

Euripides *Medea* and the politics of alliances in 431 BC

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This paper explores the relationship of the *Medea* to the politics of 431 BC and the outbreak of the war. It begins by noting that details of the entirely unmotivated entrance of Aegeus into the plot allow certain correspondences to be drawn with the political situation contemporary with the *Medea*'s performance. I argue that the explicitly circumscribed alliance Aegeus makes with Medea (ll. 720-30), one that inadvertently places him and Athens at odds with Corinth, and binds him to protect an infanticide should she succeed in reaching Athens herself can be read as enacting through myth the situation in which Athens found herself at the outbreak of the war: the unusual defensive alliance (Thuc. 1.44.1) she forged with Corcyra, one which led to open hostility with Corinth and which amounted to her supporting an 'infanticide', that is, a mother-city waging war against her own colony. On a basic level, one may read the Aegeus scene as absolving Athenians of what proved to be a destructive alliance: Athenians didn't know what 'Medea' would go on to do, and her rhetorical sophistication, no less than that of Thucydides' 'Corcyrans', made it impossible to resist an alliance which seemed to offer security for the future – children for Aegeus in the mythic plot, and alleged safety for Athens' children in the face of an inevitable war. Having established this link between mythic plot and historical background, this paper will outline further apparent points of engagement between the Euripides' mythic plot and its historical moment as recounted by Thucydides, as well as discuss the limitations of using tragedy to shine further light on historical events.