EURIPIDES' MEDEA AND THE VANITY OF ΛΟΓΟΙ

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WE are accustomed to think of Medea, in Euripides' tragedy as in other representations of her myth, as a passionate rejected wife, motivated by jealous hatred to commit a crime that exceeds even the wrong that has been done to her.[1] Indisputably, Jason has betrayed their marriage, and the tragedy is deeply concerned with problems of gender and family. But Medea's charges against her husband emphasize also issues that transcend sexual difference and domestic conflict, suggesting that Euripides is interested in the myth from other perspectives as well. For what does Medea herself actually blame Jason? When we look at her own words, in contrast to what others (the Nurse, the Chorus, Creon, Jason) say about her situation, we find little reference to jealousy and even less to love gone wrong.[2] To be sure, as Bernard Knox and other critics have recently shown, Medea responds to Jason's betrayal with a heroic temper, in the manner of an injured Achilles or Ajax, conscious above all of the dishonor she has suffered.[3] But the way she describes the nature of Jason's offense focuses, surprisingly perhaps, on his misuse of language.

Most obviously, in betraying her for a new wife, Jason has broken an oath.[4] Clearly, Medea's union with Jason was no conventional Greek marriage, in which the bride's father hands his daughter over to his new son-in-law. Instead, the couple pledged faith to one another as equals, joining hands, and sealed their bond with an oath (cf. 20–23).[5] As Medea

1. Cf., e.g., D. L. Page, *Euripides: "Medea"* (Oxford, 1938), pp. xiv and xvii; E. Delebecque, *Euripide et la guerre du Péloponnèse* (Paris, 1951), p. 72; G. Paduano, *La formazione del mondo ideologico e poetico di Euripide: "Alcesti"-"Medea"*, Studi di lettere, storia e filosofia pubblicata dalla Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa (Pisa, 1968), esp. p. 202.

2. So, too, A. Dihle, *Euripides' "Medea,"* Sitz. der Heidelberger Akad. der Wiss., Phil.-hist. Klasse, 5 (Heidelberg, 1977), p. 16. Generally, it is the Chorus who bewails the effects of excessive ἔρως and hope for moderation in love (627–42). On the Chorus' (mis)understanding of Medea, cf. H. Foley, "Medea's Divided Self," *CA* 8 (1989): 73–74. For an illuminating but extreme position on the importance of "λέχος und Affekt" in the *Medea*, cf. H. Rohdich, *Die euripideische Tragödie: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Tragik* (Heidelberg, 1968), pp. 59–66. On Medea's jealousy, cf. also below, n. 11.

3. B. M. W. Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," *YCS* 25 (1977): 193–225; E. B. Bongie, "Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides," *TAPA* 107 (1977): 27–56. On Medea's sense of honor, cf. A. Maddalena, "La Medea di Euripide," *RFIC* 91 (1963): 132–41.

4. In a forthcoming article, "Why Must Medea Kill the Children?," A. P. Burnett eloquently demonstrates the centrality of oath-breaking in the *Medea*.

5. For Jason and Medea's untraditional "marriage," cf. Pind. *Ol.* 13. 53 καὶ τὰν πατρὸς ἀντία Μήδειαν θεμέναν γάμον αὐτᾷ. On its egalitarian character, cf. S. Flory, "Medea's Right Hand: Promises

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herself cries out from inside the house: "Great Themis and Lady Artemis,[6] do you see what I suffer, even though with great oaths I bound my accursed husband?" (160–63). And in her first dialogue with Jason Medea tells him that she wonders "if you think the gods in power then no longer rule, or if new laws now prevail for men, since you know you are not true to your oath to me" (492–95).

Second, Jason has failed to behave as Medea had a right to expect from a supplicant who had sought her aid with the formal language and gestures of ἱκετεία:[7] "Ah my poor right hand, which you so often grasped, and my knees; in vain was I touched by a worthless man, and I was wrong in my expectations" (496–98). As with the oaths sworn between them, so too with his supplication of her, Medea emphasizes how Jason has perverted an important form of discourse, and one with divine sanctions.[8]

Third, as Medea ruefully tells the Chorus, she was a victim of Jason's persuasive powers: "I went wrong at the time I left my father's house, persuaded by the words of a Greek man" (800–802).[9] As she describes it, Jason misled her with his speech rather than using the discourse of πειθώ for their mutual benefit.[10]

But Medea's version of why she left Colchis is not the only way to tell that part of the story. The Nurse, for example, says that her mistress was "struck in her heart with ἔρως" (8). And Jason himself declares that Medea was forced by Aphrodite and Eros to save him (526–31). These different versions are not mutually exclusive, as we can see in Pindar's account, where Aphrodite herself gives love-charms to Jason so that Medea will be "spun by the whip of Peitho" with desire for Greece (*Pyth.* 4. 213–19). The point is that Euripides' Medea consistently emphasizes Jason's words to her when she speaks of his betrayal: she implies that his speech formed the basis of their common life—a reality which he is now undoing.

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and Revenge," *TAPA* 108 (1978): 70–71; also Burnett, "Why Must Medea Kill the Children?," and Foley, "Self," p. 75.

6. The fact that Artemis is invoked here along with Themis has puzzled commentators on this passage: cf. A. Elliott, *Euripides' "Medea"* (Oxford, 1969), p. 76, ad 160. But if it is correct to assert that oath-breaking is punished by the death of one's offspring (cf. below, n. 64), then it is not so strange that Medea cites Artemis, a goddess of childbirth, when she first invokes the oaths that Jason has broken. On Themis and Medea, cf. P. Giannini, "Interpretazione della *Pitica* 4 di Pindaro," *QUCC* 31, n.s. 2 (1979): 63.

7. Cf. J. Gould, "*Hiketeia*," *JHS* 93 (1973): 74–103, a fundamental study of supplication as a social institution. On this passage, cf. also Flory, "Medea's Right Hand," p. 70.

8. As Medea herself may hint to Creon (cf. 326, 332), and as Aegeus seems to recognize when he readily accedes to Medea's supplication of him (719–20). Cf. further Gould, "*Hiketeia*," p. 78.

9. Cf. P. Pucci, *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' "Medea"* (Ithaca, 1980), p. 113, for an illuminating deconstruction of Medea's charges against Jason. Our interest here, however, is not in the "gaps" in her language (i.e., the difference between what she "wants" to say and what we may "hear" despite her "intentions"), but on the overt and consistent problematizing of discourse itself in the tragedy. Cf. also R. G. A. Buxton, *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Peitho* (Cambridge, 1982), esp. pp. 153–70 on the *Medea*.

10. In this connection it is interesting to note that πείθομαι and Latin *fides* appear to come from the same root; these terms for persuasion and trust emerged from a shared semantic range; cf. E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris, 1969), vol. 1, p. 115.

In sum then, as Medea expresses it, Jason has perverted three kinds of speech-acts: oath-taking, supplication, and persuasion. Although to a modern reader this may well seem a cold and hyper-rational focus for her fiery revenge, Euripides has given us a Medea who expresses "psychological" reactions such as jealousy far less than she charges Jason with abuse of language.[11] Moreover, I believe that her words should be taken seriously, however much we suspect that other motives "must" lie beneath the surface. The face of Greek tragedy is rightly seen as a mask, a persona.[12] As P. E. Easterling has noted, "There are times . . . when we are made uneasy by the extremely public nature of [Sophocles'] characters, as indeed by that of all characters in Greek tragedy. This is no doubt because the Greeks were interested in individuals as part of a community much more than in the individual's unique private experience, a difference of attitude which is sometimes hard for us to share or appreciate."[13] Further, "talk about talk" in this drama does not stop with Euripides' characterization of his protagonist. The whole tragedy focuses self-consciously on λόγος, both as a medium of communication ("word, discourse, argument"), and as a basis of the way "reality" is shaped, understood, and remembered ("story, plan").

The *Medea* exemplifies a fascination with language, its dangers and powers, that characterizes many works of the fifth century.[14] This emphasis comes as no surprise, of course, in a democracy where political decisions were conspicuously dependent on rhetorical persuasion, and in a culture where gods were called to witness and defend all sworn transactions. Furthermore, Euripides' world was still in large measure dependent on oral or recently-oral traditions for its own history; but at the same time increasing literacy (among other factors) was promoting skepticism in many areas where the "truth" of such traditions had previously been assumed. In considering the *Medea* as a tragedy of discourse, I will look especially at the protagonist and her relation to various kinds of language, including even the λόγος, the story, of her adventures with Jason.

First, not without a certain terrible justice, Medea appropriates and uses against her enemies each of the forms of discourse which she accuses

11. The single clearest instance of an admission of sexual jealousy on Medea's part is her interchange with Jason at 1367–68. For a balanced analysis of the place of jealousy in Medea's revenge, cf. Foley, "Self," esp. pp. 65 and 77. R. Rehm, "*Medea* and the λόγος of the Heroic," *Eranos* 87 (1989): 103, reaches similar conclusions about Jason's abuse of language.

12. For this view of Euripidean characterization, cf. W. Zürcher, *Die Darstellung des Menschen im Drama des Euripides,* Schweiz. Beit. zur Altertumswiss. 2 (Basel, 1947). A recent brief discussion can be found in M. Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London, 1987), pp. 119–20. Cf. also P. E. Easterling, "Presentation of Character in Aeschylus," *G&R* 20 (1973): 3–19, and "Character in Sophocles," *G&R* 24 (1977): 121–29; and D. J. Conacher, "Rhetoric and Relevance in Euripidean Drama," *AJP* 102 (1981): 3–25, esp. pp. 3–5 with bibliography on "psychologizing" vs. "rhetorical" approaches to character and dramatic theme. For an opposing view of Medea's characterization, cf. Paduano, *Formazione,* esp. pp. 183–84.

13. "Character in Sophocles," p. 129.

14. For important discussions of this phenomenon, cf. S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 1–3, and D. Lanza, *Lingua e discorso nell' Atene delle professioni* (Naples, 1979), chap. 1: "I greci scoprono la lingua." Cf. also G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton, 1963), p. 34, for a general assessment of the importance of the word in a democratic state.

Jason of having abused. Jason's broken oath is surely the most powerful focus of Medea's blame. As if to demonstrate the importance and sanctity of this speech-act, the actual swearing of an oath is dramatically presented in the central episode of the tragedy. Aegeus, king of Athens, happens to pass through Corinth soon after Medea expresses her need to find a refuge after murdering her enemies. He listens sympathetically to Medea's story of betrayal and agrees to grant her asylum if she comes to his city.[15] Medea asks Aegeus to swear formally that he will do as he says: she wants a guarantee (731 πίστις) that he will protect her from enemies who might come to take her away (734–36). She makes a clear distinction between Aegeus' being "yoked by oaths" (735) and simply "joining in λόγοι" (737).[16] Rather than being offended, Aegeus praises Medea's forethought here: an oath will provide him with an impressive excuse to present to Medea's enemies (his own guest-friends) should they come to Athens seeking her extradition.

Not only do Medea and Aegeus each give reasons for sealing their agreement with an oath, but the procedure itself is deliberately enacted before the audience.[17] Medea names the gods to swear by, dictates the content of the oath, and asks Aegeus to state what he should suffer if he fails to abide by his word (746–55). The entire episode illuminates by contrast Jason's grievous fault in breaking his oath to Medea.[18] But in addition to demonstrating a "proper" attitude toward the inviolability of oaths, Aegeus provides Medea with her needed asylum and thus naively facilitates her plans for revenge.

Medea also knows well the rules of the game for supplication, and she uses this powerful form of discourse for her own advantage. When Creon, afraid of her cleverness and her threats, orders her to leave Corinth immediately with her children, she first tries to dissuade him gently: "My reputation for σοφία has hurt me often; I am no threat to you; I will quietly accept the inevitable" (292–315). Creon remains unmoved, and Medea resorts to more compelling pleas. Finally she takes hold of his hand and begs him as a suppliant to grant her just one more day to prepare for her children's exile (336–47).[19] Although he realizes his error, Creon nevertheless gives in to her plea (348–56). After this encounter, Medea candidly tells the Chorus that she would never have fawned on the

15. The relevance of the Aegeus episode in the *Medea* has been criticized since Aristotle; cf. Page, *Medea,* pp. xxix–xxx, for a summary of the major points of debate. Aegeus' role here raises the interesting question of the relationship between Medea and the audience's Athens; I return briefly to this point in the conclusion of this paper.

16. Cf. Lanza, *Lingua,* pp. 20–25, on the distinction between a view of speech as magical and effective per se, as found especially in Gorgias' *Helen,* and a more "democratic" and "rational" view of discourse espoused by theoreticians of rhetoric, esp. Aristotle.

17. Cf. B. Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy: Drama, Myth, Society* (London, 1973), p. 285: by this dramatization "the oath . . . becomes a thing of strength in itself."

18. On the seriousness of oaths and curses, in contrast to other "supernatural" elements in Euripides, cf. E. H. Klotsche, *The Supernatural in the Tragedies of Euripides* (Chicago, 1980; repr. of 1919 ed.), pp. 10–13 and 95.

19. On the dynamics of this scene, cf. Gould, "*Hiketeia,*" pp. 85–86.

king, would never have spoken to him and taken his hand, except that she could further her own plans by doing so (368–70).

Medea's supplication of Creon thus brings her the time she needs to carry out her revenge; her supplication of Aegeus (709–18) provides her with a place of refuge afterwards. Her third and final act of supplication is indirect but equally crucial: she instructs her children to take the deadly gifts to the princess and beg her for a reprieve of their exile (969–73). These three instances of ἱκετεία thus pave the way for Medea's retaliation against the one who had supplicated her falsely.

Euripides' Medea is also, as R. G. A. Buxton has called her, a "mistress of *peithô*."[20] First she convinces the sympathetic Chorus to keep silent if she finds a way to get justice from Jason (214–66, esp. 260–63). Then in dealing with Creon and Aegeus, as we have seen, self-serving persuasion—fortified where necessary with supplication or an oath—is her only weapon.[21] The most interesting enactment of Medea's persuasive powers, however, comes (again with a certain justice) in her deception of Jason.[22] First she claims to agree, on second thought, that his new marriage is indeed a fine solution for all concerned (869–93). She brings their children out and has them kiss and speak to their father (894–99). Then she begs Jason to let his sons remain with him in Corinth while she herself goes into exile (934–40). Jason is all too ready to agree: "I do not know if I can persuade Creon, but I have to try" (941). In that case, Medea suggests, Jason should convince his bride to ask this favor of her father. That should be easy, she adds with bitter irony, if his new wife is like other women—that is, if she is as easy to persuade as Medea herself once was. Completely duped, the egotistical Jason can only agree (944). And now Medea comes to the critical point of her plot: she will assist Jason in his task by sending the children to his bride with irresistible gifts, a robe and crown which Medea has inherited from her father's father Helios (946–55). Jason finds this offer too extravagant; he is sure he can persuade his wife without such foolish expenditure.[23] But Medea insists: "They say that gifts persuade even the gods, and gold is stronger than countless words" (964–65). As the children go off on their deadly errand, the Chorus ominously foresees that "the charm and immortal splendor of the golden robe will persuade her to put on the wrought crown" (982–83).

Because she has persuasively used "soft words" about her children against Creon and Jason (316, 776), Medea will be able to carry out her

20. *Persuasion,* p. 154. The subject of persuasion, including formal supplication, in the *Medea* is discussed in detail by Buxton, pp. 153–70.

21. Cf. Buxton, *Persuasion,* p. 158, who distinguishes, perhaps too finely, between Medea's not dishonest persuasion of the Chorus and her πειθὼ δόλια with "superiors in power." Foley, "Self," p. 74, similarly calls Medea's persuasion "the weapons of the weak."

22. Cf. Buxton's perceptive analysis of this scene, *Persuasion,* pp. 166–67, as well as Knox, "*Medea,*" pp. 200–201.

23. A. P. Burnett, "*Medea* and the Tragedy of Revenge," *CP* 68 (1973): 18, observes that in the Messenger's speech we learn it was not Jason's persuasion so much as Medea's gifts that broke down the resistance of the princess.

plot. She almost fails to do so, however, by using a similar discourse against herself.[24] In the great monologue where she debates their murder, she is overwhelmed more than once by her love for them; but finally her heroic (and tragic) will wins out, and she is ashamed of the "soft words" of maternal pity she has spoken (1051–52). Medea's persuasive powers have gone almost too far for the success of her own plans.

Besides the three kinds of discourse which she claims Jason used against her, Medea's arsenal includes also the language of blame. Her threats, curses, and bitter laments dominate the prologue and parodos, first as they are described by the Nurse and Chorus, then as we hear them from Medea herself offstage.[25] The Nurse takes Medea's curses seriously, especially when they are directed against the children (115–18). She knows that there will be no end to her mistress' wrath until she has struck someone down (93–95), and she warns the children to stay away while their mother "rouses her heart, rouses her wrath" with her cries (98–105).[26] Medea's voice is a "cloud of lamentation" which will soon ignite, as her anger increases (106–8). Medea at one point wishes that lightning might strike her own head (144–45),[27] but more often she directs her anger against Jason and everyone connected with him: "Cursed children of a hateful mother, perish together with your father, and let the whole house go to ruin" (112–14); "Let me see him and his bride ground down with their whole palace, since they dared to harm me unprovoked" (163–65).

It is such language that leads Creon to banish Medea from Corinth (287–91). Jason blames Medea for causing her own exile by threatening the royal family (448–54), but Medea does not repent. "To your house too I will turn out to be a curse" (608), she warns Jason.

In addition to curses and threats, Medea self-consciously uses invective against Jason: "O most evil of all—for this I can call you, the greatest evil my tongue can do against your baseness" (465–66); " . . . you have done well to come, for by speaking ill to you I will lighten my own soul, and you will feel pain in hearing it" (472–74; cf. also 499–501). As Pucci has argued in his analysis of these passages, Medea's words to Jason are by no means a mere description of what she feels: she is explicitly conscious of their remedial effect on herself (as well, we might add, of their painful effect on Jason).[28] In this scene, as throughout the *Medea,* we are con-

24. Similarly D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto, 1967), p. 195, and Knox, "*Medea,*" p. 201.

25. Maddalena, "La Medea," pp. 137–38, followed by Knox, "*Medea,*" p. 196, notes that with this dramatic technique Medea most closely resembles the Sophoclean Ajax. For thematic repetitions within the prologue and parodos, cf. E. Schlesinger, "Zu Euripides' *Medea,*" *Hermes* 94 (1966): 40–41, and Pucci, *Violence,* p. 48.

26. Cf. Pucci, *Violence,* pp. 43–44, for a Derridean perspective on the way Medea exacerbates her anger with her own voice.

27. This wish develops the lightning image latent in what the Nurse has just said about Medea: "She will not cease from wrath, well I know, before she strikes someone down" (93–94 κατασκῆψαί τινα). At the end of the play Jason uses the same image, declaring that the gods have "hurled" (1333 ἔσκηψαν) Medea's avenger against himself.

28. *Violence,* pp. 101–2. For the conventional view that Medea here speaks to Jason with absolute sincerity, cf. Schlesinger, "Zu Euripides' *Medea,*" p. 36, citing H. Strohm, *Euripides, Interpretationen zur dramatischen Form,* Zetemata 15 (Munich, 1957), p. 3.

stantly reminded that language is always more than the unmediated expression of an inner state.

In contrast—or better, as a complement—to her own effectiveness as a speaker, Medea herself is remarkably unresponsive to the speech of others. She will not respond to words of comfort, the Nurse complains in the prologue, but "like a rock or a wave of the sea she pays attention to advice from her friends" (28–29; cf. 141–43). The sympathetic Chorus also wants to soothe Medea with words; urgently they ask the Nurse to bring Medea out of the house to listen to them (173–83). The Nurse agrees to try, but without much hope of success: "Like a lioness with cubs she glares at the servants, when anyone comes near her bringing a word (μῦθον)" (187–89).

Medea does appear before the Chorus, after all, but not to heed words of comfort. Instead, she delivers a rhetorically masterful speech to gain their complicity in her desire for justice against Jason.[29] Medea retains this autonomous position throughout the drama. When the Chorus urges her not to kill her children (811–13), for example, her reply is brief: "It cannot be otherwise" (814). She soon cuts off further discussion (819), and sends for Jason so that she can put her plan into action. The Chorus now sings of blessed Athens, and wonders how such a place can receive the murderous Medea (824–50). They repeat their plea: "By your knees, by every way at all, I beg you not to kill your children" (853–55). But to their desperate supplication Medea does not even respond; Jason enters as summoned and she begins to carry out her plot.

Now, not as long ago in Colchis, Medea is also impervious to the words of Jason. When he eloquently defends his decision to marry Creon's daughter, she merely accuses him of trying to cloak injustice with clever words (580–81). In the exodos, when Medea appears in the chariot of Helios with the bodies of the children, Jason realizes that he could not "bite" her even with endless abuse (1344–45). And indeed Medea remains out of reach, unmoved by his invective as by his vain pleas to let him bury the children (1378, 1404).

Medea's mastery of language is further reflected in her habit of not wasting words. It is typical for this drama that she comments self-consciously on that fact, several times declaring that she speaks only when it is profitable for her to do so. Thus, as we have seen, after supplicating Creon she explains to the Chorus that the only reason she spoke to him was to gain something for herself (368–70). Later, when a distraught servant warns Medea to flee from Creon's avengers, he is amazed at her joyful reaction, and asks how she is able to hear such a message with equanimity. "I could of course reply to your words . . . ," she says, but she does not (1132–33). Similarly, in her final encounter with Jason, Medea answers his bitter charges: "I could make a long reply to your words, if

29. P. Mazon, "De quelques vers d'Euripide (*Medée*, 214–229)," *RPh* 27 (1953): 119–21, analyzes the influence of fifth-century rhetoric on this speech. Cf. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama*, pp. 188–89, for an appreciation of Medea's intellect and dignity here.

Father Zeus did not know what you received from me and what you did" (1351–53).[30] She need not explain herself to men; it is enough that the gods know.

Not only is Medea unreceptive to the words of others, whether friends or enemies, but she also expressly criticizes what others say. In her first speech to the Chorus, stressing their common experience as women, she repudiates a presumably typical opinion: "They say (λέγουσι) of us that we live a life without danger at home, while they engage in spearfighting. They are fools! Three times would I be willing to stand by my shield, rather than bear a single child" (248–51). Likewise, Medea criticizes what she implies is a common view of oratory, after Jason's impressive rebuttal to her charges: "In many ways I disagree with many mortals, for I think that someone skilled in speaking but unjust deserves the greatest punishment" (579–81).[31] Her opinion here of course represents a commonplace of anti-sophistic rhetoric, and Pucci rightly questions the fairness of Medea's charge against Jason: she wants to sound as if her own speech were simply an unbiased statement of the truth, when in fact it is full of self-interest.[32] Nevertheless, here again Euripides' Medea is presenting herself as a critical and independent judge of what others say.

As if taking their cue from the protagonist, the women of the Chorus also come to criticize received opinion.[33] After Medea determines to exact justice from her betrayer, they sing of how the whole world is turned around, now that a *man* has proved unfaithful: "Back flow the springs of sacred rivers" (410). In this ode the Chorus looks forward to new songs (φᾶμαι) which will bring honor to women instead of their traditional reputation for unfaithfulness. They even attribute this reputation to the fact that singers have always been men. But all this may change: "A long age has many things to say about my nature and that of men" (429–30).[34]

In the next episode, the Chorus hesitantly offers a contrary opinion (παρὰ γνώμην ἐρῶ) to Jason's well-constructed defense of his new marriage: "In betraying your wife you seem to act unjustly" (576–78). Shortly thereafter, they declare that they do not need to rely on a μῦθος told by others, since they see Medea's plight for themselves (652–53).[35]

Most strikingly, once Medea has described her plan for vengeance, the Chorus ventures an opinion very much counter to prevailing values, particularly as voiced by male characters in this play. Claiming that some women too have access to a Muse for wisdom, and that they have

30. For a different explanation, cf. A. N. Michelini, "ΜΑΚΡΑΝ ΓΑΡ ΕΞΕΤΕΙΝΑΣ," *Hermes* 102 (1974): 524–39, esp. p. 533.

31. Note the similar remark of the Messenger, concerning those who seem to be σοφοὺς βροτῶν and μεριμνητὰς λόγων (1225–27).

32. *Violence,* pp. 106–8.

33. The Nurse, too, in the face of Medea's threats and sufferings, sharply criticizes the common wisdom, in this case the use of music and song at occasions that are already happy. It would be more profitable, she declares, to use music to soothe pain and avoid violence (190–201). On this critique of music and poetry, cf. Pucci, *Violence,* pp. 28 and 42–43.

34. For a different view, cf. Foley, "Self," p. 80.

35. Cf. the Pedagogue's reluctance to accept on hearsay the fact of Medea's exile (72–73). In contrast, Medea's enemy Creon believes what he has heard about Medea, her cleverness and her threats; this is the δόξα that hurts her (285–93).

compared many subtle μῦθοι, they conclude that the happiest people are those without offspring (1081–93).[36]

Despite Medea's effective and critical use of language, she is told by many that she speaks pointlessly, in vain (μάτην). When the Chorus members first overhear her wish for death, they recoil sympathetically and try to redirect her prayer: "What is this love you have for the unapproachable bed, ὦ ματαία? The end of death will come soon; do not pray for it!" (151–54). To Creon, too, her pleas for a reprieve of exile seem useless. He tells her to stop talking and leave, says she is wasting words and will never persuade him, and finally tells her harshly, "Move, ὦ ματαία, and stop making trouble for me" (333).

Jason, as we have seen, blames Medea for continuing to speak "vain words" (λόγων ματαίων) against him, and even worse, against the rulers of Corinth (448–54). Later, in her deception of Jason, Medea herself claims to think that her anger at him was vain (882–83 μάτην). But this apparent change of heart and adoption of Jason's own discourse is of course only a ploy to further her murderous plot. Soon, when she insists on "helping" Jason persuade his bride to let their children stay in Corinth, he chides her for wanting to give away her treasures to the wealthy princess: "Why, ὦ ματαία, do you empty your hands of these things?" (959).

As it turns out, of course, Medea's words prove to be anything but vain. Her curses are fulfilled, and her supplication of Creon succeeds. Even her self-pity no longer seems pointless to the Chorus once they understand her situation: "I do not wonder that you bewail what has happened" (268). Soon, they even declare that they would rather die than suffer what Medea has (642–51; cf. Medea's wish for death in 144–47).

What is truly "vain" for Medea, as we have seen, is not her speech but her role as Jason's savior and the expectations, confirmed by oath, that were based on that role. His present betrayal leads her to retell their past adventures, to show how unjustly he is treating the one who helped him. This narrative raises a fundamental question about Jason's heroic identity, his fame as leader of the Argonauts. Jason's reputation is very important to him: as he says (542–44), he would not want gold in his house or the ability to sing better than Orpheus, if it did not bring him renown (ἐπίσημος τύχη).[37] But what is Jason's λόγος? How should his story be told?

In the famous first words of the drama, Medea's Nurse wishes that the Argo had never sailed, for then her mistress would not be dishonored and

36. Foley, "Self," p. 80, finds that the members of the Chorus here are "swayed momentarily to abandon the core of their self-interest as women." Since they are nowhere presented as mothers, this interpretation may be overdrawn.

37. Note again the Nurse's very different evaluation of the uses of songs, 190–203: they ought to bring comfort to their audience (rather than renown to their singers). On the value both Jason and Medea place on their reputation, cf. L. Bergson, *Die Relativität der Werte im Frühwerk des Euripides* (Stockholm, 1971), pp. 14–21. R. B. Palmer, "An Apology for Jason: A Study of Euripides' *Medea*," *CJ* 53 (1957): 51, offers an idiosyncratic reading of ἐπίσημος . . . τύχη (544) as "accepted in the coinage of the realm"; in this context the phrase would surely be heard as a reference to fame, not mere acceptance.

betrayed (1–19). At the end of the tragedy, Jason wishes that he had never begotten children, to see them murdered by Medea (1413–14). These impossible wishes, which frame the action of the play, hint that the *Medea* deals somehow with a negation of its own myth. Let us look more closely at the story of the Argo as it is recalled in the play.

The Nurse's regret about the voyage of the Argonauts sounds almost self-contradictory.[38] Even as she wishes it away, she summarizes the great saga in highly poetic language appropriate to epic or praise-poetry (1–6):

> Would that the ship Argo had never flown
> through the dark Symplegades to the land of Colchis,
> that in the glens of Pelion the pine had never fallen
> hewn, that the hands of brave heroes had not
> been set to oar, as they went to fetch the Golden Fleece
> for Pelias . . .

The way the Nurse evokes Jason's saga shows that the Argo adventure has become even to those who participated in it a famous story, a μῦθος or λόγος (tragedy scarcely distinguishes between the two terms).[39] In their first dialogue, however, we see that Medea and Jason have very different versions of their early adventures. They engage in a "battle of λόγοι" (546), pitting one narrative against the other as they reconstruct their past.[40] Medea first hisses that she saved Jason, as every one of the Argonauts knows (476–77): ἔσωσά σ', ὡς ἴσασιν Ἑλλήνων ὅσοι / ταὐτὸν συνεισέβησαν Ἀργῷον σκάφος. She helped him overcome the dangers set for him by her father Aeetes: to master the fire-breathing bulls, to sow the fatal field that produced armed warriors. She herself killed for him the deadly snake that guarded the fleece. Then, she continues, she betrayed her father and home, going with Jason to Greece, where she killed his enemy Pelias by a miserable death at his own daughters' hands. And now she has borne children to Jason too—but still he breaks his oath and makes vain his former supplication of her. She has made enemies everywhere by doing favors for Jason. It will be a fine shame for the new bridegroom when his own children wander as beggars, together with the woman who saved him (ἥ τ' ἔσωσά σε, she hisses again, at 515). Medea thus frames her whole account of Jason's heroic deeds with her own role as his savior.[41] But this puts Jason in a strange situation: what great Greek hero ever relied so completely on the help of a mortal woman?[42]

38. Cf. Pucci, *Violence*, pp. 32–39, for a thorough deconstruction of the Nurse's "wish"; I am not convinced, however, by Pucci's suggestion that the Nurse here adopts the diction of her mistress.

39. An exception is found in the *Philoctetes;* cf. A. Podlecki, "The Power of the Word in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," *GRBS* 7 (1966): 245–46.

40. I understand the expression ἅμιλλαν . . . λόγων to mean not only that the contest consists of words, but that two different λόγοι are being opposed to one another: it is a contest of "accounts" or "tales."

41. For Medea as Jason's savior, cf. also Pind. *Ol.* 13. 53–54 Μήδειαν . . . ναῒ σώτειραν Ἀργοῖ καὶ προπόλοις.

42. On Jason's questionable heroism, see further K. von Fritz, *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin, 1962), p. 332, and R. Aélion, *Quelques grands mythes héroiques dans l'oeuvre d'Euripide* (Paris, 1986), p. 146.

Jason begins his rebuttal by claiming he will need great skill to refute Medea's abuse of him: "It seems I had better be born no mean speaker, but like a careful helmsman, run my ship out with the top edges of its sail from your fast-mouthed tongue-pain, woman" (522–25). He starts his verbal navigation by devaluing Medea's χάρις, her favors to him. According to Jason, it was not Medea but Aphrodite who saved him. He will not go into details, he graciously declares: it would be a "grudging story" (529–30 ἐπίφθονος λόγος) to explain how Eros forced her to help him. The credit for his safety and success does not go to her. Moreover, Jason continues, "from saving me you have received more than you gave" (534–35). First, Medea now lives in Hellas, a land of justice and law rather than brute force. And, especially, she enjoys a reputation for σοφία, whereas if she had stayed at the ends of the world, she would have no fame at all (541 οὐκ ἂν ἦν λόγος σέθεν). Thus what Medea has gained from the Argo expedition and her (compulsory) role in it is λόγος itself: now there is a story about her, she is part of a myth.

It is all too easy to counter Jason's evaluation of these benefits. Supposedly "civilized" Greeks such as Creon are treating Medea lawlessly.[43] Moreover, Medea herself claims that she suffers, rather than profits, from her reputation for σοφία (292–93). And her λόγος she describes as uniquely negative: not only does she suffer all the disadvantages of ordinary married women, but in addition she is an exile without friend or family (252–58).

Beyond its obvious logical deficiencies, Jason's story of their mythical past shows that he, like the Nurse, thinks of his saga in terms of the traditional heroism of epic, the genre in which his story was no doubt at home. (Already in the *Odyssey,* we are told, the Argo is "a concern to all.")[44] One such epic characteristic is the emphasis on fame, his own and Medea's, as we have already seen. Even more striking is the way Jason, in contrast to Medea, accounts for the help he received in his great adventures. If his savior was not a mortal woman but the goddess Aphrodite, his heroism is not lessened but increased. As Aphrodite saved Paris or her son Aeneas in the *Iliad,* as Athena protected her favorites such as Achilles and Diomedes—or even more comparably, as Athena made the shipwrecked Odysseus beautiful to look at, and Nausicaa particularly susceptible to his charms (*Od.* 6. 1–40, 229–37)—so Aphrodite has used Medea to help her favorite, Jason.[45]

43. Medea is not alone in complaining that her betrayal and exile are unjust; the Nurse concurs, as well as the Pegagogue, Chorus, and soon Aegeus as well; cf. also Buxton, *Persuasion,* p. 163.

44. *Od.* 12. 70. Cf. M. Vojatzi, *Frühe Argonautenbilder,* Beit. zur Archäologie 14 (Würzburg, 1982), p. 11, on reasons for assuming the existence of a prehomeric Argo epic. Most recently, U. Hölscher, *Die "Odyssee": Epos zwischen Märchen und Roman* (Munich, 1989), chap. 13, "Die allbekannte Argo," discusses traces of such an epic in the Homeric *Odyssey.*

45. In the *Odyssey,* which contains our earliest reference to Jason, his divine protector is Hera (*Od.* 12. 52–72) and Medea is not mentioned at all. In Pindar's version of their myth, however, Aphrodite's help is critical (*Pyth.* 4. 213–19). On Aphrodite in *Pyth.* 4, cf. P. Giannini, "Metis e Themis nella *Pitica* 4 di Pindaro," *Annali dell' Università di Lecce,* Facoltà di lettere e filosofia, vols. 8–10 (1977–80 [1981]), pp. 142–43. On Jason's "unheroic" persuasion of Medea, cf. C. Segal, *Pindar's Mythmaking: The Fourth*

Jason concludes his retelling of the Argo story with words that strongly suggest a heroic narrative (545–46): "That is all I have to tell (ἔλεξ') about my labors (τῶν ἐμῶν πόνων), for you began the battle of λόγοι (ἄμιλλαν . . . λόγων)." The πόνοι mean for Jason his famous exploits, such as the difficult tasks set him by Pelias and Aeetes—a heroic motif comparable to the "labors of Heracles"[46] or to the toils of the Achaeans at Troy.[47] Clearly, Jason sees his adventures with the Argo in terms of traditional epic heroism.

The marriage with Creon's daughter is Jason's new λόγος, as he himself calls it (588), his new plan to follow up on his earlier glorious struggles with material comforts, good connections, and a powerful and lasting house.[48] As he exclaims, "What luckier find could I, an exile, have found than to marry the king's daughter?" (553–54). To carry out this new λόγος, however, Jason must abandon Medea. This means that he must make his supplication of her vain, his persuasion false, his oath void. He must begin his new story by nullifying his old words to Medea. Those words, however, were the basis of his present situation, especially of the fact that he has children by Medea, and his annihilation of them will entail consequences he does not foresee. For Medea, too, will devise a new tale, one that will be not a pleasant and rational sequel to, but effectively the negation of, Jason's story of his πόνοι—and tragically of her own labors as well. Even here the protagonist emphasizes the pre-eminent role of language: as we shall see, Medea refers to her intended actions as a λόγος.

After her encounter with Aegeus, Medea confides to the Chorus her revised plan for vengeance: "Hear λόγοι not for pleasure" (773). She has already threatened to provide Jason and his bride with new struggles in their marriage (366–67). Now she plans them in detail, orchestrating her plot in typically authorial fashion. She not only rehearses her own "soft words" to Jason (776–79), but directs the words and actions of others as well. As she previously directed Aegeus in swearing his oath, so now she will tell Jason what to say to his bride and her father (940–45; cf. 1149–55). She will manipulate her children, too, telling them how to greet and touch their father (895–96) and how to supplicate the princess with gifts and words (784–86, 969–75).

But then, Medea continues, "I will change this λόγος—and I groan at what I must do next" (790–92). She will kill her own children to eradicate Jason's house, and then leave Corinth, "enduring a most unholy crime"

Pythian Ode (Princeton, 1986), pp. 19–20. B. K. Braswell, *A Commentary on the Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar* (Berlin and New York, 1988), p. 296 ad 213–33, notes the similarity between the Pindaric and Euripidean accounts of Aphrodite's role.

46. Cf. τελέσας στονόεντας ἀέθλους of Jason at *Theog.* 994. Elsewhere in Hesiod this formula refers only to the labors of Heracles (*Theog.* 951). For more on heroic πόνοι, cf. G. Nagy, *Pindar's Homer* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 138–39, 151.

47. Cf. *Od.* 8. 490, where Odysseus praises Demodocus' accuracy in singing ὅσσ' ἔρξαν τ' ἔπαθόν τε καὶ ὅσσ' ἐμόγησαν Ἀχαιοί.

48. For the "normalcy" of Jason's aspirations, cf. Palmer, "Apology," and Bergson, *Relativität*, p. 16 (comparing Solon frag. 1. 3–4D).

(792–96). This plot, Medea declares, will give her heroic, virtually epic status (807–10): "Let no one consider me shiftless and weak, or easy-going, but of the other sort, harsh to enemies and to friends kind. For the life of such people is best-famed (εὐκλεέστατος)." The flaw in Medea's logic is evident here: in order to be most harsh to her enemy Jason she will have to kill those who are most dear, her own children (795). What she will gain from her actions will be not κλέος so much as θρῆνος, as she herself foresees (1247–50).

The Chorus tries to dissuade her from carrying out this λόγος (811–13), by reminding Medea how much such an action will hurt her (818; cf. 856–65). Medea never denies that this plan will cause her great unhappiness. But it is the best way to give Jason pain (817). Hence she tells the Chorus that, although she can forgive their words of dissuasion (814–15), nevertheless "all λόγοι in the middle are superfluous" (819).[49]

Once she has decided that her children must die, Medea's reactions baffle those who do not know her plan. Jason wonders at her tears when he describes how their sons will one day become leading men in Corinth (922–24). The old pedagogue, reporting that the children have succeeded in their appeal to Jason's bride, is similarly puzzled by Medea's sorrowful reaction to his words: "Have I somehow erred in announcing what I thought was good news?" (1009–10). Most of all, the Messenger, reporting with terror the deaths of Creon and his daughter, is astonished by Medea's response (1129–31). But his is the only story Medea wants to hear: "You have told a most beautiful tale (κάλλιστον εἶπας μῦθον). . . . Do not rush, my dear, but tell me (λέξον): how did they perish?" (1127, 1133–34). The richly detailed description of how Creon and his daughter died is, from Medea's point of view, the happy part of her plan: she has hurt her enemies. Unfortunately it necessitates in her mind the painful part, the λόγος that makes her groan. Now she must kill her children, in order to hurt Jason and avoid her enemies' laughter, but also because if she does not kill them after their role in Creon's murder, their enemies in Corinth surely will (1240–41; cf. 781–82).

Now it is clear that Medea's own struggles, the labors she endured in bearing and raising her children, were all in vain. As she debates with herself about killing them, Medea exclaims with self-pity: "In vain (ἄλλως) then I raised you, children, in vain I toiled (ἐμόχθουν) and was tortured with labors (πόνοις), bearing the cruel pains of childbirth" (1029–31). A few minutes later the Chorus repeat this sentiment in their desperate song: "In vain (μάταν) does your toil (μόχθος) for children pass away, in vain did you bring forth your dear offspring?" (1261–62).

Vain too, in the end, is the fame that Jason acquired on his great quest. Speaking from her divine chariot like a dea ex machina, Medea foretells his death: "A base man, you will fittingly die a base death, struck on your

49. The phrase οὐν μέσῳ λόγοι here could be interpreted as "words spoken between now and the time I kill the children" or "words of compromise, in the middle between extremes." The ambivalence may well be intentional; in either interpretation, Medea declares that she is beyond the reach of λόγοι.

head by a piece of the Argo, seeing a bitter end of your marriage to me" (1386–88).[50] Here we see how completely the new λόγος Medea has constructed negates the old glorious story of the Argo. Jason will be killed by a random fragment of the ship that had brought him fame.[51] Until that dismal death, he will be able only to lament the loss he has suffered (1396, 1408–9). The struggles of both Jason and Medea have come to naught.

At the end of the drama, Jason makes one last attempt to reach Medea with his words (the chariot of Helios keeps him from touching her directly): "By the gods, let me touch the children's delicate skin" (1402–3). But Medea remains out of reach: "Impossible. You have thrown out your speech in vain" (1404 μάτην ἔπος ἔρριπται). This is her last word to Jason.

In his final words, Jason bewails the loss of his children and wishes for the undoing of what has happened (1405–14).[52] The story of Jason's great adventures—his epic-like λόγος and its intended sequel—has been turned into a tragedy by Medea. Jason has now changed his version of the Argo narrative to accord better with what Medea herself described. No longer does he think of his glorious reputation or of the divine help he received. He speaks only of the beast who betrayed her fatherland and family, killed her brother, and boarded the Argo (1329–35)—the very acts that Medea herself has explicitly regretted (cf. 166–67, 483, 502–3, 800–802). Clearly, Jason can no longer envision himself as a great hero adding a happy ending to the story of his labors. All that remains for him is the mode of speech most at home in tragedy: θρῆνος.

Like Jason, Medea too will grieve, although at least her enemy will not laugh at her (1361–62 'γγελᾶς). But her children will never smile at her again either, as she realized shortly before their death (1041 τί προσγελᾶτε τὸν πανύστατον γέλων;). After this one brief day of vengeance, Medea knows that she too has a life of θρῆνος ahead of her (1247–50).

When they first learned of Jason's betrayal and Medea's desire for justice, the Chorus voiced the hope that better songs would be sung of women.[53] It was possible to think that Medea's new λόγος would provide such a song, the praise of a heroic woman. But it did not turn out so; they now see that Medea will produce only "woes in tune with kindred-murders" (1269–70 αὐτοφόνταις ξυνῳδὰ . . . ἄχη).[54] The Chorus begins

50. On Medea as dea ex machina, cf. M. P. Cunningham, "Medea ΑΠΟ ΜΗΧΑΝΗΣ," *CP* 49 (1954): 151–60, and Knox, "*Medea*," pp. 206–10. Medea's prophetic powers are attested also in Pindar *Pyth.* 4: cf. Segal, *Pindar's Mythmaking*, p. 139. On her prophetic gift in Seneca's *Medea*, cf. K. Kerényi's foreword to *Medea: Euripides, Seneca, Corneille, Cherubini, Grillparzer, Jahnn, Anouilh, Jeffers, Braun*, ed. J. Schondorff (Munich and Vienna, 1963), p. 13.

51. Cf. Page, *Medea*, p. 179 (ad 1387), for the tradition that Jason was struck by a piece of the Argo that had been dedicated in a temple of Hera, perhaps the very temple where the children were buried.

52. Cf. Pucci, *Violence*, p. 178.

53. The heavily dactylic meter (cf. Page, "*Medea*," p. 188), a striking Ionism (422 ὑμνεῦσαι ἀπιστοσύναν), and especially the clear reference to Homeric diction in the formula ὥπασε θέσπιν ἀοιδάν (423, also in *Od.* 8. 498) all suggest that the Chorus imagines these φᾶμαι as epic songs. Page, "*Medea*," p. 104 (ad 423), however, following Verrall, believes the Ionic dialect refers to the misogynistic iambics of Archilochus, Hipponax, and Semonides.

54. Thus I differ from Knox, "*Medea*," p. 224, who says that "Euripides' play itself is the change of direction" to new legends in which women will have glory. E. A. McDermott, *Euripides' Medea: The*

to sing these laments even before any deaths have occurred: as Medea's plan is set in motion, they grieve at once for the children, the princess, Jason, and Medea herself (976–1001).

In this triumph of tragedy over epic, Medea retains the upper hand not least in her authorial role, her collusion with Euripides in creating her own new λόγος.[55] For there is reason to believe that in this play for the first time Medea herself deliberately kills her children in response to Jason's betrayal of her. In a more common version, attested for example in the *Oechaliae Halosis* (frag. 4 Allen), the children are killed by angry Corinthians after Medea poisons Creon—exactly the fate Medea several times says she wishes to avoid (781–82; cf. also 1062–63 = 1240–41, 1378–81), and also the fate Jason hastens to prevent, after learning that Creon and the princess have been murdered (1301–5).[56] In addition to changing the common version of the story, Medea as we have seen behaves as author or director of her own story, as she frequently plans, rehearses, or comments on her own speech, and directs the words and actions of other characters as well.

What significance is there in presenting Medea as the "author" of her own new myth? Recent studies, particularly by Charles Segal and Wolfgang Rösler, suggest that in the course of the fifth century increasing literacy profoundly challenged the perceived "truth" of traditional stories. The role Euripides accords to his heroine here could be seen as analogous to his own role as an innovator, almost a fictionalizer, of myth.[57] As writer of a fixed text Euripides may be even more aware than a (re)teller of tales that he can shape new versions of old stories.[58] Like his Medea

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Incarnation of Disorder (University Park and London, 1989), p. 62, also believes that Medea's crime will "intensify the . . . 'evil-sounding story' which traditionally attaches to womankind."

55. For the idea of a character in collusion with her (*sic*) author, cf. N. Felson-Rubin on Penelope in the *Odyssey:* "Penelope's Perspective: Character from Plot," in *Homer: Beyond Oral Poetry: Recent Trends in Homeric Interpretation,* ed. J. M. Bremer, I. J. F. de Jong, and J. Kalff (Amsterdam, 1987), pp. 63–64. On this idea in the *Medea,* cf. now Rehm, "*Medea,*" pp. 101, 113.

56. Recently B. Manuwald, "Der Mord an den Kindern," *WS* n.s. 17 (1983): 46–49, and A. N. Michelini, "Neophron and Euripides' *Medeia* 1056–80," *TAPA* 119 (1989): 115–35, carefully renew the argument that Euripides took the plot of his *Medea* from an earlier tragedy by Neophron. But cf. Knox, "*Medea,*" pp. 194–95, for a summary of the arguments against this minority position; also L. Séchan, "La légende de Médée," *REG* 40 (1927): 251–74; and most recently McDermott, *Euripides' Medea,* pp. 9–24. T. K. Stephanopoulos, *Umgestaltung des Mythos durch Euripides* (Athens, 1980), pp. 29–30, concludes that we simply do not know whether Euripides "invented" Medea's motivation or took it from an earlier source. On the dramatic use made of presumed innovations in the plot, cf. T. V. Buttrey, "Accident and Design in Euripides' *Medea,*" *AJP* 79 (1958): 12–16. W. Burkert, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual," *GRBS* 7 (1966): 118–19, believes that the cult of Medea's children at Corinth presupposes that Medea herself sacrificed the children. Cf. Page, "*Medea,*" pp. xxi–xxv, and Braswell, *Fourth Pythian,* pp. 6–23, for literary traces of the myth before Euripides (in Braswell, before Pindar), and Vojatzi, *Frühe Argonautenbilder,* for the iconographic evidence.

57. Cf. esp. W. Rösler, "Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität in der Antike," *Poetica* 12 (1980): 312–14, on the rapprochement between fiction and myth in tragedy.

58. In citing Euripides' apparent innovations in the *Medea,* P. D. Arnott, *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (London and New York, 1989), p. 125, suggests that rather than "deriving from Greek mythology" tragedy is "part of the continuing development of mythology." True as this may be, there was doubtless a difference in self-consciousness between an oral transmitter of myths and a writing author such as Euripides: cf. C. Segal, "Greek Tragedy: Writing, Truth, and the Representation of the Self," in *Mnemai: Classical Studies in Honor of Karl Hulley,* ed. H. Evjen (Chico, Cal., 1984), pp. 41–67. The immense cultural changes associated with increasing literacy may account for some of the "creative questioning of myth" attributed to tragedy in Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy,* p. 337.

self-consciously scripting her new λόγος, he can construct an unexpected plot, but not without realizing that past "truth" is negated by the very fact of his authorial freedom. The tragedian is suspended between myth and fiction.

In the end cruel Medea goes off alone—to Athens, the city hailed in this play as the home of the Muses, Harmony, and a gentle Aphrodite. What does this mean for Euripides' Athenian audience? Many critics of the *Medea* have seen the role of Aegeus and the praise of Athens in this play as either fond patriotism or pandering to the public on the part of Euripides.[59] I would like to suggest briefly how a reading of the *Medea* as a tragedy of discourse can open up broader possibilities than these.

In reshaping and perhaps remotivating the Medea myth in 431 B.C., Euripides gives his audience a tragedy not only with great significance for relations among individuals, but also with special relevance to their precarious times at the very outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. The *Medea* demonstrates the need for great care with language, especially among φίλοι.

But who are the φίλοι to whom this tragedy applies? In part, surely, those who are bound by marriage ties. A generation ago, E. M. Blaiklock described the play as a "domestic tragedy" with special relevance to Athenian families in which one parent was not Athenian-born, and the children therefore not citizens.[60] Recent studies by Bernard Knox, Page duBois, and Helene Foley, among others, provide a more subtle look at the complex issues of gender raised in this tragedy, particularly with regard to what Knox calls "women's wrongs."[61] Yet despite these insightful arguments, I cannot think that for many in Euripides' audience Jason and Medea would be seen primarily as mythical analogues of contemporary Athenian husbands and wives.

Critics have noticed that the anomalous relationship between Jason and Medea is described as if it were a treaty between states, complete with

59. The locus classicus for this criticism is E. Bethe, *Medea-Probleme,* Berichte über die Verhand. der Königl. Sächs. Gesell. der Wiss. zu Leipzig, Phil.-hist. Klasse, vol. 70 (Leipzig, 1918), pp. 14–16. Heath, *Poetics,* pp. 64–65, sensibly points out that it was not unlikely for tragedians to include glorification of Athens in their works, especially at a public festival that was a "show-piece" for the city. On the other hand S. Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," *JHS* 107 (1987): 58–76, drawing in particular on the work of J.-P. Vernant, maintains convincingly that one of the functions of tragedy was to confront the city with radical questions about its norms. See further McDermott, *Euripides' Medea,* pp. 102–6 and 115–17.

60. *The Male Characters of Euripides: A Study in Realism* (Wellington, 1952), p. 21. Cf. also Page, "*Medea,*" p. xiv.

61. Knox, "*Medea*"; duBois, *Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor, 1982), chap. 5: "Men and Women"; Foley, "Self," pp. 82–83. See also in general Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy,* chap. 5: "Sexuality and Difference," on "the complex problems of interpretation and reading" (p. 117) when looking for insights into sexual discourse in Greek tragedy. It is perhaps significant that Goldhill devotes little space to the *Medea* in this chapter (only pp. 115–17, on Medea's comments to the Chorus about "the lot of women"), despite his certainly correct conviction that sexuality is a topic of immense importance in Greek tragedy (cf. esp. p. 107). More explicit is the conclusion of McDermott, *Euripides' Medea,* p. 79, that the *Medea* at first appears to be a clash between "female" and "male" values, but "ends by denying that the conflict between men and women has any significance beyond the quibbling nastiness portrayed in its final scene and by indicting both sexes for the same ruthless egoism."

official libations (898).[62] If nothing else, this parallel suggests that their story might legitimately be applied to political as well as domestic situations.[63] Clearly, the painful issues in the tragedy would have a broad resonance for political φίλοι, especially at a time when old systems of alliances were conspicuously breaking down and new ones taking shape, when oaths sworn years before were being vigorously debated and their validity questioned. One has only to think of the events and debates immediately preceding the outbreak of war—events which occurred in the months before the production of the *Medea*. For these issues as they appeared to a contemporary Athenian, Thucydides is our best source.

In the preceding decades, Athens had declared herself (no doubt with some justification: cf. Hdt. 7. 139) the savior of Greeks against Persians. In 432 she was still trying to make political capital of that claim. We see this especially in the speech which, according to Thucydides, certain Athenians gave in Sparta when the Peloponnesian allies were debating the question of war against Athens. Their city's present empire, the Athenians maintain, is justified in large part by the leading role she played at Marathon, Salamis, and later, protecting other Greeks against the Persians (1. 73–74).

Now, however, some of Athens' old allies find the situation very different from what it was in the Persian Wars, or when the Thirty Years' Truce was signed in 446. That pact raises specifically the question of oaths. The Corinthians, leading proponents of the war in 432, argue at the congress in Sparta that an attack on Athens would not be unjust as far as "the gods of the oaths" are concerned, for the Athenians have already broken the treaty (Thuc. 1. 71. 5). In their rebuttal the Athenians warn the Peloponnesians not to transgress the terms of the treaty; otherwise, "calling to witness the gods of the oaths," Athens will retaliate against its unjust attackers (1. 78. 5).

To "decode" the *Medea* as a simple political allegory would be a ludicrous oversimplification, a travesty of Euripides' complex tragedy. Nevertheless, questions of change and stability, the uses and abuses of persuasion in a democracy, the need for trust in what has been sworn and a righteous lust for vengeance when that is negated—all these issues

62. Cf. Flory, "Medea's Right Hand," p. 71.

63. For the concept that generally in Greek drama "the exploration of the private aimed at an understanding of the public," cf. H. P. Foley, "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama," in Foley, ed., *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York, London, Paris, 1981), pp. 127–68, esp. pp. 138–40. DuBois, *Centaurs*, chap. 5, suggests that *Medea* uses gender in part as a metaphor for new and disturbing "differences" among fellow-Greeks at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War; cf. also McDermott, *Euripides' Medea*, pp. 116–17. For an overly simple allegorical reading of the tragedy as a veiled comment on the current political situation, particularly with regard to relations between Athens and Corinth, cf. Delebecque, *Euripide*, pp. 61–73. Cf. also the recent essay by B. Knox, "Euripides: The Poet as Prophet," in *Directions in Euripidean Criticism: A Collection of Essays*, ed. P. Burian (Durham, 1985), pp. 1–12, where *Medea* is cited as one of several tragedies that present "visions of . . . the nightmare in which the dream of the Athenian century was to end" (p. 6). On the (ab)use of political interpretations of Euripidean drama in general, cf. C. Collard, *Euripides, Greece & Rome* New Surveys in the Classics, no. 14 (Oxford, 1981), pp. 32–33, with notes.

would have obvious political and social as well as personal relevance for the contemporary audience.

In the *Medea,* Euripides illustrates how persuasion, oaths, and relationships of supplication and protection comprise a universe of human expectations for trust and open communication among φίλοι. As Thucydides so poignantly summarizes in his "generic" description of the civil war in Corcyra (3.83 οὔτε λόγος ἐχυρὸς οὔτε ὅρκος φοβερός), these speech-acts can all too easily be abused; but when they are, the consequences are not to be underestimated.

In Euripides' tragedy, what causes these consequences? In a forthcoming study, Anne Burnett eloquently describes Medea as the embodiment of a daimon brought into being when an oath is sworn, who pursues and punishes the foresworn party—an inevitable supernatural agent.[64] Burnett's argument for this fundamentally religious reading of the tragedy is impressive. But Euripides' Medea is also a very human avenger.[65] Her vengeance against Jason is intelligible but monstrous, its consequences calamitous for herself as for him. In reacting to Jason's injustice, Medea adopts the heroic goal of avoiding the laughter and scorn of her enemies; this makes her destroy what is dearest to herself as well as to Jason.[66] She can indeed go off to blessed, secure Athens in a kind of inhuman triumph, but for Medea as well as for Jason what really lies ahead is perpetual mourning. In retrospect, we can imagine that in 431 Athens would have had much to learn from such a λόγος.[67]

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64. Burnett, "Why Must Medea Kill the Children?," argues that the annihilation of Jason's children is specifically appropriate to an oath-breaker: Greek oaths typically called down a curse upon the offspring of one who would break the oath. Besides the traditional connection between offspring and oaths which Burnett demonstrates, we should note that Medea is the granddaughter of Helios, a god by whom oaths are regularly sworn both in this drama (746–47, 752) and elsewhere (e.g., *Il.* 19. 258–59). This fact makes her an especially appropriate agent to punish Jason. Against interpreting Medea as a demonic force, cf. most recently McDermott, *Euripides' Medea,* p. 51 and passim.

65. Cf. H.-J. Gehrke, "Die Griechen und die Rache: Ein Versuch in historischer Psychologie," *Saeculum* 38 (1987): 121–49, esp. pp. 128–29.

66. Medea had no legal recourse against Jason, of course—just her own plot and the assent of the gods. But this condition is only to be expected in a traditional society when an oath is broken: no early Indo-European lawcode prescribes a punishment for perjury: this matter is left to the gods (Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire,* 2:175).

67. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Universities of Basel, Berlin, Bielefeld, Munich, and Tübingen during the summer semester of 1990; I am grateful to faculty and students in those institutions for lively and helpful discussions. G. Nugent, K. Raaflaub, D. Konstan, and J. Marincola have also provided useful suggestions (some perhaps rashly ignored), as has an anonymous reader for *CP.* My thanks to these friendly critics.