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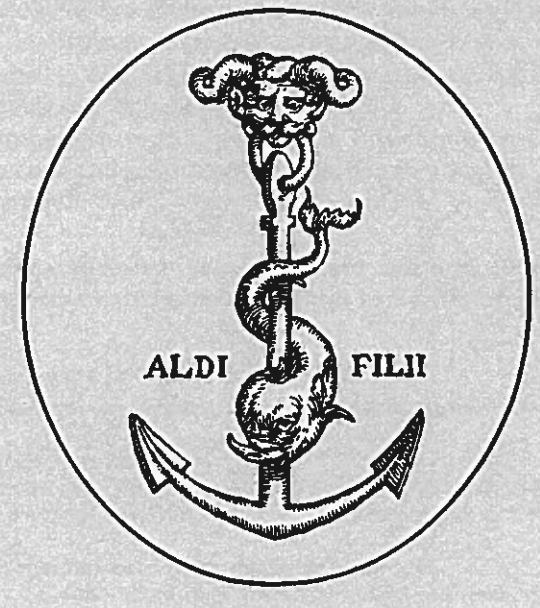

MEDEA LINE 37: A NOTE

A recent article by R. P. Winnington-Ingram elucidates Euripides' penchant for clever "jokes" at the expense of the literary traditions or the stage conventions within which he worked.[1] While Winnington-Ingram voices some trepidation that other critics may find his identification of such levity in a great tragedian "repugnant or even abhorrent,"[2] his assessment of these witticisms, which (in a play on the word's current and etymological meanings) he dubs "sophisticated," has offered insight into Euripides' artistry and inspired further study along similar lines, notably by Geoffrey Arnott.[3]

A keynote of the examples of cleverness noted by these scholars is their self-conscious and essentially anomalous calling of attention to tragic traditions or conventions which—to be serious—must be kept silent; thus Winnington-Ingram notes the wry humor involved when Elektra assumes that the intended murder of Aigisthus must have failed, "For where are the messengers?"[4] Winnington-Ingram characterizes such bits of humor as clever novelties aimed at an Aristophanes or an Alcibiades, or at the younger, more restless, more sophistically oriented population in general.

I will suggest here that just such a witticism occurs in Euripides' *Medea,* in a dark and serious moment and so thoroughly "tucked away" that it might not be readily appreciable even by an Agathon in the audience.[5]

The preponderance of mythic evidence and current scholarly opinion supports a conclusion that it was in Euripides' *Medea* that the

[1]R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Euripides: *Poiētēs Sophos,*" *Arethusa* 2:2 (1969) 127-42.

[2]Winnington-Ingram, 132.

[3]Geoffrey Arnott, "Euripides and the Unexpected," *G. & R.* 20 (1973) 49-63; cp. Arnott, "Red Herrings and Other Baits, A Study in Euripidean Techniques," *MPL* 3(1978)1-24.

[4]Winnington-Ingram, 131-32, discussing *Elektra* 759.

[5]I adopt the term "tucked away" from a critical polemic recently joined by Robert Eisner, "Euripides' Use of Myth," *Arethusa* 12:2(1979) 153-74. Eisner (157), in asserting that not only the "bookish Euripides" but even Sophocles made clever and demanding allusions in their plays, turns against A.J.A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1966) 200, his assertion that popular dramatists "do not tuck away meanings"; Waldock's assertion (as Eisner notes) may in turn have been intended, at least partially, as a justifiable corrective to Verrall's theories.

title character was first charged with the willful murder of her children.[6] In alternate traditions pre-dating Euripides, she seems either to have been innocent of their death or to have caused it inadvertently while trying to effect their immortality.[7] The audience of the original presentation of the *Medea,* then, was purposefully presented with an intensely shocking innovation into received myth, which is foreshadowed ambiguously in the prologue to the play but not revealed to the audience as an actual intent until more than halfway through the play, at line 791.[8] It is in this context that, I assert, the prologue's first foreshadowing of the play's horrible climax should be examined for *double entendre.*

As the Nurse sketches for the audience the mythic background of the present play and the disease which now afflicts the family of Jason, she describes Medea's present disaffection first from her husband (lines 17-29), then from her father (lines 30-35), and finally from her sons, the physical manifestations of her now hateful union with Jason: στυγεῖ δὲ παῖδας οὐδ' ὁρῶσ' εὐφραίνεται (36). In the next line, the Nurse turns to anxious prediction of the as yet unspecified harm to be wrought by Medea's violent temperament: δέδοικα δ' αὐτὴν μή τι βουλεύσῃ νέον (37). This stated fear, while not the clear forecast of Medea's murder of her children that it has sometimes been taken to be, is the first in an accelerating series of hints of harm to come to Medea's children.[9]

Commentators have rightly glossed the expression *ti. . . neon* by noting its sinister connotation of "untoward" and "evil." I suggest, how-

[6]*Pace* E. A. Thompson, "Neophron and Euripides' *Medea,*" *CQ* 38:1,2(1944)10-14, I agree with most recent scholars in assuming that Euripides' *Medea* predates Neophron's.

[7]The tradition that the children died accidentally while Medea tried to effect their immortality stems from Eumelos (mid-8th century) and appears as well in the Scholia to Pindar and Pausanias. In Kreophylos (via Didymos) they die at the hands of the Corinthians, who slander Medea by spreading the rumor that it was she who had caused their death. Parmeniskos (see the Scholia at *Med.* 264) attributes the murder to the Corinthian women only. For a handy review of these sources, see Denys L. Page, *Euripides, Medea* (Oxford 1938) xxiff.

[8]To the audience which foreknows Medea's murder of the children, the prologue's foreshadowings have often seemed heavy-handed. However, those who expect the play to follow a more standard mythic course might more reasonably be led by these hints to a premonition of the children's death at the Korinthians' hands, as a result of Medea's actions against Kreon. See, e.g., T. V. Buttrey, "Accident and Design in Euripides' *Medea,*" *AJP* 79:1 (1958) 1-17.

[9]Cp. lines 89-95, 98ff., 112-14, 115-17.

ever, that the choice of phrasing here not only serves as a synonym for *kakon ti*,[10] but is subtly proleptic of the novel turn to be taken by received myth at the end of the play; thus the characterization of Medea's intended revenge as *neon* incorporates as well the word's more neutral meanings of "new" and "unexpected." The particularizing force of the aorist *bouleusēi* is also significant: "I fear that she will come upon some strange new plan."

Within the immediate dramatic context, of course, the speaker of these words does not recognize that they are pregnant with double meaning. In fact, after her initial collocation in lines 36–37 of the two ideas of "children" and "revenge," she goes on to express a generalized fear that Medea's anger will be vented on members of the offending trio, Kreon, Jason and the princess.[11] In so doing, the character contains her own anticipation of the dramatic outcome within the bounds set by pre-Euripidean received myth, with a blindness to the prescient phrase she has just uttered which is reminiscent of classic tragic irony.[12] However, the playwright may speak, through one of his characters, outside both tragic plot and stage conventions.

By the end of the play, the audience will all know that Medea *has* come upon a strange new plan. Very few would be likely to think back and realize that Euripides has imbued a commonplace phrase in the play's opening lines with a double meaning which, if they were only acute enough to catch it, would signal in advance the strange innovation he was to introduce into received myth later in the play. Why, then, might Euripides have done so?

Winnington-Ingram has suggested, paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, that Euripides could resist anything except the temptation to be

[10]Cp. line 317 *(mē ti bouleusēis kakon)*; for a MSS. substitution of *kakon* for *neon* in line 37, see Page, ad loc.

[11]The text at lines 38ff. has often been called in question. Page, for instance, excises all of 38–43 (ad loc.). However one establishes the text, though, it is clear that the Nurse's conscious thoughts after the initial foreshadowing of lines 36–37 turn to violence by Medea not against the children but against those more immediately perceptible as enemies.

[12]The Nurse's worry at line 43 that, by violence against the Corinthian royal house, Medea may suffer grievous harm herself (κἄπειτα μείζω συμφορὰν λάβῃ τινά) may well contain (if the line is genuine) an oblique reference to the more standard mythic variant by which the children are murdered by the Corinthians from outrage at an action by Medea (perhaps the murder of their king?): such an unexpected loss of her sons by a mother might well be viewed by the Nurse as a more grievous fate than the simple death dealt to others.

clever.[13] It is in precisely such a capitulation to temptation that I envision Euripides as he put this particular phrase into the Nurse's prophetic mouth. However, Euripides was also sufficient master of dramatic tone to know when he wanted his cleverness to show and when its appearance would be destructive of the mood he was trying to create. This "joke" was destined to remain a very private one.

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[13]Winnington-Ingram, 138.