

Medea in Corinth: Political Aspects of Euripides' *Medea*¹

Introduction

Medea and Jason are resident aliens in Corinth, on the surface, perhaps, an apolitical or marginally political status. Throughout the first half of the drama, however, we see them and hear of them relating to civic life, the power structure, and the native-born Corinthians in two quite different ways. Jason, who is not presented as having any interest in interacting with the ordinary citizens, has gone outside his house to arrange for himself a marriage with the ruling family through which he hopes to enhance his status economically and politically. Such a route to acceptance is not open to Medea, but she does relate to the members of the community. The only Corinthians who make an appearance in the play are Creon, the king, and the chorus of Corinthian women. I contend that these women, though not citizens in the sense that they participate in civic institutions open to men only, represent an important side of civic life in Corinth. On the one hand they are set up in contrast to the king, whose decision to exile Medea (made before the play opens, like that of his Theban namesake in *Antigone*) sets the plot in motion; and on the other hand they are opposed to the men of Corinth, who are—except for the very old men whose idle gossip is reported in the prologue—conspicuously absent. Medea interacts with the chorus throughout and with Creon in just one scene. From the words used of Creon and his power and from his actions in the play we learn the nature of his rule in Corinth (that of a tyrant in the sense that became current in the fifth century and not merely a supreme ruler). The chorus' politics are more *oikos*-centered, as befits their gender, but also more universal (putting the present tragedy into a more generalized context, as it is common for tragic choruses to do). This paper will look at these two strains of politics, concentrating on details of Medea's scene with Creon and her interaction with the chorus.

Where are the Citizens?

“Pleasing the citizens to whose land she has come,” with these words (11-12) Medea's elderly Nurse describes her mistress' sojourn in Corinth, establishing at once that there is a positive relationship between Medea and the people (who will be represented by the chorus),

¹Though *Medea* is a play about a woman among women and about a woman's power, it is one of Euripides' most political plays. William Arrowsmith, “A Greek Theater of Ideas,” *Arion* 2 (1963):32-56:47 called it “a comprehensive critique of the quality and state of contemporary culture.” See Rainer Friedrich, “Medea *apolis*: on Euripides' dramatization of the crisis of the polis,” in Alan Sommerstein, Stephen Halliwell, Jeffrey Henderson, Bernhard Zimmermann, *Tragedy, Comedy, and the Polis*, Bari, 1993: 219-39.

which is confirmed by their arrival and which is shown to be political by Medea's address in the first episode. In her own early speeches to the chorus and to Creon, Medea herself shows a political awareness absent from the male characters in the play who act according to personal motives and show little or no concern for the life of the community. Only Medea and the chorus show any real social conscience or consciousness.

Where are the citizens? This is one of the questions P. E. Easterling² suggests asking of a text to discover what image of the community a play offers. Another is what civic institutions are implicit or explicit. Consideration of these along with a concern for the relationships between men and women, in this play in particular, is revealing of the inner and outer politics of the *Medea*.

The short answers are 1. a) the male citizens are playing *pestoi* and b) civic concerns are expressed by the chorus of women, mistresses of the Corinthian *oikoi*. 2. The only civic institution is Creon. More can be said, by looking both at what is there and what is markedly absent. 3. Women in the *Medea* are more thoughtful, active, and intelligent than men, even though men seem to have all the power.

Citizens first come into the story in Nurse's speech. It is as if she moves from the heroic age with her story of the *aristoi* ("heroes" of line 5) and their quest to something closer to the modern world of town life when she mentions Medea's relationship with the citizens (11-12). A scholiast tells us that Medea cured a famine in Corinth.³ Whatever it was, Medea certainly did something beneficial, when her special gifts were (still or again) used for the good. She and her family have been accepted not only as refugees but as benefactors in Corinth. What is important is that the women of Corinth are on terms of *fil iā* with her (11-12, 138, 179) and that her attitude is more egalitarian or at least less selfish than Jason's, as are, apparently, those of the women in the play generally, whether slave or free. If we use as evidence what happens in the play between Medea and these women, we might surmise that the friendship of the chorus for Medea has as much to do with mental as with practical or familial activity. The chorus comes to comfort Medea but ends up being schooled by her. We see not just a chorus of Corinthian women, but a chorus of intellectual Corinthian women, given to general reflection, like other choruses, but also to commenting on the fact that they are engaging in subtle thinking and growing more self-assured in their assessment of their literary capacities. Intellectual and political content is present in all their songs. Is it because in a tyranny, where no one has any power except the monarch, women are on a more equal footing with men than in a male-dominated

² P. E. Easterling, "Constructing the Heroic" in Christopher Pelling, *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, Oxford, 1997:21-37 (28-29).

³E. Schwartz, *Scholia in Euripidem*, vol. 2, Berlin, 1891 (reprinted 1966) ad 11 (vol. 2, p. 143). In the same note the Corinthians are said also to be interested in *farmaka*.

democracy or oligarchy where the power is shared exclusively among the men?

We do not find Jason, for example, being concerned with a favorable reaction from the citizens to whose land he has come. Not a word is said about his politics except for his royal leanings and longings. Jason is satisfied with the children he has fathered by Medea, but not with his lot as an ordinary householder with few slaves and a modest *modus vivendi*. He needs more: he wants to be *king*. Which puts him on the side of the *turannoi* in Nurse's generalization (119-130). If the democratic audience is concerned about the socio-political ramifications of the play for contemporary Athens, surely they would be concerned about this: Jason's tyrannical ambitions, nipped in the bud by Medea. The words (42),

kai\ turannon⁴ ... ktah\$ ("and kill the king/tyrant")

may not have been shocking to the Athenian audience who heroized Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the men who "killed the tyrant" (to\ turannon ktanethn) as a prelude to making Athens *i)sohomoj* (Athenaeus, 15.695a). Clearly killing the tyrant in itself is not horrifying. Nor that it would be done for personal reasons. But it *is* men's work.

Jason has not fallen victim to *e)rwj* the tyrant, but, like Pausanias the Lakedaimonian, to love of tyranny, as Medea reports to Aigeus (698, 700).⁵ It is not simply that he needs legitimate heirs because his children by Medea are bastards. This is not to say that there is nothing in the drama about the plight of women and especially foreign women and their children, but the situation is not presented from Jason's point of view. Both Jason and Medea (and their children) would be and would remain metics in Athens if they lived there in the fifth century. Many heroic age people, however, are either illegitimate or "mixed" or both.⁶ In fact the only danger to the status of the children is that, if Jason should have royal children by the princess, the present children, if integrated into the family of the young princes, would become something like Teucer

⁴It is unclear to whom *turannon* refers. One scholiast takes it to be feminine, but the others as referring to Creon. The reading Diggle (after Hermann) prefers is *turahnouj*, which must refer to Creon and his daughter. See note 14.

⁵This is not to imply that Euripides is referring directly to Pausanias, but that the audience would recognize the type: a man with ambitions to marry power. They also have Menelaus.

⁶Theseus himself is a bastard and his story touches upon this one, since his conception is to take place in Trozen between the Aigeus-scene and his father's return to Athens to be welcomed home by Medea. Hippolytus, though a bastard and of mixed Hellenic/Other parentage, is much loved and lamented by the citizens. The Euripidean tragedy that bears his name treats the theme of bastardy but, though he is not his father's heir, there is no thought of his being less of a man or less of a Greek because of his mixed ethnicity. The mother of the legitimate heirs is Cretan. In her play *Andromache's child* by Neoptolemus, himself a bastard, is the only one left to carry on the line. See Easterling (in Pelling 1997):25-7.

to Ajax in their father Telamon's eyes.⁷ As his only children they are as legitimate as many heroes' children until there are (here, only potentially) others by a bride with more status. That is, the presence of royal brothers is the only thing that would reduce the status of Medea's children and usurp their place in Jason's family. We notice that Medea's references to her own ancestry start to come after Creon's insults (406). If the audience is expected to be aware of Medea's future in Athens which certainly they are to some extent, this adds a further tragic note to her story.⁸ Her attempt on Theseus' life is part of her on-going battle to maintain the status of her own children. It must be credited to the courage of Euripides that in the *Medea* he tells the whole story from the point of view of Medea, already known to the audience as the woman who tried to kill their national hero, and to the playwright's genius that he maintains sympathy for Medea for so long.

Citizens enter our consciousness again with the return of the children and their *paidagogos*. News comes, with the males, from the masculine world outside. The old slave has been in contact with the citizens. And what is the role of the citizens? To sit at the *Pessoi* (identified as a place by the scholiast *ad* 67), gossiping about what their ruler is doing. Granted these are the oldest of the townsmen, but in many other plays old men act as a chorus of elders.⁹ In contrast to other plays about monarchs in which citizens participate at least in discussion even when the ruler is a tyrant in the modern sense (as in *Antigone*), *Medea* shows no participation by the citizens in the government. Haemon, for example tells his father that the people are siding with Antigone (693-700) in the Sophoclean play that bears her name. The chorus of elders in the same drama, though they demur from actual service and merely accede to Creon's commands, give sound advice (when at last they are consulted in desperation 1098, 1100-1, 1007). Here citizens at the gaming tables are quoted, but they are not even granted an opinion about whether it is right or wrong to exile these children and their mother. In *Agamemnon* the chorus of elders frequently comments on the political action, referring to the voice of the people, voicing criticism of Agamemnon, making cryptic comments about Clytemnestra, and openly opposing Aegisthus. Here citizens are not called in to deliberate on the sentence (as in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*) nor to judge the case (as in *Eumenides*). In this tyranny all the citizens have to occupy themselves with is games and gossip. They are interested in matters related to the royal family, but unlike democratic citizens or those in the democratized monarchies of many plays, they have no part in

⁷James F. McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece*, Ithaca (Cornell), 1993:164 suggests that they would be attendants of their royal brothers as in the *Iliad*. "Jason presumably had something similar in mind for his children by Medea, when he tried to persuade her that his new marriage served their common interests." But it is the (potential) existence of *royal* brothers who reduce the status of these children.

⁸See Sophie Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy and the Athenian Empire*, Oxford, 1997:229, "Medea's only role in Athenian mythology is her failed attempt to destroy the national hero."

⁹Even in *Herakles* the chorus of old men, though feeble and feckless, participates in hating the tyrant.

them.¹⁰ When the old slave passes on his devastating news, his word order may reflect the awe in which Creon is held, for his name is saved to the end of the sentence and the harsh, guttural *koiranoj xqonoj Krewn* (“king of the country Creon”) indicates the suffocating grip he has on the land (67-72). Politics in Corinth is reduced to gossip. The ineffectualness of the tellers even casts doubt on the veracity of their tale (72-3). They must have heard it second or third hand themselves. Why do they even bring up the story now? Because they happen to catch sight of the victims of the decree and inadvertently spread the word. The fact of secrecy in itself adds to the atmosphere of oppression: truth, even that dictated from above, is not to be spoken aloud.

Creon’s Rule

Before looking more closely at Creon in his one scene, let us consider briefly how he is referred to by the characters and chorus.¹¹ The first four times he is named in the tragedy it is as ruler. Four different words are applied to his power: *aisumn#* (19), *koiranoj* (71), *añakta* (269), and *arxei* (702). In his scene he calls himself *brabeuj* (274). *turannoj* is used over and over again, but mostly without his name.¹²

The first mention of him is by Nurse, *Krebntoj ... oj aisumn#=xqonoj* (19), a little used verb (nowhere else in Euripides). The office of the *aisumnhthj* is defined by Aristotle (*Politics* 3.14. 1285b) as *aireth\ turannij* (“elected tyranny”) and interestingly Aristotle found a resemblance between *aisumnhtai* and barbarian kings (1285a 30-32 and 1295a 11-14), from whom they differ in not having hereditary power. According to Newman in his commentary on the *Politics*, ad 1285a30, “The Aesymnete had larger powers than any Greek King of heroic times, for the administration of the State lay wholly in his hands.” The tragic kings he most resembles, then, are Xerxes, in being unaccountable to the people¹³ and Lycus (in *Heracles*) in persecuting the wife and children, here not even of his enemy but of his *fil oj*. If Creon’s rule was seen to be more like that of a foreign potentate than a heroic age king, the Greek/barbarian distinction is further blurred.

Turannoj and its derivatives, as Fartzoff points out, are used twenty-two times in *Medea*.

¹⁰Anthony J. Podlecki, “*Polis* and monarch in Early Attic Tragedy,” in J. Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986:76-100 (77-8).

¹¹See Fartzoff’s illuminating piece, Michel Fartzoff, “Le pouvoir dans Médée,” *Pallas* 45 (1996): 153-68, for the vocabulary surrounding Creon (1996):*passim*, esp. 153-5.

¹²Where his name is used in proximity to the title it is (307-8) in direct address when Medea denies her ability to hurt the “tyrants” and (1125-6) in the catalogue of the dead, “the *turannoj* girl is dead and Creon *her father*.” See below, note 14.

¹³Cf. Podlecki (in Euben, 1986):79-80 and *Persae* 213-14: *oux ubeuñunoj pol ei,/ swqeij d)omoiwñ thsde koiranei=xqonoj*.

Surprisingly only one of these many uses refers unambiguously to Creon alone, and this is when he is denying that he has a tyrannical temperament (348). The others refer specifically to his daughter, to the royal house or family, to Jason's future offspring, to the marriage, and to the royal pair, Creon and his daughter.¹⁴

Koironoj is used four times, only once of Creon alone as his epithet (71) and three times of the king and his daughter (875, 936, 1299). *Basil euj* likewise is used twice of Creon alone (554, 783), but only in the phrase "daughter of the king". Otherwise the word or its derivatives refers to the marriage (18, 547, 594), the house (960), the royal pair (455) or to Glauke alone (1003, 444?). *Basil eia* (444) is feminine but ambiguous; at some level it certainly refers to the princess, though it might be more general. By the time Medea finalizes her plans the enemy has become Creon's daughter and at the end of his life it is his capacity as father that defines him (*ofuŝaj*, 1126). This change of focus toward the bride herself may happen because it is through Glauke and not her father that Jason's ambitions are being realized. To Medea *she* is the *turannoŝ* (887, 957, 1066, 1356; cf. 967) and this mental and verbal animosity from the protagonist creates—through the playwright's sleight of hand—a prominence for her even though she does not make an appearance.¹⁵ What power does she have in her own right? The power to give Jason royal children, which Medea, though also a king's daughter, does not have. Creon may hold the political reins, but he is reached through his daughter, in Medea's persuasion of him, by Jason in his marriage, by Medea and the children in their embassy, and by his daughter quite literally in the death scene.¹⁶ If Creon's death is just a "lucky hit" for Medea, it is "likely" because (1) he loved his daughter and (2) Jason did not. Creon is devastated by her death. Jason is not. The only thing that gets to him is the loss of both his potential and living children.

¹⁴ 42 *turannon* [*turahnouj*]: if singular the reference is ambiguous, either to the daughter or to Creon [if plural then it must refer to Creon and his daughter]; 119 *turahnwn l hmata*: the reference is generic, to the tyrannical disposition in Nurse's general reflection; 140 *lektra turahnwn*: "the marriage with the royals"; 308 *ej turahnouj ahndraj*: against the royals; 348 *hkista toumoh l hm' efu turannikoh*: "my nature is not tyrannical, not in the least"; 453 *ej turahnouj* and 458 *kakwŝ turahnouj*; 607 *araj turahnouj*: Jason is referring to Medea's curses against the royals; 597 *turahnouj paidaj*: "the royal children" who are to be the brothers of Medea's children; 700 *ahdrwn turahnwn khəoj*: Medea informs Aigeus of Jason's love affair with royalty; 740 *domoj turannikoj*: "the royal house"; 778 *gamouj turahnwn*: "the royal marriage"; 887 *ghmaj turannon*: "after marrying the royal [woman]"; 934 *epeil turahnouj ghj m' apostei# ai dokei#*: "since it is the decision of the royals to exile me"; 957 *t\$=turahn% makari# numf\$ dote*: "and give [them] to the blessed royal bride"; 967 *ne# turannei#*: "young, she is in power"; 991 *khdemwn turahnwn*: "in-law of the royals"; 1066 *numfh turannoŝ*: "the royal bride"; 1125 *ol wl en h(turannoŝ artiwj koh*: "the royal girl has just died"; 1130 *turahnwn estian*: "the royals' hearth"; 1298 *turahnwn dwmasin*: "to the royal house/family"; 1356 *h(turannoŝ*: "the royal [woman]". See Fartzoff (1996).

¹⁵ On her prominence through the messenger's speech see Irene J. F. de Jong, "Three Off-Stage Characters in Euripides," *Mnemosyne* 43 (1990):1-21 (4-9).

¹⁶ As Charles Segal, "Euripides' *Medea*: Vengeance, Reversal, and Closure," *Pallas* 45 (1996):15-44, writes of Glauke instead of leaving her father's house, "this bride remains attached to her father with a ghastly literalness" (34).

As Creon approaches he is announced as ἀῆακ (269), a designation of Homeric warrior kings. Perhaps the accumulation of terms means to show the absolute power of Creon in civil and military matters. No question but that this is peacetime; still Aigeus' calling Pittheus his military ally (687) is a reminder of the nature of the society (on the brink of war in 431 B.C.). Medea fears that Creon or his survivors would "send heralds" (738) to demand her back, implying that to fail to deliver her into their hands could be interpreted as an act of war.¹⁷

Finally Creon is defined quite simply by Medea in the third episode (the Aigeus scene) as οἱ ἀρχεὶ τῆσδε γῆς Κορινθιάς (702, "who governs this country of Corinth"), perhaps because she wants to use the most neutral word to her potential new ally. After the middle of the play the influence of Creon has waned. From Medea's point of view he is no longer a focal character in her story. She has a place to go. The appearance of her friend Aigeus has neutralized Creon. He is now just the father (942, 1126, 1204, 1220). Of course she is not sorry to take vengeance on him because he meant to do her harm. The enemies are the daughter and Jason because they have denied her status and negated her value as a woman.

Creon's entrance, like those of the first four men who come on, is abrupt. He is announced by the chorus as a "messenger" (270) as if he is his own herald. He comes, like a traditional tyrant, surrounded by a bodyguard with whom he threatens to strong-arm Medea unless she lets go of his hand (335).

After pronouncing the formal sentence of exile, he appends ἐγὼ βράβευ' ἰοῦ τοῦδε εἰμί/("I am the arbiter of this sentence" 274). The βράβευ' is the umpire or judge who makes a final decision and witnesses its carrying out,¹⁸ which Creon declares he will do (275). Creon is playing too many roles: he is herald, king, judge: he has made the decision, he announces it and comes to see that it is carried out. There is to be no discussion or appeal. This must have seemed arbitrary to an audience who believed that words preceded action.¹⁹

¹⁷See, for example, Thucydides I.29. It is interesting that Aigeus begins to show sympathy for Medea immediately after finding out that it was Creon who gave his daughter to Jason (703). There is clearly no love lost between these two kings. No state visit is planned. Aigeus has some apprehension about Creon's reaction if he should offer Medea safe conduct as well as asylum and is glad for the pretext of the oath.

¹⁸"The one who sees his order executed" in A. W. Verrall (ed.), *The Medea of Euripides*, London, 1881 *ad loc.*

¹⁹See Stephen Halliwell's fine essay, "Between Public and Private: Tragedy and Athenian Experience of Rhetoric," in Christopher Pelling, *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, Oxford, 1997:120-141. especially pp. 120-3 and his references to Thucydides and Demosthenes. Also Josiah Ober and Barry Strauss, "Drama, Political Rhetoric, and Discourse of Athenian Democracy," in John J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin (edd.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, Princeton, 1990:237-70 (237-40).

Creon has arrogated to himself the deliberative function of the *polis*. No one else is allowed to use words.²⁰

Creon and Words

His first verb, ἀειπὼν (“I have proclaimed” 272) is used of a formal proclamation, usually by a herald (LSJ). He goes on to say ἐγὼ μὲν βράβευς ἰσθίου (274, words which may be translated more generally), “I am the arbiter of discourse.” With these words he cuts off debate, forcing Medea, if she is going to get anywhere, to use another form of expression: complaint and question, acknowledging that she has no right even to ask the reason for her exile (280). “There is no need to cloak my words” (282), because all words are his, he can tell the truth without shame or the fear of being put to shame with words. He has already rejected her words and does so again, μή μὲν ἰσθίου ἰεγε (“speak no words” 321). Unlike Jason, he refuses to participate in the debate. This is why her *argument* fails and she must resort to action, to suppliant status, which she does somewhere between 325 and 339. Λογούεις ἀνά οἰκίαν (“you are wasting words” 325), he says either because of his fixation with words or because she has only *said* “by your knees” but not actually gotten down on hers to take his,²¹ but she goes on “have you no respect for my prayers?” (326: ἰταῖα are admittedly still words) and σὺ ἀἰτῶμαι (“I beseech you,” 336). He continues to refuse her pleas and even threatens her with force. In any case before line 339 she has taken hold of him. At 338 she accedes: “I/we will go into exile; that is not what I supplicated you for.” I believe that she performs the full act of supplication earlier than Gould suggests²² and that it is rather her accepting the judgment that persuades him to relent to her limited request. This would explain the chorus’ despair in the first stasimon over the departure of αἰθῶν from Greece. Creon’s proprietary attitude to words is reinforced by a second sentence of exile and *death* for disobedience and by his last words in the play (Diggle deletes 335-6):

ἰεὶ ἐκταὶ μὴ οὐκ ἀψευδῆς οἴε (354 “this pronouncement has been spoken without falsehood”).

²⁰Deborah Boedeker, “Euripides’ *Medea* and the Vanity of LOGOI,” *CP* 86 (1991):95-112, notes that Medea is unresponsive to others’ words, but she is not the only one (101). On modes of discourse in the play see also Margaret Williamson, “A Woman’s Place in Euripides’ *Medea*,” in A Powell, *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990: 16-31 (esp. 17, 21, 23).

²¹As John Gould, “HIKETEIA,” *JHS* 93 (1973):74-103 argues because he says “you are wasting words” (85-8).

²²Gould argues (1973:85-8) in his definitive piece on supplication that Medea’s supplication is figurative at first and that she does not perform the full act until 338. I believe that the change of plea is what counts with Creon. He threatens her with violence at 335, in itself a brutal act in response to her pleading, whether it is merely verbal or the completed act of formal ἰκέτεια.

To an audience of Athenians used to debating every issue, this is the behavior of a tyrant, made all the more blatant by his saying that his is not a tyrannical disposition, “no, not at all” (hκista 348), after appearing at a private house (which he has recently robbed of its master) with his bodyguard and speaking and behaving in the peremptory tyrannical mode.²³ On the other hand his distrust of rhetoric (316, 319-20) would seem familiar enough to the audience,²⁴ but for him it is simplified by the fact that he does not need to use argument and reasoned debate to reach any understanding, to find the truth, or to make decisions.²⁵ His unjust treatment of Medea would show the audience (all but those lacking in the democratic spirit) that their way, fraught with peril as it is, is preferable to this brutish power without discussion. He will not be taken in by words, but he is tricked by his own paranoia into bringing the crisis to a head. His awareness of his fear (which, in spite of his saying that there are many contributing factors that cause it, is basically irrational) makes him relent enough to give Medea the time she needs.²⁶ He lists only two things that make him afraid: that Medea has special skills (so far in Corinth used for the good); and that he has heard reports that she has been making threats (which used to be more believable until textual scalpels excised her reported threat against the king and his daughter from the play).²⁷ Even Jason does not bear witness to her threats but to her speaking ill of the royal family. True, she curses them, along with herself, Jason, and the whole house, but that is not the same as threatening to do them harm. These threats may be merely figments of Creon’s imagination and what he does in this scene is to suggest more victims to Medea, already bent on taking vengeance on Jason. So far, Medea, though a woman, would be presenting a far more sympathetic case and one far more in keeping with Athenian expectations, since she, like the audience, has used arguments of various kinds, including the old favorite, that from what is likely (at lines 306-10).

Just before Creon’s entrance, the chorus has agreed to help Medea by keeping silence. They do so because Medea’s cause is just (εἰδικωῖ, 267). Medea has invited the women to participate in justice, which in Creon’s Corinth has not been participatory. The chorus utters not another word until Creon is gone. Their respect, affection, loyalty for Creon is completely lacking. I might even venture to suggest that Denys Page shows a slight cultural bias when he comments *ad* 138 that “the chorus has just had to *decide* between a conflict of loyalties -- to Medea and to Creon’s house.” On the contrary, their natural sympathies are with Medea. The

²³ See McGlew (1993):26-8 on the tyrant’s “misapplication of a principle of domestic domination to the city.”

²⁴ Halliwell (1997), especially 122-124 on the distrust of rhetoric voiced in tragedy.

²⁵ Page duBois, *Torture and Truth*, New York and London, 1991, commenting on the Platonic dialogues (which, she believes, only imitate debate), writes “The audience accustomed to the production of truth through argument in the workings of debate in the city takes pleasure in the theatrical representation of dialogue” (117).

²⁶ See Pietro Pucci, *The Violence of Pity in Euripides’ Medea*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press), 1980: “He was not prepared to counteract this minimal request...” (208 n.3).

²⁷ In fact what she has done (in the text) is curse the royals (along with herself, Jason, the children and the whole house) and spoken ill of them (according to Jason) but not made threats until *after* Creon has left. Most editors bracket 38-43 or some parts thereof: even this threat is part of Nurse’s fear for her mistress’ well-being.

treatment of her is unjust. Not long before the arrival of the chorus, Jason's servant mouths Jason's side, the politics of self-interest: everyone acts for gain, a natural stance for him to take because he belongs to Jason. But the chorus of women, in the face of injustice, has no reason *not* to side with the wronged person. The women are represented as less corrupt than the men, less self-interested.

Creon, by exiling Medea, has moved her plight from private (a purely domestic tragedy shared by and of interest to only her family, her servants, and her circle of women friends) to public (a concern to the state, here equivalent to the king). In fact, Creon, though arriving in state and issuing his sentence as a public proclamation, opens it rudely, but intimately, making reference to her facial demeanor and her most private life.²⁸

In giving the reason for exiling her, Creon continues to mix public and private. He fears for his daughter's safety because Medea has a reputation for special skills (a charge she will answer in some detail in her next major speech) and because – what could be more personal than this? – she is upset over being deprived of her marital rights, robbed of her husband.²⁹ We must bear in mind that it is Creon who has broken up her marriage to Jason. A problem with monarchy generally is the inability to separate what is public from what is private: the monarch's household is a public institution and any *oikoi* that it impinges upon become tainted by this publicity. This is part of what makes the stories of royal houses so appealing to the tragic poets of a democracy: they give an added political dimension to private disasters. Creon goes on to mention his spies who report Medea's threats (287-9), again an inappropriate intrusion of the public into the private; and like other stage tyrants³⁰ to use military terminology of his dealings with a private person (289). His hostility is personal (290, 323) but with the word *dusmenhē* he expands it to military enmity. The tyrant, like the fanatic (according to a *bon mot* of Amos Oz), has no private life. In a tyranny no one can be secure: this is exactly what Medea's Nurse was talking about in her strange remarks (at 119ff.) which Page and others take as referring to Medea, but F. A. Paley (*Euripides* vol. I, London, 1872) says (*ad* 120), "The allusion is obviously to Creon's stern decree." As Fartzoff (154) notes, this is the only use of *tu'anno* in a general formulation. The relevance of Nurse's remarks have been questioned,³¹ but I prefer to see the lines as multireferential and therefore widely relevant: in the immediate context, to Creon and his

²⁸Thomas M. Falkner in *The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy*, Norman and London, 1995 thinks that the impression Creon makes is of "a grandfatherly figure." Considering that his last words on stage are "You will die: and this is no lie" (354), I find this doubtful. Of him Denys Page (ed.), *Euripides, Medea*, Oxford, 1938 says "he knows he cannot play the remorseless tyrant for long. Throughout the scene he frowns to hide the sympathy in his eyes" (xiii).

²⁹ See Fartzoff (1996):162.

³⁰ See Podlecki (1986):98-100. "Taken to its limits, the treating of citizens as if they were troops is tyranny" (99).

³¹ By Elmsley and Wecklein, cited by Page *ad* 119.

daughter, to Jason, not content with life ἐπὶ ἰσοίῃσιν (122), and to Medea who eventually acquires the power to do as she wishes³² and is also most immediately in Nurse's thoughts about the children. Tyranny is an abomination to nature because it confounds the categories of public and private, πόλις and οἶκος. Acting—unlike some of his well-known historical counterparts—*not* out of personal lust Creon has violated another household to take from it a partner for his daughter. The daughter has now become Medea's mistress (694, 970), not appropriate for a free woman.³³ Creon is not the worst of tyrants, a man with insatiable appetites, but he is drawn as one who assumes a master's power over the households of the city and who acts like a god in determining the fates of the residents.³⁴ When Medea pretends to accede to the tyrants' wishes she will extend this divine comparison: "Gifts persuade gods" (964) and

κεῖνῃς οὐδὲ δαιμόνων, κεῖνῃς νῦν αὐτῆς θεοῦ,
 νεῆα τυράννης=(966-7 "hers is the *daimon*, and now a god will increase that;
 she is young in rule.").

In reality, however, the divine gifts come from Medea's family and, like Gyges' ring in the Platonic story, will allow *her* to do exactly what she wants.

Tyrants were known, too, for their great wealth and greed for more. This is why Jason can offer to pay Medea off "with unstinting hand" (ἀφροδῆς ... xerid, 612). In handing the gifts to her children, Medea bids them enter πλοσιβύθιοις (969 "the wealthy halls"). The girl's greed is highlighted in the description of her when she sees the gifts (1156), though later ameliorated to the pleasure a young girl takes in new clothes (1159-66). As it turns out the δαίμων Medea refers to (966) is closer to that named with apprehension by the Nurse (130) when excess brings widespread destruction (cf. Creon's cry τίς ... δαίμων; 1208). By this time Medea's designation of Creon's daughter as ἡ τυράννη has built up a prominence for her as the principal enemy and victim (after Jason)—Creon having become just "anyone who touches her"(788)—in spite of her absence from the play. Once the princess is disposed of, the "enemies" are Jason.

Creon fears Medea because she is skilled: σοφὴ/καὶ κῆκεν πόλιν ἡδὲ τὴν ἰδρίαν, he calls her

³² See Fartzoff (1997) 163, 167-8 who understands the expression πόλις ἀκρατουμένη (119) as going from the political to the psychological realms as Medea acquires her own authority.

³³"For Aristotle, the tyrant establishes himself as a master of the city and inevitably treats his fellow citizens as slaves. This makes tyranny illegal, for, by the distinction that underlies Aristotle's political theory, master and slave belong to the household not the *polis* (*Pol.* 1252b16-17)," McGlew, 27. See further McGlew 26-8 for stories of tyrants from Herodotus and Plato, pointing to the tyrants' powers over the public and the private. Cf. Podlecki on tyrants "inappropriately treating citizens as troops," (99-100).

³⁴ Cf. Plato, *Rep.* 360c and McGlew 26-7n.23.

(285). In Corinth she has used her skills to benefit the citizens (why else would they speak of the house as having been made friendly to them, 138?). Perhaps Creon has heard the story of her brief stay in Iolcus. On the other hand his fear of intelligent people might betray the stereotypical tyrant's fear of the most outstanding individuals (cf. 320). With good reason Creon dismisses Medea's rational arguments. What more can they achieve than confirm him in his suspicions? The politics of the tyrant is the politics of self-interest, defined in the prologue by Jason's old slave: "Everyone loves himself more than his neighbor" (85-7), which he presents as a well-known fact. "I love you not more than my own house" (327), says Creon, confirming the old saw. A tyrant can (and does) get rid of anyone in his way. He rules for himself and his "friends" whom he can benefit by making the private property of others in the community public. When Creon relents to Medea's pleas it is to the personal argument accompanied by gestures of complete submission and an appeal to his fatherhood and her own helplessness. Though a tyrant making his own laws, like other men he loves his child. To be a perfectly successful tyrant one would have to be without φίλοι. This causes a problem when benefitting friends is such an important cultural value.

Medea's Response to Creon

Let us turn now to the details of Medea's part in the scene. Her immediate reaction to the sentence of exile is, of course, dismay. We already have the information from the previous messenger and are thus freed from suspense to concentrate on Creon's delivery and Medea's reactions. Realizing her defeated position (280) she is able nonetheless to open the dialogue by asking the reason for her exile (281). Argument is meaningless without knowing what is in his mind. And she is surprised by his answer, being used (as Verrall points out *ad* 306) to contempt and jealousy, she had never thought anyone would fear her. Well, this is certainly disingenuous, given her past. Her response (beginning at 292) is her second educational speech. It is curious—given Creon's private reasons for wanting her out of the way—that Medea makes this wide-ranging political statement. Her concern for the relations among citizens, for that between the citizen and the state, and the individual and the group is prominent here as in her first speech to the chorus. In the presence of Creon she is less egalitarian than she was when she spoke just to the Corinthian women with whom her speech was inclusive, bringing herself into their world and them into hers. During this exchange the chorus stands witness, but is excluded from taking part or even making comments between the speeches.³⁵ She addresses the king impersonally as if she were addressing the *polis*, which of course he is. She also flatters him by taking him into her confidence and sharing these thoughts as if accepting him into the company of the intelligent few who can understand her subtle thinking and argumentation. And subtle it is: for she admits to being wise, proves herself a thinker, and at the same time (in a very difficult passage) rejects

³⁵To mark the difference Euripides might have staged Medea in the center of the chorus or certainly on the same level in her entrance speech, but in this second dialogue, she and Creon might be distanced from the chorus.

education in special skills or, perhaps, simply education beyond what everyone else has. The argument does not work because Creon's fear of being "softened" by words overrides his ability to engage in the masculine art of reasoned debate.

Her reputation has done her great harm. She realizes how important to one's ability to persuade and to engage with one's fellows is their assessment of one's abilities. Someone "too clever by half" has to be even more clever to compensate for the hearers' healthy suspicion. Who are the audiences to whom this argument is addressed? First there is Creon, the tyrant, who fears clever people and does his best to get rid of them. She means him to hear this positively: no one with all his faculties intact (*artifrwv* 294) would train his children to be clever in excess.³⁶ The commercial metaphor she uses (296-7, see Verrall *ad* 297) would appeal to Creon being both a Corinthian and a tyrant. Not only are clever people (does she mean professionals?) unproductive in the commercial life of the *polis*, they also earn envy from the citizens as the price of their efforts. This is natural: in most settings anyone different is treated with hostility or suspicion, as Medea has already suggested in her first speech. Page and others believe that this is the voice of Euripides himself (as if the rest of the play were not). But it is a good argument and necessary to maintaining the political theme of the play through the first episode. If Creon were not so paranoid it could have been effective. To the Athenian audience it is effective: they will certainly believe themselves more open-minded than Creon, but some of them at least will have to admit to being suspicious of professional wise men or at least to seeing such suspicion in their more boorish fellow citizens. What she expresses here is the paradoxical reception of philosophers that we see in attitudes towards every wise man from Thales to Socrates: too shrewd to be trusted, too busy with their useless knowledge to notice what is under their feet. Her clear-sighted understanding of reputation is winning more acceptance from those who heard the words about prejudice (the chorus and the audience) in her first speech: the message there had been not to reject a person on sight.

Next she considers two groups of people who despise a clever individual: the dim-witted, unimaginative people who see any innovations as useless and less than clever: "who needs to know that?" And other people with a reputation for special skills or wisdom (following Page's explanation *ad* 300-1): "if you are thought in the city superior to those who think they know something you will be resented (by them)." Her own case might be an example of what she means: she is well known in the city of Corinth. Any rivals will feel resentful. Or possibly her wide reputation in the city has made Creon take notice: residents in a tyranny who are noticed have their heads lopped off. Finally (diverging from Page) as a foreigner (she had talked about this in her speech to the women) Medea might be resented in the city for being superior to their native *sofoi* as in Parmeniskos' version of the myth (*S ad* 264) in which the "Corinthian women, refusing to be ruled by a woman who was a foreigner and a witch, plotted against her and

³⁶ See Verrall *ad* 294: "special education is represented as disturbing the natural balance."

killed her children, seven boys and seven girls...” If Euripides was aware of this version he might be making reference to it here. Medea concludes this part of the speech with the personal relevance: she has a reputation. Having set up her argument she now denies that she is so very clever. Whatever skill she has is within moderation (not *perissw̄j*, 295; *ouk aġan*, 305). Her argument is well taken: yes, there are people who are very clever. These people are resented both by the ignorant and the intelligent, but she is not one of them. She is no threat. In her straitened circumstances (280, 307) she is powerless. Politically this is appealing to both the onstage tyrant and the outer Athenian audience: she is a good democrat, not striving to be better than the others and a permissible subject, being powerless and acceptably intelligent or skilled.

Medea’s next argument is the old standard: the argument from probability (*eiġoj*). She has reason to be angry with her husband for deserting her, but not with Creon. Unfortunately the argument is in this instance deeply flawed—as this type of argument in tragedy often is, because it ignores the particulars—since the person to whom Creon’s heart led him to give his daughter was Medea’s husband. She cannot separate Creon and his daughter from the defection of Jason. Her sound political instincts, her understanding that people do not exist on their own, but in relation to the community, should have saved her from this specious reasoning.

Nevertheless this is a remarkable speech, coming from a woman, addressed by her to a man on terms of equality, only yielding to him in power and resources.³⁷ In it she recommends an educational policy not of elitist overspecialization, but of moderation and usefulness to the community, an argument that has gained, if not respectability, at least popularity over the millennia and into the era of universal education. This type of discourse is usually the private reserve of males in the *polis*.

The difficulty of finding the relevance of this passage has led commentators to suggest that Euripides has events of his contemporary scene in mind (Verrall and Page, for example).

Medea has to answer the charge of being a *sofh*. She does this by way of a disclaimer: her reputation exceeds her *sofiā*. She does not even approve of excess education since it causes political *fqohoj* (297 “envy” or “enmity”). Does she then demonstrate her less than superlative skill through a faulty argument that is in part passionate, as women are supposed to be (*eġmoh poġin misw̄j* “I hate my husband,” 310-11), rather than reasoned, because Creon fears being softened with rhetoric? She concludes with an offer of submission, in answer to Creon’s objection to her alleged threats against him and the newly-weds. Creon rejects her argument because as absolute monarch he does not need to listen to reason. She is reduced to supplication, submission, and flattery. Creon rejects the supplication (or at least waits until she assumes the full

³⁷For a well-considered treatment of the types of argumentation in this scene see Williamson (in Powell, 1990):20-22.

position) but falls for the flattery and submission. He, as a good father, is contrasted with Jason, who cares nothing for his children.

In this scene Creon has used words to define people according to his own feelings. His naming of his likes and dislikes is a means of expressing his power. He characterizes Medea as sullen and angry (271) and for this declares her an exile. He next defines her as clever and knowledgeable and guilty of unrestrained speech (285, 287-9), but when she offers to be silent (315), he expresses his preference for the quick-tempered person over the silent, clever one even though he is exiling her because of her outspoken anger (319-20). He defines the role she is to play ultimately in the play as the *οἰκουμεῖς* (a word used in *Eumenides* 705 by Athena of her founding of Areopagus court, to mean something like “quick to come to righteous wrath”) who is also clever enough to hide her anger when necessary. Before her last act of violence she must rouse this wrath one more time.

Medea and the Chorus

After Creon leaves, the politics change. Medea takes the power and there is no more interaction that could be called political.

Let us consider briefly Medea’s developing relations with the chorus. The chorus enters after hearing a cry from inside the stage building (135). It is as if one house were calling to the others, each member of the chorus representing one private *οἶκος* in the city³⁸ or at least collectively representing the *οἶκοι*. The disembodied voice of Medea that we hear becomes the voice of the ailing house.

The *parodos* is a wonderful, operatic scene, passionate, but still political: Nurse, chorus, and Medea are singing about justice (157), tyranny (119ff), democracy (122-3), the three parties not yet connecting. It is clear that the chorus is predisposed to Medea’s side long before her great speech. *Zeuj soi tade sundikhsei* (157 “Zeus will be your advocate in this”). The chorus of women put the desertion of one *numfa* (“young bride” 150, of Medea) for another (163, of Creon’s daughter) into a legal setting: in the cosmic court of justice, Zeus will act as Medea’s advocate (cf. *Eum.* 579 where Apollo makes himself Orestes’ advocate and/or co-defendant³⁹). Medea picks up this theme with “Themis” (160) and Nurse chimes in (169-70) with “Themis and Zeus *ofkwn tamiġ*” (“keeper of oaths”) and the chorus ends with “Zeus and Themis of oaths” who brought Medea to Greece (209-212). Here is a marshaling of powerful and righteous

³⁸See Antonio Martina, “Struttura e spazio scenico nella *Medea* di Euripide,” in R. Pretagostini (ed.), *Traduzione e innovazione nella cultura greca da Omero all’età ellenistica: Scritti in onore di Bruno Gentili*, Rome, 1993: 577-90 (587).

³⁹See Alan H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, Cambridge, 1989 *ad loc.*

(political and cosmic) forces to Medea's side.⁴⁰

The chorus is established as of a political disposition from the very beginning and their politics has to do with the οἰκοί but becomes more πολις-centered without losing interest in family matters. These women, though confined to private life, represent the people of Corinth, a πολις made up of those οἰκοί. Since the citizens do not engage in politics because of the nature of Creon's rule, the relationship of these women, formed into a group at the end of the parodos, both among themselves and to Medea, is the political life of the drama. The fact that Creon ignores them and they feel nothing for him, now or at his reported death (which has been made all the more pitiful by the messenger when he turns it into a type-scene that is certain to bring tears⁴¹), says something about civic life in Corinth.

In Medea's (first) great educational speech (214ff.) she tells what she has learned from her experiences: it might—along with her other experiences in the play, especially those with Greek men—tell us something about how a foreigner is Hellenized. At once she is other and one of us, alien and familiar.

“Women of Corinth, I have come out of the house,” she says, as if she were addressing an assembly or a jury: and if these women are like a jury they obviously find for her unanimously.⁴² Medea is playing to an audience and she even talks about other people as spectators.

I know that many people are aloof, some out of sight
others at (outside) the door (215-17).

οἰματῶν ἀπο can be said to describe Medea in the parodos when she remained hidden, speaking through her house; ἐν οὐραϊβίῃ is quite literally her present position. She is liminal and separate, not in the chorus, but potentially at least like them. Her actions here are to avoid their blame which would be a way of making them see her actively as “not one of them.” She is trying to win them over, make them more involved in her life; to make herself one of them. This is a political act, and also aesthetic: she needs them. The presence of an audience also explains why she is grief-stricken in private and collected in public. Like a poet or actor she presents herself, tells her story, revising her past, revising the feelings about marriage and her marriage that her Nurse had

⁴⁰Or has Themis, because she brought Medea to Greece become Jason's fellow-worker in the betrayal?

⁴¹Falkner (1995), “The single most frequent scene in Euripides is that of the elderly in mourning over their loved ones”: 178.

⁴²See Page duBois (1991):20, “The chorus has the collective character of a jury.” Also Ober and Strauss (1990):238, “the physical settings of mass meetings of the people--the Pnyx and the Theater of Dionysos--were very similar in terms of spatial organization.” And “The seating in the theater was egalitarian as it was in the Assembly and in the people's courts.” Of course they are not talking about women.

related. From being a woman who believed in the institution she has moved to a clearer realization that there is no benefit in marriage for women. Though illegitimate children belong to the woman even the children are not hers: Jason will claim them as his (550, 562, 596, 1303).⁴³ Medea calls these women, her audience, “*fiil ai*”, over and over (227, 377, 765, 797, 1116, 1236, most disturbingly at 765 and 797 when the word preceding “friends” is “enemies,” *εχθρῶν*). Later she will reject them and then it is because they do try to keep her as one of themselves when they beg her not to kill her children, trying to protect her from being even more unhappy and alien than she currently is. She tells them that they have not suffered as she has, separating herself from them. But by then she has a wider audience. Creon makes her plight public. Aigeus will widen the audience still further. Her exile and place of asylum give the story an international scope and bring it home to Athens from a foreign, rival city.

Yes, she transgresses by coming into the male/public sphere, but the address is to women who have requested her presence to comfort her, to show friendliness, to say to her the word *fiil a* (182). That is not what is out of place here. No, it is the speech which is alarming.

Though a woman talking to women she puts her thoughts in political terms, speaking of justice (219), of reputation and prejudice (220-1), of citizens and aliens (223-4), and more important, in general of the relation of the individual to the community. “Some people of a quiet way of life,” she continues “get a bad reputation for *r#qumiā* (218 “inactivity, indifference”): of this Paley writes (*ad* 218), “essentially an Athenian sentiment, for it was difficult for any citizen to live wholly *ἀπραγμῶν*, keeping out of the vortex of politics and the popular assembly.” Obviously not so difficult for a woman.

A stranger must adapt to the city;
but I also do not approve of a citizen who is self-willed
and therefore offensive to the citizens out of insensitivity (222-224).

a#naqiā (224) is not only an intellectual flaw, but a moral deficiency.⁴⁴

The speech is perhaps more agglutinative or meditative than coherent.⁴⁵ She has come out so that they, the women of Corinth, will not blame her. She puts blame into a general background

⁴³On the importance of the *agon* between Jason and Medea and especially his calling them “my children” for Medea’s motivation to kill the children, see Shirley A. Barlow, “Euripides’ *Medea*: A Subversive Play?” in Alan Griffiths (ed), *Stage Directions: Essays in Ancient Drama in Honour of E. W. Handley*, Institute of Classical Studies, University of London School of Advanced Study, *BICS Suppl.* 66 (1995):36-45 (41) and Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy*, Oxford, 1996: 154-174.

⁴⁴Verrall *ad* 223, “more particularly it is the want of feeling for others in all shades from cruelty down to rudeness.”

⁴⁵See Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Monolog und Selbstgespräch: Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte der Griechischen Tragödie*, Berlin, 1966:189. On the ideology of the speech, Pucci (1980):61-77.

of people who are different (semnouj 216, “aloof”, “standoffish”). What does this have to do with women or with herself? Or is it in spite of its generalizing tone more particular to her own situation, because unlike most women she does have a public persona? She then divides them (people who are different) into foreigners and natives: this is clearly leading up to her own case. She ends with herself and the shocking thing that has happened to her. Her life is over. She wants to die. Because her husband on whom she depended absolutely has turned out to be kakistoij. Of all men—who are in general unjust—she has singled *one* out, Jason. She moves from general to particular: moi ... poʂij (228-9).

She progresses next (230ff.) from people in general (the default people are men) to women. Women are, of all animate and cognizant creatures, the sorriest (230-1). First a woman has to buy a husband (232-4), as if women “negotiated the exchange.”⁴⁶ But Medea did buy her husband. Are her words here general or particular? What is going on? Is she suggesting a way (to these women and to the audience) of thinking about marriage? Taking a master of the body (of her sexuality 233) like a slave (despothj : the word suggests its opposite, douʂ oj): but in real commerce it is the other way around: the master buys the slave.

Again (at 235) she states the question as an epistemological problem. The aʂwh (“contest,” “struggle”) is to get a bad one or a good one: because women as a rule do not get a second chance (236-7) and they do not have the right to refuse, which is the point of despothn swmataoj. But Medea does get a second chance and she chooses the second king who comes to visit her in the play because with him she can have a relationship of mutual dependency and support. Each is, unfortunately, to betray the other before their contractual relationship begins.

How does this relate to Medea’s inventing herself at each occasion and to the politics of the scene? One Medea in the house, another with the chorus, another with Creon. These bleed together. She reinvents herself for the particular audience (and she even talks about the problems of inventing the right self). A self is always invented. Medea—as a woman, as a foreigner—has had to create a self to conform to the city. As a woman and foreigner she has had to learn what that means.

Every woman is a stranger who has to learn new customs and ways which she could not learn at home: the common ground between Medea and these women is subtly extended. Medea represents it (241) as though women could work it out in such a way that the man would not bear the yoke with violence (biā is also a characteristic of slavery).

Now she turns to a discussion of men. Earlier she had divided humans into strangers and citizens. Men have it easier. they have freedom of movement. They are not, like women,

⁴⁶ As Williamson puts it (in Powell, 1990):18-19.

confined inside. Women depend on *one* person. But she overwhelms the men's self-claimed superiority with the triumph of women in facing danger--women's heroism is equated to that of men, is even greater.

And at last she comes to herself: in the final part Medea isolates herself (as she had done at the end of the first section). All women enter their marital homes as outsiders. But as a political *cehoj*, the *oiĳoj* she formed with Jason is *all* there is for her. As a foreigner she is truly alone; the members of the chorus have their ancestral homes, families, and friends. Medea is without a *polij* (255). Once again she has been forced to learn new ways that she could not learn at home (*mħ\maqouan oiĳoqen*; 239): we can see her learning in the play.

She revises the story to say of herself *l el \$smehh* as if she had left her home under compulsion, to insist that this was not a regular marriage, but that she was carried off as booty like a prisoner of war. And is that not how Jason is treating her, like part of the plunder from a barbarian land? Certainly not as his wife since he has taken a second wife. Later he will claim as his favor to her, that he made her a Hellene. But his treatment of her as a foreign wife who could be kept as a concubine while he married another, native Greek, wife gives the lie to that.

She has no *mother* (as the women of the chorus would have, to stand by them in childbirth and to prepare them for marriage, to be with them at the transitions and rituals, if not more generally); no brother who would be a natural protector and *kuĳioj* in the absence of her father, no kin of any kind to offer refuge. She left her home with the hero; she needed no protector then. In truth she is and has always been her own protector. Of course she is being disingenuous here because she killed her brother, for *him*, for Jason. She is inventing a self for the particular audience she is facing now, the women of the chorus who have a more conventional and more confined life story. She reminds them of what they have: not as much as men, but more than she. And this is a political argument: she is showing them the value of having a *polis* by contrast to herself the *apolis*.⁴⁷

And so she asks for the chorus' support, at least to keep silent. By their silence they agree with her that vengeance is required.

It has been suggested⁴⁸, not unreasonably, that she undercuts her own words at the end of the speech. But is that altogether so? "A woman is full of fear, a coward when it comes to looking at the sword or deeds of valor, but when she is hurt in her marriage..." Medea has already told us what she thinks of war compared to childbearing. And why marriage is so

⁴⁷ On the importance of this aspect of the play and the character see Friedrich (1993):*passim*.

⁴⁸ By Margaret Williamson (1990). See Pucci's sensitive remarks about Medea's speaking of women "with the abusive language of society" (1980):64.

important to women. For Medea deeds of valor, men's heroism, are nothing compared to women's: this is what she teaches the chorus. And she has rejected as wrong-headedness the usual lie about women having an easier life (250). Does this masculinize her? I am not sure, since she does keep intact the structural distinction (men are valuable as warriors, women as mothers). Men have often in the past killed their innocent children to advance a war. In the heroic male undertaking, it is permissible to sacrifice whatever is in the way. Medea transfers this to the women's world and we are shocked. "You had the gall to kill them because of your marriage (bed)." "Do you think this is a trifling matter for a woman?" (1367-8). She reforms the servile status of women. Aigeus, up to a point, thinks she should accept it, but not so the women of the chorus.

The chorus agrees to abet her revenge by keeping silence: no time to think: here comes Creon. The chorus in this play (as in many others) provides a useful function (in one of its roles): as the naive audience (called by the theorists the "narrative audience"). Agreeing with Medea when she is in the right, trying to stop her when she goes too far, wanting to save the children, as if children were really being killed inside. They add a dimension to our experience by experiencing in reality and real time what we experience as fiction and by experiencing as a group what we can for the most part now only experience as individuals. The chorus is one guide to reactions to a play. It does not tell us what the original audience felt at each given time in the play. Some members of the Athenian audience of 431 B.C.E. must have been more surprised by Medea's remarks about marriage than the chorus appears to be, for example. But the chorus does present a possible reaction by women to this highly charged political statement.

Conclusions: eif a)hhr, oudei) a)hhr

The complementarity of male/female roles is usually reflected in the pol ij /oi)koj polarity. But Medea is the *diplomat*. Her role both affirms and breaks down the male/female pol ij /oi)koj distinction. The life without danger within the house attributed to women by men is not the life Medea has led. Instead she deals with the other oi)koi and she teaches the women of the chorus their political roles.

By the end of the play the political element is nearly eclipsed by religious awe and human horror. In the exodos the might of kings is seen to be nothing compared to the ferocity of Medea's qumof and the power of her divinely sanctioned revenge.⁴⁹ Yes, she is indeed able to kill the kings and get away with it. Getting away with killing her children is never a question: of course she does not get away with it; she has sacrificed what was most dear to her. Corinth as a pol ij has lost its tu)anoi and gained a new sacred ritual. The life of the pol ij goes on with the

⁴⁹David Kovacs, "Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*," *AJP* 114 (1993): 45-70 (49-52).

continuation of its οἰκοί, despite the unnatural interference of the royal family in private homes. The chorus ends affirming, sadly, but with new insight, the stewardship of Zeus (1415).

Medea ends as *apolis* but it has been a long process in the play itself. The laws under which the self-satisfied chauvinistic Jason claims she lives do not apply to her. How could she have respect for such a society, for Greek law and order? How could it *mean* anything to her at all? Her answer is devastation on both levels. She destroys both *polis* (by killing the king) and *oikos* (her own, Jason's, and Creon's).⁵⁰ Her destructiveness, though on both levels, is not absolute. The city-state continues in the households of the Corinthians, represented by the chorus. The king's house is wiped out and so is Jason's. But he was only an intruder in their lives. Creon, it turns out, was right to fear Medea, but only because he wronged her and she is able to succeed only with his (and others') participation.

When words and reason fail the only recourse is to action, tragically often, to violent action. Medea's actions are horrendous. But where do they fit in— in the drama and in life? Human life can be realized only in society. Human beings can live together and form a community (a *polis*) only when they have *dikh* and *αιδωμ* (“justice” and “respect”, cf. Plato, *Protagoras* 322c-d). Medea has been denied these (*αιδωμ* is gone, 439 and justice has been shown to be the whim of the powerful) and driven from the *polis*. A person in isolation *can* not follow the rules, something we see again and again in the stories of disturbed, lonely, and desperate filicides. If Medea has been turned into a savage being, it does not mean that a woman—an abominable child-killer—has triumphed over civilization. When we look at the political aspects of the play, a new dimension comes into focus: a person denied her share of the civilizing power and protection of the *polis* cannot be fully human.

The same story does not apply to you and me
you have a community (πολις) and home... (252-3).

The story of the *Medea* is individual and unique and because it is personal it can also be universally and politically meaningful.

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⁵⁰ See McDermott (1989):81-106 on Medea's offenses against both civic and familial *trophe*.
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