – to kill her brother. Also, the obvious contrast between Medea's salvation (*mihi...salutis*) and her brother's death (*morte...sua*) further emphasizes the degeneracy of her behaviour, and her first word *vicimus* puts an explanation point on her disturbingly indifferent attitude toward killing her own brother. We see that to kill her brother is a victory for her – that she cares only for herself – and we are supposed to feel revulsion at this.

The horror show continues when we see how quickly, and with little hesitation, Medea stabs the side of her brother (26) who, we learn, is completely innocent and, because he does not anticipate the oncoming onslaught, feared nothing (25). The point of all this information about Absyrtus is that Ovid is trying to add pathos to him. The poet wants us to feel sympathy for his plight, and this pathos works to make his murderer –

Medea – look even more callous and evil. Ovid places the words *innocuum* and *rigido* directly next to each other at the start of line 26, for he wants us to compare how the “innocent” boy is so quickly harmed by the “unbending” sword.<sup>13</sup> But in these two words – *innocuum* and *rigido* – we can also see a distinction between Absyrtus and Medea – the innocent, harmless one and the inflexible one, where the relentless and inflexible Medea will pierce her *innocuum* brother.<sup>14</sup> In fact, there is even a macabre quality to this line, since *innocuum* can also mean *unharmed* or *safe*, and Absyrtus is about to become the very opposite of unharmed when he is stabbed by his inflexible sister.<sup>15</sup> This makes Medea look even worse, for we know that her brother does not know enough to fear his sister, which suggests that he naively trusted the sister whose unbendable plans were set on killing him.

The pace of the attack and the presentation of an innocent Absyrtus work to showcase Medea in an especially vicious light, and we do not fail to appreciate the dreadfulness of her actions. However, Ovid gives us precious little time to appreciate how gruesome the murder is, for he immediately sets Medea in motion as she quickly places her brother’s limbs throughout the fields (27) and tops it off by telling us how she placed his hands and head on a high rock (29-30).<sup>16</sup> What adds to the horror of the scene

---

<sup>13</sup> See *OLD* 1a for the qualities of *rigidus* that are related to inanimate objects (“rigid, stiff, unbending”); see 5a for the qualities that are related to humans (“relentless, strict, inflexible, etc.”).

<sup>14</sup> That line 26 is a golden line - *innocuum rigido perforat ense latus* – is yet another reminder that Ovid is indeed still acting as a highly skilled poet and that he has not lost his art. In fact, the very elegance of the line stands in stark contrast to the vile and horrid action which it describes, and Ovid is asking us to appreciate just how horrific this murder is by presenting it in such a refined and elegant way.

<sup>15</sup> *OLD*, s.v. *innocuus* 3.

<sup>16</sup> Huskey (2004: 286) provides a perfect example of why precise historical analogies are tenuous, for he cites a number of previous scholars in agreeing that “the image of Absyrtus’ head and hands hanging on a rock recalls Cicero’s head and hands nailed to the rostra.” It may recall that *to us*, who have been schooled in the imagery of Cicero’s death, but we have little evidence to suggest that Ovid had this in mind.

is Ovid's repetition on line 27, where he writes *ita divellit divulsaque membra*, intentionally forcing us to acknowledge that Medea *tore* her brother's limbs apart and that she placed his *torn-apart* limbs throughout the fields. The idea of Medea tearing his limbs apart is supposed to strike us particularly savage, and Ovid wants us to think of this when we think of Tomis. When he mentions that Medea placed those limbs *per agros* (27) and in *multis...locis* (28) we are reminded that her actions are very considered and well-planned, and that this murder is more than a spontaneous act. Rather, in placing the limbs around to delay her father, we see a Medea who is organized and thorough in her evil.

Ovid tells us that the final marker to delay Aeetes is his *pallentesque manus sanguineumque caput* (30) that she places on a high rock. The very mention of these white hands and the bloody head – and the fact these four words make up the entire line – point out the gruesome nature of the act, and make Medea's actions seem still more repulsive, for she turns parts of her brother's body into a mound that will work as a marker delay her father. In this way this gruesome pile also serves as a marker for the reader, to see both Medea and the place as truly vile, a person and a place with no sense of humanity or civilization.

The penultimate image that we have in the poem is of Aeetes delayed on the journey and picking up the limbs of his son (31). Within these final lines Ovid continues to bring out the horror of Medea's actions, for he mentions the *artus ...extinctos* (31-32) that Aeetes, who is called the *genitor* (31) of those *artus ...extinctos*, must pick up along the way. Ovid asks us to focus on the effect all of this has had on the father of Absyrtus

for, along with the revulsion we feel at what Medea has done, Ovid also tells us about the grief (*luctuque*, 31) that the father feels as he travels the sad (*triste*, 32) journey. Thus Ovid asks us both to feel abhorrence at the action of this barbarian girl and to feel sympathy for those people who have to live in this area, a terrible place where terrible things happen – people such as Ovid himself.

When Ovid then ends by telling us that Tomis received its name from the sister who cut up her little brother (33-34), we notice that he frames the final line by placing the *membra* of her brother at the start and closes with the *soror*, which makes the final image one of Medea and the limbs she has just cut from her own brother. In fact, the placement of the verb *consecuisse* effectively cuts off the *soror* from the *membra* of her brother, and we see Medea as a creature who is no longer attached to her own family. She is cut off from her family and, indeed, from humanity.

At the same time we cannot help but also think of the poet who is trying to pick up the pieces of his art in this lifeless place, the place where barbarians defeat Greeks and also slaughter their own family.<sup>17</sup> The Medea in this poem is truly frightening because Ovid needs her to be frightening.<sup>18</sup> Tomis needs to appear as bad as Ovid can make possibly make it – and he thus uses Medea to win sympathy for his own plight.

---

<sup>17</sup> Schubert (1990) goes to extremes with the analogies, for he repeatedly draws a connection between Medea and Augustus, and also sees a link between Ovid and Absyrtus, where he suggests that the decapitation should be read as a type of attack on Ovid as a poet. While I do not strongly disagree with his arguments, the parallels with Augustus strike me as rather strained. The problems with such ideas arise when we note that both Doblhofer (1987) and Oliensis (1997) go to opposite extremes, with Oliensis (p.188) writing that (in this poem) “we should identify Ovid chiefly with Medea, the escape artist who has left these dead pieces for us to read.” I fail to see how Ovid would identify himself with Medea in the poem, unless he thinks of himself as a wicked barbarian, which he clearly does not. The safest answer is to simply state that Ovid identifies with Ovid.

<sup>18</sup> Evans (1983: 62) notes that Ovid does not comment on Medea’s barbarism. This is true, but I would add that his presentation of her is so horrific that it needs no comment from the author.



Those are the pragmatic and tactical purposes of the letter –how Ovid makes Medea look especially vile in order to highlight how wretched his exile in Tomis is. However, we should also consider the many ways in which Ovid employs Medea as a literary figure in this story.

### **Medea in the *Tristia* and Ovid's Previous Medeas**

**Bridging the Gap:** This is not Ovid's first mention of the death of Absyrtus, but it is his most detailed account of the event that he has made a centrepiece of her narrative.<sup>19</sup> Medea says that the death of her brother will be reason for her safety (24). We could add that this murder is also actually the reason for her decline as a sympathetic character. That is, from this point onward, Medea is no longer innocent in our eyes. Even though Jason will treat her badly, we cannot but help see her as a fratricide, someone who murders an innocent child, for this is the first shockingly depraved act of her narrative. This incident tells us what happened to her – how the Medea who was so innocent, so much a young girl in love at the start, turned into the cold-blooded killer that we see at the end. Indeed, although this scene asks as many questions as it answers, for Ovid leaves a lot to our imagination, it nevertheless provides us with her turning point. After Tomis, nothing is the same for Medea – how could it be?

**Foreshadowing:** While we should be careful not to describe the aspects of this scene as humorous, we do, however, see clever reminders that predict, or foreshadow, the

---

<sup>19</sup> Ovid mentions the death of Absyrtus in *Her.* 6.129-130 and 159-60, where Hypsipyle uses his death as way to warn Jason of how horrible Medea will become. Medea, in her own letter (*Her.* 12.113-116), also alludes to the fratricide, using the same language that Ovid uses on line 16 of this poem, for she dare not speak about the deed. And she also tells us, in *Met.* 7.54, that Absyrtus is thus far still a child (*frater adhuc infans*), which is a very important fact in understanding how we are meant to think of this act. It is not mere treachery, but rather a truly vile and evil act – just like her future infanticide.

type of Medea who will emerge during and following this fratricide. Medea is immediately introduced as *impia* (9) and we are reminded more of her future *impia* actions than we are of her current act of betraying her father. Rather, this word works better to predict both her later actions as well as her proximate fratricide. Such allusions also appear on lines 15-16, where Ovid tells us that she *has dared* and will dare *multa nefanda*. The things that she has dared thus far, we might think, are not really so bad, especially when we compare them with those *nefanda* things that she is about to dare. In fact, just prior to Ovid's reference to those future *nefanda* actions, the poet tells us that Medea strikes her breast, for she is *conscia* of her *meritorum* (15). In this case, even though Medea is still thinking of a way to evade her father, from this line we can legitimately read that Medea is nervous and strikes her breast because *she is aware* of the punishment that she deserves (*meritum*). However, what she has done thus far will not be as deserving of punishment as *what she will do*.

The fratricide itself also offers levels of foreshadowing, for we see that she intends to delay her father by some trick (*pater est aliqua fraude tenendus*, 20). This clearly points forward to Medea's future treacheries, including her dealings with the Peliades as well as her numerous deceptions in Corinth. What is more, her comment that her brother's death will be the cause of her safety (24) also reminds of how she will use the use the deaths of others, while not so much for her safety per se, but definitely for her own benefit. That is, we think of how she will use murder to help her out of uncomfortable spots. When she murders Absyrtus, Ovid emphasizes that he is innocent

(*innocuum*, 26) and, since we know that he is, according to Ovid's narrative, a child,<sup>20</sup> we can also see the innocent sides of her future victims – namely, her children – in this savage act against her brother.

**Comparison to Ovid's Earlier Medeas:** The Medea we see in this poem is cruel, calculating, and independent; she is completely evil and has no redeeming features. She follows her own rules, her own code; her interest, apparently, is in self-preservation. In this way, she is much more focused, and much more frightening, than Ovid's previous Medeas. Although there is one moment where we perceive her weakness and fear (18), she nevertheless takes complete control of the scene, proving to us how vile she can truly be, effectively undermining the heroism of the Argonauts when she leads everyone to safety by means of the vicious murder of her child brother. What makes this scene especially vivid is that this is the moment where Medea changes from the light to the dark, where the passionate, young, and sympathetic witch transforms into the more deadly witch who takes over at the end of the narrative. In many ways this scene provides Medea a moment of choice, and Ovid shows us how she chooses to behave in an utterly cruel fashion.

Ovid's earlier Medeas had a different tone than does the one we see in *Tristia* 3.9, for in the earlier versions there were lighter moments and even elements of humour. However, in this poem we have a very grim portrait, and there is absolutely no humour present – the atmosphere here is one of unrelenting darkness.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ovid specifically writes that Absyrtus is a child in *Met.* 7.54.

Interestingly, in this poem we see just as many links with Ovid's presentation of Medea in the *Metamorphoses* and, in fact, we realize that this poem could have quite easily been inserted into book 7. This is quite apparent when Ovid shows us how she made her decision so quickly (*protinus*, 25), where the poet yet again undermines our expectations, since she spends such little time debating the merits of what she will do. That is, we expect that this will be a difficult and traumatic decision for her, but instead she merely announces "*vicimus*" (23) and then quickly stabs her brother to death. This abrupt decision, the lack of inner debate, and the nature in which she places Absyrtus' limbs throughout the fields (27) perhaps even grants the scene certain macabre comic qualities. It is funny because it is so unbelievably horrid and because the pace is so quick. We expect her to debate this, we expect it to be traumatic – no-one, we think, can be so evil.

And this, the over-the-top presentation of Medea in this poem, is where we find the two-fold purpose of Medea in this poem. For, on the one hand, she is a vile creature, one who is supposed to represent the ugliness of Tomis, and one whom Ovid uses in an attempt to convince others how horrific his life of exile there is. However, she exists as a literary character as well, and through this literary appreciation we see that Ovid wants us to note the parts he is leaving out – such as her inner debate before the murder – as well as the parts that he plays up for horrific effect, such as the way Medea coolly lays out the limbs of Absyrtus. We can believe that Ovid does not think that Medea is really so completely cruel and heartless, but his intention here is to highlight this extreme action – the murder of her brother – and to use it for all it is worth. In this way the Medea in

Tomis has depth – as a literary figure – even though her actions are so cold and heartless on the surface.

## **Conclusion**

### **Ovid's Medea as One Narrative**

In order to show that Ovid is creating a Medea who is consistent, it is helpful if we think of these poems and sections as parts of one continuous narrative rather than as mere disjointed excerpts. To do this we should first examine what binds these narratives together and examine how Ovid uses subtle differences to add variety and life to her story. Doing this will allow us to see the versatility and ingenuity of his presentation, as Ovid deftly plays with his Medea, constantly returning to and refashioning her narrative, yet ensuring that she remains a credible character at the same time. This will then allow us to finally consider how Ovid treats her characterization as a whole.

**Links:** In effect, in each section Ovid is only writing parts of Medea's story. He is giving it to us in instalments, in bits – she is the same basic figure but with some minor twists.

In previous chapters I have already discussed at length the **verbal links** between these appearances, but one that stands out as a solid example is the connection between Hypsipyle's description of Medea's exotic and strange rituals (*passis discincta capillis*, *Her.*6.89) with Ovid's own portrayal of her performing those rituals (*passis Medea capillis*, *Met.*7.257) in which he employs the same words.

Moreover, we can also see links in her **actions** as well, for each narrative reflects upon how Medea uses her magic to help Jason – in fact, Ovid even gives us three full versions of Jason's trials in Colchis – and each story also centres on how Medea can (and

does) use her powers to commit more nefarious actions, such as murder. To a certain degree these stories all refer us back to the early Medea, the powerful witch who wanted to flee Colchis. Although she is young and emotionally vulnerable at this early stage, it is her witchcraft – her most forbidding character trait – that is predominantly displayed from the outset in each of Ovid's narratives. Moreover, just as these Medeas start the same way – with a magical Medea – they all end in a similar way as well: with a Medea whose darker, more formidable, and more murderous side, becomes fully realized.

Furthermore, throughout all of these texts Medea remains a mysterious and enigmatic figure: we cannot quite grasp what is going on inside her head and what is motivating her.

**Variety in the Differences:** Those parts of this narrative that may appear to be different are actually evidence of Ovid's attempt to add variety to Medea's story. To appreciate how Ovid employs this variety we need only look at the most obvious distinction between these narratives: how Ovid tells the story. In the *Heroides* we see her through the eyes of characters in her story (inside the story): at first we see her through the perspective of her rival Hypsipyle, then, in poem 12 (Medea's letter), we see her through her own eyes. However, both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Tristia* are from Ovid's perspective (outside the story), where the former at first lets us inside her thoughts but then eventually forces us to see her from the outside, while the latter invites us to witness a Medea whose horrific actions have defiled Ovid's exilic hell.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> We can even note that his lost Medea tragedy offers still another different form of presentation.

Variation provides perhaps the greatest reason why Ovid breaks Medea's narrative into so many pieces and presents it in so many different ways: it keeps the account from becoming stale. That is, if he were to write her entire story while using just one format, then it could quickly become tiring – but his Medeas are, on the contrary, vibrant and alive. In fact, Ovid helps to keep her vibrant by using each narrator in a different fashion, where each one has a unique task or object within that narrative. We see this variation in how the *Heroides* offer us hints and foreshadowing with respect to what will happen, while the *Metamorphoses* and *Tristia* give us more direct accounts of what Medea has done. These are the same narratives, yet Ovid approaches each one differently.

What is more, by breaking up her story, and by telling it in bits, Ovid is playing with the way she is perceived – for he is also asking the reader to be vigilant and notice the subtle hints that he adds about her future nefarious actions. Hypsipyle's letter often makes us smile, for what she accuses Medea of doing to her – stealing her husband – is exactly what Medea will herself lament about Creusa in Corinth. In reading Medea's letter, even though she gives herself a much more positive presentation, we do not really believe that she is as virtuous as she claims, for in her words we can still anticipate her evil actions. The *Metamorphoses* gives us both positive and negative aspects of Medea, where the girl we meet at the start of the episode is created by Ovid to appear obviously too innocent, while the one we see at its end he makes more evil than we would justly anticipate – and the same applies to his purely negative presentation we see in the *Tristia*. The character herself has not changed, but Ovid is asking us to notice how he is presenting her. It is this variety that allows the reader to interact with the presentation.



**Word Patterning:** It is very easy to see how Ovid presents a ring (or circular) composition within the overall organization of the poems. That is, in Medea's first appearance, Hypsipyle presents her as a vicious killer who has killed her younger brother, and in the *Tristia* Ovid finishes with a very similar picture of her, inviting us to leave her just as we found her – as a fratricide – showing us that he has brought us full circle with this totally dark and repulsive presentation. We can even note how Ovid forms patterns within the individual poems, for at first *Her.* 6 presents with a negative view of Medea, then *Her.* 12 has a more sympathetic view of her, while the picture we get of her in the *Metamorphoses* presents this change in reverse order, moving from a sympathetic Medea to a much more frightening one, and her presentation in *Tristia* 3.9 is consistent with the one we see at the end of the *Metamorphoses*.

In order to appreciate the relationship between these texts we also need to consider how they interact with one another and how Ovid makes the stories turn back on one another. The two letters in the *Heroides*, as we have seen, share a playful intratextuality, where each one casts doubt upon, undermines, and strengthens certain aspects of the other letter. In the *Metamorphoses*, the young Medea in Colchis foresees that her adventures with Jason will lead to great troubles, and then Ovid presents those troubles at the end of the narrative. However, the troubles we see are not quite the same ones that Medea has predicted – for they are troubles *for other people* – and in this we can see how Ovid avoids the conventional and predictable. In the *Tristia*, Ovid gives us a seemingly missing piece of her narrative, one to which both his heroines in the *Heroides* poems allude and one that would fit well into the *Metamorphoses*, for it is a part of her

story – the murder of her brother – which might explain her transformation from the innocent young witch into the maleficent and forceful witch who is prominent in the latter part of her appearance in book 7.<sup>2</sup> Thus all the Medeas we see fit within the framework of the other Medea narratives that Ovid has given us.

**Plunging the Reader in Medias Res:** Taken as a single narrative, Ovid's depiction of Medea's story uses the distinctive technique of starting her tale in the midst of her story – with Hypsipyle warning Jason of what Medea is about to do. Of course, this is the part of the narrative that we know so well: her revenge in Corinth. Medea's letter, in turn, gives us the reasons for her anger against Jason. Next, in book 7 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid takes us from the beginning of the narrative all the way through to her departure from Athens, showing us a Medea who has suffered a remarkable change – albeit one that is unexplained – where the poet emphasizes parts of the tale that we do not expect and he passes over parts of her story that we are eagerly awaiting. The final appearance, in the *Tristia*, gives us Medea's great moment of self-preserving sadism, where she murders her own brother. Thus, Ovid starts her story in the middle of her activities and ends with a reference to her most decisive, and *earlier*, action – the one that moves her from the innocent witch to the darker and more dangerous witch. In starting the narrative in the middle, then three times going back to the start (in Colchis), then moving all the way to the end (in the *Metamorphoses*), and in finally focussing on a decisive early moment in her story in her last appearance, Ovid is not only displaying a great deal of poetic ingenuity and *ars*, but he is also – through this variety – giving us a

---

<sup>2</sup> Although we cannot say anything concrete about his missing *Medea* tragedy, we can assume that Ovid would not have seen this text in isolation from his other ones, and that there would be many links.

Medea who is both multi-dimensional and enigmatic: we know a great deal about her, and about her various aspects – yet she remains a mystery. In fact, as I already noted, we finish where we started, with the image of fratricidal Medea – showing us how Ovid takes us back to the place from which we began.

With respect to Medea's final appearance in *Tristia* 3.9, we expect the murder of Absyrtus to be a traumatic moment, one in which she is fraught with guilt and indecision, but Ovid does not allow us to see any such inner-debate. If there is any doubt or regret in this action, it comes not from Medea herself, but rather from the debate *that we add ourselves* in creating our own Medea. And this points once again to a unique feature of Ovid's presentation: he lets the reader interact with the story and, while we are appreciating the various links and ironies, he invites us to fashion our own understanding of her story at the same time.

### **Medea's Characterization**

In looking at Ovid's Medea as one narrative, we can appreciate how he depicts her as a consistent, rounded, and vibrant character.

We can see how Ovid presents her as a realistic character, when we consider how believable she is as an emotional young girl in love in both *Heroides* 12 and the start of *Metamorphoses* 7 and compare that to how plausible her bitterness and anger toward Jason feel at the end of her letter to him. In fact, her emotions – for example, her fear for Jason's safety in *Metamorphoses* 7 as well as her bitter reaction to the news that Jason has just married Creusa (*Her.*12.154ff.) – are what make her seem real.

She is a remarkably memorable character as well, for we cannot forget how she kills her own brother in the *Tristia*, just as we cannot forget how she throws the body of Pelias into the boiling pot of water (in the *Metamorphoses*). And she is vivid, for we picture her with her loose garments, while she fills the ditches with blood as she prepares to rejuvenate Aeson (*Met.* 7), just as we picture her on the sidelines while Jason faces his trials as she invokes one final prayer to help him defeat the sown-born men (*Met.* 7.138-139). Above all, at these moments she comes alive for us, and we therefore see her as believable even while she does both remarkable things, such as flying away on a chariot pulled by dragons, as well as horrific deeds, such as the murder of her own brother.

We see that Ovid does not contradict himself in any of his presentations of Medea – that she is, in fact, remarkably uniform. The two letters in the *Heroides* and book 7 of the *Metamorphoses* all contain elements of Medea's meeting with Jason in Colchis, and the accounts of the events there are consistent with one another. Medea is portrayed as both a young girl in love and a witch who helps Jason because she is in love with him. Although the letter from Hypsipyle is inherently more sarcastic, negative, and ominous toward Medea, the other texts also provide their own elements of dark foreshadowing in dealing with her life in Colchis, and this early part of her story remains otherwise the same in all of them. The dual letters offer us Ovid's most extensive look at Medea's stay in Corinth, and they complement one another – with Hypsipyle warning how dangerous Medea can be, and with Medea offering up as a defence that she has been mistreated, while she also hints at the vengeance to come. The *Metamorphoses* quickly passes over her stay in Corinth, instead concentrating on the rejuvenation of Aeson, the death of

Pelias, and ending with the attempted murder of Theseus. Of course, her appearance in the *Tristia* deals with the murder of Absyrtus, but this is also mentioned in the *Heroides* letters. All of these events are in line – there is no contradiction.

Although some may see an inconsistency with respect to the changes in tone, we must always remember who is speaking the lines that we read. For example, Hypsipyle naturally wants to make Medea look worse than she may really be, Medea in turn wants to make herself look better than she is, and Ovid – in the *Tristia* – wants, much like Hypsipyle, to make Medea appear as horrific as possible, but for slightly different reasons from the ones that motivate Hypsipyle (she wants to win back Jason, and Ovid wants to win his return to Rome). So we should always consider the motivation of the narrator and how that affects Medea's portrayal. These motivations are not absent from the *Metamorphoses*, for through this text Ovid's goal is to show a Medea *who has changed*. And he does just that, taking us from the good Medea and then leading us straight through to the dark and impenetrable Medea at the end. By offering us a completely contrasting portrayal at the end, Ovid is showing us that her change is indeed a remarkable one. Yet his presentation of Medea in the *Metamorphoses* does not contradict those in the other texts, for the Medea in book 7 is no doubt still upset at Jason's actions in Corinth – but Ovid is, however, more interested in telling some other parts of her story, and in telling her story differently/*aliter*.<sup>3</sup>

By constantly changing his mode of presentation – with different narrators, using different types of poetry, and in emphasizing different episodes – Ovid makes his Medea

---

<sup>3</sup> For this we can even look back to *Ars Amatoria* 2.128, where Odysseus tells the same story to Calypso *aliter* (with variations). Ovid is telling Medea's story here much in the same way.

into a vibrant character. She is no more just the evil witch whom we see at the end than she is the innocent and virtuous girl whom we meet at the start of her narrative. The truth, as always, lies somewhere in between, and Ovid, by continually making references to her different characteristics, is showing us that his Medea is a both complex character and one who is not static. Ovid's Medea has both life and form – a form that he lets his reader interpret.

### **An Ovidian Medea**

Throughout this examination of Ovid's treatment of Medea I have endeavoured to argue that the poet is presenting a consistent portrait of this complex mythological character. Having considered each of his four treatments of Medea – and it is a disappointment that we do not have his play, which no doubt exemplified more ingenuity and complexity – my opinion remains unchanged. Moreover, taking a step away from the details of each text, we can see how Ovid employs each version of Medea to emphasize the poetic (or personal) programme of the work in which she appears. That is, his Medeas do not change, but his reasons for describing her do change. To understand what he is doing we must look at the works themselves and how she fits in to each one.

In the *Heroides*, Ovid gives us two letters, both of which interact with one another, and both of which, through Ovid's use of humour and irony, have a life and depth that stand in opposition to their otherwise melodramatic appearance. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid plays up certain aspects of the Medea narrative that have been otherwise overlooked, just as he does with other stories in the *Metamorphoses*, and here we see a Medea who changes dramatically and who acts like an anti-hero much in the

same way that the entire poem is an anti-epic. Finally, in the *Tristia*, he concentrates on the most hideous aspects of Medea – where he depicts her as a cold, conniving murderer, because here he wants to conflate her horrific image with that of Tomis and therefore make his plea to return to Rome seem all the more pressing.

What we see is that Ovid uses Medea to serve his poetic purpose. He highlights aspects that fit the needs of the poetic project, playing up certain aspects, and playing down others according to the need. As we know, Ovid is a learned and witty poet, and not a philosopher. Therefore, he does not use Medea to make any great philosophic claim. Rather, he uses her to serve his poetry.

Ovid's Medea is a very complex – perhaps even inscrutable – character, but she is no more difficult to define than Ovid is himself. I suggest that the poet uses her because there are so many complex aspects to her character and narrative. We can see that Medea's multifaceted complexity is a primary reason why she has remained such a significant figure in literature throughout the ages, and Ovid clearly recognized that her narrative and character could be exploited in many different ways, which is one reason why he chose to use her so often. She is as versatile and complex as his poetry. To see her as one-dimensional is to see Ovid himself as one-dimensional.

In Ovid's depiction of Medea we can thus see a paradigm of the poet, his approach, and the works he produced. Medea is a figure who defies easy characterizations, and so is Ovid. Her story has as many layers of nuance as Ovid's poetry does.

## Bibliography

### Commentaries

- Anderson, William S. 1972. *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 6-10*. Oklahoma.
- 1997. *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 1-5*. Oklahoma.
- Bessone, Federica. 1997. *P. Ovidii Nasonis Heroidum epistula XII: Medea Iasoni*. Firenze.
- Bömer, Franz. 1976. *Metamorphosen*. Heidelberg.
- Braswell, K. 1988. *Commentary on Pindar Pythian Ode 4*. Cambridge.
- Campbell, Malcolm. 1994. *A Commentary on Apollonius Rhodius Argonautica III 1-471*. Brill.
- Elliot, A. 1969. *Medea*. Oxford.
- Hall, J.B. 1995. *Ovidius Tristia*. Teubner.
- Heinze, Theodor. 1997. *Der XII. Heroidenbrief: Medea An Jason*. Brill.
- Hunter, R.L. 1989. *Apollonius of Rhodes - Argonautica Book III*. Cambridge.
- Kenney, Edward John. 1996. *Ovid Heroides XVI-XXI*. Cambridge.
- Knox, Peter E. 1995. *Ovid – Heroides: Select Epistles*. Cambridge.
- Luck, G. 1977. *P. Ovidius Naso: Tristia II Kommentar*. Heidelberg.
- Mastronarde, Donald J. 2002. *Euripides – Medea*. Cambridge.
- Page, Denys. 1952. *Euripides – Medea*. Oxford.
- Tarrant, R.J. 2004. *Metamorphoses*. Oxford.

### Other Books, Texts, and Articles

- Ahl, F. 1985. *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and other Classical Poets*. Ithaca.



- Allen, W. 2001. "Euripides in Megale Hellas. Some aspects of the early reception of tragedy." *G&R* 48: 67-86.
- 2002. *Euripides: Medea*. London.
- Amann, Martin. 2006. *Komik in den Tristen Ovids*. Basel.
- Anderson, W.S. 1973. "The *Heroides*," in *Ovid*. J.W. Binns, ed. Routledge and Kegan Paul: 49-83.
- 1986. "The theory and practice of poetic arrangement from Vergil to Ovid," in *Poems in their Place: Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*. N. Fraihat, ed. Chapel Hill: 44-65.
- Arcellaschi, André. 1990. *Médée dans le Théâtre Latin, d'Ennius à Sénèque*. Paris.
- Armstrong, Rebecca. 2005. *Ovid and His Love Poetry*. Duckworth.
- Baca, A.R. 1969. "Ovid's claim to originality and *Heroides* I." *TAPhA* 100: 1-10.
- Bal, Mieke. 1985. *Narratology*. University of Toronto Press.
- 1991. *On Story-Telling. Essays in Narratology*. David Jobling, ed. Polebridge Press.
- Barchiesi, Alessandro. 1987. "Narratività e convenzione nelle *Heroides*." *MD* 19: 63-90.
- 1989. "Voci e istanze narrative nelle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio." *MD* 23: 55-97.
  - 1993. "Future reflexive: two models of allusion and Ovid's *Heroides*." *HSPH* 95: 333-365.
  - 1999. "Vers une histoire à rebours de l'élégie latine : les *Héroïdes* 'doubles' (16-21)." *ElectronAnt* 5 (1).
  - 2002. "Narrative techniques and narratology in the *Metamorphoses*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 180-199.
- Barkhuizen J.H. 1979. "The psychological characterization of Medea in Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 3.744-824." *AClass* 22: 33-48
- Barlow, S.A. 1989. "Stereotype and Reversal in Euripides' *Medea*." *G&R* 36: 158-171.

- Barsby, J. 1978. *Ovid*. Oxford.
- Bartel, H. And Simon, A. (eds.) 2010. *Unbinding Medea*. Legenda.
- Bate, Marcus. 2004. "Tempestuous poetry: storms in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides* and *Tristia*." *Mnemosyne* S.4 57 (3): 295-310.
- Bell'do, M. 1996. "Les autres Médées du théâtre grec." *Pallas* 45: 57-69.
- Belloni, M. 1981. "Medea πολυφαρμακος." *CCC* 2: 117-133.
- Bessone, Federica. 1996. "Medea's response to Catullus: Ovid, *Heroides* 12.23-4 and Catullus 76.1-6." *CQ* NS 46 (2): 575-578.
- .
- 1997. "Sapere, non sapere, dire, non dire : ignoranza, reticenza ed ironia nelle *Heroides*." *Quaderni*: 207-223.
  - 1998. "Medea, leonessa infanticida: Ovidio, Seneca e un paradosso euripideo." *Quaderni*: 171-197.
  - 1998. "Valerius Flaccus und die Medeen des Ovid," in *Ratis Omnia Vincet*. Ulrich Eigler and Eckard Lefèvre, eds. Munich: 141-171.
- Bettenworth, Anja. 2003. "Ovid, Apollonius und Sappho: die Liebesymptomatik der Medea in Ov. *Met.* 7, 74-88." *Philologus* 147 (1): 101-113
- Beye, C.R. 1969. "Jason as love-hero in Apollonius' *Argonautica*." *GRBS* 10: 31-55.
- Binroth-Bank, Christine. 1997. "Der Monolog der Medea in Ovids *Metamorphosen*." *AU* 40 (4-5): 17-32.
- Bloch, David J. 2000. "Ovid's *Heroides* 6: preliminary scenes from the life of an intertextual heroine." *CQ* 50 (1): 197-209.
- Blundell, M.W. 1989. *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies*. Cambridge.
- Boedeker, Deborah. 1991. "Euripides' *Medea* and the Vanity of ΛΟΓΟΙ." *CP* 86: 95-112.
- 1997. "Becoming Medea: Assimilation in Euripides," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 127-148.
- Bongie, E.B. 1977. "Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides." *TAPA* 107: 27-56.

- Boyle, T. 1997. *Tragic Seneca*. London.
- Bradley E.M. 1969. "Ovid *Heroides* v. Reality and illusion." *CJ* 64: 158-162.
- Bremmer, Jan. 1997. "Why Did Medea Kill Her Brother Apsyrtus?" in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 83-100.
- Bright, David F. 1987. *The Miniature Epic in Vandal Africa*. Oklahoma.
- Brooks, P. 1984. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York.
- Burnett, A.P. 1973. "*Medea* and the Tragedy of Revenge." *CP* 68: 1-24.
- Burrow, C. 1999. "'Full of the maker's guile': Ovid on imitating and on the imitation of Ovid," in *Ovidian Transformations. Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and its Reception*. P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi, and S. Hinds, eds. Cambridge: 271-287.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London.
- Buttrey, T.V. 1958. "Accident and design in Euripides' *Medea*." *AJPh* 79: 1-17.
- Byre, Calvin S. 1996. "The killing of Apsyrtus in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*." *Phoenix* 50 (1): 3-16.
- 1997. "Suspense in the Phaeacian episode of Apollonius' *Argonautica*." *ICS* 22: 65-73.
- Cahill, J. 1995. *Her Kind: Stories of Women from Greek Mythology*. Orchard Park.
- Cairns, Francis. 2002-2003. "The 'etymology' in Ovid *Heroides* 20.21-32." *CJ* 98 (3): 239-242
- Casali, Sergio. 1995. "Tragic irony in Ovid, *Heroides* 9 and 11." *CQ* 45 (2): 505-511.
- 1995. "Strategies of tension (Ovid, *Heroides* 4)." *PCPhS* 41 : 1-15.
  - 1993. y. "Hydra redundans: (Ovid, *Heroides* 9.95)." *CQ* 43 : 505-506.
  - 1997. y. "The Cambridge *Heroides*." *CJ* 92: 305-314.
- Chatman, Seymour. 1978. *Story and Discourse*. Cornell University Press.
- Christie, I. 2000. "Between magic and realism: Medea on film," in *Medea 1500-2000*. E. Hall, F. Macintosh, and O. Taplin, eds. Oxford: 142-167.

- Claassen, Jo-Marie. 2001. "The singular myth: Ovid's use of myth in the exilic poetry." *Hermathena* 170: 11-64.
- Clare, R.J. 1995. "Catullus 64 and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius: allusion and exemplarity." *PCPS* 42: 60-88.
- 2002. *The Path of the Argo*. Cambridge.
- Clarke, R.J. 1996. "Catullus 64 and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius: allusion and exemplarity." *PCPhS* 42: 60-88.
- Classen, Jo-Marie. 2008. *Ovid Revisited: The Poet in Exile*. Duckworth.
- Clausen, W.V. 1964. "Callimachus and Latin Poetry." *GRBS* 3: 31-35.
- Clauss, James J. 1997. "Conquest of the Mephistolean Nausicaa: Medea's Role in Apollonius' Redefinition of the Epic Hero," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 149-177.
- Collard, C. 1975. "Medea and Dido." *Prometheus* 1: 131-151.
- Collins, Leslie. 1988. *Studies in Characterization in the Iliad*. Frankfurt.
- Connelly, Jill L. 2000. *Renegotiating Ovid's Heroides*. University of Chicago.
- Corti, Lillian. 1998. *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*. Greenwood Press.
- Courtney, E. 1965. "Ovidian and non-Ovidian *Heroides*." *BICS* 12: 63-66.
- Culler, Jonathan. 1975. *Structuralist Poetics*. Routledge.
- Cunningham, M.P. 1949. "The novelty of Ovid's *Heroides*." *CPh*: 100-106
- Curley, D.E. 1999. *Metatheater: Heroines and Ephebes in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. (d) Seattle.
- Davidson Reid, J. 1993. "Medea," in *Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts 1300-1900s*. Oxford: 643-650.
- Davis, Peter J. 1995. "Rewriting Euripides: Ovid, *Heroides* 4." *Scholia* 4: 41-55.
- Davison, M.T. 1984. "Parents and children in Ovid's poems from exile." *CW* 78: 111-114.

- Dean, N. 1967. "Chaucer's Complaint, a genre descended from the *Heroides*." *Comp-Lit* 19: 1-27.
- De Forest, M.M. 1994. *Apollonius' Argonautica*. Leiden.
- de Jong, I.J.F. 1991. *Narrative in Drama: the Art of the Euripidean Messenger Speech*. Leiden.
- Desmond, Marilyn. 1993. "When Dido reads Vergil: gender and intertextuality in Ovid's *Heroides* 7." *Helios* 20: 56-68.
- De Vito, Ann Frances. 1988. *Characterization in Greek Tragedy*. Univ. of Toronto.
- 1994. "The essential seriousness of *Heroides* 4." *RhM* 137 (3-4): 312-330.
- Dillon, John M. 1997. "Medea among the Philosophers," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 211-218.
- Doherty, L.E. 2001. *Gender and Interpretation of Classical Myth*. London.
- Doerrie, H. 1967. "Die dichterische Absicht Ovids in den Epistulae heroidum." *A&A* 13: 41-55.
- Dräger, Paul. 1995. "Jasons Mutter: Wandlung von einer griechischen Heroine zu einer römischen Matrone." *Hermes* 123 (4): 470-489.
- Dragulescu C. 1976. "Le vocabulaire psychologique dans les *Héroïdes*," in *Ovidianum: Acta Conventus Omnium Gentium Ovidianis Studiis Fovendis*. N. Barbu, E. Dobroiu, and M. Nasta, eds. Bucharest: 255-265.
- Drinkwater-Ottone, Megan O. 2003. *Epic and Elegy in Ovid's Heroides: Paris, Helen, and Homeric Intertext*. Durham.
- Duncan, Anne Elizabeth. 2001. "Spellbinding performance: poet as witch in Theocritus' second *Idyll* and Apollonius' *Argonautica*." *Helios* 28 (1): 43-56.
- Dunkle, J.R. 1969. "The Aegeus episode and the theme of Euripides' *Medea*." *TAPA* 100: 97-107.
- Dyck, Andrew R. 1989. "On the way from Colchis to Corinth. Medea in Book 4 of the *Argonautica*." *Hermes* CXVII: 455-470.
- Easterling, P.E. 1977. "The infanticide in Euripides' *Medea*." *YCS* 25: 77-91.

- Eco, U. 1979. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*.  
Bloomington.
- 1992. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge.
- Erasmio, M. 2004. *Roman Tragedy. Theatre and Theatricality*. Austin.
- Evans, Harry B. 1983. *Publica Carmina: Ovid's Books from Exile*. University of  
Nebraska Press.
- Fantham, Elaine. 2004. *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Oxford.
- Fantuzzi, M., and Hunter, R. 2004. *Tradition and Innovation in Hellenistic Poetry*.  
Cambridge.
- Farrell, Joseph. 1998. "Reading and writing the *Heroides*." *HSCP* 98: 307-338.
- Feichtinger, B. 1997. "Medeas sehen. Pier Paolo Pasolinis Film Medea im Unterricht."  
*Der altsprachliche Unterricht* 40: 4-5.
- Felson-Rubin, Nancy. 1994. *Regarding Penelope: from Character to Poetics*.  
Princeton.
- Feldherr, Andrew. 2002. "Metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*," in *The Cambridge  
Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 163-179.
- Fetterley, J. 1978. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*.  
Bloomington.
- Fish, J. 2004. "Physician, heal thyself: the intertextuality of Ovid's exile poetry and the  
*Remedia Amoris*." *Latomus* 63.4: 864-872.
- Flaherty, S.M. 1994. *The Rhetoric of Female Self-Destruction: A Study in Homer,  
Euripides, and Ovid*. (d) Yale.
- Foley, Helen P. 1981. *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*. New York.
- Y. 1989. "Medea's divided Self." *CA* 8: 61-85.
- Fowler, Roger. 1977. *Linguistics and the Novel*. London.
- Fraenkel, Hermann. 1945. *Ovid: A Poet between Two Worlds*. Berkeley.

Frécaut, J. M. 1972. *L'esprit et l'humour chez Ovide*. Grenoble.

- Y. 1984. "Humour et imaginaire dans un épisode des *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide; les paysans lyciens (VI, 313-381)." *Latomus* 43: 540-553.
- 1989. "Une double antithèse oxymorique, clef d'un épisode des *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide: le meurtre de Pélidas par Médée (VII,297-349)." *RPh* 63: 67-74.

Freund, E. 1987. *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*. London.

Frow, J. 1986. "Spectacle binding: on character." *Poetics Today* 7 (2): 227-250.

Frye, N. 1963. "Literary criticism," in *The Aims and Methods of Scholarship and in Modern Languages and Literatures*. J. Thorpe, ed. New York: 57-69.

Fulkerson, Laurel. 2000. *Quid Epistula Lecta Nocebit?: 'Reading More' in Ovid's Heroides*. Columbia, New York.

- 2005. *The Ovidian Heroine as Author*. Cambridge.

Fyfe, H. 1983. "An Analysis of Seneca's *Medea*." *Ramus* 12: 3-28.

Gabriel, Ayala H. 1992. "Living with Medea and thinking after Freud: Greek drama, gender, and concealments." *Cultural Anthropology* (Washington, D.C. American Anthropological Association) 7: 346-373.

Gaillard, Jacques. 1992. "L'imaginaire ludique ovidien dans les *Héroïdes*," in *Les imaginaires des Latins : actes du colloque international de Perpignan*. Thomas Joël, ed. Perpignan: 101-112.

Galand-Hallyn, Perrine. 1997. "Évidences perdues dans les *Héroïdes* d'Ovide.," in *Dire L'évidence*. Carlos Lévy and Laurent Pernot, eds. Paris: 207-227.

Galinsky, G. Karl. 1975. *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. University of California Press.

Galis, L. 1992. "Medea's metamorphosis." *Erano* 90: 65-81.

García Gual, C. 1971. "El Argonauta Jasón y Medea. Análisis de un mito y su tradición literaria." *Habis* 2: 85-107.

Gentili, B. and Perusino, F. eds. 2000. *Medea nella letteratura e nell'arte*. Venice.

Gessert, Genevieve Simandl. 2004. "Myth as 'consolatio': Medea on Roman sarcophagi." *G&R* 51 (2): 217-249.

- Giangrande, Giuseppe. 2002. "Medea and dreams in Apollonius Rhodius." in *Medeas*. Aurora López and Andrés Pociña, eds. Granada: 347-363.
- Giannini, P. 2000. "Medea nell'epica e nella poesia lirica e tardo arcaica," in *Medea nella letteratura e nell'arte*. B. Gentili and F. Perusino, eds. Venice: 65-82.
- Gibson, B. 1990. "Ovid on reading: reading Ovid. Reception in Ovid *Tristia* II." *JRS* 89: 19-37.
- Ginsberg, Judith. 2006. *Representing Agrippina*. Oxford.
- Gill, C. 2006. *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought*. Oxford.
- Glaser, Horst Albert. 2001. *Medea: Frauenthore, Kindsmord, Emanzipation*. Bern.
- Glenn, E.M. 1986. *The Metamorphoses: Ovid's Roman Games*. Lanham.
- Gold, Barbara K. 1993. "'But Ariadne was never there in the first place': finding the female in Roman poetry," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds. Routledge: 75-101.
- Golden, M. 1988. "Did the ancients care when their children died?" *G&R* 35: 152-163.
- Gordon, Pamela. 1997. "The lover's voice in *Heroides* 15 or Why is Sappho a man?" in *Roman Sexualities*. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner, eds. Princeton: 274-291.
- Graf, Fritz. 1988. "Ovide. Les *Métamorphoses* et la véracité du mythe," in *Métamorphoses du mythe en Grèce ancienne*. C. Calame, ed. Geneva: 57-70.
- 1997. "Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-Known Myth," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 21-43.
  - 2002. "Myth in Ovid," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 108-121.
- Green, Peter. 1988. "The armchair epic: Apollonius Rhodius and the voyage of Argo." *Southern Humanities Review* (Auburn, AL Auburn Univ.) 22: 1-15.
- 1994. *Ovid: The Poems of Exile*. Harmondsworth.
- Greenhut, Deborah S. 1988. *Feminine Rhetorical Culture. Tudor Adaptations of Ovid's Heroides*. New York.



- Griffiths, Emma. 2005. *Medea*. Routledge.
- Gross, N.P. 1979. "Rhetorical wit and amatory persuasion in Ovid." *CJ* 74: 305-318.
- Gutzwiller, Kathryn J. 2004. "Seeing thought: Timomachus' Medea and ecphrastic epigram." *AJPh* 125 (3): 339-386.
- Hall, J.B. 1990. "Conjectures in Ovid's *Heroides*." *ICS* 15: 263-292.
- Hall, E., Macintosh, F. and Taplin, O., eds. 2000. *Medea in Performance 1500-2000*. Oxford.
- Halleti, Judith P. 1993. "Feminist theory, historical periods, literary canons, and the study of Greco-Roman antiquity," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds. Routledge: 44-72.
- Hardie, P. 2002. *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion*. Cambridge.
- Harrison, Stephen. 2002. "Ovid and genre: evolutions of an elegist," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 79-94.
- Harvey, W.J. 1965. *Character and the Novel*. London.
- Hash, R.W. 1969. *The Jason Theme in Greek and Roman Literatures*. (d) Vanderbilt University.
- Heinze, T. 1993. "The Authenticity of Ovid *Heroides* 12 reconsidered." *BICS* 38: 94-98.
- Hershkowitz, Debra. 1998. *Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica: Abbreviated Voyages in Silver Latin Epic*. Oxford
- Hinds, Stephen. 1993. "Medea in Ovid: scenes from the life of an intertextual heroine." *MD* 30: 9-47.
- Hochman, Baruch. 1985. *Character in Literature*. Cornell University Press.
- Hofman, Michael. ed. 1996. *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Holland, L. 2003. "Myth and plot in Euripides' *Medea*." *TAPA* 133.2: 255-280.
- Holland, N. 1975. *Five Readers Reading*. New Haven.

- Hull, K.W.D. 1975. "Medea in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*." *Proc. of the Leeds Philos. & Lit. Soc., Lit. & Hist. Sect.* XVI: 1-25.
- Hunter R.L. 1987. "Medea's flight. The fourth book of the *Argonautica*." *CQ* 37: 129-139
- 1988. "Short on heroics. Jason in the *Argonautica*." *CQ* 38: 436-453.
  - 1993. *The Argonautica of Apollonius: Literary Studies*. Cambridge
- Huskey, Samuel J. 2004. "Strategies of Omission and Revelation in Ovid's *Heroides* 6, 12, and *Tristia* 3.9." *Philologus* 148.2: 274-289.
- Hutchinson, G.O. 1988. *Hellenistic Poetry*. Oxford.
- Iser, W. 1974. *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore.
- Jackson Steven. 1992. "Apollonius' Jason: human being in epic scenario." *G&R* 39: 155-162.
- Jacobson H. 1968. "Ennian influence in *Heroides* 16 and 17." *Phoenix* XXII: 299-303.
- 1967. *Studies in Ovid's Heroides*. Columbia University.
  - 1974. *Ovid's Heroides*. Princeton.
- Johnston, S.I. 1995. "Defining the dreadful: remarks on the Greek child-killing demon," in *Ancient magic and Ritual Power*. P. Mirecki and M. Meyer, eds. Leiden: 355-381.
- 1997. "Corinthian Medea and the cult of Hera Akaria," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 44-70.
- Jolivet, Jean-Christophe. 2001. *Allusion et fiction épistolaire dans les Héroïdes*. Paris.
- Keith, Allison. 1999. "Versions of epic masculinity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," in *Ovidian Transformations. Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and its Reception*. P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi, and S. Hinds, eds. Cambridge: 214-239.
- 2000. *Engendering Rome: Women in Latin Epic*. Cambridge.
  - 2002. "Sources and Genres in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1-5," in *Brill's Companion to Ovid*. B.W., Boyd, ed. Brill.

- Kennedy, Duncan. 2002. "Epistolarity: the *Heroides*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 217-232.
- 2002. "Recent receptions of Ovid," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 320-335.
- Kenney, E.J. 1973. "The Style of the *Metamorphoses*," in *Ovid*. J.W. Binns, ed. Routledge and Kegan Paul: 116-153.
- 1982. "Ovid," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*. Vol. 2. E.J. Kenney and W.V. Clausen, eds. Cambridge: 420-457.
  - 2002. "Ovid's Language and Style," in *Brill's Companion to Ovid*. B.W., Boyd, ed. Brill.
- Kirfel, E.A. 1969. *Untersuchungen zur Briefform der Heroides Ovids*. Bern.
- Klein, Richard. 2001. "Medea am Ausgang der Antike : Bemerkungen zum Epyllion *Medea* des christlichen Dichters Dracontius." *WJA* 25: 229-238.
- Klein, T.M. 1980-1981. "Apollonius Rhodius, vates ludens. Eros' golden ball (*Arg.* 3,115-150)." *CW* 34: 223-225.
- 1983. "Apollonius' Jason, hero and scoundrel." *QUCC* 42: 115-126.
- Knight, V. 1991. "Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 4.167-70 and Euripides' *Medea*." *CQ* 41: 248-250.
- Knox, B.M.W. 1950. "The Serpent and the Flame." *AJPh* 71: 379-400.
- 1977. "The *Medea* of Euripides." *YCIS* 25: 193-225.
- Knox, P. E. 1986. "Ovid's *Medea* and the authenticity of *Heroides* 12." *HSCP* 90: 207-223.
- 2002. "The *Heroides*: elegiac voices," in *Brill's Companion to Ovid*. B.W., Boyd, ed. Brill.
  - 2009. *A Companion to Ovid* (ed). Blackwell.
- Korn, Matthias and Tschiedel, Hans Jürgen, Eds. 1991. *Ratis omnia vincet: Untersuchungen zu den Argonautica des Valerius Flaccus*. Hildesheim.

- Kovacs, D. 1993. "Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*." *AJPh* 114: 45-70.
- Kowalewski, Ludwik Marian. 1988. *The Jason Theme in Classical Literature*. Southampton.
- Krevans, Nita. 1997. "Medea as Foundation-Heroine," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 71-82.
- Kutáková, Eva. 1988. "Fairy-tale elements in the Jason and Medea myth. On the relation of folklore to literature." *GLP* 11: 9-21.
- Laird, Andrew. 1997. "Approaching characterisation in Virgil," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*. Charles Martindale, ed. Cambridge: 282-293.
- Larmour, D.H.J. 1990. "Tragic *Contaminatio* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Procne and Medea; Philomela and Iphigeneia (6.424-674); Scylla and Phaedra (8.19-151)." *ICS* 15: 131-141.
- Lawall, G. 1966. "Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Jason as anti-hero." *YCIS* 19: 119-169.
- 1979. "Seneca's *Medea*: the Elusive Triumph of Civilization," in *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to B.M.W. Knox*. G. Bowerstock, ed. 419-426.
- Lefèvre, Eckard. 2001. "Ennius' *Medea* im römisch-politischen Kontext," in *Studien zu antiken Identitäten: Studien zu antiken Identitäten*. Stefan Faller, ed. Würzburg: 39-51.
- Lefkowitz, Mary R. and Fant, Maureen B. 1977. *Women in Greece and Rome*. Toronto.
- Lefkowitz, Mary R. 1986. *Women in Greek Myth*. Baltimore.
- Leigh, Matthew. 1997. "Ovid, *Heroides* 6.1-2." *CQ NS* 47 (2): 605-607.
- Lennartz, Klaus. 2001. "Ennius und die verbannten Kinder : (Enn. 224f. Klotz, S. 349 Jocelyn)." *Hermes* 129 (1): 131-133.
- Lesky, A. 1931. "Medeia." *RE* 15: 29-65.
- Lewis, B.E. 1984. "Valerius Flaccus' portrait of Jason. Evidence from the similes." *AClass* 27: 91-100.
- Lilja, S. 1965. *The Roman Elegists Attitudes toward Women*. Helsinki.
- Lindheim, Sara Helaine. 2003. *Mail and Female*. University of Wisconsin Press.

- 1995. *Voices of Desire: the Ventriloquized Letters of Ovid's Heroides*. Brown University.
- Lively, Genevieve. 2005. *Ovid: Love Songs*. Bristol Classical Press.
- Ludwig, W. 1965. *Struktur und Einheit der Metamorphosen Ovids*. Berlin.
- Lyons, D. 1997. *Gender and Immortality. Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult*. Princeton.
- Mack, Maynard and Gregor, Ian, Eds. 1968. *Imagined Worlds*. London.
- Mack, Sara. 1988. *Ovid*. New Haven.
- Mackie, Chris J. 2001. "The earliest Jason: what's in a name?" *G&R* 48 (1): 1-17.
- Manuwald, B. 1983. "Der Mord an den Kindern. Bemerkungen zu den Medea-Tragödien des Euripides und des Neophron." *WS* 17: 27-61.
- Manuwald, Gesine. 2002. "Die Argonauten in Kolchis : der Mythos bei Valerius Flaccus und Corneille: *Argonautica* oder Iason und Medea in Iuppiters 'Weltenplan.'" *A&A* 48: 43-67.
- Maurach, G. 1966. "Jason und Medea bei Seneca." *A&A* 12: 125-140.
- Martina, Antonio. 2002. "La *Medea* di Seneca e la XII delle *Heroides* di Ovidio," in *Medeas: versiones de un mito desde Grecia hasta hoy*. Aurora López and Andrés Pociña, eds. Granada: 589-613.
- Martindale, C. 1993. *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*. Cambridge.
- 1997. "Proper voices: writing the writer," in *Compromising Traditions: the Personal Voice in Classical Scholarship*. J.P. Hallett and T. Van Nortwick, eds. London: 71-101.
- McClure, Laura K. "'The worst husband:' discourses of praise and blame in Euripides' *Medea*." *CPh* 94 (4): 373-394.
- McDermott, E.A. 1989. *Euripides' Medea: the Incarnation of Disorder*. University Park, PA.

- McDonald, Marianne. 1997. "Medea as Politician and Diva: Riding the Dragon into the Future," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 297-323.
- Meyer H. 1980. *Medeia und die Peliaden. Eine attische Novelle und ihre Entstehung. Ein Versuch zur Sagenforschung auf archäologischer Grundlage*. Rome
- Mezzadri Bernard. 1991. "Jason ou le retour du pêcheur: esquisse de mythologie argonautique." *RHR* 208: 273-301
- Michalopoulos, Andreas N. 2004. "Fighting against a witch: the importance of magic in Hypsipyle's letter to Jason (Ov., *Her.* 6)." *Mene* 4 : 95-122.
- Michelini, A.N. 1987. *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition*. Oxford.
- Mickelson, D. 1981. "Types of spatial structure in narrative," in *The Spatial Form and the Novel*. J.R. Smitten and A. Dahistany, eds. Ithaca: 63-78.
- Mills, S. ed. 1994. *Gendering the Reader*. New York.
- Mills, S.P. 1980. "The Sorrows of Medea." *CP* 75: 289-296.
- Mimosa-Ruiz, D. 1982. *Médée antique et moderne. Aspects rituels et socio-politiques d'un mythe*. Paris.
- Moi, T. 1985. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London.
- Monaghan, Meredith. 2002. *Unfinished Business in the Argonautica of Valerius Flaccus*. Stanford University
- Moreau, Alain. 1994. *Le Mythe de Jason et Médée: le va-nu-pied et la Sorcière*. Paris.
- Morris, W. 1867. *The Life and Death of Jason*. London.
- Morwood, James. 1999. "Catullus 64, Medea, and the François vase." *G&R S.2* 46 (2): 221-231.
- Mosher, H. 1991. "Towards a poetics of *descriptized* narration." *Poetics Today* 12: 425-445.
- Mueller, Melissa. 2001. "The language of reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*." *AJPh* 122 (4): 471-504.
- Murgatroyd, P. 2005. *Mythological and Legendary Narrative in Ovid's Fasti*. Brill.

- Myerovitz, M. 1985. *Ovid's Games of Love*. Detroit.
- Nagle, B.R. 1989. "Ovid's Metamorphoses: A narratological catalogue." *Syllecta Classica* 1: 97-125.
- Nagy, G. 1979. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore.
- Neils, J. 1990. "Jason." *LIMC* 5: 629-638.
- Nesselrath, Heinz-Günther. 1998. "Jason und Absyrtus: Überlegungen zum Ende von Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*," in *Ratis Omnia Vincet*. Ulrich Eigler and Eckard Lefèvre, eds. Munich: 347-354.
- Newlands, Carole E. 1997. "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's Medea," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 178-208.
- Nikolaidis, A.G. 1985. "Some observations on Ovid's lost *Medea*." *Latomus* 44: 383-387.
- Norwood, F. 1963-1964. "Unity and diversity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." *CJ* 16: 464-476.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1997. "Serpents in the Soul: A Reading of Seneca's *Medea*," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 219-249.
- Nyberg, L. 1992. *Unity and Coherence: Studies in Apollonius Rhodius' Argonautica and the Alexandrian Epic Tradition*. Lund.
- Oppel, E. 1968. *Ovids Heroides. Studien zur inneren Form und zur Motivation*. Erlangen-Nürnberg.
- Otis, B. 1966. *Ovid as an Epic Poet*. Cambridge.
- Palmer, R.B. 1957. "An apology for Jason. A study of Euripides' *Medea*." *CJ* 53: 49-55.
- Papadopoulou, Thalia. 1997. "The presentation of the inner self : Euripides' *Medea* 1021-55 and Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* 3, 772-801." *Mnemosyne* S.4 50 (6): 641-664.
- Parry, H. 1964. "Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: violence in a pastoral landscape." *TAPA* 95: 268-282.

- Pearson C. S. 1980. "Simile and imagery in Ovid *Heroides* 4 and 5." *ICS* V: 110-129.
- Pechillo, M. 1990. "Ovid's Framing Technique: the Aeacus and Cephalus Epyllion (*Met.* 7.490-8.5)." *CJ* 86: 35-44.
- Peek, Philip Sheffield. 2001. "Black humour in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." *Ramus* 30 (2): 128-151.
- Pelling, Christopher. 1990. *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*. Oxford.
- Phinney, E. 1967. "Narrative Unity in the *Argonautica*, the Medea-Jason Romance." *TAPA* 98: 327-341.
- Pike, David. 1993. "Jason's departure: Apollonius Rhodius and heroism." *AClass* 36: 27-37
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. 1975. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*. Schocken.
- Pratt, Alan R. 1993. *Black Humour: Critical Essays*. Garland.
- Prince, G. 1982. *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative*. The Hague.
- Prince, Meredith Diane. 2002. *Magic, Love, and the Limits of Power: the Figure of Medea in Latin Love Elegy*. Duke University.
- Purnelle, Gérald. 1990. "La répartition des noms propres dans les *Héroïdes* d'Ovide." *RIS* 26: 203-219.
- Pucci, P. 1980. *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' Medea*. Ithaca.
- Rabinowitz, N. and Richlin, A., eds. 1993. *Feminist Theory and the Classics*. Routledge.
- Rabinowitz, P.J. 1977. "Truth in fiction: a re-examination of audiences." *Critical Inquiry* 4: 121-141.
- 1986. "Shifting stands, shifting standards: reading, interpretation, and literary judgment." *Arethusa* 19: 115-134.
- Ramírez de Verger, Antonio. 1994. "On Ovid's Epistulae Heroidum 6.99-100." *LCM* 19: 22.
- Rand, E.K. 1925. *Ovid and His Influence*. New York.



- Rawn, Alan Huston. 1993. *Tradition and Innovation in Apollonios' Characterization of Medea in the Argonautika*. University of Washington.
- Richlin, Amy. 1993. "The ethnographer's dilemma and the dream of a lost golden age," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds. Routledge: 272-303.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. 1983. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London.
- Rittenbaum, Ann Haigler. 1997. *The Process of Grieving in Ovid's Heroides*. Washington University.
- Rosati Gianpiero. 1992. "L'elegia al femminile : le *Heroides* di Ovidio (e altre heroides)." *MD* 29: 71-94.
- 2002. "Narrative Techniques and Narrative Structures in the *Metamorphoses*," in *Brill's Companion to Ovid*. B.W., Boyd, ed. Brill.
- Rosenmeyer, Patricia A. 1997. "Ovid's *Heroides* and *Tristia*: voices from exile." *Ramus* 26 (1): 29-56.
- Rosner-Siegel, J.A. 1982. "Amor, metamorphosis, and magic. Ovid's Medea (Met. 7.1-424)." *CJ* 77: 231-243.
- Salemme, C. 1991. *Medea: Un Antico mito in Valerio Flacco*. Naples.
- Sallmann, Klaus. 1982-1984. "Penelope oder die Anamorphose der *Heroides* Ovids." *AAntHung* 30: 283-302.
- Sargent, Jeannette L. 1996. *The Novelty of Ovid's Heroides: libretti for pantomime*. Bryn Mawr College.
- Schawaller, Doris. 1987. "Semantische Wortspiele in Ovids *Metamorphosen* und *Heroides*." *GB* 14: 199-214.
- Schefold, K. 1966. *Myth and Legend in Early Greek Art*. A. Hicks, trans. New York.
- 1978. "Die Basler Peliadenschale." *Antike Kunst* 21: 100-106.
  - 1992. *Gods and Heroes in Late Archaic Greek Art*. Alan Griffiths, trans. Cambridge.

- Schiesaro, Alessandro. 2002. "Ovid and the professional discourses of scholarship, religion, rhetoric," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 62-75.
- Schlesinger, E. 1966. "Zu Euripides' *Medea*." *Hermes* 94: 26-53.
- Schmidt, M. 1986. "Medea und Herakles, zwei tragische Kindermörder," in *Studien zur Mythologie und Vasenmalerlei*. E. Bohr and W. Martini, eds. Mainz am Rhein: 169-174.
- 1992. "Medeia." *LIMC* 6: 386-398.
- Schmit-Neuerburg, Tilman. 2001. "Triumph der Medea?: kritische Bemerkungen zu den *Argonautica* des Valerius Flaccus." *Philologus* 145 (1): 121-136.
- Schubert, W. 1989. "Medeas Flucht aus Iolcos (Ovid, *Met.* 7, 350-93)." *WJA* 15: 175-181.
- 1990. "Zu Ovid, *Trist.* 3,9." *Gymnasium* 97: 154-164.
  - 1998. "Medea in der lateinischen Literatur der Antike," in *Medeas Wandlungen: Studien zu einem Mythos in Kunst und Wissenschaft*. Annette Kämmerer, Margret Schuchard, and Agnes Speck, eds. Heidelberg: 55-91.
- Schwinge, Ernst-Richard. 2004. "Wer tötete Medeas Kinder?: einige Bemerkungen zu Euripides, Kreophylos und Christa Wolf," in *Antike Literatur in neuer Deutung*. Anton Bierl, ed. München: 203-212.
- Séchan, Louis. 1925. *Études sur la tragédie grecque dans ses rapports avec la céramique*. Paris.
- Segal, Charles. 1994. "Philomela's Web and the Pleasures of the Text: Reader and Violence in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid," in *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature*. I.J.F. de Jong and J.P. Sullivan, eds. Leiden: 257-280.
- 1996. "Euripides' Medea: vengeance, reversal and closure." *Pallas* 45: 15-44.
  - 2001-2002. "Black and white magic in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: passion, love, and art." *Arion* 3rd ser. 9 (3): 1-34.
- Sfyrroeras, P. 1994. "The Aigeus Scene in Euripides' *Medea*." *CJ* 90: 125-142.

- Sharrock, Allison. 2000. "Intratextuality: texts, parts, and (w)holes in theory," in *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*. A. Sharrock and H. Morales, eds. Oxford: 1-39.
- 2002. "Gender and sexuality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 95-107.
- Simon, E. 1954. "Die Typen der Medeadartellungen in der antiken Kunst." *Gymnasium* 61: 203-227.
- Simpson, B. 1976. *Gods and Heroes of the Greeks. The Library of Apollodorus*. Amherst.
- Smith, C. 1999. "Medea in Italy: trade and contact between Greece and Italy in the Archaic period," in *Ancient Greeks West and East*. G.R. Tsetskhladze, ed. Leiden: 123-145.
- Smith, R.A.. 1994. "Fantasy, myth, and love letters: text and tale in Ovid's *Heroides*." *Arethusa* 27: 247-273.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Christine. 1991. *'Reading' Greek Culture*. Oxford.
- 1995. *'Reading' Greek Death*. Oxford.
  - 1997. "Medea at a shifting distance: images and Euripidean tragedy," in *Medea*. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. Princeton: 253-296.
- Spaltenstein, François. 2002. "Jason est-il une personne ou un personnage?" *Aevum* 2: 99-105.
- Spentzou, Efrossini. 2003. *Readers and Writers in Ovid's Heroides : transgressions of genre and gender*. Oxford.
- Spoth, Friedrich. 1992. *Ovids Heroides als Elegien*. München.
- Stanzel, Karl-Heinz. 1999. "Jason und Medea : Beobachtungen zu den Gleichnissen bei Apollonios Rhodios." *Philologus* 143 (2): 249-271.
- Stirrup B.E. 1976. "Ovid's narrative technique. A study in duality." *Latomus* 35: 97-107.
- Stover, Tim. 2003. "Confronting Medea: genre, gender, and allusion in the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus." *CPh* 98 (2): 123-147.

- Syropoulos, Spiridon D. 2001-2002. "The invention and the use of the infanticide motif in Euripides' *Medea*." *Platon* 52: 126-138.
- Tarrant, Richard. 2002. "Ovid and ancient literary history," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Philip Hardie, ed. Cambridge: 13-33.
- Terry, Phillip. ed. 2001. *Ovid Metamorphosed*. Vintage.
- Thiel, Karsten. 1996. *Aietes der Krieger - Jason der Sieger: zum Heldenbild im Hellenistischen Epos*. Stuttgart.
- Tissol, G. 1997. *The Face of Nature: Wit, Narrative, and Cosmic Origins in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Princeton.
- Töchterle, Karlheinz. 1998. "Medea vor dem Drama: Ovid, *Heroides* 12." *Anregung* 44 (3): 160-168.
- Toolan, M.J. 1988. *Narrative: a Critical Linguistic Introduction*. Routledge.
- Tomkins, Jane, ed. 1980. *Reader-Response Criticism*. Baltimore.
- Tracy, V.A. 1972. "Penelope and Medea in the *Heroides*." *EMC* 16: 43-48
- Van Zyl Smit, Betine. 2003. "A Christian Medea in Vandal Africa?: some aspects of the *Medea* of Blossius Aemilius Dracontius," in *Literature, Art, History: Studies on Classical Antiquity and Tradition in Honour of W. J. Henderson*. André F. Basson, William J. Dominik, eds. Bern: 151-160.
- Viarre, Simone. 1988. "Acontius et Cydippe ou la métamorphose d'un thème alexandrin dans les *Héroïdes* d'Ovide." *Latomus* 47: 772-784.
- Verducci, F. 1985. *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Heroidum*. Princeton.
- Vessey, D.W.T. 1976. "Humor and humanity in Ovid's *Heroides*." *Arethusa* 9: 91-110.
- Visser, M. 1986. "Medea: daughter, sister, wife, and mother – natal family versus conjugal family in Greek and Roman myths about women," in *Greek Tragedy and its Legacy. Essays Presented to D.J. Conacher*. M.J. Cropp, ed. Calgary: 149-165.
- Vogt-Spira, Gregor. 2002. "Ennius, Medea: eine Fremde in Rom," in *Identität und Alterität in der frühromischen Tragödie*. Gesine Manuwald, ed. Würzburg: 265-275.

- Voit, Ludwig. 1994. "Dido bei Ovid: (epist. 7)." *Gymnasium* 101 (4): 338-348.
- Vojatzi, M. 1982. *Frühe Argonautenbilder*. Würzburg.
- von Albrecht, M. and Zinn, E. 1968. *Ovid*. Darmstadt.
- von Fritz, K. 1959. "Die Entwicklung der Iason-Medea-Sage und die *Medea* des Euripides." *A&A* 8: 33-106.
- Walde, Christine. 2000. "Literatur als Experiment?: zur Erzähltechnik in Ovids *Heroides*." *A&A* 46: 124-138.
- Wetzel, S. 1957. *Die Gestalt der Medea bei Valerius Flaccus*. Kiel.
- Wilhelm, Michelle P. 1990-1992. "The Medeas of Euripides, Apollonius and Ovid." *AugAge* 10: 43-57.
- Wilkinson, L.P. 1955. *Ovid Recalled*. Cambridge.
- Will, E. 1955. *Korinthiaka*. Paris.
- Williams, Gareth. 1992. "Ovid's Canace: dramatic irony in *Heroides* 11." *CQ* 42: 201-209.
- 1994. *Banished Voices*. Cambridge.
- Williams, G.W. 1968. *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry*. Oxford.
- Williams, Mary Frances. 1996. "Stoicism and the character of Jason in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius." *Scholia* 5: 17-41.
- 1996. "The character of Aeëtes in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius." *Hermes* 124 (4): 463-479.
- Winniczuk L. 1974. "Humour and wit in Ovid's *Fasti*." *Eos* 1974 62: 93-104.
- Wise, V. 1982. "Ovid's Medea and the magic of language." *Ramus* 11: 16-25.
- Worthington, I. 1990. "The ending of Euripides' *Medea*." *Hermes* 118: 505-505.
- Wyke Maria. 1987. "Written women. Propertius' scripta puella." *JRS* 77: 47-61.
- 1987. "The elegiac women at Rome." *PCPhS* 33: 153-178.

- 2002. *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations*. Oxford.
- Zanker, G. 1979. "The love theme in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*." *WS* 13: 52-75.
- 1987. *Realism in Alexandrian Poetry: A Literature and its Audience*. London.
- Zerba, Michelle. 2002. "Medea hypokrites." *Arethusa* 35 (2): 315-337.
- Zinn, E. 1960. "Elemente des Humors in augustischer Dichtung." *Gymn.* 67: 41-56.
- Zinnerling-Paul, V. 1979. "Zum Bild der Medea in der antiken Kunst." *Klio* 61: 407-436.