

From the Mouths of Slaves: Slave-Speech and Sympathy in Euripidean Tragedy

In the tragedies of Euripides, slaves speak with a style and importance that seems to contradict their social value (Mastronarde 2010, Hall 2004). In the plays *Hippolytus* and *Ion*, the Tutor and Nurse provoke the very actions that send each play into chaos (Yoon 1981). They are, despite their low status, essential to the plot of their respective works. DeForest (1989) argues that Phaedra's nurse is Aphrodite herself in disguise in order to explain the authority and elegance with which she speaks. These slaves' direct styles of speech and clear emotional attachments to their mistresses further complicate the moral ambiguities of such plays (Fletcher 2003). Building on the works of these scholars and others, I argue in this paper that slaves in the roles of "Nurse" or "Tutor" are essential in fully comprehending the characters with whom they are connected. By examining the speech and attitudes of nurses in *Ion*, *Hippolytus*, and *Medea*, I suggest that the presence of a caretaker infantilizes his or her charge, and thus incites a level of sympathy from the audience that may not exist otherwise.

In this paper, I first focus on the terms of address that each slave use with their mistress. For example, Phaedra is coaxed, coddled, and spoken to as though she were a child by her nurse, who cares for her mistress to the degree that Phaedra is a burden to her soul (*Hippolytus* 250-60). In *Ion*, Kreusa's tutor calls her both thugater and pais, daughter and child, throughout the play (θῦγάτηρ, 925, 942, and 998; παῖς, 950 and 1018), increasing her child-like status in the audience's mind. These names and attitudes create a sense of vulnerability surrounding Phaedra and Kreusa.

Second, I observe that Phaedra and Kreusa also struggle with speaking, a concern associated with childhood elsewhere in Greek tragedy. For example, Cilissa laments in Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* that baby Orestes was like a "speechless beast" whose needs she could

only guess (753-8). While the slave figures speak clearly and intelligently, both Phaedra and Kreusa falter. When Phaedra is ill and raving, unable to clearly articulate her predicament, the chorus surrounds her and tries to diagnose her, assuming her perceived babbling stems from possession, failure to sacrifice correctly, her husband's infidelity, or pregnancy (*Hippolytus* 141-169). In *Ion*, both Ion and the Tutor must coax Kreusa's past trauma from her as she mumbles incomprehensibly at multiple points throughout the play in extended scenes of stichomythia (e.g., 337-69, 925-65). Although the raving and confusion of illness is not the same thing as the babbling of a child, the inability to speak represents a level of immaturity that the closeness of their slaves helps to compound.

Finally, I use the example of *Medea* to illustrate the influence that a nurse or tutor can have on their charge. Although one is mentioned in the text, Medea and her nurse never meet on stage. Medea's lack of a nurse further demonstrates the power of such a slave-figure by their absence on the stage, and as a result, "Medea must plan and carry out the machinations of her revenge all by herself" (Brandt 1973, 28). Yoon claims that because the servant does not behave like a nurse to Medea, the audience never interacts with Medea as though she were a child (28). Although the nurse views Medea with sympathy, she never refers to her as a child or even implies that Medea needs protection. Instead, the nurse contemplates protecting others *from* Medea (36-45). Thus, the audience can view Medea as a powerful being, capable of confronting Jason alone, and the sense of vulnerability instilled by the nurse is instead transferred to the children, Medea's ultimate victims. By comparing Medea to Phaedra and Kreusa, the role of nurses in Euripidean tragedy becomes clear: to provoke the sympathies of the audience by infantilizing their charges.

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