Euripides' Medea

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1. Euripides and the death of tragedy

Many people throughout the ages, from Aristotle to Nietzsche, and even including Aeschylus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, have accused Euripides of various crimes against tragedy. He's been said to be immoral, misogynist, pessimistic, overly rationalistic, and a poor constructor of plots to boot. Legend has it he was torn apart at his death by a pack of either women or dogs. If you can judge a man by his enemies, Euripides was hard at work during his life infuriating conservatives.

To be schematic and simplistic to the point of caricature, we can say that Aeschylus is optimisitic, Sophocles ambiguous, and Euripides pessimistic, concerning the adage "we suffer into truth," that is, that human suffering will be redeemed by the gods in the form of increased awareness of the nature of the universe and man's role in it.

In the *Oresteia*, the gods' intentions are clear and unambiguous: in the concluding trial we see them on stage arguing for their points of view and justifying their actions. The Athenian reforms of 462, which relegated the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus (since Cleisthenes in 507, a sort of Senate to the popular Council of 500) to homicide trials, are justified by Athena; this change in the process of justice from family revenge to civic trial is the "truth" that redeems the suffering of Orestes and by extension the rest of his wretched family.

In *Oedipus the King*, the gods are less transparent: they never appear on stage, though the prophet Teiresias does. We know that Oedipus is the cause of his own downfall, but strictly speaking, we never learn of the family curse in the play, so that the gods' antipathy toward Oedipus becomes at once more personal and less explicable. Nonetheless, Oedipus (and Creon in the *Antigone*) do have their recognition scenes, in which the truth of their actions dawns upon them, **perhaps** (and this is the awful ambiguity of Sophoclean tragedy) redeeming their suffering. (The mystery of *Oedipus at Colonnus* can be seen in this redemptive light.)

The problem here is that too much redemption and the tragic hero becomes a mere scapegoat, just a sacrificial victim, and the tragic strictly speaking is lost in favor of a divine comedy. The impossibility of a Christian tragedy is thus explained: there is no tragedy in just universe; the *Oresteia* as a whole, we must admit, is not a tragedy. The question now, with Euripides, is: can there be tragedy in an amoral universe, in which the gods just don't care? Or just melodrama?

2. Structure of the *Medea*

Prologue: Nurse and Tutor (Medea offstage offering laments)

1st Chorus: Plight of Medea (Medea still offstage lamenting)
1st Scene: Medea's first appearance
- A. Medea's (cool and composed) speech on the condition of women
- B. Medea's negotiations with Creon
- C. Medea's dialogue with the Chorus (reveals her deceit of Creon)

2nd Chorus: Men will now be seen as deceivers (forgetting/overlooking Medea's deceit)
2nd Scene: Medea's debate with Jason

3rd Chorus: power of Aphrodite; plight of Medea
3rd Scene: Medea's negotiation with Aegeus

A. Aegeus is an old, childless man: sparks idea of M's revenge on Jason
B. Medea will provide him with children (Medea as witch)
C. Medea reveals her full plot to Chorus (Medea as warrior)

4th Chorus: Pleads with Medea not to kill the children
4th Scene: Medea fools Jason and sends the children off with the poison gift

5th Chorus: Lament of the helpless Chorus
5th Scene: Medea's debate with herself

6th Chorus: The intelligence of women; the gift/burden of children
6th Scene: Medea hears of the deaths of the princess and Creon; resolves to kill the children

7th Chorus: Call on gods to stop Medea; death of children; Medea now "stone and iron"
7th Scene: Medea, in chariot (above humanity), taunts Jason

3. When does Medea the character become unsympathetic?

One school of thought has Medea sympathetic at first, then slowly losing her sympathetic status, starting with her aside to the Chorus that she was only "fawning" on Creon. Conversely, Jason starts out unsympathetic, then at the end has gained the sympathy of the audience due to the terrible vengeance of Medea. I'm not sure of this reading, since it leaves unspecified the "audience": this might be plausible for 20th C audiences, but not for 5th C Athenian.

First of all, notice the Nurse's Prologue: in it we learn that Medea, mad with love, has killed before (Pelias, by his daughters) to help Jason. We then learn that she is mad with grief, and that she is "a frightening woman," who denies her "enemies" any "easy victories." So our first portrayal of Medea is of a fugitive murderer, swept away by passion for love or revenge, and able to be described in warrior terms! Hardly sympathetic to an Athenian audience, which was either all male, or at least, one for whom masculine self-control was the cultural ideal to which women were supposed to strive, even if their bodies prevented their fulling reaching it.

We then hear Medea's laments from inside the house, in extravagant pain and suffering. And what has Jason done? Divorced her to make a better marriage. This would hardly be unsympathetic actions to an Athenian audience, as they were quite everyday events, as the Chorus reminds Medea at 148.

To further reinforce her strangeness, consider just how shocking Medea's first appearance at 199 would be to an Athenian audience. We have just heard her off-stage, inconsolable, and now she appears in complete self-control to make a sharp, rational analysis of Greek marriage customs, positing women as a class in the process. She speaks, in other words, as a Greek Enlightenment cosmopolitan intellectual would: hardly the personage with which a woman would gain the sympathy of such an audience. Her aside to the Chorus that she has manipulated Creon is not a turning point, but only confirmation of her cool intellectualism.

Even Medea's claiming that Jason is a liar, an oath-breaker, would not have resonated with Athenian audiences, for the Athenian marriage oaths were not between husband and wife, but between husband and father (the notorious--to us--"I give you my daughter for the plowing of legitimate children"). Medea's conception of her marriage as an oath between herself and Jason would have sounded bizarre and suspect to Athenians.

Other examples: we might admire Medea's crafty negotiation with Aegeus, her *quid pro quo* with him: to Athenians, especially conservatives, this would have been not only out of place for a woman, but sordidly commercial for anyone.

(The alleged reversal of sympathy regarding Jason is equally suspect. Jason may become an object of pity at the end, but at the cost of being turned into a woman: he wants to perform burial rites. Thus he's pitiful, but in a way the Athenian would probably have considered condescending: the poor fool, not only childless, but now a woman! There is nothing of the awe-inspiring pity reserved for Oedipus, for Jason has already been reduced to Everyman status: no longer the conquering hero [Medea did all the dirty work], he's just a social-climbing bourgeois.)

4. Medea as double

Another trope of traditional work on the *Medea*, however, seems more secure to me. This is the analysis of the figure of Medea as double. She is:

a. barbarian and Greek
b. human and more-than-human (if not downright divine)
c. victim and avenger
d. mother and murderer (giver and taker of life)
e. woman and warrior
f. woman and witch

We can intrepret this duality itself in two ways: in terms of Greek sociology and in terms of patriarchal existential contradiction.

In terms of Greek sociology, the woman was always double. As the crux of alliance (marriage) and filiation (parenthood), she was both wife and mother, both the core of the family and someone from outside. Her loyalties--to father or husband--were always in question. She was essential to the city (she provided its soldiers, her sons) and outside the city (she wasn't a full-fledged citizen). She could stop or prevent wars (diplomatic marriage) or begin them (by being kidnaped or by running away with a suitor).

In terms of patriarchal existential contradictions (as Simone de Beauvoir would put it in her *The Second Sex*) real women are always double because the social category of "woman" is impossible. As a human being, a woman is an active subject; as feminine, an instance of the category "woman," she is a passive object. We can see this contradiction in patriarchal constructions of female sexuality. The wife must be sexually alluring to ensure the husband's attention and hence a steady supply of heirs and soldiers, but too much sexual desire on her part could lead her outside the marriage bed. Hence the virgin/whore dichotomy (Athena v Aphrodite). (Jason indeed suggests sex is the heart of Medea's personality.) One of the ways the Greeks dealt with this existential contradiction was by means of the figure of the Amazons: active warrior women come from elsewhere, and when they do fight Greeks (Achilles or Theseus), they lose.

5. The death of the children: the horror of the *Medea*

Undoubtedly, what makes the *Medea* such a powerful play is the killing of the children. This is Euripides' innovation. Other versions of the legend have the children killed by the Corinthians, or by Medea, but accidentally, in a botched attempt to render them immortal.

We must remember the Greek context in evaluating the horror of the *Medea*. Infanticide by exposure was the father's prerogative, as we saw in *Oedipus the King*. *A fortiori*, abortion was also practiced, again, we must assume, in the ideal case being performed with the blessing of the father. The high infant mortality and maternal (childbirth) mortality rates no doubt kept these practices in check somewhat, but the point is that there were no

religious sanctions against infanticide or abortion. (Or for that matter against other socially sanctioned takings of life: war and capital punishment being the obvious examples: it's unclear whether a master could simply kill a slave for no reason. The point is that for the Greeks as for all other societies I know about, murder is not just killing, but socially unsanctioned killing.)

But surely for the Greeks, fetuses and infants were different from children, so the obvious point of comparison is with Agamemnon's killing of Iphigeneia. Here I'd like to entertain a historical-libidinal materialist reading of the horror of the *Medea*. In an intellectualist sense, Medea's killing of her children in the service of warrior values ("no one will laugh at me" "I will help my friends and hurt my enemies" and so on), is an interrogation of those values, as if Euripides were saying to the Athenians: why is it alright for Agamemnon to kill his child for political purposes, but not then alright for Medea to do the same? Why should gender produce different obligations? (This reading assumes the hyper-rationalist Euripides who is able to universalize over gender.) And really, isn't war, that most precious of Greek values, anything other than the mass institutionalization of the killing of children for political reasons (give me your sons, says the city to the mothers)? This is a perfectly fine intellectualist argument, but it remains just that, intellectualist.

To take a historical-libidinal materialist perspective, we can say that at the level of emotional, bodily reaction, rather than that of discursively accessible values, a performance of the *Medea* wouldn't have caused a questioning of Athenian gender, but a reinforcing of it. In taking this approach I'm not being anachronistic. First of all, Aristotle uses the term *catharsis* to discuss tragedy, which was open to materialist and physiological interpretation as well as religious and psychological. And secondly we must remember that the Greeks were open in talking about moral training as training of bodily reaction, of taste. Greek children were trained at the level of bodily reaction, well before they did, or could, receive the *logos* or even the *mythos*. That is, they were trained at the level of *pathos*, then: e.g., *Republic* 402a: "He will rightly object to what is ugly and hate it while still young before he can grasp the reason ..." Such training would have been both consciously planned by moralists, philosophers, tutors, etc., and unconsciously transmitted by everyday life. With regard to gender roles, such everyday experience would train Greek bodies to expect nurture from women fulfilling the "maternal function" (since biological mothers of the upper class might delegate the work: to use the epic example, Eurycleia for Odysseus and Telemachos) and discipline from men fulfilling the "paternal function" (slave tutors often doing the day by day work of discipline).

Along that line, then, one would expect bodies to be trained into relaxing and pleasure by feminine caresses and into tension and pain by masculine blows. Later training would reinforce this: athletics and war training masculine bodies into withstanding and administering pain, caring for masculine and feminine bodies in day by day chores all the way through the burial rites training feminine bodies into relieving pain and bringing pleasure--the vulnerability of bodies exposed to feminine care being precisely the point of anxiety touched by figures like Clytaemnestra and Medea.

Now I grant this is very schematic, and of course in need of historical and political differentiation, since the two extremes of Spartan and Athenian mothers were no doubt different than the, say, Corinthian, the archaic different from the classical, etc. Neverthless, I might argure that the bodily reaction of a Greek raised in such a materially libidinal regime to Agamemnon killing Iphigeneia might have been one of repugnance--how could he do this to his own daughter?--but was nonetheless one that went along the lines predetermined by masculine pain-dealing. After all, he might feel (and I mean both literally feel, and "feel" as in "have the opinion") "that's what men do: they're trained to be warriors/soldiers, and that means withstanding and administering pain in service to honor or *polis*." Spectators hearing of Agamemnon's actions and--this is asking a lot of Greek men--identifying with Iphigeneia at the altar would already have tensed bodies, bodies ready to receive pain. On reflection, they might say it was an unfortunate object-choice to receive this particular dose of pain, but nothing out of the ordinary for the subject delivering the dose.

Medea's killing her children, however, would provoke in the spectators the bodily reaction not only of a horrible object-choice, but of a deviation from the normal maternal subject. The spectator seeing Medea, even knowing

of her past, is seeing a woman and mother, and in identifying with the children, would have bodies not tensed to withstand pain from a disciplinary father, but bodies open to receiving maternal nurture. Pain from the mother, then, would be all more painful and horrifying, as it was unexpectedly delivered to a pleasure-expecting body. In that case, the bodily reaction of spectators to the *Medea* is not one of cathartic purification, but of unredeemed horror. This bodily reaction might explain Euripides' unpopularity, as well as providing a bodily, sub-rational reinforcement to a gendering system: women are dangerous, they must be even more carefully watched, etc. Thus intellectually we can see the resistance and interrogation the *Medea* might pose to Greek warrior values, while the bodily horror does the abiding patriarchal work underneath.

Now of course disciplinary body pain was administered by Greek mothers and nurses too, but here the notion of maternal and paternal function, in their complicated interchange with gendered bodies, would have to be factored in. To what extent is a female body administering disciplinary pain "read" or felt as masculine and paternal? What would a "phallic mother" be? To do justice to this issue would take too much time, so we'll have to end the lecture here.