HEROIC ELEMENTS IN THE *MEDEA* OF EURIPIDES

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The *Medea* has generally been regarded by critics as an innovative play and as the first of the psychological tragedies of Euripides.[1] If, however, it is approached from a different point of view and studied as a work that, while foreshadowing many of the characteristics of later Euripidean drama, also looks back to earlier "heroic" plays, such as the *Ajax* and the *Antigone* of Sophocles, then many of its puzzling features fall into clearer perspective. That Euripides was interested in the idealized concept of character and the heroic concept of virtue that so fascinated Sophocles[2] is evident in his earliest extant play, the *Alcestis*, where, if we can look beyond the problems created by the unique dramatic form, we find a portrait of traditional feminine *aretê*.[3] Seven years later, in 431 B.C., Euripides gives another portrait of a woman and a wife, one whose character and principles, however, have their closest affinities, not with Alcestis and women of her kind, but rather with the great male heroes of Greek literature such as the Homeric Achilles and the Sophoclean Ajax.

[1] E.g., D. L. Page in his edition of *Medea* (Oxford 1938) x: "... the characters of *Medea* foreshadow the later development of the poet's art. Medea herself is the first of a long line of Bad Women." And again on xi: "Nor is it only the leading characters of *Medea* who point toward the future." See also D. W. Lucas, *The Greek Tragic Poets* (London 1959[2]) 200: "The *Medea* is the first play of which this [psychological motivation] is true."

[2] C. Whitman, *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge 1951) and B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1964). My debt to Knox in this article will be obvious.

[3] D. Butaye, "L'idéal de l'aretè dans les tragédies de Sophocle," *LEC* 32 (1964) 337–55, gives a good description of the Sophoclean conception of feminine virtue. The relevance to *Alcestis* is beyond doubt.

From the very opening of the play Euripides is concerned to reveal the paradox of Medea's masculine nature as he shows her reacting to a set of circumstances that could happen only to a women. On the one hand, in the first 15 lines, the Nurse describes her as a good wife[4] who came to Greece overcome with love for Jason (8).[5] She mentions that it was under the influence of this same love that Medea "persuaded" the daughters of Pelias to kill their father (a very gentle way of describing Medea's rôle in this affair). Since then, the Nurse assures us, her mistress has won the approval of the local people of Corinth with a life in total harmony with Jason (13).

On the other hand, after presenting this picture of a woman who has allied herself completely to the interests of her husband, the Nurse continues her speech with a description of Medea's present condition and her language becomes loaded with highly emotional words, many of them of great significance in the "heroic" vocabulary familiar to us from the plays of Sophocles.

In line 16 the Nurse describes Medea's state of mind by saying that what was once dear to her (*τὰ φίλτατα*) is now alien or hateful (*ἐχθρά*).[6] She makes her own attitude clear by saying that Jason has betrayed (17) her mistress by "bedding down" (18) with a royal bride. He has thus dishonoured her (20) and treated her unjustly (26). As a result Medea is directing cries of outraged complaint to the gods at the unequal "return" (23)[7] she has received from him. No reference is made, it should be noticed, to a broken heart. Although the Nurse gives a touching account of Medea's reaction to Jason's treatment (24–33), she

[4] The Nurse stresses the legitimacy of the relationship of Medea and Jason in lines 14–15. She also leaves no doubts about the treachery of Jason's treatment of Medea.

[5] Note the early appearance of *θυμός*; here it is used in a conventional sense of the heart as the centre of the emotions. The same word, in an expanded sense, acquires great significance in the course of the play. See below, note 19.

[6] The significance of these words specifically in certain plays of Euripides, including *Medea*, has been treated by James Tyler, *Philia and Echthra in Euripides*, Diss. Cornell Univ. 1968 (Ann Arbor Microfilm 69–13, 044). See also Knox 80 ff., where he discusses these concepts with relation to *Antigone*. Page's note on line 16 seems to miss the significance of *φίλτατα*.

[7] For a discussion of the relationships and obligations of *philoi* and *echthroi*, see Lionel Pearson, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece* (Stanford 1962) 136 ff. and A. W. H. Adkin's comments thereon in "Values in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Hercules Furens*," *CQ* 16 (1966) 193 ff.

is not herself deceived by this pathetic behaviour,[8] for her long experience of her mistress has taught her that she is an extraordinary woman (44) who cannot be expected to react as other women might react in these circumstances.

The Nurse's thoughts then jump with unexpected suddenness to the children (36)[9] and to Medea's ominous attitude toward them. The combination of this line with the following where she describes herself as afraid lest Medea be planning something new leads one without any logical reason to associate that fear with the children. Medea herself has not yet thought of working out her vengeance through the children and so the Nurse's premonition is truly uncanny, but her summing up of Medea's character—that it is not easy to be a successful opponent of hers (44–45)—is nonetheless convincing and gives an unmistakable clue to the approach that Euripides will take to Medea's character.[10] Medea feels keenly any threats to her status. The Nurse's insight here, plus the prominent use in these early lines of words like ἠτιμασμένη (20), ἠδικημένη (26), ἀτιμάσας (33), prepares us for a portrayal of Medea's character the key to which is not rejected love and jealousy, but a sense of slighted honour and a fear of loss of respect and status. Such a character is not, of course, an unusual type in Greek literature: the whole of the *Iliad* revolves around the reaction of Achilles to an insult to his honour; in tragedy probably the most notable example is

[8] It is significant that at this point the Nurse compares Medea to a rock and to the sea, both of them elements used in Greek poetry to symbolize the quality of intransigency. Page remarks on the figurative implications of "rock" and "sea," saying that they "represent *inflexibility* or *firmness*, especially with the implication of *cruelty*," but several of the examples he cites do not, in my opinion, support this interpretation. Soph. *OT* 334, Aes. *PV* 244 (*sic* for 242), *PV* 1033 (*sic* for 1001), Eur. *HF* 1397, *Andr.* 537–38 all use "rock" or "sea" primarily as examples of inanimate objects or forces *lacking* any feeling or sensibility. Our instance here can also be interpreted in this straightforward way—Medea does not *hear* what her friends are saying to her. However, I think Page is right in his view that there are more subtle overtones in this passage. Eur. *Hipp.* 304–05 is the example he cites that might be relevant here; Phaedra is described as αὐθαδεστέρα θαλάσσης which could mean "more relentless than the sea."

[9] A rather heavy-handed instance of foreshadowing. It must be remembered, however, that Euripides was dealing with a legend still in a fluid state, as Page makes clear (xxi ff.). The portrayal of Medea as the jealous wife who kills her own children out of vengeance for her husband's betrayal became standard only after Euripides' play. See D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto 1967) 185 f.

[10] I omit lines 38–43 from consideration here, not because they are inharmonious with my interpretation of the play (they are not), but because I agree with Page and others who consider them suspect.

the Sophoclean Ajax who cares not a whit for the hideous crime he has almost perpetrated but only for his tarnished prestige, his loss of *timê*. The value system that produced such heroes has been described in detail by Adkins,[11] and its influence on the tragedies of Sophocles has been treated by Knox,[12] but, although traditional "heroic" elements in *Medea* have been noted by various commentators,[13] no systematic attempt that I know of has been made to study it as an heroic play of the Sophoclean type.[14] The neglect of this approach to Medea's character is perhaps understandable; Greek heroes are men and the system of heroic values evolved as a male ethic based on the idealization of the successful warrior whose bravery and physical prowess in battle and athletics and whose persuasive powers in debate enabled him to impose his will on lesser men and thence to win lasting renown. As long as a man could continue to control other men and events by the force of his might and personality he was described as *agathos* and was considered to have *aretê*. Since the leisure and opportunity to develop the necessary skills in battle and debate were dependent to a large extent upon wealth, something generally inherited, the potential for *aretê* also came to be considered hereditary. But the most essential factor in identifying a man with *aretê*, as Adkins points out (37), is success. Success, along with the honour, status and renown that accompany it, is seen as the mark of the *agathos*; failure, the disgrace and ridicule associated with it, are, on the other hand, most to be feared.

The normal life of a woman was ill suited to such an ethic and a separate set of values had to be developed that allowed women to win approval and praise for what was essentially a passive existence. If a man was expected to shape events and influence people by aggressive

[11] A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford 1960); see especially Chap. 3.

[12] In the work cited above.

[13] E.g., Page's commentary. But see xvii where he calls the story "unpleasant and unheroic . . . in theme and treatment."

[14] Interestingly enough Knox himself notes (3) that "The *Medea*, in fact, with its Sophoclean concentration, is unusual for Euripides." He considers *Medea* as "a leaf from the Sophoclean book . . . in which the central character does dominate the action," but he does not develop the idea of the heroic calibre of Medea herself, nor should one expect him to in this particular book. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (New York 1954) 197, on the other hand, writes: "The *Medea* diverges from the Sophoclean pattern because Euripides' way of thinking was different."

action, then a woman was expected to endure with patience and loyalty whatever was inflicted on her by her legitimate superiors. She was not expected to cope with crises, only to survive them. The archetype of this system was, obviously, Penelope.

In the *Ajax*, Sophocles' earliest extant play, we are given a vivid picture of an *agathos* and are shown the dilemma of a hero who has lost his claim to *aretê* since he has failed to carry out his plan for vengeance against those who have slighted him. The minor character Tecmessa, Ajax' captive consort, gives us a picture of a matching female ideal, a woman who supports her husband regardless of how he treats her, whose chief concern is for her son and who, in general, accepts her lot in life. Sophocles' next extant play, the *Antigone*, again presents us with these two opposing approaches to life, male activeness versus female passiveness. But here he clouds the issue somewhat, at least for modern audiences, by embodying both ideals in women, Ismene reacting to her situation as a model woman was expected to and Antigone reacting according to the aggressive values of the male.[15]

Sophocles seems to have been fascinated by the theme of *aretê*, both the male variety and, to a lesser extent, the female, for he continued to examine it in play after play as he presented larger-than-life characters working out their relationship to their fates in accordance with this heroic value system. It would not be surprising, then, to find that Euripides, too, reflects this interest, and particularly in his earlier plays where the influence of Sophocles might be stronger than in later works. We have already noted that *Alcestis* has much to say about the concept of *aretê*, but *Medea* takes up this theme and develops it in a much more striking manner. Here Euripides presents his vision of a woman who, like Antigone, lives in accordance with a male system of values. Antigone has a positive aim in life—to meet her destiny in a way that will win her glory and honour. Medea has a negative aim inspired by the same values, namely, not to lose the honour she had, not to be disgraced and revealed as helpless in the course of events. To

[15] See Knox in his analyses of the plays in the work cited above; M. Shaw, "The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama," *CP* 70 (1975) 255–66; my article, "The Daughter of Oedipus," in *Serta Turyniana* (Urbana 1974) 239–67.

achieve her aim Antigone buries her brother in defiance of Creon's edict; her act arouses sympathy in any audience because it is fundamentally one of human decency and, whether or not we understand or accept her reasons for doing it, we can still sympathize with the act itself and judge it moral. In contrast, what Medea decides to do to achieve her goal involves an act both horrifying and immoral.[16] Thus we are confronted with one of the major problems in any critical treatment of the *Medea*—our horror at her deed interferes with our understanding of her motivation. Actually Medea is probably the most genuinely "heroic" figure on the Greek stage in that she shows greater determination in the achievement of her ends and makes greater sacrifices to her honour than does any other tragic figure: Ajax sacrifices his life as does Antigone, Oedipus sacrifices his eyes and his home, Heracles his humanity, Philoctetes his revenge, but Medea sacrifices her own children.[17]

The question we ask, then, is the following: can a detailed study of the *Medea* construed as an heroic play in the manner of Sophocles provide solutions to some of the dilemmas of interpretation that have haunted critics of the play through the ages?

We have seen that in the first 45 lines the Nurse has suggested two images of Medea: the outward Medea who is at that moment reacting to rejection by her husband ostensibly in the conventional passive or "female" manner and the other Medea of the Nurse's own experience who is δεινή (44)[18] and who does not suffer defeat easily. In her exchange with the Tutor the Nurse continues to reinforce her earlier association of the welfare of the children and Medea's possible reactions to the situation: "Keep the children isolated and don't go near their mother," she cautions, while advising him that Medea is "in ill hum-

[16] It was not an act unheard of in Greek mythology, however; Procne killed her son Itys to punish her husband and added an extra gruesome touch by serving up his body at the dinner table. Fragments of a play on this theme have been attributed variously to Aeschylus or Sophocles; see A. Wartelle, *Histoire du Texte d'Eschyle* (Paris 1971) 28–29.

[17] Quite conceivably, by the very exaggeration of Medea's heroic qualities, Euripides is in fact criticising the system of values that produced such results.

[18] Knox 23: "There is one word that is applied to them all [the heroic figures in the plays of Sophocles] to describe their character and their action; δεινός, 'strange, dreadful, terrible.'" I should add "awesome" and "extraordinary" to Knox' list of meanings.

our."[19] The Nurse then says that she has seen Medea "glowering like a bull" (92) and once again we find that she has used language frequently found in association with the Sophoclean hero who is conventionally compared to wild animals either directly or, as here, metaphorically.[20] "And she will not cease from her wrath" (χόλου, 94), a word used to denote the wrath or passionate anger of the Sophoclean hero,[21] that arouses also strong reminiscences of the language Homer applied to Achilles.[22] This speech, immediately before Medea's first outcry, ends significantly with "may she do harm to foes, not to friends" (95), reiterating the opposition of *echthros* and *philos* noted earlier as one of the main motifs of the play.

The opposition in heroic terms of these two concepts was emphasized also by Sophocles in the *Antigone* and, of course, in the *Ajax*. It was the duty of a hero to benefit those connected to him by blood or friendship, that is, his *philoi*, and to harm his foes or *echthroi*. Jason and Medea, as husband and wife, should be *philoi*, but this natural relationship has become perverted by Jason's treachery and as a result "the most intimate relationships are diseased" (16). This theme of the unnatural or perverted character of basic human relationships pervades the whole play: a husband rejects as an enemy the wife he should regard as his intimate associate, and a mother kills, as if they were foes, the children she should in the natural order of things protect.

The mood and the approach that Euripides will develop in the play are thus already strongly suggested by the time Medea's cry provokes the Nurse to hurry the children away, on the grounds that their mother "is working up her emotions . . . her wrath" (99). She goes

[19] δυσθυμουμένῃ (91), a rare word in this form and, indeed, unique in extant tragedy. The root-word is, of course, θυμός, an important word in the *Medea* and one that Knox 29 has shown is a key word for the Sophoclean hero. It indicates a "passionate intensity" that overrides reason and it is the term used by Medea in her famous statement of line 1079: "My passionate nature (θυμός) is stronger than my reasoned counsels (βουλευμάτων)."

[20] Knox 42 ff. H. Musurillo, "Euripides' *Medea*: a Reconsideration," *AJP* 87 (1966) 68, discusses the animal imagery in the *Medea* but sees it as Euripides' attempt to associate Medea with a monster.

[21] Knox 21, 51.

[22] E.g., *Il.* 1.283, 9.260.

on to say, "Beware of her savage nature (ἄγριον ἦθος, 103) and the hateful disposition of her unrelenting (αὐθάδους, 104) mind."[23] In line 108 the Nurse again refers to θυμός when she expresses her fear that Medea "soon will kindle the cloud of lament with a greater passion" and then she describes Medea's soul with a very striking word, μεγαλόσπλαγχνος (109),[24] which probably denotes a great capacity for emotions, and further by δυσκατάπαυστος (translated as "hard to check" by Page), which seems to stress the unyielding quality of Medea's character.

Medea's second outburst refers to her children as cursed (112), as if she accepts the traditional theory of inherited character. They are, after all, the offspring of a hateful (στυγερᾶς, 113) mother and so can look forward in life to nothing worthwhile. She hopes that they may perish along with their father. The Nurse misses Medea's point about the mother but she catches the reference to Jason. The children, in her view, do not participate in their father's guilt and Medea should not regard them as alien to her (117) just because their father has become an *echthros*. This leads her to comment on the extraordinary qualities of spirit of those who rule (119),[25] for such people are accustomed to power and do not lightly give up their wrath (121).

The Chorus make their sympathy for Medea immediately clear and, when they hear of her plight, urge her not to be disturbed by her husband's defection (156 f.). These women understand her despair and are afraid that she will harm herself either by wasting away or by actually taking her own life in grief. But while they offer comfort, they do not suggest that she will be able to protect her own interests; Zeus, they say (158), will support her cause. Even the Nurse momentarily acquiesces in their image of Medea as the passive and suffering woman, helplessly wasting away.

Medea, for her part, although she indulges in self-pity, insists here as

[23] Knox (pp. 23, 42 f., 51) points out how commonly ἄγριος occurs in descriptions of the heroic character. Note also *Il.* 9.629. αὐθάδης and related words are not specifically mentioned by Knox, but the meaning is clearly consistent with heroic inflexibility; cf. Soph. *OT* 549, Eur. *El.* 1117, Aes. *PV* 907.

[24] Page calls its use here in poetic context "extremely venturesome." (Normally it is a medical term signifying someone "with enlarged abdomen.")

[25] τυράννων is an unexpected word here, but, since the Nurse must be including Medea, the term seems to require a general translation.

elsewhere that the insult has been to her honour, not to her heart. She does not call on the gods to witness that Jason has broken her heart, but rather that he has broken his oaths. She wants him and his new bride utterly destroyed because they have treated her unjustly (165). The violence of her language and her almost casual reference to the murder of her brother[26] do not support the Chorus' image of her as a helpless female creature abandoned by a heartless, promiscuous male (155 f.). The Nurse is again brought to remark that her mistress is no shrinking violet and that her anger (172) will not be easily brought to an end.

After this powerful speech the Chorus seem to catch some of the Nurse's apprehension and urge her to bring the lady out so that they may soothe her and assure her of their friendship in the hope that she will put aside her anger (176). They stress their friendship and express their fear that she may indeed maltreat those within, an ambiguous statement that includes Medea herself. When the Nurse agrees to try to persuade Medea to come out and to talk with the Chorus, she again uses the imagery of the wild beast, repeating (*ἀποταυροῦται*) the very root verb that she had used earlier (92)[27] as well as comparing Medea, in a somewhat startling mixed metaphor, to a lioness with cubs.[28] The Chorus then announce the entrance of Medea herself after once again clearly stating their support of her cause; she calls on the gods, the women say, as a victim of injustice, a woman betrayed by an evil husband (206–07).

And now at last, after this lengthy preparation, Euripides shows us the public Medea, a woman very different from the passionate and outraged private Medea revealed in the earlier offstage introduction. Whatever we expected after that earlier scene, it was probably not this rational and controlled creature who appears before us now.[29]

[26] Medea describes that murder, however, as something done "shamefully" (*αἰσχρῶς*, 167), the most common term in the vocabulary of the heroic system of values to denote denigration of an act (Adkins 33).

[27] Knox 42ff.

[28] The lioness with cubs is perhaps introduced to remind us of the savage determination of the mother beast in defence of her young, but the comparison seems curiously inappropriate here since the lioness uses all her strength and wiles to protect her offspring whereas Medea will use all hers to destroy her children.

[29] G. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 151, has an excellent description of the effect of this entrance.

The speech that she makes at this point sometimes produces a less forceful impression in translations than it ought because of what seems to be a misinterpretation of σεμνούς (216) as "proud" or "haughty."[30] This is a possible meaning, to be sure, but here it seems to mean rather "worthy of respect." Medea is saying that she has come out to face the public because she knows many people who deserve respect, both in private and in public, but some of them because of their reticence, their failure to explain themselves (ἀφ' ἡσύχου ποδός, 217), acquire a bad reputation for their lack of concern (ῥᾳθυμίαν, 218). There is no justice, she continues, in the judgement of mortals for, when they have in no way been wronged, they are able to hate someone on sight, before they clearly understand his σπλάγχνον (220), that is, his inner nature or disposition.[31] Strangers, of course, have no choice but to explain themselves to the public, but even a citizen is blameworthy in Medea's view if he allows himself to become distasteful to his fellow citizens because he is too stubborn to clear away misconceptions about himself (224).

After these preliminary remarks Medea undertakes to reveal her reaction to Jason's entirely unexpected treatment of her: it has destroyed her life (226).[32] She wishes to die, for her husband has turned out to be "the basest of men" (229).[33] The next section of her speech, where she describes the exploitation of women, displays a fine sense of practical psychology on Medea's part. In fact, her situation never was the same as that of the average woman;[34] her husband owed his very survival to her and she had gone off with him (to put it mildly) against her family's wishes. But she chooses deliberately to identify herself here with the common lot of women, that most wretched breed (231). We notice, however, that even in this speech she is very conscious of

[30] The use of σεμνός in its various senses is well documented, but for a relevant example of its use (with favourable connotations) by Euripides to describe a mortal, cf. *Hipp.* 1364. For a full discussion of these controversial lines 214–18, see Kenneth J. Reckford, "Medea's First Exit," *TAPA* 99 (1968) 329–59.

[31] A verbal echo of that earlier striking use of μεγαλόσπλαγχος (109).

[32] Emphatically not "broken my heart," as it is sometimes translated, e.g., Rex Warner in Grene and Lattimore's Chicago series and Hadas and MacLean in their Bantam translation.

[33] See Page's commentary; lines 228–29, crucial to Medea's argument, are very problematical.

[34] P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (Cambridge 1975) 109, makes this same point.

heroic values. A "base" husband or a "noble" one (235–36) is the greatest danger; separations are not a matter of good repute (236); with a good husband life is ζηλωτός (243), that is, "enviable" in the opinion of others. For Medea, success clearly means status and, without that status or the esteem of others, she prefers death (243).

A few lines further on she describes a life of risk as one to be valued and insists, in her famous remark on childbearing (250–51), that the life of women does include this element of danger and action necessary to the male code of heroic values. But these references to male values are almost unconscious on her part and what she stresses here is her own isolation from country and family that permits her to be insulted (255) by her husband. She even goes so far as to mention in this regard that she has no mother, no *brother*, no relative with whom to take shelter in this disaster. Finally, after so cleverly managing the sympathies of her audience, Medea slips in her little request, almost as a mere afterthought. Silence is what she asks from the Chorus, only silence in case some method be found for exacting a penalty from her husband in return for these evils (261 and 263). To justify the inconsistency of this request with the idea of woman as a victim of circumstances that she has just finished presenting, she explains: "A woman is a fearful creature and cowardly when faced with physical strength and armed encounter, but when she is wronged in a sexual relationship, no mind is bloodier" (263 ff.).

Not surprisingly the Chorus are completely taken in by this cunning speech and immediately agree to keep silence, "for justly will you exact a penalty from your husband, Medea" (267).

In the subsequent scene with Creon Medea shows as much skill at manipulating others as she showed in the previous scene with the Chorus. Just as she cleverly exploits the resentments of the women and persuades them to identify her own situation with the unhappy lot of women in general, so she is quick to find Creon's vulnerable spot, his feelings as a parent, and to associate her situation as a parent with his. Creon has dire misgivings about Medea and in his opening line describes her as "sullen" and "enraged with her husband" (271): an unflattering description completely devoid of sympathy. But she reminds him immediately that she is a poor, helpless female (277) whose foes have cut off every avenue of escape for her; she can only

wonder why he is banishing her from the land. Creon answers quite simply that he is afraid she may do some irremediable harm to his child. He obviously does not put much faith in the image of the suffering and helpless woman that Medea has been trying to project. He knows that she is clever, knowledgeable in many evil arts, and distressed at the loss of her husband's "love," if this word can be used to translate λέκτρων (286). He has heard of her threats to himself, Jason, and the bride. She assures Creon, however, that she is not in a position to harm him, and asks what injustice he has done her that should make him afraid. It is her husband whom she hates. As for Creon, let him go ahead with the marriage, let him enjoy success. To these good wishes, she adds her own request that Creon allow her to stay in Corinth. "We shall be silent," she says, "even though wronged, defeated by our betters" (314–15). "Defeated" should remind us of the Nurse's earlier words, that Medea does not bear defeat easily (44–45).

By putting to Creon first a request she knows he cannot grant, and then by pretending to be very upset when he refuses, Medea prepares the ground for a much smaller request that he could hardly be so ungracious as to refuse, especially since she appeals to his feelings as a parent. He knows he is making a mistake, but she has manoeuvred him into a position where it would seem unreasonable of him not to grant so small a favour, permission to remain in Corinth for only one day more. As Creon departs, the Chorus, still not understanding Medea's deeper purposes, break out in teary sympathy.

The dramatic impact of this moment in the play can hardly be overestimated: Euripides tears the veil from his Medea and we see her, clearly now for the first time, in full heroic stature, a veritable Achilles or an Ajax, filled with an unrelenting resolve to destroy her enemies and to vindicate her own honour. Never, she avows, with chilling control, would she have stooped to coaxing favours had she not a plan in mind. Creon had been fool enough to give her the one day she needed to kill three of her enemies—the father (what a return to make for Creon's kindness!), the bride, and last, but most important, her own husband.[35]

[35] Note the emphasis on ἐμόν (375).

This scene alone should be enough to give pause to those critics[36] who talk about the "femininity" of Medea and who attribute her reactions to jealousy, thwarted love and other motivations that are part and parcel of popular conceptions of the "female character" but that have little to do with the heroine as Euripides presents her. Contrast the behaviour of Deianeira in the *Trachinian Women*: she does not lash out against Heracles when he betrays her with Iolê but rather she seeks to regain his love and hence her own status as his wife. Medea's reaction, on the other hand, is not typically or ideally feminine at all: it is masculine.

However, although Medea may have the soul of a man, she nonetheless has the body of a woman. Physical prowess, skill in battle and forcefulness in debate are the qualities by which the ancient hero achieved his prominence, imposed his will on others, and fulfilled the traditional injunction "to do good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies." Medea has shown that she is indeed outstanding in the art of verbal persuasion, but physical prowess and skill in battle are another matter. A woman imbued with the values of the heroic male had to compensate for a deficiency in physical strength and training in some way. In their respective plays about Electra Sophocles and Euripides both show such a woman solving this problem by using the physical strength of a male "instrument." In *Antigone* Sophocles so contrives it that Antigone's realization of her heroic nature is achieved by violence against herself, which she can bring about by verbally manipulating the other characters. The burial itself, necessary to her purposes, is presented as ritual, something she can do physically on her own. But in *Medea* Euripides chose another device by means of which his heroine could compensate for her lack of physical strength, and perhaps the very possibility of employing this device was one of the reasons that attracted him to the legend of Medea for tragic

[36] See, for example, Herbert Musurillo's article already cited, 73: "For Euripides she is pure woman, but woman at the mercy of her own destructive passions, wounded in the weakest and most sensitive part of her nature." Musurillo does recognize, however, that in the end "there is a reversal of roles: it is the man who is weak, the woman strong . . . ." See also Hermann Rohdich, *Die Euripideische Tragödie* (Heidelberg 1968), in his chapter on *Medea* (44–70) where he describes the heroine primarily not just as "eine Frau" but as "die Frau überhaupt."

presentation. At first, Medea does consider going into the palace and slaying her foes with the sword (379–80), as Ajax certainly might have done in such a situation, but she is nervous about this direct approach because she fears she may not be able to execute the slaughter successfully. And it is success that counts in the heroic outlook; a token gesture that ended in failure would bring no satisfaction to her, only defeat and ridicule (383). She decides, therefore, to use that formidable substitute for physical strength that she possesses—her magical powers (385).[37] Now she can be certain of success.

The problem of Medea's escape still remained for the dramatist to solve. He might well have preferred to portray his heroine perishing in the flames of the palace. Such a spectacular ending would have suited his purposes very well, and Medea does in fact declare her willingness to die in the execution of her plans, to go to "the utmost limit of daring" (394).[38] But here Euripides is caught by the exigencies of the legend itself, which might be flexible in some matters (such as the murder of her children) but which prevented him from having her die in Corinth. His audience knew that she had *not* perished in Corinth and that she had left there eventually to arrive in Athens. Of course, the means to escape to Athens or wherever she wanted were always in Medea's magical power, but Euripides portrays her as concerned about where she will go (386) largely because he can in that way prepare the audience for the Aegeus-episode, the real purpose of which is not so much to supply Medea with a place of refuge as to suggest to her an ultimate refinement in heroic vengeance. In her central speech (364–409) she has not yet moved beyond the rather banal plan of murdering her foes. She refers to this plan twice, in 374–75 where she clearly states that she will kill three of her foes and in 391 where she says that, if she can solve the problem of a place of refuge, she will pursue the slaughter she is planning. It is not until she talks with Aegeus that she realizes she can do better than just kill Jason; she can,

[37] Magical power rather than race, as Page asserts (xix–xxi), is the attribute of Medea that allows Euripides to develop the plot and characterization as he does. Although Euripides exploits the barbarian origins of Medea to enhance his portrayal of her as a tragic heroine, her magic power provides Medea with the capacity for vengeance that this play requires.

[38] See Knox (23, 46) for the significance of τόλμα and its cognates.

by killing his children,[39] impose on him a slow and prolonged retribution more in accord with his insult to her honour.

For the moment, however, Medea is thinking in terms of murdering her foes, just as Ajax before her and for the same reasons. She has been slighted by Jason and consequently by Creon and his daughter just as Ajax was slighted by the Greeks; she must vindicate her honour or people might think it possible to slight Medea with impunity (398). Again and again throughout the play she professes her adherence to the honour code (e.g., 383, 398, 404, 782, 797, 807, 1049, 1362), making it all the more surprising that so little attention has been paid to this aspect of her character.[40] At this point she commits herself utterly to vengeance (403) and a testing of her courage. It is inappropriate for a woman of her distinguished ancestry to incur ridicule over the union of Jason with the family of Sisyphus.[41] Women, she admits, are by nature without the resources to perform deeds of physical valour (ἐσθλ', 408),[42] but they do have the capacity to be the cleverest contrivers of all evils (409).

The first strophe and antistrophe of the Choral Ode that follows this magnificent speech by Medea show that the Chorus have understood what she means and for a moment feel a sense almost of exultation. The world will be turned upside down—again the theme of the natural order disturbed; women will practise male morality, they will no longer be the subject of malicious talk but will achieve glory (414). Their mood is not sustained, however, for they do not really believe

[39] The subtle refinement of the heroic system here bears some comparison with Sophocles' treatment of Oedipus. Suicide would have been consistent with Oedipus' heroic self-concept, as it was for that of Ajax, but Sophocles uses the restriction imposed by the legend of Oedipus' survival to great advantage to present a hero who, in the end, chooses a punishment worse than death.

[40] See Page xvii: "The story, unpleasant and unheroic as it is in theme and treatment . . ." Page's introduction shows little appreciation of the influence of heroic values on the plot and characterization. As mentioned earlier he tries to explain Medea and what she does by the fact that she is Oriental. Although Euripides does use her alien origins to stress her tragic isolation, he in fact has portrayed her as totally Greek in her desire to punish her enemies and in her obsession with her own status.

[41] Cf. Eur. *IA* 1362 and Soph. *Phil.* 417 for the disparaging connotation of the reference to Sisyphus as an ancestor.

[42] See Adkins 32; this word, apparently, has no moral connotation in the heroic vocabulary, but cf. Soph. *OC* 782, where it is clearly contrasted with κακά.

that Medea will succeed; they think she will be banished in dishonour (438) and that in fact she is wretched (437) and unfortunate (442).

When Jason enters the scene he immediately shows himself familiar through past experience with Medea's fierce[43] wrath and considers it an unmitigated bother (447). Unlike the Nurse, however, Jason is not alerted by this past experience to the real danger of Medea's character. Incomprehensibly, despite her record of wilfulness, murder, and criminality, he seems to regard her talk as empty (450) and foolish (457) and he is not unduly alarmed that she is calling him the basest of men (452). He still regards her as one of his *philoi* and someone whose interests he looks after as he should. She may reject him with hatred, but he is not going to reject her. This refusal of his to consider her a serious enemy reveals his contempt for her; in terms of heroic values he does not consider her a worthy opponent.

Medea's answering speech is again full of heroic language and values. She calls Jason παγκάκιστε (465) because it is the strongest word she can use against his lack of manliness (466). He has come to her although he is now her *echthros* (467). His willingness to face a former *philos* after treating her unworthily might seem like the boldness and daring (469) of a hero but in fact it is not—it is rather a sign of his shamelessness (472), a quality that she describes as the greatest of all mankind's illnesses. In her argument (474–515) she does not once mention love or a broken heart. Her case is couched entirely in terms of his debt to her and the return that he has made. She lists the benefits she has conferred on him, benefits that obligate him to honour her and to treat her as his *philos*.[44] The only reference she makes to her feelings for him occurs in the somewhat cynical remark in 485 where she says that she followed Jason with zealousness rather than with wisdom. It is with his failure to honour the obligations of a *philos* and his breaking of oaths that she reproaches him. She even goes so far as to say that this too would have been understandable if she had not given him children, that is, if *she* had not fulfilled *her* obligations to him as a wife. After all, if "love" were the issue in Medea's mind, whether or not she had produced children would be quite irrelevant. Notice, too, that when she speaks of physical

[43] Cf. the use of similar words such as ἄγριος and ὠμός.

[44] See note 7.

contact with Jason, it is not of the contacts of lovers at all but those of a suppliant; he took her by her right hand, he clung to her knees, but he was a base man, not a noble man, as she thought, and so she was disappointed in her expectations (496 ff.). She continues with a series of questions designed to reveal still more how shameful (*αἰσχίων*, 501) he is. As a result of conferring a favour on Jason (508), she has now become an enemy to her proper friends, that is, her family, and those whom she did not have to treat badly are now her foes (507–08). Jason's return for all this, she says with sarcasm, has been to make her blessed (509) among the mass of Greek women, thus anticipating his main argument. She closes then with the commonplace wish that there were some sure mark by which one could recognize the base man (518).

Jason answers Medea's charges on her own terms. He understands the values she respects, but he denies that she has applied those values accurately in assessing their situation. Despite the acts that Jason has seen Medea capable of in their experience together, he is astonishingly contemptuous of her, especially at the beginning of his speech. He talks about her "wearisome chatter" (525) just as if he had not seen her chop her brother into pieces. But that merely reveals his lack of judgement; his main argument proceeds from 526. He admits her point about the favour she had bestowed on him, but maintains that she acted, not of her own will, but under the direction of Kypris, his real saviour; in short, he views Medea as a passive instrument of the goddess. Her subtle mind (529) he also acknowledges, but adds that it was Eros who forced her to use that mind to save him. If he does owe her anything for her help, he feels he has more than repaid it by bringing her to Greece, by teaching her the rule of law instead of the rule of might, and lastly by making her cleverness known among all the Greeks. "You acquired a reputation," he says (540); "If you were living at the ends of the earth, there would be no talk of you." He shows here that he is clearly aware of what Medea values in life; she treasures fame and glory, just as he does himself (542–44). Fame is the highest reward available for a Greek hero, and Jason feels that, by making fame available to Medea, he has paid her in full for her help in his enterprises. The point he fails to deal with here is that he has by his recent actions brought her ill-fame since he has made her appear weak

and vulnerable, and hence open to ridicule. He then goes on to explain what Medea has interpreted as the act of an *echthros*, namely his royal marriage, as in fact the act of a true *philos* done in the interests of those most intimately connected to him, his wife and his children. Again he makes this argument within the framework of heroic values. One cannot be truly noble without money; if they are to live in noble fashion, "a matter of the greatest importance" (559), and he is to rear his children in a manner worthy of his house, he must make this marriage. He assures her that she would accept this reasoning as valid and commend him for his careful planning if she were not jealous. Twice during this speech he refers in a sneering manner to her pique at being replaced in the marriage bed, using a particularly unpleasant word in both cases (555 and 568). He also reminds us of something Medea herself had said earlier (241–43) about women thinking everything revolved around marriage, although he makes his generalization a bit more blunt by using λέχος with its connotation of the physical side of marriage, whereas she had used language less specific. In the name of marriage, he says, women turn what is best and most noble into what is most inimical (572). Like Medea he ends his presentation with a commonplace, the desire that children could be conceived without the use of women, for without women there would be no evil for mankind.

The tone of the rest of the exchange degenerates from the legalistic approach of their main debate into the bitterness of a domestic quarrel, but still they continue to talk to a large extent in terms of heroic values. In a backhanded way Medea admits the force of Jason's arguments, but says that they are effective only because he uses all his skill in speaking to cover up the real nature of his acts. Had he truly wished to benefit his family by the royal marriage, he would have consulted with her and have convinced her that it was in the interests of the family. Here she is clearly speaking not out of jealousy, but in terms of the honour code in defence of her status and heroic self-image.

On this level, however, Jason refuses to take Medea seriously; he will not deal with her on equal terms or regard her as capable of disinterested action. He points out that even now, when the marriage with the princess is an accomplished fact, even now she cannot endure to abandon her mighty wrath (590). His language here is so charged

with heroic connotations that we suspect he is deliberately mocking her pretensions. Medea in turn accuses him of acting as he has because his foreign match, as she calls herself, is not something that brings him glory (*οὐκ εὔδοξον*, 592) in old age.[45]

Jason reiterates that it is not the princess herself who has caused him to enter this marriage, but only the advantages that marriage with her conveys to his family. Medea throws this back in his face with the ironic hope that she may never have a prosperous life that is full of grief nor a wealth that chafes (599) her mind. With the use of *κνίζοι* she maliciously repeats the very verb Jason had previously used to describe her jealously (555, 568). The paradoxical form of her wish is picked up by Jason who says that she should wish that what is good (601), in the full sense of what is morally good and what is expedient, may never seem to her a matter for grief and that when she is fortunate she should not consider herself unfortunate. "Continue with your insults" (603), retorts Medea, using a verb that is significant in the vocabulary of a Greek hero. But Jason refuses to take warning or to recognize the danger in Medea. He admits her passion (615) and her wilfulness (621), but she is, after all, a woman. So confident is he, in fact, that he feels he can afford to play the gentleman to the hilt and continues to urge her to be practical while offering his help to her, which she rejects contemptuously as worthless since it comes from a base man (618). He leaves the scene with a pious assertion that he has done what he can for her and the children; she goes off with a nasty reference to his lust for his new bride and tells him to "play the bridegroom" (625) with the ominous hint that he will regret this marriage.

In general, critics have shown a curious readiness to believe the charges that Jason and Medea hurl against one another. Jason has said that Medea is motivated by jealousy and Medea has said that Jason is motivated by lust. Surely we are not, however, to take at face value what two people full of hate say about each other and at the same time refuse to accept or consider what they say about themselves! Medea claims that she could have accepted Jason's marriage for

[45] *οὐκ εὔδοξον*, despite its proximity to *γῆρας*, is more aptly taken with *λέχος*, as Page maintains. The implication thus is that the marriage, although not a credit to him, was tolerable as long as Medea was young. Nonetheless, as the lines are read, some of the effect of *εὔδοξον* is bound to cling to *γῆρας* and the ambiguity is probably quite deliberate.

practical reasons if he had discussed his plans with her and had not made a public fool of her. For his part, Jason says that he did not marry the princess because he was tired of Medea and lusted after a new and younger woman; he married her so that his family might benefit from her wealth and influential connections. And yet too often Medea is seen only as a jealous wife seeking revenge and Jason as the archetype of a hypocritical cad. Jealousy and lust, of course, are universal and timeless emotions, whereas the heroic values that underlie the thinking of Jason and Medea are no longer so easily comprehended. What we must try to remember, nonetheless, is that Euripides' audience did think in terms of the ancient code of honour and would certainly have recognized this dimension of motivation.

We should, then, not dismiss what Medea and Jason say about the reasons for their actions as mere cant or rationalization. To be sure, the accusations they make against each other may also have validity in terms of psychological probability but they serve mainly to enhance the credibility of the characterizations and do not supply the well-springs of the action. Jason, for example, doubtless marries the princess for pragmatic reasons in the interests of his family, but she is probably attractive enough to make his "duty" not totally unpleasant. Similarly Medea, had Jason consulted her on the marriage, might well have accepted it as advantageous to the whole family, but not without some pangs of jealousy. She punishes Jason for treating her with scorn, but she might not have devised such a drastic revenge had she not been prodded by these same pangs. This tension that Euripides has created between the rational and emotional motivations of his two main characters is probably one of the main reasons for the enduring impact of this rather unlikely play. Had he omitted the rational basis for their behaviour, the action would have been sordid and brutal; had he left out its emotional basis, it would have seemed frigid and unconvincing.

In the presentation of his argument Jason had expressed the belief that Medea deserved no credit for helping him since she was forced to do so by Kypris. The Chorus support his view that men are victims of love and cannot be held responsible for their actions if smitten with the "unavoidable arrow" (633) of Kypris, but they seem to imply that it is Jason who is the victim of his lust for a second bride. The twin goals

of glory and *aretê* that are his ultimate aim (cf. lines 542–44) are not to be reached through sexual passion. For themselves they hope that the awesome Kypris (δεινά, 639) will not involve them in the adulterous love that brings with it contentious anger and insatiable quarreling. To some extent, then, they absolve Jason of guilt since he is not responsible for the passion that has made him forget his honourable obligations. As for Medea, she is seen primarily as the wronged and helpless female far from the homeland where once she might have expected to find support. In closing they curse anyone who can fail to honour his *philoi* with an open heart, namely Jason, and reject him as a *philos*. Medea's claim that Jason has offended in the realm of the obligations of *philoi* is accepted; although the Chorus show tolerance and understanding with regard to the lust that Medea has accused him of, their attitude is less forgiving with regard to his performance as a *philos*. His point, that she is motivated by jealousy, is not conceded.

The Aegeus-scene that follows has offended the sensibilities of many readers and critics through the ages, but it is in fact well integrated in the dramatic structure and serves several purposes in the development of plot and themes.[46] Its chief relevance to our argument has been commented on earlier, but there remain a few minor points that deserve to be made. In general, Euripides uses this scene to reinforce the audience's sense of the strong obligations implicit in the relationships of *philoi*. Here, too, we are again reminded that Medea is not being capricious in her opinion that Jason's actions constitute a breach of obligation. Aegeus, a king and a man renowned for his uprightness, immediately supports Medea's case. Quite aside from the personal considerations involved, such as Medea's jealousy, Jason's desire for wealth and status, his lust for a new bride—quite apart from these, there is an objective argument that would have been clear to an audience of the fifth century. The Nurse supports Medea through loyalty and sentiment despite her fears of what her mistress' wrath may drive her to; the Chorus support Medea largely through feelings of sympathy for another woman helplessly trapped in a hateful situation; but Aegeus supports Medea on her own grounds of ethical obligation. Only after pronouncing Jason's actions shameful does he inquire as to Jason's motives: was he in the grip of passion (697), or

[46] Well demonstrated by Grube 157.

was he tired of his union with Medea? Medea picks up Aegeus' ἐρασθείς in her answer, "a passion and a great one" (698), and again states her main charge against him, that he is not loyal to his *philoi*. Such a man is not worth worrying about in Aegeus' opinion, for he is base (699). But Medea hastens to point out that Jason's great passion was for a marriage-connection (κῆδος, 700) with the royal house, thereby virtually admitting that Jason was telling the truth about his main motivation. Then Aegeus does not take the matter so lightly, for Jason is not running off with some insignificant village girl, he is not having a casual affair, but is offering a real affront to Medea before the whole world. Aegeus does not now blame Medea for being disturbed (703). When he hears further that Jason is allowing Medea and the children to be exiled he is almost incredulous. Medea admits that he is not himself advocating the exile, but he is willing to do nothing about it.

At this point Medea slips into her rôle of the weak, wronged woman as she uses all her manipulative skills to fasten Aegeus to a firm commitment of help. She plays on his frustrated desire (714) for children and persuades him that she could help him with drugs. Aegeus wants to help Medea first because of the gods (720), an indication of the magnitude of Jason's offense, and second because he believes her claims that she can aid him to have children (721). His scrupulousness about the conditions of his help, however, demonstrates again how very serious he deems the formal relationships of *philoi*. He is a just man (724) and will try to offer her protection as his guest; the word he uses here (προξενεῖν, 724) has both private and public connotations. He will not offend Creon by taking Medea with him out of the country since he has a relationship as guest (730) to maintain with him. Medea, however, desires Aegeus to swear an oath, thereby suggesting to us that she may well have been just as specific and particular in establishing her relationship with Jason so many years before when she required him, in a similar fashion, to take oaths to remain true to their agreements. She says, of course, that she requires this oath for Aegeus' own protection since he can then refer to it if challenged by Creon or Pelias' family—her enemies (734)—for having received Medea in exile; Aegeus accepts her reasoning here. If he fails to keep his oath, he asks for the punishment due to the impious (755), reminding us by

implication that Jason belongs to this class since he has broken his oaths. As Aegeus leaves, the Chorus acknowledge him as a noble man (762).

With Aegeus' departure and the expression of warm approval for him by the Chorus we are left with a sense almost of well-being; but we are quickly shocked out of that state by Medea's exultant cry of triumph: "Now we shall be victorious over our foes . . .; now there is hope that we shall exact a penalty from our foes" (765–67).

The plans for vengeance that she now outlines contain many more indications of her heroic outlook. She does not intend to leave her children to the insults of her enemies (782) nor will she endure the mockery of her foes (797); and, above all, she will allow no one to regard her as insignificant, weak and subdued, but rather she demands that she be seen as oppressive to her *echthroi* and well-disposed to her *philoi* (809), for to such people belongs a life of the greatest renown (810).

Her decision to kill the children is not formulated at first, as if she has to work up to an acceptance of the deed. She begins by saying that she will not leave them in a hostile land for her enemies to mock (781–82), but does not fully explain this remark until line 792 when she finally announces that she will slay her children. Then, after thus totally overthrowing the house of Jason, she will flee from the murder of her children (who are described in 795 as φιλτάτων) after venturing a deed that she herself characterizes as most unholy (796). She goes on to explain that, in fact, without father, home, or refuge, life has nothing to offer her. But she takes comfort in the fact that with divine help (802) she will exact the penalty for Jason's betrayal, for he will never see their children alive again, nor will his bride give him other children.

The Chorus are hesitant in encouraging her in her plans. Despite their desire to help her, they support human law (812) and strongly advise her against carrying out her plans. Medea understands these feelings since the women of the Chorus have not suffered what she has suffered. They find it difficult to believe that she will be so bold as to slay her own children, but she gives her reason for doing so briefly and clearly: "For thus would my husband be most painfully wounded" (817). The women remind her that by this act she would herself become most wretched (818). She accepts this without a second thought, and asks only that they not reveal her plans if they have

respect for her as their superior and sympathy for her as another woman (823).

Almost as if the women of the Chorus cannot face their own thoughts, as if they cannot admit the horror of what they have just heard, they sing their beautiful Ode to Athens. After the exquisite picture of Athens painted in the first strophe and antistrophe, however, they set in contrast the ugliness of Medea's plans; how can the beauty of the city be compatible with the ugliness of the deed? They beg her to reconsider and describe her act as one of "awesome daring" (859).

On this note of horrified disbelief Jason enters and the execution of the plan begins. Once again Medea shows her great persuasive powers. She convinces Jason that she has reversed her position and that she now thinks his arguments valid. She outlines what Jason obviously would have considered ideal behaviour from her in this situation; she should have supported her husband's plans regardless of her own hurt and she should have left the decisions and action to him. She invites the children to join her in changing former enemies into friends (897), for she has set aside her wrath (898). Very touchingly she reveals some of the inner turmoil she feels as far as the children are concerned,[47] and tears come to her eyes as she looks at them, tears she explains away as arising from the emotion she feels as a result of the quarrel with Jason. The moment that Medea adopts her feminine pose, Jason automatically falls into his rôle as the stronger one, the one who gives comfort and takes care of everything. He patronisingly reveals that he has judged Medea's anger to be the natural resentment of a female creature (909) in these circumstances, but he regards her current reaction as that of a sensible woman (913). The wish he utters for his children is chillingly ironic: "May I see you, well-brought-up, reaching the fulfilment of youth, stronger than my foes" (920–21). He is himself completely heroic in his outlook, but he fails to recognize

[47] The dramatic effectiveness of Medea's vacillating attitude toward her children has not been sufficiently emphasized. We know that her decision to kill them cost her a great deal and we are, therefore, all the more impressed with her enormous strength of will, her heroic stature. By this particular act she not only achieves the most ruinous vengeance conceivable, she also strips Jason of any means whereby he can exact retribution from her, for in destroying her children she has also destroyed her one vulnerable point. It is a perfect scheme for one who has the strength of will to go through with it. Medea is aware that her ability to execute the murders is for her a test of character as well as the measure of her vengeance.

a kindred spirit in Medea; he cannot think of a woman with strength of character sufficient to permit her to believe in and follow the code of warriors. The extent to which he misjudges her character is emphasized when he talks of her as "foolish" (959) and worries about her giving away her substance (960–63).

The Chorus see the unavoidable climax approaching and now refer to Jason as one to be pitied (991; 995) as well as Medea, with whom the women still sympathize, despite her intentions, because they realize that she is going to pay a terrible price for the sake of vengeance and honour.

When the Tutor returns with the account of the presentation of the gifts, he is puzzled by Medea's reaction. Now she knows there is no turning back, and she is distraught at the deed still to be done. For a moment she loses her perspective altogether and condemns her plan as something she devised in an evil frame of mind (1014). The wail of her misgivings and laments set against the unknowing words of comfort uttered by the Tutor is very effective, as is her rapid recovery of self-control, the resumption of the necessary mask of deception, and her hesitation again as she looks at her children and laments her own relentlessness (1028).[48] Briefly she considers life in ordinary human terms and wonders why she should double her own grief because of her anger with her children's father. But her character reasserts itself almost immediately and the heroic code of values takes precedence over her natural inclinations as a mother. She asks herself: "Am I willing to incur ridicule by allowing my enemies to go unpunished?" (1049–50). Only one answer allows Medea to remain true to herself: "The deed must be ventured" (1051). Her maternal feelings again beg her to spare the children, but once more her fierce honour code prevents her from yielding. Now she thinks not just of the hurt their death will cause Jason but, self-deceptively to be sure, of the need to keep them safe from the insults of her enemies (1060–61). Even so she is building up her resolve to carry out the murder. In her mind's eye she visualizes the royal bride with the diadem on her head and wrapped in the fatal robe (1065–66). She knows that she is entering upon a "most wretched

[48] See Page's commentary for the comparative rareness of *αὐθαδία* and its cognates in Euripides and tragedy generally. The examples he cites seem to offer some corroboration, however, of the place of the word in the heroic vocabulary.

path" (1067) and that she is going to send the children on one even more wretched. As they come to her, she greets and caresses them for the last time in a scene that can be described only as an unabashed tear-jerker.[49] But in the final three lines of this scene, before she goes offstage to fulfil her resolve, she states more clearly and movingly than any previous Greek tragic figure the forces that drive her on. Those forces are within—her own passion (*θυμός*)—and are stronger than the dictates of reason. The heroes of Greek tragedy are not reasonable; they are undeniably and magnificently unreasonable, from Eteocles in *The Seven Against Thebes* down through Prometheus, Ajax, Oedipus and Antigone. All reject the "reason" of the Chorus or of other characters, insisting on working out the requirements of their destiny, or the circumstances outside their control, in terms of their own standards and the demands of their own character.

In these lines Medea has articulated her motivating force with a preciseness that is new to tragedy, but it is the precision of her articulation that is new, not the idea itself. Antigone, too, lived out the same principle when she decided to bury her brother and thus bring about her own death in spite of the dictates of "reason;" Ajax also was driven to kill himself, just as Eteocles had to face his brother at the seventh gate, not because external forces made those courses of action unavoidable but because the heroic impulses—what Medea calls *θυμός* or her passionate nature—of those characters made them react to their situations in the only way they considered worthy of themselves. And so Medea does not imagine that the course she has chosen is good in the moral sense, but she recognizes that to be true to her own self, to go on being someone she can respect, she must wreak this terrible vengeance on the man who has disgraced her.

After the Choral Ode[50] Medea announces the arrival of the Messenger with an almost detached air and listens to his gory account with not a trace of repentance or misgiving. The deed he describes with the familiar *δεινόν* (1121), but his sympathy is still with her as he urges her

[49] The exploitation of the perils of children continued to be a Euripidean device: cf. *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, *Heraclidae*, *Heracles*.

[50] The main part of this Ode, concerning the disadvantages of parenthood, seems rather banal and more than a bit cranky, contributing little to dramatic development other than the necessary pause before the final achievement of Medea's goals. But for a sensitive analysis, see Leon Golden, "Children in the *Medea*," *CB* 48 (1971) 13 f.

to escape. To his surprise, Medea is in no hurry to leave and wants to hear how her victims perished, "For you would give us twice as much pleasure if they have died in foul fashion" (1135).

The Chorus' pronouncement after the Messenger's account has been heard is noteworthy (1231–35). The women still support Medea completely and regard what has happened as Jason's just deserts (1232), although they feel pity at the same time for the princess.

The Messenger's account moves Medea into the next stage of her plan. She must now kill the children and escape with all speed. She warns her heart to "steel itself" (1242) for evil deeds that are dread and necessary (1243). "Do not be cowardly," she tells herself, and "do not think about the children" (1246). There is time to mourn later, for, even if she does kill them, they are by their very nature her *philoi* (1250).

The Chorus now understand the true depth of Medea's passion. They call on the most elemental of the gods, Earth and Medea's own ancestor, the Sun, to stop this unnatural crime. "A ruined woman" (1253), they call her, and then, "poor wretch" (1265). They have reached the limit of toleration and will not admit the necessity for going further.[51] Their comparison of Medea to a rock or to iron (1280) is perhaps an unconscious echo of the beginning of the play where the Nurse compared Medea to a rock or the sea (28). The shock of what has happened forces the women to rationalize their experience, to attempt to put it into perspective by reminiscing about the mythological antecedent of Ino; the more obvious parallel of the Procne legend is not exploited. Their final remark on the γυναικῶν λέχος (1291), which has wrought so many evils for mortals, shows that they have in the end failed to grasp the substance of Medea's nature.

Jason's opening lines echo the exact words of the Messenger as he calls Medea ἡ τὰ δεῖν' εἰργασμένη (1294; cf. 1121). He is confident that the kin of the royal family will punish her for her crime; his only thoughts are for his own children. Medea, then, was right in her instincts about how to touch him; she knew that killing his bride would

[51] The comment is often made at this point that the rôle of the Chorus is awkward since there is no valid excuse for their failure to make any effort to help the children. In fact, Medea moves too quickly for the women to be able to do anything, as stage presentation makes clear: a few brief cries and the act is done.

effect only a superficial wound. The moment the Chorus tell him that they are dead, his confidence, his anger, crumble and he can only gasp with disbelief, "Woman, you have destroyed me!" (1310). Now *he* wants to exact vengeance (1316).

Medea has achieved what she set out to achieve, the complete and utter defeat of an enemy who had wronged and humiliated her. When she appears, therefore, in the chariot of the Sun,[52] she is in total control of herself and master of the situation. Through the symbolic function of the chariot given her by Helios, a god and her kinsman, she becomes something more than human, in a sense, purified by the cleansing fire of her own passion. The extent to which she was willing to sacrifice everything to live by the code of a hero has isolated her from ordinary humanity; she has left the word of mortals and become godlike.[53] The gift of the chariot from her grandfather the Sun symbolizes the recognition, the glory she has won in the eyes of the gods. Jason may rant and rave about a deed "most impious" (1328), he may call her names unheard before on the tragic stage (1346), but (resorting at last to the wild animal imagery referred to earlier) he still must admit that she in her daring (1326, 1340) is unmatched by any Greek woman, that she is in fact a veritable "lioness, not a woman, with the savage nature of an Etruscan Scylla" (1342–43). He knows he cannot wound with words a woman of such boldness (1345) and yet he has no weapons left except words, for Medea has disarmed and conquered him just as surely as if she had overcome him in hand-to-hand combat on the battlefield. She has no doubts about the views of Zeus on these matters; he knows what benefits Jason experienced at Medea's hands and what Jason did in return. Jason could not expect to dishonour (1354) their union, mock her (1355), and still go on leading a pleasant life. And neither could Creon expect to escape punishment (1357). Jason may call her any names he likes for she knows now that she has succeeded in wounding him in the deepest part of his being, as the situation required (1360). His only answer for all this is the weak objection that she has hurt herself by hurting him. This small comfort she takes from him too, when she says that, if he is not laughing, her pain

[52] A device unimaginatively and wrongly belittled by Aristotle and later critics as a shabby means of bringing the play to an illogical but rapid conclusion.

[53] See Knox 43 for the godlike aspects of heroes.

is relieved (1362), that is, his pain relieves her pain. He finds it difficult to believe that a woman could be so lacking in maternal feelings, but she retorts that he was the one who destroyed the children by offending her with this insult (1366) and his new marriage; again she states that his suffering makes hers worthwhile (1370). In lines harsh with alliteration (1386) she prophesies that he will die "a base man in a base fashion." He will not die as a hero, but passively, struck on the head with a piece of wood. He is a perjurer and a traitor to the obligations of hospitality (1392) to whom the gods will not listen. In the end, then, he must go off totally vanquished, denied even his children's bodies, the one favour he begged for from this "child-slaying lioness"(1407).

Much of the critical discontent with *Medea* has been based on what seems to be the essential immorality of the plot. Such a monster of inhumanity should be punished for her crime against her children. Some critics have even ignored Medea's obvious triumph at the end and insist that she *is* punished by the grief she has brought on herself. The lengths to which her vindictiveness carries her go beyond those acceptable to our civilized traditions and to our common human feelings. If, however, Medea is not acceptable to our own moral code, she is, in the code of the ancient heroic system, a veritable "saint." She went to the outer limits of daring and passion; while other heroes might blind themselves, kill themselves, or wreak terrible vengeances, Medea, to show the mettle of her character, sacrificed what to a Greek would be more precious than life itself—her children, her hope for the future.

As Knox has pointed out with regard to the Sophoclean hero (57):

> It is not that the hero is worshipped as an example of human conduct; he is no guide to life in the real city man has made or the ideal city he dreams of. But he is a reminder that a human being may at times magnificently defy the limits imposed on our will by the fear of public opinion, or community action, even of death, may refuse to accept humiliation and indifference and may impose his will no matter what the consequences to others and to himself.

Euripides, I believe, wrote *Medea* with this outlook in mind, continuing the Sophoclean tradition.

There are, of course, other themes, other levels in the play, and my

interpretation does not imply any attempt to reduce a great tragedy to one simple formula. On the other hand, to read the *Medea* without cognizance of the rôle of the heroic code, without the realization that Medea, despite her gender, lived by the same rules as Achilles, Ajax, and other great literary heroes before her, is to miss one of the most important keys to the play. It is Medea's consistent and unwavering dedication to the principles of the heroic code that, more than any other single factor, binds Euripides' great tragedy into a coherent whole.