



Euripides' *Medea*: the theatricality of “madness”

Iakovos Menelaou

University of Hradec Králové

Corresponding Author

Iakovos Menelaou

University of Hradec Králové

Czech Republic

Email: menelaou dot iakovos at gmail dot com

Received: 09-MAR-2021

Accepted: 29-AUG-2021

Published: 10-DEC-2021

Abstract

Medea is an Ancient Greek tragedy written by Euripides and first played in 431 BC. It portrays a woman who goes beyond the traditional role of a woman in Ancient Greek society, so far as to kill her children and her husband's new wife—to revenge his “betrayal.” Medea's feeling of abandonment and her jealousy can be seen as the driving forces of her behaviour, and despite her guilt, Medea became a symbol of the oppressed woman—portraying the concerns of any woman of the epoch. We propose a reading for this Ancient Greek tragedy, which widely influenced world literature and the arts, within the lens of the medical humanities. The analysis of Medea's mental state is augmented with quotations of the text in English translation (by Morwood J, 2008). Medea's description by Euripides constitutes the representation of an individual's psychology who is mentally disturbed and is a striking example of theatrical “madness.” Medical practitioners should read this Ancient Greek tragedy as they could benefit from the way the author depicts Medea's mental state. The medical practitioner is exposed to the “theatricality of madness” and can examine the protagonist's behaviour. The tragedy becomes an example of how the arts and humanities could be included in modern medicine as a means for medical practitioners to enhance their horizons and look beyond the results of a cold diagnosis.

Keywords: Euripides; Greek tragedy; Health humanities; Literature in medicine; Medea.

Introduction

In general, Ancient Greek tragedies are based on human passions and frequently on the characters' overreactions. Euripides' *Medea* is the story of a woman who, driven by jealousy and vengeful feelings, killed her children to get revenge on her husband.[1] *Medea* is a landmark in the field of the arts in general, and it has been read and analysed from several perspectives. In this article, we

approach the play through the lens of the health humanities.

The plot of the tragedy

The tragedy describes the story of Medea and Jason who arrive in Corinth as exiles. Medea feels abandoned because Jason is going to marry the daughter of King Creon—who decides to send Medea and the two children she has had with Jason into exile.

Cite this article as: Menelaou I. Euripides' *Medea*: the theatricality of “madness”. RHIME. 2021;8:116-9.

Euripides foreshadows the protagonist's mental condition and prepares the audience for what will follow. Although the Nurse and the Tutor are worried about her condition, Medea meets the chorus and appears to be "marvellously cool and self-possessed." [2] Medea convinces Creon to allow her to stay for another day. Jason accuses Medea, stating that her exile is her own fault, and the two of them have an argument. Later, Medea meets the king of Athens, Aegeus, who agrees to give her sanctuary. Following that, Medea devises a plan: she acts regretful and sends her children to the palace with a robe (poisoned) as a gift for Creon's daughter. Despite her initial hesitations, "her anger wins over her maternal love," [2] and she kills her children too. When Jason enters the scene, Medea is in the chariot of the Sun together with the dead bodies of her children.

The beliefs around mental health at the time

Although the term "psychology" emerged much later, the Ancient Greeks dealt with a form of psychology and its philosophical study. Euripides was especially interested in the mental condition of his characters, and in the driving forces behind their actions. [2] It has been said that Euripides' view of his protagonist, Medea, is that she was mad or maybe possessed by a demon. [5] *Medea* is the most striking example where Euripides presents the mental state of his protagonist, but there are also other tragedies where the mental state of characters is manifested, like his tragedy *Bacchae*. [6] When *Medea* is read in conjunction with Greek medical writings, one notices that Medea is frequently described to suffer "sexual deprivation". [7] Greek medical literature often referred to sexual intercourse as a necessity for a woman's health - in particular, the Hippocratic corpus referred to intercourse as a cure for certain female diseases. [7] Consequently, it can be said that Euripides' tragedy includes certain views of the medicine of his time.

An analysis of the protagonist's psychology through the lens of the health humanities

At a very superficial level, the tragedy could be characterised as the simplest of Euripides' tragedies, because it mainly revolves around the revenge of the protagonist. Nevertheless, there is a much deeper meaning, since Medea becomes a "dominating figure," who is characterised by "rhetorical power" and "psychological manipulation." On the other hand, Jason is presented as a man who tries to "make a new life in a xenophobic new city," with a wife, Medea, who is not a Greek. Bearing in mind the beliefs of the ancient Athenians, the legitimacy of their union is under dispute. [1] In any case, with her attitude and behaviour, Medea "repudiates the gender role assigned to her as a woman" and goes beyond traditional Greek beliefs. [1] Hence, *Medea* becomes a tragedy where "Greek confronts Barbarian, and Man confronts Woman." [3]

As a character, Medea can also be seen as an "archetype of oppressed femininity," since her complaints express those of womankind of the era in general. [4] Medea becomes a theatrical character who deserves further examination, if one is meant to understand her motives and complex psychology. Essentially, Medea is a voice of protest in a society where woman must be submissive to man. This element of protest is an important factor contributing to her disturbed mental health, which drives her towards her gruesome action to murder her own children. Nevertheless, despite her reasons for revenge, her murderous intentions do not justify her case. [5]

Medea's complex psychology and mental state can also be seen in connection with "fetal-maternal conflicts". The story of *Medea* alludes to problems which exist in modern society too and always cause the same feelings. If a story such as Medea's were to take place today, it would "provoke widespread moral outrage and might be used

to fuel the debate against the mother in cases of fetal-maternal conflict”.[5]

A look at the theatricality of Medea

The tragedy revolves around the thoughts and the mental state of the protagonist, and “explores human psychology and behaviour.” Euripides depicts a very powerful character, who despite being the one with the social vices of the time (she was a woman, a foreigner, and a witch), she still enjoys the sympathy of the chorus and the audience.[2] Another important element in this tragedy, as opposed to most tragedies—one is inclined to say—is the absence of the divine element and in particular of the “deus ex machina” (literally, “god from the machine”, that is, a person or thing that appears out of nowhere and solves a difficult problem) in the end. What the audience sees on stage, instead, is a “femina ex machina” (“woman from the machine”).[2] Thus, the audience is left wondering whether Medea is mortal or divine, and, if the latter, is meant to deliver justice and, thus, escape without any consequence for her actions.[1]

In substance, though, Medea is a child murderer. Despite her hesitations in the play, the death of her children does not affect her as it should. Following the murders, Medea is presented as triumphant on a chariot driven by dragons. She does not see the death of her children as murder, but as the manifestation of her revenge, and she justifies it as much to Jason when he laments the loss of his children:

JASON: O my dearest children.

MEDEA: Dearest to their mother, not to you.

JASON: So why did you kill them?

MEDEA: To cause you pain.

It is worth noting that in the early stages of the play, the Children's Nurse introduces the

audience into the inner world of the protagonist:

NURSE: But she hates her children and feels no joy in seeing them. I am afraid that she may be planning something we do not expect. Her temperament is dangerous and will not tolerate bad treatment.

By referring to Medea’s “dangerous temperament” and the fact that she is likely to do something not expected, the Nurse points out the protagonist’s disturbed personality.

The Nurse is also able to see the anger in Medea's eyes, and the desperation, even the depression that Medea feels after Jason leaves her for another woman.

NURSE: Go inside the house, children—all will be well. As far as possible keep these boys on their own and don't bring them near their mother in her depression. For I saw her eye just now glinting at them like a bull's as if she meant to do something to them.

Consequently, the Nurse’s role is critical as she enlightens the audience about the psychological condition, the “madness” of the protagonist from the early stages of the play.

In addition, Medea is presented as being familiar with the idea of death. For example, on one occasion she asserts:

Come, Zeus' bolt of lightning, and pierce my head! What do I gain still by living? Alas, alas! May I find rest in death, leaving this hateful life”. On another occasion she says: “I have fortified all joy in living, my friends, and I want to die.

Ironically though, although she wishes for her own death, she is not the one who dies in the end—simply because her own death does not serve her vengeful plans, which is what she cares mostly about. One is inclined to say that Medea prefers to kill her own children by Jason and kill Jason’s new bride

(not in this order in the play), and then enjoy the moment of her revenge. In fact, Medea enjoys seeing Jason in pain and considers that as her personal triumph.

What practitioners of modern medicine can learn from *Medea*

Medical practitioners encounter a character who manifests concerns, anxieties, and problems of the Ancient Greek world, and opposes a patriarchal society—which is still the case in certain modern cultures. But above all, the way Medea expresses her objection to such a society inevitably leads the medical practitioner to an investigation and analysis of her attitude, behaviour and complex psychology. Without necessarily looking for a diagnosis, one is invited to think about the reasons for her violent reaction and those forces which lead the protagonist to her gruesome actions. The challenge for the modern medical practitioner is to examine “madness” and a “disturbed mind” outside the traditional forms of medicine.

In other words, *Medea* opens the way for the consistent inclusion of the arts and humanities in modern medicine. Without undermining the knowledge or skills of the

modern practitioner, the arts and humanities can enrich the world of medicine, because fictional characters like Medea frequently reflect the inner thoughts of an individual and show how society, personal values, and other societal phenomena determine one’s personality. An understanding of these elements can help medical practitioners adopt a more humane approach in practice. Characters like Medea can open a new window for an even more effective medical practice, one which marries traditional medical knowledge with the arts and the humanities.

Conclusion

Euripides’ *Medea* can be seen as the manifestation of revenge by an abandoned woman in a society which was built by men for men. The play connects us with the role of women in Ancient Greek society. She has been wronged by her husband, and her voice is the voice of oppression in a man-made society. Nevertheless, she goes too far by killing her own children. Through *Medea*, Euripides depicts the “theatricality of madness” which reveals the inevitable intersectionality of sociology, psychology, jurisprudence, and ethics.

References

1. Euripides. *Medea and other plays*. Morwood J, translator. Hall E, introduction. New York: Oxford University Press; 2008. xv, xvi, 2, 3, 7, 38.
2. Storey IC, Allan A. *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*. 2nd ed. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons; 2014. p.273.
3. Cartledge P. Deep plays: theatre as process in Greek civic life. In: Easterling PE, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2001. p.22.
4. Schaps DM. For all that a woman: Medea 1250. *Classical Quarterly*. 2006;56(2):590-2.
5. Reid MC, Gillett G. The case of Medea—a view of fetal-maternal conflict. *J Med Ethics*. 1997;23:19-25.
6. Euripides. *Bacchae*. Franklin D, translator. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2000.
7. Hall E. The sociology of Athenian tragedy. In: Easterling PE, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2001. p.109.