ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἔστιν μοῦσα καὶ ἡμιν: The "Women's Muse" of Euripides' *Medea*

Recent scholarship on Euripides' *Medea* has explored the intersection of music and gender in the play. Such scholarship has shown that poetry and song in *Medea* are consistently tied up with questions of gender (Thomas 2018) and has argued that female poetics in *Medea* reflect Euripides' own musical ideas (Gurd 2016). This paper seeks to provide a new perspective on this subject by considering the implications of a striking but neglected passage occurring near the end of the play (*Med.* 1081ff.). In this passage, a choral interlude in recitative anapests, the chorus of Corinthian women claims to have access to a "women's muse," i.e., a muse granting wisdom specifically to women (1085–89). This paper considers what female *sophia* of this kind might look like, compares the chorus' *sophia* to that of Medea, and argues that Euripides connects this question of female *sophia* to the issue of novel vs. traditional wisdom.

What would it mean for the chorus to have access to this women's muse? In the first part of this paper, I argue that the chorus' muse is best understood as a Hesiodic figure granting verbal authority and charisma (*Theog*. 81–103), especially since the chorus appeals to the muse in order to lend authority to the gnomic remarks it makes about the sorrows of parenthood. I support this argument through a reading of the famous first stasimon of *Medea*, in which the chorus anticipates Medea's "silencing of the ancient bards" (421–22) responsible for attacking women in their songs. As in *Med.* 1081–89, the first stasimon draws a connection between inspiration by the gods and the right or ability to participate in public discourse (421–31).

I then assess whether Euripides presents the chorus as being inspired in this way, finding that Euripides undermines the chorus' *sophia* by ironizing the grand claims the chorus makes. For example, the chorus in the first stasimon claims that "honor will come to the female sex"

(417–18) because of Medea's actions against Jason; however, when the true nature of Medea's plan for revenge come to light, she becomes an object of opprobrium for both Jason and the chorus itself. As has recently been pointed out, Euripides also undermines the chorus' *sophia* in the realm most pertinent to the muses, namely that of music itself (Swift 2010); this would seem a further indication that the chorus is less *mousikos* than it would like to think.

Finally, I argue that Euripides' purpose in undermining the chorus' *sophia* is to draw attention to the female *mousa* and *sophia* of another character entirely: that of Medea herself. *Sophia* is perhaps Medea's defining quality in the play: of twenty-one instances of the word *sophos* (clever, wise), ten directly contribute to Medea's characterization as a formidably intelligent woman (285, 295, 298, 299, 303, 305, 320, 385, 539, 677). Medea's *sophia* has a verbal dimension that manifests in Medea's considerable persuasive powers (Buxton 1982), while also being tied up with her skill in magic (285, 384–85). I argue that the greater efficacy of Medea's *sophia*, as compared to that of the chorus, reflects her greater proximity (as Helios' granddaughter) to the divine; at the same time, I suggest that Euripides invites us to reflect on the differences between old and new *sophia*, with the latter represented especially by the foreign "newcomer" Medea.

Works Cited

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