

Protofeminist or Misogynist?

*Medea* as a case study of gendered discourse

in Euripidean drama

by

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Although experts and laypersons alike know well that ancient Greece was overwhelmingly misogynist and patriarchal, nevertheless there have been numerous attempts to salvage voices from the classical world at least sympathetic to the plight of women. The ancient texts and archaeological remains have been culled and analyzed repeatedly in the often vain attempt to find authentic feminine or feminist voices from the overwhelmingly negative evaluation of women by patriarchal Greece. Too often these attempts have been wholly, or at least largely, abject failures, and many have turned elsewhere (such as to Celtic peoples) in the hopes of finding feminist voices in the ancient world (Hutton 250-51). Nonetheless, many continue to peruse the Greek literary tradition and archaeological remnants for non-misogynist voices. Euripides, at least within fairly recent history, is for many just such a voice. For such advocates of Euripides, the verdict ranges for him as “in no way... a misogynist” (March 63) to Euripides as a “champion of woman’s equality” (Wright 7). If the evidence indeed points to Euripides as somewhat of a proto-feminist, his play *Medea* is the best place to start an examination for pro-feminine views. In no other play does Euripides portray a woman who so completely subverts feminine norms and overcomes masculine bonds. His mythic figure survives today as a figure of the sacred feminine (Johnson 61; Percovich 35-6), even becoming a part of feminist ritual in Wicca and other neopagan spiritualities (Ravenwolf 114, 297). To be sure, *Medea* is not featured solely in Euripides, but given that his depiction of *Medea* was highly influential and replicated to some extent by most later authors (Mastrorarde 52), the *Medea* viewed as a figure of feminine power in modernity is at least in part dependent on Euripides.

Unfortunately, upon close examination of the text of *Medea* and its presentation, the evidence for Euripides as anything but another masculine voice seeking to put females in their place all but disappears. At best, his play did seek to make the males in the audience squirm, but not only was his desire anything but painting women as oppressed or worthy of consideration, the effect of his plays would have also encouraged greater suspicion and scorn by males of females. Euripides' *Medea* indeed questioned prevailing norms and beliefs, primarily those of the heroic masculine ethic, but it did so at the expense of women, not in their support.

Before examining Euripides' negative and dangerous portrayal of Medea, it is important to survey some of the evidence marshaled by those who believe pro-feminine sentiments may be found within *Medea*. The first discourse in *Medea* pointed to by critics seeking to paint a non-misogynist Euripides is Medea's opening speech. A more detailed analysis of this speech is offered below, but what is important here is to note how others have attempted to view Medea's speech as Euripides' direction of social criticism against prevailing norms and his sympathy with the plight of women in ancient Greece. Knox calls the speech more than simply "rhetoric," stating that it "must also reflect some contemporary reality" (311). The speech contains "explosive potential" as a piece of social criticism still relevant in understanding women's position in society today (Knox 313). Hadas calls the speech "a fine feminist harangue" and notes that "when the English suffragettes were campaigning for the vote they opened their meetings with a recital of it..." (81). Medea, in the speech Euripides has her deliver, is "rebutting a critique of marriage from the male viewpoint—a critique whose essential spirit of dislike and contempt of women goes back to an ancient anti-feministic tradition..." (Reckford 336).

Further, “Medea has been treated unjustly by men, and her eloquent indictment of women’s lot is never denied” (Foley 265).

Other evidence pointed to in support of Euripides as a proto-feminist is his creation of Medea’s personality and his portrayal of her as a strong and independent woman. She is difficult to see as “a meek and subdued *Hausfrau*” (McDermott 47). “Medea is clever, certainly, as she herself admits—σοφῆ—a woman of great intellectual capacity” (March 38). Knox also calls her “a clever woman” (Knox 313) and says of her speech on the possession of such an attribute (292-305) that “[t]hese lines have sometimes been seen as Euripides’ bitter reflections on his own isolation as an advanced and intellectual poet. There is much truth in this view, but the lines are also Medea’s, the complaint of a woman of great intellectual capacity who finds herself excluded from the spheres of power and action” (314).

Even the child murder, the single act most likely to appear monstrous to readers (or viewers) of any epoch or society, is seen by some as a deliberate attempt by Euripides to vividly portray in a sympathetic light the plight of women:

But Euripides made Medea herself choose to murder [her children] as part—indeed the most hurtful part—of her revenge against Jason. This is new; and it perhaps sounds at first as if this might tell in favour of the idea that Euripides was hostile to women. But in fact it turns out to have quite the opposite result, because of the way Euripides treats his material...Euripides has created this new Medea who chooses to kill her own children. He shows us with painful insight and utterly without condemnation the mind of the woman who has the ability to do such a

murderous deed: the torment before the final decision, the ultimate grief, and, here in the final scene, the inevitable results. Medea is now finally untouched, untouchable by human hands (1320) and by human emotions... (March 35-6; 43)

In short, it appears there is a good deal of evidence to support the view that Euripides' desire was not only to portray Medea as a beleaguered woman desperate to overcome adversity, but also to illustrate how grievously women in his society are injured by an oppressive patriarchy. With all of this evidence mustered together, one may well state that, as Schlesinger puts it, "bei Euripides dagegen ist die Welt des Mannes vollkommen enthumanisiert<sup>1</sup>" (45).

Unfortunately, all the various excerpts, speeches, or scenes which critics have leapt upon as evidence that Euripides was sympathetic to women's oppression in his society rely on misconstruing the author's intent, misinterpreting his meaning, and tearing various lines free of the overall narrative of the play. Once all of these excerpts touted as evidence of the proto-feminist nature of Euripides are reinserted into the play's overall narrative, Euripides' actual intent may be understood.

Before examining the play in detail, it is important to identify three levels of analysis of the play, all of which are intimately entangled. The first is the narrative level (the world of the text itself). The narrative remains the same (barring scribal interpolations and other such alterations) as when Euripides wrote the play, and does not change regardless of audience. Another level, however, is "spectatorial level" or the level at which various audiences' reaction to the play may be analyzed. Unlike the narrative, no audience can be extricated from its cultural and social background, and so this level of

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<sup>1</sup> "in Euripides, therefore, is the world of men completely dehumanized."

analysis differs as the audience does. This is especially true as the analysis of the spectatorial level here seeks to understand the most likely reactions of an ancient Athenian audience. This audience was likely primarily (if not entirely) male (Foley 245). To perfectly reconstruct the reaction of Euripides' audience is impossible; nonetheless an imperfect reconstruction may be tentatively proposed, and some probable general conjectures will aid in determining the difference between the ancient spectators of *Medea* and modern critics. The final level is the authorial level, a term borrowed from Rabinowitz (127), though used somewhat differently here. This level is equivalent to "authorial intent" or "authorial meaning." In other words, what Euripides himself intended in any given passage or line as well as in the play taken as a whole. As with the spectatorial level for the original audience, this analysis at this level is only an imperfect reconstruction, but some educated guesses based on the text itself and the cultural milieu would not be misplaced.

To begin at the beginning, Euripides does paint Medea as an initially sympathetic character. The audience is not introduced to Medea herself (apart from cries of anguish from within the house) until over two hundred lines into the play. By this time, the audience has already been lured into a false sense of security by the Nurse's description of events, not to mention Medea's various emotional "outbursts" which would have conformed to prevalent (and current) gender stereotypes (see below).

The Medea described by the nurse is not the calculating, dangerous, frightening figure the audience is later introduced to. "Though the Nurse and Chorus are clearly afraid of what she might do, Euripides plays down the fearfulness as he establishes Medea's right to her sorrow and anger" (Rabinowitz 128). Medea lies in the house (the

appropriate place for a submissive Greek female) ἄσιτος<sup>2</sup> (24), wasting away with tears and in emotional anguish (24-25), completely distraught in the betrayal of her husband. Although the Nurse does drop several hints of the damage Medea may do, the portrait she paints is one of a woman in grief and anguish, bereft of what every woman needs: her male supporters. On the authorial level, Euripides carefully manipulates his primarily male audience into pitying Medea's plight. He makes it very clear that she has submitted (ξυμφερουσ', 13) to Jason in the "proper" manner, as this is the greatest "security" for any woman (14). Also, "[c]ontrary to what we might expect, the Nurse says that the *sōtēria* comes about not when husband and wife do not fight but when 'the wife does not disagree with her husband.' The Nurse obviously puts all the burden of responsibility on the wife..." (Pucci 37).

Shortly after, when the Chorus first interjects into the dialogue, Medea utters several cries from within the house. These cries are carefully crafted at the authorial level to reinforce the picture of Medea as "merely" a submissive wife emotionally distraught because she has done everything to help her husband and is nonetheless rejected.

"Skillfully contrived is the choral passage in which we first hear the agonized voice of Medea from offstage. If we had been prepared to see a woman of monstrous power and witchery, a being of preternatural passion and resource, we are deceived... Medea's first cry, we should recall, is the longing to kill herself" (Musurillo 54). As these four lines are

the first words uttered by Medea, it is worth looking at them in their entirety: ἰώ/

δύστανος ἐγὼ μελέα τε πόνων/ ἰώ μοί μοι, πῶς ἄν ὀλοίμαν!<sup>3</sup> (96-97)

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<sup>2</sup> Without food (From Mastronarde's text of the Medea)

<sup>3</sup> Oh, a wretch am I and miserable in my labors! Alas, alas, would that I were destroyed!

Her cry contains no plans, no invective against her husband, no curses, not even any anger. They are merely anguished pleas for death (literally, a wish for destruction) from a “wretched” woman. Although her next outburst does contain curses against Jason (111-114), it is again clearly the cries of a stereotypically emotional woman to be pitied, not to be feared. Her next cry, like her first emotional eruption, is again a wish for the release of death, for a φλόξ οὐρανία<sup>4</sup> through her head, freedom from a hateful (στυγεράν) life (144-147). On the authorial level, Euripides has carefully made Medea into the stereotypical woman: “emotional,” “self-deprecating” and “prone to ask favours or forgiveness,” as in her begging to the gods to witness her plight (Barlow 163). At the spectatorial level, even Euripides’ misogynist audience can feel pity for such a creature, without a male guardian and wishing for death over betrayal, especially after she has “properly” submitted to Jason. Yet pity is not sympathy, and it is certainly not empathy. Medea is at this point more or less “safe,” despite the warnings of potential danger. The audience would know from their store of received myth (and the Nurse’s hints) that something bad is almost certain to happen, but Euripides’ deliberate downplay of Medea’s supernatural powers and his casting of her as the “typical female” would invite the audience to think that perhaps Euripides intended to alter the myth. Ironically, this is indeed what happens, but not in the way they have been led to believe.

The first hint that all is not as it appears occurs when Medea comes out of the house at the behest of the Chorus (214). This is appropriate, because it involves her transgression into the “male” sphere: “When Medea, in this play, emerges with the words ‘I have come out of the house’ (ἐξῆλθον δόμων, 214), her statement can be read symbolically as a movement from the private sphere of the house into the public one—

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<sup>4</sup> Bolt from heaven (lightning).

normally associated with men—of the city” (Williamson 17). Her discourse with the Chorus begins with the speech, much of which (esp. 231-54) has been interpreted by many as social criticism by Euripides of women’s position in ancient Greece. Indeed, from a modern point of view, it is easy to read it as such. According to Medea, women are trapped without any recourse in a society which overwhelmingly favors men. No wonder many of the points she makes are so taken to heart by critics; they are still prevalent today.

Yet it is important to keep in mind the spectatorial level of analysis, which is here concerned with Euripides’ audience. His spectators had not been exposed to over a century of increasingly frequent and penetrating social criticism by women. Far more so than today, this audience would have been suspicious of any such talk. They also would have recognized immediately that much of what Medea said was false, and crafted at the authorial level as a deliberate attempt by Medea to deceive the Chorus and win its aid.

First of all, gone is the hyperemotional Medea wishing only for death and a curse upon her betrayer. She is rational, calculating, reasoning, and collected, and resembles in no way what the audience has been prepared for: “[h]er calmness is remarkable after the Nurse’s attempts in the opening scene to prepare us for a tearful, near hysterical woman” (Barlow 160). Secondly, one aspect of her speech would ring clearly false on the spectatorial level of the original audience: Medea makes women the “active” participants in what is really a passive (on the part of the female) exchange of women by males. Medea claims that it is women who must “buy” (πρίσθαι) their husbands (232-234). In reality:

Medea's account of the giving of dowries contains a subtle distortion: she again represents the woman as an active partner in the transaction...In fact, once again, it would be a woman's father who engaged in the transaction, not the woman herself; and her dowry, rather than being exchanged for a husband, would both accompany her and, if she was divorced, return with her. Medea is here representing all women as practitioners of exchange, just as she herself contracted her own marriage...(Williamson 19)

Not only has Medea misrepresented the process, she has also misrepresented herself. The situation she portrays (231-237) does not apply to her. She talks of women not only having to pay a dowry, but having to passively accept marriage to a man as a fact of life. Yet "[t]here is a blatant contrast between Medea's adoption as her own of the common woman's plight (214ff.) and both her standard mythic characterization as an aggressive, dangerous woman and the Nurse's direct characterization of her as *deinē*: "terrible" (44)..." (McDermott 48). Medea did not passively accept her situation at all. By her own admission she actively aided Jason at the expense of her own home (482-3), even killing her brother (167). Foley notes, "as several critics have pointed out, her eloquent first speech on the wrongs of women deceptively applies only in part to herself. For Medea is far from the passive victim of marriage and masculine brutality that she claims to be" (259).

The deception, on a narrative level, is clearly designed to win over the Chorus and achieve their help. On the spectatorial level, however, this speech would have made the Athenian audience uneasy. Medea is no longer the hysterical woman, but is (and not for

the last time) using the stereotypically “feminine” weapon of deception to achieve her ends, which are increasingly destructive. At the authorial level, Euripides has continued to keep his audience in the dark. Medea has now stated openly (261-2) that she plans to find a way to pay back her husband (asking the Chorus in lines 260-1 to keep silent ἦν μοι πόρος τις μηχανή τ’ ἐξευρεθῆ / πόσιν δίκην τῶνδ’ ἀντιτείσασθαι κακῶν<sup>5</sup>. She has not, however, revealed the form her revenge will take. All the audience knows is that she will attempt to exact some form of punishment and that her depiction by the Nurse and her own outcries as being a woman in the throes of “feminine” passion have belied the calculating, deceptive, and clever true nature of Medea. To an already intensely misogynist audience in fifth century Athens, this would not be a welcomed revelation. This unease would only grow with the discourse between Medea and the male characters which follows. Medea continues to use her “feminine charm” (Musurillo 61) to manipulate Creon, Aegeus, and finally Jason, each time moving Euripides’ male audience further from pity and into fear, suspicion, and finally loathing.

In the discourse between Medea and Creon, Medea uses “traditionally ‘feminine’ weapons” (Foley 258) to manipulate Creon into allowing her to remain a day longer, giving her time to wreak her revenge. Immediately after the discourse between Creon and Medea, Creon departs and Medea addresses the Chorus (and the audience) once more. Her speech to the sympathetic Chorus would have unnerved the male audience entirely. First, she says that she would never have fawned (θωπεύσαι) over Creon if she didn’t have some design (τεχνωμένην) or something to gain (368-69). She then announces her plans to make τρεῖς τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν νεκροῦς<sup>6</sup> (374). Here again Euripides plays

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<sup>5</sup> If I discover some way or means to exact a penalty for these wrongs from my husband

<sup>6</sup> Three corpses out of my enemies

with his audience, because he makes it seem that the only murders she is planning were expected (although by now the audience would have lost a fair amount of pity for her and would look less favorably than the Chorus at this revenge), namely, the murders of Creon, his daughter, and Jason. Her demeanor has changed wholly from the stereotypical and pitiable “submissive female” victim to a “dangerous female” of the sort sure to provoke misogynistic anxiety: “Here Medea’s transformation is quite startling: her boldness knows no obstacle, and she is completely fearless. For the first time she indicates the source of her powers, Hecate...” (Mursurillo 55). This mention of the dark goddess (397), associated with witchcraft, would only serve to bolster the connections (downplayed at first) between the Medea of Euripides and the Medea the Witch-Goddess of myth. If this is not enough, Medea also states that, given the opportunity (which will be miraculously provided by Aegeus’ unexpected entrance later) she will use potions (φαρμάκοις) to kill her enemies (385). After all, in Medea’s own words (written by her masculine author) “We women are by nature (πεφύκαμεν) without means for noble things (ἔσθλ’) but are the most crafty devisers (σοφώταται τέκτονες) in all things wicked (407-9).

Medea finally has begun to reveal her association with another one of the “feminine arts” feared by males: witchcraft. In fact, it was the figure of Medea specifically which “lent itself to the exploration of malign magic power as the particular province of women” (Gordon 180). Furthermore, “[a]lmost all of the detailed and distinctive portraits of witches in mainstream classical literature are of women” (Ogden 62). The later European conception of witches as ugly old women was actually created by the Greek and Roman authors (Hutton 256). Interestingly enough, one of the few sources

for women's voices "unfiltered" through masculine authors comes from archaeological findings of curse tablets (Ogden 62). Ogden even suggests that the survival of female voices via this medium may lend credence to the view that women actually did engage in witchcraft more than men (62). This is very speculative, and, even if true, it is little to be wondered at that an oppressed group would use the stereotype already applied to them in a desperate ploy for power over lives dominated by masculine oppressors. What is certain from the copious survival of masculine voices from antiquity is that women as witches, and users of potions and drugs, was a common "role" ascribed to women by males, and one more reason to fear and therefore control them. Medea's mention of her plans to use these very devices, which she proceeds to do, would be most unwelcome. Euripides has stirred dangerous and misogynistic fears in his audience, and it is difficult to see how he does this with any other motivation than to cast suspicion and dislike upon his feminine antihero.

Notable also is the response the Chorus sings to Medea's announcement of her plot. First, the Chorus rejoices that finally men will get their comeuppance and women will receive honor (φάμα) at last (410-20). This is important because, although Medea initially seems to appear as the champion of women, Euripides (as will be seen) intends not only to have Medea destroy any semblance she may have had (to an Athenian audience, at any rate) as a champion of women, but also to cause even the Chorus to abandon her. Also interesting here is that the Chorus declares that it is the plans (βουλαί) of men that are deceitful (δόλιαι) not women (413). This claim of a reversal of stereotypes would have immediately been determined to be wholly false by the Athenian audience: "It is Medea who has just exposed her 'deceitful plans', and whose mastery of

strategy has been revealed in the exchange with Creon” (Williamson 28). The Chorus, in a declaration of gender reversal, has cemented the stereotypes that much further by the false tones of their song.

The discourse between Medea and Jason (446-626) is perhaps the most misunderstood part of the play. McDermott’s comment on the “patent sophistry of Jason’s feeble self-justification” (79) is a fairly typical evaluation of the effectiveness and legitimacy of Jason’s arguments. In truth, for a modern audience, Jason’s calm and overly “rational” argument is entirely unconvincing, and is indeed reminiscent of the sophists. His claim to have left Medea and his children “for their own good” (559-560) seems demonstrably false. However, keeping in mind the cultural biases and deep misogyny of the Attic audience, it is likely this speech sounded far more convincing to its original audience than it does to a modern one. As McDermott states, “it must be conceded that the sins of the husband which prompted this revenge were not so great in the eyes of the author’s society” (29). Furthermore, although McDermott takes for granted that Jason has committed the “crime” of divorce—which, as she says herself, was a “commonplace affair in fifth-century Athenian society” (30)—not everyone would agree that the union between Jason and Medea would have been considered so lawful. The oaths between Jason and Medea did not form a usual part of Greek marriage (Rabinowitz 138,139), and the clasping of hands Medea refers to is likewise not typical in Athenian marriage, in which husbands grasped not the hand but the wrist of their wives “in a gesture of domination” (Foley 259). Medea has not been given by a male guardian (κύριος) as required for a legal marriage (Palmer 51). In short, “[w]e would call her today a common-law wife” (Palmer 51), not a customary Greek wife.

Of course, this does not mean that even in Greek eyes Jason owed Medea nothing. However, at the spectatorial level, the Athenian audience (unlike a modern one) may have considered Jason's obligations to Medea met: "By a public standard, Jason has satisfied his marital obligation toward Medea and returned favor for favor by bringing her to Greece..." (Walsh 295). Having satisfied the least of his obligations to his "wife" required by Athenian custom, Jason "is now consummating a perfectly conventional marriage, one based neither on oaths nor on desire for the partner but on a desire for the connection the marriage offers" (Rabinowitz 140). This new marriage "must be seen in the context of the citizenship law of 451 BC, which...marginalized marriages with non-Athenians" (Seaford 170; cf. Palmer 51). Jason's primary concern, like all Greek males, was to "have sons to carry on his family line" (McDermott 40). As Palmer notes, it is likely that Jason's sons by Medea could not have fulfilled this role, as they would have been considered "bastards" and therefore unable to "inherit, nor, worse still for Jason, can they carry out the sacred rites of the family religion—those rites which perpetuate the continuity of the family" (52). So as despicable as Jason's reply to Medea may seem to a modern audience, in the social context of the original audience Jason's response would have been far more convincing, and the new (and more conventional) marriage he has now entered into would have been deemed prudent. With this in mind, Medea's later destruction of this new bond "given the represented similarity between her and other women, on the [spectatorial] level... would [make it] seem that women's sexuality is dangerous to the very institution that requires it. The text both ascribes sexual desire to women and renders that desire problematic" (Rabinowitz 141).

The next discourse between Medea and the various males she manipulates occurs between Medea and the Athenian king Aegeus, the last male to be maneuvered (663-778). Once again Medea plays a helpless and wronged victim (although by now on the spectatorial she is no longer believable) to manipulate him. The fact that Medea is now not manipulating a foreign king or the legendary Jason, but a legendary Athenian king would have been particularly unsettling to the Athenian audience: “It would be self evident to an Athenian audience that their ancestral king would keep his oath, and alarming that a barbarian woman would exploit his integrity” (Fletcher 34). At the authorial level, Euripides has now erased any pity his audience had for Medea, and replaced it with both fear and loathing.

Euripides is not finished, however. He has one last weapon in his arsenal to transform Medea from the pitied victim to the ultimately dangerous woman: her murder of her children. It is likely that this is Euripides’ own innovation (McDermott 9-24; cf. Rabinowitz 146). Additionally, Euripides’ has repeatedly misdirected his audience until the final moment of revelation to keep the fate of the children unknown (McDermott 33-42). As McDermott aptly states, “Euripides weaves to unweave” (65). However, although she envisions a more or less sympathetic audience until the announcement, in truth Euripides has begun to “unweave” his portrayal of Medea as victim from the moment she steps onto the stage. The announcement that she will murder her own children is simply the last and most “grotesque” (McDermott 49) of his unweaving. Truly it has become evident “that nothing which seemed true at the beginning is true. Medea is not the helpless victim; she is a victimizer. She is not the protectress of her family; she is its worst enemy” (McDermott 66). Even the Chorus, at the announcement of her final plans

(791-2), cries out in protest, pleading with her (ἀννέπω) not to carry out her plans, they contravene the “laws of mortals” (νόμοις βροτῶν), and they cannot help her in such plans (811-13). They now reject her as no longer one of them, telling Medea she will be ἀθλιωτάτη γυνή!<sup>7</sup> (818). The Chorus is anguished, having lost the one who was to be their champion:

[T]hrough the chorus, we have already seen how the female voice, silenced for centuries, lacks the confidence and authority necessary to make a reply to a long masculine tradition. The women of the chorus hoped to find this voice in Medea... Later, aware... that they have lost their spokeswoman—or, in fact, that they never had one—the previously timid women struggle to give voice to the female muse in themselves and fail (1081-1115). (Foley 265)

The murder of Medea’s children by their mother is, at the authorial level, Euripides twisting the knife to open completely the wound he has inflicted upon women. Although to many modern critics her final act may be seen as vindication of a woman wronged who has succeeded in escaping masculine bonds, at the spectatorial level of the Athenian audience the murder of her children “supports the continued control of actual women because it makes Medea’s very freedom terrifying” (Rabinowitz 150). The fact that Euripides has taken pains to depict Medea as a female like other females “makes her most terrifying, for she is not a victim and not vulnerable—that is, not feminine—yet she has been identified as and with other women” (Rabinowitz 132). Euripides’ depiction of Medea created for each male in his audience a “queasy *phobos* for himself, his sex, and the social order of fifth-century Athens” (McDermott 31). With all of the above

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<sup>7</sup> The most miserable woman!

understood, it is impossible to recognize, at least at the authorial level, Medea as a figure of feminine power standing for women's rights, nor the play as a work of proto-feminist literature. Euripides has increased male fear and anxiety of women. He has not increased or inspired empathy for women.

But it would be a mistake to think that misogyny was his central purpose. Rather, his denunciation of and attack against women was merely peripheral to his central goal. Several critics have pointed out that Euripides takes pains to place Medea's dialogue and even her actions within the heroic mold, particularly the Sophoclean hero (Knox 296-8; McDermott 55; Foley 243, 245; Williamson 25). Euripides uses Medea as an antihero, a tool to criticize traditional heroic masculine ethics. Schlesinger (quoted above) was right to say that Euripides dehumanizes the world of men, but this comes at a price, not a benefit, to women. What better way to question the traditional heroic mold than to place the ultimate anti-masculine (the feminine) into this mold? As Foley points out, when Euripides uses Medea, "a barbarian woman, to display the contradictions inherent in the heroic ethic and behavior, Euripides has achieved a particularly devastating and grotesque demonstration of the problematic (and above all self-destructive) nature of this archaic heroism—and one he might have hesitated to make through a Greek or male protagonist" (266). Euripides compounds his critique by supplementing Medea's adoption of masculine ethics with her use of stereotypically feminine weapons of deceit, drugs, and witchcraft. Even her deadly gifts to the Princess are traditionally feminine products of the loom (Rabinowitz 143). The only point at which she picks up the masculine and phallic weapon of the sword is to slaughter her own children. It would be

difficult to imagine a more devastating critique of masculine heroic ethics, or a more destructive portrait (for women) of the potentially dangerous nature of females.

*Medea* was not intended to be a social critique on the status of women. Although Euripides does portray Medea as initially pitiable, the Medea at the beginning of the play stands in stark contrast with the terrifying witch-demon who escapes in a chariot given to her by her divine grandfather Helios, pulled by dragons, having murdered Creon and the Princess (in a particularly gruesome manner) and her own children. These presentations of Medea should not be seen as separate, but rather, as Lesky says, as far “eine durchaus einheitliche Gestalt” is concerned, “eine Entscheidung möglich ist, wenn wir auf das Wort des Dichters hören<sup>8</sup>” (92). When this is done, it becomes apparent that Euripides’ Medea “ist nicht aus verschiedenen Teilen zusammengesetzt<sup>9</sup>...” (Lesky 92). Rather, Medea (or rather, Euripides) has deceived not only the Chorus, Creon, Aegeus, and Jason, but also the audience. The author then continues to build suspicion and fear in the audience, until his final portrayal of Medea as a true demon. He reverses every statement Medea and the Chorus make concerning the plight of women by reinforcing the necessity of masculine control. For this reason, Euripides is clearly as misogynist and harmful to women as his male contemporaries. Only by ignoring the narrative level as a whole, not to mention the authorial level and spectatorial level of an Athenian audience, is it possible to see *Medea* in any other light. As Rabinowitz fittingly states at the close of her chapter on *Medea*, “we can look for traces of female subjectivity, but let us not fool ourselves that Euripides applauds it” (154). He is not a proto-feminist, but has constructed Medea in a way that can only reinforce masculine supremacy. Perhaps other

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<sup>8</sup> An entirely consistent figure... a judgment is possible, if we listen to the words of the poet.

<sup>9</sup> Is not a conglomerate

ancient authors may be found more sensitive to the situation of women—Euripides is clearly not such a voice.

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