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THE OATHS IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

BENJAMIN GARSTAD

Readers have long appreciated the importance of oaths in Euripides' *Medea*,[1] but it is open to question whether or not they have always understood the significance of those oaths. Modern readers may assume that these oaths are marriage vows, such as would be exchanged by a married couple in the modern West, and broken in the case of infidelity or divorce. This reading, in my experience, loses none of the sting of betrayal felt by Medea, or the faithlessness exhibited by Jason, but it is patently not the reading intended by Euripides or understood by his first audience. The oaths that Medea speaks of are not marriage vows. No vows were exchanged by the bride and groom at an ancient Athenian wedding. So, what sort of oaths are these in the *Medea*? Euripides does not specify, but his imprecision is not an oversight. The oaths are left open to a number of different interpretations which underscore important aspects of the characterization of Medea and Jason, incidents of the

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Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the meeting of the Atlantic Classical Association at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia in October, 2005, and to the Faculty of Arts and Science at Grant MacEwan College in February, 2006. I am grateful to the participants on both occasions for their kind hearing and their helpful comments. Prof. Jacob Stern of the Graduate School of the City University of New York was also good enough to read a draft of this paper and offer his views on the subject.

[1] D. Page, *Euripides, Medea*, Oxford 1938, x, xix–xx (nevertheless, Page's comments on specific verses dealing with oaths concentrate on lexical and grammatical matters); A. Burnett, "Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge", *CPh* 68 (1973) 13–5, 20–1; P. Easterling, "The infanticide in Euripides' *Medea*", *YClS* 25 (1977) 181 n.13; G. Rickert, "Akrasia and Euripides' Medea", *HSPh* 91 (1987) 106–13; D. Boedecker, "Euripides' Medea and the Vanity of ΛΟΓΟΙ", *CPh* 86 (1991) 95–6, 98; R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy*, Princeton 1994, 99. J. Fletcher, "Women and Oaths in Euripides", *Theatre Journal* 55 (2003) 29–44, concentrates on the very interesting problem of how, by eliciting oaths from men, women assume power and direct the action of drama.

drama, and its legendary background. As illicit lovers' oaths they recall and foreshadow the destruction of the household. As an imitation of a betrothal they show Medea adopting a man's role, and making an enemy out of Creon. They can offer some justification for Medea's great crime of infanticide. And they give a deeper significance to Medea's encounter with Aegeus.

Mention of oaths (ὅρκοι) and 'good faith' (πίστις) recurs throughout the tragedy. At the opening of the play the Nurse explains that, dishonoured and abandoned, Medea shouts her oaths aloud, and calls upon the great pledge of faith vouched for by the clasping of the right hands, and calls upon the gods to witness the promise.[2] Medea claims that she suffers despite the fact that she bound her husband with great oaths.[3] The Chorus observes Medea, grieving and betrayed, calling upon the oath-justice of Zeus (τὰν Ζηνὸς ὁρκίαν Θέμιν), which brought her across the sea to Greece.[4] Medea claims that the broken faith of men upsets the order of the world, and the Chorus responds by saying that 'the grace of oaths' (ὅρκων χάρις) has fled from Greece, and shame (αἰδώς) along with it.[5] Just as faith is departed from Greece, Medea's faith in oaths (ὅρκων πίστις) is gone, and she accuses Jason of thinking the gods (by whom he swore) no longer rule and new laws have been set up, since he is conscious of not swearing to her in good faith (εἰς ἔμ' οὐκ εὔορκος).[6] And in the closing of the drama she asks Jason what god or *daimon* would listen to the prayers of a man who swears falsely and cheats strangers (τοῦ ψευδόρκου καὶ ξειναπάτου).[7]

Page explained Medea's concern with oaths with reference to the old *topos* of honest barbarians and mendacious Greeks: "The contrast of truthful barbarian and lying Greek had long been a commonplace."[8] But Knox has argued that Page dismissed far too much of Medea's character and behaviour simply by saying she is a witch and a barbarian.[9] Knox showed that Euripides presents Medea not as a barbarian witch, but as a woman whose predicament

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[2] *Med.* 20–22.

[3] *Med.* 161–3.

[4] *Med.* 208–12.

[5] *Med.* 410–5, 439–40.

[6] *Med.* 492–5.

[7] *Med.* 1391–2.

[8] Page (above n. 1) xix–xx. Cf. Hdt. 1,136, 138.

[9] B. Knox, "The Medea of Euripides", *YClS* 25 (1977) 211–8.

and responses are not at all irrelevant to Athenian society. Medea is not a stereotype like the Phrygian slave in the *Orestes*. Medea's complaints about broken oaths are personal, not the product of a childish and simplistic culture, and when they are repeated by the Chorus of Corinthian women they are appropriated and reinforced by Greek society, tragedian and audience included.

If, however, we are to see the significance of the oaths to the character and story of Medea, we must first determine what kind of oaths have been broken. Apollonius and Apollodorus are quite clear about the oaths exchanged by Jason and Medea. In Colchis before Jason undertook his trials, Medea vowed to help Jason harness the fire-breathing oxen, overcome the men who sprang from the dragon's teeth, and steal the Golden Fleece, if Jason would in exchange give her his oath to take her back to Greece and marry her.[10] Euripides is not so explicit. He does not specify just what oaths Medea and the Chorus are referring to in his tragedy. So his audience is left to cast about in the literature and practice familiar to their society in order to determine the nature of these oaths.

Medea complains of broken oaths because she has been abandoned by her husband, and so the audience might look to the marriage relationship for some insight into the oaths that have been broken. For moderns who insist on reading the play on their own terms, such an enquiry yields the eminently satisfactory result of the marriage vows as oaths. A fifth-century Athenian audience might also have looked to marriage for insight, but would have been faced with a more complex and challenging answer. There was no established place for an exchange of vows or oaths in the Athenian wedding or the institution of marriage.[11] The closest the two parties came to such an exchange

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[10] Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4,87–91, 95–8, 356–9, 1083–5; cf. 3,1122; 4,194–7, 1042. At 4,89, where Medea demands that Jason call on the gods to witness vows in the presence of his men, she refers to his words as τεῶν μύθων, presaging the events which will prove them untrustworthy. Apollonius affirms the connection between oaths and marriage in the story of Jason and Medea by having Jason call on Zeus Orkios (the oath-god) and Hera Zygia (the goddess of marriage) witness his promise to take Medea to Greece and marry her; 4,95–6. R. Hunter, *Apollonius of Rhodes: Argonautica, Book III*, Cambridge 1989, 221, associates Jason's promise of marriage to Medea with such Homeric examples as Odysseus' promise to Nausicaa (*Od.* 8,467–8) and the Achaeans' offer to Achilles (*Il.* 9,297, 603). Apollod. *Bibl.* 1,9,23. Apollodorus refers to the oath with forms of the verb ὄμνυμι.

[11] On Greek, and especially Athenian, weddings and marriage, see M. Nilsson, "Wedding Rites in Ancient Greece", in *Opuscula Selecta* 3, Lund 1960, 243–50; J. Redfield, "Notes on the Greek Wedding", *Arethusa* 15 (1982) 181–201; E. Craik, "Marriage in Ancient Greece", in E. Craik (ed.), *Marriage and Property*, Aberdeen 1984, 6–29; L. Bruit Zaidman, "Pandora's Daughters and Rituals in Grecian Cities", in P. Schmitt Pantel (ed.), trans. A.

was with the *enguê* (ἐγγύη) or betrothal.[12] In the *enguê* the bride's legal guardian pledges her to the groom or his representative: "It is a transaction between men, ideally between father-in-law and son-in-law".[13] In Herodotus' classic example of an *enguê*, Cleisthenes declares, "To Megacles, the son of Alcmeon, I pledge (ἐγγυῶ) my child Agariste by the laws of the Athenians", Megacles indicated his assent, and the formal arrangements of the marriage were completed.[14] Mention of oaths is suggestive of the *enguê*, but is not a clear reference. As Herodotus presents it, the *enguê* seems more like a mutual declaration than an exchange of solemn promises or oaths. The bride, moreover, was not party to this contract, but was rather its passive object. The *gamos* (γάμος), or marriage itself, was an exchange between the bride herself and the groom, but it was a sexual act, and despite its elaborate ornamentation, legally required no ceremony, words, or even indication of consent.[15] We shall return to the oaths as *enguê*, but we must look elsewhere for what was probably the audience's first understanding of the significance of the oaths.

Goldhammer, *A History of Women in the West: I. From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992, 361–5; J. Oakley and R. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*, Madison 1993.

Aeschylus, *Eum*. 213–4, speaks of the pledges (πιστώματα) of Zeus and Hera being dishonoured by the Eumenides, who value only blood relations, so the pledges must unite them in marriage. This does not necessarily mean that pledges between man and wife were a regular part of the Athenian marriage. Aeschylus' usage may be idiosyncratic, or refer to the peculiar circumstances of the wedding of Zeus and Hera, in which Cronos was prevented from acting as Hera's *kyrios*, just as Aeëtes was prevented from acting as Medea's *kyrios*. In the same passage (*Eum*. 217–8), Aeschylus refers to marriage not as bound by oaths, but greater than an oath. See A. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, Cambridge 1989, 119–20.

[12] On the *enguê*, see H. Wolff, "Marriage Law and Family Organization in Ancient Athens: A Study in the Interrelation of Public and Private Law in the Greek City", *Traditio* 2 (1944) 51–3; R. Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece*, Chapel Hill 1990, 25–6; C. Patterson, "Marriage and the Married Woman in Athenian Law", in S. Pomeroy (ed.), *Women's History and Ancient History*, Chapel Hill 1991, 49–53; C. Leduc, "Marriage in Ancient Greece", in Schmitt Pantel (above n. 11) 272–4; Oakley and Sinos (above n. 11) 9–10.

[13] Redfield (above n. 11) 186.

[14] Hdt. 6,130,2.

[15] Redfield (above n. 11) 188.

Lovers' oaths

What is indicated when a man and a woman exchange oaths in ancient Greece? In short, that they are lovers. Not betrothed, or married, but engaged in the sort of illicit affair that led to anti-social behaviour like elopement or adultery. This is common, much later, in the novels.[16] But a fifth-century audience might have found a particularly germane precedent in a Homeric example of lovers' oaths. Eumaeus, the swineherd, tells his story, and relates that he was a prince on the island of Syria until his Sidonian nurse was seduced by a Phoenician sailor, kidnapped him, and escaped his father's island.[17] Before she agrees to go with them, the nurse insists on an oath from her lover and his shipmates promising that they will take her home safely.[18] Once she has extracted her oath, she steals three gold goblets and leads the infant Eumaeus down to the ship, intending to sell him as a slave. There are striking similarities here to the legend of Medea and how she helped Jason and the Argonauts to steal the Golden Fleece and brought about the destruction of her brother. In both cases a woman falls in love with a man who came by sea and, after exchanging oaths with her lover, betrays for his sake the household of which she is a part, stealing its precious goods and causing the undoing of its son and heir. The oaths of Jason and Medea lead to the theft of Aeëtes' treasure and the dismemberment of his son, Apsyrtus, just as the oaths of the nurse and the Phoenician pirates lead to the theft of the goblets and the enslavement of Eumaeus.[19] Lovers' oaths result in the destruction of the

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[16] Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 2,39; Xenophon of Ephesus, v.1; Achilles Tatius, 2,19; cf. Chariton, 3,2.

[17] Hom. *Od.* 15,403–84.

[18] Hom. *Od.* 15,434–7:

τὸν δ᾽ αὖτε προσέειπε γυνὴ καὶ ἀμείβετο μύθῳ·
εἴη κεν καὶ τοῦτ᾽, εἴ μοι ἐθέλοιτέ γε, ναῦται,
ὅρκῳ πιστωθῆναι ἀπήμονά μ᾽ οἴκαδ᾽ ἀπάξειν.
ὥς ἔφαθ᾽· οἳ δ᾽ ἄρα πάντες ἐπώμνυον, ὡς ἐκέλευεν.
And the woman spoke to him in turn and replied,
"This would be done, if you sailors would be willing
To pledge yourselves to me with an oath to take me back home safe and sound."
Thus she spoke; and then they all swore, as she bid.

[19] The parallels are even closer if Apollonius depended on a well-known legend when he had not only Jason, but all of the Argonauts bound to Medea by oaths (*Argon.* 4,1042), just as Eumaeus' nurse has the whole Phoenician crew swear to take her safe home.

household. This is also true of the oaths by which Clytemnestra and Aegisthus bound themselves to kill Agamemnon.[20]

So, when Euripides has Medea and the Chorus complain of broken oaths, he is not only expounding on the betrayal of Jason, he is also implicitly reminding his audience of Medea's past crimes, for which she takes only an ambivalent responsibility in his play.[21] Furthermore, mention of oaths undercuts Medea's portrayal of herself as a wronged wife just when it should be strongest. Medea pleads the broach of solemn vows, and the audience remembers the context of those vows, and puts her in the place of Homer's treacherous slave girl. But the oaths do not serve simply to remind the audience of Medea's past actions, they also foreshadow her future actions. Just as the oaths of Jason and Medea lead to the downfall of Aeëtes' house, the theft of his treasure, and the death of his heir, so those same oaths, in the retribution for Jason breaking them, will lead to the downfall of Jason's own house, the shattering of his fondest hopes and dreams, and the death of his sons. Lovers' oaths do indeed bring about the destruction of the household.

Medea as her own *kyrios*

Euripides' audience may have first appreciated Jason and Medea's vows as lovers' oaths because they are, after all, between a man and a woman and because of the allusion to the *Odyssey*, but that is not all they are. As lovers' oaths alone they might be considered "no oaths at all",[22] and far from being the heart of Medea's just case against Jason, they would seem the ridiculous evidence of her deluded state. These are oaths which promise and lead to lawful marriage. Otherwise, the union whose sundering Medea bewails is nothing more than a sordid love affair. And that is manifestly not the case. Until her awful decision to kill her children, Medea retains the sympathy of the Chorus who can only share her feelings as wives; Medea's marriage must, therefore, be as lawful as theirs. Amidst all of the specious arguments with which he tries to

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[20] Aesch. *Chor*. 973–9.

[21] Although Medea does admit killing her brother (166–7), at lines 475–98, where she catalogues the things she has done for Jason including her crimes and treacheries, she does not mention the murder of her brother. And earlier, filled with self-pity, she had bewailed the fact that she has no brother to whom she can turn in her troubles (257).

[22] Plat. *Symp*. 183B.

soothe the anger of Medea ('Aphrodite helped me, not you', 'You owe me, I brought you to Greece', 'I've left you and allowed you to be sent into exile for the good of our family'), Jason does not attempt to suggest that they are not really married.[23] In his eyes they must, in fact, be married. Jason himself attests that he married Medea, in the extremity of his grief when prevarication is beyond him, saying that she was 'given to him in marriage' (νυμφευθεῖσα) and that he chose her 'to marry' (γῆμαι) before all the women of Greece.[24] Finally, Jason mourns for the death of his sons as the failure of his aspirations to a posterity and full heroic status, as he would not do if they were illegitimate. The union of Jason and Medea, therefore, may begin as an illicit love affair, and it may have been contracted in an irregular fashion,[25] but it is a lawful marriage, and its illicitness and irregularity do not make it invalid.[26] Since Jason and Medea's marriage is valid their oaths cannot be discussed only as lovers' oaths.

The oaths of the *Medea* also have to be understood in the context of Jason and Medea's marriage. The first step toward their marriage is Jason's vow to marry Medea. As an arrangement of the marital relationship and as an assertion by the groom that he takes the bride as his betrothed, the closest analogy in Athenian marriage to the oaths which Jason and Medea exchange is the *enguê*. We have already seen that it is not a perfect analogy, and for this very reason the attention of the first audience would have been drawn to the important points of difference between the arrangement of Jason and Medea's marriage and the *enguê* to which they were accustomed. The most striking difference is, of course, that Medea's *kyrios* does not arrange the marriage for her.[27] Aeëtes, her father, is violently opposed to the match, once he finds out

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[23] *Med.* 522–75.

[24] *Med.* 1336–41.

[25] A further irregularity in the marriage as found in the legend seems to have been that Jason and Medea's wedding was conducted by Arete, the wife of Alcinous, and not Alcinous himself; see Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. 4,1110–69; Apollod. *Bibl*. 1,9,25. Medea also weds without her father's consent, a point indicated by Apollonius, *Argon*. 4,745–6, and Seneca, *Med.* 106.

[26] Burnett (above n. 1) 10, 13, in contrast, characterizes Creon's daughter as a legitimate wife and Medea as a concubine, who has not been properly transferred. She sees Jason and Medea as most like members of a secret conspiratorial society who are joined by their oaths and shared crimes. According to Easterling (above n. 1) 180–1, Euripides imposes a silence on the legal relationship of Jason and Medea, but presents them as "permanently pledged".

[27] The usual dependence of a fifth-century Athenian woman on her kyrios is nicely presented in J. Gould, "Law, Custom, and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens", *JHS* 100 (1980) 43–6 = *Myth, Ritual, Memory, and Exchange: Essays in Greek*

about it. Medea kills her brother, who might have served as her *kyrios* in the absence of her father. Medea in demanding an oath from Jason and arranging her own marriage acts as her own *kyrios*.[28] It was a legal impossibility for a woman to be her own guardian in fifth-century Athens,[29] but the actions – irregular and illegal – implicit in Medea's repeated mention of oaths are consistent with the character Euripides creates for her. Medea acting as her own *kyrios* emphasizes the fact that she rejects the confines of a conventional female role, and has assumed a male role. As her own *kyrios*, Medea herself must safeguard her own rights and represent her own interests in the public sphere, which is precisely what we see her doing. The audience in fifth-century Athens would have found this a most unusual undertaking for a woman, but they would have anticipated it and understood it once they comprehended the import of the oaths.

That Medea takes on the role of her own *kyrios* is further indicated by the discussion which surrounds her right hand.[30] At the opening of the play Medea calls upon oaths and the faith affirmed by right hands.[31] The arrangements of the *enguê* were apparently confirmed by a handshake on the part of the groom and the bride's *kyrios*.[32] The bride and the groom also shared a handclasp in the

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Literature and Culture, Oxford 2001, 122–9.

[28] Seneca, *Med.* 486–9, also presents Medea as acting as her own *kyrios*, since he has her declare that she provided her own dowery (usually the responsibility of the *kyrios*) — her brother's limbs, her fatherland, father, brother, and her chastity: *nil exul tuli / nisi fratris artus. hos quoque impendi tibi, / tibi patria cessit, tibi pater, frater, pudor — / hac dote nupsi*.

[29] Although foreign women may have enjoyed greater freedom than citizen women, and Medea does identify herself as a foreigner, the audience is not called upon to view her as such in regard to her marriage. This is so for the same reasons that the chorus of citizen women sympathize with her: because her marriage is considered valid and her children legitimate. If she were a foreign woman in the context of latter fifth-century Athens, none of this would be true.

Later, in Egypt, we have evidence that a woman could give herself away, that is, perform her own *ekdosis*, but this would have been unheard of in Euripides' Athens; U. Yiftach-Firanko, *Marriage and Marital Arrangements: A History of the Greek Marriage Document in Egypt. 4th century BCE – 4th century CE*, München 2003, 43–4.

[30] S. Flory, "Medea's Right Hand: Promises and Revenge", *TAPhA* 108 (1978) 69–74; M. Kaimio, *Physical Contact in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Stage Conventions*, Helsinki 1988, 28–9; Rehm (above n. 1) 105.

[31] *Med.* 21–2.

[32] Ἐγγύη means '[a pledge] put in one's hand', and so L. Gernet, "Hypothèses sur le contrat

marriage ceremony, when, during the wedding procession, the groom grasped the wrist of the bride and led her along.[33] But in the depictions of this act, with very few exceptions, the groom grasps the left wrist of the bride with his right hand. Medea's right hand makes her an active party to her wedding contract, unlike the typically passive Athenian bride. This adds even more significance to Medea's exhortation to her right hand: "Come, o my wretched hand, take the sword, take it!" (ἄγ', ὦ τάλαινα χεὶρ ἐμή, λαβὲ ξίφος, / λάβ', ...).[34] With her right hand Medea actively made a marriage for herself, and with this same right hand Medea will also take an active role in upholding her marriage, defending her rights, and maintaining her dignity.

One very important implication of Medea acting as her own *kyrios* is that Creon, not his daughter, is identified as her principal rival. We are naturally inclined to think of 'the other woman' as the rival of an abandoned wife, and Euripides does not dissuade us from this, since he has Medea murder Creon's daughter.[35] But there is something dissatisfactory about the rivalry between Medea and Creon's daughter in Euripides' tragedy. Creon's daughter, who never appears on the stage and is never even named, is a phantom, or rather she is obedient to Athenian society's prescription for a respectable woman: she is never seen in public and has no reputation.[36] Creon's daughter is, moreover, not the equal of Medea. Medea is active like a man, Creon's daughter is passive as a woman was expected to be. The naïve and adolescently petulant girl described for us in the messenger speech[37] is no match for an intelligent and powerful woman capable of destroying her enemies. But Euripides does not insist that his audience content themselves with this unfair fight. Medea faces a worthy foe in Creon.

Medea has made herself her own *kyrios*, so her rival is not Jason's new

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primitif en Grèce", *REG* 30 (1917) 249–93, 363–83, took the name '*enguê*' to refer to the handshake which concluded the arrangement of the betrothal. Wolff (above n. 12) 51–3, however, defines *enguê* as the act by which the bride was 'handed over' by one *kyrios* and 'received into the hand' of the other. Oakley and Sinos (above n. 11) 9 and n. 3, follow Gernet on the basis of the visual representations. See also Kaimio (above n. 30) 33 n. 29, 34 n. 31.

[33] Oakley and Sinos (above n. 11) 32.

[34] *Med.* 1244–5.

[35] Burnett (above n. 1) 10, 14, insists that Medea does set out to avenge a fresh act of sexual betrayal, but that this is not the only, or even the most important crime for which she seeks revenge.

[36] See, for instance, Pericles' funeral speech; Thuc. 2,46.

[37] *Med.* 1144–66

wife, so much as it is the *kyrios* of the new wife who has arranged this new marriage. Creon's daughter has not seduced Jason, nor pursued him, nor extracted promises of marriage from him.[38] Her relationship to Jason has been determined entirely by the decisions of her father.[39] Creon has had an active role – as opposed to his daughter's passive role – in contracting a new marriage for Jason, which harms Medea and undoes the marriage she contracted for herself. Jason breaks his oaths to Medea not by making new oaths to another woman, but by making new marriage arrangements, possibly new oaths, with Creon.[40] Euripides has us infer the gravest reasons for Medea's enmity against Creon by weighing the implications of the oaths brought up so often. Seneca, in contrast, is explicit that Medea blames Creon for breaking up her marriage and sundering the oaths which secured it,[41] but Seneca takes his cue from Euripides.

So Medea confronts her real rival on stage in her dialogue with Creon. When Creon orders her into exile, he reenacts his crime of driving her from her husband. In response, Medea dissembles to allay his fears when she tells Creon she bears no grudge against him for his role as *kyrios* of Jason's new bride:

> σὺ γὰρ τί μ' ἠδίκηκας; ἐξέδου κόρην
> ὅτῳ σε θυμὸς ἦγεν. ἀλλ' ἐμὸν πόσιν
> μισῶ· σὺ δ', οἶμαι, σωφρονῶν ἔδρας τάδε.[42]
>
> In what have you treated me unjustly? You gave your daughter in marriage
> To the man your sense thought best. But my husband
> I hate; you rather, I think, accomplished these things wisely.

It is in this very act that Creon has done most harm to Medea, ruined her

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[38] This is true of Creon's daughter, but it was not necessarily true of all Greek women. There are curse tablets from Cnidos, dated between 300 and 100 B.C., on which a wife damns the woman who stole away her husband; see C. Newton, *A History of Discoveries at Halicarnassus, Cnidus, and Branchidae*, London 1863, vol. ii, part 2, 719–45, esp. 739, 743–4 (Nos. 87, 93). I am indebted to Prof. Bonnie MacLachlan of the University of Western Ontario for bringing these tablets to my attention.

[39] See Sealey (above n. 12) 33.

[40] Cf. Burnett (above n. 1) 14.

[41] Sen. *Med.* 143–6: *culpa est Creontis tota, qui sceptro impotens / coniugia solvit quique gentricem abstrahit / natis et arto pignore astrictam fidem / dirimit;* (The whole fault is Creon's, who with his scepter's power dissolves marriages, and who drags a mother from her children and puts an end to the trust bound by strict pledge). Cf. 517–9, where Medea sets herself up as rival to Creon in a contest over Jason.

[42] *Med.* 309–11.

marriage, and caused the oaths she and her husband swore to be broken. She may lie and say she does not resent it, but she cannot keep from mentioning the action which makes Creon her enemy. Once he leaves the stage Medea forthrightly counts Creon amongst her enemies.[43] As she pleads with Creon at the end of their encounter, Medea calls on Zeus to remember who is the cause of the evils she suffers.[44] This might seem like vituperation aimed at Jason, since they have just been speaking of the misfortunes of love, but the audience, understanding their rivalry, can read it as an aside against Creon himself, an accusation to his face which he himself does not recognize.

Medea acting as her own *kyrios*, her rivalry with Creon, and her concern over the oaths all remind us that the alienation of Jason's loyalty, not his affection, is at issue. Jason's affection is largely immaterial in Euripides' play. Medea does not demand it; she expects every husband's affection to be dissipated.[45] Jason, in defending his actions to Medea, does not plead his love for Creon's daughter. Nevertheless, the men around her assume Medea to be consumed by sexual jealousy as befits a woman, rather than the sense of outrage over betrayal and indignity appropriate to a man. Jason expects that Medea is upset over 'the bed',[46] but insists that his new marriage is an advantageous arrangement, rather than a love affair.[47] Creon, once again, is not only the broker of the new marriage, but the one offering advantages in competition with the advantages Medea conferred on Jason, setting himself, not his daughter, up as her rival. Aegeus assumes that Jason's new marriage is a matter of love, but Medea is under no illusions and tells him that Jason's love was for "a marriage alliance with rulers" (ἀνδρῶν τυράννων κῆδος).[48] Jason needed to secure the aid of Medea in Colchis, in Greece he must secure the help of Creon. Even if she plans to murder the princess, Medea is less sentimental than these men think she is, and considers Creon her enemy. The conflict of the *Medea* stems not from a transfer of affection (as we might expect in the story of a divorce), but a transaction of interests, as the Athenian audience would expect between *kyrioi* arranging a marriage, from which Medea is excluded. For this reason, in their

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43 *Med.* 374–5.

44 *Med.* 332.

45 *Med.* 244–6.

46 *Med.* 555–6, 568–73.

47 *Med.* 545–75.

48 *Med.* 697–700.

argument, Medea insists on all that she has done for Jason, and Jason is concerned with the pragmatic benefits to be accrued from his new marriage.

The punishment of perjury

It has been suggested that Medea's concern with oaths helps to explain her most atrocious crime and the climactic event of Euripides' tragedy: the killing of her children. Rickert has compellingly argued that the utter destruction of one's household, his children, and his posterity was understood to be the appropriate punishment for perjury, and that Medea exacts this penalty from Jason by killing their sons.[49] If Rickert implies that Medea's actions were therefore condoned by Euripides and his audience, she may overstate her case, but Rehm's objection that the offended party was not responsible for exacting vengeance is hardly sustainable.[50] Medea has long since become habituated to taking care of her own interests, and not leaving the task to the proper authority. She acts as her own *kyrios* in her marriage, and pleads her own case to Creon when Jason's appeal for her proves unavailing. We have noted the active role Medea has assumed in regard to her oaths especially. Altogether, the punishment of perjury as a contributing justification for the murder of her sons indicates the value Medea sets on oaths: she would rather uphold the sanctity of oaths than spare her own children.

Aegeus

The scene of Medea's conversation with Aegeus has been criticized by scholars ancient and modern alike as an unnecessary and overlong episode which serves only to provide Medea with a safe haven once she has perpetrated her crimes.[51] But twentieth-century critics have come to appreciate the great dramatic power and pivotal importance of this scene.[52] It is after speaking to Aegeus, who is

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[49] Rickert (above n. 1) 106–13. Cf. J. Plescia, *The Oath and Perjury in Ancient Greece*, Tallahassee 1970, 11–2; Burnett (above n. 1) 20.

[50] Rehm (above n. 1) 147–8.

[51] Arist., *Poet*. 1461B; see Page (above n. 1) xxix n.2; G. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, Cambridge, Mass. 1957, 469–70.

[52] H. Naylor, "The Aegeus Episode, *Medea* 663–763", *CR* 23 (1909) 189–90; Page (above n.

attempting drastic remedies to end his childlessness, that Medea determines to commit the dire and unnatural crime of killing her children. She knows that she can truly have her revenge on Jason if she can reduce him to the same desperation that Aegeus suffers being without children. Medea's conversation with Aegeus, however, does more than merely suggest to her an appropriate method of exacting revenge. As the context for the only oath sworn in the course of the play (by Aegeus), it demands our attention if we are to understand the oaths in the *Medea*. The contrast between Jason and Aegeus which this exchange brings out is, moreover, the final indictment against Jason's conduct and character.

Aegeus, like Jason, is a married man whose marriage has not provided him with all of the advantages it might have. His marriage is childless, and he is anxious to have an heir. In such cases divorce was not only permitted to the husband, it was the expected course of action. Herodotus considered the devotion of the Spartan king, Anaxandrides, to his wife remarkable, since, despite her barrenness and the insistent demands of the Ephors, he refused to divorce her and took the unprecedented expedient of bigamy in order to preserve his original marriage and produce an heir.[53] Even Medea concedes that if she had not given him children Jason would have an excuse for making a second marriage.[54] In this situation, Euripides has Aegeus display signal fidelity to his wife. He might easily have taken another wife, a fertile one, but instead he pursues the difficult and costly alternative of going to Delphi and procuring oracles to help him have children with his wedded wife.[55] Euripides scrupulously avoids any mention of Aegeus' dalliance with Aethra in Troezen, which was supposed to produce Theseus, or those versions of the legend in which Medea kept her bargain with Aegeus by marrying him herself and bearing children for him.[56] It is, in the *Medea*, Aegeus' love – presumably for

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1) xxix–xxx; R. Dunkle, "The Aegeus Episode and the Theme of Euripides' *Medea*", *TAPhA* 100 (1969) 97–107; Burnett (above n. 1) 13, notes the importance of the Aegeus scene in regard to oaths; Easterling (above n. 1) 184–5; Rickert (above n. 1) 109; P. Sfyroeras, "The Ironies of Salvation: The Aigeus Scene in Euripides' *Medea*", *CJ* 90 (1994–5) 125–42.

[53] Hdt. 5,39–40.

[54] *Med.* 490–1. Jason responds that he wants no more children than the ones Medea has given him, and that he is trying to assure the comfort and eminence of the sons she has given him; *Med.* 557–60.

[55] *Med.* 667–73.

[56] Apollod. *Bibl.* 1,9,28; Plut. *Thes.* 3,3–4; Knox (above n. 9) 194–5 and n. 7. Sfyroeras (above n. 52) 126–30, finds, on the contrary, strong allusions to both the conception of

his current wife – and Medea's drugs which will produce children for him.[57] Aegeus remains a model of the faithful husband. Jason, in contrast, abandons his wife in spite of the fact that she has not only borne him children, but in addition done far more toward furthering his ambition than any wife might be expected to do. He abandons her because immediate advantages might be more easily procured by another marriage. The faithlessness of Jason stands in sharp contrast to the fidelity of Aegeus.

Aegeus' faithfulness to his wife apparently has nothing to do with oaths, but his attitude to oaths provides the most damning contrast with Jason. Aegeus is a man of his word. He tells Medea that if she can make it unaided to his country, he for his part will protect her from all her enemies, and that is what he intends to do. Despite Jason's perjury and the broken oaths that grieve her so sorely, however, Medea still sets great stock in oaths, and she asks for a pledge from Aegeus. Aegeus' response to this request shows just what kind of a man he is. It does not occur to him that an oath would bind him more securely to his word. His oath is for the benefit of others:

> ἀλλ᾽, εἰ δοκεῖ σοι, δρᾶν τάδ᾽ οὐκ ἀφίσταμαι.
> ἐμοί τε γὰρ ἐστὶν ἀσφαλέστατα,
> σκῆψίν τιν᾽ ἐχθροῖς σοῖς ἔχοντα δεικνύναι,
> τὸ σόν τ᾽ ἄραρε μᾶλλον· ἐξηγοῦ θεούς.[58]
>
> But, if it seems good to you, I will not refrain from doing these things.
> For these [sworn oaths] are most safe for me,
> Having some pretence [of obligation] to set before your enemies,
> And your affairs are more firmly fixed; dictate the gods [for the oath].

The oaths give Aegeus a plausible excuse for refusing Medea's enemies (his friends), and help her to feel more secure, but they make no difference to him.[59] He will keep his word, oath or no oath. Aegeus does not hesitate to swear an oath because his word is his bond. Jason has readily sworn oaths for precisely the opposite reason: because he does not feel obligated by them.

In regard to oaths, Euripides' Aegeus is not only a mirror in which Jason reflects badly, he also embodies the ideal of the oath-taker in the philosophy of

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Theseus as well as the whole story of Medea's future cohabitation with Aegeus in Athens.

[57] *Med.* 714–5, 718.

[58] *Med.* 742–5.

[59] Dunkle (above n. 52) 98, however, suggests that it is Aegeus' self-interested desire for security, rather than his inherent honesty, which provokes this assertion.

the playwright's day. Greek philosophers were, on the whole, critical of the habit of swearing oaths.[60] Pythagoras urged his followers to speak words which were trustworthy without oaths, and cautioned them against taking oaths, but told them to keep, by all means, the ones they swore, and advised them that it was preferable to lose a suit than to win it by means of an oath.[61] Several philosophers swore by inconsequential creatures – Socrates by the dog or beech tree, Lampon by the goose, Zeno by the goat – in order to avoid what they wished to be seen as the awesome undertaking of swearing by the gods.[62] Plato criticized the Athenian habits of swearing oaths in the haggling of the marketplace, and of having each party in a court case swear oaths as to the truth of his accusation or defense. The latter practice, he said, inevitably made half of the litigants perjurers.[63] The swearing of oaths which was so ingrained in the custom of society made casual blasphemy and disregard of the gods a very real danger. Medea accuses Jason of this very crime, of thinking the gods no longer rule, or a novel justice has been established, since he knowingly swore in bad faith.[64] Only a man like Aegeus whose word is trustworthy without an oath is fit to take an oath, and able to do so without endangering himself and reviling the gods. These characters represent various current perspectives on oaths. Medea represents the traditional respect and demand for oaths as the necessary guarantee of truth. Jason represents the resulting devaluation of oaths by men willing to engage in an easy and thoughtless blasphemy. Aegeus represents the radical notion that there can be — must be — truth-telling without oaths. His attitude to oaths as external show not touching his inherent honesty is an example of philosophical virtue, and seems to anticipate the Christian injunction against swearing oaths: "But I say unto you, Swear not at all; … But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."[65]

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[60] J. Fitzgerald, "The Problem of Perjury in Greek Context: Prolegomena to an Exegesis of Matthew 5:33; 1 Timothy 1:10; and Didache 2.3", in L. White and O. Yarbrough (ed.), *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, Minneapolis 1995, 171–3.

[61] Iambl. *VP* 47, 144, 150; Diod. Sic. 10,9,2; cf. Isoc. *Demonicus* 23.

[62] See Plescia (above n. 49) 88; Suidas: Λάμπων (Λ 23).

[63] Plat. *Leg.* 11 (917B), 12 (948D–E).

[64] *Med.* 492–5.

[65] Matt. 5.33–37; Jas. 5.12. See J. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, Edinburgh 1916, 300–303, for the context of the verses and a

It no doubt gratified the civic pride of the Athenian audience to have their ancestral king opposed as a paragon of honesty and good faith to an Argive scoundrel. It is consistent with the Chorus' hymn to the Erechtheids and the pure and holy land of Attica.[66] The Athenians prided themselves on an 'Attic faith' (ἀττικὴ πίστις) which was distinctly reliable and trustworthy compared to the *pistis* of other Greeks.[67] Euripides' depiction of Aegeus as a man of his word obviously struck a chord, not only with his audience, but with his colleagues as well. Some thirty years after the *Medea* was produced in 431, in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonnus* (produced posthumously in 401) Aegeus' son, Theseus, appeared as a character whose word was similarly so reliable that it made oaths unnecessary. Once Theseus agrees to protect Oedipus, just as Aegeus had agreed to protect Medea, Oedipus says to him, "I shall indeed not bind you under an oath, as if you were a bad man." And Theseus replies, "You would by this means gain nothing more than by my word."[68] Theseus proves as good as his word and protects Oedipus from the assaults of Creon, and when he does give his oath to care for Oedipus' children, the audience may be confident he will not fail in his undertaking.[69] In a nice intertextual balance, whereas the broken oaths of Jason brought about the destruction of his children, the faithfulness of Theseus serves to protect the children of Oedipus.

Scholars agree that oaths are important in the *Medea*, but little work has been done on how and why they are important. We have seen that an Athenian audience would identify these oaths in different ways. First, perhaps, as lovers' oaths, making Jason and Medea's union suspicious and a flagrant defiance of social convention, recalling the damage they have done to Aeëtes' household, and portending the destruction of Jason's household. Then as a variant on the customary Athenian betrothal, the *enguê*, emphasizing that Medea adopts a

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compilation of ancient opinions, Jewish, Gentile, and Christian, on swearing oaths, as well as Fitzgerald (above n. 60) 156–77.

66 *Med.* 824–45.

67 Plescia (above n. 49) 87.

68 Soph. *OC* 650–1: οὔτοι σ᾽ ὑφ᾽ ὅρκου γ᾽ ὡς κακὸν πιστώσομαι. / οὔκουν πέρα γ᾽ ἂν οὐδὲν ἢ λόγῳ φέροις. E. McDermott, *Euripides' Medea: The Incarnation of Disorder*, University Park, PA 1989, 102–3, also posits a possible connection between this passage and the Aegeus scene in the *Medea*, but, on account of her far dimmer view of Medea's intentions in her exchange with Aegeus she reads the two passages in terms of contrast rather than correspondence.

69 Soph. *OC* 1636–7.

masculine role, and showing her confronting Creon as her real rival. Broken oaths provide an important justification for Medea's infanticide which cannot be ignored. And the stress on oaths makes Aegeus stand out as a model of fidelity and honesty in glaring contrast to Jason. Oaths are not merely important to Medea, and so mentioned time and again; oaths propel the plot, and reflection on them allows us to deepen our assessment of character.

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