

Medea the Refugee

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Abstract: This essay reads Euripides’s *Medea*, the tragedy of filicide, as a critical investigation into the making of a refugee. Alongside the common claim that the drama depicting a wife murdering her children to punish an unfaithful husband is about gender inequity, I draw out another dimension: that the text’s exploration of women’s subordination doubles as a rendering of refuge seeking. Euripides introduces Medea as a *phugas*, the term for a person exiled, on the run, displaced, vulnerable, and in need of refuge. I adopt the *phugas* as a lens for interpreting the tragedy and generating enduring insights into dynamics of “forced” migration. Taking this political predicament as the organizing question of the text enables us to understand how dislocation from the gender-structured family can produce physical displacement and a need for asylum while casting the political meaning of Medea’s kin violence in a new light.

Euripides’s *Medea* centers on a foreign woman who murders her children with two ostensible aims in mind: to punish an unfaithful husband and protest the structural gender inequality that has enabled him to dissolve their family, remarry, and leave her bereft of a kinship network that she needs to acquire some standing in a polis. Yet unlike such classical Greek texts as Sophocles’s *Antigone*, which has long inspired political thinkers to theorize (feminist) agency anew,¹ *Medea*’s rendering of precariousness, “bad” motherhood, and civil disobedience is rarely read for its political theoretical

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¹Examples include Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Antigone’s Daughters: Reflections on Female Identity and the State,” *Democracy* 2, no. 2 (1982): 46–59; and Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

possibilities outside a feminist scholarship in classics, which has foregrounded the play's interest in women's subordination.

I build on and expand that familiar framing of the tragedy's political concerns. I argue that a gender analysis reveals the tragedy is also an instructive investigation into the making of a refugee. Euripides introduces Medea as a *phugas* (12), the Greek term for a person exiled, on the run, displaced, vulnerable, and in need of refuge.² Her depiction in the play illustrates the concept's rich connotative range. Euripides takes us inside the day a triply exiled woman spends in limbo not waiting passively to realize her sentence so much as plotting and securing asylum before taking flight to Athens. The poet's figuration of Medea as a *phugas* is striking—women were seldom “exiled in the proper sense of the word” because they were rarely banished on account of a crime.³ At the same time, the kinship and citizenship rules that maintain women's deprived standing in the Athenian context of the play's production inform the mythical realities of the tragedy and put women at asymmetrical risk of falling into what today we would call “statelessness.”⁴ Women's existence in the polis generally required a male guardian acquired usually through marriage, a relation that could be undone, as *Medea* dramatizes.⁵ To read the tragedy as a day in the life of a *phugas* is therefore to animate a critical exploration of how dislocation from the gender-structured family produces physical displacement and a need for asylum.⁶ Taking

²References to the Greek are from Euripides, *Medea*, ed. Donald J. Mastronarde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³Angeliki Tzanetou, “Patterns of Exile in Greek Tragedy” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1997), 22.

⁴On ancient Greek gender relations and kinship theory, see Nancy Sorokin Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Victoria Wohl, *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). As Angeliki Tzanetou writes, Athenian women's exclusion from the juridical dimensions of citizenship did not preclude their “inclusion in the civic body of Athens,” and this “civic membership” afforded them “access to property and inheritance,” as well as their participation in “the religious sphere” (Tzanetou, “Citizen-Mothers on the Tragic Stage,” in *Mothering and Motherhood in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Lauren Hackworth Petersen and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012], 100).

⁵Naomi T. Campa, “Kurios, Kuria and the Status of Athenian Women,” *Classical Journal* 114, no. 3 (February–March 2019): 257–79. Divorced women typically returned to their natal *oikos*, which is impossible in Medea's case, as I explore later. Aeschylus's *Suppliants* also explores the necessary role that marriage or male guardianship plays in providing status specifically to foreign women. See Geoffrey Bakewell, *Aeschylus' "Suppliant Women": The Tragedy of Immigration* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

⁶I use “asylum” for *asulos* (728; 387), the term for Medea's desired condition in Athens, as does Pavlos Sfyroeras, “The Ironies of Salvation: The Aigeus Scene in Euripides' *Medea*,” *Classical Journal* 54, no. 2 (Dec. 1994–Jan. 1995): 125–42. Asylum

gender as an analytic lens, my reading of *Medea* suggests that the category of the refugee may itself be constituted by the gendered structure of kinship (and polis).⁷ It also relates Medea's kin killing to her asylum seeking and casts the meaning of her violence in a new theoretical light.

This argument has two goals. The first is to elucidate that Medea becomes a *phugas* because she is a "woman." The second is to illustrate that this gender analysis generates additional, broad insights into dynamics of displacement that do not pertain exclusively to gender: the specific way that Medea tests the limits of what she can and cannot do as a *phugas* repeatedly foregrounds her activity and subordination, provoking reflection on the (gendered) presumptions of passivity and forced movement that typically inform understandings of what counts as persecution and a worthy asylum claim.

The article proceeds by looking at scenes that foreground the precariousness that Medea experiences as a woman and a foreigner. Section 2 reads closely Medea's two acts of supplication (*hikesia*, 710), the civic and religious practice through which vulnerable persons in ancient Greece petitioned an authority (divine or political) for protection in a temple or foreign city,⁸ to consider the rhetorical strategies available to a woman seeking refuge. The third section considers the maze of explanations the tragedy offers for Medea's *phugas* condition and finds that the text obstructs efforts to see her predicament as a clear-cut case of persecution at the same time that it depicts her appeals for amnesty and asylum in gendered terms that enable her subordination. The fourth section analyzes the terms of her asylum grant in Athens, which depends on offering artificial procreative help to the king. Rather than read the asylum grant as a plot point that enables her to kill with impunity, I argue for a symbolic linkage between the terms of the asylum grant and the specific murder that follows from it: Medea eliminates her biological children only after adopting motherhood as a nongenetic role (so as to receive asylum). In this light, the filicide constitutes a theoretical cleaver. It pulls apart two notions of kinship, biological and political, that the polis endeavors to conflate. Once exposed, the conflation underlying the hierarchical kinship

was not yet a distinct legal institution in the fifth century BCE. The term's various meanings, including the "inviolability of every sanctuary" and "the personal inviolability of an individual guaranteed by a foreign city," are explored in Angelos Chaniotis, "Conflicting Authorities: Asyilia between Secular and Divine Law in the Classical and Hellenistic Poleis," *Kernos* 9 (1996): 65–86.

⁷For a critique of the supposedly gender-neutral membership and kinship rules of political societies, see Jacqueline Stevens, *Reproducing the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸F. S. Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), considers supplication a quasi-legal practice because it sometimes involved the adjudication of a demand for safety by a political authority.

system that enables women's subordination doubles as an etiology of the *phugas*. For the destruction (and maintenance) of natal and conjugal kinship bonds runs parallel to and informs Medea's exile, dislocation, and asylum.

The dire political consequences of falling outside the family, as defined by marital laws and kinship conventions, do not dissipate but may be boldly manifested within a late modern context of human mobility, at times amplified by shifts in immigration legislation and practices of border policing. Legal decisions on refugee appeals always make recourse to a seemingly neutral and "fixed hierarchy of criteria," within which family ties and kinship assignments "continue to be the premier consideration."⁹ The issue is not only that "families take shape and change in all sorts of ways inconsistent with the expectations of citizenship laws through the creation of new laws for marriage and legitimacy."¹⁰ Membership and eligibility for asylum also rest precariously on "prior" definitions of kinship and the gender-structured family, which are themselves shifting and constructed concepts. The separation of migrant families at the US border and the revoked citizenship and deportation of terrorists' "brides" illustrate that the civic promises and privileges afforded today by parenthood, marriage, or birth—in short, kinship—may be as unstable, exclusionary, and instrumental in the regulation and criminalization of mobility as they were in the different political landscapes of ancient Greece.¹¹

A full appreciation of the contemporary stakes of reading Medea as a refugee falls outside the scope of this essay, however, which is devoted to establishing that interpretation in some detail. In keeping with a prominent strain of political theory, the essay works in the mode of critique, suggesting that we can deploy close readings of past texts for heuristic purposes.¹² I treat

⁹Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Garelli, Martina Tazzioli, "Autonomy of Asylum? The Autonomy of Migration Undoing the Refugee Crisis Script," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2018): 245.

¹⁰Jacqueline Stevens, introduction to *Citizenship in Question: Evidentiary Birthright and Statelessness*, ed. Benjamin N. Lawrance and Jacqueline Stevens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

¹¹On family separation, see Miriam Jordan, "Many Families Split at Border Went Untallied," *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 2019, and Masha Gessen, "Taking Children from Their Parents Is a Form of State Terror," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/taking-children-from-their-parents-is-a-form-of-state-terror>. On terrorist "brides," see Rukmini Callimachi and Alan Yuhas, "U.S. Bars Woman Who Joined Isis," *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2019; Jenna Krajeski, "A Victim of Terrorism Faces Deportation for Helping Terrorists," *New Yorker*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-victim-of-terrorism-faces-deportation-for-helping-terrorists>.

¹²Hanna Fenichel Pitkin elaborates an understanding of political theory as a critical enterprise that engages with past texts not to directly apply its insights but to unsettle lines of thought. She refers to Hannah Arendt, for whom doing "political theory . . . meant 'to think against the tradition while using its own conceptual tools'" (Pitkin,

Medea as a conceptual resource for opening new spaces of argumentation. I eschew the transhistorical meaning of the refugee while pursuing a preliminary genealogical and conceptual analysis of the *phugas* on behalf of contemporary theory. While there is no consensus over how to translate that term, I use the word “refugee” purposefully here to create paths for future analysis and to invite the reader to compare contexts. For, unlike the refugee of modern international law, the *phugas* does not refer to a legal status, even if a political act or legal sentence like expulsion could contribute to, if not require, one’s flight and search for protection elsewhere. It is in spite, if not because, of this difference that I call *Medea* a refugee. Three theoretical concerns inform this move and the following discussion.

First, the concept of the *phugas* reminds us that “refugee” does not exclusively denote a legal status in contemporary political discourse either: the seemingly pre-given, because juridical, line between a migrant and a refugee rests on shifting notions about what counts as persecution; the addressees of “refugee” are a question, not a given, for political life. Second, when the play deploys the language of *phugas*, it is signifying (new) meanings not simply transmitting referents to a particular historical reality. I attend to some aspects of Euripides’s historical context where illuminating, but I do not use the production context of the play, which draws inconsistently and partially on Athenian conventions, to read or resolve the indeterminate meanings of this text. Third, the conceptual richness of the *phugas* comes to life in *Medea* as a disquieting and critically important rendering of dislocation. *Medea*’s precariousness and asylum seeking turn out to be *both* externally imposed and self-actualized, the ambiguous culmination of willful civil disobedience, marital abandonment, crime, lawful exclusion, and structural oppression. *Medea*, in other words, may be violent, willful, strategic, and complicit in producing her own homelessness but her need for refuge is still genuine.¹³ To the extent that *Medea* challenges standard notions of the asylum seeker and of persecution, her dramatization makes a

The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998]. 243). Some examples of political theory undertaken in this mode include Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jimmy Casas Klausen, *Fugitive Rousseau: Slavery, Primitivism, and Political Freedom* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Mary G. Dietz, “Between Polis and Empire: Aristotle’s Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 275–93; J. Peter Euben, *Platonic Noise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*; Demetra Kasimis, *The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹³Boedeker, in contrast, argues that the nurse’s “pathetic descriptions” of *Medea* as a “homeless woman” are unsettled by “a series of vivid images” that the nurse uses to represent her as a “dangerous beast or natural force.” See Boedeker, “Becoming *Medea*: Assimilation in Euripides,” in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature and*

reading centering on her figuration as a refugee both easy to overlook and critical to advance.

Demanded Like a Woman

Euripides's tragedy unfolds over Medea's last day in her adopted city and is the only surviving account to detail the Corinthian piece of her widely known story.¹⁴ This adaptation, produced in 431 BCE, is also the earliest source for Medea's filicide, which may be Euripides's innovation to the myth. The tragedy opens soon after Medea has learned of Jason's secret marriage to King Creon's daughter, a princess. Worried that Medea will retaliate against the royal house, Creon exiles her from Corinth, despite her pleas for amnesty, but not before granting her request to stay an extra day. Medea spends the day as a *phugos* not only pursuing violent revenge but also procuring *asulia* in Athens from King Aegeus. The deal secured, Medea murders Jason's wife, Creon, and eventually her own two children. She ends the play on her way to Athens in a dragon-drawn chariot as Jason, reduced to Medea's kinless equal, watches from the ground, his patrilineal and political aspirations devastated.¹⁵

It is mobility not violence that closes this tragedy, just as it is mobility that opens it. Politically sensitive readers have noted the tragedy's interest in this theme but tended to decenter it so as to focus on questions of gender oppression.¹⁶ Gender subjugation emerges in these important accounts as a frame for analyzing not Medea's physical displacement so much as the limits of female vengeance or the strictures of (ancient) patriarchy, neither of which

Film, ed. James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 129.

¹⁴Boedeker, "Becoming Medea," 127.

¹⁵Medea's flight on the chariot, her semidivine background, and her propensity for magic do not necessarily make her need for asylum disingenuous. Tragic scenarios frequently combine contradictory (mythical and ordinary) elements. I share Mastronarde's view that the chariot evinces the gods' support of her escape into asylum (Mastronarde, "General Commentary," in *Medea*, 32–33). See also Judith Fletcher, *Performing Oaths in Classical Greek Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 186, which reads the end to mean that Medea "associates herself with [her grandfather] Helios' authority." For the different position that the ending indicates Medea's divinity, see David Konstan, "Medea: A Hint of Divinity?," *Classical World* 101, no. 1 (2007): 93–94.

¹⁶See Margaret Williamson, "A Woman's Place in Euripides' *Medea*," in *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, ed. Anton Powell (London: Routledge, 1990), 16–31; Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*; and Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 243–71.

can be disentangled conceptually or narratively from her homelessness.¹⁷ An exception to this tendency is Rebecca Futo Kennedy's account, which attends simultaneously to Medea's gender and foreignness. Though, as she notes, the tragedy does not use "the language of *metoikia*," Kennedy likens Medea's status in Corinth to that of a metic or immigrant woman living in Athens and reads the tragedy as an exploration of anxieties about the place of metic women in fifth-century Athens.¹⁸ After Pericles's Citizenship Law of 450/1, which required dual Athenian parentage for citizenship, the polis dissuaded non-Athenian women from marrying citizen men and "vilified" those that did.¹⁹ Jason's politically advantageous marriage, on this reading, aims to "mitigate" his own situation as a "metic" while worsening Medea's—the separation from Jason puts her status as wife and mother in crisis, revealing the inequity in their immigrant positions and making her "dependent on the good graces of the king."²⁰ Once Jason dislodges Medea from his *oikos*, Kennedy argues, he unleashes not only her anger but also the symbolic threat of the untethered foreign woman onto the city.

My interest in Medea's gender and foreignness takes a different angle. I look in depth at how Medea inhabits and manages the condition of a *phugas* (12) from start to finish in this play. Judith Fletcher stresses that Jason's "perjured oath" to Medea "occurred before the play begins."²¹ This means that the tragedy commences with Medea already in limbo, absorbing and reacting to her exile sentence, her need to take flight, and her desire for refuge, dimensions that are all connoted and encompassed by the conceptual language of the *phugas*. Medea's figuration as such begs sustained analysis, then, not only because it is especially pronounced in the play and in her mythical legacy—she is a triple exile from Colchis, Iolcus, and Corinth—but also because it belongs to and activates a broader classical Greek *topos* of exclusion, flight, and resettlement that Euripides activates when he deploys additional concepts such as *apolis* ("without a city," 642) and *asulos* ("inviolable,"

¹⁷Rebecca Futo Kennedy notes the scholarly tendency to focus on Medea's betrayal and vengeance in *Immigrant Women in Athens* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 50.

¹⁸Kennedy, *Immigrant Women*, 49. Simon Perris, "Is There a *Polis* in Euripides' *Medea*?" *Polis* 34 (2017): 318–35, by contrast, argues that the absence of consistent technical terminology from Athenian politics makes an Athenian or "political" interpretation problematic. I disagree and follow P. E. Easterling, "Anachronism in Greek Tragedy," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 105 (1985): 6, whose argument permits both a figurative and historical reading like Kennedy's and a historically sensitive conceptual analysis like mine: tragedy's "anachronisms" combine features of heroic life with Athenian democracy to establish a critical distance between the heroic world and the audience's. The "incongruous mixture of different periods" inspires a nonliteral critical engagement with questions that speak to, but are not limited to, the production's contemporary world.

¹⁹Kennedy, *Immigrant Women*, 7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 49–51.

²¹Fletcher, *Performing Oaths*, 182.

728, 387) to describe her. Seen through this lens, *Medea* poses a series of questions about gender-based asylum demands and their (gendered) interpretation. To consider *Medea* specifically as a *phugas*, rather than an immigrant, is therefore to open up the play's interest in what counts as coerced movement and persecution.

Although "the theme" of the "non-Athenian" "soon-to-be exile" who receives "refuge" from Athens runs through *Medea*, scholars do not typically classify it as a "suppliant play," a subgenre that reinforced Athens's image as a haven for foreigners, as Angeliki Tzanetou explains. *Medea*'s flight to Athens appears in most accounts as "part of the revenge plot" enabling her to murder with impunity rather than as a critical illustration of refugee practices.²² The common interpretation that *Medea*'s "unpunished" escape amounts to a "disturbing outcome" that makes a "travesty of the city's traditional role as a safe haven for powerless outcasts" distracts us from considering that the play might instead be exploring the more vexing dilemma of the powerful outcast.²³ To begin laying the groundwork for this alternative reading, I turn to *Medea*'s first speech about her predicament and analyze the scenes in which she strategizes from within her liminal position to secure time before exile and obtain a safe haven in Athens.

The play raises the peculiar risks incurred by a woman living outside her homeland as early as the prologue and pursues them relentlessly thereafter (35). The nurse, who delivers the first speech, relays her wish that Jason's ship had never docked in *Medea*'s homeland because its arrival precipitated events that have since exposed the uncertainty in her status. Most recently, Jason's new marriage has actualized whatever insecurity was latent: now "at variance" (*dichostatē*) with her husband (15), the nurse reports, *Medea* finds that "all is enmity" (*nun d'echthra panta*); her "closest ties are diseased" (*nosei ta philtata*) (16).²⁴ "The poor woman," she adds, "has learned at misfortune's hand what a good thing it is not to be cut off from one's native land" (35). These early lines establish a connection between *Medea*'s expatriation and her desperation, which inform her later exchanges with Jason and her shifting plans to punish him. They also tell us that *Medea* begins not simply with a betrayed and vengeful wife but with a woman who, in Bernard Knox's words, is "about to be deported."²⁵

And yet *Medea* is also already a wanderer when the drama opens. She is unable to return to her natal home in the Black Sea. This detail proves

²²Angeliki Tzanetou, *City of Suppliants, Tragedy and the Athenian Empire* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 26.

²³Sheila Murnaghan, introduction to *Medea*, trans. and ed. Murnaghan (New York: Norton, 2018), xviii.

²⁴Unless otherwise noted, translations are from *Euripides: Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁵Bernard Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," in *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 296.

crucial. Once Jason leaves her, Medea is not simply untethered to a man. She lacks political safety; for the political orders that she navigates, like the Athenian democracy of the tragedy's staging, serve and are serviced by the fiction of a natural sexual division of membership. Medea needs a man to bestow her with an *oikos* through which her political legibility will be only unstably and conditionally granted. Her precariousness thus results partly from the rule that women cannot form *oikoi* on or of their own. Estranged from both the natal and conjugal *oikos* relationships that would give her a kinship status, Medea becomes politically illegible and also homeless—unable to repatriate, she is a wanderer again.²⁶ By the play's halfway mark, she is compelled to supplicate an Athenian king for *asulia*.²⁷ By the closing scene, she is a filicidal refugee with a safe haven in Athens. What the prologue introduces, then, the rest of the tragedy simply goes on to highlight: Medea's fundamental problem is that she is a woman unmoored. This condition finds dramatic expression in her perpetual motion. Medea appears on stage the way she leaves it, always already in flight.

The first half of the play depicts a woman by turns trapped, omnipotent, wily, and helpless. A long speech to the chorus of Corinthian women expounds on women's inescapable social and political dependence on men. "The outcome of our life's striving hangs on this," Medea explains, "whether we take a bad or a good husband. For divorce is discreditable for a woman and it is not possible to refuse wedlock" (235–36). Yet as Medea seeks solidarity with her Corinthian listeners over their sexual difference, she also stakes a claim about the political because ethnic difference that separates her from the native women with whom she (otherwise) aligns herself in this scene. One, if not the chief, reason that Jason's behavior has proved particularly devastating concerns Medea's foreignness, expatriation, and loss of family (222, 225–29). Kinship and political protection are entangled here; the loss of the former leaves a woman uniquely precarious: "But your story and mine are not the same: you have a city and a father's house, the enjoyment of life and the company of friends, while I, without relatives or city, am suffering outrage from my husband. I was carried off as booty from a foreign land and have no mother, no brother, no kinsman to shelter me from this calamity" (252–63). Medea suggests that her predicament is the

²⁶Tzvetan Todorov argues that "wandering represents a distortion of the norm of marriage" and notes that in several extant tragedies, the denial or suspension of marriage culminates in women's mobility ("Patterns of Exile," 23). On the aberrance of moving women and the importance of remaining stationary, see also Margaret Visser, "Medea: Daughter, Sister, Wife and Mother; Natal Family versus Conjugal Family in Greek and Roman Myths about Women," in *Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy: Essays Presented to D. J. Conacher*, ed. Martin Cropp, Elaine Fantham, and S. E. Scully (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1986), 150; and Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Hestia-Hermes: The Religious Expression of Space and Movement in Ancient Greece," *Myth and Thought in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd with Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

²⁷Medea will be *asulos* (728), which Kovacs translates as "in safety."

effect not only of Jason's departure but also of events that preceded it, specifically, the peculiar conditions under which they wed. This shift in focus draws attention to the question of Medea's agency. She played no part in the decision to marry Jason, she claims here, because she was forced to leave Colchis as his bride. Now far, but also expelled, from home, she is doubly vulnerable and *unlike* the women whose confidence she seeks. Jason has robbed her of her familial and marital *oikoi*. The rest of the tragedy, however, will challenge this explanation of Medea's unmooring, as the next section suggests (483ff.). Characters eventually voice multiple and opposing accounts of the reasons for her precarious situation. Ultimately, the play will deny the audience the comfort it affords the chorus of women, who stay more or less convinced of the explanation Medea offers above.²⁸

Worth considering at this juncture is how Medea's speech to the Corinthian women presents her punishment of Jason as a response not to his infidelity per se but to her *phugas* condition, to the additional deprivileging effects of structural gender inequality that the loss of two *oikoi* implies for her. To these listeners, Medea cultivates feelings of compassion by presenting her predicament as a collective problem of inequality. If marriage and kinship rules give "husbands prerogatives by law that biology denies them," one meaning of Medea's eventual act—she has not announced the filicide yet—is that she will take from Jason and reclaim for women "the power of life and death mothers have through biology" that has been "appropriated by men" through law and ritual. The kinship laws and rituals of patriarchy are the same ones that make her descent into homelessness a constant possibility.²⁹

Medea's speech utilizes a rhetorical strategy of victimhood to call for an end to the hierarchical relations that, institutionalized through marriage and kinship rules, obtain between men and women. Temporarily, her efforts are successful. The women stay focused on Jason's actions to such a degree that they exhibit "a blindness to the scope of Medea's project," which includes killing the princess.³⁰ The women eventually agree that Medea is "justified" (*endikōs*) in punishing her husband.

But when Creon arrives to confirm her exile, Medea denies her desire for revenge. "Your words are soothing to listen to," he responds suspiciously, "but I am afraid that in your heart you are plotting some harm, and I trust you much the less than before" (316–19). Creon's reasons for expelling Medea are preventative and self-protective (277). He expects that she will injure his family and Jason (285). Medea fails to persuade Creon otherwise. She takes to the ground consequently and, grasping his knees, finds in the

²⁸Donald J. Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 119.

²⁹I draw here on the discussion of Bruno Bettelheim's views on pregnancy envy in Jacqueline Stevens, "Pregnancy Envy and the Politics of Compensatory Masculinities," *Politics and Gender* 1, no. 2 (2005): 269.

³⁰Mastronarde, *Art of Euripides*, 117.

ritualized moves of supplication an additional modality for entreating him to let her stay. Yet Medea also mentions the power of supplication as much as she enacts it. To the physical gestures that signify a supplicant's inferiority she adds a speech act referring to the social force of the ritual. Her speech implies that supplication ought to suffice for making Creon overturn his decision to exile her but neither the performance nor her explanation sways him (339). The misfire calls attention to the uncertainty of these political exchanges. Protection is not guaranteed by a procedure because the viability of the request is always already a question. Just like Medea's self-presentation as a *phugas*, supplication is an indeterminate performance, the avowal of a need that is subject to an authority's interpretation.

However genuine Medea's need for a polis, Creon concludes that the threat she poses to his political order matters more than the individual problem of her homelessness. The failed supplication scene, however, soon provokes an about-face in Medea's position that, rather than signaling her defeat, puts her on top. She accepts Creon's decision to exile her. What she wants now is an extra day to see to her children's safety. "You too are a parent," Medea claims, "it would be natural for you to show kindness toward them" (344–45). Where supplication failed, Medea's appeal to parenthood, to the supposedly shared and singular notion of the conduct that a kinship assignment entails, moves Creon.³¹ He grants Medea her request in spite of himself but takes comfort in the thought that a single day is not enough time for Medea to do real damage (350).

Medea invokes motherhood to a patriarch concerned with female vengeance, specifically the sort that would manifest as familial violence. When Medea casts the need for safety in terms of her needs as a mother, she performs a kind of self-domestication. She insinuates that she requires the king's help not to plot as a violent renegade, as he fears, but to act as a good mother. Her appeal succeeds, in other words, because it reestablishes a traditional moral order in which femininity and feminine membership are equated with motherhood, or, more specifically, with a particular way of performing that kinship assignment. Medea's penchant for violence and autonomous action will persistently unsettle the notion that there is one "natural" way to act as a mother. What makes Medea persuasive in this scene is not only a defense of the traditional family but a discursive strategy that casts her demands in terms of others (her children). Medea's wish appeals to Creon because it reinscribes her conventional political value to the polis. It is for this reason ironic that Medea's ability to carry out the filicide, what she repeatedly characterizes throughout the tragedy as the "just" (*dikaion*) thing to do, should depend partly on her victory in this scene. Whether she has yet to decide to kill her children or is still waiting to reveal the plan, her claim that parents (should) act with kindness secures the time she will use to murder not only Creon's kin but also her own, to act as a mother "unnaturally."

³¹Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Unveiled*, 129.

The chorus reacts to Medea's dialogue with Creon by reprising its lamentation of her impending displacement but importantly reconfigures her exile now as a question of refuge and asylum. The women panic, "What protectors of strangers will you find, what house, what land, to save you from calamity?" (357–60). Medea's riposte registers little concern with the gravity of her situation. Things are not all bad, she responds, because she has generated the time she needs to administer justice, which is to kill Creon, the princess, and Jason (374–75), a plan she will soon critically amend. Eventually, eliminating the signs of Jason's political power (their children) and the routes to its reproduction (Creon, the princess) will prove more fitting; for, the plan will expose and destroy the political advantage that he, as a man, enjoys over her.

Yet as Medea begins to envision the murders coming to pass, her thoughts do shift to her own future. Eventually she reiterates the chorus's worries. "Now let us suppose they have been killed," she proposes. "What city will receive me? What friend will give me a safe country [*asulon*] and a secure house and rescue me? There is no one," she adds, echoing the Corinthian women's despair (386–89). Though aware that, as a murderer, she would be unlikely to receive asylum, Medea fastens ever more tightly to her plot. She insists that she is willing to sacrifice her life to (re)gain the honor that Jason has denied her (404ff.). The women respond by echoing the idea that her revenge is a political act: "Honor is coming to the female sex [*genei*]," they declare (415–16). The murder(s) will incite what Mastronarde calls a "change in gender-relations."³²

Medea's supporters end this scene with a rousing justification for her violence. They present her plan as an act of necessary political defiance and underscore her earlier claims about female precariousness and victimhood by linking them again to her foreignness and lack of kin. "On strange soil you now dwell, you have lost your marriage bed, your husband's love, poor wretch, and you are being driven from this land a dishonored exile. . . . You have no father's home in which to find shelter from woe, unhappy woman, and another, a princess, a greater match than yourself, holds sway in the house" (433–45). For the chorus, Medea's vengeance is necessary not because Jason's actions amount to a betrayal of conjugality but because, as they think, this betrayal turned her into a refugee. And yet here the pursuit of what they call justice and honor or the violence that is said to establish, if not assert, women's equality will *also* leave her homeless.

Or so the chorus thinks. The scene that cuts the drama in half and marks its "turning point" culminates in a guarantee of political asylum for Medea because it will give her a new home (663–823).³³ This is the arrival of Aegeus, king of Athens, in a moment that Aristotle's *Poetics* (1461b19–21)

³²Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides*, 137.

³³The characterization belongs to T. V. Buttrey, as quoted in J. Roger Dunkle, "The Aegeus Episode and the Theme of Euripides' *Medea*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 100 (1960): 98.

criticized as “improbable” (*to alogon*). Whatever we make of the scene as a plot device, the suggestion that the king’s entrance feels implausible prompts the question of its symbolism.³⁴ Aegeus will give asylum to Medea in a back-and-forth that reprises the invocations of kinship and motherhood in Medea’s supplication scene with Creon yet in crucially different terms.

Aegeus is on his way home from consulting the Delphic oracle about his childlessness when he sees Medea (669). “Thus reminded of the importance of sons and the continuation of the patriline,” Fletcher writes, “Medea seizes the moment.”³⁵ “My life is ruined!” she cries out. “Furthermore, I am being exiled from the country” (704). Medea begs Aegeus to receive her as a suppliant in Athens. She reaches for his beard and knees, again augmenting the ritualized moves with an act of speech. This time, however, Medea offers something in return. “I will put an end to your childlessness,” she promises Aegeus, “and cause you to beget children, for I know the medicines [*pharmaka*] to do it” (717–18). Aware of her reputation for magic, Aegeus is “for many reasons” “eager” to grant Medea this favor, though on one condition (719ff.). She must reach Athens on her own. If he is seen helping her violate Creon’s edict, he could provoke a conflict with Corinth. Medea agrees to the demand but not before requesting that Aegeus swear an oath never to banish her from Athens (731).

Medea’s newfound political security pushes her to (voice) a new conclusion that the most fitting punishment for Jason is that she kill their children. The unlikely arrival of Aegeus and the offer of asylum in Athens, where biological reproduction also matters politically, serve dramatically to precipitate a migrant woman’s filicide. To conclude that this guarantee is simply a plot device that empowers Medea to pursue her murderous plans, however, would be to relinquish an opportunity to ask what political and theoretical relations might exist among her dislocation, the conditions of her asylum, and her filicide. As I elaborate in the next section, the regime that demands her reproductive help culminates in—we might say it necessitates—a particular kind of unmothering. From this childless position, Medea will make a home, however temporarily, in Athens but only once she has adopted motherhood as an expressly symbolic function.

Both supplication cases, depict Medea’s attempts to gain the help of a political authority. They also secure the circumstances for the violence she calls justice. The moments that facilitate these “just” acts, then, have an additional critical function: they show Medea enacting different claims to refuge and asylum and to uncertain effect. The making and adjudicating of her claims rest uneasily on contingent practices of narration, self-disclosure, witnessing, and interpretation. These performances can and sometimes do end in failure (in the play) and so they draw attention to the particular and gendered

³⁴Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Unveiled*, 130.

³⁵Fletcher, *Performing Oaths*, 184.

conditions under which a request for protection may be heard as a viable political demand or not.

Medea's agency and power are variously feared, acknowledged, and realized in these scenes. Her ultimate success, however, depends not on mounting a persuasive argument for needing safety but on utilizing a discourse of proper femininity. In both instances, Medea's invocation of motherhood echoes the standard view that women have no political value outside of a kinship system. Any request that she makes outside this language is ignored.³⁶ The precarious position that Medea inhabits on the basis of her "natural" sexual difference, however, puts her in the spot of confirming both the threatening and the seductive power of persuasion that belongs to her not only as a *phugas* but also as a woman. Medea actualizes her political capacity whenever, if not because, she occupies the formally marginal political positions that are supposed merely to evince her permanent inferiority. Thus, however much the scenes with Creon and Aegeus lay the groundwork for her revenge, they also bear a further insight: the city's insistence on a woman's impossible political autonomy makes (her into) the figure of the *phugas*. Its gender-structured kinship system produces the concomitant political need for a practice like supplication through which Medea makes political demands. To the extent that supplication may showcase the persuasive speech of the deprived, its enactment threatens to give the lie to the "natural" sexual division that not only underlies the city's exclusionary membership but also makes the *phugas* an ever-present possibility that affects women asymmetrically.

Evading Blame

One effect of Jason's betrayal is to expose the shifting and precarious nature of Medea's political status. A critical and just response to Jason's unfaithfulness, from her perspective, is to oppose the gender inequality and hierarchical kinship system on which this precariousness is premised. Euripides's heroine delivers on this score, of course. When Medea murders her children, the living symbols of her bond with Jason, she mirrors his dissolution of their family by putting an end to the line that Jason has stripped of its (political) purpose. By acting outside her scripted kinship role as a mother, Medea challenges the gender hierarchy on which the city's rules depend for their salience and political utility. She draws attention to the contingency of the *oikos* arrangement that serves unstably to ground (her) political status, male privilege, the deprived exclusion of foreigners, and the oppression of women through kinship.

³⁶For an illuminating theoretical analysis of the "contemporary forms of speechlessness confronted by asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants," see Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness*, 159.

And yet things are also more complicated than this analysis suggests. Both in the dramatic world of *Medea* and in fifth-century Athenian realities of the play's staging, marital conventions require that one man (Medea's father) contract with another (Jason) to exchange a woman (Medea) and turn her into a bride and wife. Though she hid this fact from the chorus, Medea admits on a different occasion that she brokered her own arrangement with Jason. She "chose" her husband and "won" him by what Helene Foley calls such "ruthless deeds" as enabling the death of her brother. In her heated *agon* with Jason, Medea says that she "abandoned [her] father and [her] home by [her] own accord" (483).³⁷ Her complicity is then differently underscored in the play when Jason argues that she has no one but herself to blame for her exile: she insulted the royal family and it has unsurprisingly cast her out (605).

This means that Medea's tendency to defy patriarchal rule and the principle of kinship on which it depends preceded both her divorce and her filicide, the two issues that critics most often stress in their readings. Jason's transgression therefore cannot fully account for Medea's *phugas* predicament. For the same reason, it does not by itself illuminate the critical meaning of Medea's filicide. To understand (the reasons for) Medea's homelessness and the filicide she carries out in some response to this predicament, we need to look more carefully at her unconventional union with Jason.

I mentioned earlier that all the characters, including Medea, provide differing reports about how the original relationship with Jason developed and that the audience is uniquely privy to all of them. To the chorus, Medea renders Jason fully responsible for their union and portrays herself as a victim of his force, but in her encounter with Jason, she states proudly that she married him by choice. That claim establishes Medea as his equal in conjugality. Jason responds with the third possibility that Medea was propelled by Eros to help him acquire the Golden Fleece (526–31). Whether this option suggests that their conjugal affection, the supposed motivation for Medea's aid of Jason in Colchis, resulted from divine intervention remains unclear in the tragedy, but the insinuation circulates nevertheless as one of several explanations for their union.³⁸

Quite unlike women living in Athens, then, Medea never received her father's permission to wed because she arrogated this authority to herself.³⁹ She rejected "the exchange of women" in favor of "the exchange by women," as Margaret Williamson notes, because she sees women not as

³⁷Foley, *Female Acts*, 259.

³⁸This account circulates in other versions of the myth, according to which Aphrodite is said to have caused Medea to fall in love with Jason (*Pythian* 4).

³⁹Rabinowitz (*Anxiety Unveiled*, 4) argues that the promise of the bride to the groom by a *kurios* was a contract between two men that legitimated the marriage and that this contractual relation also governed the next step, the "giving" (*ekdosis*) of the bride to the groom. See also Vernant, "Hestia-Hermes."

objects but as “practitioners in the gift exchange.”⁴⁰ That the union involved oath taking, a practice reserved for men, further underscores the uniqueness of their ceremony. When she acts as a wife *and* an equal to Jason, Medea is staging the dissolution of one form of kinship to enact an alternative one. She calls into question the gender inequality that conventional marriage presumes and reproduces. It is tempting to conclude from this that the unusual conditions of their marriage mean Jason and Medea were not officially wed.⁴¹ As P. E. Easterling notes, however, none of the characters suggest Jason was “entitled to abandon Medea without bad faith” because she was not his “legitimate wife.” Euripides, like other dramatists, “permits himself a certain vagueness in legal matters relying on the fact that the story is set in the heroic age, not in fifth-century Athens.”⁴² It is precisely Medea’s claiming otherwise—her insistence that however officially underrecognized, she is indeed Jason’s wife—that deserves our critical attention.

One important reason that Medea finds herself without a home at the start of the play, then, is that unlike a typical bride, she did not simply move from one home to another. She established a conjugal *oikos* by severing ties with her natal one (31–32). Medea is without a home(land) not only because Jason has left her but also because she acted autonomously in relation to her primary *oikos* and thus in a larger sense with regard to the standard relations of kin that the *oikos* represents. Jason, on the other hand, acts entirely within his conventional power as a “husband” when he leaves her to marry another woman. He therefore deserves Medea’s punishment only from the vantage point that he has flouted the peculiar conditions of their alternative marital arrangement, which was premised on rejecting the gender hierarchy that he has since come to take for granted. When Jason dissolves his marriage to Medea, he enacts a political logic that Medea has repeatedly disavowed (except in her exchanges with Creon) and seems to have assumed Jason had, too. For the bonds of kin that mandate and reflect women’s subordination to men in this tragedy are realized through hierarchical marriage rites that Medea and Jason never carried out.⁴³ Jason ends a relationship, in other words, that has its own origins in a sort of betrayal. He circumvented the rules and practices that not only constitute marriage in its customary sense but also maintain as their primary objective the establishment of the kinship assignments that allocate political status. The rules that make Medea politically legible are therefore the same ones that make Jason’s

⁴⁰Williamson, “A Woman’s Place,” 19.

⁴¹Louis Cohn-Haft, “Divorce in Classical Athens,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995): 1.

⁴²P. E. Easterling, “The Infanticide in Euripides’ *Medea*,” in Murnaghan, *Medea*, 58.

⁴³By contrast, Rabinowitz (*Anxiety Unveiled*, 125) argues that *Medea* “works toward reinforcing the traffic in women.” On ancient Greek marriage as a practice of exchanging women, see Vernant, “Hestia-Hermes”; Williamson, “A Woman’s Place”; Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Unveiled*; and Wohl, *Intimate Commerce*.

second marriage permissible and Medea's homelessness possible. They are for this reason precisely what she attempts to reject.

To cast Medea's *phugas* condition and challenge to political kinship simply as a reaction to what Jason does to her is problematic, not only because it delimits the political meaning and scope of Medea's action. It makes it difficult to appreciate that the tragedy repeatedly obstructs our efforts to resolve the question of who is responsible for her *phugas* situation. From killing her brother to disrespecting her father, Medea commits prior acts of insubordination. She carried out—and is known for carrying out—deeds that challenge the dominant meanings of the family positions that she (and others) inhabit long before the drama begins. Thus, contrary to what the chorus suggests (or is led by Medea to believe), Jason is not entirely responsible for Medea's situation. However indirectly, Medea's own and earliest violent acts contribute to her exile, her wandering, and her eventual request for asylum. It is in this sense that she also dislocates herself, and it is from this position that she seeks asylum, the terms of which demand that she relocate herself within a kinship system, this time as a *nongenetic* mother only.

The answer to who is liable for Medea's refugee condition becomes increasingly difficult to settle as the drama unfolds. The play confounds attempts to resolve the question of responsibility once and for all. As much as *Medea* depicts characters as powerful and symbolic actors, it is as concerned with highlighting crossing and sometimes invisible social and political forces (including coercive ones, like kinship rules) and depicting the ways a foreign woman both navigates and challenges them. *Medea* problematizes the drive to assign blame even as its heroine's public justifications for violence insist that Jason is singularly culpable for her condition. Whether Medea's fugitive condition is thus best understood as the political effect of relations accidental or necessary, whether she is in some sense responsible for her own situation but not at fault, the tragedy makes it difficult to conclude that the viability of a claim to asylum can be evaluated within a logic of choice, which is to say as a matter of forced or autonomous migration. A constellation of actions, events, and political logics culminates in her expatriation. All of them center on a political order that tethers membership to a kinship assignment and, in its insistence on the gender-structured family, renders migrant women disproportionately vulnerable in comparison to men and necessitates their appeals to a discursive context that might nevertheless end up reinforcing their subordination.

What gives these textual details their especially critical promise, however, is the additional one that whenever Medea is *not* engaging with a political authority as a "woman," whenever she is doing things besides avoiding exile and securing sanctuary, she acts decidedly unwomanly. Medea is outspoken about the dominant cultural notions of femininity that imply her subordination in Greece, and maintains that women's inequality is an unjust artifact of the polis's sexual division of membership. But it would be a mistake to take Medea's denouncement of the gendered terms of her

uneven inclusion in isolation and conclude that they have a simply or necessarily emancipatory effect. We have seen that some of her actions contributed directly to her homelessness, and her defiance (or her reputation for it) ultimately necessitates that she seek safety from authorities that demand the reconsolidation of the terms she stands against.

The tragedy depicts this migrant woman in an irresolvable bind. 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, which means her success at persuasion is not just a sign of a political capacity momentarily realized or always yet to come. Everything Medea does or threatens is ultimately coded as feminine by the kings to whom she appeals for political safety. She is compelled in the end to seek protection from these men in terms of (good) motherhood, to take up the language of feminine political value that she previously and variously mocked and deconstructed.

The political kinship positions to which women are assigned by the regulation of marriage and biological reproduction emerge first in Corinth and then, if differently, in Athens as the only available yet contingent routes for acquiring authorization, residency, and protection. The text's critical power would thus seem to reside partly in its capacity to show us how the regulation of migration and the adjudication of asylum demands can work to reinforce (women's) subjection even when they offer refuge. The rules and practices governing membership affirm narratives of feminine desert that reinsert renegade, lone, or otherwise threatening women into a logic of social debt and reproductive labor, domesticating, making conditional, and in some cases criminalizing a freedom of movement that is dangerous because it could just as easily signify autonomy and therefore a claim for women's political equality.

Still, supplication is not Medea's final act, and difficult questions remain. Medea, a refugee, will not bear Athenian progeny biologically. Her habitation of a reproductive role at once artificial and necessary is the political condition for her asylum and the city's perpetuation. Why should Medea's asylum in Athens, on the one hand, turn on a promise to make children and, on the other, provide the catalyst to unmake her own? What theoretical relation holds between these different ways of acting (un)motherly? The following section considers how this violence relates symbolically to the requirements of her asylum and explores some implications of their symbolic linkage.

Mother, Asylum Seeker, Child Slayer

A dumbfounded chorus eventually wonders how Athens, "the city" of "sacred rivers," could receive this "killer of kin, stained with blood, in the company of its citizens" (846–50).⁴⁴ Criminals were not supposed to enter sanctuaries, for

⁴⁴I have altered Kovacs's translation of *tekna* as "children" to "kin."

the reason the chorus suggests: they pollute sacred spaces. The offer of *asulia* in Athens is in this sense conditional, of course. Had Aegeus known the violence she was planning, he is unlikely to have welcomed her to Athens. Conventions of supplication and asylum suggest that this *phugas* is an undeserving asylee—Medea lies about her criminal past (and future) to gain admission to Athens. Do these “manipulations” of a political authority and its asylum practices function to corrupt the “standard motif of Athenian pride” found in suppliant dramas, which tend to celebrate Athenian benevolence toward the disadvantaged?⁴⁵ If Medea’s asylum is understood to depend on deception, the tragedy appears to constitute an *apologia* for a fifth-century political climate of suspicion. The depiction of a criminal refugee founds the permanent risks of asylum and resettlement and so on.

However plausible, this angle on the chorus’s bafflement stays focused on the matter of plot—the deception that works to ease the asylum guarantee and enable Medea’s violence—and neglects to address the specific terms and symbolic meaning of Medea’s asylum. In this section, I think less literally about the chorus’s question how Athens could take in a kin killer and more symbolically about what the city might gain from this. The characters’ speech makes it plain that Medea’s exchange benefits the city by enabling the reproduction of the king’s power. Worth asking is why the city needs Medea as such. What does it mean that Athens admits a filicidal, artificially procreating *phugas* to enable its political future? In what sense does Medea shore up and throw light on the very political order that made her a *phugas* in the first place?

When Medea loses her location within an *oikos*, she experiences more than a loss of home. The meaning of her motherhood—the gendered discourse in which her political requests are cast and evaluated—undergoes a crisis in meaning. Although she remains a biological mother following Jason’s dissolution of her marriage and family, his severing alters the political meaning of her (relationship to her) children, who are no longer “kin,” so much as human beings in a biological relation to her and their father. Just as Medea becomes a *phugas*, her children become “mere” offspring. “What drives Medea to kill is not, or not only, her sexual rage against their father,” as Jacqueline Rose puts it, “but equally the loss of his love for their children, which condemns them to an uncertain future.”⁴⁶ The figure of the *phugas* is close at hand in this discussion of Medea’s motherhood. Medea’s “greatest fear,” Rose adds, “is that she and her children will be homeless and stateless.” Medea kills her children “to save them from a worse fate.”⁴⁷

But before she eliminates the offspring whose kinship status has ceased to matter politically (because of Jason’s departure), Medea makes an agreement

⁴⁵Mastrorarde, *Art of Euripides*, 137. See also Tzanetou, *City of Suppliants*, 1.

⁴⁶Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 68, 69.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 69.

to produce not offspring but political kin. The asylum grant that mothers Medea nonbiologically enables her unmothering in a biological sense. Considered in tandem, the asylum grant and the kin killing serve to elevate the meaning of “mother” as a political kinship status not a biological one. According to Gayle Rubin, kinship “is a system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships.”⁴⁸ The arc of the play, in which Medea kills her children only after she becomes a kind of surrogate mother to Athens, would seem therefore to function as a theoretical cleaver. For the murder makes visible the distinction between biology and political kinship that polities endeavor to elide.

It matters that a female *phugas* with asylum carries out this particular kind of cleaving violence. Medea’s travails train attention to the binds, exclusions, and precariousness resulting from the polis’s elision of biology and kinship, the same elision she upholds in her exchange with Aegeus but exposes in the murder that the asylum grant enables. In this sense, Euripides’s tragedy provides an etiology of the gender-structured kinship order that constitutes the refugee as a conceptual and political possibility.

Conclusion

In focusing on Medea’s figuration as a *phugas*, I have attempted to open possibilities for reading Euripides’s tragedy as an instructive exploration of displacement dynamics that brings her filicide and asylum into new and critical dialogue with each other. I hope that a refugee reading of *Medea* proves generative for political theorists interested in questioning the relationship between the political construction of kinship ties and the making and ordering of refugees. Yet a reading that revisits the problem of dislocation by way of this text must also come face to face with Euripides’s most challenging, because conniving and violent, character. It is difficult to stay convinced of Medea’s precariousness once she begins plotting filicide. Her character complicates our efforts to sympathize with her plight.⁴⁹ This may be one reason that critics have been slow to engage *Medea*’s exploration of refuge in depth. Homelessness is often understood to lie in some tension with strategic activity. Medea’s insistence on taking matters into her own hands stresses her (desire for) autonomy and makes her dangerous, two characteristics that jar with the preeminent and romantic image of the refugee as a

⁴⁸Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 169.

⁴⁹Rabinowitz (*Anxiety Unveiled*, 127) notes that Medea is “frightening even when she is sympathetic,” but she does not explore this characterization in the context of her migration and argues that the character’s sympathy is established in the first half of the play but undercut (rather than complicated) by the violence she undertakes.

mostly helpless victim in need of benevolence.⁵⁰ And while Medea attempts to elicit compassion from the chorus, the effect of her efforts is really to turn victimhood into—make it apparent to us as—one of several modes available for framing her insecure condition persuasively. What is most challenging to accept, then, is that Medea’s vengeance does not make her pleas for political asylum disingenuous. The play goes out of its way to trouble the line between victim and perpetrator, to reveal that refugees are “more or less like us—impatient, violent, demanding.”⁵¹

To read *Medea* for its explorations of kinship and refuge is to relinquish the moral imperative that we ought to aid refugees simply out of compassion for their suffering. The preceding reading therefore invites us to confront gendered preconceptions about what a refugee is like, who deserves asylum, and how anxieties over the (potential) criminality of supplicants bears on the interpretation and adjudication of their claims. Medea may be one illustration of a *phugas*, but her dramatization offers a unique and instructive example of political asylum that cannot be assimilated to “humanitarian reason.” As Didier Fassin argues, this modern discourse addresses the displaced in a language of moral sentiment and establishes a relation of domination between the assisting and the assisted.⁵² Euripides’s tragedy troubles this hierarchical opposition and presents it as a matter of contestation: the one who needs refuge here persuades and demands, takes life and offers it.

She also enjoys no gender-neutral or abstract way to ask for or secure a new polis.

To the extent that scholarship on contemporary migration continues to treat gender not as an analytic frame or contested concept (that a focus on human mobility would throw into relief) but as an additional, descriptive, or demographic category, *Medea* offers an important countermodel.⁵³ For whenever

⁵⁰The gendered coding of refugees as victims in the contemporary US context is discussed in Meghana Nayek, *Who Is Worthy of Protection? Gender-Based Asylum and US Immigration Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), chap. 5. See also Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness*, whose reading of Arendt explores the difficulties that the stateless have in claiming and exercising their right to have rights.

⁵¹Slavoj Žižek, *Refugees, Terror, and Other Troubles with the Neighbors: Against the Double Blackmail* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2016), 88.

⁵²See Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), introduction.

⁵³In *Gender and Migration: Feminist Interventions* (London: Zed Books, 2010), Ingrid Palmay, Erica Burman, Khatidja Chantler, and Peace Kiguwa contend that the relationship between gender and migration remains underinterrogated. See also Grewal, *Transnational America* on the gendered and gendering discourses of human rights, specifically how female refugee narratives fail to persuade authorities when they do not fit scripts of victimhood and proper femininity. Gündoğdu (*Rightlessness*, 11) pursues the broader related question about how the “ordering

Medea acts improperly as a mother or daughter, whenever she transgresses and protests the terms of her deprived status, she exposes the precarious and fraught conditions of women's political existence and calls attention to the taxonomic effects of understanding the worth of an asylum claim in terms of passivity and victimhood. Some of Medea's deeds draw attention to the identities that are foisted upon her and from which she seeks to extract herself. Some of them suggest the dependency and lack of freedom that these positions entail. Ultimately, the tragedy leaves us with a question as to whether a woman can (ever) escape the conditions of her own subordination. Once a *phugas*, Medea reaches for the regulative norms of femininity that enabled, though did not strictly cause, the predicament that necessitates her asylum request. This may be one reason that *Medea* bears reevaluation today; not so much to remind us that the meanings of sexual difference are inflected by lines of racialized or nationalized political difference (and vice versa) as to provoke insight into how the membership rules and conventions that can turn someone into a refugee enable and are enabled by additional ones that arrange men and women hierarchically.⁵⁴ When the US Justice Department moves to discount domestic violence as a persecutory harm under asylum law, for example, it not only underscores the lawful gender asymmetry *Medea* depicts by disproportionately disqualifying women (who are more likely to be abused) from procuring asylum.⁵⁵ It exposes "the incomplete and gendered interpretation of refugee law" — "the failure of decision-makers" to respond to the "harms" that women asymmetrically experience on the ground.⁵⁶ A legal regime that does not recognize domestic abuse as

principles of the current international system, including existing human rights norms, contribute to the precarious condition of various categories of migrants."

⁵⁴See Anna Carastathis, Natalie Kouri-Towe, Gada Mahrouse, Leila Whitley, "Introduction," *Refuge* 34, no. 1 (2018): 3–15. Kimberlee Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000) variously call for the simultaneous, rather than discrete, analysis of race, gender, and class in the treatment of women's oppression and discrimination. This work, focused on but not limited to the experiences of Black women, is usually called "intersectional theory" for its interest in seeing the "intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" that shape the experiences of "women of color" (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1243).

⁵⁵Vivian Yee, "Marriage Used to Prevent Deportation. Not Anymore," *New York Times*, April 20, 2018.

⁵⁶Deborah E. Anker, "Legal Change from the Bottom Up: The Development of Gender Asylum Jurisprudence in the United States," in *Gender in Refugee Law: From the Margins to the Centre*, ed. Erfrat Arbel, Catherine Dauvergne, and Jenni Millbank (London: Routledge, 2014), 51.

a basis for asylum threatens to criminalize the flight from gender-based violence. Here it is striking to recall that the restrictions on Medea's freedom of movement are an effect of her *lawful* subordination. Her departure from one *oikos* to another, first coded as a transgression because of her gender, reappears in different forms throughout the tragedy as a kind of fugitivity. She is exiled and becomes a *phugas* not only because she is a renegade but also because, without a male to claim her, she lacks political protection. The free wandering that Creon first casts as harmful and threatening therefore necessitates a different kind of movement: Medea's defiant acts of freedom culminate in her being forced to move, in a crisis for her not only for the cities that let her in.