

“*tu quoque nil, mater, prodes mihi; fortior ante sola fui.*”

Medea's Maternal Relationships in Valerius' *Argonautica*

In his *Argonautica*, Valerius includes two scenes that feature a maternal figure advising Medea on her desire for Jason. In the first scene, Venus takes on the form of Circe, Medea's paternal aunt, to persuade Medea to help Jason win the fleece and go against her father (7.210-390). Venus-Circe's manipulations work, leading Medea to help Jason and abandon her natal family. As Medea flees, Medea's mother gives a speech that Medea does not hear, entreating her to return and lamenting her betrayal (8.144-170). Each maternal figure offers Medea a different model for her future: Venus-Circe models the selfish disruption of familial order, while Medea's mother embodies conventionality and adherence to social norms surrounding familial relationships. Moreover, both of these scenes appear to be entirely Valerian inventions, with no precedent in his Greek models (especially Apollonius' *Argonautica*); thus, Valerius considers these interactions to be important factors both in his characterization of Medea and in the overall world of his epic.

In this paper, I examine the influence that Venus-Circe and Medea's mother each have upon her actions; moreover, I show how Valerius uses these interactions to emphasize the significance of mother-daughter relationships to not only Medea's character, but to the stability of society as a whole. The world of the *Argonautica* is fundamentally unstable and its author's outlook on the structures of that world, including the structure of the family, is pessimistic (Bernstein 2014). Therefore, I argue that Medea's decision to seek the false Venus-Circe's advice, rather than her mother's, provides insight into her own nature and inherent disregard for familial bonds.

When Venus-Circe comes to Medea's bedchamber to offer advice, their interaction is coded as one between a mother and daughter (Zissos 2012; Davis 2020). However, I contend that the duplicity of Venus' scheme and the falseness of her disguise subvert the cultural and social expectations of her role as a mother-figure. Her advice to go towards the civilized west and leave barbaric Colchis behind is more appealing to a western, Roman audience (7.231-6)(Augoustakis 2010). However, by encouraging disrespect towards the authority of the *paterfamilias* through an unapproved marriage, she goes against Roman cultural norms surrounding marriage (Stocks 2016; Stover 2011). Venus-Circe's perversion of familial norms therefore reflects the tainted state of familial relationships within the epic; furthermore, I demonstrate how Medea's willingness to follow this false mother's example reflects her own inner desire to break with these norms and thus her inherently non-normative nature.

Then, I compare Medea's relationship with her false aunt to her (lack of) relationship with her actual mother. Medea never interacts with her mother, whose speech in *Argonautica* 8 is left unanswered. In contrast to Venus-Circe, Medea's mother behaves stereotypically in her lament (Spaltenstein 2005). She mourns her lack of a typical mother-daughter bond with Medea and reiterates the appropriate role of the daughter within the family. In doing this, I assert that her speech, even if unheard, offers Medea a model of conventional womanhood that contrasts with that which is offered by Venus-Circe. Moreover, I posit that Medea's mother and her mother fail to connect with one another because of this mismatch between Medea's transgressive desires and her mother's conventional nature.

Ultimately, I argue that by inserting two contrasting maternal advice speeches, Valerius is purposefully stressing the importance of parent-child relationships and highlighting the disruption that Medea causes to her familial bonds and thus to the entire world of his epic.

Moreover, I conclude that the contrast between the way Medea establishes a relationship with a false maternal figure, yet never interacts with her actual mother, contributes to Medea's characterization as someone who cannot, and does not want, to adhere to the norms of society.

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