

MEDEA'S RESPONSE TO CATULLUS: OVID, *HEROIDES* 12.23-4
AND CATULLUS 76.1-6

After an opening of the elegiac epistle which recalls the Euripidean-Ennian *Medea*-prologue, Ovid's heroine thus states her purpose (*Her.* 12.23-4):¹

est aliqua ingrato meritum exprobrare voluptas;
hac fruar, haec de te gaudia sola feram.

A clear break ends the exordium and leads into the main body of the letter. Introducing the new section, the distich formulates a programme which is valid for a great part of the epistle:² the *Heroides* are often punctuated by programmatic headings, thus making clear the articulation into paragraphs.

The couplet echoes the initial lines of the Euripidean *Medea* in her first dialogue with Jason, the second episode in the tragedy. As this new section of the epistle follows a prelude assuming the air of Euripides' prologue, the correspondence with the tragic dialogue takes on a structural significance. The ordering of the epistolary blocks mirrors the development of the drama and organizes its own transitions by reproducing some of the major junctures of the play.

The analogous words with which *Medea* greets Jason's entrance are more straightforwardly insulting (*Eur. Med.* 472ff.):

εὖ δ' ἐποίησας μολών·
ἐγὼ τε γὰρ λέξασα κουφισθήσομαι
ψυχὴν κακῶς σε καὶ σὺ λυπήσῃ κλύων.³

The correspondence is not accidental. The following enumeration of *Medea*'s past services to Jason, which was to become a set-piece in later treatments of the story,⁴ is the seed for the main body of Ovid's epistle; here, that catalogue is expanded into a narrative dimension and complicated with new issues. The Euripidean list is repeated by Seneca, who at the same time echoes Ovid's adaptation; cf. *Sen. Med.* 465-77 '...minora *meritis* patiar—*ingratum* caput, / revolvat animus igneos tauri halitus...': the epithet *ingratus* and the mention in the same verse of *Medea*'s *merita*—with a sinister ambivalence making her 'crimes' coincide with her 'merits'—recall our distich; this also raises the question as to the role played in this relationship by Ovid's lost tragedy, *Medea*.

¹ The text and line-numbering of the *Heroides* used here are those of H. Dörrie's edition (Berlin, New York, 1971).

² Note the presence of two key-terms, *ingratus* and *meritum*. The former is echoed in the conclusion, in line 208; marking the first verse after the 'prologue' and the last verse before the (monologic) epilogue of the letter, it frames the proper speech addressed to Jason (see also S. Hinds, 'Medea in Ovid: Scenes from the Life of an Intertextual Heroine', *MD* 30 [1993], 9-47, pp. 32-3). There is an analogous correspondence, in Seneca, between *Medea*'s words in the first dialogue with Jason (*Med.* 465) and the last lines addressed to him after the vengeance (1020-21). The two terms occur close together in the monologue of the 'Apollonian' *Medea* of *Met.* 7, which enters into an ironic dialogue with *Her.* 12: cf. 7.42-5 (an ironical prefiguration of the future). More on this and on other aspects in my forthcoming commentary on *Her.* 12.

³ The following line, 475 ἐκ τῶν δὲ πρώτων πρώτον ἀρξομαι λέγειν, is also consistent with the aim at thoroughness of the Ovidian epistle, expressed *via negativa* in line 116 *deficit hoc uno littera nostra loco*. As for *meritum exprobrare*, compare Jason's reproach to *Medea*—in answer to the speech by her referred to in this section—for overextolling her services: 526 ...λίαν πυργόις χάριν.

⁴ For the traditional character of the enumeration cf. also the lines, perhaps by Ennius, and perhaps from his *Medea*, 274-5 V. (sceptical, however, is H. D. Jocelyn, *The Tragedies of Ennius* [Cambridge, 1967], p. 350). See also Ap. Rh. 4.364-7 (*Medea* to Jason); 4.1032-5 (*Medea* to the Argonauts); Val. Fl. 8.106-8 (*Medea* to Jason).

The Euripidean model is filtered through the tradition of Latin love-poetry, and translated with an adaptation of Catullan verses. Ovid's couplet plays allusively with the opening of Catullus 76 (lines 1–6):

Si qua recordanti benefacta priora *voluptas*
 est homini, cum se cogitat esse pium,
 nec sanctam violasse fidem, nec foedere in ullo
 divum ad fallendos numine abusum homines,
 multa parata manent in longa aetate, Catulle,
 ex hoc *ingrato gaudia* amore tibi.

The repetition of three key-words (*voluptas*, *ingrato*, *gaudia*) in the same—or in an equivalent—metrical place; the correspondence of *meritum* to *benefacta*; the reappearance of the phrase *est voluptas* in a different syntactical context; the parallelism of the construction *haec de te gaudia feram* with *manent ex hoc amore gaudia tibi*: all this almost amounts to an example of 'memoria incipitaria',⁵ given the introductory and programmatic character of the Ovidian couplet.

The close parallelism in language and form only heightens the impact of the change in sentiment: Catullus' gesture is reversed. Here too the words accompany the end of a love which sees devotion (whether pure or criminal) on one side, ingratitude and betrayal on the other. While the situations are analogous, Ovid's Medea assumes an attitude diametrically opposed to that of Catullus: not the aspiration, though sceptical, to be satisfied with the consciousness of good deeds, but rather the desire for an outburst, which casts one's services in the face of the ingrate. The reader moves abruptly from the meditative atmosphere of poem 76, allusively evoked, to the polemical attitude of a resentful epistle. An interior monologue filled with the sense of the poet's own moral integrity and with the longing for virtue as its own reward (regardless of the gratitude of the beneficiary) is converted into a rude reminder, which is the exact opposite of the ideal aimed at—if with bitter irony—by Catullus.

Moreover, Ovid's verses function as a rebuttal of those of Catullus, a fact evident from the pointed reversal of *multa ... in longa aetate ... gaudia in haec ... gaudia sola*. It is as if the more cynical Medea at once convicts of vacuity the condition hypothesized by Catullus, in the form of a sceptical concession to a current moral concept. 'If (it is true that) there is a pleasure...', *si qua voluptas est*, says Catullus, doubtfully; Medea counters, in an affirmative rather than a conditional form, and again in a general proposition, *est aliqua voluptas*, 'there is a pleasure': this is not the noble pleasure of *recordari* (*benefacta*), but the less durable, and yet more immediate and sure one, of *exprobrare* (*meritum*).⁶ In all this, what Medea does is to carry Catullus' own pessimism to its logical conclusion: she asserts the failure of that aspiration, made evident by the development of poem 76. In the highly condensed form, the progress of the thought and the mode of expression reflect those of Catullus: a universal premise (centred on *voluptas*) is followed by a choice as to individual action (centred on *gaudia*).

The two opposed attitudes, either to be satisfied with the consciousness of services rendered, or to cast them in the teeth of the ingrate, are contrasted, just as in Roman popular morality, in a great body of moral-philosophical literature. The cultural

⁵ G. B. Conte's definition, in *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario* (Torino, 1985²), p. 47; cf. id., *The Rhetoric of Imitation*, translated from the Italian, edited and with a foreword by Ch. Segal (Ithaca and London, 1986), p. 70, 84 ('the memory of past openings').

⁶ The review of the past, so differently intended, is central to both poems; Catullus' initial *recordanti* may be linked with Medea's initial *memini* (v. 3): the epistle is centred on memory as reproach.

background of Catullus' verses, and his attitude towards a common conception, have been illustrated by Traina and, lately, by J. G. F. Powell.⁷ The idea referred to by Catullus recurs in Cicero's philosophical works: cf. in particular Cic. *Cat.* 9;⁸ to the other references cited by Powell one should add Cic. *Att.* 10.4.5 (very close to Catullus in the wording). The development of the conception in Stoic doctrine, according to the concept of virtue as a reward in itself, is traced by Traina; cf., for instance, Sen. *Ben.* 7.26.2; 4.12.4; see also 2.33.3; *Epist.* 81.19.

That which is longed for in Catullus' lines is a noble ideal; Ovid's Medea turns it round into its reprehensible opposite. The attitude of recalling one's good deeds to the beneficiary is stigmatized in various writers.⁹ In Seneca's *De beneficiis*, where the ideal of behaviour coincides with that referred to by Catullus, the opposite attitude, assumed here by Medea, is presented as antithetical to the morals of the Stoic sage; cf. Sen. *Ben.* 2.10.4; 2.11.1; 2.11.6; 5.22.2; 7.22.2; 7.28.3 (cf. also 1.1.4; 2.15.2; 7.30.1).¹⁰ Catullus' *multa gaudia* contrast with Medea's *haec gaudia sola*. In the context of an inverse argument, on the pleasure of remembering the benefit received, there is, in Seneca, an analogous contrast between the enduring joy of the sage and the only short-lived pleasure of the wicked: cf. Sen. *Ep.* 81.23–4.¹¹

As elsewhere in the epistle, Medea shows herself here as a negative character, who openly opposes the traditional ethical code. The 'ideological' weight of this general statement marks the difference from the Euripidean verses and outlines the irony and the critical distance which Ovid takes from his character. The Catullan text serves as formal matrix and poetic intermediary, by the aid of which Ovid can sketch the figure of a heroine in conflict with commonly acknowledged ethical values.

This characterization of the heroine with regard to *beneficia* is confirmed by the close of the epistle. Line 212 *et piget infido consuluisse viro* relates to a further comment of Catullus on ingratitude, uttered in a moment of more bitter discouragement: Cat. 73.3 *omnia sunt ingrata, nihil fecisse benigne <est>*, / *immo etiam taedet, <taedet> obestque magis*. Here again, Medea finds herself in conflict with the most rigorous ethical theories: cf. Sen. *Ben.* 7.26.2 (see also the final sentence of the work, 7.32).

What determines Medea's detachment from Catullus' position is the very nature of her services towards Jason: crimes perpetrated on behalf of the hero. Not without significance, Catullus' *benefacta* is replaced by *meritum*, which, referred to Medea, suggests at the same time 'fault': in her case, merits paradoxically coincide with crimes.¹² The substitution of *haec sola* for *multa in longa aetate* is also to be read in

⁷ A. Traina, 'Catullo e gli dei. Il carme LXXXVI nella critica più recente', *Convivium* N.S. I (1954), 358–68, reprinted in: Id., *Poeti latini (e neolatini). Note e saggi filologici*, I (Bologna 1975, 1986), pp. 93–117, see p. 101 f.; Id., 'Catullo e i misteri', *Convivium* N.S. VI, 1959, 335–9, repr. in *Poeti... cit.*, 119–29, see p. 123; J. G. F. Powell, 'Two Notes on Catullus', *CQ* 40 (1990), 199–206 (part i, pp. 199–202).

⁸ See also the commentary of J. G. F. Powell (Cambridge, 1988) ad loc., and the Greek examples in his article from Aristotle, Xenophon, Epicurus, Favorinus.

⁹ Cf. for instance, with *exprobrare*, Plaut. *Amph.* 47; *Trin.* 318 (see also Ter. *Andr.* 1.1.16); Cic. *Lael.* 71; Tac. *Ann.* 13.21.5; Claud. 22.158; cf. also Demosth. *De coron.* 269.

¹⁰ It may be noted that *voluptas* almost becomes a key-word in this debate, particularly in Seneca, in a polemical confrontation with Epicurean ethics (pleasure is not distinct from virtue, but coincides with it): *Ben.* 4.13.1–2; 4.11.5–6.

¹¹ The correspondence with Catullus' wording is observed by Traina, 'Catullo e i misteri' cit. [n. 7], p. 124 n. 1.

¹² See Sen. *Med.* 465 (cit. above in the text), where the ambivalence of the word is explicitly stressed; for *meritum* = 'crime' in relation to Medea cf. Ov. *Tr.* 3.9.15–16; an ironical ambiguity in the use of the term may be also felt at *Met.* 7.166. Cf., later in this epistle, lines 133–4 *ut culpant*

this sense: Medea's services are such, that, with regard to moral conscience, no relish can be taken in their recollection; what becomes meaningful is the recombination of the Catullan structure, which reunites the two extremes of the sentence (line 1; lines 5–6), eliminating the central attestation of one's purity (lines 2–4).

One might further note the erotic import of the terminology employed, *voluptas*, *gaudia ferre*, whereby the joy of restating one's services is presented almost as a replacement for the denied erotic pleasure¹³—Catullus too probably exploited this import of the terms,¹⁴ in view of the close connection between *ex hoc amore*... and *gaudia*. *haec sola* may also take on this meaning: 'all that remains to me, the sole joy I can get from you *by now*'.¹⁵ It is noteworthy how this nuance reproduces the tone of Euripides' verses, which themselves have been interpreted by Di Benedetto¹⁶ as twisting an erotic pattern from Sapphus' poetry, with which the woman welcomed the beloved (Eur. *Med.* 467; 472ff. cit.; cf. Sapph. fr. 48 L-P); here too the erotic pleasure gives way to the joy of insult.

The distich at once translates Euripides and connects itself to the tradition of Roman love-poetry, in its concerns for the theme of ingratitude and for the concept of *meritum* as applied to the erotic field. The outright polemic¹⁷ remains, however, closer to the tragic model; Ovid's elegiac Medea employs the thematic repertoire and the vocabulary of Latin erotic poetry with unusual violence, and by her insulting harshness places herself at the extremes of the elegiac spectrum. The peculiarity of Medea's epistle among the *Heroides* arises from this struggle between the tragic literary mould which dominates her character and the elegiac code which Ovid takes pleasure in making her aggressively distort.

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A NOTE ON OVID, *METAMORPHOSES* 11.48

[.....] *obstrusaque carbasa pullo*
naides et dryades passosque habuere capillos.

These lines come from the passage describing the mourning of the natural world

alii, tibi me laudare necesse est, / pro quo sum totiens esse coacta nocens: by the end of the long narrative section opened by our couplet 23–4, the 'merits' have proved themselves what they really are, a series of crimes (*totiens...nocens*). The point is made explicit by Hypsipyles: *Her.* 6.137–8 *quid refert, scelerata piam si vincit et ipso/crimine dotata est emeruitque virum?*

¹³ Cf. *Her.* 18.55.

¹⁴ See K. Quinn, *Catullus. An Interpretation* (London, 1972), p. 121.

¹⁵ Medea's expression may assume, finally, a twofold ironical implication. Just as Dido states that she wants to 'waste words' in a vain prayer (*Her.* 7.5–8), but then engages in a strenuous *suasoria*, so Medea, in spite of her purpose of relishing the sole pleasure of the reminder, will not exclude from her letter a prayer—however short-lived—for the restoration of her status as a wife (cf. 195 *redde torum*); the supplication will be soon overcome, in turn, by the announcement of the revenge (209ff.; cf. F. Spoth, *Ovids Heroides als Elegien* [München, 1992], p. 87 n. 9). A sinister implication might also lie in the ironical prefiguration of a different *voluptas* and of other *gaudia* which Medea will get from Jason: the joy of vengeance. In Seneca, after killing her children, Medea says that she feels a great pleasure, increased by Jason's presence: *Sen. Med.* 991–4; cf. 896 (cf. also *Eur. Med.* 1131; 1362). *Gaudere* is a stock-term for the joy of victory and revenge (cf., in this epistle, line 161); *gaudia* denotes the joy of vengeance in Ovid's Procne-story in the *Metamorphoses*, which has many contacts with that of Medea: *Met.* 6.653–4; cf. 658–60.

¹⁶ V. Di Benedetto, *Euripide: teatro e società* (Torino, 1971), pp. 38–9, n. 42.

¹⁷ Note, on the formal level, the harsh recurrence of *r* in the sequence *ingrato meritum exprobrare*; the impact of the prose-word *exprobrare*; the emphasis of the polyptoton *hac...haec*; the hammered style of the *dicolon*, *hac* (sc. voluptate) *fruar*, *haec...gaudia feram*.