

Euripides and the Rites of Hera Akraia

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TOWARD THE END OF Euripides' *Medea*, Jason tries to storm the house and exact vengeance for the deaths of Creon, Creon's daughter, and Jason's own two children; suddenly, Medea appears on the roof above and taunts him, saying she will escape in the chariot of the sun, her father. When Jason asks to bury the children and mourn over them, she refuses with these words (1378–83):

οὐ δῆτ', ἐπεὶ σφας τῆδ' ἐγὼ θάψω χερί,
φέρουσ' ἐς Ἴηρας τέμενος Ἀκραίας θεοῦ,
ὡς μή τις αὐτοὺς πολεμίων καθυβρίση
τύμβους ἀνασπῶν· γῆ δὲ τῆδε Σισύφου
σεμνὴν ἑορτὴν καὶ τέλη προσάψομεν
τὸ λοιπὸν ἀντὶ τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου.

Medea says she will bury their children in the sanctuary of Hera Akraia, and will establish a festival and rites for them in the land of Corinth. Euripides often concludes his plays with such aetiologies, which suggest (in general) some direct link or connection between the action of the play and the 'real world' of the spectators.¹ Critics often assume, in particular, a contrast between fixed and familiar rites or practices on the one hand, and a poetic appropriation of these on the other. Page, for example, maintains that "it was the custom of Euripides at the end of his play to illustrate and explain local ceremonies," and Spira argues that aetiologies lend credibility to the drama: the *aition*, in other words, anchors the factitious, poetic text to the bedrock

¹ *Heracl.* 1030–36, *Hipp.* 1423–30, *Andr.* 1239–42, *Hec.* 1270–73, *Supp.* 1205–12, *El.* 1268–75, *IT* 1435–72, *Ion* 1575–94, *Hel.* 1670–75, *Or.* 1643–47; for recent discussions of single *aitia* see F. M. Dunn, "Fearful Symmetry: The Two Tombs of Hippolytus," *MeD* 28 (1992) 103–11; C. Wolff, "Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*: Aetiology, Ritual, and Myth," *CLAnt* 11 (1992) 308–34; A. P. Burnett, "Hekabe the Dog," *Arethusa* 27 (1994) 151–64; a more general discussion is forthcoming in F. M. Dunn, *Tragedy's End*.

of contemporary life.² Our evidence for fifth-century customs and rituals is sufficiently sparse that we cannot usually put such assumptions to the test; but in the case of Medea's children and Hera Akraia, testimonia will show that the relation between text and society is much more complicated.

Of course, we cannot reconstruct in any detail what spectators of Euripides' *Medea* would have known or believed about Corinthian rites in honor of Medea's children. But we do know that the story of Medea regularly appeared in epic, lyric, and dramatic poets and early prose writers;³ and that the shrine of Hera Akraia in Perachora was a destination for many travellers from the seventh to the fourth centuries.⁴ We can therefore begin with the assumption that viewers of the play would not

² D. L. Page, ed., *Euripides, Medea* (Oxford 1952) xxviii; A. Spira, *Untersuchungen zum Deus ex Machina bei Sophokles und Euripides* (Kallmünz 1960) 161. Some agree that this anchor is historical, a vestige of tragedy's ritual function: G. Murray, *Euripides and His Age* (New York 1913) 65; W. Burkert, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual," *GRBS* 7 (1966) 87–121. Others, like Spira, argue that the anchor is rhetorical, a gesture that makes the drama more believable or its conclusion more effective: G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 78f; W. S. Barrett, ed., *Euripides, Hippolytos* (Oxford 1964) 412; H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London 1961) 286f. Still others view the link between text and religion as formal or artificial or ironic: A. Lesky, *Greek Tragedy*, tr. H. A. Frankfurt (London 1965) 178; M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Göttingen 1954) I 436f; H. P. Foley, *Ritual Irony* (Ithaca 1985) 21f.

³ The story of Medea was told in varying degrees of detail in Hes. *Theog.*; the *Nostoi*; Eumelus' *Corinthiaca*; Cinaethon of Sparta; the *Naupactia*; and perhaps Creophylus of Samos; also in Pind. *Pyth.* 4, Simonides, and Mimnermus; Soph. *Colchides*, *Scythai*, *Rhizotomoi*, *Aegeus*; Eur. *Peliades*, *Aegeus*; and in the prose writings of Pherecydes, Hecataeus Hellanicus, Herodotus, and perhaps Creophylus of Ephesus. See more fully A. Lesky, "Medeia," *RE* 15.1 (1931) 29–65; a convenient summary in T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1993) 358–73.

⁴ See H. Payne, *Perachora: The Sanctuaries of Hera Akraia and Limenia* (Oxford 1940); C. Picard, "L'Héraeon de Pérachora et les enfants de Médée," *RA* 35 (1932) 218–29; J. Salmon, "The Heraeum at Perachora and the Early History of Corinth and Megara," *BSA* 67 (1972) 159–204; R. A. Tomlinson, "Perachora," in A. Schachter, ed., *Le Sanctuaire Grec (=Entretiens Hardt 37 [Vandoeuvres 1992])* 321–46. On the vast number of votive offerings associated with a cult dining room, see Payne 116; R. A. Tomlinson, "The Upper Terraces at Perachora," *BSA* 72 (1977) 197–202. On the elaborate water system to support a large influx of visitors, see R. A. Tomlinson, "Perachora: The Remains Outside the Two Sanctuaries," *BSA* 64 (1969) 155–258, esp. 236–40; R. A. Tomlinson and K. Demakopoulou, "Excavations at the Circular Building, Perachora," *BSA* 80 (1985) 261–79, esp. 277. The sanctuary apparently underwent renovation and expansion ca 525: cf. Tomlinson, in Schachter 335, 337.

only be familiar with stories connected with Medea, but would know that rites were held at the temple of Hera Akraia to honor her children. Details of the rites are obscure to us and would have been obscure to many contemporaries, but accounts of the myths associated with these rites are clear and consistent enough to bear comparison with the account presented in Euripides.

Various sources report the deaths of Medea's children. Pausanias (2.3.11) preserves the story that, as each of Medea's children was born,

she hid it, taking it to the temple of Hera, thinking that by hiding them they would be immortal. Finally she learned that her hope was mistaken, and was also discovered by Jason—for he did not forgive her when she asked his forgiveness, but sailed away to Iolcus—and therefore Medea also left and handed over the rule to Sisyphus.⁵

It is generally assumed that Pausanias is following Eumelus' *Corinthiaca*, and that other details of this story are supplied by a scholiast on Pindar, who reports that "Zeus fell in love with her, but Medea did not comply, avoiding the anger of Hera. Therefore Hera promised to make her children immortal, and after they died, the Corinthians honor them and call them *mixobarbaroi* (half-foreign)."⁶ According to this sketchy and apparently early version, Medea had good reason to think they would become immortal, but the children died in the temple of Hera; we are not told how they died—perhaps from the manner in which they were hidden.

The other versions, apart from those that follow Euripides, report that Corinthians killed the children at the temple of Hera. A scholiast on Euripides gives the following account, citing Parmeniscus, a pupil of Aristarchus:

⁵ Eumelus fr. 5 PEG: Μηδεία δὲ παῖδας μὲν γίνεσθαι, τὸ δὲ αἰεὶ τικτόμενον κατακρύπτειν αὐτὸ ἐς τὸ ἱερὸν φέρουσαν τῆς Ἥρας, κατακρύπτειν δὲ ἀθανάτους ἔσεσθαι νομίζουσαν· τέλος δὲ αὐτὴν τε μαθεῖν ὡς ἡμαρτήκοι τῆς ἐλπίδος καὶ ἅμα ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰάσονος φωραθεῖσαν—οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔχειν δεομένην συγγνώμην, ἀποπλέοντα (δὲ) ἐς Ἰωλκὸν οἴχεσθαι—τούτων δὲ ἔνεκα ἀπελθεῖν καὶ Μήδειαν παραδοῦσαν Σισύφῳ τὴν ἀρχήν.

⁶ SPind. *Ol.* 13.74g: ἐκεῖ δὲ αὐτῆς ὁ Ζεὺς ἠράσθη, οὐκ ἐπέιθετο δὲ ἡ Μήδεια τὸν τῆς Ἥρας ἐκκλίνουσα χόλον· διὸ καὶ Ἥρα ὑπέσχετο αὐτῇ ἀθανάτους ποιῆσαι τοὺς παῖδας, ἀποθανόντας δὲ τούτους τιμῶσι Κορίνθιοι, καλοῦντες μισοβαρβάρους. Pausanias' narrative (2.3.10f) concludes two paragraphs attributed to Eumelus; the scholiast's report follows a direct quotation from Eumelus.

The women of Corinth, unwilling to be ruled by a foreigner and a witch, plotted against [Medea] and killed her children, seven boys and seven girls. When attacked, the children fled to the temple of Hera Akraia and sat before it. The Corinthians still did not spare them but killed them all at the altar. A plague affected the city and many bodies were destroyed by sickness; when they consulted the oracles, the god pronounced that the pollution of Medea's children must be appeased. Therefore every year among the Corinthians until our own times, seven boys and seven girls of noblest parents must spend a year in the goddess' sanctuary and with sacrifices appease the anger of [Medea's children] and the resulting rage of the goddess.⁷

The scholiast goes on to report that Didymus preferred the version of Creophylus:

Medea, having finished her time in Corinth, is said to have poisoned Creon, the city's ruler. Afraid of his friends and relatives, she fled to Athens, but because her sons were young and could not accompany her, she sat them by the altar of Hera Akraia, thinking their father would see to their safety. But Creon's kinsmen killed them and gave the explanation that Medea killed not only Creon but also her own children.⁸

The version attributed to Parmeniscus attempts to rationalize myth with ritual, and that attributed to Creophylus concludes with a detail that derives from Euripides; but both reflect a

⁷ Σ*Med.* 264: Παρμενίσκος γράφει κατὰ λέξιν οὕτως· “ ταῖς δὲ Κορινθίαις οὐ βουλομέναις ὑπὸ βαρβάρου καὶ φαρμακίδος γυναικὸς ἄρχεσθαι αὐτῆ τε ἐπιβουλεύσαι καὶ τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς ἀνελεῖν, ἐπτὰ μὲν ἄρσενά, ἐπτὰ δὲ θήλεα. [Εὐριπίδης δὲ δυσὶ μόνοις φησὶν αὐτὴν κεχρησθαι.] ταῦτα δὲ διωκόμενα καταφυγεῖν εἰς τὸ τῆς Ἀκραίας Ἴρας ἱερὸν καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ ἱερὸν καθῆσαι. Κορινθίους δὲ αὐτῶν οὐδὲ οὕτως ἀπέχεσθαι, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τοῦ βωμοῦ πάντα ταῦτα ἀποσφάζαι. λοιμοῦ δὲ γενομένου εἰς τὴν πόλιν πολλὰ σώματα ὑπὸ τῆς νόσου διαφθειρέσθαι. μαντευομένοις δὲ αὐτοῖς χρησμοδῆσαι τὸν θεὸν ἰλάσκεσθαι τὸ τῶν Μηδείας τέκνων ἄγος. ὅθεν Κορινθίους μέχρι τῶν καιρῶν τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς καθ’ ἕκαστον ἐνιαυτὸν ἐπτὰ κούρους καὶ ἐπτὰ κούρας τῶν ἐπισημοτάτων ἀνδρῶν ἐναπενιαυτίζειν ἐν τῷ τῆς θεᾶς τεμένει καὶ μετὰ θυσιῶν ἰλάσκεσθαι τὴν ἐκείνων μῆνιν καὶ τὴν δι’ ἐκείνους γενομένην τῆς θεᾶς ὀργήν. ”

⁸ Σ*Med.* 264: τὴν γὰρ Μηδεῖαν λέγεται διατρίβουσαν ἐν Κορίνθῳ τὸν ἄρχοντα τότε τῆς πόλεως Κρέοντα ἀποκτεῖναι φαρμάκοις. δεῖσασαν δὲ τοὺς φίλους καὶ τοὺς συγγενεῖς αὐτοῦ φυγεῖν εἰς Ἀθήνας, τοὺς δὲ υἱοὺς, ἐπεὶ νεώτεροι ὄντες οὐκ ἠδύναντο ἀκολουθεῖν, ἐπὶ τὸν βωμὸν τῆς Ἀκραίας Ἴρας καθῆσαι νομίσασαν τὸν πατέρα αὐτῶν φροντιεῖν τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν. τοὺς δὲ Κρέοντος οἰκείους ἀποκτείναντας αὐτοὺς διαδοῦναι λόγον ὅτι ἡ Μηδεῖα οὐ μόνον τὸν Κρέοντα, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτῆς παῖδας ἀπέκτεινε. Cf. Creophylus of Samos fr. 9 PEG; Creophylus of Ephesus, *FGrHist* 417 F 3.

widespread tradition that the Corinthians killed the children at the temple of Hera Akraia. In fact, all sources independent of Euripides fall into two classes: Eumelus apparently reported that Medea's desire to make her children immortal resulted in their death at the temple of Hera; others report that the Corinthians murdered them at the same temple (Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.9.28; Paus. 2.3.6; Philostr. *Her.* 53.4; Ael. *VH* 5.21; *ΣMed.* 1382b).⁹

Other accounts either follow Euripides directly, or attempt to rationalize his version with the more common story of murder by the people of Corinth. The untrue story that Medea murdered the children is one such rationalization, found not only in Creophylus but more explicitly in Parmeniscus, who reported that the Corinthians paid Euripides five talents to make Medea the murderess.¹⁰ Instead of rationalizing the different accounts of their death, Diodorus (4.54.7) confuses them: after reporting, as in Euripides, that Medea had revenge upon Jason by murdering the children and burying them in the sanctuary of Hera, Diodorus goes on to say (4.55.1) that the Corinthians "were at a loss concerning burial of the children. Therefore they sent to Pytho to ask the god what should be done with the children's bodies, and the Pythia gave instructions to bury them in the sanctuary of Hera and pay them heroic honors." If Medea had buried the children, why were the Corinthians at a loss? Diodorus has conflated the usual account in which the Corinthians, after murdering the children, are told by the oracle to establish sacrifices in their honor, with that of Euripides, in which Medea kills and buries the children herself.¹¹ Representations in art, all later than Euripides, likewise follow the tragedian's account of the children's murder by Medea, yet frequently incorporate details (altar, column with statue) that recall the story of their

⁹ Discussion in P. Roussel, "Médée et le meurtre de ses enfants," *REA* 22 (1920) 157-71; J. Tolstoï, "La scholie au vers 264 de la *Médée* d'Euripide," *REG* 43 (1930) 139-46; A. Brelich, "I figli di Medeia," *StMatSR* 30 (1959) 213-54.

¹⁰ *ΣMed.* 10: ὡς ἄρα πέντε τάλαντα λαβὼν παρὰ Κορινθίων Εὐριπίδης μεταγάγοι τὴν σφαγὴν τῶν παιδῶν ἐπὶ τὴν Μήδειαν: cf. Ael. *VH* 5.21: καὶ τὸ δράμα Εὐριπίδην φασὶ διαπλάσαι δεηθέντων Κορινθίων, καὶ ἐπικρατῆσαι τοῦ ἀληθοῦς τὸ ψεῦδος διὰ τὴν τοῦ ποιητοῦ ἀρετὴν.

¹¹ It is therefore unnecessary, with Vogel, to delete καὶ τὰ σώματα τούτων ἐν τῷ τῆς Ἥρας τεμένει θάψαι from the earlier passage (4.54.7). Likewise, Eusebius (*Contra Marc.* 1.3) says (following Euripides) that Medea killed her children, and (following the traditional account) that an oracle told the Corinthians to establish sacrifices.

murder at the temple of Hera Akraia.¹² As Gantz (*supra* n.3: 369f) concludes, “the Archaic period would seem to have offered two distinct traditions, one in which Medeia inadvertently kills her children, the other in which the Corinthians do it deliberately. To these Euripides would then add as a third possibility the slaying of them by their mother for revenge.” We should add that of the two pre-Euripidean versions, the story of murder by the Corinthians was, or became, much more prevalent.¹³

When we return to Euripides’ aetiology, we find that instead of invoking familiar customs, the playwright recasts these in novel and unusual ways. Let us begin with the childrens’ burial. At the end of the play, dramatic attention is squarely focused upon the bodies of the two boys: Jason enters intending to rescue the children (1303); when he learns that Medea has already killed them, he begs her to let him bury them (1377); and her final act of revenge, after killing her own sons, is to take the bodies with her and deny Jason any part in their burial. Does this climactic contest over the rights of burial lend new significance to a familiar tomb? Does that familiar grave in turn give the dramatic fiction a ring of truth? What is most striking here is the *lack* of any such correspondence. The drama places most weight upon the physical act of burial—performed by Medea, not Jason, and performed out of Jason’s reach at a shrine on the outskirts of Corinthian territory. The traditions that survive, on the other hand, tell us nothing about the burial: they tell us where the children died (at the temple of Hera Akraia), and how (accidentally at Medea’s hands, or intentionally at the Corinthians’), but have no knowledge of, and no apparent interest in, the circumstances of their burial (the exception being Diodorus, who, as we have seen, conflates the earlier

¹² Altar: Lucanian calyx krater *ca* 400 (*LIMC* VI [1992] *s.v.* “Medeia,” no. 36), Apulian volute krater *ca* 330 (no. 29), Campanian neck-amphora *ca* 330 (no. 30), Augustan (?) glass paste gem (no. 15), carnelian gem 1stc. B.C. (no. 16); column with statue: Campanian neck-amphora *ca* 330 (no. 31), Augustan (?) gem (no. 15); M. Schmidt, *LIMC* VI esp. 396; Page (*supra* n.2) lvii–lxviii.

¹³ Neophron may have anticipated Euripides’ innovation. Most scholars have accepted Page’s argument that Neophron’s *Medea* belongs to the fourth century, but this view has recently been challenged by B. Manuwald, “Der Mord an den Kindern: Bemerkungen zu den Medea-Tragödien des Euripides und des Neophron,” *WS* 17 (1983) 27–61, and A. N. Michelini, “Neophron and Euripides’ *Medeia* 1056–80,” *TAPA* 119 (1989) 115–35. My argument does not require Euripides’ priority.

story of their murder by the Corinthians with Euripides' account of their burial). The text of the play, instead of anchoring itself in the bedrock of contemporary customs, anchors itself in quicksand, in a burial site that is poorly attested and may not have been known to Euripides' contemporaries.

One might suppose, of course, that the problem is simply one of sources: perhaps Euripides' audience was suitably aware of a burial site for which we lack evidence. There are several reasons why this is unlikely. Given that our sources state or imply that the children died at the temple of Hera Akraia, and that all fail to mention that they were buried there, then even if a tomb existed at Hera's temple, the existence of this tomb was not widely reported. This leaves us with much the same problem: why does the text establish such an overt connection to an obscure or insignificant tomb?

But there are two reasons to believe that there was no such tomb at all. First, when Pausanias visited Corinth (2.3.6f), he was shown a spring called Glauke (named for Jason's bride), and near this spring

is the tomb of Medea's children.¹⁴ Their names were Mermerus and Pheres, and they are said to have been stoned to death by the Corinthians because of the gifts they reportedly brought to Glauke. But because their death was violent and unjust, newborn Corinthians were destroyed by them until, at the oracle's command, yearly sacrifices were established for them, and a terror was set up. The latter survives to this day, a rather terrifying statue of a woman. But after Corinth was laid to waste by the Romans and the old Corinthians were destroyed, those sacrifices were no longer established for them by the settlers, nor do their children cut their hair or wear black clothing.

Pausanias and his informants follow the usual version in which the Corinthians are responsible, although in this telling the sacrilegious murder in Hera's sanctuary is reported simply as a "violent and unjust death," and emphasis is placed instead upon a statue and grave within the city of Corinth. If other sources locate the scene of death outside the city in Perachora, and are

¹⁴ μνημά ἐστι τοῖς Μηδείας παῖσιν (2.3.6) is often correctly translated as "grave" or "tomb." E. Will, *Korinthiaka* (Paris 1955) 92, takes the word to mean "memorial," but there is no precedent for this meaning in Pausanias, for whom μνημα and τάφος are equivalent: see F. M. Dunn, "Pausanias on the Tomb of Medea's Children," *Mnemosyne*, forthcoming.

ignorant of the children's burial, why does a late source report a tomb inside the city? It is unlikely that Pausanias, and he alone, preserves an ancient tradition lacking in all other accounts. Most likely, the place of burial was not part of the story until, at some late date, this gap was filled by adding an epilogue in which the children's bodies were buried in the city, and this addition was validated by the discovery of a tomb near the spring of Glauke. There would have been little reason to fashion such a story if the children were already known to be buried at the temple of Hera.¹⁵

I suspect that modern scholars have been just as eager to fill this gap in the mythical tradition; but for a tradition of offering honors to Medea's children in Hera's sanctuary does not require knowledge of their tomb or burial place. Heracles was worshiped throughout the Greek world but lacked a tomb; the Dioscuri likewise received honors in many places, but only Castor was known to be buried at Therapne; and Erechtheus was worshiped together with Poseidon in the Erechtheum, but Erichthonius, not he, was buried there.¹⁶ Such other heroes as Pelops and Achilles had known tombs but were worshiped elsewhere.¹⁷ And a number of heroes were venerated in a manner that denied or concealed the existence of a tomb. The Trozenians (Paus. 2.32.1) underscored the special stature of Hippolytus by denying him a place of burial: "they do not allow that he died dragged along by his horses, nor do they show his grave although they know it. But they believe that the so-called Charioteer in the sky is that Hippolytus, receiving this honor from the gods." Sophocles (*OC* 1522f) likewise emphasizes the heroic stature of Oedipus by keeping the place of his death and

¹⁵ R. L. Scranton ("Temple C and the Sanctuary of Hera Akraia," in R. Stillwell *et al.*, *Corinth* I.2: *Architecture* [Cambridge 1941] 131–65) assumed that the children were indeed buried in the city, and argued that the temple of Hera Akraia was located not in Perachora but over the fountain house of Glauke. This hypothesis, followed by Dunbabin (in Payne [*supra* n.4] 20), Will (*supra* n.14: 90f), Brelich (*supra* n.9: 217 n.4), and Salmon (*supra* n.4: 200 n.241), is now fully discredited: C. K. Williams and O. H. Zervos, "Corinth 1983: The Route to Sikyon," *Hesperia* 53 (1984) 83–122, esp. 97–104.

¹⁶ Castor: Paus. 3.13.1; Erichthonius: Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.7; see E. Kearns, "Between God and Man: Status and Function of Heroes and Their Sanctuaries," in Schachter, ed. (*supra* n.4), 65–68, 84 n.23.

¹⁷ Pelops was worshiped at Olympia, some distance from the sanctuary in Pisa containing his bones (Paus. 5.13.2, 6.22.1); Achilles was thought to be buried in the Troad but was worshiped at Elis (Paus. 6.23.3).

disappearance a secret known to Theseus alone. Plutarch reports (*Mor.* 578 B–C) that the Theban hipparch sacrificed to Dirce at a secret grave known only to himself. In the sanctuary of Aeacus in Aegina there is no grave, but there was an altar (βωμός) that, Pausanias (2.29.6, 8) assures us, was secretly said to be his tomb. And the “last of the heroes,” according to the Pythia, was Cleomedes, whom the Astypalaeans worshiped after his body disappeared in the sanctuary of Athena (Paus. 6.9.7f).¹⁸ The children of Medea, Euripides tells us, will receive a festival and rites in the land of Corinth; we know, in fact, that they were honored at the sanctuary of Hera with “a mystical (τελεστικός) and inspired lament” (Philostr. *Her.* 53.4), “a mournful festival” (*Σ Med.* 1379), and heroic honors (τιμῶν ἡρωικῶν: Diod. 4.55.1). Clearly the nature and meaning of these rites is closely tied to the death of the children. But just as clearly, these rites were not attached to a known place of burial.¹⁹

The connection between text and ‘real world’ is more intractable than ever: the *aition* anchors the dramatic action to a site that need not have existed, and whose existence may explicitly have been rejected by contemporary practice and belief. Before considering possible reasons for such a problematic connection, I would like to draw attention to several further inconsistencies.

In Euripides, as we have seen, dramatic interest in the final scene is focused squarely upon the children’s burial, and in particular upon a place of burial not accessible to Jason; in sources independent of Euripides, on the other hand, burial of the children is apparently irrelevant or unknown. The converse is par-

¹⁸ Alcmena was likewise worshiped at Thebes after her body disappeared and was replaced by a stone (Pherecydes, *FGrHist* 3 F 84; Paus. 9.16.7; Diod. 4.58.6), although the people of Megara claimed that her body was buried there (Paus. 1.41.1).

¹⁹ On the authority of Pausanias, Picard (*supra* n.4) argues for two separate forms of worship: initiation rites at Perachora and funeral rites in the city of Corinth, from which he reconstructs separate traditions of fire worship and earth worship associated with Medea. Yet not even Pausanias locates rites for the children within the city; he points to a tomb, and then refers to discontinued rites without specifying where they might have taken place. Tomlinson (in Schachter, ed. [*supra* n.4], 325f) perpetuates the mistaken belief in a separate temple of Hera Akraia within the city, incorrectly citing Eur. *Med.* 1378–83, which offers no support at all, and *Σ Med.* 1379, which places the temple *not* on Pausanias’ road to Sicyon but on the acropolis, in an attempt to explain the epithet Akraia: Ἀκραίας θεοῦ· τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροπόλει τιμωμένης ... Ἀκραία δὲ εἶρηται παρὰ τὸ ἐν τῇ ἀκροπόλει ἰδρῦσθαι.

tially true as well: the focus of interest in other sources, although (in radically altered fashion) a concern of the drama, is not of interest in the final scene and its aetiologies. Surviving accounts are concerned above all with the unnatural or transgressive way in which Medea's children died, whether in Medea's abortive attempt to secure their immortality or in their sacrilegious murder by the Corinthians. The pollution attached to the children's improper death is what somehow leads to the institution of rituals in their honor. In the accounts apparently derived from Eumelus crucial details are lost, but the honors paid by Corinthians to the *mixobarbaroi* apparently take the place of their promised immortality and atone for their undeserved and unintended death. In other accounts the death is clearly sacrilegious: the Corinthians whomurdered these suppliants in Hera's sanctuary are punished with a plague, and the murder is atoned for by rites established at the oracle's command; impure deed and rites of atonement are explicitly connected.²⁰

Euripides, however, rather than anchoring the drama in this ritual model or paradigm, reverses and overturns it: in *Medea* the hideous act is a mother's murder of her own children, and the play makes it terribly clear that no atonement will follow. Not only is Medea never punished for this hideous deed, but the entire closing scene demonstrates the opposite, showing in chilling fashion that Medea acts with impunity and making it clear, as she departs upon the chariot of the Sun, that neither verbal recriminations nor the taint of pollution can touch her.²¹ Far from anchoring the drama in contemporary custom, the end of *Medea* enacts events with which ritual cannot cope; it stages a breach or crisis that familiar ritual process is powerless to resolve.

Rather than a reassuring or convincing correspondence between events of the play and contemporary practice, we

²⁰ On the pattern of transgression and calamity often described as leading to the institution of ritual, see A. Brelich, *Paides e Parthenoi* (Rome 1969); cf. J. Redfield, "From Sex to Politics: The Rites of Artemis Triklaria and Dionysos Aisymnetes at Patras," in D. M. Halperin *et al.*, ed., *Before Sexuality* (Princeton 1990) 115–34 at 123. The transgressive or sacrilegious nature of the children's death is reinforced by thematic similarities to human sacrifice: see P. Bonnechère, *Le sacrifice humain en Grèce ancienne* (=Kernos Suppl. 3 [Athens 1994]) 71–74.

²¹ Cf. Medea's quasi-divine power and detachment: B. Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," in his *Word and Action* (Baltimore 1979) 303–06.

have a surprising disjunction: the burial that is so important to the drama is apparently unknown in contemporary accounts, while the action of the play overturns the emphasis in these stories upon transgression and atonement. Inconsistencies in detail underscore the disjunction. We might ask, for example, why Medea, as she makes her spectacular departure for Aegeus and Athens, announces that she will interrupt her journey to bury the children in Perachora. And we may wonder why she gives as her reason the need to protect them from the *hybris* of their enemies, who might destroy their tombs (1380f: ὡς μή τις αὐτοῦς πολεμίων καθυβρίσῃ, τύμβους ἀνασπῶν). If her purpose is to deny Jason a part in their burial, why bury them in Corinthian territory at all? And if Medea has murdered the children, what other enemies do they have? The answer must surely be that, despite the very different premises of this play, its language is more appropriate to those versions in which Medea left the children as suppliants in Hera's sanctuary, fearing that their enemies the Corinthians might do them harm. Again, we might ask why Medea, now that her vengeance against Jason is complete, should bother with establishing festivals in Corinth. We should wonder, in particular, why she promises a holy festival and rites that will atone for their sacrilegious murder (1383: τὸ λοιπὸν ἀντὶ τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου).²² Why does the triumphantly vindictive Medea refer to the children's death as an act of sacrilege (τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου)? The answer is that Medea, who is terrifying in this play precisely because she exacts extreme revenge and escapes the consequences, uses language that belongs to a different Medea—the woman whose children were murdered by Corinthians at the sanctuary of Hera, and who might truly complain of a *δυσσεβῆς φόνος*. This leaves a further problem: why does Euripides not only introduce aetiologies that do not seem to square with contemporary rites at Hera Akraia, but also use language that draws attention to these inconsistencies?

One might argue that the playwright had no choice. Having altered the legend of Medea at Corinth by introducing Jason's infidelity, Medea's jealous vengeance, and her deliberate mur-

²² On use of ἀντί to indicate rites of atonement at *Med.* 1383 and *Hipp.* 1423, cf. Wolff (*supra* n.1) 316.

der of the children,²³ the conventional account of the children's death and the rites in their honor would no longer apply. If Euripides had wished to mention Hera Akraia and these rites, he would have had to give a new account of these institutions. Because the children were already dead, he places their burial, rather than their murder, at the sanctuary of Hera Akraia, and he makes burial by Medea part of her revenge against Jason who is thus denied a part in their funeral; but rather than alter the traditional explanation beyond recognition, he uses wording that recalls the more familiar account (ὡς μή τις αὐτοῦς πολεμίων καθυβρίση, 1380, and ἀντὶ τοῦδε δυσσεβοῦς φόνου, 1383). If the playwright tailors customs to fit his story, this is far from an *aition*. Rather than fashioning a plot that will explain existing customs, he refashions customs in accordance with his plot; and rather than grounding a fictional play in real institutions, he treats both the legend of Medea and Corinthian customs with considerable freedom.²⁴

But why does Euripides mention these institutions at all, at the expense of offering a novel and unfamiliar version? There is an obvious dramatic gain in Medea's final act of revenge, spitefully depriving Jason of the privilege of burial; but this does not require Medea to specify where and how she will bury the children, nor does it call for mention of the festival and rites; if anything, the latter detracts from the scene by interrupting the bitter conflict between Jason and Medea. Is it likely that Euripides, having so convincingly portrayed Medea as the murderer of her own children, carelessly introduces details that recall their murder by the Corinthians? It seems most likely that the incongruities are deliberate and draw attention to the liberties the playwright has taken with the plot. By the end of the play, the audience is fully immersed in the excitement and suspense

²³ Roussel (*supra* n.9) argues, against Wilamowitz, that these elements of the plot are found in versions of the legend before Euripides, but that Medea's deliberate murder of the children to avenge Jason's infidelity is a very original handling of these elements; cf. L. Séchan, *Études sur la tragédie grecque* (Paris 1926) 589–94, and "La légende de Médée," *REG* 40 (1927) 234–310, esp. 251ff; Page (*supra* n.2) xxii–xxv. On the possibility of prior innovation by Neophron, see *supra* n.13.

²⁴ The degree of innovation in Euripidean *aitia* varies considerably. The description of Trozenian rites in *Hipp.* seems traditional; in *Med.* only details are altered; in *Heracl.* Eurystheus is buried at a location otherwise unattested (Pallene, rather than the Megarid, Marathon, or Gargettos); and in *Supp.* the tripod and knife seem to have been invented.

of Euripides' version of the legend, following Medea's passion to its hideous and awe-inspiring conclusion. But when she says she will bury her children in Hera's sanctuary, we are reminded that Medea (not the Corinthians) killed the children, deliberately (unlike her counterpart in Eumelus); when she says their bodies will be safe from enemies, we are reminded that Medea (not the Corinthians) committed sacrilege against them; and when she says she will establish rites to atone for their murder, we recall that Medea (unlike the Corinthians) will not suffer for her crime.

Mention of these familiar institutions in altered form draws attention to the innovative handling of the plot, and to the striking difference between Euripides' Medea and her traditional counterparts. The aetiologies at 1378–83 do not explain the origins of Corinthian landmarks and festivals, but they do emphasize the shocking novelty of Euripides' passionate and vengeful Medea—a creature somewhere between Corinthian queen, Colchian sorceress, and immortal god.²⁵ And rather than point to the more solid ground of contemporary ritual, these aetiologies point to the originality of a playwright who not only rewrites the persona of Medea, but rewrites the institutions associated with her, creating for the children a place of burial far from their grieving father, and overturning the ritual of atonement in Medea's shocking freedom from the consequences of her transgression.

Euripidean drama may disturb, entertain, or instruct. It can also create, revise and transform: just as the poet plays with traditional details of the plot (*e.g. Electra*) and with dramatic conventions such as mask and impersonation (*e.g. Bacchae*), he also plays with the plot's relation to rites and institutions. Given the claims in contemporary criticism that culture 'writes' literature, it is instructive to find that in Euripides the opposite is true as well: the poet's factitious text has the power to rewrite not only character and legend but the 'real world' of cultural practice and belief.²⁶

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²⁵ Medea is represented as queen of Corinth by Eumelus and Simonides (*ΣMed.* 10; Paus. 2.3.10), as a sorceress in Euripides, and as an immortal by Musaeus (*ΣMed.* 10) and perhaps by Alcman and Hesiod (*Athenagoras Leg. pro Christ.* 14.1).

²⁶ My thanks to Boromir Jordan and Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge for their helpful suggestions.