

“I’m Only Sleeping?”: Medea’s Sleep and Sleeplessness as a Gendered Paradox

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I. Medea’s Sleeplessness in Valerius Flaccus

HANDOUT 1A: TRADITIONALLY REFRESHING MALE SLEEP IN VALERIUS FLACCUS’ ARGONAUTICA 3.32-40

32 *Nox erat et leni canebant aequora sulco,
et iam prona leves spargebant sidera somnos.*

...

39 *atque illum non ante sopor luctamine tanto
lenit agens divum imperiis...*

It was **night**, and the calm seas were whitened by the smooth track [of the ship], and the stars, already stooping, were sprinkling **gentle sleeps**. ... But **Sleep**, at the commands of the gods occupying him as never before, **gives him rest** from such great toil...¹

HANDOUT 1B: THE TRADITION OF MEDEA’S COMPLICATED SLEEP: APOLLONIUS OF RHODES’ ARGONAUTICA 3.616-8; 688-92; 746-572

616 *κούρην δ’ ἐξ ἀχέων ἀδινὸς κατελώφεεν
ὑπνος λέκτρῳ ἀνακλιθεῖσαν. ἄφαρ δέ μιν
ἠπεροπῆες, οἷά τ’ ἀκηχεμένην, ὀλοοὶ ἐρέθεσκον
ὄνειροι*

688 *“Χαλκιοπή, ...*

*τοῖα κατακνώσσουσα μινυνθαδίῳ νέον ὑπνω
λεύσσω ὄνειρατα λυγρά—τά τις θεὸς ἀκράαντα
θείη, μηδ’ ἀλεγεινὸν ἐφ’ υἰάσι κῆδος ἔλοιο.”...*

746...*ὑπνοιο δὲ καὶ τις ὀδίτης
ἤδη καὶ πυλαωρὸς ἐέλδετο, καὶ τινα παίδων
μητέρα τεθνεώτων ἀδινὸν περὶ κῶμ’ ἐκάλυπτεν
οὐδὲ κυνῶν ὑλακὴ ἔτ’ ἀνὰ πτόλιν, οὐ θρόος ἦεν
ἠχήεις· σιγὴ δὲ μελαινομένην ἔχεν ὄρφνην.
ἀλλὰ μάλ’ οὐ Μήδειαν ἐπὶ γλυκερὸς λάβεν
ὑπνος· πολλὰ γὰρ Αἰσονίδαο πόθῳ μελεδήματ’
ἔγειρεν...*

*ἢ δ’ ἐπεὶ οὖν τὰ πρῶτα φαεινομένην ἶδεν ἠῶ
παρθενική, ξανθὰς μὲν ἀνήψατο χερσὶν
ἐθειράς, αἷ οἱ ἀτημελίη καταειμέναι ἠερέθοντο*

As for the girl, **deep sleep** was furnishing relief from her troubles as she lay in bed. **But soon deceptive, baleful dreams** began to disturb her, as they do when a girl is in distress...

“Chalciope, ... Such dreadful dreams have I been seeing just now while slumbering in a **brief sleep**—may a god make them unfulfilled, and may you never suffer painful sorrow on account of your sons!” ...and **deep slumber** was enfolding the mother whose children had died; and no longer was there barking of dogs through the city nor echoing sounds, but silence gripped the darkening night. **But by no means had sweet sleep overtaken Medea, because in her longing for Jason many anxieties kept her awake...**

Now as soon as the maiden saw **dawn** appearing, with her hands she bound up her golden hair, which through her neglect hung down loose (***trans. W. Race 2009**)

HANDOUT 1C: NIGHT VERSUS SLEEP IN VALERIUS FLACCUS

*Night as uniform:
clara (1.416), alta (3.206), candida (5.71), aurea
(5.566)*

*Sleep as varied and paradoxical:
gravis (1.300), leves (3.33), liquidus (4.16), dulcis
(4.389), lentus (7.213)*

¹ Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated (see handout 1B).

HANDOUT 1D: SLEEPLESS IN COLCHIS (ARG. 7.1-3; 9-14; 21-6)

1 *Te quoque Thessalico iam serus ab hospite vesper dividit et iam te tua gaudia, virgo, relinquunt, noxque ruit soli veniens non mitis amanti.*

9 *“nunc ego quo casu vel quo sic pervigil usque ipsa volens errore trahor? non haec mihi certe nox erat ante tuos, iuvenis fortissime, vultus. quos ego cur iterum demens iterumque recordor tam magno discreta mari? quid in hospite solo mens mihi?...*

21 *tum iactata toro totumque experta cubile ecce videt tenui candescere limen Eoo, nec minus insomnem lux orta refecit amantem, quam cum languentes levis erigit imber aristas grataque iam fessis descendunt flamina remis.*

And already the **late evening** separates you, too, maiden, from the Thessalian stranger, and already your joys abandon you. **Night rushes down, coming on mellow [to all except for] the lover alone.**

“Now by what accident or by what willing [i.e. wilful] delusion am I dragged, continually sleepless like this? Certainly, **night** was not like this for me before [I caught sight] of your mien, most valiant youth. Why do I recall it again and again, **mad** and separated [from you] by such a large sea? Why is my mind set on the stranger alone? ... Then, having been **tossed round** the bed and having tried every side of the bed — look! — she sees that the threshold turns bright by the delicate day star, nor has the rising light refreshed the sleepless lover less than when a light rain raises drooping ears of corn or when welcome breezes descend upon fatigued oars[-men].

HANDOUT 1E: MEDEA HASN'T SLEPT A WINK; THE SERPENT; A LITTLE HELP FROM VENUS (ARG. 7 141-5; 166-9; 243-9)

141 *dixerat haec stratoque graves proiecerat artus, si veniat miserata quies, cum saevior ipse turbat agitque sopor: supplex hinc sternitur hospes, hinc pater. illa nova rumpit formidine somnos erigiturque toro...*

166 *illum etiam totis adstantem noctibus anguem, qui nemus omne suum quique aurea (respice porro) vellera tot spiris circum, tot ductibus implet, fallat et in somnos ingenti solvat ab orno.*

243 *“nulla quies animo, nullus sopor, arida lingua. quaere malis nostris requiem mentemque reponens redde diem noctemque mihi, da prendere vestes somniferas istaque oculos componere virga. tu quoque nil, mater, prodes mihi; fortior ante sola fui.*

She had spoken these things and flung her heavy limbs unto the bed, in case compassionate **rest** should come, when **slumber itself, more cruel**, disturbs and occupies her: on this side the stranger kneels in entreaty, on that side her father. She interrupts her **sleeps** by new terror and raises herself upon her bed.

And even that **serpent** standing on guard during entire nights, who encircles his whole grove and the golden fleece (look onwards!) with so many coils and so many windings — let her deceive even that serpent, and let her numb him into sleeps away from his enormous ash tree. ... **“There is no rest in my mind; no sleep; my tongue is dry.** Seek some **respite** from my sufferings and restore my mind; return day and night to me, grant me to take the **sleep-bearing garments** and to join together (i.e. close) my eyes with that wand of yours. Neither are you, mother, of any benefit to me; I was stronger alone before.

HANDOUT 1F: FROM MINAE PATRIS TO SOMNE PATER TO DRACO (ARG. 8.1-8; 64-74; 83-7)

1 *At trepidam in thalamis et iam sua facta paventem Colchida circa omnes pariter furiaeque minaeque patris habent, nec caerulei timor aequoris ultra nec miserae terra ulla procul: quascumque per undas ferre fugam, quamcumque cupit iam scandere puppem. ultima virgineis tunc flens dedit oscula vittis quosque fugit complexa toros crinemque genasque aegra per antiqui carpsit vestigia somni...*

64 *dic age nunc, utrum vigilantem hostemque videnti exuvias auferre velis, an lumina somno mergimus et domitum potius tibi tradimus anguem?"*

...*Iamque manus Colchis vimenque intenderat astris, carmina barbarico fundens pede, teque ciebat, Somne pater. "Somne omnipotens, te Colchis ab omni orbe voco inque unum iubeo nunc ire draconem, ... sed nunc, nunc age maior ades fratrique simillime Leto. ...*

84 *cunctaque Lethaei quassare silentia rami perstat et adverso luctantia lumina cantu obruit atque omnem linguaque manuque fatigat vim Stygiam, ardentes donec sopor occupet iras.*

But on the girl of Colchis in her chambers, now trembling and quaking with fear at her own deeds—all her father's rages and threats have a hold on the girl of Colchis equally; neither does there exist any fear over the dark-blue sea [for her], nor does any land seem far away for the wretched girl; she longs to carry her flight over any waves whatsoever and to embark on any ship whatsoever. Then for the last time, weeping, she gave kisses to her virgin fillets, and embracing the bed she was fleeing, she tore her hair and her cheeks amid the **traces of her former sleep...**

Come tell me now, would you either wish to carry off the [golden] fleece from him being awake and [to be able to] see the enemy, or **shall we immerse his eyes in sleep** and shall we rather hand over to you the serpent, subdued? ...And now the Colchian had stretched her hands and wand upwards to the stars, pouring forth spells in barbaric rhythm, and she was invoking you, **O Father Sleep**. **"All-powerful Sleep**, from each part of the world, I, the Colchian maiden, summon you, and bid you to descend upon the serpent alone; ... but now, now come to my aid with mightier influence, most akin to your brother Death.

... and to toss all the silences of Lethe's bough: She persists, and with an adverse chant she overwhelms his struggling eyes, and she exhausts all her Stygian power with hand and tongue, **until sleep seizes his ardent angers.**

II. Medea's Sleeplessness in Ovid's *Heroides* 12HANDOUT 2A: THE SERPENT'S SLEEPLESSNESS IN SENECA'S *MEDEA* 471-4

471 *"adice expetita spolia Phrixei arietis somnoque iussum lumina ignoto dare insomne monstrum, traditum fratrem neci et scelere in uno non semel factum scelus"*

"Add [in your mind] the coveted spoils from Phrixus' ram, [think of] the sleepless monster bidden to yield his eyes to unfamiliar sleep, [think of] the brother having been handed over to death in a single crime not perpetrated in one crime alone"

Ovid's lost *Medea* cfr. Quintil. *Instit. Or.* VIII. 5.6

HANDOUT 2B: SIGHT; SLEEPLESSNESS; SERPENT (OVID'S HER. 12.55-60).

55...*oculis abeuntem prosequor udis,
et dixit tenui murmure lingua: "vale!"
ut positum tetigi thalamo male saucia lectum,
acta est per lacrimas nox mihi, quanta fuit;
ante oculos taurique meos segetesque nefandae,
ante meos oculos pervigil anguis erat.*

...and with my teary eyes I follow you departing,
and my tongue said in a feeble murmur:
"Farewell!" as I placed myself on the arranged
couch in my chamber, badly wounded, the night
was spent by me through my tears, it was as such;
before my eyes there were bulls and
unmentionable crops, before my eyes was the **ever-
vigilant serpent.**

HANDOUT 2C: THE SLEEPLESS SERPENT (CONT.) AND ITS SLAYING (HER. 12.101-8)

101 *Insopor ecce vigil squamis crepitantibus
horrens sibilat et torto pectore verrit humum! ...
illa ego, quae tibi sum nunc denique barbara facta,
nunc tibi sum pauper, nunc tibi visa nocens,
flammea subduxi medicato lumina somno, et
tibi, quae raperes, vellera tuta dedi.*

Behold—bristling with rattling scales, the
unsleeping creature hisses and brushes the ground
with his winding chest. ... I, who have now at last
become a barbarian in your eyes, who now am
poor [as it seems to you], now seeming
pernicious—I subdued the **flame-like eyes with
sleep by means of my drug**, and to you, I gave the
fleece intact, so that you could snatch it away.

HANDOUT 2D: MEDEA VICTORIOUS YET CONQUERED (HER. 12.165-72)

165 *serpentes igitur potui taurosque furentes,
unum non potui perdomuisse virum.
quaeque feros pepuli doctis medicatibus ignes,
non valeo flammam effugere ipsa meas.
ipsi me cantus herbaeque artesque relinquunt;
nil dea, nil Hecates sacra potentis agunt.
non mihi grata dies; noctes vigilantur amarae,
et tener a misero pectore somnus abest.*

Thus I mastered serpents and raging bulls, yet I
was not able to subdue one man alone. I, who have
overcome fierce fires with skilled drugs, do not
have the power to flee my own fires. My own
incantations, herbs, and arts abandon me; nothing
does the goddess grant to me, nor do the sacrifices
to the potent Hecate grant any [help]. The day is
not agreeable to me; **bitter nights are spent awake,
and gentle sleep is absent from my wretched
chest.**

III. Sleepless Medea in Ovid's Metamorphoses 7**HANDOUT 3A: SLAYING THE SERPENT WITH SLUMBERS (OVID'S MET. 7 149-55)**

149 *Pervigilem superest herbis sopire draconem,
qui crista linguisque tribus praesignis et uncis
dentibus horrendus custos erat arboris aureae.
hunc postquam sparsit Lethaei gramine suci
verbaque ter dixit placidos facientia somnos,
quae mare turbatum, quae concita flumina sistunt,
somnia in ignotos oculos sibi venit...*

The task that remained **was to lull to sleep the
ever-vigilant serpent** with herbs. The serpent, who
was distinguished by a crest, a three-forked
tongue, and hooked teeth, was the dreadful
guardian of the golden tree. After Jason had
besprinkled him with the Lethean sap of a certain
herb, and after he had thrice spoken the words that
were to bring **peaceful slumbers**, which resist the
stormy sea and the violent rivers, **sleep came to
these eyes being unaccustomed to sleep itself.**

HANDOUT 3B: MEDEA'S POSITIVE SLEEPLESSNESS BY NIGHT (MET. 7 179-91)

179 *Tres aberant noctes, ut cornua tota coirent
efficerentque orbem; postquam plenissima fulsit
ac solida terras spectavit imagine luna,
egreditur tectis vestes induta recinctas,
nuda pedem, nudos umeris infusa capillos,
fertque vagos mediae per muta silentia noctis
incomitata gradus : homines volucresque ferasque
solverat alta quies, nullo cum murmure saepes,
inmotaeque silent frondes, silet umidus aer,
sidera sola micant : ad quae sua bracchia tendens
ter se convertit, ter sumptis flumine crinem
inroravit aquis ternisque ululatus ora
solvit et in dura submisso poplite terra.
"Nox" ait "arcanis fidissima, quaeque diurnis aurea
cum luna succeditis ignibus astra..."*

Three nights were removed before [the time when] the horns [of the moon] would coincide and complete round orb. After the **moon** shone most fully and looked down upon the lands with solid shape, Medea departed donned in loosened robes, nude as to her feet, her locks uncovered and pouring down her shoulders; and **without any company** she carried her wandering steps **through the mute silences of the middle of the night**. Deep sleep had **immersed men, birds, and beasts; the hedge was void of any murmur; the leaves, motionless, hung in silence; the dewy air was silent, too—only the stars shone**. Stretching her arms to these, she turned round thrice; she thrice besprinkled her head with waters taken up from a stream and her tongue loosened with three howlings each, with her knee sunken to the rough earth. She spoke: "O Night, most faithful to arcane mysteries, and stars, golden with the moon and with daily fires succeeding..."

Quintilian's Interpretation of Lucubratio: "nocturnal working/writing by lamplight":

Every word of Quintilian's simple and elegant description contributes to a picture of insulation and containment — **aural (silentium), spatial (cubiculum), visual (lumen unum; rectos), as well as mental and to some extent moral**. Clearly this scene of "working by lamplight" (*lucubrantes*) is what he imagines will allow the orator to **concentrate** on his writing most fully, and to store up the "roots" and "treasury" that will help him to speak well in public... Yet compared with the *locus amoenus*, the *lucubratio* takes place in an emphatically cultural environment. Whereas nature brings the herdsman's song to a close with the setting of the sun, **the *lucubratio* resists nature's demand for sleep in order to prepare public speeches**. ... The paradox of Quintilian's *lucubratio* is that while it is **the "best kind of privacy," it is still brought before our eyes as a performance that lends authority to the hypothetical orator's publicly delivered speech**. Even the words of the speech will not seem to be "just being born on the lips" (*verba in labris nascentia*, 10.3.2–3): they bring with them the nature of their private, nocturnal origin (Ker 2004: 214-5)

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