

EURIPIDES, *MEDEA* 639*

Modern interpretation tends to take E. *Med.* 639, 'driving from the senses over a second bed' (*θυμὸν ἐκπλήξας ἐτέροις ἐπὶ λέκτροις*), found within the petition of the chorus that 'dread Cypris never... inflict angry arguments and insatiate quarrels' (637–40a), as referring to a second bed that might allure these women themselves¹ rather than one that might allure their husbands.² None the less, the latter interpretation seems to be recommended by both the contents and the context of the line; it is also consistent with Euripidean idiom. As to the context, v. 639 is found in the second stasimon. An examination of the attitude of the chorus toward Medea up to this point may guide us towards a fuller understanding of the phrase.

In her opening speech in the first episode (214ff.) Medea, who was betrayed by the husband for whom she left family and country (252ff.), persuades the already sympathetic chorus (136–8, 178f., 182) to side with her as underprivileged women in a world dominated by egocentric men (230ff.). In the first pair of strophes of the following stasimon (410–30) they accept Medea's division of human beings into 'the female stock' (419) and 'the race of males' (429) and sing of male perfidy and discrimination against women. They stress their own personal involvement by replacing 'women' with 'I' and 'we' in five of the seven references to the second sex (415 and 422 'my', 423 and 430 'our', 428 'I'). This unqualified acceptance of Medea's point of view is not disturbed even by Medea's earlier revelation that she intends to avenge herself on Jason by killing him, his bride, and her father (374–5), their own king. These Corinthian women (214) are women, not Corinthians.

So far the chorus have only heard of Medea's treatment by Jason. Immediately afterwards, in the second episode (446ff.), they are eyewitnesses to it (as is stressed in 652–4). The clash between the calculating and insensitive husband and the trapped and desperate wife whom he deserted makes the chorus acutely conscious of the common plight of women; and so in the ensuing stasimon (627ff.) they pray ardently that what happened to Medea should never happen to them. The length of the passage – a whole pair of stanzas – dealing with this theme (contrast, e.g. *Heracl.* 926–7, *Hi.* 528–9, *IA* 783–9) brings to mind the *Prometheus Vincitus*, where another sympathetic chorus, the Oceanids, reacts similarly and at length to the experiences

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¹ E.g. L. Méridier, *Euripide* Tome I, Coll. des Universités de France (Paris, 1925), 'enflammant mon cœur pour un lit étranger'; D. L. Page, *Euripides, Medea* (Oxford, 1938), n. on 637 sq., 'making my heart aflame for a stranger's love'; R. Warner, *Three Great Plays of Euripides* (London, 1944), 'urge my passion to a different love'; P. Vellacott, *Euripides, Medea and Other Plays* (Penguin Books, Baltimore, Maryland, 1963), 'craze my heart to leave old love for new'; M. C. Duclos, *Euripide, Théâtre Complet* 4 (Garnier-Flammarion, Paris, 1966), 'en frappant mon cœur d'amour pour un lit étranger'. This interpretation was already in circulation earlier, e.g. E. P. Coleridge, *The Plays of Euripides* (London, 1891), 'smiting my soul with mad desire for unlawful love'; C. E. S. Headlam, *The Medea of Euripides* (Cambridge, 1897), n. on 635, 'madden my soul with longing for strange love'.

² E.g. G. Buchanan, *Euripidis Tragoediae duae, Medea et Alcestis* (Edinburgh, 1722), 'mentem mihi ne saucient Ulla dolentem pellice'; L. Humbert, *Théâtre d'Euripide* I (Classiques Garnier, Paris, n.d.), 'Qu'excite le triomphe d'une rivale'; U. v. Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, *Griechische Tragödien*, 3. Band³ (Berlin, 1910), 'Aphrodite verbanne eifersüchtigen Streit um des Gatten ungeteilten Besitz. This interpretation was considered by H. Weil, *Euripide, Médée* (Paris, 1879²), n. on 637–42, and rejected in favour of the one which prevails now.

of Prometheus and of Io in the second and third stasimon respectively (526ff., 887ff.). In the latter the Oceanids' involvement and horror are all the greater as 'such experiences could befall them too'³ – which is precisely what dictates the reaction of the chorus in our passage of *Medea*.

As these Corinthian women are aware of the ultimate cause of Medea's hardships, they implore the power of sexual attraction to refrain from exerting the same destructive influence upon them. This impassioned entreaty comprises the first pair (627–42) of the stasimon's two pairs of strophes. It is introduced by a bipartite general statement consisting of a 'negative' and a 'positive' part (627–31 = 'I'; see below): a disapproving observation based upon the marital conflict just witnessed by the chorus (627–30a = 'Ia') is followed by a maxim proclaiming the desirable and desired⁴ state of affairs (630b–31 = 'Ib');⁵ the cupitive optative found here in the subordinate clause sets the mood for the prayer that follows (632–42 = 'II' + 'III'). So too the antithetical structure of the introductory general statement serves as a pattern for the sequel; the chorus's entreaty is expressed both negatively, as they seek to avert from themselves a situation akin to that of Jason and Medea (632–4 = 'IIa', 637–40a = 'IIIa'), and positively, when they envisage the ideal conditions (635–6⁶ = 'IIb', 640b–42, = 'IIIb'). It is in the context of the former that 639 is embedded. Let us now turn to a detailed analysis of these two strophes.

'Visitations of love that come in excess bring neither good repute nor excellence to men' (ἔρωτες ὑπὲρ μὲν ἄγαν / ἐλθόντες οὐκ εὐδοξίαν / οὐδ' ἀρετὰν παρέδωκαν / ἀνδράσιν, Ia).⁷ Since this statement follows immediately upon Medea's sending

³ M. Griffith, *Aeschylus, Prometheus* (Cambridge, 1983), 887–906n.

⁴ εἰ δ' ἅλις ἔλθοι / Κύπρις, οὐκ ἄλλα θεὸς εὐχαρίς οὕτως. The chorus is emotionally involved; cf. also 635–6 in the sequel. This is a case where the original cupitive of the εἰ-clause is still felt ('Der Opt. d. Nebensätze d. Kondizional...perioden...lässt sich nicht selten als ursprünglicher Kupitiv verstehen', E. Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik*² (München, 1953–60), ii.327).

⁵ A. *PV* 887ff., the Oceanids' impassioned reaction to the fate of Io, also starts with a *gnome*; it takes up the whole first strophe of the triadic stasimon. In the other two stanzas the chorus apply this *gnome* to their own case (as our chorus do in the entreaties 632ff.). Those two stanzas comprise the wishes – what the Oceanids hope not to experience and what they would have instead, and why. Io serves as a negative paradigm to the eyewitness chorus (898–900, with εἰσοράσ' in 899). Prometheus too is a negative example in the earlier, second, stasimon (540–1, with δερκομένα in 540), and Medea in our stasimon, in the second pair of strophes (652–4, with εἶδομεν in 652).

⁶ This division is not the conventional one; usually 635–6 is connected to the sequel, separating the antistrophe from the strophe. However, the thrice repeated pattern outlined above cannot be accidental. Each of the second members of the three pairs includes an adversative δέ (630b, 635, 640b). The μηδέ ποτ' which begins the third pair (637) obviously refers back to the μή ποτ' which opens the second (632) and thus binds the antistrophe to the strophe. The enjambement may be influenced by A. *PV* 526ff. There three consecutive negative optatives of wish (μηδάμ' 526, μηδ' 529, μηδ' 533), evoked by the appalling fate of Prometheus, are followed by one positive optative of wish in the last v. of the strophe (535). This verse includes τόδε pointing forward to the beginning of the antistrophe (536–9) which contains the bulk of the positive part of the prayer; see Griffith, op. cit. (in n. 3) 535n. – There does not seem to be any similarly connected pair of strophes in extant Euripides; however, the only certain τε-connected pair of strophes in Euripides is also found in the *Medea* (W. Kranz, *Stasimon*, Berlin, 1933, 178). Euripides does have a few subordinate transitions from strophe to antistrophe (there are more connexions between antistrophe and epode, or refrain/mesode and strophe); see *Su.* 48 (participle), *Tro.* 809 (local clause), *Hi.* 131 (indirect speech). In each case the two formally connected strophes are the first pair in their stasimon and constitute a thematic unity distinct from the sequel, as in our pair of strophes.

⁷ εὐδοξίαν...ἀρετὰν seem to be a hendiadys (good repute for excellence). The translation is adapted from that of P. Vellacott (n. 1 above).

Jason back 'overcome with longing for his new bride' (623f.), 'men' here may be taken at first sight to refer to 'the race of males'. This would reflect the chorus's acceptance of Medea's claim that Jason married the Corinthian princess because he desired the young woman (556; cf. 491) and was flattered by the royal connexion (591f.; cf. 628) and not, as he had stated, for the benefit of the whole family (547ff., 559ff.). The mention of 'good repute' in this context would then allude to Jason's statement on the importance he attaches to fame (542-4) and point to the gap between his avowed ideal and his actual behaviour or, in combination with 'excellence', refer to the general heroic ideal of which he falls short.

However, the antithetical 'But if Cypris should come in proper measure, no other goddess brings such delight' (εἰ δ' ἄλῃς ἔλθοι / Κύπρις, οὐκ ἄλλα θεὸς εὐχαρὶς οὕτως, Ib) does not follow quite logically upon the first part of the bipartite introductory statement. If visitations of love that come in excess bring neither good repute nor excellence to men, one might expect to hear in the sequel that it is visitations of love in proper measure that bring men good repute and excellence, or even that it is women to whom visitations of love that come in excess bring good repute and excellence, or some other statement arrived at by the change of one factor only. Instead one learns that what is at issue is not good repute and excellence, but how one can escape being hurt by, and even derive unmarred delight from, a power as awesome as sexual attraction. Obviously this statement does not apply only to the 'race of males'. In our play it is Medea who is suffering monstrously as a result of the ruinous effect of Eros. It was because she fell in love with him that she originally followed Jason (527ff.) and, according to the latter's interpretation, her jealousy of a rival prevents her now from appreciating the expediency of her husband's conduct (551-73, esp. 568; cf. 593ff.). 'Men', of course, can stand also for 'human beings',⁸ and the initial ambiguity is likely to be intentional (see below). The wider sense of the word comes to the foreground as the song proceeds. If the more restricted interpretation hardly fits already the praises of Cypris-in-proper-measure, it is evidently inappropriate when the female chorus now passionately prays never to be hit by the goddess's inescapable shaft, which is anointed with desire (μήποτ', ὦ δέσποιν', ἐπ' ἐμοὶ χρυσέων τόξων ἐφέιγς / ἰμέρω χρίσας' ἄφυκτον οἰστόν, IIa), but rather to be cherished by moderation, the fairest gift of the gods⁹ (στέργει δέ με σωφροσύνα, / δώρημα κάλλιστον θεῶν, IIb). Clearly too the first part of their prayer (IIa) recalls Jason's contention that it is not Medea to whom he is obliged for his delivery, but Cypris, who with Eros' inescapable shafts forced Medea to act as she did (527-31). These actions of Medea, with which she turned traitor to her own stock, inevitably led to her joining Jason on his way back to Greece and henceforth put her entirely at his mercy. The chorus's prayer expresses these women's fear of being overpowered by

⁸ For *ἄνδρες* meaning 'human beings' see e.g. 518 above, *Hi.* 396; in a comparable context see e.g. *Hi.* 358 *ἔρωτα δὲ τὸν τύραννον ἀνδρῶν* and cf. *Hi.* 1280. The last two passages are found in choral songs, as is ours; *ἄνθρωπος/ἄνθρωποι* is very rarely used in Euripidean lyrics.

⁹ *Σωφροσύνη* (reasonableness, soundmindedness), translated here as 'moderation', is identified by Euripides with the mastery of passion (Helen North, *Sophrosyne*, Cornell U. P., Ithaca, 1966, 68). Cf. the meaning of *σώφρων* in 1369: Medea explains that she killed the children because Jason took a new wife. Jason retorts that a *σώφρων* wife (= a reasonable wife, a wife in control of her passions) would not have reacted in this way; cf. also 913 (these two are the only instances of *σώφρων* applied to 'woman' in this play). In our choral song, where *σωφροσύνη* is opposed to overwhelming sexual attraction, its meaning seems to be either soundness of mind sufficient to resist or master such passion, or a natural tendency to non-violent emotional experience. Medea, who betrayed her country and murdered her brother to follow her love, has obviously been denied this fairest gift of the gods on either interpretation.

passion so excessive as to do away with their discretion, like that which made Medea forgo the protection of home and country.

But this is not all. Medea's plight is not simply the result of her having become an exile. She might have lived happily in Greece with the man she followed and the children she bore him, had he not broken his oaths and left her for another woman (cf. 10–19). Only Jason's later conduct brought the latent disastrous consequences of Medea's actions to the foreground, and it is the combination of the two – her exile and his betrayal – which brings about Medea's ruin. That both factors are crucial is explicitly stressed by the nurse (31–5), Medea (255–8) and the chorus (431–45). Consequently the chorus now continues ('and never' at the beginning of 637 taking up 'never' at the beginning of 632) with a complementary antithetical wish that 'dread Cyprus never, driving from the senses over a second bed, inflict angry arguments and insatiate quarrels' (μηδέ ποτ' ἀμφιλόγους ὄρ- / γὰς ἀκόρεστά τε νείκη / θυμὸν ἐκπλήξας' ἑτέροις ἐπὶ λέκτροις / προσβάλῃ δεινὰ Κύπρις, IIIa), but that the goddess, 'respecting harmonious unions, judge shrewdly of wedded women' (ἀπολλέ- μους δ' εὐνὰς σεβίζουσ' / ὀξύφρων κρίνοι λέχη γυναικῶν, IIIb).¹⁰ Again the first part (IIIa) recalls an earlier relevant expression about Medea, namely the nurse's statement that her mistress sailed to Iolcus 'driven from her senses by her passion for Iason' (8).¹¹ That it is from themselves that these women pray to have the 'driving from the senses' and the resulting altercations averted is not explicitly stated but follows from the context; for the effect of the impersonal phrasing of this prayer see below. The interpretation of 'driving from the senses over a second bed' as 'making me react irrationally to my husband's attachment to another woman' is suggested by a number of factors, the combined effect of which seems to be conclusive: (a) both negative prayers (IIa + IIIa) include expressions which were applied to Medea earlier in the play (632–4 μήποτ', ὦ δέσποιν', ἐπ' ἐμοὶ χρυσέων τόξων ἐφείης / ἱμέρω χρίσας' ἄφυκτον οἰστόν, 530b–31 Ἔρωσ σ' ἠγάγκασε / τόξοις ἀφύκτοις τοῦμὸν ἐκσῶσαι δέμας. – 639 θυμὸν ἐκπλήξας' ἑτέροις ἐπὶ λέκτροις (Κύπρις), 8 (Μήδεια) ἔρωτι θυμὸν ἐκπλαγεῖσ' Ἰάσονος).¹² This indicates that it is what Medea has experienced that the chorus fear to experience themselves; (b) the expression 'second bed' is found only once more in Euripides, again in a choral song, *Andr.* 487, and there too it signifies 'other woman';¹³ (c) these observances are bolstered by the resemblance to A. *PV* 526–44 and 887–906, which suggests that either Euripides was influenced by these two stasima, or both poets used the same pattern. In *PV* 887–906 the Oceanids, young girls like Io, are aroused by Io's experiences, and it is specifically these that they pray in their song to be spared. The Corinthian women, in a similar position, react in a similar way.¹⁴

¹⁰ The translation is adapted from Page, op. cit. (in n. 1) n. on 640.

¹¹ That the chorus could not hear v. 8, not yet being on stage at the time, is irrelevant. What counts is that the audience has heard it.

¹² Euripides uses ἐκπλήσσειν (and ἐκπλήξις) frequently to signify the temporary loss of rational thinking (and behaviour) caused by overwhelming emotions or circumstances which bring about such emotions: sexual passion (here and *Hi.* 38f.), joy (*Alc.* 1125), fear (*Ion* 403, *Tro.* 183, *Ba.* 604, *IA* 1535), fond memories (*Hel.* 1397), noise of crowded assembly (*Su.* 160), chance (*IA* 351).

¹³ Hermione, jealous of her husband's war prize concubine, is said to have raged ἐτέρῳ λέχει, 'against the other bed'.

¹⁴ According to A. Elliott, *Euripides, Medea* (Oxford, 1964), 85 comm. on 635–41, these verses 'deal with the disturbances... in a marriage when one of the partners falls in love with someone else'. This interpretation seems too wide for this play generally and for this chorus and the situation preceding the ode in particular. For these women, the party who falls in love with another and thereby destroys the marriage and ruins his former partner can only be the husband.

None the less, the phrasing is ambiguous. By 'may Cypris never, driving from the senses over a second bed, inflict endless quarrels', these women may be asking the goddess either (1) never to give them cause for jealousy (i.e. never to make their husbands fall in love with another woman as Jason did), or (2) not to make them so passionately in love with their husbands as to be unable to accept their spouses' attachment to another (as Medea is). The latter interpretation would then recall the chorus's initial advice to Medea not to be too exasperated over Jason's infidelity (155–8). But this advice was given before the chorus met Medea in the flesh. From her opening speech (214ff.) onwards until she mentions the killing of her own children the chorus sides with Medea unreservedly (811ff. contra 267f., 578, 659ff., 759ff.); hence the first interpretation is probably to be preferred. Be this as it may, the second bed refers to a rival woman. The desire of married women for men other than their husbands is alien to this context.

The impersonal phrasing of the first part of this wish (IIIa) ('senses' with no express owner, 'inflict' with no direct object) fulfils a subtle function in the structure of these two strophes. As the repeated 'I' ('we') of the earlier part of the prayer (633 in IIa, 635 in IIb) is easily carried over to the second part, the lack of explicit personal nexus is hardly noticeable. And yet, this impersonal phrasing paves the way for the general phrasing of the wish that the goddess, 'respecting harmonious unions, judge shrewdly of wedded women' (IIIb) which concludes the prayer. This transition from the personal to the general by way of the impersonal recalls the function of the mood in 630b pointed out above. The subordinate optative there occurred in the second sentence of our pair of strophes (Ib) and served as a transition to the prayer (II + III); the impersonal phrasing here stands in the last sentence but one (IIIa) and is followed by the chorus's final entreaty (IIIb), which explicitly concerns 'women' generally. It thus returns to the introductory statement (Ia) both in its generality and by balancing the *prima facie* narrow significance of 'men' there with 'women' here; moreover, in this context of harmonious unions between husbands and wives, 'women', like 'men' above, has by implication a wider meaning too (see Fig. 1). The ring-composition is the result of the twofold function served by 637–42 (= III): in content this section is a continuation of the preceding prayer 632–6 (= II), but its impersonal phrasing links it back to the introductory *gnome* 627–31 (= I).

Fig. 1. *The ring structure of the first half of the stasimon*

I	<i>Gnome</i> (627– –631)	a (627–30a)	general	ind.	'men'
		b (630b–31)	general	subord.cup.opt.	
II	Prayer (632–	a (632–4)	personal	cup.opt.	
		b (635–6)	personal	cup.opt.	
III		a (637–40a)	impersonal	cup.opt.	
		b (640b–42)	general	cup.opt.	

N.B. a = negative, disapproved, rejected; b = positive, desirable, desired; 'men' is found in an a-context, 'women' in a b-context.

This involved structure dexterously stresses the formal unity of this pair of strophes and thereby enhances the thematic unity which has been demonstrated above.¹⁵ The

¹⁵ This unity is not monolithic, and the poet's artistry is also evident from the effect achieved by splitting the first prayer at the end of the strophe so that its first and negative part (IIa) ends the strophe, while its second and positive part (IIb) begins the antistrophe and thus gains great emphasis, balancing the (negative) opening statement of the strophe (Ia). Also, in the strophes themselves this quasi-caesura between them inverts the movement of the series of alternate negatives (a) and positives (b), so that the metrically identical units are diametrically opposed to each other in contents (strophe: a–b–a; antistrophe: b–a–b).

latter is further supported by the second half of the stasimon. Here the chorus's wish at the beginning of the strophe never to be cut off from country and home (643ff.) is supplemented at the end of the antistrophe by their curse on whoever betrays his dear ones (659ff.). This clearly reflects the two sides of Medea's plight, her exile and her betrayal by Jason. The prevalent interpretation of 639 would impair this thematic unity.

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