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Witch's Song: Morality, Name-Calling and Poetic Authority in the Argonautica

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WITCH'S SONG: MORALITY, NAME-CALLING AND POETIC
AUTHORITY IN VALERIUS FLACCUS' *ARGONAUTICA**

Abstract: This paper focuses on the interaction of Roman moral discourse and autonomous female voices in the Argonautica and Ovid's Heroides. It argues that Valerius' heroines use the moral language of the Heroides to reflect on the function of traditional language. By assigning culturally encoded roles to themselves and one another, these heroines present the audience with alternative versions of their stories that undermine the very terms they employ: they thus enact the problems inherent in using the language of the past to interpret the present. The cultural vocabulary that authorizes their voices to an internal audience presents a serious threat to the community, when coming from the mouths of marginalized characters. In illustrating the slippage between the roles of wife, witch, heroine and whore, Valerius invites his audience to consider the function of tradition, both social and literary, as a lens through which to understand the present.

στοχαστέον γὰρ καὶ τοῦ προσώπου ᾧ γράφεται·
("Indeed one must consider the person to whom the
letter is written," Dem. *On Style* 234.2–3)

According to Demetrius, the author of a letter must adapt style and tone to the recipient, finding the right language to achieve the desired effect. This paper will examine such a rhetorical strategy at work in Ovid's *Heroides* and Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, suggesting that the heroines of both texts manipulate the language of Roman social *mores*—evoking the core objectives of Augustus' moral legislation—to legitimate their version of the story.¹ In a dramatic re-writing of their own myths, Medea and Hypsipyle present their rivals

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¹ Many critics have noted the place of the *Heroides* in the *Argonautica*'s literary background. Davis (2016) offers a concise summary, arguing that the Valerian Hypsipyle and Medea are informed by Catullus' Ariadne, Vergil's Dido and Ovid's Medea, Ariadne and Hypsipyle.

as a threat to family morality and to themselves as faithful *matronae*.² The mythological authoresses of the *Heroides* provide those of the *Argonautica* with a model of internal revision, in which they seek poetic authority over their own storylines by claiming a legal and social high ground. In so doing, however, they confront limited resources: the roles of *matrona*, *coniunx*, *paelex*, *mater*, *noverca* (matron; wife; mistress; mother; stepmother), must be shared and continually reassigned, as each heroine takes her predecessor's place in Jason's affections and, in turn, in the collateral damage of his heroic career. The voices of Ovid's heroines and their re-use of the same words to form contradictory narratives illustrate that the value of moral language lies in the relationship between speaker and addressee, and not in any stable definition. As I read it, this process is akin to that described by Braund in reference to Juvenal's *Satires*: "...the antithesis between epic and satire is an important element in the generic justification ... Accordingly, satire accepts the epic frame of reference, but only to appropriate it for its own purposes."³ By working within the system of epic language and imagery, Juvenal authorizes his own poetic voice and his replacement of the genre to which he responds: this is the new Roman epic. In the same way, the female speakers of the *Heroides* and the *Argonautica* use the language of their (masculine) audience both to legitimate their own arguments and to replace the narrative told by the male protagonist of their literary world. Their words open up an alternative storyline in which the actors are re-cast into different roles and perform a different version of the mythological truth: Valerius' characters exploit his belatedness in the epic tradition to refashion the nature of that tradition. Authoritative language plays an essential role in their poetic performance, rendering plausible a dramatically different perspective on traditional material.

In his discussion of the *Res Gestae*, Karl Galinsky pinpoints this precise balance between tradition and innovation as characteristic of Augustus' moral legislation. Describing these laws, Augustus combines the radical and the time-honored (*RG* 8.5):

Legibus novis m[e auctore l]atis [multa e]xempla maiorum
exolescentia iam ex nostro [saecul]o red[uxi et ipse] multarum
rer[um exe]mpla imitanda post[eris tradidi].

² Knox (2002) 127 describes Ovid's characteristic use of characters already formed in the literary tradition to explore the implicit interpretative possibilities.

³ Braund (1996) 22.

By means of new laws brought in under my sponsorship I revived
 many exemplary ancestral practices which were by then dying out in
 our generation, and I myself handed down to later generations
 exemplary practices for them to imitate. (trans. Alison Cooley)

As Galinsky points out, the phrase *leges novae* has revolutionary connotations, but, the passage demonstrates, these measures are taken in the name of restoring traditional values.⁴ As this paper seeks to show, female speakers in the *Heroides* and the *Argonautica* use the language of traditional values to perform their own revolution within their well-known literary traditions.

This paper will look at two episodes from the *Argonautica* in which such language, borrowed from the world of satire and the law-courts, is used to foment civil and familial violence: the Lemnian episode in Book 2, and Venus' visit to Medea in Book 7.⁵ To set the stage, I will first look at the way in which Ovid's Medea and Hypsipyle use the same terms to degrade Jason's current love interest and to prove themselves his legitimate spouse.

Ovidian Authors

Throughout the *Heroides*, Ovid plays with the intertextual effect of performative self-construction inherent in the epistolary form.⁶ This, I will argue, is the aspect of Ovid's letters that Valerius develops. His Medea and Circe exploit the authorial career of their Ovidian predecessors to raise the possibility of alternate storylines within their own text, and to make a bid for the audience's collusion in redirecting the narrative. As Sara Lindheim has observed, the writers of the *Heroides* create a self-image designed to provoke a specific response.⁷ Ovid himself suggests this way of reading letters in the *Ars Amatoria* (*Ars.* 1.459–68):

⁴ Galinsky (1996) 129.

⁵ In reference to Hor. *S.* 1.9, Cloud (1989) 66 describes how "law plays an emblematic as well as a narrative role in the satire ... the good man ... is defined in terms of the right performance of his legal duties ... The emblematic role of law in this poem is as custodian of right order, right order in poetry as well as in personal behavior."

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I find Hinds (1993) convincing on the question of the authenticity of *Heroides* 12, but, as Fulkerson (2005) 21 points out, it is not necessary to assume Ovidian authorship in order for the interaction between the two letters to be examined from the perspective of later readership. For an overview of the question, see Knox (1986).

⁷ Lindheim (2003) 23. She raises the important question of whether the helpless and innocent image presented by many of the heroines is in fact an attempt to regain power through the

Disce bonas artes, moneo, Romana iuventus,
 Non tantum trepidos ut tueare reos; 460
 Quam populus iudexque gravis lectusque senatus,
 Tam dabit eloquio victa puella manus ...
 Sit tibi credibilis sermo consuetaque verba, 467
 Blanda tamen, praesens ut videare loqui.

Learn the noble arts, I bid you, Roman youth, and not only to
 safeguard your trembling clients; just like the crowd and the grave
 judge and elected senate, so will the girl, overcome by your
 eloquence, give you her vote ...
 Let your speech be natural, and your words commonplace, but
 still beguiling, so that you seem to speak in person.⁸

Ovid—no surprise—repurposes traditional rhetorical training to his own amatory pursuits, noting the need to appeal to different audiences with a tailored self-presentation.⁹ Most important to this project is the use of *consueta verba* to achieve the desired effect. In the *Heroides*, Ovid's speakers work from within socially sanctioned definitions of femininity to legitimate their version of the story: the name-calling that takes place on either side displays a distinctly Roman morality.¹⁰

Temporally, *Heroides* 6 and 12 are written immediately after Hypsipyle and Medea have become aware of Jason's next marriage. They thus witness Jason reenacting in Colchis and in Corinth the role he had first played in Lemnos, pursuing royal status with a different cast of supporting characters. In response, both heroines focus on the identity-change that Jason's shifting affections impose on them, revealing the continuum of social roles that each inhabits. Both Medea and Hypsipyle construct their argument in a series of points designed to undermine their own status as foreigners, outside the normative social world,

manipulation of their reader, offering a possible solution to the question of why Ovid's heroines would choose to create disparate and incoherent characteristics (79–81).

⁸ All translations are my own except where otherwise noted.

⁹ Farrell (1998) 312–13; Spentzou (2003) 3.

¹⁰ Spentzou (2003) 25 describes how, in the social framework, femininity becomes a set of behaviors acquired through education and social training of the individual. In reference to Seneca's *Medea*, Guastella (2001) argues that Medea takes the terminology with which she defines her social position in relation to Jason, their children and Creon from the Roman cultural context.

while at the same time exploiting stereotypes of the exotic to construct their rival as a menacing barbarian.¹¹

The first point on which these two speakers focus is their rightful claim to the status of *coniunx*. As E. J. Kenney has pointed out, Ovid frequently discusses *amor* in terms of *officium* or *mandatum*, contracts based on mutual trust and service: “[Ovid exploits] in legalistic, if not legal, language an idea of obligation that in its origins as “a social concept” belongs to the sphere of relationships ... as a source of erotic metaphor.”¹² By using such language in their appeals to Jason, Ovid’s heroines give their arguments an ethical imperative that would immediately resonate with their Roman audience.

Hypsipyle, the first victim, claims outright the status of *coniunx*, showcasing her own matrimonial constancy: *sim reducis coniunx, sicut euntis eram!* (“May I be your wife as you return, as I was when you left!” *Her.* 6.112). Hypsipyle’s description represents a striking departure from the much more casual relationship depicted in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*.¹³ Her words emphasize that Jason is a moving target, while she herself remains in place: an ideal *matrona*, awaiting her husband’s return.

Medea, too, claims legal status as Jason’s wife, describing their union in terms that invoke a Roman marriage ceremony:¹⁴ *Haec animum—et quota pars haec sunt!—movere puellae / simplicis, et dextrae dextera iuncta meae* (“These words—and how small a part is this!—moved the heart of a simple girl, and your right hand joined to mine,” *Her.* 12.89–90). More pointedly, Medea puts this language in Jason’s mouth, quoting his entreaty for help. He, too, had initially defined their relationship in terms of marriage: *ius tibi et arbitrium nostrae fortuna salutis / tradidit, inque tua est vitae morsque manu ... effice me meritis tempus in omne tuum!* (“To you has fortune given authority and power over my preservation, and in your hand lies both life and death ... By your goodwill make me yours for all time!” *Her.* 12.73–4, 82). As she quotes Jason’s earlier promises back to him, Medea describes how the two have exchanged legal

¹¹ Augoustakis (2010) 9 observes that a common characteristic of the Flavian epic poets is the adoption of a Senecan point of view in which an idealized discourse on gender and ethnicity aims to destabilize boundaries.

¹² Kenney (1969) 251–2.

¹³ Davis (2012) 40–1 argues that the most striking aspect of Hypsipyle’s character in the *Heroides* is the manipulation of her myth to resemble Medea’s by, in particular, the upgrade of Hypsipyle’s liaison with Jason to a marriage.

¹⁴ On marriage *in manum*, see Treggiari (1991) 31–2, 49.

status. In Colchis, Jason's desperation forced him to give his own survival—quite literally—into Medea's hands, granting her *arbitrium* over his life in exchange for the *officium* of saving it. In Corinth, now, she finds that her life is subject to his terms, the *linguae gratia ficta tuae* ("feigned charm of your tongue," *Her.* 12.12).

In the next stage of their respective arguments, Ovid's two speakers expand on the idea of benefits exchanged. The *munera* by which they have earned Jason's loyalty are, first, the dowry—tangible or otherwise—that each had brought to the marriage, and, second, the children born within that marriage. In the first point, both Medea and Hypsipyle contrast their own substantial *munera* with the more questionable gifts brought by their rivals:

dos tibi Lemnos erit, terra ingeniosa colenti;
me quoque dotalis inter habere potes. (*Her.* 6.117–18)

Lemnos will be a dowry for you, a land fit for husbandry; me, too,
you will win along with the dower gifts.

Quid refert, scelerata piam si vincet et ipso
crimine dotata est emeruitque virum? (*Her.* 6.137–8)

What does it matter, if wickedness outweighs piety and with that
same crime she is dowered and wins her husband?

quam tibi tunc longe regnum dotale Creusae
et socer et magni nata Creontis erat! (*Her.* 12.53–4)

How distant from your mind was Creusa's dowered kingdom
then, and your father-in-law and the daughter of great Creon!

dotis opes ubi erant? ubi erat tibi regia coniunx,
quique maris gemini distinet Isthmos aquas? (*Her.* 12.103–4)

Where were the riches of your dowry? Where was your royal bride,
and the Isthmus that divides the waters of the twin seas?

Medea, in particular, emphasizes the concrete gifts she gave to Jason, in contrast to the purely monetary dowry he currently pursues. His life and his future are owed to her; all that Creusa bestows are riches. Likewise, Hypsipyle describes the political status she could give Jason as the ruler of Lemnos, and simultaneously questions the value of Medea's aid in Colchis, the *crimen* with which she rescued Jason. To both women, Jason has traded in their more worthy gifts to pursue

those with ethical strings attached—in Medea's case, the series of murders that the two commit, and in Creusa's, the selfish and narrow desire for power and wealth.

The moralizing tone of both speakers continues through the next point of contention. The highest female status they could claim was that of the *materfamilias*, the wife who contributes to her husband's legacy by bearing legitimate children. This question of inheritance takes center stage in Augustan moral legislation, reflecting a deep-seated concern over legitimate inheritance through its promise of financial rewards for having children.¹⁵ Both Hypsipyle and Medea lay double claim to this status, having not only preserved Jason's life, but also borne him sons:

Nunc etiam peperi; gratare ambobus, Iason!
 dulce mihi gravidæ fecerat auctor onus. 120
 felix in numero quoque sum prolemque gemellam,
 pignora Lucina bina favente dedi.
 si quaeris, cui sint similes, cognosceris illis.
 fallere non norunt; cetera patris habent.
 legatos quos paene dedi pro matre ferendos; 125
 sed tenuit coeptas saeva noverca vias.
 Medeam timui: plus est Medea noverca;
 Medæ faciunt ad scelus omne manus. (*Her.* 6.119–28)

I have given birth; rejoice for us both, Jason! The father made the burden sweet for me. I am fortunate, too, in the number and brought forth twin sons by Lucina's blessing—a double pledge. If you should ask, whom they resemble, you are recognizable in them. They know not how to deceive; in all else they are their father's sons. I nearly gave them to be borne as envoys for their mother; but a cruel stepmother brought the enterprise to a halt. I feared Medea, Medea is more than a stepmother; Medea's hands turn to every crime.

si tibi sum vilis, communis respice natos;
saeviet in partus dira noverca meos. (*Her.* 12.187–8)

If I am worthless to you, yet have care for our children together; a terrible stepmother will vent her rage on my offspring.

¹⁵ Cooley (2003) 355.

per superos oro, per avitae lumina flammae,
 per meritum et natos, pignora nostra, duos—
 redde torum, pro quo tot res insana reliqui;
 adde fidem dictis auxiliumque refer! (*Her.* 12.191–4)

By the gods above, I beg, by the light of my grandfather's flame, by
 my worthy service and our two sons, our mutual pledges—return to
 me the bed for which I, in madness, left so much behind; restore
 faith to your words and come to my aid!

Both Medea and Hypsipyle couch their protests in terms of Jason's familial best interests, a clever rhetoric that aligns their wishes with his own. Designating themselves *matronae*, the guardians of their family legacy, Ovid's speakers thereby cast their respective rivals in the role of the sinister *noverca*, a threat to Jason's children. Hypsipyle invokes the terms of Augustus' moral legislation, giving a distinctly Roman overtone to her status claim, and legitimizing her fear of Medea as a *noverca*.¹⁶ The use of *pignora* for children is likewise rooted in Ovid's Augustan context, as is Hypsipyle's claim to be *felix in numero*.¹⁷ Hypsipyle's assertion that her sons resemble Jason constructs him as a Roman *paterfamilias* concerned with legitimate inheritance, while also getting in a dig at his lying ways.

The urgent concern over inheritance brings together several important elements both of Ovid's poetic project and of Valerius' response to it. Ovid's heroines transfer this concern into their appeals to Jason, playing on the traditional image of the wicked stepmother to suggest that Jason's continually changing affections will (rightly) threaten his family line. The next stage of their arguments, therefore, is to show just how unsuitable their rival is, as a *barbara*, a *paelex* and a savage *noverca* set on destroying her husband's children. Once again, this argument is reminiscent of the restrictions placed on marriages by the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, and, perhaps, contemporary fears of the political impact of figures such as Cleopatra.¹⁸ Legitimacy, then, is a product of legal and social status: the stark distinction between the included and the excluded.

¹⁶ Davis (2012) 37 argues that Medea takes on the traditional pose of a dying mother concerned for her children's welfare; cf. *Aen.* 2.789, *Eur. Alc.* 305–7. Likewise, Verducci (1985) 63–5 suggests that Hypsipyle here adopts "the posture, and the lexicon, of outraged but patient virtue," employing a specifically Augustan rhetoric of children as *pignora* and dwelling on their number.

¹⁷ See Lewis and Short and *OLD* s.v. *pignus*; cf. *Cod. Iust.* 5, 12; *Dig.* 23.3; *Inst.* 2.7.3.

¹⁸ Cooley (2003) 354–67.

Both Hypsipyle and Medea manipulate the fluidity of such roles to distinguish themselves from their rivals.¹⁹ As Laurel Fulkerson has argued, they gradually assimilate themselves to the current object of Jason's affections, a strategy that both seeks to win back his favor and traces the distance they have come from the point when they first met him.²⁰ Both, therefore, recognize the impermanence of their social status and incorporate it into their accusations against Jason. The terms *paelex*, *noverca*, *matrona*, *barbara* become tools of change in their individual lives:

paelicis ipsa meos implessem sanguine vultus,
 quosque veneficiis abstulit illa suis! 150
 Medae Medea forem ...
 utque ego destituor coniunx materque duorum, 155
 a totidem natis orba sit illa viro! (*Her.* 6.149–56)

I myself would have flooded my face with the blood of your whore,
 and those eyes of yours that she stole with her poisons! I would have
 been Medea to Medea! ... As I am abandoned, a wife and mother of
 two, may she be equally bereft of sons and man!

hoc illic Medea fui, nova nupta quod hic est;
 quam pater est illi, tam mihi dives erat. (*Her.* 12.25–6)

There I, Medea, was, what your new bride is here; as rich as her
 father is, so rich was mine.

illa ego, quae tibi sum nunc denique barbara facta,
 nunc tibi sum pauper, nunc tibi visa nocens ... (*Her.* 12.105–6)

I, who am now at last become barbarian in your eyes, who now
 seems poor, now noxious to you ...

quos ego servavi, paelex amplectitur artus,
 et nostri fructus illa laboris habet.
 Forsitan et, stultae dum te iactare maritae 175
 quaeris et iniustis auribus apta loqui,
 in faciem moresque meos nova crimina fingas. (*Her.* 12.173–7)

¹⁹ Fulkerson (2005) 19 suggests a dynamic of active re-writing of their letters between Medea and Hypsipyle, reflecting Jason's ability to turn any woman into a Medea character.

²⁰ Fulkerson (2005) 48–9.

Those limbs that I preserved, a whore embraces, and she reaps the fruit of my labor. And perhaps, when you wish to boast to your fatuous bride and say words fitted to unjust ears, you will fashion new slander against my face and character.

The repetition of *tibi* in *Her.* 12.105–6 underscores the relativity of the moral terms employed by both women.²¹ Medea emphasizes the agency given Jason by his position as focalizer: *moresque meos nova crimina fingas*. A key point of contention for both Medea and Hypsipyle, then, is the ability to control these moral terms, the authority to impose a particular interpretation on the narrative of their intertwined stories.

It is this type of authority that becomes a key concern for the two rivals. Hypsipyle emphasizes the incompatibility of Medea's magic *artes* both with the role of *matrona* to which she aspires, and with Jason's pursuit of heroic fame. Hypsipyle's suggestion that she, too, would become a Medea is in striking contrast to her traditional quality of *pietas*. Hypsipyle recognizes that her loyalty has failed to bring her any reward, and claims that she too, given the chance, would take on a new role.²² Medea likewise attacks Jason for his one-sided decisions about who is to play which role in the story, emphasizing her lack of agency in her apparent transformation into a barbarian *paelex*. Back in Colchis, she claims, she was a *simplex puella*, beguiled by Jason: *vidi etiam lacrimas—sua pars et fraudis in illis. / sic cito sum verbis capta puella tuis* ("and, too, I saw tears—these too had their part in your deception. So quickly was I, as a girl, captured by your words," *Her.* 12.91–2).²³

The legacy, therefore, over which Ovid's heroines contend, and its potential destruction, is poetic as much as familial. The assertion of normative familial roles in *Heroides* 6 is juxtaposed with Hypsipyle's polyptoton of the name Medea, enacting Medea's inability to remain within the bounds of her proper

²¹ Hinds (1993) 30 identifies *Her.* 6.151 (*Medeae Medea forem*) as the point where the two letters converge.

²² Fulkerson (2005) 51–4: the two heroines' fluid identities reflect their desire for a specific role with regard to Jason.

²³ Davis (2012) 42 notes the thematic contrast of Medea as *simplex* with Jason as always deceptive: 12.72, 19, 37, 111; cf. 12.131 on Jason's responsibility for her actions as well as his own. By depicting him as the instigator of their relationship, she exonerates herself from the charge of having bewitched him. On this theme, see Medea's narrative of the tasks faced by Jason in Colchis, emphasizing her own role as a fearful spectator (*Her.* 12.39–52, 92–104).

role: *Medea plus est* ("Medea is something more," *Her.* 6.127). Hypsipyle draws a contrast between the socially defined role in which she operates and Medea's excess. Medea, she hints, will step beyond the parameters of a *matrona* to seize control of Jason's story as well as his children. Medea will emerge as the poetic voice that calls the shots in the three characters' shared story, taking over Jason's ability to (re)define the role that each plays.

Hypsipyle's accusations against her rival increasingly focus on this authorial role. Medea, she suggests, engages in a type of deception to win Jason's love, relying on her *carmina*, rather than proper feminine virtues:

Argolidas timui— nocuit mihi barbara paelex!
 non expectata vulnus ab hoste tuli.
 nec facie meritisque placet, sed carmina novit
 diraque cantata pabula falce metit. (*Her.* 6.81–4)

I feared the Argive women—a barbarian whore is my ruin! I take my wound from an unlooked for enemy. She pleases not by face or virtue, but she is versed in spells and cuts her herbs with a bewitched knife.

male quaeritur herbis
 moribus et forma conciliandus amor. (*Her.* 6.93–4)

Badly sought by potions is love that ought to be won by merit and beauty.

Medea's use of *ars* transgresses the boundaries of female behavior and effectively precludes her from playing the part of Jason's *coniunx*, since her fame continually threatens to outshine his own. And indeed, Hypsipyle argues, this is Medea's goal: to win heroic glory over and above her husband's achievements (*Her.* 6.99–104):²⁴

adde, quod adscribi factis procerumque tuisque
 sese avet, et titulo coniugis uxor obest. 100
 atque aliquis Peliae de partibus acta venenis

²⁴ Of *Her.* 6.83–4, Spentzou (2003) 58–62 describes how Hypsipyle explains the *nefas* of love in terms of Medea's magical arts, in contrast to her own characterization as *casta* and *pudica*; she shows the tension between an idealized *simplicitas* and the erudition that characterizes the heroines' writing present.

inputat et populum, qui sibi credat, habet:
 'non haec Aesonides, sed Phasias Aetine
 aurea Phrixiae terga revellit ovis.'

Add to it, she wants herself to be written in to your deeds and those of your captains, and as wife overwrites the title of husband. And someone from Pelias' faction attributes your deeds to her poisons and persuades the people of it: "Not the son of Aeson, but the Phasian daughter of Aetes seized this golden fleece from Phrixus' ram."

Medea, Hypsipyle warns, will outshine not just Jason but also his companions, taking credit for their retrieval of the Golden Fleece. Her reading offers a proleptic image of the epic tradition in which Jason is continually reduced to playing the weak lover while Medea outshines him in the role of the hero. This threat, that Medea will claim the hero's role, is echoed in Medea's own wish that she and Jason had died on the way back from Colchis (*Her.* 12.119–22):

meritas subeamus in alto,
 tu fraudis poenas, credulitatis ego! 120
 Compressos utinam Symplegades elisissent,
 nostraque adhaerent ossibus ossa tuis ...

Let us suffer the punishments we have deserved on the deep:
 you for deceit, and I for too-eager belief. If only the
 Symplegades had crushed us together, and my bones were
 now cleaving to yours.

The threat that Medea will take over Jason's poetic legacy is realized in her desire for her bones to be mixed with his. The passage eerily echoes the joint burial of Achilles and Patroclus foreshadowed in the *Iliad*, illustrating the joint fame she envisions.²⁵ As Williams has argued, the final line of *Heroides* 12 anticipates Medea's career in the *Metamorphoses*: *nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit* ("Indeed my mind conceives some yet greater deed," *Her.* 12.212). Her ambitious words are picked up in the *Metamorphoses*, and given a distinctly literary bent, as she considers her move to Greece (*Met.* 7.55–61):²⁶

²⁵ *Il.* 23.243–4.

²⁶ Williams (2012) 53. Cf. Davis (2012) 46, who takes the phrase *maius opus* as a reference to Ovid's lost tragedy.

non magna relinquam, 55
 magna sequar: titulum servatae pubis Achivae
 notitiamque soli melioris et oppida, quorum
 hic quoque fama viget, cultusque artesque locorum,
 quemque ego cum rebus, quas totus possidet orbis,
 Aesoniden mutasse velim, quo coniuge felix 60
 et dis cara ferar et vertice sidera tangam.

I will not abandon greatness, but pursue it: the glory of having saved
 the Argive youth and the knowledge of a better realm and towns,
 whose fame flourishes even here, and the culture and arts of those
 places, and that one, the son of Aeson, whom I would choose over all
 that the whole world possesses, as whose wife I will be called blessed
 and dear to the gods, and will touch the stars with my brow.

In Greece, the home of the *artes* she will employ, Medea imagines, she will win
 her poetic immortality. Her journey with Jason will enable her to write her own
 legacy, a poetic career to rival Horace's well-known aspirations to the stars:
quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres, / sublimi feriam sidera vertice ("because if you
 include me among the lyric poets, I will strike the stars with lofty head," Hor.
Carm. 1.1.35–6).²⁷ Medea's self-fashioning as poet in the *Metamorphoses*
 follows the model set out by the *Heroides*: she claims the right to speak in her
 own voice. Medea's desire for fame illustrates exactly how accurate Hypsipyle's
 predictions were, and, furthermore, how her poetic ability is inseparable from her
 destructive potential: the ability to manipulate *carmina* is both her appeal and her
 threat to Jason.²⁸

Roman Speakers in the Argonautica: the Lemnian Episode

In the *Heroides*, both Medea and Hypsipyle vie to assign morally loaded roles to
 themselves and each other, attempting to write the definitive version of their
 story and authorizing their subjective view through the use of traditional

²⁷ Pavlock (2009) 40–1 discusses the affinity that Ovid constructs between Medea and himself,
 particularly in their ability to transform inherited material; she notes the echo of Horace.

²⁸ Pavlock (2009) 38–9 describes the verbal manipulation employed by both Euripides' and
 Ovid's Medea. Spentzou (2003) 88–90 observes that Medea's description of her first sight of Jason
 (12.29–36) shows an association of infatuation and lack of expression (echoed by Hypsipyle at
 6.39–40), a phenomenon she terms "impotent emotionality." Medea's version of events attempts
 to regain a voice against the lack imposed by her relationship with Jason; cf. *Her.* 12.31–6.

language.²⁹ Both manipulate their literary tradition to show the potential for different individuals to inhabit, or claim to inhabit, the same roles. Both women take their role as an injured *matrona* as justification for their subsequent violence (or in Hypsipyle's case, the desire for violence). A Romanized moral vocabulary informs their actions: the ability to manipulate such language, and the network of social relations that it represents, is thus representative of the ability to instigate reward or retaliation under the aegis of traditional *mores*.³⁰ In the two passages of the *Argonautica* that I will examine, Venus employs the same social categories to incite an explosion of tragic violence. These episodes suggest a striking concern with the programmatic function of generic terms in Roman society.³¹ If the women of the *Heroides* authorize their stories and actions through the use of traditional language, the invocation of this dynamic in the *Argonautica* illustrates the potential reappropriation of such language into an agenda at odds with the past it represents. In order to investigate this poetic inheritance, I will focus on the character of Venus, who, I argue, exploits the rhetoric of social paradigms to set the Lemnians and Medea on the paths to violence, effectively externalizing the thought process of the *Heroides*. As she herself says of Fama, *mox omnes agit et motis quatit oppida linguis* ("presently she besets all and causes towns to tremble with frenzied tongues," V. Fl. 2.122); in her hands, language, a product of artifice, is akin to a natural disaster.³²

One of the most striking aspects of Valerius' Lemnian episode is the Romanization of an Eastern community of predatory women. This cultural reframing is centered on the figure of Venus, who uses Roman social titles to persuade the Lemnians of their need, and right, to take vengeance on their husbands. As she prepares to exact revenge for her failed worship (2.98–106), Venus' first move is to send Fama to Lemnos, to plant the seed of injury and resentment in the Lemnian women (V. Fl. 2.131–4):

²⁹ Spentzou (2003) 29 argues that the heroines' struggle to control their destinies is an effort to rewrite their stories over the classical authorities.

³⁰ The causal link between such moral rhetoric and the violence to which it gives rise is underscored by the echo of the final line of *Her.* 12 (*nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit!*; "Truly my mind conceives something greater!" *Her.* 12.212) in Venus' words (speaking as Dryope) on Lemnos (V. Fl. 2.181–5).

³¹ Stover (2003) 123–4 (citing Feeney (1991)).

³² Buckley (2013) 86 shows that Fama and Venus act in tandem to compose the tragic events at Lemnos. Dominik (1997) 31–2 discusses the falsity of Venus' account in Valerius, in comparison with the versions of Apollonius and Statius.

adfore iam luxu turpique cupidine captos
 fare viros carasque toris inducere Thressas.
 haec tibi principia, hinc rabidas dolor undique matres
 instimulet.

(Say that) the men, enslaved by luxury and foul lust, are coming and bringing their precious Thracians to share their beds. This is your place to start, from this will grief inflame the savage women on every side.

Venus' reported speech describes both the substance and effect of moral rhetoric. In her fictitious version of events, the Lemnian men are themselves captivated in the act of taking their captives, acting out Horace's description of Rome overcome by her own Eastern conquests: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* ("captive Greece captured her fierce conqueror," Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.156:). The image of the Lemnian men corrupted by their own conquests (*luxu turpique cupidine captos*) thus invokes Roman discourses on the expansion of empire and the consequent rise of decadence.³³ As D. W. T. Vessey notes, the terms *luxus* and *turpis cupido* are more commonly associated with the degeneracy of the wealthy orient—their application to Thrace is a surprising twist on the trope.³⁴ The effect looks beyond the narrative, creating a point of confluence between the mythological world of the poem and the contemporary reality of its readership. Such language shapes political and social response, prescribing a particular course of action through morally loaded terminology.

When Fama arrives on Lemnos, the scene she encounters complements Venus' method. Her first target, Eurynome, presents an ideal picture of Roman womanhood, the faithful wife working wool in her husband's absence—in other words, a social norm that must be staunchly defended (V. Fl. 2.138–40):

manet illa viro famulasque fatigat
 litoribus, tardi reputant quae tempora belli
 ante torum et longo mulcent insomnia penso.

³³ Vessey (1985) 331 points out that Fama's speech at V. Fl. 2.156–8 (*scis simile ut...*) bases its description of the Thracians on information that "everybody knew," implicitly assuming that Valerius' audience has the same stereotypes in mind.

³⁴ Vessey (1985) 329–30.

She awaits her husband and on the shores wears out her servants,
 who count over the days of slow war by her bed and soothe her
 sleepless nights in long-drawn toil.

In this exemplary domestic tableau, Eurynome presents the ideal target for Venus' attack. Fama happily expands on the theme of corruption as a type of foreign invasion, focusing on the individual injury done to the Lemnian women and the collective threat of moral decay (V. Fl. 2.141–52):

huic dea cum lacrimis et nota veste Neerae
 icta genas 'utinam non hic tibi nuntius essem,
 o soror, aut nostros' inquit 'prius unda dolores
 obruat, in tali quoniam tibi tempore coniunx
 sic merita, votis quem tu fletuque requiris, 145
 heu furit et captae indigno famulatur amore.
 iamque aderunt thalamisque tuis Threissa propinquat,
 non forma, non arte colus, non laude pudoris
 par tibi. nec magni proles praeclara Dorycli,
 picta manus ustoque placet sed barbara mento. 150
 ac tamen hos aliis fors solabere casus
 tu thalamis fatoque leges meliore penates.

To her the goddess comes in tears, in the familiar garb of Neaera, her cheeks stricken, and says, "O sister, I wish I were not the bearer of this news, or that a wave had first overturned the cause of our grief, since now your husband whom you have served so well, whom you seek with prayers and tears, alas! he is crazed and enslaved by unworthy lust for a slave girl. And now they are at hand and a Thracian draws near your bedchamber, your equal neither in beauty, nor skill with the distaff, nor fame for no illustrious child of great Doryclus here, but a barbarian with painted hands and branded face. You may yet perhaps console yourself for these losses with other bridal beds, and choose a home of better fate.

Fama's speech picks up the rhetoric of the *Heroides* to suggest that the Thracian captives threaten the Lemnians' status as *coniuges* and *matres*. The Thracians,

she says, are not just run-of-the-mill prizes of war, but rather rivals for the Lemnians' marriages, beds and homes.³⁵

Fama paints a vivid picture of Thracian barbarity, a theme that inserts the episode into contemporary concerns about imperial expansion, particularly through references to Horatian *topoi*.³⁶ The description of Eurynome's husband enslaved *captae indigno amore* once again recalls the effect of conquest on Rome herself.³⁷ The Horatian allusion illustrates the seductive quality of the exotic, the flip side of fear of the unknown, and the precise threat that the Thracians represent to the Lemnian women. In the Romanized world of Valerius' Lemnos, the experience of the *matronae* comes closer to home.³⁸ Fama's itemized comparison between Eurynome and her putative rival continues this theme, focusing on Roman feminine values as the point of contention (V. Fl. 2.147–9):

iamque aderunt thalamisque tuis Threissa propinquit,
non forma, non arte colus, non laude pudoris
par tibi.

And soon they will be at hand and a Thracian draws near your
bedchamber, your equal in neither beauty, nor the skill of a distaff,
nor fame for chastity.

The effect of Fama's speech is jarring, employing contemporary Roman terminology from a mythological, Eastern perspective.³⁹ The comparison also brings to mind a sinister Homeric point of reference, Agamemnon's assertion that he prefers his captive Chryseis to his wife Clytaimnestra at the beginning of the *Iliad*.⁴⁰ This allusion anticipates violence in both the long and short term: Agamemnon's infatuation is the cause not only of Achilles' withdrawal from the Trojan War, but also, when transferred to a new object, Cassandra, of

³⁵ Dinter (2013) 184 notes how Valerius expands on Apollonius' causation to suggest that the Thracian women cause the Lemnians to fear becoming slaves in their own homes; he observes that this exaggerated fear would be clearly irrational to the contemporary Roman audience.

³⁶ Spaltenstein (2002) 349–50.

³⁷ Spaltenstein (2002) 349.

³⁸ Spaltenstein (2002) 350 notes a reference to Hor. *Carm.* 3.9.9, in which Thrace is exotic and home to exotic women.

³⁹ Vessey (1985) 330–1.

⁴⁰ Spaltenstein (2002) 349. Cf. *Il.* 1.115 and *Od.* 5.212.

Agamemnon's own death at the hands of his wife. The seduction of the exotic, in Fama's representation, is socially destructive for both individual and community.

Once again, family inheritance is a central issue. Fama describes the Thracians as vindictive *novercae*, as well as barbarian *paelices* (V. Fl. 2.153–5):

me tua matris egens damnataque paelice proles
exanimat, quam iam miseros transversa tuentem
letalesque dapes infectaque pocula cerno.

But your children, motherless and condemned to a mistress' hands,
take my breath away; already I see her eyeing the pitiful ones, I see
poisoned feasts and tainted cups...

In other words, these Thracian captives are precisely the type of *novercae* against whom both Hypsipyle and Medea had aligned themselves in the *Heroides*. The irony, of course, is that it is the *matronae* who turn out to be the most violent characters in the story. Names, assumed identities, are, in this framework, potentially deceptive. And the question of which literary role each character plays is at the center of this scene. Venus and Fama not only follow the traditional description of stepmothers as villains, but also activate the literary memory of the story told by the Apollonian Hypsipyle to Jason, a speech characterized as *μύθοισι αἰμυλίοισιν* ("wily words," A. R. 1.792).⁴¹ As she tells it, the Lemnian women and their legitimate children did in fact suffer at the hands of the Thracian captives: *ἀτιμάζοντο δὲ τέκνα / γνήσι' ἐνὶ μεγάροις, σκοτὶ δ' ἄρα θάλλε γενέθλη*. ("their true-born children were dishonored in their halls, while the illegitimate offspring flourished," A. R. 1.809–10). While this account does not completely coincide with Apollonius' own summary, it provides the basis, however tenuous, for the Lemnian women's claim to justice. Fama's words activate fears that resonate in and out of the text, in the collective literary memory of the Lemnian women and in the lived experience of Valerius' Roman audience. The Lemnians' response to Fama extends the Roman resonances of the scene (V. Fl. 2.167–9):

tum voce deos, tum questibus implent,
oscula iamque toris atque oscula postibus ipsis
ingeminant lacrimisque iterum visuque morantur.

⁴¹ See Spaltenstein (2002) 350 on the allusion; cf. Ov. *Met.* 1.146–7; Verg. *G.* 2.128–30.

Then they inundate the gods with prayer, then with lament and now
they redouble their kisses on their beds, now on their very doorposts
and they linger over their tears and the sight.

Individual betrayal produces a striking collective reaction, following the example of the disruptive part played by Fama and her double Allecto in *Aeneid* 7.⁴² As Hardie shows, these two figures act in parallel as agents of Juno's attempts to 'write the script' of her own *Aeneid*, a fit model for Venus' theatrics in the *Argonautica*. Furthermore, the image of the women leaving their beds and homes with kisses clearly recalls the sack of Troy in *Aeneid* 2, adding a second dimension of literary tradition: *tum pauidae tectis matres ingentibus errant / amplexaeque tenent postis atque oscula figunt* ("then fearful mothers wandered through the lofty halls, and held fast the doorposts and planted kisses on them," *Aen.* 2.489–90). The reference to the *Aeneid* reinforces the picture of a city under foreign invasion, distancing the Lemnian men from the female community they left behind.⁴³

The invocation of the fall of Troy has an additional destabilizing effect for Valerius' audience. By calling to mind the experience of Rome's Trojan ancestors, Valerius suggests a further resonance in the Lemnian episode: the characterization of Venus and her problematic role as the instigator of this familial *nefas*.⁴⁴ Valerius' description of her vengeful aspect problematically juxtaposes the Lucretian *Aeneadam genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas, alma Venus* ("mother of the Aeneadae, delight of men and gods, kindly Venus," *Lucr.* 1.1–2) with the image of a Fury bent on wreaking havoc (*V. Fl.* 2.102–6):

neque enim alma videri
tantum: eadem tereti crinem subnectitur auro
sidereos diffusa sinus, eadem effera et ingens
et maculis suffecta genas pinumque sonantem
virginibus Stygiis nigramque simillima pallam.

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⁴² Hardie (2009) 103–4. On Fama in the *Argonautica*, see Vessey (1985) 331.

⁴³ Spaltenstein (2002) 354; cf. *Aen.* 2.490; *A. R.* 4.26; *Argo.* 4.373; 8.6.

⁴⁴ Venus' characterization recalls Vergil's Helen in the disputed "Helen episode" (*Troiae et patriae communis Erinys*; "the common curse of Troy and her homeland," *Aen.* 2.573); Valerius will later apply this comparison to Medea (8.395–6). Venus thus prefigures both Medea and Helen as the instigator of international warfare.

iam fuge, iam dubiae donum rape mentis et ensem
tu potius, miser, oro, tene!

Now flee both city and me, father! No enemy, no Thracians gain the
walls bent on revenge: this is our crime, ask not, who is the author!
Now flee, now seize on the gift of my doubtful mind and, poor man,
you, I beg you, take the sword instead!

The two passages illustrate the instability of ethical categories, as the loyal Hypsipyle is revealed to be frighteningly changeable.⁴⁹ In the first, Valerius continues his Romanization of the episode, praising Hypsipyle as the *decus et patriae laus* and linking her fame to the preservation of the Roman state.⁵⁰ His characterization of Hypsipyle as an exemplary figure has sinister implications in a world in which ethical language acts as a catalyst for the type of violence carried out by the Lemnian women. In the second, Hypsipyle shows that she is aware of her Ovidian assertion *Medeae Medea forem* ("I would be Medea to Medea," *Her.* 6.151), and, though she chooses the moral course, she still reserves the right to transformation.

Through his focus on Venus as the linchpin between *exemplum* and *monstrum*, Valerius highlights a problematic aspect of the Roman relationship to the past: the desire to use *exempla* to inform ethical assessment and action in the present. Venus' association with Roman origins brings this message close to home, representing the forces of cohesion as well as division. Her manipulation of moral terms, and moralized identities, shows the potential for abuse inherent in the construction of stories told about exemplary figures both past and present.

Circe's Ovidian Carmina

In the second of our two Argonautic scenes, Venus once again picks up on the opportunity for revisionist storytelling, following the example of the Ovidian heroines to bring the story full circle. Disguising herself as Medea's aunt Circe, Venus tells a radically cleaned-up version of Circe's career in Italy, using her as a

⁴⁹ The description of Hypsipyle as the *decus et patriae laus una* ("the splendor and single glory of her homeland," V. Fl. 2.243) finds an interesting counterpoint in the simile that describes Medea handing over her potions to Jason: *non secus ac patriam pariter famamque decusque / obicit* ("just as if she offers her homeland together with her reputation and honor," V. Fl. 7.459–60).

⁵⁰ Gibson (2013) 84 cites Vergil's praise of Nisus and Euryalus (*Aen.* 9.446–9) as the model for this speech. Vessey (1985) 335 suggests that the phrase *decus et patriae laus* assimilates Hypsipyle into the Roman ideal of womankind.

good familial *exemplum* to prompt Medea to head west.⁵¹ Just as in the Lemnian episode, Venus uses normative social categories to suggest to Medea that the course of action she desires is also appropriate, concealing the violence that lurks in the background.

One of the abiding challenges of Medea's literary legacy is how to reconcile her characterizations as girl and witch, an epic Nausicaa and a tragic Clytemnestra.⁵² Through Circe's maternal voice, Venus gives Valerius' Medea an alternate framework, a Romanized ethical discourse of exemplarity, to authorize her decision to help Jason.⁵³ She is both characterized as a victim of Venus (and Juno) and at the same time taught to grow into her own tragic myth, a true *virgo nocens* ("baneful maiden," 8.426).⁵⁴ Circe's strategy follows that of her literary predecessors: in the *Heroides*, both Medea and Hypsipyle attempt to reduce their rivals to stereotypes, essentially, to the negative *exempla* of the literary tradition.

Ripoll observes that Valerius reconstructs the character of Medea with an emphasis on *pietas* and *pudor*.⁵⁵ These qualities, he suggests, increase her inner moral conflict and slow her decision to help Jason, creating a continual sense of culpability. This makes her particularly vulnerable to Venus' brand of manipulation: Medea's piety naturally inclines to following the advice of her elders (V. Fl. 7.231–6):⁵⁶

fas mihi non habiles, fas et tibi linquere Colchos.
et nunc Ausonii coniunx ego regia Pici
nec mihi flammiferis horrent ibi pascua tauris
meque vides Tusci dominam maris: at tibi quinam
Sauromatae, miseranda, proci? cui vadis Hiberno, 235

⁵¹ Stover (2011) 174 observes that *inprovisa* ("unexpected," V. Fl. 7.210) to describe Venus' sudden appearance underscores the unique addition to the myth.

⁵² On Medea's duality, see Buxton (2010) 25–38. Guastella (2001) 200 argues that Seneca's Medea in particular is deeply divided between her roles as *virgo* and *coniunx* or *mater*.

⁵³ Zissos (2012) 112 shows that Venus' rhetorical argument is especially important in terms of causation, since Valerius' Medea prioritizes morality over her own desires.

⁵⁴ On Medea's Valerian characterization, see Davis (2016).

⁵⁵ Ripoll (2004) 195. He suggests that Valerius' gods cannot be read allegorically in elision with Medea's inner struggles; rather, divine manipulation coordinates with Medea's natural emotional inclinations, giving her a dual status of victim and culpable tragic heroine (196–8).

⁵⁶ Stover (2011) 173 and Augoustakis (2010) 1–4 have recently shown that Venus, in disguise as Circe, speaks as a mother to her daughter. Augoustakis suggests that this scene reworks the speech of Chalciope to Apollonius' Medea at A. R. 3.678–80.

ei mihi, vel saevo coniunx non una Gelono?

My right was it, and right is it for you, to leave the unsuitable Colchians. And now I am the royal wife of Ausonian Picus, and my fields do not bristle with flame-bearing bulls and you see in me the mistress of the Tuscan sea: but what sort of suitors, poor girl, are the Sauromatians for you? To what Hiberian, alas! or what cruel man of the Geloni will you go, one wife of many?

As Antony Augoustakis points out, Venus borrows the term *fas* from Roman ritual and religious activity.⁵⁷ While Apollonius' Circe was adamantly against Medea's alliance with Jason, Venus' version of Circe employs the same type of rhetoric that she used on Lemnos to justify Medea's flight.⁵⁸ Venus argues that it is a straightforward question of Medea's rights (confirmed by her own example) and disparages Medea's potential local suitors as *saevi* barbarians. Venus exploits Medea's sense of her own social position and obligations, urging her to make a match worthy of her royal status. In effect, she urges Medea to the same course of action as Dido in Carthage: refusing to marry a local king, both Dido and Medea turn to an unreliable stranger for their social and political status, and in both cases, this backfires. Venus constructs a false opposition between "us" and "them", suggesting that Circe and Medea are not cut from the same cloth as the Colchians and their neighbors.

This is a distinction we have seen before: Venus' characterization of the Thracian women as *saevae paelices* and *novercae* in the Lemnian episode plays on the same type of social categorization, to suggest a narrative that justifies the Lemnians' desire for revenge. In order to do the same for Medea, Venus reworks the Ovidian story of Circe and Picus, re-casting Circe as Picus' lawful *coniunx* and queen of a Golden Age land.⁵⁹ She omits any reference to Canens, Picus' wife in the *Metamorphoses*, a nymph who sings as well as Orpheus (*Met.* 14.335–40).⁶⁰

haec ubi nubilibus primum maturuit annis,
praeposito cunctis Laurenti tradita Pico est,

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⁵⁷ Augoustakis (2010) 4.

⁵⁸ Stover (2011) 182; cf. A. R. 4.745–8.

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that Circe's reaction to Picus in the *Metamorphoses* is same as Medea's to Jason in the *Argonautica*; cf. *Met.* 14.348–51, V. Fl. 5.373–5.

⁶⁰ For Canens' title of *coniunx*, see *Met.* 14.416–18.

rara quidem facie, sed rarior arte canendi,
 unde Canens dicta est: silvas et saxa movere
 et mulcere feras et flumina longa morari
 ore suo volucresque vagas retinere solebat. 340

When this one first reached the age of marriage, she was given to Picus of Laurentum, chosen above all, a girl of rare beauty, and even more rare gift of song, whence she was called Canens: by her voice she used to move the forests and rocks and tame wild animals, bring far-running rivers to a halt and delay the wandering birds.

Canens, it seems, is not so very different from a Medea or a Circe herself: her *carmina* give her power over the natural world. It is precisely by singing, however, that Circe exacts her revenge for Picus' rejection:

'non' ait 'effugies, vento rapiare licebit,
 si modo me novi, si non evanuit omnis
 herbarum virtus, nec me mea carmina fallunt.' (*Met.* 14.355–7)

'Though you be snatched away by the wind,' she said, 'you will not escape, if I know my own self, if all the potency of herbs has not vanished, nor my songs deceive me.'

tum bis ad occasus, bis se convertit ad ortus,
 ter iuvenem baculo tetigit, tria carmina dixit ...
 nec quicquam antiquum Pico nisi nomina restat. (*Met.* 14.386–96)

Then twice to the west, twice to the east she turned herself, thrice she touched the youth with her wand, three spells she sang ... nothing remained to Picus of his former self, besides his name.

Circe's combination of *ars* and *carmina* achieve her second, if not her first, goal; although she cannot win Picus, she can rewrite the script for his future. Picus retains only his name, a title that no longer reflects his identity. Venus takes over the authorial role, and with it the opportunity to recast her fellow characters. As Servius remarks of Vergil's reference to this story in *Aeneid* 7, *coniunx vero non quae erat, sed quae esse cupiebat* ('Indeed, 'wife' is not what she was, but what

she longed to be," Servius on *Aen.* 7.190).⁶¹ In the *Argonautica*, Venus effectively redefines Circe's status as a *coniunx* by incorporating the storyline that Circe herself desired.

Against this background, Venus' impersonation of Circe is all the more plausible: she rewrites the Latin epic tradition on Circe and Picus to create an exemplary narrative that sets Medea on the desired course of action, in which she, too, will gain the authorial upper hand (V. Fl. 7.347–9):⁶²

testor cara tuas Circe Titania voces,
te ducente sequor, tua me, grandaeva, fatigant
consilia et monitis cedo minor.

I call, dear Titanian Circe, your words to witness, I follow your lead,
your counsels, my elder, wear me down and I, the younger, yield to
your advice.

Despite her revisionist tendencies, Venus reads her audience correctly. Medea proves susceptible to precisely the type of rhetoric that Venus employs, following the lead of the fictive Circe as a relative, an elder, and a mother figure (V. Fl. 7.375–87):⁶³

qualis adhuc teneros ubi primum pallida fetus	375
mater ab excelso produxit in aera nido	
hortaturque sequi brevibusque insurgere pinnis;	
illos caerulei primus ferit horror Olympi	
iamque redire rogant adsuetaque quaeritur arbor.	
haud aliter caecae per moenia deficit urbis	380
incedens horretque domos Medea silentes	
hic iterum extremae nequiquam in limine portae	
substitit atque iterum fletus animique soluti	

⁶¹ Stover (2011) 184–5; *Aen.* 7.187–91. By invoking Vergil's version of this myth, Ovid and Valerius offer an additional way of reading Venus' manipulation of the story: she is overwriting the Latin epic tradition on Circe, challenging the earlier versions of the story she tells Medea.

⁶² As Stover (2011) 172 points out, Venus offers Medea a series of *exempla* overlayed with the themes of Medea's own literary history, in a failed attempt to offer appropriate *comparanda* for the present situation. He argues that the use of Ariadne as a model echoes the Apollonian Jason's comparison of the two at A. R. 3.997–1007.

⁶³ Venus and Medea will later exchange roles at V. Fl. 7.394, as Medea begins to gather her magical powers: *iamque tremens longe sequitur Venus* ("and now Venus in fear follows far behind").

respexitque deam paulumque his vocibus haesit:
 'ipse rogat certe meque ipse implorat Iason? 385
 nullane culpa subest, labes non ulla pudoris,
 nullus amor? nec turpe viro servire precanti?'

As when a mother, pale with fright, first leads her offspring still young, from the lofty nest into the air and urges them to follow and to rise on little wings; at first horror at the cerulean sky strikes them and now they beg to return and look for their accustomed tree. Just so does Medea falter as she passes through the walls of the blind city and shudders at the silent houses, and here again in vain she halts at the threshold of the final gate and her tears of passion were let loose and she looks again to the goddess and with these words holds her fast: "Does Jason himself truly ask and himself implores me? There is no fault here, no stain of modesty, no passion? It is not shameful to help a man who begs?"

Medea's concern for the potential stain on her reputation illustrates why the moral rhetoric of barbarism, royalty, and familial pride is so effective. Like the Lemnian women, she too is deeply concerned for personal honor and its recognition in the public sphere. By offering her an ethical framework that gives legitimacy to her natural inclination, Venus sets the stage for Medea's complete transformation from *virgo* to *nocens*, anticipating the dynamics of Ovid's (past and future) heroine.⁶⁴ In the *Argonautica*, then, Venus replaces Jason as the agent who transforms the women with whom she comes in to contact from *simplices puellae* to *saevae novercae*.⁶⁵

In this later episode, Venus' methods have not changed, but the terms she employs have already been undermined by their use to incite such overwhelming violence in the Lemnian episode. Her selective re-writing of both the Lemnian script and Circe's story looks back to the fluidity of identity illustrated by the interactive name-calling of the *Heroides*. Morally loaded terms and titles are re-appropriated and re-applied from different perspectives, using the same language to direct sympathy and justice in wholly different directions. Outside the circumscribed world of the *Heroides*, however, the use of such self-authorizing

⁶⁴ Stover (2011) 181 notes that Venus at V. Fl. 7.225–6 echoes Medea at *Met.* 7.20–1.

⁶⁵ The success of Venus' moral distinctions carries into the future anticipated in the temple epiphany in Colchis (V. Fl. 5.446–8), in which the same categories are used to oppose Medea and Creusa in the tragic finale of the Argonautic myth.

language threatens to destabilize the very social context from which it draws its moral valence. Venus enacts the dangers of willful manipulation of traditional language, exploiting the vulnerability of rhetorical and literary *topoi* to justify actions that are, under a different guise, wholly reprehensible. The invocation of the past to draw ethical distinctions in the present gives rise to Medea's infanticide, the Lemnian massacre, and, if she could only manage it, Hypsipyle's desired revenge. Wife, witch, mother, and whore, the *carmina* of Ovid's heroines enact the authorization of alternate literary voices through the appropriation of language sanctioned by tradition. The vulnerability of this tradition, of literary roles or social *exempla*, to be re-cycled in such a way illustrates the fact that seemingly canonical versions of the past, both mythological and historical, could be rewritten in their own language.

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