

From Never Enough to Nothing at All: Political Commentary in Euripides' *Medea*

In 431 BCE, political tensions between Athens and Sparta were at a breaking point. Ever-growing Athenian imperialism had so frustrated her allies and concerned Sparta that Spartans would soon vote for war.¹ It was in this environment of extreme social and political turmoil that Euripides first staged *Medea*.² Its plot, at the surface level, shows the disintegration of a relationship culminating in a mother's inconceivable act towards her own children, but it also speaks to a multitude of socio-political issues present in Athens at the time. It is debatable exactly how much, if any, of the plot Euripides actually invented, for the story of Jason and Medea was already centuries old when he took it up. Despite these questions, he did make important changes which advanced his goal of presenting a play designed, in part, to offer a warning to audiences about the political dangers of Athens' continued hunger for power.

When studying *Medea*, scholars have often given primary importance to analyzing the characters themselves as well as discussing Euripides' commentary on conflicts between men and women and citizens and foreigners. Some, such as Cecelia Luschnig and William Allen, present a broader analysis of the play as a whole.³ Others concentrate on a specific aspect

¹ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.88.6.

² Euripides' *Medea* was first staged in 431 BCE.

³ Cecelia Eaton Luschnig, *Granddaughter of the Sun: A Study of Euripides' Medea*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007).; William Allan, *Euripides: Medea*, (London: Duckworth, 2002).

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of a character, as with Monica Cyrino's article on the psychological states of mythical and real women who kill their children.⁴ Still another area of focus is the ways in which *Medea* has been transformed from antiquity to modern times into other plays, operas, and movies.⁵

In his article *Euripides' Medea: A Reconsideration*, Herbert Musurillo argued that while Euripides did occasionally comment on universal themes such as the general injustices of society, he did not linger on such topics and he avoided politics altogether.⁶ Instead, Musurillo sees the play as a discussion of "the sharp decay of man's noblest passion, love, and the proximity of love to hate."⁷ This view, while correctly assessing one aspect of human nature addressed by Euripides, fails to acknowledge a deeper level of commentary which may be most fully realized only when studying the play within the historical context of its production rather than as a stand-alone piece of literature.

A different approach was taken by William Arrowsmith in his essay *Euripides' Theater of Ideas*. He proposed that plays were the means by which Euripides accomplished the end goal of critically analyzing the major events and problems of the day.⁸ It is along this line of inquiry that I would like to continue,

⁴ Monica Silveira Cyrino, "When Grief Is Gain: The Psychodynamics of Abandonment and Filicide in Euripides' 'Medea,'" *Pacific Coast Philology* 31, no. 1 (1996): 1-12.

⁵ One book which approaches the *Medea* in this manner: Rosanna Lauriola and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, eds., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Euripides*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015).

⁶ Herbert Musurillo, "Euripides' *Medea*, A Reconsideration," *The American Journal of Philology* 87, no. 1 (1966): 73-74.

⁷ Herbert Musurillo, "Euripides' *Medea*, A Reconsideration," 74.

⁸ William Arrowsmith, "Euripides' Theater of Ideas," in *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Erich Segal, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 13-14.

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focusing less on a detailed analysis of Medea herself and more on the ways in which Euripides used the similarities between Jason's greed and Athenian imperial expansion to warn Athenians about the potential dangers awaiting the empire.

This linking of recent political events to aspects of a play's plot is hardly a revolutionary way of evaluating Euripides' plays. Scholars have already connected political events which happened in Greece and themes in a few of his plays produced shortly thereafter with *Hecuba* being one example that has been studied in this manner.⁹ However, it appears that this level of commentary has not been seriously pursued in the case of *Medea* and the Peloponnesian War. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine how Euripides' telling of *Medea* serves as a commentary on Athenian foreign policy issues leading up to and at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War.

To do so, one must consider the events leading up to the height of Athenian power and dominance in the Aegean. The Delian League, formed amid the Persian Wars, offered Athens a chance to fully indulge her imperialist impulses. As Thucydides explains in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, what started as an agreement between autonomous allies soon became defined by the unequal power dynamic resulting from Athens' demand for a yearly tribute.¹⁰ When the tribute was not promptly paid, the Athenians "were strictly demanding payment and, adding punishments, they were distressing to those neither accustomed nor willing to endure hardship."¹¹ This continuous

⁹ See Justina Gregory, "Hecuba," in *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 85-120.

¹⁰ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.96.2. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified. See, 1.99.2.

¹¹ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.99.1.

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extraction of money from Athens' allies gave Athens the resources to build up her navy, making it "easy for them to attack deserters," while stripping the allies of funds to fight back.¹² Gradually, allied states began to revolt with Naxos trying to leave the league sometime before 467 BCE. This rebellion resulted in a siege, and for the first time, an allied city was enslaved in violation of the agreement in place.¹³ This pattern of attempted defection, defeat, and subjugation by Athens was repeated as necessary, notably at Thasos and Samos. Athens also weaponized her control of commerce as another way of punishing states seen as being disobedient, as exemplified in the Megarian Decree. This edict, forbidding Megara from trading at any ports within the empire or at Attic markets, was damaged Megara economically and was seen by the Peloponnesians as a great overstepping of authority.¹⁴ One of the Peloponnesians' key demands immediately before the war was that the decree be revoked, something which Athens refused to do. In 430 BCE, just one year after war broke out and *Medea* was first performed, Pericles warned Athenians that they had a tyranny which would be unsafe to let go.¹⁵ His counsel with regards to the war was that Athens should attempt no new gains and risk no dangers to the city, but rather focus on her navy.¹⁶ If Thucydides represented Pericles as thinking it necessary to emphasize these points in his speeches, it is not unreasonable to assume that a significant portion of Athenians were already in favor of Athens continuing to expand as much as possible.

¹² Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.99.2.

¹³ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.98.4.

¹⁴ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.67.4.

¹⁵ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.63.2.

¹⁶ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.65.7.

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Indeed, a couple years later, after Pericles died, his successors failed to follow his plan and embarked upon a strategy of trying to conquer as much as they could. In the end, plans such as the Sicilian Expedition proved just how disastrous this course of action was to Athenian War efforts.¹⁷

Likewise, Jason and Medea initially agreed to an alliance in support of their individual goals. Over time, as with the tribute demanded by Athens from her allies, Medea's use of her magical resources in aid of their partnership proved much more costly to her than to Jason, as her actions alienated herself from her family and homeland in pursuit of Jason's ambitions. Whereas the Athenian empire arguably reached its greatest point as the foremost member of a league of willing allies, Jason attained the ideal Athenian family structure with his marriage to Medea and the subsequent birth of their two sons. Just as Athens' downfall was due to her nonstop quest for more states to rule over, Jason's ruin came as a result of his own desire for power which culminated in his attempt to marry the Corinthian princess Glauce. It is no coincidence that the story arcs of Athens and Jason parallel each other so closely.

But the story of Jason and Medea is far older than the 5th century BCE. Jason and the Argonauts were already well-known in *The Odyssey*, and Hesiod recounts Medea's lineage and how Jason took her to be his wife in his *Theogony*.¹⁸ Before we can understand the selections made by Euripides, it is necessary to examine the pre-existing versions of which he, and his audiences, would have been aware. There are three main versions which focus on Jason and Medea's time in Corinth, the

¹⁷ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 7.87.5-6.

¹⁸ William Allan, *Euripides: Medea*. (London: Duckworth, 2002), 18; Hes. *Theog.* 957-963, 993-1003; Hom. *Od.* 12.69-72.

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same general period in which Euripides sets his play. The first is from the poet Eumelus' *Corinthiaca*, written perhaps around 700 BCE, but which survives after being referenced by Pausanias.¹⁹ This text relates a story in which Medea is brought from Iolcus to Corinth by the Corinthians to be their queen. Hera then promises Medea that she will make her children immortal, but when left in the goddess' sanctuary, the children die by accident. The earliest surviving records of the other two versions are from a couple centuries after Euripides' *Medea* was written. The first of these has Medea's children being killed by the Corinthians because of their anger at being ruled by Medea.²⁰ The second has Creon's family killing the children to avenge Medea's murder of Creon before spreading the rumor that Medea killed them herself.²¹

While it is impossible to say if these last two versions pre-dated that of Euripides', several passages in Euripides' *Medea* suggest his awareness of a version where the children are killed by someone other than Medea.²² In lines 1060-1, Medea says that the alternative to killing her children herself is leaving them "for [her] enemies to outrage," and in lines 1238-9, she tells the chorus that sparing them would merely "give [them] up for another more hostile hand to murder." Finally, at lines 1303-5, Jason announces that he has come to save his children's lives "lest those among my kin bring about something, avenging the impious slaughter by their mother."

¹⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Volume I: Books 1-2 (Attica and Corinth)*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 93 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 264-5.

²⁰ Allan, *Medea*, 22.

²¹ Allan, *Medea*, 22.

²² Allan, *Medea*, 22.

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Herein lies the biggest difference between the pre-Euripidean versions of the story and the one which Euripides presents in his *Medea*.²³ All three of these passages seem to indicate not only an acknowledgement of alternate versions of the children's deaths, in which they are killed on purpose by someone hostile to Medea, but also Euripides' refutation of them in favor of a new version in which Medea plans and carries out their killing of her own volition.

The change in murderer carries with it the change in conditions which allows Euripides to bring the plot into line with his projection of Athens' future. In the two versions where the children are killed on purpose, the entity responsible for the children's deaths appears at first glance to be either the Corinthian people or Creon's family; however, the blame can actually be traced back to Medea. If she hadn't ruled over the Corinthians or killed Creon, there would have been no cause for anyone to kill her children. By contrast, Euripides appears to make Medea the one responsible for the children's deaths, but the blame can ultimately be traced back to Jason, as it was his hunger for power which led him to abandon Medea in favor of a marriage to Glauce. This abandonment and disgrace provided the conditions under which Medea was brought to the point of killing their children. By placing the blame for these murders at Jason's feet, Euripides condemns the greed which brought them about.

²³ There is a certain amount of debate over whether it was Euripides or the playwright Neophon who first had Medea kill the children on purpose. For the purposes of my argument, it does not actually matter whether Euripides was the first to use this variation. The crucial point is that there were a variety of traditions surrounding the children's deaths and Euripides purposefully invented or selected one which allowed the maximum amount of blame to be placed on Jason.

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The degree of shock and horror inherent in the idea of a mother killing her own children intensifies this condemnation. The more disturbing the effect of something is, the more serious it makes whatever caused it appear. In the same way, the additional casualties of Glauce and Creon further compound the disaster caused by Jason's actions. Just as the shocking nature of filicide gives more gravity to Jason's misdeeds, so too does the sheer number of people who end up dead as a result of them. The amount of destruction resulting from Jason's actions leaves no doubt that his behavior should be viewed as particularly dangerous. Therefore, by having this be the cause of Jason's ruin, Euripides puts forth the idea that an immoderate desire for power ultimately leads to self-destruction.

On the other hand, many aspects of Euripides' play have the effect of transforming Medea into a startlingly sympathetic character who has been harmed by Jason's greed. She lived in Corinth as Jason's lawful wife, having been obedient to him, putting her powers at his disposal, and bearing him two sons. Nevertheless, Jason steps beyond the bounds of their alliance and "goes to bed in a royal marriage."²⁴ Because of her abandonment by Jason, Medea is called "wretched" and is said to "[lie] without food having surrendered to her body under pain, dissolving into tears all the time since she realized the injustice by her husband."²⁵ She has ended up in a situation where her payments to be with Jason, the abandonment of her homeland and family, have left her vulnerable to his whims. Similarly, the tribute required by Athens from states in the Delian League left them economically vulnerable and unable to

²⁴ Euripides, *Medea*, 18.

²⁵ Euripides, *Medea*, 20 and 24-26, respectively.

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defend themselves when Athens grew overbearing. The portrayal of Medea as a wronged woman encourages the audience to feel kindly towards her and even view her with a sense of pity. This solidifies Jason's actions as the cause of the play's bloodshed, as it discourages the audience from transferring blame from Jason to Medea.

Just as Medea's situation parallels that of the subjugated states, so too does Jason's defense of his behavior parallel that of their subjugator. The Athenians claimed that it was not their fault that they ruled over such an empire, since it was always ordained that the inferior would be oppressed by the stronger, and especially since the Athenians said they respected justice more than they had to.²⁶ In fact, they helped others just as much as they were helped.²⁷ Surely, they argued, a state could not be blamed for managing well what is of use to it.²⁸ These sentiments are directly echoed in *Medea* when Jason tells Medea that she could have avoided exile from Corinth by bearing the plans of her betters lightly, but that, even though she, refusing to accept the marriage of Jason and Glauce and speaking badly of the royal family, did not do this, he is still willing to give aid to her and the children.²⁹ He calls this a "good deed," implying that by offering this assistance, his behavior towards Medea is above and beyond that which the situation requires of him.³⁰ She had, he claimed, received many more things in return for his salvation than she had given, and he should not be faulted for trying to gain as much security as possible.³¹ Both the

²⁶ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.2-3.

²⁷ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.74.3.

²⁸ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.75.5.

²⁹ Euripides, *Medea*, 448-50, 610-13.

³⁰ Euripides, *Medea*, 621.

³¹ Euripides, *Medea*, 534-5 and 559-67.

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arguments of Athens and Jason rest on the idea that the subjugated actually benefit from their subjugation. Athens exercised more and more control over allies in the Delian League without giving them a choice while Jason made decisions affecting his family without consulting Medea. However, Medea's outright rejection of Jason's argument prompts the audience to consider whether might really does make right.

Of course, the chorus, such a well-known component of ancient Greek tragedies, cannot be ignored in this analysis. Ancient Greek plays themselves seem to have grown out of choral performances, indicating the extreme importance of the chorus, which played a mediating role between members of the audience and the actors.³² This mediation was both physical and dramatic in nature. Physically, the chorus, singing and dancing in the orchestra, was in between the audience's seats and the stage where the actors were performing.³³ Dramatically, they were immersed in the play's setting while also being able to comment as an observer in the same time and space as the audience.³⁴ In *Medea*, the chorus is a group of Corinthian women who sympathize with Medea throughout the play, describing her as being "crushed by misfortunes" and "cast into a hopeless sea of calamity."³⁵ They emphasize the ways in which she has been wronged; she has lost her marriage bed and her

³²Gagné, Renaud and Hopman, Marianne Govers. "Introduction: The Chorus in the Middle," in *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*. Eds. Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 19-21.

³³ Calame, Claude. "Choral Polyphony and the Ritual Functions of Tragic Songs," in *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*. Eds. Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 35.

³⁴ Calame, Claude. "Choral Polyphony", 35.

³⁵ Euripides, *Medea*, 357-63.

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husband's love, and now she is being sent into exile.³⁶ This is not to say, however, that the chorus has only comforting words for her. Right before Medea kills her children, they call her an "accursed woman" and attribute the act that she's about to commit to a "cruel and murderous Fury."³⁷ Though they are condemning Medea's actions, it still has the effect of removing blame from her, as though she is not in her right mind but instead is being controlled by an evil spirit. The chorus also opposes Jason as much as they support Medea, as shown through direct remarks to Jason, as well as remarks to others about his behavior.³⁸ While the chorus does advise Medea not to murder her children, on balance, they spend much more time sympathizing with her and criticizing Jason's behavior than they do admonishing her.

At the start of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian empire was incredibly powerful. The debate around future foreign policy decisions saw Pericles cautioning against further conquests while other factions were undoubtedly urging on the empire's expansion. Euripides adapts the story of Jason and Medea to portray Medea in a sympathetic manner and lay blame for the tragic outcomes clearly on Jason. This adaptation of a well-known myth intensifies the already apparent parallels between Jason and Athens and presenting a cautionary tale of one man's greed to an audience who had perhaps grown too comfortable with their own state's continuous conquests. In short, Euripides' *Medea* depicts nothing less than the logical

³⁶ Euripides, *Medea* 434-8.

³⁷ Euripides, *Medea* 1251-60.

³⁸ For remarks to Jason, see Euripides, *Medea*, 577-8 and 991-5; for remarks to others, see 999-1001 and 1231-2.

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result of Athens' unchecked greed played out to its full conclusion in a fictional world.

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