Did Chrysippus understand Medea?

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The Stoics are generally thought to have been rather bad literary critics. They consistently superimposed on Greek poetry their own philosophical preoccupations, often introducing these by means of allegorizing interpretations.¹ For instance, they ignored the important differences between the psychology of earlier Greek poetry and their own, theoretically developed, psychology, and used phrases from Homer, in particular, as support for their own psychological theories.² For this reason, it may seem implausible to look to Stoic writers for any real insights into the psychological portrayal of figures in Greek poetry. However, I think there is one Stoic discussion which is rarely studied but which is worth exploring for its potential insight. This is Chrysippus’ discussion of three lines from Euripides’ Medea. This is referred to several times by Galen, in a work which has recently been edited and translated by Phillip De Lacy, under the title, On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato.³ In Book Three, Galen deals with Stoic theories of the psyche and, in Book Four, Stoic theories of the emotions (pathē). Galen himself is not a Stoic but takes a Platonic view of these subjects.⁴ Hence, he consistently criticizes Chrysippus (whom he takes as representative of orthodox Stoic doctrine), while he agrees with Posidonius, who modified Stoic doctrine on Platonising lines; and he cites approvingly Posidonius’ criticisms of Chrysippus. The passages in Galen’s work which interest me are those in which he reports Chrysippus’ attempt to illustrate his psychological theory by several poetic quotations, notably the famous lines which conclude Medea’s decision-scene (1078-80):

καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οὖν δρᾶν μέλλω κακά,
θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων,
διότι μεγίστων αὐτῶν κακῶν βροτοῖς.

Chrysippus’ interpretation of these lines is a subtle and interesting one. What is it?

Before trying to answer this question, let me take a question that is more straightforward, the answer to which will help to clarify Chrysippus’
interpretation. How does Galen (who sets out to contradict Chrysippus) interpret these lines? For Galen, the decision-scene represents the struggle of reason (logismos) against anger (thumos) in the psyche of Medea. 'She knew what an unholy and terrible thing she was doing, when she set out to kill her children, and therefore she hesitated... Then anger dragged her again to the children by force, like some disobedient horse that has overpowered the charioteer; then reason in turn drew her back and led her away, then anger again exerted an opposite pull, and then again reason. Consequently, being repeatedly driven up and down by the two of them, when she has yielded to anger', she utters these famous lines. Galen analyses the situation in Platonic terms, based on the tripartite psyche theory of Republic, Book Four, and the charioteer-horses analogy of the Phaedrus. Plato himself, in the Republic, cited a line from a significant scene in Book Twenty of the Odyssey to illustrate his tripartite psyche theory (in Platonic terms, a line in which Odysseus' reason rebuked his thumos). Galen develops Plato's allusion, and elaborates the analysis in terms of the tripartite psyche. Indeed, the passage is a remarkable example of the way in which Homer, without the concept of a unified but divisible psyche, is capable of describing the phenomenon later conceived of as psychic conflict. Galen sees Medea's situation as the inverse of Odysseus': 'she says that her anger overpowers her reason, and therefore she is forcibly led by anger to the deed, quite the opposite of Odysseus, who checked his anger with reason', III 3.17 (307K).

Galen's reading of Medea's dilemma has also been adopted by modern critics. Bruno Snell, for instance, in a well-known discussion, translates the passage and comments as follows. 'I am overcome by evil, and I realize what evil I am about to do, but my thumos (my agitation, my passion) is stronger than my bouleumata (sound considerations), that thumos which is to blame for the greatest evils that men commit'. The conflict, therefore, is a battle inside the hearts of man. Passion, thumos, is stronger than the reasonable intentions. Snell sees these lines, and the scene of which they are the climax, as a deliberate contribution to the late fifth century debate (to which Socrates also contributed) about the capacity of reason to control emotion. In the Medea, Euripides dramatises an 'inner battle' or 'moral conflict' between 'passion and reason'. However, there is a rather different way of interpreting the scene, which is sketched in a discussion by Bernard Knox. 'There is one person who can and does pose a real obstacle to Medea's plans, who can effectively confront her with argument — Medea herself. In the monologue... she pleads with herself, changes her mind, and changes again and then again to return finally and firmly to her