

Echoes of Identity:  
Reflections of Medea in Euripides' *Bacchae*

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## 1 Introduction

In Euripides' *Medea*, one of his earliest surviving plays, we are faced with an unusual titular character. Medea is an extraordinarily powerful woman. Before her marriage to Jason, she had enabled him to reach heroic status through obtaining the Golden Fleece by her ruthless use of magical force. Despite this help which he received from her, Jason decides to divorce Medea, a barbarian woman, in favor of the princess of Corinth. The action of the play opens with Medea deciding what to do given this situation.

As the plot unfolds, Medea takes on multiple roles. She starts as a victim of Jason's abandonment. She then begins plotting vengeance upon him, and her initial plan includes murdering his future bride to get herself even with Jason. When she adds filicide into her revenge plot, Medea transgresses ordinary human boundaries and becomes a fiend. At the same time, however, she once again becomes a victim, but this time Medea is a victim of herself rather than of another. Medea's personality is thus split, and her character contains contradictory elements both sequentially and simultaneously.

The *Medea* of Euripides has been subject to endless analysis, starting in the ancient world and continuing to this day.<sup>1</sup> As Donald Mastronarde observes in his introduction to *Medea*, "even in English alone the bibliography [about Euripides' play] is immense."<sup>2</sup> Medea is a multifaceted character open to interpretation. One article on Medea which has become a classic is Helene Foley's *Medea's Divided Self*. Foley provides an alternative to the view that Medea's character is fundamentally built upon a conflict between reason and passion: building upon previous

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<sup>1</sup>. Foley notes, for example, that Chrysippus and Galen both discuss interpretations of Medea's monologue over whether to kill her children. See Foley, *Medea's Divided Self*, 61-62.

<sup>2</sup>. Donald J. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

scholarship she proposes and effectively argues for interpreting Medea as containing both “a masculine, heroic and public self and a feminine, maternal self.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar spirit of drawing out dichotomies within the titular character, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz offers a reading of *Medea* “on a grid formed by the axes of divine/mortal, masculine/feminine, and Greek/barbarian.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, Demetra Kasimis proposes a reading of Medea as a refugee, with the intention of using *Medea* “as a conceptual resource for opening new spaces of argumentation,” providing the play as a framework for discussing contemporary issues.<sup>5</sup> In my thesis, I propose an interpretation of Medea in the light of Euripides’ *Bacchae*.

In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, his last surviving play, we are again presented with the unusual theme of filicide. As in *Medea*, the filicide takes place as part of a revenge plot. However, unlike in *Medea*, the orchestrator of the vengeance and the actual perpetrator of the filicide are not the same person. Agave unknowingly kills her son Pentheus at the behest of Dionysus, who is revenging himself upon both her and her son.

Luigi Battezzato offers a succinct summary of previous scholarship on the Euripides’ last play: “The *Bacchae* has often been read for its ethical and political implications: as a moralistic tale, as a critique of religious fanaticism or of totalitarian regimes, as a liberatory ritual, or as a

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<sup>3</sup>. Helene Foley, “Medea’s Divided Self,” *Classical Antiquity* 8, no. 1 (1989): 62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25010896>.

<sup>4</sup>. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, “Vindictive Wife, Murderous Mother: Medea,” in *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 126.

<sup>5</sup>. Demetra Kasimis, “Medea the Refugee,” *The Review of Politics* 82, no. 3 (2020): 397, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670520000376>. In her article, Kasimis discusses Euripides’ use of the term *phugas*, which she translates as “refugee,” as a structure around which to interpret Medea’s character. She does so through the lens of gender as it relates to kinship. In so doing, Kasimis aims to provide a close reading of *Medea* which can be used as a tool for political theorists considering the plight of modern-day refugees, using a classical text as a framework for contemporary discourse.

subversion of normative categories of society and gender.”<sup>6</sup> In my analysis, I will be considering the motif of filicide in *Bacchae* as the main thread which connects it to *Medea*, discussing other aspects of they play as they relate to Euripides’ portrayal of Medea herself.

The internally split personality of Medea as victim and agent, sufferer and inflictor of pain, hunter and prey, is externalized in the *Bacchae* in the characters of Agave and Dionysus. Agave, like Medea, is a victim of her own aggression: her worst suffering is self-inflicted. In Dionysus, we see a vengeful killer who seeks justice and goes beyond what seems to be appropriate.

Agave and Medea are connected through Euripides’ presentations of them as filicidal mothers. Both are driven to murder their children, despite their children’s pleas for mercy. However, each woman is brought to perform this atrocity in a different way. Agave and Medea have different motives (Medea motivated by revenge; Agave motivated by *mania* induced by Dionysus), different levels of agency (Medea seemingly acting of her free will; Agave under divine influence), and different reactions to their own actions (Medea gloats; Agave grieves). Yet, they share many characteristics in addition to the act of killing their children: taking on typically masculine traits (Medea’s desire for respect; Agave’s desire to be seen as a successful hunter);<sup>7</sup> absent husbands (Medea’s husband emotionally and morally; Agave’s through death);

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<sup>6</sup> Luigi Battezzato, “Migrant Refusals: The Inoperativity of the Asian Bacchae in Euripides,” *Classical Antiquity* 41, no. 2 (October 1, 2022): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ca.2022.40.2.4>.

<sup>7</sup> Here and in many other places in my thesis I refer to the gender categories of “masculine” and “feminine.” Given the loaded and potentially problematic nature of these terms, I wanted to clarify that I am attempting to use them as they would have been perceived by the Athenian audience of Euripides’ plays. In considering the distinctions between the masculine and the feminine, I find Margaret Williamson’s emphasis on the line between public and private spheres helpful: she observes that in tragedy, we see “the primary association of women with the *oikos*, in contrast to the public, male world of the polis” (Williamson, “A Woman’s Place in Euripides’ *Medea*,” 16-17). I hope to be able to highlight the ways in which Euripides takes

and comparisons to lions, which draw attention to how the women's filicides cause them to cross the boundary of what it means to be human.

A review of the literature reveals that while other scholars have noted the possibility of comparing Agave and Medea as such, there are currently no extended treatments of this topic. Furthermore, in my research, I was unable to discover any article-length treatments of the figure of Agave in Euripides' play.<sup>8</sup> When Agave is mentioned in the scholarship, her madness while committing filicide is often emphasized.<sup>9</sup>

That Medea shares characteristics with Dionysus has been noted by many scholars. Considering how they function in the plot, for example, William Lynch claims that "what Pentheus will be to Dionysus, Jason is to Medea."<sup>10</sup> Medea and Dionysus revenge themselves upon Jason and Pentheus, respectively, because of perceived disrespect. Medea and Dionysus are also similar in that the revenge they take is extreme. Marianne McDonald comments on this similarity: "at the end of the play Euripides shows us a Medea who goes too far. By killing the children there is a shift in our sympathy; this is comparable to what we experience in *Bacchae*,

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advantage of gender categories in both *Medea* and *Bacchae*, bringing out the nuances in his characterizations as much as I am able.

<sup>8</sup>. While this was disappointing, I did not find it particularly surprising. Agave is somewhat one-dimensional in comparison with the figure of Medea in the *Medea* or the figures of Dionysus and Pentheus in *Bacchae*. As Foley notes, Agave makes "no autonomous rational choices" during the play (Foley, *Women as Moral Agents in Greek Tragedy*, 122). Agave's main act of killing her son Pentheus is done while under the god's influence, and so, in stark contrast to what has been written about Medea, very little can be said about her motivations.

<sup>9</sup>. Foley, for example, refers to her as the "mad Agave" four separate times in her article *The Masque of Dionysus*.

<sup>10</sup>. William F. Lynch, "Euripides' *Bacchae*: The Mind in Prison," *CrossCurrents* 25, no. 2 (1975): 166.

when Dionysus goes too far in his vengeance.”<sup>11</sup> While one could argue concerning the justice of going too far, it is undeniable that their revenge is extreme: Medea and Dionysus are both sensitive and powerful, which results in tragic endings for their enemies.

In this paper, I am seeking to add to the conversation surrounding the enigmatic figure of Medea by reading Euripides’ presentation of her through the lens of his depictions of Agave and Dionysus in the *Bacchae*.<sup>12</sup> Filicide leads to the transgression of the boundaries both of womanhood and of humanity more generally. Agave remains ultimately powerless, left to go into exile grieving the loss she unknowingly brought upon herself. Medea, on the other hand, appears to have passed into the divine realm, displaying power and wrath comparable to that of Dionysus. Aspects of Medea are reflected in both Agave and Dionysus.

The paper proceeds as follows. I introduce the *Medea* (1.1) and the *Bacchae* (1.2) in more detail, bringing out aspects of the plays I will expound upon in later sections. I then discuss revenge as a motivating factor for filicide in each play (2): in the *Medea* it is Medea’s revenge (2.1), while in the *Bacchae* it is Dionysus’ revenge (2.2). The following section highlights how the means used for filicide work to gender the act as masculine, although it is carried out by women in both cases (3). After that, I consider the striking language used to compare Agave and Medea to animals, positing that this language is used to show how filicide has caused them to transgress of human boundaries (4). Next, I discuss Medea’s conscious gloating over Jason with the bodies of their children (5.1) and Agave’s unconscious vaunting over her father Cadmus

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<sup>11</sup>. Marianne McDonald, “Medea as Politician and Diva: Riding the Dragon into the Future,” in *Medea*, ed. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 320–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv10vm25j.17>.

<sup>12</sup>. As far as I can tell, I am the first to write an extended analysis comparing Medea to both Agave and Dionysus (at least in English, which is the only modern language I read).

(5.2). In my final section, I consider the effect of the revelation of Medea as *dea ex machina* in portraying Medea as a semi-divine figure (6.2), comparing her last manifestation to Dionysus' similar final appearance (6.1).

### 1.1 The *Medea*

The *Medea*, written in 431 BCE, is the second oldest extant play of Euripides. It won third prize in the City Dionysia when performed alongside his *Philoctetes*, *Dictys*, and *The Reapers*. As David Kovacs points out in his introduction to *Medea*, although “this is frequently taken as an indication the Athenians were shocked by *Medea*,” it is important to keep in mind that “the competition that year was extraordinarily keen,” and thus its winning third prize is no indication of “strong antipathy to Euripides’ plays.”<sup>13</sup>

In Euripides’ *Medea*, we see Medea at a moment of crisis in her life. Her husband, Jason, has abandoned her in favor of the princess of Corinth, hoping to achieve a greater name for himself by contracting this new marriage. Medea and her children are faced with the prospect of exile, and until Aegeus appears, she has no one to whom she can turn. In view of her difficulties, she hatches a plot to assassinate the princess and the king, followed by the killing of her own children to save them from vengeance at the hands of the Corinthians. The play ends with Medea escaping with the help of her grandfather Helios in a dramatic *dea ex machina* moment.

From this synopsis, it appears that all of the action of the plot of *Medea* is driven by the eponymous character herself. There are no explicit gods present in the action of the play, which distinguishes the *Medea* sharply from the majority of surviving tragedies.<sup>14</sup> The nurse and the

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<sup>13</sup>. David Kovacs, *Euripides: Medea*, Loeb Classical Library 12 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 277.

<sup>14</sup>. This does not mean, however, that the gods have nothing to do with the action of the play. See Kovacs, *Zeus in Euripides' Medea*. In addition, Medea’s appearance on the *mechane* in

tutor merely serve to foreshadow the horrifying reality of the upcoming filicide. The chorus, composed of Corinthian women who alternately sympathize with and are horrified by Medea's actions, is impotent to stop the filicide once it is underway. The king and the princess are little more than helpless victims: the king uses only ineffectual words to protect himself and his daughter from Medea, while the princess does not even speak in the play. Aegeus and Jason, while important to the broader outline of Medea's life, within the confines of this play merely respond to Medea's actions and words. Medea herself, however, appears to have achieved "quasi-divine (and also inhuman) status" through her appearance *ex machina*, as Mastronarde observes.<sup>15</sup>

Medea herself is far from simple, however. As Kasimis notes, Medea is "a woman by turns trapped, omnipotent, wily, and helpless."<sup>16</sup> She retains many conflicting identities simultaneously: mother and murderer, divine and human, active and passive participant in fate, victim and monster, masculine and feminine. She starts out as the victim of abandonment and ends as an avenging spirit, and it is Medea's choice to commit filicide which affects this transformation. As Stuart Lawrence puts it, after the filicide, Medea becomes "two people: Medea the agent and Medea the victim of Medea the agent."<sup>17</sup> Her desperate act is unable to free her from all pain, but it assures that others will no longer be able to inflict hurt on her.

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the last scene hints that Medea herself takes on a divine role in the play. I discuss this below in the section 6.2, *Medea Ex Machina*.

<sup>15</sup>. Donald J. Mastronarde, "Actors on High: The Skene Roof, the Crane, and the Gods in Attic Drama," *Classical Antiquity* 9, no. 2 (1990): 265, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25010931>.

<sup>16</sup>. Kasimis, "Medea the Refugee," 401.

<sup>17</sup>. Stuart Lawrence, "Audience Uncertainty and Euripides' Medea," *Hermes* 125, no. 1 (1997): 53.



## 1.2 The *Bacchae*

The *Bacchae* is one of the latest extant plays of Euripides, written around his death in 406 BCE. When it was produced posthumously in 405 BCE, it won first prize in the City Dionysia. The parallels between *Medea* and *Bacchae* are striking considering that the former was written towards the beginning of Euripides' career, while the latter was one of the playwright's last works.

Agave, like Medea, is a filicidal mother. Unlike Medea, however, Agave is unequivocally shown to be an unconscious, deeply regretful participant in the murder of her child. Instead of committing the murder as an act of vengeance, she is a victim of *mania* induced by Dionysus. Agave and the other Theban women had shown scorn for Dionysus' mother Semele, questioning her tale of being impregnated by Zeus. As a result, Dionysus goaded the women out of their senses so that they would know his divine status and pay homage to him as a god. Thus, Agave's unwilling participation in filicide acts as part of her punishment for not giving Dionysus the recognition due him.

The filicide is not only a punishment for Agave, however. Her son Pentheus, as king of Thebes, had outlawed worship of Dionysus in the city and openly mocked the god. He was punished for his disrespect of Dionysus in a most gruesome manner: his own mother literally tears him limb from limb. Dionysus is thus able to bring the city of Thebes around to a proper and just respect and fear of him as a god. Dionysus is the main driver of the action, and his presence pervades the play.

## 2 Filicide as Revenge

In both *Medea* and *Bacchae*, the act of filicide is at the center of the plot. The filicides are orchestrated as part of a revenge plot: Dionysus is seeking vengeance upon Agave and Pentheus,

while Medea is seeking vengeance upon Jason. Dionysus and Medea express similar reasons for pursuing their course of revenge: they do not want to be laughed at by their enemies but rather desire respect. In their explanations for the reason the filicides must take place, both use words derived from the verb *geláō*, “to laugh.”

Upon Pentheus’ appearance on the mountain to spy on the maenads, Dionysus is the first to catch sight of him. Dionysus calls upon the Theban women to punish him. Rather than referring to Pentheus by name, however, he identifies him by his crime:

τὸν ὑμᾶς κάμει τὰμά τ’ ὄργια  
γέλων τιθέμενον

The one who made you and me and my rites to be a cause for laughter.<sup>18</sup> (*Bacch.* 1080-1081)

Pentheus had refused to recognize Dionysus as a god, and he pays dearly for his hubris.

Laughing at Dionysus is what ultimately leads Pentheus to death.

Medea shares Dionysus’ obsession with status- she too does not want to be a cause for laughter. In her explanation of why she must kill her children to the chorus, Medea claims that οὐ γὰρ γελάσθαι τλητὸν ἐξ ἐχθρῶν, φίλοι, “For it is intolerable to be laughed at by one’s enemies, friends”<sup>19</sup> (*Med.* 797). Medea would rather suffer from the self-inflicted grief caused by bringing about the death of her children than the humiliation of being laughed at by her enemies. Foley points out that the extremity of Medea’s revenge follows “a pattern typical of divine rather than human action.”<sup>20</sup> She illustrates this using Dionysus as an example of divine retribution:

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<sup>18</sup>. This and all subsequent translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

<sup>19</sup>. Mastronarde notes that concern about the laughter of one’s enemies is usually expressed by male heroes. Thus, Medea’s share in this concern is part of her “engagement in male categories of value and social standing” (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 234).

<sup>20</sup>. Foley, “Medea’s Divided Self,” 77.

Dionysus wreaks vengeance on those who do not recognize him as divine.<sup>21</sup> Foley claims that in a similar way, “the once victimized and seemingly powerless Medea appears finally as a semidivine fury whose true nature and authority were not recognized by the mortals around her.”<sup>22</sup> Medea’s appearance in the role of *dea ex machina* at the end of the play would seem to confirm this conjecture.

### 2.1 Early Hints at Filicide in *Medea*

The main event of *Medea* around which much of the plot revolves is when Medea kills her own children in her quest to get revenge on Jason for abandoning her. In my analysis, I follow Monica Cyrino in considering “the abandonment of Medea as the immediate cause of her filicidal action, and the destruction of Jason as its intended purpose.”<sup>23</sup> The children die at the hands of their mother for the sins of their father. For Medea, no other form of revenge against Jason could have been more thorough than killing his children by her: in Medea’s eyes, childlessness is a worse punishment for Jason than death. This perception is one motivating factor for her choice of adding filicide to the revenge act of killing Jason’s new bride and his father-in-law, the king of Corinth. Medea’s proximate justification for laying hands on her own children was so the Corinthians citizens would not kill them in repayment for her murder of their royal family.

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<sup>21</sup>. Foley, “Medea’s Divided Self,” 77.

<sup>22</sup>. Foley, “Medea’s Divided Self,” 77.

<sup>23</sup>. Monica Silveira Cyrino, “When Grief Is Gain: The Psychodynamics of Abandonment and Filicide in Euripides’ ‘Medea,’” *Pacific Coast Philology* 31, no. 1 (1996): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1316766>.

We first hear hints of the upcoming filicide in Medea's cries in the first scene of the play. While the Nurse is on the stage, Medea's voice comes from within the house, lamenting her great sufferings:

παῖδες ὄλοισθε στυγεράς ματρὸς  
σὺν πατρί, καὶ πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι.

O accursed children of a hateful mother, may you die with your father, and may your whole house perish! (*Med.* 113-114)<sup>24</sup>

Medea here expresses a wish that her children die, although she does not yet indicate that she plans to take part in their death. Nonetheless, the fatal role she will play is foreshadowed even here.

The Nurse expresses concern for the fate of the children after hearing Medea's impassioned outburst: τέκνα, μή τι πάθηθ' ὡς ὑπεραλγῶ, "Children, may you not suffer anything so that I am grieved!" (*Med.* 118). The Nurse, while afraid something terrible may happen to the children, does not know certainly that Medea will kill them at this early stage of the play. Her comment proves grimly prophetic, however.

Before Medea expresses the intention to destroy her own children, Euripides shows that she is searching for the best means by which to punish Jason for the betrayal of their marriage bed. Medea appeals to the chorus to aid her in her quest to find a proper punishment for him by not giving her away by revealing it to him or anyone else when she does light upon a fit penalty:

ἦν μοι πόρος τις μηχανή τ' ἐξευρεθῆ  
πόσιν δίκην τῶνδ' ἀντιτίσασθαι κακῶν  
σιγᾶν.

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<sup>24</sup>. As Mastronarde points out, Medea herself accomplishes what she asks in her curse (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 184). I posit that Medea's role as oath-fulfiller contributes to Euripides' presentation of her as a semi-divine figure, as fulfilling oaths is often a divine function.

If some way or means might be found for me to exact penalty for the wrongs done by my husband, be silent. (*Med.* 260-261, 263)<sup>25</sup>

Here, Medea's mention of "justice", *dikē*, highlights the fact that her subsequent revenge is not from a desire to be monstrous for its own sake, but from a desire for justice.

Medea's use of a common word for "husband," *pósis*, shows that she considers Jason her true husband. Mastronarde notes that "Medea has a claim upon decent treatment from Jason on the basis of being his wife and the mother of his children."<sup>26</sup> However, her claim is even stronger than that of a typical married woman who has provided her husband with legitimate heirs: Jason's abandonment of her is particularly egregious as he and Medea had exchanged oaths of fidelity upon their marriage. Describing Medea's reaction to Jason's treachery, the Nurse reports that Medea

βοῶ μὲν ὄρκους, ἀνακαλεῖ δὲ δεξιᾶς  
πίστιν μέγιστην, καὶ θεοῦς μαρτύρεται

calls upon his oaths and appeals to the great pledge of his right hand. (*Med.* 21-23)

In calling upon Jason's oaths, Medea is demanding justice from the gods. Mastronarde notes that in contrast to the way a typical Greek marriage was contracted, Medea "had formed her bond not as a subordinate in an exchange between her father and her husband, but as an equal."<sup>27</sup> Based on the oaths they had exchanged, Medea has reason to consider Jason her equal, and so, as Mastronarde notes, in abandoning her, Jason is denying "her status as an equal participant in an

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<sup>25</sup>. I have omitted line 262 because it is most likely an interpolation. See Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 215-216.

<sup>26</sup>. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 167.

<sup>27</sup>. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 7.

exchange relationship.”<sup>28</sup> Medea’s wrath, as Konstan observes, is thus “grounded not in petty jealousy but in a proud sense of honour.”<sup>29</sup> Medea is angry at Jason for mistreating her both as his wife and as his equal.<sup>30</sup>

By the time of her first speech with Jason, Medea has already decided that she will kill the princess and Creon, but she has not yet settled upon the course of killing her children. After speaking with the Chorus about her plans for murdering the Corinthian royal family Medea recounts to Jason the many ways in which she has helped him in the past, above all in relation to his quest for the Golden Fleece. We then hear hints of how she will eventually punish Jason in her highlighting of the importance of children in marriage:

εἰ γὰρ ἦσθ' ἄπαις ἔτι,  
συγγνώστ' ἂν ἦν σοι τοῦδ' ἐρασθῆναι λέχους.

For if you were yet childless, it would be pardonable for you to desire this bed. (*Med.* 490-491)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 31.

<sup>29</sup>. David Konstan, “Anger,” in *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature (University of Toronto Press, 2006), 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442674370.6>.

<sup>30</sup>. Kasimis discusses Medea’s simultaneous masculine and feminine identities as they affect her status as a migrant woman: “On the one hand, Medea’s attempts at throwing off her stigmatization are efforts at moving freely through the world, as a ‘man’ would. On the other hand, Medea is still (accounted for as) a ‘woman’ under the law when she performs these activities” (Kasimis, “Medea the Refugee,” 410). Medea is in a double bind: she wants to be treated as Jason’s equal, as a man, but she is treated as his inferior because she is a woman. The complexity of Medea’s own identity makes her relationship with Jason fraught with complication.

<sup>31</sup>. Mastronarde affirms that “the culturally sanctioned purpose of marriage was the begetting of legitimate (male) offspring,” and thus it was customary for barrenness to be a grounds for divorce (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 253). He continues that “the provision of an heir normally solidified the position of the wife and represented a pledge of a lasting marital bond,” and so Medea is justified in her complaint against Jason (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 253-254).

In this speech, Medea expresses the belief common in the ancient world that the purpose of marriage for a man is being able to leave behind legitimate offspring.<sup>32</sup> Since Medea has allowed Jason to do so, she sees no need for him to enter a second marriage.

With this interpretation of marriage, the worst possible thing that could happen to Jason is for him to lose his opportunity to leave behind his name after his death in the form of (male) children. Medea ensures that Jason is left bereft of heirs through her murder of their children together and of his future bride.

According to Anne Burnett, Medea's filicide is "infuriating because it seems to have replaced the true vengeance act, the killing of Jason."<sup>33</sup> I disagree with her interpretation as it seems to me that preventing Jason from leaving his name behind is an even more thorough form of revenge than directly murdering him would have been. Medea leaves him to suffer his mistreatment of her for the rest of his life: he will never be able to forget what she has done to him.

In addition to being directly motivated by a desire for revenge, Medea resorts to filicide out of a perception of its necessity. When she has already settled on killing the princess and the king of Corinth, she knows that the Corinthians will seek revenge upon her for that deed. Medea

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<sup>32</sup>. The Aegeus scene (*Medea* 663-823) also discusses the value children hold in marriage. Kovacs points out that "it has long been noted that Aegeus' complaint about his childless state, though it provokes no noticeable reaction in Medea during the interview itself, seems to have suggested to her a more terrible revenge on Jason than she had as yet imagined, not death but a childless old age" (Kovacs, "Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*," 59). While important to the overall arc of the play, I have not discussed the Aegeus scene in the body of my thesis because it does not directly relate to the similarities in the presentations of Agave and Dionysus to Medea.

<sup>33</sup>. Anne Burnett, "Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge," *Classical Philology* 68, no. 1 (1973): 10.

is afraid that this vengeance will include the killing of her own children as punishment for her. This fear is especially prominent in her mind because she uses the children as direct accessories to murder, sending them to the princess with the poisoned garments by which Medea brought about both her and her father's death. Medea reasons thus with the chorus:

καὶ μὴ σχολὴν ἄγουσαν ἐκδοῦναι τέκνα  
 ἄλλη φονεῦσαι δυσμενεστέρα χερί.  
 πάντως σφ' ἀνάγκη καταθανεῖν· ἐπεὶ δὲ χρὴ,  
 ἡμεῖς κτενοῦμεν οἴπερ ἐξεφύσαμεν.

Keeping quiet [seems best], not give up the children to be killed by some other hostile hand. Altogether it is necessary that they die: and since it is necessary, we who are exiled should kill them. (*Med.* 1238-1241)<sup>34</sup>

Medea, who would have been exiled from Corinth regardless of her plot against the royal family, does not care about the revenge the Corinthians would take against her own person. Her personal situation remains unchanged by her assassination plans. However, she is worried about what the Corinthians will inflict upon her children.<sup>35</sup>

Cyrino points out that Medea's perception of the necessity of her desperate act is like that of "real mothers who view the killing of their children as the only available recourse in a

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<sup>34</sup>. Medea discusses the necessity of filicide lest her children be killed by her enemies in 1056-1064 as well, but I have not included it in my argument as the text is disputed. Some critics believe it to be an interpolation, while others defend its authenticity. See Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 339.

<sup>35</sup>. Mastronarde notes that although Medea does not give extensive reasoning for why this will be the case, Euripides has readied the audience to accept it through the attitude of resignation expressed earlier by Medea and the chorus (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 361). In addition, although Euripides' play canonically established that Medea killed her own children, there existed versions of the myth in which the Corinthians did in fact kill Medea's children, which could have helped prepare the audience to see Medea's justification as reasonable. See Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 50-53.



hopeless dilemma.”<sup>36</sup> To Medea, filicide appears the best way out of her self-made quandary: her children are in only in danger of being killed by the Corinthians because of the way Medea plans to use them as accessories to murder. Medea’s plot against the princess and the king plays a role in her decision to kill her own children, as in her mind the one necessitates the other.

## 2.2 Preparation for Filicide in *Bacchae*

Like the filicide in *Medea*, the act of filicide plays a central role in the plot of the *Bacchae*. Agave has been crazed by Dionysus to tear apart her only son Pentheus, who is her father Cadmus’ only living male heir, as a punishment for Pentheus and Agave alike. Dionysus gets his revenge thoroughly and leaves the Thebans in a position where they must respect and honor him as a god.

Dionysus is angry with the daughters of Cadmus because of they have shown disrespect for his mother Semele, who is also their sister. In his first monologue, Dionysus explains why he has driven the daughters of Cadmus and the other women of Thebes to the mountains:

ἐπεὶ μὲν ἀδελφαὶ μητρός, ἃς ἥκιστ’ ἐχρῆν,  
Διόνυσον οὐκ ἔφασκον ἐκφῶναι Διός.

Since the sisters of my mother, who should have done so least of all, said that Dionysus was not generated from Zeus. (*Bacch.* 26-27)

Dionysus is forcing the daughters of Cadmus to recognize him as a god because of their previous refusal to do so. He does so by inflicting *mania*, “inspired frenzy,” upon the women, which will be important when considering Agave’s agency in her filicide of Pentheus.

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<sup>36</sup>. Cyrino, “When Grief Is Gain,” 7.

Before tricking Pentheus into dressing in women's garments and going to his death thus arrayed, Dionysus explains to the chorus that Pentheus is doomed to death for the sake of

“justice”, *dikē*:

γυναῖκες, ἀνὴρ ἐς βόλον καθίσταται,  
ἤξει δὲ βάκχας, οὗ θανὼν δώσει δίκην.

Women, the man is doomed to a trap, and he will come to the Bacchants, where he will receive justice by dying. (*Bacch.* 847-848)

Pentheus has wronged Dionysus by vehemently denying that he is a god. Dionysus further explains to the chorus that his purpose in punishing Pentheus so thoroughly is to showcase his divinity:

γνώσεται δὲ τὸν Διὸς  
Διόνυσον, ὡς πέφυκεν ἐντελής θεός.

And he will know that Dionysus is the son of Zeus, how he is by nature completely a god. (*Bacch.* 859-860)

Dionysus' action of killing Pentheus at the hands of Agave, while extreme, certainly demonstrates his divine prerogative and thus establishes his divinity beyond all doubt.

Dionysus emphasizes again the fact that Pentheus is killed as punishment right before he is killed. A messenger who was an eyewitness to Pentheus' death reports that the on Dionysus had told the Bacchants to τιμωρεῖσθ' ἐν, “punish him!” (*Bacch.* 1081). The brutal dismemberment of Pentheus at the hands of Agave follows shortly after this command, making it clear that Dionysus is the mastermind behind the act of filicide.

### 3 The Means of Filicide

While the filicides in *Medea* and *Bacchae* take place for similar reasons, as part of a revenge plots, they are brought about using different methods. The means by which each woman kills her offspring is significant: each woman uses an instrument typically associated with the

masculine sphere. Medea opts to use a sword against her children, whereas Agave tears Pentheus limb by limb with her bare hands under Dionysus' power. Medea has coolly calculated that she must kill her innocent children and uses an efficient method to put them to death. Agave, on the other hand, is herself being used as a means to punish Pentheus by Dionysus, and he does so with the utmost brutality.

### 3.1 The Weapons of Medea

In Euripides' play, Medea is associated with killing methods ranging from swords to magical poison. When speaking to the chorus, Medea discusses woman's attitude towards weapons generally:

γυνή γὰρ τᾶλλα μὲν φόβου πλέα  
κακή τ' ἐς ἀλκήν καὶ σίδηρον εισορᾶν.

For woman in other matters is full of fear, cowardly when it comes to battle and afraid to look at iron weaponry. (*Med.* 263-264)

In these words, Medea expresses how the use of iron weaponry is typically seen as unfeminine.

She further explains that this is not universally the case, however, saying,

ὅταν δ' ἐς εὐνήν ἡδικημένη κυρῆ,  
οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη φρήν μαιφονωτέρα.

But whenever she happens to be wronged with respect to her bed, there is no other more bloodthirsty in her mind. (*Med.* 265-266)

Here, Medea connects her forthcoming revenge act to Jason's wronging her as his wife. She claims that only his actions against her could induce her to take up weapons. This is rather ironic, as Medea's history with Jason is filled with violent acts committed by her long before his betrayal of their marriage bed. In her first speech to Jason, Medea enumerates all that she has done for him in the past: she saved his life from fire-breathing bulls, helped him sow the field of

death, killed the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece, and murdered Pelias using his own daughters (see *Medea* 475-487).

We hear in her speech to the chorus that Medea settles upon the use of magical poison, *pharmákos*, as her means to kill the princess:

ἐπεὶ κακὴν κακῶς  
θανεῖν σφ' ἀνάγκη τοῖς ἔμοῖσι φαρμάκοις.

Since there is necessity for her to die wretchedly, since she is a wretch, by my poisons.  
(*Med.* 805-806)

In the polyptoton of *kakèn kakōs*, emphasizing the wretchedness of the princess, it seems as though Medea has chosen poison as that will cause the princess the most pain in her death.

In addition to being a particularly cruel method, Foley notes that poison is a “feminine weapon.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, the use of poison as a murder weapon is consistent with the fact that Medea’s choice to commit this murder is directly related to her self-perceived identity as a woman. As Emma Griffiths notes, “the use of magic and poison would have been seen as a feminine trait.”<sup>38</sup> While in society at the time any violence committed by women would have been viewed with suspicion, magical poison would have seemed consistent with Medea’s status as a woman.

Medea further clarifies that the poison will be delivered through the appearance of a beautiful gift of golden adornment:<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>. Helene P. Foley, “Women as Moral Agents in Greek Tragedy,” in *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 260, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7s7m1.8>.

<sup>38</sup>. Emma Griffiths, *Medea* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 73.

<sup>39</sup>. It is noteworthy that the gifts Medea offered were originally given to her by her grandfather Helios. From this, Rabinowitz argues that “the gifts that Medea uses also evoke her troublesome duality, her immortal origins as well as her existence as an ordinary woman” (Rabinowitz (1993), 143). Medea is displaying extraordinary power against the princess and by extension, against Jason, in killing her. In addition, through the use of Helios’ gifts here,

πέισει χάρις ἀμβρόσιός τ' αὐγὰ πέπλον  
 χρυσότευκτόν <τε> στέφανον περιθέσθαι·  
 νερτέροις δ' ἤδη πάρα νυμφοκομήσει.

The gift and the divine gleam will persuade her to put on the gold-woven peplos and crown. And she will already be wearing her bridal apparel in the netherworld. (*Med.* 983-985)

As Amy Lather notes, “Medea exploit[s] the special connection between women and textiles for nefarious ends.”<sup>40</sup> Medea uses beautiful objects she knows the princess will find attractive to ensure the poison will take effect: she will don the fatal garments because they are beautiful. In addition, Medea’s choice to use clothing closely associated with the contraction of marriage is darkly symbolic. By combining poison with bridal garments, Medea changes the princess’ bridegroom from Jason to Hades.<sup>41</sup> The princess retains her identity as bride even as she dies because of the weapons used against her.

In contrast to the painful means of death consistent with her feminine identity, Medea opts to use a sword against her own children. In a speech half to the chorus, half to herself, Medea exhorts her hand to prepare to commit filicide: ἄγ', ὦ τάλαινα χεῖρ ἐμή, λαβὲ ξίφος, “Come, O my wretched hand, take up a sword” (*Med.* 1244). In personifying her hand, as Segal puts it, “as the mother of the children which must forget their birth for this one day,”<sup>42</sup> Medea is disembodimenting herself from the act she is about to commit. By addressing her hand in the second

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Medea’s eventual manifestation as *dea ex machina* in a chariot provided by him is foreshadowed.

<sup>40</sup>. Amy Lather, *The Materiality of Feminine Guile* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 211, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv21ptsjq.12>.

<sup>41</sup>. Mastronarde notes that the motif of a young woman’s death as marriage to Hades is present elsewhere; see Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 329.

<sup>42</sup>. Charles Segal, “On the Fifth Stasimon of Euripides’ Medea,” *The American Journal of Philology* 118, no. 2 (1997): 178.

person, Medea is externalizing what Burnett terms her “masculine, honor-oriented self” from her “feminine, hearth-oriented self.”<sup>43</sup> By addressing her hand as distinct from herself, Medea is expressing her masculine sense of honor, which demands that she kill her children to get revenge upon Jason.

In the speech discussed above, Medea identifies the weapon she plans to turn upon her children as a *xíphos*, a “sword.” Mastronarde notes that her reference to a *xíphos* is but one instance of Medea using the “language of masculine (often heroic/military) action and spheres.”<sup>44</sup> Through using such language, Medea is building her persona as a hero. Foley remarks that “No woman in tragedy—none of all those who take revenge—models her self-image so explicitly on a masculine heroic and even military model.”<sup>45</sup> Medea must frame her identity in masculine terms to justify her drastic choice to kill her children.

A sword, as a typically masculine weapon, is an appropriate choice considering the extraordinarily unfeminine nature of filicide. Still addressing her hand, Medea concludes her speech with the following:

καὶ γὰρ εἰ κτενεῖς σφ', ὅμως  
φίλοι γ' ἔφυσαν· δυστυχής δ' ἐγὼ γυνή.

For even if you kill them, somehow they were beloved to you: and I am a wretched woman.<sup>46</sup> (*Med.* 1249-1250)

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<sup>43</sup>. Burnett, “Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge,” 122.

<sup>44</sup>. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 337-338.

<sup>45</sup>. Foley, “Women as Moral Agents in Greek Tragedy,” 260.

<sup>46</sup>. Mastronarde points out that in emphasizing her wretchedness as a woman, Medea views her position as the result of “gender-conflict” (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 362).

In contrast to how Medea emphasizes her identity as woman through the identity statement ἐγὼ γυνή, “I am a woman,” Griffiths notes that her “willingness to use physical means to gain her revenge would have been seen as a male trait by the Athenian audience.”<sup>47</sup> However, it is consistent for Medea to take on masculine means for her non-feminine act: in killing her children, Medea is turning her back on the perceived purpose of her womanhood, bringing children into the world.<sup>48</sup>

Although Medea opts for the less painful method of using a sword rather than poison to kill her children, it is still not a painless means of death. In Euripides’ play, the filicide is audible but not visible on stage. We hear the voices of the children and the chorus in response to Medea’s actions: the children are frightened as they see their mother approach to kill them, and the chorus is too horrified to do anything to stop the filicide in progress. From the remark of one of the children, it is clear that Medea has carried out her plan of using a sword as a killing method: ὡς ἐγγυς ἤδη γ’ ἐσμὲν ἀρκύων ζίφους, “How near we already are to the snare of the sword” (*Med.* 1278).<sup>49</sup> Medea’s children suffer from the knowledge that it is their own mother

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<sup>47</sup>. Griffiths, *Medea*, 73.

<sup>48</sup>. In her famous speech to the chorus about the difficulties of being a woman, Medea concludes by saying ὡς τρίς ἂν παρ’ ἀσπίδα στῆναι θέλοισι’ ἂν μᾶλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἅπαξ, “How much I would rather stand with a shield three times than give birth one time!” (*Med.* 250-251). Mastronarde comments that Medea here takes advantage of “a common parallelism promoted by public ideology: serving as a soldier is the fulfillment of a man’s life in the polis, and bearing a child is the fulfilment of a woman’s” (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 213). Thus, within her society, Medea’s purpose was taken to be giving birth to children, and so killing her children directly contradicts her perceived identity.

<sup>49</sup>. Mastronarde notes that the use of *arkus*, usually carrying its literal meaning of “net,” here translated as “snare,” evokes the image of Medea as a hunter, an image also used for Agave. See Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 36.

killing them. They cannot flee from the sword of their mother, and as is unhappily the case in most (if not all) tragedies, the chorus is unable to do anything to protect them.

### 3.2 Agave's Bare Hands and Blurring of the Lines of Reality

Although the filicide is performed at the behest of Dionysus, the fact that it takes place at Agave's hands is emphasized several times. The first mention of the connection of Agave's hands and Pentheus' death comes from remarks Dionysus makes to the chorus after he has explained to Pentheus of the necessity to dress in women's clothing to spy on the maenads, but before Pentheus has explicitly consented to the scheme. He explains how Pentheus is doomed to die: he will be μητρὸς ἐκ χειρῶν κατασφαιγείς, "slain at the hands of his mother" (*Bacch.* 858). At this point, it is not obvious that Dionysus means that Pentheus will literally be killed with his mother's actual hands. Even if merely symbolic, however, Dionysus' remarks show Pentheus has a terrible fate in store.

Dionysus brings up Agave's hands again in his conversation with Pentheus after Pentheus has consented to his plan of dressing him in women's clothing. In this exchange, Dionysus and Pentheus talk past each other, and Pentheus does not see reality as it really is.<sup>50</sup> Dionysus tells Pentheus of the terrible fate which he will encounter, but Pentheus either cannot or will not understand him, thinking Dionysus is promising great honors to him:

ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΣ φερόμενος ἦξεις . . .  
 ΠΕΝΘΕΥΣ ἀβρότητ' ἐμὴν λέγεις.  
 ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΣ . . . ἐν χειρῶν μητρὸς.

DIONYSUS You will be borne ...  
 PENTHEUS You are speaking of my luxury.  
 DIONYSUS ... in the hands of your mother.<sup>51</sup> (*Bacch.* 968-969)

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<sup>50</sup>. The theme of perception versus reality recurs throughout *Bacchae*. Dionysus frequently blurs the lines between illusion and real events.

<sup>51</sup>. This exchange ends with what are, in my opinion the most chilling words of the whole play, spoken by Pentheus: ἀξίων μὲν ἄπτομαι, "Indeed I am encountering what I am worthy of"



As the audience, it is chilling to hear Dionysus' predictions, which come literally true. Pentheus, however, is so deep in his hubris that he is incapable of understanding reality until it happens to him.

The act of filicide takes place offstage, and it is reported by a messenger who has come from the mountains with a firsthand account of the horrors which took place there. Pentheus had been spying on the maenads from the highest branches of a pine tree. After they pulled the tree out by the roots to prevent Pentheus' spying, the maenads set upon him to kill him, starting first with his mother (see *Bacch.* 1114). The messenger reports that although Pentheus begged his mother to have pity on him, removing part of his disguise so that she might recognize him, ἐκ Βακχίου κατείχετ', οὐδ' ἔπειθέ νιν,<sup>52</sup> "Because she was possessed by Bacchus, she did not listen to him" (*Bacch.* 1124). Pentheus, too late, is aware of the reality Dionysus had shown him, but his mother Agave is blind to it. She is possessed by Bacchus and does not have control of her faculties either of mind or of body. It is in this state that she commits her brutal filicide:

λαβοῦσα δ' ὠλέναισ' ἀριστερὰν χέρα,  
 πλευραῖσιν ἀντιβᾶσα τοῦ δυσδαίμονος  
 ἀπεσπάραξεν ὄμον, οὐχ ὑπὸ σθένους  
 ἀλλ' ὁ θεὸς εὐμάρειαν ἐπεδίδου χεροῖν'

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(*Bacchae*, 970). As Dodds points out, at Pentheus' "unconsciously significant" final word "the audience shudders" (Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 197). The verb *háptō*, which can be translated with a range of meanings from "fasten," "grasp," "touch," to "kindle," often implies some kind of haptic physicality in the action. Pentheus receives what he is worthy of in a gruesomely physical manner when he is dismembered by his mother: he is certainly punished thoroughly for his hubris.

<sup>52</sup>. Dodds notes that the use of ἐκ implies that Dionysus is the "source of the mental state" (Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 217).

Grabbing his left arm at the elbow and bracing her foot against the ribs of the unfortunate one, she tore off his shoulder, not by strength but because the god gave dexterity to her hands. (*Bacch.* 1125-1128)

Dionysus has imbued her limbs with the strength necessary to kill her son without the aid of weapons. Pentheus receives death at the hands of his mother both literally and figuratively, a terrible punishment for his hubris.

#### 4 Animal Imagery

Euripides' use of animal imagery connects Medea and Agave: they are connected through references to Agave's son Pentheus as the offspring of a lioness. By comparing these filicidal women to animals, Euripides highlights the inhuman nature of their deeds: by performing such heinous acts, these women transgress the boundaries of humanity.

##### 4.1 Medea, Bull and Lioness

Euripides employs animal imagery in his description of Medea both before and after her act of filicide. The Nurse combines the image of a bull with that of a lion as she considers Medea's distraught state:<sup>53</sup>

καίτοι τοκάδος δέργμα λεαίνης  
ἀποταυροῦται δμωσίν

Indeed, she casts the bull-like glares of a lioness with cubs at the slaves. (*Med.* 187-188)

In this double imagery, Medea's wrath shines through. Alessandra Abbattista claims that while in the Homeric tradition, image of a lioness with cubs evokes the idea of a mother protecting her

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<sup>53</sup>. The Nurse also compares Medea to a bull in *Medea* 92-93: ἤδη γὰρ εἶδον ὄμμα νιν ταυρουμένην τοῖσδ', ὥς τι δρασείουσαν, "For already I see that she is enraged like a bull with respect to her eyes against them, being eager to do something." In this image, the Nurse is emphasizing Medea's savage anger. I have relegated this to a footnote because only lioness imagery is used for Agave.

offspring,<sup>54</sup> here “the danger is inverted, since Medea will turn her wrath, violence and fury against her own sons.”<sup>55</sup> The Nurse anticipates this tragic reversal both in her comparison of Medea to a lioness and a bull and her other expressions of concern for the safety of the children.

The double image of Medea as lioness and bull also suggests that Medea embodies multiple identities concurrently.<sup>56</sup> Ariadne Konstantinou points out that there is a fragment of Euripides (TrGF 689, 2-4) which attributes similar glares to a bull threatened by the impending attack of a lion.<sup>57</sup> From this, Konstantinou posits that “the double imagery in this case includes simultaneously aggressor and victim, hunter and hunted.”<sup>58</sup> Medea begins as the victim of Jason’s abandonment. She responds by becoming an aggressor against Jason, forming a plot to kill his future bride. When she adds filicide to her revenge plan to most completely destroy Jason, she becomes, as Lawrence suggests, her own victim.<sup>59</sup> Medea falls prey to her own aggression: she, like Jason, suffers the loss of her children.

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<sup>54</sup>. Mastronarde notes that although all animals are most threatening when with their young, “lions were particularly believed to be protective of their young” (Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 201).

<sup>55</sup>. Alessandra Abbattista, “The Vengeful Lioness in Greek Tragedy: A Posthumanist Perspective,” in *Revenge and Gender in Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Lesel Dawson and Fiona McHardy (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 213, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7h0vqp.15>.

<sup>56</sup>. The double image of bull and lioness contains the dual identities of masculine (bull) and feminine (lioness). See section 3.1 above for discussion of Medea’s simultaneous identity as masculine and as feminine in Euripides’ presentation of her as a filicidal mother.

<sup>57</sup>. Ariadne Konstantinou, “The Lioness Imagery in Greek Tragedy,” *Quaderni Urbinati Di Cultura Classica* 101, no. 2 (2012): 131.

<sup>58</sup>. Konstantinou, 131.

<sup>59</sup>. Lawrence, “Audience Uncertainty and Euripides’ Medea,” 53.

The image of Medea as a lioness appears again at the end of the play when Jason, upon hearing about Medea's filicide, calls her a lioness:

λέαιναν, οὐ γυναῖκα, τῆς Τυρσηνίδος  
Σκύλλης ἔχουσαν ἀγριωτέραν φύσιν.

You are a lioness, not a woman, having a more savage nature than the Tyrrhenian Scylla. (*Med.* 1342-1343).

Jason focuses on how her heinous crime has separated Medea from her feminine identity through emphasizing that she is οὐ γυναῖκα, "not a woman." By committing filicide, Medea violates all the norms of womanhood, and hence the image of a savage animal is appropriate.

Jason's comparison of Medea to a lioness also serves to mark his consideration that Medea has contravened her identity as human in addition to leaving behind her identity as woman through her crime. Jason's horror at Medea's willingness to commit filicide makes him consider her as someone who, as Konstantinou puts it, "has transgressed human boundaries."<sup>60</sup> He compares Medea to a lioness, a savage creature known to be dangerous because her act has placed her outside the realm of ordinary human beings.

#### 4.2 Agave, Lioness and Huntress

In *Bacchae*, Agave is portrayed as a lioness, consciously by the chorus, and subconsciously by her own words. Euripides uses this image for her to emphasize the beastlike nature of her crime, killing her son with her very hands.

The chorus is the first to refer to Pentheus as the offspring of a lioness. Their comparison comes after Dionysus has dressed Pentheus in women's clothing and convinced him to go spy on the maenads on Cithaeron:

τίς ἄρα νιν ἔτεκεν;  
οὐ γὰρ ἐξ αἵματος

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<sup>60</sup>. Konstantinou, "The Lioness Imagery in Greek Tragedy," 132.

γυναικῶν ἔφν, λεαίνας δέ τινος  
 ὄδ' ἢ Γοργόνων Λιβυσσᾶν γένος.

What then bore him? For he was not born from the blood of women but is the offspring of some lioness or of Libyan Gorgons. (*Bacch.* 987-990).

The chorus explains Pentheus' savage nature as the result of his parentage, and particularly as the result of his mother's nature.<sup>61</sup> In their words, the chorus eerily foreshadows how Agave will mercilessly tear her son limb from limb the way a lioness would tear apart its prey. In addition to foreshadowing Agave's future savagery, the chorus' description serves as commentary on Pentheus' character. Reference to Pentheus as a lion is, as Chiara Thumiger puts it, used as "a symbol of fierceness and violence."<sup>62</sup> This violence is present both in Pentheus himself and in his mother Agave.

Euripides incorporates the theme of hunting to showcase the unprecedented power Dionysus possesses over the people of Thebes. As Thumiger points out, in this play "the paradigm of the hunter is turned upside-down: the hunters are women and a feminine-looking stranger," namely Dionysus.<sup>63</sup> Agave and her sisters, as women, have done what even men cannot do in killing beasts with their bare hands. By portraying Agave as a hunter, an exclusively masculine occupation, Euripides highlights the unfeminine nature of Agave's action of filicide.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>. Dodds gives other examples of "the conventional suggestion that inhuman conduct implies inhuman origin" in his note on these lines (Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 201).

<sup>62</sup>. Chiara Thumiger, "Animal World, Animal Representation, and the 'Hunting-Model': Between Literal and Figurative in Euripides' 'Bacchae,'" *Phoenix (Toronto)* 60, no. 3/4 (2006): 203.

<sup>63</sup>. Thumiger, 202.

<sup>64</sup>. Euripides is also taking advantage of Dionysus' identity as *agreús*, "hunter" (see *Bacchae* 1192). By identifying Agave's work with that of a hunter, Euripides is implicitly connecting the agency of the act to Dionysus.

This is similar to the way the unfeminine nature of Medea's filicide is emphasized through her choice of a sword as a weapon against her children. Agave continues to boast of her deed as a successful hunt to her father until she discovers, far too late, what a terrible thing she has really done.

After she kills her son, Agave acts as though she has slain a lion. The messenger who was a first-hand eyewitness to the filicide reports that she as carried Pentheus' head, it was

ὡς ὄρεστέρου  
φέρει λέοντος διὰ Κιθαιρῶνος μέσου.

as though she carried a mountain lion through the midst of Cithaeron. (*Bacch.* 1141-1142).

From her actions, it is so clear that Agave believes Pentheus is a *léōn*, a "lion," that the messenger cannot help but compare Pentheus to one. Here, this reference is not to Pentheus' character, but to Agave's physical perception of him, evident through the way she is carrying his body.

Agave herself explicitly refers to Pentheus as being the offspring of a lioness. When Agave returns to Thebes triumphantly carrying Pentheus' head in her arms, she asks the chorus to share in her triumph, still unaware of the terrible deed she has committed. She boasts of her deed, saying,

ἔμαρψα τόνδ' ἄνευ βρόχων  
<λέοντος ἀγροτέρου><sup>65</sup> νέον ἴνιν.

I caught without nets this young son of a wild lion. (*Bacch.* 1173-1174)

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<sup>65</sup>. Although the restoration of this phrase is guesswork, I am including it in my evidence because every proposed reconstruction uses some form of *léōn*, "lion," or compound word containing that root. See Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 223.

Here, Agave boasts of her successful hunt of an *īnis*, or child, of a lion. Referring to her prey in relation to its parental origins calls to mind Agave's own parental relationship to her prey, indirectly implying that Agave herself is a lioness.

Even more chilling is hearing Agave speak of how her son Pentheus will praise her for her successful hunt. She refers again to his corpse as ἄγραν τάνδε λεοντοφυᾶ, “this lion-born hunt” (*Bacch.* 1196). By focusing on how the creature she has killed is *leontophuā*, lion-born, Agave invokes the origins and parentage of her victim. In her violence against her son Pentheus, whom she perceives as a young lion, Agave demonstrates characteristics of a lioness, capable of killing in cold blood.

The presentation of Agave as a huntress recurs when she acknowledges the role Dionysus played in her filicide, which for some time afterwards she believes was a glorious accomplishment. The messenger reports that while carrying Pentheus' head on her thyrsus, she was proclaiming Bacchus as τὸν ξυνκύναγον, τὸν ξυνεργάτην ἄγρας, “her fellow-hunter, her co-worker in the hunt” (*Bacch.* 1146). She continues to refer to her act as a hunt until Cadmus finally brings her to recognize her prey as her own son, Pentheus.

Agave is proud that she used no weapons. Upon her triumphant return from the mountains with the head of Pentheus, whom she still believes is a wild animal, Agave continues to speak of her exploits to the chorus of women sympathetic to Dionysus as an *ágra*, a “hunt” (see *Bacch.* 1202). She then boasts of how she and her sisters accomplished their hunting with their own hands. Agave reports that they killed their prey,

οὐκ ἀγκυλωτοῖς Θεσσαλῶν στοχάσμασιν,  
οὐ δικτύοισιν, ἀλλὰ λευκοπήχεσιν  
χειρῶν ἀκμαῖσι.

not with the hooked javelins of the Thessalians, nor with nets, but with the white blades of our hands. (*Bacch.* 1205-1207)

She again emphasizes the fact that she and her fellow maenads were hunting with their bare hands, saying,

ἡμεῖς δέ γ' αὐτῇ χειρὶ τόνδε θ' εἴλομεν  
χωρὶς τε θηρὸς ἄρθρα διεφορήσαμεν.

But we caught and tore apart the limbs of this beast with our own hand. (*Bacch.* 1209-1210).

Agave finds something to be proud of in her accomplishing filicide with her hands without the aid of weapons. This pride is in part because she still believes Pentheus is a *thér*, a “beast,” and not her son, which would indeed make her act a wildly successful hunt, not a brutal murder.

### 5 The Aftermath of Filicide: Vaunting over Bereft Males

After they commit their deeds, the filicidal mothers vaunt with the bodies of their children over the males whom they have left bereft of heirs. In their vaunting, Medea and Agave are seeking approval of their acts in masculine terms. In killing their children together, Medea has deprived Jason of offspring who could carry on his name after his death. She boasts of the deed she has committed as part of her revenge upon him for abandoning her. In contrast to Medea’s intentional boasting, when Agave vaunts over Cadmus, she is still ignorant of what she has done. However, like Medea has done to Jason, Agave has left her father Cadmus without any male heir by her filicide.

#### 5.1 Medea Gloats over Jason in Full Knowledge of Her Act

In the last scene of *Medea*, Medea knowingly vaunts over Jason with the bodies of their children to revenge herself upon him. Her words reveal her attitude towards her desperate act after she had committed it. After Jason ascertains from the chorus that she has killed his children, Medea delivers her final speech to him from the *mechane* in a chariot provided by her grandfather Helios:



εἰ δ' ἔμοῦ χρείαν ἔχεις,  
λέγ' εἴ τι βούλη, χειρὶ δ' οὐ ψάύσεις ποτέ·  
τοιόνδ' ὄχημα πατρὸς Ἥλιος πατήρ  
δίδωσιν ἡμῖν, ἔρυμα πολεμίας χερρός.

And if you have need of me, tell me if you want something, but do not touch me with your hand ever. My grandfather Helios gave this chariot to me as a guard from hostile hands. (*Med.* 1319-1322)

Medea is now quite literally untouchable as far as Jason is concerned. She has been granted divine protection despite her dastardly deed, and so she is in a position to explain herself to Jason. After interchanging a few longer statements, Medea and Jason enter polemical stichomythia.

At the start of their back-and-forth exchange, Medea explains to Jason that although she herself is grieved by her actions, she does not regret them, as they allowed her to get revenge on him: σάφ' ἴσθι· λύει δ' ἄλγος, ἦν σὺ μὴ ἴγγελαῖς, “Let this be clear to you: the pain is worthwhile if you do not laugh at me” (*Med.* 1362).<sup>66</sup> In these words, Medea acknowledges and accepts the pain she has brought upon herself because Jason also experiences pain from it.<sup>67</sup>

Jason laments above all the loss of legitimate offspring when he realizes what Medea has done:

ἔμοι δὲ τὸν ἐμὸν δαίμον' αἰάζειν πάρα,  
ὃς οὔτε λέκτρων νεογάμων ὀνήσομαι,  
οὐ<sup>68</sup> παῖδας οὐς ἔφυσα κάξεθρεψάμην

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<sup>66</sup>. For this translation, I am following Mastronarde's note due to the unusual use of *lúō* (see Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 382).

<sup>67</sup>. Kovacs argues that the fact that both Jason and Medea suffer from her revenge act points to “an intervention of Zeus, an intervention that both destroys Jason in a manner that befits his perjury and insures [sic] that Medea herself will be punished as well” (Kovacs (1993), 54). It is a divine prerogative to inflict punishment upon mortals, and as both Jason and Medea have transgressed acceptable human behavior, it is fitting for them to be punished together.

<sup>68</sup>. Mastronarde points out that Jason's use of οὐ rather than the expected οὔτε shows the strength of the emotions he is experiencing (see Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 380).

ἔξω προσειπεῖν ζῶντας ἀλλ' ἀπόλεσα.

It remains for me to lament my ill fortune, I who will not benefit from new marriage beds, who will not be able to speak to my children, whom I begot and raised up, while alive, but I am utterly destroyed. (*Med.* 1347-1350)

This and similar comments of Jason show that Medea chose the most effective means of revenge possible for a woman in her situation. In her vaunting over Jason, Medea reminds him of the responsibility he shares for the death of their children.

Medea reiterates the essential role that Jason's faithlessness to her in marriage played in her choice to commit filicide, laying the blame for the children's death at his feet. When Jason denies any responsibility for the death of the children, saying, οὔτοι νιν ἡμὴ δεξιὰ γ' ἀπόλεσεν, "My right hand did not destroy them" (*Med.* 1365), Medea responds, ἀλλ' ὕβρις οἱ τε σοὶ νεοδημιτεὺς γάμοι, "But your hubris and your newly formed marriage did" (*Med.* 1366). Jason even now does not understand the full significance his infidelity to his marriage vows to Medea has for her: his own fickleness has destroyed him.

## 5.2 Agave Vaunts over Cadmus, Unconscious of Her Own Pain

Similarly to how Medea vaunts over Jason with the bodies of their children, Agave vaunts over her father Cadmus with the body of her son Pentheus, or, more precisely, with his head, which she carries πῆξασ' ἐπ' ἄκρον θύρσον, "fixed upon the point of her thyrsus" (*Bacch.* 1141).<sup>69</sup> Agave, unlike Medea, is not in her right mind, and is unaware of the pain she has inflicted upon Cadmus and upon herself.

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<sup>69</sup>. According to Dodds, Agave carrying Pentheus' head on a thyrsus may be a Euripidean innovation, further clarifying that "In the pictorial tradition both before and after the date of the *Bacchae* it is carried by the hair (Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 218). The image of Pentheus' head on his mothers thyrsus enhances the gruesomeness of the scene.

When Agave sees Cadmus after has returned to Thebes with the remaining parts of Pentheus on a stretcher, she asks him to share in the joy of her successful hunt. She tells him that he ought to boast of her above all (see *Bacch.* 1233), she

ἦ τὰς παρ' ἰστοῖς ἐκλιποῦσα κερκίδας  
ἐς μείζον' ἤκω, θῆρας ἀγρεύειν χεροῖν.

who, leaving behind the shuttles beside the looms, has come into higher things, hunting wild beasts with my own two hands. (*Bacch.* 1236-1237).

Agave mentions shuttles and looms, tools used for the markedly feminine act of weaving,<sup>70</sup> as something which she has moved beyond. Although she is still unconscious that what she has done is filicide, Agave recognizes her deed as taking place outside the feminine sphere. In this, Agave distances herself from her identity as a woman, claiming masculine traits, which she sees as superior to feminine ones, for herself.

In her vaunting, Agave is seeking affirmation from her father, who is the only living male left in her family after her slaying of Pentheus. This fact Cadmus laments, pouring forth his grief to Agave after she comes to realize that she has killed her own son, not a wild beast:

διολέσαι δόμους  
κάμ', ὅστις ἀτεκνος ἀρσένων παίδων γεγώς.

You utterly destroyed this house and me, who have become barren of male children (*Bacch.* 1304-1305).

In destroying Cadmus' entire male line, Dionysus has effected revenge upon Pentheus and the Agave to match Medea's total destruction of Jason through filicide.

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<sup>70</sup>. The association of women and weaving in the ancient world is well recognized. Lather, for example, notes that "weaving was predominantly women's work" and that "it is women with whom fabulously decorated textiles are most frequently associated" (Lather, *The Materiality of Feminine Guile*, 28). She concludes from this that mentions of weaving are inherently gendered as feminine.

## 6 The End of the Plays and the Presence of the Divine

One way in which *Medea* and *Bacchae* seem to diverge significantly is the presence of the divine in the play. In *Medea*, there are no gods explicitly present in the play. Kovacs, who argues that hand of Zeus is in fact present in the action of the play, acknowledges that in much previous scholarship, “*Medea* has generally been seen as a drama taking place essentially on the human plane.”<sup>71</sup> Although *Medea*’s final manifestation on the *mechane* suggests that she herself assumes a divine, or at least a semi-divine, role, the apparent absence of deities in a traditional sense is noteworthy. In contrast, *Bacchae* is unique in the corpus for the virtual omnipresence of Dionysus in the action of the play. As Charles Segal puts it, Dionysus is present throughout in a way in which no other divinity is in the extant plays, for not only does he speak, *in propria persona*, in both prologue and epilogue (itself unique in the corpus), but in his role as the Lydian stranger he is also a major participant in the action.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, in the *Medea* and the *Bacchae*, it appears that Euripides is presenting two very different interpretations of the ways in which the divine and human planes interact. However, even with this apparently contradictory theological interpretation of the world, Dionysus and *Medea* are connected through their final appearance on the *mechane* in the role of *deus ex machina* and *dea ex machina*, respectively.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>. David Kovacs, “Zeus in Euripides’ *Medea*,” *The American Journal of Philology* 114, no. 1 (1993): 46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/295381>. I follow Kovacs in considering this to be an oversimplification of the theological landscape of *Medea*.

<sup>72</sup>. Charles Segal, “Lament and Recognition: A Reconsideration of the Ending of the ‘*Bacchae*,’” *Illinois Classical Studies* 24/25 (1999): 273.

<sup>73</sup>. There is a significant lacuna at the end of *Bacchae*. Dodds discusses the reconstruction of the lacuna in his note on 1329. For the purposes of my argument, the exact content of Dionysus’ speech is less important than the fact that he appears as *deus ex machina*, which is clear despite the lacuna.

### 6.1 Dionysus's Final Appearance Above the Stage

Dionysus is very closely involved with the action of *Bacchae* and interacts with the human characters on the stage for most of the play. At the end of the *Bacchae*, however, Dionysus appears, as Mastronarde points out, in “a higher position separate from the human characters.”<sup>74</sup> Although he has been present throughout much of the play, he was then, in Mastronarde's words, “a god disguised in human form.”<sup>75</sup> The Thebans' failure to recognize Dionysus as divine drives much of the plot of *Bacchae*. Thus, as Mastronarde notes, it is appropriate for Dionysus to appear at the end of the play in such a way that “both his manner of arrival and his position serve to underline the full revelation of his identity [and] to provide the final confirmation of his divine status.”<sup>76</sup> Through placing him above the human characters on stage, Euripides manifests Dionysus' full divinity in the final scene of the play.

As deities typically do while in such a position, Dionysus predicts the fates of those involved in the action of the play. After prophesying that Cadmus and his wife Harmonia will be

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<sup>74</sup>. Mastronarde, “Actors on High,” 273. Mastronarde notes further that Dionysus' arrival was contained in the lacuna, and so is lost (“Actors on High,” 273).

Since part of the text of *Bacchae* is lost, Dionysus' actual position within the theatre is disputed. Dodds places Dionysus above the castle on the *theologeion* (see Dodds, *Euripides: Bacchae*, 234-235). Mastronarde, while he categorizes the final scene of *Bacchae* as a scene “for which I accept (or at least contemplate) use of roof level” (see “Actors on High,” 284), also notes that “I advocate or contemplate use of the crane in opposition to the common opinion” (“Actors on High,” 281). Because of the lacuna, it is probable that scholars will never arrive at any certainty with regard to Dionysus' precise placement in this scene.

Regardless of whether Dionysus should be on the *mechane* or the *theologeion*, for my purposes what matters is that he appears above the stage, removed from the human characters in *Bacchae*. Euripides showcases Dionysus' divinity through his (literally) superior position.

<sup>75</sup>. Mastronarde, “Actors on High,” 273.

<sup>76</sup>. Mastronarde, “Actors on High,” 273.

turned into snakes but eventually rescued by Ares, Dionysus once again emphasizes his divine status, the refusal to recognize which has caused so much suffering:

ταῦτ' οὐχὶ θνητοῦ πατρὸς ἐκγεγώς λέγω  
Διόνυσος ἀλλὰ Ζηνός.

I, Dionysus, speak these words, having been born not of a mortal father but of Zeus.  
(*Bacch.* 1340-1341).

In these words, Dionysus is establishing divine authority for the predictions he is making. This is consistent with the action of the play, the purpose of which was to ensure that Dionysus be respected as the god he is.

## 6.2 Medea *Ex Machina*

Medea, although she is mortal, possesses many divine characteristics. She is the granddaughter of Helios, extraordinarily powerful, and is revealed at the end of the play in the role of *dea ex machina*: this is noteworthy as the *mechane* is usually reserved for deities. Mastronarde comments on the significance of the character's physical location in her final appearance to Jason: "the dramatically telling *deus*-like effect of [Medea's actions] depends in part on the human character's being placed exactly where a *deus ex machina* is usually placed."<sup>77</sup> The effect of Medea's being in the physical location of a god in relation to Jason at the end of the play is certainly striking. Medea's placement on the *mechane* is significant in Euripides' portrayal of this mysterious figure.

While scholars do not agree on the precise meaning of Medea's appearance on the *mechane*, they are unanimous in the opinion that it is unusual for a human character. Even Aristotle comments on Medea's appearance on the *mechane* at the end of the play in *Poetics*: he complains that in the *Medea*, the use of the device of *deus ex machina* is not a proper way to

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<sup>77</sup>. Mastronarde, "Actors on High," 263.

resolve the plot.<sup>78</sup> Maurice Cunningham concludes from Aristotle's remarks that "in performances which Aristotle had seen, Medea appeared on the *mechane* and that that device was inextricably associated in the minds of the Athenian audience with the appearance of divinities."<sup>79</sup> Euripides uses this association of *mechane* with the divine to make the audience consider Medea's potential divine status.

Mastronarde posits that Medea's position where deities usually belong is meant to evoke her "the quasi-divine (and also inhuman) status,"<sup>80</sup> which "she has taken upon herself through her revenge."<sup>81</sup> Medea has transgressed the boundaries of humanity in her choice to kill her own children, bringing her revenge from the human plane to the divine plane. Foley posits that Medea's "power to stage her final encounter with Jason from the chariot of the sun" displays that she has become "something more than human."<sup>82</sup> Euripides shows her changed status through the visual effect of literally putting Medea above the stage where human affairs play out in a place typically reserved for divine figures.

Cunningham notes that regardless of whether Medea has in fact become divine, "The important thing is that Medea appears aloft in the place and after the manner of a *theos*. She appears as a *theos* appears; she acts as a *theos* acts; and she says the sort of thing a *theos* says."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>. See *Poetics* 1454b 1-2.

<sup>79</sup>. Maurice P. Cunningham, "Medea ΑΠΟ ΜΗΧΑΝΗΣ," *Classical Philology* 49, no. 3 (July 1954): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1086/363788>.

<sup>80</sup>. Mastronarde, "Actors on High," 265.

<sup>81</sup>. Mastronarde, "Actors on High," 266.

<sup>82</sup>. Helene P. Foley, "The Masque of Dionysus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 110 (1980): 110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/284213>.

<sup>83</sup>. Cunningham, "Medea ΑΠΟ ΜΗΧΑΝΗΣ," 152.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood concurs, claiming that by being placed on the *mechane*, Medea “is dramatically distanced from normal women and zoomed toward the divine.”<sup>84</sup> Medea, like a typical goddess placed in the position of *dea ex machina*, announces to Jason his future unheroic manner of death. In putting this prophecy in her mouth, Euripides places Medea in the position of a deity, at least “on the figurative plane,”<sup>85</sup> as Lawrence argues.

In addition to noting Medea’s presentation as a possible divine entity generally, some scholars have further noted the parallels between Medea and Dionysus in particular. Carrie Cowherd argues that while Medea’s appearance on the *mechane* does not represent apotheosis in the fullest sense, she displays “the same vital force which Dionysus [demonstrates] against Pentheus,” a “real and mighty” force.<sup>86</sup> Medea appears to Jason, who suffered at her hands for his hubris against her, in much the same way as Dionysus appears to Agave and Cadmus, who suffered at his hands for their hubris against him.

Cunningham also proposes Dionysus as a “good parallel for the characterization of Medea in the exodos.”<sup>87</sup> He makes this comparison after explaining the general characteristics of the Euripidean *deus ex machina*: “they seem uniformly characterized by an arbitrary fixity of will; they are usually concerned with human affairs only so far as they affect themselves; and,

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<sup>84</sup>. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Medea at a Shifting Distance,” in *Medea*, ed. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art (Princeton University Press, 1997), 259, <http://www.jstor.org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/stable/j.ctv10vm25j.16>.

<sup>85</sup>. Lawrence, “Audience Uncertainty and Euripides’ Medea,” 54.

<sup>86</sup>. Cowherd, “The Ending of the ‘Medea,’” 139.

<sup>87</sup>. Cunningham, “Medea ΑΠΟ ΜΗΧΑΝΗΣ,” 158.



lastly, they bring the action to an end with finality and authority.”<sup>88</sup> These characteristics can all be applied to Medea in Euripides’ presentation of her in *Medea*. Her final appearance on the *mechane* places Medea in the same category as Dionysus: a vengeful deity who brings cataclysmic destruction upon those who do not afford the proper respect.

### 7 Conclusion

In *Medea* Euripides presents a woman suffering from the faithlessness of her husband Jason, who had benefitted greatly from her help in the past. To alleviate her suffering, she starts with a plan to kill Jason’s new bride (and his new father-in-law) using the typically feminine weapon of poison. Her plan for revenge becomes even more thorough through the inclusion of filicide, which will render Jason childless in addition to having the prospect of future children removed through the murder of his new bride. Medea chooses to commit this markedly non-feminine act of filicide with the masculine weapon of a sword. Afterwards, despite the pain she has caused for herself in this dastardly deed, Medea gloats over Jason, exulting in her comprehensive triumph over him. Through her final manifestation on the *mechane*, it seems she has passed from the human realm into the divine realm.

In *Bacchae* Euripides portrays a woman and her son being punished through a brutal filicide. Agave and Pentheus had disrespected Dionysus’ divine status, an act for which they both pay dearly. Unlike Medea, Agave committed her terrible crime under divine influence and not from her own forethought. While still suffering from *mania* brought upon her by Dionysus, Agave vaunts with the head of her son over her father Cadmus, to whom she has brought great grief by killing Pentheus. In the end, she is brought to share in his dejection, having to live both without her son and with the guilt of his death on her conscience.

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<sup>88</sup>. Cunningham, 158.

There are numerous similarities in the ways in which Euripides presents Medea and Agave. Each filicidal woman performs her heinous crime as an act of vengeance, shows similarities with lionesses, vaunts over the male whose line she destroyed with the bodies of her children, and displays strength of will and body in slaying her own offspring. Nonetheless, they are distinguished by the fact that Medea herself is the agent in her filicide, while Agave is the unwilling victim of the vengeful Dionysus.

In addition to Agave being a sort of double of Medea, Euripides displays Dionysus as someone who shares many characteristics with Medea. Both drive the plots of their respective plays. Medea does this through taking revenge upon Jason for the wrongs he has inflicted upon her in disrespecting their marriage bonds. In so doing, Medea demonstrates her extraordinary power and wrath. Similarly, Dionysus shows himself to be extraordinarily powerful and vengeful in response to Agave's and Pentheus' perception of him as a paltry figure. Their final revelation in a prophetic role above the other characters on stage cement the parallels between them, demonstrating Medea's semi-divine status and Dionysus' divine status, respectively.

Reading Euripides' *Medea* through the retrospective lens of his *Bacchae* reveals that vestiges of Medea are present in both Agave and Dionysus. This interpretive framework sheds light on the oppositions contained in the multidimensional, inscrutable character of Medea, who, leaving humanity behind through filicide like Agave, achieves a divinity like Dionysus', one most terrible to behold.

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