

Πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι: Myth and Plot in Euripides' *Medea**

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In memoriam Gareth Morgan, with whom I first read the Medea

SUMMARY: This study explores the significance of Medea's conjugal family for the plot of the *Medea*. Both Jason and the royal family at Corinth belong to the House of Aeolus; coherent reference to this House is central to the play's mythological imagery. The House's mythography, of which the chorus shows awareness, involves an inherited curse associated with the Aeolid most closely connected with Corinth, namely, Sisyphus. The outcome of Medea's oath-invoked curse calling for the eradication of Jason's line is thus over-determined.

MUCH HAS BEEN MADE OF THE PRESCRIPTIVE IMPACT of Medea's personal history and family background on the *Medea*.¹ Medea's well-documented role as a "kin-killer *par excellence*"² renders her decision to murder her own children

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¹ The recent collection of essays edited by Clauss and Johnston exemplifies the extent to which Medea's personal history has dominated the scholarship not only on Euripides' play, but also on other treatments of the myth.

² The phrase is Bremmer's (100).

less incomprehensible than it could have been. Concomitant with the disproportionate weight of scholarship on Medea and her natal family, however, is the lack of attention to her conjugal family.³ Jason's family, the House of Aeolus, was replete with murderous acts, including maternal infanticide. It might even be said that his family history provided a better antecedent for Medea's nefarious actions in Corinth than did her personal history, which did not include infanticide specifically.⁴ This study, accordingly, considers the *Medea* in light of Jason's family background.⁵

Stories about the prolific House of Aeolus, to which both Jason and the current ruling family at Corinth belonged, were part of the stock-in-trade of early Greek tragedy. Extant fragments and the mention by name of lost plays attest to their popularity, although only a small portion of the Aeolid corpus survives. Known plays include Aeschylus' (possible) tetralogy on the story of Hypsipyle and Jason, *Athamas*, and one or possibly two *Sisyphus* plays, as well as Sophocles' *Sisyphus*, *Salmones* (satyr play), *Phrixus*, two *Athamas* and two *Tyro* plays. Euripides' interest in this House began early in his career with the *Peliades* (455 B.C.E.) and yielded, among other plays, *Ino*, two *Phrixus* plays, *Alcestis*, *Aeolus*, *Sisyphus* and *Autolycus* (satyr plays), *Melanippe Sophe*, *Melanippe Desmotis*, *Hypsipyle*, and, of course, *Medea*. It will be argued that the mythography of this House suggests that it was afflicted by an ancestral or inherited curse much like the better known curses of the Houses of Atreus and Labdacus, and that this curse underlies Euripides' *Medea*.⁶

³ For instance, Mastronarde's 2002 commentary mentions neither the House of Aeolus (I owe this reminder to Cynthia Damon), nor Medea's relationship to her conjugal family. The role of the conjugal family in Greek society and law has received a great deal of scholarly attention in general; in reference to the *Medea*, recent studies include those of Visser and Cyrino, neither of which is listed in Mastronarde's bibliography. The present study, however, is mythographical in nature and not concerned either with actual Greek practice, or with theoretical considerations. Blaiklock's analysis of Jason's character does not deal with the larger House.

⁴ It may in fact be the case that Medea was not portrayed as an infanticide, even in the Corinthian episode, before Euripides' play: see Johnston 62–65.

⁵ For a truncated family tree see the Appendix. My discussion of the offspring of Aeolus is limited to members pertinent to the *Medea*. See Gantz 171–97 for a fuller discussion of the sources and 806–10 for more complete genealogical tables.

⁶ One of only two extant plays among those mentioned above. The other is Euripides' *Alcestis*, which features Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, and Admetus, son of Pheres and grandson of Aeolus; like those of Jason and Glauce, their troubles are over-determined. Earlier treatments of this story are known, but not extant: Phrynichus' *Alcestis* and Sophocles' *Admetus*. In Euripides' play there is little explicit reference to curses (line 714 refers to a curse by Admetus on his parents, a reversal of the usual pattern), though the respective Aeolid genealogies are emphasized throughout. See also Foley's chapter on *anodos* dramas (303–31), and Larson's comments on heroine cults for the daughters of Pelias (8, 10, 58, 114).

1. DEFINING ANCESTRAL CURSES

Though curses were a part of Greek culture long before the Classical period, an intergenerational cause or effect resulting from a curse “was more likely to appear with the more synoptic approach to mythology that we find in fifth-century lyric, tragedy, and the logographers” than earlier in epic.⁷ Indeed cursed Houses are the meat of Greek tragedy, where they serve to link ancestors, whose quarrels and disputes led to impious deeds, with irrational or impious behavior in their descendants. The playwrights either created such links, as West suggests for the Labdacid curse in Euripides’ *Chrysippus*,⁸ or developed existing stories. The inherited curse in tragedy appears in various forms.⁹ The specific thematic links between generations in the curse on the House of Atreus characterize one form, while another, such as the Labdacid curse, manifests itself in only a vague notion of the undying anger of the gods and Fate.¹⁰ But the history of both of these famed Houses illustrates the principal characteristic of a curse associated with ancestral wrongdoing: the recurrence of ills in successive generations.

The origin of a curse was not necessarily seen as a fixed point, but could be attributed to one or more of the ancestors guilty of impiety or some other misdeed. This flexibility stems in part from the fact that tragedy tends to focus on the endpoint of the curse, that is, the imminent fall of the House, rather than on its origin.¹¹ The more remote links to ancestral culpability are generally underplayed, since the focus of the plot is on current events, while the

⁷ West 1999: 37.

⁸ West 1999: 42–44. But whether Euripides invented a hereditary curse for the Labdacids from whole cloth or followed earlier sources cannot be determined conclusively. See further n. 14.

⁹ West’s (1999: 33–36) distinction between two types of inherited curse in myth, one an aetiological prototype for a “permanent affliction or diminished status affecting a tribe, a sex, or a zoological species,” and the other a curse that specifically condemns an individual and his entire family, including future generations, is unhelpful for our purposes, since both types are by definition inherited and permanent in that they remain with the House until it is extinct.

¹⁰ At e.g. *S. Ant.* 594–603 the chorus perceives the operation of an ancestral curse, but even they are ignorant as to its specific nature.

¹¹ Examples of the last twig from the dying tree include Polynices and Eteocles in the Oedipus saga, Orestes, and Hippolytus, for all of whom hero cults, which often mark the end of a House, are known. The cults for Orestes and for Hippolytus are well attested in the literature, while that of Polynices and Eteocles is inferred from Paus. 9.18.3, which mentions a Boeotian cult for the “children of Oedipus” (Larson 89). Female offspring of the last generation also hold a prominent place, notably Antigone, Electra, and Iphigenia, and heroine cults also are, as Larson has shown, a significant feature of Greek cult.

older stories were presumably well known. But this does not mean that a curse's origins or more general allusions to a troubled past are insignificant in tragedy. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* the awful banquet perpetrated on Thyestes by Agamemnon's grandfather Atreus informs the actions of the current scions of that House.¹² A reference to Tantalus by the chorus of Argive elders in the context of the curse on the House (1468–69), however, suggests that the imagery of dead children and feasting on human flesh throughout the play may allude to an earlier crime still.¹³ Though Tantalus had no active role in the *Agamemnon*, his ancestral presence, even if only briefly noted, was part of the understood background of the present unfolding of events.¹⁴

The present study argues that coherent references to the Aeolid family tree, specifically, to the descendants of Salmoneus, Cretheus, Sisyphus, and Athamas, provide a framework on which to understand the plot of the *Medea*. One facet of this familial prism is the current situation at Corinth, where Aeolid descendants are in power. Another is its recent history: Pelias sent Jason to Colchis, whence he returned to Iolchus with Medea. She orchestrated the murder of Pelias, which necessitated their flight to Corinth. A third facet is the more remote history of the House: Ino, wife of Jason's great-uncle Athamas, is part of this, as the chorus knows. But in this play, too, as in the *Agamemnon*, a faint ancestral ghost lurks in the background: not Aeolus himself, but Sisyphus, who is ultimately responsible for the House's current troubles.¹⁵ This study will examine first the evidence for an inherited curse in the mythography of the Aeolid House, then the evidence from the *Medea* itself.

2. THE CURSE ON THE HOUSE OF AEOLUS

Particularly regrettable is the loss of Euripides' play about the founding ancestor of this House, Aeolus, since he is likely to be the first source of an in-

¹² Atreus' banquet is made relevant to the current generation at A. 1090–118, 1242–44, 1497–504, 1583–603.

¹³ See Gantz' table 17 for the Tantalid family tree, and 531–35 for references to Tantalus' filicidal transgression.

¹⁴ Owing to the dearth of mythological information about Labdacus it is not possible to make a similar argument for Sophocles' Oedipus cycle, though the brief mention of this eponymous ancestor in the *OT* and *Ant.* (1226 and 594 respectively) hint at long-standing troubles in the House. Stinton (460–63) accepts the curse on the Labdacids in the *OC* as a functional allusion, but is skeptical about Lloyd-Jones' arguments for allusive hints to the same curse in the *OT*.

¹⁵ The Corinthian historian Eumelus stated that Medea, ruler of Corinth, at length handed the rule over to Sisyphus (Paus. 2.3.8) and returned to Colchis, but Euripides in the *Medea* seems to be following a chronology that made Sisyphus a ruler of Corinth before the arrival of Medea.

herited curse in the family tree. He was the grandson of Deucalion and Pyrrha and the eponymous ancestor of the Aeolic branch of the Greek people. Confusion arises because this Aeolus, who was the son of Hellen, was conflated early on both with the Aeolus who ruled the winds, and with Aeolus the father of Melanippe by Hippo.¹⁶ The conflated Aeolus known from later sources was famous for the ill treatment of his children: he forced his six sons and six daughters to marry one another.¹⁷ Despite our ignorance of punishment Aeolus may have suffered for his actions, and despite the absence of any explicit statement that he was cursed or cursed his descendants, he did beget at least one son who seems to have been afflicted by hereditary curse (i.e., one stemming from his father's crimes) in Greek tragedy.¹⁸

Sisyphus of Ephyre (Corinth), son of Aeolus, was known in epic, in the *Iliad*, for instance, where he was called "craftiest of men" (6.152–54). At *Od.* 11.593–600 he is already suffering his famous punishment in the underworld, though the reason is not stated.¹⁹ Hesiod (fr. 10.2 Merkelbach-West) calls Sisyphus αἰολομήτης, an appropriate epithet given his parentage and his character, while Pindar praises his cunning (*O.* 13.50–53). But though his punishment in the Homeric Underworld suggests that he was already famous for some impiety, it is not until Sophocles that Sisyphus and his descendants are referred to as cursed: Odysseus is "of the doomed race of the sons of Sisyphus" (*Aj.* 189 τᾶς ἀσώτου Σισυφιδᾶν γενεᾶς). The *Ajax* identifies Sisyphus as the generator of the curse; we may compare Aeschylus' reference at *A.* 1597 to Atreus' banquet as ἄσσωτος γένει "bringing destruction on his race."²⁰ Addi-

¹⁶ This pair also had a grandson named Aeolus, son of Poseidon and Melanippe. Gantz 167–69 outlines the various stories and their conflation. Euripides' *Aeolus* already conflates the son of Hellen with the king of the winds: in this play Aeolus' sons are Sisyphus, Athamas, Salmoneus, and Cretheus (fr. 14 Nauck).

¹⁷ This seems to be the case for Euripides' *Aeolus*, and is certainly true in Ovid's *Heroides* 11. For other sources see Gantz 169. In the *Odyssey* (10.1–12) Aeolus' six sons and six daughters are married to one another, but there is no indication that he forced the marriages.

¹⁸ The evidence for crimes committed by Aeolus is not abundant. The hypothesis to Euripides' *Melanippe Sophe* states that Aeolus exiled himself for one year after committing a murder, and upon his return ordered Melanippe's twins by Poseidon put to death, not realizing that they were his grandsons; see Collard et al. p. 248.

¹⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood 1986 surveys most of the various traditions, though Münzer (375) also lists Tyro's story (discussed below) as a possibility. *ΣΤ Il.* 6.191 Dindorf-Maass states that the line of Sisyphus was condemned by Zeus to produce no offspring. This is reminiscent of Apollo's warning to Oedipus' father, Laius, not to produce offspring, and of Amyntor's curse of Phoenix at *Il.* 9.453–57. For a more comprehensive account of the references to Sisyphus in literature see Roscher.

²⁰ It is unfortunate that no Sisyphus play survives intact to help clarify his characterization in tragedy. Aeschylus may have written two plays based on the Sisyphus myth,

tional references in Sophocles echo this characterization.²¹ In the *Philoctetes* the title character hates Odysseus, who is considered, as he usually is in tragedy, the son of Sisyphus, and Neoptolemus pretends to share the feeling, ending his long complaint with an assertion that he was cheated “by Odysseus most ill-born and descended from ill-born ancestors” (384 πρὸς τοῦ κακίστου καὶ κακῶν Ὀδυσσέως). Philoctetes, too, implies that it is disgraceful to be from Sisyphus’ stock (1310–13). Ovid’s Ajax repeats the charge of shameful ancestry (*Met.* 13.31–33). Even Hesychius’ comment on the adjective *Sisypheius* at *Medea* 405, discussed below, states that from the time Sisyphus was king at Corinth his descendants have been κακοί. We thus recognize in Sisyphus and his descendants a “permanent affliction or diminished status affecting a tribe, a sex, or a zoological species.”²²

Ceramic evidence suggests that the Sisyphid affliction in tragedy originated from a curse that invoked the Erinyes, which in turn points to the probability of a blood curse, that is, a curse originating from murder, usually of kin. In representations of Sisyphus on vases from Magna Graecia, a region noted for its depictions of various types of theatrical scenery and recognizable Greek tragedies, Oakley finds an interesting phenomenon: two of the three South Italian vases depicting Sisyphus’ punishment in the Underworld show him harassed by a female demonic figure.²³ The whip-wielding demon is generally identified by scholars as “Ananke” or “Poine,” though companion-demons

Sisyphus Drapetes and *Sisyphus Petrokylistes*, possibly satyr plays, though it is not clear if these are one play or two. Another *Sisyphus*, of which about forty lines survive, is problematically assigned to the Athenian tyrant Critias (fr. 25 Diels-Kranz). One reference exists to a Sophoclean *Sisyphus* (fr. 545 Radt), and Euripides’ lost *Sisyphus* is a satyr play.

²¹ *Philoctetes* postdates the *Medea*, and the date of the *Ajax* is unknown. Sisyphus is characterized as the real father of Odysseus in tragedy. His deception of Anticlea, Odysseus’ mother, first appears in tragedy in a fragment of Aeschylus’ “Ὀπλῶν Κρίσις” (fr. 175 Radt) and continues in both Sophocles and Euripides. See Gantz 175 for the popularity of this story on ceramics in both Greece and Magna Graecia.

²² West 1999: 36. Though κακός is common word, Euripides uses it several times to express a condition consistent with a cursed state, for instance, in the *Aeolus* (fr. 32 Nauck): κακῆς (ἀπ’) ἀρχῆς γίνεται τέλος κακόν. An unattributed fragment (fr. 1036 Nauck) of Euripides quoted by Stobaeus (*Flor.* 46.3) expresses the sentiment more generally: κακὸν γὰρ ἄνδρα χρὴ κακῶς πάσχειν αἰεὶ. Cf. also Medea’s parting curse on Jason: *Med.* 1386 σὺ δ’, ὥσπερ εἰκός, κατθανῇ κακὸς κακῶς.

²³ Oakley 786–87, referring to Munich 3297 from Canosa and Naples 81666 from Altamura, “Sisyphus” 24 and 23 respectively. Additional examples also come from Italy: from the Heraion at Foce del Sele a male demon, identified as Thanatos, hovers over Sisyphus incubus-like on a sandstone metope dating to ca. 550 B.C.E. (Paestum, Museo Nazionale; LIMC s.v. Sisyphus 26); a poorly preserved Etruscan wall-painting from the

on similar vases are called Erinyes when they harass blood-guilty people, for instance, Orestes.²⁴ The artifacts that depict Sisyphus so pursued suggest that his punishment was understood by some in antiquity to be of the same type, and literary evidence, discussed below, also suggests involvement in the murder of kin.

In addition to Sisyphus, several other sons of Aeolus played a significant role in Greek tragedy, from which we may infer that family connections were of some importance in the disasters associated with the House. First let us consider the quest Pelias set for Jason, since it is with this story that the *Medea* begins. Tyro, daughter of Salmoneus, had borne twin sons to Poseidon, Pelias and Neleus. Pelias usurped the throne of Jason's father, Aeson, in Iolchus, and sent Jason on what he hoped would be a fatal quest to steal from Colchis the golden fleece of a ram. There is an Aeolid connection in this part of the story, too, since the ram had once borne Phrixus and Helle—children of another son of Aeolus, Athamas, by his first wife, Nephele—on its back as they fled the murderous machinations of their stepmother, Ino, a figure of some significance in the *Medea*.²⁵ Athamas was also the father of Melicertes, who appears by reference, though not by name, in the *Medea*, since his mother was Ino (see 1282–89). Another glance at the family tree in the Appendix will show that Tyro was the *genetrix* for the lines of both Aeson and Pelias, a point Pindar emphasizes at *P.* 4.142–43.

There are additional aspects of the mythology concerning the descendants of Aeolus that are pertinent to a curse on the House. First, a quarrel between the brothers Sisyphus and Salmoneus (Hyg. *Fab.* 60, discussed below) is one

Tomba dell' Orco II, dating to 550–500 B.C.E., shows Sisyphus rolling his rock while being attacked by a small winged figure flying above him; and a wall painting dating to ca. 50–40 B.C.E. from a house on the Esquiline Hill in Rome depicts Sisyphus rolling his stone up a cliff while a figure above him stands poised with a whip (*LIMC* s.v. Sisyphus 29).

²⁴ In Greek hero cult Poine seems to be an avenger of wrongful death and is specifically associated with the death of children in the story of Coroeus (Paus. 1.43.7). Larson 133–35 discusses the role of Poine in the Greek stories of heroines who committed suicide as an act of vengeance.

²⁵ Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* 2.20, relates another variant: Cretheus' wife, Demodice, conceived a passion for her nephew Phrixus, who rejected her. She then claimed that the boy had assaulted her, so Cretheus demanded satisfaction from Athamas, who attempted to kill Phrixus, who was saved by the golden ram. Parallels to Phaedra and Hippolytus are obvious, as is the similarity to the sacrifice (or attempted sacrifice) of Iphigenia by Agamemnon. Apollonius Rhodius, working with still another variant, cites the murder of Phrixus as the source of a family curse at 3.336–39. Pindar, too, may allude to this curse (*P.* 4.159–63). The significance of Ino's presence in the *Medea* is discussed below.

of many in Greek mythology, including the quarrel between the brothers Atreus and Thyestes. Secondly, Pindar presents a disputed right to rule as the impetus for the story of Jason and Medea.²⁶ Likewise, the friction between Atreus and his brother began with a dispute over the throne at Argos. Quarrels and the right of succession are recurring motifs in tragedy and in Greek history, and are seen in many types of circumstances. But such difficulties seem to be particularly prevalent in cursed families.

Two other Houses in tragedy may offer insight into the nature of the curse on the House of Aeolus. The first is the House of Danaus, whose mythography includes forced marriages and subsequent murders that ultimately result, as do the crimes of Tantalus and Sisyphus, in eternal punishment in the Underworld. In Aeschylus' *Suppliants* the opening chorus notes the descent of the Danaid race from Io, and at 162–65 states that Io is the underlying cause of their current troubles, since she incurred the wrath of Hera. The *oestrus*, “gadfly,” that pursues her relentlessly is reminiscent of the Furies who pursue Orestes, and of the madness Hera inflicted on Ino in the *Medea*, discussed below.

Euripides' own *Hippolytus* offers more systematic parallels to the *Medea*. Instructive is Eisner's analysis (158–64) of the thematic unity of the *Hippolytus*. Theseus, who was himself possibly cursed, in turn curses his son, whose death marks the end of his line. The playwright links the fates of Phaedra's family and her husband, Theseus, by the common image of the bull and curses. Phaedra speaks of a hereditary curse on her family in recalling the problems of her mother, Pasiphaë, and her sister, Ariadne, in connection with the Minotaur. Theseus' curse on Hippolytus ends in his son's destruction by the bull from the sea.²⁷ The play also intersects with the real world in giving the *aition* for the hero cult of Hippolytus at Troezen, a shrine familiar to the audience either by reputation or from personal experience. It will be argued that this use of a connected body of myth, including an *aition* for a hero cult, along with the double curse—one oath-invoked, another inherited—is also found in the *Medea*.

Finally, maternal infanticide, though rare in Greek mythology in general, is a recurring motif in this family. First, Melanippe exposed her two sons by

²⁶ Pi. *P.* 4.105–15. Cf. also Σ*Od.* 12.69 Dindorf. The Aeolid Althaea provides another example from this family of a combination of curse, murder, disputed throne, and Erinyes in the story of her son, Meleager. Her husband, Oeneus, was the subject of Euripides' lost tragedy of the same name. He was deposed, but his grandson, Diomedes, restores his rule and kills the usurper Agrius, Oeneus' nephew. A South Italian vase (London 1772.3–20.37 from Paestum), not mentioned by Gantz in his account of Althaea (335), may depict the denouement of this play (see Green and Handley 38 and fig. 25): Agrius in bonds is atop an altar waiting for Diomedes to kill him. Beside the altar a black Erinyes rises from below the earth.

²⁷ See Boedeker 141 for additional similarities between the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus*.

Poseidon because she feared her father's wrath; the boys were, however, rescued.²⁸ Tyro likewise attempted infanticide in exposing her twin sons by Poseidon (Apollod. 1.9.8). Her successful infanticide of two other sons will be discussed below. Already discussed are Athamas and his wife Ino, who are credited with the infanticides of Learchus and Melicertes.²⁹ The House's recurring stories about maternal infanticide or attempted infanticide suggest that Medea's actions in Corinth align with the history of her conjugal family. We may compare how Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon is associated primarily with the Atreid curse, not with her own family history. The impetus for her impious actions as a wife was her husband's impious action against their family; likewise, Medea takes her revenge on Jason for betraying her as his wife and the mother of his children (*Med.* 488–90). Both unfortunate women thereby serve as *alastores* for the curse on their conjugal families (respectively A. A. 1501 and Eur. *Med.* 1260).³⁰

3. THE MURDER OF KIN AND THE CURSED HOUSE

We have seen that by the fifth century Sisyphus and his descendants are linked in tragedy to an inherited curse. No story connects Sisyphus himself with the murder of kin, but in at least one source his impiety results in filicide in the next generation. Hyginus relates the tale, though, as is often the case with him, the date and the origin of his source have been lost (*Fab.* 60).

Sisyphus et Salmoneus Aeoli filii inter se inimici fuere. Sisyphus petiit ab Apolline quomodo posset interficere inimicum, id est fratrem; cui responsum fuit, si ex compressu Tyronis Salmonei fratris filiae procreasset liberos, fore ultores. Quod cum Sisyphus fecisset, duo sunt filii nati, quos Tyro mater eorum sorte audita necavit. At Sisyphus ut rescit <...>. Qui nunc dicitur saxum propter impietatem adversus montem ad inferos cervicibus volvere, quod cum ad summum verticem perduxerit, rursum deorsum post se revolvatur.

Sisyphus and Salmoneus, sons of Aeolus, were enemies. Sisyphus inquired of Apollo's oracle how he could kill his enemy, that is, his brother. The response was that if he produced children from the rape of his brother's daughter Tyro,

²⁸ A vase from Apulia (Carlos Collection of Ancient Greek Art, 1994.1: www.carlos.emory.edu/COLLECTION/CLASSIC/classic07.html) depicts what is believed to be a scene from Euripides' lost *Melanippe Sophe*, with Aeolus and Cretheus present as a herdsman returns the babies to Hellen, their grandfather. For the fragments of Euripides' play see Collard et al. pp. 248–52.

²⁹ See Gantz 176–80 for the various myths. Hyg. *Fab.* 3 preserves a variant of the Phrixus story in which Aeetes in Colchis is told that an Aeolid will kill him, so he preemptively kills Phrixus, his son-in-law (through marriage to Iophossa). This story provides another intersection between Colchians and Aeolids.

³⁰ Medea in fact may be referring to herself in this function at 608, though ironically she may not realize the significance of her statement.

they would be his avengers. When Sisyphus had done this, two sons were born, whom their mother, Tyro, killed after she learned of the oracle about them. But when Sisyphus learned of this He is now said to roll a rock on his neck up a mountain in the Underworld because of his impiety; when he gets it to the top, it rolls back down behind him.

Patricide is circumvented by maternal infanticide and deprives Sisyphus of his chance at revenge on his brother. The break in Hyginus' text at the point of revealing Sisyphus' actions after the infanticide is unfortunate, since there is no other source for the story. Engelmann's suggestion that Sisyphus went on to persuade Salmoneus to imitate Zeus, an action that resulted in his death, and that this was Sisyphus' signal act of impiety, is possible, but cannot be proved.³¹ A third brother, Cretheus, married Tyro, probably after Salmoneus' death. Jason's father Aeson was one of the offspring of this union; thus Sisyphus is Jason's great-uncle, Tyro his grandmother.

The prominence of Tyro can be inferred even from the little of her mythology that survives.³² Sophocles wrote two plays in which she is the title character. One of these had as its subject Tyro's deception and subsequent rape by Poseidon; the children of this union, as we saw earlier, she attempted to kill. The argument of the other, it has been argued, is reflected in Hyginus' summary (quoted above): she killed her children in order to protect her father.³³ Even if Sophocles was not the author of that tale, its survival in Hyginus affirms that it was known, though to what extent cannot be determined, since he preserved *recherché* as well as standard variants.

Another murderous blot on the Aeolid name involves Aeolus and his children Canace and Macareus. Euripides' *Aeolus* does not survive intact, but Ovid takes up the story in *Heroides* 11 in gruesome detail.³⁴ Aeolus' daughter

³¹ Roscher s.v. Sisyphos. If this is right, Sisyphus could be seen as guilty of the murder of kin and the curse upon him due to bloodguilt.

³² For additional references to Tyro in art see Engelmann, Roscher, and *LIMC*. Tyro continued to be the subject of tragedies at least into the fourth century B.C.E.

³³ This theory was taken up by Engelmann; Pearson 273–74 mentions it as one of three possible subjects. If Sophocles did tell this particular story, Euripides could have known it, though the date of the latter *Tyro* is not known. The *Tyro* whose focus is the rape by Poseidon may have been produced shortly before 414 B.C.E., if the scholiast is referring to it in a remark on Aristophanes' allusion to a play by Sophocles at *ΣAr. Av.* 275; see introduction to fr. 654 Radt. For more recent scholarship on the *Tyro* play/plays see Magistrini (an attempt at a reconstruction of the plot(s)) and Kiso.

³⁴ The hypothesis of Euripides' *Aeolus* survives in fragmentary form, and it is generally agreed that the play was Ovid's primary model; see P. E. Knox 257–58, Casali, Williams.

Canace, having been seduced by her brother Macareus, was encouraged by her father to commit suicide. She calls out to the Erinyes as she obligingly prepares to do so (103–6):

ferre faces in me quas fertis, Erinyes, atras,
et meus ex isto luceat igne rogos.

Nubite felices Parca meliore, sorores,
amissae memores sed tamen este mei.

Bring the torches you carry against me, Furies, black ones,
and let my pyre burn bright from that fire.
Sisters, marry blessed by a better Fate,
but none the less be mindful of me whom you have lost.

Nor is Canace the only victim: Aeolus ordered the child resulting from the incestuous union exposed: 83–84 *iamque dari parvum canibusque avibusque nepotem / iusserat, in solis destituique locis* “He had already ordered his small grandson to be given over to the dogs and birds, to be exposed in an isolated spot.” Ovid, emphasizing the familial relationship (*nepotem*), insists on Aeolus’ wrongdoing in exposing the child; with her final words Canace pleads with her brother to gather the baby’s scattered remains and bury them in her tomb (121–24). Canace’s plea to the Erinyes to focus on her suggests that they were at hand for the avenging of bloodguilt on the family at large. A similar scenario in Euripides’ *Aeolus* cannot be proved from the few remaining fragments or the hypothesis that survives in part, but can be reasonably inferred since Erinyes often figure in Greek tragedies featuring the murder of kin.³⁵

These two examples of Aeolid impiety illustrate the propensity of that House to suffer the inter-generational problems that are often associated with cursed Houses, though with no mention of a specific curse. The literary tradition of Tyro’s infanticide cannot be proved to pre-date Euripides’ *Medea*, but this is not necessary for the argument, since Jason’s great-aunt Ino provides the crucial family precedent for that crime in the *Medea*. We have seen, moreover, that Sophocles posits a curse on the Sisypheids, and that his second *Tyro* play may have told the story of the infanticide. Canace’s story, as Ovid tells it, suggests that Euripides, too, may have viewed this House as one beset by Erinyes intent on requital for the spilt blood of kin. We now turn to the *Medea* and the internal evidence for an Aeolid curse.

³⁵ For instance in the *Oresteia*, and in the Oedipus cycle, when the chorus of the *OT* (463–82) sings of the coming of the Furies upon hearing Teiresias’ revelation about the murderer of Laius; and of course the *OC* opens at the grove of the Furies.

4. THE ROYAL HOUSE OF CREON

One aspect of Jason's paternal culpability concerning his marriage into the royal house at Corinth is underrated in the modern era, though it was not ignored in antiquity: Creon and his daughter belong to the House of Aeolus.³⁶ Latin writers link Creon's daughter explicitly to this House. Ovid has his Medea write to Jason: *i, nunc, Sisyphias, inprobe, confer opes* (*Her.* 12.204 "Go now, traitor, resort to Sisyphian expediences"), Statius calls her "*Aeolia Creusa*" (*Silv.* 2.1.142),³⁷ and Seneca has the chorus call her "*Aeolia virgo*" (*Med.* 104) in the *epithalamium*, perhaps an ominous foreshadowing of impending doom. In a passage reminiscent of Euripides' *Medea* 404–6 he states the case even more directly (*Med.* 510–12):

Ne veniat umquam tam malus miseris dies,
qui prole foeda misceat prolem inclitam,
Phoebe nepotes Sisyphi nepotibus.

May such an evil day never come for wretched men,
which would mingle noble offspring with base,
the grandsons of Phoebus with those of Sisyphus.

In light of the association of Jason's new bride with the House of Aeolus, Euripides' two references to Sisyphus in the *Medea* demand further investigation. It seems to be generally assumed that these references are generic terms for Corinth.³⁸ Certainly Sisyphus' name has a generic quality for Hellenistic and later authors.³⁹ But what was the import of "Sisyphian" and the "land of Sisyphus" to a fifth-century Athenian audience?

In order to approach this question, we must first examine the references to Sisyphus in Greek tragedy.⁴⁰ By far the most frequent type is his identification as the father of Odysseus (A. fr. 286 (*HK*) Mette; Eur. *Cycl.* 104, *IA* 524 and 1362; S. *Aj.* 189, *Phil.* 417 and 1311, and fr. 567 Radt; of these only the

³⁶ Modern commentators sometimes note, but rarely comment on the Sisyphid connection of Creon and his daughter, as in Elliott's brief note (35, at line 608) on Jason's affiliation with Creon's House, and his translation (24) of line 405: "by reason of the marriage of a descendant of Sisyphus and of Jason."

³⁷ Jason is identified by his ancestral name alone, *Aeolides*, when Apollonius refers to him as the most renowned member of this House (3.334–35).

³⁸ Mastronarde, for instance, follows the lead of earlier commentators in stating that Sisyphus' name at *Med.* 405 has a generic force.

³⁹ Theoc. *Id.* 22.158 ἄκτῆ, *Anthol.* 7.354 αἶα and 7.745.2 γαῖα, Paus. 5.2.5 χθών, Sen. *Oed.* 282 *terrae*, Sil. It. 14.51 *isthmus*, Stat. *Theb.* 2.380 *portus*.

⁴⁰ Omitted from consideration are references that name title plays and those that post-date Euripides.

Aeschylus passage certainly predates the *Medea* and only the *Philoctetes* certainly postdates it). There are single references to his punishment in Hades (Eur. *HF* 1103, which postdates the *Medea* by 17 years), and to his genealogy as an Aeolid (Eur. fr. 14 (*Aeol.*) Nauck, date unknown, but before 423 if Aristophanes is referring to this play at *Nub.* 1371–72). Sisyphus' grandson, Bellerophon, calls Corinth “the land of Sisyphus” in the *Stheneboea* (see Collard et al. p. 86; they tentatively date this play before 429). The immediate context of the fragment's tale is that Bellerophon required purification because of his recent murder of Bellerus, ruler of Corinth. Bellerophon is the grandson of Sisyphus; this makes the reference specific, not generic. It seems best, therefore, on the basis of the available evidence, not to assume a generic status for Sisyphus' name before the Hellenistic period.

Now let us consider the references to Sisyphus in the *Medea*. In the first, *Medea* makes a pointed distinction between her own bloodline and that of Jason and Creon (*Med.* 404–7):

ὄρᾱς ἃ πάσχεις· οὐ γέλωτα δεῖ σ' ὀφλεῖν
τοῖς Σισυφείοις τοῖσδ' Ἰάσονος γάμοις,
γεγῶσαν ἐσθλοῦ πατρὸς Ἥλιου τ' ἄπο.
ἐπίστασαι δέ·

You see what you are suffering; you must not be judged
a laughingstock because of Jason's Sisyphean marriage,
since you were born from a worthy father and from Helios. And you
have understanding.

Σισυφείοις is usually interpreted in a general sense: the marriage is Sisyphean because Jason is treacherous and because it takes place in Corinth. But the reference may instead be specific, since Glauce is a descendant of Sisyphus. *Medea's* reference to her own noble birth in the following line suggests that the specific reference is to the fore here, and, in addition, that “Sisyphean” was, for *Medea* at least, a mark of base ancestry.⁴¹ Does the epistemic *Medea* also realize that Jason has unwittingly enmeshed her, the children, and himself in the curse associated with his larger House?

The second reference to Sisyphus comes at the end of the play when *Medea* appears as a divinity in Helios' chariot and announces her intention to take the bodies of the sons she has just killed to the precinct of Hera Acraia where they will be recipients of a hero cult (*Med.* 1379–83).⁴²

⁴¹ Hesychius's comment on this word supports this interpretation: Κορινθίους κακοὺς ἀπὸ Σισύφου βασιλέως, as do the references to Glauce in Latin poetry, cited above.

⁴² Larson 88–89 discusses the category of dead siblings, including *Medea's* children, as recipients of hero cults. Male children were usually worshipped as distinct personalities

φέρουσ' ἐς Ἥρας τέμενος Ἀκραίας θεοῦ,
 ὥς μή τις αὐτοὺς πολέμιων καθυβρίσῃ
 τύμβους ἀνασπών· γῆ δὲ τῇδε Σισύφου
 σεμνὴν ἑορτὴν καὶ τέλη προσάγομεν
 τὸ λοιπὸν ἀντὶ τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου.

... bearing them to the precinct of the goddess Hera Acraia,
 so that no enemy digging up their graves shall violate them.
 And in this land of Sisyphus we shall fix a holy festival
 and rites for all time in recompense for this unholy murder.

The festival's location recalls Sisyphus' role in Corinthian history in general, but it also serves as a reminder of the ancestry of the ruling house.⁴³ In addition, designating "Sisyphus' land" as the place for institution of a festival for dead boys may recall Sisyphus' role in the Corinthian myth of Ino's son Melicertes: he founded the Isthmian games in honor of his dead nephew, whose body he retrieved and buried on the shore (Pi. fr. 6.5 Snell-Maehler, Paus. 2.1.3, Σ*Med.* 1284 Schwartz).

Jason's position in the House of Aeolus—great-grandson of Aeolus, great-nephew of Sisyphus, grandson of Tyro—ought to be relevant here, too, but Euripides never makes the familial connection between Jason and Sisyphus explicit.⁴⁴

with names, while females usually had "little or no individual identity." In the *Medea*, Euripides avoids the usual Greek practice by not giving the boys names or personalities. He may have done this in part because there were various traditions about the number and sex of her children and in part because the real-life rituals at Corinth for Medea's children involved both boys and girls. On the other hand, two male sons linked to family tragedy constitute a common pattern in Greek myth, and particularly so among the Aeolids (e.g., Tyro had two sets of male twins, Melanippe one set; and Ino in the *Medea* killed her two sons) and other cursed families, e.g., the twin sons of Atreus and the two sons of Oedipus. See also Larson 64–68 for discussion of twins in hero cult.

⁴³ See Larson's (20–21) discussion of Euripides' use of cult traditions.

⁴⁴ One could argue that he did not need to: Jason's treacherous behavior and his clever tongue were Sisyphian enough to prompt recollection of his Sisyphian connection. Burnett (196) compares Jason's cunning to that of the "Hesiodic perjurer," whose deceptions threaten the cosmic order. Similarly, Sourvinou-Inwood has convincingly argued that Sisyphus' attempt to escape Death is a grave cosmic violation (1986: 47–54). The legendary nature of Sisyphus' perjurious and treacherous character suggests that he was an immediate model for Jason's oath-breaking character in Corinth, especially if Medea herself, in her reference to Jason's "Sisyphian marriage," alludes to his Sisyphian quality.

5. THE INHERITED CURSE

A necessary feature of curses in tragedy is an “avenger” or *alastor*, a personification of the curse that has fallen on the House. An Erinyes can fulfill such a function, but family members, either by blood or by marriage, are generally identified as *alastores* as the curse courses through the generations.⁴⁵ Clytemnestra, for example, in denying that the blame for her husband’s murder rests with her, identifies herself in the *Agamemnon* as the *alastor* of Atreus (A. A. 1501). Orestes (A. *Eum.* 236) also refers to himself as an *alastor* when he prays to Athena upon his arrival in Athens. Burnett’s emphasis on the function of the *alastor* as punisher of oath-breakers (200–201) is understandable in the context of her study, but the *alastor* has another primary purpose in tragedy: punishment of bloodguilt. In the *Eumenides* the Furies hound Orestes because he has maternal blood on his hands, not because he has sworn an oath falsely (A. *Eum.* 230).

The first mention of an *alastor* in the *Medea* refers in general to the avenging demons in the Underworld. It comes from Medea’s own lips when she swears by the *alastores* that she will not allow her children to be defiled by her enemies (1059–61). Here the context does not entail a connection between the *alastor* and bloodguilt, since these demons also avenge broken oaths. But when the chorus recognizes the presence of an Erinyes, a traditional element in the murder of kin, the connection with bloodguilt is made explicit (note φονίαν): they call out to the sun, ἔξελ’ οἴκων τάλαιναν φονίαν τ’ Ἐρινὺν ὑπαλαστόρων (1259–60 “drive out from a house subject to avengers the wretched, blood-stained Erinyes”⁴⁶). One may compare the traditional language of the blood curse used by Jason after the murder of the children: 1389–90 ἀλλὰ σ’ Ἐρινὺς ὀλέσειε τέκνων / φονία τε Δίκη “Yet may the Erinyes of children destroy you, and deadly Justice.” The power at work here is more than simple vengeance; it is the same ancient and powerful force that pursued Orestes, it hints at Aeschylean guilt and retribution. Boedeker, too, has cited Medea’s identification with an Erinyes and an *alastor* at various points during the play,

⁴⁵ The term *alastor* occurs throughout Greek tragedy meaning a relentless persecutor or avenger. Burnett 201 also lists *Ara*, *Horkos*, and *Oistros* as punitive agents in Greek culture.

⁴⁶ Eden’s emendation of this line, though not his interpretation of the context, accords well with my reading of the text. Modern commentators are universally reluctant to accept the explicit statement of the scholia (ad loc.) that the chorus believes that an Erinyes is the cause of such evils, and that the Erinyes is not Medea herself. In one sense Medea does embody the Erinyes as its agent of destruction, but the demonic spirit should also be seen as its own entity. Jason’s sons have attracted the attention of the Erinyes because their father, by his marriage to Creon’s daughter, set in motion the inherited curse on the House.

but only in terms of what she calls Medea's assimilation with "supernatural powers" (140). Burnett asserts that the degree to which the chorus associates the demonic figure with Medea "is unclear" (206 n. 77). I would argue that the degree is similar to the connection between Clytemnestra or Orestes and the *alastores* of the Atreid curse and that the chorus recognizes it as such.⁴⁷

One might say, of course, that the House of Aeolus receives significant emphasis in the *Medea*, but that the curse on the House does not. Yet the curse holds a position, as do the references to Sisyphus himself, similar to that stated by Lloyd-Jones for Sophocles' *OT*: "the curse has no special dramatic importance in the play and therefore receives no special emphasis, but none the less is essential to the scheme of the plot."⁴⁸ The play focuses on descendants of Aeolus, while the House's troubled past provides the necessary mythological framework.⁴⁹

Several Apulian vases that depict the denouement of the *Medea*, while they do not correspond in every detail to Euripides' play, nevertheless provide important corroboration for the role of the avenging deities in the *Medea*.⁵⁰ Male or female demons are often part of the scene on these vases, and seem to be concerned not with Medea, but with the action on the human plane. As Sourvinou-Inwood (1990: 272) has noted, this suggests that they were also concerned with Jason's culpability.⁵¹

6. CHILD MURDER AND THE CONJUGAL FAMILY

Medea's decision to kill the children *prima facie* is simple revenge. Burnett sees Euripidean over-determination in the success of Medea's infanticide both in the fulfillment of an oath-invoked curse (206), and in the requirements of her masculine code of honor, which demands revenge.⁵² Her argument that the oath curse (112–14) must result in the utter eradication of Jason's line is

⁴⁷ Stinton 464–66 notes that an audience will fill in details for themselves if they are familiar with a story. If my assertion that the audience knew about the inherited Aeolid curse is correct, Erinyes and *alastor* would be considered traditional elements in its fulfillment.

⁴⁸ In a private reply to Stinton, who reports the gist of the argument (463 n. 28).

⁴⁹ Thus the imagery of the play, once held up by Barlow (97) as an example of bad writing, is organic.

⁵⁰ E.g., Cleveland 91.1 and Munich 3296. See Sourvinou-Inwood 1997: 269–79 for a complete list of the vases and descriptions.

⁵¹ On the Cleveland vase they are depicted in Oriental leggings. Sourvinou-Inwood (1990: 288–94) argues convincingly that Medea wore Greek dress until she appears in the chariot in Oriental costume at the end of the play, and that the Oriental costume on South Italian vases specifically signals Euripides' tragedy, but she does not comment on the demons' costume. I would argue that their dress serves to associate them with Medea, perhaps implying the similarity of their functions at the end of the play.

⁵² Visser 159–60 preceded Burnett in seeing Medea's infanticide as avenging a masculine and heroic honor.

convincing, given its wording, 114 πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι “let the whole house perish.” But her view that the other aspect of the over-determination, i.e., the harm to Medea’s masculine honor, required the murder of the children does not adequately account for the infanticide, since the vengeance could have taken a number of forms, including the murder of Jason himself.⁵³

Men and women kill children for a variety of reasons in Greek mythology. A quick glance at the surviving tragedies shows that child murder often results from madness sent from the gods: Dionysus maddens Agave in the *Bacchae*, Hera maddens both Heracles in the *Heracles* and Athamas in the *Ino* (if Hyginus’ précis of the story is correctly associated with that play),⁵⁴ as well as Ino in the *Medea* (1282–89).⁵⁵ Apulian vases sometimes interpret Medea’s infanticide as the result of madness. The aforementioned vase Munich 3296 (see n. 50) shows a torch-bearing “*Oistros*” (inscribed) driving Medea’s chariot,⁵⁶ but Euripides does not refer to Medea as mad in the play. Madness may figure by extension from Medea’s psychological portrait as a whole, but it cannot be seen as the primary force driving her actions.

Privileging one’s natal family over the conjugal family, including one’s own offspring, is the underlying rationale for several famous murders by women in Greek myth. Examples include Althaea’s decision to protect her brothers from her son, Meleager, and Tyro’s desire to protect her father from Sisyphus’ impious plan (Hyg. *Fab.* 60, discussed above). Procne’s murderous act seems *prima facie* most like Medea’s of all the child murders in tragedy, but since the rescue of Philomela was an important part of that story, this may also fall under the category of privileging one’s natal family. Medea’s realization that her sons, who belong to Jason by Greek custom, are tainted by their father’s family connections (lines 404–6, discussed above) is an important factor in her decision to kill them.⁵⁷ After Medea betrayed her father and killed her

⁵³ Carcinus wrote a *Medea* in which she made the mistake of sending the children away. When townspeople accused her of killing them since they were nowhere to be seen, Medea defended herself by saying that if she were to kill, she would kill Jason (Arist. *Rh.* 2.23.28). Euripides toys with some of these other possible outcomes in the *Medea*, as scholars have noted, thereby creating dramatic suspense.

⁵⁴ Apollod. 1.9.2 states that Hera drove Athamas mad rather than Ino, and that Pelias slew his stepmother, Sidero, who was mistreating Tyro, in the temenos of a temple of Hera, where Sidero had fled for safety (1.9.8).

⁵⁵ An Apulian amphora (Naples 81954) showing Lyssa (Rage) holding a torch and a sword (cf. θυμός in *Medea* 1078–80) next to Medea’s chariot is discussed by Sourvinou-Inwood (1997: 273). See Boedeker 136–37 for discussion and bibliography of other myths of infanticide, and Mills for parallels between the stories of Ino and Procne.

⁵⁶ Sourvinou-Inwood (1997: 272) translates the word as “Frenzy,” Burnett (194 n. 8) as “Jealousy.”

⁵⁷ See also Visser 151–53.

brother, her link to her natal family under ordinary conditions would have been irrevocably broken. Euripides, however, realigns Medea with her natal family through Helios, her paternal grandfather. It is this heritage that Medea privileges when Jason dissociates her from his House. In Medea's case, natal heritage should be seen as one of several factors in her decision, which also include the oath-invoked curse that called for the extinction of the House, the need for revenge, and the inherited curse.⁵⁸

7. THE EXEMPLUM OF INO

When the chorus names Ino as the only other example of maternal infanticide that they know, they acknowledge that her situation was different from Medea's. Why, then, mention her at all? Why was she the only such woman about whom they had heard? Boedeker's recent analysis of this problem, that "Euripides' heroine is a figure explicitly without parallel" is unsatisfactory,⁵⁹ since Ino's situation does indeed parallel Medea's in at least two significant ways. Of supreme importance for our topic is the fact that Ino, like Medea, married into the House of Aeolus (Page's commentary notes in passing, p. 172, that Ino is Jason's great-aunt). Neither Tyro nor Procne nor any of the other female infanticides in Greek myth parallels Medea so specifically. The chorus emphasizes this aspect of Ino's troubles, and by extension Medea's, with a general reference to the bridal bed as *πολύπλονον* and the bringer of *κακὰ* (1291–92).

Secondly, Ino, like Medea, had a place in Corinthian cult as the mother of dead offspring. She was worshiped there as the sea goddess Leucothea along with her son Melicertes.⁶⁰ He was one of her two sons by Athamas, and a cult

⁵⁸ A combination of factors similarly accounts for child murder in Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, which results both from the curse of Atreus and from the need for a human sacrifice in exchange for military victory. Larson's discussion of sacrificial virgins (101–9) makes a distinction between Iphigenia, whose cult was connected with childbirth at Brauron and Munichia, and other virgins whose deaths derive from traditions unique to Attica and Boeotia and pertain to the interests of men in war. She makes the point (101) that Euripides conflates these two traditions in the *IA*.

⁵⁹ Boedeker 137. At 137 n. 32 she lists earlier points of view that also hold that the allusion is flawed in some way, noting that scholars have been quick to point out that fine examples were available in the stories of Procne, Althaea, and even Agave. Elliott 98 says only that Euripides is not following here the standard version of the myth (*Hyg. Fab.* 4), in which Athamas kills one son, Learchus, and Ino leaps into the sea with Melicertes, drowning them both as she flees her husband. Newton finds little reason to accept Ino as a parallel, and concludes (501) that Euripides invented his own version of the myth.

⁶⁰ Her cult sites in Greece are numerous and widespread, but she is associated with Melicertes only at Corinth. She is the Leucothea of *Od.* 5.333–35, and receives the epithet *σαλασσομέδουσα* in Alcm. fr. 50b Davies. Cf. Pi. *P.* 11.2 and Eur. *IT* 270–71 (Larson 197 n. 114). Bremmer 87 notes that both Medea and Ino seem originally to have been

recipient in Corinth from the time when Sisyphus found the child's body on the seashore.⁶¹ To judge from Pausanias' description of the number and splendor of their shrines in the Corinth of his day, Ino and Melicertes were central figures in Corinthian cult. Euripides' reference to the pair in his play would automatically call this real-life cult to mind even though his version of the story has Ino killing both of her children.⁶² The allusion to Ino adds another touch of the realism for which Euripides is famous, since the audience would have some knowledge of Ino's, as well Medea's, importance in Corinthian cult. But Euripides is also careful to have the chorus qualify their knowledge. They express some uncertainty about the story (*Med.* 1282–89), and indeed their version, that Ino died along with her two children, is not attested elsewhere. The act of maternal infanticide itself, however, invited the audience to recall other exempla, such as Procne's murder of Itys, Agave's frenzied rending of Pentheus' limbs, or Althaea's vengeful burning of Meleager's firebrand, or possibly, as was noted above, Jason's infanticidal grandmother, Tyro, who murdered her two sons by Sisyphus. So when Jason later asserts that no Greek woman would have done what Medea did (1339–40), the audience has already been prompted to establish a mental catalogue of similar crimes that allows them to deconstruct his protest.⁶³ In selecting Ino as the chorus' exemplum, Euripides supplies a story that fits into an overall pattern of mythological imagery in the play in its evocation of Corinth and the House of Aeolus.

8. CONCLUSION

The centrality of the House of Aeolus in the plot of the *Medea* has important implications for our reading of the play: the numerous and significant references to it inform the play's structure, theme, and even its outcome. The pattern is coherent and persistent, something for which the *Hippolytus*, as we have seen, provides a parallel. The *Medea* begins with references to the Peliad branch

initiatary goddesses. Divine origin is another point of common ground that Medea shared only with Ino among the known infanticides. For the mother-child pair as cult recipients see Larson 89–95. Larson also discusses Ino's cult at 123–25, noting her independent relationship to Melicertes in cult except at Corinth, where her statue stood in her son's shrine (Paus. 2.2.1), and near Megara (on the road to Corinth), where the pair leapt into the sea from the Molourian rock (Paus. 1.44.7). For her cult in general see Farnell 35–47.

⁶¹ As per Σ*Med.* 1284 Schwartz. Sisyphus' role in the institution of the Isthmian Games is noted at ΣA. R. 3.1240 Wendel. As for the boy, his name was Palaemon in some traditions; the *IT* (270–71) states that the child's name was changed after he drowned.

⁶² This version would not necessarily preclude the outcome in which Ino and Melicertes alone become cult recipients in Corinth.

⁶³ Sourvinou-Inwood 1990: 259–60 reads the passage similarly.

of the family (6, 9), highlighting its importance as recent history for the play.⁶⁴ Since Creon and Glauce are descendants of Sisyphus, the Sisyphid branch is the most important one for the drama as it unfolds in present time. The House's inherited curse is set in motion once again by Jason's marriage to Glauce, and coincides with the oath-invoked curse Medea sets on Jason. The chorus sings of the Athamid branch after hearing of the children's deaths. Moreover, without recognition of the Aeolid background of Ino, the chorus' choice of exemplum remains inexplicable: Ino's history parallels Medea's in both her marriage into the House of Aeolus and her role in Corinthian cult.⁶⁵ The hero cult Medea establishes for the children of Jason at the end of the play marks the end of this cursed House.

It has been shown that the chorus perceives a traditional avenging force for the requital of bloodguilt at work in the play, and that this bloodguilt is probably to be associated with an inherited curse on the Sisyphids, or perhaps on the Aeolid House as a whole. The *Medea* has long been read without reference to this curse, but its recognition makes the play more intriguing, more ironic, and, in the end, more in line with the traditional plots of Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama that dangled the deeds of ancestors over their descendants as part of the characters' understanding of their current situation. It is generally the chorus that explains the ills of the current generation from this "historical" perspective. For instance, in Sophocles' *Electra* the chorus speaks as Clytemnestra dies (*El.* 1417–21):

τελοῦσ' ἀραί· ζῶσιν οἱ
 γὰς ὑπὰ κείμενοι.
 παλῖρρυτον γὰρ αἶμ' ὑπεξαίρουσι τῶν
 κτανόντων οἱ πάλαι θανόντες.

The curses are being fulfilled. Those
 who lie beneath the earth live.
 For those who died long ago draw off
 reflux blood from those who kill now.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The nurse's opening soliloquy is followed by other references (476–87, 504, 734) where the *exemplum* of the fall of the House of Pelias foreshadows what will occur later in the play.

⁶⁵ The reference to Ino may also obliquely allude to Sisyphus' role in the cult for her dead son Melicertes.

⁶⁶ Similar examples from Aeschylus have been cited above. Clytemnestra's situation also provides an analogy for Medea's in that they both marry into troubled Houses and both commit murder. See also Boedeker 138.

Medea calls down upon Jason and his House a curse that Burnett discusses in detail.⁶⁷ Certainly the oath-breaking curse is of primary importance, since it provides Medea with her motivation in the play. But a reading of the *Medea* on this level alone is satisfactory only in the sense that the *Agamemnon* is satisfactory if its motivation is understood as informed only by the actions of Atreus and Thyestes, not also by those of Pelops and Tantalus. If we understand Medea's actions only in terms of this oath-curse and her own recent history, ignoring her conjugal family, we miss Jason's contribution to the causal link between the more distant past and current events that is so characteristic of fifth-century Greece. We also miss the full relevance of the chorus' exemplum of Ino and of Medea's references to Sisyphus, and the coherent framework of the mythological allusions as a whole. Medea's infanticide is better seen as modeled on the exempla available from her cursed conjugal family, whether Euripides used existing stories or simply extrapolated from the associations of the Aeolid House.

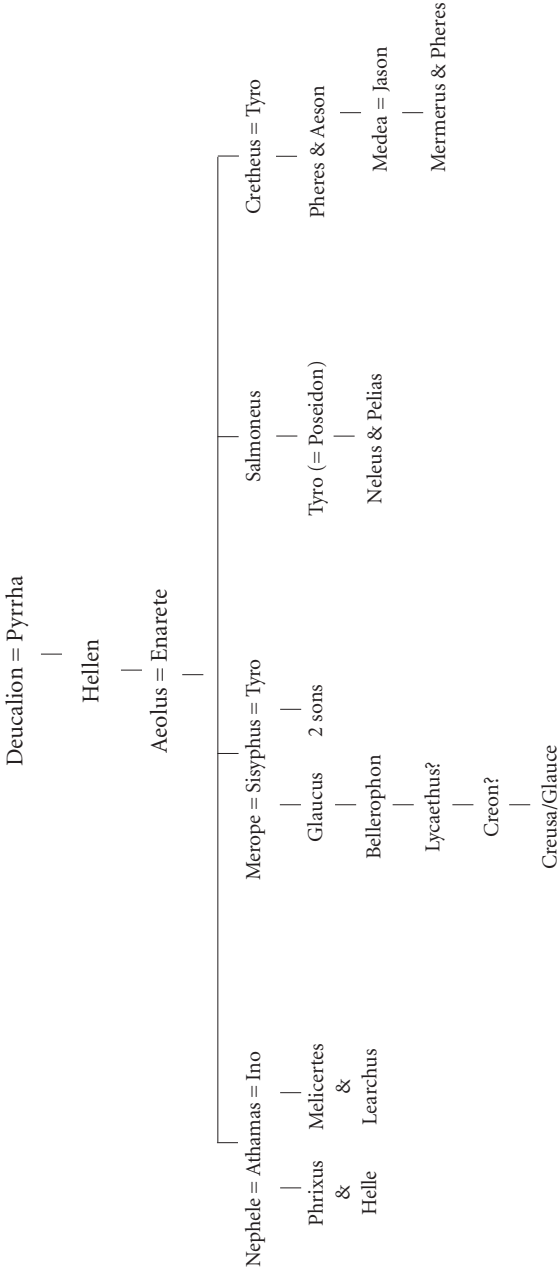
Tragic *anagnorisis* occurs when Jason asserts, at 1333, τὸν σὸν δ' ἀλάστορ' εἰς ἔμ' ἔσκηψαν θεοί "The gods hurled your *alastor* onto me."⁶⁸ Even though Jason realizes that an *alastor* has wreaked havoc on his House, he erroneously believes that it was not meant for him. If the horror of the play is Medea's (and the audience's) recognition that she must kill her own children, the irony is Jason's refusal to comprehend that he and his new family share in the responsibility for his children's death.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Burnett 206. Medea's recognition of Glauce's ancestry at *Med.* 405 may indicate that she knows that the Sisyphid inherited curse is at work, but she seems more concerned with the oath-invoked curse. The chorus, however, does care about inherited curses.

⁶⁸ Euripides may be recalling here the role of the demon in the punishment of Sisyphus, and perhaps that of Orestes and others as well.

⁶⁹ Elliot's reference (100) to a "deliberate ambiguity" in the last word of Jason's lament at 1349–50, ἀπώλεσα, is well-taken.

APPENDIX: THE HOUSE OF AEOLUS (Abbreviated, adapted from Gantz)



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