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Osa Skyberg  
*Portland State University*

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# EURIPIDES: MASTER OF THE DISCREPANT EVENT

*Osa Skyberg*

Never operating in a vacuum, writers work within a stream of consciousness and ideas presented by their predecessors. The writer copies the patterns of the past in an effort to quickly engage the audience in a proven style. Euripides, writing under the influence of predecessors Homer, Aeschylus and Sophocles, has successful patterns to follow and indeed, he uses these previously established audience expectations as the foundation of the plot of *The Medea*. The audience is quickly engaged, never expecting the disruptive layer that Euripides adds. At each turn, Euripides moves away from "just another Greek tragedian" toward a "master in the art of tragedy." And with each turn he takes the audience to new depths of suffering.

This disruptive layer is composed of a series of discrepant events<sup>1</sup> which the audience finds unnerving; women have men's parts, people step out of their own personal limits or *moira*<sup>2</sup>, slaves speak in front of the house, wives fight their husbands, and the sacredness of the family is irrevocably shaken as innocent children are killed by their own mother who in turn not only gets away with it, but is rewarded as a god.

Basic to the consistency theory is the tenet that the human mind is intolerant of such discrepancies (Petty and Cacioppo, 81). The audience responds to the layer of discrepant events that Euripides weaves including surprise,

rapt attention, horror and a compulsion to seek a balanced conclusion.

It was part of the outlook of fifth century Greeks to see the reason for suffering at the same time as pitying it. For them, tragedy taught by example, but in the case of Euripides, the classic tragedian mold had been shattered. The masterful use of Euripides' manipulation of his audience is proven as the chain of expected events is broken again and again. In the following paragraphs, I shall examine more closely the most unnerving threads of Euripides' discrepant layer as he uses classic antecedents in a new and shocking way.

One antecedent that Euripides employs in his *Medea* is the notion of the sacredness of the family and the love of children. With statements in his other plays, such as:

*Men love their children, both the better off  
And those of no account; for some have wealth  
And others have it not, but all the race  
Has love for children*

*(Heracles Furens, 634-363)*

and:

*For every man his children are his soul.  
(Andromache, 418)*

The familiar sentiment of the fondness of the Greek for his children is made well known (Bates, 42). As a student of human nature, Euripides recognized the possibility for the child on stage. With his dramatic instinct, he saw clearly that an appeal made through children rather than the traditional tragic hero would powerfully arouse or incense the audience.

Euripides was supposedly giving them the tragedy of the myth of Medea. His audience was familiar with this story and everyone knew that the "poor children" would be killed by angry Corinthians in the end, or that Medea in her efforts to save them would mistakenly kill them. At least, that was what

was expected. In his version, Euripides pulls out the stops of horror, as he changes the tradition by having Medea malevolently kill her own children, and get away with it. Up until this point, the only other infanticidal mothers that the audience was aware of were Ino and Procne, both of whom were punished by the gods for their wrongs.

In traditional Greek tragedy, only three speaking actors were permitted on stage at a time. Therefore, children, unless they were the chief characters in the play, had very little opportunity for even short speeches. To use children to excite feelings of pity and fear in the spectators that Aristotle's definition of tragedy<sup>3</sup> prescribed, Euripides made the children appear quite early on in the play, at line 46, and keeps them in the mind's eye of the audience throughout the play. The spectators are given a subconscious hint of the children's fate early in lines 92-94 when the nurse says:

*For I've seen her already blazing her eyes at them  
As though she meant some mischief and I am sure that  
She'll not stop raging until she has struck at someone.*

And then again when Medea says in lines 113-114:

*Children of a hateful mother. I curse you  
And your father. Let the whole house crash.*

Here is the dominant thought in Medea's mind, to strike Jason through the annihilation of his family. Although the audience probably did not recognize it at this point, Euripides was giving them an early warning of the children's fate.

Thus, the sympathies are with the children from the first. Euripides saw to it that the interest in them aroused already was maintained. By mentioning the boys numerous times throughout the play, having them present on stage, and intertwining them intricately into Medea's plot of clear-cut revenge, they are never far from thought. Although silent,

they grow in importance as characters as the audience feels pity not for the worthless, self-seeking Jason, or the cruel and savage Medea, but for the innocent children who appear to be destined to be used (not necessarily killed) by their own mother as her greatest tool of revenge. Ironically, and upsettingly, these nearly silent characters' only spoken parts are their final cries of fear.

The tragedy of Euripides' *Medea* comes from the fact that the boys who are pardoned of their exile and who should be safe in their own home are wantonly killed when revenge becomes the only issue, even obscuring the ties of the family. The discrepancy comes when innocent children who would be seemingly the safest at the side of the mother who bore them, are not.

And what kind of person does it take to kill her own children in revenge against her husband? How can these actions be allowed without consequence? The Greek poets described an action which disrupted the order of things, where a person overstepped the limits of his human *moira*, or his "portion of life" (Aylen, 18). As a result, catastrophe follows, and innocent human beings suffer. This cannot be avoided; but natural order<sup>4</sup>, where there is justice, is usually reasserted. In *Medea*, however, this does not hold true.

Certainly Medea oversteps her bounds of mother and wife as she destroys her family in an attempt to gain revenge on an unworthy husband. Unlike the other tragedies though, *The Medea* does not end with the reassertion of natural order. Rather, there is still a sense of disorder and wonderment left with the audience as it reviews the way that Medea obviously manipulates all that she comes in contact with, and smoothly and calmly plans and carries out her dreadful revenge. Chance plays into her hands as Aegeus arrives at just the right moment, and everything goes as she has planned. Even the dragon-drawn chariot at the ending in which the boys' bodies appear for the final time to their father and the audience is

unbelievable. Seemingly, Medea is helped by the gods, but more likely, the devil provides for its own, right down to the flying serpent chariot. Through the play, Medea has become a sort of goddess or demon herself, and thus doing so is able to escape the consequences of her actions that would follow if she were merely mortal.

The end of this tragedy is as disturbing to the audience as Euripides would have it. He employs the disturbance caused by inconsistency in the human mind to reflect his view of the world as a disorderly place. In his *Medea*, Euripides uses examples of the seemingly unjust, and unpunished, unpredictable, and melodramatic to reveal what he may consider reality; ramming home his world view.

Thus, by instilling in his audience a sense of trust that this will be yet another tragedy, with the use of the conventional form of tragedies used by his predecessors, the effect is even more shattering when he introduces the revolutionary and unthinkable ideas of cold-blooded infanticide on the part of a devoted mother, and the transformation of a woman into a goddess or demon. These shocks make the tragedy his own, and give the disturbed audience something to think about long after the drama is done.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Discrepant events - happenings that are unexplainable, and not expected. They provide a dissonance in the expected outcome of things which upsets the human mind (Petty and Caciopo).

<sup>2</sup> *Moirā* - A person's moira was his portion in life, and like the concept of "portion in life" seems to suggest a notion of the limits within which one is free, and also that of what we might call our "function in life." It was part of the scheme of things that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra should act as they did. Each person has a part to play in a total pattern. Disaster occurs when men try to step outside the limits of their *moira*; some power will intervene as the erinyes did to stop horses talking in Homer's *Iliad* (Aylen, 18).

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle's definition of tragedy, found in his *Poetics*, generally states that a tragedy, or indeed any story, is an imitation of a single action. A work of art has an organic unity. Character is revealed by choices. The basis of a story is a plot. The best plot has events which follow one another as cause and effect. The tragic protagonist suffers a fall from high estate and may not be vicious or wholly innocent (Collidge, 2).

<sup>4</sup> Natural order: The Greek concept that while everyone and everything stayed within the bounds of their personal *moira*, a sort of universal, built in order would prevail where all factions, good and evil, gods and mortals, were in balance (Aylen, 23).

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