

Euripides' Medea, Lines 1040-1052

φεῦ φεῦ· τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ' ὄμμασιν, τέκνα;
τί προσγεῖλατε τὸν πανύστατον γέλων;
αἰαῖ· τί δράσω; καρδία γὰρ οἴχεται,
γυναῖκες, ὄμμα φαιδρὸν ὡς εἶδον τέκνων.
οὐκ ἄν δυναίμην· χαιρέτω βουλευματα
τά πρόσθεν· ἄζω παῖδας ἐκ γαίας ἐμούς.
τί δεῖ με πατέρα τῶνδε τοῖς τούτων κακοῖς
λυποῦσαν αὐτὴν δις τόσα κτᾶσθαι κακά;
οὐ δῆτ' ἔγωγε· χαιρέτω βουλευματα.
καίτοι τί πάσχω; βούλομαι γέλωτ' ὀφλεῖν
ἐχθροὺς μεθεῖσα τοὺς ἐμούς ἀζημίους;
τολμητέον τάδ'. ἀλλὰ τῆς ἐμῆς κάκης,
τὸ καὶ προσέσθαι μαλθακοὺς λόγους φρενί.

Alas, alas! Why do you look upon me with your eyes, children?
Why do you smile your final smile?
Oh, what am I to do? For my courage is undone,
women, since I saw the bright gaze of my children.
I could not do it. Let my earlier plans be gone.
I will take my boys away from this land.
Why must I, in hurting their father by causing them pain,
myself endure twice as many sufferings?
Certainly not I. Let my plans be gone.
Yet, what is the matter with me? Do I wish to incur mockery,
having allowed my enemies to go unpunished?
These things must be dared. But it is my weakness
to allow such soft thoughts in my mind.

This passage, part of Medea's 'great monologue' (1021-1080) during which she debates whether to carry out her planned infanticide, is often regarded as the emotional zenith of Euripides' *Medea*. Until now, Medea's characterisation has been dominated largely by the traditionally masculine theme of wounded pride, committed to a code of honour which resembles that of an archaic hero (Foley, 1989, 76). She assumes the role of avenger, openly presenting herself in masculine and martial terms, consistently employing heroic and militaristic language, and pursuing vengeance to restore her honour. Here, however, Medea's resolve wavers upon seeing the unknowing smiles and glances of her children, and the audience is granted unusually direct access to her thought processes as maternal attachment conflicts with her heroic code. Frequent shifts in thought, emotive language, and abrupt sentences create an impression of psychological turmoil and unfiltered emotional intensity. Her hesitation is not framed in moral terms; the conflict lies between her desire for revenge and the suffering she would endure upon the death of her children. This dichotomy is a fundamental element of Euripides' characterisation of Medea, rendering this passage one of great significance within the play.

[1040-1048] These lines illuminate Medea's maternal nature most clearly; as she beholds her children, she wavers in her determination to exact her planned revenge and considers fleeing with them to Athens.

[1040]

φεῦ φεῦ: An interjection, translated variously as 'Alas!', 'Oh!', 'Ah!'. Its function here is twofold. First, the interjection denotes the shift in topic as Medea's resolve falters, with this line marking the transition from mournful resignation to active questioning of her plans. Furthermore – especially when considered alongside the later injection, αἰῶ (1042) – there is clear intention to convey a sense of Medea's vehement grief and tumultuous emotional state. For the dual purpose of interjections, see Wright, 2016, 585-593.

τί προσδέρκεσθέ...: This is the first of several interrogatives present within this passage, cf. τί προσγελάτε...; (1041), τί δράσω; (1042), τί δεῖ με...; (1046). This dense concentration of repetitive questioning highlights Medea's uncertainty.

[1041]

πανύστατον: πανύστατος is consistently used in tragedy in association with death. Its use here alludes to the imminent murder of Medea's children (Mastrorade, 2002, 336).

[1042]

καρδία...οἴχεται: This phrase could be translated more literally as 'my heart is undone', or similar. However, the meaning of καρδία in tragedy is rarely reserved for 'the

heart' in a literal sense. Its use is varied, with both positive and negative emotional and psychological connotations, including fear, distress, grief, joy, and love, amongst others (Sullivan, 2000, 72-78). In the context of this passage, the state of Medea's καρδία is directly linked with her will to carry out her βουλεύματα (cf. 1242). As such, its nuance is perhaps best understood in this context as 'my courage' or 'my passion', with Medea's heart serving as an allegory for her resolve. For an understanding of καρδία as a "personified metonym" for Medea's anger, see Cairns, 2021, 20-21. For the varied use of καρδία in tragedy more broadly, see Sullivan, 2000, 71-82.

οἴχεται: This verb developed from its Homeric usage into a tragic style which can be understood as 'to be undone' or 'to be dead', rather than the more literal 'to go', 'to depart', or 'to be gone' (Mastronarde, 2002, 208).

[1043]

ὄμμα...τέκνων: The singular ὄμμα here contrasts the plural τέκνων, giving the impression of the two boys as a singular unit. Medea perceives them collectively as 'her children', rather than as individuals.

ὥς εἶδον: The aorist used here conveys immediacy; Medea's maternal affection was triggered instantaneously as she was met with the gaze of her children.

[1044]

οὐκ ἄν δυνάιμην: This negative potential optative phrase appears sixteen times within the extant Euripidean corpus, always to envisage something deemed impossible, and always within circumstances of intense emotion (Papachrysostomou, 2015, 2-4). It is a phrase which exists inherently within the present *and* future; the potential optative with ἄν refers primarily to the future, yet the present verb δυνάιμην preserves its immediacy. However, although the phrase conveys a sense of almost-inescapable improbability, it is impossible for this future temporal frame to be fixed (Papachrysostomou, 2015, 3). As such, when Medea employs the phrase in a moment where her maternal emotion seemingly renders her plans impossible, it is important to note that her conviction has faltered completely in the *present*, but her future actions are unfixed.

[1045]

ἐμούς: The possessive adjective reinforces a sense of maternal ownership as she theorises a future in which she might spare her children.

[1046-1047]

τοῖς...κακοῖς: This instrumental dative subtly reflects Medea's confliction; in the space of a single line, the children shift from objects of maternal affection to instruments of revenge for her wounded honour.

αὐτήν: This is used here as an emphatic pronoun, turning the focus back to Medea herself. She rejects the killing of her children not because her morality denies it, but because she will suffer too deeply for it.

κτᾶσθαι κακά: It is important here that Medea specifies that she will suffer as a result of her own infanticide given that this suffering constitutes Medea's only 'punishment' for her actions within the play (Coria, 2015, 100).

[1048]

χαίρέτω βουλευματα: The repeated renouncement of her plan (cf. 1044) highlights the continual uncertainty running through the passage. Though χαίρέτω carries a sense of dismissal, the reaffirmation of the statement implies that the decision has not truly been made.

[1049-1052] These lines see Medea re-committing to her earlier plan. She does so in accordance with the heroic code of honour which has previously dominated her characterisation.

[1049-1050]

τί πάσχω; : This phrase is a self-directed version of the more common, colloquial τί πάσχεις; (Mastrorarde, 2002, 314; Stevens, 1976, 41). This marks another turning point in Medea's thought process as her resolve to carry out her plan begins to re-solidify, and she begins to dismiss her earlier wavering as a sign of weakness.

γέλωτ'... ἄζημίους: cf. 383; 404; 797; 1355; 1362. Avoiding the mockery of one's enemies is a common motivation for the (largely male) protagonists of Greek epic and tragedy, and perhaps for no character more than Medea. Indeed, a failure to defend one's self-honour made any Greek hero a fool in the eyes of his enemies (Foley, 1989, 66). Thus, this line typifies the conflict between Medea's warring masculine and feminine instincts; she is clearly not bereft of maternal affection, but Jason's actions have insulted Medea's τίμη (an important heroic virtue) and, in response, she must take action in order to avoid the ramifications of this dishonour (Catto, 1991, 25). It is this heroic fear of mockery which truly restores her conviction, revealing her fear of mockery to be a deeper motivator than even her own suffering. She is prepared to commit what she herself refers to as ἔργον ἀνοσιώτατον – the most impious act (797) – in order to preserve her heroic code of honour (Catto, 1991, 25).

cf. Eur., *IT.*, 502; Eur., *HF.*, 284-5; Soph., *Aj.*, 367, 382, 454; Aesch., *Cho.*, 222, for other tragedian instances of this fear of mockery.

[1051]

ἀλλὰ: This conjunction marks Medea's objection to her earlier perceived weakness (Mastronarde, 2002, 338).

τολμητέον τὰδ': This impersonal verbal adjective emphasises necessity. It is a striking departure from the earlier interrogatives of the passage – e.g. τί δράσω; - which conveyed a sense of agency, a decision to be made by Medea. At this stage, with Medea re-committed to her plan, the infanticide is a functional necessity as opposed to an active choice. This phrase is also an instance of Medea employing language traditionally associated with the behaviours and values of male heroes, solidifying the victory of her heroic instincts over her maternal affection.

[1051-1052]

ἐμῆς κάκης: This has been understood variously as a Genitive of Cause ('[it is] because of...', tr. Steadman, 2015, 71), or a Genitive of Exclamation ('oh, but what cowardice on my part!', tr. Mastronarde, 2002, 338). In either case, the sense of Medea's frustration with her earlier lack of resolve is conveyed to the audience.

ἐμῆς...λόγους: Here, not only has Medea's commitment to her traditionally masculine values and behaviours returned, but she dismisses the feminine, maternal voice which dominated 1040-1048 as a form of weakness (Foley, 1989, 65; 80). cf. 316 and 776, where Medea employs 'soft words' against her enemies; to maintain her self-perceived superiority, Medea must not herself fall victim to them (Mastronarde, 2002, 338).

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