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In his early fifteenth-century rendering of Medea's story in the *Troy Book*, John Lydgate portrays a woman tormented by her love for Jason, a fickle seducer who promises the young princess marriage “to a-complische his fleschely fals delite / And to parforme his foule appetite” (1.2949-50). [\[1\]](#) This attempt to suggest Medea as a wronged innocent, suffering for love, has its roots in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, and also in Benoît de Sainte-Maure's twelfth-century *Roman de Troie*, which was itself translated into a hugely influential Latin account, the thirteenth-century *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, by Guido delle Colonne. Lydgate's attempt is both preceded and followed by other English and European efforts to portray Medea as fatally undermined by her relationship with Jason – efforts that reflect the medieval concern with reducing Medea's general influence over Jason and their story. Concurrent to this, however, there exists a tradition that portrays Medea as sexually aggressive, possessed of a fundamental and deeply troubling control over her own desires, over Jason's body, and indeed over life and death as it relates to her role in these narratives. Either way, however sympathetically it is depicted, the sexualisation of Medea's relationship with Jason in the Middle Ages owes as much to societal concerns and the literary preference of the period as it does to the story's classical and early medieval sources.

“al hir world on him sche sette”: Romantic Medea and the Suppression of Autonomy.

Writing in *The Medieval Medea*, Ruth Morse points to the shift in women's literary significance that can be discerned in Benoît's *Roman de Troie*. She notes:

Benoît contributed – perhaps unconsciously – to an important shift in literary representation whose roots may be traced back to Dido, and to Augustine’s tears over her. He projected the text’s larger problems (of loyalty and betrayal, of the behaviour of guests, of the legitimacy of rulers and rule) onto women, who ought to be the most private of citizens; he showed those private citizens as participating in public events, which they see from their own points of view. (89) [\[2\]](#)

As this would suggest, Medea thus becomes a significant and influential figure within the text, and accordingly within medieval (and specifically Middle English) narratives of the Trojan War that draw, directly or indirectly, on Benoît.

Indeed, though Benoît’s source, the 6th century *Latin De Excidio Troiae Historia* of Dares the Phrygian, connected Jason’s quest for the Fleece with the first sack of Troy, there Medea is conspicuous only by her absence. The Phrygian author notes that the Argonauts Colchi profecti sunt, pellem abstulerunt, domum reverse sunt. (2) (“set out for Colchis / And stole the fleece. / And returned to their homeland”). [\[3\]](#) Benoît, then, significantly expands on this rendering (despite imagining it to be a true account), adding a description of Medea’s meeting with Jason, their burgeoning relationship, and the help she gives him in his quest for the Golden Fleece, the prized possession of her father, King Aetes. Though Nathaniel E. Griffin points to the greater influence of Guido’s Latin account in the Middle Ages, noting “the Latin history largely displaced the French poem” (xvii), [\[4\]](#) it is important to note that Guido’s history is an unacknowledged translation of Benoît’s work (albeit one augmented with his own additions). Therefore, many of Benoît’s original touches are passed down to later medieval authors who used Guido, and who may have been utterly unaware of the existence of the French text. Accordingly, the emphases that Benoît adds to Dares’ bald account of Medea’s story are worthy of attention.

Barbara Nolan notes that Benoît “draws heavily on Ovid, using the *Heroides* as well as the *Metamorphoses* to augment his Dares and Dictys and develop his own

arguments” (19). [\[5\]](#) Rosemarie Jones concurs, noting that when the texts do diverge, “differences are mainly in the portrayal of the character of Medea, and would suggest, not that Benoît did not use Ovid as his source, but rather that he did use Ovid, and made deliberate changes in the story” (44). [\[6\]](#) Most notably, Benoît greatly extends the account of the love affair sketched in Ovid’s poems, and sets the precedent for portraits of Medea as a romance heroine, noting of her father “C’est une fille qu’il a veit, / Que de mout grant beauté esteit” (1.1213-5) (“It was a daughter that he had / Who was of the greatest beauty”). [\[7\]](#) These lines, stressing as they do her father’s apparent ownership of Medea, and his possessive interest in her beauty, foreshadow the somewhat reductive way her sexuality is to be constructed in the text. Medieval English texts, following Benoît and (principally) Guido, underline the romance elements in Medea’s appearance and her first meeting with Jason – in his *Troy Book*, Lydgate describes her in terms that are typical of the genre:

Medea with hir rosene hewe,
 And with freschenes of þe lyle white
 So entermedled of kynde be delite,
 Þat Nature made in hir face sprede
 So egally þe white with þe rede,
 Þat þe medelyng, in conclusioun,
 So was ennewed by proporcioun,
 Þat finally excesse was þer noon,
 Of never nouþer; for bothe two in oon
 So ioyned wer, longe to endure,
 By thempres þat callyd is Nature. (1.1578-88)

In this account and others, Medea is immediately falls prey to her startling desire for Jason. She is struck by him instantly, and suffers the physical changes medieval readers would expect from a romance heroine – going red and white, hot and cold as she looks at him. Rather than being able to act on her desires, however, she is used by her father as a young woman in romance would expect to

be, dining with the men and receiving them as a gracious hostess, all the time concealing her growing feelings for Jason. Indeed, Benoît observes that Medea, “que d’amor esprent, / s’en vient a eus mout vergondose” (1.1308-9) (“who burned with love, / came to them very modestly”).^[8]

Here, then, Medea lacks control over her situation in several ways, despite the fact that her feelings are fully her own, since, as Nicola Macdonald notes

while there is one reference to Amors [...] in general Benoît eschews placing responsibility for the instigation of the emotion and thus the relationship on an abstract and external force. (114)^[9]

Despite this apparent independence from “external force”, however, Medea is weakened by her desire. Like the figure of the typical romance heroine, she cannot even control her physical reaction on seeing Jason, and yet concurrent to this, she cannot act on her passionate feelings while under her father’s jurisdiction. In many subsequent fourteenth- and fifteenth-century accounts, this emphasis on her depth of feeling continues to render her passive, and indeed is specifically linked to apowerlessness that may seem bizarre to the modern reader, far more used to the unrepentant child-killer of Euripides and Seneca. The French writer Christine de Pisan, for example, observes in *The Book of the City of Ladies* that Medea “loved Jason with a too great and too constant love” (II.56.1, p.189),^[10] and in *The Epistle of Othea* criticises her more harshly, connecting her feelings for Jason with her later suffering (with no mention, however, of her later crimes): “in lewde love sche suffrid hir to be maistried, so þat sche sette hir herte upon Jason and yaf him worschip, bodi and goodes; for þe which aftirward he yaf hir a ful yvil reward.”^[11]

Similarly, in his *Legend of Medea*, Chaucer depicts both Medea and Hypsipyle as helpless to resist Jason – he is a skilled and experienced seducer, and as soon as Medea sees him she “wex enamoured upon this man” (1610).^[12] Indeed, Chaucer’s account, which famously truncates Medea’s story, casting her simply as an abandoned heroine, displaces previous evidence of a troubling sexuality,

despite Medea's obvious feelings for Jason. In "Women as Exempla in Fifteenth-Century Verse of the Chaucerian Tradition", Janet Cowen notes that in Guido's *Historia* (which she identifies as one of Chaucer's sources), the author uses a remarkable metaphor to describe Medea's desire. Guido, Cowen notes, has observed of Medea that: "female desire seeks a man as matter seeks form, and as matter takes different forms, so the dissolute desire of women proceeds from one man to another" (56).^[13] She goes on to point out, however, that Chaucer "neatly turns this simile around and applies it to Jason" (56). In Chaucer's text, then, Medea is represented as helplessly desiring and desired, absolved from Guido's unflattering characterisation of her as wanton and sexually aggressive, but concurrently, and resultantly, the victim, rather than the practitioner, of the single-minded lust Guido so disapprovingly describes. Lisa J. Kiser notes another Chaucerian innovation that underscores Medea's (and Hypsipyle's) inability to resist what she refers to as Jason's "bestly desires". She observes that

Jason's trickery is possible because of his verbal skills and his ability to counterfeit the truth. In one of Chaucer's original passages in *Hypsipyle*, we find Jason and Hercules acting as conspirators in the creation of a fiction intended to "bedote" Hypsipyle into marriage:

This Ercules hath so this Jason preyed
That to the sonne he hath hym up areysed,
That half so trewe a man there nas of love
Under the cope of heven that is above. (1524-27)

It is just this kind of dissemblance that causes both Hypispyle and Medea to fall victim to the bestly desires of the man who pursues them. (114)

^[14]

Chaucer thus manipulates his sources' account of Medea's sexuality (as he famously manipulates accounts of her murderous and magical power by eliding the end of her story and the particulars of the help she gives Jason).^[15] Medea is, of course, one of Chaucer's most controversial "Good Women", and here, it

seems, any authorial compliment to her goodness may (potentially at least) be read as a particularly back-handed one. Chaucer seems to slyly suggest that Medea's inclusion in the collection may only be justified if, firstly, virtually all references to her non-sexual power over Jason are excised, and secondly, if even her alarming control over her sexual desire is not criticised (as it is in Guido) but rather is transformed, comfortingly, from activity and agency into passivity. [\[16\]](#)

In these accounts, the influence of the classical tradition is clearly apparent, whether the authors had read Ovid's work in its original form or not. [\[17\]](#) In the *Heroides*, Medea depicts herself as the passive partner, captivated by Jason. She recalls: sic cito sum verbis capta puella tuis (12.92) ("thus quickly was I ensnared, girl that I was, by your words"), and regrets the speed with which she was attracted to him, exclaiming cur mihi plus aequo flavi placuere capilli / et decor et linguae gratia ficta tuae? (12.11-12) ("Why did I too greatly delight / in those golden locks of yours, in your comely ways, / and in the false graces of your tongue?") [\[18\]](#)

While Ovid's calculated decision to grant Medea her own voice here makes her distress appear more poignant, this sense of Medea's regret at her foolish desire survives into the medieval period, though now it is often voiced by male authors or narrators. In his *Confessio Amantis*, for example, an account that criticises Jason for flouting his promise of faithfulness, while portraying Medea as relatively blameless, John Gower underlines Medea's romantic passivity and impotence. She has behaved in a transgressive way by offering Jason a deal that will help him win the Fleece, but when she has laid out her terms and explained what tasks Jason faces, "Sche fell, as sche that was thurgh nome / With love, and so fer overcome, / That al hir world on him sche sette" (5.2635-7). [\[19\]](#) Moreover, a significant addition in Gower's text are the words Medea speaks to herself as she watches Jason from her tower: "Sche preide, and seide, 'O, god him spede, / The kniht which hath mi maidenhiede!" (5.3739-40). Here Medea seems utterly powerless – in sleeping with Jason and giving him the secrets of how to obtain the Fleece she seems to have relinquished her hold over him, and finds herself at his

mercy. This issue of Medea and Jason's sexual relationship as it relates to Medea's power, and to her status within the masculine community, has been significant since some of the earliest existing classical accounts (in Apollonius Rhodius' first century *Argonautica*, Medea recognises she must assure her potential protectors, Queen Arete and King Alkinoos, that she has not slept with Jason if she is to maintain their sympathy).^[20] Predictably, it remains so in medieval accounts. Nolan notes the effect of Benoît's adding such intimacy to the story, observing "The private bedroom was a relatively new phenomenon in 12th century architecture, and Benoît seems to have recognised its special possibilities for developing the drama of Ovidian love" (34). She points out the sense of intimacy between the reader and Medea that this addition creates:

Nowhere in medieval narrative before Benoît, except perhaps embryonically in scriptural commentaries, do we have so concentrated a study of characters observed by a teller in the margin, as it were, surveying a scene within and through a setting [...] The intimate setting provides an appropriate context for the central action of the episode – a dramatic monologue. Moreover, only the narrator and the audience are privy to Medea's consciousness as she paces in her room and debates with herself. (35)

However, while it is often rendered sympathetically, and the newly intimate atmosphere of these accounts can make Medea seem appealing, her sexual relationship with Jason obviously compromises medieval attempts to write her as a typical romance heroine, and the issue is addressed in strikingly different ways across different texts. Pearsall uses a comparison of Benoît and Gower to highlight the latter's particularly sympathetic attitude to the relationship, and by extension, to Medea's willingness to enter into it. Pearsall notes:

In Gower, Jason's desire to be with Medea is devoid of calculation, and he waits eagerly for her maid to arrive to conduct him to Medea's room. In Benoît, Medea soliloquises as she waits for him and, when half the night

has passed, has to send her vieille (a much more sinister figure!) to fetch the laggard – who had to be woken up- while she prepares a rich bed for the reluctant lover. In the morning, it is Jason, according to Benoît, who recalls Medea’s attention to the essential business in hand, that of winning the fleece, and when he has got the information he wants, he departs abruptly. In Gower it is Medea who, with womanly practicality, arouses Jason to thoughts of the danger he is in, and, after the briefing, there follows a long and touching farewell scene. (75-6) [\[21\]](#)

Similarly Lydgate, while acknowledging in his Troy Book that Medea has put herself in a situation she may come to regret -“Þe same nyȝt, allas, sche hath forbore / Hir maidenhed, and þat was grete pite” (1.2938-9) – appears sympathetic. He excuses her decision, remarking “And ȝet sche ment nat but honeste; / As I suppose, sche wende have ben his wyfe” (1.2940-1), and instead, like Chaucer before him, condemns Jason as a thoughtless and ungrateful seducer. [\[22\]](#)

Whether Jason is portrayed as acting out of self-interest, or out of a genuine love for Medea, these accounts all seek to convey the depth of Medea’s feelings for him, and the extent to which the balance of power in their relationship has altered to her detriment once she has given in to these feelings. Benoît ends his account of her life by observing

Grant folie fist Medea:
 Trop a le vassal aame,
 Quant por lui let son parente,
 Sone pere et sa mere [...]
 Puis l’en avint molt malement. (1.2014-18)

(“Medea committed a great folly
 In loving this man too much
 When for him she left her parents

Her mother and her father
Then came to a bad end”)

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, *Confessio Amantis*, *The Legend of Medea* and the *Troy Book* all contain similarly doleful pronouncements about the suffering Medea underwent as a result of her rashness. However, though Christine de Pisan, Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate all treat Medea sympathetically, and pity her for her untempered, uncontrollable desire and her resultant sexual relationship with Jason, inscribed in this attitude is a strand of medieval discomfort at her decision, a censorious desire to delineate precisely how it has left her at a disadvantage. Speaking of the classical presentation of Helen of Troy, Andy Crockett notes the double-edged sword that is authorial sympathy. He observes “pity like charity seems only to further entrench the lower caste represented by Helen” (78), [\[23\]](#) and that “making Helen a victim [...] inscribes violence by designating or delimiting the social roles of victim/Helen and victimizer/Paris” (87). [\[24\]](#) If Crockett’s comments may be applied anachronistically to the medieval Medea, they remain valid, and in fact reinscribe medieval attitudes to gender roles. Indeed, even Christine de Pisan, though writing self-consciously as a woman (and, in *The Book of the City of Ladies* at least, for women) very obviously makes the decision to construct Medea as a victim, as the most effective way of refuting previous misogynist criticism of her. [\[25\]](#) Though these authors treat her sympathetically, this very sympathy underlines the folly of Medea’s actions. In turn, in these more sympathetic accounts, Medea’s sexual desire for Jason, and her decision to act upon it, undermines her control over Jason and her situation, and in so doing (re)places Jason (reassuringly for the medieval reader) in the position of authority as the pair prepare to leave her father’s kingdom.

“the shamelessness of her eyes”: Sexualised Medea and Misogynist Anxiety

If Benoît, Chaucer, Lydgate and Christine de Pisan all construct Medea’s desire for Jason as, to some degree or other, sympathetic, as a poor but understandable decision, other accounts, most notably Guido’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae*,

portray her sexual relationship with Jason very differently. Guido and others exploit her divergence from the template of the romance heroine to make the sexualised, and sexual, character of Medea a threat to male power and, concurrently, a target for misogynist criticism.

Guido is, perhaps, the first and best example of this strategy. Though Morse notes that Benoît's expansion of women's roles may not be positive, and may in fact "turn[...] attention towards a partisan and potentially woman-blaming (although not misogynistic) analysis" (84), Guido is by far the better-known misogynist, and many critics have noted the consistently anti-female bias in his additions to Benoît's *Roman de Troie*. Indeed, Macdonald finds even his decision to write in Latin to be geared specifically against women, observing

Few, if any, medieval women would ever read the *Historia*, and indeed, women are not only not initiates in the world of Guido's *Historia*, their otherness is consistently underlined as the Latin historian firmly roots his text in a predominantly misogynistic scholastic and authoritative discourse. (125) [\[26\]](#)

Predictably, the first targets of this "misogynist scholastic and authoritative discourse", as far as Medea is concerned, are her sexuality and her deception. Morse points to Apollonius' "establishment of an erotic Medea" (35), and here the medieval texts build on the classical tradition established by the Greek author and built upon by Ovid, who candidly recounts the strength of Medea's feelings for Jason. However, once again the presentation of Medea becomes refracted through the perspective of the male author. Thus, Guido characterises Medea as in control of the encounter and, indeed, sexually insatiable, and, as Pearsall notes, describes her night with Jason "with doctrinaire relish" (n.24 p.76). [\[27\]](#) Nolan points out that, at this stage in Benoît's poem,

the poet removes himself abruptly from the dramatic action and reverts to his outer perspective [...] It is as if the poet, fearful of seeming to observe the love-making too eagerly, too closely, has retreated to his scholarly,

perspicacious frame in order to report and at the same time decline responsibility for so unchaste a scene and action. (36-7)

Guido recounts their union with no such qualms, and observes:

Medea licet sui voti satisfactionem impleverit per viriles amplexus et optatos actus veneros a Iasone, propterea non evanuit scintilla cupidinis in eadem; immo per expertos actos postea graviora concepit incendia quam per facinus ante commissum.

although Medea enjoyed the satisfaction of her wishes through the manly embraces and longed for acts of love by Jason, still the spark of lust did not die down in her; on the contrary, when the acts were finished, she conceived a more intense passion than she had done before the thing was done. (3.117-121) [\[28\]](#)

Despite his eagerness to describe it, to elaborate on his source text, Guido plainly finds Medea's unbridled desire, and Jason's apparent inability to satisfy it, alarming. Moreover, he sees her transgressive determination to gratify her own desires as reflected in her calculated plotting when she first meets Jason, and implies that she only desires marriage as a means to a sexual relationship. Here, Jason is unaware of Medea's desire (though of course it is to prove crucial to his quest), and, as he will do with other ungovernable women his text encounters, including Helen and Criseyde, Guido extends his criticism of Medea's capacity to dissemble into an attack all women:

Medea ergo tanti fervoris exasperata cupidine conceptum crimen satis conatur obtegere ut non solum ab hiis a quibus inspicitur percipi forte posset, sed etiam a seipsa probabilis excusationis argumenta producit quibus illud quod esse posset nefas in virgine excusabile convertat in fas. Inde est quod tenui suos eburneos infra dentes collidit hec verba: 'O utinam iste barbarus tam speciosus tam nobilis michi maritali copula iungeretur,' ut sibi ipsa daret intelligi inculpabili affectione illud appetere quod culpa et crimine non carebat. Omnium enim mulierum semper est

moris ut cum inhonesto desiderio virum aliquem appetunt, sub alicuius honestatis velamine suas excusationes intendant.

Medea, however, stirred by a desire of great fervor, tried to conceal the sin which she was thinking of, so that not only would it not be observed by those by whom it perhaps might be perceived, but so that she also might produce in her own mind arguments for plausible excuses by which she might be able to turn by excuses what might possibly be a wrong in a young girl into a right action. And for this reason it was that she softly forced these words between her ivory teeth: ‘Oh, I wish this foreigner, who is as handsome as he is noble, might be joined to me in marriage,’ so that she might allow herself to believe that it was because of innocent affection that she was longing for what was not devoid of sin and guilt. For it is always the custom of women, that when they yearn for some man with immodest desire, they veil their excuses under some sort of modesty. (2.283-296)

The inspiration for these lines may be the *Metamorphoses*, in which Medea wonders *coniugiumne vocas speciosaque nomina culpae / inponis, Medea, tuae?* (69-70) (“But do you call it marriage, Medea, and do you give fair-seeming names to your fault?”). [29] In Guido’s text, perhaps more obviously than in Ovid’s, Medea is clearly deluding herself as she convinces herself it is marriage she desires, when in fact, Guido implies, it is simply a sexual relationship. Her ability to pursue her desires in this way, to follow what would be, to a medieval readership, clearly the “wrong” course of action, makes her a threat (and indeed Medea’s almost limitless capacity to justify her own actions to herself is later to make her a particularly terrifying danger to the masculine community). Boccaccio too famously connects the unfettered nature of Medea’s desire with the disasters that followed, observing in *De Claris Mulieribus*

[...] if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she first raised them longingly to Jason, her father’s reign would

have been of greater duration as would have been her brother's life, and her virginal honour would have remained unbroken. All these things were lost because of the shamelessness of her eyes. (39) [\[30\]](#)

Here, Medea's desire for Jason is hugely threatening, explicitly connected not just to her own downfall, but to the loss of her father's kingdom and the death of her brother (murdered by Medea during her escape with Jason and the Argonauts). In William Caxton's *History of Jason*, [\[31\]](#) a very close translation of Raoul Léfèvre's French work *L'Histoire de Jason*, Medea herself makes a similar point about the danger of her own desire, reflecting "Certes myn eyne ye ben the cause whiche displeth me" (118), [\[32\]](#) and suggesting that it is her lustful gaze (so often, of course, the preserve of the predatory male) that has brought her to ruin.

In fact, Caxton's *History* constitutes a particularly interesting depiction of Medea's sexual desire as a motif in the story, because of its inclusion of other, very different romance interests for Jason. Morse gives Léfèvre's sources as Benoît, Guido, the French *Ovide Moralisé*, and notes "it is likely that Christine's *La Mutacion de Fortune* was also part of his reading, although he shows none of her elegance" (166). However, she points out that

[...] less than half of Léfèvre's work coincides with the legends as we have hitherto seen them. Not only are there large omissions in the Argonautic voyage itself, but there are expansions which are entirely invented. This is the first time we have seen the insertion of entirely new (and entirely newly minted) material. (167)

In his translation of Léfèvre, then, Caxton does not simply present the reader with Jason's first partner Hypsipyle or with Creusa, his third wife and the woman to suffer the wrath of the jilted Medea. Both these women feature, and Hypsipyle is particularly significant as a kind of anti-Medea, a woman who willingly relinquishes control of her kingdom for a man, first as she becomes infatuated, Dido-like, with Jason, and then as she abandons her subjects and stands waiting on the cliffs for Jason to return.

Sailing past with Jason, who aims to return to Lemnos and to Hypsipyle, Medea and her nurse are able to guide the ship away, exerting a control over Jason's destiny that the more conventional female lover could not hope to wield.

Abandoned in this way, after choosing to submit to a sexual relationship with Jason, Hypsipyle responds in the most un-Medea-like way imaginable - she "toke her crowne and sette it on her hede fermely. And after toke her sceptre" (154), and drowns herself while holding a letter for Jason to find, when her body washes up against the side of the Argo. Morse finds her to be far from blameless, arguing that she is "sinning as much as she is sinned against", and suggesting that, modern sympathy for her notwithstanding, "She is responsible for her own tragedy", [\[33\]](#) due to her unwise relationship with Jason. Certainly, she demonstrates to a medieval audience the destructive effects intemperate desire may have on women (and the communities that rely upon them) but there is no suggestion of other, more violent and threatening reactions to Jason's abandonment. Thus, Hypsipyle represents, perhaps, a model of feminine unchastity that Caxton's readers found far easier to relate to their own lives and conduct than the alarming example of Medea, whose deviation from societal mores rather increases exponentially, once she has begun her fatal sexual relationship with Jason.

In fact, though Hypsipyle is used more tellingly here than she is in many classical and medieval texts, it is the addition of Mirro, Queen of Olyferne, Jason's first love and a fascinating foil for Medea, that is more significant. In all medieval texts, whether or not it is represented sympathetically, Medea's sexual relationship with Jason is seen as unwise, foreshadowing the lack of self-control she will later exhibit over other matters such as Jason's faithlessness. However, particularly in the account of Guido, the description of her sexual voracity gives her a threatening and transgressive power over Jason's body. She underlines this possessive interest late in Caxton's *History*, at Jason's wedding, as she stands over the murdered bodies of Creusa and her son and reiterates her sexual desire, telling Jason "Certes my dere love knowe ye, for trouth that I had lever see all the world deye. Thenne I knewe that ye shold have habitacion with any other woman then

with me” (176). Mirro has none of this kind of troubling power, either deceptive or sexual – she speaks to Jason publicly (in contrast to the furtive conversations he has with Medea), and far from sleeping with him before marriage, maintains her distance and, indeed, sees his desire for her as somehow threatening. Caxton notes: “Jason began to beholde her so ardantly that she was ashamed how wel that she as ayse & discrete helde honeste manere” (37), and the contrast between this balance of power, eminently acceptable to a fifteenth-century audience, and the alarmingly lustful and possessive gaze with which Medea beholds Jason, in this text and others, is obvious.

Mirro explains her attitude to her lady in waiting, observing “myn honour requireth that at this first requeste I sholde holde me straunge & not abondoune my self. For they that at the firste requeste of their lovers agree to them ought to be ashamed” (46). However, she holds Jason’s interest and the two agree to marry. Mirro, then, has a kind of power in the narrative, paradoxically through her concern for her reputation, her refusal to submit to Jason, and her adherence to the conventions of the medieval romance. This kind of feminine power within a relationship is, of course, far more acceptable to the medieval reader than is Medea’s, for it can be emphasised without diminishing Jason’s (fundamentally greater) control over the situation. It is significant, for example, that as part of his wooing of Mirro, Jason overcomes fearsome enemies without her assistance, whereas Jason’s sleeping with Medea, and his subsequent success in his quest for the Fleece, appear to be (and are) fundamentally and problematically linked.

Indeed, once Mirro has occupied this space of love interest, Medea’s power must stem from deception and witchcraft, and she is doubly troubling to the male community because of her unashamed and continuing desire for Jason, and because of the lengths she goes to in order to fulfil it. Most notably, Léfèvre’s text, and in turn Caxton’s translation, are unique in the medieval tradition in their specific accounts of the enchantments Medea casts to ensure Jason’s love. In the *Heroides*, Hypsipyle accuses Medea of this kind of power, exclaiming to Jason *nec facie meritisque placet, sed carmina novit / diraque cantata pabula falce metit*

(6.83-4) (“Her charm for you is neither in her / beauty nor her merit; but you are made hers by / the incantations she knows, by the enchanted blade / with which she garners the baneful herb”). However, David J. Bloch notes the falsity of the classical Hypsipyle’s supposition, pointing out, “An ironic assumption Hypsipyle makes is that Medea’s spells had the same efficacy on Jason’s love as on his martial success; at 12.163ff Medea categorically denies just what her rival challenges” (202). [\[34\]](#) For her part, the Ovidian Medea underlines the limitations of her magic, contrasting the feats she performed for Jason in Colchis with her inability to hold him now, and exclaiming: *serpentis igitur potui taurosque furentes; / unum non potui perdomuisse virum* (12.163-4) (“Dragons and maddened bulls, it seems, I could subdue; a man alone I could not”). Conversely, in Caxton’s *History* Medea convinces her nurse to bewitch Jason’s bed, and thereafter, as Morse notes, he loves her “with all the passion that a potion can create”. [\[35\]](#) As Morse observes, the enchantment is eventually lifted, and Jason may choose to love Medea (a Medea who has, crucially, rejected all her magical power and promised to be governed utterly by her husband). This final choice may appear to give Jason the last word in the text, to allow him to end his *History* as the more powerful partner. However, Medea’s desire for Jason, and her control over his body (and indeed the other male bodies of Aeson, Pelias, her young brother and her two sons), means that the *Histoire*, in both its English and French forms, continues to constitute a stark warning (perhaps the starkest in the Middle Ages) about the dangerous nature of Medea’s sexuality.

Nicky Hallett finds that “literary characters frequently come with past histories that extend their significance beyond the literary moment of the text in front of us”. [\[36\]](#) If this comment is applied to Medea, it may be argued that she comes to her medieval authors in classical guise, through the works of Ovid and (perhaps) Seneca, but that medieval preoccupations and literary preferences meant that authors such as Guido, Benoît, Lydgate and Léfèvre felt compelled to rewrite, to reinterpret, rather than simply to translate. Accordingly, medieval interest in the place and behaviour of women, particularly in regard to their relations with men,

meant that these were themes inevitably drawn out of Ovid, and built upon with an emphasis either positive or negative. Some authors thus use the extension of the Ovidian motifs of love and desire to reduce Medea's power and neutralise her threat. In these accounts, her passion is misguided, but it is something greater than she is, and the typical and predictable emotional and physical reactions she experiences as a result of it emphasise her vulnerability and, perhaps, her lack of accountability for what is to follow. Conversely, in the hands of other authors, she is a threat to Jason, and to others, precisely because of her troubling and atypical determination to realise her desires, without any kind of regard for her reputation or the consequences of her actions. Medea's sexual desire, and her fulfilment of the same, is thus explicitly or implicitly connected to its devastating consequences, both in the works of authors who seek to convey Medea's threatening power, and in those that attempt to stress her passivity. Either way, Medea's sexuality is a hugely important motif in these accounts of her life, reflective of medieval literature's often sensitive appreciation of its classical sources, and yet concurrently its insistence on timeliness, on the inclusion of issues and of arguments intensely relevant to the age that reimagined these sources.

Endnotes

[1] Quotations are from John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1906).

[2] Ruth Morse, *The Medieval Medea* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 89.

[3] Latin quotations from this text are from Dares the Phrygian, *De Excidio Troiae Historia*, ed. Ferdinand Meister (Leipzig: Teubner, 1873). English translations are from Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian. 'Ephemeridos Belli Troiani Libri' and 'De Excidio Troiae Historia'. Trans. and ed. R. M. Frazer (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1966).

[4] Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel E. Griffin (Cambridge, Mass: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936), xvii.

[5] Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 19.

[6] Rosemarie Jones, *The Theme of Love in the Romans d'Antiquité*. (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1972), 44.

[7] Quotations in French are from Benoît de Saint-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. Leopold Constans, Vols 1-4, 6 vols. (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot, 1908). Translations of *Le Roman de Troie* are my own.

[8] Nolan notes the classical significance of Benoît's vocabulary here, particularly the use of the verb *esprendre*: "This collocation of love and fire has very ancient roots, but it is also one Ovid had used with great regularity in both his love poems and his *Metamorphoses*" (97).

[9] Nicola Macdonald, '*Diverse folk diversely they seyde*': *A Study of the Figure of Medea in the Literature of the Middle Ages*, Unpublished Diss. University of Oxford (1994), 114.

[10] Quotations from *The Book of the City of Ladies* are from Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1998).

[11] The text here is the medieval English rendering of Christine's work, described thus by Derek Pearsall in his review of Curt F. Bühler's edition of the poem - "a translation made by Stephen Scrope, stepson and ward of Sir John Fastolfe, about 1440, of the *Epître d'Othéa la déesse à Hector*, written about 1400 by Christine de Pisan" (274). Derek Pearsall, Review of Curt F. Bühler's Edition of the *Epistle of Othea*, *Medium Aevum* 41.3 (1972) 273-5, 274. Quotations are from Christine de Pisan, *The Epistle of Othea*, trans. Stephen Scrope, ed. Curt F. Bühler (London: Oxford UP, 1970).

[12] Quotations are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

[13] Janet Cowen, “Women as Exempla in Fifteenth-Century Verse of the Chaucerian Tradition”, in Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen, eds, *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry* (King’s College London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991) 51-65, 56.

[14] Lisa J Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the ‘Legend of Good Women’* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), 114.

[15] For an illuminating discussion of Chaucer’s knowledge of the bloody end of Medea’s story, and of his decision to elide it in the Legend, see Robert K. Root, “Chaucer’s Legend of Medea” *PMLA* 24.1 (1909) 124-53.

[16] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for referring me to Cowen’s essay, and for encouraging me to consider how Chaucer’s famously equivocal representation of Medea (and indeed of Hypsipyle) impacts specifically on his presentation of Medea’s sexuality.

[17] In *Texts and Transmission*, L. D. Reynolds lists Ovid’s *Heroides* as circulating in the ninth century, and notes that by the thirteenth, “Manuscripts of Ovid are so common as to be almost a feature of the period” (xxxvii). However, Ovid’s influence on Benoît and in turn on Guido, noted above, means that direct use of the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* in medieval texts is often difficult to determine, though some influence of these texts is plainly apparent. L. D. Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1983), xxviii.

[18] Quotations are from Ovid, *‘Heroides’ and ‘Amores’*, trans. Grant Showerman (London: Heinemann, 1914).

[19] Quotations are from John Gower, *English Works*, Volume 1, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1900).

[20] The precise influence of Apollonius Rhodius’ Greek text in the Middle Ages is unclear, although in their depictions of Medea as a young, misled girl who is torn between feelings of duty and desire – or Love and Shame, as Guido and Lydgate have it – medieval authors seem to echo his work. Alison Sharrock and

Rhiannon Ash note of the first-century epic “it is one of very few Hellenistic works to survive by manuscript tradition through the Middle Ages”. Alison Sharrock and Rhiannon Ash, *Fifty Key Classical Authors* (London: Routledge, 2002), 154. Morse argues that in *De Claris Mulieribus* “Boccaccio follows Ovid (especially the *Heroides*) and Apollonius Rhodius for Medea” (200), but acknowledges

It is not clear how well Boccaccio could read Greek, nor whether or not he read Apollonius for himself, with help, or from a commentary. He refers to Greek forms, but many medieval writers did that. Chaucer probably used his references to Apollonius, and not his own reading of either the Greek or the Roman epics. (200)

Boccaccio refers directly to Apollonius, “*qui ‘De argonautis librum’ scripsit*” (“who wrote the *Argonautica*”), in *De Genealogia Deorum*. Though, as Morse points out, Boccaccio did not necessarily know the Greek text firsthand, he certainly relies on it – and, as Morse notes, later medieval authors then rely upon him. Most notably, he is a rarity in the medieval period due to his preservation of Apollonius’ representation of the classical gods, and their role in Jason and Medea’s courtship. Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Genealogia Deorum Libri*, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols (Bari: Gius, Laterza and Figli, 1951). Translations of *De Genealogia Deorum* are my own.

[21] Derek Pearsall, “Gower’s Narrative Art”, in Peter Nicholson, ed. *Gower’s ‘Confessio Amantis’: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991) 68-108, 75-6.

[22] See Cowen, however, who notes Lydgate’s well-known propensity to silently expand on Guido’s misogynist critiques – she argues that Lydgate “proffers mitigating arguments of his own which serve only to compound the misogynist rhetoric: women are often led astray by men (wantonness is commuted to weakness); since it is not fitting for women to live alone, it is not such a serious matter if they have more than one man (moral status is reduced by mitigation)”

(58). Cowen, “Women as Exempla”, 58. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the salient point is that Lydgate, like Chaucer and unlike Guido, professes to defend Medea, and that he attempts to do this by undermining Guido’s sense of Medea’s sexual aggression. (Indeed, even the last example given by Cowen, that women could potentially be involved with more than one man, may appear threatening to the male community, but Lydgate’s transgressive suggestion is immediately diluted by the implication that, since they cannot live alone, women need (at least) one man to protect and govern them.

[23] Andy Crockett, “Gorgias’ Encomium of Helen: Violent Rhetoric or Radical Feminism?” *Rhetoric Review* 13.1 (1994): 71-90, at 78.

[24] *Ibid*, 87.

[25] For a useful account of different views of Christine’s “feminism”, particularly with regard to the notorious women she includes in *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Epistle of Othea*, see Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pisan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1999).

[26] Macdonald, ‘*Diverse folk*’, 125. Conversely, though she allows (above) that Benoît may not seek to praise women, Morse suggests the possibility that the French poet’s focus on romance meant his audience was composed in part of “women, and that some of them were powerful women” (84).

[27] Pearsall, “Gower’s Narrative Art”, 76.

[28] Latin quotations are Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel E. Griffin (Cambridge, Mass: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936). Translations are from Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974).

[29] Quotations are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Vol I, Books I-VIII, trans. Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1917).

[30] Quotations from *De Claris Mulieribus* refer to page numbers in Guarino's edition of the poem. Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Claris Mulieribus*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), 39.

[31] This, according to N.F. Blake, "was completed in 1471 [...] [and] appeared in late 1473 or early 1474" (169). N.F. Blake, *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (London: Hambledon, 1991), 169. Morse notes that Léfèvre's original "appears to have been written about the year 1460". Ruth Morse, "Problems of Early Fiction: Raoul Léfèvre's *Histoire de Jason*" *Modern Language Review* 78.1 (1980) 34-45, 35.

[32] Quotations from Caxton's translation of *L'Histoire de Jason* refer to page numbers in Munro's edition of the text. Raoul Léfèvre, *L'Histoire de Jason*, trans. William Caxton, ed. John Munro (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, Ltd., and Oxford UP, 1913).

[33] Morse, "Problems of Early Fiction", 42.

[34] David J. Bloch, "Ovid's *Heroides* 6: Preliminary Scenes from the Life of an Intertextual Heroine". *Classical Quarterly* 50.1 (2000) 197-209, 202.

[35] Morse, "Problems of Early Fiction", 43.

[36] Nicky Hallett, "Women", in Peter Brown, ed, *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 480-94, 482.

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First Response

This clearly argued and well written paper explores the sources in which Medea's story was available to readers in the late Middle Ages, and isolates particular strands of the narrative which seem to have aroused special interest. The discussion makes reference to a wide range of sources, and is especially illuminating on the relationship of the medieval Latin and French ones to Ovid. While much of the material has been surveyed by Ruth Morse, Nicola Macdonald, and Janet Cowen (all here acknowledged), this paper is more specific about treatments of Medea's sexuality, and the development of different traditions of interpreting this.

'Foule appetite' is perhaps rather unquestioning about Chaucer's treatment of Medea in *The Legend of Good Women*: here assimilated into a group of accounts described as sympathetic. Chaucer's startling omissions in his version of the story (which deals only with Jason's abandonment of Medea) seem so pointed as to arouse responses more equivocal than straightforward sympathy. Furthermore his decision to append Medea's story to the legend of Hypsipyle, to which it comes to seem a brief postscript, might deserve some comment. Possibly there is more to

be said about the different contexts in which stories of Medea circulated among medieval readers?