



MEDEA BY EURIPIDES: A POSTMODERN SCRUTINY

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ABSTRACT

Medea focuses on the barbarian protagonist as she finds her position in the Greek world and the revenge she takes against her husband Jason who betrayed her for another woman just for few material gains. The play's merit consequently lies in its manner of exposition and its emotional focus, which Euripides places squarely in the flights of amoral passion that afflict the protagonist, Medea. Her infamous murders of her own children challenged the Athenian moral universe that continually hovers in the background of the play. He had an extraordinary talent for envisioning conventional mythological situations in such vivid detail that he seems always prepared to find new and original ways of presenting the commonplaces of traditional Greek lore. Weaving together an ancient Greek text and postmodernist theory, the present paper will discuss the debate between modernism and postmodernism that dominates contemporary theory, and therefore makes a sophisticated argument for the continuing relevance of the classical past, focusing on the subject of reason. *Medea* is truly a postmodern text in its distrust of reason and intellect. It pleads on the behalf of 'the other' and reflects over their version of story.

Keywords: Medea, Postmodernism, Mythology, Reason, The Other

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Regarding Postmodernism Sabina Lovibond observes:

The Enlightenment pictured the human race as engaged in an effort towards universal moral and intellectual self realization and so as the subject of a universal historical experience. Postmodernism rejects this picture. It rejects the doctrine of the unity of reason (qtd. in Dahiya: 321)

Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. It is hard to locate it temporally or

historically, because it is not clear exactly when Postmodernism begins. Postmodernism denies all encompassing rationality and challenges the totalizing discourses. In this sense, Postmodernism does not constitute any school but it is a stance and a methodology which questions hegemonic discourses. It thinks from the point of view of 'the other' by paying attention to its plurality of experience. Mary Klages in her article on Postmodernism argues that modernity is fundamentally about order, about rationality and rationalization, creating order out of chaos. The assumption is that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function (the more rationally it will function). Because

modernity is about the pursuit of ever-increasing levels of order, modern societies constantly are on guard against anything and everything labelled as 'disorder', which might disrupt order. Thus modern societies rely on continually establishing a binary opposition between 'order' and 'disorder', so that they can assert the superiority of 'order'. But to do this, they must have things that represent 'disorder': modern societies thus continually have to create/construct 'disorder'. In western culture, this disorder becomes 'the other': defined in relation to other binary oppositions¹. Klages maintains that anything non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, non-hygienic, non-rational, (etc.) becomes part of 'disorder' and has to be eliminated from the ordered, rational modern society. Klages believes that the ways that modern societies go about creating categories labelled as 'order' or 'disorder' have to do with the effort to achieve stability. Francois Lyotard equates that stability with the idea of 'totality', or a totalized system (think here of Derrida's idea of totality as the wholeness or completeness of a system). Totality, and stability, and order, Lyotard argues, are maintained in modern societies through the means of grand narratives or master narratives², which are stories a culture tells itself about its practices and beliefs. The coining of the term Postmodernism is a recent phenomena but its crusade against the monopoly of reason is independent of time and space and as such can be applied to the antiquity.

The present paper will analyze *Medea*, a play by classical Greek playwright Euripides, in the context of Postmodernism. Euripides takes delight in rehabilitative characters apparently beyond the pale of rehabilitation. David Grene notes that the sense of defeat and disappointment is constantly there in Euripides. It makes him bring to the fore those who are weak or oppressed, the despised and misunderstood; women, children, slaves, captives, strangers, barbarians. He merely tries to present from their point of view (iv). Euripides seems more concerned about raising questions than to answer them. He rejects not traditional values as such but the authority of tradition to impose its values for no better reason.

Born about 480 B.C, somewhere in the vicinity of Athens, Euripides, the son of Mnesarchides, was destined from the beginning to be a misunderstood poet. He presented his first set of tragedies at the Great Dionysia³ in 455 BC, but did not win his first victory until 441. In fact, he won only five awards and the fifth of these was not awarded until after his death. This lack of recognition might seem a bit odd when one considers that Euripides wrote about 92 plays and was compared, even during his lifetime, to the likes of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But Euripides was ignored by the judges of the Greek festival because he did not cater to the fancies of the Athenian crowd. He did not approve of their superstitions and refused to condone their moral hypocrisy. He was a pacifist, a free thinker, and a humanitarian in an age when such qualities were increasingly overshadowed by intolerance and violence. Perhaps that is why he chose to live much of his life alone with his books in a cave on the island of Salamis. Euripides was exposed early to the religion he would so stubbornly question as an adult. The radical philosopher had a profound effect on the young poet, and left with him a passionate love of truth and a curious, questioning spirit. For instance, in *Helen*, Euripides pursues an apparently unconventional way of looking at the infamous beauty, the "face that launched a thousand ships." His plays show a highly intelligent mind, fascinated by philosophical issues, with a strong distaste for uncritical acceptance of convention: a thinker with a taste for the sensational who knows that nothing in life is easy or simple. Euripides' tragedies also reveal the playwright's uncanny ability to see all sides in an argument, paying little attention to what was considered right in the day and, instead, serving up what the dramatic situation *showed* to be right. He had an extraordinary talent for envisioning conventional mythological situations in such vivid detail that he seems always prepared to find new and original ways of presenting the commonplaces of traditional Greek lore.

As with most of the myths recounted in ancient Greek tragedy, the story-line of Euripides' *Medea*, originally produced in 431 B.C, is derived from a collection of tales that circulated informally

around him. His audience would have been familiar with its general parameters and many of its specifics. The play's merit consequently lies in its manner of exposition and its emotional focus, which Euripides places squarely in the flights of amoral passion that afflict the protagonist, Medea. Her infamous murders of her own children challenged the Athenian moral universe that continually hovers in the background of the play.

Outside of Jason's adopted house in Corinth, a nurse recounts and laments the chain of events that have led to the present crisis in the city, where Medea's "world has turned to enmity" (15). Jason and the crew of his ship, the *Argo*, began this history by sailing to Colchis⁴, a city in Asia and Medea's home, in search of the legendary Golden Fleece⁵. Medea, a sorceress and princess, fell in love with Jason, used her magic to help him secure the Fleece, and eventually fled with him to Iolcus, Jason's home. There she continued to use her magic and to participate in intrigues within the royal house, eventually tricking the daughters of a rival king, Pelias, into poisoning their own father. After accepting sanctuary as exiles in Corinth, Jason and Medea had two children, now young boys, and achieved a degree of respectability, earning them a 'citizens welcome' (12) in the city. Recently, however, Jason has abandoned Medea and his own children in order to remarry with Glauce, the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. Jason hopes thereby to advance his own station, perhaps even to succeed as king.

Unlike Jason, who uses deceptive rationalizations to avoid facing the consequences of his own actions, Medea simply rides her passions unthinkingly. Some critics believe that by showing Medea as a woman who has gone mad, first in her love for Jason and then in her vengeance, Euripides portrays the Greek stereotype about women and barbarians. But the fact to be noted here is that her madness leads her to act out of her own agency and raise her voice against oppressive Greek society. Socrates also believed that our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness. (qtd. in Dodds: 64). In *Medea*, Euripides thematizes 'madness' to shock the complacent Greek consciousness. One of the chief difficulties which Euripides faced in writing this

play was in the humanization of Medea, for the Medea of the popular legend was both famous witch of antiquity and the cold perpetrator of barbaric murders (Harsh:177). That is why for *Medea* he won only third prize because horrible murders at the end repelled the Athenian audience of those times. Cold blooded murders on stage signalled the failure of Greek enlightenment⁶, where the marginalized, desperate to get justice resorted to violence and bloodshed thereby creating an alternate world order. Under the garb of logic and enlightenment Greeks imposed cruelty upon women and foreigners, calling them barbarians and extremes, devoid of reason, thereby, ironically calling into question their own chauvinism and covetousness. Just as the modern world democracy, writes Philip Vellacott, desperate to resist totalitarianism resorts to totalitarian methods weakening its own life in the process so the fiery Greek temperament made the menace of barbarism into excuse for its own excesses (7).

Plot of *Medea* centres on the barbarian protagonist as she finds her position in the Greek world and the revenge she takes against her husband Jason who betrayed her for another woman just for few material gains. The play opens with Medea grieving over her loss and with elderly nurse fearing that she might do something to herself or her children. Blinded with her love for Jason, she robbed her family of its treasure; the Golden Fleece. Medea's homeland is Colchis, an island in the black sea which the Greeks considered the edge of the earth; a territory of barbarians. She is a sorceress and a princess who used her powers and influence to help Jason secure the Golden Fleece. In her love for Jason, she left her homeland and killed her brother. But Jason has a mean calculative mind. Leo Aylene holds that Jason is the image of how Euripides the rationalist argues against himself (120). Jason believes that he could not pass up the opportunity to marry a royal princess as Medea is only a barbarian. Jason owed his life to her as she saved him and slew the dragon during the expedition. But Jason is a shameless man. He alleges:

But if I told you how Eros with his unerring arrows forced you to save me, I could injure you (630)

Medea has a high self esteem. She must not let Jason's marriage with her a laughing stock among Corinthians for she traces her family from a noble father and from Helios⁷; the sun god. She says to Jason:

I am alone, I have no city and
I am being abused by my husband
I was carried off as a trophy from
A barbarian country. I have no
Brother, mother or relative to shelter with in
this extremity (300)

Everyone knew how Jason had been enabled by the help of the witch maiden Medea to overcome the insuperable and return with the Golden Fleece to claim his inheritance from Pelias, his wicked uncle. Regarding Jason's debt to Medea, DW Lucas writes:

Since Medea was in exile with no kinsmen to stand by her and demand at least the return of her dowry. In any case Medea's dowry had been the Golden Fleece, the betrayal of a father and the murder of a brother, things not easily returned. As for the great oaths by which Medea had bound him before she left her home, an obligation additional to the ties of marriage. Jason was too enlightened a person to worry much about the consequences of breaking them. For Jason does not belong to the heroic world, but the Greece of the fifth century. (193)

Jason's obligations to Medea are far heavier than those of the ordinary husband to his wife. ER Dodds writes about Euripides' awareness of the absurdity of universe. He says that Euripides wants to make his readers and audience ponder over the question whether any rational purpose could be seen in the ordering of universe and human life (187). For Jason, mean minded calculation is rational action (Aylen: 120). In his shamelessness and empty pride, he says to Medea:

By saving me you got in return more than you gave, as I will demonstrate first of all, you now live among the Greeks, not in a country of barbarians. You are familiar with justice and the laws rather than brute force. (639)

This speech of Jason is especially filled with the sophistic⁸ cleverness which was so highly esteemed in this period. Vellacott writes that for Greeks

civilized life means life without excesses. If his behaviour strikes us as repellent that is how the behaviour of the Athenians struck many Greeks of other states in the days when Athens claimed to be the champion of the Greek way of life and firm opponent of barbarism and all its ways (7). Civilized men boast of their civilization and in their pride ignore the world of instinct, emotion and irrational experience. Concepts of right and wrong are not water tight compartments. Notions of right and wrong are dangerous, writes Vellacott, unless they are flexible and allow for constant adjustments.

Euripides' characterization of Medea exhibits inner emotions of passion, love and vengeance. Medea is a woman who knows madness. In this world full of absurdities where nothing is final and sure it is better to be loved and lost than not to be loved at all. Medea says in her desperation:

A woman may be timid- in watching battles or seeing steel, but when she is hurt in love, her marriage violated there's no heart desperate for blood than hers (307)

She attacks contemporary injustice not only to women but also to foreigners, children by foreign wives were not regarded as legitimate citizens (Hades: 92). *Medea* is truly a postmodern text in its distrust of reason and intellect. Being a woman, barbarian and a witch, she is triply marginalized. The Greek society considers Medea as 'the other'. The play pleads on the behalf of 'the other' and reflects over their version of truth as the truth projected by so called civilized Greek society is only half version of truth but projected as 'the truth'. Then this truth is mercilessly imposed upon the other version only to project it as inferior. It sympathetically explores the truth of Medea, her undiplomatic passion by subverting the binary. It explores the disadvantages of being a woman, who is triply marginalized, in an unjust patriarchal society. Medea believes in experience rather than blindly following any tradition prescribed by patriarchal society. In doing so she follows her emotions and instincts. Aylen believes that usually people who act instinctively are stronger than those who act rationally (6). Observing her extreme character HJ Rose writes:

Medea is a woman of strong character and high intelligence. She has a devilish

cleverness. She is capable of devoted affection but demanding in return fidelity and recognition of her rights (181)

Medea is morally superior to all the characters in the play even when she is a murderess. To analyze the complexity of Medea's action we need altogether different set of values. Her act may be amoral but not immoral. Medea's morality is not hypocritical morality. She makes no mistake in her moral arithmetic says ER Dodds, any more than she mistakes her passion for an evil spirit. There lies her supreme tragic quality. She has no remorse for her act of murder of her children. Medea fits in the mould of tragic character as she follows the all or none principle. She knows no mid path. In her attitude towards life she is extreme and passionate. There is so much against her: being a witch, a woman, a foreigner, abandoned by her husband yet she asserts herself powerfully. She overshadows all other characters in the play because of her single-mindedness of purpose and her will to live. She goes beyond the purpose of moral right and wrong. Through the character of Medea, Euripides presents the case for animal nature in human beings. Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

Saying yes to life even in its strangest and more painful episodes, the will to live rejoicing in its own inexhaustible viability even as it witnesses the destruction of its greatest heroes that is what I called Dionysian in order to celebrate oneself the eternal joy in destruction. (qtd. in Kofman: 45)

Medea is postmodern in its approach even before the proper coining of the term. With its feminist assertion, distrust of reason and totalizing discourses, subversion of binaries, and glorification of animal instincts, it brings into question monolithic systems. It shows conflict between men and women, between civilization and wild nature; the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian forces of nature. *Medea* hints towards the changing gender roles. Chorus sings:

The waters in the sacred rivers
Are flowing in reverse
And all well ordered things
Are once more turning on themselves

Men's plans are now deceitful
My life is changing- coon talk
Is giving me a better reputation

Honour's coming to the female sex (419)

Medea in her love for Jason and in her revenge shows manly aggressive energy but he seems cold and effeminate. Through the character of Medea, Euripides criticizes the division of gender roles in Athenian society. Medea says:

Men tells us we live safe and secure
At home while they must go to battle with
Their spears
How stupid they are! I'd rather stand
There three times in battle holding up
My shield than give birth once. (290)

So to conclude, we may say that Postmodernism is independent of time and space and can be applied to any age. In Euripides' times, old values, which were previously modern in their attempt at progress and their campaign against irrationality, in turn became oppressive and irrational. Dodds rightly connects tradition and modernity when he considers Euripides as not only a writer of enlightenment but also a revolutionary who stands against its excesses (187). Medea's movement from being a sympathetic abused woman to a monstrous child killer, and finally to something almost indefinable and incomprehensible, a mother who kills her children and is not only unpunished but actually helped by the gods, actually signals not only the failure of Greek enlightenment but also hints towards resistance and militant responses where the marginalized, failed by the civilization, gets sympathy from the divine. Medea proves her heroic greatness in her punishment of Jason and debunks the binary between barbarians and civilized. In its appeal, the play is truly postmodern since the portrayal of destruction and disorder seems more reasonable than reason itself which fails to deliver justice to the marginalized.

Endnotes:

1. A revolution in human thought took place in a specific area: the Greek cities of Ionia—the southern coast of Asia Minor. During the sixth century BC, there appeared in these Ionian cities a number of remarkable individuals who questioned the existence and the moral

significance of the gods, who argued that nature is governed by discoverable laws, who believed that all matter consists of atoms, who argued that human beings evolved from lower life forms, and that human disease was caused by natural factors, not by the wrath of the gods or by demonic possession. Their legacy was largely a matter of attitude; in brief, they were the first rationalists in the Western world. The Ionian Enlightenment received its origins in both ancient Mesopotamian and ancient Greek philosophy. Many of the Ionian ideas and beliefs were adopted by the Athenians.

2. Binary opposition is a key concept in structuralism, a theory of sociology, anthropology, and linguistics that states that all elements of human culture can only be understood in relation to one another and how they function within a larger system or the overall environment. We often encounter binary oppositions in cultural studies when exploring the relationships between different groups of people, for instance: upper-class and lower-class, White and Negro, or disabled and non-disabled. On the surface, these seem like mere identifying labels, but what makes them binary opposites is the notion that they cannot coexist and out of two terms one is inferior. The problem with a system of binary opposites is that it creates boundaries between groups of people and leads to prejudice and discrimination. One group may fear or consider a threat the 'opposite' group, referred to as 'the other'. By using a rhetorical device known as 'Aporia', an expression of doubt or uncertainty, Euripides subverts the binary between civilized and barbarian.

3. The term was brought into prominence by Jean-François Lyotard in 1984, with his claim that the Postmodern was characterised precisely by a mistrust of the grand narratives (Progress, Enlightenment) that had formed an essential part of modernity. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard highlights the increasing scepticism of the postmodern condition toward the totalizing nature of metanarratives and their reliance on some form of 'transcendent and universal truth'. Attempts to construct grand theories tend to unduly dismiss the naturally existing chaos and disorder of the

universe, the power of the individual event, ignoring the heterogeneity or variety of human existence, metanarratives are created and reinforced by power structures and are therefore untrustworthy. Postmodernists attempt to replace metanarratives by focusing on specific local contexts as well as on the diversity of human experience.

4. Great Dionysia, also called City Dionysia is an ancient dramatic festival in which tragedy, comedy, and satiric drama originated; it was held in Athens in March in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine in Greek mythology. The festivals were attended by all Athenian citizens (likely women as well as men) and visitors from throughout Greece. Judges, chosen by lot, awarded a prize to the best poet.

5. Colchis is an ancient region at the eastern end of the Black Sea, in the western part of modern Georgia. In Greek mythology, Colchis is the birth country of Medea, where Jason and the Argonauts (a band of heroes in Greek mythology) sailed to capture the Golden Fleece. It was a land of fabulous wealth and the domain of sorcery. Historically, Colchis was colonized by Milesian Greeks to whom the native Colchians supplied gold, slaves, hides, linen cloth, agricultural produce, and such shipbuilding materials as timber, flax, pitch, and wax. It is at the border between Europe and Asia.

6. In Greek mythology, the Golden Fleece is the fleece of the gold-hair winged ram, which was held in Colchis. The fleece is a symbol of authority and kingship. It figures in the tale of the hero Jason who set out on a quest for the fleece by order of usurper King Pelias, in order to place him rightfully on the throne of Iolcus in Thessaly. Through the help of Medea, he acquired the Golden Fleece. The story is of great antiquity and was current in the time of Homer (eighth century BC). After the death of King Cretheus, the Aeolian Pelias usurped the Iolcan throne from his half-brother Aeson and became king of Iolcus in Thessaly (near the modern city of Volos). Because of this unlawful act, an oracle warned him that a descendant of Aeolus would seek revenge. The story is set a generation before the time of the Trojan War, around 1300 BC, but the first known written mention of it comes six centuries later, in the age of Homer (800 BC). The Greeks have retold

and reinterpreted it many times since, changing it as their knowledge of the physical world increased.

7. Helios was the personification of the Sun in Greek mythology. He is the son of the Titan Hyperion. Helios was described as a handsome youth who drove the chariot of the sun across the sky each day and returned to the East at night. As time passed, Helios was increasingly identified with the god of light, Apollo.

8. The term sophist (sophistēs) derives from the Greek words for wisdom (sophia) and wise (sophos). The sophists were itinerant professional teachers and intellectuals who frequented Athens and other Greek cities in the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. In return for a fee, the sophists offered young wealthy Greek men an education in aretē (virtue or excellence), thereby attaining wealth and fame while also arousing significant antipathy. Hostility towards sophists was a significant factor in the decision of the Athenian dēmos to condemn Socrates to the death penalty for impiety. Prior to the fifth century B.C.E, arête was predominately associated with aristocratic warrior virtues such as courage and physical strength. In democratic Athens of the latter fifth century B.C.E, however, aretē was increasingly understood in terms of the ability to influence one's fellow citizens in political gatherings through rhetorical persuasion.

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