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THE PERMANENT INTRUDER: THE RECREATION OF THE FEMININE IN TRAGIC THEATER

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Abstract

The study presented here is part of our research on gender relations in tragedy. The use of gender categories in studies of tragedy allows us to break through interpretive boundaries in which the feminine and masculine were sometimes seen as naturalized, that is, the elaboration of these categories at the time was accepted, and at other times as socially separate, as if there were no contact or interaction between the feminine and masculine in everyday relationships. The aim is to understand the unequal relationship established between the feminine and the masculine in the society portrayed in tragedies.

Keywords

Tragedy; gender; isonomy; feminism; theater.

Resumo

O estudo ora apresentado é parte de nossas pesquisas sobre as relações de gênero na tragédia. A utilização da categoria de gênero nos estudos da tragédia nos permite romper limites interpretativos nos quais o feminino e o masculino era constituídos ora vistos como naturalizados, isto é, aceitava-se a elaboração da época para estas categorias, outras vezes como socialmente separados, como se no cotidiano das relações não houvesse contatos e vivencias entre o feminino e o masculino. O que se busca é compreender a relação desigual que se estabelece entre o feminino e o masculino na sociedade retratada nas tragédias.

Palavras-chave

Tragédia; gênero; isonomia; feminismo; teatro.

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"Let us not forget—we are only women."

The line above appears in verses 49-68 of Sophocles' *Antigone*. In these verses, Ismene, with gentle words, reveals to Antigone the reasons why she will not join her in her personal rebellion – an act of defiance in defense of her family against Creon, king of Thebes. Ismene's words reveal the position, or rather the world, in which the feminine was situated at the time, namely the first half of the fifth century B.C. This world, which in discourses, practices, values and logics, coexisted in parallel with another world, the masculine one. This parallelism, we may say, composed a web in which, although the two touched and lived under the same roof, there were entire sectors of social life that were beyond women's reach, where no coexistence was possible.

Tragedy has long been studied as a means of situating women both within the context of tragic art and, from the clues offered by these dramas, within the context of the city. Our aim in this text is to highlight the importance of analyzing these works through the category of Gender. Based on the research we have developed, we have noticed that this theme finds in tragedies a growing field of inquiry, as they present situation and contexts in which social gender relation can be grasped, thereby creating new readings of tragic works. Rich in strong female characters, tragedies nonetheless reveal a masculine dominance over all aspects of life, in which women are often made culpable, portrayed as agents of disruption within the masculine order. Clytemnestra, Medea, Helen, Alcmena, among others, invite us to reflect on a masculine territory sustained by a sexual division that assigns man and woman to different social positions.

Here we turn to Medea, an emblematic figure in Western tradition, analyzed through the lens of gender. This study, developed within our research group on Culture and Politics in the Ancient World, seeks to articulate new ways of explaining the political relations that took shape in the isonomic polis of Athens in the fifth century B.C. In our investigation, we aim to reveal the struggle Medea wages to break with the "masculinist" models of the constitution of the feminine. The play recounts how Medea reacts to bring set aside by her husband and how this masculine act is transformed into a movement of self-creation by the character herself.

The article is divided into three parts: first, I briefly outline my view of Greek theater and tragedy, based on a total cross-pollination between tragedy and the city, between theater and politics. In the second part, I present some approaches to the category of gender in tragic studies over

recent decades. In the third part, I examine *Medea* in greater detail and contextualize its representations of sexual identities, as well as its unexpectedly modern tendencies to theorize gender.

The invention of theater – or rather, the transformation of the Dionysian festival into theater, the Dionysian inspiration, the possibility of constructing a world beyond reality – merges in the context of the struggles among the aristocracy, aristocratic factions, and peasants in the last quarter of the sixth century B.C. Theater is contemporaneous with the formation of isonomy. It takes shape at a moment of intense paradigmatic crisis. While the aristocracy's educational inspiration was situated in the past, within a hierarchical system that cultivated specialized and secret knowledge and power, genders and authority, parents and children were scrutinized through stagings that exposed to all the sites of clashing experiences. Theater and isonomy established a relationship of fundamental importance.

Amid the crisis institutionalized by the tyrant Pisistratus, theater took on the contours of a popular festival (Euben, 1986), in which the entire city actively participated. As a form of popular participation, theater catalyzed Athenians into debating their everyday problems. The crisis that persisted during the tyrant's rule allowed, due to the very nature of tyranny, that is, its capacity to implement popular measures contrary to aristocratic interests, since the tyrant's politics entailed confrontation with the elites, the growth of actions favoring the creation of a space for popular agency.

Tragedy problematizes. Tragedy does not discuss political or philosophical theory, but rather delineates a mode of lived experience in the city. In other words, it reflects on lived reality, mixes temporalities, articulates different practices, and always seeks to create with the citizen-spectator a profound resonance that the text itself reveals in the moments when characters turn to the audience, almost as if engaging in dialogue with them (Villacèque, 2013)

As we can see, tragedies present us with violent family scenes, like murders and betrayals, permeating the tragic universe in such a way that we are compelled to ask why the authors focused so sharply on this dimension of Greek life. What we want to emphasize is that the constitution of the democratic polis was forged through a struggle between two distinct ways of organizing human existence. The tragic scene shows us, within a specific context, an anthropological opposition: two different conceptions of humanity, revealing the struggles in which Athens was engaged as the isonomic process deepened. The radicalization of isonomy in Athens undoubtedly produced, as texts of the time attest and as tragedy

demonstrates, a radical discontent that made urgent the discussion of the relationship between family and politics, that is, between one patriarchal, hierarchical way of organizing human experience, and another that emerged precisely to detach itself from kinship relations.

Kinship itself is a language, a basic structure that is repeated or developed through the integration of new elements. For kinship to exist, three elements are required: a relation of consanguinity, a relation of alliance, and a relation of filiation. As Lévi-Strauss (2017, p. 58) points out, kinship is a language that constitutes a social experience, one of power, gender, and authority.

Thus, two spheres of experience collide on the tragic stage, seeking to trigger a process of critique, that is, a reflection on the new form of living being constituted at that moment. This crisis, of immense proportions, becomes tragic because it defines another kind of humanity, sustained by a new construction of social insertion, one based on a new dimension of understanding human action. What kind of human being does the isonomic constitution require? What kinds of knowledge are necessary for building this new humanity? And what are the conceptions of authority and justice that this new coexistence demands? What, from the past, must be preserved or rejected in shaping this new social life?

Oedipus, with his renowned wisdom, which even clashes with Tiresias (Weiss, 2016), reveals how much this isonomic life had to learn from the past. To what extent could this new authority, grounded in logos, afford to forget the divine entirely in the elaboration of a new morality? In *Agamemnon*, the first play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the city is presented as weary, exhausted by aristocratic wars that drained it of young men. A city fatigued by patriarchal experiences that compromised its future in endless family feuds. An aged city, populated by the old, faces a queen bent on vengeance. No, a city cannot remain at the mercy of this type of authority. It is necessary to move beyond experiences rooted in kinship relations and to construct new ways of understanding humanity and social belonging.

In *Medea*, we see a city in which men fail to honor agreements, leading to the collapse of the *polis* system. This is the crisis tragedy addresses. These performances had the capacity to investigate the community's weakness, call leaders to account, desacralize values and beliefs, portray characteristic conflicts, suggest paths of reparation, and, overall, reflect on the current situation in the known world.

This crisis is historical, not theatrical invention or fiction. It is attested by numerous authors and sources from the eighth century onward and

rearticulated in the fifth century, when new intellectual frameworks were brought into play. What was at stake was a mode of social coexistence capable of breaking with violence and the aristocrats' domination over the rest of the population, as Aristotle explains in his *Athenian Constitution*, in which he describes the struggle between poor and rich beginning in the seventh century, accompanied by a new mode of thought that legitimated Solon's emergence amid the crisis.

Breaking the recurring cycle of division led to social dissolution was the task of the tyrants of the sixth century and, later, the reforms of Cleisthenes, whom Christian Meier (1995) describes as the creator of civic presence. Theater, in this sense, was a form through which a new content for dialogue was established – the tragedy – as an interlocutor between past and present, between a new identity in formation (*polis* identity) and another based on kinship. The construction of this new experience entailed the creation of new forms of social intervention, learning, gender regulation, understandings of humanity, and of thought itself. This is what tragedy is about: instituting, amid a constantly shifting world marked by crises, errors, and disillusionments, what is possible, what is viable.

The fifth century would establish such a powerful level of opposition between radical isonomy and aristocratic solutions that Aristophanes' comedies, on the one hand, and Socrates' death, on the other, may be seen as representing two opposed poles.

Of Women and Men

Men and women were regarded as two different species by the ancient Greek. In Hesiod's cosmogonic poem, the *Theogony*, the origin of man remains untold, creating the impression that men had been present from the very beginning. By contrast, the origin of woman is recounted twice; once in the *Theogony* (507-616) and again in *Works and Days* (42-105). In each case, the origin is tied to myths related to sacrifice and agriculture. In the *Theogony*, for example, Zeus creates the "species and tribes of women" (*genos kai phula gunaikôn*, 591) as an inescapable curse upon men on their path toward acquiring Promethean fire. From that point on, as Hesiod's narrative(s) imply, men were compelled to plough the earth to sustain themselves, to sacrifice to the gods, and to take wives in order to generate offspring. This triad – marriage, sacrifice, and agriculture – defines the human condition for Hesiod and also for some of the earliest Greek poets. The entry of woman into the scene marks man's fall from a golden-age, quasi-divine existence.

While Homer's epics adopt wholesale the misogynistic worldview of Hesiod's poems, Greek tragedy disrupts the binary structure of gender relations represented as normative in archaic epic. This is not to say that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* lack interesting and subtly formed female characters. Penelope, for instance, certainly rivals her husband's exceptional *mêtis* ("cunning intelligence"), while threatening to seize control of the narrative in the final books of the *Odyssey*. Yet the world evoked by Homeric epic is a warrior culture, a society in which men achieve their highest honors and secure their names on the battlefield (or upon their return from it), while women are taken as spoils of war. As wives, Homer's women – Penelope more than others – exercise a particular kind of feminine agency within the domestic sphere.

The intimate association of women with the inner realm of the *oikos* ("household") is taken for granted in tragedy; yet their actions continue to bear political consequences. Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, is renowned for defending the unwritten laws of burial voluntarily sacrifice themselves to save their cities.

The conditions for the study of gender in Euripides differ from those in, say, Aeschylus or Sophocles, insofar as the poet's own attitudes toward women have themselves been the subject of debate. Was Euripides a misogynist, as ancient biographical tradition suggests? Or was he, anachronistically, a proto-feminist? No other Greek author has divided critical opinion so sharply. As Allan points out:

> To formulate our investigation in terms of misogyny and feminism is to blur the form and impact of the texts by viewing them through a strangely modern set of concerns, while also presupposing a mistaken correspondence between the views adopted by fictional characters and those adopted by the author (Allan, 2000, p. 163)

The expression "bad women" captures (and oversimplifies) the complex characterization of heroines driven by lust. Unfortunately, the phrase acquired a life of its own and came to be applied indiscriminately to women in tragedy, creating the impression that misogyny was somehow woven into the fabric of the genre, both in its creation and reception. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (1989, p.140), for example, asserts that "the Athenian audience would have seen Antigone as a woman out of place, acting against what was considered appropriate female behavior as a 'bad woman.'" Barbara Goff (1990: 94), in turn, highlights Euripides' "insistence on an ugly realism and his fascination with bad women." Scholars have used the phrase to describe ancient spectators' responses, but not all

spectators must be imagined as having held such deeply negative views of women in Euripides.

Classical scholars, unlike anthropologists, cannot rely on first-person testimony from informants. We cannot simply ask Sophocles' audience whether, in their opinion, Antigone was a "bad woman." It has thus been necessary to theorize audience responses by reconstructing the sexual-gender system of classical Athens. This system is revealed gradually and indirectly through literary and archaeological sources. Naturally, scholars disagree on how to interpret these materials. Michael Shaw's (1975) influential analysis of the "female intruder" is a case in point. For Shaw, the "female intruder" is any woman in tragedy who enters the public sphere. Typically compelled to act in response to a male transgression, she proceeds to commit a crime more heinous than the one committed against her family, thereby validating the cultural logic behind her seclusion: the frighteningly articulate, murderous women of tragic theater reaffirm patriarchal ideologies by demonstrating their necessity.

Others have questioned whether Athenian women really lived their lives in silence and isolation – whether the mere appearance of a woman outside her home (especially on stage) would have been cause for alarm. David Cohen (1989), for instance, argues that even if the cultural ideal was a woman unseen by public eyes, that does not mean Athenian women were actually hidden away. Cohen cites the experience of a social anthropologist working in a Greek village. Having "read about submissive, powerless women who considered themselves morally inferior to men," the anthropologist was surprised to discover instead "physically and socially strong women who had much to say about what happened in the village" (Cohen, 1989:4, citing M. Clark, 1983:122). Classical scholars, Cohen (1989:4) contends, "have fallen victim to the same trap, failing to distinguish between ideology and normative ideals (sometimes conflicting) on the one hand, and lived social reality on the other."

Helene Foley is another scholar who disrupts the notion of the "bad woman". In her seminal essay, Foley (1981a) avoids the moralizing discourse of "good" and "bad" and instead contextualizes the decisions taken by tragic women in light of the social (and generic) expectations governing their choices. Foley acknowledges that, culturally, women were excluded from public life, while men aligned themselves with political and cultural institutions. But she resists the "simple equation of woman: "*oikos* as a feminine place, and *polis* as a man place," arguing that "this equation does not hold on the Greek stage" (1981:161). In an expanded argument, Foley (2001) suggests that women in tragedy are essentially "outsiders," both in their marriages and in the *polis*. The structure of Greek marriage

was such that a bride was taken from her father's house and installed in her husband's, where (ideally) she would bear children to carry on his family's name. Yet affective ties were not always so easily transferred. Women often remained torn between conflicting obligations to their natal and marital families. Hermione in Euripides' *Andromache* is an instructive example in this regard. Ironically, as Foley (2001: 87-105) argues, the true foreigner, Andromache, is in a stronger position than Hermione to claim her husband's affection. Even as concubine, Andromache is more fully integrated than the Greek wife into Neoptolemus' *oikos*, having recently borne him a son – despite the fact that Neoptolemus was the son of the man who had killed Andromache's first husband, Hector. What makes it easier, so to speak, for Andromache is that her natal household had been destroyed; her loyalties thus pull in only one direction.

Lévi-Strauss (2017:115) describes marriage not as a transaction "between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men." The transfer of the bride from father to husband creates a new social bond among men. Women themselves are merely the objects of exchange (Rubin, 2017:9-61). This conception of women's passive role undoubtedly resonated in certain sectors of the Athenian *polis*, and such ideas can be discerned behind the proto-feminist cry of a character like Medea, who defiantly declares that women "buy" husbands with their dowries (*Medea* 231-3). Moreover, psychoanalytic and anthropological approaches have been productively refined and combined in the work of scholars such as Rabinowitz (1993) and Wohl (1998). Observing, for example, that intimacy between women is "conspicuously absent" in the discourse of Athenian drama, Rabinowitz (!993:19-20) argues that seemingly voluntary acts of female self-sacrifice (as in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*) form part of a narrative strategy complicit in keeping women circulating as objects. Even situations in which tragic female characters might appear to engage in acts leading to posthumous renown are, in Rabonowitz's view, male fetishizations. Wohl (1998) is likewise concerned with the ideological functions inscribed in representations of the feminine. Combining Lévi-Strauss's theory of the exchange of women with a Lacanian model of male psychosexual development, Wohl (1998: xxvi) argues that the tragic woman is less a portrait of female lived experience than "a fantasy – fiction and ideological investment – through which the male subject thinks about himself and his place in the world." This critical move was anticipated, in a certain sense, by Zeitlin, whose model of "playing the other" posits that the representation of the feminine enabled men, as actors and as citizens of the Athenian *polis*, to sustain their masculinity.

In tragedy, Zeitlin (1996:346) asserts, "the self that is really at stake must be identified with the male, while the woman is given the role of the radical other." The feminine exists not in itself, but as an alternative sexuality to be experienced by the male subject (whether by viewing or by acting it out). Zeitlin regards Pentheus' cross-dressing in Euripides' *Bacchae* as emblematic of Dionysian theatricality, with its reliance on feminine modes of persuasion and representation. For it is only when Pentheus dons women's clothing— "visually feminized"—that he begins to feel Dionysus' power and to perceive the god as he truly is. According to Zeitlin (1996:363), this is a sign that he has achieved the "double consciousness" that men can only attain by dressing up in and performing feminine roles. It is this access to both masculine and feminine perspectives, through the "play of the other," that tragedy offers men. And this explains the paradox, as Zeitlin fervently puts it, that "the theater uses the feminine for the purpose of imagining a fuller model of the masculine self" Zeitlin, (1996: 363).

A different critical strategy has focused on the "women's voices" in Greek tragedy. Laura McClure (1999) and Judith Mossman (2001) have been at the forefront of this effort to identify the distinctive speech patterns of female characters and choruses. Their studies do not aim to reconstruct the actual speech of Athenian women, but rather to examine the ways women were represented as speaking in texts authored (and performed) by men. Nevertheless, these representations provide useful information about the diverse speech communities of classical Athens and the role of language in constituting gender identities. Greek literary sources, for example, depict women speaking in one style when among exclusively female groups, and in another when in mixed company or addressing male interlocutors. As Mossman (2001:378) notes of Euripides' *Electra*, in the presence of men "Electra [delivers] her speech in particularly careful terms," as she deems it desirable "to underline her conformity to generally accepted moral thought by using banalities." Like her mother, and indeed like almost all women in tragedy, Electra is acutely conscious of public opinion and the potentially devastating impact of gossip on her reputation. McClure's 1999 study takes the content and style of female speech in tragedy as a starting point for broader observations on the construction of ancient sexuality. Unrestrained speech, McClure argues, was interpreted as a sign of unrestrained sexuality, whereas silence suggested verbal and sexual self-control.

These two critical methodologies – one focused on women's voices and the other on the construction of the male subject – are not mutually exclusive. The former privileges the aesthetics of gendered verbal performance on the

tragic stage; the latter examines tragedy's broader contribution to the creation of gendered *ethos* (principally male) in Athenian society. Together, these approaches illustrate the variety of methods, drawn from fields as diverse as sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalysis, that scholars have used to explore gender in tragedy. Yet, as even this brief survey makes clear, the critical tide has shifted away from interpreting women's representations in Greek drama as reflections of the historical realities of women's lives. A much greater concern today is how to assess the effect of the feminine on the male (and perhaps even the female) spectator. This shift in focus, from reality to performance, and to the performative, follows the trajectory of feminist studies.

From women and men to gender

Feminism and the feminist studies of the 1960s and 1970s were fundamental in highlighting the study of women. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the critical energies that had been directed toward recovering, criticizing, and rethinking the role of women in history and society gave way to a growing discomfort with the term *woman* as a category of analysis. Even positing the existence of "woman" as an individual, let alone "women" as a collective, was, it was argued, to assign a fixed and stable identity (that is, femininity) to a status that was in fact being problematized by the very terms of analysis meant to describe it. One became a "woman" only by being compelled to identify with the term. Butler's influential *Gender Trouble* (2015) was instrumental in effecting the disciplinary realignment from "Women's Studies" to "Gender Studies." With its focus on the performative power of language and on the implicitly heterosexual bias of much feminist scholarship, Butler's work helped to reframe the academic study of gender.

"Gender reality is performative," Butler writes (1990a:270), "which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed." Greek tragedy offers a particularly rich corpus for performative analyses of gender, given that the "women" in these plays were all portrayed by men. What was feminine in these staged women was purely the result of theatrical *mimesis* – of performance. The audience would have perceived the actors as feminine (or at least as playing women) through stylized gestures and verbal acts. In the same way, we too "perform" gender.

Gender is not something our bodies are "passively scripted with" Butler, (1990b:277). Nor is it a set of completely improvised acts. Rather, as Butler (1990b: 277) puts it, "the body of gendered acts performs within a

culturally restricted corporeal space" and "within the limits of already existing directives." Butler's theatrical metaphor is particularly useful to keep in mind as we examine of the most memorable performances of gender on Euripidean stages.

Medea[2]: Who is this woman?

Among tragic female characters, perhaps none has undergone as much reinterpretation as Medea. From antiquity to the present day, this woman has been reconstructed in literary vision that range from the destroyer of households to the figure of a passionate lover. All these portrayals were produced in contexts in which the feminine was fundamentally defined in relation to the masculine, hence her classification as witch, sorceress, or enamored woman. Among tragic women who dare to act – that is, to assume control over their destinies – Medea is the only one who escapes death.

Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, is killed by her son Orestes, who justifies his act by declaring, "We cannot allow a woman who murders men to remain alive." Antigone, in turn, chooses death over living in a world where the family structure is not also the legitimate structure of power. Medea, however, survives her own drama because, in Euripides' creation, she perceives with precision the limits of coexistence with the masculine in a markedly androcentric society. She triumphs over death not only physically but morally – that is, she sustains her ethical stance by confronting Jason as an equal, on the very same argumentative terrain. She recognizes that the agreements men establish with women lack the force of contract, lack moral weight, and can be dissolved without consequence. She understands the position she occupies in the *oikos*, alongside other women, and this awareness drives her to rebel against her condition as a woman before rebelling against her social condition. Women's voices are lost within the walls of their quarters, meaningless to male ears. They are not mute; they speak – but their speech is mediated by a set of rules that render them subordinate, confined to the domestic world.

[2] *Medea* was staged in 431 B.C. The plot of this tragedy revolves around the conflict between Medea and her husband Jason. This struggle emerges after Jason becomes engaged to the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth – the city that shelters Medea and her children. Medea refuses to accept her condition as a woman expected to yield to her husband's interests, allegedly undertaken for the sake of the family's future.

In tragedy, as in epic, the actions of an individual woman, whether good or bad – reflect on the entire category of women; her deeds are treated as representative of her sex. Thus, from Alcestis' nobility, all women gain a good reputation. But men, and Alcestis' husband in particular, suffer a corresponding loss of honor. The dynamic between individual and collective glory and shame operates somewhat differently for men. In both tragedy and epic, when a man attains glory, he stands apart from his peers; his achievement does not elevate men as a collective. Likewise, when a man behaves as a coward, he compromises only his own masculinity; he does not disgrace the male sex a whole. "Look at the man, shamefully alive, who dared not to die, but as a coward gave up his wife and escaped death. *Do you call him a man?*"

Medea, however, intends to make her name by avenging her husband's betrayal of their marriage. (Jason has recently married the daughter of the kind of Corinth, despite already having children with Medea.) The Chorus' support is crucial to Medea's strategy of revenge. As a foreigner, Medea seeks common ground with these Corinthian women, alluding to their shared suffering at the hands of men. The Chorus expresses sympathy for Medea in their first *stasimon*, where they sing of rivers flowing backward. Here they dare to hope that women will no longer be the target of "reputation that seems evil" (420). Yet, of course, their optimistic prophecy is not fulfilled by the play's end. This fear, and her desire to punish her husband, drive Medea to a crime that horrifies the Chorus; Jason denounces her as "a monster, not a woman" (1342). Is she simply the monster Jason portrays, guilty of a crime that, in his words, no Greek woman could ever have committed? Medea's identify as woman, victim, and avenger makes her at once deeply relatable and profoundly terrifying.

In his poignant portrayals of vengeful mothers, Euripides makes it impossible to arrive at clear moral evaluations of their actions. Both Medea and Hecuba (in the play of the same name) commit the murder of small children. Yet each is presented to us as the victim of male transgression. Medea's husband has abandoned her in a foreign city.

Older, more traditional models of gender and character were still at play in contemporary democratic institutions such as the Athenian funeral oration (*epitaphios logos*). Death in battle was an event for the city to celebrate. Yet there is something unsettling, even grotesque, about a young woman or an old man assuming the heroic banner. Through such "unnatural" applications of the heroic code, Euripides calls into question both the ethics of civic self-sacrifice and the gender roles on which it rests. Euripides' staging of deviant gender roles has a cumulative, defamiliarizing effect. Gender is an important component of this dialogue

between city and drama, with tragedies reinforcing but at times also questioning heteronormative notions of "masculine" and "feminine".

To frame the question of Medea's character in terms of "good" versus "bad" is to ignore the way the play itself interrogates the very values by which its characters ask to be judged. The play challenges its audience to rethink the foundations of their reasoning about character ethics – for men as well as for women. On the one hand, Medea displays superb rhetorical mastery of misogynistic proverbs that describe women as irrational creatures of passion; on the other, she does not refute those proverbs through her actions. Having used her rhetorical skill to regain her husband's trust – only to then brutally murder her children – Medea ultimately embodies some of the very clichés with which Jason had previously denounced her and the female sex.

In their first extended verbal exchange, Jason proclaims:

> "You women have come to such a state of mind that, if you married life is good, you think you have everything; but if in this quarter things go wrong, you consider your best and truest interests the most hateful" (*Medea* 569-73)

We might her this as a baseless attempt to dismiss Medea's carefully articulated claims about the reciprocal benefits of marriage. Yet their final dialogue casts Jason's earlier words in a new light. Medea has just mentioned the arrogance of Jason's new marriage. In response, Jason asks in disbelief, regarding the children she has killed: "And for this you chose to kill them?" (1367). Medea replies mockingly: "Is love so small a thing to a woman?" (1368). How should we evaluate Medea's tone here? Is she mocking Jason's trivial misogyny? Are her words spoken ironically? Or with anger and contempt? Medea's character is riddled with contradictions: she manipulates misogynistic stereotypes about women in order to deceive the men around her, even as she strives to be taken seriously by her former husband.

The representations of gender roles and gender performance in Euripides are challenging and multifaceted, resisting any simple summation. Today's readers, however, are generally less quick to judge or to apply labels than in earlier times. Rather than denounce Medea as a "bad woman" or celebrate Euripides as a proto-feminist, we may be inclined to appreciate the complexity and diversity of the characters that populate his stage, and to recognize that the often sophisticated, always provocative handling of their gender identifies is one of the distinctive features of Euripidean art.

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