

By the Light of the Moon: Medea and Agrarian Magic in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
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Ovid's Medea, in the *Metamorphoses* (7.1-424), seems to be an archetypal literary witch. Cunning and powerful, she proves to be deadly. Medea's characterization, however, appears to be inconsistent. For example, Carole Newlands sees two Medeas in the *Metamorphoses*, a young girl and a witch, and argues that Ovid is drawing attention to the contradictory nature of Medea's myth. At first, when assisting Jason, Medea does not trust her skills in the magical arts and her use of them is marginalized. Then, she proves her ability as a witch in the total rejuvenation of Aeson and the destruction of Pelias, before, finally, her talent fails and Medea unsuccessfully attempts to do away with Theseus. Medea's nature, I argue, is not inconsistent, but cyclical, and corresponds to Roman ideas about the moon and agrarian magic.

Judith Rosner-Siegel and William Anderson, like Newlands, distinguish several Medeas within the text. These scholars divide the tale into three episodes: Medea and Jason, Medea and Aeson, and Medea and Pelias, denoting Medea the young girl, the benevolent witch, and the malevolent witch respectively. I accept these three divisions of Medea's behavior and power and also add Medea and Theseus as a fourth. Yet, rather than seeing three distinct and discordant personalities of Medea, I find a gradual transition that parallels Roman agrarian magical beliefs.

Roman rural magic, the facets of which have been usefully compiled by Eugene Tavenner, encompasses the rituals a Roman farmer employed and his adherence to the lunar almanac. Following Rosner-Siegel and Anderson's three episodes and adding the fourth, I argue that Medea's magical actions correspond to the magical beliefs about the three visible phases of the moon and the unseen new moon. The Jason episode represents the waxing crescent, Aeson the full moon, and Pelias the waning crescent. The small episode concerning Theseus is as slight as the new moon. Ovid uses an agrarian magic analogy to unite an otherwise seemingly discordant narrative of the Medea story and consciously crafts a barbarian witch, who is understandable to, and tamable by, the Romans.