Chapter 11

Medea: From Epic to Tragedy

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Introduction

The history of Medea’s place in Greco-Roman literature is long and complex. For Valerius’ Flavian readers that history extended back some eight centuries and included works in two languages and a multiplicity of genres: epic and tragedy, lyric and elegy. Complex too is Medea’s biography, for her roles include Jason’s virgin-lover in Colchis, murderous wife in Iolcus, abandoned mother in Corinth, poisonous stepmother in Athens, potential filicide in Colchis and even wife of Achilles in the underworld. But of these six episodes two stand out: the epic story of the princess who helps the foreign hero and the tragic tale of the woman who kills her sons.

Like Apollonius before him, Valerius faced the problem of reconciling these two Medeas. Given that Apollonius is typically focused on the past and on the origins of present names and practices (aetiology being one of the poem’s obsessions) and that Valerius is characteristically concerned with origins and the future (prolepsis being the poem’s defining trope), it is not surprising that the two poets handle this difficulty in different ways.

1 E.g. epic: Eumelus’ Corinthiaca (eighth century BCE), Apollonius’ Argonautica, Varro’s Argonautae, Ovid’s Metamorphoses 7; tragedy: Euripides’ Peliades, Medea and Aegeus, Ennius’ Medea Exul, Pacuvius’ Medus, Accius’ Medea sive Argonautae, Ovid’s Medea, Seneca’s Medea; lyric poetry: Pindar’s fourth Pythian; elegy: Ovid’s Heroides 12.

2 It is noteworthy that in the literature of which we have knowledge the first part of Medea’s story is related only by epic poets (Apollonius, Varro, Ovid, Valerius) and that the story of Jason’s betrayal and the murder of the children is confined to tragedy (Euripides, Ennius, Ovid, Seneca).

3 For this problem, which also faced Ovid, see Kenney (2008) esp. 369 (on Metamorphoses) and Davis (2012) on Heroides.
Medea and the Future: Corinth

Apollonius’ primary method of hinting at Jason’s future infidelity is allusion to the myth of Theseus and Ariadne. Thus at 3.997–1004 Jason invokes the example of Ariadne, the girl who helped Theseus, abandoned her country and achieved immortality and, less than a hundred lines later, deflects Medea’s embarrassing request for more information about ‘Pasiphae’s famous daughter’ (3.1074–6, 1096–1101). That the reader is right to infer that the poet intends to foreshadow Jason’s later treachery is not confirmed until 4.432–4 when the narrator refers to Theseus abandoning ‘Minos’ virgin daughter’ on the island of Dia. But if Apollonius prefigures Jason’s desertion of Medea at some unspecified time in the future, he does not explicitly foreshadow his marriage to the Corinthian princess or Medea’s killing of her children. Indeed the only event in Medea’s future that is plainly foretold is her marriage to Achilles in the underworld (4.811–15). Particularly striking is the fact that in describing the wedding of Jason and Medea, Apollonius presents the event as joyous and refrains from including elements that might portend a disastrous future (4.1128–69).

If we turn to Valerius’ account of the love of Jason and Medea, we find a different narrative strategy. Medea enters Apollonius’ poem when Jason finds her in her father’s palace, looking for her sister (3.248–9). A little later, Medea dreams that the stranger has come not to win the fleece but to marry her, that she herself yokes the bulls and that her parents are deeply distressed when she chooses the stranger over them (3.619–32). By contrast, we meet Valerius’ Medea for the first time as she wakes from sleep. Her dream is reported as follows:

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\begin{align*}
\text{visa pavens castis Hecates excedere lucis,} \\
\text{dumque pii petit ora patris, stetit arduus inter}
\text{pontus et ingenti circum stupefacta profundo}
\end{align*}
\]

If Hunter (1993) offers a few connections between Apollonius’ account and the events of Euripides’ Medea in Ch. 3. It must be said, however, that they are subtle, slight and not entirely convincing. Spaltenstein (2002) 110 notes that Apollonius speaks only elliptically of the murder of the children, citing 3.837 (with caution) and 3.1132. The first reference is vague, while the second need not refer to the future at all.

Cf. the descriptions of the weddings of Dido and Aeneas (Virg. Aen. 4.165–72) and Orpheus and Eurydice (Ov. Met. 10.1–7). See below for the wedding of Medea and Jason in Valerius, Book 8.

For this, see Garson (1965) 109. Comparing Apollonius and Valerius, Garson notes that ‘only the Roman narrative is wholly coloured by allusions to the final outcome’.