Seneca’s Medea and Euripides’ Medea

1. Medea and Euripides

- Euripides’ Medea of 431 BCE establishes Medea’s canonical identity.
- Medea’s character alters: she is pitiable at the beginning of Euripides’ version (E. Med. 20-35) as well as eloquent in attempting to win over the chorus (E. Med. 214-66); by the end of E.’s play, Medea has assumed a terrifying power and we tend to feel pity for Jason (E. Med. 1405-14).
- Euripides presents Medea in heroic terms and as having no magical powers at all (Knox, 284-5):

  "μηδείς με φαύλην κάσθενή νομίζέτο
  μηδ’ ἤσυχαίν, ἄλλα θατέρου τρόπου,
  βαρεῖαν εχθροῖς καὶ φίλοισιν εὐμενή:
  τῶν γὰρ τοιουτών εὐκλεόστατος βίος."

  Let nobody think that I am slight and weak nor gentle, but of the other way, severe towards enemies and kindly towards friends: for the life of men such as these is the most glorious. (E. Med. 807-10)

- Euripides draws comparisons between childbirth and battle (E. Med. 248-51). Medea sees herself as a warrior preparing for battle and taking up a sword as well as an ill-fated woman who will kill the children she bore and loves (E. Med. 1240-7).
- “Euripides presents the paradox of a character who aspires to male heroism within the confines of what are presented as inescapably female concerns” (Boedeker 136).

2. Seneca’s Medea

- “In the course of the play Medea’s character does not develop. She loses hope and becomes increasingly deranged and destroys and ruins the lives of others around her. The other characters are in effect foils to her inflamed dialectic: she dominates the play totally” (Costa 9).
- Seneca’s Medea is an exploration of passion; “Whereas the despair of Euripides’ Medea is linked to her dread of insanity, Seneca’s Medea embraces madness with a voluptuous enthusiasm” (Corti 73):
accingere ira teque in exitium para
furore toto.

Bind yourself with wrath and prepare yourself for death with total madness (Sen. Med. 51-2).

- In Euripides’ version, Medea’s problem is inappropriate and immoderate love. The virtuous person can avoid this problem:

  ἔρωτες ὑπὲρ μὲν ἄγαν ἐλθόντες οὐκ εὐδοξίαν
  οὐδ’ ἀρετάν παρέδωκαν ἀνδράσιν: εἰ δ’ ἄλις ἔλθοι
  Κύπρις, οὐκ ἄλλα θεός εὖχαρις οὕτως.

  When Loves come to us in excess, they give neither honor nor excellence to men: but if Kypris comes in moderation, there is no other goddess so gracious (E. Med. 627-31).

- For Seneca, this is foolishness. “There is no erotic passion that reliably stops short of its own excess. That very way of caring about an external uncontrolled object yields uncontrol in the soul” (Nussbaum 221):

  funestum impie
  quam saepe fudi sanguinem, et nullum scelus
  irata feci: suasit infelix amor.

  How often I have poured out death and bloodshed irreverently, but I have committed no crime in wrath: unhappy Love provoked me (Sen. Med. 134-6).

- Medea’s *ira* vs. *ultio*.

- “Medea’s *ultio*, which consists of burning down the royal palace and then killing her own children, is definitely meant to inflict injury on Creon and on Jason, as was the case in Euripides’ play. In Seneca’s version, however, there is an additional dimension to this story of vengeance and criminality: Medea’s actions now become a way of reconstructing her own identity—an identity thrown into disarray by her separation from Jason—while at the same time exacting a compensation for the crimes she had committed in the past” (Guastella 198).
• “Medea as *virgo* and Medea as *coniunx/mater*—“Medea’s life is split in two by the *repudium*, everything that Medea had previously done to win her *coniugium* with Jason has suddenly been rendered null and void—Seneca’s *Medea* reveals a deep division between the Medea of once upon a time, the love struck *virgo*, ready to do anything for Jason, and Medea the *coniunx/mater* who has attained the object of her love and consolidated her union with Jason” (Guastella 200).

• “The *repudium* stole Medea’s identity; Medea will enact a calculated revenge to match the crimes she committed as a *virgo* in order to become *coniunx/mater* with even greater crimes” (Guastella 201).

• “Unlike Euripides’ version, the actions of Seneca’s *Medea* become a way of constructing her own identity—Medea’s crimes are now interpreted as the means to a new end, a preparation for redemption—Medea can attain a full realization of her identity: *Medea nunc sum*. Medea the *virgo* will be integrated with the *coniunx/mater* so that she may be ‘herself’ once and for all” (Guastella 210).

3. The Murder of Children

• It is suggested that Medea’s infanticide was a Euripidean innovation—Seneca’s tragedies, however, are replete with child murder.

• Seneca adds sadism to the child murderer as an inspired addition of psychological immediacy to the Euripidean portrait of the mercilessly driven fanatic.

• Unlike as in Euripides’ version, Seneca’s Medea not only kills her children, but also takes sadistic pleasure in doing so. After murdering her first son, she exults obscenely:

  … voluptas magna me invitam subit
et ecce crescit!

  A great desire comes upon me, reluctant, and behold, it is growing! (S. *Med.* 991-2).

• “But she (Medea) loves. And any person who loves is opening in the walls of the self a hole through which the world may penetrate … Seneca’s language, far more graphically physical than the language of Greek tragedy, reminds us that a life given over to love cannot avoid having holes in it … The invasions and the corruptions of the self that come with passion can be corrected only by further violations” (Nussbaum 231-2).
• “Seneca’s Medea, therefore, does not punish Jason simply because he has betrayed her, as is the case in Euripides. Instead, in this version of the story Medea’s wrath unleashes a much wider-reaching strategy. Medea does not intend only to deprive Jason of his progeny, but also to obtain compensation for the losses that she suffered in order to marry Jason in the first place” (Guastella 215).

• “Medea thus emerges as the inversion of the ideal bride: instead of effecting an alliance between two houses, Medea instead brings disaster on both her family of origin and on the family that she acquires by marriage. More precisely, the logic of Medea’s revenge demands that a parallel injury be inflicted on her family by marriage as compensation for the injury this marriage inflicted on her family of origin. The plan to avenge the crimes committed against Medea’s family of origin is completely absent from Euripides’ play but in Seneca’s version this aspect of Medea’s revenge is what actually motivates the infanticide” (Guastella 216).

• Medea has won:

    Iam iam recepi sceptra germanum patrem,  
    spoliumque Colchi pecudis auratae tenent;  
    rediere regna, rapta virginitas redit.

    Now, now I have regained the royal power of my brother, my father,  
    and the Colchians hold the hide of the golden ram; my realms have returned, my stolen virginity returns (Sen. Med. 982-4).
Bibliography


