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# Redefining Medea's magic and power in Ovidian poetry

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# Redefining Medea's Magic and Power in Ovidian Poetry

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Bachelor of Arts

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## INTRODUCTION

How do ancient male authors portray strong female characters? This is a question that has plagued classical scholars concerning such female figures as Circe, Dido, Cleopatra, and, of course, Medea. Not surprisingly, there is a vast array of scholarship dedicated to the study of Medea and Ovid. However, there appears to be little to no scholarship dedicated to understanding the spell that Medea is under, as presented in surviving Ovidian poetry. This paper aims to fill that gap. Specifically, this paper will argue that Jason is in fact the caster of the love spell on Medea, will define the exact style of love spell that he uses, and finally demonstrate that the spell mixes a traditional love spell with another form of binding spell commonly referred to as a spell used ‘for acquiring an assistant.’ The implications for this new interpretation provide a new view of Medea and impacts future scholarship.

The story of Medea has been told and retold by many authors throughout the Ancient Greek and Roman periods. Although each author adds his/her own interpretation, overall the story follows a common narrative. In Jason’s quest to find the golden fleece, he comes to the island of Colchis, where the King offers Jason the fleece if he can complete an impossible task. In order to help him with the task, a love spell – cast by different characters in different sources – is placed on the Colchian king’s daughter, Medea. After using Medea’s magic to complete the task and capture the fleece, Jason flees on his ship, taking Medea with him. Ignoring his previous wife, Hypsipyle, Jason marries Medea, who then performs multiple spells and tasks for him, the severity and violence of which vary from version to version. Eventually, Medea and Jason separate. The story ends with Jason marrying another woman, Creusa, and Medea killing the children she had with Jason. All parts of this story vary depending on the version.

Ovid was one of the many authors who told the story of Jason and Medea. And indeed, Medea appears in many of his poems. She is a main character in his *Metamorphoses VII*, which begins just after Medea first meets and falls in love with Jason. Medea also is the supposed author of Ovid's *Heroides XIII*, which takes the form of a letter written from Medea to Jason after she leaves him. Similarly, she is the subject of *Heroides VI*, which Ovid writes as a letter to Jason from Hypsipyle, Jason's first wife, whom he left for Medea. Medea further appears in the didactic poems of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria II* and *III* and his *Remedia Amoris*. In these didactic poems, Medea is depicted as a cautionary tale against using spells to attain love. Finally, Ovid wrote an entire play called *Medea*, which was unfortunately lost. Given these numerous writings, one thing is clear: Ovid certainly had a fascination for Medea.

Despite extensive scholarship focused on categorizing spells, and the spells aligned with Medea in particular, scholars tend to neglect the spell cast over Medea in Ovid. While the spells Ovid's Medea performs have been discussed at length,<sup>1 2</sup> the spell she is under is not. This gap in the literature is likely because the performance of this spell does not appear in Ovid's surviving poetry. Therefore, this paper will attempt to define the love spell that Medea is under in Ovid by reconstructing it using Medea's behavior, Ovid's descriptions in the surviving poems, and historic spells.

Even with the lack of scholarship regarding the spell, there is no question that Medea is under a love spell in Ovid's poetry. Although Ovid's *Metamorphoses VII*, the piece set earliest in Ovid's timeline of Medea, starts just after this spell is traditionally cast on her

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<sup>1</sup> Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69, 98.

(Ap.Rhod.*Argon*.3.1-294), Ovid's Medea still laments in the opening monologue the unusual changes she is undergoing. Immediately, Medea grieves:

*"frustra, Medea, repugnas:  
nescio quis deus obstat,' ait, 'mirumque, nisi hoc est,  
aut aliquid certe simile huic, quod amare vocatur  
... si possem, sanior essem! sed trahit invitam nova vis."*

("In vain, Medea, do you fight; I know not which god opposes you," she said, "Is this or certainly something like this what they call to love... If only I could, I would be more sane! But this new power drags me unwilling.") (Ov.*Met*.7.11-19).

Almost from the first lines of the poem, Ovid has not only noted that Medea feels love for Jason, but that this love comes from an unnatural source. Thus, Ovid immediately shows his reader that true to the conventional storyline of Medea, his version of this character is also under a love spell. The question then is who cast the spell as, mentioned previously, it was not depicted in the surviving lines of Ovid.

In addition, in order to fully understand the spell over Medea, this paper will use comparisons to historic magic. Ancient magic was a prevalent aspect of the ancient world. Slotted between ancient religion and ancient science,<sup>3</sup> magic dealt with everything from cures for ailments<sup>4</sup> to protection charms<sup>5</sup> to aid in legal battles and sporting events.<sup>6</sup> This paper in particular will deal with binding spells or *defixiones* spells, which were used to control or harm another human being. These spells all contain a caster, a victim, an object of the victim's desire, and, in some cases, an intermediary. Often, but not always, the caster and the object of desire are

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Tavenner, *Studies in Magic from Latin Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 5-12.

<sup>4</sup> Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; Including the Demotic Spells; Second Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), PGM VII.193-96, 197-98, 199-201, 201-202, 211-12.

<sup>5</sup> Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; Including the Demotic Spells; Second Edition*, PGM IV.1496-1595.

<sup>6</sup> Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; Including the Demotic Spells; Second Edition*, PGM VII. 370-73.

one and the same. An intermediary is often a deity or *daemon* or some sort, called upon by the caster to help enact the spell.<sup>7</sup> Within this vast category of *defixiones* spells are love spells, which is the style of spell cast on the character of Medea in her traditional storyline.

It also is important to note that Ovid himself had an extensive understanding of ancient magic. Medea is not where Ovid's love of magic ends. Charles Segal (2002) details a number of places in Ovidian poetry in which Ovid refers to magic, which are often spells from Ancient Greece, in his writing.<sup>8</sup> A knowledge of magic itself would not have been unusual for someone in this time period.<sup>9</sup> As a concept that crosses religion and medicine, people would often buy spells from a local witch to help their crops grow, remedy an illness, or protect their children from harm with an amulet.<sup>10 11</sup> Darker magic, such as knowledge of poisons, spells against the gods, and charms used to "bind" a victim were known by fewer people.<sup>12</sup> However, as Segal (2002) points out, Ovid was well versed in these spells as well.<sup>13</sup>

The first chapter of this paper argues that in Ovid's poetry Jason is the caster of the spell on Medea, and not by a god such as in Apollonius' version (*Ap.Rhod.Argon.3.1-294*). Jason, as Ovid describes him, is unusually associated with witchcraft and the typical attributes of an ancient witch. Furthermore, Jason is directly connected to the spell that Medea is under, not only as the object of her affection but also in a way suggesting he has influence over it.

The second chapter will provide details of the type of love spell Medea is under in Ovid's poetry, given that this spell has not been defined in previous scholarship. Because no surviving

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<sup>7</sup> Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; Including the Demotic Spells; Second Edition*, PGM VII. 390-93.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Segal, "Black and White Magic in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Passion, Love, and Art," *Arion* 3rd Ser. 9, No. 3 (2002 2001): 1-34.

<sup>9</sup> Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Tavenner, *Studies in Magic from Latin Literature*, 5-12.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 1.

<sup>12</sup> Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Segal, "Black and White Magic in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Passion, Love, and Art," 1-34.



description of the spell survives, this paper will delineate typical effects of ancient love spells based on Medea's behavior. Ancient love spells often included many and very specific instructions, which varied greatly from spell to spell, enabling identification of the exact spell placed upon Medea.

The third chapter will further detail the spell Medea is under, demonstrating that it is not merely a love spell, but rather a love spell combined with aspects of another binding spell. Medea displays symptoms of magic that are not typical of a love spell, as they give Jason control over her magic rather than just her emotions. Because love spells are merely one style of *defixiones* spell, love spells could include aspects that are typically resigned to other *defixiones* spells. Medea's behavior seems most similar to another style of spell that is used to bind a more powerful being, such as a *daemon* or minor deity, in order to give the caster control of this powerful being's magic. A great example of this spell is the spell PGM I.42-195. This type of spell aligns with Jason's desire for Medea's magic, rather than her love as described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

And finally, the fourth chapter will discuss the impact these observations might have on future scholarship. The extent of Jason's power over Medea changes the traditional view of Ovid's Medea that she is an autonomous being. Rather, the interpretation provided here supports the view that much of her behavior and decisions are in fact dependent on Jason. Furthermore, this understanding of the spell over Medea brings up other questions about magic in Ovid.

## CHAPTER 1: THE CASTER

Love spells always have a caster. Thus, the first step of understanding the love spell Ovid's Medea is under is to discover who cast the spell. Because none of Ovid's surviving poetry depicts the performance of this spell, this knowledge must be pieced together. In most versions of Medea, such as Apollonius' version, this caster is one of the gods (Ap.Rhod.*Argon*.3.1-294). However, in Ovid's Medea no god is referenced to as being in this position. Indeed, no god is individually described outside of a few invocations.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it is Jason who is described as adhering to the traditional ancient witch archetype as well as in connection to the spell Medea is under. Thus, it is argued that in Ovid's poems, Jason is in fact the caster of the love spell on Medea.

In other versions of this story, different characters have played the role of the caster of the love spell on Medea. Most commonly, this role goes to Cupid or Eros, the god of love as in such works as Apollonius's *Argonautica* (Ap.Rhod.*Argon*.2.250-294) . Others have taken more disparate paths, such as Pindar's version, which has Jason cast the spell on Medea (Pindar, *Pythian*, 4.211-50), which is similar to what is being argued here regarding Ovid's version.

In Ovid's version, there is some indication that, similar to Apollonius's *Argonautica*, Cupid is the caster (Ap.Rhod.*Argon*.3.250-294). In Medea's opening monologue she notes "*aliudque cupido, mens aliud suadet*" ("[*cupido*] urges me one way, reason another") (Ov.*Met*.7.19-20). If indeed *cupido* is meant to refer to the god of love, this would certainly be a convincing argument. However, the correct translation of this line is highly contested. Anderson

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<sup>14</sup> William S. Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: Books 6-10* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 246, 247, 248, 249.

(1972) argues “*cupido*” may not actually refer to the god Cupid, but merely is the Latin word for ‘desire,’<sup>15</sup> This interpretation implies that this quote describes the power of her emotions under the spell rather than a controlling figure. Thus, no clear figure has been identified in previous scholarship that fits the role of the spellcaster.

The first sign that Jason is the caster of the spell on Medea is that he is described in direct alignment with the witch archetype of the time. Although perhaps not true to reality, the ancients believed that witches were largely foreign,<sup>16</sup> primarily Thessalian,<sup>17</sup> women who followed the teachings of their patron goddess, Hecate. From here, witches tended to perform magic differently depending on the context. On the one hand, in reality, an ancient Greek or Roman establishment might have a local witch who would sell small spells for ailments or protection.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, more dangerous or imagined witches would use poisons, transmutations, or *defixiones* spells to harm or control others.<sup>19</sup> Thus, an indication that Jason is connected with magic is his direct association with Hecate, the goddess of magic. In the first scene in which Jason appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses VII*, Medea finds him already at the temple of Hecate (Ov.*Met.*7.74-77). Furthermore, Jason later invokes Hecate, “*per sacra triformis ille deae ...iurat*” (“He swore by the sacred rights of the three-formed goddess Hecate”) (Ov.*Met.*7.94-97). Hecate, being the goddess of magic, is not a common goddess to swear by except for by those who take her as their patron or are performing a spell. Thus, Jason’s relation to Hecate in Ovid’s poetry is the first sign that he has a direct connection to magic.

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses: Books 6-10*, 251-2.

<sup>16</sup> Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 24, 27, 45, 66, 92, 96, 99-100, 104-5, 107, 155, 161, 165, 214-9, 225, 261, 317.

<sup>18</sup> Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 1-4.

<sup>19</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 78-129.

Another way Ovid presents Jason as a witch is through the foreign terminology that he associates with Jason. As noted before, one distinguishing aspect of the ancient witch is the stereotype that witches are typically foreigners.<sup>20</sup> Because of this, one of the most frequent terminologies used for a witch is to label them as such; calling witches *barbari/ae*.<sup>21</sup> Ovid similarly follows this trend by first referring to Medea as a *barbara* immediately after the completion of her first spell (Ov.*Met.*7.144), and then continuing to do so whenever Medea is discussed in relation to magic (Ov.*Met.*7.276) (Ov.*Her.*6.19, 81). Similarly for Jason, although he does not directly use the term *barbarus*, Ovid uses its synonym “*alieni*” (“foreigner”) (Ov.*Met.*7.22), as well as “*hospes*” (“visitor” or “stranger.”) (Ov.*Met.*7.90). By using the perspective of Medea in many of his poems, Ovid shows Jason to be the outsider rather than Medea. Jason’s status as an outsider is also supported by Ovid’s aim at a Roman audience, to whom both Jason and Medea’s homelands are foreign. This perspective is unlike that of Euripides’ and Apollonius’ Greek audience to whom Medea would have seemed like more of an outsider. Thus, Ovid’s Jason takes on the stereotypical ancient witch attribute of being a foreigner.

Moreover, Jason is not merely a foreigner, but one who originates from Thessaly, a place intimately tied to witches in the ancient world.<sup>22</sup> Jason is said to have been born in Iolcos, an area in Thessaly. Being from Thessaly would have further associated Jason with a witchcraft in the minds of the ancients.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Ovid himself mentions Thessalian witches, both in his *Remedia Amoris* when he writes: “*Haemoniae siquis mala pabula terrae et magicas artes posse iuvare putat*” (“If someone trims the harmful plants of Thessaly to be able to benefit his own magic

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<sup>20</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 26, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 44.

arts.”) (Ov.Rem.am.249-250), as well as in his *Amores* when he describes a scene in which he himself had been placed under a binding spell by a Thessalian witch (Ov.*Am*.III.7.27-36).

Therefore, not only were Thessalian witches a common stereotype in the ancient world, but one Ovid himself was aware of. Finally, one might argue, that this origin is common to all forms of Jason and not specific to Ovid’s version. However, in Ovid’s poetry, Jason’s origin in Thessaly is mentioned five different times (Ov.*Met*.7.132,159; Ov.*Her*.12.127; Ov.*Her*.6.23). Therefore, Jason’s emphasized origin from Thessaly feasibly associated him with witchcraft both in the minds of the ancients and for Ovid himself.

The next indication that Ovid’s Jason cast the spell on Medea is his extensive knowledge of spells. After completing the tasks set for him by Medea’s father using her magical herbs, Jason asks Medea to perform a spell to help his elderly father. Jason says:

*“o cui debere salutem confiteor, coniunx...  
deme meis annis et demptos adde parenti!”  
...‘quod’ inquit ‘excidit ore tuo, coniunx, scelus? ergo ego cuiquam  
posse tuae videor spatium transcribere vitae?  
nec sinat hoc Hecate, nec tu petis aequa;”*

(“Oh wife, whom I confess to have preserved my life... remove some portion of my youth and give that portion to my father.” “What sin,” she said “falls from your mouth, husband? Do I seem able to transfer to anyone a part of your life? Neither may Hecate allow this, nor is what you seek right.”) (Ov.*Met*.7.164-174).

This passage shows that Ovid has given Jason a knowledge of a spell that even Medea, one of the most famous witches in literature, and the goddess Hecate herself are averse to performing. Knowledge of dark or uncommon spells was considered a skill that only a witch would know. An example of such is the trial of Apuleius, in which Apuleius is convicted of being a harmful witch for his mere knowledge of dark witchcraft (*Apol*.1-101). This same phenomenon appeared in many other convictions of witchcraft – in that the knowledge of non-everyday magic was only

thought to be known by harmful witches.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Jason's knowledge of magic is a second indication that Jason could be a witch and thus the caster of the spell on Medea.

Beyond Jason's curious association with witchcraft, he is also directly related to the love spell Medea is under in a way that indicates that he cast the spell. First, Jason seems aware that Medea is under a love spell and uses this to his advantage. Ovid shows this awareness in Jason's references to Medea's love for him even during their first depicted encounter:

*“coepitque loqui dextramque prehendit  
hospes et auxilium submissa voce rogavit  
promisitque torum, lacrimis ait illa profusis:  
'quid faciam, video: nec me ignorantia veri  
decipiet, sed amor”*

(And the stranger begins to speak and, seizing her right hand, with a moderate voice he asked her help and offered a marriage bed in return. That girl with pouring tears said “I see what I will do; nor will ignorance of the truth deceive me, but love.”) (Ov.*Met.*7.89-92).

If not for the love spell, Jason's offer of marriage alone would not have been persuasive enough to convince Medea, who has only encountered Jason briefly once before, to perform the spell and abandon her family. Thus, Jason is aware of the extent of love Medea feels for him and uses this knowledge to convince her to do what he wants. This awareness is unlike the version by Apollonius where Jason is not responsible for the spell (Ap.*Rhod.Argon.*3.938-1026). Instead, the only other depiction of Jason's awareness of the spell itself is presented by Pindar, who also had Jason as the caster of the spell on his Medea (Pindar, *Pythian*, 4.211-50).

Another indication that Jason is the caster is that he fits Medea's description of the being that controls the spell over her. In her opening monologue, Medea remarks that she feels as if a

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<sup>24</sup> Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, 1-4.

god is causing the effects of the spell that she is experiencing, saying “*frustra, Medea, repugnas: nescio quis deus obstat*” (“In vain, Medea, do you fight, I know not which god opposes you”) (Ov.*Met.*7.11-12). As previously noted, prior scholarship has shown that this *deus* is not necessarily cupid.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, no other god is described in reference to the love spell. Rather, upon first seeing Jason, Ovid describes Medea as “*spectat et in vultu veluti tum denique viso lumina fixa tenet nec se mortalia demens ora videre putat nec se declinat ab illo*” (“she noticed him and her eyes fixed on his face as if she were only just seeing him, and mad with love she thought that she saw him as immortal nor could she turn away from him.”) (Ov.*Met.*7.87-88). Because it is only Medea herself who refers to the power controlling her as a *deus*, her view of Jason as also godlike allows Jason to fill this role. Furthermore, Ovid has previously used the *deus* both as a word to describe gods and god-like mortals, such as in his *Amores II* (11.44).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, when Medea refers to caster of the love spell as a *deus*, she equates the caster to Jason who she similarly views as godlike.

In sum, Jason is the caster of the spell in over Medea in Ovidian poetry. Ovid creates this dynamic by associating Jason with the ancient witch stereotype through his worship of Hecate and his homeland in Thessaly. Furthermore, Jason shows an understanding of the nature of the spell Medea is under, which exceeds that of versions in which he has not cast the spell. Finally, Medea refers to both Jason and the power that controls the spell over her in similar ways, further connecting the two. Having now determined who cast the spell over Medea, the next question, of course, is what type of spell did Jason cast.

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<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: Books 6-10*, 251-2.

<sup>26</sup> Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Ovid *Amores* 2.11.44.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LOVE SPELL

Ancient love spells are diverse and complex in nature. Having determined in the previous chapter that Jason is the caster of the spell over Medea, this chapter will go on to determine the type of love spell that he casts. Because of the diversity in styles of historic love spells, there is no obvious answer to this question. Therefore, this particular love spell is identified by comparing the behaviors and emotions Ovid's Medea expresses with symptoms of historic love spells in order. These comparisons indicate the spell that Ovid's Medea is under is an attraction spell that causes its victim to experience an emotion of intense love, distress upon separation from the object of affection, a burning sensation, an ability to be taken away from loved ones by their object of desire, a pull to go to the object of their desire, an impulse to marry the object of their love, and a longevity of these symptoms.

Ancient love spells come in many different forms. As a subset of *defixiones* spells, love spells often involve restricting a victim or forcing specified behaviors.<sup>27</sup> These spells involve a variety of different symptoms, such as a burning sensation or an inability to talk to others of the same gender as the caster.<sup>28</sup> The specific combination of symptoms is determined by the goal of the caster, be it adoration from the victim, lust, or marriage. Finally, these spells are also performed in a variety of different ways. Spells can call on a god or minor deity to help them as an intermediary or be performed directly by the caster. The spell itself is then performed through a variety of different tools and methods, such as using herbs, animals, clay figures, magical words, lead tablets, to name a few.

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<sup>27</sup> Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 79.

<sup>28</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 227-244, 261-264.



To give a sense of the range of styles of love spells, a few examples are presented here. For example, one love spell may focus mostly on an object through which the spell is transmitted to the victim, such as in *Suppl.Mag.72.1-14*:

“Say it three times over. I will pelt with apples... [lacuna] I will give this spell which is ever apt for eating for mortal man and immortal gods. Whichever woman I give the apple to, whichever woman I throw the apple at and hit with it, may she put off everything else and become crazy with love for me. Whether she takes it in her hand and eats it, or puts it away in her dress, may she not stop loving me. Cyprus-born Aphrodite, bring this spell to fruition.”<sup>29</sup>

This particular spell is a spell aimed to attract the victim to the caster, using an object as its basis, in this case an apple. Furthermore, this spell calls upon Aphrodite as an intermediary to aid the caster and causes a “crazy” and permanent form of love. In contrast, an example of a notably different love spell is *DT 68*, which is a spell that was written on a tablet and placed in a grave.

The spell goes as follows:

(Side A) I bind Theodora in the presence of one (female) at Persephone’s side and in the presence of those who are unmarried. May she be unmarried and whenever she is about to chat with Kallias and with Charias – whenever she is about to discuss deeds and words and business... words, whatever he indeed says. I bind Theodora to remain unmarried to Charias and (I bind) Charias to forget Theodora, and (I bind) Charias to forget... Theodora and sex with Theodora  
(Side B) [And just as] this corpse lies useless, [so] may all the words and deeds of Theodora be useless with regard to Charias and to the other people. I bind Theodora before Hermes of the underworld and before the unmarried and before Tethys. (I bind) everything, both (her) words and deeds toward Charias and toward other people, and (her) sex with Charias. And may Charias forget sex. May Charias forget the girl, Theodora, the very one whom he loves” (*DT 68*).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Trans. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 213.

<sup>30</sup> Trans. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 22.

This love spell is one in which the caster desires to separate the victim from another lover, using a corpse as the magical object, and calling upon multiple gods for help. These are merely two examples of the vast range of styles in which love spells can appear.

The exact style of love spell that Ovid's Medea is under is not one that is especially unusual. This paper argues that the style of spell she experiences is an attraction spell, which causes its victim a drastic emotional change of overwhelming love as well as distress at being separated from the caster, a burning sensation, being brought to the caster, able to be separated from the person's family and homeland, an inability to deny the caster marriage, and works over a long duration of time. These symptoms displayed by Ovid's Medea are also typical of historic love spells. An example of a historic spell in this style is *Suppl. Mag. 45*, which includes most of these elements. A portion of this spell goes as follows:

“... Wake up demons who lie here, and seek out Euphemia, to whom Dorothea gave birth... Bring Euphemia, to whom Dorothea gave birth, to Theon, to whom Proechia gave birth, loving me with lust, longing, and sexual congress, crazed with lust. Burn her limbs, her liver, her women's body until she comes to me, loving me and not ignoring me... And bind her with unbreakable bonds, strong and adamantine ones, so that she loves me, Theon, and do not allow her to eat, drink, find sleep, joke, or laugh, but make her leap out of every place and every house and abandon her father, mother, brothers, and sisters until she comes to me, Theon... If she holds another man with her embrace, let her cast him off, forget him, and hate him, but let her feel love, warmth, and affection for me.”<sup>31</sup>

Although this spell does not include a duration of time for the spell or a direct discussion of marriage, it still is quite similar to the spell Medea is under.

To begin the discussion of the love spell's symptoms that are portrayed by Ovid's Medea, using previous scholarships' categorization of spells, the spell over Medea seems to be an attraction spell. Because of the vast range of love spells and the complexity of each, it is difficult

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<sup>31</sup> For full spell see Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 207 = *Suppl. Mag. 45*.

to categorize love spells. However, previous scholarship has attempted to create broad categories, such as Petropoulos' *agogai* (attraction spells) and *philtrokatadesmoi* (binding tablets),<sup>32</sup> Faraone's separation vs. attraction spells,<sup>33</sup> and Winkler's spells to curse rivals in order to make their spouses leave them or ruin a pimp's business.<sup>34</sup> Using this categorization, Ovid's Medea seems to be under an attraction or *agoge* spell. Simply, this is because the spell causes Medea to show an attraction to Jason rather than a repulsion from him. Furthermore, since Medea is unmarried and did not have a previous lover before Jason, this spell is not separating her from another man. It is hard to tell if there is a general clause in the spell that forbids her from having a romantic or sexual relationship with other men she may meet going forward, as is sometimes found in love spells,<sup>35</sup> as she barely interacts with other men enough in the story to show such influence.

The first notable symptom of the love spell Ovid's Medea experiences is a drastic emotional change. The most extreme emotional change for Medea is a feeling of frenzied and overwhelming love. While love seems to be an unsurprising symptom of a love spell, many such spells vary in how they want this love to manifest. Some casters seem to desire warm and affectionate love while others focus on lust, with the exact style of love sometimes detailed in the spell itself. For example, one historic spell notes that that the caster wants his victim to be "loving me with love, desire, affection, sexual intercourse, and a frenzied love."<sup>36</sup> Ovid's portrayal of the love that Medea feels is largely an overwhelming and

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<sup>32</sup> Joannes C. B. Petropoulos, "The Erotic Magical Papyri." *Proceedings of the XVIII International Congress of Papyrology* 2 (1988): 216.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher A. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells," *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (1991): 13.

<sup>34</sup> John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 94.

<sup>35</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 30.

distressing love. In the opening of the piece, the love Medea feels is referred to as a *furorem* (which translates to “madness,” “fury,” or “passion”). This style of love is not unusual to literary love spells. For example, *furor* is similarly used to describe the love of Dido in Vergil’s *Aeneid* (Verg.*Aen.*4.65), another example of a literary love spell. Throughout the rest of Ovid’s poems, the love continues to manifest in this way, as a consuming love that distracts Medea from her other objectives. In *Heroides XII*, Medea again describes the feeling of love that consumes her, saying:

*“et vidi et perii! nec notis ignibus arsi,  
ardet ut ad magnos pinea taeda deos.  
et formosus eras et me mea fata trahebant:  
abstulerant oculi lumina nostra tui.  
perfide, sensisti! quis enim bene celat amorem?  
eminet indicio prodita flamma suo”*

(“I saw you and I was ruined. Nor was I burned with familiar fires, so that I burn like a pine torch from the great gods. And you were beautiful and my fate was dragging me. Your eyes snatched away the light from mine. You sensed it, dishonest one! For can anyone conceal love well? Its flame is prominent, the betrayer to its own discovery.”) (Ov.*Her.*12.33-38).

Her recognition that this love is a dramatic shift from what she felt before indicates that this love is a symptom of a spell rather than a natural emotion.

Another aspect of emotional change the love spell creates in Medea is that she experiences emotions of distress when separated from Jason. These negative emotions are also a common aspect of historic love spells. Many love spells often specify that the victim should feel anguished until they are united with the caster. For example, one historic spell notes its victim should be “afame, distressed and incapable of sleep, until she comes to me.”<sup>37</sup> Medea certainly experiences distress before joining Jason. In *Heroides XII*, in

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<sup>37</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 211.

describing the experience of the first onset of the spell, Medea states “*hinc amor, hinc timor est—ipsum timor auget amorem*” (“here is love, here is fear – the fear increases the love itself”) (Ov.*Her.*12.61-64). Historically, these feelings of distress at separation often also cause an inability to sleep, as noted in the quote above. Although such versions as Apollonius’s Medea includes a description of Medea experiencing sleeplessness as soon as the spell was placed on her (Ap.*Rhod.Argon.*3.585-670), Ovid only shows his Medea to undergo such after leaving Jason: “*ut positum tetigi thalamo male saucia lectum acta est per lacrimas nox mihi, quanta fuit*” (“So that I, wounded, having fallen to the bed placed in my chamber. How much of the night for me was led by tears”) (Ov.*Her.* 12.58-59). This later experience of sleeplessness is another aspect of the distress dictated by the love spell that Medea experiences upon being separated from Jason.

The third specified symptom of the love spell Medea is under is a burning sensation. This feeling of burning is another common aspect of historic love spells. Faraone (1999) notes that “the goal of burning the female victim is probably the most popular one found on the extant Greek *agoge* spells of the later periods. We have seen, of course, how during an “in-the-fire” spell (*empuron*) a practitioner urns various herbs, spices, and other household objects to make a woman burn with passion.”<sup>38</sup> Ovid’s Medea certainly undergoes a burning sensation. In her opening monologue, Medea says

*“excute virgineo conceptas pectore flammis,  
si potes, infelix! si possem, sanior essem!  
... quid in hospite, regia virgo,  
ureris et thalamos alieni concipis orbis?”*

(Drive out the developing flames from your maiden breast if you are able, miserable girl. If I were able, I would be more sane... For what, royal maiden, are

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<sup>38</sup> Faraone, Christopher A. *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 58.

you burning for a stranger and considering taking a chamber in a foreign world?") (Ov.*Met.*7.17-22).

Medea's sensation of burning reappears throughout Ovid's poetry (Ov.*Her.* 12.33-38; Ov.*Met.*7.75-76). The frequent repetition of the concept of flames and burning in association with the love that she feels links this sensation to the love spell that she is under. Furthermore, this burning is exaggerated when Medea sees Jason. For example, when Medea first sees Jason in Ovid's *Metamorphoses VII*, the narrator states:

*"cum videt Aesoniden exstinctaque flamma reluxit.  
erubere genae, totoque recanduit ore,  
...sic iam lenis amor, iam quem languere putares,  
ut vidit iuvenem, specie praesentis inarsit"*

("When she saw the son of Aeson and the seemingly extinguished flame blazed again. Her cheeks reddened and all her face paled... So now the enduring love, which now you may have thought had grown faint, when she saw the young man it flared at the sight.") (Ov.*Met.*7.76-83).

This connection of burning with her love for Jason, as well as Medea's own notation that the feeling she is experiencing is unnatural, indicates that this sensation is another symptom of her love spell.

A fourth behavior of Ovid's Medea exhibits is that Medea appears to be "brought" to Jason by the spell. Many love spells and *defixiones* spells dictate the way in which the victim will next encounter the caster. Ogden (2009), in his description of the typical love spell, notes that the victim is typically "viscerally dragged, raving, through the streets (the context is usually implicitly urban), sometimes even made to take wing, until she arrives at her admirer's door and frenziedly beats on it."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Ogden (2009) notes that the typical ancient Greek or Roman person would likely be familiar with this general template of a love spell.<sup>40</sup> Medea

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<sup>39</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 277.

<sup>40</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 44.

seems to be either brought to Jason by the spell itself, or perhaps by the goddess Hecate (to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter). Either way, Medea is brought to Jason in some way specified in the spell. Ovid shows this behavior when, upon completing her opening monologue, Medea goes to the temple of Hecate only to find Jason already there (Ov.*Met.*7.74-77). Ovid does not explain what prompts her decision to go to this place except that it seems to be a sudden and not cohesive with her thoughts (Ov.*Met.*7.70-75). This behavior of Medea's seems especially unusual given that Hecate is the patron goddess of magic, and, in her last monologue, Medea has determined she will not perform magic given its immoral nature (Ov.*Met.*7.71). Instead, it appears as if Medea is being drawn to Jason, which, in the minds of the ancients, would seem like a symptom of a love spell.

The fifth symptom that Ovid's Medea presents that is consistent with love spells is the ease at which Jason is able to take her from her family and homeland. This behavior of being taken from one's family is common for victims of historic love spells. Once again, Faraone (1999) states

“the *agoge* spell, which has a consistent narrative: it “leads” the women immediately from the house of her father or husband to the practitioner, a movement that mimics in some obvious ways the transfer of a bride from her old home to her husband's home.... In essence, this type of spell employs a wide variety of means to torture or otherwise discomfort the female victim, until she is forced away from her family and into the arms of the man performing the spell.”<sup>41</sup>

Medea similarly shows such behavior. In her opening monologue, Medea suppresses her desire to be with Jason in favor of her duty to her family: “*ergo ego germanam fratremque patremque deosque et natale solum ventis ablata relinquam? ...quin adspice, quantum adgrediare nefas, et, dum licet, effuge crimen!*” (“Therefore would I with the whisking winds leave behind my sister,

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Faraone. *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 56.

brother, father, gods, and homeland?... Why not consider how much sin you may be approaching and flee the crime while you can.”) (Ov.*Met.*7.51-71). And yet, within just a few moments after seeing Jason again, Medea agrees to leave with him. Furthermore, Medea later says: “*quid te Phasiacae iuverunt gramina terrae, cum cuperes patria, Colchi, manere domo?*” (“What help to you are the herbs of the Colchian land when you desired to stay in your homeland of Colchis?”) (Ov.*Rem.am.*261-2). Here Medea herself describes her abandonment of her family as not being her own decision but rather as the result of the influence of some power. She even describes this power as one that she would attempt to fight with her own magic, thus indicating that her departure is due to the influence of the spell she is under rather than the result of her own volition.

The sixth, and final, symptom of a love spell that Medea demonstrates is her inability to deny Jason marriage. While some love spells only specify the desire for love from their victims, others specify the exact union they wish to attain. For example, spell *DT 271* states “unite them in marriage and as spouses in love for all the time of their lives.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as previously discussed, Medea immediately agrees to marry Jason despite her previous reluctance (7.89-94). Thus, this inexplicable marriage is another aspect of the spell Medea is under.

Finally, these symptoms Medea experiences continue over time. While some ancient spells only desire a limited burst of passion, even in the *Heroides XII*, the last piece in Ovid’s surviving timeline of Medea, Medea exhibits these behaviors. In *Heroides XII*, set after Jason has abandoned her and married another, Medea still pleads

“*per superos oro, per avitae lumina flammae,*

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<sup>42</sup> Trans. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 36.



*per meritum et natos, pignora nostra, duos,  
redde torum, pro quo tot res insana reliqui!”*

(“By the mouths of those above, by the light of my grandfather’s fire, by kindness and our two children, our security, return to our bed, by which I insanely abandoned so many things!) (Ov.*Her.* 12.191-194).

Despite the length of time that has passed and Medea’s own departure from Jason, she is unable to shake the oppressive feelings of love from the spell, creating an enduring, if not permanent, effect. Furthermore, either by specification of the spell or as a byproduct of her persistent love for Jason, this spell does not allow Medea to love another man besides Jason.

In summary, one is able to reconstruct the spell placed upon Medea in Ovid’s poetry, despite the lack of a surviving scene in which the spell is cast, by analyzing Medea’s behaviors in comparison to historic love spells. This love spell is represented by a number of specific symptoms, including undergoing an emotional change, a burning sensation, being brought to Jason, being easily taken from her family and homeland, and agreeing to marry Jason. This love spell is also persistent, as Medea continues to feel these sensations even after separating from Jason.

## CHAPTER 3: COMPOUND SPELLS

Medea's symptoms, as depicted by Ovid, go beyond the traditional love spell described in the last chapter. Rather, Medea has been placed under a combination spell, formed from both an *agoge* spell and a spell 'for acquiring an assistant.' These additional symptoms acquired by the spell 'for acquiring an assistant' gives Jason control over Medea's magic.

*Defixiones*, or binding spells, include many types of spells from causing love to getting revenge. Historically, different types of *defixiones* spells can be combined. Gager (1992) explains that different types of *defixiones* spells are not rigidly separated into explicit categories. He states,

“Indeed one common element in *all* binding spells is constraint, through the deployment of powerful formulas, names, figures, and other materials, for the purpose of bending the actions and sentiment of others according to one's own desires. Thus, an eventual transfer of *defixiones* to the realm of sex and love, if this is how things developed, must have happened quite naturally.”<sup>43</sup>

Consistent with Gager's postulation, it would not be unusual for a love spell and aspects of another style of binding spell to be combined. Thus, the love spell placed on Medea could be mixed with other binding spells, and recognized as such by ancient Romans.

In particular, Ovid's *Metamorphoses VII* describes the binding spell Medea is under as similar to the PGM I. 42-195, which Betz (1986) categorizes as a spell 'for acquiring an assistant.' For the purposes of this paper, Betz's terminology for this style of spell will be used. A spell 'for acquiring an assistant' is used to “bind” a more powerful being in order to force

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<sup>43</sup> Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 79.

him/her to perform tasks, often magical, for the caster. In particular, the binding spell used by Ovid's Jason follows the same style as spell PGM I.42-195, which goes as follows:

“The spell of Pnouthis [has the power] to persuade the gods and all [the goddesses]. And [I shall write] you from it about [acquiring] an assistant... you will behold the angel whom you have summoned and who has been sent [to you], and you will quickly learn the decisions of the gods. But do not be afraid: [approach] the god and, taking his right hand, kiss him and say these words to the angel, for he will quickly respond to you about whatever you want. But you/ adjure him with this [oath] that he meet you and remain inseparable and that he not [keep silent or] disobey in any way... If you give him a command, straightaway he performs the task: he sends dreams ... he kills, he destroys, he stirs up winds from the earth... he causes invisibility so that no one can see you at all... he is a bringer of fire... he checks all wild beasts and will quickly break the teeth of fierce reptiles... and whenever you wish to bring down stars... O [blessed] initiate of the sacred magic, and will accomplish it for you, this most powerful assistant. Share this great mystery with no one [else], but conceal it, by Helios” (PGM I.42-195).<sup>44 45</sup>

This spell is reminiscent of the spell that Jason places on Medea. This spell is used to ‘bind’ a powerful being, such as a daemon, demigod, or other. Medea, as the granddaughter of the god Helios, fits this mold. Furthermore, this spell is used to give the caster complete control over the victim’s magic, reminiscent of the symptoms of a spell Ovid’s Medea exhibits that cannot be explained by a love spell.

Similarly, Ovid portrays his Jason as going through a ceremony matching the one described in spell PGM I.42-195. This ceremony appears in Ovid’s poem at the point when Medea first sees Jason. As described in the second chapter of this paper, when Medea first goes to the temple of Hecate, she seems to go there under a magical influence. As discussed previously, in this first meeting of Jason and Medea at the temple of Hecate, Ovid describes no

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<sup>44</sup> Translation used throughout is Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; Including the Demotic Spells; Second Edition*, PGM I.42-195

<sup>45</sup> Only a fragment of this spell is listed here. For the full spell see Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation; Including the Demotic Spells; Second Edition*, PGM I.42-195.

reasoning behind Medea's choice to go there, even contradicting her most recent decision to not perform magic (*Ov.Met.7.74.99*). In fact, this unusual circumstance of Medea going to the temple of Hecate mirrors the situation mentioned in the above *defixiones* spell, which states "you will behold the angel whom you have summoned and who has been sent [to you]" (PGM I.42-195 = trans. Betz). This symptom of the victim being brought to the caster in particular is a symptom of both love spells and of spells 'for acquiring an assistant.' However, by having Medea brought at this exact moment to Jason, Ovid further emphasizes the pattern of spell PGM I. 1-42.195 in his *Metamorphoses VII*. This *defixiones* spell (PGM I.42-195 = trans. Betz) next indicates that the caster should "[approach] the god and, taking his right hand, kiss him and say these words to the angel, for he will quickly respond to you about whatever you want" (PGM I.42-195 = Betz). Similarly, the first actions attributed to Jason in the *Metamorphoses VII* is:

*"ut vero coepitque loqui dextramque prehendit  
hospes et auxilium submissa voce rogavit  
promisitque torum, lacrimis ait illa profusis:  
'quid faciam, video: nec me ignorantia veri  
decipiet, sed amor. servabere munere nostro,  
servatus promissa dato!'"*

("But when the stranger began to speak, grasped her right hand, and in low tones asked for her aid and promised marriage in return, she burst into tears and said: "I see what I am about to do, nor shall ignorance of the truth be my undoing, but love itself. You shall be preserved by my assistance; but when preserved, fulfill your promise") (*Ov.Met.7.89-94*).

In this interaction, Jason goes exactly through these steps, including taking Medea's right hand, telling her what he wants, and her immediately agreeing. The only difference between the two is that instead of kissing her, as the spell suggests, Jason promises Medea marriage. Finally, the results are the same as dictated by the *defixiones* spell, with Jason asking multiple favors of Medea, all of which she grants.

One manifestation of this additional binding spell is Medea's inability to deny Jason's requests that she perform magic. A spell to 'acquire an assistant' is used to force its victim to perform spells for the caster without "disobey[ing] in any way... If you give him a command, straightaway he performs the task." The control over a victim's magic is the greatest difference between the effects of a love spell and those of this style of binding spell. A love spell would not give such control over the victim's behavior. However, a spell 'for acquiring an assistant' would account for how Jason is able to force Medea to perform magic for him against her will. Medea, in her opening monologue, clearly recognizes the negative consequences of performing spells, describing such as "*nefas*" ("sin") and "*crimen*" ("crime") (*Ov.Met.* 7.11-71). However, Medea immediately agrees when Jason asks her again to use her magic to help him achieve the impossible tasks required of him by her father. She agrees despite her continued view that to perform this magic is amoral (*Ov.Met.* 7.74-99). This pattern of Medea agreeing to perform magic despite not wanting to continues for the next two spells Medea performs in the story. Rosner-Seigel (1982) argues that it is Medea's love for Jason, and thus the spell, that causes her to agree to perform this magic. While it is clearly the spell that leads to her behavior, given that control of magic is not typical of a love spell but rather of a spell 'for acquiring an assistant,' this behavior further indicates that Medea is under a combination spell.

Another manifestation of this additional binding spell is that Medea is unable to successfully perform an impactful spell that is not commissioned by Jason. This behavior can be explained by the total control a *defixiones* spell gives the caster over his/her victim's magic. Medea's inability to perform magic without Jason's permission does not mean, however, that she does not cause damage. For her third "spell," which is asked of her by the daughters of King Pelias, and not Jason, who wish to rejuvenate their father, Medea instructs them to slice up their

father, promising to give them the magical herbs necessary to resurrect him. However, she does not actually supply the magical herbs and the king dies a gruesome death (Ov.*Met.*7.297-349). Despite being a witch, Medea's choice to cause damage using a lack of magic might indicate that she is not able to perform a spell on her own. It can be argued that Medea is able to perform this spell as she is able to demonstrate it on a lamb (Ov.*Met.*7.309-321). However, this demonstration is of no great impact or sin, as it more closely resembles a sacrifice than dark magic. At a later point, Medea attempts to poison Theseus, again without Jason's approval, but also fails (Ov.*Met.*7.404-423). Since poisoning falls under the breadth of what is considered ancient witchcraft, this encounter can be seen as another instance of Medea's failure to perform magic when it is not commissioned by Jason. Overall, an inability to perform magic without permission could certainly be explained by a *defixiones* spell over Medea's magic as well as a love spell.

Another sign that Medea is controlled by Jason, beyond the effects of a love spell, is her lack of ability to put a spell on Jason, despite her attempts. In the *Ars Amatoria II*, Ovid writes:

*“Non facient, ut vivat amor, Medeides herbae  
Mixtaque cum magicis nenia Marsa sonis.  
Phasias Aesoniden, Circe tenuisset Ulixem,  
Si modo servari carmine posset amor.  
Nec data profuerint pallentia philtrea puellis:  
Philtrea nocent animis, vimque furoris habent.”*

(“Medea's herbs will not make love stay alive, nor with Marsian dirges mixed with magic songs. Medea would have held the son of Aeson, Circe would have held Ulysses if songs were able to save love. Nor are pale potions having been given to girls profitable: love potions harm the soul and have the power of madness.”) (Ov.*Ars.am.*2.109-106).

Here, Ovid's Medea attempts a love spell on Jason, with Ovid even noting her use of herbs as a basis for the spell. Further references to Medea's attempt to perform a love spell also appear in other poems of Ovid (*Her.*VI.150, 85)(*Met.*7.206-7). Two of these (Ov.*Her.*6.85)(Ov.*Met.*7.206-

7) are described as spells that draw down the moon, another typical style of love spell.<sup>46</sup>

However, as pointed out in the above quote, all of these love spells failed. These failed attempts are additional ways that Ovid shows Medea's inability to perform spells without Jason's permission. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Ovid notes that Medea also fails to use magic to defend her autonomy from Jason: "*quid te Phasiacae iuverunt gramina terrae, cum cuperes patria, Colchi, manere domo?*" ("what help to you are the herbs of Colchian land when you desired to stay in your homeland?") (Ov.*Rem.am.*261-2). Jason's ability to be unaffected by Medea's own magic demonstrates that the spell over her has properties beyond that of a love spell, which are explained by a spell such as one 'for acquiring an assistant.'

Jason's power over Medea's magic also plays a crucial role in the transformation of Medea from a human to a witch, a magical effect that is not explained by a love spell. Rosner-Seigel (1982) argues that Medea is led from being an innocent girl to a witch by her misguided love for Jason. He notes that Ovid begins his piece with both Medea and the narrator ignoring her magical past in favor of her human attributes and emotions. Instead, as Rosner-Seigel explains, it is Jason who perceives Medea as a witch, showing her little affection and calling her a "*muneris auctorum*" and a "*spolia*" ("prize" and "spoil") (Ov.*Met.*7.155-158). Additionally, as Medea begins her transformation into a witch, she seems to align more with Jason's desires. It is Jason who forces the love-struck Medea to perform magic against her will. More specifically, Rosner-Seigel (1982) points out that it is the performance of the spells themselves that seems to drive Medea's transformation from a human to a witch. By the third spell that Medea performs for Jason, Rosner-Seigel believes Medea has so undergone a loss of human emotion that she rejects Jason and abandons him. Instead, this paper argues that Medea seems to reach a point

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<sup>46</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman World*, 236-240.

where she aligns exactly with Jason's desires, becoming an unaffectionate witch who does not shy away from the types of spells he had previously asked of her. Thus, previous scholarship as is summarized by Rosner-Seigel, states that Medea's love for Jason allows him to play a role in the transformation of Medea from a girl to a witch. This transformation would not be caused by a typical love spell but could be explained by another type of binding spell such as one 'for acquiring an assistant.'

So why might Ovid have chosen to have Jason perform a mixed spell rather than just a traditional love spell? One reason may be that Ovid wishes to highlight Jason's desire for power rather than his desire for love. Rosner-Seigel (1982) previously has argued that Jason does not appear to actually love Medea. When comparing Jason's treatment of his father to his treatment of Medea, Rosner-Seigel points out the great difference in affection that Jason presents, concluding that Jason does not love Medea.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Jason only mentions his romantic relationship with Medea when attempting to persuade her to perform magic for him.<sup>48</sup> This lack of affection on Jason's part in and of itself complicates the love spell on Medea by changing the motivation behind it. Thus, by adding aspects of another type of *defixiones* spell to the traditional love spell on Medea, Ovid is able to fully create this new primary motivation in his Jason. By using a mixture of a love spell and a *defixiones* spell, or binding spell, Jason is able to gain control over Medea's magic in addition to just her affection.

In sum, the spell placed on Medea is not just a love spell. Rather, it combines a traditional love spell with another form of binding spell, similar to the style of binding spell Betz describes as a spell 'for acquiring an assistant.' This observation is supported by the extent of control Jason

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<sup>47</sup> Rosner-Seigel, "Amor, Metamorphosis and Magic: Ovid's Medea (Met. 7.1-424)," *The Classical Journal*, vol. 77 (1982): 231-243

<sup>48</sup> Rosner-Seigel, "Amor, Metamorphosis and Magic: Ovid's Medea (Met. 7.1-424)," 231-243.



has over Medea's magic and Medea's inability to perform spells on her own. Even more convincing is the discovery that Jason goes through the steps necessary for performing this spell at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses VII*.

## CHAPTER 4: IMPLICATIONS

The shift in power dynamics of Medea and Jason has greater implications for in scholarship. This new understanding of the spell cast on Medea in Ovid as a combination of a traditional love spell and a spell used ‘for acquiring an assistant’ cast by Jason himself changes the way in which Ovid’s Medea should be interpreted along with related topics. By recognizing Jason’s power over Medea in Ovid, different sources begin to arise as more prominent for understanding Ovid’s poetry, such as Pindar’s *Pythian* (Pindar, *Pythian*, 4.211-50). The recognition of the power of the spell over Medea also leads to a new perspective of her behavior, as past scholarship often ignores or diminishes the impact that the spell has over her autonomy. Thus, in this final chapter, the broader impact of the previous findings regarding the love spell on Ovid’s Medea is discussed.

To begin, this more nuanced definition of the spell indicates that Pindar should be viewed as a more important source for understanding Ovid’s Medea than previously considered. Pindar’s *Pythian*, as noted earlier, includes a version of the Medea story in which Jason casts a spell on Medea. To date, a large body of previous scholarship has attributed Ovid’s *Metamorphoses VII* and *Heroides VI* and *XII* to being solely based on Apollonius’s *Argonautica* and Euripides’ *Medea*.<sup>49</sup> Others have argued that Ovid also alludes to the works of *Eumelos*<sup>50</sup> and Varro Atacinus’ *Argonautica*.<sup>51</sup> However, none of these versions of the story have Jason casting the spell on Medea, making these sources less beneficial for understanding how that dynamic may work.

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<sup>49</sup> Jacobson, “Heroides 12,” 110.

<sup>50</sup> Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Epic* (Oxford : Clarendon Press 1924), 176, n.1.

<sup>51</sup> Jacobson, “Heroides 12,” 109-110.

In addition, the observation that Ovid's Jason is a witch brings a greater focus to Pindar's *Pythian IV* as a source for understanding Ovid. Pindar's *Pythian*, written in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC,<sup>52</sup> has been previously thought to be the only version of *Medea* in which Jason casts the love spell on Medea. This is not to say that Ovid specifically intended his *Medea* to allude to Pindar, especially since in Pindar's *Pythian* the spell is different from that in Ovid's *Medea*. The spell in Pindar is as follows:

“Μίξαν Αιήτα παρ’ αὐτῶ. πότνια δ’ ὄξυτάτων βελέων  
Ποικίλαν ἴγγα τετεράκναμον Οὐλθμπόθεν  
ἐν ἀλύτῳ ζεύξαισα κύκλῳ  
μαινάδ’ ὄρνιν Κυπρογενεῖα φέρειν  
πρῶτοω ἀνθρώποισι, λιτάς τ’ ἐπαιιδὰς ἐκδιδάσκησεν σοφὸν Αἰσονίδαυ:  
ὄφρα Μηδείας τοκέων ἀφέλοιτ’ αἰδῶ, ποθεινὰ δ’ Ἑλλάς αὐτὰν.”

(“And the queen of the sharpest arrows, Cyprogeneia,  
Brought down from Olympus the dappled *iunx* bird  
Pinned to the four spokes of an inescapable wheel,  
A mad bird, to mankind of the first time,  
And she taught Jason to be skillful in prayers and charms,  
In order that he might strip Medea of reverence for her parents,  
And that desire for Greece might shake her  
With the whip of Persuasion as she was burning in her heart”)  
(Pindar, *Pythian*, 4.213-219).<sup>53</sup>

This spell, given to Jason by Aphrodite, uses a *iunx* bird as a focus for the magic. In contrast, Ovid's spell involves no noted object of focus and calls upon the goddess Hecate. However, given that Pindar's *Pythian* is the only known previous version of *Medea*'s story that includes Jason as a witch, this piece can still be used as evidence for understanding Ovid's work and spells cast by mortals in literature. Furthermore, Ovid seems to have known of Pindar's *Pythian*

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<sup>52</sup> Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 244.

<sup>53</sup> Trans. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 56.

*IV*, as it is thought to be referenced in his *Amores* 1.8,<sup>54</sup> giving an indication that Ovid was in fact familiar with Pindar's works and, from such, this style of spell.

Another way in which this discovery of Jason's casting a mixed spell on Medea changes the view of Ovid's *Medea* in scholarship is that many authors ignore that Medea is under a spell. A common view of Ovid's Medea is that she is an especially unfeeling and cruel version of the character.<sup>55</sup> However, such an interpretation hinges on her independence, which is undermined if her behavior is controlled by a spell. For example, Jacobson (1974) writes, "Ovid presents a villainous creature, a fratricide, a corruptor of the innocent, about to become a child-murderer, who, though always aware of her crimes and her guilt, seeks to present herself as a girl, once innocent and pure, corrupted by a treacherous criminal."<sup>56</sup> Jacobson (1974) also notes how Medea, rather than blaming herself for her crimes, besides her frequent mention of her guilt,<sup>57</sup> tends to largely blame Jason for her actions.<sup>58</sup>

In considering just *Heroides XII*, Jacobson (1974)'s argument might very well be correct. However, in looking at Medea as a cohesive character across Ovid's poems, the spell creates a different story. Jacobson writes, "she may claim naivete, coercion is quite another matter."<sup>59</sup> However, with the description of the spell in *Metamorphoses VII* and this new understanding of Jason as the caster, there is no naivete, but only coercion. For isn't the basis of casting a behavior-altering spell coercion? Medea's lack of control is further emphasized by the

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<sup>54</sup> Nicholas P Gross. "Ovid, *Amores* 1.8: Whose Amatory Rhetoric?" *Classical World* 89, iss. 3 (Jan 1, 1996): 197.

<sup>55</sup> Stratton, Kimberly B. *Naming the Witch; Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 87-88;

Jacobson, Howard. "Heroides 12: Medea." *Princeton University Press* (1974);

Carole E. Newlands, "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's Medea." In *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, ed. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 179.

<sup>56</sup> Jacobson, Howard. "Heroides 12: Medea." *Princeton University Press* (1974), 118.

<sup>57</sup> Jacobson, "Heroides 12: Medea," 113.

<sup>58</sup> Jacobson, "Heroides 12: Medea," 112-113.

<sup>59</sup> Jacobson, "Heroides 12: Medea," 113.

understanding of the spell as not only a love spell but a combination spell, giving Jason control over many aspects of Medea. Thus, Medea's blame of Jason is less an attempt to remove blame from herself, but rather an insightful understanding of the situation. However, perhaps intentionally, when reading *the Heroides XII* alone, a point at which Medea is fully under the spell, like Jacobson (1974) argues, Ovid's Medea certainly seems to show little depth or character development. Thus, my understanding of the love spell on Medea can provide an alternative way of viewing Medea, contradictory such scholarship as Jacobson (1974), which views Medea as an independent being.

In recognizing that Medea is not an independent figure, this interpretation of Ovid's Medea also separates his work from Seneca's Medea. Stratton (2007) argues that Seneca's Medea and Ovid's Medea together create a new perspective of the character. She argues "Medea has, by the first century CE, come to signify women's deadly magic in the Roman imagination. Invocation of her name alone conjures allusions to women's unrestrained passion, subversive desire to control their husbands, and penchant for using dangerous poisons in magic rites."<sup>60</sup> Stratton (2007) bases this argument on Ovid's detailed descriptions of Medea's performance of spells and that "she never struggles or feels the pull of emotion (either loving or vengeful). Instead, Ovid reduces her story to a series of ghastly episodes – whose interest lies more in the description of brutality than in her humanity."<sup>61</sup> Again, this image changes given the new interpretation of the spell that has been cast upon Medea, as argued in this paper. If Jason indeed has complete control over Medea's magic, then the blame for the damage caused by some of her

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<sup>60</sup> Stratton, Kimberly B. *Naming the Witch; Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Stratton, *Naming the Witch; Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World*, 87-88.

spells shifts, as least partially, to him. Therefore, the character of Ovid's Medea is quite different from the internally cruel version of Seneca's Medea, as argued by Stratton (2007).

This new understanding of the spell Ovid's Medea is under also brings into question how Ovid deals with witches in general. Ovid frequently connects Medea and Circe in his poetry, potentially indicating that these two characters are similar in multiple ways. Circe is a character who is not normally portrayed as being under a specific spell, despite being defeated in Homer by Odysseus' use of the *moly* flower. One might argue that Ovid's connection of the two could be used as an argument against Medea's loss of autonomy (Ov.*Ars am.*2.100-105; Ov.*Rem.am.*261-265). However, while Ovid certainly connects Circe and Medea, it is not through their strength as witches but rather through their failures and loss of power (Ov.*Ars am.*2.100-105; Ov.*Rem.am.*261-265). There is also potential to view this connection as working the other way, bringing a new understanding to Ovid's Circe rather than his Medea. Circe herself seems to be presented by Ovid as a victim of love or even a love spell, which differs from the traditional Homeric storyline. Ovid discusses the extent of this love in his *Metamorphoses XIV*,

*“et Circe (neque enim flammis habet aptius ulla  
talibus ingenium, seu causa est huius in ipsa,  
seu Venus indicio facit hoc offensa paterno,)”*

(“But Circe (for indeed no one has a nature more included to the flames of love, whether the cause is from herself or whether Venus offended by the nature of her father made her this way.”) (Ov.*Met.*14.25-27).

Ovid both notes that Circe is under a level of oppressive love that it could be caused by a god, similar to a love spell like the one Medea is traditionally under. Thus, Ovid seems to deal with the issue of incredibly powerful witches by giving love a controlling power over them, and consequently giving the objects of their desire a level of power over them. Neither Medea nor Circe are able to in turn gain power over the love that they feel with their magic, as Ovid notes

that neither of them are able to cast a spell on their beloved (Ov.*Ars am.*2.100-105; Ov.*Rem.am.*261-265).

Overall, the recognition that Ovid's Medea is under a spell changes the scholarly view of this character. While the common view is that Ovid's Medea is unfeeling and ruthless, similar to Seneca's Medea, her loss of autonomy to Jason and the spell she is under weakens this perspective. Rather, Jason is at least partially responsible for Medea's actions, which could affect future scholars' treatment of both Ovid's Medea as well as his Jason. Furthermore, this understanding could affect the way that scholarship may think about Ovid's understanding and use of magic in his books, particularly in his treatment of women.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper argues that in Ovid's surviving poetry, Jason is in fact the caster of the spell over Medea. Furthermore, it defines the exact style of love spell that Medea is under, based on which of her behaviors align with those typically caused by love spells. Finally, because Ovid's Jason has additional control over Medea's magic, this paper argues that the spell Jason places on Medea combines both this *agoge* spell as well as a style of binding spell that Betz (1986) calls a spell 'for acquiring an assistant.'

In creating a spell of this nature, Ovid shows a new way of dealing with the issue the ancients seemed to face with Medea: how to deal with such a strong female character. Each version of the story of Medea deals with this issue differently. By making Jason the caster of the spell and making it such an extensively controlling spell, Ovid allows his Medea to be dangerous and powerful but under the control of a man. Furthermore, as noted by Rosner-Seigel (1982), Ovid's Jason even gains control over Medea by being the one who incites her transformation from an innocent maiden to a dangerous witch. Thus, even the dangerous side of Ovid's Medea is contingent on her already being in Jason's power. The continuous nature of this combination spell also keeps her from becoming too powerful upon leaving Jason.

Given this new understanding of the spell Medea is under, Ovid presents a version of Medea slightly unlike that of other authors. This perception of Ovid's Medea shows her to differ slightly from other versions. Similar to Apollonius' version of Medea, Ovid's Medea is able to be controlled by Jason. However, while Apollonius' Medea is powerful, she is restricted by her own naturally submissive personality, resulting in her being a lower threat to the greater population. Meanwhile, Ovid's Medea, should she go unrestrained, could pose a significant



threat. However, because of Jason's ability to match and override her individual control, Medea is less menacing. The other difference between the presentations of Medea is that Apollonius' Medea is fully a witch even before meeting Jason, and is able to exist peacefully in the world as such. Meanwhile, Ovid's Medea only completely transforms in a witch after Jason arrives. Ovid's Medea similarly differs from Seneca's Medea. While Seneca's Medea is dangerous and powerful and goes largely uncontrolled, Ovid's Medea is in fact controlled by Jason.

This treatment of Medea by Ovid could be considered more complicated than some other versions. However, it is noteworthy that Ovid himself seemed to have a fascination with commenting on the role of women in Roman society, such as is found in his *Ars Amatoria I, II, and III* and *Remedia Amoris*. Thus, in reading his poems altogether, Medea creates a complex picture, in line with Ovid himself who does not think of or deal with women simplistically in his other texts. This difference in the interpretation of the power dynamic between Jason and Medea adds commentary to the ways in which Ovid assimilates and differs from other authors and thus how scholarship defining such intertextuality might consider these underlying themes.

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