

Medea and the women of the tale of genji: trapped in a man's world



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Medea, in *Medea* by Euripides, might be described as a hysterical and ruthless murderer, for she kills an innocent princess and slaughters her very own children. The women in *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu could easily be described as needy and foolishly jealous, for they are depicted whining and biting their husband's fingers out of vicious envy. Why did these women act in the ways that they did? Perhaps their actions were not born from inherent personality traits, but rather actions of the oppressed. As the Norton Anthology claims, "this is the unspeakable violence of the oppressed, which... because it has been long pent up, cannot be controlled" (Knox/Thalman 615). Whatever the case, the women in each story are clearly acting out of desperation to escape an andro-centric reality. These were women who faced oppression and ultimately lived very unhappy lives due to their unrealistic gender expectations, and a lack of rights and power in society.

To begin with *Medea*, *Medea*, like the women in *The Tale of Genji*, is a victim of a society that holds unrealistic gender expectations for women; in many cases men in society even hold women to a double standard. *Medea* was born into her unfortunate state of exile, all due to her attempts to live up to the self-sacrificing ideal of womanhood. *Medea* killed her own father, and abandoned her own country all for Jason's well being. The expectation for women to be selfless is described in the following lines; "And she herself helped Jason in every way./ This is indeed the greatest salvation of all,—/ For the wife not to stand apart from the husband" (Euripides 13-15). While women are held to such expectation, it is a double standard, for men are not expected to do the same. Jason does not stand by *Medea* when he quickly

leaves her for another and ultimately fates her to banishment. In many aspects men did not appreciate women for the individual that they were, but rather used them in ways of self-fulfillment. Not only did Jason apparently use Medea selfishly as a way to escape Iosco's, but also as exemplified in the text, women of Greece were mostly just a means for rearing children. Jason says to Medea, "It would have been far better for men/ to have got their children in some other way, and women/ Not to have existed" (Euripides 561-563). In many ways Medea proves a point by murdering her children as a way to show that she is not just a mother, that she and all women in society matter as complex individuals with agendas and emotions of their own. Medea, understanding her expectations women utilizes the prescribed feminine role of selflessness and motherhood to get Jason to go along with her plan. She tells Jason to, "Beg Kreon that the children may not be banished"(636,) regardless of her own fate.

Complementing the gender biased expectations that women faced, women also suffered from a lack of rights and power in society. Medea is helpless to the fact that as a man, her husband, has the power to divorce her. Women do not of the same rights; "there is no easy escape" (Euripides 233). In fact, "nor can she say no to her marriage" (Euripides 234). Medea is put in between a rock and hard place when she faces banishment, for women in Greece do not have any economic power or ways to survive independently without the reliance of a man. Without Jason, Medea has no home and no way to feed herself or her children. The Norton Anthology explains, "Medea is both woman and foreigner...she is a representative of the two freeborn groups in Athenian society that had almost no rights at all" (Knox/Thalman

615). Angered at the powerless reality of Greek women Medea cries, “ We women are the most unfortunate creatures” (Euripides 236). It is with a lack of any other resources that Medea resorts to using magic and trickery—it is the only power she is offered in society.

Like women in Greek society women in Japanese culture, as demonstrated in *The Tale of Genji*, were not valued for being the independent individuals they are, rather they are seen as a pawn or a piece of property. Their identities were created by an andro-centric society in which men held the power to create an impossible ideal of what a woman should be. The Norton Anthology explains, “ It was not only attention and affection they sat waiting for behind their screens but a definition of themselves which depended entirely on male recognition” (Danly1334). The men in the novel describe an ideal woman. The “ soft, feminine” women are admired, however if a woman takes her femininity too far and is “ too domestic” and pays “ no attention to her appearance” she is no longer thought fondly of (Shikibu 1442). They talk about the benefits of a “ gentle, childlike wife” in which a man “ must see to training her and making up for her inadequacies” (Shikibu 1442). Such women are valued because, like a child, they are considered to have not even have their own independent thoughts and need someone to domineer over them. Again however, there is a double standard placed on these women, for in such cases the men criticize their lack of ability to “ perform various services” (Shikibu 1442) when it comes to duties the man needs her to accomplish for him. It is not important for a woman to be capable and independent in general, as a man would actually prefer that she not be, however when it comes to matters benefiting the man she is expected to

have the independence needed to perform. In fact, while the men desired women who lived secluded and untouched by others they regretted their lack of ability to counsel them about public manors. The men settle on an ideal of a “ quiet and steady girl” (Shikibu 1442,) that is, someone who is submissive enough and does “ not give to tantrums” (Shikibu 1442). The men mostly criticize women who overcome with jealousy or are in any other way not fluid to the lifestyle the men participated in which included polygamy, sexual freedom and societal independence. The men explain that, “ It is very foolish for a woman to let a little dalliance upset her so much that she shows her resentment openly” (Shikibu 1443). Women not only faced impossible expectations struggling to manipulate themselves in a way that best catered to men, they themselves are told, “ when there are crisis, incidents, a woman should try to overlook them” (Shikibu 1443).

Again, in a manner that recalls Medea, the women in The Tale of Genji are at the whim of the male dominated world they live in with very little power or independence of their own. They grow up under the shelter of their parents and eventually are at the whim of a marriage to a man and would most likely even continue living with their parents. They were not invited to participate in the world in the same way that men were. The Norton Anthology explains, “ Nor did they enjoy the same mobility as men or have careers, except as ladies-in-waiting” (Danly 1433). Unlike women in Greece, woman in Japan could “ own, inherit, and pass on property” (Danly 1433). Regardless, they still suffered from a sense of helplessness, as money could not save them from many products of a male dominated culture. The wife of the Governor of Iyo is a great example of a woman who is powerless to her circumstances.

Not only has she been married to a man she does not care for, but she faces the disturbance of Genji breaking into her room and was made to “surrender” to his will (Shikibu 1455). While she “would have liked to announce to the world that a strange man had invaded her boudoir,” she was also overcome with guilt and ashamed that her husband might find out (Shikibu 1455). The lack of remorse on Genji’s part shows the amount of power men had to be able to selfishly partake in such actions despite the consent of the other, as her consent was not of any great concern. She does not have very much power or rights of her own. Women in Japan were not participating in decision making of any sort, and certainly not any government or society decision-making. As the Norton Anthology describes, “A noblewoman’s days were spent behind curtains and screens, hidden from the world (or from the male world)” (Danly 1433). Unless of course a man had a particular desire to momentarily pull a woman away into his world for his pleasure, “women lived a circumscribed existence” (Danly 1433).

The result of such a cultural reality for the women of both Greece and Japan was that the women faced a great deal of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life. Medea regularly expresses, “lost in my sufferings,/ I wish, I wish I might die” (Euripides 96-97). The mental and emotional strain on women in *The Tale of Genji* is evident as well: “She thought constantly about hiding her less favorable qualities, afraid they might put me off (Shikibu 1445). Their actions and behaviors were not products of negative personality traits but rather desperate expressions in the only way they were afforded within their cultures, due largely to unrealistic gender expectations. The women

themselves did not want to be murders, or jealous wives, but were acting out of despair at being trapped within a man's world.

Works Cited

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