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Power and Passion
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Deconstructing the Greek Construct: Men and Gods

In the Greek world *The Medea* inhabits, the gods existed and interacted with humanity, demanding sacrifice, escorting sailors, and acting on a human level they established order. Yet Athena, Apollo, and Zeus were definitely not human: immortal gods, they ordained a culture of heroism to the Greeks, men living masculine lives of *timé* and *ethos*, women never “to stand apart from the husband” (Euripides l. 15). With immortals determining the heroic culture of fourth and fifth century B.C. Greece, the Greeks questioned any man or woman who broke the traditional roles the gods ascribed; for both males and females there was an ordained order that humans were not to fracture.

In *The Medea*, Medea definitely breaks out of her traditionally feminine role as mother and wife, killing her children to avenge her desertion at Jason’s hands. In breaking out of her role as a submissive female, Medea challenges the order of Greek society the gods seem to have ordained, committing evil upon evil, ostensibly horrible because she is not obeying the seemingly god-decreed social customs. In *The Medea*, though, Euripides questions the very order that condemns Medea. Although Medea commits horrendous evils, Euripides casts doubt on the idea that the gods call into place the dominant Greek culture; he asks his audience to question its assumptions about Medea’s revenge. By calling into question the very line to the gods men purportedly have, Euripides lets his audience see the pain women must experience as men create a culture that yokes females into narrow, subjugated roles, but puts only a very light and escapable harness on the men and their roles.

When Medea is free of her marriage to Jason, she undeniably does evil. Killing Glauce, Creon, her own children—she seems totally out of control. Even Medea herself admits the evil she does, saying that when she kills her children, she “shall have done a dreadful deed” (l. 796). Too, Euripides makes plain the vileness of her murders when Medea kills Jason’s new young bride,

daughter of Creon. Says the messenger bringing news of Creon's daughter's death, "Her head there oozed out blood and fire mixed together. / Like the drops on pine-bark, so the flesh from her bones / Dropped away, torn by the hidden fang of poison" (ll. 1200-202). Creon, too, dies a most disgusting death at Medea's hand, her poisoned dress "ripping his aged flesh from his bones" (l. 1217). Euripides' words are vividly disgusting, and so vilely does he paint Medea's killings, so dreadful even Medea admits they are, it is hard to see that Medea has done anything but evil.

Giving one plausible reason for Medea's killings, especially to a male Greek audience, Euripides makes it seem as if Medea is committing evils because Jason no longer holds her in check. With the extant perspective that a man should be in control of a marriage, an idea the Greeks held to be necessary and ordained by the gods, Euripides' Greek audience might easily have seen Medea's killing as but a result of her freedom. Euripides allows the perspective of problems arising because of Medea's lack of a man to have some play in his drama, and he has the Chorus question early in *The Medea*, "O, what will she do, / Proud-hearted and not to be checked on her course" (ll. 108-9). Medea's nurse too says that the "greatest salvation of all" is "For the wife not to stand apart from the husband" (ll. 14-15). Jason as well tells Medea that she should live with "reasonable submission to our ruler's will" (l. 448). Thus, with myriad references to the necessity of a woman being submissive, checked, even harnessed into a marriage, it seems Euripides suggests that Medea's dress-poisoning murders are results of her refusal to exist in the normal realm of Greek women. By blaming the killings on Medea's emancipation from marriage's normal control, Euripides appears to propose a misogynistic understanding of women's roles, supporting the culturally accepted and immortally-ordained essentiality of keeping women subordinate.

Medea laments the very cultural assumption Euripides toys with, unhappy that the gods were supposedly ordaining a society of male hegemony. Through her unhappiness and the general pain of womankind, Euripides actually brings his audience to sympathize with Medea. As Medea says at her most reasonable moments early in the drama, "We women are the most unfortunate creatures...it is

required / For us to buy a husband and take for our bodies / a master” (ll. 231-34). Medea continues to mourn the fate of women, saying “I would very much rather stand / Three times in the front of battle than bear one child” (ll. 250-51). Through Medea’s touching and believable soliloquy, Euripides makes his audience sympathize with Medea and the plight of women in general. Admittedly, to Euripides’ male Greek audience it might seem that Euripides brings his viewers to empathy only to explode the sympathetic view he creates, reminding the Greeks that men need to subordinate women, just as widely held Greek beliefs supported. Perhaps Euripides lends Medea humanity and brings his audience to compassion only to remind the audience not to let women onto an equal footing with men, lest some disaster such as befell Creon and Glauce occur. As a dramatist, though, Euripides plays with his audience’s expectations and allows culturally accepted views to show only because he strives to overturn his audience’s initial intrinsic assumptions.

To the traditional Greek audience, *The Medea* seems (on the surface) to endorse the idea that the gods demand a culture that survives only when men maintain their heroism and women their domesticity. In effect, men should harness the women because the gods demand it—men need to be on top. Using Jason to exemplify traditional views of society, Euripides has Jason reason about the sacrifices Medea made for him: “it was love’s inescapable / Power that compelled you to keep my person safe” Jason says (ll. 530-31). Jason makes it seem as if Medea had no choice about killing her own brother and his uncle Pelias because the goddess Aphrodite was directing Medea’s affections. What she did for him, then, Medea “did well enough,” he says (l. 533). Jason strongly evidences an overarching cultural idea that Euripides attacks: the idea that the gods determine human life, and among their decrees is that women are subordinate to men.

Attributing control to Zeus and Poseidon, the Greeks believed like Jason that men come under the control of the gods. Of course, it was thus necessary for men to take control over women, but Euripides questions the thesis that there is a justifiable line of control from the gods to men over women. While much of his audience probably believed that the gods gave men a directive and the

right to be masters over women, Euripides questions both the actual men in power in *The Medea* and their right to be in control—he questions their line from the gods. Trying to paint a picture of the inevitability and immortally-designed fate Euripides questions (as Greek culture as a whole did), Jason claims that some higher power must have been at work for his amazing chance, for “an exile to marry the daughter of the king” in his speech to Medea about love’s power over her and his reasons for leaving her (l. 554). The audience knows, though, that Jason has created the cycle of betrayal and wrong; he has broken his oath to Medea. Through Medea’s nurse, Euripides shows that Jason chose his course: as the nurse says, “poor Medea is slighted” and Jason “desert[s] his own children and my mistress” (ll. 20; 17). Thinking of his new wedding as a divinely sanctioned responsibility, Jason has in fact begun the cycle of cruelty and retribution by ending his marriage with Medea to take on a younger, more beautiful bride.

Further casting doubt on the Olympian-ordained male dominion, Euripides highlights Jason’s complete lack of understanding of the gods. Late in *The Medea*, speaking to his children, Jason says, “As to the future, your father / And those of the gods who love him will deal with that” (ll. 918-19). But it is Medea who warns Jason that he will “die without distinction, / Struck on the head by a piece of the Argo’s timber” (ll. 1386-87). With his sons’ deaths and his despondent demise, hit by a piece of his own rotting ship as Medea forecast, Jason’s claim that the gods love him is obviously false. Euripides blatantly questions the assumed godly directive of male control and supernatural understanding by killing Jason so unceremoniously, so miserably, hit by a piece of the very ship that began the cycle of Jason’s life with Medea, even as Jason believed the gods who fated him for greatness would protect him.

Questioning the godly directive assumed by much of the Greek culture to exist, Euripides is undermining much of the basis for order in Greek society. As Jason assumes that he knows the gods’ wills and how to enact them, Euripides brings to light the problems with the assumption that the men are subordinate directly, and only, to the gods, cogent of Apollo’s and Athena’s wills. Euripides

further shows that the arrogance of believing that the men know the gods' wills is self-perpetuating. Jason tries to explain that he is yoked by the gods into a situation of marrying the king's daughter, and so he is free to go through with the marriage. And yet the audience, because of the way Euripides has made us empathetic toward Medea through her early soliloquy, her nurse, and the Chorus, knows that Jason has made the choice to marry on his own, has broken the promises himself. Jason, though, in assuming he knows the gods' wills, can easily justify all he does as being something ordained by the immortals so that he and Medea "might live well" (l. 560). To Jason, the gods justify all he does and allow him to keep following his fate as he sees it, but thus he is in an ironic self-perpetuating cycle of assumed knowledge the audience learns he does not have—the gods are not with Jason, as Medea proves by destroying his life.

Through the total destruction of Jason's life even as he believed the gods supported him, Euripides shows the audience that men really are not yoked by the gods; the men have created the conventions that govern the society and attributed them to the immortals' commands. The men's creation of the rules and godly ordinances allows them to easily transcend the rules to the immortals have supposedly created and to which women are subject. As the chorus says, "Suppose your man gives honor / To another woman's bed. / It often happens. Don't be hurt" (ll. 155-57). Men are always able to escape, even though, as Medea says, a man bears a "yoke" in marriage (l. 242). As Euripides highlights the male-centric culture, the audience realizes that men are able to escape their marriages and loves because they have created the set of rules governing them—there is no real pact with the Gods. Through Jason we the audience can hear the patriarchal culture: "Oh, woman. You have destroyed me!" he cries upon learning of his children's deaths (l. 1310). Jason's first reaction is not a sorrow for his children's lost lives, but sorrow for the destruction of his seed and manly immortality; death exposes the selfishness of the patriarchal cycle.

Admittedly, Euripides makes the audience at least feel some of Jason's pain as he cries out, so the audience might realize Medea's evil. Medea, one could contend, is so deranged that she kills

her own children, leaving Jason utterly alone and dejected; and triumphant, she flies away in her chariot. Perhaps *The Medea* is, as mentioned earlier, but a warning to men not to allow power to women, as Jason did when he married Medea on equal footing without the benefit of the *Kurios* (the other man to give the bride away). But Medea's departure is not entirely triumphant and guiltless; in her chariot are the "dead bodies of the children" (l. 1318). She is deeply in pain and knows she must "sacrifice / each year for ever to atone for the blood guilt" (ll. 1381-82). Her triumph is negated by the vivid presence of two dead boys slung over her 'victorious' chariot. Thus, though Medea has committed great evil, the audience cannot dismiss her entirely as deranged and vicious—she realizes what she has lost and that she has sacrificed her humanity. Jason's pain is not the only pain.

Spreading the pain among the characters in *The Medea* so liberally, making Jason and Creon suffer just as much pain as Medea and the women in the play, Euripides does not push his audience toward a misogynistic warning against giving women equal footing. Bringing his listeners away from the traditionally patriarchal Greek culture, Euripides asks his audience to consider the pain women must feel as the men so easily dissolve the constructs—marriage, love—they claim the gods have ordained.

To bring his audience to consider the mirror of men feeling the pain usually women feel, Euripides shows his audience male failings in the Greek society. With Aegeus, while Medea does to some extent inhabit the role of the stereotypical scheming woman in their meeting, surreptitiously guaranteeing herself safety in Athens, Aegeus brings to light an interesting problem. Unable to have children, Aegeus had seen the oracle of Phoebus to find a cure for his childlessness, and as he relates to Medea, "I am not to loosen the hanging foot of the wine-skin...Until I return again to my hearth and house" (ll. 679; 681). The hanging foot of the wine-skin is a phallic reference, and it is obvious that as long as Aegeus does not make love to a woman while he is away from home, he will go home to Athens able to have children. The audience must assume, because most men had extramarital relations away from their wives (as the Chorus shares in lines 150 through 157), that great King

Aegeus too was an adulterer. Euripides implies that because Aegeus has inhabited other beds, he has been unable to have children; Euripides implicates the men in breaking the contract of marriage by inhabiting other women's beds.

Throwing blame on the men for their failures in marriage, Euripides is inverting the traditional—men were, as the Chorus admits, allowed, even expected, to have extra-marital relations—but in *The Medea*, when men break out of marriages, out of their yokes of matrimony, Aegeus's impotence and the death of all close to Jason are the results. Further inversions Euripides brings to life with Medea herself. Often using her stereotypical feminine trickery, admitting that she “would never have fawned on [Creon] / Unless I had some end to gain or profit in it,” Medea nevertheless adopts heroic characteristics generally reserved for the men (ll. 368-69). It is because of *timé* and *ethos*, her immense pride, generally a heroic quality, that Medea cannot stand to let her enemies “mock” her, and so she must avenge herself through violence and gruesome slaughter (l. 1362). Medea has adopted characteristics reserved for heroic men, and her heroism causes the slaughter. Euripides definitely plays with the danger of subverting social norms of femininity and masculine heroism, but having questioned so much the male-centrism of the society, he has Medea break out of her womanly role not to warn against female equality but to invert the normal social order.

Inversion upon inversion Euripides creates through the very last lines of *The Medea*. The Chorus' last song, which in many Greek tragedies is a cathartic ending, containing the moral of the play, seems at first glance to be inconclusive in Euripides' drama. Says the Chorus:

Zeus in Olympus is the overseer
Of many doings. Many things the gods
Achieve beyond our judgment. What we thought
Is not confirmed and what we thought not god
Contrives. And so it happens in this story. (ll. 1415-19)

Looking closely, though, Euripides inserts a statement of meaning in the Chorus' last lines. What the Chorus had thought “Is not confirmed,” what the Chorus entirely did not expect “god / Contrives.” Euripides concludes not with vagaries but with a complete inversion of everything expected,

reminding his audience to look in the mirror he has been creating. He wants his audience to see that men are responsible for the problems in *The Medea*—their breaking of the contracts they themselves have created is at fault, not Medea's escape from her role as a mother.

In bringing Jason and Creon to such immense pain—dead sons, dead daughters—while he inverts many of the traditional Greek societal beliefs, Euripides asks his audience to feel the pain women must feel when men break marriages and other covenants women cannot because of the invented ordinances of the gods. The audience, even in identifying with Jason and his pain, especially at the end in the face of all Medea's murders, must realize too the pain women feel as men break out of marriages and out of love to seek younger beds. Euripides allows the audience, too, to see social constructs as but men's inventions to yoke women, harness them under the guises of love and gods, yet to see that men can traditionally easily break and escape from the constructs and harnesses.

As Euripides shows, men always break the yoke of god-ordained rules that pervade Greek society. Yet in forwarding the idea that men created the yoke to begin with, created the set of cultural principles by which the Greeks were to live, Euripides questions the male dominance of society. While Medea could be naught but a crazed demigoddess, flying triumphantly from her killings in Helios's chariot and reminding men not to allow women to break out of the roles Greek culture assigned them, there is more to *The Medea*. In inverting and questioning many male-female traditional roles, placing a mirror between Jason and Medea, Euripides makes his audience see that the masculine bonds surrounding society, supposedly ordained by the gods, are hypocritical and not immortally-ordained at all, but a male-centered self-perpetuating myth.