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Nutrix

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Bridging the Gap with Epic: the Nurse in Euripides' *Medea*

Abstract

This paper argues for a deliberately epic role for the nurse in Euripides' tragedies, especially in his *Medea*.¹ In that specific play, the nurse's influencing of events resembles the omniscient characters familiar from narrative epic like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In Homer's *Odyssey*, as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the nurse tends to align either with the household norms, generally labelled patriarchal, or with the lady of the house left behind. In *Choephoroi* 748-762, the task, duties, and responsibilities of the nurse are sufficiently presented. In Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama, nurses act and speak within the limits of these duties and responsibilities, while in Euripidean drama, however, the nurse's role changes. Acknowledging the special position of the nurse's contribution in Euripides' *Medea* as discussed in Ian Ruffell's "The Nurse's Tale", I link the changing and changed role of the wet nurse to the characteristics of epic behaviour: a certain amount of providence, combined with typically human indifference, and, ultimately, helplessness. She is the only one who, in lines 36-37 and 89-95, foresees the event that must have been a great unpleasant surprise (if not shock) for the audience: infanticide. It has been suggested that the nurse's "epic" behaviour, speech, and foreknowledge develop in the context of the societal circumstances in 421 BCE; in other (lost) plays by Euripides, nurses are allegedly involved in the psycho-sexual problems of their mistresses. In *Medea*, however, the issue is infanticide. The level of transgression in Medea's planned behaviour, I argue, is mirrored in the level of "epic" as shown in the nurse's self-importance and presumptuousness. Her speech in the prologue equals prologues spoken by omniscient and influencing characters, e.g. Dionysus in *Bacchae* and Aphrodite in *Hippolytus*, as does her self-reflection in the course of the play.

KEYWORDS: nurses in Greek tragedy; prologuing characters; double motivation; tragic transgression

1. Introducing Transgression

Euripidean tragedy tends towards transgression (Reilly 2007; Thumiger 2007; Swift 2006, 2009; Lush 2015; Verheij 2016). Many characters involved, both on the human and the divine level, display a behaviour that transgresses

¹ I thank the editor Rosy Colombo and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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the values of society as well as the conventions of the tragic genre (Steiner 2004, 10-11). Aeschylus confronts man with the gods, even in a fellow human being.² In Sophocles, man is confronted with himself, and the rare appearance of a god only serves to underline the characters' correct balancing of what seem to be incompatible, but equally accepted, norms and ethical guidelines.³ Euripides was (in)famous for his lavish use of the *deus ex machina* to put an end to tragic suffering and lack of prospect.⁴ In his plays, man falls victim to his own shortcomings, the inevitable outcome of human nature. Thus, the *deus ex machina* proves to be a necessary and merciful safeguard for humankind in the face of man's fallibility, and his inborn impulse towards transgression.⁵ Transgression may be presented as a side-effect of what is in principle a rational and well-balanced decision,⁶ especially in Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama.⁷ In Euripidean tragedy, transgression is more frequently resulting from character flaws; not a side-

² The suffering Persian court in *Persae* (first produced in 472 BCE) recognises the divine hand in the unexpected defeat at the hands of the Greeks, as do the survivors in *Septem* (467 BCE). In *Prometheus Vincit* the mortal hero Heracles is the instrument of Zeus, even for an immortal protagonist. The *Oresteia* (457 BCE) concludes with introducing the gods to the human stage to bring a solution for irresolvable and contradictory complexities. While in *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* humans err and act with reference to divine order or justification, in *Eumenides* the gods appear in person to take responsibility for apparently unjustifiable moral behaviour; they demand retribution, and finally solve the inherently inhuman dilemma (Fletcher 2014).

³ Cf. e.g. Lawrence 2005 for the *Ajax*. In the play named after him, Philoctetes, as another example, accepts Heracles' confirmation that both he and the bow need to return to Troy despite the Greeks' low trick to try and rob him from it, and possibly from his livelihood, through deceit (Tessitore 2003).

⁴ Cf. Worthington 1990 on the *deus ex machina* in Eur. *Med. vis-à-vis* Aristotle's criticism of the scene in *Poet.* 1454a37-b2, and his general criticism of the feature in *Poet.* 1454b2-5.

⁵ According to Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in *Poetics*, this is the essence of tragedy as a genre, and as a type of mimesis of reality: the tragic character, of sufficiently high class to emphasise the discrepancy between societal privilege and depravation but nonetheless relatable for a democratic audience, is subjected to suffering and loss as the result of a *hamartia*, a personal mistake that does not stem from character, but rather from misinterpreting the possible reactions to very specific, demanding circumstances (Taylor 2008, 269-72; Kim 2010, 38-46).

⁶ As a form of 'corruption', e.g. of ritual, cf. Lush 2015.

⁷ Sophoclean characters like Creon, Antigone, and Oedipus show transgression as a result of a deliberate decision even more poignantly: their considerations count as rational, but once decided upon their actions and words tend to be harsher than initially required, and meant to enforce the path chosen rather than to allow for any more criticism, reconsideration, or reflection. Creon resorts to torture instead of milder punitive action; Antigone to suicide rather than being content to fulfil her filial duties (discussed as transgression of gender norms in Penrose 2020, 31-2).

effect but rather the execution of *hamartia*.⁸ Divine intervention is thus a remedy to balance human imperfection.⁹

In several instances, however, human transgression in Euripides is not just man's shortcoming; it may be divinely ordained, predicted, exploited, instrumentalised (Hamilton 1978; Sypniewski and MacMaster 2010). In the latter case, the *hamartia* from which it stems or which it entails is equally not a *human* shortcoming: it is a deliberate action, orchestrated by a prologuing god, to exercise influence, power, or vengeance in the mortal domain.¹⁰ It is therefore a divine transgression.¹¹

Such morality, if it may be called so, is reminiscent of epic poetry rather than of the Attic drama as it is found in Aeschylus and Sophocles (Sypniewski and MacMaster 2010). The double motivation, with human decision-making as the effectuation of the gods' setting-in-motion of fate, resembles the Iliadic "will of Zeus", and the "decision by the gods to have Odysseus return to Ithaca" in the *Odyssey*. In tragedy, similar patterning becomes tangible in the plays that do not allow for options and choice (however wrong or misgiven) by the human protagonist(s), due to divine direction (Hamilton 1978). The *deus ex machina* nullifies characters' psychology through the wisdom of hindsight;¹²

⁸ Cf. Verheij 2014, 190-95 on the cohesiveness of Medea's motivation to commit infanticide.

⁹ In Sophocles, the "care of the gods" (*Phil.* 196) (Pucci 1994, 17-21). Papadimitropoulos 2011, 501 (on Apollo's epiphany in Eur. *Or.*): "The god imposes order in a disorderly state of affairs and manages to reconcile the opposites by bringing about peace in a situation consistently dominated by strife".

¹⁰ Examples from Euripidean tragedy are *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*. Both plays feature a god delivering the prologue in which they proclaim they will get someone into trouble and subsequently punish him or her.

¹¹ Allan 2013, 593 argues for the efficacy of revenge through violence in Attic drama: "tit-for-tat violence is characterized as problematic from the earliest Greek literature onwards, but also stresses the continuing importance of anger, honour, and revenge in classical Athenian attitudes to punishment and justice. With these continuities in mind, it analyses the new process by which punishment and justice were achieved in Athens, and argues that the Athenians' emphasis on the authority of their laws is central to understanding tragedy's portrayal of personalized vengeance and the chaos that ensues from it. Though (for reasons of space) it focuses on only a selection of plays in detail (Aesch. *Eum.*, Soph. *El.*, Eur. *El.*, *Or.*), the article adduces further examples to show that the same socio-historical developments are central to the portrayal of retaliatory violence throughout the genre, and ends by considering how tragedy, in depicting revenge as problematic, offers a more positive alternative to such violence which does justice to the emotional and social needs of its audience".

¹² Cf. the standardised choral ending, as in *Med.* 1415-19: πολλῶν ταμίᾳς Ζεὺς ἐν Ὀλύμπῳ, / πολλὰ δ' ἄελπτως κραίνουσι θεοί / καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἐτελέσθη, / τῶν δ' ἁδοκίτων πόρον ἦρε θεός / τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα ("Olympian Zeus has many things in his treasury, and the gods accomplish many things contrary to expectation.

the *deus in prologo* does so from the start, with only horrible consequences to be expected by the audience.

In this contribution, I argue that, next to the *dei in prologo*, there are other signallers of similar “epic” reminiscences with regard to a higher level of transgression expectancy in Euripidean drama. Particularly interesting is the role of the *nutrix in prologo* in *Medea*; with reference to *nutrices* in other plays by the same author, I will show that the epic predecessors of Medea’s *nutrix* paved the way for the decisive influence she exerts on the irreversibly destructive behaviour of her mistress.

2. *Nutrices priores*

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, a nurse figures prominently in the character of Eurycleia, who nursed both Odysseus and his son Telemachus. The epic is explicit about Eurycleia’s provenance and the nurse’s working circumstances. She works in the Ithacan royal household as a slave:¹³

Εὐρύκλει', Ὀπρος θυγάτηρ Πεισηνορίδαο,
τὴν ποτε Λαέρτης πρίατο κτεάτεσσιν ἑοῖσιν
πρωθήβην ἔτ' ἐοῦσαν, ἔεικοσάβοια δ' ἔδωκεν,
ἴσα δέ μιν κεδνῇ ἀλόχῳ τίεν ἐν μεγάροισιν,
εὐνῇ δ' οὐ ποτ' ἔμικτο, χόλον δ' ἀλέεινε γυναικός
(*Od.* 1.429-33)

[Eurycleia, daughter of Ops son of Pisenor, whom Laertes once bought with his wealth when she was still in her first youth. For her he gave the price of twenty oxen. He cherished her on a par with his spouse inside, but he never slept with her – and thus he shunned the wrath of his wife.]

Though the *Odyssey* does not explicitly state that Odysseus’ father was already married when he invested in a slave girl, apparently Eurycleia, herself of good family given the naming of her father and grandfather,¹⁴ has been bought with the prospect of replacing Laertes’ lawfully wedded wife Anticleia as a mistress, as a housekeeper, and as a mother. The latter only in the sense of a foster mother, as Laertes never shared her bed: whether or not married at the time of the purchase, Laertes explicitly reserved sexual contact and motherhood in the royal family for Anticleia (Marshall 2017,

What was expected did not come to pass, but for the unexpected a god found a way. In such fashion was the completion of this play”).

¹³ Editions from which passages have been cited are in the references. All translations are by the author.

¹⁴ Like Eumaius (*Od.* 15.403) and his Sidonian nursemaid (*Od.* 15.427), Eurycleia was presumably kidnapped by pirates, cf. Heubeck, West and Hainsworth 1988, 126.

188-90). Nonetheless, he bought Eurycleia at a very young age and against a high price,¹⁵ suggestive of the exploitation of her breeding potential. The underlying assumption seems to be that in general young girls were added to the affluent household to serve as housekeepers, sex slaves, and breeders of bastards, with the buyers only refraining from the latter usability for reasons of discretion and intermarital respect and restraint. Replacing the biological mother with a nurse, however, was not considered an infringement on marriage and, instead, one of the main tasks of the acquired female servant (cf. *Od.* 19.482-3).

The *Odyssey* does not comment on the relationship between Anticleia and Eurycleia.¹⁶ The latter did, however, acquire a solid position in the palace: next to breastfeeding baby Odysseus, she was tasked with supervising the provisions and the wine cellar. When Odysseus' son Telemachus leaves for Pylos and Sparta, he acknowledges her overview of the household's provisions, as well as her ability to manage and to distribute the stock.¹⁷ In addition, he beseeches her secrecy: when Eurycleia protests and warns him not to leave the house, Telemachus urges her to swear not to tell his mother that he left for at least eleven or twelve days. And so she does (*Od.* 2.377-8). This is not the only occasion in the *Odyssey* where the nurse Eurycleia is approached as a confidant: both Penelope and Odysseus confide in her, even when her position as an intimate threatens one's safety. Once recognised despite his disguise as a beggar (*Od.* 19.392-3, 467-8), Odysseus has to prevent Eurycleia from shouting out to Penelope through smothering her and

¹⁵ Names like Ἀλφεισίβοια, Ἐρίβοια, and Πολύβοια similarly suggest cattle as a standard of value, but rather with regard to marriage-prospects than trade (Heubeck, West & Hainsworth 1988, 126). A similar amount, 20 oxen, is suggested as compensation for Odysseus per suitor (*Od.* 22.57). The *Iliad* provides comparison for the high value: 4 oxen for a skilled labour woman (*Il.* 23.705), 100 oxen for a set of golden armour (*Il.* 6.236), a male prisoner (*Il.* 21.79), 12 oxen for a tripod (*Il.* 23.703), 9 oxen for a set of bronze armour (*Il.* 6.236), and 1 ox for a cauldron (*Il.* 23.885).

¹⁶ Cf. *Od.* 11.155-62, 181-203, 216-24.

¹⁷ μαί, ἄγε δὴ μοι οἶνον ἐν ἀμφιφορεῦσιν ἄφυσσον / ἡδύν, ὅτις μετὰ τὸν λαρώτατος ὄν σὺ φυλάσσεις / κείνον οἰομένη τὸν κάμμορον, εἴ ποθεν ἔλθοι / διογενὴς Ὀδυσσεὺς θάνατον καὶ κῆρας ἀλύξας. / δώδεκα δ' ἐμπλησον καὶ πώμασιν ἄρσον ἅπαντας. / ἐν δέ μοι ἄλφιστα χεῦον ἐῦρραφέεσσι δοροῖσιν. / εἵκοσι δ' ἔστω μέτρα μληφάτου ἀλφίτου ἀκτῆς. / αὐτὴ δ' οἷη ἴσθι. τὰ δ' ἀθρόα πάντα τετύχθω. / ἐσπέριος γὰρ ἐγὼν αἰρήσομαι, ὅππότε κεν δὴ / μήτηρ εἰς ὑπερῷ' ἀναβῇ κοίτου τε μέδεται. (*Od.* 2.349-58; "Mother, pour me sweet wine in vessels, the second best, right after the one you guard, always pondering on that wretched man, if godlike Odysseus may from somewhere return, having escaped death and fate. Fill me twelve of them and close them all carefully with covers. Pour me barley meal into well-sewn skins: there should be twenty measures of ground barley meal in each. You must be the only one to know: make sure all this is brought together. For I will come to collect it in the evening, when my mother will retreat to her chambers and mind her rest").

making her swear an oath not to divulge his identity: if she betrays him, she is like a mother causing the death of her own child.¹⁸ Upon Odysseus' return, Eurycleia's loyalty to him outdoes her loyalty to Penelope.¹⁹ For twenty years, she was her support and protector as well, tending to the household and to Telemachus (*Od.* 17.31-5, 23.289-92), and serving as Penelope's eyes and ears throughout the palace.²⁰ At several occasions, the nurse functions as an advisor and instigator,²¹ suggesting that the nurse's role may well exceed the limitations of replacing motherhood.

In Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy, nurses feature prominently. There, too, they tend to align with the household norms, generally labelled patriarchal, or with the lady of the house left behind. In *Choephoroi* 743b-65, the task, duties, and responsibilities of the nurse are sufficiently presented. Answering the worries of the chorus in response to the message of Orestes' alleged passing, Orestes' nurse Cilissa comments on her position:

ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγώ·
 ὥς μοι τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ συγκεκραμένα
 ἄλγη δύσοιστα τοῖσδ' ἐν Ἀτρέως δόμοις
 τυχόντ' ἐμὴν ἤλγυνεν ἐν στέρνοις φρένα.
 ἀλλ' οὔτι πω τοιόνδε πῆμ' ἀνεσχόμην·
 τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα τλημόνως ἦντλουν κακά·
 φίλον δ' Ὀρέστην, τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς τριβήν,
 ὃν ἐξέθρεψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη,—
 κάκ' νυκτιπλάγκτων ὀρθίων κελευμάτων
 καὶ πολλὰ καὶ μοχθήρ' ἀνωφέλητ' ἐμοὶ
 τλάσῃ· - τὸ μὴ φρονοῦν γὰρ ὥσπερ εἰ βοτὸν

¹⁸ τῇ γὰρ Ἀθηναίῃ νόον ἔτραπεν· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς / χεῖρ' ἐπιμασσάμενος φάρυγος
 λάβε δεξιτερῇφι, / τῇ δ' ἐτέρῃ ἔθεν ἄσσον ἐρύσσατο φώνησέν τε. / μαῖα, τίη μ' ἐθέλεις
 ὀλέσαι; σὺ δέ μ' ἔτρεφες αὐτὴ / τῷ σῶ ἐπὶ μαζῶ· νῦν δ' ἄλγεα πολλὰ μογήσας /
 ἦλυθον εἰκοστῷ ἔτει ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν. / ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ ἐφράσθης καὶ τοι θεὸς ἔμβαλε
 θυμῷ, / σίγα, μή τίς τ' ἄλλος ἐνὶ μεγάροισι πύθηται (*Od.* 19.479-86; "Athena had
 diverted Penelope's attention. But Odysseus grabbed her by the throat with his right
 hand, and with his left he pulled her closer and said: 'Mother, why do you want to
 ruin me? You fed me yourself at your breast. Now, after suffering many woes, I have
 returned to my native country in the twentieth year. Now, since you discovered me and
 a god somehow allowed you to find me out, keep your silence, lest anyone else in the
 house finds me out, too.'").

¹⁹ Cf. Eurycleia's consolation of Penelope in *Od.* 4.742ff.

²⁰ Following the slaughter of the suitors, Eurycleia brings the message of Odysseus' return to Penelope (*Od.* 23.1-84). As long as he had to maintain his disguise, Odysseus was secretly informed by her as well, cf. *Od.* 22.417ff.

²¹ Eurycleia keeps the maid servants locked up when the weapons are removed from the great hall (*Od.* 19.15-30) and during the slaughter of the suitors (*Od.* 21.38off., *Od.* 23.41ff.). Afterwards, she oversees the cleaning of the hall (*Od.* 22.48off.).

τρέφειν ἀνάγκη, πῶς γὰρ οὐ; τρόπῳ φρενός·
οὐ γάρ τι φωνεῖ παῖς ἔτ' ὢν ἐν σπαργάνοις,
εἰ λιμός, ἢ δίψη τις, ἢ λιψουρία
ἔχει· νέα δὲ νηδὺς αὐτάρκης τέκνων.
τούτων πρόμαντις οὔσα, πολλὰ δ', οἶομαι,
ψευσθεῖσα παιδὸς σπαργάνων φαιδρύντρια,
γναφεὺς τροφεὺς τε ταῦτόν εἰχέτην τέλος.
ἐγὼ διπλᾶς δὲ τάσδε χειρωναξίας
ἔχουσ' Ὀρέστην ἐξεδεξάμην πατρί·
τεθνηκότος δὲ νῦν τάλαινα πεύθομαι.
στείχω δ' ἐπ' ἄνδρα τῶνδε λυμαντήριον
οἴκων, θέλων δὲ τόνδε πεύσεται λόγον.
(743b-62)

[Wretched me! How the old unbearable troubles, one heaped on top of the other, in this palace of Atreus continuously caused pain for my heart in my breast! But never did I sustain a blow like this: all other troubles I withstood patiently, but now my beloved Orestes, my soul's only care, whom I got handed over from his mother and nursed, and from the loud cries in broken nights both many and troublesome failures for me despite my efforts – for one must nurse the unthinking thing like an animal, what else? You just follow your instincts. The child does not yet speak while still in swaddling clothes, not when hungry or thirsty, or in need: the young children's lower body follows its own rules. I tried to anticipate such, but often, I reckon, became the baby-linen's washer as I was mistaken; laundress and nurse had the same aim. I had these same two handicrafts when I received Orestes for his father. And now I, wretched one, hear that he is dead. I will go to the man who brings destruction over this house, and he will hear the news he has been hoping for.]

Both the service as a replacement mother and the confidentiality *vis-à-vis* the keepers of the household norms become apparent in her speech. As the nurse in other Aeschylean and Sophoclean plays, Cilissa speaks and acts within the limitations of her position as a servant and as a woman.²²

3. *Nutrix Euripidea*

The nurse's role changes in Euripides where she appears in *Medea* (431 BCE), *Hippolytus* (428 BCE), and *Andromache* (ca. 425 BCE). Actually, it is extended to encompass active influencing of protagonists and of the play's plot. Euripidean nurses are still concerned with their *protégés* and with the

²² Though speaking from her own thoughts and judgements, cf. Van Emde Boas 2018, 328.

daily care for the household, but, unlike their predecessors, they exercise a strong and steering influence on their adoptive child – always female – in especially the aspects of adult life in which she replaces them as a τροφός: motherhood, childcare, role as a (threatened and abandoned) spouse, and sexuality. As a rule, nurses assume this role when they are taken in on their *protégé*'s despair as an ultimate confidant: in their attempt to replace their *protégé* psychologically as well as physically, they contribute to the psycho-sexual stress of the mistress, and actively steer her – and the plot – to death and disaster.

In *Andromache*, the Nurse steps in (802) once her mistress sees no way out: jealous of her potential rival Andromache (Torrance 2005, 45-50), Neoptolemus' share of Troy's spoils, Hermione, herself childless, planned to make use of her husband's absence to murder Andromache and her child. In the play's first half, she found a willing accomplice in her father Menelaus, but he was stopped from committing the crime through the timely intervention of Peleus, Neoptolemus' grandfather and master of the house in his grandson's absence. Now that her scheme failed and her father Menelaus left Phthia, Hermione fears her husband's homecoming: with rope and sword she tried to end her life,²³ but servants prevented her suicide. Urging her mistress to face her husband Neoptolemus, the Nurse comments on Hermione's sexuality, and steps in as the guardian of her mistress' proper behaviour in public.²⁴ The Nurse equally comments on Hermione's position as a potentially abandoned spouse, but downplays the risk that presented itself so readily: Neoptolemus lending his ear to Andromache does not imply the end of his and Hermione's marriage.²⁵ Further discussion of this issue, the threat to Hermione's marriage constituted by Neoptolemus' spoil of war

²³ The attempt to commit suicide by hanging confirms Hermione's interpretation of her misdeed against Andromache as sexually motivated. In *Andr.* 930-38a, Andromache admits having succumbed to other women's scorn of her sexual-competitive position against Andromache.

²⁴ Έρ. ἰὼ μοί μοι· σπάραγμα κόμας ὀνύχων τε / δαί' ἀμύγματα θήσομαι. / Τρ. ὦ παῖ, τί δράσεις; σῶμα σὸν καταικιῇ; / Έρ. αἰαῖ αἰαῖ· / ἔρρ' αἰθέριον πλοκάμων ἐμῶν ἄπο, / λεπτόμιτον φάρος. / Τρ. τέκνον, κάλυπτε στέρνα, σύνδησον πέπλους . . . ἀλλ' εἰσιθ' εἴσω μηδὲ φαντάζου δόμων / πάροιθε τῶνδε, μή τιν' αἰσχύνῃν λάβῃς / [πρόσθεν μελάνθρων τῶνδ' ὀρωμένη, τέκνον] (Eur. *Andr.* 825-32, 876-8; "HERMIONE Oh no, I will tear out my hair and horribly scratch myself with my nails. NURSE What will you do, my child? Maim your own body? HERMIONE Please, no, away from my braids into the sky, you, lightly-woven cloth. NURSE Cover your chest, child, and close your garments . . . Come on, come inside and do not show yourself outside this house, lest you load some shame onto yourself (when you are seen in front of this palace, child)").

²⁵ Τρ. οὐχ ὧδε κῆδος σὸν διώσεται πόσις / φαύλοις γυναικὸς βαρβάρου πεισθεὶς λόγοις (Eur. *Andr.* 869-70; "NURSE Your husband will not undo your marriage like that, won over by the idle reasoning of a foreign woman").

Andromache, is delegated to Orestes who happens to run into Hermione and her Nurse, and chooses words that resemble Aegeus' in *Medea*. Orestes also addresses Hermione's childlessness, and thus adds to the interference by her Nurse: whereas the Nurse thought of her mistress' replacement as a spouse, Orestes makes Hermione speak explicitly about her replacement as a mother.²⁶

In *Hippolytus*, the Nurse is much more proactive as a dramatic character: she acts independently in order to further the plot as a tool of divine will.²⁷ Like her counterpart in *Andromache*, she steps in when her mistress Phaedra seems to be ill (176, 205, cf. the chorus in 269). Initially, she does not know what befell her mistress, though her complaint that mortals "appear to be problematically in love" (193, δυσέρωτες δὴ φαινόμεθ' ὄντες) foreshadows what is wrong. She duly corrects Phaedra's incomprehensible utterances about "hunting in the mountains", with the chorus as her witness (286, ὥς ἂν παροῦσα καὶ σύ μοι ξυμμαρτυρῇς "as you, since you are present, may testify to as well"), but notices that Phaedra responds to the mention of Hippolytus (310). In her lead-in to mentioning his name, she has also touched on Phaedra's role as a mother: giving in to her illness, Phaedra will bring Theseus' bastard Hippolytus in a favourable position when compared to her own children by Theseus.²⁸ Phaedra's response to the mention of her stepson's name appears at first sight to be the Nurse's finally successful attempt to break through her mistress' defences.

What seems to be an issue of inheritance, however, quickly turns out to be a matter of forbidden love, a confession extracted from Phaedra²⁹ by her

²⁶ Ὅρ. τίς οὖν ἂν εἴη μὴ πεφυκότων γέ πω / παίδων γυναικὶ συμφορὰ πλὴν εἰς λέχος; / Ἐρ. τοῦτ' αὐτὸ καὶ νοσοῦμεν· εὐ μ' ὑπηγάγου. / Ὅρ. ἄλλην τιν' εὐνὴν ἀντὶ σοῦ στέργει πόσις; / Ἐρ. τὴν αἰχμάλωτον Ἑκτορος ξυνευνέτιν. / Ὅρ. κακὸν γ' ἔλεξας, ἄνδρα δίσσ' ἔχειν λέχη. / Ἐρ. τοιαῦτα ταῦτα. κἄτ' ἔγωγ' ἡμνάμην (Eur. *Andr.* 904-910; "ORESTES What trouble can there be for a woman other than her marriage, as long as there are no children yet? HERMIONE Exactly that is where we suffer; you sharply see my soft spot. ORESTES Does your husband long for another to replace you? HERMIONE The wife of Hector, won by the spear. ORESTES You mentioned something shameful: a man having two wives. HERMIONE Exactly that – but I took countermeasures.")

²⁷ As she rightfully acknowledges in 359a-61.

²⁸ Τρ. ἀλλ' ἴσθι μέντοι – πρὸς τάδ' αὐθαδεστέρα / γγνου θαλάσσης – εἰ θανῇ, προδοῦσα σοῦς / παῖδας, πατρώων μὴ μεθέξοντας δόμων (Eur. *Hipp.* 304-6; "NURSE But know this, and as far as I am concerned you remain more stubborn that the sea in this regard: if you die, you have betrayed your children, for they will not share in their father's wealth".

²⁹ Φα. τί τοῦθ' ὃ δὴ λέγουσιν ἄνθρωπους ἐρᾶν; / Τρ. ἥδιστον, ὃ παῖ, ταῦτόν ἀλγεινόν θ' ἄμα. / Φα. ἡμεῖς ἂν εἴμεν θατέρῳ κεχρημένοι. / Τρ. τί φῆς; ἐρᾶς, ὃ τέκνον; ἀνθρώπων τίνος; / Φα. ὅστις ποθ' οὗτός ἐσθ', ὃ τῆς Ἀμαζόνος . . . / Τρ. Ἰππόλυτον αὐδᾶς; / Φα. σοῦ τάδ', οὐκ ἐμοῦ κλύεις. / Τρ. οἴμοι, τί λέξεις, τέκνον; ὥς μ' ἀπώλεσας.

Nurse³⁰ to her own demise: nurse and protégé go down together (Castrucci 2015, 416-18). In this case, however, the Nurse does not support her mistress' self-constraint; on the contrary, she rapidly shifts side to, unknowingly, join Aphrodite in convincing Phaedra to accept – and yield to – her longing. Instead of actively protecting her mistress' private peace of mind and public appearance (as did the Nurse in *Andromache*), she encourages Phaedra to be sexually proactive in order to “save her life”.³¹ The arguments she mentions in the process are to be considered indicative of the character of the Nurse herself: preference of impulse and instant pleasure over thoughtfulness and reputation, eagerness to take sexual initiative, overstatement of personal suffering, lack of self-restraint. The Nurse promises Phaedra not to betray her to Hippolytus (521), but soon enough she proves to have done just that: in addition to being a nurse, she has now become a matchmaker (589-90). She tries to downplay her betrayal of Phaedra with Hippolytus, only enticing the latter to his famous speech on the analogy between trouble and women (616-68). Phaedra realises that the Nurse's actions will cause her death, and curses her. After the Nurse is dismissed and has left the stage, Phaedra announces that she will take Hippolytus with her in her downfall, thus paying her debt to Aphrodite. The Nurse has no further role to play than to find her mistress hanged.

(Eur. *Hipp.* 347-53; “PHAEDRA Men call it ‘being in love’: what does it mean? NURSE The sweetest thing, my child, and at the same time the most painful. PHAEDRA I can only make use of the latter. NURSE I beg your pardon: are you in love, my child? With whom? PHAEDRA Whoever he is, the son of the Amazon . . . NURSE Hippolytus, you mean? PHAEDRA Those are your words; you do not hear me say such. NURSE O dear, what are you about to say? How you have ruined me!”).

³⁰ Presumably not present in the first, failed version of *Hippolytus* (Hutchinson 2004), where Phaedra delivered the incriminating letter confessing her passion for Hippolytus herself.

³¹ Τρ. οὐ γὰρ περισσὸν οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἔξω λόγου / πέπονθας, ὄργαι δ' ἐς σ' ἀπέσκηψαν θεᾶς. / ἔρᾳς· τί τοῦτο θαῦμα; σὺν πολλοῖς βροτῶν. / κᾶπειτ' ἔρωτος οὐνεκα ψυχὴν ὀλεῖς; / . . . τί σεμνομυθεῖς; οὐ λόγων εὐσχημόνων / δεῖ σ', ἀλλὰ τάνδρός. ὥς τάχος διστέον, / τὸν εὐθὺν ἐξειπόντας ἀμφὶ σοῦ λόγον. / εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν σοι μὴ 'πὶ συμφοραῖς βίος / τοιαῖσδε, σώφρων δ' οὐσ' ἐτύχχανες γυνή, / οὐκ ἂν ποτ' εὐνῆς οὐνεχ' ἡδονῆς τε σῆς / προῆγον ἂν σε δεῦρο· νῦν δ' ἀγὼν μέγας / σώσαι βίον σόν, κοῦκ ἐπίφθονον τόδε (Eur. *Hipp.* 437-40, 490-7; “NURSE You do not experience something extraordinary or beyond explanation: you have simply been struck by the goddess' anger. You are in love – what is so extraordinary about that? It happens to many people. And now you plan to destroy your life because of love? . . . No more solemn words! You do not need well-arranged arguments – you need the man! We must make it clear as soon as possible how things truly stand with you by making it explicit. If your life were not in such perils as it is now, and if you were a self-controlled woman, then I would never guide you in this direction for the mere pleasure of sex. Now, however, the stakes are higher, saving your life, and there is nothing reproachable in that!”).

The Nurse's developing and changing role in *Hippolytus* – from caring for her mistress to acting independently with a certain amount of providence and indifference for her protégé's interest, to utter helplessness with regard to the destructive outcome of her initiatives – is, of course, instrumental to the divine will that determines the play from the start. In her prologue, Aphrodite explicitly states the purpose of the play (Danek 1992): to demonstrate that individual gods destroy hubristic humans through using other humans as defenceless pawns – in this case, to show that she will bring down Hippolytus through sacrificing Phaedra.³² The Nurse's considerations and actions in *Hippolytus* represent the double motivation familiar from epic: the mirroring of divine council, will, and decision through human deliberation, consultation, and determination. Human protagonists seemingly act on their own accord, but whatever they do or say proves to have been prepared and fated on the level of the gods. At times, humans in epic are vaguely or painfully aware of this, as is the Nurse in *Hippolytus*. Nonetheless, her behaviour is transgressive, as is the goddess' motivation and execution: the downfall of tragic protagonists is not primarily the result of their Aristotelian *hamartia* within or before the play's plot, but rather a premeditated and highly personal divine vendetta. An audience can hardly feel engaged with the undeservedly non-productive exertions of the tragic character and experience fear and pity accordingly; they remain rather detached from identification with a protagonist who is from the outset condemned by an outside higher force and whose suffering within the play, like that of the divine pawns, is both the reason for, and the result of, transgression.

³² Ἀφρ. σφάλλω δ' ὅσοι φρονοῦσιν εἰς ἡμᾶς μέγα. / ἔνεστι γὰρ δὴ κὰν θεῶν γένοιτο
 τόδε· / τιμώμενοι χαίρουσιν ἀνθρώπων ὑπο. / δεῖξω δὲ μύθων τῶνδ' ἀλήθειαν τάχα
 . . . / ἃ δ' εἰς ἔμ' ἡμάρτηκε τιμωρήσομαι / Ἰππόλυτον ἐν τῇδ' ἡμέρᾳ. τὰ πολλὰ δὲ /
 πάλαι προκόψασ', οὐ πόνου πολλοῦ με δεῖ . . . / ἰδοῦσα Φαίδρα καρδίαν κατέσχετο
 / ἔρωτι δεινῷ τοῖς ἔμοις βουλευμάσιν . . . / ξύνοιδε δ' οὔτις οἰκετῶν νόσον. / ἀλλ'
 οὔτι ταύτῃ τόνδ' ἔρωτα χρηὴ πεσεῖν, / δεῖξω δὲ Θησεῖ πρᾶγμα κάκφανήσεται. / καὶ
 τὸν μὲν ἡμῖν πολέμιον νεανίαν / κτενεῖ πατὴρ ἀραῖσιν . . . / ἢ δ' εὐκλεῆς μὲν ἀλλ'
 ὅμως ἀπόλλυται Φαίδρα· τὸ γὰρ τῇσδ' οὐ προτιμήσω κακὸν / τὸ μὴ οὐ παρασχεῖν
 τοὺς ἔμοις ἐχθροὺς ἔμοι / δίκην τοσαύτην ὥστ' ἔμοι καλῶς ἔχειν (Eur. *Hipp.* 6-9, 21-
 3, 27-8, 40-4a, 47-50; "APHRODITE I will bring down those who do not respect me. For
 within the race of gods the following applies: they enjoy being worshipped by men. I
 will swiftly demonstrate the truth of these words . . . for what he did me wrong I will
 punish Hippolytus today. I have prepared many things in advance – it will be an easy
 game to play for me . . . when she saw Hippolytus Phaedra was captured by a terrifying
 passion; all that was my doing . . . among the palace personnel no one knows of her
 affliction. But her love may not end like that: I will show Theseus the entire matter and
 everything will come to light. The father will kill this young man, so hostile to me, with
 his curses . . . she will keep her good reputation but she has to die anyway – Phaedra.
 I will not value the evil that befalls her higher than the prospect of not punishing my
 enemies to an extent that satisfies me").

Both Aphrodite's and the Nurse's transgression in *Hippolytus* is thus comparable to divinely instigated transgression in similar situations, like Dionysus' and Pentheus' in Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 BCE, staged posthumously). In this play, as in *Hippolytus*, a god uses the prologue to explain the play as a demonstration of divine revenge (Allan 2013, 601-2): Dionysus chooses to introduce his worship in Thebes, as the first city in Greece, to take revenge for the treatment of his mother by her sisters and to punish the already condemned king Pentheus, his cousin, for not acknowledging his divinity.³³ Dionysus' condemnation of Pentheus, as well as the latter's predestined and mechanically staged downfall within the play, are reminiscent of the divinely ordained, supervised, and executed destruction of the epic hero, as it is found in the treatment of, for example, Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Hector in the *Iliad*, or the suitors in the *Odyssey* (Allan 2013, 593-5). The 'epic' combination of being the instrument of divine will made explicit, and, at the same time, acknowledging that what appears to be one's own free will is actually predestined thought and action, characterises secondary characters in the plays of Euripides. Determinant prologuing, as in *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*, makes for characters' behaviour that is as unpredictable, or implausible, as the playwright's heavily criticised *ex machina*.

4. *Medea: nutrix epica*

A particularly remarkable instance of a determinant prologue is Euripides'

³³ ΔΙ. πρώτας δὲ Θήβας τῆσδε γῆς Ἑλληνίδος / ἀνωλόλυξα, νεβρίδ' ἐξάψας χροὸς / θύρσον τε δοὺς ἐς χεῖρα, κίσσινον βέλος· / ἐπεὶ μ' ἀδελφαὶ μητρός, ἃς ἤκιστα χρῆν, / Διόνυσον οὐκ ἔφασκον ἐκφῦναι Διός, / Σεμέλην δὲ νυμφευθεῖσαν ἐκ θνητοῦ τινος / ἐς Ζῆν' ἀναφέρειν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν λέχους, / Κάδμου σοφίσμαθ', ὧν νιν οὐνεκα κτανεῖν / Ζῆν' ἐξεκαυχῶνθ', ὅτι γάμους ἐψεύσατο. / τοιγάρ νιν αὐτὰς ἐκ δόμων ῥστροησ' ἐγὼ / μανίαις, ὄρος δ' οἰκοῦσι παράκοποι φρενῶν . . . / Κάδμος μὲν οὖν γέρας τε καὶ τυραννίδα / Πενθεὶ δίδωσι θυγατρὸς ἐκπεφυκότι, / ὃς θεομαχεῖ τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ καὶ σπονδῶν ἄπο / ὠθεῖ μ', ἐν εὐχαῖς τ' οὐδαμοῦ μνείαν ἔχει. / ὧν οὐνεκ' αὐτῷ θεὸς γεγώς ἐνδείξομαι / πᾶσιν τε Θηβαίοισιν (Eur. *Bacch.* 23-33, 43-8a; "DIONYSUS As the first city in Greece I have caused Thebes to shout out loud, covering them in deer skins, and handing them the thyrsus, a weapon topped with ivy. Without being provoked to do so at all, my mother's sisters openly proclaimed that I, Dionysus, was not the child of Zeus, and that Semele was deflowered by a mere mortal and put the blame for her pregnancy on Zeus. A clever scheme conjured by Cadmus, for which Zeus allegedly burned her to death, as she lied about the affair. As punishment I have driven them out of their houses in madness, and now they camp on the mountain, insane . . . Cadmus leaves privilege and kingship to his daughter's son Pentheus, who opposes my divinity and worship, keeps me at bay from sacrifices, and never mentions me once in prayers. In retaliation, I will show myself in my full capacity as a god to him and to all of Thebes").

Boedeker 1991; Mueller 2001; Levett 2010). On the other hand, the Nurse speaks against inequality “on a democratic basis”, going “beyond what is realistic in having the nurse articulate these thoughts”. He observes that there is something peculiar in the nurse’s role at the time of *Medea*’s first staging:

The most obvious points of comparison for the nurse in *Medea* are the parallel characters in the series of plays that were picked upon by Aristophanes as examples of Euripides’ unhealthy interest in women and in sexual morality – or immorality. In *Frogs*, the Aristophanic Aeschylus claims that Euripides’ women, who explored sexual desire, such as Sthenoboea and Phaedra, were notorious (1043-4). These scandalous women all belong to plays of roughly the same time as *Medea*, and all seem to have been accompanied by a nurse, who was speaking and a very active character, and deeply impacted in the psychosexual problems of their mistresses. The nurse of *Medea*, I suggest, is not only parallel to these but actively *draws upon* their example. Or, to put it another way, audience expectations would have been framed by this cluster of Euripidean interest. (Ruffell 2014, 70)

Let me add that the Nurse’s providence equally frames the audience expectations. While *Medea* herself speaks of suicide (145-7), then of killing Jason and the rest of the royal family (163-5), then again of suicide while taking the boys with her (111-18), the Nurse fathomed the danger to *Medea*’s sons much earlier (Papi 1991, 294-5).³⁵ She knows that her mistress is a dangerous woman when enraged, and having noticed that she gazes at her children the way she looks at enemies, the Nurse actively moves to keep the boys at a safe distance from their mother. Her presentiment, however, proves to turn out correct, of course. In my view, the combination of the Nurse’s “heroic” language and her role in the prologue confirm as a “further possibility” Ruffell’s observation “that the Nurse is ultimately . . . the one who most helps *Medea* bring about the destruction of Creon’s family and the murder of her children” (2014, 79-80). For him “this suggestion turns on whether the nurse returns with *Medea* at 214 and stays on stage to be

³⁵ Τρ. στρυγεῖ δὲ παῖδας οὐδ’ ὀρώσ’ εὐφραίνεται. / δέδοικα δ’ αὐτὴν μὴ τι βουλευσῇ νέον . . . / ἴτ’, εὖ γὰρ ἔσται, δωμάτων ἔσω, τέκνα. / σὺ δ’ ὡς μάλιστα τοῦσδ’ ἐρημώσας ἔχε / καὶ μὴ πέλαζε μητρὶ δυσθυμουμένη. / ἤδη γὰρ εἶδον ὅμμα νιν ταυρουμένην / τοῖσδ’, ὥς τι δρασεῖουσιν· οὐδὲ παύσεται / χόλου, σάφ’ οἶδα, πρὶν κατασκηψαί τι. / ἐχθροὺς γε μέντοι, μὴ φίλους, δράσειέ τι (Eur. *Med.* 36-7, 89-95; “NURSE She loathes her children, and does not rejoice seeing them. I fear her, lest she devices something unheard of . . . Come now, it’ll be alright, boys. You, tutor, keep them as far from her as you can and do not let them near their despairing mother. I already saw her throwing them that savage bull-like look, as if she might do something to them. She will not stop her anger, that I know for sure, until she had her way with someone. I only hope she moves against enemies, and not against her near and dear”).

brought into the plan at 820-3, and exits with the children at 1076 to take them to their death" (80).

I argue, in addition, that the nurse's steering influence on the plot and on Medea's unforeseen decision to murder her own children rather stems from the comparison with similar epic-like prologuing characters (Hopman 2008). Like the prologuing Dionysus in *Bacchae* and Aphrodite in *Hippolytus*, each presenting the protagonists' acts and decisions as predetermined and hence severely inhibiting the capacity of the audience to identify with *Bacchae*'s Pentheus and Cadmus as well as with *Hippolytus*' Phaedra and her Wet Nurse, in the same way the prologuing nurse of *Medea* sets the stage for the inevitability of unspeakable acts by Medea (cf. Sypniewski and MacMaster 2010). Whereas pre-Euripidean versions of the Medea-story commonly presented the heroine as taking her revenge for Jason's betrayal on him, his wife, and the further royal family (cf. 374-5; Graf 1997), Euripides was probably the first playwright to have her kill her own sons with Jason (Micheline 1989, 120-4; cf. Boedecker 1997). The ominous words of the Nurse in 36-7 and 89-95, prepare the audience as irrevocably as Dionysus' in *Bacchae* 23-33, 43-8a and Aphrodite's in *Hippolytus* 6-9, 21-3, 27-8, 40-4a, and 47-50. She actively keeps the boys from going to their mother,³⁶ but foresees, in response to Medea's wish for her sons to die with their father³⁷ that an evil outcome may not be averted.³⁸

For some running time, still, the possibility remains that the play may have another outcome: not until the fortuitous but very useful meeting with the Athenian king Aegeus, stopping by on his way from Delphi to Troezen and unknowingly offering Medea the opportunity to execute her horrifying plan with a change of escape (Sfyrouras 1994; Blankenborg forthcoming), does the Nurse's announcement of the children's fate resurface in Medea's words:

ΜΗ. νῦν ἐλπὶς ἐχθροῦς τοὺς ἐμοὺς τείσειν δίκην.
οὗτος γὰρ ἀνὴρ ἧ μάλιστ' ἐκάμνομεν
λιμὴν πέφανται τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων.
ἐκ τοῦδ' ἀναψόμεσθα πρυμνήτην κάλων,

³⁶ ΤΡ. σπεύδετε θάσσον δώματος εἴσω / καὶ μὴ πελάσῃτ' ὄμματος ἐγγὺς / μηδὲ προσέλθῃτ' (Eur. *Med.* 100-2a; "NURSE Hurry, quickly, into the house, and do not go into her view, do not come near her").

³⁷ ΜΗ. ὦ κατάρατοι / παῖδες ὀλοισθε στυγεράς ματρός / σὺν πατρί, καὶ πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι (Eur. *Med.* 112b-14; "MEDEA Cursed children of a wretched mother – wish that you would die together with your father").

³⁸ ΤΡ. τί δέ σοι παῖδες πατρός ἀμπλακίας / μετέχουσι; τί τούσδ' ἔχθεις; οἶμοι, / τέκνα, μή τι πάθῃθ' ὥς ὑπεραλγῶ (Eur. *Med.* 116-18; "NURSE What part do your sons have in their father's wrongdoing? What do you hate them for? Oh, boys, I am so afraid that you may suffer some consequence").

μολόντες ἄστῳ καὶ πόλισμα Παλλάδος.
ἤδη δὲ πάντα τάμῃ σοι βουλευμάτα
λέξω

...
ἀλλ' ὥς δόλοισι παῖδα βασιλέως κτάνω

...
κακῶς ὀλεῖται πᾶς θ' ὃς ἂν θίγῃ κόρης

...
ἐνταῦθα μέντοι τόνδ' ἀπαλλάσσω λόγον.
ῥῶμαξά δ' οἶον ἔργον ἔστ' ἐργαστέον
τοῦντεῦθεν ἡμῖν· τέκνα γὰρ κατακτενῶ
τάμ'· οὐτίς ἔστιν ὅστις ἐξαιρήσεται
(Eur. Med. 767-73a, 783, 788, 790-3)

[MEDEA Now there is hope that my enemies will be punished. In my moment of need this man has appeared as a safe haven for what I plan to do. I will securely moor with him, once I have reached the city and stronghold of Athena. Finally, the moment to tell you all that I have planned to do has come . . . yes, I plan to kill the king's daughter through trickery . . . and everyone touching her will die a gruesome death . . . but from this point I do not so readily continue speaking of my plan – I have cried over the task that I have to perform next: I will kill the children, my own boys. No one will ever take them from me.]

With or without the Nurse attending the scenes as a silent character, from this point on Medea is herself helpless against her own predestined resolve to murder her sons, echoed by the chorus in 976-1001. Feigning against Jason to want only what is best for their sons, she cannot hide her true emotions from him:³⁹ she knows that his wish for “long lives” will be in vain. In lines 894-976 the children are on stage, probably together with a supervisor, either the Nurse or the *paedagogus*. The reappearance of the latter together with the children in 1002 suggests that he was also accompanying them in the previous scene; the Nurse does not get an explicit second staging. After a final moment of hesitation, Medea confirms her resolve with reference to a force stronger than her own plans:⁴⁰ emotions overpower reason. Having heard the death of the princess, she confirms her resolve again, in 1236-40: speaking to the chorus she argues that others will kill her children if she

³⁹ ἸΑ. τί δὴ, τάλαινα, τοῖσδ' ἐπιστένεις τέκνοις; / ΜΗ. ἔτικτον αὐτούς· ζῆν δ' ὅτ' ἐξηύχου τέκνα, / ἐσηλθέ μ' οἶκτος εἰ γενήσεται τάδε (Eur. Med. 929-31; “JASON Why then, poor woman, do you cry for these boys? / MEDEA I bore them. When you just prayed that they may live long lives, I felt a sudden stroke of pity – will this be the case for them?”).

⁴⁰ ΜΗ. θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσω τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων, / ὅσπερ μεγίστων αἴτιος κακῶν βροτοῖς (Eur. Med. 1079-80; “MEDEA Irrationality is stronger than my plans – it is the main reason behind mortals' misery”).

does not.⁴¹ Having killed the Corinthian king and his daughter she can only hope to save her own life.

And so she proceeds; she kills the boys as the Nurse predicted, against her better judgement. In the play's final scene, Medea appears as the revengeful goddess, reminiscent again of Dionysus and Aphrodite, thus combining aspects of the prologuing Nurse's providence and plot-steering, as well as of the spiteful divinities who got their way as they themselves announced. Medea appears as a *deus ex machina*, standing on the chariot of her grandfather the Sun God, her children with her. From here, she makes clear that she will take care of them *alone*, thus replacing the nurse and arranging a proper funeral well outside the mortal realm (Holland 2008). The prospect sketched by the Nurse in the prologue is brought to the foresaid conclusion by Medea as goddess.

5. Conclusion: an Epic Ring

In *Medea*, the Nurse and Medea constitute a pattern of words and acts that corresponds to the double motivation of epic and its narrative predestination. More than in the extant plays that better conform to Aristotle's analysis of tragedy as *mimesis* through acting out (Murhaghan 1995), but in ways similar to Euripides' 'divinely-determinant' plays like *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, the presentation of the plot and its performance have much in common with the Aristotelean description of epic as *mimesis* through narration. At the play's start, the Nurse, in line with epic diction and concepts, speaks with self-importance and presumptuousness, regularly showing signs of a character using a democratic stance in a pre-democratic society, like the mythological (and, possibly, in the view of contemporary Athenians [Lloyd 2006]) Corinth. More importantly, she displays a level of omniscience and foresight in her – correct – prediction of the murdering of Medea's sons by their mother, a plot development that was an innovation by Euripides.⁴² Her subsequent reflections and comments, as Ruffell shows, not only prepare the audience for what is to come, but also help Medea develop into the infanticide she is destined to become. Helpless against what has been ordained in the play's

⁴¹ ΜΗ. φίλοι, δέδοκται τοῦργον ὡς τάχιστα μοι / παῖδας κτανούσῃ τῇσδ' ἀφορμᾶσθαι χθονός, / καὶ μὴ σχολὴν ἄγουσαν ἐκδοῦναι τέκνα / ἄλλῃ φονεῦσαι δυσμενεστέρᾳ χερὶ. / πάντως σφ' ἀνάγκη καθθανεῖν (Eur. *Med.* 1236-40; "MEDEA Dear friends, my decision has been made to murder the children as soon as possible and then flee from this land, so as to not by doing nothing extradite them to be killed by another, more hostile, hand. They must die in any case").

⁴² Holland 2003 argues that infanticide was already a feature of Aeolus' pedigree.

prologue, and defenceless against the potentially destructive irrationality that incites an unprecedented indifference towards human suffering in tragedy, Medea gradually changes into the entity responsible and accountable for all the protagonists' transgressive behaviour. On a par with goddesses she transcends the human level, both in claiming responsibility for what has happened, and for the replacement of the Nurse in taking care of the children's dead bodies. Clearly the Nurse, built from the many models of nurse-behaviour predating Euripides, particularly from the epic tradition, and considered a character fitting for prologuing a 'determinant' plot, could not bring such a play to completion. Such a task befalls to larger-than-human characters alone: Artemis in *Hippolytos*, Dionysus in *Bacchae*, Medea in *Medea*. For the Nurse as a tragic character, this unique 'epic' performance resulted in a return to the more common use of the character,⁴³ as a confidant in the psycho-sexual problems of their mistresses, be it with an undeniable propensity to arbitrariness and transgression from now on.

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⁴³ Ypsilanti 2008, 162-8 points out that the nurse's position remains rather influential in contrast with the "silence" of the chorus, due to their inability to enter the palace. Whereas the nurse exercises influence on the main character(s) and the plot, the chorus' role is restricted to consolatory poetry (Fabbro 2020).

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