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Breaking Bodies: Materiality and Vulnerability in *Heroides* 12

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a queer and trans intersectional feminist interpretation of Ovid's *Heroides* 12, centering on lines 119–26. It argues that this passage contains a queer imagining of a degendered and dehierarchized togetherness for Medea and Jason, accessible only through accepting the material vulnerabilities of the body, that ultimately challenges normative temporal assumptions including what constitutes a desirable or successful future. By focusing on this passage as a lens through which to interpret the rest of the poem, this reading highlights the queer potential in more hopeful and charitable moments of the letter, while acknowledging the enmity expressed, to paint a more complex and ambivalent portrait of Medea.

KEYWORDS

Ovid, Medea, *Heroides*, queer, gender, fragmentation, temporality

If one were to describe Medea's *modus operandi* in a single word, one might settle upon fragmentation: she cuts up her brother Absyrtus, scattering his body parts into the sea to delay her father's pursuit, and convinces the daughters of Pelias to dismember him in a magical rejuvenation ritual,[1] resulting in his death and Jason's ascent to his throne. Her magical power is to literally and figuratively "dismember the household" by mobilizing paternal and filial love against its members.[2] These events are

[1] Ov. *Met.* VII. 297–349.

[2] Nugent 1993: 317.

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recounted in several of Ovid's works,[3] including *Heroides* 12,[4] the style of which has been called "disjointed,"[5] reflecting this thematics of fragmentation in its form.[6] As Stephen Hinds has observed, "[Medea's] story is from the beginning a story of fragmentation ... Fragmented by her story, fragmented by her constant reinscription in new texts, in new genres, in new eras, Medea will always in the end elude her interpreters."[7] Medea's power to fragment, as well as how the literary tradition maligns such an ability, is well recognized. And yet, even though she wields this power against herself in *Heroides* 12, there has been no discussion of the conditions that make fragmentation possible and even desirable: foremost, the acknowledgment and acceptance of the body's vulnerabilities. This attitude becomes apparent through the intersectional queer and trans feminist reading of *Heroides* 12 presented by this paper.

The *Heroides* as a collection has been described as an exercise in female vulnerability, one consequence of overlaying the elegiac posture of passivity on female characters, including Medea.[8] Sara Lindheim observes that

[3] Medea recurs throughout Ovidian poetry — see Heinze 1997: 3–24. *Met.* VII. 1–424, though the lengthiest extant portrait of Medea by Ovid (his tragedy *Medea* is lost), focuses primarily on the external magical dimension of her power, and so proves less relevant to my discussion, which considers the internal imaginings of the Heroidean Medea — see Gildenhard and Zissos 2013: 95–100 on interpreting the *Metamorphoses* Medea metaliterarily rather than psychologically. For further readings that consider the genre and metapoetic significance of the *Metamorphoses* Medea, see Wise 1982, Williams 2012, and Boyd 2019. See Bessone 1997: 14–19 on the lost tragedy *Medea* and 26–32 on the *Met.* Medea. See Jacobson 1974: 109–23, Jouteur 2009, and Davis 2012 on the influences of Apollonius and Euripides.

[4] Absyrtus in lines 113–20 and Pelias' daughters in lines 129–30.

[5] Griffiths 2006: 92.

[6] Hinds 1993, especially p. 46, observes slippages between literal, metaphorical, and textual fragmentation, suggesting that the thematics of fragmentation encourage speculation regarding textual authenticity. For a summary of the authenticity debate from a skeptical perspective, see Knox 1995: 5–14, 34–37. *Her.* 12 is notably absent from Knox's text and commentary. See also Kenney 1996: 20–27 on the style and authenticity of the double letters (*Her.* 16–21).

[7] Hinds 1993: 46.

[8] Boyd 2019: 7 suggests that Medea's self-depiction of "powerlessness" is apt given the genre.

Hypsipyle's letter[9] "reveal[s] her helplessness and vulnerability, which, as we have seen, are hallmarks of the *Heroides'* heroines."[10] Furthermore, "the heroine's text is the text of an ideology that codes femininity in paradigms of sexual vulnerability".[11] Associating femininity with vulnerability[12] relies on a multidirectional and circular reasoning, for "vulnerability is predominantly understood as *feminizing* and subsequently as negative, scary, shameful and, above all, something to be avoided and protected against."[13] Instead of reading the heroines' characteristic vulnerability as a rhetorical gesture designed to appeal to male desire,[14] or as contributing to the competition between male and female desire and authorial voice,[15] I resignify vulnerability as an orientation toward the material self that enables queer world-building by shifting conventional conceptions of futurity and relationality. To do so, I interpret the textually controversial[16] passage *Her.*

[9] On the connection between Medea and Hypsipyle, see Verducci 1985: 33–85, Rosati 1988, Fulkerson 2005: 40–55, Davis 2012: 40–1, Vaiopoulos 2013, Westerhold 2023: 79–100.

[10] Lindheim 2003: 122. Lindheim sees Medea as an exception to this rule of vulnerable heroines, instead "feigning" vulnerability (p. 130), mimicking Jason's former lover Hypsipyle's helplessness (*Her.* 6) to appeal to Jason in a Lacanian desire-triangle. I consider instead, *pace* Lindheim, the implications of placing Medea among her fellow vulnerable heroines.

[11] Miller 1980: xi, quoted by Rimell 2006: 139 n. 48. Although Miller's study covers primarily 16th century French and English novels, her argument is presented as applying to feminocentric texts generally, that is, ones written from a female point of view or following a central female character, including epistolary novels, which are perhaps the closest Early Modern equivalent to the *Heroides*.

[12] An association Ovid makes in *Ars Amatoria* III, according to Thorsen 2014: 178–79.

[13] Dahl 2017: 41.

[14] Lindheim 2003: 4.

[15] Rimell 2006: 125–26.

[16] Bessone 1997: 182: "Sulla rievocazione, del viaggio, e su questo distico in particolare, si sono concentrate le discussione sull'autenticità dell'epistola." See Davis 2012: 41 for a summary of scholarship on the first couplet's inauthenticity based on content. The *Heroides* as a whole is subject to doubts of authenticity: cf. Verducci 1985: 56 on *Her.* 6 and 12: "they are companion targets for an almost universal critical disapproval, a disapproval based on what has seemed to be a markedly unbridled and unredeemed excess of the conventionally understood Ovidian flaws." Verducci does not name those flaws explicitly. Hinds 1993: 10–11 summarizes the censure on which grounds the poem has been deemed inauthentic. Rosati 1996: 216 concludes that the controversial *Epistula Sapphus* (*Her.* 15) is authentic because of its "theoretical awareness and … expressive capacity." Cf. Tarrant 1981: 134–35 on the same poem: "It is my private opinion that the *ES* is a tedious production containing

12.119–26 through feminist, queer, and trans approaches to the body. This passage is especially suited to such a reading due to its creation of alternative timelines through the usage of the contrafactual, a grammatical manifestation of critical fabulation[17] and queer utopianism.

Many interpretations of elegiac time position it as anti-normative, observing a circular "feminine" time opposed to the teleology of masculine epic.[18] This gendered difference in temporal experience appears also within the *Heroides*, for the "women's propriety is endless time as they wait and live in hope of a future reunion [with their lovers], [while the men] have the space in which to move and progress."[19] Furthermore, the *Heroides* has proven to be remarkably suitable for explorations of non-normative temporality,[20] since these letters intervene in already established literary narratives, offering prequels, pauses, and "ironic prefiguration … through intertextual anticipation."[21] Medea's mythological story itself challenges linear temporality — in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, she reverses time, performing miracles including bestowing youth upon Aeson.[22] This article builds on these past observations of non-normative temporality by exploring queer temporality in particular, as well as how such a queered experience of time might stem from a dehierarchized relationship to a de-gendered body. Queer

hardly a moment of wit, elegance, or truth to nature, and that its ascription to Ovid ought never to have been taken seriously …"

[17] See e.g. Honig 2021: 72–100, which applies Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation to the *Bacchae*. Bessone 1997: 183 comments that Medea's regret that Jason did not get crushed in the Clashing Rocks is "*in forma irreale*," while Heinze 1997: 167 calls lines 119–26 an "*irrealen Wunsch*."

[18] Gardner 2013 observes that the elegiac *puella* tends to embody cyclical time, the reproductive cycle, and thus mortality and decay, while the male elegiac poet-lover subscribes more to linear time, creative (metaphorical) reproduction, and thus potential transcendence of mortality. Despite this gendered difference between its characters, she concludes that the genre as a whole defines success as dwelling in the process of delaying and waiting.

[19] Spentzou 2003: 98.

[20] See Barchiesi 1993 on the "future reflexive" nature of the *Heroides*, which positions the literary past as the story-world future of the heroines. Liveley 2008 demonstrates that the heroines explore "what if?" timelines. See also Drinkwater 2022, which reads Ovid's political contemporary as influencing the concerns of the heroines, as well as his exile subsequent to the publication of the *Heroides* as ironically prefigured by those poems, confounding normative timelines.

[21] Casali 1995: 505.

[22] Ov. *Met.* VII. 159–293. See Boyd 2019: 12–13 on this passage.

theorist Lee Edelman has termed the dominant temporal ideology "reproductive futurism," which denotes a system of logic predicated on the fetishization of an idealized Child as the only representative of the future. This is a future grounded on biological reproduction and children's faithful replication of their parents and normative societal values.[23] Edelman argues that queers have "no future" according to societal norms due to their disinvestment in biological descendants and the linear heterocentric temporality that accompanies children — an accusation that could easily apply to Medea, as she literally kills her children (and their father's future).[24]

A queered temporal experience need not be tied to a queer or trans identity. For my argument, it matters less who someone has sex with and the gender(s) of the involved parties than how they relate to each other. That is, identifying as queer does not automatically exempt one from perpetuating heteronormativity,[25] rendering identity a less useful metric for queer liberation than might be assumed.[26] Queer in my usage signifies a politic,[27] a way of imaginatively moving in and relating to the world so as to remake it. Similarly, rather than being relegated to only identitarian concerns, transness also describes a transformational movement that is not directional or teleological,[28] but "nonlinear, undirected, dislocated, and localized."[29] By disentangling the political project of queerness from identitarianism, without forgetting that queer and trans people have often been forced to

[23] Edelman 2004: 21–22.

[24] Nooter 2022: 104.

[25] Hence the term "homonormativity," which names "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." Duggan 2003: 50.

[26] Similarly, Haraway 1988: 586: "Subjugation is not grounds for an ontology; it might be a visual clue."

[27] Cohen 1997. Similarly, Bey 2022: 46: "My hesistance to affix the politicality and fugitivity of the black and trans to the physiognomic stems from the fact that their corporeality implies little about how one does their work."

[28] Crawford 2008: 138: "gender modification would seem to be at its most deterritorializing when we are emphatically unconcerned with moving from one fixed point to another on the path of least distance and detour."

[29] Santana 2019: 211.

find creative pathways for their own survival,[30] the project of imagining otherwise[31] need not fall solely on the shoulders of the marginalized.[32]

While this refusal to be beholden to identity has found some traction within queer and trans studies, it holds a special resonance within Classics. There is the danger, when dealing with ancient texts and authors as well as fictional characters, of committing the violence of imposing an identity on those who cannot claim one for themselves. It is not for me to say what Medea's relationship to her (?) body or gender might have been, nor Ovid's, and so I center my analysis on what they do and write, not who they are. On the other hand, I name my own identities as queer, trans, nonbinary, of color, because my lived experience undeniably shapes the arguments I produce. In frontloading my biases, influences, and agenda, I hope to sidestep the trap of false objectivity,[33] which subtends racist practices in the discipline.[34] Moreover, my personal experience of temporality through the cycles of death, rebirth, and collapse engendered by transness,[35] shapes this article not only in content, but also form. I have pinpointed *Her.* 12.119–26 as key to my discussion, but centralize these lines in a way that may feel disorienting to a reader accustomed to arguments that are largely linear in nature. Each piece of my argument does build on the former, but in a motion that might be described as spiralic. That is, new aspects of the aforementioned passage are revealed by the introduction of additional touchpoints, and so I continuously circle back to this passage after excursions in various theoretical and textual directions. Furthermore, the directionality of influence moves multiply: I contend that lines 119–26 can be viewed as programmatic, representing a wistful desire for non-hierarchical relationalities that permeates the entire poem.

[30] Cohen 1997: 440.

[31] My usage of this phrase stems primarily from Chuh 2003, but the concept reverberates across queer utopianism and Black futurism.

[32] Bey 2022: 11–12.

[33] Haraway 1988: 582–83 argues that "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility." Greenwood 2022: 194 cautions that "we embody these languages and impart our values to them, no matter how scrupulous or objective we think we are being."

[34] Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022: 201–2.

[35] Carter 2013: 134: "Transition pleats time, and in so doing transforms our relational capacities."

Finally, in contrast to the gender binary assumed by most scholarship on gender in the ancient world, my deployment of gender draws upon the work of Marquis Bey, who argues for the abolition of the hegemonic categories of race and gender by turning to the fugitive movement of black/trans/feminism. It is only through abolishing identitarian gender and race that one is able to access and inhabit the flesh, as such categorizations, themselves formed through colonial and patriarchal logics, inevitably shape and constrain thought.[36] While the recuperation of female voices in antiquity,[37] including those of the *Heroides*,[38] is a valuable intermediate step toward gender-based liberation, Bey would contend that it is not enough, for the "[m]ere reversal of the valuative hierarchy between the hegemonic and the subordinated reifies its logic, fails to interrogate the texture of hegemonic identities, and keeps in place the identities modernity has created."[39] That is, seeking and uplifting the female in these texts is "understandable but not the final resting place of our political endeavors,"[40] as this practice ultimately reinforces the gender hierarchy that is created through the insistence on binary gender (and Bey would argue, all gender) in the first place. Similarly, the model of gender inversion whereby the male poet assumes a feminine positionality,[41] indispensable as it may be for understanding the genre of Roman erotic elegy, or the common interpretation of

[36] Bey 2022: 42, 64.

[37] E.g. Lardinois and McClure 2001 on Greek literature, Gold 1993 on Roman poetry, Keith 1997 on Virgil's Dido and Sulpicia, Michalopoulos 2011 on Cynthia in Propertius, James 2012 on Propertius' Arethusa. See also the vast bibliography on Sappho and Sulpicia, of which Winkler 1990 and Purves 2014 as well as Richlin 1992 and Keith 2006 are helpful places to start.

[38] Lindheim 2003: (especially) 78–135, Spentzou 2003, Fulkerson 2005.

[39] Bey 2022: 42.

[40] Bey 2022: 64.

[41] Hallett 1973. Greene 1995, Sharrock 2000, and Wyke 2002 demonstrate that the inversion is rhetorical and does not disturb traditional gendered power hierarchies. See also Lyne 1979 and McCarthy 1998 on *servitium amoris*, an elegiac trope that metaphorizes this gendered power dynamic in terms of status.

Medea as transgressively masculine,[42] ultimately bolsters the gender hierarchy by legitimizing binary gender as an object to be deconstructed.[43] These approaches, while illuminating, also render thinking beyond binaristic gender increasingly impossible.

I combat such models both by recuperating (feminized) vulnerability and by degendering femininity, resignifying it as marking a particular orientation toward the body that is possible for all genders and sexes. All bodies exist in material conditions of vulnerability,[44] though this state has historically been coded as feminine.[45] I interpret Medea in *Heroides* 12 as demonstrating one possible method of gender abolition through her imagining of an alternative timeline in which she and Jason are propelled into an infinite future spent as dehierarchized material together. I conclude that the vulnerability of the body, which enables and indeed encourages its own fragmentation, predisposes it to openness, a precondition of horizontal relations. Medea mobilizes this openness to envision a non-reproductive queer future contingent on materialist approaches to the body. This is a move to degender gender itself, circumventing the limits of binary gender to reach for something new and as of yet undetermined.

[42] Particularly influential are Knox 1977 and Easterling 1977 on Euripides' *Medea*; see Durham 1984 for counterpoint. See Segal 1996: 25–36 for a discussion of Medea's masculine vs. feminine roles in the *Medea*. Foley 1989: 62–63 summarizes the relevant scholarship. See Boyd 2019 on this theme regarding the Ovidian Medea. Bessone 1997: 178 finds it ironic that the Heroidean Medea calls herself *femina* in line 118 (a woman) because she is so manly. The masculinization of Medea, an Eastern barbarian princess, is a manifestation of the phenomenon of using conventional gender roles to police proper social roles and denote otherness: see Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008: 12–13. See Smith 1995: 314–19 on the Otherness of Medea originating partly from colonialist discourses, which manifest in modern casting decisions and performances exaggerating the Otherness of her character. Mills 1980: 291 characterizes Medea's story as "exotic" and "supernatural." Liu 2018: 27–28 points out that Medea rejects the moniker "barbarian" employed by Hypsipyle against her (*Her.* 6) in her own letter (*Her.* 12). Nooter 2022: 104 tries to create a third category of "queer womanhood," but does not flesh out this category's difference from normative womanhood.

[43] For a psychoanalytic deconstructive analysis of elegy, see Miller 2004.

[44] In the Roman context, a masculinized integrity is often signified by the adjective *integer*, which most famously appears in Hor. *Od.* I. 21. Literary discussions of this poem can be found in Lowrie 1997: 189–94, 201–4, and Oliensis 1998: 109–12.

[45] As well as disabled or "sick": Hedva 2016: 8–9.

Fragmentation as Dehierachization

Heroides 12 is a 212-line Latin elegy presented as a letter that Medea has written to Jason, after he has abandoned her, but prior to her infanticide. Over the course of the poem, Medea recounts everything she has done to help Jason, including forsaking her homeland and murdering her brother. She oscillates between fond reminiscing, painful remorse, and heaping angry curses upon Jason. The poem begins with her regret that she ever met him (lines 1–20), then shifts to a chronological retelling of his arrival and how she assisted him in accomplishing Aeëtes' tasks (lines 21–112). This narrative is interrupted by a lament for her brother, whom she sacrificed for Jason's sake (lines 113–18), followed by a wish for mutual death (lines 119–128). The account resumes again with a *praeteritio* of her encounter with Pelias and his daughters (lines 129–33), and the remainder of the poem consists of a summation of her exile[46] from Corinth (the subject of Euripides' *Medea*) interspersed with further laments and curses, along with an appeal to Jason's mercy (lines 134–212). The following passage is one of the most textually controversial of the poem,[47] and occurs near its center, disrupting the linear narrative flow. In it, Medea wishes for Jason and herself to die violently together[48] (*Her.* 12.119–26):

> numen ubi est? ubi di? meritas subeamus in alto,
> tu fraudis poenas, credulitatis ego!
> Compressos utinam Symplegades elisissent,
> nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis;
> aut nos Scylla rapax canibus mersisset[49] edendos —
> debuit ingratis Scylla nocere viris;
> quaeque vomit totidem fluctus totidemque resorbet,
> nos quoque Trinacriae supposuisset aquae!

[46] Cf. Jacobson 1974: 122.

[47] Knox 1986: 216–17 on the grounds that the *Heroides* passage clumsily borrows from *Met.* 7.62–65 in addition to various inconsistencies with the mythological tradition. Hinds 1993: 11–21 rebuts Knox's points, including the argument that the *Metamorphoses* is prior to this letter, as does Bessone 1997 *ad loc*. See also Heinze 1993.

[48] Jacobson 1974: 114 observes that there is no other place in the *Heroides* at which a heroine wishes for her male lover to die, marking the extraordinariness of this passage.

[49] The manuscript readings provide *misisset*, "sent," emended by editors to *mersisset*, "drowned." Both readings are incorporated into my argument below.

> Where is divine oversight? Where are the gods? May we meet our
> deserved punishments in the deep,
> you for your deceit, I for my gullibility!
> Would that the Symplegades had crushed us until we were melded
> together,
> and my bones clung to your bones;
> or that ravenous Scylla had drowned us to be consumed by dogs —
> Scylla is the right choice for harming unthankful men;
> and she [Charybdis] who spews up waves as many times as she swallows
> them down,
> would that she had submerged us too in Trinacrian waters![50]

Upon first impression, this passage seems to fulfill common literary preconceptions that paint Medea as a witchy woman unable to control her emotions, hell-bent on vengeance at any cost.[51] She lays out her and Jason's crimes: gullibility (*credulitatis* line 120) and deceit (*fraudis* line 120) respectively. For two different misdeeds, each implicated in the other, Medea wishes for a shared punishment — is the communality of their gruesome death part of the sentence?[52] Medea doesn't merely wish for Jason and herself to suffer side-by-side, but to be physically crushed together (*compressos*), flesh stripped away so that bones cling to bones (*nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis* line 122), their innermost parts mingling in a grisly concoction of fractured limbs. The two ex-lovers are not just to spend their last moments together, but their bodies are to be as close to each other in death as can be. The interlocking word order of *nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis*, with possessive adjectives framing their doubled bones, reinforces this notion, as does the elision joining *nostraque* and

[50] All translations my own. Latin text from Goold 1977.

[51] E.g. Davis 2012, Michalopoulos 2021. Jouteur 2009: 84 pathologizes the Heroidean Medea's emotional vacillation as "*schizophrénie*." See Smith 1995: 307–8 for historical reactions sanctioning Medea as too monstrous and unsympathetic a character to perform. See Mills 1980 on Euripides' *Medea* as a "revenge plot"; similarly Burnett 1973, Segal 1996, and Hopman 2008. Jacobson 1974: 111–13, 118–20 argues that Ovid's Heroidean depiction emphasizes rather than excuses Medea's criminality. See also Nooter 2022: 100 on Medea's association with Hecate and witchcraft.

[52] These lines are markedly morbid in comparison to the desire expressed in *Met.* 7: see Bessone 1997: 185, who also points out the reference to the less macabre Propertius IV. 7.93: *nunc te possideant aliae; mox sola tenebo: / mecum eris et mixtis ossibus ossa teram* (now other women may possess you; soon I alone will hold you: / you will be with me and I will rub my bones upon your bones mixed in.).

adhaererent.[53] For Medea, it seems that being together with Jason is only desirable or perhaps possible if preceded by fragmentation. She defines their union as much by their melding as by this violent disintegration of bodily boundaries.

The hitch in this interpretation of fragmentation *qua* punishment is Medea's own implication in it.[54] Why does she doom herself to the same fate as Jason, given her professed enmity toward him and a demonstrated instinct for self-preservation? Perhaps this is not a punishment, but rather a revelation of a different form of existence. Though I ultimately argue that this passage represents a degendering of the body, I do so by moving through feminist/gendered critique to account for the material circumstances of the world as-it-is (we are not yet beyond gender) and give due credence to the rich history of feminist thought on the (vulnerable) body. So, according to Anne Carson, "[i]n myth woman's boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concern for them unreliable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity."[55] This lack of fixed boundaries renders the mythological women of the ancient world penetrable and therefore vulnerable, as well as boundless and therefore monstrous. They are wholly unwilling and unable to control their corporal boundaries, and thus those bodies themselves. Medea has dissolved the boundaries between her and Jason, committing a terrible act in the sense that she has feminized him, which is one sort of the contagious pollution that Carson claims makes mythological women so dangerous. Although Carson is critiquing Western mythological depictions of women, I argue that the Heroidean Medea leans in to this characterization, and so mobilizes what seems like a negative stereotype to her own advantage. By embracing formlessness, she imagines alternative possibilities for theorizing her relationship to Jason: possibilities that we shall see are inflected as trans.

One helpful formulation of the formless body is the "body without organs" of Deleuze and Guattari, first presented in essays on the artist Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*. For Deleuze, the body without organs

[53] I thank Catherine Conybeare for the observation about the elision.

[54] Bessone 1997: 176 sees Medea's desire to destroy herself along with her enemy as characteristic of her tragic portrayal.

[55] Carson 1999: 79.

is a body without the organism, by which he means the organizing structure inherent to the organism, with organs each possessing their own delineated and circumscribed functions, positioned in hierarchical relation to each other and to the organism as a whole.[56] The body without organs consists of the body's material components:[57]

> This objective zone of indiscernibility [between man and animal] is the entire body, but the body insofar as it is flesh or meat. Of course, the body has bones as well, but bones are only its spatial structure. A distinction is often made between flesh and bone, and even between things related to them. The body is revealed only when it ceases to be supported by the bones, when the flesh ceases to cover the bones, when the two exist for each other, but each on its own terms: the bone as the material structure of the body, the flesh as the bodily material of the Figure.

By recovering the body's existence as "flesh or meat," that is, by considering its materiality and stripping away its particular functionality, which are imposed by human conceptions of the body, the difference between man and animal melts away, and by extension, so does all hierarchical relationality. Deleuze develops this idea through the example of bones and flesh. When bones and flesh do not exist solely for the purpose of each other, when bones do not only exist so that flesh does not collapse, and flesh only so that the bones are not exposed, but rather "each on its own terms," terms that are material in nature, hierarchy collapses and the material existence of the body is freed from ideological constraint. This is about the moment of encounter between two things, here flesh and bone, in which they come together without prior baggage.[58]

Ovid's Medea seems to have anticipated the body without organs. She reduces herself and Jason to their material existence, mere bone independent from its obligations to the flesh and governing principles of bodily organization. Her bones and Jason's mingle freely together, while the identificatory distinction between them dissolves. It is only in this state that Medea and Jason can come together on equal footing, their past history of betrayal stripped away. Although both Bacon's paintings and Medea's

[56] Deleuze 2003: 39–40: "The body without organs is opposed less to organs than to that organization of organs we call an organism … for the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life."

[57] Deleuze 2003: 20.

[58] Deleuze 2003: 20–21.

imagining seem initially to depict immense suffering and violence, understanding the two as presenting the body without organs modifies the horror that they might provoke. Both become more about the perception of forces acting materially on the body (sensations) than of the potential cruelty or other humanly determined motivation propelling the action (feelings).[59] That is, this application of force reveals the material vulnerabilities inherent to having a body, vulnerabilities that are shared across gender and other social categories.

This is not to dismiss the violent nature of the passage, nor to deny the pain and suffering depicted. Instead, this is a move to reimagine punishment as transformation, a reshuffling of the body in the service of a new materiality. Consider how Eva Hayward reflects on an experience of re-forming the body through surgical transition:

> To cut off the penis/finger is not to be an amputee, but to produce the conditions of physical and psychical re-growth. *The cut is the possibility*. For some transsexual women, the cut is not so much an opening of the body, but a generative effort to *pull the body back through itself* in order to feel mending, to feel the growth of new margins. The cut is not just an action; the cut is part of the ongoing materialization by which a transsexual tentatively and mutably becomes. ... My cut enacts a regeneration of my bodily boundaries — boundaries redrawn. ... My cut is *of* my body, not the absence of parts of my body. [emphasis hers][60]

Growth for Hayward, the process of materialization and becoming, is possible through the cut, conventionally understood as a site of suffering and loss for the body. The cut becomes a part of her, is and was always a part of her, a condition of her becoming. To dwell in the cut, rather than to quickly pass through it to arrive elsewhere, is to accept the continuity and overlapping of past, present, and future selves. Transition does not always involve surgical cuts, but I would venture that a metaphorical cut, as a stand-in for the types of undoing and re-forming that are a condition of transformation, cannot be done away with. Breaking the boundaries of the self through surgery is not cast as good or bad, but necessary for healing and

[59] Deleuze 2003: 39–40.

[60] Hayward 2008: 255.

reinvention.[61] The question is not whether to willingly undergo fragmentation, because one does not always have a choice, but rather what can be done with that dissolution. Medea is not necessarily trying to destroy herself and Jason on her quest for vengeance, but through undoing their bodies to create alternative possibilities of being together, with societal constraints and assumptions tossed aside. She has imagined "a body that survives the organism",[62] a materiality that can only be discovered once the pretenses of organization have been stripped away,[63] a material becoming through the cut.

The body without organs opens up possibilities of function and understanding by doing away with the distinction between "normal" and "pathological" in addition to de-organizing the body.[64] Deleuze and Guattari suggest that organs do not produce specific products; for example, the brain alone does not produce thoughts, but rather multiple organs work together to create these products. Products are not end-states, but instead everything is in a state of produced-producing-becoming. This represents an absolute freedom from as well as a leveling of hierarchy. No one organ is more important than another, a relationality that can be extrapolated to community relations: no one person or thing is more important than another. Critically, this state of freedom and dehierarchization is enabled by a free movement of desire: the flow of desire in multiple directions is what disrupts hierarchizing organizing principles, in part because it disrupts subject-object relationality.[65] What is the *Heroides* but the injection of female desire into traditional mythological stories, often male-oriented in perspective? Given the confluence between the free flow of desire in the body without organs and the critical place of desire and the erotic within Second Wave feminist thought, it is curious that Deleuze and Guattari fail to acknowledge gender explicitly in their formulation of the body without

[61] Cf. Hayward 2008: 262: "'Hurt' is not a masochistic enactment (or, at least, not this alone), but signals a breach in language and a tear in the traditional subject/object formation."

[62] Deleuze 2003: 44.

[63] Deleuze 2003: 47: "But in escaping, the body discovers the materiality of which it is composed, the pure presence of which it is made, and which it would not discover otherwise."

[64] Numerous queer and trans theorists have taken up the body without organs. E.g. Crawford 2008, Musser 2012. See Garner 2014.

[65] Musser 2012: 78.

organs, except to appropriate for men the female experience as an idealized minoritarian state.[66] This omission of the histories of subjugation and lived experience attached to gender, rather than liberating thought from the dangers of identity-bound territorialism, threatens to reinscribe the very oppressions it seeks to dismantle.[67]

It matters that Medea has a female body, and that she calls on the female monsters Scylla and Charybdis to reduce Jason's and her bodies to matter. In light of Carson's formulation, it seems that the female body in mythology is predisposed to becoming the dehierarchized material body described by Deleuze, and may inherently exist in such a state. Elizabeth Grosz writes along similar lines as Carson, positing that the Western female body has been constructed as formless and liquid:

> Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment — not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? I am not suggesting that this is how women are, that it is their ontological status. Instead, my hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage.[68]

According to Grosz, the female body has been abjectly constructed as liquid to the male solid, exhibiting a dangerous and contagious formlessness that threatens to contaminate, absorb, and disrupt the sealed and therefore pure male body.[69] There are uncanny echoes between Grosz' account and the *Heroides* passage. Is not the whirlpool formed by the endless swallowing and regurgitation of seawater by Charybdis a physical manifestion of "a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order?" Leaving Charybdis unnamed, Ovid heightens her characterization of formlessness by

[66] Williams 1998: 73–75. For additional feminist critiques of Deleuze and Guattari, see Grosz 1994: 160–83 and Jardine 1984. Cf. Goulimari 1999.

[67] A parallel operation occurs in Propertius: "His appropriation of the feminine position does not imply a new symmetry in sexual power relations so much as a destabilization of the category of the masculine. In the final analysis, it remains an appropriation that was not equally open to all. And that is real power too." Miller 2004: 146.

[68] Grosz 1994: 203. See Stephano 2019 for a critique of Grosz' transphobia.

[69] Similarly, Shildrick 1997.

not imposing on her the order of a name. In contrast, Scylla, the conventionally attractive female nymph morphed together with beastly dogs into a massive sea monster, has too much form. Charybdis and Scylla together disturb the orderly voyages of seafaring men, the calm of the sea itself, rendering the sea untamable by men. Woman's form is not previously intact and subsequently broken, "not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship," but instead was never legible as form to begin with. By refusing the comparison to a purposeless broken vessel, Grosz rejects patriarchal standards of measurement, against which women are predetermined to fail. It is these standards that cast Charybdis and Scylla, representations of a monstrous feminine, as the extremes of form: a dearth and an excess respectively, fittingly employed by Medea to deconstitute herself and Jason.

Hélène Cixous reframes the feminine tendency to be fragmented as one that produces a non-hierarchized relationship to the body:

> If there is a self proper to woman, paradoxically it is her capacity to depropriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without 'end,' without principal 'parts'; if she is a whole, it is a whole made up of parts that are wholes, not simple, partial objects but varied entirety, moving and boundless change, a cosmos where eros never stops traveling, vast astral space. She doesn't revolve around a sun that is more star than the stars.
>
> This doesn't mean that she is undifferentiated magma; it means that she doesn't create a monarchy of her body or her desire. Let masculine sexuality gravitate around the penis, engendering this centralized body (political anatomy) under the party dictatorship.[70]

Cixous paints a dynamic picture of a body in motion, perpetually redefining itself. She analogizes hierarchical political forms such as monarchy and centralized government to a masculine relationship to the body, specifically to the cultural and personal exaltation of the phallus.[71] The horror of female excess, the "endless body," is instead reframed as a body "without 'end'," as

[70] Cixous and Clément 1994: 44, excerpt of "The Newly Born Woman," original English publication by Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986: 63–65; French text on pp. 115–19 of *La Jeune Née*, Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1975.

[71] I use "phallus" rather than "penis" both to combat transphobic assumptions and in agreement with Butler on the lesbian phallus (Butler 1993: 57–91).

limitless and uncontainable, vast and complex, as well as inherently dehierarchized. I argue that this non-hierarchical orientation reflects a feminized relationship to the body that does not necessarily correspond to, though may be related to, one's gender or sex. That which has been understood as femininity can be de-gendered, or detached from the female — instead of marking a binaristic sex-gender position, it represents a challenge to hierarchical phallogocentric concepts of wholeness and autonomy.

Within this poem, the horizontal relations that are enabled by the feminine dehierarchization of the body are reflected in the language that Medea uses to describe her relationships to Jason and her children, enacting her fabulations syntactically. Near the beginning of the poem, Medea describes the first time she lays eyes on Jason in lines 33–36:

> 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.
>
> And I looked and I was undone; and I burned with not-unknown flames,
> just as a pine-torch burns for mighty gods.
> And you were beautiful, and my fates were dragging me to doom;
> your eyes stole my eyes away.

Notice the prevalence of coordinating conjunctions, here mostly "*et*" (and), connecting clauses that might more naturally be written with subordinating conjunctions such as "because." Bessone *ad loc.* notes that the line borrows from Vergil's *Eclogues* 8.41: *ut vidi, ut perii, ut me malus abstulit error!* (When I saw you, that's when I perished, that's when a terrible mistake snatched me away!).[72] The transformation of Vergil's temporal *ut* to Ovid's coordinating *et* marks a shift from a hierarchical affectation by desire to a horizontal relationship, from chrononormative cause-and-effect to parallel list. This stacking of paratactic clauses headed by *et* nearly eliminates grammatical subordination from these lines. One might naturally expect in English the following:

[72] Bessone 1997: 104.

Because I looked, I was undone; *and then* I burned with not-unknown
flames,
just as a pine-torch burns for mighty gods.
You were *so* beautiful *that* my fates were dragging me to doom;
your eyes stole my eyes away.

The avoidance of grammatical subordination removes hierarchies at the level of language in Medea's recollection of the first moment that she met Jason. Imagining the undoing of their bodies, rendering it material flesh and bone, goes hand-in-hand with Medea's ability to turn back the clock to this moment in their relationship before power relations and hierarchies became established. This queered temporality is made possible through the shared fragmentation of their bodies, and is both enacted and made manifest through language. The only other time at which such a concentration of parataxis occurs in *Heroides* 12 is when Medea describes her children in the following passage, lines 187–90, nearly the end of the poem.

si tibi sum vilis, communis respice natos;
saeviet in partus dira noverca meos.
et nimium similes tibi sunt, et imagine tangor,
et quotiens video, lumina nostra madent.

If I am worth little to you, then have regard for our shared children;
their awful stepmother will act savagely toward my offspring.
And they are too similar to you, and I am touched by the likeness,
and as often as I see them, my eyes grow moist.

We can perform the same exercise as with the previous passage, rendering this into idiomatic English, which is to say, with more subordinate clauses instead of parallel paratactic clauses. Such a transformation might produce the following:

If I am worth little to you, then have regard for our shared children;
their awful stepmother will act savagely toward my offspring.
Since they are too similar to you, I am touched by the likeness,
so that as often as I see them, my eyes grow moist.

This concentration of parataxis via coordinating conjunction occurs in *Heroides* 12 only in these two passages, in which Medea describes her relationships to Jason and to her children. I interpret this as an attempt by Medea to relate to Jason and her children in a dehierarchized manner.

Though such an attempt ultimately fails, what is important here is her imaginative exploration of the possibility of dehierarchized relationships through the power of language.

Being Vulnerable Together

The body without organs can be applied to the social and political body to reimagine community, relationality, and governance. Rather than viewing fragmentation and dissolution of text and body as negative processes inherently associated with the feminine, I apply feminist thought on precarity and vulnerability as necessary conditions of humanity and participation in the social fabric, and indeed as constitutive of it. Femininity is stereotypically associated with the negative qualities of vulnerability, exposure, emotionality, softness, and passivity.[73] Vulnerability on a relational level can indicate a need for others, a susceptibility toward being affected, contradicting the humanist ideal of a free-floating autonomous subject.[74] Since vulnerability can be both an effect of and a susceptibility to wounding or trauma, such associations align femininity with brokenness. The aforementioned qualities feminize, and thus become entangled in shame, needing to be avoided or prevented.[75] These assumptions are a byproduct of a liberal humanist tradition in which the (masculine) subject is presumed to be "unified, closed, masked, and disciplined,"[76] the binary opposites of which are abjectly assigned to the female.[77] Traditional feminist critiques, broadly speaking, have attempted to describe, historicize, and reject these aspects of femininity. More recently however, feminist thinkers including Ulrika Dahl have sought to embrace these stereotypes through exploration of the complexities of emotionality and negativity by recasting negative conceptions of vulnerability and passivity as instead a capacity for openness and receptivity.[78]

[73] Dahl 2017: 40–44.

[74] Butler 2004: 22: "It is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you?"

[75] Dahl 2017: 41.

[76] Dahl 2017: 49.

[77] Butler 2004: 41.

[78] Dahl 2017: 44, building on Cvetkovich 2003.

Expanding out from the individual to the community, Judith Butler contends that those who have experienced loss, and especially women and minorities, due to their disproportionate subjection to harm within our current societies, acquire their social identity partially due to their experiences of violence. Consequently,

> [t]his means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies–as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.[79]

The experience of vulnerability stems from our connection to others, the foundation of communities — it "is the existential condition of being in the world."[80] To be part of a community is to be vulnerable to loss, and so to isolate oneself in response to or as a preemptive avoidance of loss is to refuse to acknowledge one's relationship to others. The refusal of vulnerability, the refusal to be *feminine*, is to reject one's obligations to and dependence upon others, to reject the basis of community.

Jason's abandonment of Medea can thus be understood as his refusal to acknowledge how much he has depended on her. In response, Medea makes hers and Jason's vulnerability undeniable by subjecting them to fragmentation, a move that recovers their connection and expands the possibilities of relationality, at least in the timeline generated by the contrafactual. Medea's imagining serves as a wish fulfillment of her desire earlier in the poem to have been torn apart alongside her brother Absyrtus, whom she dismembered in an effort to enact a(n impossible) clean break with her past. We can see this mobilization of bodily disintegration in one of the most poignant passages of the poem, lines 113–18, in which Medea fails to recount how she killed and dismembered her beloved brother in order to prevent their father King Aeëtes from effectively pursuing herself and Jason as they fled with the Golden Fleece.

> at non te fugiens sine me, germane, reliqui!
> deficit hoc uno littera nostra loco.
> quod facere ausa mea est, non audet scribere dextra.

[79] Butler 2004: 19.

[80] Nirta 2021: 347.

sic ego, sed tecum, dilaceranda fui.
nec tamen extimui — quid enim post illa timerem? —
credere me pelago, femina iamque nocens.

But I didn't leave you behind without me when I was fleeing, brother!
my letter fails in this one place.
That which my right hand dared to do, it does not dare to write.
So I ought to have been torn apart, but with you.
Still, I did not fear — for what else could I fear after this? —
to trust myself to the sea, though I was now a guilty woman.

This is the one memory that Medea, normally so bold, cannot face. There is a certain beauty and terror in these lines, so full of regret, pain, and possibility, stemming from her act of tearing her brother apart. This is a desire to reclaim the familial bond she exploited and in some ways destroyed by killing her brother, a desire for reconnection so as to not be alone, a desire for kinship and community. The interlocking word order, with *te* (you) and *germane* (brother) punctuated by *me* (me) and *reliqui* (I left behind), referring to Medea, enforces Medea's insistence that she did not abandon her brother. It seems that being alone, deprived of her loved ones, is a most terrible fate for Medea[81] — an ending she rationalizes that she spared her brother by killing him instead of leaving him behind. Despite this, her brother's missing presence looms large, as these lines contain an overabundance of words associated with lack, loss, and departure,[82] resolved by the wish for mutual fragmentation in line 116, replacing *sine me* (without me) with *sed tecum* (but with you). What is missing is the fact that she killed her brother, then carried his body parts with her,[83] dropping them piecemeal in the sea, to delay her father's pursuit. Instead, she reframes what might be considered a heartless strategy as a prolonging of togetherness with

[81] Indeed, one reason Medea kills her children is to deprive Jason of a family line, and she kills his future wife to prevent his ability to recreate a family — the worst "punishment" she can conceive of. Immediately preceding this passage, she laments leaving her sister and mother behind (line 112).

[82] Verbs of departure: *fugiens*, *reliqui* (I view the negation *non* as piling a negative on a negative, exacerbating rather than canceling out the sense of loss). Verbs of deficiency: *deficit*, *non audet*. The very center of line 113 is occupied by *sine me*, which marks the sense of abandonment that Medea feels at the loss of her brother, while also ignoring her part in his death.

[83] Ovid's version places the agency squarely in Medea's hands: in other variations of the myth, she did not perform the actual killing. See Bessone 1997 *ad loc*.

Absyrtus, imagining an alternative timeline in which they were jointly dismembered (*sic ego, sed tecum, dilaceranda fui.*). What went wrong here, marked by the obligatory sense of the feminine singular gerundive *dilaceranda*, is not the fact that her brother was torn apart, but that *she* was not as well.

These lines occur just before the passage (lines 119–26) in which Medea depicts herself and Jason becoming bodies without organs. That passage, itself framed as a wish, responds directly to Medea's desire to have been torn apart with her brother just a few lines before.[84] To fulfill a wish with a wish is to retreat deeper into an indeterminate queer time, multiplying uncertainty and possibility. The synchesis in line 113, joining Medea and Absyrtus, serves as a prequel of that in line 122, *nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis*, which refers to Jason and Medea. This is a rather queer replacement of Medea's husband Jason for Medea's brother, leveling distinctions between familial and romantic connection by focusing on shared aspects of fragmentary togetherness. Medea reenacts her brother's traumatic mutilation with her own and Jason's bodies, displacing the acting force of dismemberment from herself, which she does not acknowledge even when describing her brother's death as seen in the passage above, onto the unnamed and wildly formless Charybdis. She does not fear the sea (lines 117–18), for any retribution it might have in store for her, reframed through her imaginative fabulation, instead enables a dehierarchized communality. Indeed, the "deserved punishment" (*meritas* ... *poenas* lines 119–20) she serves to herself and Jason is resignified near the conclusion of the poem as a deserving to be together in kinship (*Her.* 12.197–98):

> te peto, quem merui, quem nobis ipse dedisti,
> cum quo sum pariter facta parente parens.
> I seek you, whom I deserve, you who gave yourself to me,
> with whom, a parent, I have been made equally a parent.

The polyptoton of *merui* (I deserve) with *meritas* (deserved), with *merui* taking Jason as its object, creates a verbal echo that reinforces the non-punitive nature of the punishment (*poenas*). The tone of Medea's description of Jason here is at the very least neutral, and perhaps even fond. Though she refers obliquely to the trust broken between them using legal language (*te peto, quem merui, quem nobis ipse dedisti*), at this moment, the

[84] Heinze 1997: 166 notes the conceptual parallel between Jason and Absyrtus.

open animosity present in other lines is missing.[85] Instead, she alliteratively emphasizes their equal status (*pariter*) as genderless parents (*parente parens*) in another polyptoton, not distinguishing between the roles of mother and father. Medea's ideal world is one in which she and Jason treat each other as equals, enjoying a horizontal relation of dehierarchized togetherness. This is the vision that Jason betrayed in leaving her, and the one that she seeks to create anew in her letter.

A Fantastic Future

In addition to this reformulation of the body as one without organs and subsequent rethinking of relationality to others, lines 119–26 present an unconventional orientation to temporality[86] that can be considered queer. Medea has traditionally been seen as a future-killer: "By killing [her] children Medea destroys the spirit and the line of Jason, leaving him without a future, but finally also she punishes herself."[87] In killing her own children, destroying Jason's future as well as her own, she transgresses normative motherhood. This commonly accepted interpretation is both shaped by and reinforces Medea's characterization as vengeful, capable of horrifying atrocities, and dangerously fulfilling her female passions using supernatural powers. My reading contests this narrative, demonstrating that the future-

[85] Medea's tone shifts throughout the text. She resorts back to name-calling in line 206, referring to Jason as *ingratus* (ungrateful). In line 21, both *ingrato* and *meritum* appear. As an anonymous reviewer points out, lines containing forms of *mereo* are laden with legal language, including *pignora* (guarantee of a contract, referring to the children, line 192), *peto* (to seek a claim in court, line 197), and *dedisti* (to hand over in accordance with a contract, line 197). On the law in Ovid and Euripides' *Medea*, see Ziogas 2021 and Giombini 2018 respectively. My reading seeks to emphasize the queer potential in more hopeful and charitable moments, while still acknowledging the hostility she experiences elsewhere, in an effort to paint a more complex and ambivalent portrait of Medea. Consequently, I do not see love or affection as mutually exclusive with a desire for recompense or even hatred. What is significant here is that Medea's fondness seems to surface primarily in these moments of horizontal relationality.

[86] Heinze 1997 *ad loc.* finds that the narrative logic jumps backward through time ("*Dieser Wunsch kommt aus der Retrospektive*") even while employing the present tense ("*Anapher und Präsens (*est, subeamus*) markieren den Gedankensprung deutlich, der Tempuswechsel kommt wie häufig in diesem Brief zwar unvermittelt, bleibt aber nicht unverständlich*").

[87] Burnett 1973: 22.

killing actions of Medea in *Heroides* 12 are in the service of a queer non-reproductive futurity contingent on accepting the material vulnerabilities of the body.

Medea, in mobilizing the power of fragmentation, can envisage futures outside what is commonly accepted as desirable because of her reimagining of relationality between people. Part of this reimagining is a redefinition of what normally constitutes closure, such as the idea that the body is a closed system, that death is a conclusion. Crucially, a condition of Medea's and Jason's shared future is the transformation of their bodies into ones without organs. The reorientation of the body towards its materiality enables its futurity. As Kara Keeling writes in her monograph exploring futurity through depictions of the Black body, "[t]he very elements through which we materialize on this planet — that is, through which we matter (our brains, our tongues, our sex, our necks, our fingers) — are available to invest in building another reality."[88] We can learn from Black folks, whose existence has so often been reduced to only body, that bodily materiality can be reoriented toward fabulating a future. This is a shared mattering, as indicated by the first person plural pronoun "we," a being together that enables an imagining otherwise.

At this point, I reprint the passage in question for the convenience of the reader in a final act of revisitation (*Her.* 12.119–26):

> numen ubi est? ubi di? meritas subeamus in alto,
> tu fraudis poenas, credulitatis ego!
> Compressos utinam Symplegades elisissent,
> nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis;
> aut nos Scylla rapax canibus mersisset[89] edendos —
> debuit ingratis Scylla nocere viris;
> quaeque vomit totidem fluctus totidemque resorbet,
> nos quoque Trinacriae supposuisset aquae!

[88] Keeling 2019: 152–53. The first person plural refers to Black American women upon first reading, but seems more expansive upon further consideration. Cf. Hayward 2008: 255: "... my tissues are mutable in so far as they are made of me and propel me to imagine an embodied elsewhere."

[89] The manuscript readings provide *misisset*, "sent," emended by editors to *mersisset*, "drowned." Bessone 1997 *ad loc.* prefers *misisset* as creating a more fluid effect, while Knox 1986 takes Palmer 1874's emendation of *mersisset* due to sense. Heinze 1997 *ad loc.* does not object to Scylla having enough distance from her dogs to be able to throw something to them, and so prefers *misisset*. Both readings are incorporated into my argument below.

> Where is divine oversight? Where are the gods? May we meet our deserved
> punishments in the deep,
> you for your deceit, I for my gullibility!
> Would that the Symplegades had crushed us until we were melded
> together,
> and my bones clung to your bones;
> or that ravenous Scylla had drowned us to be consumed by dogs —
> Scylla is the right choice for harming unthankful men;
> and she [Charybdis] who spews up waves as many times as she swallows
> them down,
> would that she had submerged us too in Trinacrian waters!

So what kind of future for Medea is this? Two possibilities are offered: first, to be eternally crushed in the Clashing Rocks, the Symplegades, and second (containing two further possibilities) to be caught in the trap of Scylla and Charybdis, either (drowned and) eaten by Scylla or drowned by Charybdis.[90] The manuscript reading in line 123 of *misisset*, "sent," creates a rubber band effect: Scylla tosses the bodies for her dogs to retrieve and eat, while the editorial reading of *mersissent*, "drowned," creates the further danger of the bodies to be snatched up by Charybdis in the process of drowning. Either reading neatly links the actions of Scylla and Charybdis together, as mutually implicated in drowning and/or cyclical movement, transferring the indigestive consumption of Charybdis onto Scylla as well. The continuous cycle of consumption and regurgitation performed by Scylla and Charybdis as well as the constant clashing and reopening of the Symplegades defines the "punishment" as eternally inconclusive.[91] On the one hand, the cyclical temporality invoked by the repetition indicated by the correlatives (*totidem … totidemque* line 125) and underscored by the backdrop of oceanic currents creates a morbid sense of stability, a certain and eternal future in the mouth, as it were, of the whirlpool Charybdis. On the other, the wholeness of the

[90] Hopman 2008: 161–68 interprets the references to the Argo and Symplegades in Euripides' *Medea* in combination with Medea's "revenge" as a "nullification of the past" (p. 168), emphasizing the repetition of the past rather than an orientation toward the future, as I do here.

[91] One of the main concerns with this passage is that the Symplegades are supposed to be frozen in motion after Medea sails through with Jason and the Argonauts. If so, this example supports my claim that Medea has a queer sense of temporality.

cycle is ironically composed of a fragmentary process in which the continuously fragmented bodies inevitably resurface, short-circuiting that consumption. It is not just Medea's and Jason's bodies that are fragmented, but also those of their punishers in a process of affective transference: the Rocks always join and separate, Scylla's dogs seem to be autonomous beings that are both part of and not part of her, Charybdis' form is of the negative space created by constantly churning liquid. Scylla's and Charybdis' failure to incorporate what they swallow, whether it be bodies or seawater, results in a regurgitation that represents a shift in the desire for consumption into a refusal of closure, a prolonging of that ravenous desire (*rapax*), never to be satiated.

Scylla's desire to eat is mirrored by Medea's indecisive desire for death. Rather than merely indulging in a suicidal vengeful impulse, through the process of fantasizing she reformulates death as an eternal material communality, codependence as interdependence, fragmentation as togetherness. This is not a romanticization of death — the path to this future is through deconstitution and the loss of their previous selves. The multiplication of potential fates that she wishes upon herself and Jason reflect choices that she cannot decide between or fulfill.[92] Each punishment is an overdetermined death that doubles as a prolonged union, a purgatory in which Medea and Jason can suffer together forever. Just as a whirlpool creates its own momentum, so too do Medea's deathly fabulations propel Medea and Jason into the future.

The shifting of temporal reality, enabled by her embodied transformation, opens up new possibilities for Medea. Medea disjoints Jason's and her combined bodies in order to indefinitely delay closure,[93] that is, the end of their relationship and death. Fragmentation is a precondition for their union, as their future depends on reimagining and reshaping their past.[94] Affect, after all, not only dehierarchizes the body so that it can relate multiply to other bodies and objects, but also "produces a body that is

[92] Heinze 1997 *ad loc.* sees the choice as an intertextual one between Apollonius' version and Euripides'.

[93] An act that is perhaps mirrored by the poem's ending. Boyd 2019: 9 observes that the final three couplets of the poem employ aposiopesis, the future tense, and the imagery of birth in order to disrupt closure.

[94] A temporal scrambling characteristic of the *Heroides*' future reflexive relationship to intertexts (Barchiesi 1993), though this effect is magnified by the content of *Her.* 12.

radically open to the nonlinear temporalities of sensation."[95] Our understanding of current and future embodiments rewrites our perception and recounting of past embodiments when engaging in autopoiesis, as in the case of some trans individuals that use post-transition pronouns to refer to their pre-transition selves.[96] This nonlinear and nonprogressive experience of the body is even more evident for genderqueer or nonbinary trans individuals. For example, the application of hormones such as testosterone has been used not only for gender transition, but also in a creative practice of undoing gender.[97] Since trans experiences do not accord with conventional norms regarding sex and gender, they can reveal the limits of those norms as well as other ways of being.[98] Reese Simpkins' analysis of trans*-becoming[99] demonstrates how autopoiesis of the material body disrupts chrononormativity[100] by expanding the ways we perceive time and relationality. Here I reinscribe autopoiesis via the gender-disrupting Medea as not creating internal cohesion and organization, as the term is traditionally used,[101] but instead as un-cohering and de-organizing. If autopoiesis produces assemblages that work in concert, why not have that coordination be non-hierarchical and free flowing? I depart here from Simpkins' work, attached as it is to the concept of the individual as a whole. Both traditional autopoiesis and the dehierarchizing autopoietic process I see in Medea create a specific and non-universalizing temporal experience, that is, one that does not correspond to universal time units such as minutes or days.[102]

[95] Simpkins 2017: 129.

[96] Simpkins 2017: 124–27. Some trans individuals dispute a teleological transition model, which has been named as following "hormone time," because it depicts transition linearly, pandering to a cis gaze (Horak 2014). See also Galupo, Pullice-Farrow, and Ramirez 2017 on nonbinary and genderqueer trans identities.

[97] Preciado 2013 and Bolton 2020. See also Prosser 1998: 171–205 on Leslie Feinberg's gender ambivalence.

[98] Simpkins 2017: 130.

[99] I use the asterisk in trans* here in line with Simpkins' own usage, though omit it in my own writing. On the terms trans, trans-, and transgender, see Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008.

[100] Freeman 2010: 3 defines chrononormativity as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity ... a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts."

[101] Simpkins 2017: 131–35 summarizes the usage of autopoiesis in other theorists' work.

[102] Simpkins 2017: 132.

Recall that Medea's imagined eternity together with Jason is couched within a contrary-to-fact conditional, marked by *utinam* ("would that" line 123), which I have argued is a grammatical manifestation of imagining otherwise. This conditional intertextually echoes the last words of Jason in Euripides' play, following his discovery that Medea has killed his children, also framed as a contrary-to-fact conditional (Eur. *Med.* 1413–14):

> οὓς μήποτ' ἐγὼ φύσας ὄφελον
> πρὸς σοῦ φθιμένους ἐπιδέσθαι.
>
> Would that I had never begotten them
> to see them dead at your hands.

As S. Georgia Nugent observes, the contrary-to-fact introduced by ὄφελον ("would that" line 1413), is a "bracketing [that] oddly places the entire play into a kind of hypothetical space–of erasure or non-being. The effect is to present the play to its audience as something so horrible that it should never have happened at all. It is a kind of absent presence: it exists but we, the audience, are hoping, are wishing that it did not exist."[103] Assumed equivalence between the audience and Jason aside, Nugent's analysis does reveal that Euripides' Jason presents an alternate temporality, just as Medea does in the *Heroides*. The comparison between the Euripidean Jason's and the Heroidean Medea's words, however, create a sharp contrast: Medea's future, while macabre, contains a queer hope for different types of connection and relationality,[104] whereas Jason's lines effectively foreclose the future, the loss of which he blames on Medea. Not all contrafactuals build a queer futurity. Jason cannot imagine an alternative future in which he and Medea coexist, but would rather envision a space of nonexistence, an alternative reality in which his children were never alive. The feeling of closure evoked here is reinforced by the fact that these are the last lines that Jason speaks, and likely the last of the entire tragedy.[105] Jason seems wedded to reproductive futurity: without his children and future spouse, there is no future to be had, and so he wishes his own past away. Medea, on the other hand, with her refusal of reproductive futurity via infanticide, seems to be the quintessential Edelmanian queer figure without a future.

[103] Nugent 1993: 322.

[104] See Muñoz 2019 on queer hope, especially pp. 1–18.

[105] On the case for excising the generic choral passage after these lines, see Mastronarde 2002 *ad loc*.

While Nugent focuses her analysis on the end of the *Medea*, she seems also to allude to the contrary-to-fact uttered by the Nurse that opens the tragedy, which serves as the open bracket to Jason's closed (Eur. *Med.* 1–6):

> Εἴθ' ὤφελ' Ἀργοῦς μὴ διαπτάσθαι σκάφος
> Κόλχων ἐς αἶαν κυανέας Συμπληγάδας
> μηδ' ἐν νάπαισι Πηλίου πεσεῖν ποτε
> τμηθεῖσα πεύκη, μηδ' ἐρετμῶσαι χέρας
> ἀνδρῶν ἀριστέων οἳ τὸ πάγχρυσον δέρος
> Πελίᾳ μετῆλθον.
>
> Would that the hull of the Argo never have winged its way
> to the land of the Colchians through the dark Symplegades,
> nor that the pine ever have fallen in the glens of Mount Pelion,
> cut down, nor furnished oars for the hands
> of the noble men who pursued the Golden Fleece
> for Pelias.

This extended contrary-to-fact, reinforced by the emphatic particle εἴθ' (line 1)[106] and tricolon structure μὴ ... μηδ' ... μηδ', highlights the futility of the Nurse's words. A contrary-to-fact is a wish that attempts to negate an inevitability, which in fact solidifies the impossibility of altering what has happened, because if reality were different and could be changed, the contrary-to-fact would not require expression. The Nurse names several potential turning points at which Medea's fate became tragic, all of which center around the actions of Jason and the Argonauts, depriving Medea of agency. Unlike Medea in *Her.* 12.119–26, the Euripidean Nurse and Jason offer no imaginings of what could have been, instead dwelling in a space of pure negativity that denies the past and leaves no possibility for an alternative future.

Perhaps it is the queer and feminist potential of *Her.* 12.119–26 that has contributed to the designation of this passage as textually questionable. Medea's orientation to the future in this passage is unrecognizable and even nonsensical by normative standards, a queer illegibility that might render the text suspect in terms of authenticity. Over the course of this article, I have resignified feminine vulnerability as instead a degendered and dehierarchized orientation to and acceptance of the body as material, which in turn facilitates possibilities of non-hierarchical relationality. The reorientation of

[106] Mastronarde 2002 *ad loc.*

the body toward its materiality and vulnerability, which subsumes and perhaps even renders obsolete binary gendered identifications, reshapes how we understand our selves in relation to others, opening up new futures for us all.[107]

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