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Anne Duncan

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, aduncan4@unl.edu

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SPELLBINDING PERFORMANCE:
POET AS WITCH IN THEOCRITUS' SECOND *IDYLL*
AND APOLLONIUS' *ARGONAUTICA*

Anne Duncan

The connection between poetry and enchantment in Greek literature is by now a familiar subject.¹ The poet enchants (θέλει) his audience as a magician chants a spell or administers a drug, causing pleasure and the forgetfulness of pain in the listener. As with most other poetic *topoi*, this one goes back to Homer, to figures like Circe, the Sirens, and even Helen. In this paper, I will argue that two witches from Hellenistic poems should be regarded as poet-figures: Simaetha in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2, and Medea in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Theocritus and Apollonius use the performing female voice of the witch to suggest a kind of performance context and an authenticity for their work. By simultaneously focalizing and objectifying the young, nubile witch as she performs her spells, the Hellenistic poets enchant and seduce the reader. Both Simaetha and Medea use magic to achieve their ends, and both seem to have enchanted their readers, yet neither one is typically read as a poet-figure. The reason for this is bound up with the way in which both poets portray these witches: as young, inexperienced, nubile girls, potentially powerful but also vulnerable. Their gender, youth, and inexperience tend to lead critics to view them as the objects of men's charming language (Delphis, Jason) rather than as the agents of magical, poetic charms themselves. Critics also seem led, over and over, to psychological interpretations of the witches' characters rather than to structural or symbolic analyses of the way the witches stand in for the poet in their respective poems.

The character usually taken to represent Theocritus within his poems is Simichidas in *Idyll* 7. Simichidas is often seen as a mask of Theocritus partly because of the connection both have to Cos (which is inferred for Theocritus based in part on this poem²), but mostly because he is a singer in an explicitly programmatic setting.³ But Simaetha is a kind of singer as well (a point I will return to later). Furthermore, *Idyll* 2 also contains subtle references to Cos,⁴ and it has been suggested that these references could be as significant as those in *Idyll* 7, that

¹Walsh; on poetry as enchantment in Hellenistic poetry, see Albis, chap. 4, and Parry.

I would like to thank Eva Stehle for her thoughtful and patient editorial work. Any remaining infelicities of thought or expression are my own.

²See Cunningham's introduction to his Teubner edition of Herodas' *Mimiambi*.

³Bowie; Damon 114-15; Zanker 119.

⁴Gow ad *Idyll* 2.21 notes that the name Delphis is "not common but occurs in Coan inscriptions" and that Simaetha's oath at 160, ναὶ Μοῖρας, is rare and "may therefore be supposed to be particularly Coan." See also Dover xix-xx, 96; Fabiano 523.

Theocritus may be identifying himself with Simaetha as much (or as little) as he is presumed to identify himself with Simichidas.⁵ Simaetha's gender makes her a slightly different kind of poet-figure than Simichidas, as we will see, but it does not prevent her from being one altogether.

Orpheus is often seen as *the* poet-figure in the *Argonautica*, although Medea takes over this role completely in Book 3.⁶ Albis is one critic who sees Medea, at least partially, as a figure for the poet, noting four different aspects of her presentation that mark her out as a poet-figure: her connection with *eros* (citing Hesiod's Pandora as a precedent); Medea's use of *pharmaka*; the power her incantations give her over others; and the way her words sometimes echo the narrator's.⁷ Ultimately, however, he argues that "Medea is sometimes assimilated to audience, sometimes to poet," that her power is disturbing to the audience, and that Jason is also a poet-figure.⁸ In other words, Medea is more a model for the audience affected by poetry, or a negative model of a poet, or no poet at all. All three of these readings seem based on the fact of her femaleness: she is the object of Jason's seduction, and so a figure for the audience; she is a witch, and so a negative poet-figure; she is a girl, and so not a poet. But the markers are all there, as Albis himself points out, and thus we need to look at them as part of a poetic strategy that uses a female *persona* to accomplish a kind of enchantment of the audience that a male *persona* cannot.

The mere fact that they are female does not automatically exclude Simaetha and Medea from consideration as *personae* of their respective poets; there are too many other hints that this is exactly how they function. Goldhill notes the emergence of a new kind of poet-figure in *Idyll* 2: "The first-person narrative in the voice of a young woman of uncertain status and background immediately indicates a shift in the alignment of possibilities of poetic self-expression." But then Goldhill goes on to assert that what is "crucial" in this poem is "the *distance* inscribed between the author as the one who speaks out and the voice he impersonates" (262; original italics); the acknowledgement of the witch as a possible poet-figure is undercut by his emphasis on the poet. Goldhill's tacit acknowledgment of performance ("speaks out," "voice," "impersonates") is equally "crucial," however; both *Idyll* 2 and Medea's sections of the *Argonautica* are presented as magical, spellbinding performances. In fact, Theocritus and Apollonius draw in the (presumed male) audience by partially focalizing narratives of erotic suffering and enchanting magic through the performing female voices of young, nubile witches. It is the delicate combination of distancing and identification, objectification and focalization, which produces these poems' enchanting effects.

The dominant critical approach to interpreting Simaetha and Medea has been psychological, an approach prompted in part by the assumptions that a male author

⁵Griffiths 1981: 266-67 suggests that Simaetha sounds more like a man (i.e., Theocritus) than any other woman in Greek literature, and in a footnote (273 n. 29) that "Simichidas" and "Simaetha" are both pseudonyms of Theocritus (and, in fact, sound like each other).

⁶Pavlock 32. Goldhill 297 discusses Orpheus as the figure through whom "the performance of song is highlighted"; see 298-99 for his reading of the encounter with the Sirens as the episode that "captures the complexity of the representation of the performance of song/speech in this work." In neither context does he discuss Medea.

⁷Albis 71, 81, 84-89.

⁸Ibid. 84, 89.

uses only male *personae*. While a psychological lens has provided some valuable and finely nuanced studies of these two female characters, it does not take into account how the presentation of these characters encourages this sort of reading. A strictly psychological interpretation, in other words, provides evidence that the reader has been seduced.

Many commentators and critics have described Simaetha as a naïve, confused, lower-class woman who turns to magic to soothe her own troubled psyche—but who is charming for these very reasons. Her spell, they conclude, fails⁹; it works as “ritual therapy,” not as a piece of magic.¹⁰ This kind of psychological reading of Simaetha’s monologue, coupled with an amused condescension, is assumed by many critics to be the attitude of Theocritus’ ideal “sophisticated reader.”¹¹ Critics do not see Simaetha as a *persona* of Theocritus, because, they say, Theocritus is inviting us to smile patronizingly at Simaetha from an ironic distance.¹² “Naïve” is the adjective most often applied to the character, sometimes repeated insistently.¹³ Because she is poor, because she has been dumped by someone of higher class, and because she speaks in a mixture of Homeric and Sapphic allusions which she is seen as not fully controlling,¹⁴ critics like Parry conclude that “Simaetha is no *persona* of Theocritus” (204).¹⁵ But such readings do not take into account the evidence provided by the poem that Simaetha is in control of her language,¹⁶ that

⁹Griffiths 1979: 88: “Out of the deflated hopes for the magic ritual, a *pharmakon* has in fact worked—not to bind Delphis, but to release Simaetha.” Segal 1985: 116-17: “The shift of perspective at the end at least suggests that she has an inkling of where her real hope of salvation and ‘calm’ lies: not in sorcery but in herself.” On the other hand, several critics and commentators have to admit that she seems actually to have summoned Hecate by line 35 of the poem; see Gow 43 and White 26.

¹⁰Burton 69 uses the phrase “ritual therapy” to describe Simaetha’s spell—although, to be fair, she also seems to consider the possibility that the spell is efficacious as a spell (68). See Parry 182-83 for the consensus on psychological interpretations of Simaetha; see 265 for his inferences about real women turning to aphrodisiacs in the absence of other, poetic forms of consolation. Segal 1985: 117-18 uses a great deal of psychological language in his analysis: “In *working through* her tale and in *passing* from magic to narration, Simaetha has set forth all the *material* necessary for such a *resolution*, but we cannot be sure that she actually has it within her grasp” (*italics mine*).

¹¹The phrase recurs over and over in criticism of *Idyll* 2; Goldhill makes it part of his argument (266).

¹²Segal 1984: 201: “The poem wins our sympathy for its protagonist by having her present details whose import she does not herself grasp. The device belongs to what Northrop Frye calls the ‘ironic mode,’ wherein the reader is superior to the character.” See also 206-07 and 1985: 112, 117-19; also Griffiths 1979 as well as White, chap. 2.

¹³White calls her “the naïve Simaetha” five times in 18 pages: 21 (twice), 28 (twice), 29.

¹⁴See esp. Segal 1984; Griffiths 1979; Pavlock 22.

¹⁵See also Segal 1973: 43 n. 32.

¹⁶Burton 61 argues that the mixture of everyday Doric and Homerisms in *Idyll* 15 is “programmatic,” not in the sense of imparting a supercilious attitude towards the women in that poem, but in the sense of elevating their everyday experiences sympathetically into the epic realm. We could argue the same for *Idyll* 2. Goldhill 271 argues against Segal’s view that Simaetha’s use of Homeric language is unwitting on her part and meant for the reader’s amusement, noting that her use of the Homeric phrase “the loveless man” “already cues the recognition of fickleness.” Fabiano 521, 524, 526, 529, 533, and 535-36 argues that Theocritus’ style is a “mosaic” of dialect and diction.

she has a greater awareness of the world outside her house than she is usually given credit for having,¹⁷ and that not reading her as the object of amused condescension reveals other sorts of poetic strategies. Damon (111) notes this critical tendency to patronize Simaetha, asking, "Does the author who endows some external ego with speech always want us to laugh at his creation from a vantage point of comfortable superiority?"

Some critics have found a psychological reading most compelling for Medea as well.¹⁸ Apollonius' descriptions of Medea's passion and torment as she is seduced by Jason's handsome appearance and persuasive words have led other critics to view her as a figure for the audience seduced by poetry.¹⁹ In the process of reading Medea as the object of Jason's "charms," however, and reading Jason, not Medea, as the poet-figure, critics often have to downplay her effectiveness as an active wielder of magical "charms."²⁰ Sometimes Medea is described as simply an inconsistent character, depicted primarily as a girl in love, but sometimes, when necessary for the plot of the epic, as a powerful witch.²¹ Once again, this is only half of the story: as a witch, she performs spells that charm monsters and overpower even the epic narrator, and is a poet-figure in her own right; both aspects of her character—the nubile girl and the witch—work towards this identification.

In a recent book, Joan Burton has demonstrated a different approach for reading Theocritus' *Idylls* 2, 14, and 15, an approach that uses modes of analysis other than just irony to achieve a more productive reading of these poems.²² She analyzes all these "urban" *Idylls* in terms of their interest in female subjectivity, without assuming that that interest is ironic or condescending. It is this approach that I wish to use as a model to reexamine Simaetha and Medea. Both Theocritus and Apollonius create a partial focalization of their witch characters, presenting at least parts of their narratives in a performing female voice. Simaetha and Medea are thus focalized enough to make the audience sympathetic to them.²³ But there is also a

¹⁷Goldhill 265 points out that Simaetha must be aware of sympotic conventions: she knows that Delphis is preparing to court someone else based on reports of his behavior at symposia. Goldhill does not fully incorporate this point into his reading of Simaetha, however.

¹⁸Fowler 79, 82; Zanker 198.

¹⁹Thus Albis, chap. 4; see also Goldhill 301-05; Holmberg 148, 150; Pavlock 63.

²⁰Goldhill 301 mentions that Jason asks Medea "not to deceive him with charming words (980-3)"; Holmberg 143 notes that Medea "will also be the source of *θελκτική*," as well as their object.

²¹Goldhill 316. To be fair, he makes the point that Medea's character does not adhere to post-Romantic notions of consistency as a way of warning others against overpsychoanalyzing Medea. Nazez 43 argues that Medea is primarily a girl in love, rather than a witch, because if she were primarily a witch, she would make herself a love-charm as Simaetha does.

²²Burton, *passim*, esp. 15, 40, 58-62, 94, 102-14.

²³Since Simaetha speaks all of *Idyll* 2, we can say that the entire poem is focalized through her. Burton 40 observes: "By presenting *Idyll* 2 in monologue form rather than dialogue, Theocritus avoids subjecting Simaetha's actions to judgments of approval or disapproval within the poem and thus perhaps encourages the reader to suspend moral judgment for the poem's duration as well." On Medea's focalization, see Papadopoulou 654-64. Pavlock 55 reads the simile of the young widow at *Argonautica* 3.656-63 as reflecting Medea's perspective, not the narrator's. Hutchinson 121, in discussing *Argonautica* Book 3, states: "I do not at all imply that we are not interested in Medea from her own point of view. On the contrary, the two viewpoints interact, with pointed and poignant results . . ."

sort of antifocalization at work in these poems as well, where the witch objectifies herself, identifying her subjectivity with that of a male reader/viewer. The partial focalization draws the reader in and then the objectification seduces him. This effect is something the poet can achieve only by means of a bewitching female *persona*, and it is why, I believe, Simaetha and Medea are to be considered poet-figures.

Simaetha should be read as a poet-figure for several convincing reasons. For one, she speaks the whole of *Idyll* 2²⁴; in this role as sole narrator she is comparable to Simichidas in *Idyll* 7. And part of *Idyll* 2 is a spell that Simaetha explicitly performs.

Besides speaking the entire *Idyll*, Simaetha invokes both the Moon and Hecate (10-16):

νῦν δέ νιν ἐκ θυέων καταδήσομαι. ἀλλὰ, Σελάνα,
φαῖνε καλόν· τιν γὰρ ποταείσομαι ἄσυχᾳ, δαῖμον,
τῇ χθονίᾳ θ' Ἑκάτῃ, τὰν καὶ σκύλακες τρομέοντι
ἐρχομένην νεκρῶν ἀνά τ' ἡρία καὶ μέλαν αἶμα.
χαῖρ', Ἑκάτα δασπλήτι, καὶ ἐς τέλος ἄμμιν ὁπάδει,
φάρμακα ταῦτ' ἔδρῳισα χερεῖονα μήτε τι Κίρκας
μήτε τι Μηδείας μήτε ξανθᾶς Περιμήδας.²⁵

But now I will bind him with offerings. Moon,
shine clearly; I will sing softly to you, goddess,
and to earthly Hecate, she whom dogs tremble at
as she goes among the tombs of the dead and the black blood.
Hail, fruitful Hecate, and attend me to the end,
making these drugs stronger than those of Circe
or Medea or blonde Perimede.

Simaetha's invocations of these goddesses suggest the poet's invocation of the Muse: "I will sing to you, goddess" marks the beginning of the poem's subject and the request for divine assistance as strongly and self-consciously as a poetic invocation.

The objection may be raised that poetry and magic are not exactly the same sorts of activities. Traditionally, poetry is sung, while spells are chanted, "muttered," or whispered. Poetry seeks to create pleasure in the listener, the forgetfulness of pain and the remembrance of true things; magic seeks to compel the intended recipient/listener. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that poetry is "high" discourse, while magic is "low."²⁶ Yet the similarities between poetry and magic are strong. Both are highly structured forms (metrical, repetitive, or at least alliterative, and sometimes including a refrain, as in *Idyll* 2) which are uttered aloud; that is, both are dependent on the performance of a special kind of discourse for their efficacy.²⁷ Both poetry and magic invoke gods for assistance and support, as Simaetha

²⁴See Burton 40, 43; Goldhill 261.

²⁵I cite Gow's 1952 OCT. All translations of Theocritus and other authors in this paper are my own.

²⁶Magic seems often to be contrasted unfavorably with religion in discussions of ancient cultures. Winkler 72 observes: "'Magic' is a relative term: we only call something 'magic' if we do not (or no longer) accept the premises of its meaning or operation. The term thus reveals—or may be used to reveal—as much about the speaker as it does about the subject."

²⁷Luck 24.

does in this poem. Both kinds of discourse position themselves, and talk about themselves, as forms of power over an audience that is "enchanted." And the similarities can be analyzed in either direction: poetry uses the language of magic to describe its effect (θέλγει), and magic uses the techniques of poetry to effect what it describes. Faraone borrows Calame's concept of the "performative future" in lyric poetry to analyze the use of strongly marked first-person "deictic speech" in Hellenistic magical inscriptions and in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2. He argues that the use of these "performative future" verbs "reveals a very old (but unfortunately lost) Greek tradition of metrical incantations, which probably had its origin in the same performance-oriented poetic milieu as the other, more literary genres in which they occur."²⁸ Winkler consistently uses the language of performance in his discussion of erotic binding spells.²⁹ Thus, while poetry and magic are not perfectly congruent activities, they are both highly wrought, special kinds of speech, performed with the help of a god in order to charm an audience.

Simaetha's performance of the spell within *Idyll* 2 marks her as a poet, as does her role as sole narrator throughout the poem. Another mimetic, poetic, and performative feature of Simaetha's poem is her use of the ἴνυξ, which is associated with *eros* and makes an enchanting sound when whirled.³⁰ The *inyx* could even be read as an allusion to Pindar's Fourth *Pythian*, in which Medea uses an *inyx* to bind Jason to her. This allusion would connect our two enchantresses explicitly, but Simaetha herself already makes this connection, praying that her spell may work as well as those of Medea or Circe (15-16). Simaetha thus uses the *inyx* at several levels: at the literal, to cast her spell; on the literary, to allude to other poets and enchantresses; and on the figurative, to accompany her song with music, as a poet accompanies himself with a lyre.

Medea also acts like a poet in her poem, although her role in the epic is more complex than Simaetha's in her solo performance. There are thematic and formal links that connect Medea to the poet. She invokes Hecate,³¹ just as Simaetha does, and just as the narrator famously invokes Erato at 3.1-5, "Medea's book."³² The narrator invokes Erato and says that she "charms" (θέλγεις, 3.4) unwedded maidens.³³ Medea invokes Brimo when she cuts the herb (φάρμακον) that she will give to Jason, and she invokes Hypnos to "charm" (θέλξει, 4.146) the dragon that guards the Golden Fleece. She uses *pharmaka*, which have a long association with poetry and *eros* (Circe, Helen),³⁴ combined with spells (or songs:

²⁸Faraone, *passim*. He notes (11) that Theocritus "has Simaetha employ the future tense four times (thrice with the adverb νῦν) to indicate the ongoing activity of the magic ritual"; the instances are at lines 10, 11, 33, and 159. Faraone also notes (*ibid.*) that the hexameter is used both in popular binding incantations and in *Idyll* 2.

²⁹He states that rituals are "staged" by those who are "experienced in self-dramatization" and "entertaining themselves" (73); see also 86 and 93.

³⁰Johnston 178, who also notes that the association is more precisely between the *inyx* and short-term, failed *eros*; see also Segal 1973: 35, 41.

³¹As Brimo (3.861-62). Medea also invokes Hypnos (4.146) and the Keres (4.1665-66).

³²Goldhill 287 discusses the invocation at the beginning of Book 1 of the *Argonautica* as "hymnic," like Callimachus' *Hymns*, arguing that the "signs of hymnic language here trace a performative scenario"; he does not mention the invocation at the beginning of Book 3.

³³Holmberg 142: "The meta-narrative seduction of Erato mirrors the narrative, erotic, and pharmaceutical seductions contained within the book."

³⁴Walsh 14, 18-19; Parry 25, 56.

ἄοιδαις, 4.1668) to subdue the dragon (4.145-61) and the bronze giant Talos (4.1654-90).³⁵ And she uses persuasive language to lure her brother Aspyrtos to his death (4.440-81); significantly, her words are described as being like drugs and Aspyrtos is implicitly likened to a wild, fierce animal:³⁶

τοῖα παραιφαιμένη θελκτῆρια φάρμακ' ἔπασσεν
αἰθέρι καὶ πνοιῇσι, τὰ κεν καὶ ἄπωθεν ἔοντα
ἄγριον ἡλιβάτοιο κατ' οὖρεος ἤγαγε θήρα.³⁷ (4.442-44)

... wheedling with these sorts of words she sprinkled enchanting drugs
onto the air and the winds, which even from a distance
would have drawn down the wild beast from the steep mountain.

Her invocations to the gods to help her charm her victims, her *pharmaka*, and her bewitching language all mark Medea as a powerful, if dangerous, poet. Finally, her sacrifice to Hecate is too awesome and terrifying for the narrator to describe:

τῇ γάρ σφ' ἐξαποβάντας ἀρέσσασθαι θυέσσιν
ἠγώγει Ἑκάτην, καὶ δὴ τὰ μὲν ὅσσα θυηλὴν
κούρη πορσανέουσα τιτύσκετο (μήτε τις ἴστωρ
εἶη μήτ' ἐμὲ θυμὸς ἐποτρύνειεν αἰεδεῖν)
ἄχομαι αὐδήσαι· τό γε μὴν ἔδος ἐξέτι κείνου,
ὄρρα θεῶ ἥρωες ἐπὶ ῥηγμῖσιν ἔδειμαν,
ἀνδράσιν ὀψιγόνοισι μένει καὶ τῆλοσ' ἰδέσθαι. (4.247-52)

There she commanded them, disembarking, to appease Hecate
with sacrifices. And furthermore, the things which the girl prepared
to make ready the sacrifice (may there be no one with knowledge of it,
and may my soul not urge me to sing it)
I shrink from telling; but truly, the temple, at least, even from that time
which the heroes built to the goddess on the shoreline
remains to be seen from a distance by later-born men.

In a sense, Medea overpowers the narrator; her magical relationship to her patron goddess is more powerful than the narrator's power to tell the story, helped by his Muse. This moment distances Medea from the poem's narrator, whereas up to this point she has been identified with the narrator. The oscillation between identification and distancing thus recurs as part of a poetic strategy. Both Simaetha and Medea, then, can be seen as poet-figures. A Hellenistic poet would undertake this kind of identification between poet and witch for two major reasons: to make a statement about generic identity, and to enchant his audience.

In terms of genre, the witch as poet provides at least a hint of a performative dimension, something supposedly lost from "high" Alexandrian poetry and possibly felt to be missing. The *pretense* (at least) of a performative context would be one

³⁵Holmberg notes that Medea "takes on Talos alone, with no help whatsoever from the other heroes: her insistence and her solitary power are unsettling" (155). Hutchinson, in his discussion (123-24) of the dragon episode, notes that "all depends on Medea," but the part of the episode he quotes and discusses is all about Jason.

³⁶See Holmberg 154.

³⁷I have used Fränkel's 1961 OCT as my text of the *Argonautica*.

way in which Hellenistic poets negotiated their relationship with the literary past.³⁸ It would provide a sense of continuity, however self-conscious and fictional, with the performance traditions of earlier Greek poetry. At the same time, the witch's performance is different from earlier Greek poetic performance: it is private and is done by a woman operating outside of male control and outside of socially sanctioned means to power. The performance that the witch's presence suggests is thus ambivalent, or hybrid, a seductive mixture of traditional and non-traditional elements, of public speech and private spell.

Idyll 2 and the *Argonautica* exhibit a number of performative aspects. *Idyll* 2 could conceivably be staged as a mime, having the same initial scolding of a slave (1-62) that we see in many of Herodas' *Mimiambi*.³⁹ The repetition of the spell's refrain, combined with the emotional narrative of suffering, has a theatrical quality.⁴⁰ Medea's soliloquies in the *Argonautica* have the same theatrical quality and psychological intensity, inevitably bringing to the reader's mind Euripides' *Medea*. In addition, Medea's performance of her spells are given more detail than Orpheus' performances of his songs. Most of Orpheus' performances are reported briefly, in indirect speech,⁴¹ the exception being 1.494-512, which is described in more detail, although still indirectly (the passage is a kind of counter-*Theogony* sung to soothe a quarrel).⁴² In 2.928-29 Orpheus dedicates his lyre at Lyra, before the Argonauts reach Colchis (leaving his instrument behind, presumably). Orpheus drowns out the Sirens at 4.905-09, but it is reported in indirect speech; we hear

³⁸Cameron and Mastromarco, *passim*, argue for the possibility of performance for Callimachus and Herodas, respectively. Hunter 32 argues that even if Herodas' poems were not actually performed (something we will never know), they were "composed for the most part in a mode which strongly suggests, and was intended to suggest, 'performance' by more than one actor, rather than solo recitation."

³⁹See esp. *Mimiambi* 1, 5, 6, and 7. See also Dover xxxviii-xxxix, 97; Hunter 39-40; Mastromarco 46, 51; Hutchinson 151, 155, 200, 240.

⁴⁰Segal 1973: 32 envisions Simaetha turning the *ixnx* once every time she speaks the refrain, "Ἰυνξ, ἔλκε τὸ τῆνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα" ("Turn, magic wheel, and draw the man to my house"), for a total of nine rotations. See also Gow 39-40.

⁴¹To be fair, the *Argonautica* has a much lower proportion of direct speech overall than the Homeric epics (29 percent as opposed to 55 percent; cited in Hunter 109 n. 37). Medea's spells and Orpheus' songs are both described in indirect speech. But Medea's laments and soliloquies, which are the other component of her "performance" (see below), appear in large blocks of direct speech, thereby making them even more striking. Papadopoulou 655 notes that "Medea's dilemma is regarded as having been developed far beyond the needs of the plot, which further suggests a lack of symmetry in the structure of the epic."

⁴²Pavlock, significantly, compares Orpheus' song to a spell: "Apollonius shows that the bard's effect is in fact spellbinding . . . The language here is significant, as *thelktron* is commonly used for love charms as well as for music. Orpheus' song is seductive, not unlike the poet's in the *Argonautica*" (32). If Orpheus' songs are *thelktron* like a magic spell, then Medea's *thelkteria* can be charming like a song. Pavlock also notes (*ibid.*) that many of Orpheus' songs are pointless or ephemeral in their effects.

neither his song nor theirs.⁴³ And significantly, Orpheus is entirely absent from Book 3, displaced from his role as performing poet by Medea.⁴⁴

The evocation of performance in these two poems confronts us with generic issues of hybridization and mixture. A pastoral poem that contains elements of mime (*Idyll* 2), or an epic with a tragedy as its subtext (*Argonautica*), draws attention to the way that Hellenistic poetry mingles genres in its attempt to ingest and digest the literary past. These poems combine read and performed genres, or "high" and "low" genres (or "masculine" and "feminine" genres in the case of epic and tragedy). Contamination, hybridization, and the mixture of "low" and "high" are strategies that appear in works of other Hellenistic poets, notably Callimachus⁴⁵ but also Herodas.⁴⁶ While mixing "high" and "low" may be a common generic agenda among Hellenistic poets, the use of the witch as a figure for the poet is not; Callimachus calls his poetic enemies "Telchines" (famous mythical wizards) who "mutter" against the poet's work (*Aetia* 1.1).⁴⁷ Thus the use of the witch as a figure for the poet or his poetic program entails certain risks, especially when the witch is also young, attractive, and vulnerable.

The most obvious risk is the potential "feminization" of the genre, whether pastoral or epic, through the use of the performing female voice. *Idyll* 2 can be seen as trivial or slight, while the *Argonautica* can be found to lack proper Homeric vigor, its hero insufficiently heroic.⁴⁸ Feminization entails a reduction of the poetry's prestige, but it seems conceivable that aiming to produce poetry in less esteemed (and more performative) genres is consistent with a Hellenistic *recusatio* of grandiose poetry. Burton analyzes the women's praise of a tapestry in *Idyll* 15 to show that their praise echoes many of the aesthetic criteria in use among Hellenistic poets. Rather than reading this congruence as Theocritus' mockery of pretentious housewives, she suggests that "Theocritus is showing how the academy's values happen to coincide with female values" (104). In addition to feminization, the other kind of risk that the use of the witch as a poet-figure runs is the association of poetry with "low" genres, such as mime, and with "low" social practices, such as magic. Yet this, too, can be seen as part of a deliberate poetic program.⁴⁹ "Low" topics and themes do not just add novelty: they require the reader to reexamine his or her assumptions about traditional poetry and, as we will

⁴³Goldhill 299 reads this episode as Apollonius' brilliant overcoming of his epic predecessor Homer, having Orpheus smother even a description of the Sirens' song in indirect speech. He does not discuss the fact that Orpheus' song is also not described.

⁴⁴Goldhill 297 sees Orpheus as highlighting performance in the poem, and even mentions the Sirens, but not Medea.

⁴⁵*Hecale*; the "Mousetraps" episode of the *Aetia* with Heracles and Molochus.

⁴⁶*Mimiamb* 6 can be read as programmatic, a competition between poets, expressed as a salespitch by a dildomaker to a group of eager women: see Stern; also Parker 106.

⁴⁷Gow notes that ἐπιτρύχουσα, the verb Simaetha uses at line 62, is the same verb Callimachus uses in *Frag.* 1.1.

⁴⁸Segal 1985: 107 refers to the subject of *Idyll* 2 as Simaetha's "little drama." As for the *Argonautica*, "Jason . . . clearly lacks the heroic stature of an Achilles or an Odysseus": Claus 1. See Hunter 11 for a summary of scholarly condemnations of Jason's inadequacy. Hutchinson 85-86 takes issue with the usual diagnoses of Jason's weak leadership, and rightly notes that leadership is problematic even in the *Iliad*.

⁴⁹Fabiano, *passim*; Hutchinson 5, 11, 148; Zanker 155-214.

see, can also be used to entice the reader, especially when mixed with "high" topics and themes. This hybridization of genre is analogous to the blend of focalization and objectification of the witches' subjectivities in the two poems; both work to enchant the reader with the promise of something novel, feminine, and occult, in the midst of the familiar and traditional.

Besides making a statement about genre, the witch as a poetic mask enables the poet to cast his poetry as enchantment. This enchantment is achieved in two ways: by the inclusion of what seem to be at times realistic depictions of actual magical practices, and by the figurative seduction of the audience.

The detailed description of the ingredients and procedures of Simaetha's spells, and her repetition of the magical refrains, suggest to the reader that the poet has drawn this material from "real life."⁵⁰ This offers a kind of authenticity to Theocritus' poem, analogous to the ways in which Apollonius alludes to earlier literature and to scientific, geographic, and ethnographic writings in order to give his poem the weight of learned authority. The elaborate nature of these presentations of rituals, facts, and details suggest that the reader is presumed not to be familiar with the information. That the reader is presumed to want to learn about these unfamiliar topics suggests a desire for information about exotic and/or "low" subjects. The desire for authenticity is thus revealed as a desire for the Other. The figure of the witch is at the heart of this desire; the witch as poet demonstrates that arcane knowledge (whether culled from "low life" or the Library at Alexandria) *can*, after all, be used to enchant an audience. Significantly, the knowledge of magical practice is typically a hidden knowledge; in revealing this occult lore, Theocritus and Apollonius enact a version of the usual poetic practice of revealing what only the Muse knows.

The poets seduce the (presumed male⁵¹) audience by portraying the witches in their verses as young, tormented by passion, aggressive, and inexperienced. In both poems, there is a quasi-pornographic depiction of the beautiful girl suffering in love, describing her body's suffering (or having it described by the narrator, in Medea's case), and speaking enchanting words. Power, in the description of the witches' performance of spells, and erotic vulnerability, partially focalized through a first-person narrative, are juxtaposed and draw the reader in.⁵² This focalization allows the reader to imagine being a desiring and desirable girl, or seducing a

⁵⁰On the resemblance of Simaetha's spell to "real spells," see Dover 94, 97-101 (who discusses similarities between Simaetha's and Medea's invocations to Hecate); Gow 35-36; Fabiano 531; Faraone, *passim*; Fowler 144-45; Hutchinson 144-45; Luck 15.

⁵¹Obviously, there may have been both male and female readers of these poems; however, the primary reader seems to be imagined as male and interested in erotic depictions of women. The descriptions of Jason's beauty in the *Argonautica* also mention the effect of his beauty on an audience of women (most famously in the *ekphrasis* of his cloak and the description of its effect on female spectators, 1.730-68), while many of the descriptions of Medea's beauty occur without a male internal audience. Hunter 106-07 reads the episode of the Mossynoikoi (2.1015-29) as aimed at a male audience, since the narrator giving the ethnographic description of the Mossynoikoi copulating with their women on the ground in public is allied with a presumably male interest in the description. And Simaetha, of course, has only her slave Thestylis as an internal audience for part of the poem.

⁵²Papadopoulou 654-64 provides a fine discussion of the "abundant" "interior focalization" of Medea in Books 3 and 4 of the *Argonautica*.

desirable youth, or, perhaps, being a youth seduced by another young man. But while this narrative is partially focalized through the perspective of the distraught girl, at the same time it partially objectifies the girl. This complicated narrative strategy, which focalizes the reader through the perspective of a girl who is objectified and also objectifies herself, reflects ancient "erotic handbooks," which were written for men by men under the pseudonyms of *hetairai*.⁵³ Thus Simaetha describes her *own* body falling onto her bed as "lovely" and "stiff like a doll" (110), visualizing it from the (male) viewer's perspective.⁵⁴ Thus *she* is the one to seduce Delphis; she is the one who summons him to her house, takes *his* hand, and draws him down on the bed with her (139)—she is, then, the male fantasy of the sexually aggressive woman.⁵⁵ Thus the slightly patronizing, but charmed, critics, who deduce Simaetha's low status, perform only psychological readings of the poem; they even proceed to predict that her magic will not work.⁵⁶ But her spell does work, and the clearest evidence of this is the enchantment of her audience, who consistently call this poem "a masterpiece."⁵⁷ In addition to seducing the attention of a male reader, this move by the poet is yet another way of making a generic statement: his poetry looks at "high" modes of poetic discourse through the lens of a nearly subliterate form,⁵⁸ mingling high and low promiscuously, objectifying the literary past. In using her as a mask, Theocritus risks having readers read the *Idyll* as feminized, trivial, perhaps even performative, and most of all, "low"—but he gains an erotic interest on the part of his audience in "watching," and listening to, Simaetha. She is what they want to imagine: an enchantingly beautiful woman, in thrall to her love for a man who is superior to her.⁵⁹

Apollonius' description of Medea as she suffers in love partakes of this same poetic strategy of erotic enchantment through focalization and objectification. In Book 3, Medea laments her misfortune in impassioned soliloquies (464-70; 636-44

⁵³Parker 105-07.

⁵⁴Segal 1984: 203 notes that Simaetha uses "the verb *πῆγνυμι* ('fix fast') in *propria persona*" at line 110.

⁵⁵Segal 1984: 201 calls the scenario "a familiar male fantasy: the girl is desperately in love and ready to yield; she herself sets up the scene of seduction, and the man has only to play along, profit from the situation, and then is free to go about his business, with no further consequences." Griffiths 1979: 83 argues that Delphis is made uncomfortable by Simaetha's breach of modesty and protocol and has to pretend to be the one who initiated contact.

⁵⁶Segal 1985 refers to Simaetha's "little drama" (107) and her "pathetically narrow emotional world" (109 n. 14), but then claims that Theocritus "does not substitute condescension for sympathy. He may allow us occasionally to smile at Simaetha's innocence and naivete, but he does not therewith diminish our compassion for her misery of betrayal and abandonment" (119).

⁵⁷Griffiths 1979: 82: "an acknowledged masterpiece"; see also Griffiths 1981: 247, 268; Goldhill 261, 263. Papadopoulou 656 calls Medea's monologue at *Argonautica* 3.772-801 "a masterpiece."

⁵⁸For Parker 103, "erotic handbooks" were categorized as didactic literature, like Aratus or Nicander. Mime was considered a "subliterary" form.

⁵⁹Winkler reads the erotic binding spells of the Greek magical papyri as testifying to the strength of *eros* on the magician, instead of the strength of the magician's spell on the (usually female) victim. The man uses the spell to project his desire onto his intended victim. I think the reverse is going on in Theocritus' depiction of Simaetha's suffering, and it may be another reason why the poem is spoken by her.

and on to 664; 772-801), often pacing back and forth in only her nightgown; she weeps so much that she wets her lap/bosom (κόλπους, 804-06); she tries to speak the shameful words of her *eros* through her "desirable lips" (ἱμερόεν στόμα, 685). It is an eroticized picture of the beautiful young woman suffering. Like Simaetha, Medea makes the first move and takes her lover's hand (1067).⁶⁰ Where the audience of *Idyll* 2 falls for Simaetha, Jason falls in love with Medea precisely when he sees her crying with love for him (1077-78).⁶¹ In fact, Medea's magic is tied up with losing her virginity—or more precisely, her power as a witch increases with her desire for Jason. She gives Jason the drug from her maiden zone (1013-14), signifying that she relinquishes her virginity to him.⁶² She runs to Jason from her father's house singing spells to open the doors (4.41-42), symbolizing her own sexual accessibility to Jason. Even the drug she gives Jason suggests that her magic is linked to sexual vulnerability: it is an herb, born of the ichor of Prometheus, with two stalks that rise above the ground. Where the stalks join, the root looks like a wound in flesh, and the sap is dark (3.850-65)—an image evocative of a woman's legs and genitals. It will make Jason invulnerable, but it will lead to Medea's hasty marriage, loss of virginity, and betrayal by him.

It is significant that Simaetha and Medea, while working as poet-figures, are witches—and women. They enable the poets writing them to coopt "low," performative, and "feminine" genres for their own generic purposes, and they serve to enchant and seduce the readers of the poem. Ultimately, the witch as poet suggests the poet's own powerful, yet vulnerable, position: his enchanting language, potent knowledge, and seductive performance need a reader, an audience, who will respond to the seduction.

Perhaps the most suggestive image of this kind of Hellenistic poetry appears in another section of the *Argonautica*, the part of the *ekphrasis* of Jason's cloak which depicts Aphrodite:⁶³

ἐξεῖς δ' ἥσκητο βαθυπλόκαμος Κυθήρεια
 Ἄρεος ὀχμάζουσα θοδὺν σάκος, ἐκ δὲ οἱ ὤμου
 πῆχυν ἐπὶ σκαῖδν ξυνοχὴ κεχάλαστο χιτῶνος
 νέρθε παρὲκ μαζοῖο· τὸ δ' ἀντίον ἀτρεκὲς αὐτῶς
 χαλκεῖν δεικνὺλον ἐν ἀσπίδι φαίνεται ἰδέσθαι. (1.742-46)

And next in order deep-tressed Kythereia had been fashioned
 holding fast the swift shield of Ares, and from her shoulder
 to her left forearm, the fastening of her garment was loosened
 beneath her breast; opposite her in this manner, her exact
 reflection showed to be seen in the bronze shield.

The reader "looks at" the desirable woman looking at herself, representing herself, and is enchanted.

⁶⁰Noted in Hutchinson 129.

⁶¹Pavlock 55 notes that the simile comparing Medea to a young widow (3.656-63) "seems to reflect Medea's perspective."

⁶²Albis 82.

⁶³On the cloak as programmatic for Apollonius' poetics, see Fowler 17; Goldhill 309-12; Hutchinson 142; Merriam; Pavlock 27, 36-39; Zanker 47, 69-70, 76.

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