
Euripides' Vision of Medea's Character

Critics have noted that unlike his illustrious predecessors who also specialized in Greek tragedy, Euripides bears a far greater sensibility towards the marginalized sections of society such that many of his prominent characters are seen to be either women or people belonging to the 'lower classes'. This was in stark contrast to Greek dramatic tradition, which mainly focused on men of noble birth and the divine immortals. Apart from other aspects, it is this realism of Euripides that makes his plays shine forth in retrospective analysis, attributing to them a timeless universal quality.

In Euripides' treatment of the legend of Medea, one finds subtle subversions of the patriarchal ethos of his time, which at the same time are balanced through his dramatic innovations for the purpose of tragic ambivalence. As Richard Rutherford claims in his preface to the play, "It is probable that Euripides was the first to make Medea kill her own children deliberately", which of course is the vital conflict in the play. While it is made clear that Medea's need for revenge as a wronged woman is completely warranted, Euripides introduces the question whether such a situation could justify any means to achieve vindication. Thus, the feminist assertion is brought in conflict with the basic notion of motherhood associated with the female gender, as Rutherford elaborates: "What kind of a woman, even in such circumstances, could bring herself to kill her own infant children?" To further highlight the tragic aspect, Euripides makes it more than evident that Medea is fully aware of the horror of her deeds and yet proceeds as she does, instead of mitigating her crime as an action executed in a moment of insanity.

Through Medea, Euripides portrays a strong-willed woman who would go to any length to preserve her honour and extract due revenge in spite of all the odds stacked against her; as in her own words: "Wrong a woman in love and nothing on earth has a heart more murderous". For being a woman living in a patriarchal society in a foreign country, alienated from her own land, spurned by her husband and then banished from her state of residence, Medea has no external resources or influence to help her in her cause. Apart from the promise of asylum from Aegeus and the initial public sympathy, it is clear that Medea must rely on her own wits to realize her purpose. It is no wonder then that at the start of the play she is found to be wallowing in the throes of despair, self-pity and anguish.

Right from the start, Euripides employs a unique technique to assert the tragic situation of Medea, which is then echoed at various occasions later in the play. The nurse initiates the play with a vain lament of the past to emphasize the tragedy of the present, while conveying the basic premise at the same time: "If only it had never gone to the land of Colchis, the ship Argo". For after all, if this wasn't the case, the tragic instances would never have occurred. Apart from

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everything else, numerous murders would have been prevented at the hands of Medea, such as those of her brother, Pelias; and in the course of the play, the murders of Creon, his daughter, and Medea's own sons. Therefore, even before Medea's actual intent is declared in the play, it is implicitly understood that she is a dangerous woman, well versed in witchcraft and unafraid of killing people to serve her purpose; as the nurse states: "No one making an enemy of her will win an easy victory"

Oaths were deemed of great significance in Greek tradition, and thus, Jason's rejection of the marriage oath serves to further highlight the injustice meted out to Medea. As a result, until Medea finally declares her murderous intent, Euripides continues to provide a rationale for her rage and direct sympathy towards her through the perspectives of the other characters and her interactions with them, including the chorus of Corinthian women. For again, public sympathy was held to be quite important in Greek society owing to its democratic customs of debate (agon) and justice. In fact, it is keeping in mind this tradition that Medea finally regains her composure and appears in public to make her appeal, which is seen to be a passionate observation of the female plight in a patriarchal world with statements such as: "Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the most miserable of specimens...we must buy a husband, taking a master to play the tyrant with our bodies". It is this objective treatment of gender notions that marks the genius of Euripides in the play, and after all, it is heartening to realize that a man writing in the fifth century BCE could possess such a heightened sense of awareness.

Furthermore, through the tutor's statement: "Is he so different from the rest of mankind?" and at latter occasions, through the chorus such as in the lines 410-430, Euripides provides incisive commentary on the patriarchal hypocrisy that made adultery seem almost acceptable for men. This sentiment is again echoed in the first agon scene between Jason and Medea where Jason's audacity in his reasoning by virtue of being born a man is more than evident. However, though the chorus could be seen as symbolic of female solidarity, as they boldly claim, "No more shall we women endure the burden of ill-repute", in support of Medea's retaliation, even they refuse to accept her eventual heinous decision, thus underlining the paradox regarding women and motherhood as discussed before.

Coming to the declaration itself: "I shall kill my own children; no one shall take them from me...to suffer the mockery of my enemies is something I will not tolerate", it is needless to say that these statements reflect Medea's psychological turmoil; and in the subsequent dialogue between her and the chorus, Euripides defines the rationale behind Medea's actions: "But to kill your very own children – will you have the heart for that, lady? Yes; it is by doing this that I shall hurt my husband most". In these statements, one finds the deranged reasoning of a woman scorned, stemming from an egotism that is fixated upon the notions of justice and honour. However, in this mode of rhetoric, one might derive that there is some pragmatic

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thinking behind Medea's murder of her children, for as a woman born in a man's world, where would she have dragged her children along in exile? What fate would they meet, and despite Jason's assurance, could she really trust the man who had already betrayed her once? "They must be killed; there is no other way. And since they must, I will take their life, I who gave them life." This tragic sentiment reflects a certain heroism and courage on Medea's part, which is then once more juxtaposed against the notion of motherhood in her heartbreaking vacillation in her soliloquy, until she finally realizes that she is a woman guided by passion and remarks on the fate of her children: "You have lost this world, thanks to your father".

Then in the messenger's detailed description of Creon and his daughter's deaths, there is a visible devilish delight that overcomes Medea, for the messenger's graphic monologue provides a cathartic sense of vindication for her. After all, through these murders she ends up having her revenge both on Jason and Creon, the men who were to be blamed for her predicament. Though from this point onwards, the public sentiment starts to sway towards Jason, there is a strong argument voiced by Medea herself that it was easy to blame her for her conduct, simply because the others being objective commentators, weren't in her shoes. Also, it might be interesting to note the irony that while the chorus of women call upon the Sun god to prevent the murder of the children, he instead sends his chariot to help Medea in her getaway. Should this be seen as a mere whim of the gods congruent with Greek legends as voiced by Homer or Hesiod, or could this be interpreted as a subtle indication that the gods too agreed with Medea's sense of justice? Again, the ambivalence of Euripides makes it difficult to take a definite stance but then, therein, lies the mark of great literature.

Finally, in the climax, it is evident that Medea has indeed made Jason suffer to the highest degree such that she even denies him the burial of their children, all "to cause you (Jason) pain". However, in the end, it is both vain and unfair to question Euripides' motives behind the play. While his sensitivity towards the position of women is amply clear, it is somewhat unreasonable to claim that he intends Medea's behaviour to be seen as the ideal of feminist retaliation, simply by virtue of his choice of her mode of revenge. Rather, Euripides' purpose seems to lie in highlighting the tragedy of human behaviour or an aspect of it, through the portrayal of the inner conflict of an individual and the social reactions to it, to comment on the notions of justice and revenge. With regard to a specific feminist voice, Euripides rather chooses to delve into objective logic while commenting upon the prevailing circumstances of his time, as voiced by the chorus:

"The rolling ages have much to tell of our side, much, as well, of men's"

Therefore, instead of pinpointing and dissecting Euripides' intent, Medea must be treated simply as an individual work of literature, which encompasses the trivialities of the human condition into a timeless framework.

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