

Excerpt taken from: *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides*. Contributors: Ruby Blondell - editor, Mary-Kay Gamel - editor, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz - editor, Bella Zweig - editor, Euripides - author. Publisher: Routledge. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 1999.

INTRODUCTION

Medea and Athens

At *Medea* 824-65 the chorus sings of an idealized Athens, home of Harmony and the Muses, goddesses of poetry and song; here Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and sexual desire, makes passionate desire (*erōs*) sit down by the side of wisdom, or “cleverness,” and engender human excellence. The chorus wonder how this sacred place can possibly give shelter to a woman who has murdered her own children—a woman, we may add, who embodies the power of Aphrodite, *erōs* and “cleverness” at their most terrifying. In mythology, Athens would do just that, with near-disastrous consequences: Medea tried to poison Theseus, the greatest Athenian hero, son and heir of Aigeus, king of Athens. In classical Athens, this event was memorialized in ritual. But the problem embodied in *Medea* cannot be confined to ritual or myth. Euripides’ drama concerns the position and treatment of women and outsiders in Athenian life and ideology in his own day. On a meta-theatrical level, the chorus are asking how Athens, in light of its own most cherished values, can incorporate the story of this murderess into the civic body by and for whom the play was first performed.

The year was 431 BCE (*Medea* is Euripides’ second surviving play, after *Alcestis*). Athens was at the height of its power and prestige. But this was also the year of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, which was to bring decline and demoralization over the next quarter century. That war was imminent: The Spartans had just attacked Plataea, an Athenian ally, and the Athenian citizen army was mobilizing. There was also acute hostility between Athens and Corinth, where this play is set. It was a time of anxiety, distraction, and fervid activity, of patriotic enthusiasm and military pride. Such was the atmosphere in which the chorus sang lyrically of the greatness and beauty of Athens, and in which Medea declared that she would rather “stand three times behind/a shield in war than give birth to one child” (250-51).

These words offer a startling challenge to contemporary Athenian assumptions about gender roles. Along with other military language used by Medea (e.g., 263-66, 1242-44), they also raise questions about the value of violence and warfare, which played such a huge role in Greek life and literature. Like Medea herself, the Peloponnesian War would destroy many children of the rising generation. But the extended bloodshed of that war was yet to come, and whether or not the play questions male military values, it did not find favor with the Athenian audience. It came third out of three in the tragic competition. Sophocles won second prize, and first was Euphorion (one of Aeschylus’ sons), perhaps with a revival of some of his father’s plays.

The Myth

Euripides’ drama is the first detailed account we have of the Corinthian portion of Medea’s story, and has exerted a powerful influence on later representations in art and literature. We know from ancient references that there were earlier versions (including one by Aeschylus), but none of them survives. The myth of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, however, which forms the background to the drama, was certainly familiar to Euripides’ audience: Jason’s ship, the *Argo*, is described in the *Odyssey* as “known to all” (12.69-70), and an ode by Pindar that predates this drama tells the tale in considerable detail (*Pythian* 4). Euripides himself had shown an early interest in the story: one of his first plays, produced in 455 BCE

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but now lost, concerned Medea's murder of Pelias (below, p. 151).

The Golden Fleece belonged to Aietes, king of Colchis, a non-Greek region at the eastern end of the Black Sea. It was a treasured possession, guarded by an unsleeping dragon. The Greek hero Jason was sent to fetch the Fleece by his wicked uncle Pelias, who had killed Jason's father Aison and usurped the throne of Iolcus. When Jason, the rightful heir, arrived to claim the throne, Pelias sent him for the Fleece, hoping that the long and dangerous journey would destroy him. Jason sailed to Colchis with the Argonauts (his comrades on the ship *Argo*), who included many famous heroes, such as Herakles, Kastor, and Pollux. Aietes agreed to give up the Fleece if Jason could yoke his team of brazen-hoofed fire-breathing oxen, plow and sow a field with dragon's teeth, then defeat the armed men who would spring up from those teeth. Jason did so with the aid of the Colchian princess Medea, who had fallen in love with him.

Medea, the daughter of Aietes and a nymph named Iduia ("she who knows"), is a disturbing mythological figure. Her own name suggests Greek words for "cunning" or "full of plans" (compare lines 401-2, with p. 422, n. 68), as well as the name of the Medes or Persians—the greatest foreign enemy of the Greeks in Euripides' lifetime (above, p. 8). In some stories she actually becomes the ancestor of the Medes, via a son named Medeus. She is noted above all for her sinister magic powers. This is just what one would expect from her family background. She was not only a granddaughter of Helios the sun-god (father of Aietes, and a god closely associated with magic), but niece of Circe (Aietes' sister) and dimly related to the goddess Hekate. Medea, Circe, and Hekate are the three most notorious witches in Greek mythology.

In Greek culture magic can be positive or negative, but we hear much more about the latter variety. Destructive magic is strongly associated with women, sexual enchantment and female song (a sub-theme of Euripides' play; see especially 415-30). Circe, for example, is an eroticized witch who sings as she weaves, an expert in magic drugs who bestializes and emasculates the men she ensnares (*Odyssey* 10.133-574). These ancient figures are not culturally identical to the witches persecuted in medieval Europe or early modern America, who belong to a specifically Christian context. For example, Greek "witches" are not devil-worshippers, but women with magical powers for good or ill. (There is no concept of the devil in ancient Greek religion.) But there are certain points of continuity, above all in the persistence with which male anxiety conceptualizes female agency and sexual autonomy as an exertion of demonic power.

Medea used her magic arts to help Jason carry out Aietes' "impossible" exploits, kill the dragon and abscond with the Fleece, her furious father in hot pursuit. In the course of their flight she killed her only brother, Apsyrtos. After Medea and Jason delivered the fleece to Pelias, she used her magic arts to convince Pelias' daughters to kill him too. She cut up an old ram, then restored it to youth by boiling it in a cauldron with magic herbs (a popular scene on Greek vase paintings). She then convinced the daughters of Pelias to do the same to him, but omitted the herbs so that he remained dead. Similarly in our play she uses a combination of magic and persuasive speech to destroy the king through his own daughter and crush Jason through his sons.

The couple then took refuge in Corinth, where Euripides' drama is set. When the play opens, Medea has just discovered that Jason has secretly

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married the daughter of Kreon, king of Corinth. Moreover, the king, out of fear of retaliation, has decided to exile her with her two young sons. Enraged by this betrayal she devises and enacts a horrible revenge. First she arranges a refuge for herself with Aigeus, king of Athens. Then she uses poisonous drugs to kill the princess, causing the king's death as well. Finally she kills with her own hand the two sons she bore to Jason. At the end of the play she escapes punishment by fleeing to Athens in a dragon-drawn chariot given to her by her grandfather, the sun-god Helios.

This precise sequence of dramatic events could not have been predicted by Euripides' audience. It is true that Medea's track record was not a good one. But there are also favorable stories about her, since like most magical figures she is ambiguous in her powers. In some stories she is involved in the foundation of cities—normally a positive role. The nurse alludes to her assistance in saving Corinth from a famine and claims she was a model wife to Jason (11-15). Her powers will enable Aigeus to produce offspring. The lyric tradition prior to Euripides speaks of her marriage to Achilles in Elysium, and a later story makes her instrumental in reviving her father's kingdom (Visser 1986:164 n. 54). In other stories prior to Euripides she attempted to make her children immortal. In any case, the Greek dramatists enjoyed considerable liberty in adapting traditional characters and stories (above, pp. 45-8). So the audience, though aware of some of the myths about Medea, would not have known in detail how Euripides would handle this material.

In particular, they *may* not have known that she would kill her sons. We know of several other traditions about the children's death. One suggests that Medea killed them accidentally in the temple of Hera Akraia while trying to render them immortal, and was banished by Jason for this reason. Another tells us that the Corinthians (or women of Corinth) killed Medea's seven sons and seven daughters in that temple, out of hostility to her barbarian ways. Yet another says that she killed Kreon then fled the vengeance of his family, leaving her children in the temple for Jason to protect (compare 1301-5); Kreon's family killed them there, then spread the rumor that she had murdered them herself. From these accounts it is a short but very significant step to Euripides' version, where she kills them purposefully out of revenge for Jason's betrayal. Some scholars think this was an innovation by Euripides, but opinion has recently inclined against this view (see Michelini 1989; Johnston 1997b). In any case the infanticide is crucial to the play, and the poet carefully builds suspense toward this shocking climax.

Medea as Other

Medea was probably in origin a Greek figure, from northern Greece or Corinth (Hall 1989:35). But ethnicity is fluid in myth, and Euripides' Medea is not Greek, but a foreigner or "barbarian," from the distant land of Colchis. It seems that he was the first to "barbarize" Medea in this way. The geographical gulf that separates Greek from "barbarian" is emphasized in the Nurse's opening words, where she speaks of the passage of the Argo through the Symplegades or Clashing Rocks, which marked the entrance to the Black Sea. The playwright has thus developed a core attribute of Medea's mythological persona—her status as outsider—by locating her origins at the far (and hazy) limits of the Greek world.

A famous passage from the historian Herodotus tells us that the people of Colchis were "black-skinned and woolly-haired," and resembled the Egyptians, from whom he thought they were descended. The precise historical relationship between these peoples is much disputed by modern scholars, but the Colchians were evidently known to be a dark-skinned race, historically as well as mythologically. Black skin was a clear marker of

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non-Greek origin, and some “barbarians” in tragedy may even have appeared in dark-skinned masks. But there is no sign that Euripides’ Medea was one of these, and her children are light-haired. But Medea probably did appear in exotic “barbarian” costume. All our vase paintings of her in such dress post-date Euripides’ play, and it seems likely that it was his presentation of her as a “barbarian” that influenced these portrayals.

As a “barbarian” female witch, Medea is located at the very margins of Greek society. Jason points out that she was raised without the benefits of Greek “civilization” (536-38), and later claims that no Greek woman would have behaved as she has done (1339). There is heavy dramatic irony here, since he has himself violated the Greek ethical norms of trust and honesty in his treatment of her. But the ancient Greeks, like most peoples, projected their own culturally undesirable qualities onto outsiders. Many such “barbarian” attributes are reflected in Medea: unrestrained emotion (especially extreme displays of grief and anger); lust, sensuality, and transgression of normative Greek gender roles; bestiality; wealth, especially gold (a motif of this play, starting with the Golden Fleece); luxurious clothing (like Medea’s gifts to the princess); brutal violence and lawlessness; untrustworthiness, duplicity, and expertise with magic drugs.

Many of these attributes are characteristic weapons of the powerless. Not coincidentally, many of the same stereotypes were attached to (Greek) women, since the barbarian and the female were the primary categories of “Other” through which the adult Greek male defined himself. Chief among these negative female stereotypes are duplicity, emotionalism, and lustfulness. So a barbarian woman like Medea was doubly damned. The only way she could sink any lower on the ideological scale would be as an old slave-woman, like her own nurse. In addition, she violates in the most drastic way the positive ideals and desirable stereotypes of Greek womanhood—sexual restraint, deference first to one’s father and then to one’s husband, and devotion to one’s children.

Euripides’ Medea, then, the barbarian, female, witch, and murderer of her own children, is the quintessential transgressive outsider. Like Euripides’ barbarian witch, such a figure challenges the most sacred mainstream conventions and assumptions concerning sex, gender, and social roles. Homosexuals today are commonly suspected and accused of behavior destructive to these conventions (e.g., recruitment of children, leading to extinction of the “traditional” family). Medea’s transgression likewise strikes at the heart of the patriarchal family, which was the primary unit of Greek society, and at the carefully constructed and maintained gender roles on which that society depended. Above all, she stirs the primal male fear that women may depart from their “proper” role as bearers and nurturers of men’s children. The primary locus of this male anxiety about female agency is sex and reproduction. In an “inappropriately” erotic woman (i.e., just about any erotically active woman except a faithful and contented wife and mother), female power is often conceptualized as witchcraft. It is no accident that the witches of Greek myth tend to be destructive mothers and hostile toward children in general.

The threat posed by Medea is underscored by repeated references to the house, home or household (*domos* or *oikos*), which lies at the heart of Greek culture. This threat is not only personal but structural, extending to the loftiest embodiments of patriarchal rule. Medea does not just kill her own children and wipe out Jason’s family line. She also kills the king himself, and the daughter who would have borne him heirs, just as she earlier killed King Pelias and before that wiped out her royal father’s line by murdering her only brother, Apsyrtos, and her own children. A more

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benevolent side of Medea is shown in her promise to ensure offspring for Aigeus, king of Athens, by means of her magic. But this too shows her awesome female power to control men, and the perpetuation of their line and name, by controlling their fertility. As the Athenian audience knew well, Aigeus and his son Theseus would have a narrow escape from her deadly charms.

Medea and Marriage

As part of the ideology that both supports and assuages this patriarchal fear, the Greek construction of gender (like our own) posits mother-love as the most powerful “natural” emotional bond. In a typical example, the orator Isaeus describes the maternal bond as “the closest by nature.”²⁵ Despite the conflicting feelings aroused by the fact that Jason is her children’s father (36, 113-14), Medea clearly embodies this affection (see 1021-80, esp. 1069-75). It is crucial to recognize that Euripides does not portray her as a cold or uncaring mother, but an intensely loving one, even after she has killed them (1397). In this respect, as in her preoccupation with marriage, Medea is not the bloody, passionate, and transgressive barbarian sorceress of myth, but a stereotypical Greek woman. Euripides draws on the former persona when it suits him, but also gives Medea aspects of a normative Athenian wife and mother.

A helpful way to consider this apparent dissonance is through Sourvinou-Inwood’s terminology, borrowed from cinema, of “zooming” and “distancing” (1997:254-62). Medea’s character is constructed through various conceptual schemata, such as “good woman,” “normal woman,” and “bad woman.” These are the cultural models or parameters through which ancient audience members made sense of their theatrical experience. Euripides, like other dramatists, employs various poetic and dramatic techniques to activate (“zooming”) or subvert (“distancing”) these schemata in accordance with his own purposes.

This vacillation between Medea as a representative of the woman’s condition in marriage and Medea as the ultimate Other (and as the embodiment of woman as the Other)—the outsider, the monster, the creature of uncontrollable and destructive passions—corresponds to the vacillation of the world of the play between a familiar domestic world and a mythic realm of nightmarish possibilities. (Segal 1996:31)

Some critics construe these varying aspects of Medea as a radical incoherence in her character, others as a complexity corresponding to that of actual human motives and behavior. Since we interpret the behavior of real people through the same schemata that we bring to drama, these modes of interpretation are not necessarily incompatible.

One way to read the play is as an attempt to address the disturbing question of what could make a devoted wife and mother murder the children she loves so much. The question is one that exerts a continuing fascination. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a contemporary fictional approach to the same subject, and the media handling of Susan Smith’s murder of her children in 1994 bears witness both to the deep-seated fears that the idea of maternal infanticide still provokes, and the potentially mythic status of such a tale in our own time.²⁶ Nowadays, such status is conferred primarily by media representations. The fact that news stories and popular accounts explicitly likened Susan Smith to Medea (e.g., Peyser 1995:161), bears witness to the ways in which we still use Medea to read our world. Conversely, it is only from the perspective of our own world that we can read

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Medea. Thus Jules Dassin's 1978 film, *A Dream of Passion*, uses a contemporary setting to explore the relationship between Medea and real mothers who kill their children.

One might expect any representation of a woman who kills her own children to be unequivocally negative. But Euripides (like Morrison) goes beyond such easy judgments to explore the cultural, material and psychological circumstances that might make a person behave in such a way, and even to stir sympathy for his heroine. In doing so he is in accord with an interesting countercurrent in Greek literature, xenophobic and misogynistic as it so often is. The Other—whether foreigner, enemy, or woman—is often portrayed with remarkable sympathy (e.g., the Trojans in the *Iliad*, the Persians in Aeschylus' play of that name, and Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*).

Euripides starts his play by gaining sympathy for Medea, who is represented in the prologue as a desperate woman maltreated by a contemptible man. Her famous opening speech gives us a much fuller picture of a female perspective, with its forceful and sustained complaint about the wretched lot of women in general, and specifically in marriage (230-51). This is not the only surviving complaint about the position and treatment of women in classical Athens. (The closest parallel is the fragment of Sophocles quoted above, p. 57). But with its long and specific account of the perils of marriage for a woman and the sexual double standard, it is unique in surviving classical literature for its insight into the position of women and sympathy for their lot.

In simple plot terms, this speech is designed to win over a chorus of conventional Greek women by identifying the speaker with her audience as a woman burdened by an oppressive and unjust institution. But it goes far beyond what is necessary for that limited dramatic purpose, clearly suggesting that Medea's behavior is in part the outcome of her plight as a woman in a patriarchal culture. We can only speculate as to the effect it may have had on an ancient Greek audience, either at the moment of utterance (when the audience does not yet know the crimes Medea will commit), or in retrospect, when the play can be interpreted as a whole. The internal audience—the chorus of Corinthian women—responds sympathetically, but this is not a sure guide to the responses of men—or women—in the Athenian theatrical audience. A wide range of possible interpretive strategies and responses was available to them, as it is to us.

One possibility is to read the speech as a bold "feminist" statement on Euripides' part, to be heard independently of its overall context. Such an approach would be compatible with the common practice among ancient authors of quoting drama for one's own purposes without regard for context. Yet the speech may look entirely different if dramatic context *is* taken into account. It may, for example, be taken to suggest that any woman critical of the prevailing social structure, is a (potential) murderer.²⁷ On the other hand, maybe a murderous monster is the only culturally "safe" vehicle for the articulation of such views, enabling Euripides to voice a radical or woman-identified position without being too closely associated with it. It might even be the only conceivable such vehicle, in the sense that within the cultural parameters of classical Athens, female discontent might be equated by definition with murderous witchcraft. Even in this case, however, such monstrous figures might serve a useful purpose for articulating socially unpalatable critiques. Nor does Medea's monstrous behavior at the end of the play necessarily erase the sympathy aroused earlier (Barlow 1995). Broadening the context in a different way, the speech might suggest that male mistreatment of women—or more

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specifically, male violations of the ethical norms of loyalty and friendship—will provoke women to protest against, and even destroy, the status quo. A rather different methodology suggests that the “feminist” message is simply erased by the fact that the speech is written, performed, and directed toward men. “The feminist reader might conclude that women need not relate to these roles or even attempt to identify with them,” since they are “properly played as drag roles” (Case 1988:15; see further above, pp. 60-64). Of course, these interpretive strategies are not all mutually exclusive, and ancient audience members, like modern critics, doubtless varied greatly both in their immediate responses and in their subsequent reflections. It is particularly interesting to speculate on the reactions of any women who were present in the audience (above, pp. 62-3), and of how their presence may in turn have affected the responses of the men. A further complication is introduced by the predominant tendency in Greek literary theory to view audiences as directly influenced in their feelings and behavior by dramatic characters, via the mechanism of emotional identification (above, pp. 29-30). Is Medea so monstrous that she is impossible to identify with? Is she a (dangerously) sympathetic role model for women? Is she a warning to men and women alike? We can only speculate as to ancient reactions. But clearly Medea’s speech does not necessarily make this a “feminist” play in any simple sense. The emotions and judgments aroused by the drama are complex, and they shift kaleidoscopically as it develops.

However we interpret this speech and its impact, one function it clearly fulfills is to give us a powerful picture of the centrality and significance of marriage in ancient Greek women’s lives. Like every other character in the play, Medea assumes that sex and/or marriage, often referred to as “the bed” (above, p. 58), are the central concerns of a woman’s life (compare 263-66, 1367-68). Her great speech tells us why. In a perverse and mythic way, Medea is an extreme embodiment of what marriage meant for a Greek girl.²⁸ In a sense, every bride was a stranger in a strange land. And every married woman was dependent on her husband (compare 228 and below, p. 420, n. 51). But Medea’s situation is exaggerated because she is from a place far beyond the boundaries of the Greek world and has cut herself off, by terrible crimes, from her paternal home. She is therefore far more radically separated from her natal family than a Greek woman married within her own city-state, who might return to her paternal home in certain circumstances, such as divorce or widowhood (compare 252-8). And now Medea is to be banished even from her adopted home. Exile, especially in a tribal society like that of ancient Greece, is a terrible fate even for an independent man (as many passages in Greek texts attest), let alone for a single woman with young children (compare especially *Medea* 645-53). Medea’s situation thus takes the Greek woman’s lot to a nightmarish extreme. If she is the patriarchal male’s nightmare, Jason is the dependent woman’s.

On the other hand, Medea did not exactly walk down the aisle in white. (For the Greek cultural equivalent, see above, p. 56.) Her “marriage” to Jason was an elopement lacking all the proper elements of an Athenian marriage, from the formal betrothal when the bride’s father (or other empowered male) promised her to the groom, to the procession in which the bridegroom “led” her from her father’s house to his own (Jason uses this verb at 1331), to the further family celebrations that took place the next day. These ceremonies involved the exchange of gifts (including clothing and golden ornaments), sacrifice, singing, and torches carried in procession from one house to the other—all of which play a role in the imagery of Euripides’ play, but were *not* involved in Medea’s union with Jason. Despite her implicit claim to marital status in her opening speech, her position is more like that of a *pallakē* at Athens, a concubine or common-law wife, who might be a foreigner cohabiting with an Athenian citizen and had little or no legal protection for herself or her children (above, p. 59).

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Moreover, in an Athenian marriage, the woman had little say in the matter, whereas Medea's union with Jason was her own choice. She, not her father, chose her husband, "bought" him with her stolen "dowry" (the Golden Fleece), and entered an alliance of *xenia* ("guest-friendship") with him (see 1392 with note).²⁹ She speaks misleadingly when she uses passive verbs of her "abduction" by Jason (255-56).³⁰ In contrast to the passive princess of many tales, she accepted her future husband as a suppliant (496-98), and actively saved him from disaster more than once (476-82). She omits to mention, when bewailing her lack of natal family, that she cut these kinship ties herself—quite literally in the case of her brother (257-58). In the course of the drama she disposes of ancestral patrilineal gifts in her own right: the finery she sends the princess was "a gift from Helios, my father's father, to his heirs" (954-55). She cements an alliance of guest-friendship with Aigeus, which removes any pressing economic need for a husband (compare 514-16, 616-18).³¹ She makes independent plans for the future, and when she decides to leave, does so under her own power, thus violating the expectation that a married woman's place is fixed at her husband's hearth, the literal and symbolic center of the household (above, pp. 57-8).

Medea represents the threat posed by female subjectivity and independent will, especially the active exercise of women's erotic desire. Her elopement was prompted by the overwhelming power of the goddess Aphrodite, i.e., by sexual passion. Aphrodite and her son Eros often appear in wedding scenes in art and literature, showing that sexual attraction was viewed as a necessary, or at least a desirable, condition of a successful marriage (compare 627-44). But the institution of marriage exists in large part to domesticate the awesome power of these divinities, especially over women (whom Greek ideology viewed as less able than men to resist sexual desire), and to render it safe and productive of legitimate offspring only. A "marriage" blessed only by Eros and Aphrodite (compare 527-31), as opposed to the primary gods of marriage such as Hera, is perverted and uncontrolled, and might seem doomed to disaster from the start. There is in fact no mention in the play of any wedding rite of any kind between Jason and Medea. (One's little brother is not the usual sacrificial victim on these occasions.) In contrast to Jason's match with the king's daughter, their union is rarely referred to as a marriage (*gamos*).³² But this does *not* mean Medea's sense of betrayal is unjustified. This is myth, not history, so the formal marriage procedures of Euripides' own day are not literally applicable. Besides, significant elements of Athenian marriage *are* present, especially the fact that Jason and Medea have lived together publicly in a household and produced children. Jason's language at 1330-31 evokes an Athenian wedding, and other characters besides Medea refer to him as her *posis*, a word normally used for a lawful husband.

Even supposing the marriage is acknowledged, however, one might question whether a husband in Euripides' Athens would feel obliged to consult his wife before divorcing her. Such arrangements would be made not with the woman herself but with her *kurios* (her father or another empowered male). But the validity of Medea's point is shown by the fact that Jason feels the need to answer it (588-90; so Gill 1996:163, n. 245). More important, perhaps, is the fact that Medea is in effect her own *kurios* (below, p. 161). In any case, all the other characters, including Aigeus, view Jason's behavior as disgraceful. Neither Kreon nor even Jason tries to argue either that he was not really married to Medea, or that a husband has the right to divorce his wife behind her back. As Gill drily puts it, "the claim that one has remarried (in secret) for the sake of one's previous wife and children (549-67) seems abnormal by virtually any standard" (loc. cit.). Medea's marriage is a perverted one by Athenian standards, but her claim against Jason is legitimate.

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Oaths and the Aigeus Scene

Quite apart from the question of their marriage, the fact that Medea helped Jason in response to his supplication places him under a reciprocal obligation of loyalty to her (496-98). This obligation was acknowledged and sealed by a formal oath, in which they both pledged their right hands (see e.g., 21-23). Since no one challenges this, not even Jason, we may take it as given. In fifth-century BCE Athens, such an oath was not part of the marriage ritual—the contract was between the bride’s father and the groom (compare Klytemnestra and Achilles at *IA* 831-6). But formal pacts of friendship between *men* were often sealed with an oath and the ritual clasp of right hands. Medea seems to view the matter this way when she accuses Jason of violating the relationship of *xenia* (1392), a formal friendship that might be sealed with oaths and the clasp of hands (above, pp. 21-2). The bride’s father and the bridegroom probably also sealed the contract of betrothal with a handshake (above, p. 50). Medea thus places herself in two masculine roles: that of an equal participant in a formal relationship of *philia*, and that of her own *kurios*, the man empowered to give his daughter to another man in marriage.

Jason’s oath to Medea places him under a powerful moral and religious obligation to abide by his word (above, pp. 13-14). Moreover, the principal gods of oaths include Medea’s own grandfather, Helios the sun god, along with Zeus and the ancient goddess Earth (compare 149, 746, 752-53, 1251, and, e.g., *Iliad* 19.258-60). Oath-breaking was viewed as “twin to kin-murder” (Burnett 1973:13), and the customary imprecation against a transgressor “is that utter destruction ...should befall the oath-breaker and his line” (Burkert 1985:251; compare 253 and see Rickert 1987:109-13). This does *not* mean the offended party is morally or legally justified in carrying out such a penalty in person, rather than leaving it to the gods, even if, like Medea, they have no legal recourse. Yet this is exactly the punishment that Medea brings upon the head of Jason, using that same right hand whose pledge he violated—a connection emphasized throughout the play (22, 496, 898, 1070, 1365; see further Flory 1978). Since Jason has broken the male side of the marital bargain by abandoning her, she retaliates by breaking the female side through killing their children. Aigeus, by contrast, will beget children as a result of keeping his oath.

The enormous significance and binding power of oaths is brought out through the Aigeus scene, which culminates, at the exact center of the play (709), in a formal supplication resulting in a solemn oath of protection. This dramatic reenactment shows us how Jason’s oath to Medea should be envisaged. Besides the connection with supplication (709-10), note both the invocation of Earth and Sun (746, 752) and Aigeus’ acceptance of the customary punishment for transgression (754-5). Unsurprisingly, Athenians are usually portrayed in Athenian tragedy as models of virtue, and Athens itself as a sanctuary for people in distress.³³ Euripides’ audience would know that in keeping with Athenian ideals, Aigeus did keep the oath he swore to Medea. His oath binds him to protect even a child-murderer, just as Jason’s oath bound him to Medea despite her bloody deeds. Aigeus stands for, and abides by, the Greek values of justice and law in which Jason takes such pride (536-38). This time, Medea’s trust in a Greek man will not be misplaced (compare 800-1).³⁴ But the audience would also know the mythological consequences of Aigeus’ oath—that Medea would attempt to murder Theseus, Aigeus’ son and heir. It is Aigeus’ straightforward, simple, even naive adherence to Athenian moral and religious ideals which guarantees the arrival of Medea in Athens, and thus forces the Athenians to confront the transgressive attitudes and behavior that she embodies. The Aigeus scene has often been criticized as artificial, ever since Aristotle (*Poetics* 1461b21). Aigeus turns up unexpectedly, and all too conveniently for Medea’s purposes. But it serves an important role in the dramatic economy of the play. Besides enacting and highlighting the

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binding power of an oath, and providing an external (and Athenian) judgment that Jason is in the wrong, Aigeus brings out the fundamental importance of (male) children to a Greek man, especially a king. Sons not only provide support for their parents' old age (compare 1032-35, 1396), but bestow a kind of immortality through the perpetuation of a man's family name, his property and line. A woman, by contrast, is viewed as a passive conduit of male fertility, passing on her husband's name and property to his (male) heirs.³⁵ However much she may love her sons, she does not have the same *kind* of stake in children as their father does.³⁶ It is only after Medea's encounter with Aigeus that she declares her intention to kill her children (contrast the indirection of 375). She rightly sees that only the death of Jason's sons *and* his new bride, who might bear other sons (compare 804-5), will make him suffer just as he has hurt her, not only by stripping him of family and friends, but by striking at the heart of his social status and gender identity through the destruction of his entire house (compare 114, 139, 794).

Medea as Hero

Medea's reliance on the oath underlines the fact that in important ways she is not *merely* a stereotypical barbarian female. Rather, Euripides uses her to problematize such simple dichotomies as male/female, Greek/barbarian, human/animal, and divine/human. As we have seen, she plays a "masculine" role in arranging her own marriage. Aristotle calls barbarians "natural slaves" (above, pp. 22-3), but Medea is certainly not servile. Nor is she effeminate or cowardly. On the contrary, she displays many stereotypically Greek male attributes, such as courage, intelligence,³⁷ decisiveness, resourcefulness, power, independence, and the ability to conceive and carry out a plan effectively. In these qualities she surpasses every male character in the play.

Medea the "barbarian" is also skilled in the use of language and persuasion in which Greeks—especially Athenians—took great cultural pride.³⁸ The controlled, "masculine," "Hellenic" character of her opening speech in the public domain contrasts with the lyric emotional outbursts that we have heard from within, which tend to be coded as "female" and "barbarian" (Hall 1989:130-31). With her first sentence, "I have come out of the house," she moves out of the space culturally defined as female, and steps forward in a masculine gesture to justify herself in public to the female "jury" of the chorus. Her argument in the next sentence, that one who secluded himself or herself would be considered either proud or lazy, is much more easily applicable to a man than a woman in Greek culture. This is especially true of democratic Athens, where all male citizens were expected to participate in public life while women were largely secluded (above, pp. 48-54). A few lines later Medea alludes to herself with the word "man" (*anēr*; see below, p. 419, n. 39). She will continue to use the language of male experience throughout the play, especially imagery of warfare and sailing.

Above all, Medea is "clever" or "wise" (*sophos*). This is the fundamental source of her power and independence (compare especially 677), and Jason claims it has brought her glory among the Greeks (539-40; compare 11-12). But this is not an unproblematic claim (compare above, p. 51). The words *sophos* and *sophia* (translated "clever" and "cleverness" respectively) connote skill and sophistication, and less frequently, wisdom of a moral kind. But they can also refer to reprehensible cleverness, especially that which is used to trick or deceive. "Cleverness" may thus be viewed with suspicion even in men (compare 285, 292-305, 319-20, 1224-47).³⁹ In women, whether good or bad (Penelope or Klytemnestra), it nearly always takes the form of deviousness, often linked with sexual licentiousness (see e.g., Euripides, *Hippolytos* 640-44). This kind of cunning,

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negatively coded, is also a “barbarian” attribute.

A distinctive feature of Medea’s complex relationship to gender stereotypes is the way in which her “feminine” deviousness takes the form of performing a “femininity” that she belies by her behavior (compare 368-9). In particular she deprecates her own sex, as women portrayed by men often do in Greek texts (263-64, 407-9; compare the chorus at 1081-84 and Iphigenia’s famous line at *IA* 1394). Medea uses such deprecation to manipulate Jason, exploiting his conventional gender expectations in order to dupe and destroy him (869-93, 908-13, 922-28).

Another factor further complicates these ideological categories. Euripides has portrayed Medea as a heroine in the tradition of the heroic male warrior. In particular, she bears a striking resemblance to Homer’s Achilles, the greatest warrior hero of the *Iliad*. She resembles him especially in her passionate angry spirit, her pitilessness, and her pursuit of revenge and glory.⁴⁰ The Nurse’s opening monologue, epic in style, recalls many details of Achilles’ grief at the death of his friend Patroklos: Medea does not eat (24; compare *Iliad* 19.205-14); she lies prostrate on the ground (27-28; compare *Iliad* 18.26-27); the nurse fears she will kill herself (38; compare 1444-47, *Iliad* 18.32-24). The Nurse also suggests she is somehow inhuman, by likening her to a rock or the sea, as Patroklos famously does Achilles (28; compare 1279 and *Iliad* 16.34-35). Like Achilles, Medea displays both subhuman behavior and superhuman powers connected with divine ancestry, in particular an extraordinary—though limited—prophetic knowledge of the future (1386-8; compare *Iliad* 9.410-16). Like Achilles, she debates with her passionate spirit (her *thumos*) what she should do (1042-63; compare *Iliad* 9.644-48). Like Achilles she refuses to be bought off with material compensation (616-18; compare *Iliad* 9.378-87). And like Achilles, she is willing to give vengeance priority over the well-being of her dearest *philoï*—her children (compare *Iliad* 18.79-82). (On *philia* or “friendship” see above, pp. 20-22.)

Like Achilles, Ajax, and many other great male heroes (especially in Sophocles), Medea has an overwhelmingly powerful sense of honor (see e.g. 20, 26, 33). She reacts to dishonor with an equally powerful sense of disgrace, consuming anger at a friend’s ingratitude, and a passionate desire for extreme revenge at any price, including her own life (392-93). Like them she alienates herself even from innocent friends (36, 187-90), is deaf to persuasion (853-55), a dangerous enemy (45), and destructive to her friends as well as her enemies (94-95). The moral code she purports to live by, to seek “glorious renown” by helping her friends and harming her enemies (807-10; compare 765-66), is that of Greek culture generally (above, p. 20), but she expresses it in ways strongly evocative of male heroism. *Kleos*—“glory,” “fame,” or “renown”—is a prominent goal of the warrior hero in the *Iliad*, and runs directly contrary to the notorious remark of the Athenian leader Pericles, that a good woman should have the least possible *kleos* among men, whether for good or for bad.⁴¹ When Medea does finally kill her children, she does so out of a desire to avoid mockery from her enemies (797, 1049-50, 1354-56, 1362)—a typically male heroic motive—and uses a sword, the manly weapon par excellence (1244, 1324-6). For the earlier murders, she contemplates using fire or the sword, but rejects open violence for the more “feminine” (i.e., devious) method of poisoned clothing, again in order to avoid mockery from her enemies (376-85, 404-5; compare 391-94).⁴² Euripides thus associates Medea and her deed of violence with male as well as female stereotypes.

The *Iliad* was the most influential of Greek literary works, and Achilles, its hero, was enormously admired. We might therefore expect Medea’s

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heroic qualities to meet with approval from a Greek audience. But her gender complicates this issue. Certainly it can be a compliment to call even a “good” woman “manly” for her intelligence or courage.⁴³ And women in drama often display such “manly” qualities. But in tragedy this usually leads to disaster—most notably in the case of Klytemnestra, Aeschylus’ “woman with a heart of manly counsel” (*Agamemnon* 11). This is because women’s power over men is located within the family. So when the violent, vengeful nature typical of the heroic male is unleashed in the person of a woman, it leads to acts of appalling violence against intimate family members, rather than outsiders, who may be slaughtered with relative impunity. Men in myth do also kill their children (Agamemnon and Herakles are two examples). But the domestic sphere is not the sole locus of their power. As a woman, then, Medea is caught in a double bind: If she is to crush her husband as he has crushed her, she must strike within this female realm. But by doing so, she also destroys her “essential” femininity (herself as mother), in the service of “masculine” revenge, and earns the horrified condemnation of her community.

Medea embodies this female predicament at its most extreme. But in a sense, all women in Greek drama are trapped in a double bind when faced with a situation demanding decisive action. Just as a female character cannot enter the stage without challenging her idealized gender role, which requires her to remain in the house (above, p. 60), so too no woman can be portrayed taking decisive public action without being to some extent masculinized (above, p. 51). Even a character like Sophocles’ Antigone, whose behavior is clearly right in the eyes of the gods and beneficial to the *polis* as well as the family, is played off against her conventionally feminine sister (*Antigone* 61-62), and poses a severe threat to the masculinity of Kreon, the king whom she defies (*Antigone* 484-85, 525, 577-79, 678-80, 746, 756). It is far from clear how a Greek audience would have responded to her, let alone the murderous Medea. These assertive heroines are an obvious expression of male anxiety about any woman who transgresses her approved gender role. But the consequences may also be viewed as a critique of a system that allows women no other form of self-assertion, or even a critique of male values per se.

In accordance with the polarized gender ideology of ancient Athens, the appropriate counterpart to the masculinized woman of tragedy is the feminized man. This is made explicit in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, where Aigisthos, Klytemnestra’s lover who stays home from the Trojan War, is addressed as “woman” by the chorus (1625-27). But it applies more subtly to Jason as well. By actively saving him and arranging their marriage (480-85), Medea cast him in a subordinate and “feminine” role complementary to her own “masculine” one. She continues to do so within the play, e.g., by sending him inside the house (623-24, with note). His second marriage is more conventional (below, p. 413, n. 32), yet even here he takes the “female” role by relocating to his bride’s ancestral home.⁴⁴ Jason’s behavior also displays many of the negative stereotypes associated with women and barbarians in general and Medea in particular. She accuses him of being motivated by sexual lust (623-24), just as he does her, each of them ignoring the other’s avowed motives (compare 555-75). And his injustice, violence and duplicity clearly violate the Greek ideals that he himself affirms (536-38).⁴⁵ His death, appropriately, will be an unheroic and emasculating one (see 1386-88, with note). Jason and Medea are thus perversely united not only by their similar behavior, but by their distortions of ideal gender and cultural roles: he the barbarous feminized Greek, and she the masculine Hellenic barbarian.

These distortions are constructed as complementary, shifting along with the power dynamic between the two characters as the drama unfolds. The

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role reversal becomes complete, and theatrically manifest, in the final scene. Medea is now in complete control, while Jason occupies an inferior “feminine” position, reduced to the female activity of mourning for dead kin (compare Segal 1996:39-40). He is as helpless and wretched as Medea was at the outset. This reversal is underlined by the linguistic texture of the play. Jason’s language for his predicament at the end of the drama echoes Medea’s for hers at its beginning.⁴⁶ One verbal echo is particularly striking. When the Chorus question her resolve to kill her children, Medea replies that she must do it, because this is what will “bite” Jason “to the quick” (817). By the end of the play, she has succeeded in this goal (1370), in revenge for the way her husband “bit” her earlier (110). The wording clarifies Medea’s motive: It is the age-old justice of the *talio*, of repayment in kind.

In the final scene Jason even displays Medea’s “maternal” values, including tender expressions of physical affection (1403, 1411-12; compare 1069-75), lamentation at the sufferings of parenthood (1349-50, 1413-14; compare 1024-37, 1090-1115), and use of the word “dearest” (*philtata*) for his children (1397; compare 795, 1071, 1247). Medea sends him back once more to the house, the female realm, to attend to the funeral of his dead wife, and he accepts her command (1394-95). In his final words (1403-4), Jason voices the futile wish that he had never begotten these children, echoing the Nurse’s futile wish which opened the play. He now fully shares Medea’s regrets about the past. She has reached her goal of reducing him to the state she herself was in at the start of the drama, by depriving him of everything that is important to him, as he destroyed everything that mattered to her (compare 228, 1074).

Aristophanes depicts Euripides as particularly interested in women, and some comparative statistics bear out this claim. Thirteen of his nineteen extant plays have female protagonists; by comparison, among the seven plays of Aeschylus only one, *Agamemnon*, can be said to have a female protagonist (and even that is questionable, as the title suggests), as do two of the seven plays by Sophocles (*Elektra* and *Antigone*, though Deianeira may be considered the protagonist of *Women of Trachis*). Thematically as well, Euripides’ plays seem especially concerned with questions of gender, of women’s lives, of their relation to men and their role in society.

Euripides’ female characters are represented as speaking from women’s point of view. Though erratic, they are psychologically plausible human beings; even Iphigenia’s change of heart, criticized by Aristotle, is comprehensible in terms of her relationship to Agamemnon, Klytemnestra, and Achilles. Women’s social status as inferior to males, their use as objects traded between males, the restrictions on their sexuality and social interactions and on their freedom to speak their minds, the social and sexual double standard, their lack of control over their children’s destinies—all these are depicted in detail. And these conditions are not assumed to be correct or taken for granted as the status quo; they are examined by female characters, their injustice is criticized, and they are sometimes violated or rejected. Other playwrights also represent women’s point of view; Deianeira’s eloquent lament about the difficulties of being the wife of Herakles is a case in point (*Women of Trachis* 1-48; compare also the fragment of *Tereus* quoted above, p. 57). But in Euripides, women’s complaints are frequent enough to constitute a central theme of his surviving works.