

Reading Hypsipyle's Medea: Looking at the Chronology of Ovid's *Heroides* 6 and 12

Until recently, scholars have viewed Ovid's *Heroides* as a collection of letters that, though residing within a single collection, should be read individually, with little regard to other letters in the collection. As a result of this view, scholars have regarded the letters as, "little differentiated" (Wilkinson, 1962) and "monotonous" (Otis, 1970). More recent scholars, such as Laurel Fulkerson and Sara Lindheim, have looked at the similarities between each letter, not as "monotonous," but instead as a way to unify the letters through the shared experiences of each heroine. Fulkerson (2005) in her introduction suggests that each letter should be read "centrally in the corpus," suggesting that each heroine is influenced by other heroines within the *Heroides*, though not necessarily in any particular order. Building on Fulkerson's idea, I suggest that, while a chronological reading of the most of the letters is unnecessary, one must read letter 6 (Hypsipyle to Jason) and letter 12 (Medea to Jason) in chronological order. This paper will analyze Medea's letter to Jason, specifically the way in which Ovid situates Medea both in relation to the "source text" of Euripides' *Medea* and within the *Heroides*, particularly in relation to letter 6. By analyzing Medea's position in relation to both of these works, this paper will demonstrate that Ovid has fashioned Medea in such a way as to maximize her sympathy to the reader, both by omitting well-known episodes from her story and by surrounding her with heroines who share a similar fate.

In order to understand Medea's characterization in letter 12, one must consider Hypsipyle's portrayal of Medea in letter 6. By introducing Medea through Hypsipyle's words in letter 6, Ovid primes the reader with negative expectations for the characterization of Medea, primarily focusing on the model put forth by the latter half of Euripides' *Medea* where her horrific acts are revealed. Hypsipyle, drawing from Euripides' tradition, paints Medea as a

barbara venefica (6.19) who is capable of deeds beyond imagination (*quae nescierim melius*, 6.93). As Hypsipyle nears the end of her letter, the reader conjures in his/her mind the stereotypical image of Medea: the infanticidal mother bent on revenge at all cost. However, six letters later, Ovid defies our expectations of Medea by introducing her as the abandoned heroine whose sudden betrayal by her lover, Jason, has left her in a state that is evocative of her condition in the first half of Euripides' *Medea*. This stark contrast in her characterization between letters forces the reader to reevaluate Ovid's previous portrayal of Medea by questioning Hypsipyle's portrait of Medea.

Arguably the most shocking addition to Medea's myth by Euripides is Medea's role in her children's death. With the production of Euripides' *Medea*, Medea's own hand in her children's murder becomes canonized and, especially considering Hypsipyle's portrayal six letters prior to Medea's letter, is a part of the myth the reader expects when encountering Medea's letter to Jason. Unlike Euripides' *Medea*, the thought of infanticide never occurs to Ovid's Medea, whose letter contradicts the reader's expectation from Hypsipyle's letter. This elision is especially interesting when we consider that Ovid frames Medea's letter with two other references to child murder: the death of Canace's son in letter 11 (lines 83 ff.) and Laodamia's reference to the sacrifice of Iphigenia in letter 13 (line 3).

By reading certain letters of the *Heroides* in chronological order rather than as separate and self-contained poems, the reader forges a relationship between the heroines and recognizes their not-so-different stories. By encountering Hypsipyle's letter first, the reader creates an image in his/her mind of Medea, an image of a raging sorceress who knows no limits to achieve her revenge, including, but not limited to, infanticide. Immediately preceding Medea's letter to Jason, the reader encounters yet another reference to infanticide in letter 11, Canace's letter to

Macareus. As with Hypsipyle's portrayal of a child-murdering Medea, the violent portrayal of the death of Canace's son brings infanticide to the forefront of the reader's mind. Finally, we come to Medea's letter, not simply with Euripides in mind, but with Hypsipyle's characterization and the death of Canace's son, only to have our expectations thwarted. This unrealized expectation of Medea as a *barbara veneficia* (6.19) alters the reader's view of Medea, maximizing her sympathy and preventing the reader from viewing Medea as the infanticidal mother.

Bibliography

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- Lindheim, S. H. *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides*. University of Wisconsin Press. 2003.