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AUTOCHTHONY, MISOGYNY, AND HARMONY:

MEDEA 824–45

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In Euripides' *Medea*, the formidable heroine is onstage nearly the entire drama, and her powerful presence dominates all the other figures in the play. We see her engage and manipulate other characters; we witness with sympathy her treatment at the hands of Jason; and we recoil in horror at the savagery with which she takes revenge on the royal family in Corinth as well as her own children. It is thus no surprise that critics view the play primarily in terms of her status as a woman and as a foreigner, as a "wife" and mother, as a heroine espousing the masculine code of revenge, as a purveyor of magic, and, finally, as a semi-divine character lofted away in her wondrous chariot, apparently never to be called to account for her crimes.¹ No matter how one reads the play, it seems clear that the role of women in Greek society is one of its major concerns. However, it is debatable whether women were even in the original audience; and if they were not, it is unclear how the men in the audience would respond to the display of gender conflict.² Meanwhile,

1 On Medea's espousal of heroic values, see Knox 1977, Bongie 1977, Foley 2001.243–68, McDermott 1989, Galis 1992, Rehm 1989, Harder 1993, Katz 1994, Segal 1996, Boedeker 1997, Allan 2002.81–99. For the relevance of Athenian marriage and family practices, see Palmer 1957, Visser 1986, Seaford 1990, Williamson 1990, Sicking 1998, Burnett 1998.196–202, McClure 1999, Bowman 2002, Allan 2002.45–65, Mueller 2001, Lyons 2002. For the infanticide, see Easterling 1977, Gellie 1988, Rabinowitz 1993.146–47, Syropoulos 2001–02, Allan 2002.81–99. On the meaning of Medea's final escape, see Galis 1992, Burnett 1998.220–24, Friedrich 1990, Rehm 1994.105–08, Griffiths 2006.75–78. My overall view of the play is most influenced by Rabinowitz 1993.

2 On the makeup of the audience, see Podlecki 1990; Goldhill 1994, 1997. For the impact on the audience of the *Medea*, see Castellani 1989; March 1990; Rabinowitz 1993; Barlow 1989, 1995; Lawrence 1997; Newman 2001; Allan 2002.67–79.

the central scene in which the Athenian king Aegeus visits Medea, and the chorus in praise of Athens immediately following his departure, place Athens and the gender relations of its male citizenry inextricably in the midst of the moral and social maelstrom provoked by Medea. That ode opens with a clear reference to the autochthonous origin of Athens (824–26):

From ancient times, the sons of Erechtheus are favored;
they are children of the blessed gods
sprung from a land holy and unconquered.³

Nicole Loraux and others have shown that the theme of autochthony is a crucial linchpin connecting issues of gender and citizenship in the Athenian democracy, a theme that is central to Euripides' *Ion* and his fragmentary *Erechtheus*.⁴ In what follows, I would like to explore this theme in the *Medea*, where the powerful figure of its heroine has caused its importance to be overlooked.

To anticipate my conclusion, I will argue that the utopian image of the ode in praise of Athens is simultaneously a distillation of the central conflicts of the drama and an attempt to produce an aesthetically satisfying resolution to those very issues. By celebrating the homogeneous male citizenry through the discourse of autochthony, while also making provision for the positive aspects of heterosexual reproduction, the choral ode provides a utopian vision of Athens bereft of the conflicts that the rest of the play dramatizes so powerfully. Moreover, Euripides exploits the dramatic possibilities of the stage to blur distinctions of time, place, and gender in a way that contributes to the production of that utopian vision, revealing art's general inclination towards "transcending in fictive unreality the social limitations and historical conditions of its own production."⁵ I will begin with a brief account of the tragic discourse of autochthony as laid out by Loraux and others and then use that discourse as a context for reading key passages in the play, especially the first two stanzas of the third stasimon.

The topic of autochthony became a key ideological motif of democratic Athens. The original meaning of the word, as its etymology suggests, must be something like "residing in the same land"; but in the fifth century,

3 Translations of the *Medea* are from Kovacs 1994, slightly modified.

4 Loraux 1986, 1993, 2000; Saxonhouse 1986, 1992; Tyrrell 1989; Zacharias 2003.

5 Hall 1997.125. Compare Griffin 1998.

the term came to mean more specifically “born of the earth,” as in the case of Cecrops and others, but especially Erechtheus/Erichthonius.⁶ Despite the patent absurdity of the idea that men and women are born in different ways, Athenians elaborated the notion that all true citizens were autochthonous in this narrower sense, even in the face of the Periclean law of 451 restricting citizenship to persons of citizen birth on both their father’s and mother’s sides.⁷ The rationale for such a claim lies in the importance of creating a bond among all Athenian citizens that transcended other commitments within and outside the city. This becomes translated into the doctrine that all Athenians are united into a homogeneous collectivity by their common autochthonous birth.

The discourse of autochthony was inflected in different ways in different contexts. For example, in the wartime funeral speeches delivered in the *kerameikos*, the official cemetery at the foot of the Acropolis, Athenian orators praised the dead sons of the fatherland (*patris*) as they were buried in the civic soil (*chora*) from which they had sprung in terms that emphasized their equality to each other (Loraux 1993.43–44):

The *kerameikos* is a heroic site, but also an isonomic one, where citizen-soldiers, rich and poor, residents of the city and the countryside, the *agathoi* and the nameless, are all buried side by side, tribe by tribe, in the same monument, not known either by patronym or by deme.

In the *kerameikos*, democratic discourse has incorporated autochthony and translated it into an ideal devoid of any mention of Erechtheus or Athena. On the Acropolis, however, the myth of the earth-born son and his protective female deity Athena is remembered, and Erechtheus is celebrated as the forefather of all the Athenian people. There the city “chooses to remember that its cohesiveness is wholly collective, and the Panathenaic procession ‘enumerates’ the diversity of the democratic polis: sexes, age groups and social classes all mingled together” (Loraux 1993.45).

The Panathenaic festival celebrated the special character of the city of Athens in opposition to all other Greek cities (whose inhabitants were

6 Rosivach 1987, Shapiro 1998.

7 Aristotle *Ath. Pol.* 26.4. For the meaning of the wording in Aristotle, see Patterson 1986, who takes a broader view of women’s role in the city than Loraux.

immigrants), and this idea played a key role in the Athenian justification of their empire. Even here on the Acropolis, however, the inclusion of a representation of Pandora at the feet of Athena in the Parthenon is a reminder of the myth complementary to autochthony: the “tribe of women” are a separate race descended from Pandora, who was “fashioned” from the earth (i.e., not “born” of the earth: Loraux 1993.72–110). For there can be no question that the discourse of autochthony also entails the exclusion of women and denigrates their role in the reproduction of the city. Between these two extremities of the city’s symbolic landscape, Acropolis and *kerameikos*, is the space of tragedy, where mythic and civic discourse met in another format in order to confront the difficulties encountered by the exclusion of women.⁸ Here in the theatre of Dionysus, as Loraux points out, the issues of gender tend to be foregrounded most strongly, and the dark side of the myth of autochthony is given expression (1993.220–47).

In the case of Euripides, the *Ion* and the fragmentary *Erechtheus* have been the focus of attention with regard to autochthony. But the *Medea* is one of two plays by Euripides in which a male character expresses the wish that there were some way for men to reproduce without the mediation of women, a wish that Loraux argues (1993.72–110, 2000.83–94) is reflected in the Athenian myth of autochthony (*Medea* 573–75):

χρῆν γὰρ ἄλλοθέν ποθεν βροτοῦς
παῖδας τεκνοῦσθαι, θῆλυ δ’ οὐκ εἶναι γένος·
χοῦτως ἂν οὐκ ἦν οὐδὲν ἀνθρώποις κακόν.

Mortals should produce children from some
other source, and there ought to be no female kind.
Then mankind would have no trouble.⁹

This remark by Jason, of course, and the one similar to it in the *Hippolytus*, take for granted that humans of both genders are, in fact, born of women

8 This is not to say that women were, in fact, completely excluded from the city’s life, only that for Athenians their *politeia* was increasingly thought of in abstract and primarily male terms. Patterson 1986 surveys the range of participation of women in the traditional community of Athens as opposed to this more narrowly male sovereign body. For women’s legal status, see Foxhall 1996.

9 Cf. *Hippolytus* 616–19: “O Zeus, why have you settled women in the light of the sun, women, this bane mankind find counterfeit? If you wished to propagate the human race (βρότειον γένος), it was not from women that you should have given us this.”

and not from the earth, and tragedy is one of the places where the myth of autochthony faces up to the fact of this dual heritage. The conflicts that arise from the inescapability of women's presence in the city and from the role of women in the reproduction of its citizenry make up a normal tragic scenario. The *Medea* certainly centralizes this theme and the various institutions that deal with it, so it will be convenient to give a brief survey of these issues in the play.

Most readers observe that Medea undergoes a change in the eyes of the audience in the course of the play. She is initially made to be quite sympathetic, a sympathy that is foregrounded in the response of the chorus—whose collusion she secures in her scheme to punish Jason—and also in the condemnation of Jason by the nurse and by Aegeus. However, many things contribute to the sense that Medea's revenge is excessive and reprehensible, such as the graphic account by the messenger of the piteous death of Creon and his daughter, and the chorus' revulsion at Medea's plans to kill her children. Moreover, it is often noted that the earlier and more sympathetic Medea articulates her complaints as the general grievances of her gender, making her a kind of representative woman. As such, the final negative judgment that the play seems to cast on her actions intimates that women as a whole are capable of terrible deeds and not worthy of the sympathy evoked earlier in the play for them.¹⁰ Indeed, Medea's protestations that she is a woman without any choices, whose infanticide spares her children a fate worse than death, seem to be refuted by the surprise revelation at the end that she has the power to prevent Jason or anyone else from touching the children.

At the same time, Medea, as a representative of her gender, is characterized as essentially "other" in regard to the male community of citizens, whose masculine values were celebrated and confirmed in civic events such as tragic competitions (Goldhill 1990, 1997). She is a foreigner, incapable of producing legitimate male heirs; she is a woman, who is thus "outside" an exclusively male sovereign body. Finally, at the end of the play, she is revealed to be semi-divine, so that in her final appearance *ex machina*, Medea "will have appeared not only as female, but as emphatically barbarian, and quasi-divine rather than mortal, triply distanced from the self-definition of the mortal, male, Athenian audience."¹¹

10 McDermott 1989.51, Rabinowitz 1993.132.

11 Bowman 2002.161. See Rabinowitz 1993.131–41. O'Higgins 1997 and Graf 1997 show this overdetermined "otherness" is part of Medea's character in other contexts.

There are many dimensions of the *Medea* that complicate and enrich this basic narrative trajectory, and I do not mean to dismiss their importance for the meaning of the play to its original audience. But there is good reason to focus on the meaning of the play for the problematic relationship between the exclusively male community of Athenian citizens and the “tribe of women,” who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. When the Athenian hero Aegeus arrives on stage and Medea proposes to help him with his problem, childlessness, in exchange for being allowed to enter his city and find safety there—the very devil’s bargain that Jason has just lamented earlier in the play—what was going through the minds of the Athenian men in the audience? Did they, knowing what they did about Medea, begin yelling to Aegeus like a child in a scary movie: “Don’t do it, Aegeus! She’s a witch!” Indeed, this whole scenario—a play set in Corinth, but taking place at a festival in the very heart of Athens whose surrounding monuments were clearly visible to the audience, in which an Athenian hero enters the fictive Corinth and promises to bring Medea “home” to Athens so she can settle there and help him produce children—this whole scenario must have made the audience, in Knox’s words, “a trifle uneasy” (1977.201).

Producing this uneasiness must have been one of the aims of Euripides in this play, since it can be observed at many levels. The fictive temporal and spatial setting of the play, for example, would have created a certain distance between the audience and the performers, but this distance is violated numerous times in the play by the introduction of contemporary issues.¹² With her insistence on oaths and revenge, Medea seems to be a creature from the heroic past, while Jason seems to live in the present world of Athens. Indeed, his reasoning about having legitimate heirs and the status of his relationship with Medea would not have sounded unfamiliar or illogical to the men in the audience. Meanwhile, the complaint of Medea about the lives of women seems to be drawn from the experiences of contemporary Athenian wives, while the issues of citizenship and foreigners echo those of Athenian politics. Finally, the fact that Medea, a representative of women in general, who transcends her role as a woman in part by taking on characteristics of the masculine heroic code, was being played by a cross-dressing male actor might have been a factor in the audience’s reactions to the display of gender issues in the play. Although Froma Zeit-

12 On this fictive distance in tragedy in general and its ambiguities, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988.29–48. For the *Medea* in particular, see the works cited in note 1 above.

lin argues that this is a potentially significant aspect of any dramatization of women in Attic tragedy, Nancy Rabinowitz argues persuasively that the cross-dressing conventions may have had a special impact in the *Medea*.¹³ Moreover, Helene Foley shows that the great monologue of Medea pits a heroic male self against a maternal self. How would such a juxtaposition of gendered values have made the male members of the audience feel about *themselves*?¹⁴ Which side of Medea's "divided self" would have seemed more admirable and noble to these men: the masculine or the feminine?

The chorus of Corinthian women are also cross-dressing males, and their vacillating support of Medea contributes to the sense that right does not lie completely with either Jason or Medea. Medea's passion for Jason sets her apart from typical Athenian wives who, unlike Medea, are given in marriage by their fathers, passing from the authority of one man to that of another. Although Medea frequently speaks of the oaths that bind her and Jason, their relationship is never called a *gamos*, and the audience may have considered Medea comparable to a concubine who would be ineligible to produce male heirs (Bowman 2002). Somewhere between Jason, who in typical male fashion treats relationships as economic contracts, and Medea, who is willing to sacrifice everything for her passion, the communal voice of the chorus suggests that a middle ground is possible and desirable. Although the non-verbal part of the performance of the chorus is one of the least documented dimensions of Greek tragedy, we can imagine that the audience must have had a strong emotional response to the chorus, whose elaborate movements and beautiful voices must have been a source of pleasure that went beyond the mere meaning of the words they sang. Homogeneous, coordinated, visually and aurally beautiful, they must have also been a source of enormous civic pride to the men in the audience whom they represented in the dramatic competition.¹⁵

With these ideas in mind, let us turn to the text of the first strophe and antistrophe of the third stasimon (*Medea* 824–45):

Ἐρεχθεΐδαι τὸ παλαιὸν ὄλβιοι
καὶ θεῶν παῖδες μακάρων, ἱερᾶς
χώρας ἀπορθήτου τ' ἄπο, φερβόμενοι

13 Zeitlin 1990a; Rabinowitz 1995, 1998.

14 Foley 2001.257–68. Cf. Burnett 1998.273–87.

15 For discussions of the chorus and its relationship to the audience, see the works cited below note 44. With special reference to the chorus of the *Ion* of Euripides, see Farber 1992.

κλεινοτάταν σοφίαν, αἰεὶ διὰ λαμπροτάτου
 βαίνοντες ἄβρῳς αἰθέρος, ἔνθα ποθ' ἄγνὰς
 ἐννέα Πιερίδας Μούσας λέγουσι
 ξανθὰν Ἀρμονίαν φυτεῦσαι·

τοῦ καλλινάου τ' ἐπὶ Κηφισοῦ ῥοαῖς
 τὰν Κύπριν κλήζουσιν ἄφυσσαμέναν
 χώρας καταπνεῦσαι μετρίας ἀνέμων
 ἡδυπνόους αὔρας· αἰεὶ δ' ἐπιβαλλομένην
 χαίταισιν εὐώδη ῥοδέων πλόκον ἀνθέων
 τῇ Σοφίᾳ παρέδρους πέμπειν Ἑρωτας,
 παντοίας ἀρετᾶς ξυνεργούς.

From ancient times, the sons of Erechtheus are favored;
 they are children of the blessed gods
 sprung from a *land* holy and unconquered.
 Feeding on wisdom most glorious, and *ever* through the
 bright air
 stepping gracefully, where once the holy
 nine Pierian Muses, they say,
 brought forth fair-haired Harmony.

At the streams of beautiful flowing Cephisus,
 they say that Aphrodite, having drawn out water,
 blew down upon the *land* temperate and
 sweetly blowing breezes. And *ever* dressing
 her hair with a fragrant chaplet of roses,
 she sends the Loves to sit at Wisdom's side,
 joint workers in every kind of excellence.

These lines are a remarkable hymn-like praise of Athens, comparable to the ode in praise of Athens in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (668–719). Discussions of this example in the *Medea* emphasize the contrast between these first two stanzas, which portray Athens as a place of light, beauty, and poetry, populated by primarily feminine figures (Harmonia, the Muses, Aphrodite),¹⁶ with the last two stanzas that urge Medea not to kill her children (“How could such a city receive a murderess?”). How-

16 Pucci 1980.116–27, Rehm 2002.263–67.

ever, these first two stanzas can be seen to set up a contrast between each other as well, something highlighted by the structure and balance between them.¹⁷ Besides the significant repetition in identical metrical position of *χώρας* and *αἰεῖ*, there is a parallel contrast in each stanza between tenses of continuous action and aorist tenses: *φερβόμενοι* and *βαίνοντες* versus *φυτεῦσαι*; then *ἀφυσσάμεναν* and *καταπνεῦσαι* versus *ἐπιβαλλομένην* and *πέμπειν*. The present tenses describe a continuous state of affairs; the aorist tenses describe two obscure events in the past. Against the background of these parallels, an important contrast emerges.

The strophe refers to the Athenians as “Children of Erechtheus,” a poetic term that calls attention to their autochthonous heritage through the traditional king “born of the earth,” Erechtheus/Erichthonius.¹⁸ The autochthony topos is reiterated with the assertion that the Athenians are “sprung from” (*ᾠπο*) a land that is “unconquered” (*ἀπορρήτου*) or “never invaded” by foreigners, which we could translate as “unpenetrated” to underline the way military and political domination was often cast in sexual terms in Athenian visual and verbal discourse.¹⁹ The idealized Athenian community in the strophe derives its special character from its peculiar origin as “children of the gods” and “sprung from the earth.” Moreover, this origin seems to translate into a perpetual state of affairs, emphasized by the verbs of continuous action: the Athenians are “feeding themselves (*φερβόμενοι*) on wisdom” and “ever stepping (*αἰεῖ βαίνοντες*) through the air.” The word *αἰεῖ*, which is repeated in exactly the same position in the antistrophe, stresses the description of a perpetual state of affairs that transcends and survives the coming and going of individuals, who are interchangeable and equal to each other, one of the key elements in the ideal of autochthony. Indeed, Loraux notes the importance of the word *αἰεῖ* in institutional decrees to express this permanence within transience:

Referring to the rotation of public duties, with every year seeing new magistrates presiding over the political life of the polis, the institutional language of the decrees used an “always” (*αἰεῖ*) in which the perpetual commencement of

17 See the commentaries of Page 1938 and Mastronarde 2002 ad loc.

18 Erechtheus seems to be the name of the adult king, Erichthonius the name most often associated with the earth-born child, although the sources are inconsistent. See Loraux 1993.46–52.

19 Henderson 1991.44–45, although he does not cite this word.

the same was expressed, and, with its “magistrates always in office” [τῶν αἰεὶ ἐν ἀρχῇ ὄντων] the city confirmed its own identity, preserved above and beyond the diversity of individuals.²⁰

Indeed, these first few lines of the strophe show the way autochthony is often implied to be an inherited trait, something that all Athenians share in equally, so that “through the celebration of autochthony, time is annulled in a perpetual recreation of origin.”²¹ The underlying vision here of an abstract and homogeneous community is clearly the version of Athenian identity that is celebrated in the *kerameikos* in the annual funeral oration, and it is this community of male citizens that is imagined to sustain itself and reproduce itself *without the mediation of women*. This is, of course, a piece of mythic thinking. It does not represent the day-to-day beliefs of Athenians about their actual births and parentage, but rather it is a discourse that is allowed to operate and circulate under specific circumstances.

Females do enter the picture at the very end of the strophe, in the first of two obscure events reported in indirect discourse with aorist tenses. Whereas the preceding lines describe an ongoing state of affairs (the Athenians *are* blessed, they *are* feeding, they *are* stepping), there is now a pointed change to a particular event: “where once (ἔνθα ποτε), they say, the nine Muses brought forth (φύτεῦσαι) fair-haired Harmony.” These lines contain a puzzling catachresis that has produced a second interpretation of the line: “fair-haired Harmony begat the nine Muses.” For the anthropomorphism of Harmonia implicit in the adjective ξανθὰν seems to suggest the idea of organic birth for the verb φυτεύω,²² and it makes more sense that the single female figure Harmony would “beget” nine sisters rather than nine sisters

20 Loraux 2000.17. For the expression “magistrates always in office” (τῶν αἰεὶ ἐν ἀρχῇ ὄντων), see, for example, Pericles’ funeral oration (Thuc. 2.37).

21 Loraux 2000.17. See again Pericles’ funeral oration (Thuc. 2.36): τὴν γὰρ χώραν οἱ αὐτοὶ αἰεὶ οἰκοῦντες διαδοχῇ τῶν ἐπιγιννομένων μέχρι τοῦδε ἐλευθέραν δι’ ἀρετὴν παρέδοσαν, “For the same people, ever inhabiting this land, by a succession of generations up to the present, handed it down free through their valor.” The funeral oration’s task is to link the dead in this endless chain of generations, the Athenian *aion*, which is “transitory and permanent, exhausting itself in the course of generations, disappearing in its very renewal, and surviving forever through its ever-renewed plenitude” (Loraux 1986.125, citing the definition of *aion* from Benveniste).

22 As it does a few lines later: κασιγνήτους τέκνοις ἐμοῖς φυτεύων, “begetting brothers for my children” (*Med.* 872–73), and in all other occurrences in Euripides.

somehow “begetting” an individual “Harmony.”²³ However, φυτεύω regularly refers to a male “begetting” children, as opposed to τίκτειν, “to bear.” In fact, all the other sixteen occurrences of the word in Euripides refer to male “begetting,”²⁴ which makes the application of the word either to the Muses or Harmonia a catachresis. Moreover, the Muses are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, nor were they traditionally born in Athens. In fact, the adjective Πιερίδας, usually interpreted as a toponym, “daughters of Pieria,” indicates their association with northern Greece. Thus the metaphorical “bringing forth” of Harmony by the Muses is the more sensible reading, celebrating the power of song to produce literal and figurative harmony. Nevertheless, in a passage that is already focused on peculiar forms of “bringing forth,” the grammatical and lexical ambiguity in this line seems designed to blur distinctions of gender and agency, especially since the literal meaning of φυτεύω is to “plant something in the ground.” In fact, Gilbert Murray (1912.91–92) interprets the line to mean that the Muses allegorically “planted” Harmony in the soil of Athens.

Besides being an abstraction, of course, Harmonia is also a mythical figure, the “fair-haired” daughter of Aphrodite and Ares. Traditionally, she is given in marriage to Cadmus, in a wedding that is celebrated by all the gods (including the Muses²⁵), and she joins Cadmus as the ancestor of the Theban royal house. Her children include Semele, Ino, and Agave, all mothers who, in different ways, cause, or nearly cause, the death of their own children. In fact, Ino’s story is recalled by the chorus of the *Medea* in lines 1282–90, the only other woman they can think of who laid hands on her own children. But Cadmus’s marriage to Harmonia is only one of the two systems of reproduction focused around that famous Phoenician immigrant, for Thebes has an autochthonous myth of its own. According to that story, Cadmus slays a dragon, the child of Ares, and sows its teeth in the ground, whence the Spartoi emerge from the earth, who immediately set about killing each other. Most of our sources for this Theban autochthony are Athenian and implicitly contrast it negatively with the “good”

23 This is the argument of Pucci 1980.217 n.40 and Most 1999.20 n.1, rejected by Mastrocinque 2002.309.

24 *Suppl.* 980, 1092; *Iph. Aul.* 29, 1177; *Med.* 873, 1090; *Orest.* 11, 552, 585; *Alc.* 662; *Rh.* 352, 883; *Ion* 1099; *Hipp.* 460; *Bacch.* 538; *Andr.* 49.

25 Theognis 15–18, Pindar *Pyth.* 3.88–92, Eur. *Phoen.* 822. According to Pausanias (9.12.3), the bridal chamber of Harmonia and the very place where the Muses sang her wedding song were identified by the Thebans of his time.

autochthony of Athens, the latter producing equality and harmony, the former incest and internecine conflict.²⁶ Given the peculiarities of the introduction of “fair-haired Harmony” in the *Medea*, it is possible that the role of Thebes in Attic tragedy as a kind of “anti-Athens” is the background for her appearance here.²⁷ This relevance is further suggested in the antistrophe, for the chorus now turns to Aphrodite, Harmonia’s mother, and her role in the history of the city of Athens.

The antistrophe presents a contrast in tenses similar to the one in the strophe, but in reverse order, beginning with an obscure event that is reported in indirect discourse and aorist tenses: “They say (κλήζουσιν) that Aphrodite drew water (ἀφυσσάμεναι) from the river Cephissus and breathed upon (καταπνεῦσαι) the earth.” There does not seem to be any specific mythological incident to which Euripides is referring,²⁸ but the erotic associations of flowers, fragrances, and hair identify Aphrodite as the goddess of love and sexual desire. Rush Rehm notes a number of specific echoes of Sappho in these few verses.²⁹ In the second half of the antistrophe, marked off clearly by the repetition of the adverb αἰεί, there is a switch to present tenses that represent the perpetual activity of Aphrodite: she causes the Erotes, personified agents of erotic desire, to team up with “Wisdom” as allies and coworkers in every kind of excellence (ἀρετή). This unusual evocation of Aphrodite’s role in assisting with the successful production of Athenian excellence and community leaves no doubt about her specifically erotic connotations, and this is all the more striking because of the contrast it sets up with the asexual autochthonic community envisioned in the first strophe.³⁰ Moreover, the particular formulation of Erotes teaming up with

26 Zeitlin 1990b.148–50, Loraux 2000.14, 56–57. On Theban sources, see Mastronarde 1994.17–30 and Vian 1963. See the choruses in Euripides’ *Phoenissae*, especially *Phoen.* 818–33, where Harmonia and the Spartoi are juxtaposed in an ode that is a companion piece to this ode in the *Medea*. For discussion of these choral odes, see Arthur 1977.

27 For Thebes as a kind of “anti-Athens” in Greek drama, see Zeitlin 1990b. On Cadmus as a barbarian in Euripides, see Saïd 2002.87–100. The two ideas are connected in Morris 1992.378–83.

28 I therefore cannot agree with Pucci 1980.217 when he says that “already” the association of Aphrodite and the Muses with Athens was traditional, citing as evidence only the chorus for *Oedipus at Colonus*, a play produced many years after *Medea*. Shapiro 1998.142 notes an example of Aphrodite at the scene of the birth of Erichthonius on a late fifth-century calyx-krater.

29 Rehm 1989.87. Pucci 1980.117, on the contrary, sees Aphrodite as standing for art and poetry, rather than for the sexual drive.

30 Pucci 1980.122–25; Rehm 2002.264: “The audience . . . is carried upstream in a poetic river, finding at its source an idealized and poetically ‘feminized’ Athens.”

Wisdom is itself a utopian formulation of one of the major conflicts of the play, that between reason and passion.³¹ Indeed, in the second stasimon, the destructive force of Aphrodite herself and her Erotes had been emphasized (627–35):

Loves (ἔρωτες) that come to us in excess bring no good
 name (εὐδοξίαν)
 or goodness (ἀρετάν) to men. If Aphrodite comes in
 moderation,
 no other goddess brings such happiness.
 Never, O goddess, may you smear with desire
 one of your ineluctable arrows and let it fly
 against my heart from your golden bow!

The river god Cephisus also plays a role in Athenian myths of origins, since traditionally he is the source of a kind of “feminine autochthony” as the sole parent of Praxithea, the wife of Erechtheus.³² Her story is most famously presented in Euripides’ fragmentary *Erechtheus*, where her sacrifice of her daughter helps to “restore the city’s foundations” (ἐξανώρθωσας βάθρα, frag. 370.95) after a foreign invasion, and she subsequently becomes Athena’s first priestess.³³ Although sources about her are scant, Praxithea seems to be the motherless daughter of the river god. The expression used to describe how Aphrodite “drew” water from the river Cephisus has a vaguely sexual overtone to it, which one translator augments by rendering the phrase as she “filled her pail.” This strikes me as a subtle parallel to the numerous euphemisms for masculine penetration, chief among which are the terms for “plowing” or “sowing” a field.³⁴

31 Newman 2001.65 notes the following instances in the tragedy: 190, 285, 295ff., 320, 409, 485, 580, 600, 1225. See Foley 2001.246–57.

32 On Praxithea and “feminine autochthony,” see Sissa and Detienne 2000.210–22. Loraux 1993.248–49 disputes the possibility of “feminine autochthony,” just as she claims there is no such things as a female Athenian; but if there was ever an exception to prove the rule, the parthenogenetically produced daughter of Cephisus would be it. Later accounts (Apollodorus 3.15.1) make Praxithea the granddaughter of Cephisus.

33 For Praxithea in Euripides, see Harder 1993.336–42, Collard et al. 1995.148–94. Praxithea is twice called the daughter of Cephisus in Lycurgus (partially cited below) and in the restored reading of line 63 of frag. 370 (Collard et al. 1995.191). She is also the mother of the Kreousa of Euripides’ *Ion* (cf. *Ion* 277–80).

34 I can find no specifically erotic use of ἀφύσσω, which is used primarily of drawing liquid from a larger vessel with a smaller one (LSJ s.v.), but duBois notes that an analogical

It seems that Aphrodite is being delicately evoked as a maternal figure in the production of Praxithea by “receiving” the “waters” of Cephisus. Such an oblique participation in procreation would find a parallel in the unusual story in which Hephaestus, Athena, and Ge each contribute to the engendering of Erichthonius/Erechtheus. In that story, Hephaestus pursues Athena unsuccessfully, but his premature ejaculation lands on the thigh of Athena, who then brushes it off onto the earth. Erichthonius/Erechtheus, the earth-born hero, is thus the “offspring” of Athena, Hephaestus, and Ge.³⁵ In the antistrophe, we can observe a parallel sequence, in which Aphrodite “drew from” the river Cephisus and then “breathed upon the land” (καταπνεύσαι). The verb καταπνεύω can refer to divine inspiration,³⁶ and in this context, could connote some oblique form of insemination. The exact repetition of the word χώρας in the antistrophe thus serves to make a parallel between the autochthony of Athenian males in the first strophe and this “reproductive event” of Aphrodite in the second, while simultaneously drawing a contrast. For the first instance of χώρας is an example of what we could call a “genitive of origin” with the preposition ἀπό, while the second is the direct object of καταπνεύω,³⁷ setting up a contrast in agency. The “children of Erichtheus” are spontaneously “of the earth” and “feeding themselves” on wisdom in the first strophe, but in the second, Aphrodite breathed “on the land” and “sends” the Erotes to sit with Wisdom.³⁸

Although Praxithea is not named in the ode, her presence is evoked indirectly by the mention of her parallel in Theban myth: Harmonia. Just

system links ceramic vessels, earth, and women’s bodies, since “all are seen as hiding, containing, producing, and giving up substances that permit the continuation of human existence” (duBois 1988.49). Obscene references to household bowls and implements are catalogued by Henderson 1991.142–44, although no exact parallel in comedy can be found to this passage (not surprisingly).

35 Loraux 1993.57–64. The multiplication of parthenogenetically born agents: Hephaestus, Athena, Ge, Aphrodite, perhaps helps to evoke the “motherless” Praxithea.

36 As in Aeschylus *Ag.* 105. Cf. Eur. *Rh.* 387. It is used in an erotic context in Aristophanes *Lys.* 552. Another extraordinary parallel in Euripides’ *Phoenissae* occurs when Ares, who is called παράμους (785), is said “to inspire the Argive army with a lust for Theban blood” (789–90: στρατὸν Ἀργείων ἐπιπνεύσας αἵματι Θήβας), and a few lines later (794–95): “inspiring the Argives against the race of the Spartoi” (Ἀργείοις ἐπιπνεύσας Σπαρτῶν γένναν).

37 Actually, the manuscripts have χώραν in line 837 and χώρας is a restoration. See Mastro-narde 2002.310.

38 The middle participle describing Aphrodite in the antistrophe as “helping herself” to the water of Cephisus (ἀφυσσασμένην) also contrasts with the middle participle describing the Athenians φερβόμενοι (“feeding themselves” on wisdom) in the strophe.

as Harmonia is the wife of the Theban founder Cadmus, Praxithea, as the wife of Erechtheus, is a key figure in one of the two reproduction systems that center around that mythical ancestor of the Athenians. In the context of Euripides' play, Praxithea makes a good contrast to the figure of Medea, for she is famous for being a "good Athenian mother," willing to sacrifice her female children for the good of the male state, an episode in Athenian history that is dramatized in Euripides' fragmentary *Erechtheus*. Praxithea's speech from that play is quoted at length by Lycurgus in the fourth century to illustrate how a good wife puts the welfare of the state ahead of the welfare of her own children (Lyc. *Against Leocrates* 98–101, trans. J. O. Burtt, Loeb ed. 1954):

You will find in [the speech of Praxithea from Euripides' *Erechtheus*] a greatness of spirit and a nobility worthy of Athens and of a daughter of Cephisus:

"I shall give my child to die for many reasons: first, there is no state I count more worthy to accept my gift than Athens, peopled by no alien race.

For we are of this soil (αὐτόχθονες δ' ἔφουμεν), while other towns, formed as by hazard in a game of draughts, take their inhabitants from diverse parts . . . And secondly, it is that we may guard our country and the altars of the gods that we bear children at all. There is one name for this whole city, but many inhabit it. How can I destroy all these, when I can give one girl to die for all?"

On these verses, gentlemen, your fathers were brought up. All women are by nature fond of children, but this one Euripides portrayed as loving her country more than her offspring.

Giulia Sissa and Marcel Detienne (2000.215–19) call Praxithea an "Anti-Clytemnestra"; but Euripides' Medea is also an appropriate inverse of this defender of male values. It may be objected that the allusion to Praxithea here is so subtle as to be non-existent, but such an elision of female participation in the procreation of the Athenian citizenry is not inconsistent with the discourse of autochthony that permeates this ode. So, too, in Pericles' funeral oration, the greatest glory for women is not to be spoken of for good or bad (Thuc. 2.45).

Also noteworthy is the utopian state of affairs in Athens produced by the continuous erotic activity of Aphrodite (ἐπιβαλλομένην, πέμπειν). These verbs of continuous action, reinforced by the significant repetition of αἰεὶ, correspond to the present tense verbs of the strophe. But they are also a contrast to the metaphorical production of “harmony” at the end of that strophe. Whereas there the multiple Muses produced (once) the single Harmonia, here Aphrodite continuously produces a specifically heterogeneous and multiple unity: she sends the plural Erotes to be “partners” (παρέδρους) and “co-workers” (ξυνεργούς) with Wisdom. In contrast to the first strophe, the ideal community here is not homogenous but a heterogeneous multiplicity, presided over by the queen of heterosexuality.

In the subsequent two stanzas, the chorus wonders: “How could such a city receive a murderess?” Since it is known by the Athenian audience that Aegeus does welcome Medea and that she is destined to pose a threat to his children as well, there is a tendency to see the question of the chorus as ironic.³⁹ But Athens was proud of her tradition of allowing suppliants and foreigners to have a place in the city, even though there were severe restrictions on their participation in the city’s life. This policy regularly appears in the funeral orations alongside the claims to autochthony,⁴⁰ and it is also the subject of a number of tragedies, such as Euripides’ *Suppliants* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. But this provision for foreigners is analogous to the role of Athenian wives, who are also in a sense “outsiders” who have an essential, albeit restricted, role “inside.” The chorus’ question is therefore not necessarily ironic but paradoxical. Just as Athenians must allow women into their city in order to reproduce the community—despite the dangers of female subjectivity—so also Athenians must allow outsiders a limited role in their city in order for it to be the vital city that it is, despite the dangers particular aliens might pose.⁴¹ Medea, the problematic “wife” who is also a foreigner in the strict sense, embodies all the dangerous necessities and necessary dangers associated with “otherness.”

39 McDermott 1989.102–06, Sfyroeras 1994–95, Rehm 1994.106, Mastronarde 2002.305, Allan 2002.77.

40 In Pericles’ funeral oration (Thuc. 2.39), for example, Athenian openness is contrasted to the Spartan tradition of expulsion of foreigners (*xenelasia*). See Loraux 1986.67–69, Saxonhouse 1992.88, Strauss 1994, Loraux 2000.128–34, Patterson 2007.163. Also see Zeitlin 1990b.148 on the “closed” character of Thebes, marked by incest and internecine conflict.

41 Lueck’s emendation of the problematic μετ’ ἄλλων το μέταυλον (= μέτοικος) in line 850 helps draw the parallel between wives and foreigners. For discussion of this textual problem, see Most 1999 and Mastronarde 2002.311.

The *Medea* is remarkable in the way various oppositions become famously blurred in it: male and female, mortal and divine, *oikos* and *polis*, foreign and native, past and contemporary, Corinth and Athens.⁴² One effect of this blurring is the uncanny sensation that things are not as they seem—a kind of cognitive dissonance. Another effect of this blurring can be a sense that, after all, these contradictions and oppositions can be mediated and palliated. Everything in the first two stanzas of the third stasimon seems to be aimed at producing two contrasting and contradictory versions of the reproduction of the Athenian community—one homogeneous, male, autochthonous, without any kind of “invasion”; the other heterogeneous and effected by the participation of women—while at the same time insisting that they are somehow both just the one Athens. It is a classic case of mythic thinking: Athens is both homogeneous and heterogeneous, simultaneously “born from one and born from two.”⁴³ Part of what makes this illusion possible and plausible in the context of the *Medea* is the harmonizing power of song, invoked in the words of the chorus at the end of the first strophe, but, equally importantly, enacted by the chorus in their physical presence and performance. This performance, ostensibly by Corinthian women, but in reality by cross-dressing Athenian boys or men, must have had a powerful effect on the males in the audience who could see and hear in their performance an enactment of a communal ideal. Athens has been called the “choral state” (Kowalzig 2004), and a number of scholars have suggested ways in which the tragic chorus reflects or refracts some aspect of the Athenian civic community.⁴⁴ As such, their physical presence and performance serve to enact the very utopian vision the words they sing articulate.

The idea that song has some sort of a transforming function is a theme that is sounded several times in the play. It comes up first, negatively, in the Nurse’s complaint that singers have failed to produce songs that heal (195–200): “No man has found a way to allay hated grief by music and the minstrel’s varied strain, whence arise slaughters and fell strokes of fate to overthrow the homes of men. And yet this were surely a gain, to heal men’s wounds by music’s spell.” Donald Mastronarde notes

42 Newman 2001, Boedeker 1997, Sfyroeras 1994–95.

43 The phrase is borrowed from the structural analysis of Theban autochthony in Levi-Strauss 1967.216. For a structuralist reading of Athenian autochthony, see Peradotto 1977.

44 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988.29–48, Longo 1990, Winkler 1990, Bacon 1994–95, Nagy 1994–95, Calame 1994–95, Henrichs 1994–95, Gould 1996, Goldhill 1996, Segal 1997, Calame 1999, Mastronarde 1999.

that these words have a “metatheatrical or metapoetic thrust,” since tragedy itself “is a musical performance conducted amid festivities, and audience enjoyment is one of its effects and goals.”⁴⁵ This “metapoetic” call for a new and better song is reprised in the most famous choral ode of the play, the first stasimon (410–45):

Backward to their sources flow the streams of holy
 rivers,
 and the order of all things is reversed:
 men’s thoughts have become deceitful
 and their oaths by the gods do not hold fast.
 The common talk will so alter that women’s ways will
 enjoy good repute.
 Honor is coming to the female sex (γυναικείῳ γέννῳ):
 no more will women be maligned by slanderous rumor.

 The poetry of ancient bards will cease
 to hymn our faithlessness.
 Phoebus lord of song
 never endowed our minds
 with the glorious strains of the lyre.
 Else I could have sounded a hymn
 in reply to the male sex (ἀρσένων γέννῳ). The long
 expanse of time
 can say many things of men’s lot as well as of
 women’s.

This extraordinary counterclaim to the slanders against women is, according to Loraux (1993.107), the first instance of the expression “male *genos*.” Indeed, the passage is exceptional in intimating a symmetry between men and women, and it is tempting to see in this ode, shorn of its context, a “proto-feminist” Euripides reviling his male audience for their chauvinism, but this is perhaps wishful thinking.⁴⁶ There is a parallel passage in the third stasimon of Euripides’ *Ion* where the theme of autochthony is also sounded,

45 Mastronarde 2002.201–02. Cf. Segal 1996.42, Pucci 1977.

46 For a proto-feminist Euripides, see Castellani 1989, March 1990. Rabinowitz 1993, among others, argues against such a position for the author.

so the opposition between the two “races” in the *Medea* should perhaps be seen in this context.⁴⁷

Loraux argues that there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a “female Athenian,” a claim that is based on her strong reading of the discourse of autochthony (1993.111–23). This paradoxical claim, however, gives an incomplete idea of the actual position of women in Periclean Athens.⁴⁸ Autochthony is itself a divided and incoherent ideology, insisting on the cohesion of a community by insisting on its difference from the “other.” But insofar as the male citizenry of the sovereign *politeia* is also part of the larger entity of Athens, its “other” (women) is also part of the “same”: the “same” to which all non-Athenians are contrasted. Thus one of the consequences of the discourse of autochthony is that women, who are notoriously heterogeneous and variable, acquire a parallel homogeneity of their own over against male homogeneity. If the unity of the female *genos* is often used against them in a broad damnation of the “whole tribe of women,”⁴⁹ there is still a sense in which that unity reflects the larger and more heterogeneous tribe of all Athenians celebrated in the Panathenaic festival. Misogyny and harmony are both consequences of the claim of autochthony, springing from the same Athenian soil. Between the sympathetic Medea of the first part of the play, aligned as she is there with women as a whole, and the increasingly savage Medea of the second half, in every way becoming more and more alien to the values of Athenian males, Euripides has placed a striking celebration of a utopian harmony. It echoes both the utopian myths of the pan-Athenian Acropolis as well as the ideals of the more narrowly male discourse found in the *kerameikos* but makes use of the special resources of tragedy to make provision for both.⁵⁰

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47 *Ion* 1090–99: “You who sing in discordant hymns of our beds and of the unsanctioned, unholy loves of Cypris, see how much we surpass in reverence the unrighteous race of men (ἄρστον ἀνδρῶν). Let a counter-song (παλίμφομος) ring out against men, harshly indicting their loves.”

48 See Patterson 2007 for a broader interpretation of women’s “sharing” in the city of Athens.

49 See the discussion of Hesiod and Semonides in Loraux 1993.72–110. For women as a “discordant harmony,” see the discussion at Zeitlin 1996.236–44 of the phrase *dystropos harmonia* at Eur. *Hippolytus* 161.

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