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Medea – Mother of the Year

Euripides’ tragic play, *Medea,* has been read and cherished throughout the world. This is not only because of its unusual protagonist, an outcast woman, but because it explores some of the most taboo human conditions known to human experience, namely infanticide and the unquenchable thirst for avenged blood. Throughout the entirety of the play, Euripides is weaving a complex, dynamic character in Medea. Through his set up of a mysterious past life for Medea to his manipulation of the rhetoric of the characters, much can be discovered by delving deeper into her character, digging down into the pores of Medea and extracting her essence. From her complicated relationship with Jason to her questionable upbringing to her sense of isolation Medea struggles through a plethora of problems. Perhaps trying to examine some of these complex relationships and past problems can help explain the slaying of her two young children. In my estimation, it is safe to assume the reasons behind the infanticide are deeper than as presented in the play, as simply a pawn of revenge against Jason. I will explore some of these reasons, as well as who is at fault. As the audience is led to believe, I don’t agree that Jason is the only one at fault – I also see heavy blame that could be attributed to Medea as well.

The play begins with a nurse, lamenting over the poor condition that Medea seems to be in. This is a truly unusual way to start the play, especially for this era of writing. In the words of critic Jeffrey L. Buller, “the play begins with a prologue in which the central conflict of the tragedy is revealed to the audience. This prologue is not delivered by a god or by any member of the nobility, but by a nurse, a character of relatively humble status” (2). The fact that this play transcends the norm of its time and that Euripides chooses to have a commoner deliver the crucial prologue certainly sets the scene for the play and establishes the keynotes. Because the nurse is humble in socioeconomic status, and because she is a woman (and a very gentle, maternal woman figure at that), the audience is sucked into the story, being able to relate so readily with the motherly narrator. The nurse goes on to tell the story of how the father of Medea’s children has just left her for another, younger and higher-class woman (in fact, she’s a princess), and she simply cannot come to terms with this. The audience never “sees” Medea throughout the prologue; rather she can only be heard crying from inside the house. The fact that Medea cannot even show her face to the audience is enough to invoke pity into the hardest of hearts. This bit of information, coupled with her past that is exposed to us in chunks throughout the story, makes us feel her pain, suffer along with her. In the words of critic Ruby Blondell, “Euripides starts his play by gaining sympathy for Medea, who is represented in the prologue as a desperate woman maltreated by a contemptible man” (156).

The prologue is not the only instance in which pathos serves as the building blocks of the literary execution either. Throughout the entirety of the story, a constant emphasis is put on Medea’s “pariah” status, not only for being a geographical outsider, but also for being a woman in a highly patriarchal society. Because she has been exiled from both her hometown and Corinth as a result of trying to do what she feels is “right” for Jason, she is now a wanderer, an outsider. The actions Medea takes against her father, whether or not they are justifiable, are done for Jason’s sake and his acceptance, further making Jason look like the harsh one – Medea forgoes no risk to win him over. Additionally, she is an outcast in the sense that she is a woman in a society that is wholly man-driven. When a woman’s life is threatening enough to receive any type of male attention, it is automatically seen as odious and ridden with dark magic, simply because women are of little value in said society. Not only is Medea portrayed as a “barbaric” woman, but she is also seen as a witchy creature, wholly mysterious, bloodthirsty, and untrustworthy. One critic has a theory as to why she is portrayed as such – “It might even be the only conceivable such vehicle, in the sense that within the cultural parameters of classical Athens, female discontent might be equated by definition with murderous witchcraft” (Blondell 157). With this statement, I wholly agree. Because Euripides lived in a time when women did not have merit within the complex structure of society, their lives and problems went unseen.

Not only are the women part of the audience captivated by such an interesting character, but the men can find some sense of sympathy with Medea as well. This is because of the predicament in which she finds herself, with infidelity being the forefront of her problems - a conflict to which both sexes can relate. The critics tend to agree with me on this point. Buller writes, “[Euripides] has brought his mythic characters down to the level of ordinary human beings and has shown that what motivated them were emotions that the audience could readily understand. By doing so, Euripides is able to make Medea seem a sympathetic character, despite her violent actions and the elements of fantasy traditionally found in her story” (2). This statement thoroughly lines up with all of my assumptions about the text, but one thing that I did not think about, but strongly agree with is if people can see themselves as a possible part of this predicament, then they recognize that they too could be capable of the terrible things that Medea commits. Carol Weisbrod writes specifically on this point – “But if Medea’s responses are emotions to which we can all relate, given sufficient provocation, then Medea’s violence represents something about the potential for violence in all women and perhaps all people” (97). Because the audience sees that they too could be capable of killing their own offspring, they feel more sympathy for this homicidal mother.

This building up of pathos for Medea is important for a couple of different reasons – it gets the audience actively involved in the life and happenings of Medea as well as makes the audience experience mixed emotions when she kills her children in cold blood. Instead of feeling nothing but hatred for Medea, we get a sick sense of understanding, of relating, but we are still obliged to feel for Jason as well. Our emotions are torn between the two hurt parents, the decision being heavily obscured through the passion and emotion that both characters display.

One of the biggest themes, and the biggest source of conflict, for the story is the relationship between Jason and Medea. This is obviously a source of fuel for Medea’s inevitable downfall, but what contributes to the ruin of the relationship and how does this effect Medea’s psyche? The first thing that is often overlooked in the reading and the comprehension of the original text is that Jason and Medea aren’t even legally married. As mentioned by Carol Weisbrod, “Medea has no claim as first wife. That is, Jason was never married to Medea since she was a barbarian and he could not contract a legitimate Greek marriage with her” (107). While some could look to this fact as a reason to dismiss Jason’s terrible actions, the flip side can also be taken into consideration. Marriage was, as it is in contemporary times, a great and exciting privilege. There were complex and often taxing rituals that must take place at the time of marriage. In fact, one critic suggests that marriage was “the most important transition for women…” and that “to remain unmarried was not an available choice for women, and even among men it was extremely rare” (Blondell 54). I believe that it stands to reason that Medea is unable to become an official bride after I read this criticism – “One word for ‘wife’ (damar) is related to a word for taming animals (damazdo), suggesting that marriage was viewed as a form of ‘breaking in’. To take on the ‘civilized’ role of married woman and mother… had to be ‘tamed’ by a series of rituals” (Blondell 55). Because Medea is described as a “barbarian” woman, it stands to reason that she will not be a suitable bride even if the couple is allowed to tie the knot legally. However a person decides to look at it, the fact that Jason and Medea are never able to formally take part in these acts is a terrible loss. This makes the infidelity that Medea faces even worse in the reader’s mind - knowing that she cannot have him legally and that she is unable to hold on to him physically or emotionally must be very difficult on her psyche. And we see that the loss of this man would be detrimental to her from the beginning, not only because they have created two children together and decided to live as traveling exiled persons, but because Medea is willing to slaughter her own kin for the sake of a man that she has only just met.

From the beginning, a weird sense of monomania haunts their relationship – Medea is so taken with him that she will literally do anything to please him. Weisbrod agrees with my conclusion – “When Medea says… that Jason is ‘her whole life,’ we have some sense of where the difficulty lies…” (108). Throughout the entirety of the play, we see that Medea is constantly starved for that attention from Jason, that the motivating factor through the whole play is either trying to win Jason’s love back wholly or seeking the bitterest type of revenge that she can muster. She is not content to simply accept Jason’s help. In accepting this aid, she has a guarantee that her children will not only be wonderfully cared for, which means stability for the family (something which they haven’t had, as a result of being exiled and haphazardly homed), but they will be part of the aristocracy. Her two little sons will have every physical and mental need met. (Euripides l. 908-940). Instead, Medea decides that Jason’s importance surpasses even that of her children, and she decides to enact the inevitable.

This has undoubtedly led to the biggest theme of the essay – Medea’s children and her role as a mother. Blondell comments about Euripides’ portrayal of Medea as a mother in saying, “It is crucial to recognize that Euripides does not portray her as a cold or uncaring mother, but an intensely loving one, even after she has killed them” (155). I do agree that there is some form of affection shown to the children, but this is mostly through her psychotic raging during deciding whether or not to commit the deed (Euripides 1019). Through this dialogue, she does indeed mention that she loves her children and wants what is best for them. Eventually, the need to exact revenge upon Jason wins over, and she justifies it in some pretty sick and twisted ways. One of the remarkable instances is that she tries to make herself believe that she is going through with it to save her children from a fate far worse than that in which their own mother takes their lives – that her enemies would be after them after she is dead and gone (Euripides l. 1060). Some critics agree. For example, Weisbrod makes mention that Medea recognizes that “they have his blood. As long as they live I shall be mixed with him” (100). It can be likened to burning all of the old mementos that an ex-boyfriend gives a girl during their dating years – a primal catharsis that can only be satiated by destroying those last bits of the relationship before moving on to bigger and better things. Sadly, in Medea’s case, these mementos come in the form of two little young ones.

There is another clear-cut reason that Medea’s maternal role is highly perverted -throughout the entirety of the play, the young boys are never named once, in dialogue and elsewhere. They are only referred to as “1st Child” and “2nd Child”. This not only shows the unimportance of the young boys to their mother, but it also sets up the context to view them as nothing more than objects, tools for which Medea to reap her revenge on her ex-lover.

With Medea’s case, endless psychological conclusions can be reached. Hints of what is called “altruistic filicide,” where “a mother kills her child out of ‘love’ because she believes death to be in the child’s best interest’,” are present (Friedman 2). I touched base earlier with the idea that Medea uses her children’s safety against her enemies as a reason for slaying them, but I feel that this is more of an excuse and not really a main motivator. The psychological term that is a better fit to her condition is surely “spouse-revenge filicide.” This type of filicide, being the least common one, “occurs when a mother kills her child specifically to emotionally wound the child’s father” (Friedman 2). This is clearly the case. Because Medea is up in arms when Jason finds another spouse, Medea decides to hit him where it hurts the most – in his lineage. Delving further into my psychological study, I found that mothers who commit filicidal crimes are “often socially isolated full-time caregivers of lower socio-economic status who experienced substance abuse and were victims of domestic violence” (Friedman 2). This fits the bill perfectly – while Medea is not born into a low socioeconomic situation, she assumes that role in society after going against her family to win Jason over. She is also a “full-time caregiver” to her children, especially when Jason is not around to help her. The fact that she is a pariah, a leper of society means that she is surely isolated. Could this not point to a distinct answer to why she is so willing to give up her maternal roles to exact revenge on the man that she loves the most? I believe so.

Another point of interest to be brought up about Medea’s role as a mother is she is quick to help Aegeus with his problem of childlessness (Euripides l. 719). He desires so badly what Medea takes advantage of – her two beautiful sons. One critic suggests that Medea kills her children on the premise that there will be a promise of more “make-up” children with Aegeus (Buchan 8). Looking at it this way, we see that, with the death of Jason’s new wife, as well as the death of their children, Jason loses everything – his key to a higher social status, his name-bearers, his love. He is literally left with nothing but the bitter taste of revenge, exacted by a mighty woman. Medea is sitting relatively pretty, with the promise for flourishing of life, new children to rear, and a place to call home, all while having the stinking blood of her babies becoming stagnant upon her hands.

A last, but most vital thing to look at when considering the maternal role of Medea is how the play ends and how the children are put to rest. Medea is insistent that Jason will have no say in the way that their sons are put in their final resting places. She even denies him access to them for a fleeting moment to kiss them goodbye (Euripides l. 1378). Kerri J. Hame writes, “Medea’s command to Jason to take care of the burial rites of his bride highlights Jason’s exclusion from his children’s burials and the family he once had with Medea; in Medea’s eyes his proper place is with his new family and bride…” (Hame 7). I wholeheartedly agree. This sets up an interesting picture of their inevitable everlasting bond – both of them will be performing ceremonial rites for loved ones, each paralleling the other, their eternal grief unmatched by any other inhabitant of Greece.

It has been illustrated why Medea is such an easily character to sympathize with, how her love with Jason can be viewed as toxic, her shortcomings as a mother, and eventually her fall. We have explored psychological explanations for her filicide, reasons for her codependency issues, and how these all fit into the grand scheme of things. One of the biggest questions left unanswered is one that I will pose upfront… who is to blame? Is it Jason, the adulterer, the liar, the cheat, or is it Medea, the psychotic, the dependent, the irrational? Can the blame be put on a certain character, or is it just the way things inevitably pan out? All of these questions and more are left unanswered by Euripides. I feel the impulse to carry on his legacy and leave these questions open-ended, the way I imagine this great writer would have wanted. After all, where is the fun in literature if the audience does not get to play a little judge and jury? One thing is for sure though – after this essay, the audience will be carefully considering the options for years to come!

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