

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

---

Ancient Studies

Faculty of Arts

---

2003

## Women and Oaths in Euripides

Judith Fletcher

Wilfrid Laurier University, [jfletcher@wlu.ca](mailto:jfletcher@wlu.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.wlu.ca/ams\\_faculty](https://scholars.wlu.ca/ams_faculty)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fletcher, Judith, "Women and Oaths in Euripides" (2003). *Ancient Studies*. 2.  
[https://scholars.wlu.ca/ams\\_faculty/2](https://scholars.wlu.ca/ams_faculty/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ancient Studies by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# Women and Oaths in Euripides

Judith Fletcher

“The oath is what holds democracy together,” claimed the Athenian orator Lycurgus, whose democracy was composed exclusively of men.<sup>1</sup> Athens was the definitive phallogocentric community where public discursive practices such as the oath were the prerogative of male citizens who competed for power in the agora, the assembly, and the lawcourts. Euripides, however, represents the disquieting occurrence of women tendering oaths from men, a phenomenon that challenges the gendered hierarchy of his society.<sup>2</sup> In this article I explore how three Euripidean dramas, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, allow women to use these potent speech acts to control men’s language and action.<sup>3</sup> By tendering promissory oaths Euripides’ female characters cite a conventional social practice that is intrinsically performative; oath taking scenes are reflective both of the world external to the drama and of the dramatic performance itself. Furthermore when men swear to do something for a woman—

---

*Judith Fletcher is Associate Professor for the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. She was Honorary Research Fellow at the Centre for Ancient Drama and Its Reception (CADRE) at the University of Nottingham in 2001. Her publications include numerous articles on Greek Tragedy and Comedy, and on the Classical Tradition in Postmodern Literature. She is co-editor (with Bonnie MacLachlan) of Virginité Revisited: Configurations of Female Chastity from Antiquity to the Present (Manchester University Press, 2003).*

---

<sup>1</sup> Lycurgus *Leocr.* 79, translation mine. The oath had the power to seal contracts and guaranteed the straight dealing of dikasts in the court of law as well as magistrates such as archons in political life. Indeed every male citizen who, upon reaching maturity, swore the ephebic oath never to desert a comrade. General discussions include Joseph Plescia, *The Oath and Perjury in Ancient Greece* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1970). Gerhard Thür, “Eid. Griechenland,” in *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike*. Herausgegeben von Hubert Cancik und Helmuth Schneider. Altertum. Bd. III. (Verlag J. B. Metzler: Stuttgart & Weimar, 1997), 909. On the religious implications see Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, 1996), 186–87; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 250–54.

<sup>2</sup> There is ample documentation for the conceptual division that constructed the public world as masculine, and the less visible and less vocal world as feminine. Often cited is the Thucydidean version of Pericles’ funeral speech in which he exhorts Athenian women to incur as little public recognition as possible (Thucydides *The Histories* 2.45.2). For an overview of the issue see John Gould, “Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 38–59; Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 79. Laura McClure, however, specifies that women did have a public voice within certain (mostly religious) contexts in *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> For a brief survey of oaths in tragedy see J. D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 79–85.

grant sanctuary, keep a secret, carry a letter—they also enter into a contract with the gods who function as the guarantors of the oath. This triangulated relationship—man, woman, god—contributes to the increased agency of female protagonists, whose authority is fortified by invoking the gods as witnesses to the oaths. Oaths “were divinely ordained and magically protected,” as Anne Burnett puts it, and they “stood like the primeval pillar that supports the sky.”<sup>4</sup> Consonant with the ancient world’s respect for their cultural authority, Euripidean oaths become a powerful dramaturgical device by which the divine world aids women’s machinations, now an inexorable force that propels the tragedy to its reversal.

Euripides thus plays with how the spoken word can give power to women by exploiting what J. L. Austin would call the oath’s “perlocutionary” consequences, the unpredictable outcome of a speech act.<sup>5</sup> Rather than functioning as stabilizing rituals as for example in Hyllus’ oath to Heracles in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* (1179–258), Euripidean oaths tendered by women lead to a disruption of the status quo.<sup>6</sup> Oaths complicate the storyline of the *Medea* and *Hippolytus*; that is to say they create the *desis*, or “binding” of the plot, by obliging characters to perform otherwise improbable acts. Consequently female characters not only achieve authority over the men who swear the oaths but also function as authorial figures within the fiction. To a predominately male audience of the fifth century this degree of female agency would represent a potential threat to the male hegemony that was demonstrably nervous about women’s use of language. Classical Greek literature consistently manifests this anxiety in representations of women’s speech as duplicitous or dangerous, a stereotype that includes oath-tendering females in tragedy.<sup>7</sup>

Two non-dramatic sources suggest that there was a certain suspicion about women and oaths, that women could subvert a discursive practice meant to sustain social order by using oaths to obtain power over men. Agamemnon’s apology in *Iliad* 19.107–13 tells how “crafty-minded” (*dolophrosuneis*) Hera tendered an oath from Zeus who in a

<sup>4</sup> Anne P. Burnett, “‘Medea’ and the Tragedy of Revenge,” *Classical Philology* 68 (1973): 13.

<sup>5</sup> I use J. L. Austin’s distinction between an illocutionary act, a speech act which creates a specific social situation, and a perlocutionary consequence, “the achieving of certain effects by saying something.” As he points out the illocution is conventional while the perlocution is not (J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], 121). Austin’s fundamental distinction between the constative and the illocutionary speech, a statement of fact and a performative utterance, has been challenged most notably by Austin himself, but also by Jacques Derrida in “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–23.

<sup>6</sup> In *Trachiniae* Heracles solicits an oath from Hyllus both to marry Iole, Heracles’ concubine and to prepare his funeral pyre. The oath given by a son to a father represents a movement toward civilization and the perpetuity of Heracles’ family; it establishes a ritual and a marriage, putting an end to the destruction and violence that have characterized his family dynamics until now. It occurs at the end of the play and resolves rather than complicates the dramatic action. See Judith Fletcher, “*Panta aristeuon cheroïn*: Deeds of the Hands in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*,” *Mouseion* 1 (2001): 1–15. Similarly at the conclusion of the *Eumenides* Orestes swears an oath of alliance between Argos and Athens (Aeschylus 761–67); the ritual will not affect the plot in any way but actually looks toward a positive future beyond the dramatic scope. Athena decrees that Adrastus must swear a similar oath at the end of Euripides’ *Supplices* 1189–210, although Adrastus does not perform the oath in the presence of the theatre audience. These oaths involve men exclusively, solidifying in one case a patrilineal bond, and have civic and ritual implications.

<sup>7</sup> A. Bergren, “Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought,” *Arethusa* 16 (1983): 69–95; McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 26 (see especially n. 96).

moment of folly made a pledge that resulted in the supremacy of Eurystheus over Heracles. Less obvious is the pledge sworn by Euphiletus, accused of murdering his wife's lover, to the slave woman who witnessed the activities of the illicit couple in *Lysias* 1.93.20. Euphiletus swears not to torture her, but since a slave's testimony was only admissible when elicited by torture, Euphiletus is deprived of a means of substantiating his story about his wife's adultery and his plea of justifiable homicide. Both examples suggest how high the stakes were when a man swore an oath to a woman and help to sustain a stereotype of manipulative women exploiting the oath's authority.<sup>8</sup>

Aristophanes was clearly aware of how Euripides exploits this preconception as a plot device. In the *Thesmophoriazusae* "Euripides" dresses up his old kinsman in drag so that he can intervene in the women's plan to exact vengeance for Euripides' misrepresentation of them. The feminized Kinsman takes control of the script by demanding an oath, "that you come to my rescue should any harm befall me."<sup>9</sup> Inevitably the Aristophanic Euripides is compelled to risk his life to rescue the old transvestite when he is detected. The lampoon works so well because several extant Euripidean plots require male characters to submit to dangerous enterprises because they swore an oath to a woman. As a consequence of the oath, Aristophanes' transvestite heroine—and here we must remember that all Euripidean female characters were played by male actors—becomes an authorial figure who apparently determines how the action will proceed. The comedy obviously exploits a recognizable Euripidean plot device, the oath, and the ability of the oath to turn female characters into the authors of the texts that they inhabit.

Aristophanes also appears to be manipulating his fellow citizens' apprehension about women swearing oaths amongst themselves in the *Lysistrata* 183–238 when the Greek wives swear an oath of chastity that solidifies their plot to take over the city and its men. The oath has similarities with the venerable oath of chastity sworn by the Gerarai, priestesses involved in the festival of the Anthesteria, but this fictionalized version emphasizes the guileful potential of women's solidarity.<sup>10</sup> Euripides tunes into

<sup>8</sup> An enigmatic fragment of Sophocles, "I write a woman's oaths in water" (fr. 811 Radt), has lost its context, although Catullus (poem 70) co-opted it for his elegiac purposes. But the sentiment resonates with the stereotype of women's trickery with regards to oaths, either taking them or soliciting them. Other examples from oratory contribute to the stereotype that a woman could manipulate the oath even when she was not the one who tendered it. In Demosthenes 39.3–4 (*Against Boeotus*) a litigant prosecuting a rival for his patrimony tells how his father tendered an oath from the mother of his spurious son. She swore to refuse an oath challenge in court, but in fact she accepted the challenge and testified that not only Boeotus had the same father as the litigant, but in fact so did her other son. The account of this double dealing comes of course from a hostile source, but nonetheless it attests to a popular assumption that women could manipulate oaths. Women were just as likely to be victims or pawns in the male dominated law courts, however. See Lin Foxhall's comments on how women themselves may have been the impetus behind some law suits, and how their testimony could be inserted in the form of oaths. Lin Foxhall, "The Law and the Lady: Women and Legal Proceedings in Classical Athens," in *Greek Law in Its Political Setting: Justifications Not Justice*, ed. L. Foxhall and A. D. E. Lewis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 134–52.

<sup>9</sup> Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazusae* 270, translation mine.

<sup>10</sup> The text of the oath is preserved in [Demosthenes] 59.73. See my discussion of the oath of the *Lysistrata* in "Sacrificial Bodies and the Body of the Text in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*," *Ramus: Critical Studies in Greek and Roman Literature* 28 (1999): 108–25.

precisely this concern, for none of his female-authored oaths would have much force if they were not sustained by the complicity of the female Chorus, whose vows of assistance contribute to the female protagonists' intrigues. It is thematically appropriate that these vows occur in the context of other oaths, although these promises of silence are also a convenient way of preventing decent Corinthian and Troezenian housewives from interfering in a murderous scheme, or in the case of Iphigenia's companions, of making them put the interests of the main characters ahead of their own.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally the Chorus could not intervene in the action, but it would be facile to write off their oaths as simply convenient excuses for their secrecy and dissimulation. There was always the option of sending the Chorus away—the Chorus of the *Helen*, for example, leaves the orchestra temporarily in the middle of the play—but Euripides chose instead to make them party to the scheme in his three oath-driven plays. It is significant that only female Choruses make such promises of assistance, and only to female characters, a phenomenon that enhances the agency of the female protagonists and contributes to the sense that women have a collective control of communication.<sup>12</sup>

### The *Medea*

The *Medea* articulates its dramatic action as a series of consequences initiated by Jason's oath, sworn and forsworn before the play opens, culminating in Medea's retributive murder of their children, committed apparently with impunity.<sup>13</sup> Zeus *Horkios* (Zeus in his capacity as oath god) is ultimately responsible for punishing Jason's perjury, but his power is evidently congruent with Medea's revenge, appropriately facilitated by the opportune arrival of Aegeus whose subsequent oath, precisely in the center of the play, guarantees Medea sanctuary in Athens. So striking is this apparent intervention of Zeus that the causative relationship between the two oaths sworn to Medea seems unequivocal. As we shall see, this link between the instigating speech act of a man, a violation of language performed prior to the drama, and the

<sup>11</sup> Mary DeForest, influenced by Winkler's hypothesis of the ephebic tragic Chorus, detects an allusion to the oaths sworn by ephebes: "The ephebic oath may account for the frequent oaths sworn by female Choruses to keep another woman's secret, a practice scorned as a blatant plot device" ("Female Choruses in Greek Tragedy," *Didaskalia* 4.1 [1997]. Rpt. at <http://didaskalia.berkeley.edu/issues/vol4no1/deForest.html>). Yet oaths sworn by individual characters also promise assistance: Aegeus vows to defend Medea against her enemies, and Pylades to deliver a letter to help Iphigenia escape. At any rate, Winkler's theory is highly speculative with the most persuasive evidence being the Pronomos Vase. John J. Winkler, "The Ephebes' Song: Tragoidia and Polis," in *Nothing To Do with Dionysos: Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 20–62.

<sup>12</sup> Montiglio notes that "only feminine Choruses offer their silence to help the accomplishment of a plan," while male Choruses (e.g. Sophocles *Ajax* 814, Euripides *Alcestis* 746) temporarily leave the stage. Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 252–53.

<sup>13</sup> According to David Kovacs, the oath of Aegeus allows Medea to act as the retributive agent for this perjury; she is, in the words of the Chorus (*Medea* 1260), one of the Erinyes, who seek vengeance against forsworn oaths (e.g. *Iliad* 19.259–60) ("Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*," *American Journal of Philology* 114 [1993]: 45–70). As Ruby Blondell notes it is not the role of the offended party to exact punishment for the perjury. See her remarks on the oath scene in Ruby Blondell, Mary-Kay Gamel, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, Bella Zweig, *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 160–62.

female-authored oath, which contributes to a discursive space controlled by women within the drama, is a textual strategy that the *Medea* shares with *Hippolytus* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*.<sup>14</sup> Medea's ability to dupe Aegeus into a blind oath, which compels him to contribute unwittingly to infanticide, is consistent with the rhetorical skill that she exercises throughout the drama. Creon, despite his misgivings, is lulled by her "soft words" which enable her to squeeze out one more day in Corinth<sup>15</sup>; she manages to persuade Jason to convince the princess to accept the children's gifts; she dispatches the Nurse to fetch Jason even though the old woman is fully aware that this will lead to the children's death; and she secures the Chorus's cooperative silence.<sup>16</sup> She can appeal to a shared bond of women's oppression one moment and negotiate like a man with other men the next, although her negotiations are laced with the seductive magic of *peitho dolia* or "tricky persuasion," a subversion of the masculine art of public rhetorical persuasion.<sup>17</sup> Medea uses this remarkable ability to co-opt a speech act used to create alliances between men within a civic context in order to dupe and bind her victims for her own personal vendetta.

To obtain Aegeus' oath Medea exploits her social position as a foreign woman without recourse, a manipulative technique that she had used earlier with Creon. The prelude to her oath is supplication: Medea touches Aegeus with her right hand, the same hand she uses in the oath, and ultimately the hand that kills her children.<sup>18</sup> The shift from supplication to oath ritual involves a mercurial transformation from abjection to control.<sup>19</sup> Medea tenders the oath, dictates its terms to Aegeus, and solicits the appropriate answers. Her wording is precise and detailed.

Medea: Swear by the great plain of Earth, and the Sun,  
 father of my father, joining all the gods together.  
 Aegeus: That I do or not do what, tell me.  
 Medea: That you will never cast me from your land  
 Nor release me to my enemies, as long as you live.

<sup>14</sup> In Jason's case it is not evident until after he commits perjury that his oath was indeed such a violation.

<sup>15</sup> Euripides *Medea* 316, translation mine based on J. Diggle, *Euripidis Fabulae*, v. 1, 2, 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981, 1984, 1994). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text. Medea obtains her request specifically by manipulating the ritual of supplication. See John Gould, "Hiketia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 93 (1973): 74–103, especially 85–86. Also R. G. A. Buxton who describes the act of supplication as "her ultimate persuasive resort" (*Persuasion in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Peitho* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 159).

<sup>16</sup> On Medea's ability to subvert and control a range of conventional discourses see: Deborah Boedeker, "Euripides' *Medea* and the Vanity of LOGOI," *Classical Philology* 86 (1991): 95–112.

<sup>17</sup> Buxton, *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy*, 153–70 uses the term *peitho dolia* to describe the persuasive force of female characters in tragedy who are obliged to use cunning because of their subordinate social status. He examines Medea's use of this technique in her dealings with Creon, Aegeus, and finally Jason.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. S. Flory, "Medea's Right Hand: Promises and Revenge," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 108 (1978): 69–74. Flory notes the hand motif in relation to Jason's oaths before the play to the murder of the children.

<sup>19</sup> Aegeus is "like a fish biting the hook," writes Emily A. McDermott, who contrasts this scene with the "gentlemen's agreement" between Oedipus and Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus* (649–51). Oedipus responds to Theseus' offer of protection in Athens by saying, "Nor would I secure your good faith by oaths as if you were a bad man." McDermott, *Euripides' Medea: The Incarnation of Disorder* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 103. Cf. Burnett, "'Medea' and the Tragedy of Revenge," 13.

Aegeus: I swear (*omnumi*) by Earth and the shining light of the Sun  
 To abide by what I hear from you.  
 Medea: That will do. What will you suffer if you don't keep your oath?  
 Aegeus: That which befalls impious mortals.

[744–55]

Medea has total command of the situation. The oath is like a dramatic script, and Medea a director coaching her actor. She dictates the names of the gods (including the Sun, Medea's grandfather), the terms of the agreement, and the imprecation. The liturgical quality of the stichomythia—its antiphonal question and response format—enhances the impression that Medea is controlling Aegeus' speech; of particular note is the powerful verb *omnumi*, "I swear," in the "performative present."<sup>20</sup> Every detail of the scene, including the self-curse upon which she insists, underscores Medea's control of the situation and harkens back to that unseen oath sworn by Jason to Medea. The interconnectedness of these oaths creates a plot woven between parallel speech acts, the second oath ensuring that the imprecation of the first will be enacted.

The Aegeus scene, then, recreates a situation in which Medea binds a man to her with an oath and provides her with the opportunity to punish another man for perjury. An Athenian audience, familiar with the mythic tradition in which Medea marries Aegeus and bears him a son in Athens, would be sensitive to the correspondence between the two oaths.<sup>21</sup> Yet these correspondences also illuminate an important distinction between Jason and Aegeus. Medea's new alliance is based on an elite system of reciprocity, which Jason failed to uphold.<sup>22</sup> In this new contract Medea will supply a remedy for Aegeus' sterility; in return the Athenian king will admit Medea to Athens. Aegeus' oath provides the means by which Jason will pay for his perjury, thus allowing Medea reciprocity of a different kind. It would be self evident to an Athenian audience that their ancestral king would keep his oath, and alarming that a barbarian woman would exploit his integrity. The remainder of the play illustrates the alternative: total devastation visited upon an oath breaker and his accomplices. As Anne Burnett argues, Creon and his daughter, who evidently disregard Jason's vows to

<sup>20</sup> Michael Lloyd uses this term specifically to designate the potent force of the present tense in tragic oaths ("The Tragic Aorist," *Classical Quarterly* 49 [1999]: 24–45). He uses Aegeus' oath as an example.

<sup>21</sup> See Pavlos Sfyroeras, "The Ironies of Salvation: The Aegeus Scene in Euripides' *Medea*," *The Classical Journal* 90.2 (1994): 125–42, especially 128–29 for evidence that this tradition was well established before the production of Euripides' play. Sfyroeras draws attention to 713 where Medea asks to be received at Aegeus' domestic hearth "like a bride integrated into the hearth of her new home." Margaret Williamson also sees the exchange between Aegeus and Medea as a marriage contract ("A Woman's Place in Euripides' *Medea*," in *Euripides, Women and Sexuality*, ed. Anton Powell [New York: Routledge, 1990], 16–31).

<sup>22</sup> J. Roger Dunkle remarks on the parallels between the oaths of Jason and Aegeus, focusing on the opportunism shown by all parties involved ("The Aegeus Episode and the Theme of Euripides' *Medea*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 100 [1969]: 97–107). He writes, "Medea and Aegeus need each other and use each other, Jason and Medea do likewise" (100). Melissa Mueller, examines the relationship more objectively based on a model of the social dynamics of reciprocity. She views their oath as a version of an aristocratic oath of friendship ("The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*," *American Journal of Philology* 122 [2001]: 434–98, especially 487, n. 54). On Medea's manipulation of the essentially honorable Aegeus see Elizabeth Bryson Bongie, "Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 107 (1977): 27–56, especially 49.

Medea, are also implicated in his perjury and are caught as firmly as he is in the net of vengeance.<sup>23</sup>

Other than Aegeus, respect for vows and disapproval of perjury are pronounced only by Medea and her female companions, the Nurse and the Chorus. The Chorus are distinctly appalled at Jason's perjury, which they universalize to include the perfidy of all men. The first stasimon (409–45), sung immediately before the first entrance of Jason, begins with the observation that "justice [*dika*] is completely overturned" and that a "pledge in the name of the gods is no longer secure"; the ode concludes with the reflection that "the gracious reciprocity (*charis*) of oaths has gone." The Chorus challenge the male authored literary tradition of women's faithlessness, for it is obviously men who do not keep their oaths; the Corinthian women predict a new song to supplant this tradition. Uncertainty about earlier versions of the death of Medea's children prevents us from reading this promised palinode as Euripides' new version of the infanticide, as some scholars have tried to argue.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the remainder of the tragedy seems to conform to the misogynistic tradition that the Chorus decry. Indeed they evoke this tradition themselves in the fifth stasimon when they compare Medea's crime to that of the mythical Ino (1284–85). Yet the first stasimon does hold true for a play which illustrates all too cogently that women are not faithless, that they in fact keep their word. The Chorus themselves provide the fulfillment of their own prediction. In the preceding scene Medea had requested their silence: "I hope I can obtain this much from you, that you keep quiet [*sigān*], / if I find some way of making my husband pay for these wrongs" (259–63). The Chorus leader had agreed to the request, and vowed: "I will do this [*draso*], for it is just that you make your husband pay, Medea" (267–68).

To criticize the Chorus's vow of silence for its notional artificiality is to miss its perfect relevance, not only in a sequence of commissive speech acts, but also as an argument against charges of "faithlessness." The Chorus, like Aegeus, has entered into an agreement with Medea who persuades them, wins their trust, and binds them so artfully that they are spellbound in the face of the catastrophe when it happens.<sup>25</sup> The Corinthian women do not approve of Medea's infanticide but can say nothing to stop her. Upon hearing her appalling plan they protest, "I forbid you to do this" (813), but their attempt at performative speech misfires. "It will not be otherwise" (814), responds Medea, who has a singular power to create action with words. The Chorus had only to say, "I will do so" (*drasō*), to submit to her binding power. As promised, this story, set in motion by a woman's control of language, demonstrates that women

<sup>23</sup> "It was not the negative act of adultery that violated Jason's oaths, it was his positive substitution of a new pact for the old. . . ." Burnett draws attention to Aegeus' astonishment "that anyone could have offered a new alignment, as Creon had, to a man already solemnly bound" ("Medea' and the Tragedy of Revenge," 14–15).

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston reviews the evidence and theories and argues that the tradition of Medea the child killer was a well established Corinthian tradition that evolved from a cult of Hera Akraia ("Corinthian Medea and the Cult of Hera Akraia," in James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston ed., *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 44–70).

<sup>25</sup> This promise is exacted during Medea's first interaction with the Chorus, even before she has formulated a plan, showing "exceptional foresight and rational calculation" (Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 254–55).

honor their pledges. Medea too proves the Chorus right, for after the first stasimon she makes a vow to herself, "by Hecate who dwells in the innermost corner of my hearth," to make Jason's marriage "bitter and painful" (395–99). As we have it, the tragedy is the fulfillment of her oath.

### *Hippolytus*

The plot of the *Hippolytus* is constructed as an interlocking series of speech acts in which language is entangled with female sexuality and desire. The corresponding thematic dyad of silence and chastity, far from unsnarling this imbroglio, lies at its very core. Issues of speech and silence have dominated scholarship on the *Hippolytus* since Bernard Knox's seminal discussion over fifty years ago, and extend to contemporary psychoanalytic and feminist linguistic readings,<sup>26</sup> yet there is still more to be said, as a structural and thematic comparison with the *Medea* reveals. The pattern is familiar: once again the dramatic action issues from a preliminary illocution occurring before the play begins.<sup>27</sup> Another vindictive and powerful female, Aphrodite has taken offense at a man's verbal transgression.<sup>28</sup> Just as Medea's outrage at Jason's perjury was highlighted in the prologue (20–22), so is Aphrodite's indignation at Hippolytus' blasphemy set out in the first lines of the play: "He says that I am the vilest of the gods," she complains.<sup>29</sup> Not long after this, Hippolytus performs his insults by sneering at the goddess in front of the old man, a foolish abuse of language (*mataia badzei*, 119) that emphasizes how perfectly suited the means of her revenge will be to his offense.<sup>30</sup>

Aphrodite creates a linguistic sequence, which begins when the Nurse utters the name of "Hippolytus" to Phaedra, and thus sets in motion a series of speech acts,

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Knox in "The *Hippolytus* of Euripides" (*Yale Classical Studies* 13 [1952]: 3–31) notes that all characters, including the Chorus, must make a decision to speak or be silent, a decision that becomes a metaphor for free will. Cf. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz: "Although [Phaedra] had vowed silence, the play depicts her move into language, first with unwilling speech, then with mediated speech, then with writing" ("Female Speech and Female Sexuality: Euripides' *Hippolytus* as Model," *Helios* 13 [1986]: 127–40, especially 131). Also see Barbara Goff, *The Noose of Words: Readings of Desire, Violence and Language in Euripides' Hippolytus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Hanna M. Roisman, *Nothing Is As It Seems: The Tragedy of the Implicit in Euripides' Hippolytus* (Lanham, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999), 75–107.

<sup>27</sup> Goff remarks "Phaedra's *logos* (336) is one that 'goes forward' (*prosbetai*, 342) and overtakes all the characters, wrecking their attempts to contain it in silence and *sophrosune* as it proliferates in ever more powerful and uncontrollable versions of itself" (*The Noose of Words*, 13).

<sup>28</sup> See Bernard Knox, *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 295–322. The intensity of Medea's anger and her ability to escape the scene of her crime with impunity suggest to Knox that she has affinities with Aphrodite and other vengeful deities in Euripides.

<sup>29</sup> Euripides *Hippolytus* 13, translation mine. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>30</sup> See Anne N. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). The "tactlessness" which Michelini attributes to Hippolytus in his response to Theseus is another example of this lack of restraint: "Hippolytos depreciates monarchy to a monarch and the charms of Phaedra to her widower. The warning of the servant in the prologue is confirmed, and we can see that Hippolytos' alienation from Aphrodite derives from the same trait of awkward honesty, or arrogance. He is unable to pay the lip service that piety or tact demands" (295).

which climaxes with the curse of Theseus, what Charles Segal describes as a “magical speech that ‘sends forth’ [1324] a destructive supernatural power.”<sup>31</sup> The Nurse as Aphrodite’s agent is able, like Medea, to exploit the seductive charms of language with her ambiguous suggestion to Phaedra of a charm for her lovesickness (*philtrā*. . . . *thelkterīa erotos*, 509).<sup>32</sup> The Nurse’s attempted remedy is nothing more or less than a revelation of the facts to Hippolytus, but she has the power and the perspicacity to extract a blind oath from him first. This oath of silence, which reflects “the condition of physical restraint imposed by the denial of eros,”<sup>33</sup> secures Hippolytus’ predetermined doom. The oath, its performance unseen by the audience as its consequences are unseen by Hippolytus, fulfills the same function in the sequence of speech acts as the blind oath of Aegeus to Medea. And while the oath taker in this case is the one and the same as the victim of the oath’s power, the pivotal position of the oath in the plot and its manipulation by a female character correspond with the pattern that we observed in the *Medea*.

The oath evidently also served a function in the first *Hippolytus*, but the play instead featured Phaedra herself supplicating and tendering the oath from Hippolytus in front of the audience.<sup>34</sup> By letting a woman of servile status gain power over a king’s son, Euripides’ second version reworks the supplication/oath combination with even more emphasis on the oath’s ability to skew the patriarchal power structure. The oath is sworn inside the house, out of sight of the audience, but the threat of perjury is performed outside—“my tongue swore, but my mind remains unsworn” (612)—integrating perfectly with the illocutionary sequence that fulfills Aphrodite’s plan. Hippolytus keeps his vow, it turns out, but his menacing words also have a performative force. A Herodotean anecdote is illuminating here: A Spartan man, Glaucus, consulted the Delphic oracle regarding an oath he had given to a Milesian visitor who had entrusted some silver to Glaucus. He confided to the Pythia that he was contemplating perjury but took her advice to honor his word. Nonetheless he was punished with the extirpation of his family, simply for verbalizing a suggestion of perjury.<sup>35</sup> Viewed in this context it becomes apparent that Hippolytus’ fate is overdetermined by his recurrent verbal incontinence. If even a hint of perjury is enough to offend the oath god, then Hippolytus would be at risk. But the deck is already stacked against him. He seals his own fate by activating the punishment for his blasphemy and provoking the measures that Phaedra feels she must now take.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Charles Segal, “Signs, Magic and Letters in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*,” in *Innovations of Antiquity*, ed. R. Hexter and D. Seldon (London: Routledge, 1992), 420–56, especially 437.

<sup>32</sup> See Barrett’s detailed commentary on the ambiguity of the Nurse’s recourse to charms and potions. W. S. Barrett, *Euripides Hippolytos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 248–56. On the magical qualities of the Nurse’s speech see: Segal, “Signs, Magic,” 420–56, n. 56; McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 138–41.

<sup>33</sup> Froma Zeitlin, “The Power of Aphrodite,” in *Playing the Other* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 260.

<sup>34</sup> Fr. 435: Phaedra apparently agrees to release a man (as the masculine participle *lutheis* indicates) from her supplicatory clasp.

<sup>35</sup> Herodotus *The Histories* 6.86.

<sup>36</sup> Euripides was called to book for this line on several occasions suggesting that the threat made ancient audiences somewhat nervous. Aristotle recounts how a litigant in an antidosis trial used the line as an attack against Euripides’ character (*Rhetoric* 1416a). Artemis commends Hippolytus for keeping his oath in the end (*Hippolytus* 1308–9), although it is self-evident that his threat of perjury

The staging of this scene between Hippolytus and the Nurse is controversial: does he see Phaedra; does she hear the remainder of his conversation with the Nurse?<sup>37</sup> It is obvious, however, that his threat has a performative force and perlocutionary consequences.<sup>38</sup> As the logic of Aphrodite's revenge unfolds, words interlace to create an unavoidable outcome. By intimating that he will not keep his oath of silence, Hippolytus provokes another speech act. Stung by Hippolytus' threats and insults, as Aphrodite was stung by his blasphemy, Phaedra tenders an oath from the Chorus that they "veil in silence what . . . [they] have heard [t]here." The Chorus oblige, using the powerful verb *omnumi*: "I swear by sacred Artemis, daughter of Zeus, never to reveal your ills / to the light" (713–14).

The Chorus's oath of silence is thematically appropriate in a play about the distortion of communication. There are similarities with the *Medea*. In addition to complementing the destructive force of an oath sworn by a man to a woman, the collusion of the Chorus allows a woman to destroy a patrilineal bond. In both plays men lose their sons because a community of women keep secrets. Actually the Troezenian Chorus does more than this; it lies to Theseus, by feigning ignorance of the cause of the catastrophe, as he stands before the door of a house.<sup>39</sup> The Chorus's oath combines with Hippolytus' oath, as that other choral promise combined with Aegeus' oath, to grant an authorial power to Phaedra. Like Medea she gains control of the script, and her letter catapults her words into a more public space where they provoke a king to utter a curse and a proclamation of exile.<sup>40</sup> And like Medea, Phaedra uses the voice of one man to punish another man—a particularly deadly form of ventriloquism.

The letter illustrates how a written text can have a performative force, and its affinity with the previous speech acts is highlighted by Theseus: "It cries aloud, the

contributed to his destruction. Scholars are unanimous in their sympathy for the disparity between Hippolytus' crime and punishment. See for example Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> Although W. D. Smith argues that Phaedra leaves the acting space during Hippolytus' invective ("Staging in the Central Scene of the *Hippolytus*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 91 [1960]: 162–77), the text gives no indication of her departure and re-entry. Roisman (*Nothing Is As It Seems*, 99) suggests that Hippolytus is aware of Phaedra's presence but chooses to ignore her. His promise to remain silent but vigilant (*Hippolytus* 659–62) is too ambiguous for her to regain confidence. Indeed Hippolytus has already compromised his vow of secrecy by speaking openly about the proposition in the presence of the Chorus, a detail which Barrett dismisses as a necessary convention (*Hippolytos* 274).

<sup>38</sup> Austin in *How To Do Things with Words* (9–10) cites line 612 as an example of an infelicitous performative, that the oath has misfired, but the line actually exemplifies his ultimate conclusion that the strict division between constatives and performatives can be blurred. Here an untrue statement acquires an illocutionary force.

<sup>39</sup> "I only know this much, having just come to the house to mourn / your misfortunes" (*Hippolytus* 804–5). The Chorus, despite their loyalty to Phaedra, are horrified at the fate of Hippolytus and do their best to support his attempts to acquit himself. Their presence throughout the remainder of the play serves as a reminder of the disastrous consequences arising from women's control of communication. Barbara Goff, *The Noose of Words: Readings of Desire, Violence and Language in Euripides' Hippolytus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Ultimately women's voices become neutralized, and as Nancy Rabinowitz observes, Artemis' statement that virgin Choruses will worship Hippolytus "reaffirms the cultural practice of making invisible women's connections to other women" ("Female Speech and Female Sexuality," 136).

<sup>40</sup> See McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman*, 125 for a discussion on the Nurse's role as an intermediary between male and female realms, and 157 on how women's speech breaches "discursive boundaries."

tablet cries out woeful tidings . . . it calls out a song / with its letters" (877–80). For all his protests Hippolytus is unable to say anything more authoritative than this written text. Theseus will not wait for oracles; Hippolytus' elegantly structured defense speech has no force, his oath of denial toothless. Accordingly critical consensus has the letter exemplifying a system of communication that privileges writing over speech.<sup>41</sup> Admittedly the written word of Phaedra has more authority for Theseus than his son's speech at this point. Yet the competing discourses of the play are not simply the written and the spoken but more specifically the feminine and the masculine. Because of the power of Aphrodite, Phaedra and her collaborators have control over all forms of discourse, not exclusively the written, which functions as another link in a continuous chain of communication. The letter exists as a document of authority because women have control of language, because a man swore an oath to a woman and the Chorus swore solidarity to a woman's cause.

In this play where every illocution generates another speech act, the letter of Phaedra functions as an utterance, begotten by a previous violence of language and itself a parent of the curse. The connection between letter and speech in this case also has self-reflexive implications regarding the production of tragedy. Noting that Euripides' letters facilitate tragic reversals often in shocking and unexpected ways, Patricia Rosenmeyer suggests:

The letter itself may be understood as a miniature script within the larger context of the memorized lines of the whole tragedy; when brought on stage it is as if the actor were coming forth with a newly written scene from the author, a fresh angle on a familiar story.<sup>42</sup>

Rosenmeyer is among the majority of scholars who distinguish between writing and speaking in the *Hippolytus*, but as her words here suggest, the letter is implicative of a dramatic script, one of the most obvious examples of the illocutionary force of a written text.<sup>43</sup> Phaedra's letter thus concretizes the idea of a woman authored text, an idea that was suggested by the Chorus of the *Medea*, whose promise of a women's palinode functioned as a commentary on Medea's authorial control.

Hippolytus, on the other hand, has no such authority. He is compelled, like a woman, to exhibit his virtue by keeping silent. Yet he dies as the result of his father's curse. In the presence of his father, in the world of men, his words are patently ineffectual. The young man who had threatened to commit perjury now resorts to a judicial practice of offering an oath as evidence:

By Zeus, the god of oaths, and the wide expanse of earth,  
I swear (*ommumi*) to you that I did not touch your wife,  
nor did I want to or even consider it.

[1025–27]

<sup>41</sup> McClure, *ibid.*, 142–45 discusses the letter as part of a visual rather than aural register, a point developed quite nicely by Patricia Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 92.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 94.

<sup>43</sup> "In practical criticism with a speech act orientation, pride of place is held by drama. A theatrical spectator's experience begins and ends with observation of words doing things; dramatic force and illocutionary force are one whenever a play is performed." Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 86.

Yet Hippolytus' oath to his father misfires—Theseus refuses to accept his pledge that he did not violate Phaedra, although the curse proffered as a guarantee is more felicitous, or to be more specific, it echoes Theseus' imprecation of his son.<sup>44</sup> Hippolytus calls forth total annihilation upon himself, if he violated Phaedra:

may I perish utterly without honour, name,  
 a city or a home, a wandering exile,  
 may neither the sea nor the earth receive me,  
 a lifeless corpse, if I am a base man.

[1028–31]

Otherwise the oath sworn in secret to a slave woman, the Nurse, has more force and authority than the oath sworn in the open by a son to his father. One oath creates the linguistic lack in which the letter can be heard and believed, and the letter thus gains the authority to deflect the second oath. There is a tragic irony in Hippolytus' pious silence; the young man did things with words, and he insulted a goddess and the woman who would enact that goddess's vengeance. Now he finds himself unable to make words work for him, and he is instead bound by an oath that prevents him from exonerating himself. Even if he were to commit perjury and reveal the truth about Phaedra, he would not be saved, for nothing he can say has more potency than her dead body, the most powerful text of the drama.

### *Iphigenia in Tauris*

I have argued that the *Hippolytus* moves through a sequence of performative language that integrates oaths and writing, a contention that challenges the distinction between two apparently disparate forms of communication. These considerations are relevant to the *Iphigenia in Tauris* where the combination of letter and oath is especially potent; the letter embedded in an oath functions as a plot device accomplishing both the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis*. Like the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus* the *IT* is a series of linked speech acts beginning before the play opens. In this case the instigating speech event is Agamemnon's vow to Artemis to sacrifice the finest produce of the year, which Iphigenia presents as the cause of her present bind.<sup>45</sup> Although Clytemnestra has enacted her vengeance for the loss of her daughter, Agamemnon's spoken words condemned Iphigenia to a fate that she can only unravel by other words. The important oath scene at the center of the play, far from being a gratuitous flourish on a conventional recognition scene, responds to and undoes the earlier vow of Agamemnon, specifically by causing the name of Orestes to be spoken. The element of choral collusion, which was required in the other two plays featuring women's oaths, is repeated here.

The pattern is familiar: a sequence of potent illocutions leads to the reversal. But the *IT* belongs to that category of tragedies in which the reversal is rehabilitative rather than catastrophic.<sup>46</sup> The oath achieves a *luisis*, or "release," rather than a *desis*, or

<sup>44</sup> Segal notes the effectiveness of this self curse, which derives from its coordination with the imprecation of Theseus and emphasizes the profound disparity between Hippolytus' guilt and punishment ("Curse and Oath in Euripides' *Hippolytus*," *Ramus* 1 [1972]: 165–80, especially 169–70).

<sup>45</sup> Euripides *Iphigenia in Tauris* 21. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text and translation will be mine.

<sup>46</sup> On the tragic elements and structure see M. J. Cropp, *Euripides' Iphigenia in Tauris* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 2000), 33–36.

binding. Family ties are restored, and relationships between men and women are wholesome and even to an extent egalitarian. The action occurs far from any Greek polis where inequities of gender are instrumental to the maintenance of the state. There is no vindictive woman plotting to destroy an *oikos*, or misogynistic male inciting her to do so. Yet, the play is structured upon the same framework as the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus*, although it lacks the motivating force of sexual rejection. Instead, the central female character is a virgin, whose primary allegiance would be to her natal family and whose machinations support its patrilineal succession.<sup>47</sup>

Iphigenia's deployment of the oath revisits issues of speech and gender raised in the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus*. Like Medea, who is also stranded in a foreign country, she tenders an oath from a male visitor, Pylades, who is to assist in her escape from a difficult situation, just as Aegeus is to assist in Medea's escape. Iphigenia will exempt Pylades from sacrifice if he swears to carry a letter dictated to a former sacrificial victim by Iphigenia: "Give me an oath that you will take this letter to Argos to the friends / to whom I send it" (736–37). The formal structure of this oath, with its liturgical *stichomythia* specifying guarantor gods and execration, has much in common with the oath of Aegeus. But the oath tendered by Iphigenia involves neither hidden agenda nor conscious duplicity. The provocative spectacle of a woman tendering an oath from a man is mitigated by having Iphigenia swear a reciprocal oath to Pylades at the request of Orestes. Her oath, that she will grant Pylades safe passage, is as she herself points out, redundant: how else could he deliver the letter? (740). Why then does Euripides feature a bipartite oath here? If an oath gives one person power over another, then Iphigenia's oath to Pylades balances whatever authority she has over him. As the priestess officiating over a cult of human sacrifice, Iphigenia has until now been the one in control; Orestes' insistence that she swear a corresponding oath dilutes her apparent authority; he becomes the mediator of the two oaths, taking control of the situation. And once the oath has been fulfilled he will be revealed as Iphigenia's brother and legal guardian.

The oath and letter combination recalls the *Hippolytus*, yet Iphigenia is guilty of no deceit here. The trickery is all Euripides', and Euripides uses the oath once again to lead to the *peripeteia*, which develops from the oath/letter. As Burnett puts it, "It is speech that must be obtained, if this scene is to succeed."<sup>48</sup> When Iphigenia decides to recite the contents of the letter to Pylades, the scene becomes a miniature version of a theatrical production in which a dramatic script is performed. That the scribe subsequently died contributes to the sense that the words of the letter have been dormant and impotent in their unspoken textual form. The letter holds within its folds the name of Orestes, doubly suppressed, it seems, since he was reluctant to reveal it himself. By asking Pylades to memorize the contents of the letter, Iphigenia believes: "if this letter disappears at sea, you will save its words [*logous*] / by saving your body [*soma*]" (764–65). Her words completely invert the operation of dictating the letter to her doomed scribe. Initially the man dies, having turned speech into text, so that only the letter survives; now it seems the letter will dissolve, and the man will live having made the letter part of his own body.

<sup>47</sup> On the unique ethical position of the tragic virgin see Helene P. Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 123–25.

<sup>48</sup> Anne Pippin Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 53.

The detail of the sacrificial victim who served as Iphigenia's amanuensis foregrounds two important concepts. First it seems that Iphigenia does not know how to read and write herself, a detail that attenuates our impression of her agency. Second, by speaking the contents of the letter aloud, Iphigenia makes them happen. She brings the text to life as an actor would bring a script to life; she does things with words. The words that she speaks are her own, but not written by her, a paradox that calls into question her agency and authorship. And yet there is another paradox. Letters have the uncanny ability to make an absent speaker present (especially if that letter has been vocalized by being dictated to someone else), but ironically the author of this particular letter is not absent. It is the addressee of the letter whose presence is manifested by its recitation. Iphigenia has only to say the name of Orestes, and he stands before her. And so the woman, whose living death was accomplished by the words of her father, undoes the spell by speaking out the name of her brother.

As I have noted, her letter allowed Phaedra, in her absence and death, to insert her voice into the silent void created by the oaths of Hippolytus and the Chorus. Likewise the oath of the *IT* creates a linguistic space that the letter can occupy, but oath and letter produce a synergy altogether different from the competing discourses that run through the *Hippolytus*. The movement is toward revelation and disclosure rather than concealment and secrecy. The felicitous combination of letter and oath, instead of severing a son from his father, reinstates a son to his patrimony. The connections between letters, which have the authority to direct a play, and the programmatic oath are especially meaningful in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Iphigenia's letter possesses an authority equal to that of Phaedra's letter but with none of the pernicious effects. The oath creates a context for the letter's articulation, and the letter brings about the rapid fulfillment of the oath. It is important to note that the oaths of Iphigenia and Pylades are fulfilled, although not in the way that either of them would have expected. Pylades is able to deliver the letter to Orestes and specifically remarks that he is fulfilling the oath:

You bound me with oaths easy to fulfill  
And swore fine oaths yourself. It will not  
take long to accomplish the oath I swore,  
Look, I am carrying the letter and delivering it  
to you, Orestes, from your sister here.

[788–92]

True to her word Iphigenia grants him safe passage—along with herself and her brother—from Tauris, thus fulfilling her part of the bargain. The dramatic plot thus unfolds into the intrigue, escape, and adventure of the remainder of the play.

The final element in this sequence, as in the other two plays, is the complicity of the Chorus, also secured by an oath. Again a different set of dynamics gives a different implication to this choral oath, although we see the same fundamental structure as before. Like the Choruses of Corinthian and Troezenian women Iphigenia's companions swear an oath of silence (1075–77), but this female conspiracy is authorized by Orestes, whose concern about the Chorus's loyalty motivates Iphigenia to tender its oath.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the promises of silence given by the Choruses of the *Medea* and the

<sup>49</sup> Montiglio in *Silence in the Land of Logos* comments on the specific appeal to shared gender in both Iphigenia's request to the Chorus and Medea's appeal to the Corinthian women for silence (253–54). It

*Hippolytus* in the private, moments that belong exclusively to the women in the tragedies, the companions of Iphigenia give a promise in the presence of Orestes. Their pledge (*Isto megas Zeus*, 1077) supplements the consequence of the central oath, as did the pledge of the Troezenian women, although there are other factors to consider. Thoas is a barbarian, and the Chorus has an allegiance to their compatriots; the women's confederacy aids the restoration of an Argive son to his patrimony; their intrigue does not serve a subversive woman seeking to undermine the continuance of a family. Quite the opposite, in fact, for the women endanger no one but themselves, and as their escape ode after their oath suggests, they expect their exile in Tauris to be permanent (1089–152) despite Iphigenia's promise to rescue them. The oath is necessary if the central characters are to escape, and the Chorus heroically helps to deceive Thoas, even though he threatens them (1431–33), because it has sworn an oath.

It is interesting how the spatial configuration of the Chorus's deception recalls the *Hippolytus*. A female Chorus, bound to conspiratorial silence by an oath, deceives a male character at the door of the skene.<sup>50</sup> Iphigenia's companions lie to the messenger about the whereabouts of Thoas, as the Troezenian women lied to Theseus regarding the events within the household. Yet this choral deception, which is a corollary to the central oath scene, has nothing but beneficial consequences. Ultimately the exiled women are rewarded for keeping their oath by the intervention of Athena who grants them escape from Tauris for keeping their word (*gnômês dikaias*, 1467–69).<sup>51</sup>

The *Iphigenia in Tauris* reconfigures the conventions of the oath-driven plots of the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus*, and therefore isolates the elements that lead to catastrophe. Women get men to swear oaths in order to gain power over them and consequently achieve control of all channels and instruments of civic discourse. Their supremacy over communication is so catastrophic that it seems to interfere with the most elemental manifestation of a man's potency, his ability to preserve his sons. It is abundantly clear that when a powerful linguistic instrument, the oath, is exploited by an otherwise disempowered social group, it becomes an effective means of sabotaging the fundamental elements of a male hegemony. However the *IT* shows a more wholesome concourse between men and women, a balance of power epitomized by the matching oaths. As we have noted, the virginity of Iphigenia reduces whatever danger her gender may pose, and her innate female guile becomes a means of protecting her family's future. Furthermore the location of the oath, in the sanctified area of Artemis' temple away from the polis, contributes to the salutary program of the drama.

is interesting that the Chorus of the *Helen* do not swear a similar oath in a similar circumstance and yet perform the same function of duping Theoklymenos. Helen tells them *sigateon*, there must be silence; they never respond explicitly to this request but simply do what is necessary.

<sup>50</sup> A door scene in which the Chorus advance the deceit is common in intrigue plots in addition to the *Hippolytus* and *IT*. Although Electra has not sworn the Chorus to secrecy in Euripides' *Electra*, they welcome Clytemnestra into the house where she will be murdered (*Electra* 987); similarly the Chorus of women in *Iphigenia at Aulis* welcome Iphigenia and Clytemnestra at the entrance to Agamemnon's tent. They are in fact sympathetic to Iphigenia, but obey Agamemnon's demand for their silence (*IA* 542). The prototype for the Chorus's deception at the door is *Choephoroi* 838, where the Chorus of slave women, who are loyal to Orestes, deceives Aegisthus.

<sup>51</sup> Cropp, *Iphigenia*, 264 compares this with the commendation of the daughters of Erectheus whom Athena honors for keeping their oath (F370.68–69). In this positive representation of women's oaths it is again germane that the Erectheids are virgins.

The oaths of Iphigenia and Pylades seem to cite and correct oaths sworn in the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus*; additionally we might think of the oath of Jason sworn to Medea in Colchis, which also resulted in an escape by ship to Greece. The oath scene of the *IT* is part of a comprehensive intertextual program that includes a paratragic structure based on Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy.<sup>52</sup> These allusions to other texts resonate in interesting ways with the ambiguity attached to Iphigenia's role as an authorial figure; they invite us to see the play from a distance and to place Iphigenia within a fictive tradition in which she is herself only a character in a play speaking words and performing actions that are not entirely her own. In turn we become aware that every oath, whether it is sworn onstage or in a real life situation, is part of a complex intertextual tissue that cites a powerful and ubiquitous social practice which is really an authorless speech act whose authority no one can really claim for her own.

<sup>52</sup> See R. Caldwell, "Tragedy Romanticized: The *Iphigenia Taurica*," *Classical Journal* 70 (1974-1975): 23-40 for a discussion of the echoes of the trilogy.