BREAKING BOUNDARIES: MEDEA AS THE "BARBARIAN" IN OVID'S *HEROIDES* VI AND XII

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Abstract: Medea is an intriguing figure in Greek mythology who has been portrayed in a variety of ways by ancient Greek and Roman authors. One dominating feature in all her stories is her identity as an outsider who enters the mainland Greece through her marriage to Jason. In the Heroides, the Roman poet Ovid depicts Medea in two of the single letters. Taking advantage of his audience' familiarity with the mythical tradition and possible awareness of previous literary works, Ovid plays on the idea of Medea as an outsider: in Hypsipyle's Letter VI, Medea is represented as a barbarian, while in Letter XII Medea mocks "Greek" values and practices. Through intertextual references to each other and to the prior literary tradition, Ovid is able to portray a complicated, self-reflective figure in these two letters, whose multiple potentials are brought out when confronted with a diversity of life experiences. In creating a figure who breaks all boundaries, Ovid the poet is also breaking the boundaries of texts and genres.

Of the heroines of all 15 single letters in Ovid's *Heroides,* Medea takes up a little more than the average for the letters as a whole. In addition to *Heroides* XII which is under her name, Hypsipyle, the heroine of *Heroides* VI, also dwells extensively on Medea who has just replaced her by the side of Jason. It is obvious that Ovid himself is fascinated by the figure of Medea, and he gives various representations of her in different works. Still, one wonders why Ovid should choose to describe Medea through Hypsipyle, and, with two letters addressing the same heroine and recounting similar life events, one asks whether (and if so, why) Ovid is repeating himself. This essay discusses the representation of Medea in these two letters, and attempts to address these questions through the analysis of intertextual contact.

Before I go to the details of the text, let me say a few words about the literary

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form of the *Heroides*, Ovid himself claims to have invented a new genre, whatever we understand it to be: ignotum hoc aliis ille novavit opus ('this work, unknown to others, he (re)invented', Ars Amatoria 3.346). The verb novo means both to "invent" and "renew"; with this statement Ovid seems to be claiming originality, but he may merely claim to be initiating a Roman form of literature from the Greek counterpart. (Fulkerson 2009, 81) The former is more likely to be the case, since elegy has come a long way in the hands of Roman poets, but before Ovid there was almost nothing like the poems in this collection, written in elegiac couplets and in letter form. The only possible predecessor we know of is Propertius 4.3, a fictional letter by a woman to her husband who is soldiering abroad. Still, it is not at all clear which precedes the other,[1] and obviously Ovid's heroines are mostly mythical figures, whose stories are familiar and variously told. Two elements deserve notice here. First, the feature fictional female figures voicing their unrequited love, while conventional elegy almost always features a male protagonist who is very much in love with a woman who is fickle, greedy, and untruthful. Thus, though fictional, these letters offer a personal perspective of the heroines, who give their own accounts of well-known traditional stories, launched at a specific moment in their lives, and employ the style that best suits their purposes. They may offer new or neglected details in the well-known mythical tradition, thus challenging previous literary texts that the readers are familiar with and accept as authoritative. On the other hand, these poems cannot be taken as letters written only to be read by the addressees. Besides the practical issues in writing and sending these letters (the most extreme example being Ariadne's), their content and style indicate that the heroines may have in mind other possible readers, and very often they seem to be engaged in a prolonged dialogue without an addressee but with themselves.

This "new form" not only offers the poet immense possibilities, but also provides new possibilities for the readers. The fictional female voices constantly appeal to the readers' knowledge of the previous Greco-Roman texts written by others about them, in such a way that one suspects that they have read these works themselves. Indeed, Ovid makes sure that every heroine's fictional voice is embodied with his own literary knowledge and perception. Take the example of Medea in *Heroides* VI and XII. Ovid alludes explicitly to previous literary

[1] For a thorough discussion of this see Howard J. Jacobson, *Ovid's* Heroidos (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974).

incarnations of this character, most prominently Euripides' tragedy Medea and Apollonius' epic poem Argonautica; but very often, his allusion is not just a recollection of past events which the characters have experienced (e.g. Aeneas looking at the paintings on the wall of Carthage). Alessandro Barchiesi describes another mode of allusion in the *Heroides* as the phenomenon of the "future reflexive": a later work's allusive reflections of an earlier text creates an awareness of future events that the characters are going to experience. (Barchiesi 1993, 343) While the character is looking forward to a future moment, the readers have already known about that future as described in a previous text, and the poet stops right there, leaving the readers to think about the future as described in the earlier text, and to ponder the irony of this allusive situation. In addition, the intertextual contact between different epistles in the *Heroides* is interesting. Medea in XII is constantly imitating and responding to Medea in VI. Certainly it is quite possible that Medea has read Hypsipyle's letter when she is with Jason; but as many scholars have argued (and a point on which I agree), the heroines in this collection form a community who would read, imitate, and rival each other's letters. (Fulkerson 2005, 2) Thus the reading of each one of these letters involves the reading of a collection, and the reading of a literary background. We are going to look at the two letters concerning Medea, and see how this intertextual method works itself out.

I. *Heroides* VI: The Exile of a Barbarian

"(L)itora Thessaliae reduci tetigisse carina / diceris auratae uellere diues ouvis." The first two lines of Hypsipyle's letter outlines the speaker's pain and loss. Like many heroines in the collection, she has been praying for her lover's safe return; sadly, she is not a Penelope for her man (and he is not Ulysses either), but more of an Odyssean Calypso. Hypsipyle plays a minor role in Jason's heroic career, and has nothing to do with the Golden Fleece ("non erat hic aries uillo spectabilis aureo, / nec senis aeetae regia lemnos erat", 49-50). In various literary representations before Ovid, her relationship with Jason is brief and ends when he leaves Lemnos.[2] However, in *Heroides* VI, Jason stays with Hypsipyle for two

[2] Homer mentions the son of Jason and Hypsipyle, Euneos, King of Lemnos (*Iliad* 7. 467-471). Aeschylus and Sophocles portray the Argonaut's visit to Lemnos, but both plays are lost. Euripides' play *Hypsipyle*, surviving in part, concentrates on her later life. In

years (56); the marriage contract between the two is explicitly emphasized (41-46), and in the vividly-depicted parting scene, Jason promises to return (59). Ovid's Hypsipyle cannot get over the fact that Jason did not even stop by Lemnos on his way back, and that he sent no letter. To make things worse, Jason returns with a new bride, a barbarian from far away. Hypsipyle is not surprised that Jason takes another wife; what surprises her is that he has married a "barbara… venefica" (19). Naturally, she talks endlessly about Medea in this letter.

For Hypsipyle, there is definitely a hierarchy in space. A potential wife from mainland Greece would be superior to herself, a Lemnian queen (79-80), but she is in every way superior to a girl from Colchis, a "barbara paelex" (81) who should find a husband in her own land (107-108). Medea is thus defined by her foreignness and her geographic/tribal inferiority. Hypsipyle follows this up with an accusation of Medea's morality and her lack of maidenly and feminine virtues. First, whereas Apollonius elaborates on Medea's hesitation and deliberation before she decides to help Jason, and whereas in Argonautica Medea is the innocent maiden, very much concerned with "shame", confined to a bedchamber (3. 616-824), and subject to patriarchal authority, Hypsipyle totally ignores this aspect of Medea's characterization, but goes directly to describe the Medea who has exited from the bedchamber, as a "adultera virgo" (133). Her transgression is further marked by her use of magic. The realm of magic, as Hypsipyle portrays it, is in total contrast to the confined, domestic space for respectable Greek and Roman women; rather, it involves a series of uncivilized or non-human images: the moon, the sun, water, trees, rocks and tombs (85-90). Her disheveled appearance ("discincta capillis", 89), and the loosened knots required in magic, seem to indicate the loosening of her moral standards.

It is true that in ancient literature women are often portrayed to be associated with medicine and magic, and Medea as a sorceress is a staple characterization by Ovid's lifetime. Yet for the Roman poet to assert that she uses poison on Jason to win his love is somewhat surprising. In Apollonius's Argonautica, Medea is the victim of Eros (3. 284-285); as an impressionable maiden she is helpless before

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Apollonius' *Argonautica*, she is portrayed as the queen with whom Jason never had an explicit marriage; and when Jason wants to leave she lets him go, never expecting him to return ("ἀλλ᾽ οὐ σύγε τήνδε μενοινὴν σχήσεις, οὔτ᾽ αὐτὴ προτιόσσομαι ὧδε τελεῖσθαι." 894-895). Euripides' *Medea* has the heroine kill her children so as to make Jason childless, which seems to neglect the tradition of any child by Hypsipyle.

the gods' conspiracy and Jason's words, and she is thus easily "won" over as the hero's booty. Yet in this letter, Hypsipyle emphasizes that she did not win Jason through beauty or merit, as a woman should, but by her magical incantations, "carmina" (83); she yoked this man through magic just as she yoked the ox (97), a transgression of feminine reserve. Likewise, Medea also transgresses the boundaries between man and woman, husband and wife, by stealing into the male sphere and laying claim to fame: "adde quod ascribi factis procerumque tuisque / se iubet et titulo coniugis uxor obest" (99-100), lines that remind us of Jason's claim in Euripides' Medea, that he did a great favor to Medea by bringing her to Greece and making her famous. She is indeed famous now, as Hypsipyle proves by her detailed knowledge of what Medea has done, and how people talk about her (101-104). But she has definitely stepped out of the standard feminine role, which is passive, obedient, and largely confined to the domestic sphere.

Furthermore, Hypsipyle accuses Medea for what she did to her family. While Hypsipyle herself is staying in her fatherland and among her people, Medea betrayed and left her fatherland ("deseruit Colchos; me mea Lemnos habet" 136), killing her brother en route ("sparagere quae fratris potuit lacerata per agros / corpora" (129-130). Thus Medea has consciously severed all ties to her family, a shocking act especially because male members of the family are supposed to represent and protect the rights of a married daughter. Scholars have pointed out that, from the archaic to classical period, there was a general change in the marriage system from an exogamous to endogamous emphasis. That is, people in such societies tended to arrange marriage for their children within the patrilocal society, with individuals of similar social and economic status, so as to maintain wealth, security, and social status across generations.[3] Thus for the 5th century Athenians as well as for Romans of Ovid's time, the readers would expect married daughters to retain a stronger tie with the family of origin than that matrimonial tie, as represented in archaic literature.

In this context, Medea's distant fatherland and spatial activity become an issue, her special ability in magic is disquieting, and her attitude to her family shocking. It is no wonder that Hypsipyle has been distancing herself from Medea, contrasting her own behavior with Medea's. However, the letter ends with an

[3] See Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), Part II passim, especially pp. 62-63, 72-73, for a discussion of endogamy in Athenian society and further reference.

interesting twist. Towards the end of the letter, she curses Medea to suffer whatever she has herself suffered, to do harm to her children and husband just as she harmed her father and brother, and to be a perpetual exile, ("exulet et toto quaerat in orbe fugam", 158), she also specifies in considerable detail that Medea is to take to the air after she has exhausted all routes on sea and on land: "cum mare, cum terra consumpserit, aere temptet" (161). This is almost exactly what is to happen to Medea in her relationship with Jason. The readers cannot help but be reminded of the last scene of Euripides' play, when Medea, after avenging Jason and killing her own children, stands above the stage in the sun chariot, ready to fly away, leaving Jason helpless and desperate—a scene where Medea's superiority is graphically and all too emphatically visualized. In the end, Medea demonstrates her formidable power: not only is she able to travel over vast expanses of land like a man, but she is also able to ascend to the sky in a god-like fashion.[4] Readers may also be reminded of Hypsipyle's own future. According a tradition depicted in Euripides' eponymous play, she is later exiled by her fellow Lemnian women when they find out that she spared her father.

How do we take this curse? From Hypsipyle's perspective, given that she curses without knowing the future, the irony is brought out by the superior knowledge of the poet and the readers: the one who curses will also be an exile, and the one cursed is going to demonstrate her formidable power in the fulfillment of her own curse. From the poet's perspective, the subtlety of his maneuver lies in the fact that, while avoiding a direct depiction of the heroines' future—especially given that it is preceded by Euripides' tragedy, Ovid is able implicitly to insert Medea's future activities into Hypsipyle's curse. Thus Hypsipyle turns the future Medea—the formidable magician and infanticide, the

[4] Euripides' flying Medea might be the most well-known image, but not the only one. Apollonius' Medea also imagines the blasts bearing her to go over the see to Iolcus, to reproach Jason in face, if he ever forgets her (3. 1111-1117). This is laughed off by Jason as "vain talk", but the image of a flying Medea is hinted. Even Ovid himself depicts her flying in the sun chariot in the *Metamorphoses*. In that context, she flies in her chariot after killing Pelias through his daughters' hands to escape punishment (*Metamorphosis* 7. 350 ff). A little earlier, Ovid depicts Medea as if she were a female Odysseus, searching for new lands of sophistication (*Metamorphosis* 7. 53-58). Obviously, Ovid is familiar with the image of Medea flying, and may choose to depict her male features and enigmatic powers.

flying semi-goddess—into a figure compelled by circumstance, and her triumphant ascent to the sky is pronounced as a punishment. Hypsipyle has shown her disdain for Medea's "carmina" (83), where *carmen* is used in the sense of a spell, while she herself is writing a *carmen* of a higher form, a "song". However, at the end of her letter, Hypsipyle utters the exclamation: "Medeae Medea forem!" (151) Ironically, Hypsipyle's threat is realized in the sense that she, like Medea, also uses *carmen* as a spell. Indeed, Hypsipyle certainly knows how to curse someone at a distance (90-2). She has successfully made a simulacrum of Medea, and has been stabbing it with her "acus", the stylus. Hypsipyle has cursed Medea, thus giving an ironic nuance to all of Medea's future actions, namely that she (Medea) will act in that way only because of another woman's curse. In this respect, Hypsipyle, like Medea, also gains a certain divinity: she is like a goddess in one of Euripides' tragedies, and unwittingly foreshadows the future plot for a heroine who is emerging from behind the curtains.

II. *Heroides* XII: Greek or not Greek?

Hypsipyle ends her letter with a curse: that Jason and Medea should live on their "deuoto… toro" (164). In XII, Medea has lost this cursed marriage bed, and vainly asks Jason to return (193). Whereas in *Heroides* VI Medea is depicted as one who violates all the conventional rules and norms, in *Heroides* XII Ovid creates a Medea who ruthlessly mocks and laughs at such rules and norms.

Heroides XII is a highly self-reflective letter, and more like a soliloquy in her imagination; she mainly speaks to Jason but sometimes she shifts her address to her dead brother, her father, and her fatherland. Most of the time, Medea is entangled in a sea of past recollections, her present predicament, and her future actions. Medea brings up the issue of memory, "memini" (1), from the first line, and plunges directly into past events, as indicated by "tunc … tum" (3, 5) and then by the frequent use of pluperfect and perfect tenses. Because she writes to a man who is always forgetful ("immemor", 16) of the favors he received, it is necessary for her to constantly remind him of what she has done and given up for him. On the other hand, Medea's repeated reference to the past is not for remembrance; she constantly shows her obsessive reflection on past events.

tunc quae dispensant mortalia fila sorores

debuerunt fusos evoluisse meos.
tum potui Medea mori bene! (3-5)

quantum perfidiae tecum, scelerate, perisset,
dempta forent capiti quam mala multa meo! (19-20)

These lines almost echo the words of Odysseus who, in recounting his wondering to Alcinous, looks back on his past experience from the perspective of someone who's learnt his lesson and knows better. Indeed, for Medea, reviewing the past would shed light on the present; she is different now from what she was in the past. As Florence Verducci points out, it is memory that serves to reconcile the youthful and the mature Medea. (Verducci 1985, 71) But I think there is more than that; whenever Medea reviews the past, she is thinking about the present and the future. For example, she evokes the idea and imagery of fire image on multiple occasions: Jason could have confronted the fire exhaled from the bull unanointed (15), she burns with an extraordinary fire at the first sight of Jason (33, "nec notis ignibus arsi"), and so on. These images not only remind Jason of the dangers that she has fended off for him, but are also a sinister omen of the conflagration that she is going to instigate in Corinth. ("(M)eritas subeamus in alto": in the immediate context alto refers to the depths of the sea, but the word can also mean "high up". Medea is also implying that she may rise up.) Sometimes, it is very hard to determine whether she is invoking past memory or making future threats—or perhaps she is doing both. "(Q)uod facere ausa mea est, non audet scribere dextra" (115); where "est" can be replaced by the future, "erit", which fits perfectly into the present context: what she is going to do is to be hinted at, but not explicitly written down. Medea keeps Jason's past in her memory, and on the basis of past favors she claims possession of Jason's present; in addition, she also determines and controls his future.

Medea has obviously learnt well from Hypsipyle. Reminding Jason of past favors, comparing herself with the new bride, and pleading his resemblance to the children (12. 25-30, 103-104; 12. 189 cf. 6. 123) are Hypsipyle's methods; and "nostri fructus illa laboris habet" (12. 174) is a direct imitation of "Vota ego persolvam? votis Medea fruetur!" (6. 75). But more importantly, Medea contests all the previous literary accounts of her story, including Hypsipyle's. For example, Medea makes the point that, after Jason came to Colchis, she was crying all night, but within her chamber (57-62), and it is only after her sister exhorted her in the

morning that she agreed to meet Jason in private, an account which not only refutes Hypsipyle's accusation but also goes against Apollonius's story. Another refutation of memory is her account of the bull. Euripides' Medea claims that she herself yoked the bulls (479), and Hypsipyle follows it up by saying that Medea also yoked the man in the way she yoked the bulls (6. 97). However, Medea in XII claims that she only sat watching when Jason fought the bulls, "pallida sedi" (97). Is she lying? If so, Jason would know, and this glaring mistake would remind him even more of Medea's past favor; if we accept the statement as it is, Medea would also refute Hypsipyle's accusation that she subdued Jason by erotic poison. The issue is still more interesting if we consider the fact that Thessaly, where Jason is from, is considered the traditional locus of magical events. (Fulkerson 2005, 114) Medea's recounting of her first sight of Jason shows a magical effect: "vidi et perii" (33). In one tradition, Jason indeed does bewitch Medea, not the other way around. (Jacobson 1974, 99 n. 12)

Medea also subtly rejects the tag "barbarian". In line 70, she mentions the statue of Diana made by a barbarian hand, "barbarica manu". By this, does she mean a Greek hand or a Colchian one? Does being a barbarian depends more on one's perspective and, ironically, on what one needs? This idea is bitterly and powerfully brought out in 105, when she is recounting her aid in subduing the snake: "illa ego, quae tibi sum nunc denique barbara facta". It is not until this point that Jason thinks of her as a barbarian; she was not *barbara* as long as she was helpful to him. Medea is well aware of the insults that she receives because of her identity as an outsider; but she is exceptionally good at returning such insults, following the "Greek" way. She probably has in mind Hypsipyle's account of her dowry (6. 117-8) when, imploring Jason to come back to her marriage bed, Medea imagines Jason asking her for dowry ("dos ubi sit, quaeris?", 199) While Hypsipyle promises her fatherland and herself as the dowry, Medea sarcastically points out that her dowry has been paid in cash on the field ("numeravimus", 199),[5] and that her dowry is no other than the life and safety of Jason and his Greek young men (203). The dowry has been paid for the marriage, in the Greek way; and it should be returned according to the Greek way in divorce, a point Medea makes strenuously:

[5] Arthur Palmer ed., *P. Ovidi Nasonis Heroides, with the Greek Translation of Planudes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898. See Palmer's note on the technical sense of the word *numero* on p. 399.

dos mea, quam, dicam si tibi "redde!" neges. (202)

In following the market-place terms in Euripides and the practice of the Greeks, Medea shows her way of being a Greek woman; her ironic barbs are directed beyond Jason and extends to all the Greeks, who are obsessed with money matters. Her disdain and threat are well rendered in describing Jason's wealth as "Sisyphean" (204), a word which means Corinthian in the immediate context but also suggests the futile efforts of a deceitful man. In many ways, Medea mocks Jason's Greek mores. She talks about supplicating him just as he often supplicated her (185); she also imitates Greek rhetoric in her language, a skill that Jason is famous for and is well demonstrated in Apollonius. Throughout the letter, Medea demonstrates her ability in using ambiguous insinuation, or in making threats without actually spelling them out: all in all, she and Jason are birds of the same feather. But she also makes it clear that she transcends these Greek ways that she can easily imitate.

Towards the end of her letter, as if feeling that she has condescended long enough and tried to be elegiac long enough, Medea gives more blatant threats in the simple future tense:

dum ferrum flammaeque aderunt sucusque veneni,
hostis Medeae nullus inultus erit! (181-182)

However, right afterwards, Medea talks about her "preces" (183) that may touch Jason's heart; and the readers cannot help but wondering about the sincerity of these entreaties—or could they perhaps be sincere and deceitful at the same time? For her, though, these are merely "animis… verba minora meis" (184). At the end of Euripides' play, Medea transcends all boundaries of man and woman, mortal and divine, heaven and earth; likewise, Medea at the end of *Heroides* XII hints at her divinity and pointing to the unspeakable, greater things:

ingentis parturit ira minas. (207)

viderit ista deus, qui nunc pectora versat.
nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit! (211-212)

After all, she takes pleasure in reproaching the ungrateful man in this letter (21). Medea is different from most heroines in the collection, in that they will either wait for their man or commit suicide after the letter is written; but, she is much more than a wife and mother, more than a female, and more than a mortal. Medea is going to have many actions and better days; her "greater" future exceeds the boundary of this letter and the entire collection.

Ovid's *Heroides* depicts the figure of Medea in two of the single letters, but he is by no means repeating himself. Through intertextual reference to each other and to the prior literary tradition, Ovid is able to portray a complicated, self-reflective figure, whose multiple potentials are brought out when confronted with a diversity of life experiences. The figure of Medea, who is always capable of something "more", also shows us that this is not simply a collection of elegies with gender reversal. To read the collection as successive displays of female lament for and complaint at the absent lover would be of little avail, and easily incur the unjustified accusation of monotony and repetition. On the other hand, the experience and thrill of reading the *Heroides* resembles the process of reading literary history, with Ovid's implicit and subtle comments and criticism. As we have seen in the figure of Medea, although the letter is written at a specific location and moment, Ovid invites the reader to review the whole lifetime of the heroine, and all previous texts about her. Just like Medea breaks all boundaries between men and women, mortal and immortal, heaven and earth, Ovid is also breaking the boundaries of genres and texts.

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