Reversed Heroism and Heroic Perversion in Euripides' Medea

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and the study of her divided mind, torn between on the one hand loyalty to her father and her country and on the other hand her love for Jason. From there it gets into Latin poetry. It was a woman in distress because she has been in love, betrayed her country for love, betrayed her country for a lover, that is the theme of the longest poem of Catullus in the middle of the 1st BC. Under Catullus’ influence, some of those words and sentiments get into the passions of Dido in the Fourth Book of Vergil’s Aeneid, and from that into The Metamorphoses of Ovid, in which there is a sequence in the central section of divided mind heroines, often because of a love passion. For example there is Scylla who betrays her father to his death because she is in love with his enemy. There is a woman who is in love with her own father and is therefore torn between morality and duty. There are two stories of lesbian passions, one of which ends tragically, the other of which ends happily because the metamorphosis is that the woman is changed into a man, so that’s all right then! Among these is Medea herself, and Ovid uses the famous words in which he puts in a nutshell the divided mind. Medea says: “vide meliora proboque deteriora sequor” - “I see the better course and approve it, and I follow the worse.” It is a similar sentiment to that which we get in the Epistles of St. Paul when he says that the evil that I would not do, that I do; the good that I would do, that I do not do - the great philosophical puzzle of how it can be that you know that something is right and yet you do something that is wrong.

Euripides was part of a great philosophical ferment of the time. Socrates had made the question, how is it that people do wrong?, and produced the great Socratic paradox that no-one willingly does wrong, that all wrongdoing is in fact some kind of mistake, but that is another question. I shall end by simply saying that Medea is at the beginning of this great process of psychological exploration of the divisions that we all experience between reason, will and desire.

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The last several years have witnessed a sudden extraordinary rise in the popularity of Euripides. Greek tragedy in general has attracted scholars and playwrights, readers and audiences across the millennia. Productions of Greek tragedy are a curiously persistent feature of our culture. If Euripidean plays once tended to be dismissed as decadent, melodramatic or somehow “untragic”, they have come increasingly to seem appealing to modern literary tastes, and their vision of the world has in certain regards become more and more an uncanny anticipation of our own.

During the past two decades, Euripides’ Medea, Bacchae and Trojan Women have broken out of the confines of classical scholarship to become important documents in contemporary culture. For instance, there were three productions of Medea in 1986 (London: Gate Theatre; Young Vic; Lyric Theatre) and two more in 1992 (London: Almeida Theatre; Bucharest: National Theatre, directed by Andrei Serban and followed by Trojan Women and Sophocles’ Electra, which comprised his “Ancient Trilogy”). Trojan Women was produced by Annie Castledine and Annabel Arden (Théâtre de Complicité) in 1995 at the National Theatre in London and Bacchae was produced in Peking by the Beijing Opera Actors in 1996.

Likewise, there has been much recent discussion of these Euripidean plays. In particular, at the beginning of the century Medea was associated with the women’s
liberation movement; readings of particular passages describing the precarious plight of women as wives and mothers in male society (Med. 231-251) were read in the meetings of the suffragette society in Gilbert Murray’s translation. It would be absurd to interpret the recent discussion of Medea in purely literary terms, for clearly what is involved is also a set of political issues which have become particularly acute in the last few decades: women’s rights, women’s sufferings and women’s revenge as a symptom of the violence and inequality inherent in even the most democratic and liberal political organisations. A new interest in giving voice to the silent is currently in evidence: women have been seen as the exemplary sufferers, whose traditional silence had once been comfortably interpreted as acquiescence, but now becomes increasingly understood as repression. The chorus in Medea raise the issue in their first ode (Med. 410-430) which immediately follows Medea’s soliloquy where she decides to resort to killing and thus transform herself from victim to avenger; they call attention to the silencing of women and pronounce the need for a new poetry by women to be added to (or to replace?) the traditional poetry of men.

Medea is still a figure through whom many people want to work out their anxieties and concerns in our society. For example, in the fall symposium on Women’s Studies, organised by the Officer for Women in the German-American Institute of the University of Heidelberg (13-15 November 1996), Medea has been advertised as “the ancient myth of the magic power of women” and the intentions and power of the heroine and especially her sexuality were described as “ominous” and regarded as “posing a threat to the established [male] order”. In the same leaflet there was a reference to the dramatic versions of the story in Euripides and Seneca which clearly offers the particular interpretation espoused by the organisers of that women’s conference; the Euripidean Medea is described as a scorned wife who “uses her children as a means of revenge and in this way symbolises the murderous power of the mother”, whereas in Seneca’s Medea, it is argued, “it is not so much the betrayed woman who stands in the foreground as the woman raging in measureless fury who employs her superhuman cruel power as a magician in a criminal way”. Both renderings of the story of Medea do, indeed, focus on the danger of female sexuality and the sexual attractiveness of dangerous females, but the balance can tip over to serve the purposes of numerous audiences across the centuries from feminists to upholders of male order.

In her long history, Medea has become a kind of heroine. But what does it mean to talk of heroism in a play like Medea?

There are two usages of the term “hero” in ancient Greek culture:

(a) The first is associated with the foundation of a hero-cult. The hero suffers and achieves a close relationship to the gods both positive (i.e. honour) and negative (as in the case of Hera-kles who achieves his glory through Hera’s pursuit). Such heroes retained local efficacy after death in connection with the honours at their tombs. Usually, but not always, they are male.

(b) The second usage of the term refers to the warriors of traditional Greek epic. Often, but not always, these are identical with the first group. They fight and kill and are killed for the sake of honour. They uphold the traditional code of helping friends and harming enemies and fear above all being laughed at by their enemies. They are always male.

There are two further modern usages of the term which could be applied to ancient figures:

(c) The first of these is the protagonist of the Greek tragedy, the tragic hero. Often but not always, this is identical to the first and second group; these tragic heroes oppose the moderate values of the chorus and often suffer extreme penalties in order to remain true to their own values. This is especially true of Sophoclean heroes, and less so of those in Euripides’ plays, except for this very play.

(d) In the second modern use, one discerns a certain didactic function, for the hero is presented as setting a moral paradigm; according to this definition, the hero is someone who does extreme good by unusual actions which call upon us to imitate them in our own behaviour.

So, in what sense or senses is Medea a hero?
(a) The least interesting sense for us is the first one. Medea does not have a hero cult in Greek religion because she is a foreigner, but there is a cult in Corinth for her dead children. How they died was reported differently, and Euripides both presupposes that his audience knows that they will die and at the same time surprises and shocks them by the brilliant and horrible new idea of his own, that it is their own mother who kills them.

(b) According to the second usage, in traditional epic, Jason is the hero, not Medea. It is he who commands the most famous band of heroes in Greek legend, the Argonauts, on their extraordinary adventure to the Eastern limits of the world, in Colchis, where he regains the Golden Fleece and manages to get his men safely back to Greece after many adventures. In a sense, Jason is a greater hero both than Achilles (because he survives) and than Odysseus (because he saves his crew). Yet in his play Euripides has stripped Jason of his traditional heroic character and transferred all the heroic dimension, astonishingly, onto a woman, Medea.

Jason is a weak, pragmatic, ambitious calculator, interested in money more than anything else. He even thinks that when he betrays Medea for the sake of money he can buy her forgiveness and gratitude by giving her money for herself and the children. Medea, on the other hand, is the bearer of the heroic ethos in the play. She is afraid more than anything else of her enemies laughing at her (esp. Med. 383, 398, 405, 797, 1355), wants to help her friends and hurt her enemies ("Let no-one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited, inactive, but rather just the opposite, dangerous to my enemies and helpful to my friends; for the lives of such persons are most remembered", Med. 807ff.; 1049), and is willing to suffer the extreme agony - here, to kill the children that she loves - if that is the only way that she can reach her end and remain true to herself ("my grief is gain if you cannot mock it", Med. 1362). The most powerful resistance to her plans is posed by herself; in a memorable soliloquy before the infanticide, she confronts her maternal feelings and, not without an agonising struggle, resolves her dilemma by opting for honour and revenge (Med. 1021-80). Her chosen course of action is concordant with the heroic ethos, but only at the expense of her femininity, or rather, her humanity. Euripides has chosen to reverse the roles, stripping Jason of his legendary heroism and endowing Medea with heroic qualities normally reserved for male heroes. Once she has resolved to kill her children, Euripides’ Medea is fearsome and unrepentant; her heroism is perversive.

(c) Obviously Medea is the protagonist of this play. Not only is it named after her, she is the central figure about whose actions and plans everything turns. From the very beginning to the very end, she is either on stage or else is the only person about whom the people on stage talk. Everyone who comes onto the stage either does so in order to talk to Medea or ends up talking with her as soon as he appears. Jason comes once on his own in order to talk with her, once at her summons to talk with her, and a third time in pursuit of her after she has killed Kreon and his daughter.

But there is more: Medea is also more like a Sophoclean hero than any other figure in Euripides’ plays - but with significant differences. In a recent article by B.W. Knox ("The Medea of Euripides", YCS 25, 1977), Medea has been compared to Ajax; according to Knox, Medea is not a barbarian nor a witch and therefore to be dismissed from Greek society. Knox tries to portray her as a typical and ordinary Greek woman. But how typical and unique is she? She is an outsider.

At this stage it would be interesting to think of the trilogy of plays by Euripides which were performed at the same time as Medea in 431 BC at the Theatre of Dionysos in Athens. The other two were Philoktetes and Dictys. Unfortunately these only survive in fragments, though there is, of course, another version of the myth of Philoktetes in Sophocles’ play of that name. Philoktetes was the epic hero who was wounded and isolated on the island of Lemnos. Because both he and his bow were needed for the capture of Troy, according to the god’s oracle, Odysseus and Neoptolemus came to Lemnos to take him with them so as to bring about the end of the siege. So, Philoktetes is an outsider, away from the city and away from his own. In this, he is much like Medea.

The other play, the Dictys, dealt with the story of Danae and Perseus, who were cast
adrift from Argos in a box; this was subsequently found by Dikty, whose brother was the king Philodectes, who wanted to marry Danaë. The only surviving fragment is one where Danaë flees to the altar and tries to escape Philodectes who wants to rape her. Perhaps, then, if we think of the three plays as consecutive, performed on the same day, we could see how both Danaë and Medea suffer away from their own family and country: both are isolated women, suffering the danger of an outsider.

(d) According to the last usage of the term, of Medea as a moral paradigm: is Medea someone whose actions bring good and whom we are called upon to imitate? She kills a maiden, her old father (Kreon), and her two small children. In human terms, she is indeed what Jason calls her, a monster. Imagine what it would be like to be married to her! The chorus feel sympathy and solidarity with her from the beginning, but even they distance themselves from her when it becomes clear that her plan for vengeance on Jason requires that she kill the children as well. Indeed, from the very beginning there is a constant focus upon children and childhood and upon Medea’s children in particular as the focus of natural sympathy, protectiveness and pity. Even those modern feminists who see something heroic in Medea presumably do not mean that we should all go out and slaughter our children. They must mean that the underlying violence of social institutions becomes revealed through the drastic actions of Medea in such a way that we can all see how unjust society is and can benefit from this knowledge. This is not a Greek way of looking at tragedy, I think, but it is a perfectly valid modern way of doing so, as long as we recognise that this is our own approach and not Euripides’.

Yet there is a further problem. The play allows the human characters (Jason, the chorus) to say that Medea is terribly wrong. But the play also itself says that she is absolutely right: it puts her in the position of the god at the end, it lets her punish Jason for his violation of the oaths in a way which even the chorus calls appropriate, it permits her to escape to Athens, it even requires that the Corinthians, not her, alone for the death of her children. This is the real scandal of the play, for it establishes a distance between religious and human dimensions: the requirements of divine justice are such that they cannot be measured in human terms; the rewards and punishments of the gods exceed our human capacity to assess justice. In this sense, the play is not just about women in male society, but about human beings in a world ruled by gods they can only partly comprehend.

It is not accidental that the group of plays Euripides offered in 431 BC, including this one, was rightly offered a chorus, but only received the third prize in the end, for Medea, at least, was calculated to cause scandal. Indeed, the chorus predict (and program) the reaction of the Athenian audience when they sing towards the end, “How will Athens ever receive Medea who has killed her children?” They mean, how will the city of Aegaeus take in the person of Medea; but we cannot help understanding them to mean as well, how will the audience of the Greater Dionysia be able to give a prize to the play Medea. The Athenian audience fulfilled perfectly Euripides’ expectations - yet comedies and visual arts testify that the play had a deep impact which lasted for many years. This impact continues to this very day.