MEDEA HYPOKRITES

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> **Hypokrites**: an answerer; I. an interpreter or expounder (of riddles, of oracles, of dreams); II. 1. of an actor, one who plays a part on the stage (Attic); 2. of an orator, one who delivers, recites, declaims; 3. a rhapsodist; 4. a pretender, dissimulator, hypocrite.
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> Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*

I

The locution *Medea hypokrites* is not likely to have circulated in classical Greece. In the fifth century, the term *hypokrites* had come to designate an actor on the Greek stage, typically an actor who took a prominent role in the dialogue.[1] It therefore would have been used of the individual who may have been Euripides' chief tragic actor, a certain Cephisophon, but it was not used of the character whom he played.[2] The origin of the Greek term for actor has

1 I use D. L. Page's 1938 edition of *Medea*, rpt. 1988. Oxford. All translations from the Greek are my own.

See Pickard-Cambridge 1968.126–27. The term first occurs in literature in Aristophanes' *Wasps* 1279 (422 B.C.) and later in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147a23 and *Rhetoric* 1403a23. The Didaskaliai of the victors at the City Dionysia, compiled and put on stone after the middle of the fourth century, uses the term to refer to the victorious protagonist in the actors' contest in tragedy, instituted about 449 B.C. The usage almost certainly preserves the fifth-century records of the eponymous archon as regards historical facts and terminology. See also O'Connor 1908.1–5 and Haigh 1968.226–29.

2 Thomas Magister in the *Vita* of Euripides mentions Cephisophon as Euripides' chief actor, but the statement has been contested. I use the reference for illustrative purposes. See O'Connor 1908.110–11.

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been disputed for some time.[3] Lexicographers and grammarians such as Photius, Hesychius, Pollux, and Apollonius trace the meaning back to the verb *hypokrinesthai*, meaning "to answer," a sense commonly found in Herodotus, though only infrequently in Attic.[4] The actor, according to this view, is a *hypokrites* insofar as he "answers" the chorus. Thespis was the first to do so, to face the choral group in dialogue; he was the first actor, and we know he made use of masks. But another early meaning of *hypokrinesthai,* "to interpret," found in Homer, complicates the picture. Plato glosses this meaning in the *Timaeus* when he observes that, in contrast to the *mantis*, who is out of his wits with inspiration, the *hypokrites* interprets "words and enigmatic signs" (72a–b); by analogy, the actor is the *hypokrites* who interprets the words of the text composed by the dramatist, as the orator is the one who interprets the law or public policy.[5] Though the meaning of *hypokrites* as orator is attested only in late texts, Aristotle uses the term *hypokrisis* in Book Three of the *Rhetoric* for the art of rhetorical delivery, which he regards as an extension of the art of stage-acting. The evolution of the word to mean "dissembler" or "pretender" stems from the actor's assumption of another identity, his playing the part of another. The pejorative sense is already apparent in Plato's debunking of the class of poets and rhapsodes, who are, psychically speaking, a mere jumble of voices, a confusion of personalities without a steady moral center, and hence the arch counterexamples to the ideal personalities Plato seeks to cultivate in his *Republic*.[6]

There seems to be no way of resolving the dispute about which sense of the word is primary in the field of drama, though recent critics, following Pickard-Cambridge's tentative preference, have favored the meaning "interpreter."[7] My argument in this essay does not depend on choosing one meaning over another nor on resolving the split by merging the meanings into a synthesis, though both senses will circulate as possibilities for interpretation in the discussion that follows. Rather, my chief claim is that

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3 For discussions of this dispute, see Pickard-Cambridge 1968.126–35, and, more recently, Svenbro 1990 and Wise 1998.147–50.

4 Photius s.v. *hypokrinesthai*; Hesychius s.v. *hypokrinoito*; Pollux 4.123; Apollonius *Lexicon Homericum* s.v. *hypokrinaito*. For Herodotus, see Powell 1938, which cites thirty instances of the verb meaning "to answer." Also see Haigh 1968.226–27.

5 For a fuller discussion, see Wise 1998.147–52.

6 See especially *Republic* 2–3, 376e–401d; the case against the rhapsode is made in *Ion*.

7 See especially Wise 1998 and Svenbro 1990. Slater 1990 adopts the sense of *hypokrites* as "answerer" without considering the alternative.

Euripides' Medea invites us to entertain the reversibility of the terms "actor" and "character." Though the Greek actor certainly stimulated in his audience "a lively interplay between belief and incredulity, between emotional proximity and distance," there is ample evidence that he identified with his role in such a way as to elicit a significant degree of identification from the audience.[8] This is so despite the obvious and constant reminder of theatricality in the mask, which, in any case, was an item in the Dionysiac repertoire that facilitated the assumption of multiple identities and the loss of personality in ritual performances celebrating the god (Easterling 1997). If the actor, then, is someone whose sympathetic response allows him to enter into a character, then we may legitimately regard Medea as a character who enters into the actor—or rather into "actorliness" more generically. To put it another way, if the personality of the actor disappears in the role he plays, then Medea is the character as actor par excellence, the character who loses her identity in the variety of roles she plays.

The approach to Medea advanced in this essay draws on various readings that emphasize the pervasiveness of deception in the play and in Medea's actions; and it takes on the critical problem posed by the multiplicity of identities she assumes.[9] By so doing, it counters interpretations that try to argue for a coherent dramatic personality in Medea on the assumption that only if unity in difference can be maintained in Aristotelian fashion is she a successful tragic figure. Such interpretations include those that treat Medea as Euripides' version of the Sophoclean hero driven by a consistent ethical code of revenge that is the legacy of the Homeric Achilles.[10] But they also include gender-based readings whose premise about Greek tragedy is that it is "a species of recurrent masculine initiations, for adults as well as the

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8 Rehm 1992.45–51; see also Walton 1980.45–56, Taplin 1978.159–78, and Stanford 1983 passim. The rhapsode, with whom the actor is so closely associated in the Greek tradition that both share the name *hypokrites*, is treated by Plato in *Ion* as possessed by his roles. Though there may be polemical exaggeration in the characterization, it is unlikely that Plato is advancing an idea that fundamentally misrepresents rhapsodic performance. Rehm rightly points to a passage in Cicero's *de Oratore* (2.46) for a later Roman discussion of actorly sympathetic response that may very well reflect the Greek experience.

9 See Knox 1979, McDermott 1989, Williamson 1990, and Lawrence 1997.

10 Knox 1964 presented this heroic profile, but, in his application of it to *Medea*, he rightly qualifies his conclusions in view of the multiple "deformations" apparent in Euripides' handling of the conventions. A more straightforward and problematic application of the heroic model to *Medea* is Bongie 1977. Burnett 1973 demonstrates how profoundly Euripides transforms the received form of the revenge play, but the Medea who emerges from her reading is very much an integrated, coherent character.

young . . . designed as an education for its male citizens in the democratic city."[11] The new didacticism fostered by such readings creates for the critic of Greek tragedy a number of problems too complicated to engage here, but, in the case of Medea, we should note that it necessitates a view of the dramatic subject as the stimulus for a kind of learning in the audience, a civic consolidation of values, that is impossible to extract from Euripides' text. In fact, another group of recent interpretations, more formalistic, generic, and hermeneutic in their aims, moves away from the implications of current gender-based theories by emphasizing the thoroughgoing ambiguity or sense of disorder generated by Euripides' play. While sympathetic with this orientation, I also seek to ground insight into Euripidean iconoclasm in contexts different from those of recent elucidators, and I qualify the claim about Euripidean nihilism with which they sometimes conclude.[12]

Euripides, I argue, is not the most dramatic of the three extant playwrights but the most dramatistic: the one who most self-consciously explores the actorly premise that underlies the construction of character, the one who most fully exhibits the mask as a sign of potentially endless transmutation at the level of character. That is why we would profit by understanding *hypokrisis* in the *Medea* not so much as stage-acting of the performative kind, the sort of thing Aristotle connects with spectacle and treats as secondary to *ethos*, but as an activity that dominates *ethos* and informs it from the inside out. The result is, to adopt the formulation of Ann Michelini, "a stance of aesthetic provocation," but a provocation, I hope to demonstrate, that is more extreme and deeply situated than has heretofore been acknowledged.[13] In one sense, Euripides returns the audience to a more archaic awareness of the actor behind the mask, the sort of awareness we might associate with earlier stages of the drama, and particularly with Aeschylus, when the actor was a less "naturalized" convention of the tragic

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11 The quotation is from Zeitlin 1985.66, but it represents an elaboration of the views of Jean-Pierre Vernant. It is also espoused by Zeitlin's co-editor Winkler in *Nothing To Do With Dionysos?*, as well as by a number of other critics whose work is included in that volume. A recent critic who uses this approach in a reading of Euripides is Rabinowitz (1993.10–12, 125–54).

12 See especially McDermott 1989.107–18, Lawrence 1997, and Foley 1989.

13 Criticism of Euripides has increasingly taken cognizance in different ways of what I call the "dramatistic" orientation in his plays, the tendency toward a high level of theatrical self-consciousness. An important contribution is Michelini 1987, from whom the quoted phrase is drawn (90), and who includes a useful review of the scholarship. For another treatment, see Eisner 1979.

contests. In another sense, the return to such awareness is no return at all but an experiment in wrenching the Sophoclean achievement in the area of character and dialogue off its hinges. For instead of developing tragedy as an organic interconnection between motive, action, and suffering—an interconnection rendered poignant by the effects of dramatic irony—Euripides exploits the insight that the dramatic agent is first and above all an actor with a variety of histrionic postures at his disposal, a theatrical being intent upon fulfilling the freedom that comes from playing roles. This is the kind of innovation we might ordinarily think of in relation to twentieth-century experimental theater, perhaps with the innovations of Brecht, or even with the metadrama of the intensely stage-conscious Shakespeare. But Euripides was engaging in his own exploration of the dramatistic premise long before our own century and long before the Renaissance. The fascination *Medea* has exerted on audiences since its first production in 431 B.C., which, not surprisingly, troubled the judges who awarded it third place, has much to do with Euripides' creation of his heroine as a *hypokrites*: an actor, answerer, interpreter of the tradition, rhetorical virtuoso, and consummate dissimulator. Though the term *hypokrites* had a specific meaning in the world of classical Athens, the complex of actions and behaviors with which it was linked (or with which it was becoming linked) significantly shaped Euripides' revisions of the tragic model in *Medea*.

II

Beginning the play as an absent presence, a distraught, frantic, female voice sounding in the theater from offstage, Medea ends the play as a gloating murderer who stands with impunity in a dragon-drawn chariot supplied by Helios that occupies the place of the *deus ex machina*. The transition between these two points has not been brought about by a sequence of necessary or probable actions. Euripides' spectacular manipulation of the final scene so as to divinize the child-killer while her husband, who never manages to rise to the tragic occasion, flails around on the *skene* beneath her, is a dramatic non sequitur with terrific shock value, and its effect is to make the audience reel. We are not in a world of entelechy where ends are contained in origins. Even if we mitigate the dissonance by explaining the scene as concluding prior arrangements with Aegeus or prior debates with Jason; even if we acknowledge that the play ends by reminding us of the divinity of a figure the audience would have known as a goddess; even if we observe that Medea's apotheosis is merely figurative, since she is, after

all, on her way to Athens, we are still confronted with an epilogue that jolts us, formally and thematically.[14] Euripides would not appreciate the critical impulse to organicism that would make of the epilogue a tail that belongs to his otherwise shapely creation, this play. He went about the *Medea* with a different set of aesthetic aspirations.

Driven by honor and an obsessive passion for vengeance, Medea plays life as a zero-sum game: to vindicate her offended sense of nobility, she must make her violator lose absolutely. Sophocles uses this model in such tragedies as *Ajax* and *Antigone*. But Euripides goes further when he invests a female character with this temper.[15] By making his heroine's vengeance a mother's murder of her own children, Euripides exceeds one of the benchmarks of horror in tragedy: Clytemnestra's murder of her war-victor husband, a deed that at least had as one of its motives the hurt she suffered when that husband murdered their daughter, Iphigenia. Shabby as his actions are in the play, Jason's setting aside of Medea is, after all, a legal and moral alternative open to Greek males, and his behavior on this score hardly warrants an extreme response (see McDermott 1989.43–45). Thus Medea's motives do not even approach Clytemnestra's admittedly inadequate but stronger incentive for cutting down Agamemnon.

Medea's choice of infanticide, of course, makes her revenge about as extreme as one can imagine. If the *teknophonos* is Euripides' innovation—and Emily McDermott has cogently reaffirmed the view of Denys Page and others that it is—then the playwright has gone to some lengths to create a rift in Medea's dramatic identity: he makes her express her masculine heroic honor through a murder that constitutes a brutal violation of the mother-child bond central to the definition of conventionally female honor.[16] Moreover, the dramatic representation of the murder as a displacement of an earlier plan of revenge organized with good, old-fashioned isomorphism around the deaths of those who had wronged her, namely, Jason, Creon, and Creusa, is a strategy that serves to heighten the horror and deviance of the

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14 The ending of the *Medea* has generated endless controversy. For a recent essay that surveys some key critical views, see Lawrence 1997.53–55. Readings of the play cited in previous notes all contain discussions of the epilogue.

15 See Knox 1979. Michelini 1987 fully explores the legacy of Sophocles in her chapter entitled "Euripides and His Tradition," 52–94.

16 McDermott 1989.9–24; Page 1938.xxiv advanced this view, which was thereafter adopted by critics such as Conacher 1967.184ff. and Knox 1979. For a contrary position that argues for Euripides' borrowing of the infanticide motif from Neophron, see Michelini 1989.

final killings. Medea's "properties," shall we say, are already, at the general level we are discussing, too dissonant to be essentialized into a "character." The heroic model inherited from Sophocles is deliberately shot through with contradictory forces that challenge its coherence in the play, and the great monologue of self-doubt showcases the anomalies.[17]

The clash of two different moral registers in the "heroic" action central to the tragedy should not be downplayed or explained away. This clash may be conceptualized as the thematizing of doubleness in the tragic mask, the projection of a dramaturgical doubleness pertinent to the actor onto the dramatic level of the tragic character. In fact, the Euripidean bifurcation of the Sophoclean heroic model is the large-scale version of a doubleness that proliferates in scene after scene. Medea is not so much a character who experiences changes of mood or emotion that are explainable in terms of a consistent *ethos* as she is a figure who repeatedly signals shifts in the ethical ground from which emotion stems. Medea "plays at" identifying with a succession of value-oriented postures and with a succession of onstage individuals whom she persuades by feigning a common set of interests. The rhetorically provisional nature of this posturing is repeatedly disclosed in the play.

When Medea addresses the chorus of Corinthian women in the first episode, her composure and control are something of a surprise after the hysteria of the opening cries, but the key point is that her *ethos* becomes a problem as soon as she begins to speak onstage. For the case she proceeds to make, on the basis of an experience she ostensibly shares with the chorus as women, is, in every sense, staged. Medea has not been compelled to buy a husband and take a master of her body, as she says women must do. If her escape from a bad marriage is difficult for her now—and escape, she claims, is always difficult for women—she has brought about the hardship herself, since she could have said no to the husband she married, who was not, after all, her father's choice. This point leads to another: the oaths of betrothal to which Medea appeals in vilifying Jason's breach of honor would not normally have been part of a marriage ceremony, and, to the degree that oaths would have figured in a marriage pledge at all, they would have been

17 A number of critics acknowledge the rift. Some, like Burnett 1973, end up retrieving another kind of unity from the play. Others such as Michelini 1989, Foley 1989, McDermott 1989, and Laurence 1997, see a final, unresolved challenge to understanding. I build on their assessments and draw new conclusions from it.

between the husband and the wife's father or guardian. Medea herself, however, was her own marriage-broker in an act of self-betrothal that violated social rituals by usurping the role of the male citizen-guardian responsible for marriage arrangements. As others have noted, Medea, in the act of appearing to be quintessentially female in her demeanor before the chorus, reveals her involvement in acts of exchange and negotiation typically reserved for male citizens in the public sphere (see Williamson 1990). P. E. Easterling, who argues that "Jason and Medea are to be regarded as permanently pledged, so that when Jason abandons Medea he is breaking faith (and even he does not deny it)," supports her position by noting that Euripides, like other dramatists, "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" (1977.180–81). Yet the play taps into both frames of reference, as do virtually all classical tragedies, and the contemporary values of Greek culture, never entirely suspended, help heighten our awareness that Medea constructs her case in a particular way, that she is aware of the arguments that feature her plight from its most pitiable angle. Her rhetorical self-consciousness becomes more apparent as the speech goes on.

When Medea discredits the notion that women have a peaceful time at home by pronouncing, famously, that she would rather stand three times in battle than bear a single child, we recall the breach of the peace, to put it mildly, she brought upon herself by chopping Pelias to bits and making him stew in his own juices. As for the fact that she has no mother or brother or any other relation with whom she can take refuge in her present misfortune, how much sympathy can we have for a woman who has expediently dismembered her brother in order to escape the hot pursuit from Colchis of her father Aeetes? Though the event is muted in the play, Medea's violent past as a whole is not. The chorus, as women, can feel compassion for the fate Medea bemoans because they are blind to key pieces of information possessed by the audience. But we are able to see her play-acting for what it is. If, at this early stage of the dramatic action, we do not press hard upon its implications, that is because the play has already set in motion sufficient sympathy for her suffering to allow us to override what is potentially a fissure in the construction of pity. We are prepared and, more importantly, an Athenian audience, habituated by the time of Euripides' play to Sophoclean norms of tragedy, would have been prepared to assimilate Medea's situation to familiar heroic conventions (Michelini 1987.52–69). In the case of a woman who was the protagonist, that could involve a certain measure of ungrudging identification with her pain and a certain measure of

ill will toward her male antagonist. *Antigone*, first performed ten years before *Medea* in 441 B.C., would be an important touchstone in such a scenario; it was the play of Sophocles apparently most respected and beloved in the ancient world, the one said to have motivated his election to *strategos* (Lefkowitz 1981.86). To be sure, the emotional situation in Euripides' play is not presented in sharply oppositional terms at the beginning—fear of Medea's violence interacts with pity—but the lines of orientation are clear. Still, if we overlook Medea's rehearsed rhetoric in even a provisional act of sympathy, the play soon brings us up short.

Medea's first display of actorly aplomb is followed by others. With Creon, who appears immediately after the set speech, Medea effectively puts on a helplessness that is belied in the very process of being staged. Once again, she uses her slighted status as a strategy to secure a key agreement from the king, and, in doing so, she plays the role of the male citizen while seeming to be a female victim. To the charge that she is clever and accomplished in many forms of evil, she responds with a familiar Greek commonplace: "A sensible person ought never educate his children to be exceedingly clever; for apart from the lack of profit they live with, they earn the envy of their fellows" (294–97). The social advantage of proper subordination implicit in this remark is reinforced by the overt subordination Medea enacts before Creon as a suppliant begging for mercy with the words: "Permit me to live in this land; for although I have been wronged, I will be silent, submitting to those stronger" (313–15).[18] In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle calls such forms of speech enthymemic: they are propositions adducing a reason or cause that disclose *ethos*, the moral character of the speaker, and they succeed with an audience to the extent that the *ethos* evoked is one that has social acceptance (see *Rhetoric* 2.22). But in this scene, as elsewhere, Medea's *ethos*, which is indeed aimed at social acceptance, is the improvisational creation of an actor who understands the profit in feigning a morality she, in fact, deplores—a point that emerges clearly in her mockery of Creon after he has left the stage as one who has reached the height of folly in giving her one day to make arrangements for her children's safety.

What follows is the speech in which she sets forth her first plan of revenge, a speech that shows her to be the opposite of the meek and self-subordinating type of the Creon scene. Here she consolidates several suggestions left floating from the beginning of the play when the Nurse expresses

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18 See Gould 1973 and Williamson 1990.

fear of her mistress as *deina* and claims that whoever does her wrong will not come off well. In laying out her initial plot, Medea fulfills the Nurse's warnings: she is made to resemble the male heroes of Greek myth in defying the mockery of her enemies and seeking retribution for the slight she has suffered. The apparent about-face from her meeting with Creon, however, does not present us with the real Medea. For one thing, the agent we have witnessed in two successive scenes is a consummate deceiver, and deception is incompatible with the heroic profile Euripides invokes in shaping her actions as avenger.[19] Among other things, deception is associated with archetypal female guile. The Achillean prototype that tolerates no bluff provides the point of reference, as does one of his female avatars, Antigone, who signals acquiescence to a masculine standard of honor by appearing only too happy to be caught red-handed in an act forbidden by political edict. The dissonance created by Medea's pervasive use of deception is deliberate. Its effect is complex, but I would emphasize two important consequences that bear on the present argument: it intensifies the collision of male-female stereotypes in one and the same dramatic figure, and it foregrounds the status of the Sophoclean heroic posture as the actorly assumption of a persona that may be taken up and set aside at will.

As if to drive the colliding elements to the very edge, Euripides makes Medea tail off her heroic remarks with a commonplace that effectively exposes his strategies: "I am a woman," she says, "most helpless in good and noble deeds, and a most clever deviser of all forms of wrong" (408–09). Now the nobility of the retributive act is traditionally crucial to the Achillean or Sophoclean hero's self-understanding, even if that act is feared, qualified, or criticized by the chorus and other characters. Here, that nobility is undermined by Medea's own reference to gender and to the age-old association of women with cleverness and evil-doing. She makes the same "admission" in her next confrontation with Jason when she says, "We women are what we are, I hate to say—bad" (889–90). The latter example is easy enough to explain as yet more manipulative double-talk, but the former lines are uttered by Medea in the presence of friends, the Corinthian women whom she has enlisted on her side, and their effect is less practical than metadramatic. They disrupt the integrity of the heroic persona she has just tapped into and indirectly comment upon its status as a convention that may

19 The incompatibility is noted by Knox 1979.309 and discussed by numerous critics including Williamson 1990 and McDermott 1989.

be used and abused. If the lines have troubled critics, that is because they apparently contradict her "character." But "character," implying as it does a complex coherence of traits that explain thought and action, seems more a fiction whose enabling conditions Euripides unsettles than a dramatic resource exploited in the interests of a Sophoclean-style naturalism with its fine-tuned treatment of individual sufferers in the throes of self-discovery.

The two scenes with Jason feature more of the outraged heroic sensibility that will not suffer slight. And yet, as others have demonstrated, Medea's repeated appeals to the sacrality of relationships in the *oikos* have received no grounding in the play.[20] Jason's betrayal of these bonds, therefore, may not be set off oppositionally against her cultivation of them primarily for the reasons already referred to: she has betrayed her father and murdered her brother. She is no Antigone defined by love of *philoi*, no Neoptolemus who discovers the meaning of *philia* in his own and Odysseus's breach of its claims. Rather, her situation is the one she herself declares in the first agon: already hated by her loved ones at home, she has made enemies of those she ought not have treated wrongly (506–08). Medea's appeals, then, to the traditional values of family and oaths are not so much hollow assertions as rhetorically expedient commonplaces she can brandish in a war of words. Their status as weapons at hand for sparring is chillingly demonstrated by the role her children will assume in the second plan of revenge: Medea imagines them as the most effective tools for getting back at Jason. Her *philoi*, once again, will be instrumentalized in a drama of disturbingly self-referential and self-profiting ends. Sleazy as Jason is in his sophistic calculation of profit and advantage, Medea is no stranger to the game he plays; the Asiatic princess is as capable as her Greek husband of manipulating fifth-century Athenian popular opinion to demonstrate the moral rightness of self-interested exchange, and, ultimately, of the exchange entailed by revenge. Euripides not only avoids linking such slippery moral conduct with oriental barbarism, he presents Medea as outdoing the Greeks at what they do best. In Knox's words, "there is no suggestion in the play that anyone regards Medea as a barbarian, except of course, in the end, Jason."[21] The result is that the audience is prevented from comfortably

20 See especially Williamson 1990 and McDermott 1989.81–106.

21 Knox 1979.310. He made the case against Page, who claimed the audience could effectively distance themselves from a child-killer by regarding her as a barbarian monstrosity. Also see Easterling 1977.180.

compartmentalizing the dubious behavior of the protagonist as the deviance of a foreigner. Her rhetorical skill, her *hypokrisis*, dazzles the audience at the same time as it turns Jason into a tawdry, wrung-out version of her virtuoso act. Aegeus, who follows Jason onstage after this first debate, does not end up looking half so bad, and yet we should observe that Medea treats him, an ostensible *philos* to whom she turns for asylum, with no less cunning and self-interest than she does her *echthros*-husband.

When Aegeus leaves the stage and Medea declares, "I will now be victorious over my enemies" (765–66), she continues to adopt heroic language at the same time that she dissociates it from an expected set of actions. Because this dynamic has been in motion from the beginning of the play, her second plan of revenge, in which she targets her children rather than her enemies, should not be seen as the sudden *peripeteia* some critics have made of it; it should not be considered the hinge on which our sympathies violently shift from pity to horror.[22] That it is often viewed this way is evidence, again, of the extent to which the Sophoclean model has influenced readings of the play by mitigating its early, calculated shocks; Euripides was, no doubt, counting on this influence to shape his own dramatic strategies. The plan, when hatched, is spine-tingling not because Medea assaults heroic standards with her plan after having consistently invoked them to elicit our sympathy, and not because this is the first "aesthetic provocation" in the play. What invests Medea's infanticide with iconoclastic force is the extremity of the murder she deliberately and knowingly chooses as measured against the existing mythological antecedents that present her killing as an unwitting error in an escape scheme gone wrong or assign blame to the Corinthians who act in retaliation against Medea's murder of their king and his daughter. Euripides' improvisational treatment of the myth may easily be seen in terms of stage action as the improvisation of his principal, the willful seizing by the character-as-actor upon an innovation that breaks with tradition. By laying bare the creative power of the dramatist (and his actor) to reinvent the received tradition, Medea's infanticide is arguably the quintessential dramatistic element of the play, the one that most clearly exposes the agent as a self-conscious commentator on the very form she inhabits. McDermott's interpretation of the Nurse's lines about Medea, "She hates the children and takes no joy in seeing them. / I fear she may plan something

22 Page views the plan of child-killing as a turning point; more recently, see Rabinowitz 1993.125–54.

new [*neon*]" (36–37), underscores the metadrama, for she contends that the Nurse's remark "points with disguised wit to the innovation into received myth to be introduced into the play when Medea premeditatedly kills children who up till then had died either by accident or at the hands of others" (McDermott 1989.18).

However we regard this suggestion, McDermott's way of interpreting it is in line with the conclusions of several other critics who explore Euripides' penchant for witticisms that self-consciously and ironically point to the dramatist's play with conventions—as when, in the *Electra*, the title character, anticipating news of Orestes' attack on Aegisthus, concludes as she waits that Orestes must have failed, "For where are the messengers?" (759).[23] In claiming that Euripides has inverted the character-actor configuration in such a way as to transform Medea into a *hypokrites*, I am arguing for more than a local touch of metadramatic color. In no other extant tragedy are we made as aware as we are in the *Medea* of the actorly premise that underlies the conception of the chief agent, and in no other tragedy is this premise played out more brilliantly and sensationally. We may be accustomed to such techniques in Aristophanic comedy, and not only in the parabasis, the conventionalized address to the audience in which dramatic illusion is effectively dropped. But it is not until the Renaissance, and until Shakespeare's plays, in particular, that we find tragic figures conceived as full-blown characters-become-actors. In *Richard II* and *Hamlet*, two salient examples, theatrical metaphors, moving well beyond figures of speech, insinuate themselves into the very texture of the hero's self-conception and way of being, and thus become a problem with which the audience must reckon. For play-acting is so intimately connected with deception, self-delusion, and insincerity that it inevitably involves the audience in fundamental difficulties of interpretation. Hamlet's madness, an endless subject of controversy, is a case in point; Richard's "passion," which involves suffering, pretense, and histrionic posing in a combination guaranteed to bewilder, is another.

Medea's "hypocrisy," I contend, is an early ancestor of such Shakespearean stage-consciousness, even if Shakespeare did not borrow from Euripides in developing his metadramatic techniques. Constituted as she is

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23 See Winnington-Ingram 1969, from which the incident in *Electra* is drawn, Arnott 1973, and Nisetich 1986. Michelini 1987.95–128 goes further than most critics in seeing Euripides' self-disclosing theatrical strategies as sustained efforts that overarch specific comments and moments; also McDermott 1989.17–20, 107–18.

by a forcing together of two divergent premises about heroic action and by an ease of role-playing that allows her to move between both premises while experimenting with several others as well, Medea is entirely at home onstage. The stage is her element. This argument does not stand or fall on the question of what we think about Euripides' modification of the myth. His likely invention of Medea's *teknophonos* lends power to the dramatistic thesis and illustrates the consequences it may have for the artist's manipulation of his materials. But the play contains much additional evidence that carries the thesis, including the show-stopping monologue in which Medea presents herself as strung out between the claims of heroic masculine honor and her traditional role as maternal nurturer. The pathos of the scene is intense, and Euripides' choice of the monologue form is an invitation to the audience to take the struggle as genuine, as an expression of a character torn between equally valid but mutually exclusive ethical claims.[24]

In fact, to accept Medea as the actor I have argued she is in no way commits us to denying her power to elicit emotion from the audience. All good actors invite us to lose ourselves in their performance, if only temporarily—as Hamlet loses himself when, for a moment, while he listens to the Player's rendition of Pyrrhus's murder of Priam, he imagines he is that very Pyrrhus. Though Hamlet is emphatically not Pyrrhus (even if a part of him wants to be), though he has asked the Player for just a moment's enjoyment of "as if," well aware that it is an actor who pulls him into the fiction of unencumbered revenge, though the provisional, actorly premise of the Player's speech pervades the performance, and, not least of all, because it is one of the tragedy's several plays-within-a-play, Hamlet is entirely absorbed by the spectacle, even more than he is absorbed by his own reality. Emotional identification may operate even when a high degree of theatrical self-consciousness is imposed upon the spectator. And that, I would submit, is something like the situation of an audience beholding the performance of Medea *hypokrites* as she hardens herself to carry through the act of vengeance. So thoroughly does she engage us in the emotional potential of such a scene that we believe. We believe in the credibility of the revenge to be exacted; we believe in its claim upon the heroine's action, which approaches the monstrous; we believe in the contrary pull of maternal sympathy. We believe, and we disbelieve.

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24 See Foley 1989 for a full treatment of the monologue and of the interpretive problems surrounding the nature of the conflict. Easterling 1977.178 poses the question of how seriously we should take the speech.

We disbelieve because the monologue, while plunging us into the suffering encompassed by a violent inner conflict, also continues to force upon us the outrageousness of its enabling hypothesis. It is in Medea's speech of self-doubt that Euripides drives to the edge the consequences of an Achillean-minded heroine steeling herself to the murder of her own children as the necessary vindication of her slighted honor. Yes, necessary vindication. For each time she falters and feels the love of a mother for her children, Medea tenses into the heroic "must" that drives her to see between two alternatives only one finally conscionable course of action, and that one is attended by all the exacting force of an inexorable Fury. The interactions of belief and disbelief, of emotional engagement and emotional skepticism, of the mask as a sign of coalescence and difference between actor and role are at the center of how we experience this scene—and of the controversy over the seriousness of Euripides' handling of it. But interpretive approaches that would have us choose one alternative over the other neutralize the potency of the interplay between the dramatic and the dramatistic that is at the heart of the tragedy's disruptiveness.

That Euripides is intent upon exploiting the dramatistic possibilities of this scene is apparent in the way he turns it into a strategic hook from which we are abruptly dropped as the messenger speech commences and streaks its gruesome way from burning heads, to seething brains, to shrieking bodies on fire and melting—all the results of poisonous gifts sent by the woman with whom we have just empathized to the princess who receives them with a naïve sense of her adversary's good will. It is a short step from here to Medea's enactment of the planned infanticide, an act the chorus imagines only someone with a heart of stone could carry through, and another step to the horrifying deification in the end of a very hard-boiled customer who celebrates the devastation she has wreaked by mocking the now eviscerated enemy-husband she once feared would mock her.

III

In his essay, "Euripides: The Monument and the Sacrifice," Pietro Pucci develops an argument about the paradoxical gain and loss attendant upon the pity and fear generated by Euripidean tragedy.[25] The "monuments" linked with violence in Euripides' plays, that is, both the sacrificial ritual

25 Pucci 1977. The essay treats a complex of problems more fully explored in Pucci 1980.

that responds to death as well as the drama that is a theatrical commemoration of it, are forms "through which men achieve a remedy, placate their consciousness, establish order in chaos, compensate for losses and ruins." Central to the function of the dramatic monument is its status as representation, its rhetorical, mimetical, and fictional enactment not only of the "originary" death but of the sacrifice that remediates it. Thus the *Medea* "records and dramatizes the event that is annually commemorated by the ritual at the temple of Hera in Corinth" and, by so doing, should therapeutically aid in healing the audience's experience of the pity and fear the play has elicited by the killings. But there is a problem: Medea defines the murder of her children as itself a sacrifice in which her own suffering and wretchedness are implicated (1053–55). Thus ritual loses its capacity to reshape the experience of loss into gain: the sacrifices in Corinth do not commemorate anything other than a sacrifice. Pucci concludes that the "original" event is already a script, a stage script and a ritual script. Medea "fails to receive the therapeutic and ritual advantage from her action," and by implication, the audience fails to do so as well. What the play confronts us with instead is the scenario of endless repetition and regress.

This reading would gain considerable strength if the sacrifice Medea imagines she offers is actually her own theatrical reworking of the received myth—if the infanticide, that is, is scripted in the radical sense of being invented by Euripides. But I introduce Pucci's argument in order to make two larger points. First, the dramatistic reading I have offered underscores the degree to which the problems of the *Medea* are implicated in its extended theatrical self-consciousness, its decision to treat not only disparate events, such as the sacrifice, as scripted but to transform the protagonist herself into a script that discloses itself as such or, to put it another way, to transform her into a self-scriptor, an actor who effectively identifies with the playwright as inventor, and, by so doing, exposes the strategies of dramatic art and ritual recuperation. Such heightened theatricality has two paradoxically related sides. Though it explains why Euripides is "the most tragic of the tragedians" in Aristotle's terms, the most adept at eliciting the emotions of pity and fear by virtue of playing a scene for every last ounce of pathos it is worth, it also interferes with an orderly, cathartic disposition of emotion. The intrusion of dramatistic motives into the space of high drama is, in one sense, what accounts for the tug-and-jerk feel of Euripidean tragedy, its lack of resolution, its double-sightedness, its utterly distinct and un-Aeschylean stage-consciousness.

There is a second issue raised by the problem of sacrifice in the

Medea. Neither Pucci nor others who comment on this element in the play relate it to scapegoating, but there is good reason to do so.[26] Euripides sets up an initial configuration in which Medea assumes the status of a scapegoat for the Corinthians, or at least for the Corinthians we may associate with Creon, their king. The scene in which she begs him for the mercy of one more day in his city makes this apparent. Creon orders her to leave his land; he refuses to return home until he has cast her outside the bounds of his city; he fears her—there is trouble afoot in which he suspects she will meddle; her threat is increased because she is "a clever woman, skilled in many evil arts" (285); the safety of his family and his country depends upon driving her out. Though relatively little is made in the play of Medea's foreign origins and her involvement with magic, these muted traits mingle with others in creating an unmistakable profile: accepted in Corinth enough to command respect as a Greek among Greeks, she is nonetheless different, other, marginal enough to be singled out. The abusive terms marshaled against her by Creon and Jason, the fear of her generated in part by the Nurse and Paedagogus, the linking of trouble in Corinth to her presence—all clarify the intended expulsion as a scapegoating.

But as Euripides brings Medea into greater control of the situation, he also exposes the scapegoating as such. For the dyslogistic vocabulary of the scapegoaters is shown to be a rhetorical topos wrested from their grasp by the potential victim of their violence; and wrested in such a way that she ends up heaping upon them the *katharma*, or dirt, they seek to expel by getting rid of her. Medea aborts the scapegoating ritual by becoming the scapegoater herself and then revealing the stratagem by assuming a position *dea ex machina*, above it all, from which she can tease Jason into vilifying her—which indeed he does, but to no effect. By this point, of course, the entire premise of scapegoating, which is based on the unanimity of communal blame directed against a lone outcast, has been stunningly derailed by Medea's assumption of an entirely private and individual motive for the tipping of the scales. Not only has the play reversed the ordinary ritual mechanism, it has invested the power of the group in a single agent who effectively "banishes" the group by making it grovel in the form of the synecdochic Jason on the ground below her as she stands privileged,

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26 On sacrifice in tragedy, see especially Foley 1985.17–64 and Burkert 1966. On the practice of scapegoating, see Burkert 1979.59–72, Bremmer 1983, and Girard 1977. I have also drawn on Burke 1969.183–333.

"cleansed," "purified," in the space of the *machina* where no one who counts can dispel the image of godlike superiority. Or, to explain the dragon-chariot in another way, it becomes the means for the scapegoat turned scapegoater to escape the fate that threatened her; banishment has been transformed into asylum; death has been diverted by the saving figure of Aegeus in Athens into whose protection she quite literally flies. In either case, dramatistic motives have displaced dramatic ones.

The devices of scapegoating are foregrounded, we might observe, from another angle in the erotic wrangling of the final scene, in which Medea's comeuppance calls attention to the usually disguised fact that the scapegoat as the mystified other may also be the object of desire—as Medea was when she and Jason, the easterner and westerner, the Greek male adventurer and the Asiatic female princess, eloped from Colchis. The exotic beloved is never far away from being the sacrificial kill in Euripides' play; what makes her erotically attractive happens, not coincidentally, to be the very balance of strangeness-within-similarity that also makes her a perfect surrogate victim.

This analysis suggests that the dramatism of the play, its formation of character as "actorly," moves at one level toward a secularizing demystification. Ritual is not only exposed as a rhetorically shaped accommodation but as an action whose capacity to mediate between the divine and the human is gutted by an actor whose "character" is a self-disclosing series of improvisations that bridge the scale from victim to victimizer. Transcendence is parodied, and divinity is revealed as a spectacular form of *hypokrisis*, in which Medea effectively seizes hold of a vacancy that the play never fills via theodicy, prophecy, or allusions to an ultimate principle of justice in the cosmos. The motif of hierarchy remains strong in the play, for we end with a visibly vertical configuration of the axis of meaning, with Medea on top. But the mystery of hierarchy, so powerful an element in Sophoclean tragedy, where it typically is presented as divine reticence in the face of human suffering, is debunked by Euripides. Only a misplaced critical nostalgia gets it back again by taking Medea seriously as the goddess she has incipiently always been.

Deception is a common element in Greek tragedy, and it admits of a full range of treatment from the cold-blooded, unregretful form we find in Aeschylus's Clytemnestra to the self-conflicted, repentant form we find in Sophocles' Neoptolemus. But Euripides' Medea presents us with a case that is unlike anything else in Greek tragedy—with the exception, perhaps, of Dionysos in the *Bacchae*. For, in the *Medea*, deception is written so deeply

into the character that she ceases to be a character at all; the figure onstage is more a congeries, a pastiche, a self-fashioning succession of impressive theatrical identities with the power to elicit and banish a range of emotions, including but not exclusively the exemplary tragic ones of pity and fear. If there is magic in the play, it is not the magic of a dramatic persona who is the witch from Colchis but of a histrionic conjurer adept in the art of the stage, which is itself an art of illusion.

We might in closing recall Gorgias's famous dictum about tragedy, that it produces "a deception in which the deceiver is more justly esteemed than the nondeceiver and the deceived is wiser than the undeceived" (B24). According to this view, the deceiver-playwright and the deceived-audience collaborate in the creation of a state of mind Gorgias calls *apate*, within which emotional identification takes shape. In other words, the artistry of the playwright in tandem with the capacity for acquiescence of the audience effect the "spell" of tragedy.[27] It is this spell, especially associated by Gorgias with Aeschylean tragedy, that Euripides so adeptly manipulates. By transferring his dramaturgical spellbinding to the protagonist, he brings about a complicated kind of illusion-making that discloses itself as it goes along. The impact is finally not very Aeschylean at all. For in Aeschylean tragedy, as Thomas Rosenmeyer has argued (1982.85): "rhetoric as deception is to be associated with the purposes of particular characters in a drama, and not with the purposes of the dramatist himself, or of the play . . . The idea that the playwright himself might, through delusive guidance and misleading pointers, get the audience off on the wrong track, only to put them right with a shocking twist, cannot be entertained for Aeschylus." Yet this is precisely the case we must entertain for Euripides.

Nonetheless, the immediate effect of the play upon the Athenian audience was felt more profoundly in its departures from what was currently in vogue: not the spectacle-making of Aeschylus but the dramatic naturalism of Sophocles, a style whose influence cannot be overemphasized given the very high proportion of first-place honors its creator won and given that his domination was already the state of affairs when Euripides produced his first tragedy in 455 B.C., fourteen years before the *Medea*. Such bold departures from the Sophoclean tragic norm that we find in this play must have been extremely difficult for an audience to assimilate, especially since so much,

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27 See Segal 1962 and Rosenmeyer 1955.

at first glance, seems indebted to the techniques of Sophocles. The bewilderment produced by the aesthetic experiments of the *Medea* explains the tension apparent in Euripides' standing in the fifth-century world of the dramatic contests: artistically masterful enough to secure regularly a chorus and a place in the competition of the Great Dionysia, he was provocative and offbeat enough to be repeatedly passed over by the judges for first-place honors.

By treating Medea as *hypokrites* in the multiple senses of actor, answerer, interpreter, orator, and dissimulator, I have tried to cast new light on the particular form of Euripides' inventiveness in the classical tradition. The pervasive metadramatic play for which I have argued seems to befit the kind of restless, contentious, artistically brilliant mind Euripides possessed. Moreover, it is comprehensible as an aesthetic stance available to someone who came relatively late in the evolution of Greek tragic drama—and relatively late in a process whereby Athenian society was able to conceptualize its institutions of state, especially political ones, as theatrical in themselves. If Thucydides' Cleon, however much contempt the historian bears him, utters a viable commonplace when he accuses the Athenians of being victims of their own pleasure in listening to speakers in the Assembly, of being "more like an audience sitting at the feet of a professional lecturer than a parliament discussing matters of state"; if sophists such as Gorgias were both showmen who dramatized their skills in awe-inspiring spectacles and teachers of a highly practical art; if stage-acting and political rhetoric were coalescing in the term *hypokrisis*, then we may legitimately assume that the notion of theatricality was being extended beyond the Dionysian stage and transferred to activities with which it once may have been opposed or contrasted. Euripides' metadrama is intelligible as a manifestation of this development, though his tonalities are very different from those implied by Cleon's denunciation.[28]

There is, in fact, considerable energy and even buoyancy in the subversions of the *Medea*. And that makes it difficult to appreciate the nihilism for which some critics have argued in the tragedy.[29] Extreme moral disruptiveness and aesthetic irreverence are compatible with an alternative

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28 For a recent treatment of this theme, see Longo 1990, also Pucci 1977. The quotation is from Rex Warner's translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. London 1986.214.

29 McDermott 1989.107–18 argues explicitly for Euripides as a nihilist, but a similar note is sounded by Foley 1989 and by Lawrence 1997.

reading, one that sees in the tragedian's iconoclasm an art full of vigor and the sense of creative possibility, the art of a poetic personality who may have been incapable of composing without a strong force of resistance to feed his invention. Euripides seems to have found a vitality and opportunity for redemption in his long relationship with the theater, an opportunity that he felt was lost in his own life as a citizen of Athens and in the wider, increasingly murky moral world of the later fifth century. Though the image of the dramatist holed up in a cave on Salamis writing his plays may imply a misanthrope, cantankerously alienated from people, it may also imply an inspired artist whose distance from society was the enabling condition of his extraordinary ability to distance the theater from its roots in ritual, reverence, and tradition.

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