

The development of medea's tragic character



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What lends tragic literature its proximity to human nature is that the border between being a tragic villain and a tragic hero is extremely thin.

A question that this statement will certainly bring up is whether there is such a thing as a hero or a villain or whether these terms are defined by the ideals of the society. Tragedies such as Macbeth or Oedipus Rex feature a character with heroic traits who falls victim to a personal flaw or an outside circumstance which finally pushes that character into becoming a villain. Macbeth's greed and hunger for power are the causes for his descent into madness and villainy, and Oedipus falls victim to fate because of his pride and finally ends up tearing his eyes out and running into exile. A similar progression can also be followed in Euripides' Medea. Medea is a play about a woman, Medea, who is betrayed by her husband, Jason, and expelled from the city. In an outburst of treacherous but cleverly planned rage, she avenges herself by first poisoning Jason's new fiancé and then killing her own children, thus leaving Jason without distinction. Though Medea possesses certain traits of a victim and a heroine, it is impossible to identify her character as solely one of these. In order to fully comprehend her tragic character, one must instead view it as a combination of these traits and trace her development into a villain.

Medea's position as a victim of fate is already defined by the first lines of the play, in which the nurse tells the tale of Medea and Jason so far. Medea had, through Hera's influence, fallen in love with Jason and given up her home, killed her brother, and taken various risks upon her to save him and live with him in a foreign country (1-15). Throughout the play, Medea's ill fate is recognized most clearly by her servants and fellow women. According to the

nurse, Medea had gone through the entire adventure to retrieve the Golden Fleece and defied her household only to be deserted by him and left “slighted, and [crying] aloud on the Vows they had made to each other, [...] [calling] upon the gods to witness what sort of return Jason has made to her love” (20 -24). But her situation only becomes worse when she is informed by Creon that he is going to force her into exile (270-274). After a long discussion in which Medea pleads to Creon and finally succeeds in getting permission to stay for one day, the chorus of Corinthian women remarks that “ a god has thrown suffering upon [her] in waves of despair” (358-9). Here one can once again see that it is the fellow women who feel sorry for Medea and go beyond the prejudices against foreigners to recognize the terrible fate of which she has become a victim. One may assume that women were, in certain ways, oppressed in ancient Greek society and that they could thus relate to Medea's problems.

It is the identification with Medea that leads the chorus to see her heroic traits and even admire her as an avenger for all women. In an attempt to soothe Medea's sorrow, the chorus states that “ God will be [her] friend in this” (156). This statement implies that the chorus believes her cause to be worthy of God's support and thus a good cause. The chorus views Medea as a victim of ill fate and is naturally inclined to support her. Though this statement is made before the chorus finds out about Medea's brutal scheme, it must be noted that the chorus reaffirms its support for Medea after she has revealed her plans. After a monologue in which Medea finally does reveal her plan and ponders about how to implement it, the chorus delivers an ode about the oppression of women: “ Flow backward to your sources,

sacred river, and let the world's great order be reversed [...] women are paid their due. No more shall evil-sounding fate be theirs" (407-413). In this ode, the chorus condemns the oppression of women and encourages Medea to pull through with her plan. It views this as a rare chance for women to avenge all the wrongs that men have done to them and to turn the hierarchy around, putting the men at the mercy of women. Medea acts as a kind of a revolutionary saviour to them. Another trait of Medea's which may be considered heroic is the extent of her self-sacrifice for the sake of vengeance. The fact that she goes so far as to kill her own children for her cause proves her strength and determination. In an extensive monologue, Medea wavers but finally overcomes her feelings of love and sympathy and comes to the conclusion that she must kill her children (995-1053). This act theoretically puts Medea into the position of a martyr, who is willing to sacrifice more than just her life for her cause.

Practically, however, it is this last step that causes Medea to finally lose the support of the chorus. Though it may have supported the murder of Jason's new fiancé as a means for revenge, the killing of Medea's own children is morally intolerable. But Medea's descent to a villain starts long before the murder of her children. Her reputation as a violent, ruthless woman at the beginning of the play is reaffirmed by the nurse's foreshadowing statement that she " may even kill the king and the new-wedded groom" (42) and Creon's fear that she is " a clever woman, versed in evil arts" (283), who " may injure [his] daughter mortally" (281). Medea's evil intentions further become evident through her reaction to the news from a messenger that Creon and his daughter are dead. She replies that " those were the finest

words [he has] spoken" (1101) and that "[he] will delight [her] twice as much if [he says] they died in agony" (1109-1110). Medea shows no sign of guilt, remorse, or pity. Instead, she listens intently while the messenger reports every detail of their agonizing deaths. Finally, the brutality of the means that Medea uses to get revenge suffices to classify her as a villain. The deaths of Creon and his daughter, as well as the murder of her children, which, though it occurs backstage, is still presented to the audience through the children's cries " what can I do and how escape my mother's hands?" (1237-1248). Are so horrible that even the chorus, who was on Medea's side, can't accept them: " O your heart must have been made of rock or steel, you who can kill with your own hand the fruit of your own womb" (1253-1255). With the murder of her children, Medea has reached the climax of her villainy.

So one can clearly trace the progression within the play of a victim with certain heroic traits who, because of her ill fate and her ruthlessness, becomes a villain. This progression, which greatly resembles the standard progression of tragedies such as Macbeth or Oedipus Rex, combines the traits of a victim and a hero and pursues the development of these traits into those of a villain. But the question about the definition of such terms as " hero" and " villain" still remains open. Certainly, in our contemporary society as well as in ancient Greek society, the murder of one's children would be considered intolerable and condemned. But if one traces the development from a victim to a villain and takes the motives for such intolerable acts into consideration, the acts don't become more tolerable but they do become more human. Also, certain traits, such as ruthlessness or willingness to self-

sacrifice, can be considered as both heroic and negative. So are there really heroes and villains, or are we all just human?