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A Feminist Icon or a Homicidal Coward

Medea's Revenge on Patriarchy

Beyza Ertugrul

The Medea is not about woman's rights; it is about woman's wrongs, those done to her and by her.

—B. M. W. Knox, “*The Medea of Euripides*”

Medea, living in conservative and misogynistic ancient Greece, is wronged by her husband and fights back by murdering everyone dear to him. Her actions set up Medea as the perfect target to be victimized by pseudo-feminist writers mistaking her brutality for a war of sophistication. Despite Euripides' seemingly enlightened and transgressive message of Medea breaking free from masculine emotional abuse, she is not a strong character but static due to her ongoing obsession over her husband, Jason, and physical escapism. In an article, Betine van Zyl Smit views the sorceress as “a symbol for women and an icon of feminism” (102). Other scholars like Kyle Kim agree, saying she is “a woman going against the status quo.” While her opposition to the misogynistic discourse of ancient Greek society displays Medea as a transgressive character, her hypocritical behavior contradicts these claims. Even though her actions may seem a mere response to the great tragedy she encounters, Medea herself knowingly causes a catastrophe that should be unassociated with feminism in any way.

Medea's actions do not align with the feminist attitude she expresses. In her famous speech to the women of Corinth, she speaks out on major gender inequality, complaining that "women are the most unfortunate" (Euripides 7) and criticizing injustice and sexist stereotypes particularly apparent in women's roles saying, "I'd rather stand there / three times in battle holding up my shield / than give birth once" (8). With this statement, Medea examines how her society wrongly views men as braver and more hard-working than women and she would prefer fighting in a war over giving birth. Medea has not only won several fights, but has given birth to two children, which shows that a woman is capable of both battle and motherhood (Rhodius 260). While a man can easily take a temporary or even permanent break from his family whenever he desires, a mother is bound to serve her children and husband eternally.

Medea specifically complains that women do not have any kind of company as an output for their emotions. This loneliness causes her to wish that she was born of the other gender, which is seen in her preference for dying in a war over being of the underprivileged female sex (Euripides 8). Medea's courage to protest publicly against sexism is certainly admirable, but her expression of internalized misogyny¹ throughout the tragedy—particularly in the form of a hate crime against another woman—makes praising her as a feminist highly problematic. Despite her clearly expressed knowledge that women in ancient Athens "can't refuse to take a husband," Medea blames Jason's new bride for destroying her marriage (8). A true feminist would feel pity for Jason's next victim—whom he only marries for her royalty—and advocate for women's rights to choose their own partner instead of being married off like merchandise. Instead, Medea "plans her vengeance with cold brutality" and curses her all throughout the drama (Salmond).

Further proof of this powerful sorceress' internalized misogyny can be found in several of her statements regarding women's stereotypes. For instance, she supports the perspective that women are hysterical, and melodramatically bound in marriage, in spite of potential abuse. Acting as though the most important element of a woman's life is her marriage, Medea justifies her murders by claiming that "there's no heart more desperate for blood than" that of a divorcee (Euripides 8). Although Medea uses these stereotypes to depict the grief that she is put through and to generalize her actions, making them symbolic for

1 internalized misogyny: the unconscious adoption and exertion of a patriarchal society's ideological sexism, specifically by women towards women

women overall, they are predominantly harmful as a corrupt representation of the female gender. Contrary to popular belief, though, she is not an ordinary woman. Medea is privileged due to both her magic powers and powerful mind. Instead of using these for the greater good or for a more moral outcome of her heartbreak, she abuses that power and still pretends the malevolent reaction she shows is typical of the female gender. No matter how advanced Medea's truly unique recognition and challenging of patriarchal values is, her misogynistic actions of victim-blaming and stereotyping contradict the idea that the tragedy's heroine is a true feminist, let alone the mother of feminism.

Naturally, this internalized misogyny stems from an oppressive patriarchal society which certainly influences Medea's crimes. While her wrath is only natural, the subsequent brutality of her serial murders addressed to uninvolved people is not. Her quadruple murder cannot be simply justified by these outside factors; she must take responsibility for the killings. While every subject of the patriarchy is influenced by its ideology, women specifically suffer from the circumstances they are put through. Culturally stereotypical injustices and imposed impossibility of independence, or even individuality, shape women's minds to expect hopelessness and grief in their own lives. In questioning this discrimination of women, Medea's rage for the abuse she suffers from male figures in her life is very reasonable, and she deserves to express this anger—to a certain extent. Jason, Medea's ex-husband, betrayed her to gain royal status by marrying the princess of Corinth. He also emotionally abuses her even further, particularly trying to gaslight² the mother of his children into believing she is indebted to him and should be more grateful, exclaiming, "By saving me you got in return/ more than you gave" (16). Moreover, he calls women "idiotic" (17) and declares that "[t]here should be no female sex. With that, / men would be rid of all their troubles" (17). As an embodiment of misogyny, Jason's words add fuel to the fire burning in Medea's chest. Aggravated by this provocation, her fury expands along with the murder plots she makes. Betine van Zyl Smit's problematic and self-declared feminist view in "Medea the Feminist" absurdly excuses the protagonist's crimes with patriarchal oppression, claiming,

[Medea] is driven to the unnatural act—the reversal of her role as nurturing

2 gaslighting: "psychological manipulation . . . that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator" ("Gaslighting")

mother—of killing her own children, by the harsh treatment she has received from the men who have some power over her, namely Creon and Jason. It could be argued that the men bear the moral responsibility for her act. (105)

The article hereby reasons a potential for Medea's moral blamelessness, justifying her slaughter of innocent people. This perspective not only places a halo above her head but indicates that Medea, as a victim of misogyny, stands above the law.

Moreover, many apologists, like in the statement above, imply a suddenness in her escalated response of murder to being exiled by Creon, the king of Corinth, and verbally abused by Jason. However, even though the tragedy is set in a single day, Medea does not murder in an arbitrary frenzy. She plans every detail, from not leaving traces that lead to her being caught to her safe escape from the consequential punishment for her killings.

In addition to thorough planning, Medea is not set back emotionally by these tyrants' attempts to wield power and authority over her; instead, she speaks up against them and manipulates them back. Medea seems passionate about the several ways to murder Jason, Creon, and the latter's daughter when she is given an extension of one day to prepare for her banishment. After Medea's old friend Aegeus promises her a safe stay in his city upon her exile, she changes her plans and wants to kill her children in order to spite Jason by destroying his bloodline. Before killing them, she plans to use them to send enchanted gifts to their new stepmother that ultimately lights both the princess and the king on fire. By those means, Medea knowingly disturbs and traumatizes her sons before her double-filicide³. Even though she acts out a dilemma of being unable to murder her children, she seems oddly ingenuine. In specific regards to the nurse's recognition in the exposition of the tragedy that now Medea "hates her children. When she sees them, / there is no joy in her," the cruel mother shows deeply sadistic⁴ and psychotic behavior (Euripides 2). It is important to look at the work in its context, especially in terms of Medea's victimization by both herself and feminist critics due to the very central patriarchal oppression in her life.

In the article "Murderer and Trailblazer," Kim argues that Jason and Medea represent the "inequality between men and women" because she is being banished upon her divorce while he gets to live on with his life. Even though this

3 filicide: the killing of a child by its parent

4 sadism: the pleasure of harming someone cruelly

sexist injustice is true, Medea is not actually being exiled for being a divorced woman. As a matter of fact, Creon literally tells her, “I’m afraid of you” (Euripides 9). This fear that she would take revenge on him or his daughter is very plausible since Jason’s new bride would not be the first person on the partially divine witch’s conscience. Medea, a granddaughter of the sun-god Helios, not only murdered King Pelias when he refused to give up his throne to the rightful heir, but also committed fratricide⁵. She does not seem to regret the murder of her brother until her life is going downhill.

Although she is certainly a perpetrator, some of Medea’s circumstances make it possible to call her a victim. The love spell put upon her by Eros, the god of love, caused her to kill her own brother—and betray her father and homeland—involuntarily. She does all this to please Jason and stay with him, but he completely dismisses her efforts. In her article, Emily Cassello further investigates Medea’s circumstances and the forces influencing her decisions. She comes to the conclusion that a proper analysis of Medea’s character requires an isolated look at her direct behavior rather than regarding her actions as inevitable responses, deciding, “Though murdering her children cannot be justified, Medea’s rage can be and her character can also be given the honor it deserves” (10). Therefore, Jason’s treason and the constant patriarchal injustice Medea suffers do make her a victim. Yet, she is still to blame for her own homicides, no matter the systematic inequality she feels driven by, because she does not take revenge on her direct oppressor but sacrifices innocent lives, all in an effort to hit Jason where it hurts.

Medea’s blind rage leads her to harm others and herself in the process of hurting Jason, which is the chief reason why she is a static character who repeatedly escapes from the consequences of her own actions. This physical escapism creates a pattern for Medea to destroy her old life and welcome a new one wherever and whenever she wants. Admittedly, the first time Medea ever leaves her homeland, she is under a love spell and does not really have a conscious choice. Upon Jason’s plan to take Medea with him and make her his wife, the princess of Colchis betrays her father and home by aiding him in stealing from her land. Being followed by Medea’s brother, the couple plots to kill him, and this very fratricide—besides the treason—is the essential reason for Medea’s inability to return home after her divorce from Jason and her self-exile. Even though this murder is the only one that Medea does not commit on her own, but together

5 fratricide: the killing of one’s brother

with her husband, it is the only crime she exclaims to regret after her love spell breaks upon her divorce. However, that does not stop her from killing many more people, including her own children.

As a location of another one of Medea's plotted murders, her second banishment is further evidence that she is, indeed, a passionate and calculating killer rather than a victim of outer circumstances. By convincing the daughters of King Pelias of Iolcus to kill their own father in the belief of helping him gain youthfulness, Medea uses her intelligence to help Jason ascend the throne through murder, ending up in exile once again. King Creon of Corinth, who is aware of Medea's past crimes and banishments, fears the powerful witch's wrath and exiles her. However, she refuses to leave without having taken her homicidal revenge because she rejects the idea of her "enemies escaping punishment" (32). This rampage of hers does not stop with the tragedy's ending.

In the story of another hero, Theseus, Medea reappears and attempts yet another murder by sorcery, which fails and sends her into exile—yet again (Hamilton 158). Even though she is generally enraged by her rivals getting away without consequence, Medea does not simply seek justice, but concealment of her crimes. She vehemently refuses to be caught in the act of murder or to be punished. To protect her own life, she chooses to escape, conspiring,

And when I've done this,
 . . . I'll leave,
 evading the punishment I'd receive
 for murdering my darling children. (Euripides 24)

She tries to make her audience believe that she only commits her filicide in order to save the two boys from a hopeless and humiliating life. Medea similarly escapes from accountability and fits right into the role of a "wronged victim" in the eyes of pseudo-feminists (van Zyl Smit 107). However, the eponymous protagonist takes pride in her perfectly schemed murders and escapes. Partly, this stems from her distress about being ridiculed and seen as a "laughing stock" if she remains without action (Euripides 13). This fear grows so much that her pride is what ultimately determines her decision to commit filicide and thereby induce self-inflicted harm. When she is asked whether she can handle murdering her sons, she is completely detached from her feelings as a mother and can only focus on her ex-husband's reaction, unwaveringly explaining, "Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason" (25). She dismisses the chorus' following worries about how much pain this will cause her because she is blinded by her own rage

and pride as she was once by love.

In both cases, Jason is standing right at the core of Medea's obsession. Although she manages to break free from the divine love spell, she actively chooses to act upon her rage. Even if she fails to admit it, this proves that Medea is not fully free from male control in her life. The lack of freedom causes her to not only give up her family, homeland, and royalty in her mania, but to deliberately destroy what little she has left once she becomes lucid. Despite Medea's opportunity to flee to King Aegeus' promised land in the happy company of her sons, where she could restore her reputation, she chooses Jason, as she prefers to see his temporary misery rather than her own permanent happiness. In a short moment of reason, Medea questions her plans, wondering, "Why harm them as a way to hurt their father/ and have to suffer twice his pain myself?" (32). Despite her clear awareness that the pain will ricochet, her pride and reputation are more important to her than a clean conscience for four lives, two of which belong to her. Ironically, Medea's intelligence turns to obliviousness once it is directed at Jason. Instead of taking his life, which is of the utmost importance to a hero whose primary goal in life is kingship and materialism, the sorceress assumes that the breaking of emotional ties would be more devastating to him.

Medea's attempts to maim Jason are not symbolically rooted in feminism. Instead, she acts out of personal revenge and even misogyny⁶. Despite her efforts, the quadruple murder does not affect Jason as much as she thinks it would. First, he neither loves nor fights for his children who are sent into exile, he only married the princess of Corinth to become a royal, and lastly, he does not really care for King Creon in the first place. The only thing that is of similar importance to a hero as leadership is his biological fitness. Medea's child murder is also an attempt at destroying Jason's bloodline since no other woman would ever dare to come close to Jason upon hearing the tales about his homicidal ex-wife, which would mean no heir to Jason's name. Despite there still being a possibility of finding a mate, Medea could have used her magic powers to try to vasectomize Jason and then escape along with her children. However, this plot is not representative of women but rather motivated by Medea's need to tear down her ex-husband's masculinity and identity as a hero. Instead of trying to punish Jason with direct consequences to his actions, Medea takes from him what she assumes makes him a "typical" man: fame, royalty, and biological fitness. Acting on such misogynic motives, she supports toxic gender

6 misogyny: a hatred of men

stereotypes even further rather than setting a statement for the equality of sexes—the essence of feminism. Even if she were right about the means of how to hurt Jason, murder is not the right way to express her understandable rage. Revenge that solely includes innocent people, as much as it hurts the addressed person, does not speak for a morally intelligent—let alone a dynamic—character. Medea openly admits that her “judgment / can’t check [her] anger” (33), and from the very beginning, all of her feelings revolve around Jason, whether it is passionate love or obsessive anger. In the process, her plan to escape and never face the consequences of her actions does not change. Her looping through past, present, and future thus looks very similar in terms of her personality since she fails to learn from the mistakes she does not necessarily realize. Due to all these elements, Medea does not mature nor develop in any other way, which makes it clear that she is a static character.

Since Medea runs from her problems and their consequences, she lacks the strength necessary to properly embody sophisticated feminism. She had the potential to embody true feminism when she rejected the sexist injustice around her, but this rejection transformed into destruction of other innocent and marginalized people, which is inherently un-feminist. Even though the eponymous character makes some remarkable arguments about women’s place in a patriarchal society and could, in some ways, be viewed as an actual feminist icon, her internalized misogyny in most other scenes is very present and makes her personality complex and controversial. Despite the constant misogyny forced upon her, Medea’s crimes cannot be justified; she has to take responsibility for her actions, particularly the senseless murder of her innocent children. Even though she has the power to break free from Jason’s manipulation, she uses it for revenge. Ultimately, she destroys herself most of all.

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