

CHAPTER 19



The Maternal Contract in *Beloved* and *Medea*

Hilary Emmett

Small World, David Lodge's 1984 novel depicting the academic conference circuit, features a character who, goaded by a fast-talking literary theorist, rashly inverts his rather unexceptional research interest in the influence of Shakespeare on the poetry of T. S. Eliot into the more adventurous 'influence of T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare.' 'Who can read Hamlet', he asks, 'without thinking of Prufrock?'¹ This essay turns on a similar anachronism. While several critics, myself included, have read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through the lens of the myth of Medea,² I argue that it is equally profitable to read *Medea* via *Beloved*; that is, to utilize recent critical interventions into novels and narratives of American slavery in order to highlight the representation of vexed questions of contract, property, and inheritance in Euripides' play.

I take as a point of intersection between the two texts the 451 BC Periclean citizenship law: '[w]hoever has not been born of parents who are both citizens has no share in the city.'³ This law, which stripped the children of common-law wives of citizenship and thus demonstrated the mutual implication of marital contract and inheritance, has a suggestive parallel in the 'peculiar institution' of American slavery whereby a child's slave status was transmitted matrilineally. To put it in Russ Castronovo's words: '[t]he denial of suffrage to women and the legal definition of the black slave as the mother's child reveal patrifilial identification as the only valid [path to] citizenship.'⁴ Via readings of *Beloved* and *Medea*, alongside Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, and Russ Castronovo's *Necro Citizenship*, I show that, like Morrison's *Sethe*, *Medea* performs an infanticide that is both a reiteration of matrilineal bonds and an insistence upon her children's legal subjectivity. I argue that in both texts the death of children institutes or asserts a matrilineal identification over and against a disavowal of the children's legitimacy or humanity by fathers or father-substitutes. On the strength of this connection, I propose a speculative concluding thesis suggesting that as *Sethe* acted to preserve her daughter's humanity, so *Medea* may have acted to secure for her sons the legitimacy that their father's defection from the family denied them. I suggest that in killing her sons, *Medea* forces their father into a public acknowledgement of paternal duty and in setting up a cult in their honour, claims for them a kind of posthumous or 'necro' citizenship (to use Castronovo's term) of the *polis* of Corinth.

The Modern Medea

In her comparative treatment of Euripides' *Medea* and Morrison's *Beloved*, Lillian Corti notes the multiple points of intersection between these works, asserting that they 'share the same basic plot.'⁵ Based on the true story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who was known and portrayed in the contemporary press as the 'Modern Medea' (Figure 9.1) for having murdered her own daughter rather than have her returned to slavery,⁶ Morrison's novel spirals outward from the slave-woman Sethe's treatment at the hands of the slave-owner, known only as 'schoolteacher', whose scientific racism drives her to attempt to kill her children rather than have them subjected to his dehumanizing experiments. She is successful in killing only one of her four children — the 'crawling already?' baby girl. The next eighteen years are spent 'keeping the past at bay,' as she is haunted quite literally by her daughter and by the events which drove her to believe that a fate worse than death awaited her children at schoolteacher's hands.⁷ Her situation is catalysed by the return of the baby ghost in human form. Taking as her name 'Beloved' — the word inscribed on her tombstone — Sethe's returned daughter seeks recognition and remembrance from the community, not only for herself, but for the 'Sixty Million and more' 'black and angry dead' (181) to whom the novel is dedicated. The text closes with the exorcism of Beloved and the ambiguous incantation that hers 'was not a story to pass on' (274–75).

Apart from the obvious shared plot point of infanticide, Morrison's text intersects with Euripides' in two key ways: both *Medea* and *Sethe* inhabit societies in which child-death through exposure or abandonment was not uncommon, and both women are placed in situations where functional paternal protection is absent. To name Oedipus, Ion, and Romulus and Remus is to name but a few mythological figures who were abandoned as infants. Likewise, in Morrison's text, Sethe herself was the only child her mother kept, despite several pregnancies. The novel references several children who, as the products of forced relations with white men, are unceremoniously discarded: 'without names, she threw them' (62, emphasis: the author). However, as Corti points out, in both *Medea* and *Beloved* deliberate infanticide is distinguished from these other acts as the spectacular reaction of individuals to 'flagrantly abusive' state[s] of affairs.⁸ For Corti, both *Medea* and *Sethe* are Aristotelian tragic heroines insofar as their actions are *re-actions* to intolerable circumstances. Moreover, she argues that the irresponsibility and cruelty of these 'civilized' male figures ironizes the charges of barbarism and cannibalism levelled at the two women.⁹

It is with regard to this question of 'barbarism' that Steven Weisenburger takes exception to the application of the *Medea* myth to Margaret Garner's story. Euripides' *Medea*, he insists, is a barbarian witch who kills her children in revenge against her husband who abandoned her in favour of a racially 'pure' wife. He suggests that contemporary depictions of Garner on trial as the 'Modern Medea' entailed some disturbing inferences regarding 'miscegenation, sexual bondage, and the black woman as alluring and dangerous Other' (an objection that did not deter him from titling his own study of the case the same way).¹⁰ He is further troubled by the implication that Garner was motivated by jealous rage to kill her daughter

— a child he believes was probably a product of sexual exploitation by the slave-owner Archibald Gaines. Weisenberger utilizes ‘barbarism’ somewhat uncritically here and in a way that undermines the significant resonance the term may in fact have for Garner’s story. For the Greeks, a barbarian was first and foremost someone who did not speak Greek — the word is derived from the meaningless ‘ba-ba’ noises made by foreign tongues. In this etymological respect then, the term is particularly appropriate to Garner/Sethe’s dilemma in that neither woman has a voice capable of impacting upon the world around them. The institution of slavery as Gaines/schoolteacher conceived of it is founded on the non-humanity of the slaves. Speech is a function of humanity, and therefore to be denied at all costs. Both the fictional and the historical woman were forced to find alternative modes of expressing resistance. Ultimately, the savagery and barbarism attributed to the slaves by their masters is inverted in the novel to be presented as interior to the white men themselves. Schoolteacher’s belief that ‘every care and guidance was needed to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred’ (151) is starkly undermined by Paul D’s assessment of antebellum Ohio:

It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless coloredgirl out into territory infected by the Klan. Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam the Ohio at will (66).

Paul D’s reference to the Klan here illustrates that even in the years following abolition black parents continued to fear the abuse or loss of their children at the hands of white men. Such parental powerlessness is a concern common to both texts. As critics of the play have noted, following Bernard Knox’s influential reading of Medea’s undeniable heroism, Jason’s belated claim that he married in order better to provide for his children is weak and unconvincing.¹¹ Medea’s fear that her children will be left destitute, or worse, used as political pawns in the absence of adequate protection from their father is echoed in Baby Suggs’ lament that ‘nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children’ (23). Constructed as breeders rather than parents, slave mothers were denied the capacity for sexuality or for reciprocal love relationships with their partners and children. As Sethe comments: ‘to get to a place where you could love anything you chose — not to need permission for desire — well, now, that was freedom’ (162). Nowhere is this role as ‘breeder’ more chillingly obvious than in the episode in which Sethe is restrained by schoolteacher’s pupils, and ‘milked’, as she tells it, ‘like she was the cow, no, the goat [...] two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking at my breast and the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up’ (200, 70). We discover that schoolteacher has instructed his students to observe the ‘human’ and ‘animal’ characteristics of his slaves. Through the white man’s act of dehumanization black maternity is inscribed on ‘the animal side of the paper’ (251). And white milk from black breasts is transformed into black ink on the white pages of schoolteacher’s text.¹² It is this viciously debasing act that spurs Sethe’s decision to escape. In doing so, she simultaneously rejects the two paradigms of black motherhood enforced upon her: the Mammy/wet nurse figure, wherein the slave mother’s milk was fed to white babies before her own, and the childbearing figure, wherein reproduction was for the profit of the slave-owner.

Sethe is sustained throughout the ordeal of escape purely by her need to get milk to the baby girl she has already sent on ahead.

But she is to enjoy only twenty-eight days as 'the mother of her children' before the slave-catcher arrives to take her back to Sweet Home. For Sethe, the thought of her children returned to the possession of schoolteacher is unconscionable: 'I couldn't let her nor any of 'em live under schoolteacher' (163). Therefore, in an act which Paul D reduces to the bestial — 'you got two feet Sethe, not four' — she insists upon her children's humanity. 'Nobody was going to list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper' (251) so

She [...] collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her which were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out away, over where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

In keeping with the conventions of tragedy, the infanticide takes place 'offstage', that is, inside the woodshed at the back of the house, outside even the immediate vision of Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid. Moreover, the method of Beloved's death — the hacksaw drawn across the 'kootchy-koo place under the chin' (239) — recalls that of a sacrifice and thus distinguishes Sethe's act from her own mother's disposal of babies born to white rapists. Sethe's infanticide, like Medea's, is highly ritualized and imbued with particular significance. Nicole Loraux writes that in classical tragedy the throat is a point of feminine beauty but also the place of greatest vulnerability.¹³ It is by a knife wound to the throat that Iphigenia and Polyxena are sacrificed and by the throat that Antigone hangs. In killing her baby girl thus, Sethe preserves, in a sense, the purity that is the reserve of the sacrificial victim.¹⁴ Her children were 'the part of her that was clean. [...] Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing' (251). It is in order to preserve and protect their innocence that she attempts to kill them all.

In portraying the scene, Morrison presents us with a macabre pietà which resonates at the centre of this story. In her monstrous tableau

two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand [...]. [The] little nigger girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so that her head wouldn't fall off [...]. (149–50)

Yet despite the violence of this image, its structure as an emblem of anguished maternity suggests that even as the infanticidal mother is responsible for the death of her own child, she may nevertheless claim the right to mourn its passing. This peculiarity has been examined in depth by Loraux, who notes that in Athenian myth, tragedy and society, 'the mourning nightingale is the symbol of all feminine despair. [...] As if there were only one model for mourning women: at the same time maternal and desperately deadly.'¹⁵ For Loraux, the murdering mother is necessarily also the archetypal figure of the mother in mourning, a conflation not lost in Morrison's representation of Sethe's infanticide. Indeed, in its presentation of Sethe in an iconic attitude of maternal loss, her dead child clasped to her breast, the text insists upon her status as bereft, not despite, but by virtue of the very fact of her own implication in her loss.¹⁶

In her treatment of the *pietà* figure in 'Stabat Mater' Kristeva argues that the milk and tears of Marian iconography are part of 'a semiotics that linguistic expression does not account for'.¹⁷ The milk which nurtures the body of the child, the tears which prefigure its death and, I would add, the blood which flows in the event of both birth and death, are powerful metaphors of 'non-speech.' That is, they are symbolic of the ineffable, of an anguish that cannot be spoken. But if this is indeed the case, what exactly does this non-verbal system of signs — the ebbing of Beloved's blood, even as she is clasped to her mother's breast, not to mention Denver's ingestion of her sister's blood ingested along with her mother's milk — signify? How are we to *read* Sethe's infanticide? Her action may be taken as the ultimate act of appropriation; however, to say unequivocally that infanticide is a radical assertion of ownership is contentious. In killing Beloved, Sethe reclaims control over her child's destiny, but at the moment of death, this appropriation necessarily becomes a loss. Beloved is marked as Sethe's daughter less by the *fact* of her death, than by virtue of the *manner* of her death. The action of the handsaw inscribes a broad arc across her throat, a mark made all the more prominent in her reincarnation by her complete lack of any other distinguishing features. Beloved has 'new skin, lineless and smooth'; it is 'soft,' 'flawless' except for 'three vertical scratches on her forehead' (50–51) and 'the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-koo place under the chin' (239) — the marks left by Sethe's fingernails and her blade. It is by these scars that she is recognized at first by Denver and then by Sethe.

The scar as a mark of recognition obviously has a mythological precedent, most famously in the recognition of Odysseus by his Nurse at the end of the *Odyssey*; but it is also thematized throughout this novel in the trope of the slave brand. In a reinvention, if not a reclaiming, of the brand, Sethe imprints her daughter with an unmistakable mark of ownership. In remembering her own mother Sethe recounts:

Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right into the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I'm the only one got this mark now. The rest is dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' [...] 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said, 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.' [...] Sethe chuckled.

'Did she?' asked Denver.

'She slapped my face.'

'What for?'

'I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own.' (61).

The handsaw is thus identified as a kind of branding iron by which Sethe's possessive and all-consuming 'motherlove' replaces the brutalizing discourse of the possession of property by which slaves were 'hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized' (23). In marking her daughter as she herself is marked and her mother was before her, Sethe asserts that Beloved belongs to her and to the fragile and fractured genealogy of slave women who came before her. Thus, Beloved's scars are, after Hortense Spillers' formulation, 'hieroglyphics of the flesh,' but they are not 'undecipherable

markings on the captive body'.¹⁸ Rather, the cut of Sethe's handsaw interpellates her child as loved: 'You are my Beloved. / You are mine' (216).

The Maternal Contract

As the extensiveness of critical material on the subjects implies, Euripides' *Medea* is a play to which notions of contract, property and inheritance are vital. In keeping with Bernard Knox's influential reading of the undeniably heroic status of Medea, numerous commentators have demonstrated the centrality of the heroic oath or contract to Euripides' play. Indeed, as Anne Burnett and David Kovacs have argued, the tragedy of Medea's situation is that she cannot allow Jason's violation of their heroic pact to go unpunished.¹⁹ Much attention has been paid to Euripides' lexicon of contract and violation by both Stewart Flory, who draws attention to the recurrent motif of the contractual clasping of the right hand in the play,²⁰ and Seth Schein who highlights Euripides' use of the language of *philia*: the heroic codes whereby one helps one's friends and harms one's enemies.²¹ More recently, Melissa Mueller has closely examined the language of reciprocity in the *Medea*, arguing that Medea's inheritance of both material goods and divine-heroic power must be seen as fundamental to the operations and relations of *philia* in Euripides' play.²² Yet such studies touch only briefly on the place of Medea's children (who, significantly, remain unnamed in Euripides' account) within this narrative of contract, oath, and inheritance. In an effort to extend Mueller's compelling argument regarding genealogy, heredity and the gift, I explore here the implications for Medea's sons, of being simultaneously disinherited by their father and claimed by their mother. I argue that as in *Beloved*, the death of children at their mother's hand acquires for them a mode of subjectivity or genealogical recognition that is not afforded them in life.

In the opening address of Euripides' play Medea's Nurse depicts her mistress' marriage as an equal partnership in which Medea 'helped Jason in every way' (Warner, 13), and stood by her husband in all things.²³ Medea is described as 'the perfect foil' for Jason (Roche, 13), his match and his peer. It is clear that in the eyes of Medea and her household, the oaths, vows and promises she and Jason swore to one another amounted to much more than the usual marriage contract — an arrangement forged between men and depicted in contemporary artwork via the linking of the groom's right hand and bride's left wrist.²⁴ Medea, we learn, sealed her commitment to Jason by 'the all-powerful oath of the right hand,'²⁵ a gesture hitherto encountered only between male heroes of equivalent status. Significantly, it is not to Hera as goddess of marriage that Medea appeals, but directly to Themis 'goddess of Promises' and to almighty Zeus himself, 'the Keeper of Oaths' and purveyor of justice (Warner, 169–70). As Medea presents it, Jason has not merely dishonoured their marriage bed, but committed a monstrous act of effrontery. If indeed Jason has violated a heroic contract, his actions are an affront to the Olympian order which took such oaths and treaties very seriously. We know from Hesiod's *Theogony* that oath-breaking was equivalent to kin-murder and even the gods themselves were not exempt from punishment for perjury.²⁶ It is unclear which betrayal Medea herself sees as the more heinous, but she certainly ensures

that her prayers and entreaties are publicly heard both on earth and in the heavens. Not only do her curses and cries penetrate beyond domestic space, but even her Nurse is prompted to leave the household to tell Medea's woes 'to the earth and air' (Warner, 58). The chorus of Corinthian women further endorse Medea's appeal to Zeus, assuring her that Zeus will take her part against the faithless Jason. As Kovacs (citing Knox) argues, there can be little doubt that Jason, former darling of the gods, has incurred their righteous anger and that it is Medea who is cast 'as the exemplification of the heroic' in Euripides' play.²⁷

Choral sympathy for Medea reaches its height on the entrance of Creon who hands down a decree of banishment against her and her children. Their ode depicts exile as 'the worst of sufferings', indeed, a fate worse than death: 'Let death first lay me low and death / Free me from this daylight. / There is no sorrow above / The loss of a native land' (Warner, 648–51). Even more significantly, they call down a curse upon Jason, and by association, Creon: 'oh let him *die ungraced* whose heart / Will not reward his friends' (Warner, 659–60; emphasis mine). The decree of exile both gives the lie to Jason's already lame assertions that his new marriage is for the good of his family and catalyses Medea's curses and lamentations into a well-wrought plan. In the Greek world exile was equivalent to 'social death,' a phrase I use here deliberately to invoke Orlando Patterson's seminal formulation. For Patterson, the structures of slavery are isomorphic with those of what he terms social death. While there are obviously many differences between slavery and exile, not least of which is the fact that the subject of banishment remains 'self-possessed', so to speak, the three constitutive elements of Patterson's model are in evidence in the classical Greek concept of exile. The first of these facets is that slavery is a commuted death sentence — 'a substitute for death in war [...] or death from exposure or starvation'; the second is the slave's enforced 'natal alienation,' that is, 'the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations'; and the third is the slave's existential condition of 'generalized dishonour'.²⁸ Jason's rejection of Medea, and her resultant exile, potentially render her socially dead in all three of these ways. As Creon makes clear, Medea's life depends on her immediate remove from Corinth — exile is thus explicitly an alternative to death. Secondly, in betraying her father and murdering her brother, Medea had not only alienated herself from the family of her birth, but also committed a crime that necessitates exile. At the very least, atonement for blood-guilt required the guilty party's remove to a foreign *polis*. But more than this, Jason's complicity in her new exile ensures that she will have no promise of legitimate descendants, no conjugal family to take the place of the paternal protection she rejected. Her children, too, follow the condition of their mother and are stripped of the legitimacy that Jason's paternity formerly offered them — a particularly significant point to which I will return. Finally, Medea's name is widely abhorred — granted, she herself contributed to the fear and loathing with which she is regarded, but this banishment from her husband's bed and adopted kingdom brings with it a shame and disgrace hitherto unencountered. As the chorus notes, Jason's shameless renunciation of his wife and partner leaves her a refugee, 'driven forth [...] in dishonour from the land' (Warner, 437–38).

However, as soon as the chorus's lament on the travails of exile draws to a close,

Medea begins to turn the tables on Jason. Like Morrison's Sethe, Medea faces the prospect of social death for herself and her children. And like Sethe, she (re)acts violently to prevent it. It is Jason, therefore, who will be made to suffer all the evils that Medea's association with him brought upon her. While she does not use the term 'social death', Burnett has shown in convincing detail the 'exactitude' of Medea's revenge.²⁹ Burnett's term refers to the way in which Medea strikes back at Jason in precisely the ways in which he first hurt her. As a result of her actions, Jason is divested of posterity, his good name, and any claim to a homeland or sanctuary. But where Burnett's argument is based on careful analysis of Euripidean language, my argument here turns on an anachronistic, but nevertheless fruitful pun on the English word, 'contract.' Jason breaks the contract wrought between himself and Medea, witnessed by the eternal gods. Medea in turn takes out a 'contract' on Jason's life. Much as Tony Soprano might organize a 'hit' on a family member whose fidelity and loyalty are in question, Medea contracts to divest Jason of everything that might give meaning to his continued existence.³⁰ Yet even so, it does not seem entirely necessary that Medea should kill the children she bore to Jason. Certainly, for Jason's social death to be complete there must be no potential for the perpetuation of his name and line; however, he had already effectively disowned and disinherited the children he had. He is content to see them exiled with their mother, claiming rather feebly that once they have grown into 'young men, healthy and strong,' they may return to Corinth to take up a social position alongside the new brothers produced by his advantageous second marriage (Warner, 916–21).

Aside from the fact that Jason of all people should know that sending one's sons to be reared in exile, yet encouraging them to return to claim their inheritance, is tantamount to signing their death warrant,³¹ the Chorus are quick to point out that his arguments are mere sophistry, accusing him of betraying his family and acting dishonourably (Warner, 577–78). More importantly, under Athenian law at least, Jason would have been able to claim that his sons were never legally his rightful heirs in the first place.³² Only citizens could 'own, inherit, and bequeath property'.³³ In choosing to treat Medea as his concubine and take for himself a citizen wife Jason thus denies the legitimacy of his children. They may have enjoyed a certain status as the half-brothers of princes, but, as Alan Boegehold has shown, they would not have stood to inherit their father's estate over and against his legitimate offspring.³⁴ Moreover, Euripides' decision not to name the boys in his account of the myth is significant here for the way in which it intimates their precarious status in relation to Jason's *oikos*, or household. On the seventh or tenth day after birth, infant males were given a name which marked their father's acceptance into his household. Such ceremonial acknowledgement, 'witnessed by friends and relatives [...], could later be used as evidence that in disputes concerning inheritance or citizenship the son is not a *nothos* [bastard].'³⁵ Jason's failure, throughout the play, to name his sons publicly calls their legitimacy further into question.

So given that Jason signals in several ways his foreclosure of the perpetuation of his name and property through his first-born sons, why does Medea kill them — especially since it seems to afford her genuine pain and heartbreak? As Kovacs

would have it, it is precisely to bring this agony upon herself that Medea *must* perform her infanticide. '[I]n the ordinance of Zeus,' he explains, 'Medea deserves to suffer herself while carrying out the gods' punishment of Jason.'³⁶ Kovacs argues that the multiple invocations of Zeus in the initial scenes of this play signal the beginning of an inexorable chain of events in which Medea's desire for vengeance is in fact subordinated to a vaster scene of divine retribution. He writes:

Zeus rarely employs the thunderbolt or intervenes in any overtly miraculous way. [...] Instead he works through natural events. Sometimes human agents, who have their own motives for revenge, are taken up in Zeus' plan and become agents (mostly unwitting) of his justice.³⁷

As Medea herself admits in the play's *parados*, she is guilty of an earlier murder — that of her brother, Apsyrtus (Warner, 167). To the Greeks of Euripides' audience, kin-murder was a genuinely appalling crime. For a sister to murder her brother was virtually unthinkable given the relationship of dependence and responsibility that existed between siblings.³⁸ Evidence for the sanctity of fraternal bonds comes to us from numerous sources: we might argue that Medea joins Procne and Althaea as examples of women who kill their sons to avenge a wrong committed against a brother or sister. Sophocles' *Antigone*, performed ten years before *Medea*, was a tale familiar to Euripides' audience: like Antigone, Medea is trapped in a closed circle of endogamous violence that will end only when the sins of the parents have been visited upon the next generation. Given the sheer size of the extant canon of sources dealing with this theme we can be sure that Medea's murder of her brother was an occasion for horror on the part of the audience, yet the very fact that she was free to acknowledge her guilt publicly illustrates that she had not yet paid the usual price for such a deed. She shows none of the signs of the madness that afflicts Orestes, nor has pollution been visited upon the city as in the case of Oedipus. As the play wears on, she does, however, start to exhibit signs of mental anguish in her vacillation that is accompanied by a strange sense of compulsion. Kovacs puts it simply: 'Medea's plan makes no sense and [...] she knows it.'³⁹ According to Kovacs, we should read Medea's infanticide as the result of the mysterious workings of Zeus who bides his time but nevertheless ensures that the murder within the family eventually exacts its price. To my mind, this reading is certainly borne out by the action of Euripides' play — it explains Medea's clear ambivalence regarding her act and also provides a rationale for her appearance as the *deus ex machina* at the play's conclusion. Since only Zeus had the power to know the future, she clearly functions as his instrument in prophesying Jason's ignominious end. Similarly, the appearance of the chariot of Helios is certainly due to their familial connection but also to Helios' role as a witness to the forging of heroic contracts — made manifest in the oath Medea elicits from Aegeus, who swears by earth and sun.

It is on this familial rather than divine connection that I focus while drawing some speculative conclusions regarding contract, exchange and inheritance in this play. Mueller has done extensive and impressive work in linking these themes, suggesting that Helios's gifts of chariot, *peplos* [gown] and diadem are central to Medea's participation in the operations of *philia*, the code governing heroic alliances. She writes: 'the gifts given to [Medea] by her grandfather, Helios are implicated in her

own genealogy'. 'When Medea passes on the gifts [of *peplos* and diadem] through the hands of her children, [...] she is in fact extending the family narrative [...] both forward and backward.'⁴⁰ For Mueller, Medea's use of these gifts to destroy the princess and her father indicates her renewed contact with her divine heritage. But might we also argue that in placing her inheritance in her children's hands Medea also marks them out to inherit the violence that her *oikos* represents? As Margaret Williamson point out, Medea has made something of a hobby of disrupting the relations of the *oikos* — first betraying her father and slaying her brother, and then tricking the daughters of Pelias into dismembering and boiling their own father.⁴¹ Having made her children heirs to this tradition by implicating them in the murder of Creon and his daughter, the familial violence she has made her speciality engulfs her own *oikos* in turn. Her sons' complicity leaves them prey to the vengeance of the people of Corinth, and since 'every way will have it they must die' (Warner, 1240), Medea as mother claims this right. Her last words to her children are 'Come children, give / Me your hands, give your mother your right hand to kiss' (Roche, 1069–71). The surfacing of the recurrent motif of the right hand at this particular moment signifies not simply a gesture of pity or tenderness as Flory would have it,⁴² but demonstrates the forging of a new bond which I have called a maternal contract. Like Sethe, Medea sees killing her children as a way of asserting maternal possession and control. In the moments before their death maternal love and maternal violence are indistinguishable in her presentation of the murders as an act 'as necessary as it is cruel and hard' (Roche, 1244). Once again her right hand is invoked to carry out the task she has pledged to perform — better they die by the hand of love than be 'slain by another hand less kindly to them' (Warner, 1239). 'Let me be the one to cut them down: / the very one who gave them life' (Roche, 1243–44).

But unlike the slave mother in Morrison's text, Medea's maternal claim on her children is not in question. And until she manipulates Jason and his new wife into granting the children a reprieve, they are to accompany her into exile. In response to these plot points I propose a speculative thesis that considers Medea's maternal contract in relation to Jason's abrogation of his paternal duty. In killing their children, Medea forces Jason into a public acknowledgement of his sons' rightful place. She taunts him: 'Now you would speak to them, now you would kiss them / Then you rejected them' (1401–02). Jason replies by begging her to allow him to touch them, and more significantly, to bury them. On the death of his sons Jason seems to be claiming here the rights (and rites) of kinship with which he played fast and loose during their lives. Loath to save them from the dislocation and social death of exile while they were alive, he seeks to lay them to rest in death. But Medea forces this admission of paternal responsibility only to deny Jason the privileges of paternity, namely, burial. In the Athenian tradition, the sharing of common burial ground signalled membership of a particular bloodline.⁴³ Of those belonging to the same *genos* (extended kin-group), those who shared a burial plot were most closely related. Therefore, when Medea announces that she will bury her sons herself and institute 'in the land of Corinth / [...] a holy feast and sacrifice / Each year to atone for the blood guilt' (Warner, 1381–83), she annexes them to her own bloodline, repudiating Jason's belated claim. With the 'holy feast and

sacrifice' she passes on to the people of Corinth the responsibility for the rituals which mark children as belonging to particular kin-groups, or *phratries*, as they pass from childhood to adolescence. We might read this annual ritual as representing the *koureion*, the sacrifice usually enacted by the father in recognition of his son's enrolment in the *phratry* at the time of adolescence. In the same way that Sethe's baby girl Beloved is given subjectivity by death, Medea's sons receive recognition and sanctuary, 'necro-citizenship,' so to speak, only after their lives are taken. As the child of slaves, Sethe's 'crawling-already?' baby girl had no name, nor could she hope to one day rest in a marked grave. But in dying at her mother's hand Beloved obtains both name and tombstone. Similarly, death affords Medea's sons the particularity they were denied in life. Unrecognized by Jason and the ruling class of Corinth in life, they gain lasting posthumous status as epichoric heroes — worshipped and celebrated in the cult of Hera Akraia and, thus, as part of the city's civic identity.

Notes to Chapter 19

1. David Lodge, *Small World: An Academic Romance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), pp. 51–52.
2. The earliest comparative study of the two texts is Lillian Corti's 'Medea and Beloved: Self-Definition and Abortive Nurturing in Literary Treatments of the Infanticidal Mother', in *Disorderly Eaters: Texts in Self-Empowerment*, ed. by Lilian R. Furst and Peter W. Graham (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 60–77. For subsequent explorations of the connections between the two see Shelley Haley, 'Self-Definition, Community, and Resistance: Euripides' *Medea* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present*, 2, 2 (1995), 177–206, and Hilary Emmett, 'Medea to Morrison: Towards a Genealogy of Mourning Mothers', *Classicum: Journal of the Classical Association of New South Wales* 31, 2 (2005), 29–38.
3. The formulation of the Periclean law here is Aristotle's, cited by Alan L. Boegehold, 'Perikles' Citizenship Law of 451/0 BC', in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. by Alan L. Boegehold and Adele C. Scafuro (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 57–66 (p. 57).
4. Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 14.
5. Lillian Corti, 'Medea and Beloved'. The structural similarities between the two texts are examined pp. 60–65.
6. For a book-length study of the Garner case, see Steven Weisenburger's *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998). Weisenburger takes his title from Thomas Satterwhite Noble's representation of Garner as 'The Modern Medea' (Figure 9.1). Painted in 1867, eleven years after Garner's act, the picture shows her confronting the slave-catchers over the bodies of two of her children (figured as boys) while two more sons cling to her skirts in attitudes of supplication. Noble's painting thus contrives to conflate Garner's act with Medea's in two ways: the killing of sons and the simultaneous appeal of those sons to their mother for mercy. Although this essay also draws out the relations between Medea's actions and those of an infanticidal slave mother, this is in no way intended to elide the historical particularity of Garner's act as Noble's representation does.
7. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 42. All subsequent references are to this edition and will hereafter appear in parentheses in the text.
8. Corti, 'Medea and Beloved', p. 64.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 68.
10. Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*, p. 8.
11. This reading of Jason was first offered by B. M. W. Knox in 'The *Medea* of Euripides', *Yale Classical Studies*, 25 (1977), 193–225 (p. 202). See also Corti, 'Medea and Beloved', pp. 63, 65.

12. Both Judith Wilt and Mae Henderson note the conflation of milk and ink via Sethe's body in *Beloved* in the way that, after taking her milk, schoolteacher uses the ink that she has mixed to 're-mark' her body with the sign of his ownership, sustained by the discourse of scientific racism. Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 160. See also Mae G. Henderson, 'Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text', in *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text*, ed. by Hortense J. Spillers (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 62–86 (p. 71).
13. Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 50.
14. On the necessity of sacrificial victims being 'without blemish' see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 52.
15. Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. by Corinne Pache (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 55.
16. For an extended treatment of Sethe's position within a genealogy of mothers in mourning see Emmett, 'Medea to Morrison'.
17. Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 160–86 (p. 174).
18. Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', in Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Colour: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 203–29 (p. 207).
19. Anne Burnett, 'Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge', *Classical Philology*, 68 (1973), 1–24; David Kovacs, 'Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*', *American Journal of Philology*, 114 (1993), 45–70.
20. Stewart Flory, 'Medea's Right Hand: Promises and Revenge', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 108 (1978), 69–74.
21. Seth L. Schein, 'Philia in Euripides' *Medea*', in *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, ed. by Mark Griffith and Donald Mastronarde (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 57–73.
22. Melissa Mueller, 'The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*', *American Journal of Philology*, 122 (2001), 471–504 (p. 471).
23. In the interests of gleaning as much information as possible about the subtleties of Euripides' language I have worked with several translations of *The Medea*. Those used most extensively in the writing of this essay are those by Gilbert Murray (London: Allen & Unwin, 1910), Rex Warner, in *Euripides*, ed. by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, IL, and London: Chicago University Press, 1955–59), and Paul Roche, *Three Plays of Euripides* (New York and London: Norton, 1974). Line references to the play are included in parentheses in the text, accompanied by translator.
24. Flory, 'Medea's Right Hand', p. 70.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
26. See Burnett, 'The Tragedy of Revenge', p. 13 and Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. by M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 26.
27. Kovacs, 'Zeus in *Medea*', pp. 51, 48.
28. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 5, 10.
29. Burnett, 'The Tragedy of Revenge', p. 14.
30. I am indebted to Russ Castronovo for pointing out the rich polyvalence of the word 'contract'. *Negro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth Century United States* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 44.
31. The fact that Jason himself survived attempted murder at the hands of his uncle, Pelias, should not mitigate, but rather confirm his irresponsibility in potentially placing his sons in similar danger.
32. The question of whether contemporary Athenian law is in fact relevant to a drama set in the mythic past is a vexed one. I have relied upon Bernard Knox's and Emily McDermott's historicizations of Euripides' play in assuming that the *Medea* could not have failed to have a

certain resonance for Athenian citizens in light of the prevailing Periclean citizenship laws that granted citizen status only to the offspring of citizen men and Athenian-born women. Knox, 'The *Medea* of Euripides', pp. 211–21. Emily A. McDermott, *Euripides' Medea: The Incarnation of Disorder* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), pp. 7–8, 44–45.

Spiridon Syropoulos notes that it 'is more than likely that the law was in the Athenian audience's mind' as they considered Jason's flight from Iolchos and the reasons behind it. Exile, he concedes, clearly brought with it the loss of all rights of inheritance. However, Syropoulos argues that as *Medea* is the cause of the family's exile from first Iolchos and then Corinth, the audience would have laid the blame for her sons' disenfranchisement at her door, and applauded Jason's claim that he contracted a new marriage for their sake — 'whether or not Euripides intended it to be so.' Given that Jason makes no attempt in the play to save his sons from their second exile, from Corinth, it seems to me that this projected audience sympathy has little basis in the actual text. I would reframe Syropoulos's comment to read: Euripides text presents Jason as responsible for his sons' exile, whether the audience liked it or not. 'The Invention and Use of the Infanticide Motif in Euripides' *Medea*', *Platon*, 52 (2002), 126–38 (p. 129).

33. Boegehold, 'Perikles' Citizenship Law', p. 60.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–63.
35. Adele C. Scafuro, 'Witnessing and False Witnessing: Proving Citizenship and Kin Identity in Fourth-Century Athens', in *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, ed. by Alan L. Boegehold and Adele C. Scafuro (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 159–99 (p. 159).
36. Kovacs, 'Zeus in *Medea*', p. 64.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
38. Jan N. Bremmer, 'Why Did Medea Kill Her Brother Apsyrtus?', in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, ed. by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 83–100 (p. 100).
39. Kovacs, 'Zeus in *Medea*', p. 62.
40. Mueller, 'The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*', pp. 472, 494.
41. Margaret Williamson, 'A Woman's Place in Euripides' *Medea*', in *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, ed. by Anton Powell (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 16–31.
42. Flory, 'Medea's Right Hand', p. 73.
43. Scafuro, 'Witnessing and False Witnessing', p. 166.

Unbinding Medea

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