

Commentary on Apollonius' *Argonautica* 4.6-46

Apollonius opens book 4 with Medea's emotional collapse and fleeing of Colchis after Jason's successful completion of the task to obtain the Golden Fleece. Instead of focusing on the celebrations of the Argonauts, the focus is upon Medea and the emotional consequences from her decisions from Book 3 are followed up within the beginning of Book 4. The short passage introduces dark themes which are a counter to the themes within Book 3, where events happened within daylight, this passage takes place in the darkness of night. Medea's decision to go to exile by following Jason is agonised over within the confines of her bedroom, before she departs alone down a path towards Jason and the Argonauts. There are also feelings of shame, and fear, which have intensified since the speech in Book 3¹.

Apollonius is writing using Homeric influences. Aeetes plotting by night, after Jason completed his test, can be referenced to Book 7 of the *Iliad* where the Achaeans had constructed the ramparts to protect their ships, Zeus was plotting at night devising more evils.² The departure of Medea also contains Homeric references, in which Pavlou argues that by covering her face when she flees to not be recognised, this is like Nausicaa in *Odyssey* who refuses to walk with Odysseus to town to avoid gossip.³ Apollonius also uses similes within the passage, in which Medea is described as a *κεμῆς* (young deer)⁴ and as Hunter⁵ explains in 4.35-40, Medea is compared to a girl from a rich family that has been captured in war.

Despite Medea only being introduced in Book 3, Apollonius uses the start of Book 4 to frame Medea as the centre of the narrative with the use of Homeric simile and

¹ Apoll. Rhod. 3.771-801

² Hom. *Il.* 7.476-9

³ Pavlou, (2009), p. 192

⁴ Apoll. Rhod. 4.12

⁵ Hunter, (1993), p. 66

using the domestic setting to place Medea as the main antagonist for Book 4. As DeForest⁶ states, placing Medea as central to the poem takes its allusion from the *Iliad*, where the departure of Achilles, and eventual return, is replaced by the departure of Heracles to continue his story and replaced by Medea. Removing Heracles and replacing him with Medea changes the direction of the Epic from one about Jason and the Argonauts' quest, to a prequel of Euripides' *Medea*.

The beginning of book 4 marks a distinct shift from the events in the previous book, which imports some doubt into the reasoning behind Medea's fleeing from Colchis. Medea, *κούρην Αλήτεω πολυφάρμακον* (daughter of Aeetes, expert in magical drugs),⁷ having successfully used her knowledge to help Jason succeed in the improbable task of yoking the fire-breathing oxen, ploughing the field, planting the teeth, and defeating the men who had grown from the earth,⁸ is now faced with the knowledge she has betrayed her father. The opening scene within book 4 starts with the narrator evoking a muse to continue the story as they are unsure whether it was love, or panic, as the reason Medea will flee Colchis.⁹ However at the beginning of book 3, the narrator calls upon the Muse *Erato* to tell the story of how Medea's love meant Jason could return the fleece to Iolcus.¹⁰

In lines 4.6-10, the narration focuses on Aeetes and his plans to trap the Argonauts, angry that Jason has completed the contest, and surmising that his daughters must have been involved. Within book 3, Aeetes is shown as quick to anger¹¹ and yet can also control his emotions enough to restrain himself from killing, instead planning a

⁶ DeForest, (1994), p. 123

⁷ Apoll. Rhod. 3.27

⁸ Apoll. Rhod. 3.1246-1407

⁹ Apoll. Rhod. 4.1-5

¹⁰ Apoll. Rhod. 3.1-3

¹¹ Apoll. Rhod. 3.382-385

test of strength.¹² Aeetes, now the test has been successfully completed although with help, still does not go to killing Jason and the Argonauts outright, instead focusing on an inescapable trap. Karamitsou puts forward a compelling argument that Aeetes is meant to be represented as a tragic figure,¹³ using Aristotle's *Poetics*¹⁴ as the framework, in that Aeetes is neither a wholly good nor wholly bad person, is a part of nobility, and his downfall is because of a flaw.

Aeetes' flaw, of being quick to anger, is because of a prophecy from his father Helios, that he will need to avoid the treachery and plots of his own family. Aeetes did not see his daughters as able to plot treachery against him, nor his son Apsyrtus, and therefore he only viewed his grandchildren from Chalciope and Phrixus with the ability to follow through with the prophecy.¹⁵ Aeetes at this point correctly surmises that both of his daughters were involved. Apollonius has introduced the flaw of Aeetes, in that he did not suspect his children, as his hubris had, until this point, ensured that his test was improbable to be defeated. However, the realisation that that his thoughts about how his children would not betray him comes to the fore here. Therefore, it is assumed that the trap Aeetes is planning for Jason and the Argonauts will also be a trap for his daughters. While there is not any indication of what the trap will be, it seems he will be indirectly responsible for the killing of his daughters. The awareness that Medea will end up killing her own children, because of anger, in Euripides' tragedy¹⁶ is suggestive that violent rage resulting in death is a trait that has been passed down to Medea through her father.

Aeetes planning through the night with his advisors, in which Clare¹⁷ argues that it is

¹² Apoll. Rhod. 3.396-400

¹³ Karamitsou, (2023)

¹⁴ Aristot. *Poet.* 1452^b28 – 1453^a16

¹⁵ Apoll. Rhod. 3.598-608

¹⁶ Eur. *Med.*

¹⁷ Clare, (2002), pp. 218–219

reminiscent with the *Iliad* Book 7 and Zeus plotting. The allusion here is that Aeetes is showing godlike arrogance, another flaw of his character, as he does not possess the “omniscience and omnipotence of Zeus¹⁸.” The acknowledgment that his daughters must have been involved makes Aeetes feel he is one step ahead.

Ironically, it is another god, Hera, who directly keeps Medea one step ahead of her father, and indirectly the Argonauts a step ahead of Aeetes. The setting of where this discussion is taking place, in Aeetes’ palace, with the ὅσσοι ἄριστοι¹⁹ (best of his men), counters to where Medea is introduced within Book 4, her bedroom, and brings into focus the difference between the genders and their place within the household.

The deer simile marks the first major attempt in Book 4 to externalise Medea’s psychological panic through Homeric imagery. Within line 11, Hera is said to have “ἀλεγεινότατον κραδίη φόβον”²⁰ (cast extreme fear into [Medea’s] heart). This is not the first time that goddesses have been described within the bedroom setting. In Book 3, Hera and Athena visit Aphrodite to persuade her to gain Eros’ help, and ultimately the reason for Medea’s falling in love with Jason so she can help Jason succeed in obtaining the golden fleece. The contrast is striking but also emphasises that Medea is currently being manipulated by divinity. This manipulation makes Medea flee “ἢ ἔτε τις κούφη κεμάς” (like a nimble fawn). The Homeric simile of using a deer is discussed in detail by Hunter where within the *Iliad* the use of his simile is like “the rout of a soldier or army²¹.” The imagery of a young deer being hunted elicits the feelings that would be felt. Fear and panic, and invoking the fight or

¹⁸ Clare, (2002), p. 219

¹⁹ Apoll. Rhod. 4.6

²⁰ Apoll. Rhod. 4.11

²¹ Hunter, (1987), p. 136; (1993), pp. 65–66

flight response, which in Medea's case is flight. The change from Homer's *Iliad*, where Odysseus and Diomedes chase Dolon like hounds²², Medea is being cast into the role of Dolon. She will run, under the cover of darkness, to escape what will become her pursuers. Effe²³ argues that Apollonius uses this to form the psychological and thematic intensification for the flight Medea is about to take. While this is a good explanation, the simile goes further. Medea is aware that the servants who were with her when she first met Jason have loyalty to the house, not to her. The knowledge that she betrayed her father for Jason is soon to become known. As Medea is aware of this, the simile can be shown to be fear of her father and the Colchians, as once they are aware of her betrayal, she will be hunted by them. Medea is vulnerable, and if she does not depart, she will not have protection from the 'hunters' and, just like a fawn that does not have the protection of its mother, would be easy to find and 'rout.'

Medea's response to this is reminiscent to that of her response to her abandonment by Jason in Euripides' *Medea*. She moans in woeful pain, tears at her hair, and clutches her throat, which is similar to the description of Medea by the Nurse, and her off stage wailings.²⁴ Apollonius uses repetitive wording here to emphasise the pain Medea is feeling, "πυκνὰ" being repeated.²⁵ Here Hunter argues that Apollonius is using Homeric allusions.²⁶ In the *Iliad* Agamemnon tears at his hair and wails²⁷ while lamenting the state of his army, and ultimately his own position. Medea is lamenting her own position and, like Agamemnon who will seek out Nestor in the

²² Hom. *Il.* 10.360

²³ Effe, (2008), p. 156

²⁴ Eur. *Med.* 96-97; 111-112; 144-147

²⁵ Apoll. Rhod. 4.18

²⁶ Hunter R L, (2015), p. 87

²⁷ Home. *Il.* 10.15-16

night, Medea will end up seeking out Jason in the night. However, in this, her actions are turned towards her and not others. As in Book 3²⁸ Medea contemplates suicide using poison, and as before it is Hera that intervenes. The narrative is that Hera ensures Medea flees with Phrixus' Sons, her cousins. This is especially important for the rest of his section, as the focus is upon Medea's departure from her family home to join Jason. From Book 3, the audience have been told that the reason Medea has fallen for Jason is because of Hera and Athena persuading Eros, indirectly, to ensure this would take place.²⁹

The description of fear that envelops Medea;

...ἐν δέ οἱ ὄσσε

*πλήτο πυρός, δεινὸν δὲ περιβρομέεσκον ἀκουαί, ...*³⁰

evokes imagery of lyric poetry from Sappho describing the feelings of love that overtakes the human body.

ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε, λεπτον

δ' αὖτις χρωὶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν

ὀππατεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-

βεισι δ' ἀκουαί...

and my tongue fails,

at once a fine fire runs under my skin

²⁸ Apoll. Rhod. 3.818

²⁹ Apoll. Rhod. 3.6-29

³⁰ Apoll. Rhod 4.16-17

and my eyes see nothing,
my ears fill with rumbling...³¹

Apollonius here is alluding to lyric love poetry to describe the feelings of fear. The feeling of fear is close to that of love, and sometimes it can be indistinguishable. Sappho describing the bodily response to a feeling of love is all encompassing. The language Apollonius uses is similar, especially with the rumbling within the ears. This imagery used within this passage is similar to the passage within Book 3³², when Medea first meets Jason, and her actions are attributed to love. Dyck and Hunter³³ put forth persuasive arguments that Apollonius uses this as a narrative device, linking to the start of Book 4, where the narrator is unable to determine whether Medea's actions are a result of love or because of panic. This device reinforces the feeling that neither the narrator nor the Muse that has been invoked is able to determine the actions from love or panic. This is further reinforced when the Moon speaks out during the flight of Medea, thinking it is because of love that Medea flees her family home. Apollonius in using similar language of lyric love poetry keeps the ambiguousness of the reason for Medea fleeing an unanswered question, as the narrator and gods are also not aligned in the reason for Medea's night abscondment from her family home.

Medea's *φάρμακα* description within Book 4 is reminiscent of Book 3, when Medea was contemplating whether to agree to Chalciope's request to help Jason, and therefore the Argonauts, in their quest for the Golden Fleece. In both, Medea is contemplating suicide using drugs. Apollonius describing Medea with drugs is

³¹ Sap. 31. Translation by myself.

³² Apoll. Rhod 3.1008-1025

³³ Hunter, (1987), p. 135; Dyck, (1989), p. 458

drawing upon earlier narratives which emphasises Medea knowing many drugs.

Homer's version of a Medea figure, Agamede, is described within the *Iliad* as 'knowing all the drugs that the earth bears.'³⁴ Mimnermus, writing in the 7th Century BC, wrote about how Jason would not have brought back the fleece from Aea³⁵, although the mention of Medea is now lost to us from this fragment. There are other fragments that have survived to us dated from the 6th Century BC³⁶ which suggests that the mythology surrounding Medea was already fully formed, and well known in the Graeco world, before Euripides and Apollonius. A lost play of Sophocles, *PIZOTOMOI*, (Root-Cutters) written within the same era of Euripides, explains how Medea harvested the plants, including her state of dress, tools, and noises made.³⁷ From these, Apollonius has not reinvented the tradition surrounding Medea, instead emphasising what was already established about Medea within his epic.

Fantuzzi explains Apollonius' treatment of the magic of Medea including how her status has now changed due to her helping Jason win the Fleece.³⁸ Apollonius' emphasis on *φάρμακα* complicates Medea's agency, raising the question of whether her actions are divinely controlled or self-directed.³⁹ This is reiterated later in the text with the moon where it is explained how Medea uses the moon for her incantations.⁴⁰ However this goes further. The ability for Medea to manipulate and control is, at this point, being removed. Medea's knowledge of drugs means she can alter the reality around her, or for those she chooses to help. The usual becomes unusual. For Medea to possess this knowledge and ability, she is almost connected

³⁴ Hom. *Il.* 11.738-741

³⁵ Ogden Daniel, (2002), p. 312

³⁶ Ogden Daniel, (2002), pp. 312-313

³⁷ Lloyd-Jones, (1996), pp. 268-271

³⁸ Fantuzzi, (2008), especially pp. 301-302

³⁹ Hunter, (1987), p. 135

⁴⁰ Apoll. Rhod. 4.57-65

to a godlike figure. Again, Apollonius leaves this open ended, and whether Medea is under control of the gods, or she is controlling her own actions, is not easy to conclude.

Apollonius next shifts from psychological terror to domestic farewell ritual. In lines 26-29, Medea is shortly going to leave her bedchamber, which she is saying farewell symbolically to her current life. She strokes the *δικλίδας* (doorpost) which alludes to the Homeric *δικλίδες*⁴¹. Hulse explains in detail why this phraseology is difficult to match Homeric usage.⁴²

Medea saying farewell indicates the change of her domestic life, surrounded by family, to what she hopes will be a married life in a foreign land. The symbolic safety of her bedchamber, her home, is lost to her. Thalmann explores this in detail. The link between Book 4 Medea and the bed chamber of Aphrodite in Book 3,⁴³ where Aphrodite's bedroom is linked to marital intimacy, Medea's shelter's her virginity. The process of Medea physically saying farewell to her bedroom is Medea saying goodbye to her virginal status. She is going into exile.

There is a stark contrast with Aeetes. While Aeetes is surrounded by his trusted men, plotting revenge against Jason and the Argonauts, Medea is alone, and apart from Hera driving her to flee, the process of how this will be completed is decided by Medea alone.

Medea's speech in Lines 30-33 indicates a wish, one which is similar to the start of Euripides' *Medea*.

⁴¹ Hom. *Od.* 2.345; 17.268; *Il.* 12.455.

⁴² Hulse, (2023)

⁴³ Thalmann, (2011), pp. 138–139

“Αἶθε σε πόντος

ξεῖνε διέρραισεν πρὶν Κολχίδα γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι.”

“Would that the sea

had smashed you to pieces, stranger, before you had come to the land of Colchis.”⁴⁴

Medea wishes that Jason had never reached the Colchian land. The start of Euripides’ *Medea* has the same wish, instead voiced by the nurse.⁴⁵ The premonition of what will happen once Medea joins Jason is well established, and this phraseology is Apollonius once again alluding to the myth surrounding Medea from previous authors.⁴⁶

Medea’s wish reiterates the beginning of Book 4. The narrator is unsure of Medea’s mind, whether it is fear or love for the reason of her imposing exile upon herself. Another option that Apollonius introduces in this is necessity. Medea is aware her choices are now extremely limited, and the reason why they are limited is because of the arrival of Jason. However, Jason is also her only chance to survive. Once again the ambiguity of whether Medea is acting out of fear, or love, is still not resolved but the consequences of her actions are clear.

Lines 35-40 focus on the fleeing from her home. Apollonius uses another simile, comparing Medea to one who is to become a slave, almost as a spoil of war. This passage fulfils Medea’s fall from that of a life of a daughter of the king, to someone who is going to be subordinate in a world that is not her own, away from everyone she knows. The Homeric allusion is clear to see. In the *Iliad*, Briseis, a princess of

⁴⁴ Apoll. Rhod. 4.32-33

⁴⁵ Eur. *Med.* 1-2

⁴⁶ As previously mentioned, there are fragments about the previous stories of Medea, and of Jason, which shows that Apollonius’ Epic is not original. We are unaware of how much has been lost.

Lyrnessus through marriage, is a war prize of Achilles. Her status has changed, and to ensure her ongoing survival, she must be submissive, while hoping that her captor, Achilles, eventually marries her.⁴⁷ Medea is similar, and needs to persuade Jason to marry her. Her status is about to change, she will go from a princess of Colchis to someone who is relying on another for status and protection, a fragile alliance in which they require the other to keep to their word. Both are thrust into servitude, both will end up captives of a bad master (Agamemnon for Briseis, Jason for Medea), and for both, they once again end up alone in a foreign country.⁴⁸

Hunter discusses this simile in detail, and argues that Helen's flight from Sparta is similar to Medea's flight, whereby Helen's beauty is just as dangerous as Medea's magic.⁴⁹ Hunter also explains that the story of Helen to Troy was disastrous to the city as Medea will be.

This simile is a strong premonition of future events, especially within Euripides' *Medea*. Medea is alone, in a foreign world, abandoned by her husband, and lost the protection that brought. Her life, once she decides to leave Colchis, is going to be difficult.

The flight of Medea from her bedroom is a contrast to Medea leaving in Book 3. Medea's magic is brought into the fore again.

τῇ δὲ καὶ αὐτόματοι θυρέων ὑπόειξαν ὀχῆες
ὠκείαις ἄψορροι ἀναθρώσκοντες ἀοιδαῖς.

⁴⁷ Hom. *Il.* – Briseis is in Book 1, Book 9, and Book 19. Briseis is the reason Achilles stops fighting, until Patroclus is killed.

⁴⁸ There is no definitive answer to what happened with Briseis after the events of the *Iliad*.

⁴⁹ Hunter, (1993), pp. 66–67

And to her the bolts of the doors yielded
springing back at the swift incantations.

Medea is showing that she can also influence inanimate objects through words, as well as having the ability to harvest and manufacture drugs. This can be seen as persuasiveness, whereby even the inanimate cannot resist bending to her will.

Medea's ability to persuade, to use speech to bend others towards her will, is seen later within Book 4⁵⁰ as well as within Euripides' *Medea*.

Medea's panic is also brought back into focus. While fleeing, she is barefoot, travelling along narrow paths, and holding her robe over her face. This is significantly different to Medea's previous excursion. In Book 3, she has her attendants, travelling in daylight, and others avert their eyes from her. In this, she is alone, in darkness, keeping away from the main routes, and in holding her robe over her face, keeping her eyes averted from others. The use of *πέπλον* to cover her face is argued by Pavlou as being significant, and is not a coincidental vocabulary decision by Apollonius, using *πέπλος* and *καλύπτρη* separately instead of interchangeably.⁵¹

The effect of using *πέπλος* as her own robe, and not a separate veil, while needing to keep herself hidden from prying eyes, keeps her identity secret⁵² yet also shows her resourcefulness. She is conscious of her actions, aware of the need to escape as unseen as possible. There is a Homeric allusion linking to Nausicaa, when she refuses to walk to town with Odysseus to avoid the gossip of others.⁵³

The symbolism by having Medea depart alone and in darkness, trying to keep away

⁵⁰ Apoll. Rhod. 4.355-390; 410-420; 1014-1052.

⁵¹ Pavlou, (2009), pp. 191-193

⁵² Pavlou, (2009), p. 193

⁵³ Hom. *Od.* 6.273-88

from others, encompasses the dark themes that are upcoming within Book 4, and of Euripides' *Medea*. Medea during this does not feel safe nor secure. Her decisions, while looking like based on instinct at first reading, is calculating, yet due to the circumstances are also rash, a reflection of Medea's character.

At the start of Book 4, Apollonius shifts the narrative of the epic. Where the previous books focused on Jason and the Argonauts, there is a clear shift to Medea as the central character. Apollonius has shown Medea to be complex, calculating, yet can be rash with her actions. Her ability to manipulate the physical world, and knowledge of plants to make drugs, indicates her link to the divine world, as well as being able to persuade those around her to achieve her aims.

Apollonius draws upon Homeric allusion throughout, linking events within the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to events within the *Argonautica*. Using similes to emphasise the vulnerability of Medea emphasises the complexity of her character. She is both a practised, exceptional witch, seemingly strong and confident, and yet also vulnerable, fearful, and can be manipulated by the divine.

Book 4 increasingly adopts tragic modes of psychological and emotional representation. This is a departure from the Homeric epic to explore the consequences of the actions of Medea within Book 3. The dark themes of exile, shame, and emotional instability ensure this epic delves into the psyche of the character of Medea. Medea transforms to the lead character, a diversion from the Homeric epic where male characters were the lead, and female characters the secondary. Book 4 anticipates many of the psychological and thematic concerns later developed in Euripides' *Medea*, including her rhetoric, her thought process, her emotional instability, and her ability to survive no matter the cost.

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