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**THE POLIS IN MEDEA: URBAN ATTITUDES AND
EURIPIDES' CHARACTERIZATION IN
MEDEA 214–224***

Few entrances in Greek drama are more culturally charged than Medea's first exit from the οἶκος. In her first speech, Medea tries to evoke sympathy from the chorus of Corinthian women, solicitous of her well-being, and Euripides intends the speech to have a similar effect on his Greek audience with its strong male constituency. In the multiple registers of speech and dramatic action exhibited in her appearance before her Corinthian friends, Euripides allows us to see how thoroughly he has infused Medea's language with the ideas that define the polis. Though Medea is a foreigner, her first few lines (214–224) present us, nevertheless, with an arresting flexibility and adaptability to the Greeks and to their unique social and political creation, the polis. Similarly, her language reveals the kind of adroitness that is characteristic of the sophistication born out of the town life of the fifth-century Greek aristocrat. In its dramatic context, Medea's malleability appears stunning if not demonic, for only moments before, the audience has heard her disconsolate wails, so alarming that they arouse both the chorus' sympathy and fear. These outcries rightly belong only to the restricted private world of the γυναικεῖον within the οἶκος. Accordingly, when Medea steps outside shortly afterwards, she presents a cool and calculated affect, and in her speech she, as a woman, discloses a remarkably astute assessment of the essentially male attitudes that make the Greek polis. As Euripides intends, the familiarity of this complex male discourse to both internal and external audiences does, in fact, achieve an initial, necessary, but perhaps fleeting, compassion in them for Medea,¹ for through the first lines of this entrance speech, Euripides uncovers political and social ideas that underlie polis life in Athens in the last third of the fifth century, the subject of this study: (I) the centripetal force of the city that pulls the individual often uncomfortably into itself, and two sets of polarities that are in some ways manifestations of this force: (II) πολυπραγμοσύνη and ἀπραγμοσύνη, and (III) rusticity and polis sophistication.

* I am particularly thankful to the reviewers of this article for their kind and helpful comments and suggestions; I claim responsibility for any errors and infelicities that remain.

¹ But her own disturbing offstage cries and the nurse's evaluation of her as δεινή (44) already destabilize this feeling in these audiences and ultimately help to subvert this early uneasiness to righteous anger later on. In some ways, preserving an ambivalence to Medea in Euripides' audience is, of necessity, one of his goals; see C. Segal, "Euripides' *Medea*: Vengeance, Reversal and Closure," *Pallas* 45 (1996) 18–19. See also E. McDermott, *Euripides' Medea: The Incarnation of Disorder* (University Park, Pa., 1989) 48–49.

δύσκληϊαν ἐκτήσαντο καὶ ῥαθυμίαν. 218
 δίκη γὰρ οὐκ ἔνεστ' ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς βροτῶν,
 ὅστις πρὶν ἀνδρὸς σπλάγχχνον ἐκμαθεῖν σαφῶς
 στυγεῖ δεδορκῶς, οὐδὲν ἠδίκημένος.
 χρῆ δὲ ξένον μὲν κάρτα προσχωρεῖν πόλει. 222
 οὐδ' ἀστὸν ἦνεσ' ὅστις ἀθάδης γεγῶς
 πικρὸς πολίταις ἐστὶν ἀμαθίας ὑπο.⁷

I've come out of the house, for fear that you would criticize me. I do understand that many are superior, haughty (*σεμνός*)⁸ either privately (out of others' sight) or publicly. Still others because of their quiet ways (*ἀφ' ἡσύχου ποδός*) get for themselves a reputation for indifference (*ῥαθυμία*). For there is no justice in people's eyes (that is, when they judge from appearances only) if someone loathes another, at first glance, unwronged, before that person gets to know clearly the inner man.⁹ And a foreigner must indeed conform to the polis. I can't praise the fellow townsman who has grown self-willed and is bitter to fellow citizens out of insensibility (*ἀμαθία*) [to their communal ways].¹⁰

Euripides has thus created a dramatic situation in which Medea's emergence from her house requires explanation, and in such an explanation, she must sound as if she understands the assumptions which both the internal and external Greek audiences will make about her staying in the house and her coming out of it. Medea's concern is twofold: she must anticipate what the Corinthian women assume about her behavior up until now and, for her plans to work, she needs them to have sympathy for her. For these reasons, her words must reflect subtly and profoundly the internal, attitudinal workings of the Greek polis she finds herself in.

⁷ All quotations from and references to Euripides' *Medea* derive from J. Diggle's *OCT* (Oxford 1984).

⁸ E. B. Bongie ("Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides," *TAPA* 107 [1977] 36) suggests the meaning "worthy of respect," but Euripides wants Medea to register her understanding of the results of an individual's disdain of public opinion, so the issue is not public respect, but much stronger, prideful contempt.

⁹ LSJ VI.5 (*ἀνὴρ*) provides an appropriate meaning for this passage of "a man, any man"; but in a speech like this one, even this use of *ἀνὴρ* seems anything but casual.

¹⁰ All translations are my own except where otherwise noted. I provide this translation mostly for expository purposes and not as a refined rendering. This is a vexed section of Euripides' text, and I attempt to provide a more or less sociopolitical perspective that acquires meaning within the larger context of the polis outside of tragedy, that is, the polis as experienced by the lyric poets, Thucydides, and Aristophanes, in particular. Please see the references which K. Reckford ("Medea's First Exit," *TAPA* 99 [1968] 329) provides and H. Zilliaccus, "Euripides *Medeia* 214–221 und Ennius," *Arctos* 12 (1978) 167–71.

I.

Conspicuously, Medea's opening remarks express an attitude fundamental to the entire social structure of the polis: an awareness of the normative force of public opinion within it. Polis dwellers as early as the lyric poets express this same consciousness of being drawn almost inescapably into the struggle of polis life. To gain the sympathy she wants, she must demonstrate the humble awareness, for instance, which Simonides of Keos expresses in a brief but significant fragment (D 53): "[T]he polis teaches a man" (*πόλις ἄνδρα διδάσκει*). This force the city exerts is both corrective and directive as it strives to graft and assimilate the will of the individual to the polis' common will.

The lyric record is filled with strong-minded polis dwellers¹¹ not unlike Medea in their awareness of what the polis demands of them. Mimnermos, for example, chafes against the magnetic, psychological pull of the polis:

[μῆτε τινὰ ξείνων δηλεύμενος ἔργμασι λυγροῖς
μῆτε τιν' ἐνδήμων, ἀλλὰ δίκαιος ἑών,
τὴν σαυτοῦ φρένα τέρπε. δυσηλεγέων δὲ πολιτῶν
ἄλλος τίς σε κακῶς, ἄλλος ἄμεινον ἐρεῖ.

[Causing harm with baneful acts neither to a foreigner nor to a citizen; but having rightness,] find your own happiness—one of your grief-mongering fellow citizens will speak badly of you, another a little better.¹²

Such public opinion in the polis causes the sixth-century Phokylides (D 5) to consider counter measures: *χρῆ τοι τὸν ἑταῖρον ἑταίρω / φροντίζειν ἄσσο' ἂν περιγογγύζωσι πολῖται* ("Friend ought to take thought with friend about whatever their fellow citizens mutter around"). But Arkhilokhos (D 9), while recognizing this problem, refuses to let it bother him: *Αἰσιμίδη, δήμου μὲν ἐπίρρησι[μ] μελεδαίων / οὐδεὶς ἂν μάλα πόλλ' ἡμερόεντα πάθει* ("Aisimides, no one who pays any attention to the criticism of the people would ever get much pleasure out of life"). Similarly, Anacreon (Page 371) takes a wait-and-see

¹¹ In the evidence which follows, clearly the polis that Greek lyric poets experience is not the same as the Athenian polis which serves as the context for Euripidean (and Greek) tragedy. The poleis which lyric poets inhabit represent a stage of development characterized by the advent of hoplite warfare, expansion of trade, colonization, as well as the social polarization and unrest leading to the establishment of tyrannies. Yet many of these poets exhibit a consciousness of the social ties that underlie polis life, and their own political biases, including support (or lack of it) of aristocratic aims within the polis, may also color their attitudes toward fellow citizens; see the quotations that follow and C. Brown, "Archilochus," in D. Gerber, ed., *A Companion to the Greek Lyric Poets* (New York 1997) 69; B. MacLachlan, "Personal Poetry: Sappho," in Gerber (above) 162–65 (the separation of what is public from what is private in Sappho's poetry); and G. Nagy, "Theognis and Megara: A Poet's Vision of His City," in T. Figueira and G. Nagy, eds., *Theognis of Megara: Poetry and the Polis* (Baltimore 1985) 22–81.

¹² The last two lines comprise D 7; the same two lines appear in Theognis (Y 793–794) with the bracketed lines preceding.

attitude toward his fellow citizens: οὐ δὴδ' ἔμπεδός τ' εἶμι / οὐδ' ἀστοῖσι προσηγής (“Now again I am not obstinate¹³ nor am I pleasant with my fellow townspeople”). But Theognis of Megara (Y 24–26) gives up trying to satisfy them: ἀστοῖσιν δ' οὐπω πᾶσιν ἀδεῖν δύναμαι. / οὐδὲν θαυμαστόν, Πολυπαῖδῃ. οὐδὲ γὰρ ὁ Ζεὺς / οὔθ' ὕων πάντεσσ' ἀνδάνει οὔτ' ἀνέχων (“But I am not yet able to please all the townsmen. Don't be surprised, Polypaides, for even Zeus doesn't satisfy everyone either when he causes rain or when he doesn't”).¹⁴ In a similar passage (Y 367–370), Theognis admits that he cannot penetrate the minds and attitudes of those with whom he shares the polis:

οὐ δύναμαι γινῶναι νόον ἀστῶν ὄντιν' ἔχουσιν.
 οὔτε γὰρ εὖ ἔρδων ἀνδάνω οὔτε κακῶς.
 μωμεῦνται δέ με πολλοί, ὁμῶς κακοὶ ἤδὲ καὶ ἐσθλοί.
 μιμείσθαι δ' οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀσόφων δύναται.

I'm unable to interpret the attitude of citizens whatever one they have because I'm not pleasing to them either by treating them well or badly, and many find fault with me, both lowborn and noble; but no one of the unsophisticated is able to imitate me.

Theognis grasps, from a single citizen's perspective, not only the potentially negative social climate of the polis but at the same time his unique and superior position in that constituency which a portion of the polis group cannot attain or imitate. Lowell Edmunds argues that Theognis seeks to separate the true citizens (*σοφοί*) with whom he identifies and for whom he writes from the “outsiders” (*ἄσοφοι*) who have “literally come from outside the city, wearing the goatskins of their previous life (v. 56), which show that they are not yet city-dwellers.”¹⁵ Theognis identifies this latter group as competitively inferior, “unclever” or “unsophisticated,” a label significant for its connections with Medea's later description of herself (292–305).

The attitudes expressed by these poets reveal polis culture as the kind in which hiding one's true feelings is the secret to survival. John Winkler describes this characteristically Greek societal duplicity as “a policy of systematic and deliberate misdirection, in matters great and small, in order to protect oneself in a social environment full of enemies and charged with unremitting suspicion.”¹⁶ And viewed from the perspective of the individual against

¹³ This is D. Campbell's translation of the incomprehensible *ἐμπεδός* (*Greek Lyric*, vol. 2 [Cambridge 1988] Anacreon 371).

¹⁴ Nagy argues that the separation which Theognis feels from his fellow citizens is a function of Theognis' aspirations as a lawgiver like Solon (Figueira and Nagy, [above, n.11] 30–33).

¹⁵ L. Edmunds, “The Genre of Theognidean Poetry,” in Figueira and Nagy (above, n.11) 110.

¹⁶ J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York 1990) 135.

a group thus constituted, these writers recognize the polis as containing individuals varyingly opposed to them so that widespread social approval is much less achievable than just an uncomfortable tolerance. Even more basic is the awareness that an individual polis dweller must understand that often the sentiment directed his/her way, always present and potentially powerful, necessitates ready countermeasures.¹⁷ Thus Medea, a marginalized but powerful human being, female and foreign, must demonstrate and express overtly an identification with the psychological workings of the polis if she is to draw on the sympathy of the chorus of women before her and the citizen spectators beyond, predominantly male.¹⁸

Medea's grieving and protest, therefore, overheard by the chorus, betray the personal and private side of her plight, and this private region of her life she rightly fears will of necessity be misconstrued, for the Greeks connect the public, not the private, with success and prominence, ἀρετή.¹⁹ George Walsh makes clear the risks when private purposes run contrary to public values:

If his [the dramatic character's] public role is imposed by society which demands service and accords approval and honor, or blame, he plays a private role when he does not aim at service to society or at winning its approval, and a privately motivated action is most sharply marked when the hero contemplates doing something that will damage society's interest or win him shame in its eyes.²⁰

Medea seeks, accordingly, a visible correspondence between her image—not remarkably strong if she conforms to the societal conventions of both woman and foreigner—and her goal, revenge on Jason. Athenian cultural practice mandates that as a woman, Medea work only and completely within the sphere women occupied, the οἶκος. Likewise, as a foreigner, Athenians would expect that she stay aloof, disengaged, and noninvolved.²¹ But the Greek male competitive ἀρετή principle of public polis life drives her desire for revenge and pushes her to transgress these unstated boundaries of her gender and origin. For this reason, she chooses to

¹⁷ If expressed in a positive way, this phenomenon becomes “a complex, fructifying tension between human egotism and communal ties,” as C. Starr characterizes it (*The Origins of Greek Civilization* [New York 1961] 300).

¹⁸ This kind of sensibility to the social milieu of the polis appears other places in tragedy: Eur. *Supp.* 892–895; Aesch. *Supp.* 195–203; and Soph. *OC* 171–72, as D. J. Mastronarde (ed., *Euripides Medea* [Cambridge 2002] note *ad loc.*, 207) points out.

¹⁹ See Bongie (above, n.8) 27–56.

²⁰ G. B. Walsh, “Public and Private in Three Plays of Euripides,” *CP* 74 (1979) 294.

²¹ By the same token, I admit that her foreignness may possibly work to free her from these very restraints in the way Euripides has conceived her character. To be sure, it at least grants her a more independent perspective, unavailable to Greek citizens, from which to see her plight and the potential for revenge and escape and, as such, may form part of her *sophia*.

play the role of a Greek male citizen, a role which presupposes that she lives and speaks according to the conventions of male citizens and Greek polis dwellers.

Her opening address reveals her understanding of that dual role of male and Greek citizen. Its formality reflects the male world of Sophistic rhetoric, as Paul Mazon suggests,²² through its patterns of abstract nouns, maxims, and somewhat artificial balances. What is more, some of her words suggest concepts—*σεμνότης* (“haughtiness”), *ἡσυχία* (“quietness/political inactivity”), *ῥαθυμία* (“indifference”), *αὐθάδεια* (“[self-]wilfulness”), *ἄμαθία* (“insensibility/ignorance”)—with which Euripides’ fifth-century audience of polis members was very familiar. Medea is concerned that, because she shuts herself away from the rest of the polis, citizens will label her “superior,” “haughty,” “proud”—*σεμνός*, which ranges in meaning from “holy” to “classy” in some contexts. For Euripides and other writers of his generation and the next, *σεμνός* takes on pejorative meanings when applied to persons in a nonreligious context²³ as, for example, in Euripides’ *Andromakhe*, 699–700. Here Peleus lays blame on generals who claim public credit for victories for which the rank-and-file citizenry undertook the real risks: *σεμνοὶ δ’ ἐν ἀρχαῖς ἡμενοὶ κατὰ πτόλιν / φρονοῦσι δήμου μείζον* (“and the supercilious city authorities think they’re better than the people”). Likewise, then, Medea says that an individual deserves this title of *σεμνός* by public actions or by a private aloofness, by keeping apart from the communal eyes of the city. By this statement, she displays her knowledge of the polis’ social dynamic of distrust of others, especially if they remain apart (as foreigners) or inside (as women) where their fellow citizens can only guess at their motivations and intent.

But in the more famous part of Medea’s first speech which follows, both the female chorus onstage and the mostly male audience in the theater observe her adaptability as she secures another voice, this time female, by which to display how accurately she feels what a Greek woman ought to feel. To create sympathy, she seems able to fit her role and presentation to each desired audience. And when she speaks as a woman to the female chorus, she also speaks as *βάρβαρος* because there is a sense in which Medea the woman and Medea the foreigner coalesce or perhaps never really diverge. As she creates the painful picture of the new wife who has to learn the strange ways of the man whom she has bought as husband, she uses language which echoes the role of cultural/political outsider she previously owned: “[S]he [the new wife] has arrived to new customs and regulations and must be a prophet, if she’s not learned from home, how best to get along with him who

²² P. Mazon, “De quelques vers d’Euripide,” *RPh* 26 (1952) 119–21.

²³ Also, Lys. 16.15; Xen. *Symp.* 3.10, *Mem.* 1.2.24, *Oec.* 10.13; Ar. *Cl.* 363, *Eccl.* 617; Hdt. 2.173. See J. E. Harry, “Médée énigmatique,” *RPh* 13 (1939) 8–9. N. Loraux (*The Invention of Athens: Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, tr. A. Sheridan [Cambridge, Mass., 1986] 319–23) finds the term *σεμνός* so “charged with pejorative overtones” that “very little margin” is left “for positive meaning.”

shares her bed" (ἐς καινὰ δ' ἤθη καὶ νόμους ἀφιγμένῃν / δεῖ μάντιν εἶναι, μὴ μαθοῦσαν οἴκοθεν, / οἶψ' μάλιστα χρήσεται ξυνευέτη, 238–240).²⁴ Only minutes before, she refers to the similar situation of the foreigner who, at her arrival in an alien Corinth, "must indeed conform to the polis" (χρὴ δὲ ξένον μὲν κάρτα προσχωρεῖν πόλει, 222). So for Medea, in an immediate and real sense, being a woman and being a foreigner present an estrangement, similar if not the same, from the male and Greek world of the polis, a world where Jason moves freely. She overcomes this alienation, then, by assuming this dual identity of a Greek and a male citizen yet without erasing her own womanhood. And in this way, Medea's self-portrayal of the person who understands how to conform to existing political and gender realities creates a tie with all her spectators.

II.

Medea also draws attention (217–218) to a group of citizens, οἱ ἀφ' ἡσύχου ποδός ("those because of their quiet ways"), whose noninvolvement the citizens around them interpret as ῥαθυμία, indifference, apathy, laziness. Athenians may have understood something quite specific about this lack of concern for the affairs of the polis; in fact, it becomes a catchword in the political climate that Thucydides and Plato describe. Ἡσυχία greatly resembles ἀπραγμοσύνη²⁵ or τὸ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν,²⁶ "minding one's own business," "doing the things that pertain to oneself," and this apathy about the polis community carries a negative political connotation in the last third of the fifth century.²⁷ In Thucydides' recreation of the famous Funeral Oration, placed by him only the next year after the performance of the *Medea*, Pericles, going beyond a simple awareness of the communal will of the polis,²⁸ emphasizes the involvement that the polis demands of each citizen (2.40.2, as Warner translates):²⁹

²⁴ Reckford (above, n.10) 353–54 also draws important connections between Medea (*Med.* 217) and Alcestis (*Alc.* 532–533) through the notion of outsider, conveyed by the adjective *θυραῖος*.

²⁵ See Mazon (above, n.22) 119; and L. B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian* (Oxford 1986) 42–47.

²⁶ Plato views this behavior positively, includes it in what he defines as *δικαιοσύνη* (*Rep.* 433A–B), and links it also to *σωφροσύνη* (*Ti.* 72A). But he also decries it as being *κόσμιος*, "orderly," "moderate," and a stepping stone to being unwarlike and contributing to becoming a slave (*Plt.* 307E).

²⁷ Euripides favors this concept elsewhere; see *Or.* 902 ff. and Carter (above, n.25) 46.

²⁸ Varying representations of the polis complicate issues here. The polis which Athenian tragedy images may often be vague and unidentifiable, yet as a context for interpretation, it often means Athens: "What we might call symbolic geography is a peculiar feature of Athenian tragedy, which prefers to displace its theatrical investigation of the *polis*' own 'self' onto 'other' cities far removed . . ." (Mendelsohn [above, n.2] 51–52). Certainly, Thucydides attempts here not only to describe the real Athens he knows but to raise it above other cities, especially Sparta. Likewise, Euripides' characterization in this play of Aegeas as opposed to that of Creon may also reveal a subtle praise of his own polis Athens; see Mendelsohn (above, n.2) 53.

²⁹ *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1971) *ad loc.*

ἐνὶ τε τοῖς αὐτοῖς οἰκείων ἅμα καὶ πολιτικῶν ἐπιμέλεια,
καὶ ἑτέροις πρὸς ἔργα τετραμμένοις τὰ πολιτικὰ μὴ ἐνδεῶς
γνώναι. μόνοι γὰρ τὸν τε μὴδὲν τῶνδε μετέχοντα οὐκ
ἀπράγμονα, ἀλλ' ἀχρεῖον νομίζομεν. . . .

Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics—this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business [ἀπράγμονα]; we say that he has no business here at all [ἀλλ' ἀχρεῖον νομίζομεν]. . . .

In his article on the social and political implications of its opposite *πολυπραγμοσύνη* (“being a busybody”)³⁰ A. W. H. Adkins takes up the relationship that *ἀπραγμοσύνη* (“minding one’s own business”) bears to the aristocratic and city-state ideal of *ἀρετή*. He states that in the register of political action/inaction “we have here . . . an Aristotelian triad, a virtue between two vices, *polupragmosune—arete—apragmosune*.”³¹ He maintains that the Athenian polis of the late fifth century contains politically inactive *ἀγαθοί* who oppose the methods and approach of the *demos*, an elite group who cannot find a place for themselves in a polis which relies on the fleet over the army, or who, like Plato, turn to philosophy when Athenian politics are no longer to their liking. These *ἀγαθοί* are not the variety which the polis exalts; as Adkins puts it, “active *ἀρετή* is expected of the *ἀγαθοί*.”³² Similarly, Carter connects *ἡσυχος* with the Spartans, as opposed to the Athenians who are characteristically active (where active is viewed positively and quiet negatively): “There [book 1] Thucydides had set out an antithesis: Athenian/Spartan = active/idle (*hesychos*).”³³

The Corinthian women listening to Medea and Euripides’ audience as well would understand, perhaps subliminally, the implications of Medea’s language here when she usurps the sociopolitical idiom of the Athenian polis.³⁴ Once she steps out of the house and plays the role of a male citizen in action and presentation, she can no longer afford to be viewed as either aloof or inactive. She refuses to take on the characteristics of the “citizen” who does not want

³⁰ “*Polupragmosune* and ‘Minding One’s Own Business’: A Study in Greek Social and Political Values,” *CP* 71 (1976) 301–27. For a complete history and exploration of *ἀπραγμοσύνη*, see Carter (above, n.25).

³¹ Adkins (above, n.30) 315.

³² Adkins (above, n.30) 319.

³³ Carter (above, n.25) 100.

³⁴ Her friends would also have been aware that she usurps here the male understanding of this active citizenship, a seeming participant (though female) in the community of equals that comprises the hoplite army—a striking implication of what her assumption of the male citizen role means. See N. T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic: The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy* (New York 1994) 47.

to be a part of polis life—for either reason—because she is too good for it and for her fellow citizens (*σεμνή*) or because she prefers the politically inactive role of the citizen who behaves like a non-citizen (*ἀφ' ἡσύχου ποδός = ἀπράγμων*). Euripides represents Medea as a male citizen who is fluent in the language and understanding of Athenian polis life, both social and political. Through this portrayal the chorus and the audience begin to realize that, though she may be foreign and female, she speaks their same language and thinks like them. She closes any gap between her and her male (and female) listeners at 807–809, where she pays allegiance to the old heroic and Homeric shibboleth of male competition by refusing to allow herself to be considered *ἡσυχαία*, which she links with *φαύλη* and *ἀσθενής*:³⁵

μηδεῖς με φαύλην κάσθενή νομιζέτω
μηδ' ἡσυχαίαν, ἀλλὰ θατέρου τρόπου,
βαρεῖαν ἐχθροῖς καὶ φίλοισιν εὐμενῆ. . . .

Let no one consider me low-ranking and weak
nor quiet (inactive), but of the other kind,
grievous to my enemies and kind to my friends. . . .

III.

As Medea continues (223–224), her language finds further parallels with late fifth-century sentiments about the polis. She will not praise the citizen who is self-willed (*αὐθάδης*) and bitter (*πικρός*) toward his fellow citizens. Pericles, likewise, comments on the Athenian ideal for interpersonal relations in the polis (Thuc. 2.37.2):

ἐλευθέρως δὲ τὰ τε πρὸς τὸ κοινὸν πολιτεύομεν καὶ ἐς
τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλους τῶν καθ' ἡμέραν ἐπιτηδευμάτων
ὑποψίαν, οὐ δι' ὀργῆς τὸν πέλας, εἰ καθ' ἡδονὴν τι δρῶ,
ἔχοντες, οὐδὲ ἀζημίους μέν, λυπηρὰς δὲ τῇ ὕψει ἀχθηδόνας
προσπιθέμενοι.

We conduct the affairs of the city in a liberal fashion,
so also the way we regard each other in our daily
pursuits: we do not hold a grudge against a neighbor
for doing what he wants every day, nor do we give
him vexing looks which are not entirely harmless
but can hurt his feelings.

The significance of this passage lies in what John Finley calls the “elaborate study,”³⁶ contrastive in nature, of Spartan and Athenian culture, in which Thucydides engages in his first two books. Much in Pericles’ Funeral Oration furthers this same contrast. From the outset, Sparta is consistently characterized as rural, rustic, backward,

³⁵ See also M. Shaw, “The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama,” *CP* 70 (1975) 262.

³⁶ *Thucydides* (Cambridge 1942) 112.

and countrified in its outlook; whereas Athens is viewed as urban, complex, liberal, and sophisticated. Thucydides begins the contrast in the archaeology of book 1, where the Spartan configuration of city is scattered villages (κατὰ κώμας, 1.10.2). In Pericles' first speech in his history, he makes the point that the Spartans are farmers with the latent social values that characterization carries with it—no accumulated wealth, public or private, and greater value placed on physical property than human life (1.141.2–7, 1.143.5). The Corinthians, in addition, charge the Spartans with ignorance (ἀμαθία) of foreign affairs (1.68.1). This contrast, working at a deep level in Thucydides' text, depends heavily on rural-urban differences. Thucydides is pointing, therefore, to the tolerance and sophistication that city life breeds, a frame of mind which allows citizens to live together without showing disapproval, even by their facial expressions, of their neighbor's way of life—an Athenian ideal, surely not completely realized, but it is also, for modern readers, a revealing way of viewing the social milieu of the individual Athenian citizen within the polis.³⁷ If being self-willed (not concerned with her neighbors' desires and needs) and bitter (unpleasant) connote the same countrified behavior as the "dark looks" which Pericles says Athenians as polis dwellers avoid, then Medea seeks to divest herself of rural sensibilities that may mark her as hostile or antisocial to her fellow citizens.

Overtones of this city-country polarity, for that matter, are not absent from Euripides' characterization of her, for he creates, in fact, a Medea, clever and sophisticated, who confronts in the polis the boorish as well as the pseudosophisticated. In her opening speech this characterization is only suggested, but a portion of the encounter a little later with Creon (292–305)³⁸ brings it out more clearly. To lessen his fears about her *sophia*, Medea attempts to explain to Creon why the polis, including him, is suspicious of her. She admits that the polis seems organized against her (294–299):

χρὴ δ' οὔποθ' ὅστις ἀρτίφρων πέφυκ' ἀνήρ
 παῖδας περισσῶς ἐκδιδάσκεισθαι σοφούς.
 χωρὶς γὰρ ἄλλης ἧς ἔχουσιν ἀργίας
 φθόνον πρὸς ἀστῶν ἀλφάνουσι δυσμενῆ.
 σκαιοῖσι μὲν γὰρ καινὰ προσφέρων σοφά³⁹
 δόξεις ἀχρεῖος κοῦ σοφὸς πεφυκέναι. . . .

Sensible people ought never to have their children educated to be overly sophisticated, clever (*σοφός*), because besides the reputation for laziness they will

³⁷ See C. Lloyd, *Sophistication and Refinement in Greek Literature from Homer to Aristophanes* (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, Bloomington, 1976) 51–67.

³⁸ Similarities between the situation of Anaxagoras, one of Euripides' teachers, leading to his trial the year before Euripides presents his *Medea*, and this speech of Medea are most likely not coincidental; see Carter (above, n.25) 141–47.

³⁹ Aristophanes parodies this line at *Thesm.* 1130.

acquire, they will reap from their fellow citizens a hostile jealousy. If, in fact, you offer novel signs of your sophistication, cleverness (*σοφία*) to the boorish (*σκαιοί*), you will appear useless (*ἀχρεῖος*)⁴⁰ and unclever. . . .

So, for Medea, the social geography of the polis contains at least two fairly distinct and possibly polarized groups, the sophisticated or clever (*σοφοί*)⁴¹ and the boorish or unsophisticated (*σκαιοί*). This unrefined and unexamining segment of the polis (*οἱ σκαιοί*) the polis-minded Medea worries about most, and it is they in her entrance speech who she anticipates will misconstrue her previous silence and seclusion.

In this way Medea also represents herself as experienced in “reading” the attitudes of the polis, and expands her miniature sociogram of the polis (300–305):

τῶν δ' αἶ δοκούντων εἰδέναι τι ποικίλον
 κρείσσων νομισθεῖς ἐν πόλει λυπρὸς φανῆ.
 ἐγὼ δὲ καὐτῇ τῆσδε κοινωνῶ τύχης.
 σοφὴ γὰρ οὔσα, τοῖς μὲν εἰμ' ἐπίφθονος,
 [τοῖς δ' ἡσυχαία, τοῖς δὲ θατέρου τρόπου,]
 τοῖς δ' αἶ προσάντης. . . .

And if, in turn, you are regarded more highly than those who seem to have some subtle (*ποικίλος*) knowledge of their own, you'll only be viewed as offensive (*λυπρός*) in the polis. I myself have my share of this lot, for, as a clever (*σοφὴ*) woman I am an object of envy to some, to others noninvolved (*ἡσυχαία*), of the opposite sort to others,⁴² and to still others hostile (*προσάντης*). . . .

Medea now suggests that yet another group may become hostile to her, a group that has some “intricate,” “complex,” “subtle” (*ποικίλος*) knowledge in their own right, who might be classified as hypersophisticates or pseudosophisticates, people who show off their knowledge to establish themselves competitively as some kind of intellectual elite. She explains that she has experienced firsthand being stigmatized by this group; certainly *λυπρός* and *προσάντης* here recall *πικρός* (224) in her opening speech, the antisocial characteristic that she fears the polis assumes she has. And Medea implies here that she has survived varying public reactions to her *sophia* by

⁴⁰ Not coincidentally, perhaps, Thucydides characterizes the *ἀπράγμων* citizen as useless (*ἀχρεῖον*, 2.40.2; see above, p. 123).

⁴¹ Williamson (above, n.5) 19 points out that Medea speaks here as if she is male; her language refers only to male citizens who are *σοφοί* and not to a woman in her situation.

⁴² Euripides may mean here “meddlesome,” “interfering”—*πολυπράγμων*—as A. Elliott in his note suggests (*Euripides Medea* [London 1973] *ad loc.*).

her own kind of social malleability and adaptability. Whether people react to her with these varying responses or she herself actually becomes what will be most effective for a given segment of the people is unclear, but Euripides hints that she has a role in presenting varying personalities to varying audiences as she needs to in order to succeed, a distinctly urban trait that she employs throughout her first speech onstage.

Medea's versatile kind of *sophia* appears as early as Theognis in a set of verses (213–218) which suggests Medea's situation and parallels her language:

θυμέ, φίλους κατὰ πάντας ἐπίστρεφε ποικίλον ἦθος
 ὀργὴν συμμίσγων ἦντιν' ἕκαστος ἔχει.
 πουλύπου ὀργὴν ἴσχε πολυπλόκου, ὃς ποτὶ πέτρῃ,
 τῇ προσομιλήσῃ, τοῖος ἰδεῖν ἐφάνη.
 νῦν μὲν τῇδ' ἐφέπου, τοτὲ δ' ἀλλοῖος χροῶα γίνου.
 κρέσσων τοι σοφίῃ γίνεται ἀτροπίῃ.

Turn, Heart, toward all friends an ever-varying (ποικίλος) disposition, suiting your temperament to that of each. Have the temperament of the crafty octopus, which appears to be of the same substance of the rock it lives with—now follow along this path, now be a different color. Indeed, *savoir-faire* (σοφίῃ) is better than inflexibility (ἀτροπίῃ).

Similar to various poems of Theognis which describe the complex social interactions of the Greek symposium,⁴³ this fragment describes a kind of successful polis behavior whereby individuals protect themselves through exhibiting, by means of dissimulation, a flexible social assimilation. The verbal echoes in this Theognidean passage point out the subtleties of Euripides' text: Medea is using her *sophia* to establish credibility with Creon and ultimately to deceive him at the same time that she is speaking of the plight of people who are σοφός—here ποικίλος describes both the speaker and the text itself, as well as the group of city sophisticates it is aimed at.

In both sets of remarks, Medea's entrance speech (214–224) and her reply (294–305) to Creon's fear of her *sophia*, she represents herself as having a unique perspective on the attitudes of the polis and its social realities. She understands how seemingly unimportant actions can be misconstrued by the varying dispositions of the social groupings that make up the polis and how this misunderstanding can and does create alienation. This awareness of the inner workings of the polis impresses the audience with her similarity to them. In the second speech the audience would recognize in her language her cognizance even of rural-urban differences, similar to the city-country contrast used by Thucydides

⁴³ D. Young, ed., *Theognis, Ps.-Pythagoras, Ps.-Phocylides, Chares, Anonymi Aulodia, Fragmentum Teliambicum* (Leipzig 1971) 295–298, 309–312, 475–496, 563–566.

to stigmatize Sparta as rural and unsophisticated. Euripides opposes σοφός (295, 298, 299) and σκαιός (298) and even positions σκαιοῖσι at the beginning and the σοφά at the end of line 298 to underscore this fundamental polarity.

These two adjectives elsewhere in the literature of the late fifth century belong to the register of speech used to represent extremes of urban sophistication and rural boorishness. Throughout Aristophanes' *Clouds*, for instance, σοφός is used to characterize the ultimate sophistication of the Sophists and their rhetorical education as contrasted with the rustic dullness of a Strepsiades. At *Cl.* 94, Strepsiades points out that the "Mental Institute" belongs to men who are σοφοί, which carries with it in the complex social situations of the play varying connotations of sophistication—"brilliant," "highly educated," "accomplished," "discriminating," "sophisticated." In contrast, σκαιός figures prominently also in the *Clouds*, where it keeps almost constant company with ἄγροικος, the adjective used to describe the country bumpkin, the rube. Socrates, flabbergasted by Strepsiades' agrarian dimwittedness, exclaims (*Cl.* 628–631):

οὐκ εἶδον οὕτως ἄνδρ' ἄγροικον οὐδαμοῦ
οὐδ' ἄπορον οὐδὲ σκαιὸν οὐδ' ἐπιλήσιμονα,
ὅστις σκαλαθυρμάτι ἄττα μικρὰ μανθάνων
ταυτ' ἐπιλέλησται πρὶν μαθεῖν.

I've never seen *any* man so boorish (ἄγροικος), so hard to deal with (ἄπορος), so gauche (σκαιός), so forgetful—whatever little bits of subtlety he's trying to learn he's forgotten before he's learned them.

At *Clouds* 655, Socrates says, "You are boorish and gauche," ἀγρείος εἶ καὶ σκαιός. Aristophanes also has Bdelycleon address his boorish and rural father with a reproach which links σκαιός with ἀπαίδευτος, "uneducated" (*Wasps* 1183): ὦ σκαιὲ κάπαίδευτε. In *Rhesus* (dubiously attributed to Euripides), Hector exclaims (266): ἦ πόλλ' ἀγρώταις σκαιὰ πρόσκειται φρενί, "Much ineptness (σκαιά) belongs to the minds of yokels (ἀγρώται)!"⁴⁴

Medea's opening speech displays this same vocabulary of Greek refinement and rusticity, for Euripides also uses there ἀμαθία (224), "insensibility" to the polis, "ignorance" of its ways, and σεμνός (216), "superior," "haughty." Here Medea's point concerns the inappropriateness of a citizen who, because he is self-willed and self-absorbed (αὐθάδης, 223), cannot adapt to the polis and sounds strident (πικρός, 224) to the minds of other citizens; this social disharmony is the result, she says, of ἀμαθία, ignorance of and insensibility to the way polis dwellers conduct their common life together. Elsewhere, the adjective ἀμαθής is often linked like σκαιός with ἄγροικος.⁴⁵ Xanthias, for example, in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (1319–

⁴⁴ Alcman uses these adjectives together also (*PMG* 16): οὐκ ἦς ἀνὴρ ἀγρείος οὐδὲ σκαιός. . . .

⁴⁵ Aristophanes also connects ἄγροικος with δυσμαθής at *Cl.* 647.

1321), describes Philocleon's coarse behavior in a way which links ἀμαθής with ἄγροικος and the whole register of countrified speech/behavior:

τοιαῦτα περιύβριζεν αὐτοὺς ἐν μέρει,
σκώπτων ἄγροίκως καὶ προσέτι λόγους λέγων
ἀμαθέστατ' οὐδὲν εἰκότας τῷ πράγματι.

In such a way he committed unaggravated assault on each guest in turn, making boorish (ἀγροίκως) jokes, and over and over again telling stories in the most ignorant (insensible, ἀμαθέστατ') way, not appropriate to the subject of conversation.

Medea's use of ἀμαθία (224) suggests the same incongruity, disharmony, and inappropriateness, but in relation to the ordinary conventions of polis life.

At the other end of the spectrum of rusticity/urbanity, the adjective σεμνός (*Med.* 216) sometimes refers to the refined ways of the city-centered aristocracy of Athens. In social and nonreligious contexts, σεμνός suggests the attitude which social inferiors within the polis assume that their social superiors possess—people who are wealthy, highborn, and self-identified with the polis and its city ways. In the *Clouds* (48), for instance, Strepsiades paints a vivid picture of the city-country match his marriage is—he, a country hick (ἄγροικος), his bride, however, “from the city” (ἐξ ἄστειως) and, from his perspective, “classy” (σεμνή, 49). In the *Wasps* also, Aristophanes links this adjective with the urbanity of polis life. Bdelycleon tries to determine diagnostically just how much training Philocleon will need before he ventures into the sophisticated atmosphere of the urban symposium:

ἄγε νυν, ἐπιστήσει λόγους σεμνοὺς λέγειν
ἀνδρῶν παρόντων πολυμαθῶν καὶ δεξιῶν;

Well now, will you know how to tell elegant stories (carry on elegant conversations? λόγους σεμνοῦς) when you're in the presence of men who are very learned (πολυμαθῶν) and clever?⁴⁶

Clearly the idea that only stories that are σεμνός are befitting the symposium is central to Bdelycleon's understanding of what constitutes urbane manners and behavior. In his question πολυμαθῶν underscores the connection between the registers of learning/ignorance and urbanity/rusticity, and this is the opposition that is subtly present in Medea's entrance speech and more overtly exhibited in Medea's defense of her *sophia* before Creon.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Wasps* 1174–1175. See also *Wasps* 1472, *Cl.* 363, *Frogs* 1496, and *Wealth* 940. See also Carter (above, n.25) 53.

⁴⁷ Other examples abound in Aristophanes and in various late fifth-century writers which attest to the existence of such a register of language describing the sophistication and refinement in the polis. In the previous passage the adjective δεξιός suggests the

Thus, Medea's language of the polis and the echoes of it in other central Greek texts show the elaborate subtlety of Euripides' characterization of Medea, beginning with her opening speech to the Corinthian women. He draws a chameleonlike figure, unparalleled in her ability to assimilate to the masculine and Greek environment of the polis. Through the multiple masks with which Euripides provides her, the members of the Athenian audience begin to believe that Medea, an outsider in more than one way, is not too different from them. This credence forms the initial part of Euripides' strategy.

Yet as Medea hides herself in the ideology of the polis, she, by this very action, casts in starker and more discernible outline the contours and interrelationships of the cultural structures and patriarchy that form it. In the mouth of a marginalized noncitizen and female, the language of male and citizen supremacy sounds itself foreign. This strangeness makes the values of the polis' center seem conspicuously skewed, for someone outside the city's circle takes possession of them. And it is from this off-center perspective that Euripides then disassembles Medea's acculturation. As its outer crust crumbles, not only do the spectators see Medea for the human chaos she embodies, but they begin to see face-to-face and uneasily those communal forces of the polis which shape and move them.

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the language of city refinement as well. In the *Wasps*, Aristophanes seems to contrast *δεξιός* with *σκαίος*. As D. M. MacDowell (*Wasps* [Oxford 1971] 138 *ad loc.*) claims, these adjectives are opposites. In the play's prologue, Xanthias tells the spectators that the play is not more clever, sophisticated (*δεξιώτερον*) than they are, nor smarter (*σοφώτερον*) than vulgar comedy (65–66), and later (1013–1014) the chorus assumes that the audience is not *σκαίος* as it is about to appreciate elegant language (*εὖ λέγεσθαι*). See also Lloyd (above, n.37) 68–110.

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