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Reciprocity and Revenge in Euripides' *Medea*

The *agôn* in Euripides' *Medea* (446-626) presents a dynamic contest over the terms and control of social exchange. This paper explores the relation between Medea's ultimate revenge and Jason's earlier refusal to validate her claim to remuneration for past services. I focus specifically on the emergence of two kinds of discourse on friendship: Medea presents her relationship with Jason as predicated on the exchange of *charis*, a term signifying the embeddedness of gift-giving in reciprocal social obligations [23, 500, 508-510; see Schein 1990]. Jason, on the other hand, explicitly rejects Medea's reference to *charis* in favor of a relationship which is based on profit and monetary gain (*kerdos*, *chrêmata*) [454,461, 526, 566].

Medea's revenge embodies the conflict between these two discourses. Jason's misunderstanding of the reciprocal nature of gift-exchange allows Medea to trick him into receiving another 'gift' for his wife [material adornment 959-968]. He pays for this 'gift' with his new wife's death. Medea's murder of her children further emphasizes the inseparability of gifts from social relationships [see Gill 1996]. As the product of their marriage, the children are the material manifestation of the *charis* bond between husband and wife. Medea destroys their children in active imitation of Jason's prior destruction of their *charis* .

The interchange between Medea and Aegeus provides an external standard from which to evaluate the arguments presented in the *agôn*. Aegeus' readiness to greet Medea as a *philos* (664) and to engage in reciprocal benefaction (*pollôn hekati tēnde soi dounai charin* 719) stands in stark contrast to Jason's refusal to acknowledge the class of obligation due to a *philos* of equal status (459). Thus the weakness of Jason's self-defense in the *agon* is clarified in this later exchange of *philia* between Medea and Aegeus.

I will argue that at a more general level the *agôn* can be read as a struggle between husband and wife over relative autonomy and agency. The ability to participate in a *charis* relationship presupposes one's ability to act as an *agent* in social exchange. By denying that Medea served as an agent in his successes, Jason seeks to silence her claim to the returns of *charis*. Medea counters Jason's denial with a twofold reclamation. On the one hand, Aegeus' acceptance of her indictment against Jason allows Medea to enter into a *charis* relationship with him. On the other hand she is able to exact repayment from Jason by destroying all evidence of the relationship he refused to recognize. In his grief over the loss of his children Jason is unwittingly made to acknowledge the relationship of which they had been the concrete symbol.