

RUNNING UPSTREAM: THE FUNCTION OF THE CHORUS IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

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Euripides' *Medea* takes place in a chaotic world where vows are broken, trust is impossible, and every human value is brought into question. This state of affairs begins when Jason, in violation of Greek ethics, abandons his wife Medea, and culminates in Medea's murder of a fond father, a newlywed girl, and two small boys. Medea draws on deceit and artistry to conceal her plans from the actors in the drama; however, a group of fifteen Corinthian women, the play's chorus, are aware of Medea's murderous intentions. Although they seem shocked by Medea's plan to kill her children, they do nothing when given obvious opportunities to prevent the deaths. Initially, this seems unrealistic and therefore a dramatic flaw, but in actuality, the chorus' failure to act serves a vital role in the play. Euripides intentionally implicates the chorus as Medea's accomplices to further his depiction of a world turned upside down.

The chorus' attitude towards Medea and her plans vary throughout the course of the play. In the *parados*, the chorus tells us that they have heard Medea's cries (130).¹ During the dialogue with the nurse, they express sympathy for Medea (147-59) and friendly feelings for her family (136-8), stating explicitly that their purpose in coming is to calm Medea:

How might she come into our sight
and hear the sound of spoken words,
so that, perhaps, she'll let go
of her sullen rage, her mind's arrogance? (173-7)

¹ Euripides, *Medea*, ed. Donald J. Mastronarde, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). All translations of *Medea* are my own..

Medea's first words to them, the respectful address "women of Corinth", emphasizes that the chorus is composed of reputable residents of the city (214). Yet, after a brilliant and persuasive speech by Medea, they eagerly approve her plans to take revenge on her husband (267-70). In the first *stasimon*, they rejoice at the new age that Medea's acts seem to herald:

Holy rivers are running upstream;
Justice, everything, is twisted backwards.
Men's designs are deceptive; their vows
Though made by the gods, come loose.
But fame will turn my life around to have respect:
Dignity is coming to the race of women. (410-17)

The chorus begins the next *stasimon* mildly with criticism of excessive love and a prayer that they never have to leave their homeland, but end it with strong sympathy for Medea's plight and a condemnation of Jason: "May every thankless man be destroyed who doesn't have it in him to honour his family" (658-60). The chorus' firm support of Medea falters when she announces her plan to kill her children: they express horror, urge her to reconsider and, in the third *stasimon*, dwell on the impiety and cruelty of such a deed (824-65). However, they remain virtually silent during a subsequent scene in which Jason professes love for the boys, only stating: "I have begun to weep at these words" (906).

In the fourth *stasimon*, the chorus shows that they are fully aware of what will happen: "Now, I no longer have hopes that the children will live" (976-7). Despite their certainty that the children will die, the chorus still makes no comment when the paidagogos, the children's guardian, enters. During Medea's "Great Monologue" (1021-80), although Medea seems to be wavering, and even though she addresses the chorus directly - "My boldness is gone, women, because I looked at my children's joyous eyes" (1042-3) - they say nothing. The *stasimon* that immediately follows consists of a meditation that it is really better not to have children at all (1081-1115). The chorus stays quiet when the messenger arrives to announce the deaths of Creon and his daughter Glauke, and then comments that Jason has been justly punished (1231-2). The next *stasimon* takes place after Medea announces her intention to kill her children immediately and enters the house. The chorus pleads for divine intercession and criticizes Medea, but does nothing (1251-70). In the middle of this *stasimon*, the cries of the boys are heard off stage as Medea kills them. The chorus debates going in but does not (1275-6). Instead, they mourn the deaths and

veer into a brief mythological tangent about Ino.² When Jason appears, they inform him of what Medea has done. If, as seems probable, the formulaic anapests in line 1415-1419 are later additions, the chorus' last statement of the play is "When you've opened the gates, you'll see your children dead" (1313).

The behaviour of the chorus in *Medea* appears surprising to the audience because, given the opportunity to prevent the children's murder by alerting Jason or the *paidagogos*, the women stay quiet. It is generally assumed that Euripides provides a rationale for this early in the play: Medea asks the chorus not to reveal her plots against Jason (259-63). Their "vow of silence", in the view of Phoutrides, is all that keeps the chorus from speaking out.³ This explanation, however, can be refuted by a comparison with a similar situation in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, written three years later.⁴ In *Hippolytus*, the chorus of Troezenian women are aware that the title character is innocent of the charge of incest laid on him by his stepmother Phaedra; revealing this could prevent his death. Euripides explains the chorus' inaction by placing them under a vow of silence, apparently the same tactic he used in *Medea*. The circumstances of this vow, however, differ drastically in the two plays.

In the *Hippolytus*, the chorus hears of Phaedra's love for her stepson and her overwhelming guilt and shame. Overcome with embarrassment, Phaedra asks the chorus: "Grant me this...that what you have heard here you wrap in silence."⁵ The chorus responds "I swear by holy Artemis, child of Zeus, never to bring your troubles to the daylight."⁶ The chorus, then, makes this promise before Phaedra has contemplated any kind of crime. Once it is aware of the tragic consequences of its silence, it is powerless as the women have made an explicit vow to a goddess. Furthermore, in this play, an altar to Artemis is part of the set, intensifying the strength of the oath.

None of these circumstances apply to the corresponding oath in *Medea*. Medea asks:

"And so, I want to meet with just this much help from you:
that if I should find out some way

² The wife of Athamas, who, the Chorus claims, is the only other woman to have killed her children; traditions differ concerning the exact circumstances in which she did this. Actually, other instances of mothers murdering children could be cited; for example, Procne and Althaea.

³ Aristides Evangelus Phoutrides, "The Chorus of Euripides," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 27 (1916): 132.

⁴ 428 B.C.E.

⁵ Euripides, *Hippolytus*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 192.

⁶ Ibid.

to exact vengeance from my husband for his crimes,
you be silent." (260-3)

The chorus responds: "I'll do that. For you would rightly take vengeance on your husband, Medea" (267-8).

The contrast is glaring. Instead of a sacred oath made to a specific deity, the chorus makes a casual promise. The phrase actually used for agreement, δ'ας? tade, "I will do these things", is significant. It occurs frequently in the play; at line 184, the nurse uses it to promise that she will try to make Medea leave the house, though she doubts she will succeed, and at line 1019 Medea uses it to promise the *paidagogos* that she will cheer up, although she is clearly being insincere. The phrase, then, is neither strong nor binding, let alone being the religious oath laid on the chorus in *Hippolytus*.

In addition, the chorus of *Hippolytus* only realizes the consequences of its oath when it is too late; they did not consciously agree to conceal a crime. The chorus of *Medea*, by contrast, agrees to keep quiet about Medea's plans to exact vengeance from Jason (261). Medea does not leave any room for doubt: "When [a woman] finds that she's been wronged in marriage, there is no other mind more bloody" (265-6). The word μιαι—φονώτερα, "more bloody", is formed from , μιαινω "to stain," and φονος, "murder"; therefore, it has intense connotations of defilement and crime that listeners cannot have overlooked. The chorus in *Medea* is well aware of what Medea is planning. Their assertion "You would rightly take vengeance on your husband" is not merely condemnation of Jason's crime, but knowing approval of his murder (267-8). Medea's subsequent revelations that she also intends to kill Creon and Glauke pass without comment by the chorus and only the prospect of the children's execution makes their support of Medea waver.

Because the chorus was clearly aware of Medea's violent intentions, the attempt to represent them as innocent bystanders who have blundered into a binding oath is unsatisfactory. Nor can it be convincingly argued that it is mere clumsiness on Euripides' part that causes the chorus in *Medea* to make a perfunctory promise, while the chorus of *Hippolytus* makes a firm vow. The theme of promises is recurrent in *Medea*, usually with reference to the dire fate awaiting the man who breaks them; the proper form for a promise, however, also comes under discussion. After Aegeus offers Medea a safe refuge, she asks him to swear it formally, concerned that he might betray her "after agreeing just with words, not under oath in the gods' name" (737). There follows an elaborate procedure in which Aegeus is asked to make his vow "by the plain of Earth, and the Sun, my father's

father, and the entire stock of gods put together" (746-7). Medea, and therefore Euripides, is making a distinction between a holy oath, which is binding, and an agreement with words, which is *not*. Since the chorus has made its promise "just with words", they have the option of revealing Medea's plans.

Clearly, for the purposes of the plot, Euripides could not have allowed the chorus to prevent the children's murder. As testified by *Hippolytus*, however, he could have provided them with a sounder pretext for not doing so. By giving them only a flimsy excuse for staying silent, and by demonstrating that they are aware of Medea's violent intentions, Euripides intentionally implicates the chorus in the crime; they are no longer onlookers, but accomplices.

Was this abnormal? Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, has little to say on the subject of the chorus. Once "the most important element in Greek drama," used at great length and to great effect by Aeschylus, by Euripides' time it had decreased in significance.⁷ On how the chorus should be employed, Aristotle has only one instruction: "It should be considered as one of the actors, [as] an [integral] part of the whole [action]...not in Euripides' way, but in Sophocles'."⁸ Generally it is assumed that in saying "not in Euripides' way", Aristotle was making one of the criticisms often made of Euripides: that his choral odes were irrelevant to the action. Phoutrides, however, in his "Chorus of Euripides", argues against this assessment and suggests that Aristotle is finding fault with another characteristic of Euripidean choruses: "They come much nearer to being real men and women than the choruses of either Aeschylus or Sophocles."⁹ Rather than being idealizations, as in Aeschylus, or impartial observers, as in Sophocles, the typical chorus of Euripides is realistic. This assessment is supported by the satirical portrayal of Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where Euripides declares of his own dramas: "Nothing was wasted. Mistress spoke, slave, master, girl, old women..."¹⁰

As this comment suggests, Euripides' choruses show a wide range of different characters. Of the nineteen extant plays of Euripides, five have male choruses and fourteen female.¹¹ There are instances, as in *Alcestis*, *Heracleidae*, and *Hercules*, of the chorus of male citizens favoured by Sophocles. This kind of chorus tends to operate as the "representative of the people": they are the voice of reason that provides a foil to the turmoil unfolding in the play.¹² In *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, *Andromache*, and *Phoenissae*, there are female choruses who are residents of the city in which the play is set, watching and com-

⁷William Nickerson Bates, *Euripides: A Student of Human Nature*, (New York: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 33.

⁸Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. George Whaley (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 123.

menting on the action. These choruses are usually considered Euripides' weakest: they are detached from what is going on and have only a small importance to the plot. Another kind of chorus, made up of women in Euripides, represents "friends or servants of the hero or heroine devoted to their interests," as in *Orestes*, *Ion*, *Electra*, and *Hippolytus*.¹³ We also find many instances of choruses made up of female slaves, suppliants, and captives, as in *Trojan Women*, *Suppliants*, *Helen*, *Hecuba*, and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. Finally, there is the chorus of bacchantes in *Bacchae*, a frenzied crowd of worshippers.

In the following plays of Euripides, the chorus can be considered implicated in a murder or murder plot: *Orestes*, *Ion*, *Electra*, *Hecuba*, *Bacchae*, and *Medea*.¹⁴ This seems a high percentage in light of the chorus' classic role as observer and moderator; of the fourteen surviving plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus, only three (Sophocles' *Electra* and Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*) depict the chorus as being similarly implicated. The level of the chorus' involvement, however, differs from play to play. In *Orestes* and *Ion* the choruses are not actively involved in the scheme but, being loyal to the tragedies' protagonists and concerned for their interests, they do not voice objections when the protagonists plan crimes to protect themselves.¹⁵ In both plays, the planned crime does not actually take place. Similarly, in *Electra*, the chorus' deep sympathy for their friend drives them to take her side when the killing of Clytaemnestra is planned. In *Hecuba*, the chorus approves of Hecuba's murder of the man who, in violation of the sacred obligations of hospitality, killed her young son; compassion and a sense of justice motivates them. In the *Bacchae*, as in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the chorus is no longer the realistic, flesh-and-blood entity described by Phoutrides, but an otherworldly, insane throng. Their implication stems from their madness.

Therefore, while the chorus' implication in crime was not usual in Greek drama, it was certainly not unknown, especially in the plays of Euripides. It is possible to see, even within the small surviving fraction of his work, a number of ways in which Euripides portrayed choruses as accomplices to murder. He could have cast *Medea's* chorus in any of these lights. They could have been, like the chorus of *Ion*, loyal servants who supported their mistress implicitly or like the chorus of *Hecuba*, they could have been outraged at

⁹ Phoutrides, 130.

¹⁰ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, trans. Patric Dickinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 217.

¹¹ This number includes the chorus of *Cyclops*, a satyr play, and *Rhesus*, whose authorship is in question. Neither is included in subsequent discussion.

¹² Phoutrides, 114.

¹³ Bates, 34.

¹⁴ *Hippolytus* is excluded from this list because of the strength of their vow of silence, as described above..

Medea's sufferings and eager to see justice done. They could have been, as in *Electra*, faithful friends, or, as in *Bacchae*, half-mad revelers. Indeed, *Medea's* chorus includes all of these elements: friends of Medea, slightly in awe of her, who are shocked by Jason's crimes and who, at times, seem almost crazed in their anticipation of vengeance. What makes this chorus different, however, is that they also fill a role which seems irreconcilable with the rest: they are very similar to the typical chorus of male citizens whose function is to operate as the voice of reason.

Upon its entrance, *Medea's* chorus seems to fit into the category seen in *Heracleidae*, *Hercules* and *Alcestis*, and the works of other tragedians, such as Sophocles' *Ajax*. While sympathetic, speaking of "the poor Colchidean woman" (132), they urge Medea towards self-restraint and moderation: "If your husband's devoting himself to a new marriage, don't be angry at him" (155-6). They cite divine law: "Zeus will be your defender in these matters" (157). They are there to offset the rash emotion of the tragic hero and provide a dramatic foil. Neither a helpless bevy of slave women, nor an adoring set of servants, they fit well into the description that Phoutrides gives of the chorus of *Alcestis*: "They are free-born citizens whose fortunes are involved in the fortunes of their rulers. They have the right to speak, to question, to suggest."¹⁶ Presented with this first glimpse of the chorus, the audience could have reasonably expected them to continue in this role. They would then have been similar to the chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, who remain in ignorance of Clytemnestra's plans until they hear Agamemnon's off-stage scream.

This expectation, however, is frustrated. The chorus, who enter as the voice of reason, was converted within the course of one monologue to Medea's φίλοι, "friends-and-supporters," deeply implicated in her plans for revenge. She apparently trusts them enough to not bind them with oaths, as she does Aegeus. But the chorus does not become implicitly loyal, like the choruses of *Ion* or *Orestes*. They continue to question and waver. They support Medea, yet fear for her children; they argue with her, but preserve her secret.

To a Greek audience, *Medea's* chorus must have seemed incongruous. Euripides does not form this chorus according to any one of a number of predictable dramatic conventions, but leaves it betwixt and between. It disappoints the initial expectation that it will fill the conventional function of a chorus: moderator, observer, and foil. Later, it does not simply support Medea unquestioningly, like a number of other female choruses, but continues to debate and critique. Within the world of the play, the Corinthian women who form the chorus would have seemed equally strange. By criticizing men and permitting

¹⁶ Moreover, the planned victim in *Orestes* is Helen of Troy, a figure typically seen as despicable

the children's murder, they fail to act in accordance with their social roles as loving mothers, virtuous women, and grateful wives.¹⁷

But such dramatic role reversal and failure to operate within prescribed parameters is exactly the theme that pervades *Medea*. With the exception of Aegeus, who, as the representative of upright Athens, is the voice of justice and reason, every character in the play is the opposite of the role he or she is supposed to represent. Jason, the hero, is a coward striving for his own comfort: "[I wanted] to knit the families together so that I might prosper" (565-6). Creon, in defiance of Greek moral codes, refuses Medea's passionate supplication (325). The nurse, conventionally the most loyal of servants, expresses her fear of Medea (37). The *paidagogos*, responsible for the children's safety, is unable to protect them; the children unwittingly kill their stepmother.¹⁸ Finally, Medea, in the most drastic role reversal possible, murders her own offspring. The theme of a world turned upside down continues throughout the plot. The sound laws of Greece, praised by Jason, fail to provide Medea with protection (537-8), sacred oaths are broken (414), and the marriage of Jason and Glauke becomes a funeral.

The culmination of the play is also warped. Euripides frequently used the *deus ex machina* device: at the end of a tragedy, an actor playing a god would be hoisted up on the *machina*, or crane, at the back of the stage. The function of this god was to restore order to chaos; he or she would explain the situation, prevent further murders, and provide a sense of completion and finality. In *Hippolytus*, Artemis reveals Hippolytus' innocence and allows him to be reconciled with his father before his death. In *Medea*, however, it is the murderess and not a god who is hoisted above the stage at the end. The tragedy is not contained and controlled by divine intervention; the play ends not with understanding or reconciliation but with an anguished monologue by Jason. The world of Medea has been turned upside down and, at the end of the play, it remains that way.

Seen in this light, Euripides' guilty chorus is another dramatic device that shows that the world is falling apart. The chorus' inexplicable silence, in defiance of moral codes and their own better judgment, is comparable to the other unthinkable events that occur in the play. In addition, it is relevant that the chorus is female; women are shown as "both wild

¹⁶Phoutrides, 86. Women, of course, were not Greek citizens, but the free-born Corinthians of *Medea* would be the closest female equivalent.

¹⁷The monologue in which Medea convinces the women of Corinth that she is justified in taking revenge dwells at length on the burdens of wifehood: childbearing, imprisonment at home, paying a dowry and dealing with a husband. From the chorus' enthusiastic response, it can be reasonably assumed that this spoke to their condition. Therefore, the chorus contained some very dissatisfied wives.

and tamed", irrational and instinctive, in contrast to the logical male.¹⁹ It shows that while females are viewed as weaker and more cowardly - a thought expressed several times in *Medea* - their emotional, irrational nature can drive them to acts of reckless passion. Even the respectable housewives of Corinth can undergo a drastic inversion that turns them into criminals.

This theme is implied in other Greek tragedies where a female chorus is implicated in murder. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, a chorus of insane Maenads establishes the mood of the play, where order and reason are overcome by madness, and a king is to be torn to death by a group of women that includes his own mother. The *Electras* of Euripides and Sophocles, the *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, all revolve around a single subject: whether Orestes is justified in killing his mother, who is guilty of killing their own father, who was guilty of killing his own daughter. The same kind of inversion and role reversal so visible in *Medea* is an obvious theme in these plays where child and parent, spouse and spouse, are opposed. Much like in *Medea*, "all things are hateful, and what should be dearest is diseased" (16); right and wrong are inverted and it is beyond human understanding to determine what should be done.

Likewise, the chorus of *Medea*, through their participation in the crime, act as an index of the world's corruption. Their implication in the crimes, though, is more serious than the preceding examples. Because they were aware to Medea's intentions, respectable residents of the city and trusted by the protagonist, they are fully capable of contesting the murders, a fact of which an Athenian audience must have been aware. Without the excuse of ignorance or weakness, they allow by their silence not only murder, but the murder of children. More than in the *Oresteia* or Sophocles' *Electra*, the world of *Medea* is one of unrestrained chaos where nothing, not family, hospitality or the entreaties of a suppliant, let alone dramatic conventions, is sacred. As the chorus ask bewilderedly after the death of the children: "Is there any terrible thing that can't happen now?" (1290).

The chorus of *Medea* is not a dramatic afterthought, but an integral and vivid part of the action. As Aristotle suggested, it is a character in its own right, and like every other character in the play, it vacillates between cruelty and kindness, mixing correct with criminal conduct. Its conscious guilt is an important dramatic device with which Euripides can show that the world of *Medea* is inverted, profane, and wrong. The play's chaotic universe is not resolved by the appearance of a god; similarly, nothing occurs to absolve the chorus

¹⁸By giving her poisoned gifts prepared by Medea.

¹⁹Helen King, "Women," *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 778.

of their culpability. It is even possible that while the essential Aristotelian reaction of pity would have been evoked by the children's murder, the accompanying idea of "terror" would have been produced by the thought of what the women of the chorus would say to their husbands on returning home that night.

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