

The Monsters of Colchis and Ovidian Poetics

Despite what may appear to be a steady flood of work—long overdue—on Ovidian poetry, there are still things to be done. One of these, I suggest, is scrutiny of the many monsters that populate the *Metamorphoses*. In this paper, I want to look at the monsters that Jason must face in Colchis in order to escape with the Golden Fleece and with his bride Medea, an episode that is usually treated for literary reasons that exclude its depictions of the monsters themselves (Libatique, Otis, Newlands, Tissol) or that focus above all on the role of magic (Rosner-Siegal, Segal, Williams). These monsters and the means used to overcome them offer us insight into Roman ideas of danger as well as Ovid's conception of his work, above all, of the shifting, chimerical nature of the *Metamorphoses* itself, as well as Ovid's affiliation with Vergil and other poets of civil war (Barchiesi).

Jason's first task is to yoke fire-breathing bulls. The bulls are monstrous because they are dangerous, but also because they represent a confusion of naturally separate categories. The bulls are both animal and machine, at the heart of which is the fire god himself. Jason's task is to bring under control a force of nature so potent it is conveniently styled a god—and of course he needs a semi-divine witch to do it.

The bulls are to be used in plowing and sowing the field of Mars; the seeds are the teeth of a dragon, treated with poison. In the pregnant earth, the seeds are transformed into human bodies, *noua corpora*, and we are reminded of the proem to *Metamorphoses* 1. Thus, Jason's act of agriculture is a creation parallel to that of the human race but also to that of the poem in which he stands. The growth of these warriors also has affinities with Ovid's description of spontaneous generation at 1.416-37.

In spite of his easy victory over the bulls, Jason's men are afraid, but Medea is too, despite the evident success of her enchantment against the first challenge. She chants (or sings, *canit*) an "assisting spell" (or a "helpful" or "supplemental song"). If Jason's agriculture recapitulates the spontaneous generation Ovid discusses elsewhere while also constituting a parallel *Metamorphoses*, Medea enhances her earlier spells with a spell that is also like Ovid's poem. The hero and the witch are different kinds of poets. Moreover, the passage foregrounds not only the nature of Ovidian poetics but also the easy descent of human beings into civil war, for Jason easily turns the newborn warriors against each other.

The dragon that guards the fleece itself has eyes unaccustomed to sleep until Medea's spell. Magic and poetry can make sleepless guards sleep, but creatures that never sleep are themselves monstrous. Ovid described the guard Argus in Book 1 as a man who is always to some extent awake (Lowe 226-32). It is inhuman not to need sleep—and indeed this rhetoric colors Roman description of their most deadly military and civil foes such as Hannibal (Livy 21.4.6-7) and Catiline (Cicero *In Cat.* 1.26; Sallust *BC* 5, 27).

Jason's encounters with monsters, along with Medea's help, allows the poet to outline concerns of both poetics, civil war, and power.

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