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Oath Making and Breaking in Euripides' *Medea* KARYN GREENE

The swearing of oaths was an important feature of the Ancient Athenian political system. It was “a political process that could be expressed in ritual language and by means of ritual acts” (Cole, 227). In the *Medea*, Medea uses this political process as a means to both punish Jason for his betrayal and to avenge her dishonor. Euripides’s use of this practice emphasizes the importance of politics to the maintenance and successful continuation of both private and public life within the polis.

Oath making defined Athenian culture. It played such an integral role in society and was employed to determine the citizenship of Athenian males. First, an oath was made by the men who decided which youths were eligible to be honored with citizenship. Then, another oath was made by the men charged with equipping these youths with all the knowledge necessary for them to be successful and productive members of society. Finally, one last oath was made by these youths in which they swore to be honorable citizens and to dedicate their adult lives to the polis. One’s honor was determined by how well his oaths were kept and these oaths formed private and public bonds between citizens that ensured the social and political success of the city-state. “A failure to uphold sworn oaths damaged the political community and produced disaster” (Cole, 234). It also had a negative effect on individual families.

In the opening of the play, the nurse wishes that her mistress Medea had never left Colchis for then Jason would have never had the opportunity to dishonor her by betraying their marriage oath. The oath that Jason made with Medea follows the political conventions of oath making in Athens. When Jason, who had approached her as a suppliant to assist him in his quest to obtain the Golden Fleece, swears the oath to

Medea, he employs the practice of *dexiosis* (swearing by the right hand). *Thusia*, the standard form of sacrifice as described by Cole, is also an important aspect of Jason's oath. This practice emphasizes the bond between the oath giver and the oath receiver as well as the obligation of both parties to honor the gods who govern such practices. In these types of sacrifices, the entire body, after being cut to pieces, could be either burned, buried, or thrown into the sea (230). This description is eerily reminiscent of Medea's slaughter of her brother Absyrtus.

According to the myth, Absyrtus had originally been accompanying Medea and Jason as they fled from Colchis. However, Medea, in an effort to delay her father's pursuit of the Argos, decided to murder her brother, dismember him, and then hurl his severed body parts over the side of the ship and into the sea. Absyrtus, serves as the sacrificial animal that would have been a standard feature in this oath making. "The fate of the sacrificial victim represented the potential destruction of the person swearing the oath and was a visual and tangible sign of human powerlessness in the face of the gods" (Cole, 230). Such an event only solidifies the sanctity of the oath that Jason swore to Medea and provides ample evidence supporting the necessity of the severe punishment that he receives at the end of the play.

Medea employs the practice of *dexiosis* again in her confrontation with Creon. Even though Medea speaks to Creon with soft words, he exiles her and the children from Corinth for fear of his own life and for fear that Medea will bring about the destruction of his house. The decree of a king is not to be taken lightly and Medea knows she must do as ordered. Clinging to him with suppliant hands, she begs for just one more day in Corinth to settle her affairs and make provisions for her children. Creon continues to refuse until Medea summons the gods to witness his refusal of her plea. Creon is a king and so he must conduct himself in an honorable manner and serve as an example of excellence for his subjects. He must accept the plea of a suppliant. However, Creon grants Medea this favor against his better judgment, reasoning that there is no possible way that Medea could do any of the things that he fears she is capable of doing in only one day. Creon pays for this underestimation of Medea with

not only his life but with the life of his daughter as well. Once again Medea proves to the audience just how destructive the rippling effects of one broken oath can be.

In ancient Athens, the families of those found guilty of not upholding their oaths were cursed. Medea delivers a powerful threat to Jason when she says, “καὶ σοῖς ἀραῖα γ’ οὔσα τυγχάνω δόμοις” (I will bring about a curse on your house too, 608). Although Medea is Jason’s wife, she would not have been considered family in the same way that the concept is understood today. Jason’s sons, who stood in line to inherit his wealth, power, and reputation, also had the task of making sure that Jason was remembered. To the ancient Athenians, Jason’s family was comprised of his offspring, not his spouse.

In ancient Athens, there was a certain criteria for oath making: “an invocation to a god or gods (often three in number) to bear witness; a claim or a promise, and, in solemn or “great” oaths, a self-directed curse if the claim were true or the promise not kept” (233). Medea, in her lamentation, “θεοὺς μαρτύρεται οἷας ἀμοιβῆς ἐξ’ ἰάσονος κυρεῖ” (calls the gods to witness the nature of the requital that she gets from Jason 22-23). There are numerous other instances within the narrative in which both Medea and the chorus invoke Zeus and Themis, the gods who govern oath making and justice, respectively, as well as Helios as witnesses to the making or breaking of an oath.

Athenian men were expected to uphold these values concerning oaths for the preservation of the polis. According to Judith Fletcher, “oaths were divinely ordained and magically protected... and they stood like the primeval pillar that supports the sky” (30). Having acknowledged Jason’s betrayal, the chorus declares that there is no longer faith in oaths, βέβακε δ’ ὄρκων χάρις (439), a sentiment that is echoed by Medea on line 492 when she says “ὄρκων δὲ φρούδη πίστις” (I no longer put any trust in oaths). Medea recognizes that oaths are not serving in the capacity for which they were meant and makes use of the social upheaval to exact her revenge against Jason and to restore her honor. The chorus of Corinthian women also acknowledges that this breaking of an oath exists outside of the normal societal expectations. They say:

ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παγαί,
καὶ δίκαια καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται:
ἀνδράσι μὲν δόλαι βουλαί, θεῶν δ'
οὐκέτι πίστις ἄραρεν.
τὰν δ' ἐμὰν εὐκλειαν ἔχειν βιοτὰν στρέψουσι φᾶμαι:
ἔρχεται τιμὰ γυναικείῳ γένει:
οὐκέτι δυσκέλαδος
420φάμα γυναικῆς ἔξει.

The streams of the holy rivers flow backwards, and the order of all things is turned about: the thoughts of men have become deceitful and their oaths by the gods are no longer fastened. Rumor will so turn that women will possess a good reputation. Honor is coming to the race of women: no more will women be thought of with ill-repute (410-420).

Medea's decision to exact revenge in this manner is grounded in the ancient law of the polis. Since men can no longer be trusted to act honorably it is easily for Medea to use this warped social institution to manipulate many characters in the tragedy so that she can successfully accomplish her goals.

In this new reality, Medea is able to convince the chorus to keep the nature of her plan a secret even though they strongly disagree with her decision to murder her own children. She is able to convince Jason to persuade his new bride to accept their children into the city. She is able to trick Creon into allowing her another day to plot and plan and she is able to trick Aegeus into granting her refuge. Medea playfully taunts Jason, asking if he thinks that the gods who govern oath-making have changed or if they no longer care. But what she is really asking him is if he thinks he will escape divine punishment for the crime that he has committed against her, and ultimately against the gods as well. She says:

φεῦ δεξιὰ χεῖρ, ἧς σὺ πόλλ' ἐλαμβάνου

καὶ τῶνδε γονάτων,
ὡς μάτην κεχρώσμεθα
κακοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρός, ἐλπίδων δ' ἡμάρτομεν.

Oh right hand, which many times you held
And these knees too,
All in vain, was I touched by a base man,
How I have been deprived of my hopes (496-498).

Just as Jason has deprived Medea of her hopes, she will deprive him of his. It is clear by the nature of Medea's complaint that Jason promised to marry her if she helped him in his quest. While it is unknown exactly what self-directed curse Jason made when swearing this oath to Medea, it can be assumed that the curse in some way involved his progeny, as "the tradition of self-directed curses recognized the anxiety associated with paternity... and the necessity of the preservation of the family as the unit of the city" (235). Jason seems to be very much attached to the idea of raising his sons with Medea along with his unborn sons by the princess, increasing the glory of his house, and winning renowned for his family. However, this desire may have only been voiced to placate Medea's rage over the circumstances of his betrayal. In this way, Medea's actions against Jason are justified by political and social traditions of Athenian law.

The passage above also marks the first time in the tragedy in which Medea addresses her own hand. The hand with which she made the oath with Jason is the same hand that she will employ in her plot to extract her revenge from him for the breaking of it. This scene also foreshadows her future conversation with Creon, in which she approaches him as a suppliant and he, in vain, grants her request to remain in Corinth for just one more day. "The symbol of friendship and sacred trust thus becomes the instrument of violence" (Flory, 70). Medea, who has previously honored her oaths, now uses them to manipulate those around her into unconsciously participating in her revenge plot.

There are many scholars who argue, as Jason and Creon do, that Medea is angry because she has been romantically rejected by her husband. However, her anger stems instead from the way in which she has been dishonored. Medea is not heartbroken because Jason has left her for another woman. If anything, Jason appears to be the one who is utterly consumed by his love, love for the new princess. Medea laments all that she has sacrificed for Jason, her brother's life, her father's love, and her country just to be dishonored by a man who himself is so dishonorable that he does not uphold his oaths. Medea reproaches Jason for his betrayal of their agreement. She has held up her end of the bargain, she reasons. She tells Jason that perhaps she could have understood his treatment of her if she had never borne him children, which she would be obligated as his wife to do. As Elizabeth Bongie states, "if 'love' were the issue in Medea's mind, whether or not she had produced children would be quite irrelevant" (42). Since Medea has given much to Jason and he has not returned the favor, she aims to take away all of the gifts that she gave, starting with the two children that she bore him.

When Jason offers the ἀφθόνῳ . . . χερὶ (willing hand, 612) to Medea to help her and the children in their exile, Medea refuses to accept it because she knows that promises made by that hand are not to be trusted. She tells him:

οὐτ' ἂν ξένοισι τοῖσι σοῖς χρησαίμεθ' ἂν
οὐτ' ἂν τι δεξαίμεσθα, μηδ' ἡμῖν δίδου:
κακοῦ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς δῶρ' ὄνησιν οὐκ ἔχει.

I want nothing to do with your friends nor will I will not accept them,
Offer me nothing;
For a base man's gifts hold no blessing (617-618).

Medea has learned that nothing good comes from the promises made by Jason and she knows that he can offer her no benefit. When she calls for

a truce on line 899, Medea instructs the children to “λάβεσθε χειρὸς δεξιᾶς” (take the right hand) of their father. In this passage she considers her recent decision to murder the children and appears to struggle with following through with her plan. However, upon hearing Jason’s wish that they reach manhood; Medea knows that the murder of the children is a crime she must commit. By no means does Medea ever really consider a truce with Jason. Instead, Medea uses this ‘truce,’ secured by the children’s embrace of their father’s right hand, to trick Jason into believing that she is repentant for her earlier indiscretions, specifically the speeches that she made against him and the royal family. Medea is fully aware that Creon may not be persuaded to allow her children refuge. Her plan is dependent instead of Jason’s ability to woo his new bride. The only way for Medea’s plan to work is if Jason can convince the princess to accept the children but Medea is confident that Jason will be successful because she knows all too well how capable Jason is of bending women to his will.

According to Cole, “oath giving and oath taking were forms of exchange” (237). Medea gives Jason safe passage from Colchis, helps him obtain the fleece, and gives him two children, among many other things. In return, all Jason was required to provide was an equal partnership in their marriage. However, he falls short of the expectations of this agreement. Medea can never regain all that she has given up for Jason. She cannot bring her brother back to life, she cannot win back her father’s love, and she cannot return home to her fatherland. She can neither restore the life of Pelias nor remove the guilt from his daughter’s bloodstained hands. By murdering the children that she had with Jason, Medea inflicts the strictest form of punishment against him for the severe crime of breaking his oath and takes from him just as he has taken from her.

Not only does Medea’s quest to avenge her honor destroy Jason’s house, but it destroys the royal house as well. Creon is king of Corinth and, as mentioned earlier, the nature of his office requires him to perform specific duties and uphold certain standards. Creon, as monarch, serves as the embodiment of all laws and traditions of his people. He is a

living representation of the city-state. Although it is Medea who provides the poison, it is ultimately Jason's betrayal that causes the death of both Creon and the princess. Jason literally destroys the city of Corinth with the breaking of the oath made before he even arrived in the polis. Medea also engages in an oath with Aegeus, king of Athens. She approaches him as a suppliant; much like how Jason first approached her. In this encounter, Medea manages to secure for herself refuge once she escapes Corinth and arrives in Athens by promising to help Aegeus beget children of his own by use of her magical powers. Medea is certain to make secure this oath. While murdering her children is the only way to properly avenge her dishonor, it will all be for naught if Jason or the Corinthians are able to hold her accountable for her crimes. The exchange between Medea and Aegeus in the passage below follows the traditional conventions for oath making (745-755):

Αἰγεύς: . . . ἐξηγοῦ θεοῦς.

Μήδεια: ὄμνυ πέδον Γῆς
πατέρα θ' Ἥλιον πατρός τοῦμοῦ
θεῶν τε συντιθεῖς ἅπαν γένος.

Αἰγεύς: τί χρῆμα δράσειν ἢ τί
μὴ δράσειν; λέγε.

Μήδεια: μήτ' αὐτὸς ἐκ γῆς σῆς
ἔμ' ἐκβαλεῖν ποτε, μήτ', ἄλλος
ἦν τις τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν ἀγειν
χρήζη, μεθήσειν ζῶν ἐκουσίῳ
τρόπῳ.

Αἰγεύς: ὄμνυμι Γαῖαν Ἥλιου θ'
ἀγνὸν σέλας
θεοῦς τε πάντα ἐμμενεῖν ἅ σου
κλύω.

Μήδεια: ἀρκεῖ: τί δ' ὄρκῳ τῷδε
μὴ ἴμμένων πάθοις;

Αἰγεύς: ἅ τοῖσι δυσσεβοῦσι
γίγνεται βροτῶν

Aegeus: By what gods should I swear?

Medea: Swear by the ground of Earth, by Helios, my grandfather, and by the whole race of gods added up all together.

Aegeus: What should and what shouldn't I do, speak.

Medea: That you yourself will never throw me out of your land and that, if any of my enemies ask to take me, and that you, while living, will never willingly set me loose as long as you live.

Aegeus: I swear by Earth, by the holy light of Helios, and by all the gods that I will do as I have heard from you.

Medea: That's sufficient. And what should you suffer if you don't abide in the oath?

Aegeus: That which becomes of ungodly mortals.

Aegeus makes his promise to protect Medea from her enemies, swearing by all of the gods. He does not hesitate to make the self-directed curse.

Aegeus is the king of Athens and would be expected, much like Creon is, to honor the oaths he makes. His last words are particularly significant to the understanding of the passage. He says that he accepts whatever punishment befalls mortals who break their oaths.

“Punishment for contempt of public as well as private oaths was expressed... by the loss of descendants, as symbolized in oath ritual by images of mutilation (Cole, 255). Euripides’ audience would have been familiar with the next episode in the myth in which Medea arrives in Athens after leaving Corinth and begets two children to Aegeus. Medea then tries unsuccessfully to assassinate Theseus, the long lost son of Aegeus; for fear that he would usurp her sons’ birthright. Medea promised Aegeus that he would have children if he harbored her and because he acted honorably she is able to do as she desires. The Athenian king appears to be the only character in the tragedy who is rewarded for upholding his end of an oath. Still, Aegeus is just another character manipulated by Medea in her plot for revenge.

According to Anne Burnett, Medea is “a figure only narrowly distinguished from the secular criminal... fearfully effective in [her] worldly strength, [her] intelligence, and [her] final victory” (3). The audience is able to sympathize with Medea because she is both a woman and foreign to the city of Athens. Countless times throughout the narrative the audience is reminded that Medea’s situation is one unique to women and that there is no possible way for her to return home to her own people. Another way in which the guilt shifts from Medea elsewhere is that she alone is not responsible for all the destruction, although she does play a hand in it. If Jason had never broken his oath then Creon, the princess, and the children would still be alive. Medea would have had no reason to supplicate Creon, or trick Jason or Aegeus. She would have had no reason to kill the children. Medea uses the children themselves as instruments in her plot. First she employs them as messengers of death

as it is they who deliver the poisonous wedding gifts to the princess. Then Medea takes their lives in her final act of punishment to their father.

Not only does Medea use oaths to punish Jason for everything that he has done against her, she also uses them to undo everything that she has done for him. While Jason may claim that he has never broken his oaths, it is clear that his punishments are justified because the gods, who play such an active role in the process, do not stop Medea from exacting her revenge. Medea systematically manipulates nearly every single character within the narrative to punish Jason for his betrayal and she is successful in doing so. Medea strips Jason of his reputation but she also takes so much more. By killing both her children and the princess, Medea makes it impossible for Jason's line to continue. Never will Jason be able to increase the glory of his house, in fact, he will die a pathetic death by being hit over the head with piece of wood fallen from his own ship.

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