

HEKATE: A SYMBOL OF THE DANGERS OF FEMININE KNOWLEDGE IN
EURIPIDES

BY

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Abstract:

Without looking at the *Argonautica* and later Roman portrayals of Hekate, such as Ovid and Seneca, I want to explore Hekate's relationship with Greek tragedy. How does a goddess evolve so quickly from possessing a share of land, sea, and earth (*Theogony*) and becoming the attendant to Persephone (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*) to the goddess of witchcraft (*Argonautica*) less than five hundred years later. I believe Medea's reliance on Hekate for assistance navigating the liminal space between the feminine sphere of nature and the masculine sphere of culture in Euripides' tragedy began Hekate's transformation. After mentioning Hekate and Medea's close relationship in *Medea* (431 BCE), Euripides' consequent mentions of Hekate [*Hippolytus* (428 BCE), *Troades* (415 BCE), *Helen* (412 BCE), *Phoenician Women* (410 BCE)] bring certain connotations into each scene. I am exploring what those connotations might be and how *Medea* started it.

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Introduction

There is an assumed relationship between Medea and the goddess Hekate stemming from both the Greek and Roman traditions. Apollonius of Rhodes, writing in the 3rd century BCE, tells us in the *Argonautica* that Medea learned the art of *pharmaka* from Hekate, and he mentions the goddess seven times (478, 529, 739, 842, 915, 985, and 1035) in book three as he describes how Medea helps Jason accomplish her father's labors in order to win the golden fleece.¹ Over three hundred years later during the Early Empire of Rome, Ovid and Seneca continue Medea's adventure. While Apollonius focused only on Medea's youth and marriage to Jason, Seneca reveals her murderous deeds in Corinth in his tragedy *Medea*. Seneca mentions Hekate four times (7, 577, 833, 841), even having Medea call upon the goddess within the first ten lines. In book 7 of the *Metamorphoses* Ovid explains Medea's journey after she murdered Creon, the Corinthian princess, and her two sons, incorporating her association with Hekate into the story (74, 174, 241). Although these three authors provide a clear link between the goddess and the Colchian princess, the known myths about Hekate and Medea do not always involve each other.

I am interested in how the distinct characters of Medea and Hekate evolved into a co-dependent unit. By first examining Archaic portrayals of Hekate, such as *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Hesiod's *Theogony*, we can establish an original identity for Hekate without the influence of Medea. Entering the Classical period there is literary and material evidence for both Medea and Hekate. This will be separated into pre-Euripides and post-

¹ κούρην δὴ τινα πρόσθεν ὑπέκλυες αὐτὸς ἐμείο/φαρμάσσειν Ἑκάτης Περσηίδος ἐννεσίησιν. (3.477-478)

Euripides. I am using Euripides to distinguish periods because I want to explore the possibility that his tragedy *Medea* helped initiate the trend to connect the two females. However, in order for these two characters to be linked together, their individual identities needed to change in order to more easily allow for the union. Using Sophocles' fragments, Pindar's *Pythian 4*, and early 5th century BCE Attic vase paintings I hope to reasonably establish how Athenians viewed Medea before they saw Euripides' play. Euripides deviates from the canonical version of Medea and uses Hekate to reinforce his message. From this moment Hekate and Medea begin to transform from their earlier images and build connections with each other. After identifying all the intricate and subtle changes of Euripides' Medea, from her word choice, to how she views her potion skills, to her realization that women are in a terrible situation, we see a pattern. Medea understands now how men have systematically subjugated women; her personal evolution is tied with her desire to disrupt the system which oppresses women and provides men with privilege. It is beneficial to incorporate gender theory into this analysis in order to help establish a framework for us to determine the extent to which Medea's changes are related to the strict construction of gender in 5th century Athens BCE.

Torch-bearing Hekate

Hekate begins to infiltrate literature of the Greek world in the Archaic period with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Hesiod's *Theogony*. Hesiod devotes forty one lines² with considerable detail to the goddess, who is relatively minor in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE.

ἦ δ' ὑποκυσαμένη Ἑκάτην τέκε, τὴν περὶ πάντων
Ζεὺς Κρονίδης τίμησε: πόρεν δέ οἱ ἀγλαὰ δῶρα,
μοῖραν ἔχειν γαίης τε καὶ ἀτρυγέτοιο θαλάσσης.
ἦ δὲ καὶ ἀστερόεντος ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἔμμορε τιμῆς
ἀθανάτοις τε θεοῖσι τετιμένη ἐστὶ μάλιστα.³ (411-415)

And she conceived and bore Hecate whom Zeus the son of Cronos honored above all. He gave her splendid gifts, to have a share of the earth and the unfruitful sea. She received honor also in starry heaven, and is honored exceedingly by the deathless gods.⁴

Although it is tempting to transpose our knowledge about Hekate from 5th century BCE Athens into the Hellenistic period onto this particular passage, Johnston cautions readers to avoid this, adding, "We can say, more generally, however, that Hekate's portrayal in the *Theogony* indicates her potential interest and participation in virtually every aspect of the

² 411-452.

³ *Theogony* text from Hamilton (1981).

⁴ *Theogony* translations by Evelyn-White (1914).

relationship between humanity and divinity.”⁵ I agree with Johnston’s approach, but I think unpacking the five lines above would help to expand on her interpretation. By designating three distinct spheres of the world- earth, sea, and heaven- Hesiod sets up invisible boundaries. The fact that Zeus gave Hekate a share of all three spheres suggests that she is also responsible for the small spaces that exist between the spheres. These crevices in which a person or object occupies two spheres at once are called liminal spaces. If someone needed assistance as they were transitioning between the sea and the land, they would invoke Hekate since she oversaw all aspects of the transition.

Although Johnston is hesitant to view the *Theogony* as evidence for Hekate’s early identification with transitional places, she finds the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as convincing evidence. Hekate sees Persephone enter the Underworld (54-58), then welcomes her back when she returns (438-440). Hekate’s chthonic nature stems from this myth and vase paintings (cf. figure 1 and 2 in the section “Medea and Hekate: before the friendship”), which depict Hekate with torches accompanying Persephone between the living and the dead. This association continues into early Greek tragedy as well.

ἀλλ’ εἴ σ’ ἔνυπνον φάντασμα φοβεῖ

χθονίας θ’ Ἐκάτης κῶμον ἐδέξω⁶ frag. 489c (adesp. 375)

But if you are terrified by a vision in sleep and have been visited by the revel-band of Hekate from the underworld.

⁵ Johnston (1990) 22.

⁶ All Aeschylus text and translation from Sommerstein (2008). Found in Plutarch *Moralia* 166a, cautiously attributed to Aeschylus. If not Aeschylus, Sommerstein thinks it is likely from tragedy from the similarities to Euripides’ *Helen* 569-570.

Unfortunately for Hekate she seems to lose some of her honors and respect, which Zeus and Persephone once bestowed upon her in the Archaic period. Hekate still presides over liminal spaces, but these spaces become less significant. Her influence became more prominent in crossroads and gateways. Johnston suggests that the statue of Hekate near the Propylaia, which both Hesychius and Pausanias (II.30.2) describe, was before Pericles' building project. Aristophanes claims, with uncertain accuracy of course, that every home in Athens placed a statue of Hekate at their door.⁷ A fragment from one of Aeschylus' tragedies reinforces this idea.

Chorus:

δέσποιν' Ἑκάτη,

τῶν βασιλείων πρόδομος μελάθρων⁸ (frag. 388)

Lady Hekate, you who dwell in front of the royal palace.

With these human-centered liminal spaces come new meanings. Johnston points to three main ideas. The first deals with political boundaries and is often represented by the god Hermes with an apotropaic phallus. He serves as a reminder to approaching enemies or foreigners. The second is reminiscent of Hekate's relationship with Persephone. This can refer to something as simple as a new beginning or the complex process of leaving life. The third, however, is the most intriguing and applies nicely to tragedy. Johnston summarizes the idea, "a threshold is neither inside nor outside of the house, a frontier belongs to neither country, the crossroads are the junction of roads A, B, and C but belong

⁷ Johnston (1990) 23-24.

⁸ From Scholia to Theocritus 2.35-36.

to none of them; liminal spaces, especially crossroads, offer varied options but no reassuring certainties.”⁹ These liminal spaces can be dangerous, unnatural, and even perceived as a danger to society. Liminal spaces are not just physical; they can also occur in the constructed customs of each culture.

While the majority of 5th century BCE evidence portrays Hekate as a transitional goddess, she occasionally presents a darker side. Ogden identifies a subtle relationship with Hekate and the Erinyes, associated with the Underworld and snakes. Ogden describes an Attic black-figure vase painting from the 470’s BCE which depicts Hekate with her right arm outstretched commanding two dogs to tear apart a soul while on the left three Erinyes watch.¹⁰ In the fragmentary play *Alexander*, Euripides uses this as material for demeaning insults.

Cassandra:

Ἐκάτης ἄγαλμα φωσφόρου κύων ἔση¹¹ [frag. 62h (968 N, 42c N-Sn)]

You will be a dog, a favorite of torch-bearing Hekate.

Tragedians also transposed the association between the Erinyes and snakes onto Hekate. Sophocles discusses Hekate with snakes around her head attending her mistress, combining both the *Homeric Hymn* and Erinyes traditions.¹² Hekate is not confined to one domain. Her inclusion in a myth can have various connotations depending on the medium, genre, and author.

⁹ Johnston (1990) 24-25.

¹⁰ Ogden (2013). 254-256.

¹¹ Text from Collard and Cropp (2008); from Plutarch *Moralia* 379d.

¹² frag. 535, discussed in more detail in section “Hekate and Medea: before the friendship.”

Hekate and Medea: before the friendship

Before seeing Medea on stage in 431 BCE in Athens, Euripides' audience would have been familiar with her character from previous literary mentions and artistic representations. Using what extent evidence we have, I want to create a reasonable image of the Colchian princess in order to examine the ways in which Euripides has altered or maintained tradition.

Although fragmentary literary evidence proves challenging to date accurately, for this analysis I am going to assume that Sophocles wrote *The Root-Cutters* before 431 BCE. With his known career spanning from the 440's (*Ajax*, *Antigone*) to 409 (*Philoctetes*) we know that he began competing before Euripides but also served as a contemporary to Euripides. Since his descriptions of Hekate and Medea, found on two separate fragments from different sources, align more closely with the vase paintings of the early to middle 5th century BCE, I will continue with my assumption that *The Root-Cutters* is pre-Euripides.

Lloyd-Jones summarizes the scholarly consensus of *The Root-Cutters* as a play likely about either Medea failing to provide Pelias's daughters with the proper medicine, causing his death, or it centered around Medea helping Jason's father, Aeson, combat old age.¹³

ἢ δ' ἔξοπίσω χερὸς ὄμμα τρέπουσ'

ὁπὸν ἀργινεφῆ στάζοντα τομῆς

χαλκίοισι κάδοις δέχεται...

¹³ Lloyd-Jones (1996) 268-269.

...αἰ δὲ καλυπταὶ
κίσται ριζῶν κρύπτουσι τομάς
ἄς ἦδε βοῶσ' ἀλαλαζομένη
γυμνὴ χαλκείους ἦμα δρεπάνοις (frag. 534)

And she, looking back as she did so, caught the white, foamy juice from the cut in bronze vessels...and the hidden boxes conceal the cuttings of the roots, which she, uttering loud ritual cries, naked, was severing with bronze sickles.¹⁴

Chorus:

Ἦλιε δέσποτα καὶ πῦρ ἱερόν,
τῆς εἰνοδίας Ἑκάτης ἔγχος,
τὸ δι' Οὐλύμπου <προ>πολοῦσα φέρει
καὶ γῆς ναίουσ' ἱεράς τριόδους,
στεφανωσαμένη δρυὶ καὶ πλεκταῖς
ὤμων στείραισι δρακόντων (frag. 535)

Oh Sun our lord and sacred fire, the spear of Hekate of the roads, which she carries as she attends her mistress in the sky and as she inhabits the sacred crossroads of the earth, crowned with oak-leaves and the woven coils of savage dragons.

Although it may not accurately represent the theme of the entire play, fragment 534 highlights Medea's knowledge of the powers of nature. It is interesting to note that

¹⁴ All Sophocles' translations by Lloyd-Jones.

Sophocles, at least in this particular fragment, does not describe Medea as evil or a threat to society. In the two possible narratives that fragment 534 could be describing, Medea's roots have positive affects (at least if Pelias had received them) and benefit influential men of the community. Either Pelias or Aeson are restored to their youth, and thus can reestablish their power. Considering Euripides used Sophocles' *The Root-Cutters* as a template for his own play *The Daughters of Pelias*, it seems Euripides deliberately and dramatically changed Medea's perceived intentions.

Unfortunately it is unclear how the two fragments (534 and 535) are connected. Macrobius' *Saturnalia* (5, 19, 8) provided fragment 534, and a Scholium on Apollonius of Rhodes (3, 1214f.) gives fragment 535. Therefore I am going to avoid the temptation of interpreting the Medea scene in conjunction with Hekate. Although Medea and Hekate are linked in later authors (Euripides, Apollonius, Ovid, Seneca), from the extant evidence I do not think Sophocles is emphasizing a relationship. Fragment 535 discusses Hekate's closeness with cross-roads and her status as an attendant to her mistress, who is most likely either Demeter or Persephone. There is nothing about potions, herbs, or natural powers.

Attic pottery depicts a similar portrayal of Hekate as an assistant to Persephone and an over-seer for transitions between the world of the living and the Underworld.¹⁵

¹⁵ Permission to copy image from Metropolitan Museum from Open Access to Scholarly Content; permission from British Museum through Creative Commons <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/legalcode>.



Figure 1: Attic red-figure krater
Metropolitan Museum 28.57.23
440 BCE



Figure 2: Attic red-figure hydria
British Museum 1868,0606.8
430 BCE

Figure 1 shows Persephone on the far left coming from the Underworld. She is accompanied by Hermes, Hekate, and Demeter on the far right. Hekate lights Persephone's path with two torches. Similarly, figure 2 shows Hekate, securely identified by an accompanying inscription, holding two torches alongside Persephone (not shown in this angle of the hydria) and Demeter on the left wearing a crown. The goddesses are preparing for the sending of Triptolemos (the figure on the far left whose face is only visible). Both vases seem to rely on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to characterize Hekate. Just like in fragment 535 of *The Root-Cutters*, Hekate resides over crossroads, specifically the boundary between earth and the Underworld, and assists Demeter and Persephone. She is removed from Medea and does not seem to have a connection to the magical realm.

Only thirty years earlier than the production of *Medea*, Pindar characterizes Medea as a benevolent sorceress who fits neatly into the Greek patriarchy. In *Pythian 4*, Pindar recalls how Battus founded his own colony, reminding his audience about the subsequent immigrants flooding into Greece, and Pindar ends with the story of the Argonauts and how Jason was able to civilize Aeetes' daughter. As O'Higgins points out, Pindar creates a dichotomy between Greeks and non-Greeks. He describes Medea and her people as κελαινώπεσσι Κόλχοισιν (black-faced Colchians, 212), and further emphasizes her foreignness with παμφαρμάκου ξείνας (foreign female potion master, 233). Yet at the same time Pindar allows her to occupy the literary position of the Muses in his encomium of Arcesilas.

...Αιήτα τό ποτε ζαμενής

παῖς ἀπέπνευσ' ἀθανάτου στόματος, δέσποινα Κόλχων. (10-11)

Once the inspired daughter of Aetes, the queen of the Colchians, breathed forth from her immortal mouth.¹⁶

O'Higgins argues that this contradiction represents the female conundrum: too deceptive and irrational to properly use knowledge. She says, "This male appropriation of female intelligence-famously enacted in the primordial swallowing of the goddess Metis by Zeus-is central to the myth of Jason and Medea as Pindar tells it."¹⁷ This is exemplified in lines 218-219:

ὄφρα Μηδείας τοκέων ἀφέλοιτ' αἰδῶ, ποθινὰ δ' Ἑλλάς αὐτὰν
ἐν φρασὶ καιομένην δονέοι μάστιγι Πειθοῦς.

[Aphrodite taught Jason] so that he could rob Medea of reverence for her parents, and a longing for Greece would lash her, her mind on fire, with the whip of Persuasion.

Jason has the finite verb ἀφέλοιτ' claiming the active role while Medea is allotted the passive participle καιομένην, resulting in men and emotions (ποθινὰ) controlling her actions. Pindar wants to create a hierarchy between races and sexes, with Medea in the least privileged position. Pindar, like Sophocles, believes Medea's sphere of knowledge is in nature.

σὺν δ' ἐλαίῳ φαρμακώσασις' ἀντίτομα στερεᾶν ὀδυνᾶν
δῶκε χρίεσθαι. (221-222)

¹⁶ Pindar translations by Svarlien (1990).

¹⁷ O'Higgins (1997) 108.

And she mixed drugs with olive oil as a remedy for hard pains, and gave it to [Jason] to anoint himself.

Note that Pindar adds ἀντίτομα (“antidote” or “remedy”) to supplement the meaning of φαρμακώσασ’. In the same way that Medea’s potions would benefit men in *The Root-Cutters*, so too would her drugs in *Pythian 4*. From these two authors we can reasonably suggest that although Medea was well-known for her potion mastery, she was still viewed as a resource for men, specifically Greek men, to use. Her drugs were powerful, yet served the patriarchal society.

Visual representations from late 6th and early 5th centuries BCE reiterate this conclusion.



Figure 3: Attic black-figure amphora
British Museum 1837,0609.62
510-500 BCE



Figure 4: Attic red-figure hydria
British Museum 1843,1103.76
480-470 BCE

Both pieces of pottery are dated before Euripides' play and share similarities with the literary portrayals of Medea that we have examined. In figure 3 Medea stands to the left of the cauldron as she sprinkles presumably an herb over the ram to start the revitalizing process. An aging Jason stands with an outstretched arm, almost as if to command and control Medea's actions. The artist has deemphasized the Colchian princess' origins by placing her in a Greek chiton and mantle. In figure 4 Medea again stands on the left of the cauldron, dressed in a chiton, but she is now the one with a raised arm. Pelias sits down behind Medea with white hair and a downcast glance; his body language and positioning suggest he lacks a position of power at this point. Pelias' daughters stand to the right of the cauldron, one of whom raises her in shock. Arm movements over the cauldron suggest power, such as Jason in figure 3 and Medea in figure 4, while arm movements away from the cauldron, such as the daughter of Pelias in figure 4, suggest timidity and even fear. There is a change of power among the characters from the earlier vase (figure 4) to the vase thirty years later (figure 3). While Medea controls her own knowledge and skill in the late 6th century BCE depiction, she loses ownership over her intellectual property on the vase dating to 480-470 BCE. Perhaps this later hydria represents the shifting ideals of Athens after the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE and amidst the height of the Delian League in the early 470's BCE. Athens, as well as other influential Greek *poleis*, became focused on the public sphere: military affairs, politics, foreign relations, and commerce. In the scene on figure 3, Jason commandeers Medea's feminine knowledge of nature for the benefit of the public sphere, specifically to ensure his physical strength and his ability to govern.

Sophocles, Pindar, and the two Attic vases (figures 3 and 4) all suggest that the Greeks perceived Medea as a useful resource to maintain the public sphere of their society. I have been integrating ideas from gender theory studies into my analysis of Medea the character in order to describe the ways in which Greeks constructed gender. Although transposing modern terms onto an ancient culture has the potential to lead to inaccurate interpretations, I feel that using anthropological view points such as constructionism and essentialism, which appear in societies across temporal, geographic, and religious spectrums, will contribute to the understanding of ancient Greek gender roles. I will specifically use Ortner's interpretation of women and their relationship to nature as a framework for my analysis. Ortner argues that women are universally subjugated due to the belief that women are biologically better suited for nature, while men excel at culture. Culture is parallel to the public sphere, including all activities seen as civilizing the community. Nature encompasses the private sphere, defined as domestic duties, but also includes the wild, mysterious aspects of the natural world. Men view women as closer to nature because of their bodies- menstruation, breast milk, and childbirth. Since men lack these biological abilities, they assume they must have different biological abilities, which give them a strong and rational mind. The idea that women will succeed only in the home because of their biology is referred to as essentialism.¹⁸ Ortner finds blaming nature for the systematic devaluation of women problematic. She argues that gender is constructed by each society and that "woman is not 'in reality' any closer to (or further from) nature

¹⁸ Ortner (1974) 67-73.

than man- both have consciousness, both are mortal.”¹⁹ Applying Ortner’s ideas to *Medea*, we can examine the ways in which Euripides constructs gender on three levels: 1) how men perceive Medea’s gender, 2) Medea’s feigned gender performance, and 3) how Medea feels about her own gender identity.

¹⁹ Ortner (1974) 87.

Hekate makes a woman out of Medea

In the prologue of Euripides' *Medea* the Nurse reminds the audience about Medea's adventurous past.

οὐδ' ἄν κτανεῖν πεῖσσασα Πελιάδας κόρας

πατέρα κατώκει τήνδε γῆν Κορινθίαν

ξὺν ἀνδρὶ καὶ τέκνοισιν, ἀνδάνουσα μὲν

φυγὰς πολίταις ὧν ἀφίκετο χθόνα

αὐτῷ τε πάντα ξυμφέρουσ' Ἰάσονι.²⁰ (9-13)

and would that she never persuaded the daughter of Pelias to kill their father and now be inhabiting this land of Corinth, with her husband and children, an exile loved by the citizens to whose land she had come, and lending to Jason himself all her support.²¹

This description confirms the previous tradition from Sophocles, Pindar, and Attic vase paintings. Euripides assures the audience that Medea herself did not murder Pelias, she simply persuaded (πεῖσσασα) his daughters to perform the evil act. While Euripides omits any mention of potions or drugs, the audience, whom would be quite familiar with the popular myths and visual representations of the time, would link the stories. Euripides' emphasis on Medea helping Jason in any way he needed is reminiscent of *Pythian 4*, in which Pindar allows Jason to use Medea as a resource for his personal and political gain.

²⁰ All *Medea* text from Mastronarde (2002).

²¹ *Medea* translations by Kovacs.

From these five lines the audience can recognize the canonical character of Medea whose knowledge is appropriated by society, or as Ortner would argue, by male-dominate culture. As Page points out in his commentary, ἀνδάνουσα in line 11 refers to a story that Medea stopped a famine in Corinth by sacrificing to Demeter and the Lemnian maidens.²²

ἐν Κορίνθῳ κατώκει καὶ ἔπαυσε Κορινθίους λιμῶ κατεχομένους θύσασα Δήμητρι
καὶ νύμφαις Λημνίαις (Schol. on P.O.xiii. 74).

In Corinth [Medea] was living and she stopped Corinth, being seized by a famine,
by offering to Demter and the Lemnian maidens.

Although the scholium does not specify exactly how Medea appeased Demeter, besides the participle θύσασα, it is within reason to assume that Medea might have turned toward the powers of nature to supplement her offering. Ortner would challenge my assumption that Medea has autonomy over her intelligence. Perhaps, instead, Medea was commanded by either Jason or the men of Corinth to solve their problem with her knowledge. This scenario would be similar to figure 3 in which Jason commands Medea to restore his youth with her potions. In either case Medea is portrayed as helping maintain the town and its establishment.

The nurse ends her prologue with words of concern and fear that her mistress may become violent.

...ἐγῶδα τήνδε δειμαίνω τέ νιν
μὴ θηκτὸν ὄση φάσγανον δι' ἥπατος (39-40)

I know her, and I fear that she may thrust a whetted sword through her vitals.

²² Page (1976) 64.

Surprisingly, the nurse is not concerned about Medea unleashing her potions on Jason or anybody else. She predicts that Medea will chose a sword as her weapon of choice.

Swords are linked to military officials, kings, and soldiers. In other words, they represent men and culture. While the translation “vitals” or “liver” for ἥπαρ is literal and makes sense within the sentence, ἥπαρ can also refer to a pregnant women’s womb.²³ In fact, in Euripides’ *The Suppliants* uses this very specific translation.

ὦ τέκνον, δυστυχῆ σ’
ἔτρεφον, ἔφερον ὑφ’ ἥπατος
πόνους ἐνεγκοῦσ’ ἐν ὠδίσι... (918-920)

Oh child, I raised you into ill-fortune, I carried you from under my womb, having endured the labor pains.²⁴

Not only does Medea want to adopt strategies from the culture side of society’s dichotomy, she also wants to use this weapon against nature, which is represented here by a woman’s biological ability to bear children. The nurse sees Medea questioning her confinement within the feminine sphere and fears the consequences.

Before this point, as far as the audience is concerned, Medea has accepted her subservient role in society by allowing men to appropriate her skills. In line 214 Euripides introduces a new, more enlightened Medea. Williamson argues that Medea’s opening line ἐξῆλθον δόμων (I have come out of the house, 214) represents her eagerness to leave the *oikos* and enter the *polis*. Not only does Medea change her location, but as Williamson

²³ 7th edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon: ὑφ’ ἥπατος φέρειν, of pregnant women, Eur.

²⁴ Translation is my own.

adds, “from within the house we hear her expressing extremes of rage, misery, and hatred in lyrical anapaests; as soon as she steps outside it her language becomes controlled, abstract, intellectualizing and indistinguishable from that of any of the male characters she confronts in the early scenes of the play- including Jason.”²⁵ Williamson is referring to the cries of anguish [αἰαῖ (111, 143), φεῦ φεῦ (146), ἰώ (96, 97)] which Medea releases while inside her home. In the monologue that follows Medea tells the Corinthian women that women are the most unfortunate creatures of all,²⁶ ending with this powerful and relevant message:

...ὡς τρις ἂν παρ’ ἀσπίδα

στῆναι θέλοιμ’ ἂν μᾶλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἅπαξ.(250-251)

I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once.

This perfectly summarizes Medea’s new mentality. She no longer wants to fit into the mold into which men placed her. When Creon enters the stage, his words are responding to this new Medea, not the one which Sophocles and Pindar described.

...δέδοικά σ’

μή μοί τι δράσης παῖδ’ ἀνήκεστον κακόν (282-283)

I fear that you will do some fatal evil to my daughter.

σοφή πέφυκας καὶ κακῶν πολλῶν ἴδρις (285)

You are a clever woman and skilled in many evil arts.

²⁵ Williamson (1990) 16-17.

²⁶ πάντων δ’ ὅσ’ ἔστ’ ἔμψυχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει/γυναῖκές ἐσμεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν. 230-231.

Even though Medea's skills have not changed- she still has access to the power of herbs- Creon calls her abilities evil (κακῶν). He associates these potentially evil talents with her cleverness (σοφῆ). Intelligence is a valued attribute and contributes to improving the community, but only within the minds of men. If it is ever possessed by a woman, it will only harm society. Medea understands this contradiction.

σκαιοῖσι μὲν γὰρ καινὰ προσφέρων σοφῶ
δόξεις ἀχρεῖος κοῦ σοφὸς πεφυκέναι: (298-299)

If you bring novel wisdom to fools, you will be regarded as useless, not wise.

Creon perceives Medea as failing her gender identity. Since the Colchian princess is not adhering to feminine subservience, Creon fears that she has permanently left nature and is attempting to infiltrate culture.

Fortunately Euripides does not simplify gender roles down to that extent. He allows Medea to feel lost. Medea is unsure where she belongs, whether nature or culture, and falls into a liminal state.

πολλὰς δ' ἔχουσα θανασίμους αὐτοῖς ὁδοῦς,
οὐκ οἶδ' ὅποια πρῶτον ἐγχειρῶ, φίλαι:
πότερον ὑφάψω δῶμα νυμφικὸν πυρί,
ἢ θηκτὸν ὄσω φάσγανον δι' ἥπατος.(376-379)

Now since I possess many ways of killing them, I do not know which I should try first, my friends: shall I set the bridal chamber on fire or thrust a sharp sword through their vitals.

Line 379 should look familiar. This is the exact line spoken by the nurse in her prologue. Her fears are coming true. Medea separates her options according to nature and culture. Setting the bridal chamber on fire emphasizes that Medea's reference is set in the private sphere, specifically the room which will witness the union between Jason and the Corinthian princess. By destroying this room, Medea can maintain her marriage and return to the parallel between wife and nature. On the other hand, she could use a sword to puncture a womb.²⁷ Neither the nurse nor Medea specify whose womb this might be. I would like to argue that it is Medea's own womb, not the princess'. In her monologue Medea already expressed preference for the masculine sphere over childbirth. If she eliminated her own womb, perhaps she could more easily enter culture.

While in this liminal state, Medea chooses to perform a perverse interpretation of the evil femininity which Creon perceived her to possess. Creon believed her feminine knowledge combined with cultural ambitions was a threat to his city. Medea responds by acting as a caricature of this image to make a point.

κράτιστα τὴν εὐθεΐαν, ἣ πεφύκαμεν

σοφοὶ μάλιστα, φαρμάκοις αὐτοὺς ἐλεῖν. (384-385)

Best to proceed by the direct route, in which I am the most skilled, and kill them with poison.

Medea chooses to destroy the city with what it fears most when it is unable to control it: nature.

οὐ γὰρ μὰ τὴν δέσποιναν ἣν ἐγὼ σέβω

²⁷ For the definition of ἦπαρ that relates it to a womb see footnote 23.

μάλιστα πάντων καὶ ζυνεργὸν εἰλόμην,

Ἐκάτην, μυχοῖς ναίουσαν ἐστίας ἐμῆς,

χαίρων τις αὐτῶν τοῦμὸν ἀλγυνεῖ κέαρ.

πικροὺς δ' ἐγὼ σφιν καὶ λυγροὺς θήσω γάμους,

πικρὸν δὲ κῆδος καὶ φυγὰς ἐμὰς χθονός.

ἀλλ' εἶα φείδου μηδὲν ὧν ἐπίστασαι,

Μήδεια, βουλευούσα καὶ τεχνωμένη:

ἔρπ' ἐς τὸ δεινόν: νῦν ἀγὼν εὐψυχίας. (395-403)

By the goddess I worship most of all, my chosen helper Hecate, who dwells in the inner chamber of my house, none of them shall pain my heart and smile at it! Bitter will I make their marriage, bitter Creon's marriage-alliance, and bitter my banishment from the land! Come, Medea, spare nothing of the arts you are mistress of as you plot and contrive! Into the fray! Now it is a contest of courage.

Even though Hecate is only mentioned in line 397, this single invocation intensifies Medea's gender performance. Hecate is considered the goddess of the crossroads, meaning she presides over the liminal space between two spheres. She is also heavily connected to Demeter and Persephone, who represent the feminine experience. Since Medea wants to remain in her gender limbo, possessing qualities of both nature and culture, she needs Hecate. Hecate's intimate experience with women overcoming male control, as we see Demeter and Persephone do against Zeus and Hades in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, would also appeal to Medea at this time. The Colchian princess wants

to exaggerate her reliance on and commitment to this liminal goddess to intensify her performance. In no piece of pottery or literary work is Medea associated with Hekate. Yet, Euripides has Medea claim that she worships Hekate more than any other divine being and that she lives in Medea's innermost hearth (395-397). I think the important world here is *μυχοῖς*. It can mean simply "innermost," but it can also refer to the women's quarters of a home.²⁸ I think this imagery is metaphorical. Hekate dwells inside the purely feminine aspects of Medea's gender identity, and Medea is ready to free her skills and abilities which have been controlled by men up to this point. Medea's attempt at performing the gender which Creon perceives her to have is strengthened when she calls to herself in the third person in line 402. She urges herself to adopt this "Medea" character with the exclamation *εἶα* and orders herself with an imperative (*φείδου*) to not temper or tame her feminine power.

This scene reveals Medea's new role to the audience. She even steals Creon's own words which he used to describe her.

πρὸς δὲ καὶ πεφύκαμεν

γυναῖκες, ἐς μὲν ἔσθλ' ἀμηχανώταται,

κακῶν δὲ πάντων τέκτονες σοφώταται. (407-409)

And furthermore we are women, unable to perform great deeds of valor, but most skillful architects of every evil.

In the same way that Creon accuses Medea of using her cleverness to perform evil tasks, Medea assigns these attributes to all women (*κακῶν, σοφώταται*). As she allows herself to

²⁸ 7th edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon: entry 2 for *μυχός*.

evolve, Medea remembers the strict dichotomy which forced her into an inferior position to Jason. He saw her youthful eagerness (πρόθυμος) as complacency for him to silence her intelligence (σοφωτέρα). Medea frames the two ideas as opposing each other, just as nature and culture do in Corinth.

κτείνας' ἀνέσχον σοὶ φάος σωτήριον.
αὐτὴ δὲ πατέρα καὶ δόμους προδοῦσ' ἐμοῦς
τὴν Πηλιῶτιν εἰς Ἴωλκὸν ἰκόμην
σὺν σοί, πρόθυμος μᾶλλον ἢ σοφωτέρα: (482-485)

Having killed [the snake] I raised up the saving light/torch for you. Of my own accord I abandoned my father and my home and came with you to Iolcus under Pelion, showing more love than sense.

The audience finally learns who performed the heroic tasks surrounding the Golden Fleece. Tired of being forced into the passive role, Medea uses active particles (κτείνας', προδοῦσ') to take ownership of her accomplishments and her actions. Pindar describes the events differently.

κτεῖνε μὲν γλαυκῶπα τέχναις ποικιλόνωτον ὄφιν,
ὃ Ἄρκεσίλα, κλέψεν τε Μήδειαν σὺν αὐτᾷ, τὰν Πελῖαο φόνον. (249-250)
[Jason] killed the gray-eyed serpent with its dappled back by cunning, Arcesilas, and stole away Medea, with her own help, to be the death of Pelias.

Pindar seems to omit whose cunning (τέχναις) truly defeated the snake, but he does make clear that Jason took Medea away from her homeland as a resource to exploit for his own murderous plans. Medea changes this story as well as the connotation of the word

φάρμακον. As discussed earlier, Pindar uses this word to reference a cure or remedy, which is beneficial for society, or often just Jason. In Euripides, φάρμακον should usually be translated with “poison.”

τοιιοῖσδε χρίσω φαρμάκοις δωρήματα.(789)

with such poisons will I smear these gifts. (Medea)

...ἐπεὶ κακὴν κακῶς

θανεῖν σφ’ ἀνάγκη τοῖς ἐμοῖσι φαρμάκοις. (805-806)

since that wretch must die a wretched death by my poisons. (Medea)

ὄλωλεν ἡ τύραννος ἀρτίως κόρη

Κρέων θ’ ὁ φύσας φαρμάκων τῶν σῶν ὕπο. (1125-1126)

The princess and her father Creon have just been killed by your poisons.

(Messenger)

Once potions are no longer under control of culture they change from “remedy” to “poison.” Poor Aegeus was absent during Medea’s initial monologue and thus was not informed the definition had changed.

παύσω γέ σ’ ὄντ’ ἄπαιδα καὶ παίδων γονὰς

σπεῖραί σε θήσω: τοιάδ’ οἶδα φάρμακα. (717-718)

I will put an end to your childlessness and cause you to beget children, for I know the medicines to do it.

Medea strikes a deal with Aegeus, exchanging her “remedy” for asylum in Athens. Aegeus assumes that Medea is still securely in the feminine sphere of Greek society as a willing

resource to help men and their troubles. But Medea has switched from πρόθυμος to σοφός. She uses her talents for her own gain now.

Having performed this hybrid gender, a mix of nature and culture, for the majority of the tragedy, Medea ensures all the fears of Creon and the Corinthian society came true—a powerful, uncontrollable female regained her autonomy and severely harmed the city. It is important to remember that this was an act for Medea. She played a character. It is not realistic to continue to live in the liminal space between strict gender boundaries in the ancient Greek society. Medea was forced to choose. As Williamson points out, Medea re-enters the *oikos*, but only to murder her children.²⁹ The boys' cries inside the house [ἰώ (1271), οἴμοι (1273)] remind the audience of Medea's emotional shouts from the beginning of the play and contribute to the chaos and pain which Medea associates with the private sphere.

...τί μέλλομεν

τὰ δεινὰ κἀναγκαῖα μὴ πράσσειν κακά;

ἄγ', ὦ τάλαινα χεῖρ ἐμή, λαβὲ ξίφος, (1242-1244)

Why do I put off doing the terrible deed that must be done? Come, wretched hand, take the sword.

By picking up the symbol of culture (ξίφος) and with it destroying her two sons, which link her to nature, Medea kills all connection she has to the feminine sphere and enters the *oikos* for the last time. Her desire is to permanently occupy the masculine sphere of culture so she can maintain control over her mind and body.

²⁹ Williamson (1990) 26.

Hekate in other tragedies

Medea was the first time Euripides included Hekate in one of his tragedies. Her inclusion emphasized Medea's feelings of being lost between the feminine and masculine sphere. Hekate helped empower Medea in this liminal space between the genders. After the *Medea* production Euripides inserts the goddess into four extant plays (*Hippolytus*, *Troades*, *Helen*, *Phoenician Women*)³⁰ and the fragmentary play *Alexander*,³¹ never using her name more than once in each play. Euripides also only lets women genuinely call upon Hekate³² or perceive her presence.³³ The one instance in which Euripides has a male cry out to Hekate is by Menelaus in *Helen*, but the invocation is meant to feminize Menelaus and create humor.

Produced in 428 BCE, *Hippolytus* explores the Phaidra's love, created as punishment by Aphrodite, for her step-son, Hippolytus. The following passage is spoken by the chorus of women after learning about Phaedra's physical ailments.

ἧ γὰρ ἔνθεος, ὦ κούρα,
εἴτ' ἐκ Πανὸς εἴθ' Ἐκάτας
ἡ σεμνῶν Κορυβάντων φοι-
τᾶς ἡ ματρὸς ὀρείας;
ἴσδ' δ' ἴ ἀμφὶ τὰν πολύθη-
ρον Δίκτυναν ἀμπλακίαις

³⁰ lines 142, 322, 569, and 111, respectively.

³¹ frag. 62h (968 N, 42c N-Sn).

³² Cassandra in both *Troades* and *Alexander*; Antigone in *Phoenician Women*.

³³ The chorus in *Hippolytus* believe Phaidra is possessed by Hekate.

ἀνίερος ἀθύτων πελάνων τρύχη;³⁴ (141-147)

Has some god possessed you, dear girl? Do your wits wander under the spell of Pan or Hecate, the august Corybantes or Cybele, the mountain mother? Are you being worn down for some fault against Dictynna, her of the wild beasts, and are you tainted with failure to offer the holy batter?

They assume that her irrational behavior is due to the influence of a god, and they are not wrong. They perceive their queen's pain and anguish as the result of an untamable, female power. Here Euripides is not connecting Hecate with Phaidra, the powerless woman who wishes she could maintain her position under her King Theseus. Instead, Euripides relates Aphrodite with Hecate. Aphrodite has unconquerable power over Love to such an extent that the other gods, including Zeus, want her powers to be checked.³⁵ As a goddess, Aphrodite does not fit into the gendered dichotomy that mortals have created. She refuses to allow men (and gods) to appropriate her powers. Although Medea could not survive in the liminal space of gender, because of Aphrodite's divine status, the goddess of Love is able to thrive in liminality, never concerned with the oppressive state of the private sphere. Hecate symbolizes this liminality for women.

Euripides continues this trend with *Troades* in 415 BCE and *Helen* in 412 BCE. He characterizes Cassandra from *Troades* as a woman who will not accept the submissive position as Agamemnon's concubine. Cassandra, similarly to Medea, has a skill which

³⁴ *Hippolytus* text and translation from Kovacs (1995).

³⁵ cf. *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*.

men fear because they cannot control it. Cassandra calls upon Hekate to help her destroy the female sphere.

ἐπεὶ σύ, μήτηρ, ἐπὶ δάκρυσι καὶ
γούοισι τὸν θανόντα πατέρα πατρίδα τε
φίλαν καταστένουσ' ἔχεις,
ἐγὼ δ' ἐπὶ γάμοις ἐμοῖς
ἀναφλέγω πυρὸς φῶς
ἐς ἀγάν, ἐς αἴγλαν,
διδούσ', ὦ Ὑμέναιε, σοί,
διδούσ', ὦ Ἐκάτα, φάος,
παρθένων ἐπὶ λέκτροις
ἧ νόμος ἔχει.³⁶ (316-324)

Since you, my mother, are busied with tears and lamentations in your mourning for my father's death and for our country dear, I at my own nuptials am making this torch to blaze and show its light, giving to you, O Hymen, giving, O Hekate, a light, at the maiden's wedding, as the custom is.³⁷

As we have seen in figure 1 Hekate is shown carrying two torches to light the way for Persephone as she re-enters the earth from her husband in the Underworld. Hekate is present for marriage arrangements that require the crossing of a liminal space. In the same way as Persephone, Cassandra wants Hekate to watch over her wedding. With Hekate's

³⁶ *Troades* text from Murray (1913).

³⁷ Translation for *Troades* from Coleridge (1891).

blessing, Cassandra can take the opposite path of Persephone- from the world of the living to the world of the dead. While Hekate supports Medea and Aphrodite whose gender identity is in a liminal space, she also assists women, such as Cassandra, with her traditional role of guardian of physical liminal spaces.

Euripides uses Hekate's character as a source of humor in his *Helen*, which is always difficult to categorize because of Euripides' excessive use of comedy and his goal to masculinize Helen and feminizing Menelaus. Having Menelaus invoke Hekate is a sure way to feminize the King of Sparta.

H: ὦ χρόνιος ἐλθὼν σῆς δάμαρτος ἐς χέρας.

M: ποίας δάμαρτος; μὴ θίγῃς ἐμῶν πέπλων.

H: ἦν σοι δίδωσι Τυνδάρεως, ἐμὸς πατήρ.

M: ὦ φωσφόρ' Ἐκάτη, πέμπε φάσματ' εὐμενῆ.

H: οὐ νυκτίφαντον πρόπολον Ἐνοδίας μ' ὄρας.

M: οὐ μὴν γυναικῶν γ' εἶς δυοῖν ἔφυν πόσις.

H: ποίων δὲ λέκτρων δεσπότης ἄλλων ἔφους;³⁸ (566-572)

H: Oh, at last you have come to the arms of your wife!

M: What do you mean by wife? Do not touch my robe.

H: The one whom Tyndareus, my father, gave to you.

M: O torch-bearing Hekate, send visions that are favorable!

H: You see in me no specter of the night, attendant on the queen of phantoms.

³⁸ *Helen* text from Murray (1913).

M: As one man, I am certainly not the husband of two women.

H: You are the master of what other wife?³⁹

Menelaus calls for Hekate's good will; he does not want spirits from the Underworld to confuse his vision and plague his existence. He does not want her to access the liminal space between the two spheres of the world. Since Hekate almost exclusively watched over these transitional stages, either physical or emotional, for women, the audience would have viewed Menelaus' invocation as ridiculous and his attempt as infiltrating the feminine sphere. Euripides employs humor and perversion to solidify Hekate's purpose and identity even more.

Examining more in-depth how Hekate is able to allow female characters to transform in Euripides' tragedies would create insightful research. While my paper focused particularly on Medea, it would be interesting to determine if other prominent female figures in literature altered and expanded Hekate's identity.

³⁹ *Helen* translation from Coleridge (1938).

Conclusion

Euripides' mention of Hekate in line 397 of his tragedy *Medea* transformed both the goddess herself and Medea. From Archaic literature, fragment 535 of Sophocles' *The Root-Cutters*, and two Attic vase paintings from 440 and 430 BCE, Hekate was portrayed as a goddess closely associated with the myth of Demeter and Persephone. She served to guide Persephone between earth and the Underworld, and as a result, she became associated with physical liminal spaces. Her sphere of influence expanded after the production of *Medea*.

Medea originally was a woman skilled in potions, whose skills and intelligence men felt comfortable using for their own benefit. We saw this in Pindar's *Pythian 4*, Sophocles' fragment 534, and two Attic vase paintings from 510 and 480 BCE. She securely was in the feminine sphere and had no desire to explore the cultural aspects of society, which were dominated by men. As Euripides introduced the two women, Medea decided to occupy the liminal space between nature and culture, creating a new gender and causing panic throughout Corinth. Hekate allowed her to claim ownership over her knowledge and guided her through her transition. Unfortunately for Medea, it is not possible for a mortal to live in liminality for a sustained amount of time. As a result, Medea entered her home for the last time and killed the last things that linked her to nature: her children.

After this production Hekate and Medea formed a union in literature. Medea no longer was viewed as a resource, only as a wild witch with harmful poisons. Hekate

adopted some of these characteristics as well, becoming the goddess of witchcraft. All because of line 397.

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