




2013-06-13

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Maggie Sharon Hoyt

*Brigham Young University - Provo*

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Giving Birth to Empowerment:

Motherhood and Autonomy

in Greek Tragedy

Maggie S. Hoyt

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Cecilia M. Peek, Chair

Stephen M. Bay

Carl Sederholm

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

Brigham Young University

June 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### Giving Birth to Empowerment: Motherhood and Autonomy in Greek Tragedy

Maggie S. Hoyt

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, BYU  
Master of Arts

The Greek tragedies of Classical Athens frequently portray mothers in central roles, but despite this significance, the relationship between mother and child has long been overshadowed in secondary scholarship by the relationship between husband and wife. This study demonstrates the direct relationship between a female character's active possession of her children and her autonomy, or her ability to act in her own interests, in three plays of Euripides: *Electra*, *Medea*, and *Ion*. In general, women who internalize their ownership of their children, expressed on stage both in word and action, have greater influence over the men around them and the power to enact the revenge they desire. Once their ends have been achieved, however, these tragic mothers often devalue their relationship with their children, leading to a decrease in power that restores the supremacy of the patriarchal order.

Within this broad framework, Euripides achieves different results by adjusting aspects of this cycle of maternal empowerment. The *Electra* follows this outline just as its predecessor the *Oresteia* does; however, Euripides invents a fictional child for Electra, extending the concept of maternal empowerment to Electra and defining Clytemnestra as both mother and grandmother. In *Medea*, Euripides demonstrates the significance of Medea's children to her power, and Medea does devalue her children enough to destroy them, the source of her influence, but she is not punished and cannot be reabsorbed into the patriarchal structure, which leaves an audience with a heightened sense of anxiety at the threat of maternal empowerment. Finally, the *Ion* initially demonstrates a cycle similar to *Medea*: empowered by her ownership of the child she believes she has lost, Creusa attempts revenge against the young man who threatens her but is in fact her lost son. In the end, however, Creusa uses her empowerment to achieve recognition between mother and son and voluntarily relinquishes her ownership, resulting in a peaceful reabsorption into patriarchal society and a happy ending. Despite the variations on this cycle presented by Euripides, one theme persists: motherhood was both empowering and threatening, and it required strict male control to avoid tragic results. Thus as scholars of tragedy, we cannot ignore the mother-child relationship, not only for its power to illuminate the feminine, but also for its capacity to reveal the vulnerabilities of the masculine.

Keywords: Greek tragedy, motherhood, Euripides, Electra, Medea, Ion, Oresteia

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Peek, my committee chair, for her encouragement, confidence, constructive comments, and patience; Dr. Bay and Dr. Sederholm, my committee members, for their thoughtful responses and guidance, often at the last minute; my mother for the hours spent reading and editing; my family members and friends for their support; my fellow graduate students for their aid in the development of this project; and especially to BYU Graduate Studies for the Graduate Research Fellowship that enabled the completion of this study.

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## Introduction

The treatment of women in Classical Athenian society is famous for its unfairness, its repression of female thought, and its refusal of women's rights. As Pericles states in Thucydides' portrayal of his Funeral Oration:

τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χείροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἡ  
δόξα καὶ ἣς ἂν ἐπ' ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ ψόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος  
ἦ.

Your greatest glory is not to be inferior to what God has made you, and the greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you (II.45.2).<sup>1</sup>

This echoes the isolation of women within the home demonstrated in forensic evidence and other sources, where we discover that women lacked the fundamental rights of citizenship: the ability to own property, the power to represent herself in court, or a voice in the affairs of the state.<sup>2</sup> To modern western audiences, certainly, the curtailment of freedom is astonishing and distasteful. Movement was restricted, voices were silenced, and options were limited.

Such a portrayal, however, would appear to neglect the evidence of one of the greatest contemporary sources for fifth-century Athens: tragedy. Of the surviving Greek tragedies, only *Philoctetes* contains no female characters, and the women in these plays are portrayed in situations outside the norm of their stay-at-home counterparts. As A.W. Gomme said in 1925:

Ismene... does not censure Antigone (and herself) for appearing outside the gynaeconitis and still more for proposing to walk through the streets of Thebes.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Rex Warner, Penguin Classics, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> For summaries and discussions of a woman's place in ancient Athens, see especially Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*; Foley, "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama," 127-68; Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*; Clark, *Women in the Ancient World*; and Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece*.

Neither does Medea hurry indoors when the stranger Aegeus appears, and the latter—a perfectly respectable Athenian—does not seem to expect her to.<sup>3</sup>

Our social assumptions of Athenian women seem contradicted in Greek tragedy, especially in the voice it offers its characters. Greek tragic women seem to form a sort of paradox: they must be based in reality, and yet they do not seem to represent their real-life counterparts very well at all.<sup>4</sup> These contradictions have led many scholars of Greek tragedy to attempt to illuminate the gap between tragedy and reality, which reveals the role women did play in society: Greek women participated in religious festivals and were known for exercising persuasive power in family councils, even though such persuasion was not always appreciated.<sup>5</sup> Still, these actions pale in comparison to Clytemnestra's rule over Argos in Agamemnon's absence or Medea's bargaining of her own marriage contract. The world of Greek tragedy, therefore, is not entirely real; although it represents reality, it has its own rules and customs.

Although such an approach to women in Greek tragedy is necessary, it is frequently frustrating, as we do not have all the evidence needed to disentangle reality from drama. Furthermore, we have not yet accounted for all the layers that remove tragedy from reality. Most importantly, the powerful women portrayed on stage were written by men, played by men, and viewed at least mostly by men, causing us to question even further the accuracy with which tragic women represent actual women.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gomme, "The Position of Women," 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, for arguments for the similarities between tragic women and their real-life counterparts, see Seidensticker, "Women on the Tragic Stage," 151-173; Easterling, "Women in Tragic Space," 15-26.

<sup>5</sup> For example, both Solon and several fourth-century orators considered female advice particularly dangerous in cases of inheritance (See Plutarch's *Solon* 21.2-3, Isaeus 6.48, 2.19, and Demosthenes 46.14). On the other hand, Lysias tells a story of a widow who offers sound counsel on behalf of her children (32.12-18). For a discussion of these and other examples, see Foley, *Female Acts*, 273-5.

<sup>6</sup> The debate over whether women were allowed in the theatre continues, although currently, prevailing scholarship leans toward accepting that women were most likely in attendance. Foley's assertion that a

Following the work of Froma Zeitlin and Helene Foley, many modern feminist scholars of Greek tragedy examine tragic women as “the other” rather than as a realistic representation of ancient Greek women, demonstrating the function of the feminine in expanding the range of issues relating to masculinity that could be portrayed in the plays.<sup>7</sup> Thus scholars such as Nancy Rabinowitz, Victoria Wohl, and Kirk Ormand use a variety of literary models to discuss the symbolic use of women in tragedy to support the society’s system of gender norms.<sup>8</sup> Although the three ultimately draw different conclusions, they share a theoretical approach to the significance of the exchange of women in tragedy and the power this “feminine other” has in reinforcing or disrupting traditional values. This approach is useful in that it allows us to avoid some of the difficulties of disentangling reality and drama in order to consider the relationship between these tragic women and the values of Greek society, but it also expands the paradox. These characters are women, which implies that they must have some relation to real Greek women, yet the nature of the creation of tragedy suggests that these women are in fact a complex mirror image of masculinity and serve a purpose we still only guess at.

As we consider the most influential studies on women in tragedy, we notice particular themes: female speech and female sexuality are key focal points for scholars of tragic women.<sup>9</sup> We can also examine the various roles played by women in Greek

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small number of women (perhaps older and noncitizens) may have attended but that they were not part of the intended audience seems reasonable (Foley, *Female Acts*, 3).

<sup>7</sup> Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*; Foley, *Female Acts*.

<sup>8</sup> See most significantly, Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*; Wohl, *Intimate Commerce*; and Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden*.

<sup>9</sup> The language of Greek tragedy is currently a very significant topic, represented most particularly in the work of Laura McClure. See McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*; Griffith, “Antigone and Her Sister(s),” 117-136; and Roisman, “Women’s Free Speech,” 91-114. For sexuality in tragedy, see Powell, *Euripides*,



tragedy, as in Nicole Loraux' *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, which discusses ways in which women die on stage and differentiates between types such as masculine women and sacrificial virgins. Helene Foley's influential *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* studies the ability of tragic women to make ethical choices and examines three categories of women: virgins, wives, and mothers. Yet in this study, virgins and wives each receive over twice as much attention as mothers, despite the fact that the wives, Medea and Clytemnestra, are both mothers themselves. Indeed, in Greek tragedy, a large number of female characters—Medea, Phaedra, Hecuba, Andromache, Creusa, Alcestis, and Jocasta, for example—are mothers, but this aspect of their character tends to be overlooked by modern scholars: a side note, perhaps, in support of a greater study of justice, fate, or vengeance. In large part, motherhood seems less interesting—if tragedy illuminates the complex concepts of Greek masculinity and femininity, then it is the relationships between husbands and wives that seem most relevant, and it is as wives or “proper” women that these characters are analyzed.

This oversight appears particularly glaring when we consider the historical significance of motherhood. Childbearing was not only the essential function of women in Greek society, but because of its necessity, it was the chink in the armor of male dominance. As much as heroes such as Hippolytus and Jason may lament that the gods provided no other way to have children, women were required to produce the heirs of the *polis*. Furthermore, the bond between the mother and these children is unique to the feminine, serving as an essential source of the persuasive power women held within their homes and at family counsels. The anxiety over this power in Greek society is evident in

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*Women and Sexuality*; Rabinowitz, “Tragedy and the Politics of Containment,” 36-52, and “Greek Tragedy: A Rape Culture?” 1-21.

male attempts to control reproduction, which involved marrying girls at a young age, encouraging frequent pregnancies, and replacing female care of expectant mothers with that of the Hippocratic doctor.<sup>10</sup> Tragedy, on the other hand, seems to dramatize the good reason behind this anxiety as Clytemnestra murders her husband over the loss of a child and Medea destroys Jason's house by killing their children. Over and over, we see women who should theoretically never leave the house ruin their husbands and others either because of an injury to their children or, a disastrous misfortune for an Athenian man, through the destruction of his children.<sup>11</sup> In this study, I propose to examine the direct relationship between a female character's possession of children and her power over male characters as well as the converse relationship: women who do not have or do not accept their children have far less influence.

In order to more deeply explore the correlation between motherhood, feminine power, and masculine anxiety, I have limited my examination to three plays of Euripides. Although Aeschylus and Sophocles certainly portray their share of powerful women, Euripides is most famous for his female voices, which causes some to praise him as a feminist while others accuse him of misogyny.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, many of his heroines highlight the difficulties that faced women in Athenian society. Medea, for example,

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, these practices were very dangerous for both mother and child. See Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*.

<sup>11</sup> Clytemnestra, Hecuba, Phaedra, and Creusa, for example, are motivated by threats to their children or their potential to bear children. Medea, Hecuba, and Creusa actually attempt to kill their enemies' children (only Creusa does not succeed). This latter group is joined by Procne, a character from mythology and a lost tragedy of Sophocles.

<sup>12</sup> Euripides' reputation as a misogynist dates back to Aristophanes; in *Thesmophoriazusae*, for example, the women complain that Euripides' portrayal of morally corrupt women has caused their husbands to be suspicious (ll. 378-432, 575-8). In *Frogs*, Aeschylus also accuses Euripides of writing only bad women (ll. 1044-6). By contrast, some modern scholars have argued that Euripides displays the challenges facing women. See March, "Euripides the Misogynist?" 32-75; Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Wives, Whores, and Slaves*, 103-12; Wright, *Feminism in Greek Literature*. For a balanced point of view examining the way Euripides both offers female characters insight and significance and uses their stories to support the patriarchy, see Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*.

famously describes the challenge of adjusting to a husband's household, particularly when he is allowed to escape the house in times of tension while women are not, and she closes her speech with the well-known line, "I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once" (ll. 250-1).<sup>13</sup> Many of his heroines initially appear as sympathetic victims treated appallingly by men, yet not all of these women remain victims. A master of upsetting audience sympathy, Euripides reveals a frightening vision of the damage that occurs when women are allowed to take their revenge, which provides support to those wishing to label him a misogynist but is also especially fitting for our exploration of masculine fears of motherhood. Thus, the three plays I have chosen contain two key qualities: motherhood must play a significant role, and audience sympathies must be thwarted or reversed. By requiring these two qualities, we throw ourselves into the center of controversy. We examine not just the mother-child bond, but also its potential for disastrous consequences for the masculine.

First, I will look at Euripides' *Electra*, which contains two mothers: Clytemnestra and Electra, although the latter's child is merely a hoax. At the beginning, we feel sorry for Electra's disgraceful treatment, but when Clytemnestra finally appears, we are struck both by her humanity and Electra's seemingly petty jealousies. Next, I turn to *Medea*, who begins the play as a victim of Jason's insensitivity but eventually commits far greater outrages as she murders Creon, his daughter, and her own children. Finally, I examine *Ion*. Once again, Creusa at first is a victim of both Apollo and her husband, but sympathy for her dwindles when she decides to take revenge by killing Ion; however, this play differs from the other two in that it ends happily, offering reconciliation to the wronged mother.

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<sup>13</sup> Translation by Kovacs, *Loeb Classical Library*, 2001.

While we have increased commonalities in limiting our selection of plays, if we truly wish to determine the extent to which tragic mothers receive power from their children, we need a standard of measurement. To this end, we will turn to one of the original stories of motherhood in Greek literature: the *Oresteia*. In particular, we will focus on the *Eumenides*, the third installment of the trilogy. When the *Eumenides* opens, Orestes has already killed his mother Clytemnestra in revenge for her murder of his father Agamemnon. Pursued by the Furies, who punish kin-murderers, Orestes flees to Athens, where he stands trial for matricide. As Orestes cannot and does not deny that he killed his mother, his case comes down to which parent takes precedence. Does the blood he shares with his father require that he enact vengeance, or does his kinship with his mother prohibit him from rightly killing her?

The argument for the mother is represented by the chorus of Furies. When it examines Orestes during the trial, he questions whether he is blood-kin to his mother. The chorus replies:

πῶς γὰρ σ' ἔθρεψεν ἐντός, ὦ μαιφόνε,  
ζώνης; ἀπεύχηι μητρὸς αἷμα φίλτατον;

How else did she nourish you, you filthy murderer, beneath her girdle? Do you disavow your mother's blood, the nearest and dearest to your own? (ll. 607-8)

It seems rather obvious to the chorus, as it does to modern audiences, that Orestes is of the same blood as his mother. In fact in the ancient world, maternity was far surer than fatherhood. Fathers had to rely on the word of the mother, but the physical nature of childbirth very clearly reveals a child's mother. As the chorus responds here, they draw attention to this physicality, describing how Clytemnestra nourished Orestes in her womb, which reiterates claims made by Clytemnestra previously in the trilogy expressing

parenthood from the mother's point of view. The children ought to belong to the mother because the nourishment and physical effort put into giving the child life prove that the child came from no one else.

On the other hand, as Apollo argues that Agamemnon's claim for justice is stronger than Clytemnestra's, he must discredit this argument of the Furies. He argues:

οὐκ ἔστι μήτηρ ἢ κεκλημένη τέκνου  
τοκεύς, τροφεὺς δὲ κύματος νεοσπόρου·  
τίκτει δ' ὁ θρώϊσκων, ἢ δ' ἄπερ ξένωι ξένη  
ἔσωσεν ἔρνος, οἴσι μὴ βλάβηι θεός.

The so-called “mother” is not a parent of the child, only the nurse of the newly-begotten embryo. The parent is he who mounts; the female keeps the offspring safe, like a stranger on behalf of a stranger, for those in whose case this is not prevented by god (ll. 658-61).

Apollo bases his argument on the attribution of the physical effort of procreation to the father, the θρώϊσκων. The mother, by contrast, merely keeps the father's seed safe—she is a stranger, Apollo says, who guards the embryo. Just as mothers give their children to wet-nurses, fathers give an embryo to the mother to nurse. Motherhood is defined passively here, and as the physical labor of childbirth is ignored, so is the child's blood connection to the mother denied.

When the final vote is tallied, Orestes is acquitted. Although the jury is split, Athena casts the deciding vote, and she supports Orestes, saying:

μήτηρ γὰρ οὐτις ἐστὶν ἢ μ' ἐγείνατο,  
τὸ δ' ἄρσεν αἰνῶ πάντα, πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν,  
ἅπαντι θυμῶι, κάρτα δ' εἰμι τοῦ πατρός·

There is no mother who gave birth to me, and I commend the male in all respects (except for joining in marriage) with all my heart; in the fullest sense, I am my Father's child (ll. 736-8).

Athena supports Apollo's view of parenthood in her verdict, reinforcing the idea that the father's claim to the children is more valid and that the mother is not the *τοκεύς*, or the one bringing forth the children. It is difficult to know how widely acceptable this view was in Classical Athens, and the hung jury in the *Eumenides* suggests that there were many who found the mother's claim to her children nearly equally important.

Nevertheless, this trial offers us a test, so to speak, of perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood—to whom do the children belong? In this study, therefore, we shall evaluate the power offered by motherhood by examining whether these characters consider their children as belonging to them. Mothers who take ownership of their children are actively pursuing their role in the family, particularly in a culture in which possession has long signified social standing and power. In any environment, one fights to retain one's possessions, whether they are slave women or tribute-paying allies. A mother who believes in her ownership of her children is more likely to take action when her children are threatened and has a greater stake in her family's fortunes. This examination seeks to prove that when tragic mothers actively take ownership of their children, as shown in the examples of Clytemnestra, Electra, Medea, and Creusa, their capacity for successful action increases, but in order to resolve the conflict created by these women, empowerment must occur in a cycle: if these women reject ownership of their children, they ought to lose their influence in the male-dominated worlds of the tragedies and are restored to the patriarchal order.

Before we dive into these three plays of Euripides, however, we should consider the first two plays of the *Oresteia*, *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroe*. Both have obvious influence on Euripides' *Electra*, but Aeschylus' representation of Clytemnestra provides

a useful background for our analysis of *Medea* and *Ion* as well.<sup>14</sup> We will begin with an examination of ownership in *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroe* since these contribute to the development of our test in the *Eumenides*, and as we do so, we will note several key aspects of motherhood that reoccur in the plays of Euripides.

### *Oresteian Precedents*

In describing the progression of Clytemnestra's relationship with her children, Froma Zeitlin states:

If the female overvalues the mother-child bond, her own unique relationship, she will undervalue the marriage bond, which in turn will lead to or be accompanied by an assertion of sexual independence (free replacement of one sexual partner by another) and will be manifested politically by a desire to rule. The next step, paradoxically, will be her undervaluation, even rejection, of the mother-child bond, as in the case of Electra and Orestes. Child, in response, will undervalue and reject mother.<sup>15</sup>

Despite Apollo's argument in the *Eumenides*, the *Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy, portrays a drastically different image of motherhood. Clytemnestra indeed does take possession of Iphigenia, working vengeance largely in her daughter's name and setting in motion disastrous events because of her mother-child relationship. The trilogy, through Clytemnestra's example, dramatizes the anxiety discussed earlier by demonstrating the danger of allowing women to take possession of their children, and it resolves the conflict created by Clytemnestra's actions only through the legal acceptance

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<sup>14</sup> There is evidence that after Aeschylus' death, a decree was passed allowing his plays to be revived in competition with new plays. The close parody of *Choephoroe*'s recognition scene in Euripides' *Electra* causes many scholars to date the *Electra* as immediately following a performance of the *Oresteia*. There is no actual record of a specific revival of the *Oresteia* in the fifth century, but that does not exclude the possibility. If such revivals did occur, they likely had a significant effect on the entire Euripidean corpus. For a discussion of *Agamemnon* in antiquity, see Easterling, "Agamemnon for the Ancients," 24-36; for an examination of the relationship between *Electra* and revivals of the *Oresteia*, see Bain, "[Euripides'] *Electra*: 518-44," 104-16.

<sup>15</sup> Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 97.

of Apollo's argument. As Zeitlin describes, Clytemnestra overvalues her relationship with Iphigenia, causing her to undervalue her marriage to Agamemnon. By *Choephoroe*, the middle of the trilogy, we realize that Clytemnestra's feelings toward Iphigenia are not consistent with her treatment of her other children. She has, as Zeitlin states, rejected her relationship with both Electra and Orestes.

### *Agamemnon*

In the *Agamemnon*, Iphigenia is the child of primary concern to Clytemnestra. The most obvious way for mothers to demonstrate their ownership of children is through language, and Aeschylus' Clytemnestra does this through emphasizing separation between herself and her husband. Although she considers Iphigenia her own, she does not deny Agamemnon's role in fathering their daughter; by contrast, she accepts his claim to parenthood, strengthening her vilification of Agamemnon's character—he was willing to sacrifice his own daughter. However, as she discredits Agamemnon, she elevates her own role as parent, separating herself from her husband. By creating distance between herself and Agamemnon, Clytemnestra calls attention both to his failure as a parent and to her superior claim as Iphigenia's mother.

As Clytemnestra contends with the chorus after the murder of Agamemnon, she complains that although they now condemn her, they brought no charge against Agamemnon when he slaughtered Iphigenia. In lines 1417-18, Clytemnestra says:

ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλτάτην ἐμοὶ  
ὠδῖν', ἐπωιδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων.



He sacrificed his own child, the darling offspring of my pangs, as a spell to sooth the Thracian winds.<sup>16</sup>

Here Clytemnestra creates a separation between Agamemnon and herself by using both αὐτοῦ and ἐμοὶ. Rather than describing Iphigenia as “our” daughter, she contrasts their different views of ownership over Iphigenia. For Agamemnon, Iphigenia is only a child, παιῖδα, a colorless, genderless term. Even so, she is his own (αὐτοῦ) child, and he sacrifices her as though she were an animal (ll. 1415-16). For Clytemnestra, on the other hand, Iphigenia represents a vivid, emotional ordeal. As the Furies do, Clytemnestra reminds us of her labor pains, the physical effort that proves she is Iphigenia’s mother. She did the work and suffered the pain; therefore, Iphigenia ought to belong to her. Ironically, Agamemnon caused violence as he sacrificed her while Clytemnestra suffered pain to give Iphigenia life. In addition, the enjambment of ὠδῖν’ onto line 1418 creates a second shade of meaning for Clytemnestra’s statement. Taking line 1417 by itself, φυλάττην, in its feminine singular form, would seem to refer to Iphigenia herself, although not as a child, but as a human being. Iphigenia was a sacrificial victim for Agamemnon, but she is the dearest girl to Clytemnestra. By defining Iphigenia’s relationships with her father and mother separately, Clytemnestra both condemns Agamemnon for his treatment of his daughter and confirms her superiority as a parent.

Another example of the distance created between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon occurs in lines 1551ff., when Clytemnestra declares that no one in Argos will mourn for Agamemnon—only Iphigenia will meet him at the gates of Death:

ἀλλ’ Ἰφιγένειά νιν ἀσπασίως  
θυγάτηρ, ὡς χεῖρ,

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<sup>16</sup> Texts and translations are Sommerstein, *Loeb Classical Library*, 2008, unless otherwise noted.

πατέρ' ἀντιάσασα πρὸς ὠκύπορον  
 πόρθμευμ' ἀχέων  
 περὶ χεῖρα βαλοῦσα φιλήσει.

No, his daughter Iphigeneia,  
 as is proper, will meet  
 and welcome her father  
 at the swift Ferry of Grief,  
 throw her arms around him and kiss him! (ll. 1555-9)

Clytemnestra fills this passage with terms of devotion, using both θυγάτηρ and πατέρ', as well as ἀσπασίως, φιλήσει, and the image of Iphigenia throwing her arms around Agamemnon, which sharply contrast the dark reality of the situation. After being murdered by his wife, Agamemnon must now face the daughter he sacrificed, confronting, from Clytemnestra's point of view, his inadequacy as a parent. As we listen to Clytemnestra's speech, we cannot fail to note that she is the person who has sent Agamemnon to this fate. In the context created by Clytemnestra's ironically sweet vision of the underworld, however, she is the avenging parent, clearly superior to Agamemnon, the murdering parent.

Even the chorus recognizes the irony inherent in Agamemnon's relationship to Iphigenia, demonstrating an important aspect of fatherhood which we shall see again.

They describe her sacrifice thus:

λιτάς δὲ καὶ κληδόνας πατρῷους  
 παρ' οὐδὲν αἰῶνα παρθένοιόν τ'  
 ἔθεντο φιλόμαχοι βραβῆς·  
 φράσεν δ' ἄοζοις πατήρ μετ' εὐχάν  
 δίκαν χιμαίρας ὑπερθε βωμοῦ  
 πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῶι  
 προνωπῇ λαβεῖν ἀέρ-  
 δη...

Her pleas, her cries of “father!”,

and her maiden years, were set at naught  
by the war-loving chieftains.  
After a prayer, her father told his attendants  
to lift her right up over the altar  
with all their strength, like a yearling goat,  
face down, so that her robes fell around her... (ll. 228-35).

She cries for her father while he urges the sacrifice on, treating her not as his daughter, but as a sacrificial animal. Several lines later, the chorus remembers when Iphigenia used to sing for her father's guests, a domestic scene incongruous with the gruesome sacrifice taking place. From the beginning of the play and to characters more trustworthy than Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's role as father is suspect. His actions do not fit the father for whom Iphigenia cries out or the familial scene the chorus describes. But as Clytemnestra eventually argues, Agamemnon is not publically punished for such a crime, perhaps because there were mitigating factors: the demands of Artemis and the war effort at Troy, the "yoke of necessity" that falls upon Agamemnon. Clytemnestra evokes powerful emotions as she demands our sympathy, but the logic of the situation forces us to admit that her methods are too extreme. Similarly, although Jason's behavior is appalling, Medea's revenge is disproportionate; Xuthus' plan to lie to Creusa is insensitive, but it is difficult to find a more acceptable option. For Agamemnon as for these other fathers, moral ambiguity clouds their decisions, enhancing the irony of their fatherhood. Additionally, because Agamemnon is never resolutely condemned or absolved, he is cast simultaneously as the general plagued by the necessity of duty and the blasphemous parent. Thus we are left with two distasteful options: it proves disastrous for Clytemnestra to take ownership of her daughter, but we are uncomfortable offering the children to Agamemnon as well.

Iphigenia is not the only child Clytemnestra references in the *Agamemnon*. As she welcomes her husband home, Clytemnestra explains why Orestes is not present, and her epithet for Orestes adds a significant layer to her view of parenthood:

ἐκ τῶνδ' ἐ τοὶ παῖς ἐνθάδ' οὐ παραστατεῖ,  
ἐμῶν τε καὶ σῶν κύριος πιστωμάτων,  
ὡς χρῆν, Ὀρέστης.

That, you will understand, is why our son is not standing here by my side, the holder of our mutual pledges, as he ought to be—Orestes (ll. 877-9).

Clytemnestra's ambiguous use of παῖς and her delay in naming Orestes disguises which child she truly indicates. After all, as the chorus' song has already demonstrated, the child most noticeably absent is Iphigenia. Clytemnestra is not so forthright, but her construction here invites us to apply to both Orestes and Iphigenia the description, “master of pledges, mine and yours.” First, Clytemnestra once again creates distance between herself and Agamemnon by using ἐμῶν and σῶν, instead of saying “our.” This reflects the two sides of the bargain evoked by πιστωμάτων and elevates Clytemnestra to the status of an equal partner—she considers her pledges with Agamemnon as her own, not her father's, an unusual view of marriage that is repeated in *Medea*.<sup>17</sup>

The word πίστωμα occurs elsewhere in the *Oresteia*. In *Choephoroe*, as Orestes reveals the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, he calls to mind their oath to each other:

...ὄρκος τ' ἐμμένει πιστώμασιν·

...their oath has been faithful to its pledges (l. 977).

<sup>17</sup> See Harrison, *Athenian Law*, 1-59, for a discussion of the marriage transaction in ancient Greece. Cf. Flory, “Medea's Right Hand,” 69-74; Boedeker, “Euripides' Medea and the Vanity of ΛΟΓΟΙ,” 95; and Foley, “Medea's Divided Self,” 75, for the unusual nature of Medea's partnership with Jason and thus Clytemnestra's representation of her marriage here.

Additionally, in the *Eumenides*, Apollo chastises the Furies for ignoring the pledges of marriage:

ἦ κάρτ' ἄτιμα καὶ παρ' οὐδὲν †ἠρκέσω†  
Ἥρας τελείας καὶ Διὸς πιστώματα·

Truly you have held in utter contempt the pledges of Hera, goddess of marriage, and of Zeus, and <treated> them as being of no account (ll. 213-14).

In both of these instances, *πίστωμα* refers to the bonds of marriage, the assurances of a marriage relationship. Certainly in the *Choephoroe*, Orestes uses the term ironically, as he compares the pact to murder Agamemnon to a marriage contract between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Apollo, on the other hand, uses the term to condemn the Furies for pursuing Orestes but ignoring Clytemnestra's violation of her marriage pledge. For both Apollo and Orestes, murder ought to break a pledge, not form the basis of one. In the *Agamemnon*, however, Clytemnestra gives a sense as to the terms of the pledge. Here, she expresses that their son Orestes holds mastery over their promises to each other. How could he? As we will eventually see in *Medea*, children protect both parents' interests. So long as Jason protects Medea's children, her place is secure. As soon as he takes a new wife to produce new children, Medea's sons—and Medea's security—are jeopardized. For Clytemnestra, while Agamemnon respects her children, her worth as a wife is safe. But if he were to devalue the children she produced, he would devalue the mother. Naturally, Agamemnon has no intention of rejecting Orestes. Clytemnestra's delay in naming Orestes, however, now has increased significance, as Agamemnon has not only rejected Iphigenia but destroyed her, and Clytemnestra considers her daughter's death a justified reason to break her pledge of marriage. We see how Clytemnestra overvalues

her bond with her children—they are what keep her faithful to Agamemnon, and once he has damaged his half of the pledge, Clytemnestra considers herself free to discard hers.

In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra cites Iphigenia’s sacrifice as justification for her murder of Agamemnon. She tells the chorus:

καὶ τήνδ' ἀκούεις ὀρκίων ἐμῶν θέμιν·  
 μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην,  
 Ἄτην Ἐρινύν θ', αἴσι τόνδ' ἔσφαξ' ἐγώ...

You will now also hear this righteous oath I swear: by the fulfilled Justice that was due for my child, by Ruin and by the Fury, through whose aid I slew this man... (ll. 1431-3).

Clytemnestra believes that Justice helped her to kill Agamemnon because Iphigenia deserved it, a sentiment that is echoed in ll. 1521ff.: Agamemnon deserved death for killing Iphigenia, and Clytemnestra dealt him his punishment. Here we see the intersection of her ownership of Iphigenia, or her “overvaluing” of the mother-child bond, and her ability to act. Clytemnestra places such significance on her relationship with Iphigenia that she considers it the *πίστωμα* of her marriage. Because of her sense of possession of Iphigenia, demonstrated through her language, she is empowered by her grief at Iphigenia’s death, and she takes vengeance upon the man who has destroyed her possession.

### *Choephoroe*

In *Choephoroe*, the focus shifts from Clytemnestra’s relationship with Iphigenia to her relationships with Electra and Orestes. Now that Clytemnestra has broken her pledges with Agamemnon, she also rejects her remaining children from that marriage. Unlike Euripides’ *Electra*, as we shall see, *Choephoroe* does not provide motivation for

Clytemnestra's shift in behavior. Clytemnestra's rejection of her children seems simply to be the natural progression from her relationship with Aegisthus. Although this seems inconsistent with Clytemnestra's character in the *Agamemnon*, we can see how this is a necessary step in the trilogy. Despite the sympathies we feel for Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*, we must also be willing to accept the verdict at the end of *Eumenides*. Thus, *Choephoroe* discredits Clytemnestra's relationship with her children by making her undervalue Orestes and Electra and questioning her claims to ownership.

The evidence of Clytemnestra's mistreatment of her surviving children is displayed early on in the play. In her prayer before Agamemnon's tomb, Electra laments how she has been relegated to the position of a slave (ll. 132ff.), and in the *kommos*, she describes how she was mistreated and confined to the house (ll. 444-50). Similarly, Orestes bemoans his exile and his lost property (ll. 246ff., 299-301). Unfortunately, these accusations tell us relatively little about Clytemnestra's view of her children because we only see one side of the argument, and Clytemnestra is never allowed to justify her treatment of her children. This results in a lack of depth particularly to the relationship between Clytemnestra and Electra, as they do not interact in this play. We know that Clytemnestra does not value Electra in the same way she appreciated Iphigenia, but we cannot delve deeper.

Clytemnestra's relationship with Orestes in the *Choephoroe* is more complex and interesting. Her words suggest that she values and takes ownership of Orestes, but Aeschylus undermines her appearance of affection through the character of Cilissa. For example, Clytemnestra reacts strongly when Orestes' death is announced:

οἱ γὼ, κατ' ἄκρας †ένπᾶς ὡς† πορθούμεθα.  
ὦ δυσπάλαιστε τῶνδε δωμάτων Ἄρα,

ὥς πόλλ' ἐπωπᾶις κάκποδῶν εὖ κείμενα·  
 τόξοις πρόσωθεν εὐσκόποις χειρουμένη  
 φίλων ἀποψιλοῖς με τὴν παναθλίαν.  
 καὶ νῦν Ὀρέστης, ἦν γὰρ εὐβούλως ἔχων,  
 ἔξω κομίζων ὀλεθρίου πηλοῦ πόδα  
 νῦν δ' ἦπερ ἐν δόμοισι βακχείας κακῆς  
 ἰατρὸς ἐλπίς ἦν, προδοῦσαν ἔγγραφε.

Ah me, we are completely, utterly ruined! Curse of this house, so hard to wrestle free of, how much you keep your eye on, even when it's placed well out of the way! Scoring hits at long range with well-aimed arrows, you strip me, wretched me, of my loved ones! And now Orestes—he was showing wisdom in keeping his feet clear of the deadly mire, but now, the hope there was in the house of a cure for your evil revelry—write it down as having betrayed us! (ll. 691-9)

Clytemnestra says all the right things, indicating that she still considers Orestes as belonging to her. In line 695, she says that she is stripped of her loved ones, a construction which implies possession, and her use of the present tense conveys an ongoing affliction; she first lost Iphigenia, and now—καὶ νῦν (l. 696)—she has lost Orestes as well. Although she knows that he was the only hope of her enemies, she expresses enough sorrow that it is proper for Orestes as the messenger to act apologetic. In less than one hundred lines, however, Cilissa, Orestes' nurse, appears to contradict Clytemnestra's speech. She tells the chorus:

πρὸς μὲν οἰκέτας  
 θέτο σκυθρωπῶν πένθος ὀμμάτων, γέλων  
 κεύθουσ' ἐπ' ἔργοις διαπεπραγμένοις καλῶς  
 κείνηι, δόμοις δὲ τοῖσδε παγκάκως ἔχειν,  
 φήμης ὕφ', ἧς ἠγγειλαν οἱ ξένοι τορῶς.

In front of the servants she put on a sorrowful face—concealing the laughter that is underneath on account of the event that has come to pass, which is a good thing for her, but for this house things are thoroughly bad, as a result of the news that the visitors have reported very plainly (ll. 737-41).



According to Cilissa, whom we have no reason to mistrust, Clytemnestra's performance was just that. In private, she does not mourn her son but instead laughs at her good fortune. She does not seem to value Orestes as much as she had Iphigenia. Her political security as ruler and the freedom she obtained by murdering Agamemnon may be of more importance than the loss of her children.

*Choephoroe* also returns to the motif of nursing and childbirth. In ll. 527-33, the chorus describes Clytemnestra's dream to Orestes: she gives birth to a snake, and when she attempted to suckle it, the snake bit her. Orestes responds:

εἰ γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον ἐκλιπὼν ἐμοὶ  
οὐφίς †επᾶσα σπαργανηπλείζετο†  
καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον  
θρόμβωι τ' ἔμειξεν αἵματος φίλον γάλα,  
ἢ δ' ἀμφὶ τάρβει τῶιδ' ἐπώιμωξεν πάθει,  
δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας,  
θανεῖν βιαίως· ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ' ἐγὼ  
κτείνω νιν, ὡς τοὔνειρον ἐννέπει τόδε.

If the snake came out of the same place as I did, and found a welcoming home in my swaddling-clothes, and opened its mouth around the breast that nurtured me, and made a clot of blood mingle with the loving milk, and she screamed out in fear at the experience—then, you can see, as she nursed this monstrous portent, so she is destined to die by violence. I become the serpent and kill her: so this dream declares (ll. 543-50).

Orestes understands the obvious symbolism in Clytemnestra's dream—he is the snake she bore, and he will turn on her violently. The dream becomes reality at the end of the play. As Orestes threatens Clytemnestra, she asks him to respect the breast that nursed him:

ἐπίσχες, ᾧ παῖ, τόνδε δ' αἶδεσαι, τέκνον,  
μαστόν, πρὸς ᾧ σὺ πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἄμα  
οὔλοισιν ἐξήμελξας εὐτραφὲς γάλα.

Stop, my son, and have respect, my child, for this breast, at which you many times drowsed while sucking the nourishing milk with your gums! (ll. 896-8)

Orestes wavers but does not concede, and Clytemnestra eventually realizes that he is the snake she dreamt of (ll. 928-9). The image represented by the dream and played out at the end of the play certainly demonstrates Zeitlin's argument that the children eventually "undervalue and reject the mother." But what does it say about Clytemnestra's view toward Orestes? Clytemnestra does not take ownership of Orestes to the degree that she values Iphigenia; after all, she sends Orestes away from her so that he cannot threaten her power, robbing him of his inheritance. The image of nursing, however, suggests an intimacy that contradicts Clytemnestra's cutthroat approach to politics. Clytemnestra expects to receive the respect due to a mother for giving her children life, even if her actions of late are undeserving, which is evident when she tells Orestes:

ἐγὼ σ' ἔθρεψα, σὺν δὲ γηράναι θέλω.

I reared you, and I want to grow old with you (l. 908).

Clytemnestra evokes a maternal right expanded upon by Medea: in return for her nourishment of her children, she expects to receive care from them when she is old. Clearly, Clytemnestra's recent treatment of her children is of less importance to her than the initial care and nourishment she provided for them when they were infants. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra emphasized her labor pains in bearing Iphigenia, using her effort as evidence of her ownership of her daughter. In *Choephoroe*, she references her suckling of Orestes as proof that he belongs to her, and as her son, he owes her—in this case her life.

Of course, Cilissa undercuts this tender image of nursing as well. She tells the chorus:

φίλον δ' Ὀρέστην, τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς τριβήν,  
ὄν ἐξέθρεψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη...

But dear Orestes, who wore away my life with toil, whom I reared after receiving him straight from his mother's womb! (ll. 749-50)

While a wet nurse is not a sinister sign of parental neglect, Cilissa still challenges the basis of her mistress' cries for mercy.<sup>18</sup> Clytemnestra claims ownership based on effort, but although she gave Orestes life, she apparently did not physically give him the care and nourishment that would create the debt she feels she is owed. It is difficult and perhaps impossible, especially without viewing the original performance, to reconcile the contradictions between Clytemnestra's behavior onstage and Cilissa's speech.<sup>19</sup> Even if Cilissa has misread the situation, however, her words still plant doubts in the minds of audience members. Although in the *Agamemnon* we can believe that the labor Clytemnestra undertook in giving birth to Iphigenia increases her share in her child, in *Choephoroe*, we begin to question the validity of Clytemnestra's claims, building support for Apollo's argument to come in the *Eumenides* and laying the foundation for Athena's verdict.

At the end of *Choephoroe*, Clytemnestra is quite clearly powerless. She attempts to persuade Orestes to spare her life, using some arguments that are similar to those which she expressed in the *Agamemnon*. She bares her breast and appeals to the effort of nourishment, and she claims that she wishes to grow old with Orestes, the natural consequence of her early effort. However, Clytemnestra never mentions her strongest

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<sup>18</sup> Nursing was a common profession for lower class women in Athens; see Demosthenes 57.35, 45. Cf. Goheen, "Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism," 132-7, who argues, as I do, that Cilissa undermines Clytemnestra's claims to motherhood but overstates the damning effect of Clytemnestra's use of a nurse.

<sup>19</sup> The question has, of course, been considered by many. See Margon, "The Nurse's View," 296-7; Rose, "The Significance of the Nurse's Speech," 49-50; McDonald, "A Dilemma," 368-9; Lloyd-Jones, *The Libation-Bearers*, *ad loc.*

argument: the death of Iphigenia. After defending her decision to send Orestes away (ll. 914ff), Clytemnestra cites Agamemnon's μάταξ (l. 918), his "vanities," or "lustful follies."<sup>20</sup> In using this word, which can connote sexual misconduct, Clytemnestra neglects specific mention of her daughter, which had gained her sympathy in the previous play, and instead potentially evokes an argument with little weight, as her anger at Agamemnon's affairs is quite balanced by her own affair with Aegisthus.<sup>21</sup> This adjustment of Clytemnestra's arguments mirrors the decreased sense of ownership she feels over her children; not only is she mistreating Electra and Orestes, but she has also abandoned her argument of justice for Iphigenia. Accordingly, Clytemnestra has no power to persuade Orestes and loses her life.

The *Oresteia* introduces us to a few motifs and qualities of motherhood and fatherhood that maintain their significance in the plays of Euripides. For example, the use of labor pains and nourishment as support for a mother's claim and the morally gray area in which the actions of the father are placed are repeated throughout the plays we will study. Euripides also carefully crafts his characters' words to maximize the contrast between mother and father. Fundamentally, however, the *Oresteia* presents the idea that mothers are empowered when they take ownership of their children and lose power when they abandon ownership, and most importantly, the *Oresteia* portrays this concept as a cycle. The progression described by Zeitlin takes time—Clytemnestra takes ownership of one child, giving her the power to choose a new partner and murder her husband, which then causes her to devalue her previous children and lose the power she had gained. Such

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<sup>20</sup> The former is Lattimore, *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 1953; the latter, Sommerstein, *Loeb Classical Library*, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> See Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "μάτη." That Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, l. 820, uses the word with the suggestion of lewdness supports the reading here.

a cycle is necessary to resolve anxiety over empowered mothers—although Clytemnestra presents a threat to a masculine society, all is put back into place by the end of the *Eumenides*, after Clytemnestra has been decapitated. Because Euripides' *Electra* uses the same tradition, we see a similar progression as we supply the first half of the cycle from our knowledge of the *Oresteia*; however, we will also see that Euripides increases the role of motherhood through his development of Electra's character and thus further explores human possibilities for resolution. In *Medea* and *Ion*, however, the length of time is shortened and the cycle altered. In *Medea*, the title character's view of her children is complex, and we will use modern psychology to help us disentangle Medea's sense of ownership; while we do see that Medea requires ownership of her children to enact her revenge, we cannot arrive at a satisfactory resolution because Medea does not lose power when she rejects her children, thus maximizing our feelings of anxiety. Like Medea, Creusa also uses her empowerment to kill her child rather than her husband, but *Ion* refrains from *Medea*'s extreme form of empowerment and offers Creusa a final chance for reabsorption into patriarchal society, leaving us finally with a happy ending. Although *Electra*, *Medea*, and *Ion* approach motherhood from different angles, all three reinforce the concept that maternal ownership of children increases female power, and while the plays may reach different outcomes, they all support the conclusion that if this cycle of ownership cannot reach a natural conclusion, it will result in destruction, for both masculine and feminine.

## Chapter 1: *Electra* and Mythic Innovation

Although Euripides' *Electra* occupies the same place in the story of the House of Atreus that Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* does, it takes considerable liberties with tradition, particularly with the character of Electra. Not only does Electra take a far more direct role in the planning and killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but she receives a new identity that deeply affects her involvement in the plot. Rather than keeping her cooped up in the palace as a slave, Euripides marries Electra to a poor farmer, and although the farmer refuses intercourse with his royal wife, Electra pretends that she has had a child, which lures Clytemnestra to Electra's home where Orestes waits, ready to strike. Thus, although the cycle we observed in the *Oresteia* is still present—Clytemnestra has still killed Agamemnon over her bond with Iphigenia, and she still dies because she has rejected her other children—we can see that the changes Euripides has made create new wrinkles in our vision of maternal empowerment. In this chapter, in addition to examining the process of this cycle of power, we will also explore Euripides' unique methods of resolution. Although both Clytemnestra and Electra receive power from taking ownership of their children, this power is reduced to safe levels not only through Clytemnestra's death, but through Electra's illusion of childbirth and the realistic progression of Clytemnestra's life. First, however, we must consider current scholarly discussion on the tone of Euripides' *Electra* and how this applies to our reading of these unique characters.

Scholars of Euripides' *Electra* are generally divided into two interpretive camps. David Raeburn summarizes the controversy well: the prevailing, or "traditional," view sees the *Electra* as realistic and non-heroic; it humanizes the villains and vulgarizes the

heroes, condemning the matricide and perhaps even the murder of Aegisthus.<sup>1</sup> Orestes and Electra do not seem like heroes nobly carrying out the violent will of a god and tragically bearing the consequences. Instead, they are “the people who would kill their mother in the offstage world, and this is how they would feel afterwards.”<sup>2</sup> They are motivated by factors common to an audience, and they suffer real psychological repercussions. Championed by Knox, Conacher, and Arnott, this view is accepted by most scholars of the play.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, challengers of this interpretation claim realism as well: led primarily by Lloyd, some scholars attack supposed evidence of Electra’s bitter delusions and Orestes’ hesitance by claiming that the characters’ behavior is appropriate for the trials they face.<sup>4</sup> Thus while many see Electra’s lamentations as excessive and self-serving, particularly as she completes unnecessary menial tasks, Lloyd claims that her laments are entirely what one expects of lament in Greek culture: unrestrained, attention-calling protestations of grief or mistreatment.<sup>5</sup> Orestes’ delay in revealing himself to Electra and his need to have a quick escape route as he enters Argos indicate to many his reluctance to enact his vengeance; others see his actions as natural precautions in a dangerous situation. In the end, proponents of the traditional view see the matricide as unambiguously condemned, whereas opponents assert that Electra and Orestes may be justified.<sup>6</sup> While my intent is not to add my opinion to the wealth of well-argued judgments, the tone with which we view these characters’ actions will affect our

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<sup>1</sup> See Raeburn, “The Significance of Stage Properties,” 149-51, for a presentation of both sides of the issue.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Raeburn himself, see Bernard Knox, “Euripidean Comedy” in *Word and Action*, 250-74; Conacher, *Euripidean Drama*, 199-212; Solmsen, *Electra and Orestes*, 31-62; Arnott, “Double the Vision,” 179-192; Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides*, 54-5, 74; Sheppard, “The *Electra* of Euripides,” 137-41.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd, “Realism and Character,” 1-19; Zeitlin, “The Argive Festival of Hera,” 645-669; Kubo, “The Norm of Myth,” 15-31.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd, “Realism and Character,” 2ff.

<sup>6</sup> See n. 3 for proponents, n. 4 for opponents.

observations on motherhood and power, requiring that we choose one of these quite opposed readings.

One of the difficulties in reading Euripides' *Electra* is that despite the many valid justifications supplied by Lloyd and others, we cannot truly shake the feeling that relatively speaking, this Orestes simply does not make the impression his predecessor did.<sup>7</sup> Aeschylus' Orestes is bold and determined from the beginning; he formulates his own plan, and although he shrinks once from matricide, he overcomes his fears with the aid of Apollo's oracle and does the deed himself. Perhaps *Aeschylus'* Orestes is unrealistic; we should not expect Euripides' Orestes to be so decisive—yet we do anyway because we have fully accepted the tradition of the *Oresteia*. Murder, particularly matricide, strikes most human beings as morally wrong, even in the most “justifiable” circumstances. In the *Oresteia*, the overarching influence of Apollo adjusts the conflict over Orestes' actions to disbelief over whether a god could truly give such a controversial command. Euripides' *Electra*, however, largely ignores these commands of Apollo, leaving the audience with little to consider except its very mortal characters, and Euripides has taken steps to level the playing field for his heroes and his villains. Electra and Orestes are not purely heroic, and Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are not wholly evil.<sup>8</sup> Moral ambiguity has been increased, and we cannot be sure that we support the actions of Orestes and Electra. Thus, in accordance with the traditional view, I see these characters

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<sup>7</sup> I choose to compare Euripides to Aeschylus. Had we a secure date for Sophocles' *Electra*, analyses of these plays would be undoubtedly richer, but in absence of an accurate timeline, a comparison between Sophocles and Euripides is potentially illogical.

<sup>8</sup> Some commonly cited reasons for the vulgarity of Electra and Orestes have already been discussed: her self-centeredness, his doubt and hesitance; additionally, scholars cite Electra's treatment of the farmer and her skepticism of the tutor's tokens of Orestes. The merits of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are generally Aegisthus' hospitable treatment of Orestes and Pylades at the sacrifice and Clytemnestra's willingness to answer Electra's summons. See in particular Arnott, “Double the Vision,” 179-92; Brian Vickers, *Towards Greek Tragedy*, 561; M. A. Harder, “‘Right’ and ‘Wrong,’” 15-31.



as far closer to real people than those of the *Oresteia*, but they have been placed in a setting of heroic mythology. Taking into account Lloyd's objections, I am not sure we can so wholeheartedly condemn Orestes and Electra, but we can certainly rely on their dysfunction. Fortunately for us, realistically dysfunctional people have complex family relationships, which this play displays prominently.<sup>9</sup>

We can trace Electra's progression throughout the play from powerless to powerful and able to act on her own desires and in her own interest, and we can associate this development with her status as a "mother," although in her case, the title is a construct of the imagination. In the prologue, as the farmer describes the current situation in Argos, he explains how Electra came to be his wife and specifically details Aegisthus' grievance against her:

δείσας δὲ μή τῳ παιῖδ' ἀριστέων τέκοι  
Ἀγαμέμνονος ποινάτορ', εἶχεν ἐν δόμοις  
Αἴγισθος οὐδ' ἤρμοζε νυμφίῳ τινί.

But Aegisthus was afraid she might bear to one of the nobility a son who would avenge Agamemnon's death, and so he kept her in the house and would not give her to a husband (ll. 22-4).<sup>10</sup>

We are rather immediately confronted with the power of childbirth. Electra is a threat to Aegisthus because she has the potential to bear an avenger; he may fear male members of Agamemnon's house, but in Orestes' absence, Electra serves as a source of his fears. Electra's child-bearing potential is not the only factor weighing on Aegisthus, however.

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<sup>9</sup> Halporn, "The Skeptical Electra," 102 argues that Euripides' *Electra* downplays the familial, and it is true that it de-emphasizes the significance of the children's need to avenge their father, but rather than abandon the familial altogether, it instead brings the children's relationship with their mother to the fore. Even Halporn must admit, "At the end of the play there is a tie of blood between Electra and Orestes: it is not the blood of the father in their veins, but the blood of the mother on their hands" (114).

<sup>10</sup> *Electra* texts and translations are Kovacs, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1998, unless otherwise noted.

He particularly fears that she will bear a child of noble birth, so he marries her to an impoverished farmer. As the farmer states,

ὥς ἀσθενεῖ δούς ἀσθενῆ λάβοι φόβον.  
εἰ γὰρ νιν ἔσχεν ἀξίωμ' ἔχων ἀνήρ,  
εὕδοντ' ἄν ἐξήγειρε τὸν Ἀγαμέμνονος  
φόνον δίκη τ' ἄν ἦλθεν Αἰγίσθωι τότε.

This he did so that if he gave her to a weak man, the fear he felt might also be weak. For if a man of standing had married her, he would have awakened from its slumber the murder of Agamemnon, and punishment might have come thereafter to Aegisthus (ll. 39-42).

While this certainly articulates a cultural belief about wealth, standing, and power revisited later in the play, it also reveals the inadequacy of motherhood. Electra's power is easily squashed: she still requires a man to realize her potential, and a common-born child cannot threaten Aegisthus, and thus her marriage to a farmer appeases him. She is very much the nurse of Apollo's argument in *Eumenides*: she is a vessel that carries the child, but the quality of the child is primarily dependent on the seed placed in the vessel. Additionally, while her farmer-husband is poor in property, he is noble in spirit: he has preserved her virginity on account of her status as a princess (see ll. 43-46). While he is commended for this, this fact also double-determines her lack of children to help her. While she would appear empowered by her potential, such power is easily done away with through no real action of her own. She is powerful only because of what she might do, and such hypotheticals prove illusory in the face of the actions of the men around her.

Electra demonstrates her acceptance of her powerlessness as she laments and bemoans her fate. Her parodos consists primarily of complaints and turns to revenge only as she laments her brother's absence:

ἔλθοις δὲ πόνων ἐμοῖ

τᾶι μελέαι λυτήρ,  
ὦ Ζεῦ Ζεῦ, πατρί θ' αἰμάτων  
αἰσχίστων ἐπικούρος, Ἄρ-  
γει κέλσας πόδ' ἀλάταν.

Come to free  
me the unfortunate from trouble  
(O Zeus, Zeus!) and avenge your father  
for his shameful murder,  
setting your exiled foot on Argive soil! (ll. 135-9)

Revenge for Electra can only come if Orestes frees her from her powerless status.

Aegisthus only fears male family members; as a woman, Electra requires a man to help her carry out her revenge, and in her current marriage, she cannot rely on her husband or son. After she learns that Orestes is alive, however, she imagines herself taking a more active role in the revenge. She longs to pay Aegisthus back for her marriage:

ΗΛ. τοιαῦτ' ἐβούλευσ' ὦν ἐμοὶ δοίη δίκην.

El. That was his plan. May I be able to pay him back for it! (l. 269)

When asked what Orestes ought to do if he arrived in Argos, she answers boldly that he should kill his father's murderers. Then Orestes asks:

Ορ. ἦ καὶ μετ' αὐτοῦ μητέρ' ἂν τλαίης κτανεῖν;  
ΗΛ. ταῦτῳ γε πελέκει τῷ πατῆρ ἀπώλετο.

Or. Would you also have the hardihood to kill your mother with his help?  
El. Yes, with the same ax with which my father met his death! (ll. 278-9)

This is a far cry from Electra's previous laments. With her brother's help, she is certain that she could participate in her mother's murder. Knowledge of Orestes' safety has not only given Electra hope, but has also empowered her to believe that she could take action on her own behalf.

In Euripides' *Electra*, however, the idea of Orestes proves to be much more powerful than the man himself. Arnott succinctly summarizes the contrast between Electra's vision of Orestes and his actual characterization: while Electra insists that Orestes is the vision of the aristocratic hero of the *Iliad*, who would never sneak back into Argos but would defeat Aegisthus in single combat (cf. Il. 337f., 525ff.), he in fact does return in disguise, and he stabs Aegisthus in the back.<sup>11</sup> Euripides' Orestes is no inheritor of the aristocracy, and by rejecting practices that had long been synonymous with values of excellence and honor, Orestes' powerlessness is highlighted.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Orestes is capable of very little on his own. He has not arrived with a plan; instead, he accepts the instructions of both the old man and his sister. He is a tool of those with greater capacity, not dissimilar to Electra, the vessel of noble men who can implant noble seed. Ironically, as Orestes commends the farmer for his virtue, he notices that many of no reputation are proven to be noble, while those born into nobility are sometimes worthless. As Goff states, "when [Orestes] says, 'Before now I've seen a man of no account sprung from a noble father' (369-70), he is his own best example."<sup>13</sup> Despite what Electra wishes, Orestes is not the aristocratic hero she envisions. To many, the drastic difference between Electra's image of Orestes and reality serve as evidence of Electra's mental state and the

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<sup>11</sup> Arnott, "Double the Vision," 182-3.

<sup>12</sup> Here we see how the contrast between the realistic, perhaps even intelligently cautious Euripidean character and his noble, if unrealistic, Aeschylean forebear reflects poorly on Euripides' character. We may perhaps notice similarities to Odysseus here, but by 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, Odysseus was not particularly representative of the aristocracy either. For a discussion of allusions to Odysseus in Euripides' *Electra*, particularly as it relates to the recognition scene, see John Davidson, "Euripides, Homer, and Sophocles," 117-128; Goff, "The Sign of the Fall," 259-67; Luschnig, *The Gorgon's Severed Head*, 86-159; Halporn, "The Skeptical Electra" 101-18.

<sup>13</sup> Goff, "Try to Make it Real Compared to What?" 102. See Goldhill, "Rhetoric and Relevance," 163 for a similar view. For a discussion of *eugeneia* both in this play and in Greek tragedy in general, see O'Brien, "Orestes and the Gorgon," 13-39; Cairns, "Values," 310; Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition*, 207ff.

anti-heroine status she enjoys.<sup>14</sup> For our discussion, however, this dichotomy eliminates yet another source of power for Electra. She is empowered more by the idea of her brother than she is by his actual presence, and while this poetical construct emboldens Electra's thoughts, the actual power behind her success must come from other sources.

In part, Electra receives strength through Aegisthus' death—once Orestes has finally taken action. After the messenger has related the story of Aegisthus' murder, Electra exclaims:

νῦν ὄμμα τοῦμόν ἀμπτυχαί τ' ἐλεύθεροι,  
ἐπεὶ πατρὸς πέπτωκεν Αἴγισθος φονεύς.

Now I can open my eyes in freedom since Aegisthus, my father's killer, has fallen! (ll. 868-9)

Similarly, Electra expresses her liberty when Orestes finally convinces her to revile Aegisthus' body:

καὶ μὴν δι' ὄρθρων γ' οὔποτ' ἐξελίμπανον  
θρυλοῦσ' ἅ γ' εἰπεῖν ἤθελον κατ' ὄμμα σόν,  
εἰ δὴ γενοίμην δειμάτων ἐλευθέρα  
τῶν πρόσθε.

Yet in the early morning hours I never ceased from rehearsing what I wanted to say to your face if ever I should be freed from the fears that are now past (ll. 909-12).

With Aegisthus' death, Electra is free (ἐλεύθεροι, ἐλευθέρα) from her fears, brought about by the tyranny of Aegisthus' rule, which excluded her from her rightful inheritance: a proper marriage. Because of Electra's potential as a mother, Aegisthus threatened her life, which was saved only through a marriage that rendered her powerless. Now that Aegisthus is dead, Electra no longer needs to fear for her safety, and thus does not need

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<sup>14</sup> Particularly, see Arnott, "Double the Vision" for a full discussion of Electra's skewed view of reality, as well as Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides*, 92ff.; Zeitlin, "The Argive Festival of Hera," 647ff.

her farmer-husband, who also dampened her potential for children through his nobility. She is freed from the constraints of her marriage, which is no longer needed to preserve her life. Electra is empowered by Aegisthus' death, but not simply because her enemy has fallen. The “θανάσιμον γάμον” (l. 247) is now rendered unnecessary, allowing Electra to regain the potential for power—the potential to bear children—that she possessed before her marriage.

While Orestes sets out to murder Aegisthus, it is Electra's task to trap Clytemnestra. Her plan is wholly her own and requires no input from the old man, who doubts the success of the plot. Electra instructs the old man to tell Clytemnestra that Electra has given birth because she is certain that Clytemnestra will come to the cottage to see the child. Electra's assessment proves correct: Clytemnestra falls for Electra's ruse and enters the cottage where Orestes waits. Ironically, everything has come full circle. Electra finally gains the power to kill her mother not through her potential to bear children, but through the report of an actual child. When she merely *could* bear a child, Electra is easily disregarded, but it is only when she asserts that she actually has that she finally triumphs over her mother.<sup>15</sup> Motherhood certainly seems to empower Electra; however, the child itself is an illusion, just as the power Electra gained from her potential was at the beginning of the play. This indicates that Electra's power comes not from physical ownership of her children but from the idea of motherhood itself, which is a sharp contrast to what we have seen in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra's empowerment comes very much from the physical nature of her motherhood. For Euripides' Electra, by contrast, motherhood functions primarily as an idea; she has

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<sup>15</sup> True to the play's critique of aristocracy, the nobility of Electra's child is no longer an issue. It comes from the farmer's ignoble seed, yet Electra still triumphs.

suffered no pains and has no child to claim as her own, but she is empowered simply by stating her identity as a mother, which will, in the end, allow this power to be neutralized nonviolently.

Integral to Electra's plan, however, is her knowledge that Clytemnestra will answer her summons. This presents a contradiction. When Electra describes her plot, the old man questions her:

Ηλ. ἤξει κλύουσα λόχιά μου νοσήματα.  
Πρ. πόθεν; ἴτί δ' ἴ αὐτῇι σοῦ μέλειν δοκεῖς, τέκνον;  
Ηλ. ναί· καὶ δακρῦσει γ' ἀξιώμ' ἐμῶν τόκων.

El. When she hears of my being in childbed, she will come.  
Pr. Why do you think so? Do you imagine that she cares about you, my child?  
El. Yes, and she will weep for the low standing of my baby (ll. 656-8).

He does not believe that Clytemnestra cares for Electra enough to visit, but Electra assures him otherwise. However, Electra's hatred for her mother expressed thus far makes this a surprising statement. How does Electra know that Clytemnestra will come? Incorporated into Electra's view of motherhood is her perception of her own mother, who unlike Electra has a very real claim to several children. Electra sees the world through tinted lenses, and she may not fully grasp the realities of motherhood or Clytemnestra's point of view, but she understands enough of Clytemnestra's complicated feelings toward her children. Clytemnestra will come, and when she does, we gain a greater understanding of the role motherhood plays in this tragedy.

Until Clytemnestra arrives on stage, we learn only a very few details about her nature from the perceptions of other characters. As the farmer describes Aegisthus' worries about Electra's childbearing potential, he explains:

κτανεῖν σφε βουλευσαντος ὠμόφρων ὄμως  
μήτηρ νιν ἐξέσωσεν Αἰγίσθου χερός.

ἔς μὲν γὰρ ἄνδρα σκῆψιν εἶχ' ὀλωλότα,  
παίδων δ' ἔδεισε μὴ φθονηθεῖη φόνωι.

But her mother, cruel-minded though she was, rescued her from Aegisthus' hand. For as regards the husband she slew she had some excuse, but she feared resentment if she killed her children (ll. 27-30).

Clytemnestra would not allow Aegisthus to kill Electra but only because she feared resentment from the people of Argos. While they might reluctantly understand her motivations for killing her husband, she feared they would bear a grudge if she murdered her innocent child. The farmer suggests nothing noble about Clytemnestra's actions, even if she did save Electra's life. Rather, self-preservation drives Clytemnestra to prevent evil. Even so, Electra seems to misjudge her mother's motivations. Immediately following the farmer's prologue, Electra enters and exclaims:

ἦ γὰρ πανώλης Τυνδαρίς, μήτηρ ἐμή,  
ἔξέβαλέ μ' οἴκων, χάριτα τιθεμένη πόσει.

My mother, the accursed daughter of Tyndareus, has cast me out of my house to please her husband (ll. 60-1).

But as the farmer has just told us, Clytemnestra did not cast Electra out as a favor to Aegisthus—Electra was married off only because Clytemnestra rejected Aegisthus' far bloodier plan. Thus while it would be a stretch to expect Electra to thank her mother, it is clear that she has a skewed view of her own situation.<sup>16</sup> Electra assumes that Clytemnestra has discarded her previous children, erasing evidence of her previous household in order to make room for the new. Such physical displacement of Electra and Orestes from their home would seem to suggest that, from Electra's point of view, Clytemnestra has disowned her older children: they no longer belong to her. On the other hand, the farmer's explanation indicates that Clytemnestra still very much takes

<sup>16</sup> See n. 14 above, as well as Harder, "'Right' and 'Wrong,'" 15-24.



ownership of her children, as she acknowledges that her treatment of them will reflect upon her. At the very least, Clytemnestra accepts that the people of Argos view her children as belonging to her, and she acts accordingly. From the beginning, we suspect that Clytemnestra's sense of ownership of her children is muddled: she knows people will see them as hers, but she does not fully accept them as her own.

We do not receive new information about Clytemnestra until she finally enters. That she comes at all is significant. At line 265, Electra argues to Orestes:

γυναῖκες ἀνδρῶν, ὧ̃ ξέν', οὐ παίδων φίλαι.

Women, stranger, love their husbands, not their children.

Clytemnestra's appearance, however, suggests otherwise. She has come to her daughter's aid when called, and she is willing to perform the sacrifice Electra claims to require, postponing her meeting with Aegisthus. The *agon* between Clytemnestra and Electra provides the final details in our examination of these characters' views toward motherhood, demonstrating the un-empowered state to which Clytemnestra has sunk.

Roisman and Luschig argue that in the *agon*, "Euripides presents a good case for [Clytemnestra], humanizing her and making her vulnerable."<sup>17</sup> I find this only partially true. While Clytemnestra may be vulnerable, the case presented for her is not good.

Clytemnestra's argument has serious flaws, which I find more debilitating than do Roisman and Luschig. This humanization of Clytemnestra has a rather opposite effect—it reveals her as a pathetic figure, far from either the empowered terror of Aeschylus'

*Agamemnon* or even the less powerful Clytemnestra of *Choephoroe* who has nevertheless

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<sup>17</sup> Roisman and Luschig, eds., *Euripides' Electra*, 210. Some commentators see this as an example of Euripidean feminism. (See Roisman and Luschig, 213; England, "The *Electra* of Euripides," 103; Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition*, 220.) As with most instances in Greek tragedy when the charge of feminism is leveled, I find it hard to believe that a character such as this would inspire men to extend greater rights to women.

retained her desire to fight.<sup>18</sup> The dangerous Clytemnestra who murdered her husband over the loss of her daughter is a creature of the past, and because Euripides has deemphasized these dangers, he highlights the resolution or reduction of maternal empowerment. Although motherhood offers both Electra and Clytemnestra temporary power, it is fleeting and foundationless.

Electra provokes the *agon* with Clytemnestra, as she cannot resist accusing her mother of reducing her to a slave, and Clytemnestra cannot resist defending herself. Roisman and Luschnig astutely note that both Clytemnestra's and Electra's speeches "seem rehearsed."<sup>19</sup> Mother and daughter have been at odds for too long for either of their arguments to be spontaneous: each has practiced what she would like to say to the other, and now they are given the opportunity. Nor is their reasoning particularly new to the audience; after years of Aeschylean tradition, the audience is familiar with Clytemnestra's possible motivations for her actions. In the context of Electra's deception, however, her argument takes on new meaning. Clytemnestra has arrived believing that Electra has born a son; while the audience knows that Electra still harbors resentment for her lack of a marriage and children, Clytemnestra must assume that her daughter can now understand the concerns of a wife and mother.<sup>20</sup> Thus while Clytemnestra's arguments are familiar, the nuances in the present context have changed.

Clytemnestra begins with the age-old argument of Iphigenia's sacrifice, and much of her language reflects her traditional overvaluing of her relationship with Iphigenia. Her first statement reads:

ἡμᾶς δ' ἔδωκε Τυνδάρεως τῶι σῶι πατρὶ

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Choephoroe* ll. 887ff., where Clytemnestra calls for an ax.

<sup>19</sup> Roisman and Luschnig, *Euripides' Electra*, 210.

<sup>20</sup> Zeitlin, "The Argive Festival of Hera," 666.

οὐχ ὥστε θνήσκειν οὐδ' ἅ γειναίμην ἐγώ.

My father Tyndareus did not give me to your father so that I or the children I bore should be killed (ll. 1018-19).

Her emphasis on “ἅ γειναίμην ἐγώ” (“which I bore”), reinforced by the phrase “παῖδα τὴν ἐμήν” (“my child”) in the next line demonstrates her possessiveness of Iphigenia. As in the *Agamemnon*, because Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia, Clytemnestra felt compelled to avenge *her* child. Since she is presenting this argument to Electra, however, the argument takes on new life. Clytemnestra presents her argument in such a way as to exploit the horror she expects Electra to feel at losing a child by giving a visual description of the sacrifice:

...ἔνθ' ὑπερτείνας πυρᾶς  
λευκὴν διήμης Ἴφιγόνης παρηίδα.

...there, stretching Iphigenia out above an altar, he slit her pale white throat (ll. 1022-1023).

Clytemnestra not only overvalues her own children, but she also expects Electra to value her newborn equally highly. For Clytemnestra, maternal ownership of children is the norm, and a feeling with which Electra ought to sympathize.

As Clytemnestra continues speaking, however, she both undercuts her argument and backs off from her ownership of her children. First, she allows the possibility that the sacrifice could have been just, saying:

κεῖ μὲν πόλεως ἄλωσιν ἐξιώμενος  
ἢ δῶμ' ὀνήσων τᾶλλα τ' ἐκσώζων τέκνα  
ἔκτεινε πολλῶν μίαν ὑπερ, συγγνώστ' ἂν ἦν.

If he had killed one child for the sake of many, trying to avert the sack of our city or to benefit our house and save our other children, it would be forgivable (ll. 1024-26).

We can perhaps see why Clytemnestra would make such an argument in her tenuous political situation. Both the farmer and the old servant hint at the queen's concern for public opinion.<sup>21</sup> According to the farmer, her fear of her people's reaction saved Electra's life (ll. 27-30); the servant knows that the people hate her (l. 645), which he suggests is the reason that she would not join Aegisthus for the sacrifice (ll. 641-643). Before Clytemnestra begins her defense in the *agon* in earnest, she too says a few words about her reputation:

λέξω δέ. καίτοι δόξ' ὅταν λάβῃ κακὴ  
 γυναιῖκα, γλώσση πικρότης ἔνεστί τις...

Still, I shall speak. Yet when evil repute takes a woman as its prey, her words have an unwelcome character to them... (ll. 1013-14).

Clytemnestra realizes that public favor is not on her side, so she includes in her justifications evidence that might sway her people into supporting her in her current capacity as ruler. Thus, while she claims the sacrifice of Iphigenia as one of her motivations, she admits that there might have been good reason to sacrifice a child. Despite her strong motherly feeling, Clytemnestra would be willing to suffer for the benefit of the house or the city, for the greater good. In making this argument, Clytemnestra introduces a limit on her ownership of her children. Aeschylus' Clytemnestra raged uncontrollably, refusing to admit any rationalization for Agamemnon's deed. Euripides' Clytemnestra, however, as a responsible ruler, can envision herself making a personal sacrifice for the sake of her people.<sup>22</sup> By using this argument, Clytemnestra downplays the importance of motherhood. Iphigenia may have belonged to her, but her own personal insults are, hypothetically, of lesser importance.

<sup>21</sup> See Mossman, "Women's Speech in Greek Tragedy," 374-84, for a discussion of verbal genres in this play, as well as female self-consciousness of speech.

<sup>22</sup> Naturally, Clytemnestra argues that Agamemnon had none of these noble motivations (ll. 1027-9).

Motherhood is certainly a factor, but it is not as all-encompassing for Euripides' Clytemnestra as it was for Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, continuing to represent Clytemnestra's muddled sense of ownership.

As Clytemnestra continues her argument, motherhood becomes even less of a motivation. Clytemnestra uses the sacrifice of Iphigenia to condemn Agamemnon, but she does not claim the sacrifice as her motive for killing Agamemnon, saying:

ἐπὶ τοῖσδε τοίνυν καίπερ ἠδίκημένη  
οὐκ ἠγγιώμην οὐδ' ἄν ἔκτανον πόσιν  
ἀλλ' ἦλθ' ἔχων μοι μαινάδ' ἔνθεον κόρην  
λέκτροις τ' ἐπεισέφρηκε, καὶ νύμφα δύο  
ἐν τοῖσιν αὐτοῖς δώμασιν κατεῖχ' ὁμοῦ.

Well, even though I was wronged, it was not this that made me savage, and not for this would I have killed him. But he came home with the god-possessed seer girl and installed her in his bed and meant to keep two women at the same time in the same house (ll. 1030-4).

The forceful transition “ἀλλ' ἦλθ'...” in line 1032 emphasizes strongly that the arrival of Cassandra as a new wife was the true reason for her actions. Clytemnestra's argument has an obvious hole: she had committed adultery long before she knew of Cassandra's existence, and her plan to murder Agamemnon had been contrived before his return. Roisman and Luschnig argue that her affair with Aegisthus did not necessarily precede Agamemnon's affairs during the Trojan War, which Clytemnestra knew of in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.<sup>23</sup> While this is not false, it does not make Clytemnestra's argument more persuasive. Why doesn't Euripides' Clytemnestra mention other affairs as part of her argument, especially considering that Euripides has not shied away from Aeschylean

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<sup>23</sup> Roisman and Luschnig, *Euripides' Electra*, 213; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ll. 1439.

references in this play?<sup>24</sup> The traditional evidence was there, and the point rhetorically valuable for Clytemnestra. Moreover, it is little likely to be an argument that the audience would have supplied itself. As Clytemnestra goes on to state, when a wife “imitates” her husband in having an affair, women are the ones blamed:

κάπειτ' ἐν ἡμῖν ὁ ψόγος λαμπρύνεται,  
οἱ δ' αἴτιοι τῶνδ' οὐ κλύουσ' ἄνδρες κακῶς.

And after this it is we who are loudly blamed, while men, the authors of this situation, hear no criticism! (ll. 1039-40)

The well-known double standard in ancient Greece makes it seem unlikely that an audience would have granted Clytemnestra the benefit of the doubt without any prompting from the text. Cassandra as motivation for murder strikes us as illogical, despite the fact that Agamemnon’s adultery was possibly, as Roisman and Luschign point out, a legitimate source of anger for Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra’s speech reveals the lack of power in her life. In terms of justifications for her actions, the death of Iphigenia is her strongest logical point and introduces a valuable aspect of moral grayness. While an audience would not condone Clytemnestra’s murderous actions, it cannot discount the crime Agamemnon committed against her. Even in the *Eumenides*, where matricide is justified, the jury is still hung—half of the Athenian jury supported maternal rights. If Clytemnestra truly takes ownership of her child, she has greater rhetorical strength. Euripides’ Clytemnestra, however, seems to do her best to downplay the significance of her strongest argument. She abandons it for a confused, chronologically illogical idea of which Electra takes full advantage. Without

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<sup>24</sup> See, most significantly, the signs of Orestes at the tomb, a topic of considerable scholarly discussion. See Fraenkel, *Aeschylus’ Agamemnon*, 815-26; Lloyd-Jones, “Some Alleged Interpolations,” 171-84; Bond, “Euripides’ parody,” 1-14; Bain, “Euripides’ *Electra*: 518-44,” 104-116; West, “Tragica IV,” 17-22; Kovacs, “Euripides, *Electra* 518-44,” 67-78. For a summary of key viewpoints, see Davies, “Euripides’ *Electra*: The Recognition Scene Again,” 389-403.

the power of potentially righteous indignation, this Clytemnestra is forced to admit after Electra's speech:

οἴμοι τάλαινα τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων·  
ὡς μάλλον ἢ χρῆν ἤλασ' εἰς ὀργὴν πόσει.

Ah, how wretched my plotting has made me! How excessively I raged against my husband! (Il. 1109-10)

There is so little fight left in Clytemnestra. In denying herself the motivation of Iphigenia's death, she refuses the power that motherhood could bring her, and she is revealed as a fraud, unjustified and guilty.

Yet before Clytemnestra concludes her argument, she returns to Iphigenia's sacrifice, though not with an appeal to Electra's motherly emotion. Instead, Clytemnestra uses a complex role reversal, offering a petition to justice.

εἰ δ' ἐκ δόμων ἤρπαστο Μενέλεως λάθρῃ,  
κτανεῖν μ' Ὀρέστην χρῆν, κασιγνήτης πόσιν  
Μενέλαον ὡς σώσαιμι; σὸς δὲ πῶς πατήρ  
ἦνέσχετ' ἂν ταῦτ'; εἶτα τὸν μὲν οὐ θανεῖν  
κτείνοντα χρῆν τᾶμ', ἐμὲ δὲ πρὸς κείνου παθεῖν.

If Menelaus had been abducted from his house in secret, would I have been right to kill Orestes in order to preserve Menelaus, my sister's husband? How would your father have put up with that? So can you claim it would have been wrong for him to be killed for killing my child, yet right for me to suffer at his hands? (Il. 1041-5)

In this hypothetical, Clytemnestra argues that Agamemnon would certainly have punished her for killing Orestes to save Menelaus; thus it cannot be right for his injury toward her to go unpunished. This statement seeks to eliminate the double standard in its logic: what would be wrong for women ought to be wrong for men. At the crux of Clytemnestra's argument, however, is that she knows Agamemnon would have been angry if she had killed his son. Conversely, then, she had every right to be angry when he

sacrificed her daughter. We see here that Clytemnestra does ultimately take ownership of her own children, as emphasized in line 1045: he has killed τᾶμ', and she has suffered because of him. Her role reversal would not be effective if she did not believe Iphigenia was hers, but in the light of her previous arguments, this sentiment contributes more to confusion than clarity. Iphigenia represents an argument from Clytemnestra's past, a point that had once brought her strength, but now things have grown too complicated, and she cannot enjoy undiluted empowerment from her children.

Clytemnestra's appearance at Electra's cottage reflects this conflicted sense of motherhood. As Electra points out in her speech, while Agamemnon may have killed Iphigenia, Electra and Orestes did no wrong to Clytemnestra, yet Clytemnestra has exiled Orestes and robbed her children of their inheritance (ll. 1086ff.). And although her interference did save Electra's life, Electra has still been mistreated and subjected to a disgraceful marriage. We know that Clytemnestra has born children to Aegisthus (ll. 63-4), and perhaps she has decided to replace the former children with the new. Elements of her behavior reflect her ownership of her children: her appearance at Electra's cottage, her saving of Electra's life, her previous relationship with Iphigenia. Yet many of her actions contradict full-fledged ownership of her children: she has cast out Electra and Orestes and she downplays the significance of Iphigenia's death in her *agon* with Electra. Perhaps she has intellectually convinced herself that her ownership of her children is less important; after all, political expediencies require that she give precedence to her new children and protect her position from her previous, vengeful children. Her possession of her children is only buried, however, and as it is visible between the lines of her argument, it is evident in her character as well. Deep down, Clytemnestra knows that the



children are hers, and thus she will come to see her grandchild, as Electra knows she must.

Euripides interprets the cycle seen in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* by emphasizing the humanity of Clytemnestra's transition from one stage of life to another. In her younger days, as a mother, Clytemnestra used her children as a source of power. Her first argument demonstrates her value of her ownership of Iphigenia, a relationship which bestowed masculine power upon Clytemnestra: like a man, she kills her husband with a sword, penetrating his flesh with a blade.<sup>25</sup> By the time the *Electra* takes place, however, Clytemnestra's children are fully grown and capable of threatening her in return. While *Choephoroe* continues to portray a masculine Clytemnestra who rushes onstage with an ax when danger is obvious, Euripides depicts a woman attempting to return to fifth-century standards of femininity. Rather than emphasize the death of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra stresses Agamemnon's adultery, describing how women are envious of their husbands and desirous of choosing their own sexual partners—falling rather directly into Jason's argument of the *Medea* that women are concerned only that no misfortune befalls their bed (ll. 569-73). Once, ownership of her children allowed Clytemnestra to enter a masculine sphere of action, but now that her relationship with her children has become more complex and her thoughts have turned more to her bed than the children it produced, she is weakened. Euripides also dramatizes this change in Clytemnestra's life through Electra's ruse, which makes Clytemnestra a grandmother, a weaker mother. At this stage of life, Clytemnestra cannot truly take ownership of her grown children. No

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<sup>25</sup> Cunning and poison were the typical weapons of women; see Seidensticker, "Women on the Tragic Stage," 159. On Clytemnestra's appropriation of masculine motifs and heroic language, see Betensky, A. "Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," 11-25; Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus*, 101-131; Foley, *Female Acts*, 203-12; McClure, "Logos Gunaikos," 115-20 and *Spoken Like a Woman*, 71-80; Fraenkel, *Aeschylus Agamemnon*, *ad loc* 1401.

longer τᾶμ' but ἦ and ὅ, Electra and Orestes are capable of rejecting their mother, leaving her with no possessions and no power of her own. In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra's empowerment was resolved at her death, when, after rejecting Orestes and Electra, they undervalued and rejected their mother. Euripides' *Electra* puts this resolution in human terms. Having left the prime of her life, Clytemnestra's influence is now waning; the power that was so dangerous to a patriarchal society is not only neutralized when Clytemnestra dies, but as she transitions from mother to grandmother.

Electra, on the other hand, is a young woman coming into the height of her power, and as the prologue demonstrates, her ability to bear children threatens those in power. Previous installments in this mythic tradition, however, have demonstrated the danger posed by a woman with children; even if her glory has faded in this play, it is clear that Clytemnestra was powerful once. Therefore, the power Electra has gained during the play must be resolved as well if we are to avoid an end feeling of anxiety. In part, the problem of Electra's power is settled before it begins because she is empowered only by the idea of motherhood: she has no actual children and is even still a virgin, as far from able to take ownership of children as she could possibly be. By that same token, she also does not fully receive the masculine strength that Clytemnestra did; Electra urges Orestes on and her hand is on the sword (ll. 1224ff.), but the blow is ultimately Orestes'. She begins an excursion into the murderous ways of her mother but is not as far gone. In the end, Electra is brought under control once again through the institution of marriage, this time to Pylades, a legitimate husband, and we can see here a reflection of the methods of Athenian society: the best way to restrain maternal empowerment is to control female reproduction, and Electra is put in a marriage where her potential can be of most use.

Euripides cannot deny the empowering abilities of motherhood, but he curtails Electra's threat level through images, rather than the realities, of motherhood and resolves it through traditional marriage.

Like the *Oresteia*, Euripides' *Electra* demonstrates the cycle of motherhood, but it adds a unique and human look at the resolution of maternal power. Both Clytemnestra and Electra are empowered by taking ownership of children. For Clytemnestra, this ownership took place in the past and enabled her to kill Agamemnon. By the action of the play, Clytemnestra's sense of ownership has waned, creating a sense of conflict and confusion in regards to her surviving children evident both in her actions and her speech. Appropriately, then, Clytemnestra herself is less powerful in the present, and she falls victim to her children. Electra's sense of ownership, on the other hand, is a Euripidean innovation. Electra is threatening to her mother and Aegisthus because she had the potential to bear children, but when she pretends that she has actually born a child, she gains the power to take revenge on Clytemnestra. By adding this element to Electra's character, Euripides emphasizes the human side of Clytemnestra's regression; as a grandmother, she has reached a stage of life where she cannot maintain a fierce possession of her grown children. On the other hand, Electra's transition back to safe levels of strength is largely cerebral as the child that brought her power was never real, and she is put to work as a functioning member of the patriarchy through a legitimate marriage. As usual, Euripides has expertly played with our sympathies: the humanity of Clytemnestra's decline evokes pity, as does Electra's fight against her mistreatment. Nevertheless, Clytemnestra's initial empowerment has brought the destruction of all who surround her: Agamemnon, Aegisthus, as well as Orestes and Electra, as we see from

their pathetic reaction to matricide and the response of the Dioscuri. The children, in turn, have contributed to their own destruction through Electra's empowerment, which made matricide possible. Thus, although our anxiety may be resolved in the end, we are still left with an unshakeable opinion that maternal empowerment is excessively destructive.



## Chapter 2: *Medea* and Masculine Anxiety

Unlike Euripides' *Electra*, the *Medea* does not give us such a tidy transition from ownership and empowerment to rejection and resolution. The elements of the cycle are still present, but they have been rearranged as Euripides has packed them into a single installment. *Medea* also offers a new perspective on the cycle of maternal empowerment because it brings the father onstage, which *Electra*, of course, cannot do. Thus as we analyze *Medea*, we will see that although the outer layers of Medea's character appear to reject ownership of her children, there is an underlying, initial seizing of ownership that empowers Medea to enact her revenge against Jason. In the end, however, Medea's rejection of her children results not in her own death but in theirs, and while she has destroyed the source of her power, she is not reduced to a safer entity, leaving us with a sense of unease rather than resolution.

The defining act of Euripides' *Medea*, the murder of Medea's two children at the hands of their own mother, is obviously shocking because it severely contradicts our assumption of how a mother ought to behave. We do not require Euripides to convince us that a mother ought to value her bond with her children highly enough that she would not harm them, and he does not attempt to do so. Instead, a mother's bond with her children is a standard we are not expected to question, which allows Euripides to exploit our sympathies through Medea's violent shattering of the assumed stereotype. Whereas Clytemnestra was under scrutiny for either overvaluing or undervaluing her children, Medea is simply supposed to value them, and she does not, demonstrating that a mother can take ownership of her children without overvaluing her bond with them. Thus, *Medea* provides a picture of acceptable motherhood, an ideal of which Medea falls short.

The beginning of Medea's great monologue calls to mind standard aspects of the traditional mother. In ll. 1024-7, Medea says:

ἐγὼ δ' ἐς ἄλλην γαῖαν εἶμι δὴ φυγὰς,  
πρὶν σφῶν ὀνάσθαι κάπιδεῖν εὐδαίμονας,  
πρὶν λουτρὰ καὶ γυναῖκα καὶ γαμηλίους  
εὐνὰς ἀγῆλαι λαμπάδας τ' ἀνασχεθεῖν.

I shall go to another land as an exile before I have the enjoyment of you and see you happy, before I have tended to your baths and your wives and marriage beds and held the wedding torches aloft.<sup>1</sup>

First, Medea lists the opportunities she should have had to care for her children, particularly at their weddings. She focuses on an event in their adult life, indicating her desire to see them grow to adulthood—to witness the fulfillment of the nourishment she has provided for them. As their mother, Medea ought to enjoy the privilege of assisting her children in their transition into manhood. She continues by saying:

ἄλλως δ' ἐμόχθουν καὶ κατεξάνθην πόνοις,  
στερορὰς ἐνεγκοῦσ' ἐν τόκοις ἀλγηδόνας.

I see, that I brought you up, all in vain that I labored and was racked with toils, enduring harsh pains in childbirth! (ll. 1031-1)

Now, she mentions the effort she went through to bring her children to life, which, as we recall, serves as important evidence for a mother's claim to her children. Unlike Electra, whose children were only illusions, Medea recognizes the physicality of childbirth.

Finally, Medea says:

ἧ μὴν ποθ' ἢ δύστηνος εἶχον ἐλπίδας  
πολλὰς ἐν ὑμῖν, γηροβοσκήσειν τ' ἐμὲ  
καὶ κατθανοῦσαν χερσὶν εὖ περιστελεῖν,  
ζηλωτὸν ἀνθρώποισι.

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<sup>1</sup> *Medea* texts and translations are Kovacs, *Loeb Classical Library*, 2001, unless otherwise noted.

Truly, many were the hopes that I, poor fool, once had in you, that you would tend me in my old age, and when I died, dress me for burial with your own hands, an enviable lot for mortals (ll. 1032-5).

She ends this portion of her lament by imagining the benefits she ought to have received from her children in her old age, demonstrating a safer, societally appropriate cycle of childbearing: in return for the nourishment Medea should have given them, her sons would in turn care for her when she could no longer tend herself.<sup>2</sup> This beginning to Medea's monologue reminds us of the standard motherhood tropes: mothers raise their children to adulthood, suffering intense pain along the way, and eventually have the favor returned in old age. A mother might well lament the pain she suffered in vain or the loss of their care in old age if her children were going to be killed. The irony, of course, is that Medea herself is the cause of her own suffering. In murdering her own children, Medea also kills the traditions of motherhood, distancing herself from her customary role in society.

As Medea continues her monologue, she is overcome by emotion at the presence of her children. In ll. 1040-3, she says:

φεῦ φεῦ· τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ' ὄμμασιν, τέκνα;  
 τί προσγελάτε τὸν πανύστατον γέλων;  
 αἰαῖ· τί δράσω; καρδία γὰρ οἴχεται,  
 γυναιῖκες, ὄμμα φαιδρὸν ὡς εἶδον τέκνων.

Oh! What is the meaning of your glance at me, children? Why do you smile at me this last smile of yours? Alas, what am I to do? My courage is gone, women, ever since I saw the bright faces of the children (ll. 1040-3).

The sight of their faces and their smiles rob Medea of her courage, and when she says she cannot do it (l. 1044), we know she means that she cannot kill them. Medea intensifies

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Clytemnestra's plea to Orestes in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* that she wishes to grow old with him, ll. 896ff. See Introduction, page 21 above.



the sentiment of these lines as she concludes her monologue by calling her children to her. She cries:

ὦ γλυκεῖα προσβολή,  
ὦ μαλθακὸς χρῶς πνεῦμά θ' ἥδιστον τέκνων·

Oh, how sweet is the touch, how tender the skin, how fragrant the breath of these children! (ll. 1074-5)

She has moved from seeing her children to touching them, and as she grows more specific in her description of her children's dearness, using even her sense of smell, her pain clearly grows into agony. This indicates a natural part of a mother's character: her children are so dear to her that she could not possibly do them harm, but we probably do not need to be convinced of this, and throughout the play, the nature of a mother is more understood than argued. When the Nurse tells us that Medea loathes her children (l. 36), it is clearly proof of the danger the Nurse senses. Why? Because Medea ought to love her children, a fact the nurse does not need to tell us. The chorus tells Medea:

ἀλλὰ κτανεῖν σὸν σπέρμα τολμήσεις, γύναι;

Yet will you bring yourself to kill your own offspring, woman? (l. 816)

We can understand their use of the verb τολμήσεις because Medea does dare to act so far outside the norm. Again, the irony in Medea's monologue is that she is the source of her distress. Much of Medea's lament is entirely appropriate. As we consider a primary characteristic of mothers, their undying love for their children, a characteristic well attested in everyday life, we note that Medea's natural pain at the loss of her children comes from her unnatural desire to kill her children.

In addition to portraying several key aspects of a mother's nature, *Medea* also emphasizes significant details that further define the role of a father. Jason's character is

under particular scrutiny, as his actions against his family set up the main conflict of the play. While most characters pass judgment on Jason's behavior toward Medea, his treatment of his children receives attention at three key points. First, the Nurse and the Tutor expose Jason's lack of feeling toward his family. After the Tutor reveals that Medea and the children will be banished, the Nurse asks:

καὶ ταῦτ' Ἰάσων παῖδας ἐξανέξεται  
πάσχοντας, εἰ καὶ μητρὶ διαφορὰν ἔχει;

But will Jason allow this to happen to his sons even if he is at odds with their mother? (ll. 74-5)

Although the Nurse has clearly shown herself to be sympathetic to Medea, even she understands that Jason would do little to prevent Medea's banishment. She is astonished, however, that he would allow such a thing to happen to his children, and she voices thinly disguised criticism a few lines later:

ὦ τέκν', ἀκούεθ' οἷος εἰς ὑμᾶς πατήρ;  
ὄλοιτο μὲν μή· δεσπότης γὰρ ἐστ' ἐμός·  
ἀτὰρ κακός γ' ὦν ἐς φίλους ἀλίσκεται.

O children, do you hear what kind of man your father is toward you? I don't go so far as to curse him, for he is my master. Yet he is certainly guilty of disloyalty toward his loved ones (ll. 82-4).

She holds herself back from cursing him, but his actions, it seems, would be worthy of one. The Tutor, on the other hand, is not surprised. As he explains,

τίς δ' οὐχὶ θνητῶν; ἄρτι γιγνώσκεις τόδε,  
ὡς πᾶς τις αὐτὸν τοῦ πέλας μᾶλλον φιλεῖ,  
[οἱ μὲν δικαίως, οἱ δὲ καὶ κέρδους χάριν,]  
εἰ τοῦσδε γ' εὐνῆς οὐνεκ' οὐ στέργει πατήρ; (ll. 85-8)

As what mortal is not? Because of his new bride, the father does not love these boys: are you only now learning that each man loves himself more than others [, some justly, others for the sake of gain]? (ll. 85-8)

Despite his matter of fact nature, however, the Tutor makes no attempts to justify Jason's decisions, and he does not assess Jason's motivations as particularly praiseworthy. Jason no longer loves these children, and he is not friendly to his former house (ll. 76-7), but this is simply the way of human behavior. While neither side condones Jason's actions, the gender divide establishes two possible ways of viewing this conflict. From the feminine point of view, Jason's actions are despicable; from the male side, these are merely the ways of the world. Thus while a good father would probably not treat his family this way, a man should not really be expected to serve any interests but his own. This establishes important criteria for us as we judge Jason. We may find it quite easy to doubt Jason's sincerity.<sup>3</sup> How can we assume that Jason's overtures of aid to his family are motivated out of any desire to be a good father? Obviously, we can't. We can, however, trust that Jason wants to seem like a good father. Just as the tutor suggests, men care about themselves, and Jason's speeches indicate his concern for his image, particularly at ll. 542-4, where he states that he would want neither gold nor Orpheus' talent if it did not bring him fame.<sup>4</sup> His actions may not be successful or particularly considerate, but they are more than likely designed with the goal of making Jason look like a noble father.

Although Jason's first appearance is dominated by his *agon* with Medea and their conflict over their relationship, his primary purpose for appearing on stage has a great deal to do with his children. When he enters at line 446, Jason explains that Medea's

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<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Bongie, "Heroic Elements," 45-6, encourages us to consider both Medea's and Jason's stated rationalizations for their actions along with their more sordid motivations of jealousy and lust.

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars have also noted Jason's attention to his image. See, for example, Boedeker, "The Vanity of ΛΟΓΟΙ," 103; Rickert, "Akrasia," 105; Walsh, "Public and Private," 295-6.

exile is all her own fault. But although Medea has reviled Jason and the royal family, Jason is unwilling to let his family leave destitute:

ὅμως δὲ κακῶν δ' οὐκ ἀπειρηκῶς φίλοις  
ἦκω, τὸ σὸν δὲ προσκοπούμενος, γύναι,  
ὡς μήτ' ἀχρήμων σὺν τέκνοισιν ἐκπέσης  
μήτ' ἐνδεής του·

Still, even after this I have not failed my loved ones but have come here in your interests, woman, so that you might not go into exile with your children penniless or in need of anything (ll. 459-62).

Jason has come to provide for his family, and not simply with a one-time gift. At the end of the scene he says:

ἀλλ', εἴ τι βούληι παισὶν ἢ σαυτῆι φυγῆς  
προσωφέλημα χρημάτων ἐμῶν λαβεῖν,  
λέγ'· ὡς ἔτοιμος ἀφθόνωι δοῦναι χερὶ  
ξένοις τε πέμπειν σύμβολ', οἱ δρᾶσουσί σ' εὖ.

But if you wish to get some of my money to help the children and yourself in exile, for I am ready to give with unstinting hand, and also to send tokens to my friends, who will treat you well (ll. 610-13).

He is willing to help Medea and the children ἀφθόνωι χερὶ (l. 612), πᾶνθ' (l. 620), through both money and favors, because he believes that this prevents him from “failing” his loved ones. His assumption is, perhaps inadvertently, corroborated by Medea when she says:

καλόν γ' ὄνειδος τῶι νεωστὶ νυμφίωι,  
πτωχούς ἀλᾶσθαι παῖδας ἢ τ' ἔσωσά σε.

What a fine reproach for a new bridegroom, that his children are wandering as beggars, and she who saved him likewise! (ll. 514-15)

It would be a mark against Jason if while he were getting married his children were wandering beggars, a clear sign that he either cannot or chooses not to provide for his

family. Medea, of course, has overlooked the fact that Jason has come to avert such a black mark, but nonetheless, her remarks demonstrate that Jason should be expected to provide for his family in exile. Monetary provision is an important part of the father's role, and Jason attempts, at least, to fulfill it.

In addition to providing for his children's current temporal needs, Jason also expects to provide for their future. Jason claims that his primary purpose for marrying anew was in fact the security of Medea's children:

παῖδας δὲ θρέψαιμ' ἀξίως δόμων ἐμῶν  
σπείρας τ' ἀδελφούς τοῖσιν ἐκ σέθεν τέκνοις  
ἐς ταὐτὸ θείην καὶ ξυναρτήσας γένος  
εὐδαίμονοίην.

I wanted to raise the children in a manner befitting my house, to beget brothers to the children born from you, and put them on the same footing with them, so that by drawing the family into one I might prosper (ll. 562-5).

Cast out from his rightful kingdom, Jason decides to marry into a new royal family in order to provide a royal upbringing for his sons. Because of Jason's social status, he has standards for his children that he cannot meet.<sup>5</sup> Even after the children have been exiled, Jason still believes that someday, he will give his sons a fitting place in Corinth:

οἶμαι γὰρ ὑμᾶς τῆσδε γῆς Κορινθίας  
τὰ πρῶτ' ἔσεσθαι σὺν κασιγνήτοις ἔτι.

I think that some day with your new brothers you will hold the very first place in the land of Corinth (ll. 916-17).

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<sup>5</sup> McDermott, *Euripides' Medea*, 44-5, 129-30 (n. 8), argues that even though *Medea* was performed while Pericles' citizenship law of 451/0 was in effect, a time of looser citizenship regulations was well within recent memory, thus making it probable that an Athenian audience would have accepted Jason's plan to combine his families as plausible. Pericles' citizenship law seems an odd restriction to apply here: we are not in Athens, and Jason is not Corinthian, so his children with the princess have just as underprivileged a status as Medea's. Regardless, the restrictions of the citizenship law would have made Jason's plan even more necessary—as Medea's children, they could have no rights, but at least with noble brothers, their position might be improved. Thus, even though Jason's motivations are dubious and the legalities of his unique marriage contract with Medea are vague, it seems entirely possible that his actions could have been beneficial to his children, if not to Medea herself.

Although Jason's methods may seem tactless, at the very least, he legitimately seems to desire to create a life for his sons worthy of his stature. As a father, Jason is not only expected to provide monetarily for his children while young, but also to pave the way for their social status as adults.

Finally, Jason considers himself responsible for the lives of his children. When he prays to see his children grow to manhood (l. 920-1), Medea bursts into tears, and when Jason questions her, she replies that she wondered whether they truly would live. Not knowing, of course, why she has reason to doubt, Jason assures her,

θάροσει νυν· εὖ γὰρ τῶνδ' ἐγὼ θήσω πέρι.

Have no fear! I shall take good care of that! (l. 926)

Although Medea clearly has unusual reason for suspecting her children will not grow old, the fear that children may not reach adulthood is an innocent one which is echoed by the chorus after Medea sends the children into the house. At line 1090, the chorus proclaims that those without children are happier than those with. Parents, they say, are burdened with providing for their children, and they do not even know if their children are human beings worth providing for. The chorus then sings:

καὶ δὴ γὰρ ἄλις βίον θ' ἠῦρον  
σῶμά τ' ἐς ἥβην ἤλυθε τέκνων  
χρηστοὶ τ' ἐγένοντ'· εἰ δὲ κυρήσαι  
δαίμων οὕτω, φροῦδος ἐς Αἴδου  
θάνατος προφέρων σώματα τέκνων.

Suppose they have found a sufficient livelihood, suppose the children have arrived at young manhood and their character is good: yet if their destiny so chances, off goes death carrying the children's bodies to Hades (ll. 1107-11).

When Jason reassures Medea that he will see that the children live, he takes on a responsibility we know he cannot fulfill with surety. First, as the chorus indicates, fate itself, the “δαίμων,” may interfere. Second, Medea will ensure that he fails. After Medea has killed Creon, the princess, and the children, Jason reappears onstage—not to punish Medea, but to save the lives of his children:

ἀλλ’ οὐ γὰρ αὐτῆς φροντίδ’ ὡς τέκνων ἔχω·  
κείνην μὲν οὖς ἔδρασεν ἔρξουσιν κακῶς,  
ἐμῶν δὲ παίδων ἦλθον ἐκσώσων βίον,  
μή μοί τι δράσωσ’ οἱ προσήκοντες γένει,  
μητρῶιον ἐκπράσσοντες ἀνόσιον φόνον.

But it is not so much about her that I am concerned as about the children. *She* will be punished by those she has wronged, but I have come to save the lives of my children, that no harm may come to them from the next of kin, avenging on them their mother’s impious crime (ll. 1301-5).

In the end, no father, neither Creon nor Jason, can fulfill the ultimate responsibility of saving his children, for Medea outmaneuvers them both.

*Medea*’s emphasis on these aspects of motherhood and fatherhood illustrates the profit each parent derives from taking ownership of the children. For Jason, the benefits of children are clear. As he defends his decision to marry again, he says:

...οὐδ’ εἰς ἄμιλλαν πολύτεκνον σπουδῆν ἔχω·  
ἄλις γὰρ οἱ γεγῶτες οὐδὲ μέμφομαι·

...nor was I eager to rival others in the number of my children (we have enough already and I make no complaint) (ll. 557-8).

However, he goes on almost immediately to state that if he merges his two families, he will prosper (ll. 562ff.). An increase in children would help Jason succeed, even if quantity is not the key issue. In the *agon*, Jason is concerned about his image, and his treatment of his family factors into this—he suffers publicly if he can be seen as failing

his family, which is why he offers aid at their exile. By the same token, the success of Jason's sons also reflects well on him: he wants his children to receive an upbringing worthy of his stature, which in part leads to his seeking of a new wife. Like the happiest men described by Solon in Herodotus, the lives of Jason's children contribute to our judgment of Jason's own merit.<sup>6</sup> By claiming the children as his own, Jason receives all the benefits to his status from their achievements.

For Medea, ownership of her children is a much more complicated matter. When she is exiled by Creon, Medea uses her children to beg for one more day, begging him to think of them and appealing to his own nature as a father. She asserts herself as a superior parent to Jason, saying:

μίαν με μείναι τήνδ' ἔασον ἡμέραν  
καὶ ξυμπερᾶναι φροντίδ' ἧ φευξούμεθα,  
παισίν τ' ἀφορμὴν τοῖς ἐμοῖς, ἐπεὶ πατήρ  
οὐδὲν προτιμᾶι, μηχανήσασθαι τινα.

Allow me to remain this one day and to complete my plans for exile and how I may provide for my children, since their father does not care to do so (ll. 340-3).

By claiming the children as her own, Medea creates common ground with her enemy, which obtains his mercy as well as the opportunity for Medea to enact her revenge. Yet as she plans the most effective way to harm Jason, she gains a great advantage from his ownership of the children. In lines 816-17, the chorus and Medea have the following exchange:

Χο. ἀλλὰ κτανεῖν σὸν σπέρμα τολμήσεις, γύναι;  
Μη. οὐτῶ γὰρ ἂν μάλιστα δηχθεῖη πόσις.

Ch. Yet will you bring yourself to kill your own offspring, woman?  
Me. It is the way to hurt my husband most.

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<sup>6</sup> See Herodotus, *Histories* I. 30-2.



The Chorus attempts to emphasize that the children belong to Medea (σὸν), but Medea focuses only on the pain she can cause her husband. Killing her children is the best way for Medea to hurt Jason because the pleasure and prosperity he receives from them affects his social standing and his legacy, which are more concrete benefits than Medea receives. With the exception of care in her old age, Medea primarily expects to receive emotional pleasure from her children, such as the privilege of seeing them married. Thus as Jason's benefits from his ownership of the children come with more public significance, Medea can exploit this and cause him the most pain by giving them up. Contrary to what we have seen in the *Oresteia* or *Electra*, it would seem that Medea only really gains power over Jason by sacrificing her children.

Medea's sense of ownership is not so simple, however, and we see the complicated combination of ownership and rejection in her great monologue, the authenticity of which has long been questioned by scholars, largely because portions have been regarded as illogical or unnecessary. In a play like *Medea*, however, logic becomes a tricky question, as it asks us to imagine a woman willing to kill her own children. Such an extreme character makes it difficult to determine whether we can validly say anything about a very human topic like motherhood. To this end, I will turn to a different sort of analysis that uses aspects of modern psychology not to impose modern meaning on an ancient work, but to highlight the humanity of Medea's mental state and to clarify the twists and turns of her controversial monologue. While scholars have put forward many readings of this passage based on the internal logic of the play, the ambiguities of the ancient text provide no criteria with which to judge opposing perspectives; without some sort of structure, we are lost in controversy and uncertainty. Thus, I propose to use

psychology as a lens, forming a structure necessary for focusing our view on Medea's attitude toward her children.

The very concept of child murder is naturally controversial, particularly as we consider how an audience might react. In his commentary on the text, Page says:

The murder of the children, caused by jealousy and anger against their father, is mere brutality: if it moves us at all, it does so towards incredulity and horror. *Such an act is outside our experience*; we—and the fifth-century Athenian—know nothing of it (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, the murder of one's children is probably out of the individual experience of any audience member, but then, so is homicide in general, which is a strike against a large number of Greek tragedies. Page cannot mean personal experience; he refers to a collective experience, which says that child murder is so outside the realm of human behavior that Medea's actions are improbable, if not impossible. Numerous scholars have responded to his assertion; Easterling cites statistics which demonstrate that a rather large proportion of murder victims are in fact children and that many of them are killed by their parents. She says:

May it not be that in *Medea* we find Euripides exhibiting the same psychological sureness of touch as in his studies of Phaedra and Electra and Pentheus, or as in the scene where Cadmus brings Agave back to reality?<sup>8</sup>

Expanding on Easterling's explanation that Medea's actions are alarmingly within the realm of human experience, I will examine several ways in which Medea's behavior intersects with qualities of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, looking first at how the cause of her suffering corresponds with the triggers of PTSD, establishing the validity of PTSD as a lens, and second at how her mental state fits the description of dissociation, a key aspect of this mental disorder. This will lead toward a more inclusive reading of her great

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<sup>7</sup> Page, ed., *Medea* by Euripides, xiv-xv.

<sup>8</sup> Easterling, "The Infanticide in Euripides' *Medea*," 196.

monologue that highlights her mental and emotional separation from her children, thus distinguishing between acts of ownership and acts of rejection of her children.

As discussed by Jonathan Shay in his *Achilles in Vietnam*, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is often triggered by a betrayal of the social and moral order, reflected in *Medea* in three different ways.<sup>9</sup> First, Medea emphasizes strongly Jason's breaking of his oaths to her. She first mentions her marriage oaths at lines 160ff.:

ὦ μεγάλα Θέμι καὶ πότνι' Ἄρτεμι,  
λεύσσεθ' ἅ πάσχω, μεγάλοις ὄρκοις  
ἐνδησαμένα τὸν κατάρατον  
πόσιν;

O mighty Themis and my lady Artemis, do you see what I suffer, I who have bound my accursed husband with mighty oaths?

The concessive feel of the participle in line 162 reflects the betrayal with which Medea struggles. Even though she has bound her husband with oaths she believed would protect her, she still suffers. She continues to stress the breaking of oaths in her *agon* with Jason.

ὄρκων δὲ φροῦδη πίστις, οὐδ' ἔχω μαθεῖν  
εἰ θεοὺς νομίζεις τοὺς τότ' οὐκ ἄρχειν ἔτι  
ἢ καινὰ κείσθαι θέσμι' ἀνθρώποις τὰ νῦν,  
ἐπεὶ σύνοισθά γ' εἰς ἔμ' οὐκ εὖορκος ὦν.

Respect for your oaths is gone, and I cannot tell whether you think that the gods of old no longer rule or that new ordinances have now been set up for mortals, since you are surely aware that you have not kept your oath to me (ll. 492-5).

Divorce was not uncommon in ancient Greece, but Medea's marriage with Jason is clearly not a common union.<sup>10</sup> These oaths indicate a partnership of equals, a more

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<sup>9</sup> *Achilles in Vietnam* compares the causes and effects of combat trauma in Homer's *Iliad* and the Vietnam War as observed by Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., a psychiatrist for combat veterans of the Vietnam War. See Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 3-21, for a discussion of the "betrayal of 'what's right.'"

<sup>10</sup> For divorce in ancient Greece, see Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Ancient Greece*, 25-6; cf. McDermott 29-30, 44-5. For Medea's marriage to Jason as an "equal" partnership, see Flory, "Medea's

serious bond than marriage might usually be, and Jason's breaking of these oaths seems firmly in the realm of betrayal, reflected in Medea's invocation of the gods.<sup>11</sup> Medea expected that these oaths would keep her safe, just as she expects Aegeus' oaths to protect her if her enemies attempt to dissuade him from harboring her. When Jason breaks his oaths, abandoning Medea and her children, her social order is disturbed.

Second, the social order is betrayed by the combination of Jason's abandonment and Medea's unique personal circumstances. Again, divorce in the ancient world was not an uncommon—or even dangerous—occurrence. Normally, however, wives who were put away would return to their natal family, an option certainly unavailable to Medea.

She explains this predicament to Jason as well:

νῦν ποῖ τράπωμαι; πότῆρα πρὸς πατρός δόμους,  
οὗς σοὶ προδοῦσα καὶ πάτρῃν ἀφικόμην;

Where am I now to turn? To my father's house, which like my country I betrayed for your sake when I came here? (ll. 502-3)

Ironically, Jason's betrayal of Medea is made that much more painful by Medea's own betrayal of her society in Colchis. Used to creating trauma for others, Medea has now had the tables turned. She describes Jason to the chorus as the man

ἐν ᾧ γὰρ ἦν μοι πάντα, γινώσκω καλῶς...

in whom all I had was bound up, as I well know... (l. 228).

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Right Hand," 69-74; Boedeker, "Euripides' Medea and the Vanity of ΛΟΓΟΙ," 95; Foley, "Medea's Divided Self," 75.

<sup>11</sup> Barlow, "Stereotype and Reversal," 161, asserts that Medea's anger at the breaking of these oaths is akin to Ajax's anger at the Atreidae or Achilles' at Agamemnon: heroic wrath at treacherous injustice. Cf. Bongie, "Heroic Elements," 27-56, and Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," 196-7, 201-2.

He is her social order, as she cannot return to father or brother. Thus, because of her past actions, when Jason rejects her for a younger princess, Medea has no social order on which to fall back. She has been betrayed, both by her past and Jason's present decisions.

Finally, Jason's abandonment also strikes deeply at Medea's personal moral order. In their *agon*, Medea says to Jason:

ἐκ τῶν δὲ πρώτων πρώτον ἄρξομαι λέγειν·  
ἔσωσά σ', ὡς ἴσασιν Ἑλλήνων ὅσοι  
ταῦτὸν συνεισέβησαν Ἀργῶιον σκάφος...

I shall begin my speech from the beginning. I saved your life—as witness all the Greeks who went on board the Argo with you... (ll. 475-7).

She then lists the deeds she has undertaken to save Jason's life: she helped him conquer the fire-breathing bulls, killed the dragon guarding the fleece, abandoned her home, and caused Pelias' death at the hands of his daughters; an impressive list of tasks, but all with sinister undertones. We in the audience, however, are fans of the Argonauts, and we certainly would not wish such great heroes to fail. Thus despite the ominousness of Medea's catalogue of favors, because of her service to Jason, we can place her actions in the morally gray area occupied by so many myths and legends. Similarly, Medea herself can overlook the criminal nature of her own actions, appeasing any guilt, by attributing her actions to the necessity of saving Jason. Medea's identification of herself as Jason's savior fulfills the important moral purpose of justifying her otherwise unspeakable crimes. Jason responds to this claim with a classic *praeteritio*:

ἐγὼ δ', ἐπειδὴ καὶ λίαν πυργοῖς χάριν,  
Κύπριν νομίζω τῆς ἐμῆς ναυκληρίας  
σώτειραν εἶναι θεῶν τε κἀνθρώπων μόνην.  
σοὶ δ' ἔστι μὲν νοῦς λεπτός· ἀλλ' ἐπίφθονος  
λόγος διελθεῖν ὡς Ἴερος σ' ἠνάγκασεν  
τόξοις ἀφύκτοις τοῦ μὸν ἐκσῶσαι δέμας.

Since you so exaggerate your kindness to me, I for my part think that Aphrodite alone of the gods and mortals was the savior of my expedition. As for you, I grant you have a clever mind—but to tell how Eros forced you with his ineluctable arrows to save me would expose me to ill will (ll. 526-31).

He pretends not to bring up that he thinks Medea was forced to help him through god-induced love, but of course, in avoiding mention he calls more attention to his point. As he rejects Medea's service to him, the murders committed on his behalf, he strips Medea of her role as his savior, giving credit to Aphrodite instead.<sup>12</sup> The defense she has created for her actions crumbles; she is simply a murderer, not a savior, and her heroic status is diminished. As Barlow asks, "does she not deserve the name hero as much as he?"<sup>13</sup> So long as Medea is a pawn of Aphrodite, she cannot claim a part in the heroic code. This denial of Medea's identity, the justification of her crimes against her family, represents a serious betrayal of her social and moral order, triggering a reaction similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

If we can accept the serious mental consequences of Jason's behavior, we can begin to accept that Medea's destructive, extreme reaction might be within the realm of human possibility. As mentioned above, Medea's revenge, necessitated by this betrayal of her moral order, is most powerful when it takes advantage of Jason's ownership of his children. As is frequently noted, Medea in many ways adheres to the value system of the heroic age, desiring to avoid disgrace and mockery, to retain her honor, and to help friends and harm enemies, and this aspect of her identity is notably disregarded by Jason.<sup>14</sup> Of course, this creates an obvious contradiction: as a hero, Medea, like Ajax,

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<sup>12</sup> See Boedeker, "The Vanity of ΛΟΓΟΙ," 103-5.

<sup>13</sup> Barlow, "Stereotype and Reversal," 162.

<sup>14</sup> The comparison between Medea and a Sophoclean hero has been definitively demonstrated by Bongie, "Heroic Elements," 27-56, and Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," 193-225.

must carry out her revenge, but her children ought to be the *philoï* she most wishes to help. In other words, her ownership of her children ought to prevent her from harming them. We are aided in our reconciliation of these details by a second key feature of PTSD: the dissociative state. The International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation describes dissociation thus:

Dissociation is a word that is used to describe the disconnection or lack of connection between things usually associated with each other. Dissociated experiences are not integrated into the usual sense of self, resulting in discontinuities in conscious awareness.<sup>15</sup>

Medea is able to kill her children because she does not integrate the experience into her sense of self. Thus while we know Medea's self ought to take ownership of the children, in her need for revenge she has separated from herself, resulting in a degree of emotional numbness required to bring herself to commit the crime. The great monologue, with all its wavering back and forth, puts words to the entering of a dissociative state. However, three key reasons cast doubt over the integrity and internal logic of the speech: the movement of the children, the sudden insertion of the Corinthians as an external threat, and the difficulty in interpreting ll. 1078-80.<sup>16</sup> While scholars have found ways to work around these challenges, many scholars answer the difficulties posed by excising some or all of ll. 1056-80.<sup>17</sup> But in removing the lines that create contradictions, we also lose

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<sup>15</sup> "What is dissociation," International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, <http://www.isstd.org/default.asp?contentID=76>. See also Frey, "Dissociative Disorders;" Pascuzzi and Weber, "Conversion Disorders, Malingering, and Dissociative Disorders;" Rauschenberger and Lynn, "Fantasy Proneness," 373-80; Spiegel and Cardeña, "Disintegrated Experience," 366-78..

<sup>16</sup> For a clear, concise summary of the problems with the monologue and the various opinions and options for solving these problems, see Seidensticker, "Euripides, *Medea* 1056-80," 89-102, and Mastronarde, "*Medea* 1056-80," 388-95. McDermott, *Euripides' Medea*, 58 offers an ingenious solution for the problem of the Corinthians: when Medea states that the children must die anyway (l. 1062), Euripides refers to the mythic tradition. If Medea does not kill the children, "then we'll have to revert to the one where the Corinthians do," because in every tradition, the children die.

<sup>17</sup> Reeve, "Euripides, *Medea* 1021-80," 51-61, is the most influential advocate for cutting the entire monologue, ll. 1056-80. Other scholars have proposed smaller revisions. Lloyd-Jones, "Euripides, *Medea* 1056-80," 51-9, for example, recommends removing ll. 1059-63. Most significantly, Kovacs, "On Medea's

Medea's changes of mind, which are essential in believably dramatizing Medea's horrific decision. Reeve scoffs at what he considers one of few possible explanations for including the lines: "or were the poets themselves thrown off balance by the emotion of their characters?"<sup>18</sup> Far from being thrown off balance, Euripides here demonstrates the beginnings of and the need for a dissociative state, again exhibiting his "psychological sureness of touch."

The monologue begins with a lament, lasting from line 1021-1039, for the aspects of motherhood Medea will miss. At this moment, she seems to have accepted the grief she faces, saying:

σφῶιν γὰρ ἔστερημένη  
λυπρὸν διάξω βίον ἀλγεινὸν τ' ἔμον.

For bereft of you I shall live out my life in pain and grief (ll. 1036-7).

In an instant, however, her resolve weakens as she looks at her children and sees their smiles, and she says:

οὐκ ἄν δυναίμην· χαιρέτω βουλευματα  
τὰ πρόσθεν· ἄξω παίδας ἐκ γαίας ἐμούς.  
τί δεῖ με πατέρα τῶνδε τοῖς τούτων κακοῖς  
λυποῦσαν αὐτὴν δις τόσα κτᾶσθαι κακά;  
οὐ δῆτ' ἔγωγε· χαιρέτω βουλευματα.

I cannot do it. Farewell, my former designs! I shall take my children out of the land. Why should I wound their father with their pain and win for myself pain twice as great? I shall not: farewell, my designs! (ll. 1044-8)

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Great Monologue," 343-52, excises lines 1056-64, which is accepted by some as the best possible solution. McDermott, *Euripides' Medea*, 132, n. 28, 34, demonstrates a reluctant acceptance of the appeal of Kovacs' argument. On the other hand, Foley, *Female Acts*, 269-71, outlines the first two reasons for deletion, but in n. 96, she states, "In short, bracketing all or part of 1056-80 does not fully resolve the problems raised by those objecting to the lines." Similarly, Mastronarde, "Medea's Great Monologue," 392, notes these recommendations for excision but also notes the flaws—particularly the awkward transitions—with each.

<sup>18</sup> Reeve, "Euripides, *Medea* 1021-80," 57, n. 11.



The pain she had previously seemed to accept is now too much to bear; while killing the children would certainly wound Jason, she admits that it would hurt her twice as much (ll. 1046-7). In line 1049, Medea changes her mind once more, reminding herself that her enemies would mock her, and resolves that the deed must be done. The transmitted text includes one more wavering of courage, but many scholars would eliminate this change in opinion: Reeve would end the speech at l. 1055, while Kovacs would delete ll. 1056-64.<sup>19</sup> These changes remove contradictions and even out the complexity of Medea's internal motivations, but the alternative readings do not ring true psychologically. Medea's admission that her pain would double Jason's significantly represents an internalization of the maternal lament given at the beginning of the speech. Medea is, in fact, capable of feeling the pain we expect a mother should feel at killing her children, for all the reasons she has listed, and while Medea may be able to supply rational reasons for the necessity of her revenge plans, it is difficult to believe that reason can so cleanly resolve pain such as this.

Instead, as a human being, Medea finds this rationalization difficult to make, and in line 1056, she wavers from her seeming resolve, saying:

μη δῆτα, θυμέ, μη σύ γ' ἐργάσῃ τάδε.

Do not, my angry heart, do not do these things!

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<sup>19</sup> As mentioned above, n. 17, Kovacs' reading is often accepted and appears to solve, though not decisively, some of the real issues in the text. Like Foley, I do not think these cuts satisfactorily address the problems, and I also believe such a reading is inferior emotionally. My argument, however, does not rest on retention of the questionable lines. Medea is still torn between her maternal and heroic sides, and she must still separate herself from her maternal feeling, with or without ll. 1056-64, but I feel the struggle is stronger with the additional moment of indecision.

Here, Medea addresses a part of herself: her *thumos*. The use of this word in this monologue has received considerable attention, particularly because it appears again in the supremely controversial lines 1078-80:

καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἶα δοῶν μέλλω κακά,  
 θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων,  
 ὅσπερ μεγίστων αἴτιος κακῶν βροτοῖς.

I understand what sort of bad things I am about to do [or, suffer], but my heart-determined-on-revenge is master over my [revenge] plans.<sup>20</sup>

Foley gives an extensive catalogue of Euripides' use of the word *thumos*; in *Medea* specifically, the *thumos* can represent anger (ll. 879, 1152), or it can represent an aspect of Medea's self that feels desire, grief, and even pity (ll. 8, 639, 108, 865).<sup>21</sup> Because of these connotations, many have interpreted the contrast between θυμὸς and βουλευμάτων as a fight between passion and reason, but this causes considerable difficulties.<sup>22</sup> More recently, scholars have instead seen Medea's entire speech as

<sup>20</sup> Foley's translation, *Female Acts*, 255. The difficulty with ll. 1078-80 is that context almost requires that both θυμὸς and βουλευμάτων refer to Medea's desire for revenge, whether that means the passion behind her desire for revenge or the plans she has constructed to kill her children; however, κρείσσων, l. 1079, most commonly means "stronger than," and it makes little sense for Medea to say that her desire for revenge is stronger than the plans she has already made for revenge. (See Mastronarde, "Medea's Great Monologue," 393-5, for a thorough summary of the difficulties and various attempts at resolution.) Foley, *Female Acts*, 251, translates κρείσσων as "master of," supporting Diller, "THUMOS DE KREISSON TON EMON BOULEMATON," 367, and Walsh, *Aristotle's Conception of Moral Weakness*, 19, resulting in the translation above. Although there are still difficulties with the reading (Mastronarde, 393-4), this seems the only logical and most preferable option.

<sup>21</sup> Foley, *Female Acts*, 253-4.

<sup>22</sup> Primarily, that although Medea is driven by a passion for revenge, she has quite calculatingly planned her murder of the children. See n. 20 on the troubles with contrasting θυμὸς and βουλευμάτων. For scholars advocating a reading of reason vs. passion, see Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 52-60 and *Scenes from Greek Drama*, 126; Fortenbaugh, "On the Antecedents of Aristotle's Bi-Partite Psychology," 233-50; and Gill, "Did Chrysippus Understand Medea?" 136-49. This view originated in antiquity, and the arguments of Chrysippus and Galen are represented by Gill and Dillon, "Medea among the Philosophers," 211-18, respectively.

representing a struggle between her revenge-driven self and her maternal self, with much more persuasive results.<sup>23</sup> Foley describes Medea's *thumos* as follows:

In Medea's case, the *thumos* that rules her plans, if we read it in the context of the motives for her revenge offered throughout the play, unites jealousy, anger, and courage with justice and a rational principle of heroic action that has consistently operated for Medea: that of harming enemies and helping friends.<sup>24</sup>

Medea's *thumos*, capable of experiencing a range of emotions, is a part of herself that urges her toward vengeful action.

If the *thumos* is a part of the self, which part of Medea addresses the *thumos* in line 1056? Clearly, her maternal side must argue to save the children, and in this monologue, the maternal Medea presents her case to her *thumos*. By the end of the monologue, the *thumos* has definitively won. Thus, as Medea brings herself to commit this crime, she refuses to integrate her maternal side into herself. Her address of her *thumos* is an indication that Medea has split her personality, and as the nature of her arguments suggests, her maternal side and her *thumos*, which incorporates her longing for revenge, her heroic mentality, and her sense of justice, are in deep conflict with each other. Just as the actual violent act of killing the children is not portrayed on the tragic stage, neither is the actual moment of dissociation. Instead, Euripides dramatizes the conflict between Medea's personalities, but as her *thumos* triumphs and she resolves to kill the children, the dissociative state has begun. This separation is confirmed and reiterated as Medea prepares to enter the house to kill her children after learning the fate of Creon and the princess:

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<sup>23</sup> Burnett, "Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge," 1-24, offers a gendered view of Medea's struggle. Knox, "The Medea of Euripides," 193-225; Bongie, "Heroic Elements," 27-56; Wolff, "Euripides," 233-65, support Burnett's view. Foley, *Female Acts*, 243-71, elaborates on Burnett's idea to construct the interpretation of ll. 1078-80 followed here.

<sup>24</sup> Foley, *Female Acts*, 256.

καὶ μὴ κακισθῆις μηδ' ἀναμνησθῆις τέκνων,  
 ὡς φίλταθ', ὡς ἔτικτες, ἀλλὰ τήνδε γε  
 λαθοῦ βραχεῖαν ἡμέραν παίδων σέθεν  
 κάπειτα θρήνει· καὶ γὰρ εἰ κτενεῖς σφ', ὅμως  
 φίλοι γ' ἔφυσαν· δυστυχῆς δ' ἐγὼ γυνή.

Do not weaken, do not remember that you love the children, that you gave them life. Instead, for this brief day forget them—and mourn hereafter: for even if you kill them, they were dear to you. Oh, what an unhappy woman I am! (ll. 1246-50)

As she urges herself on to commit the crime, Medea orders herself to forget her love for her children. The emotions Medea's children elicit threaten her ability to carry out her revenge, and overcoming these emotions is not merely a matter of strength and willpower; she must divorce herself from her maternal feelings entirely.

The language of dissociation reveals that Medea must deny her ownership of the children in order to enact her revenge. To her *thumos*, the children have become a disadvantage. They ought to have protected her from Jason's abandonment, as she argues in lines 488-91:<sup>25</sup>

καὶ ταῦθ' ὑφ' ἡμῶν, ὦ κάκιστ' ἀνδρῶν, παθῶν  
 προὔδωκας ἡμᾶς, καινὰ δ' ἐκτήσω λέχη,  
 παίδων γεγῶτων· εἰ γὰρ ἦσθ' ἄπαις ἔτι,  
 συγγνώστ' ἂν ἦν σοι τοῦδ' ἐρασθῆναι λέχους.

And after such benefits from me, O basest of men, you have betrayed me and have taken a new marriage, though we had children. For if you were still childless, your desire for this marriage would be understandable.

Instead, as Jason argues, they played a significant role in his decision to find a new wife. Not only have they been a detriment to Medea, but they are also a great advantage to Jason and a weakness in his armor. Thus, Medea dissociates herself from the aspect of herself that ought to take ownership of the children, devaluing her bond with her children

<sup>25</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1162a 28-29 on the role of children in holding a marriage together.

in order to kill them. This seems as though it contradicts the observations of our maternal cycle of empowerment: Medea carries out her revenge, acting in her own interests, when she kills her children, but she is empowered to do so when she rejects her maternal side and her ownership of the children.

As we learn from Jason's example, however, we make a disastrous mistake if we discount Medea's maternal strength. On the surface, *Medea* seems to present children as a more important possession of the father. Even as Medea begs for mercy on behalf of her children, she succeeds largely because of Creon's own feelings as a father. Medea's ownership of her children allows her to identify with Creon at a key moment, but she soon encourages herself to forget her children. Nevertheless, the children provide Medea with a source of power misunderstood by Jason, who is capable only of seeing the significance of the children to his own power and happiness. In the *agon*, he asks Medea:

σοί τε γὰρ παίδων τί δεῖ;

What need do you have for children? (l. 565)<sup>26</sup>

Previous lines indicate that Jason needs his children to further his legacy, and from his point of view, this line of reasoning should not apply to Medea. On the one hand, women in Classical Athens were famously not supposed to seek legacies.<sup>27</sup> But although Medea hardly seems the type of woman to conform to such a stereotype, Jason has already asserted that her legacy comes from him. Because he brought Medea to Greece, she is famous:

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<sup>26</sup> My translation. Kovacs translates this, "For your part, what need have you of any more children?" While the word "more" can certainly be seen as implied in the sentence, it is not, strictly speaking, in the text, and I believe its absence highlights Jason's ignorance. It is not just that he thinks she should be happy with the children she has, but he does not recognize why she needs children at all.

<sup>27</sup> See Thucydides' account of Pericles' Funeral Oration, *History of the Peloponnesian War* II.45.2, quoted in the introduction above, p. 1.

πάντες δέ σ' ἤισθοντ' οὔσαν Ἑλληνες σοφὴν  
καὶ δόξαν ἔσχεσ· εἰ δὲ γῆς ἐπ' ἔσχατοις  
ὄροισιν ὤικεις, οὐκ ἂν ἦν λόγος σέθεν.

All the Greeks have learned that you are clever, and you have won renown. But if you lived at the world's edge, there would be no talk of you (ll. 539-41).

Jason views Medea as indebted to him and dependent on him for her prosperity, present and future, and although he neglects the significance of her aid in his past, he is correct to a certain extent about the present. Medea's lamentations and complaints against Jason in the beginning of the play indicate the significance of his presence to her well-being. His abandonment of her creates a predicament that she cannot fully solve herself; his betrayal of her social order leaves her without allies and nearly helpless. This, however, is precisely why Medea needs children. While she may have neither natal family nor husband, she does have children, who provide her with a connection to society through which she can sow chaos and destruction, and throughout the play, Medea requires her children to communicate with her enemies. She obtains a day's reprieve from Creon because she takes ownership of her children, and Jason visits her the first time partly because he wishes to fund the children's departure. When she decides on a plan to kill the princess and Creon, Medea summons Jason with the pretext that she wishes him to persuade Creon not to banish the children. Then, she sends the children with her poisonous gifts, knowing that the princess will be moved by their appearance. While Medea does not fight for their rights as Clytemnestra does for Iphigenia, Medea uses her children as a tool to accomplish her objectives in a society from which she is isolated, reminding us of the isolation of Athenian women in their society. In dissociating herself from her maternal side, Medea splits off a part of herself that most certainly exists. Medea does take ownership of the children, and they empower her to take the harshest

revenge possible; paradoxically, however, she must excise this maternal ownership in order to physically commit the act that secures victory.

When Clytemnestra rejects Orestes and Electra, the subsequent lack of power results in her death. When Medea dissociates herself from her maternal side, on the other hand, she does not lose her life and in fact does not suffer justice of any kind. When Jason arrives, hoping to save his children from the Corinthians, he sees Medea on a chariot provided for her by her grandfather Helios. He begs her to allow him to bury the children and she refuses, carrying them away with her on her chariot. Medea appears to have won, totally. Jason is powerless, not she, which is reflected even in the staging: she is the goddess on the machine, while he is a weak mortal left below. Medea's power is not resolved in this play, and we know that she will travel to Athens where she will once again attempt to ruin an ancestral house through the destruction of its heir.<sup>28</sup> The only inkling of what Medea has lost comes as she admits to the pain she feels over the death of her children:

Ια. καὐτή γε λυπῆι καὶ κακῶν κοινωνὸς εἶ.  
Μη. σάφ' ἴσθι· λύει δ' ἄλγος, ἦν σὺ μὴ ᾿γγελαῖς.

Ja. Yes, and you also have grief and are a sharer in my misfortune.  
Me. Of course, but the pain is worthwhile if you cannot mock me (ll. 1361-2).

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<sup>28</sup> In certain versions, Medea marries Aegeus and produces the son Medus (although he is elsewhere the son of a barbarian king whom Medea marries after she flees Athens). Medea attempts to kill Theseus and is driven out. See Sfyroeras, "The Ironies of Salvation," 125-42 for a summary of the myth of Medea in Athens and his argument that the implications of this myth on the Aegeus scene encourage us to see Medea as becoming a wicked stepmother to her own children. The significance of the Medea-in-Athens myth in *Medea* is of course reliant upon knowledge of the story at the time of production. It is true that Euripides wrote an *Aegeus* that treats this portion of the myth, but dating this play is very difficult; however, fifth-century vase imagery suggests that the myth was still popular: Sfyroeras, 126-7; McDermott, *Euripides' Medea*, 137, n. 10; Sorvinou-Inwood, "Myths in Images," 395-445. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy*, 224, n. 30, and Foley, *Female Acts*, 267, n. 88, are more cautious in accepting the prevalence of this story in Athens when *Medea* was produced.

Medea recognizes, as she did in her monologue, that she also feels pain over the death of the children, but as she determined previously, her grief was worth the victory. It is cold comfort to us and to Jason to know that Medea too has suffered, even if we know that she cannot enact such vengeance again. She has destroyed the source of her power and her connection to society and thus truly must be exiled, but the damage she has done is so great that we cannot accept this as a resolution. She does not die as Clytemnestra did, eliminating the threat, and she cannot be reabsorbed into patriarchal society as Euripides' Electra was. Thus in Euripides' *Medea*, the dangers of female empowerment are left unresolved.

After examining both Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Electra*, we expect to see that Medea is empowered by taking ownership of her children and that she suffers if she rejects them, and we do not entirely receive what we want. Instead, we view a conflict between Medea's maternal side, which wishes to take ownership of her children, and Medea's *thumos*, which needs to take action against Jason and requires empowerment. Both sides cannot win, but both sides are necessary for Medea to obtain her greatest desires. *Medea* emphasizes the significance of children to the father, and we can easily see that Jason's ownership of the children makes him particularly vulnerable to Medea. Like Jason, however, we may not observe so quickly the importance of the children to Medea, who needs them to associate with Jason, Creon, and even the princess on a level that benefits her. Thus, Medea must take ownership of her children to achieve every aspect of her revenge. In the end, however, we see that maternal ownership brings with it not only power, but also the maternal bond referred to so frequently in this play, and Medea cannot take advantage of Jason's primary weakness so long as her maternal



side influences her actions. She wreaks her greatest act of destruction, then, only after she dissociates herself from her maternal side, rejecting her bond with her children in order to obtain the strength to kill her children. *Medea* dramatizes the extreme dangers of the heterosexual relationship: while Medea is more powerful because she possesses children, Jason is weaker, illustrating masculine anxiety over the mother-child bond. Furthermore, this sense of anxiety is not allowed to resolve as it does in the *Oresteia* and *Electra*. Medea may lose strength as she destroys her children, the source of her power, but her revenge is too final for that to satisfy us as a resolution. Jason cannot save his situation, for there will be no Orestes to avenge him. In tampering with the cycle of maternal empowerment, *Medea* presents in the fullest sense a mother's capacity for destruction with no reprieve or salvation.

### Chapter 3: *Ion* and the Safety of Happiness

Unlike either play we have observed so far, Euripides' *Ion* ends happily. Hidden identities are revealed before any murderous plots are carried out; Ion and Creusa are reunited and receive what they desire most. From the perspective of a patriarchal society, we also see the most satisfying resolution: Creusa does not succeed in killing Ion, and she is appropriately restored to her place in masculine society by the play's end. Along the way, however, we witness disturbing actions from several male characters that bring about Creusa's destructive anger. In this chapter, we will return to a more traditional cycle of maternal empowerment. Creusa begins the play deeply conflicted about her ownership of her lost child and is appropriately powerless. When she reaches her lowest point, she turns to motherhood as a source of power, which gives her the strength to enact vengeance, demonstrating the destructive nature of maternal ownership. Like Medea, Creusa's revenge takes the form of murdering her own child, although Creusa is ignorant of her relationship to Ion; before Creusa can destroy the source of her own power, however, she receives the knowledge she needs to put her maternal power to a less destructive use. Yet even after this positive portrayal of motherhood, we must still see the end of the cycle. Creusa gives up her public ownership of Ion and her power and receives her place in patriarchal society.

The prologue of Euripides' *Ion* is a blueprint, the master plan of the prophetic Apollo, delivered by the messenger Hermes. He begins with the backstory: Years ago, Apollo forced himself upon Creusa, and she gave birth in secret to a child she abandoned; Apollo had the child brought to Delphi, and Creusa married Xuthus, but they are childless. Having brought the audience up to speed, Hermes narrates what will happen

next: Creusa and Xuthus are coming to Delphi to inquire about their childlessness, and Apollo will say that his son Ion is in fact Xuthus'. Apollo plans for Creusa to recognize Ion as her son in Athens, but he also intends to keep their union a secret, thus preserving a delicate balance that keeps everyone happy. From the beginning of the play, the audience should know what will happen—we even know that Ion is destined to be the ancestor of the Ionian Greeks. Yet unlike *Hippolytus*, which falls out precisely as Aphrodite meticulously and viciously predicts, *Ion* does not completely follow the appointed plan. Apollo's oracle gives Ion to Xuthus, but from there, the play deviates from its prophesied course. Both Creusa and Ion attempt to kill each other until finally Creusa recognizes Ion there in Delphi, not in Athens. Apollo's end goal is reached, but not precisely as we are led to believe.

The questionable methods used by Apollo—rape, false prophecy—and their moderate success occupy a central place in scholarly discussion of *Ion*, raising the question of how negatively we are meant to view Apollo. Norwood famously called Apollo “a brute, a liar, and a bungler,” and many have seen reason to criticize Apollo for his behavior toward Creusa, the false oracle he gives Xuthus, and his inability to carry out the details of his plan.<sup>1</sup> Others defend the god against these charges, citing his efforts to protect Creusa, the irrelevance of the lie to the characters themselves at the end, and the relatively few specifics that escape his notice.<sup>2</sup> On these specifics, Burnett states:

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<sup>1</sup> Norwood, “Review of Euripides, *Ion* by A.S. Owen,” 113. Critics of Apollo include Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*, 321-31; Vickers, *Toward Greek Tragedy*, 328-37; Conacher, “The Paradox of Euripides’ *Ion*,” 20-39; Ferguson, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, 364; Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy*, 113-22.

<sup>2</sup> The defenders of Apollo and the Olympians are far fewer in number. Most significantly, see Burnett, “Human Resistance,” 89-103; as well as Wasserman, “Divine Violence,” 587-604; and Farrington, “ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ,” 121-5. A far more middle road is taken by Wolff, “The Design and Myth,” 169-94, who argues that while Apollo has seen to everything, his methods are not entirely truthful.

In two details, however, this situation does not reflect the announced program: the recognition between Creusa and Ion has already taken place, at Delphi instead of at Athens, and the secret of Ion's parentage has probably been guessed by the chorus. This state of affairs hardly constitutes a defeat for the god...<sup>3</sup>

Even if we do not wish to condemn the god, we cannot argue that he has made no mistakes, and while calling these mistakes a defeat is extreme, nevertheless the displacement of the recognition ends up a rather significant detail. The recognition between Creusa and Ion at the end of the play is necessitated by the actions of the mortals, both of whom have attempted to kill each other—were it not for the recognition, one of them surely would succeed. Apollo sets his plan in motion as predicted, but something goes wrong along the way; he expects to introduce Ion to Creusa in Athens, but mother and son force his hand. I do not desire here to pass judgment on Apollo himself, but if we look closely at the cause of the disintegration of his plan, we see a close link with Creusa's sense of motherhood. Although Apollo has seen to many necessary details, there is a disconnect between his estimation of humanity and the actual actions of mortals, and this aspect of the human experience that Apollo does not account for is motherhood.

It is difficult to examine *Ion* without turning to its apparent political commentary on an Athenian founding myth and contemporary practices of citizenship and exclusivity. Of course, opinions on just what judgment Euripides is passing cover both ends of the spectrum: some argue for the *Ion* as pro-Athenian propaganda, others see the play as a critique of Athenian citizenship laws.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, the theme of autochthony that runs

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<sup>3</sup> Burnett, "Human Resistance," 93.

<sup>4</sup> Conacher, "The Paradox of Euripides' *Ion*," 22-3, and Wasserman, "Divine Violence," 587-604, discuss the propagandistic aspect of the play, while Walsh, "The Rhetoric of Birthright," 301-15, sees the play as discouraging Athens' xenophobic attitude. Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 272-3 also views

deeply through the play and seems to comment on Athenian legislation, imperialism, and diplomacy also intersects with the theme of motherhood. The connections between autochthony and motherhood in *Ion* have been well stated by Arlene Saxonhouse, who notes the inherent elimination of the female in the typical autochthony myth: the Thebans sown from dragon teeth or even the Athenians, sprouting from the Earth after Hephaestus spills his seed in pursuit of Athena, are both created without the need for either heterosexual relations or the essential physical functions of motherhood that we have seen so far: labor pains and nourishment.<sup>5</sup> While the female has her role in the traditional Athenian myth of autochthony in the characters of Athena and mother Earth, she is denied actions that we have seen provide women with a sense of ownership and therefore power.

Euripides' *Ion*, on the other hand, only loosely uses the traditional Athenian founding myth, and it does so in a way that infuses the significance of the feminine into the origins of Athens as it highlights Creusa's relationship with Ion.<sup>6</sup> We see this rather unexpected emphasis on motherhood in Ion's longing to learn his mother's identity.

When Xuthus has finished telling Ion of Apollo's pronouncement, Ion exclaims:

ὦ φίλη μῆτερ, πότε ἄρα καὶ σὸν ὄψομαι δέμας;  
νῦν ποθῶ σε μᾶλλον ἢ πρὶν, ἤτις εἶ ποτ', εἰσιδεῖν.

O dear mother, when shall I see you as well? Now I long more than ever to look upon you, whoever you are! (ll. 563-4)<sup>7</sup>

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the play as critical. Again, Wolff, "The Design and Myth," 174, takes the middle road, seeing the patriotism of the play as narrow and nostalgic.

<sup>5</sup> Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 259-60.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, VII.94 and VIII.44, names Xuthus as the biological father of Ion. Wolff, "The Design and Myth," 191, n. 9, suggests that transferring fatherhood to Apollo was Euripidean invention. More scholars, however, believe that Euripides' version of the myth existed in the tradition but was not generally known: Conacher, "The Paradox of Euripides' *Ion*," 23-6; Walsh, "The Rhetoric of Birthright," 311, n. 45; Cole, "Annotated Innovation," 313. See also Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 260-1, n. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ion* texts and translations are Kovacs, *Loeb Classical Library*, 1999, unless otherwise noted.

At no comparable point in Greek literature do we find the mother so essential to a young man's identity, particularly once the father has been revealed. Greek demigods—a class to which Ion unknowingly belongs—from Perseus to Phaethon search for their divine father. Even Oedipus, the most iconic seeker of identity, desires to know his full parentage; mother is certainly not more important than father. Ion is not satisfied with knowledge of his father, and because this is a unique perspective we must look at the text for Ion's motivations. After Xuthus all but orders Ion to come to Athens and outlines his plan to keep the news secret from Creusa, Ion replies:

στείχοιμ' ἄν. ἐν δὲ τῆς τύχης ἄπεστί μοι·  
 εἰ μὴ γὰρ ἦτις μ' ἔτεκεν εὐρήσω, πάτερ,  
 ἀβίωτον ἡμῖν. εἰ δ' ἐπεύξασθαι χρεῶν,  
 ἐκ τῶν Ἀθηνῶν μ' ἢ τεκοῦσ' εἶη γυνή,  
 ὥς μοι γένηται μητρόθεν παρρησία.  
 καθαράν γὰρ ἦν τις ἐς πόλιν πέσει ξένος,  
 κἂν τοῖς λόγοισιν ἀστὸς ἦι, τό γε στόμα  
 δοῦλον πέπαται κούκ ἔχει παρρησίαν.

I will go! Now only one thing is missing from my lot. Unless I find my mother, my life will be no life at all, father. If it is right to do so, I pray my mother may be Athenian, so that I may have free speech as my maternal inheritance! For if a foreigner, even though nominally a citizen, comes into that pure-bred city, his tongue is enslaved and he had no freedom of speech (ll. 668-75).

The importance of the identity of Ion's mother is its intersection with Athenian politics:

as Xuthus is not an Athenian, Ion believes he cannot anticipate true *παρρησία* in

Athens.<sup>8</sup> Ion's point of view is contrasted with those of Xuthus and Apollo who are, as

Saxonhouse argues, "willing to disregard the role of the female in the process of

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, Ion's fears are largely anachronistic, as this play takes place in a time of aristocracy, whereas his description of the assembly reflects the democracy of the fifth-century. See Lloyd, "Divine and Human Action," 38.

procreation.”<sup>9</sup> The opposition between Ion’s need for a mother and Xuthus’ and Apollo’s disregard for the maternal leads to Saxonhouse’s reading of *Ion* as a gentle critique of the Athenian masculine identity and an exposure of the inadequacies of the typical masculine myth of autochthony.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, the political aspects of this play are significant.<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of our study of motherhood, however, specific references to the laws of Athens are less important than the universal relationship between mother and son and masculine disregard for this bond.

From the beginning, Apollo has not fully appreciated Creusa’s relationship with her child. As Hermes narrates the prologue, he never blames Creusa’s rape on Apollo’s lust, a common motivation for Zeus’ dalliances, or even Apollo’s attempted union with Cassandra.<sup>12</sup> By leaving this aspect unstated and emphasizing Apollo’s plan for Ion to become the eponymous ancestor of the Ionians, Hermes allows the impression that Apollo’s purpose for intercourse with Creusa was primarily that she would bear a child.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Apollo was prepared to ensure that no harm came to the child: he hid Creusa’s pregnancy so her family would not know, spirited the child away to Delphi, and has now instituted a plan that will see Ion in his rightful place in Athens. Many who argue for Apollo’s ultimate beneficence point to these actions, particularly the hiding of Creusa’s pregnancy, and while they are certainly evidence that the god has not been negligent, they

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<sup>9</sup> Saxonhouse, “Reflections of Autochthony,” 269.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>11</sup> Most scholars point specifically to Pericles’ citizenship law. On the political implications of *Ion*, see: Hoffer, “Violence, Culture, and the Workings of Ideology,” 312-14; Walsh, “The Rhetoric of Birthright,” 307-13; Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity*, 95-136; Owen, *Euripides’ Ion*, xi-xii; Barron, “Religious Propaganda” 35-48.

<sup>12</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, says Apollo was “struck by desire,” l. 1204.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that lust played no role; Creusa certainly describes the rape in these terms, but she is not the most reliable witness of Apollo’s motivations. Mueller, “Athens in a Basket,” 379-80, discusses Creusa’s wording that Apollo gave *charis* to Aphrodite. For my argument, the certainty of Apollo’s motives is less important than the ambiguity of Hermes’ speech.

do not take into account the sense of ownership that grows within Creusa. Apollo's plan, in essence, requires the forcing of a child upon Creusa, and the god very much seems to use her as the vessel he argued for in the *Eumenides*.<sup>14</sup> He intends to father the next lord of the Erechtheid line, and Creusa is merely the receptacle of his seed.<sup>15</sup> In refusing to give Creusa a choice, Apollo denies her the chance to take ownership of her child, and she originally complies, abandoning Ion in the cave in which he was conceived. Although Hermes says that she thought the child would die (ll. 19-20, 26-7), Creusa tells the old man that she believed Apollo would save the child:

Πρ. σοὶ δ' ἐς τί δόξ' ἐση̄λθεν ἐκβαλεῖν τέκνον;  
Κρ. ὡς τὸν θεὸν σώσοντα τὸν γ' αὐτοῦ γόνον.

Pr. Why did you think to cast the child out?  
Cr. I thought the god would save his son (ll. 964-5).

Creusa's rage that Apollo may not have saved the child supports this—Creusa thought Apollo would save the son he forced upon her, an act that strongly suggested his intentions toward possession. Creusa rejects ownership in abandoning the child, but in her mind, she is offering ownership to the father.

Despite her behavior, however, it is in Creusa's nature to take ownership of this child, and her regret for abandoning Ion is evident throughout the play. First, Hermes tells that Creusa left Ion in the cave

προγόνων νόμον σώιζουσα τοῦ τε γηγενοῦς  
Ἐριχθονίου.

preserving the customs of her ancestors and Erichthonius the earthborn (l. 20).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Introduction, pp. 7-8 above.

<sup>15</sup> Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 270-1.

<sup>16</sup> My translation.



According to her family's customs, Creusa leaves golden serpents in the cradle with Ion, marking him as a member of the Erechtheid family and indicating her reluctance to truly give up her claim. Then, after she exposed Ion, Creusa went back to the cave. She tells Ion:

Κρ. θῆράς σφε τὸν δύστηνον ἐλπίζει κτανεῖν.  
Ἴων ποίωι τόδ' ἔγνω χρωμένη τεκμηρίωι;  
Κρ. ἐλθοῦσ' ἴν' αὐτὸν ἐξέθηκ' οὐχ ἠϋρ' ἔτι.  
Ἴων ἦν δὲ σταλαγμὸς ἐν στίβωι τις αἵματος;  
Κρ. οὐ φησι· καίτοι πόλλ' ἐπεστράφη πέδον.

Cr. The woman thinks beasts killed the hapless child.

Ion What reason did she have for thinking this?

Cr. When she went to where she had left him, she could not find him again.

Ion Where there any drops of blood on the path?

Cr. She says there were not. And she searched the ground carefully (ll. 348-52).

Creusa's return to the cave raises several interesting questions. If she exposed the child with the expectation that it would perish, why would she return? More than likely, there would be no sign of the child. She could only hope to confirm her expectations, and perhaps give the child a burial (cf. l. 388). On the other hand, if she expected that Apollo would care for it, that he was raising him secretly, as Ion suggests (l. 357), she would similarly find no trace of the child and have no real reason to return. Thus Creusa either hoped to find evidence of the destroyed child, representing a sense of closure for a child she was not ready to give up, or she somehow expected Apollo to preserve Ion miraculously in the cave itself, which would have allowed her to visit the child or perhaps even to bring him back to Athens at a later, safer point. In either case, Creusa hoped somehow to retain her rights of ownership.

By the time of the action of the play, Creusa's regrets have become bitter, and she blames Apollo for his unjust treatment of her. As she shares the misfortune of her "friend" to Ion, she cries:

ὦ Φοῖβε, κακεῖ κἀνθάδ' οὐ δίκαιος εἶ  
 ἐς τὴν ἀποῦσαν, ἧς πάρεισιν οἱ λόγοι·  
 ὅς γ' οὐτ' ἔσωσας τὸν σὸν ὄν σωσαί σ' ἐχρῆν  
 οὔθ' ἱστορούση μητρὶ μάντις ὦν ἐρεῖς,  
 ὡς, εἰ μὲν οὐκέτ' ἔστιν, ὀγκωθῆι τάφῳ,  
 εἰ δ' ἔστιν, ἔλθῃ μητρὸς εἰς ὄψιν ποτέ.

O Phoebus, you are unjust both then and now to the absent woman whose plea is here. You did not save your child, as you should have done, and prophet though you are you will give no answer to the mother's question, so that if he is dead, he may receive a burial, but if alive, may come to the sight of his mother (ll. 384-9).

Creusa's knowledge is not impeccable—she assumes Apollo has forsaken her child when the evidence certainly offers the possibility of divine rescue; Creusa admits that there was no blood in the cave (l. 352), which would seem to rule out death by wild beasts. Creusa wants to be angry with Apollo, so she chooses that explanation of her facts. Her accusations against Apollo have caused some to charge Creusa with blasphemy, but this is largely unfair.<sup>17</sup> Her judgment of the situation may be wrong, but she has no knowledge to help her correct her views, and by the end of the play, she is more than willing to amend her opinions. These critics also, like Apollo, overlook the real harm done to Creusa. She knows nothing of Apollo's master plan, but she does know that she has been denied the opportunity to take ownership of her own child. In addition to censuring Apollo for not saving his son, Creusa also condemns him for her lack of knowledge—if the child is dead, she does not know it and cannot bury him (l. 387-8), and if he is alive, she cannot meet him (l. 389). In either case, Creusa wants a share in her

<sup>17</sup> For example, Farrington, "ΤΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ," 134; and Burnett, "Human Resistance," 97.

child's existence, which is refused to her through her ignorance. This is the one aspect of Creusa's well-being that Apollo has neglected. He has taken care for lives and for reputations; he has saved Ion, and he has taken care that no one know that Creusa had a child out of wedlock or that he fathered an illegitimate child. This is a necessary and insightful form of protection. He has not, however, cared for Creusa's emotional needs as a mother, the root of the suffering she expresses to Ion.

At the beginning of the play, having suffered repeated efforts to suppress her possession of children, Creusa is not a very powerful individual. In her opening episode with Ion, both her speech and her actions are repressed. She cannot tell her own story openly and pretends that she is visiting the shrine on behalf of a friend. Bowing to the outward pressures of shame and propriety, Creusa herself denies owning the illegitimate child even though she seeks to reassert her ownership by learning of the child's welfare, and from her public position as a woman who has never born children, Creusa is incapable of acting on her own behalf. She wishes to confront the oracle, but as Ion suggests, she would need a man to speak for her. He says:

οὐκ ἔστιν ὅστις σοι προφητεύσει τάδε.  
ἐν τοῖς γὰρ αὐτοῦ δώμασιν κακὸς φανεῖς  
Φοῖβος δικαίως τὸν θεμιστεύοντά σοι  
δράσειεν ἄν τι πῆμ'.

There is no one who will act for you in this. For if Phoebus in his own house were convicted of baseness, he would quite properly punish the man who acted as your spokesman (ll. 369-72).

Creusa is doubly barred from action: she cannot present her own case to the oracle, and she cannot find a male advocate. Creusa cannot possess children, and accordingly, she has no power to act on her own behalf.

Matters only become worse for Creusa as Apollo continues executing his plan. When Xuthus asks the oracle about his and Creusa's childlessness, Apollo gifts Xuthus with Ion, leading Xuthus to believe that Ion is biologically his, from a union the mortal no longer remembers. Xuthus describes Ion thus:

δῶρον, ὄντα δ' ἐξ ἐμοῦ.

A gift, but my own true son (l. 537).

Apollo has in essence transferred his ownership of Ion to Xuthus. On a basic level, this rubs at Creusa's wounds, both those that are open and those that are secret. Saxonhouse discusses the significance of the lack of mutuality here: male and female do not share in procreation.<sup>18</sup> Xuthus cannot see such deeper problems, but he does recognize the simple principle that getting something someone else wants is bound to cause grief.<sup>19</sup> Thus he tells both Ion and the chorus to keep the prophecy a secret, saying:

καὶ γὰρ γυναῖκα τὴν ἐμὴν οὐ βούλομαι  
λυπεῖν ἄτεκνον οὔσαν αὐτὸς εὐτυχῶν.

I do not want my own good fortune to cause my wife grief in her childlessness (ll. 657-8).

There is nothing particularly sinister about Xuthus' secret. Although he is deceiving Creusa, he recognizes the pain his fortune could cause her, and he decides to hide his ownership of Ion. He explains:

ἄξω θεατὴν δῆθεν, οὐχ ὡς ὄντ' ἐμόν.

Thereafter I shall take you Athens as a visitor, not as my own son (l. 656).

<sup>18</sup> Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 269.

<sup>19</sup> Some strongly condemn Xuthus for his plan to deceive Creusa: Hoffer, "Violence, Culture, and the Workings of Ideology," 310-12; Knox, *Word and Action*, 267; Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 271-2; Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, 207. Like Farrington, "ΤΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ," 124, I see very little that is purposefully cruel in him. He is oblivious and misguided, but he does his best to spare his family the pain that he does anticipate.

The placement of ἐμόν emphasizes Xuthus' disguised ownership—Xuthus is quite eager to accept Ion as his own, but the moment for open possession has not yet come.

When the chorus reveals Xuthus' secret to Creusa, however, her distress goes far beyond envy. The chorus introduces the problem by saying:

οὐκ ἔστι σοι, δέσποιν', ἐπ' ἀγκάλαις λαβεῖν  
τέκν' οὐδὲ μαστῶι σῶι προσαρμόσαι ποτέ.

My lady, it cannot be that you will ever take children into your arms or suckle them at your breast (ll. 761-2).

After hearing the specifics, Creusa agrees, lamenting:

ὄτοτοτοῖ· τὸν ἐμόν ἄτεκνον ἄτεκνον ἔλακ'  
ἄρα βίοντον, ἐρημίαι δ' ὄρφανούς  
δόμους οἰκήσω.

O woe! So Apollo has said my life will be childless, childless,  
and in desolation I shall dwell  
in a house bereft! (ll. 790-2)

Creusa and the chorus immediately see the political repercussions of Apollo's plan.

Because Xuthus will want Ion to inherit, he must ensure that his legitimate wife now has no children to challenge Ion's claim. While they had come to Delphi to enquire jointly about their childlessness, Xuthus and Creusa have suddenly been placed in competition with each other, and Xuthus is winning. His current ownership of Ion trumps Creusa's potential ownership of children, and she is denied future possession since she is unlikely to bear Xuthus children in the current circumstances. This rejection of future children increases Creusa's powerlessness. As heir to the Erechtheids, Creusa, like Electra, has the potential for influence in her ability to bear heirs—only she can continue the family line. Similarly, in her relationship with Xuthus, she had the power to produce his heir. Xuthus' ownership of Ion, however, eliminates the need for Creusa's childbearing potential,

greatly reducing her usefulness to him and abolishing the possibility that she might be of use to her natal family. Not only is this news emotionally upsetting because of Creusa's desire for children, but it also leaves her completely bereft of sources of power.

Taken from Creusa's perspective, Apollo's actions seem calculated to prevent Creusa from ever owning children, whether they are real or potential, a devastating loss for Creusa. Apollo, however, had counted on secrecy. Athena tells Ion:

ἔμελλε δ' αὐτὰ διασιωπήσας ἄναξ  
 ἐν ταῖς Ἀθήναις γνωριεῖν ταύτην τε σοὶ  
 σέ θ' ὡς πέφυκας τῆσδε καὶ Φοίβου πατρός.

Lord Apollo intended to keep all this quiet and in Athens to reveal your mother to you and that you were her son by Phoebus (ll. 1566-8).

Although the initial rape and concealing of the child were inconsiderate of Creusa's relationship with her child, Apollo did intend to avoid the second insult that provokes Creusa's murderous impulses, but his oracle to Xuthus is revealed to Creusa by the chorus. Those of us in the audience would probably not expect such a degree of choral influence on the action of the play, and ironically, neither does Apollo.<sup>20</sup> Setting aside Euripides' play with the meta-theatrical, the chorus of *Ion* also has properly motivated reasons for disobeying Xuthus. After Ion and Xuthus exit, the chorus begins its stasimon thus:

ὄρω δάκρυα καὶ πενθίμους  
 <ἀλαλαγὰς> στεναγμάτων τ' ἐσβολάς,  
 ὅταν ἐμὰ τύραννος εὐπαιδίαν

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, "Prologue Prophecy," 280, states, "The choruses which actually participate in the action of a Sophoclean or Euripidean play can be counted on one hand," and argues that this chorus is the only one that significantly affects the plot, which he believes would have shocked the audience. Foley, "Choral Identity," 14-17, is not so definite, challenging slightly the perception of passive choruses in Sophocles and Euripides, but the chorus of the *Ion* still stands out in comparison to her other examples of Euripidean choral action (*Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Phaethon*, *Orestes*). For the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy in general, see Foley, "Choral Identity," 1-30, and Henrichs, "'Why Should I Dance?'" 56-111, both with excellent bibliography.

πόσιν ἔχοντ' εἰδῆι,  
αὐτὴ δ' ἄπαις ἦι καὶ λελειμμένη τέκνων.  
τίν', ὦ παῖ πρόμαντι Λατοῦς, ἔχρη-  
σας ὑμνωιδίαν;

I see tears, mournful <cries>  
of pain and the onset of groaning  
when my queen learns  
that her husband enjoys fair offspring  
while she herself has none and is bereft of children.  
O prophetic son of Leto, what song was this  
you uttered in prophecy? (ll. 676-82)

The previous episode immediately provokes sympathy from Creusa's slaves, who recognize the pain Creusa will feel at the sudden opposition between her own rights to children and Xuthus' possession of a son. Their lament then turns to vague suspicion over Ion's unknown origins. They give no reason for suspecting deceit in Apollo's oracle (l. 685ff.), but they do hint at the source of their misgivings over Ion:

πόθεν ὁ παῖς ὄδ' ἀμφὶ ναοὺς σέθεν  
τρόφιμος ἐξέβη; γυναικῶν τίνος;

This boy nursed about your altars,  
from whence did he come? From what woman? (ll. 683-4)

Ion's mother is the only mystery left, and this causes the chorus to question Ion's motives. This group of women cannot trust a man whose mother is unknown.

Finally, the chorus deliberates telling the secret to Creusa. By the end of the ode, the song has turned political. In lines 702-4, the chorus observes that Xuthus is an outsider, and in lines 708-10, it calls attention to its devotion to the Athenian royal house.

The ode closes with the following warning:

μή <τί> ποτ' εἰς ἐμὴν πόλιν ἴκοιθ' ὁ παῖς,  
νέαν δ' ἀμέραν ἀπολιπὼν θάνοι.  
στεγομένα γὰρ ἂν πόλις ἔχοι σκῆψιν  
ξενικὸν ἐσβολάν·

άλις ἔασεν ὁ πάρος ἀρχαγὸς ὦν  
Ἐρεχθεὺς ἄναξ.

Never may the boy come to my city:  
ere then may he leave his young life behind.  
The city would have good reason  
to keep off an incursion of strangers.  
Enough have been admitted by our old ruler,  
King Erechtheus (ll. 719-24).

The chorus' xenophobia is certainly evident; Athens ought to be kept free of strangers. But if we read carefully, xenophobia is not the cause of their decision to reveal Xuthus' secret; rather, it is their reaction to Xuthus' plan.<sup>21</sup> To the chorus, Xuthus' actions seem to threaten the house of Erechtheus, which engenders the idea that foreigners are dangerous—they and Creusa trusted Xuthus at first, and now he threatens to eradicate Creusa's line.<sup>22</sup> Thus the city could or would—note the potential optative in line 721—have reason to keep all strangers at bay, since this particular one has proven so treacherous. Because of Xuthus' behavior, the chorus has changed its position toward future foreigners. In the current situation, the chorus' sympathy for Creusa still motivates its actions. In lines 695-701, it says:

φίλοι, πότερ' ἐμᾶι δεσποῖναι  
τάδε τορῶς ἐς οὔς γεγωνήσομεν  
πόσιν, ἐν ᾧ τὰ πάντ' ἔχουσ' ἐλπίδων  
μέτοχος ἦν τολμᾶν;

<sup>21</sup> The significance of Athenian xenophobia in *Ion* is undeniable; see: Whitman, *Euripides and the Full Circle of Myth*, 97-9; Farrington, "ΤΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ," 130-6; Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 269; Owen, *Euripides' Ion*, xxii; Walsh, "The Rhetoric of Birthright," 307-13; Rosivach, "Autochthony and the Athenians," 294-306; Mastronarde, "Iconography and Imagery," 164-5; Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, 220-4; Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 299. However, Farrington, 131, for example, argues that the chorus reveals Xuthus' plot because of their hatred of strangers. As above, I argue that xenophobia does not chiefly motivate the chorus; however, it certainly reaches a violent and extreme form when the tutor learns of Xuthus' deception.

<sup>22</sup> Saxonhouse, "Reflections on Autochthony," 256, 265, argues that Creusa is hostile to Xuthus throughout the play. She claims that Creusa's tone in l. 290 is "apologetic," but this does not strike me as hostile, particularly since Creusa does in fact want a child with him. She does not compete with Xuthus until he receives a child that is not hers.



νῦν δ' ἢ μὲν ἔρρει συμφοραῖς, ὁ δ' εὐτυχεῖ,  
πολιὸν ἐσπεσοῦσα γῆρας, πόσις τ'  
ἀτίετος φίλωι.

My friends, shall I speak this  
clearly in my mistress' ear,  
that the husband in whom her all was bound up,  
the sharer of her hopes, has dared this deed?  
Now while he is blessed, she is ruined by misfortune,  
cast into grey old age and unhonored  
by her dear husband.

We are reminded of Medea's description of Jason as "the man in whom all I had was bound up," and just as the Corinthian women agree to Medea's conspiracy, so Creusa's servants affirm that their loyalties lie with their mistress.<sup>23</sup> They reason that he has betrayed her, when she put all her hope of bearing children in him, and she will now never bear children because he will dishonor her by casting her aside. The chorus reveals Xuthus' secret first and foremost because they are loyal to Creusa and sympathetic to her pain, grief that comes from her frustrated desires to possess children. This demonstrates that Creusa's longing for ownership of her children is not an isolated occurrence but a natural part of womanhood understood very well by her chorus of maidservants. Furthermore, ownership is empathetically empowering. Throughout his interactions with Creusa, Apollo has shown his tendency to overlook the pull of motherhood on women, and at this crucial moment, his blind spot threatens to derail his plans. Through their sympathy for Creusa's childlessness, when she has been reduced to a minimum of power, this chorus is empowered to achieve what few others can accomplish: significant, plot-changing action.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. l. 697, quoted above, with *Medea*, l. 228, "ἐν ᾧ γὰρ ἦν μοι πάντα, γιγνώσκω καλῶς."

Although Creusa is not the cause of the alterations to Apollo's plan, she too finds the strength to act for herself when his designs begin to unravel, and her capacity for action changes when she learns that Apollo has given Ion to Xuthus. On the one hand, this seems counter to our observations thus far. Creusa has reached her ultimate moment of desperation: she has been denied ever owning children, yet she still manages to find empowerment. When her future has been lost, however, Creusa turns to her past. Finally, she tells the story of her rape and secret childbirth, and in bringing the story to light, she takes public ownership of her child. In her monody, Creusa twice juxtaposes ownership of the child, emphasizing first that the child is hers and second that it is Apollo's. The first instance is in lines 902-5:

οἴμοι· καὶ νῦν ἔρρει πτανοῖς  
 ἀρπασθεῖς θοίνα παῖς μοι—  
 καὶ σός, τλᾶμον.

Ah me! And now he is gone, seized  
 by creatures of the air for their feast, my son—  
 and yours, hard-hearted one!

The first two lines indicate that this is a lament, and the placement of μοι provokes sympathy for Creusa—her child has been killed by wild birds. In line 905, however, she abruptly recalls that the child is Apollo's as well, but this is meant as a reproach. Whereas she deserves sympathy for her loss, Apollo is condemned for allowing the tragedy to occur. Similarly, in lines 916-18, Creusa cries:

ὁ δ' ἐμὸς γενέτας  
 καὶ σὸς <γ'>, ἀμαθῆς <θεός>, οἰωνοῖς  
 ἔρρει συλαθείς, οἰκεῖα  
 σπάργανα ματέρος ἐξαλλάξας.

yet my son  
 and yours, unfeeling <god,> has vanished

taken as prey for birds, leaving  
his own mother's swaddling bands behind.

Again, ἐμὸς and σὸς are both emphatic, but they have different purposes. By placing herself first, Creusa asserts her claim to the child, which she then contrasts with Apollo's, whom she describes as ἀμαθής. While Creusa sees herself as an object of sympathy, Apollo ought to be reprimanded. As before, Creusa describes her child's fate as being eaten by birds, but she adds the detail that the child has left the wrappings given by its mother. This description represents Creusa's loss of ownership discussed earlier; when she abandoned the child and Apollo received it, it was released from the hold its mother attempted to place on it. Now, however, Creusa has changed her perspective. Even though the child escaped her grasp, she is still its mother, and now that she has revealed her status as a mother, she is prepared to act in her own interests.

Although Creusa has been empowered by owning the birth of Apollo's child, she does not have the courage to take any possible action, nor does she know what action to take. As she tells her aged servant,

τί γάρ με χρῆ δρᾶν; ἀπορία τὸ δυστυχεῖν.

Why, what should I do? Misfortune means helplessness (l. 971).

Although Creusa has admitted to her ownership of her lost child, she is still conflicted and not fully committed. She is amenable to her servant's suggestions, but she needs help formulating her own plan. The old man suggests three possible courses of action. First, he invites her to take revenge on Apollo himself, the source of Creusa's trouble, but she is afraid, and knows that she does not have the power to harm a god:

καὶ πῶς τὰ κρείσσω θνητὸς οὔσ' ὑπερδράμω;

But how can I, a mortal, overcome one more powerful? (l. 973)

Next, the servant suggests that she murder Xuthus; Creusa is also unwilling to take this advice because she knows Xuthus was kind to her previously. In marked contrast to Medea, Creusa will not take revenge on a friend-turned-enemy, even though she feels deeply betrayed, and while Medea's ownership of her children gave her the power to take revenge on her husband, Creusa's identification of herself as a mother does not allow her to act against either of the men who have wronged her. The old man's final plan, however, is acceptable:

*νῦν δ' ἀλλὰ παῖδα τὸν ἐπὶ σοὶ πεφηνότα.*

Well at least kill the child who has come to rule over you (l. 978).

Although Creusa accepts the suggestion, she still cannot see how to carry it out, but the servant pushes and prods her until she herself develops a workable idea. Creusa's acceptance of her empowerment is gradual, and her actual abilities limited to what is both most fitting and most ironic. As a mother, Creusa can only take revenge on the child that is currently denying her ownership of future children, an appropriate target for a power that comes from acceptance of a past child. Ironically, of course, the target of her wrath and the source of her strength are one and the same. Although Creusa may seem reluctant to truly take advantage of her power, she has nevertheless entered the destructive cycle of maternal empowerment that we have already observed. Medea's ownership of her children brings her ultimately to kill them, achieving her revenge but destroying the source of her power. Clytemnestra uses her power to kill her husband, but her actions make her vulnerable to her remaining children whom she neglects. Based on precedent, maternal empowerment seems doomed to destroy Creusa and those around her.

*Ion*, however, has a happy ending, and Creusa's maternal strength also offers her a final opportunity to set things right. After the Pythia has stopped Ion from killing Creusa at the altar, she gives him the cradle he was found in, which Creusa naturally recognizes. She tells Ion:

οὐκ ἐν σιωπῇι τὰμά· μή με νουθέτει.  
ὄρῳ γὰρ ἄγγος ὦι ἔξεθηκ' ἐγὼ ποτε  
σέ γ', ὦ τέκνον μοι, βρέφος ἔτ' ὄντα νήπιον,  
Κέκροπος ἐς ἄντρα καὶ Μακρὰς πετρηρεφεῖς.  
λείψω δὲ βωμὸν τόνδε, κεῖ θανεῖν με χρή.

This is no time for me to be silent. Do not admonish me. I see the vessel in which I long ago exposed you, my son, as a newborn babe at the cave of Cecrops and the Long Cliffs. I will leave this altar, even if I must die (ll. 1397-1401).

Suddenly, Creusa's speech is commanding and decisive. She will not allow Ion to silence her, and she does not require the old man to think for her. Creusa realizes what she must do, and she allows no one to stop her. The difference is that Creusa now knows that Ion is the son she has owned in her earlier monody, and she renews that ownership here, reflected in her use of personal pronouns and adjectives: τὰμά, με (l. 1397), ἐγὼ (l. 1398), and especially “ὦ τέκνον μοι” (l. 1399). Unlike her previous empowerment which led her to attempt to kill Ion, her current agency leads her to risk her own life. She is so secure in her knowledge that Ion is hers that she will leave her position of safety and even bargain with Ion for her life:

Ἴων καὶ τοῦνομ' αὐτῶν ἐξερεῖς πρὶν εἰσιδεῖν;  
Κρ. κὰν μὴ φράσω γε, κατθανεῖν ὑφίσταμαι.  
Ἴων λέγ'· ὡς ἔχει τι δεινὸν ἢ γε τόλμα σου.

Ion And will you tell me what they are before you see them?  
Cr. Yes, and if I fail, I consent to my death.  
Ion Say on: your boldness inspires awe (ll. 1414-16).

Ion himself is shocked by her courage, based solely in her knowledge of possession. Finally, unlike her fellow mothers in myth, Creusa has broken free from the destructive power of motherhood: she risks no one's life but her own here, and her boldness in doing so leads to a reconciliation of mother and son, rather than the violent encounters of Medea and her children or Clytemnestra and Orestes.

Despite these alterations to Apollo's plan, however, Burnett and others are correct: the god is not defeated, nor is his plan drastically changed. Ion has been revealed to Creusa in Delphi, but he still cannot be revealed as Creusa's son publicly. When Athena comes to resolve the loose ends, she tells Creusa:

νῦν οὖν σιώπα παῖς ὄδ' ὡς πέφυκε σός,  
 ἴν' ἢ δόκησις Ἐοῦθον ἠδέως ἔχηι  
 σύ τ' αὖ τὰ σαυτῆς ἀγάθ' ἔχουσ' ἦις, γύναι.

Now therefore tell no one that he is your son: Xuthus will enjoy a pleasant delusion and you, lady, will go your way in possession of the blessing that belongs to you (ll. 1601-3).

Now that the conflict is resolved and Apollo's plan must be put back on track, the need for secrecy returns. In order to gain the power to act in her own interests, Creusa needed to openly take ownership of Ion, but she is now commanded not to disclose that Ion is her son. She must revert to her previous state of repressed language, and we must decide how much power she truly loses. Creusa is not without benefits in this resolution. Athena tells her to leave with the good things that are σαυτῆς, indicating that Creusa retains possession of something. What are these good things? Creusa still possesses knowledge of her ownership of Ion, a secret possession, as well as the knowledge that Apollo has in fact handled everything well, both of which have been extremely important to Creusa throughout the play. Because of this knowledge then, when Athena tells of the legacy of

Ion's posterity throughout Athens and the Mediterranean, Creusa knows that they are her posterity as well. She is also promised additional children by Xuthus, the ancestors of the Dorians and the Achaeans, thus essentially becoming the mother of a rather large portion of Greece. In the end, she receives all that she had wanted: knowledge of her child's fate and a share in the continuation of the house of Erechtheus, and she in fact receives more. We can perhaps imagine that as a mother with a stake in the family, Creusa will retain the persuasive power offered to Athenian women of the fifth century.<sup>24</sup> However, she has lost the power for independent speech rejected to most women of the fifth century, indicating that this resolution is meant to appease masculine anxiety. The ending to the *Ion* opposes happiness, the fulfillment of Creusa's desires, with independent speech, suggesting that women are happiest when they have returned to their proper role in patriarchal society. Independence, brought about by continued, public maternal empowerment, on the other hand, is only appropriate for a brief moment, for if Creusa were to tell Xuthus that Ion was her son by Apollo, she would suffer for bearing a child out of wedlock, thus allowing the cycle of empowerment to carry her to destruction. In its happy ending, *Ion* fully eliminates male anxiety: Creusa's power gained from childbirth is put to a good end, and she gives up this power in exchange for happiness.

Although Euripides' *Ion* portrays the same relationship between ownership and empowerment that we have observed thus far, it does so with limitations designed to keep the strength of the feminine under control even as it demonstrates many distasteful elements of masculine power. The beginning of the play emphasizes Creusa's weakness as a childless woman, afraid to own her son with Apollo and barren in her marriage with Xuthus; at the same time, Creusa's impotence highlights Apollo's inability to see the

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<sup>24</sup> See introduction, p. 2, n. 5 above.

importance of maternal ownership to Creusa, as it is his plan which has put her in this position. His plan continues to take its toll on Creusa as events unfold at Delphi, and when Apollo gives Ion to Xuthus, Creusa reaches the depths of loss. At this point, however, the extreme significance of motherhood to all women begins to challenge Apollo's planned order of events, and sympathy with Creusa empowers the chorus to reveal Xuthus' secret to Creusa, setting in motion events that will require Apollo to change the scene of the recognition between Creusa and Ion. Now, Creusa too becomes empowered as she publicly owns her child with Apollo, and she attempts to kill Ion. While Medea might have succeeded, this play has safeguards installed, and Creusa cannot kill Ion; instead, she uses her maternal empowerment to convince Ion that she is his mother. Unlike Medea and Clytemnestra, Creusa never strays too far from the bounds of patriarchy. Her ownership of her child did not give her the power to fight against the men who would deny her role in the origins of Athens. Maternal ownership only allows Creusa to win back her assigned role in a masculine society. In this play, we can see the necessity of mutuality, but we are still wary of the dangers of the feminine, and thus as we resolve our happy ending, it is masculine anxiety we are most concerned with appeasing.





## Conclusion

Known for his striking portrayals of strong female characters, Euripides does not disappoint in his depictions of motherhood. In our study of *Electra*, *Medea*, and *Ion*, we have seen that Euripides repeatedly works within the framework evidenced in the *Oresteia*: women with a strong sense of ownership of their children also possess greater power to act independently and in their own interest, but this power often leads to a subsequent devaluing of children, which reduces a woman's power and has great potential for ending in disaster. Euripides, however, creates complexity in the different sections of this cycle, creating different dramatic effects—increased humanity and vulgarity in *Electra*, profound anxiety in *Medea*, and a happy ending in *Ion*—that nevertheless reinforce the same concept: maternal empowerment must somehow be resolved lest we are reminded too easily of the violence that often accompanies it.

At this point, we naturally want to apply these patterns to the mystery of female characters in Greek tragedy, remembering that the many variables in this paradox inspire caution and often skepticism. The repetition of similar themes, however, suggests an underlying societal anxiety that perhaps helps close the gap between drama and reality. We might suppose that the threatening nature of motherhood possessed the merit of universality and effectively evoked pity and fear, which would inspire a search for similar patterns in the plays of Sophocles and the remaining works of Aeschylus and Euripides. These three plays were chosen particularly for the violent shifts in audience sympathies and the conflict that creates—is motherhood as frightening when our emotional loyalties are not challenged, as in, for example, *Trojan Women*? This hypothesis of a universal fear of motherhood naturally begs the question why, which would perhaps lead us to examine,

as Zeitlin would describe it, mothers as the “feminine other.” We have seen motherhood characterized by a possessiveness of the physical generative power. Why is this so culturally important to portray on stage, and why, when a masculine society is “playing the other,” is this cycle of empowerment, destruction, and resolution so culturally and psychologically significant?

Certainly, we have raised more questions about the paradox of women in Greek tragedy than we have the research to answer. However, I believe this study has shown the necessity of including discussions of motherhood in many analyses of Greek tragedy, such as those focusing on female agency and decision-making, gender roles and relations, and dramatic techniques. Although the relationship between husband and wife directly involves both genders, the relationship between mother and father involves commodities, investments in the future, and the potential for influence. As these plays have shown us, the mother-child bond has a profound effect on the father, and by extension, on society in general. And in the discussion of a genre with deep roots in civic education and the reinforcement of societal values, how can we ignore the role that gives women their greatest investment in the world of the masculine?

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