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THE *Medea*

From Folk Tale to Tragedy

There is a directness and intensity about the *Medea* which elicits, even from critics, a different sort of response from that accorded to the other plays of Euripides. No gods determine, either in reality or by dramatic convention, Medea's passion. Of her adversaries, none has sufficient stature, in comparison with Medea, to modify significantly the structure of the plot. She is, to some degree, the victim of circumstance, but not in the extreme sense in which this is true of a Hecuba or an Andromache; what happens in her case we feel to be more the result of her own nature than of anything else. As Kitto has said of Medea, "... she was never really different from what we see her to be; [she was not] ... a good but passionate woman who plunges into horrors only when stung by deadly insult and injury." But is Medea tragic, as this critic also avers, as "a purely passive figure," as helpless a victim of her passion as are her own victims? It is this view which categorizes Medea as "the impersonation of one of the blind and irrational forces in human nature" and which enables the critic to include her, "depersonalized" with many another Euripidean hero, in that group image of which he can say, "In the last analysis, Euripides' tragic hero is mankind."[1]

[1]For these four quotations, see Kitto, *G.T.*, 189, 195, 199 and 195, respectively. Several of the points raised in this paragraph have already been discussed in general terms in the Introduction; see above, pp. 21–23 and nn. 29 and 31. Similar questions concerning freedom and necessity in Euripidean tragedy have been raised in connection with Phaedra in the *Hippolytus*, though in her case the questions must be somewhat differently expressed due to the mythological context of the play. See above, chapter 2, pp. 37–38 ff. and nn. 13 and 14, Appendix I, and the references to various critics given in the notes. In the present chapter, I have taken Kitto as a most eloquent spokesman of the "tragic victim" view of Medea (and of various other Euripidean heroes) which is shared, at least to some degree, by many critics.

Kitto's account of the structure of this play in terms of its single-minded concentration on Medea's temperament is a valuable correction of misjudgments of that structure by Sophoclean comparisons.[2] Nevertheless, I believe it is possible to see in this Medea a more individually tragic heroine, engaged in a real *agôn* and a real choice, than the catastrophic figure, doomed by her nature to suffer and to cause disaster, which Kitto describes. Even the adaptations here made in the traditional *persona* and circumstances of Medea may serve as a preliminary indication of the poet's purpose.

The story of the Argonauts[3] goes back at least to the time of the composition of the *Odyssey* in which we find references to Jason's father, Aeson, and to Pelias (*Od.* XI. 254 ff.) as well as a reference to the ship Argo (*Od.* XII. 70) which suggests wide-spread circulation of its story at this time. Indeed, the overlapping and, in some cases, identity (e.g., Circe, the Harpies, the Sirens) of various creatures and adventures with which Odysseus and Jason are respectively involved, remind us that here, as in the "Wanderings" portion of the *Odyssey*, the traditional basis of epic has been invaded and overlaid by folk tale. Medea herself, though not mentioned by name in the *Odyssey* (the first extant occurrence of her name is in Hesiod, *Theogony*, 961) has close affinities, in blood and in profession, with Circe, the sorceress of Aeaea, whose brother Aietes

[2]See Kitto, 188–93. Cf. also Pohlenz's view of this shift of emphasis from plot to the individual nature of the tragic hero as characteristic of the difference between Euripides and his predecessors (Pohlenz, 258); cf. also John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, Part IV, who, since he minimizes the Aeschylean and Sophoclean concern with "character," expresses this contrast in rather more extreme terms.

[3]The following summary of the ancient evidence about Jason and Medea is drawn mainly from the excellent accounts in D. L. Page's edition of *Medea*, xxi–xxx and in L. Méridier, *Euripide* I, 105–10, and from the ancient authorities there cited. The most sustained of the ancient accounts of Jason's quest for the golden fleece, of the aid afforded him by Medea at Colchis, and of their subsequent adventures there and at Iolkos and Corinth, is to be found in Apollodorus, I. 9. 16–28. In that part of the legend which coincides with the action of our play, Apollodorus' account (sec. 28) is the same as that of Euripides, but Apollodorus' additional reference to a different version of the murder of the children, as well as one or two differences in detail (e.g., in the circumstances of Medea's murders of Apsyrtus and Pelias), show us that he was familiar with other ancient traditions on Jason and Medea besides the one which Euripides was following. The earliest continuous account of these exploits up to Medea's slaying of Pelias at Iolkos is to be found in Pindar, *Pythian* IV. (For other, fragmentary references to the legend in the lyric poets, see Méridier, 106, nn. 4–5.) Reference to various other versions (some going back to cyclic epic) of the doings of Jason and Medea at Corinth will be made in subsequent notes.

is Medea's father. Certainly the services which Medea, the witch (*pharmakis*), as Apollodorus calls her, renders Jason in Colchis, aiding him to subdue the brazen-footed, fire-breathing bulls, to sow the dragon's teeth and to defeat the dread guardian of the golden fleece, all fulfil the regular folk-tale characteristic of suspending the natural order of things by magical means.

This character of a folk-tale witch still attaches to Medea in the exploits recounted of her in Greece: witness the fiendish and magical manner in which she disposes of Pelias of Iolkos, her husband's enemy, and of Glauke and Creon, at Corinth. However, as we approach the Greek part of Medea's exploits, we notice certain interesting variations in the accounts given. Several traditions, for example, link Medea with Corinth but in a way rather different from that suggested by Euripides and Apollodorus.

According to an account originating in the eighth century with Eumelos, Helios, Medea's grandfather, gave Corinth to Medea's father Aietes; when his heir Bounos died, the Corinthians summoned Medea to be their queen, and through her Jason became king.[4] These circumstances do not readily provide the motive for the sort of *crime passionel* which we find in Euripides. According to Pausanias II. 3.11 (following Eumelos), Jason abandoned Medea because she had concealed her children in a temple of Hera, believing that they would be made immortal. As Page has observed, the explanation of this truncated narrative appears in a scholium to Pindar (Schol. g, *Ol.* XIII. 74) in which we learn that though Hera had promised immortality to Medea's children (because Medea had refused the embrace of Zeus), the children died; thus Jason, it would appear, abandoned Medea not merely for concealing her children in the temple of Hera, but for exposing them to some treatment which caused their death.

Two other ancient accounts (summarized in Schol. *Med.* 264) agree in blaming the Corinthians themselves for the murder of Medea's children, though they differ greatly in their statements of the circumstances and the sequel of the deed. According to Parmeniskos, the Corinthians acted simply from resentment of the rule of a foreigner and a witch, and later were forced to expiate their deed. According to Creophilos, Creon's relatives murdered them in vengeance for Medea's murder of Creon, and then blamed all the murders on Medea, who had fled to Athens.

The interesting feature about all these accounts is that none of them

[4]See Schol. f, Pindar *Ol.* XIII. 74 (which includes a quotation from Eumelos), Schol. *Med.* 9, and the complementary account in Pausanias II. 3. 10–11.

makes Medea responsible for the intentional slaughter of her children, though two of them (considered jointly) suggest that she was accidentally responsible for it, while another one claims that she was unjustly accused of it.

From this summary, two points relevant to our study of Euripides' treatment of Medea[5] may be stated. One is that, by a blend of two conflicting versions, together with some necessary adaptation of his own, Euripides himself made Medea responsible for the murder of her children. It is tempting to infer as well that the whole element of the *crime passionel* at Corinth is also a Euripidean innovation, but of this we cannot be sure: Medea must have had *some* motive for the murder of Creon which is reported in Creophilos' account, and there are one or two other hints in the non-Euripidean part of the tradition that the story of Glauke's agonizing death may have existed independently of our poet.[6]

The second point concerns the change which Euripides makes in the general image which the pre-Euripidean Medea presents. In the tradition, Medea shows little affinity with the tragic, or even with the heroic type. She is a creature of folk tale, an outlandish barbarian, a witch who has helped Jason by a mixture of black magic and inhuman savagery. Even those versions in which it is Medea and not Jason who establishes the family at Corinth smack of the folk-tale tradition: in Olympian mythology the sun god does not go about giving Greek cities to individuals, least of all to barbarians. In these same versions, Medea's search for everlasting life for her children, like the black magic by which, elsewhere, she claims to be able to restore youth from age, is also a folk-tale motif: in the more proper world of myth and tragedy, it is only the gods who are immortal. To this witch of the folk tale, Euripides adds a new dimension; while denying her neither her fury nor her magic, he yet makes her a woman of stature, of potentially tragic power.[7] And the plot, while it

[5]In speaking of "Euripides' treatment," I leave out of account the opinion, quoted in an anonymous *Hypothesis* of Euripides' *Medea*, that this play was based on a plot of Neophron's. The improbability of this opinion has already been well established by Page, xxxv–vi, whose position on the matter has not, I think, been overthrown by E. A. Thompson (*CQ*, XXXVIII [1944], 10–14), one of the relatively few recent critics to maintain the anteriority and influence of Neophron's *Medea*. A thorough summary of the whole "Neophron problem" is also to be found in L. Séchan, *Etudes sur la Tragédie Grecque*, Appendix VII, 592–94, together with references to the main authorities arguing for either side of the question.

[6]See Page, xxv–vi.

[7]Cf. A. Lesky, *Die Griechische Tragödie*, 147–48, who also stresses that in the *Medea* Euripides almost lets us forget the witch in favour of the person, though he adds that witchcraft has its proper place in the treatment.

retains the theatrical excitement, the *Grand Guignol* effects suited to the original Medea, sustains as well something of the tragic struggle between good and evil.

Such developments would surely be unnecessary if Euripides, as Kitto suggests, were merely illustrating the destructive power of passion by displaying one of its most helpless victims. Thus we may expect a theme and characterization more individually tragic than the predetermined victim of Kitto's description will allow.

Dramatic Analysis

The intense centripetal focus of this tragedy begins in the prologue. Its three parts, monologue, dialogue and a frightened anapaestic series punctuated by Medea's off-stage cries, produce their complementary effects in an ascending scale of excitement. The first speaker is the Nurse, and so our earliest impression of Medea comes through an intimate and sympathetic witness. Her news, that Jason has deserted Medea for the daughter of King Creon, is enclosed by accounts of the past services of Medea to Jason and to the city which has sheltered him, and, hideous as these services have been, they are presented in the light of Medea's passionate devotion to her husband. The description of Medea's mood suggests a savage, wounded animal and in the Nurse's apprehension of some monstrous deed (perhaps against the children, whose sight Medea now abhors) we get our first warning, from the one who knows her best, of what Medea can become, when wronged.

Enter the Tutor, leading the children of Medea. As the bearer of fresh news—that Creon is about to exile Medea—and more particularly as the guardian of the children, he increases the sense of apprehension and makes it more specific. The Nurse redoubles her worried chatter:

> O keep the children from her . . . for even now I saw her glaring at them like an angry bull. . . . She'll not leave this fit, too well I know it, till she has charged at someone. May it be enemies, not friends, she chooses! (90–95)

Two savage cries, off-stage, provide the final impact of this prologue: Medea screams her wrongs and curses husband, children, "all the house." (111–14) The brief intensity of these cries, contrasted with the Nurse's long-winded moralizing, brings the prologue to a chilling climax. The series of emotions traversed—sympathy, apprehension, horror—anticipates in a few rapid strokes the responses which, in the same sequence, the coming action will evoke.

This sinister blend of effects is repeated, in choral terms, in the

parodos, where the brief songs expressing sympathy and fear are harshly punctuated by Medea's off-stage cries. The direction of this tragedy requires that the Chorus should *begin* by feeling sympathy for Medea. Thus, singing as women rather than as Corinthians, they remind us (208–12) that it was Jason's vows, by which Medea now curses him, which first induced her to take her ill-starred voyage to Greece.

The contrast between the fury of Medea's initial cries and the controlled and calculated rhetoric of her opening address to the Corinthian women has already been compared with the presentation of Phaedra in the *Hippolytus*.[8] The same dramatic purpose is served in both cases: that of showing in striking contrast the most elemental and the most civilized or even sophisticated aspects of the same personality. What difference there is between the two contrasts is due to the difference between the two women. Even in hysteria, Phaedra seeks to cloak her naked passion (this impulse is, indeed, the *cause* of her hysteria); later, in her discourse on human frailty (her own included) one feels that she expresses her own character more truthfully than does Medea in *her* official bid for sympathy. Freudians, no doubt, could express these same distinctions more accurately in terms of the *ego*, the *super ego* and the *id*.

Medea's purpose in her opening speech (214–66) is, purely and simply, to win the Chorus of female citizens to her side. As a piece of rhetoric (this time needing no apology for dramatic relevance) the speech is one of the poet's finest passages.[9] It begins on a note of specious but ingratiating familiarity, moves on to the briefest possible indication ("I'm finished, good women, my husband has betrayed me!") of the speaker's plight, and then concentrates with a wealth of poignantly familiar detail on "woman's lot," a trouble which the Chorus shares. "We women are a timid lot . . . but wronged in marriage, there's none more murderous!" All Medea has asked is silent co-operation. By the end of her speech, the Chorus, to a woman (δράσω τάδ'! 267), regards her vengeance as its own.

The poet's purpose in this passage is, perhaps, more complex than Medea's, though it has much in common with it: we, too, like the Chorus, are destined to begin in pity then to move through fear to horrified revulsion. But to see the larger dramatic purpose of the speech we must consider it in relation to the whole presentation of Jason's barbarian wife.

Prior to this speech, Medea is known to us only as the terrifying witch

[8]See above, chapter 2, p. 35.

[9]On the influences of sophistic rhetoric on the speech, see P. Mazon, *Revue de Philologie*, 3me série, XXVII, 119–21.

whom the dramatist has received from the tradition; even if we have no direct knowledge of that tradition, both deeds and character of *that* Medea have been emphatically made known to us in the opening portions of the play. Now, for the first time, we are introduced to another Medea: a woman and a foreigner who can move the Greeks of the Chorus, and perhaps of the audience, with that disciplined compound of passion and reason which the Greeks called rhetoric. Despite her outlandish background, this Medea manages to strike a common chord in people who (as Jason so tactfully reminds her later) regarded their own society as a privilege which a barbarian must enjoy on sufferance. Thus it is that the dramatist begins, at least, to endow his folk-tale witch with something of the stature which a tragic heroine requires: here and in subsequent encounters with Creon, with Jason and with Aegeus, the many aspects of Medea's powerful personality—eloquent and cunning, wise and passionate by turns—are gradually revealed.

In facing Creon, Medea must play the fawning hypocrite to win at least a day's reprieve from exile. With nice irony, the dramatist endows her with the insight and skill to twist what should most tell against her—her reputation as "a wise one" and Creon's protective love for his own daughter—to serve her purpose. The exchange with Creon has other qualities as well. Medea's appeal "for her children's sake" to Creon's paternal instincts keeps the "children theme" before our minds, while the passage in which Medea allays Creon's fears about her special powers allows Euripides a sly, contemporary aside on the slander which clever people must suffer in society.

While something of Medea's power appears even in the scene with Creon, the full force of her personality is necessarily muted by the situation. This briefly *piano* effect is more than redressed by her next and most dramatic encounter. Here Medea's greatest advantage is achieved at the expense of, and in contrast to, the traditionally "epic" figure of Jason, for the hero of the good ship Argo cuts a very sorry figure in her presence. Generosity, absolute loyalties, action and feeling on the grand scale, are the hallmarks of the heroic character. Jason's quibbling rationalization of his actions Medea answers with the single word ἀναίδεια ("O utter shameless brazenness!" 472), as she launches into an impassioned account of all that she has done for him. Consistently, Jason plays the sophist to a heroic Medea: for past favours, he has really Cypris to thank, not her; besides, for a barbarian, life and fame among the Greeks is more than just requital of her service. Previously, horror may have been our main reaction to Medea's deeds for Jason. Now, confronted by Jason's niggling sums in settling the accounts

of love, we are impressed by the wild generosity of passion which made them possible.[10]

The effect of the Aegeus scene on the "public image" of Medea seems often to have been missed by the critics, distracted, no doubt, by arguments concerning its allegedly "episodic" nature.[11] Surely we must be impressed by Aegeus' respect for Medea's advice and the readiness with which he confides in her. Nor does he speak in the tone which one reserves for one's witch-doctor: rather, they converse on terms of mutual regard—witness the warmth of their greetings (663–66) and the exchange of confidence and sympathy with one another's plight. It should be noted, too, that Medea's utterances acquire a sort of brisk professionalism, completely different in tone from other speeches in the play, as soon as Aegeus begins his consultation (see especially vv. 672–86); this is our only actual view in the play of Medea as a specialist, a professional "wise woman." And the readiness with which Aegeus accepts Medea's offer to put an end to his childlessness in return for future sanctuary at Athens shows a confidence in her powers at least equal to that which he feels in Apollo's oracle or in the wise and pious Pittheus of Trozen. In general, this treatment from the King of Athens does as much as anything to establish Medea in our minds as a "personage" not to be disposed of as a mere gypsy baggage from barbarian lands.

The Aegeus episode is, of course, important for other reasons as well: it heralds, as we shall see, a turning-point in Medea's career of vengeance and in the sympathy which the Chorus has hitherto afforded her.

[10]There are some who would argue that Jason is "justified" in his treatment of Medea (see, for example, R. B. Palmer, *CJ*, LIII, 49–55): so he may be, legally and so the dramatist could have made him appear, morally, if he had wished to. But if Euripides wished us to sympathize with Jason in this play—or, indeed, to have any use for him at all—one wonders why he let him cut such a sorry figure in comparison with Medea in this scene, why he made him so insensitive and stupid concerning her throughout the play and, in particular, why he afflicted him with such revolting arguments at vv. 526–44.

[11]The scene might appear to offend against Aristotle's views on the need for a necessary or probable sequence of action in the plot of a tragedy (*Poetics* 1451b 33–35). See Kitto, 196–97, and Page, xxix–xxx, for two very different defences against this rather tedious criticism. My only reservation about Page's discussion of the scene is that I do not think it can be stated categorically that it is here that Medea gets the idea of taking vengeance on Jason by murdering their children. This *may* be true—and certainly Aegeus' plight turns *our* thoughts toward the special need of kings for sons. But Medea may have thought of harming her children, and through them Jason and his house, before this: see vv. 112–14.

In her encounters with Creon and Aegeus, Medea has assumed soft-spoken roles which circumstances have forced upon her. After both these encounters, the essential single-minded Medea reappears in impassioned outbursts alone with the Chorus. ("Do you think," she reassures the Chorus at 368–69, about her attitude to Creon, "that I'd have ever fawned on *that* one, if I'd not been weaving wiles to serve my ends?") There is, however, a terrible difference in the content of these two speeches, and this gulf is marked by the sharp contrast in tone between the earlier and later choral lyrics of the play. In the first of these speeches (364–409), Medea shows, it is true, a sinister delight in pondering the different routes—poison or the knife—by which her enemies may be despatched, but however much her oath "by Hecate, the sharer of my hearth" may chill us, it is still her enemies she speaks of killing.

In the lyric (almost "a song for feminists") which follows this speech, the Chorus is still full of sympathy for Medea. As often in Euripides, the first strophe and antistrophe generalize on the situation (here, "the injustice done to women") while the second strophic pair applies the theme directly to the tragic sufferer:

> Now rivers flow upstream and the established course of justice is reversed—for now 'tis *men* who are unjust and laugh at oaths. . . . (410–14)
>
> Through the ages, man-made songs show women faithless, but if we women had the gift of song, we'd sing a different tune. . . . (421–29, paraphrase)
>
> So with you, Medea. Love brought you across the seas to Greece. But now, abandoned (for no longer do Greeks reverence marriage oaths) you have no refuge, no paternal home, as a royal rival destroys your marriage bed. (431–45, paraphrase)

The chorus which follows the encounter with Jason is not, however, quite as single-minded in its championship of women and Medea. The first strophe, praising moderate love, decries that excessive passion which ruins judgment and virtue; the answering antistrophe, which praises self-control (*sôphrosynê*), decries the adulterous love which causes strife. Thus, in the generalizing part of this lyric, the Chorus glances at the faults of both Medea and Jason in turn. In the second half, however, nothing distracts attention from sympathy for the deserted and homeless foreigner.

The decisive change in the dramatic action and in the attitude of the Chorus occurs after the scene with Aegeus, for it is then that Medea announces the awful means by which she plans to take vengeance on her husband. The excellence of the play's structure is well illustrated by the placing of this crisis and by the kinds of effect which precede and follow it. The gradual revelation of Medea's personality has now

been completed, save for one essential feature which is to give the *agôn* its tragic meaning. The "children theme," so essential to this meaning, has been kept constantly before our minds: in the frightened premonitions of the Nurse and in Medea's own off-stage curses (36–37, 89–95, 112–14); in Medea's exploitation of Creon's paternal instincts, and, ironically enough, in Jason's own claim that *he* is acting for his family's sake: "For what need have *you* of children?" he asks Medea (565; see also 488–91, 557–65 for other recurrences of the "children theme" in this episode). The Aegeus episode itself is, of course, vital both to this theme and to the mechanics of the plot. Aegeus' own royal trouble, childlessness, and the lengths to which he goes to cure it, is our most forcible reminder of a king's essential need of sons. Again, in promising the outcast sanctuary in Athens, Aegeus unwittingly removes the only barrier to Medea's plans and her last reticence in revealing them to the Chorus.

Medea's three addresses to the Chorus (214–66, 364–409, 764–810) follow an ascending scale in keeping with the gradually increasing impetus in plot and theme. In the first and most rhetorical of these, Medea's passion is rigorously subordinated to her immediate purpose of winning the Chorus to her side. The second speech with its curse by Hecate and its pondering of the various means of murder, is both more savage and more sinister, but it tells us little of Medea's actual intentions. Only after the scene with Aegeus does she shout for all to hear the full horror of the vengeance which she plans.

One of the most shocking effects of this speech comes from the lack of horror which Medea displays herself. The plan to send her children to the princess bearing poisoned robes is told with hideous matter-of-factness, and only an occasional word or phrase (ὤμωξα, 791, ἔργον ἀνοσιώτατον, 796) suggests any hesitation at the awful plan of slaying her children for the sake of vengeance on their father. All this suggests that the hints given in the prologue told the truth, that Medea has from the start been determined on this course of action. The main emphasis of the speech is that laughter from one's enemies is not to be endured (see 797, 807 ff.), and the cry, "grievous to my enemies and kindly to my friends" (809) serves as a grim reminder of the accuracy of the Nurse's description (at v. 38) of Medea's spirit.

It is in the ode (824–65) immediately following these dreadful revelations that the Chorus begins to withdraw its allegiance from Medea. The first strophe and antistrophe deal, in highly poetic terms, with the purity and beauty of Athens. Euripides may well have enjoyed pleasing his fellow citizens and himself with such idealized pictures of his city,

but here he does not do so at the expense of the dramatic situation. The point of the description appears in the second strophic pair: "How," asks the Chorus (at 846 ff.), "will such a city ever welcome you, Medea, a child-murderer polluting all you meet?" Now the respect and chivalrous treatment which Medea had won from the King of Athens has been one of the most impressive features of her earlier presentation; the immediate effect of that treatment, however, has been to confirm Medea in her secret and terrible decision. Thus to dwell as the Chorus does on the hideous uncongeniality between Medea the child-murderer and the pure and serene haven which she has chosen in an effective way of expressing the self-destruction which her plans involve. The terms in which Athens is described are admirably suited to this purpose: it is the physical serenity of the place which is stressed, for this is the aspect which is particularly vulnerable to the pollution with which Medea threatens it. Thus, Athens is "the sacred, unplundered land—where golden Harmonia produced the Muses nine"; the land whose children "ever culling illustrious wisdom, stride spendidly under skies of glorious brightness." (825–32) What sharper contrast to the black deeds of Medea could we find than all this bright serenity? Even Cypris, so dread a goddess in Medea's case, "breathes moderate, pleasure-wafting breezes on this land." (836 ff.)

The actual execution of Medea's plot against the Princess needs little comment. It provides, of course, one of the most exciting and theatrical of the playwright's intrigues and suggests, perhaps, at least one reason why the *Medea*, of all Greek drama, has survived most successfully as a play which is still presented on the stage. The gulling of the pompous Jason, unaware as ever of his wife's true nature; the contrast between the children's innocence and the glittering fatality of the gifts they bear; the suspense, heightened by the vivid anticipations of the Chorus (978–88), as to whether the Princess will yield to the "heavenly charm" of these adornments; the gruesome account, in the messenger's speech, of the switch from delight to anguish, then all the gory details of the deaths themselves: all this provides many opportunities (and none is missed) for melodrama and irony of the more obvious sort. Such effects are legitimate enough in themselves, particularly in view of the sort of creature which Medea is to become before the last scene is ended; nevertheless, a tendency to overplay this aspect of the drama, from the second scene with Jason to the murder of the children, has sometimes obscured certain more subtly tragic effects with which it is combined. Thus far the dramatist has presented a Medea who combines the elemental passion of the folk-tale witch with certain qualities of mind,

emotion and personality which let her tower above the several royal and (conventionally) heroic characters who appear beside her on the stage. Now, in her last speech to the Chorus (764–810) this human and potentially tragic Medea vanishes: instead we hear an embodiment of the *alastôr* (the avenging spirit from Hades) coldly announcing child-murder as a necessary part of her revenge. If this is the Medea which we are to watch without relief to the play's end, then both the Chorus and ourselves have been the dupes, both of the "heroine" and of the dramatist, for yielding our sympathy and interest. Fortunately, however, it is the air of cold inflexibility which is false: a cloak of desperate resolution hiding the maternal anguish as well as a device by which the dramatist may, in the end, present that anguish more effectively.

The agony of Medea begins quietly and unexpectedly in the scene with Jason. The "reconciliation speech," the apology to Jason, Medea accomplishes with all her usual aplomb. The first onset of grief suddenly occurs at the entry of the children, summoned to heal the reconciliation, when Jason thus addresses them: "Only grow up! Your father and whatever gods are kindly will assure the rest! Soon may I see you glorying in the strength of youth. . . ." (918–21) In each instance, the effect of Medea's tears is so veiled by her ambiguous explanations, so muted by her resourceful ironies, that some critics have taken the tears themselves as a calculated device for securing Jason's sympathy. But Medea's dissimulation only shows us the measure of her will in masking, with characteristic ingenuity, the anguish which, for a moment, overcomes her. So viewed, this scene anticipates, in miniature, the major struggle to come.

The alternation of the human and the fiendish Medea in the following scenes corresponds to the curious interweaving of the tragic and the macabre elements in the double catastrophe. The chorus (976–1001) which follows the despatch of the children with the gifts heralds both deeds of violence: the first strophe and antistrophe anticipate, with sinister vividness, the temptation of the Princess and its fatal results, while the concluding strophic pair expresses grief for the woes of Jason and Medea, respectively, in the coming murder of the children. The report of what has happened at the palace is divided, most remarkably, into two parts. The Tutor's announcement that the children and their gifts have been accepted is, to his surprise, greeted with sullen gloom by Medea; on the other hand, the Messenger's announcement in the following episode, of the deaths which the gifts have caused is received with hideous joy. In between these two reports comes the most crucial passage (1019–80) in the play: that agonizing self-debate in which

Medea twice revokes and twice confirms her decision to slay her children.[12] After the Messenger Speech, lengthy (μὴ σπέρχου, 1133, Medea has ordered, in one of her most chilling moments) with all the harrowing details, we are brought with the speed of necessity to the final catastrophe for, Medea argues desperately, if their mother does not kill the children now, some hostile hand may do so. (1236–41) But δέδοκται at the beginning of the speech (1236) reminds us of the truth of the matter: the original decision to slay the children was a part, perhaps the major part, of the original plan, before the fatal gifts were sent. Medea utters her final determination with the grim conviction that for her a life of misery must now begin: "Steel your heart for one brief day—then mourn thereafter!" (1247–49)

A final brief and despairing lyric (1251–70) precedes the off-stage murder. It is significant that now the Chorus no longer addresses its pleas to Medea but to the "nature" deities, Earth and Sun (Medea's grandsire) to restrain this unnatural murderess, this embodiment of a vengeance-driven Erinys (1260), which Medea has become. For Medea herself they have only despairing questions and equally dismal prophecies.

Why are the two deeds of violence, in many ways so different, presented in this interwoven fashion? Partly, no doubt, for the practical reason that the poet does not wish to lose dramatic impetus by having to work up two separate crises. But there are, I think, reasons more significant than this.

From her folk-tale chrysalis, Medea has emerged, in this play, as a human heroine with the power to achieve her ends in a highly civilized social context (as Jason reminds her) against all odds. So far, however, save for a few hints in the second scene with Jason, her passion for vengeance has been tempered by no redeeming emotion: though human, she is not sympathetic (the Chorus sympathizes with her situation rather than with her): we cannot achieve any degree of identification with her. Again, so far there has been no essential conflict in this play. True, Medea, abandoned and alone in a hostile state, has had to bend two kings, a Chorus of Corinthian women and an ambitious husband to her will, but this achievement is only the measure of her greatness: in this play, Medea herself is really the only one capable of resisting Medea.

[12] Lesky (152) emphasizes the psychological uniqueness in Greek tragedy of this speech of Medea's, distinguishing it sharply from demonstrations of inflexible will, such as we find in Sophocles' *Ajax*, in that here we see an individual struggling with conflicting powers which seek for the possession of her soul. See also Pohlenz's sensitive account of Medea's *agôn*, 255–56.

Regarded as a tragic figure, the Medea of the earlier scenes corresponds to a hate-ridden Philoctetes as yet undisturbed by the friendship of Neoptolemus, or to a stubbornly resentful Achilles, untried by the loss of Patroclus.

Medea's first full statement of her plans (in the last of her three addresses to the Chorus) has shocked us by its coldness. More recently, in the second scene with Jason, we have seen signs that this frozen determination does not represent the whole Medea. Now, when the child-murder suddenly becomes imminent with the success of the first phase of the plan, Medea's resolution falters for the first time. Thus the great speech at 1019 ff. is essential to the characterization of Medea and to the meaning of the play.

If Medea's sudden flood of emotion, her passionate regrets for lost maternal joys, should strike us as commonplace, let us remember that that is just its purpose. We are meant, simply, to realize that Medea loves her children as deeply as any woman does. So, too, the sudden effects of the children's smiles, and of Medea's lightning switches from "I cannot do it" to "I must," and back again, far from being bathetic melodrama, are essential to the realistic presentation of the struggle in Medea's soul. Without this scene, what Medea eventually becomes would indeed smack of melodrama. That monstrous figure attains tragic significance only when we see it as the result of a conflict—of a victory, as Medea herself expresses it (1079–80)—of her all-consuming passion for vengeance over her better counsels. To grasp the nature of this struggle, we must see the good in Medea before we see her at her worst. The plot requires that something of her lethal savagery should appear before the ultimate horror of the child-murder, but had we already seen her gloating over the details of her palace butchery the sympathetic presentation of her own agony would have been impossible. So it is that the *first* news from the palace, that the children and their gifts have been accepted, is greeted sadly by Medea, and that the horrible sequence to this news is postponed till after the emotional climax at vv. 1019–80. By the time that the second bulletin, showing the first results of Medea's cruelty, arrives from the palace, Medea's self-debate concerning her children, and with it the dramatic need for our sympathy, is over; indeed, the wholehearted gloating over the Messenger's hideous account, contrasting so sharply with her despondent reception of the Tutor and his news, may be meant to illustrate the new Medea, now totally committed to evil, who emerges only after the completion of her interior struggle.

In the concluding passages of the play, after the murder of the children, the monstrous and inhuman aspects of Medea are played up in a variety of ways. The Chorus by its reference to Ino (1282 ff.), intimates that no human mother could bear to live after slaying her children and Jason echoes this thought when he cries, "Can you still look upon the sun and earth, after enduring such an impious deed?" (1327–28) And yet Medea lives and flourishes. More significant, perhaps, is Jason's bitter reference to the unnatural deeds of Medea—deeds from which *he* took the profit—against her own family in Colchis. During the very human action of this play, little has been made of these dark deeds, save as examples of Medea's devotion to the ingrate Jason, but now that "Medea the fiend" has triumphed over the human heroine this reminder of the barbarous, magic-working Medea of the folk tale is all too apposite. Jason complains that the *Alastôr* which should pursue Medea for these deeds is pursuing him instead, but we who have witnessed the moral destruction of Medea in the preceding episode are all too well aware that the *alastôr* has not missed its mark. As for the murderess herself, Medea the avenger, in the final scene with Jason, has quite defeated Medea, the tortured mother: ". . . Call me lioness or Scylla, as you will . . . as long as I have reached your vitals. . . ." (1358–60) "My grief is solaced if *you* cannot mock!" (1362)

The "improbable" and inorganic ending of the play—Medea's departure in the Sun-god's fiery chariot—is a feature of the play which appears to have irritated Aristotle. (*Poetics* 1454b 1–2) However, such macabre touches, such departures from the real world of tragedy, if they serve some purpose, are surely permissible when the tragic meaning has already been expressed. That, in this instance, the supernatural intervention is not meant to intrude on the real action of the play has already been shown by the fact that, earlier, the human and the tragic Medea has been concerned with such practical matters as the arrangement for asylum at Athens and the impossibility of escaping with her children from the vengeful Corinthians. (See, for example, lines 1236–41.) Thus the only point of interest in the *deus-ex-machina* ending lies in the symbolic purpose which this device fulfils. This has been variously expressed by critics in accordance with their different views of Euripides' "Medea theme." Kitto finds in the device the poet's answer to the Chorus's and Jason's idea that "Sun and Earth, the most elemental things in the Universe, have been outraged by these terrible crimes," while Lesky and M. P. Cunningham both regard the chariot scene as marking the fundamental, qualitative change which her awful deed has

effected in Medea.[18] In terms of the present study, it seems fair to suggest that by this final macabre touch of symbolism, the poet is once again expressing the transformation of a human heroine back to the folk-tale fiend of magic powers.

[18]See Kitto 198–99; Lesky, 153; M. P. Cunningham, *CP*, XLIX, 151–60. An important distinction must, however, be made between Lesky's and Cunningham's interpretation of the theme and its *dénouement*: unlike Lesky (see above, note 12), Cunningham tends to dismiss the moral quality of Medea's struggle with herself and seems to regard her as basically the same ("a sort of witch," p. 153) throughout the play. Thus his view of the "transformation symbol," if we may call it that, suggests the sort of idea we get in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, that of latent corruption finally made physically manifest (in Medea's case because of an act of ultimate evil) in a particularly shocking way.

11

THE *Electra*

Some Previous Views

Euripides' *Electra*, which is more unusual if not a better play than is sometimes realized, has suffered from a certain "categorizing" tendency in recent critics. Those interested in the more technical aspects of Euripidean dramaturgy discuss the *Electra* in connection with the *Ion*, *Helena* and *I.T.* Certainly the fact that all these plays contain a "recognition sequence" and an "intrigue," or *mêchanêma*, leading to revenge, escape, or both, by the principals concerned, does supply a good deal of common ground for formal criticism; several scholars, notably Professors Solmsen and Strohm,[1] have commented fruitfully on the various uses of these plot elements in the plays concerned. But this examination of shared technical features has, I feel, tended to exaggerate similarities in tone and dramatic purpose, and sometimes, even, to suggest a basic congeniality which does not in all cases exist. It is in this generalizing tendency that such criticism, however excellent in other respects, tends to come unstuck, for such generalizations seldom fit all the plays concerned with equal felicity. Thus when Solmsen suggests that the techniques and the rationalistic criticisms of these plays tend to replace more meaningful content, and again that the sensitive but passive and "*tychê*-ridden" characters in these plays contrast sharply with the strong and

[1]See F. Solmsen, *Hermes*, LXIX (1934), 390–419; Strohm, *Euripides*, 75–86. An earlier example of a similar approach is to be found in E. Howald, *Untersuchungen zur Technik der Euripideischen Tragödien*, chap. 5, "Intriguenstücke"; here some interesting contrasts with Solmsen's conclusions are to be found, particularly in the use of observations about plot technique in the various "recognition plays" as evidence for their respective dates. See chap. 15, pp. 268 ff., and notes 3, 21, 22. See also, in sharper contrast with Solmsen's views here, Zuntz's convincing arguments against grouping the *Electra* with the other plays of recognition and intrigue (Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides*, 69, n. 1).