were expecting from a fourth play? We have no way of answering the question for certain. It is better simply to rejoice in the particular—indeed unique—range of emotions and tones which make up this rich and complex masterpiece.[39]

[39] This is an expanded version of a paper given at the Hellenic Society Colloquium for Prof. Winnington-Ingram; my thanks are due to the audience for their constructive comments, and in particular to Ian Jenkins for subsequent assistance. The same material also formed the basis of a lecture given in Greek in the Department of Classical Philology at Ioannina; the ensuing discussion was of great value to me, particularly the contributions by Mary Mantziou, Katerina Synodinou, Andreas Katsouris and D. Sakalis. The present paper is substantially the same as that which appears in *Dodoni: Philologia*, 14 (1985), 75–90, and is printed here with the kind permission of the editors of that journal.

9

The Infanticide in Euripides' Medea

P. E. EASTERLING

In many respects Euripides' *Medea* is not a problematic play. It is a singularly bold, clear-cut, assured piece of writing, the concentration and dramatic intensity of which are readily felt by reader or audience and command the respect even of those who find the subject matter repellent or who cavil at the Aegeus scene and the dragon chariot. But its starkness makes it deeply disturbing; and this unease is reflected in the critical literature on the play. The language, though consistently powerful, lacks the rich expansiveness of *Hippolytus* or *Bacchae*, almost never allowing us to range in imagination away from the immediate painful situation; it is typical that one of the most prominent of the recurring images is of Medea as a wild beast.[1] Then there is the striking absence of a cosmic frame of reference: we are given no sense of divine motivation or sanction or control. Medea is admittedly grand-daughter of the Sun, but the fact has no theological significance: its function is to symbolize her sense of her heroic identity and—at a different level—to motivate the final scene. The most uncompromising feature of all is Euripides' handling of the story, his design which makes the murder of the children the centrepiece of the play.

This horrific act is something from which we naturally recoil. 'No sane person', we say, 'would do such a thing', and indeed Euripides' many imitators have tended to present Medea's behaviour as that of a madwoman.[2] Or 'no civilized person would do it'; Sir Denys Page, for example, writes, 'The murder of children . . . is mere brutality: if it moves us at all, it does so towards incredulity and horror. Such an act is outside our experience, we—and the fifth-century Athenian—know nothing of it.'[3] Doubts have been felt in particular about

[1] 92; (103); 187 ff.; 1342 f.; 1358 f.; 1407. [2] Cf. Friedrich 1968, 209.
[3] Page 1938, xiv.

Medea's great speech at 1021 ff. in which she wrestles with her conflicting feelings of injured pride and love for her children: is Euripides merely playing with our emotions through a rhetorical handling of the situation, exploiting the dramatic effectiveness of Medea's debate with herself rather than having an eye to what a person would really do in such circumstances?[4] Or conversely, is this conflict in Medea's soul the real high point of the drama, of more tragic importance than the violent act itself?[5] Or is it possible, as has recently been suggested, that we retain some sympathy with Medea right through to her final triumph, so that the final scene is the real climax of the play?[6] Clearly an important question to be faced by any critic who wishes to interpret *Medea* is whether Euripides is exploring the realities of human behaviour or creating only an illusion of reality out of a sequence of essentially melodramatic actions.

'Real life' in drama is not, of course, the same phenomenon as real life outside. Distortion or suppression of documentary fact and neglect—within certain limits—even of probability are part of the dramatist's stock-in-trade which we accept at the same time as believing in the truthfulness of his situations. Thus it is no fundamental failure on Euripides' part that he abandons probability in his treatment of the chorus. It is highly unlikely that these respectable ladies of Corinth would really have stood ineffectually by when Medea announced her intention to kill their king and princess and then her own children. In real life they would have taken steps to have Medea taken into custody, or at the very least would have gone to warn the royal family and Jason. But we accept their inactivity because these women are not at the centre of the play: they are peripheral figures whose role is not to do and suffer but to comment, sympathize, support or disapprove. The advantages of providing Medea with a sympathetic and understanding audience within the play far outweigh any loss of naturalism. A much graver breach is committed by Seneca, when he makes Medea after killing the children toss the corpses down to Jason.[7] The whole motivation of the mother who murders her children is unintelligible if she is willing to surrender their corpses to the husband whom she is punishing. Similarly, in

[4] 'She has her struggle with her maternal feelings—a theatrical struggle rather than a psychologically convincing one', Kitto 1961, 195.

[5] Cf. Pohlenz 1954, 1. 255 ff. [6] So Steidle 1968, 165.

[7] If modern editors are right in so interpreting 'recipe iam natos parens' ('Now, father, take back your sons', *Medea* 1024).

Corneille's *Médée* there is no conviction at all in the scene where *Jason* thinks of killing the children to punish Medea.[8]

It is worth considering how Euripides manipulates the story in order to force us to take Medea seriously. The barbarian sorceress with a melodramatic criminal record who could so easily be a monster must become a tragic character, a paradigm, in some sense, of humanity. The Nurse's opening speech alludes briefly to that record: Medea is in exile for persuading the daughters of Pelias to kill their father, but there is no suggestion that she is shunned or feared by the Corinthians; the Nurse says she 'pleases' them (11 f.) and the friendly words of the chorus (137, 178 ff.) imply that she is an accepted, even a respected, figure. According to a scholiast on Pindar (*O.* 13. 74) Medea served the Corinthians by stopping a famine in their city; but Euripides makes no explicit mention of a story which on the face of it looks ideally suited to his purpose, for the good reason that it would introduce distracting complications into the scene with Creon. Unlike Seneca and Corneille, he clearly wanted to avoid giving the situation even the vaguest political dimension: there are to be no outside pressures on Creon, and he is to have no obligations to Medea for past services. So Euripides with fine sleight-of-hand contrives to imply that Medea's status at Corinth is one of some dignity, but without explaining why; later it becomes clear that she has a reputation as a wise woman, but the picture that is very lightly sketched in (for example in the scene with Aegeus) is as close to that of a respectable religious authority as to that of an outlandish witch.[9]

Medea as foreigner is another theme which is delicately handled by Euripides. At the most superficial level the fact that she is a barbarian from Colchis must have helped a Greek audience to accept both her past crimes and her expertise as a powerful sorceress, but we should be rash to conclude that it offered them an adequate explanation of the child murder. If Medea is to be seen as a distinctively oriental type ('because she was a foreigner she could kill her children')[10] why does Euripides make her talk like a Greek, argue like a Greek, and to all appearances *feel* like a Greek? It is hard to believe, particularly in view of the astonishingly crass words he gives to Jason at 536 ff., that Euripides was seriously imputing moral superiority to the Greeks, implying that only a foreigner could or would murder her own kin. On the contrary, he seems to exploit the theme of Medea's

[8] *Médée* Act v. Sc. v. [9] Cf. Conacher 1967, 186–7, 190. [10] Page 1938, xxi.

foreignness in order to emphasize her vulnerability and isolation and also to make a searching analysis of the nature of civilization and barbarism, a deep preoccupation of this play, to which we shall return.

Similarly, the record of Medea's past crimes is used—initially at any rate—more to arouse than to alienate the audience's sympathy. Euripides does not suppress the murder of Apsyrtus (166–7) or the killing of Pelias (9), though he is careful not to dwell on the grisly details of dismemberment and boiling. The subdued recall of these past horrors no doubt foreshadows the violence to come; but one of its main functions is to make clear that Medea has sacrificed literally everything for Jason, thus emphasizing his special ingratitude and her special defencelessness: she has not merely abandoned her family, she has betrayed them for Jason's sake. Nor does Euripides allow any character to raise the question of the legal relationship between Jason and Medea. None of them suggests[11] that Jason was perfectly entitled to abandon Medea without bad faith because as a foreigner she could not be his legitimate wife. Like other dramatists in other plays[12] Euripides permits himself a certain vagueness in legal matters, relying on the fact that the story is set in the heroic age, not in fifth-century Athens, however strongly the social comment may strike us as contemporary. This is one of those questions which in real life would be crucially important, but which it suits a dramatist to suppress. The essential situation is perfectly clear-cut: Jason and Medea are to be regarded as permanently pledged,[13] so that when Jason abandons Medea he *is* breaking faith (and even he does not deny it).

Euripides has taken pains, therefore, to present the situation in such a way that we are obliged to take Medea seriously. The structure of the first part of the play and the detail of these early scenes seem to be aimed at the same objective, the audience's full response to Medea as a tragic character.

The prologue from 46 ff., the entry of the children, can fairly be described as a 'mirror scene', a tightly self-contained presentation in miniature of the course that the action is going to take. It has very little direct connection with the immediately following scene, beyond

[11] Although at least one critic has done so (Murray 1910, vii f.).

[12] e.g. Sophocles on the edict in *Antigone*. Cf. Hester 1971, 19–21.

[13] The theme of their oaths is given repeated stress: 21 ff.; 160 ff.; 168 ff.; 208 ff.; 438 ff. (and the whole *stasimon*); 492 ff.; 1392.

the fact that the chorus ask the Nurse to coax Medea out of the house and she does actually emerge at 214, the beginning of the first episode: its main function seems rather to be prophetic, like the short scene in *Hippolytus* where the old servant reproves Hippolytus for his neglect of Aphrodite (88–120). Here the Nurse three times expresses her fear for the children's safety at their mother's hands (90 ff.; 100 ff.; 116 ff.), having already glancingly introduced the theme in her opening speech: 'She hates the children and takes no pleasure in seeing them. I am afraid she may make some new [i.e. sinister] plan' (36 f.). Medea's own curses reinforce this sense of foreboding: 'O cursed children of a hateful mother, may you perish with your father, and the whole house go to ruin!' (112 ff.). And the children themselves appear, fresh from their games, to impress their significance on the audience. From the start, then, it is made clear that this is not just a quarrel between man and wife, but a family drama in which the future and even the safety of the children are at stake. Medea herself is presented in all the alarming violence of her passion, but framed by the sympathy of Nurse and chorus, and therefore to be seen by the audience as a victim, even if also as a potential criminal.

When Medea comes out to talk to the chorus all the wildness has gone and she develops her arguments with complete composure. The focus of the dramatic interest is now this commanding personality in a sequence of encounters, first with the chorus, then with three men who in different ways have power to affect her life. With the chorus she is at her most frank and open, winning their whole-hearted support with her account of the miseries of a woman's life. At this stage the audience, too, must readily give her their sympathy, but complications already begin to arise. How much, we may ask, of what she says to the chorus is special pleading, designed to make them promise to keep her secret? As always with Medea it is hard to be sure; and here we meet for the first time the subtle complexity of Euripides' character-portrayal. At least her description of the constraints on women is deeply convincing, but when she complains of her special lack of resource as a foreigner with 'no mother, no brother, no kinsman' to support her (257 f.) we perhaps remember that it was she herself who caused her brother's death and betrayed her family. These words lead straight into her plea for collusion on the part of the chorus if she finds some way of punishing her husband: 'for woman is fearful and timid in other respects and a coward when it comes to looking on steel, but when her marriage is

treated with contempt there is no bloodier purpose than hers' (263 ff.). We are left in no doubt that this is a formidable woman; and, despite all that she has said in this scene about the limitations of the feminine role, it is clear that she herself is capable of overcoming them. When she makes her famous claim (250 f.) that she would rather stand three times in the battle line than bear one child she wins our respect—she is talking, of course, about the emotional hazards of being a mother, not just about the physical pain and danger of childbearing—but even so, not many women would say what Medea says; these words may come back to our minds at the end of the scene with Creon.

With the king we see the full exposure of Medea's cleverness, her *sophia*. Creon is explicit that he is exiling her because he fears what her cleverness may devise to harm his family; Medea's response is a dazzling virtuoso display of the very quality he fears. First she argues that her cleverness could not possibly be used to harm *him*, next exerts extreme emotional pressure by appealing to his feelings as a father,[14] and finally makes a disarmingly modest request: just one day's grace, time for making the necessary arrangements for going into exile. But as soon as he has left and Medea has got her way there is a striking change of tone: now we see all the contempt of the clever person for the fool. 'Do you think I would have fawned on that man if I had not had some profit or plan in mind?' (368 f.). Now in a highly professional way she discusses the possible modes of murder she might choose: shall it be fire, or sword, or poison, her speciality? This could easily be bloodcurdling for bloodcurdling's sake as in Seneca and Corneille, who both make much of her gruesome rites and incantations. In Euripides the effect is less gothic; indeed a main function of this detail seems to be to emphasize Medea's cleverness: in her own view of herself her magical skill is part of her heroic *aretē*.

This speech at 364 ff. (and particularly the last section from 392) illuminates a most important aspect of Euripides' Medea. She sees herself not just as a woman wronged, but as a great personage in the heroic mould of an Ajax or an Achilles: she owes it to herself and to her high pedigree to allow no enemy to triumph over her. The granddaughter of Helios must face 'the test of courage': *νῦν ἀγὼν*

[14] Schlesinger 1966, 42, makes much of Creon's remark at 329 that his children are dearer to him than anything else in life. This is certainly important, in that it gives Medea her cue for exploiting Creon and keeps the theme of children in the foreground, but can we say that it actually gives her the idea of killing her children?

εὐψυχίας, language that an Ajax or an Achilles might perfectly well use. In this context Medea standing in the battle line becomes fully intelligible. The scene ends on a less grandiose, more sinister, note: 'We are women, helpless when it comes to good deeds, but skilled practitioners of all kinds of evil' (408 f.).[15] There is a clash here between Medea's self-image as a hero of the old style braving a great ordeal and her awareness of the destructiveness of thwarted female passion. We see very clearly that her cleverness is a potent force for evil as well as for good. The tragedy is that she does stand out above the limited or shabby people around her, does have a sharper moral awareness and far greater distinction and force of personality, yet the audience cannot help but shudder at the ruthlessness of her anger and passion for vengeance.

In her first scene with Jason, Medea is at her most sympathetic, because here we are allowed to see the full extent of the provocation she has been suffering. Jason is a status-seeker, embarrassed by his barbarian wife who refuses to go quietly, anxious to have her out of the way but insensitive enough to talk about exile being a hardship, crassly patronizing in his offer of material help. Medea's theme is simple: 'I saved you';[16] and she is right. All her past acts of betrayal were committed in the cause of Jason and her love for him; and now he is guilty of the greatest betrayal of all, the breaking of those dearly-bought oaths. The only extenuation would have been if their union had been childless: but they *have children* (*παίδων γεγώτων* at 490 carries the strongest possible emphasis). Jason's answer only confirms our sense of his outrageousness. He is sophistical in his argument that it was Cypris, not Medea, who saved him, ludicrously arrogant when he recalls the benefits he has conferred on his wife by bringing her to civilized Greece from her benighted barbarian home, patently self-deceptive[17] when he pretends that his only interest in the new marriage is the welfare of his existing family. Once more the importance of children is made very prominent, particularly at 565, when Jason implies that he needs a family more than Medea does. Medea's final taunt turns into a sinister threat which recalls the

[15] The rhyme (*ἀμηχανώταται . . . σοφώταται*, 'most helpless . . . most skilled') adds to the sonorousness of this ending.

[16] 476; 515: powerful use of ring-composition.

[17] The chorus are not deceived (578; 637 ff.); and Jason's words to the princess (reported by the Messenger at 1151 ff.) suggest that he was enjoying his role as royal bridegroom.

concluding lines of the two previous scenes: we are reminded that she is still planning revenge, though the encounter with Jason has done nothing to further the action in any practical sense and Medea still has no idea where she can go when she has punished her victims.

Then Aegeus arrives unexpectedly to answer her need. Aegeus is merely passing through Corinth on his way from the Delphic oracle to consult Pittheus, his old friend who is king of Troezen. The casualness of his arrival has been criticized from Aristotle[18] onwards, but as with Io's visit to the place of Prometheus' punishment in *Prometheus Bound* such casualness is readily acceptable to an audience provided that the scene itself is dramatically significant, and provided that it is seen to be part of a structural pattern. Here there is a clearly discernible design: three contrasting visits to Medea, of which the third offers a close parallel to the first.[19] Both the scene with Creon and the scene with Aegeus show Medea using her wits to get what she wants from a person in authority; but whereas Creon was all suspicion and misgivings Aegeus is full of honourable and rather naive trust. Medea is equal to either situation; and the most interesting link between the two scenes is in her choice of persuasive argument. With Creon it is his feelings as a parent she exploits, with Aegeus his longing to be a parent. Once more her cleverness succeeds: she now has a refuge in Athens, and she can afford to make a detailed plan of vengeance.

Her speech at 764 ff. is the most remarkable in the play. It starts with her triumphant exultation and her plot for the murder of the princess and Creon, then leads without preparation into the terrible revelation that she intends to kill her children. Her own explanation makes the best starting point for a discussion of this speech. She sees the murder of her children as a means of *punishing her enemies*. The deed will be 'most unholy', but she will do it because her enemies' laughter is not to be tolerated. The penalty that is worse than death for her enemy Jason will be to have no children, neither Medea's nor any borne to him by the princess. And so 'let no one think me cowardly or weak, or peaceable, but of quite the opposite temper: dire to my enemies and kindly to my friends. For it is such people who live in the highest esteem.' This is the kind of language with which she exults in her success over Aegeus: 'now I shall win the victory over my enemies' (764–7), language that recalls the end of the scene with

[18] *Poetics* 1461^{b}21. At least Euripides has warned us to expect *someone* to arrive (390–4).

[19] Cf. Lucas 1959, 197.

Creon with its image of the heroic Medea facing the 'test of courage'. These are all words that belong to the traditional code, in which the laughter of enemies is the ultimate disgrace and harming enemies and helping friends is the duty of a hero. But Medea's appropriation of the code seems hideously out of place in a situation where the enemy is her husband and the means of punishing him is to be an act of bloodthirsty treachery followed by the murder of her own children.

The essential relevance of the scene with Aegeus must be its stress on the value and importance of children. Euripides does not make clear exactly when Medea arrives at the details of her plan, and we cannot say that the encounter with Aegeus gives her the idea to kill the children; it is enough that after the scene with Aegeus she has the idea very fully worked out: this will be Jason's consummate punishment, to be robbed of his future. Her announcement comes as a surprise, but it is not factitious: the prologue's prophetic warnings and the prominence of the theme of parents and children in all three of Medea's encounters have effectively prepared the way.[20] This technique is perhaps subtler than the version preferred by Seneca, an episode in which Medea sees how much Jason loves his children and says 'Now I have him.'[21] Euripides' Medea does not need to be shown evidence of Jason's fatherly love: she simply knows that even a man as selfish and coarse-grained as Jason, who for the moment is quite absorbed in his young bride and his new social status and content for his whole family to go into exile, can still be profoundly hurt by the loss of his children.

Even more than the scene with Aegeus it is the child murder itself that has caused the greatest critical unease. Perhaps this is because society so much abhors the murder of children that it refuses to regard it as anything but the rarest and most outrageous of deviations. Hence the attempt to explain Medea's act as something quite outside the experience of civilized people. In general we tend not to look on murder as such with the same disbelief; and it comes as a surprise to find from modern statistics that a large proportion of murder victims are in fact children—nearly one-third of the total in the United Kingdom between 1957 and 1968,[22] nearly half in

[20] Cf. Ebener 1961, 224.

[21] *Medea* 549–50: 'sic natos amat? | bene est, tenetur, vulneri patet locus' ('Is this how much he loves his sons? Good, he's caught: the place to wound him is exposed.').

[22] Cf. Gibson and Klein 1969. I am grateful to my colleague Mrs A. M. Morris for a criminologist's view of the problem of child murder.

Denmark in recent times[23]—and that the killers are predominantly their parents. Often the killing of children is accompanied by suicide on the part of the parents, but one parent may kill a child or children as a means of hurting the marriage partner. May it not be that in *Medea* we find Euripides exhibiting the same psychological sureness of touch as in his studies of Phaedra and Electra and Pentheus, or as in the scene where Cadmus brings Agave back to reality?[24]

Medea is trying to achieve the punishment of Jason: the death of the princess and Creon is not enough, because through her children Medea can still be hurt or insulted (by the 'laughter of her enemies'), if *they* are hurt or insulted. With them alive and in his care Jason can still look to the future through them. There is no question of Medea's admitting to a wish to punish the children: she calls them 'most beloved' (795) and her deed 'most unholy' (796): only in the prologue does she curse them and the Nurse say she 'hates the children' (presumably because they represent her vulnerability to Jason). Indeed she thinks she is being loyal to her dear ones and winning glory by her actions (809 f.), heroic language which a psychologist would probably describe as an 'altruistic' and 'protective' rationalization of the child murder. It seems that very often the parents who kill their children convince themselves that the children would in their own interests be better dead.[25]

The scene of false reconciliation between Medea and Jason makes magnificent theatre; it also has a subtle importance in its relation to the rest of the play.[26] It emphasizes the link between the two stages of Medea's revenge by showing the children who are to be victims of the culminating deed innocently bearing the poisoned gifts which will make them the agents of the first murder, with Jason as their accomplice. From 894 ff. the children are the focus of the action; and seeing them in Jason's embraces and hearing his confident words about their future, Medea twice breaks down, though each time she resourcefully contrives to explain her tears in a sense which furthers her deception of Jason. The episode has a complex function: it confirms our awareness of the children's importance to Jason and at the same time prepares for the moving passage (1029 ff.) where Medea imagines the future that the children will never have. Moreover

[23] Cf. Harder 1967, 197 ff.
[24] Cf. Devereux 1970, 35–48 for a study of this scene.
[25] Harder 1967, 235 ff.
[26] Cf. Lesky 1972, 307; Steidle 1968, 156 f.

her self-mastery here, according to Steidle's persuasive analysis,[27] foreshadows the success of her resolve in the following scene. Certainly it must now seem clear to the audience, as it does to the chorus, that the children are bound to die: 'Now no longer have I any hope left for the children's lives, no longer. They go already to their deaths' (976 ff.).

Now Medea learns that the first part of her plan has worked and the children have been allowed to stay in Corinth; she must say goodbye to them, ostensibly because she is going into exile, but we know that she confronts the essential issue. Time is short, and without the death of the children her revenge will not be complete; but can she face the deed? The speech at 1021 ff. in which she expresses the struggle between her maternal love and her desire for revenge has been tirelessly discussed:[28] is it the tragic climax of the play, showing Medea caught in a conflict on the outcome of which we hang in suspense, or is the inevitability that she will kill her children strongly felt all through the speech, and the climax reached only in the final scene? Recent critics have been particularly concerned with the structural question and also with the apparent inconsistency of Medea's motivation. Within the space of a few lines she moves from the statement that she will take the children with her into exile (1058) to the assertion that there is no escape: they are certain to be killed in Corinth, and she must therefore do the deed (1059–64).

The detail of the speech suggests that despite a certain rhetorical formalism of manner Euripides keeps close to observed patterns of human behaviour. The reality of Medea's love for her children is evoked in her very precise recall of the hopes she used to cherish for their future and hers (1024–35) and in her response to the extraordinarily powerful appeal of their bright eyes and soft skin (1070–5). But the reality of her obsessive need to triumph over her enemies is also made inescapably clear (1049–55; 1059–60), the need to hurt Jason as deeply as anyone can ever be hurt, which has been fully explored earlier in the play, both in the betrayed wife's passion for vengeance and in the heroic self-image which makes Medea a far from ordinary but none the less convincing and tragic figure.

Euripides needs to make us believe in Medea's maternal feeling not because we are to think there is a real hope that she may change her mind for good, but in order to achieve the full depth of tragic

[27] See n. 26 above.
[28] Cf. Lesky 1972, 311 f.

seriousness. The deed she contemplates is so horrific that we cannot accept it unless we are given evidence that it has cost a profound struggle. Comparison with Seneca illustrates very well the difference between tragic and melodramatic treatment of the situation. Seneca's Medea carries conviction only as a raving madwoman, whose moments of maternal feeling (938 ff.) show none of the Euripidean Medea's precise awareness of what children mean to a mother. In any case, her softer emotions soon give way to visions of Furies accompanying the dismembered Apsyrtus, to whom Medea sacrifices one of the children, keeping the other to be killed in full view of Jason and the citizens. With her intended victim at her side she expresses a fleeting sense of remorse, but this is soon lost in the joy of gloating over Jason; of the child's presumed agony she seems (like Seneca) to be unaware:

> quid, misera, feci? misera? paeniteat licet,
> feci. voluptas magna me invitam subit,
> et ecce crescit. derat hoc unum mihi,
> spectator iste. (990–3)

wretched woman, what have I done? Did I say wretched? I may repent, but I did the deed. A great sense of pleasure comes over me against my will, and it is growing. There was just one thing missing: he should have been there to see it.

Euripides' master-stroke in this speech is Medea's announcement at 1059 ff. that there is no going back: the poison must have done its work by now and the princess must already be dead. We can assume that the treacherous murder of the princess and Creon will in reality mean danger for the children from the outraged royal family (as Jason later confirms, 1303 ff.). Medea's reaction, when she faces the fact that the murder must have happened, is to treat this danger as inescapable, although a moment earlier she has been speaking of taking the children away with her. She is filled, in fact, with a sudden sense that she is caught in the tide of events and has no longer any choice. This is the atmosphere of sudden urgency in which we are told that the murder of children is often committed: the parent becomes convinced of a threat to the children that clinches the feeling that they would be better dead.[29] Such an interpretation seems much more relevant to Medea's case than any of the others that have been put forward, of which the latest is that the children were too young to accompany their mother in a hasty escape.[30]

[29] Cf. Harder 1967, especially p. 237, and Bender 1934, 41.
[30] Steidle 1968, 159 ff.

The sense of urgency is brought to a desperate climax in Medea's speech after the Messenger has told his story and urged her to fly. There is no word now of triumph over her enemies or of her own situation at all beyond her need to steel herself: her whole concentration is on the children. She must act 'as swiftly as possible', 'without delay'; since they are bound to be killed, she who loves them must be the one to do the deed, not some 'other more hostile hand' (1239 ff.). The murder itself is represented by means of cries from the children and the chorus, but without any word from Medea; nowhere is there any hint of the gloating of Seneca's Medea as she raises the knife: 'perfruere lento scelere, ne propera, dolor' ('Take your crime slowly, my grief, and enjoy it to the full', 1016).

The gloating (but never over the children) is to come in the stark final scene where Medea triumphs over Jason from the chariot, prophesying an evil death for him, refusing to let him even touch the children's bodies. The brute fact of Jason's loss moves us now; but it is Medea who speaks with prophetic authority. Clearly she has the role of the 'god from the machine' who so often in Euripides makes the final dispositions. This is one of the most alarming features of the play, the fact that there is no comparatively distant and objective divine figure to speak with the voice of authority, relating these events to real life through their link with some cult or institution and thereby restoring a sense of normality after the frightful extremes of the action. Medea makes a link between this story and a festival at Corinth (1381 ff.); but she offers no relief whatever from the horror of the situation.

The powerful effect of this final scene depends on Euripides' use of the supernatural device of the dragon chariot, which transforms Medea's status from that of runaway criminal to something outside ordinary human experience. It was a bold dramatic experiment, but Euripides was justified in making it, granted that the effect could be adequately and not absurdly represented on the Greek stage. There has been criticism of the contrast between this very blatant use of the supernatural and the realistic tone of the rest of the action,[31] but some kind of miraculous device was needed if Euripides was to contrive a final confrontation between Jason and Medea in which Medea should at last have her triumph. The whole plot in fact rests

[31] R. Lattimore, for instance, regards the chariot as 'preposterous', merely a 'taxi to get from Corinth to Athens' (Lattimore 1958, 108).

on unrealistic data which we accept without qualm: for example, Medea's relationship to Helios (a frequently stressed motif which helps to prepare for the chariot) and the remarkable nature of her magical power. Yet throughout we are invited to take Medea seriously as a real human being, and even this final scene is perfectly consistent with the rest of the play in its handling of her motivation; it is only the spectacle of her in the chariot, high above Jason, taking with her the children's bodies that he may not touch, that makes her seem to have been transformed, in Murray's words, 'into a sort of living Curse . . . Her wrongs and her hate fill the sky'.[32]

The sense that Euripides seems to be making out of all this is as comfortless as the conclusions to which he points in *Hippolytus* or *Bacchae*. What a vulnerable thing is civilization, when man's passions are so powerfully destructive. When he makes the insensitive Jason praise Greek society and values and when he gives the barbarian witch the ideals of a traditional Greek hero he is surely suggesting that there is no safe dividing line: civilized life is always most precariously poised, continually threatened from within.

One of the play's recurrent themes is that of song and the Muses: it comes in that curious passage at the end of the *parodos* where the Nurse meditatively wonders why poets have not devised songs to cure human miseries instead of accompanying their pleasures (190 ff.); in the first *stasimon* when the chorus reflect how poetry has always represented the man's side of things (421 ff.); most prominently in the great passage in praise of Athens after the departure of Aegeus (824 ff.). Athens, city of the Muses, the ideal of civilized splendour, where *Sophia* and the Loves are in harmony: is this merely a fine compliment to an Athenian audience, or is it related more intimately to the deeper meaning of the play? All these passages draw attention to the ambivalence of human intelligence and creativity, which is potentially a source of beauty and harmony, but liable, too, to break out in destructive violence under the influence of passion. Medea in her *sophia* exemplifies this ambivalence: we see her great expertise and intellectual power turned, because of her betrayed love for Jason, to destructive—and self-destructive—ends. And her heroic sense of identity is used to bring out the tragic nature of what she does and suffers.

[32] Murray 1910, xi f.

10

Hippolytus: A Study in Causation

R. P. WINNINGTON-INGRAM

Why did the events happen as they did? This is no problem to Aphrodite or to Artemis. Bitter enemies though they may be, on one point they are agreed—that what takes place is the work of a god; and the responsibility which Aphrodite claims in the Prologue is endorsed by Artemis in the closing scene. Yet the human characters seem to choose their courses and to work out their disasters on the plane of human circumstance and motive, so that Wilamowitz could say: 'Aphrodite is not necessary for our understanding of the action.' (Though I should myself prefer to ask whether the action is not necessary to our understanding of Aphrodite.) Another critic finds it the very purpose of the play to demonstrate that human freedom is illusory. Various views have been held by various scholars; and at the moment I do not wish to express one of my own. Though I would ask a question. Where else does Euripides use a god or gods as the spokesmen of his deepest insight? (In the *Bacchae* do we not learn far more about Dionysus from the Chorus and the Messengers than from anything Dionysus himself says?) However that may be, the degree of truth which may reside in the utterances of the two goddesses can only be determined by close study of the action as a whole.

I have chosen my original question as the starting-point for a survey which will range widely. The play is rich, complex, subtly-patterned (as are few of Euripides): in a brief paper one can only single out certain aspects and certain details, hoping that the selection does not too seriously falsify the total work of art. I shall from time to time give warnings against over-simplification, but I know that I shall myself be guilty of this critical fault, which I hope may be corrected in the discussion that follows.

Aphrodite and Artemis. The symmetry of the two goddesses, whose appearances frame the disastrous action, is a striking formal device, which must be significant. Here are two divine powers—one

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