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MEDEA AND THE TRAGEDY OF REVENGE

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THE desire to give back a wound for a wound received is an emotion almost universally felt. Tales of revenge from every time and place show this wish impelling even men who had never wanted power or known sexual desire; they describe it as taking precedence over instinct itself and causing the avenger to forget every other need. Vengeance tales also like to show debts of violence that pass from father to son or from brother to brother before they are finally paid. And lawgivers have agreed about the virulence of this emotion, making private vengeance one of the first things that the state prohibits. "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out," says Bacon in his essay, *Of Revenge*. The man of civic virtue, when he is wronged, is expected to accept an indirect and bloodless recompense, and so he is left, if his hatred was strong, with an unslaked thirst. The more civilized he is, the more unbearable does he find his persisting reprehensible dream of the enemy's witnessed agony. Vengeance in fiction is the only satisfaction he can know; indeed it is, especially in the full dress of the stage, almost a necessity. Produced in a sensitive community, vengeance drama will strain the moral ingenuity of both audience and creator, since the deed that is publicly forbidden is publicly performed, and yet the play can

hardly fail. Each secret avenger in the audience destroys his enemy and is freed of his burden of rancor, providing, as he leaves the theater, the cleanest example one can show of what catharsis means.

Human vengeance was an old theme in the literature of Greece and it was probably one of the earliest actions to be staged there, when actors began to appear, for it later supplied the fiction for one of the six favorite plots of Attic tragedy. It is quite plain that Aeschylus, when he wrote the *Choephoroi*, was not writing the first play of its kind but was instead reshaping a form already familiar both to himself and to his audience, consciously manipulating variations that he brought to a well-established theme. Any attempt to reconstruct the general outline of the vengeance plays that preceded his is open to all the dangers of the hypothetical, and yet it is only by making such an attempt that we can understand the problems that later poets faced as they too worked with revenge as the fiction for tragedy.

In the description of this imaginary ur-vengeance play the terminology of Aristotle can be of use. The minimal vengeance plot will have been an imitation of an action of the negative type, centered on catastrophe. It was embodied, however, in a principal whose function was the opposite of the function of the divine-punishment principal, for instead of being

the object of a deed of destruction, this central avenger was the agent of the same sort of deed. The plot was thus necessarily active rather than passive, and the result was a special pattern in the emotions that were aroused, since here there was portrayed a change of fortune experienced, not by the first figure of the piece, but by a secondary one, the victim who was tracked down and repaid. The overturn from wealth, success, and happiness into disaster and death, which was, according to Aristotle, the very marrow of good tragedy, was certainly present here, but it was not to be seen in the protagonist of the play. And this fact about the vengeance drama hero added a dramaturgical difficulty to the original moral dilemma that had been created by the fact that the protagonist was a criminal.

Measured by brute event, this could be the most dynamic of plots, for its active principal freely sought out his enemy, forced his way into his presence, and attacked and punished him. In final effect, however, the simple vengeance action must have been a curiously static thing. When the play was over and the second figure had moved from prosperity to destruction, the principal would have been left upon the scene simply as one whose assignment was done. The present deed had had its origin in an earlier malefaction, and the one indispensable speech, when vengeance was first put on stage, would have been that in which the old crime was described and attributed to the man who had fallen (or was about to fall). The intention of the revenger, throughout whatever mayhem he had made, would have been to recover a certain neutrality that he once had known before his honor had been injured, and thus, at the end of the simple vengeance play, the external sum of his day's work would have been wholly retrospective. An old score settled, an ancient hatred

satisfied, an established reputation restored, and that was all. The hero began his play owing a debt and finished it quit of that debt but otherwise unchanged by his own deed, if that deed were one of vengeance unadorned.

Even the reversal felt by the victim in this simplest vengeance play would have been of an unsatisfying sort, by the standards of Aristotle, for it came close to being no more than the depiction of the bad end of a bad man. It would have had little power to arouse pity or terror, but the special interest of the primitive vengeance plot probably lay not in its evocation of these emotions but rather in the nice appropriateness with which the new crime was fitted to the old—"the quaintness of the malice," as the Jacobean said (*Revenge's Tragedy*, III. v. 108). Here was its characteristic delight, but this aspect of carefully contrived balance would only create a further difficulty for a more advanced poet who meant to write a vengeance play. The archaic Athenian audience may well have felt, as did the later Jacobean crowd, that primitive justice could make an agreeable plot—"Where the bad bleeds, there the tragedy is good"—but by the fifth century the fashion had changed. A more experienced playgoing audience had begun to demand something subtler than the old side-show exhibitions of slyness or of brawn, and a more reflective public conscience had begun to ask whether good and bad were quite so easily distinguished as their grandfathers had supposed and to look for some sign that what they saw on stage was determined by causes beyond mere chance or probability. And so the private exaction of recompense for harm came to seem, in its unvarnished form, an inadequate and nontragic deed, being paradoxically both too criminal and too just to engage a sophisticated sympathy. Consequently the dramatists of the fifth

century went to work to develop variations and ameliorations that could deepen the rude but still compelling strain of simple vengeance, giving it the harmonies that were to their ears necessary to the sound of tragedy.

Some of the new attributes of tragic vengeance were quite superficial, while others made radical alterations in the very *praxis* of the plays. Some were dictated by the dubious ethical quality of the avenger or by the excessive justice of his criminal act, while others attempted to compensate for his failure to experience fortune's overturn. This sinister principal was, in his primitive state, a figure only narrowly distinguished from the secular criminal, but on the other hand, he was a man fearfully effective in his worldly strength, his intelligence, and his final victory. His guilt had to be undercut if he was to arouse feelings of brotherhood in the Athenian audience, and his strength had to be diminished, if his success was to be touched with mystery and a sense of nonsecular causation. For these reasons extreme youth, isolation, obscurity, femininity, or pathetic old age often characterized the stage avenger.¹ Pindar if he liked could tell of a bloody Heracleian ambush, but the revenge action imitated on stage was far more likely to be that of a feeble Thyestes, a lamenting Creusa, or a Cresphontes still in his teens. The most striking example of this technique of weakness imputed and innocence conferred is found in the *Choephoroi* where Aeschylus, having brought his youthful hero to resolve upon his deed and therefore necessarily to take on a degree of maturity and guilt, magically erases these qualities by superimposing upon the spectator's view of the avenging Orestes

the unexpected image of the hero as a wet baby in his nurse's arms.

Another very simple technique for lessening the overt guilt of the vengeance principal was to give him an accomplice. This second figure could take some of the moral responsibility, drawing off a certain amount of the hero's criminality and efficiency so as to leave him a better candidate for that sense of fraternity that should exist between the spectator and the principal of a tragedy. Hecuba almost gets permission from the commander-in-chief before she attacks her enemy, and Orestes hears Pylades suggest his crime and Electra perfect its machinery before he takes it as his own, in Euripides' *Orestes*. Cresphontes and his mother work together, as do Zethus and Amphion, and in the *Ion* Creusa's accomplice (a feeble old man) not only helps plan the assassination but actually attempts the deed, with the result that the queen never really seems guilty at all.² This old man demonstrates another function of the accomplice, for he is visible proof that the revenger is not made exclusively of hatred, but is capable of loving and of being loved.

It was not only the avenger, however, but also the act of revenge that had to be carefully seasoned if vengeance was to become the meat of classical tragedy. The physical destruction was, in Aristotle's term, the irreducible *praxis* of the play, but this deed was sometimes so diminished that it came to occupy little more stage time than it takes to thrust a knife home to the heart. The killing, or its substitute, once perhaps the chief part of the spectacle, was still extensively prepared, witnessed in the form of a cry from offstage and proved in a final display, but it was swiftly done

1. Even in the *Odyssey* Odysseus' beggar's disguise performs something of this function.

2. A special version of the accomplice is seen in the case of Orestes' vengeance upon Neoptolemus in *Andromache*, a

vengeance we are soon taught to re-evaluate and to see as an action of divine punishment. Here the agent enlists a whole party of accomplices and then himself quits the scene, leaving the violence entirely to others.

and was not, in the softened vengeance play, retold by any messenger.³ This taciturnity must be compared to the magnificent loquacity of the fifth-century dramatists when they came to describe the catastrophe of divine punishment or the act of escape in a rescue piece. The audience of the humanized vengeance play was, by this remarkable ellipsis, requested to think about the reasons and the consequences of the play's successful crime, but it was urged not to exercise its imagination upon the actual moment when the hero became an atavistic criminal.

When the *praxis* act of violence was thus reduced and almost banished from the staged action, a kind of vacuum necessarily appeared in the vengeance play, for the filling of which two almost canonical scenes were developed. The first of these was a scene of decision, wherein the weakness and reluctance of the principal was pitted against the strength of his motive, and the second was the scene of intrigue, in which he showed his cunning and so by inference made physically plain the dangers that he dared to run. Both of these scenes were improved by the presence of a confidant, someone who could bring out the emotional color of the first, and the coldly practical tone of the second, and this role was economically filled by the same accomplice who was to subtract from the hero's material responsibility. With the violence almost erased from the visible action, the drama of the vengeance piece came to be measured by the distance its principal had to travel as he moved through these two scenes. The archaic path from a physical

blood thirst to its pragmatic satisfaction, a path beset by tangible difficulties, could thus become, in developed vengeance drama, an inner journey filled with moral danger as the principal moved from doubt and distaste to boldness and confidence. The old fiction of muscle and tenacity might thus find itself providing, in the fifth century, the *mythos* for a new sort of play that depicted psychic change.

If the primitive man of brawn was to become the man of conscience, however, the poet had to exert himself. His problem was that of justifying an initial unwillingness in his hero, since revenge in the imaginary past of the vengeance fiction had been positively dictated by the aristocratic code. It was, according to the earlier moral system, a deed formally beyond doubt or decision, a duty to be recognized and done. An initial reluctance could be externalized as a psychic or physical flaw in the revenger—he could be mad or crippled—but it could not be wholly explained in this way or the later shift to boldness would lose all verisimilitude. The dramatist had to create, if he could, a second imperative that might forbid the very crime archaic self-respect commanded, and this was difficult since the voice that spoke for law of another sort had to sound out without breaking the illusion of mythic anarchy. If the vengeance hero were simply moved forward in imaginary time and set down in a period when more advanced civic institutions were a part of the décor, he became at worst a thug, at best, like the Euripidean *Orestes*, a kind of bloodstained Don Quixote in a piece of social satire.

3. There is no messenger speech to describe the murders of the *Choephoroi* or the Sophoclean *Electra*; in the Euripidean *Electra*, the murder of Clytemnestra has no messenger but that of Aegisthus does. In the latter case (*El.* 774–858) a full vengeance fiction is recapitulated in the speech, including arrival of avenger, dissimulation of identity, gaining of access (and the hint of a counterplot in the bath offered and refused?), description of a symbolic act, that of sacrifice, made at length, description of actual killing finished in six of the total seventy-

three lines, and finally a scene of political recognition that transforms the whole account into one of joyful return (854–55). In the *Hecuba*, where the poet is not trying to redeem the avenger but to show her as demonic, though Polymestor plays his own messenger, he is remarkably terse about the actual infliction of his wounds (*Hec.* 1160–71). Unsuccessful vengeance attempts like that of Creusa in the *Ion* or Orestes in the *Orestes* can of course be described at length since the violence does not occur.

If the crime of vengeance was at the same time a crime against a kinsman, then the conditions making for difficulty in decision were admirably present, since the deed was simultaneously demanded and countermanded by the very same code, but unfortunately not every vengeance fiction could be built around the murder of a mother. A decent reluctance was demanded by the fifth century, scarcely supplied by the tales of the past, and this fact contributes a second explanation of why women were often made the agents in later vengeance tragedy. An imaginary archaic man, bred to the potential duty of vengeance, would properly decide to punish an enemy with ease, but an imaginary archaic woman was a different affair. Her Hellenic education in *aidos* and in quietude forbade any act of self-assertion, let alone of violence, and so when the avenger's role was given to an Electra or a Creusa the decision became an agonizing one, magnificent enough to satisfy the most rarefied ethical taste.⁴

Another series of innovations, in appearance of an opposite tendency, worked to enhance the present crime instead of trying to minimize it. The approach was oblique, however, for the usual practice was to magnify the old crime and the evil of the enemy who was repaid by a present deed. Archaic vengeance had been in essence a private act; it stemmed from an affront privately felt and not necessarily one of blood. And it fed on a private sense of shame. Suitably enough, then, this vengeance demanded of the avenger a secret resolution and a lonely brush with death. These situational facts had given the old tale much of its magic, making it turn frequently upon the trickery or disguise that is the soul of theater. Unfor-

tunately, these same facts threatened also to reduce the staged vengeance piece to the level of melodrama, or even to mix a touch of farce into its effects (a danger which Euripides chose to exploit when he wrote *Orestes*). If this lowering tendency was to be withstood, the evil to be overcome by these cunning means had to be portrayed as itself grand enough to lend a high solemnity to its own overthrow. When the victim was no ordinary bully but a man of great and baleful power, when his past misdeed was one of blood and one that was publicly as well as privately unjust, then indeed his downfall could become an event of monumental size, and the man responsible grew correspondingly large.

A usurpation based on a murder plainly filled these grandiose requirements for the crime of the past, and this set of details was frequently used in classical vengeance drama. The shift to the realm of politics, however, brought with it a corollary set of fictional details that were not quite so Aristotelian in their effects. A usurping monarch could be removed only by the legitimate heir, and this obvious fact fixed a necessary character upon the vengeance principal and as a result almost changed the valence of the tragedy. Vengeance, says Aristotle, can provide the *mythos* of great tragedy because its overturn is negative, but with a returning prince in the hero's shoes the negative quality of the victim's descent is no longer protected and emphasized by an action that sends its agent back to an obscure neutrality. Instead, this new throne-claiming agent will experience an upward *metabole* that crosses and almost erases the downward arc of his enemy's fall, for his success will take on an outward, lasting, institutionalized form. The political vengeance play

4. Phaedra in a sense belongs here since she is fictionally an avenger of her own honor, though her function in the action of the *Hippolytus* is as the agent of a divine punishment.

would naturally end with all the private joy and public jubilation that had originally belonged to the happy action of the exile's return, and so it would come suspiciously close to arousing emotions of a positive and not of a negative sort in its audience.

The playwrights of the fifth century clearly did not feel so much distaste for these results as Aristotle might have wished them to. They often mixed vengeance with return and drew from that hybrid action a particular profit. Vengeance stories in their simple form were aggressively secular, and some types of early drama may have been equally so, performances related to pantomime or battle-dance, but classic taste demanded that any action to be given a full scale imitation should seem to have been consonant with the will of god. It was hard to imagine a heaven satisfied, or even interested, by the sordid exchange of blow for blow, but when the vengeance protagonist was a prince who cleansed his palace of an unsanctioned interloper, who could doubt that the gods who protected his dynasty had guided him and were rejoiced at his success? An explicit divine sanction could be added, but it must be remembered that this detail, excessively prominent because of the Orestes plays, is technically quite superfluous in the play of vengeance. It is the final poetic expression of the sophisticated attempt to tame revenge and give it a moral delicacy.⁵

The variants thus far discussed have been matters of detail, selections or innovations made in the fictions of revenge as they were adapted for the stage. In addition to these, some radical experiments in form can be

observed in the fifth-century treatment of the drama of revenge. In the imaginary ur-vengeance play, the pattern of the action would have been provided by the hunt, and the emotions excited would have been those of fear and triumph as one man stalked another and risked discovery and further dishonor that he might inflict his private punishment upon his enemy. The later poet, in search of the annual prize, could, as we have seen, begin to investigate the hunter's state of mind, but he could also make his play more exciting by increasing the dangers of the hunt. Such an increase might come, epic fashion, from the mere multiplication of accident and physical difficulty, but in this case the fear of the audience, though it might grow, would not necessarily expand to become pity, and the principal would meanwhile be inflated by every danger met until he became a kind of superman in his final victory. If, on the other hand, the revenger were to be made the object of a counter-attack, if the beast stalked the hunter while the hunter stalked him, then the risk of the principal would become supreme and he as well as the victim might become the focus of tragic emotions.

The counter-intrigue offered the poet a wealth of possibilities, but it took some ingenuity to establish it within the probabilities of the vengeance fiction. If the victim himself were to threaten the life of the principal, he could do so only because he was somehow conscious of his own danger, and if he was thus actively on his guard it would be difficult to explain his being ultimately done in by a lonely adversary.⁶ The story problem was great, and an even

5. The problems surrounding the determination of the time and place of this innovation are not relevant here; the point is that Aeschylus chose to make it central to his trilogy. See the discussion of J. Defradas, *Les thèmes de la propagande Delphique* (Paris, 1954), pp. 160–204.

6. One vengeance victim who fought back directly seems to have been the Atreus of the Sophoclean *Thyestes*. There the situation was ambivalent since the knowing Atreus did

not himself act, but sent as his agent an unknowing Aegisthus whose blind counter-revenge was then interrupted by a recognition. Euripides seems to have experimented with another variant in his *Pleisthenes*, where, as far as we can tell, a palace counterplot actually succeeded against an agent of vengeance sent by an outside enemy. See Hyginus *Fab.* 86 and T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London, 1967), pp. 236–37.

greater dramaturgical difficulty loomed, since the victim, were he to be made active in this fashion, would inevitably threaten the inner structure of the simple, active vengeance plot. Once allowed to behave like a principal he would become far too interesting in himself, and if in consequence he drew the concentration of the drama to his own final *pathos*, then the play would shift from being one about doing to being one about suffering, making punishment tragedy out of its tale of revenge.⁷

The humane tragedian wanted a means by which his principal could garner all the ethical profit of being threatened, while his second personage was yet denied the effects of added strength and interest that would accrue to him as author of a threat. An ingenious craftsman (who was perhaps, but not necessarily, Euripides) saw that the solution lay in mounting a second vengeance plot around yet a third figure, and in making it not the knowing vengeance that praises man's ingenuity but the blind interrupted revenge that shows him to be a mortal fool. Both blindness and interruption have, in the schema of hypothetical tragic action, an air of mutation about them, and the vengeance fiction,

with all its inherent tragic anomalies, lent itself well to the pair. Blind, interrupted vengeance became a type of action in itself, and though it has not shaped an entire surviving tragedy, it is to be found as a subplot in dramas that we know firsthand or by report.⁸ Its popularity is easy to understand, for the vengeance plot in this altered form was an ideal vehicle for a sort of portraiture otherwise denied to the poet of tragedy. The straight vengeance plot, with its successful deed accomplished open-eyed, was necessarily strong in its celebration of the agent's will and his intelligence, whereas the blind vengeance plot refuted this near heresy. It continued to show human beings who were characterized by determination and wit, but it showed them misusing their gifts. The principal of the blind plot bends all his mind and his power toward the destruction of a friend whom he takes to be an enemy, and yet this wrongheaded agent is no Lycurgus or raving Agave. His blindness is not divinely induced as part of the heavenly punishment of another, but is all his own.

If the blind vengeance plot is not interrupted, the play will end by describing a world of intolerable confusion.⁹ It may be

7. The fictions of *Hippolytus*, *Agamemnon*, and *Women of Trachis* could all be told as vengeance tales; it is the structural and ethical concentration, along with the internal poetic instruction, that proves that for the purposes of these tragedies the three avenging women are in fact secondary agents in plays of divine punishment where the *praxis* is one of suffering, not of doing.

8. Blind interrupted vengeance can be seen in its simplest form in Creusa's attempt upon her son's life in the *Ion*; Merope's in *Cresphontes* will have been much like it, and a third example is provided by the royal brothers' intrigue against their unrecognized rival in the *Alexander*. Also to be put in this classification is Iphigenia's near sacrifice of her brother in *IT*, though the fiction there brings details that vary from those of the usual vengeance situation. (Iphigenia, incidentally, provides a nice example of a vengeance agent who acts under divine command, since her vengeance upon all Greeks takes a ritual form.)

9. Theoretically any plot could take a blind or a knowing form, just as it could show a deed completed or interrupted, but in fact blindness and interruption tended to keep company. Neither blind success nor knowing failure lent itself to the magnification of tragedy, but blind failure might in certain

circumstances be exalted as a form of providence. If a blind vengeance hero succeeds, he is apt to turn into the principal of a subsequent punishment, a truth stated with greatest economy by the *HF*, where the act of blind vengeance, the killing of the children, is at the same time the *pathos* of a plot of divine punishment. For knowing unsuccess, see Euripides' *Aegeus*, where Medea mounted a knowing intrigue against the returning Theseus. She had, however, associated the unknowing king with herself in her vengeance, so that in his person the action is blind. With this duplication of agency, Aegeus could bring to the play all the potentialities of blindness—recognition, interruption, reconciliation—while Medea brought the extra dangers and interest of the knowing counterplot. Sthenoboea's attempt against Bellerophon would have had much in common with that of Medea against Theseus, if, as is doubtful, it contributed to the action of the Euripidean *Sthenoboea*; see Webster, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–84. A surviving example of knowing unsuccess is seen in the attempt made by Orestes, Electra, and Pylades upon Helen in the *Orestes*; here the deed is not interrupted, it simply fails and Apollo treats it as if it had been blind, forcing the reconciliation that belongs to that condition upon the open-eyed avengers and their victim.

brought to completion, in other words, only on the nonclassical stage. When the blind action is interrupted, the sense of confusion is avoided, but the final vision is one of futility unless the interruption comes from within the situation itself and results in a restoration of sight. This is why the plot of blind vengeance borrowed the scene of kin recognition from the plot of return and found itself, as a result, suffused with emotions of tenderness and joy.¹⁰ When an erroneous act of vengeance was interrupted by such a scene, it ended by depicting not only mortal foolishness and futility, but also mortal love.

The central agent in blind vengeance was appropriately feminine, since women could be blind with better grace than men. It was natural for them to be foolish, and they could ask forgiveness in the end for whatever they almost had done. In consequence, of course, the victim was best a male, since this arrangement would allow the fullest exploitation of the latent ecstasy of the recognition scene. Paradoxically too, whereas a man conquered by a woman suffered the extremest shame, escape from a woman's plot left no tarnish on a hero's honor, when a similar escape from a man might have seemed to hint at fallibility.

A plot of interrupted blind vengeance was evidently still considered to be an example of negative overturn by the author of the *Poetics*, but be that as it may, it necessarily had many of the qualities that we think of as belonging to comedy. And this is why it was so frequently combined with actions of positive *metabole*: with rescue, as in the *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, or with return, as in the *Ion* and the lost *Alexander* of Euripides. When it

was paired with its own twin, the truly negative plot of knowing and successful revenge, as in the *Cresphontes* that Aristotle so admired, a whole new company of lighter ethical nuances attacked the austerity of the ancient vengeance plot. The hero of this lost play wonderfully escaped from death and was almost resurrected by love, in this case a mother's love, as it had been his mother who had plotted against him. Only after the audience had thus learned to feel a kind of tenderness for him and a joy in his existence did he go on to do in his uncle, the usurper of his father's throne.

Return and blind interrupted vengeance were thus both able to supply qualities of humanity and mercy to the stern, antique, private justice of the simple vengeance action. Either of these additives could bring the redeeming scene of recognition that technically had no place in the minimal economy of vengeance, and so could allow a depiction of emotions exactly opposite to those strictly proper to revenge. There was also a third type of dramatic action that could be blended with vengeance to work a transformation upon it, and that was the action of rescue. This particular mixture had a formal appropriateness since the active rescue principal, like the active revenger, is the agent of someone else's *metabole*—the difference being that he works a change from bad to good upon a friend, not one from good to bad upon an enemy. For the playwright who wished to elevate his vengeance hero, the added rescue plot was an ideal implement, since it allowed him to make of his principal a savior as well as a destroyer. When he had been fitted out with this complementary

10. That these are the essential emotions aroused by a scene of recognition hardly needs argument, but two exceptions are worth noting. In the Euripidean *Electra* the poet does not want any sense of tenderness or joy upon his stage, and yet a recognition is forced on him by his fiction; he therefore neutralizes his scene by introducing the estranging, self-conscious discussion of tokens and so breaking the dramatic

illusion. In the lost Sophoclean *Thyestes*, where the counter-intrigue from within the palace was frustrated by a recognition between Thyestes and his son, the resulting joy was extinguished by a different means, that of a second recognition between Thyestes and his daughter with its necessary further recognition of the incest that had occurred between them.

aspect, the sinister near-criminal became the ultimate man of justice in the old-fashioned sense, since in the act of blighting his enemy he also helped a friend.¹¹ Such a hero no longer showed only a single vengeful profile, but could be drawn in action as a full and admirable figure who actively recognized and responded to good as well as to evil.

The compatibility of rescue and vengeance is nobly illustrated in the Sophoclean *Electra*, where the revenge principal is introduced, then banished from the stage while the technically lesser figure of the princess in distress comes forward to replace him. She is shown to be physically threatened by Aegisthus, and then is condemned to a more terrible captivity when the playwright tricks her into thinking that she will have to do the killing here. The spiritual agony of this unwanted responsibility is far worse than any torture of the flesh might have been, and so the mere reappearance of the actual revenger constitutes a rescue for her. The recognition scene with her brother, the true principal of the vengeance plot, liberates her from her fear and her isolation, from her self-sacrifice and her unwomanly crusade; then in the end her kinship to Andromeda is confirmed when the actual murders set her free from her slavery to the usurping tyrant. Like the heroine of a genuine rescue piece, *Electra* moves from a rough and alien nature into a loving society, for she goes from her abandoned and uncomfortable station outside the palace to a sumptuous and sociable life within; she is rescued from her monstrous vocation of hatred and returned to those she can love. When the killing is finally done, the sharp brief joy of victory that is proper to vengeance tragedy is softened and made tranquil

by the remembered joys of the fraternal recognition, and these are fulfilled in imagination by the continuing life of the restored pair. The two revengers enter the palace at the play's end much like bride and groom, not because they are joined in crime, and not for any of the reasons a psychoanalytical modern might propose, but because they are formally a rescuing hero with the princess he has taken from the dragon's jaws.

The Orestes of the Sophoclean *Electra* is young; he has an accomplice and a divine command, and he comes to avenge a crime that was public as well as private, one that drew another's blood and not his own. He is replaced, throughout most of the play, by a second avenger who is female, wholly isolated and without physical resource, and filled with reluctance for the work ahead. No counter-intrigue is mounted against these avengers, but their drama is compounded by the addition of the two themes of the prince's return and the princess' rescue, and it is lightened and made positive by a recognition scene. This play thus offers an almost perfect summary of the alleviations that fifth-century taste had wrought upon the ancient drama of revenge, and as such it makes a telling foil for Euripides' *Medea*.

Euripides shocks us in the *Medea* by seeming to turn his back upon all of these elegant mitigations and embracing the rudeness of a simple archaic revenge. Where are the marks of weakness or of innocence in this avenging principal? The avenger here is neither very young nor very old, neither mad nor maimed, but instead a middle-aged person of tremendous vitality. Female she is, but that misfortune is more than overbalanced by her sorcery and by her foreign freedom from the Hellenic

11. The same effect was achieved on a smaller scale when the fiction was arranged so that the principal avenged a wrong done not to himself but to a kinsman.

sense of shame. Far from being of testified innocence, this agent of revenge has already been guilty of the worst crimes known to humanity, a barbarian indeed among her fellow revengers often so artfully perfumed and restrained by their creators.

The principal of the *Medea* has no accomplice with whom to share her guilt.¹² She has full knowledge of her situation and she begins with no reluctance, but rather with a fixed determination to act in defense of her honor. The overt outrage she means to repay is not an old, long-festering crime of blood, but a fresh affair of sexual betrayal. It is hardly a public misdeed that moves her now to her bloody private action. Her enemy, as he is embodied in Jason, is not an illegitimate rival usurping a civic place by force, but instead a man who has abandoned a private place that was freely offered to him. As embodied in the princess, this enemy appears superficially as a legitimate wife where Medea is a concubine, and as embodied in Creon, as the legitimate ruler, where she is the foreign intruder. Every one of the advantages of the political vengeance plot has been abjured, and here, in the area of the old crime as in that of the definition of the principal, we find Euripides willfully pouring away the whole chest of vengeance remedies.

Ameliorations of form, like those of fictional detail, are not merely passed over in the *Medea*; they are defiantly reversed. Instead of a return, there is further exile for the principal;¹³ instead of a counterplot from the palace to rouse our sympathy with the threatened heroine, there arrive a

number of boons from that place. Indeed, there is an unusual ease about the accomplishment of this vengeance deed, for the play smooths out difficulties instead of preparing them. Instead of a recognition, with its healing effects, there is here a cruel parody of the same scene (866 ff.), when Medea pretends to recognize that Jason is not after all her enemy, pretends that her vengeance was blind and now will be interrupted by her return to sight.¹⁴ And finally, instead of a rescue there is a last, deeply perverse act of destruction in this play.

As Sophocles has shown, one of the suavest forms of rehabilitation that could be offered to the vengeance principal was his simultaneous casting as the hero of a rescue piece. An Orestes, a Cresphontes, a Zethus or Amphion saved a suffering relative from the enemy, but Medea adds her children to the holocaust. The child-murder of the *Medea* is disturbing because it is child-murder; it is distressing because it follows the other murders and so appears gratuitous and unnecessary; it is infuriating because it seems to have replaced the true vengeance act, the killing of Jason; and finally it is almost unbearable because it is the inversion of an expected tragic pattern. The sons of Jason stood potentially to this plot as Electra or Antiope do to theirs. They might have been held as hostages by Jason or threatened by the angry city—these possibilities were suggested by the traditional tales of Medea at Corinth¹⁵—and they might have been liberated by Medea as she punished her enemies. In any such case they would have played their ameliorating role, and their

12. She uses the children in her intrigue mechanism, but they are not accomplices and they make her seem the more reprehensible since they do not know what it is she makes them do.

13. There is a slight sense, however, created by the spectacle of the finale, that Medea wins a throne in the sky.

14. This is her version of the primitive disguise, or of the false identities assumed by Orestes and Cresphontes.

15. Scholiast at *Med.* 264; cf. Apollodorus *Bibl.* 1. 9. 28. On the myths of Medea at Corinth see C. Robert, *Gr. Helden-sage*, III. i, 870 ff.; K. von Fritz, *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin, 1962), p. 333; A. Lesky, *Fondation Hardt, Entretiens VI* (Geneva, 1960), 31, where it is suggested that Medea's murder of the children is a Euripidean innovation.

survival would have allowed us to view their mother with an approving complacency even after we had heard the account of the disasters at the palace. When they are given death instead of a fresh life, when their bodies and not those of the princess and her father are displayed in the tableau at the end, the lost possibility of redemption joins the hideous actuality of crime to create the momentary impression that the tragic cosmos has got out of joint, that the stage has betrayed us, and that things are far worse here than art has been licensed to show.

The Euripidean refusal of the traditional niceties is so thorough in the *Medea* that it seems to constitute a kind of manifesto on the poet's part, an announcement that he intends to rediscover the vengeance action in its naked state. But if the palliatives were invented because a more civilized audience needed them, and if they are all here renounced, how did the dramatist yet manage to make a play that was accepted for performance at Athens in 431 B.C.?

One way to seek an answer to this question, though the method is transparently farfetched, is to consider for a moment another and very distant play, the *Revenger's Tragedy*. This patent breach of historicity suggests itself because some of the problems that Euripides chose to face with his *Medea* were forced upon Tourneur by his Christian setting. A Christian vengeance murderer could not be made to act under a directive from heaven, nor could his character be very much softened, and once he had killed his guilt was open to no earthly remedy. Religion demanded that his crime should be depicted as an ugly sin, no matter what its motives were,¹⁶ yet meanwhile the inner aesthetic of revenge

tragedy demanded that this same crime should not only be successful but should somehow be celebrated in its success. The satisfaction, within a single play, of these contradictory imperatives is Tourneur's achievement, and it is one that can be happily compared to Euripides' *tour de force*.

Tourneur gave his characters names they might have worn in a medieval morality play,¹⁷ but this was not enough. He had to lend beauty, generality, and a final sense of justice not only to these personages but also to Vindice's ugly and specific actions of injustice, and this he did by generalizing the deed to be avenged. He made the old crime so evil that in the end his single criminal seemed to have triumphed over Crime itself. His method, however, was very different from that of the fifth-century tragedians who made sure that the old crime was one with political consequences and so itself a solemn and public thing. The Duke of the Jacobean play is no usurper, and his ancient act of violence was not public but rather of a most private kind—rape. Tourneur has made this crime general not by showing that it was practiced upon the populace but instead by showing that the populace partakes of its practice. It seems almost accidental that one specific act of lechery and outrage should have attracted this day's vengeance to itself, for the Duke in this play is a monster of sin who lives surrounded by his kind. The palace, once entered, is not like the palaces of classical tragedy, the lair of a Lycus or an Atreus who was the single author of an act of violence. This palace is instead a seething pit of corruption, a spawning place for crime (“Oh accursed palace!” cries Vindice in his opening speech, I. i. 30). Its poet causes its stench

16. On medieval and renaissance ideas about the practice of revenge, see F. T. Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Princeton, 1940), pp. 8-11.

17. For Tourneur's debt to the morality play, see L. G. Salingar, “‘The Revenger's Tragedy’ and the Morality Tradition,” *Scrutiny*, VI (1938), 402-24.

to spread as soon as possible, teaching his audience to think that the ducal residence is exemplary of all society, an island of filth afloat on a vast sea of decadence and indecency.

In Tourneur's play the vengeance action multiplies and grows more hideous with every passing minute until it ends almost farcically in the reduplication of the paired sets of masked assassins in Act V. And the revenging hero is in no sense rescued from this generating ugliness.¹⁸ Vindice, like Medea, begins his play determined on revenge, and he knows no moment of doubt or of revulsion. He has a confidant in his brother, but Hippolito serves rather, with his milder temper, to underscore the principal's ferocity, and he in no way takes responsibility on himself. Vindice, like Medea, does the reverse of rescuing his kin, for he actually lends himself to a scheme that threatens his sister's chastity. The poison seems to be everywhere ("Now let me burst, I've eaten noble poison," says the hero, I. iii. 166), and yet the Jacobean poet is able to bring his play to an acceptable close, sending the spectator home with the sense that he has seen a pattern of health in the chaos of this moral disease. When the piece is over the dukedom has passed to a new and more worthy dynasty and Castiza has proved able not only to save her own virtue but to win back her mother from her fallen state.¹⁹ Vindice has destroyed himself with his own boastful tongue, and having done so he has come to seem a sinner justly punished who has yet left the world a more innocent place because of his violent crimes. He has grown monstrous himself, a terrible medicine for

a terrible malady, but he has answered his own early call—"Why does not earth start up / And strike the sins that tread upon it?" (II. i. 249). The innocence of Castiza has been shown to be even stronger than his guilty drive for bloody satisfaction; he and his sin are removed while her purity survives, and because of this we feel that something like the Mass that Vindice loved to swear by will be celebrated in future by a citizenry no longer given over entirely to debauchery.

Incest and adultery are used in the *Revenger's Tragedy* to represent all human crime, and the play's rich language pours their corruption into our ears, making every midnight foul:

Oh Dutch lust! Fulsome lust! Drunken pro-
creation which begets so many drunkards!
Some father dreads not, gone to bed in wine,
To slide from the mother and cling to the
daughter-in-law;
Some uncles are adulterous with their nieces,
Brothers with brothers' wives—oh hour of
incest!

[I. iii. 57 ff.]

This of course is wholly unlike the voice of Attic tragedy, and yet it can be argued that Euripides by his own means attempts in the *Medea* to give as heavy a taint to the air of his imagined Corinth. The first thing to observe, however, is that lust, though it appears as a theme in the *Medea*, is subordinated there to a moral corruption of a different sort, for the Attic tragedian makes his representative crime one of the spirit, not of the flesh. Jason is the center of the pollution in the *Medea* and Jason is indeed a kind of adulterer, but he has another attribute that is far more important for

18. When the principal is threatened by several counterplots instead of one, when all other characters plot against one another, and when these plots are knowing but yet sometimes misfire, then all of the potential ethical profit to be taken from the counter-vengeance plot is frittered away. Some critics find that irony has quite destroyed the tragic in the *Revenger's Tragedy*; see Bowers, *op. cit.*, p. 134

19. Bowers (*loc. cit.*) believes that Vindice is portrayed

first and last as a villain and that Antonio's is the first normal voice to be heard in the play. On the other hand, there are those who believe that Antonio is meant to be as bad as the rest, and some contemporary critics find Castiza's virtue so hard to stomach that they minimize her function in the play's economy; see the summary of critical opinion in the edition of Lawrence J. Ross (London, 1967), pp. xxiii-xxvi.

this play. He is a man of injustice, and in this action he is primarily and persistently defined as an impious oath-breaker.²⁰

The twentieth century is apt to find this a poor substitute for lust. We at least know the meaning of that word, whereas we have forgotten what an oath could be. If, however, we are to read this oath-bound play we must, like Dr. Johnson with the witches of *Macbeth*, take up a temporary superstition and believe for a while as the ancients did. Oaths in their world were no mere human conveniences, like a business man's contracts; they were absolutely necessary to society, but more than that, they were divinely ordained and magically protected. Oaths stood like the primeval pillar that supports the sky, a link that could at the same time hold off a possibly angry weight. The oldest doctrine was that oath-breaking was twin to kin-murder, these two being initially the only human crimes of interest to the pre-Olympian divinities.²¹ The broken oath, like the drop of kin blood, brought an erinyes into being (*Hes. Erg.* 804) and the demon was not to be appeased until the wrongdoer had been made to suffer. Such beliefs persisted even in classical times, and Euripides makes them a part of the explicit instruction of the *Medea*, for we are told that violation of an oath is an act that outrages the great Olympian divinities, Themis and Father Zeus (169–70; cf. 158, 161, 207); it is considered to be an example of *hubris* (1366) that alienates all of the gods (1391–92; cf. 493) and creates an erinyes (1260).

The alliance of Jason and Medea was not an ordinary marriage, and this fact is central to an understanding of what it is

that Medea avenges in her play. The connection between this Greek and this barbarian took its whole substance from its defining, extraordinary oaths (161–62, 492–98), for it existed outside society as a thing sanctioned only by the gods the two had named. Medea had not been transferred by her father to her husband like a piece of property as ordinary brides were;²² rather she had solemnly moved in her own full autonomy to join herself with him. These two 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. (Note Medea's vocabulary at 898 where their reunion would be the making of a new treaty, and compare the words of the Tutor at 1004.) They were united too as two members of a secret society might be, bound together by common crimes like the club members Thucydides describes, and each sworn to put their common interest over that of kin (cf. 506–8). Any failure of active support, any realignment meant betrayal, unless it was commonly agreed upon (586–87; for *προδίδοναι* as a description of Jason's behavior, 17, 206, 489, 578, 606, 778). In the eyes of the gods they were joined by the semimagical power of the oaths they had repeated, and one of the functions of the central scene between Medea and the king of Athens is to show us what these oaths were like.²³ Judging by this replica (731–55), they were terrible words, administered by Medea and spoken by Jason as he touched her right hand (cf. 20, 496), words that bound him to her by Gê and Helios and all the other gods (746, 752–53; cf. 1251 where the chorus calls

20. It is amusing to note that the *Revenge's Tragedy* provides a line that might be used as an epigram for the Attic play: "Fayths are bought and sold, / Oaths in these daies are but the skin of gold" (III. i. 7–8).

21. *Theog.* 231–32, for Horkos as child of Eris; cf. *Erg.* 219; for erinyes as avengers of broken oaths, *Erg.* 803–4. In folk belief the Palikoi performed the same functions; *Diod.* 11. 89. 5.

22. Even under usual circumstances the marriage oath was solemn enough; cf. *Eum.* 217–18.

23. Another of its functions is to suggest the rescue theme. Medea, like Electra, becomes the tortured female who must escape, and so for a moment in this scene we have the identification of the avenger not with the rescuer, as in some other plays, but with the rescued; see esp. 759.

upon Gê and Helios in defense of the children of this marriage), words that invited the punishment of the impious upon him if he should fail to honor them.

And Jason did fail to honor them, has already flouted these oaths when the play begins. The prologue speech announces that the eternal pact has been violated by one of its parties, who has replaced his sacred alliance with another that is more ordinary but also, now the old dangers are past, more to his advantage. Unless the gods have changed (cf. Medea's words to Jason at 492), Jason cannot go unscathed, and the Nurse reports that Medea already invokes them. She sums up:

Miserable Medea, suffering wrong,
Shrieks of the oaths and the claspings of hands,
Names the pledges solemnly sworn
And calls upon the gods to witness
Jason in his gratitude! [20–23]

As Medea moves through the play calculating the niceties of her scheme,²⁴ she works always on two levels at once, that of personal injury and that of Jason's largest criminality. In both cases her scores are settled with exactitude. "For you I gave up father and home," she seems to say to him, "so from you I take a father-in-law and an adopted home. You dissolved my marriage and meant to take my children from me (note his cruel σοί τε γὰρ παίδων τί δεῖ; at 565); I dissolve your marriage now, the old one and the new, and take your children both present and future forever away from you (803–4). Because of you I am tainted with crime, an exile, and alien wherever I go

(502 ff.; note how Jason's ἀπελαυνόμεθ' at 1405 balances the exile announced for Medea at 70); because of me you too will be tainted now, and no second king will offer refuge and his daughter's hand to you. You meant to give me an abandoned old age; I give one now to you" (1396). All of this satisfies her private need, but at the same time her retribution fits a larger scheme. In breaking his oaths Jason is a deserter, and so he is left alive,²⁵ himself deserted in the end. The physical marriage pledges exchanged were male children (490; cf. *Agam.* 878) and these pledges are now confiscated by that same right hand that Jason clasped as he falsely swore (the point is made emphatic by the two apostrophes to the hand at 496 and 1244). The oaths were almost certainly taken in the name of Helios, and Helios oversees the punishment of him who now has failed to keep them. The honor of the Sun's line has to be defended against the disrespect of upstarts (406), and he provides the gift that baits the murder trap (954), and then the escape that makes his granddaughter's vengeance perfect in the end.

In neither of these realms, the personal or the general, is it simply the misdemeanor of sexual infidelity that Medea would avenge.²⁶ It was not the negative act of adultery that violated Jason's oaths, it was his positive substitution of a new pact for the old, and it is this that is seen as his essential crime. To those who equate the physical with the real, this point may seem a senseless legal quibble, but to those who believed in the gods and in the demons they

24. She composes like a poet; her vengeance, like a victory ode, is made of a series of decisions that lead to the most perfect expression of her purpose. Note the conscious Pindaric trope at 376.

25. The poet teases his audience with the suggestion that Jason is to be killed, as at 374–75, and we do not have to suppose that the fictions about his death were so fixed and unanimous as to make this murder impossible. Rather Jason is left alive in the interest of Medea's perfect repayment, and also because she is *not* being shown as a bloodthirsty woman;

she has none of Clytemnestra's terrible glee. It might just be noted as well that in the parallel fairy stories of the nymph's revenge upon an unfaithful Daphnis figure, the punishment was usually blindness or impotence but not death.

26. Jason of course pretends that Medea is moved merely by lust (568 ff.), just as he tries to deny the benefactions he has received from her by saying it was not she who aided him, but Aphrodite (527–28). He is very sure of his own physical attractions, as he shows with fatuity at 944.

could send, it was of absolute importance.²⁷ Divinity was not interested in human sexual practice, but it was interested in the use men made of the powerful names of the gods. Jason’s new, oath-breaking alliance had a corollary, the exile of Medea,²⁸ and this outrage is cleanly emphasized while Jason’s philandering is dismissed with contempt, in the conversation between Medea and King Aegeus. Creon is the official author of the exile, though Jason is its inspiration, and in this scene we are taught, by outside testimony, to recognize Creon too as one who insults the authority of oaths. The king of Themis-loving Athens is astonished at the thought that anyone could have offered a new alignment, as Creon had, to a man already solemnly bound (701). This was at very least a form of cheating, which is why Creon and his daughter are twice called “descendants of Sisyphus” in the play (405, 1381).²⁹ By extension then, though the point is not overtly made, the princess too is touched by this failure to respect Jason’s ancient pledge, and the royal palace at Corinth seems to be a place that has forgotten the sanctity of oaths.

The enemies of Medea are thus multiplied, and her repayment must be correspondingly extended, so that outrage and revenge become more widespread, as they are in the *Revenger’s Tragedy*. Here as well as there the deeds charged against those who are to suffer are keyed to flaws of individual character but at the same time shown to be exemplary and indicative of a larger decline in morality. Jason is not just the author of one discrete and definable

act of injustice, any more than Tourneur’s Duke was, but like that old man he is a figure of sordid moral decline. He puts material comfort before every other thought (559–60), and of his new marriage made at the cost of all common respect for god and man he boasts, “What scheme could I have found more opportune?” (553). He is not worried by the necessary anger of the gods (Medea at 493–94), it is the notion of poverty that frightens him (561). He would choose always what is physically advantageous (601–2, 611; cf. Medea’s conscious irony at 876), and he prefers notoriety to good fame (544). He has himself been bought, first by Medea and now by the Corinthian palace, and he assumes that the rest of the world is like himself; thus he hopes to rid himself of her whom he thinks of as a now useless accomplice by sending her off with some money and some letters of introduction (610 ff.)—to whom they are addressed he does not say.

All of these details of character might seem to make Jason no more than an anti-hero, the right man for a bourgeois drama of jealousy and petty crime, the wrong one for tragedy. And so it could have been, did Euripides not insist that we see these despicable failings always in the glare of Jason’s present impiety and of his past history. In such a light the hero’s flaws grow and become truly fearsome. Our contempt for him is made to swell to a kind of terror when we are reminded that it was this shabby mortal who asked the Argonauts to risk their lives for his present notoriety, that Medea’s brother was cut to

27. The chorus at 1000–1 gives neutral expression to the idea that abandoning the old marriage for a new one was done as a breach of law (*ἀνόμιως*) and an act of treachery. Creon likewise, in sentencing Medea to exile before she had committed any crime, chose to violate ordinary Hellenic practice, and these facts give a special ugliness to Jason’s claim (537–38) that he had been Medea’s benefactor since he had given her the advantage of Hellenic law and usage, taking her out of the realm of simple *force majeure*.

28. At 399–400 Medea would avenge three things, the new marriage, the new system of alliances, and the edict of exile against herself; cf. 1356–57.

29. Creon well knows that Medea has reason to hate him and his daughter as well as her husband (*τὸν δόντα καὶ γήμαντα καὶ γαμιουμένην*, 288), and so she, when she would deceive him, goes straight to this point and slyly helps him to deny his guilt towards her (309–10).

pieces to bring him safely back to the creature comforts of Greece, and that the daughters of Pelias had to become the murderers of one they loved, merely to procure a temporary advantage for this hustling, puny man.

The myth of the Argonauts hangs like a great painted scene behind this play,³⁰ much as the sacrifice of Iphigenia does behind the *Agamemnon*. The Argo is the first thing to be named in the play; it appears like a signal in line 1, and the succeeding nine lines add Colchis, Symplegades, Pelias, Medea, Ioicus, and the daughters of Pelias. As the drama continues, the spectator is never allowed to forget the earlier chapters of this present tale, and it is supposed that he will remember how extraordinary the story was among the heroic chronicles. Jason had never been a hero according to rule, for he had not set off alone (or with a single companion) but rather in a vast company, and he had conquered his monsters not by his own strength and the aid of an Olympian divinity,³¹ but by the borrowed sorcery of a local witch.³² Passed by these means, the tests failed to prove Jason's purity and his right to rule, and that is why the stories told about him had consistently destroyed his line, by one means or another,³³ and had refused to let him take his hereditary throne. His lost sandal had marked him from the first as spiritually lame,³⁴ and his maimed ship marked the whole endeavor in the same way, after the passage of the

Symplegades. The expedition is viewed as favorably as possible by Pindar, in the Fourth Pythian, where its deep inadequacy is expressed anew in the symbol of the lost clod and becomes the central theme of the poem. The presence of Medea, on the return trip, was another sign of a distortion in the heroic pattern, for she was no princess rescued from the monstrosity of nature but herself a kind of dragon, an evidence that Jason had allied himself to the forces it was his commission to destroy. Jason was, as the French mythologist Paul Diel would have it, a "banalized" hero, one who had perversely chosen the world over the spirit, the Titans over Zeus.³⁵ It is as if Perseus had taken the aid of Medusa instead of that of Hermes and Athena and like some misguided Patrick had brought the serpent back with him.³⁶

Euripides makes his Jason recognize just one atom of this truth at the end of the *Medea*. "I see it now," he says, "I was wrong to have brought you with me from Colchis" (1329 ff.; cf. her matching statement at 800). Typically enough, Jason is trying to define the minimal, material error behind his present desolation, but the poet has made him point also to the largest truth about himself, the fact that he betrayed his calling as one of the cleansers of the earth and cast his lot with the demonic enemy. In the same way, glimpsing just a fragment of the largest scheme of fate, he says τὸν σὸν δ' ἀλάστορ' εἰς ἔμ' ἔσκηψαν θεοί (1333). By this remark—"The gods

30. References to the expedition: 1-10, 32, 133, 166-67, 476-87, 502-5, 1263, 1330 ff.

31. Hera is mentioned at *Od.* 12. 69 only as having got the ship past the Symplegades; in *Pyth.* 4 she inspires the young men of Greece but is otherwise absent, though Aphrodite teaches Jason spells for winning Medea. Apollonius apparently sensed the lack of sufficient Olympian participation and insisted that Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite were all working through Medea. On divine aid to Jason, see K. von Fritz, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

32. As she tells it here, all of his reputed deeds were actually Medea's work (475-82).

33. Karkinos, in the *Naupaktika*, told of the death of a son in the hunt (Paus. 2. 3. 9); Eumelos, in the *Korinthiaka*, gave

the children a disastrous version of the Achilles-Demophon fate, for not only were they not made immortal by their mother's efforts, they were killed as a result of an uncomprehending intervention in her immortality ritual (Paus. 2. 3. 11).

34. Lévi-Strauss sees him as a man born of earth, since he was swallowed and coughed up by the serpent, and as marked, like such figures generally, by a kind of lameness. *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), pp. 215-17.

35. Paul Diel, *Le symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque* (Paris, 1966), pp. 173 f.

36. Note the dragons or winged serpents that were Medea's attributes in the spectacle of the play's finale, according to the Scholiast B at 1317, and to the first hypothesis.

have sent your destructive daimon against me”—Jason means one thing while the audience hears another. He has concluded that some malfunctioning part of the machinery of providence has caused a destructive bolt intended for Medea to swerve aside and fall on him, but the spectator is sufficiently instructed to take a second line of interpretation. To his ears the banalized oath-breaker announces: “The gods have hurled destruction at me in your daimonic form.”³⁷

Behind the worldly oath-breaker of the visible play there stands always the larger and more disturbing figure of the hero who has sullied his quest. The fiction is one that could have served a tragedy of divine punishment instead of a vengeance play, since Jason’s *pathos* is a necessary repayment that he makes to the gods. This, however, was not the poet’s will, and on closer scrutiny it is seen that the Jason of mythology was not well suited to a tragedy that traced the destructive effects of an act of *hamartia*. Colchis was his Aulis, the place where he had performed fated actions in the wrong spirit and so had sprung the trap of his own downfall, but Jason had no Troy, no scene of magnificent heroic accomplishment scarred by monumental acts of impiety. He can occupy more stage time in the *Medea* than any other vengeance victim does, yet never threaten to distort the true action of the play, because he is debased even in his impiety. Petty and flawed and corrupt as he is, he is properly destroyed by a secular female enemy who represents in herself not so much the religion of the proud Olympians as the

very magic of the older gods that Jason thought to use and cast away.

Jason’s debased nature is a function of his myth, but it is exploited by the poet of the *Medea* and extended until it seems to have infected the whole Corinthian land. The first range of extension is to the royal family, and it is effected by means of an anomalous messenger speech (1136–1230). Coming at a moment when the vengeance deed would seem to be complete, the messenger is himself a violation of the audience’s expectation, for they naturally think to see next a tableau on the eccyclema with bodies artfully shown. In addition, this man does what messengers did not do in ameliorated vengeance tragedy, for he reports at length and with luxurious detail upon every phase of the physical execution of Medea’s crime.³⁸ His speech is on a scale familiar in dramas of divine punishment and rescue but is of a sort that is exotic here, and it must therefore be heard as containing things indispensable to the poet’s most central concerns.

Like many others of its sort, this speech describes an internal scene that could not have been directly witnessed because of the outdoor convention of the Attic stage, but this messenger does not open up the visible architecture at the back of the playing space, as his fellows often do. Instead, he causes the spectator, like another Jason, to desert this scene and move off to another house, and this is an explicit reminder of a breach of convention that has been built into the very décor of this play. For once, the visible building does not stand at the center of a city or a settlement but at its

37. Note Medea’s oath at 1059, and compare *OC* 788, where *ὁ ἐμὸς ἀλάστωρ* means “me as an avenging daimon.” Some editors have rewritten the line to rid it of its ambiguity: Kirchoff’s *τοῖον σ’* is most explicit, Verrall’s *τῶν σῶν* less so; Nauck read *τοῖόνδ’*, taking Medea out of the statement altogether.

38. The whole speech is unusually long (1136–1230) and 53 lines of it are given over to description of the death agonies (36 lines for the princess, 17 for Creon). Compare the mes-

senger speech of the Euripidean *Electra* (774–858) where only 6 lines are given to Aegisthus’ death, or the speech of the *Hecuba*, where 12 lines of 50 describe the acts of violence (1160–1171). Even the great agonies of divine punishment are not more extended than this: Heracles in his poisoned robe is described in 40 lines (*Trach.* 765–805) of a 71-line messenger speech, the *sparagmos* of Pentheus in 33 lines of a 109-line speech (*Bacchae* 1114–47), the killings in *HF* in 37 lines of a 94-line speech (*HF* 963–1000).

edge; for once, the visible doors do not open into a place of authority but into one of obscurity.³⁹ This is no palace but a half-abandoned suburban villa where the master and many of the slaves have gone and the mistress lives on as a suspicious foreigner. It is a hollow place that produces a murderous snare and takes back nothing, receiving not even a corpse at the end, but closing its doors upon emptiness. All of the actors, with the exception of Creon, who is to die, reflect this scenic alienation from power and stability, for all are transients here. Only the chorus represents Corinth, and they prove to be women first and citizens only later (note how they ask first for safe marriages, then for the safety of life within their fatherland, at 627 ff.). This deflection of the décor from its normal focus means that Creon's power is denied the outward confirmation that his visible palace would have given it, thus making his death as little political as possible.⁴⁰ The scene buildings confer their insecure honors upon Medea instead, showing her to be the queen of a desolate and temporary place. And finally the unusual décor has a third effect as well, for its dislocation means that when the spectator is forcibly removed from Medea's house by means of the messenger speech, and put down inside the nuptial palace of her husband, he is given the only information and the only impression he is going to get of the society where Jason has found his friends and Medea her enemies. The princess's palace is Corinth, as that city is to appear for the purposes of this play.

39. The closest parallel to this centrifugal stage situation is found in *Ajax*, but even there the spectator finds himself before the tent of an independent prince in a camp of his peers. In the other camp settings seen in *Hecuba* and the *Trojan Women*, the camp is temporary, but it is made in imitation of the order of the *polis* and the scene buildings represent the tent of the leader.

40. Creon, the one Corinthian man to be seen, is shown to be weak and a traitor to his own definition of what a ruler should be (348 ff.). With an inadvertent irony he puts himself in the sorceress' power when, to avoid her supplication, he

The tragic messenger speech, as a minor genre in itself, offers the dramatist a brief escape from his duty of imitating action with action. Here he can use purely verbal tricks, invading the imagination of the audience with his messenger's tongue and planting images there that he never could arrange in pure spectacle. He can achieve broad effects of epic grandeur, painting panoramic views, or he can create for each listener a sharp hallucination. This last is what Euripides has chosen to do in the *Medea* messenger speech. The palace is what Jason had sold Medea for (note the indirect reminder of this at 1144), and when the messenger opens its unseen doors he puts on display the princess who is chief among Jason's new possessions. He shows her first as touched by lust (1146), then as haughty and filled with loathing for Medea's sons, and then at last he depicts her change of mind, the change that seals her doom as she decides to receive the boys and their gilded offering. This is her ethical crisis; Aristotle has taught us to look for her portrait in her decision, and the messenger marks out its delineation plainly by pointing to the impulse that guides this proud and sensual Corinthian. It was greed that moved Creon's daughter and so destroyed them both. Jason's persuasion, it would seem, was not so powerful as he had expected it to be, but "when she saw the tiara she could refuse no more," says this eyewitness to the scene (1156), going on to show her so transported by delight in her new possessions that she entirely forgets both her stolen husband and his sons.⁴¹

asks of her just what he is going to get, an ἀπαλλαγή πόνων (333). The situation is thus made to approach that "absence of the Magistrate" that almost justified vengeance in Elizabethan law; see Bowers, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

41. Medea has laid the groundwork for this characterization of the princess as greedy with her words on gold at 963-67, reiterated by the chorus at 982 ff. Jason typically thinks that gift giving, unless it is necessary as a bribe, is only a form of self-pauperization (959 ff.), while Medea is shown as one who can refuse a gift (617).

Having stated this truth about the girl’s avidity with a bald literalness, the poet reinforces it with a pair of images. First he presents a picture of the princess in her deadly finery, smiling into a glass like the *Vanitas* of some medieval morality play and admiring “the soulless likeness of her flesh” (1162). Then upon this vision he piles a second, the picture of the same girl’s naked skeleton from which the same rich flesh now melts away like tears (1200). This distinction between bone and flesh, with its underlying notion of an essential mortal frame covered by a corruptible companion substance, is repeated in the description of King Creon’s death. There, by the poet’s phrase, the old man’s meat is seen to fall in shreds from his bones as he struggles from the entanglement of a gossamer shawl (1217).⁴²

According to these images, the structure of mortality (or at least of Corinthian mortality) combines an essential skeletal ugliness with an ephemeral fleshly beauty. But the bodies of the two victims could never have been made to decompose before our eyes,⁴³ and we recognize in the two heaps of bones the peculiar fruit of this anomalous messenger speech, the profit the poet has made from these words that came where corpses were expected. These ossified images have allowed him to impose a sense of austere exactitude upon the apparent excess of the double poisoning, for as their flesh falls away Medea’s enemies are seen to be stripped of the very pride and sensuality that caused them to conspire against her. The victims are

tempted by gold they do not need (this is made explicit at 959 ff.), then by that very gold (1193) they are robbed of the corporeal wealth that gave them their brief victory, their ability to buy the fragile Jason. At the end of this messenger speech the princess and her father are left by the poet not merely dead but almost unburi-able. They have lost all personal identity and have become merely hideous symbols of their debased and soulless world.⁴⁴

The royal skeletons pass a kind of judgment upon the temptations that caused Jason to abandon his oaths, for the messenger speech creates a sense that Jason’s new establishment, the palace of this tragedy, is a place of greed and vanity.⁴⁵ In another section of his play, Euripides can be seen at work to make his audience feel that Jason and this Corinthian palace represent a malady that has spread even further abroad. He has of course written nothing like Tourneur’s “hour of incest” lines, with their Hogarthian power, but he has taken the first opportunity to let us know that the kind of banal evil that Jason represents has not been quarantined. The first ode (410 ff.) begins with an allusion to Archilochus on the eclipse, an appropriate note to sound on this day when Helius will disturb himself so tellingly. (Indeed, the whole reversal of nature motif is extremely apt, since a mother is to bring death instead of life to her children, and a woman is to play a man’s part in avenging her own honor.) Rivers run uphill, justice stands on its head, men have turned to trickery, and faith no longer links mortals

42. For the notion of flesh as a temporary garment, cf. *σαρκός ἐνδύτά* (*Bacchae* 746), *σαρκός περιβόλαια* (*HF* 1269), and *σαρκῶν χιτῶνι* (*Emped. Frag.* 126). The skeleton appears as an emblem of mortal brevity and vanity at *Anth. Pal.* 7. 472.

43. It is interesting to contrast the practice of the Jacobean poet, who brought the death’s head of Gloriana on stage, had it decked out there, and made it the engine of the Duke’s destruction, so that to its ordinary symbolism (“See ladies, with false forms / You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms,” *III. v.* 96–97) was added that of vengeance from beyond the grave.

44. Compare the later epigram, presumably to accompany a representation of a skeleton: *εἰπεῖν τις δύναται σκῆνος λιπάσαρκον ἀθήσας / εἴπερ “Υλας ἢ Θεορείτης ἦν . . .* W. Peek, *Griechische Vers-inschriften*, I (Berlin, 1955), No. 1612.

45. Note his boast at 960 and Medea’s scornful reiteration in the phrase *πλουσίους δόμους* at 969; the *ἀβρὸν βαίνουσα παλλεύκῳ ποδί* of 1164 gives an air of slightly degenerate Oriental luxury to the princess and her palace, and the messenger, in the platitudes of his summation, puts his finger once more upon material wealth as the temptation that misleads men (1229–30).

to the gods. And why has all this happened? Because, the chorus answers itself with an unforgettable phrase, “the lovely reciprocity of oaths is gone” (βέβακε δ’ ὄρκων χάρις, 439).

There is a similarity in tone to the great ode on impiety in the *Oedipus Rex*, with its ἔρρει δὲ τὰ θεῖα (*Oed.* 910), but there is also an intentional echo to be heard. *Charis* is not a word ordinarily associated with oaths though it is undeniably appropriate, since oaths, like Peitho and Aphrodite herself, are the graceful clasps that hold the social fabric, protectors of all that is precious in human life. This sense of *charis* is characteristically Euripidean, but the bare notion of the graciousness of oaths has been borrowed, as the scholiast saw long ago, from an awesome but familiar source. It comes from the apocalyptic passage in the *Works and Days* where the end of the debased fifth age of man is described. In the last days of the iron race, Hesiod tells his brother, there will be no *charis* in the well-kept oath (*Erg.* 190), and men will turn to praising *hubris* instead, lauding those who bring evil by its means. Just so have Creon and Corinth praised their bridegroom Jason, though he has won his place by the *hubris* of oath-breaking, and this is why the chorus likens this day of Medea’s vengeance to the Hesiodic day of Zeus’s wrath. They clinch their comparison with the addition of another echoing note, saying, “Now that the grace of oaths has gone, Aidos has also abandoned men and flown away from them” (439 f.), which is what Hesiod had said she would do, when men had proved themselves ready in their meanness for the final day (*Erg.* 197–200).

The first ode of the *Medea* thus suggests that the world of Corinth, like the world of the race of iron, is at its end, ready for some show of indignation from the gods. No wonder, for all of the Hesiodic characteristics of decline are manifest, either in the past of Medea and Jason or in the present of the city. There is no want of examples of the deterioration of relations between parents and children, guests and hosts, brother and brother, or friend and friend (Hes. *Erg.* 182–85); each of these sacred connections has already been violated by the principal pair. Gods are no longer feared (492; cf. *Erg.* 187), *anaideia* is Jason’s ruling quality (472; cf. *Erg.* 192–93),⁴⁶ and rewards are won by injustice. In addition, Jason and his new friends have been shown to be moved in their central crime of shameless oath-breaking by the very power that Hesiod had said would move men in their final hour: the greedy envy of what others have (*Erg.* 193–95; see Jason’s explanation of his motives at 551 ff. and Medea’s words at 598–99). As soon as Jason’s abandonment of his family has been described in the prologue, it is explained by the Tutor, who says, “Surely you knew already that every man loves himself better than those who are close to him—some with every right, others out of greed” (85–87).⁴⁷ All of which means that when Medea flies off in the end she will have something of the Hesiodic Nemesis (*Erg.* 200) about her departing figure, as well as something of the look of an erinyes. She will seem to follow Lady Aidos, already gone, and to be withdrawing from a race of men who have declined into their last hours of depravity.

The Hesiodic reminiscence is strong, and

46. Creon compliments himself upon his own *aídos* at 349 because, after threatening to have the suppliant Medea violently removed from his city, he grants her a 24-hour reprieve. Some critics have tended to exaggerate this king’s generosity; it must be remembered that Medea is being banished, not because of any crime, but simply because she

is a potential embarrassment to the royal house and is reported to have uttered threats.

47. Creon says the same thing of himself when he announces that he will not reverence Medea’s (hypocritical) prayers because he loves his own house better than he does this suppliant.

yet of course the *Medea* is no more an allegory than the *Revenge's Tragedy* is. No matter how powerfully the dramatist has imposed this sort of universality upon his plot, the audience watches the movements of a heroine who is primarily neither a private *alastor* nor the personification of a just public disaster, but rather a breathing, barbarian woman. She attacks enemies who are exemplary of general evil, creatures whom the gods have no cause to love, but she does so entirely to satisfy her own lust for revenge. She proceeds without a sign from heaven, according to her own desires and without performing any redeeming act of goodness as she goes. In the end the visible chariot will confirm what she has done, but even with this tangible reassurance—note how the Christian play offers a much weakened version with its thunder and its star—the fifth-century spectator felt that though his heroine must rejoice in her archaic crime, she could not be given human happiness as its direct reward. Indeed, like the revenger in Tourneur's tragedy, *Medea* has to suffer even while her triumph is maintained. She cannot be punished by any outside human agency, or the essential archaic victory will collapse, and she cannot be punished by a divinity, lest the poet's elaborate rationale for that victory should likewise crumble away. And so, again like *Vindice*, *Medea* must be made the author of her own misery.

The killing of the children is, as has been said, a perverse defiance of the classical attempt to civilize the vengeance tragedy, but it is paradoxically at the same time an alternate solution to the problem of suiting a sixth-century fiction to the conscience of the fifth century. As soon as the children have been sent on their mission to their father's bride the raw intrigue enters its final phase, for there is nothing, apparently,

but a final tableau of victory still to come. Up to this point the movement of events has been a remarkable reproduction of the imaginary early vengeance play, and yet the audience has been teased with suggestions that things are not as simple here as they pretend to be. The poet has broached the idea of the children's death but he has skillfully manipulated it, outlining now a future in which they live, now one in which they die.⁴⁸ To the spectator their death has come to seem almost his own obsession until the ambiguous news of the boys' success with the princess suddenly makes this subterranean fear a reality. As suddenly, the heroine of the *Medea* undergoes a change. During the first thousand lines of her play she has gained every point, won every battle with ease, and her whole *metabole* has been a positive one as her opening lamentation transformed itself into a cry of victory (note how her *νῦν καλλίνικοι . . . γενησόμεσθα* at 765–66 echoes the Nurse's prediction at 45 that no one would have an easy victory over her mistress). While plotting the deaths of the Corinthian royal family she was archaic in her efficiency but now, as she plans her final crime, she becomes at last the revenger of classical tragedy, one who feels reluctance and who must fight an inner enemy.

In her own terms *Medea's* total conquest demands of her the same painful sacrifice that Agamemnon had to make to conquer Troy. The last perfection of her private revenge turns on the children's death, for if she is to reject her husband exactly as he has rejected her she must erase every evidence that they have ever loved. This is especially true since he has as much as said that the only use he ever had for her was as the bearer of his children (573–75). When he begs to bury the

48. On these effects see T. V. Buttrey, "Accident and Design in Euripides' *Medea*," *AJP*, LXXIX (1958), 1 ff.

children her answer is, "Bury your wife" (1394), for if the princess was Jason's wife then these were not legitimate sons of his. She has repossessed them entirely, making them all hers in the only way she can and treating them almost as if they were consecrated objects that would be soiled by Jason's touch (1320, 1378, 1464).⁴⁹ Only with these children dead can Jason be isolated as he had meant his wife to be,⁵⁰ and the killing of the children is necessary, too, to the larger scheme, for only in this way can Jason be robbed of the last fruit of that flawed quest for the fleece. He will have not so much as a pair of corpses to show for that entire expedition.

By killing the children Medea destroys the spirit and the line of Jason, leaving him without a future, but finally also she punishes herself. In the immediacy of the present she teaches herself to think that the murder of her sons is necessary to keep them from falling into her enemies' hands (781, 1060; cf. 1239 and 1322). She comes to her resolve, however, only after a shattering inner argument (1019–80, concluded at 1236–50),⁵¹ and in the difficulty of her decision she shows her first signs of a redeeming weakness and becomes an Orestes at last. She gives her desire for revenge the sound of archaic virtue (1049–50, 1242), her merciful maternal love the opprobrium of crawling cowardice (1051, 1246), but she shows her humanity, even as she does it violence. It has been said that Medea's inner struggle is one between reason and passion,⁵² but it is rather the case that she finds herself caught between a pair of passionate imperatives: "Kill the

children because you hate their father," and "Do not kill them because you love them as their mother." The dialogue is held between a part of herself called *thumos* (1056, 1079), or sometimes *kardia* (1042, 1242), and another part that is *mētēr* (1038; cf. 1247, etc.). Psychologically speaking it is a struggle between Medea's masculine, honor-oriented self and her feminine, hearth-oriented self. This second party to the inner debate is no erinys or Nemesis; it is not even a sorceress, but simply a female creature whose every instinct is to preserve her young. When she kills her sons, Medea simultaneously destroys that female creature, her human self, as well as all its mortal hopes (1032 ff.). If her enemies' personal individuality has been removed with their flesh from their bones, there is a sense in which hers has likewise dissolved, for when she shows the children's corpses to the audience, Medea shows also the last evidence of her own humanity, now mortified and sloughed off.⁵³ Medea is no longer a woman when she appears in the chariot, but she has been one. She has destroyed the spirit and the line of Jason, and she has also destroyed his first wife and the mother of his children. Killing her sons has cost her, according to choral prediction (818; cf. 1047 and the Ino comparison at 1284), a suffering beyond that of all other women, and by inflicting that suffering upon herself she has tainted her human victory while she became at last a truly impersonal *alastor*. The murder of the boys is an act of violence against herself with which Medea the erinys punishes the woman

49. This suggestion is a reminiscence of the mythic version in which Medea tried to make the children immortal but failed because Jason's touch reversed the process; the echo is enhanced by the scenic fact that the children's bodies do not appear where they are expected, laid out in the doorway as mortal corpses ordinarily were, but above, halfway to heaven, in the sun's chariot.

50. Her success in reducing him to her own former state is proved by the verbal similarity of his address at 1323–28 to hers at 465–72 and, this being so, it is hard to see why 468

should not be allowed to stand as an intentional preparation for 1324.

51. It is typical of Euripides' complexity that he has already made her parody this sort of inner debate in her false speech to Jason at 872 ff.

52. B. Snell, *Scenes from Greek Drama* (Berkeley, 1964), p. 52.

53. Compare the conclusion of E. Schlesinger, "Zu Euripides Medea," *Hermes*, XCIV (1966), 53.

Medea, much as Oedipus the servant of Apollo punished the incestuous man. She avenges not only wrongs done to her, but also those she has performed, offering symbolic repayment to the rulers of Corinth, to her brother Absyrtos, and most appropriately to the daughters of Pelias, who by her arts had likewise been forced to kill where they loved best.

In the *Medea* Euripides has kicked at the conventions of sophisticated revenge, while he has yet found ways to satisfy both the austere tragic genre and the softened sensibility of his own century. Like Tourneur he has accomplished the seemingly impossible, and he has done so by giving the world of his stage an ugly and formless depravity, so that specific crimes of repayment can suggest order and even beauty in their dread appropriateness to such a society. He has also, like Tourneur, seen fit to provide a punishment for his agent of punishment, so that he does away with the tension that otherwise characterizes the vengeance play, the pull between the negative fate of the victim and the potentially positive valence of the principal's success. Tourneur, however, did offer a final fictional motif of regeneration for the society he had imagined, for he recounted the survival of Castiza's virtue, the salvation of the sinful Gratiana, and the accession of the new duke. And here again there is a parallel to be found in the ancient tragedy.

There is at Corinth no new dynasty and no explicit promise that a decent political life will begin when the dead are cleared away. Jason must leave the city, and though there has been a glancing reference to remote members of the royal family (1304), these unseen men cannot fill the vacuum left in a city whose male citizens have been entirely absent from this stage. All seems desolation here, as a result of Medea's crimes. There is however another place

that has been brought to the spectator's notice by the poetry of the piece. Athens is Medea's destination when she flies away and its king will be her champion. Indeed, the earlier promise of this refuge has already been a kind of salvation for Medea, since she had determined to act openly and lose her life, if no protector should appear (392 ff.). The coming of Aegeus was thus decisive for the aspect, though not for the simple perpetration, of Medea's crimes, and Athens is thus in a sense made to take a final responsibility for them. And since this truth is one that might be taken cynically, the poet leaves his clear instruction as to how we are to view the city that receives Medea in the end.

After the departure of the Athenian king, when the last physical difficulty has dissolved and the avenging heroine truly sees her way, the chorus sings a song in praise of the haven she has found. Their ode has a rich and familiar sound, for its first strophic pair (824–45) is a musical rendering of Pericles' funeral oration, its verses telling of a city of brilliance and delicacy, wisdom and harmony, where passion and virtue can dwell side by side. The women of the chorus were doubtful that such a city could take in a polluted barbarian, but the King had given his oath and Medea, from her chariot, confirms the fact that she is bound for the land of Erechtheus (1385). Evidently the city that had swallowed up the Aeschylean Furies would be able to digest one more demon of punishment; it is even suggested that, like the Furies, Medea might undergo a transformation and join the company of benevolent forces, since her promise to Aegeus, like theirs at the end of the *Eumenides*, is one of fruitfulness (714–15). The King's protection shows that *aidos* still persists in Aegeus' capital, and Nemesis can thus take refuge there where she may find honor and awe. It is plainly in the

poet's own city that we are to find the Castiza of this play.

Euripides seems to say, then, that though Jasons may walk the streets of the world (particularly the Peloponnesian world?), they do not yet abound at Athens, a city that is healthy and virtuous still. Like the continuing Mass of the *Revenger's Tragedy*, justice will yet be celebrated there and the day of doom, the end of the iron age, can be held off for a while. Athens once more plays her favorite role of sanctuary,⁵⁴ keeping her oaths, honoring the gods (720), and offering salvation where another city would refuse. There are even verbal touches in the Athens ode to suggest that the city is a kind of earthly paradise, a fit

resort for the blessed (compare the vocabulary especially of 824, 840, and 829–30 with that of Pindar in the Second Olympian and in Frag. 129 Sn.); it looms distant but indestructible, a *πύργος ἀσφαλής* (390) where none could be expected, the one enduring earthly element in the tragedy of Medea. Surely this ultimate vision of a safe and redeeming city is a final reason for the 431 production and also for the perpetual success of this otherwise atavistic play. To Athens we too escape, with a sense that we are free now not only of external enemies but of the Jason within—the corruption of Corinthian dreams.

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54. Medea's gesture at 710 gives to Aegaeus the function of the protector of suppliants, to his city that of the secular

refuge that ordinarily is offered to those who have taken flight temporarily to an altar.