

TAMARA PLEĆAŠ

Univerzitet u Beogradu, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju
tamara.plecas@ifdt.bg.ac.rs

ANA ĐORĐEVIĆ

Univerzitet u Beogradu, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju
ana.djordjevic@ifdt.bg.ac.rs

Medea: Greek Myth and Peculiar Identity

This paper will primarily focus on the philosophical depictions of Medea's character and actions. The following identities will be examined: *gender* (which roles defined a woman in antiquity and are these definitions still relevant today), *political* (what does it mean to be a foreigner and not belong to a particular political community), and *psychological* (do passions inevitably lead to a split in the psyche or, on the contrary, constitute it). These will serve as frames that outline Medea's exceptional (in)humanness in the Greco-Roman society.

Key words: Medea, philosophy, mythology, Euripides, Seneca, woman

Медеја: грчки мит и особени идентитет

Овај рад ће се првенствено фокусирати на филозофске приказе Медејиног лика и поступака. Испитиваће се следећи идентитети: родни (које су улоге одређивале жену у антици и да ли су ове дефиниције актуелне и данас), политички (шта значи бити странац и не припадати одређеној политичкој заједници) и психолошки (да ли се страсти неминовно доводе до расцепа у психи или је, напротив, конституишу). Они ће послужити као оквири који оцртавају Медејину изузетну (не)хуманост у грчко-римском друштву.

Кључне речи: Медеја, филозофија, митологија, Еурипид, Сенека, жена

The myth of Medea fascinated the Greeks and Romans, to the point that “philosophers and orators returned to her obsessively” (Harris 2004, 131), and it continues to fascinate modern readers.¹ Myth and philosophy can be interpreted as two polarities, but these polarities are not self-explanatory because it seems that philosophy cannot even exist without myth. One of the oldest and most challenging philosophical questions is what constitutes the core of someone’s identity, and it is related to the myth of Theseus. In his *Life of Theseus*, Plutarch presents a paradox, later referred to as a “thought experiment,” which is well known to modern philosophers. It goes as follows: “The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their places, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same” (Plut. *Vit. Thes.*). Is it *the same* ship that left the port in Crete if all the old planks have been replaced? If so, what makes it the *same* ship? The preserved *name* of the ship, its history, convention, or none of that? Some of these questions lead to a discussion of Medea’s character, which appears to have *changed* between her first and last meeting with Jason, at least in the sense that she committed her first evil-doings while she was young and motivated by love, as she herself said, while the rest she committed as a mature woman and driven by revenge and anger. The philosophical approach to the problem of identity and the accompanying discussions prompts us to ask:

Who (or what creature) is Medea, the princess of Colchis, who set off with Jason and the famous crew of the Argo ship, leaving behind her homeland, her distraught father, and her brother’s dismembered corpse, knowing that after all the crime she had committed because of her love for Jason, she would never be able to return to Colchis? Who (or what creature) is Medea, who soared into the sky in the golden chariot of Helios after the terrible crime she committed against her and Jason’s sons? Is it the same Medea? If so, why does she utter a comforting cry in the tragedy, daring herself: *I want to become Medea* (“[Medea] I will be”: Sen. *Med.*

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172)? Who (or what) is this Medea who warns us of becoming another Medea? Do we know who (or what) she is, can we determine her identity, and why can (or cannot) we? These are the questions we will attempt to answer by challenging the following notions:

1. Medea as a married woman,
2. Medea as a female foreigner,
3. Medea as someone *prone* to excessive emotions or passions, which either *build* a psychological identity or *undermine* it, presenting it as a chimera.

However, these questions cannot be posed, let alone answered, without considering another branch of the history of identity – Ancient Greek theatre – which shows that identity is not only a personal but also a social problem. In the theater, identity is presented through a mask, a “persona,” which serves the purpose of identifying a character on the stage (Elliot 1982). The audience understands that the actor behind the mask is *not the same person* as the character they represent, but that does not stop them from immersing themselves in the play and reacting and cathartically relieving themselves *as if* they were a real-life character. If we consider the stage to be a metaphor for social life, we can perceive identity as inherently linked to a certain *tension* between a person (their authentic “I”) and their social role. This emphasizes the problem’s social, political, and performative dimensions, but it also relativizes the existence of an authentic identity, or at the very least highlights its changeability.

Even more intriguing is the mask’s history as a tool for assuming different identities in religious rituals, orgies, and festivals held in honor of the god Dionysus (Du Toit 1997). During those festivities, anyone could be *anyone*, including the social position opposite their own, so the social order was turned upside down: ordinary people could be gods, kings could be beggars, women could be men, and so on. The mask played a magical role in the transformation of the social order, which could not only be imagined, but also sometimes physically, bodily, and sensually experienced, allowing one to get a taste of the social world as it might be (Du Toit 1997). At the same time, such a play laid bare the features of the social world *as it already were*.

Following on from these political aspects of identity, which prompt us to address its social functions as well as its performative and transformative potentials, while considering Medea’s multiple social positions we at the same time ask: who does Medea *represent*? *What is the society* in which she lives *like*? What does it mean to be married? What does it mean to be a woman/mother? What does it mean to be a foreigner *and* a woman?

When she deviates from society's norms, doing horrifying and truly monstrous things, what new society is she potentially *creating*? How do other members of that society, such as Jason or the Corinthian women she speaks to, *react* to her deviations?

We presented the outlines and frameworks that will help us in developing a portrait of Medea and her identity in "a society between a familiar domestic world and a mythic realm of nightmarish possibilities" (Segal 1996, 31).

MEDEA AS A MARRIED WOMAN

In Ancient Greece, though not exclusively there and then, a woman was defined by a number of characteristics, including being invisible, in the house, on the margins, on the sidelines, out of the way of curious eyes, ignorant, silent, the one who gives birth, a slave, a servant, enduring, a subject of contract² and social arrangement, an outcast, passive, the one who dies young, a girl but still a mother to her children, and the like. However, there are two remarks to this, two *buts*.

But, *the first but*, not all women were positioned and treated according to the previously mentioned description. In the seminal classical study, *The Greeks*, among other relevant sources, Humphrey D. F. Kitto challenges us to reconsider the aforementioned notion in an attempt to defend the position of women, particularly Athenian women but also married women. He makes the well-known argument – the evidence is insufficiently, unkindly, erroneously, and partially read (Kitto 2008 [1951]). What he wants to emphasize, albeit using different wording, is the following: if the sources were read more carefully (and more methodically), we would see that there is tenderness in marriage; that spouses conversed and not just shared the marital bed; that wives were not completely excluded from city life; that women were not mere prisoners; and that some women were probably even respected, mourned, and grieved over when they died too young (which was always too soon); and he illustrates this with meticulously discovered examples. These examples seem to aim to overshadow or at least mitigate Pericles' words from the *Funeral Speech*: "Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad." (Thuc. 2.45.2). To Kitto's examples, we might add that

² When we refer to a woman of the Athenian *polis*, we can notice that she was predominantly "the subject of a contract" confirmed between her father and her husband, which "reflected on her social position" (Avramović & Stanimirović 2012, 118).

wives could be friends – there is evidence that their partners confided in them, some philosophers believed that women could be intellectually equal to them (cf. Plećaš 2021). All of this, however, does not change the fact that there are numerous examples to the contrary, indicating that the women in Kitto's examples are *merely* and *predominantly* an exception to the rule. Caution is undoubtedly required because no story, mythical or otherwise, is one-sided.

But, the *other but*, women in Ancient Greece were not always portrayed as powerless and weak. For example, Greek tragedy heroines were not like that, nor were priestesses, hetaeras, and some foreign women. But what were these women like, then? We learn about them, or, more precisely, we read about them almost entirely in sources authored by men;³ women are painted on vases and sculpted in marble solely by men – we learn about them again *only* from men. Of course, there are exceptions. There are records that attest to what they were like. There is gold jewelry that attests to women's taste, and perhaps even more so to men's status. There were cults of the mother and fertility, there were women who were beautiful, powerful, and glorious, those to whom sacrifices had to be offered, those who were capable of anger, those who deceived (like Athena or Aphrodite), those who were intelligent, lustful, and those who brought peace (or turmoil) (cf. Bell 1991; Vernan 2002; Slapšak 2013; Grimal 2015; Pari 2020).

Unlike women in Greece, women in Rome were visible, because Roman women had more rights and greater independence. Medea can be a woman of Greece as well as a woman of Rome, and it seems that Euripides' Medea is more of a Greek woman and Seneca's more of a Roman woman.⁴ Of course, she is a foreigner in both cases, a "barbarian" from Colchis on the Black Sea and an immigrant on the margins of Corinthian society⁵ (Blondell 1999).

Svetlana Slapšak describes the three-headed goddess Hecate, the one who instills fear, as the one who "belongs to the underground" and whose time is night, as well as the one "who has power over wealth and some forms of fertility, which is why she was respected in antiquity among

³ However, there is at least one ancient source that stands out. It is poetry written by Sappho who mentions some women of young age like Atthis, Megara, Anagora, and Gongyla (see: Rayor & Lardionois 2014; Plećaš 2021).

⁴ Throughout the text, the authors interpret Seneca's and Euripides' Medea in parallel, emphasizing as well certain relevant features and differences between Greek and Roman society.

⁵ For a discussion on Medea as otherness in terms of her barbarism and femaleness, see Šijaković 2014.

ordinary people;" Homer makes no mention of her, despite the fact that her "altars, shrines, and statues are scattered all over the ancient world" (Slapšak 2013, 88). It seems that *every* Athenian house had a spot dedicated to this goddess, and "only women" engaged with her (Slapšak 2013, 88). Despite her Asian origins, she was settled and worshiped in Athens (OCD s.v. Hecate). The Amazon women are also of Asian origin, as well as Medea, who, at least in one version of the tragedy – Seneca's – was portrayed as a woman of supernatural powers, as a witch, as a woman asking for the fulfillment of her prophecies, as a woman both unconstrained and untamed. So, Amazon women are warriors, Hecate is the leader of witches, and Medea appears to be both. Medea is the only woman among the Argonauts, and she makes political as well as military decisions – for what is war if not an attack on a sovereign, an invasion of his territory by a foreigner, and the theft of one of his greatest treasures? It is Medea, not Jason or Hercules – to name a few Argonauts – who is responsible for acquiring the Golden Fleece, and for Argo sailing home safely with its crew (Sen. *Med.* 238). Her use of her magical powers to help Jason complete his mission elevated her to the ranks of men, as well as heroines, and made her his "partner in crime."

By this very act, Medea becomes the symbol of war and masculinity, displaying "many stereotypically Greek male attributes, such as courage, intelligence, decisiveness, resourcefulness, power, independence, and the ability to conceive and carry out a plan effectively. In these qualities she surpasses every male character in the play" (Blondell 1999, 162). In Euripides' *Medea*, she herself says: "I'd rather stand three times behind a shield in war than give birth to one child!" (Eur. *Med.* 250-1). However, her Achilles-like heroic attributes had not been met with a comparable admiration, because "her gender complicates this issue" (Blondell 1999, 164).

Medea is also *someone* who invokes Hecate and other divinities associated with marriage ("O gods of marriage!": Sen. *Med.* 1), such as Juno and Athens – goddesses whom Jason also invoked on their wedding day when he made his vow to Medea. At the same time, Medea calls upon the "Chaos of Endless Night" and cold Persephone (the "queen abducted"), as well as her ancestor Helios. She also summons Furies, for they punish sinners ("O vengeful Furies, punisher of sinners": Sen. *Med.* 13), and one such sinner is, obviously, her husband Jason. Medea is skilled with spells and potions, and in this she resembles the lunar divinity Hecate which sometimes symbolizes the irrational or unsound. However, she is also a descendant of Helios, the god of the Sun, who brings light and reason,

which often symbolize the rational. Hence, Medea could bear the polarity of two principles, which will be discussed later at greater length.

She does not hesitate to use violence against her family, first against her primary family (father and brother), then her secondary family (husband). Like the mythical Odysseus, she disrupts the established support structures,⁶ both her own and Jason's (by killing his second wife and her father King Creon). One could even say that this makes "Medea the radical and direct destructive force of otherness: the otherness of a woman is directed against husband's authority, while the otherness of a barbarian has its influence through the king and his house on the whole society" (Šijaković 2014, 190).

Medea appears to be violent not only in front of and to others; she is also violent towards her own nature. Stoicism holds that caring for one's offspring is *natural* and inherent, which is one of the reasons Seneca deemed her behavior unnatural. By committing violence against those who have power over her but should also represent her support structure, she commits violence against the biological (her own blood) and the political (her homeland, the community) inside her. But what does it mean to be married, and which norm must be met before we can say that someone is in a marital relationship? Most versions of the myth tell us that the ship Argo and its crew arrived on the Phoenician island of Corcyra. Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts were welcomed by King Alcinous and his wife Arete, and when the Colchians, who happened to be there, demanded that Medea be surrendered to them, Queen Arete responded that Medea is a married woman, and thus they have no right to deport her, which the Colchians had no choice but to accept (Bell 1991, 294-5). It is unclear when the wedding took place, but it appears undeniable that Medea and Jason were married and that their marriage was consumed. The norm was, therefore, met.

However, some authors argue that Jason and Medea's relationship is not a traditional Greek marriage because they united in love based on personal choice (rather than social arrangement), since Medea *by choice* helped Jason and the Argonauts stealing the Golden Fleece and running away. This makes Medea and Jason equal partners who have united in mutual adventure, as previously explained. The beginning of the myth tells

⁶ Mythology tells us that Odysseus cheats on Penelope with Medea's aunt (see, for example, Hes. *Th.* 1011), but also that he fails to protect his friends and crew members which is described in the *Odyssey*, thereby betraying them and leaving himself without their companion and support.

us about Medea's love ("heart-struck with passionate desire for Jason," Eur. *Med.* 8) and Jason's vows made to her ("Wretched Medea, cast into dishonor, cries aloud, 'The oaths he swore!', invokes the greatest of all pledges, his right hand, and calls upon the gods to witness what repayment she has got from him;" Eur. *Med.* 20-23). Medea exemplifies the absolute nature of love – which is founded on the absolute destruction of the primary family and absolute vengeance when this love and loyalty are betrayed by her partner – rather than a conventional, arranged marriage (Ato Quayson, pers. comm.). On the one hand, grief-stricken by the betrayal and broken promises, Medea appears as a stereotypical Greek woman preoccupied with love and marriage, and on the other, we see her as "the masculine Hellenic barbarian" (Blondell 1999, 166), enraged and revengeful. Again, the present polarity reveals the complexity of her character.

But what exactly are her marital rights? To reiterate, Roman women had more rights than Greek women. This can be seen in Roman laws, and some scholars go so far as to claim that the women of ancient Rome were, *legally speaking*, emancipated, meaning equal to men (but only before the arrival of Christianity), although "they were under the jurisdiction of a tutor" or guardian who looked over them and their businesses (Vigneron & Gerknies 2000, 107). Roman women appear to have had some influence over their tutors (husbands or other legal representatives) and could choose whom they married. In addition, they could ask for substitute tutors in absence of their own and, for example, "when the tutor refused to authorise a contract the woman wanted to make, she could appeal to the *praetor* and the latter would force the tutor to admit the contract" (see, for more detail, Vigneron & Gerknies 2000, 113-114). Divorce was more common among Roman women than among women in Euripides' time, especially among Roman aristocratic women (and we could imagine Medea as an aristocrat; after all, she is the daughter of a king).

According to *legal documents* of the Athenian polis, the guardian (mostly the father) "gave the woman in marriage – and a dowry with her," and "if there was a divorce, the dowry returned with the wife to the guardian" (Kito 2008, 261). In divorce cases, Roman women kept the dowry they brought to their marriage. That is "their husbands were obliged to give the dowry back in the case of a marriage's dissolution" and in such cases "the wife was certain to get her dowry back" (Vigneron & Gerknies 2000, 112). Dowry (gr. *προίξ*, lat. *dos*) can be defined as a gift, a present, a form of exchange, or something *freely* given (LSJ, Lewis & Short). As Medea thoroughly explains, she brought a dowry into her willful marriage with Jason, a dowry that is *treasure* or that which is most valuable to her father

(the Golden Fleece and his son, her brother), then her homeland, but also her shame, a dowry that cannot be returned to her (see Sen. *Med.* 480-90). (However, despite the fact that Medea cannot return to her father, her first guardian, she goes to her father's father, Helios, and she goes alone.) Her position is such that she requests what she *cannot* have back in order to divorce from Jason ("I am leaving; give me back what is mine," Sen. *Med.* 488-9). Because she has not received back what she believes is *rightfully* hers, it appears that Medea cannot get out of marriage. But since her husband abandoned her, she is no longer married either. She is found in a state of *ἀπορία* which is an internal contradiction in that she is both married and unmarried.⁷

By becoming again *whom she wants to become*, Medea commits violence and thereby, we would argue, undermines the institution of marriage, the institution that should principally protect her. Jason's and Medea's marriage, which is still in effect, is a marriage born out of a heroic but also criminal act and can only be resolved through crime or violence. Or, as Medea says: "The tale of your divorce, must match your marriage" (Sen. *Med.* 52-3). Seneca's version emphasizes that the Colchidian princess becomes Medea ("Now, I am Medea": Sen. *Med.* 910) only when she commits a more heinous crime than all her previous ones, only when her identity, i.e. who she *is*, evolves through the suffering she is subjected to – "My nature has grown with my suffering" (Sen. *Med.* 910). Additionally, this suffering could be interpreted as *a woman's*, when Medea appeals to the chorus of Corinthian women for compassion and solidarity: "Of all those beings capable of life and thought, we women are most miserable of living things" (Eur. *Med.* 230-2), after which they express sympathy for her "misfortune" and promise to keep her revenge quiet.

MEDEA AS A FEMALE FOREIGNER

Women could be, and from the Ancient times onwards are traditionally understood as "the other tribe, born from other races and the imagination of ill-disposed gods," or as *the* beings "who cause disorder in the world of men" (Slapšak 2013, 13). According to myths, the first woman – Pandora – was like that (cf. Vernan 2002). When writing about the myth of the Amazon women, Svetlana Slapšak asks whether Greeks and Romans were

⁷ It is, however, hinted to her that she can go and will face no legal ramifications. However, Euripides' and Seneca's versions differ in this regard. Seneca forbids a woman from taking her children with her, which is in conformity with Roman law, because the father, not the mother, decided on the fate of the children.

“frightened of women,” and claims that the Greeks certainly were, because women were “seen as creatures between barbarians and animals, as beings beyond culture and civic order, beyond society, but also necessary to produce new citizens” (Slapšak 2013, 13).⁸ Barbarians and animals are *the others*, the ones whose position we do not understand, except maybe when we ourselves are the others, the ones who are not *ordinary* people.⁹

Philosophers liked to assert that the distinctive feature of the humans or human ψυχή is rationality (see, for example Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1012a-b; Diog. Laert. 7.110; Epict. *Diss.* 2.9.2), that humans could be seen as rational animals (see also Annas 1993, 160), i.e. that they differ from other animals or living things in their rationality (making them similar to gods, the Stoics would say; Diog. Laert. 7.85-88; Long 2002, 148), but also that humans are political animals, that is, social beings actively involved in the *polis*. A woman, on the other hand, could not take advantage of this privilege, meaning she could not participate in the affairs of the *polis*. Some philosophers like Aristotle go as far as to consider a woman not having a fully developed mind and thus representing an immature child (cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1260 a-b).

Since antiquity, Medea’s name has been associated with μήδεσθαι (i.e., the verb μήδομαι), meaning cunning plotting and contriving, making her an archetypal example of a barbarian woman who schemes and deceives, cheats by using a trick, or commits (un)expected fraud (cf. OCD s.v. Medea; LSJ). Such a woman defies the established order; she is capable of committing atrocities, horrifying and unforgivable acts; in other words, “she intends some terrible deed: wild and unnatural” (Sen. *Med.* 395). Seneca attributes to her the heart of a wild, untamed woman, that of a beast (“my savage heart has made a plan;” Sen. *Med.* 917). If we recall the definition of a typical Greek woman at the beginning of the previous section (housebound, invisible, silent, and at disposal of the familial and societal need), we very much assume that, in accordance with *being* a barbarian, Medea’s actions are quite the opposite to those of a typical Greek woman, and similar to the actions of barbarian women. Sometimes

⁸ Perceiving a woman as a dangerous savage, and a man as a threatened, tragic figure is as much possible as it is according to patriarchal, male standards that we interpret women. Placing a woman in the center of our perspective allows us to notice the real basis of such inventions: “An unclean conscience and traumatization, well-described by tragedy and comedy writers and philosophers, created a myth that justifies it all – namely, the myth about dangerous women...” (Slapšak 2013, 13).

⁹ Orpheus, for example, talks with animals, enchants the non-living world, and enters the land of the dead; he is not ordinary.

she resembles the wild and terrifying Maenads, the women who follow Dionysus in a state of ecstasy and frenzy after they ceremonially leave the city (Bell 1991, 287-8; OCD s.v. maenads). Her nurse even compares her to them, advising her to suppress her anger (Sen. *Med.* 381) and control herself ("As a Maenad staggers on uncertain feet, mad with the inspiration of the god, on the peak of snowy Pindus or Mount Nysa, so she runs to and fro, her movements wild, her face displays her crazy passion's marks..." Sen. *Med.* 382-6). Medea thus represents Dionysian principle: she is unruly and immodest, wild and defiant of conventional laws (cf. OCD s.v. Dionysus). The symbolism of Dionysus is night, the nocturnal mode, a mode in which "moisture, woman, sexuality, earth, and the Dionysian are combined," all of which stand against what is *sunny, dry, and rational* (Pari 2020, 182).

Medea, unlike an Athenian woman or a woman of some other Greek *polis*, is not even Greek; she is a foreigner, *someone* whose language and culture are not entirely comprehensive. Foreign women bring with them a risk. In certain societies, they cannot even produce children who can be full members of society. Such societies include that of Sparta, and also of Athens during some periods. Jason, despite being from another Greek polis, is not a barbarian and thus does not fully comprehend her situation. Perhaps that is why Medea curses him at the start of Seneca's interpretation of the tragedy with the words: "What is worse than death? What can I ask for Jason? That he may live! – in poverty and fear. Let him wander through strange towns, in exile, hated and homeless, an infamous guest, begging a bed" (Sen. *Med.* 19–22).

Medea is not only a foreigner but also a refugee, seeking shelter (in marriage) and exile in a foreign land. Moreover, she is threatened with expulsion despite the fact that she is already expelled – she tells Jason, "You impose exile on exile, but grant me no place to go" (Sen. *Med.* 458). She asks for mercy and to not be left alone in a foreign country (Sen. *Med.* 119; Sen. *Med.* 447). We need to be aware that "for the Greek men, the plan had always been to return home with their booty, both treasure and fame; but for her, once she had joined Jason and left her family, there could be no route back to an old way of life on the return journey. In Colchis, she becomes part of *his* story, entering upon a dangerous exploit, always in flight, venturing into the unknown with him" (Lusching 2007, 1).

Medea is not just a representative of a foreigner, but also the way in which a foreigner is treated. The Ancient Greeks, as some translators and interpreters of Greek tragedy believe, "projected their own culturally undesirable qualities onto outsiders" (Blondell 1999, 153). Such "barbarian"

attributes, such as unrestrained emotion, lust, transgression of normative Greek gender roles, law, and order, brutality, untrustworthiness, and expertise with magic drugs have been placed in Medea. Medea is a negative, an exception that exposes the rule, debunking societal projections to the outsiders as the reflection of the society's own making. In that respect, Medea might be regarded as the renegade of Greek society, acting as its mirror.

Notwithstanding, Medea is above all a human being, and thus it is important to consider her as a "citizen of the world," given the Stoic cosmopolitan demand not to be a stranger to the world and to feel everywhere at home, since the whole world represents homeland for all people (we can "measure the boundaries of our citizenship by the sun;" Sen. *De otium*, 4.1). However, it is questionable whether Medea can understand this demand because she is a fugitive, and the Stoics believed that a fugitive "runs away from social principle," just like they believed that the blind "shuts the eye of the mind" (Aur. *Med.* 4.29), meaning acts inadequately and contrary to human nature. As previously considered, she does act inadequately, against nature, when she kills her own children. Nonetheless, late Roman Stoic Aurelius asserts that the soul of each man [human being] is fundamentally the same as the souls of other human beings (cf. Aur. *Med.* 4.29) – implying that a human soul is rational, and that this is what unites all people (including slaves, foreigners, rulers, beggars, men, and women).¹⁰ If this is true, then Medea, despite her actions, is no stranger to the world, at least no more than any other human. However, she must understand this demand and internalize it; from a Stoic standpoint, she must (self)educate and (self)form anew (see also Muson. 3, 4; Epict. *Diss.* 1.12.15-17; Epict. *Diss.* 1.22.9; Epict. *Diss.* 1.1.24-5; Grahn-Wilder 2018, 160–161), which could have been more available to her in Rome than in Greece.

MEDEA AS PRONE TO EXCESSIVE EMOTIONS

Greek and Roman men commonly believed that women, like children and barbarians, were prone to uncontrollable and, worse, unjustifiable bursts of rage or anger, and one such stereotype was present in various genres beginning with Homer as "not simply a *cliché*" but "a hostile stereotype" (Harris 2004, 130). One of the women who was portrayed and seen as a beast or monster was Clytemnestra, and she was followed by, obviously, Medea. The question is whether Medea is ruled by madness or irrational passions, and what her behavior represents in society. Is Medea acting rationally

¹⁰ This stance is the opposite to Aristotelian consideration of the women's position.

and willfully, and does she (or does she not) understand what she is doing? Is there a single answer to these questions, or does Medea represent the psyche's (and society's) inherently divided, ambivalent, contradictory nature?

In the tragedy, Medea made the decision to kill her and Jason's sons. However, she changes her mind when she sees them in front of her, within her reach, and utters the words: "Aiai! What shall I do? Women, my heart for this deed disappears when I catch sight of my sons' shining eyes. I cannot do it! Farewell to the plans I made before! I'll take my sons away from here" (Eur. *Med.* 1040–1045). Although for a moment it seems that a tragedy will be avoided, Medea changes her mind again and says the famous words that many have interpreted: "I understand the evil I'm about to do, and yet my raging heart is stronger than my plans – the heart which causes mortal kind the greatest evils" (Eur. *Med.* 1078–1080).¹¹ Medea suffers and is enraged as a result. For Seneca, suffering is always something immoderate, something over the top, something that is an excess for both an individual and a society that strives to be average and balance emotions in order to function. Seneca turns this message backwards and assigns the chorus in the tragedy the role of the reminder: "No one ever suffered from taking safe paths" (Sen. *Med.* 603). In other words, abstain from excess and you will not suffer.

As Julia Annas notices, Medea recognizes two things going on in her: "her plans and her anger or θυμός," just like she recognizes that anger has taken over and changed her previous intentions (Annas 2020). These verses served as an inspiration to philosophers for understanding *passion* but also the *weakness of will* in both antiquity and today (see: Gill 1983), but they also served as a template for understanding the human psyche, which is not surprising given that they *do* represent a philosophical component in Euripides' play. Medea's actions and what she does, the *conflict* between anger and rational decisions, can all be explained from at least two different ancient perspectives. The Stoics would argue that Medea does not have separate and different desires and forces within her, that she is always *one*, and that it would be incorrect to regard her as different from one moment to the next (cf. Annas 2020). Medea is a single, undivided human being, just like everybody else, with all their virtues and flaws or vices, and everything that happens inside her takes place on the *same* stage where we can think one thing one moment and something else the next. There is no inner division, only actions based

¹¹ In Greek original: "καὶ μανθάνω μὲν ὅτι τολμήσω κακά, θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων, ὅσπερ μεγίστων αἰτίος κακῶν βροτοῖς" (Eur. *Med.* 107–1080).

on what *appear* to be the best reasons (she does not want to leave her children, become a refugee along with her children, etc.). However, “she is out of control as *a whole*” (Annas 2020), which is why anger is one of the most horrible and destructive emotions in the Stoic classification of emotions. When anger silences and overpowers other motives, judgment serves anger. Even then, Medea is rational, because the human soul as a whole is rational, whereas emotions are simply a manner/expression of a person’s psychical state (see also Nussbaum 2009 [1994], 449).

Roman Stoic Epictetus would argue that Medea should have known better, and thus bears moral responsibility. She could have chosen to interpret her situation and hopelessness differently, thereby avoiding her fall. However, we should not be harsh on her, but rather instruct her, and not just her, but everyone who acts on reasons that are colored by excessive emotions (Sen. *Ir.* 1.14.3). Those who do wrong should be treated with compassion and understanding. And so, Epictetus says kindly of Medea: “This is the error of a mind that was endowed with great inner strength” (Epic. *Diss.* 2.17.21). As Nussbaum says: “The Stoic values Medea for her greatness: he would like to teach her to have that greatness without the evil,” and Epictetus “thinks this is possible” (Nussbaum 2009[1994], 448).

Unlike the Stoics, Plato would say that Medea’s irrational side outweighed her rational side, and that Medea is not a unified whole. Plato would have considered her to have a split and a struggle between passion and reason in her personality,¹² and while this explanation appears more convincing than the Stoic one, “the Stoics do better than Plato in explaining how the person carried away by fury still can act in a self-aware, complex and planned way” (Annas 2020). Remember, this is what she has been doing the entire time: she consciously chooses to kill her children, she consciously chooses love and crime out of love at the start of her relationship with Jason, and then she consciously chooses anger. However, she acts in ignorance, and her ignorance is reflected in the fact that she does not know, at least from a Stoic perspective, what she can and cannot influence; because if she did know this, she would have realized that Jason is not hers and that she has no control over him, only over herself (cf. Epict. *Diss.* 2.17.21-22; Epict. *Diss.* 1.1).

Some recent readings of Euripides’ tragedy by classical scholars

¹² Here we refer to Plato’s tripartite soul division, reason, spirit, and appetite, put in dynamic in his famous *chariot allegory* (Pl. *Phdr.* 253d-254e). Medea’s wavering whether or not to kill her children could be represented as the charioteer (reason) trying to tame the horses (spirit and appetite) – and not succeeding.

interpret Medea's struggle not as something inherently divided and contradictory (reason vs. passion), but as something rather complex in operation, whereby two sides of her motivation are not separate and opposite – they play in concert when she makes a horrific decision (Foley 1989). This complex angry, passionate, yet calculated Medea, represents an ultimate threat to patriarchal society, one reflected in a woman's subjectivity and independent will. She uncovers male anxiety about women's will and sexual autonomy, which, given her status as a witch, are viewed as expressions of demonic/evil power (Blondell 1999, 151).¹³ By killing her children, she not only exacts vengeance on Jason, preventing him from leaving inheritance and leaving him without anything, because she was left without anything in order to be with him, but she also destroys her identity as a mother: "Nurse: Medea –; Medea: I will be.; Nurse: You are a mother!; Medea: By you-know-who" (Sen. *Med.* 171-4). Medea will become Medea when she ceases to be a mother, because she was made a mother by Jason, whom she wishes to take vengeance on.

CONCLUSION

In this text, we attempted to ask who Medea is, what she is or is not, what she wants to become and what she can become, and what her intentions reveal about her, about women, and about some aspects of Greek and Roman societies. Any attempt to ascertain her identity in advance is doomed to failure because it eludes us in its inconstancy. Medea appears to be constantly striving to become what she is not (still), as much as being a person torn between two extremes. Do we, therefore, know who Medea or Medea's *mask* is? Even more important, can the myth of Medea reveal something about *real* women, women of flesh and blood, men of flesh and blood? Not just about them, it can also tell us about the society in which they lived. If Pericles' words still stand, she would be a woman spoken of for evil – a woman with an *evil* or *bad reputation* – a woman to avoid at all costs. Even today, she would be someone who instills fear and causes unrest, disrupts the assumed natural order of things, and commits a crime "against nature." According to Aristotle, tragedy and Greek myths have the value of expressing "general truths concerning character inside of a particular story: it is not explicitly about ἀκρασία (weakness of will), it is about Medea, but yet it can, by telling the story of a particular person, such as Medea, reveal what ἀκρασία is all about" (Arist. *Poet.* 1451b7-10; Grahn-

¹³ She previously demonstrated her "good" power when she helped Jason acquire the Golden Fleece.

Wilder 2018, 138).¹⁴ And “[m]aybe to *women* mythology meant survival, underground culture, refusal to disappear, a reminder and proof that power has more than one definition” (Pari 2020, 169; cursive by the authors).

Today, Medea’s case could be interpreted through the lens of identity politics or politics of recognition, as an exemplary representative of *the other*. However, she bypasses simple positions that we would forcefully impose in order to understand her. That is why we aimed to understand her character and actions in relation to her many positions and to societal demands, through a philosophical reading. Even so, our analyses remain deficient in their attempt to substantiate all the complexity of her case. She could also be interpreted within the framework of contemporary feminist concepts, such as *intersectionality*, as a complex ensemble of interacting forms of oppression and privilege based on multiple social categories (Geerts & Van der Tuin 2013). But what Medea constantly delivers is *excess*, probably best understood through patterns of interference by Karen Barad (Barad & DeKoven 2001), which are constraining as well as enabling, non-exhaustive and undetermined, yet always open for surprise.

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¹⁴ We dealt with Medea when she was still in a relationship with Jason, not after she left him, as that is a different story and myth. However, Seneca’s play seems to foresee that myth, as Seneca’s Medea, predicting ominously, utters the following words: “Do you not know your wife? This is the way I *always* leave the country” (Sen. *Med.* 1021-23; cursive by the authors).

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