Metre

by Anthony Bowen

Like all Greek plays, Medea has portions for speaking, for chanting and for singing. The prologue is spoken in iambic trimeters, lines of 12 syllables whose obvious counterpart in English is our blank verse of ten or eleven syllables. The bulk of the play is written in these trimeters; it is the normal metre for all solo actors in any play.

At the end of the prologue a cry is heard within, and Medea starts chanting in anapaests. Anapaests are commonly used for the entry of the Chorus; they are a marching rhythm: 'What a cry, what a cry, what a heart-felt cry!' the Chorus might have said1 if they had come on, but Euripides is playing a game with our expectations, and often did at this point. Medea is flat on her back inside, the Nurse outside is not marching anywhere, and when the Chorus do appear they switch promptly into lyrics. Anapaests recur only at the exits of Creon and Aegeus, briefly, and for the last 25 lines – apart from a unique and peculiar sequence at 1081 after Medea's most famous soliloquy.

Lyrics, often very various in rhythm, are entirely confined in Medea to the Chorus. After their entry song (called the parodos), they make five further contributions, called stasima, in lyric metres. Text, alas, is all that survives of what was dance and song, but in the text are the rhythms. The stasima of Medea are rhythmically remarkable. The first four all begin very similarly, as though the plot's increasing divergence from decency is set against a norm in the music. All the five stasima have two pairs of verses; each first pair in the first four stasima are built almost entirely from two rhythmic motifs, one of seven syllables and one of three, usually linked by another syllable: very roughly, 'Oh what a cry, what a cry' plus 'Oh the cry' plus… etc. ad lib.

The fifth stasimon is wholly different. In its third verse are incorporated the cries in iambics of Medea's two sons as she kills them; in the fourth, answering verse, their voices are silent, and the Chorus deliver the vacant trimeters. All the rest of the stasimon is in dochmiacs, a rhythm probably invented by the tragedians to mark extreme emotion. The Chorus' part in Medea thus comes to a spectacular musical climax.

Vocabulary

by Anthony Bowen

As a painter squeezes out the colours he wants for this picture or that, so Euripides chose his words for Medea. Close study of his vocabulary reveals several surprises, not only for the frequency or focus of some words, but also for the absence of others which might have been expected. There are themes which he does not develop, as well as those he does.

Words for father and child are especially prominent, of course; the fate of Creon and his daughter gives them an extra prominence. Παῖς and τέκνον between them are used nearly one line in ten1. Mother, by contrast, is only half as frequent as father: by the time Jason can chide Medea for bad mothering, the play is nearly over. Unsurprisingly frequent are words for exile and getting away; more interesting is the contrast between home and πόλις, between Greek and non-Greek (or barbarian). Jason makes the basic point that Medea has forfeited her home and that she has no πόλις, not being Greek, but he does not press the point. She does talk of home, however, and δόμος, δῶμα and οἶκος are used nearly 70 times. Γῆ, γαῖα and χθών also occur nearly 70 times. Thus Euripides diverts the focus to words which will least spoil her case. He is similarly silent about Jason's actual offence. Oath is used six times, first by the Nurse and then three times by the Chorus; when Medea at last uses it herself (492), it is in a phrase of unspecific complaint. You could ask what the oath was, and what its circumstances, but Euripides lets neither of them say. Right at the end, however (1392), Medea returns to the charge, still vague but magnificently crushing. Words for oath, pledge and swear belong mostly in the Aegeus scene.

What Medea charges Jason with, overwhelmingly, is being κακός. The word, as noun or adjective, occurs over 50 times and 19 times as adverb, which easily outstrips any other adverb of an adjective (καλῶς and εὖ occur 13 and 10 times respectively, 15 times on Medea's lips, all but once with deliberate irony, and 6 times on Jason's lips, usually with ignorant irony: the slant here is remarkable). How does the hero prove he is not a coward? Apparently by yielding to her. Jason's dilemma is perfectly put in Euripides' choice of words.

[1] My wordcounts, unchecked, were done using James Diggle's Oxford Classical Text, omitting all lines in square brackets.