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**The hidden tragedy : Medea and the daughters of Pelias in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
(Ov. *Met.* 7, 297-351)**

Notice biographique

Kathrin Winter est en ce moment enseignant-chercheur à l'université d'Heidelberg. Elle prépare une thèse sur la représentation et l'esthétique du mal dans les tragédies de Sénèque. Ses domaines de recherches s'étendent sur la tragédie romaine, la littérature néronienne, l'œuvre d'Ovide et l'assimilation des formes et genres littéraires par d'autres genres.

Résumés

La Médée dans le septième livre des *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide est un caractère fort et puissant, dominant entièrement le cours des événements. C'est pourquoi ce n'est qu'en regardant de plus près qu'il devient évident que l'épisode de Pélias et ses filles, la seule version complète de cette partie de l'histoire, se fonde sur une action tragique : tentées par la proposition séduisante de Médée, les filles sont déchirées entre *pietas* et *scelus* jusqu'à ce qu'elles attaquent enfin leur père – juste pour découvrir qu'elles ont été trompées et conduites à commettre un meurtre. D'un côté, ni leur conflit ni leur situation tragique ne sont décrits explicitement, mais sont inhibés et supprimés par l'omniprésence de l'action et du discours de Médée. D'un autre côté, ces mêmes actions et discours ne peuvent être compris dans toute leur portée que si la tragédie cachée des filles de Pélias est prise en considération.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7, Medea is portrayed as a strong and forceful character who dominates the course of events entirely. Therefore only when you take a closer look, it becomes evident that the episode on Pelias and his daughters, the only extant complete version of this part of the story, is based on a tragic plot : tempted by Medea's alluring offer, the daughters are torn between *pietas* and *scelus* until finally they attack their own father – only to discover that they were deceived into committing murder. On the one side, neither their conflict nor their tragedy is described

explicitly ; instead, it is inhibited and suppressed by Medea's ubiquitous action and speech. On the other side, these same actions and words can only be understood to their full extent if the hidden tragedy of Pelias' daughters is taken into account.

Mots-clés : Ovide, *Métamorphoses*, Médée, épisode des filles de Pélias, action tragique.

Keywords : Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Medea, episode on Pelias' daughters, tragic plot.

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The story about Pelias and his daughters represents a minor episode within the story about Jason and Medea. On their way back from Colchis, Medea and Jason stop at Iolcos in order to take revenge on Jason's uncle Pelias, who had sent his nephew to Colchis in the hope that the young man would die on the dangerous journey. This story of revenge is frequently neglected and interest centres on the major stories about Medea, for example the events in Colchis or Corinth. Ovid's account of this revenge in *Metamorphoses* Book 7 is not only the most detailed extant version of the story¹, but also contains a special feature which enables a different mode of presentation : The epic passage contains structural elements of a tragedy – a fact which is not at first evident but serves an essential function in the general characterisation of Medea.

1. Hidden tragic structures

In Ovid's version, the story opens with Medea arriving at the daughters' house and telling her unsuspecting hosts the false story of how she split up with Jason and also as her

¹ SIMON 1994, p. 270.

greatest achievement, how she rejuvenated Jason's father Aeson. In this way, she inspires the daughters with the hope of rejuvenating their own father in a similar way : *spes est virginibus Pelia subiecta creatis*². After realising what this could mean, the daughters beseech Medea to grant them the same favour as Jason : *idque petunt pretiumque iubent sine fine pacisci*³.

The daughters accept that such a request requires something from them in return. They say that Medea can demand a price – a limitless price, thereby indicating that they have made a firm decision. On hearing their request, Medea pretends to hesitate and then finally promises to consent : *mox, ubi pollicita est [...]*⁴. Up to this point the course of events is logical and understandable, but then in Medea's direct speech, the situation takes an unexpected turn :

*mox, ubi pollicita est, « quo sit fiducia maior
muneris huius' ait, 'qui vestras maximus aevo est
dux gregis inter oves, agnus medicamine fiet »*⁵

Then, having promised it, she says, « To make the trust in this gift greater, the leader of the flock, which is the oldest amidst the sheep, will become a lamb by magic cure. »

The point at issue is simple : if Medea has already persuaded the daughters of her magic skills, why does she think it necessary to give a demonstration of her powers ? The daughters have already decided to trust her, as can be seen from the very generous price they have offered, and so their *fiducia* in Medea must be great enough. Besides, she has already promised to rejuvenate Pelias for them. Would it not be better (especially in view of her true intention in this matter) to proceed directly to her main aim and to fulfil her purpose as quickly as possible ?

There is a way to understand this unexpected sequence of events by assuming that Medea's words are in response to something that is not directly narrated but implied by Medea's words. One can establish a logical connection between the daughters' offer and Medea's promise combined with her suggestion to give a demonstration by assuming that between these two parts of the conversation (i.e. between her promising and her direct

² Ov. *Met.* 7, 304. The Latin text is from W. Anderson's edition (Munich / Leipzig, 1982). Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

³ Ov. *Met.* 7, 306.

⁴ Ov. *Met.* 7, 309.

⁵ Ov. *Met.* 7, 309-311.

speech in line 309), the daughters have raised objections.

At least one of them is hesitant and opposes the others' enthusiasm – a conflict is in the offing : The sisters are uncertain about committing such a vicious crime – on the one hand, they want their aged father to recover but, on the other, they realise what a terrible deed this would require of them. In their minds there might also be suspicions of the barbarian witch and doubts about her trustworthiness, her real intentions and possibly also her ability. In such a situation, Medea would have to give a demonstration of her powers as her only chance to remove the scepticism and convince all or at least most of the daughters of her powers and reliability.

This wavering of the daughters between trust and mistrust of Medea and between daring or not daring to commit such a crime is an inner, moral dilemma, which signifies characters with a moral purpose. Such inner, moral conflicts are substantial and traditional elements of tragedy – often being its starting point. It will be seen later that this not the only element of tragedy that is worked into this episode. Indeed, all the main elements which according to Aristotle's *Poetics* constitute a tragedy are worked into this story about Pelias and his daughters in a way that makes them essential for how the narrative develops, but at the same time keeps them implicit and indirect.

Before elaborating this point, it might be useful to consider the larger context : It is not surprising to find connections between the story of the *Peliades* and the form of tragedy since there was a long-established literary tradition : *Peliades* is the title of two lost tragedies, one by Euripides and one by Aphareus, a 4th century BC tragedian ; Sophocles used the material in his lost *Rhizotomoi*⁶, and in Roman literature the story was adapted for stage by Gracchus⁷, a tragedian whom Ovid names along with Valerius Rufus in a catalogue of contemporary writers in his *Episutlae Ex Ponto*⁸. It was a frequent motif in pottery, which often displays elements of the story that are neglected in the epic and these, as Schmitzer points out⁹, support the tragic aspects of the story. Although the tragedies are lost (except for a few fragments) and pottery represents a different medium, they give indications of different versions of the myth which might be significant for our passage.

⁶ SIMON 1994, p. 270.

⁷ RIBBECK 1897, p. 266.

⁸ LIEBERMANN 1998, p. 1188. See also Ov. *Pont.* 4, 16, 31.

⁹ Cf. SCHMITZER 2003, p. 37.

It is reasonable to deduce from this evidence that the otherwise so impenetrable group of *Peliades* were often divided. In pictures, the daughters are usually depicted before the murder¹⁰, mostly with a cauldron and a ram, showing different reactions to the imminent crime. Some bring weapons or eagerly observe the cauldron, some seem to be lost in (moral ?) thought, while others turn away in horror¹¹. One of the daughters, possibly Alcestis, is set apart in Hyginus' summary of the story and probably also in Euripides' tragedy – she is described by Homer as the prettiest of the daughters¹² and by Hyginus as the one to first refuse Medea's offer¹³. These moral conflicts experienced by Pelias' daughters are clear characteristics of individuals, since it is easier and more natural to display moral considerations in individuals rather than in groups. Accordingly, the ethical differentiations embodied in the different daughters seem to have belonged to the usual repertoire of the story – a case similar to Antigone's and Ismene's¹⁴.

Since Medea demonstrates her powers in order to persuade the *Peliades* and having in mind that the daughters with a cauldron and a ram are a frequent motif in pottery, we can conclude that the revival of the ram is an important and relevant part of the traditional story. The poet therefore does not omit¹⁵ this scene, so as to increase the speed of narration, but probably uses it together with Medea's first speech to refer implicitly to the daughters' tragedy. The function of this scene should not be limited to providing a successful example of an animal being rejuvenated, since there is already a much more elaborated example in the preceding episode regarding Aeson. Since a further successful example is not required by the audience, it can only be necessary in order to persuade the fictional characters, the daughters, who have not observed the former scene and so need proof.

Furthermore the scene is arranged in a dramatic way : It is the first and – apart from when Pelias' guards are made unconscious – the only occasion in this episode that Medea exercises her magical powers. It is the first and only time that she is called *venefica* whereas both before and afterwards she is always referred to by patronymics or toponymics (*Aetias*,

¹⁰ SIMON 1994, p. 273.

¹¹ Cf. SIMON 1994, p. 272 and MEYER 1980, p. 38-39 ; 46.

¹² Hom. *Il.* 2, 714-715.

¹³ Hyg. *Fab.* 24. Cf. KANNICHT 2004, p. 608-609.

¹⁴ SIMON 1994, p. 272.

¹⁵ Generally Ovid does not include episodes that have already been told frequently or are famous ; one of the best examples is his summary treatment of Medea murdering her own children, Ov. *Met.* 7, 394-397.

*Colchis, Phasias, etc.*¹⁶). This way of description reinforces the demonstration of her powers because she is not depicted cutting up poisonous herbs and plants¹⁷ but only killing the ram and putting its limbs in the cauldron. In this way the focus of narration remains on the ram all the time, tension is thereby generated and the story culminates in the dramatic and even sensational description of the ram's revival and rejuvenation. At first, only a faint bleating is heard from within the cauldron (*tener balatus auditur*¹⁸), then the acoustic sign of Medea's success is followed by a visual and final proof : the ram – now turned into a lamb – jumps out of the cauldron in search of its mother ([...] *exsilit agnus / lascivique fuga lactantiaque ubera quaerit*¹⁹). This scene resembles the dramatic vividness of messenger scenes and alludes to theatre itself since it is specifically staged for spectators (*balatum mirantibus*²⁰) to watch and be persuaded.

The daughters react with astonishment (*obstipuerunt satae Pelia*²¹) but immediately there is a further hint of their former uncertainty : *promissaque postquam / exhibuere fidem*²² – « after her promises had proved trustworthiness » : Medea's plan has succeeded and her demonstration has served its purpose of resolving the daughters' inner moral conflict in Medea's favour. The wavering daughters are now convinced that the procedure will not harm their father and so make their (fatal) decision (*tum vero inpensius instant*). How the daughters now beg for Medea's services is indeed of a different quality to the *id petunt* in verse 306 ; otherwise their second plea would be irrelevant and even redundant. This scene constitutes the turning point²³, the *peripeteia* of the daughters' inner dilemma, in the tragedy of the *Peliades*, after which the plot changes from good to bad²⁴ and heads for catastrophe.

There then follows a short break between the two cauldron scenes, so that the audience will be able to concentrate again after the peripety. Three days later the stars are shining at night, and Medea brews an ineffective potion after having made the king and his guards unconscious. The daughters enter their father's bedroom to realize their plan. As they

¹⁶ Ov. *Met.* 7, 298, 301, 326, 331, 348.

¹⁷ For a detailed description of Medea as *venefica* compare the episode on Aeson, Ov. *Met.* 7, 262-278.

¹⁸ Ov. *Met.* 7, 319.

¹⁹ Ov. *Met.* 7, 320-321.

²⁰ Ov. *Met.* 7, 320.

²¹ Ov. *Met.* 7, 322.

²² Ov. *Met.* 7, 322-323.

²³ Cf. MEYER 1980, p. 40 : « Sowohl der Bock, [sic] als auch Pelias fehlen im Bild, und zwischen die Kochungen beider fällt gewöhnlich der Entscheidungsprozeß der Peliaden [...] »

²⁴ Aristotle *Poetics*, ch. 11 (1452a 22-24) and 13 (1453a 12-17).

gather round his bed, Medea delivers her second speech. Bömer regards this speech as pointless for the narrative's development and explains it as a mere variation of the Aeson scene²⁵. Medea does not just encourage the daughters, but urges them on and accuses them of being hesitant and inactive. All the time her speech is remarkably emotional and keeps appealing to *pietas*.

However, analogously to Medea's first speech and in keeping with the tragic tendencies, the speech does have an important function : assuming, as before, that Medea is reacting to behaviour not explicitly described, a reasonable explanation is that the daughters are wavering again. At the sight of their father, their courage fails them, the nagging doubts so wonderfully wiped out by the rejuvenated ram return and so does their inner tragic conflict.

In this context, Medea's speech makes sense, since again she has to dispel doubts and persuade the daughters to commit the crime. On closer examination of her words, it is clear that they have been carefully chosen for this persuasive and manipulative purpose :

[...] « *quid nunc dubitatis inertes ?*
Stringite » ait, « *gladios veteremque haurite cruorem,*
ut repleam vacuas iuvenali sanguine venas.
in manibus vestris vita est aetasque parentis :
si pietas ulla est nec spes agitatis inanes,
officium praestate patri telisque senectam
exigite et saniem coniecto emittite ferro ! »²⁶

[...] « Why are you wavering lazily ? Pull out, » she says, « the swords and drain out the old blood, so that I can refill the empty veins with young one. Life and age of the father are in your hands : if there is any piety and you do not entertain vain hopes, do your duty by your father, and with weapons drive out age and with a stroke of steel let the ichor flow from his body ! »

It is striking how emotionally charged the speech is, which enables Medea to manipulate the daughters easily. She refers to their inactivity (*dubitatis inertes*, *spes inanes*), confronts it with appeals to their moral duties (*pietas*, *officium*, *in manibus vestris*, *vita aetasque*

²⁵ BÖMER 1976, p. 279.

²⁶ Ov. *Met.* 7, 332-338.

parentis) while, at the same time, exhorting them to action by constantly using imperative forms (*stringite, haurite, praestate, exigite, emittite*). In keeping with her first speech, where she called her method *medicamen*²⁷, she here repeatedly refers to Pelias' old age as if it were a dangerous and spreading disease from which he could be cured. This is implied by the use of *sanies*, which denotes « ichorous matter discharged from a wound²⁸ », but at this point Pelias does not have any wounds. Instead, the word *sanies* is used metonymically for « old blood » / « age », thereby suggesting that an old body is like a wound – and so can be healed. In a similar way, she describes the exchange of blood as being like a medical process (*ut repleam vacuas venas*), thereby implying that the procedure the daughters are about to carry out is not a violent attack. Thus she appeals to the daughters' sense of duty, talks directly about their inner moral conflict and finally manages to resolve it to her own advantage. We observe here another element of tragedy in this scene : the daughters' wavering and Medea's additional urging and decisive speech retard the action before the final catastrophe.

Medea's second speech is as successful as her first and following this, the daughters commit the crime. Its description forms a visualisation of their inner conflict. Driven by duty, they stab their father but at the same time they know that they are committing a crime and perceive it as such – otherwise they would not close their eyes and turn away : they cannot watch their own *scelus* although it is done for pious reasons²⁹. The drama in his passage contains the final catastrophe, a fact that is also emphasised in the language. Not only is this the first time the daughters really act (in so far as their actions are described in active verb forms), it is also the first time the group are individualised a little – with *quaeque pia* / « each pious girl » instead of the usual « all ».

Interestingly, the final part of the daughters' tragedy is missing, because the story ends abruptly with Medea finally killing the old man and throwing his limbs into the cauldron. Afterwards she flies away in a carriage drawn by dragons to escape punishment and revenge (*quodnisi isset in auras, / non exempta foret poenae*³⁰), an element which refers again to tragedy, since Medea's flight in the Chariot of the Sun was first introduced by Euripides in

²⁷ OLD s. v. « *medicamen* » 1, 2.

²⁸ OLD s. v. « *sanies* » 1.

²⁹ Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, watching frequently has negative connotations or consequences : the act of watching can become a crime itself (e. g. Actaeon) or merely add to the viciousness of a crime – irrespective of whether the perpetrator deliberately watches his own offence (e. g. Procne) or turns away (like Pelias' daughters).

³⁰ Ov. *Met.* 7, 350-351.

his play *Medeia*³¹. Had they (the daughters and whoever else 'they' are), been able to seize Medea, they would, of course, have punished her severely. From this short remark in lines 350-351 we understand that, in-between, the daughters must have realised that Medea has deceived them, that the potion was ineffective and that they have irretrievably killed their own father. Though it is not described in detail, recognition, one of « the most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy³² », as Aristotle says, is also an essential and indispensable part of this story.

Although this recognition is only indirectly referred to by Medea's flight, it has been previously indicated. In a dramatically arranged scene, Pelias is not just stabbed to death in his sleep, but awakes during his daughters' attack and tries to raise himself on his bed (*temptat consurgere*³³). The description of him illustrates the frailty and violation of his body (*cruore fluens, semilacer, inter tot medius gladios, pallentia bracchia*) and depicts him as a helpless victim, a fact that intensifies the viciousness of the crime. In his last words, he confronts his daughters with their evil deed and this causes a plausible reaction: *cecidere illis animique manusque* – « their hearts and hands sank ». Pelias expresses in words what they were not even able to watch – whereupon they stop acting. This verse is almost anticipating their recognition because we can easily – although nothing is described in detail – add to it in our minds the usual procedure of mourning following such a recognition and complete their lament and sorrow.

Summing up so far, we can state that this episode of the *Peliades* contains all the important elements of a classical tragedy as they are described by Aristotle, though many of them are used implicitly or merely hinted at. First of all, there is a consistent and unified plot that would be disjointed and disturbed if any of its constituent parts were displaced or removed (a major criterion established by Aristotle in his *Poetics*)³⁴. The plot contains a complication³⁵, in which a tragic conflict is triggered by Medea and results in her first speech and the demonstration of her powers; without the inner dilemma, both of these elements would be pointless and superfluous. Furthermore, the daughters reach their fatal decision in

³¹ BÖMER 1976, p. 286. For further details on the element of the dragons in Euripides' play cf. PAGE 1952, p. xxvii.

³² ADAMS 1992, p. 53. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6 (1450a 33-35).

³³ Ov. *Met.* 7, 344.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 8 (1451a 32-35).

³⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 18 (1455b 24-29).

a peripety and this turns the situation from good to bad. In the dénouement³⁶, when the murder is prepared and executed, the action is slowed down by Medea's second speech and this refers back to the daughters' wavering. Finally, the daughters' actual recognition is omitted but is implied by Medea's flight. This last point particularly shows how implicit and indirect this method of narration is : most parts of the tragedy are only hinted at, but without them the whole plot would not be carried through.

2. Medea' s role in the drama

The technique of implication used in this episode can be described – using a theatrical metaphor – as follows : the narrator dims the light that should be on Pelias' daughters by referring only indirectly to their tragedy. His technique, however, is not limited to implications and hints, but he skilfully employs similar means on the language level. It is, for example, striking that the daughters are passive throughout the whole episode because apart from the presentation of the actual murder, few active verb forms are used to describe their actions. Occasionally the verbs denote stative situations or activities, but do not enhance the development of the plot. The daughters, for instance, welcome Medea (*excipiunt*) because their father is too old to do so (*quoniam gravis ipse senecta est*³⁷), and they are also astonished at the sight of the revived and rejuvenated ram (*obstipuerunt*³⁸). Twice they beg Medea to use her powers to rejuvenate their father (*idque petunt pretiumque iubent sine fine pacisci* and *tum vero impensius instant*³⁹), but in both cases they do not take action themselves but ask somebody else to act.

By contrast are many passive verb forms and constructions are used in the more crucial situations. First, the daughters are induced by Medea to pursue their father's rejuvenation (*spes est virginibus Pelia subiecta creatis <sc. ab ea>*⁴⁰). They are passive while Medea rejuvenates the ram and makes the guards unconscious. As the climax approaches,

³⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 18 (1455b 24-29).

³⁷ Ov. *Met.* 7, 299.

³⁸ Ov. *Met.* 7, 300, 322.

³⁹ Ov. *Met.* 7, 306, 323.

⁴⁰ Ov. *Met.* 7, 304.

the daughters enter Pelias' bedroom on Medea's orders (*intrarant iussae*⁴¹). The attack on Pelias is an exception to how they are usually described, because here their actions are described in active verb forms⁴², which brings the daughters into increased focus. This continues, however, for only a short while, until a new voice appears on stage : Pelias awakes to speak his final words. Immediately afterwards the narrative focus shifts back towards the daughters, but they are no longer the subject of the sentence (*cecidere illis animique manusque*⁴³). It is interesting that their hands sink at the very moment that somebody else, in this case Pelias, raises his hands (*pallentia bracchia tendens*⁴⁴). It is altogether striking how little the daughters act themselves and how much they react and respond to others.

In addition to their overall passiveness, they generally stay in an impenetrable group although, as we have seen earlier, there are versions of the myth in which the daughters have different names and characteristics. It is striking that the daughters – neither as individuals nor as a group – are given any room for direct speech to communicate their feelings and thoughts or to reflect on their situation. This is even more so if we consider that everybody else, namely Medea and Pelias, is granted such an opportunity – even the lamb is allowed to bleat. The daughters, however, are kept passive and silent.

This method of carefully fading them out into the background is successful only if something else is illuminated in the foreground, and in this case the narrator keeps the spotlight on Medea. She is active, seemingly ubiquitous, controls everything around her and thereby provides the sharpest contrast to the daughters. Her husband Jason, the very man for whom Medea is exacting revenge, is, as Bömer points out, deliberately put on one side⁴⁵, the reason for the revenge being never even mentioned. This fact is even more important if we consider that, in earlier versions of the story, Jason “plotted the murder of Pelias and used Medea as his willing instrument” for the execution of his revenge⁴⁶. In the *Metamorphoses*, however, one gets the impression that Medea is doing everything, performing everybody's part, thereby obtaining a special, authorial function like that of a dramatist. What Barchiesi says about the primary narrator in the *Metamorphoses* is true for her, too : the audience's

⁴¹ Ov. *Met.* 7, 331.

⁴² Ov. *Met.* 7, 339-342.

⁴³ Ov. *Met.* 7, 304, 331, 347.

⁴⁴ Ov. *Met.* 7, 345.

⁴⁵ BÖMER 1976, p. 278.

⁴⁶ ANDERSON 1977, p. 276.

attention is always on « the virtuosity of the conductor⁴⁷ ». It is she who sets the whole episode in motion, who induces the daughters to commit the crime and makes them do this exactly as she wants. She thereby displays herself as invincible mastermind, someone who « act[s] within a plot [she has] constructed » herself⁴⁸.

On closer examination of Medea's role in the Pelias episode, her powers are seen in two instruments which she uses to achieve her plans and which render her constantly active. First, her powers are concentrated in her hands, which metonymically represent the actions she performs and therefore the potential she can fulfil. Medea's hands brew the poisons and magic potions which, in their most extreme form, can kill a creature and then revive the dead (and mutilated) body – as is demonstrated in the revival of the ram. Medea's hands are therefore usually feared being, as Huskey puts it, « a powerful instrument that can preserve life or take it away⁴⁹ ».

Although this statement is valid for the whole episode, the word *manus* is nowhere used more powerfully than in Medea's second speech : *in manibus vestris vita est aetasque parentis*⁵⁰ / « Life and age of the father are in your hands ». Here Medea ascribes the power to preserve life, which is so characteristically attributed to her, to the daughters' hands rather than her own. In this way, she not only urges the daughters on but also shifts the focus to them for the murder that is to follow (a fact that is, as we have seen, also supported on the language level and additionally intensifies the impression of Medea staging the crime). She apparently hands over her usual role but, since the potion she – the *venefica* – has made is useless, this also adds tragic irony to her words : She and the reader know that the the outcome of daughters' choice will be the opposite⁵¹ from what they believe it will be : they

⁴⁷ BARCHIESI 2001, p. 55.

⁴⁸ SCHIESARO 2003, p. 19. Although Schiesaro uses the words to describe Seneca's Medea, his characterisation is also valid for Ovid's Medea since these qualities certainly influenced Seneca's way of portraying this person.

⁴⁹ HUSKEY 2004, p. 278.

⁵⁰ Ov. *Met.* 7, 335.

⁵¹ The whole episode is a singular example of reversals and inversions, of turns from good to bad, especially in the context of the Aeson scene (cf. ANDERSON 1977, p. 276) : the Pelias episode is set directly after the successful example of a rejuvenation, but the same procedure fails the second time, ending up with a mutilation instead of a mutation. Likewise, its structure is repeated but twisted : in Aeson's case, it is Jason who asks Medea for this favour and even offers to transfer some of his own years to his father ; in Pelias' case, it is Medea, who tricks the daughters into asking for a repetition of her previous deed (passive as they are displayed, they don't act from an inner impulse). In what then follows, Medea grants Jason more than he asked for (he does not have to give up any of his years), the daughters less (namely nothing at all). In Jason's case we observe real *pietas* that even touches Medea (Ov. *Met.* 7, 169 : *mota est pietate rogantis* ; cf. SCHMITZER 2003, p. 35), the daughters' *pietas* is turned into the opposite (SCHMITZER 2003, p. 36) because they paradoxically become *impiae* trying to be *piae*. Furthermore, in the

think that by killing Pelias they will prolong his life whereas in fact only their refraining from such a crime could do so.

By handing over her powers, Medea is not involved in the actual actions of the crime (as she does not use her powers at all) and so the emphasis is on the daughters' hands and powers. They try to use this power over life and death, but it works differently from what they expect and it is obvious that they are going to fail. All the time they stay weak characters controlled by outside forces. When their father wakes up, he only has to raise his hands for them to let their hands sink and to become passive again. Obviously Pelias must be more powerful or authoritative than they are. In the end, however, it is Medea's hands which again wield power over life and death : she kills Pelias and mutilates his body, showing that she actually never passed on her powers or lost control.

Medea's second and equally powerful instrument used to exercise her controlling powers and constant action is her speech. Like her hands, it has a magical quality which is demonstrated in line 330, where she puts the guards and the king asleep ([...] *somnus* [...], *quem dederant cantus magicaeque potentia linguae*). The controlling power of her words is much more apparent in this episode since Medea is cunning, manipulative and fully aware of the effect of her speech, which constitutes another major difference to the daughters. At the beginning of the episode, for instance, Medea's insinuating herself into Pelias' house is noticeably enriched with words meaning 'deceit' or 'falsehood', for example *doli*, *falsum*, *adsimulat*, *callida*, *mendacis*, *imagine*, *videtur*, *ficta*⁵² – this also hints at the general characteristic of illusion in any drama and emphasises the impression that Medea is playing a role in a drama. As she deceives the daughters easily with false friendship in a very short time (*tempore parvo*⁵³), we should not just assume that they are broadly guileless and innocent, but should also realize that Medea uses her speech effectively. She calculatingly lingers on her story about Aeson and pauses at exactly the right moment (*hac in parte moratur*⁵⁴) to give the

Aeson episode no spectators are allowed during the secret rites and accordingly everything is displayed in epic narration. In the Pelias episode, however, spectators are not only admitted but (bearing in mind the persuasive function) are necessary. Aeson does not awake until the procedure is over ; when he does, he is astonished at his youthful body but remains completely silent. Pelias, on the other hand, awakes during or rather before the fake procedure, speaks powerfully enough to cause a reaction amongst his daughters and seems to have at least partly realised what is going on around him – including the fact that his daughters do not act of their own accord (*quis vos in fata parentis / armat ?* Ov. Met. 7, 346-347).

⁵² Ov. Met. 7, 297-301, 307-308.

⁵³ Ov. Met. 7, 300.

⁵⁴ Ov. Met. 7, 303.

story time to have its effect⁵⁵. Later on she pretends to be hesitating and to be reluctantly considering the offer the daughters have made. Thus Medea presents herself not only as an artful witch but also as a powerful speaker, who uses the effects of both words and silence to exert control.

Both aspects, her hands and her words, work together to make Medea successful in staging this little drama and controlling her surroundings effectively. Pelias' role in this episode mirrors Medea's actions and additionally emphasises her effectiveness since, apart from Medea, he is the only person in this passage whose hands and words are explicitly mentioned. Compared with his daughters' reaction, he is powerful in both aspects, too – but Medea controls even him and so remains successful as she prevents him from finishing his final sentence (*plura locuturo guttura abstulit*⁵⁶), cutting off his words as well as his hands and limbs⁵⁷ and illustrating her ability to manipulate her surroundings.

If one reconsiders the theatrical background, it would appear that the poet has found a special and possibly new way of relating a tragedy by changing the usual narrative approach. Medea seems to star in a drama that is not about her and uses the actual protagonists as mere instruments of her will. There is the clear impression that she acts or at least controls all the roles while the tragedy keeps on unfolding in the background⁵⁸. Although the two levels are not displayed equally, the tragedy in the background is indispensable, because it works reciprocally to the Medea story in the foreground. On the one hand, Medea's action and speeches are needed to mirror what is going on in the background and to make the tragedy visible ; on the other, it is the hidden drama that renders Medea's words and actions meaningful. The drama hidden in the background helps us realize how Medea (like a dramatist) is staging this drama in the foreground. This illustrates how both levels are inextricably combined. This method – keeping the spotlight on Medea and displaying the tragedy only in the shadows of the background – is as ingenious

⁵⁵ Schmitzer's short summary of this element of the story is misleading as far as the characterisation of Medea is concerned (cf. SCHMITZER 2003, p. 36) : The daughters do not know about Aeson's recovery from rumours but from Medea herself, who uses this story deliberately to manipulate Pelias' daughters.

⁵⁶ *Ov. Met.* 7, 348-349.

⁵⁷ The overall impression is that Pelias stays restricted to his decaying and corruptible body, which constitutes an ideal object for a metamorphosis into a *novum corpus* (cf. *Ov. Met.* 1, 1-2 and FARRELL 1999, p. 128-129). But, as everything is reversed in this episode, this seemingly perfect mutation does not take place but ends up in mutilation.

⁵⁸ Medea's continuing ubiquity and superiority maintain the impression that the passage is told very « light-heartedly » (HILL 1992, p. 204).

as it is arresting : all this is done in a way that enables the audience to understand the hidden drama perfectly well – without actually seeing it enacted.

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