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Revenge and Mythopoiesis in Euripides' *Medea**

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SUMMARY: In the first stasimon of *Medea,* the chorus of Corinthian women exalts Medea's revenge as a palinode that will put an end to the misogynist tradition and bring them honor. This article analyzes Euripides' tragedy as a metapoetic reflection on Medea's voice, its relation to the earlier poetic tradition, its power and limitations, and its generic definition. While Medea's revenge metaphorically and symbolically unfolds as a revision of the Argo saga and thus undermines one of the most famous androcentric epics of the Greek song culture, I argue that mythical constraints ultimately prevent Medea from generating a new, gynocentric epic. Rather, the intertextuality of the final scenes increasingly departs from the Iliadic model and firmly anchors Medea's revenge in the tragic genre. Metapoetically, Medea's palinode thus defines tragedy, by contrast to epic, as a genre that is congenial to female voices but does not bring them *kleos.*

ἔρχεται τιμὰ γυναικείωι γένει *Honor is coming to the female race!*

THE CHORUS OF CORINTHIAN WOMEN ENTHUSIASTICALLY SINGS THESE WORDS (E. *Med.* 417–18) as they hear Medea describe how she will avenge her honor by killing Jason, his new bride, and the bride's father Creon (374–85). For one fleeting moment, Jason's unsettling breech of his oaths is envisaged as having one positive consequence. It will allow for a twist in the spoken tradition (στρέψουσι φᾶμαι, 414–16) that will bestow praise on women and put an end to the old misogynist discourse castigating the "female race" (γυναικείωι γένει, 417–18).

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From an enunciative standpoint, the chorus's utterance engages Medea's plans (βουλεύματα, 372) at a doubly referential level, intra- and extra-diegetic. On the one hand, the plans are evaluated with reference to the fiction of the tragedy. The opening considerations about the reversal of natural order, the transgression of justice, and the treachery of males (410–13) refer directly to Jason's broken oaths; the hope that "honor" (τιμά, 417) will come to the "female race" harks back to Medea's attachment to her reputation and to her emphatically repeated concern that she has been dishonored (ἠτιμασμένη, 20; cf. 33, 438, 696, 1354) by Jason's new marriage. Yet the diction of the stasimon also indicates that the revenge is evaluated in meta-poetic terms. The word φήμη (φᾶμαι, 415–16; φάμα, 419–20) can mean both "common report, rumor" and, especially in the Doric form φάμα, "song" (*LSJ* s.v. φήμη). The relevance of the latter meaning in the context of the strophe is confirmed in the antistrophe by the reference to the "Muses of singers born of old" (μοῦσαι… παλαιγενέων . . . ἀοιδῶν, 421–22), who—the chorus hopes—will stop blaming women for their untrustworthiness. The revenge of Medea, then, is not only evaluated as an adequate retaliation to the offense but is also envisaged as a palinode that will subvert the earlier poetic tradition.[1]

The chorus's appreciation of the revenge as a palinode on a par with the songs of old is doubly justified by Medea's special authorial status and constant engagement with the poetic tradition. From her entrance at line 214 to her spectacular departure on the chariot of Helios in the exodos, Medea continuously occupies the stage, except for a brief exit at lines 1251–316 to kill the children. Her overwhelming physical presence matches her control over the tragic plot. The revised plans (τἀμά ... βουλεύματα, 772) that she describes to the chorus at 772–810 provide the spectators with an exact outline of the events that they are about to witness on stage. Medea is more than a mere character in the play; she also acts as its implied author.[2] Consequently, her revenge can be analyzed as a poetic performance embedded in the tragedy—a *mise en abyme* of the poetic process.

Moreover, the tragedy—or Medea's revenge—displays a high level of engagement with earlier traditions, including epic, lyric, iambic, and tragic poetry. The background of the plot overlaps with the story of Jason and the

[1] My analysis of Medea's revenge as a palinode systematizes the idea raised by Rush Rehm 1989: 101 and Deborah Boedeker 1991: 109–10, that Medea behaves as the author of her own myth and enacts a new λόγος about Jason and herself.

[2] I borrow the concept of the implied author from literary criticism, especially Booth 1983, to refer to the persona constructed in the fiction, as opposed to the historical author of the work. For the idea of the collusion of a character and its author, see Felson-Rubin 1987: 63–65 on Penelope.

Argonauts that was celebrated in an important body of now lost epic poetry[3] and is the subject matter of Pindar's fourth *Pythian Ode*. Medea's attachment to her honor and reputation engages the model of Homeric and Sophoclean heroes, as Bernard Knox (1977: 196–206) and Elizabeth Bongie (1977) have brilliantly demonstrated.[4] Laura McClure (1999: 379–93) has shown that Medea's speeches appropriate and twist the language of praise and blame about women epitomized in the epics of Hesiod and the iambic poetry of Archilochus and Hipponax. References to lyric diction also cast Medea as an athlete emulating the victors celebrated by Pindar.[5] Finally, the modalities of her revenge, including the princess's entanglement in a poisoned robe and the murder of blood relatives, echo the tragic plot of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and possibly—depending on the relative chronology of the plays—Sophocles' *Trachiniae*.[6] Clearly, Medea's revenge engages the "Muses of the singers of old" mentioned by the chorus. As such, it can be analyzed as an ancient precursor of the modern concept of mythopoiesis, which describes the revision of prevailing myths or discourses by minoritarian (often female) speakers.[7] The question arises, then, whether Medea fulfills the chorus's hopes by successfully twisting the earlier poetic tradition and generating a new story that will bring glory to women.

[3] The idea that stories about the Argo saga formed a body of epic poetry on a par with the Trojan cycle was first raised by Meuli 1921 and more recently developed by Dräger 1993 and West 2005.

[4] Bongie's study is a striking example of the results and limitations of a methodology based on the search for parallels and sources. Her analysis of *Medea* as "a heroic play of Sophoclean type" stresses several illuminating resemblances with *Ajax* and *Antigone*, but fails to note the differences among the plays. My own approach is based on the structural premise that meaning emerges by contrast and thus, once a paradigm has been established, departures need to be analyzed as carefully as similarities.

[5] The adjective καλλίνικοι (765) "gloriously triumphant" that Medea applies to herself after her encounter with Aegeus often occurs in Pindar to refer to athletic victors (*I.* 1.12; *I.* 5(4).54; *P.* 1.32). The evaluation of the length of the princess's agony with reference to a race (1181–84) further characterizes Medea's revenge as an athletic triumph.

[6] The distinctively tragic character of those deaths, as well as Medea's quasi-authorial status, has been recognized by Nancy Rabinowitz, who describes Medea as "the dramaturge behind the messenger speech" and "the playwright orchestrating the deaths from a distance," Rabinowitz 1992: 49; Rabinowitz 1993: 145. About the date of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, see Easterling 1982: 19–23, who emphasizes the lack of external and internal evidence and concludes that "any date between 457 and, say, 430 would not be implausible."

[7] About the tension between patriarchal mythos and feminist mythopoiesis, see Rétif and Niethammer 2005.

This paper addresses that question by comparing Medea's revenge to the poetic paradigms that it addresses and revises. The first two parts emphasize Medea's mythopoietic and dramaturgic abilities. Drawing on studies of tragic space, I first show that the language and movements of the actors diffract the Corinthian setting of the tragedy and create a new, imaginary space that focuses on the Argo journey and the passage through the Symplegades (I). Beyond the Corinthian setting, that imaginary space provides a context for Medea to enact a symbolic revision of the Argo story that nullifies the old saga, annihilates her marriage, and deprives Jason of his heroic glory (II). Yet the increasing gap between Medea's revenge and the plot of the *Iliad*, as well as her progressive alienation from the internal audience, suggests that her palinode will not bring her the glory (κλέος) associated with communal performances of epic (III). The last scenes of the tragedy firmly anchor the revenge in the tragic genre, a genre that Medea fully controls but which will not bring honor to her or her fellow women (IV).

SCENIC AND METAPHORICAL SPACES

Plainly put, *Medea* stages the revenge of a woman whose husband has abandoned her for a new bride. The theme of marriage thus stands at the core of the tragedy, and much of the tension between Medea and Jason derives from the incompatibility of their views on their relationship. As the prologue unfolds, the nurse makes it clear that, as far as Medea is concerned, Jason's recent engagement to the Corinthian princess amounts to a nullification of their ties. The *philia*, the reciprocal friendship that used to bind them, has been replaced by enmity (16), a view later reiterated by the tutor, another member of Medea's household (76–77). The discrepancy between that and Jason's viewpoint is forcefully conveyed in the *agōn*. While Jason insists that his new marriage does not impinge on his obligations to Medea and their children and still speaks of them as his *philoi* (559–65, 609–15), Medea considers him an enemy (ἔχθιστος, 467) who is doing evil to his friends (φίλους κακῶς δράσαντ', 470). From her perspective, the *charis* that she expected in return for her help in Colchis has been annihilated (506–19).[8] Jason's engagement to the Corinthian princess breaks away from their common past.

Given the prominence of the marriage theme, the drama fittingly takes place in front of Medea's and Jason's house in Corinth—a suitable image of the household (οἶκος) that is being disrupted and destroyed. Yet that scenic space is not the only space that the spectators are invited to visualize. While most Greek tragedies open on deictic pointers to their setting, the first lines

[8] About the themes of χάρις and reciprocity in the *agōn,* see Mueller 2001: 473–86.

of *Medea* transport the spectators far from Corinth to the Symplegades that Jason, the Argonauts, and later Medea traversed on their way to and from Colchis (1–6). The importance of that distant location is confirmed by its thrice reiterated description in the parodos (208–13), the first stasimon (432–38b), and the fifth stasimon (1261–64).

Those recurring, almost obsessive references to the Argo journey are of course relevant to the plot since the expedition coincides with the beginning of Jason and Medea's relationship. Yet, from a performative standpoint, they do not merely belong to that past. The coincidence between the description of the Symplegades and the movement of the actors suggests that the passage is actually enacted on stage and therefore belongs to the performative present. Two of those evocations are sung precisely when Medea goes through the doors of the *skēnē* either to enter (204–13) or exit (1251–70) the stage. As David Wiles (1997: 121) points out, the passage through the *skēnē* into the orchestra is thus equated spatially with the passage through the Bosphorus. The crossing of the Symplegades does not only belong to the tragic past; it is also enacted in its present. As such, it exemplifies the capacity of theater to conjure a variety of spaces and times in the present of the performance.

The ability of language to bring imaginary settings before the reader or listener's eyes has been termed space *deixis am phantasma* by Karl Bühler (1934). In Athenian drama, a famous example is the parodos of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* which, as George Kernodle (1957/58) has shown, re-enacts the sacrifice of Iphigenia and juxtaposes a new space in Aulis to the scenic space of Argos. Drawing on analyses of space in *Oedipus at Colonus* and other tragedies, Lowell Edmunds (1992; 1996: 39–83; 2002: 114–15) has developed a classification of theatrical space that displays its many levels and layers, including physical and dramatic, deictic and diegetic, *ad oculos* and *am phantasma*. Further justification for the idea that ancient tragedy enacts a variety of spaces and times has been offered by Wiles (1997: 18), who showed that the distinction between theatrical, scenic, and dramatic space that applies to modern theater breaks down in the case of ancient theater. In the latter, the scarcity of props—the signifiers that identify the scenic space—allows for that space to be shaped by the language and movement of the actors and the chorus.[9] Subsequently, Wiles (1997: 121) introduces the notion of "meta-space" to refer to the alternative space that, in contrast to the referential space set in front of a house, cave, or temple, is constructed through the language and movements of actors. In the case of *Medea*, Wiles suggests that the Symplegades function

[9] The distinction between theatrical, scenic, and dramatic space comes from Ubersfeld 1977 and Issacharoff 1981.

as an alternative space that constantly interacts with the scenic space of the Corinthian setting.[10] Just as the crossroad where Oedipus and Laius met in the past of the plot lies at the core of the dramatic development of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the crossing of the Symplegades provides *Medea* with a spatial focus constantly re-invoked and revisited by the participants in the drama.

Thematic reasons for the spatial and performative prominence of the Symplegades are many and involve various referential levels. First, the passage through the rocks metonymically stands for the journey of the *Argo* and, by extension, for the marriage initiated by that journey. In the prologue, the nurse's contrary-to-fact wish that the *Argo* had never crossed the Symplegades (1–6) is followed by the no less counterfactual statement that Medea would then not have sailed to Iolcus and Corinth (6–13). The Symplegades epitomize the journey of the *Argo* that itself symbolizes Medea's marriage. The latter equivalence literally expresses the metaphor of marriage as a sea journey that appears elsewhere in Greek tragedy[11] and which Medea invokes in her first speech to promote a sense of community between the Corinthian women and herself.[12] Through that series of equivalences, the Symplegades come to stand metonymically for Medea's marriage. The transgression of cosmic order to which their passage amounted (3–4) ominously foreshadows the destruction of the relation between Medea and Jason.

The choral odes further elaborate on the symbolic relation between the Symplegades and the marriage by metaphorically connecting the rocks to key moments of it including the wedding procession, the wedding night, and the birth of children. In the first stasimon, the chorus describes the sea journey in terms of leaving the father's house (οἴκων πατρίων, 432) for a foreign land (ξέναι...χθονί, 435–36). In that context, the Symplegades are envisioned as the double doors (διδύμους... πέτρας, 433–35) that delineate the threshold crossed (ὁρίσασα, 433–34) by the bride to go to the house of the groom, an analogy visually enforced by Medea's simultaneous entrance through the doors of the house that she used to share with Jason.[13] More distinctively

[10] Burnett 1973: 16 already intuited the performative and visual importance of the myth of the Argonauts, which she describes as "[hanging] like a great painted scene behind this play."

[11] Seaford 2005: 115n5 lists among other examples Eur. *Hipp.* 732 ff., A. *Niobe* fr. 154a Radt, and S. *OT* 420–23.

[12] Cf. *Med.* 238–40, where Medea describes the troubles of the bride—any bride—forced to discover new "customs and ways" (ἤθη καὶ νόμους, 238). By doing so, Medea manages to cast her foreign status as a paradigm for the female condition and hence to secure the unconditional support of the Corinthian women.

[13] On the juxtaposition of the words and movements of the actors at that moment, see above.

sexual connotations are conjured up in the parodos, when the passage through the straits is described as a night event (νύχιον, 211–12) and the Bosphorus referred to as the "key" (κλῆιδ', 213) of the Black Sea. The passage closely follows a reference to Jason as the "evil bridegroom betrayer of [Medea's] bed" (τὸν ἐν λέχει προδόταν κακόνυμφον, 206), and key imagery is used elsewhere in Euripides and Aristophanes to refer to defloration; it is thus tempting to follow Rush Rehm in his reading of the lines as a metaphor for the wedding night.[14] Finally, in the fifth stasimon, the chorus juxtaposes an evocation of Medea's vain labor pains (1261–64) to the last mention of her passage through the Symplegades. Here, as Rehm suggests, the straits seem to be linked to Medea's body and to offer a metaphor for childbirth.[15] The association between the Argo journey and the marriage of Jason and Medea goes far beyond chronological coincidence. Not only is the marriage metonymically equated to the sea journey, but its most important components are metaphorically tied to the passage through the Symplegades. Medea's marriage to Jason chronologically, metonymically, and metaphorically coincides with the journey of the *Argo*.

A SYMBOLIC REVISION OF THE JOURNEY OF THE *ARGO*

The symbolic equation of the marriage and the passage through the Symplegades bears important implications for the logic of Medea's revenge. I mentioned earlier that, in Medea's view, Jason's new marriage amounts to a destruction of their bond. Her revenge, especially the infanticide, precisely enacts that view. As Christopher Gill (1996: 168–69) has emphasized, by killing the children, Medea destroys the tangible proof of her relationship with Jason; by causing their death, she acts out in the most literal and irreversible manner the vanity of his oaths (496–98) and, ultimately, of their shared past. Yet the revenge involves a second spatial and referential level. Since the marriage chronologically, metonymically, and metaphorically coincides with the journey of the *Argo*, the revenge unfolds as a new journey, a revised version

[14] Rehm 2002: 254, who quotes Eur. *Hipp.* 538–40 and Ar. *Thesm.* 976. In the former passage, Eros is referred to as "the holder of the keys (κληιδοῦχον) to the beloved chambers (θαλάμων) of Aphrodite." The allusion to defloration is reinforced by the fact that, as Barrett 1966 points out ad loc., the word θάλαμοι hints at the use of the term to refer to a bridal chamber. Ar. *Thesm.* 976 praises Hera "who holds the keys of marriage" (κλῆιδας γάμου φυλάττει). On Aristophanes' sexual use of gates and passageways, see Henderson 1991: 137–38.

[15] Rehm 2002: 254. Those lines describe the crossing of the straits more violently than its previous evocations. The violence implicit in the word ἐσβολάν (from εἰσβάλλω, "throw into, invade") may mirror both Medea's pains in childbirth and her brutal annihilation of their outcome.

of the Argonauts' story.[16] Six moments can be identified in that revision of the heroic saga.

(1) At the beginning of the play, Medea finds herself in a critical situation. The circumstances of her departure from Colchis, combined with Jason's marriage to the princess, place her in a state of utter isolation, epitomized by her exile decreed by Creon. Several nautical images uttered by Medea herself (257–58, 278–79), the nurse (78–79), and the sympathetic chorus (361–63, 442–43, 647–48) compare her to a ship full of bilge-water (78–79) and tossed in the midst of a rough sea, with no place to anchor (μεθορμίσασθαι, 258 and 443) or to achieve a safe landing (ἔκβασις, 279). While Medea's enemies have confidently "spread their sails" (278–79), she finds herself in a surging sea (κλύδωνα, 362) where it is difficult or impossible to find a path (ἄπορον, 362; δυσπέρατον, 647–48). By challenging his relation to Medea and therefore questioning the process that brought her to Greece, Jason's engagement to the Corinthian princess has put Medea back into the turbulent waters that accompanied her passage from Colchis to Greece.

(2) Medea, however, quickly takes the situation into her own hands. Once she has managed to postpone the exile for a day, she starts deploying her revenge verbally in the *agōn* by uttering words that simultaneously bring her solace and hurt Jason (473–74). As Gill (1996: 154–74) has shown, the *agōn* brings to the fore the incompatibility of Jason's and Medea's views of their ties: she sees as reciprocal and binding *charis* (508, 526) what he considers a temporary and practical association. Because those ties were initiated and defined by the events in Colchis, the *agōn* also involves a debate about the past that gives Medea the opportunity to provide her own, unorthodox version of the events. Jason, on the one hand, downplays Medea's agency in the Argo saga and attributes the success of his expedition to the help of Aphrodite, "the only one of gods and mortals that brought safety to [his] voyage" (526–28). His version emphasizes his autonomy (ἐγώ, 526) and, as Deborah Boedeker (1991: 106) has pointed out, casts the Argo expedition as a heroic quest in the epic or lyric model. Just as Odysseus is assisted by Athena in his search

[16] I obviously disagree with Barlow 1971: 97–98, 105 and Kurtz 1985: 483, whose studies of Euripidean imagery deem the nautical metaphors in *Medea* stereotyped and irrelevant. Other commentators, including Musurillo 1966: 67–68 and Boedeker 1997: 130, stress the relevance of the nautical imagery to the background of the plot and the expedition of the Argonauts. My argument goes further and suggests that those metaphors amount to a revised enactment of the Argo journey. The engagement of the play with the Argo saga has been recognized by Rehm 1989: 98 and Boedeker 1991: 104–09, who suggests that Medea's revenge negates the old glorious epic of the *Argo*. I develop that insight by showing that Medea's revenge stages a revised version of the Argo saga.

for Ithaca in the *Odyssey*, Jason receives the assistance of Aphrodite in his quest for the Golden Fleece. His version of it comes close to that of Pindar's fourth *Pythian Ode*, which too emphasizes the help that Aphrodite gave to Jason and presents Medea as a victim of the spells of love (Pi. *P.* 4.213–19). Medea, on the other hand, offers a version of the journey that jeopardizes Jason's heroic status and emphasizes the help that she brought him (475–87). First-person verbs pile up as she argues that she saved him from the bulls (ἔσωσα, 476), killed the dragon (κτείνασ', 482), betrayed the house of her father (προδοῦσ', 483), came to Iolcus (ἱκόμην, 484), killed Pelias (ἀπέκτειν', 486), and ruined his whole house (ἐξεῖλον, 487). If mentioned at all, Jason only occurs as a passive object of her actions (πεμφθέντα, 478; σπεροῦντα, 479). In that version of the Argo journey, Jason's agency is displaced; the heroic role is filled by Medea. Indeed, Jason fully senses the implications of the speech, its performative power, and the danger that it raises for his heroic reputation. Before launching into his own version of the story, he metaphorically casts himself as a steersman (οἰακοστρόφον, 523) who had better use the very fringes of his sail (ἄκροισι λαίφους κρασπέδοις, 524) to escape from Medea's lashing tongue (ὑπεκδραμεῖν τὴν σὴν στόμαργον... γλωσσαλγίαν, 524–25). The relevance of the image goes far beyond the commonness of seafaring metaphors with reference to political leadership (so Mastronarde, 2002 ad 523). Instead, it fully acknowledges the implications of Medea's speech and the danger raised by her voice. In contrast with the tale that had praised Jason's glorious sea-voyage and return to Iolcus, Medea has started to present a version that metaphorically puts him into dangerous waters, surrounded by sea-creatures ready to devour him.

(3) The next scene with Aegeus yields one further element in the preparation of the vengeful journey staged by Medea. Coming back from Delphi where he interrogated the oracle about his sterility, the Athenian king agrees to grant asylum to Medea and to protect her against Jason and Creon in all circumstances (719–45). As such, the scene is an indispensable element of the plot since it counteracts Medea's earlier isolation and the exile decreed by Creon.[17] Yet its implications go beyond that practical element. As Roger Dunkle (1969: 99–101) emphasizes, Aegeus functions as a precise complement to Jason. The relation that Medea builds with him closely enacts the conception of marriage that she has just developed in the *agōn*: a reciprocal relation of *xenia*, complete with oaths that make up for those broken by Jason (731–55) and a promise that Aegeus will sire children (714–18), but deprived of the erotic attraction that Jason had emphasized in his own version of the

[17] About the structural function of the Aegeus scene, see Grethlein 2003: 335–45.

story. Accordingly, Aegeus is a key element in Medea's revised version of the journey, since he will be the harbor (λιμήν, 769) to which she will attach her stern-cable (πρυμνήτην κάλων, 770). Finally, Aegeus's willingness to utter solemn oaths, complete with self-directed curses, reasserts the performative value of language jeopardized by Jason's broken oaths. From then on, Medea's revised version of the Argo saga rises to a new level, and the verbal metaphors become acted out in symbolic deeds.

(4) Once Aegeus's protection is secured, Medea can fully deploy her revenge which, as she informs the chorus (772–93), now involves killing Jason's bride, anyone who touches the princess, and her own children.[18] As Medea describes it, the triple murder is geared toward preserving her honor and hurting Jason to the full by destroying his house, his present children, and the hope that he may sire new ones (803–06). Yet the murder of the princess also symbolically revisits the story of the Golden Fleece and the first moments of the relationship of Medea and Jason.

The princess dies poisoned by gifts—a delicate robe and a wreath of beaten gold (λεπτόν τε πέπλον καὶ πλόκον χρυσήλατον, 786)—that Medea has the children deliver to her, allegedly to win over the princess and have her convince Creon to revoke the boys' exile (942–51). The gift-giving process and the gifts themselves bear close resemblance to Medea's version of the events in Colchis. Once again, Jason will reach his goals—the revocation of the children's exile—thanks to the help of women—the princess, and ultimately Medea. His tranquil confidence in his ability to convince the princess "if she is indeed a woman like the rest" (945) ironically acknowledges that the events about to unfold reiterate past experiences. His begging for a "favor" (χάριν, 1155) from the princess mirrors the favor (χάριν, 508) that Medea claims to have done for him. The gifts themselves are reminiscent of the Golden Fleece. Like the Fleece, they come from Medea's paternal house (Ἥλιος πατρὸς πατήρ, 954–55); moreover, as Louis Gernet (1981: 131–40) and Melissa Mueller (2001: 490) have noted, the juxtaposition of the golden crown (786, [949], 978, 984, 1160) and a cloth object mirrors the composite nature of the Golden Fleece. By accepting the gifts, Jason unwittingly lets Medea reiterate her gift of the Golden Fleece and enact her—as opposed to his own—version of the events in Colchis.

While the gift process confirms Medea's version of the Argo saga, its outcome—the death of the princess—dramatically revisits the wedding that followed the capture of the Golden Fleece. Aside from resembling the Fleece, the gifts are also a dowry, "wedding gifts" (φερνάς, 956). Accordingly, the princess's donning of the crown and robe is described as a perverted wedding

[18] About the motivation for Medea's change of plans, see part III below.

scene that symbolically revises the wedding of Medea and Jason. The princess acts as a substitute for a young Medea.[19] She is Jason's bride (νύμφη, 1066; cf. 1137, 1179) just as Medea once was (νύμφα, 150); she wears the attire that Medea probably donned on her wedding day; her foot is "milk-white" (παλλεύκωι, 1164) like Medea's neck (πάλλευκον δέρην, 30); and she looks at Jason with the same eagerness (πρόθυμον, 1146) that Medea displayed when she followed him from Colchis to Greece (πρόθυμος, 485). By killing the princess, Medea does not only annihilate Jason's hopes to build a new family tied to the royal house (Rehm 1989: 107–8 and 111–12; Rehm 1994: 103–5), she also stages a revised version of her own wedding that emphasizes her autonomy as gift giver and enacts the consequences that, according to her, result from Jason's remarriage. The young, innocent Medea inflamed by love for Jason has been annihilated and transformed into a bride of Hades.

(5) Once the princess and Medea's younger self are dead, only the children remain as traces of the past. Their death therefore logically follows from that of the princess, a link sensed by the chorus in the fourth stasimon (976–79) and emphasized in Medea's monologue where the thought that the princess is perishing (νύμφη τύραννος ὄλλυται, 1066) abruptly puts an end to her hesitations. Like the princess's death, the infanticide symbolically acts out Medea's interpretation of Jason's remarriage. Earlier in the *agōn*, she had emphasized that Jason's broken oaths make her help in Colchis a vain gesture (μάτην, 497). That vanity is mirrored by the chorus's description of Medea's vain childbirth pains (μάταν, 1261, 1262) as she kills her sons off-stage. The filicide symbolically revises the Argo saga by destroying the most obvious proof of Medea's and Jason's shared past.

(6) The final encounter between Medea and Jason both acknowledges and explores the implications of that symbolic revision. After announcing to Jason that she will bury the children, institute a cult in their honor, and go to Athens, Medea prophesies that he will encounter a death worthy of his deeds and have his head struck by a remnant of the Argo (Ἀργοῦς κάρα σὸν λειψάνωι πεπληγμένος, 1387). While it is unclear whether the story was traditional or invented by Euripides (Mastronarde 2002: 55), it sharply echoes the opening lines of the play.[20] The participle πεπληγμένος comes from the

[19] The similarities between Medea and the princess have been noted by Boedeker 1997: 143, who interprets them as a demonstration of Medea's power to assimilate the features of other characters in her story. My interpretation of the princess as a substitute for Medea coincides with Pasolini's reinterpretation of Euripides' tragedy in his 1969 film, where Medea gives the princess the attire that she wore when she met Jason in Colchis.

[20] For a detailed analysis of the formal correspondences between the first and last parts of *Medea*, see Cunningham 1954: 157.

same verb πλήσσω "strike" as the toponym Symplegades (Συμπληγάδες), whose occurrence in the prologue of Medea is its first extant attestation. The ring composition thus casts the death foreseen by Medea as a suitable though delayed response of the Crashing Rocks to Jason's initial transgression.[21] Jason too senses that the outcome of the drama counteracts the Argo expedition. Not only does he regret having brought Medea from Colchis (1329–32), but in his two final lines (which may be the final lines of the play if 1415–19 are indeed spurious)[22] he wishes that he had never begotten the children rather than witness their murder. The grammatical structure of his contrary-to-fact wish (οὓς μήποτ' ἐγὼ φύσας ὄφελον, 1413) closely parallels the nurse's initial wish that the *Argo* had never crossed the Symplegades (Εἴθ' ὤφελ' Ἀργοῦς μὴ διαπτάσθαι σκάφος, 1) and provides a suitable closure to the tragic plot. Medea's revenge has fulfilled the nurse's wish and symbolically negated the Argo journey.

The violent exchange between Medea and Jason contains one further detail that brings that new version of the story even closer to an utter revision of the past. After singling out Medea as the most hateful woman of all, Jason describes her as "having a nature more savage than Tyrrhenian Scylla" (1342–43). Shortly after (if the lines are not spurious), Medea coolly acknowledges the comparison and argues that her deeds are a legitimate retaliation for the way Jason treated her (1358–59).[23] The two references to Scylla are short and include little characterization except for her savagery (ἀγριωτέραν, 1343) and location in the Tyrrhenian sea. The poetic pedigree of the monster, however, indicates that it participates in Medea's revision of the Argo journey. Like the Symplegades, Scylla and her counterpart Charybdis delineate sea narrows, an attribute apparent as early as the *Odyssey* and emphasized here by the epithet Τυρσηνίς, coined after the sea that spans the north of Sicily and west of Italy, and ends at the Straits of Messina. Moreover, the rocks crossed

[21] As Mastronarde 2002: 55 notes, the motif of Jason's deadly stroke by a remnant of the *Argo* parallels a tale transmitted by Diodorus Siculus, according to which a hunter is killed in his sleep by the head of a boar that he has suspended from a tree as an impious dedication to himself (D.S. 4.22.3). Just as the boar is the hunter's source of pride and glory, so is the *Argo* the guarantor of Jason's fame. The fact that he dies struck by a remnant of the ship matches the inglorious version of the Argo saga staged by Medea.

[22] For a discussion of the authenticity of the lines, see Mastronarde 2002 ad loc.

[23] Aesthetic considerations about the "flatness" of the relative clause ἣ Τυρσηνὸν ὤικησεν πέδον and the "impropriety" of the word πέδον to describe Scylla's habitat, have led Arthur Verrall, followed by James Diggle, to excise line 1359 and take the καί of 1358 as adverbial. While the aesthetic judgement of modern editors may not be a sufficient argument to excise the line, my argument does not depend on its authenticity.

by Jason whether they are called Symplegades, Cyaneae, or Planctae and the straits of Charybdis and Scylla are often featured as structural alternatives. In the *Odyssey*, Circe describes the Planctae, on the one hand, and Charybdis and Scylla, on the other, as two possible routes that Odysseus could take after passing the island of the Sirens (*Od.* 12.55–126).[24] Two centuries after Euripides, Apollonius of Rhodes places the Symplegades against Charybdis, Scylla, and the Planctae in mirroring positions on the Argonauts' way to and from Colchis (Vian and Delage 2002: III, 41). In the context of the nautical "meta-space" of Euripides' tragedy, Medea's assimilation to Scylla amounts to a replacement of the Symplegades with a new set of straits.

That assimilation, moreover, does not occur only at the linguistic level. As Wiles (1997: 122) suggests, Medea's final position in a dragon-driven chariot, overlooking Jason from the top of the *skēnē*, and holding two corpses in her arms, provides a visual counterpart for the comparison.[25] The verbal image is fully enacted on stage: the dragons are reminiscent of the fish or snake tails characteristic of Scylla in visual arts, while Medea's lofty position and the bodies that she holds parallel the monster's location in a high cliff and the sailors that she snatches in the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 12.73–84 and 12.245–57).[26] By the end of the play, Medea has indeed *become* a Scylla and Jason stands below as a helpless Odysseus whom she has bitten (δήξεται, 1370) to the quick.

The implications of Medea's transformation are twofold. First, it contributes to the challenge that her appropriation of heroic values raises for Jason's own heroism. The two sets of straits convey opposite connotations. The Symplegades or Planctae are a locus of heroic glory, one of the most famous moments of the Argo journey. In the *Odyssey,* after Circe singles out the *Argo* as the only ship ever able to sail past the Planctae, she calls her "who is in all men's minds" (πᾶσι μέλουσα, *Od.* 12.70), an expression reminiscent of the phrase πᾶσι... ἀνθρώποισι μέλω (*Od.* 9.19–20) that Odysseus uses in conjunction with a reference to his heaven-reaching glory (κλέος, *Od.* 9.20) at

[24] The structural equivalence of the Planctae on the one hand and Charybdis and Scylla on the other, are further emphasized by verbal and narratological similarities in Circe's description, on which see Hopman 2005: 62.

[25] The evidence for dragons or serpents pulling the chariot comes from the B scholium to *Med.* 1320 and from the iconography of South Italian vase-painting, where the theme of Medea's escape on the chariot of the Sun first occurs (and becomes popular) after 430 B.C.E. See Cunningham 1954: 152 for a discussion of the scholia and Sourvinou-Inwood 1997 for a careful evaluation of the visual evidence to reconstruct the staging of the tragedy.

[26] For Scylla's representation in the visual arts, see *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* s.v. Scylla.

the beginning of the *apologoi*. From a formulaic standpoint, the phrase πᾶσι μέλουσα is semantically connected to heroic glory. Jason's successful passage through the Planctae is one of his claims to immortal fame as celebrated in epic poetry. In the exodos of *Medea,* Jason himself alludes to that epic past by calling *Argo* "beautiful of prow" (καλλίπρωιρον, 1335), a rare ornamental epithet reminiscent of epic diction. Conversely, the passage through Scylla and Charybdis is one of the lowest moments in Odysseus's journey, when neither his wits nor his strength can save his men from the impending danger that becomes "the most pitiful scene that [his] eyes have looked on in [his] sufferings" (*Od.* 12.258–59).[27] While the Planctae or Symplegades traversed by Jason are a traditional locus of heroic glory, Scylla and Charybdis define narrows through which even the most cunning hero of all cannot find a safe passage. Medea's transformation into Scylla at the end of the tragedy deals the final blow to Jason's traditional heroic status.[28]

Moreover, that transformation brings the revision of Medea's and Jason's story very close to a literal nullification of the past. In the previous scenes, Medea had first verbally revised the Argo journey in the *agōn* and then acted out that revision through symbolic substitutes, including the princess and the children. Her metamorphosis into Scylla—and Jason's simultaneous transformation into a helpless Odysseus—brings that revision to a new level that involves the actual participants of the past events. I showed earlier that the Symplegades and the straits of Charybdis and Scylla are alternative paths, hence incompatible spaces from the *Odyssey* onward. Since the Symplegades are metaphorically and metonymically associated with the marriage, Medea's transformation into Scylla symbolically negates the past that she once shared with Jason. While history can never be undone, Medea's revenge comes very close to such nullification. Her revenge acts out a gradual negation of the Argo journey that first involves words, then symbolic substitutes, and finally the original actors. To that extent, her palinode fully exploits and demonstrates the capacity of drama to symbolically re-enact, and thereby modify, events of the past.

[27] About the Scylla episode as Odysseus's failure to use a heroic, Iliadic strategy, see Hopman 2005: 62–66.

[28] Jason's loss of his heroic status was already pointed out by Burnett 1973, who stressed that "behind the worldly oath-breaker of the visible play there stands always the larger and more disturbing figure of the hero who has sullied his quest" (17). I disagree, however, with Burnett's idea that Jason was never a full hero in Greek poetic traditions. The diction of *Odyssey* 12 makes it clear that he was.

AN ABORTED EPIC

Medea's revised version of the Argo saga at least partly fulfills the hopes expressed by the chorus in the first stasimon. The poetic tradition, indeed, has been reconfigured—στρέψουσι φᾶμαι. Yet that palinode may not be enough to bring a "life of good fame" (εὔκλειαν . . . βιοτάν, 415–16) and "honor" (τιμά, 417–18) to the "female race." As Gregory Nagy (1999: 16–17 and passim) has shown, the notion of glory (κλέος) is intrinsically connected to the genre of epic poetry in ancient Greek culture. That connection is exemplified in the first stasimon, whose meter, dialect, and intertext make it clear that the chorus thinks of Medea's glory in terms of epic poetry.[29] The dactylo-epitrites of the first stanza are reminiscent of dactylic hexameters (Page 1938: 183–85); the Ionic contraction of the infinitive ὑμνεῦσαι (423) may refer to the dialect of the misogynist poetry of Archilochos, Hipponax, and Semonides that the chorus hopes to see put to an end (Page 1938 ad 423), but it also connotes Homeric diction; the phrase θέσπιν ἀοιδάν (425) echoes the diction of the *Odyssey*, where it refers to the "divine song" performed by Phemios (*Od.* 1.328) and to the "divine gift of singing" of Demodokos (*Od.* 8.498). If Medea's revenge is to bring honor to women, it needs to initiate an epic tradition in her praise.

While tragedy can of course not morph into epic, it may include some proleptic references to epic songs to be performed in praise of its main characters. That capacity is exemplified in Euripides' *Alcestis*. Alcestis's willingness to die in lieu of her husband is described as a female equivalent for what Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991) has called the "beautiful death" of epic warriors. Just as Sarpedon and other Iliadic heroes fall in their prime like trees to the ground (*Il.* 16.482–84), so Alcestis dies in bloom, at the peak of her "flowering youth" (*Alc.* 471–72). As Achilles, Agamemnon and their ilk compete to win honor and become the "best of the Achaeans" (*Il.* 1.91, 2.768, etc.), so does Alcestis's death make her worthy of "honor" (τιμῆς, *Alc.* 434) and the title of "best woman" (γυναῖκ' ἀρίσταν, *Alc.* 442). Accordingly, the chorus suggests that just like Achilles, Alcestis will become the subject of epic songs. In the second stasimon that immediately follows her death, they announce that poets will "sing her *kleos*" (κλέοντες, 447) both "to the seven-stringed lyre and in hymns without the lyre" (446–47)—that is, in both lyric and epic songs. Moreover, those songs will involve the participation of a large audience, including the Athenian spectators, since they will be performed both

[29] See Boedeker 1991: 108n53 for a brief analysis of the songs envisaged in the first stasimon as epic poetry.

in Sparta and in "rich and blessed Athens" (452). According to the chorus, Alcestis's death will leave behind epic and lyric songs for singers to perform (453–54) and for the whole Greek community to echo and embrace.

The hopes enthusiastically voiced by the Corinthian women after they hear Medea's initial plan to kill Jason seem to rely on a similar scenario to the one described in the second stasimon of *Alcestis*. That plan, indeed, seems most suitable to initiate an epic tradition since it shares many similarities with the deployment of Achilles' wrath in the *Iliad*. As Ruby Blondell (1999: 163–64) has pointed out, the nurse's opening description of Medea recalls many features of Achilles' grief at Patroclus's death. Medea does not eat (24; cf. *Il.* 19.205–14); she lies prostrate on the ground (27–28; cf. *Il.* 18.26–27); she retreats from her friends (27–33); and she raises the fear that she might kill herself (43; cf. *Il.* 18.32–34). In the words of the nurse, Medea's insensibility to the advice of her friends assimilates her to "a rock or the surging sea" (ὡς δὲ πέτρος ἢ θαλάσσιος / κλύδων, 28–29), a comparison reaching back through literary history to Patroclus's complaint about Achilles' harshness (*Il.* 16.33–35) (Mastronarde 2002 ad 28–29). As Gill (1996: 154–74) has noted, Medea's acts and choices later in the play confirm her psychological resemblance to Achilles. Like Achilles, Medea makes the choice of a difficult but honorable life, rather than a prosperous and easy one (598–99; cf. *Il.* 9.410–16); she refuses material compensation for the offense to her honor (616–18; cf. *Il.* 9.378–87); she passionately debates with her *thumos* over what she should do (1056; cf. *Il.* 9.644–48); and she is willing to choose a mode of revenge that implies her own death, if not a physical death like Achilles (*Il.* 18.95–96 and 114–16), at least an emotional one (1028 and 1036–37). Until the infanticide, Medea's revenge has much in common with the development of Achilles' wrath, thus justifying the chorus's hope that she may become the subject of an epic tradition.

The infanticide brings that possibility to an abrupt ending. Such a deed does not fit into the subject matter of epic. Achilles kills, but does not shed his kindred's blood. As Richard Seaford (1994: 11–13) has emphasized, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* depict a society characterized by the solidarity of the household and therefore tend to exclude stories of intra-familial killing. Homeric accounts of the death of Agamemnon and its aftermath, for instance, downplay Clytemnestra's role and do not mention Orestes' matricide.[30] The non-Homeric character of Medea's infanticide is fully revealed in the exodos, whose

[30] About the Odyssean accounts of the return of Agamemnon and their contextual specificities, see Garvie 1986: x and Heubeck et al. 1988: 16–17, with further bibliography on the Atreidae-paradigm in the *Odyssey*.

progression can be read as a negation of *Iliad* 24. Both involve the encounter of a murderer (Achilles or Medea) and the father of the victim(s) (Priam or Jason), a discussion about the corpses, and provisions for their funerals. Yet those three themes receive opposite treatments. The *Iliad* closes off its announced subject matter—the anger of Achilles—on a scene of reconciliation, physical proximity, and shared grief (*Il.* 24.507–12); conversely, the final scene of *Medea* brings the tension and physical distance between Medea and Jason to a climax, as she stands on the top of the *skēnē* far away from him and proclaims that she killed the children solely to hurt him (1398). Achilles' empathy with Priam leads him to grant the old man's request, accept material compensation for the death of Patroclus, and return Hector's corpse (*Il.* 24.560–70); in contrast, when Jason begs Medea to let him bury (1377) or at least touch (1399–1400; 1402–03) the corpses of his sons, she implacably refuses to do so (1378–83) and dismisses his supplications as empty words (1404). Achilles' reconciliation with Priam leads to the celebration of grandiose funerals that gather the whole Trojan community around Hector's body (*Il.* 24.692–804); Medea announces that she will bury the children "with [her] own hands" (1378)—hence probably alone—in the temple of Hera Akraia, a sanctuary located in Perachora at the fringes of Corinthian territory. Medea's intention to take the corpses there excludes Jason and the Corinthian community from the funerals and involves a very different burial from the emphatically public funerals celebrated for Hector in the *Iliad*.[31] Medea's prophecy sanctions the departure of her revenge from the model of Achilles and closes off the hope that it may inspire an epic tradition.

Just as the plot of Medea's revenge progressively departs from the story of the *Iliad*, so does the evolution of her internal audience confirm that no one will be there to listen to and perpetuate an epic tradition about her. The audience's fundamental role in the performance of Greek poetry, especially praise poetry, is now widely recognized, thanks in particular to the work of Bruno Gentili (1988). The indispensable interaction between poet and audience is epitomized in *Medea* through the intertext of the first stasimon. The phrase θέσπιν ἀοιδάν that the chorus uses to refer to the "divine gift of song" (425) echoes the highly meta-poetic passage of the *Odyssey* when Odysseus challenges Demodokos to sing the fall of Troy exactly as it happened (θέσπιν ἀοιδήν, *Od.* 8.498). Subsequently, as he hears Demodokos describe the trick

[31] The rituals to be instituted in Corinth (γῆι δὲ τῆιδε, 1381) are physically disconnected from the tomb in Perachora and involve atonement, not burial. Dunn 1994: 109–11 suggests that one of the reasons why Medea buries the children in Perachora, far from the cult place in Corinth, is to make the place of burial inaccessible to Jason.

of the wooden horse and the sack of Troy (two episodes where he played a major role), Odysseus weeps uncontrollably and identifies with his own victims (*Od.* 8.521–34). The phrase θέσπιν ἀοιδάν thus conjures a passage deeply rooted in literary history that bases epic performance on the close emotional connection between bard and audience.

In contrast, the evolution of Medea's internal audience makes it clear that the infanticide leaves her bereft of potential listeners to her praise. As the plot of the revenge departs from the Homeric model, so does the initial sympathy of the internal audience move towards alienation. Initially, Medea enjoys a full, unconditional support from the Corinthian women, who affirm that she will "justly pay back" (ἐνδίκως γὰρ ἐκτείσηι, 267) Jason for his offence, chastise his guile (410–14), and effectively curse him (659–62). Their attitude changes radically after the disclosure of Medea's revised plan (772–810). After a vain attempt to dissuade her (811–13), the chorus launches into an ode that extends their own moral estrangement to the implied Athenian audience.[32] As Mastronarde (2002 ad 824–65) has shown, the praise of Athenian wisdom (σοφίαν, 828–29) and moderate Eros (835–45) implies a systematic contrast with Medea's dangerous cleverness (σοφή, 305) and destructive desires (627–62). While Alcestis is praised by the chorus and notionally the whole Greek world, Medea finds herself alienated from both the chorus and the implied Athenian audience.

Musical images confirm that Medea's moral alienation from her internal and implied audience voids the possibility of an epic tradition celebrating her. While Alcestis leaves a song for all the Greeks to hear and hum, Medea's palinode explicitly becomes out of tune with her audience. The musical harmony mentioned in the third stasimon as a distinctive feature of Athens (832–34) implicitly suggests that the song left by Medea will not blend into the local tradition. As the revenge proceeds, that discordance becomes increasingly apparent. As the tutor points out, Medea's scream of anguish upon hearing that her sons' exile has been revoked "does not sing" (οὐ ξυνωιδά, 1008) with his news. Later, her response to the report of the princess's death, which she finds a "most beautiful tale" (κάλλιστον... μῦθον, 1127) that she enjoys hearing (χαίρεις κλύουσα, 1131), arises the indignation of the messenger. Whether she cries at good news or rejoices at bad, Medea's interaction with her internal audience contrasts with the emotional and musical connection between the epic bard and his listeners. That departure is confirmed *a contrario*

[32] The notion of "implied audience" mirrors that of "implied author" and was developed by Wayne Booth (1983) to refer to the fictional audience described and constructed by the play.

by the chorus's final mention of "the bed of women, cause of many sufferings" (1291–92). Simultaneously a direct reference to and re-enactment of the misogynic tradition deplored in the first stasimon, the chorus' expression sanctions the end of the hope to see the poetry of Hesiod, Archilochus, and Hipponax replaced by an epic tradition in praise of women.

The increasing distance between Medea's palinode and the genre of epic reaches its climax in the final laments embedded in the tragedy. Traditionally, laments are a type of publicly performed songs closely tied to praise poetry (Alexiou 2002: 182). At the end of the *Iliad*, the laments for Hector simultaneously assert the community of the living, grant eternal *kleos* to the dead, and announce the epic tradition that will rise in his honor. The three solo songs performed by Andromache (24.725–45), Hecuba (24.748–59), and Helen (24.762–75) are followed by antiphonal response from the community (24.746; 24.760; 24.776) and thematically resemble the women's greetings to Hector in the homecoming of Book 6 (Richardson 1993 ad *Il.* 24.718–76). The laments embedded in *Iliad* 24 point toward the future performance of the epic itself.[33] In contrast, the laments at the end of *Medea* are isolated utterances, bereft of the community that would bring everlasting honor to the dead. While Medea's farewell to her children (1021–40) includes traditional lament themes, it nevertheless perverts the genre, since it is performed before the death by the future murderer and is devoid of antiphonal responses (Mastronarde 2002 ad 1030). That same isolation characterizes the laments and dirges performed by Creon (θρήνων, 1211), Medea (θρήνει, 1249), and Jason (θρηνεῖς, 1396; θρηνῶ, 1409), as well as the funerals and hero cult that Medea plans for her children. Unlike the aetiologies for the cult of Alcestis (*Alc.* 445–54) or Hippolytus (*Hipp.* 1423–30), Medea's prophecy does not mention songs to be performed in honor of the children, an omission all the more striking as the actual cult seems to have included dirges and laments.[34] In its tragic stylization, the cult for the children is featured as a silent ritual. Medea's revenge arouses not praise but mournful silence from her internal audience. The infanticide and the manner of the children's burial irremedi-

[33] The generic relation of lament and epic was first emphasized in 1974 by Alexiou (re-edited in Alexiou 2002), and has recently received much attention. For a stimulating survey of the scholarship on the question, see Dué 2006: 30–56. Comparative evidence on the fluidity of the boundaries between the genres of lament and epic poetry has recently been adduced by Aida Vidan 2003 in her analysis of South Slavic traditions.

[34] For recent work on the cult of Medea's children, see Pache 2004: 9–48. Evidence for the songs performed in that context include Philostratus's mention of a "mystical and inspired lament" (*Her.* 53.4) and the scholium to *Medea* 1379, which refers to a "mournful festival."

ably thwart the chorus's hope that Medea's revenge will give rise to an epic tradition favorable to women.

If the infanticide prevents Medea from becoming the focus of such an epic tradition, why then does she not follow her initial intention to kill Jason? The mixed motivations mentioned in the play suggest that Medea's change of plan is at least partly dictated by the mythical tradition. To be sure, psychological causes can be invoked. In the second part of this article, I noted the psychological necessity that ties the death of the children to Jason's remarriage. In Medea's logic, as Gill (1996: 154–74) has shown, the destruction of the *philia* between the parents necessarily results in the death of the children who embody that bond.[35] That reasoning underlies Medea's final accusation that Jason's "sickness" was the cause of the children's death (1364). In her view, the infanticide brings to its logical conclusion a chain of causes and effects initiated by Jason. Moreover, the language (803–06 and 1398) and organization of the play make it clear that Medea sees the infanticide as the most effective way to harm Jason. Its revengeful power is emphasized by the timing of the disclosure of her new plan right after the Aegeus scene (790–806). Focusing at it does on Aegeus's sterility and his hopes for paternity, the conversation emphasizes the importance for Greek males to father legitimate children and perpetuate the family line. Medea's new plan, which she describes to the chorus immediately after Aegeus's departure, applies Aegeus's concerns to Jason's situation and involves the full extinction of the latter's progeny, both present and future (803–06). Although a striking peripeteia, the infanticide plan is carefully prepared for and grounded in Medea's understanding of her situation.

Yet other scenes, in particular Medea's great monologue, suggest that psychological motivations could have been dismissed to let the children live. When Medea contemplates the pain that the murder will bring her (1046–48) and the future joys of which she will deprive herself (1058), she moves beyond these psychological considerations and ends with an argument of external necessity: since "at any rate, it is necessary that [the children] die" (πάντως σφ' ἀνάγκη κατθανεῖν· ἐπεὶ δὲ χρή..., 1062 = 1240), she will perform the deed.[36]

[35] Except for Gill's contribution, Medea's change of plans, although a central issue of the play, has received little scholarly attention.

[36] The repetition of those lines at 1062–63 and 1240–41 has led most editors to deem the first occurrence spurious, an excision confirmed by the Berlin papyrus that does not have 1062–63. See Page 1938 and Mastronarde 2002 ad loc. Even if the lines in the monologue are spurious, the argument remains that Medea's final justification for the filicide relies on the unavoidability of their death.

The line—possibly spurious in the monologue—is repeated immediately before the children's murder. In both instances, it follows a fearful allusion to the possibility that the children may die at the hands of Medea's enemies (1060–61; 1238–39). As Mastronarde (2002: 49–53; ad 1060–61) points out, those passages (as well as 1301–05 and 1380–81) presuppose the audience's awareness of a tradition in which the children were killed by Creon's relatives. No matter whether the infanticide by Medea is a Euripidean innovation, the children have to die because the audience expects it and a long mythical tradition says so.[37] Ultimately, the infanticide is only one among the many competing versions that variously ascribe the death of the children to Hera, the angry Corinthians, or Creon's relatives.[38] Medea's latitude for revenge concerns the manner and motivation of the death but cannot alter the brutal fact that is yielded by the mythical and ritual material. In spite of her cleverness, her palinode is bound by the tradition that shapes the expectations of her—and ultimately Euripides'—audience.

A TRAGIC REVENGE

As Medea's palinode departs from the epic genre that would yield her praise, the staging and intertextual references of the final scene signal its distinctively tragic tone. As Maurice Cunningham (1954) and Bernard Knox (1977) have shown, Medea's final appearance on the chariot of the Sun positions her as the *deus ex machina* that closes off many Euripidean tragedies. In addition to offering Medea an escape from Corinth to Athens, the device conveys a complex and ambiguous range of meanings. Medea's quasi-divine status may cast her as an incarnation of ferocious vengeance and divine retribution for Jason's betrayal of his oaths (Knox 1977: 209–11). It may also stress her loss of humanity and transformation into a being that is simultaneously infra- and supra-human (Cunningham 1954: 158–60). From a meta-poetic perspective, the device simultaneously anchors Medea's revenge in the genre of tragedy and emphasizes her control over it since she, a mortal woman, now occupies a position normally reserved for the gods.[39]

[37] The thorny issue of whether the infanticide was first introduced by Euripides impinges on the question of the relative chronology of Euripides' *Medea* and that of Neophron, about which see Mastronarde 2002: 57–64, with bibliography. My argument, however, is not affected by that problem.

[38] For a full account of the many versions of Medea's story, see Moreau 1994 and Graf 1997.

[39] Another indication of the tragic character of the revenge comes at 1282–89 from the chorus's comparison of Medea with Ino, the subject matter of a Euripidean tragedy of unknown date.

Medea's masterful appropriation of the tragic genre is further confirmed in the allusions to the language, plot, and staging of Aeschylus's paradigmatic trilogy, the *Oresteia,* in the final scenes of the play.[40] Beyond the individual echoes and references previously noted by commentators (Cunningham 1954: 152; Katz 1994: 88; and Boedeker 1997: 138–39), the last steps of her revenge fundamentally subvert and appropriate the logic of the Aeschylean trilogy.

Elements of vocabulary and staging concur to create an uncanny resemblance between Medea's infanticide and the death of Agamemnon in Aeschylus's tragedy. A first possible allusion to the imagery of *Agamemnon* occurs when Medea characterizes the murder as a "sacrifice" in her monologue (1054). Although the phrase can be understood, as Mastronarde (2002 ad 1053–55) has argued, as a distortion of ritual language that frequently occurs in tragedy, it may also be read as a specific allusion to the *Oresteia* which, as Zeitlin (1965; 1966) has brilliantly shown, makes particularly thorough use of sacrificial imagery. The fifth stasimon, performed while Medea kills the children off-stage, confirms the Aeschylean connotations of the murder and its resemblance to the death of Agamemnon. The comparison of Medea to a "wretch, bloody Erinye driven by an avenging demon" (τάλαιναν φονίαν τ' Ἐρινὺν ὑπαλάστορον, 1259–60)[41] parallels the attribution of Agamemnon's murder to the vengeful Erinyes of the house (A. *Ag.* 59, 463, 1119, 1433, 1580). As in Aeschylus's play, the chorus hears cries from within the *skēnē* (1270–78) and senses that a murder is being performed but fails to act quickly enough to prevent it; the helpless agitation of the Corinthian women who cannot decide whether to enter the house (1275–76) resembles the confusion of the old men of Argos running across the stage during the murder of Agamemnon (A. *Ag.* 1330–71). The weapon with which Medea kills the children is described by one of her victims as a "hunting net of swords" (ἀρκύων ξίφους, 1278) that closely resembles the net-like garment used by Clytemnestra to ensnare

[40] My suggestion that *Medea* makes precise allusions to both the text and performance of the *Oresteia* is supported by the probability that Aeschylus' plays were re-performed after his death. Evidence for such a revival includes Ar. *Ach.* 9–11 (where Dikaiopolis speaks of sitting in the theatre expecting Aeschylus), *Ra.* 868 (when Aeschylus says that his tragedies have not died with him), and *Vita Aesch.* 12 (which states that a decree passed after the death of Aeschylus authorized the continuous production of his plays). See Dover 1993: 23, with bibliography.

[41] The text is difficult. The manuscript reading ὑπ' ἀλαστόρων "remove that Erinye through the agency of avenging divinities" seems implausible, since Medea is being compared precisely to one of those divinities. The text that I print here follows the emendation ὑπαλάστορον proposed by Page 1938.

Agamemnon (A. *Ag.* 1380–83). Finally, once the crime has been perpetrated, Medea appears holding the corpses of the children just as Clytemnestra comes out of the *skēnē* between the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra.[42] Vocabulary and staging concur to assimilate the infanticide to Clytemnestra's murder of her husband.

Those similarities carry dangerous implications for Medea since they suggest that like Clytemnestra, she will eventually fall at the hands of an avenger. That scenario is in fact exactly what the chorus fears and Jason hopes. The chorus's concerns for the pollution (μιάσματα, 1268–69) involved by the shedding of kindred blood (αἷμα, 1256) and for the divine wrath (1269–70) that will irremediably follow, reflect the same notion of pollution and retribution that structures the Aeschylean trilogy and prompts Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra in the *Choephoroi* and the Erinyes' incessant pursuit of him in the *Eumenides*. Likewise, Jason too expects Medea to encounter an Aeschylean type of retribution. Right before learning the full extent of her revenge, he asserts that she will face a "just punishment" (δίκην, 1298) at the hands of the royal family and fears that the children may be the victims of the retaliation (1293–1305). His fears and hopes rely on the same notion of "justice" (δίκη) as do Aegisthus's revenge for the banquet of Thyestes (A. *Ag.* 1577–1611), Clytemnestra's retaliation against her husband for the sacrifice of Iphigenia (A. *Ag.* 1412–25), and Orestes' revenge against his mother for the murder of his father (A. *Ch.* 306–14 and passim). When Jason understands that Medea has killed their sons in addition to his bride, his orders to open the door of the *skēnē* (1314–16) rely on the expectation of seeing the two corpses rolled out of the stage building, perhaps on the *ekkyklēma*, like those of Agamemnon and Cassandra in *Agamemnon* (A. *Ag.* 1372) and those of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in the *Choephoroi* (A. *Ch.* 973).[43] When Medea's appearance on the top of the building undermines this expectation, Jason still invokes the

[42] About the paradigmatic status of the death of Agamemnon and Cassandra off-stage, see Lebeau 2003: 310–11.

[43] Similarly, Burnett 1973: 17 points out that audience's expectations are deceived when they do not see the princess's and Creon's corpses rolled out on the *ekkyklēma* and hear a long, unusually gory messenger speech instead. The use of the *ekkyklēma* to display the murder tableaus in the *Agamemnon* and the *Choephoroi* is discussed by Taplin 1977: 325–27 and 357–59. The lack of a linguistic signal to the device leads Taplin to doubt that it was used in the *Oresteia* (and even to conclude that it was not invented during Aeschylus's lifetime) and to suggest that the corpses were carried out by mute scene-shifters. What matters for my argument here is that the corpses of Agamemnon, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus were brought outside the *skēnē* and that Jason expects the same to happen with the corpses of his sons.

model of retributive justice by announcing that the children will arise Furies (1389–90) and become vengeful demons (μιάστορες, 1371). This is a word used in the *Eumenides* (μιάστορ', A. *Eum.* 177) to signify the avenger who would punish Orestes for the murder of his mother and thus perpetrate the cycle of retributive justice. Like the chorus, Jason senses that the infanticide resembles the murder of Agamemnon and thus expects Medea to undergo Clytemnestra's fate.

Medea, however, manages to undermine those expectations. As a dramaturge fully in control of the tragic genre, she circumvents the danger of becoming a new Clytemnestra by combining characteristics of various Aeschylean figures.[44] Earlier in the play, the nurse's description of her mistress "bulling her eye" at the children (ὄμμα...ταυρουμένην, 92) uses the same participle as a description of Orestes (ταυρούμενον, A. *Ch.* 275) that was famous enough to be parodied by Aristophanes (*Ra.* 804). The intertextual echo justifies the nurse's concern that, like Orestes, Medea may shed kindred blood and explains her recommendation that the children stay away from their mother (89–95). While the infanticide confirms the nurse's fear and closely resembles Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, it also assimilates Medea to Agamemnon himself. Like the king of Argos, Medea kills her own children, and her description of the infanticide in terms of a "sacrifice" (τοῖς ἐμοῖσι θύμασιν, 1054) is reminiscent of the literal sacrifice allowed by Agamemnon at Aulis (θυτὴρ... θυγατρός, A. *Ag.* 224–25). Medea's resemblance to Agamemnon reaches a climax in the exodos, when she appropriates some of his words. Jason's descriptions of Medea as a lioness and Scylla (1342–43) hark back to comparisons made by Cassandra about Clytemnestra (A. *Ag.* 1233, 1258) and thereby confirm Medea's resemblance to the Argive queen.[45] Medea's answer that "long is the speech that [she] could have made" (μακρὰν ἂν ἐξέτεινα, 1351) directly borrows from Agamemnon's characterization of Clytemnestra's greetings (μακρὰν γὰρ ἐξέτεινας, A. *Ag.* 916) and transforms it through the use of a counterfactual construction. That subtle intertextual appropriation displays Medea's awareness of, and careful distancing from, the Clytemnestra model by integrating Agamemnon's perspective. In her own and other characters' words, Medea combines features of Clytemnestra, Clytemnestra's victim, and Clytemnestra's murderer in a way that blurs the lines across the Aeschylean cycle and makes her own punishment impossible.

[44] Medea's assimilation of the characteristics of several Aechylean figures has been pointed out by Boedeker 1997: 138–39.

[45] About the intertextuality of the Scylla comparisons in *Agamemnon* and *Medea*, see Hopman 2005: 109–10.

Medea's masterful appropriation of the *Oresteia* paradigm reaches its climax and conclusion in the treatment of the corpses. I noted earlier that her appearance with the dead children on high undermines Jason's expectation to see the corpses rolled out in the Aeschylean manner. By withdrawing the children from the ground where tragedies typically unfold, Medea prevents them from becoming or inspiring avengers along the lines of the dead Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Similarly, Medea's control over the hero cult of the children protects her from future retaliation. In the Aeschylean trilogy, Clytemnestra attempts to placate Agamemnon's angry spirit only after encountering an ominous dream. The libations that she sends by way of Electra and the captive slaves are ritually incorrect (A. *Ch.* 89–90) and come too late to cure the pollution (A. *Ch.* 514–22). Subsequently, she dies at Orestes' hands, but fundamentally through Agamemnon's agency (A. *Ch.* 886). By instituting rites of atonement in honor of her children, Medea simultaneously recognizes and avoids the pregnancy of the *Oresteia* paradigm. By becoming both "the murderer and the agent of ritualization of the event" (Pache 2004: 13), she undermines the audience's expectation to see her die in the manner of Clytemnestra. The conspicuous absence and apparent deafness of the gods to Jason's cries (1391–92; 1405–12) confirm the definite closure of the revenge process. As the *deus ex machina* of her own plot, Medea undercuts the possibility of divine retribution. She may not become the focus of an epic song, but she has created the perfect revenge tragedy.

Read as a palinode that engages major genres and songs of Greek culture, Medea's revenge offers a rich reflection on the poetic space available to a new voice—a question, which, as Michelini (1987) has shown, was of special interest to Euripides. Medea's revised version of the Argo saga fully exploits the power of Athenian drama to conjure distant times and spaces, symbolically re-enact past events, and thereby modify their interpretation and meaning. By killing the princess, murdering the children, and emerging as a new Scylla who dominates Jason from the roof of the *skēnē*, Medea offers a version of the Argo journey that nullifies her past relationship with Jason and deprives him of the heroic glory epitomized by the successful crossing of the Symplegades. Yet her mythopoiesis also underscores the impossibility of creating a new story at odds with the mythical tradition. Even though Medea's initial plan to kill Jason would fulfill epic values and bring her glory, it cannot be completed, partly because of psychological motivations, and partly because the tradition says that the children will die. Medea's revenge cannot alter the brutal "facts" of life and death yielded by the mythic tradition; it can only appropriate them.

Ultimately, Medea's revenge fails to fulfill the possibility—already raised by the disguised Odysseus about Penelope at *Odyssey* 19.107–14—that a woman may gain epic glory, *kleos*. Although her revenge initially resembles the plot of the *Iliad*, it increasingly departs from it and loses the support of the internal audience. In particular, Medea's refusal to return the children's corpses to Jason strikingly contrasts with the pity that unites Achilles and Priam in *Iliad* 24. Yet as Medea departs from the epic model, she also creates a perfect tragic plot, one that appropriates—and therefore perhaps surpasses—Aeschylus's paradigmatic *Oresteia*. By becoming the agent of the children's death, by organizing their burial, and by arranging their future cult in a skillful adaptation of Aeschylus's trilogy, Medea secures the impunity of her revenge and demonstrates her mastery of the tragic genre. Her palinode simultaneously engages issues of genre and gender. As Medea's song comes to a close, it metapoetically defines tragedy—or at least Euripidean tragedy—as a genre congenial to women, even if it does not grant them the un-wilting honor associated with epic.

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