

The 'Monstrous' Medea: A Vindication

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Abstract

The character of Medea has been consistently associated with the notion of a child-killing sorceress, who totally disregards her maternal bonds. Through this paper, by focussing on *Medea* by Euripedes, I have attempted to show such a portrayal is a result of the way in which such women like her were seen as unnatural, and even barbaric, in ancient Greece, during the time when Euripedes was writing his play. And at the same time, the paper shows how she becomes an embodiment of the feminine resistance to such patriarchal restrictions imposed by society, both through her portrayal within the play, and how she has interpreted by the British suffragette movements in the 19th to the 20th centuries. To conclude, the paper shows how Medea in the play, transcends such restrictive binaries and emerges as a character in her own light.

Keywords: Medea, Euripedes, Feminism, Ancient Greece, Iliad

“I would rather thrice stand in arms

Than bear the pangs of birth once.”

- *Medea*, Euripides.

“Wrong a woman /In love and nothing on earth has a heart more murderous.”

-*Medea*, Euripides (57)

Introduction

The two quotes provided in the epigraph is perhaps one of the most iconic lines that we can possibly get from ancient Greek tragedy. Attributed to the mythical sorceress and child-murderer Medea, in a play by the Greek dramatist, Euripides, it perhaps makes apparent the way women, especially unusual women, like Medea, were seen as the ‘unnatural other’ in patriarchal society. Medea has been represented throughout the centuries in different ways, but perhaps the most consistent image is that of the child-slaying demoness.

In the following paper, I will make an attempt to show how the representation of Medea as 'unnatural' has mostly been due to the way she has been perceived from the male point of view. It is highly unfortunate that hardly anyone has tried to see that, perhaps, from her side, it was all quite natural. It is the patriarchal perspective towards Medea, that I would try to correct, via this paper.

Euripedes: Feminist or Misogynist

We hardly know much about the personal life of Euripedes, rather it is his dramatic career which is far better known. He is known to have written over 90 plays, of which 16 still exist today and that he won the first prize in the City Dionysia festivals four times in total (of them, once posthumously). With respect to his stance on women, there are quite a few legends prevalent about him, mostly through the satiric treatment by the comic playwright Aristophanes, that he hated laughter and women, and that he lived in a cave looking out to the sea from Salamis, but none of them can probably be more than doubtful anecdotes. In reality, the fact that most of his plays are named after female protagonists, such as Medea, Alcestis, the eponymous Trojan Women in a play of the same name, etc., more than shows his liberal and sympathetic stance toward the condition of women.

With respect to his play *Medea*, it is important to note that the idea of Medea herself killing her children is a deliberate invention by Euripides. Earlier myths tell of the same children being killed by the people of Corinth in revenge for the deaths of their king and princess. Certainly, other than him, there are no definite evidence of any other dramatist, however minor, attempting the same. According to Robert Graves, in his book, *The Greek Myths*, there is a probability that perhaps Euripides was bribed by the people of Corinth to represent Medea as a child-killer, thereby relieving them of their guilt: "Since any drama which won a prize at the Athenian festival...at once acquired religious authority, it is very probable that the Corinthians recompensed Euripides well [with 15 talents of silver]for his generous manipulation of the now discreditable myth"(Graves,156.2). But it could be mere conjecture, in the absence of any actual, conclusive evidence.

The inclusion of a fully female chorus in the play by the dramatist is quite an innovative invention. We hardly find any other example except perhaps the chorus of Erinyes in the play *The Eumenides*, by Aeschylus. But there is a difference -- the Furies are mostly super-human beings, while the Corinthian women are drawn from the daily every-day life of the city. For Euripedes, this became a means to allow him to present a realistic portrayal of the position of women in a male- ordered society. Via Medea's conversations with the Chorus, Euripedes highlights the male double-standard which states that it would be better for women to stay back at home while men go out to fight in heroic battles, or vote in parliament. According to Medea, "[Men] say we live sheltered lives in the home, free from danger, while they wield their spears in battle -- what fools they are." (Euripedes, 57). In the essay by Erich Segal titled, "Euripedes: Poet of Paradox", he claims that "Sophocles... acknowledged that Euripedes presented men as they really were -- as people, not paragons. Euripedes therefore owns the distinction of having

brought realism to the theatre.”(Segal, 23) This is mostly exemplified through the chorus in *Medea*, as well as the fact that he chose domestic troubles and marital betrayal as the main theme.

Medea's Heroic Temper: A Hero(ine) Among Heroes?

In ancient Greek tradition, notions of bravery and heroism were mostly reserved for men, and hence, warfare was primarily a male profession. On the other hand, the domestic space was mostly reserved for women. The ideal of womanhood was to be a perfect mother and wife. They were not permitted into the public space (though perhaps they did go to see plays being performed), nor did they have any sort of political presence. The Greek notion of *kleos*, usually translated as renown or fame, relates to a hero's striving after eternal recognition, through great feats of bravery conducted in battles. It was unthinkable to imagine a woman as capable of possessing *kleos*, or fame. This is the reason, why the statement made by Medea that she would rather fight in war rather than bear children, appears so bold to the audience of Euripides' time.

In this context, it is interesting how Euripides begins his play in medias res, at a point when, after fleeing from Colchis with Jason due to having fallen in love with him, Medea had settled in the kingdom of Corinth and has just received the news that her husband Jason is now planning to marry the royal princess, thereby abandoning her and her sons. The Nurse describes her brooding, depressed state as follows: “ From the moment her husband’s criminal behaviour came home to her, she has remained where she lies...surrendering herself to anguish and melting the hour with tears.. She hates her children and takes no pleasure in seeing them. My fear is she may hatch some unheard-of scheme. She is no ordinary woman; no one making an enemy of her will win an easy victory”(51). Thus, she is described as an unusual woman, with a “savage temperament, stubborn will and unforgiving temper”(53), as someone who holds a terrible grudge, and will go to any extent to see herself avenged, regardless of the cost. She does not listen to any persuasive advice, nor does she allow anyone to come near her, but remains fixed, brooding like a wounded lioness.

This could have been taken as an indication of her barbarian, non-Greek origins, if not for the fact that she appears to be governed by the same type of all-consuming passion that characterises the Greek heroes of Homer. As we note from the Homeric epic poem, “The Iliad”, great heroes such as Hector, Achilles or Ajax were described as being restless, brooding, prone to holding grudges for a long period of time, and not resting till they were properly avenged, as in the interaction between him and Agamemnon after the latter snatched his war-prize, Briseis from him, and the aftermath, where he withdraws from the battle:

But I tell you bluntly, and I am going to take a solemn oath on this staff in my hands.....By this I solemnly swear that the day is coming when the Greeks one and all will miss Achilles badly, and you in your despair will be powerless to help them as they fall in their multitudes to man-slaying Hector. Then you will tear your heart out in remorse for giving no respect to the best of the Greeks.....

Olympian-born son of Peleus swift-footed Achilles was sitting by his ships, nursing his anger. He had not only kept away from the fighting but had attended no meetings of the assembly where men win glory. He stayed where he was, eating his heart out and longing for the sound and fury of battle. (Rieu 10-17)

Thus, her situation, here, appears to perfectly mirror the way Achilles barricaded himself in his own camp, refusing to fight, due to his been slighted by Agamemnon, resulting in the deaths of countless Greek heroes. According to Bernard Knox, in his essay “The Medea of Euripides”,

Medea is presented to the audience in the unmistakable style and language of the Sophoclean hero, [as] one of those great individuals whose intractable firmness of purpose, whose defiance of threats and advice, whose refusal to betray their ideal vision of their heroic nature, were a central preoccupation of Sophoclean tragedy. (Knox, 274-75)

Interestingly, in spite of the fact that women are not supposed to be associated with the idea of *kleos*, we do find instances of female warriors in Greek mythology, for example, the fierce Amazonian warriors. The idea that to be heroic, for a woman, is to lose all sense of ‘female-ness’ is also exemplified through the inclusion of the mad-woman trope, as presented through the character of the Trojan queen Hecuba, who goes mad after her husband’s death, and acts as one possessed. In her fit of madness, she, along with other women, attacks and blinds the traitor Polynestor, and kills his two sons. Yet, according to Carolyn A. Durham in her essay titled, “Medea: Hero or Heroine”,

[The] femaleness of legendary Medea stands unquestioned...Medea herself, of course hates men...[but]she is homicidal in a gender-particular use of the term...Not only defined as a killer of men, Medea also incarnates the destruction of the private, domestic, traditionally female part of the family. Herself guilty of fratricide and infanticide, she arranges parricides through others. (Durham,55)

The case in point here refers to the death of Pelias at the hands of his daughters, and the inadvertent death of Creon, via his dying daughter, Glauce. But, unlike the Greek heroes who distinguish themselves through heroic feats, she herself has to resort to typically feminine tricks of guile and deception, as evident in how she dupes Creon into granting her an extra day or Jason by appearing meek and submissive, and thereby, entreating him to allow her to send her children with gifts to his bride.

A second, but related, aspect to Medea's heroic stature appears at the very end of the play. Here, we see Medea standing in a chariot, drawn by dragons, in a triumphant gesture, while Jason is standing down below, literally begging for her to return the bodies of the dead sons. According to Knox, to achieve such a position,

[she] must be either on the roof of the stage building...or in the mechane”(280)-the typical device of the deus-ex-machina, as observed in the case of Apollo in the *Oresteia* or of Aphrodite in the play *Hippolytus*- the place reserved in Attic tragedy for gods, not...the pathway of mortals..[and] as the scene progresses, this hint that she has become something more than mortal is confirmed. Her situation, action, and language are precisely those of the divine beings who, in so many of the Euripedean plays, appear at the end in power to wind up the action, give judgement, prophesy the future, and announce the foundation of a religious ritual. (280)

Here, it should be mentioned that she already comes from a divine lineage, through the sun-god Helios, her grand- father. But despite that, Medea, at the end, actually seems to usurp the role of a deity in that she refuses Jason access to his dead children, and pronounces that “[she] will bury them with these hands, taking them to the sanctuary of Hera of the Cape...In this land of Sisyphus, [she] will establish a solemn festival with ritual observances to atone for the impious bloodshed in years to come”(86). With that, she leaves in her chariot, in the face of Jason's curses. Accordingly, she also refers to the sacred power of oaths, by which she had once bound Jason to her in marriage, which he had now violated by remarrying.

According to Knox, “[the] effect of this investment of Medea with all the stage properties of divinity must have been to bring home to the audience the conviction that [she] is not merely an individual woman wronged and revengeful, she is....a figure who represents something permanent and powerful in the human condition”(282), as akin to a deity. At the same time, she also appears to have the favour of the gods, since she is able to leave the kingdom of Corinth, scot-free, despite the heinous nature of the crimes committed.

Marriage and Medea: Unequal Standards

Medea had arrived at the land of Corinth as Jason's wife, and yet it is through the institution of marriage that she is betrayed by him when he decides to marry the daughter of King Creon, Glaucus. After staying locked inside her home for a long period of time, when she finally addresses the Chorus of Corinthian women, it is to offer an indictment against how the institution of marriage is inherently disadvantaged against women:

Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the most miserable of specimens! In the first place, at great expense we must buy a husband, taking a master to play the tyrant with our bodies (this is an injustice that crowns the other one). And here lies the crucial issue for us, whether we get a good man or a bad. For divorce brings disgrace on a woman and in the interval she cannot refuse her husband. Once she finds herself among customs and laws that are unfamiliar, a woman must turn prophet to know what sort of man she will be dealing with as husband – not information gained at home. Now if we manage this task successfully and share our home with a husband who finds marriage a yoke he bears with ease, our lives are to be envied. But if not, we'd better off be dead.

When a man becomes dissatisfied with married life, he goes outdoors and finds relief for his frustrations. But we are bound to love one partner and look no further. They say we live sheltered lives in the home, free from danger, while they wield their spears in battle – what fools they are! I would rather face the enemy three times over than bear a child once, (56-57)

This indictment against the male-dominated patriarchal society, which mandates unequal standards in marriage for men and women, made personal in Medea's life through Jason's betrayal, leads to the act that has caused her to be vilified as a villain across the centuries. And this is what will be addressed in the next paragraph.

'Unnatural' Mother: Barbarian or Avenging Spirit?

So far, I have avoided talking about Medea's killing of her children, the one act by Medea that has remained virtually indefensible. Since the time of Euripedes, for this one act, she has been considered the epitome of the 'bad' or 'unnatural' mother who killed her own children merely out of feminine jealousy. My attempt here is to correct this stance, and perhaps, to see her in her own light.

As has been mentioned above, the play opens with Medea in a depressed state, following Jason's marriage to the Corinthian princess, Glauce. As the Nurse says, Medea keeps lamenting over her misfortunes and at one point, she even curses her own innocent children, "O cursed children of a hateful mother, I want you to die along with your father, all the home to go to ruin." (54) At this point, she hasn't made any conclusive plans for revenge, but is merely conscious of what she has lost and suffered. She remembers the previous crimes that she had committed against her own homeland, as a result of which she is now an exile in this foreign land, alone and friendless.

Her status as a barbarian and a sorceress is first evoked by Creon, when he comes to evict her from the land of Corinth, "I fear you...in case you do some irreparable harm to my daughter..You are a sorceress and a woman who is no stranger to dark knowledge." (58) This idea of Medea as a barbarian, i.e., as someone who is a total outsider is perhaps one explanation given for Medea's murderous attitude towards her children. After all, the idea is that no one in 'civilised' Greek society would do such a thing. But we do have instances of Greek men and women who have committed such a deed, while being divinely possessed, e.g., Ino, Agave and Heracles. But Medea is fully aware both of what she is going to do as well as the cost that she will pay for it.

It is during Medea's bitter confrontation with her ex-husband, Jason, that she learns of the importance of children in his life. This is evident from where he says, "For I have a sufficient number of sons, and am well content with them". (65). It is perhaps this line, coupled with Aegeus's desperate desire for fatherhood and children, that probably ingrains in Medea's mind the importance accorded to children, especially male children, in a patriarchal society, as a means of gaining legitimacy for one's life. Together with Creon and Aegeus, she has now gained

both one extra day to prepare her revenge, as well as a safe refuge in Athens. Now, she is free to exact her revenge on Jason as well as the princess. To effect this, she plans on using her great knowledge of drugs and poisons, invoking the help of the goddess Hecate, the goddess of magic and witchcraft. But in order for her plan to succeed, she requires the help of her children (and also the unwitting help of Jason). Thus she determines that “[she] will use honeyed words [toward Jason], saying that this royal marriage.. is for the best... [and she] will send [her children] with presents in their hands: a finely woven dress and a coronet of beaten gold.”(71). Both these gifts would be anointed beforehand with deadly poisons, granting death to whoever wore them.

It is only after concocting the initial plan, that she contrives the final and ultimate act of revenge on Jason. She now realises that it is only by killing her children, that she will be able to hurt him the most, since, thereby, she will destroy all his hopes for the future, thereby rendering him impotent, and also ensure that there would be no one to whom he could pass on his heroic deeds, so that they are remembered in posterity. Initially, her need for killing her children was so as to prevent them from being killed by the Corinthian people as atonement (as indeed happened in the original myth), when she says,” It makes me groan to think what deed I must do next. For I shall kill my own children; no one shall take them from me..... You see...to suffer the mockery of my enemies is something I will not tolerate.” (71-72)

But at the same time, Medea knows well the pain of having to prepare herself for such a ghastly deed of using her children as the instruments of her revenge. In the play, Euripides poignantly describes Medea’s inner turmoil and her mental anguish, at the deed. He records the vacillations of her thoughts, as she moves back and forth, once recoiling from it, and then again, urging herself on to the terrible deed,

Why do you fix your eyes on me, children?...I could not do it! Goodbye to those plans I made! I will take my children away from Corinth with me...And yet what is the manner with me? I must find it in me to do this thing. To think I could have been so weak! Did I actually let myself be influenced by such cowardly thoughts?...I shall not weaken my hand...Ah, stop..[let] them be, poor fool, spare your children! When they are there living with us they will bring you joy...No...I will not leave my children to the mockery of my enemies. (78)

The Chorus also urges Medea to reconsider her plans, but at the end, they reconcile and are reduced to grieving for the deaths of the innocent children:

Consider what it is to strike your children down, consider whose blood it is you mean to spill. No. at your feet, by every means, in every way we beg you not to murder your children! [Antistrophe] Where will you find the boldness for such a deed? And, in the fearful act, as you bring death upon your children, how will you prepare hand and heart? How will you look upon your children and in the act of slaying them refrain from weeping? When your children fall down to beg for mercy, you will not be able to dip your hand in blood with a heart that does not falter.....

[Antistrophe] But I grieve now for your anguish, pitiful mother of sons who will shed your children's blood to avenge your bridal bed, forsaken lawlessly by your husband, so that he might have another to share his house and bed. (Euripedes 73-76)

However, Medea remains blind to their concerns, intent on avenging herself on Jason. She demonstrates an unending desire for achieving his total destruction, by any means necessary, even if she has to sacrifice her own motherhood for it.

Thus, according to Charles Segal in his essay titled, "Euripedes' Medea: Vengeance, Reversal and Closure", "Medea's desire for a heroic revenge is compromised by her status as both wife and mother.. As a vengeful and injured wife, she may wish to wipe out Jason's present and future children; but as the mother of those children she too is implicated in the suffering." (C. Segal, 18) She is well aware of the cost that she will pay, if she kills her children, as then she will never be able to see them grow up: "It was all for nothing, then, children that I reared you, all for nothing that I struggled and knew the agony of labour...There was a time...I had great hopes in, that you would care for me in old age....But now that thought and its sweet comfort are no more. Robbed of your company, I shall endure a life that brings you pain and sorrow...(77)

The loss of her children will, therefore, be as much of a source of sorrow for her as it will be for Jason, perhaps even more so. And therein, perhaps lies the source of the tragedy for her. Taking revenge on Jason necessitates her killing her own children with her very bare hands, which leads to the arousal of feelings of pity and fear in the audience, i.e., the tragic catharsis. The idea of Medea directly killing her children also somewhat humanises her character, shedding it of the supernatural or barbarian elements, thereby making it perhaps easier for the audience to understand her.

However, it is through Jason's eyes that the patriarchal mind-set of seeing her as the monster endures in the public imagination, as especially manifest at the end, when he begs her to give him the bodies of his sons, so as to give them a proper burial(a basic rite in Greek society) but is refused, wherewith he castigates her, calling on the gods as witness, "Zeus, do you hear..what injury she does me, this abomination, this lioness who takes the lives of children?...I wish I had never fathered them to see them destroyed by you."(87) But, Medea pays no heed, and drives away.

Medea: Feminist Icon or Misogynist Model

Based on what has been discussed above, we are now confronted with two contrasting images of Medea, as seen from two different points of view- patriarchal/misogynist and the feminist. One way to give justice to these two contrasting views is to access how far the play reflects the tragedy of Medea's and how much of Jason's.

The extent of the play as a representation of Medea's tragedy has been mostly touched in the previous two sections, in relation to the grievous wrongs done by Jason in marrying Glauce, and

thereby abandoning her and her children, since, as she continuously points out, it is only because of him that she committed all her crimes- whether it be killing her brother Aspyrtus, or engineering the death of Pelius through his daughters, as a consequence of which she had become an exile, alone, without friends: “Where am I to turn now?...my own family at home now have cause to hate me, while to please you, I have become hated by the very people who should have had kindness from me, not harm.”(63) As for the crime of killing her children, with its tragic consequences, much can be made of how she uses her own hands to kill them, which makes it all the more personal, in contrast to the remote fashion of the death of Glauce.

To assess the play from Jason's standpoint, one has to draw on the connotation of Medea as a barbarous sorceress which places her outside the bounds of civilised Greek society. From his side, he considers Medea's aid to him as merely inspired by the love-arrows of Aphrodite, not done of her own volition, thus effectively belittling her use to him. After hearing of the children's deaths, he thereby construes her as the death-spirit who has wrecked havoc on his family as well on his cherished dreams of legitimacy. In this respect, he recalls how Medea had begun her career of crime and bloodshed even before she had set foot in Corinth, even before she had become a passenger of the Argo. His tragic position is primarily focussed on the fact that Medea has killed the princess as well as his children, thereby destroying all hopes that he can have of security in old age. And accordingly, his utterly pitiful position is fully exhibited at the very end of the play when he lies prostrate before Medea, begging her to at least allow him to give proper burial to his sons, “Allow me to bury my dead and weep over them.”(86). But the refusal of this earnest plea by Medea further intensifies his suffering. Readers more inclined towards Medea often feel that the ending thereby becomes anti-climactic, for the focus shifts from Medea as the tragic protagonist towards the pathetic figure of Jason.

In the recent decades since the 20th century, Medea has come to be recognised as a feminist symbol of triumph against male oppression, and, as such, it should be mentioned that some of the speeches by Medea about the general position of married women in a male-ordered society was utilised in the suffragette movement in Great Britain through the translation of Gilbert Murray. To them, she represented the unfortunate position of a woman under male oppression, until she decides to take things into her own hands and thereby redress the wrongs suffered by women through the ages. She shows that women have the power to change their own destiny, a sentiment attested in the play itself by the Chorus:

Conclusion

Thus, we see that Medea, seemingly, is rather a confusing figure to analyse. She does not appear to fit comfortably within any fixed, specific paradigm, and, ultimately one is left to one's own devices. The patriarchal- minded ones may very well rail against her as unnatural, barbarian, who has no place in cultured society, but is rather a representative of the earlier, primitive society, while the feminists are more inclined to see her as the redresser of wrongs done on women, as the avenger of female suffering. But Medea is more than just this. She cannot be seen from a single point of view. Accordingly, my attempt in this paper has been to show how she

needs to be seen within the context of her actions and thoughts, as presented in the play by Euripides, rather than taken out of it, in order to be presented as the exemplum for either side. Medea here is not the Medea of the myths, but of Euripides. And the playwright (whether he was bribed or not, as Robert Graves pointed out), though he couldn't move beyond his time, didn't make a play with a villainous lady as the protagonist. The play would have been a disaster in theatre. He had drawn Medea as villain, but with respect and honour.

In this paper, I have tried to analyse her nature from multiple viewpoints, especially from the viewpoint of the playwright, and tried to show how she embodies both sides, yet does not conform to any one. She is neither fully a villain, neither is she fully heroic. She is beyond all these simplistic categorisations. She is Medea, woman in her own right.

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