

TRAGEDY, EURIPIDES, MELODRAMA: HAMARTIA, MEDEA, LIMINALITY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines socio-historical dimensions and cultural and dramaturgic implications of the Greek playwright Euripides' treatment of the myth of Medea. Euripides gives voice to victims of adventurism, aggression and betrayal in the name of 'reason' and the 'state' or 'polity.' Medea constitutes one of the most powerful mythic forces to which he gave such voice by melodramatizing the disturbing liminality of Greek tragedy's perceived social and cultural order. The social polity is confronted by an apocalyptic shock to its order and its available modes of emotional, rational and social interpretation. Euripidean melodramas of horror dramatize the violation of rational categories and precipitate an abject liminality of the tragic vision of rational order. The dramaturgy of Euripides' *Medea* is contrasted with the norms of Greek tragedy and examined in comparison with other adaptations — both ancient and contemporary — of the myth of Medea, in order to unfold the play's transgression of a tragic vision of the social polity.

KEYWORDS

Dramaturgy, Euripides, liminality, Medea, melodrama, preternatural powers, social polity, tragedy.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia las dimensiones sociohistóricas y las implicaciones culturales y teatrales del tratamiento que Eurípides da al mito de Medea. Eurípides da voz a las víctimas del aventurerismo, de las agresiones y de las traiciones cometidas en nombre de la 'razón' y del 'estado' o el 'gobierno'. Medea es una de las fuerzas míticas más potentes a las que Eurípides dio voz, al transformar en melodrama la inquietante liminalidad del orden social y cultural de la tragedia. El gobierno social se enfrenta a un choque apocalíptico contra su orden y contra las formas de interpretación emocional, racional y social a su alcance. Los melodramas de horror de Eurípides teatralizan la violación de las categorías racionales y aceleran la liminalidad de la

visión trágica del orden racional. Asimismo, se compara la dramaturgia de la *Medea* de Eurípides con las reglas de la tragedia griega y se examina a la luz de otras adaptaciones del mito, tanto antiguas como contemporáneas, a fin de desvelar cómo la obra transgrede la visión del gobierno social propia de la tragedia.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Dramaturgia, Eurípides, liminalidad, Medea, melodrama, poderes preternaturales, gobierno social, tragedia.

Driven by daemonic, chthonic / Powers.
T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* (1941)

Then one day, we woke up to find this chthonic spirit turned political.
T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926)

Jules Dassin's filmic adaptation of the Medea myth poses social, cultural and ethnic differences as unexpected avenues for construing Euripides' *Medea* for a modern audience. A collaborative French, German and Greek cinematic production, Dassin's *A Dream of Passion* (1978) was released in Greece under the title Η άλλη Μήδεια (*The Other Medea*). Though nominated as Best Foreign Film in the Golden Globes competition as well as for the Palm d'Or at Cannes, it is less well known than Pier Paolo Pasolini's mock-operatic *Medea* (1969), starring Maria Callas. Unlike Pasolini, Dassin appears less interested in constructing a cinematic *mise-en-scene* that projects Nietzschean and Freudian conceptions of primal urges to vengeance, sacrifice and destruction. *A Dream of Passion* dramatizes a modern Greek actress, played by Melina Mercouri, who has been cast in the role of Medea in an adaptation for the Greek stage but who finds she cannot fathom the *pathos* of the ancient character. The rehearsals are wooden and without focus, until Maya (Mercouri's character) hears about 'the other Medea' who has come to light in a suburb of Athens. This other, modern and 'tabloid-mediated' Medea is an American woman named Brenda Collins (played brilliantly by Ellen Burstyn), whose husband has betrayed her for a local Greek woman. The distraught, discarded American wife has killed her three children in a fit of vengeful passion; and the act has branded her 'the other Medea.' Maya's initial, awkward, self-serving attempts to get Brenda to talk about her motives for child-murder unexpectedly produce powerful disclosures about the world the American woman has left behind in order to pursue 'a dream of passion' with a man rooted in another culture and social polity. The despair, entrapment and unnerving isolation that have engulfed her precipitate further

emotional vertigo and utter self-isolation. Indeed Brenda suffers abject separation from her own flesh and blood who mark and fill the social and ethnic gap between being ‘Greek’ and being ‘foreign.’ The *mise-en-scene* of Dassin’s film, of course, cunningly mediates between modern Greek and American English as well as between the bright harshness of an Athenian prison and the comfortable interiors of Maya’s own home-life and theatrical career. The modern Maya, though, learns to play the passion of the ancient Medea by entering into the cultural, somatic and visceral disorder of this ‘other Medea.’¹

During the summer of 1976 Melina Mercouri delivered a number of open-air performances of *Medea*, most notably at Philippi in Greek Macedonia. This modern Greek adaptation was electrifying, in terms of its sheer spectacle and its dramatic coherence. These performances inspired the production of *A Dream of Passion*, and the fact that the film reached even larger audiences in the enclosed and open-air cinemas of Greek cities, towns, villages and islands perhaps signalled a crucial moment in the modern reception and interpretation of Euripides’ *Medea*.² This fortuitous coincidence of filmic and dramatic, modern and ancient, media in the cultural recreation and performance of Euripides’ *Medea* in Greece in the late 1970s was not only a symptom of the social and cultural renaissance of post-junta (1967-74) Greek democracy but a strongly representative signal of contemporary struggles to comprehend Euripidean dramaturgy and the myth of Medea.³

The only comparable production of *Medea* for an Anglophone audience I have been fortunate to witness was the stunning Almeida and Wyndham’s Theatres production of 1992-93, directed by Jonathan Kent, designed by Peter Davison, and starring Diana Rigg as Medea. The harsh, alternating dark and bright, muted and raucous, prison-like interior in which the play was staged

¹ Ian Christie (2001: 160-62) provides an illuminating reading of Dassin’s film and its range of dramatic and cinematic genres, including ‘the play within a play,’ and its intertextuality with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Bergman’s *Persona*. Christie, though, finds “the multiple political allegory of *A Dream of Passion*” compromised by “the climactic psychodrama” at the end of the film in which Maya’s and Brenda’s Medeas “can no longer be clearly distinguished” (2001: 147, 162).

² Platon Mavromoustakos (2001: 172-3) notes the significance of Mercouri’s 1976 performance, as well as the strong and inspirational link between the two productions, stage and screen, in 1976 and 1978. See also Christie (2001: 147, 162).

³ See Heike Bartel’s and Anne Simon’s *Unbinding Medea* (2010) for a recent collection that approaches the figure of Medea from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives – including myth criticism, legal and legislative policy, and political representations of the infanticidal mother and the abused victim.

comprised a brilliant counterpoint to Medea's impassioned conception of her plight before Jason and the Corinthian King Creon and the utter, mutual incomprehension of the former lovers and now estranged spouses and parents. As Fiona Macintosh has noted, Diana Rigg "gave Medea the abandoned wife a feminist edge with her intelligence and ingenuity" (2001: 26). In contrast, the Abbey Theatre, Dublin and Queen's Theatre, London production of *Medea* in 2000-01, directed by Deborah Warner and starring Fiona Shaw, though clever in parts, pinned far too much upon distraught, histrionic characterization of an abused wife. What the latter production gained in terms of a modern psychological portrait of brutal, domestic motives compromised the high dramatic tension structuring intimate, familial, civic and ethical conflicts of the earlier London and Greek productions.⁴

Social, cultural and ethnic differences can construct emotional barriers. They may also compose bridges into the emotional depths of abjection, into the sheer *pathos* of undergoing the horrifying liminality of one's perceived social and cultural order. In an anthropological sense, according to Victor Turner, liminality involves "the detachment of the individual [...] from an earlier fixed point in the social structure" (1967: 80). Such individuals "are brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain" and "come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially 'unstructured'" (Thomassen 2006: 322). Jules Dassin's *A Dream of Passion* and Jonathan Kent's 1990s version of Euripides' play enable entry into the felt experience of disturbing liminal zones, the felt experience "of being in between interpretations, in between states of being" (Stewart 1982: 40). Melina Mercouri's and Diana Rigg's performances of the Euripidean Medea each enact unsettling senses of being caught, disclosed and painfully entrapped in the "unstructured" spaces between divergent social systems and established ethnic and gender identities. Such dramatized *liminality* provides insight into the myth of Medea.

⁴ See Fiona Macintosh's comments on both dramatic productions (2001: 26, 28-9). See also Gowen and Wrigley's "*Medeas on the Archive Database*" (2001: 255-6, 265-6, 274) as well as the Oxford-based Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/> for a wealth of information concerning the history of performances and adaptations of Euripides' play.

1. EURIPIDES, TRAGIC DRAMATURGY AND SOCIAL POLITY

Euripides has been a notoriously difficult dramatist for scholars to categorize in comfortable fashion (Michelini 1987: 3-69). His extant plays explore ethnic, cultural, social and gendered differences. Euripides also appears to differ with tragedy, tragic form and the sort of tragic vision projected in the more resolutely Greek worlds of Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama. In *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* John Jones, for instance, argues the difficulty of fitting Aristotle's *Poetics* to Euripidean drama. Indeed, such an approach "leans heavily upon failure to find coherence in Euripides's work, of the order of those distinct coherences which the two critical fictions of the Aeschylean norm and Sophoclean mutability were intended to explicate" (Jones 1971: 267-8). Viewed in this respect, Euripides appears open to the barbed criticism that Aristophanes staged for him in *Frogs* (405 B.C.) — namely, "a posthumous literary debate between Aeschylus and Euripides, with Sophocles standing by in silent support of the older poet" (Jones 1971: 239).

Jones, though, notes and argues the merits of a cunning departure from Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy in the casting of a third, distinctly Euripidean version of *The Orestia* in *Electra*. Euripides abandons arguable tragic norms in the interests of a new, more expansive dramaturgy. He weds Electra to a Mycenaean peasant, houses her much against her proud status in the farmer's cottage, and casts a chorus of country women to judge her ferocious anger toward her mother Clytemnestra. Jones maintains Euripides expands the notion of 'nobility' by staging a peasant-husband for an exiled princess of the House of Atreus and by enabling the farmer to speak caustically, correctively and courageously to his royal wife (Jones 1971: 244-5). The peasant's reply to Electra's hasty demolition of an offer of hospitality to Orestes, for example, comprises "a sudden ripping open of the status-defined surface of things" (Jones 1971: 243). The peasant stands his ground as a worthy man who respects the important Greek value of *philoxenia* — namely, friendship and hospitality toward the stranger. Indeed, from its opening lines delivered by the Mycenaean peasant, *Electra* sets up phonal and thematic motifs which play upon classical Greek words for 'friend' (*philos*) and 'home' (*oikos*). One measure of Euripidean originality, then, seems marked through dramaturgic and social differences from fellow Athenian dramatists.

N. T. Croally's *Euripidean Polemic*, though, provides a strong note of caution. We may risk turning overly categorical in measuring differences among these three Greek tragedians. Croally reads Euripides, especially *The*

Trojan Women, as espousing many of the features that make Greek drama generically, socially and politically ‘Greek tragedy.’ The democratising institutions of tragedy and dramatic festivals embody important measures of civic commonality among the various Athenian playwrights and the Athenian *polis* (Rehm 1992: 3-30; Croally 1994: 1-5). Like Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides provides his audience with “fictional, often alien, characters on a stage, characters who are, in various permutations, culturally, ethnically, socially and sexually different from the members of the audience” (Croally 1994: 13). Yet Euripides explores and problematizes these differences, these dramatic figures of alterity, more aggressively. He probes ideological fault-lines and fissures of the Greek citizen’s conception of selfhood in relation to “the other” (Croally 1994: 12-3). Euripides participates in the formulation and progressive development of Greek tragedy. Thus, “it is not valid to see Euripides transgressing norms or confronting conventions which he may have helped to develop”; “Euripides not only reacted against Sophocles; he also influenced him (and vice versa)” (Croally 1994: 14).⁵ Sophocles and Euripides revise and extend the Aeschylean model; but as contemporaries they rival and influence one another in expanding tragedy’s capacity to articulate the Athenian social polity and the audience’s capacity to respond to alterity, differences and social problems. Euripides, then, must be read within a context which perceives “tragedy as an educative discourse” — that is, a civic and social discourse “produced by the *polis*, which allows Athens to examine itself” theatrically, performatively and critically “with the potential of teaching the citizens about themselves and their city” (Croally 1994: 17, 43).⁶

Croally takes Euripides’ *The Trojan Women* as his extended proof case for these claims (Croally 1994: 46-7, 70-248). He is at pains to show that Euripides teaches the Athenian citizenry through the drama of the survivors and within a scenic backdrop of a war-ravaged Troy. Croally demonstrates that Euripides stages a full critique of Homeric ideology and an indirect critique of Athenian imperial ideology in the throes of the Peloponnesian War.

⁵ It is noteworthy that “*Philoctetes* would seem to be the most Euripidean of Sophocles’ extant dramas” (Croally 1994: 14, n. 52). This challenging and problematic Sophoclean drama is the one Seamus Heaney (1990) chooses to adapt in his extraordinary lyric interface between ancient and modern conceptions of tragic loss and tragic hope, *The Cure at Troy*.

⁶ See also Gregory (1997: 1-17, 185-9) for a similar argument about the educative, civic and political dimensions of Euripidean tragedy. Croally (2005: 55-70) provides a compact overview of his earlier book, with reference to all the major Greek tragedians.

Thus he fits *The Trojan Women* to a capacious sense of the civic and educative discourse informing Greek tragic form and ideology — a sense, moreover, informing an extraordinary, modern Greek adaptation of the play to stage and film by Michael Cacoyannis.⁷ Euripidean tragic dramaturgy is, therefore, a tragic pedagogy. Indeed, it is important to recognize that many of Euripides' extant plays fit more comfortably with tragic form and the discourse of tragedy than not.⁸

To return to the case of *Electra*, dwelling on its tragic form and civic discourse, Euripides does construct a tragedy of revenge that, like Aeschylus and Sophocles before him, explores the social and political dilemmas of estrangement, exile, blood-debt, matricide and justice. Electra's ferocity deliberately counterpoints the Hamlet-like hesitancy of her brother Orestes and the compassion and generosity of her unnamed peasant-husband. Electra relentlessly drives the drama forward, but Euripides graphs the course of her passion so that it brings about a convergence and a mutual articulation of a mother's and a daughter's motives for revenge. Clytemnestra comes to recognize immediately before her death that her daughter Electra follows the same logic of blood-vengeance as herself:

With what insensate fury I drove myself to take
My grand revenge! How bitterly I regret it now! (*Electra* 1963: 142)⁹

Yet Electra is full of intent and will not be dissuaded from her bloody course of action either by her mother's moment of tragic recognition or her mother's moment of gendered rationalization and ideological critique. Euripides gives his most probing analysis of Greek civic discourse and the construction of 'reason' in *Electra* to Clytemnestra to articulate in the face of her daughter's hatred and incomprehension:

⁷ The film *The Trojan Women* (1971), written and directed by Michael Cacoyannis, is closely based on Euripides' play and stars Irene Pappas as Helen, Katharine Hepburn as Hecuba, Vanessa Redgrave as Andromache and Genevieve Bujold as an especially brilliant Cassandra. See also Gregory (1997: 155-83).

⁸ See Conacher (1967), who takes a Fryean approach to anatomizing six types of Euripidean tragedy: mythic tragedy, political tragedy, tragedies of war, realistic tragedy, romantic tragedy and '*tragedies manques*.' Conacher groups two or three dramas under each type, but the classification obscures Euripides' tendency to dramatize 'the political' and to explore and expand the parameters of 'the tragic' in the lives of characters caught in extreme social situations. See also Gregory (2005).

⁹ I have checked Vellacott's splendid translation against the Greek text of *Electra* (1939).

The husbands are to blame—but they’re not criticized;
Suppose Menelaus had been abducted secretly,
Would I have to kill Orestes, to get back
My sister’s husband Menelaus? Would your father
Have stood for that? No: he’d have killed me if I’d touched
His son; he killed my daughter—why should he not die?
I killed him. I took the only way open to me—
Turned for help to his enemies. Well, what could I do?
None of your father’s friends would have helped me murder him.
So, if you’re anxious to refute me, do it now;
Speak freely; prove your father’s death not justified. (*Electra* 1963: 140-1)

Electra refuses to admit the justice of these comments regarding the fraternal and masculinist origins of the Trojan War. She refuses to engage in rhetorical, civic or judicial debate; her mother for her is guilty of murder, of mercilessly killing “the most noble man in Hellas” (*Electra* 1963: 141). The chorus of Mycenaean women, though, will allow that Clytemnestra’s “words are just.” However, these words open a mode of reasoning and critique that must not be admitted in this ancient Greek court of social and civic conscience:

Your words are just; yet in your ‘justice’ there remains
Something repellent. A wife ought in all things to accept
Her husband’s judgement, if she is wise. Those who will not
Admit this, fall outside my scope of argument. (*Electra* 1963: 141)

Clytemnestra’s reasoning probes too deeply into the heart of patriarchal social order. Even the chorus of Mycenaean women, though conceding a measure of justness, will not accede to its wisdom. The social order depends too much on the social wisdom of subaltern obedience, of wifely and daughterly conformity. To suggest otherwise threatens a “repellent” shock to the system; it threatens to expose the patriarchal social order to an abject, unsettling sense of liminality. An unnerving recourse to matricide is socially and tragically more acceptable in comparison.

Certainly within the dramatic logic of *Electra*, the murder of Clytemnestra by her own children appears to possess more ‘justice’ and more ‘reason’ than the reasoning of a Greek woman who would kill a ‘noble’ patriarch and argue that her case was ‘justified’ and not to be refuted in a wider court of social emotions and natural law. Euripides would teach another way of thinking and feeling here, yet he renders a terrible scene of matricidal horror. Moreover, who will avenge Clytemnestra? Euripides immediately copes with this dilemma by splitting the chorus of Mycenaean women into two, one arguing

pity and sympathy for the fallen mother and the other pleading the justness of the revenge. The chorus becomes whole again only after Electra admits publicly the wrong done to her brother in forcing him to be an accomplice to matricide. She also articulates the tragic recognition of her own bloody bond with the mother she has ‘just’ (just now and justly) slain:

Tears, my brother — let tears be endless.
I am guilty.
I was burning with desperate rage against her;
Yet she was my mother, I her daughter. (*Electra* 1963: 145-6)

Electra recognizes her *hamartia*, her tragic flaw, the same as her mother’s, and the filial bond with her mother she has ruptured so savagely. This scene comprises stunning tragic dramaturgy, and the epilogue of *Electra* is no less extraordinary.

Since estrangement and exile from Mycenae are now incumbent upon Electra and Orestes, Euripides plots a brilliant denouement from ‘out of the machine’ to resolve the choral emotions and the fates of the siblings satisfactorily for a tragic audience. Two gods, two divine siblings, the Dioscouri, Castor and Pollux, appear *ex machina* above the royal house and dictate a series of just resolutions. They foretell the trial in Athens of Orestes for his “blood-guilt,” including the divided or split decision of the jury that will win Orestes his “acquittal” (*Electra* 1963: 148-9). Euripides stages two divine brothers of Clytemnestra and Helen, placed in the starry firmament by their father Zeus, measuring out justice for their all-too-human niece and nephew in Mycenae. These symbolic exemplars of patriarchy (and of familial strife overcome) promise a very human *and* very Athenian way of handling the endless ‘double-bind’ of tears which tear the fabric of families, royal houses and social polities apart.¹⁰ A human court of law, like the human court of emotional trial and civic conscience which is Greek tragedy, will hear the case fully, played out completely in its various roles and arguments, and will award a split decision, a decision which acquits the guilty matricide but redeems the ability of the democratising yet still patriarchal state to administer justice. The Dioscouri echo Aeschylean (“the pattern of Necessity”) and Sophoclean (“fateful curse inherited from your fathers”) norms of tragic

¹⁰ Scenes such as the epilogue of Euripides' *Electra* raise serious problems for the social relevance, the ideological subtext and the reactionary model of social polity projected in theoretical works such as those by René Girard (1977, 1978).

explanation in their closing exchanges with the chorus and the matricidal siblings (*Electra* 1963: 150). Even more significantly, they mete out strong criticism of the mistakes made by the patriarchs Menelaus and Agamemnon in prosecuting the Trojan War in the first place. The Dioscouri also protect the future of the worthy Mycenaean peasant who has sheltered Electra and whose actions and speech have best embodied core Greek values of loyalty, friendship and hospitality, especially toward the stranger.

The dramaturgy of *Electra* demonstrates in detail that the playwright construes the form and social vision of tragedy well. Despite John Kerrigan's attempt in *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* to read the poetics and politics of Renaissance revenge drama backwards into the tragic form and social vision of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, all three major classical Greek tragedians project significant variations of a tragic social vision that supercede Kerrigan's construction of them as rhetorical "machines for producing ethical deadlock" (Kerrigan 1996: 29). The rhetorically brilliant denouement of Euripides' *Electra* alone provides ample testimony for this claim. Like *The Trojan Women*, *Electra* is a stunningly contrived Greek tragedy. Euripides explores, expands and exploits possibilities of tragedy and the tragic vision of social polity as intensively as either Aeschylus or Sophocles. However, he also explodes tragic conventions when it suits his pedagogical, polemical and dramaturgic intentions. As Charles Segal explicates, *Medea* breaks with tragic form, conventions and catharsis and with a tragic audience's expectations of mortuarial rituals:

[W]hen an expected closing ritual is withheld or postponed to a time and place far from the immediate scene of action, as in Medea's refusal to allow Jason's burial of his murdered sons, the ending seems troubling, bitter, and unresolved. In the case of the *Medea*, Jason's empty hands, reaching in vain to the heroine above him, constitute the sign of a negated ritual, an anti-cathartic closure in which neither Jason nor spectator can find adequate relief in tears for the murdered children. This refused or incomplete ritual is powerful precisely because it appears so vividly onstage, whereas the future burial of the children in the sanctuary of Hera on Acrocorinth, and the rite which will derive from it, are remote (*Medea* 1378-83). Medea's announcement that she will then proceed straightaway to Athens would probably do little in the way of catharsis for the original Athenian audience (1384f.). (Segal 1996: 158)

Segal thus observes Euripides' dramatic rupture of both ritual process and tragic closure. *Medea* as a drama, unlike *The Trojan Women* and *Electra*, breaks with tragic dramaturgy. The dramaturgic mode of *Medea* and Euripides' treatment of the myth of Medea thus demand a closer look.

2. TRAGEDY, MELODRAMAS OF HORROR AND LIMINALITY

Eighteen plays by Euripides have survived, out of ninety-two he is believed to have authored; some scholars include a nineteenth (*Rhesus*), but it is best regarded as spurious (Kovacs 1997: 146-7; Burnett 1985: 13-51). Even with the eighteen plays attributed to him, the volume of his extant work more than doubles that which has survived by Aeschylus or Sophocles (Webster 1971: 30).¹¹ One of the factors for such markedly different rates of survival, given the ambivalence registered in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Aristotle's *Poetics* regarding Euripides' beliefs and dramatic effects, is the playwright's immense popularity posthumously: "Soon after his death Euripides became by far the most popular and widely performed of the tragic poets, and his works were produced throughout the Greek-speaking world" (Kovacs 1997: 148).

Drama such as *Medea* and *The Bacchae* played for centuries (Knox 1985: 11), and the revival of both plays on stage and in film during recent decades remains no accident. Plutarch's notorious tale of a performance of *The Bacchae* in Parthia in 55 B.C. involving the display of the decapitated head of the Roman general Marcus Crassus in lieu of a theatrical prop to intimate the decollated Pentheus has become a scholarly set-piece indicative of the wide provenance of Euripidean drama in Hellenistic and Greco-Roman times (Plutarch 1958: 137; Dodds 1960: 223; Kitto 1961: 97; Knox 1985: 11; Kott

¹¹ It is easy to overlook how little drama has survived from antiquity and how disproportionately it is represented by Euripides. The fact that the age of great tragedy should appear to modern scholars and literary historians as disproportionately represented by Euripides says a lot about not only the sheer quality of his work but also his reception, reputation and circulation in Hellenistic and Greco-Roman ages.

Drama by Euripides had considerable circulation as theatrical promptbooks and as papyri, but the Alexandrian Edition compiled by Aristophanes of Byzantium around 200 BC became a standard and much copied composite edition for several centuries (*Medea* 1938: xl-xli). Around 200 AD a selection of what were considered the ten best plays of Euripides, including *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, was made for use in schools in the Roman Empire, though "the survival of the selected plays is owed chiefly to their continued employment in schools throughout the Eastern Empire" (*Medea* 1938: xli). Eight to nine 'unselected plays' have chanced to survive as the sole remaining volume of a 'complete' edition (Kovacs 1997: 148; *Medea* 1938: xli). However, the preservation over the centuries of the ten selected plays provides strong testimony to their popularity and value in the eyes of Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Arabic, Persian and eventually Italian readers and scribes (*Medea* 1938: xlii; see also Michelini 1987: 69).

1973: 230; Sandys 1900: lxxxiii). This pronounced, posthumous popularity would be difficult to confine to any one factor or motive. However, during an extended period of Roman imperial expansion and belligerent dominance, dramatic analyses of cross-cultural crises and severe conflicts of passions, ambitions and loyalties would strike contemporaneous chords. Euripides disturbs; he unsettles; he threatens “to leave us with a sense of uncertainty, painfully conscious now, if not before, of the treacherous instability of the world in which we live, its utter unpredictability, its intractability” (Knox 1985: 2). The coherent worldview and relative comfort of the tragic vision of things, though persuasive as a democratising social ideal and public ideology, no longer fully articulates with emotional or cathartic satisfaction the behaviours of the present — indeed, of a present displaced from the grand, illustrative plots of the past.

In Euripidean tragedy old certainties are shattered; what seems solid cracks and melts, foundations are torn up, directions lost. “The waters of the holy rivers flow uphill,” sings the chorus of the *Medea*. “Justice and everything in the world is turned upside down.” (Knox 1985: 8)

Euripides’ powerful inversions of the status quo, including his trespassing of tragedy in such works as *Medea*, offer audiences, posthumously, imperially and post-imperially, a way of making sense of a tragic vision of things “turned upside down.”

At the time *Medea* was first produced in Athens in 431 BC, tensions within the Confederacy of Delos (Delian League) had reached a critical juncture, with Sparta and Corinth challenging the hegemony of Athens within the Greek confederation of city-states. Indeed just a matter of weeks before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), *Medea* took third prize, defeated by now-lost plays of Aeschylus’ son Euphorion and Sophocles (Headlam 1897: xx; Kovacs 1997: 149). The drawn out, immensely costly Peloponnesian War affords an important social and political context for *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, *The Trojan Women* and many of Euripides’ extant plays. Euripides’ notorious polemics against war, aggression, imperial adventurism and the mistreatment of allies and victims of martial campaigns are composed and staged during the disaster-strewn years of an Athenian long march toward catastrophe. Aeschylus fought at Marathon and perhaps at Salamis; Sophocles was a general at the time of the suppression of Samos and a public inquisitor into the military disaster in Sicily (Havelock 1970: viii-ix.). Euripides, though, “hated aggressive war and the kind of ambition in the young and muddled thinking in the old that leads to aggressive war” (Webster 1971: 39). Aeschylus was a hero in wars of resistance against the invading Persians, Sophocles an

administrative functionary caught up in wars of the imperial centre against its rebellious margins, while Euripides eulogized the Athenian soldiers slain in the Sicilian disaster that Sophocles had to explain and justify civically (Havelock 1970: ix). Thus, Euripides was alternately analyst and elegist of an Athenian polity in immense social crisis. In the end, he becomes a recluse who retreats from Athens to the court of Archelaus of Macedonia and composes *The Bacchae* and the unfinished *Iphigenia at Aulis*, both dramas about royal families, cities and social polities rending themselves apart at the seams in apocalyptic fury (Kovacs 1997: 154-5; Havelock 1970: ix-x). Euripides gave voice to the allies and the victims of adventurism, aggression and calculated betrayal in the name of 'reason,' 'state' and '*realpolitik*.' The figure of Medea constitutes one of the first and most powerful forces to which he gave such voice.

Euripides' contemporary historical context was one that the tragic dramaturgy of *The Trojan Women* and *Electra* could well address, as long as an audience could share in and be moved by a tragic vision of the social polity. However, plays such as *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, which transgress the expected conventions of tragic form, answer profoundly to other modes of comprehending extreme personal, social and apocalyptic crises. Such plays foreshadow the extreme personal and social crises that afflicted Athens, Greece and the Hellenic world in the decades and centuries after the death of Euripides, perhaps more so than the tragic dramaturgy of Aeschylus and Sophocles. William Arrowsmith, in his superb essay "A Greek Theatre of Ideas," has made this case more eloquently than the wide host of classical scholars and historians who have spoken deeply about these matters over the years. Arrowsmith's much reprinted essay strikes a dual theme: (1) Greek drama in general fostered "the diagnosis and dramatization of cultural crisis" and (2) the drama of Euripides in particular staged "severe formal dislocations or intricate blurrings of emotional modes and genres once kept artistically distinct" (Arrowsmith 1966: vii). Arrowsmith historicizes Euripidean dramaturgy, and he moves comprehension of the dramatist's more demanding plays toward recognition of what I have chosen to call 'melodramas of horror.'

At the root of the cultural crisis reflected in Greek drama for Arrowsmith are the civil wars of the second half of the fifth century BC, of which the Peloponnesian War is the most sustained and savage (Arrowsmith 1966: viii-xi). The image of the coherent Greek social polity mediated by Homer and Hesiod, as well as by Solon and Aeschylus, appears severely threatened:

Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Thucydides are all, each in his different way, haunted by the disappearance of the old integrated culture and the heroic image of man that had incarnated that culture. There is a new spirit of divisiveness abroad in the Hellenic world [...] (Arrowsmith 1966: ix).

Tragedy offers a crucial generic and social means for coping with the problems which compromise a culture's chosen image of itself. Yet if the culture and its iconic, heroic and holistic image of itself are threatened with deep fractures and loss of coherence, the tragic vision of the social polity 'goes by the boards' and slips disastrously into deep incoherence, into a liminal zone of contested and contesting comprehensions. For Arrowsmith, the theatre of Euripides reflects and performs this deep cultural threat:

[T]he *propter hoc* structure required by Aristotelian drama is in Euripides everywhere annulled by **created** disorder and formal violence. What we get is **dissonance, disparity, rift, peripeteia**; in Euripides a note of firm tonality is almost always the sign of traditional parody; of the false, the unreal, or lost innocence remembered in anguish. What this assumption of disorder means is: first, that form is not organic; second, that character is not destiny, or at best that only a part of it is; and third, that Aristotelian notions of responsibility, tragic flaw, and heroism are not pertinent. (Arrowsmith 1966: xi-xii; emphases in original text)

Alcestis, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Heracles* and *The Bacchae* comprise Arrowsmith's recurrent, more convincing instances of Euripidean disorder and contra-Aristotelian dramaturgy. The fact that these plays tend to be produced either early or late within Euripides' extant work coincides with a significant point made in *Euripidean Polemic*: "The plays of Euripides which seem most difficult to pin down as to their genre come from both early and late in his career" (Croally 1994: 238). Croally charts strange, comic features of *Alcestis* (438 B.C.) and *The Bacchae* (406 B.C.), especially the appearance of Cadmus and Teiresias in the latter play as two old men in Dionysiac costume (Croally 1994: 238-40). The Greek audience's expectations of these Theban figures as heroic and dignified are thus strongly compromised. Rather than accept the arguments of Arrowsmith as applying equally well over the entire extant work of Euripides, it is important to acknowledge the arguments of Croally, Gregory, Michelini and others regarding the tragic form and function of much of Euripides' dramaturgy, most particularly *The Trojan Women* and *Electra*. If it is indeed the case that early and late works of Euripides best exhibit the "severe formal dislocations or intricate blurrings of emotional modes and genres" which Arrowsmith claims for them, then a look

at the precise shape of their disparity, dissonance and formal departure is necessary.

Essentially Arrowsmith reads the shape of melodrama in his examples. He sees in Euripidean drama “the disappearance of the hero” and the installation of “an agon or contest between two paired characters,” notably Jason and Medea and Pentheus and Dionysus, but also Admetus and Alcestis and Hippolytus and Phaedra (Arrowsmith 1966: xv). Moreover, the “obsessional nature” of these “consistently paired antagonists” performs a particular sort of personal and social disorder in each play:

The wholeness of the old hero is now represented divisively, diffused over several characters: the paired antagonists of the Euripidean stage thus represent both the warring modes of a divided culture and the new incompleteness of the human psyche. Alternatively, as in *The Bacchae*, they embody the principles of conflicting ideas: Pentheus as *nomos*, Dionysus as *physis*. (Arrowsmith 1966: xv)

This quotation supplies the crucial generic distinction needed to build a case for reading the figures of Medea and Dionysus as elemental or preternatural forces of nature (*physis*) and for reading *Medea* and *The Bacchae* as melodramas of horror. Euripides composes tragedies (*The Trojan Women*, *Electra*), satyric drama (*Cyclops*), melodramas (*Alcestis*, *Heracles*) and melodramas of horror (*Medea*, *The Bacchae*). There is no justification in collapsing his extant drama into one sort of dramaturgy when it embodies a clear range of generic forms and deformations.

The case has been made for recognizing Euripides’ tragic achievements, and Arrowsmith helps make the case for Euripidean destabilization of Aristotelian tragedy in pursuit of a dramaturgy which enables “the analysis of culture and relationship between culture and the individual,” especially in moments of extreme civil disorder, cultural crisis and fears of apocalyptic disaster (Arrowsmith 1966: xvi). Euripidean melodrama explores “the warring modes of a divided culture and the new incompleteness of the human psyche,” for instance, through the paired opposition of Admetus and Alcestis. However, Euripidean melodramas of horror trespass tragedy and stage warring antagonists who not only reflect cultural division but also perform a horrifying opposition between culture and nature, social polity and natural alterity, *nomos* and *physis*.

There can be little doubt, for instance, that Euripides meant his *Medea* to end in a way which must have shocked his contemporaries and which still shocks today. His purpose was, of course, not merely to shock, but to force the audience to the recognition that Medea, mortally hurt in her *eros*, her

defining and enabling passion, must act as she does, and that her action has behind it, like the sun, the power of sacred *physis*. (Arrowsmith 1966: xviii)

Like Dionysus, the mythic figure of Medea embodies a primal force of nature. Medea's passionate nature is not solely or simply embodied as a gendered human being. Euripides (for one) embodies and dramatizes her as both human and preternatural. *Medea* and *The Bacchae* stage agonistic melodramas that redefine the nature of tragedy through an unsettling experience of liminality. The social polity is confronted, not so much by tragic *hamartia* or the melodramatic division of character and motive, as by the sheer *liminality* of the social order and its available modes of emotional, rational and social interpretation. Euripidean melodramas of horror dramatize the violation of rational categories and the abject liminality of the tragic vision of rational order on an apocalyptic scale. Though there are upwards of a half-dozen plays by Euripides which may be regarded as 'melodramas' in William Arrowsmith's apt analysis, there are only two, *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, which generate the transgressive dramaturgy and the discrete genre I have elected to name 'melodramas of horror.'

3. EURIPIDES' MEDEA AS A MELODRAMA OF HORROR

I will explore *The Bacchae* as a melodrama of horror at some length elsewhere and will dwell only on the earlier drama *Medea* here. My reading of *Medea* as a melodrama of horror departs significantly from the direction taken by two major studies of the play in recent years. Pietro Pucci's *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' "Medea"* and Emily McDermott's *Euripides' 'Medea': The Incarnation of Disorder* provide sustained philological studies of the play's sources and motifs. They also elaborate two divergent strands of a persistent pattern for plotting the myth of Medea found concisely phrased in four sentences of Clinton Headlam's notorious 1897 "Introduction" to the Greek text:

The Medea of Euripides is not a type, but a study. The *barbara Colchis* has none of the Greek restraint, the self-mastery they so highly prized. Terrible in the whirlwind of passion she rises above the vulgarity of the uncontrolled by the tragic vehemence of her emotion, that by its own intensity avails at last to subdue every instinct to a single purpose. By this, and by this only, Euripides is dramatically justified in making her kill her own children. (Headlam 1897: xii-xiii)

Headlam regards Euripides' drama as a character study in extreme passion, particularly the extremities of a 'barbarian' mode of *eros* betrayed

and turned violent, vengeful and destructive. Headlam's Medea is a female barbarian from the wilds of Asia Minor ("*barbara Colchis*"), lacking the civility, self-control and gender-specific repression of a hypothetical Greek wife. Likewise, Pucci sketches in extreme detail the "purposely self-inflicted additional pain and violence" which Medea brings upon herself, her family and her audience (1980: 32). The upshot of her whirlwind of passion is that Aristotelian analysis of tragic sympathy "arises even for strangers" who assault the norms of the Greek social polity (Pucci 1980: 174). Likewise too, McDermott argues the extreme dramatic impact of Medea's character and violence:

Taking the love of mother for child as normative of cosmic order, as the effective *sine qua non* of human morality, the playwright turns Medea's violent breach of this order to such devastating dramatic use that in the end not only the character Medea but the play itself has become an embodiment of disorder. (McDermott 1989: 5)

Medea's extreme passion alienates and murders; it imperils "cosmic order" because it reveals "a mother who will kill the children she loves, **simply** to devastate the husband she hates" (McDermott 1989: 5, 9; emphasis mine).

This thesis clearly intersects with the social and cultural polarities that compromise Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian*. Hall maintains that Medea's "conversion into a barbarian was almost certainly an invention of tragedy, probably of Euripides himself" (Hall 1989: 35). This extraordinary claim reifies the Euripidean Medea as ethnically typecast and utterly mutes the dramatic critique of ethnic and cultural differences which Euripides' play stages. A similar simplification of Medea occurs in Edith Hall's prominent review of a collection edited by James Claus and Sarah Johnston entitled *Medea: Essays in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*. In "The Archetypal Anti-Mother" Hall dismisses this collection of essays for attempting to explore the enduring "complexity" of a mythical figure who at root is very simple:

[T]he editors are fundamentally mistaken in thinking this narrative complexity explains Medea's attraction in modernity. On the contrary, the reason lies in her **simplicity**. Medea has survived because her children didn't. (Hall 1997: 4; emphasis in original text)

Medea, the dreaded maternal infanticide, or Medea, the invented barbarian of central typecasting: these simplifications betray the figure of Medea as some sort of theatrical Myra Hindley or cross-cultural *Fatal Attraction*. At best, such simplifications tend to read Seneca's *Medea* and his

rather Stoic moral portrait of Medea's passionate excesses into the composite ethical and social fabric of Euripides' drama. Medea's barbaric gesture of social and domestic excess imperils a Greek, tragic order of things. The Euripidean critique of what Emily McDermott calls the "normative" nature of this assumed cosmic "morality," however, is repressed. Jason's culpability appears forgotten in the rush to reinforce maternal infanticide as "clearly the central fact — the crux — of Euripides' play" and to underscore "the woman's unspeakable breach of her societally appointed role as wife and mother" (McDermott 1989: 9, 7).

Medea slays her children in the course of Euripides' drama. This extreme act of passion has both a dramatic and an iconic context which McDermott's choice of "simply" in the phrase "simply to devastate the husband she hates" shrouds in social and cultural forgetfulness. Robert Heilman's recognition that Euripides' Medea oscillates between the figure of avenger, "that essentially melodramatic character who haunts the stage for two millenia," and the character of a tragically conflicted and grievously wronged woman argues otherwise (Heilman 1968: 266-7). Generic tension between tragedy and melodrama refuses any audience, ancient or modern, the moral comfort of *simply* judging Medea as barbaric, alien and contra-Greek in her violent actions and disordered states.¹² Moreover, Kitto's contrast in affective response between the emotions of pity and horror in his analysis of *Medea* as a 'tragedy of passion' demands at the very minimum from its various audiences a post-tragic or contra-Aristotelian reading of the drama:

The unrelieved baseness of Jason is revolting; revolting in the highest degree is Medea's great crime; and what of the Messenger-speech? The horrible death of Glauce and Creon is described exhaustively in the terrible style of which Euripides was such a master. It is sheer Grand Guignol. We have yet seen nothing like it in Greek Tragedy. We have had before scenes, described or suggested, of horror — the self-blinding of Oedipus, the murder of Clytemnestra — but always the horror has been enveloped in the greater emotion of tragic pity. It has brought with it its own catharsis. Where is the tragic pity here? (Kitto 1961: 193)

Tragic pity and catharsis appear beside the point. *Medea* carries its chorus and its audiences elsewhere and onto an apocalyptic terrain that enacts the shocking trespass of tragic form, tragic social vision and tragic ethos.

¹² Compare Easterling (2003) and his careful investigation of the ways in which Euripides invites and sustains audience empathy for Medea's predicament, including the unsettling act of infanticide.

Indeed, *Medea* dramatizes a cultural critique that pits passion and reason profoundly and catastrophically against one another. As William Arrowsmith argues:

Like *The Bacchae*, Euripides' other great critique of culture, the *Medea* is based upon a central key term, *sophia*. Inadequately translated "wisdom," *sophia* is an extremely complex term, including Jason's cool self-interest, the magical and erotic skills of the sorceress Medea, and that ideal Athenian fusion of moral and artistic skills which, fostered by *eros*, creates the distinctive *arete* ['excellence'] of the civilized polis. (Arrowsmith 1966: xxiii)

The Nurse and the Chorus of Corinthian Women in *Medea* project collectively what Arrowsmith calls an ideal "harmony of *eros* and *sophia*" (1966: xxiii), but one that the characters of Jason and Medea (as well as Creon) find impossible to enact in the domestic and civic realms of Corinthian life.

Jason's calculating, practical *sophia* is, lacking *eros*, selfish and destructive; Medea's consuming *eros* and psychological *sophia* (an emotional cunning which makes her a supreme artist of revenge) is, without compassion, maimed and destructive. They are both destroyers, destroyers of themselves, of others, of *sophia*, and the polis. And it is this **destructiveness** above all else which Euripides wants his audience to observe: the spirit of brutal self-interest and passionate revenge which threatens both life and culture [...] Behind Jason and Medea we are clearly meant to see that spreading spirit of expedience and revenge which, unchecked by culture or religion, finally brought about the Peloponnesian War and its attendant atrocities. (Arrowsmith 1966: xxiii; emphasis in original text)

In other words, *physis* and *nomos* — nature and social polity — as well as *eros* and *sophia* — that is, passion and civil reason — are split asunder apocalyptically; their brutal divorce brings utter destruction. Such wanton destructiveness, moreover, trespasses melodramatically ideals of ethical and cultural fullness. At the outset of a Greek civil calamity in the year 431 BC, Euripides melodramatizes a Greek cultural catastrophe in the figures of heroic, Bronze Age legend who shadow the long receded images of their former Argonautical adventures.

From its opening lines until the appearance of Aegeus,¹³ it is possible to read *Medea* as a Kittoan 'tragedy of passion' or revenge-tragedy. Indeed John

¹³ See Euripides, *Medea* (1938), ll. 663-763. The pivotal scene with King Aegeus of Athens occurs over these 101 lines midway through the Greek text of the drama. I will cite

Kerrigan's *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* largely recycles this Kittoan mode of reading the play, through its focus on ancient attitudes and vengeful passions regarding honour, envy and gift-giving (Kerrigan 1996: 88-97). The intervention of the Athenian king Aegeus and Medea's seizure of a chance of safe haven in Athens, however, turns the drama precipitately toward horror. As Denys Page notes, prior to the philoxenic offer by Aegeus, "Medea's plan for vengeance is vague and uncertain; after it her mind is made up" (*Medea* 1938: xxix). It is not merely the sudden chance of a solution to enforced exile from Corinth, but the plight of Aegeus' own childlessness that spurs Medea toward a specific plan. A Greek king without child cannot continue a dynasty, either by direct succession (Jason's hope) or through marriage of a daughter to an appropriate male leader (Creon's hope). Medea's meeting with the childless ruler of Athens generates her plan: to leave Jason as childless and miserable as Aegeus, but without any hope of royal marriage, offspring or dynastic ambitions in Corinth (*Medea* 1938: xxix-xxx). It is a supreme act of revenge with pain and violence for many to bear. It also cancels two tragic possibilities at play until that point: (1) that Medea might harm or kill herself, pathetically and tragically, or (2) that Medea might kill Jason (or Glaucus) and then come to recognize her *hamartia* of uncontrolled or excessive *eros* and undergo remorse. The timely meeting with King Aegeus thus puts in train a plot and a set of horrific outcomes that trespass the conventions of tragedy.

Following her meeting with Aegeus, Medea dispatches Jason, her sons and their Tutor to the palace bearing golden gifts that her grandfather Helios granted his descendants. The gifts now, of course, are vehicles of poison directed at the heart of the royal house and Jason's prospective dynastic alliance. They bear as well subtle, highly sublimated cultural freight. Medea surrenders her patrilineal inheritance here; it is the price for ending Jason's patrilineal and patriarchal pretensions. The gesture comprises a troubling distortion of a bride-price or dowry as well; a patriarchal symbol of matrimonial alliance and of the promise of prosperity and procreation now becomes the overt sign of filial ransom and the covert vehicle of familial destruction. The golden gifts of Helios, emblematic of generation and the mutual alliance of cooperative procreation, bear symbolic inversions of these natural and cultural practices and attest the power of that which engenders life to destroy it as well. The chorus comprehends this dilemma and sings with

passages from *Medea* with reference to lines from this standard text and with page references to the superb translation by Philip Vellacott (1963) in *Medea and Other Plays*.

disheartened clarity about the incommensurable, melodramatic antagonism that they have just witnessed (*Medea* 1938: ll. 976-1001). They foresee the abrupt juxtaposition of innocence and murder, of bridal array and brutal destruction, and Jason's assurance of "destiny" amid his confident ignorance (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 47). Once her children return from their mission, Medea undergoes an abrupt juxtaposition of the ordinary lives she and they will now no longer have (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1021-39) and the extraordinary emotional crisis which now racks her maternal commitment (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1040-77). Tragic sympathy and the tragic vision of social polity reach breaking point, as the silent sons and the spellbound chorus witness Medea's emotional struggle. With disheartening clarity Medea banishes doubts and steels herself to "understand/ The horror of what I am going to do" (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 50). The counsel of the chorus, however wise, well-reasoned and in touch with the ideology of a tragic vision of the world, seems an utter irrelevance to her (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1081-1115).

Unremitting horror breaks across the stage once the awaited Messenger from the palace arrives. He counsels flight because of "an unholy, horrible thing" (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 51) which has taken place in the palace and which he will narrate in gruesome detail (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1121-1230). The narration, though at one remove from the represented scene of horror, spares little in its ghastly description. The childish, impetuous behaviour of the young princess contrasts grotesquely with the abject deformation of her body consumed by "unnatural devouring fire," as though the heat of intense sunlight were released suddenly upon it (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 52-4). "It is sheer Grand Guignol," as Kitto maintains (1961: 193), and provides a strange pretext and strong prefiguring of the disturbing immolations of Claudia, Madeleine and others in the Theatre des Vampires in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1977: 324-8). The abject horror is repeated with the death of Creon, who hoping to comfort his only child, finds himself clinched in "a ghastly wrestling" with the mortal remains of his daughter and the destructive fury of the golden gifts of Medea (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 54). Medea delights in the news of these horrible deaths, but the Messenger and the chorus seek comfort and explanation in tragic constructions of life's fragility and uncertainty and in "the will of Heaven" (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 55; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1224-32). Again Medea's response exceeds the compass of tragic vision. She turns her focus immediately toward compounding the horrors just narrated by steeling herself to slay those "beloved sons" to whom she has given birth so that they will not fall into the hands of others who would send them to an even worse fate (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 55; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1236-50). Toni

Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) stages a gruesomely similar choice for the escaped slave-woman Sethe: is maternal infanticide an inconsolable gift of love and freedom, or is it the unforgiving horror beyond all naturally impossible and culturally unthinkable horrors? Sethe suffers both choices, and Morrison's readers rather like Euripides' audiences must struggle to comprehend how two grotesquely contradictory destinies coincide for a mother who murders her beloved offspring.

The Chorus of Corinthian Women narrates the climactic scene (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1251-92). Medea has gone inside the house to her children; and the chorus, fearing the worse, would beseech as divine agents of intervention the same gods whom Medea invoked earlier when swearing Aegeus to his oath:

Earth, awake! Bright arrows of the Sun,
Look! Look down on the accursed woman
Before she lifts up a murderous hand
To pollute it with her children's blood!
For they are your own golden race;
And for mortals to spill blood that grew
In the veins of gods is a fearful thing.
Heaven-born brightness, hold her, stop her,
Purge the palace of her, this pitiable
Bloody-handed fiend of vengeance!
(*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 55-6; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1251-60)

The chorus invokes the earth surrounding and under-girding the Theatre of Dionysus as well as the sun coursing overhead during the unfolding of Euripides' *Medea* in Athens, 431 BC. Gaia (Earth) and Helios (Sun) should not condone or consent to infanticide. However, Medea's next appearance *ex machina* at notorious line 1317 of the Greek text compromises this choral view of what gods, especially Helios, must do. The chorus pleads with the enshrouded Medea and links her fury and her impending abomination to that which has "come from the blue Symplegades/ That hold the gate of the barbarous sea" (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 56; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1263-4). Yet Medea's rage is not typecast by them as barbaric, Asiatic or as darkly poisonous as the dread waters of the Black Sea. As the voices of Medea's sons are heard for the first time in the throes of death (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1271-8), the chorus laments the "stone and iron" Medea has made of herself and grasps at meaning for such wanton infanticide through the only precedent they know — namely, the very Greek instance of Ino, daughter of Cadmus of Thebes and sister to Agave and Semele who figure significantly in *The Bacchae*. Ino, driven mad by the goddess Hera, flung her homeless and "defiled" self into the sea in

recompense for killing her two sons (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 56-7; *Medea* 1938: 172). This maddened Greek mother provides the chorus a tragic ‘model’ for comprehending the unnatural motives, abject abomination and consummate atonement for infanticide. Medea’s familial and civil abomination, however, are given an utterly strange and unique provenance in the final scene of the play (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1293-1419). The chorus’ efforts to encompass tragically the *pathos* and *praxis* of the play will not suffice to explain the final, excessive display of Medea horribly triumphant.

Jason enters the stage for the third time, now seeking Medea as a “vile murderess” and hoping to secure the lives of his sons before vengeful Corinthians kill them (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 57). He swears that “she must either hide in the deep earth/ Or soar on wings into the sky’s abyss” to avoid his own vengeance (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 57; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1296-8 and 173). Jason’s oath obliquely and ironically invokes Medea’s chosen deities for a third time. Only Gaia or Helios could protect Medea at this moment. Medea then appears, epiphanous, above the roof of the now abandoned house, secure in the chariot of Helios drawn by snake-like dragons, with the bodies of her sons beside her (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 58; *Medea* 1938: xxvii, 174-5). This convergence of earthly and solar powers manifests Medea as a preternatural force of nature. Medea, a very human murderess, is assimilated to the divine. She is granddaughter to Helios by whose agency she is plucked from Corinth; she is linked to chthonic powers and earthly goddesses; her prophetic powers foretell the fates of Aegeus and Jason; and godlike she decrees and consecrates sacred rites as expiation for her act of infanticide (*Medea* 1938: ll. 1378-83). She embodies the avenging power of *eros*, a preternatural force rendered female and subversive, which Jason has offended deeply through his abuse of *sophia* as well as his disdainful murder of love in the heart of Medea. Jason calls her “polluted fiend, child-murderer” and “no woman, but a tiger; a Tuscan Scylla—but more savage” (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 58; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1346, 1342-3 and 176). He trades upon her barbarous background (“a land of savages”) and exonerates himself of any culpability for her crimes, past or present (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 58). Medea rejects his abusive names and self-serving apologetics with the assertion “I’ve reached your heart; and that is right” (*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 59; *Medea* 1938: l. 1360). Her sole justification, thus, is that she has done what had to be done to shatter Jason’s confidence in his own right to rule *eros* as he sees fit.

Though Jason is given the last word in this final, bitter exchange between the two former companions, the sense that pervades lines 1317-1414 of the Greek text is one of unending, perpetual feuding. The ideal harmony evoked

by the chorus earlier in the drama is now thoroughly deracinated not only by horrifying events but by the horrifyingly melodramatic spectacle of two deeply heart-riven parents blaming the other for deception, dishonour, pollution and murder. Jason is also given the last word in Seneca's *Medea*, but in a mode that justifies his righteous anguish and her intolerance before any divinity (1973: 60, 159-60). Euripides dramatizes otherwise. Medea appears in the final scene robed and displayed as an embodiment of the preternatural linked to eastern and solar powers, to Asia Minor and the barbaric, but also to Greece and the reasons of the passions. Euripides' mythic embodiment of Medea mediates between Greek and Asian, between civilized and barbaric, between human and preternatural, and between polluted infanticide and iconoclastic icon of the cultural contradictions of *eros*. She is the iconic embodiment of those social and cultural alterities that Jason wills to repress in pursuit of his own goals.

Medea trespasses tragedy. The concluding scene defies tragic form and vision. The chorus' formulaic lines, used as well at the conclusion of *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Helen* and *The Bacchae*, "seem a little inapposite," according to Denys Page (*Medea* 1938: 181), the editor of the Clarendon Press text of the drama:

Many are the Fates which Zeus in Olympus dispenses;
Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
The unexpected God makes possible;
And such is the conclusion of this story.

(*Medea*, Vellacott trans. 1963: 61; *Medea* 1938: ll. 1415-9)

Euripides' melodrama of horror exceeds choral comprehension. "The unexpected," the supernatural flight of Medea from the scene of horrifying crimes — viewed tragically and rationally — and from the scene of righteous vengeance — viewed melodramatically and emotively — may of course be attributed to Helios or Zeus. Dramaturgically speaking, though, Euripides enacts a melodrama of horror that trespasses the social vision that tragedy projects for the Greek social polity. *Medea* summons attention to that which has been socially and politically repressed. The play as staged and performed and as preserved and reconstructed by scholarship articulates a dramaturgic texture. It stages a struggle between two potentially tragic characters who are arrayed against one another, with neither one willing to recognize or act upon any personal recognition of *hamartia*. Instead, an audience encounters a pitched melodramatic struggle for self-justification and righteous domination that produces a highly emotional and thoroughly externalised combat of

words and actions between former friends and heroes who now utterly fail to speak and act like tragic heroes.

Jason and Medea dramatize two types of social force — the former recognized, dominant and privileged and the latter undervalued, subordinate and disenfranchised. Jason appropriates unto himself a distinctly masculinist vision of the role of the patriarchal ruler and assumes as his birthright the Greek virtues of control, reason and wisdom. Medea is left with a stark choice: to play a submissive Greek woman *or* to perform the subversive, overly passionate female who in social and cultural terms must be regarded as unGreek, barbaric, alien and Asiatic. These are melodramatic stereotypes, yet Euripides puts them into play into order to dramatize a disordered state of passion and reason that pervades the civic composition of a social polity's most exemplary houses and families.¹⁴ Though “the conflict between reason and passion is one of the central themes of the play” (Lloyd 1992: 43), this fundamental socio-cultural ‘agon’ is staged not merely as an intellectual debate but as a deeply unnerving, civic quarrel that stuns chorus and audience, rends families and polities, and strains and tortures the values and rhetoric of tragic discourse at its roots.

The words and actions of Jason and Medea transgress the limits of the socially acceptable. Both characters rupture and destroy fundamental familial and social bonds of friendship, civility and parental care. Two families are thoroughly cleft asunder through the actions plotted by Medea. Jason's intimate culpability, however, is never excused or exonerated by the formal structure or emplotment of Euripides' *Medea*. The ending of the play reveals that Medea has ‘divine’ protection — that is to say, she embodies a social power or force that Euripides does not condemn, as Seneca would later feel it his social and dramaturgic duty to do. From the solar chariot of her paternal

¹⁴ The production of *Medea* I witnessed at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in June 2000 underscored crucial dimensions of this reading of the play as a melodrama of horror. In many respects the drama's preternatural resonances and cultural implications were severely narrowed in this production in order to focus upon the gender-bound dissonances played out between Fiona Shaw's Medea and Patrick O'Kane's Jason. However, Deborah Warner's direction discovered an effective, modern, rather Ibsenite dramaturgy through which to stage slowly escalating misrecognitions between an utterly self-involved, self-justifying, masculine rationalist and an utterly betrayed, 'forty-something,' mother of two. Fiona Shaw's Medea erratically shifted mood, tone and conviction as she precipitated the remnants of her household toward utter despair and sheer horror, toward progressively intractable modes of deranged madness and abjection, in the wake of male and female incommensurability in matters of married love.

grandfather, Euripides' Medea dispenses prophetic judgements as though she were a god, like the Dioscouri in *Electra* or Dionysus in the epiphany of *The Bacchae*. However, the sense of an ongoing, unending feud between melodramatically estranged halves of a horribly rent domestic and civic polity will endure. The play precipitates its audience toward this liminal zone of contesting interpretations and of bitterly contested "states of being" (Stewart 1982: 40). Jason refuses to recognize the rights of Medea, and Medea turns to horror to reach the heart of the Greek man who without such abject violation of the categories of his vision of the world might never glimpse the destructiveness of his own sophistries. In the meantime, Euripides' Chorus of Corinthian Women and the audience of *Medea* experience the abject, unnerving liminality of tragic dramaturgy and an apocalyptic transgression of the tragic vision of the social polity. Tragedy can neither encompass nor legitimate the horrors by which Medea plots the demise of Creon, Jason and the sons of her own body. Euripides stages the myth of Medea, but as a melodrama of horror which trespasses the comforting rhetoric and rituals of Greek tragedy and draws the imagination and the experience of the social polity towards a vertiginous abyss.

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