

‘I’m Only Sleeping’?: Medea’s Sleep and Sleeplessness as a Gendered Paradox

In Latin literature, sleep often occurs in its grammatical plural (*somni, -os, ...*). This grammatical peculiarity can be explained by the sundry of symbols in which “sleeps” can occur within the narrative: sleep can be decidedly healing or harming depending on the character’s slumber. Gender is one variable that can influence the nature of sleep. Sleeping and sleepless women alike are treated with the usual gender expectations. As opposed to the inspiring and refreshing sleep that is often reserved for males (e.g. respectively, Cicero’s treatment of sleep in *Scipio’s Dream* and Aeneas’ slumber in *Aeneid 4*), the Roman female sleep is generally represented as rendering canonical female characters as weak and vulnerable (e.g. Ariadne in *Catullus 64*, Dido in *Aeneid 4*, Lucretia in Livy and Ovid). Medea’s sleepless experience, however, stands out among female sleepers in Ovid and Valerius Flaccus.

Medea has traditionally been considered as peculiar in the tradition because of her perpetual “quest for *materia*” (Battistella 2015), her gender role reversal with Jason (Segal 1989), and her “boundless appetite always for the next challenge” (Williams 2012). I will add evidence to this theory of Medea’s unique position in the corpus by employing the lense of gendered sleep and sleeplessness. My readings of Medea will establish her as an idiosyncratic sleeping and sleepless woman by contrasting her not only with the general expectations of female sleep, but also by examining three different Medeas within the Latin corpus.

First, I will show that Flaccus’ account grants limited agency and control to Medea in her sleep(-lessness). Indeed, most of the references to sleep in *Argonautica 7* and *8* focus on Medea’s destabilising and thus typically female sleeplessness. Yet, the possibility of the paradoxical sleep is still present here: Medea is emphatically aware that sleep can both harming

and embalming, as proven by her triumph over the serpent and Aeson's rejuvenation process. Ultimately, however, the Flaccian Medea becomes another victim of the vulnerable sleeplessness that hinders the woman's vision, sense, and perception of reality. A woman's sleeplessness is thus in stark contrast with the usually productive male sleeplessness (as in Ker's reading of *lucubratio*, 2004).

Second, I will show that, just as for Dido and Ariadne in *Heroides* 7 and 8, sleep and sleeplessness both become a means for elegiac persuasion in the *Heroides* 12. Even though Ovid presents Medea as using sleep productively in her schemes, it is her ironic sleeplessness that stands out. She remains the only person whom she is unable to defeat by means of sleep, which suggests the scope of her immense, uncontrollable power. I argue that Medea's sleeplessness is difficult to determine and to limit: it contributes to her fickle and intricate character as an "intertextual heroine" (Hinds 1993) and "perhaps the most complex of all of Ovid's heroines" (Davis 2012), which is fitting for the paradoxical sleep(-lessness).

Third, I will demonstrate how the other Ovidian Medea becomes conspicuous through her difference from the sleeping geography that surrounds her. Medea in *Met.* 7 is a most complex figure regarding the significance of slumbers and the lack thereof: her episode includes positive sleep and sleeplessness and negative sleep and sleeplessness. She uses sleep, evoked by means of her *pharmaka*, now as a medicine for Aeson, then as a weapon against the serpent (as in V. Flaccus). By contrast, Medea's sleeplessness is positive in that it enables her to practise her magic of the night, whilst inhabiting a Roman masculine sense of productive and active sleeplessness. In the *Metamorphoses* 7, then, with Medea, sleep is fully established into a gendered paradox: sleep and sleeplessness thus function as yet another means of indicating Medea's anomalous gender experience.

Bibliography

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