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Euripides and the Tyranny of Honor

The question of moral responsibility for the disastrous denouement of the *Medea* has provoked a variety of answers, some of which stress the pathology of individual characters while others emphasize the predominance of particular mental functions. The mutually contradictory quality of certain positions is worth noting. Thus, Sale insists on Jason's "neurosis" (34), while Pucci deplors Medea's "abnormal psychology" (155); Mallinger's assertion that Medea kills her children "in obedience to a higher law of justice" (50) emphasizes the role of conscience, and Kott's observation that, in Euripides, "the id revolting against the superego is personified by woman" (224) suggests the operation of uncontrolled passion. On the other hand, interpretations focusing on the problematic quality of familial and social relationships tend to be consistent with each other. Analyses by Easterling and Simon linking literary structure with the psychology of abuse complement readings by Reckford, who underscores the "psychological consequences" of the "social mistreatment" of women (341), and Foley, who examines the abusive potential of sexist customs and discourse in the Euripidean text, arguing that "the heroic code itself oppresses women" (79). Simon's view of Euripidean art as dramatizing the process by which traumatized people move from a "passive position to the active one of traumatizing others" (81-82) emphasizes the interpersonal origin of Medea's dreadful revenge in a way that makes it difficult to avoid the human relevance of the act of child-murder. An examination of the degree to which the psychology of abuse pervades the world of this play would be justified if only for the purpose of reclaiming the humanity of a character whose criminal deeds are often dismissed as the work of a wicked witch or a perverse deity.

Whereas an appreciation of the human significance of tragedy suggests the advisability of great caution in exploring the

metaphorical implications of Medea's excesses, the temptation to attribute the act of child-murder to a witch-like character is persistent. Thus, Reckford insists on the process of "psychological deterioration" by which "the woman Medea is transformed . . . into the unequivocal witch of legend" (339, 342, 359), while Bongie and Foley seem to assume the essentially static nature of Medea's character, regarding the presentation of tragic action as a revelation of superhuman power rather than the disastrous development of an essentially human problem. Bongie's assessment of Medea as an indomitable dissembler who manipulates the image of "the passive and suffering woman, helplessly wasting away" (34), and Foley's reference to "the feminine mask" that "gradually slips to reveal first an archaic hero and then a near goddess" (77), tend to minimize the problem of Medea's actual suffering. Assuming the illusory nature of her vulnerability, they suggest that she has always been a superhuman force, and that her final ascent in the chariot of the gods is merely the unveiling of her omnipotence. Although the Nurse's early warning that Medea is not likely to yield before an attacker (44-45) may lend some support to this argument, it does not undo the general effect of Euripides' characterization of Medea as a human figure whose grief is entirely credible. Yet Easterling notes that "Euripides keeps close to observed patterns of human behavior," (188) and I will argue that Medea's "victory" is disturbing precisely because it dramatizes a psychological development that is all too recognizable.

Medea's transition from misery to triumph is analogous to the process whereby dependent children initially dominated by adult figures learn, through interaction with playmates and mentors, to exercise control over themselves, to negotiate on equal terms with peers, and eventually, to govern their own dependents. Since the action of the play takes place in a society where economics and politics are organized so as to exalt the exercise of power to the level of a moral absolute, the discourse of the characters reflects both the ethical standard of the group and the frustration of particular individuals with the uneven and hierarchical distribution of power. Having accepted a code exalting freedom and mastery, Medea chafes in the role of the trapped and dominated subject. The single most essential attribute of her character is a cruel conscience that mirrors the adamant imperatives implicit in her world and will not allow her to accept the inglorious role of homeless mother with dispossessed children. Her grief is emblematic of the fundamental contradictions in ancient Greek society, and the Chorus' sympathy for her suggests a community of interest between the defiant protagonist and the exploited groups on whose continued subjection Athenian "democracy" depended. In the *Medea*, Euripides presented in dramatic terms the likely result of a decision on the part of the underlings to act in accordance with the precepts of their masters. Thus, the act of child murder in this play is not simply the result of

mental deterioration or the manifestation of divine power, but the dynamic culmination of an ordinary psychological process that regularly results in the death of children—sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally.

The assumption of adult status in any authoritarian system entails a psychological transformation of the child-subject into an adult authority. The protagonist in this masterpiece of personal and political psychology makes the complete transition from afflicted child to persecutory parent, and the structure of the drama reflects her gradual acquisition of increasing power in her dealings with other characters. In the first episode, when she confronts Creon, she is clearly under his sway. Concerning this scene, it is not enough to say that the relationship between subject and sovereign is analogous to that between child and parent. When Creon addresses Medea as a fool and commands her to crawl away (333), almost as if she were a snake or a worm, his language suggests the dehumanizing potential of the master-slave relationship. The abject obedience he demands could only be expected of a child, a slave, a beast, or a woman. Since the situation requires it, Medea is fawning and conciliatory, but, after he leaves, her anger at herself for groveling at the foot of the tyrant erupts in the aggressively defiant question she hurls at the Chorus: "Do you think that I would ever have flattered this man if I had not been devising a plan or getting something out of it?" (368-69). In this passage, it is worth noting that the question of what the Corinthian women think of Medea is not entirely distinguishable from what she thinks of herself.

In the episode with Jason that follows the one with Creon, Medea confronts a figure who, although he is more or less her equal, presumes to exercise the power of a superior. The destructive potential of Jason's arrogance is evident in the negativity of his language, especially his rather conventional wish that children could be engendered without recourse to the "female race" (573-74). In this exchange, Jason demonstrates that power may depend on denial rather than affirmation, and Medea's parting words to him—"You marry in such a way as to deny yourself a marriage" (626)—suggest that she has learned her lesson well. Finally, in the scene with Aegeus, Medea confers with an august authority who promises her the support and approval she needs to defeat her enemies. Only through her alliance with the ironically well-meaning Aegeus does Medea emerge with the confidence of an established power to assert with terrible simplicity that she will kill her children (792). Thus, the first episode shows Medea as the passive recipient of abuse, the second presents her parrying insults with a peer, and the third casts her as the talented protégée of a powerful mentor. With the assumption of vindictive authority, her transition from persecuted child to tyrannical adult is complete, and the murder of Medea's own children, far from being a

gratuitous incident, is a dynamic development which originates in the logic of victim and aggressor that is the bedrock of this tragedy.

Rationally speaking, of course, one might object that a person with access to a dragon chariot might dispense with the assistance of any mere mortal. According to this logic, Medea does not need to confer with Aegeus. For that matter, however, she does not really need to bicker with Creon or Jason, and least of all does she need to carry on about Jason's defection in the first place. But the truth of tragedy does not lie in the construction of rational argument; it lies in the presentation of emotional realities. In this connection, it is worth noting that of the three above-mentioned episodes, the one with Aegeus has, since the time of Aristotle, been especially troubling to critics. Whereas Schlesinger's speculation on the dramatic relevance of the episode (88) is affirmed by Easterling, who asserts that "the essential relevance of the scene must be its stress on the value and importance of children" (185), T.B.L. Webster objects that "the idea that Aegeus' childlessness suggested to Medea that she should make Jason childless is attractive, but Euripides would have told the audience if he had wanted them to think this. What he has told the audience is that Medea hates her children" (54). His observation is important in that it shifts the critical focus from details of logic and strategy to the fundamental emotional problem in this tragedy, but Webster does not go far enough. What is remarkable about this play is not the animosity of any particular individual toward the children, but the way in which all visible social structures and sanctions seem to conspire against the children. Before any of the principal players ever makes an entrance, we are told that Medea hates her children (36), that Jason does not love his children (88), that he treats his loved ones badly (84), and furthermore, that in this he is probably no worse than any man in the audience (85). That we are all implicated in the crimes of omission and commission perpetrated by Jason and Medea is precisely the message that such techniques as excessive emphasis on individual character or the isolation of discourse from historical context may serve to obscure. An interesting example is the case in which the text clearly states the desire that the children had never been born and the critic infers the wish that they had not been killed.

Speculating that the tragedy of Medea is contained, as if parenthetically, "between two desires that the action should not have happened" (36), Pucci cites, as the first of these desires, the opening lines of the Nurse, expressing the wish that the Argos had not sailed from Colchis through the Symplegades, that the timber to build the ship had not been cut down, and that the hands of the best men had never rowed out to sea in quest of the Golden Fleece (1-6). In wishing, however, that all the events leading up to the birth of the children had never happened, the Nurse may be regarded as opening the drama with a wish that the children had never been born in the first place. Just such a wish is blatantly stated by Jason at the end of the play

when he refers to the dead bodies of the children he "ought never to have begotten to see them killed" by their mother (1413-14). Inseparable as this wish is from Jason's immediate sense of personal loss, the actual words he speaks express a desire that the children had never been born. Although the sentiment uttered is equivalent to that implied in the Nurse's opening speech, the claim that it negates the central action of the tragedy is doubtful. Pucci's reading of such "wishes" is, however, quite consistent with his observation that the Chorus' lengthy complaint about the trials and tribulations of raising children is "really not . . . so much against children as against our painful involvement in the misfortunes of people we love" (146). I believe, however, that in this tragedy culminating in the murder of children, the language that prepares the way for the central action regularly expresses antagonism toward children.

The tragedy of *Medea* may be read as a constant restatement of the wish that the children did not exist. Medea states the inconvenience of their existence bluntly enough: "If you were still childless, your wanting this marriage would be forgivable" (490-91). When the Tutor tells the Nurse of Creon's plans, he states first that the children are to be banished, and only afterwards adds that their mother will go with them: "I heard someone saying that Creon, the ruler of Corinth, is about to drive these children out of this land with their mother" (67-72). This articulation is a noteworthy reflection of the circumstance that the children themselves represent a threat to the royal succession in a way that Medea does not. The most spontaneous and gratuitous representation of hostility toward children in the entire play is, indeed, the reaction of Jason's new bride when his children show up: "But then she covered her eyes and turned her pale cheek away from the children, disgusted at their entrance" (1147-49). The choral song from lines 1081 to 1115 is, moreover, as direct a statement of the frustrations of parenthood as has ever been written. Most significantly, the Chorus says that "those who do not have children get further in fortune than those who do" (1090-93). Rather than being bracketed parenthetically within two wishes that negate its central action, this tragedy is replete with various statements of the problem posed by the presence of the children. If, indeed, the expressions of hostility to children contained within this play are regarded as separate instances of negation, then the Euripidean tragedy follows the logic of ancient Greek grammar, in which the effect of repeated negation is cumulative; the statements of negative desire by the Nurse and Jason are only the most conspicuously placed of many suggestions that the world presented by this play is one in which the lives of the children define the terms of the adult predicament and set the limits of adult possibility. If we consider that the existence of the children constitutes a factor in the scheme of the drama that negates the things that all of the adults would affirm with their lives, the precariousness of the children's situation stands out in

stark relief. The best way to demonstrate the strength of this assertion is to examine the nature of the adult values and aspirations presented in the text.

Vellacott credits Euripides with putting the most perceptive judgments into the mouths of his least imposing characters (218), and it is, in fact, the Tutor who makes the most generally applicable statement concerning the dynamics of adult behavior in this play. When the Nurse denounces Jason as being unkind to his loved ones, the Tutor responds with a question: "But who of mortals is not?" (85). He proceeds to articulate the principle of egotistic self-interest as a universal condition: "Just now you notice this, that each and every man loves himself rather than his neighbor?" (85-86). Granting that a certain amount of generosity and selflessness are required for the nurturing of children, the vision of a world where adults are routinely selfish and competitive is hardly reassuring with respect to the survival of offspring. Although the Tutor admits that self-love may, in some cases, be justified, he does not seem inclined to make such an exception for Jason, suggesting, rather, that he is one who acts "for the sake of gain" and concluding that "their father does not love these children." Whereas the statement criticizing Jason is conditional—"if, for a new marriage, their father does not love these children" (87-88)—the condition under which it would be true is the apparent state of affairs, and so that Jason's not loving his sons is, from the very beginning of the play, given parity with Medea's hating them (36). While the basis of Jason's self-love is arguably less justified than Medea's, the effect of the dramatic action is to question every standard of justice articulated in the text. We may sympathize with Medea because her essentially defensive position compares favorably with Jason's enterprising offensive strategies, or because her actions conform to her ideals, in stark contrast with Jason's vain and capricious inconsistencies. Yet, Medea and Jason both justify their unjustifiable actions in terms of the same code of honor, the importance of which has been eloquently stressed by many scholars, including Knox, who describes Medea as heroic in the Sophoclean manner (297), Bongie, who observes that if "Medea is not acceptable to our own moral code, she is, in the code of the ancient heroic system, a veritable 'saint'" (55), and Foley, for whom Medea's "heroism" reflects both "the avenging archaic warrior Achilles and the clever and crafty Odysseus" (81).

Foley's analysis of conflict in *Medea* as a debate between masculine heroic and feminine nurturing forces is an essential articulation of the sexual politics inherent in the text. Describing Medea's ordeal as issuing in "the death and betrayal of her maternal self" and the Euripidean drama as a critical examination of "masculine heroism and masculine ethics" (82-83), she sheds considerable light on the subversive implications of the text. Her reading of the play is not, however, without its problematic aspects. The conclusion that

"Medea's inability to trust her maternal voice . . . destroys our hopes for a more enlightened form of human ethics, the authoritative female identity and integrity that could contest masculine ethics, whether archaic or contemporary" (83) seems inconsistent with Foley's own sensible observation that "for Euripides' audience a proper Greek wife had no fully autonomous self, no muse, no public voice" (77). In the absence of just such a "public voice," just what "hopes" may we reasonably nourish? Like Pucci's description of Medea as abandoning the morality of the slaves and espousing the morality of the masters (61-66), the conception of the character ignoring her own "maternal voice" suggests a parity between masculine and feminine ethical imperatives that seems rather anachronistic. As recently as 1933, Freud speculated that women are "weaker in their social instincts" and less capable of sublimation than men (*S.E.* 22:134), and it was only in 1982 that Carol Gilligan demonstrated the insufficiency of ethical paradigms derived from masculine experience for evaluating peculiarly feminine ethical perspectives. In fact, Gilligan's emphasis on "the silence of women" and "the difficulty of hearing what they say when they speak" (173) seems peculiarly relevant to the discussion of a text in which a community of women participates with the criminal protagonist in a conspiracy of silence, and the only person who anticipates disaster is a female servant to whom nobody pays much attention. Although the logic of coexisting moralities is appealing, Katha Pollitt's observation that "there is only one culture, and it shapes each sex in distinct but mutually dependent ways in order to reproduce itself" (806) is probably at least as relevant to the ancient Greeks as to ourselves. In any case, the consistency with which the "slaves" adhere to the "morality" of the masters contributes a good deal to the horror of this play, and the unequal distribution of power between male and female participants suggests that the antagonism between man and woman is complicated by the problem of reconciling the role of the compliant child with the integrity of a self-respecting adult.

Although it is something of a truism that patriarchal constraint tends to infantilize the traditional wife and mother, Gilligan's focus on the inconsistency between masculine ideals and feminine development is especially illuminating with respect to the moral dilemmas confronting individual women: "the conflict between self and other constitutes the central moral problem for women, posing a dilemma whose resolution requires a reconciliation between femininity and adulthood" (Gilligan 71). If Medea's crisis is regarded as a conflict between the claims of "femininity and adulthood" rather than a confrontation between the alternate claims of maternal and heroic ethics, the difficulty of her situation becomes all the more apparent, because she may only save her children by accepting a demeaning and tenuous status for herself. The precarious condition of the child in antiquity suggests, moreover, that the "demotion" Medea faces may

entail, over and above the humiliating loss of dignity, an implied threat to life itself. In order to appreciate the terrifying potential for violence between adults and children in ancient Greece, we may consider the relationship between children and stepparents, which is an important element in the context of this play.

In an age when frequent divorce and remarriage make it expedient to discredit the myth of the wicked stepmother, we may with difficulty comprehend the traditional distrust of stepparents. The Euripidean interest in the dangers endured by stepchildren is apparent in the plots of many extant plays, such as the *Ion*, the *Electra*, and the *Alcestis*, as well as in plays of which only fragments remain, such as *Aegeus*, *Ino*, *Phrixus*, and *Kresphontes*. The problem is clearly stated in *Alcestis*, when the dying wife pleads with her husband not to remarry lest his new wife abuse the children of his first marriage. Though it would be difficult to imagine a more benign character than the woman who agrees to give up her own life in order to save her husband, *Alcestis* indicates, in her speech denouncing the cruelty and treachery of stepmothers, that she wants for her children exactly what Jason and Medea want for themselves—security and power (Euripides, *Alcestis* 304-10). The model of the good wife, *Alcestis* may die content as long as she has assured herself the triumph of her own reputation and the eventual exercise of power through her children. That these are things for which a woman might not only die but also kill is evidenced by the story of *Ino*, who, in marrying *Athamas*, was so eager to assure the inheritance of her own children that she tried to kill *Phrixus* and *Helle*, the children of *Athamas*' first marriage.

The importance of *Ino* for the *Medea* is emphasized by the choral reference to her immediately after *Medea* murders the children (1284). Referring to *Ino*'s eventual murder of her own children, the Chorus reminds the audience of a mythical sequence of events which is linked to the story of Jason and *Medea* in several ways. According to legend, Jason was related to *Athamas*, both *Athamas* and Jason's grandfather *Cretheus* being sons of *Aeolus* (Apollonius Rhodius 3: 356-66); the quest for the Golden Fleece would never have been offered to Jason as a challenge if *Phrixus* and *Helle* had not fled from the wrath of their stepmother on the back of a talking ram with golden fleece that carried *Phrixus* to the land of *Colchis*. When the ram was killed, his fleece was enshrined in the sacred wood of *Apollo*, where it was protected by a serpent until Jason, with the help of *Medea* and her drugs, was able to retrieve it. The significance of this story is such that the very mention of *Ino*'s name would probably suffice to make the Greek audience apprehensive regarding the probable fate of any children entrusted to the care of Jason's new wife, even if the Euripidean delineation of *Creusa*'s spontaneous revulsion at the sight of Jason's sons were not so emphatically disturbing. In any case, it is unlikely that, with *Ino*'s name echoing in their minds, the members of the audience would have missed the irony in Jason's indignant denial

that a Greek woman would ever do such a thing as kill her own children (1339-40). The difficulty of leaving the children in their father's care is so obvious that few critics have questioned the validity of *Medea*'s refusal to "leave them on hostile soil to be assaulted by enemies" (781-82, 1060-61, 1238-39).

The survival of the Greek child was so much a function of paternal responsibility that the infant was not even considered human until after a ceremony was performed in which the father signaled that the child was to be nurtured and not "exposed" (Sheleff 194-95). The degree to which the well-being of children depended on material provision by the father regularly gave rise to vicious competition between mothers of different children by the same man. That the obligation to provide for offspring represented a considerable burden for a married man is reflected in the ancient Greek language by the fact that marriage was called a "yoke" to be borne by the man. *Medea* says women are lucky if their husbands bear the yoke not by force, but willingly (242), and *Aegeus* lets *Medea* know that he is married by saying that he is not "unyoked of marriage" (673). Curiously enough, when *Aegeus* invites *Medea* to come to Athens, he does not mention the children, and she does not ask if she may bring them with her. This might be taken to mean that it goes without saying that the children would share in the bounties of Athenian hospitality as surely as their mother. Yet there may exist at least the hint of a question concerning the fate of the children when they get to Athens in the opening lines of the choral ode in celebration of Athens: "prosperous descendants of *Erechtheus* and children well-favored by the gods in ancient times" (824-25). The founding father thus revered is one who sacrificed his daughter, *Otonia*, in order to secure an Athenian victory. Thus, the allusion may be read as an ironic reminder that even the sanctuary of Athens was originally founded on the principle that some children must die in order that others might live.

This famous choral passage actually mentions a number of mythical figures whose names are not only associated with Athens, but also with the terrible tales of particular children. Along with the reference to *Erechtheus*, the one to "fair-haired *Harmonia*" (832) may be considered as having a vaguely dreadful resonance. Of *Harmonia*'s four daughters, *Agave* and *Ino* killed their own children, while *Semele* bore the child, *Dionysus*, who was dismembered and devoured by the Titans; *Autonoë*, who joined her sister in the revels that were the undoing of her nephew, *Pentheus*, was the mother of *Actaeon*, who paid a heavy penalty for offending the goddess, *Artemis*. There is, moreover, at least a possibility that the allusions to *Erechtheus* and *Harmonia* may have been auxiliary to the generally ominous association between the dramatic spectacle of the homeless mother and child and the numbers of refugee women and children from the Attic countryside to which Athens opened its gates in the early spring of 431 B.C.E., in preparation for the Spartan invasion (Thucydides

2:14-17). Although the oration of Pericles abounds with optimism and confidence (Thucydides 2:60-64), the spectacle of so many vulnerable human beings crowded into spaces that were not prepared to accommodate them must surely have troubled some thoughtful observers. Such misgivings would prove well founded with the outbreak of plague in the following year. It is, therefore, altogether possible that the naive benignity of Aegeus' invitation to Medea contained an ironic suggestion, for the contemporary audience, of the infeasibility of extending the hospitality of the polis beyond its capacity to support its members. The Athenian audience would not have to be told that if Medea and her children were to find a secure future in Athens, they would have to depend, not only on the generosity of the city, but on the dubious enterprise of finding a male provider.

Even if she does remarry, Medea cannot thereby assure the safety of her children, the reputation of stepfathers for promoting the welfare of stepchildren being hardly better than that of stepmothers. In the recurring myth of the woman whose second marriage joins her to the man who killed her first husband in battle, the children of the first marriage are murdered in order to eliminate the possibility of eventual revenge. Such was the fate of Astyanax, son of Hector and Andromache, and also of Clytemnestra's son by a marriage prior to the one with Agamemnon (Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 1150-52). Euripides dealt with mythical stepfathers in the *Electra* and also in the fragmentary *Kresphontes*. In these two stories, the infant son, who is hidden and saved from death, returns in early adulthood to challenge or murder his mother's new husband. Although Medea has not, like Andromache or Clytemnestra, been taken as a prize in battle, she must still contend with the reluctance of men to bear the "yoke" of marriage for other men's children, a problem that prompts Velacott to speculate, with respect to Alcestis, that the decision to die in her husband's place is less a matter of altruism than a realistic concession to the practical problem of providing for the children: "If Alcestis as a widow had married again, she would have bought her own prosperity at the cost of her children's; this she will not do" (105). If this is true of Alcestis, we may judge accordingly the despair of a woman for whom her children's safety cannot be bought at any price.

Of the options open to Medea, neither leaving her sons nor taking them with her will assure their well-being in the absence of a father's protection. The insolubility of her problem is acknowledged by the Chorus, which describes her predicament as a piece of divine mischief: ὡς εἰς ἄπορον σε κλύδωνα θεός, / Μήδεια, κακῶν ἐπόρευσε (A god has guided you here, Medea, into an impassable flood of evils, 362-63). As significant as the qualifier "impassable" (ἄπορον) is the choral invocation of Medea as fruitless: μελέα τῶν σῶν ἀχέων (wretched of your own grief, 358). μελέα, meaning both "wretched" and "fruitless," is a word spoken by Medea herself in her first woeful

lamentation, before she even enters on stage at the beginning of the play: ἰω, / δύστανος ἐγὼ μελέα τε πόνων (Oh miserable and without fruit from my labors, 96). It is hard to see how the final act of child-murder could ever have been considered inconsistent or gratuitous in connection with a character who mourns the fruitlessness of her womb before ever coming out on stage.

That she has been deprived of the "fruit of her labor" is the essential fact of Medea's predicament, and it is also the basis of the common bond between her and the Corinthian women. The solitary lament that Medea first utters in isolation assumes the form of a communal complaint when she tells Creon that she has labored but not been given the fruits of her labor (334). In her use of the first person plural during the confrontation with the king, there is a suggestion that Medea is not voicing a purely personal grievance. Her position is equivalent to that of the women of the Chorus, who do not enjoy the status of citizens and yet are expected to display the same loyalty to invested authority as those who exercise full civic privileges. This is why she speaks for them, as they so often speak for her. Her complaint expresses the collective resentment of women required to supply the human fodder for military machines that may, at best, make token acknowledgment of their contribution. Though the subjects' identification with an idealized concept of authority may enable them to accept the objectives of the incumbent rulers, it will reconcile them to their own subservient position only with great difficulty. Hitler, for example, would probably not have been able to do quite as much damage as he did if many people listening to the rhetoric of the master race had ever imagined themselves as being slaves. The essential source of discord in this play is that Jason and Creon expect Medea to act like a slave while she insists, uncooperatively, on thinking of herself as one of the masters. There is every indication, moreover, that the Chorus of women takes vicarious pleasure in Medea's successful defiance of authority. The justice of her case is, curiously enough, no more disputed by her enemies than by her friends. Even Jason does not take issue with Medea's accusation that he has deprived her of the comfort and pleasure the children might bring her; he counters her indignation with a simple question that suggests that children are, for him, the means to a coveted end: "Why are children necessary for you, anyway?" (565). His own "use" for children is explained in his second meeting with Medea, when he cheerfully speculates on the prospect of having grown-up sons to help him out in his military campaigns (920-21). Since Medea is a woman and will not engage in battle, and since the essential utility of sons is to grow up and fight their father's enemies, she should have no use for the boys. His logic is unencumbered by any consideration that the survival of children is only assured to the degree that it may be regarded as an end in itself and not subservient to any ultimate "use" or purpose.

A skeptical examination of the world which this play presents might lead us to conclude that the children are doomed precisely because everybody around them regards them as a means to an end. Whereas Jason sees them as military reinforcements, Medea considers them her social security: "Really, wretched me, I had ever much hope in you, to take care of me in my old age, and dying in your hands to be clothed well, an enviable thing for men" (1332-35). Though there is more than a little selfishness in the attitude of both parents toward the children, a comparison of the two of them shows Medea in a better light than Jason. Jason is not only selfish but also belligerent and offensive, conceiving of the children as weapons against his enemies when the only foes in sight are allies whom he has attacked. Selfish as it may seem at certain moments, Medea's perception of the children is defensive rather than offensive. They would have been her bulwark against the natural calamity which must be the lot of every mortal creature. Although she finally accedes to the warlike logic that seems to be the human standard in her world, Medea nevertheless inspires more sympathy than Jason because she does not regard the children primarily as tactical auxiliaries.

In view of Piers' observations on the way in which infanticide may be promoted by "those who fail to see it" (16), the choral complaint that Jason harms his children by not seeing them is worth noting: "But you, wretch, ill wedded of princely alliances, since you do not see your children, you bring destruction on their lives" (991-93). Medea's great anguish, on the other hand, lies most evidently in the fact that she sees the children all too clearly: "Oh, oh! Why do you look at me with your eyes, children? Why are you laughing your last laugh of all? Oh, what will I do? For my heart is wiped out, women, when I see the bright eyes of my children. I might not have the *strength*" (1040-44). In this beautiful passage, the remarkable image of the mother and child fixed in each other's gaze is suggestive of the role played by eye contact in the process by which the nursing mother becomes bonded to her child, and also of the literary tradition of the accessibility of the soul through the eyes. Medea's reaction to the gazing eyes of her children underscores the positive nurturing quality of her role, dramatizing the strength of her maternal bond. Unfortunately, this passage also demonstrates that she regards her vulnerability to maternal emotion as weakness, as that which saps her strength and wipes her out (1042-44). That Medea feels threatened by her susceptibility to that part of her nature which others have defined as ignoble and worthless may be demonstrated by an analysis of the speech of various characters in the play.

It is characteristic of Jason that the first word we hear him utter is a negation and that the object of his denial is strong emotion: "Not now for the first time but many times have I seen what a useless evil is harsh emotion" (446-47). Negation is as typical of Jason as strong emotion is of Medea. It is tempting to regard this notorious couple in

the light of Freud's judgment that "affirmation, as being a substitute for union, belongs to Eros, while negation, the derivative of expulsion, belongs to the instinct of destruction" (*S.E.* 19:239). In the *Medea*, we are told that the protagonist misses her homeland, that she hates her children, that she wants to die; all her passions, including the most noxious ones, are stated in affirmative constructions. One of the rare occasions when Medea expresses a negation is in the above-mentioned passage ("I might not have the strength"), where the object of denial is precisely the emotional capacity required for the act of killing the children. The negation of this "strength" thus emerges as an affirmation of the emotions that would deny the act: love, pity, fear. Jason, on the other hand, would expel passion from his life along with Medea, and he is consistently described in negative terms: he does not love his children, he does not see his children, he does not marry for the sake of love. His desire that children could be engendered without resorting to the "female race" denies the humanity of half the human race and also the wisdom of a cosmos in which women exist at all. Though negativity is the distinguishing feature of Jason's speech, his conviction that strong emotion is the source of human limitation is typical of the local ruling class.

No less a personage than King Creon is ashamed to feel pity and condemns the exercise of mercy as a weakness unworthy of a king: "At least my spirit was born worthy of a king, but many a thing have I ruined utterly in feeling pity" (348-49). At this point, Creon's misgivings are entirely justified, because, in banishing Medea, he has openly declared his hostility, and the first letter of Machiavellian law is that you do not show pity after having initiated aggression. There may be an ironic comment on hypocritical demagogues in the apparent inconsistency between Creon's desire to exercise inordinate power and his determination to present himself as a good fellow. If Jason and Creon sometimes talk like would-be crowd-pleasers, however, Medea has the dubious distinction of being a better general than either one of them. In denying mercy to her children, she conforms, ironically enough, to the adamant ideal that Creon rightly feels he is betraying, and the emptiness of her "victory" has more to do with the limitations of the military premise than with any defect in her logic. Jason himself may claim the unenviable distinction of having served as her master of strategy, because his insistence on crediting Eros for the fact that Medea saved his life (530-31) lets his nemesis know that sensuality and desire are her own worst enemies, that she has them to blame for her humiliation and defeat. Thanks to him, she is persuaded that her own life affirming impulses have caused her humiliation and defeat. Jason delivers his lecture with noteworthy inconsideration of what it might mean for his children if Medea should be as superior to the powers of Eros as he seems to be.

Euripides' special emphasis, in this text, on the continuity between erotic and maternal functions suggests that the denial of

emotion is a particular threat to the survival of the children. Both sexual indulgence and bearing children are identified as sources of harsh, disfiguring pain for Medea. When Jason indignantly seeks her approval of the plan which would eliminate her from his life, he suggests that even Medea would cheerfully endorse his scheme "if desire did not grate at" her (568). The vividly concrete term κνίζοι, from κνίζειν, *to grate, to scrape, or to make itch*, stands out in this passage and underscores Jason's contempt for sexuality by the use of language immediately evocative of animal gestures and mechanical procedures. Medea uses a similarly suggestive term when she laments that she has been "shredded" by the labor of childbirth (1030-31). The word she uses, κατεξάνθη, is a derivative of the verb, ξάλναι, *to card or to shred*, often used to describe the preparation of wool. Like κνίζειν, καταξάλναι suggests the cruel action of an abrasive instrument against vulnerable living tissue. For one who has been "grated" by desire and "shredded" by childbirth, the pleasures of the flesh and the impulsion of the senses may well appear to be untrustworthy and inimical. Therefore, Medea is urged, not only by Jason but by her own disappointing experience, to repudiate the life of the body. This is in itself a disastrous development for her children, and not only because they are the ones who have "shredded" her.

The physical love that binds Medea to her sons seems, at certain moments, to stand as an obstacle between her and her determination to avenge herself. Her effusive and lyrical description of the children's bodies and the pleasures their closeness gives her (1071-75) suggests that she has great difficulty in tearing herself away from them. In this celebration of hands, mouths, bodies, faces, gentle touch, tender skin, and sweet breath of the children, Pucci sees an indication of the "justice of the mind" (137), and yet it seems that the mother's poignant lament is rather more remarkable for the love of the body than for the justice of the mind. When Medea says to the children that their father has taken away the sweet things of this life (1073-74), she means not only the fleshly pleasures of her children's presence, but all the earthly joys that have been her delight, all that Eros offers and Jason ridicules. It is really no wonder that Medea believes people will laugh at her if she does not control herself. The affirmation of physical pleasure which seems to be all that stands between the children and their doom has been identified by Jason as the source of Medea's suffering and disgrace. She has no "reason" not to believe him.

Reason, or at least the pseudo-rationality that passes as such in this play, presents a far greater threat to the survival of the children than anybody's "instincts." Creon and Creusa, indeed, have substantial "reason" for wishing the children out of the way; Jason uses "reason" as an excuse for abandoning them to a doubtful fate. The Chorus cheerfully expresses the logically unassailable point of view that people who don't have children are more likely to achieve a certain

kind of worldly prosperity than people who do (1090-93). For Medea, the children are the tangible signs of her shame and bondage to her passions. We may object to certain unstated assumptions that seem to be the basis of human enterprise in this community. Though a mother's "instinct" is not enough to sustain anybody's children, reason alone would hardly require their deaths; what passes for reason in this play is not reason but the denial of Eros. Reason would question the very value of subjecting every human consideration to the ultimate goal of "getting ahead" or winning. In this play, however, only the servants are at liberty to question the priorities of "free" men and women. The Nurse says she would rather not pass the days of her old age in great estate (123-24), but the wisdom of accepting personal limits emerges as an isolated articulation in this text, whereas Medea's inability to embrace a subservient role for herself reflects the generally sanctioned lunacy. Pride may well cost Medea the lives of her children, but it hardly distinguishes her from her peers. In the end, she is persuaded, in the name of "reason," to squelch her most generous impulses, while everybody else depends complacently on the reflex action of maternal love as an escape hatch for evading personal responsibility.

Foley's argument that Medea's revenge is required by ethical imperatives rather than by emotional excess is not only persuasive in its own right but also eminently consistent with the psychological and anthropological evidence that the potential for parental violence against children is rather a failure of culture than of instinct. The hypothesis of the ruinous female instincts, moreover, can hardly account for the care with which Euripides depicts Medea's physical attachment to her children. To the degree that he deals with her maternal nature as such, he presents it in a positive light. Various characters may say that Medea hates her children, but Euripides demonstrates that she is the only one who loves them. Freud's remarks on the regularity with which love is accompanied by hatred may suggest, indeed, that there is no surer sign of Medea's love for her children than the very fact that she hates them (*S.E.* 19:43). If mothers killed their children merely because they hated them, few children would be safe. The text leaves little doubt, moreover, that if Medea could trust her "instincts" and the promptings of her senses that Foley identifies as a "maternal voice," she would not kill her children.

The critical difficulty posed by the internal debate in which Medea chafes against her own stubbornness (τῆς ἐμῆς αὐθαδίας 1028) and yet pleads with her passion for revenge (θυμός) as if it were somehow external to her (1056) is evident in the rivers of ink that have been consecrated to the explication of Medea's monologue. Foley's essay on this text is essential, not only because of her meticulous exposition of the scholarly bibliography, but because of the interpretive acuity of her argument. Particularly helpful is her evaluation of the word *thumos* as a "capacity located in Medea that

directs her to act, a 'heart' that can (or at least pretends to itself that it can) choose to side either with the arguments of the revenger or the arguments of the mother (although it is predisposed to the former)" (70-71). Wisely rejecting traditional arguments that dismiss Medea's *thumos* as a relatively simple source of "irrational passion" or "rage," Foley insists on the complexity of the *thumos*, which "can impel Medea either to kill or to spare" the children, and "even comes close to representing what we might call a self." Regarding my own perspective on Medea's dilemma as an elaboration of Foley's, I would like to underscore her parenthetical observation that Medea's *thumos* is "predisposed to" endorse the arguments of the revenger.

Medea is predisposed to endorse the arguments of the avengers because every discernible personal ideal in this play, whether male or female, is a fierce parental figure. The spectacle of the protagonist pleading with a part of herself that is outside of herself recalls Freud's description of the superego as being the representative of our relation with our parents (*S.E.* 19:36), and suggests that the *thumos* that haunts Medea is a moral passion, the standard-bearer for past generations of angry parents, which she embraces with all the fervor of her own passionate nature. Thus, her *thumos* is ultimately inseparable from the many divine figures, identifiable as formidable parents or guardians of the young, whom Medea invokes in the course of the play. Paternal authorities with reputations for fiery tempers, such as Zeus, the father of all the gods and thrower of thunderbolts, and Helios, the father of Medea's own ruthless father, are complemented by maternal figures such as Themis, an earth-mother who upholds oaths, and Hecate and Artemis, guardians of the young associated with cults requiring the sacrifice of children. Medea's own superhuman "fury" is etymologically linked to the Aeschylean conception of revenge as the province of cranky maternal deities. In any case, the distinction between internal and external dimensions of the mind is largely irrelevant in the context of a culture that conceives of personal gods both in terms of anthropomorphic figures, such as Aphrodite, and the psychological manifestation of the passions that such deities symbolize. The intuition of a connection between Medea's predisposition to revenge and a heritage of abusive parental authority is reinforced, moreover, by the way in which Euripides juxtaposes statements of Medea's hatred for her children with reminders that she misses her father.

Immediately before her terrifying assertion that Medea "hates her children," the Nurse describes her mistress as one who is learning "that the land of one's father is not a thing lightly to be abandoned" (34-36); the servant thus formulates the conflicting claims on Medea's conscience in personal terms that illustrate the Freudian assertion that the ego "is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and . . . contains the history of those object-choices" (*S.E.* 19:29). Later, Medea clarifies the connection between missing her father and hating

her children by identifying the children as the living emblems of her mistake in betraying her father for Jason: "I was mistaken then when I left my father's household, persuaded by the words of a Greek who, with the help of a god, will render justice and not ever will he see his children, begotten of me, living out the rest of their lives" (800-04). In this passage, the imperative for revenge focuses on the children as if the act of killing them will not only hurt Jason but also undo the wrong she has committed against her father. Like the negative wish with which the Nurse begins her first speech, this statement of regret for the events that led up to the birth of the children constitutes a wish that the children did not exist. It is followed by a reference to the god on her side, which reinforces the sense of her spiritual obligation to her father. The conventional formula by which she anticipates her revenge—"he will render justice"—is not only an appropriation of the rhetoric by which all manner of abominations are regularly justified, but a revelation of the conviction that the death of the children is something Medea seems to feel she owes her father.

Medea's statement of her past error is comparable to Jason's claim that he was out of his mind when he led Medea out of her barbarian household into the land of Greece. Denouncing his former partner in crime as the "betrayal of father and sustaining homeland" (1332), he dismisses his own role in initiating the train of events that led to the birth of the children as attributable to temporary insanity but does not go so far as to say, like Medea, that he was mistaken. Just as he denies his children the support on which their lives depend and yet blames Medea for their deaths, so he benefits from her past misdeeds only to set himself up as her conscience, condemning her for betraying father and country. Ironically enough, Medea's constant sorrowful references to her father and fatherland suggest that she agrees with him. Lamenting that she has no reason to live since she has no fatherland (798-99), she seems to be haunted by the memory of her homeland (328). The recurring lament for homeland and paternal household (πατρίς, δόμους πατρῶους) contains the root of the word for father, and, like the constant invocations of the god who is her grandfather, takes its place in an intricate network of remorseful reminders of her absent parent.

The notion that Medea suffers as much from pangs of conscience as from uncontrolled passion suggests a connection between Euripides' depiction of tragic pathos and Freud's discussion of melancholia, especially the observation that a person who has to give up a sexual object often experiences "an alteration of his ego which can only be described as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia" (*S.E.* 19:29). Medea's condition as described by the Nurse at the beginning of the play seems curiously similar to that of one suffering from melancholia: despondent and self-reproachful, she can neither eat nor sleep. Her transformation in the course of the drama from a mood of abject misery to one of

exuberant triumph seems relevant, moreover, to Freud's account of the way in which the dejection of melancholia may change into the exaltation of mania. Although diagnostic terms such as *melancholia* and *mania* would seem to be at odds with the assumption of Medea's relative sanity on which my argument is based, they are, in any case, unnecessary. The character's distress at the beginning of the play may quite fairly be described as a state of mourning, which Freud described as a normal condition resembling the pathological affliction of melancholia (*S.E.* 24:253-55). As the action proceeds, the audience watches Medea assume control of herself by acquiescing to the parental authority within herself and deliberately adopting the standards of those against whom she has defiantly struggled. The briefest reflection seems likely to suggest that if Medea misses her father and seems to be in the process of setting him up as a role model, her children are already in trouble.

The ominous implications of Medea's mourning for lost objects are apparent in legends, associated with both her parents, which tend to recall Lloyd de Mause's view of the relationship between the ancient parent and child as being in "the infanticidal mode" (51). Although there is no mention of Medea's mother in most versions of the myth, an omission that suggests minimal emphasis on the nurturing and compliant qualities that were presumably within a woman's domain, Diodorus Siculus names as Medea's mother the witch Hecate, long associated with fertility cults, magic, and infanticide; he describes this particular goddess as being "known far and wide for her cruelty." The same author describes Medea's father, Aeëtes, and her paternal uncle, Perses, as "exceedingly cruel," Aeëtes especially being noted for his "natural cruelty" (4:45-46); Valerius Flaccus speaks of "the guile, the cunning of the faithless offspring of the Sun," commenting, moreover, that he "deserved to be abandoned and betrayed" (5:222-24). Having taken issue at an early age with the family custom of murdering all strangers who arrived on the shores of the kingdom, Medea was disciplined on suspicion of subversive activities even before the arrival of the Argonauts in Colchis (Diodorus 4:46). It is precisely because Medea abandoned family and homeland to save Jason and his friends from her father's cruelty that Jason's position seems so offensive: like her father, he is a deceiver of strangers. His identification with the callous parental tyrant in her past is in counterpoint with the textual suggestion of equivalency between Medea and her children.

In addressing the Chorus of Corinthian women, Medea says that "of all things which are alive and have judgment, we women are the most wretched creatures" (230-31), echoing the conventional Homeric expression that "there is not anywhere, of all such things that breathe and crawl upon the earth, anything that is more wretched than a man" (*Iliad* 17:445-47). Homer's language, however, distinguishes between men and inhuman things by the very use of the word for man

(ανδρός), while the Euripidean formulation establishes the equation between woman and the creature as blatantly in Medea's speech as in Creon's command for the fool to slither off: ἔρπ' ὠ ματαία (crawl away, you madwoman 333). Medea says that women are the most wretched things grown, equating a word for human beings (γυναικες) with the neuter noun for something grown (φυτόν). Denoting "a thing that has grown" and, by extension, a "plant," "creature," "descendant," or "child," the word φυτόν implies the equivalence of women and things, of children and things, and also, of women and children.

Like the German word *Kind*, the Greek word φυτόν and the more common τέκνον are neuter nouns that suggest the less than human status of the child within the social group. Even the word παῖς, which may be masculine or feminine, may, in certain contexts, mean "slave" or "servant," so that Finley cautions against the "warm overtones of the word 'child' " for modern readers, recalling that Aristophanes "once invented an etymology of *pais* from *paiein* 'to beat' "(96). A good indication of the unenviable lot of the child in any community is the fact that, even today, grown people may be insulted by being called "boy" or "girl." The vulnerability of the child to exploitation and abuse derives in great measure from the adult capacity to perceive of him or her as an alien creature. Thus, children may be victimized by the logic of pseudospeciation, according to which countries at war regularly encourage their citizens to regard the enemy as other-than-human (barbarians, Krauts, Gooks). Piers documents the way the "dehumanization of the doomed child" has served as a mechanism permitting parents to abuse, neglect, and murder children throughout history (17). The crucial importance of the other-than-human status of the child in the psychology of child abuse affords an interesting perspective on the linguistic phenomenon of the child as neuter thing.

The antagonism toward children of the "silent code of civilization" that adults hurl against the young in the form of criticism, restrictions, and injunctions of all kinds led Zilboorg to claim that "to the unconscious of the parents, the child plays the role of the Id" (39). The word *id*, literally meaning "it," has in common with φυτόν, τέκνον and *Kind* the fact that it is grammatically neuter. The significance of references to children as neuter objects is illuminated by Bettelheim's complaint that the translation of Freud's "das Es" as "the id" instead of the plain English "it" entails a problematic loss of emotional immediacy. He observes that all Germans, during their early years, "have the experience of being referred to by means of the neuter pronoun *Es*, and it reminds them of a time when their entire existence was dominated by the 'it' " (57). In describing the world of the instincts as "Es," Freud showed insight into the truth that certain languages reflect in the forms of familiar words: that the concept of "humanity" itself is somehow bound up with the idea of civilized

control. The child, relatively lacking in such control, is not quite human. Therefore, if Medea sees the problem of transcending the state of child, animal, thing, woman, and slave as a matter of achieving personal integrity and human worth, we should not wonder. Her anguish resembles that of any human being in the difficult state of transition between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, and the resolution of her predicament is a grim illustration of Freud's maxim: "where id was, there ego shall be" (*S.E.* 22:80).

The textual identification of Medea as child is not only implied in the word *φυτόν*, but also in certain similarities between Medea's situation and that of her children. Medea, like her children, is hated. The Nurse tells us that Medea hates her children (36), and Medea uses the same word to describe herself when she speaks of her sons as "the cursed children of a hated mother" (112-13). Although Foley underscores the feminist implications of Medea's self-hatred, observing that "she has come to envision all that is female as despicable" (80), it is also worth noting that Medea hates in herself precisely that which may bother adults about children, that is, an unrestrained nature. Furthermore, both Medea and her children are presented as being trapped in an impassable situation that has been imposed on them by a powerful, threatening figure of authority. It is a god who has brought Medea into a flood of evils with no way out (362-63), and Medea's sons find themselves overpowered by her in the same way that she has been overpowered by the god. The child cries: "Oh, what will I do? How may I flee the hands of a mother?" (1271) and his question, *τί δράσω*; is a literal repetition of the dreadful question posed by Medea herself at the moment when she is confronted by the realization that she will kill the children (1042). The identity of the despairing exclamations of Medea and her children throws into somber relief the resemblance between the mother's desperate predicament and the helpless affliction of the children; both are at the mercy of a hostile, powerful figure who ought to be protecting instead of persecuting them.

The transition from persecuted victim to persecutory authority requires a process of rejecting one role and choosing another, and the "progress" from one to the other entails a kind of betrayal. Having been persuaded that the revolt against her father by which she sought to liberate herself from the status of persecuted child has failed because it was committed in the service of Eros, Medea laments her reckless youth. If, in regretting her betrayal of her father, she betrays the offended child she once was and affirms her father's hostile treatment of strangers and children, Medea has little alternative. The affirmation of her youthful rebellion would mean choosing the lot of the victim, and liberation from the status of the creature entails going from "obeying instincts to inhibiting them" (*S.E.* 19:48). In order to "grow up," Medea must embrace the cruelty and tyranny of the authorities with whom the law is identified in her mind, at least as her

mind is represented in the language of this play. It is noteworthy that the obsession with punishment that is characteristic of Medea reveals the continuity of thought between child-victim and adult-aggressor.

The childishness of Medea's persistent concern with suffering, punishment, and vindication is evident immediately after the episode with Creon, when she tells herself, "You see the things you are suffering. You, being born of a good father and descended from Helios, must not bring laughter on yourself through marriage to Jason, relative of Sisyphus" (403-06). In the tone of an angry parent, Medea addresses herself as "you," literally standing apart from herself, as if in conformity with Freud's perception of the superego as "the capacity to stand apart from the ego and to master it" (*S.E.* 19:48). With the allusion to Sisyphus, she reminds herself and the audience of a legend of infanticide on Jason's side of the family. When Jason's great uncle Sisyphus, feuding with his brother, Salmoneus, seduced Salmoneus' daughter, Tyro, in order to harm her father, Tyro bore her uncle two children before discovering his scheme, at which point she killed the children (Tripp 533-34), presumably out of just such a combination of anger and filial loyalty as Medea seems to be enduring at present. In this passage, Medea's desire to avoid the laughter of enemies, described by Foley as "a logical extension of the shame-culture position" (60), seems inextricable from oppressive aspects of the bond between parent and child. When the character insists that she must not incur the laughter of Jason and relatives of Sisyphus because she is born of good family, the descendant of Helios, we are reminded, not only of the divine implications of her *agon*, but also of the painful evidence of her obligation to paternal authorities.

In the word *ὀφλεῖν*, from *ὀφλισκάνειν*, meaning *to owe* or *to incur*, which is used here and frequently elsewhere by Medea in the expression "to incur laughter," we find a curious sense of obligation and also the hint of a suggestion that laughter entails something more than humiliation. Occurring also in the phrase "to incur punishment" (580-81, 1226-27), the word *ὀφλισκάνειν* implies the passive suffering of an ordeal, so that "laughter," when it occurs as the grammatical complement of the verb "to incur," may register as a kind of punishment. Mocking laughter, like any humiliation, is endured helplessly, in much the same way as a child endures the aggression of a hostile adult or suffers from being the brunt of crude merry-making. The position of the child as outsider in an adult world actually has an intimate connection with the fate of the exile in the dynamics of this play because the terror of being excluded and ostracized by the group is not only a reflection of the plight of the ancient citizen banished from the protection of the city; the condition of outsider is, after all, the ordinary status of the child, and the peculiar vulnerability of children derives from their essential exclusion from the world of adults. To the degree that the members of

any audience can identify with Medea's dread of humiliation, their sympathy derives from the fact that such anxiety is part of the virtually universal heritage of infancy. The adult horror of exile and the child's fear of infanticide are one.

It is precisely the infantile quality of much of the emotional interaction in this play that makes the representation of the passions so immediate and familiar. Jason and Medea are more like a couple of squabbling children than two mature adults with a grave mutual responsibility. When Medea feigns compliance with Jason in order to get the best of him, she admonishes him "not to counter childish things with childish things" (891). For these so-called grown-ups, daring and showing that you can take a dare are essential values, and yet, even this foolishness does not distinguish them from their peers. When Medea tells the Chorus of her plan to kill the children, the women tell her not to do it, but quickly ask, as if in fascination: "But will you dare to kill your children, woman?" (816). Their use of the word *τολμήσεις* from *τολμᾶν*, *to have the courage to do something or to dare* is significant, first of all, because the future indicative form of the verb suggests that the attempt to dissuade Medea from her brutal project may perhaps be less than whole-hearted. The response of these women to the proposed deed is notably ambiguous, suggesting a mixture of overt disapproval and covert admiration: "Miserable woman, so you really were of rock or iron who killed the crop of your children that you bore for your share with your own hand" (1279-81). Though the audience may be horrified by the begrudging tribute implicit in the phrase "made of rock or iron," there is no reason to doubt that the Chorus is on some level positively impressed by Medea's "heroic" daring. The irony of the passage resides in the disparity between the communal estimation of heroic values and Euripides' probable view of them.

In this play, the verb *τολμᾶν* is the textual antithesis of the verb *ὀφλισκάνειν*. Though *τολμᾶν* has the positive connotation of asserting oneself actively and *ὀφλισκάνειν* has the negative connotation of suffering passively, both words may have the English meaning *to endure*, the operative difference inhering evidently in that the former implies the act of enduring for the sake of honor, and the latter a state of being in which shame and disgrace are passively endured. Recurring with some regularity in Medea's speech, these verbs ultimately suggest that her determination to safeguard her honor is imperfectly distinguished from her fear of punishment. After sending the poisoned gifts to the princess, but before killing the children, she asks herself: "And so what am I enduring? Do I want to incur laughter, letting my enemies go unpunished? These things must be dared. But even the allowing soft words into my heart is from cowardice" (1049-52). Here, as in the earlier passage describing her situation as a contest of endurance (403-04), Medea's use of the verb *πάσχειν*, *to suffer*, is a reproach to herself for being too passive and thus inviting the fate of

the victim. In this speech, however, the dread of incurring laughter is inseparable from the indignity of letting her enemies go unpunished, and the choice of words shows a certain change in orientation. As the one incurring laughter, she was herself the helpless sufferer; in suggesting that she might be the one to "punish" her enemies, she embraces the role of tormentor. When she says that these things must be dared (*τολμητέον*), she shows that, of the painful alternatives open to her, she chooses the one that is sanctioned by the code of honor. Her troubled impression that "even the allowing of soft words" into her heart "is from cowardice" serves as a reminder that if, in choosing to repress her "cowardliness" Medea seals the doom of her children, she also accedes to a certain internal conception of moral exaltation.

Medea speaks of necessity as a compulsion of the mind attributable partly to divine ordination and partly to her own contriving: "There is great necessity for me, old man; for the gods and I, thinking badly, have contrived these things" (1013-14). The evidence of the gods' involvement in her cause is conspicuous enough, Helios having provided the offensive weapons with which she destroys Creusa and Creon as well as her ultimate defense, the dragon chariot. The military description of the vehicle is noteworthy: "Helios, father of my father, is giving us such a chariot as a defense against an enemy hand" (1321-22). Not only significant is the warlike language of this declaration, but also the fact that the name of the god Helios is sandwiched between the nominative and the genitive forms of the word for father (*πατὴρ Ἥλιος πατῆρ*), as if to mock any possible attempt to dissociate Medea's crime from her paternal heritage. The fact that she rises above the station of ordinary mortals by exercising the ferocity of the warrior makes Medea all the more an embodiment of familiar and hallowed ideals. Even Achilles, who killed Polydorus, the youngest son of Priam, and refused mercy to Tros, the youthful son of Alastor (*Iliad* 20:407-18, 463-72), was not unacquainted with the act of child-murder. The fact that these murders take place on the battlefield instead of the inner quarters of a palace does not detract from their savagery, but merely demonstrates the circumstance under which such brutality might be assured of full social sanction.

The destructive potential of familiar ideals is underscored by Freud's observation that "even ordinary morality has a harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality which gives rise to the conception of a higher being who deals out punishment inexorably" (*S.E.* 19:54), and the transition of such characters as Medea and Achilles from the role of badly treated subject to the office of merciless avenger demonstrates the process by which Freud's "poor creature," the self, may evolve into "a higher being who deals out punishment inexorably." Inasmuch as the fury of Medea and the wrath of Achilles are both reactions to the denial of desired objects by figures of authority, they suggest that there may be a fundamental link between the exercise of authority and the function of negation. It

is a connection that transcends the boundaries of particular traditions. All but one of our Ten Commandments, for example, are negations, the single exception being the fifth command, to honor thy father and mother "that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord, thy God, giveth thee" (Exodus 20:12). A passage in the history of pagan ethics that bears comparison to the biblical "Thou-shalt-nots" is the case of Socrates, who attributed his own moral authority to a voice that came to him from early childhood, always dissuading him from what he was proposing to do, and never urging him on (*Apology* 31 C-D). It was the very silence of this voice at his trial that persuaded him to accept the death penalty, as if the voice of the higher moral authority which responded with continual injunctions to the project of life, had finally consented to the project of death. The noteworthy correlation between this statement and Freud's observation "that the death instincts are by their nature mute and that the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros" (*S.E.* 19:46) may suggest that the Socratic embrace of death was, no less than the crimes of Achilles and Medea, a simultaneous affirmation of honor and negation of life. The fact that the imperative of the superego may be experienced as a death wish is consistent, moreover, with the thesis that the voice of conscience is often conceived as a voice that says "no" to life. The prototype of traditional morality would seem to be a parent who says "no" to a child, and literally threatens death as the penalty for disobedience.

Although the concept of a death instinct is incompatible with the evidence that excessive aggression is a cultural rather than an instinctual problem, Freud's articulation of the death-wish seems peculiarly relevant to the discussion of a character who raises her voice to ask how she may die before she ever appears on stage (97), and who proceeds, in the course of the drama, to destroy everyone she loves and hates. Certain passages of Freud's in which he describes the inordinately strong superego as "raging against the ego with merciless violence," or where he speaks of a "pure culture of the death instinct" as "holding sway in the superego," seem to leap off the page and recommend themselves as impressionistic criticism of the *Medea*. The concept of the death instinct, like the paradoxical phrase "pure culture of . . . instinct," may, in any case, be a problem of translation, as Bettelheim's critique of the standard English edition suggests (104), and the phrase "eine Reinekultur des Todestriebes," when translated as "a pure culture of the death impulse," ceases to present appreciable difficulties. It is interesting to consider, moreover, that the effect of mistranslating the word "Trieb" (*drive*) as instinct is the same as that of attributing the violent action of a tragedy to an excess of instinct alone. In either case, the language is misused in such a way as to allow a certain distance between the speaker and the cultural implications of tragic pathos. With respect to the misuse of Freudian terminology, it is worth noting that such concepts as the id, the ego, and the superego

were never intended to imply that the mind may be divided into neat compartments. Freud described every aspect of the mind as being continuous with every other part of it, positing the ego as a specially differentiated part of the id, and the superego as a part of the ego that is "always close to the id." His conception of the superego as being "farther from consciousness than the ego is" (*S.E.* 19:38, 52, 48-49) suggests that the question of whether "rage" or "reason" predominates in Medea's *thumos* is basically irrelevant. In fact, the assumption that conscience, the functional representative of parental dictates, is necessarily reasonable and opposed to demonstrations of spontaneous rage derives from the essentially abusive premise that all generational conflict entails confrontation between "good parents" and "bad children."

Whereas Foley's assertion that "there are rational as well as counterrational considerations on both sides of Medea's internal conflict concerning the children" (64) is an essential corrective to simplistic readings of the text, her emphasis on the gendered aspects of Medea's dilemma tends to obscure the implications of dynamic inequality in the opposing arguments. In fact, Medea's "maternal voice" offers little more than a childish whimper against the adamant insistence of the avenger. In the soliloquy following her feigned compliance with Jason's project, she twice rejects the plan to murder the children, pleading with her *thumos* to spare them in the name of the pleasure the living children would bring her (1058); she even articulates a new plan to lead them out of the country when she goes into exile (1045). When she finally rejects this plan, she does so precisely because of the necessity of repressing the desire for pleasure that she identifies with the cause of saving their lives. She literally disconnects her sensual attachment to the children by sending them out of her range of vision: "Go, go! I can no longer look at you, but I am overcome by bad things" (1076-77). Unable to look at the children because the sight of them disarms her vindictive resolve, she identifies the merciful impulses prompted by her sense of sight as an evil that overwhelms her, just as, in an earlier passage, she experienced the admission of "soft words" into her heart as cowardice (1051).

Having acquiesced in the general opinion that she is the fool of Eros, Medea may well feel threatened by her own affectionate feelings for the children, but the requirement of controlling her passionate longings can only be accomplished by the negation of the senses. She cannot look at the children and know what she must do. When she says she knows what a bad thing she is about to do (1078), she shows that even as she is besieged on all sides by opposing impulses, her basic perception of reality is exactly the same as our own. There is no more poetic suggestion of the weakness of the ego than Medea's inability to seize upon this slender shoot of good sense and declare it as her standard, in defiance of received opinion. She cannot deplore her tormentors in the manner, for example, of

Shakespeare's Emilia, who says: "Thou hast not half the power to do me harm/ As I have power to be hurt" (*Othello* 5.2.161-62), nor can she affirm her physical nature with the grandeur of Cleopatra, who calls herself "No more but e'en a woman, and commanded/ By such poor passion as the maid that milks/ And does the meanest chares" (*Antony & Cleopatra* 4.15.76-78). The only power Medea knows is the power of the victor; all she has learned of her own "poor passions" is that they have made her a loser. Knowing that it is the "cause of the greatest evil for mortals," she submits to the angry spirit inside her because it is stronger than her unalloyed desire to evade it. That this angry conscience should be strong enough to dominate her most vital longings is not so amazing if we consider the way in which parental commands may be enforced by subtle and not so subtle threats of murder. Medea's *thumos* has every appearance of harboring the angry phantoms of such threats.

The essence of Medea's confusion inheres in the fact that, of the raging impulses that seem to assail her from all sides, she does not know which ones to identify as "passions," that is, the treacherous promptings of Eros, and which ones are the honorable exigencies of conscience. Though she is able to perceive and evaluate the external world with clarity, her "self" seems too fragile to act on what she seems to know: that killing the children is bad, no matter what anybody says or thinks or does. It is this very uncertainty that underscores the moral quality of her dilemma. Whereas Freud called the id "totally non-moral," he described the ego as "striving to be moral" and said of the superego that "it can be super-moral, and then become as cruel as only the id can be" (*S.E.* 19:54). Medea's internal struggle is that of the "ego striving to be moral"; the outcome of her agony gives her every appearance of having chosen the super-morality of the fanatic. We need only reflect on the chaos wreaked by the moralistic refinements of Crusaders, Inquisitors, Puritans, Nazis, and various ethnic cleansers, to know whom Medea most resembles in her decision to kill her children. It is characteristic of crusaders, as of Medea in her triumphant ascent, that all vestiges of moral confusion have been banished from their minds, as if by higher decree, even if, to a nonbeliever, those who regard themselves as the "chosen few" or the members of the "master race" may seem hopelessly confused concerning questions of basic decency. Medea's determination to decide her course of action on the basis of "noble" and "moral" imperatives is, in itself, disastrous for her children.

That the *thumos* Medea experiences as external and, like the Freudian superego, able "to stand apart from the ego and to master it" may be conceived either as an "angry passion" or a "directing spirit" suggests that it encompasses not only the internalized negative dictates of an absent parent, but also the evolution in values from the physical concerns of the child to the sublimations of the adult. Although it is true, in any society, that self-mastery depends, to a great extent, on

controlling the demands of the body, Medea's particular anxiety about being misled by the errors of the senses and duped by physical desires mark her as a true citizen of fifth-century Athens, and her final ascent in the dragon chariot is thoroughly consistent with the Socratic teaching that "true philosophers abstain from all bodily desires and withstand them and do not yield to them" (*Phaedo* 82C). Indeed, the textual identification of the children with their mother's carnal passions is especially disquieting because it occurs in the context of a culture where disembodied ideals are held in great esteem. Socrates observes that "every pleasure or pain has a sort of rivet with which it fastens the soul to the body and pins it down and makes it corporeal, accepting as true whatever the body certifies" (*Phaedo* 83D), and Medea's refusal to accept as true the argument, "certified by the body," in favor of sparing the children, constitutes a grim mockery of the Socratic ideal of the triumphant spirit. Shuffling off the constraining rivets of corporality by cutting her children away from herself along with the pleasures and pains of her humanity, she ascends to heaven in a literal liberation of the self from the weight of bodily matter. In this profoundly anti-Platonic document, Euripides seems to affirm the Socratic conviction that the soul's triumph over the body can only be achieved in death, but he strips the process of all glamour by presenting it in sensual terms. The images of Creusa's rotting flesh and the bleeding bodies of Medea's children have the effect of turning the rhetorical nicety of spiritual triumph into a loathsome spectacle.

It is tempting to speculate that the degree to which generations of scholars have been rather more inclined to celebrate the idealism of Plato than the sensual wisdom of Euripides may inhere in the circumstance that Plato flatters us precisely where Euripides offends us—in our narcissistic image of ourselves as exalted spiritual beings. Whatever the role of narcissism in the critical reception of Euripidean art, its relevance to the cultural context of his drama has been underscored by Slater, who describes life in fifth-century Athens as "an unremitting struggle for personal aggrandizement, for fame, honor, or for such goals as could lead to those (wealth, power and so forth)" (38). This observation seems relevant to the *Medea*, in which Jason's and Creon's concern for their children is presented as an extension of their love for themselves, and, conversely, Medea's rejection of her dispossessed and despised sons follows inexorably from their inability to nourish her own self-esteem. In fact, the murder of the children has in common with the paternalistic arrogations that provoke it, the quality of aggrandizing and improving the image of the actor in her (or his) own regard. The Euripidean text also seems to illustrate Slater's perception of narcissistic disorders as being "emotionally contagious, particularly between parents and children" (51), because the girl Creusa, strutting admiringly before the image of herself in the mirror, seems emblematic of all the major characters in the play.

As royal princess and favored child of fortune, Creusa stands midway between the worlds of sovereign and slave, man and woman, adult and child. More of a caricature than a character, she gives dramatic emphasis to the narcissistic process by which the child assumes an adult identity. The expression of disgust (1149) with which she greets the entrance of Jason's children is not only a reflection of Jason's own attitude in rejecting family concerns for the sake of worldly goods, nor, in all probability, is it entirely attributable to the ruling family's interest in eliminating the threat to the royal succession. Rather, the spontaneous nature of her revulsion suggests that the daughter of Creon, like many an adolescent child, simply does not want to be around small children. Being not so far from childhood herself, she rankles at the very proximity of children, seemingly irritated by the reminder of an identity that is so much a part of her recent past as to be still too close for comfort. Yet Creusa, parading before the mirror in the golden wreath and variegated gown Medea has given her, is like a little girl dressing up in a grown woman's clothes.

Creusa is enchanted by her reflection in the glass, which Euripides' messenger eloquently calls "a lifeless thing, the laughing image of her body" (1162). Inasmuch as it is a "lifeless thing," this golden image that Creusa finds so much more entertaining than Jason's living children, is the textual equivalent of all the things the adults in Creusa's world value: gold, honor, victory, and good fame are all lifeless things, and yet they are generally held in greater esteem than the lives of these little boys. Even their father seems never really to notice them until after they are dead. Norman O. Brown's insistence on the Freudian maxim that gold, in the products of the unconscious, is equivalent to excrement, seems peculiarly relevant to the image of Creusa, and, indeed, to the entire project of interpreting a tragedy in which the lure of golden objects is essential. In Brown's reading of Freud, the adult preoccupation with gold, money, time, and such abstractions as honor, success, and glory, results from the denial of the child's body and the subsequent return of the repressed in dehumanized form (110-34). The articulation of repression as the denial of the polymorphously perverse infant body suggests that the rejection of corporality is equivalent to the hatred of the child, while the affirmation of spiritual values corresponds to love of the adult. Thus, Creusa's negative reaction to the children and her loving celebration of the golden phantom in the glass are emblematic of the process of repression by which the life of the body is inhibited in the routine transition of any individual from child to adult. As the child learns the standards of grace and beauty idealized by the adults in his or her world, he or she also learns that one is lovable and deserving of esteem to the degree that one conforms to those standards.

The narcissistic image of Creusa turning her back to the children and courting her own ornamented reflection in the mirror is

the image of the entire tragedy cast in disarmingly familiar terms. The *Medea* presents the spectacle of a young soul in the process of forsaking the life-loving child within herself. For the protagonist, renunciation is required in order to be able to confront other adults on equal terms, and also, as Bongie observes, in order "to be true to her own self, to go on being someone she can respect" (52). The disastrous consequences of the acts by which Creusa and Medea deny the primary value of the body and embrace different conventional versions of human worth imply an ironic view of the adult world that Euripides saw before him in all its willingness to sacrifice the lives of countless young people for the abstract values of freedom, honor, and glory. The end of the play is tragic precisely because Medea succeeds so well in achieving the heroism and idealism that we tend to associate with ancient Greek civilization.

Medea's tragedy is that of fifth-century Greece, which wasted its land and children as a result of vain, pompous rhetoric, and the selfish interests of private individuals. Indeed, the degree to which the arguments of Medea and Jason correspond to certain contemporary debates reported by Thucydides is noteworthy. The complaint by an Athenian ambassador that the Peloponnesians feel more bitter over slight disparities "than they would if we, from the first, had set the law aside and had openly enriched ourselves at their expense" (1:77), suggests that the Athenians were not, any more than Jason, above accusing their subjects, rather arrogantly and in doubtful circumstances, of being ungrateful to their protectors. Telling somebody to be thankful that you do not take advantage of your superior strength to treat him worse than you do is like reminding a child that she should be grateful you did not kill her when she was born, and the irritating potential of such thrusts would seem to have been all the more problematic in a culture where every child owed his or her parents just such a debt of gratitude. In assuming the essentially parental role of persecutory protectors, the Athenians were evidently tempting the ferocious retaliation of their subjects.

Just as Jason's attitude is similar to that of certain Athenian ambassadors, so Medea's fears bear comparison with those expressed by Corinthian delegates to the Spartan assembly:

And let us be sure that defeat, terrible as it may sound, could mean nothing else but total slavery. To the Peloponnesians, the very mention of such a possibility is shameful, or that so many cities should suffer the oppression of one. If that were to happen, people would say either that we deserved our sufferings or that we were putting up with them through cowardice and showing ourselves much inferior to our fathers. (Thucydides 1:122)

This speaker fears slavery, defeat, shame, and the effect of what people might say just as much as Medea does. He is just as anxious to suppress all visible signs of cowardice in himself as she is, and the

bottom line for him, as for her, is proving himself worthy of a paternal ideal.

Though it would be absurd to consider any tragedy as an allegory of current events, the resemblance between the arguments of certain dramatic characters and the debates of various contemporary figures is surely an indication of the fact that both discourses are haunted by the ghosts of generational hostility. Among the wonders of Euripidean craft, no small place must be given to the way in which so many of his characters show the plight of the child so transparently through the veneer of adult posturing. Creusa dressed up in Medea's clothes plays at being grownup, while Jason is as much the spoiled little boy as the fatuous hero, and Medea is as much the frustrated little girl as she is the vindictive woman. Jason acts as if he were the growing child and Medea the suffocating mother, while Medea acts as if she were the mistreated child and Jason the tyrannical father. The poetical perception of the child within every adult contributes enormously to the timeless and universal quality of Euripides' characterizations.

Inasmuch as Medea's triumph is achieved by the sacrifice of the sensual child within herself, her tragedy is our own. And so, for all its horror, this drama has a certain exalting effect on the emotions of the spectator. What is exhilarating about the *Medea* is the spectacle of successful revolt against corrupt and abusive authority. The brutal parent who commands our attention seems to have the soul of a child desperate to thwart the hostile conspiracy of an adult world trying to destroy her. By daring to act, Medea throws off the bonds of an unbearable external domination and becomes the master of her own destiny, apparently heedless of the fact that nothing so much reveals her affiliation with her oppressors as the infanticidal nature of her rebellion. Whereas the psychological consistency of Euripidean characterization is an ironic indictment of the banal conventional rhetoric that serves the purposes of abusive power, the moral impact of his tragedy derives precisely from the dynamic ambiguity of our own fascinated revulsion with the act of child-murder.

 3

Seneca and the Scourge of Anger

Writing in a tradition that emphasized the importance of *pietas*, an ancient concept roughly equivalent to the modern notion of "family values," Seneca focused unrelentingly on the murder of children. The centrality of child-murder in his dramas has been noted by Elisabeth and Denis Henry, who underscore the cosmic implications of the killing of children in *Medea*, *Thyestes*, and *Hercules Furens* (83-84), but these notorious tragedies are arguably only the most conspicuous examples in a recurring pattern. The slaughter of Iphigenia is as essential to the *Agamemnon* as the killing of Polyxena and Astyanax are to the *Troades*, both the beginning and the end of the Trojan War having been marked by public executions that wasted the blood of children. The *Oedipus* and the fragmentary *Phoenissae* are dramatizations of different parts of a myth in which an entire family is wiped out by the destructive effects of parental antagonism toward progeny, and the fury of a vindictive stepmother proves the undoing of the protagonist in both the *Hippolytus* and *Hercules Furens*. Although the *Octavia* is no longer believed to have been written by Seneca, its thematic affiliation with the tragedies is evident in the ghost of Agrippina, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the malevolent Juno of the *Hercules* plays. The peculiar emphasis of these plays may hardly be dismissed as a reflection of their mythic models because Seneca's adaptations of Greek tragedy are notably selective, dealing neither with dramas of reconciliation, such as the *Eumenides*, *Philoctetes*, *Helen*, *Ion*, and *Alcestis*, nor with plays focusing on vengeful youths, such as the *Libation Bearers*, the *Orestes*, and the *Electra* plays. His treatment of the legendary trials of the House of Atreus emphasizes the sins of the fathers rather than the retribution of the children, passing over the material of the second and third plays in the Aeschylean trilogy and placing a distinctive mark on the *Agamemnon* by introducing the action with a soliloquy by the ghost