

# Binary oppositions in medea and bacchae

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



Name: Instructor: Course: Date: Binary Oppositions in Medea and Bacchae

Binary opposition refers to opposing ideas or themes in literary text. Binary opposition is portrayed in terms of pairs of contrasting characters, ideas and themes. Binary opposition is paramount in the analysis of literature and reveals the thematic differences contained in a text. Binary oppositions do not usually consist of a pair of ideas. They are sometimes made up of diverse and varied terms (Marvin, 1). Binary oppositions can also be employed by the author in order to portray what side of two opposites he considers good or morally right. A work of literature can, therefore, contain loads of binary oppositions. Binary oppositions mostly portray different sides of the pair as being either good or bad.

One opposite is always good, and the other opposite is bad. Euripides' Medea and Bacchae contain numerous examples of binary oppositions, which can be used to analyze the thematic ideas within these works. In Bacchae, one of the most significant binary oppositions is the contrasting position of man and god. This contrast can be seen from the onset of the tragedy when Zeus strikes Semele, Dionysius mother. Zeus is the supreme god and is esteemed highly.

According to the story, gods are to be treated with a high level of respect. Gods are ruthless and punish their human subjects ruthlessly. Men, on the other hand, are loyal subjects of the gods.

Man is required to worship and respect the gods; those who fail to honor this requirement are punished. Such was the case with Pentheus who was destroyed by Dionysius for persecuting those who worshipped him. The gods

are also powerful beings who have supreme control over the actions of men. Dionysius who is the son of Zeus has miraculous powers, which he uses to enchant the Maenads sending them into the mountain. He also applies these powers when locked up in Pentheus palace and uses them to break free and raze down the entire palace. Man does not possess such powers in Bacchae, the only way human beings can perform miracles is when they receive powers from a god. This happens to the Maenads who performed miracles with authority from Dionysius. In Medea, god is seen as a superior being, one who can end misery.

Medea cries to God to save her from her misery when Jason marries the king's daughter. She cries out to Artemis and Zeus and makes known her plight to them (Esposito, 60). Like Bacchae, Medea shows man as subject to gods who have supreme power over all nature. Human beings and gods, therefore, depict a significant example of binary opposition used to show the natures of men and gods. Another important case of binary opposition in Bacchae is the contrasting form of God. While Zeus exists in a divine and invisible form, Dionysius his son takes the form of man. The contrast also shows in the manner in which he deals with people. He gives women a lot of privilege over their men but punishes them for going against men.

While Zeus limits his association with men, Dionysius relates with men freely. He creates a following among the Bacchae and drives the maenads ecstatic. In Medea, the gods are unfamiliar people as they live in distant areas that are inaccessible to humans. This is how the chorus describes Themis the Daughter of Zeus. These binaries exist in Euripides' portrayal of

gods in Bacchae and Medea. They act as principal factors in shaping his thematic ideas in both texts. The relationship between men and women, and the social status of women in society, is also one prominent case of binary opposition. In Bacchae, Euripides portrays the oppression of women in Greek society.

He uses Dionysius to attack this notion. Dionysius goes against contemporary Greek beliefs and the place of the woman in Greek society. This is contrasted by Perentheus' stand on the issue. Perentheus is against the privilege that Dionysius provides women with and calls him "too womanish to be proper", in relation to his association with women and the difference with which he treats women (Esposito, 230).

The contrasting treatments given to women by these two sides (Perentheus and Dionysius) show a notable binary in the society of the Greek in Baachaes. It enhances the role of Dionysius and illustrates the oppression of women in Greek society. In Medea, Euripides the position of men and women in society is similar to that of Baachaes. Euripides once again depicts the oppression women undergo in Greek society and their subordination.

This is clearly depicted from Medea's speech in the chorus (Esposito, 38). The chorus demonstrates the pain and injustice women are suffering in Greek. The entire plot of Euripides tale borders on one woman who seeks justice. Jason treats Medea spitefully. He makes the decision to marry Creon's daughter without her approval.

Medea talks of this injustice when she says, “ There is no justice in the eyes of mortal men...they hate her on sight though she has not hurt them” (Esposito, 57). He unashamedly sends her away from Greece with her two children because of that. This series of actions by Jason illustrate the extent of oppression women undergo in this society. Medea’s cruel revenge is motivated by the injustice she gets from Jason when he marries Creon’s daughter. Creon also reveals the low position held by women when he decides to banish Medea.

He does not give her a fair hearing and even threatens to call his guards to throw her out. Euripides uses these binaries to illustrate the plight of women in society, especially Greek society. Euripides also uses Bacchaes to portray the binary of Sophia/wisdom and Amathia/ ignorance. Dionysius and Pentheus are used to demonstrate two opposing personalities.

Dionysius is portrayed as one who is wise while Pentheus and his followers are ignorant men lacking in wisdom. The brutality through which Pentheus rules the kingdom shows his lack of wisdom. Pentheus denial of Dionysius divinity, his crackdown on all his followers and his insistence on maintaining control on women demonstrate Amathia. Dionysius, however, exhibits both attributes. He shows Amathia when he carries out his ruthless revenge mission on Pentheus and his mother Agave. He also shows Sophia in the way he deals with people especially the way he treats women. Old men like Cadmus who advise Pentheus to act cautiously on the issue of Dionysius divinity are said to possess Sophia. Wisdom is a virtue possessed by diverse

persons in Bacchae, the Bacchae, the Maenads and the old all possess wisdom though in different forms.

In Medea, this is the most beneficial binary. Medea's actions portray her mastery of Sophia. She is knowledgeable and cunning as well. In one instance, as she addresses Creon, she says that it is more satisfying to be born a fool than to have wisdom because men prefer foolish women to the wise. Medea, however, does not have a platform to employ her intellect and wisdom. The society in Medea does not value intellect or wisdom. The highly esteemed lack wisdom, while those who possess wisdom such as Medea are despised.

Medea in her wisdom cannot entertain the pain and shame she suffers because of the rejection she receives from Jason and, therefore, decides to plot her revenge. Jason, on the other hand, shows Amathia in some of the choices and decisions he makes. For instance, her decision to leave Medea and the two children for the king's daughter was an act of foolishness and ignorance. Creon also demonstrates that he lacks wisdom in some of his decisions. He takes Jason away from his wife and children and hand his daughter in marriage to him. The fate that befalls him and his daughter at the end is because of his lack of wisdom, and she is easily persuaded by Medea to let her stay (Esposito, 78). These two opposite virtues serve an important role in establishing Euripides' plot and building up the other themes. Euripides also introduces the foreigner/citizen binaries in Bacchae.

Foreigners are despised and loathed because they are seen to represent a different way of life. Citizens are supposed to maintain the status quo of the

land. Dionysius is seen as a foreigner in Greece and the fact that he attacks Pentheus with a legion of foreign women make Pentheus despise him more (Esposito, 210).

His followers, his new form of worship and his personality are all foreign to the Greek people. He introduces a foreign philosophy, his views on women are non-Greek, and his claims to be worshipped are all foreign practices. Dionysius, therefore, meets with a lot of opposition, not just from Pentheus but also from a section of the Greeks.

In Medea, this binary is portrayed through Medea. From the onset, the nurse tells us that Medea is a foreigner. Greeks despise Barbarians and Medea's origin as one puts her in a difficult condition. This fact also emerges when Jason sends her away to a foreign land she laments about going to a foreign land. Greeks and their neighbors alike despise foreigners. In spite of her foreign identity, she still emerges as a woman of different character.

There is lack of peaceful co-existence in Greek society and foreigners are abhorred. The uses of binary opposition in the two works of Euripides play a significant role in conveying the message that the author wants to pass across. He articulates his main points through this contrasting themes and ideas to portray the Greek society during his era. Euripides employs the binaries in an entertaining way and a keen reader will easily understand the message by analyzing the various binaries that he employs in his works.

Through the binaries he uses, he can demonstrate his opinion on very tricky issues in contemporary Greek society (Marvin, 1). Binary opposition makes

Euripides works appealing, and the themes are easy to discern and analyze.

Works Cited Esposito, Stephen. Euripides Four Plays: Medea, Hippolytus, Heracles, Bacchae. Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2004. Print.

Marvin, Corey. “ Understanding Binary Oppositions in Literature.” Class Handout: English 101. Cerro Coso Community College, 2010. Print