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Kόσμος ἐπέων.
Studi offerti a Franco Ferrari

A cura di Luigi Battezzato e Giovan Battista D’Alessio
Filippomaria Pontani

Mothers with Child: on Eur. Med. 1271*

Medea’s behind-the-scene murder of her children is perhaps one of the most frequently evoked scenes in the whole of Attic drama. This is the text of Eur. Med. 1270a-1278 in van Looy’s edn.:

1270a <ΠΑΙΣ> (ἔσωθεν) ἵω μοι
1273 ΧΟ. ἀκούεις βοᾷν ἀκούεις τέκνων;
1274 ἵω τλάμον, ὡ κακοτυχεῖς γύναι.
1271 ΠΑ.α. οἴμοι, τί δράσω; ποί φύγω μητρός χέρας;
1272 ΠΑ.β. οὐκ οἴδ’, ἀδέλφε φίλτατ’ ὀλλύμεσθα γάρ.
1275 ΧΟ. παρέλῳ δόμους; ἀρήξαι φόνον
1276 δοκεῖ μοι τέχνοις.
1277 ΠΑ.α. ναι, πρὸς θεῶν, ἀρήξετ’ ἐν δέοντι γάρ.
1278 ΠΑ.β. ὡς ἐγγύς ἥδη γ’ ἐσημέν ἀρκών ξίφους.

Seidler’s transposition of ll. 1271-1272 after 1273-1274 and the presence of an exclamation before 1273 (to which the chorus’ ἀκούεις βοᾷν clearly refers) have been confirmed by the Ptolemaic anthol-ogy P.Stras. WG 304-307, beautifully re-edited by Marco Fassino in 1999. ¹ The other textual problems of these lines are mostly trivial and need not detain us here; however, two central issues have been hotly debated by scholars: the overall metrical structure, and the distribution of the couplets 1271-1272 and 1277-1278 among the two children. The latter problem can be deemed solved by now, for the first couplet is clearly divided among the two paides both in the majority of manuscripts and in the Strasburg papyrus (which however omits 1277-1278): few scholars have subscribed to Nauck’s perplexity about the possibility of a dialogue behind the scenes between two otherwise κωφά πρόσωπα – an idea that pushed Nauck himself, Wecklein and others to either suspect or delete l. 1272, and, e.g., Diehl to ascribe ll. 1271-1272 to both voices together.²

* My thanks to the editors and to Andrea Rodighiero for their advice.

¹ Fassino 1999 (see esp. pp. 12, 20 and 23-24). It should be noted that the papyrus repeats ll. 1273-1274 (the first time with omission of ἀκούεις τέκνων) both before and after ll. 1271-1272, thus pointing to an early corruption in our text of the Medea.

² See van Looy 1992, p. 131; Diehl 1911, ad loc.; Weil eliminated the question mark
As for the metre, the fifth stasimon of the Medea, and particularly the second strophic couple starting on l. 1273, is characteristically made of dochmiacs, a metre occurring frequently before an off-stage killing.\(^1\) In and of itself, the presence of iambic trimeters such as 1271-1272 and 1277-1278 in a dochmiac context is far from uncommon, particularly in scenes of high emotional tension;\(^2\) however, the delivery of these lines remains uncertain: were they intended to be spoken or sung?\(^3\) Given the relative paucity of full iambic trimeters in Euripidean choruses, the answer is far from obvious:\(^4\) the absence of resolutions,\(^5\) the general tone of the lines and the fact that they are neither Doricised (μητρός not ματρός) nor uttered by an otherwise singing character,\(^6\) would rather conjure up a spoken delivery,\(^7\) and invite a comparison, e.g., with Eur. El. 1165 and 1168, both occurring in an iambic-dochmiac structure and containing the cry of Clytemnestra and the chorus’ reaction – both of which may be hard to imagine in a sung form. It would perhaps be tempting to assume, with Judith Mossman, that the corresponding trimeters ll. 1284-1285 (and 1288-1289), uttered by the chorus in the antistrophe as part of their uninterrupted, appalling account of Ino’s mythical exemplum, could be in fact sung rather than spoken:\(^8\) this would create in the performance a dissymme-

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\(^1\) See, e.g., Soph. El. 1384-1397; Eur. HF 735-746; El. 1147-1164, with Finglass 2007, p. 502, and Mossman 2011, p. 349.


\(^3\) Dale 1968, pp. 81-86, while declaring that «the occurrence of acatalectic trimeters in lyrics gives rise to unanswered speculation about their delivery» (see also Gentili, Lomiento 2003, p. 137), thinks for this category of verses (including, e.g., Soph. OT 1312-1330 and Eur. Hipp. 817-851) about the possibility of a ‘mixed delivery’.

\(^4\) Korzeniewski 1968, pp. 102-103 and n. 59 gives a list and envisages the possibility of «eingestreute Sprechverse oder in παρακατολογή rezitierte Verse».

\(^5\) Denniston 1936, pp. 127-129.


\(^7\) I leave here aside the controversal possibility of parakataloge, on which form of delivery see recently Moore 2008. By contrast, Pippin Burnett 1998, p. 220 n. 110 believes this to be the only case in which «the cries of vengeance victims are incorporated into a strophic structure (and so given a musical accompaniment)».

\(^8\) Mossman 2011, p. 349. See, however, Popp 1971, pp. 265-266, evaluating the two cries of the children as «innere Epirrhema» of the stasimon (therefore spoken), matched by corresponding Sprechverse in the antistrophe. See esp. Segal 1997, pp. 173-
try matching the other oddity consisting in a change of speaker between corresponding lines in strophe and antistrophe – a change obviously imposed by the intervening death of the former speaker by the time the antistrophe has begun.\(^1\)

However, if we assume, on firmer ground, a spoken delivery, ll. 1271-1272 (and 1277-1278) may become the first and virtually the only lines spoken by children in the whole of extant Greek tragedy. It is a well-known fact that children appear quite often on the Attic stage, particularly in Euripides,\(^2\) and rarely come to the word:\(^3\) when they do, it is assumed that for reasons of control and audibility adult actors lend them their voice,\(^4\) usually singing lyric amoe-beans with other characters, or else full-fledged choral laments or monodies. One might recall Molossos’ lyric dialogue with his mother in the Andromache (501-514 and 523-536),\(^5\) the children chorus in Suppl. 1123-1164, and the lament of Alcestis’ son upon the death of his mother in Alc. 393-415\(^6\) (the earliest known instance of a child speaking on stage): «cantum solum tragici, non verba pronuntianda pueris imposuerunt»,\(^7\) which is why the pueri can even listen to cruel or inconvenient dramatic exchanges without being expected to react.\(^8\)

This intertwining of probably spoken lines into the choral ode has been rightly regarded as a «bold stroke» on the part of Euripides, achieving a «most powerful climax of violence».\(^9\) Eccentricity (and expressive connotation) grows if we consider this peculiar arrangement against the broader typology of the so-called «off-stage cries» in Attic tragedy: the children’s screams in the Medea are not

175 on the oddity and the surprise effect produced by the responsion of the trimeters in the antistrophe.

\(^1\) Page 1937; Finglass 2007, p. 509; Segal 1996, p. 22.
\(^3\) Allan 2002, p. 115 note 65 believes this a characteristic feature of Euripidean plays, intended to «intensify the scene’s emotional register».
\(^4\) Devrient 1904, p. 8, arguing that this was necessary in order to make the words audible by all spectators; Battezzato 1991. But see, contra, Haym 1897, arguing (esp. pp. 275 and 280-289) that children were actually using their own voice in the earlier part of Euripides’ career: however, he makes an exception (pp. 224-225) precisely for our lines of the Medea, which he also attributes to older actors.

\(^5\) See in particular, in view of our argument to be developed below, the exclamation of despair in l. 513 ὡμοι μου τι πάθω.

\(^6\) Devrient 1904, pp. 4-6; Sifakis 1979. More instances in Haym 1897, pp. 280-283.

\(^7\) Haym 1897, p. 276.

\(^8\) Battezzato 1991.

\(^9\) Segal 1997, p. 170; Mossman 2011, p. 351.

only more numerous than usual (this might be the earliest instance where more than two cries are executed),\(^1\) not only do they represent the only case of a «shared cry»\(^2\) and the only (if exceedingly short) dialogue taking place behind the scenes,\(^3\) but they represent the only utterances of tragic victims that directly call the chorus into question, eliciting its immediate, active response and lending a sort of amoeboid thrust to the entire Iou-Szene.\(^4\) A comparable case, in terms of the size and the purport of the lyric exchange but also in terms of scenic organisation,\(^5\) is represented by the trimeters of Clytemnestra in Sophocles’ Electra (1404-1405, 1409, 1415-1416)\(^6\) and in Euripides’ Electra (1165, in a dochmiac-iambic context: \(\text{o téknà, } \tau ròs \text{ Theòn, } \mu h \tau tάnhte } \mu tɛrəx).\(^7\)

But only in the Medea do we encounter the outspoken use of one of those rare teasing challenges to dramatic conventions, whereby the chorus is explicitly summoned to move, is encouraged to intervene by the intended victim,\(^8\) and ultimately refrains to take action.\(^9\) In this context, the importance of the children’s exclamation is paramount, for it is through this aural connection between on-stage characters and off-stage action\(^10\) that the chorus becomes aware of the tragic deeds in the house, and elaborates its decision to intervene (or not to intervene),\(^11\) and it is again through those

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\(^2\) Arnott 1982, p. 39 believes this to be an Euripidean innovation.

\(^3\) The case of the exchange between Electra, Hermione and Orestes in Eur. Or. 1347-1352 (evoked by Hamilton 1987, p. 592) is very controversial: see Medda 1999, pp. 56-65.


\(^5\) Zeppezauer 2011, pp. 160-161 defines this typology as an «offene Iou-Szene».

\(^6\) On this kommos and its metrical and literary implications see Mazzoldi 2008, esp. pp. 186-192.

\(^7\) Cries from within also occur in an iambic-dochmiac context, e.g., in Herc. Fur. 734-762 and Or. 1296-1301.

\(^8\) The oddity of this exchange prompted Pippin Burnett 1998, p. 220 n. 109 (after Verrall) to suspect ll. 1277-1278, which are missing from the Strasburg papyrus (see above, p. 123 n. 1).


lines that the public can cherish for a moment the illusion that the children may after all still be saved.¹

All the functional peculiarities highlighted so far are matched in terms of content by other special features: l. 1271, the first cry of despair of the first child, is built around two short questions, in and of themselves rather typical of scenes of anguish and despair. The second one, ποῖος φύγω μητρός χέρας, vividly depicts the little child’s desperate attempt to escape his mother’s weapon: several parallels have been found for the use of ποῖο rather than πού or πού,² and of course this usage may be reminiscent of Medea’s own cry of despair in l. 502 νῦν ποῖο τράπωμαι; πότερα πρός πατρός δόμους; But most important is the reference to the mother’s ‘hands’, which iconically alludes to the particularly violent modality of the killing, but also brings to the extreme consequences the insisted repetition (32 occurrences!) of the word χείρ throughout this tragedy – a symbol of violence, tenderness or loyalty,³ and peculiarly frequent in Medea’s monologue (1019-1080), where it stands for the special link of affection and intimacy between the protagonist and her sons (ll. 1055, 1070, 1071),⁴ and later (just before our stasimon) in Medea’s exhortation to her own hand to accomplish the deed irrespective of love or family ties (ll. 1244-1250 ἄγ’, ὁ τάλαννα χείρ ἔμη, λαβὲ ξίφος...).⁵

However, the adoption of the τί δράσω exclamation in this context has a partly unusual flavour to it. Robert Fowler’s penetrating analysis of the rhetoric of the despair in Attic drama⁶ has cleverly gathered in a long footnote all the relevant occurrences of the very common formula ‘τί δράσω’ (or the like), without of course discussing each of them in detail. A closer look shows that these occurrences fall by and large into two categories:⁷ on the one hand,

¹ Romilly 1961, p. 54.
² Blaydes 1901, p. 43; Elmsley 1822, pp. 295-296.
⁴ Serious doubts have been cast on the authenticity of ll. 1056-1080: see most recently Lucarini 2013, who deals with earlier bibliography, recapitulates the arguments for detaching the lines at issue from the rest of the play, and draws some consequences from this.
⁵ Segal 1997, pp. 169 and 178.
⁶ Fowler 1987, esp. n. 56.
⁷ Roughly corresponding to the aporetic/deliberative and to the rhetorical questions classified by Mastronarde 1979, pp. 7-10. It would be interesting to analyse the occurrences of the formula in Attic comedy, e.g. (as Andrea Rodighiero points to me) in such an evocative passage as Ar. Ach. 466, where Dicaeopolis’ parodic question καίτοι τί δράσω; (prefiguring imminent death, see below) is addressed to Euripides himself.
a real hesitation between two courses of action, a moment in which the possibility of δεύτερα φροντίδες is suddenly and concretely envisaged (e.g. Neoptolemus before betraying Philoctetes in Soph. Phil. 908 and 969; Heracles on the verge of suicide in Eur. HF 1157; Menelaus attempting to save Hermione in Or. 1610); on the other hand, a mere rhetorical expression of sorrow or despair, which does not contemplate a serious intervention to change the course of events (e.g., Tecmessa after Ajax’s suicide in Soph. Ai. 920; Admetus to Alcestis in Eur. Alc. 380; Hecuba to Polyxena in Hec. 419, and to Agamemnon in Hec. 737; Creon contemplating his plight in Phoen. 1310).

Strictly speaking, neither of these categories applies to our passage of the Medea, where the children are literally on the verge of being killed, and thus can no longer prevent the evil (or seriously believe to be able to prevent the evil) – and yet they still seem to contemplate the possibility of the chorus intervening in their favour (whereby again the possibility of autonomous δράσες on their part is anyway reduced to a minimum). While we do find τί δράσω exclamations on a rhetorical tone in distressing situations (especially in Euripides, with his characteristic «goût de la faiblesse, du doute, de l’inquiétude avant l’action»),¹ this is never the case – except for this passage – with victims in the very moment of their death.

It has been remarked that, in the economy of the play, the child’s desperate question harks back to Medea’s hesitation in her famous monologue (Med. 1042 αἰαί· τί δράσω; καρδία γὰρ οἶχεται), at the end of which her original resolution (v. 1019 δράσω τάδ’) will be finally put into practice. Whether l. 1042 was inspired by the similar monologue in Neophron’s Medea (fr. 2 Radt ἔλεν, τί δράσες θυμέ) or – as it seems more likely – the reverse is the case (the issue of priority between Neophron and Euripides is still not settled),² it clearly marks a watershed in the play, for the faltering and much-debated monologue of Medea is ostensibly the last the children hear from her mother before being killed by her at l. 1278.³

¹ Romilly 1961, p. 18. See also, in a similar vein, Soph. Ai. 457. Harder 1985, p. 83 points to particularly compelling parallels where the question is followed by a second one: Hec. 419 οἶμοι· τί δράσω; ποί τελευτήσω βίον;; HF 1157-1158 οἶμοι, τί δράσω; ποί κακών ἐρημίαν / εὔφη, πτεροτός ἢ κατὰ χθόνος μολὼν; (see also paratragic τί δράσω, ποί φύγω in Men. Sam. 568).
³ Knox 1979, p. 240.
The importance of Med. 1271-1272 has been indirectly confirmed by a recent papyrus find, which has changed dramatically our image of this play, if not of ancient tragedy tout court: I am referring to P.Oxy. 76, 5093 (1st century CE, 2nd half), an obscure rhetorical text mentioning inter alia that Euripides ‘corrected’ (col. iv, l. 2 ἐπανορθωσάμενος) an earlier representation of the filicide on stage, by deleting the following lines, «quoted by some» (col. iv, ll. 3-4 τοὺς στίχους ἐκεῖνους ὦν μέμνηνται τινες διαγράφας):

ποῖ δήτα μητρὸς χεῖρα δεξιὰν στυγῶν  
φεύγεις; ἀνάδρου βήματος τἰθεὶς ἵγνος;

These lines, the only ones we know of the ‘first Medea’, might be the fruit of a rhetor’s fanciful invention, or the extrapolation by a Schwindelautor relying on no direct knowledge of drama but only on a peculiar, erratic couplet. However, if we do take seriously the papyrus text, the lines might give us several clues about the appearance of that earlier play, and suggest that it must have been quite different from the preserved one especially as far as the dramatic sequence of events in the final part is concerned – after all, the papyrus text itself (whatever its reliability in matters of detail) insists on this, see col. iv, ll. 6-10 καθόλου τε τὴν οἰκονομίαν ἀλλάξας ἐνδον ἁμφοτέρως κατέσφαξεν ὡς μετριοτέρας ἐσομένης τῆς τεχνοκτονίας εἰ μὴ ἐν φανερῷ πραχθεὶς. In par-

1 Colomo 2011.
2 Along, perhaps, with the controversial quotation ὁ θερμαύσομον σπλάγχνον (Eur. fr. 858 N.) attributed to Euripides’ Medea by schol. vet. Ar. Ach. 119 but not attested in ‘our’ Medea (Wilson corrected ἐν Τιμενίδικες; see Luppe 2013 and Magnani 2014, p. 98); see also the fr. 905 Kn. discussed by Lucarini 2013, p. 187.
3 See Colomo 2011, pp. 112-116; see also Magnani 2014, pp. 91-95, esp. pp. 99-101 on the possibility of an autoschediastic origin. Luigi Battezzato believes the lines could even belong to a different play: he will come back on the issue in a special paper. G. B. D’Alessio rightly observes that in tragic diction the verb στυγάω expresses hate and disgust rather than fear (the situation is different, for example, in epic: see, e.g., schol. D Il. 7.112 and 20.65) – however, it is often used in contexts of family ties (Soph. Ant. 571; Eur. Alc. 338, El. 933 etc.), and I assume that Medea is seen here in a psychologically very unstable condition, so that the nuances of her words should not necessarily be taken ad litteram.
4 Despite Colomo 2011b (and Magnani 2014, pp. 96-97), I start from the methodological assumption that the information conveyed by the papyrus cannot be wholly fictional and unreliable: see Lucarini 2013, pp. 185-189.
5 An attempt to reconstruct the facies of this Medea is made by Mehl 2011, pp. 275-279. Lucarini 2013, pp. 187-189 attempts to link Euripides’ Ur-Medea to the play once allegedly containing Med. 1056-1080 (see above, p. 127 n. 4), but those lines are definitely irreconcilable with the murder on stage.
ticular, we have here, as opposed to the lucid character we know from the extant play,¹ a raging mother madly running after her son and blaming his alleged cowardice,² patently falling victim of the φοινίκα λύσσα mentioned by Neophron’s Medea when she speaks to her hands ready for murder (fr. 2.11-12). However, it is not easy to believe that these lines should come from Neophron’s (or from anybody else’s) play,³ for the rhetorical text in the papyrus (col. iv, ll. 11-15) parallels Euripides’ diorthosis with his similar, well-known intervention on the earlier version of the Hippolytus,⁴ and thus it would be strange to learn that in the case of Medea Euripides «corrected» not his own play but someone else’s; indeed, the papyrus seems to state that ‘even so’ (i.e., after mildering the παιδοφονία, presumably producing what is our extant Medea) Euripides was nonetheless once more defeated in the tragic contest (col. iv, ll. 10-11 καὶ τότε οὐδὲν ἦν τοιῷ ἐνικήθη): and to my mind this way of expression univoquely points to self-correction.⁵

Of course, the sudden discovery of a Euripidean Ur-Medea, whether or not confirmed by another papyrus (PIFAO inv. PSP 248) allegedly labelling ‘our’ Medea as Β’ Μήδεια,⁶ has raised all sorts of doubts, both on the relative chronology of the two plays (some now argue that ‘our’ Medea should be dated later than 431)⁷ and on the possibility that the ‘taboo’ about the representation of violent acts on the tragic stage (famously spelled out, e.g., by Hor. ars poet. 185: «Ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet»)⁸ could in fact be violated or might even never have existed altogether.⁹

¹ Segal 1997, pp. 175-176.
³ A case for this is made by Colomo 2011, pp. 112-114 (cf. Magnani 2014, p. 93), who makes the most of the information about Euripides διασκευάς Neophron’s play (hypoth. Eur. Med. 25-27 Diggle = TrGF τ2 = Dicaearch. fr. 63 Wehrli).
⁴ For other cases in which Euripides wrote two redactions of the same play, see Luppe 1996.
⁵ On the same line Magnani 2014, pp. 95-96 (who however denies the rhetor any reliability). A different view in Scattolin 2013, pp. 136-137, who inclines to attribute the two lines to Neophron.
⁷ Luppe 2013 (but see Magnani 2014, pp. 94, 101).
⁸ Colomo 2011, pp. 116-118 marshals the evidence, and Rodighiero 2000, pp. 77-80 examines the rationale of this convention.
⁹ Arnott 1962, pp. 134-138, and Mehl 2011, pp. 279-287 (insisting also on Ajax’s suicide in Sophocles’ play) argue on different grounds against the very existence of this veto; Mehl, in particular, insists that by the middle of the 5th century playwrights had all
Whatever the truth about these thorny issues, it seems likely that by changing such a sensitive moment in the plot of his play, Euripides, no matter the ultimate goal of his intervention, was consciously acting a radical departure from his earlier expressive choice, implying a refashioning of his main character as well as of the moment clou of the action.¹ The two lines in the earlier version of the play, as quoted by P.Oxy. 5093, share with Med. 1271-1272 at least two important characteristics: the interrogative tone and the motif of escaping the killer’s hand.² On the other hand, the almost military image of the ‘footprint of the cowardly step’, applied to the poor child’s attempt to avoid his own mother’s knife (possibly after the murder of his brother had already taken place, as is the case in at least three South Italian pots),³ can only be explained – if the lines belong indeed to a Medea – as the fruit of the woman’s obnubilated mind. What Euripides has effected in the lines of ‘our’ Medea is thus not only a shift from a crazy, child-hunting Medea to an off-stage killing evoked by ‘cries from within’ (and not even described by a messenger’s report), but also a dramatic change of perspective: no longer a frenzied mother attacking her son in the open light and blaming him, but a desperate son vainly seeking help, a way to escape his mother’s attack, «running in the dark, trapped in the space that leads nowhere».⁴

The pivotal role of the trimeters (1271-1272 and 1277-1278) in the fifth stasimon of Euripides’ Medea should have become clear by now: unusual both in metrical and in dramatic terms, innovative both as spoken by children and as openly directed to the chorus, these lines envisage a totally new dramatic structure by substituting the cry of despair of the victims to a savage and furied on-stage killing. It may thus be worthwhile to look back at l. 1271 and to resume the point about the oddity of the τὶ δρᾶσις motif in this line. The aforementioned contact with Medea’s hesitation in l. 1042 the technical possibilities to hide violent acts from the spectators’ gaze – so the showing of a killing ἐν φανερῷ was not the result of material constriction but rather of deliberate choice.

¹ This is in keeping with Euripides’ general refrain from the exhibition of actual violence: see Romilly 1961, pp. 20-21 and 43.
² On the latter point see above and Colomo 2011, p. 118. The ποῖ should be taken as a further guarantee of the ποῖ, not πῶ, in l. 1271 (see above, pp. 123-124 n. 2).
⁴ Luschnig 1992, p. 43, a perceptive study of the relationship between internal and external space in Euripides’ play. See also Segal 1996, p. 23.
ai`a tì δράσω, may represent a bridge to an intertext that contains perhaps the most famous hesitation in Greek literature, namely Aeschylus’ Cho. 889 (Πυλάδη, τι δράσω; μητέρ’ αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν;) spoken by Orestes to Pylades just before killing his mother Clytemnestra. In the Choephoroi, of course, Orestes’ wavering (and thus his τι δράσω) is perfectly at home, because the speaker is effectively called on to decide between two very different courses of action – to kill or not to kill his mother: indeed, this very alternative appears as a fundamental stroke in the definition of Orestes’ independent character, not (as some interpreters have believed) as an empty rhetorical question in an already written fate. The penetrating study by Lutz Käppel has shown that Cho. 899 is the dramatic akme of the play precisely because it corresponds to the first (and sudden) occasion in which Orestes becomes fully aware of the real purport and dangers of his vengeance, and painfully convinces himself (also through Pylades’ support) of the need for such a tremendous act as matricide, which had been certainly implied in the previous scenes of the play (and spelled out in ll. 434-438, where the noun μητηρ however does not occur), but not yet fully or consciously thematised.

As it happens, in Med. 1271 it is another son who exclaims τι δράσω in front of his mother, being this time a victim, not a killer; this time, his words do not appear as the mark of sudden hesitation before a terrible deed (in fact, they had fulfilled this role on Medea’s lips in l. 1042), but rather as the theatrical signpost of the coronation of the long and winding process of Medea’s decision-making, around which the entire play revolves. That this nice game of mirrors should arise by chance, especially in a play whose very outcome in terms of responsibility and dramatic fault seems to

2 Snell 1928, pp. 13 and 32-33.
3 For the debate on this line see Garvie 1986, p. 293, ad loc.
5 One may wonder if this idea had crossed the mind of the anonymous Byzantine author of the Christus patiens, who put no less than three lines drawn from Med. 1271-1272 (l. 474 οἷοι τι δράσω πῶς λάθω λαῶν χέρας; and l. 477-478 τι γοῦν, τι δράσω; πῶς φύγει τόσοις βρόχοις; / οὖκ οἶδ’ ἀδελφὴ φιλτάτη· δέδωκα γάρ) in the mouth of a mother losing her son and dreading the attack of the Jewish crowd, namely the Virgin Mary.
turn upside down the final of the *Oresteia*, is to my mind implausible. By choosing the τί δράσω motif, Euripides was inserting a somewhat untypical element in this murder scene, but was also producing something more important than a mere intertextual dialogue: he was implicitly describing Medea’s filicide under the same, abominable rubric as Orestes’ matricide.

That l. 1271, as refashioned by Euripides after the dramatic change of perspective we know of thanks to P.Oxy. 5093, should represent an allusion precisely to Orestes’ hesitation in the *Choephori*, is made even more likely by a body of circumstantial evidence, extending also to the subsequent lines in the stasimon:

- the occurrence of the syntagm μητρός χέρες in l. 1271, while announcing analogous misdemeanours in Euripides’ later plays (Agave and Pentheus in *Bacch.* 858 and 969), or evoking *e contrario* the ideal comfort of family protection (see, e.g., *Hec.* 50, *Or.* 1340, *Iph. Taur.* 234), might also in my view cling back to the conspicuous (and highly emotive) occurrence of μήτησε in *Cho.* 899, the first time Orestes uses this word for Clytemnestra in the play: nowhere else is the word ‘mother’ associated with the τί δράσω motif in extant Greek tragedy.

- the complex image of the «sword’s nets» (ἀρχυνες ξίφους) in the words of the second child (*Med.* 1278) might be explained as a hint to the repeated occurrence of the hunting imagery in the *Oresteia*, and particularly to the use of nets in *Agam.* 1116 and *Cho.* 1000; both Medea and Clytemnestra (see esp. *Cho.* 492 μέμνησο δ’ ἀμφίβλητρον ὡς ἐκαλύνσας, in Electra’s words) entrap their victims in the net of their machinations, and then slay them with a blade;

- Medea’s definition as an Erinys in ll. 1258-1260 has an obvious Aeschylean flavour, and evokes, e.g., the representation of Cly-

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1 Segal 1996, pp. 40-41.  
3 One might even speculate that this τί δράσω is deliberately and ironically echoed by the poet at the end of Jason’s first speech upon entering the house, when – still unaware of the tragic murder – he utters his concern for possible retorsions of Glauce’s family against his children (ll. 1304-1305): μή μοι τι δράσω’ οί προσάκινοντες γένει, / μητρόν ἐκπράσσοντες ἀνόσιον φόνον (note μητρός as subjective genitive, whereas the same adjective occurs as objective genitive precisely for Orestes’ matricide in *Aesch. Eum.* 230 ἀλλὰ μητρόν).  
4 Vidal-Naquet 1976, pp. 121-144. On the imagery of the *Oresteia* and its aftermath see Rutherford 2012, pp. 128-137.  
5 The bold metaphor will also appear in *He* 729-730 βρόχοισι δ’ ἀρχικῶν γενήσεται: / ξεφηφρόροισι: see Wilamowitz 1895, 11, pp. 163-165, and Bárberi Squarotti 1993, pp. 118-120.  
temnestra as an Alastor or Erinys in the *Oresteia* (e.g., *Agam.* 1497-1504);¹

- the chorus’ search for a comparable *exemplum* of a murderous woman in ll. 1282-1289 (controversially focusing on Ino) has its closest parallel in the catalogue provided by the chorus in *Cho.* 585-651, and including the mother of Meleager;²

- Clytemnestra’s murder in the *Choephoroi* is one of the closest scenes we get to the «meurtre sur la skène», an issue that *P.Oxy.* 5093 shows very important also for Euripides’ (re)staging of the *Medea*;³

- Clytemnestra’s appeal to her rearing of Orestes (*Cho.* 896-928), iconically displayed in the famous gesture of showing him her breast, corresponds to a pivotal theme in Euripides’ *Medea*, namely the loss of children and the waste of the toil of rearing them, as underlined by Medea herself (250-251, 1021-1023, most notably 1028-1031) and by the chorus.⁴

- the murder scene of the *Choephoroi* was extremely popular in Attic theatre,⁵ probably easy for the audience to recognise, and thus fairly often imitated, not least by Euripides himself in his own, later *Electra* (see l. 967 τι δῆται δρόμεν; μητέρ’ ἦ φονεύσομεν,⁶ and 1206-1207 for the gesture);⁷ it can be remarked that the very famous gesture of showing the breast to a son was traditionally used by mothers (e.g., Hecuba in *Il.* 22.80-82) not in order to save their own lives, but to beg their sons to save themselves⁸ – an indirect reference to the context of the Aeschylean scene would thus add to the tragic irony of the *Medea* passage, all the more so if Euripides and his audience knew of a version in which Medea attempted to save her children from the danger of retaliation from the inhabitants of Corinth.⁹

Other parallelisms between the *Medea* and the three *Electra*-plays

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¹ Kovacs 1993, p. 63.
⁴ See on this central theme Segal 1997, pp. 176-180.
⁵ No less popular than Agamemnon’s killing in *Agam.* 1343-1345, echoed, e.g., by Soph. *El.* 1414-1416 (Romilly 1961, p. 54).
⁶ Romilly 1961, p. 17 stresses the metrical parallelism even with the metrical position of the word μητέρ’, but also the very different poetic function (Orestes’ hesitation «s’estale à loisir en une longue scène de doute et de tourment). See also *Iph. Taur.* 95-96 Πυλαδή (αὐ γὰρ μοι τοῦδε συλλήπτωρ πόνου) / τί δρόμεν;
⁷ Sommerstein 1996, pp. 167-170, with yet more possible influences on other tragic passages, and Castellaneta 2013, pp. 61-79.
⁸ Pippin Burnett 1998, p. 113; on the Nachleben and meanings of this gesture, see now Castellaneta 2013.
⁹ See on this Lucarini 2013, pp. 175-182.
have been variously suggested here and elsewhere, and they concur particularly in framing a closer dialogue between the Colchian princess and Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra: according to Donald Mastronarde, «Medea can usefully be read as a revision or extension of the model of Clytemnestra», and this is particularly true as far as the controversial relationship of ‘ownership’ and conflict with the respective children is concerned. That Euripides should choose to evoke this through an open, if subtle, intertextual reference to a famous line of the Choephoroi, therefore seems less than surprising.

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