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Betraying the Bond of Philia

**The Causes of Conflict,
Destruction and Self-Destruction
in the Plays of Euripides**

The ancient Athenian tragedians stand at a specific point between our age and the unfathomable dark matter of humanity's first efforts to create viable institutions and social bonds aimed at keeping balance in society. Several of Euripides' extant plays deal with the betrayal of *philia* – which, in his time, was the bond between people which kept them in a balance of expectations. As Medea proclaims, the husband and wife in a marriage may not have equal rights and duties, but the bond between them is such that each knows what to expect of the other. When this bond is violated, when expectations are thwarted, one party is cast adrift, losing the protection and honor that came with the bond. In Euripides' world, the victim turns avenger and destroys the violator of the bond.

This paper focuses on *Medea*, whose protagonist responds to her husband's betrayal by murdering their children; on *Hippolytos*, in which, through her suicide, Phaedra destroys the object of her unrequited love; on *Alcestis*, in which a wife gives in to her husband's pleas to die in his place, and, in her sacrifice, he loses all that was of value to him; on *Hecuba*, in which the defeated queen of Troy destroys the murderer of her youngest son, metamorphosing into an avenging bitch to do so. Through these plays and the thinking of the time, we examine a bond that maintains a balance in human relations – and the destructive forces unleashed by frustration and defeat.

Introduction: Democracy and its friends

For the ancient Greek tragic poets, the concept of friendship and kinship – *philia* – plays a key role, both in determining plot structure and in shaping their protagonists' characters and actions. As Aristotle notes in his *Poetics*, it is good for a play to focus on trouble within a *philia* relationship, as, for example, "when brother kills or is about to kill brother, or does something of this kind, or when son does this to father, or mother to son, or son to mother, these things are to be sought."¹ In this paper I will argue that in a number of Euripides' early plays, *philia* is not only the relationship which makes violations against it all the more dramatic – or tragic – for the audience, but also a primary force of social cohesion: when *philia* among individuals is violated, it leads to conflict, de-

struction and self-destruction; when it is affirmed, it heals wounds and leads to restoration of order. *Philia* (like *xenia*, which covers relations with foreign friends or guests) is a social convention but also represents the sense of closeness and belonging engendered among those bound by it. Violation of *philia* leads to the breakdown of the relationship and, when one partner is dependent on the other, the destruction of the betrayed party. Now facing destruction, the betrayed party can either accept what has happened or decide to destroy the traitor. Without the institutions of modern states the world of the tragedians – both the mythical one in which most of the extant plays take place and that of the Athens in which they were written – placed great store in reciprocal relationships between individuals as a way of achieving social cohesion: people who were cast out of this relationship faced the uncertainty and terror of exile or death. A breakdown of *philia* and *xenia*, in other words, jeopardized the very existence of the betrayed party. This frustration of expectations prompts the rage, the self-sacrifice and the destruction that we see in so many of the tragedies that have survived.²

The tragedies of ancient Athens are products of their time but they stand for all time. They reflect the debates of fifth century B.C. Athens but, as thinkers have done since, the playwrights mined the even more ancient archives of myth and legend for themes and characters in their search for answers to eternal questions. The tragedies are explorations of the pity and terror of human existence, of the potential for error and disaster, and of the forces that shape individuals within their society and the role that individuals play in shaping their own lives and the lives of those around them. They examine human nature and motives within the context of conflict – either within the home or in the broader social sphere, as in war and its consequences. They are born of their society's ongoing attempts to create viable institutions and they examine the bonds aimed at keeping individuals and society in a state of balance. These very same questions occupy us today, whether we are examining relationships within the home, in broader society, or in groups;

¹ *Poetics* 1453b19-22.

² For an overview of *philia* in all its forms in plays and fragments by all the tragedians, see Belfiore, E.S. (2000) *Murder Among Friends: Violation of philia in Greek Tragedy*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

whether we are looking at ageless domestic issues or the sudden changes that sweep society when it comes under severe stress, as in war or economic crisis.

What shapes individuals, how they are affected by groups and how they affect groups, has been the subject of psychoanalysis as well, since the publication of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921).³

In the century since the birth of psychoanalysis, much has been said about Freud's inspiration from ancient cultures, including Greek tragedy, and how his interpretation of antiquity has shaped contemporary views of the past. It is clear that both sides have gained from this osmosis, just as the tragedians gained from their anonymous predecessors who poured millennia of experience into the bottomless trove of myth, legend and history. Though we must beware of seeing Athenian tragedies as "confirmation" or paradigms of psychoanalytical theories, just as we cannot squeeze the products of tragedians' imaginations into modern theoretical constructs, it is most likely that we can gain valuable insights both into the tragedies and into our exploration of human nature if we see the focus of both as the intensive examination of human nature and behavior, of relations between individuals and of the dynamics of groups. In this, it is interesting to see how the world of Greek tragedy can be seen in the light of psychoanalysis and to see what the tragedies themselves can contribute to the pursuits of psychoanalysis. This close relationship derives from the efforts of both tragedy and psychoanalysis to explore the dark past and uncovered present. As Freud noted in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "There is an unmistakable indication in the text of Sophocles' tragedy itself that the legend of Oedipus sprang from some primaeval dream-material which had as its content the distressing disturbance of a child's relation to his parents owing to the first stirrings of sexuality."⁴

3 Freud, A. (1936).

4 Freud, 1900, SE IV, (pp. 263-4). Here it is worth noting Aristotle's comment on the sage Epimenides, who "disclosed the past rather than the future; indeed, his gift of second sight brought ancient transgressions into the open, disclosing hitherto unknown crimes, whose taint brought disturbance and disease to individuals and entire cities – the frenzied delirium of mania with its consequent disorder, violence

In several of the early plays of Euripides, *philia* is the bond, the institution that brings people together and whose violation leads not only to the loss of *philia* but also to conflict that unleashes mighty forces of destruction and self-destruction.

The tragic poets wrote their plays as contributions to the festival of the unruly, foreign-born god Dionysus, and they were participants in a demanding competition. The authors had to impress audiences and judges with issues that would interest and surprise them, issues that explored the pity and terror of human fallibility and leave them with the satisfaction of understanding - the "catharsis" of which Aristotle wrote. This process of unraveling truth is reflected in Freud's comment on "Oedipus the King": "The action of the play consists of nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement – a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis – that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta."⁵

The tragedians worked within the world of myth, epic and history. Being poets and being competitive, they developed themes that would be of interest to their audience and judges, such as the exploration of human behavior and motives against the background of an unpredictable fate, the dynamics of relations between members of a household or *oikos*, and the need for balance in society. Bennett Simon, a psychiatrist and classicist, stressed that "Harmony and balance are key terms in any discussion of Greek tragedy," and that "Imbalance is typical of the tragic protagonists."⁶

The question of balance and harmony was a key issue at the time the Athenian tragedies were written. For nearly two centuries – from the reforms of Solon in about 600 B.C. to those of Cleisthenes in 508/7 –

and murder." Vernant J-P. (1982) *The Origins of Greek Thought translation of Les origines de la pensee grecque* (1962). London. Methuen.

5 Freud, S. (1900), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE 4, pp. 261-62.

6 Simon, B. (1978), *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece: The classical roots of modern psychiatry*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

Athens had been developing a system of government that would allow all male citizens to participate as equals, with no group being favored above others. This was a unique concept, and what we know as democracy did not come about easily nor by chance. Solon introduced the idea of equality before the law, for all citizens of Athens, irrespective of their social standing and power. "I wrote the same laws for the *kakos* (low) and the *agathos* (high), setting down impartial justice for each," Plutarch quotes him saying. Jean-Pierre Vernant notes that in Solon's reforms, "Corresponding to *sophrosyne*, the virtue of the happy medium, is the image of a political order that sets up an equilibrium between opposing forces, establishing an accord between rival groups."⁷

Nearly a century later, Cleisthenes' reforms created the democratic constitution of Athens, with the breaking down of the perennially quarreling political and social blocs into 10 new ones that were intended to redistribute the members of the former groups according to geography (where they lived in Attica) and not their lineage or social station.

"The foundation of these thoughts was the philosophy of Anaximander, who declared that the world was stable because of the balance of forces. Since the earth was located at the center of a perfectly circular universe, it could remain motionless by reason of its equidistance, without submitting to the domination of anything whatever: *hypo mydenos kratoumene*," Vernant writes. "For Anaximander ... no single element, no portion of the world could dominate the others. It was the equality and symmetry of the various powers that made up the cosmos that characterized the new natural order. Supremacy belonged exclusively to a law of equilibrium and continuous reciprocity. *Monarchia* was replaced, in nature as in the city, by a rule of *isonomia*."⁸ In implying that *dike* (justice) governed the universe, Anaximander implied that all within it was subject to causal laws.⁹ This was adopted by the pre-Socratic philosophers who, through their dynamic participation in public discussion and in their teaching of rhetoric

and politics, created the climate of intellectual ferment of fifth-century Athens.

In the time of Euripides, Athens had moved from the endless quarrels between the landed aristocracy, the working people of the bustling coastal area and the poor farmers and charcoal makers of the outlying districts, to a functioning democracy which, from 431 until 404, found itself embroiled in a debilitating and eventually catastrophic war with the other great Greek power, Sparta. The political system was based on equality of all male citizens and their active participation in government and all forms of political life. This need for balance drew the interest of the tragedians, as did the consequences of destroying this balance – both within public life and within the home, spheres untouched by the effort to impose equality. A few decades later, in 380 B.C., Plato, in the dialogue *Gorgias*, has Socrates explain the forces of cohesion in society, in terms that had gained currency since Solon's reforms: "And philosophers tell us, Callicles, that communion and friendship (*philia*) and orderliness and temperance and justice bind together heaven and earth and gods and men, and that this universe is therefore called Cosmos or order, not disorder or misrule, my friend. But although you are a philosopher you seem to me never to have observed that geometrical equality is mighty, both among gods and men; you think that you ought to cultivate inequality or excess, and do not care about geometry." (Plato, *Gorgias* 508a).

The years in which Euripides wrote were a period of great philosophical ferment which stressed just how difficult it was to maintain balance in a world in which Xenophanes could question even the nature of the gods. His distinguishing "between what is knowable and what is not appears again and again in fifth-century thought, and is surely one of its chief glories; it is the foundation of scientific humility," wrote E.R. Dodds in *The Greeks and the Irrational*. He also noted that "Euripides is the first Athenian of whom we can say with confidence that he had read Xenophanes, and he is also represented as introducing the teaching of Heraclitus for the first time to the Athenian public."¹⁰ Among his laconic yet reverberating declarations,

7 *ibid* p. 85

8 Vernant. pp. 121-2

9 Lloyd-Jones, H. (1971, 1983) *The Justice of Zeus*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. University of California Press. p. 80.

10 Dodds, E.R. (1951) *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. University of California Press. pp. 181-2.

Heraclitus stressed the central responsibility of individuals, rather than luck and divine temptation, in determining their lives, saying *ηθος ανθρωπων δαμων*, which can be translated as “character is destiny.” The Sophists inspired Euripides and others to discuss fundamental moral questions in terms of the dispute between *Nomos* and *Physis*, the conceived and inherited customs and behaviors versus an unwritten “natural law” and “natural rights” of the individual (along with the attendant danger of anarchic immoralism, as Dodds puts it). This leads to a question: Why do people behave as they do?

And so, Euripides presents a world in which human beings may be pushed into actions by gods but they are left alone to deal with their passions; they are responsible for their actions and for what these actions will bring upon them. At the same time, social harmony depends on maintaining the delicate reciprocity, the balance of duties and expectations that bind people and groups of people. The roots of disaster may lie within the individual and not with the gods, but they are still dangerous and mysterious. When Medea kills her children, she sees this as a highly rational act, arguing that the children were condemned anyhow, and that by killing them she protects them but also exacts the most terrible revenge on Jason, who has robbed her of all that she had. In *Hippolytos*, written three years later (428), Phaedra, moving toward her own death and the destruction of her stepson, declares that though we may understand what is good for us, we fail to act on it either because of inertia or because we are distracted by “some pleasure.” (vv. 373-383) Weakness of character, in other words, can lead to destruction, even if we should know enough to avoid it.

This Enlightenment in democratic Athens did not come without powerful reaction. This may have been instigated by the professional diviners, who saw the questioning of faith as disastrous for their business, but it was intensified by the fear and suspicion of all things new and unsettling (such as doubting the existence of gods) that accompanied the climate of war during the conflict with Sparta. From about 432 or 431 (when Euripides wrote his *Medea*), and for the next 30 or so years, atheism and the teaching of astronomy were declared offenses and leaders of progressive thought such as Anaxagoras, Diagoras, Socrates, Protagoras and

perhaps even Euripides were put on trial.¹¹ If Euripides was indeed tried, he was the only one of those named above, to be acquitted. In any case, he was at the very center of the debate and the conflicts of his time. He could only be expected to take a stand and to examine all the angles in dramatic detail.

A performance of tragedy, as a public and highly concentrated vehicle for debate, could not be unaffected by the questions raised by the philosophers of the time. Interestingly, the word *philia* does not appear in extant Greek literature until about this time, the third quarter of the fifth century.¹² This may suggest one more reason for Euripides' extensive exploration of the subject.

With everything apparently open to debate, in the context of an unpredictable universe, with the understanding that great consequences could come from the unwitting actions of individuals, the tragedians of Athens became an integral part of the intensive examination of the nature of things, of what made people do what they do, how their character affects their actions, and how their actions (arrogant or mistaken, forced or voluntary) affected not only their own circumstances but the fate of their family, their group, and their city as well.

It is revealing to see, in the plays that have survived, how intensely Euripides focuses on the issue of *philia* betrayed, presenting it as the central *pathos* in most of them. In the *Bacchae*, *Herakles*, *Hippolytos*, *Ion*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Medea*, a parent harms a child. In *Elektra* and *Orestes*, a child harms a parent. In *Iphigenia in Taurus* and the *Phoenician Women*, siblings harm (or come close to harming) siblings. In marriage, husbands harm their wives through the betrayal of *philia* in the *Medea* and *Alcestis*. In *Hekabe* and *Helen*, the bond of *philia* related to *xenia* is violated. In the *Children of Herakles* and the *Suppliants*, the bond of suppliance is violated.

11 Dodds, p. 189

12 Schein, S.L. (1990) *Philia in Euripides' Medea* in Griffith, M. and Mastronarde, D.J. *Cabinet of the Muses: essays on classical and comparative literature in honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*. Atlanta. Schein notes that the only earlier use of the word is by the sixth-century elegist Theognis.

The Medea

The *Medea* of 431 is simple and unforgettable: Medea, a barbarian princess and sorceress, gave up her old life when she fell in love with Jason and helped him and his Argonauts steal the Golden Fleece from her father. When, after some years of marriage in Corinth, Jason betrays Medea by deciding to marry a local princess, she exacts a terrible revenge, killing their children, along with the Corinthian king and Jason's betrothed. An important question that has hung over the play is whether Medea's murder of her children was an invention by Euripides or whether this version of their death already existed, along with others - such as one that has the Corinthians killing the children because they were fed up with their foreign sorceress mother, or another in which Medea unwittingly kills them while trying to make them immortal.¹³ The play came last in the competition that year but it has since triumphed due to its popularity, longevity, and the effect it has had on art and thought through the ages.

The *Medea* is structured around the concept of *philia* and the many forms that this can take in social relationships. It explores the strength of *philia* in keeping people together, either in marriage, in friendship or in any other kind of pact or group. It shows how *philia* works as a bonding agent, how it can be exploited for selfish ends and how one bond of *philia* can conflict with another. It examines the consequences of betrayal of *philia*, where the traitor is burdened with the responsibility of betrayal and the betrayed is pushed toward destruction; the one who is betrayed then has to choose between accepting destruction as something unavoidable, thereby trying to salvage some honor by accepting it with dignity, or destroying the one who destroyed the bond.

The essence of the *Medea* is that Jason's betrayal of his wife and sons is not only a breaking of oaths, it also condemns his dependants (Medea and their two sons) to a dangerous fate – they are to be evicted from Corinth. He has, in effect, destroyed his wife and sons. Euripides presents Medea as having no option but to

exact revenge on Jason. She has the divine powers granted her by the mythical world from which she comes – she is the granddaughter of the Sun and also has a sure command of magic, which she is not averse to using now that her contract of domesticity has been broken. But Euripides enriches her character with very human qualities of rationality and cunning – it is only at the very end of the play, when her terrible vengeance is complete that she shows her supernatural status once again. During the action, though, she is rocked by grief and anger; she presents her arguments with cold logic, rationalizes the murder of her children, and plots her revenge. First she gains some time (one day) before her eviction from Corinth, by appealing to King Creon's pity for her weak state, and in so doing, she violates the bond of suppliance, in which she swore him no harm. She then exacts a promise from the visiting king of Athens, Aegeus, that he will offer her sanctuary, even though Aegeus is also a friend of Creon; she implicates her sons in the murder of Creon and his daughter so that she will have no choice but to kill them before she escapes Corinth in a chariot sent by the Sun. Given these bare bones of the plot, it is evident that Medea, as a powerful sorceress with divine resources, could have exacted any form of revenge on Jason and his new wife without implicating their sons or sacrificing them. The murder of the children, then, is presented as a consequence of the breakdown of the very human relationship of *philia*, and all the implications that this has. Jason betrays his *philia* with Medea and his family, this leads to Medea and their sons being all but destroyed as they are exiled into the unknown; as she too broke the bond of *philia* earlier (by betraying her father and killing her brother). She has lost everything, including her homeland, in order to give Jason everything (his life, his prestige as a hero, his sons), Medea argues that neither she nor her sons have anything left to lose; her revenge is to make Jason, too, lose everything – his new wife and his sons. Betrayal of the bond of marriage brought destruction upon Medea, prompting her reaction, which destroys all that Jason held dear. Medea's escape in the winged chariot is a nod toward the mythical roots of her character but it is also an integral part of the play in that it shows how much Medea had given up when she chose to live with Jason as his wife and mother of her sons – in effect she had been stripped of her royal standing, her mythical powers and her "foreign" connotations. The exploration of *philia* in the play is very much within the context of mortal relationships. Medea herself ignores her divine

¹³ Lesky, A., (1972, 1983) *Greek Tragic Poetry*. Translated by Dillon, M., New Haven and London, Yale University Press. "Based on our present knowledge we cannot determine whether Euripides was the first to make revenge the motive for Medea's killing her sons," he writes.

connections early in the play when she says she is prepared to die in her effort to kill Jason, Creon and his daughter (v. 392-4). Bruno Snell notes: "Euripides in his *Medea* is the first to portray a human being who excites pity by the mere fact of being a human being in torment...; as a barbarian she has no right, but as a human being she has. This same Medea is also the first person in literature whose thinking and feeling are described in purely human terms, as the products of a human soul and nothing else. She is a barbarian by birth, but in intellectual attainments, in the power of speech, she is superior to all others. No sooner does man declare his independence of the gods, than he acclaims the authority of the free human spirit and the inviolability of human rights."¹⁴

The *Medea* begins with the news that Medea is shocked and grief-stricken by the fact that Jason has decided to take another wife. The verdict on Jason by two of his servants – the Nurse and the boys' Tutor right at the start is unequivocal and establishes the context of the play. Jason's betrayal has overturned everything in the lives of Medea and her sons.

Nurse: *Now all things are hated, and those most loved are sick.
Jason has betrayed his own sons and my mistress
with a royal wedding.*
(v. 16-18)

A little later, in her discussion with the Tutor, she declares:

Nurse: *He is guilty: he has betrayed those near and dear to him.*
Tutor: *What man's not guilty? It's taken you a long time to learn
that everybody loves himself more than his neighbor.
These boys are nothing to their father: he's in love.*
(v. 84-88)

The Nurse then prepares the audience for her mistress' revenge:

Nurse: *I pray that she strikes her enemies and not those dear to her.*
(v. 95)

When she emerges from her house, at the call of the Chorus of Corinthian women, Medea moves to engage their empathy with a great monologue on the trials of womanhood and the disadvantages of being a woman in a relationship with a man, as the woman is forced into a position of dependency and has to rely on the man's whims for everything. Then, after having the women identify with her, Medea points out that she is in a far worse situation, being a woman who depends fully on her husband because she has no kin of her own in Corinth.

Medea: *You have this city, your father's home,
the enjoyment of your life, and your friends'
company.
I am alone; I have no city; now my husband
insults me. I was taken as plunder from a land
at the earth's edge. I have no mother, brother,
nor any
of my own blood to turn to in this extremity.*
(vv. 253-8)¹⁵

The women of Corinth, Medea points out, have their friends and kin, their *philia* relationships. Now that her relationship with Jason has been destroyed, Medea is completely alone, having neither home, nor homeland nor family in her time of trouble. This reinforces her dependence on the bond of *philia* and the threat constituted by the breaking of that bond. When the king of Corinth orders her banishment, but allows her a day to prepare for this, Medea has both the motive and the opportunity to take her revenge on Creon, Jason and Jason's new wife.

In Medea's opening monologue she says that she endured the inequality of the relationship between husband and wife out of duty and custom, out of dependence and love for him. This is the bond of *philia* which creates an equality of expectation, of isotes. Jason's oaths to Medea were part of this bargain, as was her bearing of children. Breaking the bond pro-

14 Snell, B. (1982) *The Discovery of the Mind*, translated by T.G. Rosenmeyer, New York: Dover. (p.250)

15 Translations from the *Medea* and *Herakles* are by Philip Vellacott, from Vellacott, P. (1963) *Euripides: Medea and Other Plays*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

vides for the inverse of Solon's theory, with which he tried to legislate peace and order in Athens: "The man who is an equal is incapable of starting a war." Medea, deprived of *philia*, is no longer a partner in marriage and, therefore, is not equal to Jason: she is, in short, capable of starting a war and destroying the person who betrayed her, whose actions became an existential threat to her.

In her first confrontation with Jason (who, ironically, declares that he "will not desert a friend"), Medea lists all the sacrifices that she made for his sake: saving his life and helping him gain the Golden Fleece, deceiving her father, leaving her home, tricking the daughters of Pelias into killing their father because he had usurped Jason's throne in Iolkos:

*Medea: And in return for this you have the
wickedness
to turn me out, to get yourself another wife,
even after I had borne you sons!*
(v. 488-90)

The destruction of the bond with which Jason and Medea were tied, through oaths of *philia*, highlights Medea's dependence on her husband, and leaves her with the only options of accepting her fate – her banishment – or fighting back and destroying those who will destroy her. The betrayal also represents a loss; the loss of Medea's sexual partner, the person with whom she fell in love and for whom she abandoned everything, and now she has nothing. This is at the heart of the play. *Philia* is the bonding agent which creates the group through a web of expectations and obligations which can keep the unequal in a state of responsibility to each other. This, as we noted earlier, was very much an issue of public debate at the time the play was written.

Midway through the play, the plot receives a critical push when the king of Athens, Aegeus, arrives in Corinth. His personal pain is that he has no children and has been to Delphi to consult the oracle as to how he may become fruitful. This provides Medea with her plan for revenge and for her escape: she begs Aegeus to take pity on her and offer her asylum in Athens, she promises him that with drugs which she knows she will help him acquire children, and she realizes that the greatest punishment she can bring upon Jason is to

deprive him of his children. Aegeus agrees and Medea binds him with a great oath. But he has one condition: she must get clear of Corinth on her own, as he does not want to violate his *philia* with the city. "*The Corinthians, too, are friends of mine and I don't want to give offense,*" Aegeus says (v. 730). No one will know until the end of the play how Medea will manage to escape Corinth, but from now on she has a plan for revenge and for the sacrifice of her children. Now she is sure of success (vv. 765-7).

Addressing the Chorus of Corinthian women, Medea unveils her plan to kill the princess with a poisoned dress and diadem, which will prove deadly also to anyone who goes to her aid. She will send the deadly gifts with her children. And then, she makes the terrible revelation:

*Medea: I will kill my sons.
No one shall take my children away from me.
When I have made
Jason's whole house a shambles, I will leave
Corinth
a murderess, flying from my darling (philtaton)
children's blood.
Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible;
the laughter of my enemies I will not endure.*
(vv. 792-7).

She sees the murder of her children as an integral part of her revenge as well as a declaration that they belong to her. Her failure will mean both the murder of her children by others and will bring upon her the ridicule of her enemies. She stresses that the children are her own, she stresses also that they are most dear to her, most *philoï*. In rationalizing her decision, Medea declares that their sons should have been the guarantee of Jason's marriage to Medea but he abandoned them nevertheless. It is he who has destroyed them, she claims repeatedly. And yet, in a dramatic heightening of tension a little later, in a great monologue (v. 1021ff) Euripides depicts Medea's wavering before the bloody act that she has decided upon. But she will not allow herself to be swayed from her course, as she makes clear later:

*Medea: No cowardice, no tender memories; forget
that you once loved them, that of your body they
were born.*

*For one short day forget your children; afterwards
weep: though you kill them, they were your
beloved sons.*

(vv. 1246-1250)

She refers to her sons as *philoï*, then she enters the house and murders them. This is a breach of *philia*, the murder of kin, that is worse than the betrayal that prompted it. Medea argues that Jason had condemned his sons to death by abandoning them. But it is also evident that she sacrifices them in order to hurt Jason as much as she possibly can. At the start of the play she laments the loss of her marriage, the destruction of her family, the fact that she has no home and no friends to turn to. In the end, Jason too is without wife, without children, without honor. In her revenge, Medea has taken from him all that was important in his male-dominated world. She has, in effect, castrated him. And, in the process, she has lost her femininity and, with her departure in the winged chariot, her human dimension. The closing of the play depicts a Medea who is far from the woman who was once a victim, who agonized over the future of her sons, who wavered repeatedly before murdering them. She has been transformed into an inhuman avenger, crowing at her successful destruction of Jason, free of every human restraint, free of fear and obligations. She is, in every sense, inhuman.

The madness of Herakles

It is interesting that Euripides depicts infanticide in two other surviving plays, and in both cases, as in the *Medea*, the children are victims of a breach of *philia*. In *Herakles* (420 B.C.), the hero himself murders his wife and children while in a frenzy cast upon him by Hera, shortly after his return from a labor in the underworld and after having saved them from a death that resulted from his being absent, a situation which had deprived them of the protection that he, as *philos*, was obliged to provide. In effect, Euripides says, Megara and her children were already condemned, before her husband's return and his madness. In *Hekabe*, the recently enslaved queen of Troy engineers the murder of the sons of Polymestor, a king who was a guest-friend, a *xenos*, who was entrusted with protecting the youngest son of Hekabe and Priam. This happens after she learns that Polymestor has murdered her son and taken as his own the treasure entrusted to him by the

Trojans. In the same play, the Trojan queen has had to endure the sacrifice of her daughter Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles. She, like Medea, has nothing more to lose. Unlike Medea who can count on an escape, Hekabe's fate is to be transformed into a dog, to die alone on a barren isle. Having lost everything, she does not care that this is what awaits her. Herakles, though burdened by terrible blood guilt, is more fortunate: in another variation on theme of *philia*, he is redeemed by his friendship with Theseus, king of Athens, who owes him his life and who takes his friend back to Athens with him, where he will cleanse him. As Herakles, who has been so painfully tortured by the gods, says at the end of the play:

*Herakles: I, who have shamefully made destitute
my house,
will follow Theseus like a helpless wreck in tow.
If any man thinks wealth or power of greater worth
to him who has them, than a good friend – he is
mad.*

(vv. 1423-26).

The play has shown that the betrayal of *philia* perpetrated by Herakles when he was not in Thebes to protect his family from his enemies had the same result as the madness which was forced upon him, and which killed them. But even as *philia* betrayed leads to conflict and destruction, *philia* affirmed can redeem even the worst of crimes.

The Hekabe

Philia is the bond with which people can save each other in times of need. And this is the central theme of the *Hekabe* of 425 B.C.; as Hekabe puts it after she has taken her revenge on the former friend who murdered her son – his guest – and stole the treasure of Troy.

*Hekabe: If you had done your duty
by my son, raised him and kept him safe,
men would honor and respect you as a noble
friend.
For real friendship is shown in times of trouble;
prosperity is full of friends. And then,
if someday you had stood in need of help,
my son would have been your friend and treasury.
But killing him you killed your loyal friend;
your gold is worthless now, your sons are dead,*

and you are as you are.
(vv. 1224-1232)¹⁶

Rejecting Polymestor's claims that he betrayed the Trojans out of friendship with the Greeks, the victorious king of the Greeks, Agamemnon, is unequivocal in his judgment of the Thracian king:

Agamemnon: *Know then,
I find you guilty as charged.
You murdered your ward, killed him in cold blood,
and not, as you assert, for the Greeks or me,
but out of simple greed, to get his gold.
You then construed the facts to fit your case
in court.*

*Perhaps you think it is a trifling matter
to kill a guest.*

*We Greeks call it murder.
How, therefore, could I acquit you now
without losing face among men?*
(vv. 1243-1250)

Philia, which includes the rules of guest friendship, is a reciprocal relationship which protects those who have committed themselves to it. It is also, as Agamemnon notes so emphatically, the obligation of others to reaffirm its power and to condemn its violation. Here it is worth remembering that according to Solon's reforms, it was incumbent on every citizen to ensure that crimes did not go unpunished, even if the crime was not against him. As Agamemnon says, if he does not condemn Polymestor for his violation of friendship, then he will lose face for supporting a traitor. This indicates the public esteem in which *philia* was held, as all people recognized their dependence on it, but it also indicates that the observance of *philia* is a criterion for evaluating people and their behavior.

This latter expression of the power of *philia* is explored in the *Hippolytos* of 428 B.C.

The Hippolytos

This tragedy, performed three years after *Medea*, is the tragedy of the queen, Phaedra, who is destroyed when Aphrodite instills uncontrollable lust in her for her husband Theseus' son, Hippolytos. This, as Phaedra laments, makes her failure a very public spectacle, condemning her reputation for all time. It is this which makes her decide to kill herself and, in so doing, to destroy Hippolytos. Phaedra, who knows full well the importance of keeping her name unsullied, is the unwitting victim of Aphrodite, who wants to avenge herself of Hippolytos for his single-minded chastity. Hippolytos, with his exaggerated sense of propriety, reacts furiously to the revelation of his stepmother's lust, revealed to him by the Nurse who first binds him with an oath of secrecy. Mistakenly believing that Hippolytos will make her shame public, Phaedra has no option but to kill herself, and, in an attempt to protect her name and take revenge on Hippolytos, she leaves a note accusing him of raping her – and violating his *philia* with his father. When Theseus discovers his wife's corpse and the note, he curses his son, who is then killed, in another violation of *philia*. With his dying breath, Hippolytos reaffirms *philia* and his role as the good son, forgiving his father of his blood guilt.

As she moves towards death, Phaedra curses her Nurse, who revealed her passion for Hippolytos, betraying her friendship with Phaedra in doing so. "*This is a fine service you have rendered me, corrupted, damned seducer of your friends!*" (vv. 682-3) she declares. "*Now I must die, and die dishonored,*" (v. 687). Hippolytos, she says, "*will fill all the land with my dishonor. May my curse light upon you and all the others who eagerly help unwilling friends to ruin.*" (vv. 692-4)¹⁷.

Phaedra understands that her reputation depends on what people say about her. She believes that Hippolytos, with his exaggerated sense of chastity, will make public her adulterous passion for him, a passion which is the more shocking because it violates the *philia* between her and her stepson, between her and her husband, and between her husband and his son.

¹⁶ Translations from the *Hekabe* are by William Arrowsmith, in Grene, D. and Lattimore, R. (1947, 1958) *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides III*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷ Translations from the *Hippolytos* are by David Grene, in Grene, D. and Lattimore, R. (1955) *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides I*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press.

Euripides stresses the implications of *philia* when he has the Nurse try to persuade Hippolytos, on the basis of *philia*, not to make public what the Nurse told him after swearing him to secrecy. The Nurse, in her exchange with Hippolytos, pleads: "Son, what would you do? You'll not destroy your friends?" (v. 613). His reply is violent: "'Friends', you say! I spit the word away. None of the wicked are friends of mine." (v. 614).

Phaedra's decision to destroy herself is a bid to rescue her honor. But furious at her sacrifice, she decides to destroy Hippolytos as well. After her death, and before he hears the claims against him, Hippolytos approaches his father to comfort him, in a moment of supreme Euripidean irony. "You should not hide your troubles from your friends, and, father, those who are closer than your friends." (vv. 914-5). Theseus, furious, having read his wife's note, echoes Hippolytos' angry reaction to the Nurse's invocation of *philia*: "If only there were some token now, some mark to make the division clear between friend and friend, the true and the false!" (vv. 925-7). In his plot, Euripides has Phaedra destroy herself as well as her stepson because she believes that Hippolytos will make public her shame. Yet, despite having declared that he will shame Phaedra publicly, Hippolytos keeps his oath to the Nurse and does not besmirch Phaedra's name when Theseus accuses him of raping her and casts him out of his kingdom. In sending his innocent son to his death, on the accusation of a breach of *philia*, Theseus himself is carrying out a dreadful violation of his *philia* with Hippolytos. When the goddess Artemis reveals the truth to him, Theseus declares, "Mistress, I am destroyed." (v. 1325). When Hippolytos, with his last breath, says that he frees his father of blood guilt, Theseus' response is "Oh dearest, (*philtate*), how noble you have proved to your father." (v. 1452).

Throughout the play, Euripides focuses on the *philia* between the characters, on how every violation of what each expects of the other leads to destruction, on how, at the end, Hippolytos reaffirms *philia* by absolving his father of the guilt of causing his death. Here it is interesting to note that Euripides had dealt with the issue of Phaedra's love for her stepson in an earlier play, where she was presented as brazenly accosting Hippolytos with her lust for him. In his second treatment, Euripides chose to show the queen as the victim of others' machinations just as much as Hippoly-

tos is the victim of her destruction. In effect, though the tragedy may be instigated by Aphrodite who wants to use Phaedra to destroy Hippolytos, it is through the implications of their own characters that each protagonist has the power to destroy others, to self-destruct, and to redeem each other. This shows the cohesive power of *philia* when it is affirmed, and the forces of destruction unleashed when it is violated.

The Alcestis

The earliest of Euripides' plays to survive, the *Alcestis* of 438 B.C. suggests that the examination of *philia* and *xenia* interested him from early on in his career. This strange play is a tragedy insofar as it portrays the weakness of character of Admetus, king of Thessaly, who asks his wife, Alcestis, to die in his stead - only to find that in losing her he destroys both his reputation and the joy of life itself. But it is a tragedy with a happy ending, because Admetus' friend and guest, Herakles, goes down to Hades and returns Alcestis to the land of the living. The play is an investigation of the institutions of *philia* and *xenia*, but also of the responsibility of individuals, whose actions are determined by their characters, with their strengths and weaknesses. Admetus loses his wife and his joy when, because of his weak character, he gets her to die in his place. But the institutions of friendship and hospitality that he upheld, even at the time of his greatest sorrow (as he chooses to entertain Herakles without telling him of his loss and thus spoil his mood) are those that will save him: Herakles is so moved by Admetus' devotion to these principles that he goes into the underworld to bring back Alcestis. The play is a deceptively simple but illuminating exposition on the relationship between character and custom, an aspect of the *nomos vs physis* debate, and on the civilizing process of institutions that bond groups together, and protect humans through shared resources and responsibilities.

The god Apollo, who opens the play with a monologue announcing that this is the day that Alcestis will die, declares that Admetus is his friend, because he treated him well when he (Apollo) was forced by Zeus to serve penance as a mortal man, in the service of Admetus. Apollo has protected Admetus since then, and now that the time has come for him to die, he can escape death if he gets someone else to die in his stead. When Death asks Apollo why he cares so much for

Admetus, the answer is simple: “*He is my friend, and his misfortunes weigh on me.*” (v. 42). In her first words, in a prayer before she dies, Alcestis is concerned with the future marriages of her son and daughter: let her son find a *philen* (φίλην) wife and her daughter a brave husband, (v. 166), may they not suffer a fate like hers, and may they live in the land of their birth. She, on the other hand, is destroyed, (απολλυμαι) she says, because she chose not to betray her marriage bed. Alcestis’ observance of the bond of marriage, in other words, is that which leads to her death; yet the audience is aware that Admetus violated his *philia* with Alcestis by asking her to die in his stead. And, when Alcestis is returned to him in the end, Admetus acknowledges that “*Her death destroyed me more than I can say.*” (v. 1082).

The exchange between Admetus and his father, Pheres, who refuses to die in his son’s stead, shows that the bond of *philia* between them is broken by Admetus’ asking his parents to die and by their rejection of his request. In placing life above *philia*, both sides destroy that bond: Admetus loses his parents and his parents lose their child. The dialogue begins with Admetus’ rejection of his father’s condolences for Alcestis’ death. “*I did not invite you to this burial, nor do I count you among my friends,*” (vv. 629-30), he declares. It ends with his rejection of his parents: “*Go now, you and that woman who lives with you, grow old without children, as you deserve.*” (vv. 734-6). During their argument, Pheres makes the point that reveals both his position and that which his son has shown by having his wife die for him. When accused by his son of not offering to die in his place, he declares: “*Dear (philon) is the light of the Sun. Dear (philon).*” (v. 722). Life, in other words, is dearer than any other person, Pheres says, stressing the same word at the beginning and the end of the sentence. As the play makes clear, however, placing anything – even life itself – above *philia* leads to a loss far greater than anything gained by its violation.

The play is full of references to *philia* and correct behavior.¹⁸ Apollo protects Admetus and offers him a way to escape death because he is affirming their

philia. Admetus violates his *philia* with his parents and his wife by asking them to die for him. His parents violate their *philia* by refusing to die for him, while Alcestis affirms *philia* by dying for him. The only one to gain anything from this is Alcestis, whose noble act is remembered for all time (In Plato’s *Symposium* of 360 B.C., Phaedrus notes that Alcestis put love above all else, only to have Socrates quote Diotima saying that Alcestis died not out of love but in order to gain this reputation – something that anyone hearing Alcestis’ dying words cannot agree with). But, when all is lost, it is Admetus’ respect for *philia* and *xenia* which make him a good host to the wandering Herakles, who rewards him by bringing Alcestis back from the dead. *Philia* violated brings confrontation and death, *philia* affirmed can conquer even Death, the play argues.

Conclusion

The analysis of five of Euripides’ earliest extant plays depicts *philia* as a reciprocal dependency, a defense against danger, a key element in an individual’s identity and his and her relations with others. It shows *philia* contributing to the framework of the familiar, maintaining a balance of equal expectations and obligations between individuals or groups who may not otherwise be equal. It keeps the marriage, the group or society in a state of balance, allowing these institutions to stick together and to develop. The violation of *philia*, on the other hand, results in the traumatization of the injured party, and the fear of annihilation or annihilation itself. The collapse of the system, and the failed dependency result either in acceptance of destruction, the active pursuit of self-destruction, or the willed destruction of the violator of *philia*. Where *philia* is reaffirmed, as in the *Alcestis*, the *Hippolytos* and the *Herakles*, it can cleanse guilt and provide sanctuary. Where there is *philia*, there is hope, equality and occasion for order and balance.

These issues create dramatic theater, but, as the debates of the time show, they were also of primary concern in the Athens of the fifth-century B.C. The question of what brings people together in constructive cooperation occupied Freud as well, and questions of cohesion and incohesion in pairs, groups and society

¹⁸ Allen, J.T. and Italie, G. (1954) *A concordance to Euripides*. London. University of California Press and Cambridge University Press. They note that *philen* and the concept of *philia* appear in 36 verses.

remain open for further exploration.¹⁹ Central to the question of group cohesion, which includes *philia*, is the sense of justice that is necessary for the successful reciprocal relationship. In *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego*, Freud (1921) suggested that the libido is what holds groups together, as individuals identify with a leader or an ego ideal. In Euripides' Athens, however, society was different: citizens were not united by their love for a leader, by seeing their ego ideal in him. Unlike the Army and Church in Freud's essay, the Athenian leaders were not the institutions we have in the chief of a modern state's army, or Christ as head of the Church, who could instill in their followers the belief that they cared for them individually and were crowned with the prestige of their position. In democratic Athens, political leaders and generals were elected by all the citizens: one year they might be in power, the next in exile. Religious leaders did not play a separate, significant role. In Euripides' world, in other words, the "love" citizens could feel for each other was their narcissistic identification with each other – as equals with equal rights and responsibilities, each with his own strengths and weaknesses, his heroism, cowardice, mistakes and betrayals. People depended on each other and on the bonds between them. When these ties of *philia* – of friendship, kinship, and love – were betrayed, the traumatization of the individual was deep and definitive.

This brings us to another important aspect of group cohesion which Freud noted: the demand for justice, for equal treatment for all. When the demand for equality is not met, when expectations are frustrated, the individual who cannot handle the disappointment of deprivation unleashes aggression – either against him or herself, or against the cause of his or her privation, or both.

It is significant to note that Euripides, who has been called "the first psychologist"²⁰ and the father of psychoanalysis both reached into an archive that was just as ancient for the ancient Athenians as it is for us today. As a treasure trove of characters, experience,

disputes and resolutions, it allowed ancient thinkers, and those of our age, to explore the questions of their own time against a backdrop of great drama that could appear both familiar and universal.²¹ As the ancient tragedies, philosophical constructs and the more distant myths have shown repeatedly, they too can display problems clearly and suggest solutions in all eras, for as long as people care to seek answers to the dangerous riddles of human existence.

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¹⁹ See Hopper, E. (2003) *Traumatic Experience in the Unconscious Life of Groups: The Fourth Basic Assumption: Incohesion: Aggregation/Massification or (ba) I:A/M*. International Library of Group Analysis. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

²⁰ Jaeger, W. (1939-1944, translated 1965) *Paideia* Vol. 1 (2nd Edition), translated by Highet, G. Oxford. Basil Blackwell. No.8, p. 353.

²¹ See Armstrong, R.H. (2005) *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

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