

Reading Medea and Io in Propertian Myth Networks

Study of the myth in Propertius has, for the most part, followed Boucher's original formulation of mythological exempla: metonymic, allusion to another author, or the heightening of emotional depth/highlighting the qualities of a particular character (242). Heslin has furthered this schema by showing how Propertius uses myths to ironically subvert the literal reading of the poems while simultaneously referencing Virgil (Heslin, 2018). The specific study of mythical women in Propertius has been limited to individual figures like Medea across the Propertian corpus (Prince, 2002, 2003) or Isis in individual poems (Miller, 1981). However, the interaction between mythical women—and how the myths themselves subtly shift based on their interaction with other women across poems—has been remarked upon only in passing.

For example, Prince has noted how Medea in 2.34.7 (Barber, 1954) is focalized and her agency fore-fronted. However, in 2.21.11 Jason is focalized, deceiving Medea—who is the direct object of Jason's deception (Prince 134, 145). In both cases, Propertius retains a lack of knowledge, but the locus of ignorance shifts from Medea in 2.21 (*Colchida sic hospes quondam decepit Iason*) to Jason in 2.34 (*Colchis et ignotum nonne secuta virum est*). Medea and Jason are directly compared to other mythical characters in both instances, namely Paris and Menelaus in the later passage, and Calypso and Ulysses in the former; the comparisons are consistent with the internal logic of the poems in each case. However, when read together with other instances of Calypso and Medea, a clear pattern emerges.

Calypso cries for her departed lover at 1.15.9-14 as the model for an appropriately virtuous woman. Heslin notes that this version of Calypso, alongside the Propertian catalogue of mythical women, uniquely inverts her traditional Odyssean mental state. These lines are striking

however, in that they directly precede another reference to an altered mental state: Medea by way of Jason and Hypsipyle (1.15.17-20) whose mind is also changed from the original myth to *anxia* (Heslin 117-8). In the poem Hypsipyle and Calypso in 1.15 are both abandoned, much like Calypso and Medea of 2.21. Heyworth notes that 2.21 leads into a sequence of erotic betrayal (200), clearly prefigured not just by the generic travelling of Book I, but the mythical women themselves who are abandoned by the narrator for other women in Book II.

A similar network can be seen with Ariadne, Andromeda, Io, and Medea. Ariadne and Io are first compared together in 1.3.1 and 1.3.20, both asleep and passive as watched objects—what Heslin calls a voyeuristic rape fantasy—exempla for Cynthia in the presence of her lover (93). Ariadne is again compared at 2.24b.45, but this time to Medea. Propertius describes Medea and Ariadne similarly across poems; both are deserted, one (Ariadne) recognized by the *carina* of her lover and the other (Medea) abandoned by the *carina* of her lover. Both are taken as virtue models for Cynthia: Medea and Ariadne in 2.24b for their chastity (Boucher 457)—an inversion of the traditional view of Medea, and Ariadne and Andromeda in 1.3.4 (as stated above). Further, Andromeda at 2.28a.21 is compared to Io at 2.28a.17—remaining chaste though enduring much (Camps 188), reinforcing the Ariadne, Andromeda, Io and Medea interactions.

This paper examines such webs as they pertain to Medea and Io, given that these figures are complicated by Propertius' own adaptation of the mythical narrative and focalization shift. Io/Isis in 2.33a shifts into the object of Propertius' ire (Miller, 1981); Medea/Jason in (2.21/2.34) prefigures Propertius' own deception and amorousness, both complicating the comparison networks in which they appear.

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