

6-1992

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Recommended Citation

Blankenship, Debra (1992) "Oikos and Polis in the Medea: Patterns of the Heart and Mind," *Anthós Journal* (1990-1996): Vol. 1: No. 3, Article 14.

Available at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss3/14

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OIKOS AND POLIS IN THE MEDEA: PATTERNS OF THE HEART AND MIND

Debra Blankenship

The composite of history, culture and society has always been the matrix for human creativity. The context of time and place continually has shaped the possibilities and directions of creative expression. History forms the warp threads while culture and society supply the colors and materials of the weft. Individuals weave their own peculiar patterns and textures, using what is at hand. Such metaphor entertains the intriguing possibility of looking back over the intricate fabric of human endeavor and focusing on certain responses by individuals to their particular juncture in time. In keeping with these remarks, this paper will examine how the Greek playwright Euripides used what S.C. Humphreys noted as the "main symbolic form of classical Athens: tragedy" as a medium for comment on the milieu of fifth century B.C. Athenian life (18). Specifically, the discussion will center on Euripides' play, *The Medea* and the ways in which he invoked the dichotomy of traditional values associated with the deeply inculcated concepts of *oikos* and *polis*.

The terms *oikos* and *polis* — household and city — represent the most fundamental categories of social interaction in fifth century B.C. Athens. *Polis*, the life of the city, was egalitarian, competitive and impersonal. It was

"the masculine world of politics and the *polis*, power and honor, taking first place in Athenian values" (Humphreys, 4). By contrast, *oikos* was the private domain marked by the interpersonal, by the hierarchy of family relationships. It was the world of women, children and slaves, all of whom had no place or status in the workings of Athenian public life. Even the architectural arrangements of classical Athens reflected the contrast of these two types of social relationship. *Oikos* contacts were confined to the closed space of private households while the public roles of *polis* were transacted in the open arenas of the assembly, marketplace, law-court, theater and battlefield.

The concepts of *oikos* and *polis* were deeply ingrained in the earliest descriptions of Greek culture. Homer's epic heroes, Achilles and Hector, portray differing responses to the demands of these two spheres of human experience. Hector went into battle motivated by the public honor of defending Troy and by the duty of keeping his *oikos* intact with the pleas of Andromache to not let her and their son be taken captive ringing in his ears. Achilles, on the other hand, exhibited a level of *aristeia* resulting from all social codes being thrown aside in order to avenge the personal disaster of public shame. (The implications will be discussed later; however, Achilles' transformation into an insatiable monster when he does so should be noted as a theme reworked by Euripides in the actions of his character, Medea.) Although the preeminence of a man in his public honor and status comes through unequivocally in the epic tradition, the ties of *oikos*, of home and primary relationships represented by the faithful Penelope, function as the impetus for the return of the Homeric hero, Odysseus, from his voyages.

To a great extent, the constructs of *oikos* and *polis* symbolized the separate worlds of women and men. However, by the fifth century B.C. the rise of democratic government intensified this separation. As Roger Just

observes: "democracy accentuated a major disparity between the lives of men and women; a disparity which can be seen in terms of the continual contrast between public and private which runs through Athenian thought" (23). Under democratic rule, men were increasingly involved with politics and the public life of the city. The civic ideals of rationality, impartiality, self-control and impersonal disregard for private interests or loyalties also represented male virtue and honor. Excellence as a citizen required the exercise of these qualities to ensure the best interests of the city-state. Women, as non-citizens, were excluded from public life; excluded to the extent of being treated as outsiders to Athenian society along with metics and slaves. An exclusion that, in addition, rendered them highly suspect. As the symbolic embodiment of *oikos* values of loyalty, emotionality and the personal ties to family, women were viewed as a threat to the very ideals deemed necessary to the government of the city-state. Humphreys refers to a 1975 article by Roger Just wherein he describes male virtues and masculine psychology in classical Greece as centered around self-control, rationality and the capacity to not give way to emotion while women, in contrast, were seen as psychologically unfree and incapable of controlling themselves. Needless to say, there was enormous social and psychological pressure to keep *oikos* from interfering in the masculine domain of *polis*.

Although Freudian insights into human psychosocial development were still centuries away from being formulated, the underlying tensions and conflicts in a society that sought to so completely control emotions and distance primary relationships can still be discerned. In the theater, more so than any other area of classical Greek life, the strength and nature of these tensions becomes accessible. The action in tragedy centers around the contrast and juxtaposition of *oikos* and *polis* in the events of Greek life. Humphreys makes the statement that "tragedy is private life 'raised' to the political

level; both spheres are equally essential to it and the ostensibly heirarchic relation between them is, implicitly, constantly called into question" (73). She goes on to note that the strong women characters of tragic drama with their exaggerated departure from female norms to the extent of appearing quasi-masculine were greatly compelling to dramatists and audiences. She suggests this fascination stems not from viewing Greek tragedy as a discourse on relations between the sexes but rather as a discourse on the relation between public and private life (72).

In his tragedy, *The Medea*, Euripides evokes the dichotomy of values present in these cultural constructs of *oikos* and *polis*. By doing so, his retelling of the traditional Medea story becomes, also, a discourse on the relation between public and private life. He weaves into the actions of his three main characters three different combinations of emotionality and rationality, loyalty and distancing, public and private concern.

Jason's actions are grounded solely in rationality. He considers the end he seeks of public honor, esteem and position by marrying the Corinthian princess as completely justifying the means of getting there, even though it means the betrayal of his vows to Medea and the abandonment of his family. In the face of Medea's legitimate outrage at being cast aside, he argues that taking advantage of the opportunity to make a royal alliance is in everyone's best interests. (Particularly ironic since these interests mean exile for Medea and their sons.) After all, points out Jason, "What luckier chance could I have come across than this, / An exile to marry the daughter of a king" (lines 553-554). He classifies Medea's angry protestations as stemming from lack of self-control and as irrational. It is exactly what would be expected from a woman, a member of the uncivilized outsiders of society. There is no room in Jason's plan for considering what impact his actions might have on others. It is simply the most rational and politically expedient thing to do: send Medea and their

sons into exile and marry the princess.

Jason emerges as a shining example of completely, rationally and impartially separating his public goals from any connections or investments in his private life. He also appears as an egocentric, callous opportunist, unable to recognize any connection between his actions and Medea's response. Euripides portrays him as naked self-interest justified by the convention of *polis* rationality.

King Creon, on the other hand, allows his deep love of his family to influence his official duties and affect his actions. This combination of *oikos* and *polis* is no less disastrous than Jason's position. When Creon confronts Medea and orders her and her children into exile immediately, it is clear that he is taking this action in order to protect his family. It is the interests of his children that is at the heart of Creon's actions, children he claims to love more than anything, with even his love for his country coming second (lines 327-330). Medea capitalizes on this aspect of Creon's character to bargain for just one more day before going into exile so she can ostensibly make arrangements to support her children. "What you say sounds gentle enough. Still in my heart / I greatly dread that you are plotting some evil..." speaks Creon, "And by showing mercy I have often been the loser. / Even now I know I am making a mistake. / All the same you shall have your will..." (316-17; 349-51). This decision to give Medea one more day, decided for against his better judgment, proves disastrous for Creon and his daughter, Jason's bride-to-be. During the twenty-four hour reprieve, Medea poisons the princess. Creon discovers his dead daughter, considers not the responsibilities of kingship and declares "O let me die with you, my child!" (line 1210), throws himself across her body and becomes another victim of the poison.

Medea is easily the strongest person in terms of action in the drama. Her decision to murder her children in order to punish Jason and avenge her honor is particularly chilling — because

it stems not from a disregard of *oikos* ties but rather from a place of full recognition of their importance to individuals and society. Her anger towards Jason is rooted in his easy disregard of what she considers the permanent bonds of *oikos*. Paradoxically, it is exactly because she recognizes the power of *oikos* relationships in human life that she plots to destroy Jason by killing their children. Nor will she tolerate the possibility of Jason ridiculing her passionate regard for their relationship. Her repeated justification for killing her children is that she cannot bear for Jason to laugh at her. In order to carry out her deed of revenge, Medea must move from the realm of *oikos* where the self is involved with others toward the construct of *polis* where the maintenance of self-image can generate the kind of fury necessary to destroy one's enemies at all costs. Her speech in lines 1041-1080 records the struggle between mercy and courage, loyalty and distancing, care for her children or destruction of her enemy that precedes her decision to act. Her final words of the speech express her cognizant choice to murder her children: "I know indeed what evil I intend to do, / But stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury, / Fury that brings mortals the greatest evils" (1078-1080).

The desire for revenge and destruction of her enemy, Jason, causes Medea to throw off the bonds of *oikos*. By pushing aside the constraints of social codes, she becomes a monstrosity akin to Achilles in his battle with Hector. Her desire to destroy Jason is so insatiable that she even murders her own children.

Jason was not aware of his impending destruction until it was too late. Creon courted his own disaster by letting emotions sway his decisions when it was clearly against his better judgment to do so. After destroying her own children and, in a sense, herself also, Medea flies off to Athens in the dragon-drawn chariot of her grandfather, the god *Helios*, free to continue to wreak havoc. Jason disregarded any

connections with his private life, investing himself completely in political and social expediency. Creon was unable to separate his private and public interests. Medea fully recognized the power of *oikos* bonds and knowingly denied them, by the conventional definition of male *arete*, to prove she can harm her enemies and do good to her friends (809). Euripides shaped his tragedy around these domestic machinations, but surely their counterparts in the world of Athenian politics were readily apparent. However, Euripides does not offer solutions to the place of public and private, *polis* and *oikos*, in Greek life, only the polemics.

The relationship of the private sphere to the public sphere is still in debate today. It lies at the center of such issues as liberal versus conservative agendas, the abortion controversy, gender politics and even sex education. If the weaving metaphor which began this paper may be reasserted, then Euripides would surely recognize some of the materials being used in the creation of contemporary patterns: shades and subtleties of cultural antecedents reappearing in the fabric of today.

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