

MEDEA'S RIGHT HAND: PROMISES AND REVENGE

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The ancient Greeks clasped right hands to demonstrate trust or friendship or to seal a bargain. In Homer the words *δεξιαί* or *δεξιτερὰ* alone are often synonymous with “trust.” Since he who offers his right hand shows that he carries no weapon, the handclasp is a denial of hostility. At *Iliad* 6.233, for example, Glaucus and Diomedes, instead of fighting, pledge friendship with a joining of hands and an exchange of gifts. And at *Philoctetes* 813 the archer seals Neoptolemus’ promise of fidelity by asking him for *χειρὸς πίστιν*, “the pledge of your hand.”¹

In the *Medea* the action is precipitated by Jason’s violation of an agreement which he made with Medea, an agreement sanctified by oaths in which the gods were called as witnesses and which they confirmed by joining right hands. The play opens with a speech by the nurse in which she describes the reaction of Medea to Jason’s treachery in marrying Creon’s daughter. Medea, says the nurse, recalls the promises the lovers made to one another and “appeals to the all-powerful oath of the right hand (*δεξιᾶς πίστιν μεγίστην*).” She calls the gods to witness “what she has gotten in exchange (*οἷας ἀμοιβῆς*) from Jason” (21–23). References to hands, Jason’s, Medea’s, and the hands of others, not only occur frequently in the play, but develop and shift in dramatic significance as the *Medea* progresses. The touch of the hand appears in contexts other than the formal handclasp. The touch of the hand may be a caress, a sign of physical intimacy between husband and wife or parent and child. This caress may also be deceitful and conceal cynical or murderous designs. Also, the denial of the right to touch constitutes an act of cruelty. Conversely, in one

¹No one word or phrase in Greek describes the handclasp. *ἀντιδεξιάμοι* is rare, *δεξιάμοι*, like *ἀσπάζομαι*, can also mean to wave at or salute from afar, *χείρ* means both hand and arm and it is often uncertain whether the handclasp is literal or figurative. Though the handclasp may acquire religious significance where, as in the case of Jason and Medea it accompanies sacred oaths or supplication, its basic significance is secular as in *Il.* 6.233, *Soph. Phil.* 813, and also *OC* 1632. Oaths of great sanctity may be undertaken without any joining of hands (e.g., *Med.* 741 ff.). Throughout this paper I have translated texts relating to the handclasp in order to clarify my interpretation of the passage. The text is that of D. L. Page (Oxford 1938, repr. 1964), and I have used his commentary extensively.

grotesque image, the inability to stop touching, the painful adhesion of flesh to flesh, leads to death (1211 ff.). The ultimate transformation in the symbol of the touching hand from loving to hostile, however, concerns Medea's right hand, for, as Euripides repeatedly says, it is with the very hand she pledged to Jason that Medea takes revenge on him by killing their children. The symbol of friendship and sacred trust thus becomes the instrument of violence.

Though Medea appeals to the *δεξιᾶς πίστιν μεγίστην*, Euripides never quotes the exact substance of their agreement or of the oaths they swore. But evidently Medea promised to help Jason procure the golden fleece, and he promised in return (*ἀμοιβή*) that he would be her consort. Medea's promise was also the granting of a suppliant's petition, since Jason desperately needed her help.² The important point, however, is that Jason is untrue to the sacred oath of friendship and intimacy marked by the joining of hands and that throughout the play Euripides presents the handclasp as a significant symbol of that pledge.

Both the handclasp between Jason and Medea and the agreement it represents are extraordinary according to the *mores* of fifth-century Athens. No Athenian woman could enter into such a contract on her own behalf, and the occasional *dextrarum iunctio* of grave reliefs for this period is a symbol of farewell, not of marital contract.³ The pledges (possibly with a handclasp) attendant upon a betrothal (*ἐγγύη*) passed between prospective groom and father-in-law, not between man and woman.⁴ In the wedding processions depicted on contemporary vases, where the bride and groom hold hands, he holds her passive left wrist in his right hand. Nor can we find any clear mythological parallels for the handclasp between Jason and Medea. The joining of right hands in the Homeric poems occurs only

²Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.99-100 describes a handclasp between Jason and Medea, but there the situation is reversed: Medea is a suppliant begging Jason to rescue her from a wrathful Aeetes, and Jason pledges to marry her once they reach Greece.

³*dextrarum iunctio*: e.g., relief of Damasistrate and Polycleides (c. 400 B.C.), illus. in W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (London 1968) facing p. 118. See also Dar.-Sag. s.v. "matrimonium" 1655 ff. In a Roman wedding the handclasp was "the most solemn moment in the ceremony" (U. E. Paoli, *Rome*, tr. Macnaghten [London 1963] 117), but I find no evidence of it for a Greek wedding, where it would be inconsistent with the passive status of the bride.

⁴The *ἐγγύη* is then a transaction between the bride's father and the bridegroom of which the bride is the object, and we may guess that in its earliest form the transaction involved a putting of something into the hand" (A. R. W. Harrison, *Athenian Law of Property* [London 1968] 2 and see pp. 1-59 for discussion with bibliography). Cf. *RE*s.vv. *πολὶξ* and *φερνή* and *OCD*² s.v. "Marriage." The *ἐγγύη* (either marriage or agreement—Euripides purposely leaves it vague) also resembles a commercial agreement (marriage itself being chiefly a commercial contract) because of Medea's emphasis on *do ut des* (*ἀμοιβή*), cf. *πρίασθαι* (233).

between male heroes of equal station.⁵ The stately phrase, *σπονδαί τ' ἄκρητοι καὶ δεξιάι, ἥς ἐπέπιθμεν* (*Il.* 2.341, 4.159), bespeaks a solemn covenant sanctified by religious rites. *σπονδαί* is the regular Thucydidean word for a truce between warring cities, and Medea too sees her relationship with Jason in quasi-political terms: *σπονδαί γὰρ ἡμῖν καὶ μεθέστηκεν χόλος. / λάβεσθε χειρὸς δεξιᾶς* (898-99, cf. 1140).⁶ Here she falsely addresses her children in order to deceive Jason: "There is a truce between your father and me and our anger is gone. Take his right hand!" These legal, heroic, and political connotations of the handclasp add stature to Medea. She is a larger-than-life female whose contract with Jason takes on the character not just of a marriage settlement but of a treaty between sovereign states.⁷

I shall now analyze the *Medea* in terms of the changing symbolism of the right hand. Medea onstage twice addresses her hand directly. First, in the *agôn* with Jason Medea appeals to her hand as a witness to her mate's perfidy: *φεῦ δεξιὰ χεῖρ, ἥς σὺ πόλλ' ἐλαμβάνου* (496), "Alas, right hand," and then she turns to Jason, "how desperately you grasped it."⁸ This is the hand given in trust. And then, at the final and crucial moment of killing her children, Medea speaks directly to her hand for a second time: *ἄγ', ὦ τάλαινα χεῖρ ἐμή, λαβὲ ξίφος*, "Come, poor hand of mine, take the sword!" (1244).⁹ The hand given in trust has become the hand of violent revenge. No actor could, I believe, speak these lines without some actual gesture of the right hand to reinforce their dramatic effect.

⁵Groom leads bride by left wrist: e.g., *ARV*² 539/40 (460 B.C.), 1317/1 (400 B.C.), 1031/51 (450 B.C.). Holding by the wrist involves some condescension as between Odysseus and Penelope (*Od.* 18.258); between Priam and Achilles (*Il.* 24.672). For the more usual Homeric, man-to-man handclasp: e.g., *Il.* 10.542; *Od.* 1.121, 20.197.

⁶In Thucydides (e.g., 1.35, 4.16) *σπονδαί* is used regularly of a temporary cessation of hostilities. Since the word does not routinely describe personal relationships, it is in Medea's speech an arresting metaphor.

⁷B. M. W. Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," *YCS* 25 (1977) 197, 224-25, 211-18, emphasizes the heroic yet still human stature of Medea. See also M. Shaw, *CP* 70 (1975) 255-66.

⁸496 describes, I believe, the pledge, which took place once, and 497 (*καὶ τῶνδε γονάτων*) the many *supplicationes* by Jason of Medea (at Colchis, at Iolkos, and en route). *πολλ'* thus indicates (as usual in earnest statements and entreaties, cf. *Il.* 5.358, 9.183, 11.782) intensity rather than frequency. At 496-97 Medea, in her anguish, describes together two separate but for her related actions: the promissory clasping of right hands and the supplicatory embracing of knees. Jason would have needed two right arms to combine the gestures using the classic posture for supplication (as in *Il.* 1.501, cf. *Med.* 709-10). Another interpretation: A. P. Burnett, *CP* 68 (1973) 13, "... as he touched her right hand." But Burnett is elsewhere (13-14) persuasive where she describes the unusual nature of Medea's marriage.

⁹B. Meissner, *Hermes* 96 (1968) 155-66, stresses the martial and evocative ring of Medea's address to her hand and cites with great aptness *Alc.* 837, *Heracl.* 740, *HF* 268 f.

Furthermore, before Medea actually comes to the murder of her children, Euripides foreshadows in the language of the chorus the terrible rôle her hand will play. They try to dissuade Medea from the killing by impressing upon her the horror of committing the act with her own hand: *πόθεν θράσος ἢ φρενὸς ἢ χειρὶ . . . καρδίᾳ τε λήψῃ*; “Where will you get boldness of mind or hand and heart?” (856–57)—a textual problem exists in the lines, but the reference to the hand seems clear. Then the chorus continues: “You will not be able, once your children fall suppliant before you, to bloody your hand (*τέγξαι χέρα φοινίαν*) with a steadfast heart” (862–65). Later, as if in answer to the chorus, and as she steels herself to the deed, Medea says *χεῖρα δ’ οὐ διαφθερῶ*, “I will not weaken my hand” (1055).¹⁰

Then she withdraws at last to perform the murder, saying: “I shall not, by delaying, yield my children to be killed by another, more hostile hand (*δυσμενεστέρα χερὶ*)” (1238–39). The chorus now cries out to the earth and sun to stop her before “she sets the bloody hand which kills its own (*φοινίαν . . . χέρ’ αὐτοκτόνον*) upon her children” (1253–54). Only a moment before the sword strikes we hear from offstage the voice of one of the children: *οἷμοι, τί δράσω; ποῖ φύγω μητρὸς χέρας*; “Where shall I flee my mother’s hands?” (1271). The chorus once again registers shock: “Poor woman, you must be rock or iron to slay with your own, death-dealing hand (*αὐτόχειρι μοίρα*) the crop of children you bore” (1279–81). It was only Ino, they say, who “laid a hand upon her children (*χέρα βαλεῖν τέκνοις*)” (1282–83). Now, Jason rushes onstage and the chorus tells him: “Your children are dead by their mother’s hand (*χειρὶ μητρῶα*)” (1309).

So Medea’s right hand, which represents trust and amity at the beginning of the play, becomes the hand of bloody revenge by the end. But the hand of trust is also the hand of deceit. Medea, in appealing to the *μεγίστη πίστις δεξιᾶς*, complains of the deceit of Jason’s hand: *ὥς μάτην κεχρώσμεθα*, “How falsely I was touched!” (497). *χρώζω* means to touch the surface of, to touch superficially.¹¹ Medea herself is mistress of the touch which deceives. When she wants falsely to persuade Jason that she and her children are now friendly to him, she commands them (a passage quoted above): *λάβεσθε χεῖρὸς δεξιᾶς* (899).¹²

¹⁰Following Page’s (above, note 1) interpretation of *διαφθερῶ*. In 856–57 (zeugma of *θράσος* and *χερὶ*), 864 (prolepsis of *φοινίαν*) and here, Euripides uses strained and lofty language to focus attention on the significance of the hand.

¹¹The *χρώς* of a thing is properly its surface, not its color. So LSJ’s “defile” for *χρώζω* here is tendentious in the wrong direction. Page (above, note 1) aptly quotes Eur. *Phoen.* 1625, *γόνατα μὴ χρώζειν ἐμά*.

¹²Surely not: “Take my hand” as, e.g., G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1961) 159, since they take her hand at 1069 ff. For the gesture as a farewell, see note 3 above.

Just as the hand of trust is also the hand of deceit, the bloody hand of revenge has another, in this case, kinder aspect: the hand may also provoke pity and administer the touch of tenderness. When Medea addresses her children for the last time, she says: "Give, O children, give your mother your right hand to kiss (δότ', ὦ τέκνα, δότ' ἀσπάσασθαι μητρὶ δεξιὰν χέρα). O sweetest hand (ὦ φιλάττη χεῖρ), lips that are sweetest to me, and form and noble countenance of my children . . . O sweetest touch (προσβολή), O soft skin and sweet breath of my children!" (1069-75). Here the hand is the emblem of physical intimacy and love.

Furthermore, in the closing scene of the play, Medea denies to Jason this very intimacy by not allowing him to touch the dead bodies of his children: "You shall never caress them with your hand (χειρὶ δ' οὐ ψάύσεις ποτέ), such a chariot has my grandfather Helios given me as a bastion against an enemy's hand (πολεμίας χερὸς)" (1320-23).¹³ Here, a key word, which occurs three times in the last one hundred lines of the play and not before is *ψάύω*, to touch lightly or caress. But Jason still recalls the crueler touch of Medea's hand: "It was not my right hand (οὐ . . . ἡμὴ δεξιὰ) which killed them" (1365). Then he begs: "Allow me just to caress (*ψαύσαι*) the soft skin of my children" (1402-03). But Medea has forbidden him: "With this hand here (*τῇδε* . . . *χερὶ*) I shall bury them" (1378). Jason has the final speech in the play, and when he calls the gods to witness that Medea now prevents him from caressing (*ψαύσαι*) his children (1412), we recall the play's first speech, in which Medea was described calling these same gods to witness Jason's perjury of the oath of the right hand.

There is yet another side to the pathos of touching in the *Medea*, namely the deaths of Glauke and Creon. Medea's poison gifts cling indissolubly to the body of the young girl. All fear to touch (*θιγεῖν*) her corpse (1202-03). But Creon does touch her: *περιπτύξας χέρας* (1206). The two die in a grotesque parody of a tender embrace:

κείνται δὲ νεκροὶ παῖς τε καὶ γέρων πατὴρ
πέλας, ποθεινὴ δακρύοισι συμφορά. (1220-21)

The corpses, child and aged father lie close, a fate his tears desired.

Medea's magic has produced a touch from which there is no release.

A brief analysis of the scene already mentioned, in which Medea asks her children to take Jason's right right hand, serves here as a summary of the rôle which this powerful image assumes in the play. The intensity of this dramatic moment, when it is seen in the complete context of "touching" in the *Medea*, acquires special significance.

¹³S. A. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides* (London 1971) 130, contrasts this passage with 1069-75, but the topical organization of her book prevents her from analyzing the pervasiveness of this image.

λάβεσθε χειρὸς δεξιᾶς· οἷμοι, κακῶν
 ὡς ἐννοοῦμαι δὴ τι τῶν κεκρυμμένων.
 ἄρ' ὦ τέκν', οὔτω καὶ πολλὸν ζῶντες χρόνον
 φίλην ὁρέξετ' ὠλένην; τάλαιν' ἐγώ,
 ὡς ἀρτίδακρὺς εἰμι καὶ φόβον πλέα. (899-903)

Grasp his right hand! Ah! How I am reminded just now of what is hidden!
 Children, can it be that you will live long lives and continue to reach out, as
 now, your dear arms? How ready to weep and full of fear am I!

Medea is startled by the scene of her children touching Jason's hand, and though the touching in itself reminds her of his treachery, she thinks now of the terrible act her own hand must commit. Here we find all the gradations of touching from love to hate crystallized in a single moment on stage. The tableau of joined hands conjures up for Medea the memory of her own trusting hand and Jason's deceitful hand. This is the hand of tenderness which also presages the hand which must in the end grasp the sword.

Two general comments on the type of imagery here discussed complete my analysis of "Medea's right hand." First, the image of the hand has a special interest because it is conveyed, we presume, by dramatic action and not by words alone. The *Medea* thus provides a precious hint at how gesture might have been used in the original staging of a Greek tragedy.¹⁴ Second, this image of the hand has a development and plot of its own which parallels the major action of the play.¹⁵ The touch of the hand undergoes a gradual but complete transformation from the loving and trusting to the deceitful and hostile hand and finally to the hand stained with blood.

¹⁴Another hint: οὐδ' ἂν ἠψάμην χεροῖν (370), where the contrary-to-fact condition indicates that Medea did physically fawn upon Creon at some point in 292-347. The touch of supplication is explicit in the Aegeus episode (709-10).

¹⁵Contrast the nautical imagery of *Med.*, e.g., 79, 258 (see Barlow [above, note 13] 97-98 and E. M. Blaklock, *CP* 50 [1955] 233-37), which is strictly verbal and does not develop. H. Musurillo, *AJP* 87 (1966) 66-74, has studied other static, verbal imagery in this play.