

## Odyssean Echoes in Euripides' *Medea*

In 1977, Bernard Knox observed, in an almost offhand manner, that Euripides' *Medea* "acts as if she were a combination of the naked violence of Achilles and the cold craft of Odysseus" (Knox 1997, 202). While the first part of this observation, likening *Medea* to Achilles, has been taken up and is now generally recognized by scholars, the second, recognizing the Euripidean heroine's kinship with Odysseus, has been largely neglected. Like Achilles, *Medea* certainly possesses stubbornness and, above all else, a keen sense of personal honor, but, as Deborah Boedeker has shown, the *Medea* is not only a revenge play but a "tragedy of discourse" (Boedeker 1991, 97). In fact, *Medea*—and the *Medea* as a whole—have much in common with Odysseus and the *Odyssey*.

These Odyssean echoes or resonances occur in multiple areas: in terms of content, for example, there is the centrality of the *oikos* to both works; stylistically, there are narratological effects such as the intense focalization or even identification that audiences of both works feel with the protagonist. This paper focuses on two other such echoes. First, it considers the revisionist histories (usually called "lying tales" in the *Odyssey*) offered by multiple characters, but especially by the main character, in each work. Second, it examines the ways in which Odysseus and *Medea* manipulate others through *logoi*.

As an example of the latter point, take *Med.* 580-81, where *Medea* begins to respond to Jason's claim that he is merely doing what is right for their family: ἐμοὶ γὰρ ὅστις ἄδικος ὄν σοφὸς λέγειν / πέφυκε πλείστην ζημίαν ὀφλισκάνει (in Kovacs's translation, "to my mind, the plausible speaker who is a scoundrel incurs the greatest punishment"). On the surface, *Medea* aligns herself here with speakers like Achilles, who famously declares, in response to Odysseus,

that whoever hides one thing in his mind but says another is as hateful to him as the gates of Hades (*Il.* 9.312-13). Like Achilles removed from the Greek army, Medea declares that her opinion—her honesty—removes her from most mortals (l. 579). Complicating this picture, however, is the fact that Medea is herself a clever speaker (σοφός, or in this case σοφή λέγειν), as Jason has just affirmed at line 540; moreover, the audience has already seen Medea play on the sympathies both of the Chorus and Creon, gaining from them a vow of silence and a day to carry out her plan. Medea is, then, adopting the rhetoric of frankness and honesty while nevertheless using rhetorical skill to achieve her aim, a tactic previously used to great effect by Odysseus (especially in the second half of the *Odyssey*; see Emlyn-Jones 1986, Buxsein 2017). Her *agon* with Jason allows the audience to see clearly that, despite the fact that Jason insists that he is a skilled and even-handed speaker while Medea presents herself as frank in her anger, it is Medea who has learned from the *Odyssey*, not Jason.

Ultimately, reading the *Medea* in juxtaposition with the *Odyssey* (a text with which the playwright will have been intimately familiar and with which he could have expected his audience to be similarly familiar) offers a counterpoint to those who, like Knox, have emphasized Medea's kinship with Achilles and confirms the readings of scholars like Boedeker who have emphasized the power of Medea's *logoi*. More than that, however, reading these texts together sheds new light on a possible inspiration for one of the most powerful and enigmatic characters in classical literature.

#### Bibliography

- Boedeker, D. 1991. "Euripides' *Medea* and the Vanity of *Logoi*." *CP* 86: 95-112.
- Bongie, E.B. 1977. "Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides." *TAPA* 107: 27-56.

- Bouxsein, H. 2017. "Truth Be Told: The Rhetoric of Honesty in *Odyssey* 13-24." In Anne H. Groton, ed., *Ab omni parte beatus: Classical Essays in Honor of James M. May*, 1-15. Mundelein, IL.
- Buxton, R.G.A. 1982. *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Peitho*. Cambridge.
- Cairns, D. 2021. "The Dynamics of Emotion in Euripides' *Medea*." *G&R* 68: 8-26.
- Emlyn-Jones, C. 1986. "True and Lying Tales in the *Odyssey*." *G&R* 33: 1-10.
- Hopman, M. 2008. "Revenge and Mythopoiesis in Euripides' 'Medea'." *TAPA* 138: 155-83.
- Knox, B.M.W. 1977. "The *Medea* of Euripides." *YCS* 25: 193-225.
- Kovacs, D. 2001. *Euripides: Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea*. Cambridge, MA.
- Levett, B. 2010. "Verbal Autonomy and Self-Restraint in Euripides' *Medea*." *CP* 105: 54-68.
- Luschnig, C.E. 2007. *Granddaughter of the Sun: A Study of Euripides' Medea*. Leiden.
- Maddalena, A. 1963. "La *Medea* di Euripide." *RivFil* 91: 129-52.
- Mastrorarde, D.J., ed. 2002. *Euripides: Medea*. Cambridge.
- McClure, L. 1999. "'The Worst Husband': Discourses of Praise and Blame in Euripides' *Medea*." *CP* 94: 373-94.
- Rehm, R. 1989. "Medea and the Λόγος of the Heroic." *Eranos* 87: 97-115.
- Zerba, M. 2002. "*Medea hypokrites*." *Arethusa* 35: 315-37.