# Stepmothers: The Enemy Within

## *An exploration of the hostile stepmothers in Euripides*

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## [*]Introduction

The appearance of the hostile stepmother within Euripidean tragedy suggests anxieties within classical Athenian culture about the sanctity of the family and cultural identity. It is concern with foreignness and otherness that is reflected onto stepmothers, resulting in a stereotype of the "hostile stepmother". I take 'stereotype' to mean a convention of a character whose traits and actions establish a predicted end; with the hostile stepmother, that end is violence. Watson's *Ancient Stepmothers* outlines the ancient stepmother as being "invariably hostile", unrestrained, jealous, treacherous. She argues the stepmother is the inheritor of misogyny, the negative stereotypes of (sexual) jealousy, treachery, and fear of women's sexuality: a woman's lack of self-control is a threat to the *oikos*.[1] I take this further, arguing that the negative stereotype is linked to concerns of cultural dilution and curbing foreign influence, which was on the rise in Athens during the fifth century. The stepmother was the representation of the enemy on the home front, a threat within the family unit.

It was a time of war: a century of losing men to battle throughout the Mediterranean wrought havoc on the family unit that was left at home. The death rates that we can surmise from sources such as Thucydides or tribe inscriptions of the war dead in Athens paint a picture of regular loss on a large scale. The fifth century BCE saw Athenians in power, but at war, almost

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[1] Patricia A. Watson, *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995) 11, 22-31, 84-9; David Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens* (Chippenham: Cambridge University Press: 1991) 144-6.

constantly, across the Mediterranean world. The Persian War at the start of the century brought Greek *poleis* closer together as a semblance of "Greece," having a common enemy against which to identify themselves. Their victory brought an abundance of wealth to the region, Athens as head of the Delian League benefitting greatly, even as asserting control over the League engendered more war.[2] A memorial of war-dead from the Erectheis phratry in Athens for the year 460/59 lists over 100 dead in Cyprus, Egypt, Phoenicia, Halieis, Aegina, and Megara.[3] The Peloponnesian War and the plague in Athens overshadowed the end of the century. Smith uses Thucydides to estimate a death toll that averages to approximately 850 per year of the war, although total casualties were probably more.[4] Akrigg estimates that there were 30,000 male citizens at the beginning of the Persian War, a number that then doubled preceding the Peloponnesian War, but by the end of the war there were fewer male citizens than at the start of the century.[5] The continuous casualties were destabilizing to households: each soldier's death left behind family, parents, a wife, children who lived in the aftermath.

Greek contact with the Persians and beyond must have engendered questions of what it means to be "Greek", a broader identity than one's *polis*, but distinct from societies such as the Persians; cultural differences create a line to draw in the sand, an "us" and a "them".[6] Athens was very conscious of who was a citizen who had a share in the polis. Delineating who was a

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[2] For example, the campaigns on Karystos and Naxos in order to force them to join the league, Thucydides 1.98.
[3] *IG* $I^3$.1147. *IG* $I^3$.1162 lists another 57 dead from several phratries in Byzantium and the Cheronese ca. 447(?).
[4] Gertrude Smith, "Athenian Casualty Lists," *Classical Philology* 14, no. 4 (Oct. 1919), 362-63.
[5] Ben Akrigg, *Population and Economy in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 77. The dramatic citizen population shifts were due to casualties of war, and to shifting definitions of citizenship.
[6] For a full discussion of immigration, metics, and Athenian exceptionalism, see Kasimis (2018). For more on the immigrant woman, see Kennedy (2014).

member of that democracy was as important as who was excluded from it.[7] *Nothoi*, recognized bastards, were excluded from inheritance, beginning with citizenship laws attributed to Solon.[8] The number of *nothoi* increased after Pericles' infamous citizenship law of 451/0 which limited Athenian citizenship only to those whose parents were both Athenian citizens. Ironically, twenty years later Pericles was granted leave to assign his own *nothoi* as heirs after war and plague had taken his legitimate children.[9] Where the hostile stepmother appears, *nothoi* are often right there with them.

In Euripides, we see examples of both of actual "hostile stepmothers" and what I shall term the "specter of the stepmother", in which there is no stepmother, but the threat of one and what she may do is a source of a character's concerns or action. We must take into account that dramatization will amplify reality in order to create a character or make its point, however amplified.[10] The hostile stepmother stereotype shows up in declamations, oratory, and Roman new comedy, as well as in fairy tales and modern culture.[11]

In this paper, I investigate the historical stepmother in the context of marriage, step-motherhood, citizenship, and inheritance law, and outline the "hostile stepmother" stereotype,

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[7] Cynthia B. Patterson, *The Family in Greek History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 83-91.
[8] In Aristophanes' *Birds*, 1660 -70, Heracles is read Solon's law and told that he cannot inherit his father's house as he is a bastard: ἐρῶ δὲ δὴ καὶ τὸν Σόλωνός σοι νόμον: ΄νόθῳ δὲ μὴ εἶναι ἀγχιστείαν παίδων ὄντων γνησίων. ἐὰν δὲ παῖδες μὴ ὦσι γνήσιοι, τοῖς ἐγγυτάτω γένους μετεῖναι τῶν χρημάτων.΄ "I will tell you, Solon's law runs: 'A *nothos* will not inherit, if there are legitimate children of the *anchisteia*; And if there are no legitimate children, the property must pass to the nearest *genos*.'" For a full exploration of *nothoi* and their position in Athens see Patterson (1990) Rhodes (1978).
[9] Plutarch, *Pericles*, 37.
[10] Olga Taxidou, "Tragedy: Maternity, Natality, and Theatricality" in *Preforming Antagonism*, ed. Fisher and Katsourki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
[11] It is unclear whether μητρυιά carried the same weight, but the hostility contained within *saeva noverca* is clear. The *saeva noverca* becomes a stock character beginning in the late Republic, even superimposing onto Juno. See Watson, *Stepmothers*, 92-132 for a full discussion of the *saeva noverca* in Roman literature.

drawing on Watson's *Ancient Stepmothers*, as well as the "specter of the stepmother". I then explore examples in Euripides, connecting the historical context to the literary representations of the hostile stepmother. Theatre is a way for both playwright and audience to grapple with the political issues of the day. Euripides' gives us examples of the specter of the stepmother in *Alcestis* and *Medea*, hostile stepmothers in *Andromache* and *Phrixus*, the lustful stepmother in *Hippolytus*, and a combination in *Ion*, where mistaken identity leads Creusa to take on the role of the hostile stepmother towards her own child. These plays also feature *nothoi* and themes of otherness and foreignness in conjunction with the stepmothers. I conclude by connecting these literary phenomena to issues of citizenship and identity in classical Athens.

**The Historical Stepmother: Doubly Other**

All women are foreigners to their husband's house. They are at a remove from the start, and if their husband dies, they are remanded back to their father's house.[12] The stepmother is inherently other, entering the family unit as a wife, who remains apart from the *anchisteia*, the ordered pool of potential heirs to an estate.[13] They are doubly other as they are a replacement creating a further asymmetrical relationship leading to discomfiture with preexisting children.[14] The stepchild has anxieties about a new woman in the role his mother once inhabited and the husband has anxieties about his new wife's cohesion in the house.

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[12] When a woman married, she joined her new husband's *oikos,* but *not* his *anchisteia*, thus she was never a full member of the family, even if she bore heirs, an eternal guest. Cynthia Patterson, "Marriage and the Married Woman in Athenian Law," in *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah Pomeroy (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1991) 53.

[13] Patterson, *Family*, 82-3. See Appendix 1.

[14] Modern sociologic research shows this phenomenon continues to this day: Miller, Cartwright, Gibson (2018), Renegar, Cole (2019). The evil stepmother is a figure we can all recall, from fables (see, for instance, Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 1932), to Disney princesses and their antagonists, to the 1998 remake of *The Parent Trap*: who could forget Meredith Blake?

Marriage in Athens had no formal, legal definition by the state: you would not file a marriage certificate. There were formal and cultural recognitions which led to a legitimate marriage, including a publicly witnessed wedding. The bride would then move from her father's house and protection to her husband's, her new *kyrios.*[15] Providing children, in particular male heirs, was a way to naturalize herself and to cement the marriage.[16] Preexisting children add vulnerability to a second wife's position in the household: an asymmetric relationship between children, father, and (step)mother is created. Despite the stereotype against stepmothers, second marriages must have been common, due to deaths in war and childbirth. We have proof of such in the 4th century, especially if a woman widowed was still of childbearing age.[17] Second marriages of men were often to virgins, which created a large age gap, explaining anxiety around a potential lustful stepmother: she might be far closer in age to her stepson than her new husband, and therefore more attracted to him than his father.[18]

Although there is little direct evidence of stepmother/stepchild relationships, we do have evidence of the hostile stepmother—speeches from legal cases and in a certain inscription from the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus—which makes clear the stereotype persisted, regardless of its veracity.[19] Legal cases concerning inheritance and legitimacy of offspring frequently painted as the villain or sexually promiscuous to the end of the plaintiff.

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[15] Patterson, *Family*, 108-9; Patterson, "Marriage," 51.
[16] Plutarch references a Solonian law in which a wife would have the right to have sex with close relatives of an impotent husband in order to continue the line. Plu. Sol. 20. For a discussion of lawful concubinage in Athens, see Sealey (1984).
[17] Plato. *Leg.* 930b. Plato speaks against remarriage if an heir already exists. He was known to dislike his own stepmother. On divorce in classical Athens, see Cohn-Haft (1995).
[18] Euripides, *Phoenix*, F. 807: πικρὸν νέᾳ γυναικὶ πρεσβύτης ἀνήρ. | An elderly man is bitter for a young wife.
[19] The stereotype grew, the stepmother becoming a regular character in declamation practices. For a full discussion of declamation, see Gruber (2008). We see warnings against the hostile stepmother scattered

An inscription from the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus, describing a man cured from leeches he had ingested:

> Ἀνὴρ Τορωναῖος δεμελέας. οὗτος
> ἐγκαθεύδων ἐνύπνιον εἶδε· ἔδοξέ οἱ τὸν θεὸν
> τὰ στέρνα μαχαίραι ἀνσχίσσαντα τὰς
> δεμελέας ἐξελεῖν καὶ δόμεν οἱ ἐς τὰς χεῖρας
> καὶ συνράψαι τὰ στήθη· ἁμέρας δὲ
> γενομένας ἐξῆλθε τὰ θηρία ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν
> ἔχων καὶ ὑγιὴς ἐγένετο· κατέπιε δ᾽ αὐτὰ
> δολωθεὶς ὑπὸ ματρυιᾶς ἐγ κυκᾶνι
> ἐμβεβλημένας ἐκπιων.
>
> A man of Torone with leeches. Going to sleep [in the temple of Asclepius] he saw a dream: he dreamt that the god opened up his chest with a knife, extracted the leeches, put them into his hands, and sewed up his chest. When day came, he went out holding the creatures in his hands and was cured. He had swallowed them tricked by his stepmother, who had put them in a posset that he drank.[20]

Watson investigates the probability of truth of the entire affair, but the point she reaches at the end is the salient one: regardless of her fault in the matter, this stepson thought his stepmother would be willing to attempt to kill him.[21] The episode shows the stereotype both in the stepmotherly hostility and in the approach of attack: to sneak it into a drink. A similar accusation is put forth in Antiphon's *Against the Stepmother for Poisoning*. A young man is prosecuting his

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across antiquity, from classical Greece into the Roman period: e.g. in Pindar Pythian 4.162, in reference to Ino: "saved from his stepmother's godless weapons" | σαωθη ἐκ τε ματρυιασ᾽ ἀθεων βελεων. Pliny the Elder: parens melior homini an tristior noverca fuerit. *The Natural History*, Bk. VII, Ch. 1. The connotations of *noverca* persist, for instance in Roman New Comedy. See Watson, *Stepmothers*, ch. 4.

[20] *SIG*[3] 1168. Case no. 13, as translated in Patricia Watson, "A Fistful of Leeches or Stepmotherly Ingenuity," in *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, ed. Michael Whitby, Hardie, M. Whitby (Bristol: Bristol Classics Press, 1987) 70.

[21] Watson, "Leeches," 69-78.

stepmother for poisoning his father, and she is defended by his half-brother, the woman's son. There is no concrete evidence, but the speaker speaks strongly of his own familial loyalty versus his stepmother's disloyalty, citing a supposed previous poisoning attempt: "…on a previous occasion this woman— the mother of these men— had contrived our father's death by poisoning, that he had caught her in the act, and that she had not denied it, except to claim she was giving the drug as a love potion, not to kill him."[22] This account seems to be entirely fabricated and there is no corroboration, but the tale stands as example of the hostile stepmother in Athenian minds. He presents a stepmother using poison (*pharmaka*) and treachery in order to kill her husband, although he never makes clear why she might want to kill him.

Wanting better inheritance for her children is a common motivation for a hostile stepmother in tragedy, but there was not much incentive in Athens for such actions due to the realities of inheritance law. To begin with, there was no sense of primogeniture, rather heirs would each have a share in their father's estate.[23] If she were the only child, a woman could become an *epikleros*, and the inheritance would pass to her children.[24] In both cases, the inheritance passes the wife altogether, and maneuvering and murdering so only *her* children would benefit strikes as more dangerous and more effort than it is worth.

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[22] Antiphon, *Against the Stepmother for Poisoning* 9: τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ ἠθέλησα μὲν τὰ τούτων ἀνδράποδα βασαβίσαι, ἃ συνήδει καὶ πρότερον τὴν γυναῖκα ταύτην, μητέρα δὲ τοῦτων. τῷ πατρὶ τῷ ἡμετέρῳ θάνατον μηχανωμένην φαρμάκοις, καὶ τὸν πατέρα εἰληφότα ἐπ᾽ αὐτοφώρῳ, ταύτην τε οὐκ οὖσαν ἄπαρνον, πλὴν οὐκ ἐπὶ θανάτῳ φάσκουσαν διδόναι ἀλλ᾽ ἐπὶ φίλτροις. Michael Gagarin, *Speeches from Athenian Law* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) 44-51.

[23] Watson, *Stepmothers*, 59.

[24] See Patterson, *Family*, 91-103, for a full discussion of the position of the *epikleros*. See also Foxhall (1989).

The family was intrinsically wrapped up with the polis; strong families led to a strong polis, and as *poleis* became larger and more powerful, the incentives to declare who was one of "us" and who was not became more relevant, especially to those in power.[25] Private issues would seep into public life, and the desire to control the moral fiber of both is clear in Athenian law.[26] The moral interdependency of public and private life is seen in the representation and legislation of marriage and adultery.[27] A fragment of Solon to this effect reads:

> the public ruin invades the house of each citizen,
> and the courtyard doors no longer have the strength
> to keep it away,
> but it overleaps the lofty wall, and though a man
> runs in and tries to hide in chamber or closet, it
> ferrets him out.[28]

The public and private were seen as intrinsically connected. A large part of the laws around legitimacy are concerned with women's sex lives, a preoccupation that if she does not as she is told, she will bring down ruin.[29] The negative traits associated with women are amplified in the case of the stepmother, who is doubly suspicious because of her inherent remove from the family

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[25] I use family here in a general, encompassing sense. Definitions of, for instance, *oikos* and *genos*, and their particularities and meanings in law stand in debate. See Patterson (1998) Ch. 3, MacDowell (1989), Manville (1990), Bourriot (1976), Lambert (1993).

[26] Patterson, *Family*, 107-8.

[27] Ibid., 130-32. For an argument that Athenian women had rather more liberation than is often assumed, see Roy (1997). There were laws against men committing adultery as well, with potential penalty of death. Cohen, *Law*, 100-2.

[28] Solon, frag. 4 West, trans. by Richmond Lattimore, *Greek Lyrics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 21: οὕτω δημόσιον κακὸν ἔρχεται οἴκαδ᾽ ἑκάστῳ, αὐλειοι δ᾽ ἔτ᾽ ἔχειν οὐκ ἐθέλουσι θύραι, ὑψηλὸν δ᾽ ὑπὲρ ἕρκος ὑπέρθορεν, εὗρε δὲ πάντως, εἰ καί τις φεύγων ἐν μυχῷ ἢ θαλάμου. For early development of the Athenian community, see Dmitriev (2018).

[29] Watson, *Stepmothers*, 88-90. In *Trojan Women*, Hecuba argues for Helen's death, concluding her argument: "thus the custom hereafter for all other women is made: death is the cost of adultery." νόμον δὲ τόνδε ταῖς ἄλλαισι θὲς γυναιξί, θνήσκειν ἥτις ἂν προδῷ πόσιν. Eur. TW. 1031-32.

she is joining. Concerns of foreign influence on the Athenian citizenry are then shifted onto the stepmother, who becomes the placeholder for otherness.

Athenian citizenship was codified by Solon and Cleisthenes in the sixth century and made stricter by Pericles in the mid fifth century.[30] The limiting of Athenian citizenship by Pericles 451/0 speaks to Athenian exceptionalism, a desire to exclude those who were *not* Athenian. It was a shrewd political maneuver to curb foreign influence and control the population in power, keeping it consolidated.[31] For all that marriage was central to the legitimacy of an heir and proof of their citizenship and ability to enroll in their phratry, there was no legal representation or formal certification thereof. It was a recognized social process, but it was ambiguous.[32] Due to nonspecific definitions of marriage, proving (il)legitimacy was a possible avenue to gain or block someone from an inheritance, and we have evidence of the sons trying to do so.[33]

In 430/29, an exception to Pericles' own law was made to legitimize his *nothos* as his legitimate heirs had died. Exception or an emendation, this set a new precedent for the Athenian citizenry after the previous two decades.[34] It would not be remiss to suppose this change in law

[30] Patterson, *Family*, 24, 26, 109-10.
[31] See Habicht (2000) for a discussion of foreign last names as a marker of foreign influence in Athens. In the mid-fourth century, there is a clause, mentioned in Demosthenes, which in fact prohibited citizens from marital cohabitation, or *sunoikein* (συνοικεῖν), with non-Athenians. Dem. 59.16: "I want to show you clearly that Neaera is a foreigner, and that she is living as married with Stephanus in violation of the law." ὡς δ᾽ ἐστὶ ξένη Νέαιρα καὶ παρὰ τοὺς νόμους συνοικεῖ Στεφάνῳ, τοῦτο ὑμῖν βούλομαι σαφῶς ἐπιδεῖξαι. Victor Bers, trans., *Demosthenes. Speeches 50-59* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003) 158; For more on *sunoikein* and marriage as a cultural process, both social and legal, see Patterson (1991) 48-9, 61-2. For more on the law, see Kapparis (1999) 202. See also Kennedy (2014) 17-22.
[32] Patterson, *Family,* 108-14.
[33] Watson, *Stepmothers*, 52-71.
[34] For an argument that it was an emendation of the law in 430/29, rather than merely an exception, see Edwin Carawan (2008).

would make some of the population, in particular the ruling class of citizens, nervous about who is inheriting what: suddenly the *nothoi* who twenty years ago were prevented from inheritance were now a threat to legitimate sons' inheritance.[35] This is reflected in speeches from legal cases we have such as Antiphon 1, as discussed above, and Isaeus 8; the case is about the estate of Ciron, the speaker's mother's legitimacy was evidently called into question by the opposition in order to reject their claim to inheritance.[36] After Pericles' law of 451/0, there was an increase in *nothoi* in Athens, newly excluded from citizenship, and likely unhappy about it.[37] The appearance of *nothoi* in Euripides is a response to shifting citizenship laws and the probable unrest about them.

Patricia Watson outlines the consistent traits of the stepmother that we see in myth as evil and self-centered, lacking self-control, jealous, and cunning.[38] The hostility they portray takes the form of violence or lust, as with Hermione and Phaedra, for example. Watson argues that the stepmother is the inheritor of general misogynistic attitudes, the traits of jealousy, treachery, a lack of self-control commonly attributed to women as a whole to explain their inferiority. The fear of female sexuality as a potentially destructive force contextualizes these assumptions: a potential illegitimate pregnancy is a threat to the integrity of the *oikos*.[39] It is a logical step for these negative traits associated with women to be magnified in the case of the stepmother, who represents the other within the family. This stereotype is a reflection of concerns of identity

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[35] Anastasia Valtadorou, "Merely a Slave? Bastardy, Legitimation and Inheritance in Euripides *Andromache*," *The Classical Journal* 177, no. 4 (2022) 422-437.
[36] Isaeus, "On the Estate of Ciron," in *Isaeus*, trans. E. S. Forster, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 282-83, 287-89. See also Isaeus 12 and Lysias 32.
[37] For a detailed exploration of the citizenship law, see Cynthia Patterson, *Pericles Citizenship Law of 451-50 B.C.* (Salem, NH: The Ayer Company, 1981).
[38] Watson, *Stepmothers*, 22-31.
[39] Ibid., 84, 88-89. For discussion of adultery, Patterson, *Family*, 114-25. An adulteress was barred from public religious life but could remarry. Cohen, *Law*, 107, 124.

legitimacy in Athens, particularly after Pericles' law of 451/0, which we see dramatized in Euripides as the "hostile stepmother".

**The Hostile Stepmother in Euripides: Specter and Killer**

The stepmother is an inheritor of common negative cultural ideas about women, garnering further suspicion due to her position as a replacement in the family. Evidence of these sentiments against women in general is present in Euripides' works, for example: in *Medea*: "Although a woman is so fearful in all other ways…when she's been wrongly treated in the field of sex, there is no other cast of mind more deadly, none,"[40] and "What's more, we are born women. It may be we're unqualified for deeds of virtue: yet as the architects of every kind of mischief, we are supremely skilled."[41] In *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, Orestes says "Women are awfully good at scheming,"[42] to Iphigenia: she, a woman, would be better and plotting an underhanded escape. When we see examples of women's plotting violence, it is often through trickery or poison, as with Medea and Creusa, or the treachery shows itself in a false accusation as with Phaedra or even the concubine in *Phoenix*.[43] The hostile stepmother appears in Euripides,

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[40] Euripides, *Medea*, trans. Oliver Taplin, in *Euripides I*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 263-66: γυνὴ γὰρ τἄλλα μὲν φόβου πλέα κακή…ὅταν δ᾽ ἐς εὐνὴν ἠδικημένη κυρῇ, οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλην φρὴν μιαιφονωτέρα.
[41] Ibid., 407-09: πρὸς δὲ καὶ πεφύκαμεν γυναῖκες, ἐς μὲν ἔσθλ᾽ ἀμηχανώταται, κακῶν δὲ πάντων τέκτονες σοφώταται. See also 889-90.
[42] Euripides, *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, trans. Anne Carson, in *Euripides III*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 1032: δειναὶ γὰρ αἱ γυναῖκες εὑρίσκειν τέχνας.
[43] Clytemnestra is an exception to 'womanly' violence in her 'manly' assault on Agamemnon. There is continued debate over reading Euripides as a radical, a feminist, or as a staunch conservative. March (1990) argues well that although he portrays wicked women, he gives them full characterization and sympathy. He was controversial enough in his time to have his portrayals of women lampooned by Aristophanes, for instance in *Frogs* 1043-1054. Aeschylus accuses Euripides of portraying bad women and corrupting the women of Athens through his work. See also in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, 466-519, Mnesilochus' speech on Euripides' representation of women. I argue radical or not, he brings rich characters to life that have engendered debate for over two millennia: he was good at his job.

both in its hypothetical form to spur fear or action from a character, and in real stepmothers who are hostile to their stepchildren. The stereotype is both an extension of the misogynistic views and a reflection of anxieties about cultural dilution. The otherness of the stepmother makes her an enemy within the household.

*Alcestis* and *Medea* both include a fear of a hostile stepmother and her potential to harm their children. In *Alcestis*, as Alcestis is on her deathbed, she implores Admetus not to remarry, to not subject her children to a stepmother (μητρυιά):

> τούτος ἀνάσχου δεσπότας ἐμῶν δόμων,
> καὶ μὴ ᾽πιγήμῃς τοῖσδε μητρυιὰν τέκνοις,
> ἥτις κακίων οὖσ᾽ ἐμοῦ γυνὴ φθόνῳ
> τοῖς σοῖσι κἀμοῖς παισὶ χεῖρα προσβαλεῖ…
> ἐχθρὰ γὰρ ἡ ᾽πιοῦσα μητρυιὰ τέκνοις
> τοῖς πρόσθ᾽, ἐχίδνης οὐδὲν ἠπιωτέρα.
>
> Keep them as masters in my house, and do not marry
> again and give our children a stepmother
> who will not be so kind as I, who will be jealous
> and raise her hand to your children and mine…
> for the new-come stepmother hates the children born
> to a first wife; no viper could be deadlier.[44]

As she lay dying in place of her husband, the promise she exacts from him is to not remarry, for fear of a stepmother and what she will cause. Alcestis fears that the stepmother will harm their children, "raise her hand to your children" (παισὶ χεῖρα προσβαλεῖ) and states this violent relationship between stepmother and stepchildren as a given: She will act violently out of

[44] Euripides, *Alcestis*, trans. Richmond Lattimore in *Euripides III*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 304-10.

jealousy.[45] Here jealousy, one of Watson's main characteristics of the stepmother, is the prime motivator for her theoretical violence towards Alcestis' children. Alcestis' command to "keep them as masters in my house" (ἀνάσχου δεσπότας ἐμῶν δόμων) represents a fear that a second wife would complicate her children's status within the household. Her reference to "my house" is a remark on the wife's mastery over the internal affairs of the house, including of the raising of children, and connotes an aversion to another, the spectral stepmother, taking it over or affecting her children. The internal affairs of the home are the only space in which she has tangible power; relinquishing it to another, even after death, is unthinkable. The chorus of citizens is in agreement with Alcestis, saying if Admetus does not do as she asks, he is making a mistake.[46] She declares, "no viper could be deadlier [than a stepmother" (ἐχίδνης οὐδὲν ἠπιωτέρα)*;* the stepmother as a venomous snake drives home the idea of a woman's sneaky, underhanded violence. She is the viper sent to kill Heracles in his crib. Although imaginary, the threat of the stepmother, and her potential children, as replacing Alcestis and her legacy, the implication, is enough to be a potent fear as she lay dying.

In *Medea*, as well, the specter of the stepmother looms over Medea's decisions to protect her children by killing them. To an Athenian audience who knew of her future actions against Theseus in Athens, it is rife with dramatic irony. In this reading of Medea, her infanticide is an

[45] Ibid., 306-07: φθόνῳ …προσβαλεῖ Lattimore translates "who will be jealous and raise her hand…" which while poetic, the operative dative φθόνῳ drives home jealousy (of Alcestis' relationship with Admetus, her children, their position in the household) as the motivation of this potential stepmother's violence, right in line with one of the major characteristics of the stepmother as outlined above.
[46] Ibid., 327.

act of love, a merciful act in the face of a violent threat towards her children: that if she is now an enemy, her children are as well. Just before killing her children, Medea says:

> καὶ μὴ σχολὴν ἄγουσαν ἐκδοῦναι τέκνα
> ἄλλῃ φονεῦσαι δυσμενεστέρᾳ χερί.
> πάντως σφ᾽ ἀνάγκη κατθανεῖν· ἐπεὶ δὲ χρή,
> ἡμεῖς κτενοῦμεν, οἵπερ ἐξεφύσαμεν.
>
> I must make no delay, and give no time
> for someone else's crueler hand to slaughter them.
> Now they are bound to die in any case;
> and since they must, it will be me, who gave them birth,
> who'll be the one to deal them death.[47]

A similar sentiment is expressed during Medea's speech during which she decides to follow through killing them: "…there is no way that I shall leave my boys among my enemies so they can treat them with atrocity."[48] These lines are followed by the same three lines above "now they are bound…deal them death".[49] In these moments it is clear that she sees her killing of her children as necessary: if she does not do such a deed herself, others, (such as a spectral stepmother) will, and far more violently. "They are bound to die" (ἀνάγκη κατθανεῖν): the circumstances not only threaten, but *necessitate*, the children's deaths. The only question now is how they shall die, and Medea ensures that at least it will not be a cruel death. Medea sees her killing of her children not simply as a means to the end of destroying Jason, but as an act of

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[47] Eur. Med. Taplin, 1238-42.

[48] Ibid., 1060-61: οὔτοι ποτ᾽ ἔσται τοῦθ᾽ ὅπως ἐχθροῖς ἐγὼ παῖδας παρήσω τοὺς ἐμοὺς καθυβρίσαι.

[49] There is much debate over whether 1056-1080 are an interpolation. I agree with Foley (1989), and her with Murray, that the potentially contradictory nature is due to Euripides' complex arguments, and that while textual issues may be apparent, there does not feel enough argument to remove the block of speech outright. Kovacs (1986) concisely explores the arguments for excision and argues well for inclusion. I would add to his argument that the necessity of Medea's filicide is twofold—complete revenge on Jason *and* an act of mercy out of motherly concern for their lives, by their new stepmother or other enemies.

mercy, as well.[50] In other versions of the myth preceding Euripides, Medea's children are indeed killed by the Corinthians.[51] Children being killed in order to wholly defeat their parent also has precedent across history and literature, from the sack of Troy to Athens' siege of Melos. Medea has evidently assimilated. She has close friends and supporters, the Nurse and the Chorus visiting and supporting her against Jason: "I will do this [stay silent]: you are justified in exacting punishment on your husband, Medea."[52] Although they do not approve of Medea's actions, they do not betray her to Jason or Creon. Despite these connections, Medea is still a foreigner, an other, to Corinth, which means that she will be treated as an enemy, that they shall do their worst by her, which includes killing her children.[53]

After the deed is done, the chorus compares Medea to Ino, noting Medea's mental clarity.[54] The choice to reference Ino in particular, rather than another madness-induced filicidal woman such as Agave, foreshadows Medea's future actions as a hostile stepmother herself towards Jason in Athens. Ino schemed to kill her stepchildren, Phrixus and Helle and later killed

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[50] For Medea's simultaneous revenge on Jason and sorrow for her children, see Mills (1980).

[51] Kreophilos and Pausanius have the Corinthians kill the children in a temple and then spread rumor that Medea had killed them. Some variations see Medea *accidentally* kill her children attempting to grant them immortality, for instance Eumelos. One thinks of Demophon in the *Hymn to Demeter* 233-62, a child who was almost granted immortality, but accidentally doomed by his own mother. Jennifer March, "Euripides the Mysogynist?" in *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, ed. Anton Powell (New York: Routledge, 1990) 35-36; Watson, *Stepmothers*, 24 n. 15. Mastronarde (2002) 50-52. See also Page (1938) xxiii.

[52] Eur. Med. 267: δράσω τάδ᾽· ἐνδίκως γὰρ ἐκτείσῃ πόσιν, Μήδεια.

[53] Concern for the children is present throughout the play from several characters, not just Medea: cf. Eur. Med. 36-37, 89-91, 181-88, 344-45, 555- 67, 782, 914-15, 1303-5, 1378. Elsewhere in Euripides, *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women* feature children killed in war for who their parents are. Cf. Eur. Hec. 220-29; 1137-45; Eur. TW. 725. Rochelle (2012) explores the role of children and their deaths in tragedy more broadly.

[54] Eur. Med. 1282-4: μίαν δὴ κλύω μίαν τῶν πάρος γυναῖκ᾽ ἐν φίλοις χέρα βαλεῖν τέκνοις· Ἰνὼ μανεῖσαν ἐκ θεῶν… "I've heard of only one woman past, to raise a hand against her dear children: was Ino, sent mad by the gods." Ino's story ends in her death, as does Procne, another story of revenge through her own children, although Procne lacks the motherly affection Medea retains. See Mills (1980) and Newton (1985) for more on Ino and Procne parallels in Medea. Foley (1989) discusses the clear-headedness of Medea's decision, though contrasts the head with the heart. I propose a Medea who is acting as a *unified* self, hurting, yes, her heart, but not in conflict with it.

her children and herself in madness sent from Hera.[55] I address below the fragments of Euripides plays concerning Ino. Medea, conversely, becomes a filicide and then goes on to attempt to poison Theseus due to the threat he represents to her own children by Aegeus. Jason views Medea's actions throughout the play as motivated by sexual jealousy, another of the main traits of the hostile stepmother as posited by Watson.[56] Her actions here are haunted by the specter of her future actions as a cruel stepmother against Theseus, attempting to have him killed to secure her place in Aegeus' house in Athens.[57]

I move now to the actual stepmothers we have in Euripides, beginning with Phaedra, our example of a lustful stepmother. Phaedra is punished by Aphrodite to lust after Hippolytus as

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[55] Hera is arguably the epitome of the hostile stepmother represented in the Greek pantheon. Although she is not a stepmother in full, her murderous intent towards all of her husband's bastard children is a strong presence throughout myth. In some sense, she is doing so in defense of the sanctity of marriage and the family unit. Hera, though, is ruthless in her attacks, going after both mother and child. Ino, for instance, who helped nurse Dionysus is sent made by Hera after the *Phrixus* cycle of myth, killing herself and her children, who were wholly innocent of involvement, in the process. Hera is the hostile stepmother who is able to successfully carry out her violent plans without repercussion because she is a god: they may do what they wish, and it is the mortals who suffer for it. Dionysus continues the cycle of violence when he returns to Thebes in *Bacchae*, having no care for Agave's part in his upbringing. Hera is the godly incarnation of the potential of female rage and violence which is behind the hostile stepmother stereotype. See O'Brien (1990-1991) for an exploration of this 'savage' Hera in the Odyssey.

[56] Watson, *Stepmothers*, 26-9; Torrance (2019) 81-83 argues that Jason's new marriage and improved status it will bring is wrapped up in the *more* legitimate children the marriage would create. Both Jason and Medea are foreigners in Corinth, Medea more so, and Jason sees the new marriage as naturalizing himself, a bit of reversal of roles in marriage. Lloyd (1992) 131-32 discusses the *agon* in Euripides' often address topical issues, and do not carry large consequence for the characters, but serves to highlight both sides of the main conflict of the play.

[57] We have fragments of a Euripidean play about Medea in Athens, which Collard and Crop posit preceded his *Medea*, but there is scant evidence and fragments. In any case, all variants of the story involve Medea attempting to have Jason killed in order to prevent him from claiming his place in Aegeus' house, a threat to her own position, either by setting him up against the bull of Marathon or convincing Aegeus to poison Theseus, saved at the last moment by his father's recognition. The fragments we have include a line which is quoted in Stobaeus 4.22.157: πέφυκε γάρ πως παισὶ πολέμιον γυνὴ τοῖς πρόσθεν ἡ ζυγεῖσα δευτέρα πατρί. | A woman is naturally somewhat hostile towards the children of a previous marriage when she is their father's second wife. Euripides, "Aegeus," in *Euripides VII: Fragments: Aegeus—Meleager*, trans. Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 3-11. Mention of the episode also appears in Plutarch's account of Theseus: Plu.Thes.12.2-3; For connections between *Medea* and the Athenocentric myth, see Sfyroeras (1994-1995).

revenge for his eschewing of sex and worship of Artemis rather than her.[58] He is the firstborn of Theseus, but born out of wedlock, a *nothos*,[59] whereas Phaedra has borne her own children to Theseus, legitimate heirs; Phaedra's nurse, who ends up betraying her to Hippolytus, implies that these children would be at risk of not inheriting their due if she commits suicide:

> εἰ θανῇ, προδοῦσα σοὺς
> παῖδας. πατρῴων μὴ μεθέξοντας δόμων,
> μὰ τὴν ἄνασσαν ἱππίαν Ἀμαζόνα.
> ἣ σοῖς τέκνοισι δεσπότην ἐγείνατο
> νόθον φρονοῦντα γνήσι᾽, οἶσθά νιν καλῶς,
> Ἱππόλυτον…
>
> If you die, you will be a traitor to your children.
> They will never know their share in a father's palace.
> No, by the Amazon queen, the mighty rider
> who bore a master for your children,
> one bastard in birth but trueborn son in mind,
> you know him well—Hippolytus.[60]

Though it is unclear why Phaedra's suicide would directly affect her children's inheritance, the concern for Theseus' favor of Hippolytus, "trueborn son in mind" (φρονοῦντα γνήσι᾽), is clear.[61] Phaedra is unwilling to act on her forced feelings, the Nurse's divulging of the secret to

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[58] I would like to comment here that the tragedy of Hippolytus hinges on godly machinations of Aphrodite, for a perceived slight: they have no care for their effects on mortals. Aphrodite's anger stems from her jealousy of Hippolytus' piety to Artemis: it boils down to hostile actions out of sexual jealousy. Eur. Hipp. 10-22. The same could be said of Hera in myth, although as the goddess of marriage she is at least ostensibly acting on principle. See note 55 for more on Hera as a hostile stepmother.

[59] Cf. Eur. Hipp. 305, 960, 1080. Hippolytus' position as a *nothos*, but a divine and favored one imply anxieties of what issues a preferred bastard might bring to a family.

[60] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, trans. David Grene, in *Euripides I*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 305-310. Potentially, φρονοῦντα γνήσι᾽ is a reference to Pericles' granted concession to his own citizenship law to enroll his *nothoi* by Aspasia in his phratry after his trueborn heirs died. His use of μεθέξοντας is particularly Athenian, the verb used to discuss citizenship as having "a share in the city".

[61] For more of parent-child relationships in classical Athens, see Raepsaet-Charlier (1971).

Hippolytus leads to Phaedra to commit suicide and falsely accuse Hippolytus of raping her. This falsehood is so that he will be discredited, and her own children will be assured of Theseus' heirship. It will prevent Hippolytus becoming the "master of [her] children" (τέκνοισι δεσπότην). The cunning maneuvering behind the back of her husband to the end of ensuring her children's inheritance over the *nothos* Hippolytus is both an example of the traits of the hostile stepmother and evidence of anxieties surrounding *nothoi* in Athens. The idea that a bastard, despite their illegitimacy, might be preferred to the legitimate child and have bearing on inheritance was likely a concern of the sons of Athens. They are added competition with whom there is less familial connection: rivals, enemies. Phaedra resorts to schemes in order to damn Hippolytus, seeming to decide that if she is to die, she will take him with her, fulfilling her role as a both lustful and hostile stepmother. There is a unidirectional continuum for the stepmother: A lustful stepmother can and will become hostile; a hostile stepmother is beginning at the violent end of the spectrum and does not become lustful.[62] A woman's lust, then, is seen as inherently dangerous to the Greeks, potentially destructive to their view of how things, families, women, should be, therefore it is to be kept at bay: the continuum is a warning to men of what female sexuality can bring, and to women, that should they act, they will meet a tragic end. Hippolytus in his position as a *nothos* dramatizes the potential strife a bastard can bring into a legitimate family unit.[63] *Hippolytus* serves to illustrate concerns about the damage both stepmothers and *nothoi* could do the family, no matter how powerful or virtuous.

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[62] Along with Phaedra, the concubine in *Phoenix*'s story is an example of the lustful becoming hostile.
[63] Phoenix is an adjacent story: In Homer, his father, Amyntor's, concubine supplanting his mother who asks him to sleep with the woman in order to tempt her away from Amyntor. Phoenix does, but his father curses him with childlessness. Hom. Il. 9.447-77. In the fragments of Euripides *Phoenix,* he refuses his mother's request, but the concubine falsely accuses him of rape (like Phaedra), which leads to his father blinding him, this variation potentially Euripides invention. Euripides, "Phoenix" in *Euripides VIII:*

*Andromache* gives us the murderous stepmother in Hermione, who attempts to take the lives of both Andromache and her son while Neoptolemus is away, even as Andromache has taken sanctuary at a temple. Hermione lives up to all the violent stereotypes here, acting out of jealousy, in an underhanded manner, and against the gods. This contrasts with Andromache, who states her own acceptance, and even breastfeeding, of Hector's bastards: "I often nursed [Hector's] *nothoi*, in order to not show him any bitterness."[64] This line serves to underscore her non-Greek origin: of course, Andromache would do such a shocking thing: she is a barbarian.[65] Although Andromache is the non-Greek war-bride, she is the sympathetic endangered protagonist of the play, pitted against the royal, Greek Hermione. The play is overtly anti-Spartan, which is fitting given the play's production in during the Archidamian War in the mid-420s, calling Menelaus, Hermione, and the Spartans unjust schemers on several occasions.[66]

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*Fragments: Fragments: Oedipus-Chrysippus & Other Fragments*, trans. Christopher Collard and Martin Cropp, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) 405-21; Although not a stepmother outright, Amyntor's concubine represents the threat of another woman as an enemy within and to the family unit who brings with her ill ends. Another lustful woman who brings danger to a hero is Stheneboea, who lusts after Bellerophon and upon rejection accuses him of seducing her to her husband Proetus, who exiles him further. Euripides' *Stheneboea* and *Bellerophon* are variant to Homer Il. 6.155-66, but the general point remains the same: a lustful and jealous woman will bring ruin to even the most virtuous of heroes. Euripides, "Stheneboea," in *Euripides VIII*, 121-25; Stheneboea and Phaedra are both named examples in Aristophanes *Frogs*, 1043-55 as examples of wicked women (πόρναι) who should not be portrayed, an argument against Euripides.

[64] Euripides, *Andromache*, trans. Deborah Roberts, in *Euripides II*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 224-5: καὶ μαστὸν ἤδη πολλάκις νόθοισι σοῖς ἐπέσχον, ἵνα σοι μηδὲν ἐνδοίην πικρόν.

[65] Most obvious is that the play is so anti-Spartan (produced in the mid 420s) that the point of this is that even a "barbarian" is more civilized than a Spartan, helping the audience sympathize with Andromache is Hermione and Menelaus' blatant ill-treatment and disrespect for Greek custom. or it is a pointed comment on different family structures.

[66] Cf. Eur. Andr. 445-9, 550, 615, The impiety displayed in *Andromache* by Menelaus and Hermione is doubly shocking because they are Greeks, thus are expected to be civilized, and because of the underhanded nature of their salvos: waiting until Neoptolemus and Peleus are away, lying to Andromache on the altar about the fate of her child, Hermione running away with Orestes to avoid consequence, Orestes' own 'savagery' in how he kills Neoptolemus (arguably an echo of Neoptolemus' murder of Priam at the altar in Troy). These unvirtuous actions are perhaps expected, or at least understandable from Hermione, a woman, a stepmother, but for a hero such as Orestes to act in such a way during peacetime strikes as remarkable. The play engenders questions of what it means to be foreign, or barbarian; perhaps

Andromache and Hermione act as foils: Andromache acts as a good and pious wife, although she is "barbarian", while Hermione is a devious woman, a hostile stepmother, plotting the murder of her husband's child and concubine while he is away.

Hermione is the epitome of the hostile stepmother. She is the legitimate wife of Neoptolemus, but her inability to provide an heir has driven her to attempt killing his existing son and Andromache. This motivation gives support to the argument that providing children, preferentially sons, was a way to cement the status of a woman in her husband's house. Preexisting children, legitimate or otherwise, lessen the hold of any new children a new wife would provide. Hermione's inability to produce an heir only adds to the delicate position of power she holds in Neoptolemus' house. She feels threatened by Andromache, blames her, son and acts accordingly:

> σὺ δ᾽οὖσα δούλη καὶ δορίκτητος γυνὴ
> δόμους κατασχεῖν ἐκβαλοῦσ᾽ ἡμᾶς θέλεις
> τούσδε, στυγοῦμαι δ᾽ ἀνδρὶ φαρμάκοισι σοῖς,
> νηδὺς δ᾽ ἀκύμων διὰ σέ μοι διόλλυται:
> …ἀλλὰ κατθανῆ.
>
> You are a slave, a woman won by the spear,
> Who wants to keep this home and throw me out.
> Your drugs have made me hateful to my husband,
> And because of you my ruined womb is barren
> …you will die.[67]

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it is not from one place or culture, but to act against the cultural "norm" as defined by whomever is speaking, or to undermine it in some way.

[67] Eur. Andr. Roberts, 155-62. Hermione's accusation of Andromache's use of φαρμάκον necessarily calls Medea to mind, another non-Greek on her own in a foreign land. Use of *pharmaka* falls under womanly violence; when women kill, they do so indirectly, through scheming. See also Watson, *Stepmothers*, 24-5.

The interplay between the two women—one free, but childless; one a slave, but with an heir—serves to highlight the precarious relative positions of power women held. Hermione is a less explicit prisoner of her circumstance, but trapped nonetheless, which is put into stark relief when Menelaus essentially abandons her to whatever punishment Neoptolemus and Peleus wish. Hermione schemes against Andromache and is left vulnerable and alienated, whereas Andromache seems to have made friends (with the chorus, at least), keeps her head down and does as she is told.[68] This play is as much telling women to keep their heads down and do as they are told as it is about the consequences of Hermione's jealousy. Both Andromache and Hermione are doing what they see as necessary for their survival. Even freeborn, aristocratic Greek women are always in the control of someone other than themself: the best she can hope for in terms of security and independence is to be a freeborn in a good marriage, and to produce an heir to cement her place in the *oikos.*

Andromache's son is a threat by nature of his very existence, neither completely foreign nor completely Greek, and is threatened because of the limbo he occupies. He is a parallel to Medea's children, though they do not escape death. He is a proxy for the potentiality of the enemy within that the stepmother; his asymmetrical relationships, and therefore split loyalties, are perceived as a threat. He is the son of a former enemy, one who was the wife of Hector. Menelaus defends killing son alongside mother, through a false vow and at the altar, saying:

> …καὶ γὰρ ἀνοία
> μεγάλη λείπειν ἐχθροὺς ἐχθρῶν,
> ἐξὸν κτείνειν
> καὶ φόβον οἴκων ἀφελέσθαι.

[68] Although Andromache is quite outspoken to both Hermione and Menelaus, but they are about to kill her and her son. Cf. Eur. Andr. 184-230; 319-363.

> …It is thoughtlessness
> of a major kind to leave enemy children
> of enemies behind, when instead you can kill,
> and relieve your household of fear.[69]

Menelaus' words encapsulate the sentiment that in order to wholly defeat your enemy, all traces of them, including children, must be destroyed. It echoes Talthybius' phrasing of the necessity of Astyanax's death in *Trojan Women*: a son of Hector's is not allowed to live for what he might grow up to do in the future.[70] Bastards, particularly of a war prize, are a cuckoo in the proverbial nest.[71]

We have fragments of two plays about Phrixus from Euripides. They present us with a conniving and murderous stepmother in the form of Ino, who strikes out against her stepchildren Phrixus and Helle in order to preserve her own children's inheritance. In both variations Ino is plotting to kill both of her stepchildren; she convinces the women of the city to roast the corn seed in order to kill the crops, creating a false plague. In turn, Athamas sends a consult to Delphi and Ino compels the messenger to deliver a false prophecy necessitating Phrixus' sacrifice to Zeus. In *Phrixus* A, set in Thessaly, from Apollodorus, Athamas is about to sacrifice Phrixus, who is saved at the last moment by his divine mother Nephele,[72] alongside his sister, Helle, and taken to safety in Colchis by a golden ram who is then sacrificed. In *Phrixus* B is set in Boeotia,

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[69] Eur. Andr. Roberts, 519-22. Be the worst enemy to your enemies, and the best friend to your friends.
[70] Eur. TW. 723-25.
[71] Valtadorou argues that the legitimation of Neoptolemus' bastard by Andromache at the end of the play in order to continue the family line may have been seen in a positive light by the Athenian audience watching as they were living through plague and war, having just witnessed Pericles the Younger take up the same role. Valtadorou, "Merely a Slave?" 433-4.
[72] One thinks of Artemis' last second saving of Iphigenia in *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*.

summarized by Hygnius, Phrixus volunteers himself for sacrifice,[73] but Ino's plots are exposed by a remorseful messenger, and she is sentenced to death. Ino is saved, however, by Dionysus, whom she nursed as a child, and he sends his maenads to kill Phrixus and Helle.[74] The children are again saved by a golden ram sent by Nephele, though in this version Helle falls to her death while fleeing to Colchis, an etiology for the Hellespont. This ending may have been stated as a prophecy from Dionysus in this play, and the veracity of Phrixus' voluntary sacrifice in either is not complete.[75] In either case, Ino's focus is on Phrixus, who, as the male, is the larger threat to her own children's future. Phrixus and Helle are, like Hippolytus, *nothoi* but divine and favored by their fathers. Once again, we see a stepmother plotting the demise of her stepchildren, out of jealousy and in order to ensure her own children's heirship over the *nothoi* of her husband.

*Ion* presents us with a special case: a mother who thinks herself to be a stepmother and subsequently comes close to killing her own son to ensure her husband's supposed *nothos* does not inherit the Athenian throne; it is bad enough Xuthus is a non-Athenian himself who is in power.[76] Creusa is shown to be a 'good' woman until she finds herself in the role of stepmother, at which point she is spurred to violence by her own motivations to keep a foreign *nothos* from the throne of Athens and at the encouragement of the old man:

ἐκ τῶνδε δεῖ σε δὴ γυναικεῖόν τι δρᾶν·

[73] The Maiden's speech in *The Children of Heracles*, 500-34 comes to mind: the voluntary sacrifice of a child to save a city. Polyxena makes a similar speech of acceptance of death, though she is not volunteering her life. Cf. Eur. Hec. 345-78.
[74] Dionysus' favor to those who raised him and shielded him from Hera's wrath only goes so far: he causes Agave's madness in *Bacchae* and is nowhere to be seen when Ino is sent mad by Hera (see below). The gods remain callous to mortal's suffering, it seems.
[75] Collard and Cropp, "Phrixus A and B" *Eur. VIII*, 423-7. Both versions establish the golden fleece in Colchis for Jason and his Argonauts to quest after. Ino's story ends in tragedy, Hera striking her with madness for her part in raising Dionysus, leading to Ino jumping into the sea with her children, as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, IV. 416-511. For more on Hera as a hostile stepmother, see note 55.
[76] See Eur. Ion, 290-3, 813-5, 1291-1305.

ἢ γὰρ ξίφος λαβοῦσαν ἢ δόλῳ τινὶ
ἢ φαρμάκοισι σὸν κατακτεῖναι πόσιν
καὶ παῖδα, πρὶν σοὶ θάνατον ἐκ κείνων
μολεῖν.

so you now must act a woman's part:
kill them, your husband and his son, by sword,
by poison, or some trick before death comes
to you from them.[77]

The Old Man is very encouraging of Creusa's violence, presenting it as an argument in self-defense: Creusa must attack before they attack her, echoing Medea's preemptive violence in Corinth. The Old Man says as much to Creusa, "They will accuse you, innocent or guilty." Creusa responds, "True: they say stepmothers are always jealous."[78] This exchange implies that even if Creusa does *not* attack Ion, she will be accused of doing so at some point anyway, just for being his stepmother. I recall here Antiphon 1 and the inscription from Epidaurus: however spurious the evidence, the stepmother will be blamed. When Creusa refuses to kill Ion for his loyalty to her, he says "then kill the son, who has become a menace to you."[79] Ion's appearance, and the assumption that he is a *nothos*, threatens Creusa's position in the household, and Athenian social integrity. She does not immediately want to act violently but is convinced by the threat a foreign *nothos* poses to her and the Athenian line she represents. She assumes the role of hostile stepmother, confirming the priestess' warning to Ion, "Wives are always hostile to

[77] Euripides, *Ion*, trans. Ronald Frederick Willetts, in *Euripides III*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 843-6.
[78] Ibid. 1024-5: σὺ παῖδα δόξεις διολέσαι, κεἰ μὴ κτενεῖς. ὀρθῶς· φθονεῖν γάρ φασι μητρυιὰς τέκνοις.
[79] Ibid., 978: νῦν δ᾽ ἀλλὰ παῖδα τὸν ἐπὶ σοὶ πεφηνότα.

children born before."[80] Creusa and Xuthus are in Delphi to inquire about an heir as they have been unable to produce one: A legitimate heir is needed to continue the family line.

Ion recognizes these issues, and before the truth of his mother is revealed, he does not want to go with Xuthus and Creusa, fearful of a stepmother and that he would be a foreign *nothos* asserting himself as heir to Athens:

> εἶναί φασι τὰς αὐτόχθονας
> κλεινὰς Ἀθήνας οὐκ ἐπείσακτον γένος,
> ἵν᾽ ἐσπεσοῦμαι δύο νόσω κεκτημένος,
> πατρός τ᾽ ἐπακτοῦ καὐτὸς ὢν νοθαγενής…
> αὐτὴ καθ᾽ αὑτὴν τὴν τύχην οἴσει πικρῶς,
> πῶς οὐχ ὑπ᾽ αὐτῆς εἰκότως μισήσομαι,
> ὅταν παραστῶ σοὶ μὲν ἐγγύθεν ποδός,
> ἡ δ᾽ οὖσ᾽ ἄτεκνος τὰ σὰ φίλ᾽ εἰσορᾷ πικρῶς
>
> The earth-born people of glorious Athens are said
> to be no immigrant race. I would intrude
> there marked by two defects, a foreigner's son,
> and myself a bastard…she will
> have cause for bitterness and cause enough
> to hate me when I take my place as heir:
> without a child herself, she will not kindly
> regard your own.[81]

Ion is acutely aware of the issues at hand. He knows that the Athenians will not take kindly to an outsider in the ranks of their rulers. He thinks himself to be doubly other (a reflection of the stepmother) both "a foreigner's son, and…a bastard." (πατρός τ᾽ ἐπακτοῦ καὐτὸς ὢν νοθαγενής). Ion already sees himself under threat because of his otherness, from Athens as a

[80] Ibid. 1329: προγονοῖς δάμαρτες δυσμενεῖς ἀεί ποτε.
[81] Ibid., 589-92, 610-4.

whole and Creusa, herself.[82] He prays for his mother to be an Athenian in order to give him rights of speech.[83] He would still be *nothos*, but at least a (partially) Athenian one. There is a clear fear of foreign dilution of the Athenian citizenry and assertion of Athenians as Athenians. The last lines, "without a child…" imply that without children of her own, the hostile stepmother is perhaps more likely to hate and lash out at her stepchildren. Their presence puts her position in the house at further risk.[84]

The maintenance of the Athenian line, descended from Erectheus is front and center in this play, coming to in the stichomythia between Creusa and Ion:

> Κρέουσα: ἔκτεινά σ᾽ ὄντα πολέμιον δόμοις ἐμοῖς
> …κἀπίμπρης γ᾽ Ἐρεχθέως δόμους.
> Ἴων: ποίοισι πανοῖς ἢ πυρὸς ποίᾳ φλογί;
> K: ἔμελλες οἰκεῖν τἄμ᾽, ἐμοῦ βίᾳ λαβών.
> I: πατρός γε γῆν διδόντος ἣν ἐκτήσατο.
> K: τοῖς Αἰόλου δὲ πῶς μετῆν τῶν Παλλάδος;
>
> Creusa: I tried to kill the enemy of my house…you tried to burn Erectheus' house!
> Ion: What fiery flame, what torches did I carry?
> C: You hoped to force possession of my home!
> I: My father's gift—the land he gained for himself.
> C: How can Aeolians share Athenian land?[85]

[82] See Kasimis (2018) 26-45 for a full discussion of Ion and the politics of Athenian immigration.
[83] Eur. Ion, Willetts, 670-5: "I pray my mother is Athenian, so that through her I may have rights of speech. For when a foreigner comes into a city of pure blood, though in name a citizen, his mouth's a slave: he has no right of speech." εἰ δ᾽ ἐπεύξασθαι χρεών, ἐκ τῶν Ἀθηνῶν μ᾽ ἡ τεκοῦσ᾽ εἴη γυνή, ὥς μοι γένηται μητρόθεν παρρησία. καθαρὰν γὰρ ἤν τις ἐς πόλιν πέσῃ ξένος, κἂν τοῖς λόγοισιν ἀστὸς ᾖ, τό γε στόμα δοῦλον πέπαται κοὐκ ἔχει παρρησίαν.
[84] A similar situation is at play for Hermione in *Andromache*.
[85] Ibid., 1291-7.

Ion poses a threat to end that, to Creusa who represents Erechtheus' line, a mythic *epikleros* and, by extension, Athens' social integrity. In 1295, "You hoped to force possession of my home!", the Greek, ἐμοῦ βίᾳ λαβών suggests an even stronger, "seize my life," βίᾳ, life encompassing Creusa's power in Athens and all she represents as the physical legacy of 'pure' Athenians. Her accusation that Ion "tried to burn Erectheus' house" speaks to this as well: his presence and subsequent inheritance of Athens if he was in fact a foreign *nothos* would have ended the familial line, ending the legacy of Erectheus.[86] This exchange encapsulates the conflation of the family unit and public life, and has the preservation of a 'pure' Athens at its core. Aeolians cannot be allowed to inherit Athens; as Ion mentions earlier, the "people of glorious Athens are…no immigrant race."[87] Creusa's fears about Ion as assumed to be Xuthus' foreign *nothos* displays the Athenian fears about both foreign influence and the issues that *nothoi* and stepmothers can bring to families. The threat to Creusa's position in her home, Athenian land, and the house of Erectheus that Ion represents is enough to drive her to murder.

**Conclusion**

Exploration of the hostile stepmother as she appears in Euripides helps us to understand anxieties in classical Athens about identity which stemmed from the disruptive violence of the time. The stepmother was an easy scapegoat onto which fears were offloaded; their tenuous position in the family unit lent them to represent otherness in the microcosm of the family. The projection of insecurities onto a minority group of the population is not unfamiliar to us today, just as the hostile stepmother persists in the collective imagination. All this discussion of bad

[86] Cf. Peleus' reaction to Neoptolemus' murder at the hands of Orestes, Eur. Andr. 1077.
[87] Eur. Ion, 589-90.

stepmothers begs the question, is there such a thing as a *good* stepmother in the Athenian imagination?

Greek tragedy frequently takes well-known myths and interjects Athens' presence. The city itself is central to the plots of *Suppliant Women*, *Children of Heracles*, and *Medea*. In these plays Athens stands as a sanctuary to characters seeking refuge. The city's presence is a character itself, lying in the background of the action. Part of Athens' identity of exceptionalism is the freedom it claims to represent through democracy which extends to its position as a place of refuge and justice. Even in the mythic monarchal setting, both Theseus and Demophon defend this.[88] In *Suppliant Women*, Theseus rejects Adrastus and the women's supplication at first, but once he commits to their protection and the retrieval of their dead, he is steadfast in his mission. Theseus is convinced by the grief of the chorus and by his mother, Aethra, who appeals to the justice of protecting the suppliants and retrieving the dead for proper burial. This sets up the moral high ground which bolsters Theseus, and by extension Athens, as the play goes on.[89]

*Children of Heracles* features Athens providing sanctuary for the imperiled weak: children, an old man, and a lone woman, who are fleeing a hostile *polis*.[90] Demophon rejects the Mycenean herald's claim on the children, declaring that if he betrayed the suppliants, "it will

[88] Euripides, *The Suppliant Women*, 404-584 sees Theseus debate Eurystheus' herald about the superiority of democracy over autocracy. Demophon balances the desire to grant sanctuary to the children and his loyalty to the Athenians when it is declared that a noble maiden must be sacrificed: he will not be tyrant to his own people: Eur. Heraclid. 410-24.
[89] For Athens' mercy for Thebes, cf. Eur. SW. 723-30. Morwood (2012) argues convincingly that the play is emblematic of Athens' narrow, nationalist world view and is an appeal against isolationism and Athenocentrism.
[90] The play is a strong parallel to the terms in which the Peloponnesian war was couched by Athens. They are shown to welcome suppliants, be strong in battle, but still merciful, avoiding miasma from killing Eurystheus after he surrenders, leaving it to Alcmene. Cf. Eur. Heraclid. 1022-55.

look as if I'm governing a country that is not free."[91] Once Heracles' daughter sacrifices herself, Demophon and the Athenians stand by the sanctuary they gave Alcmene and the children, successfully defeating Eurystheus. *Medea*, as well, features Athens as a presence of sanctuary which aids the protagonist: Aegeus shows up in Corinth as Medea is attempting to figure out her plans and offers her sanctuary in exchange for aiding him in producing heirs. "…once [you] arrive safe in my country, then I'll do my best to act as your protector there, as would be only right."[92] Although there is a more transactional nature, the promise of protection to an outsider stands, as well as an appeal to the godly righteousness protecting Medea entails.[93] Athens stands in the background of tragedy as a sanctuary to those needing protection, especially to victims of war.

In the dramas, Athens, itself functions as a benevolent stepmother. It is an adoptive mother-land to those seeking sanctuary in the examples above, such as the children of Heracles. This reading is not at odds with the Athenian concerns of foreignness: they were an immigrant state, metics holding an established and strong presence in the city; the concern of the Athenians was controlling who was a *citizen*.[94] I turn to historical precedent of the city as an adoptive mother. Athens seemed to treat orphans as a private affair: depending on which parent had died, they would end up in one place or another. The state was concerned with protecting that child's

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[91] Euripides, *The Children of Heracles*, trans. Mark Griffith, in *Euripides I*, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore, 3rd ed., ed. M. Griffith and G. W. Most, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 244-5. οὐκ ἐλευθέραν οἰκεῖν δοκήσω γαῖαν.

[92] Eur. Med. Taplin, 723-4: σοῦ μὲν ἐλθούσης χθόνα, πειράσομαί σου προξενεῖν δίκαιος ὤν.

[93] τήνδε σοι δοῦναι…πρόθυμός εἰμι, πρῶτα μὲν θεῶν, ἔπειτα παίδων ὧν ἐπαγγέλλη γονάς. "I am inclined to grant this favor to you. First, piety to the gods; and then for the fertility that you assure me of." Eur. Med. Taplin, 720-22.

[94] Kasimis, *Perpetual Immigrant*, 51-83, 145-67 discusses immigrants passing as citizens through Dem. 57. Kennedy, *Immigrant Women*, 28-9 discusses Athenian panhellenisim and the metic woman.

*legal* connection to his mother, ensuring proper enactment of inheritance laws.[95] The importance of the connection to the Athenian mother post-Pericles' law of 451/0 is evident in *Ion* as discussed above.

The procession of the orphans of war at the Festival of Dionysus and the city's legal protections of orphaned children support the reading of Athens as a benevolent stepmother. It is unclear whether the procession of orphans before the festival was meant to be a military display, one of democracy, or otherwise, but it is a clear acknowledgement of the children, and a promise to recognize and raise them, even if only so they can in turn protect the state. The procession of orphans served both as an opportunity for the city to symbolically adopt the children and a stage on which to highlight the tragic consequences of war.[96] By the late fourth century, it is clear from a speech of Aeschines, the ceremony no longer happened. The description has an anti-war sentiment, displaying the processions of orphans as the cost of war.[97] The parade of orphans and

[95] See Rosalia Hatzilambrou, "Was the Athenian State in the Classical Period Indifferent to Maternal Absence?" in *Missing Mothers: Maternal Absence in Antiquity*, ed. S. R. Huebner and D. M. Ratzan (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2021), 57-69.

[96] Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 107 (1987) 60-1; See Andrea Gianotti, "The Pre-Play Ceremonies of the Athenian Great Dionysia: A Reappraisal" (PhD diss., Durham University, 2019), 97-147 for a discussion of the parade and its posited meanings; Isocrates, *de Pace* 82 speaks of the procession: καὶ παρεισῆγον τοὺς παῖδας τῶν ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ τετελευτηκότων, ἀμφοτέροις ἐπιδεικνύοντες τοῖς μὲν συμμάχοις τὰς τιμὰς τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῶν ὑπὸ μισθωτῶν εἰσφερομένης, τοῖς δ᾽ ἄλλοις Ἕλλησι τὸ πλῆθος των ὀρφανῶν καὶ τὰς συμφορὰς τὰς διὰ τὴν πλεονεξίαν ταύτην γιγνομένας. "…they led in upon the stage the sons of those who had lost their lives in the war, seeking thus to display to our allies, on the one hand, the value of their own property which was brought in by hirelings, and to the rest of the Hellenes, on the other, the multitude of the fatherless and the misfortunes which result from this policy of aggression." The passage highlights the orphans' procession as a public spectacle of the effects of war on the populace, though speaking out against excess greed feels a touch hypocritical, Athens. Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia," 60-1.

[97] Aeschines, *Against Ktesiphon* (330 BCE). Goldhill, "Great Dionysia," 63-4.

the city's commitment to their upbringing as citizens and warriors was a public affirmation of Athenian democracy and community at play.[98] The city will be their worthy stepmother.

Thinking about Athens in this way helps us understand Pericles' perplexing conclusion to Athenian mothers in his funeral oration as comes to us from Thucydides:

> εἰ δε με δεῖ καὶ γυναικείας τι ἀρετῆς. ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσονται. μνησθῆναι. βραχείᾳ παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ…τὰ δὲ αὐτῶν τοὺς παῖδας τὸ ἀπὸ τοῦδε δημοσίᾳ ἡ πόλις μέχρι ἥβης θρέψει…νῦν δὲ ἀπολοφυράμεοι ὃν προσήκει ἑκάστῳ ἄπιτε.
>
> If I may speak also of the duty of those wives who will now be widows, a brief exhortation will say it all…the city will maintain their children at public expense from now until they come of age…And now it is time to leave, when each of you has made due lament of your own.[99]

These orphans, whose fathers have died in the war, are being taken in by the state, although their mothers still live, mothers who are told to go home, not to their deceased husband's house, but back to their fathers' houses, to begin again. Pericles charges them with properly, but *briefly,* lamenting their deceased husbands, fulfilling traditional lamentation of women,[100] and the loss of their children to the state, then they are dismissed.[101] The women's "duty" is to relinquish their

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[98] Ibid., 73.
[99] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 2. 45-6.
[100] Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) 4-7.
[101] Plato's Menexenus 237b-c discusses the state raising children orphaned by war who have now died for their motherland: "…natives…living in their own true fatherland, and nurtured by no stepmother, like other people, but by their motherland where they live, which birthed them and raised them and now at their death receives them again…" …αὐτόκθονας…ἐν πατρίδι οἰκοῦντας καὶ ζῶντας, καὶ

children to the state to be raised as ideal Athenian citizens. *Athens* has now adopted these children, and she will be superior to the mothers in every way: the benevolent stepmother.

Athens as a beneficent adoptive mother, may at first feel at odds with the negative stereotype of the stepmother. There is a cognitive dissonance between the paradigm of sanctuary for others and the desire to be an insular community in order to control power. Worries about what outside influence can do to the family unit, and, by extension, the *polis* is not gone: it is balanced against the glory of what Athens stands for. Athens sees itself as a protector of ideals: freedom, democracy. Athens can be a benevolent stepmother, because the collective idea of her is stronger than any human, and there is no possibility of her becoming hostile. Human stepmothers are hostile, and if they are not yet, they will be. Athens as a benevolent stepmother removes the problematic human element of the adoptive relationship: the woman.

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τρεφομένους οὐχ ὑπο μητρυῖας ὡς οἱ ἄλλοι, ἀλλ᾽ ὑπὸ μητρὸς τῆς χώρας ἐν ᾗ ᾤκουν, καὶ νῦν κεῖσθαι τελευτήσαντας ἐν οἰκείοις…καὶ ὑποδεξαμένης.

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