

Hellenistic Magic in the *Argonautica*

While the scholarship on the magic of Apollonius's Medea is significant, there nonetheless remains in it a curious gap: all scholars can agree that Medea is, clearly, a formidable magician, but a study of the specific elements of her magic is long overdue. This paper seeks to provide but a portion of it: an examination of Medea's portrayal not merely as a powerful magic-user, but as four distinct aspects of the Hellenistic magician.

At first glance, of course, yet another talk on witchcraft and Medea—yet another anything on witchcraft and Medea—may seem a bit like flogging a dead horse. Considering all that has been written on this topic, it may in fact, to borrow a quote from Neil Gaiman, seem a bit like flogging the greasy patch on the driveway where a dead horse once used to lie. Medea's powers have ever been one of the first things that come to mind, when we think of her and of her legend, and when it comes to considering her as a character in Apollonius, they have certainly garnered more than their fair share of scholarly interest. Yet for all the attention paid to how Medea's use of magic casts her in the traditional feminine role of helper-maiden, in the traditional male role as the hero, as a stock character from folk tale, or as a Nausicaa from hell (Clauss 1997), nothing has been done to evaluate the *kind* of magic she employs in the poem. And a look at the kind of magic Medea employs in the *Argonautica* is an appealing look indeed, for it is very, very different from the kind of magic she employs in Pindar; it is very different from the kind of magic she employs in Euripides. Apollonius looked not only to her earlier literary incarnations for inspiration when creating his version of Aeetes's drug-wise daughter, but at contemporary magic-users, at the witches and sorcerers that dominated Alexandria in the third century B.C. For in his portrayal of Aeetes's daughter, Apollonius entwines the four distinct categories of practitioners of Hellenistic magic: the young woman sick with longing for a lover; the old woman equipped with a wide-ranging knowledge of herbs and incantations; the wonder-worker who combines incantations and prayers to produce marvels; and the stranger from the East, possessed of rare and sometimes frightening powers. Combined with the well-noted parallel between the Hellenistic interest in averting the evil eye and the power inherent in Medea's gaze (R. Hunter, 2002), the combination of these four disparate aspects mark her as an explicitly Hellenistic witch.

The purpose behind such an association is not mere conceit: Apollonius is not showing off his knowledge of contemporaneous magical practice simply because he can. Rather, associating Medea with an aspect of Hellenistic culture allows him to ground the *Argonautica* more firmly in his audience's world, to lend Medea's powers a framework and context that would otherwise be lacking. It is a trick at which he is well-accomplished: he has linked the *Argonautica* to the Hellenistic world through his portrayal of both religious (Stephens, 2003) and political (Mori, 2008) elements of the poem. An examination of the ties that bind Medea to the Hellenistic world, useful in its own right, reveals an unexpected treasure: Apollonius's commentary on the cultural boundaries and expectations of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Works Cited

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