

“*Quod facere ausa mea est, non audet scribere dextra:*”

Medea’s agency and self-perception in *Metamorphoses* 7 and *Heroides* 12

Ovid’s two extant portraits of Medea—the Medea of *Metamorphoses* 7 and the Medea of *Heroides* 12—have a strong intertextual relationship. Each of Ovid’s Medeas is surprisingly sympathetic, emerging from the page as a forcefully effective woman whose choices, however horrifying or regrettable, always make a twisted sort of sense. In both texts, the inherent, disturbed logic of her choices stems from her strong, assertive voice, which justifies her actions, past and future, and presents a point of view that serves her personal vision. Medea displays a high level of agency in both *Heroides* 12 and *Metamorphoses* 7, although she spends much of the former trying to deny it in order to fuel her guilty vision of herself as a victim of Jason’s manipulations (*Her.* 12.131-2). However, in these two works, Medea ultimately defines her own identity in relation to her agency: she connects her own value and goals to her ability to act and enact change, both on others and herself (Ovid *Met.* 7.37-8).

In this paper, I examine how these two different and yet poetically coherent versions of Medea perceive their own agency; moreover, I show how the disparity between these two perceptions affects her dynamic presence in the Ovidian corpus. Ovid’s narrative characterizes Medea as an instrument of transformation, who enacts change upon others while remaining unchanged herself (Newlands 1997). Medea’s perception of herself presents a conflict between her past deeds and her intended actions. This conflict not only deepens her characterization, but also emphasizes her power in the narrative. In this paper, I analyze her self-characterization and rationalization of her past actions in *Heroides* 12 and compare it to her self-

characterization and rationalization of her future actions in her own words in *Metamorphoses* 7. This analysis shows that Medea's efforts to deny her agency actually asserts its strength.

Moreover, I contextualize Medea's self-perception of her agency by discussing how other characters perceive her. The most significant of these characters is Jason: Medea simultaneously subordinates her agency to him and demands more extensive power from him. Jason's deep entanglement in Medea's view of her own agency casts a shadow across her Ovidian narratives (Davis 2012). Across the two works, she positions herself paradoxically as both more powerful than and compelled by him (*Met.* 7.89-94; *Her.* 12.203-4). Furthermore, Medea's magical abilities in *Metamorphoses* 7 enhance her agency as well as the extent to which she is able to exercise her transformative powers (Rosner-Siegel 1982; Williams 2012). Thus, her consistent celebration of her magical abilities in *Heroides* 12 emphasizes the centrality of that agency to her identity and her fundamental inability to truly deny it (Ovid *Her.* 12.109-13).

Ultimately, the intertextual dialogue between these two representations of Medea highlights the complexity of her character and her overall power to effect transformation, both in herself and others. In spite of her accusations and vitriol towards Jason, Medea never truly relinquishes control of her actions, causing her efforts at denial to fail (Ovid *Her.* 12.114-5). She attempts to portray her actions as primarily motivated by her relations to others—by her family, Jason, and even the gods—but she never truly questions her ability to act (Ovid *Met.* 7.51-56; Ovid *Her.* 12.109-13). Therefore, Ovid's two portrayals of Medea affirm her overall narrative agency.

Bibliography

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