

Maidenhood and Kinslaying:

Medea's Suicidal Ideation in Apollonius Rhodius and Valerius Flaccus

In both Apollonius Rhodius' and Valerius Flaccus' treatments of the *Argonautica*, Medea becomes a focalizing character and protagonist in much of the latter parts of the epics. After divine meddling causes Medea to fall in love with Jason, the Colchian princess experiences a crisis of conscience as she grapples with whether to aid the Argonaut in his quest for the Golden Fleece. In both works, the turning point of this crisis of conscience comes as a moment of suicidal ideation in which Medea considers death as an escape from this seemingly impossible choice (Ap. 3.798-809; V. Fl. 7.312-35). Unsurprisingly both the Hellenistic and Roman versions follow the same course in broad terms, however their differences demonstrate different cultural attitudes attached to suicide in each work and different goals of using the suicidal ideation to characterize Medea.

Using information collected in van Hooff's survey of Classical suicides (van Hooff 1990), I examine the cultural significance of Medea's suicidal ideation and the methods she contemplates using to take her own life. In this episode of suicidal ideation, Apollonius Rhodius characterizes Medea as a maiden about to be wed, and Medea's anxieties are framed as tension between her irresistible feelings for Jason and her loyalty to her family and country (Ap. 3.616-34). Medea's first instinct is to hang herself (λαιμὸν ἀναρτήσασσα μελάθρω, Ap. 3.789), which is a natural, Greek response, where hanging was coded as a young woman's method of suicide, as shown by similarities to Hippocrates' *Peri Partheniôn* (*Diseases of Young Girls*), which speaks of a propensity for young women to hang themselves (ὕπὸ δὲ τῆς περὶ τὴν καρδίην πιέξιος ἀγγόνας κραίνουσιν, Hp. *DYG* 31). On the other hand, Valerius Flaccus notably omits it as

potential method, which I argue is due to different cultural connotations of hanging (Hill 2004) and a different characterization of Medea, which would make hanging inappropriate in the Roman epic.

Suicide in Valerius Flaccus' work has a political dimension lacking in the Hellenistic version (McGuire 1997), and although the only true suicides in the work are those of Aeson and Alcimedea, Medea's suicidal ideation also has undertones of political protest: her father is a *tyrannus* in her eyes (V. Fl. 7.78) and she objects to her father's treachery (V. Fl. 7.344-6). The Flavian epic poet also writes Medea consistently with her Euripidean filicide in mind (Davis 2014). While Valerius Flaccus does not include hanging as a potential method of suicide, he inserts the drugs supernaturally calling to Medea, which foreshadows Medea as a witch. Furthermore, Valerius Flaccus' similes surrounding the suicidal ideation connect Medea to notorious kinslayers (V. Fl. 7.141-152, 301-6), heightening the effect. Thus, I show that Medea's suicidal ideation, while present in both poems, responds to different cultural attitudes to suicide and fulfills different narrative goals for the two poets.

Bibliography

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