

Love/Sick: Medicalized Love in Apollonius' *Argonautica*

The Hellenistic poets have a reputation for being almost too learned, their verses replete with allusions to poetic, philosophical, and scientific texts. In spite of this, references to contemporary medical works in Apollonius' *Argonautica* have not been explored in great detail, apart from Medea's dream and psychological state (e.g. Fusillo 1994, Kessels 1982, Reddoch 2010) and brief considerations of her headache (Aguilar 2004, Solmsen 1961). In this paper I argue that Apollonius was not only acutely aware of the medical progress of the Hellenistic physicians Herophilus and Erasistratus, but that he demonstrates his knowledge of these advancements through the rejection of Hippocratic diagnosis. Apollonius adopts these contemporary scientific writings to innovate the traditional poetic *topos* of love as illness and craft a cutting-edge poetic pathology of love.

Beginning from archaic poets such as Sappho (fr. 31), love is an emotion entwined with the manifestation of its symptoms. As medical knowledge advances and texts disseminate, poets associate the experience of being in love ever more explicitly with chronic psychic and physical distress. The short-lived practice of human vivisection, as practiced by Herophilus and Erasistratus, resulted in an increased understanding of the anatomical interactions between mind and body (von Staden 1989). Although a number of contemporary medical references in the *Argonautica* have been noted, these references have yet to be unified into one reading and, to my knowledge, none account for the presence of Hippocratic medicine within the epic.

The brief Hippocratic text *Peri Parthenion* grounds Apollonius' Medea in the medical tradition. The author of the medical treatise attributes this "virgin's disease" to a blockage of menstruation, the only cure for which is marriage, sex, and childbirth. Each of the symptoms listed in the *Peri Parthenion* cannot perfectly map onto Medea struck with love for Jason, but her

symptoms broadly align and follow the same pattern: madness, chill, fever, raging, fear, and suicidal ideation. Apollonius dedicates the bulk of Book III of the *Argonautica* to a detailed pathology of Medea's love, but the treatment prescribed in the *Peri Parthenion* does not effect any change on her mental and physical state. Apollonius draws attention to marriage's ineffectuality on Medea because it is purely a social remedy for an uninformed diagnosis, rather than a medical treatment for a legitimate psychophysiological illness.

One of Erasistratus' most reported contributions to the medical field details his treatment of Antiochus suffering from a mysterious illness producing the same symptoms which Medea exhibits in the *Argonautica*: speechlessness, fevers, chills, a racing heart, and pallor. (App. Syr. X.59, Plut. *Demetr.* 38). Through careful observation Erasistratus diagnoses Antiochus with a psychophysiological ailment – lovesickness, a mental illness, causes Antiochus to experience a number of physical symptoms. The pains of love move beyond the bounds of poetic aesthetic and into the realm of medicine, legitimizing Medea's suffering and justifying Apollonius' precise use of contemporary medical terminology.

There are three main episodes within the *Argonautica* which clearly demonstrate Apollonius' knowledge of Herophilus' medical writings: Medea's dream (III.616-635), a description of her pulse (III.755-61), and her headache (III.761-5). A number of scholars (as noted above) debate the significance and interpretation of her dream. When the dream is read in conjunction with Euphemus' dream (IV.1737-45), it seems quite clear that Apollonius employs Herophilus' tri-partite dream theory (as recorded in Ps-Plut., *Placita* 5.2). He again uses highly precise language to describe a sharp pain at the base of Medea's neck, a scene which Solmsen believes follows "no convention and no precedent" (Solmsen 1961: 195). Most significantly, Apollonius equates Medea's heart racing to a darting beam of light, explicitly defining the rate at

which her is beating. Herophilus is perhaps most famous for his exhaustive work on the nature of pulses and the connection between pulse rate and health (von Staden 1989). These examples as well as countless other linguistic similarities show the overwhelming presence and significance of Hippocratic and Hellenistic medicine in the depictions of love in Apollonius' *Argonautica*.

Bibliography

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