# Hobbes's Medeas:

## *Sparagmos* and political theology

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Abstract:

This article explores Thomas Hobbes's political translations of Euripides's *Medea* and, particularly, his representation of the Dionysian ritual of killing and dismembering a sacrificial victim (*sparagmos*). To answer the question of what forms political theology may take in modernity, I contend that Hobbes seeks to reverse the original political theological meaning of ancient Greek s*paragmos* --- which was depicted in Euripides as a legitimate religious sacrifice whose objective was to reunify the *polis* --- by turning it into a senseless act of political violence which will dissolve the civil state into competing interest groups or body parts. If Hobbes seeks to expel religious sacrifice from his political state into archaic pre-history, however, the article goes on to argue --- via Bramhall, Schmitt and Cavarero's revisionary readings of his work --- that the philosopher's critique of *Medea* ends up bestowing a legitimacy upon the tragic heroine which disarticulates the political theological unity upon which his Commonwealth is founded. In the tragic figure of Medea, Dionysian *sparagmos* returns to dismember and even potentially consume the body parts of the Leviathan.

KEYWORDS: Hobbes, Euripides, Bramhall, Schmitt, Cavarero, Dionysius, *sparagmos*.

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In his *Brief Lives* (1696), John Aubrey recalls that the fourteen-year-old Thomas Hobbes presented his schoolmaster with a parting gift before leaving for Oxford University: Hobbes's own original translation of Euripides's *Medea* from Greek into Latin verse (Aubrey 2000). To revisit the famous plot of this play, Euripides's tragedy is the story of a princess and sorceress of the kingdom of Colchis, who disobeys her father to marry Jason of the Argonauts but then goes on to wreak a terrible vengeance upon her husband when he abandons her: Medea murders Jason's new wife, his father-in-law, and finally her own two sons, before escaping in the chariot of her grandfather, the sun-god Helios. If the young Hobbes's translation of *Medea* is now sadly lost --- Aubrey speculates that the schoolmaster's household may have "sacrificed" it to the fireplace (Aubrey 2000) --- it seems that the philosopher's interest in the play never disappeared because Hobbes returns to it repeatedly throughout his subsequent career. In his three major works of political theory *De Cive* (written in the late 1630s but first published in Latin in 1642), *Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (1640), and *Leviathan* (1651) --- as well as in his subsequent debate with Bishop John Bramhall on freedom and necessity --- Hobbes also goes on to explore the modern political theological fate of one particular act of extreme violence from Euripides's drama: *sparagmos* (from the Greek σπαραγμός, from σπαράσσω or *sparasso*, "to tear, rend, pull to pieces" --- AB).

To briefly reconstruct the obscure mythological context out of which *sparagmos* emerges, the Maenads --- which quite literally means "the raving ones" who worshipped the Greek god Dionysius --- would apparently perform a ritual in his honor whereby a living animal or *pharmakos* would be sacrificed by being killed and then torn limb from limb. It appears that the Maenads would frequently accompany, and complete, this *sparagmos* with an act of *omophagia* (from the Greek ωμός or "raw") in which the dismembered body would be reincorporated by the eating of its raw flesh. If it remains a matter of scholarly dispute whether *sparagmos* ever historically took place, Friedrich Nietzsche famously makes the claim (which is subsequently taken up by such figures as the Cambridge Ritualists, Walter Burkert and René Girard) that what we know today as Greek tragedy rose out of, and aestheticized, Dionysian rituals of religious violence --- and, indeed, much of the surviving evidence for *sparagmos* can be found in the work of Euripides (see Burkert 1966, Otto 1973; Dodds 1973, Girard 1979; Segal 1982 and Storm 1998 for a range of responses). In the classical philologist Károly Kerényi's verdict, Medea --- who also kills and dismembers her brother Absyrtus at the beginning of the play when she and Jason escape with the Golden Fleece --- is thus "a cruel sorceress who tore her victims to pieces" (Kerényi 1951: 193).

If Dionysian *sparagmos* has an equally long and complex *rezeptionsgeschichte* within seventeenth century philosophy, theology, and literature --- which provoked new readings of *Medea* by such diverse figures as René Descartes, John Milton, Bishop Bramhall, and Pierre Corneille amongst others (see Lieb 1994, Chappell 1999 and Gilby 2019) --- it is arguably also the site of what we might, and not without a certain historical violence of our own, call a "political theological" trauma or wound. It is crucial to remember here that in Euripides' own lifetime "Dionysius" (whose cult apparently entered Greece from Asia) became the signifier of a power struggle or territorial dispute between the *polis* and the gods, or, more precisely,

between a state-sanctioned civil religion, whose gods could be safely admitted into the pantheon, and the divine violence of a "foreign" or antinomian religion, whose gods were apparently inimical to the city. For Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre-Vidal Naquet, writing in their classic book *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (1990), Dionysius "demands from the city official recognition for a religion that in a sense eludes the city and is beyond it" (Vernant and Naquet 1990: 402). In Euripides's final play *The Bacchae*, which famously recounts the political theological struggle between Dionysius and King Pentheus over the city of Thebes, Dionysius orders his intoxicated followers to perform a *sparagmos* upon Pentheus in revenge for the latter banning worship of the god in his kingdom: the Maenads (who include the king's own mother) go on to tear Pentheus limb from limb and scatter his body parts on the ground.

In order to answer the question of what form political theology may take in modernity, I want to explore Hobbes's translations of Euripides's *Medea* into the early modern political theological vernacular of a mid-17th century England which had, of course, recently killed and dismembered its own king. It is well documented that Hobbes's deep investment in the political theological unity of his ideal state compels him to disavow what he saw as antinomian acts of religious sacrifice, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom as wholly irreconcilable with membership of the commonwealth (see Bradley 2019: 95-118). According to his famous theory of "public worship" --- which commandeers final authority over public forms of religious expression for the state --- civil subjects are restricted to performing only what "the sovereign ordaineth in the worship of God for signs of honour" (Hobbes 1991: 253). To propose his own modern political theology, I contend that Hobbes seek to produce a strong political misreading of the Greek trope of *sparagmos* which is no longer intended to secure the Dionysian re-entry of the foreign or antinomian gods into the state, of course, but rather their Penthean expulsion into the realm of archaic pre-history: what Euripides arguably presents as an act of legitimate or "deserved"

religious sacrifice which will reunify the *polis* in *The Bacchae* is reduced by Hobbes in *De Cive* and later texts to a senseless act of murder, terrorism or what Adriana Cavarero calls "horrorism" (Cavarero 2008) which will dissolve the civil state into competing interest groups or body parts. For Hobbes, Euripides's tragic *dramatis personae* --- Dionysius, Pentheus, Pelias and, of course, Medea herself --- are thus re-inhabited and performed by a new cast of (quite literal) bad actors in political modernity: political and religious dissenters, reformers, enthusiasts and so on. If Hobbes seeks to expel the modern equivalents of the Maenads from his theory of the civil state, however, I will argue that Bishop Bramhall, Carl Schmitt and Adriana Cavarero's revisionary readings of his work all in their very different ways contend that the philosopher ends up bestowing a curious political theological legitimacy upon the tragic figure of Medea which disarticulates the unity of political and religious authority upon which his state is founded. In Hobbes's diverse re-readings of *Medea*, Dionysian *sparagmos* returns to dismember and even potentially consume the body of the Leviathan.

1. They cut him into pieces

In *De Cive*, which he originally published in Latin, Hobbes returns for the first time since his schooldays more than 30 years earlier to Euripides's *Medea.* It is tempting, however, to read this new Latinate text as really an attempt to "translate" the play into English --- or, at least, into the turbulent context of English politics in the 1630s. As Monia Brito Vieira observes, Hobbes now reads *Medea* politically as "a tale of dismemberment and delusions of re-incorporation, which serves as the literary counterpart of the dissolution of civil commonwealths at the hands of dissenting factions" (Vieira 2009: 76). To pursue this political allegorical reading of *sparagmos* in the chapter "Of the internal causes, tending to the dissolution of any Government," Hobbes interestingly does not choose to revisit Medea's own killing of her children, but another episode in the mythology (which is recalled but not

explicitly staged in Euripides's play) where the sorceress tricks the daughters of King Pelias, who has earlier betrayed Jason, into murdering their father and cutting him to pieces:

> For *folly* and *eloquence* concur in the subversion of government, in the same manner (as the fable hath it) as heretofore the daughters of *Pelias* King of Thessaly, conspired with Medea against their father; They going to restore the decrepit old man to his youth again, by the counsel of Medea, they cut him into pieces, and set him in the fire to boil; in vain expecting when he would live again. So the common people through their folly (like the daughters of *Pelias*) desiring to renew the ancient government, being drawn away by the *eloquence* of ambitious men, as it were by the witchcraft of Medea, divided into *faction*, they consume it rather by those flames, than they reform it (Hobbes 1998: 255).

If Medea embodies the seductive power of political eloquence in Hobbes's demythologization of the play, Pelias's daughters (who fatally act under her influence) emblematize the violent consequences of a well-meaning but misguided desire for political reform amongst the people which, under the influence of "ambitious men," only ends up butchering the political body it seeks to ameliorate. For Hobbes, this strong political misreading of *sparagmos* --- which will be reproduced more or less identically in the *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan* over the course of the next decade or so[1] --- thus re-enacts Euripides' tragedy as a black political farce with the vulnerable body of Pelias standing in for the precarious English state itself: what originally appeared as an (at least potentially) justifiable act of revenge against the aged Greek king for failing to give up the throne to Jason in Euripides now becomes a gratuitous act of private parricide against a legitimate civil sovereign. In his later discussions of *Medea*, however, Hobbes ironically risks becoming one of the very "internal causes" of the dissolution of government he rails against in *De Cive.*

To be sure, Hobbes's total commitment to the political theological unity of his ideal commonwealth would seem to compel him to disavow Pelias's daughters murder of their father under the influence of Medea as a purely private act of *sparagmos*, but this makes it all the more intriguing to find an obscure moment later in his corpus where he appears to read Medea's ritualized violence as metaphysically, if not politically, defensible. It is in the philosopher's famous debate with the Anglican theologian Bishop John Bramhall on freedom and necessity in the 1650s that this alternative metaphysical reading begins to emerge. As Vere Chappell documents, Hobbes and Bramhall both agree that human beings have such a thing as "free will," but they have very different concepts of what freedom is, where it comes from and whether it is compatible with a larger necessitarianism in the universe: Hobbes takes the radical materialist position that everything that happens, including free human actions, must have an antecedent cause, whereas Bramhall replies with the classic scholastic position that free human action cannot be necessitated by any antecedent factors (Chappell 1999). For Hobbes, as he makes clear in his essay *Of Liberty and Necessity* (1654), human beings do have the freedom to act upon or, in accordance with, their will but, crucially, this will itself is pre-determined by our appetites or desires: I am free to eat when I feel hungry, for example, but whether or not I feel hungry in the first place is obviously decided for me by external forces. If Hobbes famously argues that what we call "free will" is really nothing more than "the last Appetite, or Aversion, immediately adhering to the action" (Hobbes 1991: 44) --- such as my appetite for food just before I eat --- Bramhall replies that free will is the entirely voluntary operation of our rational or intellectual faculty: human beings are free both to determine their will and to act, or not act, upon it as they see fit. In the history of modern philosophy, of course, the Hobbes-Bramhall debate is already exhaustively documented as a defining episode in the confrontation between a waning medieval scholasticism and an emerging early modern materialism, but what is rarely

observed is that, at one obscure moment in their exchange, both appeal to the tragic figure of Medea to justify their very different positions.

If Hobbes and Bramhall clearly mean entirely different things by freedom and necessity --- to the point where they scarcely seem to debate one another at all so much as engage in competing monologues --- they both invoke Medea's *sparagmos* in the context of an apparently minor disagreement over something called *akrasia* (ἀκρασία, "lacking command" or "weakness"--- AB): a hypothetical failure of the will identified by Plato in the *Protagoras* which leads us to act against our better judgement.[2] It is upon this much-debated "akratic" question --- is it possible to willingly choose a bad course of action or is a bad choice always the result of some weakness or defect of the will? --- that Bramhall breaks with the late Thomist "intellectualist" orthodoxy of which he is generally a card-carrying proponent. As Samuel C. Rickless notes, Bramhall departs from the intellectualist view that our will is solely moved by the last judgement of the understanding upon the good to argue that the will is not always determined by the rational or intellectual faculty --- which means it is entirely possible for us to knowingly pursue the bad or even the worst option (Rickless 2013: 396). To defend *akrasia*, Bramhall's first response to Hobbes in *A Defence of True Liberty* (1655) thus cites Medea's speech from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which she recognizes rationally that it would be better not to disobey her father and marry Jason but, overpowered by love, she freely chooses what she knows to be the worse option anyway:

> It is true indeed the will should follow the direction of the understanding, but I am not satisfied that it doth evermore follow it. Sometimes this saying hath place, "*Video meliora probo*[*que*]; *Deteriora sequor*" ("I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse)" (Bramhall 1844: 147).

However, Hobbes's rival theory that the will is nothing more than the "last appetite" immediately before an action will lead him to a very different reading of Medea's bad decision: I must act in a way that I find to be good (such as eating to satisfy my hunger) otherwise I would never act in that way in the first place. For Hobbes, Medea's defense of her actions in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and, by extension, Bramhall's own defense of *akrasia* --- "I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse" --- thus may be "a pretty saying" but it is simply "not true": "Medea saw many reasons to forbear killing her children," he explains, "yet the last dictate of her judgement was that the present revenge on her husband outweighed them all, and thereupon the wicked action necessarily followed" (Chappell 1999: 34-5). In Hobbes's rebuttal of Bramhall's defense of *akrasia*, Medea thus could not have rationally seen the better act but knowingly pursued the worse: she was always compelled to pursue whatever action appeared best to her in the circumstances --- even if that action was killing her children.[3]

In this later reading of Euripides's *Medea*, Hobbes thus appears to bestow a certain limited metaphysical dignity upon the Greek tragic heroine's archaic act of ritual killing which, I wish to claim, not only retroactively contradicts his earlier political critique of the text as an allegory for reformism but also what we have seen to be the political theological exclusion or containment of *sparagmos* in his work more widely. It is remarkable, firstly, that Hobbes's response does not deign to address the grounds of Bramhall's original objection at all --- which, recall, concerned Medea's (relatively trivial) desire to disobey her father and marry Jason --- but jumps immediately to what Rickless rightly calls Medea's "far more calculated and cold-blooded decision" to kill her children in revenge when her husband later abandons her in order to wed Creon's daughter (Rickless 2013: 400, n6). After Bramhall had sought to explain away the princess's original decision to marry as a simple failure of the rational will to pursue the good, Hobbes's apology for Medea's rational and premeditated act of child-murder restores to

the Greek heroine a (hard materialist and determinist) version of her original tragic fate in which she can do no other than what she does. To refute Bramhall's original defense of free will, Hobbes thus claims that --- far from being the victim of a momentary failure of reason or lapse of her better judgement --- Medea has no choice but to knowingly will that which she believes to be good (which is to say revenge against Jason) and so her subsequent execution or performance of that will (murdering her children) can only be an attempt to satisfy this desire for the good. If Hobbes is certainly not offering an ethical defense of Medea's action here --- which remains both entirely voluntary according to his own highly restricted theory of freedom as simply the ability to act "free of externall Impediments to motion" (Hobbes 1991: 145) and (at least potentially) culpable in the eyes of his larger understanding of the first law of nature which compels "*every man ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as has hope of obtaining it*" (Hobbes 1991: 92) --- this qualified necessitarian defense of her decision to kill her children not only rebuts Bramhall's own unrestricted libertarianism but, what is more to our point, also problematizes the philosopher's own earlier political critique of Pelias's murderous daughters. For Pelias's daughters, after all, Hobbes's metaphysical description of Medea's decision to kill her sons could presumably also apply to their own political decision to kill their father: they may be seduced by Medea, but are not in any way physically coerced or impeded by her, which means that their actions are free and voluntary in strict Hobbesian terms; they are genuinely exercising their free will, as opposed to being victims of a form of *akrasia* or weakness of will; and, most crucially, they are fully actualizing their own last appetite for the good, rather than acting in a way they know to be evil. In this way, Hobbes's broad metaphysical apology for Medea's act of ritual killing calls into question the more pointed political lesson he seeks to derive from the case of Pelias's daughters: political reformers, dissenters or enthusiasts are neither simply the useful idiots of bad state actors, nor the passive victims of their own weak

wills, but are pursuing what they genuinely, if wrongly, believe to be the best of all possible acts for them.

## 2. Torn to pieces with their teeth

In his final riposte to Hobbes, *The Catching of the Leviathan, or The Great Whale* (1658), Bishop Bramhall revealingly goes on to claim that Hobbes fails to learn the very lesson he seeks to teach in his reading of *Medea*: "I wish," Bramhall declares, that "before his attempts and bold endeavours to reform and renew the constitution of his native country, he had thought more seriously and sadly of his own application of the fable of Pelias's 'foolish daughters'" (Bramhall 1844: 575). It may be possible to extend Bramhall's conservative political critique of Hobbes here --- which is that he is foolishly interfering with a delicate political organism he does not understand --- because the theologian's argument is that the philosopher does not learn the lesson of his own metaphysical determinism either. According to this argument, Hobbes's very pursuit of his own political good --- which is to say his absence of *akrasia* or, if you prefer, his *failure to fail* in an act of will --- inexorably leads him (like Pelias's daughters) to inflict a death of a thousand cuts on this ideal body politic. To introduce his own strategy for catching Hobbes's "great whale", Bramhall goes on to describe a new act of political *sparagmos* which re-imagines Pelias's foolish daughters as cunning Greenland fishermen:

> Our Greenland fishers have found out a new art to draw him out of his castle, that is, the deep, though not with a fish-hook, yet with their harping irons; and by giving him line and space enough to bounce and tumble up and down, and tire himself right out, and try all his arts, as spouting up a sea of water out of his mouth to drown them, and striking at their shallops with his tail to overwhelm them, at last to draw this formidable creature to the shore, or to their ship, and slice him in pieces, and boil him in a cauldron, and turn him up in oil (Bramhall 1844: 517-18).

If Bramhall's self-professed ambition in his essay is to "catch" Hobbes's political whale, as so many other Hobbes' critics will do after him (see Mintz 1962), what this remarkable extended metaphor already begins to make clear is that he will attempt to do so in the same way that the contemporary Greenland whalers catch, kill, cut up and consume its physical equivalent: they both seek to turn the creature's own "arts" against it by letting it defeat itself. In Bramhall's immanent critique of *Leviathan*, Hobbes will thus not only play the role of Pelias's daughters but also of Pelias himself: the philosopher is shown to dismember his *own* political body in the act of perfecting it.

To understand Bramhall's strategy here, we need only consider his single most influential, albeit polemical, argument from *The Catching of the Leviathan*: Hobbes's *magnum opus* --- which notoriously seeks to arrogate absolute political and religious power for the civil sovereign --- is ironically tantamount to a "Rebel's Catechism" (Bramhall 1844: 555). It is with the unlikely figure of the royalist theologian Bramhall that the so-called "liberal" reading of Hobbes (associated with later readers like Spinoza, Schmitt and Strauss) is really set in motion, because Bramhall is the first scholar to identify the radical political implications of the philosopher's claim that human beings possess a natural right to preserve their own existence --- even or especially when this existence is threatened by the civil sovereign (Hobbes 1969: 71). According to Bramhall's reading, Hobbes's decision to grant the subject the natural right to resist political authority would deprive him of any means of criticizing the actions of political "reformers" like Pelias's daughters who could also, if they so wished, presumably defend their killing of their father as the legitimate overthrow of a dangerous tyrant who threatened their lives.[4] For Bramhall, Hobbes not only gives *carte blanche* to any potential rebel who wishes to overthrow the state but retroactively annuls what the philosopher famously calls "the mutual Relation between Protection and Obedience" (Hobbes 1991: 491) upon which his

commonwealth rests. If every subject reserves for themselves the right to resist under certain circumstances, as Jean Hampton observes, then they can hardly be said to ever "authorize an absolute sovereign" in the first place (Hampton 1986: 103). In positing this unresolvable disequilibrium at the core of the Hobbesian commonwealth, Bramhall does not so much dismember Hobbes's political project as seek to argue that it was already disarticulated from the beginning.

If Bramhall's polemic against Hobbes begins with one scene of rhetorical *sparagmos* --- which is to say the Greenland whalers' capture, killing and consumption of the Leviathan --- it concludes, fittingly enough, with another imaginary tableau of the ritual dismemberment and reincorporation of his political rival in the New World. To return to this final translation of *Medea* in the Hobbes-Bramhall debate, Bramhall playfully imagines what might happen if Hobbes ever got the opportunity to personally apply his political theory to a *real* state of nature --- such as the one that the latter himself claimed could be found in the newly discovered territories called "the Americas":

> Who knoweth (if there could but be some means devised to make them understand his language) whether the Americans might not choose him [Hobbes --- AB] for their Sovereign? But the fear is that if he should put his principles into practice as magisterially as he doth dictate them, his supposed subjects might chance to tear their "mortal God" to pieces with their teeth and entomb his Sovereignty in their bowels (Bramhall 1844: 597).

For Bramhall, this thought experiment --- which re-casts once more Hobbes as a modern Pelias torn to pieces by his New World sons and daughters --- obviously invites his readers to imagine the philosopher's bloody fate as empirical reality's revenge over the pretensions of political theory but, yet again, we may also read his *sparagmos* as the outworking of a fatal liberal

disarticulation within the latter's theory of the commonwealth itself: what this imaginary Hobbes encounters in the form of the indigenous American cannibals are not *homo homines lupi* in an original state of nature, after all, but model Hobbesian citizens who are merely exercising their legitimate right to resist against their new "magisterial" sovereign by tearing him to pieces and eating him! In Bramhall's translation, though, Hobbes is probably best read as a comic or farcical stooge, rather than a tragic victim, of his own fatal misreading of *sparagmos*: what the native Americans presumably see in the figure of the English philosopher is an opportunity neither for barbaric religious sacrifice nor for well-meaning political reform, but simply a good meal.

In *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (1938), his own requiem for the absolutist Hobbes written almost 300 years after the Hobbes-Bramhall debate, Carl Schmitt not only credits Bramhall's *Catching of the Leviathan* as a key precursor for his anti-liberal reading of *Leviathan* (Schmitt 2008: 56-7) but gives his own esoteric, indeed almost kabbalistic, contribution to the modern reception history of *sparagmos.* It is Schmitt's famous thesis in this essay, recall, that Hobbes's fatal decision to choose the historically divisive Biblical figure of the Leviathan to symbolize his new Commonwealth ends up transforming the philosopher from the last great hero of sovereign personalism into the unwitting midwife of the liberal depoliticization of the state. According to the German jurist, what Hobbes had intended to be the signifier of unified, absolute, and incontestable state power --- the mighty, God-like Leviathan --- instead became the symbol of a monstrosity which only succeeded in uniting its enemies against it. To support his specific claim that the Jews of the Hebrew Bible saw the struggle between the mythological figures of Leviathan and Behemoth as symbolic of "the heathen world powers" (Schmitt 2008: 8), Schmitt notoriously summons up one more image of the ritual dismemberment and consumption of the Leviathan's flesh:

> But the Jews stand by and watch how the people of the world kill one another. This mutual "ritual slaughter and massacre" [*Schächten und Schlachten*] is for them lawful and "kosher," and they therefore eat the flesh [*das Fleisch*] of the slaughtered peoples and are sustained by it (Schmitt 2008: 9).

If Schmitt's mythical tableau of the Jews as parasites or scavengers upon the nations of the world emerges out of a particular Christian anti-Semitic imaginary, it nonetheless remains possible to read this Jewish *Schächten und Schlachten* of live flesh as another re-staging of Greek *sparagmos* and *omophagia* which further dramatizes the latter ritual's descent in modernity from an act of legitimate religious sacrifice, through one of illegitimate political resistance, to one of pure, if pseudo-sacralized, self-interest: Schmitt's imaginary Jews are arguably beneath even Bramhall's indigenous Americans (who at least took the trouble to kill their victim themselves before dismembering him) in the hierarchy of modern Maenads because they simply stand and wait for the Leviathan to destroy itself and provide them with a ready-made kosher meal. For Schmitt, this anti-Semitic mythological scene of the Leviathan's self-dismemberment for the delectation of a hungry Jewish audience will, of course, be re-enacted as the auto-destruction of the Hobbesian Leviathan in political modernity: what Schmitt calls "liberal Jews" will exploit a "barely visible crack" in the body of the Hobbesian total state --- which is to say Hobbes' famous concession that the religious subject possesses freedom of conscience --- to eviscerate that state's authority, he claims, and leave it a mere carcass to be consumed by liberal individualism. In creating this fatal division between the gods and the city, politics and religion, public and private authority at the center of his Commonwealth, Schmitt's Hobbes (like Bramhall's before him) again ends up condemning himself to becoming the first sacrificial victim of a liberal *sparagmos* which "destroy[s] the mighty Leviathan from within" (Schmitt 2008: 57).

3. Auto-sparagmos

In the modern political theological imaginary, Dionysian *sparagmos* appears to be experiencing an uncanny afterlife. It has, revealingly, become a new --- or, rather, old --- name for our own obscene acts of political and/or religious violence which explode the singular integrity of human being into so many unrecognizable body parts: genocide, terrorism, suicide bombings, drone strikes and so on (see Cavarero 2008; Debrix 2016; Pugliese 2020 for a range of readings). As Joseph Pugliese provocatively contends on drone warfare, "The sparagmatic art of the drone kill is one predicated on ritualized desecration and dismemberment without the possibility for Dionysian redemption" (Pugliese 2020: 197). To trace the conceptual origins of what she calls the "horrorism [*orrorismo*]" (from the Latin *horrere* "to bristle with fear, shudder," --- AB) of such contemporary political violence, Adriana Cavarero revealingly also returns once more to the bloody primal scene that is Euripides's *Medea*: Medea's horrific ontological crime of killing her children consists precisely in the "dismemberment of the body," she argues, which has the effect of "cancelling its uniqueness and reducing it to flesh without figural unity" (Cavarero 2008: 26). If Cavarero's genealogy of horrorism stretches all the way from Ancient Greece to contemporary Iraq, she nonetheless recognizes (like Bramhall and Schmitt before her) that the signature "Hobbes" plays an instrumental role in this story of the fall of *sparagmos* from a theatre of religious sacrifice into to a scene of pure and nihilistic *carnage* (from the Latin *carnaticum* "slaughter of animals," and *carnem* "a piece of flesh" --- AB). In Cavarero's reparative reading of Hobbes's theory of the mother's natural authority over her child --- which, like Bramhall and Schmitt again, identifies a certain (albeit in her case redemptive) self-contradiction in the philosopher's affirmation of the subject's rights or freedoms --- I want to propose that we can perhaps find one last disturbing Hobbesian apology for Medea's acts of ritual killing and dismemberment.

To explore her own immanent critique of his work, Cavarero observes that Hobbes --- who is of course the philosophical father of the modern autarkic subject remorselessly focused on the preservation of its own life at the expense of all others --- nevertheless recognizes that there is at least one human being who is helplessly exposed to the other: the child. It is Hobbes's peculiar claim in the *Elements of Law*, she recalls, that the mother, nurturer or caregiver has immediate authority over the child in the state of nature: "The title to dominion over a child, proceedeth not from the generation, but from the preservation of it; and therefore in the estate of nature, the mother in whose power it is to save or destroy it, hath right thereto by that power" (Hobbes 1969: 132). According to her reading, the Hobbesian mother's right over the child does not derive from the fact she has given birth to it, but because the very survival of the child depends on her. For Cavarero, Hobbes is thus compelled to concede, over and against his own governing political ontology, that a child can never be a *homo homines lupus*, who will kill or be killed, but is a precarious or vulnerable life who must be cared for or die:

> Bound to the other and dependent on the other for its very existence, the newborn infant is not a combatant. Absolutely helpless, although already characterized by its effort to survive, it is vulnerable in a unilateral way. So much so that, to guarantee it any hope of life, Hobbes is forced to attribute to the mother a power over her offspring that, abandoning the generally lupine nature of mankind, plays on the alternative between saving it and destroying it (Cavarero 2008: 23).

If Cavarero contends that the Hobbesian mother's natural power over its child derives from the philosopher's unwitting recognition of that child's pre-subjective vulnerability --- which again opens up the dream of a "liberal" humanitarian future for Hobbes's thought so feared by Bramhall and Schmitt --- we may object here that the philosopher's own argument for maternal authority is far less sentimental: Hobbes perversely insists that the new born child is *already* a fully-fledged autarkic political subject, not a vulnerable life helplessly exposed to death, who

is apparently capable of giving assent to its mother's power over it because of its own innate desire for self-preservation.[5] In this curiously natural version of his famous "mutual Relation between Protection and Obedience" (Hobbes 1991: 491) --- as opposed to Cavarero's relational ontology of care --- we may also discover the real reason why Hobbes affords the mother the appalling right to destroy her own child: a child who is naturally capable of becoming disobedient, intractable or combative --- which is to say a baby wolf --- would presumably break its contract with its mother and thus forfeit its right to her protection.

If his theory of maternal authority reads suspiciously like a retroactive naturalization of his contractarian theory of political authority, Hobbes further confirm this suspicion in his (curiously self-fulfilling) account of what happens when the child grows up to become a fully-fledged political subject. To replace its tacit childhood assent to maternal authority in the state of nature, Hobbes's final reply to Bramhall, *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* (1656), argues that the full-grown adult subject gives a corresponding full and complete consent to political authority in a civil society where, once again, the political "mother" is given the right to destroy its "child": "This also is from the desire of preserving their lives," he writes of children, "which first the Parents might take away, where the Parents be free from all subjection; and where they are not, there the Civil power might do the same, if they doubted of their obedience" (Hobbes 1840: 180). For Hobbes, what we might call this right of political infanticide --- which may be inflicted upon guilty and innocent "children" alike --- is disturbingly captured in his reading of the Biblical story of Jephthah the Ammonite, a mighty warrior from the Book of Judges, who ends up having to kill his own daughter in fulfilment of a promise to God:

> [A] Subject may be put to death by the command of the Soveraign Power; and yet neither doe the other wrong: as when *Jeptha* caused his daughter to be sacrificed. In which, and the like cases, he that so dieth had Liberty to doe the action, for which he is neverthelesse, without injury put to death. And the same holdeth also in a Soveraign Prince, that putteth to death an innocent subject (Hobbes 1991: 148).

In Hobbes's reading of this notorious Biblical episode, which he proposes in the famous Chapter 21 of *Leviathan*, "Of the Liberty of Subjects," in support of his theory of the unlimited sovereign right to put to death even an innocent subject, Jephthah has the political right to kill his daughter, not because she has disobeyed him and forfeited her right to his protection, but precisely because she has *consented* to die so that he does not break his promise to God (Judges 11: 36): what may well appear to be a (natural and political) father's act of murder or infanticide is, in reality, an act of sacrifice performed by the daughter herself.

In Hobbes's reading of Jephthah "Of the Liberty of Subjects," to conclude, he is obviously seeking to answer a very different question to the one addressed by his reading of Medea in *Liberty and Necessity* --- which is to say the political question of rights versus obligations rather than the metaphysical question of freedom versus determinism --- but it is possible to interpret the former as one last translation of Euripides's tragedy from, if you like, Greek into Hebrew: both the Jewish warrior and the Greek princess, after all, engage in what the philosopher would evidently regard as free, conscious, and rational acts of child-killing. It is worth recalling, too, that Jephthah's terrible act excited almost as much philosophical and theological handwringing in the 17th century as Medea's (Bradley 2022). After praising Hobbes's representation of the mother-child relationship for drawing out the latter's two "essential" dimensions --- which are "an openness both to wounding and to care" --- Cavarero goes on to compare Greek tragedy favorably to Judeo-Christian theodicy in this respect: Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is, unlike

Medea's, allegedly predicated on a reductive choice between saving and destroying his child (Cavarero 2008: 24). Yet, upon this reading, Medea --- whose acts of violence against her own children cannot be easily or comfortably isolated from her expressions of love for them (Cavarero 2008: 27) --- has more in common with Jephthah, who also clearly loves the daughter he kills (Judges 11: 35). To pursue this reading of the Book of Judges as one final addition to his collected translations of *Medea* a little further, Hobbes also appears to furnish a disturbing new political apology for the Princess of Colchis's notorious crime: what we confront in Jephthah's killing of his daughter is neither a private act of family vengeance nor a public act of punishment for political rebellion but a free exercise of the sovereign monopoly upon violence. For Hobbes, who arguably actualizes here a perverse death drive within the Dionysian cult that only ever remains virtual in Euripides,[6] what legitimizes both Jephthah's and Medea's acts of loving infanticide is, again, the supposed *assent* of the sacrificial victim to their own death: religious *sparagmos*, killing and dismemberment is thus transformed, by the victim's consent, into political suicide, self-sacrifice, *auto-sparagmos.* If Bramhall, Schmitt and Cavarero all end up casting Hobbes in the role of a modern Pentheus vainly holding back the entry of Dionysius into his city --- which is to say that the Hobbesian political theological project, whether for better or worse, inevitably falls into *sparagmos*, division and destruction --- I thus want to draw this essay to a close by hypothesizing that we perhaps encounter here a more disturbing, antinomian and even "Dionysian" Hobbes who seeks to capture or internalize the libidinal horrorism of religious *sparagmos* for his own version of civil religion: Medea's children may even become the prototype for the self-sacrificial Hobbesian civil subject who has already assented to put its life in the hands of its sovereign as the pre-condition of its entry into the Commonwealth (see Bradley 2019: 95-118). In order to defend us against the horrorism of a world in which a mother can freely slaughter her own children, Hobbes thus

ironically creates a new *civitate horroris* where political "children" freely and voluntarily die for their parents.

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[1] In Hobbes's other readings of *Medea*, we can find an almost identical appeal to the story of Pelias and his daughters as a warning against political rebellion. To recall his argument in *The Elements of Law*: "Seeing then Eloquence and want of Discretion concur to the stirring of Rebellion, it may be demanded, what part each of these acteth therein. The Daughters of Pelias King of Thessaly, desiring to restore their old Decrepit Father to the Vigour of his Youth, by the Counsel of Medea, chopped him in pieces, and set him a boyling with I know not what Herbs in a Cauldron, but could not revive him again. So when Eloquence and want of Judgement go together, want of Judgment like the Daughters of Pelias consenteth through Eloquence, which is as the Witchcraft of Medea, to cut the Common Wealth in pieces, upon Pretence, or Hope of Reformation, which when things are in Combustion, they are not able to effect (Hobbes 1969: 178). In more cursory fashion, *Leviathan* (1651) invokes Pelias's daughters once more: "they that go about by disobedience, to doe no more than reforme the Commonwealth, shall find they do thereby destroy it; like the foolish daughters of *Peleus* (in the fable;) which desiring to renew the youth of their decrepit Father, did by the Counsell of *Medea*, cut him in pieces, and boyle him, together with strange herbs, but made not of him a new man" (Hobbes 1991: 177).

[2] To recall Socrates's original argument in the *Protagoras*, the will always follows reason and so *akrasia* is simply impossible: "'Is anything else the case,' I said, 'than that nobody willingly advances towards bad things or things he supposes to be bad, nor is this, as seems likely, a part

of human nature, namely to be willing to go towards things one supposes to be bad instead of the good things? And whenever one is compelled to choose one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater one when it's possible to choose the lesser?" (Plato 2004: 358d).

[3] If it is impossible to know exactly why *Medea* should figure so largely in the Hobbes-Bramhall debate, it is worth recalling that the first philosophical discussion of *akrasia* (or the lack of it) in the context of the play occurs as early as Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Aristotle, Medea's decision to kill her decision is to be contrasted with Oedipus's killing of his father because the former is performed knowingly: "First, the action can occur as in the early poets who made the agents act in knowledge and cognisance (as Euripides too made Medea kill her children). Alternatively, the agents can commit a terrible deed, but do so in ignorance, then subsequently recognise the relationship, as with Sophocles' Oedipus" (Aristotle 1984: 1453b38). In the case of Hobbes's own reading of *Medea*, I think it is at least possible that, as a former member of Marin Mersenne's philosophical circle in Paris in the 1630s, he was also aware of the debate between Mersenne and Descartes in which the same expression from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* cited by Bramhall was invoked to exemplify their respective positions on *akrasia*: "the understanding represents different things to the will at the same time," Descartes writes in a 1637 letter to Mersenne, "from which we have the saying *I see the better and approve it*" (Descartes 1996 1: 366). See Gilby 2019 for a summary of this debate.

[4] See Sreedhar 2010 for a recent variation upon Bramhall's thesis that *Leviathan* is an apology for political resistance. To be clear about my own position, I think Bramhall confuses Hobbes's real claim that the civil subject has the *natural* right to preserve their own life against whoever may threaten it (including the sovereign) with the larger claim, which Hobbes never actually makes, that the subject has the individual or collective right to *politically* resist or even overthrow their sovereign. In any case, as we will see in the final section of this essay, Hobbes

is always insistent that --- notwithstanding the rights of the subject --- the sovereign possesses an unlimited right to punish and kill even the innocent.

[5] For Hobbes, the child "ought to obey him by whom it is preserved, because preservation of life being the end for which one man becomes subject to another, every man is supposed to promise obedience to him in whose power it is to save or destroy him" (Hobbes 1991: 140). However, he elsewhere contends that children belong to that class of non-persons (including animals and fools) who are deemed naturally incapable of giving consent, and so the question of how a child can be supposed to give even tacit assent to their mother's authority remains notoriously unresolved in his work. In order to address this problem, Hobbes scholarship has proposed a range of different solutions including the ingenious arguments that the child gives "hypothetical" consent (where we may reasonably presume that they consent to their mother's authority, even in the absence of any concrete evidence, because it is so clearly in their best interests to do so) or "retroactive" consent (where the adult may consent retrospectively to the authority they fell under as a child by continuing to obey their parents in maturity) but both these solutions are clearly a very long way from even a tacit act of consent expressly given by the child themselves during their childhood. See Lewis 2003 for an overview of the scholarship.

[6] In Euripides's *The Bacchae*, recall, Pentheus --- who is the self-appointed defender of civil religion against the allegedly antinomian threat posed by the foreign gods --- seems to be curiously attracted to, and excited by, the liberating excesses of the Dionysius cult that will ultimately kill him. If this death drive or self-sacrificial economy remains largely implicit in Euripides' original play, it is rendered explicit in modern adaptations of the tragedy such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's classic film *Medea* (1969). In the opening of Pasolini's (otherwise largely faithful) rendition of the play, we find a scene that is not to be found anywhere in Euripides's play, namely, the *sparagmos* of a *willing* victim: a *pharmakos* is voluntarily tied to a cross and then torn apart with his body parts scattered on the ground.

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