Living With Medea and Thinking After Freud: Greek Drama, Gender, and Concealments

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Fiction and drama are free to make use of the motives laid bare when [s]ocial ideals are rudely disturbed.

—Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*

Women's goals themselves are shaped by social systems which deny them ready access to the social privilege, authority, and esteem enjoyed by a majority of men.

—Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology"

It is occasionally rewarding for a feminist anthropologist to turn her attention to Freud, not necessarily for the insights that he offers about women, but for many of his broader theoretical insights that are instructive and helpful in framing feminist readings of women's issues. Strikingly illuminative, for example, is the relationship that Freud draws between the text of fiction and "actual life" (1952:218), a relationship in which anthropologists have had a long and keen interest. Freud claims that fiction and drama reveal, expose, and give expression to contradictions between ontology and ideology, or, in his words, between "things in real life" and "social ideals" (1952:216), contradictions, according to Freud, so vividly evoked in Greek drama. I draw attention to the obvious: there is an affinity between Freud's claim and one of anthropology's broader interests, that of contradiction or conflict between "real life" and "social ideals." Less immediately obvious, perhaps, is the relevance of this insight for feminists. However, its ramifications will emerge in the discussion, and I start by calling attention to Freud's deployment of a Greek male hero: Oedipus.

Greek drama, according to Freud, is perturbingly revelatory. It unmaskes aspects of real life that people are anxious to conceal, deny, and suppress because they are at odds with prevailing ideas. Accordingly, Freud reads in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* a fictionalized, universal narrative of life that lays bare the complexities of child-parent relationships, including, among other things, hostilities and rivalries between children and parents of the same sex and attachments and sexual

drama reveals the "Oedipus complex, because in the Oedipus myth the two extreme forms of the wishes of the son—the wish to kill the father and marry the mother—are realized in an only slightly modified form" (1952:217).

It is precisely because such issues as hostility or desire toward a parent contradict cultural ideas, like the love of the child toward the parent, or the absence of sexuality in children, that these issues will be pushed out of sight; and it is precisely because these experiences and feelings are part of life that they obviously cannot be pushed out of mind. Freud, like the ancient Greek playwrights, was himself a revealer of "secrets" that many of his contemporaries denied or were anxious to conceal. In acknowledging the resistance with which his theory of the Oedipus complex was greeted by the scientific and medical community, Freud said, "My own unchanged conviction is that there is nothing in it to deny or gloss over. We ought to reconcile ourselves to facts in which the Greek myth itself saw the hands of inexorable destiny" (1952:218).

My own interest is not in Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, but in the possibilities that Freud opens for us in suggesting that Greek drama exposes "social secrets." I take up Freud's view of Greek drama to explore what Euripides' *Medea* reveals about denials and concealments of Medea's, as well as the Corinthian women's relations to their social order. Whether or not we choose to consider seriously that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* reveals a universal or near universal "complex," we can at least accept that Freud has used it to provide provocative ideas in thinking about puzzles in parent-child relations. In a similar vein, my interests here are not with universals, but with some intriguing puzzles that Euripides' play offers regarding concealments of Medea's relationship to the social order.

I begin by laying out some issues that Euripides' *Medea* raises, and proceed by turning to each more fully in the course of the discussion. I propose that in *Medea* Euripides uncovers an intricate relationship between gender and universalistic and particularistic principles, and evinces women's familiarity and involvement with both.¹ At one level, Euripides unveils Medea's dilemma: for Medea, as a woman, to listen, to speak, and to act in accordance with the demands of one set of principles means to confront a denial, contradiction, and negation of it at another level. Medea's dilemma is what Bateson (1972) calls a "double-bind," in the sense in which "an overt demand at one level . . . [is] covertly nullified or contradicted at another level" (Hoffman 1981:20). In the play, Euripides discloses how a call on Medea to follow universalistic rules can be countered by a reminder of her gender, or of her duty to adhere to particularist interests, or of her "proper place," and a demand to follow particularistic interests is invalidated, diminished, or even endangered by a reminder that prestige, power, and authority are rooted in universalistic interests.

Euripides also reveals one of the less obvious aspects of the cultural creation of gender, namely, its dynamic and transformative nature.² "Cultures assign a gender to such nonhuman entities as hurricanes and mountains, ships and nations. . . . Gender . . . [is] an analytic category within which humans think about and organize their social activity rather than . . . a natural consequence of

sex differences" (Harding 1986:17). Euripides displays in *Medea* not only this obvious culturally "assigned" side of gender, but also the very process of "gender creation," or genderization of humans and nonhuman entities, by revealing the ways in which they go through rapid transformations.³

Euripides shows that gender can serve as a mask that can be worn to disguise other issues. Gender, unlike anatomically sexed bodies, is extraneous to things, and can, like a manufactured label, be attached to, and detached from, such things as roles, acts, events, and objects. This gender on/off process, like the performance of skilled magicians in conjuring a trick when the quickness of the hand deceives the eye, is often imperceptible. Humans and nonhuman entities can be in one context gender-free and in another genderized, so that Medea, for example, can be referred to, and refer to herself, as woman, mother, or wife, on the one hand, and as warrior, on the other.⁴

Euripides' *Medea* presents yet another paradox: Women may, in turn, deny, comply with, consent to, or resign themselves to, their subordinate position; yet they may also be cognizant of it, and, depending on the context and circumstances, may resist it as well (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Martin 1987; Ridd 1986). Absence of resistance, as Euripides reveals, does not necessarily mean women's lack of awareness; and open conflict, as expressed by Medea, and a desire for change, as articulated by the chorus of Corinthian women, can go hand in hand with women's embeddedness in their culture. "Women's capacity to embody the culture and essence of their people" can, as Euripides shows, be used by the women to protest and to "assert themselves politically" (Ridd 1986:5), while those in positions of authority and power, like Jason and Creon, make every effort to depoliticize the protest and use gender categories to conceal it.

I propose to unfold my arguments by exploring some interpretations that commentators have offered of *Medea*, for, as Knox notes, Euripides' *Medea* "has left a deep and lasting impression in the minds of his Athenian audience; comic parodies, literary imitations, and representations in the visual arts reflect its immediate impact and show that the play lost none of its powers to fascinate and repel as the centuries went by" (1983:272). Among some contemporary writers Medea has elicited strong condemnations, and a number of interpretations see her as a creature consumed by jealousy and passion. She has been described as a "cruel," "savage" (Kitto 1973), "hate-consumed maniac" (Grant 1963), a mother who butchers (Balzer 1969) her children, driven by "insane jealousy" (Kitto 1973). For such interpretations only a kind of madness can explain her actions, and in particular her killing of her beloved children. Many writers, among them those who are quite sympathetic to Medea, see her conflict with Jason only in its domestic context; they view it as a private matter and see her as a woman "who killed her sons to spite her husband" (Lefkowitz 1981:41). Similarly, some interpretations that are quite critical of Jason also focus on the domestic context, presenting his actions as a private betrayal by a husband followed by a "private revenge" by a wife (Burnett 1973); or they have seen Medea's actions as "the revenge imposed upon her by her own nature" (Schlesinger 1983:295).

This wide range of interpretations, albeit mostly restricted to the domestic and the personal mode, and the occasional emotionally laden responses that the

play evokes, are linked, I suggest, to what many commentators see as disturbing puzzles that Euripides poses. For example, "critics have been troubled by the dramatic function of the scene in which Aegeus appears and offers an ultimate refuge for Medea" (Oates and O'Neill 1950:290). Euripides, we are told, "has also been censured because he permits Medea to escape in the dragon-chariot at the end" (Oates and O'Neill 1950:290). In the following discussion, I turn again to these unsettling puzzles. Why indeed does Euripides allow Medea to escape? Why does he choose to have Medea kill her children? Why does he provide a jealous woman, a child murderess, with kings and gods as allies? Obviously my discussion is not the first attempt to deal with these puzzles. Indeed, my own analysis draws on several excellent discussions, including Knox's (1983) and Schlesinger's (1983). I propose that attention to what Euripides reveals about women's concern with universalistic principles and Medea's ensuing "double-bind" provides a perspective in which his choices make sense. To make more sense of Euripides' choices is, as I argue later, to ask the question, Why are some contemporary Western readings of *Medea* so troubled by it?

Anthropology's awareness of the social and cultural dimensions of human beings can provide useful insights to literary puzzles. Anthropology invites us to see Medea not only as a psychological being, motivated by inner forces, that is, the subject of unique dispositions and characteristics (Harris 1968, 1989), but also as a social person, the subject of an ensemble of statuses and roles that entail rights and obligations guided by cultural rules for conduct (Fortes 1962). Moreover, this Greek drama invites us to explore one of the central themes in feminist anthropology, that of the relationship between gender and the various spheres of social life. More specifically, the play is employed here to uncover some of the problematics of the relationship between gender and what Strathern (1981) calls self-interest and social good distinctions, what Ortner and Whitehead (1981) call particularistic and universalistic oppositions, and what Gilligan (1982) calls ethic of care and ethic of justice differences.⁵

In Ortner and Whitehead's (1981) view, there is evidence to indicate that women are more involved in particularistic interests of the domestic units, whereas men promote universalistic interests of the larger social good. Gilligan proposes a similar binary model of moral judgment in which women follow an "ethic of care" and men follow an "ethic of justice and rights" (1982). These statements are of particular interest here because at one level Euripides' *Medea* readily lends itself to precisely that kind of gender mapping. Two of the drama's main protagonists, those who represent the political authority of Corinth, insist on it. I will argue later that it is precisely at this level, of Jason's and Creon's gender mapping, that a number of contemporary interpretations respond to the play. However, Euripides shows how such a mapping of gender is manipulated to conceal women's connectedness to universalistic, social-good interests and to an ethic of justice.

The concealment is highlighted in Euripides' drama because, among other things, Medea crosses gender roles and moves "beyond the bounds of custom" (Marks and Courtivron 1981:5). Medea's crossing gender roles provides, in this

case, the arena for the tension between Jason's and Creon's desire to map gender onto distinct principles and her insistence on her connection to the social order.⁶ Euripides' play shows the ways in which Medea's crossing gender roles becomes problematic, even life threatening, because those in political authority oppose it. At the same time, this crossing is possible, even insisted on, precisely because she and the women of Corinth understand the culture of the public arena as a result of their connection to the social order and their commitment to universalistic rules for social conduct. They know both women's culture, constructed out of their specific life experiences, and the requirements of the broader culture.

I avoid, at this point, the debate over whether universalistic rules, as they emerge in *Medea*, are synonymous with men's rules, or whether this "main" culture is male culture in ancient Greece. The debate itself is crucial to appreciate Euripides' multiplex approach, and some aspects of this debate will emerge in the following discussion. I now turn to the play to recast some of its perceived puzzles.

Medea As a Social Person: Rotating the Puzzles

There are several versions of the story of Jason and Medea that predate Euripides' play. In these versions, the Corinthians, not Medea, kill her children.⁷ Classicists note that it is Euripides' own choice to present Medea as the killer of her children (Knox 1983). Kitto's interpretation is that Euripides wanted to show the tragic consequences of "passion uncontrolled by reason" (1957:247), and Durham (1986) argues that Euripides presents an uncontrolled Medea to emphasize the importance of moderation.⁸ Yet, these readings raise new questions: If Euripides had Medea kill her children to show the dangers of unbridled passion, why did he allow Medea to escape and go unpunished, even though she killed blood relatives? Is Medea's escape to be interpreted as justification or as reward for "passion uncontrolled by reason"?

I propose an alternative view: The drama shows the social side of women and reveals the complexities that it entails. Medea's escape, aided by the gods as well as by Aegeus, makes more sense if her actions are seen not only as psychologically motivated, but also as actions that are determined by, and within, a social and cultural universe of ancient Greece.

But in talking about Medea's cultural universe, I enter a debate that centers on the fact that Medea is a foreigner or, as some claim, a barbarian. And the question is, Can Medea be seen to speak for and within Greek culture? Knox makes it clear that, although Medea is a foreigner, Euripides allows her to speak for, and in the voice of, Greek culture, and he considers Medea's speech to the chorus of women as "a reflection of Athenian social conditions" (1983:290). As Knox persuasively argues, "There is no suggestion in the play that anyone regards Medea as a barbarian, except of course, in the end, Jason" (1983:287). And he adds that the chorus of Corinthian women "obviously feel[s] that Medea's situation might well be their own: as far as they are concerned, she speaks like and for them . . . far from suggesting that she is a witch and oriental barbar-

ian . . . they find a parallel in their Greek situation" (1983:287). Moreover, considering Greek women as well as Greek men, Knox argues that Medea "in her thought, speech, and action is as Greek as Jason, or rather as Ajax and Achilles" (1983:287). Although Medea is a foreign woman by birth, she has lived in Greece for many years, is familiar with its culture, and, above all, shares many of its values and religious beliefs. It is clear that Medea's status as granddaughter of the god Helios places her, as we shall see, in a larger political and religious context encompassing her and the Greeks. There are several other important cultural and social elements to keep in mind: Medea's political actions on behalf of Jason, Jason's oath of alliance to her in the name of the gods, his defiance of the gods in breaking this oath, and Creon's violation of the rule of hospitality.

Woman/Warrior—Woman/Wife: Can She Be Both?

She said that I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman.

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

The story as presented by Euripides includes the following events: Pelias, King of Iolcus, who fears Jason, sends him to Colchis, the kingdom of Medea's father. Jason's mission is to get the golden fleece and bring it to Iolcus, a mission that Pelias hopes will cost Jason his life. Medea's father, the son of the god Helios, is in possession of the golden fleece and has no intention of parting with it. Like Pelias, Medea's father dares Jason to undertake death-defying missions. Only Medea, with her extraordinary powers, can help Jason. The gods, who favor Jason, ordain that Medea fall in love with him. Medea betrays her father and her country, saves Jason's life, and helps him get the golden fleece and escape safely. Jason marries Medea and, in return for saving his life and for her other help, makes eternal vows to her in the name of the gods. Jason, Medea, and the heroes of the mission return to Iolcus with the golden fleece. However, King Pelias still perceives Jason as his enemy. To protect Jason, Medea convinces Pelias's daughters that she can rejuvenate their father if they cut him into small pieces. With Pelias dead, Medea and Jason escape to Corinth. For several years all goes well: Medea, although a foreigner, is well liked by the people of Corinth, and bears Jason two sons. Without telling Medea, however, Jason marries the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. Creon banishes Medea and her two children from his land, leaving her with no place to go. While passing through Corinth in search of a cure for his childlessness, Aegeus, king of Athens, learns of Medea's plight and makes a vow to Medea to give her a place of refuge in his country. Medea kills Jason's bride, the bride's father, and the two sons she had with Jason. To help her escape from the angry Corinthians, her grandfather, the god Helios, sends a chariot drawn by dragons. Medea safely escapes.

Medea protests Jason's marriage to the Corinthian princess. But what are the grounds for her protest? Her protest, I argue, is grounded both in domestic relations and, more important, in the political domain. The marriage of Jason and

Medea is not an ordinary marriage because Medea is not given in marriage to Jason by her male relatives, according to the custom in ancient Greece (Lacey 1968). She betrays her father and her country for Jason, and gives herself in marriage. Yet, her act means that she is a woman without kinsmen to protect her and that Jason is responsible for protecting her. There are several socially significant elements in Jason's betrayal. Jason, without divorcing Medea, marries the Corinthian princess in secret. This places Medea in a rather precarious position. Although she is not divorced, she is no longer a wife who enjoys her husband's protection, since he has agreed to have her exiled. She becomes not only a betrayed and rejected wife but a socially liminal person as well. Moreover, Medea is not merely Jason's wife. Medea is more than a woman who lives for love, and her case is more than that of a rejected jealous woman. Medea is a daughter of a king, and a granddaughter of a god. There are political links between Jason and Medea. She becomes a friend to Jason before becoming a wife, by aiding him in his political endeavors. In return, according to Euripides, he makes oaths to her invoking the gods. I draw attention to the fact that such oaths are different from those made by lovers. Jason's oath to Medea is shown by Euripides to go beyond conjugal and domestic obligations. As we shall see, Medea, the chorus of women, Aegeus, and even Jason and Creon, who try to obfuscate it, all know that Jason made the oaths in return for political acts.⁹

Oaths, Alliances, Friendship: Gendered or Gender-Free?

Some comments on the nature of alliances and oaths in ancient Greece will help unravel the Medea-Jason conflict and the question raised earlier: What are the grounds for her protest? In ancient Greece, the gods are the highest authority and the ultimate protectors of justice. Dover reminds us that "to swear falsely by the gods involves the divine world in a way which many reprehensible behaviours do not" (1981:46). Oaths in the name of the gods are made to bind people within and across political systems. Parker writes that "upon . . . the sanctity [of the oath] depended innumerable relations, both within states and between them: through his office as guardian of oath, Zeus was automatically guardian also of social morality. . . . The humblest of citizens was thus constantly forced to choose between 'respecting' and 'defiling' the gods" (1983:186). Oaths ensure that promises and alliances will not be easily broken. The breaking of an oath invites punishment that affects not only the transgressors but their children as well. Parker notes that "in serious oaths, the swearer invoked destruction on himself and his descendants in case of perjury. . . . This threat to descendants is constantly mentioned in connection with broken oaths" (1983:186). This link between parents' oaths and their children's well-being has, as we shall see, serious ramifications.

In this cultural context, therefore, some key political and religious elements emerge in Medea's claims. Jason is a man who defies the gods and brings a curse on himself and his children when he breaks his oath to Medea. Although Jason breaks a rule for conduct between mortals and the gods, he also breaks rules for

conduct among mortals. In terms of political trust between people, Jason violates a rule of hospitality to Medea and betrays her as a friend. Friendship in Greek culture takes place "when a stranger makes a willing, immediate and personal agreement to be immediate friends" (Lattimore 1955:3). In what ways do questions of gender press on this discussion? Some questions that leap to mind are, How does gender play itself out in issues of friendship, oaths, and rules for conduct? Are these commitments gender-free? Or, are they anchored in values that are "for men only"? If so, is Medea wrong or deluded to claim them?

Women's Connectedness to the Social Order

I begin from an assumption that Euripides has Medea press claims because she thinks that these cultural rules apply to her. As Medea sees it, in marrying the princess of Corinth, Jason, who was a friend, brings dishonor on her, and in betraying their alliance, he becomes an enemy, a political adversary. Some of the rules that underlie honor need to be mentioned at this point. Honor violated calls for justice; restoration of honor takes place through revenge. Kitto comments that for the Greeks, "to forgive your enemies is a bad thing, and to be revenged on them a plain duty" (1957:245). Medea reacts to the betrayal like a male Greek hero, as Knox notes, like Ajax or Achilles. Since heroes, he argues, "lived and died by a simple code 'help your friends and hurt your enemies' it was only to be expected that their revenge when they felt themselves unjustly treated, scorned, could be huge and deadly" (Knox 1983:277). Medea knows, understands, and follows this code for conduct. Jason, who was a friend she had helped, has turned into an enemy that she is bound, by social convention, to hurt. Medea—the woman, the wife, the individual—may want revenge, but Medea, the political person, is also impelled by cultural rules to fight, to avenge, to hurt, to become a hero. If Medea as a private individual had a submissive temperament, she still would have the same legitimate claims and the duty to act that the angry Medea has.

Euripides shows Medea to take universalistic rules as gender-free. Her commitment to Greek cultural ideas of justice and honor is, as Euripides shows, rooted in her political statuses as Jason's ally, as a princess, and as a descendant of a god. These give her no choice but to respond to Jason's denial of obligation. At the same time, Euripides presents Medea also as a woman and a mother, and her encounters with the chorus reveal the specificity of women's experiences and represent the domestic sphere, particularistic principles, and the ethic of care.

In Creon's actions, Euripides underscores Medea's difficulties to respond, as a woman, to Jason's betrayal. Creon's visit reveals the process in which Medea's attempts to follow universalistic principles are being ignored by Creon, who approaches her as wife and mother: "So set against your husband, / Medea, I order you to leave my territories / An exile, and take along with you your two children" (1955: lines 271–274). Creon's pronouncement forces the issue for Medea, tipping the balance toward the ethic of justice and making the ethic of care harder for her to choose. Creon, king of Corinth, the highest human authority to whom

Medea can appeal, is also an accomplice to Jason's wrongful acts. Creon violates an elementary Greek "moral virtue" of hospitality (Guthrie 1954). In banishing Medea and her children, he violates this code of hospitality, the rule of what Lattimore calls "the nonabuse of power against those over whom one has power" (1955:4).

Since Medea has no kinsmen to help her, and she cannot appeal to the king of Corinth, she has to act on her own and, as she did when she helped Jason in the battlefield, once again cross gender boundaries to act in the role of warrior, or hero. In seeking justice, she turns to humans as well as to the gods, to sanction her actions of retribution. As she reenters the political sphere, Medea emphasizes her political statuses, by referring to herself as a person "whose father was noble, whose grandfather [was] Helius" (1955: line 406), and gains social support for her claims against Jason and Creon. Medea's personal nurse, the chorus of Corinthian women, as well as a royal male peer, Aegeus, recognize and support her claims as justified, and the gods sanction her claim as a legitimate punishing agent.

The Alliance of Women: Submission and Resistance

It strikes me that there are a great many ways women express consciousness of their position and opposition to oppression.

—Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body*

In the first part of the drama, Euripides reveals a complex tapestry of women's submission, resistance, and alliance. Although it is important to understand Medea's political protest, it is equally important to not lose sight of the fact that Euripides chooses to show her connectedness to particularistic interests and to make a point of women's support for her claims. Medea's nurse presents the political and domestic elements of the conflict. Significantly, this woman, a servant, is the first to voice the opinion that universal principles have been violated, principles which, from her perspective, seem gender-free. The nurse recounts Medea's political actions on behalf of Jason. But at the same time, she also describes Medea's domestic accomplishments and notes her achievements as a wife: She has given Jason two sons and has conducted herself properly in Corinth. In return for her friendship, love, and loyalty, the nurse says, Jason betrays her and the children. If the nurse begins by legitimating Medea's political claim, making it gender-free, her following comments present a complication. The nurse foreshadows Medea's transition to the political sphere by describing her as a warrior. Medea, the nurse says, will not tolerate being dishonored by Jason. The nurse fears that Medea, using a warrior weapon, "may sharpen a sword and thrust [it] to the heart" (1955: line 40) of one who wrongs her.

By now it becomes clear that the "plot of gender thickens." Medea's claims for justice may be perceived, by her and by the nurse, as gender-free, but it is another matter for her actually to act like a warrior, crossing gender roles. Or is the role gender-free? Can Medea also take it on, without being challenged? Me-

dea, as the nurse tells it, has acted as a warrior and helped Jason, a male warrior, in the battlefield before she became Jason's wife. But if, as contemporary writers like Redfield note, in ancient Greece "the battlefield is inhabited solely by men, and heroism is a superbly masculine role" (1975:119), did Medea create a paradox of doing the "right thing" in the "wrong gender," and will someone quickly point that out to her? Or, do her actions entitle her to a claim, as she argues? In Euripides' skillful unraveling of the arguments, it is important to note not only what people say but also what is left unsaid.

At first glance, the chorus of the Corinthian women who come to speak to Medea advise compliance and acceptance. What they see at first is a domestic crisis, a wife grieving excessively for a husband who has left her for another woman. "Suppose your man gives honor/ To another woman's bed./ It often happens. Don't be hurt./ God will be your friend in this./ You must not waste away / Grieving too much for him who shared your bed" (1955: lines 155–159). Not knowing that the Corinthian women are outside her house, Medea calls upon the gods to witness Jason's violation of oaths to her. Medea's nurse turns to the chorus of women and restates Medea's appeal to the gods, thus making compliance and acceptance more difficult: "Do you hear what she says, and how she cries/ On Themis, the goddess of Promises, and on Zeus,/ Whom we believe to be the Keeper of Oaths?" (1955: lines 168–170). The women no longer call for submission, but instead acknowledge Medea's claim and recognize Jason's violation of the oath: "Wronged, she calls on the gods,/ On the justice of Zeus, the oath sworn" (1955: lines 207–208).

Euripides establishes women's consciousness of the complexity of their position—their knowledge of both particularistic and universalistic rules. Euripides has Medea deliver a magnificent speech addressing domestic and political concerns. In her speech, which is "one of the most famous speeches in Greek tragedy" (Knox 1983:288), Medea speaks first of women's common experiences. She talks about the hopes, trials, and pains of marriage and childbirth; of the limited choices women have; of women's total dependence on men; and of the domestic and nondomestic privileges accorded only to men. Euripides allows Medea to reveal a contradiction between men's ideas and women's ideas and real life experience. Men, Medea says to the women, see the battlefield as an arena in which they have to face danger and display courage, but they view women's domestic life as quiet and safe (1955: lines 248–249). Having experienced the battlefield as well as the pains of childbirth, Medea prefers the warrior's role and says, "I would very much rather stand/ Three times in the front of battle than bear one child" (1955: lines 250–251). Women have no way of knowing if the men they marry will treat them well, Medea says, and her husband turned out to be the worst of men. Although she presents women with issues that unite them, Medea also reminds them of the circumstances that make her case political and her claims justified. She explains that she gave up her rights as a citizen in her own country to come to the assistance of Jason. Jason's marriage to the princess of Corinth makes her homeless in a double sense: she lost not only a home but a country as well. She has become a refugee.

Euripides elucidates women's connectedness to universalistic rules and their alliance with a woman who speaks in the voice of an ethic of justice. He does not present the Corinthian women as shocked at another woman's rebellion against tradition, but as women who understand Medea's political claims. They recognize that rules for social conduct have been broken: Jason has violated rules of hospitality (gender-free) and has broken a political oath (gender-free) to Medea, an oath given in return for acts in the battlefield. The women, significantly, now take a different approach, and no longer chastise Medea for excessive grief. They now speak to Medea as allies: "This I will promise. You are in the right, Medea,/ In paying your husband back" (1955: lines 267–269).

An Authority Uses Gender as a Mask to Conceal the Issues

How great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just to open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.

—Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"

So far Euripides has allowed women to support Medea's claim. She has the Corinthian women's support not only for the legitimacy of her claims, but also for her desire to see Jason punished. But how is Jason to be punished? Medea's only recourse to justice is through the king of Corinth. However, he has already broken a rule of hospitality by allowing Jason to take his daughter as his bride, and furthermore he now comes to tell Medea that she and her children are to leave Corinth right away. Creon's second violation of hospitality is significant in that every additional violation of universalistic principles tips the scales for Medea, putting more weight on the side of the ethic of justice.

Creon does not merely order that Medea be banished. Euripides has him go in person to tell her of his decision. Euripides uses the king's gesture to reveal the contradictions between what Creon knows and what he chooses to acknowledge. Creon has authority over Medea, but he is also afraid of her. She is, on the one hand, "only" a woman, but also, on the other hand, an equal—a warrior. Medea is "from a family descended from the sun-god and therefore related to both the divine and heroic worlds" (Schlesinger 1983:306). Creon knows the source of her anger but denies it. Because she is a woman, he can ignore her claims and decide that she is to be exiled with her two young children. But he reveals that he fears her as an equal—as an enemy. He admits that he is afraid of her because she is a clever woman; yet he refuses to listen to her, to hear her protests, to acknowledge her claims. Even as he grants her, after much begging on her part, one day's stay, he warns that he will kill her if she does not leave at dawn. He makes references to Medea's gender, and speaks to her as a woman who disrupts arrangements between men. When in supplication she asks him to give her one day to prepare for her exile, he turns her rationale into emotionality and transforms a reasonable request to prepare for exile into female hysterics: "Woman, you seem to want to create a disturbance" (1955: line 337).

Medea's Dilemma: A Double Bind—Restore Your Honor/You Cannot (Should Not) Do It

The chorus of women puts Creon's denials and obfuscations into perspective by openly acknowledging the severity of Medea's political isolation. "Where will you turn? Who will help you? / What house or what land to preserve you / From ill can you find?" (1955: lines 359–361). Medea is clearly no longer viewed as simply a wife left by a husband, and as a friend betrayed, but as a political refugee with no place to go and no authority to turn for justice. Creon's violation of hospitality has serious political implications for Medea, and she now includes Creon among her political enemies. More important, whereas before she wanted to see her enemies punished, she now has to act as a punishing agent herself. Medea tells the women that she now plans the death of her enemies, whom she lists as the "father, the girl, and my husband" (1955: line 375), and discusses ways of killing them. She considers a warrior's weapon and the possibility that she would "sharpen a sword and thrust it to the heart" (1955: line 379).

Medea's dilemma gains clearer, sharper gender contours. A demand to follow universalistic rules, to seek justice, and to restore her honor is covertly nullified by another message, which Creon imparts: She is a woman, a wife, a mother, and he can ignore her claims. Medea has to take revenge and kill her enemies. Yet the methods of killing that Medea contemplates, which include the use of a sword, present a dilemma of gender: To follow universalistic rules is contradicted by "facts of life." Even if we can seriously entertain the idea that in ancient Greece the role of warrior or hero is gender-free, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the role itself is customarily allocated to men and that Medea is an exception, a woman who crossed gender lines. The women have become her allies, but they follow customary roles and are not women warriors. If Medea attempts to use the sword to kill her enemies in the palace, she will be surrounded by the guards. Since she will be one against many, she needs to find a revenge that affords her a better chance of surviving. In discussing her plans for punishment, Medea—for the first time—mentions her grandfather, the god Helios, and reminds herself and the women of Corinth that her statuses entail duties. The arguments for Medea to follow an ethic of justice are mounting. Not only is she a betrayed friend, but also, as a daughter of a king and a granddaughter of a god, she has an obligation to act and seek retribution.

Consciousness, Resistance, and an Ethic of Justice and Rights

What is the response of these Corinthian women when they hear that Medea plans to punish not only Jason but their own king as well? No warnings come from the women. They do not tell her that as a woman she has no right to be concerned with justice. Nor do they warn Medea that, blinded by principles of justice, she is going to hurt others. In fact, what Euripides presents is women who are conscious of women's oppression, and through Medea's choice to act they rejoice in what they see as an opportunity to reverse the course of nature, the social order, and injustices to women. "Flow backward to your sources, sacred rivers, / And

let the world's great order be reversed. / It is the thoughts of *men* that are deceitful, / Their pledges that are loose. / Story shall now turn my condition to a fair one, / Women are paid their due. / No more shall evil-sounding fame be theirs" (1955: lines 410–420, emphasis added in Warner's translation).

Euripides presents a link between women's consciousness of oppression and the social good, and it is forged not only by Medea, but by the Corinthian women as well. At the same time that Euripides has the chorus acknowledge injustices to women, he also has the Corinthian women affirm Medea's insistence that rules for social conduct have been broken. The chorus states that Greece has lost some of its moral fiber. "Good faith has gone, and no more remains in great Greece a sense of shame" (1955: lines 439–440). In the eyes of these women, Medea's personal situation both mirrors a larger injustice to women and becomes a concern for the social good. It expresses women's aspiration, a hope that Medea's actions will affect women's lives, that it will bring about a change in the way women are perceived, and that Medea's acts will turn their condition to a better one. At the same time, her predicament reflects a threat to the fundamental rules that guide social relations among human beings, women and men, and relations between mortals and the gods. The women's response prepares the ground for Medea's emergence as an agent of the social order.

A Conjuring Trick: Jason's Attempts to Conceal By Genderizing Medea's Claims

Ladies and Gentlemen . . . throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity—. . . Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem—those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem.

—Luce Irigaray, quoting Freud, *Speculum of the Other Woman*

How does Euripides present Jason's response to Medea's claim? He shows Jason undermining it by genderizing, domesticating, and privatizing her protest. Jason presents Medea as "the problem," as an irrational woman obsessed by sexual jealousy; he genderizes her behavior as a reflection of female nature, ignores her political claims, and avoids any reference to her statuses as friend, warrior, princess, and descendant of a god. Jason attributes what he considers to be her lack of political sense to her being a woman. He, like Creon, portrays Medea as a disruptive female who, in her denunciation of him and the king, breaks the rules of proper behavior. He criticizes her personality: She has, he says, a "stubborn temper" (1955: line 447). She talks too freely, he charges, in condemning the king. He tells her that she should have displayed greater submission to the king. Indeed, he says, she should consider herself lucky that exile, and not worse punishment, is her fate. For a brief moment he attempts to act as a husband and benefactor to Medea. He claims that he did his best to calm the king on her behalf, but unfortunately, he says, because she would not stop talking against the king, his efforts were frustrated. He says that he now comes to help her. "All the same, and in spite of your conduct, I'll not desert / My friends, but have come to make

some provision for you,/ So that you and the children may not be penniless" (1955: lines 459–461).

Euripides has Medea reveal what Jason attempts to conceal. Whereas Jason genderizes and domesticates the conflict, Medea speaks directly of political claims. She responds to his comment on friendship, but refuses to let Jason talk about himself as a friend at this stage. Now, she says, he is her enemy because he has injured her. She talks "like a warrior," accusing him of lack of courage, and saying that he is shameless because he dares show his face to those he has betrayed. To present her claims like a warrior and not a wife, she places them in the context of the battlefield. She wants to set the record straight and puts her claims in order of importance:

And first I will begin from what happened first./ I saved your life, and every Greek knows I saved it./ Who was a shipmate of yours aboard the Arago./ When you were sent to control the bulls that breathed fire/ And yoke them, and when you would sow that deadly field. Also that snake, who encircled with his many folds/ The Golden Fleece and guarded it and never slept,/ I killed, and so gave you the safety of the light. [1955: lines 475–482]

Medea thus establishes that she has acted like a hero. She became Jason's friend by saving his life in the battlefield, and she reminds him that there are witnesses, warriors, his own friends and peers, who can substantiate her claim. As a result of her acts, she became a traitor to her father and her country. She recounts that she killed King Pelias because he was Jason's enemy, although she herself had no quarrel with him. These are the acts on which she bases her claims. In return for these acts, she continues, he left her and took another wife, although she had given him sons and heirs. Medea, significantly, directs to Jason the accusation that the chorus of Corinthian women earlier directed to Greek men in general. "Faith in your word has gone. Indeed, I cannot tell/ Whether you think the gods whose names you swore by then/ Have ceased to rule and that new standards are set up./ Since you must know you have broken your word to me" (1955: lines 492–495). In all her accusations, Medea makes little reference to herself as a wife. She states that she has given him two sons, but she does not include the sons in the debts she is owed. What she puts on the side of Jason's debts to her are only political acts. Her emphasis is on the fact that she has saved Jason's life and that he, in return, has broken oaths to her.

Jason cannot deny Medea's acts as a friend who saved his life in the battlefield. Although he acknowledges the actions, he discredits them by claiming Medea was not responsible. The god who ordained that she fall in love with Jason is responsible for Medea's actions. He does not deny that Medea has helped him in many ways, but he claims that he has paid the debt. It is significant that he sees the balance in political terms, rather than domestic, since he says that he has taken her out of what he calls her barbarous country and has brought her to live in the country of law. He further argues that in Greece she is famous as a clever woman, and that people honor her. Who would have known of her if she had remained in her father's country? he asks. Jason also insists that he does not want to bring up

all that he has done for her, but she is forcing the situation: "remember it was you who started the argument" (1955: line 546).

Euripides skillfully unravels the concealment of contradictions. While he shows Medea's acts on behalf of Jason as lifesaving acts for him, he presents Jason's acts on her behalf as life threatening for her. Euripides reveals a hidden double-bind: Jason's statements to Medea are contradicted by the reality of her situation. Thus, Jason's claim to have made Medea famous comes shortly after the king, the representative of the law, has told Medea that he wishes to banish her because she is famous as a clever woman, and Medea has described to Creon the trials of those who are considered "clever." Similarly, all of Jason's acts on Medea's behalf are harmful since they entail the losses of rights for her. Thus, Jason argues that his marriage to the Corinthian princess is meant to enhance his own social position and, at the same time, to benefit Medea and their two children. Medea's children will become brothers to the children that Jason will have with the princess, and thus they will be allied to Corinthian royalty. Medea, he argues, does not need children. He asks her, "Do you think this is a bad plan?" (1955: line 567).

Euripides presents Jason as a man who conceals that he has broken rules for social conduct by stereotyping, and thus distorting, the action of women to avoid facing the consequences. Jason talks about women in a way which the chorus of women earlier deplored. He discusses what he sees as female gender characteristics, the many shortcomings of women and their inability to think logically. Women, he says, think too much of the marital bed. Sexual desires cloud women's judgment. If sex is good, they think that life is good. If something goes wrong in their sex lives, they can no longer see where their best interests lie. Medea's problem is a female problem. She, like all women deprived of sex, cannot see what is best for her. Jason concludes, "It would have been better for men / To have got their children in some other way, and women / Not to have existed. Then life would have been good" (1955: lines 573–575).

The Chorus of Women Speak for a Gender-Free Social Order

Again, Euripides provides a counter-balance to Jason's arguments and at the same time prepares for Medea's transformation into an agent of the social order. The Corinthian women who witness the dialogue between Jason and Medea find Jason's arguments unconvincing and his acts on Medea's behalf transparently bad. They again accuse him of betraying a friend and they support Medea's claims, "O let him die ungraced whose heart / Will not reward his friends" (1955: lines 659–660). The women do not respond to Jason's attempts to feminize Medea or to domesticate her claims. They refuse to accept his view that Medea is motivated by sexual jealousy, or that sexual deprivation prevents her from being rational. They say to him, "You have betrayed your wife and are acting badly" (1955: line 578).

Several elements make it clear that Euripides presents a single cultural system of rules for social conduct and moral judgment, which men as well as women

recognize. The distinctions lie in the fact that Jason and Creon use gender to ignore, deny, and conceal the charges that they have violated rules for conduct. Euripides shows how men like Creon and Jason make use of gender to obscure and deny their own personal motives and to justify their actions. And at the same time, he demonstrates the difficulties that women face in making claims. The problem is not that they are ignorant of universalistic issues, and not that they are "inarticulate" in the public arena (to use Ardener's [1975] phrase), but that men have authority that is often denied to women (Rosaldo 1980). Creon and Jason are annoyed with Medea precisely because she insists on principles of justice, because she articulates with remarkable clarity the violations of social rules by her husband and by the Corinthian king. Her gender is used to discredit her claims and to turn her universalistic concerns into disruptive, selfish, jealously motivated issues.

A King Arrives to Uphold the Women's Claims: The Social Order Is Gender-Free

In introducing Aegeus, king of Athens, Euripides is not, as some critics argue, making a dramatic error. Rather, he is making the crucial statement that men's rules are not necessarily synonymous with the voice of the culture. Although Creon and Jason have authority and power, they do not, in this case, speak in the voice of the Greek culture. The gender difference in which Jason is so eager to wrap Medea's claims is counter-balanced again. As a male peer of Creon and Jason, Aegeus provides peer judgment for Medea's claim and gives the authority of the king of Athens to a woman's claim on universalistic principles, on the sanctity of rules of social conduct among mortals and between mortals and the gods.¹⁰

To appreciate Euripides' statement on women's connectedness to the (broader) social order, it is important to pay attention to some of the details of the drama. Aegeus passes through Corinth on his return from a visit to an oracle to which he has turned in despair over his childlessness. He comes to see Medea, and learns from her that Jason has taken a second wife. Aegeus's response is similar to the initial response to the women: "then let him go" (1955: line 699). Upon learning of the king's involvement, Aegeus understands the political aspects of the affair and, like the chorus of women, assures Medea that her grief is understandable. Medea then tells Aegeus that she is banished from Corinth. Aegeus recognizes Jason's as well as Creon's violations of rules of social conduct, violation of oaths as well as of hospitality. Aegeus agrees to help Medea and to grant her refuge for two reasons: First, for a universalistic, religious reason, "for the sake of the gods" (1955: line 720), because Aegeus, like Medea, knows that rules for social conduct have been broken and that the gods have been defied; and second, for personal reasons, for her promise to help him in curing his childlessness. If she reaches his land on her own, he will give her sanctuary, Aegeus promises. Medea wants a pledge from him—an oath in the name of the gods.

In presenting Aegeus making an oath, Euripides not only says something about a woman's right to a binding political alliance, but he also calls attention to

the previous oath, now violated, made by Jason. Aegeus shows the oaths to be gender-free, and reaffirms Medea's claims about the binding nature of oaths in making and protecting alliances and her insistence that there are consequences for breaking rules of social conduct. Medea says to Aegeus, "If you are bound by this oath, / When they try to drag me from your land, you will not / Abandon me; but if our pact is only words, / With no oath to the gods, you will be lightly armed, / Unable to resist their summons" (1955: lines 735–739).

Aegeus agrees and tells Medea to name the gods. She asks him to swear by Helios, the father of her father, and by all the gods, that he will never turn her out to her enemies. Aegeus swears by the Earth, by the god Helios, and by all the gods. Medea asks him what will happen to him if he breaks his vow. He answers that he will suffer the consequences of those who have no respect for the gods. In having Aegeus swear by Helios, Euripides prepares the stage for Helios to help Medea.

An Agent of the Gods and the Social Order

Aegeus's visit marks a shift in roles for Medea. Knox comments, "Medea is presented to us not only as a hero, but also, at the end of the play, by her language, action and situation, as a *theos* or at least something more than human" (1983:281). In following Knox's observation, I argue that if Medea acts "like a god," it is because she emerges as an agent of the social order and thus comes to represent the gods. Medea herself, at this stage, lays her plan of punishment before the women of Corinth, whom she now addresses as friends. She will, she says, call upon Jason and tell him that she regrets her former behavior, that she has come to understand the value of his plan of a political marriage, and that she thinks the children should stay with him and not go into exile. She requests that he ask the princess to let the children stay. As a gesture of good-will, Medea will send the princess a magnificent dress that she was given by her grandfather, the god Helios. However, Medea tells the Corinthian women that when the princess puts on the dress, she will die, as will anyone else who touches her. Helios's part in Medea's acts gains prominence, as Aegeus has sworn by Helios to give Medea sanctuary, and now Creon, the king of Corinth, and the princess will die by the dress Helios gave to Medea.

It is at this point that Euripides shows Medea's connectedness to—or representation of—the social order in her transformation from a person who protests the breaking of rules for social conduct into a punishing agent. As an agent of the social order, Medea must now make a choice between an ethic of care and an ethic of justice, between parental love and political duties, between her role as a mother and her role as an agent of the gods and of the social order. As an agent of the gods, she knows that her children are cursed because their father has broken an oath and has defied the gods. The gods, it will be recalled, are the highest authority and the ultimate protector of justice and of oaths, and "the swearer invoked destruction on himself and his descendants in case of perjury" (Parker 1983:186). The children will not be allowed to prosper. As an agent of the social

order, if she takes revenge, her children will die at the hands of her enemies. As Medea now sees it, she has no choice but to take the fate of her children into her own hands. "Force every way will have it they must die, and since / This must be so, then I, their mother, shall kill them. / Oh, arm yourself in steel, my heart! Do not hang back / From this fearful and necessary wrong" (1955: lines 1240–1243).

The complexity of Medea's choice is underscored in Euripides' choice to present her as a mother who loves her children, who had hoped to see them grow into adulthood, have accomplishments, enjoy marriage, and comfort and support her in her old age. All hopes and aspirations have vanished: "Oh surely once the hopes in you I had, poor me, / Were high ones: you would look after me in old age, / And when I died would deck me well with your own hands / . . . For, once I am left without you, / Sad will be the life I'll lead and sorrowful for me" (1955: lines 1032–1037). When faced with the act of killing her children, she changes her mind several times and says, "Why children, do you look upon me with your eyes? / Why do you smile so sweetly that last smile of all? / Oh, Oh, what can I do? My spirit has gone from me, / Friends, when I saw that bright look in the children's eyes. I cannot bear to do it. I renounce my plans / I had before" (1955: lines 1040–1045).

The women of Corinth, who up to this point acknowledged universalistic principles and an ethic of justice, now speak for particularistic concerns and ethic of care. The women, who have never uttered a word of protest at Medea's announcement that she is about to kill their own king and his daughter, object when they hear that she is about to kill her children. A woman killing her children is most unusual. They say, "Of one alone I have heard, one woman alone / Of those of old who laid her hands on her children" (1955: lines 1282–1283). They see the killing of the children as breaking the taboo on spilling kindred blood.¹¹ In contrast to the complete support that they give Medea in her claim for justice, they do not support her plan to kill the children. They appeal to an ethic of care and to Helios as Medea's grandfather: "Yours was the golden birth from which / She sprang, and now I fear divine / Blood may be shed by men" (1955: lines 1255–1257). At the same time, they appeal to Medea the mother, "O where will you find the courage / Or the skill of hand and heart, / When you set yourself to attempt / A deed so dreadful to do?" (1955: lines 856–859).

The women of Corinth know what Medea and all Greeks know: the children of a father who violates an oath are cursed. They also realize that Medea, by choosing to protest, has made the choice to act as an agent of the social order, and in this role has allied herself with the gods whom Jason defied. Precisely because the women recognize Medea's choice to act as an agent of the social order, they make no attempt to stop her. Although they do not want her to kill her children, they remain her allies.

Euripides presents Medea, in her relationship to Jason, as an individual and as a social person. As an individual, Medea loved a man who left her, and as a social person, Medea—the princess, the granddaughter of a god—helped a warrior in the battlefield who later betrayed his alliance with her. Medea the woman

who loved Jason wishes to take revenge and hurt Jason, and in killing the children, she knows that she will hurt and destroy his house. Medea the mother faces the difficulty of killing the children she loves. Medea the social person expects to be revenged. Yet, in killing the children, for whatever reason, she faces the problem that she violates a rule of conduct, a taboo on killing blood relatives. She is the first to recognize her pain and the gravity of this taboo, and she describes her plan to kill the children as the most impious deed.

As far as the children are concerned, what are the choices open to Medea? She could, of course, ignore universalistic principles and an ethic of justice and abandon her claims. But, like (male) heroes, she is well aware of her social statuses, and she makes her choice to act as an agent of the social order. Had she abdicated her claims, she still would have to face the fact that her children are cursed. Had Jason violated a rule of conduct between humans only, had he, for example, been only an unfaithful husband, the children would not have been cursed, and he would not have brought down the wrath of the gods on his house. But he has betrayed a friend and has broken an oath to her. This is why "Medea from her first appearance has no doubts that the gods support her cause" (Knox 1983:278) and why "she is quite sure, from start to finish, that the gods are on her side" (Knox 1983:278). His violation of the oaths makes it impossible for his line to continue. So Medea first kills his new bride, destroying all hope of further children, and then kills the now cursed children he already has.

In ignorance of the children's death, Jason comes to save them from the angry Corinthians who now want revenge for the deaths of their princess and king. In the final scene, Euripides has Medea escape through the help of her grandfather, the god Helios. The god affirms the judgments given by mortals, the nurse, the chorus, and Aegeus, and vindicates Medea's acts. Medea appears sitting in a chariot drawn by dragons and holding the dead bodies of the children. She says to Jason, "You will never touch me with your hand, / Such a chariot has Helios, my father's father, / Given me to defend me from my enemies" (1955: lines 1320–1323).

Jason repeats the words Medea uttered at the opening of the play, "Oh, my life is over" (1955: line 1350). He has lost his alliance and his hope for his house to prosper through his descendants. Medea reminds him that the children died of a paternal disease. "They died from a disease they caught from their father" (1955: line 1364) because he has defied the gods. Jason asks Medea if she killed the children for the sake of the bed. And for the first time, Medea responds to the charge directly, briefly reverting to her role of wife, and asks him if he thinks that this is a small role for a woman. Then, immediately returning to her role as an agent of the social order, she seeks expiation and purification for her shedding of kindred blood, the killing of her children. She says, "I shall establish a holy feast and sacrifice / Each year for ever to atone for the blood guilt" (1955: lines 1382–1383). The killing of the children, as presented by Euripides, is neither condemned nor condoned. It is placed in a cultural context in which Jason violates an oath made in the name of the gods, a violation that brings a curse on his children.

It is as a social person that Medea, like other heroes in drama, transforms private conflicts into public concerns, and affirms social order over chaos. Euripides allows a woman to emerge as an agent of the social order and act according to universalistic principles and an ethic of justice. Her actions are guided by such cultural values as friendship, honor, and respect for oaths and hospitality. The chorus of Corinthian women and Aegeus, king of Athens, acknowledge and affirm these values, and the gods sanction the action that Medea sees herself as obliged to take.

Conclusion

While women in Euripides' *Medea* may seem in one sense to concern themselves with particularistic interests, and while Jason and Creon certainly go to great lengths to ensure that they do, the women also clearly speak the language of the public arena and follow universalistic principles of justice. The play unfolds Medea's dilemma, a problem of a double-bind, and reveals that while Medea herself is concerned with universalistic principles, she is confronted by those in political authority who deny her claims and use intimidation to force her to follow particularistic interests.

Now I want to return briefly to some of the play's central puzzles and to Freud, contemporary commentators, and feminists. First, I recall that I draw on Freud's ideas of the link between fiction and "real life." While Freud sees it as self-evident, I want to briefly explore possible links between Euripides' *Medea* and women's lives in ancient Greece, and to consider what is known about Greek women's knowledge of universalistic principles and their connectedness to the social order. Such a consideration allows one to place some of the drama's gender issues in a more historical context.

Writers like Foley (1981), Humphreys (1978), and Pomeroy (1975) rightly caution us against making generalizations about the lives of women in ancient Greece from images of fictional heroic women in Greek drama. At the same time, Knox draws a reasonable link between *Medea* and "real life," and argues that Euripides' play "is grounded in the social reality and problems of its own time" (1983:283). Knox comments that "in fact there are many signs that in the intellectual ferment of late fifth-century Athens, the problem of women's role in society and the family was, like everything else, a subject for discussion and reappraisal" (Knox 1983:288). At first glance, women's exclusion from the political sphere may seem to lend support to a mapping of gender on particularistic and universalistic interests. Yet a closer look suggests that women in ancient Greece were, like Medea and the Corinthian women, familiar with universalistic concerns and were expected to transmit them to their children. In the private arena, women talked to kinsmen, to their fathers, and to their husbands (Schaps 1979). Lacey argues that in ancient Greece "women did talk to their husbands about public affairs, and take an interest in them" (1968:174). Moreover, there are accounts of women's knowledge of, and interest in, legal matters. Foley notes that "court cases refer to women who mediated between kin through their knowledge

of matters of finance and inheritance" (1981:131). Similarly, Lacey notes an orator's comments that "some women do not allow their husbands to give false evidence" (1968:174). Dewald argues that Herodotus's *Histories* presents accounts of 5th-century Greek women who, like Euripides' Corinthian women, remind men "of the rules within which the society is supposed to act" (1981:92). Herodotus provides images of women who, like Medea, "disrupt their husbands' plans not as wild or irrational forces, but as representatives themselves of social norms that their husbands have flouted" (Dewald 1981:92).

I argue that the drama unfolding in Euripides' *Medea* makes more sense if we consider that in ancient Greece women's familiarity with universalistic concerns came not only from their talking to kinsmen in the domestic sphere, but also from their participation in the religious sphere. Although Greek women were excluded from the political sphere, they were not excluded from the religious sphere, and they "participated in an enormous range of rituals and festivals, both public and private" (Foley 1981:131). Such broader knowledge that was available to women would have enabled individuals like Medea to cross gender roles and take on roles customarily assigned to men. Dewald comments that, occasionally, women switched gender roles and took direct political action. She notes that Herodotus writes about such women taking on political roles in groups or individually, as, for example, the three queens who crossed the bounds of customary behavior and "avenged the murder of brother, husband, and son" (Dewald 1981:108).

In Medea's specific case, however, a genderized, problematic double-bind emerges. Her insistence on universalistic interests is countered by Jason's and Creon's equal insistence that she, as a woman, remain loyal to particularistic principles. In Medea's case, ironically, it is, of course, Jason who first asked her to follow universalistic interests and act like a warrior to save his life. She was asked, as Schlesinger (1983) notes, not just to help Jason, but to save the entire Argonautic expedition. Because she is a woman, Jason can also use her gender to conceal it all, and thus create her dilemma.¹² In Medea's case, the double-bind exacts a price: She can become an agent of the social order, favored by the gods, at the cost of losing her children. Euripides' *Medea* reveals that not only does a mapping of gender conceal women's link to the social order, but also that women who resist such a binary mapping may suffer painful consequences.

I began the discussion by employing Freud, contemporary literary interpretations, and feminist theories to explore some puzzles in Euripides' *Medea*. In my closing remark, I alter the order of things by suggesting that in offering several possible responses for Medea's dilemma, Euripides provides a useful comment on contemporary approaches to gender. Medea can, for example, do what Jason asks, that is, comply and submit to particularistic interests and respond to demands to be a wife and mother. At least at first, this solution is also what the chorus of Corinthian women and Aegeus suggest. The second alternative is to follow an ethic of care, to distance herself from Jason, to decide that the social order is male and that justice is for men only, and to take the children and leave, as she herself momentarily suggests.¹³ However, each of these responses means

that she accepts a gender mapping, renounces universalistic concerns, and ignores the obligations imposed upon her by her own earlier actions and her social statuses. The third is the choice that Euripides makes her take, which is to become an agent of the social order. He lays bare Medea's dilemma as follows: To be constructive at one level is to be destructive at another, to act as an agent of the gods is to accept that her children are cursed. To respond to universalistic rules, to uphold values of oath, honor, and justice, she has to ignore particularistic interests and an ethic of care. Euripides unfolds for us the price Medea has to pay for her insistence on universalistic principles and an ethic of justice. His own choice to have Medea, rather than the Corinthians, kill the children is not to provide answers for dilemmas such as Medea's, but to unravel some concealments.

And now I return once again to Freud, and this time to the question that Euripides' *Medea* raises for a reading of Freud. What are some of the issues that underscore Freud's blind spots regarding women, his own mapping of gender onto a binary model of ethics, and his notion that women have a different sense of justice, which is inferior to the sense of justice displayed by men? Freud claims that

for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women—that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are ready to submit to the great necessities of life, that they are more influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility—all of these would be amply accounted for by the modification of their super-ego. . . . We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth. [Freud 1963:193]

Freud's statement has been widely commented on by a number of feminists, and my intention here is not to remind us of Freud's mysogyny but to draw attention to a resonance between Jason's and Creon's utterances on women and Freud's ideas of women as impaired human beings lacking a proper sense of justice. One obvious question that comes to mind, in the light of Euripides' revelations of the political motivations for Jason's and Creon's concealments and distortions, is, What are some of Freud's reasons for this gender mapping? Or, to use his language, What are some of his anxieties about women that underlie his mapping? While such an exploration is outside the scope of this article, Euripides' *Medea* makes clear how easy it is to map gender onto binary categories and how dangerous this mapping can be, particularly if employed by those who become voices of authority, like Freud, because they transform women who reject such a mapping into "deviants." Although in Euripides' drama Jason and Creon are, in fact, unsuccessful in their attempt to turn Medea into a deviant, they find allies, not only in Freud, but also in some contemporary interpretations that ignore other voices in the play.

Euripides allows two major voices to speak in *Medea*: one that insists that gender is mapped onto universalistic and particularistic interests and another that

resists it. From the very beginning, the audience is led from one voice to the other. The chorus of Corinthian women begins the process by calling attention to Medea as wife and mother, leading the audience to think that what is about to unfold is a domestic fight. But as soon as the idea begins to settle in, Medea's brilliant speech destroys any illusion of mapping gender onto her dispute with Jason. Yet, as soon as the audience is led to see a much more politicized dispute, Creon and Jason bring in another voice, and insist on genderizing and privatizing Medea's claims. The audience, at this point, can be split in its view, analogous to the split between Medea and the Corinthian women, on the one hand, and Creon and Jason, on the other. Aegeus's acts bring back the other voice, a voice affirming Medea's political claims. It is, in my view, not surprising that Aegeus, who disrupts any notion that Euripides presents a gendered alliance of women (Medea and women of Corinth) versus men (Jason and Creon), is the one protagonist that a number of commentators find disturbing, and that "critics have been troubled" by his role. For commentators who follow Jason and Creon and see Medea as a mad, cruel, savage, uncontrolled woman, Aegeus, as well as the god Helios, disrupts a neat mapping of gender onto discrete binary principles. Rather than do away with gender mapping, these commentators, like Jason and Creon, domesticate and privatize Medea's claim, turn her into a deviant, and attempt to get rid of the male voices who support her claims by turning Aegeus and Helios into puzzles and riddles, and into Euripides' dramatic mistakes.

Euripides' *Medea* also invites some feminist self-reflection and further questions on what kinds of concealments are taking place for us when we insist either on theoretical mapping of gender differences or on action-oriented gender mapping, or on both. One of Medea's options, as I suggested earlier, is to decide that the social order is male, to take her children away and leave. This rejection of the social order—which is not Medea's choice—is, however, evoked by some contemporary voices of women who would like to turn inward, celebrate women's specific experiences, and sever women's links with the social order. A number of French women writers, as Marks and Courtivron note, argue against any women's involvement with the social order, and "in general, French feminists, whether radical or reformist, attack male systems, male values, . . . the French feminists are more convinced than their American counterparts of the difference between male and female" (1981:35–36). Although American feminists may be less inclined to see inherent differences between women and men, some—like Ortner and Whitehead (1981) and Gilligan (1982), who interpret a mapping of gender onto binary principles as the work of culture—may find that it is a path that leads to transforming women who resist such a mapping into deviants, problems, and riddles. One alternative is to explore what underlies some specific concealments (French, American, or various other feminists' mapping) rather than to dismiss these as "useless," to engage in uncovering some of our own anxieties, or denials, which are masked by gender mapping.

In the end, Euripides' *Medea* can be read in many ways, but it clearly reveals issues of gender, power, and control that are embedded in various concealments. This play is an unusually rich source of material for thinking about contemporary

Western gender mapping onto binary principles, and it reminds us to ask ourselves this question, When we engage in this kind of gender mapping, in what kinds of concealments are we implicated?

Notes

¹I refer here to the various women in *Medea*—the nurse, the chorus of Corinthian women, and Medea herself.

²In using the term *gender*, I concur with Strathern's view that "whether or not the sexing of a person's body or psyche is regarded as innate, the apprehension of difference between 'the sexes' invariably takes a categorical form, and it is this to which gender refers" (1988:ix). On the significance of theorizing gender, see also Lamphere who emphasizes that "gender and kinship, is [sic] socially created and not just added to natural biological facts" (1987:23).

³Harding reminds us that, "as a symbol system, gender difference is the most ancient, most universal, and most powerful origin of many morally valued conceptualizations of everything else in the world around us" (1986:17).

⁴Strathern clearly demonstrates how important it is not to "allocate the whole woman or the whole man to a gendered status" (1988:61).

⁵Simmel (1984) offers a somewhat similar notion that women stand apart from "male justice."

⁶Marks and Courtivron (1981) demonstrate the case for French women.

⁷I use Rex Warner's translation of Euripides (1955). I have, however, also checked a number of passages in Warner's translation with two classicists. Warner's, like most translations, raise problems of multiple interpretations embedded in the original. For example, while Warner translates one of Medea's early references to the children as "I hate you, / Children of a hateful mother" (lines 112–113), the Greek text may also read as "cursed children of a hated mother." Warner's translation obscures the fact that Jason has brought a curse on his children.

⁸Humphreys says that, in killing the children, "Medea cuts off her nose to spite her face" (1983:73). Although this is certainly one reading of her actions, I propose an alternative interpretation.

⁹Burnett notes that Medea was not given to Jason by her father and says that Medea and Jason "were united as two states might be, where one had performed marvels of aid for the other and was to be repaid by an eternal treaty of friendship and support" (1973:13).

¹⁰In response to Aristotle's objection to Euripides' use of Aegeus, Schlesinger proposes a different interpretation. He says that Euripides employed Aegeus to emphasize the process by which Medea comes to choose her revenge. In Aegeus's desire for children, "Medea sees how important children are to a man . . . and determines once and for all the specific form of the revenge—infanticide" (1983:309).

¹¹For differences between the consequences of killing a person who is not kin and the consequences of killing a blood relative, see Parker (1983). The most serious consequences are attached to parricide.

¹²Knox offers a different view and places more emphasis on the psychological dimensions of the play. He says that "Euripides is concerned . . . with the eruption in tragic violence of forces in human nature which have been repressed and scorned, which in their long-delayed breakout exact a monstrous revenge. The *Medea* is not about woman's rights; it is about woman's wrongs, those to her and by her" (Knox 1983:283).

¹³Feminists are aware of women's connectedness to the social order and explicitly or implicitly take positions anchored, in some cases, in different cultural traditions. Some feminists (Ortner 1974; Rosaldo 1974) would like to transform the social order by having women share authority with men. Other feminists would like to sever women's link because they consider main culture as male culture.

French feminists attack where it hurts most. They poke fun at male erection, the male preoccupation with getting it up, keeping it up, and the ways in which the life and death of the penis are projected into other aspects of culture: in the need for immortality and posterity, in the fear of death, in the centralized organization of political systems, in the impossibility of living in the here and now. [Marks and Courtivron 1981:35, 36]

But there is more to French feminists' own connection to main culture than meets the eye. At the same time that they call for separatism they are themselves deeply rooted in a French tradition of worship of "language, both the written and the spoken word," a tradition which has bestowed "prestige on those who could use the French language properly" (Marks and Courtivron 1981:5). Historically, argue Marks and Courtivron, literature was used by French women to achieve recognition and public prominence. This is still the case for contemporary feminist writers who use language to make political statements but avoid, scorn, or shun the conventional political activity of American feminists.

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