THE PRINCESS'S GRUESOME DEATH AND *MEDEA* 1079

Much has been made, over the centuries, of the duality of Medea's nature in Euripides' eponymous play. Among the ancients, Galen and others saw the conflict of passion and reason in Medea through a Platonist filter. Recently, Helene Foley has stressed a gendered conflict, and analysed 'Medea's self-division within the context of gender relations developed in the play as a whole'.[1] Whether or not the division is to be understood through Platonic exegesis or through perceived patterns of gendered ideology,[2] there is no doubt that Euripides is very much concerned with revealing the internal struggle between two forces in the great monologue of his *Medea* (1021–80). The focus of treatments of Medea's duality is (understandably) her monologue, the final outcome of which is often viewed as Medea's passion or *thumos* decisively conquering her rational plans or *bouleumata*. The crucial line in question, θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων (1079), is not unproblematic in itself. This line and, indeed, whole sections of this speech have been deleted by some editors because of the problems they raise.[3] Others have regarded the lines as genuinely Euripidean and sought to retain all or most of the speech, addressing problem areas.[4] There are essentially two ways of interpreting 1079, the crux of the issue being how to understand κρείσσων in the line. The reading 'my vengeful passion *is stronger than* my plans' was adopted by Platonists who used the line to illustrate the Platonic theory of the tripartite soul, which is divided into rational and irrational parts, 'with

[1] H. P. Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, 2001), 244.

[2] Some scholars have, in my view, exaggerated the degree of Medea's 'masculine' characteristics. For example, in his recent commentary, D. J. Mastronarde (ed.), *Euripides: Medea* (Cambridge, 2002), 20, uses Medea's driving wish to keep her enemies from 'laughing' at or 'mocking' her as evidence of her using 'terms from masculine spheres of action and modes of behaviour'. Ad 383, he refers us to Sophocles' *Ajax* 79, 303, 367 (where enemies' mockery is a concern for Ajax) and *Antigone* 483, 647 (here with reference to Creon). But this is slightly misleading, for in the latter play, Antigone is also concerned about the laughter of her enemies at 839, as is the Sophoclean Electra in the play of the same name at 807 and 1153 (cf. 277). In her forthcoming commentary on Euripides' *Medea* (Warminster), Judith Mossman will argue that Medea's character is not necessarily to be analysed in such masculine terms.

[3] E.g. D. Kovacs, 'On Medea's great monologue', *CQ* 36 (1986), 343–52 deletes 1056–64, J. Diggle (ed.), *Euripidis Fabulae Tomus I* (Oxford, 1984) deletes all of 1056–80, H. Lloyd-Jones, 'Euripides, *Medea* 1056–80', *WJA* 6a (1980), 51–9, argues that 1059–63 may be a fourth-century interpolation. See B. Seidensticker, 'Euripides' *Medea* 1056–1080', in M. Griffith and D. Mastronarde (edd.), *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer* (Berkeley, 1990), 89–102, for more detailed discussion of the scholarly debate on these lines.

[4] O. Regenbogen, 'Randbermerkungen zur *Medea*', *Eranos* 48 (1950), 21–56, thinks no one but Euripides could have written 1068–80. Editors D. L. Page, *Euripides: Medea* (Oxford, 1938), H. Van Looy, *Euripides: Medea* (Leipzig, 1992), and Mastronarde (n. 2) retain all or most of the monologue. A. P. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (California, 1998), 273–87, also addresses the problems of the monologue and argues, following A. Dihle, *Euripides' Medea* (Heidelberg, 1977), that 'the final lines of Medea's speech could conceivably announce that her formulated plans for vengeance are overborne by a spirit [a *thumos*] now filled with maternal pity' (280). Serious objections had already been raised to Dihle's suggestion by Lloyd-Jones (n. 3) and O. Zwierlein, 'Die Tragik in den Medea-Dramen', *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 19 (1978), 27–63. Burnett addresses these objections, but the fact remains that the ancients themselves understood 1079 as essentially meaning a struggle between reason and passion, not two different kinds of passion as Burnett suggests (283).

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the possibility of an irrational element in the soul overcoming the reason'.[5] This reading is unproblematic in terms of immediate meaning, but makes less sense in the context of the play where, on this basis, we should understand that Medea's vengeful passion overcomes her ability to plan. The alternative reading involves understanding κρείσσων in the sense of 'my vengeful passion *controls* my plans'.[6] Although not the standard meaning of κρείσσων, it is not without parallel.[7] The advantage of the latter reading is that it makes better sense in the context of the drama. In the most recent commentary on the play, Mastronarde understands κρείσσων as 'controls', although he argues that *bouleumata*, literally 'plans', cannot mean 'reason' or 'rationality'. But an ability to plan necessarily entails some degree of rationality, and this was certainly how Platonists interpreted it in *Medea* 1079.

Foley argues that 'the logic of the monologue itself, which brings the maternal Medea into conflict with the avenging Medea, and Medea's previous habits of deliberation make translating *bouleumata* as "rational plans to save the children" the most viable of [the] alternatives'.[8] But this reading is problematic. The term *bouleumata* is used twice in the speech before 1079, an emphatic repetition of χαιρέτω βουλεύματα in the same end of line position at 1044 and 1048, each time referring to Medea *abandoning* her *bouleumata* in order to *save the children*. The *bouleumata* are her plans to *kill* the children.[9] In 1079 then, despite problems of interpretation, it seems clear that Medea is not saying that her *bouleumata* have been overcome. Rather she is saying that her vengeful passion 'controls' her plans.

The idea that Medea's reason does not, in fact, become obliterated by her passion for revenge is not a new one, although it has not always been a popular one.[10] Both Dillon and Gill have emphasized an alternative philosophical tradition, which makes use of the same passage of *Medea* to illustrate a different philosophical theory of the soul (although Gill [n. 11] seems unaware of Dillon [n. 5]). Indeed the use of the *Medea* passage to expound the Platonist theory became so common in antiquity, that the exploitation of the passage for an alternative exegesis left Galen in considerable *aporia*. This was the interpretation of 'the most brilliant Stoic thinker', Chrysippus.[11] Dillon reconstructs Chrysippus' argument from what we know of his doctrine and that of the Stoics: 'For Chrysippus, impulses are in all cases decisions (κρίσεις)- often very bad decisions, but decisions nonetheless. His point is presumably that Medea, even though she may try to shift responsibility by blaming her θυμός, nevertheless

[5] J. Dillon, 'Medea among the philosophers', in J. J. Clauss and S. I. Johnston (edd.), *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, and Philosophy* (Princeton, 1997), 211–18, at 215.

[6] The interpretation of κρείσσων as 'rules over', 'controls', was first proposed by H. Diller, θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων, *Hermes* 94 (1966), 267–73. The phrase 'is master of' is used to render κρείσσων by J. Davie, *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays* (London, 1996), 78.

[7] See Diller (n. 6), 274, for parallels.

[8] Foley (n. 1), 250.

[9] See also Burnett (n. 4), 278–9, who emphasizes that the *bouleumata* are the revenge plans, although she interprets *thumos* as maternal pity.

[10] Recent studies of the play do warn against the Platonist interpretation. Foley (n. 1), 257, argues that 'it is precisely this inseparable combination of rationality and irrationality, passion and intelligence, in Medea's determination for revenge that makes it so very terrifying and … far more tragic than a philosophical defeat of reason by passion'. Mastronarde (n. 2), in spite of arguing that *bouleumata* cannot mean 'reason' or 'rationality' also stresses *ad* 1079 that 'we are shown a mixture and alternation of rational and emotional elements at work'.

[11] C. Gill, 'Tragic fragments, ancient philosophers and the fragmented self', in F. McHardy, J. Robson and D. Harvey (edd.) *Lost Dramas of Classical Athens: Greek Tragic Fragments* (Exeter, 2005), 151–72, at 162. Cf. Gill's previous work on the subject referred to in n. 25.

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makes a *decision*, and this is an act of her whole soul.'[12] Chrysippus' doctrine is followed and elaborated by Epictetus in the first century A.D.: 'Anger may loosely be said to overcome reason, but the human being cannot perform an action (πρᾶξις) in the proper sense, unless he or she has assented to it. And that is an act of the whole soul.'[13]

This notion, that Medea's anger does not cancel out her ability to plan, and that reason (in this sense of planning) and vengeful anger continue to co-exist in Medea, is further confirmed by the manner in which the revenge itself is effected, a point which, to my knowledge, no one has yet put forward. It is a feature of tragic imagery that it often symbolically expresses character or motivation. The ambivalent image of the bow in Euripides' *Heracles* has recently been shown to confirm the expression of the ambivalent nature of Heracles himself.[14] In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the image evoked of Iphigenia's weaving during the recognition scene and her proficiency at it foreshadow her ability to contrive a viable escape plan.[15] Hecuba in Euripides' *Hecuba* is characterized in part through agricultural imagery which emphasizes her identity as a mother, the prime motivating factor in her avenging the death of her son.[16] In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon is characterized by metaphors drawn from the harsh worlds of metal-working and military efficiency, which help to explain his harsh treatment of Antigone.[17] Aeschylean tragedy, particularly dense in imagery, also reveals this tendency. So the Persians are presented as slaves through the image of the yoke in the eponymous play. They have no motivation or intention to rise up against the yoke of Xerxes' tyranny, although he has led them to destruction, unlike Greece which violently shakes off the yoke of the invader.[18] In *Septem* the elaborate symbol on the shield of each attacking champion represents a particular form of aggression.[19] The fact that Amphiaraus' shield is blank expresses his desire 'not to *seem* the bravest, but to *be* the bravest' (*Septem* 592), but it also symbolizes his lack of motivation in taking part in this expedition which he knows is doomed to failure. In the *Agamemnon* there is also much symbolic imagery. Agamemnon's corruption by barbarian wealth is expressed through his reckless trampling of precious purple fabrics, with his decision to do so based on Clytemnestra's appeal to the tendencies of the Trojan king Priam.[20] Clytemnestra herself at *Agamemnon* 11 has a 'woman's heart with a man's counsel'. She has both masculine and feminine qualities which are expressed through the tools with which she effects her revenge on Agamemnon. He is murdered by entanglement

[12] Dillon (n. 5), 213.

[13] Ibid. 214.

[14] See T. Papadopoulou, Heracles *and Euripidean Tragedy* (Cambridge, 2005), 137–51.

[15] The association between weaving and cunning is examined in detail by M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. J. Lloyd (Chicago, 1991). The verb ὑφαίνω means 'to weave' and 'to contrive' (see *LSJ* s.v. ὑφαίνω). Compare also the verb πλέκτω 'to plait' or 'to contrive'.

[16] See J. M. Mossman, *Wild Justice: A Study of Euripides'* Hecuba (Oxford, 1995), 120–2 and 164–203.

[17] See M. Griffith (ed.), *Antigone* (Cambridge, 1999), 36–7 and *ad* 473–96.

[18] On this system of imagery, see E. Hall (ed.), *Aeschylus: Persians* (Warminster, 1996), 21–2.

[19] On the significance of the imagery on the shields, see W. G. Thalmann, *Dramatic Art in Aeschylus'* Seven Against Thebes (Yale, 1978), 107–35; P. Vidal-Naquet, 'The shields of the heroes', in J. P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet (edd.), *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*, trans. J. Lloyd (Sussex–New Jersey, 1981), 120–49; and F. Zeitlin, *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus'* Seven Against Thebes (Rome, 1982).

[20] Cf. E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford, 1989), 209. On this scene, see also K. J. Dover, 'The red fabric in the *Agamemnon*', in his *Greek and the Greeks* (Oxford, 1987), 151–60.

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in a robe combined with the violence of a blade stroke,[21] the entrapment representing Clytemnestra's womanly scheming, the blade her unnatural transgression into the male world.[22]

Similarly, the tools of Medea's revenge on the princess can also be seen to represent the two elements of Medea's nature, working in unison. The beautiful poisoned robe and crown are unusual, though not unique, plot elements,[23] and they are particularly appropriate in that they appeal to the vanity and material greed of the princess, who immediately succumbs to their charms (1156–66). But fire is a powerful image both of passion and of revenge. The lover's heart can burn with desire just as the personifications of vengeance themselves, the Erinyes, are said to breathe fire in tragedy.[24] So the crown of gold, which emits a devouring fire as it fastens onto the head of the princess (1187, 1190), can be seen to represent Medea's vengeful passion. As the princess tries desperately to shake off the crown, the flame only burns twice as fiercely (1193), and, even as she dies, fire continues to drip from the top of her head (1199). Simultaneously, as we have seen, weaving is a common metaphor for cunning planning. A plan of entrapment can be represented by a πέπλος 'robe' as at *Agamemnon* 1126 (cf. 1580). In *Medea*, the fine quality of the πέπλος 'robe' Medea sends to the princess is emphasized. It is λεπτός 'delicate' (786 [cf. 949], 1188, 1214) it has χάρις ἀμβρόσιός τ' αὐγά 'an ambrosian charm and brilliance' (983), and it is ποικίλος 'elaborate' (1159). So the finely woven robe which sticks fast to the princess' flesh, melting her skin, represents the threads of Medea's plans, the woven cloth itself reflects her ability to plan.

Whatever the implications for the soul, the effectuation of Medea's revenge on the princess confirms the Stoic reading of 1079 and an interpretation of the line as 'my vengeful passion controls my plans'.[25] The ability to plan rationally and the drive to passionate vengeance both continue to co-exist in Medea's character. Gill has shown how Platonic interpretations of poetic passages can 'lead to misinterpretation, or at least neglect, of original context'.[26] Medea's passion for vengeance, her *thumos*, is in control of her plans, her *bouleumata*, but these plans are not overpowered by her passion as Platonic readings suggest. Both parts are agents of the revenge, manifest in the tools used to contrive the gruesome death of the princess.[27]

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[21] Scholars disagree as to whether the weapon involved is a sword or an axe, see e.g. A. H. Sommerstein, 'Again Klytaimestra's weapon', *CQ* 39 (1989), 296–301, for a discussion of the issue.

[22] On Clytemnestra and gender in the *Agamemnon*, see e.g. R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge, 1983), 101–31; F. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago, 1996), 87–119; S. Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge, 2004²), 33–6.

[23] Sophocles' *Trachiniae* also features a poisoned robe which kills its unsuspecting victim. For a parallel to the crown, compare Herodotus 4.5 where the Colchian Medea's neighbours, the Scythians, are faced with gold objects which burst into flames at a touch.

[24] Cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 137–8; Eur. *IT* 288.

[25] On the Stoic understanding of 1079 cf. C. Gill, 'Did Chrysippus understand Medea?', *Phronesis* 28 (1983), 136–49; C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy* (Oxford, 1996), 223–4, 232, n. 215; and Gill (n. 11), 162–3.

[26] Gill (n. 11), 161.

[27] I thank the anonymous reviewer for suggestions on revising the original draft.

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