

The eponymous protagonist of Euripides' *Medea*¹ perfectly epitomizes the proverbial 'woman scorned'. Betrayed by her husband Jason for whose sake she has abandoned her own country, Medea swears to "make dead bodies" (370) of her enemies. The play chronicles the ensuing bloodbath, and is as fraught with complex themes as it is with grisly detail. As Medea's tragic plight unfolds, the reader is led to ponder issues of life and death, male and female gender roles, loyalty, and a host of other thematic concerns that lurk within the dark passions of the play. This essay seeks to explore, by critical examination of a section (130-165) of the text, the ways in which these themes, and the often intricate relationships between them, are elucidated.

Enter the chorus, whose role in Greek theater is to comment on, rather than to participate in, the dramatic action of a piece. Stage directions in this play specify 'a chorus of Corinthian women' – a choice which unapologetically foregrounds gender and which also serves to highlight the dynamic associations between the chorus, the nurse and Medea herself. To the extent that all three of these characters/character functions are explicitly female, they can be thus categorized, and in a sense, be considered allies and/or equals. The chorus, after all, does arrive to inquire about the "the sad wife" (148) and attempt to console her, as any friend would. To the nurse, however, Medea is "mistress" (138) indicating the former's inferior social status as slave. By equating these two characters on the basis of their gender, the text subtly suggests that to be woman is to be slave, a point more explicitly expressed elsewhere in Medea's views on marriage: "it is required/For us to buy a husband [...]A master" (230-32). Similarly, Medea can be

¹ Worthen, W.B., ed. *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama (Brief 5th Edition)*, pages 46-58.

differentiated from the chorus based on her origin; she is “Colchis’ wretched daughter” (131), and therefore an outsider to Corinthian society. The chorus only hears her cry from “within” (133) the court, thus spatially separating them from Medea, whom we can assume is ‘without’. Ironically, the chorus itself, because it functions peripherally and necessarily cannot participate in the unfolding of events, is like Medea (and further, like us) in its ‘otherness’. From these and other considerations emerges a *gestalt*, a network of inextricable relations between the classifications ‘slave’, ‘woman’ and ‘foreigner’, that persists within the larger context of the play as a whole and informs reader response to its central character.

Enter Medea; or more accurately, her voice. That she is introduced by her absence reinforces the nihilistic strains that course through this play. Medea never really *exists* within the space of this text, as she is twice exiled and consequently “utterly lost” (275) with no sense of family or community: “I have no mother or brother, nor any relation” (255). The chorus, in its first few lines, unwittingly answers the question ‘why’. It refers to Medea as “daughter” (131) and to the nurse as “mother” (132), highlighting some of the roles Medea plays as woman. Notably, these are the same roles she betrays with her acts of murder that include patricide and infanticide: “...I shall kill my own children” (776). Given her loathing of Jason and the fact that she is replaced by the new bride, she also obviously fails as “wife” (148) and thus effectively severs her moorings to any recognizable social construct. She inflicts upon herself the very wrongs she laments and tries to avenge.

And lament she does. She asks rhetorically, “Oh, what use have I now for life?” (143) and as readers we answer involuntarily, ‘none’, sinking with her even as we do,

into abysmal hopelessness and despair. “That lightning from heaven would split my head” (142) is a hyperbolic restatement of the less dramatic but more ambiguous “I would find my release in death” (144). As the first statement exaggerates Medea’s death wish to spectacular proportions, it simultaneously undermines it because the odds of the described phenomenon actually occurring are nil. Further, the second statement begs the question ‘whose death’. Medea does indeed “leave hateful existence behind” (145) in the form of her (also) “hateful husband” (162) and all he represents. ‘Hateful’ here could describe either the feelings he evokes in her (‘exciting hate’²) or Jason’s own ‘malignancy’ and ‘repulsiveness’³. Medea herself is, however, still very much alive in the corporeal sense at the end of the play. This fact is ironic because after destroying both loved ones and enemies, *she* is the one left behind in the wake of her murderous rampage. Like Sophocles’ Oedipus, Medea achieves her particular ‘non-existence’ or ‘death’ by killing others (homicidal suicide, if you will), and ultimately, in exile, having failed at being daughter, sister, mother, wife or loyal citizen. The parallelism between lines 143 and 144, ending “...life” and “...death” respectively, structurally highlights the aforementioned dichotomy, but reminds us that the boundary between life and death is more fluid than it may seem. Medea basically dies ‘a living death’⁴.

The grim inevitability in question is euphemistically referred to by the chorus as “that appalling rest” (150), so called because although it mimetically recalls sleep or rest, death’s absolute permanence, its “final end” (151), terrifies. Thus in retrospect, the chorus’ earlier enquiry about Medea, “... is she not yet/At rest” (132-3) can be read both

² Oxford English Dictionary online

³ Ibid

⁴ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost* (Book X, 788). Gordon Teskey, ed. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005

as concern for her wellbeing, and impatience for her to die. Although the first interpretation fits better with the superficial positioning of the chorus as Medea's ally, the second cannot be ignored, especially since the chorus is Corinthian, and Medea not.

Like the "double gates/Of the court" (133-4) which simultaneously demarcate 'within' and 'without', several other choices the text makes function in such a two-fold manner as the already discussed pun on 'rest'. When the chorus hears "her cry" (134), we cannot help but wonder what is meant: the noun – a detached cry issued forth by Medea, or the verb – the physical act of Medea sobbing, this latter of which makes her sadness more immediate and affecting because it presents a familiar image. Whatever the case may be, the chorus sibilantly expresses condolences, "I am sorry/For the sorrow of this home" (134-5) and then proceeds to fish for gossip in true womanly fashion, "O, say, what has happened?" (135) The serpentine connotations of the alliteration, coupled with the fact that 'double' sometimes means 'duplicitous', again makes us doubt the supposed good-intentions of the chorus.

'Home' as used above means more than just the house or "room" (140) to which Medea, in grief, has confined herself. It is a metonymy that represents family unity and the institution of marriage that forms its foundation. When the nurse responds "there is no home" (136), she essentially paraphrases her earlier statement "love is diseased" (16). Medea's love for Jason is now turned to hatred because he has "betrayed both her bed and her marriage" (205). 'Bed' itself is another metonymy that symbolizes the physical relationship between a man and his wife. For his treachery, for giving "honor/To another woman's bed" (154-5), Medea prays that Jason, "his bride and all their palace [will be] shattered" (162). The use of 'shattered' suggests that this new alliance is already fragile,

like glass. Medea suffers the same ill fate she prays for, but she uses ‘palace’ instead of ‘home’ to emphasize that this new alliance is a “royal wedding” (137), one that has political implications for Jason. In the same way “my country” (164), for Medea, encapsulates her origins, her sense of belonging, her role as citizen and all the other ties she is freed from when she is exiled.

Medea prays this request for vengeance to Themis, goddess of justice, and to Artemis virgin goddess of fertility. By so doing, she aligns herself, not with slaves or foreigners, but with goddesses, who although they are female, are powerful and not subject to the social frameworks that govern Medea’s world, in which women are hierarchically inferior. The invocation of Artemis is also ironic because rather than nurture them, Medea takes away the lives of her own children, contradicting in the worst possible way, the necessarily (as yet) female condition of fertility and pursuant childbirth.

Commenting on this text’s preoccupation with pairs, dichotomy, things that both *are* and *are not*, is an interesting way to end this endeavor because not only are these ideas pervasive in the play, they aid in our understanding of the characters, and inform our judgment of their actions. “Earth and Heaven” (146), life and death, male and female, slave and master, insider and outsider, honor and dishonor, true and false, even the two children Medea slays could be considered functions, all of which serve to show that as human beings, we are, at the very core, “split” (141), an assertion that reverberates with Freudian echoes. Medea is neither good nor bad; she is both, she is human.

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