

Medea's Foreshadowed Suicide

This paper will argue that Medea's suicide is foreshadowed throughout Euripides' tragedy which would add another layer of innovation to the playwright's portrayal of Medea (Boedeker 1997). By investigating Medea as if a suicide will occur, I hope to find and discuss new elements of Euripides' characterization of a complex figure.

In the introduction, the nurse fears for Medea (Eur. *Med.* 36), and Medea herself expresses passive suicidal ideation (φεῦ φεῦ· θανάτῳ καταλυσσίμην βιοτὰν στυγερὰν προλιποῦσα. "Ah, ah! May I take my rest in death, leaving behind my hateful life!" Eur. *Med.* 144-8). This suicidal tendency is amplified by the similarities between Medea and Sophocles' Ajax (Bongie 1977, Knox 1977). Neither of them will suffer to be made a mockery of.

On the one hand, the audience cannot be expecting a suicide. They know that Medea will find refuge in Athens. And indeed, Medea herself seeks and finds a safe refuge for herself after her revenge is complete. On the other hand, Euripides is known as an innovator, especially in creating *aitia* for cults and ritual (Scullion 1999-2000, Mastronarde 2002). So, the possibility that Euripides would alter the details exists. In fact, his foreshadowing of suicide continues after Medea receives Aegeus' promise. Medea expresses a second explicit passive suicidal ideation: τί μοι ζῆν κέρδος; "What profit is there for me to live?" (Eur. *Med.* 798). Just before killing her child, she declares that she goes to the βαλβίδα λυπηρὰν βίου, "the painful finish line of life" (Eur. *Med.* 1245) and addresses her hand as αὐτοκτόνον, "killing reciprocally" (Eur. *Med.* 1254).

Additionally, the last choral ode (Eur. *Med.* 1282-91) is also of interest. The Chorus describes their shock at Medea's parricide, and they offer up Ino as an dramatic *exemplum* for the deed. Rick Newton has previously discussed the ways in which this *exemplum* is unusual and

argues multiple reasons that Ino could be used (Newton 1985). I add, however, that a simile to Ino is supremely appropriate within this framework of a foreshadowed suicide: Ino leapt into the sea along with her son Melicertes.

Of course, Medea does not commit suicide and die alongside her sons at the play's conclusion. However, she does symbolically end her life as she knew it. So alienated from her society, Medea, like Ino, abandons her previous existence and ends her life as a mortal woman and takes on a new divine persona. Throughout the play, Medea's alienation, both from the rest of the world (Eur. *Med.* 252-8) and from herself (Eur. *Med.* 1049-64). She most identifies not with fellow women or even her own children but with the gods (Knox 1977), and Jason likens her to an ἀλάστορ (Eur. *Med.* 1333) as well as Scylla and a she-lion (Eur. *Med.* 1342-3), which affiliates her with divine figures (Sorvinou-Inwood 1997).

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