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I am a PhD student in the Department of Italian at UCLA. My Masters studies included the development of the novella as a genre, the changing use of personification in Italian literature, and the theme of female passion. I am especially interested in theories of love in Medieval and Renaissance literature.

A Female Hero and Male Antiheroes: An Investigation of the Tragic Hero and Gender Roles in Euripides' *Medea* According to Aristotle's *Poetics*

Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero in his *Poetics* indicates a contradiction in one of the great heroes of Greek tragedy; one to which he refers several times in treatise on dramatic theory: Euripides' Medea. The Euripidean *Medea* centers upon a female hero that is good not inherently, but by speech and action (see Aristotle 53; 15.1). Medea also demonstrates, however, a "manly valor" and "unscrupulous cleverness" that Aristotle deems "inappropriate" in women (53; 15.2). Furthermore, the tragedy includes examples of males that do not exhibit heroic traits, which serve to underline Medea's unique nature. Medea's self-contradictory disposition also counters the strict categorization—specifically of genders and tragic heroes—embraced in ancient Greek culture in general and, specifically, in Aristotle's poetic theory. Medea's transcendence of such categories may explain why the author of the *Poetics* does not cite the Euripidean heroine—whose creator he deems "faulty […] in the general management of his subject" (Aristotle 47; 13.6)—as an example of the ideal tragic hero, even though she fulfills almost all of the Aristotelian requirements.

Aristotle defines the "first" and "most important" requirement of a tragic hero as his goodness (53; 13.1). The philosopher explains that it is this goodness that will allow the tragic hero to instill in the audience pity and fear, which he states is the very purpose of tragedy (Aristotle 45; 13.2). In this first consideration of her adherence to the Aristotelian code of the tragic hero, Euripides' Medea poses a problem. How can a murderess—let alone the killer of her own children—be perceived as good? However, as explains S. H. Butcher, the success of a tragic

hero—though he must be good—is not dependent upon his adherence to a moral code (224). Aristotle's seemingly contradictory definition of a hero in regard to his goodness is resolved in his expansion of the quality in *Poetics* XIII. Medea is certainly not "eminently good and just"—her murdering her innocent children, regardless of her motives, can hardly be considered an act of goodness or justice—but neither is she an "utter villain" (see Aristotle 45; 13.2-3). Ensuring that she is not perceived as such is a challenge that Euripides most apparently overcomes in Medea's monologue before she kills her children. Medea balks twice before committing infanticide, each time letting out a cry of anguish (1042-8; 1056-8). Euripides clarifies that Medea is suffering from an inner struggle. The heroine's monologue demonstrates that she is not motivated by "vice or depravity" (see Aristotle 45; 13.3), but by a strict adherence to a heroic code. Such a conclusion is supported by Medea's response to her own maternal instinct; she overcomes her first moment of maternal "weakness" with the exclamation, "But what's come over me? Do I want to incur / laughter for leaving enemies unpunished? No! / This must be dared. What cowardice it was in me, / to let those soft words even come into my mind!" (Euripides 1049-50). Medea's fear of being ridiculed by her enemies explicitly links her with the Greek heroic code (Easterling 185). Shirley A. Barlow, in fact, notes that Medea's "one fear […] that her enemies will humiliate her (383, 404, 1049, 1060-1) […] [is] in the masculine heroic tradition of an Ajax or an Achilles, both of whom react violently against insult and impeachment of honour" (187). Thus, though Medea's deed is "horrific," (Easterling 188), "hideous" (Knox 224), "horrifying and immoral" (Bongie 32), it is not villainous. It is simply an example of adherence to the Greek heroic code, which is not synonymous with the adherence to a moral code (Bongie 52). Elizabeth Bryson Bongie relates this difference directly to Medea: "If,

however Medea is not acceptable to our own moral code, she is, in the code of the ancient heroic system, a veritable 'saint'" (55).

Medea, then, is not "eminently good and just" and her "misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity"; "there remains, then," Aristotle states, "the character between these two extremes"—one whose misfortune is the result of "some error or frailty" (45; 13.3). That is, in order to be a tragic hero, Medea must possess what has come to be known as a "tragic flaw." In *Medea*, the heroine's misfortune is first brought about by Jason's decision to marry Creon's daughter. The tragedy, however, is rooted in Medea's reaction to this betrayal. The nature of Medea's reaction—or rather, that she has a reaction at all—is blatantly unfeminine. The passivity that was expected of women in ancient Greece and an example of a Greek heroine who meets these domestic expectations is the Homeric Penelope. Odysseus' abandoned wife waits patiently and loyally for her husband to return. Euripides' heroine, theoretically, should have submissively and peacefully accepted her husband's choice to marry another. Medea's tragic flaw, then, is that she is a woman, yet she acts like a man. In other words, Medea's tragic flaw is her possession of the manly valor in women that Aristotle considers inappropriate. Even Jason notes her impropriety; upon discovering his dead children and his guilty wife, he laments, "There's no Greek woman who'd have dared this deed" (Euripides 1339).

Medea's tragic flaw is her inappropriateness, but there are two elements that Aristotle considers the base of impropriety in women. Besides "manly valor," he mentions "unscrupulous cleverness." Euripides establishes that Medea is clever, describing her on several accounts as *sophos* (Euripides 285, 303, 305-6, 409,600, 677) or *deninê* (Euripides 37, 44). Hugh Parry explains, "'Cleverness,' *sophia*, was always an ambiguous term to the Greeks and so a cause of anxiety. The clever female provokes particular disquiet […] Clever Medea is a frightening

figure" (133-4). Medea's cleverness, exhibited in her plots of revenge against Jason and Creon and admitted in her own words (Euripides 303, 407-9), must have been frightening to her audience. It may be assumed that ancient Greeks would have perceived Medea's *sophia* in the same way that do Creon and Jason within the play: something to be distrusted and feared.

The fear that *Medea*'s two male protagonists harbor for the heroine expresses their belonging to the category male antiheroes. The Corinthian king, for example, fears Medea's *sophia* to such an extent that he is overcome by it, and subsequently demonstrates that he is void of the heroic resolve that the heroine so explicitly exhibits. Euripides most starkly contrasts Medea's heroism with Creon's antiheroism in the dialogue between the two characters regarding Medea's banishment from Corinth. Creon at first tries to establish the immovability that is expected of his gender: "It's settled," he responds firmly to Medea's request to stay in Corinth, "You've no scheme that will enable you / to stay here with us in hostility to me" (322-3). Upon hearing her further appeals, he replies, "Your words are wasted; you will not persuade me, ever" (325). The regal antihero, however, is no match against the heroic *sophe*. Within twenty-five lines, Creon concedes to the woman's wishes: "I see I'm making a mistake— / but your request is granted, woman […] / So if you need to stay, stay just for this one day; / that's not enough to do the awful things I fear" (350-1, 355-6). His relenting to Medea's wishes, especially after the declaration that he would not do such a thing, confirms his role as a male antihero and thus a foil to the female hero. As The King of Corinth acquiesces to Medea, he displays a submissiveness that in ancient Greek society was regarded as a highly female—and thus, unheroic—characteristic.

According to the hierarchy of ancient Corinth, Medea, as a woman, should have naturally submitted to all men, but she should have especially surrendered herself the two men that are

represented in Euripides' tragedy: Creon, her king, and Jason, her husband. Euripides' heroine, however, eclipses both of her masters. Jason, after all, proves to be just as definitively an effeminate antihero as his new father-in-law. Jason's shortcomings as a hero in *Medea* are most apparent when one considers his former heroic status as leader of the Argonauts and obtainer of the Golden Fleece as recounted in ancient mythological texts. The ancient texts, the Euripidean *Medea*, and the *Argonautica* all suggest that Jason would not have obtained the Golden Fleece—and thus, would not have achieved his heroic glory—without the help of Medea herself. In Euripides' tragedy, Medea reminds Jason of his indebtedness to her on account of this event (476-7, 480-2). Even more extraordinary is Medea's motivation to help Jason in his heroic quest: the tragedy confirms on more than one occasion that it was the heroine's physical desire for Jason that prompted her to aide him. In her opening monologue, for example, the Nurse reveals that it was Medea's being "heart-struck with passionate desire for Jason" that impelled her to "benefit Jason with compliance in / all things" (Euripides 7, 13-4). Jason himself is conscious of his wife's first motivation to help him, pronouncing to her, "Eros forced you with / his arrows inescapable to save my life" (Euripides 530-1). Heroes accomplish heroic deeds by employing certain heroic skills, such as cunning, prowess in battle, etc. Jason, however, as Seth L. Schein notes, "accomplish[ed] his deed […] by means of his erotic attractiveness to Medea" (71 n. 29). Schein's analysis introduces an interesting proposal: if, for example, Achilles' heroic characteristic is "naked violence" and Odysseus' is "cold craft" (Knox 202), is Jason's—in the story of the Argonauts—"erotic attractiveness?" Such a possibility further effeminates Jason as an object of sexual desire—an identity, in the ancient Greek world, restricted to women.

A mere glance at the bibliography including titles such as "Stereotype and Reversal," "Abortive Nurturing," "Medea's Divided Self," and "Medea: Daughter, Sister, Wife and

Mother" reveals that the nature of Euripides' heroine is self-contradictory. In an essay with a title similarly suggestive of inconsistency, "Euripides' *Medea*: Woman or Fiend?", Lena Hatzichronoglou identifies the Euripidean Medea as not only a woman, but "also a mother, a wife, a witch, a lover, a killer, a friend, an enemy, a barbarian, a Greek, a victim, a destroyer, a mortal, and an immortal" (187). Hatzichronoglou observes the threat that this rebellion against categorization posed to members of the ancient Greek world (183). The critic names Jason and Creon as examples of Greeks threatened by Medea's "fusion of opposites," but she may have also described Aristotle himself as "frightened, confused, and upset" by Medea's unwillingness to be categorized (183). The author of the *Poetics*, after all, was also a member of "the old Greek, aristocratic, male-dominated world in which everything was once neatly defined" (183). This description also applies, however, to the world of Medea's very creator; Euripides belonged to the century preceding Aristotle's. It is in light of this fact that the exceptionality of *Medea* demonstrates itself: while the fourth-century BC philosopher known for his logical, categorical representation of the ideal Greek Tragedy cannot except Medea as a female heroic character, the fifth-century BC author of her tragedy creates a protagonist who refuses to fit into a category, and thus forces us to reevaluate the heroism of traditional male mythical figures and offers us a new a different notion of the tragic hero.

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