

Critical Analysis of Medea, 764-783

This passage appears in the third episode in the centre of the six-episode structure of *Medea*, directly following Aegeus's exit over choral anapaests. Prior to this passage, Aegeus has sworn an oath by the Earth, Helios and all the gods (752-3) to offer Medea asylum in Athens (725), but not to offer her safe passage from Corinth to Athens (730). In exchange, Medea will use her knowledge of drugs to assist him in having children (717-8). Following his exit, during this passage, Medea rejoices that she has found a safe haven to escape to when she has achieved her revenge, and goes on to detail to the chorus her revised plans for vengeance. This passage leads up to the stunning revelation that the culmination of her revenge will now be the murder of her children (τέκνα γὰρ κατακτενῶ | τᾶμ' (793-4).

The passage is a rhesis in trimeters. In tragedy, rhesis is an extended speech which is often used to substantiate an opinion or viewpoint, but can, as in this case, be used for self-justification, a revelation of values or character, and critique and review of misfortune. It contrasts with the stichomythia and irregular dialogue of her conversation with Aegeus and adds a feeling of Medea's resolve and serious planning to what unfolds. good

The rhesis appears at a structurally significant point, following the Aegeus episode. Much scholarship has been devoted to attempt to justify the seeming 'irrationality' of Aegeus's convenient and previously undiscussed appearance, in part thanks to Aristotle's reference to Aegeus in the *Poetics*: 'It is right to censure both irrationality and baseness of character where, with no necessity, the dramatist pointlessly makes use of irrationality, as Euripides makes use of Aegeus' (146b19-21). The two most historical rationales for Euripides' use of Aegeus are either that his misery over lack of progeny inspires Medea to create the same scenario for Jason and murder his children, or that his offer of asylum facilitates her ability to enact her plan for revenge by removing the barrier of a lack of escape route from Corinth.¹ However, T. V. Buttrey points to the significance of the structural point of the Aegeus scene for a more convincing justification: this scene, along with the following passage, is the direct midpoint of the play and marks a turning point in the action of the plot, tone, and emotion.² Up until this point, the episodes have been focused on Medea being mistreated, first by Creon, then particularly by Jason. At the

¹ Pavlos Sfyroeras, 'The Ironies of Salvation: The Aigeus Scene in Euripides' *Medea*', *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Dec. 1994-Jan. 1995), pp. 125-142, p. 125 and see n.2 and 3 for discussion of historical precedence of these viewpoints.

² T. V. Buttrey, 'Accident and Design in Euripides' *Medea*', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (1958), pp. 1-17, p. 6.

opening of Medea's *rhesis* at 764, Medea begins to explicitly state how her plan will unfold; this is the beginning of her vengeance being enacted. As Buttrey states, 'the two halves of the play thus defined and neatly balanced are almost two different plays.'³ By Aegeus's departure, the audience feels convinced and comfortable in their sympathy for Medea's plight and the pleasing appearance of Aegeus to solve her problem of how to escape from Corinth as the location of the antagonists enacting injustices upon her. The opening of the *rhesis* lulls us into believing that everything is coming together for our unfortunate tragic heroine, but the language of this passage foreshadows the revelation of the horrors to come.

good



The passage opens with Medea invoking Zeus, Justice, daughter of Zeus, and the light of Helios, as have previously been spoken or referenced in the prologue and *parados*, and in the preceding oath from Aegeus.⁴ The invocation of these particular gods, in their capacity as witnesses of oaths and being representative of divine ^{ref} justice, not only reminds us of the justification for Medea's revenge due to Jason's impiety in breaking his oaths, but also suggests Medea's plans will be approved of or supported by the gods. The inclusion of Helios also reminds us of Medea's familial link, and potentially foreshadows the *deus ex machina*.⁵

good

David Kovacs offers an additional significance to the fact that the first utterance from Medea following Aegeus's departure is an invocation to Zeus in particular. He claims that rather than accepting the fourth-century Aristotelian literary criticism that Aegeus's unannounced arrival is an *alogon*, something absurd and contrary to reason, we should instead interpret this even from the perspective of archaic poetry, where 'Coincidence, though opaque to human reason, serves the divine will' and 'such unforeseeable intersections are often regarded in Greek literature as the result of Zeus's design'.⁶ Again, this invocation suggests the gods' approval, but in addition potentially signposts that they are also responsible for the proceeding events and that Zeus has every right to intervene

³ Buttrey, p. 10.

⁴ 21-2, 148, 160, 168-9, 208-9, 746, 752. Medea also calls on Zeus at 332 and chides him at 516-9.

⁵ See Donald J. Mastronarde's note to line 764 in his edition of *Medea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ David Kovacs, 'Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 45-70, p. 58. Marianne Hopman also indicates the engagement of *Medea* with earlier traditions, 'Revenge and Mythopoeisis in Euripides' *Medea*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 138, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 155-183, p. 156. For discussion on Medea's engagement with Homeric and Sophoclean heroes, see Bernard Knox, 'The *Medea* of Euripides', *YCS*, Vol. 25, 1977, pp. 193-225, p. 196-206 and Elizabeth Bongie, 'Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 107, 1977, pp. 27-56.

and devise a punishment for Jason due to his impiety.⁷ With this in mind, the genitive construction of Δίκη τε Ζηνὸς (764) could not only be interpreted as the personified Justice, daughter of Zeus, but also as Zeus's divine justice.

good

The theory of Zeus's responsibility for the plan which Medea will go on to detail makes her use of the first-person plural in vv. 766, 768, and 770. Of course, she has used the feminine plural vocative φίλοι in 765, presumably referring to the chorus and suggesting that it is they who are part of the collective first-person plural, which has its own significance, but there is a possible implication here that the gods are involved too. Regardless, in using the first-person plural during a section of conventional tragic nautical imagery, Euripides makes the chorus, and therefore the audience, complicit in the plans which she is about to describe. The tragic convention continues the feeling that Aegeus has provided a solution and that, thanks to tradition, it is somehow acceptable to be complicit in the resolution which, without knowing the exact details of Medea's revenge, we would assume would be forthcoming in the more traditional fourth and final episode; that, as in the myth Euripides most likely drew on, the tragic outcome will be that the Corinthians will kill Medea's children. Yet, as Buttrely states, this is a masterful use of Euripides' dramatic irony against both chorus and audience; by using conventions even as Medea reveals her plans, the unexpected horror of Medea's admission that she will kill her children becomes even more powerful — 'the problem was solved, and the new problem is worse beyond comparison'.⁸

awkward, rephrase

good

Interestingly, the language Medea uses immediately following her invocations has a particularly military or athletic slant; καλλίνικοι (765) can variously be translated as 'with glorious victories' or 'triumphs', 'triumphant' or 'the glories of victory' and in combination with ἐχθρῶν and later repeated ἐχθρούς for 'enemies' suggests Medea as military leader.⁹ καλλίνικοι is also found in Pindar referring to athletic victories.¹⁰ Either emphasis attributes masculine qualities to Medea. Medea's stereotypical femininity or lack thereof has had such extensive scholarly discussion that it would be impossible to go into detail about it in this context, but I note it as a point of interest if we interpret Zeus taking some or all of the responsibility for the subsequent action of the play; perhaps Medea is taking on some of his qualities as his agent. The second mention of ἐχθρούς is in combination

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⁷ See also Judith Fletcher, 'Women and Oaths in Euripides', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Ancient Theatre (Mar. 2003), pp. 29-44, p. 32.

⁸ Buttrely, p. 15.

⁹ See Mastronarde, p. 36 for a succinct summary of the frequency of this within the text.

¹⁰ Hopman, p. 157 n. 5.

with τείσειν, from τίνω, which can have the epic connotations of atoning with one's life but can also be used in the context of paying a price and discharging a debt; balance being restored with a hint of legalese to justify it.

The inevitability of the tragic denouement is emphasised with the phrase κείς ὁδὸν βεβήκαμεν (766), 'and we have stepped on to the path'. At this turning point we take our first steps in the direction of a tragic outcome, with some force as indicated by the use of the perfect tense.¹¹

The nautical imagery previously mentioned is in response to Aegeus's offer of asylum. Medea states that this man, i.e. Aegeus, has appeared at the point where she was most afflicted and exhausted as a harbour for her purposes (768-69); Mastronarde, in his note to v. 769, interprets the use of the genitive here as a type of possessive, her purposes being 'a valued thing that the harbour protects'. She continues the simile by going on to say that she will anchor a stern-cable to him (770), 'stern-cable' being constructed from κάλων, 'rope', and 'πρυμνήτην' referring to the stern of a ship. As well as being a common image in tragedy, this use of nautical imagery contrasts explicitly with previous references to images of sailing and the sea earlier in the tragedy. Nautical images are expressed by Medea (257-58, 278-79), the nurse (78-79), and the chorus (361-63, 442-43, 647-48); Medea has nowhere to anchor (μεθορμίσασθαι, 258 and 443) or to achieve a safe landing (ἔκβασις, 279). As a direct contrast to this passage, Medea's enemies at v. 278-79 have 'spread their sails' whereas it is difficult or impossible for her to find a path (ἄπορον, 362). This turnaround of imagery reflects the turning point of the action of the tragedy at this structural point. E. M. Blaiklock puts it very poetically that 'It is a telling touch when Euripides makes her take the very metaphor of her most piteous plea, and in cynical reference to it call Aegeus a timely harbour when her ship most labored, a firm stanchion for the cable of her fate'.¹²

Medea ends this initial section of rejoicing at her newfound haven with, as Mastronarde puts it in his note to 771, 'a high-style periphrasis for Athens, featuring heniadys... and the poetic use of πόλισμα as a variation on πόλις', as well as the reference to Pallas [Athena] rather than using the name 'Athens'. This may be for the benefit of an Athenian audience, proud that their hero, Aegeus, appeared as a messenger of sanctuary, offering asylum to a sympathetic Medea, and glorifying Athens itself as a safe haven with highly poetic language. It is interesting to consider the implications of this

¹¹ See Mastronarde's note to 766.

¹² E. M. Blaiklock, 'The Nautical Imagery of Euripides' Medea', *Classical Philology*, 50, Vol. 4, (October 1955), pp. 233-37, p. 235.

with the idea of Euripides later turning his dramatic irony on the audience; this could be a form of easing them into Medea's shocking revelation to heighten the unexpectedness and horror of it.

From v. 772 onwards, Medea lays out her revised plans for revenge. Prior to this she has displayed indecision; here she uses the future and present tenses, demonstrating her decisiveness. At the same time, she is precisely describing exactly what the audience will see over the rest of the tragedy. Marianne Hopman interestingly equates this with Medea taking on the characteristics of an implied author, presumably not unlike an epic bard; she describes it as 'a poetic performance embedded in the tragedy — a *mise en abyme* of the poetic process'.¹³ For Hopman, this indicates that Medea is attempting to rewrite her own version of the epic of the Argo, and in the process undermine the androcentric nature of it. Presumably, at this point, having found her equivalent of Jason in Aegeus, whose relationships with her are both based on oaths, and who both facilitated an exodus from a place where she has murdered family members, she feels able to begin to sing her own song. While I can see parallels between the two stories, and would not deny this as a possible interpretation, I think it is equally possible that placing Medea in a position where she is able to explicitly describe the rest of the plot gives Euripides an opportunity to build irony and foil expectations of a conventional tragic structure. good

Euripides uses an interesting present imperative as a hint at what is to come in 774. Although the sense seems to be 'you will not receive my words with pleasure', or 'do not expect to receive pleasure from my words', it is almost as if Medea is instructing: do not receive my words with pleasure. Implying 'you won't like it', or 'don't expect anything good' feels less forceful than a direct present imperative. In this sense, it is more of an indicator that what is to come may be unexpected. There is pleasure in the playing out of a myth already known and understood, in a traditional form, i.e. that the tragedy may come to a conclusion after one more episode. This imperative is more like a warning, that what is to come will be worse than you currently imagine.

Medea's summary of her planned conversation with Jason for the chorus (776 ff.) is interesting in its use of tense. According to Michael Lloyd's theory on the use of the aorist in tragedy, this is the tense most often used as a form of polite distancing from socially problematic situations, such as thanking or offering approval.¹⁴ Here, however, Medea

¹³ Hopman, p. 156.

¹⁴ Michael Lloyd, 'The Tragic Aorist', *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1999), pp. 24-45, p. 38-39.

repeatedly uses the present tense (δοκεῖ; γαμεῖ; ἔχει; εἶναι; 777-80; contrast this to her use of the aorist in 223, when she is comparatively deferential to the chorus). This may be tenuous as it is not directly addressing Jason; it could be because she is declaring plans, or it could be an accurate indicator of the falsity of her offering of approval. She does go on to use the present tense during her dialogue with Jason at e.g. 884. Regardless of tense, she is overly repetitive: 'I will speak soft words, | Both how I agree with him [from 'it seems the same to me'] and it is well he marries | A royal family, which he has, having betrayed us | And that is suitable and well thought-out', which also demonstrates mocking and feigning of feeling. Although repetition can indicate a problematic text, in this instance and in the next I will describe, it seems to serve a purpose here.

Medea also seems unwilling to distance herself from the action in v. 781, where she uses the participial form 'λιμοῦσ' ἄν' corresponding to a potential optative.¹⁵ The use of the participle here could perhaps indicate that Medea will be more directly involved in not leaving her children in the land of her enemies, subtly undermining the anticipated outcome that the Corinthians will kill her children, and foreshadowing her actions. This foreshadowing is compounded by the consistent repetition and emphasis of παῖδας τοὺς ἐμοὺς in 780 and 782.¹⁶ Something will happen to the children and Medea will be unable to save them. Buttrey points out the strikingness of the repetition, and its re-emphasis through continuing use of παῖδα to refer to Creon's daughter (783); his belief is that this allows the audience to carry on believing that the myth will play out as expected, and by having Medea continue her planning, the eventual reveal becomes all the more shocking.¹⁷ Referring to Jason's bride using the same word as she uses to refer to their children also alludes to the fact that by killing her, Medea will prevent Jason from having more children with his new wife, thoroughly ensuring that she has destroyed his chances of children as far as she can.

This passage, then, is a crafted exercise in subtle foreshadowing and playing with common tragic imagery and repetition to build audience expectation of both plot and structure, providing a build to subvert them with intense dramatic irony. It continues to justify Medea's revenge through its invocation of Zeus, in particular, and perhaps hint at the involvement of the gods in the ultimate outcome. Its positioning directly following the dialogue between Aegeus and Medea allows Euripides to create a turning point in the

¹⁵ Mastronarde, note to 781.

¹⁶ Mastronarde notes that some editors have deleted 782.

¹⁷ Buttrey, p. 14.

action, emotion and tone of the tragedy, through Aegeus as problem-solver, Medea's rejoicing at this, and her succinct and decisive description of her plans and therefore his plans for the rest of the drama. The use of language and content establishes a seemingly predictable sequence of events to heighten the shocking nature of Medea's revelation: τέκνα γὰρ κατακτενῶ | τᾶμ'.

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