

## A Herodotean Moment in Euripides' *Medea*

The fourth book of Herodotus' *Histories* describes a strange collection of gifts offered to Darius by Idanthyrsus, king of occupied Scythia: a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows (4.132). Darius mistakes these as tokens of submission, but they are actually intended as a warning to the Persians to escape into the sky, earth, or water while they still can. When the Jason of Euripides' *Medea* discovers that his former wife has murdered his fiancée, he warns of his forthcoming vengeance in nearly identical terms, telling Medea she will have to fly up to heaven or hide beneath the earth to avoid it (1296-98). Here, Euripides, who would have encountered Herodotus' work in Athens (Wells 1928, Evans 1979 and 1987, Ostwald 1991, Forsdyke 2001) seems to appeal to two Herodotean concepts that inform both scenes: hard cultures routinely overcome soft cultures and complete understanding of any scenario requires the ability to appreciate cultural relativism. However, unlike in Herodotus' scenario, where Idanthyrsus is victorious but Darius escapes, Medea succeeds in both respects, leaving Jason helpless and defeated while she literally flies away in Helios' dragon chariot. Medea's triumph is foreshadowed throughout the play by dozens of references to both heaven (Helios) and earth (chthonic deities and earth-grown poisons), the meaning of which becomes clearer in hindsight after Jason utters his ironic warning. However, the play also establishes Medea's dominance in water - the sphere mentioned in Herodotus but not by Jason - in its imagery of rivers reversing their courses, the Athens to which Medea will escape, and the broken hull of the *Argo*. This emphasis on water aligns Medea more closely with her Scythian counterparts from Herodotus. Potentially drawing on Herodotus Book 4, Euripides allows his audience a more nuanced understanding of Medea's barbarian otherness (see Segal 1990, Boedeker 1997, Karamanou 2014). If Euripides is indeed advocating a specifically Herodotean cultural relativism in this

play, this suggests a fascinating new perspective on Euripides' typically empathetic portrayal of marginalized characters.

#### Bibliography

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