

# Intimations of Feminism in Ancient Athens: Euripides' *Medea*

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The monumental cultural achievement of the Athenians in the fifth century BCE is so commonly taken to contain the origins of our modernity (“we” being “the West”) that it is reasonable to enquire whether that culture included the beginnings of feminism. But to put the question of whether there was an actually existing feminism in Athens raises obstacles and resistances at many levels. Short of the unlikely event of the discovery of a hitherto lost library of new evidence, the empirical data for answering the question is likely to remain as limited and unyielding as it is now. The alternative method is re-reading the existing texts, subjecting them to new methods of analysis and different perspectives for interpretation. As Fredric Jameson defined this difference:

the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths, which only ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things.<sup>1</sup>

The paucity of the available evidence means that the paths identified by Jameson will never meet: conclusions will remain hypothetical, judgments controversial. This does not mean that the enquiry is entirely quixotic or simply arbitrary. It can take its place in the realm of the provisional and the relatively persuasive which is the familiar home of literature, theory and politics. It is obliged to live with an old anxiety about authentic knowledge and preserve a decent reticence about imposing on the past anachronistic values of the present. Such concerns are especially potent when one is negotiating the ancient classics, a field which until recently was the preserve of a special clerisy.

Contemporary literary theory can help ease such difficulties. Addressing the question of the original meaning of a text, for

example, the supposed “naïve reading claiming immediate access to the true meaning of a text” (which is only accessible to the aforesaid clerisy), Slavoi Zizek argues that such a moment does not in fact exist.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that right from the start there always co-exist “a number of mutually exclusive readings claiming access to the true meaning”. Zizek goes further than simply denying the existence of an original true meaning: he argues that the way past the impasse of deciding between mutually exclusive possibilities lies through the interpretive tradition itself:

this problem of the ‘true’, ‘original’ meaning of *Antigone*—that is, the status of *Antigone*-in-itself, independent of the string of its historical efficacy—is ultimately a pseudo-problem: to resume the fundamental principle of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, there is more truth in the later efficacy of a text, in the series of its subsequent readings, than in its supposedly ‘original’ meaning (214).

That spring morning in Athens in 431 when Euripides first presented *Medea* to a discerning audience at the great dramatic festival of the City Dionysia, for which he was awarded third prize, is indeed irrecoverable. That is not to deny that subsequent ages have understandably been driven by the desire to grasp what could never properly be re-imagined. But Zizek’s simple proposition is also compelling. Among other things, it has the merit of allowing a legitimate place for the most recent contemporary incursions—linguistic, feminist, Lacanian—into the venerable field of classical studies. Some such set of flexible assumptions about validity underlies my present study of *Medea*.

### *A theory of tragedy and society*

In 1972, out of the Parisian milieu which was the birthplace of contemporary literary theory, the structuralist-Hellenists Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet published an influential book on Greek tragedy. They exposed classical studies to the winds of change which were already transforming

other disciplines in the humanities. The title of its opening chapter, “The Historical Moment of Greek Tragedy”, was glossed in the following way: “‘moment’ is here being used to define a period between two turning points”.<sup>3</sup> The ‘moment’ referred to encompassed the whole of the fifth century, the Golden Age of Periclean Athens no less; in terms of cultural as well as political history, this was indeed an epoch of world-historical changes. The useful significance of this comment is that for Vernant and Vidal-Naquet the moment of tragedy spans the period between two turningpoints, rather than simply marking a turningpoint itself. The sudden appearance of tragedy at the end of the preceding century and its equally sudden cessation as a creative force at the century’s end mark the limits of the period of a gap. Such a formula reopens the question of the paradoxical relationship between tragedy and the democracy in Athenian cultural life at its zenith. Its creative ferment is redefined as the response to a felt crisis, at the level both of material history (the democracy, Athenian hegemony, the great wars of the century) and of culture (the drama, plastic arts, philosophy). The age is seen as transitional, a time of exciting and also disturbing change. The question to determine is how this altered framework might affect our understanding of the culture of that time of crisis.

One useful model for negotiating such a project is Raymond Williams’ tripartite division of culture into dominant, residual and emergent discourses, overlapping and coexistent.<sup>4</sup> This dynamic model has the flexibility to include the persistence of tradition, the governing consensus of the moment and the potential for future change immanent in the unresolved tensions of the present—or even actually present in the form of marginal or minority movements. To explore the possibility that there was a feminist movement in Periclean Athens, the model recognises emergent discourses that do not conform with the dominant culture (the “Athenian world-view” so to speak). It is a fairly uncontroversial truism that women played no part in the public life of Athens; the most quoted statement of this view occurs in the famous funeral oration which Thucydides puts into the mouth of Pericles himself. After extolling the valour of

the Athenian soldiers killed at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, as well as the civic ideals for which they died, he curtly reminds the widows of the dead soldiers of their chief duty to live quietly and avoid scandal. Since that speech was to be appropriated at the dawn of our modernity as one of the foundation texts for the liberal ideals of modern Europe, it is interesting to read this salient, subdued reference to the women of Athens in the translation of the seventeenth-century British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes:

And since I must say something of feminine virtue for you that are now widows, I shall express it in this short admonition. It will be much for your honour not to recede from your sex and to give as little occasion of rumour amongst the men, whether of good or evil, as you can.<sup>5</sup>

Pericles' speech was delivered just a few months after the first production of Euripides' *Medea*. Their juxtaposition prompts the question of how we (or the imaginary first Athenian audience) are meant to take the challenge of Medea's opening speech on stage, with its affirmation of the wrongs against women and contempt for mere military courage compared with the pains of childbirth. The crux for interpretation is whether her sentiments are to be taken as a legitimate call for feminine solidarity and an assertion of female right, or rather as symptomatic of Medea's notorious extremism, her heterodox and dangerous alienness. The resolution of such questions tends to determine both readings of the play and the assumptions that are to be made about the culture of Athens at this turning-point in its history. Pericles' eulogy to Athenian greatness is overpoweringly idealistic; at its conclusion Thucydides, without explicit comment, moves directly to the disastrous results of Pericles' war policy of crowding the populace of Attica behind the Long Walls of Athens just as the great plague was about to decimate the Athenian population. The historian's dramatic method places a large question-mark over the status of the ideals just voiced as well as their famous proponent. It may be too much to infer that the historian's scepticism extends to the leader's blunt dismissal of the women; but set alongside the fact that the same Pericles

had as mistress the only woman whose intellectual prowess has ensured that her name survives among those of her more illustrious male friends and equals, the foreigner Aspasia, there is at least some reason to linger over the combination of texts that emanated from that remarkable year.

The limitation of Williams' categories for this inquiry is that they don't adequately account for tragedy itself as a discourse. The most significant invention of the Athenians after the democracy itself, tragedy has been assigned at times to all three of Williams' locations. It is seen, for example, as a cultural form intended mainly to preserve a place in the democracy for the old traditions of the Hellenic peoples. Grounded in the myths of the Heroic Age, this assignment of tragedy underlies conservative interpretations of particular plays, and attaches above all to Sophocles. Alternatively, the cultural practice of tragedy, appearing as it did at the very moment when the democratic revolution in Athens was consolidated in the reforms of Cleisthenes, is said to embody the essence of the Athenian achievement, incorporating both old and new into a brave new world: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, with its triumphant closure in an Athenian court of law and reconciliation with the older chthonic deities, is the ideal candidate for this emphasis. More recently, tragedy has been read as a genre highly experimental in nature, even including possibilities unheard of in the real world of Athens: Euripides, sometimes called "the Brecht of the ancient world",<sup>6</sup> especially because of his confronting representations of women and general resistance to Athenian norms, gets most attention from this point of view. The trouble is that the "woman question" (for one) is not a problem limited to Euripides: the contrast between the powerful and articulate heroines of tragedy, who often stand out against the patriarchal state itself (Clytemnestra, Antigone, Medea) and the supposed quiescence of the women of fifth-century Athens is focused by all three playwrights. It requires to be framed by a more adequate understanding of the cultural role of tragedy in the democracy.

Following Vernant and Vidal-Naquet and incorporating the work of Michel Foucault, Timothy J. Reiss attempted to specify the nature of that “gap” which attends the (rare) manifestations of the genre of tragedy.<sup>7</sup> To simplify his complex analysis, Reiss argues that tragedy appeared in Athens in response to a gathering “epistemic crisis”: a failure of faith in the discourses that had hitherto enabled access to knowledge or truth, accompanied by the excitement that something new and unrevealed lay around the corner. While the crisis was undoubtedly related to the revolutionary invention of the democracy itself, Reiss describes the trajectory of tragedy through the social function it performs at the level of discourse rather than in terms of conventional social history. It was the historical function of tragedy, he argues, to contain the crisis, for tragedy above all is “the discourse that grasps and encloses a certain ‘absence of significance’”(Reiss 3). The consequence of this sustained and exhaustive act of enclosure, the “progressive” function which tragedy performed at Athens, was to open the way for new discourses of knowledge to emerge. For Reiss, the discourse of truth that emerged was only made possible by tragedy’s capacity to contain the felt *impossibility* of accessing truth. That new discourse was the Socratic tradition of scientific and philosophical enquiry which after a period of struggle emerged triumphant at the end of the fifth century. Its triumph in the work of Plato and Aristotle superseded earlier Greek sciences and would retrospectively be claimed as the origin of our modernity. Such a role for tragedy of enabling a paradigm shift provides a more progressive account of its social function than Friedrich Nietzsche’s similar narrative of the sudden disappearance of tragedy with the emergence of Socratic rationalism.<sup>8</sup> Tragedy and rationalism, according to Nietzsche, were incommensurable and incompatible. Under the sway of Socrates the young Plato forsook his ambitions to be a tragedian, a profession which he came to regard as incompatible with truth. For Nietzsche, this is a story of loss, tragic knowledge for him always remaining deeper and fuller than knowledges that are purely ratiocinative. Reiss, in contrast, while accepting the disjunction between

tragedy and philosophy, posits a dynamic relationship between the two at the moment of change.

In accepting Reiss's historicist framework, this present reading of Euripides' *Medea* will argue that the play encloses one particular strand of the epistemic crisis: the incompatibility of the emergent humanist discourse at Athens with the ongoing denial to women of access to its rewards. It will also be argued that the polemics of Euripides' drama indicates at the very least a theoretical development of a feminism in Athens itself, the beginnings of a political backlash against oppression. In contrast with the experience of Europe and the modern "West", one implication of this argument is that the incipient women's revolution in Greece, signalled in *Medea*, was aborted: the Peloponnesian War, which began in the very year in which Euripides produced *Medea* and concluded with the eclipse of Athenian hegemony in the Greek world (though not of the democracy itself), prevented the full development of that embryonic feminism. It was not until late in the nineteenth century in England that John Stuart Mill gathered together the claims established through the political struggles of early modern feminism and enshrined in liberal ideology the truth that the democratic revolution would remain incomplete as well as unjust until women were admitted with men to its social privileges. It may not be too fanciful to see his landmark essay *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) as a belated response to the anguished protest of Medea when she first comes out on the stage in Euripides' play.

### *Modern feminism and the ancient classics*

One manifestation of the ongoing revolution which is the modern women's movement was the rapid growth, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, of a feminist discourse within classical studies. In book after book, women classical scholars stormed one of the ancient citadels of male high culture, ironically breathing new life into an academic discipline which from other perspectives would seem to be in its dotage.<sup>9</sup> So

successful has been that intervention (especially in the United States) that the publication at the century's end of an imposing new series of translations with extensive commentary of Greek dramas from the viewpoint of the Woman Question appears almost as a new orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup>

On the question of the ideological imperatives governing the representation of women, Euripides' *Medea* is startlingly modern. Explicit in both *Medea's* outrage at her treatment by her husband and the Chorus' female solidarity with the wronged woman is their shared consciousness that the desire to be heard as well as the craving for alleviation of emotional pain are thwarted by a deeply prejudicial literary tradition. Immediately before *Medea's* first entrance, the Nurse scathingly draws attention to the poverty of that tradition:

You would not be wrong if you said that so far humans have been bunglers and not smart at all. They've invented songs for festive occasions, banquets and dinners, pleasant music to accompany our lives. But no-one has found a way to stop bitter grief for mortals—certainly not with music and harmonious songs. Grief leads to deaths and disasters—it can bring down whole families. It would have been a real benefit for people to cure these pains with songs—what is the point of well-catered feasts straining out loud songs? Isn't the bulk of the feast enough to give delight?<sup>11</sup>

As postmodern practice has demonstrated to a fault, references to literature within a literary "work", whether deferential, parodic or pastiche, are never innocent. They draw instant attention to the construct in which they are included, provoking comparison and judgment.

After the Nurse's dismissive account of the poverty of the literary-musical tradition in the face of suffering, in the first Choral ode at the end of the prologue the Corinthian women take up this refrain even more pointedly. In addressing the ideological history which has perpetuated a lowly image of women, the Chorus names as the chief cause the fact that the poets were all men. At the same time, the ode proclaims that the crisis produced by Jason's actions is also an opportunity. Its



announcement of a revolutionary turn, challenging and triumphant, describes the crisis in terms of a struggle between the sexes at the level of discourse:

The streams of the holy rivers run backwards, the order of things is turned upside down. The counsels of men are cunning, but their oaths to the gods no longer bind. The stories must be rewritten, to make better our lives! Honour is coming for the female race! No more will reputation hold women in subjection.

The songs of the old poets will cease chanting our faithlessness. Apollo the god of poetry chose not to bestow on our minds the gift of lyric. If he had, we would have produced a poem in answer to men's. But the long stretch of time might tell much of our lot, as it does of theirs (410-30).

This direct reference within a poetic drama to the slanderous representations of female deceitfulness by older poets is not only deliberate: it draws attention to the way biases against women are produced and reinforced by poetry and at the same time invites direct scrutiny of Euripides' own representation of Medea as a woman. This does not automatically mean that the question of gender-bias is cast in simple terms. With some justification, Euripides has been seen from ancient times alternately as women-hater and defender of women's rights. The cutting edge of his analysis in *Medea* consists in the stark presentation of Medea as indubitably wronged woman and also the monstrous murderer of her children. The responsibility to judge is handed over to the audience and registered in the faltering solidarity of the Chorus of Corinthian women; it involves judgments and choices which are at the heart of feminist politics.

*Medea: a reading*

If Greek tragedies in general show a high level of intertextual awareness, they can also be read as dialogical interventions in a field of ongoing debate. *Agamemnon* (458 BCE), Aeschylus' rereading of the Homer's Trojan War and its aftermath, can readily be set against the most famous of all home-comings, the *Odyssey*, with Clytemnestra emerging as the monstrous antithesis of Penelope, the very prototype of Greek female dutifulness. Clytemnestra's revenge-killing of her husband, the father who sacrificed their daughter to prosecute a war of questionable legitimacy, initiates a debate over the place of woman in the new civic and natural order. By the middle of the fifth century, that is, woman had become a problem. The trilogy-form enabled Aeschylus partially to evade the traumatic consequences of Clytemnestra's appropriation of the male heroic code: her action, especially in vaunting her success at destroying the hero of all the Greek forces at Troy, had blasted the continuum of history (as Aeschylus shows and accepts). What he couldn't decide was where to place such a woman in the new world-order her action had helped bring into being. In the last two plays of the trilogy, Clytemnestra, after her moment of personal greatness, is effectively side-lined, lingering in the cultural memory only as a problem to be resolved.

More significant than the problematic nature of this new woman who appears on the tragic stage is the fact that in a number of outstanding instances women actually dominate the stage. Clytemnestra, Antigone and Medea not only challenge the patriarchal order of the state with the kind of breath-taking effrontery that belonged to an Achilles; they even appropriate the language and attitudes of the male heroic. Of the male adversaries of these extraordinary women, Agamemnon's vacillations before the persuasive power of his wife see him ignominiously murdered in a bath, while Creon and Jason are left stranded on the stage at the end of their respective plays—alone, miserable and diminished. Even more significant is the way the momentum of the dramatic action in these plays follows the trajectory of the heroine's experience. Whatever ethical debates swirl around the traumatising actions of these women, it is they who hold the spectator's gaze transfixed.

The ability to dominate the stage is one of the signs I am taking as evidence of a feminist movement at Athens. Women emerge from the privacy of their domestic confines to occupy the liminal space of the stage. Of course, the range of female types in the extant tragedies is considerable, and generalisations need to be made cautiously. Even the three just mentioned are highly differentiated. Moving from Clytemnestra to Medea, for example, involves the recognition of a major cultural shift. The debates over male versus female right in Aeschylus, which generated a critical tradition of balanced negotiation of contrary claims, are displaced in *Medea* by a problematic which has little to do with balance and everything to do with choice. The play could even be mobilised to challenge the liberal tradition of balanced appraisal as part of the very ideology that produced Jason's abuse of his wife and family.

Notions of balance, like appeals to ambivalence, soften the hard political edges of the tragedy. With *Medea* a balanced reading is impossible to sustain, given the indefensibility of Jason's behaviour and the horror of Medea's revenge. The most famous example of the use of the idea of ambivalence to resolve intractable conflictual material in a text is Hegel's interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*.<sup>12</sup> For Hegel, both Creon and Antigone embody flawed, partial understandings of the law, which they thus fail to comprehend in its totality. Both are blind to that part of the whole represented by the other. Antigone's single-minded and uncompromising claim for her brother's absolute right to burial (claims of kinship and blood, love and religion) are at odds with Creon's proclamation, which will not permit burial to that same brother because he was a traitor to the state. Reasonably, Creon as political leader understands the law as aiming for the good of the community as an entity. Because neither Creon nor Antigone comprehends the position of the other, the failure of each to understand the totality which includes the other leads to catastrophe. The cathartic process belongs to the drama as a whole, embodying a meaning which escapes the protagonists. Yet even in this persuasive reading of *Antigone*, the habit of balanced appraisal has the *political* effect of reducing Antigone's heroic choice of death for an ethical

principle merely to one side of a balanced equation, while softening the injustice of Creon's arbitrary decree to deny the burial-rights of a family member.<sup>13</sup>

Even-handed readings of *Medea* tame all that makes the play exciting and controversial and resolve nothing. Like the final choric comment, or like Jason's calmly rational provision for his family once he has betrayed it, this reading of the drama suppresses the human passions and needs which produced such antagonisms in the first place. *Medea* is a harsh, discomfiting play in its exposure of the position of women in civilised societies. Having asked its audience to take the full measure of the effects on Medea of Jason's callous behaviour, the play confronts it with the unspeakable crime of infanticide, the monstrous underside of feminine *ressentiment*. Finally, and most provocatively of all, we are left with the spectacle of Medea, the infanticide, triumphant with the support of divine intervention and the promise of safe asylum in Athens itself. The closing remarks of the Chorus are more like a shrug of despair than the resolution of the play's contradictions.

The meaning of the play, then, will not be reached by balancing rights against wrongs or by choosing between the marital pair. Jason presents an argument to justify his remarriage, but the audience has been positioned to dismiss this justification. His attempt to blame Medea for Creon's banishment of herself and the children is in bad faith: before Medea has even spoken with Creon, the edict of banishment is announced; it is taken by all on stage as proof of Jason's disregard of his family. Medea's revenge is horrible, but grows from the relentless logic of refusing to accept Jason's *fait accompli*. There is no moment in the play when an even-handed appraisal of the conflict between the two can work; besides, it is strongly biased towards Medea's interpretation of their conflict. In the belief that Euripides, not unlike Brecht in our own time, wanted his audience to leave the theatre arguing intensely over matters difficult and important, the following reading of the play is conscientiously partial. Its unstated hypothesis is that Euripides' exposure of a fundamental

injustice in the existing social arrangements concerning women and marriage challenged the institutional practices of his own Athens and that is what constitutes the play's enduring fascination. What were the poet's personal judgments of the play's total action is debatable, even undecidable; my interest is to show that *Medea* documents the presence of a developed feminist discourse in the Athens of Pericles and Euripides.

The opening scene of the play presents three different, seemingly incompatible representations of Medea. The first is the Nurse's recollection of Medea as happily married wife of Jason in Corinth:

She came as an exile to this land with her husband and children. She was delightful to our citizens and supported Jason himself in everything. And that is the greatest security of all—when a wife in no way disagrees with her man (11-15).

The traditional order of relations between the sexes is at once affirmed and defined as patriarchal and paternalistic: the good wife obeys, benefits from a man's protection and wins social respect. While there is that in Medea's past which suggests something more volatile than this pretty picture admits, this moment of Medea's social acceptability is firmly recorded by the Nurse.

Like most Greek tragedies, *Medea* is marked by a great sense of compression and immediacy. The children are with their Tutor, and there hasn't been time for them to learn what has befallen the family. Even as the Nurse speaks, Medea is within the house, her fortunes overturned. She is next presented as a woman traumatised: "She lies around and won't eat, and submits her body to pain. She has melted with tears the whole time since she discovered that she has been wronged by her husband" (24-7).

The point about these two contrasting tableau-portrayals of a Medea we never actually see is that they are two sides of one coin. There is an ideological consistency between the loving, happy wife and the helplessly devastated wronged woman: both

reinforce a received idea of women as essentially dependent. The Medea who actually appears on stage is like neither of these two images: dignified, stately, altogether composed, she delivers a powerful diatribe not just against Jason, but against the patriarchal society which supports him. Her stance is political, in that she speaks now not only on her own behalf, but for all women whose lot is wholly bound up with the institution of marriage and who have little power, before or after, over the terms of their own marriage. The solidarity between Medea and the Chorus of Corinthian women, sealed by the Chorus' clear acceptance of Medea's request for secrecy about her plans, is founded on a shared recognition of the conditions for marriage which govern their lives: the dowry, lack of freedom in the choice of a husband, inequity of divorce provisions and sexual inequality. The speech describes exactly the contemporary marriage arrangements of Euripides' Athens. When the play was first produced, Athens was caught in controversy and anxiety over the impending war with Sparta: hence Medea's linkage of her anti-patriarchal analysis to an affirmation of female courage in childbirth as against male courage in fighting has contemporary and controversial resonance.

But the most striking aspect of this first stage appearance of Medea is the way it reverses the images already given of her. Her clear-sighted and rational analysis of her predicament is not the response of a blindly-in-love, recently happy, now shattered wife. It rather speaks a life-time experience, with a new objectivity that distances her victimhood: "The man in whom I had invested everything, I now know it well, has turned out to be the worst of men—my husband"(228-9). Her composure is not the emotionally brittle hardness of one recently traumatised by helpless humiliation. The Medea we must come to terms with is represented as strong and clear-sighted about her situation and her choices. Between the moment of trauma of her desertion and her stage appearance, Medea is politicised.

The scenes between Medea and, in turn, Creon, Jason, and Aegeus trace the development of that change. Her actions are

not mitigated by confusion or emotional disturbance. Jason assumes that Medea, like all women, is reacting simply out of sexual jealousy: his self-justification exposes a deeply ingrained, clapped-out mythology of female nature whose patriarchal underpinnings have already been exposed by Medea and the Chorus. The collapse of Jason's claims within this new framework represents a heavy assault on the patriarchal order itself. In his first confrontation with Medea (522-75), the values he espouses ring like a thin parody of Periclean ideals. But when he says he has brought Medea the boon of civilised justice, the claim is compromised by the fact that he has wantonly broken oaths made to the gods; when he affirms the value for himself, her and their children, of his marriage with a royal princess, he is asserting the values of a social order which Medea has put in question. This claim of Jason that he was calculating on improving his own and all their fortunes by this marriage is the one which Medea will seize on for her revenge. Recognising that Jason is actually sincere in proposing this grotesque idea, she uses her ability to understand both sets of assumptions—his, socially acceptable ones, and hers, based on feminine insights of a socially subversive kind—to outflank her enemies.

These three confrontations bring Medea to a full understanding of what she must do. To gain time from Creon, she wins a day's delay of her exile; importantly, she does this by appealing to his feelings as a father. In the first scene with Jason, her superior knowledge enables her to destroy his every attempt at self-justification, but it doesn't help her destroy him. Political skill, not mere argument, is needed to win this battle. The scene with Aegeus has the dual function of redressing the power imbalance and revealing to Medea the ideal form of her revenge. That Aegeus provides a safe route of escape for Medea is perhaps the least important aspect of the scene. His reason for travelling that way from Delphi, that he is on a pilgrimage to seek a cure for his infertility, tells Medea that the deepest way to hurt Jason is through his paternity. What brings this ancient story home to Euripides' audience is the fact that Aegeus is king of Athens.

When Medea announces her terrible resolve to kill her sons, the Chorus for the first time balks at her plan of revenge. Their alienation at this point marks the drama's Brechtian challenge to the audience. The ode which follows (824-65) begins as an idealistic hymn in praise of Athens (in its idealism, not unlike Pericles' famous funeral oration) then rounds on the audience with the question how such a city could give protection to a polluted child-killer. But how could it not, without condoning Jason's actions and abandoning Medea meekly to accept her lot in life? The audience itself is caught in the responsibility of deciding, and no appeal to the complexity of the issues provides an escape from the toils of those dialectics.

The dark irony elaborated from this point until the climax of the play depends on a kind of theatrical double-vision. As Medea, with disturbing ease, carries out her plan of deceiving Jason and Creon's family, it becomes clear that Medea's success derives from her ability to articulate more vividly than Jason himself could have imagined the happy resolution of his dreams. She plays the part of the understanding and forgiving wife so convincingly because she has spied the self-bound secret of patriarchal values. The power of her insight and her uncompromising will to act at whatever cost to herself give Medea at this moment a terrible grandeur. As audience, following the ironies as Jason cannot, we are driven to make judgments: the attractive images which hold out the conditions of a bloodless outcome (Medea repentant and accepting, the children bearing wedding gifts for their father's young bride, the royal court of Creon delighted with the happy conclusion) force us to ask whether such an outcome would indeed have been a good one. Medea's pride and exile from Corinth are the only price to pay for the social order to be preserved. In taking another path, she refuses an ethics based on the social good and, like Sophocles' Antigone before her, accepts the harsher ethics of refusing to compromise with her desire. She does, however, move considerably beyond Antigone in stretching the bounds of the thinkable.



In confronting Jason's own socially admissible choice Medea reveals the obscene underside of social acceptability. Jason (we, as well as Medea, believe) does not "love" his young bride. This fact sits comfortably with his earlier statement of total antagonism towards women: "Mortals should be able to beget children in some other way—there should be no race of females. If that were so, mankind would be rid of evils" (573-5). The blessed future Medea holds out to Jason near the play's climax is a virtual fulfilment of that dream: his children restored to him, their mother gone and a new royal marriage to bring him a better position in society. If Medea's child-murder is unnatural, Jason's desired world order is a rejection of nature itself. Because Medea comes to understand the desires that govern the man who was her "whole life", she discovers both her own need and the best means of destroying him. What is affirmed in the killing of her sons is the unnaturalness of the act, generated not out of impulse but from a rational reading of the situation to which she has been brought by the social order of Creon and Jason. Invited to sacrifice herself to that order, she performs a different sacrifice to bring down the order itself.

The scene of sacrifice focuses our attention on two things: first, the powerful maternal feelings in Medea at the moment of taking her sons' lives; secondly, the marks of ancient ritual which are the important religious signs of Greek tragedy's ties with an older, pre-democratic world. In Medea's great monologue prior to the sacrificial moment (1021-80) she does not falter in her resolve so much as take the full measure of her act. Like Antigone, who at the point of moving towards the tomb of her burial alive sharply registers all that she is forfeiting, now Medea undergoes her mother's pain. As a woman, she embraces her personal agony; but her act also has a wider political significance, a dimension that escapes Jason who remains immersed in the norms of the social order. His horrified denunciation of Medea is strangely empty of substance; even as a grief-stricken father, he is denied pity. What Euripides presents at the end of *Medea* is the question still to decide.

At the level of “real history” the question of whether there was an actual feminist movement at Athens will remain undecided. After *Medea*, Euripides produced an extraordinary run of plays cataloguing the wrongs of women, above all as the innocent victims of the war. The war, as noted earlier, would curtail many of the cultural developments the Athenians were capable of achieving. The fact that the impasse against women’s access to equity and justice could be voiced at all must be set against the other fact that the intimations of a feminist revolution in the *Oresteia* and in *Medea* at that moment of history had nowhere to go. In Aeschylus, the powerful sense of right which marks Clytemnestra’s dominance of the first play (*Agamemnon*) produces a density of implication for every question of justice the drama entertains; the exploration of that density in the subsequent plays of the trilogy is achieved at the cost of forgetting Clytemnestra. The closure of *Medea*, which makes explicit the feminist standpoint only gestured towards in Aeschylus, calls up the ghost of Clytemnestra.

At the level of discourse, however, developments did take place which throw light on the idea of tragedy’s function of enclosing the epistemic crisis of Athens. If the final symbolic break with the moment of tragedy was Plato’s abandonment of the stage, and if Athens’ moral nadir was marked by its execution of Socrates, such closures also heralded the arrival of confident new discourses of knowledge. Plato’s *Republic*, which lays down a blueprint for hitherto unimaginable social arrangements, entertains ideas for the social place of women of astonishing modernity. Plato’s Socrates concludes:

There is therefore no function in society which is peculiar to woman as woman or man as man; natural abilities are similarly distributed in each sex, and it is natural for women to share all occupations with men, though in all women will be the weaker partners.<sup>14</sup>

The allowance made for women’s physically weaker nature notwithstanding, Plato’s prophetic insight is light years away from the predicament faced and articulated by *Medea*, and

would take several millennia to come near to fruition. Arguably, such a development at the level of thought was enabled by the shocking experimentalism of the dramatists. Where Euripides “stood” on the woman question is less important than the new categories his drama both documents and places on the political agenda: women’s solidarity, equality before the law, sexual equality, the place of ideology in sustaining the patriarchal order, the capacity of women to appropriate male positions, and infanticide as a product of repression.

An earlier version of this reading of *Medea* was an article written for matriculation English Literature students, “Woman-hater or Proto-feminist? Euripides and *Medea*”, *Viewpoints* 88, ed. Brian McFarlane (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988). I wish to acknowledge an old debt to the Classics lecturers at Newcastle University College in the 1950s who first taught me Greek; and to the late Maggie Tomlinson who first got me thinking about the tragedies in the English Department at the University of Sydney in the 1960s. She herself published a brilliant article on Greek tragedy, mainly reviled at the time for its presumption in daring to mount a general case about Greek tragedy based on translations (“Hubris in Greek Tragedy”, *The Melbourne Critical Review*, 7, 1964). More recently, unmeasurable benefits for my own thinking about Greek tragedy’s obsession with women have been derived from long discussions with Ms Briony Schroor, who is currently preparing a PhD thesis on the subject at La Trobe University.

- 1 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.
- 2 Slavoi Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 213-15.
- 3 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex: Harvester, 1981), 5.

- 4 See “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, in Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 40-42.
- 5 David Grene, ed., *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War: The Complete Hobbes Translation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 115.
- 6 See for example Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge), 72-73.
- 7 Timothy J. Reiss, *Tragedy and Truth* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980). See especially Chapter 1, “A Hypothesis and its Prehistory”.
- 8 For Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1870-71), which is also the story of the death of tragedy, the loss of the glory of Greek tragedy and the special kind of knowledge it embodied derived from its failure to withstand Socratic rationalism. For Nietzsche, Socrates failed to understand the profound links between tragedy and myth. Both Nietzsche and Reiss see discursive incompatibility as lying at the heart of this narrative.
- 9 A very short selection of the publications that have at once created and contributed to this field includes: Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975); Page duBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); Pauline Schmitt Pantel, editor, Arthur Goldhammer, translator, *A History of Women in the West: I. From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1992); Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic of Women* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993); Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (London: British Museum Press, 1995); Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in*

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*Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

- <sup>10</sup> The second volume in this series is *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides (Alcestis, Medea, Helen, Iphigenia at Aulis)*, trans. and ed. by Ruby Blondell, Mary-Kay Gamel, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Bella Zweig (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>11</sup> *Medea*, lines 190-203, in *Euripides: Cyclops-Alcestis-Medea*, edited and translated by David Kovacs, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 312. Quotations from *Medea* are my own based on Kovacs' text, and will be indicated simply by line numbers in the body of the text.
- <sup>12</sup> As one source of Hegel's scattered discussions of *Antigone*, see G.F.W. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1217-8.
- <sup>13</sup> For a fuller analysis of Hegel's reading and Jacques Lacan's radical contestation of it, see Terry Collits, "Lacan's *Antigone*: an ethics for the tragedy of our time?", *Analysis*, 1999. This discussion of Lacan's use of *Antigone* to define an ethics proper to the process of psychoanalysis is part of an ongoing project examining the applications of contemporary literary theory to Greek tragedy.
- <sup>14</sup> *Plato: The Republic*, transl. H. D. P. Lee (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin), 209.

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