

## Medea the Restorer? Reading Ovid's Aeson through Pacuvius' Aetes

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* focuses unusual attention on Medea's rejuvenation of Jason's father, Aeson, which takes up 30% of his Medea narrative (*Med.* 7.157-296 w. Kenney ad loc). The story is a minor variant and Ovid's sources fragmentary (Gantz 1993); he must have had a great deal of creative freedom. This paper aims to add an overlooked allusion within Ovid's episode: Pacuvius' *Medus*, the story of Medea returned to Colchis to restore her aged father to his throne. Ovid's passage, I argue, is in intertextual and thematic dialogue with Pacuvius' reunion scene between Medea and Aetes. Through shared vocabulary, imagery, and wider contextual parallels, Ovid's portrayal of Medea as a physical healer of Jason's father draws on Pacuvius' famous depiction of Medea as a (less literal) healer of her own father's misfortunes.

As Ovid's Medea restores Aeson to youth, Ovid lets us see old Aeson and young Aeson simultaneously to underscore Medea's singular power to bridge the two. Old Aeson has a scraggly beard, an overall facial gauntness, paleness, and the decay of his once youthful visage (*Met.* 7.288-91):

...*barba comaeque*  
*canitie posita nigrum rapuere colorem,*  
*pulsa fugit macies, abeunt pallorque situsque,*                    290  
*adiectoque cavae supplentur corpore ruga.*

Old Aeson, I argue, is a reflection of another old man still familiar from the tragic stage: Pacuvius' old, beaten Aetes. Pacuvius' tragedy featured a powerful reunion between father and daughter. When Medea sees him, he is an old man (*Pac. Med.* Fr. 253-6):

*Refugere oculi, corpus macie extabuit;*

*lacrimae peredere umore exsanguis genas;*

*situm inter oris barba pedore horrida*

*intonsa infuscat pectus inlucie scabrum.*

Like Ovid's Aeson, he is beset by *situs* (decay) of the face and *macies* (gauntness). While neither word is an odd fit for describing old age, a PHI search reveals only three surviving passages in Latin literature which contain these words in such close proximity – these two passages and a passage from Lucan *BC* 6 that uses Ovid as source. In other words, for Romans familiar with Pacuvius' drama, the parallels between two paternal figures in need of Medea probably stood out.

With this accepted, further points of contact emerge. Both Aetes and Aeson have marred beards: Aetes' is shaggy with filth (*barba paedore horrida*), while Aeson – who has been deposed but not imprisoned by an evil brother – is simply colored with gray shagginess (*barba comaeque canities posita nigrum rapuere colorem*). Both exhibit a general paleness of the face: Aetes has *exsanguis genas* while Aeson has a general *pallor*. Each man is also described as having hollowed out cheeks, or, in Aeson's case, hollow cheek wrinkles (*lacrimae peredere umore exsanguis genas; cavae...rugae*).

Why this echo of Pacuvius and why this scene? The two men share some story plots; in many versions Aeson is deposed by power-hungry Pelias (and sometimes imprisoned) just as Aetes is by power-hungry Perses. But a bigger reason, I argue, is Pacuvius' unusual focus on Medea as Restorer. In the reunion scene, Medea says she had abandoned her father *florentissimo regno*, but now that he is weak, only she can restore him (*sola ut restituam paro*). Critics have seen Pacuvius himself here alluding to the older tradition of Aeson's rejuvenation (Schierl 2006), a metaliterary assimilation of Medea-the-healer-of-bodies and Medea-the-healer-of-body-politic.

This is precisely the sort of multivalent play that Ovid so enjoys finding in predecessors and expanding in his text.

This paper contributes to a wider discussion of the influence of Republican tragedians on late Republican and Augustan literature which. Some scholars have indeed found a certain Pacuvian flavor throughout the *Metamorphoses* that both speaks to a shared spirit of inventiveness and to Ovid's marked engagement with the tragic side of the stories his epic tells (e.g. D'Anna 1959; Curie 1981; Curley 2013). Through this particular allusion which comes from the same mythological storyline but not the same tragic plot, I argue, we can see Ovid rivaling a memorable staging of Medea-the-restorer by bringing the dutiful daughter into his narrative while also using this scene as a hinge point between Medea's powers of healing and Medea's powers of destruction.

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