

BOOK REVIEW

Virgo to Virago: Medea in the Silver Age. By KIRSTY CORRIGAN. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. Pp. ix + 300. Hardcover, \$84.95. ISBN 978-1-4438-4655-4.

Corrigan's work began as her PhD thesis, an examination of women in Silver Age Latin literature that shifted to one figure, Medea, reflecting her "enduring fascination" (1). Corrigan explores Medea chronologically in Ovid, Seneca, and Valerius Flaccus, devoting a chapter to each author and offering close readings of the texts themselves. In this "character study" (7), she compares and contrasts the texts with each other and the major Greek sources, pinpoints what themes or moments of her career are depicted, explores how each Medea reflects the period, and investigates whether each author adheres to a stereotypical "evil witch" Medea or ever presents her more sympathetically.

In the introduction (1–8), Corrigan justifies her study of Medea by enumerating the "tensions within her character" (2) and various aspects of her. She defends her choice of the Silver Age, noting that the only surviving narratives of Medea come from this period and that Medea's emotions, role as witch, and atrocious actions made her perfect for the Silver Age, with its debt to rhetoric and fondness for "sensationalism" and "the macabre" (6–7). Corrigan aims "to have a complete overview" of Medea from this period and to "look at the significance of any comparisons" (8).

Chapter 1 (9–97) analyzes Medea throughout Ovid's works. Corrigan begins with *Metamorphoses* 7.1–425 since, as she notes, it covers a great part of Medea's career. As she analyzes each section (Jason, Aeson, Pelias), she tracks Medea's progression from girl to wife to witch, examines recurring themes (e.g. Medea as prize, what is owed to her, Jason's promises), and discusses differences between Ovid's Medea and Apollonius', as well as other influences, especially Vergil's Dido. In her analysis of *Heroides* 12 (Medea's letter to Jason), Corrigan stresses Medea's viewpoint and her "defying her stereotype" (51), while Hypsipyle, in *Heroides* 6, emerges as more Medea like than Medea herself. Corrigan also examines Medea's brief, but rarely discussed, appearances in Ovid's love and exile poetry, even the *Fasti*, by looking for recurring themes. Corrigan emphasizes how

Ovid's Medeas vary, due to changing genres and contexts, and even within the same work Medea can be "both victim and villain" (95). As Ovid delves into Medea's "darker side", he still presents her with sympathy (96).

Chapter 2 (99–190) covers Seneca's tragedy *Medea*. This chapter proved difficult to digest; chapter 1 was divided up by different works, but this one lacks a logical place to pause to catch one's breath. As Corrigan moves sequentially through the play, she compares this Medea with those of Euripides and Ovid, analyzes how the actions and opinions of others in the play characterize Medea, and examines how differences of other characters (e.g. Jason, Creon) from their predecessors affect our reading of her. Comparisons extend further, as Corrigan examines, for example, the influence of Ovid's Procne and Althaea on Medea's debate to kill her children. Seneca's Medea is bad but also pitiable (184), due to her situation and others' behavior, a woman "who has a deep concern for piety towards her family" (187).

Chapter 3 (191–260) discusses Valerius Flaccus' unfinished epic *Argonautica*. Corrigan briefly examines Valerius' references to Medea before she actually appears and the "expectations" arising from them (199). Corrigan situates this Medea against both Apollonius' Medea and Homer's Nausicaa, notes intersections with the love-struck Medea of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and further discusses a Roman Medea. Emphasizing Valerius' focus on Medea's youth and blamelessness, she argues, "Valerius has portrayed Medea as a proper Roman girl, endowed with good attributes. He very reluctantly allows her to become bad, and excuses her when she does" (257).

A conclusion (261–271), followed by bibliography and index (273–300), closes the book. Corrigan summarizes her major points and recurring elements from the three authors. Emphasizing differences of time (within the Silver Age), genre, and moments of Medea's life among the works, she notes "there is no one consistent image" (261). Yet one is evident as each author moves beyond horror to pity and Medea displaces Jason as hero.

Although at times inconsistent, Corrigan is at her best reading the Roman sources against each other and the Greek sources. I would have liked more done with the Roman Medea, how *pietas*, *pudor*, or *furor*, for example, make Medea distinctly Roman in nature. Elaborating on Euripides' and Apollonius' works would aid anyone unfamiliar with the details of Medea's myth and, in her discussion of Ovid's love poetry, acknowledgment of Medea's popularity in, and suitability for,

elegy in general would prove helpful. My biggest criticism is how much she has revised her 2010 thesis. The book was published in 2013, yet nothing later than 2009 appears in the bibliography.¹

Despite these drawbacks, Corrigan nicely illustrates how appropriate Medea was for the time and how each author put his own mark on her and presented a more positive portrayal. Corrigan offers an important contribution to scholarship on Silver Age poetry and Medea herself, taking her beyond an individual author or work, and provides a model for future character studies.

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¹ Although this may have been too recent for inclusion, most notably missing is *Roman Medea*, edited by A.J. Boyle, *Ramus* 41.1 and 2 (2012), which includes articles on each of the authors/works Corrigan discusses.