Meeting Medea or not

Apollonius Rhodius' notion of Theseus' position in time

"May I therefore succeed in purifying Fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of History. But where the obliviously disinclined to make herself credible, and refuses to admit any element of probability, I shall pray for kinds like this, and such as... with... the tales of antiquity." (Plutarch, Parallel Lives Theseus 1.2).

Aeletes and Pasiphae, children of Helius, had their respective daughters kidnapped by foreigners. Medea (daughter of Aeletes) escaped with Jason, and Ariadne with Theseus.

But who was abducted first? Some think that Medea was, asserting that she came to Helius with Jason, lived with him for ten years, and later, having left him, married Aeletes (Ap. 1.9.28). New Aeletes ignored that years before he had fathomed a son in Troezen, and in Epides Medeo, he tells the Colchian witch.

"I am childless: it is the act of some god." (671)

It is told that later Aeletes' son Theseus came from Troezen to Athens, where Medea attempted to poison him (Apolodorus, Description 1.9.1; Plutarch, Theseus 2.2; Diodorus Siculus 4.55.4-6; Pausanias 2.3.8; Ovid, Metamorphoses 7.466-472, and others). But Aeletes, having recognized his son, expelled Medea from the city. After that incident, Theseus sailed to Crete, a voyage which resulted in the abduction of Ariadne.

Several authors agree in that order of events. Yet, Apollonius Rhodius thought that the first to be abducted was Ariadne since he represented Jason telling Medea:

"In days past the maiden, Ariadne, daughter of Minos, with kindly heart resuced Theseus from grim contests—the maiden whom Pasiphae, daughter of Helius, bare." (Argonautica 3.197).

In Apollonius' view, Theseus belonged to "days past", which means that he could not have been the victim of a plot conceived by Medea (since when she attacked on Theseus 'life no one knew who Theseus was, whereas Apollonius Jason obviously knows him very well—and so does the girl he is seducing).

Also Alcippides and Hyginus preclude the meeting between Theseus and Medea in Athens. But whereas they do it by counting Theseus among the ARGONAUTS, Apollonius Rhodius achieves this result by placing Theseus in "days past" (i.e., previous to the expedition of the 'Argo'). Yet Apollonius also suggests (2.6.3) that the voyage of the ARGONAUTS and the tales of the Calydonian boar took place while Theseus was traveling from Troezen to Athens, clearing the list of falsifiers.

Quite a few manuals tell the story of that fateful meeting between Theseus and Medea as happening before the participation of Theseus in the expedition of the ARGONAUTS. Yet one has to wonder: Was it not this same expedition that brought Medea to Hellas? And if Theseus, as member of the expedition, indeed brought Medea to Hellas, how could he, as an unknown newcomer, meet her in Athens some time afterwards?

Other difficulties arise when Theseus is thus placed in "days past":

The death of Meleager, soon after the Calydonian boar-hunt, clearly suggests that the expedition to Colchis took place before the boar-hunt since Meleager was among the ARGONAUTS (the same could be said of Ancaeus, another Argonaut who was accidentally killed by Pelias during the hunt; or of Iphiclus, another Argonaut who was accidentally killed by Helius during the hunt; or of Lycus, an Argonaut whom the same Helius swayed while disputing about the skin of the Calydonian boar). Similarly, if Jason had participated in the Calydonian boar-hunt before becoming an Argonaut, he would have been known, not only to Pelias; but to the whole of Helius. Ovid (in Metamorphoses 8.320), when counting Jason among the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS, calls him 'the first ship's builder' (a title which Apollodorus, 1.2.14, gives to the father of the NAPAECIDES) acknowledging that the Argonaut became a hunter rather than the other way round.

Besides, Apollonius Rhodius precludes a sequence: 1) Calydonian boar-hunt, 2) Calydonian boar-hunt. That the story of Mopsus (who was an unknown newcomer) take place before or after the Calydonian boar-hunt? Thinking of Caeneus (who was an unknown newcomer) that was later buried alive by the CENTAURS (i.e., previous to the voyage of the ARGONAUTS), and being already famous, Theseus should hunt the boar after meeting Medea and not before (for before meeting her, he was an unknown newcomer). Although for Diodorus (The Library of History 4.50.4) King Pelias met his death on the very return of the ARGONAUTS to Iolcos, Alcippides suggests (3.9.2), or more emphatically implies (3.13.1) that the Calydonian boar-hunt took place before the death of Pelias (who was murdered at the instigation of Medea). Hyginus (Fabulae 25) asserts that Jason was burned to death, along with his new bride Gauce and his father Creus, as a result of Medea's machinations. If it is at this point that Medea is believed to have met the unknown newcomer Theseus in Athens, it becomes difficult to see how Theseus could have hunted Medea (as Ovid, the same Medea, so properly represent). Plutarch (in his Theseus) does not insist on Theseus being among the ARGONAUTS and the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS:

"Of the many exploits performed in these days by the bravest men, Herodorus thinks that Theseus took part in none, except that he aided the Lapiths in their war with the Centaurs; but others say that he was not only with Jason at Colchis, but helped Meleager to slay the Calydonian boar..." (Plutarch, Parallel Lives Thesegus 23.3).

How did Herodorus (6C BC) think... "When did Theseus go hunting? For here again, the hunters were famous, and so Theseus should hunt the boar after meeting Medea and not before (for before meeting her, he was an unknown newcomer). Although for Diodorus (The Library of History 4.50.4) King Pelias met his death on the very return of the ARGONAUTS to Iolcos, Alcippides suggests (3.9.2), or more emphatically implies (3.13.1) that the Calydonian boar-hunt took place before the death of Pelias (who was murdered at the instigation of Medea). Hyginus (Fabulae 25) asserts that Jason was burned to death, along with his new bride Gauce and his father Creus, as a result of Medea's machinations. If it is at this point that Medea is believed to have met the unknown newcomer Theseus in Athens, it becomes difficult to see how Theseus could have hunted Medea (as Ovid, the same Medea, so properly represent). Plutarch (in his Theseus) does not insist on Theseus being among the ARGONAUTS and the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS:

"Of the many exploits performed in these days by the bravest men, Herodorus thinks that Theseus took part in none, except that he aided the Lapiths in their war with the Centaurs; but others say that he was not only with Jason at Colchis, but helped Meleager to slay the Calydonian boar..." (Plutarch, Parallel Lives Theseus 23.3).

Summing up, we notice that the story of Medoeagor and others establishes the sequence: 1) ARGONAUTS, 2) Calydonian boar-hunt. That the story of Mopsus suggests another sequence: 1) LAPITHS/CENTAURS, 2) ARGONAUTS. And that the story of Caeneus orders the events thus: 1) Calydonian boar-hunt, 2) LAPITHS/CENTAURS.

In the view of Apollonius Rhodius, Theseus most celebrated adventure (the one resulting in the abduction of Ariadne) belonged to "days past" (i.e., previous to the voyage of the ARGONAUTS, and being already famous, Theseus could not have met Medea in Athens in the shape of an unknown newcomer as other poets and mythographers would have us believe). Had Apollonius included Theseus among the CALYDONIAN HUNTERS? It is not likely, since in Apollonius view Theseus did not follow the ARGONAUTS because he was retained in the Underworld:

"But Theseus... an unseen bond kept beneath the land of Tanaurus, for he had followed that path with Pithridus; assuredly both would have lightened for all the fulfilment of their task." (Argonautica 1.101).

Theseus' abduction of Helen and his subsequent detention in the Underworld is generally believed to have occurred near the end of his career (v. Apol. Ep. 3.13; Paus. 9.1.4). Apollodorus to Plutarch Theseus 31.1, quoting Heliandicus, Theseus was fifty years old when he abducted Helen, and having later returned from Hades for some other place, as others say), he went into exile and died.

Did Apollonius believe that also the war of the SEVEN AGAINST THEBES occurred before the voyage of the ARGONAUTS? How is then the role attributed to Theseus by Euripides (The Suppliants, Sophocles (Edipus at Colone) and others that war to be combined with such an order of events? Did Alcestis or son Patroclus due to Theseus (Apol. 3.6.8; Eur. Pharm. 1157; Paus. 9.18.6; Stat. Theb. 9.885) before his brother killed the Calydonian boar? It appears that if someone wished to accommodate Apollonius Rhodius' view of Theseus' position in time, he would also have to drastically rearrange or eliminate several tales. But then he would meet with a similar difficulty, with the authors who count Theseus among the ARGONAUTS... Indeed,

"The legends of Greece generally have different forms..." (Pausanias, Description of Greece 8.53.5).

Carlos Parada
Lund, July 10, 2003