

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Sōtēria*, the Mother as Other

## MEDEA IN ANCIENT GREECE (AND BEYOND)

In the introduction, it was noted that “Ancient Greece” is typically a distinct unit within the construction of Western histories. All these biases—linear history, Ancient Greece, and Western Civilization—are integral to the formation of Western identities. Ancient Greece is exemplary of the arguments I laid out in the introduction: it is a narrative (spawning more evaluative accounts) of identity. It is “part of culture,” and because Ancient Greece has been narrated as the Birthplace of Democracy, it is not difficult to perceive its significance for the formation of Western identities. One evaluative account that should be provided about Ancient Greece, however, was written by one of its contemporaries, the playwright Euripides. In this chapter I contest other interpretations of his account of the folkloric figure Medea by interrogating the construction of alterity in Ancient Greece.

Among the surviving stories from that time period, perhaps Medea is the character that leaves audiences with the most bipolar reactions. She alternately fascinates and repulses; one vacillates between pity and blame, empathy and disbelief. Her infanticidal actions are so engrained in historical memory that even twenty-first-century mass popular culture invokes her. In just the past decade, journalists have made prominent several infanticidal mothers: Susan Smith, Elizabeth Broderick, and Andrea Yates are just a few. In each case, at least one media market has referenced Medea during its report of the murders (Moroco, 2003).

But the overuse of Medea to characterize twenty-first-century women and their postpartum depression is unjustified. The only semblance between Susan Smith and Euripides’ great queen Medea is that they both killed their children. While infanticide in general is too horrific an act to be put in such

simple terms, narratively and specifically there is a deep contrast. The motives behind these actions were much different, speaking to historical as well as cultural diversity. Medea, as depicted by the tragedian Euripides, was driven by a maternal love specifically tuned to her Otherness in Greece. Her story was meant to explore the themes of passion, reason, and barbarism in Athens, at least in the short term for Euripides' audience. In the long term, one finds a narrative trope that endures—not in spite of its horrifying qualities, but because of the continually grounded sense it gives to woman as Other. This chapter argues that the theme of *Sōtēria* (safety and deliverance) weighed heavily on Euripides' Medea as she logically constructed her revenge against Jason—and that the outcome of her reasoning offers intriguing insights into Western origins of the Other.

To unpack this argument, it will first be necessary to provide some historical and mythical background for Medea. Once this foundation is established, a discussion of Medea as Other is undertaken through the text of Euripides' play, with special attention to *Sōtēria*. Finally, this chapter addresses the endurance of Medea's story and the rhetorical uses of her actions in more contemporary time periods. In the end, Medea will be established as one of the first Western narrative tropes on Otherness that, although fictional, remains an important rhetorical metaphor in intercultural contexts.

#### OF ATHENIANS AND ALTERITY

Medea is first and foremost a mythical character, looming large in Greek oral tradition. Her mythical origins were set down in literature by Apollonius Rhodius in the *Argonautica*, after Euripides had already made key episodes of her narrative famous. But there is some evidence that she may have been a real person (just as many of the Greek gods and goddesses are suspected to be ancient culture heroes). Evidence of this fact is given to us by Herodotus, one of the Western tradition's finest historians and ethnographers, as he briefly outlines the background to the wars between Persia and the Greek city-states. According to Herodotus's knowledge, the war began because of resentment over a series of kidnappings. The Phoenicians apparently struck first, stealing Io, the daughter of King Anachus, during a merchant stop in Argos. In retaliation, some Greeks (Herodotus guesses they were from Crete) took the Phoenician princess, Europa:

The Greeks sailed in a long warship to Colchian Aea, on the river Phasis. After taking care of the business they had come about, they abducted Medea, the daughter of the king. The Colchian

king sent a messenger to Greece asking for his daughter back and demanding damages for the kidnapping. The Greeks answered that since the Phoenicians had not given damages for the kidnapping of Io, the girl from Argos, they would not give anything, either. (Herodotus, p. 4)

According to Herodotus's Persian sources, the kidnapping of Medea was Alexander's justification for abducting Helen of Sparta two generations later. Herodotus does not comment on other details of Medea's identity at this point, but it seems far too coincidental for the story not to be linked with Jason's history, and also Euripides' play. Indeed it is somewhat amusing to consider how Herodotus may be glossing over Jason's capture of the Golden Fleece with this phrase: "After taking care of the business they had come about, they abducted Medea, the daughter of the king" (p. 4). The present intent is not to argue the fine points of Medea's identity as an historical figure, but rather as a mythic one—so Herodotus's arguments may prove moot. It is nonetheless interesting to note the way in which women are at the center of intercultural conflict between the Persians and the Greeks. That characterization of Medea, if nothing else, jibes with the rest of this chapter.

As Medea is a famous figure in Greek myth, one is not surprised to find multiple literary versions of her story not only in ancient Greece, but also throughout all of Western history. Nonetheless, Euripides' play remains "canonical" in discussions of the Medea narrative (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 231)—his version set the standard for all other dramas centered on her character.

One reason why his variant of the story is so central may pertain to its ironic application of "appropriately Athenian" virtues. Euripides is considered one of the "Great Three," with Sophocles and Aristophanes, among the Greek tragedians. In fact, Euripides' plays were cited by Aristotle as the epitome of tragedy—which Aristotle defined as the purgation of pity and fear through the representation of these very emotions (Pucci, 1980, p. 16). Euripides was known for unsettled and unsettling types of stories; he continues to challenge the "norms" his audience may presuppose through the simultaneous evocation of opposing emotions such as sympathy and shock (Johnston, 1997, p. 9). Perhaps most unsettlingly, many of his characters use self-inflicted pain to their own rhetorical advantage (Pucci, 1980, p. 32). This is certainly the case in his *Medea*.

When Euripides' Athenian audiences experienced the play, they would have been very familiar with Medea's story. It is one from that vast body of folklore based in the Heroic Age. In fact, it is quite a remarkable "exploration" story, identifying certain features of the geographic landscape (Burn,

1965, p. 94), so that even in its humble beginnings the Medea tale is a salient one in the study of alterity. In Greek myth, just as in the historical example previously cited, Medea is a foreigner from Colchis on the far Eastern outskirts of the known world. She is said to be granddaughter to Helios, the sun, whose home is in the East (Graf, 1997, p. 32). Her role in Greek myth does not begin until the arrival of Jason in Colchis, during his quest for the Golden Fleece. Medea, daughter to the Colchian king, defies her father by helping Jason obtain his prize. Worse, she kills her brother Apsyrtus in order to ease her own and Jason's escape, and then conspires with Jason to cause the death of Pelias of Iolcus (Jason's place of birth and rightful kingdom). Apollonius reports in the *Argonautica* that Aphrodite has caused Medea to fall in love with Jason, and overall we might presume the Greek audience concluded that these murders occurred due to the power of eros. In the end, Jason marries Medea and they settle in Corinth, where she bears him two children.

It is shortly after this point in Medea's narrative that Euripides starts the action of his play. Jason is obviously a man of great ambition; his successful quest for the Golden Fleece proves that. But his ambition is also Medea's undoing. Jason can never be a supreme ruler in Greece, for two reasons: first, he has been involved in murder. Second, and more significant to the argument in this chapter, his wife and sons are "barbarians." To remedy these difficulties, Jason abandons Medea and secures the hand of Glauce, princess of Corinth, in marriage. Medea's rage at this is naturally profound, but Jason misreads it as the passionate grief of a lover scorned—not the cunning anger of a marginalized mother. What happens next is one of the most shockingly famous revenge stories in all of oral tradition: after tricking Jason into false complacency, securing her own refuge in Athens, then poisoning Jason's new wife and father-in-law (implicating her innocent sons in these murders), Medea ultimately kills both the children she bore to Jason.

Again, this is a story the Athenians would have known quite well, and yet the suitability of Euripides' chosen historical moment for setting this myth on stage is almost uncanny. His goal seems to have been an ironic representation of the traditional virtues of Athens. True, shortly previous to the first performance of *Medea*, Athenians erected the Parthenon, Herodotus penned his histories, and Pericles inspired political advances. Sophocles was writing his masterpieces, and peace reigned. But that peace ended the same year Euripides launched his heroine Medea onto the Athenian stage. And his city was tainted by the fact that, twenty years earlier, Athens had retracted the citizenry of immigrants, decreeing that those without Athenian parents on both sides must be disenfranchised (Burn, 1965, p. 219ff). It was a respectful disenfranchisement, in a way; the "foreigners" had a kind of honored sanctuary in the city. But it nonetheless underscored the significance of

exile, which I posit as a key theme in Euripides' tragedy. As this chapter will argue, for a foreigner in Athens, exile is the worst possible alternative to safety and deliverance. Lacking citizenship, if one faces exile, one is cut off from salvation—what the Greeks would have called “sōtēria.” To draw out that theme, and sketch out a possible model of Otherness in Athens, this chapter turns now to an analysis of the play itself.

### SŌTĒRIA AND EXILE

While it may be difficult to bracket off contemporary interpretations of Euripides' tragedy (discussed later by means of counterarguments), in order to understand *sōtēria* and exile as narrative tropes one must bear in mind the historical moment in which Euripides composed his plays. Information about that moment is scarce, of course (Haley, 1995), but even the citizen law of 451 B.C. gives sufficient clues about the political climate regarding alterity—especially Persian alterity—twenty years later. It is significant that it is against this backdrop, the Golden Age of Athens, that Euripides presented *Medea* to the world in 431 B.C. The significance lies in the fact that as in any performance, even though it may recall episodes from “long ago,” the author/performer cannot help infusing it with traces of his or her own time (Burn, 1965, p. 48).

In Euripides' story, Medea is quite clearly a “barbarian,” worse still an Asian—a representative of the perennial Persian enemy. Jason regards her as less capable of reason, more given to passions, since she is female as well as Colchian. But he is unprepared for the lengths she will go as Colchian, Asian, female, and mother. *Sōtēria*, or salvation, is the one consistent Greek value one can attribute to Medea. It underpins her actions throughout vacillations between passion and reason, maternal love and anger.

Literary critics and scholars of ancient Greek offer a rich array of interpretations concerning Medea's rhetoric throughout the play. As her distinction is horrific—she commits the unthinkable in killing her children—their evaluations of her motives and character development justifiably center on this final act. Their assessments run the gamut of inquiry, from feminist criticism (Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997) to psychology (Pucci, 1980). The psychologizing of Medea, while compelling, will not serve this chapter's arguments. As a narrative trope, her child-murder must transcend the act of a “real” individual. Granted, one of the reasons she is so fascinating a character is that Euripides paints her realistically through her speech. She second-guesses herself; she falters; she is finally clever and cunning. She loves her children, she hates Jason. All of this is part of her story. And yet Medea cannot be real; she is, especially in her final moments of “triumph,” first and foremost a

myth (Clare, 2002). If one is to learn from her about the Western construction of the Other, one must do so in narrative terms. The communicative praxis of Medea (especially Euripides' crafting of her rhetoric) presents her as Other in her motherhood and her striving for *sōtēria*. To understand this is not to reject other interpretations of Medea, but to texture them. *Sōtēria* is additive as an interpretation of Medea; consequently, traditional readings of Medea cannot be accepted on exclusive terms. In that sense, it is necessary to address some of the canonical ways scholars read Medea, and to make room in the discussion for *sōtēria* as a specific narrative of the Other in ancient Greece (and beyond).

First, the dialectic between passion and reason is highly persuasive in the cultural context of ancient Athens. It is most certainly one of the boundaries that Greeks drew between Greek and Other. At the same time, the tension between passion and reason is too simplistic in the whole of Medea's rhetoric. Passion's triumph over reason is only part of her story. She is presupposed to have an affinity toward reckless, unreasonable passion, being both a woman and a foreigner. Jason, in fact, misreads her anger at his new marriage as jealousy, specifically driven by her sexual desires. In this he is quite explicit (568–575). Medea too blames her actions on the anger within (*thymos*) that supposedly comes to rule her actions. She claims to have no control (1074–1076). But Medea's voiced hesitations, prior to the act of infanticide, are all that one would expect from a "real" and complex character in a tragedy. Anything less would make Medea a monster, which is not Euripides' intention. In fact, when Seneca wrote his own version of *Medea* he did so primarily as an extension of the Stoics' arguments regarding passion and reason, and Nussbaum (1997) regards this as a failure purely because of Medea's humanity. Seneca means the audience to judge Medea harshly because she allows passion to rule her reason; instead they are fascinated by Medea and drawn to her complexity. "Stoicism has bitten itself," Nussbaum writes, for Seneca would never have meant audiences to *prefer* Medea's passion, to wallow in her humanity (1997, p. 247).

Outside the critical eye, a practiced reading of Medea also indicates that one may judge too quickly the tension between passion and reason. Medea's oratory is most effective when she is calm and reasoned. Her wildly passionate rhetoric is reserved for three types of exigencies: soliloquy, dialogue with the sympathetic chorus, or deception (first of Jason, then of Creon). As noted, Jason mistakes her deception as typical, addepleted, oversexed, *female* talk—he thinks she is upset at losing him from her bed. Here is where an interesting irony of character occurs, for Creon does not accept Medea's deception so easily. The irony lies in the rhetoric of Jason and Creon: Jason is glib, practiced in rhetoric, perhaps even a sophist. Medea certainly accuses him of such:

To me, a wicked man who is also eloquent  
 Seems the most guilty of them all. He'll cut your throat  
 As bold as brass, because he knows he can dress up murder in  
 handsome words. He's not so clever after all. (580–583)

But Creon, in contrast to Jason, speaks consistently plainly—and consciously so. When Medea asks why he wishes to banish her, Creon replies, “I fear you. Why wrap up the truth? I fear that you / May do my daughter some irreparable harm” (282–283). Ironic, then, that Jason—who understands sophistry so well—does not recognize it in Medea, while Creon does. When the king of Corinth announces to Medea his official fiat—her banishment from the city—she tries to placate and flatter him, begging for mercy. He responds,

Your words are gentle, but my blood runs cold to think  
 What plots you may be nursing deep within your heart.  
 In fact, I trust you so much less now than before.  
 A woman of hot temper—and a man the same—  
 Is a less dangerous enemy than one quiet and clever. (316–320)

Note, too, that Creon makes no false judgments of Medea based on her womanhood; a person's temper is evaluated equally whether man or woman. The issue for Creon is one of sophistry, and also of parental love. He states plainly that he fears for his daughter's life, and therefore wants Medea removed.

And it is this theme of exile itself on which the entire tragedy hinges. Exile must be addressed here, in terms of *sōtēria*, even more stringently than the passion–reason argument. Even without extensive knowledge of political forces in Corinth, it is clear from Euripides' clues that exile for foreigners was a fate worse than death. Such sentiments from Medea, a non-Greek, are certainly expected. Yet Euripides makes them repetitive and blatant. First, Jason's sexism is overshadowed only by his ethnocentrism as he verbally spars with Medea. Herodotus, the great ethnographer of the ancient world, would no doubt consider him a typical Greek: Jason thinks any “barbarian” would consider herself lucky to find refuge in Greece, and tells Medea so quite bluntly. When she recounts all she did for him during his quest for the Golden Fleece, he retorts:

But in return for saving me you got far more  
 Than you gave. Allow me, in the first place, to point out  
 That you left a barbarous land to become a resident  
 Of Hellas; here you have known justice; you have lived  
 In a society where force yields place to law.

Moreover, here your gifts are widely recognized,  
 You are famous; if you lived at the ends of the earth  
 Your name would never be spoken. (533–540)

These lines are doubly interesting because they do not merely separate out Colchis as a “barbarian” and lawless place. Here Jason situates them “at the ends of the earth,” and his ethnocentrism is value-laden as well as geographical. He certainly refers to values all Athenians espoused: justice and reason. But fame is what Jason—like many Greek men of his time—seeks above all else; fame spurred him toward the Golden Fleece, and fame will no doubt be his *hamartia*. There seems to be no question in his mind that fame is what Medea would value most as well. Later in his arguments he tries to persuade Medea that his marriage to Glauce is helpful to the whole family; after all, now they will be wealthy and their sons will be brothers to his new, Greek sons. He seems to imply that this is the next best thing to being born Greek. And in his final tirade, after he discovers Medea has killed the children, Jason laments ever having taken her from her “palace in a land of savages” (1329). He declares that no woman in all of Hellas would have committed these murders, and considers himself mad for choosing Medea over a Greek woman. Jason calls her a “Tuscan Scylla,” a redoubled metaphor for barbarian foreignness and geographical horror. In postmodern terms, the intercultural enmity in these passages is profound.

In the face of such ethnocentric rhetoric, it is no wonder that Medea even begins to self-identify as a foreigner. Harkening back to her early days in Greece, she recalls “Coming among new laws, new customs” (239–240). The chorus follows this pattern as well (432–445). Medea also links herself closely with metaphors of wandering and travel: “My enemies have spread full sail; no welcoming shore waits to receive and save me” (279–280), and the chorus calls her “Poor Medea! . . . A wanderer, where can you turn?” (357–359). Most significantly, Medea strikes at the heart of the narrative in Euripides’ tragedy when she points out the true reason for Jason’s abandoning her: “But you’re an ageing [sic] man, and an Asiatic wife was no longer respectable” (591–592).

Given her Asiatic status, it is narratively plausible for exile to come to the forefront of this tragedy. By this point in the play, she has committed no crime against the polis. But since she is already viewed as a barbaric, lawless foreigner, the hateful words she utters against Jason’s new wife, Glauce, are enough to send the princess’s father Creon into a panic. His action is swift and quite terrible for Medea. As Euripides unfolds the story, the reader is swept up into a series of events in which each one is more astonishing than the last. Thus it is easy to miss the most potent metaphor in the story—that is of exile.



It is on exile that the whole horrible narrative hinges. At the beginning, when the audience first discovers Medea's woe in her role of abandoned wife, her only thought is to kill herself. Inconsolable, she repeatedly expresses the wish to die (142–147). "Death is better," she declares, than an unfaithful husband (245). Yet already we sense Medea's cleverness and her cunning with words; when she speaks to the chorus she is calm, and her rhetoric is accusatory toward Jason. The Medea we encounter at the beginning of the play has multiple options open to her, and none of them includes infanticide. But again, she is a foreign "witch" feared by the king of Corinth, and, once he banishes her, her options *are* severely limited. The reaction of the other characters in the tragedy ought to make clear how grave Creon's pronouncement truly is. Despite her misery at having been abandoned, her children's tutor tells their nurse that Medea "has not heard the worst" (61). The nurse is shocked that Jason would allow for such a thing as exile to happen to his wife and children (72–73). And she is right to be appalled, for Jason himself understands the pain of exile in ancient Greece. Among his many sophistic attempts to explain to Medea the motives behind his new marriage, he includes the accurate and significant one that when they arrived in Corinth, Jason himself was "a stateless exile, dogged and thwarted by misfortunes" (552–553) and now counts himself lucky to advance his position through marriage to Glauce.

Upon the news of banishment, then, Medea's misery evolves into desperation. Her status has irrevocably reversed, in even worse ways than divorce might present. Before banishment she was a marginal foreigner, but marginality often has its uses (Herrnstein-Smith, 1978). Medea was accorded a certain amount of power and fame through marriage to Jason. She had many admirers because of her intelligence and her skills in magic, and these factors might have afforded her a tolerable life in Hellas. But banishment deprives her of this possibility as well. The momentum of her personal hell begins to build, not unrecognized by the chorus:

O my country, my home!  
 May the gods save me from becoming  
 A stateless refugee  
 Dragging out an intolerable life  
 In desperate helplessness!  
 That is the most pitiful of all griefs;  
 Death is better. Should such a day come to me  
 I pray for death first. (642–649)

Euripides was an innovator in his use of the chorus; in his plays these characters carry heavy narrative burdens. In this passage, one senses a pivotal

narrative moment and an essential cultural rhetoric. For the Athenian audience the chorus in this play are women of Corinth. They are more centrally “Greek” than Medea and therefore more credible. If a reasoned Greek voice in the play *Medea* declares death to be better than exile, no Athenian should be surprised at the murderous turns the character Medea begins to take.

This is not to say that exile is the only motive behind Medea’s actions. However, the theme of exile offers a new perspective on the text and on intercultural communication. Critics have not yet paid enough attention to the importance of exile in the narrative or in ancient Greece. At the same time, to suggest that Medea’s desire for revenge, her pride, or even her foreignness itself is *less* important than exile would be to commit the same error. Here, I am exploring the Otherness of Medea in new ways. I am struggling with the ethnography of a different time and place, imagining what fates would be worse than death for an Asiatic maternal Other in Hellas. For these fates are those that endure. Medea’s fate is part of the beginnings of Western biases toward Others.

Exile is a pivot on which Euripides’ tragedy turns because it is a severe limiter of Medea’s choices as a foreigner in Hellas. In this atmosphere of desperation, tragic events are set in motion. Interestingly, Medea’s desperation gives rise to clarity of thought and a narrative logic that ensures her success. After her banishment, she wants *sōtēria* (salvation, safety, and deliverance) for herself and her sons. This is problematized by her vanity, for she still seeks revenge on Jason. Her wish is to kill Jason, Glauce, and Creon, but she knows that it must be done through devious means or else she may be caught in the act and put to death. This will not do, she tells herself; her sons would be stranded in “enemy land” without her, and her foes would “have the last laugh.” It is safer for her to use instruments of concealment: first poison to do the killing, and finally her unwitting sons to deliver the weapon.

She arrives at these plans, however, only after being assured of *sōtēria* for herself. She achieves the potential for refuge in Athens through an appeal to her friend Aegeus. Euripides thus posits the “open gate” of Athens as the solution to Medea’s exile, and it allows her vengeful plans to go forward. She sends for Jason and pretends to make peace with him, allegedly so that their sons can stay with him in Corinth and be raised as Greeks. “Not that I would think of leaving sons of mine behind / On enemy soil for those who hate me to insult;” she tells the chorus, “But in my plot to kill the princess they must help” (779–780). Medea drenches a golden dress and crown with poison, sets it in a trunk, and proposes to Jason that their boys can bring it to his new bride as a gift. She is acutely aware of the rhetorical devices of gift giving, and uses these to her advantage. Jason tries to dissuade Medea from giving away these valuable things, but she assures him that her gesture will help in buying freedom from exile for her sons. She

continues this theme of exile in her speech: “To buy my sons from exile I would give life, not just gold” (968–969).

Jason apparently accepts Medea’s reasoning, for he goes with the boys to the palace and tells his new wife to take the gifts “and ask / Your father to revoke their exile for my sake” (1154–1155). Jason’s sulking princess finally agrees. Jason and the boys exit Glauce’s chamber, she tries on her new finery, and dies a most gruesome death from the poison. Creon discovers Glauce and falls upon her lifeless body, weeping; he, too, succumbs to the venomous clothing and dies. Now, by the logic of the narrative, Medea assumes that she has no choice but to kill the children:

Friends, now my course is clear: as quickly as possible  
To kill the children and then fly from Corinth; not  
Delay and so consign them to another hand  
To murder with a better will. For they must die,  
In any case; and since they must, then I who gave  
Them birth will kill them. Arm yourself, my heart: the thing  
That you must do is fearful, yet inevitable. (1233–1238)

Of course, the audience may not be utterly persuaded that the murder is inevitable. Again, my intent is not to suggest that Medea kills the children *purely* out of maternal love and desire for *sōtēria*; but she does not kill them *purely* out of revenge either, and that is where previous interpretations of Medea have been unsatisfactory. There is a keen narrative logic at work here, and while we may accuse Medea herself of putting in motion, it is powerful nonetheless. “The gods, / And my own evil-hearted plots, have led to this,” she weeps (1015–1016). Having implicated the children in Glauce’s murder, after supposedly assuring their security in Corinth, Medea is no doubt correct in assuming they will be punished. And so her revenge on Jason can become total, absolute: he will be left with nothing once she kills their children.

All of this is undeniable. And yet there is a deeper narrative logic to Medea’s reasoning that has to do with divine notions of *sōtēria* and maternal love. For note well that she says to Jason, “To buy my sons from exile I would give life, not just gold.” Never does she say “I would give *my* life”—only that she would give life, and that means giving up her sons’ lives. We should make no mistake in listening to Medea’s anguish before the actual murder in understanding that the loss of her sons is a terrible hardship. But she means to buy them from exile in any case. “For myself, exile / Is nothing,” she tells Creon earlier in the play; “I weep for them [my sons]; their fate is very hard” (348–349). For indeed, as we have seen, exile is universally understood by Euripides’ characters in this play to be worse than death.<sup>1</sup> Jason himself

(expelled from Iolcus, his rightful kingdom) claims to be motivated by the miseries of exile. And of all the reasons he gives for marrying Glauce, this is probably the most truthful one (especially when juxtaposed with Medea's perceptive statement that Asiatic wives like herself are unsuitable for ambitious men like Jason). Yet Jason, like the Athenian *ostrakon*, could go elsewhere in Greece to seek his fortunes, and maintain hopes of returning to his homeland. *Sōtēria* is delayed for an exiled Greek, but for a banished foreigner *sōtēria* utterly vanishes.

So exile in and of itself is only part of the puzzle. Medea's tortuous decision also stems from the desperation a foreign and exiled mother would feel for *sōtēria*, the Greeks' term for safety and deliverance. This is the key to the new reading of *Medea*.

Previous scholarship on *Medea* sometimes elides the complexity of love as the Greeks understood it. There are multitudes of misunderstandings when ancient Greek is translated for twenty-first-century audiences (Diggle, 1994). I do not propose to solve those problems here or give a final pronouncement on what Euripides "really" meant. But for the sake of intercultural narrative study, it does seem fair to open up possibilities if they will enrich readings. And this is where my argument takes a radical turn: Medea speaks often of love, but does she always mean eros? Might one not learn more about Medea, and thus more about Otherness in ancient Greece, by exploring the complexity of love both during that time and beyond? Some passages from Euripides' tragedy support the notion that Medea is driven by maternal love, not solely erotic love. For instance, it is a curious exchange between Medea and Creon that occurs during 329–331:

CREON: I love my country too—next only to my daughter.

MEDEA: Oh, what an evil power love has in people's lives!

CREON: That would depend on circumstances, I imagine.

The lines preceding this exchange make no mention, by either speaker, of erotic love. Medea has taken them up, begging Creon not to banish her, and has made a tangential reference to "My home, my country!" (328). Again, exile permeates her words. Creon responds to her patriotic sentiment by introducing his love for his daughter into the conversation. Only then does Medea call love an evil power. So, given the rhetoric preceding her statement, it is a plausible conclusion that the love to which Medea refers is political or filial, not erotic. Jason has not been a topic of conversation for over twenty lines; even then he is a passing referent (Medea says, "I hate / My husband, true; but you had every right to [marry your daughter to him]" [310–312]). And how curious that Creon's only response to Medea's assessment of love as an evil power is the line: "That would depend on circum-

stances, I imagine” (331). Were this to be a dark foreshadowing of events to come, wherein Medea will be so tormented by her scorned lust for Jason that she will go on a murderous rampage, we might expect a statement from Creon somewhat less banal than the one he gives here. It is possible that Medea means a different love altogether that causes pain and perhaps even evil at times. She speaks of the love Creon has for his daughter Glauce, which he has just introduced into the conversation. She recognizes it as akin to the love she has for her sons. From her perspective, paternal love drives Creon to the evil of banishing Medea, and it is true that he gives no other reason than his worry over Glauce. As for Medea, the impossibility of *sōtēria* means she must kill her children. Love is the “evil power” in the whole equation, set in motion by Creon and carried to its only conclusion by Medea.

So while conventional wisdom—along with centuries of literary criticism—states that Medea loses control of her reason because of her extreme passion, it is too tempting to leave the passion untextured and plain. There is no denying that Medea’s love for Jason quickly turns to hate; she admits herself that she takes pleasure in Jason’s pain, especially his anguish over their dead sons. But by the narrative logic of Euripides’ tragedy, erotic passion cannot be the sole reason for its outcome. At the beginning of the story, Jason abandons Medea, and she wants to die. Very soon thereafter, Medea is banished from Corinth—and she wants her children to die. Why?

I argue this answer: because there is a grave difference between an exiled Greek and an exiled Other. For Jason, the opposite of exile is fame and power. In his quest for fame and power, exile is the root of all his problems. He is sent into exile as a mere baby by Pelias; he lives in exile until he can bring the Golden Fleece to Iolcus. But he overplays his hand and becomes greedy. The murder of Pelias sends him once again into exile, yet he can still attain fame and power by marrying Glauce. All the while his quests are discursive; he wins many friends with his words. Most important, his fear of exile is circumscribed by the ideal of the polis: he wants to be a man of Greece, and a powerful and famous one at that. Exile denies him the polis.

But for Medea, the polis does not constitute the opposite of exile. As a foreigner, she already has to live without its benefits. Instead, one might say that the opposite of exile for her would be love. Were she not exiled from Colchis, she would still have her father and brother during her times of misery—she states this often in Euripides’ drama (the truth notwithstanding that she is responsible for these estrangements). More important, her exile from Corinth would be unbearable for her sons. Either they will stay behind to be persecuted by her enemies or will go into exile with her to be “begging beside the road” (516). Such a life would be worse than death; even the Corinthian chorus admits it. Her response to exile, unlike Jason’s rhetorical strategies, is visceral. It is drawn along the lines of *philia*. She takes savage

action to save her sons from exile, grasping for its non-Greek antithesis: love. Once again, an indication of this cultural connection between love and *sōtēria*, posited against exile, might be found in Medea's rhetoric. Her final three lines to Jason cut him worse than a sword; she denies his request to touch their dead children, and mocks his tender sentiments, clearly fitting exile and love into a dialectic:

Now you have loving words, now kisses for them:  
Then you disowned them, sent them into exile. (1372–1373)

As further narrative evidence of Medea's move toward murder to avert exile, we might point to the clues Euripides gives us about her sons' divinity. According to myth, Medea is the granddaughter of the Sun. The Sun is, in fact, the *deus ex machina* that provides her escape from Corinth: our last glimpse of Medea shows her flying away in Helios's chariot with the bodies of her sons. Her allusions to the boys' kinship with the Sun are subtle, but provide support for an argument that the choice to kill the children secured their *sōtēria*. She addresses them directly before their deaths, and twice describes her love for them through the metaphor of "city" or polis. But the city is not Corinth, or Athens, or any Greek place; broadly construed, she struggles to describe for them the safety they will find in death:

O children, children! You have a city, and a home;  
And when we are parted, there you both will stay for ever.  
(1021–1022)

At this point in the narrative, the boys may believe she is referring to Corinth, since as far as they know she has bargained with Jason and Glauce for them to stay behind while she is exiled. But in a dark allusion addressed to the tutor, just a few lines before, Medea has muttered, "I have others to send home" (1016, emphasis mine)—so the "city" to which she refers is a place to which she must send them, not a place they have been given permission to remain. In a more direct manner, she speaks to her sons again: "Dear sons, my blessing on you both—but there, not here!" (1069).

The notion that *sōtēria* may best be obtained through death is one with which the Athenian audience would identify. The motif is present in other stories, including a fable about Solon (democratizer of Athens) and his visit with Croesus of Sardis. Croesus was a man of great fortune, and enjoyed showing off his wealth to Solon. When his visitor had seen all his riches, Croesus asked Solon if he had met any man he thought to be more fortunate than all others—expecting that Solon would reply, "You, Croesus!" But Solon promptly answered, "Tellus the Athenian." Croesus was shocked, and

thought he ought to at least deserve second honor in this “contest,” so he asked Solon to name the next most fortunate man. There, according to Solon, was a tie: Cleobis and Biton were, after Tellus, the most fortunate of men—because, like Tellus, they had great fortune in death. There is no telling who has the greatest fortune until death befalls them, according to Solon. That point was supposed to resonate with the Athenians: “It is better for a man to die than to live” (Herodotus, p. 12).

So Medea’s choice of death for her sons has some precedent in Athenian folklore and emerges as a more acceptable option than one may presuppose. Of course there are differences between the stories. Yet, as Herodotus is careful to point out, their story is meant to convey god’s dictum that a good death is more glorious than life. For Medea’s children, this sentiment is underscored by two unique aspects of their existence: First, they are great-grandsons of Helios, and second—more important—they are non-Greek Others implicated in regicide. They may have lived in Corinth, or even Athens, after the deaths of Glauce and Creon, but living is far different from *sōtēria*. From one standpoint, her aggressive actions are not so very divergent from Homeric virtue (Burn, 1965, p. 128). Medea chooses divine *sōtēria* for her sons.

Perhaps her real tragedy is that she fails to choose it for herself; Greek myth tells us her life in Athens will turn gravely difficult as well. Perhaps the best assessment of Medea, post-Euripides, comes from the Stoics. For Epictetus, Medea was “a great soul” who fell into failure because she cared about life too much and never gave her fate over to God (Dillon, 1997, p. 217).

#### MOTHER AS OTHER: THE RHETORIC OF INFANTICIDE

Epictetus and his fellow Stoics go on to say that *Love tears a hole in the self*. For Seneca, who wrote his own version of *Medea* after Euripides, the temperate love Aristotle idealized can never exist. No love can stop short of excess (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 221–222). In making his argument, especially through his play, Seneca is presupposed to refer to erotic love. The same is true of most readings of Euripides. But what love tears a hole in the self—both literally and figuratively—more thoroughly than maternal love? For the Greeks, eros was conceived as more of a life force than a god (Burn, 1965, p. 78). Eros was not a concept easily personified or anthropomorphized. Maternal love, on the other hand, has stood since the dawn of civilization as the foundation on which life is built. I argue that it is maternal love that makes audiences uneasy with Euripides’ *Medea*, not eros. Eros is amorphous, volatile, and subject to the whims of the gods; maternal love is supposed to be bounded, predictable, set in place by the “normative ideology of the polis”

(Sourvinou-Inwood, 1997, p. 254). Medea's reaction to Jason is almost unsurprising in Euripides. Audiences are all too familiar with that story. But her actions toward the children are another matter altogether. Medea makes audiences ponder maternal love, shaking their own *sōtēria* and then ultimately redoubling it. For as the nurse implies in her soliloquies in the opening stages of Euripides' *Medea*, it is the *mother* who bears the responsibility for ensuring her family's *sōtēria* (Pucci, 1980, p. 37).

This, I have argued, is the impact of Euripides' narrative on the history of intercultural contact in Western civilization. It is no surprise that *Medea* remains a memorable and prominent literary motif, since the horror of a mother killing her children is not easily forgotten. Yet shock is not sufficient to yield appropriation in narrative; plenty of stories—both real and imagined—are too horrible ever to tell again. Instead *Medea's* power comes from what the story can tell about identity and alterity in Western thought, both in ancient Athens and beyond.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, contemporary journalists have occasionally referenced Medea in their analysis of American women who have killed their children out of severe depression or because their romantic partners were reluctant to maintain a relationship with a woman who already had children. Any mother guilty of infanticide, by the reasoning of many Americans, is ripe for the label "Medea." But I hope this chapter has argued effectively against such oversimplified characterizations. Euripides' Medea is not defined solely by her infanticide. She is defined by her Otherness, and in the course of Western history this complex character has reemerged and been put to use rhetorically in moments of intense intercultural conflict.

The most prominent cases when Medea has come forward as a narrative motif concern the plight of slave mothers in nineteenth-century America. In abolitionist literature, the theme of the slave mother killing her children rather than seeing them enslaved is fairly common. Examples range from the fairly obscure, as in John Jolliffe's *Belle Scott* (1856), to the well known, such as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). It is possible, even probable, that some slave women did kill their infants rather than see them live in bondage—but the number of cases is most likely much lower than the abolitionists might have thought. Part of the reason for the discrepancy is no doubt due to their zealous use of rhetoric in the antislavery fight, but another reason may be purely medical. There was a much higher rate of infant mortality among slave mothers than white mothers during the antebellum period in the American South, but given what is currently known about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), many of the African American slave infant



deaths might be attributed to poor nutrition and bad living conditions that led to a higher rate of SIDS (Weisenburger, 1998, p. 259).

This consideration, of course, does not mitigate the loss of so many African American infants. Whether these children died because of the conditions of slavery or the resistance of their parents to those conditions, the institution of slavery and its perpetrators are culpable. But these nuances of historical accuracy are necessary to understand how the infanticidal slave mother—called the modern Medea after a fashion—was, like the classical Greek Medea, a cultural icon that transcended real people. It was the rhetoric of infanticide that mattered, not immutable fact.

This was the case even when a “true” modern Medea emerged in the form of Margaret Garner in Ohio in 1856. Margaret was enslaved on a plantation in Kentucky, wife of Robert Garner and mother to four children. She had two boys and two girls aged infant to six years old when the family—including Robert’s parents—made a run for the free soil of Ohio. Margaret’s “master,” Archibald Gaines, and his posse of men caught up with them just across the Ohio River and surrounded the cabin where the family had sought refuge. Cornered like a trapped animal, apparently knowing she would be severely punished and returned to slavery, Margaret killed her infant girl and attempted to murder the other three children as well. She was unable to complete her mission because the authorities outside burst into the cabin and arrested her (Weisenburger, 1998).

A sensational criminal trial followed. In a strange twist, Margaret’s defense lawyer was the abolitionist John Jolliffe who had written *Belle Scott* just prior to meeting Margaret. His novel, as previously noted, included an episode in which a slave mother murders her child rather than relinquishing her to bondage.

Initially, reporters believed that Margaret’s husband Robert was responsible for little Mary Garner’s death because of the amount of blood on his clothes when the family was apprehended. And, interestingly, newspapers still turned to classical myth in delivering the story to their readers: Robert was compared to the Roman Lucius Virginius, who killed his maiden daughter Virginia when her paternity was unfairly questioned by Marcus Claudius. Rather than allow his daughter to be abducted and raped through the ruling of the court, Virginius killed her (Weisenburger, 1998, pp. 87–88). The use of this Roman myth in an 1856 newspaper has great significance. Bauman and Briggs (2003) argue that the rhetorical connection between modern “Others” and the ancients was an important facet of race and ideology in this period. Thus, when it came to light that *Margaret* had killed little Mary, she became Medea in the rhetoric of multiple parties involved in the case (Weisenburger, 1998).

In his chronicle of Margaret Garner's life, Weisenburger (1998) argues that it may be only fitting that Margaret's story disappeared from national consciousness in the wake of the states-rights arguments that dominated discussions of slavery after the Civil War. Margaret, like Medea, needed to disappear from the stage—any “normal” ending to her life would have lacked narrative logic. One true episode definitely confirms Margaret's stated intentions in killing Mary: While the Garners were being shipped South on the Ohio River, back to slavery in Kentucky, Margaret jumped overboard with her other daughter, who drowned. It was reported that after Margaret was pulled from the water, she rejoiced, triumphant that now both her daughters would be spared the terrors of slavery (Weisenburger, 1998).

But after that, and for over a century, Margaret's legend was lost. The rhetoric of infanticide was replaced by the rhetoric of the Union until the late twentieth century, when popular perspectives on antebellum America looked once again to the inhumanity of slavery. The polyphony of the post-modern era gave rise to such considerations; perhaps the most famous (and effective) examples of a contemporary Medea are manifested in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) and the film that followed (1999). Morrison based her book, in a very loose way, on the story of Margaret Garner (*New York Times*, 1987, p. 17). Once again, the narrative motif of infanticide—to spare the child something worse than death—was revived and settled back into popular Western discourses on the Other.

The arguments in this chapter are supported by further cross-cultural comparisons. The Japanese ritual of *boshi-shinju*, mother-child suicide, often reflects particular values that take precedent over living existence. In such cases shame has proven resolvable only through *boshi-shinju*. The Japanese mother-child relationship in this context is similar to the expectations of the role of the mother in ancient Greece as well as African American culture. Takahashi and Berger (1996) cite the 1985 case of a Japanese woman in California who sought to commit *boshi-shinju* out of shame due to her husband's extramarital affairs. They point out that the woman spoke no English and had no support system in the United States. It is not difficult to perceive the woman as a marginalized and exiled mother in the same vein as Medea.<sup>2</sup>

In drawing these comparisons with *Beloved* and the existence of Japanese *boshi-shinju*, I am not implying that they are dependent on the Medea myth (and therefore the Western canon). One is able to read Morrison's novel—and be moved by it—regardless of one's familiarity with *Medea* or even Margaret Garner, for that matter. The point in making this reference is only that the narrative theme has endured and given expression to those “radical Others”—mothers—who are oppressed. All of the stories are complicated, but all commonly call on universal human experience that cannot be coincidental. In Euripides' time, it was common for philosophers to make

“an argument from the poets” that suggested how we ought to live (Dillon, 1997, p. 211). Centuries later, Margaret Garner’s lawyer John Jolliffe summed up his case with an appeal to “commonsense morality,” drawing on the New Testament and English literature for his final abolitionist argument (Weisenburger, 1998, p. 146).

The prosecution, it must be noted, resented Jolliffe’s “absurd” insistence on putting the trial “within the humanities”—the prosecuting lawyer used those very terms when objecting to the court (Weisenburger, 1998, p. 159). One might accuse me of having the same bias. The thread of “Medeas” throughout history may be tenuous by scientific standards, but I am interested in plausibility, not proof. Euripides’ *Medea* opens up alterity because its retellings produce a dynamic intertextual dialogue.

Euripides’ drama is a timeless narrative that encapsulates what it means to be barbarian, woman, Other, and mother. In that sense it *must* be embedded in the humanities, for it tells about the yearning for love, salvation, deliverance, and home. All of these, in the Medea motif, are radically opposite not merely to slavery and death, but to the threat of exile that haunted foreigners in Greece. The marvelous polis of Athens, the first democracy of the Western world, is called into existence in historical memory by the story of a woman—a witch, a foreigner, a mother—who dramatically opposed all of its virtues *except for sōtēria*.

The next chapter’s narrative more directly engages soteriology, placing “early Christianity” within the horizon of significance for the construction of Western identities. The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians forms a highly contested narrative of alterity in its implications for universalism. I examine this debate in the next chapter.