

Walling Naomi

Professor Dombourian

ENGL M01B

01 November 2023

Heroes and Feminists

In Euripides's play "Medea", he presents an unconventional, progressive female antagonist that attempts to challenge her expected social roles. Medea takes the wrong approach to feminism, promoting internalized misogyny along with a desire for violence. Her reckless behavior is masked as liberation for herself, however it's actually a cry for help.

Medea values herself highly through her internalized misogynistic view that emulating masculine traits is superior to feminine traits. Strict gender roles forbids women from being strong, brave, and ambitious; as well as men being gentle and showing emotion. Women could never be heroes in Ancient Greece, the time period of this play. Antonio Maurice Daniels discusses this fact in his work "Gender in Medea" saying, "...Athenian women were expected to refrain from anything that would be perceived as 'masculine'. Her argument highlights the capability of women to participate in war...an inherently masculine attribute." Medea doesn't let these social ties refrain her from desiring a life of danger in battle. Bravery, adventure, honor are all noble traits; that are common for young men to strive for. Medea does not desire these heroic traits for goodness and the title. She desires them because they're masculine and therefore valued in a rigid patriarchal society. Ian Reily explains in his literary criticism, "Euripides creates a traditional Greek hero...who not only espouses but reinforces male heroic values; her unflinching resolve to salvage her honor at whatever cost...problematizes our view of women in Greek tragedy..." ("Revenge is Never a Straight Line"; Transgressing Heroic Boundaries:

Medea and the (Fe)Male Body in Kill Bill). Medea finding worth in male archetypes places men on top in the hierarchy; instead of women and men being equal. She's dismissing her own gender, but doesn't realize she'll hit a glass ceiling. She's cutting her support group, women, because "...she unites feminine self posturing with a heroic subjectivity, she may be viewed as a confused imitation of heroic masculinity..." (Ian Reily). No matter how hard she attempts to emulate masculine traits as a hero, she won't be accepted or valued by men. Instead she's attacking and abandoning her own gender.

Medea breaks out of her traditional role of passive femininity when the patriarchal system no longer benefits her; however she still shows loyalty to the same structure that oppresses her. Although Medea seems to exhibit a progressive thought process, throughout the play she constantly references and longs for the old ways. She tells Jason, "But respect for oaths has gone to the wind. Do you, I wonder, think that the old gods no longer rule? Or that new laws are now in force?"(pg. 31). Men committing and dying by their oaths is Medea's way of saying "back when men were men". Medea even takes on her own oath, again emulating masculine behavior, when she announces, "[She] must die a hideous death. Let no one think of me as humble or weak or passive; let them understand I am of a different kind: dangerous to my enemies, loyal to my friends. To such a life glory belongs."(Pg.42). Medea views oaths as a way to a glorious life, and follows through with it. Cementing that only she is the exception for this rule, and men should go back to the old ways of gender roles. The space of power men are stepping back from to give women more of an equal playing ground of free will; doesn't benefit Medea. A strict patriarchal system where Medea can gain power by her husband's title is a system she thrives in. Kanaga discusses this point in her "A Comparative Study of Euripides' Medea and Ibsen's A Doll's House", she says that, "...[Medea] excessive behavior protests

against her position as supportive wife when she found that Jason had neglected his obligation as a protective husband.” If Jason stayed faithful to Medea, she’d have no desire to break free to have better conditions for women to live in. Jason's lack of cooperation for his role forces Medea to leave her comfy chair in a rigid patriarchal system.

Medea’s actions originate with an intention of causing harm to Jason, rather than passion to break free of traditional feminine roles. Jason betraying Medea causes her to scramble a new system she can latch onto and parasite off of. However Daniels points out that, “Medea underscores the importance of female solidarity in overcoming gender inequalities and demonstrates that one individual can bring about meaningful change.” (“Gender in Medea”). Medea brings about meaningful change that benefits nobody. Instead of falling back on the best asset she has, female companionship; she is fueled by rage. The Nurse realizes Medea’s intent, “I’ve watched her watching them, her eye like a wild bull’s...she’ll not relax her rage till it has found its victim.”(Pg.20). Medea’s revenge is directed towards both men in her life, her father and Jason. She isn’t upset about the system oppressing her and the women around her; she’s upset they didn’t play their part. Without them playing their part, she can’t win the most power. Priya makes the point that, “To some extent, the betrayal of her father comes home to her in the form of her husband’s rejection...her intense passion is the cause of the destruction of her predecessors...” (A Comparative Study of Euripides’ Medea and Ibsen’s A Doll’s House). This bottled up anger was created out of frustration of Medea’s structured plan on living off of Jason’s title falling apart. She doesn’t strive for a system that doesn’t require a woman to depend on her husband to live. She follows through with her same plan again and marries a king after the events of this play. She realizes the ins and outs on how society works, she won’t abandon that traditional feminine role.

Euripides juxtaposes Medea with Aphrodite, shining light on a feminist who doesn't dismiss feminine traits; but rather embraces it. Aphrodite's presence in the play paints her as the ideal model on what a woman "should be". Her description is intertwined with nature, "...It is she who breathes over the land the breath of gentle honey-laden winds; her flowing locks she crowns with a diadem of sweet-scented roses...and with her to create excellence in every art."(Pg.42-43). To both men and women she is beautiful, while Medea is referred to as pollution in a river. Despite opposite descriptions, Medea and Aphrodite understand the hierarchy and their position in society. With this awareness they can use it to their advantage to manipulate others to gain power. In Maria Dolores Perez's "Aphrodite and the queens: a look at the women's power in Hellenistic Greece" she notes that, "Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love, and was especially popular for women [that lived] in relation-particularly sexual-to men. But she was as well expression of a...feminine power: the power of seduction". Both women learned how to use the male gaze to their advantage, and thrive in that environment. They don't make efforts to change that system, because why would they give up their cushy lifestyles. Despite both encouraging the male gaze, Aphrodite embraces her feminine traits, and doesn't disregard what makes her a traditional woman of her time period. Giving a positive model to women that being feminine is good.

Medea's attempts to challenge the patriarchal system can't be achieved because she believes men should be at the top of the hierarchy. Euripides creates a complex yet static character in her beliefs. She can never break free from her internalized misogynistic mindset.

Works Cited:

Daniels, Antonio Maurice. "Gender in *Medea*." *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*, Facts On File, 2020. *Bloom's Literature*,
online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=97154&itemid=WE54&articleId=38686. Accessed
3 Oct. 2023.

María Dolores Mirón Pérez. "Aphrodite and the queens: a look at the women's power in
Hellenistic Greece." *Feminismo/s (Universidad de Alicante)*, no. 20, 2012, pp. 165–86,
<https://doi.org/10.14198/fem.2012.20.09>.

Priya, I. Kanaga. "A Comparative Study of Euripides' *Medea* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*." *Language In India*, vol. 17, no. 10, Oct. 2017, pp. 117+. *Gale Academic OneFile*,
link.gale.com/apps/doc/A517880026/AONE?u=moor85003&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid
=5c7a7a9d. Accessed 2 Oct. 2023.

Reilly, Ian. "'Revenge Is Never a Straight Line': Transgressing Heroic Boundaries: *Medea* and
the (Fe)Male Body in *Kill Bill*." *Medea - Euripides*, Chelsea House, 2015. *Bloom's
Literature*,
online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=97154&itemid=WE54&articleId=380788.
Accessed 3 Oct. 2023.