"Me miserable!": Ovid, Apollonius, and The Distressed Heroine in *Paradise Lost*

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Scholarship on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has long focused on Homeric and Vergilian models for the character of Satan. Such studies have much to offer: by illuminating the many allusions to the *Odyssey, Iliad*, and *Aeneid* Milton employed, they not only establish *Paradise Lost* as the heir to Homeric and Vergilian tradition but explore how Milton himself read classical epic. Yet though these analyses have exhaustively addressed the parallels between Satan and the epic hero, they have yet to focus attention on one of the most intriguing parallels of the poem: Satan and the distressed heroine. Aspects of it appear in all of the first four books, but not until Satan's speech to the sun at *PL* 4.32–113 does it fully takes shape.

A literary figure familiar from Apollonius's Medea, Vergil's Dido, and the Ariadne of Ovid and of Catullus, the distressed heroine always exhibits four particular characteristics. She is torn between the shame that forbids her from actively pursuing some course of action and the desire that impels her to do so. She expresses this dilemma in the form of either a soliloquy or dialogue with a trusted confidante. In choosing, in the end, to embrace her desire rather than heed her sense of shame, she embraces the potentiality of her own destruction; and when she is inevitably betrayed and abandoned to that destruction, her bitterness stems not only from spurned love but from the sense that what was owed to her was not repaid. Each of these characteristics appears in either a positive or inverted guise in Satan's soliloquy. That Milton would assimilate a male character to such a model is hardly without precedent; Vergil and Apollonius do the same with their own heroes at various points throughout their poems. And assimilate Satan to the model of the distressed heroine Milton certainly does, for it is not only nebulous qualities of shared circumstance and character we find in this soliloquy. In its topoi and structure, we find a partial reworking of *Heroides* 10 and Catullus 64; more importantly, in its language and imagery we discover an inverted conflation of two speeches of Medea from the *Argonautica.* An exploration of these allusions accomplishes three important tasks: it offers a new point of comparison between Ovid and Milton, highlights the unappreciated immensity of the debt Milton owes Apollonius, and points the way toward a potential new reading for the poem as a whole: as a far more Hellenistic than Homeric or Vergilian epic.