THE MEDEA OF EURIPIDES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Pavlos Kavouras

Zeus is in charge of many things on Olympus
And many things the gods achieve beyond
expectation;
The expected was not accomplished
And the god found a way for the unexpected.
This is how this story ended.

Euripides in Medea [1]

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In waking naked.

W. B. Yeats: A Coat [2]

The Medea of Euripides is an archetypal play; it
dramatizes the fragmentation and alienation of
humanity, the estrangement of human beings
from society, nature and themselves. Medea is
the cosmological voice of a poet, grounded in a
poet's vision of the interexistence of humanity,
society and nature. But the Euripidean Medea is
not, and should not be read as, a psychological
drama. The characters of the play are
anthropomorphic, but not anthropocentric. They
do not represent psychological but cultural
modes of being, knowing, acting, and judging in
the world.

The Euripidean Medea is at the same time
critical and therapeutic. It criticizes the social-
anthropocentric mode of living and aims to
transcend the anthropocentric process of social
formation and reformation through social
transformation, as conceived in the classical
Greek world. For Euripides, social transforma-
tion must be the diminution of society as icon, a
transformation based on a poetic vision of the
cosmic and non-anthropocentric unity of
humanity and nature.

In Medea, Euripides dramatizes the clash
between two modes of social living in the world:
non-anthropocentric (or cosmological) on the
one hand, and anthropocentric (or rationalist),
on the other. A mode of living is, of course,
simultaneously a mode of being, experiencing,
thinking, acting, and judging. Society is the
vehicle for, and enactment of, the dialectic
between the realms of humanity and nature. A
non-anthropocentric mode of living understands
the sociocultural as a domain through and in
which the relationship between nature and
humanity is historically realized. On the
contrary, an anthropocentric mode of living is
based on a conceptual dissociation between
humanity and nature through "abstract"
reason.[3]

Euripides understands thought as an aspect of
culture. For Euripides, as the part relates to the
whole, thought relates to culture. Thus, when he
juxtaposes two distinct modes of thought in
Medea he, at the same time, juxtaposes two
archetypally different cultures.

In Medea, Euripides dramatizes the tension
between two modes of thought – nominalism
and essentialism. He deals with nominalism as a
mode of experience and cognition which is

---

Pavlos Kavouras is a Ph.D. student, Department of
Anthropology, New School for Social Research.

dialectical and non-anthropocentric, whereas he understands essentialism as an anthropocentric and rationalist mode of thought. The basic difference between nominalism and essentialism is that while nominalism deals with concrete historical contradictions, essentialism involves conceptual dualisms. Essentialist thought bifurcates the category of reality as physical from metaphysical (that is philosophical) reality. Essentialism introduces and reproduces a split between perception and conception. The rationalist (and essentialist) perspective was first systematically articulated by Plato. The Platonists claimed that people know reality as appearance through sense perception, but the true reality, reality as essence (or metaphysical reality), is conceivable only through abstract philosophical reasoning, of which only an elite is capable. On the other hand, nominalist thought is grounded in the dialectic unity of perception and conception, perhaps the term "concrete abstractions" covers the case. Unlike philosophical (and rationalist) thought, nominalist (and cosmological) thought is based on the perceptual experience and cognition of the concrete, the embodied, and the sensuous. In my view, a Marxist/phenomenological perspective which sees reality as an historically concrete dialectical totality may serve as a useful theoretical and methodological framework for an intuitive and (at the same time) analytical understanding of the Euripidean tensions in Medea.

MEDEA AND JASON: TWO MODES OF EXPERIENCE AND COGNITION

Medea and Jason are the prototypical personifications of two distinct cultural modes of human existence in, experience of, and cognition of the world. Medea's world embraces a kin-based and state-free society, while Jason's the Greek city-state. Medea's thought is dialectical, cosmological, existential, and nominalist, whereas Jason's may be termed positivist, rationalist, and essentialist. Nominalism is an aspect of the existential-dialectical mode typically encountered in kin-based and state-free societies, and is powerfully expressed through myth. On the other hand, essentialism is a cognitive expression of rationalist/positivist mode of thought associated with philosophical reason, embodied in Plato's Republic the heavenly reflection of the Greek city-state social formation.

Medea thinks dialectically. Her thinking is grounded in a unified vision of nature and society, while Jason's reasoning is based on the conceptual dissociation of nature and society – this thinking is philosophical/metaphysical, and hierarchal. It is assumed, as in Plato, that through abstract reasoning human beings transcend their physical limitations on the one hand, and grasp the essence not only of their humanity, but of divinity, on the other. Platonic essentialism was the first systematic articulation of such conceptual rationalism. Jason's mode of thought is a form of Platonic essentialism.

Unlike philosophical reason, myths, as articulations of nominalist thought, do not question the relationship between reality and knowledge. Myths deal directly with existential reality through the very process of the formation of such reality. On the other hand, philosophical reason bifurcates reality as appearance, and reality as essence. In contrast to abstract reason, myths are visions of reality. They do not negotiate the knowledge of reality, they enact it. The ontological/epistemological dichotomy does not exist in the nominalist world of myth.

While nominalist thought anthropomorphizes reality, it is not anthropocentric. Unlike nominalism, conceptual rationalism is always anthropocentric, despite its non-anthropomorphic (conceptual) appearance and "objective" account of reality.

Myth versus philosophical reason, existential/cosmological dialectics versus conceptual rationalism, nominalism versus essentialism – these are the contradictions that provide the tensions for the Euripidean drama. In Medea
these tensions are revealed in the interaction of the two main characters of the drama – Medea and her husband Jason. Medea reflects the kin-based society from which she sprung, while Jason reflects the essentialist thought and pragmatic imperatives of the privileged class of the Greek city-state. Medea, then, is not a psychological drama; it is a cosmological tragedy.

**EROS AND THANATOS**

The notions of *eros* (love), *thanatos* (death), and their relationship are central in *Medea*. While *eros* is an active manifestation of concrete existence, *thanatos* reflects the very cessation of existence. For Euripides, *eros* and *thanatos* are dialectically intertwined: there can be no *eros* without *thanatos*. The power of *eros* lies in its capacity for *thanatos*, and the power of *thanatos* in its capacity for *eros*. In myth, *eros* means and is *thanatos*. This dynamic is most powerfully expressed in the rituals of life, death, and rebirth in kin-based and state-free societies.

Essentialism reduces the dialectical contradiction of *eros* and *thanatos* to an abstract dualism. As it separates humanity from nature, so it dissociates *eros* from *thanatos*. Essentialism reduces *eros* to a maximizing rationality which longs for pleasure, a narcissistic pleasure associated with dissociated self-reflection. Moreover, it sees *eros* as that anthropocentric desire which aims to modify nature or, humanize it. The total *eros* of existence becomes the conceptual desire for rationalist knowledge and political power. In a similar vein, essentialism identifies *thanatos* with fear, the fear of the loss of anthropocentric immortality. Thus, essentialism reduces the dialectic of *eros* and *thanatos* to the philosophical-psychological dichotomy of desire and fear. *Eros* here becomes rationalist desire, an individualistic desire which orients psychological subjects to maximize their social power and minimize their fear of the *thanatos* (cessation) of their sociocultural existence.

Unlike Medea who has the power of *eros* and *thanatos*, Jason has a dissociated desire for social power, which is stimulated by his aversion to the fear of the possibility of his own social death. The conflict between Medea and Jason may be partly understood as the conflict between the cosmological and rationalist views (and forces) of *eros* and *thanatos*.

**IVRIS AND DIKE**

For Euripides, the dialectic of *eros* and *thanatos* is inextricably related with the dialectic of human order and chaos.

Every *thanatos* is an encounter with chaos, every *eros* a rebirth of cultural meanings. In Medea’s world, the notions of *eros*, *thanatos*, human order, and chaos are dialectically related, pertaining simultaneously to the realms of nature, society, and the supernatural. In Jason’s world however, as the dialectic of *eros* and *thanatos* is reduced to desire and fear, so is the dialectic of human order and chaos reduced to social/ideological order and disorder. Another example of this practice is the transformation of cosmological morality into essentialist ethics.

While Medea’s existential judgement is related to the human “order of custom” which is central in all kin-based and state-free societies, Jason’s essentialist judgement is an uncritical expression of the political-ideological “rule of law” of the Greek city-state.[10]

To understand Medea’s cosmological morality and ethics one must understand first the existential dialectic of *ivrís* (hubris) and *dike* (justice). The famous archaic Delphic dictum *Meden Agan*, which meant “nothing in excess”, warned people against committing the crime of *ivrís*, or immoderation. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod too defined *ivrís* as “immoderation” and urged people to cultivate *dike* (justice) to keep the growth of *ivrís* at a minimum.

But if *ivrís* is immoderation, it is immoderation in relation to what? In pre-state Greek
societies, any human attempt toward transgressing cosmological (and, of course, sociocultural) order was judged as immoderation, that is, an act beyond human capacity. *Ivris* was perceived as *adikia* (injustice) which, in turn, provoked *dike* (justice). Pre-state Greeks understood *dike* as the dialectical-cosmological counterpart of *ivris*. The notion of *dike* was associated with both the restoration of cosmological order which was disrupted by human *ivris* and eternal punishment inflicted by supernatural forces on the desecrating humans. To understand Medea's cosmological morality and ethics one must comprehend the centrality of the dialect of *ivris* and *dike* in state-free or pre-state Greek societies.

Euripides deals with the classical Greek notions of rationalist *dike* and *ivris* as social-judicial categories. He shows that, in the Greek city-state society, rationalist justice was coupled with socioeconomic order and its instrument, the political-ideological institution of law. Euripides depicts rationalist injustice as the violation of law - the rationalist-antropocentric law of the Greek city-state. For Jason, *ivris* is sociopolitical crime. He understands *ivris* as a disruptive individual or collective act aimed against the existing socioeconomic order and political ethics of his world. Jason, of course, represents the culture of the privileged class in the Greek city-state.

For Euripides, existence, experience and cognition are dialectically related aspects of a sociocultural whole. While nominalism and cosmological morality are distinguishing characteristics of Medea's kin-based and state-free society, Jason's essentialism and rationalist ethics (and politics) are associated with the Greek city-state. As the personification of her kin-based and state-free society, Medea is morally bounded by the existential/cosmological dialectic of *ivris* and *dike*; it is in such context that her morality and ethics can be grasped as aspects of the totality of her existence. Medea embodies cosmological morality; she is a living symbol of existential *ivris* and *dike*. On the other hand, the essentialist Jason lives in, experiences, and reproduces a world of justice and injustice which is rationalistic and hierarchical. Jason's thought revolves around an abstract conceptual center at the expense of any existential/cosmological perspective. Jason's essentialist ethics (and politics) is determined by the "rule of law". Thus, while Medea has the power of *ivris* and *dike*, Jason, who has committed the *ivris* to desire social power through abstract reasoning, provokes and experiences the supernatural effects of a more powerful realm of existence. Medea's cosmological *dike* demolishes Jason's rationalist, iconic, and existentially false world.

Jason's defeat by Medea is not, and should not be interpreted as, an aesthetically justified prophecy of ethnocide. Jason's punishment by Medea may be seen instead as the symbolic defeat of the Greek city-state culture, which is incapable of transcending its moral contradictions. Such transcendence is based on a poet's vision of social transformation, as conceived in his time. Ironically, while Euripides was in 431 B.C. alluding through Medea to the symbolic *thanatos* of the Greek city-state social order as a creative and constitutive moment in the historical becoming of Greek culture, a few years later, that is in 416 B.C., the city-state of Athens committed an actual genocide and ethnocide by obliterating the people and the culture of the Greek island city of Melos.[11]

**SOME ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MEDEA**

What follows is a brief historical introduction to some central aspects of the sociocultural background of Medea with respect to, first, the major historical developments in the Greek world of the fifth century B.C. in which Euripides lived; second, the mythic origins of the plot in Medea and its sociocultural significance for the fifth century Athenian society; and third, the cast of characters in Medea.
I. EURIPIDES AND THE FIFTH CENTURY
B.C. GREECE

The eighth century B.C. was a landmark in the history of Hellas[12]. The new social formation of polis (the city-state) replaced monarchy. Drawing their political and economic power from private property (mainly, landed estates), hereditary aristocracies superseded the power of the hereditary kin-based and state-free monarchies of priest- or clan-kings. Following the extensive colonization of the circum-Mediterranean by Greek city-states (750–550 B.C.), the merchant class grew stronger and merchants claimed the political leadership from the aristocrats. Such crucial socioeconomic developments in the Greek world were crystallized in the prototypical polities of the fifth century city-states of Sparta and Athens – oligarchy and democracy, respectively.

The fifth century Greek world, the century of drama, philosophy, rhetoric, and the arts, was marked by two major military events: the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. In 480 the Greek (mainly Athenian) fleet defeated the Persians in the naval battle of Salamis. It was at this place and time that Euripides was born (Salamis 480 B.C.). In 477 the Athenians formed and led the Delean League (a proto-NATO organization) which was a confederacy of mainland and island city-states of the Aegean. This political, economic, and military alliance aimed to protect Greece from a future Persian invasion. The members of the Delean League contributed money or ships to the confederation and the treasury was kept on the island of Delos. Soon, the Delian League became a political-ideological instrument of Athenian imperialism. The conflicting imperialistic interests of Sparta and Athens resulted in the declaration of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C. It was in 431 that Euripides presented Medea in the annual dramatic competition in Athens, winning him third prize.[13] The Peloponnesian War ended in 404 B.C. with the defeat of Athens by Sparta and its allies. Euripides died in Macedonia in 406 B.C. He lived in a period which saw the height of a series of crucial socioeconomic developments, developments that generated and sanctioned new modes of existence, experience and cognition.

II. MEDEA: MYTH AND DRAMA

The play Medea is based on the Greek myth of the Argonautic expedition. A summary of this myth is as follows:

Jason’s throne in Iolkus was seized by his uncle Pelias. Pelias had promised to return the throne to Jason if he would bring back the golden fleece from the land of Colchis on the Black Sea. In Colchis, Jason encounters Medea, the daughter of Aeetes who is the king of Colchis and the sun god’s son. There, Medea falls in love with Jason. With her help, Jason steals the fleece by slaying the dragon that guards it. Together they flee the country, pursued by Aeetes. They finally escape through Medea’s intervention. Protecting Jason, Medea kills her brother carrying his body aboard Jason’s ship. To delay her father in his pursuit of the thief and his wayward daughter, Medea cuts up the corpse, throwing the pieces into the sea. Aeetes stops to collect the pieces and bury his dead son. In Iolkus, Medea avenges Pelias, who continues to deny Jason the throne, causing Pelias’ death at the hands of his daughters. Banished from Iolkus, Jason and Medea find sanctuary in Corinth. There, they live peacefully and have two sons. Ten years later, Jason marries the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. It is at this time and place that Euripides begins his drama Medea.

It must be made explicit from the outset that there are at least two cultural-historical dimensions in Medea. One pertains to kin-based and state-free societies, and the other, to the fifth century B.C. Greek city-state in the context of which the writing and “teaching” of Medea occurred.[14] Often, Euripides intervenes and modifies the mythical and historical voices of
his protagonists to create dramatic tension. His aim is to awaken the social consciousness of the Greek rationalist audience by leading them to experience a sociocultural transcendence. The critical voice of Euripides is raised against the society of the Greek city-state; his aim is social transformation.

III. MEDEA: THE CHARACTERS

Apart from Medea and Jason, the main protagonists in Medea, the other characters of the play include: the female Nurse and the male Tutor of Medea’s children; Creon, king of Corinth; Aegeus, king of Athens; a Messenger, one of Jason’s male attendants; and finally, the Chorus of Corinthian women.

The voices of the Nurse, the Tutor and the Messenger counterbalance the royal voices of the other protagonists. The dialogues or narratives of the former reflect that Euripides was aware of the class contradictions in the Greek city-state. He does not fuse and confuse the culture and history of the rulers with those of the ruled. By juxtaposing royal and plebeian voices, Euripides castigates the socioeconomic order and the political-ideological ethnocentrism of the privileged class of the Greek city-state.

The role of the Chorus of Corinthian women is central in Medea. They form a complex entity with a manifold identity. In my view, the Chorus displays three main identities. First, it represents the consciences of Medea and the fifth century Greek city-state women. Second, it represents the sublimated sociocultural voice of the rationalist Greek city-state society irrespective of class differences. Finally, the female identity of the Chorus represents a marginalized anthropomorphic expression of an embodied iuvris against a male, rationalist, and anthropocentric social order. Such an order was established and reproduced through the hegemony of abstract reason in the context of the socioeconomic and political/ideological processes that characterized the Greek city-state social formation.

MEDEA: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This section discusses Medea from an anthropological perspective.[15] In drama, the sequence of events, dialogues and monologues defines the context of the play. To remain as close as possible to the dramatic context of Medea, I have juxtaposed my anthropological interpretation of it with precis of the original text.

Drawing on Aristotle’s study of dramatic poetry, I have divided Medea into the following sections: prologue, parodos, episoode, stasimon, exodos.[16] The discussion of each of these sections consists of two parts: the single-spaced first part is my summary and the double-spaced second part is my anthropological interpretation of it.

PROLOGUE (lines 1–130)
[The Nurse; the Tutor; Medea’s voice]

The Nurse introduces the audience to the background of the play. She tells them that Medea fled her country, and murdered, or caused the murder, of her brother and Jason’s uncle because of her passionate eros for Jason. Medea now hates Jason because she feels he has betrayed her and the children by marrying Creon’s daughter. Jason’s shameful act has dishonored her. Now, says the Nurse, Medea recalls her own betrayal of her beloved father, home, and country all for the sake of a man who would finally leave her for another woman. Medea hates not only Jason, but also the children she had with him. The Nurse is afraid that Medea will slay both Creon and Jason thus incurring some major misfortune.

The children’s Tutor informs the Nurse that Creon has decided to banish Medea and the children from Corinth. The Nurse criticizes Jason in front of his children but refrains from cursing him for "he is still her master". The Tutor reminds her that people are egocentric, not altruistic. The Nurse describes Medea as a dangerous person and wonders what Medea’s response to such injustice will be.

From offstage, Medea’s voice is heard cursing Jason, their home, and the children. The Nurse wonders what the children have to do with their father’s shameful act, and criticizes the vindictive moods of the royalty. She argues that living among equals is the best way people can practice moderation; excess of any kind provokes
the anger of the gods.

Right from the beginning, Euripides uses the notions of *eros*, *thanatos*, *ivris* (as dishonor), and *dike* (as revenge) to transform the relations between psychological identities and allude to the clash between cosmological and conceptual-antropocentric forces.

Euripides opens the play with a juxtaposition of different types of *ivris* committed by Medea, Jason, the Nurse, and the Tutor. The opening theme in *Medea* is that all people commit the crime of *ivris*. Jason’s first *ivris* in relation to Medea (that is, his new marriage) is followed by another; he allows Creon to banish Medea and her children from Corinth. The Nurse’s critical stance against Jason’s acts reflects a different form of *ivris*—against class relations of power. From the perspective of the privileged class of the Greek city-state, the Nurse is perceived as a socioculturally inferior person in relation to her master, Jason. Yet, despite her criticism of Jason, the Nurse is afraid to curse him—that would be a most serious *ivris*. Moreover, when the Tutor dogmatically affirms that people are not altruistic but egocentric he commits a double *ivris*—that is, against humankind and his master Jason. Euripides here expresses the classical Greek view that the notion of *ivris* pervades human interaction and characterizes human specificity.

For Euripides, any excess is immoderation and therefore, an *ivris*. Euripides, through the Nurse, reminds his Athenian audience that any *ivris* of immoderation is always followed by a cosmological *dike* (punishment). But, up to this point in *Medea*, Euripides has not distinguished between different modes of morality and ethics. The Nurse thinks that both Jason and Medea are guilty of crimes of immoderation and therefore subject to the gods’ *dike*. Here the Nurse fuses and confuses two distinct modes of morality and ethics: Medea’s cosmological notions of *ivris* and *dike* on the one hand, and Jason’s rationalist ideas of injustice and justice on the other. In the Greek city-state, *ivris* and *dike* were identified with the violation of, and punishment by, the law, respectively—the social (human) or the super-rationalist (divine) law.

PARODOS (lines 131–213)
[The Chorus; the Nurse; Medea’s voice]

The Chorus responds to Medea’s complaints saying that it is common for a husband to take another wife and that Zeus will take care of such injustice. The Nurse replies that Medea will soon take vengeance on Jason. She blames the old poets for dealing only with the joys of life and not the sorrows of humanity which, if not soothed, bring death, havoc, and destruction to people.

The Chorus here represents the sublimated female voice of the Greek city-state’s androcentric society. According to the Chorus, a dishonored wife can only turn to the gods for justice. Euripides implies that since political and juridical rationality is monopolized by men, the *dike* (justice) of women who have been wronged by men can only be effected by the gods themselves. The ideological identification of human rationality with male rationality implies that a male *ivris*, which is not a social *ivris*, can only receive a *dike* of a super-rational (or divine) nature.

The Nurse, an aged plebeian, is critical of the sociocultural structures and processes of the privileged class of the Greek city-state. She criticizes the old poets for failing to discover poetic ways to soothe humanity from its sorrows, and blames them for the death, havoc, and destruction of humanity caused by unreconciled cultural contradictions. The Nurse’s conception of poetry as an activity which deals successfully only with the joys of life reflects an essentialist view of experience, cognition, and art. What Euripides seems to be saying here is that, despite her criticism of hierarchical society, the Nurse—a product of the same society as Jason though of a different class—ideologically reproduces the structures and processes of the Greek hierarchical society.

Most probably, by the phrase “old poets” Euripides refers to Homer and especially, to the Greek lyric poets of the period between 750–450 B.C. Gilbert Murray interprets the Nurse’s view
of poetry as Eupipides' "apology for tragedy". "It gives", Murray argues, "the tragic poet's conception of the place of his art in the service of humanity, as against the usual feeling of the public, whose serious work is devoted to something else, and who go to a play to be amused." [17] Murray's comment reflects a rationalist approach to art. The characterizations of tragic poetry as serious work and service to humanity as opposed to pre-tragic poetry as amusement or the opposite of serious work are rationalist and ideological interpretations of art in general and poetry in particular.[18]

In my view, the Nurse's understanding of the relation of poetry to human joy and sorrow is doubly instructive. First, it relates historically the emergence and development of rationalist thought as a distinguishing characteristic of the Greek city-state. Homer's epic poetry and especially, the Greek lyric poetry of the period between 750-450 B.C. represents modes of thought and artistic expression which were contemporaneous with the emergence and development of the Greek city-state. Second, it can be seen as the expression of the pervasiveness of abstract rationalist thought among different social strata. We may notice that not only the privileged classes of the Greek city-state but also the plebeians (although more sensitive to cosmological forces than the members of the upper class) thought in rationalist terms.

The Chorus and the Nurse split the emotional universe into pleasure and sorrow; pleasure is coupled with the experience of the divine, whereas sorrow follows from ignorance. According to the essentialist views of the Chorus and the Nurse, people desire the pleasant and avoid the sorrowful. Euripides alludes here to a major experiential transformation: Greek civilizational thought reduces the cultural to the psychological through philosophical reasoning. It reduces the dialectical totality of eros and thanatos to the ego-centered dichotomy of desire and aversion. The experience and cognition of the Chorus and the Nurse are based on desire (the essentialist eros for the pleasant) and aversion (the essentialist-behavioristic response to the stimulus of the fear of thanatos - the sorrowful). Desire and aversion have their roots in the existential fear of thanatos transformed into the rationalist fear of loss of identity in eternal oblivion.

FIRST EPISODE (lines 214-409)
[Medea; the Chorus; Creon]

Medea speaks to the Chorus of the sorrows of married women who are subject to their husbands. She challenges male superiority, arguing that women, as birth-givers, bear greater pain than men experience as warriors. Medea distinguishes her position from that of the Corinthian women of the Chorus, saying that while they have a city, homes, relatives and friends she is an exile. Her passionate eros for Jason made her forsake her country, relatives, and friends; now, Jason's marriage to Creon's daughter has ruined her family life again. Medea tells the Chorus that she will take vengeance on Jason, and the Chorus finds her decision righteous.

Creon banishes Medea and the children from Corinth. Creon expels Medea because she might injure his daughter through sorcery. Unable to make Creon repeal his order, Medea, appealing to Creon's parenthood, persuades him to allow her to stay in Corinth one more day. When Creon is gone, Medea confides her plans to the Chorus: she will kill Jason, Creon and his daughter using sorcery.

This episode focuses on the theme of exile - the involuntary separation of human beings from their concrete, embodied, and symbolic sociocultural worlds. The notion of exile is a metaphor for death. In forsaking her country and relatives Medea experiences a symbolic death. She can no longer be in eros with her country and relatives because she is now in eros with Jason. Medea's eros for Jason causes the thanatos of her eros for her native world. Medea's new sociocultural world is the product of her total union with Jason, who is, of course, more than a biological or social husband to her - Jason is Medea's sociocultural Other. When Jason marries Creon's daughter, he sends Medea to an absolute exile; he causes Medea's social death.

Medea's death by Jason symbolizes myth's
death by abstract reason. Once separated by abstract reason, the social and the natural become opposite and mutually exclusive conceptual categories. Essentialists, like Jason, associate the realm of the social with rational (and intellectual) thought and the natural with irrational (and emotional) thought. This view is reflected by the rationalist characters in the play who treat Medea as an irrational and emotionally disturbed human being. Deprived of her social (and symbolic) dimension of being, Medea is forced by Jason to enact the *eros* between the natural and the supernatural. In Medea’s world however, there is no *eros* without *thanatos*. The *thanatos* of the symbolic will be coupled with the actual *thanatos* of embodied human beings, and with a *thanatos* of the social, conceived by Jason as icon. We will return to this important point later on in this essay.

The sociocultural appearance of Medea as barbarian, woman, and murderess makes her a completely marginal figure in the eyes of androcentric Greek state society. In distinguishing Medea’s sociocultural position from that of the Chorus, Euripides alludes to the complexity of the character of Medea. She is not what she appears to be; she is more than a woman in trouble in an alien, patriarchal, and socioeconomically hierarchical society. Despite her social-psychological alignment with the Chorus as marginal voices in an androcentric world, Medea cannot align her conscience with the female conscience of the Chorus. What they do not have in common is culture. Medea’s conscience is a cosmological conscience in which the social is a constitutive part of a non-anthropocentric totality. Unlike Medea, the female conscience of the Chorus is a social conscience which acts and exists for its own sake. The marginalized Corinthian (that is, Greek city-state) women in their powerful demand for gender reforms are not aware that they reproduce the *ivris* of hypostatizing the social at the expense of its relation to a cosmological totality (envisioned as the coexistence of society, nature, and humanity). Euripides seems to be aware of the historical dynamic revealed by the oppressed social strata demanding social reforms. His aim though is much more radical; his purpose is to rekindle in the hearts of his audience the repressed and forgotten possibility of social transformation. Medea’s voice is the voice of a poet who abides simultaneously in two contradictory worlds — social-cosmological (in which the social is a cosmological symbol) and social-ontological (in which the social is a rationalist icon). Unlike the Chorus which represents the sublimated female voice of the Athenian society, Medea is not satisfied with changes in the social; she demands instead a total change of the social.

In the dialogue of Creon with Medea we are told that Creon has decided to banish Medea and her children from Corinth because he is afraid that Medea will injure his daughter. For Creon, Medea is the human incarnation of the natural and the super-natural (as opposed to the rationalist social). This is why Creon is afraid of her. Like nature, the female enchantress Medea is conceived by Creon as an alien, uncontrolled, distant, and dangerous entity. We encounter, once again, the rationalist reduction of the existential dialectic of *eros* and *thanatos* to the psychological dichotomy of desire and aversion. Creon loves his daughter because it is through her that he hopes to fulfill his desire to obtain heirs to his throne and thus attain immortality. Were his daughter to die, Creon’s identity would be lost forever in oblivion. Creon’s *eros* for his daughter is not a cosmological, sensuous, and embodied *eros*; it is a rationalist *eros* for social power and immortality. It is a self-centered desire for social pleasures and aversion to social misfortunes. Creon, like Jason, commits a rationalist anthropocentric *ivris* against the cosmological and non-anthropocentric totality of humanity and nature.

FIRST STASIMON (lines 410–445)

[The Chorus sings and dances]

The old culture is changing. The world is being turned up-side down. The old values of humanity are
respected no longer. Disorder has replaced order. There is no justice, only injustice. Faith in gods has become an illusion. Men's thoughts and deeds are treacherous. Yet, women's position in the society is improving. The old male poets condemned women as faithless and shameful but history, the speech of the old world, has much to say about the interaction of men and women. Self-exiled because of her erotic passion Medea is now dishonored by Jason and exiled again, this time from Corinth. Greeks respect the institutions of oath and honor no more.

This stasimon focuses on sociocultural transformation. Through the socially marginal female voice of the Chorus, Euripides argues that the old culture and values are falling apart. The designation "old" is ambiguous. In my view, it refers to the historical origins of the Greek city-state formation, since the eighth century B.C. Sometimes though, as in the above stasimon, Euripides glosses over the boundaries between mythical, cosmological, and rationalist-anthropocentric modes.

The Chorus restores the sociocultural status of women from a historical perspective - men and women make history together. As I have noted already, Euripides uses the gender categories of man and woman both literally and metaphorically. Focusing on gender inequality, Euripides alludes to the estrangement of human beings from society, nature, and themselves. His critical position is not a sheer social iveris, but a total iveris of the social, an absolute iveris against the Greek city-state.

Euripides begins this stasimon by saying that "The sacred rivers flow upward and back to their fountains". In my view, this means that the social is returning to its cosmic sources - a crystal-clear expression of a poet's vision of sociocultural transformation. While Euripides brings to our attention the critical attitudes of dominated groups in the Greek state society (e.g., the plebeians Nurse and Tutor, and the women), he alludes to the major alternative of social transformation. The possibility of social transformation is introduced by Euripides through Medea, who is an unpredictable and alien figure for the sociocultural standards of Greek state society.

Medea, alone, embodies a mode of experience and cognition which is different from that of any other character in the play, including that expressed by the Chorus. Euripides juxtaposes the figure of Medea with each of the play's rationalist figures implying that the multiplicity of rationalist voices in Medea is, ironically, unitary in substance. Medea's cultural mode of being, acting, thinking, and judging represents a mode of living suppressed, repressed, and forgotten in the Greek world since the emergence of the city-state. An embodied human figure like Medea, who has the power to form and reform the social, does not only threaten the socio-political status quo of the Greek state society with reform; she also threatens with destruction and reformation the political/ideological dynamics of the Greek city-state. Medea embodies the dike of the social-anthropocentric iveris committed by the Greek city-state against the cosmological totality of society, nature, and humanity.

SECOND EPISODE (lines 446–626) [Jason; Medea]

Jason tells Medea her banishment from Corinth is self-exile caused by her insolence to royalty. He offers Medea money and supplies to soften her exile. In a passionate speech, Medea calls Jason a totally evil man (pankakistor) and accuses him of having been infected by the worst of all human diseases; shamelessness (amaideia). While reconstructing the history of their married life and emphasizing her demonstrated absolute faith in him, Medea curses Jason for his unjust and shameful new marriage. Jason counters that Medea has greatly benefited from their marriage; she now lives in Greece and not in a barbarian land, she has learned how justice can be the product of social laws and not the result of personal power, and she has gained fame for her wisdom throughout Hellas. Wealth and wisdom, says Jason, are worthless if hidden from people's eyes. Jason explains that the purpose of his new marriage has been to improve his family honor and give his children a royal upbringing. Medea scolds Jason for being rhetorical and tells him that the real purpose of his marrying the princess is ambition, the ambition to ensure for himself an honorable old age to which she, an alien wife (varvaron lehos), has been an obstacle.
This dialogue deals with the sociocultural dynamic of honor and shame. While Medea understands the concepts of honor and shame in relation to concrete, embodied, and sensuous human beings, Jason perceives them as abstract ideas. Medea is concerned with Jason’s honor and shame in relation to herself not as an abstract idea, but as concrete existence. On the other hand, Jason aims to maximize his own honor and, at the same time, minimize his shame within the Corinthian society. For Medea, the dynamic of honor and shame is associated with her symbolic union with Jason, a union sanctioned by the sacred oath of eros—the two have become one, while remaining two. Jason however sees the concepts of honor and shame as “objective” and absolute social values generally applicable to any social relation, including marriage. According to the marriage norms and values of the Greek city-state, women-wives are expected to socially fuse with and obey their men-husbands. In Jason’s world, the two remain two, becoming one only when the wife is ideologically and socially subordinated to her husband.

For Medea, the dynamic of honor and shame is part of a sociocultural totality, whereas, for Jason, honor and shame are rationalist constructs reflecting and reproducing the ideological structures and processes of the Greek city-state. Jason seeks honor and avoids shame. His psychological perspective is coupled with a calculating rationality which aims to maximize honor and minimize shame, simultaneously. Jason marries Creon’s daughter to maximize his honor, to improve his social status. Moreover, he benefits from Medea’s banishment from Corinth because her departure will minimize his shame. In the rationalist and ethnocentric Greek city-state, Greeks were ideologically distinguished from non-Greeks whom they called barbarians (varvaroi). Of course, the Greek world was ideologically associated with honor (the desired), whereas the “barbaric world” was conceptually coupled with dishonor and shame (the undesired). Through the dramatized conjuncture of Jason’s marriage in, and Medea’s exile from, Corinth, Euripides shows the attitudes of the rationalist (and ethnocentric) socioeconomic consciousness of the privileged class of the Greek city-state. These attitudes focus on the simultaneous maximization of the desired through the maximization of cultural homogeneity (as honor-generating) as well as the minimization of the undesired through the minimization of cultural heterogeneity (as dishonor-and shame-generating).

In this dialogue, Euripides takes issue with the transformation of cosmological subjectivity into psychological individuality through abstract reasoning. Here the dynamic of honor and shame is reduced to the dichotomy of recognition and guilt. Jason offers Medea money to soothe her exile and his guilt; were it not for his marriage to Creon’s daughter Medea would have remained in Corinth. Moreover, Jason argues that wealth, wisdom, and poetic skills are worthless possessions if not publicly displayed. Jason’s aim is recognition based on superior socioeconomic status.

In Medea’s value-world not only has Jason shamed her, but, what is worse, he is shameless. Since Jason, as we have noted, has a vested interest in minimizing his shame, we may conclude that he sees his actions differently. Jason’s ignorance of his shameful activities and shamelessness underlines the irris of the ethnocentric Greek city-state against humanity. The latter is oblivious to and insensible of the evil it brings about in the concrete, sensuous, and embodied world of people.

SECOND STASIMON (lines 627–662)
[The Chorus sings and dances]

Unmoderate love dishonors and disgraces. It defies honor (eudoxia) and virtue (areti). Moderation is a heavenly gift. Moderate love creates harmonious unions. Passionate love leads to adultery. The greatest sorrow is the sorrow of exile. The people who deny friendship will perish.

The main theme of this stasimon is the relationship between eros and sofrosini
(moderation). The focus is on the contrast between moderate and passionate eros and its social consequences.

The main emphasis is on the causal relationship between passionate eros on the one hand, and exile and denial of friendship on the other. The Chorus deals with three forms of eros — that is, the eros for gyne (woman), patris (fatherland), and philia (friendship). From the view of the Greek city-state’s privileged class, the concepts of patris and philia were strictly associated with male interaction. From a gender perspective, this stasimon reflects an explicitly androcentric view of eros. Moreover, when the Chorus sings the ivris of passionate eros which leads to adultery on the one hand, and causes the thanatos of the eros for patris (through exile) and philia (through the denial of friendship) on the other, it implies that the very ivris of passionate eros as sexuality entails the dike-thanatos of the eros for patris and philia.

Put otherwise, for Jason, there are two types of eros: social and sexual. While sexual eros is the eros of and for women, social eros is the eros of and for men. For Jason, sexual eros, which is related to women, is associated with natural sexuality, whereas social eros, which is related to men, is coupled with patriotism and friendship. For Jason, only male eros is both sexual and social. Thus, when the rationalist Chorus castigates passionate eros as an ivris of immoderation, they castigate sexual and not social eros. They condemn Medea as a woman identified with sexuality (and through sexuality with immoderation) and as a barbarian ignorant of the rationalist law of moderation. Moreover, since passion (that is, immoderate emotion) is what threatens the ideological stability of the rationalist figures in Medea, they portray Medea as a passionate erotic being who desecrates the hegemonic social order of the Greek city-state. Significantly, this male-biased approach to eros is expressed by the Chorus of Corinthian women, which represents here the sublimated female voice of Greek state society. In this passage, Euripides uses irony to castigate the estranged Athenian conscience of his time — neither men nor women are able to grasp Medea’s sociocultural mode. He implies that the notions of injustice and justice (and the notions of crime and punishment) have lost their dynamic cosmological character and have become empty, ideological concepts, aspects of a cognitive justification of the hegemonic culture of Greek state society.

For Jason, female eros, as sexuality, represents the irrational roots of nature in male eros. He believes that such roots can be transcended only through abstract reason which creates the possibility for the experience of a higher order of eros — the social eros for patris and philia. In the face of female eros, identified by Greek civilization with the eros of and for the natural, we may see the repressed and forgotten possibility of humanity to envision itself as the cultural-historical offspring of the eros between society and nature.

THIRD EPISODE (lines 663–823) [Aegeus; Medea; the Chorus]

Aegeus, king of Athens, meets Medea in Corinth. He comes from Delphi where he had gone to seek counsel of Apollo’s oracle on how to beget himself children. Medea tells Aegeus her troubles and persuades him to give her sanctuary in Athens, promising that she will help him to get natural heirs through sorcery. Medea makes Aegeus swear an oath in the name of the deities of the earth, the sun, and all the gods, that no matter what happens he will accept and protect Medea in Athens. When Aegeus is gone, Medea confides her plans for vengeance to the Chorus. She will contact Jason again and, pretending that she now understands his reason for his new marriage, she will suggest that their children remain in Corinth with him. She will then advise Jason to persuade his new wife to intercede with Creon. Meanwhile Medea will send the princess precious gifts with the children; these gifts will be poisoned. When the princess tries them on, she, and whoever touches her, will die in agony. Medea’s final blow against Jason will be to kill the children rendering him childless. The Chorus disapproves of Medea’s plans declaring that her thoughts and acts are incompatible with the laws of humankind. Medea defies the ethical power of the Chorus and proceeds to enact her plans.
This episode focuses on childlessness and its consequences for hereditary leadership. It deals with the problems of reproduction of hegemonic structures and of processes of social power in hierarchical societies. Without children the house of Aegaeus will perish. The childless Aegaeus has no future; with his physical death, Aegaeus’ power and identity will be lost for ever in oblivion. To hereditary rulers, childlessness implies death – social death. Creon shares with Aegaeus a tragic destiny; he is heirless too. Creon is not childless however like Aegaeus, but has no male children. Creon expects to get male grandchildren from his daughter’s union with Jason. The acquisition of male natural heirs will ensure Creon’s immortality. While Medea promises to use sorcery to help Aegaeus get children, she, at the same time, announces to the Chorus that she will avenge Creon and Jason by making them childless. This is one of the greatest Euripidean contradictions – a central tension in Medea. It is based on the existential contradiction between life and death and their sociocultural implications for hereditary leadership.

What does the Chorus mean when it says that Medea’s thoughts and acts are opposed to the laws of humankind? In my view, it implies that blood ties are stronger than affinal ties and therefore Medea will commit a major _ivris_ by avenging an affinal wrong through a consanguineal murder. Moreover, from the perspective of the privileged class of the Greek city-state, the murder of Greek male royal heirs by their mother is perceived as perhaps the most serious social crime any woman could commit in the Greek world. Medea’s social murder of Jason and Creon through the physical deaths of their children is perceived by the Chorus as a direct and unprecedented _ivris_ against the hegemonic social order.

THIRD STASIMON (lines 824–865)
[The Chorus sings and dances]

Athens is the city of wisdom (sophia) and virtue (areti). Will such a glorious city receive Medea, the murderess of her own children? It would be a sacrilege for Medea to live among the Athenians. Where shall Medea find the courage to harden her heart so that her hands may kill her children?

This stasimon reflects the essentialist and ethnocentric perspectives of the Chorus. They examine Medea’s decision from a sociological and a psychological viewpoint. In both analyses, the Chorus judges Medea’s thoughts and acts according to their own Greek sociocultural background.

The Chorus begins this stasimon by analyzing Medea’s relationship with the city of Athens. Its comparison of Medea with Athens is not carried out in cultural-historical terms, but according to an essentialist and ethnocentric view. The Chorus translates (that is, homogenizes) the historically particular and the culturally different entities Medea and Athens into essences or “abstract” abstractions. It is Medea and Athens as essentialist ideas that are being compared by the Chorus.

Athens and Medea are identified with _areti_ (virtue) and _kakia_ (vice), respectively. For the essentialist Chorus, while _areti_ is associated with moderation (the object of rational _eros_), _kakia_ (vice) is related to immoderation (the object of irrational _eros_). To the Corinthian women of the Chorus Athens is the ideal social expression of divine order, whereas Medea represents a barbarian mode of existence coupled with physical destruction and social disorder. Once again, we encounter the rationalist dichotomy between social (and male, moderate, rational) _eros_ and sexual/natural (and female, immoderate, irrational) _eros_. Based on such unreconcilable dualisms and the metaphysical comparison between Medea and Athens, the Chorus judges Medea’s sanctuary in Athens as a sacrilege, an _ivris_ of immoderation.

The sociological inquiry regarding the relationship between Medea and the city of Athens completed, the Chorus proceeds to discuss Medea’s activities from a psychological perspective. It sees Medea as a personality torn between two contradictory psychological selves;
a rational, moderate, and emotional self on the one hand, and an irrational, immoderate, and passionate self, on the other. According to the Chorus, while the rational-emotional self of Medea seeks to strengthen the mother-child bond, the irrational-passionate self aims to improve her status in the Greek world by socially or physically defeating her social antagonists.

In my view, this is a false struggle. The Chorus understands Medea and the forces that she represents from an essentialist and ethnocentric perspective. First, it reduces the embodied and sensuous being, Medea, into a psychological persona, and then, it conceptualizes Medea’s total (that is, multi-faceted and symbolic) identity as a split duality of emotional selves. In contrast, from Medea’s perspective, emotions are not abstract ideas, but sociocultural forces — the embodied manifestations of a cosmological totality. The Chorus thinks of and judges Medea’s activities from the perspective of the culture of the Greek city-state. The ethnocentrism of the Chorus is inextricably associated with a dualistic and hierarchical conceptualization of existence, experience, and cognition in terms of a “self” versus “other” dichotomization; this is the product of, and a means for, the hegemonic reproduction of the political/ideological dynamics of the Greek city-state.

FOURTH EPISODE (lines 866–975)
[Jason; Medea]

Medea begs Jason’s forgiveness for her immoderate behavior. She tells him that she now understands the reason for his new marriage. Medea attributes her irrationality to the vicious nature of women, and she begs Jason to understand and forgive her. Jason praises the change in Medea’s conduct. Medea then tells Jason to ask his new wife to intercede with her father, Creon, so that the children may remain in Corinth under Jason’s care. Finally, Medea persuades Jason to let her send the princess precious gifts from her own inheritance, a fine robe and a golden diadem.

This episode focuses on power. While Jason has a desire for power, Medea has the power of desire. Medea’s power of persuasion is of a different nature than Jason’s rhetorical power. While Jason has an ideational view of language as the medium for the expression of essentialist thought, Medea sees language as practical consciousness — a vehicle for, and a concrete aspect of, culture. Medea understands the notions of moderation and immoderation as aspects of a sociocultural dynamic, while Jason dissociates the idea of moderation from immoderation associating them with reason and emotion, respectively. The essentialist dichotomy between reason and emotion remains an unreconciled contradiction until either emotion is suppressed and repressed by abstract reason, or abstract reason is destroyed by emotion become passion — these tensions are revealed in Medea’s interactions with the rationalist figures of the play.

Medea’s power of persuasion lies in her ability to deal with reason and emotion not as a philosophical/psychological dichotomy, but as a sociocultural dynamic. Medea’s thought (and language) is simultaneously emotional and intellectual. While Jason relies on rhetoric, or the ideological power of words to persuade people, Medea has the power to transcend any symbolic expression of her culture and therefore, language (and, of course, rhetoric, which is a particular form of discourse).

Medea plays with emotion and reason manipulating sociocultural situations. By pretending to be submissive, she validates Jason’s male and egocentric superiority and thus, apparently attests to the ideological superiority of reason over emotions. Medea’s emphasis on the children and their stay in Corinth is aimed at emotionally engaging Jason and establishing the situation in which she will achieve her revenge. This situation will be constructed through the successive emotional activities/intercessions of Jason, Creon’s daughter, and finally Creon himself — all rationalist figures with different individualistic interests. Medea’s objective is to make Creon repeal his order and let the children remain in
Corinth. To do this, she will emotionally persuade Jason to convince his new wife, also through emotion, to intercede on Jason’s behalf and make her father repeal his order using, again, the power of emotion. While every rationalist figure in Medea seems to be a slave of the black and white egocentric and ideological politics of reason and emotion, nobody except Medea is able to effectively use and finally transcend this contradiction. Medea’s power of desire is expressed through a dialectics of the concrete.

FOURTH STASISON (lines 976–1001)  
[The Chorus sings and dances]

The children are doomed. The poor princess will wear the robe and the diadem and will die in agony. The wretched bridegroom, who sought a princely alliance, leads his children and new wife to death, unknowingly. His will be a great fall. The wronged mother will kill her children to avenge Jason, he who betrayed her with another woman.

In this stasimon the Chorus examines death and wretchedness. The physical deaths of Jason’s sons and Creon’s daughter are meant by Medea to provoke the social deaths of Jason and Creon themselves. What makes Jason a tragic figure is that he himself leads his children and new wife to their physical death, causing, at the same time, his own social death. Jason will lose everything; by losing his children he will lose his immortality and by losing his new wife he will lose his princely alliance with the throne of Corinth.

The tragic cycle will be completed; the eros for social power leads Jason to his social thanatos. The fall of the great Greek hero and prince, Jason, will be absolute. Ironically, the dike-thanatos of Jason will be absolute and total as was the ivris of the social- anthropocentric culture of the Greek city-state against the non-anthropocentric totality of society, nature and humanity, as realized culturally and historically in Medea’s state-free society. The hero-prince Jason will become a childless exile and plebeian. What makes his dramatic fall a tragic one is that it is caused by a barbarian woman – his wife. For Euripides, Jason’s punishment by Medea is not, and should not be taken as, the actual defeat (and punishment) of Greek civilization by the culture of a state-free society. In the context of the Greek city-state, Medea represents a repressed and forgotten possibility of sociocultural existence, experience, and cognition of humanity in relation to nature. Its awakening is the awakening of a truly revolutionary consciousness. The result of such an awakening cannot be other than social transformation.

FIFTH EPISODE (lines 1002–1080)  
[The Tutor, Medea]

The children’s Tutor informs Medea that her children will not be expelled from Corinth. After hearing this, Medea is torn. As mother, she loves the children and wants to spare them. As avenger, she desires to punish Jason by killing his sons. Medea’s passion to avenge Jason overrules her motherly emotion. She finally decides to kill the children.

This episode deals with Medea’s clash of emotions as mother and avenger. She struggles between two contradictory emotions; her eros for the children on the one hand, and her desire to avenge Jason on the other. Medea’s emotional conflict should not be interpreted from a psychological perspective, however. By portraying Medea as mother and avenger, Euripides personifies emotion through her – moderate emotion and immoderate emotion (or passion), respectively. Medea’s symbolic identification with emotion reflects and underlines her completely marginal status in the Greek city-state in which emotion was ideologically subordinated to reason by the privileged class. Instead of justifying and reproducing the Greek city-state cultural order Medea reverses the Greek hierarchical relations between structural oppositions – she turns emotion against abstract reason and perception against iconic conception. While Medea’s non-rationalist emotion becomes passion for vengeance, her perception is transformed into a supernatural vision orchestrating a total punishment of Jason.
For Medea, her children are not only hers; they are the product of her erotic union with Jason. Medea and Jason however, differ profoundly regarding their eros for their children. While Medea’s motherly eros is associated with her eros for Jason, Jason’s fatherly eros is completely dissociated from his sexual and social union with Medea. Jason has an ideological (that is, essentialist) eros for his children. To him, his children are abstract ideas rather than concrete, embodied, and sensuous beings; they are rationalist signs of immortality and prosperity. Unlike Jason, Medea loves her children as the living and embodied symbols of her eros for Jason. When Medea decides to kill them she painfully sacrifices an aspect of her cosmological/symbolic totality in return for the total destruction of Jason’s iconic (that is, anthropocentric/symbolic) world.

FIFTH STASIMON (lines 1081–1115)
[The Chorus sings and dances]

Women are capable of practicing philosophy, but the women of wisdom are very few. Is parenthood a blessing or a curse? Parenthood is full of sorrows. Parents strive to rear their children properly and provide them with wealth. But who knows if his children will become good or evil people? Parents experience the greatest of sorrows when after having raised a good and honest child death takes him away.

This stasimon deals with the relationship between women and wisdom as well as with the sorrows of parenthood. Once again, Euripides focuses on the marginalized position of women in the Greek city-state, this time with respect to the practice of the eros for wisdom (that is, philosophy). He is critical of the ideological view of the privileged class who hold that philosophizing is a natural attribute of the male human mind. “Women are capable of reasoning as much as men are”, argues Euripides. The realist Euripides makes the Chorus quickly add that “the women of wisdom are very few”. What Euripides tells his audience here is that the marginalization of women in the Greek world is not due to a biological incapacity of women for reasoning, but the product of the hierarchical socioeconomic structures and political/ideological dynamics of the Greek city-state. In other words, the possibility of a non-anthropocentric humanity — the cultural-historical offspring of state-free society — is suppressed and repressed in Greek civilized society because the hierarchical socioeconomic processes of the Greek city-state create and perpetuate through ideology an iconic gap between social-anthropocentric and physical existence.

Euripides deals with the sorrows of parenthood as a symptom of social-anthropocentric experience in the Greek city-state. Jason sees parenthood as an investment based on the social-ideological value of children in the Greek city-state; in this context it is expected that parental sorrows and sacrifices will be compensated by the making of good and honest citizens — that is, citizens who will be committed to the reproduction of hegemonic social order. Yet, as Euripides tells us, the idea of a rationalist maximization of the honor of parenthood meets with two problems: children may become evil people or, what is even worse, the children who finally become honest and good citizens may die. In both cases, the anthropocentric rationalisms of Jason and the Chorus cannot deal with the uncertainty and the historical contingency of concrete human existence. Unable to deal with the unexpected, the unknown, and the contingent, the Chorus turns essentialist thought into scepticism. It questions the human motivations for action from the utilitarian standpoint of investment and profit making. “It is probably better for people not to have children because parenthood is replete of sorrows”, sings the Chorus, in a sudden burst of sceptic relief from an essentialist impass.

Euripides reveals through the Chorus how the existential contradictions of life and death can turn essentialism into either a Sisyphean scepticism or a super-rationalist spiritualism.Only Zeus and the gods (conceived by Jason and the Chorus as super-rational entities) know what determines the destiny of
humankind. Of course, Jason and the Chorus conceive of philosophical (and metaphysical) reasoning as the human mode of bridging the physical world of mortal existence and the super-rational world of spiritual eternity. The metaphysical reasoning of the Chorus as regards the sorrows of parenthood leads them to question the necessity of having children in utilitarian terms. The emphasis of this stasimon on essentialism turned into scepticism is a dramatic prelude to another alternative – that is, essentialism turned into spiritualism – which constitutes the main theme of the last section and is the dramatic (and tragic) peak in Medea. Euripides tells us here that metaphysical reason attributes to a super-rational (or spiritual) capacity what social-anthropocentric rationality cannot "objectively" understand through science and philosophy. Unlike Jason, who oscillates between the physical and metaphysical and also between the rational and super-rational, Medea embodies the totality of the natural and supernatural; her transcendental consciousness is an aspect of her non-anthropocentric existence.

EXODOS (lines 1116–1419)  
[A Messenger; Jason; Medea; the Chorus]

One of Jason's attendants informs Medea that Creon and his daughter are dead. Creon has died in agony after touching his daughter's body as it was consumed by Medea's poison. Having heard the news, Medea proceeds to slay the children. The Chorus disapproves of Medea's act reminding her that the shedding of kin blood is a great sin and that it will invite the vengeance of the gods. As the voices of the children are heard begging Medea to spare their lives, the Chorus wonders if they should intervene and prevent this terrible crime. The Chorus reminds the audience, again, that such a wicked crime will cause Medea a horrible death.

Jason arrives to rescue his children from the wrath of Creon's kinmen. As the Chorus informs him that Medea has slain them, Medea appears in the sky in a chariot drawn by dragons. In it are the bodies of the dead children. Cursing her, Jason cries that only a barbarian mother could kill her children. Jason then asks Medea to give him the bodies of his sons so that he may offer them an honorable burial. Medea rejects Jason's request and, after foreseeing his tragic death on his ship, she flees to Athens. The Chorus sings: sometimes, human judgement differs from the judgement of the gods.

Exodos, the final section of Medea, focuses on the ivris of the shedding of kin blood, and examines whether human dike is commensurate with the dike of the gods. The Chorus condemns the shedding of kin blood as a great blasphemy against humankind and the gods. To them, it is an ivris which is expected to provoke the gods' most rampant dike (punishment). Yet, Medea is allowed to escape in a supernatural way, unpunished by either humans or the gods.

For Jason and the rationalist figures of Medea, this sequence of events constitutes the worst possible ivris committed against the Greek city-state's social order in its totality – rational (human) and super-rational (divine). Medea's supernatural escape forces Jason and the Chorus to address fundamental questions. If human judgement is different from the divine judgement of the gods, human reason (that is, scientific and philosophical/metaphysical reason) cannot be the pure and only reflection of divine reason leading to absolute truth. For Jason and the Chorus, this means that a human rationality based on metaphysical reason is not the gods' way for humans to attain absolute truth. Moreover, it means that abstract (and metaphysical) reason is neither the only, nor the best form of human reason.

Once again, Euripides criticizes the andro- and ethno-centric orientation of Greek essentialist thought and, by implication, the hierarchical socioeconomic structures and political-ideological processes of the Greek city-state. Through Medea's supernatural escape, Euripides suggests that metaphysical reason (and the sociocultural totality of which it is the historical product) is weak, impotent, and worthless when compared to supernatural reason. The consequences of such a sociocultural transcendence are devastating for abstract reason, state society, and civilization. Through her demonstrated supernatural powers, Medea demolishes literally and metaphorically Jason's world, and with it, Jason's belief in the ideological supremacy of
Greek civilization, state society, and abstract rationality. Medea’s supernatural escape is a metaphor for, and an allusion to, the social transformation of Greek city-state envisioned by Euripides as a necessary and inescapable moment in the cultural-historical becoming of the Greek world.

The dialogue between Jason and Medea dramatizes the sociocultural contradictions between rationalist and cosmological thought, and between state-free society and the city-state. Jason remarks that only a barbarian mother could kill her children, never a Greek. While, for Jason, the shedding of kin blood is an absolute wrong, for Medea, there are no conceptual universals. Her children are what they are; the product of her union with Jason. While Medea’s judgement is grounded in the totality of her existence and her experience in the world, Jason’s judgement is based on metaphysical reason and the ideological justification and maximization of his social status. Medea’s embodied eros for the children is cosmologically coupled with their embodied thanatos. Medea kills her children without provoking the dikē of the gods because by killing them she does not commit an .ivris against cosmological order. This is possible because she deals with the children as the offspring of her eros for Jason, her nuclear family being the living symbol of the cosmological totality of society, nature, and their offspring, humanity. By killing her children, Medea symbolically kills that aspect of her humanity which is related to Jason. By killing her children, Medea compels Jason to face his .ivris — the dissociation of the social from the natural.

Jason begs Medea to give him the bodies of his dead sons to offer them an honorable burial. It is not the children however that Jason wants to care for, but himself. An “honorable burial” is a death ritual. Rituals are vehicles for and enactments of cultural creativity, but they can also be used as means for the ideological reproduction of hegemonic values. When Medea denies Jason’s request she totally deprives Jason of the most essential embodied (albeit lifeless) materiality to relate to and appropriate through abstract reason causing a de facto paralysis of any ideological process justifying his .ivris. Jason’s social death marks off the disintegration of his iconic cosmos; Jason becomes a tragic Sisyphean hero.

In a final ironic demonstration of her superior supernatural powers, Medea foresees Jason’s inglorious physical death, telling him that he will die stricken on the head by a fragment of his ship Argo. While Medea causes Jason’s social death, she forsees his physical death. This pairing reflects the important combination of Medea’s social determination and supernatural vision. These two qualities are indespensable in any attempt toward social transformation. Isolated in his conceptual domain and without a material world to appropriate, Jason is forced to self-reflect; .ivris becomes dikē. Yet, the truth of the matter is that Jason cannot reflect on his .ivris until his social death is effected by Medea. Euripides alludes here to consciousness as the product of concrete sociocultural processes; any radical social change is wedded to the radical realization of the social. As long as the socioeconomic and political/ideological dynamics of state power are mediated by rationalist thought, even though self-reflecting and critical, a society so charged cannot overcome its basic modality.

Euripides reminds us that humanity is the offspring of the existential eros of society and nature. Since this is a dynamic totality, significant changes in human consciousness and culture depend on radical transformations of the relationship between society and nature, not the other way around.

NOTES

1. The final choral song in Medea. In this case as elsewhere in this essay, if not otherwise mentioned, the English translation from the Greek original is mine.

7. See S. Diamond, In Search of the Primitive, pp. 171–175; also see H. Y. Jung, “Being, Praxis and Truth”.
8. See J. Israel, pp. 62–77; see also Jung, “Being, Praxis and Truth”.
11. Athenians killed the men and enslaved the women of the island city of Melos because Melos refused to join the Delean league, a militaristic instrument of Athenian imperialism; see also A. R. Burn, The Pelican History of Greece (Penguin, 1983), p.276.
14. In the fifth century B.C. Athens, dramatic poetry was written with the purpose of educating the audience. For the Athenians, drama was not sheer performance, but teaching (didaskalia). Dramatic presentations were organized and funded by the Athenian city-state. They were significant sociocultural events.
17. G. Murray, The Medea of Euripides, op. cit., p. 84.
18. A much more interesting negative approach to poetry has been expressed by Plato. In the Republic, Plato defines poetry as mimesis and argues that the poetic reality is thrice removed from the divine realm of ideas. He considers the poetic expression and confrontation of existential contradictions, such as eros and thanatos, or human order and chaos for example, as dangerous activities threatening the ideal social order. Although an admirer of Homer, Plato dismissed poetry from his Republic arguing that the only forms of poetry, music and art, in general, that could be acceptable in it would be those which praised the divine order of the Republic.
19. Siyphus was an ancient king of Corinth who was punished by the gods for his great sins. In Hades, Siyphus was compelled eternally, but unsuccessfully, to roll a heavy stone to the top of a hill. See G. Schwab, Gods and Heroes (New York: Pantheon, 1974 [1946]).