

INTRODUCTION

MEDEA IN THE MORNING LIGHT

As the sun, rising above Mount Hymettus, lights up the packed wooden bleachers on the south slope of the Acropolis, some fifteen thousand Athenian citizens and resident aliens, their retinues and guests from abroad,¹ revived by warming wine, readjust their cushions, pull their cloaks around their shoulders against the early morning chill, and gaze down at the wide circle of the deserted dance floor (*orchestra*). A short while before, just after dawn, it had been abustle with purifications, libations poured by generals—chief among them Pericles—announcements of gold chaplets (*stephanoi*) awarded to the city's benefactors, panoplied war orphans eligible for the first time to bear arms against the foe, and buckets of gold and silver tribute from subject states. But now the tribute has been removed and all the VIPs have taken their seats at the foot of the hill. In the front row, toes to the orchestra's rim, the year's most prominent office holders and other notables flank the Priest of Dionysus at the center and the ten judges, just chosen by lot,

1. Were women present? There is no good evidence one way or the other, but my guess is no, not so much because of demographics, as because of Greek attitudes toward their wives and daughters appearing in public at all and because I suspect that the satyr plays and old comedies performed along with the tragedies at this festival would have been considered too lewd for proper women to see and hear. Demographics support this conclusion: Thucydides gives figures for the number of troops, both citizen and foreign, available to Athens in 431 BC for the conduct of the war (*Peloponnesian War* 2.13), which, though hotly disputed by modern scholars, suggest that even if only half of these men (numbering in excess of 90,000) were in the city at the time of the festival and that if even fewer than a third of these attended the theatrical performances that spring day, along with their sons, others exempt from service or disabled, numerous resident aliens not serving, and foreign guests (and their servants?), there would have been scant room on that crowded hillside for proper ladies. Even the performers were men. It was almost a men-only political club at play. If women were there, they would probably not have been the chaste wives and daughters of upstanding citizens. For a good discussion of the Athenian audience at the City Dionysia, see Simon Goldhill, "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy," *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge, 1997), 54–68.

who will soon cast their votes for this year's winning poet (not destined to be Euripides, who will come in third or dead last). Nearby stands the old wooden statue of the wine god, brought in procession to the festival and thought to be as eager as the human spectators to watch the show. The trumpets have sounded. Anticipation has settled into stillness. In the backdrop spanning the rear of the dance space, palace doors open. The *Medea*, a new play by the notorious Euripides, is about to begin.

What did the audience expect that morning in mid-March 431 BC, as they watched a solitary man wearing the mask of an old woman shamble toward them, and were their expectations met or frustrated? How might they have interpreted the actions and the words of the masked actors and dancers—fellow citizens all—who came before them that day to sing, to dance, to gesture, to declaim, and to honor the wine god who mingled his spirits with theirs? What circumstances impinged on their consciousness? How would their assumptions and reactions have differed from ours as they witnessed the drama from whose script our Greek text, corrupted over time, is derived, a sometimes uncertain remnant of that first performance?

For months they had known that Euripides, already in midcareer, would be one of the three tragic poets exhibiting that spring at the annual city festival of Dionysus. He, Sophocles (Euripides' senior by at least a dozen years and a frequent favorite with the judges), and Euphorion (son of the great playwright Aeschylus and destined to be this year's victor), along with their respective chorus masters, the *chorēgoi*, had been chosen the summer before, shortly after the highest ranking city official, the *eponymous archon*, whose duties included oversight of the great festival of Dionysus, had taken office. Whatever shows the other two poets might put on, Euripides' were sure to rattle the audience, for he had been schooled by the sophists—those foreign-born, self-promoting, self-styled wise men who, with Pericles' encouragement, had arrived in boomtown Athens to peddle their newfangled, high-priced higher education to any with the leisure and means to become conversant with its confounding techniques of arguing the pros and cons of any issue and its unnerving theories about the nature of things—and he often made his characters act as though they had received the same indoctrination.

His fellow Athenians must have had mixed reactions to his characters' more extravagant sophistries. To those who were less than sanguine about the new ideas floating around Athens, who feared for the future of Athens and for their own, and who saw in Euripides' dramatic style a sign of the city's corruption, they must have been painful. How large

this group was and who belonged to it we do not know. We can guess that it included those whose power and prestige was tied (or so they thought) to inherited landed estates (large and small) and who despised the manners and pretensions of newly “sophisticated” youths and their teachers and were opposed to Pericles’ aggressive, populist, imperial policies; or, for that matter, just about any fathers or guardians who at home were scandalized by back-talking, rebellious sons and wards or who in the courts had been bested by captious arguments. The list was probably as long as the motives for disliking Euripides were many. Yet, despite his poor showing with the judges, the list of Euripides’ fans was even longer. He fascinated those among the upper classes, especially the leisured, city-dwelling younger generation, who had imbibed the new learning at its source and were more than ready to applaud characters who thought and talked like, or more cleverly than, themselves. Even the as-yet unenlightened, less well-to-do majority, who were either too busy or too poor to pay the sophists’ exorbitant fees, must have been easily seduced by rousing displays of spellbinding rhetoric unavailable to them by any other means. They were regaled by characters who might at any time begin to wax philosophical and question the veracity, worth, even the existence of the Homeric gods and whether men ought to be worshiping them, and, if not them, who or what.

But to these working men, better than all the logic-chopping and philosophizing was the way Euripides brought the imposing presences from Greek myth—those lofty alter egos of Athens’ proud, Spartan-loving oligarchs—on stage in, shall we say, debasing circumstances. His characters, less remote, more human, delighted the newly enriched and newly empowered lower classes—city-dwelling, landless traders and artisans who had prospered from the manning and maintenance of Athens’ large navy and from the new markets Athens’ supremacy at sea had opened up. Thanks to Pericles, who for the last dozen years or so had been the undisputed master of Athens, and much to the chagrin of the so-called few (*oligoi*), aristocrats who thought themselves more qualified by birth and upbringing to rule, these vulgar many (*demos*), whom Pericles had flattered, rewarded, and led, now dominated the assembly and the courts. It must have been they most of all who a few years back had applauded so wildly when, dressed in rags, the great and noble son of Heracles, the Mysian Telephus (in a lost Euripidean play of that name) had hobbled before ancestral Argive peers to beg for aid. Surely there would be more outrageous surprises of this kind from Euripides’ fertile mental store, something everyone could love hating.

They will not be disappointed. In the play they are about to see,

the wondrous, magical, triumphant marriage of two matchless heroes — Jason, captain of the Argonauts, and Medea, his trophy wife—will enter the divorce court. To an audience raised on Aeschylus's larger-than-life personages, the leading characters of the *Medea* will seem disturbingly like the chattering high-folk of imperial Athens, whose dirty linen, though washed, has been hung out to dry. Under Euripides' tutelage, the art of masking is being transformed from a ritual putting-on of the real presence of a god or antique hero into the presentation of a familiar type confronted with familiar situations. As exotic as Medea is, she is still a woman; as unusual as her story is, it is nevertheless the story of a marriage; as assimilated to the divine nature as her sorcery is, for an ancient Athenian it still rings true to the real-life activities of lady herbalists or "root-cutters." Yet, although Euripides' protagonists will suddenly seem a bit too uncomfortably familiar, the play will be no *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The action will remain public—there will be no displays of unseemly misconduct in the women's quarters—and, by our standards, the diction will seem grave, discreet, and declamatory, though the question of carnal attraction, in keeping with the mythical tradition, will not be altogether avoided. It is mentioned in the prologue (7–8) and emerges prominently as an issue in several of the choral odes and in Jason's caviling.

Not only have the spectators that morning long been expecting something shockingly sophisticated from Euripides, they have also been primed for a "Medea in Corinth." On the day preceding the grand procession that inaugurated the five-day festival, at a preliminary ceremony in the Odeion, the new auditorium flanking the Theater of Dionysus on the audience's left, each competing producer had first presented his poet, his chorus of fifteen men, his actors—also men, usually limited to three, the number necessary to play all the roles throughout the play by assuming different masks—and then announced the subjects and settings of the four plays his team would soon present—as a rule three tragedies, followed by a ribald satyr play (a burlesque of heroic myth in tragic style). Though they held celebratory garlands, the performers were maskless and wore ordinary dress in place of the elaborately embroidered "royal" robes or lewd satyr costumes they would don for their performances. That year Euripides would be offering the *Medea*, along with three other plays now lost: a *Philoctetes*, a *Diktys*, and a satyr play called *Theristai*.

LEGENDARY BACKGROUND

Ancient Greek myths tend to coalesce around ancestral dynasties, in this case, around one known as the Aeolidae, descendants of Aeolus,

Jason's great-grandfather, who had originally ruled in the plains of Thessaly in northern Greece. One of Aeolus's seven sons, Athamas, had two famous wives. The first, Nephele, bore him a son, Phrixus, and a daughter, Helle; the second, Ino, attempted to kill Phrixus. In fifth century accounts of this wicked stepmother's plot and its thwarting—we know of at least three plays of Sophocles and three of Euripides that touch upon it—there seems to have been an abortive sacrifice of Phrixus, after which he and his sister fly off toward the East on the back of a golden ram, sent either by their mother, Nephele, or by a god. Helle falls off, giving her name to Helle's sea (the Hellespont), but Phrixus arrives safely in the land of the Colchians at the eastern end of the Black Sea. Here he sacrifices the golden ram and gives its fleece to Aeëtes, son of the Titan Helios (the Sun) and King of Aia, a city on the Phasis River. In return, Aeëtes welcomes him into his household and gives him the hand of a daughter (Medea's sister) in marriage. After fathering a number of sons, Phrixus dies in Colchis. All this time the unearthly fleece hangs in a sacred grove, safeguarded by a huge serpent.

Meanwhile, back in Thessaly, the scene has shifted to the harbor town of Iolcus, at the foot of Mount Pelion. Athamas is no longer in the picture, and his nephew Aeson, the father of Jason, has been overthrown by Aeson's half brother Pelias. At the time of the coup, Aeson's supporters entrust the boy Jason to the wise centaur Chiron, who raises him far from town in a cave near Pelion's peak. Years pass. Pelias, though tormented by a prophecy to beware of a man wearing a single sandal, rules without opposition. Then, one fine day just such a one-sandaled man arrives in Iolcus: a heroic figure, indeed, in Pindar, who

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ebruary a generation earlier wrote:

a man terrible with twin javelins; and a twofold guise was on him.
A tunic of Magnesian fashion fitted close his magnificent limbs,
and across it a panther's hide held off the shivering rains.
Nor did the glory of his streaming locks go shorn,
but blazed the length of his back. Striding apace
he stood, and tested his unfaltering will
in the market place that filled with people.

They knew him not; yet awe-struck one man would say to another:
"This cannot be Apollo, surely, nor Aphrodite's lord,
he of the brazen chariot. . . ."

(*Fourth Pythian Ode*, 78–88, tr. Richmond Lattimore)

The man is Jason, come home at last to claim his royal birthright. Along the way he has lost one of his sandals. The lines from Pindar, representative of a tradition familiar to Euripides' audience, allow us

to see what that audience would have realized at once: just how far Euripides' Jason has fallen compared to Pindar's godlike warrior.

When King Pelias learns the identity of this awesome, one-shoed stranger, the wily usurper is ready with a deft proposal: The ghost of Phrixus has been haunting his dreams and has called upon him to bring the fleece of the golden ram back to Iolcus. Would Jason be enterprising enough to wrest it from the formidable Aeëtes? Jason, a hero to his core, accepts Pelias's challenge and calls upon most of the heroes of the age to go with him to the world's eastern edge, a mysterious, potent, sacred spot, charged with danger, where the Sun rises from his Underworld home, and where no Greek had gone before. They come from all over, these brave adventurers. With Athena's help, they build the world's first man-of-war, the Argo, and from Iolcus they sail (and row) into untested waters beyond the Bosphorus. On the way, they encounter many obstacles, all of which they overcome, only to find the greatest obstacles of all in Colchis.

As soon as the purpose of the Argonauts' mission is made plain to Aeëtes, the ungracious and devious king sets tasks for Jason to perform in order to win the Golden Fleece—tasks that Aeëtes believes will be impossible. The hero must plow a field with fire-breathing bulls, sow dragon's teeth in the furrows, and kill the fully armed warriors that will sprout from this sinister seed. The gods, however, are on Jason's side. Aphrodite makes the king's daughter Medea fall so madly in love with the beautiful Greek stranger that she, a priestess of Hecate and therefore accomplished in the secret arts of magic, gives him potions to protect him from the bulls' fire and sound advice on how to set his new-grown adversaries to fighting among themselves. When her father does not keep his side of the bargain and refuses to grant Jason the Golden Fleece, she helps her lover seize the prize from under the watchful eye of its guardian dragon and then escapes with him aboard the Argo. Along the way, she and Jason kill her brother and, according to at least one fifth-century account (though not attested by Euripides), chop up his corpse and scatter his limbs behind them as they flee, in order to delay her father's pursuit.²

At some point in these adventures, in return for her aid and to protect her from her father's vengeance, Jason solemnly swears to make Medea his lawful wife. This marriage—one of the great marriages of myth, in which the human and the divine worlds come together to

2. Michael Collier incorporates some details of this version at lines 160–62. Euripides, however, tells us nothing about the cause or the manner of this murder, only that it was shameful (160/166–67) and that it took place at Medea's father's hearth (1308/1334).

celebrate an extraordinary union — is accomplished either on the home-ward voyage, during which Medea’s magical powers often come to the aid of Jason and his crew, or upon the couple’s triumphal return to Iolcus. In Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Argonautica*, an epic written about a century and a half after Euripides’ *Medea*, it forms a highlight of the last, culminating book. Significantly, Apollonius has it take place in Phaeacia, the enchanted land where Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* was finally rescued from the sea and sent home to Ithaca. The marriage bed of the god-blessed couple — so often referred to in the play — was, we are told, set up in a sacred cave and covered with the Golden Fleece itself: “Nymphs gathered flowers for them, and as they brought the many-coloured bunches into the cave in their white arms the fiery splendour of the fleece played on them all, so bright was the glitter of its golden wool. It kindled in their eyes a sweet desire. They longed to lay their hands on it, and yet they were afraid to touch it. . . . As for his bride, the place where the pair were brought together when the fragrant linen had been spread is still called the Sacred Cave of Medea.”³

The quest for the Golden Fleece had many sequels. The oldest and most famous was the murder of King Pelias by his daughters, who were tricked by cunning Medea into killing their own father, a tale that is introduced as background in the prologue of the *Medea* to account for Jason’s and Medea’s status as exiles from Iolcus (see notes, lines 8–9/9–10). Another sequel, her stint in Athens with King Aegeus, which is anticipated in the third episode of the play (658–815/663–823; see below) and set after Medea’s flight from Corinth, may well have been devised only in classical times. Both Euripides and Sophocles are known to have written undatable lost plays called *Aegeus*. But even if one of them included Medea in its plot, and that play was produced before our *Medea*, it is unlikely that the Athens episode, in contrast to the murder of Pelias, would have formed a part of the audience’s assumptions or expectations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Because the dates of most of Euripides’ surviving plays are unknown, and because those that are known do not always belong to moments in Athenian history as well documented as the spring of 431 BC, we are not usually in a position, as we are with the *Medea*, to explore the

3. Apollonius, *Argonautica*, lines 1143–48, 1153–55, tr. E. V. Rieu (Penguin 1971), 178. For a complete account of this and related legends, see Timothy Gantz’s *Early Greek Myth* (Johns Hopkins, 1993), where a valiant attempt is made to sort out the many competing versions.

relationship between the action of the play and the events of the world. The *Medea* was produced during the incidents described in the first two books of Thucydides' history of the great Peloponnesian War. Of course, that proud morning the audience did not know what the future would bring or that the war upon which they were embarking would be twenty-seven years long and ultimately disastrous for Athens. They did know, however, that it had already begun, for the previous summer Sparta had declared war, and as soon as the campaigning season got under way in earnest, efficient, ruthless Spartan phalanxes would be marching toward Athenian territory.

Anxious though the majority in the audience must have been about this anticipated invasion, chances are at least one of them, the leader of the anti-Spartan, prowar, expansionist, democratic faction, was outwardly calm, for he had already decided that such an incursion would be of little long-term consequence. Pericles had always aimed for Athens' preeminence in Greece at Sparta's expense, wanting to pit his city's young sea power against the other's venerable land power. Now his efforts were paying off. On his advice, Attic farmers, the mainstay of the heavily armed infantry (the hoplites), would soon send their livestock to neighboring islands and, abandoning their holdings in the countryside, reluctantly take up temporary residence inside the city walls, along with their women and children, their servants, and, we are told, their household furniture. Let the invincible Spartans and their Dorian allies do their worst. What had Athenians to fear, so long as they stayed behind the ramparts? With Athens' coffers bursting and her fleet unchallenged from Coreyra to Colchis, they could count on war supplies and other resources being shipped in from overseas. Meanwhile, their war fleet, manned by the best-trained rowers in the world, would make surprise raids on the inadequately guarded territories of Sparta and her allies.

In this perfervid atmosphere, names like "Argo," "Clashing Rocks," and "Corinth" were laden with implications they can scarcely have for us. Had not the citizens of Athens, like the Argonauts of old, "forced every sea and land to be the highway of [their] daring" (Thucydides 2.41, tr. R. Crawley)? Not only had they sounded the farthest reaches of the Black Sea, but with their own garrisons, settlers, and naval patrols, they had turned its once formidable waters into a large lake, from which big-bellied merchantmen, laden with grain and salt fish, made their swift, unobstructed way past the Clashing Rocks, through the Bosphorus and the Hellespont, to Athens.

Athens' new prosperity and sudden power, however, had brought many problems. Foreigners, both Greek and non-Greek, had flooded

the city. Many of those involved in trade, native and foreigner alike, had become newly rich and influential. As the use of ships and money increased, the land holdings in Attica that supported the hoplite army no longer counted for as much, and the room and board once supplied to farmhands and servants had given way, in the city at least, to wages. With wages came the possibility of freedom and, to the ambitious, hard-working, and lucky, social and political advancement. Old distinctions no longer applied. No one knew anymore who was who. Political allegiances shifted like sand as each man sought his own advantage.

Because tragedy by definition deals with heroes' hard times, it goes without saying that the audience that morning did not expect to see either Jason or Medea as the exultant figures portrayed in early epic or in Pindar's epinician odes from thirty years before. But what would this audience at this time have felt when they saw an old slave woman—and, as they soon learn, the slave of a barbarian princess to boot—emerge from the scene building to speak the prologue of this play? By her very appearance on stage, she immediately reoriented their expectations toward the background of the action about to unfold, toward the immigrant population growth and mixing up of peoples and status that maritime supremacy had brought in its wake. If the surviving Euripidean tragedies are any guide to the common practice of this most “democratic” of the fifth-century tragedians, then the Nurse is indeed unusual. Almost always, a god or hero speaks his prologues; she is an immigrant's slave. Oh yes, she is an aristocrat among servants (see notes, lines 1–39/1–48 and 40/49), but a servant nonetheless, and there she stands in that great circle of empty space and, like any free Athenian citizen, addresses the rulers of the sea, a symbol perhaps of the recognizable confusion of daily life in democratic Athens, where the base-born lord it over their betters and slaves and foreigners cannot be distinguished from freemen (cf. Ps. Xenophon, *Constitution of Athens*, 1.4–12).

Already nonplused by her appearance, what must their astonishment have been when the first words out of her mouth wished the Argo and its triumphs away—the Argo, whose voyage was a mythical emblem of their own sea power—and along with it the whole turmoil of domestic and public life that its sudden success had brought. Who in that audience would not have felt the pull of what she said? Even the overseas clients and the immigrants in Athens (the metics), who had prospered beyond their wildest imaginings, would have felt the anxiety of life in the fast lane, far from home and the old familiar ways evoked by this old servant's lament. But perhaps none there that day would have felt her words more strongly than the slaves, some from as far away as

Colchis, who perhaps were waiting on the edges of the crowd for the signal between plays to bring more refreshments to their masters. They too saw the veil of literary convention raised just enough to reveal a cynical reality with which they and those around them were all too familiar. Underneath the heavy veneer of the ennobling past, the commonplace was peeping through. The Argo was beached.

Then there was Corinth. Ready to pit their seamanship against that of any of Sparta's allies, how could this audience not have reacted to the drama's being set in Corinth? Although we usually say that the Peloponnesian War was between Athens and Sparta, this is merely a neat formula for a far messier reality. In reality the war arose between Athens and her allies—that is, all the subject cities of the Delian League, the maritime federation over which she ruled—and Sparta and her allies, largely the cities of the Peloponnesus, the south Greek peninsula. Of this region the chief naval power was Corinth, the northernmost city of the Peloponnesus. Straddling the neck of the peninsula, she not only controlled the north-south land route, but had once been the busiest port in Greece, until Athens challenged her ascendancy. Indeed, it was actually with Corinth, not Sparta, that the disagreements leading up to the final breach of the 'Thirty Years' Truce had started. Corinth was the real enemy, her fleet the real threat, her jealousy of upstart Athens the driving cause. In the months leading up to the war, Athens, already first in the Aegean and the Black Sea to the east, had deliberately challenged Corinth's control of the sea lanes between mainland Greece and the prosperous Greek colonies in South Italy and Sicily to the west. Corinth had retaliated. By the time Corinth, during the previous summer, had finally convinced Sparta, with her invincible elite land forces, to join the fight, Athens and Corinth were already fully engaged.

So, whatever his motives, Euripides had picked a myth and a setting that fit the hour. His audience, he well knew, was made up of the same citizens who had voted to aid the city of Corcyra in her rebellion against Corinth and to reject outright the last blunt, impossible Spartan ultimatum that, to keep the peace, the Athenians should give up their empire. Now, on the brink of a war they had asked for, they sat, elated and afraid, and watched Medea wreak havoc upon hostile Corinth's ruler and his new ally, the great Thessalian seaman Jason, who, fool that he was, had suddenly switched his allegiance from her to the Corinthian king Creon.

If the dramatic action had been confined to Corinth, Medea's vengeance would have been riveting, but it would have lacked the frisson generated by the sudden appearance on stage of ancient Athens' King

Aegeus offering asylum to the calculating, yet persuasive Medea (658–815/663–823). Since ancient audiences were used to etiologies in tragedy, like the one at the end of the play that accounts for the historical cult of Medea's children at Corinth, they would doubtless have been alert to the ominous etiological implications of Aegeus's ill-considered promise. Here before their eyes was a myth to explain how Corinth and Athens had become enemies. The scene thus reached out to them in several ways not obvious to us. We have no emotional commitment to Athens' founding hero Theseus, the son Aegeus is going to beget on Pittheus's daughter when he leaves Corinth; not so the Athenians, whose fathers and grandfathers had gone to great trouble and expense to bring this man's bones back from the island of Scyros to Athens and to inaugurate a festival in his honor, replete with a grand procession, sacrifices, and athletic contests. We do not sense the extent of Aegeus's blunder when, needlessly, in exchange for an heir, he welcomes Medea into his home and commits his city to her defense against her new enemies, ipso facto making them his and Athens' own, not for a single generation, but for many generations to come. We do not anticipate, as they did, that Medea will bear to Aegeus a child named Medus, who will become the founder of the ever-threatening Persian kingdom (Media), or that she will attempt to murder the noble Theseus,⁴ nor suspect that the child-destroying taint clinging to her uncanny powers might still be at work in Athens in the shape of her latter-day, root-brewing disciples (see p. 19). Nor do we fear the endless inheritability of blood guilt feared by the Athenians, who, close upon Aegeus's exit from the stage in Euripides' play, discovered from Medea's own lips⁵ that he and hence their shining city had made a commitment to a woman who would murder her own children, an act of pollution so dire that they might have exclaimed along with the Chorus that no ritual cleansing imaginable could make her fit to reside among them (830–39/846–55). With the full extent of Medea's plans revealed, their foreboding at the outcome of her compact with Aegeus is registered musically by the contrast the Chorus draws between Athens' glorious, god-blessed, true wisdom-engendering purity and Medea's depravity (816 ff./824 ff.). Future generations found

4. We know of two undated tragedies that probably dealt with Medea's attempted murder of Theseus, one by Sophocles, one by Euripides. That one of them antedates the *Medea* is proven by "a series of Red-Figure pots starting about 450 B.C. and showing Aigeus, Theseus, the Bull [of Marathon], and a woman who must be Medea . . ." (Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, vol. 1, p. 255.)

5. It has been concluded by many Euripidean scholars that Euripides did not inherit the myth of Medea's murdering her own children but invented it.

Euripides' lyrics the most moving parts of his plays. Was this also true at their premieres? Did the savvy Athenians, unconquered children of the gods and Earth, exult unabashedly in the glory of their city and yet fear for the danger that lay ahead? I cannot help but think so.

The audience's sense of unease at the sinister quality of the Athens-Corinth connection would have been heightened by the way in which Euripides locates the familiar political machinations of the play not in a public space but deep inside a noble house, where the destabilizing quest for personal power, honor, and glory, and for the honor of one's house, began and ended. For ancient Greek politics, as will become clearer when we look more closely at the topic of Medea's honor, was not distant like ours, representative and televised, but immediate, direct and personal, oftentimes played out among participants who had known each other since childhood. Wheeling and dealing could not be left behind when an ancient Athenian or Corinthian went home, because his home and its nexus of alliances with kin and peers constituted his faction, his party. Unstable marriage alliances and bloody vendettas (which Athenian court procedure reflected and often was powerless to replace), coups and countercoups, betrayals and counterbetrayals were the very stuff of political life throughout Greece and often undermined the common good. Not only is Euripides' play centered on one of these explosive political marriages, the maneuvering between husband and wife is brought down from the royal, public heights on which it had been displayed in other tragedies (e.g., Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) into the bathos of a domestic tug of war between a husband and his no-longer-convenient, unrestrained, foreign wife, who refuses to go quietly into the limbo to which she has been consigned and instead, unassisted, outsmarts all her pantywaist foes.

MEDEA'S CHARACTER

In developing Medea's character, Euripides plays the received tradition off contemporary situations and prejudices. Her fierce, mantic nature, to Pindar a sign of her prophetic powers (*Pythian* 4.10), is now a symptom of a defective character type: the aloof, intractable, uncontrollable, uncompromising, stubborn *authades*, who, when crossed, is given to inordinate rage and resentment and resists all attempts on the part of friends at mollification or amelioration. The Greek word is fairly new⁶ and belongs to the emerging discourse of medicine, rhetoric, and

6. Significantly, the word first appears in the *Prometheus Bound*, which, in my opinion, is neither by Aeschylus nor much earlier in date than the 430s BC. But this is a controversial topic out of place here.

ethics, and, although rare in Euripides, is used four times to describe Medea. Up until Jason's betrayal and her unjust abasement, she had managed to conceal her true nature behind a facade of restrained solicitousness, obliging her husband and his friends when necessary (9–12/11–15) and like a true lady, showing just the right amount of reserve and dignity to make others, like the Corinthian women who have extended their friendship to her (131/138; 177–80/178–79, 181), think that she is a perfect wife—modest, chaste, and temperate (*sophrosyne*, or “soundness of mind/integrity of heart,” includes all these attributes of a woman capable of controlling her passions, cf. line 636). But as soon as her anger is unleashed by Jason's betrayal, she starts to behave differently. Instead of passively enduring her fate, or in shame committing suicide like some wilting Madame Butterfly, she becomes totally resistant to moderation, indifferent to the propriety of her actions, incapable of bowing to the will of her betters, much less of her equals. “She is deaf to friends' advice, like a stone, like a wave” (24–25/28–29), the Nurse explains early on to the audience; and later to the Tutor, “She came into the world fierce and stubborn” (94–95/93–94); and still later to the Chorus, “She'll growl and snarl when I approach, like a lioness shielding her cubs. She'll snort like a bull. I doubt I'll lure her out” (190–94/184–89). For it is not just the violence and intensity of Medea's wrath that is at issue in the play, but its utter relentlessness, its unappeasability. Inside the house, she reveals to all her familiars that she has the reach and temper of a thwarted tyrant or of one like an Ajax or a Prometheus, who, though used to high honors, has been suddenly and unendurably shamed; except, unlike them, she has at hand the means to avenge herself upon her tormentors. Outside, before the Chorus and her other interlocutors, like a true sophist, she can play whatever role is necessary to obtain her ends, including, when it serves her purpose, that of a reserved and dignified noblewoman (*semnos*, cf. 222–32/214–224).⁷

Of Medea's great intellectual acumen and professional skill, Euripides' audience had no doubt. Her powers of prophecy and sorcery were essential to her mythic persona. But just as Euripides has disconnected

7. Even though the meaning of the opening lines of this speech remains doubtful, the underlying argument can be shown to be a ploy familiar to us from Plato and Aristotle. Wishing to disguise her true nature and forestall the accusation of *authadeia*, Medea insinuates that she is not really self-willed and recalcitrant as some people think but rather virtuously reserved and worthy of respect, a claim that is convincing because the simulated virtue (*semnotes*) is known by qualities similar to those by which the concealed vice (*authadeia*) is known. Thus anticipated censure is turned into apparent praise. (Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 267A; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.9.28–32 1367a33–b27 and *Eudemian Ethics* 2.3.4 1221a; 3.7.5 1233b 35–38, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3.26–34 1124b17–1125a16)

Medea's passionate nature from her noble art and turned it from a virtue into a vice, so he makes his audience view her "profession," her *sophia*, in nontraditional ways. By moving her into a situation in which her political power and prestige as Jason's wife are at risk, he exposes the dark, destructive side of her talent. Like other sophists (professors, wise men) of Euripides' day, we see her arguing any side of any case that will at any given point best serve her interests. If she needs the Chorus's complicity, she obtains their good will in specious appeals for sympathy and solidarity. When her arguments fail to convince Creon that he should give her a reprieve from instant banishment, she begs abjectly for pity (abject begging was an often-used ploy in Athenian courts to arouse the pity of the jurors). Confronted by the one who has wronged her, she mounts a strong prosecution. Presented with a chance for asylum, she engages in the question and answer of cross-examination, a technique from the courts that provides the backbone of Socrates' famous method of philosophical interrogation. If upon stepping through the palace doors, she appears by turns calm and dignified, abject, confident, or contrite, she is only doing what other heroes before her had done—what loyal Greeks always still did—when confronted with an enemy. She schemes, she tricks, she deceives. Only, in this play, the enemy is her husband and his friends, and the arguments she uses are taken from the latest instruction manuals for speech-making. Thus, those watching her proficient duplicity must confront not only the power of the new rhetoric but also a familiar truth, that when allegiances change—as they so frequently did in city politics—duplicity is a two-edged sword. Everything depends on who the true enemy—or friend—is.

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ebruary Just as her transparent sophistry strips her of her inherited grandeur, so it strips her interlocutors of theirs. Thus, as she accuses or feigns submission or gloats, and Jason offers disingenuous (though, as we shall see, in real life often convincing) excuses or condescending approbation or a last, pathetic retort, he is demoted from a great hero and daring explorer to an exiled and humbled former first citizen scheming to better his lot. By the end of the play he has made such a complete mess of things and is so bested by his wife that her prediction—that he will end his life shamefully, one of the lowest of the low, a childless wretch accidentally done to death by a fragment of his old ship—is utterly believable. Nor is Jason the only character who succumbs to Medea's up-to-date tactics and cunning, although he alone exhibits no obvious, compensating virtue. By matching arguments or answering her far-from-innocent questions, both Creon and Aegeus diminish their kingly stature. Creon is less a king because, though he has taken ac-

curate measure of his enemy, he nevertheless succumbs to her pleading and out of misplaced pity fails to make the right decision. The kings in traditional epics made mistakes, but it was the gods who befuddled their wits, not clever women and their own yielding natures. In a different situation, Creon's mildness and mercy might even be deemed princely virtues; but when his kingdom is at stake, succumbing to this side of his nature is folly; it is what Aristotle would call missing the mark most tragically.

As already indicated above, Aegeus's character is more of a puzzle, partly, I think, because, in his encounter with Medea, the techniques of forensic oratory are not being employed, and it is from the argumentative techniques of this kind of rhetoric which were being systematized in the courts that Euripides derived his technique of revealing character through dialogue. Furthermore, true to the politeness of this simpler question-and-answer dialogue, the poet chooses to make neither character say anything by way of praise or blame to the other, nor does he use a third party—a servant, a messenger, a chorus—to introduce Aegeus as he introduces Medea in the prologue. Only Medea, the prevaricator—who in the audience would take anything she says without evident rancor for Jason at face value?—has any opportunity to characterize him, and she doesn't. So Aegeus seems just, generous, and a fool; not grand but tragicomic.

Much has been made in recent times of Medea's exotic nature as a barbarian witch. Of her lack of Greek culture, considering how many important Athenians at the time were the sons or grandsons of non-Greek mothers (see p. 22), too much, I believe, has been made. The only character in the play who denigrates Medea for being a barbarian is Jason, and he, like any aristocratic student of the sophists, will use whatever convenient ploy against her he can find to justify his own actions. But nowhere else in the play does her ignorance of Greek manners or speech stigmatize her socially—in her dealings with Creon, Aegeus, or the Chorus, nor in the servants' comments—although her status as an outsider of a different kind is often at issue: as a woman who does not belong by blood to her husband's family or as the wife of a political exile who is not a citizen of the city in which he finds himself. These categories were quite distinct in the Greek mind, and in the play they are regularly signified by different words, *barbaroi* for non-Greeks, *thuraioi* or *allotrioi* for nonfamily members, and *xenoi* for noncitizens.

But of Medea's proficient barbarian witchcraft, so central to the dramatic action, moderns have made too little, or, rather, they have tended to misjudge its import. To the Athenians of Euripides' day, witchcraft

was not the fantastic, pagan, sci-fi art portrayed in today's movies or on TV; it was regarded as an integral part of the latest scientific research and regularly used by proficient healers and salvific priests, whose knowledge of the demonic world allowed them to harness its forces, either to cure or destroy. Even in its most rational or materialist forms, ancient Greek science never completely separated the divine nature from the world it investigated. Essential to Aristotle's biology, developed almost a century after Euripides, was the belief that the gods are living beings and that the soul, as the vital principle governing all life forms from gods to worms, not only encompasses all our physical and mental functions but is also the very stuff—the DNA, if you will—that determines our individual natures and links us to other members of our species, both those of us now dead and those yet to be born (cf., e.g., *On the Soul* 1.1 402a ff., and *On the Generation of Animals* 1.18 724b14 ff.). To the Stoics, who came after Aristotle, the universe itself was a living creature suffused by the controlling fiery, pneumatic material they called Reason and God, and they claimed that a wise man's reason was actually a piece of this divine *Pneuma*. Such philosophizings merely rationalized an earlier, widely held, Classical belief that the human soul contains a measure of the divine, the unsullied intellect, and because of it we are in some sense akin to the gods. The greater the intellect, the more godly its possessor, and those with the most powerful, most agile, most refined minds⁸ were deemed to be gods, not necessarily gods of the highest order, not the Olympic or heavenly gods who dwell in perpetual bliss, but powerful, almost indestructible beings nonetheless, the kind called *daimones*, those invisible natures proficient for good or evil who, with countless companions, travel in the soul-rich air around us, or inhabit the flowers, trees, and rivers that spring from the immortal earth, or, indeed, who themselves arise from the earth out of the corpses of previous generations or descend from on high into this miserable, tainted, mortal sphere of war, disease, decay, and death to mediate between us wretches and those glorious, uncontaminated souls above.

Although in Euripides' day this vision of the world and the role of the divine nature in it lacked the coherence of later philosophical systems, it was, nevertheless, already present in embryonic or, as late Platonists would insist, oracular form; and Euripides himself was

8. Though only implicit in Collier's translation ("And you, yes, you have a mind for plots and treachery," 537–38), in the Greek text Jason explicitly refers to Medea's mind as subtle (or finely threshed, *leptos*, 529), a word that in the late fifth century was often associated with sophistry and in Aristophanes, specifically with Socrates (and Euripides). See p. 19.

caught up in the early stages of the great intellectual task of its articulation. He was, by all accounts, associated with the most advanced thinkers in Athens, in particular with Socrates, who was periodically accused on the comic stage of helping him write his innovative and disturbing plays. Whatever one may think of Aristophanes' historicity, his unforgettable portrayal of Socrates in the *Clouds* (produced within a decade of the *Medea*) as the archetypal priestly sophist, swinging aloft in his basket and mingling his finely threshed, elevated thought with the ever-flowing numinous Air, clearly relies on a popular conception of contemporary wise men, who were laying claim to an intelligence above that of ordinary mortals and to direct contact with divine. Even Plato, Socrates' greatest apologist, depicts him in a similar state of intellectual communion with the divine nature. What is more, in the *Symposium*, he makes the young Socrates the disciple not of a sage but of a sage-ess, the plague-diverting priestess Diotima (*Symposium* 201D).

To this seldom-witnessed distaff side of the new schools of the learned, Euripides' *Medea*, priestess of Hecate and sharer in the goddess's most secret treasury of transforming drugs and charms, surely belongs. She is, to be more specific, a professional healer (and harmer) trained in the art of gathering, preparing, and applying drugs. Because this art depended upon knowledge of certain divine rites and charms, some of which were revealed only to women, women held a secure place in this branch of knowledge. They were thought to be particularly capable in the nocturnal collection of roots, leaves, flowers, and bark and in turning their finds into efficacious salves and potions, which they must have supplied to physicians like Hippocrates (a contemporary of Socrates and Euripides) or to less reputable healers, and which they themselves must have prescribed, particularly in their duties as midwives.

Like the sophists remembered in our ancient sources, holy wise women must have wielded sufficient power through their arts to have been labeled dangerous, *deinai*, an adjective that can describe anything alarming but in the fifth century came to be attached to those ingenious few who were possessed of intimidating new intellectual and persuasive powers. It cannot be accidental that this adjective is often predicated of *Medea* in the rising action of the play, where she is presented both as the awe-inspiring, semidivine ancestress of female pharmacists—a being that is *deine* in the old sense of the term—and also as her own glib, modern incarnation. She has, as it were, a split personality, and it is this unresolved tension between the exalted, awful being who can do what her modern counterparts claimed to be able to do—control nature—and a more mundane, more desperate, more human

reality that makes her endlessly fascinating. She is both a steward of sacred magic and a purveyor of marvels, an emblem of the times.

There are many clues throughout the play that Euripides means his audience to see Medea and her wisdom in this way, but these will not be obvious to Michael Collier's readers, because, in order to make Euripides' difficult Greek accessible to contemporary, English-speaking readers, he necessarily recasts the passages that most reveal the scientific-sophistic issues: the first three choral odes and the prologues to Medea's first two speeches. Since it is impossible in a general introduction to examine all of these, I will consider but one example, Medea's second speech (313 ff./292 ff.). Modern philologists steeped in Socratic lore have long recognized the similarity between Medea's answer to Creon's indictment (303–12/282–91) and Socrates' protestations in Plato's *Apology* that he is misunderstood and not really so wise; but not seeing its appropriateness to her character, they have treated this point of the play as a rather undramatic intrusion of Euripides' own voice, laden with frustration at the uneducated obtuseness of his audiences.

In her speech, Medea's aim is to blunt Creon's fear that she will inflict some irremediable harm upon his daughter, but rather than try to deny the truth of the inflammatory and now public fact that she is, as he alleges, "distressed at being deprived of [her] man's bed" (286) and has been "threatening . . . to take action (*drasein ti*) against [all three parties to Jason's new marriage contract], the grantor, the groom, and the bride" (287–89), she astutely prefers to answer the less pressing charge that she is "by nature (*pephukas*) wise/skilled (*sophê*) and versed (*idris*, an unusual, poetic word) in many evils (*kakôn pollôn*)" (285). Even in these few lines, the directness, imagistic force, and colloquial smoothness of Michael Collier's translation are self-evident. Instead of impeding his verses with Euripides' awkward legal formalities quoted above, he encapsulates in one or two image-laden words the gist of Creon's accusations: Medea "sting[s] with loss" (305); she makes "the darkest threats . . . against his house" (307–8); her "nature, clever and vindictive, thrives on evil" (304–5). Since the last of these three charges is the one Medea answers, but is the first to be uttered by Creon, in order to preserve continuity, the phrase "a woman like you," which echoes the idea of Medea's nature, is added to Creon's last sentence (311) as a convenient thread for Medea to pick up at the beginning of her rebuttal, when she exclaims "A woman like me!" (313). The transition is seamless, but the original line of argument is lost. The issue is no longer the frightening effectiveness of Medea's talent for and skill in the art (*sophia*) of black magic, but a more modern issue, the den-

igration of a clever women. Yet it was Medea's science, not just her intellectual agility, that concerned Creon, and it is this objective reality, in the guise of the new learning and its practitioners, that Medea addresses in her rebuttal. Here, with true sophistry, she turns herself into a victim of the prejudice widely incurred (in Athens) by the *sophoi*.

Not now for the first time, but often, Creon, has my reputation harmed me and caused great evils. A sensible man (*artiphron pephukas*) ought never to have his children too highly educated [in the new sciences] (*perissos ekdidaskesthai sophous*), for, apart from fecklessness,⁹ their only profit is the ill will and envy of their fellow townsmen. For, if you proffer new discoveries (*kaina sophia*) to benighted bunglers (literally "left-handed," *skaios*), [by them] you will be thought ineffectual and not really competent (*sophos*).¹⁰ But if in the city you are thought superior to those who think they are experts (know something abstruse, *eidenai ti poikilon*), [to these] you will seem offensive. I too share in this misfortune. Being skilled (*sophê*) [in my art/science], I am envied by the latter and deemed too steep by the former. (292–305)

Instead of calling attention to her proven and therefore dangerous skill in witchcraft and its possible application to the case at hand, Medea shrewdly speaks of the *sophoi* in general, claiming, with a wonderfully personalized and, under the circumstances, apt rhetorical ploy (I wouldn't want my children to be wise), that experts and scientists like her are misunderstood. Since the majority of citizens don't know what to make of them and cannot use their advice, they are in effect useless to the city (and therefore not dangerous); at the same time they arouse envy in those who think that they too know something worth attending to or paying for. Either way, out of envy or misunderstanding, their skill is (unjustly) condemned as dangerous and deemed a potential source of trouble to the well-being of the city.

Although the Greek is not entirely clear here and the passage has in fact proved a stumbling block to exegetes, it is obvious from this rendition that Medea's arguments have nothing to do with the distinction between men and women that resonates so forcefully with us moderns and upon which Michael Collier's translation depends; rather, they aim first at the conflict between newfangled science and received wisdom;

9. Cf., e.g., Aristophanes, *Clouds* 334.

10. Twenty years later in the *Thesmophoriazousae*, Aristophanes makes a pretend-Euripides parody these lines ("For if you proffer new insights [*kaina sophia*] to the benighted, you expend them in vain [lines 1130–31]), only in the comedy the unspecified benighted being referred to here is made flesh and blood on stage in the shape of an uneducated policeman, a Scythian archer and public slave, whose pidgin Greek (in the preceding dialogue) has already assured the audience that Euripides' clever arguments will be lost on him.

then at disparities between those who are both gifted and educated and the stupid and ignorant—or, as students of Classical rhetoric know, between the upper and lower classes; and, finally, at the sometimes vicious rivalries among those competing for political prominence. All three motifs are at work here.

MEDEA'S HONOR

As telling to Euripides' audience as her sophisticated learning (*sophia*) and her unbending refusal to be placated (*authadeia*) was Medea's "divorce" from Jason and consequent reduction in legal standing from wife to concubine. The topic had been rendered thorny for many in Euripides' audience by a restrictive citizenship law ushered through the assembly twenty years earlier by Pericles himself. Previously, a child was considered legitimate if he was the offspring of a legitimate marriage and if his father had citizen status. Even many highborn, celebrated Athenians had non-Athenian mothers. Cimon and Themistocles, heroes of the Persian wars, had Thracian mothers, and Pericles himself was the great-grandson of Agariste, daughter of Cleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon. Now both parents, no matter how well born, had to be able to prove their citizen status.

For many Athenians this law must have had grave consequences. Despite its not being retroactively applied to citizens already registered with their precincts (*demes*), it must have immediately affected young men eighteen years of age who were just then applying for citizenship. Children of Athenian fathers who were declared illegitimate lost not only their citizens' rights but their inheritances as well, which would go instead to the nearest legitimate relative and his heirs. A poor man who had little to leave his sons would not have had to defend his own or his heirs' legitimacy in court against would-be heirs or beneficiaries; a rich man was an easy target, so like most of the legislation of the Periclean age, as a rule this law punished the propertied classes more than the working man.

Another of the law's consequences must have been that Athenians who had married foreign women now had to replace them with Athenian wives if they did not want their future sons and daughters to be bastards. These divorces would have created a class of newly disfranchised, but still free, foreign-born grass widows, who, Medea-like, either had to stay in a reduced condition as concubines in their former husbands' households—the option Jason seems to envision for Medea—or find new partners and legal protectors (*kyrioi*) among the foreigners who resided in Athens or, like Aegeus in Corinth, who were just passing through.

If these independent, foreign women happened to be beautiful, rich, well-connected at home, or highly educated, they might have been seen by many powerful men as desirable additions to their households. Pericles himself might have married his notorious Milesian mistress, Aspasia, had he been able. But ironically, because of his own citizenship law, unlike the noblemen of preceding generations, he was forced to make other arrangements. What he did might seem shocking to modern sensibilities, but makes good sense in light of Athenian custom. As his Athenian wife's guardian in law, he divorced her by arranging a new marriage for her with an acceptable new husband—one wonders how much this unnamed woman suffered from the humiliation of being transferred from Pericles to someone else—and then lived openly with Aspasia as his legal concubine. Under this arrangement, their children would be free but not citizens, a fact that would not have been a hindrance to Pericles since he already had two legitimate sons by his former Athenian wife.

As for Aspasia, concubinage with Pericles brought her as much honor as she could hope to claim in Athens. As a foreigner, she had none of the public religious duties and enjoyed none of the privileges accorded great Athenian ladies. Even though within Pericles' household she might have been in charge of the domestic servants and the storeroom, as the mother of a bastard (she had one son, named after his father), she was second-class, not the equal of the proud mothers of Athenian boys. Philosophers may have admired her, but from the moment she caught her man, this influential, unconventional woman became a lightning rod for Pericles' political enemies and grist for the comic poets' mills, a convenient instigator of all his blunders and hated policies. Like Medea, she was a liability if she proved to be too much for the man who had put his honor on the line to win her.

At the time Euripides was composing the *Medea*, general awareness of the effects of Pericles' marriage law must have been quite acute, because first sons of marriages made immediately subsequent to its passage were just now applying to their precincts for entrance onto the citizen rolls. It is not surprising then to find traces of its impact in Euripides' dramatization of the appalling end of Medea's fairy tale marriage. Has not Jason, like so many Athenians, set aside his marriage oaths and dishonored his wife for his own political convenience, apparently believing that, under altered circumstances, the gods would allow his new arrangements to override old oaths (494–96/492–94)? Does he not believe that unrestrained rulers—like Creon and himself or, in democratic Athens, the majority of the citizens' assembly—could with their decrees, newly inscribed on mere wood and stone, override

old unwritten marriage settlements, sanctioned not just by mouthed formulas but by oaths spoken directly from the heart to the ears of the gods?¹¹ To the extent that the *Medea* engaged such issues, it offered its audience small consolation that there might be satisfactory solutions. Indeed, one of the things that is so disturbing about this play is that Medea refuses to go along with the little arrangement between Jason and Creon to sustain Creon's family's rule in Corinth and to return Jason to power in Iolcus, managing instead to enforce divine justice within a single day.

The audience that morning in the Theater of Dionysus must have begun to squirm in their seats when Medea and Jason finally confront each other in the great debate (*agon*) that supplies the climax to the first part of the play. In the course of her argument, Medea reviles her former husband for his contempt of their marriage contract, his willingness to trample her honor, and his desertion of their friendship, not in the emotional sense so much as in the sense of an alliance of interests. To satisfy his lust, a man had other places to go, but for the raising of chaste and strong children and harmony within the house, tranquil friendship (*philia*, the word Aristotle uses to describe the relationship between man and wife) was best. Medea's lust, her succumbing from the outset to the strong and wrong Aphrodite (cf. *Medea* 634 ff./627 ff.) in her relationship with Jason, was a sure sign of something gone awry in the marriage she had forged in defiance ironically, of all the old unwritten laws of the family she now invokes; it is a sure sign of a force that might in the end tear a friendship apart (cause civil war), rather than cement it for all time. For in this society, where all friendships were understood to entail a mutual exchange of benefits, not just goodwill rooted in affection, and every party to a friendship was publicly judged according to the amount of honor he had gained in forging it, a dishonoring misstep could lead to disaster.

When Medea says to Jason, "Or have the gods allowed you / to make new rules that govern oaths?" (495–96/494), her meaning for the ancient audience was far more pointed than it is for us modern readers. When she says, "Come then, if you want, I'll speak to you as a friend and ask the questions a friend would ask" (502–4/499), she means what she says not just in an intimate, personal sense but in the wider political sense upon which their union was founded, as a wartime alliance between herself and Jason. In fact, however, she had been willing to betray her father's house, not for gain—as Jason liked to think—but for love. She was so maddened by love, so innocent of Jason's true

11. Cf. Sophocles, *Antigone* 453–55; Plato, *Phaedrus* 274B ff.

character, that she told herself it did not matter that she was marrying him for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way. But, of course, in the delicate balance of honor gained and given, it did matter. She gave up the rights that she held under her father's rule for other rights, secured, she thought, by oaths; but as it has turned out they were rights that could be overridden as soon as the political winds shifted.

Although Jason's arguments in his defense may seem lame and chauvinistic to us, who feel the justice of Medea's charges, they were probably familiar to Euripides' audience and would have had more force with them than they have with us, because Athenians had both used them themselves and believed them implicitly. Like Jason, Athenians might have argued that, since emotions did not count, according to the public honor code, a foreign "wife" actually got more out of her friendship with her Greek husband than she had put into it. Just the chance to live in Greece so far exceeded her investment that she would have no grounds for complaint. Through her Greek spouse, she, like Medea, would have achieved celebrity and the privilege of submitting to Greek "laws" rather than barbarian force. The irony of this latter claim would probably have been felt by Euripides' audience, who were increasingly aware of the way Athenian laws, not least the marriage law, could be imposed on others, both individuals and subject city-states, by whoever at the moment ruled the assembly. The decrees they voted upon every month seemed to undermine the ideal of inherited law and to serve convenience rather than justice. Thus, in the play, when Jason alludes to the privilege of living under Greek laws,¹² which kind did they think he meant, the sacrosanct traditional laws that Greeks were willing to die honoring, as the noble 300 Spartans had done at Thermopylae, or these latter day contingent laws passed by men proficient in the new techniques of oratory, who were able to gain ascendancy over the many by securing for them the privileges and wealth that were once enjoyed only by the noble and able few? Instinctively, they would have said that he means the former; but they could see that, by his actions, it is the latter, the laws that guaranteed the Greeks their honor as free men and the aristocracy its greatness, that he is flouting and that Medea, the barbarian, is upholding as she defends her own and her children's honor. Paradoxically, she, not Jason, seems to be the one making the stand at Thermopylae and obeying the unwritten, divine law of oaths and the inviolability of an honorable

12. *Medea*, 545–46/537–38. The compression of the English version "Justice, not force, rules here." obscures this point, which is clear in the Greek: "You . . . are acquainted with justice and enjoy laws without having to gratify force (i.e., do favors to the powerful or submit to their will)."

man's word: "Whatever it commands [she does]; and its commandment is always the same: it . . . requires [her] to stand firm, and either to conquer or die" (Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 7.104, tr. George Rawlinson). If along with Aegeus (cf. 690/695) the audience found themselves agreeing with Medea's stronger case—if they found themselves censuring Jason—they would logically be obliged to censure themselves, too.

But Jason in his argument with Medea does not stop with pointing out the benefits she has reaped by having the privilege of learning Greek laws and being lauded by Greek poets. He goes on to maintain how very advantageous, despite appearances, his new marriage arrangements are to Medea and her children, how they do not really represent the dissolving of an old friendship but its expansion. With Creon as a near connection by marriage and with future royal half brothers as kin, they will be so much safer, wealthier, and better placed politically than they would have been on their own. Truly, he had not acted out of lust; he had acted the way a savvy Greek vying for a place at the head of the table always acted, to satisfy ambition and the constraints of altered political circumstances. In other words, he makes a lame excuse to justify an arrangement that increased his own honor but destroyed Medea's.

Much that is strange in this play can be made more intelligible if we remember how crucial honor was to the calculations of all the Greeks. In our society nonconformity, independence, and self-reliance are prized, even in women. But this kind of individualism (a nineteenth-century word) is alien to the ancient world, not just in women, who were praised when compliant and invisible, but even in men, whose duty it was always to be striving to promote their honor and the honor of their family. The leadings of conscience meant nothing to them. Their very being, their selfhood was bound up in the opinion others had of them. In their small world of virulent family feuding, especially the privileged upper-class part of it, honor—the respect due to position and achievement, openly acknowledged every hour of every day—was everything. Breeding (high birth and the right education), wealth, talent, physical presence, offices won and successfully administered, above all prowess in war, both as a strategist and as a fighter in the front lines—these were the things that counted most, these and the fact that they were known to and approved of by others, especially one's peers and betters. "Fame," as Jason so pointedly observes (548/542–44), "is the important thing," for it was the measure of a man's greatness. Being top dog on a desert island or in faraway Colchis was tantamount to not being at all. A man who had lost his honor,

whom no one feared or respected, had nothing left to fall back on, nothing to make life meaningful.

To such men as these, there was nothing more glorious to be sought than to die in battle, fighting for the city of one's fathers and the honor of one's house. The 300 Spartans who fell at Thermopylae against an overwhelmingly superior Persian force reached the pinnacle of honor and had for their reward lasting glory, because they had subordinated all their personal desires for the salvation of Greece and to uphold the honor of their ancestors. Conversely, to have survived the battle by some incalculable misfortune, like being behind the lines on sick leave, was a disgrace worse than dying unburied on a desert shore, for living in Sparta after Thermopylae meant enduring day after day the open contempt and open laughter of those who had once feared, respected, and praised you. You had gone from being a Somebody to being less than a Nobody, and there was no place to hide from this fact. "When Aristodemus [who had survived Thermopylae because he had been ill and unable to fight] returned to Lacedaemon [Sparta], reproach and disgrace awaited him; disgrace inasmuch as no Spartan would give him a light to kindle his fire, or so much as address a word to him; and reproach, since all spoke of him as the craven" (Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 7.231, tr. George Rawlinson).

In the honor game women too had a strategic part to play, and they knew it. Though subordinate, they were essential to their husbands and fathers, not just biologically as mothers of their children and grandchildren, but as keepers of their own and their houses' reputations as well. How large a dowry and how much political influence they brought to their husbands' houses, how well they managed the household staffs and the storerooms, how modestly they comported themselves inside and outside the home, even how good they looked (for beauty adds grace to virtue and enlarges praise)—these things really mattered. But what mattered most, the thing that brought them the greatest personal honor, because by its means they proved themselves capable of bearing noble, purebred offspring, was their chastity—before marriage their virginity and after marriage the sanctity and purity and, indeed, the discreet privacy of the marriage bed.

In honor due a woman, as the Nurse tells us at the beginning of the play, Medea stood at the top, and her unmerited demotion from a proud and revered legitimate wife to the exposed, degraded position of a concubine had destroyed her honor as surely as illness had destroyed the honor of the Spartan Aristodemus, with this important exception: misfortune was not the cause of her disgrace; Jason was. She had never been at fault in their marriage, but he had treated her as though

she had been, and, as far as she was concerned, he had done this for no good reason. If she had been barren or had crossed him in his public or private life, her fall would have been hard but understandable. As it was, he had acted just to aggrandize himself, to serve his own pleasure, for lust (as she saw it) and convenience and apparent, not true, honor. The Greeks had a good word for this kind of transgression, *hubris*: intentional and arrogant insult, any action that purposely depreciates or shows too little respect for another worthy of respect.

If the marriage of Jason and Medea had been in any way ordinary, his arrogant trampling underfoot of the just pride of a weak woman whose protector he was supposed to be would have been wrong but perhaps pardonable, since in the ancient honor code, his honor trumped hers. Regrettable as such divorces might be, they were sometimes necessary. The man, the stronger, ultimately determined the right. But as Euripides' audience well knew and as Medea herself reminds her women friends (271 ff./251 ff.), theirs was no ordinary marriage. She had been no meek bride obedient to her father's will, but Jason's companion in arms, who had more than once given him tangible aid against his mortal enemies. Her reward for her help in his foreign and domestic wars had been her marriage. Under such circumstances their union could not be deemed a mere alliance between two families, but something more electric, a blood pact between fellow conspirators, who were honor bound to harm each other's enemies and do good to each other's friends.

In the computation and retention of honor, harming one's enemies was not just a duty, it was a coveted mark of success. By contrast, to hurt one's friends without cause, to disrespect them, was despicable. The trick lay in being able to distinguish between them, in order not to do the wrong things to or with the wrong people. Feelings, especially strong feelings, were better ignored or muted, for they could easily lead one astray, as they did Medea, whose passion for Jason had deluded her into thinking him a worthy ally. Of course, affection, even love, played a cementing role, especially among close friends, but in the ancient city, where no higher impersonal corporate authority as yet defined or provided for the common good, friendships were too important to be left to affection. They involved careful, reasoned deal making, for a friend was not necessarily someone you liked, but someone to whom you owed tangible benefits and who owed you benefits in return. Friendships not formed for pleasure's sake, though pleasure might indeed result, but for honor's, for visible political gain and prestige, were negotiated in many ways, marriage alliances being but one

of them—albeit an extremely important one because they stood at the intersection of two basic kinds of friendships, those determined by blood and those based on agreement. Although marriage was, of course, intended to enlarge and perpetuate the former, in origin it belonged to the latter, those freely made, which were designed to advance family honor and the honor of the participants and their kin. When peacefully negotiated between responsible, rational parties—like Creon and Jason—they might indeed lead to unforeseen political calamities, especially if the contracting parties were leaders in their cities, but they were not calamitous in themselves, like the one Medea, *in loco patris*, forged with the desperate Jason.

Among voluntary friendships, the purest, most emotionally intense were not marriages, but those made by the young among their peers. The Greeks termed such friends *hetairoi*, that is, the friends of the shield or comrades with whom one marched in battle, engaged in politics, did business, formed a cult or even a cabal. Although they might include kin, and often did, kinship was incidental to their basic conception. Indeed, such friendships might even include former enemies. In large cities, just as the assembly was a meeting of the army and veterans, this model of comradeship defined many nonfamilial associations, the sworn alliances called *hetairiai*. Such friendships might be formed, for example, to forward a public concern or commercial enterprise. But sometimes they had the force of life and death alliances formed in times of extreme danger for the purpose of overthrowing a common enemy by force of arms. Of this latter kind was Medea's marriage pact, a joining of forces by two natural enemies under such duress that, like other life and death pacts, it was sealed by an oath, taken "over a [blood] sacrifice without blemish," whereby the two parties swore to "pray that he who observes this oath may be blessed abundantly: but that he who observes it not may perish from the earth, both he and his house."¹³

Thus, it was under constraints of this kind of oath that Medea avenged herself upon Jason to restore the honor his *hubris* had taken away. We can measure its putative binding power by the way in which the gods themselves fail to censure Medea's vengeance. To fulfill its terms and avoid the humiliation she might endure if she tried to attack Jason in person and failed, she made his life a living death and destroyed his house, rather than him, by slaughtering his new wife and

13. After a law of Solon, decreed by the democratic Assembly in 410, concerning slaying with impunity any enemy of the Athenians; quoted in Andocides's speech, "On the Mysteries," paragraphs 97–98, tr. K. J. Maidment (Loeb, 1941).

her own darling boys, the latter an act so terrible, so polluting to the Greeks that it required annual rites of expiation for all time to come (1353–57/1378–83) as compensation. Yet despite her palpable grief, she remains utterly unrepentant; nor is she punished for her crime. Instead she flies off to the temple of Hera and thence to Athens, in a conveyance provided by her ancestor, the Sun, the very god appointed to be the eye of the world's all-powerful enforcer and judge, Zeus. It is as if only the destruction of Jason's whole house, including his children (106–9/112–14), would satisfy the bloodthirsty Underworld avengers, set loose upon the earth by his breaking of the mighty wartime oath by which he had bound himself to this superhuman woman (163–66/160–63).

What we see at work here is a merciless, more primitive kind of justice, far removed from our abstract, carefully defined notions of law and order and closer to the kind of sublegal justice portrayed in *The Godfather*. Jason's sons' were necessary victims, whose death completed the punishment exacted by the Underworld; the annihilation of his house was guaranteed by the oath he had sworn and sealed by blood offerings poured into the earth and by the curses he had himself invoked. Although in this instance retribution was swift, it need not have been. Indeed, Jason himself, blindly trusting in the genuineness of his goodwill toward Medea and his own innocence—after all, under the pressure of circumstance he had done nothing more than other honor-seeking, realistic Athenians would have done with impunity—believes that the death of his boys must be delayed retaliation for the earlier death of Medea's brother back in Colchis (1306–7/1333). His line of reasoning was familiar to and accepted by many in Euripides'

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Although most in that audience would have readily acknowledged the power of animate blood and of the Underworld gods who drank it eventually to punish Jason for his wrongdoing, even by the killing of his sons, to judge by the Chorus, they would have found it difficult to justify Medea's making herself their instrument. While the compensation demanded by the gods for the violation of a powerful, sacred oath might explain the bloody outcome of the plot, it does not explain how Medea, who knew what she was doing—she was no “deranged housewife”—was able to force herself to commit what amounted to self-murder, the spilling of her own blood. Looked at from one perspective, the demonic, she was justified; from another, the ethical, she was not: hence the emphasis in the play upon her corrosive anger and how deeply she felt the insult of the blow Jason had dealt her. Repeatedly she expresses her horror at the derisive laughter of those she

now considers her enemies (787–88/797), aimed not just against herself (1328–30/1354–57) but also against her children, if they were to remain in Jason's house (771–72/781–82, 1035–37/1059–61) or be buried by Jason (1353–55/1378–81). This horror of insult was something Euripides' audience with their explosive, Mafia-like contentiousness, would have understood, even if we do not. For them as for Medea, it was an irresistible motivating force. Medea had risked everything for Jason, not just the undying enmity and disgrace of her father's house but her own life and honor as well. Her reward was a marriage bed shared with Greece's greatest captain and the head of one of Greece's richest, most powerful, and lordly houses, to whose welfare she contributed unstintingly, for she was more than Jason's Mamma Corleone; she was his loyal, irreproachable *consigliere*. No wonder then that Jason's betrayal cut so deep. Euripides' audience would have understood the depths of Medea's uncontrollable anger, her dread of public shaming, and her thirst for the sweet honey of revenge. When wronged in the privileges of the marriage bed, even ordinary women become bloody minded (281–83/263–66). But would they have thought that Medea's fear of imagined future insults against her boys justified her, their nourisher and ally, in killing them? Drama with its many voices and diverse points of view shuns easy answers. But in this instance I think not, and not for sentimental reasons so much as for the fact that in killing them she had violated not just another unwritten law but one as strong as nature itself, the bond between mother and child.

Beyond the wildest imaginings of even the most callous Athenian, Medea had succeeded in wreaking total vengeance on her betrayer, but in so doing she had betrayed herself. In the grip of this palpable paradox, chances are that the audience, as they marveled at Medea rising in her chariot with the sun, sat in dumb silence, afraid not just for themselves and their own precarious honor—what man in that audience did not fear the power of women, especially able women they could not control, to undo them behind their backs—but for mankind's inability to fathom the Underworld's—and Zeus's—inexorable logic.