
The present monograph is the result of a lifetime of reflection upon the Medea of Euripides. While initially considering Medea as something inhuman the author has arrived at a more positive view of the protagonist, as the Preface ‘A Monster No More’ emphasizes. Drawing attention to some overlooked aspects the author aims at «an open and multiple reading of the drama». The other aim is to show that characters of myth are not unrelated to actual human beings. An Afterword ‘Medea Among Us’ as well as numerous epigraphs taken from contemporary literature underscore this concern.

The interpretation of the Medea, although giving ample attention to all characters, still has its protagonist at the centre, witness the titles of the 8 chapters, 6 of which refer to Medea: ‘Introduction. The Polysemous Medea’, Ch 1 ‘An Ideal Woman’, Ch 2 ‘Medea and Jason’, Ch 3 ‘ex machina: If She is not a Woman, What is She?’, Ch 4 ‘Medea and her Children’, Ch 5 ‘Medea in Corinth’. Even the last two chapters Ch 6 ‘The Slave’s Voice’, and Ch 7 ‘The Battle of the Stories’ are much concerned with Medea. An index of passages cited as well as a thematic and literary index conclude the volume.

The result of two hundred pages devoted to the Medea is first of all an extremely detailed reading of the text, accompanied by extensive reference to the scholarly literature on the drama. Drawing on the work on word order by Helma Dik1 the author devotes particular attention to the way nouns, pronouns and verbs may be included or excluded within a phrase, and how these aural illusions may characterize the speaker’s mind set.

In the Introduction the author offers the basis for her interpretation, asserting that «Tragedy, especially Euripidean tragedy, is self-consciously made of a juxtaposition of two kinds of lives.» What the author has in mind is the opposition between the life of heroes, who cross boundaries, and the life as it is lived by human beings, »simply living human lives without grand aspirations«(1).

Assuming that Euripides by presenting Medea as the murderer of the children has made the drama her story and hers alone (3), the author focuses on the way Medea is characterized, and, as will become clear, crosses the two kinds of lives identified as the subject of tragedy. The «polysemous Medea» refers to her complex identity, not only a sister, wife, mother but also a famous wise woman, both Greek and foreign, rational as well as passionate, good and evil (2).

The introduction presents furthermore special attention to lexical aspects, in particular terms of power and status. Here too the author accounts for the method of scrutinizing the «placement of words in a line [as] spatial and temporal like the placements of persons and events on stage», affecting emphasis and ethos (4).

In the following chapter, Ch 1, the author explores how the drama presents Medea as crossing the border between the domestic and the heroic pattern of action, undercutting the male/female polarity of active and passive roles. A central concern is to highlight how the protagonist, in spite of her bold actions, is

1 Helma Dik, Word Order in Ancient Greek: A Pragmatic Account of Word Order Variation in Herodotus, Amsterdam 1995.
presented as a recognizable character (the filicide even being compared with contemporary hospital reports, 12). Medea’s tragedy is caused by the fact that she has a heroic temper which causes her to deny her womanhood and her humanity (34). The same concern to establish characters with recognizable motivations represents Jason as a man concerned with status, i.e. tyranny, who is not satisfied «with his lot as an ordinary householder with few slaves and a modest modus vivendi» (20).

Ch 2 further examines the motives and developments of the tragic protagonists, including an extensive analysis of the use of pronouns, which are seen as the manifestation of the protagonists’ separation or entanglement. Here Jason is characterized as principally the betrayer of his philoi, a verdict that is not mitigated in the course of the book.

In Ch 3 the author is particularly concerned with the ethical aspects of the tragedy, a concern that can be found throughout the book. Laying the ultimate responsibility on the gods, the author presents Medea here as «the instrument of divine vengeance», bringing retribution on Jason for his violation of oaths (65). At the same time she is the tragic character who «show[s] us what we are», Medea serves as «our protection from the Medea within us» (83).

In Ch 4 the author suggests that the «Medea is in part an exploration of marriage and family» (91), offering an extensive analysis of norms and values, in particular weighing the motives leading to the murdering of the children for their ethical load. An appendix analyses the prominence of the children during the tragedy.

In Ch 5 the author studies the drama as «one of Euripides’ most political plays» (119). Among the arguments proposed is the way Corinth is presented as a tyranny, Creon being «the only political institution» (122). While the male citizens of Corinth never engage in a democratic debate, the Corinthian women voice political views in all their choral songs, and these are analyzed for their «social commentary» (154). The (male) citizens do not even have the right to voice their opinion about the exile of the children (121). Creon’s public proclamation against Medea is seen as a result of the «problem with monarchy generally [...] its] inability to separate what is public from what is private» (128).

The 6th chapter focusing on the secondary characters continues the analysis of social values, such as democracy, egalitarianism, freedom, which, according to the author, frequently are voiced by slave characters, instead of by a free, male, Greek character, thus breaking down such distinctions (157).

In the 7th chapter the author resumes her evaluation of the main characters concluding that Medea appears as «the divine avenger of the oath-breaker», Jason (188). In addition «[Medea] changes the story so that she will not be the victim of others» (196), accepting her «new self» (198).

The «Afterword» once more reflects on the motivation and justification of Medea’s deed and the tragedy’s relevance to our age, comparing Euripides with modern authors.

Many readers will agree with the overall analysis of the dramatic events, which describes when the protagonist is empowered, or when the chorus loses sympathy for Medea. Likewise I think this monograph will be stimulating to those interested in subtle character analysis and socio-ethical evaluation. Whether the
judgments presented will find adherence may depend on how the reader identifies with the characters. In spite of stern pronouncements on Medea’s actions she is granted a kind of ‘tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner’, while Jason is subjected to consistently negative assessment elaborating on «the real ugliness and inhumanity of Jason’s behavior» (179). Jason is considered false (54) and callous (112), «he has shamelessly transgressed the rules of family life» 156, he is «[responsible] for the wrongs suffered by his family» (65), «his betrayal is absolute» (156).

The idea that word order may be influencing the audience’s perception of the events is original, although not everybody will find all instances convincing.

As a commentary to vv 792f
tέκνα γὰρ καταστενὼ τὰῦ
«Here word order ... prefigures the murder, where she will come between the children and kill them one by one» (113).

A more serious objection may be that the author seldom envisages the ancient audience. This may be justified when preparing for staging the drama, and sometimes we get the impression that this is the author’s aim (cf. «In the first part of this episode, I would put Medea in the orchestra», 136). Even when the original audience is mentioned it seems to be given a modern role. E.g. the ancient audience is supposed to be critical of the Athenian ode (vv 824–865, «The audience would know of times less prosperous» 152). Obviously we will never know what the original audience experienced during a tragic performance, and we should instead examine the function of the ode within the dramatic events.

Another surprising aspect of this work is the way characters are treated as having a real existence, although the author once seems to be aware of this problem. Discussing the role of the exodos, the author comments «though [the Nurse] is not present for the denouement there is no question that she is affected by it, in so far as she still exists at all as a remembered character», 160). There are numerous instances of assumptions about the characters’ past and development or their future after the drama has ended.

Sometimes the author may stretch the text. Commenting on Medea’s famous complaint about the condition of women, the author concludes, «She has made the comparison between childbirth and war and she chooses war» (27), a point of view reiterated in the volume. Medea is simply complaining of the harshness of women’s life. Furthermore, terminology may be imprecise: technical expressions as «the polysemous Medea» (Introduction, title) unaccompanied by a semiological definition, the pseudo-linguistic «agglutinative», or the pseudo-anthropological «liminal», referring to Medea’s scenic absence, (being «not in the chorus, but potentially at least like them», 136), a term referring to disrupted social status, not physical absence.

In spite of many references to the Ancient social world the author has firmly remained in her contemporary world. The analysis reflects present-day American value orientations not all readers will feel familiar with: The «two kinds of lives», identified in the dichotomy between public-private (128 and Index), polis-oikos, male-female (143), heroic (aggressive)-nurturing is a pervasive perspective, ultimately deriving from Talcott Parson, the focus on marriage (138), freedom (160) or the self (175) likewise. Interpreters from other cultural areas would not
automatically feel these concepts as central. The dramatic events are interpreted from a basically moralistic point of view, with its minute analysis of motivation, while the balance is tilted in a feminist way to Medea’s advantage, «she is the upholder of traditional morality» (65, emphasis in the original). «She accomplishes a major feat in making women us and men them» (190, emphasis in the original).

In so far as the present study is (meant to be) informed by modern (American) cultural concerns or intended for staging a reviewer should not offer any pronouncements about the interpretation. As a hermeneutic method I would prefer to study tragic drama as an expression of the age that brought forth these dramas, e.g. study the value of offspring to the (head of the) oikos, rather than «the innocence and vulnerability» of young children (104).

This prompts a basic methodological question. I am not convinced that these tragedies were staged in order to document (or for that matter, explore, criticize and comment on) the social world. This is implicitly the assumption of the present interpretation, as it is of most interpretations of Ancient tragedy, answering our modern (Christian, individualistic) cultural concerns. Aristotle’s theory of tragedy suggests that these tragedies violated basic social institutions and values, in order to revitalize them. But this question cannot be addressed within a short review.

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