

### The Monstrous Feminine in *Medea*

In classical antiquity, monsters are beings that represent a transgression of the audience's expectations (Gilmore). By combining elements separated by either natural or hierarchical boundaries, monsters like Scylla, Medusa, and others defy an accepted understanding of the world and therefore pose a threat to the safe stability of Zeus's cosmos. In the patriarchal Greek society, it's unsurprising that poetry and drama often connected the monstrous to the feminine and other violations of gender roles (Clay). In particular, misogynistic anxieties about the power in eroticism, control over the desire to reproduce, and the precariousness of established familial structures created a specifically feminine monster trope. This trope appeared in diverse narratives, from Hesiod's *Theogony* to *The Odyssey*. It typically connected women's ability to influence men as fundamentally dangerous. As a foreigner with magical abilities and as a mother who kills her own children, Medea certainly crosses multiple geographical, mystical, and social barriers. However, unlike the unambiguously monstrous figures of Scylla and Medusa, the characters in Euripides's *Medea* defy even the categorization of monstrosity. By creating a parallel between Medea and traditional heroes, establishing sympathy for her plight, and writing Jason as a foil to Medea, Euripides offers a surprising critique on the validity of gender stereotypes.

In most interpretations of the original myth, poets frame Medea as an unquestionably

monstrous character. Her story is violent, transgressive, and shocking. For example: Seneca's *Medea* establishes its title character as an unsympathetic villain before the action even begins.

The original *dramatis personae* describes the Chorus as “friendly to Jason and hostile to Medea” (Seneca). Seneca further develops this sentiment throughout the course of the play by writing

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Jason's decision to leave his wife as founded in “fearful father-love that has conquered faith” (Seneca) in contrast to Medea's irrational, lust-driven rage. As such, this particular interpretation of the Medea myth is simply a reiteration of the long tradition of the ‘feminine monster’ trope. In short, because Medea defies the established role of protector and mother by murdering her own children, she is not traditionally written as a character with whom the audience is supposed to sympathize. Euripides defies this tradition by making Medea a more sympathetic character, therefore forcing the unsuspecting audience to consider her point of view. By establishing a sympathy for Medea, Euripides's drama acknowledges but confuses Medea's historical identity, therefore subtly questioning the stereotypes that produce the female-monster narrative.

Perhaps most surprisingly to an ancient audience, Euripides establishes sympathy for Medea by creating a parallel between her story and those of traditional Greek heroes. In classical antiquity, Greek heroes tend to be passionate to a fault, proud, and successful in their pursuits for justice. In Euripides's version, Medea arguably displays all of these qualities. Like Zeus, Medea

is powerful enough to overcome an established hierarchy. Like Odysseus with Penelope's suitors, Medea refuses to be insulted; as the Nurse points out, "she'll not tolerate mistreatment" (38). Like Heracles in *The Shield of Heracles*, Medea commits a great deal of violence in her pursuit of justice. Furthermore, like the traditional Greek hero narratives, Medea's quest for revenge is ultimately successful. She kills Jason's new wife, father in law, and his children and escapes the country to live happily ever after in Athens. Though the audience would certainly not put Medea on the same level of adoration as those established heroes, she does, in fact, share some of their characteristics. The Chorus even alludes to Medea as a hero, claiming that her plot for revenge will "about-[turn]... the stories of women...so that my life will achieve proper glory" (415-416). By creating a parallel between Medea and the traditional Greek heroes, Euripides consciously

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questioned the hero worship in hyper-masculine narratives (that is, he examined the validity of adoration for a group of people that are similar to Medea) and offered a new perspective to an audience that would most likely have inherently connected Medea to monstrosity. By suggesting that Medea was perhaps a hero within the context of her story, Euripides invited his audience to reread previous monster narratives with a more sympathetic view for female characters and reconsider some of their previously held, gendered stereotypes.

*Medea* also depicts its title character as exceedingly clever, therefore both continuing and complicating the parallel between Medea and heroes. Medea's name is derived from the Greek words for "counsel, plan, and cleverness". Indeed, her cleverness is well known. The male characters fear and appreciate her skills. Aegeus, the king of Athens, trusts her and comes to her for help with his infertility. In contrast, Creon, the king of Corinth, fears that Medea will use her cleverness to hurt his family. As they discuss her imminent banishment, Creon questions the veracity of Medea's promise to leave peacefully, stating that she is both "by nature clever and well versed in evil practices" (285-286) and a "grim scowling scourge against [her] husband" (271). Although cleverness is a laudable trait in male-driven hero narratives (for example, Odysseus is praised for outsmarting Polyphemus in *The Odyssey* and Jason himself brags about being "clever first" in *Medea*), the male characters tie Medea's shrewd nature to sexist perceptions about women's duplicity. However, the play does not depict Creon's fears as unfounded. Medea does take advantage of men's perceptions of women to manipulate them. She ultimately convinces Creon to let her stay in Corinth for another night by telling him that she simply wants to protect her sons. Medea similarly manipulates Jason into believing that she has realized her overly-emotional stupidity and is no longer a threat, all while plotting his wife's death. Her remarkably self-aware ability to tap into other people's perceptions is both a testament

to her cleverness and ultimately an illustration of the danger of men believing these stereotypes.

By believing these stereotypes, the male characters are manipulated and led to their demise.

In addition to comparing her to traditional heroes, Euripides writes Medea as a sympathetic character. In perhaps the most famous speech of the play (“Women of Corinth”, 214-266), Medea ruminates on women’s unfortunate social positions as the consequence of male domination through marriage. In this passage, Medea establishes the rationale for her actions: like other women at the time, she is politically powerless compared to her husband and the indifferent patriarchy that dismisses women as living “a life secure... at home, while [the men] confront the thrusting spears of war” (247-248). Even though she finishes the speech with a threat to enact a violent revenge on Jason and his new wife, the Chorus leader says that Medea is “justified inflicting punishment”. Betine Van Zyl Smit, a feminist scholar, argues that “the sympathy with her lot shown by the Nurse and the Chorus of Corinthian women establishes her as a typical representative of her sex” (103-104). As such, Medea is not written as a radical outsider but a credible spokeswoman for women’s struggles. Basically, this passage—as well as the Chorus’s reaction to the speech— suggests that there is a legitimate anger that produces the trope of feminine monstrosity. This suggestion is further supported by Aegeus’s support for Medea and condemnation of Jason’s actions. Though few would argue that she is guiltless, this particular section of the drama establishes a sympathy that undermines the audience’s assumed perception of Medea as a monster.

As a direct foil to Medea, Jason is not the sympathetic character or hero that the ancient audience may have expected. In his first scene, Jason argues that she should be grateful for being

exiled rather than put to death for “refus[ing] to curb [her] stupid tongue, forever slandering the king” (457-458). Instead of acknowledging any wrong that he may have done, he insults her for

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not recognizing that he will marry the princess to provide his children with “a prosperous life” (559). Furthermore, he insists that he “never could reciprocate ill will” (464) towards Medea, despite abandoning their family. In short, Jason’s dismissive misogyny gives credence to Medea’s earlier argument that men can be callous and cruel towards women. Throughout the play, the audience hears more about Medea’s perspective than it does Jason’s. As such, it is not motivated to understand or empathize with Jason’s reasoning for abandoning his wife, unlike in other versions of the myth. Indeed, Jason’s surprising villainy ultimately serves as a foil to Medea’s nontraditional heroism. In other works, Jason is a prototypical, monster-slaying hero; in *Medea*, he is a destabilizing force that destroys a family through his uncontrollable desire to ascend within the social hierarchy, therefore breaking the same boundaries as Medea and fulfilling the same role as the feminine monsters found in other ancient works.

Throughout the play, the male and female characters also switch roles with regards to reproduction as a source of power. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, female characters like Gaia create havoc and monsters (like the Hundred Handed Ones and the Cyclopes) for the male characters to fight and conquer. As such, the female propensity to reproduce is written as a destructive,

dangerous force. Jenny Strauss Clay writes, “this female drive toward expansion and proliferation inevitably menaces the stability of any regime if left unchecked by the male” (171). However, in *Medea*, Jason takes on the traditionally female role of caring for and desiring progeny. He tells Medea that his primary motivations for marrying the princess were to “keep [Medea] safe, and to beget royal siblings for [his] sons, a safeguard for [his] line” (595-597). Jason bitingly tells Medea that that “it should have been a possibility for mankind to engender children from other source, and for the female sex not to exist. That way there’d be no troubles spoiling human life” (573-575). Although Jason suggests that women’s singular purpose is to

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bear and protect children, he arguably assumes this role throughout the course of the play. Conversely, Medea assumes the traditionally male role of killing one’s children in order to protect their interests. As Jason weeps over the death of his sons, Medea tells him that they were not his darlings, but hers. By killing their children, she has taken complete and final ownership over their progeny. Indeed, Medea even finds a poetic justice in her being the murderer of her children, as “the one who gave them birth” (1064). In this light, part of Medea’s victory is in reclaiming power over reproduction and the future generations from a male authority (similar to Zeus’s and Kronos’s attempts to reclaim this power from women in *The Theogony*). In these actions, Medea and Jason alternate gendered reproductive roles. By doing so, Euripides

continues the parallel between Medea and masculine, heroic figures and rejects gendered stereotypes by alternately depicting both the mother and the father as monstrous.

It could be argued that Medea is the embodiment of negative Greek stereotypes about women rather than a complex female character that questions those stereotypes. One could similarly read the Chorus's support for Medea's revenge as a condemnation of any woman's desire to break out of a submissive role, rather than indicative of Euripides's genuine sympathy. After all, Jason calls Medea "a thing of hate, woman most loathsome to the gods, and me, and all humanity" (1324-1325). Even Medea states that women are fundamentally untrustworthy when she says, "What's more, we are born women. It may be we're unqualified for deeds for virtue: yet as architects of every kind of mischief, we are supremely skilled" (407-409). In this light, Medea's characterization is sexist rather than empowering or transgressive. However, Medea ultimately remains a sympathetic character (despite her evil) and therefore avoids being placed in the same category of 'feminine monsters' like Medusa. Medea's decision to kill her children is not one made with hysterical insanity, with a thoughtful hatred and determination to punish

Jason. Furthermore, the Chorus does not approve of her murder of her children, but condemn the act as a "foul abomination" (1253-1254). Therefore, the play does not argue that all women are bloodthirsty, but most women both understand and condemn Medea's actions. By acknowledging

bloodthirsty, but most women both understand and condemn Medea's actions. By acknowledging the negative stereotypes about women while maintaining Medea's identity as a complicated but sympathetic character, Euripides may be utilizing a dramatic irony to call the validity of these stereotypes into question. Medea is not virtuous but remains a complicated character beyond the reductive category of feminine monstrosity.

*Medea* is a remarkably modern play in its willingness to explore uncomfortable transgressions of social boundaries. Many feminist scholars posit that the gender inversions in *Medea* can be read as complex reclamations of a previously sexist narrative and celebrate the work for its progressiveness. The play even passes the Bechdel test! However, like Medea herself, Euripides's overarching arguments concerning women's rights and gender roles defy simple categorizations. Despite the play's more contemporary elements (such as the "Women of Corinth" speech), it is possible that Euripides's narrative was meant to be a cautionary tale about falling prey to dangerous, witchy women rather than a radical re-examination of the stereotypes surrounding the original myth. Indeed, whether or not Medea can be properly labelled as either a 'feminine monster' or revolutionary hero is kept deliberately ambiguous. While Medea acts monstrously, she wants to do so and succeeds only as a result of the male characters' gendered prejudices. Ultimately, the play's outlook is not as clearly pro-woman as much as it is anti-stereotype. Euripides's overall argument about the danger of stereotypes and other assumed knowledge is best summarized in the play's final words:

Zeus stores many things on Olympus,

Gods do many things that surprise us.

The endings expected do not come to pass:

Those unexpected—the gods find a way.

That sort of story has happened today.

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