

The question of ethics in medea



At first glance, the system of ethics presented by Euripides in his masterpiece *Medea* seems to parallel the systems found in several other tragedies of ancient Greek theatre. This system of helping friends and harming enemies, which recurs throughout many of tragedians' works, attempts to rationalize the excessive violence and hostility (Blundell 1989). This system falls short in *Medea*, however, as *Medea* is forced to decide a course of action which both ways will harm her friends and help her enemies. Therefore, both *Medea* and *Jason* must be driven by an alternate motivation, which turns out to be a utilitarian position in which all that matters is personal success and happiness, regardless of consequences. These ethical overtones, however, contrast a great deal with *Sophocles'* ethical standards portrayed in the *Antigone*. Through an examination and interpretation of the actions of principle characters from *Medea* and *Antigone*, it is brought to attention that Euripides finds *Sophocles'* system inadequate.

Medea is in a situation where regardless of her actions, she and her friends will suffer and her enemies aided. If she kills her children she will harm her enemy *Jason*, but she will be forced to endure the pain of murdering her own offspring. Conversely, if she decides to not kill her children and go on living as *Jason's* wife, she does not harm her enemies in any way and must endure the disgrace of *Jason* taking another wife. *Medea* recognizes the difficulty of her situation but decides that it is better to take action and bear the pain than to give in to her maternal desires, saying " Do I want to be laughed at for letting my enemies off scot-free?" (*Medea* 1049 - 1050).

Euripides puts *Medea* in a unique situation. Because of her circumstances, the traditional system of ethics applicable in most other plays falls apart. A

more fundamental system of motivation – in this case, utilitarianism – is required. Medea must adopt the idea that the best course of action is the one that best advances her self-interest. She decides that avenging the shame Jason brought upon her by introducing a mistress into the home is more important than killing her children. Harming Jason is worth the price of murder.

Medea's deed further subverts conventional ethics because she is a woman. In ancient Greek time, women were often thought of as second class citizens, needed only for procreation, raising of children, and tending to the man's home. Because she breaks away from her expected role, some scholars, most notably Helene P. Foley, argue that through her action she becomes a man in all senses other than physical (2001). This drastic change is only possible through Medea's adoption of a new set of ethical values.

Medea also displays a utilitarian stance when she formulates an agreement with Aigeus. She promises that in exchange for refuge in Athens, she will give Aigeus fertility. It may seem that she is doing this to help her friend, but really she is simply looking out for her own safety. The safe haven Aigeus provides allows Medea to murder her children and avoid retribution.

Jason employs a similar utilitarian system of ethics when he brings a new mistress, a daughter of Creon, into Medea's house. By marrying Creon's daughter, he secures a political and financial bond between his house and that of the king of Corinth. Jason's actions explicitly depict a utilitarian viewpoint, as he consciously brings disgrace upon Medea to ensure his own security and his children's financial well-being.

In contrast to Euripides, Sophocles illustrates Blundell's ethical system of "helping friends and harming enemies" in his play *Antigone*. Both Antigone and Creon adhere to the system, though each hold allegiance to different area of their group - Creon to the state, and Antigone to her family. Antigone is so dedicated to helping her friends that she is prepared to die for them, saying to her sister "... you made the choice to live, and I to die" (*Antigone* 555). In this case, she is determined to help her dead brother Polyneices by honoring his dead body with a proper burial. In addition, when Antigone's sister Ismene attempts to talk her out of defying Creon, Antigone fiercely resists, thinking that Ismene simply wants a share in the glory: "Don't try to share this death with me. Don't claim as yours a deed you did not touch. My own death will suffice" (*Antigone* 546-547). Antigone is simply remaining devout to her moral system.

Because Creon is more interested in political affairs than familial bonds, he views Polyneices as an enemy for rebelling and leading troops against Thebes. He states that the body of Polyneices will be left "unentombed, to be the food of birds and dogs, an outrage to behold" (*Antigone* 205-206). Creon, however, does honor Eteocles, the brother of Polyneices, with a proper burial because Eteocles died defending the city. Antigone, conversely, ignores their political affiliation and believes strongly that both men should be honored because they are her brothers.

While their opinions differ, however, Antigone and Creon share devotion to their ethical code. Antigone's suicide illustrates that people dedicated to morality must be prepared to make sacrifices if their morals conflict with

those in power. This moral code works in Sophocles because the concepts of friends and enemies, though not agreed upon, are clear and defined.

The reader's understanding of characters' ethical codes is essential when one attempts to interpret a play. For example, Foley argues that Medea makes the transition from woman to man to divine through her choices and actions (2001). It would be very difficult to make such a strong interpretation if the reader did not first understand the motivation that drove Medea.

Euripides disregards the moral code presented so clearly by Sophocles because the situation he depicts in Medea is too complicated to follow that code. The “ helping friend and harming enemies” ethical code works well in clear-cut matters, but falls well short in situations in which helping friends will also help enemies, or vice-versa. By presenting a situation in which Sophocles' ethics break down, Euripides argues that such a code cannot and should not be followed.

Bibliography

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