

“THE WORST HUSBAND”:
DISCOURSES OF PRAISE AND BLAME IN EURIPIDES’ *MEDEA*

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ALTHOUGH EURIPIDES’ *MEDEA* has been termed a “tragedy of discourse,”¹ a play preoccupied with language and the uses and abuses of persuasive speech, scant attention has been paid to Medea’s language, especially her use of blame discourse. Even B. M. W. Knox, who first argued in 1977 that Euripides modeled this character on the Sophoclean hero, has little to say about the speech practices that may have strengthened her epic connection.² Blame speech may be generally defined as “words uttered to another person or persons blaming him for an action or omission, disapproved of by his society, which he . . . is in a position to remedy.”³ The *Medea* organizes this type of speech around a νεῖκος (638, 904, 1140), aberrantly staged between a husband and wife, that reaches its climax in a sophistic “contest of words” (ἀμιλλαν . . . λόγων, 546). Through her use of blame discourse, Medea is said to provoke such “wordy wars” (ἀμφιλόγους ὀργάς, 637–38): she utters curses (112–14, 160–67 and passim), threats (ἀπειλεῖν, 287), reproaches (ὄνειδος, 514; ὠνείδισας, 547) and engages in name-calling (κάκιστος at 229 and passim), discursive strategies not normally considered appropriate to wives. Through Medea’s abusive language, the play suggests a transgression of normative gender roles that prefigures her elevation to semi-divine status at the end of the play.

Combined with more traditional feminine means of persuasion, such as supplication, Medea’s blame discourse wins the sympathy of the female chorus and persuades her powerful male interlocutors—Creon, Aegeus, and Jason—to do her bidding. Through these verbal performances, Medea gains control of her opponents and becomes the “author” of a new discourse about

1. Boedeker 1991, 97 refers to Euripides’ *Medea* as “a tragedy of discourse.” All unattributed Greek references in this essay are to the text of D. L. Page, *Euripides’ “Medea.”* I would like to thank the editor and the two anonymous readers of *Classical Philology* for their advice.

2. Knox 1979, 298–99 does not consider abusive language in his list of heroic attributes, perhaps because it is not confined exclusively to their speech. The idea of the Homeric insult is latent in Bongie’s discussion of Medea’s use of ὕβρις at 603; see Bongie 1977, 45. Although Pucci 1980, 101–7 alludes to Medea’s use of invective, he does not analyze specific linguistic features; instead, he argues more generally that her invective, stemming from “the *dike* of consciousness and of love” has a remedial effect on herself. Boedeker 1991, 100 does consider Medea’s abusive language in somewhat more detail but focuses on other aspects of her speech.

3. This definition comes from Adkins 1969, 7.

Jason and herself.⁴ She concocts for her husband a legacy of blame similar to the one the male poets perpetuated about women, exposing him as a womanish paramour and indicting the institution of marriage as a κακόν, an evil for women, in an inversion of the traditional νόγος γυναικῶν, “invective against women.” Because of the pervasive association between speech and power in Classical Athens, female control of discourse, particularly invective, a literary and verbal genre often involving the ridicule of subordinates, represents a form of subversion that challenges the prevailing social and political organization of the contemporary polis, and its institutions.

WOMEN AND BLAME SPEECH

With the notable exception of certain festivals, like the Athenian Thesmophoria and the Adonia, which sanctioned risqué badinage and verbal mockery among women, abusive language, both as a literary genre and as a discursive practice was normally not associated with females in ancient Greece, especially when directed toward males.⁵ Such ritual mockery often took place away from men, among women only, although Plutarch does mention a Spartan ritual in which girls publicly humiliated cowardly men while praising others.⁶ In Attic old comedy, female characters, with the exception of crones, utter far fewer primary obscenities than their male counterparts, and very seldom do so in the company of men.⁷ Contemporary studies in sociolinguistics have also identified obscene usage and slang as traditionally the province of males, while noting that strong and abusive language has historically been considered inappropriate for women in Western European cultures.⁸

Among the women poets, there are few, if any, examples of blame discourse. Some intriguing fragments of Sappho suggest mild rebuke, especially her criticism of her brother for his relationship with an Egyptian-Greek prostitute named Rhodopis or Doricha (Hdt. 2. 135 = frag. 202 Campbell). In the best-preserved fragments, she prays for her brother (frag. 5 Campbell) while denouncing the woman (frag. 15 Campbell). Another series of fragments criticizes several women, some of whom appear to have been poetic rivals, or young women who left her group to join these rivals (frags.

4. For this idea, see Boedeker 1991, 109.

5. Sexual joking was not strictly masculine in ancient Greece, but frequently occurred at women-only religious festivals such as the Thesmophoria; see Winkler 1990, 188–209.

6. Plut. *Lyc.* 14.4–6; for a discussion of the passage, see Stehle 1997, 34. This comment on Spartan custom is typical of ancient views of Laconian women as dominating and outspoken.

7. Sommerstein 1995, 79 observes that out of seventy-five instances of primary obscenities uttered by characters in the three Aristophanic comedies featuring women (*Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Ecclesiazusae*), fifty-five instances occur in the speech of men, twenty in that of women, usually speaking only among themselves. More recently, I have shown that most of these obscenities tend to occur in the speech of crones; see McClure 1999, 211.

8. Although Otto Jespersen was the first to argue that avoidance of obscenity was characteristic of women's speech, Bornstein 1978, 135 has shown how cultural prescriptions, as found in etiquette manuals and magazines, have shaped this view. Lakoff 1973, 50 describes obscenity as masculine and argues that women tend to use weaker expletives, such as “oh dear.” See also Henley 1977, 147; Coates 1986, 108–9; and de Klerk 1997, 152, who associate this verbal genre with a dominating discursive style.

55, 57, 71, 131, 144, and possibly 178 Campbell).⁹ A similar use of invective against a female poetic rival is found in a fragment of Corinna on Myrtis (frag. 664a).

Among non-tragic literary representations of women, Helen in Book 3 of the *Iliad* provides an early example of a female character whose speech challenges or undermines her husband's authority (Hom. *Il.* 3.428–36). Although in a domestic context, Helen rebukes Paris not for shirking his marital duties, but for his poor performance on the battlefield, as if seeing him from a male perspective, “You left the battlefield; I wish you had perished there, conquered by the stronger man, who was once my husband” (ἤλυθες ἐκ πολέμοι· ὥς ὄφελες αὐτόθ' ὀλέσθαι, / ἀνδρὶ δαμείς κρατερῶ, ὅς ἐμὸς πρότερος πόσις ἦεν, Hom. *Il.* 3.428–29). This scornful abuse, with its goading imperatives and negative epithets, resembles the hostile speech of sparring warriors, thus suggesting that she places herself on a level equal with her husband.¹⁰ Her language recalls the insults Hector had earlier heaped on Paris: both compare him unfavorably to Menelaus (3.52–55; cf. 432–36), and both express a wish to see him dead (Hom. *Il.* 3.40). Helen's appropriation of the heroic taunt in this scene reinforces the idea of gender inversion already implicit in Paris' womanish flight from the battlefield to the bedroom.

In a more contemporary text, Euripides' *Andromache*, the poet models Hermione after her epic mother by portraying her as a bourgeois scold. Instead of winning her husband's affections with blandishing and seductive words, with her goading she incurs his hatred; like Helen, Hermione feels her marriage to a social inferior potentially jeopardizes her own status (*Andr.* 209–12). Hermione's boast of discursive entitlement (ἐλευθεροστομεῖν, 153) violates the ideology of silent subordination promulgated within the play by Andromache and possibly reflects contemporary Athenian views of Spartan women as disdainful and deprecating toward their husbands. In his discussion of the timocratic youth in the *Republic* (*Resp.* 549c–e), Plato depicts status-conscious Spartan wives as verbally domineering and querulous toward their husbands. He suggests that this linguistic inversion has a direct impact on the masculine political sphere by producing avaricious and prestige-seeking children who value money over virtue (*Resp.* 551a). Similarly, in Aristotle's view such a state of affairs within the house leads to gynecocracy in the city (γυναικοκρατούμεναι, *Pol.* 1269b20–25), a situation aggravated

9. On the idea of a separate women's poetic tradition, see Skinner 1993. Lardinois 1996 argues for a separate tradition of male and female public poetry performed in gender-specific contexts. Two fragments of Sappho conveying a tone of reproof appear to address uneducated or rustic women (55, 57 Campbell); in the latter example, Athenaeus describes the words as a form of mockery (σκώπτει). *P. Oxy.* 1787 frag. 6 contains the vocative κα[κό]τροπε while frag. 131 Campbell consists of a kind of self-blame. Fragments 144 and 178 appear to speak of poetic rivals. At Hdt. 2.135, Sappho is described as reviling Rhodopis (πολλὰ κατεκερτόμην), her brother's prostitute-lover, in her verses. On these fragments as evidence of blame poetry in Sappho's corpus, see Lardinois 1989, 16–17.

10. In similar fashion, Agamemnon later goads his troops into battle by name-calling and insults (Hom. *Il.* 4.242, 370–71, and passim). The fact that denouncing a warrior as a γυνή (woman) represents one of the worst forms of Homeric abuse further suggests the pervasive derogation of women in ancient Greek culture; cf. Hom. *Il.* 8.163. Worman (forthcoming) argues that Helen's speech at many points resembles that of the male warrior.

by the frequent absence of men on military campaigns (*Pol.* 1270a1–8). That Athenian wives also had a tendency toward *λοιδορία* is apparent in Socrates' criticism of the tragic actors who impersonate women on stage: "We will not then allow our charges, whom we expect to prove good men, being men, to play the parts of women and imitate a woman young or old wrangling with her husband. . . ." (οὐ δὴ ἐπιτρέψομεν, ἣν δ' ἐγώ, ὄν φαμέν κήδεσθαι καὶ δεῖν αὐτοὺς ἄνδρας ἀγαθοὺς γενέσθαι, γυναιῖκα μιμεῖσθαι ἄνδρας ὄντας, ἢ νέαν ἢ πρεσβυτέραν, ἢ ἀνδρὶ λοιδορουμένην. . . . *Pl. Resp.* 395d5–e2).

These examples of challenging female speech suggest that the Greek imagination associated such verbal dominance with inverted gender roles, with powerful women and emasculated men. Indeed, it is part of the topsy-turvy, upside-down world of the *Lysistrata* that Aristophanes portrays Lysistrata not only as making a public oration before a male audience, but as reviling them (*λοιδορεῖσθαι*, *Ar. Lys.* 1128). The numerous references to this character type in the classical period, especially in Athenian drama, may have reflected the increased attention given to issues of discourse and power in the classical polis.¹¹ As a drama about discourse, Euripides' *Medea*, like Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* before it, depicts a frightening status reversal brought about by a verbally dominant female who powerfully manipulates discourse in order to destroy her husband.

THE TRADITION OF INVECTIVE AGAINST WOMEN

While there are few examples in the literary tradition, especially in Athenian tragedy, of challenging speech uttered by women, women frequently serve as the objects of blame discourse both in early epic poetry and in genre poems devoted to this type of invective. This remarkably heterogeneous discourse appears as early as Homeric epic and extends to the fifth century C.E.¹² Helen's self-reproach in the *Iliad* may point to a separate blame tradition directed toward her, and other women, in lyric poetry and possibly alluded to in a fragment of Alcaeus (ὡς λόγος, 42 LP).¹³ This tradition may have had a counterpart in non-Homeric hexameter poetry, since in the *Cypria*, Momos (Censure) is made to suggest that Zeus should beget Helen, while Hesiod describes how Aphrodite cast her and the other daughters of Tyndareus "into ill repute" (κακῇ . . . φήμῃ, frag. 176 M-W).¹⁴ Indeed, the song of loathing that Agamemnon predicts will attach not only to Clytemnestra for his murder, but also to womankind in general, may refer to a different type of poetic treatment, a blame tradition separate from epic but coextensive with it, "And

11. Ober 1989, 5–6 and *passim* stresses the importance of exclusivity as a means of coalescing political identity in the classical polis: as a group, the citizen body distinguished itself from others, especially foreigners, metics, women, and slaves, through its elite practices, particularly its access to political speech.

12. In a provocative discussion, Loraux 1993, 106–7 argues for the continuity and heterogeneity of the blame tradition against women in the Greek literary corpus, but locates its origins in Hesiod and Semonides rather than in any earlier tradition. For further discussion of this invective, particularly in Euripides, see Nancy 1984.

13. Graver 1995, 55–59.

14. *Ibid.*, 56.

a hateful song will be hers among mortals, and it will bring a harsh reputation to womankind, even to one who does good things” (στυγερὴ δέ τ’ αἰοιδῇ / ἔσσειετ’ ἐπ’ ἀνθρώπους, χαλεπὴν δέ τε φῆμιν ὀπάσσει / θηλυτέρῃσι γυναιξί, καὶ ἢ κ’ εὐεργὸς ἔησιν, Hom. *Od.* 24.200–202).

The idea that the misdeeds of one woman can bring disgrace upon all women is central to subsequent blame discourse: unlike Helen’s specific attack on her Trojan husband, the invective against women treats all women as generically the same. Hesiod’s depiction of the first woman, in the *Theogony*, involves similar elements of invective: from the individual example of Pandora, the poet generalizes about all women, or, as he terms it, “the race of female women” (γένος . . . γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων, Hes. *Theog.* 590),¹⁵ characterized as deceptive, treacherous, and troublesome to men (δόλον αἰπύν, ἀμήχανον, 589; πῆμα μέγα, 592). The poet underscores this idea by his multiple repetitions of the word κακόν (evil) in connection with them (καλὸν κακόν, 585; κακόν, 600; cf. 570, 602, 609, 612; cf. *Op.* 57, 58, 88).

While Agamemnon’s almost bardic prophecy about female ignominy in the *Iliad* may well reflect a very early poetic tradition of invective against women, Archilochus and Semonides are traditionally, although probably inaccurately, credited with the invention of the iambic genre and its use of abusive language in the seventh to sixth centuries B.C.E.¹⁶ This genre typically consists of a poetic monologue of simple structure composed in iambic trimeter or trochaic tetrameter; the speaker addresses himself to a public, an individual, sometimes a friend, but more often to an object of derision. The poet ridicules or denounces particular persons or universal types, frequently deploying sexual innuendo and vulgarity.¹⁷ The most famous example of an iambic invective against women is Semonides’ fragment 7, a poem from the last half of the seventh century B.C.E. that parodies women through a series of unflattering comparisons to animals; only the silent and industrious bee woman incurs no blame (μῶμος, 7.84).¹⁸ West notes that fragments addressing the evils brought about by women also appear in Hipponax 68 and Susrion, an author credited with the invention of comedy in the Attic deme Icaria, while another parallel classification of women according to different animals appears in the hexameters of Phocylides.¹⁹ This evidence suggests, as does Graver’s work on dog-insult in the *Iliad*, that the invective against women may have been a very early feature of the ancient Greek literary tradition.

By the time of tragedy, the invective against women, whether understood as a ψόγος γυναικῶν modeled on Hesiod and the earlier tradition, or simply

15. Loraux 1993, 72–110 notes that the denunciation of women as a κακόν in literary invective always involves a fundamental asymmetry of the sexes: women are seen as an isolated group, a separate tribe or race, γένος γυναικῶν or θῆλυ γένος, while men are never referred to in this way, with the exception of Eur. *Med.* 429 and *Ion* 1095, two passages discussed later in this paper.

16. Lloyd-Jones 1975, p. 11 and n. 4.

17. West 1974, 28. Rosen 1988 discusses the role of personal invective in the iambic poets and argues that the targets of this poetic antagonism must be understood as stock or fictional figures rather than actual people.

18. On the dating of this poem, see Lloyd-Jones 1975, 16. Because of the pervasive confusion of Semonides with Simonides among ancient writers, the poet’s *floruit* is very uncertain.

19. West 1974, 32.

as a form of κακῶς λέγειν (slander), is a literary commonplace epitomized in a fragment from Euripides' *Aeolus*, "Whoever stops slandering women will be called a wretch and a fool" (γυναῖκα δ' ὅστις παύσεται λέγων κακῶς, / δύστηνος ἄρα κού σοφὸς κεκλήσεται, Eur. frag. 36 N²). This tradition extends to late antiquity, to Athenaeus in the second century C.E., and to Stobaeus in the fifth century C.E., whose *Anthology* collects examples of this discourse in a chapter entitled Ψόγος Γυναικῶν, a work no doubt responsible for preserving a vast number of misogynistic sentiments from Euripidean drama.²⁰ But even as early as the late fifth century B.C.E., the poet seems to have had a special association with this type of discourse: when the female chorus in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* playfully mock the idea of women as a curse with their ironic repetition of the word κακόν, they refer not only to the legacy of Hesiod, but to Euripides himself, the very man they have sought to put on trial for slandering them (Ar. *Thesm.* 786–99).²¹

Hippolytus' notorious diatribe against women (Eur. *Hipp.* 616–68), performed just three years after *Medea*, provides a good example of the Euripidean invective against women. In this speech, Hippolytus resorts to a generalized attack on the female race in response to the actions of two specific women, Phaedra and the Nurse, borrowing several motifs from Hesiod, particularly the idea of women as a κακόν, an extravagant nuisance for men. But the speaker departs from the earlier tradition in a significant way: in his final condemnation, he configures his hatred of women as a speech act comprised both of curse and diatribe that will perpetuate a legacy of slander against women (ὀλοισθε. μισῶν δ' οὐποτ' ἐμπλησθήσομαι / γυναῖκας, οὐδ' εἰ φησί τις μ' αἰεὶ λέγειν, *Hipp.* 664–65). At the same time, Euripides has several of his female characters defend themselves against either a staged or imagined male discourse of blame. For example, Melanippe in a fragment from the lost *Melanippe Desmotis*, a play apparently full of invective against women,²² disparages men for criticizing women, "In vain is the invective against women launched by men, a futile shot, and in vain is their slander" (μάτην ἄρ' εἰς γυναῖκας ἐξ ἀνδρῶν ψόγος / ψάλλει, κενὸν τόξευμα, καὶ κακῶς λέγει, Eur. *Melanippe Desmotis* frag. 499 N²). Thus Euripidean tragedy conceptualizes the ψόγος γυναικῶν as a type of speech act, whether formal or informal, performed mostly by men and directed toward controlling women's sexual behavior. Moreover, the tragic genre, staged before predominantly male spectators in a civic context, itself plays an important role in shaping and transmitting this blame discourse.

20. Nancy 1984, 113–15 and passim. The amount of blame discourse in Euripides' plays strikingly contrasts with that of the other tragedians, perhaps underscoring his concern with the domestic drama.

21. Note that the women of the chorus also mockingly refer to themselves as a γυναικεῖον φύλον (Ar. *Thesm.* 786), the designation commonly used in the male blame tradition. On this speech as a response to men's blame discourse, see Loraux 1993, pp. 73–74 and n. 5.

22. For examples of blame discourse in the fragments of *Melanippe Desmotis*, cf. Eur. frags. 493, 494, 498, 502 N². The fragment appears to introduce a longer speech on the important religious role played by female priestesses in the polis, for which see Page 1942, 112–15. For another example of this counter-discourse, cf. Eur. *Protesilaus* frag. 657 N²: ὅστις δὲ πάσας συντιθείς ψέγει λόγῳ, / γυναῖκας ἐξῆς, σκαίος ἐστὶ κού σοφός: / πολλῶν γάρ οὐσῶν τὴν μὲν εὐρήσεις κακὴν, / τὴν δ' ὥσπερ αὐτὴ λῆμ' ἔχουσιν εὐγενές.

Although the *Medea* antedates the aforementioned plays, it nonetheless reflects Euripides’ preoccupation with the tradition of the ψόγος γυναικῶν at several key moments. It depicts Medea as delivering a “woman’s complaint” (230–66) that borrows its language from the tradition of invective against women to denounce the institution of marriage from a female perspective. But instead of indicting men as a separate race, the speech consists of a personal invective directed toward a single man. Such a generalized blame discourse could occur only if women had control of the poetic tradition, as the female chorus suggest in their choral ode at 410–30, which expresses a wish to replace the ψόγος γυναικῶν with a song of praise for women. Later, Medea cunningly directs this invective against herself in an attempt to reconcile with Jason. By the end of the play, however, Euripides reinscribes the ψόγος γυναικῶν through Jason’s scathing denunciation of his wife as treacherous beyond all other living creatures.

MEDEA’S BLAME LANGUAGE

The prologue immediately identifies Medea with angry and condemnatory speech even as it attributes the tragic chain of events to Jason’s unsettling abuse of language, the oath sworn to Medea upon their departure from her native land and later broken.²³ The intensity of her speech derives from her implacable anger (δυσθυμουμένη, 91); rather than fighting to maintain a circumspect silence, as does Phaedra in *Hippolytus*, she openly rages because she has nothing shameful to conceal. The Nurse depicts Medea as loudly denouncing her perfidious husband and noisily wailing (ἀποιμῶξη, 31), “She cries aloud ‘oaths’ and calls upon the mightiest assurance of the right hand, invoking the gods as witnesses” (βοᾷ μὲν ὄρκους, ἀνακαλεῖ δὲ δεξιᾶς / πίστιν μεγίστην, καὶ θεοὺς μαρτύρεται, 21–22). Unlike the Homeric Helen, however, she takes her husband to task not for his martial performance, but for a domestic and erotic failure incongruously conceptualized as a gentlemanly breach of contract. Although it is not clear whether she refers to a violated nuptial oath, sworn between herself and Jason, or simply to Jason’s promise of marriage in response to her act of supplication (496–98), Medea’s almost legalistic language implies an egalitarian political alliance rather than the hierarchical arrangement typical of the average Greek οἶκος.²⁴ From the Athenian standpoint, the union of Medea and Jason has no legal basis because it was contracted not between the father of the bride and the husband, but directly between husband and wife. Also uppermost in the minds of the spectators may have been Pericles’ law of 451/0 prohibiting the offspring of

23. Boedeker 1991, 97 details Jason’s misuses of language, including violations of oath taking, supplication, and persuasion. For allusions to Jason’s broken oath within the play, cf. lines 20–23; 160–63; 492–95. Burnett 1998, 196–97 views Jason as the quintessential Hesiodic perjurer, citing the verbal echo in the fourth stasimon, ὄρκων χάρις, (439–40) that recalls εὐορκου χάρις at Hes. *Op.* 190–91 and 199–200.

24. On the idea of Jason and Medea’s union as a political contract between (male) equals, see Burnett 1973, 13; Foley 1989, 75; Williamson 1990, 18; and Boedeker 1991, 95. Some scholars interpret the reference to δεξιᾶ at 21 as a handshake: in Burnett’s words, the pair are united “as two states might be,” their marriage sealed by a handshake. Flory 1978, 70–71 notes that the handshake, normally a feature of contracts, was not standard practice in the wedding ceremony; because it usually occurred only among men, this gesture

unions not contracted between two citizens from participating in the city (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 26.4). Medea's initial censure of Jason thus hints at her dominating discursive practices and infuses the play with a central irony: although her interlocutors frequently describe her speech as vain and ineffectual (in the same way as the male chorus disparage the speech of women and Clytemnestra throughout the *Agamemnon*), her verbal facility gives her the upper hand throughout the play.²⁵

Indeed, her first speech act onstage consists of a curse, "O cursed children, may you perish at the hands of your hated mother along with your father, and may the whole house be damned" (ὦ κατάρατοι / παῖδες ὀλοισθε στυγεράς ματρός / σὺν πατρί, καὶ πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι, 112–14). She quickly reinforces this curse with another one calling for the death of Jason and of his bride (160–65):

ὦ μεγάλα Θέμι καὶ πότνι' Ἄρτεμι
 λεύσσεθ' ἃ πάσχω, μεγάλοις ὅρκοις
 ἐνδησαμένα τὸν κατάρατον
 πόσιν; ὅν ποτ' ἐγὼ νύμφαν τ' ἐσίδοιμ'
 αὐτοῖς μελάρθοις διακναιομένους,
 οἳ' ἐμὲ πρόσθεν τολμῶς' ἀδικοῦν.

O goddess Themis and queenly Artemis,
 do you see the great troubles I suffer,
 even though I bound my accursed husband to me
 with great oaths? May I look upon him and his new wife
 crushed to dust, house and all,
 for the injustice they dared commit against me.

Medea's use of the verb ἐνδέω at 162 echoes the contractual language found in the prologue, while its middle voice possibly suggests a more active role in forming the alliance than was customary for Greek women; this shift away from the passive voice will be seen again in her first address to the chorus. The chorus sympathetically interpret her plangent rage as a form of mourning, "I heard the sad cry of lamentation as she wails her shrill, painful grief" (ἀχάν ἄ-/ιον πολύστονον γόων, / λιγυρά δ' ἄχεα μογερά βοᾷ / τὸν ἐν λέχει προδόταν κακόννυμφον, 204–6; cf. νέφος οἰμωγῆς, 107; ἀχάν, 149). In Classical Athens and elsewhere, women's laments were often viewed as dangerous because they could serve as a public vehicle of protest and resistance,

further suggests a political activity. But it is also possible that the term δεξιά refers to a gesture of supplication, a ritual activity in which hands played a central role.

By contrasting oaths and the right hand in a μέν/δέ clause at 20–23, the text suggests two separate actions, the swearing of an oath and physical contact, whether a handshake or act of supplication. Burnett 1973, p. 13, n. 22 and 1998, p. 202 and n. 56 argues that the text refers to a nuptial oath, elsewhere unattested; she cites Aesch. *Eum.* 217–18 where the nuptial bed is said to have a greater power than the oath (εὐνὴ γὰρ ἀνδρὶ καὶ γυναικὶ μόρασιμος / ὅρκου 'στί μείζων); Archil. 173W; Theoc. *Id.* 22.147–48, γάμος ἐν ὅρκῳ; and the ploughing metaphor, Men. *Pk.* 1010. For children as a kind of marriage pledge, cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 878.

25. Boedeker 1991, 103 observes that "Despite Medea's effective and critical use of language, she is told by many that she speaks pointlessly, in vain (μάτην)"; cf. Eur. *Med.* 152, 333, 450, 883, and 959.

especially when they contained elements of blood vendetta and cursing.²⁶ Moreover, blame and criticism are also a regular feature of women’s laments in modern Greece.²⁷ The loudness and violence of Medea’s speech serve as the tangible signs of a greater disturbance in the οἶκος, an aberrant equality of status between husband and wife brought about by Jason’s crime of perjury.

Medea’s discursive power may also be viewed as reinforcing her characterization as an epic hero, an idea first put forth by A. Maddalena in 1963 and elaborated by Knox and by E. Bongie in 1977. She possesses the same “passionate intensity” characteristic of the hero: she is “high-spirited” (μεγαλόσπλαχνος, 109), full of resolve and daring.²⁸ This temperament contributes to her inability to tolerate injustice or disrespect, as evidenced by the number of epic value terms found in connection with her (ἡτιμασμένη, 20; ἀτιμάσας, 1354; ἡδικημένη, 26; ὕβριζε, 603). Medea also exhibits a strong preoccupation with avoiding the laughter of her enemies, a potential source of shame and fear: “In dying I will become a joke to my enemies” (θανοῦσα θήσω τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἐχθροῖς γέλων, 383; cf. 398, 404–5; 797; 1049–50; 1354–55, and 1362). Like a hero, she wishes to appear formidable and invincible rather than vulnerable in the face of her opponents: “Let no one think me trifling and weak, or gentle, but of the opposite temperament, difficult to my enemies and well-disposed to my friends” (μηδεῖς με φαύλην κάσθενῃ νομιζέτω / μηδ’ ἡσυχαίαν, ἀλλὰ θατέρου τρόπου, / βαρεῖαν ἐχθροῖς καὶ φίλοισιν εὐμενῇ, 807–9). Given this ethical position, she perceives Jason not so much as a husband, but as an enemy (ἔχθιστος, 467) on whom she desires revenge (νῦν δ’ ἐλπίς ἐχθροῦς τοὺς ἐμοὺς τεῖσιν δίκην, 767). And like the epic hero, and not like a wife, she longs for κλέος (810), the fame and glory through song reserved for warriors and typically denied to women, at least for the type of action Medea contemplates.

But as critics more sensitive to gender issues have noted, Medea is not wholly an epic construction: because she unites feminine self-posturing with a heroic subjectivity, she may be viewed as a “confused imitator of heroic masculinity,” a figure who departs radically from her Sophoclean prototype.²⁹ Euripides portrays her as manipulating Greek conventions of feminine behavior when attempting to gain the compliance or sympathy of

26. On blood vendetta and women’s laments, see Holst-Warhaft 1992, 5–6, 33, 118; as a form of social protest in Attic tragedy, see Foley 1993, 113.

27. Holst-Warhaft 1992, 73–93.

28. On Medea’s heroic attributes, see Maddalena 1963, 132–41; Knox 1979, 298–99; Bongie 1977, 29–34; Gellie 1988, 16; Barlow 1989, 161–63. Knox specifies as heroic attributes her determination and uncompromising resolve (cf. αὐθάδους, 104; δυσκατάπαυστος, 109; ἐργαστέον, 791; δεδογμένων, 822; τολμητέον, 1051; δέδοκται, 1236); her recalcitrance (28–29); her implacable wrath (χόλου, 94; ὄργαν, 176) and savage nature (ἄγριον ἦθος, 103) as well as her suicidal intentions (τί δέ μοι ζῆν ἐτι κέρδος, 145, 798). Bongie 1977, 29–30 discusses much of the same material to arrive at a similar conclusion, that the same heroic motivations of honor and glory motivate both Euripides’ Medea and the Sophoclean Ajax. In the same way, Foley 1989, 76 observes that Medea “thinks and acts not like a classical woman but like an archaic and Sophoclean hero when he feels he has been wronged.”

29. Foley 1989, 81; this confusion arises in part from her “feminine role-playing” (74–75), in which she deceptively adopts whatever pose might effectively persuade her interlocutors, while as the play progresses, her feminine mask gradually slips away to reveal her heroic persona. On this mixture of masculine and feminine roles, see Burnett 1973, 22 and 1998, 194; Bongie 1977, 28; Barlow 1989, 167; Rehm 1989, 109; Rabinowitz 1993, 148; Segal 1997, 18.

her interlocutors, in a manner similar to the Aeschylean Clytemnestra. Only at the end of the play does Medea appear as a figure of masculinized boldness who has subordinated maternal scruples to an all-consuming passion for revenge. Their similarity is further suggested by the fact that Medea, like Clytemnestra, is never given lyric song, not even as she stands over the corpses of her children: she sings in anapaests, a marching meter suitable “for indomitable, masculinized females.”³⁰

This combination of feminine and heroic self-presentation finds expression in Medea’s famous comparison of battle to childbirth, an assertion that exemplifies the mix of heroic and maternal modes repeatedly exhibited by her character: “I would rather stand before a shield three times than give birth once” (ὥς τρίς ἂν παρ’ ἀσπίδα / στῆναι θέλοιμ’ ἂν μᾶλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἅπαξ, 250–51). This comparison recalls the birth similes in the *Iliad* that accompany battle scenes, such as the one that likens the wounding of Agamemnon to the fierce pangs brought on by Eileithyia (Hom. *Il.* 11.269–72; cf. 17.4–5 and *passim*). Medea’s comparison of childbirth to battle both reinforces her status as mother and alludes to her characterization as an epic warrior in an unsettling conflation of gender categories.³¹ And yet in subsequent lines she evokes the forlorn and tearful Andromache at the end of *Iliad* Book 6 (6.429–30) when she speaks of herself as a spear prize (λελησμένη, 256) bereft of kin (οὐ μητέρ’, οὐκ ἀδελφόν, οὐχὶ συγγενῇ, 257), an ominous allusion to her role in her brother’s death. As Foley and others have shown, the traditional view of Medea’s heroic qualities must be qualified by an understanding of the feminine self-representation Euripides assigns to her. Her use of the language of invective similarly straddles two spheres, affiliating her, on the one hand, with the aggressive taunting of the Homeric hero, while at the same time revealing her transgression of the strictures against outspokenness in the legitimate wife and mother.

In the quarrel scene at 446–626, Medea’s verbal presence assumes a form of κακῶς λέγειν, a phrase that can refer in other dramatic contexts to the “slander” or insult typically directed toward women by men, as discussed above. Even the structure of the *agon*, in which Medea accuses Jason of betrayal, reflects her unusual verbal status, since this type of scene in Euripidean drama typically stages a conflict between men of equal status.³² In his *Medea*, however, the tragic poet constructs the scene as a domestic dispute in which a scorned wife scathingly derides a glib and fickle husband. In his opening words, Jason emphasizes his wife’s verbal excesses, attributing her exile to her verbal incontinence, “On account of your empty words, you will be driven into exile” (λόγων ματαίων οὐνεκ’ ἐκπεσῇ χθονός, 450). A

30. Hall 1999: 115; see also Pintacuda 1978, 114 and 171–73, who argues that the anapaests of Clytemnestra and Medea indicate a dominating, masculinized temperament.

31. Easterling 1977, 182 takes this assertion as a comment on “the emotional hazards of being a mother,” while Bongie 1977, 37 argues the opposite, that it indicates her assimilation to male values. At the very least, it foreshadows the child murder; see Barlow 1989, 160.

32. Lloyd 1992, 3 lists thirteen scenes in Euripides’ plays generally acknowledged to be formal *agones*: most occur between men (*Alc.* 614–733; *Heracl.* 120–283; *Hipp.* 902–1089; *Andr.* 547–746; *Supp.* 399–580; *Phoen.* 446–635; *Or.* 470–629; *IA* 317–414); three take place between two women (*Andr.* 147–273; *Tro.* 895–1059; *El.* 988–1138); and only two occur between a woman and a man (*Med.* 446–622; *Hec.* 1109–292).

few lines later he reiterates that her sharp tongue and penchant for κακῶς λέγειν have piqued the wrath of Creon, resulting in a decree of exile, “You will not give up your foolishness, always bad-mouthing tyrants. For this reason, you are driven out of this land” (σὺ δ’ οὐκ ἀνίεις μωρίας, λέγουσ’ αἰεὶ / κακῶς τυράννους· τοιγὰρ ἐκπεσῇ χθονός, 457–58). Indeed, Jason portrays her throughout the scene as inappropriately quarrelsome and outspoken, finding fault with her “fierce garrulity” that blasts him like a gale (τὴν σὴν στόμαργον, ὃ γύναι, γλωσσαλγίαν, 525).

Medea does not deny Jason’s accusations; instead, she argues that her use of κακῶς λέγειν, or insult, will alleviate her own suffering while increasing his, “For I will unburden my soul by bad-mouthing you and you will be hurt by listening” (ἐγὼ τε γὰρ λέξασα κουφισθήσομαι / ψυχὴν κακῶς σε καὶ σὺ λυπήσῃ κλύων, 474–75). But Medea does more than insult her husband: she constructs an almost literary invective against him by revealing his self-serving cowardice, “Once interrogated you will appear even more base” (ἐρωτηθεὶς γὰρ αἰσχίων φανῇ, 501). Medea’s remedial discourse converts the epic tale of Jason’s heroic struggles into a story of tragic disgrace; as Boedeker puts it, “Medea retains the upper hand not least in her authorial role, her collusion with Euripides in creating her own new λόγος.”³³

In contrast, Jason largely avoids the language of abuse in the *agon*, claiming an intention to remain well disposed toward his former wife, “For even if you hate me, I would not ever be able to think badly of you” (καὶ γὰρ εἰ σὺ με στυγεῖς, / οὐκ ἂν δυνάμην σοὶ κακῶς φρονεῖν ποτε, 463–64). His explicit avoidance of blame discourse is expressed in the phrase οὐδὲ μέφομαι when he asserts that he does not find fault with Medea for failing to produce children, since she has given him two sons (ἄλις γὰρ οἱ γεγῶτες οὐδὲ μέφομαι, 558). When he sarcastically invites Medea to continue railing against him, “Don’t ever stop saying that Jason is the worst husband” (μὴ παύσῃ ποτὲ / λέγουσ’ Ἰάσον’ ὥς κάκιστός ἐστ’ ἀνὴρ, 451–52), he seems to encourage her to employ a blame discourse traditionally employed by men.

And yet Jason does not entirely avoid the invective mode he imputes to Medea. At one point, he sounds remarkably like Hippolytus in his desire to eliminate women from the reproductive process: “Mortal children should be born from some other source, not from the female race; then they would not be an evil to men” (χρὴν γὰρ ἄλλοθέν ποθεν βροτοὺς / παῖδας τεκνοῦσθαι, θῆλυ δ’ οὐκ εἶναι γένος· / χούτως ἂν οὐκ ἦν οὐδὲν ἀνθρώποις κακόν, 573–75). This commonplace makes reference to two traditional elements of the νόμος γυναικῶν: the idea of women as an evil to men, a κακόν, and as a species distinct from them, the θῆλυ γένος. Similarly, one of Medea’s final comments attributes a threatening undertone to Jason’s words when she taunts, “Go on and insult me, since you have somewhere to turn” (ὕβρις’, ἐπειδὴ σοὶ μὲν ἔστ’ ἀποστροφή, 603). These instances of invective in Jason’s speech prefigure his final denunciation of Medea at the end of the play (1323–50) as well as the chorus’ subsequent apostrophe about the grie-

33. Boedeker 1991, 109.

brought about by women and marriage (1290–92), since the union that brought him children will now take them away.

Another unusual feature of Medea's speech in the *agon* is her use of derogatory address, since female characters normally do not employ this type of construction in Euripidean tragedy, especially when speaking to men. Pejorative terms used as a form of address, such as *παγκάκιστος* and *κάκιστος*, appear far more frequently in male speech, particularly in quarrel or debate scenes and occur only five times in the speech of women in Euripides.³⁴ It is therefore significant that two of these examples occur in the *agon* as Medea derides her husband for his cowardice and perfidy, "You utter scoundrel, for this is the worst thing I am able to call you in speech for your lack of manliness" (*ὦ παγκάκιστε, τοῦτο γάρ σ' εἶπεν ἔχω / γλώσση μέγιστον εἰς ἀνανδρίαν κακόν*, 465–66). Later in the *rhesis*, her derogatory address, *ὦ κάκιστ' ἀνδρῶν* (488), punctuates a long list of past favors she performed for the thankless Jason.

The final part of the *agon* again assimilates Medea's blame speech to the verbal genre of the curse. When she asks why she has received a sentence of exile, Jason specifies that she brought it upon herself by calling down curses upon the royal family (*ἀρὰς τυράννοις ἀνοσίους ἀρωμένη*, 607). In response, Medea identifies herself with the power of the curse when she says to Jason, "Yes, and I am a curse to *your* house too" (*καὶ σοῖς ἀραία γ' οὔσα τυγχάνω δόμοις*, 608). By the end of the quarrel scene, Medea becomes more than the vehicle of vilification, instead embodying the curse she had earlier uttered against Jason and their children, a speech act that has as its counterpart her final emasculating prophecy. The *agon* thus does not merely portray Medea's blame discourse as an aspect of her heroic characterization; rather, it shows how she constructs for Jason a "fair reproach" (*καλόν γ' ὀνειδος*, 514) similar to the male poets' age-old censure of women.

ELEMENTS OF INVECTIVE IN MEDEA'S FIRST *RHESIS*

Euripides lays the groundwork for the "fair reproach" Medea constructs for her husband in her first long speech at 214–66. This speech attempts to elicit the sympathy of the female chorus through its elaboration of women's plight within the male-governed *οἶκος*, resembling, in parts, the *rhesis* of Procne in Sophocles' *Tereus*.³⁵ Medea deploys numerous commonplaces as

34. This type of utterance frequently appears in *agon* scenes, most of which are between men in Euripides; cf. *Andr.* 590, 631, 719; *Alc.* 697, 717; *Or.* 719; and *Hipp.* 959; for this insult among men only in other scenes, cf. *Supp.* 513; *Hec.* 577; and *HF* 182. Similarly, the vocative *ὦ σχέτλιε* appears only in the speech of men in the Euripidean corpus (cf. *Alc.* 824 and *Bacch.* 358; *ὦ πανούργε*, *Hec.* 1257). See McClure 1995, 54–55; see also Bongie 1977, 42.

McClure 1995, 54–55 notes that of the five examples in Euripidean drama of mortal women employing a negative form of address, such as *παγκάκιστε* and *κάκιστε*, two belong to Medea (465, 488); at *Tro.* 943, Helen addresses Menelaus in this way; at *Hipp.* 682, Phaedra denounces the Nurse for revealing her *ἔρω*s to Hippolytus; and at *Hec.* 1199, Hecuba derides Polymestor for killing her son; cf. *Heracl.* 947 where Alcmena uses *ὦ πανούργε* of Eurystheus; for an example of a goddess using this phrase of a mortal man, see *Eur. Hipp.* 1316.

35. Knox 1979, 312 compares this speech to that of Procne in Sophocles' *Tereus* (Soph. *Tereus*. frag. 583 Radt), a play concerned with infanticide also, and full of programmatic statements about women; see also Mills 1980. The differences between the two speeches are, however, more striking than the similarities. Although

a means of conveying her adherence to the feminine status quo, a strategy that later reappears in her mock reconciliation with Jason. At the same time she turns the traditional elements of invective against women to critique the social institution of marriage from a female perspective. Medea's invective against Jason, however, must deviate from the traditional *ψόγος γυναικῶν* uttered by men in one important way: because women do not retain control of poetic discourse, as the chorus later point out, her attack must be confined to her husband and does not extend more generally to the “race of men.” Whereas Hippolytus employs a critical discourse about women, alluding to them as a *κακόν* (*Hipp.* 627; cf. 616, 629, 632, 649, 651, 666) and stating a generalized hatred for them (*μισῶ*, *Hipp.* 640), Medea's invective takes a more personal form: she begins by denouncing Jason with the superlative adjective, *κάκιστος*; this word and its cognates comprise the heart of her blame discourse here and elsewhere. In fact, she refers to her husband as a *κακός*, a base and cowardly man, ten times in the course of the play,³⁶ and later states to Creon that she passionately hates her husband (*ἀλλ’ ἐμὸν πόσιν / μισῶ*, 310–11).

As if in imitation of the *ψόγος* voiced by men about women, Medea shifts from a personal attack on Jason as a *κακός* to a more general condemnation of men and marriage as a *κακόν* (234), a word which further plays upon the tradition of women as a curse (228–34):

ἐν ᾧ γὰρ ἦν μοι πάντα, γινώσκει καλῶς,
κάκιστος ἀνδρῶν ἐκβέβηχ’ οὐμὸς πόσις.
πάντων δ’ ὅσ’ ἔστ’ ἐμψυχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει
γυναικές ἐσμεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν·
ἅς πρῶτα μὲν δεῖ χρημάτων ὑπερβολῇ
πόσιν πρίασθαι, δεσπότην τε σώματος
λαβεῖν· κακοῦ γὰρ τοῦτ’ ἔτ’ ἄλγιον κακόν.

He knows full well that my whole life was bound up with him;
and he, my husband, has turned out to be the worst of men.
For of all things which are living and have judgment
we women are the most wretched creatures.
First, we must buy a husband for ourselves
by outbidding others with a wealthy dowry, and then take him
as a master over our bodies. And this is an evil worse than that evil.

the two women begin their complaints with a commonplace about the wretched lot of women, “We women are nothing” (ὥς οὐδὲν ἐσμεν, 583. 3; cf. *Med.* 231), Procne dwells on the delights of a girlhood spent in her natal οἶκος and her reluctance to marry. Her use of the passive voice to describe the role of girls in marriage strongly contrasts with Medea's deployment of the active voice: they are “thrust out” of their fathers' houses (ὠθεύμεθ' ἔξω, 583. 7) and “traded” between men (διεμπολώμεθα, 583. 7). Everything about Procne's speech suggests girlish modesty and loyalty to her paternal household; in contrast, Medea boldly proclaims to Jason her willingness to betray her family (αὐτὴ δὲ πατέρα καὶ δόμους προδοῦσ' ἐμοὺς / τὴν Πηλιῶτιν εἰς Ἰωλκὸν ἰκόμην / σὺν σοί, πρόθυμος μᾶλλον ἢ σοφωτέρα, 483–85). For others, this speech marks her as a conventional Greek woman in order to earn the sympathy of the female chorus; see Bongie 1977, 36; Foley 1989, 74 and Rabinowitz 1993, 134.

36. For the word *κακός* used in connection with Jason, cf. 84, 498, 586, 618, 699, 1386; in a general sense, cf. 518. For the superlative *κάκιστος*, cf. 229, 452, 488, 690.

Her claim that men are an economic liability because brides must buy their husbands with their dowries (232–33) amplifies the Hesiodic undertone in its evocation of the female bees who sit idly indoors and reap the rewards of others (Hes. *Theog.* 596–99). Hippolytus makes the same complaint about the dowry fathers must pay to marry off their daughters (*Hipp.* 628–29) and employs the same term, *πρίασθαι* (*Hipp.* 622), in his fantasy about purchasing babies from temples. Moreover, by using the active rather than the passive voice, Medea strikingly portrays women as active partners in the marriage arrangement (232–33), a role reversal further reinforced by her use of *γαμοῦσα* at 606.³⁷ The shift from passive to active voice further recalls the opening allusion to the broken nuptial contract described in political terms as an alliance between two equal entities. But even as the speech borrows the language of invective to describe marriage from a woman's standpoint, it also deploys the commonplace of women as a *φυτόν*, a race or species apart.

In the next section, Euripides has Medea echo Hesiod in yet another way (cf. Hes. *Theog.* 607–10) when she states that everything depends upon whether a woman marries a good or bad man (235–40):

κάν τῷδ' ἄγών μέγιστος, ἢ κακὸν λαβεῖν
ἢ χρηστόν. οὐ γὰρ εὐκλεεῖς ἀπαλλαγὰι
γυναιξίν, οὐδ' οἷόν τ' ἀνήνασθαι πόσιν.
ἐς καινὰ δ' ἦθη καὶ νόμους ἀφιγμένην
δεῖ μάντιν εἶναι, μὴ μαθοῦσαν οἴκοθεν,
ὅπως μάλιστα χρήσεται ξυνευνέτη.

And this is the greatest struggle, whether she takes a bad husband
or a good one. For divorce does not bring fair repute
to a woman, nor may she renounce her husband.
But arriving among new customs and laws,
she must divine—if she has not learned this lesson at home—
how she might best manage her husband.

The repetition of the infinitive *λαβεῖν* in 234–35 reinforces the woman's role in the nuptial process as active rather than passive. Her reference to the winning of a husband as a kind of male athletic competition, an *ἄγών*, is also peculiar, since in Greek myth marriage frequently awaits the male victor in such contests, while females serve as the prize.³⁸ Finally, her allusion to divorce in terms of *κλέος* prefigures her own heroic preoccupation with this

37. Williamson 1990, 19 discusses the phrase *χρημάτων ὑπερβολῇ πόσιν πρίασθαι* as an example of how Medea sees herself as an active partner in the marriage transaction; on the peculiarity of *γαμοῦσα* as an active form, see Foley 1989, 76; see also Rabinowitz 1993, 137.

38. Foley 1989, 75 cites Medea's allusion to marriage as an *ἄγών* as an example of violation of conventional feminine norms. It is also worth mentioning that in Greek myth, women often serve as the prize awarded to the victorious athlete or hero; for examples, cf. Pind. *Ol.* 1. 144–45, in which Pelops wins Hippodamia from Oenomaus in a chariot race; and *Pyth.* 9. 195–206, in which Danaus offers his forty-eight daughters as a reward for victors in a foot race, specified as an *ἄγών*. The metaphor of marriage as an *ἄγών* also recurs in Antiphon B49 DK, e.g., *μέγας γὰρ ἄγών γάμος ἀνθρώπων* (49.3–4). On this passage in connection with *Medea*, see Knox 1979, p. 311 and p. 322, n. 78.

concept only fully revealed after her interview with Aegeus (εὐκλεέστατος βίος, 810).

In subsequent lines, Medea inverts the traditional invective against women: her oblique reference to men’s access to other sexual partners outside marriage seems to apply a feminine standard of sexual self-control and marital fidelity to husbands (244–47):³⁹

άνηρ δ', ὅταν τοῖς ἐνδον ἄχθεται ξυνών,
ἔξω μολὼν ἔπαυσε καρδίαν ἄσης·
[ἢ πρὸς φίλον τιν' ἢ πρὸς ἥλικα τραπεῖς·]
ἡμῖν δ' ἀνάγκη πρὸς μίαν ψυχὴν βλέπειν.

But a man, whenever he grows tired of
consorting with those within the house,
goes outside and puts an end to his vexation,
[turning either to some friend or companion.]
But for us it is necessary to look to one soul alone.

Medea credits her domestic trouble to men’s access to sexual partners outside of marriage and to an overvaluation of ἔρως characteristically associated with women (ἐρασθῆναι λέχους, 491), even though Jason adamantly denies that he has been so overwhelmed by desire (μέρῳ πεπληγμένος, 556). The verb πλῆσσω (strike) assimilates Jason to the feminine sexual folly originally attributed to Medea by the Nurse (ἔρωτι θυμὸν ἐκπλαγεῖσα, 8). Clearly the chorus in their prayer that Aphrodite not “strike them with desire for someone else’s bed” (θυμὸν ἐκπλήξας ἑτέροις ἐπὶ λέκτροις, 639) allude not to so much to Medea but to Jason as the partner who has strayed from his marriage, while the feminine participle implicitly suggests that such sexual betrayal is womanish. Similarly, Medea uses the words πόθος (623), with its crudely sexual meaning, and νόσος, a term frequently applied to female sexual passion in Euripides, to describe Jason’s feelings for his new bride.⁴⁰ In effect, Medea holds her husband to the same standard of sexual fidelity normally reserved for women and conveyed by the word πίστις (492; cf. 22). She sarcastically remarks in the *agon*, “What a wondrous and loyal husband I, long-suffering, have in you!” (θαυμαστὸν δέ σε / ἔχω πόσιν καὶ πιστὸν ἢ τάλαιν' ἐγώ, 510–11) and then confides to Aegeus that Jason has not been πιστός (faithful) (698).⁴¹ Medea imputes ἀπιστοσύνη, the sexual betrayal ascribed to women in the first stasimon (422), to Jason, thus inverting the discourse of blame normally directed toward wives. In reconciling with him later in the play, her use of the term ἀπιστήσω (927) in reference to his deceptive words ironically reinforces this sexual betrayal.

39. Page 1938, 90 takes 245 to mean “that the husband consoles himself with other women” and brackets 246 on the grounds that it “eliminates this indelicacy” since the man turns to his male friends and companions.

40. For some examples of the term applied to female sexual desire in Euripides, cf. *Med.* 1364 and 16; *Andr.* 220, 956; *Hipp.* 479, 512, 698, 730, 766. On the idea of Jason as motivated by ἔρως, see Pucci 1980, 101–2, who argues that he mistakes sexual infatuation for love, as implied by his praise of Aphrodite as his rescuer (526–28).

41. For a parallel, cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 606 where the phrase γυναῖκα πιστήν (faithful wife) refers to the sexual self-control expected of wives in ancient Greece.

At the same time, in condemning Jason's actions as an ἔργον ἀσχιστον (695), Aegeus suggests that such behavior on the part of men has dire social consequences also, because it imperils the civic institution of marriage and its main purpose, the propagation of citizens.

Lastly, Medea seems to allude, at least indirectly, to the male discourse that has shaped these prevailing ideas about women, "For men talk about how we live a cowardly life inside the house, while they do battle with the spear. How wrong they are!" (λέγουσι δ' ἡμᾶς ὡς ἀκίνδυνον βίον / ζῶμεν κατ' οἴκους, οἱ δὲ μάρνανται δορί· / κακῶς φρονοῦντες, 248–50). The masculine noun ἀνὴρ at 244, and the masculine pronoun οἱ δέ at 249 suggest that λέγουσι refers to the ideas and words publicly generated by men, perhaps even their invectives against women.⁴² Her dismissive phrase, κακῶς φρονοῦντες, indicates how completely she attempts to rebut this talk through the creation of a counter-discourse in which husbands, not wives, are blamed as the source of domestic ills.

A PALINODE FOR WOMEN

In the first stasimon, this counter-discourse receives poetic expression in the form of a collective praise ode honoring women, one that reverses the φᾶμαι of the past and confers glory instead of blame on women.⁴³ This "song for feminists," as Conacher calls it,⁴⁴ introduces the possibility of a remedial, feminine discourse that will counteract the traditional invective against women (410–20):

ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παγαί,
καὶ δίκαια καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται.
ἀνδράσι μὲν δόλιαί βουλαί, θεῶν δ'
οὐκέτι πίστις ἄραρε·
τὰν δ' ἐμὰν εὐκλειαν ἔχειν βιοτὰν στρέψουσι φᾶμαι·
ἔρχεται τιμὰ γυναικείῃ γένει·
οὐκέτι δυσκέλαδος φάμα γυναικᾶς ἔξει.

Back flow the waters of the sacred rivers,
justice and all things turn back again.
The counsels of men are treacherous, and the faith vowed
by men in the name of the gods is no longer secure.
The legends will change so that women will win fair repute.
Honor will come to the female race.
No longer will women receive a bad name.

42. Barlow 1989, 159–60 argues that with this term Medea "dissociates herself not just with [*sic*] women's stereotypes as they are commonly accepted by women as well as men, but more important from the myths and fictions that *men* particularly propagate about women."

43. It is possible that passages such as this one, in which a female chorus mock male blame discourse and accuse men of the crimes typically associated with women, e.g., *Ion* 1090–98 and *Ar. Thesm.* 785–845, in addition to *Eur. Med.* 410–30, derive in some way from ritual mocking choruses of men and women like those found in the Syracusan cult of Demeter (cf. *Diod. Sic.* 5.4.7) and in the Demetrian festival at Pellene; cf. *Paus.* 8.27.9.

44. Conacher 1967, 191.

The words εὐκλεία and τιμά evoke Medea’s heroic affinities and posit a form of public acclaim for female agency. And yet, the chorus imply that such a reversal of discourse and action could only occur in a world turned upside down, where rivers run away from the sea and the whole order of things is altered, a state brought about in the play by Jason’s broken oath, here thematically underscored by the term πίστις.⁴⁵ In another choral ode strikingly close in language and thought to this one, a female chorus similarly decry the biased songs of men and their depiction of women’s loves as lawless and unsanctioned (Eur. *Ion* 1090–98). Like the chorus in *Medea*, they call for a palinode that could exculpate women and expose the erotic misdeeds of men (παλίμψαμος ἀοιδὰ / καὶ μοῦσ’ εἰς ἄνδρας ἵτω / δυσκέλαδος ἀμφὶ λέκτρων, Eur. *Ion* 1096–98).

While female heroism might occasion a new poetic discourse, the chorus nonetheless recognize, as Medea had earlier, that the blame tradition is the product of women’s exclusion from male poetic activity; if they had been the singers, the ignominy of men and the glory of women would have been the subjects of song (421–30):

μοῦσαι δὲ παλαιγενέων λήξουσ’ ἀοιδῶν
τὰν ἐμὰν ὑμνεῦσαι ἀπιστοσύναν.
οὐ γὰρ ἐν ἀμετέρᾳ γνώμα λύρας
ᾠπασε θέσπιν ἀοιδάν
Φοῖβος, ἀγῆτωρ μελέων· ἐπεὶ ἀντάχῃσ’ ἂν ὕμνον
ἄρσένων γέννα. μακρὸς δ’ αἰὼν ἔχει
πολλὰ μὲν ἀμετέραν ἀνδρῶν τε μοῖραν εἰπεῖν.

For the songs of the ancient poets will stop singing of our treachery.
But Phoebus, lord of music,
did not endow us with the divine song of the lyre.
If he had, I would have sung a response to the race of men.
Long years have as much to tell about men’s lives as ours.

The epic elements present in this strophe, including dactylic meter, Ionic forms (ὑμνεῦσαι ἀπιστοσύναν, 422) and Homeric diction (ᾠπασε θέσπιν ἀοιδάν, 425; cf. Hom. *Od.* 8. 498), may allude to the tradition of non-Homeric hexameter blame poetry discussed above. It is also possible however, that the Ionic dialect refers instead to the iambs of Hipponax, Archilochus, and Semonides.⁴⁶ And as if to imitate this blame discourse and respond directly to the traditional description of women as γένος γυναικῶν,⁴⁷ the female chorus atypically refer to men as a separate and isolated group, the “race of men” (ἄρσένων γέννα, 429). As a quasi-epic song, the ode glorifies Medea while imputing to Jason, in a gesture familiar from invective, the type of faithlessness typically associated with women and designated in the next

45. Burnett 1973, 20.

46. On the nature of the δυσκέλαδος φάμα, see Page 1938, 103–4, who, following Verrall, appears to view it as a reference to iambic songs, and perhaps to an earlier tradition like the one discussed by Graver 1995. For a discussion of both epic and iambic possibilities, see Boedeker 1991, p. 108, n. 53.

47. On this passage, see Loraux 1993, 107; for a similar allusion to men as a race apart, cf. ἄπορον ἀνδρῶν, Eur. *Ion* 1095.

strophe by the hapax, ἀπιστοσύνη (421). A further irony is implied: the heroic action of Medea, the woman who inspires their song, must take the perverted form of child murder.

Whereas the first stasimon indicates how completely Medea has won the allegiance of the chorus, their sympathy gradually diminishes as they grapple with the depth of her destructive violence revealed in her revenge speech at 764–810, a sea change accompanied by a shift in discourse from praise to blame.⁴⁸ In the fifth stasimon, the chorus repudiate their own verbal authority and further downplay the possibility of a female poetics intimated in the praise ode: they assert that most ideas are beyond the reach of women (1081–84), attributing poetic skill to only a few women (πάσαισι μὲν οὐ· παῦρον δέ τι δὴ / γένος ἐν πολλαῖς εὖροις ἂν ἴσως / οὐκ ἀπόμουσον τὸ γυναικῶν, 1087–89). This pessimism accompanies the chorus' increasing awareness of Medea's capacity for violent revenge and their role in abetting her crimes.⁴⁹ By the end of the play, with its shocking revelation of child murder, the chorus adopt the stance of traditional blame poetry in their denunciation of the trouble married women cause men: "O grief-filled nuptial bed of women, how many evils have you contrived for mortals!" (ὦ / γυναικῶν λέχος / πολύπονον, ὅσα βροτοῖς ἔρεξας ἤδη κακά, 1290–92). The transformation of the chorus, from sympathetic protofeminists to exponents of the very discourse they had earlier denounced, implicitly ridicules the idea of a palinode for women and prefigures Jason's scathing castigation of his wife in the play's final scene.

MEDEA AS MODEL WIFE

Before Medea can carry out her treacherous plans, however, she must regain her husband's trust. In order to persuade him, she recasts the discourses of praise and blame she has earlier deployed, becoming the embodiment of the conventional Hellenic wife evoked in her first *rhesis*. In their penultimate exchange, at 866–975, Medea uses Jason's assumptions about women against him in fashioning her self-invective.⁵⁰ She blames herself for the trouble she has caused, addressing herself with a derogatory adjective, *σχετλία* (873), in the same way she had earlier derided Jason. She then claims that once she came to her senses, she rebuked herself rather than her husband (ἐγὼ δ' ἐμαυτῇ διὰ λόγων ἀφικόμην / κάλοιδόρησα, 872–73). Now, instead of reviling Jason, she praises him (ἐπαινῶ, 884) for being a *σώφρων* (sensible) man (884), while denigrating herself as *ἄφρων* (without sense, 885). She defers to his authority, acknowledging the wisdom of his counsel (τοῖσι βουλευούσιν εἶ, 874) and the shortcomings of her own (ἀβουλίαν, 882). This feminine role-playing culminates in her assertion that

48. Conacher 1967, 192 is right to see Medea's interactions with the chorus at 214–66, 364–409, and 764–810 as an "ascending scale" in which she maximizes their support and sympathy. And yet, once they have heard her revelations, their allegiance begins to wane, as indicated by the choral ode at 824–65.

49. Segal 1997, 171 views the fifth stasimon as a moment in which the chorus is forced "into shockingly direct contact with the crime that it has reluctantly abetted."

50. On Medea's manipulation of female stereotypes in this scene, see Barlow 1989, 163–64; Foley 1989, 74–77; Boedeker 1991, 99.

she should have offered to preside over his impending nuptials, like the mother of the bride (887–88), a gesture of self-sacrifice paralleled only by Andromache’s outrageous willingness to nurse Hector’s bastard children in another Euripidean tragedy (Eur. *Andr.* 224–25).

To render her performance even more plausible, Medea deploys two gnomic statements, one of which evokes the *ψόγος γυναικῶν* inverted by her earlier speech: “We women are such as we are—I won’t say an evil” (ἀλλ’ ἐσμὲν οἷόν ἐσμεν, οὐκ ἔρῳ κακόν, / γυναικες, 889–90). This ambiguous assertion simultaneously reinforces and undermines a traditional male sentiment regarding women. By echoing the Hesiodic definition of women as a curse, κακόν, Medea tells Jason what he wants and expects to hear, thereby joining herself to the blame discourse she had earlier repudiated and signaling an acceptance of a subordinate female role. Her apostrophe to her children (894–905), whom she already intends to kill, followed by her gnomic assertion that women by nature are given to weeping (γυνὴ δὲ θῆλυ κἀπὶ δακρύοις ἔφθ, 928), completes her portrayal of a repentant wife with a maternal flourish. Her final allusion to Jason as the “best” of husbands, a phrase laden with all the irony of her earlier references to him as a κακός, shows how fully she exploits discourses of praise and blame in order to gain control over her husband, “in you she [Glaucê] gains the very best man as a husband” (ἄνδρός τ’ ἀρίστου σοῦ τυχοῦς’ ὁμευνέτου, 953). Duped by this performance, Jason rewards Medea with a discourse of praise: “I praise what you have said, nor do I find fault with it” (αἰνῶ, γύναι, τὰδ’, οὐδ’ ἐκεῖνα μέφομαι, 908) and then deems her a σώφρων wife (913). The phrase οὐδ’ . . . μέφομαι echoes Jason’s earlier use of the phrase in the *agon* and shows how completely he has reversed his prior stance in response to his wife’s performance. By appearing to embrace the blame discourse perpetuated by men against women, Medea convinces Jason of her loyalty and obedience, even as she prepares to destroy him, in a verbal strategy strongly evocative of Clytemnestra’s duplicitous and ambiguous response to the messenger at 587–615 in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.

JASON’S INVECTIVE AGAINST MEDEA

In the final scene of the play, these discourses of praise and blame suffer a final overturn. Once he has learned the full extent of his wife’s crimes, Jason resorts to invective and reinscribes in the strongest terms the traditional *ψόγος γυναικῶν*; and yet his invective, like that of Medea, has a more personal object, since he directs it mostly toward his wife (1323–50). In language and content, this speech recalls the numerous passages in Euripidean drama in which women are denounced for their domestic treachery, and returns full circle to the gnome Medea pronounces at the end of her first *rhesis* (265–66).⁵¹ Several verbal echoes evoke his wife’s earlier use of invective: just as she constructed a blame discourse for him (καλόν γ’ ὄνειδος, 514), so in turn he denounces her with countless reproaches (μυρίοις ὀνειδέσι,

51. On female domestic treachery in Euripides, cf. *Andr.* 269–73; *Ion* 843–46; frags. 276, 429, 1159 N².

1344). The magnitude of his hatred, expressed in an exceptional apostrophe, now surpasses that of his wife because it encompasses the hatred of all mortals and even the gods, "O hateful thing, O woman hated most of all by the gods, and me, and the entire race of mortals!" (ὦ μῖστος, ὦ μέγιστον ἐχθίστη γύναι / θεοῖς τε κάμοι παντί τ' ἀνθρώπων γένει, 1323–24). Similarly, the other vocatives with which he addresses his wife, αἰσχροποιέ and τέκνων μαιφόνε (1346), far exceed the derogatory superlatives she had earlier uttered (e.g., ὦ παγκάκιστε, 465). In designating Medea an "evil mother" (μητρὸς . . . κακῆς, 1363), Jason recalls her repeated denunciation of him as a κακός. And just as Medea had previously condemned Jason's house to oblivion, so now he heaps imprecations on her (ὄλοιο, 1329; ἔρρε, 1346), and his culminating curse similarly invokes vengeance deities, "May the Erinys and murderous Dike destroy you for the sake of your children" (ἀλλὰ σ' Ἐρινὺς ὀλέσειε τέκνων / φονία τε Δίκη, 1389–90). Medea now becomes the enemy, spawned by their hateful and destructive union (κῆδος ἐχθρὸν ὀλέθριόν τ' ἐμοί, 1341).

Whereas the first part of the *Medea* inverts the genre of the ψόγος γυναικῶν, redirecting it against men and simultaneously creating a new discourse of praise for women, Jason's speech partially restores the traditional masculine view of women. He appropriately refers to his matrimonial actions with the active voice, γῆμαι σέ (1341; cf. ἡγόμην, 1331), while designating her role with a passive participle, νυμφευθεῖσα (1336), a grammatical shift that contrasts her perversion of active and passive voice in the first *rhesis*. Borrowing the language of Hesiod, as Medea had earlier, he refers to her as a κακὸν μέγα (1331), specifically in a nuptial context. And as in Semonides' iambic and the diatribe of Hippolytus, the female is compared to wild and supernatural creatures outside human civilization: "You, a lion, not a woman, who has a nature fiercer than Tuscan Scylla" (λέαιναν, οὐ γυναικα, τῆς Τυρσηνίδος / Σκύλλης ἔχουσιν ἀγριωτέραν φύσιν, 1342–43), a comparison that evokes her Aeschylean counterpart, since Clytemnestra receives a similar condemnation in the *Agamemnon* (Aesch. *Ag.* 1232–33). As Jason's betrayer (προδότιν, 1332), Medea has proven the truth of women's ἀπιστοσύνη proclaimed by the poets.

But his words have no effect on Medea; in rhetoric like that of the self-confident Jason earlier in the play, she exhorts him to continue hating her (στύγει, 1374) and denounces his speech as empty and vain, using μάτην as he had of her (μάτην ἔπος ἔρριπται, 1404). At the level of grammar, Medea's abrupt imperatives underscore her discursive dominance.⁵² Functioning as a *dea ex machina*, with her words assuming the power of a deity, she delivers a final prophecy over Jason, "As for you, a base man you will die basely, as is fitting, your head struck by a fragment of the rotting Argo" (σὺ δ', ὥσπερ εἰκός, καθανῇ κακὸς κακῶς / Ἀργοῦς κάρη σὸν λειψάνῳ πεπληγμένως, 1386–87).⁵³ Earlier identified with a vengeance deity,

52. Cf. λέγε, 1320; σάφ' ἴσθι, 1362; στύγει, 1374; στεῖχε . . . θάπτε, 1394; μένε, 1396.

53. Collinge 1962, 170–71 argues that the staging of the final scene creates a striking visual metaphor for a "dehumanized" Medea; others have viewed her as a primordial, feminine vengeance deity; see Foley 1989, 77; Rabinowitz 1993, 132 and 136; and Burnett 1998, 224.

an ἀλάστωρ (Ἐρινὺν ὑπαλάστορον, 1260), Medea appears in the play’s final moment in a deified form, as “Curse-demon satisfied,” one that compels Jason to look upon his crime and calls him “false to his oath” (ψευδόρκος, 1392).⁵⁴ All of Medea’s earlier speech acts, particularly her use of curses and invective, culminate in this prophecy, while the repetition of κακὸς κακῶς evokes all of her allusions to Jason as a deficient spouse. The participle πεπληγμένος, a word placed in the same metrical position as in its earlier occurrence at 556, recalls the ἔρως that has consumed and destroyed him, and its just punishment: instead of being “stricken with desire” (ἰμέρω πεπληγμένος, 556), he will die stricken by a segment of the ship that brought him glory. The prophecy thus deprives Jason of his heroic legacy, cloaking him instead with tragic ignominy and reducing him to the speaker of a womanish θρῆνος (1409).⁵⁵ Through the character of Medea, Euripides contrives a “song of loathing” for Jason, as the earlier poets had for women in their invectives, and, in the process, shows us a truly terrifying world, in which women are capable not merely of adultery, or even of murder, but of controlling discourse.

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54. Burnett 1998, 218–19. Rabinowitz 1993, 136 also views Medea as a deity, but as a symbol of the matriarchal power repressed by Hellenic male civilization.

55. Boedeker 1991, 109 shows how the play, through Medea, provides a new, tragic λόγος for Jason which supplants that of the heroic past.

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