

Divine Invocations and Intratextual References in Medea 144-64

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Euripides does not show the gods as characters in the *Medea*, actively speaking and taking part in the action. Nonetheless, they are ever-present, as characters call out to them, invoke them, and swear by them. Lines 144-64 in particular foreground the gods, as each section of dialogue begins with a direct invocation to specific gods. But Euripides uses these invocations as more than simple dramatic highlights; in each passage, they serve as either intertextual or intratextual references that mark reversals in Medea's situation, from passive victim to murderous victor, as she drives the play toward its grizzly conclusion.

The first direct address to a god is Medea's cry from within the house, obviously, but not explicitly, addressed to Zeus: *διά μου κεφαλᾶς φλόξ οὐρανία βαίη* ("may heavily fire go through my head!" lines 144-45).¹ Medea, in her grief, has already stated her wish to die (in lines 96-97), but why does she entreat Zeus to strike her down with lightning? Zeus held a special role as the guardian of oaths, so such a death would be more suitable for her to wish upon Jason.² But Zeus was also the guardian of justice more generally among mortals.³ Medea admits in the course of the play that she killed her own brother: *ὦ πάτερ, ὦ πόλις, ὧν κάσιν αἰσχρῶς τὸν ἐμὸν κτείνας' ἀπενάσθην* ("O Father, O City, whom I shamefully abandoned, having killed my own brother" lines 166-67). She also involved the daughters of Pelias in her killing of their father: *καλῶς γ' ἂν οὔν, δέξαιντό μ' οἴκοις ὧν πατέρα κατέκτανον* ("Indeed, they, whose father I killed, would of course receive me gladly into their home..." lines 404-05). Her guilt for these crimes not only burned her bridges to those who might help her, but might also alienate the aid the gods during her exile. The wish for death by thunderbolt, then, underscores not just the grief she

¹ Translations are my own.

² Mastronarde, 2002 b, p. 36; see Kovacs, 1993, pp. 51-54 for a fuller discussion of Zeus's reasons for punishing Jason.

³ "Part of the honour due to Zeus from mortals is the duty to abstain from crime against each other; his greatest gift to them is that 'violent grace' by virtue of which he punishes, late or soon, a man who has done injustice to another..." Lloyd-Jones, 1983, p. 161.

feels as a woman abandoned in a foreign land by an unfaithful husband, but also suggests that Medea is not innocent in this situation either.⁴

As the play unfolds, however, Medea gains the upper hand on Jason, despite her crimes.⁵ Learning of his sons' deaths, Jason tells Medea that the gods turned the punishment that she deserved against him. In an echo of Medea's acknowledgement of her guilt in lines 166-67, he says:

τὸν σὸν δ' ἀλάστορ' εἰς ἔμ' ἔσκηψαν θεοί:
κτανοῦσα γὰρ δὴ σὸν κάσιν παρέστιον
τὸ καλλίπρωρον εἰσέβης Ἀργοῦς σκάφος.

The gods have set an avenging spirit meant for you against me: having killed your own brother at the hearth you came aboard the ship Argo of the beautiful prow (lines 1333-35).

Line 1334 in particular bears a striking similarity to Medea's earlier acknowledgment of guilt. Not only do both Medea and Jason use the related participles κτείνασα and κτανοῦσα ("having killed"), they both use κάσιν ("brother") of Medea's victim – the only use of this word in the play. Moreover, Medea's admission that she fled her city after the murder finds its continuation in Jason's statement that she came aboard the Argo. This detail sets up the final reversal of the play: Medea initially appealed to Zeus to strike her through the head with a thunderbolt (lines 144-45), but in the end she tells Jason that it is he who will die by a blow to the head. Fittingly, his death will come from a piece of the ship that brought them together, rather than from lightning:

σὺ δ', ὥσπερ εἰκός, κατθανῇ κακὸς κακῶς,
Ἀργοῦς κάρα σὸν λειψάνῳ πεπληγμένος,
πικρὰς τελευτὰς τῶν ἐμῶν γάμων ἰδών.

But, as seems fitting, you, as a base man, will die basely, having been struck on the head with a piece of the Argo, after you have seen the bitter ending of my marriage to you (lines 1386-88).

⁴ For a larger discussion of Medea's guilt and its role in the play, see Fletcher, 2003, p. 32.

⁵ Kovacs, 1993, p. 60 argues convincingly that Zeus punishes Medea as much as Jason: "In the course of exacting her revenge she will do herself a great hurt. ... Medea in the act of executing Zeus's punishment is helping to bring about her own." For related themes of justice more generally in Euripides, see Lloyd-Jones, 1983, pp. 154-55.

Thus, the divine death that Medea initially called down on her own head in lines 144-45 is reversed in her prediction of Jason's demise – Zeus's final punishment against Jason for betraying Medea.

After calling for her own death by lightning, Medea's plea is answered by the chorus, calling upon Zeus, Earth and Daylight to witness the woman's suffering:

ἄιες, ὦ Ζεῦ καὶ γᾶ καὶ φῶς,

ἀχὰν οἶαν ἃ δύστανος

μέλπει νύμφα;

Do you hear, O Zeus and Earth and Daylight, what a wailing the wretched woman sings forth?
(lines 148-50).

The chorus members, as noted above, assure Medea that Zeus will be her advocate (lines 158-60). But the invocation of Earth and Daylight (i.e., the sun) has a universalizing aspect of encompassing the natural world, and was thus seen as especially powerful.⁶ In this way, the chorus members emphasize the severity of Medea's suffering, and invoke the greatest powers to help her. But Euripides also subtly undermines this invocation through an intertextual reference to another poem about an angered and grieving hero: the Iliad.

There are three passages in the Iliad in which characters directly invoke the Earth and the Sun, but each results in a reversal or unexpected outcome. In Book III, for example, Menelaus, before facing Paris in single combat to settle the war, calls for a sacrifice to Earth and Sun (lines 103-04). However, the duel ends without a clear victor, because Aphrodite whisks the Trojan prince away (lines 380-82). Thus, Earth and Sun were called to witness an unfulfillable oath. And in Book XV, Hera, swearing by Earth and Sky, tells Zeus that she did not prompt Poseidon to help the Greeks in battle (lines 35-44). But her oath is deceptive, as Zeus never accused her of any such thing. Rather, he had accused her of seducing him so he would not see Poseidon's actions (lines 31-33). As punishment, he makes Hera the messenger of his

⁶ Universalizing: Mastronarde, 2002 a, p. 195; Powerful: Bernabé, 2015, p. 132-33.

order that Poseidon leave the Greeks to the ravages of the Trojans. Hera's invocation of Earth and Sky, then, achieves the opposite of her desired outcome. Finally, in Book XIX, Agamemnon returns Briseis to Achilles, calling upon Zeus, Earth, Sun and the Furies to witness that he never slept with her (lines 258-32). Achilles, however, had already said that his resentment toward Agamemnon was so strong that he no longer cares if the Greek king slept with her (Book IX, lines 136-37). And with the death of Patroclus, Achilles cares even less, saying he would have preferred Briseis had died rather than so many Greeks (Book XIX, lines 59-60). Thus, Agamemnon invokes Earth and Sun as powerful witnesses to an oath that, in fact, means nothing.

The chorus members' invocation of Earth and Sun goes in equally unexpected and unpredictable directions. When they first call upon these divinities in lines 148-50, it is with the expectation that Medea needs their protection. But when they call upon the Earth and Sun again in lines 1251-54, it is not because Medea needs protection, but because her children need protection from her:

ὦ Γᾶ τε καὶ παμφαῆς
ἀκτὶς Ἀλίου, κατίδεν' ἴδετε τὰν
ὀλομένην γυναῖκα, πρὶν φοινίαν
τέκνοις προσβαλεῖν χέρ' αὐτοκτόνον

Oh Earth and radiant beam of Sun, look down and behold this accursed woman, before her murderous, blood-stained hands strike the children (lines 1251-54).

The invocation of the Earth and Sun highlights the difference between Medea's defeated and betrayed state in lines 148-50, and the subsequent inversion of her situation by lines 1251-54. Euripides hints at this unexpected outcome in Medea's status through his allusion to the Iliad, where (as with the chorus members here) all the characters who called upon Earth and Sun see their expectations thwarted or twisted in some way.

Medea resumes speaking at line 160 with another direct address to divine powers: ὦ μεγάλα Θέμι καὶ πότνι' Ἄρτεμι (O great Themis and mistress Artemis...). The reference to Themis is clear in the context of Jason's broken oaths. But the reference to Artemis (the play's only direct reference to her) has long puzzled scholars, as Artemis has no association with oath-keeping, and the Nurse rephrases it as an invocation to Themis and Zeus: κλύεθ' οἷα λέγει κάπιβοᾷται Θέμιν εὐκταίαν Ζῆνα θ' ("Do you hear what she says, how she calls upon Themis and Zeus"... lines 169-70).⁷ However, Artemis has a strong association with Hecate, whom Medea especially reveres (lines 395-97).⁸ Indeed, Artemis and Hecate, as goddesses associated with the moon and venerated by women, are often conflated as different manifestations of a single divinity.⁹ If the reference to Artemis is not a manuscript corruption, then her invocation at line 160 can be understood as a foil to Hecate in lines 395-97. When calling to Artemis, Medea is passive, unable to do more than wish for her enemies' destruction:

λεύσσεθ' ἃ πάσχω, μεγάλοις ὅρκοις
ἐνδησαμένα τὸν κατάρατον
πόσιν; ὃν ποτ' ἐγὼ νύμφαν τ' ἐσίδοιμ'
αὐτοῖς μελάθροισι διακναιομένους

Do you see what I suffer, having bound my accursed husband with great oaths? May I see him and his bride wiped out someday, along with their whole house... (lines 161-64)¹⁰

But once she wins the chorus members' silence, and an extra day in Corinth from Kreon, Medea begins to speak of exacting vengeance by her own hand, using active and concrete terms: δόλῳ μέτειμι τόνδε καὶ σιγῇ φόνον (I shall pursue this murder with cunning and in silence..., line 391) or τρεῖς τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν νεκροὺς θήσω (I shall set out the three corpses of my enemies, 376-75).¹¹ This change in tone is capped by her oath to Hecate in lines 395-400, swearing to bring ruin on her enemies, and marking a

⁷ Elliott, 1969, p. 76, Verrall, 1881, p. 17.

⁸ Mastronarde, 2002a, p. 197.

⁹ Morford & Lenardon, 2003, p. 208-09—Selene is often part of this conflation as well.

¹⁰ Note the use of the optative ἐσίδοιμ: "may I see".

¹¹ Note the change to the indicative: μέτειμι "I shall pursue" and θήσω "I shall set out".

complete reversal of her lament to Artemis. Moreover, that lament focused on Jason's broken oath and Medea's resulting grief, while Medea's oath to Hecate remains unbroken—with grievous results for Jason.¹² Thus, the invocation of two aspects of the same goddess points to the change in aspect that Medea undergoes: from plaintive and passive at the beginning, to vengeful and active by the end.

Through direct invocations of the gods, lines 144-64 not only convey the depth of Medea's grief, they also link to later portions of the play, highlighting the reversal of her position. From a soon-to-be exiled foreigner who cannot expect help from anyone, possibly not even the gods, Medea, in the end, turns the tables on those who betrayed her. She expresses her grief and isolation by wishing that Zeus kill her with a lightning bolt (indeed, the manner of death suggests she feels she deserves such a punishment). But in the end, she leaves Jason in utter isolation by killing Kreon and his daughter – and their two children. The chorus members' invocation of Zeus, Earth and Sun, meant as a call for these divinities to help Medea, carries an intertextual suggestion of up-ended expectations. They later repeat this invocation near the end of the play – not to help Medea this time, but to protect her children from their own mother. Finally, Medea's invocation of Artemis has a corresponding invocation of Hecate, marking her complete change from passive to active, and from lamenting Jason's broken oath, to keeping an oath of her own that brings down a murderous revenge on her betrayers. The divine invocations that feature so prominently in these lines are, in the end, not just dramatic details. They are also a literary technique to convey the profound change that Medea undergoes throughout the play.

¹² Fletcher, 2003, pp. 35-36.

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