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Re-visioning Medea

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Re-Visioning Medea

by

Nancy A. Caronia

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

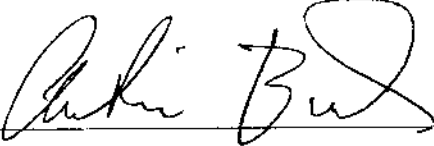
Master of Arts

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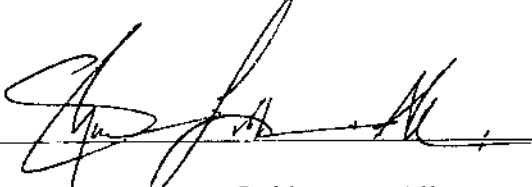
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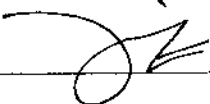
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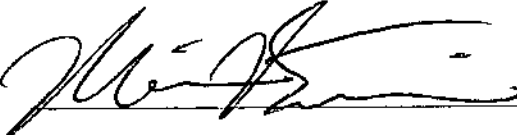
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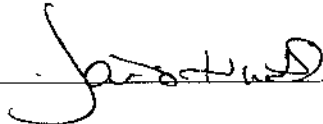
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for

Henrietta, niece through friendship
 Maya, niece through spirit
 Sabrina Marie, niece through blood

The voice of time will change, and our glory will ring down the ages. Womankind will be honored. No longer will ill-sounding report attach to our sex.
 Euripides's Medea

I am grateful to the outstanding faculty I have found within the SUNY Brockport English Department. I offer my appreciation to Dr. Austin Busch, who agreed to direct this thesis and, towards that end, spent many patient hours guiding me through these first tentative steps in learning a more rigorous scholarship. This thesis would not have been possible without Dr. Busch's exacting standards and enthusiasm. To my thesis readers: I thank Dr. Joseph M. Ortiz for his continued encouragement, his kind words, and compassionate nature with regards to my intellectual pursuits. Dr. Sharon Lubkemann Allen has exhibited an enthusiasm and erudition of critical inquiry that has confused, frustrated, frightened, delighted, and inspired me; I thank her for making me aware that intellectual rigor does not need to be drudgery.

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To Jerome O'Neill and Michael Weisenburg: my gratitude for last minute assistance. Any errors or mistakes are my own.

Abstract

The Euripidean Medea has been canonized as the de facto standard of *all* characterizations found within the Medea tradition. The image of Euripides's infanticidal murderess has persisted for nearly two millennia due to interpretations that have furthered the impression that the infanticide is her most salient character trait. However, Pindar, Apollonios, and even Euripides did not make infanticide the central concern of their texts. Pindar privileges Medea's divinity and skills as a prophetess, while Apollonios focuses on the ways in which she was manipulated by gods and mortals. Euripides, who may have originated the infanticidal twist, uses the children's deaths to indict Jason and Creon's willful disregard of the hereditary blood curse on the House of Aeolus, to which both were connected. Roman texts such as Ovid's Heroides 12 and Metamorphoses 7, Gaius Valerius Flaccus's Argonautica, and Seneca's Medea reveal the complexity of the Medea tradition by explicitly and implicitly indicting the brutality and arrogance of patriarchal authority. Ovid creates an abandoned wife in Heroides 12 and a wife who would do anything for her husband, including transforming herself into an amoral supernatural being, in Metamorphoses 12. Valerius chooses to subvert Medea's purpose in the quest for the Golden Fleece by portraying the Argonauts as a band of pirates bent on destruction. Seneca's Medea displays the attributes of imperial rulers, which suggests that Seneca was crafting a veiled critique of the depravity and corruption found in the first century C.E. of Rome. Contemporary texts including Ludmila Ulitskaya's Medea and Her Children and Toni Morrison's Beloved privilege a post-modern self-consciousness,

which further displaces reductive interpretations of Medea as a static figure of murder and mayhem. Ulitskaya chooses to create a Medea who more closely resembles the earliest strands of the Medea myth where she was privileged as an herbalist and a priestess; Medea Sinoply has never left her homeland and is portrayed as the nurturer and stability of her large extended family, which directly contradicts any interpretations of Medea that choose to see her as the bringer of chaos and destruction. Morrison's Sethe has the most explicit characteristics of Euripides's Medea, but Morrison uses these traits to challenge any simple notions of Sethe's killing of her daughter in a severe indictment of the institution of slavery. Morrison offers no easy answers since her Medea-like creation not only loses her daughter and her connection to her community, but also her sanity. Close examinations of these texts will reveal the complexity and sophisticated nature not only of the myth, but also of these authors' creations.

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1¹

Deconstructing the Demonization of an Archetype

In each epoch, in each social circle, in each small world of family, friends, acquaintances, and comrades in which a human being grows and lives, there are always authoritative utterances that set the tone—artistic, scientific, and journalistic works on which one relies, to which one refers, which are cited, imitated, and followed.

—from “The Problems with Speech Genres” by Mikhail M. Bakhtin (88)

In Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual, the foremost modern scholar of Greek religion and myth Walter Burkert explains that a tale does not become a myth at the moment of its creation, “but by being retold and accepted” until it is “used as a means of communication in subsequent generations” (2). Roland Barthes argues that once a myth loses its potency or essential reason for existence, it will “alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (120); however, Burkert characterizes changes in “multivalent” mythic construction as “distortions and reelaborations” that are integral in maintaining a particular myth’s effectiveness over time (Structure and History 5). Burkert’s concept of myth is related to Bakhtin’s notion of “great time,” when texts break through the age in which they were created to live a “more intense and fuller life than they might have within their own epoch” (“Response to a Question” 4). In this way, Greek mythological archetypes continue to influence contemporary Western culture through perpetual examination and re-interpretation.

¹I have standardized spelling of certain names; however, where names have been quoted, I have retained the spelling found in the quoted texts. Below is a list of alternative spellings found within this thesis: Medea also appears as Medeia in Apollonios Rhodios’s The Argonautika; Colchis also appears as Kolchis in Pindar’s “Pythia 4” and Apollonios Rhodios’s The Argonautika; and Aeëtes appears as Aietes in Pindar’s “Pythia 4” and Aiëtes in Apollonios Rhodios’s The Argonautika.

Euripides's Medea is, to use Bakhtin's language, an "authoritative utterance," inspiring such works as Toni Morrison's Beloved ("The Problems with Speech Genres" 88).

Yet there is a conundrum inherent in such intertextual lines of literary development and interpretation. Once Greek myth becomes, as Fritz Graf states, "stories about individual, non-interchangeable figures—Odysseus, Orestes, or indeed Medea—each of whom seems to have been shaped by a single, authoritative literary work: Homer's Odyssey, Aeschylus' Oresteia, Euripides' Medea," the myth becomes static due to the sense of "permanence" that the authority of the canonical text renders (21). Graf acknowledges that Euripides's infanticidal murderess represents the most known depiction of Medea, giving credence to what Deborah Boedeker calls a "powerful and canonical Euripidean *persona*," a persona that seems to have all but effaced both the divinity and the helper-maiden traditions of the myth found in extant texts such as Pindar's fourth Pythian ode and Apollonios Rhodios's The Argonautika (129). Twentieth-century critical and literary discourse privileges an interpretation of Medea that renders her a one-dimensional witch-like character who is in love with murder and mayhem and kills her children to satisfy her lust for revenge—Louise Mead even suggests, "No more terrible figure has come down in classical legend than Medea" (qtd. in Tuana 253). In contrast, Burkert chooses to dismiss the Euripidean tragedy as an "abnormal continuation" in the "complex Argonaut tradition," yet his stance creates more of a distance between the accepted interpretation of the canonical persona and Euripides's actual project (Structure and History 10). Continuous

misrepresentations of the tragedy—not only through biased or poor translations of the canonical portrait, but also through a modern lens that diagnoses a woman who murders her children as an evil sociopath—obscure the full-breadth of Euripides’s motivation for placing the infanticide in Medea’s hands.

While infanticide could be interpreted as a heinous crime without any need for further investigation, earlier strands of the myth suggest that Medea’s children were sacrificed for a variety of reasons and Medea took no part in these deaths. These pre-Euripidean explanations for the children’s murders demand, at the very least, a re-examination of Euripides’s Medea in order to clarify whether she is a monstrous mother with no care for her children bent on avenging her husband’s betrayal or if Euripides is purposefully gesturing towards other, older strands of the myth to create a different kind of portrait.

Graf reports a version of the myth found in the mid-eighth century B.C. Corinthiaca by Eumelos, which depicts a non-conjuring Medea summoned by the Corinthians from Iolkas to be the queen of Corinth. She leaves her children in Hera’s temple, but Hera does not follow through on her promise, bestowed after Medea refuses Zeus’s advances, to make Medea’s children immortal and the children, without any explanation of how or why, perish (Graf 35; Page xxii; Braswell 11). This “Corinthian Medea failed to immortalize her children” in part because “herbal magic was not her concern—and far less magic of any other kind,” but also due to her reliance on a goddess who lets her down (Graf 35).

In another version preserved by a scholiast on Euripides, the women of Corinth, “impatient of obeying a foreign sorceress, rose against Medea and killed her seven sons and seven daughters in the Hera Akraia” (Page xxiii). In this case, her status as a foreign exile and her knowledge of herbs marks her as an outsider of whom to be wary, but she is still not the murderer of her children, fourteen in number in this case, and it is the female Corinthians who slay Medea’s offspring in Hera’s temple. Graf believes “this version is etiological,” in order to explain a yearly ritual that called for seven boys and seven girls of noble birth to be sent into the sanctuary of Hera Akraia (35). Sir James George Frazer notes, “Down to a comparatively late date the Corinthians used to offer annual sacrifices and perform other rites for the sake of expiating the murder of the children. ... These customs fell into desuetude after Corinth was captured by the Romans” (Apollodorus and Frazer 124). According to Page, “Didymus questioned this account, quoting Kreophylos, whose story he paraphrased,” testifying to the children’s murder at the hands of *Creon’s relatives* after Medea murders Creon and his daughter (xxiv). “[I]n a raging desire for vengeance, [Creon’s kinsmen] seized the children of Medea from the altar in Hera’s temple, where [the children] had gone as suppliants, and stoned them to death” (Sanderson 6). Creon’s kinsmen then “spread the rumor that Medea had” murdered her own-children (Knox 296). This version is corroborated by the Oechaliae Halosis, which states that Medea kills Creon, flees to Athens, and stands falsely accused “for the murder of her children whom Creon’s relatives killed in revenge” (Braswell 8). Apollodorus mentions an alternative tradition to Euripides’s ending wherein Medea

“left behind her children, who were still infants, setting them as suppliants on the altar of Hera of the Height; but the Corinthians removed them and wounded them to death” (I.ix.28). In these accounts, Medea’s regicide causes the Corinthians to devolve into a barbaric state and commit the act that Euripides and later, Seneca place in Medea’s hands.

In “Corinthian Medea and the Cult of Hera Akraia,” Sarah Iles Johnston sheds light on the cult of Hera Akraia to which some versions of the Medea myth, especially the one Euripides deploys, are related. The cult focused on rites of atonement regarding the children’s deaths, but “the myths talk not so much about the *children*, and their ordeal, as they do about *Medea* and hers; the children as individuals are so relatively unimportant that their names, number, ages, and even genders vary from account to account” (51).² If the cult were more concerned with Medea, mothers, and women of childbearing years, it is not surprising that Hera is involved in many of the variations of what occurs to Medea’s children, since she is “closely associated with parturient women and mothers as well” as brides (52). As a goddess, she has the ability of bestowing life and determining death; if she is able to grant mothers’ wishes, she can also refuse them and cause the children’s deaths.

The cult of Hera Akraia was responsible for keeping at bay what Johnston terms reproductive demons, and she notes that the Corinthians may have even

²Interestingly, Johnston prefaces her discussion by stating, “I will continue to call the Corinthian heroine I discuss in this essay ‘Medea,’ although the question of whether this name belonged originally to the Colchian figure who helped the Argonauts in their exploits or to the Corinthian figure whose children died, is as far from settled as is the question of how these two quite different figures came to merge into a single individual during the archaic age” (45).

“erected an *apotropaion*,” a statue of a terrifying female figure thought to ward off evil, in order to protect mothers, parturient women, and infants from harm (60). The reproductive demons were analogous to Hera since “[c]ulturally, she helped to protect against the forces that brought pregnancy and childhood to unhappy ends; mythically, she was represented as one of them herself” (60). Reproductive demons explained a multitude of strange sicknesses that befell infants and women in childbirth and were believed to be females who died as virgins or in childbirth and thus failed “to complete the reproductive cycle ... [thus] inflicting the same fate they suffered upon other women” (57-58).

Johnston argues that it is possible the reproductive demon within the Hera Akraia tradition was linked with the Colchian Medea myth to fulfill “the desire of cities, during the archaic period, to link themselves to the figures of Panhellenic epic” (66). The infamous act of infanticide attributed to Euripides’s Medea could be due to the Corinthians’ wish to “encourage the identification of some local Corinthian hero or heroine with a character from one of the great sagas” (66). Jan Bremmer notes, “[a]s various cities lost their political significance, it was their mythical past that could still furnish them with an identity and help them to distinguish themselves from other cities” (“What is a Myth?” 5). This suggests that the Medea of Colchis is purposefully transformed into the Euripidean Medea of Corinth, a woman who is “known as the killer of her children,” through the conflating of two distinct mythic traditions—the local myth regarding a reproductive demon and the more archaic myth of the Colchian helper-maiden turned exile—into a third, more powerful persona in

Euripides's tragedy (Johnston 65). While Burkert sees mythological variations of this type as "never exclusive; they appear as varying forms, trends, or options within the one disparate yet continuous conglomerate of ancient religion," according to Johnston, at one point there *were* initially two cults with entirely separate focuses (Burkert Ancient Mystery Cults, 4). One worshipped child heroes and the other "centered on a goddess or heroine known as Hera or Medea and on her children" (Johnston 60-61). The children of both cults later merged into one cult associated with the Hera Akraia and it is at this point that the Medea whose children "died due to Hera's neglect ... became identified as the mother of the children murdered by the Corinthians" (61).

This catalog of extant texts and cultic ritual sheds light on the long tradition of portraying Medea and her children as the victims of both the Corinthians' wrath and Hera's whim. Indeed, in every version of the archaic myth, Medea does not directly commit infanticide.³ Yet there is a possible indirect agency. Even though Burkett

³There is every indication that either Euripides or a near contemporary of his—Neophron—originated the infanticide of the Medea tradition. While Knox notes, "I am convinced by [D.L.] Page's demonstration (pp. xxx ff.) that Neophron's Medea is later than that of Euripides," Boedeker states, "Euripides may not have originated this plot—according to the first hypothesis of the play (which cites Dicaearchus and Aristotle), he followed outlines of an earlier drama by a certain Neophron—but it was his heroine who became the point of reference for later versions" (Knox 316; Boedeker 127). Ann N. Michelini dismisses Page's findings, stating that in light of the ancient assessment in the hypothesis, Page's assertions seem "a little short of preposterous," and defends E.A. Thompson, whose evidence citing Neophron as Euripides's predecessor was ignored due to "the wide use and great prestige of Page's commentary" (115; 116). Emily A. McDermott chooses "Euripides' anteriority... as a working hypothesis on the grounds that arguments to the contrary are unconvincing and too weak to contravert a general sense that it is more likely that the lesser play is an imitation of the greater than vice versa" (24). While Knox and others cannot help but to suggest that the infanticide by Medea is pure "Euripidean invention," whether or not that is the case, Euripides's representation became the canonical standard (296).

claims that Euripides's tragedy is an "abnormal continuation," he also suggests that Medea's *divinity* is what causes Jason's downfall in the tragedy, not because her marriage to him is beneath her (deities do this sort of thing quite often), but because his disavowal of a "superior wife" is a serious crime; Medea is neither a reproductive demon nor an evil barbarian—she is simply exercising her divine rights as a goddess (Structure and History 10). This suggests that Hera and Medea's divinity as well as Medea's allegiance and connection to Hera in conjunction with the Corinthian's violence towards the children would be essential components to any examination not only of Euripides's Medea, but also of Pindar's fourth Pythian ode, and Apollonios's The Argonautika. While many scholars search for a common thread through privileging a negative interpretation of the infanticide in Euripides's tragedy, the actual portraits of Medea found in these three texts suggest that there is no direct or indirect correlation between the infanticide of Euripides's Medea and Pindar's prophetess or Apollonios's helper-maiden.

Whether Medea is mortal, half-mortal or divine, it is worth investigating why Euripides's act of infanticide compels interpretations of the tragedy that not only foster the notion that this Medea is an inherently evil monster, but also see this infamous persona in every other representation of the myth. There are a multitude of Greek mythological figures—mortal and immortal—who commit heinous acts,

Other, older strands of the tradition privileging the Colchian princess's divine nature as well as her helper-maiden status are abandoned in light of the shift in responsibility to Medea as the sole perpetrator of infanticide. Most interpretations look only to her status as a scorned foreign woman murdering her children to avenge her husband's new marriage and label her a terrible monster without looking any further. This cannot have been Euripides's aim as I shall argue below.

including infanticide, without suffering from constricting descriptions that efface the full-breadth of their mythic arcs. One only needs to scan the dysfunctional family tree in Greek mythology compiled by Bernard Knox to understand that the infanticide attributed to Medea by Euripides is not, unfortunately, the most despicable act committed by mythological figures in ancient Greece:

Orestes and Alcmaeon, the matricides; Clytemnestra, Eriphyle, Deianira, husband-killers; Oedipus the patricide; Medea, Ino, Althaea, Procne, and Agave, who brought about the deaths of their own sons; Agamemnon, a father who kills his daughter; Scylla, a daughter who kills her father; Heracles, who butchers his sons, and Oedipus and Theseus, whose curses have the same effect on theirs; the fratricidal brothers Polynices and Eteocles and the only slightly less murderous Atreus and Thyestes; twin sons who kill their stepmothers, Pelias and Neleus, Amphion and Zethus; mothers who expose their children, Creusa, Hecuba, Jocasta. (21)

This short list of the good, the bad, and the ugly in Greek mythology suggests that there must be another, more salient reason why Euripides's Medea became renowned for her disturbing infanticide rather than for the heroic assistance she provides in Apollonios's The Argonautika or the account of her divine ancestry as a relative to the Sun god privileged in Pindar's ode. If Euripides's creation is an alternative tradition that becomes an influential portrait only in the fifth-century and later Greek society, the exaggerated effacement of the half-mortal helper-maiden must stem from a misinterpretation of Euripides's project. After all, the hero Herakles is most

remembered for the triumph of his labors and his ascension to Olympus and not his numerous acts of rape or infanticide.

While twentieth-century scholarship makes much of the infanticide as a monstrous and selfish act on Medea's part, according to Page, Euripides explains Medea's murderous impulse with reference to "the infidelity of Jason" (xxiv). This element creates a complex moral dynamic. First, once Jason rejects Medea, their children do not have much chance for survival—Creon certainly would not want them around to threaten his family's ruling lineage, and any Greek audience would understand that. There is no reason to believe that Creon or his daughter would feel any more empathy for Jason's sons than the victorious Greeks had for Andromache's infant son, who was thrown from the walls of Troy once the Greeks triumphed over the Trojans. Jason and Medea's sons would be seen as a threat to their future stepbrothers in the same way that Hector and Andromache's child is seen as a threat to the future rulers of Greece. Jason marries Creon's daughter to further his political career, but an audience would not be naïve enough to believe that the children from his marriage to the foreign-born exilic first wife would be safe once he and his new Corinthian wife have their own children together.

Medea understands only too well the dangerous landscape she inhabits with her children and it is her own precarious position in Greek society that allows her to murder her children in order to protect them from "my enemies to insult" (Euripides Medea 49). Once Jason disrespects their marriage vows, Medea becomes "a combination of the naked violence of Achilles and the cold craft of Odysseus" and

her acceptance of the responsibility for infanticide is obscured by her forceful sense of vengeance (Knox 300). In this way, Euripides indicts any defacto cultural or political standard that would force a Medea-like figure into doing exactly what it would do to her and her children if she chose to be submissive rather than assert her own agency in determining her and her children's destiny.

Further, while Jason's marriage to Creon's daughter is a central conceit in Euripides's tragedy, there is more to Jason's betrayal than mere infidelity. In his remarriage to Creon's daughter, Jason has broken a sworn oath to Medea and, according to Robin Mitchell-Boyask, "to disregard oaths was thus to commit an offense against the gods" (80). Jason has also committed another crime—he has married into the House of Aeolus, which, according to Lora Holland, carries an hereditary blood curse that made "maternal infanticide, though rare in Greek mythology in general, ... a recurring motif in this family" (262). This implies that Medea may be the agency by which the infanticides are carried out, but it is Jason's breaking of his sworn oath and remarriage into a family with a hereditary blood curse that leaves Medea no choice. She becomes the *alastor*, a "relentless persecutor or avenger," who murders her children as an agent of divine justice (269). This makes it clear that Euripides is not crafting a maniacal baby killer bent on making her husband suffer. This is a loving mother who is left with no agency but to sacrifice them to divine vengeance if she wants to protect her children from both the Corinthians and the Aeolian blood curse.

These reasons for Medea's extreme action foster a greater critical awareness of the strong cultural connection to divine authority that is made explicit in the ancient strands of the myth. Euripides is not crafting a selfish and monstrous woman—she is a mother and wife disenfranchised by an opportunistic husband. These startling revelations, foregrounding divine authority and critiquing patriarchal authority, become the foundation of this larger project to recast Euripides's tragedy, Pindar's ode, and Apollonios's epic into a cultural framework that privileges both women's autonomy and divine justice. Explorations of related texts, ranging from Ovid's Heriodes 12 and Metamorphoses 7, Gaius Valerius Flaccus's Argonautica, Seneca's Medea, Shakespeare's Macbeth to twentieth century novels such as Morrison's Beloved and Ludmila Ullitskaya's Medea and Her Children, reveal the ways in which classical constraints can be filtered through the self-reflexivity of a post-modern rhetoric to create complex female narratives that upend expected responses to acts that challenge patriarchal authority and mortal law in defense of moral justice and a higher authority.

Re-Visioning Medea considers the multiple cultural, gender, and political displacements found in these texts with the aim of neutralizing interpretations that offer one-dimensional views of creations that stem not from the infanticide found in Euripides's tragedy, but from the various strands of the Medea tradition. In Chapter 3, Pindar's fourth Pythian ode is examined in its role as a precursor to Euripides's tragedy. Pindar privileges Medea as both a prophetess and a divine being, suggesting that the Greeks did not relegate Medea or the myth into the simplistic framework of

“evil monster” that is regularly utilized in modern scholarship. Apollonios Rhodios’s The Argonautika reframes the quest for the Golden Fleece and the trajectory of the helper-maiden tradition by adding a sub-plot wherein Medea is manipulated by Hera, Jason, and her sister Chalkiope; this displaces the negative traits usually associated with Medea onto the authoritative discourses of those who would have her do their bidding. The Roman texts of Ovid, Valerius, and Seneca discussed in Chapter 4 highlight the cultural and societal differences between the Greek relationship with divine authority and the Romans’ concern for the material. Ovid constructs a Medea in Heroides 12 who is the Roman equivalent of a “desperate housewife” recently dumped by her husband once she is no longer of any use to him, while in Metamorphoses 7 the Roman poet characterizes Medea as a woman who is transformed into an amoral supernatural being to reveal the way in which figures of authority use individuals’ skills with no regard for the outcome. In The Argonautica, Valerius overtly indicts patriarchal brutality by placing the Argonauts in the midst of one bloody battle after another; this not only questions the might and right of military power, but also usurps Medea’s place within the helper-maiden tradition since the Argonauts are portrayed as pirates who take what they want—Valerius’s Medea is not so much a willing accomplice as booty. Seneca’s Medea becomes the proto-typical villainess expected by modern scholars, but even his portrait has less to do with the qualities seen in an infanticidal murderess and more to do with the covert examination of an imperial ruler run amok.

Chapter Five focuses on the way later writers gesture towards crucial similarities between central characters in their works and the mythological figure in order to suggest the multiplicity of meanings these authors have found in their adaptations of the Medea myth. Shakespeare's Macbeth takes a plot twist found in Seneca's Medea in order to consider the nature of ambition, while political and cultural landscapes are subverted by novelists such as Ludmila Ulitskaya and Toni Morrison who privilege an "internally persuasive discourse" over the "authoritative utterance" of patriarchal power (Bakhtin "Discourse in the Novel" 534; "The Problems with Speech Genres" 88). Ulitskaya reframes the Medea myth so that exilic displacement, which is an inherent trait in other texts, becomes an internally motivated project. Medea Sinoply does not travel outside her homeland in Medea and Her Children and is recast as the caretaker and nurturer found in the earliest strands of the myth. Morrison's Beloved uses explicit elements from Euripides's Medea to point towards the proper hermeneutic orientation for readers to take as they come to terms with Sethe's shocking action.

This reframing of Euripides's Medea is designed to free the tragedy of any one-dimensional evaluations of Medea, which are often implicit in critical analyses and the accepted standards in judgments of the work. By developing a deeper understanding of the points of contact between these texts, a new view will emerge that will allow not only Euripides's Medea but each of these texts to experience an "intense and fuller" expression ("Reponse to Novy Mir" 4). This will liberate the

myth and these texts from reductive interpretations that ignore the breadth and variety of the creations the myth has fostered.

II

Friendship, Complicity, and Heroic Virtue in Euripides's Medea:
Revisiting a Canonical Standard

Back to their sources flow the sacred rivers. The world and morality are turned upside-down. The hearts of men are treacherous; the sanctions of Heaven are undetermined. The voice of time will change, and our glory will ring down the ages. Womankind will be honored. No longer will ill-sounding report attach to our sex.

—from Medea by Euripides (41)

Rene Girard asserts that tragedy does not “allow any sort of value judgment, any sort of distinction, subtle or simplistic, to be drawn between ‘good’ and ‘wicked’ characters”; however, when the tragic act is infanticide and the perpetrator is a woman, there seems to be difficulty in maintaining such open-ended judgment (47). While Euripides’s tragedy is not the first account of Medea to appear in written form, it is the text that has made her infamous not only for her act of infanticide, but also as “a witch,” directing just such moral censure and simplification as Girard precludes from tragedy (Page xxi). According to Claire Armand, “Every interpretation of a pre-existing text is an act of intervention,” but there is a running theme found in interpretations of Euripides’s Medea, which view her as an outsider extraordinaire and an inherently malevolent virago (228). Page describes Medea as the first in a “long line of Bad Women—Phaidra, Stheneboia, Kanakê, Augê” (x); Jan Bremmer notes she is a “kin-killer *par excellence*” (“Why Did Medea” 100); and even Girard writes about “Medea’s insane behavior” (9). Knox argues, “She is a hero ... but since she is also a woman, she cannot prevail by brute strength; she must use deceit,” thereby equating her speech and actions with underhandedness rather than skill or

wisdom, as the Greek word *sophe*, which both Medea and Creon use to describe her, implies (300).⁴

Interpreters of every extant ancient embodiment of the Medea myth, from Pindar to Apollonios to Ovid, hunt for the monstrous woman with “a profound and disturbing power” (Boedeker 127). This is particularly ironic considering that Euripides crafts the figure of Medea as a tragic heroine, not as a villain; however, analyses of the tragedy resist the constraints of the genre and tend to focus on the infanticide as the supreme act of a sociopathic witch.⁵ That Euripides intended this is unlikely, especially since the female chorus empathize with Medea throughout the tragedy and Euripides crafts Medea’s actions to echo male heroic traditions.

H.D.F. Kitto not only asserts that Medea “is no character compounded of good and bad,” implying indirectly that she is “bad” from beginning to end; he also insists, “we certainly cannot fear for her as for one of ourselves” (286). This is clearly not accurate, since Euripides has the chorus affirm its concern for her and empathize with her situation time and again. The chorus entreats the Nurse to “bring her here, make her come forth from the palace. Tell her that here too are friends,” when it hears Medea’s grief-stricken cries coming from within the house (Euripides *Medea* 36-37). The chorus want “to be ever at the service of my friends” and hope to persuade

⁴Knox suggests Medea and Creon’s choice of the word *sophe* has specific connotations to “not only the wisdom won by experience and reflection, but also the new intellectual, enlightened outlook” (313). How Knox equates this definition with underhandedness is a mystery.

⁵See Knox for his challenge to Page’s assertion that Medea is a witch (306-308) since Page argues this premise without citing any evidence that she has any witch-like characteristics (xxi).

Medea to “hear the sound of the words we speak” so that “she might forget the resentment in her heart and change her purpose” (36). The camaraderie exhibited by the chorus emphasizes how strong Medea’s connection to her Corinthian community actually is. She is not alone. Although in her grief she is unable to listen to “the admonitions of her friends,” even this cannot dissuade the chorus from offering its support (34). If Medea were merely an insane sorceress, it is doubtful that the women of the chorus would make any effort—they would probably hide in their homes until she had done her worst.

Contrary to Kitto’s assertions then, Medea *is* like other women; the inherent difference between the female chorus and Medea is that once she believes that her reputation has been tarnished and that she and her children have been placed in a dangerous situation, she opts for action over silence. This is an audacious choice given that she is in a politically vulnerable position. Creon, the ruler of Corinth, gave permission for Medea and Jason to stay in the city even though she was a foreign exile who had not only murdered her brother, but also instigated the murder of Pelias, the ruler of Iolkus. Now that her husband has married Creon’s daughter and has become Creon’s son-in-law, Medea is nothing more than excess baggage to Jason and the city. She could also be a danger to Corinth if her father were to come in search of her or were the citizens of Iolkus to seek revenge for Pelias’s murder.⁶ While the

⁶Medea states she has “brought death [to Pelias], the most painful death there is, at the hands of his children. Thus I have removed every danger from [Jason’s] path” (Euripides *Medea* 43). Additionally, while not all strands of the Medea tradition hold her culpable for her brother’s death, Euripides has Medea hold herself responsible. Before she enters the stage, the Nurse and chorus listen to her

chorus could find Medea untrustworthy due to her outsider *and* exilic status, as well as the murders of Iolkus's ruler Pelias and her own brother, none of this prevents her Greek female counterparts from interacting with and befriending her, which further complicates any notion that this Medea is an isolated stranger without friends.⁷ It is likely then, that Euripides purposefully fashions the chorus's response to Medea's situation in order to indicate to the tragedy's audience how to look upon this betrayed wife and mother; after all, no matter the choices she makes, the chorus do not waver in their support. The chorus's empathy, if seen as an extension of the audience's minds, would make it difficult for them to judge Medea harshly; by passing judgment on her, they would be judging themselves. Most importantly, even when the chorus indicate that Medea's decision to murder her children does not "support the laws of mankind," they still agree to keep silent—a pact akin to complicity (50).

While the chorus's empathy might be related to the fact that it sees Medea as "[t]he victim of grievous wrongs," this victimization is not spectacular in and of itself

lamentation, where she remembers, "father, O country, that I forsook so shamefully, killing my brother, my own" (36). Jason also holds her accountable for her brother's murder, "In your own home you had already slain your brother when you came aboard the Argo" (61).

⁷This relationship between Euripides's chorus and Medea is in direct contrast to Seneca's *Medea*, written five hundred years *after* the Greek tragedy. Shadi Bartsch discusses Seneca's *Medea* within the context of the Stoic sage in Neronian Rome and through the creation of a "less sympathetic" chorus than the one found in Euripides's tragedy, a characterization that reveals an isolated figure from the beginning of the Roman tragedy (*Mirror* 273). I believe that the Senecan *Medea*'s isolated status has actually had a greater influence on nineteenth and twentieth century views of Euripides's *Medea*, although the Greek tragedy is the antecedent inspiration and must have had an impact on Seneca's playwriting. What this means is contemporary views of Euripides's *Medea* mistake the Greek tragedian's project with Seneca's.

due to the chorus's own claim that Jason's taking of a new bride "is a common event" (37; 36). This indicates that, unlike Kitto's assertion, Medea's situation is not unique but is a predictable occurrence among the married women of Greece. Corti agrees that Medea's "position is equivalent to that of the women of the Chorus," while Knox suggests, "[t]he chorus obviously feel that Medea's situation might well be their own: as far as they are concerned, she speaks like and for them" (Corti *Myth of Medea* 39; Knox 310).⁸ In other words, there are plenty of individuals who identify with her plight, as well as her response to it. Euripides has the chorus interact and empathize with Medea so that it might observe what happens when another female usurps the dominance of a ruler such as Creon or her husband Jason. This suggests that Euripides was not creating a maniacal baby killer, but a woman transformed into an instrument of justice who turns the patriarchal workings of Athenian society inside out and perhaps elucidates the inequity under which its women lived.

Thus, Medea's role serves Greek women, and its critical function is contingent on the fact that Euripides crafts her not only within a domestic context according to what makes a "good" Corinthian wife, but also as a respected member in good standing within the Corinthian community of women. The tragedian has the Nurse

⁸In the scholarship that I have read, these are two of only a handful of remarks concerning the chorus that directly connects them to Medea. While much is made of her inherently evil characteristics (that are seen through a lens of "barbarian" exile) and male-oriented "heroic" attributes (usually examined as a deceptive trait to lull Jason and Creon into believing they are safe as she conjures her devious plot), little is done to see a connection between her status as a woman and the chorus's empathy. Instead, her actions create what Deborah Boedeker calls Medea's "canonical identity: the woman who kills her children in vengeance when her husband deserts her" (127). This view undercuts not only the characterization of Medea, but also of the Greek tragedy as a whole.

open the tragedy with an outline of Medea's public history as "a perfect partner in all things for Jason" (Euripides *Medea* 33). There is no indication in the Nurse's speech that Medea has been anything but an exemplary wife and mother, equivalent to an upstanding Greek wife; in contrast, she goes on to accuse the male "hero": "Jason has betrayed his own children and my mistress to sleep beside a royal bride" (33). From the beginning of the tragedy, Euripides presents Medea as the wronged figure, even though she refuses to behave within the expected framework of a victim.

The women of the chorus are a willing audience in this project from the moment Medea first shares her grief, frustration, and rage with them. Medea exhibits no need to hold back when she confides, "Woman in most respects is a timid creature, with no heart for strife and aghast at the sight of steel; but wronged in love, there is no heart more murderous than hers" (38). The chorus is not frightened; this comment apparently strikes a chord since there is no attempt on their part to temper her argument or disagree with her. Indeed, they go so far as to want to encourage her to "[d]o as you say, Medea, for just will be your vengeance. I do not wonder that you bemoan your fate" (38). This response does not offer Medea any solution beyond "egging her on" to do her worst. The chorus is as invested as Medea is in obtaining justice. Her outsider status as a foreign-born woman actually serves the chorus; it need risk nothing in observing what she chooses to do. They only need to observe as this familiar foreigner vocalizes her (and their) discontent and then wait to see how the patriarchal power responds.

If the chorus receive a "vicarious pleasure in Medea's successful defiance of

authority,” it is due to its sense that Jason, in his marriage to Creon’s daughter, is an example of the way in which figures of authority, i.e., Greek husbands, are overwhelmingly disrespectful to their vows (Corti Myth of Medea 39). The chorus declares, “nowhere in all the breadth of Hellas is honor any more to be found; it has vanished into the clouds” (Euripides Medea 42). If this is true, the only honorable figure the women can turn to is “luckless Medea, [whose] desolation invokes the promises [Jason] made, appeals to the pledges in which she put her deepest trust, and calls Heaven to witness the sorry recompense she has from Jason” (33). Medea is a woman who keeps her promises, no matter the cost, and expects the same standard from those around her. After all, she pledged to assist Jason in his procurement of the Golden Fleece, even if it meant “forsaking my father and my own dear ones” (43) and becoming an exile and murderer of Pelias, her brother, and the dragon “that kept safe watch over the Golden Fleece” (43).

By placing its confidence in Medea, a loyal and steadfast, if “furious,” woman, the chorus envision honor and order brought back to a chaotic world where sworn oaths and the gods have become less important than male mortal authority (37). The Nurse and the chorus therefore listen attentively to Medea as she calls on “Great Zeus and Lady Themis, see you how I am treated, for all the strong oaths with which I bound my cursed husband?” and the chorus asks Zeus to “hear what a sad lament the hapless wife intones” (36). The chorus have no reason to doubt that the god “will support your cause. Do not let grief for a lost husband waste away your life” (36). Later on, it reiterates that Medea should “be not exasperated. Zeus will support your

cause” (36). These statements assure the audience (and the chorus) that even if husbands do not find Medea’s situation outrageous, Zeus will aid Medea in bringing justice to Jason so that he does not walk away from his broken oaths unscathed.

The chorus strengthen this position by empathizing with the inequity of Jason’s abandonment of Medea and the couple’s children, not only through the way in which these women flock to Medea’s side, but also in their defense of her to Jason. They interrupt Jason’s tirade against Medea when they remind him, “you have acted unjustly in betraying your wife” (45). Jason seems to ignore them, but their point is made and he tempers his argument. A few lines after their reminder, he states to Medea that if she “wants anything of mine to assist you or the children in your exile, just tell me. I am ready to give it with an ungrudging hand and to send letters of introduction to my foreign friends who will treat you well” (45-46). Of course, he cannot help but to add the tag, “If you reject this offer, woman, you will be a great fool” (45-46). Medea uses the chorus’s daring confrontation of Jason, as well as their past reassurances, to bolster her own argument with him: “Do you believe that the gods of the old days are no longer in office? Do you think that men are now living under a new dispensation? For surely you know that you have broken all your oaths to me” (43). This is not simply Medea warning (or pleading with) her husband to be wary of *her* actions, but a guarantee that the gods will enact some sort of reprisal for his betrayal and a reminder that it is not up to herself or him as to who or what that divine instrument and the degree of justice will be.

After Medea imparts her decision to murder her children and Creon’s

daughter, the chorus's declaration, "I should like to help you, but since I also would support the laws of mankind, I entreat you not to do this deed," is disingenuous (50). When placed alongside the chorus's previously mentioned trust in divine justice, as well as their and Medea's warnings to Jason that he has broken the gods' laws through his betrayal, this sudden turn towards man-made law must be considered suspect. The chorus has lamented a Hellas going to Hell in a hand basket due to the disrespect accorded to sworn oaths and, by extension, to the gods. These women have assured Medea that Zeus will make Jason pay for his betrayal. Their departure from this divine perspective becomes a passive-aggressive tactic to avoid responsibility for Medea's planned infanticide *and* homicide of a royal figure. By claiming this rationale, the chorus is free to observe without telling anyone of Medea's plans. These women have already admitted that they have no faith in "the laws of mankind," which disavow sacred oaths and leave them abandoned by their husbands without any means of recourse (50). The chorus's decision to claim the supremacy of man-made laws once Medea announces her plans is nothing more than an excuse designed to protect it if knowledge of her murderous plot is discovered. After all, the infanticides would amount to a small offense since the children are the product of Jason and a foreign-born woman (Creon might even secretly give thanks), but there can be no doubt that the murder of the ruler's daughter would be considered a grave offense. Nevertheless, the chorus have numerous opportunities to tell Jason about *all* of Medea's plans, but choose silence, which enables them to embrace Medea as the agent of justice not only for the gods, but also for women betrayed by their husbands.

The chorus question Medea's ability to go through with the infanticides, but this is more than a proactive measure to talk her out of committing the murders; the women exhibit a morbid curiosity as to how the act will feel. It is almost as though these women wonder if "hav[ing] the heart to destroy your own flesh and blood" would actually make any female "the unhappiest woman in the world" (50).

Medea never wavers from her belief that infanticide is the only means of waking up Jason to the heinous crime he has committed in breaking his oath. However, her conviction that she must "murder my children, these children of mine. No man shall take them away from me" is not only an act of justice and retribution, but also one that will protect the children from being removed from their mother's side, where they could suffer horrible consequences (50).⁹ Her husband's ability to break a sworn oath has revealed her and her children's precarious position in the city (50).

As Corti argues, "Of the options open to Medea, neither leaving her sons nor taking them with her will assure their wellbeing in the absence of a father's protection" (*Myth of Medea* 38). Medea is an exile, who can never return to her homeland, and her children will no longer have a safe harbor since they will be a threat to Corinth's ruling family. Medea's children would have had no legal rights in their mother's adopted country of Corinth, according to Moses Hadas; however, he

⁹While dead is dead, there are numerous accounts of children being murdered in particularly heinous ways. Euripides makes the point in *The Trojan Women* that the Greek hero Odysseus convinces the Greek council to "hurl [Andromache's son Astyanax] from the battlements of Troy" in order to keep "the son of a heroic father" [Hector] from reaching adulthood (191). This is just one example of the way that Greeks treat the children of their "enemies."

mistakenly claims, “Jason was in fact securing their future by marrying a Greek princess” (“Medea” 31). In the most likely political scenario, Jason and Medea’s children would be eliminated in order to secure the crown for any progeny that Jason and his Corinthian princess would produce; even Jason could not protect his half “barbarian” sons once they were seen as a threat to Corinth’s ruling power structure. Corti argues, “the difficulty of leaving the children in their father’s care is so obvious that few critics have questioned” Medea’s inability to “leave my children for my enemies to insult” (Corti Myth of Medea 37; Euripides Medea 55).¹⁰ Medea is not speaking of barbed wordplay, but of the physical consequences her children face as her sons. Jason’s assertion to Medea that she could have “stayed on in this land and in this house by submitting quietly to the wishes of your superiors” may be optimistically naïve, but he is correct in that the danger to the children is compounded (or accelerated) by Medea’s inability to “keep [from] reviling the king” (42).

Previous to Jason’s comment, Euripides has the Nurse admit her fear that Medea could “drive a sharp sword into [Jason’s] vitals or even kill both the King and the bridegroom” and Medea does share her intention to commit regicide with the chorus: “I shall make corpses of three of my enemies, father and daughter and my own husband” (34; 41). In other words, if Medea is afraid of what Creon might do, he fears her since she has already threatened to take a defensive action in order to protect

¹⁰In Diane Arnson Svarlien’s translation of Euripides’s Medea, Medea’s fear is more clearly outlined: “I will not leave my children at the mercy of my enemies’ outrage” (Euripides Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus 104). This indicates that once Medea’s plan to murder royalty is carried out, the “laws of vengeance” would be enacted immediately against the children (104).

herself, her honor, and her children. Creon could not allow her or the children to stay in Corinth if he believes she will attempt to harm him or his family. The best scenario is that he exiles them from the city; the worst is he executes Medea and her sons to avoid later reprisals from the children. Either way, the children become part of the danger to the city of Corinth.

Even if Medea had taken a submissive posture, it is doubtful that the children would have stayed safe for long. At the beginning of the tragedy, the Tutor warns the Nurse, "Old loves are weaker than new loves, and that man [Jason] is no friend to this household" (35). This intimates that Jason is the fickle partner in the relationship and cannot be trusted to keep Medea or the children safe now that he has secured his place in Creon's family. This statement gives further credence to Medea's fear that Creon will have the children murdered. If Medea firmly believes she has the approval of the gods, she also insists that her children "must die. And if die they must, *I shall slay them, who gave them birth*" (55). While her resolve is determined by the sudden pronouncement of forced exile, Jason's brazen claim that he married Creon's daughter in order "to bring up the children in a style worthy of my house, and, begetting other children to be brothers to the children born of you" would, more than likely, add to Medea's desire to avenge her reputation and fear for her children since any new progeny of Jason's would be privileged over her sons in Corinth (44). However, it is Jason's blatant insult, "What do *you* want with more children?" followed up by the arrogant statement: "[a]s for me, it will pay me to advance the children I have by means of those I intend to beget," which more than likely gives

Medea the idea for the infanticide (44).¹¹ Jason takes pride in his children as possessions that embody his material worth in the world. Medea realizes that Jason's sons are valuable commodities who serve his ego. To destroy the children would be to destroy his ego and his manhood.

Jason is patronizing and arrogant throughout the tragedy. He is even egotistical enough to assume that his speech could have caused Medea to see "the light of reason" when she asks for his "pardon, and confess[es] that [she] was wrong then. But now [she claims,] I have taken better counsel" (52). Medea hands over the poisoned "dainty robe and a headdress of beaten gold" to bring to Jason's new wife (50) and states, "to save my children from exile, I would give my very life, let alone gold" (53); however, this interaction defines the utter hopelessness of the children's situation in the eyes of the chorus. The women of the chorus understand the irony in Medea's remark since she believes the children cannot be saved from exile or from Creon's murderous reach. Medea's statement is not devious; she *is* giving her life, the life of the sons she brought into the world. She willingly chooses to sacrifice her sons' lives so that they will not experience being "homeless and forsaken," like she does (38). Following a moral logic difficult for most modern critics to consider, this act not only assures retribution of Jason's crime against the gods, but also proves her love for her children, since even the chorus reminds the audience that homelessness

¹¹In Arnson Svarlien's translation, Jason states, "What do *you* need children for?"—an indication of a more direct threat to the children's lives. Of course, he follows that line with "For me though, it's good if I can use my future children to benefit my present ones. Is that bad planning?" (Euripides Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus 83). Euripides's answer is a resounding yes.

“is an intolerable existence, hopeless, piteous, grievous. *Let me die first, die and bring this life to a close.* There is no sorrow that surpasses the loss of country” (46, emphasis added). While the chorus does not doubt the dangerous ferocity of Medea’s love for her children, it does lose hope in any intervention on their behalf after Jason departs with them and Medea’s “gifts.” The women lament, “The children are doomed. Already they are on the road to death” (53). Their comments on exile indicate that the children’s destiny is not only determined by Medea’s fatal view but a more universally negative view of displacement. According to Medea, they have been on that road from the moment that Jason broke his marriage vows with her.

Even at this juncture, the chorus does not waver in its empathy for Medea, the “hapless mother of these children. You will slaughter them to avenge the dishonor of your bed betrayed, criminally betrayed by your husband who now sleeps beside another bride” (54). The chorus pronounce the sentence imposed upon the children by virtue of Jason’s crime and Medea’s role as avenger. The women, rather than tell Jason of the poison his sons are unwittingly carrying to their stepmother, do nothing but mourn the tragic end since, although their “hopes” for the boys have vanished, they believe in the gods’ vengeance more than mankind’s laws (53).

While these notions of the chorus’s friendship and passive complicity, as well as the children’s hopeless situation, open up a different view of the landscape infanticidal Medea inhabits, it must be noted that the infanticide itself may not have been considered extraordinary given the history of the House of Aeolus. According to Lora Holland’s illuminating mythography regarding the House of Aeolus and its

hereditary blood curse, Aeolus “forced his six sons and six daughters to marry one another,” which created the curse (259). Holland argues that an audience who saw Euripides’s tragedy would have had knowledge of the family as well as the nature of the curse, but offers no in-depth analysis of the tragedy. What Holland does is explain the mythography of the House of Aeolus and Creon and Jason’s connection to it—a formidable project in itself.¹² Medea’s most unlawful crimes must be understood in this context, especially given her connection to the House of Aeolus only by marriage, not blood in case the tradition insistently uses the outsider as the agent of mayhem. When Medea leaves the stage to murder her children, a moment of “dramatic power . . . after so long a stay” on the stage, according to Page, the chorus pointedly invoke the memory of Ino, the “only [woman] in the history of the world, [who] laid murderous hands on her children” (Page 167; Euripides *Medea* 60). This is not true. Holland suggests rather that the chorus’s mention of Ino actually triggers a series of “exempla, such as Procne’s murder of Itys, Agave’s frenzied rending of Pentheus’ limbs, or Althaea’s vengeful burning of Meleager’s firebrand” (273).

More important, the chorus’s allusion would strike a chord with any Greek audience member with knowledge of the House of Aeolus, a lineage that includes both Jason and Creon, since “maternal infanticide, though rare in Greek mythology in general, is a recurring motif in this family” (262). In addition to the infanticides committed by his great aunt Ino, Jason’s great grandmother Melanippe attempted

¹²This information and what follows was culled from Lora Holland’s “Πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι: Myth and Plot in Euripides’ *Medea*.” Her mythography is a fruitful discovery that will continue to shed further light on Medea’s lack of malevolence with regards to the murder of her children and Jason’s culpability in that act.

infanticide after giving birth to Poseidon's sons "because she feared her father's wrath" (263). Jason's grandmother Tyro attempted infanticide with her first two sons, who were conceived after her "deception and subsequent rape by Poseidon" (ironically, one of these sons is the Pelias Medea murders in Iolkus). She was successful in her second attempt with two other sons (this time Tyro's rapist is her uncle Sisyphus, not Poseidon) (264). These infanticidal murderesses, like Medea, are all connected to the House of Aeolus through marriage. Furthermore, they murder their children in order to avoid the wrath of the male members of the House, whom the women fear will commit filicide, patricide or fratricide.¹³ In this way, Medea's decision to commit infanticide is not shocking since this type of murder is a common thread in the Aeolus family lineage; what is shocking is Jason's perilous decision to marry Creon's daughter since "Creon and Glauce are descendants of Sisyphus," who, according to Hyginus, raped his brother Salmoneus's daughter Tyro (274). Sisyphus and Salmoneus were brothers, but they were also enemies. Sisyphus was told by an oracle of Apollo that the children of this rape "would be his avengers" and destroy his brother (qtd. in Holland 263-264).

Medea invokes the memory of the House of Aeolus after she meets with Creon. The ruler gives her one day to set plans for her and her sons' exile, but Medea sees this as "the test of courage ... It is not right that the seed of Sisyphus and Aeson should gloat over you, the daughter of a noble sire and descendent of the Sun" (Euripides *Medea* 41). Medea is acknowledging that she has married into a cursed

¹³See Holland 263-265 for further elucidation.

family and, even though she may be a foreigner in Corinth, her bloodline is pure and her family is vastly superior to either Creon or Jason's lineages. Since Jason is also a member of the House of Aeolus, he has doubly cursed himself by marrying into the Sisyphian strain of the ancestral lineage thereby unwittingly unleashing an Erinys (Fury), "a traditional element in the murder of kin" (Holland 269). "Family members, either by blood or marriage" could serve in the Erinys role as an *alastor*, the "relentless persecutor or avenger" (269). Thus, throughout the tragedy, Euripides has been purposefully crafting Medea's words and actions, as well as the chorus's references and support, to deconstruct Medea's position as a typical female victim in order to privilege her role as the avenger of Jason's betrayal, not only for herself, but also, more importantly, for Zeus. The complex web of mythological allusions Euripides carefully constructs demands that Medea be viewed neither as a pathetic victim nor as a maniacal murderer, but rather as a divine avenger, a fury like those of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, who enacts a disturbing justice that verges on vengeance.

There is one other possible reference to the House of Aeolus worth examination. As the cries of the children emanate from within the house, the chorus proclaim:

O Earth, O glorious radiance of the Sun, look and behold the accursed woman.
 Stop her before she lays her bloody, murderous hands on her children. Sprung
 are they from your golden race, O Sun, and it is a fearful thing that the blood
 of a god should be spilt by mortals. Nay, stop her, skyborn light, prevent her.
 Deliver the house from the misery of slaughter, and the curse of the

unforgetting dead. ... Gone, gone for nothing are your maternal pangs. For nothing did you bear those lovely boys ... On the man that spills the blood of kinsmen the curse of heaven descends.¹⁴ Go where he may, it rings ever in his ears, bringing sorrows and tribulations on his house. (Euripides *Medea* 59)

The chorus is deliberately referencing the House of Aeolus through its use of words such as “blood,” “kinsmen,” “curse,” and “house,” overt reminders of the House of Aeolus’s bad blood and the renewal of the curse through both Creon and Jason’s brazen disavowal of Jason’s oath. These words create a sense that Medea is not “kill[ing] her sons to make Jason a lonely, childless man,” as Knox suggests, but to avenge the oath that Jason has broken and teach him the ultimate lesson in humility (315). Furthermore, this language also suggests that the infanticide will perpetuate and avenge the earlier infanticides found within the House of Aeolus. Euripides is driving the narrative to present a larger mythological context of vengeance in which the crimes make perfect sense. It also is a way to indicate that Jason and Medea, even Creon and his daughter, are caught in a familial legacy that is much larger than they can imagine. Medea is not a mortal mother any longer, but has been elevated to the position of an Erinys, the avenger of Jason’s betrayal. In this way, by the time the chorus call on her grandfather the Sun, Medea has already become, literally, an instrument of justice through her acceptance of her role as Zeus’s *alastor* in Jason’s reckoning.

¹⁴In Arnson Svarlien’s translation, the chorus actually states: “remove this bloodstained Erinys; take her away from this house cursed with vengeance” (Euripides *Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus* 111).

While Page argues, “Medea is not a *goddess*, and the point [of the chorus’s ode] is that only gods and goddesses have the right to kill the descendents of gods and goddesses,” he is mistaken that the chorus is referencing Medea’s mortality (169). Medea’s grandfather is Helios, the Sun god, but Page dismisses Medea’s half-mortal incarnation as a “superficial objection” to any reasoning that the children’s divinity in the ode must mean their mother is also divine (169). However, the chorus is not calling Medea a bad mortal, but an “accursed woman” due to Jason’s *mortal* crime of broken oaths (Euripides *Medea* 59). In this way, the chorus is indicting Jason for his ignorance of how he has awakened the gods’ wrath. It is also calling on Helios to help not only his great grandsons, but also his granddaughter, who has been placed in an untenable position as a mother. The women are not asking Helios to stop Medea from committing infanticide per se, but are pleading with Helios to remove this responsibility from her shoulders and allow her and her children to be given some sort of reprieve as the victims of Jason’s mortal crime and the curse of the Aeolus clan. Of course, the chorus know this is an empty gesture since Medea has willingly chosen to take on this role as the gods’ avenger. Medea may be elevated to the status of an Erinyes, but the chorus still empathize with her role as mother due to her courage in choosing to sacrifice her children to carry out the gods’ laws no matter how much she “shall live a life of pain and sorrow” when her work for Zeus is complete (55).

Medea makes it clear that she does not want to murder her children. Her human, maternal side sees what she will do as difficult and unlawful: “Stop, my heart. Do not you commit this crime. Leave them alone, unhappy one, spare the children”

(55). If Medea is a mother, her devotion to the gods' divine law means she must also steel herself to be the righteous agent of justice. Each time the chorus invokes Medea's motherhood as a reason not to murder her children, Euripides uses their dialogue to point out that if Medea were acting solely on the maternal love she has for her children, she would not be able to complete the infanticide. As the chorus suggests, she *is* made of "steel" due to her belief in divine law, and her transformation into an *alastor* means she must put aside her maternal concerns in order to make sure the children do not fall prey to the curse of the House of Aeolus even while they are paradoxically the sacrifice that curse calls forth from the avenging spirit it has set in motion (60). While Creon states, "apart from my children, [my fatherland] is *my* dearest love," Medea's love for her children is equal to that of her devotion to the gods (40). In this way, Medea's role as a mother is not negated by her commitment to follow through with the infanticide, but is placed alongside her willing role as the *alastor*, creating a complicated portrait of a woman wronged. Her railing against Creon and Jason *before* the infanticide is Medea's attempt to make them understand the gods' will and what will occur if they do not accept responsibility for their actions.

If Medea is not a typical victim or even a "normal" woman, she is also not a straightforward tragic heroine. With the addition of the Sisyphean history, complete with Medea as avenging angel, "Jason's paternal culpability" becomes more prominent considering the lengths Medea will go to in order to carry out divine law (Holland 266). Even if Medea is a difficult woman (and by the Nurse's account, she has been nothing but "a perfect partner"), it is Jason, through his marriage into the

Sisyphean strain of the Aeolus family line, who has given Medea no choice, but to join the other women in the House of Aeolus as infanticidal avengers of their men's crimes (Euripides Medea 33).¹⁵

Jason's connection to the House of Aeolus constricts the choices Medea has, but it also makes his remark that "[n]o Greek woman would ever have done such a deed" appear naïve and imprudent in the extreme; it would be an insult to anyone with knowledge of his family lineage (61). As Corti suggests, "[i]t is unlikely that, with Ino's name echoing in their minds, the members of the audience would have missed the irony in Jason's indignant denial that a Greek woman would ever do such a thing as kill her own children" (Myth of Medea 36). However, it is not only the mention of Ino's name, but also her relationship to the Aeolus family lineage, which would leave the chorus, and by extension, the audience, shocked at Jason's arrogance. After all, Jason must know his family history, a lineage where the women fear their male relatives and kill their children almost as quickly as they give birth to them. Jason's supercilious attitude, present throughout the Greek tragedy, as well as his effrontery in marrying Creon's daughter, in spite of the family legacy of infanticide, would add to the reasons that the chorus choose silence over disclosure. If Medea is the wronged party and makes decisions that, at first glance, seem extreme, Jason is in denial about the ways in which he is responsible for her actions and what she becomes. Additionally, it is the chorus's reliance on Zeus's justice, as well as

¹⁵Creon states that he is "afraid you will do my child some irreparable injury," which could also be seen as another harbinger of the reemergence of the family curse (Euripides Medea 39).

historical echoes pointing towards Jason's culpability, which reveal Medea's decision to take on the gods' mantle of divine justice as heroic and to reveal Jason and Creon's decision to ignore family history and Jason's breaking of his sworn oath as foolishly tragic.

The chorus cannot be surprised by, even if they pretend to disagree with Medea's announcement to murder her children any more than Euripides's audience would be outraged by her choices. She may be a wife and mother, but she is also Zeus's avenging angel. Once Creon executes his sentence of exile on Medea and the children, the chorus approve Medea's plans to take divine action: "God has steered you, Medea, into an unmanageable surge of troubles" (Euripides Medea 40). While this could seem like a declaration of the hopelessness of Medea's situation, it also describes "her predicament as a piece of divine mischief" (Corti Myth of Medea 38). The chorus has already stated that Medea has done nothing to cause her situation and intimated that Jason, and by extension Creon, is culpable for causing it through the purposeful disregard of Jason's sworn oath. Medea chooses the role of Zeus's agent and, according to Knox, she "never wavers from her faith that what she does has divine approval" (302).

If Medea not only recognizes the futility of her and her children's position, she also understands the power she wields through the gods' need for retribution. Medea states, "I am a good friend, but a dangerous enemy. For that is the type the world delights to honor" (Euripides Medea 50). According to Knox, this claim is analogous to "the creed by which Homeric and Sophoclean heroes live—and die"

(Knox 300). But if Medea chooses heroic virtue to guide her, she is not simply doing it for the reason Boedeker claims: to “displace Jason from the saga of which he was a hero” (147). Medea’s choice to become an *alastor* is heroic in a self-sacrificing sense given that there is little to warrant that she will be seen as a hero for honoring the gods’ laws. Knox argues, “Like the heroes, [Medea] feels that she has been treated with disrespect” and “[l]ike Achilles in his rage against Hector ... [whose] spirit (*thumos*) would drive him to strip Hector’s flesh from his body and eat it raw,” Medea wants to make certain that Jason will pay for his betrayal of their marriage bed (Knox 298; 315). Knox is missing the point. Achilles was avenging the death of Patrocles at Hector’s hands. Medea, on the contrary, is carrying out a vengeful plot for the gods. It is Jason who has chosen to disrespect divine law over his desire to be a legitimate ruler and Medea is placed in the position of righting his wrongs. Medea’s actions are in some ways less problematic than a hero such as Achilles’s because the end result is the total loss of everything she holds dear. Knox suggests, “Achilles relents. Medea does not” (315). Perhaps Achilles lets go of his anger and gives into grief because he has avenged his friend’s murder. For Medea, there will be no such catharsis. Boedeker suggests that Medea’s actions echo the *Orestia* trilogy and are Euripides’s purposeful design to “add to the grotesque stature of his Medea by evoking the series of kin murders” (138). Even if that is true, when Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigeneia, he is doing so to reap earthly rewards (temporary though they may be); Medea subverts her role as mother to sacrifice her sons in order to do the work of the gods, but there are no earthly rewards. Ironically, Agamemnon does not

become the standard-bearer for terrible fathers in the way in which Medea is seen as the most heinous mother figure, but her act is more selfless than either Agamemnon's or Achilles's.

Not surprisingly, neither Jason nor Creon can perceive in Medea a passionate heroic spirit (*thumos*); to Creon she is nothing more than a "hot-tempered woman" "possessed of evil knowledge" who, "like the hot-tempered man, is easier to guard against than the cunning and silent" (Euripides *Medea* 39). Jason too believes that her discourse is nothing more than the overemotional rantings of a woman and focuses on her "forward tongue" and "insolence to royalty" (42). These men mistake her *thumos* for an attack of "*até*, a violent delusion" and it is their inability to recognize heroic virtue in a female figure that causes their destruction (Toohey 63). By creating in Medea a female character with the attributes of heroic virtue, Euripides creates a female character in Medea who reveals the shoddiness of man-made law in the face of the gods' retribution.

Moreover, when Jason first confronts Medea after Creon has pronounced his sentence of exile, the Argonaut places responsibility for Medea's dilemma not only on a sense of *atê*, but also on her womanly vanity. "You women have actually come to believe that, lucky in love, you are lucky in all things, but let some mischance befall that love, and you will think the best of all possible worlds a most loathsome place" (Euripides *Medea* 44-45). This statement is narcissistic on Jason's part. Medea has given up her entire world to be with him. For Jason, she has betrayed her father and her country, she has murdered her brother and Pelias, and she lives as an exile.

These are not small “mischances” and certainly do not sound as though Medea was, in fact, lucky in love. Indeed, as Corti asserts, “The essential source of discord in this play is that Jason and Creon expect Medea to act like a slave while she insists, uncooperatively, on thinking herself as one of the masters” (Myth of Medea 39). But Medea does not see herself as their master; she sees herself as a mother and an instrument of the gods. It is remarkable that a character such as Medea could exhibit masculine, heroic virtue in service to the gods and be canonized as an evil witch rather than an upholder of divine justice.

Soon after Medea steps into the full power of her avenger position, the chorus declare:

[I]n this world those who have had no experience of paternity are happier than the fathers of children. Without children a man does not know whether they are a blessing or a curse, and so he does not miss a joy he has never had and he escapes a multitude of sorrows. (Euripides Medea 56)

Hadas’s translation is problematic for a number of reasons. Before this ode, Medea states, “My misery overwhelms me. O I *do* realize how terrible is the crime I am about” (50). She wrestles with her role of mother and her god-appointed position as avenger. She has no choice but to follow divine law, but that does not mean she does not feel the power and pain of what she is about to do. The women of the chorus invoke the Muse to show that Medea and they “have grappled with subtle subjects and sounded depths of argument deeper than woman may plumb” (50). These then are womanly concerns that Medea and the chorus discuss, but Hadas slips the

translation into a discourse on paternity, which lessens the impact that this ode is about the bond between a mother and her children. The chorus is speaking of childbirth and making the point that women who do not give birth do not know this maternal, eternal connection and cannot suffer the loss of it. However, Hadas chooses to translate this text into a masculine gender and the impact of the choral ode is lost.

In Diane Arnson Svarlien's translation, the chorus state, "the childless among us, the ones who have never experienced parenthood, have greater good fortune than those who have children. ... Their lack of experience saves them from heartache" (Euripides Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus 105). This translation clearly keeps the gender neutral and allows the chorus to claim maternal connection as a deep and everlasting bond that is as painful as it is wonderful.

Page's commentary offers an odd insight into Euripides's intention:

τυγχάνειν παίδων is of course not a normal phrase for 'to have (get) children', but is not unnatural in this context, where the sense is '*happening* to have no children', with the implication perhaps that they *wanted* them: the idea is 'not having *attained* them' rather than not having *got* them. (152)

To "have" a child seems like the action of a woman giving birth rather than a father helping to conceive or raising a child. Page's use of the word "got" at the end of his commentary further elucidates this point. Women do not "get" children, they have them. Men do not "have" children, they "get" them. While this seems like a minor point, it may explain Euripides's strange diction and could serve to make clear that the chorus do understand and empathize with Medea's pain as she transforms from a

mother figure who loves her sons more than her own life to the avenger who must slay them in order to appease the gods. The women in this ode align with Medea's position. Those who have the ability to give birth feel an uncommon depth as to the loss of that child.

Medea understands too well the danger in which the children have been placed due to their father's ignorance and arrogance. She has no choice, no matter how painful, but to right the wrongs of her husband. If she does not, the children and she will suffer at the gods' hands and this suffering is what modern critics are arguing she should submit to in keeping with social convention, but it is not in keeping with Euripides's complex representation of her position. Medea never breaks her promise to Jason. Killing the children is Medea's attempt to keep them from being victims of Jason's broken oath.

Medea's ascent in Helios's chariot is not a simple *deus ex machina*, but the divine reward for her ability to transcend her motherhood and give everything in service to the gods. She becomes "something more than human," but she is not a god or a sorceress (Knox 304). She is mother and a woman willing to sacrifice everything in order to make sure the spirits of her sons are not tainted through a "cursed" family heritage or a father's broken oaths. Her declaration at the beginning of the tragedy, "They say we have a safe life at home, whereas men must go to war. Nonsense! I had rather fight three battles than bear one child," is not the voice of a woman railing against the pains of childbirth, but of one stating the difference between killing one's enemies in battle and being responsible for the lives of one's children (Euripides

Medea 38). Medea does not waver in her sense of responsibility to the children, as well as her allegiance to divine law. She becomes something more than a hero since the gods' work is also to love her children in a hard way.

Earlier in the tragedy, the chorus state, "The voice of time will change, and our glory will ring down the ages. Womankind will be honored. No longer will ill-sounding report attach to our sex" (41). Medea's heroic virtue, while not a mother's or a man's virtue, enables the women of Greece to witness the chaos of man-made crime righted and the men of Greece to recognize that there are consequences for their broken promises. Medea is not witch or insane, but an uncommonly rare human being willing to sacrifice everything in service to a higher purpose.

III

Demonic Impulse! What Demonic Impulse?
Dignity and Innocence in Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode and
Apollonios Rhodios's The Argonautika

No way can my words fall to earth unfulfilled...

—Medea in Apollonios Rhodios's The Argonautika (4.387-388)

Thirty years before Euripides's Medea was performed at Athen's Dionysiac Festival, Pindar wrote the fourth Pythian ode in 462 B.C.E. for Arkesilas IV of Cyrene, the winner of a chariot race. Through the lens of the mythic quest for the Golden Fleece, Pindar's victory ode becomes a history lesson about Arkesilas's bloodline. The Argonaut Euphamos, Arkesilas's ancestor, receives "a magic piece of earth" from Poseidon as the Argonauts are returning to Iolkus (Pindar line 37). Pindar has Medea prophesy that the god's "token of friendship" will be the means for Euphamos's family to "colonize the grainlands of Libya," where they will prosperously rule for many years (22; 6).¹⁶ Medea's small, but crucial role within the ode helps to strengthen Arkesilas's claim as ruler in Libya—an hereditary rule that was, according to Bruce Karl Braswell, consistently "threatened by the local aristocracy since at least the reign of Arkesilas III" and "the real reason why the ode was composed" (1; 6).

Central to Pindar's project is Medea's appearance as both "Aietés' mantic daughter, lady of Kolchis" and an individual of divine ancestry (Pindar 10). These

¹⁶Bruce Karl Braswell explains that Arkesilas's rule was "an hereditary monarchy ... with real political power," but "in an economically advanced Greek state of the second quarter of the fifth century [B.C.E., this] was obviously an anachronism" (1).

character traits emblemize her role as a respected female figure and give credibility to her disclosure of Arkesilas's connection to the Argonauts. Contrary to Dolores O'Higgins' assertion that Medea's prophecy is nothing more than the "potentially sinister metamorphosis ... [of an] other Circe," Pindar chooses to portray Medea as a god-like being who deserves to be listened to and respected, not feared (115).

Arkesilas's chariot victory is juxtaposed against the pre-eminence of his ancestral heritage—a lineage that Medea reveals to the Argonauts aboard the *Argo*. Medea's "immortal lips" prophesy the significance of Euphamos's acceptance of "the token of friendship" from Poseidon, establishing that Arkesilas is as worthy and heroic as any of the Argonauts, not only for his ability to win a chariot race, but also as the most recent example of the Euphamos bloodline (Pindar 11; 22). Even though her prophecy is filled with optimism for Euphamos's ancestral lineage, she chides "the half-god crew of Jason the spearman" for their ignorance in not taking seriously the sacred trust of Poseidon's gift (12). In the ode, Medea must not only forecast the illustrious family lineage of Euphamos, but also remind the Argonauts of their place as standard-bearers of heroic virtue. She points out that she has cautioned the Argonauts, numerous times, to watch over the sacred "clod" of earth, "[b]ut their hearts forgot," causing Poseidon's gift to be "washed from the deck" (34; 41; 38). Medea reprimands the Argonauts for behaving in an unheroic manner, a lapse in virtue that will cause Euphamos's bloodline, for generations to come, to be without a homeland.

After Medea reveals all she knows regarding the “clod” of earth and Euphamos’s lineage, the Argonauts “were struck to motionless / silence” (34; 57-58). Medea’s pronouncement reveals the quandary in which these Argonauts are caught. They may be the best that Greece has to offer, but if they do not appreciate and care for the gifts of the gods, they could be punished or, more important, their lineages could suffer for their unheroic carelessness. Medea’s prophecy serves to warn them that their cavalier conduct has consequences; the Argonauts are rightfully cowed by this knowledge.

O’Higgins suggests that Pindar’s use of “ the verb $\pi\tau\eta\sigma\omega$ ” to express the Argonauts’s silence after Medea’s prophecy “applies frequently to animals and birds cowering in fright” and that this is an allusion to the Argonauts’ terror of Medea’s commanding presence on the *Argo* and what she might do to them (115). However, Medea has pointed out, quite succinctly, that these men have unwittingly snubbed Poseidon’s attempt to assist Euphamos in founding a city in spite of the prophetess’s warning “to guard [the clod of earth] well”; this would be enough to make anyone nervous—much less a group of heroes traveling by ship (Pindar 41). The overwhelming dread experienced by the Argonauts is more likely aimed at Medea’s acknowledgment of their dismissal of Poseidon’s powerful “token of friendship,” not any imminent threat from the Colchian princess (22). After all, the Argonauts have to travel by a sea route and this god controls the waterways. The gods’ anger wreaks havoc and brings death. If Poseidon decides to exact revenge, no one could help them.

Medea's prophecy is an essential component that reveals the momentary lapse in heroic judgment of the Argonauts and confirms the bloodline of Arkesilas; however, her ability to provide Jason with "oil medicating" salves to protect him from her father's fire-breathing oxen is given less weight than Jason's heroic strength (221).¹⁷ Jason's heroism, not Medea's "magic," is the most important factor in obtaining the Golden Fleece. Although Medea's potion keeps the fire-breathing oxen from causing Jason's body to burn up, it is the "main strength of his body," which allows him to "yoke [the oxen], single-handed" and plow the field (235; 226). Even Medea's father, "in pained and speechless amazement, gasped, admiring that act of strength" (237-238). This Jason has god-like strength and tenacity and has no need of Medea's help in retrieving the Golden Fleece since "by guile he slew the green-eyed serpent," its protector, and "stole away Medea" and the fleece (249; 250).

While Pindar does claim that Medea will be the "bane of Pelias," Jason declares that Pelias "unrighteously and in persuasion of his pale heart / has stripped the power by force from my fathers, the kings of old" (251; 109-110). Pelias is an untrustworthy figure with no respect for hereditary blood rule. He is portrayed as a disreputable male and one who could easily, even if the Argonauts return successfully with the Golden Fleece, renege on his "strong oath" to "Zeus / our mutual ancestor"

¹⁷In Apollonios's epic, Jason needs "Aiëtes' drug-wise daughter" to give him "drugs to enhance [his] strength." (*The Argonautika* 3.27; 3.984). *The Argonautika*'s Jason admits to Medea that he could "never come out on top in this grievous contest" without her assistance (3.989). She tells him he must "rub [the potion] all over [his] body like oil" and "spear and shield are sprinkled, and sword too" in order to elevate his strength to yoke the oxen and plow the field (3.1046-1047). This is a distinctly different interpretation from Pindar's heroic Jason.

to “yield [to Jason] the whole kingship” (167; 166-167; 166). In the same way that Jason must deal with the underhanded Pelias for control of Iolkus, Arkesilas must fight off those who would deny his hereditary right to rule. In this context, Medea is not “a deadly weapon, nor even the embodiment of Pelias’ death” (O’Higgins 123); Pelias’s arrogance and disrespect of hereditary rule is what ultimately destroys him (Pindar 166-167).

It is doubtful that Pindar would deemphasize his own point in attempting to embellish Arkesilas’s hereditary connections to the *Argo* by crafting Medea to be a menacing sorceress. No one, including the audience for whom the ode is meant, could trust any of the prophetess’s declarations if Pindar made her a threatening figure whose *modus operandi* was that of a wicked, duplicitous woman. Pindar could have purposefully chosen to ignore certain of Medea’s less attractive characteristics, but if Medea’s “Circe”-like attributes were such an integral feature of the Medea tradition, it would be more prudent to choose another female figure within the Argive tradition—Hera or Aphrodite, for example—to bolster Arkesilas’s claims of hereditary rule. In Pindar’s ode, Medea’s position as divine prophetess and maiden from Colchis serves both the Argonauts and Arkesilas.

It is worth noting that while Lattimore translates the Greek phrase “ζείνας” to read “a strange witchmaiden,” Braswell translates the same phrase as “his hospitable friend skilled in all kinds of remedies” (Pindar 253; Braswell 50).¹⁸ Braswell offers

¹⁸While Braswell deals with Lattimore’s use of the word “strange,” he does not examine why Lattimore chooses the word “witchmaiden,” a concept the Greeks

an illuminating commentary on this phrase, which further clarifies Medea's position within Pindar's ode:

ζείνας: not "strange" (Lattimore, Bowra), either in the sense "foreign" (cf. Puech: "l'étrangère") or "unusual" (a meaning not in fact found in Pindar and common only later, but ... "*hospitae*" (Boeckh). Medea may have been unusual in the eyes of the Greeks and also a stranger from their point of view (though it would be odd to call her the latter in Colchis); nevertheless, all of that is unimportant in comparison to her hospitable reception of [J]ason. (321)

This suggests that Pindar does not see Medea as an evil woman who wants to cause harm to Jason or the Argonauts, but a divine figure wishing to be helpful in all matters regarding the Argonauts' quest. Pindar not only crafts Medea to assist Jason in obtaining the Golden Fleece, but also uses her to elevate Arkesilas's position by establishing his connection to a long line of heroes dating back to the *Argo*. Medea's prophecy would be considered suspect if the central conceit of the Medea tradition was one in which she was portrayed as a duplicitous, manipulative wicked creature, but, as Braswell's commentary makes clear, Pindar does not portray her in this manner. She is hospitable and welcoming to Jason and his men. Pindar makes sure to foreground her in this way by treating her with the knowledge that she is an honored princess and a respected prophetess. The poet's careful crafting of the Argive myth allows Arkesilas to lay claim to a glorious past through a gracious woman's prophecy. The ode is meant to strengthen Arkesilas's rule; Medea's prophetic utterance is the

would not have recognized, most especially in the context of an individual's hospitality.

primary stylistic weapon in Pindar's arsenal that celebrates and defends the Libyan ruler.

While Pindar purposefully crafts Medea as a divine prophetess whose presence bolsters both Arkesilas's bloodline and his heroic virtue, Apollonios Rhodios surrounds Medea with gods and mortals who manipulate and trick her at every turn. In The Argonautika, written approximately 190 years after Pindar's ode, Medea remains of divine ancestry and a priestess to Hecate, but her role as Jason's helper-maiden is seen through the distorted lens of Hera's need to exact revenge for Pelias's "paying no heed to Pelasgian Hera" (Apollonios The Argonautika 1.14).

The Argonauts' quest is a two-pronged event—the journey for the Golden Fleece is merely the precursor to fulfill Hera's vengeful plot to punish Pelias for not paying the goddess proper tribute. Although Jason and the Argonauts' exploits are the main focus of the epic, the retrieval of the Golden Fleece is secondary to Hera's need for Medea to serve as the goddess's means of retribution. While Hera chooses Medea to avenge Pelias's disrespect, the goddess admires Jason's "righteousness" for carrying "her through the rapids" when she appeared to him in the guise of an old woman (3.68; 3.73). Hera believes Jason is a trustworthy figure and declares to both Athena and Aphrodite that she "will protect [Jason], with all my limbs' innate strength, so that Pelias, who in his arrogance left me unhonored with sacrifice, may not mock me by escaping his evil fate" (3.63-66). This suggests that Jason's continued success throughout the epic is due in part to the goddess's wish to have Medea in Iolkus. Although Apollonios does not narrate it, it is Medea's future role in

Pelias's death that drives his epic and this action causes Medea to be seen in a negative light in spite of the innocence and vulnerability with which she acts throughout The Argonautika.

Medea's confusion and agitation at the choices she is forced to make causes D.C. Feeney to assert, "It is, naturally, quite impossible for any reader with a memory of Euripides' Medea to be heedless of the fact that Medea's murder of Pelias led directly to the couple's move to Corinth, and to the ensuing murder of their children" (62-63). While Hera's revenge is privileged, there is no mention of infanticide either covertly or overtly in Apollonios's epic; however, Richard L. Hunter also insists, "The action of the Euripides' tragedy hangs over the epic like a cloud about to burst, so that the later poem becomes almost an explanatory commentary on the terrible events of the drama" (123). James Clauss emphasizes Jason's position since Medea "is forced to sail with the Argonauts out of fear, and, try as he may, both in Kolchis and on the way back to Greece, Jason cannot shake the helper-maiden from Hell" ("Conquest" 175). In spite of Apollonios's continual references only to Hera's revenge exacted on Pelias for which Medea will be responsible, Hunter, it would seem, cannot "shake" the memory of infanticide in Euripides's tragedy from any reading of The Argonautika. Clauss acknowledges Medea's helplessness in one breath, while his terminology in the next would indicate that Medea not only finds herself in a double bind on the *Argo*, but also within the scholarship that analyzes The Argonautika.

Apollonios's Medea is referred to as a "maiden" (The Argonautika 3.616); a "girl" (3.477; 3.724; 3.1139); a "young lady" (3.975); a "silly girl" (3.1120). She also has a "maiden heart" (3.287); a "virginal modesty" (3.682); and a "virgin heart" (3.760). When Jason meets with her in Hecate's temple, he even speaks to her with "comforting flattery" since he realizes "she'd been made the victim of some heaven-sent twist to the mind" (3.974; 3.973-974). However, Feeney suggests, "Apollonios [is] point[ing] up the future nightmares" in their first meeting since afterwards Jason promises, "Our bed in the bridal chamber shall be tended by you, and no other barrier shall keep us from our love till the death decreed by fate enfolds us about" (Feeney 63; Apollonios The Argonautika 3.1128-1130). Apollonios states, Medea's "heart within her melted, yet shuddered to contemplate such deeds of destruction" (3.1131-1132) and Feeney assumes Medea is sensing the crimes of Euripides's Medea. But her deeds of destruction have to do with her betrayal of her father and her homeland not only by assisting the Argonaut, but also by agreeing to marry Jason.¹⁹ This seems enough to make her shudder with fear and there is no need to imagine an allusion to the actions of the Euripidean tragedy even if Medea is usurping her father's authoritative discourse for Hera's.

Green, in a slyly suggestive irony, avoids the entire debate by suggesting, "The biggest single influence on The Argonautika is commonly said to be Euripides' Medeia of 431 ... no one could guess this from the iconographic evidence, which

¹⁹It is interesting that her handmaids are worried that "time was running short for the girl to hurry back home" (Apollonios The Argonautika 3.1138-1139). This seems like an allusion to the fact that she is, after all, a very young girl, who is still under the care of her parents.

largely ignores Medeia as *Kindermorderin* till the Roman period” (29). The implication is clear—Euripides’s Medea, while a canonical standard of Western literature, did not necessarily solidify Medea’s place as an infanticidal murderess during the epoch it first appeared. It also suggests that the infanticide was a more recent addition to the Medea tradition and neither the artwork nor Apollonios’s epic overtly references it. If Apollonios wanted Medea to be an infanticidal murderess in The Argonautika, he could have easily made her one; however, as Green’s research indicates, the epic poet would have needed to do more than place obscure references and create opaque metaphors to a mythological datum itself not familiar at the time he was writing in order to accomplish that task. Apollonios’s Medea is a carefully crafted portrayal of a vulnerable innocent manipulated by outside forces, not an individual with a depravity lurking beneath the surface. If Apollonios intended this negative reading of his epic’s Medea, he would have pointed his audience towards that direction in an obvious, transparent manner or at least have used an approach familiar to them.

The purposeful crafting of Medea’s innocence and chaste status, as well as Jason’s recognition of her situation and Hera’s desire to use her as a tool of vengeance against Pelias, indicates that Apollonios is not making obscure references to Euripides’s tragedy in his epic, but is contextualizing why Medea is so easily manipulated and why Jason must leave—at all costs—with Medea. Apollonios never mentions the Euripidean Medea’s infanticide in The Argonautika, but he does privilege both Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece *and* Hera’s desire to avenge Pelias.

Without Hera's need for revenge and continual interference, it is doubtful that Apollonios's Medea (or Hera) would assist Jason in obtaining the Golden Fleece.

In spite of Medea's youth and innocence, Hera needs an inordinate amount of magic and manipulation to break the girl's will and acquire the maiden's help for Jason. Hera asks Aphrodite to send her son Eros to "shoot Aiëtes' virgin daughter full of desire for Jason" (Apollonios The Argonautika 3.143-144). This shaft is not a transmitter of amorous obsession for passion's sake alone, but "the tool of Hera" (Feeney 82). In order to convince Eros to do Hera's bidding, Aphrodite promises to obtain "one of Zeus's most beautiful playthings... a well-rounded ball ... [whose] rings have been fashioned of gold" (Apollonios The Argonautika 3.132-137). Hunter suggests, "the fact that Medea's bitter tragedy is to be for Eros merely a matter of a new toy emphasizes the gulf which separates mortals from the divine" (qtd. in Green 257-258). This also emphasizes Medea's helplessness—her actions are predicated by and in service to Hera's revenge, not an uncommon passion that has only been waiting for some god to prick open. Eros's poisonous shaft ensures that Medea will not be able to resist aiding Jason in obtaining the Golden Fleece, but it will also assure Hera that Medea will need to flee Colchis and leave on the *Argo*—putting her plan to avenge Pelias in place.

It is this manipulation by Hera through Eros that leaves Medea with "sharp pangs of distress" once she arrives on the *Argo*—she does not know that Hera wants her to be an avenging angel, but she is aware of her exilic status and the betrayal of her father and homeland she has perpetrated (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.351).

However, Medea is nothing more than a plaything for Hera in the way that Zeus's golden orb is a toy for Eros. Apollonios crafts her confusion not only about what to do but also about whom to trust in a way that suggests she cannot think her way out of her predicament; Hera is the last word and will have her way.

Green suggests that the "emphasis in The Argonautika on human decision-making is undercut by the lack of knowledge on which such decisions are based," leaving Medea at "the arbitrary and unpredictable machinations of [Hera]" (39). This notion of unpredictability casts Medea as the innocent pawn of gods and mortals. Eros hits his target and leaves, "cackling with laughter," revealing just how amoral the gods' actions can be (Apollonios The Argonautika 3.286). The shaft "strick[es] her heart speechless" and her "mind's restless anguish now flushed her soft cheeks (3.284; 3.297-298).²⁰ Medea struggles and does not understand why she becomes "so grief-stricken" over Jason and the impossible tasks her father has set out for the Argonaut (3.464). She prays that he will "cheat death, get back home" and that he will "court some Achaian girl, far off among his own people, leave me to virginity and my parents' house" (3.468; 3.639-640). Medea senses the danger she is in and even dreams that "some great evil may be brought here" due to the Argonauts' arrival, but she has no idea what has overcome her (3.637).

²⁰The split between Medea's mind and heart is more clearly shown by Richard Hunter's prose translation. Once Eros's arrow lands, Medea's "spirit was seized by speechless stupor" and "the wearying pain scattered all prudent thoughts from her chest" (Apollonios Jason and the Golden Fleece 72). Additionally, "the control of her mind" (73) vanishes as soon as her passion becomes aroused in this invasive manner.

In the myriad turns her mind takes after Eros poisons her, Medea decides to “make trial of my sister, see if she asks me for aid in the contest, through grief for her own sons: *that* would quench the sharp agony in my heart,” but “[e]ach time she stepped out [of her chambers], shame checked her, sent her back; yet bold desire spurred her onward, though barred by shame” (3.642-644; 3.652-653). It is not until her sister Chalkiope, after sitting “with her sons, figuring out just how to win her sister over,” enters Medea’s chamber to plead with her sister “to contrive some trick or ruse [for Jason] that would surmount the ordeal for the sake of my sons” that the maiden’s destiny seems fated and Hera’s manipulations have succeeded (3.367-368; 3.720-721).

Chalkiope’s son Argos asks his mother to persuade Medea to assist Jason. Chalkiope “had thought of this earlier, but fear choked back her spirit lest perhaps her efforts to win her proved vain and out of season, with Medea scared of her father’s murderous wrath” (3.613-614). Clauss insists Medea is “utterly shameless: she pretends that her dream involved harm coming to her sister’s children ... so she can seem to give Jason the help he needs out of sororal piety,” while Hunter observes that Medea’s obsessive longing for Jason causes her to deceive both herself and Chalkiope, making her “as confused as she is hypocritical” (Clauss “Conquest” 162; qtd. in Green 270). However, Chalkiope’s attempt to manipulate Medea is one of the primary reasons why Medea fails to fight the poison from Eros’s arrow. Medea has no reason not to trust Chalkiope, but, like Hera, Chalkiope has her own agenda that has nothing to do with Medea’s well-being. When Chalkiope enters Medea’s room,

she greets Medea with her fear that her sister has “heard some deadly threat against me and my sons from our father” (Apollonios The Argonautika 3.677-678). Hunter and Clauss disregard Chalkiope’s fear for her sons, the girls’ fear of their father’s rage, and Chalkiope’s persuasive pleading on her sons’ behalf.

While Medea has already expressed worry about both Jason *and* her nephews, she becomes caught up in her sister’s fear for her sons. Medea is drawn to make a binding oath that promises her assistance to Jason in order to keep her nephews safe: “May the dawn never again rise shining into my eyes, may you see me living no longer, if I set greater store on anything than your life or the lives of your sons, who have been as brothers to me” (3.728-731). The effect of this oath is that Medea is forced to betray her father—a man who, after Jason succeeds in yoking the oxen and plowing the field with Medea’s help, “spent the whole night planning sheer disaster for the heroes” (4.7). Medea is everyone’s pawn; she contends with Hera’s efforts to have her act in the goddess’s and Jason’s best interests, her sister’s pleading for her sons’ life, and her sense of loyalty to and fear of her father, a ruler who believes that the Argonauts are there for “my crown and my kingdom” and “was certain that none of [Jason’s success] had been done without his daughters’ knowledge” (3.376; 4.9-10). It is remarkable that Medea is able to maintain any dignity considering the way in which she is manipulated and managed at every turn.

While Medea’s family and Jason’s machinations complicate Medea’s plight, other females’ situations in Books 1 and 2 of The Argonautika reflect the notion that Medea’s decision to assist Jason has less to do with mortal concerns and more to do

with the gods' will. The Amazons, the most brazenly violent women in the epic, are "neither civil nor law-abiding by nature ... [and] cared for nothing but war and grievous outrage, being by race the offspring of Ares and the nymph Harmonia, who bore Ares these war-hungry daughters" (2.987-991). These women are as dangerous and fierce as any males—they are their father's daughters—"scattered across the countryside," awaiting opportunities to engage in battle with whatever enemy appears upon their shoreline (2.996-997). Apollonios suggests that the Argonauts "might have lingered to mix it up with the Amazons—no bloodless battle there ... had Zeus not given them back their strong nor'-wester" (2.985-993). Like the Argonauts, the Amazons show no discrimination as to whom they fight; they only want to engage in battle. Destruction is their god-given right and they embrace their fate with gusto.

There are overtly sympathetic portrayals of women in Apollonios's text, but these females act in ways that seem to concretize Greek society's idea of correct feminine conduct. The Pelasgian female inhabitants, including Jason's mother, lament the impossible journey on which Jason and the Argonauts are about to embark. Jason's mother Alcimedede's "arms clasped close around him ... wept still more sorely" (1.269) and she says, "like a slave in the empty palace, [I will be] wasting unhappily away with longing for you" (1.285-286). This statement foreshadows the ways in which Medea is tormented by *her* longing after Eros shoots her with his arrow when she first sees Jason.

There is another episode where a young woman commits suicide after Jason kills her husband in battle. When the *Argo* stops for a few days in the land of the

Doliónes, the Argonauts are treated with “hospitality” since the ruler Cyzicus “learnt from an oracle that when a band of god-born heroes arrived, he must straightway welcome them in friendship and take no thought for war” (1.962; 1.969-971). “[C]asting all fear from his heart” since he has met the Argonauts with amity and feels he has safely avoided the oracle’s predication, Cyzicus joins in the feast that he has laid out for his guests and becomes fast friends with Jason (1.979; 1.970). After the *Argo* departs, the ship is caught in “a contrary hurricane” and the Argonauts do not realize they have returned to Cyzicus’s land “in the dead of night” (1.1016, 1019). The Doliónes believe that the “fierce Makrians, had landed” and “sallied forth to combat” with not the Makrians, but the “god-born” Argonauts (1.1024; 1.1025; 1.970). Cyzicus makes the fatal error of taking to the battlefield before discovering whom he is fighting. Of course, Cyzicus’s new friend Jason “ran him straight through the breast, and the bone shattered under the spearpoint, and he on the sand, in spasms, accomplished his destiny” (1.1033-1035). Until the first light of day, Jason has no idea that he has killed Cyzicus, but due to the storm, he becomes the agency by which Cyzicus is taught that he cannot “overrid[e] his fate” (1.1030). At “dawn [when] both sides acknowledged their deadly, incurable error,” Cyzicus’s young bride Kleité “compounded bad with worse by knotting a noose around her neck” (1.1053-1054; 1.1064-1065). Kleite’s suicide reads like a precursor to Virgil’s interpretation of Dido, a woman who chooses death once her beloved Aeneas abandons her for his fated destiny; however, Apollonios mentions that Kleité “still remained innocent of

childbirth,” indicating that she is as young and confused, as Medea is in Colchis (1.974-975).

Kleit ’s suicide is predicated upon her grief for her husband’s death and the realization that her husband’s attempt to avoid his fate has been in vain. Hera works to nudge Medea out of Colchis from the beginning of the epic—this is Medea’s fated destiny, yet Clauss suggests that Medea is weak and vain since she cannot “even muster the courage to kill herself, as Phaedra managed to do” (“Conquest” 164). If Medea followed Clauss’s advice, she would “have died, overriding her destiny with a dose of her own drugs, and voided Hera’s plans” (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.20-21). Apollonios has already shown what occurs when an individual attempts to avoid his fate—Cyzicus is given a bloody send-off and Jason is the innocent instrument—to prove that the gods’ authority will always preside. In Medea’s case, Hera is the one that causes her “to flee, in her confusion, with the sons of Phrixos”; Medea has no idea what is happening to her even as she acts in accordance with Hera’s desire (4.20-23). She is not running from her fate, but to it.

This is the difference between Phaedra and Medea or Kleit  and Medea: Phaedra’s suicide acts as the agency of destruction for Hippolytus and Kleit ’s husband believed he could avoid his destiny, but is punished for his rash action in assuming that it was the Makrians who were planning a nighttime attack and did not follow the oracle’s instructions to welcome *all* newcomers when they arrived at his shore. In Euripides’s Hippolytus, Aphrodite’s plans for Phaedra have to do with punishing Hippolytus for not paying respects to her. Phaedra’s attraction to

Hippolytus is turned against her stepson through her suicide—she leaves a note for her husband Theseus that indicates, “Hippolytus has laid violent hands on [her]” (Euripides *Hippolytus* 86). Phaedra is the agency by which Theseus destroys his own son—neither Phaedra nor Theseus realize they are instruments of Aphrodite’s revenge in the same way that Jason has no idea he is the instrument of the gods in either the murder of Cyzicus or his quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Jason is in Colchis not to obtain the Fleece, but to bring Medea, whose skills as Hecate’s priestess are prized by Hera—to Iolkus. Even if Medea does not fully believe Jason will follow through on his promise to marry her, Hera could not allow her to commit suicide until the goddess’s revenge is complete. If Medea’s “agony of grief” and her desire to self-destruct seem similar to Phaedra’s, the responsibility for it must be placed on Hera, who has designed her revenge on Pelias to include Medea’s skills (Apollonios *The Argonautika* 4.19). Medea’s responsibilities are not finished at the end of *The Argonautika*, but only beginning. Hera has Medea become Jason’s helper-maiden in order that he will assist her in getting to Iolkus; any claims that Medea is weak-willed because she is not “courageous” enough to commit suicide or cannot avoid her divinely manipulated destiny in some other way ignore the hegemony of the gods in this epic and the analogous oft-cited mythology of Phaedra and Hippolytus.

The Amazons do not attempt to deny their heritage and embrace their destiny as Ares’s daughters through their brazen joy in destruction, Kleité commits suicide after her husband’s fated death at a “god-born” hero’s hands, and the women of Lemnos appear to be as lethal as the Amazons since they “pitilessly, at one stroke”

murder the entire male population (1.970; 1.610). However, their situation is more complicated than either the Amazons' or Kleité's for a number of reasons. The Lemnian women murder their husbands who "had grown disgusted with the wives they married ... conceiving instead a savage passion for the girl captives they rounded up while raiding the Thracian mainland" (1.612-614). These wives are "not content with the slaughter of husbands and captives for bedding together, [but also] slew every male" (1.617-618). While the women's anger towards their shamelessly adulterous husbands might be justified, their violent response seems out of proportion since the women murder everyone, including their sons, in order "to escape retribution ... for this terrible mass murder" (1.618-619).

These women's actions seem insane, which is a good indication that they are being influenced by some god and indeed, their killing rampage is predicated upon Aphrodite's "terrible anger [, which] pursued the wives for too long neglecting her worship" (1.615-616). Green reports a tradition regarding the Lemnians where Aphrodite punishes the women for not making ritual offerings to the goddess by bestowing "unpleasant body odors" upon them, which drives the Lemnian men into the arms of their female Thracian captives (213). This would suggest that Aphrodite is punishing the women in her "usual spiteful and narcissistic [manner] when crossed or neglected" (214). Besides the fact that Apollonios does not make any mention of the women having any peculiar odor, Green's commentary does not explain why Aphrodite allows the women to slaughter the males of the city and, afterwards contentedly "herd cattle, put on bronze armor, plough the fields for wheat"

(Apollonios The Argonautika 1.627-628). If Aphrodite were punishing the *men* for not making ritual sacrifices to the goddess by unleashing their “jealous past satiation” wives on the entire city, the Lemnian women’s vengeance would make more sense (1.616).

However, Green asserts that men, including the Lemnian men, have no reason to honor Aphrodite and questions Askelpiades of Tragilos’s claim that it *is* “the Lemnian *men* who default on their sacrifices to Aphrodite” and suggests that scholars such as Vian and Clauss are suffering from “indiscriminate feminist zeal” in believing that the Lemnian men may be guilty of the infraction against Aphrodite since “husbands [might] have put up with their wives’ malodorous state; but it was the wives who failed to sacrifice to Aphrodite” (214). This remark ignores the numerous occurrences where males are punished for refusing to honor this goddess. The most obvious case is Hippolytus, who shuns Aphrodite and pays respects only to Artemis; Aphrodite uses Phaedra’s suicide to carry out a plot of revenge against Hippolytus. Hera follows the same trajectory and sends Jason to get Medea in order to punish Pelias’s refusal to honor her. Hunter’s prose translation of the epic opens the possibility that the Lemnian men have been ignoring Aphrodite. This translator’s use of a neuter pronoun points more directly to the men’s culpability for not paying tribute to the goddess:

The whole people had been pitilessly killed at one stroke by the wickedness of the women. Spurning their lawful wives whom they had come to hate, the men conceived a violent desire for slave-girls ... The cause was the terrible

anger of the Kyprian goddess, because they had for a long time denied her due honors. (Apollonius Jason and the Golden Fleece 17)

While the women's behavior here is "wicked," this passage suggests that it is not only the men's denial of their wives' bridal beds that causes the women to turn on their husbands, but also Aphrodite's anger that the men have "denied her due honors" (17). Furthermore, Hera and Aphrodite are as powerful as Zeus, Poseidon or Apollo and have the same right to extract justice from an individual—male or female—who does not pay tribute to them. If Aphrodite were angry with the Lemnian women, some other retribution would be needed once the wives have killed their husbands and sons, but there is none; these women may live in "fearful dread" of someone discovering what they have done, but they do live an essentially peaceful existence once their men are gone (Apollonios The Argonautika 1.632).

While it is not totally clear if Aphrodite is actually angry with the Lemnian women or men, there is a stronger implication that the men have transgressed and their wives, on account of Aphrodite's disgust with the male population, kill their husbands to avenge the goddess. Their decision is not attractive or morally acceptable to Greek society, but these females are made "jealous past satiation" in order to serve Aphrodite (1.616).

Medea too is caught in the bind of a goddess. Hera never lets up on the manipulation of Medea in order to get her to Iolkus. At the beginning of The Argonautika 4, Medea is described as "some captured woman, torn away from a wealthy house—one whom fate has taken far from her husband" (4.35-36). She still

believes—like the Lemnian women or Kleité’s husband—that her acts are of her own volition (4.35-36). She fears that Aeētés will make an example of her behavior since she has helped Jason in defiance of her father. Her only option, from her point of view, is to flee, but, unbeknownst to her, this is exactly what Hera wants her to do. However transparent Apollonios makes Medea’s fear of a return to Colchis and her father, her narrative is driven not by her desire to be with Jason or her fear of her father, but by Hera’s need to avenge Pelias.

Still, the scene where Jason murders her brother Absyrtos, like the Lemnian women’s slaughter of their husbands, is problematic—until it is viewed through the lens of ritual sacrifice. Before arriving in the territory of the Brygoi, Medea makes the Argonauts stop “on the shoreline of Paphlagonia” to offer “propitiatory sacrifices to Hékaté” (4.244-245; 4.246-247). While this ritual seems designed to assure the Argonauts a safe passage home, it also lays the groundwork for the murder of Absyrtos in the temple of Artemis. Both this sacrifice to Hecate and the murder of Absyrtos in Artemis’s temple suggest that Hecate and Artemis are one and the same figure. According to Walter Burkert, Hecate was “often ... equated with Artemis from the fifth century onwards,” which gives credence to the idea that Apollonios is using the names Artemis and Hecate interchangeably (Greek Religion 171).²¹ This is a significant point since “Artemis is and remains a Mistress of sacrifices, especially of cruel and bloody sacrifices” akin to the murder of Absyrtos (Greek Religion 152).

²¹This is not as far-fetched as it might sound. After all, the epic’s narrator refers to the goddess of love as Aphrodite in the Lemnian episode of Book 1 (Apollonios The Argonautika 1.614), but in Book 3 the narrator, Hera, and the goddess herself refer to Aphrodite as Kypris (3.25-127).

While it could be argued that Hera means to insult Artemis by allowing the murder of Medea's brother to occur in Artemis's temple—Artemis is the only goddess that Apollonios does not overtly show offering assistance to Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece or Medea's journey to Iolkus—still the sacrificial murder associated with and committed in Artemis's temple *is* the equivalent of Artemis doing her part.

Furthermore, since she is the “mistress” of blood sacrifice, if the proper actions are followed, there would be no crime in murdering Absyrtos in her temple (152). When the epic's narrator refuses to reveal what Medea has done in Paphlagonia “in preparing this offering” and “shrink[s] in awe from uttering” any of the ceremony's words, it is a clear indication that there is more to the tribute to Hecate/Artemis than a wish for safe travels (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.248; 4.250).²²

After the sacrifice to Hecate, Medea becomes more agitated and is not acting like herself. This is partly due to the Argonauts' wish to leave her and keep the Golden Fleece in spite of Jason's promise of marriage once “we reach the land of Hellas,” but it also seems that the ritual to Hecate has transformed her (4.98). She confronts Jason and informs him that she will not be his or the Argonauts' pawn and intentionally alarms Jason into keeping his oath since she believes that he has “no regard for all the speeches you made me when necessity pressed you so hard” (4.356-357). Her situation *is* more ruinous than Jason's—he will be a hero no matter what the outcome, but she will be thought a traitor whether she is returned to Colchis or

²²Bremmer notes, “It has been suggested by Versnel that the dismemberment of Apsyrtus served as a sacrifice to avert extreme danger at sea, but because in the oldest tradition Apsyrtus was killed at home, it is clear that this interpretation can be valid at most only for the later versions of the story” (“Why Did Medea” 88).

goes on to Iolkus. She may have saved the Argonauts, but she understands her situation as a foreigner and traitor better than Jason does and insinuates as much when she states: “a killing shame I brought upon women everywhere! So it’s as *your* wife, *your* daughter, too, I tell you, *your* sister, that I now follow you to Hellas” (4.367-370). Her agency as Jason’s helper-maiden is transformed in this moment so that she becomes more than Jason’s trusty female sidekick; she is a weapon of the gods not easily dismissed as a bargaining chip and insinuates that his protection of *her* is paramount to his ability to return to Greece.

She has not spoken this eloquently to Jason since meeting him; her dialogue is more in line with Hera’s discourse than her own. While Hera has seemed to disappear from the epic at this point, she is speaking through Medea and warns Jason that if he reneges on his promise and the girl is returned to Colchis, “[t]he moment you reach your homeland may my Furies drive you out again, in revenge for all I’ve suffered from your stubborn cruelty” (4.385-387). Jason and the Argonauts may have no more need for Medea now that they have the Golden Fleece, but Hera still desires her in Iolkus. Hera believes Jason is righteous, but gives him a reminder not only of his binding oath, but also the trouble that could be made for him if he does not leave with Medea.

Jason attempts to calm this Medea, whom he has not seen like this, with words, but, after the ritual to Hecate, she will not be appeased. He must assure her that he will take action to protect her. That action seems to be the murder of Absyrtos, but if Medea agrees to the plan in a somewhat cavalier manner (“if you relish the job—I

couldn't care less—kill, and set up a battle against the Kolchians”), Apollonios inserts a narrative intrusion that leads into the meeting between Medea and her brother, which describes a “hateful frenzy [in] Medeia’s heart” that did “wickedly dispatch Absyrtos” (4.419-420; 4.449; 4.450). While this does not describe Medea’s emotional state, it is an accurate description of Hera’s rage at Pelias.

Medea’s brother feels safe meeting her in the temple to Artemis due to Medea’s position as a priestess of Hecate and they meet “under a dark night sky” within Artemis’s temple “on the sacred isle” (4.458; 4.458). This is another indication that both Hecate and Artemis are the same figure. “Hecate is [also] the goddess of pathways, *Enodia*, especially cross-roads and of the offerings laid down there” and Apollonios purposefully spends time describing the landscape around Artemis’s temple (Burkert Greek Religion 171). The island itself is “three-cornered, its broad base reading the delta, its apex facing the current, dividing the outfall into two separate streams” that suggest this island was a significant pathway (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.309-312). Absyrtos and his men cut off any access to escape for the Argonauts, but the Colchians leave the “sacred shrine” out of “respect for Zeus’s daughter” alone, giving the Argonauts and Medea a safe haven (4.331).

Apollonios chooses not to share the conversation between the brother and sister except to say that Absyrtos wants to know “if she’d contrive some snare to entrap the strangers,” but it is impossible to know how Medea actually feels about her brother or what is about to happen to him (4.462). Nowhere throughout the epic is it stated if Medea and Absyrtos have a loving or contentious affiliation—Medea’s

relationship with her sister is clearer since Chalkiope “raised me to your breast as a baby” and she chooses to help her sister’s sons—her nephews whom she also regards as brothers (3.734-735). There is a distance between Medea and Absyrtos that Apollonios chooses not to bridge. This distance may have to do with the altered state Medea has been placed in after her ritual to Hecate, but Apollonios chooses to keep their interaction private. What is revealed is that “Jason hid in ambush waiting for A[b]syrtos, and then for his companions” (4.455-456).

Absyrtos is likened to “some fragile child approaching a swollen wintry torrent that grown men would not cross” (4.460-461). This allusion is a direct reference to his role as the unwitting sacrificial victim to Jason and Medea’s plan. There is no reason for Absyrtos to believe that his sister would harm him, but this girl before him is already something more than his sister. Hunter sees “[t]he horror of the murder of Apsyrtus ... [as] a sinister and perverted reprise of the meeting of Jason and Medea at the temple of Hecate” (Apollonios Jason and the Golden Fleece 61). However, the murder is not a horrible crime that cements Jason’s role as an unwitting victim to a “bad seed,” but a reenactment of Burkert’s description of the taurobolium where “the initiand, crouching in a pit, is flooded with 50 liters of blood from a bull agonizing just above” (Ancient Mystery Cults 98).

In a similar manner, “Jason sprang from close ambush, drawn sword upraised in one hand” and like “some butcher axing a great horned bull, sighted and struck [Absyrtos]” (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.464-465; 4.468-469). It cannot be an accident that Absyrtos is alluded to as a bull—this is a direct reference to the sacrifice

of the taurobolium. Medea is the initiate, but, even in her altered state, she is frightened. She is a priestess to Hecate and, since the ritual on Paphlagonia, something has taken possession of her and strengthened her resolve, but her inability to watch as Jason, now the helper to Medea, murders her brother suggests she is still a young girl who does not know what is driving her to do what she is doing. As Burkert notes, the intensity of the taurobolium “would hardly have seemed a blessed state” (Ancient Mystery Cults 98). Medea cannot watch the sacrificial killing and “turned her eyes away, face hidden behind her veil, desperate not to see her brother cut down, murdered” (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.465-467). Apollonios names Absyrtos a hero who “gasping his life out, cupped the black blood in both hands as it gushed from the wound, spattered his flinching sister’s white-silvered veil and robe with clots of crimson” (4.473-474). Medea is unable to accept the blood of his sacrifice, but her brother takes his blood and covers her in the same way that the bull’s blood in the taurobolium covers the initiate “crouching in the pit” (Burkert Ancient Mystery Cults 98).

Once Absyrtos covers his sister with his blood, the ritual is complete, but Jason makes sure that his spirit cannot come back and wreak vengeance on either Jason or Medea since neither is cognizant that they have enacted a sacred blood ritual. Jason “lopped the corpse’s hands and feet, thrice licked up blood from the killing, thrice spat the pollution out from his teeth, right atonement for treacherous murderers, then buried the flaccid corpse out of sight” (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.477-481). Green suggests Jason does this not only “to stop the corpse from taking vengeance,”

but also “to convert the act of murder into sacrifice to the chthonian deities” (313).

Jason does not need to convert this sacrifice since both Artemis and Hera have witnessed and approved it, but he has no way of knowing this.

When Jason and Medea return to the *Argo* after the sacrifice, the crew is discussing what to do next now that Absyrtos and his men are dead. It is strange that Medea “joined them in their deliberations,” since she has not been able to do this before (Apollonios The Argonautika 4.93-494). There is a change of status, which Green attributes to “her position as the betrothed of Jason ... plus complicity in the murder of her brother ... and the authority conferred by her magical powers” (313). While all these events may serve to raise her status in the Argonauts’ eyes, in the taurobolium, after the initiate has been covered with the blood of the bull, he or she “is “adored” ... as one who has risen to a superior state” (Burkert Ancient Mystery Cults 98). This suggests Medea has become an exalted figure through the sacrifice of her brother and while this ritual might seem violent or extreme to a contemporary reader, there are “a number of cults [where] human blood is shed ... The image of the Taurian Artemis, which presided over the human sacrifices in Colchis ... is mentioned in particular as provoking such rites” (Burkert Greek Religion 59).²³ In Apollonios’s epic, Medea’s position as helper-maiden and the tool of Hera engenders

²³Rene Girard notes, “Even in fifth century Greece—the Athens of the great tragedians—human sacrifice had not, it seems, completely disappeared. The practice was perpetuated in the form of the pharmakos, maintained by the city at its own expense and slaughtered at the appointed festivals as well as at a moment of civic disaster” (9). According to Walter Burkert, a pharmakos is “the Greek equivalent of the scapegoat” and the human blood sacrifice was usually an individual was “an especially repulsive person” (Structure and History 64; 65).

a more sophisticated reading of Medea than the supposition that she would become Euripides's creation due to some sort of inherently evil trait. She may be unwittingly behaving in a manner that is working for divine justice, but she has no conscious knowledge of that fact. Feeney emphasizes that Medea "never knows what Hera is doing to her, nor why Hera is doing it, nor even that Hera is doing it" (85). She is a young girl torn by the powers she has learned in service to Hecate and her bewitchment at Hera's instigation. Jason becomes her helper, her brother is a sacrifice to divine revenge, and Medea is "transformed by the promptings of Hera" from the priestess of Hecate into Hera's avenger (Apollonios *The Argonautika* 3.818).²⁴

By freeing Medea from her responsibility and obligation to Hecate/Artemis and allowing her to "work" for Hera, Artemis sacrifices more than either Athena or Aphrodite in Hera's cause. Apollonios chooses to unite these female goddesses in the epic in order to elevate Medea to the position of an *alastor*—an avenger in the cause of divine retribution. In this way Clauss, Feeney, and Hunter are correct in seeing an allusion to Euripides's tragedy, although it is not that Apollonios's Medea will one

²⁴When Jason and Medea arrive at Circe's, they throw themselves at her hearth as suppliants. Circe enacts a ritual that is an accurate reenactment of a purification ritual designed to relieve "murderers from blood guilt: blood is purified through blood. The standard example is that of Orestes, although Aeschylus does present Ixion as the original paradigm ... The ritual includes a "sacrificial piglet being held over the head of a person, [the pig is] slaughtered ... to drench the patient with blood" (Burkert *The Orientalizing Revolution* 56-57). This further suggests that Medea and Jason do not know that their murder of Absyrtos is actually a sacrificial ritual that has assisted Hera in transforming Medea into her *alastor*. While Circe warns Medea (in Colchian—Jason is cut out of this conversation completely), "I can never condone the deeds you plotted and did, your disgraceful flight," she is also "moved by [Medea's] tears to pity" suggesting Circe understands the entire bind in which Medea finds herself (Apollonios *The Argonautika* 4.746-747; 4.738).

day become a maniacal baby killer, but a figure of divine justice willing to sacrifice everything in the name of the gods.

Apollonios depicts in graphic detail what happens when mortals attempt to thwart fate or divine obligation—Jason kills Kleité’s husband by mistake to fulfill the ruler’s destiny and the Lemnian population is either slaughtered or lives in fear of being found out of a mass murder that has been committed in service to Aphrodite. Only the Amazons embrace their father’s heritage as the god of war and follow the ethos of destruction without fear or regret. Throughout Apollonios’s epic, Medea is unknowingly compelled by the “religious necessity” of Hera, not through any personal choices she might make (Vernant and Naquet 52). By privileging Hera’s place in the Argive myth, Apollonios implies that the Colchian princess is being driven to follow a fate that Hera wills, not Medea. The priestess to Hecate is the ultimate sacrifice in the quest for the Golden Fleece and the real prize of Jason’s journey. Hera gets what she wants and Medea will discover what is expected of her now that she has been transformed into Hera’s avenger.

IV

Isolation, Innocence, and Magic:
Portrayals of Medea in Ovid, Valerius Flaccus, and Seneca

Nero, in his bewilderment and impatience to destroy his mother, could not be put off till Burrus answered for her death, should she be convicted of the crime, but "anyone," he said, "much more a parent, must be allowed a defence [sic]."

—from The Annals by Tacitus (13.20)

In The Annals, Tacitus records an endless stream of infanticide, filicide, fratricide, parricide, regicide, suicide, and straight up homicide in a history of Rome “from the death of Augustus in 14 C.E. to that of Nero in 68” (Hadas “Introduction” xiii). Perhaps the most infamous of these acts are the fratricide of Britannicus and the matricide of Agrippina by Nero. At sixteen years of age, Nero was aware that his position as ruler of Rome would be in jeopardy now that his half-brother Britannicus was soon to “complete his fourteenth year” and Nero covertly poisoned Britannicus’s water one night at dinner in order to have his death witnessed by family and invited friends (Tacitus 13.15). Agrippina, who had poisoned her husband Claudius not long prior, realized that once Britannicus was dead, “she was robbed of her only remaining refuge, and that here was a precedent for parricide” (13.16). Up until the moment a trio of mercenaries slash Agrippina’s aged body, Nero’s mother “clings in desperate belief to a performance via which she professes belief in Nero’s innocence” (Bartsch Actor 21). Once she understands that her son has chosen the route of matricide, Agrippina supposedly shouts, “Smite my womb” to directly indict Nero in her murder (Tacitus 14.8).

No less shocking than Nero's brazen acts of matricide and fratricide is Tacitus's account of the strangulation of Sejanus's last two remaining children—a son and daughter (the rest had already been executed for their father's misdeeds). Although the ages of the children are not given, they must have been quite young, since the girl, due to her virginal status, “was violated by the executioner, with the rope on her neck” before she and her brother “were strangled and their bodies, mere children as they were, were flung down the Gemoniae” (5.9). Suetonius explains that the treatment accorded Sejanus's daughter was codified during Tiberius's rule “[b]ecause it was not permitted by ancient custom to strangle virgins” (3.61.5) (qtd. in Corti Myth of Medea 60).

Artists, including actors and playwrights, were also subject to the executioner's block. According to Suetonius's records, “Caligula is said to have had an Atellan poet burned alive for an ambiguous verse in his play (Cal. 27.4), and Domitian is said to have put to death the younger Helvidius Priscus for” referring to the ruler's “marital situation in a stage farce (Dom. 10.4)” (Bartsch Actors 78). Tacitus writes about Seneca's execution at Nero's behest on a fabricated charge of conspiracy. Nero's former tutor seems to shrug his shoulders at the moment of his forced suicide when he states, “Who knew not Nero's cruelty? After a mother's and a brother's murder, nothing remains but to add the destruction of a guardian and tutor” (Tacitus 15.62). Seneca then slit the tendons in his arms; however, due to “his aged frame, ... the blood ... escape[d] but slowly, [so he] severed also the veins of his legs and knees” (15.63).

These accounts of assassination and public execution appear to be defense strategies in the political maneuverings of Rome's rulers and their family members, but there is an underlying paranoia in the commission of these acts that historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius capture for posterity. Braden argues, "the logic of imperial paranoia reconstitutes civil war as palace intrigue ... The stakes are quite real, and paranoia in an emperor sooner or later verifies itself, but there is still a bizarre air of ... make-believe in the politics of imperial terror," suggesting that even if only half of the bloody and duplicitous historical narratives of Rome written by Tacitus and Suetonius are factually accurate, playwrights and poets might have taken advantage of any opportunity to create sensationalistic works that mirrored the bloody gore and homicide of the imperial court in a manner analogous to contemporary comedy shows such as "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" that satirize the political process or drama shows such as "Law and Order," "Without a Trace," and "CSI," which see the criminal element in every aspect of life in the U.S. (15).

It would be simple to distort the most shocking aspects of the Medea tradition to echo the perceived reality of the day. Corti suggests that Medea's popularity during the early imperial period was of "cultural importance" due to "the dazzling collection of female monsters" Tacitus writes into posterity—a list of "notorious professional poisoners ... Plancina, Martina, and Locusta" and Rome's female ruling family members, "Livia, Marcellina, Livilla, Silana, and Agrippina" (*Myth of Medea* 61). These women, according to Corti are "a gallery of female bullies who are quite as jealous, treacherous, and vengeful as any Medea" (61); however, this assertion

imposes one-dimensional portraits not only on the female figures in Roman society—even Tacitus humanizes Agrippina—but also on the complex mythic and literary tradition that, by and large, did not portray Medea as a singular monster of depravity and evil. A close examination of Roman poets and playwrights such as Ovid, Valerius Flaccus, and Seneca reveal that they do exploit and embellish certain of Medea's actions, not to create a monster of depravity, but to comment on and critique—in a covert manner—the murderous violence within Roman society.²⁵

* * *

In the *Heroides*, a series of verse-letters written by mythological women to their husbands and paramours, Ovid privileges Medea's right to defend the life she has led in service to Jason.²⁶ In this way, Medea's point of view becomes the tool

²⁵Ovid and Seneca were exiled at least in part for what one can only suppose were their perceived radical discourses and, at the end of his life, Seneca was forced to commit suicide. Ovid, exiled from Rome by Augustus in 8 A.D., also died in exile in 17 C.E. Bartsch argues, "In the realm of literary allusion ... the detection of double entendre by audiences and emperors and the punishment (or not) of authors and actors is attested under almost every reign from Augustus to Domitian" (*Actors* 66). What this suggests is that Ovid, Seneca, Valerius Flaccus, and their peers were aware of the tension between the subjects they wrote about and the danger in which they could find themselves if the critique was too transparently obvious. Not a simple or safe task.

²⁶There are twenty-one letters in all, but only fifteen were published in 15 B.C.E., including the letters from Medea and Hypsipyle. Additionally, there are three letters from men: Paris to Helen, Leander to Hero, and Acontius to Cydippe. Philip Hardie suggests that Ovid's position within the literary history of Rome is "at a point of transition between two periods of Latin literature, frequently conceived in evaluative terms as a transition from a 'Golden', Augustan, to a 'Silver', Imperial, age" (34). In other words, Ovid was writing during an era that was becoming both politically and culturally destabilized and, according to Richard Tarrant, "[for] later writers such as Seneca and Lucan, Roman and specifically Augustan predecessors—notably Ovid himself—largely replace the Greeks as the models for emulation" (19).

Ovid uses to reveal a woman who chooses monstrous actions in support of her husband's ambition. It is Medea's love for her uncaring and monstrous husband Jason to which Ovid's epistle explicitly assigns responsibility for Medea's rage.

Medea's letter begins *in medias res* as though Jason has slammed the door behind him before Medea has had a chance to respond to his proclamation that she and their two sons must "[d]epart from this, the house of Aeson" (Ovid *Heroides* 110). Unlike Harold Isbell's assertion that "the dialogue ... has in fact been going on in Medea's disordered imagination" for some time (105), there is every indication that this is something akin to a hastily drawn up note left for Jason as Medea is leaving her house with "our two children and what will remain with me, my love for you" (Ovid *Heroides* 110). Medea writes in an attempt to "overcome a separation" forced upon her by Jason's sudden remarriage and dismissal from her home (Kennedy 221). The letter hopes to remind Jason of the couple's binding relationship, but "caught up in the logic of its temporality," emotionally overwrought Medea harshly indicts Jason for betraying his solemn oath made to her in Colchis (223).

Medea's failure to stay focused as she reiterates the couple's mutual history is an indication of her "greatly distraught character," but not, as Isbell argues, her inability to "restrain her great powers for evil" (105). Medea has only recently discovered that her husband has married Creusa and, on the heels of that revelation, Jason evicts her and their children from their home. Any woman would be distraught, angry, and confused by these recent occurrences, let alone an exile and a murderous accomplice to her husband's ambition. Even if Ovid is engaging in "open

borrowings” of previous texts that draw on the Medea myth “with the intention that they should be recognized,” there is no reason to believe these intertextual references are designed to remind the reader of a Medea who is, as Isbell asserts, “a person of astounding and unparalleled evil” (Bartsch Mirror of the Self 262; Isbell 103).²⁷

Tracey Walters suggests, “In the Heroides Medea’s letter to Jason humanizes Medea and gives her the opportunity to defend herself and fully express her torment” (35). In this way, Ovid is dismissing any simple portrait of Medea which might show her as evil since Medea’s letter to Jason is predicated by *his* action as the authoritative male, a husband who forcefully and cavalierly displaces Medea and their children from his protection and home.

It is no accident that Medea begins the letter with a reminder to Jason that “I, Queen of Colchis, found time when you came begging for help” (Ovid Heroides 106). Medea is asking Jason to return the consideration that she has always shown him. She does overstate her position by crowning herself the “Queen of Colchis,” a title she may have one day received if she never left Colchis; however, she quickly abandons that train of thought and wishes that “those sisters who spin the threads of life should have unwound at last my spindle,” before she imagines what her life would have been like if Jason had never arrived in Colchis (106). Medea needs Jason to listen to her, but caught up in the “authenticity of emotion,” she cannot balance or suppress her

²⁷Of course, Isbell also views the Medea of Apollonios Rhodios’s Argonautika, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and Euripides’s creation in the same exact manner (105). To lump all these finely crafted portrayals into one big malevolent pile of murder and mayhem does a disservice not only to the complexity of the Medea tradition, but also to the poets and tragedians themselves.

feelings of fear, rage, and grief (Kennedy 222). Ovid carefully crafts this letter to make it apparent that Medea is being impulsive in reaching out to Jason. She has no real plan nor is she trying to manipulate her husband. Ovid is manipulating the text to make the point that Medea is like any loyal wife caught off guard by her husband's behavior.

Her remembrances, which she recounts ostensibly to lure Jason back to his senses and to her, are problematic since any sense of nostalgia is lost due to the nature of her crimes, which she committed to assist Jason in meeting his objectives. This complication causes Medea's frustration to grow and while she may want to focus on the memories that bond them as a couple, she is at odds to recall a single "good" memory that does not have some murderous or treasonous mischief connected to it. In order to reckon what is left now that Jason has remarried, Medea continually turns towards the predicament in which she finds herself. Jason has not only abandoned her for a younger, richer wife and neglected to tell her until after he had married Creusa, but he has also left her alone in what, for Medea, is a foreign country. She cannot return to her homeland since she is a fugitive from there, as well as in Iolkus. Medea is enraged that Jason does not seem to care, especially since she believes she committed every crime in service to him. Harold Jacobson sees in Medea's rage a "contemptible personality," which he asserts reveals nothing more than "self-concern, arrogance (e.g., 183-184), ... [and] a lack of sincere feeling for Jason (even her "love" is self-serving, possessive, and grasping. 175-176, 199-200)" (119-120); however, Medea *has* given everything she is and has to Jason and he throws it away

casually once a better opportunity presents itself. Jason is solipsistic and arrogant and Medea is now at the mercy of her husband's authoritarian position.

Ovid constructs the Heroides' Medea as a woman torn between her love for a man who betrays her and the acts she has committed in service to that love. His Medea is utterly alone and cut off from everyone she ever loved or who loved her, yet Isbell argues that Medea "makes no attempt to deny or even to mitigate the horrors that she has committed and will soon commit" and sees her as "a perfect model of depravity" (104; 105). Medea does hold herself responsible for her crimes, but she also argues that the reason she committed those crimes was that she loved Jason, a man who told "lies that fell so gracefully from your tongue" (Ovid Heroides 106). She understands that once she "gave the fleece into [Jason's] hands," she had "betrayed my father, gave up my throne and the country of my birth" (110). She also admits her part in causing "Pelias' daughters who for love of their father were led to evil and their hands to butcher their father's corpse" (110). The only time she cannot name her crime directly is when she writes about the murder of her brother: "What my hand did willingly, it cannot write. I too should have been torn apart" (109). Medea admits to playing an active role in dismembering her brother and explicitly indicts herself when she says she is "a woman covered with guilt" (110).

Her overarching sense that she will now be forced to live an exilic existence with no one to protect her or the children compounds the inescapable and nightmarish reality of her crimes. She is filled with thoughts of her "[w]ounded father ... You Colchians, abandoned by me ... My brother's ghost," and asks them to "accept from

this my downfall the sacrifice I have owed to you” (111). Medea has always suffered from the guilt associated with her actions; it is her inability to forget her crimes that makes the enormity of her immorality unfathomable once Jason leaves. Her brother and homeland share center stage in Medea’s guilt-ridden subconscious and these crimes manifest in her conscious world once Jason’s abandonment removes what she had used to justify her immoral actions. Medea not only loves Jason, but also needs him in order to keep her guilt from overwhelming her; after all, as long as her acts are in service to a loyal, steadfast, and grateful husband, she can assuage her guilt. Once Jason abandons her, not only does her complicity surface full force in her consciousness, but she also comprehends that she has no protection from the outside world.

Medea cannot and does not pretend to be completely innocent, but the list of her crimes is as much a reflection of the bond she and Jason have, as it is her personal rap sheet. These crimes leave her in an untenable position with no one to turn to or trust. Her claim that she is “alone, deprived of all, my throne, my country, my home, and my husband” is not histrionic, but an overwhelming fear of the reprisal Jason has opened her to now that he has remarried and banished her from the only home she has known besides her father’s (111). Her vitriolic indictment of Jason as an accomplice to her crimes continually circles around Jason’s broken oath, which was made when he asked her to assist him in procuring the Golden Fleece:

[B]y the deity of your all-knowing grandfather, the bright sun; by the mysteries and by the three faces of Diana, by my family’s gods—if it is gods

that we have—by these take pity on me²⁸ ... I swear that my soul shall cease to be before one other than you becomes my bride. As pledge, I call Juno, in whose shrine we stand, the guardian of all marriage contracts. (108)

Medea recalls this sworn oath made “under the deeply shaded grove of pine trees and the limbs of the holy oak” (108) and the enormous pressure Jason was under to not only attain the Golden Fleece, but also to keep himself and his men safe from her father Aeëtes. She believes his pledge to marry her was a life-long promise made to keep her safe no matter what occurred, but Jason, in Medea’s retrospective view at least, never had any intention of staying loyal, but was always about “treachery” (106), “betrayal” (107), “unfaithful[ness]” (107; 108; 113), “deception” (109), and “deceit” (110).²⁹ These words depict a duplicitous, ambitious, and cunning man and suggest Jason is a fraudulent hero who loved and was loyal to Medea only as long as

²⁸Diana and Artemis are two names for the same goddess. Burkert notes, “Artemis is and remains a Mistress of sacrifices, especially of cruel and bloody sacrifices (152), which suggests that Jason knew the seriousness of his sworn oath when he made it. Additionally, “Hecate ... was equated with Artemis from the fifth century [B.C] onwards and the triple-form figure of Hecate arose from the three masks which were hung at the meeting of three pathways (Greek Religion 171). Isbell believes “the attributes of Diana and other goddesses are often confused,” but it is more likely that, as Barthes suggests, myths “alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (Isbell 114; Barthes 120). In this way, a myth may become completely effaced in favor of a singular transmission through another mythic figure with similar attributes.

²⁹Jacobson argues, “The language of 199 seems significant, *te peto, quem merui*. Not, I have earned your love, but I have earned you. Medea is possessive” (120). While this is an interesting point, Jason’s oath makes it clear that he is not offering love, but a loyal and steadfast partner. He swears to stay by her side if she helps him attain the Golden Fleece; she *has*, after a fashion, earned him—his endless loyalty—and he has broken that promise without any thought to the consequences to her or his children.

her presence was advantageous to him.

Since Medea is not a totally reliable narrator, considering that she is distressed by Jason's most recent actions, Ovid has Hypsipyle also write a letter to Jason that bolsters Medea's notion of Jason as a double-dealing figure with no consideration for her or their two sons. Hypsipyle describes the "two summers and two winters" she and Jason lived together in a marriage that "was public" and blessed by both Juno and Hymen (Ovid *Heroides* 50; 49). As Jason's *first* wife, she reminisces about his departure from Lemnos and his promise that "I am yours as I leave and will always be. May what I leave heavy in your belly grow that we together may nurture it" (50). In Ovid's world, Jason is a polygamist, who skillfully avoids conflicts and confrontations by withholding the truth to the women in his life.

Jason's multiple marriages and his broken oaths do not concern Isbell, who never mentions them. Neither does Jacobson, who suggests that Hypsipyle and Jason's marriage is "a short-lived romance" that "Ovid revises [from] Apollonius' chronology to increase the depth of Jason's commitment to Hypsipyle" (94; 96).³⁰ The problem is that Ovid crafts the character of Jason with no depth. Both Hypsipyle

³⁰Jacobson argues that Ovid is influenced by many ancient texts that focus on the Medea myth, some of which no longer exist, in order to create a character that is completely Ovid's own. He even accuses other scholars of acting "as if Apollonius and Euripides were Ovid's sole sources" (Jacobson 110), but then finds Medea's assertion that Jason "wept—your tears aided the deception" (Ovid *Heroides* 109) during their meeting in Colchis problematic since "Jason sheds no tears in Apollonius; in fact, it is Medea who does (1064, 1077, 1118-1119)! [exclamation point Jacobson's]" (Jacobson 118). Interestingly, in *Heroides*, Ovid has Hypsipyle state, "Weeping, you could not speak" (50), but Jacobson does not question Ovid's intertextual assertion that Jason is consistent in his use of tears to manipulate the women in his life.

and Medea's letters reveal Jason to be nothing more than a shallow and cavalier man who takes what he wants and then leaves. The Argonaut never bothers to tell Hypsipyle that he will not be returning to Lemnos any more than he lets Medea know he is about to marry Creusa. Hypsipyle hears about Jason's marriage to Medea through "rumor" (Ovid *Heroides* 48) and Medea discovers his newest marriage to Creusa when she hears "a crowd of revelers ... shouting loudly, 'Hymen, O Hymenus'" (110) as her younger son calls to her, "Mother, come here by me, a parade is coming and Jason, my father, is at its head" (111). After his public marriage to Creusa and his abrupt ejection of Medea from their home, Medea cannot believe that anything Jason ever said is true. When Medea's letter is placed alongside Hypsipyle's, whose representation of Jason is consistent with Medea's, it is clear that Ovid is not indicting Medea as a paragon of evil, but rather is revealing a patriarch who shows no compunction in breaking oaths when those promises no longer seem profitable. Ovid's use of the female voice could be seen as an attempt to obfuscate that critique since these women have no power or authority in Greece, but the parallel events depicted in Medea and Hypsipyle's letters are a clear message that Jason is a solipsistic and unheroic figure.

While Medea holds Jason responsible for his unsympathetic behavior and not "that slut" Creusa, Hypsipyle, whose "heart seethes with rage and love" as much as Medea's does, places responsibility not with her husband, but squarely on the shoulders of Medea, whom she calls "some barbarian poisoner," "barbarian slut," and "stepmother whose hands are well made to commit any evil act" (111; 50; 49; 51; 52).

Hypsipyle has no proof of any of Medea's misdeeds or even Jason's marriage to Medea since she is repeating rumor rather than citing a direct missive from Jason. However, if Hypsipyle could avenge Jason's abandonment of her, she "would choose to be merciful to you" while being "Medea for Medea" (53).

Jacobson suggests, "Euripides' Medea comes to mind" in Hypsipyle's letter and "the curses which Hypsipyle calls down upon Medea's head ... are so strikingly accurate in their fulfillment that one scarcely restrains a smile" (103). While the "curses" and rumors Hypsipyle transmits in her letter to Jason do allude to Euripides's tragedy, one cannot forget that Ovid's contextualization of these allusions ensure that they actually reinforce Medea's position as an outsider and give credence to Medea's anger towards Jason. The references in both Hypsipyle and Medea's letters call up "specific canonical ... texts with which they correspond in both dramatic and verbal detail," but Ovid's gestures towards previous texts that engage the Argonaut and Medea traditions do not reinforce past literary creations, but complicate them, even calling certain mythological suppositions and literary notions into question (Kennedy 225). After all, Ovid's portrayal of Medea is, first and foremost, an "abandoned woman, a sympathetic elegiac type," not, as Jacobson argues, "a villainous creature" (Newlands 179-180; Jacobson 118). In both letters, it is Jason's despicable behavior that Ovid illuminates by pointing out that his duplicity and ambition has victimized both Medea and Hypsipyle. Their rage and vengeful thoughts are not the rantings of crazy women who might go off on a homicidal rampage, but disavowed wives fighting for their place in a world where their presence

is no longer wanted or needed. The stakes for Medea are high since she can be found guilty of the murders of Pelias and her brother, as well as charged with treason in her homeland of Colchis.

Unfortunately, Hypsipyle's rumors and Medea's admittance of her crimes cause Ovid's intertextual references to make it simple to pin Medea with the title "Queen of Evil." Ovid anticipates the readers' assumptions and even has Medea acknowledge that the maiden Jason married, at least in his eyes, no longer exists; she understands that she has "become a barbarian to you, the lass who [has] become poor, the lass who is now a source of injury" (Ovid *Heroides* 109). Ovid places Medea in the position of defending her acts—crimes that she committed to elevate Jason's status in society. She ignored those who knew nothing about the couple's marriage and assumed she was a "barbarian;" she believed, and thought Jason believed, her crimes contributed to Jason's ever-rising stature (109). Medea is most aggrieved that Jason, like readers who will not look any deeper into the injured figure of Medea and the duplicitous nature of Jason, sees in her the embodiment of the barbarian now that she has outlived her usefulness. Medea is rightfully disconcerted by Jason's uncaring attitude in discarding her for a newer model.

It is this conflict between Medea's deeds and the reason why she committed them that Ovid wrestles with in his gesture towards literary precedents. The poet challenges the idea of Medea's depravity by privileging her anxiety and fear as well as her understanding that she is guilty of every deed she has ever done. While Medea never attempts to dissuade Jason or the reader that she has committed heinous crimes,

Ovid makes it clear that she has not committed any of her crimes in a vacuum—her acts were in service to her husband—not due to any inherent evil traits. Ovid constructs a Medea who is attempting to figure out how to survive Jason's abandonment, but the poet is also crafting a text that is working its way through other strands of Medea's mythic tradition to reveal a woman who is a loyal wife discarded not for her crimes, but because she is no longer useful to Jason's vision of himself as a ruler. Once Jason abandons her, Medea can no longer trust that there will be no consequences for her murderous and treasonous deeds—she is a single mother and an exile. There is no one to turn to or trust. Anyone would rightly fear this position—Medea is no different.

In the Heroides, Ovid constructs Medea as a wife and mother who fears the isolated and vulnerable position in which she has been placed due to her husband's renunciation of their marriage vows and his apathy in leaving her unprotected. Her crimes were in service to and perpetrated with the complicit knowledge of her husband, but Jason's abandonment forces Medea to face the consequences of those actions without him by her side. Medea is an isolated exile (fugitive might be a better word for her position) and will face reprisals for her and her crimes now that her husband has abandoned her. One-dimensional portraits of Medea become destabilized when placed alongside Jason's treatment of Hypsipyle. If Ovid's Medea admits to an arsenal of horrible crimes, she also knows that she will be forced to pay for them while Jason will walk away unscathed.

Ovid's Metamorphoses, published more than twenty years after the Heroides,

further a deconstruction of a simplistic portrait of Medea as an evil and shallow creature through an unconventional means—Medea becomes transformed into a supernatural being in service of Jason’s request to make his father young again. However, Carole Newlands argues that Ovid appears to “pass abruptly from a sympathetic portrayal of Medea as love-sick maiden to a tragic-comic account of her career as accomplished *pharmaceutria* (witch) and murderess” (178). Similarly, W.S. Anderson suggests this Medea “is an accomplished witch, delighting in her powers and rather amusing us by her skill” (qtd. in Newlands 178-179). Even though Ovid does have comical transformations within the Metamorphoses such as the Pygmalion episode in Book 10 or sweet episodes such as the transformation of the devoted couple Baucis and Philemon in Book 8, Medea’s descent into the supernatural realm does not play into the comical or delightful stylistic turn of Ovid’s project. Medea becomes a supernatural “witch” in response to Jason’s appeal in the only way that is acceptable to her—she gives him what he wants without fully thinking through the consequences.

Instead of transforming Medea into a bird (Procne and Philomela (Ovid Metamorphoses 6.668-78)), a tree (Daphne (1.552-69)), a stone (Niobe (6.304-317)), a spider (Arachne (6.134-146)), or even a cow (Io (1.615-51)), Ovid focuses on Medea’s expertise as a magician and herbalist to transform her into a powerful supernatural persona who wreaks havoc on those around her. While Newlands suggests that Medea is not “motivated by love” for Jason, but by “her ambition as witch,” it is apparent in the way in which Ovid constructs this metamorphosis that

Medea's embodiment of the supernatural has as much to do with her love for Jason as other female figures' metamorphoses have to do with their (usually forced) submission to overpowering male aggression (187).³¹

Soon after Medea and Jason's arrival in Iolkus, Jason requests, "if you now can (and spells and chants and magic may accomplish even this), please take some portion of the years I'll live and, since I am still young, assign that share to my dear father" (Ovid Metamorphoses 7.167-170). This request places responsibility for what Medea must do to rejuvenate Aeson firmly with Jason, but it also reveals the filial devotion her husband has for his father. She may envy his loyalty or feel a nostalgic sense of longing since she has betrayed her father, but this portrayal of a son's love for his father sets Medea into motion. Jason's intimation that he would willingly sacrifice his own youth or life span in order to accomplish this task strongly suggests that Medea needs to sacrifice someone or something else in order to accomplish Aeson's rejuvenation. Medea knows this when she chides her husband, "how can you permit such sacrilege to issue from your lips? Do you believe I have the power to prolong another's life, depriving you of years?" (7.176-180). Medea's love causes her to lie. She does not want Jason to be the sacrifice to the magic she must unleash to accomplish his father's rejuvenation. Medea then is warning Jason (and the reader) that the power of this magic would be overwhelming to a mortal man like Jason. The doublespeak Medea uses to talk around Jason's request is ominous rather than

³¹Here are but a few examples of female figures appearing before Medea's entrance in Book 7, who must deal with male aggression in Ovid's Metamorphoses: Daphne and Io in Book 1; Callisto and Europa in Book 2; Proserpina in Book 5; and Philomela in Book 6.

amusing since she cannot refuse her husband anything. “I’ll try to lengthen Aeson’s life—but not by shortening your days. For magic arts will be the means I use—if Hecate will help me realize this daring feat” (7.183-185). What this intimates is that Medea does have certain knowledge that she can draw on, but she will not allow the man she loves to be exposed to any danger that might arise from this magic.

While the full extent of this sacrifice is not made clear immediately, Ovid creates a lengthy pre-ritual to Aeson’s rejuvenation and the poet carefully develops the procedure for what Medea must do in order to make the rejuvenation work. According to Newlands, “Ovid goes into tremendous detail—112 lines in all—in describing the magical rituals involved in Aeson’s rejuvenation (7.179-287)” (187); however, Newlands sees in this detail Ovid’s attempt to add humor to the entire situation and, in particular, Medea’s “new appearance as a witch” (187). While Ovid’s description is ornate and sensationalistic, the idea that it is comical seems unlikely given Medea’s complete transformation into an amoral supernatural being at the end of Aeson’s rebirth. As Newlands makes clear, Ovid spends an inordinate amount of time explaining the process leading up to ritual. However, this is due to the fact that in addition to Aeson’s rejuvenation, it is also Medea’s metamorphosis—she will sacrifice herself to give Jason’s father a new life. This is the only transformation in the epic that has a long transition process and continues to follow Medea after the change is complete since no other character is shown after their metamorphosis is complete. Furthermore, Ovid carefully crafts Medea’s metamorphosis from beginning to end in great detail, which allows the reader not only to witness Medea’s

transformation, but also his stylistic technique in action. If Ovid were allowing the reader to witness the magic of his art—revealing the artifice in the art as it were—the kind of exaggerated comedy some critics see in the episode could undermine not only the shocking revelation of Medea’s metamorphosis but also Ovid’s expertise as a poet.

Medea waits for a full moon before asking the immortal deities and mortal beings ruled by night for permission to do the rejuvenation. This encounter with night is a purification ritual designed not only to cleanse her, but also to prove her mettle to night’s guardians:

[U]pon her head, she poured fresh river water; and three times, Medea opened wide her lips and wailed; then, as she knelt on the hard ground, she said: “O Night, true guardian of secret rites; o golden stars, who, when the flames of day retreat, emerge with the moon’s rays; and you, o three-formed Hecate, who are aware of our endeavors, you who shield and shelter the chants and arts of sorcery; and Earth, who offer to magicians potent herbs; you breezes, winds, and mountains, rivers, lakes; all you forest gods and gods of Shades—be my allies! (Ovid Metamorphoses 7.189-196)

In Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Medea is already a powerful magician; now she asks permission to become something more than human in order to assist Jason’s father. By entering and embracing night’s world, Medea is also willingly entering the realm of death. She not only calls on Hecate, but also on Earth and its creatures to assist her in this powerful ritual of rebirth and rejuvenation. In this way, Medea is making the ultimate sacrifice for Jason since she will enter the realm of night and may not be able

to return after Aeson's rejuvenation. This pre-ritual then places Medea in an even more isolated position than her exile from Colchis has put her since neither Jason nor any other human will be able to offer her protection during and after this ritual.

The magic she unleashes during the rejuvenation is so powerful that she "called on Jason to leave; she had the servants sent away—warned all to turn aside their eyes—lest they profane the secret rites. They all obeyed" (7.256-258). Once Medea is left alone with Aeson, her appearance and manner suggest "a bacchant" (7.259).³² The ceremony not only becomes a transformative moment for Aeson, who is left "bewildered," but also for Medea, who is metamorphosed into something more than human (7.292).

Ovid marks Medea's transformation by naming her "a "barbarian sorceress" (7.277). This is not to suggest that she is a foreigner from Colchis who is only acting in a manner consistent with the way in which all barbarians do, but an individual who has entered a realm few human beings are able to access. Medea's metamorphosis from a woman of uncommon loyalty and love to a purveyor of supernatural powers completes a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that is consistent with Medea's devotion to Jason. Both Aeson *and* Medea are reborn in this ritual; however, Aeson is given his youth to live his life over again and Medea becomes an amoral being who will be more isolated and alone than she could have ever imagined upon leaving Colchis. Perhaps Medea has known all along that she will swallow too much of this darkness, but her loyalty to Jason forces her to acquiesce to his request. Her transformation is

³²Bacchus actually witnesses the ritual performed by "this dazzling prodigy" and procures the potion from her (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 7.294).

the result of Jason's continual requests to use her power to assist him. He does not think of or care about the consequences; he is only interested in a successful outcome.

Jason's willingness to sacrifice the length of his life suggests that Medea will need to balance Aeson's rejuvenation with another's life and there is a shift in the narrative "[t]hat fraud might have its day in full," further signifying that a second component to the rejuvenation ritual must still take place (7.297). Medea has already made it clear that she will not allow Jason to be the offering that will complete the ritual and she has sacrificed her own mortal self, but she has not entered the realm of Hades; however, she has no qualms in compelling Pelias, Aeson's brother and Jason's uncle and rival in Iolkus, to be the unwitting sacrifice. While this is an act of duplicity, Medea's metamorphosis has transformed her into a completely amoral being and she does not hesitate in convincing Pelias's daughters "to be most pious through impiety" (7.337).

Medea's loyalty and love for Jason derails her hoped for life at his side as a wife and mother and her newfound amorality allows her to wreak havoc wherever she travels. Her transformation is different from other figures in the Metamorphoses because the long-term consequences of Medea's metamorphosis are concretized rather than imagined: her story continues after her metamorphosis, unlike most other characters in Ovid's work. Medea becomes not a static image forever frozen in time, but a paragon of amorality—a being who chooses murder every time her position is threatened. Medea's metamorphosis was predicated on Jason's desire to use the full command of her power and there is no childish amusement or curiosity, as Newlands

and Anderson suggest, when Medea chooses to fulfill Jason's desire to make his father young again. The harsh recourse Jason receives at Medea's hands for his remarriage has less to do with an overt intertextual reference to Euripides's tragedy and more to do with Ovid's desire to comment on those who would make use of the power of others without caring how those resources will be replenished or what the consequences of that appropriation would entail. Medea's willingness to embrace the darkness of her magical power is in service to her husband Jason; however, the consequences of that metamorphosis, as Ovid makes clear, affect not only Medea, but also her family and anyone else who happens to stumble onto her path.³³

Ovid's narrative structure foregrounds the female point of view and, in Medea, the poet creates not only a tension between female powerlessness and the power of love, but also a female embodiment of aggression and authority that challenges patriarchal power structures. In the Hecroides, Medea is an isolated angry figure who comprehends the dangerous position in which she has been placed by her husband's abandonment, while in the Metamorphoses, she is an innocent who reaches beyond acceptable social strictures in service to her husband and becomes a completely isolated amoral figure. If Ovid prefers feminine embodiment and the female voice to

³³Like in Euripides's tragedy, Ovid has Medea murder Jason's new wife with poison, but "the blood of [Medea's] own infants stained her sacrilegious sword," suggesting the possibility of rejuvenation to these children since she uses the same sword to revive Aeson's aged body (Ovid Metamorphoses 7.397-398). Ovid does not follow up on the covert thrust of this idea except in noting that after marrying Aegeus, who has given her refuge in Athens, she manipulates him into poisoning his son Theseus. The attempt fails, indicating perhaps a failed attempt to complete her sons' rejuvenation or it could be that she wished to punish anyone who has children now that her sons are no longer alive.

defend or comment on the position of women, Gaius Valerius Flaccus's unfinished Argonautica, an epic written sometime between 80 and 93 C.E., portrays Medea as an "innocent" figure caught up in the gods' overt references to other strands of the Medea tradition and Jason's "glorious brilliance" (5.380, 5.405).³⁴

* * *

While Andrew Zissos argues that Valerius's epic is "obsessively concern[ed] with its own place within a rich literary history" (300), the epic daringly subverts any notions of evilness or depravity in Medea by overtly critiquing violent and bloody patriarchal rule—an allusion, perhaps, to the Roman rule found in Tacitus and Suetonius's histories. Valerius chooses the blunt violence of Jason and his men, as well as the youth and innocence of Medea, to continually overturn interpretations of Medea that see her as an inherently malevolent figure. Any "intertextual tension" between Valerius's Argonautica and other texts focus on usurping a one-dimensional idea of the Colchian princess and virtuous heroic actions (Hershkowitz 9).

Valerius's Medea is not an isolated, lonely figure. When she first appears, she

³⁴Jove first mentions Medea in Argonautica 4, when he states, "That wicked maiden of Colchis waits for the *Argo* to come, and for her crimes I foresee that at last Aeëtes' sorrows shall be avenged" (Valerius 4.12-14). Jove again piques the reader's interest in Medea's crimes when he states, "one day Medea (having paid a dismaying price of atonement to fate) will return to the aid of her helpless, aged, and exiled father and place on the throne his grandson, restoring his line once more" (5.750-753). These are clearly references to one strand of the tradition where Medea does enact revenge on her father's brother and helps her father regain control of Colchis, but Valerius's Medea does not exhibit any of the traits expected of this behavior. She is still a young "innocent" girl, who may have a great ability with herbs and magic, but she does not quite understand the power she can wield (5.380). It is the gods and the narrator who continually interject intertextual references into the epic to remind the reader of the possible behaviors Medea could exhibit.

is interacting with “a few of her court attendants” (Valerius 5.372). She is distraught before Jason’s trials with the bulls, but rather than staying alone in her room and brooding as she does in Apollonios’s *Argonautika* 3, Valerius has Medea “ask her sister to speak of Phrixus ... or perhaps to talk of Circe, their aunt” (7.131-133), “seek[s] among her handmaidens solace and comfort” (7.136-137), and “goes to her parents and clings to them like a child” (7.137). Valerius also engages Medea to an Albanian prince, although she admits to Venus, who Medea believes is her aunt Circe, that “I am engaged to be married to a man for whom I feel nothing” (7.282). She obeys her father’s wishes since she is willing to marry a man for whom she does not care, but who is her father’s choice.³⁵ She is loved by her parents and is a loyal Colchian subject. Most important, she is a child, not a woman, who looks to her family for love and support.

Additionally, when Jason leaves with Medea and the Golden Fleece, Medea’s family shows concern for her welfare. Her mother rails against Jason and calls him a “vile pirate” (8.148) who can “[k]eep the fleece; keep anything else you’ve filched from our temples; but give her back” (8.153-154). Medea’s mother is not alone in lamenting the loss of Medea since “her sister and all her maidens in waiting, [are] wailing, keening, calling their mistress’s name and a last farewell” (9.167-168).

³⁵Aeëtes has a dream where he is warned of an attack by the Greeks. To shore up his military strength, “the king is persuaded to take all proper precautions against those perils Phrixus’ ghost described—and Medea, though still a little girl, is betrothed to Albania’s prince” (Valerius 5.278-280). That the males in this epic do not think twice about using Medea as a negotiating strategy cannot be overlooked. She is a prized possession, not a formidable woman—only the gods’ (and the epic’s narrator’s) interpolations suggest otherwise.

Absyrtos whips together an army, which includes her fiancé, and calls Jason a “kidnapper, rapist, and a thief. No Jove, no godlike hero, he’s a common robber who flees with Phrixus’ sacred fleece and the girl, the princess—my sister” (8.253-255). Medea’s brother does not mince words about the way in which he perceives Jason’s actions. His attitude echoes heroic virtue since his purpose is to retain the honor of his city and his sister by pursuing and wreaking havoc on the Argonauts.

Medea then is a young, innocent girl connected to family and friends. She is certainly not a minor figure in Valerius’s epic, but her presence becomes overshadowed by the epic’s focus on the selfishness and brutality of not only Jason and the Argonauts but also Pelias, creating a disjunctive narrative turn that questions heroic honor even while privileging it. In Valerius’s *Argonautica*, it is difficult to codify who the savage barbarians are. The interplay between the constructs of barbarism and civility is the most significant theme of this text, and while Valerius has the gods intimate that Medea will act in proscribed ways *after* the Argonaut’s complete their journey through overt intertextual references to other literary embodiments of the figure, this Medea, like Apollonios’s, is consistently loyal, if more naïve, and manipulated by gods, goddesses, and Jason.

Valerius undercuts expectations of who Medea is by maintaining Medea’s innocence throughout the epic; the most surprising and shocking moments in the Roman *Argonautica* are not the overt hints of the most-known interpretations of the Medea persona, but the vengeful, frightening mistakes in battle and the sordid revenge of old men at the end of their power juxtaposed against which Medea’s

innocence comes into stark relief. Valerius chooses to portray Pelias, though a “feared and powerful king” (1.21), as a paranoid ruler who “is driven by hate” to send Jason, his nephew, on an “expedition [that will] end in ruin and death” (1.82). Once Jason has left with the *Argo*, Pelias chooses to destroy his nephew’s family. Aeson realizes what his brother Pelias will do and he and his wife choose to commit suicide rather than submit to Pelias’s cruelty. This effectively eliminates the rejuvenation ritual in Ovid’s Metamorphoses 7 and Medea’s need for supernatural powers. However, before Aeson kills himself, he imagines Jason returning with the Golden Fleece, where “my spirit will gloat as Pelias cringes,” and then foreshadows his brother’s heinous death:

But let his end be shameful, not by the hand of a soldier in the light of day, but secret, wretched, as women, his kinfolk, do him to shameful death. Let it be painful and also absurd, as those he has trusted turn on him, betraying, tearing him limb from limb in a madness that does not leave fragments enough for a tomb. (1.867-868; 1.868-873)

This curse invokes not only the shocking scene of Pelias’s murder found in Ovid’s Metamorphoses 7, but, more specifically, an episode in Metamorphoses 3 where Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, is dismembered by his wife and sisters during a Bacchanal.³⁶ In Metamorphoses 3, Autonoe “shreds [Pentheus’s] right arm and fierce

³⁶The episode in Ovid’s Metamorphoses 3 also echoes the many battles in which Jason and his men engage in during the Valerian epic, which include the battle between Amycus and Pollux in Argonautica 4 and the battle in Colchis in Argonautica 6. Valerius specifically equates the “shame and chagrin” of the women

Ino rips his left. . . . Agave seeing that, just howls; she shakes her head, her hair, tears off his head, and yells, as she lifts high his head: ‘This, comrades, spells our victory—our work!’” (Ovid Metamorphoses 3.724-727). Aeson envisions his brother’s death in much this manner, a bloody frenzy that has family member turning on family member in the same way Pelias has already turned on Aeson’s family. Valerius deemphasizes any idea of Medea assisting in Pelias’s murder by having Aeson wish that Pelias’s women destroy him in a bacchanalian fury.

While Zissos suggests, “Valerius’ poem exhibits a persistent drive to air the possibility of rival versions of its myth,” it does so by continually eliminating the possibility of Medea’s crimes presented in other texts (300). In Aeson’s hoped for end to Pelias, responsibility for Pelias’s murder shifts from Medea’s shoulders directly onto Pelias’s actions and his brother Aeson’s curse. This brother-versus-brother or uncle-versus-nephew violence, not privileged in Apollonios’s epic, may critique Roman political escapades—especially since, if Tacitus’s histories are accurate, parricide seems to have been a rite of passage in the imperial family of first century C.E. Rome. Even if Medea were to commit Pelias’s murder, this overt shift also serves to mitigate her culpability, since the murder of Jason’s younger brother is not only heinous but also a public act of execution.

There is something disturbing about Aeson’s son appearing as both witness to the enactment of his parents’ suicide pact and victim to Pelias’s soldiers. These men cannot take out their aggression on the already dead Aeson and Alcimedea, so the

who tore Pentheus apart with the horror the Argonauts feel after realizing they have murdered the entire male population in Cyzicus’s land in Argonautica 3 (3.286).

soldiers show “the little boy, terrified by his parents’ death . . . no mercy but hack him at once to pieces” (Valerius 1.884-886). This murderous act is extremely vicious and Aeson and Alcimedede’s inability to take their younger son’s well-being into account recalls what Euripides’s Medea does to her sons and, at the same time, invites the reader to wonder if what Medea does is more cruel than forcing a child to watch his parents commit suicide and then to suffer a hideous, shameful, and painful death without anyone to defend him. Furthermore, Valerius’s addition of Jason’s brother’s appalling murder serves to create an intertextual tension that illustrates that Euripides’s Medea’s worries for her children are justified. A depraved ruler like Pelias will stop at nothing to keep himself in power and, unlike Alcimedes, Medea could never allow her children to die without her by their side. Additionally, Medea would not be needed to murder Pelias since Pelias’s act assures him of a cruel death at Jason’s hands. The direct assault on Jason’s family creates an expectation that Jason must avenge his family when and if he returns with the Golden Fleece. Valerius’s hero could not remain on the sidelines while a covert accomplice, his wife, kills his family’s murderer.

In order to survive in a family as cruel and bloodthirsty as Jason’s, Valerius proves Jason to be as capable of violence as Pelias. Most particularly, in the nighttime battle on the shores of “the city of Cyzicus, a rich and prosperous king,” Jason proves his ability to destroy without compunction (2.677). When Jason and the Argonauts arrive in Cyzicus’s city, the ruler warns them that “[t]here are savage people here in this harsh terrain . . . but we are by no means brutes. Loyalty one can find here, and

honor, much like your own” (2.685-687). There is a civility with which Cyzicus treats Jason and the Argonauts and Cyzicus and Jason claim a lasting friendship after spending two days together. When the Argonauts board their ship, Cyzicus “weeps at their parting” (3.10). Unfortunately, Jason’s helmsman falls asleep at the wheel and, in the middle of the night, the Argonauts wind up back in Cyzicus’s shore without realizing where they are. Valerius complicates any notion of the Argonauts’ heroic stature since he revises his epic predecessor Apollonios to introduce a fault in their characters; in the Apollonian epic, they wind up back on Cyzicus’s shores due to “a contrary hurricane” and not to irresponsibly falling asleep at the wheel (1.1019). Further misfortune ensues since Cyzicus’s citizens are expecting a raid by a band of “savages” and arm for battle. Before the sun rises, this impromptu battle between friends devolves into a brutal, bloody, and heinous mess that leaves gory entrails and body parts strewn throughout the city.

Jason rises above the fray to be “the lord of the field and the battle’s master ... splashed in blood and gore, a force of nature, a storm whipping the waves of the killing” (3.164-167). Valerius’s Jason is a one-man killing wonder; there is no doubt that he is a stealthy and stalwart soldier. This hero is not afraid of battle or blood and enjoys lauding it over his opponents. He is as lethal and unstoppable as Hercules, who “with his huge club, flails about him with blows from a woodsman’s axe” (3.176-177).

Jason and Hercules are not the only combatants who fight without fear; even Cyzicus, who believes “his army has triumphed and put the invaders to flight” (3.243),

urges his men to “join in the orgy of killing” (3.254) before “Jason’s javelin hits him and strikes him close to the heart” (3.260). Jason kills his newest friend with one blow and Cyzicus’s last thoughts are not for his family or city, but “a regret for the pains of those woodland beasts he has slain himself with his spear” (3.261-262). Valerius privileges this revelation at the moment of Cyzicus’s death to equate the ludicrousness of friends blindly swiping at each other with the impersonal nature of a hunting expedition. This scene treats battles like a sporting event with opponents seen as nothing more than savage beasts to be slaughtered indiscriminately. There is no rhyme or reason to this murderous spree and it makes Medea’s actions in any other text seem like child’s play. These Argonauts’ enjoyment of and skill in battle, especially when unwittingly slaughtering their friends, complicates any simple-minded portrait of Medea, which presents her to be an evil entity waiting for a chance to commit some immoral crime. Placed alongside this spur-of-the-moment battle, Medea’s infanticide in Eurpides’s tragedy is a well-thought out, sensible action.

Valerius revels in the gory details of the carnage, but also spends an inordinate time describing the aftermath. Citizens “swarm over the field and its piles of corpses ... a mother stops as she recognizes a piece of fabric she wove herself, or a wife, staring down at the ground, weeps to see the gift she gave the broken body that has to be her husband” (3.297-301). Hershkowitz suggests that if Apollonios’s epic is “about the actions of men, ... Valerius’ epic, like Vergil’s [is] about something greater than the actions of men” (37). While there are obvious textual references between the two epics, there is a direct connection between the way in which both

epics choose not only to focus on the futility of war and violence, but also give voice to the victims of these senseless and brutal slayings.³⁷ Valerius's epic is continually undermining heroic tradition, even as it purports to emulate it, by showing the consequences of violence committed by heroes who treat war like an event at the Olympics.

When the Argonauts arrive in Colchis, they immediately join Aeëtes in battle with his brother Perses. In the Apollonian epic, neither the battle, nor Perses exist; Jason is forced, almost immediately, to attempt to accomplish Aeëtes's impossible tasks. In Valerius's epic, Aeëtes does not want the Fleece to leave Colchis, but the ruler of Colchis, like Pelias, lies to Jason and says he will gift him with the Golden Fleece if the Argonauts help him defeat his brother. This battle is as bloody as any the Argonauts have fought. Valerius describes "broken bodies that squished underfoot" (6.210), "body armor ... filled with blood" (6.212), "sudden geysers of blood" (6.213), and "the wheels of the rushing chariots mashed [Caresus] to pulp" (6.225). In this battle, "it's madness out there, and bravery seems to count for nothing" (6.230). If these descriptions of the carnage do not make the point that Jason and his men are heroes who revel in gore and killing, Valerius has Gesander, a one-man killing machine, confront the Argonaut Canthus on the battlefield:

Greek, you have traveled far, supposing the entire world were nothing more than the farms and vines you know in your native land, with its hillsides

³⁷In Valerius Flaccus' Argonautica: Abbreviated Voyages in Silver Latin Epic, Debra Hershkowitz analyzes in excruciating detail the intertextual references in Valerius's epic, which include Virgil's Aeneid, Homer's Iliad, and Apollonios's Argonautica.

dotted with houses. But this is harder country, colder, meaner, and we are reared to a toughness that you can scarcely begin to imagine. . . . We do not build city walls, for we do not believe in their illusions of safety and have no wealth, no heaped-up pile of possessions we need to protect. (6.354-364)

This passage is a judgment on men like the Argonauts who plunder without any regard for the people and places they destroy. Their goal is material wealth and power and Gesander suggests that he and his countrymen do no worry about material wealth and are tougher because of it. Gesander's speech warns Greeks, and by extension Romans, that everyone loves their homeland and will defend its honor to the death. Gesander's speech can also be seen as a reminder that Valerius's Medea will never renege on her love for Colchis. This notion is given credence by Jove's assertion early on that the "wicked maiden of Colchis waits for the *Argo* to come, and for her crimes I foresee that at last Aeëtes' sorrows shall be avenged" (4.12-14). This overtly intertextual reference to not only Euripides's *Medea*, but also Pindar's fourth Pythian ode and Apollonios's *Argonautika*, suggests that Medea is being sent to Greece not to avenge Pelias's disrespect to Jove's wife, as asserted in both Pindar and Apollonios's texts, but to avenge the Argonauts' theft of the Golden Fleece and Medea and thus to restore honor to Aeëtes and Colchis. Seen in this light, Gesander's proclamation places Jason in the role of outside instigator—the disrespectful foreigner who does not care about or comprehend the consequences of his actions.

Hershkowitz argues, "Aeëtes and his people were not better off before the arrival of the Greeks to their shores: the Argonauts' disruptions of natural boundaries

threatens and signals the start of social and political disruption on a world-wide epic scale” (236). In Valerius’s epic, this disruption is seen most clearly at three specific moments. While Medea’s mother wants to “tear the face of that vile pirate” once Jason has taken off with Medea and the Golden Fleece, she becomes pragmatic since she has already lived through her daughter Chalkiope’s marriage to the Greek Phrixus (Valerius 8.148). Medea’s mother realizes she cannot keep the Greek world from invading the Colchian shores and attempts to make a place (at least in her mind) for Jason as her daughter’s husband. She blames herself for not understanding the danger her daughter was in and believes, “[i]f only I had been smarter, I could have managed better: Jason could have lived in the palace, a son-in-law” (8.161-162).

Absyrtos, on the other hand, will never allow Jason to become his sister’s husband. Her brother’s perception is based on a rule of law that would see Colchis in a weaker light if Jason were allowed to abscond with both the Golden Fleece and his sister. This act would leave Colchis open to attack by other Greeks who believe that Aeëtes is a weak ruler and the city is an easy mark. Absyrtos asks his men not only to regain the Golden Fleece and his sister, but also to kill all “fifty sailors” before sinking the *Argo* in order to regain the city and his father’s honor (8.260). Medea’s brother proves himself as fearless a leader as Jason since the Colchian is fighting for what he believes is the safety and welfare of his city and his father’s rule. When he relays the rumor that Jason and Medea are to wed, the tone is obviously sarcastic: he would never allow this disrespectful Greek to wed his sister. However, in a veiled threat to the Greeks he begins pragmatically, “I must attend, as her brother and

representing our father ... We will present ourselves with banners flying and torches waving to do them the honor the occasion deserves" (8.263-268), before the full extent of his rage becomes evident, "A girl whose royal descent goes back to the god of the sun should have a wedding the world remembers—and I promise the Greeks, for as long as they live, will never forget it" (8.267-269). Absyrtos is his father's son and is willing to deceive the Argonauts to retrieve both his sister and the Golden Fleece. Jason will not have the chance to stab this soldier in the back, as he does in the Apollonian epic; Absyrtos will come out swinging.³⁸ These Greeks, if Absyrtos has anything to do with it, cannot have long to live.

Lastly, Medea's innocence and the protection of her family, in conjunction with Juno making sure Jason appears "gorgeous" to Medea, are all causes that contribute to her leaving with the Argonauts (5.397). If her family had taught her to be more cautious of outsiders, she might have been able to see the Argonauts for the brutal pirates that they are. It is only when she steps on the *Argo*, her brother and the Colchian army in pursuit, that Medea's consciousness shifts and she becomes aware of the consequences of her actions. There is danger not only to her person, but also to her city. She realizes that either Jason or her brother will die by the other's hand and makes a decision "that, however events may turn out, she will not endure the disgrace, but instead will end her life" (8.301-302). Medea is ashamed that she has placed her

³⁸In the Apollonian epic, Absyrtos becomes a sacrifice akin to the bull in the ritual known as the taurobolium. In Ancient Mystery Cults Walter Burkert gives a detailed account of this ritual, which is an accurate description of Apollonios's murder of Absyrtos. Of course, no one knows what happened to Absyrtos in Valerius's Argonautica since the poet died before he was able to complete the epic.

city in danger and in order to bring order back, she is willing to sacrifice her life.

Valerius's Jason, unlike Pindar and Apollonios's heroes, is willing to leave her behind.³⁹ The Argonauts see her as nothing more than kidnapped booty and become discouraged by her brother's relentless pursuit. Jason's shipmates take him aside and berate him for holding onto "this fury you've brought along" (3.378). The Argonauts want to know "why he should risk the lives of so many men of courage and honor, his friends and companions, for the sake of a single girl, a foreigner, a woman, a stranger?" (8.369-371). Jason listens to them and, rather than disagree and in spite of his longing for "the prospects of married life," he believes his men "have made a convincing case" and agrees to "leave her behind" (8.384; 8.383; 8.386). He asks his crew to remain silent so Medea does "not know the cruel decision he's made," but Medea figures out their plan and confronts Jason (8.391). When she is finished accusing him and the Argonauts of being ungrateful, "Jason is silent" (8.429). She realizes she is alone and "storms away in a fury ... [and] spends the day weeping, muttering imprecations, shouting defiant complaints, howling like wolves or lions or howling like cows whose heifers have been led away to the slaughter" (8.429-438). The young girl in her runs rampant on the deck of the *Argo*. Finally, Jason comes to

³⁹In contrast, Apollonios's Jason and the Argonauts appear to be willing to leave Medea with "Leto's daughter, till one of the royal lawgivers issued his verdict, whether she must turn back to her father's home ... or follow the heroes to the land of Hellas," but Jason assures Medea that this is a sham when she confronts him (The Argonautika 4.346-349). Jason's plan is to "lure [Absyrtos] on to his ruin" and use Medea as the bait (4.404-405). Pindar never mentions Absyrtos and Aëtes actually shows Jason where the Golden Fleece is hanging after his success with the fire-breathing bulls and hopes that Jason cannot "accomplish that labor" (243). He does—without any assistance from Medea.

her, but while he is “ashamed of himself and his men ... he is mindful of what he’s agreed to” (4.440-441). He is not speaking of his promise to Medea, but of his promise to the Argonauts. His last words and the last words of the unfinished epic are: “Do you think this was my idea?” (4.443).

This Jason *is* a pirate and Medea, her brother, and her mother comprehend, too late, the danger that Colchis has become prey to due to Jason’s unrelenting pursuit of the Golden Fleece. Colchis’s safety is compromised and Medea has assisted in creating this destabilization of the city before becoming his unwitting kidnap victim; the brutality and violence with which the Greeks live will now be a part of Colchis’s daily grief. The Greeks are the outsider invaders in this epic and no matter what the gods may say to indicate otherwise, Valerius continually subverts other renderings of Medea by maintaining her innocence in his *Argonautica*. This creates a portrait of Medea that challenges readers’ expectations at every turn. The endless, senseless violence of the epic’s males is contrasted against this innocence to offer a harsh critique of the brutality of heroic exploits. Ovid may privilege women’s narrative, but Valerius, by treating violence as sport, also reveals that women and children become sacrifices to a narrative that foregrounds violent acts committed in the name of fame and material gain. While both Ovid and Flaccus are critiquing social constructs of their day through narratives that privilege either the female point of view or critiques of a patriarchally authorized brutality, in *Medea*, Seneca constructs a narrative that challenges the notions of correct female behavior through a lens that suggests heroic virtue, but may actually be a critique of corrupt Roman rulers. Seneca purposefully

crafts his Medea with a negative pall, effectively effacing other literary texts' empathetic portrayals of Medea.⁴⁰

* * *

Seneca's Medea, an isolated female figure of singular self-possession, does not care what anyone thinks of her. She claims to be a loyal wife and a good mother, but Seneca fills the stage with magical rites and incantations, murderous acts of vengeance, and a character with the self-possession and ruthlessness on a scale equivalent to the heroics of an Achilles or Hercules and the god-like omnipotence of a Jove or Juno. If this is not enough to make her an unsympathetic character, Seneca also manipulates the plot by adding two twists that are not found in any other extant literary text in the Medea tradition. First, he has Pelias's son Acastus demand the death of Jason in retribution for the murder of the ruler of Iolkus, thereby complicating the reason why Jason marries Creon's daughter—he does it not to abandon his wife, but keep himself safe for the sake of the children.⁴¹ Second, there is no threat, imminent or otherwise, to Medea and Jason's children. Jason marries Creon's daughter, a woman he does not love, to keep them safe and Creon says he “will take them into my fatherly embrace as if they were mine” (Seneca line 284).

⁴⁰J.D. Bishop suggests that while there is no way to know when Seneca's tragedies were actually written, “if they are political, than the tragedies can hardly have been written during Seneca's exile except as a criticism of Caligula; but of what use and value was that?” (2). While there is no definitive answer as to whether Nero was or was not emperor when Seneca wrote *Medea*, I use examples of his rule as an allusion to the greater depravity and manipulation present during Rome in the first century C.E.

⁴¹In the reading and research I have done, I have not found one other source that uses or talks about Acastus's desire to avenge his father's murder.

This makes it difficult to empathize with Medea's plight. It is doubtful that Seneca's Medea needs empathy; she only craves an audience to watch what she does.

While Shadi Bartsch suggests, "her success *cannot* be simply dismissed as madness" (Mirror 278), Medea's determination to avenge Jason's betrayal of their vows creates a self-serving, manipulative, and dangerous portrait of an individual who frightens the citizens of Corinth. When Creon indicts Medea for having "a woman's irresponsibility for reckless daring and the strength of a man, with no thought of reputation" (Seneca 266-267), he means it as an insult, but these are the attributes of a hero, someone like Hercules, who continually pushes the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior with no thought for the consequences, or a Roman ruler like Caligula or Nero, who exhibit an amorality that transforms their subjects "into a gathering of the gagged" (Bartsch Actors 3). Seneca, more than Euripides or Ovid, pushes Medea's portrayal to the outer bounds of ethical behavior and Corti sees in his Medea the unattractive and dangerous qualities of Roman political figures. Seneca does this, according to Corti, because Medea is "not Roman, not male, not sane, and not easily recognizable," which allows him to obfuscate his critique of Roman imperial power while making that critique explicit (Myth of Medea 73). This perception that Seneca has chosen to portray the amorality of Roman rulers through a monstrous female figure cannot be dismissed outright and Bartsch argues that Seneca's Medea is "the madwoman with the bloody hands, the granddaughter of the Sun, the epitome of the most drastic form of vengeance," suggesting that Medea does, in fact, exhibit godlike traits that are regularly attributed to Roman rulers (Mirror

257).⁴²

Medea certainly acts like a Roman emperor. She does not mince words or minimize her crimes; she is afraid of no one and does not hesitate to put a ruler such as Creon in his place. Her figure looms awesome and terrifying throughout the tragedy. She even suggests that if she had stayed in Colchis she would have been her father's rightful heir since "I shone brilliant in my father's high birth and traced glorious lineage from my grandfather the Sun ... Nobly born, blessed, royalty and power made my life a shining splendor" (Seneca 208-216). Seneca's palimpsest privileges the most outrageous aspects of any of the various strands of the Medea tradition, while elevating this Medea through her adherence to the idea that what she does is "*fas*—lawful and right" (Nussbaum 224).⁴³ Imperial rulers such as Nero often believed that what they did was *fas* and it was their duty to demonstrate that justice through wielding power however they deemed fit. Stephen Greenblatt asserts, "the quintessential sign [of power] is the ability to impose one's own fictions upon the world: the more outrageous the fiction, the more impressive the manifestation of power" (13).

⁴²See Ovid's Metamorphoses 15 for the deification of Caesar.

⁴³Shadi Bartsch asserts that Medea's "Roman audience would know [her] from a whole series of dramas by that name: not only Euripides' drama, but also Neophron's and Carcinus' tragedies ... as well as Apollonius Rhodius' epic Argonautica; and closer to home, Ennius' Latin translation of Euripides' play, Varro of Atax's version of the Argonautica ... , Heroides 12 ... , the account of Medea in book 7 of Ovid's Metamorphoses, and, probably, most influential, his own now lost Medea" (Mirror 261). What this suggests is that Seneca may be the most self-conscious of all Roman writers, struggling to create a tragedy that would privilege the most salient points of each literary text where Medea is mentioned while also adding his own literary twists to make the characterization his own.

Bartsch equates “Nero’s reaction of pleasure and self-satisfaction at the image of his power” with the “delicious pleasure” Medea mentions after she has killed her first son; this misplaces Medea’s pleasure or *voluptas* onto the act of infanticide itself rather than the result of what it accomplishes—Jason’s complete annihilation (Mirror 186; Seneca 991). By focusing on Jason’s response to the infanticide rather than the infanticide itself, the act moves from the realm of amorality into Medea’s idea of *fas*—she believes she is committing a moral act designed to reap justice for her and to make Jason suffer. Medea does have a sense of morality since she exhibits remorse at the killing when she looks down on her son and states that she is “sorry for my deed” and calls him a “poor wretch,” even while acknowledging her *voluptas* at regaining her “scepter, my brother, my father; again the Colchians hold the prize of the gilded ram; my royal state is restored, my virginity returned” (Seneca 989; 980-983). Her pleasure is in making Jason pay for his inability to recognize her power and his abandonment of his position as her husband. In this way, Medea “is justified: yet she does monstrous things” (Nussbaum 445). Yet, if her actions are monstrous, they are as monstrous as an Achilles or Hercules, *and* a Caligula or Nero. Seneca plays a fine line between seeing Medea as a hero and portraying her like an amoral emperor out of control.

Nussbaum attempts to downplay any sense that Medea is other than a betrayed housewife when she suggests that, in general, Seneca’s tragedies “parade before us a series of loyal loving wives who are abandoned in middle age by opportunistic husbands—usually for a younger woman, sometimes for money, always with callous

disregard for the wife's long years of service" (224). Nussbaum further asserts, it is the loyal spouse, like Medea, "who really understands what it is to value a commitment to an external object—who will be most derailed by a loss" (224). However, Medea is not the loyal-middle-aged wife who commits to a man and then is bereft when he decides to leave her for ambition or a trophy wife.

Jason remarries in an attempt to keep his sons safe. Seneca adds a complication that places both Medea and Jason's life at risk at the top of the tragedy—Pelias's son Acastus wants to avenge his father's murder and is calling for their "capital punishment" (Seneca 256). Since Jason did not actually commit the murder, he and Creon believe "he has detached himself from complicity and kept himself undefiled" (264-265). By marrying Creon's daughter and distancing himself from Medea, he is offering protection to his children—nothing more and nothing less. Jason is torn by his decision, but he does not understand why Medea is not "more concerned for the children than for her marriage" (443).

Seneca radically departs from Euripides's characterization of Jason as ambitious and Ovid's interpretation in the Heroides that he is deceitful and duplicitous. Seneca shifts any cavalier attitude regarding the children's wellbeing from Jason to Medea. Medea now becomes the solipsistic warrior or ruler who loves danger and does not worry about the consequences to anyone, including herself; or does not believe there will be any consequences to her since she is invincible. Seneca makes Jason's remarriage to Creon's daughter not about his ambition to rule, but about his desire to avoid execution and stay alive for his sons' sake. Unlike Medea,

who revels in the drama, this Jason is tired of life on the run and wants to live without fear. This could make him a more pathetic figure than the character found in Euripides's tragedy, but his seeming willingness to sacrifice Medea to Acastus is for the protection of his sons; Jason does not want Medea to die since he convinces Creon not to execute her even though the Corinthian ruler makes a pledge to do just that. Seneca's Jason is weary of fighting; he wants peace. He marries Creusa in order to keep himself alive for his children. Jason wrestles with his choices, in what can only be described as the antecedent to Shakespeare's conflicted Prince of Denmark, Hamlet:

If I should choose to keep faith with my wife's deserts, I should have to yield my head to death; but if I should choose not to die, I must, poor wretch, prove faithless. Yet it is not fear that has vanquished faith, but the apprehension of a conscientious father, for surely the children would follow their parents to death. . . . The sons have prevailed over the father. (Seneca 433-438)⁴⁴

This Jason proves his love for his children by placing their wellbeing over Medea's. He is tormented by his decision and feels guilt for abandoning his wife, but he believes he must stay alive to protect his sons. Even the fact that Creon is only too happy to protect Jason, whom he sees as "an exile helpless and haunted by pressing fear," must leave Jason with a sense of guilt (255). If Acastus has made clear his wish to avenge his father Pelias's murder by "demanding [Jason's] person for capital punishment," Jason and Creon believe Medea's life is also in danger (257). Jason

⁴⁴This speech in both syntax and sentiment corresponds to Shakespeare's Hamlet's "To be or not to be speech" (Hamlet III.i.56-88).

knows he will be able to slip through and not be charged with Pelias's murder if, as Creon tells Medea, "Jason can defend his case if you separate yours from it. No blood has tainted his innocence. ... It is you, you, who are the architect of odious crime" (262-266). This is an indication that this ruler was never happy to have Medea reside in Corinth, but also of Jason's knowledge that Medea has always been loathed inside the city.

However, even Creon tells Medea, "Go, I will take [your children] into my fatherly embrace as if they were mine" (282). Unlike in Euripides's tragedy or Ovid's *Heroides*, there is every reason to believe that the children will be safe in Corinth. Jason, in spite of his faults, is a reasonable man and a good father; additionally Creon has chosen to protect him by making him his son-in-law. If Medea had any concerns about the children, she might pack up and leave with them, but Medea's reason for murdering her sons has nothing to do with any fear that the Corinthians or anyone else will destroy them; her plan only focuses on vengeance. She is angry that Jason is unable to stick with her no matter the consequences.

Jason becomes the only person Medea wants and the only one she cannot have. Until the moment he is truly gone, it has not mattered. Seneca completely isolates Medea, making it difficult to understand what Jason ever saw in her. This isolation causes her to completely "cut herself off from the judgment of society," indicating that Medea does not operate in the ethical world of daily life, but is somehow above it or, at least, believes she is above it (Bartsch *Mirror* 279).

Her entrance, the first of the play, occurs on an empty stage. She arrives

alone—there is no Nurse, no chorus to make a connection or create empathy between audience and character. She is not the disavowed wife heard lamenting offstage as in Euripides’s tragedy, but like Aphrodite in Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, Medea enters with the full knowledge of who she is and what she will do.⁴⁵ Medea invokes, “Jupiter and Juno, patrons of wedlock; thou Lucina, keeper of the conjugal couch; thou Minerva ... Neptune ... Hecate ... Pluto ... Proserpina” (Seneca 1-6), not to ask for their blessing for the acts of vengeance she is about to commit, but so they can watch her work. At the beginning of this tragedy, Medea does not appear to believe she is human—she acts like an equal of the gods and calls on them as though she is sending out invitations to a dinner party. Before she ever steps onto the stage, she has planned out the murder of “the new bride, death for the father-in-law and the royal stock” (18). This Medea does not need or want anyone’s assistance or approval to do what she already knows she will do. She lets loose with the war whoop of a hero about to go into battle and the certainty of a god when she declares, “Gird yourself in fury, and with all your frenzy ready yourself for destruction! Let the tale of your divorce be as memorable as that of your marriage” (Seneca 51-53).

If, as Nussbaum suggests, she is a disavowed middle-aged housewife raging at the prospect of being left for a younger wife, she will not sit quietly; however, this Medea, more than any other extant text’s portrait does not seem as though she ever sat quietly for anything. While she does hold Jason culpable for her crimes and tells

⁴⁵ Aphrodite’s first line in Euripides’s tragedy before she reveals how and why she is going to destroy Hippolytus is “Great is my power and wide my fame among mortals” (Euripides *Hippolytus* 67).

Creon, “Many times have I been made guilty, but never for myself” (278), she never claims innocence, even when Jason first met her in Colchis. Her self-assured posture does not allow for an empathic connection; her sense of privilege is so large, there is almost no space for anyone else. If she were Aphrodite, the audience might sit back and watch the plot unfurl, but Medea is a wife and mother, not a god, and Seneca *wants* the audience to pass judgment.

Corti argues, “Seneca’s Medea is divested of the social context that makes her seem relatively understandable in the Euripidean text” and the most obvious way Seneca does this is through the chorus’s fear and loathing of her (Myth of Medea 69). Unlike Euripides’s chorus, who empathize, comfort, and aid Medea, creating a sense of a connection with her Corinthian community, Seneca’s Medea enters the stage alone, shares her plan for vengeance with the gods and the creatures of the Night before moving to the side of the stage to watch the chorus from a distance as they deliver an epithalamium to celebrate the marriage of Jason and his new bride. Medea and the chorus *never* interact. The chorus are relieved that Jason is “[d]elivered from the wedlock of uncouth Phasis, schooled fearfully and with [an] unwilling hand to fondle the bosom of an incontinent mate” (Seneca 104-106). While there is no indication if this chorus consists of men or women or a combination of the two, whoever they are they detest and fear Medea and look forward to the departure of “the woman who surreptitiously marries a foreign husband” (114). It is clear from this opening choral ode that Medea has never found a community of peers in Corinth. Perhaps this is due to her foreigner status as an exile or perhaps her murders and

magical skills truly frighten the Corinthians and they do not trust what she might do if they became too close. Either way, there is a sense from this ode that Medea has always been isolated in Corinth and she has protected herself by exuding an air of superiority.

In the second choral ode, the chorus equates her with the dangers inherent in sea travel and finds Medea “an evil worse than the sea” (361). Medea never reveals to the chorus what her plans are, but as it senses the culmination of her “blazing hatred,” brought on by the dissolution of her marriage, it notices that “[h]er expression is rigid with stark passion, her head she weaves with gesture fierce and proud, and threatens even the king; who would believe her an exile?” (577; 855-857). The chorus then finds this Medea a woman of uncommon self-determination who does not know her place as an exile. It resents her ability to live with no shame, especially considering the crimes she has committed, and it fears the magic in which she dabbles. They also do not trust her inability to act like a proper “Aeolian” wife (107). The chorus treats her like a pariah and cannot wait for her to leave Corinth.

The chorus is not alone in their estimation of Medea. If it were up to Creon, he never would have allowed her to enter Corinth, but Jason is his blood relation through the House of Aeolus and so he acquiesced. Creon willingly would have “eradicate[d] that dangerous plague with the sword, but my son-in-law begged me off,” indicating that Jason may be the only individual who empathizes with her (185-186). Creon minces no words; in addition to calling her a plague, he calls her “menacing” (186); “monstrous, savage, repulsive self” (262); and “wicked” (297). He has no problem

insulting her to her face. In Creon's mind, Jason's marriage to his daughter is the best reason to rid Corinth of the Colchian princess. Creon believes that Medea's presence causes "my realm ... fear" (186) and once he has acquiesced to Jason's request not to execute her, he hopes she "go[es] elsewhere for her safety," intimating that Medea will not last long in Corinth now that Jason has married Creon's daughter and no longer has the protection of Creon, the city of Corinth or Jason (187). Medea cannot help but to put Creon in his place. She gloats over Creon that she is more successful at taking care of Corinth's subjects than he is:

[T]here is a glorious and incalculable possession in the power of kings which time can never snatch away: To protect the downtrodden, to shelter supplicants on a hearth they can trust. This alone have I brought with me from my Colchian realm, that myself I saved that magnificent and illustrious flower of Greece, bulwark of the Achaean race, progeny of gods. Orpheus is my gift ... Castor and Pollux, and Boreas' scions, and Lynceus ... and all the Minyans. (218-227)

Medea rebukes Creon for not protecting his subjects when they need his help, i.e., her, while making it clear that she embraced that responsibility *and* succeeded. She believes she is a better example of Greek heroics than Creon could ever be since she saved the Argonauts, the "progeny of the gods," from what would have been certain destruction (226). She is insulting Creon by stating that she knows more about proper rule than he does. This Medea is not—and never was—an innocent girl manipulated by gods or handsome Greeks; she is not a wise prophetess or a divine being. However,

she is more than the betrayed wife seeking revenge—she talks about Jason to Creon as though she was the one who set out on the *Argo* to grab the Golden Fleece: “there is no debt [for Jason], him I charge to no one’s account. The others I brought back for you; Jason, for myself” (228-230). To Medea Jason is not a human being, but an object of possession—he is her Golden Fleece and she will do anything to protect that connection and her prize. Medea believes she is as heroic as Hercules and as powerful as the gods. In her eyes, she is the powerful ruler that Creon and Jason cannot be. In this way, when Medea seeks revenge through the acts of regicide and infanticide, she does not care about the consequences because she knows she is Creon and Jason’s better.

While Medea cannot behave with any sense of civility around Creon or the chorus, she does let her guard down with Jason. Jason, for his part, is clearly torn; he is entering into a loveless marriage with Creon’s daughter in order to keep his sons out of harm’s way. Medea revels in exile and dangerous escapades, but Jason is tired of his exilic existence and wants something more for his children. Medea indicates she would forgive him if they left together, but she makes it sound like a command: “Medea is not forcing you to take arms against your father-in-law or to pollute yourself with the murder of your kinsmen Acastus; flee with me, free of guilt” (523-525). Jason cannot. He is tired of being on the run, of always watching his back, and he wants a different life for his sons. He turns to Medea and asks, “who will defend us if twin wars assail us, if Creon and Acastus join forces?” (526). He knows the answer. Medea, like any Homeric hero or emperor is not afraid of anything. Bring on

the Colchians, she daringly proclaims, and her father along with the Scythians and Pelasgians—she “will overwhelm them all” (528). Jason can no longer live in the charade and admits, “Life is thankless when one is ashamed of having received it” (501, 530). He is no longer the young adventurer grateful that she saved his life. To survive and give the children a chance at life, he must reject Medea and her crimes. Medea can fend for herself; she has proven herself worthy of that task time and again.

In this way, Medea becomes the dangerous supplement that can render the downfall of the Corinthian kingdom because she reaches beyond expected social norms to take what she wants as any hero or Roman ruler does; she *is* a woman who acts like a man. Medea’s statement that Jason “robbed me of father, country, kingdom; can he cruelly desert me, all alone and in a foreign place” is disingenuous since no one makes this Medea do anything (117). She knows exactly how powerful she is and she knows that Jason, who has “seen fire and ocean vanquished by my crime,” understands this too (118). This Medea does not apologize for her actions and Jason is the only thing that matters to her. He is her prize, her Golden Fleece and everything she does is in service to making sure that everyone knows this.

When the Nurse announces to Medea that “nothing is left,” Medea is well aware that “Medea is left. Here you see sea and land, steel and fire and gods and thunderbolts” (157; 158). In Seneca’s tragedy, Medea believes that she *is* the natural law. While Bartsch argues, “she has been becoming Medea ever since the first lines of the play,” this Medea has sprung full form as a completely self-reliant figure of *fas* that she is (Mirror 258). She does not need the time of the tragedy to transform into

anything. Bartsch suggests that Medea says her name eight times in this tragedy as opposed to the one in Euripides's in order to "suggest that the literary and legendary model of who 'Medea' is stands before her eyes as well as ours," but this Medea is unlike any other Medea that has come before and will come after (258). Her *volputas* comes from her fearlessness; it is the mark of an Achilles and the brutality of a Hercules and the amorality of a Nero. The fierceness of this Medea overpowers other literary markings of the Medea tradition and wipes out any reason to call her good. Seneca's Medea *is* the monstrously amoral figure that Hunter and Clauss insist exists in Apollonios's innocent priestess overwhelmed by Hera's plot and Isbell and Jacobson excoriate in the pathetically tragic victim of Ovid's Heroides. Even Page mistakes the divine justice of the *alastor* in Euripides's tragedy for Seneca's paragon of evil. Seneca's Medea kills Jason's children to watch Jason suffer in the same way that Achilles kills Hector to make Hector's father Priam weep or Nero poisons Britannicus in front of the dinner guests: because they can. Medea then is the ultimate threatening and dangerous entity that can destroy the infrastructure of a civilized society.

Denis Henry and Elizabeth Henry assert, "Medea's purpose is at all stages ... a destructive one," but Medea does not believe she is being destructive, she is only meting out the justice that any imperial ruler would see as a fitting punishment for a disloyal subject (34). Medea's exit on the dragon chariot is not, as Nussbaum argues, "the triumph of love," nor is it merely, as Bartsch suggests, "Medea's deformity, like that of an angry man in the mirror, shines back at her, and like him, she likes it—and

her community of one is enough for her” (Nussbaum 249; Bartsch Mirror 281).

Rather Seneca privileges Medea’s most disturbing aspects to call into question the amorality present in Roman rule and the danger of allowing that amorality to continue unchecked in society. Seneca’s purpose is not to create a monstrous woman, an “other” that will allow an audience to distance themselves from their own despicable crimes, but to embody the solipsistic amorality of an imperial culture run amok—an amorality that the philosopher, as the tutor of Nero and a supporter of imperial rule, may feel a partial responsibility.

In the De clementia, Seneca proposes that the imperial ruler sees himself as “the arbiter of life and death for all peoples” and recognizes that “whatever luck and standing anyone has is placed in my hand; anything Fortune wants to give to any mortal, she announces through my mouth” (qtd. In Braden 16). This is a much different idea of justice than what is found in Euripides’s tragedy and Pindar and Apollonios’s poems. Greek tradition often seems to privilege a belief that the gods were the final arbiters of fate and no one, no matter how hard they struggled, could elude their destiny. Seneca’s implication in the De clementia is clear— imperial rule has replaced the gods’ justice, but in his Medea, this precept is recast in a more sobering light. The divinity accorded imperial rule is mirrored in Medea’s exit on the chariot, but instead of it being a glorious event, it bodes a destructive end and Jason, a good, but feckless man, can only watch as his wife leaves to wreak havoc somewhere else. For Jason and for Seneca there are no gods where amorality lives—it is an ideology that cannot be hacked at with a sword or reasoned away. Medea has left

Corinth, but her spirit will ride the universe in the guise of imperial rule and justice;
what is *fas*, will be duped by ego.

V

Re-Visioning Medea

[A]rt does not pretend to autonomy; the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power.

—Stephen Greenblatt in Renaissance Self-Fashioning (7)

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that ... And a rush of imagination is our "flooding."

—Toni Morrison in "The Site of Memory" (199)

The secularizing demonization of Medea began well before Pindar wrote the fourth Pythian ode, but the strands of her tradition that privilege divinity and innocence have been most noticeably destabilized by "the revenge-crazed, blood-stained mother" of Seneca's imperially-based tragedy, as well as misinterpretations and misogynistic readings of Euripides's *alastor* (Tuana 268). While the strong traces of her divine past are clearly encoded within Euripides's Greek tragedy and Pindar and Apollonios's poems, Ovid, Valerius, and Seneca overtly refashion the myth to serve the ideological stance that "life and death [are] opposites" (268). Death becomes an evil that must be overcome or denied, and, according to Nancy Tuana, any individual "who has the power over the mysteries of life and death will be transformed into an evil witch" (269). By the first century C.E. in Rome, this delineation is a *fait accompli* and prevailing dogma—both religious and political—excise without compunction any overt traces of feminine sovereignty with its ambivalence regarding blurring of these boundaries.

Almost two thousand years after Euripides's Medea first appeared, Chaucer's The Legends of Good Women, based on Ovid's Heroides 12 and Guido delle Collone's Historia destructionis Troiae 1-3, doubly effaces the powerful and autonomous Medea, connected to the divine, through a portrayal that places her squarely in the category of "gentile women, tender creatures" who are duped by "false lovers" like Jason (Chaucer IV.1370; IV.1368).⁴⁶ While Chaucer had at his disposal numerous texts that privilege a negative reading of Medea, the Medieval poet chose Ovid's portrayal of the betrayed wife in the Heroides 12 to craft a text that domesticates Medea through her submission to both her father's will—"He made hire don to Jason companye / At mete, and sitte by hym in the halle" (IV.1601-1602)—and Jason's wooing—"Youre man I am, and lowely yow beseche / To ben my helpe" (IV.1626-1627). Medea's "supernatural" abilities are sanitized and Chaucer focuses on Jason's unchivalrous behavior towards both Medea and Hypsipyle, who is named as Jason's first wife. The unsavory crimes of Medea found in Seneca and Euripides do not exist in Chaucer's work; she is reborn as a devoted *and* chaste wife who becomes the unwitting pawn of her husband's "desyren through his appetit / To don with gentil women" (VI.1586-1587). Medea no longer controls the purview of her domain and is portrayed as a reflection of her father and husband's wishes; she serves as an exemplar of both chastity and loyalty. There is no threat that this woman will

⁴⁶In The Riverside Chaucer, M.C.E. Shaner and A.S.G. Edwards's explanatory notes suggest Ovid's Metamorphoses 7.1-396 is also an influence "although Shannon, *Ch and Roman Poets*, 219, denies the influence of the Metamorphoses here" (1069).

breach patriarchal power's stronghold—she is the epitome of submission to male authority.

While this is an extreme example of one of the ways in which Medea has been rehabilitated throughout the last two thousand years, Shakespeare retools Seneca's Medea in a more sophisticated manner than Chaucer's re-interpretation of Ovid's Heroides 12. The Elizabethan playwright adapts a minor plot point that is the foundation of Seneca's tragedy to analyze the pitfalls of treasonous ambition. While Inga-Stina Ewbank suggests, "Shakespeare has seized on a few emotional key-moments in the Medea, linked them with other themes and images in the play, and built them into his own moral structure," this is not entirely accurate (83).

Shakespeare appropriates a minor, but significant, plot twist attributable to Seneca in order to shift the entire focus from the female heroine of the Roman tragedy to an ambitious man's reach for ever more power in Macbeth. Seneca privileges the idea that Pelias's son Acastus wants to hold both Medea and Jason responsible for his father's murder, which brings a sense of immediacy to the tragedy that is not found in Euripides's Medea.⁴⁷ This shift in plot implies that the couple killed Acastus's father in order to secure Jason a place as ruler of Iolkus; but while Medea's murderous action succeeded, Jason never rose to power and the couple flees to Corinth in order

⁴⁷In John Studley's translation of Seneca's Medea, Creon makes it especially clear that Acastus is coming after Medea and Jason for their attempt to unseat Pelias—"Acastus having got the crowne of Thessail lande, Requyreth in thy guilty bloude to bath his wreackful hande" (Newton 67). Later on Jason tells Medea, "Acastus is at hand" (78). Whether Shakespeare read Studley's translation, Seneca's Latin or both is not certain, but there are elements traceable to each version in Macbeth.

to escape retribution. Acastus's desire to avenge his father's murder drives Jason to marry Creon's daughter in order to distance himself from Medea's murder and protect their two sons from Acastus's wrath. Medea is left without protection and this drives her to seek revenge. There is no such revenge in Shakespeare's Macbeth since the playwright is not concerned with exploring an act of treason in terms of the revenge drama it sets in motion. Rather Shakespeare is interested in the act of treason that the blind ambition for the crown of Scotland motivates.

During Shakespeare's epoch, treason was a genuine threat to royalty and in 1600, the earl of Gowrie, "violating ancient codes of hospitality and of fealty ... attempted to murder James VI of Scotland while the sovereign was staying at Gowrie's house in Perth" (Mullaney 116). Gowrie was "cut down in the attempt," but, according to Gowries Conspiracie, he was found with a pouch that contained "magicall characters, and words of inchantment, wherein, it seemed, he put his confidence" (116; qtd. in Mullaney 116). Shakespeare extracts pertinent details from the story of Gowrie as well as the plot twist and magical incantations associated with Seneca's Medea to craft a tragedy that subverts any notions of female power and aggression in favor of examining why and how "brave Macbeth," a man who is described as "[d]isdaining Fortune" and "valor's minion" becomes a treasonous subject (Shakespeare Macbeth I.i.16; I.i.17; I.i.19). This is ironic since Seneca's entire tragedy revolved around hiding imperial masculine depravity in his female character's vengeful plot and Shakespeare places the power back into the patriarchy's hands since he does not need to hide "the evil that men do" (Julius Caesar III.ii.75).

However, Shakespeare's tragedy no longer has any resonance with Medea's revenge or Jason's betrayal and becomes a secular nightmare of corrupt power, duplicity, and regicide. Shakespeare exploits the model of Pelias's murder in Seneca's Medea and places Macbeth and Lady Macbeth at the moment when they decide to kill Duncan, the king of Scotland. This allows Shakespeare to unravel the reasons for treason from a patriarchal vantage point, while incorporating magic into political intrigue on a level more sophisticated than Seneca attempted.

Although Lady Macbeth's pathology is more complex than Seneca's Medea, Shakespeare examines her trajectory from fiendish sidekick to distraught accomplice while privileging the premise that magic, in any form, is "the sin of Satan" and must be punished (McGee 65). Lady Macbeth may appear to be the driving force that keeps her husband on course for the bloody gore that follows the couple throughout the tragedy, but she is more bluster than action.⁴⁸ She engages the powers of darkness to help Macbeth accomplish his treasonous plans, but when she famously tells Macbeth that she could "[h]ave plucked my nipple from [my child's] boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this," she does not *need* to do this (and cannot since she has no children). Her words are an empty threat and have more to do with convincing herself to stay strong for her husband's benefit and rooting for Macbeth to stay his course (Macbeth I.vii.57-59). Lady Macbeth has no position of authority in this endeavor; Macbeth "break[s] this enterprise to [her]"

⁴⁸ Actually, she sounds like a football coach attempting to rile up her star quarterback for the big game. Al Pacino's Tony D'Amato in Oliver Stone's Any Given Sunday is a good example.

and she is the loyal wife who supports her husband's ambition rather than reporting him to the king, which mirrors the young Medea's choice, found in Apollonios and Valerius's epics, to assist Jason in obtaining the Golden Fleece instead of telling her father what Jason's plans are (I.vii.48).

Lady Macbeth, unlike Medea, cannot live with what she has done (or not done) and her life ends with a whimper. Her inability to immerse herself in the immorality of Macbeth's plan proves that this is not a woman of overarching depravity, but a wife who meant to be loyal to her husband no matter what turn his plans took, but fails in her endeavor. Lady Macbeth's transformation into a secularized archetype of evil is complete only when she succumbs to guilt. Her shame as Macbeth's accomplice unmoors her, and Shakespeare makes it clear that she is not an instrument of "vengeance," but Macbeth's "undaunted mettle" that cracks under pressure (Seneca Medea 24; Shakespeare Macbeth I.vii.73).

In Medea, Seneca catches Medea in the moment after Jason betrays her, not before the treasonous act of Pelias's murder; Shakespeare transports the couple back in time and reverses the power dynamic between Jason and Medea; in Macbeth the man runs the murderous enterprise and the woman is his passive, although willing, accomplice. Macbeth is the driving force behind every crime that occurs in Shakespeare's tragedy. He does not shy away from his responsibility for his crimes but does wonder if he is following the most expedient course of action. Shakespeare unconsciously crafts Macbeth with the heroic virtue of the Jason seen in Pindar's fourth Pythian ode—a man who is not afraid of battle and, until recently, a loyal

subject, but with the fortitude of Seneca's villainous Medea. When Macbeth vacillates between regicide and patience, Lady Macbeth meets and extends his ambition, although she is not the agency of it. Unlike Seneca's Medea, Macbeth is not a solitary, isolated figure; he is connected to his wife, his soldiers-in-arms, and the Weird Sisters. Additionally, Duncan considers him a loyal and trustworthy subject whereas no one ever completely trusts Seneca's Medea. Macbeth does not behave in an emasculated fashion that, according to W. Moelwyn Merchant, "Lady Macbeth has presumed to judge ... as merely ineffectual weakness," but he is a good soldier who weighs his choices carefully and understands that if the regicide fails not only will his ambition be thwarted, but both he and his wife will be held responsible and probably executed (77).

By incorporating elements of the plot of Seneca's Medea into his tragedy, Shakespeare actually manages to place Macbeth in the position of Jason *and* Medea. His ambition is seen through the lens of his wife's gaze—a powerful man with heroic ability who only needs someone to keep him on track. Once he has murdered Duncan, he feels beholden to these evil entities even though he knows "[t]his supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (Shakespeare Macbeth I.iii.130-131). Like Lady Macbeth's call to the "spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts," he turns to "seeling night" to offer him protection from the doubts he has:

Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
 And with thy bloody and invisible hand
 Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond

Which keeps me pale. (I.v.38-39; III.ii.46-50)

When Macbeth asks for this aid, he is waiting to hear confirmation that Banquo has been murdered by the mercenaries he hired. Even if he is “but young in deed,” Banquo’s murder will make it impossible for Macbeth to disavow the regicide—his action is no longer the singular deed of an ambitious man; there are other crimes and other people in addition to his wife who now know what he is capable of in his quest to be and remain king of Scotland (III.iv.144). Shakespeare takes Medea’s defiance—she murders Pelias, Creon, and Creusa without caring that they are royalty and with no design on their positions—to shape Macbeth’s desire to be king.

Unlike Medea, Macbeth has no ill feeling towards Duncan or Banquo or anyone else he has murdered—they are only obstacles in the way of the crown who must be eliminated. His vacillation is brought on by the enormity of what must be done to assure his right and stronghold to the kingdom. He chooses, like Lady Macbeth, to call the dark spirits for support in his endeavor. When Macbeth doubts his actions, his vacillation also follows Seneca’s Medea’s remorse for what she is about to do to her children: “Why, soul of mine, do you teeter? Why are my cheeks flooded with tears, why do I waver and let anger now jerk me this way, and love, now that?” (Seneca *Medea* 937-939).⁴⁹ Medea and Macbeth express moments of regret; however, unlike Lady Macbeth, neither reneges on their decisions to commit

⁴⁹Studley’s translation of Seneca’s tragedy suggests that this vacillation is a key component even in Medea’s makeup. “Of false revolting mynde, Why dost thou staggering to and fro such change of fancies fynde? Why is my Face be sprent with teares, what makes mee falter so that wrath and love with striving thoughts doe leade me to and fro?” (Newton 95).

treasonous acts of regicide. They follow their plans to the bloody end. Macbeth's ambition leaves more dead bodies than Medea's revenge since he chooses to murder anyone with a connection to the crown, including the small children and wife of Macduff; however, even though Shakespeare's tragedy has been called "an exploration of the meaning of Evil and its ramifications," Macbeth's vacillation and his maleness (in addition to fact that the children he had murdered are not his own) may allow him to appear more human than the infanticidal murderesses of both Euripides and Seneca's tragedies (G.K. Hunter 1). While Seneca's Medea is perceived as the ultimate outsider, Shakespeare's Macbeth is empathized with due to the moments where he wonders if what he has done is morally acceptable not to the gods, but to other human beings; however, both characters do not regret their murderous crimes. Like Seneca's Medea, Macbeth "throw[s on his] warlike shield" and refuses to capitulate (Shakespeare Macbeth V.vii.33). He has made his choice and will stick with it through and into death. That is the difference between the two characters. Macbeth pays for his immorality with his life, and Medea gets off scot-free.

Medea's tale of vengeance is erased from Shakespeare's tragedy since he is more interested in the treason that occurs in the often-ignored episode in Iolkus, but Seneca's small shift in plot allows Shakespeare to construct a full-bodied interpretation of the nature of ambition using the minor plot point found in the Roman tragedy. Shakespeare's Macbeth suggests that a Medea as monstrous as Seneca's

creation would not have ever had the chance to murder her children—she and Jason would have never made it out of Iolkus after murdering Pelias.

In Macbeth, Shakespeare privileges patriarchal authority and transports a small plot point and Medea's resolve from Seneca's tragedy in order to shed light on the psychology of an ambitious soldier's actions. While the playwright gives an emotional arc to Macbeth's wife, Shakespeare is only concerned with her actions and thoughts as they relate to her husband's plans. Against the backdrop of the brutality of war, the male figures in Macbeth are judged according to their devotion to the king. Shakespeare uses Macbeth to shape a world where men's actions are inherently barbarous, but moral if they are devoted to the hierarchal order and immoral if they chose to usurp the power structure for their own gain. In this way, Macbeth has less to do with the evil that emanates from entities like the Weird Sisters or Hecate and more with the notion that desire and ambition are immoral in any form.

Macbeth's moments of self-reflection, especially after Banquo's murder ("The time has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die / And there an end. But now they rise again / with twenty mortal murders on their crowns") and at the discovery of his wife's death ("Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more"), suggest that Shakespeare was ahead of his contemporaries in creating multi-dimensional portraits that refuse simplistic interpretations of good and evil while privileging a patriarchal authoritative discourse (III.iv.78-81; V.iv.24-26). In the twentieth century, the shift towards self-reflection reallocates concern from the political discourse and

machinations of high-born individuals found in Greek, Roman and Elizabethan tragic and epic poetics to the prosaics of the novel, which concentrate on the more apparently ordinary familial history seen in ignoble lives. Bakhtin claims, “In the history of literary language, there is a struggle . . . against various kinds and degrees of authority” and novels such as Ludmila Ulitskaya’s Medea and Her Children and Toni Morrison’s Beloved purposefully engage with political and cultural concerns refracted through the personal discourse of ordinary human beings (“Discourse in the Novel” 534). This privileging of the commonplace delays and disperses the ramifications of any individual’s action as it relates to the domains of both the familial and the political. The self-reflective “internally persuasive discourse” becomes the foundation of a post-modern dialectic that fosters multiple points of view and eliminates any sense of surety and stability (534). This prosaic discourse also secularizes the context in which the gods are apparently dead or absent or at least silent and arbitrary. Rather than divine authority, it is time that alters perspective and a situation that once seemed traumatic becomes part of a forgotten landscape of why family members refuse to speak to each other or why neighbors self-defensively judge another’s extreme action. New crises are the grounding force that alters the landscape. Every moment is a decision, but sometimes the ramifications of a decision do not manifest until an individual is long dead. Chance becomes the norm and decisions are the acts of human beings caught in the moment.

In Ulitskaya’s Medea and Her Children, Russia’s multiple displacements due to revolution and war during the late nineteenth and twentieth century are purposefully

positioned in the background while the tale of Medea Sinoply's large and eccentric family foregrounds the novel. Medea is again the center of both the novel and the family's history, but her portrayal serves as a stark counterpoint to Euripides or Seneca's tragedies. This Medea is more like the young innocent girl skilled with herbs and devoted to Hecate in Apollonios's epic or Euripides's Nurse—long-suffering and silent. The novel opens with her “not strolling idly but gathering sage, thyme, mountain mint, barberry, mushrooms, and rosehips” privileging her connection to the natural world and her skills with herbal concoctions (Ulitskaya 4).

At sixteen years of age, after her parents die within a short time of each other, Ulitskaya's Medea is called on to raise the three youngest of her number of siblings—two brothers and one sister. Like Apollonios's Medea who bases part of her decision to help Jason on Chalkiope's request to help her sons, she willingly sacrifices her youth to care for these relatives. Once her siblings are grown, in contrast to the classical Medea, she does not have children of her own; however, she becomes the safe haven for her young relatives—nieces, nephews, grandnieces, grandnephews—who visit her each summer in her Crimean home.

This Medea is also not displaced nor exiled in the same sense as her classical counterparts. Medea feels no need to travel and see the world—she allows the world to come to her and remains, for the most part, unmoved by its allure. She “has been outside the Crimea only twice in her life, for a total of six weeks” (5). Both of these trips were predicated on her overwhelming sense that some part of her life had been changed by the entrance of a child who was not hers. The first trip occurs after her

sister Alexandra gives birth to her oldest child, Sergei. Medea cares for Alexandra and helps with Sergei until the girl's lover comes to take her and their son back to Moscow. Medea "had become so attached to her nephew" that she is thrown from the simplicity and complacency of her life and does something uncharacteristic—she "took time off work and went with them to help Alexandra settle into her new home" (100). This is the first time she leaves the Crimea and, unlike Apollonios's Medea, she poses no danger to this young male relative. Ulitskaya emphasizes Medea's empathy for the infant's needs as well as her own desire to be a mother as motives that send her on this trip. This is not an escape plan hatched in panic, but a call to motherhood, which is so strong that at times she feels as though "her own breasts were filling with milk" (101). While this experience gives her a certain joy, it fills her with "inner emptiness and loss" and she recognizes that her "youth is over" since at thirty years of age, she has not married and she has no prospects (101). Thus, one literal (if temporary) dislocation has to do with a temporal rupture and the realization of loss—not of a traditional homeland, but of a kind of traditional home or family.

The second time Medea travels, it is two weeks after her husband Sam passes away. She goes through his papers and discovers that he has fathered a child, Nike, with her sister Alexandra. She believes that she has "been degraded by her husband, betrayed by her sister, abused by fate itself, which had denied her children," but there will be no opportunity to avenge this wrong since Sam is already gone and she chooses not to speak about the incident to Alexandra, whom she raised (212). Ulitskaya's Medea does not rage or promise to get even with her sister or kill her

niece Nike, but travels to visit her oldest friend Elena whose family served as a surrogate for her own before the Revolution. Medea's relationships with Elena and her family represent yet another of the ways in which Medea becomes an exile without exactly being expelled from her homeland. Part of the pre-Revolutionary liberal intelligentsia and then the provisional government in the Crimea, Elena's family affords Medea a cosmopolitan education and access to another language (French), while expanding her place into another another, historically marginal, anachronistic identity since she is already bi-lingual because of her particular Greek origins and preserver of that language and culture. This Medea then not only "adopts" alien children, but also alien cultures. Medea and Elena quietly continue to speak and correspond in French long after this language becomes a dangerous marker of the culturally marginalized and Ulitskaya's Medea defines herself or finds herself most at home as a stranger, not literally transposed, but translingual. Her displacement is both a function of choice and historical change; after all, she has no problem in assisting the Tatar Ravil Yusupov, who wishes to purchase land in the Crimea although it is illegal. She assents and Yusupov states, "Thank you Medea Georgievna, you are unusually courageous. I haven't come across that very often" (12). While she dissents from cultural norms and expected political affiliations, she does not exactly court danger. Rather, her role is that of preserver of otherness in an intolerant political climate. Thus, she "saves" Elena by having her brother Fyodor marry her friend and assists Yusupov by purchasing land for him, but placing it in her name—it is only

years later, after she has died that her family discovers to whom and why she has left her property.

On her second journey away from home, Medea's emotions draw her to connect with her family, especially her extended family member, Elena, as she felt connected to the infant Sergei years before. If Medea goes to Elena in the hopes of relieving herself of the anger she feels regarding her husband and sister's affair, she finds instead that she is not the only Sinoply woman to be betrayed by a husband. Medea realizes that the orphan, "the fair-skinned little blond Shurik," who Fyodor and Elena adopted after one of Fyodor's female worker's died, "gave every indication of being a Sinoply" (220). Medea observes Elena, who clearly dotes on Shurik as if he were her own child, and wonders if Elena realizes that this is her children's stepbrother. Medea may be the most prominent, but she is not the only female in this novel taking care of other people's children. Medea, Alexandra, Nike, and Elena all bear the burden of raising children without any concern as to whether they are blood relations or not, creating a communal concern for children that defies the brutality and murder exhibited by Euripides and Seneca's Medea, as well as the Russian history through which the Sinoplys are living that mirrors the Argonauts' brutality in both Apollonios and Valerius's epics. Ulitskaya thus creates complex parallels to Medea's adult and childhood experiences of betrayal and surrogacy. Caretaking is privileged over brutality, and those who nurture keep the world sane.

If Medea wonders about Shurik's hereditary bloodline, she cannot ask Elena; however, her brother Fyodor confronts his sister with "this shared blood of theirs,

mingled in the blood of someone else” (225). Medea is embarrassed with Fyodor’s brazen attitude; he is defiant and berates Medea, “You recognized it all, but [Elena] is a holy fool like you and sees nothing” (225). This moment is shocking for a number of reasons. Fyodor implies that everyone has always known that Alexandra’s youngest daughter is Sam’s child except for Medea. She has been purposefully left out of the equation, or as Fyodor intimates, she has chosen to remain ignorant. In addition, Fyodor is angry that his wife has not confronted him about his adultery, but willingly, even lovingly, takes his child into their home without questioning his motivation. He wants Elena to act like Euripides’s Medea, but she capitulates like Apollonios’s god-fearing maiden.

Medea backs away from her brother’s wrath and chooses to remain silent since she believes Elena “wants to know nothing about it” (225). Medea is not submissive; she is merely confused by the new information she has received. For a while Medea is stuck with “the gloom in her soul,” but eventually, if she cannot completely forgive Sam or Fyodor or avenge her sister, she lets go of her feeling of betrayal enough to embrace Nike and keep Alexandra’s secret from her whenever the girl visits (212). This silence, which makes her complicit in her own betrayal, also paradoxically serves as a kind of self-sacrifice of her own motherhood (of her absent children) for the sake of her surrogate children, preserving their place and honor in a complicated modern social scape.

If Medea’s appearance seems almost too calm in the midst of each new crisis, it is her devotion to the spiritual that allows her to transcend each situation. She is a

devout Christian who “thought nothing of rising before daybreak on a Sunday, putting the twenty kilometers to Theodosia behind her, standing through the liturgy, and walking back home toward evening” (4). This devotion is not dogmatic since she “felt that the bosom of Abraham was situated not all that far distant from the regions inhabited by the souls of Christians” (186). When her Jewish husband becomes terminally ill, she is grateful to the young man who bestows upon him the Siddur, a Jewish prayer book. “Orthodox Medea rejoiced” that her husband “returned to his people” before his death (186). Her Christianity is quiet and she is as likely to walk the long distance to mass as she is to whisper a morning prayer of gratitude—“Lord, I thank you for all your goodness, for all that you send, and may I have room for it in my heart, rejecting nothing” (206). This devotion to the spiritual mirrors the young priestess in Apollonios’s epic and re-centers Medea as a human being whose “allegiance is to a higher authority” (51). At the same time—like Medea’s Greek origins, anachronistic French language, Jewish marriage, and peripheral attachment to the dislocated Tatar culture—her spiritual sensibility de-centers official and dogmatically secular Soviet culture. The Medea of mythic tradition has always been connected to the spiritual realm; in this modern context, as in the classical, this notion destabilizes any notion that this Medea will do something extraordinarily depraved or evil. At every turn, Ulitskaya’s Medea does less, says less—her quiet observance is almost unnerving and yet her young relatives depend on that serenity and sparsity as a safe haven.

Medea does not waver in her faith that “the wind of the Spirit blows where it wills” —suggesting her recognition of the arbitrariness of both the Divine and History (68). Further, she realizes, early on, that interfering in others’ lives will not help, but could hurt. Hence “she made no attempt to pry into her sister’s personal life” when she is raising Alexandra and their two brothers; in contrast, “[s]he was much more worried about the younger [brothers],” and her effort to “tactfully steer [Dimitry] away from the military profession” is for naught since “he was profoundly sensitive to her maneuvering, clammed up, distanced himself from her” (93). Interference in such cases fails because of the pull of the individual will away from any other compelling will, but also because of a historical climate pulling her family members in different directions, threatening division and disintegration. She loses most of her brothers to the violence of changing political regimes and, according to her nephew Georgii, she refuses to align with any political ideology since “one of her brothers [was] killed by the Reds, another by the Whites; in the war one [brother] was killed by the Fascists, and another by the Communists. For her all governments are the same” (51). Her passivism has more to do with her understanding that she cannot control the brutal follies of men (in this case, too, political power is apparently defined by male voices and acts)—she can only control her own behavior; thus Ulitskaya shows us how Medea’s self-control, silence, and stability quietly destabilizes and dislocates authority. Her ability to listen to Fyodor’s tirade without saying or doing anything stems from this innate ability to see the bigger picture—she trusts not only in spiritual continuity, but also the politics of change. Regimes will

come and go. Men will impregnate women who are not their wives. But Medea remains the steady rudder in the midst of the country and the family's constantly changing fortunes and associations.

Medea is a survivor, navigating treacherous political tides. At the beginning of the novel, she is already an old woman who has lost her parents, most of her brothers and sisters, and her husband. Every event is an opportunity for her to turn inward, to search for a deeper truth. Medea spends her days gathering memories, transecting apparently discrete moments in a traumatically ruptured Russian history (pre-Revolutionary, Soviet, and immediately post-Soviet), even as she is "gathering" herbs in a landscape located on the geographical and cultural margins of the Soviet empire (4). While she is skilled in herbs and knows how to make special teas and decoctions, she is also a nurse who has worked most of her life in hospitals. Her life has been spent watching out for the needs of others, aligned with aggressively opposed political factions, ethnicities, and cultural traditions, thereby complicating any notion that she is a passionless woman. Her passion is inherent to her ability to caretake and nurture no matter the climate of the country.

In one long reflexive turn, Medea is revealed as the caring sister, the concerned friend; the doting aunt. Her compassion is complicated by the contingencies with which Medea must contend and reflected in her insistence, on the one hand, that Fyodor marry Elena in order to preserve her life and in her silence, on the other hand, about Fyodor's inconstancy that threatens to destabilize that alliance from within. While Medea may wonder if she did the right thing all those years ago

by insisting Fyodor marry Elena, she chooses the same unconditional stance with regards to her own husband Sam although the results are different. She cares for him during his terminal illness. She uses her knowledge of herbs to make “a decoction of chamomile and sage” in order to sterilize his open wound (187). While Sam feels “squeamishly embarrassed at the exposing of this unpleasant physiology,” Medea is only “concerned about the inflamed edge of the wound or a delay in the outpouring of porridge” (187). She remains detached in order to do what is best for him. While she appears impassive, her actions show her passionate commitment to her husband and her family. Medea gives when it is necessary, but does not share her confusion or pain with others. If this is a weakness, or a kind of silence apparently imposed by her lower status and possible complicity with a patriarchal Soviet culture, it does enable those around her to feel safe in her presence. This may be because of their own complicity or partly because of the way her silence paradoxically “speaks” her understanding of a complex reality that requires discrete languages and logics. Whatever the reason, Sam is able to leave the world with his dignity intact due to her careful nursing during his final days and the fact that she will not allow his death to be any less dignified than what she supposes their lives together have been. Hers is a silent attentiveness that is also predicated partly on misunderstanding and maybe even conscious/unconscious self-deception; this attitude is consistent with her ability to suspend judgment in any number of situations.

Long after Sam’s death and her discovery of his affair, she embraces the young relatives who continue to visit her each summer, each with their own cultures

and contingent relationships. She senses “the languor of love . . . and the subtle stirrings of hearts and bodies,” but cannot quite comprehend how Nike and Masha have both been bewitched by Butonov, a modern day Jason, since she has never been drawn to anyone in quite that way (87). There is a narrative intrusion that states, “Medea’s perspicacity was in general greatly exaggerated” (179). She is, after all, only human and cannot see or comprehend everything that is going on with her relatives, especially since they only visit in the summer for a few weeks or a month. Yet her limited understanding does not mean that she does not care for them or attend to their individual discourses, only that she has learned to respect, the hard way, their rights to make their own mistakes and speak their own languages. If she is not as aware as others believe she is, it may have more to do with this sense that not everything needs to be watched over and that she need not continually assert her agency over others.

Medea’s relationship with Sam serves as a counterpoint to Masha’s bewitchment by Butonov. When Medea meets Sam he is a womanizing dentist who is also “a professional revolutionary” and a former psychiatric patient who “spent three years in political exile” since as “the commanding officer of the grain squad,” he could not murder three poor men for hiding grain to feed their town (64; 64-65; 67). This Jason-like figure does not know how or want to engage in battle like his classical counterpart, but from the moment Medea meets him, he sends an overt clue that he may not be able to be faithful. Her marriage is framed by failures—potential and realized. Their relationship began “in a sanatorium” that specializes in “the treatment

of infertility,” which is ironic since the couple never has children and he manages to impregnate her sister Alexandra (58; 59).

Unlike Apollonios’s Medea and her grandniece Masha, Medea is not bewitched by Sam. Medea sees the dentist’s “keen eye” for the ladies as comical and does not take his words seriously (58). She is not a young girl, easily swayed by a flirtatious compliment. She is not needy, searching for another’s approval. In a surreal moment of courtship, it is revealed that Sam may be a smooth-talker with other women, but his attempt to woo Medea is spectacularly unromantic and feeble—the antithesis of Apollonios’s Jason wooing Medea with the help of Hera. Medea rejects Sam’s marriage proposal since she has no reason or need to marry this man—she is a completely independent and self-sufficient woman with her own career. It is only when she comes down with a case of influenza and Sam “nurse[s] her zealously” that Medea agrees to marry him (69). Sam jokes, “Other people have a feverish honeymoon, but Medea and I had a honeymoon of fever” (267). She believes their marriage, while nothing spectacular, is an honest union, but like the Jason found in Euripides, Ovid, and Seneca’s texts, Sam betrays the couple’s union. The difference is Medea Sinoply Mendez only discovers Sam’s infidelity after he passes away.

Medea cannot punish Sam, but for twenty-five years, she gives Alexandra nothing but silence and distance. In contrast, Medea’s memories of Sam are more real to her than his presence ever was. She elevates him to “a man of monumental importance, something of which there had been not the slightest evidence while he was alive,” indicating she could keep detached while he was alive, but now needs to

place meaning on their relationship—meaning that it may not have had (54). This self-deception, which might also be a form of revenge if Sam longed for transparency, is mitigated finally by the unspoken recognition of the betrayal and reconciliation when the two sisters are finally brought together by Masha's suicide, a death that could also be read, in part, as a function of Medea's silence or non-intervention—as a kind of indirect infanticide, also self-sacrificial and saving Masha from various kinds of exile.

If Medea is Apollonios's embodiment of the Colchian princess before Eros shoots his arrow, then Masha is the embodiment of a possessed Medea. She is tormented by her maternal grandmother as a child and learns early on that “there was a possibility she hadn't known about, and knowing about it made her feel better” (157). If her misery became too great, the pre-adolescent decides she can always commit suicide. As a child, Masha finally jumps from her window, but only manages to fall one floor and it is at this point that everyone realizes that her grandmother is insane. Medea's sister Alexandra and her niece Nike hope that their love will help the young Masha to “bury ... the whole sorry business,” but Masha has been severely traumatized and she remains sensitive throughout her lifetime (161). When the quintessentially seductive Russian Butonov shows up, she is a happily married woman with a baby boy, but Butonov brushes up against her accidentally at the cove and it is the equivalent of Apollonios's Medea being shot with Eros's arrow. She never quite recovers from her passionate longing and no one understands that she is no longer moored to this life in spite of her husband and child. Her husband Alik

gives her “tranquilizers and increased the dose of sedatives. [But] Masha refuse[s] to take psychotropic drugs” (289). Their relationship is open—he knows about her affair with Butonov and she tells him, “I’m not a lunatic, Alik, I’m an idiot, and you can’t treat that” (289). Masha recognizes the lack of agency she has in this affair since there is not only sexual passion, but also a more Apollonian inspired possession that suggests her attraction is divinely ordained.

Masha is a poet, and once she meets Butonov, her writing proliferates, but she also grows “very thin, becoming even more fragile” suggesting that her authorship is contingent on her betrayal to herself and of others (292). She cannot shake her attraction for Butonov and begins hearing and seeing angels, “translucent people flying above her [that] were strong and free” (293). The more connected she feels to these angels and the more she learns from them, the less she wants to be in the world. The night of her suicide, she astrally projects herself from her apartment to Butonov’s car where he and Nike are contemplating going up to his apartment to have sex. When Masha invisibly touches “Butonov’s gleaming chest,” Nike tells him to take her home—there will be no intimate connection between them that night (300). While this could be a coincidence and it would be simple to write off Masha as insane, Nike and Masha have been connected since Masha was a young girl. Is it really out of the realm of possibility to believe that Masha now possesses otherworldly power and goes to the couple before she dies not out of malicious intent, but simply because she can? Masha’s suicide is complicated by the notion that she may not realize what she is doing since after seeing Nike and Butonov she feels the ghost of her grandmother

and a panic wells up inside her. However, her ability to see and touch Butonov and Nike in the car, an event that the narrative corroborates in a separate storyline, indicates that she has some primordial power, but has no idea how to channel it, just like Apollonios's Medea has no idea of the full-breadth of her power.

Her husband Alik is worried and calls Volobuev, a consulting psychiatrist, but it is too late. Volobuev diagnoses her with "acute manic-depressive psychosis," but Alik is reluctant to place her in a hospital since they are emigrating to Boston where he will continue his research at MIT. This too constitutes a going into exile that Masha, like Euripides's Medea, finds worse than death. His decision may not cost Masha her life, but it is one of many decisions that have brought her to the ledge. However, Ulitskaya does not allow her death to be a tragedy. Medea and Alexandra are brought together again and while Alexandra found "Masha's death a great sorrow ... it had also brought [her] a great joy" (304). Medea watches her sister and "couldn't imagine how it had come about that she had not seen the person dearest to her for a quarter of a century, and she was horrified" (304). Thus, Ulitskaya attests that each decision may have a horrible consequence, but there is also the chance that the outcome may create a connection or jumpstart an old one. In this context, the exploration of alternative responses to betrayal and exile within the text, most especially Medea's retrospective reflection, allows for the sort of vicarious realizations available only to the audience (or perhaps the chorus as stand-in for audience) in Euripides's tragedy.

Ulitskaya privileges time (a time available within the space of the novel as it is not within classical tragedy and within novelistic consciousness as it is not within epic discourse) as a healing balm and suggests that there is no right or definitive answer in any situation. Medea has watched traumas and betrayals her entire life, but she has figured out a way, without drama or tragedy, to go on in spite of anger or sadness or grief. Life is not divided into good and evil or even life and death—there is only the circle of life. Ulitskaya purposefully ends not with the overarching presence of a Medea ready to take on the world, but with Medea’s extended family—life goes on and there will be successes and failures, births and deaths, but what matters most is that “it is a wonderful feeling, belonging to Medea’s family, a family so large you can’t know all its members by sight” (312). This suggests that Medea is everyone’s mother and aunt and sister and wife. Unlike the tragic figures of Euripides, Ovid, and Seneca’s texts, Ulitskaya’s Medea is the woman who stands not as the bringer of destruction, but as the still point amidst chaos—the gatherer of a community disenfranchised through multiple upheavals in the Russian diaspora. By creating such a Medea, Ulitskaya not only engages in dialogue with the various strands of the tradition, but also intertextually challenges canonical Russian texts such as Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, Tolstoy’s War and Peace, and Anna Karinina where the central themes suggest that families must collapse under the weight of crisis or political strife.

By re-inscribing Medea as caretaker and silent observer, Ulitskaya’s creation becomes the still point of a narrative arc that mirrors older extant traditions of the

Medea myth where she was considered a priestess and a helper-maiden. This portrait decenters any notion of Medea as a destructive force, while also placing the larger global concerns of Russia's multiple revolutions and wars that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the periphery. Ulitskaya's Medea stands as an example of stability in the face of a changing world order. In Beloved, Toni Morrison has a similar project although it manifests itself in a different way since there is no way to separate or deny her characters' connection to the institution of slavery. Morrison is "propel[ling] a backlog of memories headlong into a postemancipation community that has been nearly spiritually incapacitated by the trauma of slavery," while challenging the literary antecedents of slave narratives—abolitionist tracts and novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin—to reconstruct and remember what has been left unsoken (Holloway 516). Morrison is purposefully "presenting [the slaves' lives] with the veil withdrawn" in order to enter the emotional landscape of "these anonymous people called slaves" (Child 5; qtd. in Sitter 17). Morrison decenters the white patriarchal point of view by casting the response to Sethe's infanticide largely through the community of free-born blacks, slaves, runaways, and ex-slaves. This complicates Stanley Crouch's claim that Beloved "seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest," since Morrison's central theme examines Sethe's infanticide not only within the context of her struggle for autonomy, but also by privileging the sometimes harsh judgement of her community (qtd. in Holloway 517).

The ramifications of Sethe's public infanticide must be borne or buried by the entire community since this act disrupts the semblance of peace these individuals have made away from "life" on the plantation. Sethe's action brings the entire brutal legacy of slavery to the surface and jeopardizes not only the community's actual freedom from "whitepeople," but also its collective burial of the degradation and horrors of slavery in order to survive freedom—a burial that has been necessary to survive life in a free state (Morrison Beloved 209). In Beloved, Morrison is arguing that *none* of slavery's immoral and inhumane legacy can be denied if the community is to truly move beyond it to fashion a new life. Morrison then is not creating victims in this narrative, but is asserting female autonomy and the power of memory and remembering. Early on Baby Suggs tells Sethe that she had eight children, but the only thing she remembers is that her oldest "loved the burned bottom of bread" (5). Sethe's infanticide is framed by her response: "That's all you let yourself remember," suggesting that forgetting is a dangerous act that may even place children in jeopardy (5).

Beloved does not privilege Sethe as a "perfect" victim; she commits infanticide—an act she considers just—to counteract the injustice of slavery, but her community indicts her even though they know the horrors of slavery first hand. As Homi Bhabha suggests, "What has to be endured is the knowledge of doubt that comes from Sethe's eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life, her banishment in the homely world of 124 Bluestone Road, as the pariah of their postslavery community" (1342-1343). This is seen in the way her neighbor Ella, who was

degraded by white men and “had been beaten every way but down. She remembered the bottom teeth she had lost to the brake and the scars from the bell were thick as rope around her waist,” turns her back on Sethe after Beloved is killed in a public way even though Ella “remembered every bit of” the horrors she went through (Morrison Beloved 258; 119). Once Paul D discovers that Sethe’s love meant “safety with a handsaw,” he is able to quickly transfer “his shame to hers” (164; 165). Paul D shows no compunction in judging Sethe. He states, “what you did was wrong” and “you got two feet, Sethe, not four,” which allows him to displace the shame he feels regarding the abuse he took at the hands of white men “straight to her too-thick love” (165).

Even though her action is motivated by the same sort of hard love that drives Euripides’s Medea to protect her children, Morrison pushes Beloved beyond the scope of Greek tragedy and Euripides’s divine vengeance of an *alastor* by focusing on the self-reflexivity found not only in Sethe’s memory of her action, but also in the community’s response to the infanticide and its perpetrator. Morrison shies away from a linear narrative even as the story is told in a linear fashion. It continually circles towards the breaking point to move beyond the paradigmatic constraints of classical tragedy’s heroic standards to a post-modern self-consciousness that privileges “the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices” so that Sethe’s action, while understandable considering schoolteacher’s arrival to retrieve his “property,” must be judged by the community and Sethe (Bhabha 1334). There can be no reconciliation and healing without the

community's forgiveness of Sethe's public action, but this means acknowledging the humility and brutality of the slaveholding culture that made it possible for her to commit the disturbing act. Darlene Clark Hine suggests, "it would be a mistake to see black women solely as victims under slavery" or "to create myths of the superheroic black woman who stoically met every obstacle, endured total debasement, only to rise above her captors" (qtd. in Fultz 67-68). Sethe is not a heroine or someone for whom the community wants to care since their response is silence after the infanticide. No one interacts with her and Baby Suggs once Sethe has killed Beloved. They are left alone with the ghost of 124 Bluestone Road.

Morrison therefore is not simply transforming a "tale of domestic dispute into a narrative that investigates the limitations of motherhood for slave women," but is purposefully engaging with Euripides's tragedy through a post-modern reflexive lens in order to construct a story where the horrors of slavery are not described to mitigate Sethe's infanticide, but to detail the ways in which this multi-layered community of ex-slaves and free-born blacks must judge Sethe guilty for murder even though the infanticide is designed, according to Sethe, to protect the children "from what I know is terrible" (Walters 109; Morrison *Beloved* 165). This is what Euripides's Medea intimates to Jason, the chorus, and the Nurse in the Greek tragedy: her children's lives are at risk whether it is the Corinthians or the House of Aeolus blood curse that will destroy them. Sethe understands that she and her children's lives are worth nothing under slavery except what a slaveholder can reap from their labor or by selling them off as property. Lucille Fultz claims, "Sethe and her children are denied the

fundamental human rights of freedom and familial bonds. They are by law chattel—they can be sold, traded, and bartered like animals” (65).

This struggle for autonomy is one of Morrison’s central concerns and she positions Sethe’s response to the unconscionable next to Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother, and Ella’s implicit and explicit responses to the slave-holding culture thus “inscrib[ing] their maternal narratives against the patriarchal discourse within the slave system” (66). The infanticide in Euripides’s tragedy is the climax of the tragedy, but in Morrison’s novel it is the center around which everything revolves and the culmination of all Sethe and the community becomes.

Sethe tells Beloved, “First beating I took was my last,” and, for her, it is enough to know she will not allow it to happen to her children (Morrison Beloved 202). Morrison describes Sethe’s childhood as one horror after another. The small girl Sethe witnesses her mother’s branding mark as though it were the sign that she belonged to her mother rather than a sign of ownership to the slaveholder and realizes only later that the bit in her mother’s mouth meant “when she wasn’t smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile” (203). After Sethe’s mother is hanged—Morrison does not say what her crime is—no one, including Sethe can be sure it was her mother since “[b]y the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look” (61). Sethe never knows her father except for the information her mother’s friend Nan gives to her. Nan assures Sethe that she is her mother’s one true child since she chose to “put her arms around”

Sethe's black father (62). "The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe" (62).

Sethe's mother also commits infanticide: "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them," indicating that infanticide is not an uncommon event, but a too common occurrence in the life of a slave woman (62). Infanticide becomes the agency by which these women make sure that the children they give birth to do not have to grow up under the auspices of slavery or that they themselves do not have to care for children who are the product of rape by their white captors. Morrison suggests infanticide is the only "no" these women possess. Sometimes the murder is a passive act as it is for Sethe's neighbor Ella who "delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound," but other times, like in Sethe's mother and Sethe's case, it is a purposeful act of vengeance that demonstrates these women are not completely without power over their captors (258-259).

In spite of all the horrors her mother has faced and Sethe has witnessed, it is not until Sethe receives her first beating—a whipping so bad that when the young white girl Amy finds her she describes the wound as "a chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches"—that she decides the only way to defend her children from slavery is to "put [her] babies where they'd be safe" (79; 164). For Sethe, who does not even fathom the idea that she could murder the schoolteacher

and his nephews (it is not even in her vocabulary), the only thing she can do to protect her children is to kill them.

While Bhabha suggests, “infanticide was recognized as an act against the system and at least acknowledged the slavewoman’s legal standing in the public sphere,” the real difference between Sethe and these other women is that Sethe makes the infanticide public by defying and overtly indicting the white authority—her slavemaster schoolteacher—since Beloved is killed with his full knowledge (1343).⁵⁰ Sethe’s action becomes equivalent to Euripides’s Medea’s infanticides—killings that are public sacrifices for her husband Jason’s error in not honoring a sworn oath and ignoring the blood curse in the House of Aeolus. This is the real threat to Sethe’s community and an important reason why they turn their backs on her. Her action is a crime against her slaveholder’s property and might draw attention not only to other fugitive slaves in the area, but also hurt any chances of nullifying slavery since the public infanticide could support a theory that slaves are no better than animals. Both Sethe and Medea challenge and defy a structure of public morality in favor of following a higher authority to protect and defend their children.

⁵⁰This also contradicts Halle’s action when he sees schoolteacher and his nephews whipping and milking Sethe. Sethe’s response sounds like something Euripides’s Medea would say: “He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw?” (Morrison *Beloved* 69). Paul D defends Halle’s actions by stating, “It broke him, Sethe. . . . Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face” (69). In a similar manner, Baby Suggs takes to her bed to contemplate color after Sethe commits infanticide and Sethe becomes incapacitated when Beloved returns. Everyone in this novel pays a price for their actions or non-actions.

Morrison's concerns stretch beyond Euripides's tragedy since she privileges the infanticide as a public response that forces the community to confront what it has taken them to survive the inhumanity and injustice of slavery. While Sethe's infanticide clearly indicts schoolteacher and his nephews, schoolteacher cannot acknowledge the inequity of slavery since he only regrets that "the whole lot was lost now," while his nephew shakes and keeps asking, "What she want to go and do that for?" (Morrison Beloved 150). Fultz argues:

The efforts of slave women to assert their rights as mothers prove that, in defiance of the slaveholders' power, they were insisting that maternity was not in the slaveholders' hands but in the physical and affective bonds between mothers and their children. (66)

This suggests that infanticide is the one moment in these women's lives where they are able to affirm their autonomy and power. They become the reproductive demons in the Hera Alraia or Hera herself who has the power to bestow or deny life to children. Baby Suggs's pronouncement, "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed ... and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks," suggests that the black women in the community do have a certain power to restore autonomy, but the price to pay is their children (Morrison Beloved 89). However, her statement also suggests that unless the black community brings to light and acknowledges *everything* that has occurred under the institution's rule no one can truly move beyond the legacy.

Paul D might find that Sethe's "love is too thick," but he also understands that "her price was greater than his; property that reproduced itself without cost" (164; 228). While slavery has taught Paul D that it is best "to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit" and Ella to proclaim, "Don't love nothing," Sethe refuses to live in that manner (45; 92). She defiantly challenges the whites and the blacks to deny her "[t]he best thing she was, was her children," while asserting with reference to schoolteacher's "scientific observations" that "no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (251). Both Medea and Sethe's infanticides are not merely the products of good or even defective women who have turned bad or worse, but overt indictments of society's ills and a social structure that wants to control female behavior in order to silence women's dominion. Corti suggests, the infanticide found in Euripides's tragedy and Morrison's Beloved "results not so much from 'excess' on the part of the character who commits it as it does from the institutional 'deficiencies' of societies" ("Medea and Beloved" 63).

Morrison does not use intertextuality as a stylistic technique to make a connection between mothers who kill their children, but to fashion a novel that demands the veil be lifted on *everything* so that Sethe is not merely the poster-girl for victimized slaves, but a woman who can and will avenge the crime of slavery by sacrificing her own children—her slave master's property. Morrison develops the infanticide seen in Euripides's tragedy so that it is a central event of Beloved, but not its climactic moment.

Sethe murders her daughter for much the same reason as Medea does—it is an act of divine vengeance against the blood curse of slavery in the same way that Medea protects her children from the House of Aeolus’s blood curse. Morrison uses the *alastor* of Euripides’s Medea to wipe the curse of slavery from Sethe’s children. At the same time Morrison extends Euripides’s tragedy to examine the repercussions within the community and Sethe’s family once the “whitepeople” are gone (Morrison Beloved 209). Morrison allows Beloved to return to 124 Bluestone Road to force reconciliation, recovery, and healing of the curse of slavery in a way that cannot be done if Sethe’s action is judged as a singular event and buried. Once Beloved “returns,” the community and Sethe must work through Sethe’s crime in order to heal and come together.

While Beloved’s corporeality is beyond the scope of this project, she could be a runaway slave or an apparition, but no matter what or who she is, everyone—both Sethe and her community—come to see Beloved as the living embodiment of Sethe’s action. Sethe defends what she has done in the name of love and justice and has no doubt that she would do it again, “I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I’m yours” (203). Like Medea, who sees the act of infanticide as the only way to mitigate the blood curse upon Jason’s betrayal of their marriage bed, Sethe murders her own children in order to keep them safe from the stink of slavery and becomes the avenger whose sacrifice directly indicts the institution of slavery.

Morrison describes the Clearing as a safe space for the blacks to look “back to the beginning. In the beginning [where] there were no words. In the beginning [where there] was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (259). The howls that emanate during these circles of healing allow each individual to claim “ownership of that freed self,” but it is juxtaposed against the community and Sethe’s silence as she is led away by the sheriff after killing her infant daughter (95). The townspeople do not know how to respond and judge her harshly: “Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably” (152). They cannot offer her a “cape of sound . . . to hold and steady her on the way”(152). They wait until after she is already down the road before they begin “[h]umming. No words at all” (152). It is not so much that Sethe has committed infanticide, but that she has done it in full view of the whites. They cannot deny the things that they have had to do in order to survive the slavery once Sethe makes her act public.

Beloved’s death affects the community in other ways. Sethe’s family, due to the “spiteful” presence “[f]ull of baby’s venom” at 124 Bluestone Road, is never whole (3). Her two boys, Buglar and Howard, abandon the house by the time they are thirteen. Baby Suggs’s unshakeable faith has been broken and, as Denver suggests, “She had done everything right and [the whitepeople] came to her yard anyway” (209). Baby Suggs no longer feels she has the right to preach the “Word” in the Clearing since “she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice,” although Stamp Paid believes, “one or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last” (180). Baby

Suggs, unlike the community, cannot easily judge Sethe's action and it is Baby Suggs's community's ability to step back and hold itself at a distance that ultimately breaks the once powerful community leader and takes her to contemplate color—"something harmless in this world"—in the last years of her life (177; 179).

In addition to Beloved, Sethe's daughter Denver becomes the bridge between her mother's action and their community's fear. Denver is the baby girl who "tasted [Beloved's] blood when Ma'am nursed [her]" (209). Her maturation is stunted since she has been kept away from other people besides her mother and Baby Suggs, but once she realizes that "her mother could die," Denver forces herself to act (243). Denver must grow up in order to help herself and her mother. She goes to Lady Jones to ask for work, but it is this ability to reach out and ask for help that enables the women in this community to soften their indictment of Sethe and reach out to her and her family. "Maybe they were sorry for [Denver]. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain"; whatever has caused them to keep a distance, they begin with food—basic sustenance—to bridge the gap between their ostracism and Sethe's need for help (249). Denver becomes the agent that brings this change about.

While Euripides ends with Medea taking off in a chariot with her two dead sons at her side—perhaps in a suggestion that she too will need to work through her actions—Morrison keeps Sethe in her community. There will be no magic chariot to lift her away from the reality of slavery or what she has done to keep Beloved from being inculcated into schoolteacher's ideology. Beloved's return forces Sethe to face

what she has done and it costs Sethe her sanity. While the women of the community may come together in even more active support than Euripides's chorus offers Medea, they are too late. Her mind is broken and Morrison does not seem to indicate that Sethe will recover from everything that has happened to her and what she has been forced to do. Paul D returns, not just "to put his story next to hers," but also to become her caretaker (273). While she cannot stop remembering that Beloved was "my best thing," Paul D reminds her, "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (272; 273).

Morrison ends with the repetitive pronouncement: "This is not a story to pass on" and yet, as Bhabha suggests, "she does this only in order to engrave the event in the deepest resources of our amnesia, of our unconsciousness" (1344). Morrison crafts Beloved to be a deliberate passing on of the emotional landscape of individuals who are forced to deny, even to themselves, the legacy with which slavery has left them. In this way, Steven Weisenburger's claim that Morrison's Beloved "insist[s] that slavery as a whole constituted a historical trauma whose forgetting has put a people's collective sanity in chronic peril" is akin to Euripides's Medea insistence that Jason's forgetfulness not only of his sworn oath, but also of Creon's connection to the House of Aeolus blood curse places their children in dire consequences (10).

Each of these texts, whether through overt reference as in Euripides, Ovid, and Shakespeare, covert deployment of a minor plot point as in Seneca's Medea or through a displacement of the patriarchal order as seen in Apollonios and Valerius's epics and the multiplicity of patriarchal, cultural, and personal displacements found in

Ulitskaya and Morrison's novels, challenges notions of patriarchy as the dominant receptacle of authority and memory. The idea of female autonomy is integral to remember and re-vision the powerful agency of each incarnation of Medea that is drawn in these literary texts. What begins to emerge is a portrait not of a homicidal maniac or, as Page asserts, "a witch," but a woman, often possessed of uncommon strength and courage, who cannot acquiesce to patriarchal principles that change with each new shift (political, cultural, and personal) in the landscape (xxi). While Seneca's tragedy purposefully allows Medea's anger to veer towards an overt display of vengeance, this character trait is not the default position for every other creation based on the myth. The canonical portrait of Medea found in Euripides's tragedy is not insane or bent on vengeance for the sake of revenge, but serves as a reminder that a female figure cannot only be heroic, but can also stand as the agent of justice when patriarchal authority forgets its duty to a higher authority.

Each of these portraits privilege different aspects of the Medea tradition, which ultimately fosters a multiplicity of three-dimensional representations of female autonomy. The most resilient trait of this myth is found in its ability to maintain its core of female power while allowing alterations to external attributes in order to shift the focus according to each text's needs. While Pindar chooses to portray Medea as a divine prophetess, he gives no indication how Medea feels about Jason or what it means to her to leave with the Argonauts, but it does not matter to his interpretation—her presence is important primarily as it relates to Pindar's task of bolstering Arkesilas's claim as ruler. Medea, while an important figure in the ode, is not its most

integral feature. Apollonios and Valerius's epics suggest that Medea is not crucial to the quest for the Golden Fleece, but the epic poets purposefully usurp the patriarchal authority of Jason and the Argonauts through covert and overt means to centralize her importance to the epic itself. Apollonios chooses to make Medea's actions the product of divine bewitchment rather than her choice, compromising any notion that his Medea is the agent of her own destiny and focusing on the overarching importance of divine justice. Valerius focuses on the Argonauts's descent into barbarity to indict military explorations as nothing more than piratical pillaging in order to reap material rewards—Medea is relegated to an object tossed between the Colchians and Greeks.

While Shakespeare's Macbeth has the least direct contact with the Medea myth, the Elizabethan playwright's project displaces patriarchal authority through murderous treason so that the agency of the private self is revealed. Macbeth is the agent of his own destruction much in the same way that Seneca's Medea cannot see she has caused most of her own problems even though, like Macbeth's humanizing sense of ambivalence, Seneca allows his Medea a modicum of humanity when she expresses grief that she must kill her children in order to exact the perfect revenge on her husband.

Both Euripides and Morrison's texts offer portraits of women who choose a justice that usurps patriarchal authority; however, both Medea and Sethe's acts of justice come at an enormous price. Especially in Beloved, Sethe's sense of herself, her daughter, and her sanity have been sacrificed in order to keep her children from

the degradation of slavery. Even while patriarchal brutality and ignorance is overtly indicted in these two texts, the cost is prohibitively high. Sethe is not a monster, but in order to avoid being returned to the Sweet Home plantation, she chooses an action that will cause not only her displacement from the institution of slavery, but also from her community, her daughter, and herself. Euripides's tragedy offers a different view of Medea's disdain for patriarchal authority since she is allowed to leave on a divine chariot with the bodies of the sons she has slain. This may indicate that her ability to avenge the gods has given her a greater understanding of spiritual matters, if not material concerns, but the fact that she leaves with her sons suggests that she too will have to face the consequences of her actions in the same way that Sethe must deal with the ramifications of killing her daughter Beloved.

Each of these women functions on the margins of a dominant culture and, for a time, interacts within the parameters of these cultural and social communities. If Euripides's Medea and Morrison's Sethe break through those cultural constraints to enact a crime against the laws of man that answers to a higher authority only Ovid's creation in Metamorphoses suggests that Medea's transformation becomes something supernaturally evil. Ovid's Medea becomes lost not only to the dominant culture, but to any mortal culture and is transformed into a supernatural being that may have some of the attributes of an imperial ruler, but the power of a god. Only Ulitskaya's Medea seems mortal in any prosaic sense since she suffers and does not react, but merely responds to situations in a quiet manner.

Rather than creating a reductive pose that would allow each text to be filtered through the lens of a simple template, this exploration transmits some of the varied and various Medeas presented throughout the last two millennia. This is not done to create a new superficial template, but to open a further dialogue that will allow Medea to be observed within a multi-faceted and dynamic tradition that has made her one of the most challenging characters not only in mythology, but also in Elizabethan tragedy and twentieth century fiction. By focusing on the differences inherent in each creation rather than asserting specious similarities, the full-breadth of the tradition can emerge to stand as the cultural image of what it means to be an outsider forced to engage with a dominant culture:

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