

Translating Medea's Infanticide: A Reading of Euripides' *Medea*

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Abstract

The figure of Medea is indeed one of the most enigmatic and problematic characters of Greek mythology. In Euripides' *Medea*, the problem becomes acute because it is not merely a vengeful character that the reader comes across, but a woman who in order to avenge her husband's betrayal, chooses to kill her own children. And in traditional patriarchal society that is certainly not acceptable. In the recent past, Medea's actions have presented her as a cruel hearted murderess, a passionate woman bent on revenge, a mortal woman emerging as a goddess through her actions, and even as one of the first feminists to have uttered vengeance against man's unfair treatment of women. While this paper looks at all those interpretations, it also attempts to analyze and interpret the riddle of Medea from other perspectives. Drawing on the historical background of the Asian sorceress, this paper aims to present Medea as a lost voice of matriarchy that retaliates against the father's rule that denies a mother to have any hold over her children. In the process, the woman may lose her most precious possessions, she may also be deemed as a monster, but she also just might regain her honor and esteem.

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One of the biggest problems I face in teaching Greek tragedies is that students would not accept Medea as a great heroine because she ends up killing her own children. They cannot understand why any dramatist would allow such a vile creature to ride out in a dragon-drawn chariot in full glory. Yes, they can see that her husband is a selfish, dimwitted fool, and they are moved by her plight. But they ask if that can be enough reason for a mother to *kill* her children? Isn't a mother supposed to protect her children at the cost of her own life, honor and whatever precious possessions she has? Why does not this mother do the same? Even among the most gruesome tales from Greek mythology the story of Euripides' Medea killing her own children has always been a problematic one for critics. As Robert Palmer points out, the character of Jason in Euripides' *Medea* is at best "a bourgeois hero with a bourgeois sense of morality" (53). But how is one supposed to interpret the character of Medea? The manner of deaths she delivers to the Corinthian Princess and her father is terrifying, but understandable, and to some extent even justifiable. They had treated Medea as vermin with no respect or place in society. They had lured her husband away, broken her home, and threatened to send her and her children into exile. Even the slaves of Corinth had more security than a woman with children and no guardian. So, is Euripides trying to show that a woman's urge to avenge the wrongs inflicted upon her by her husband is so strong that she would kill her own children? Critics have put forward different theories which show her as a cruel hearted murderess, a passionate woman bent on revenge, a mortal woman emerging as a goddess through her actions, and even as one of the first feminists to have uttered vengeance against man's unfair treatment of women.

Referring back to Greek mythology, even though mortals very often commit heinous crimes such as homicide, incest, and cannibalism, they are also punished through divine intervention. But Medea rides out of Corinth in the chariot of Helios like a goddess while helpless Jason whimpers in futile

rage and sorrow. However sympathetic Euripides might have been at the plight of foreigners living in Athens, or women's situation in Greek society, surely he had more reasons to allow Medea to leave the stage as a glorified *deus ex machina*. I would say that her actions may cry out vengeance, but they also commemorate the song of a lost time, the last cry of matriarchy that failed to protect itself against the rising patriarchal system.

Before engaging with the play, I would like to look at Medea's background to understand how she is different from her contemporary women in Greece. The Nurse, the Chorus, Jason, and Medea herself refer from time to time to her past life as the Princess of Colchis, which according to Jason, was like "living among barbarians" (l. 524). Colchis was actually an ancient pre-Greek state of Pelasgian culture. Homer refers to the Pelasgians in the *Iliad* while describing the allies of Troy. In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Milesian Greeks were attracted by the natural and economic sources of Colchis and its surrounding area (Modern Georgia in Europe), and laid siege to local cities. It explains why Medea's father Aietes, the King of Colchis, did not like Greek invaders who visited his country for the Golden Fleece. The fleece might very well be a symbol of his wealth. Therefore, he had the fleece guarded by a terrible serpent. At the same time, he set the young adventurers to perform impossible tasks, enticing them with the promise of the fleece. The cult of death he practiced was terrible indeed, but in many other places of ancient times, similar rites were present. *Iphigenia at Tauris* explores a parallel ritual where young strangers were sacrificed at the temple of Artemis. So in Colchis, Medea, a granddaughter of the sun god Helios, was a powerful sorceress and she was also either a daughter, or priestess of Hecate, the pre-Olympian goddess of fertility. Emma Griffith in her study of Medea records at least one diagram of lineage that shows Medea to be the daughter of Hecate (10). But Medea in Euripides' play swears an oath on Hecate and claims her as mistress and the goddess of her household.

Medea also claims to have fallen in love with Jason when he arrived at Colchis with the Argonauts. She promised to help him on the condition that he would make her his bride. And according to Apollonius, Jason took an oath that he would love Medea for the rest of his life. His marriage to Medea, therefore, was not a mere social contract like most Greek marriages where the bride could be sent to her father's home with her dowry if the husband wished to end the relationship. In Euripides' play, we see that the once great hero Jason now looks at Medea's love as a ploy of the gods to help him. Furthermore, he accuses her of belonging to a barbaric race and lesser origin than his, and shows a condescending attitude by claiming to have honored her by making her his consort. In his attempt to treat Medea as merely a hindrance in achieving his ambition, Jason acts not only as a typical contemporary Athenian of Euripides, suspicious and contemptuous of foreigners, but as an ingrate as well.

Medea had left her country and family for Jason, and she also had sacrificed her brother for the safe passage of the Argonauts. She killed Jason's usurping uncle Pelias by tricking his daughters. However, whatever she did was for the interest of Jason to whom she submitted body and soul. The doors to her fatherland and parents' house were sealed for her. Therefore, when she addresses Jason for his betrayal with remarriage, the utter wretchedness of her situation is revealed:

“Where am I to go? To my father’s?
Him I betrayed and his land when I came with you.
To Pelias’ wretched daughters? What a fine welcome
They would prepare me who murdered their father!
For this is my position, – hated by my friends
At home, I have, in kindness to you, made enemies
Of others whom there was no need to have injured
A distinguished husband
I have, – for breaking promises” (ll. 490- 99)

Medea’s plight is more abject than most Greek wives because though she has “married” a Greek man, being a foreigner and outsider, she has no legal claim on him. He has the right to leave her any time he wants. But for Medea, Jason’s second marriage is an ultimate act of treachery, because, as C.A.E. Luschnig observes “she has broken from her family more operationally than other brides” (24), the very reason for which she refuses to take up the position of a secondary wife or concubine.

After the initial shock over her husband’s remarriage, Medea steps out of her house to talk to the Chorus of Corinthian women who notice a stark change in her attitude from what the Nurse had earlier reported. The nurse had informed the Chorus that her mistress was lamenting her lost marriage by prostrating on the floor. But when Medea approaches the Chorus, she appears quite level headed, passionate even. In Ancient Greece, notes Margaret Williamson, especially in Athenian society, a woman’s place was the *oikos* or the hearth of her household. By crossing that threshold and by speaking logically like a Greek man, Medea starts taking charge of the situation very early in the play (17). Even though the Chorus asks her to accept her fate as sufferings inflicted by the gods, this is where we begin to suspect that she may choose not to do so.

Considering her past conduct, Medea’s confidence and the ability to look squarely at things is not surprising. Even in her relationship with Jason she was the one who initiated and did everything. She combines the figures of the dangerous and ugly witch with the mesmerizing and lovely princess. She also helps Jason with the killing of the guardian of the Golden Fleece. Her only goal in life then was helping out the man she loved with her whole heart. But in doing so, unlike most heroines, she has transgressed social norms and boundaries. Even though she embraces the identities of wife and mother in Corinth, her past actions were not forgotten by the people surrounding her. Creon, the King of Corinth, knows about Medea’s past, and precisely for that reason wants to banish her.

Threatened with exile and humiliated beyond endurance, Medea once again resumes her assertive self, but this time the focus of her interest changes drastically. From a doting and caring woman she turns into a chimera bent on revenge against her once beloved husband. However, if we look at her action as only revenge, it would be too simple an assessment of her situation and character. When Medea lived in Colchis, she had an important place in her father’s house, which depended on her magical skills. In her union with Jason she had lost all that. Therefore, when she is betrayed by that very man, she laments over her past decision of leaving her father’s land and murdering

her brother. Medea, a semi-divine woman, being a granddaughter of Helios, was also the Princess of Colchis, a priestess of Hecate, and a niece to the sorceress Circe. But she betrayed her former self, her father's house and her people by crossing over to the Greeks. Therefore, if she wants to atone, it has to be difficult, dangerous, and self-mutilating. As Lillian Corti implies, the rituals of Hecate required child sacrifice for atonement (44), and that very implication is foreboding. Medea, having been Hecate's priestess in the past, and still honoring her as her household goddess, makes it all the more ominous. Her killing of the Corinthian Princess, King Creon, and the children of her and Jason's union are all bound together in one piece of symbolic sacrifice that she feels might redeem her.

Medea's murder of the young Princess is of course an act of revenge, and yet, she is an emblem of Medea's younger self. When urging Jason to talk to his wife about the refuge of the children, Medea reveals how she herself once was fascinated by his charm:

“Then you must tell your wife to beg from her father
That the children may be reprieved from banishment . . .
If she is like the rest of us women, you will.” (ll. 918-21)

The messenger, who describes how the Corinthian Princess died, also relates how fervently she awaited Jason when he went to meet her. It almost mirrors a younger Jason asking a younger Medea for help, and she granting his wishes in a similar manner. When Medea kills the Princess, symbolically, she destroys her own younger self that loved Jason. Her gruesome death can be interpreted as the result of loving Jason, or the price of being married to Jason. Marriage to Jason and his subsequent treatment scarred Medea. As Marianne Hopman observes, “The young, innocent Medea inflamed by love for Jason had been annihilated and transformed into a bride of Hades” (165). But whereas, being a mere girl, the Princess actually dies, Medea lives on. She will live on even after being burned and disfigured.

Therefore, for Medea, the death of the Princess means completion of only half of her atonement. To complete the task she has to embark on something almost impossible – killing her own children. Critics have often questioned if Medea could not have saved them. But if we follow the chain of events carefully, it shows that in spite of being a powerful woman, Medea, too, has her limitations. When she makes her bargain with Aegeus, she speaks only for herself, and not for her children. She, being a foreigner, really cannot claim Jason as her legal husband, not in Corinth, and certainly not in Athens, home of Aegeus. Even though a sanctuary for exiles, the root of Athens is buried in the sacrifice of children, which is suggested in the Choral Ode sung in the praise of Athens:

From of old the children of Erechtheus are
Splendid, the sons of blessed gods. They dwell
In Athens' holy and unconquered land . . . (ll. 808-10)

Corti sees this reference as ominous because, “the founding father thus revered is one who sacrificed his daughter, Otonia, in order to secure an Athenian victory” (37). While the Chorus may fail to see why Athens, a city of wisdom and prosperity, would give shelter to a child murderer, their own song implies that some children will always be sacrificed for the welfare of some other. If it can happen in Athens, it may happen anywhere.

Moreover, after Jason's desertion, Medea becomes virtually an unmarried woman with children. Without the protection of their father these children would be hounded to death in no time. The only way she could perhaps have saved them, as suggested by Lillian Corti, is "by accepting a demeaning and tenuous status for herself," through enslaving herself to Jason and his bride (35). This is an option a woman like Medea cannot take, and even if she did, it was not an absolute certainty that the children would live. Both Creon and his daughter have good reasons to hate and fear Medea's sons, because they are a threat to the children to be borne by Jason's second wife.

Moreover, when Medea uses her children to bear her poisonous gifts to the Princess, their life is forfeited, as the Chorus correctly observes. The Corinthians will look upon them as objects of their vengeance, for which very reason Jason comes to save them right after the deaths of Creon and his daughter. Yet, it should not be assumed that Medea is happy about using her children as tools in her revenge. One of the most passionate and sad speeches uttered by Medea is the one she delivers to her sons while bidding farewell to them. Initially, one might think she is reconsidering her decision of killing them by leaving them behind. But then it becomes clear that she is actually singing a dirge before their death. She laments the futile pain she bore during their birth as all of it has come to nothing. Her words after bidding the children to go inside the house are full of premonition and ambiguity:

And he whom law forbids
To stand in attendance at my sacrifices,
Let him see to it. (ll. 1027-29)

Pietro Pucci in *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' Medea* offers two reasons behind Medea calling this murder a sacrifice, "First, they replace Jason because they are the most precious things he has, while they are also very dear to Medea; and second, their murder is intended to resolve her crisis and to be, therefore, her final act" (134).

However much it may hurt her, Medea must suffer as much as she made her father suffer. With this I would like to add that as the daughter/priestess of Hecate (in later ages often identified with Artemis), Medea also needs to perform this sacrificial ritual to purge herself. When she had left Colchis, in the sacrifice of her own brother she had destroyed her father's line of descendants. Now she must destroy all possibility of Jason leading a happy and comfortable life in old age, well-cared for by his children. At the end of the play, Jason accuses her of betraying her father's house, but long before that, Medea confessed her guilt while accusing Jason of treachery: "I myself betrayed my father and my home" (l. 471). She had killed her brother and caused her father tremendous pain, and she never forgot that. Jason's betrayal probably makes her grasp the futility of all her past actions.

Moreover, by marrying Jason, Medea had forfeited her former position of a virgin and priestess. She had also made herself subservient to a man who was not her equal, as Luschnig perceives:

The marriage of Jason and Medea almost reaching Homeric ideal of like-minded husband and wife (*Odyssey* 6.181-5) was an illusion all along: there was no equality (as Medea sees in hindsight), no shared world view. Jason, taking advantage of a man's greater mobility, went out and negotiated for a new wife. Medea's agreement and help are not asked for now. (25)

Now if Medea wants out of her marriage to regain her former status, she must annul the marriage too, but in a way very different from her husband's. Jason, who claims to belong to a "civilized" race, can abandon his foreign wife any time he wants to. But for Medea, it is a painful and difficult process. Being identified with a dark goddess of fertility, Medea will have to sacrifice; and her sacrifice will have to be the most treasured object in her "marriage," with which she had betrayed her former self. Jason cannot be a sacrifice because she has no love left for him. The sacrifice has to be precious, as was the case with Agamemnon, and as Pucci further observes, "Medea's purposeful resolve implies her self-mutilation but promises a full victory over Jason and a full restoration of her self" (142). Through her infanticide she also destroys "the tangible proof of her relationship with Jason ... [acting out] in the most literal and irrevocable manner the vanity of his [Jason's] oaths" (Hopman 161).

Yet, in spite of all the reasoning, Medea *is* guilty of filicide. Why then is she allowed to get away in the chariot of Helios? She is probably the only mortal child killer in Greek myths to have been allowed to get away without vengeance. The Orestian tragedy started with infanticide, and the curse visited the family for generations. The Chorus invokes the story of Ino, the one who dived into the sea after killing her son. Does that mean that Medea too will commit suicide? However, what the Chorus does not say is that after her death, Ino was transformed into a goddess. Most of the mothers of Greek mythology, who die of grief after killing their own flesh and blood, go through metamorphosis. Procne and Ino are two of such figures. Nevertheless, neither of them knew beforehand what the pain would be like. But Medea had the full knowledge of what she was doing. "Just for this one short day be forgetful of your children, afterwards weep," says Medea (l. 1221-22). Like Procne, she too, is severed from her children for all eternity. But unlike Procne, or Ino, her murder of her children was carefully planned, and she also knew of her coming transformation.

So, Medea in her dragon-pulled chariot becomes a *deus ex machina* – the divine presence that appears in all plays of Euripides to remind human beings of their limitations, and to reveal the truth of things. "In the world of the gods, oaths are inescapable and irrevocable," says Luschnig (65), and by marrying the Corinthian Princess, Jason breaks the oath he took in his marriage with Medea. By breaking his *oikos*, and leaving his wife and children destitute in order to fulfill his cold ambition, Jason proves himself a lowly man. Like many mythical heroes he wants to set himself at home after all his adventures, but at the price of discarding his devoted partner. *That* is an act of ultimate treachery. The woman Medea suffered as his wife, but in killing the children, she becomes an instrument of the gods. Invoking the name of Zeus, who punishes all oath-breakers, Medea does not only ride away safely, but prophesies an unheroic death for Jason. She is no more the woman Jason can upbraid and criticize. Like Dionysus in Euripides' other play *Bacchae*, Medea too, is slighted and insulted in the beginning of the play, but she rises at the end in her full glory. To some extent, she is also like Artemis at the end of *Hyppolitus*, who appears to clarify the wrongs inflicted on young Hyppolitus. Medea's crime might be insupportable, but Euripides allows her a platform to speak from and to justify what she has done.

Moreover, Medea's act of filicide transforms her into something inhuman, almost an immortal. In killing her children she destroys Jason, and in the process she also destroys the wife and the

mother within. "After committing this murder she becomes so changed, so hardened, that one doubts if she will ever weep again," (42) comments Jennifer March in "Euripides the Misogynist?" From now on, her dealings with people will be emotionless and businesslike, which she shows in her pact with Aegeus. In her commitment to Jason she had submitted herself heart and soul. But with Aegeus it is "a contract based on exchange and reciprocity between equals," observes Margaret Williamson (19). Conforming to the patriarchal mode of society she accepts Aegeus as her protector, but she will probably never be emotionally dependent on him or any other man as she was on Jason.

Even though Euripides shows Medea to be guilty of infanticide, he also makes her one of the greatest heroines of all time. In other stories concerning Medea, her children are either killed by the goddess Hera, or by the relatives of Creon, which suggest that these children could not have survived the disastrous events surrounding them. Or, even if they had survived, they would not be allowed to achieve greatness – being merely the sons of Jason by a foreign mistress. By making Medea kill them, Euripides actually gives Medea the power to write her own story. Earlier, Jason had denied her share not only in his story of the Golden Fleece, but also negated her role as a wife and mother:

You need no children.
And it pays me to do good to those I have now
By having others. (ll. 553-55)

He reproves her by saying that these sons will be useful to him because as sons, they belong to the father's world. He also takes away the identity he had given her only too easily, and at the same time, expects her to behave as a good wife by accepting his second marriage as well as give up her children. For Jason, he is always the center of his world. Medea has done so much for him in the past that he takes it for granted that she would do so again.

King Creon, the supposed protector of his land and people, had tried to make Medea a homeless fugitive. Only Aegeus, as Luschnig points out, "offers her a place from which to rebuild herself and recognizes a self in her from which to start" (3). And when Medea takes up that offer and acts from the shelter of that position, Jason is no less surprised than Medea was by his betrayal. All these years he has thought her as a loving wife doing wonderful things for him. Now when she kills their children, he sees the terrifying aspect of Medea:

A traitress to your father and your native land.
The gods hurled the avenging curse of yours on me.
For your own brother you slew at your own hearthside,
And then came aboard that beautiful ship, the Argo.
And that was your beginning. (ll. 1307-11)

Here we can clearly see that though Jason had been trying to deny Medea her part in his story by saying that the gods granted him glory, and that she had no part in it, in reality she is the one who had saved him as well as the Argonauts through her fratricide. She was no less terrible in the past, but she was then tremendously handy as a tool for Jason. Therefore, as long as she was useful for

the cold-hearted, ambitious man, he saw no fault in her. But the moment she begins to oppose his wishes, he starts finding her ill-tempered, useless, and as one only satisfied if her “life at night is good” (l. 558).

A woman pushed beyond endurance, Medea, therefore, kills her children and makes them immortal through the ritual she follows. It is noteworthy that she is different from all other child killers, most of whom die of grief, or are killed by avengers. Knowing full well what she was doing, immediately after the murder Medea rushes off to the temple of Hera, the goddess of marriage and child bearing. She performs the ritual connected to sacrifice to atone her deed and also to establish “a holy feast and sacrifice” for future generations of Corinthians to commemorate the death of her sons (l. 1357). It almost seems that by appealing to the goddess of marriage she finds a sanctuary for the bodies of her children, where they would not be dug up by some angry mob looking for vengeance.

Thus instituting the rites of atonement by Medea is a very important aspect of her story. Not only is she allowed to get away with murders, but like an immortal goddess lay the responsibility on the people of Corinth. Medea’s character reflects the “code of the ancient heroic system,” identifiable with the archaic heroism of Achilles and Odysseus (Knox 216). Mirroring Achilles’s grief after the death of Patroclus, Medea, too, lies prostrating on the ground after she learns about Jason’s second marriage. Soon, however, just like Achilles, she cries vengeance and wreaks havoc on her opponent. Like Odysseus, she is crafty too (her name, Medea, meaning the cunning one), in the deception and manipulation of Jason and Creon. When her revenge is complete, she rides out of the city in triumph, like an epic hero, apparently without caring what casualty she has caused, or how much it has cost her. She has been able to assert herself, and nobody will dare to laugh at her, or forget her as an insignificant and abandoned wife.

For his original audience Euripides has a very important message too. For the fifth century Greeks, more especially, Athenians, Medea being a woman and a foreigner, does not have the standing of a full human being. She is supposed to stay off-stage, her sufferings supposed to stay inside the house. The Chorus of Corinthian women laments it as the fate of women, but fails to find any solution: “Medea, a god has thrown suffering/ Upon you in waves of despair” (ll. 358-59). That a woman can actually cry vengeance for the wrongs inflicted upon her, was unheard of in those days. Euripides’s Medea, however, speaks and acts in ways that were totally unexpected by the contemporary audience. When she makes the claim that she would stand three times in the battle line than bear one child, she draws attention upon a sore spot – the physical and mental agony a woman goes through during child bearing. “Not many women would say what Medea says,” observes Easterling, and it surely was something unheard of by the patriarchal Athenian audience (182). Yet they did make a huge fuss over warfare and heroes dying in battlefield. The question is, where is the song for women who die at childbirth, or those who raise children only to be dismissed by husbands like Jason?

Thus, Euripides uses the figure of Medea to wreak vengeance of woman upon man for a long suffering cause. It probably is also a foreboding of chaos and revolution that a rebellious woman might cause for mistreatment and rejection. Moreover, attention is drawn to the fact that even in

a democratic city like Athens, the children of a foreigner like Medea would never be considered as citizens. The right to become a citizen of Athens was jealously guarded. Although the city depicted in *Medea* is Corinth, the scenario is the same, and Medea herself is aware of her disadvantages and shrewdly perceives the main reason behind Jason's marriage: "No, you thought it was not respectable/ As you got on in years to have a foreign wife" (ll. 579-80). So, Medea cannot be accepted as one of the Greeks even with her superior knowledge. They can sneer at her, but at the same time, they are afraid of her, as we observe in case of the Corinthian King Creon who banishes her from the city for the welfare of his daughter.

Therefore, in spite of all her trials and attempts to become a Greek, Medea remains an outsider. With her knowledge and wisdom she is also a forerunner of the "wise women" of the Medieval Ages, many of whom were burnt at the stake as witches. She reminds one of those mothers in slave narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, who would choose death for her children rather than slavery and an inferior life. She is also reminiscent of the ferocious mother of matriarchal society where children were identified with the mother. Medea realizes that she will have no part in her sons' lives, they will be strangers to her if they lived, being tools of Jason's further ambition. The other, stronger possibility is they will be killed by the machination of a step-mother, or her relatives. Medea can allow neither, and decides to kill her children mercifully, with love. Therefore, Medea's infanticide is not a question of right or wrong, but an exploration of what might happen when the society acts without consideration, targeting one or two individuals by passing an arbitrary judgment.

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