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NINAGAWA'S PRODUCTION OF EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

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THE JAPANESE THEATER DIRECTOR Yukio Ninagawa, known for expressing his opposition to repressive politics in his productions during the 1960s, claimed that he staged the *Medea* because he wanted Japanese women to know that they could be as strong, as straightforward, as the character Medea. Japan, which has been the largest consumer of his *Medea*, was and still is a male-dominated society. According to Ninagawa, it is a country in which for a woman to be demure and weak is considered a virtue.<sup>1</sup> And yet, if you look closely at Euripides' *Medea* you might conclude that Medea, although strong, is not an ideal role model for women.<sup>2</sup> (This was the view of Leda Geh of the Singapore *Sunday Star*, who reviewed Ninagawa's production in 1992.)

Ninagawa's *Medea* was enormously successful. It ran for more than 250 performances in Japan, in other parts of Asia, and in the West, even though all the performances were in the Japanese language. Between the first productions of the *Medea* in 1978 and the latest in 1999, Ninagawa played to oversold, sold-out, or virtually sold-out houses in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, as well as in smaller cities throughout Japan.<sup>3</sup> The 1993

<sup>1</sup>Interview of Ninagawa by Hani Ahmad on 21 June 1992, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for the *Malay Mail*.

<sup>2</sup>In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Western drama was first imported into Japan and staged in Western style by the Japanese, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* were special favorites of the audiences.

<sup>3</sup>In 1978, for example, in Tokyo's Nissei Theater, with a capacity of twelve hundred seats, 33,000 people attended the thirty-seven performances; the same year at the Asahi Theater in Osaka, with a capacity of nine hundred seats, 23,400 people attended the twenty-six performances; nine years later, in Kofu City approximately one hundred miles

production in Tokyo had a three-night run, in a theater with a capacity of eight hundred seats, which was on average 84 percent filled.<sup>4</sup> During a second tour to Athens in 1984, over a two-night run at the Herodes Atticus Theater (which has a capacity of six thousand people), fourteen thousand attended the performances. According to the producer Tadao Nakane (whom I interviewed in Tokyo on 15 March 1999), the audiences, including those sitting on the sides of the Acropolis, applauded so long and hard that tears came to his eyes.<sup>5</sup> In London, in 1978, Tokusaburo Arashi's performance of *Medea* brought him a nomination for an Olivier award<sup>6</sup> and, in the fall of 1999, Ninagawa served as the first non-English-speaking foreign director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *King Lear*. Given these and other successes, it is clear that Ninagawa was able to bridge the gap between the West and East, on the one hand, by appealing to Western audiences with his Japanese productions and, on the other, by bringing a Western play to Japanese and other audiences.

In this article I will consider how Ninagawa was able to take this ancient Greek tragedy and make it popular, not only with other Asian or non-Japanese audiences but also with those in Japan. He based his *Medea* on the poet Mutsuo Takahashi's<sup>7</sup> line-by-line adaptation of Euripides'

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west of Tokyo, in a theater with a capacity of thirteen hundred seats, 3,900 people attended over the three-night run. The statistics for all performances both in Japan and elsewhere in the world between 1978 and 1997 are published in a program sold at the Setagaya Public Theater during the successful 1998 run of the *Medea* there.

<sup>4</sup>Ninagawa's published notes (Ninagawa 1989) give the background to his directing strategies of earlier productions (1966–1988) of the *Medea*. I assume that some of these strategies apply to our production. I have chosen this production, rather than the latest that I saw live, because I had at my disposal a videotape of the performance that I was able to view repeatedly and analyze carefully.

<sup>5</sup>The performance at the Herodes Atticus theater is mentioned as an entry in a list of modern productions of classical plays in Walton 1987, 290; however, Walton does not discuss this or other Ninagawa productions of the *Medea* in the main body of his book. Yet it has been claimed that Ninagawa's *Medea* stands on a par with Strauss and Hofmannsthal's *Electra* as a reception of a Greek tragedy. Ninagawa's *Medea* is mentioned in Helene Foley's presidential address to the American Philological Association in 1998 (Foley 1999, 8–9).

<sup>6</sup>Performances by Mikijiro Hira, the other actor who has played the role of *Medea* for Ninagawa's productions, also brought great applause and many curtain calls in Edinburgh, Athens, and elsewhere.

<sup>7</sup>Known for his religious and homoerotic writings, Mutsuo Takahashi published his translation of the *Medea*, entitled *Ōjo Medeia* (Queen Medea) in 1998. From among his works, there have appeared in English *Poems of a Penisist* (Chicago Review Press 1975), *A Bunch of Keys* (Crossing Press 1984), and a few poems in Koriyama and Luedens 1995.

*Medea*. Not all of Takahashi's lines are used in each production; however, Ninagawa's productions of *Medea*, like his production of *Oedipus the King*, do adhere to the words of the text much more closely and fully than do Tadashi Suzuki's *Bacchae* or *Trojan Women*. Ninagawa infused his productions of the *Medea* with a very strong Japanese presence, consisting of elements drawn from Japan past and present. And it is these elements that I believe have helped ensure his success with Japanese audiences who (like us) bring their own cultural baggage to the theater.

To demonstrate the Japanese content of the productions, I draw on a live performance of the *Medea* that I saw in Tokyo in 1993 and on my translations from the Japanese of both Takahashi's adaptation of Euripides' text and Tange Kazuhiko's translation from the ancient Greek.<sup>8</sup> I also draw on programs, playbills, the published notes of Ninagawa, and videotapes of productions. I hope to show how Ninagawa infused the Greek tragedy with a Japanese presence in the Tokyo production of 1993 and to note how that production differed from the version of his *Medea* performed in Athens in 1984. I place the Tokyo performance within its cultural context by pointing out the Japanese elements—in a play that he had already demonstrated again and again he was able to universalize, if not always for its social purposes, at least for its aesthetic appeal—that carry Ninagawa's message to his Japanese audiences.<sup>9</sup> As will become

<sup>8</sup>Many speeches from Takahashi's text were shortened, such as Creon's expression of his fears of Medea and his threats against her (282–91); choral passages were also omitted, such as the women's wish that the god of love not strike them down and that instead modesty love them (628–62). Takahashi does not use proper names for Greek places, people, or gods, except for Medea. For example, before Medea enters from the palace, the chorus of women in sympathy with her cries call on the goddess of law, a daughter of the supreme god (Zeus, in the Greek). Instead of using the name Themis (169), Takahashi has *hitohashira*, meaning literally "one god." The word is a Shinto counter for deities in which *hito* means "one." Later in the Aegeus scene (667), Aegeus (who is portrayed simply as a traveler, not as Aegeus) says that he consulted the oracle of divination at a *yashira*, the Japanese word for a Shinto shrine. There are a number of other ways in which the Japanese religions are insinuated into the text. For example, Aegeus says that it was *sadame*, "gods' decision," that he was childless, not as in the Greek *tuche*, "chance" or "luck" (671) (in Japanese Buddhist thought everything is interconnected, to the extent that there is no such thing as chance). When Medea swears an oath with Aegeus she calls on her father's father and the whole race of gods, that is, the "eight million" gods, the Japanese way of referring to all gods. As Tadao Nakane, the producer, remarked to me during our interview, "We Japanese do not limit ourselves to one or some gods, as in Christianity or ancient Greece. Everything and everyone can be a god" (15 March 1999, Tokyo). Tange's translation appears in Matsudaira 1990, 89–193.

<sup>9</sup>I agree with the many scholars who recognize the importance of contextualizing performances. See, for example, Goldhill 1989, 173–74.

apparent, with the exception of an occasional reference to the ancient Greek reception of Euripides' *Medea*, I do not discuss well-known controversies nor most of the commentary on this Euripidean tragedy, though it should be clear from my reading of Ninagawa's directing strategies how he resolved these controversies in his productions of the play.

To present to his Japanese audience a *Medea* who was a sympathetic female character, a victim of the perceived weaknesses and constraints of her gender, exiled by the king and forsaken by her husband for another woman, but at the same time both strong-willed and determined in her resolve, Ninagawa drew on some of the theatrical conventions of kabuki, a traditional theater of Japan, and bunraku, the puppet theater. Those who know the conventions of these theaters can see that Ninagawa's production is not pure kabuki or bunraku. He, in fact, describes his *Medea* productions as avant-garde or modern (*zeneiteki*), traditional (*dentōteki*), and symbolic (*shōchōteki*), and he played the elements of kabuki and bunraku against those of other theaters and performing arts.<sup>10</sup> Ninagawa's tripartite description does not include the term "Western" because there is such a high degree of Western inflection already in the Japanese way of life that what some Westerners might label as Western elements of the performance—which in their original form may have been influenced or inspired by the West—to a great extent represent elements that have become fully assimilated into Japanese culture and are no longer considered either foreign or exotic. To the Japanese they are part of the Japanese presence.

The overture to the *Medea* provides one example of what Ninagawa might have meant by his description. The music and lyrics of the song "Daikanjō" (Deep Feeling) were composed for this and other productions by Hiroshi Mikami, a popular Japanese pop artist, who also sang the lyrics, either in person or on a recording, for the various productions (Ninagawa 1989, 129).<sup>11</sup> The guitar music of the overture is in the mode

<sup>10</sup> See Ninagawa 1989, 197. Ninagawa played off kabuki and bunraku also in the *shingeki* and *shogekijo undō*, dramatic forms introduced by the new theater movement of the 1970s, of which Ninagawa was a member.

<sup>11</sup> Ninagawa does not comment on the use of guitar music in the overture to his *Medea*, except to say that it was inspired by Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. The lyrics were not published with Takahashi's translation, but as far as I could tell from listening to them, and with the help of Jun Yasuba, they approximate the following: "Going to the capital city over the sea from very ancient times, hundreds of millions, tens of thousands, and thousands [the Japanese language can be very vague—I assume years are meant], the small white boat bobs up and down, hundreds of millions, tens of thousands, and thousands

of modern pop folk. It sounds Western and belongs to the Pepsi-Coke generation, to be sure; but it belongs to the Pepsi-Coke generation of Japan, not to mention every country in which Ninagawa's *Medea* has played. With this overture, Ninagawa attracts the audience's attention and creates a context that is modern in sound, familiar, not foreign-sounding and therefore more than likely emotionally compelling to young Japanese at the time of the production in 1993. With words (not drawn from Euripides) Ninagawa transports the audience back in time to the archaeological remains of the earliest Japanese settlement at Tsugaru, and deep into itself, expressing the "deep feeling" of one's body and the cries that can be heard. Given their attitude toward this kind of music in other contexts, the older members of the audience might have called it new-fangled, overemotional, and unwholesome for the young, using the kind of criticism launched against Euripides' music by the character Aeschylus in Aristophanes' *Frogs* at lines 1301–3. Ninagawa punctuates the music with the sound of gongs ringing, as if from a temple bell tower. By using this convention from kabuki, especially in those kabuki plays set at a Buddhist temple, Ninagawa adds a traditional and solemn note, evoking the ethos and practice of Buddhism. The gong might even remind Japanese audiences of one of the most famous passages from the canon of Japanese literature, the first lines of *The Tale of the Heike*, an epic-like account of the famous Heike and Genji wars, dating from the twelfth century. These wars are as famous in the Japanese context as the Trojan Wars are within the Greek. The lines read as follows: "The sound of the Gion Shōja bell echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sala (teak) flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night;

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[miles or times]. If one goes to Miyakejima to the distant end of the sea [an island about sixty miles south of Tokyo, traditionally a place of exile], hundreds of millions, tens of thousands, and thousands [miles], gold and silver glisten and can be seen, can be seen, can be seen. If one returns to Tsugaru village [the home of the *tsugaru shamisen* played in the Ninagawa production and the location of some of the earliest, indigenous Japanese people], white towers in great numbers can be seen [marking the archaeological ruins in the Tsugaru area] beneath a dark sky in the rift between the clouds, can be seen, can be seen, can be seen, hundreds of millions, tens of thousands, and thousands. If one goes to Hida no Takayama [an area in the mountains, a likely burial site for Medea's children; in some productions she says she will bury them at the holy shrine of the god of the mountains] down along the middle of a flowing river, the blood of venerable people can be seen, can be seen, can be seen. If one returns to the inner depths of one's body, how many springs, from the very, very distant past, hundreds of millions, tens of thousands, thousands, crying voices can be heard, can be heard, can be heard."

the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind” (McCullough 1988, 23).<sup>12</sup>

Ninagawa manipulates some of the kabuki and bunraku conventions in such a way that he ends up subverting them. Consider, for example, a scene that takes place in the Tokyo production during the overture, against the backdrop of what in the traditional Japanese context might be a rudimentary Shinto shrine or a gate, the entrance to a Buddhist temple (these two religions have become inextricably intertwined with each other in Japan).<sup>13</sup> As Mikami sings to the accompaniment of the guitar, Medea’s nurse, wearing a white headpiece that is slightly suggestive of a Shinto priest’s headdress (to disguise her character before the prologue), sprinkles pieces of paper about the stage. These evoke the falling paper cherry blossoms or snow ubiquitous in kabuki productions, themselves reminders in Japan of the impermanence of all things in the world. However, Ninagawa directs the actor playing the role of the nurse, before he sprinkles the pieces around, to lift what looks like a thin book up to his face in the ritual fashion of the bunraku narrator, the *gidayu*, who, on a platform to the side of the stage, always holds up his text similarly at the start of bunraku performances, in which he both narrates and reads the lines for the puppets. A *gidayu* is also present in

<sup>12</sup> Gion Shōja is a monastery, built at Srāvasti, India, by a wealthy man in honor of Sakyamuni, the Buddha. “The impermanence of all things” are words from a Buddhist text; when the quatrains are chanted, they are accompanied by the tolling of bells set in the four corners of the Mujōdō hall, where sick priests imagined that they could forget all earthly suffering and enter Nirvana. The Nirvana sutra, where Buddha’s entrance to Nirvana is described, says that at each corner of his bed there stood a pair of sala (teak) trees, which bowed down toward the center and their color changed to the white of cranes as the Buddha began to pass into Nirvana. See Kitagawa 1977, 6 nn. 1–3.

<sup>13</sup> In one Tokyo production Ninagawa used an actual Shinto shrine, Honozono; in another, a Buddhist temple, Sozōji. An interesting combination of Japanese and Greek appear in a proscenium production in which the palace doors are covered with a large *ema*, a votive plaque customarily hung on walls of buildings within a Shinto shrine’s precinct and painted with some person, animal, or object that is closely related to the shrine. In the production, the painting was that of the legend of the Argo. According to the producer, Nakane, in my interview with him (15 March 1999, Tokyo), the most exciting set was the temple Yakushiji, because, he said, this old temple was thought to have been built in the shape of a Greek temple under influences brought along the Silk Road. For the productions in which Hira starred as Medea, Ninagawa also used a proscenium, in one instance, a stucco building resembling a contemporary Greek dwelling surrounded by flowers. Ninagawa claimed that the Herodes Atticus theater structure reminded him of the Yumedono, a cylindrical building at Horiuji, the oldest standing Buddhist structure in Japan, and the building in which Prince Shotoku, the man who introduced Buddhism into the country, read sutras (Ninagawa 1989, 197).



Figure 1. Nurse. All photographs in this article are courtesy of Point Tokyo, Japan, the producers of Yukio Ninagawa's plays. I thank Point Tokyo for supplying the slides.

some kabuki performances—those in which the texts are taken over from bunraku—in which he both narrates and reads the lines for the actors, as if they were dolls. The nurse, however, is not exactly a *gidayu*, for she proceeds to tear up the pages and sprinkles the shreds of paper about the stage so that they resemble blossoms or snowflakes. With this gesture Ninagawa makes a strong metatheatrical statement to the *cognoscenti* that he is not only using but also altering, even subverting, kabuki and bunraku practices. In the Athens production there is no book, there are no shreds of paper. Instead, the nurse walks from one side of the stage at Herodes Atticus to the other, lighting torches from a large, fiery torch in his hands.

Some knowledge of kabuki and bunraku techniques greatly enhances an appreciation of the impact on a Japanese audience of the

production's most memorable moments. In preparation for such moments, Ninagawa fills out the atmosphere first created in the overture—an atmosphere that evokes but also alters kabuki and bunraku. For example, in this all-male cast (all-male as in kabuki and ancient performances of Greek tragedy), a chorus of sixteen men enters strumming *shamisen*, the banjo-like, three-stringed instrument usually associated with kabuki, bunraku, and traditional Japanese dance and song. Kabuki performances can employ a large number of shamisen players or small choruses, but do so differently—the players who usually accompany a dance sit in rows along the back of the stage without moving about or engaging in dialogue or song. Kabuki choruses do not play instruments, but do move around and do engage in a kind of dialogue, including passing on from one member to another the words of a long speech and then concluding it in unison, a practice known as *watarizerifu*. Ninagawa, moreover, does not use the traditional shamisen of kabuki, which has a refined tone, but the *tsugaru* shamisen, which has an extra twang to the sound of the strings.<sup>14</sup> He also offsets the kabuki effects and adds an exotic touch by dressing the chorus in wide-brimmed hats, which look like the straw hats that are a part of the costumes of women in kabuki (especially in female dance pieces), except that long veils drape down from the brims to cover the chorus's faces. The chorus also moves in ways not typical of kabuki, diagonally across the stage in two groups and single file.

Ninagawa's production thus evokes kabuki and bunraku practices without reproducing them. The nurse's screams, for example, do not belong to kabuki, as they would to a Greek production. Yet Medea—as played in the Tokyo production by Tokusaburo Arashi, a kabuki actor trained in the rigors of an *onnagata*, that is, one who traditionally plays female roles—first appears after the tutor has led the two children away and, in a pure kabuki style, speaks at the doors, which are now identified as those of Medea's palace. Medea says, "Of all beings that exist within this world the most pitiable ones are we, that is, women."<sup>15</sup> It is this voice

<sup>14</sup>The *tsugaru shamisen* originated in Tsugaru (Aomori) in a northern section of Japan mentioned in the overture and was just beginning to enjoy great popularity with urban audiences in concerts throughout Japan at about the time of the first performance of the *Medea* in Tokyo. The instrument provided Ninagawa with another ready way of engaging his audiences' attention with a contemporary sound.

<sup>15</sup>Here as elsewhere my translation is based on the Takahashi text. These words translate *Med.* 230–31 of the Greek, which here as elsewhere refers to Diggle 1984, and the Japanese translation by Kazuhiko Tange. It is not my intent always to cite the Greek that



that transforms the Tokyo performance as much as any other feature into one with a strong kabuki presence. Although Arashi allows his voice to sound masculine when Ninagawa so directs, the assumed female voice, along with Arashi's gestures and costume, continues to surface and to remind the audience that this is the voice of the *onnagata* in the world of kabuki. It is a world that Ninagawa brilliantly manipulates by piling Japanese layers on Western-influenced ones, traditional on modern, female on male, one on top of the other. In the Greek production, by contrast, the actor playing Medea (Mikijiro Hira) sounds masculine at the start of the play.

Flute music, soft and mellow, plays from offstage in the background in all the productions, in the manner of the traditional kabuki flute. Yet it sounds like New Age music in some scenes; when a violin is added, it sounds like traditional Western classical music—Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, for example. These instruments replace the guitar of the overture and the shamisen used by the chorus when it first enters. A musical *mélange* is conventional in kabuki, but the music is of a very different kind.<sup>16</sup>

Medea's costume in both the Tokyo and the Athens productions is a gorgeous robe weighing approximately twenty kilograms (fifty pounds), heavily layered, with an interior third layer in red—almost, but not quite, the red worn in kabuki and bunraku by young women and geisha. The robe both is and is not a kimono.<sup>17</sup> Missing is the large and voluminous obi, the hallmark of repressed Japanese women, a sash wound around the waist almost high enough to bind the breasts, sometimes flaring out in front with winglike projections to obscure the chest, waist, and abdomen. Instead, with great attention to detail—the hallmark of a Ninagawan production—Jusaburo Tsujimura, the costumer and artistic director, took fifty antique brocade obis, cut them up, sewed them together again, and used them not to bind but to create the magnificent outer robe, under which a second layer of the costume is visible, which exposes the large (artificial) breasts attached to it. Medea's large headdress reproduces the size and evokes the general shape of the headdresses of some women's roles in kabuki (especially those of geisha), including the long ribbons

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corresponds to Takahashi's text, though I wish to show that Ninagawa adheres to the sequence of lines in the original and thus to more than just its spirit.

<sup>16</sup>On the subject of Japanese music in kabuki, as well as other aspects of this theatrical form, see Brandon 1978.

<sup>17</sup>See Ninagawa 1989, 128.

hanging down over each shoulder. But the headdress created by Tsujimura has dangling sequins and decorations, including what look like ram's horns and a baby doll's face, replacing the usual hair ornaments, which normally include such items as cherry blossoms and combs placed in black hair elaborately coiffed into a large wig. Medea's partially blackened teeth and white face makeup are a conventional part of female roles in kabuki, harkening back to the style of women in the late eighth to late twelfth centuries (though at that time the faces were a starker white, more like the female faces on black-figured Greek vases of antiquity). The light black and blue makeup applied around Medea's eyes are conventional colors in kabuki makeup—but in kabuki they are used on a male character or a supernatural or evil being, rather than on a human female, and they are more pronounced.

The intensity of the kabuki infusion into the play increases after the king exits and Medea has learned that she and the children will be exiled. It is then that the Japanese audiences hear, as the Greek audiences did not, the clack of the *ki*, rectangular wooden clappers struck against the floor in kabuki performances to alert the audiences that especially dramatic moments, usually filled with emotion, are occurring. These are the high points for which many, probably most, Japanese go to the kabuki and bunraku theaters. From the time that kabuki first developed into an artistic form, it has appealed to audiences because of its theatricality, the ability of its actors, and the visual and aural color and excitement of its productions. For kabuki audiences, it is these, not the structure or the plots of the plays, that are the indicators of character. The human beings, their problems and their calamities, are considered most important. In fact, kabuki and bunraku plots are of the type that Aristotle would have called episodic. Kabuki performances often consist of only an episode or two pulled out of a longer play. Japanese critics, scholars, and members of an audience in a kabuki theater are not likely to sympathize with Aristotle's claim that the sudden entrance of the character Aegeus, later in the play, is illogical. In that scene, the kabuki audience would concentrate on the characters, Aegeus and Medea, not the structural probability or necessity of his being there.

In Ninagawa's Tokyo production the first theatrically engaging moment occurs when the *ki* first sounds and Medea by herself says, in her kabuki voice, that for revenge against the king (who has decided to exile her) and her husband (who has abandoned her) she will destroy her three enemies—these two men and her husband's newly betrothed (*Med.* 374–75). As the *ki* starts clacking, Arashi assumes a *mie* pose and laughs in a kabuki style—a sustained burst of laughter that is controlled and



Figure 2. Medea.

manic. Arashi's *mie* is slightly quicker and shorter in duration than the conventional version, in which the kabuki actor rolls his head around, nods, and then crosses one eye with a powerful glare; however, there is no mistaking this pose for what it suggests, inasmuch as the *ki* draws our attention to it, as it would do in a kabuki performance. The *ki* is used again several times later in the play, including the scenes in which we hear that Medea will kill her own children (*Med.* 792–93) and, later, that the princess and the king are dead (*Med.* 1125–26).

Like the distinctive laugh and the *ki*, the *mie* pose is a marker of especially dramatic moments in kabuki; however, once again Ninagawa manipulates and alters by allowing an *onnagata* to assume this *mie* pose. In kabuki that is the privilege of the *tachiyaku*, the player of a strong, “macho” male. At the same time, Ninagawa also allows Arashi's male voice to emerge as he climbs up the stairs to the palace, holding his sword in a show of strength, and then descends very deliberately to the accompaniment of the *ki* clacking even more insistently than before. The

audience is alerted to what Ninagawa calls the ambivalence of Medea's persona.

These borrowings from modes of acting in kabuki and bunraku help to prepare for the chorus's declaration of what Ninagawa viewed as his intent in producing the play. At first individually and then in unison, the chorus declaims the following words (it does not sing as it would have done in the original Greek):

The direction of the river's flow changes; there is nothing in the world that does not change. Men's hearts, which are unreliable, change with exceptional ease. We do not know when, but their firm oaths made in the name of god will be broken. Should not women be praised and extolled for their virtue instead of men who tell lies excessively? The singers of tales should be ashamed [of themselves] for singing what is far from the truth, namely, that the hearts of women are inconstant. If the god of music takes up his lyre and empowers women in their breasts to make the decision, then at that time we will want to sing with loud voices that it is not a woman's heart that easily changes but a man's. There are many songs to be sung about us as well, who are not men.<sup>18</sup>

This is the moment in which Ninagawa speaks with visual and verbal conviction directly to the audience. With a superb display of theatricality, in which the form underscores the content of Takahashi's written text—thanks in great part to the talents of the artistic director, Tsujimura, who was trained in bunraku puppet techniques—Ninagawa marks the inversion of the traditional roles of women by inverting a kabuki convention. In place of the traditional Japanese music of shamisen and the flute, the music, sounding now vaguely like Handel, or Corelli's *La Follia*—music heard again and again in this performance—is played loudly, accompanied by the chiming of church bells.<sup>19</sup> Medea and each of the chorus members draw red ribbons slowly and deliberately out of

<sup>18</sup>Takahashi has changed the original and given the women a slightly more positive outlook than we find in the Greek or in Tange's versions. Kovacs's translation of the beginning of this choral ode (410–30) reads as follows: "The poetry of ancient bards will cease to hymn our faithlessness. Phoebus, lord of songs, did not endow women's minds with the glorious strains of the lyre, else I could have sounded a hymn in reply to the male sex. Time in its long expanse can say many things of men's lot as well as women's." See Kovacs 1994.

<sup>19</sup>Whether Ninagawa intended the audience to think of the aria "Lascia ch'io pianga" from *Rinaldo* or not, it seems more than a coincidence that the opera not only dates from the time when kabuki and bunraku flourished but also features a sorceress, as well as a vehicle drawn by two dragons of the sort Ninagawa uses at the finale of his *Medea*. I owe the identification of this music as the melody from *La Follia* to Marianne McDonald.



Figure 3. Medea drawing a red ribbon from her mouth.

their mouths in a piece of choreography performed en masse. Ninagawa's staging suggests on one level that the chorus and Medea are spewing blood—red ribbons can signify blood in both kabuki and bunraku.<sup>20</sup> However, these theaters also use red ribbons differently. The very popular and frequently performed dance piece, *Fuji musume* (Wisteria Girl), for example, features a lovely woman—the spirit of the wisteria—a girl at play, falling in love, coy, and coquettish. To express her love, kabuki convention requires that the actor playing the girl place the red ribbons attached to his red hat into his mouth.<sup>21</sup> Ninagawa's Medea and the chorus do not place the ribbons into their mouths; they spew the ribbons out. The egurgitation of the red ribbons is a stunning alteration, if not subversion, of kabuki practices.

<sup>20</sup> Ninagawa says that the visual effect seems like that of blood (Ninagawa 1989, 196). Red ribbons signify blood, for example, in the kabuki *Shinobiyoru koi (ha) kusemono* (The Witch Princess).

<sup>21</sup> An *onnagata* actor like Tamasaburo Bando, whose performance of this role in March 1999 at the Kabukiza in Tokyo is just one example of his virtuosity, can be exquisite in his display of enticing femininity.

All these kabuki practices, significantly, apply almost exclusively to Medea, the female chorus, and the nurse. It is Arashi, the actor in the Medea role, who uses the distinctively kabuki style of delivery in his speeches, his laughter, and his crying; the other actors speak for the most part in the style of the modern Japanese classical theater or, in the case of Aegeus, in the style of contemporary, realistic Japanese theater. (This level of subtlety in the characterization was missing in the Greek production.)

In the scene where the king first appears onstage in Takahashi's version of the text, unlike the other texts, Creon addresses Medea (*Med.* 271) as *ikoku no onna*, a woman from a foreign land. Because the Japanese phrase can also mean a woman from somewhere else within Japan but outside the capital city, Ninagawa can represent Medea as a Japanese: she speaks Japanese and is not explicitly called a foreigner from another country by any of the male characters.<sup>22</sup> Only the nurse, the chorus, and Medea herself say that she belongs to another realm. And yet Ninagawa does differentiate her from the other characters. She is an *ikoku no onna*, an outsider, because she and she alone is permitted to speak in a pure kabuki style. And when she does, she lies outside the norm; she becomes an anachronistic figure within the context of the play.

The other characters adhere closely to one style of speech, that of the modern theater, not kabuki, and during the course of the performance remain consistent to this type. For example, the nurse, the tutor, and the messenger—all servants—use polite language in speaking to Medea and her children, although not particularly with each other.<sup>23</sup> In a way the Greek language does not, the status markers in the morphology of the Japanese language readily indicate when someone places himself or herself in a position inferior or superior to another character. Creon, being the king, does not use polite forms when speaking with Medea, and, using locutions associated with an older person, sounds old-fashioned

<sup>22</sup> At *Med.* 536 and 591, one can read *barbaros* as meaning “foreigner” or as “Ainu,” that is, an indigenous Japanese from the northern area in which Tsugaru is located; however, *ikyo* at line 256 should mean “foreign” (a word spoken by Medea). Line 1330 in the Japanese version reads: “from a land that touches the sky rather than the one over which the sun’s light pours.” These words, spoken by Jason, again probably refer to the northern part of Japan, not a foreign country.

<sup>23</sup> The nurse very politely tells the children to enter the palace: *ohairi nasaimashi* “please enter.” The paidagogos, *moriyaki*, is not particularly polite when he speaks with the nurse, but is polite with Medea. The messenger, after speaking politely to Medea, changes to the narrative mode in his report.

throughout.<sup>24</sup> Medea's husband, Jason, on the other hand, speaks in a modern and impolite (rude as well as informal or brusque) manner to his wife, like the stereotypical Japanese husband of the time of the productions. In the Greek text of Euripides he calls her *gunai* (*Med.* 525), not Medea; in the Japanese, he uses abrupt endings to all of his sentences.

My last example of inversion of kabuki or bunraku practice is Ninagawa's decision to have Aegeus speak a standard, contemporary Japanese, making him the least theatrical and the most polite among the men of any status in the play. Aegeus has come from "the capital city" (where Medea will also find refuge), which in the Japanese production means Tokyo, the location of the theater; instead of referring to Athens as the city of Pallas (*Med.* 771), Medea refers to *miyako*, which to the Japanese can mean only their capital. Is Ninagawa suggesting with the language of Aegeus and his display of respect toward Medea that there is hope for the women in the audience, who are in Tokyo, that men and women can talk to each other as equals at least there? The tone of Aegeus' speeches is strikingly different from that of Creon and Jason.<sup>25</sup>

Given his *onnagata* training, Arashi can in his speeches easily and naturally use the kabuki intonation of a female, a forsaken woman, a geisha or a seductive woman, and in all of these depict Medea as a traditional woman, a victim of her society, and polite in her speech. She belongs to the world of kabuki in which an *onnagata* can represent a single character in various manifestations, such as, for example, the woman in the popular kabuki *Musume Dōjōji* (The Maiden of Dōjōji). She is first a jilted maiden, then a courtesan, who is in fact a maiden in disguise trying to inveigle her way into a temple to exact revenge on the man who jilted her, and finally an avenging spirit in the form of a serpent. In addition, Arashi can speak in a masculine or a neutral Japanese when so directed and depict Medea as strong in her resolve, modern, and able to take control of her own life.<sup>26</sup> Ninagawa uses the world of kabuki to

<sup>24</sup> For example, at *Med.* 316–17, he says, "You speak words mild-sounding to the ear, but I am afraid that you are planning something evil." In the Japanese he says, "What you say is mild sounding, but frightening" (*otonashii yaka*). Here Takahashi tries to capture the flavor of the old-fashioned Greek word *orrōdia* "fear"; in the Japanese the suffix *-yaka* attached to the adjective *otonashii*, which means "gentle, mild, or grown-up," also sounds old-fashioned.

<sup>25</sup> The chorus members speak politely, but not as politely as the nurse. They use the form *kudasai*, instead of *nasaimashi* (*se*). However, to Jason they speak more politely (*Med.* 576–78), after his long speech and when they are praying to gods.

<sup>26</sup> The flexibility thus derived is an immeasurable advantage to Ninagawa's depiction of Medea as modern and traditional, feminine and masculine, and victim and victimizer.



Figure 4. Medea and Chorus.



create a persona with many faces; his Medea is that of an actor trained as an *onnagata* who does not always follow the dictates of his very strictly disciplined and in some respects feudalistic training. He steps in and out of conventional behavior, representing a Medea who does likewise. She not only steps in and out of different images of a woman but also crosses the lines of gender.

For example, Medea speaks naturally and without markers of status when she speaks to her own soul, steeling herself to kill her children, without an assumed kabuki *onnagata* voice, without a masculine voice; but when she weeps, clinging to Creon, her voice and her cries come directly out of the kabuki style of *onnagata* delivery,<sup>27</sup> with a level of politeness and deference all the more apparent because the king speaks brusquely and uses informal syntax, in the style of the modern classical Japanese theater.<sup>28</sup> But when her faithless husband enters and speaks in very abrupt language to her, Medea responds in kind. Now Arashi's rough intonation sounds like that of a man. She throws the red ribbons at him, then switches to a sarcastic use of polite forms and words to challenge his sophistic attempts to explain why it is beneficial to her and the children that he marry another woman. Politeness is a sign of sarcasm in Japanese for both men and women when it is used with those with whom one does not have to be polite.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For example, instead of using the simple *desu*, the neutral form of the verb "is," at 307–8, she says, *arumai dewa gozaimasen ka*. The sentence, directly translated, reads, "Is it not so that I, in an inferior position, would not intend to oppose you and the royal house?" *Gozaimasen* is more polite than *desu*. In Japanese, the more indirection there is (as in Medea's speech), the politer the language becomes, and the politer the Japanese language becomes, the more deference one shows. In the Greek she says, "Don't be afraid of me, Creon. I am not in such a position as to commit a fault against royal personages." She is polite to the king in Tange's translation, but less so in Takahashi's. When left alone, she continues to use her kabuki voice, but with male terms of abuse. She calls Creon a "moron," *manuke*, and "monster of cruelty," *hitodenashi*, words of extreme insult in Japanese.

<sup>28</sup> As in the language of Ninagawa and Nakane's productions of *Genroku Minato Uta* (Genroku Harbor Song), set in the Genroku period (1688–1704).

<sup>29</sup> Ever in control of each situation, as the other characters are not, she says, after enumerating the ways in which she helped Jason, including the murder of her own brother and leaving her own home, *O yasashii anata wa sono orei ni to, kono watakushi o hito mo urayamu tobikiri shiawase na onna ni shite kudasatta koto. Anata to iu okata wa, hontou ni gorippa na, hontou ni tanomi kai no aru otto desu wa* (Takahashi 1998, 40), "Oh, how nice and courteous you are and what a fortunate person people out of envy will think I am for all you have done for me. And as for you, you are a truly wonderful, truly effective husband." The Greek (e.g., *Med.* 499–506) is sarcastic; however, even if we take into account the actors' styles of delivery and their gestures, the sarcasm is more intense in the Japanese by virtue of the position into which the language helps Medea place herself—she ends the second sentence of the Japanese with *desu wa*, a very feminine way of speaking.

In the next scene, when she begs Aegeus to grant her asylum in his city, she speaks at first at the most polite level found in kabuki, saying in place of the more customary word *anata*, meaning “you,” the very polite word *anatasama* (used five times; cf. *Med.* 709–18) and instead of *kudasai*, meaning “please,” saying *kudasaimashi* (cf. *Med.* 709). Arashi here assumes the feminine and geisha *onnagata* style of delivery, seducing Aegeus in both intonation and words. Arashi’s gestures enhance the effect of the voice: Medea places her hands on her breast in a modern style of seduction and holds the end of one of her kimono sleeves up toward her mouth when she claims that women are weak, in a kabuki, geisha style of seduction. In the Athens production the actor does not use his sleeve this way; there, the breasts do the speaking. In the Tokyo production the scene is suggestive of seduction scenes in kabuki, which have always been a major attraction to the kabuki enthusiast, an opportunity to see how well the *onnagata* can play his role. It gives us the kind of scene that the character Aeschylus in Aristophanes’ comic play *Frogs*, at lines 1043–44, might have chosen to criticize as an example of Euripides’ portrayal of active sexuality by women on stage.

Successful in her attempt to gain asylum into the capital city, Medea then speaks as an equal to Aegeus, without the seductive language and gestures and persuades him to take an oath on her own terms, not as a man, but as a woman. Later, because she was successful with Aegeus, she uses the same technique of seduction when she elicits from her husband a promise that he will ask the princess, his betrothed, to entreat her father not to exile their children (cf. *Med.* 925–68). Earlier her polite tone with him had been sarcastic, but now, as the actor’s gestures clearly indicate, the tone becomes politely seductive, the language of the bedroom. And as one might expect, since Medea is playing the weaker sex, her husband, unlike Aegeus, becomes even more masculine sounding than in the earlier scene. In the Greek text (*Med.* 902–5) she speaks of tears; in the Japanese, she uses a female kabuki intonation throughout. In the Greek he says *malista* “certainly” (*Med.* 944); in the Japanese he grunts *un*, instead of saying yes and says, *yatte miyo* “Yeh, I’ll try.”<sup>30</sup> Takahashi’s language and Ninagawa’s direction portray Aegeus as an archetypically boorish man in a modern world, all too familiar to the women in the audience. However, the shamisen music in the background, the silk-tasseled cover on the Japanese-style gift box that contains the

<sup>30</sup> Probably a mistranslation of 944 *peisein ge doxazō sph’egō* “I think that I shall persuade her.” The clacking of the *ki* is heard at the time of her decision to send the gift.



Figure 5. Medea and Aegeus.

poisoned robe intended for the princess, the adornments hanging down Medea's face, and the gestures reinforcing Arashi's style of *onnagata* delivery all belong to a world of the past, disguising this contemporary issue. By capitalizing on the kabuki practice of setting contemporary events and issues into a fictional or legendary context so as to avoid the sanctions of censorship during the Tokugawa period (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when kabuki first developed), Ninagawa better directs his message at the audience. He does this not because there is censorship in Japan related to women's issues but to avoid sounding too didactic.

By using Arashi's kabuki style of acting to confer on Medea the

special status of having more than one persona, Ninagawa sets her squarely into the time frame of Japan past; he also molds her into someone equal to men. But the masculine code of the Tokugawa period, which Medea imitates when she acts firmly and in control, is outdated and inoperable. Thus he avoids the problem of forcing his Japanese audience into thinking that contemporary women have to be like men in order to take control of their lives. His Medea interacts with men who belong to a different world than she does, that is, the world of contemporary theater, not of kabuki. Ninagawa creates a production that demonstrates that, with the exception of Aegeus, men acting like contemporary Japanese men are treating women as if they belonged to the Tokugawa era, and simultaneously that women, like Medea, can escape from their stereotypical roles by rejecting outmoded conventions and ethical norms.<sup>31</sup>

In kabuki the traditional samurai code of honor (which included individualistic integrity and a strong sense of pride and self-will) was one that the shoguns who ruled Japan during the Tokugawa period tried to suppress in favor of Confucian doctrines. These included above all loyalty and obedience to a superior authority: the subject to his lord, the child to its father, wife to her husband, and younger to elder brother. This moral principle of *giri* and *ninjō*—creating as it did the conflict between one's social duty, *giri*, and personal interests, *ninjō*—lies at the source of the pathos in kabuki's most emotionally gripping scenes, in which characters are caught in the web of this conflict. In the context of the kabuki world, *giri* is such a strong sanction that it can cause parents to sell their daughters into prostitution, kill their children, or sacrifice their own lives.<sup>32</sup>

Medea fits naturally into the traditional Japanese context driven by

<sup>31</sup> Ninagawa claimed that his productions of *Medea* were in part a *parodei*, the Japanese pronunciation of "parody," not meaning "parody" exactly in our sense of the word, but more like the practice in kabuki of disguising something, be it old or legendary or famous, into something else in terms that are not so much vulgar, as they are familiar. In kabuki many characters appear disguised as someone other than they seem to be. For example, in one of the most popular plays, *Sukeroku Yukari no Edo Zakura*, Sukeroku is a suave, likeable man-about-town with his eyes on the geisha Agemaki. He is really the hero Soga no Görō in disguise, one of the famous Soga brothers, known in legend for avenging their father's death and as famous in Japan as Orestes is in Greek legend. For a translation, see Brandon 1975, 51–92. Other kabuki featuring disguised characters who play a lead role are *Rokkasen* (Six Poets) and *Narukami* (Narukami, the Priest).

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the *Terakoya* (The Village School), a scene from *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagamai* (The Secret of Sugawara's Calligraphy), summarized in Scott 1955, 261–70.

this ethic: as a wife who has been treated shamefully by her husband, she is disgraced, dishonored, and humiliated and thus must get revenge. She says that Jason knows no shame—*haji shirazu*, a translation of the Greek *anaideia* (*Med.* 472). Near the end of the play, Medea in a strong male voice says to Jason (*Med.* 1354–60), “You were going to make a laughing stock out of me in front of other people when you yourself were about to lead a uniquely pleasant life and despise the bed of one bound by duty to her household. I have fittingly stung you so that your anger cannot be healed.” In the Greek of Euripides she says that Jason dishonored her, *atimasa* (*Med.* 1354); in the Japanese she says that she was loyal to her duty, *giri*, that is, in contrast to *ninjō*, her personal interest, and that Jason despised their marriage contract. In the traditional Japanese context of *giri* and *ninjō*, this means that he dishonored her; it also means that she was treated unfairly, for she has been loyal to her husband as the Confucian ethic requires. Ninagawa elevates Medea not only above ordinary women but also above ordinary human beings. She is made to speak like the famous heroes of kabuki. If she has any integrity and sense of honor, she must act. Her situation is like that of Yoshitsune, the most popular Japanese legendary hero, whose story is told in *The Tale of the Heike*. Though loyal to his brother, Yoshitsune was then betrayed by him. Yoshitsune’s integrity reaches such a high level that when his brother, exploiting him for reasons of personal aggrandizement, orders Yoshitsune’s wife and child put to death, Yoshitsune kills them himself. Numerous other legends have risen up around the figure of Yoshitsune, most of them folklore; there is, however, one certain fact about him—he, like many other avenging heroes of Japan, became a leading character of kabuki, bunraku, and noh plays. These were not merely valiant men but *hitokami*, “man gods,” who had the power of performing miraculous feats, even appeasing powerful, revengeful spirits.<sup>33</sup>

Ninagawa sets Medea up on a pedestal, on a level equal with these men, who, when unfairly treated by those in power, exacted revenge out of a sense of honor. But of course he is using the ethical sanctions out of the world of kabuki only to subvert them: Medea is not a man but a woman. As she disrobes, Medea says in a strong voice, “Let no one think this woman is weak, this woman is spineless.” (The Japanese repeats the word *onna*, “woman,” twice; the Greek uses feminine endings without emphasizing her feminine gender [*Med.* 807–8].) “No,” she says, “it is the

<sup>33</sup> See Ortolani 1995, 170 and 172, on bridging the gap between our world and the spiritual in kabuki.

opposite. I am one who understand no mercy at all toward my enemies and no limit of devotion toward my friends.” Here the Japanese and the Greek texts are almost identical; in the epic tradition of both cultures the language belongs to heroes.<sup>34</sup>

Ninagawa draws on the conventions of kabuki and bunraku performance techniques to emphasize Medea’s decision to take revenge on her enemies. Following a kabuki convention called *hikinuki*, that is, the removal of one’s costume during the course of a play, Ninagawa directs Arashi to remove several layers of robe, including the attached breasts that had marked Medea’s sexuality. His elaborate costume is a visible sign of how restrained Medea has been within her female trappings. (Arashi has said that three months before he plays the role of Medea he must jog, swim, and cycle daily in order to build up his strength to bear the burden of both the role and the weight of the costume.)<sup>35</sup> And, in accordance with another kabuki convention, that of featuring characters disguised as someone else and representing themselves as someone else (there is scarcely a kabuki play without a disguised character whose identity the audience waits to discover), Arashi reveals the male, self-assertive side of Medea’s character thus far disguised; with her kimono removed, Medea stands before the audience stripped down to a red sheath, angry and resolved to act, like a Japanese male hero.

The characters in kabuki, male or female, who have to sacrifice family members to maintain their honor, never do so without a struggle.<sup>36</sup> It is not easy for Medea to make the decision to kill her own children. During her monologue Medea struggles with herself and wonders whether she should kill the children for whom she suffered such pain in child-

<sup>34</sup> Takahashi’s text (1998, 59) reads (in translation): “With splendid praise to be praised as a heroine in songs and tales, isn’t that what kind of person a woman (that is, I) should be?” The Greek at lines 809–10 reads: “hard on enemies and kind to friends, for such people have the life of greatest glory [*eukleestatos bios*].” Taking out of the Greek adjective, *eukleestatos*, the word *kleos*, “the glory/fame of a Greek hero and warrior,” Takahashi applies the heroism to Medea and embellishes upon it. The uncommon word *retsujo*, containing the feminine suffix *-jo* and the prefixed Chinese character meaning “strong-willed and passionately determined on a course of action” (a Chinese character found in more than one word meaning “hero”) means “heroine.” And the question “to be praised in songs and tales, isn’t that what kind of person a woman (that is, I) should be” provides the beginnings of Medea’s realization of the hope of a future in which women are the subject of song. This was first expressed in the choral piece during which she and the chorus eurgatitated convention, symbolized by the red ribbons.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Tadao Nakane, 15 March 1999, Tokyo.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Ernst 1956, 233–34, 237, and 244–45.



Figure 6. Medea with the Chorus.

birth, who could comfort her as she wanders from place to place, who are the children she embraced and suckled with milk at her breast. These words, delivered in *onnagata* style, are not in the Greek; even in the Athens production the actor who plays Medea, Hira, delivers them in a feminine style, though up until this point in the play he sounds very masculine.<sup>37</sup> When Medea returns to the words of Euripides (*Med.* 1056), she asks her heart, *kokoro* (*thumos*, in the Greek), not to carry out the act. But she also says to herself, with the intonation of a man (in both the Tokyo and Athens productions), “Don’t be weak.” She struggles over the impending deed, with all of the emotion that a kabuki actor can muster. However, using the very reasoning that the hero Yoshitsune might have

<sup>37</sup> The breast is emphasized throughout both the Tokyo and Athens productions through gestures, costume, and text: the nurse refers to Medea as the one whom she nursed at her breast (Takahashi 1998, 9); Medea says that a storm rises in her breast (32), that she has a plan in her breast (55) and a thought in her breast (56), and that her breast is crushed (77); in his last speech Jason tears off his robes “down to his breast” (97).

used, she understands that the consequences of not killing the children would be to expose them to the contempt of her enemies. And so she makes a vow to the bloodthirsty beings in hell (*Med.* 1059–61), “I will not in full knowledge of what I am doing surrender to the enemy these children. Their fortune [*shiwase*] is greater if they die at their mother’s hands than face the contempt of the enemy.” She then adds, “My chest is crushed [the Greek here reads *alla nikōmai kakois* “I am overcome with evils”; *Med.* 1077]. I understand what kind of terrible thing I do. And although I understand, I must do it.” And then she explains (*Med.* 1077–78), “Even though I understand that it is the source of *wazawai* [‘evils,’ but also ‘serious trouble, woe, disaster, calamity, evil, ruin, *kaka*], my *ikidōroshisa* [‘resentment, feeling of insult’],” she says, “is stronger.” In the Greek these well-discussed lines read, *thumos de kreissōn tōn emōn bouleumatōn hospēr megistōn aitios kakōn brotois* (*Med.* 1079–80). Takahashi translates *thumos* (“the place out of which arise emotions like anger, passion”) as “resentment”; he does not include the controversial second half of the Greek sentence, which explains what her feeling is stronger than or in control of.<sup>38</sup> In the Japanese, Medea says simply that she has been insulted and resents that insult. Dishonored in this way, she feels justified in her actions, in spite of the consequences, and she appeals to the right for retribution. The pathos and the emotional outpourings in this scene are extraordinarily intense. Medea confronts a difficult choice among the emotions deep within her, as characters do in similar scenes of kabuki in which *giri* and *ninjō* are in conflict. If she is a true Japanese hero, however, there is no choice; she must act. There is no intellectual discourse involved here, but there is emotional outpouring. It is for this that an audience in a kabuki theater would be waiting.

Many scholars have observed that Euripides’ Medea is like a hero, inflexible, strong-willed, and determined to take revenge, because of the dishonor that has befallen her.<sup>39</sup> Many others have said that the dishonor does not alleviate the horror and consternation we feel over her murder of the children, a viewpoint shared by Lida Geh in her critique of the

<sup>38</sup> Many scholars have published articles on the subject of Medea’s speech and the authenticity of the lines. Among them are Reeve (1972, 51–61) and Foley (1989, 61–85 and 273–87).

<sup>39</sup> The bibliography is large. Among the many who have said that Medea is like a hero, has lost her womanhood, and acts like a man, there are Knox (1977, 193–225), Bongie (1977, 27–56), Easterling (1977, 177–79), Burnett (1973, 1–24), des Bouvrie (1990), and Rehm (1989, 97–115).





Figure 7. Medea at the palace doors and Chorus below.

*Medea* performed in Singapore.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Ninagawa seems to intensify the emotional impact of the murder by bringing the children on stage, allowing them to interact intimately with Medea before she kills them, and, following Euripides' text closely, by having them cry out loudly for help from within the palace during the murder.<sup>41</sup> (This is one of the scenes in which the feminine side of the actor Hira in Athens emerged brilliantly.) In kabuki, the participation of child actors onstage moves the audience strongly;<sup>42</sup> many take out handkerchiefs to dry their tear-filled eyes. When kabuki productions of tragic pieces are successful, men and women alike permit themselves a display of emotions that their culture

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Easterling 1977, 188.

<sup>41</sup> In the performance, according to kabuki convention, although the children are standing at the top of the stairs in full view of the audience, they are considered outside the action. The audience does not think of them as participating characters until Medea addresses them again and they come down the stairs to her side.

<sup>42</sup> In *Sakaya* (The Sake Shop) a child carries a missive announcing his parents' impending suicide to his grandparents. In *Hirakana seisuiki* (Simple Chronicle of the Vicissitudes of the Heike and Genji Clans), a child speaks only at the end of the play and is saved from being killed. See Gunji and Yoshida 1987, 69.

does not allow in public, outside the theater.<sup>43</sup> And yet, these productions, even when a child is decapitated, do not shock. There is an honorable justification for the killing.

In defending Euripides against the charge of excessive violence—and in spite of Aristotle’s criticism of the scene as a contrivance (*Poet.* 54b1)—some classicists have argued that Euripides mitigates the effect of Medea’s murder of her children by transporting her on the serpent-drawn vehicle of Helios to another world, one where she no longer need be judged by human standards. To some extent Ninagawa would agree with them, although he imported Aristotle’s term *katarushisu* “catharsis” to describe the effect he wanted to have on his audience (Ninagawa 1989, 198).

In the finale, after the murder of her children, Medea, now wearing the all-white robes and makeup appropriate in kabuki to a supernatural being, enters from above on a chariot drawn by a pair of dragons and suspended by a crane. In the Athens production the chariot is drawn by a pair of winged horses. He thus uses a technique that it is generally agreed Euripides employed,<sup>44</sup> one that is also familiar to kabuki audiences, called *chūnori*, literally meaning “riding through the air,” which allows actors to be carried up over the stage or out over the audience’s heads by a crane or pulley.<sup>45</sup> Like a Japanese hero, Medea now is superior to all other human beings. She literally rises above them, and has become a *hitokami* “a god person,” like the heroes of Japanese legend and kabuki. This is theatricality played to the hilt. The audience’s attention is directed for a moment toward the spectacle, *opsis*, and away from the murder. She is disguised like many a kabuki character; however, that

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, on Greek tragedy, Zeitlin 1996, 363. According to Aelian, *Varia historia* 14.40, the actor Theodoros (associated with female roles such as Antigone, Demosthenes 19.246) was very talented in imitating the voice of his character and drew tears from members of the audiences, even from the tyrant Alexander of Pherai, when he played the role of Hecuba in Euripides’ *Trojan Women* (Arist. *Rhet.* 1404b21–24). The actor Polos had the same talent for making members of the audience cry when playing the female Electra (Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 6.5.7).

<sup>44</sup> See Mastronarde 1990, 247–94.

<sup>45</sup> The device is used for magical creatures, supernatural creatures, and ghosts. For example, in the kabuki *Yoshitsune sembonzakura* (Yoshitsune of the Thousand Cherry Trees), Yoshitsune’s retainer Tadanobu, a fox in disguise, rises up into the sky and is carried over the heads of the audience (this scene is reproduced in the background of the set for *Genroku Minato Uta*). I have had the experience of being in the audience at the Minamiza Theater in Kyoto and seeing the actor Ennosuke in the role of the hero Yamato Takeru (a character connected closely with Japan’s founding myth) swoop over my head.



Figure 8. Medea and Children.

disguise is multilayered, like her robes. Even on the chariot she represents more than a *hitokami*.

In their final exchange, when Jason threatens Medea with *onryō*, the hungry ghosts of their children (a translation of *miastores* “avenging spirits” [*Med.* 1371]) that will fly around Medea’s head for her hideous act, she reinforces her justification for the killing in terms of the traditional Japanese heroic ethos and refuses him the burial of their sons because she says it would be as shameful, *hazukashime*, as handing them over to an enemy for burial. She then proclaims that instead she herself will bury them in the earth of a remote shrine (*yashiro*, a Shinto shrine) of the queen goddess of high mountains. In Takahashi’s text but not in Ninagawa’s productions she adds that she will bequeath a *matsuri* (occasion for a repeated ritual) to purify the pollution (*tsumi*). This kind of ritual, a *heortē kai telē* in the Greek (*Med.* 1382), would sound quite natural and appropriate in the context to a Japanese audience, inasmuch as *matsuri* for the purification of the dead are not limited to heroes and

are used nowadays as regularly as they were in the past. *Matsuri* help to alleviate the crime religiously. And she will go, she says, to live with the ruler of the capital city nearby happily forever after. She then adds that, as is fitting, Jason will pay for his evil deeds (her word *akugō* means that he will have an evil karma). He again calls on the children's female *onryō* "hungry ghosts," which are justly thirsty for blood. She asks what god would listen to someone (like him) who broke his oath, as was predicted in the choral ode of the red ribbons. However, in Ninagawa's production, Jason again calls on the *onryō* and also on a female god of justice who is thirsty for blood (a translation of *erinys* "a fury" [*Med.* 1389]) to come down on Medea's head and punish her for murdering the children.

At this juncture, Ninagawa directs the audience's attention away from Medea, the *hitokami*, to a Medea who is like an avenging spirit of revenge. In many *noh* and *kabuki* plays (for example, in the various renditions of the tale *Dōjōji*, including the *kabuki Musume Dōjōji*), the avenging spirit of a jealous or wronged woman is transformed by a change of costume into a serpent or dragon.<sup>46</sup> Members of the audience who know the traditional legends and stories about angry women would be bound to think of these spirits, which are essential ingredients of numerous *kabuki* and *bunraku* plays. The difference is that here Medea is transported by rather than turned into a serpent or dragon flying over Jason's head as he crouches on the ground below her, beating his breast and weeping like a defenseless woman. So he was all wrong when he threatened her with the *onryō* of the children flying over her head (the words "flying over the head" are not in the Greek). Medea, played in the style of an *onnagata* (the type of actor conventionally chosen to play the role of avenging spirits rather than the male *hitokami*), is triumphant in her revenge. No avenging spirit will haunt her. By bringing the *onryō* of the children to haunt Jason, she has the last laugh. (Arashi actually laughs.)

Ninagawa claims that in his productions of the *Medea* he did not

<sup>46</sup> In *Modori bashi* (Modori Bridge), another dance drama, a woman changes into a demon and performs a battle scene; in the *noh Aoi no Ue* (*Aoi no Ue* is a woman's name), a jealous Rokujo is the demon. There is a whole mythology connected with these women. On the one hand, females are considered evil; on the other hand, since Buddhism was thought able to transform evil into good, women, on the condition that they are first transformed into another being, can be saved. In some versions of the *Dōjōji* story the woman does receive enlightenment; in others she does not. When Medea says to her children that they will enjoy happiness somewhere else, *betsu no tokoro* "a separate place" in the Japanese (a translation of *ekei* "there" in the Greek at line 1073), Takahashi introduces the possibility that the children and she are granted enlightenment in Nirvana.



Figure 9. Medea, sword in hand, enters the palace.

want to shock his audiences or cause the consternation that matricide entails, and he explains that he lightened the heavily charged, emotional burden of the murders not only with the flying machine, but also by using dolls (Ninagawa 1989, 132). As one can see, he created children who appear doll-like; they have a pierrot quality about them and wear white, not the color customarily worn by real or kabuki children, but a color that in kabuki signifies either death or divinity. Then, in a commonly employed kabuki technique, Ninagawa also uses dolls in place of the child actors for the corpses (he uses a doll as a baby for Medea to hold during her heart-rending monologue before she kills the children). This strategy disembodies the children and directs the audience's attention away from the dead. The dolls are very small and have red ribbons hanging down from them; the dragons drawing the chariot now signify blood. Ninagawa said that his decision to present the children in this way was connected in part with the fact that a male actor plays Medea's role and, therefore, unlike a real woman, he cannot be a mother. On the other

hand, he said that his choice to use live actors as children before the murder was tied to Jason's love for them. He directed Tsuchi Kurahiko, the actor playing Jason, to express intense grief to the fullest of his acting ability (Ninagawa 1989, 132). Jason's interaction with the children earlier and his emotion at the finale increase the effect of his loss; the use of dolls lightens the effect of the act itself.

Medea's final laugh is important in this regard. It recalls the earlier laugh accompanying Medea's first *mie* pose, in which Arashi, as *onnagata*, assumes the stance of a *tachiyaku*, a male role portrayer, but gives out a laugh (as here, where Medea is both a male and a female spirit) that sounds almost exactly like the laugh of a bunraku narrator, the *gidayu*, who laughs for the puppets who do not have life, and therefore no voices. (Medea's final emotional outburst before murdering her children similarly replicated cries in the voice of the *gidayu*.) In the West we see actors playing actors who play characters, or actors playing characters who play actors. In Ninagawa's production Arashi assumes the voice of a narrator for himself, that is, he plays the narrator speaking for a nonspeaking kabuki actor who, like a puppet, plays the character of Medea. This is a clear inversion/subversion of a kabuki and bunraku technique, which creates moments in the production that only those familiar with these two theaters will notice for the theatrical effects. Ninagawa represents Medea's barrenness, not only with the removal of the kimono and attached breasts and with the use of dolls in place of living children, but also with Arashi's voice. When Medea cries, and at the end when she laughs at Jason, Arashi is no longer acting as an *onnagata* or a male actor; with a brilliant stroke of genius Ninagawa transforms his voice to a voice from outside, which objectifies the shock of the murder. Medea's laugh is not the laugh of bunraku in the Athenian production; it is clearly that of a Western-trained actor.

After Medea's exit, the music continues playing,<sup>47</sup> and Jason calls upon the gods in the heavens and other gods to hear the words of the lioness murderer. He grieves for the helpless children, himself unable to do anything for them, and then adds a sentence that is not in the Greek text: "I want to tear off my robe down to my breasts, put ashes on my head, and weep to the limits of my voice." Ninagawa assigns Jason the role of a female mourner in a Greek tragedy and furthermore, directs him to weep at the end of the scene in the style of the narrator of bunraku, again the *gidayu*, just as Medea had done in her cries and her

<sup>47</sup>Ninagawa mistakenly describes the music as being like that of Handel (1989, 196).



Figure 10. Medea in the Finale.

last laugh. Both she and he, because they use the voice of the *gidayu*, like the children, are thus turned into puppets.<sup>48</sup> They are all on an equal footing and judged by the audience not as part of the world of spirits but as dolls in a bunraku or kabuki production. Ninagawa's goal in his *Medea*—to effect a *katarushisu*—is complete. He explains that he wanted his audience to be engrossed in the performance within the first three minutes and to feel for at least three minutes after the end of play two things: first, as a group, a sense of anarchy (his word) and, as individuals, a resolute sense of self, as was not the social norm for women in Japan in 1993 (Ninagawa 1989, 132).

With the baroque music still playing in the background<sup>49</sup> the *Medea* ends, with a coda spoken by the chorus to the accompaniment of their *tsugaru shamisen*. In this blended musical finale, the chorus speak about the ways of the gods—what the gods accomplish is not expected, what one thinks will occur does not. The play ends with the words of Euripides, not with those of kabuki. But the shamisen increases in volume and gradually drowns out the sound of Western music until only the shamisen music remains to accompany the chorus offstage—music from the Japanese instrument, in a Japanese musical idiom, in the presence of a predominantly Japanese audience.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The movements and speech of the kabuki actors are often based on the technique of the bunraku theater, and the *gidayu* is used as an accompaniment and in some cases as a voice. See, for example, the play *Sakaya*, outlined in Scott 1955, 249–54. In the kabuki *Ayatsuri Sambasō* (*Puppet Sambasō*), Sambaso dances as if he were a puppet on a string. See Gunji and Yoshida 1987, 115–16.

<sup>49</sup> This music was heard near the end of the scene in which Medea rejects Jason, in the scene when she decides to kill her children and removes her headdress and outer robe and then removes her breasts and yellow gown, at the end of the scene in which the chorus addresses the wonders of Athens, and in the scene in which Medea enters the house to kill her children and the chorus cry to the Sun for help.

<sup>50</sup> The Athens production, which was much shorter than the one in Tokyo, depended on Hira's Western-style acting played against the "exotic" Japanese elements for its success. An analysis of that production, which unfortunately I did not see except on videotape, would yield a different side to Ninagawa's directing skills than I have presented here. However, my occasional references to that production should indicate his extraordinary ability to read his audiences between the years 1966 and 1988.

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