

**Appropriating the Homeric Ethos:  
Looking Beyond Gendered Obligations in Euripides' *Medea***

Brandi Buckler

Euripides' *Medea* provides a window into the cultural confluence of a fading epic ethos and the pervading democratic ideals of Athenian society in 431 BCE. I argue that by presenting conflicting cultural norms within his characterization of Medea, Euripides was able to confront contemporary issues in terms familiar to the Athenian audience. Medea was wronged by those who shirked their universal obligations, such as ξενία, and these offenses undercut her ability to balance competing societal expectations. Subsequently, she adopted a masculine heroic code, divided her φρήν between her feminine social obligations and her masculine need for justice, and avoided the mockery and prying eyes of her enemies in the πόλις. I propose that Euripides was elucidating a changing idea of what it meant to be Greek in a world where one πόλις could turn against another as the Peloponnesian War loomed over Athens. The Homeric ethos, adopted by Medea and carried out to a destructive, unconscionable end, was no longer congruent with contemporary societal paradigms. I propose that Medea's fall from grace was a tragic mechanism for reassessing an outdated cultural system of heroic hierarchy, a system which no longer corresponded with the prevailing implicit and explicit cultural norms of Euripides' time.

When viewing Medea from both a philological and an anthropological perspective,<sup>1</sup> it is possible to discern an amalgamation of social dispositions, roles, and coalescing obligations that a woman in classical Greece would have been expected to negotiate. Medea breaks free from the established, attested roles of women by unwaveringly adhering to what had become an anachronistic ethos in fifth-century Athenian culture— the idea of the epic hero. Medea moves beyond the bounds of the feminine sphere by adopting a masculine Homeric code within the framework of a Sophoclean heroic tragedy, ultimately leaving behind her human constraints

entirely. This paper will be focused on the clash of two incompatible cultural constructs, classical and archaic, as I examine larger cultural concerns which are embedded within the tragedy.

Though Foley claims there was no feminine model of “full social and ethical autonomy” available to her (243), Medea could have been cast as one of her feminine predecessors. Medea’s heroic side is not evident from the tragedy’s onset; rather, Medea’s heroic side gradually emerges as she transforms throughout the tragedy,<sup>2</sup> thus eliminating a number of possible exemplars that Euripides had at his disposal, including Clytemnestra, Ino, and Procne.<sup>3</sup> I argue that Euripides intentionally cast Medea in the role of a hero, not a heroine. Medea, unlike other tragic women, expressed no remorse or grief for her actions and transcended the mortal realm in an anomalous act of unapologetic, unbounded vengeance. Medea’s situation was unique and by depriving Medea of a clear feminine predecessor, Euripides seems to be exploring the limitations of a woman’s agency in enacting her own justice; the only way for an Athenian woman to take control of her own fate would have been to adopt a masculine, heroic ethos.

In *Medea*, a theme of laughter and mockery pervades Medea’s rhetoric as she seeks justification and means to enact her revenge against Jason. In Medea’s ἀγῶνες with Jason, she adopts masculine diction,<sup>4</sup> using pejorative terms including παγκάκιστος (465) and κάκιστος (239, 630) which were generally confined to arguments between males;<sup>5</sup> in fact, the use of this kind of taunting, derogatory language was particularly common among Homeric heroes.<sup>6</sup> Though it would not be unprecedented for a female to adopt derisive behavior in exceptional festival proceedings, such as the Thesmophoria or Adonia, Medea’s appropriation of this masculine diction would have been shocking to the Athenian audience. Adopting this derogatory diction highlighted Medea’s growing masculine characterization as she began to explore behaviors

marked by fairly rigid gender divisions. Likewise, this rhetoric of ridicule would have prefigured Medea not only as masculine, but also as distinctly Homeric.<sup>7</sup>

Once she was exiled by Creon and discarded by Jason, Medea had to find a way to defend her honor- the only thing she had left to her that was hers alone.<sup>8</sup> In the opening scene of the tragedy, the nurse alluded to the shifts occurring in Medea's φρήν in the opening scene of the tragedy, anticipating Medea's subsequent transformations, describing Medea as ἀτιμάσας (33). The negation of the verb τιμάω, the Homeric shortening of the verb τιμάζω, with the alpha privative (33) draws attention to the noun, τιμή, related to this verbal form. Τιμή is a recurring theme in the Iliad and in the construction of the Homeric ethos, representing the reward or manifestation of one's value and in turn their honor. The quantity of an individual's τιμή can increase or decrease depending on the assessment of others,<sup>9</sup> thus making τιμή an ongoing concern and motivation for an epic hero. Both τιμή and κλέος, the fame and perpetuation of τιμή, are integral elements of the heroic ideal and act as elements of the heroic characterization of Medea, appearing three more times within the Euripidean tragedy.<sup>10</sup> The nurse does not describe Medea here as shamed or wronged, but rather characterizes her as removed of her honor by Jason's actions and mistreatment. This fixation on the loss of honor rings clearly of a Homeric social construction, not a Classical social structure.

In lines 373-385, Medea is able to secure herself one day to design and implement a plan to enact her revenge against Jason and Creon for slighting her honor and shirking their obligations. Medea must act to protect her honor and carry out her revenge, but by no means at the cost of being mocked by her enemies, recognizing that if she were to be caught in the act of revenge then θήσω τοῖς ἐμοῖς ἐχθροῖς γέλων (383). Medea no longer has the luxury of time and must act the only way she knows how – by using her innate skills (ἦ πεφύκαμεν/σοφοὶ

μάλιστα 384-5) to follow in the footsteps of her masculine heroic predecessors. Though she could have taken up the sword like Clytemnestra, she was concerned about the ridicule she would endure within the city from her enemies.

Both Medea and her Sophoclean antecedent,<sup>11</sup> Ajax, fear the laughter of their enemies “more than anything else in the world,”<sup>12</sup> and this fixation on laughter is reflected in the expression of mockery with the verb γελάω in both *Ajax* and *Medea*. Forms of γελάω appear nine times in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, but more telling are the seven instances of γελάω and its compound forms in Euripides’ *Medea* – all but one of which are uttered by Medea herself.<sup>13</sup> Beyond their comparable loathing of mockery, the similarities between Ajax and Medea are manifold.<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that Euripides draws parallels between these two figures – it would have been apparent to the Athenian audience that *Medea* was hearkening back to the recently produced *Ajax* of Sophocles,<sup>15</sup> making the characterization of Medea as an epic hero, not a heroine, all the more evident. By drawing upon a recently employed heroic figure, moreover, a figure which was fresh on the minds of the Athenian audience, Euripides was able to effectively put Medea in relief with the Sophoclean hero.

Medea’s characterization and diction would have come across as distinctly Sophoclean and I believe that the use of this familiar characterization allowed Euripides to highlight the differences between an epic ideal, Ajax, and the tragic actualization of this ideal, Medea. The time for an Ajax figure had come and gone, and by conflating a figure such as Medea with this romantic notion of a true Sophoclean hero would have made Medea’s shortcomings even more pronounced. Medea’s societal obligations as a woman complicated the Sophoclean model and heightened the contrast between the ideal fifth-century Athenian woman and the ideal hero.

Having established the Homeric and Sophoclean aspects of Medea's motivation and principles, I now turn to the contentious nature of Medea's classical obligations as a woman in light of this pervading epic ideology. Medea oscillates between two separate identities within herself and the distinction between Medea's two halves has been discussed in terms of gender by both Knox and Foley; I believe, however, that the division in her φρήν is made along not one, but two lines: gender and historical period. Medea is not torn between fifth-century masculine and feminine codes, but rather a Homeric masculinity and a fifth-century Athenian femininity, and she is thus unable to resolve the two halves of her split φρήν because they are dissimilar on two distinct planes of cultural norms.

Medea debates with Jason in terms which bridge the two periods: universal concerns such as ξενία and φιλία which transcend the cultural distinctions between archaic and classical Greek culture. Once Jason has disregarded these tenets, however, Medea is faced with the choice between two courses of action corresponding with one historical period or the other: either to yield with fifth-century Athenian female subservience or to fight back with her Homeric masculine sense of vengeance. Medea pointedly denies Jason's accusations that her revenge is based on feminine concerns, such as the denial of sex, but rather that Jason perpetrated universal wrongs. Though Medea no doubt envies Glauce as a rival for Jason's affections, Jason's universal offenses<sup>16</sup> and his paternal sickness (πατρῴα νόσῳ 1364) are the catalysts for her revenge; these wrongs fuel the split between her gendered halves and lead to the ultimate domination of her adopted masculine code. Medea, in my opinion, is caught between not only conflicting gender roles, but also competing historical views.

Despite her best efforts, Medea was receiving internal and external pressure to adopt both masculine and feminine responsibilities. As she taunts Jason in response to his accusations

and failed obligations, taking up a masculine tone of invective,<sup>17</sup> she begins to straddle the two sides of her φρόνη. Greek literature after Homer allowed individual characters to recognize an internal struggle,<sup>18</sup> thus enabling separate, competing aspects of an individual's φρόνη to exist simultaneously. The conflict between Medea's two engendered halves is most marked when Medea begins to address her own θυμός.<sup>19</sup> This speech is perceived by some as a sign of Medea's delusion, but in fact this self-referential dialogue denotes the realization that her internal dilemma is her only obstacle.<sup>20</sup> As a result of this realization, Medea is able to move from the role of Classical woman to epic Homeric hero with the articulation of her dilemma. Medea is torn between what she feels is expected of her according to contemporary cultural norms and her own unwavering adherence to an anachronistic ethos to defend her τιμή.

By adapting and calling upon both Sophoclean and Homeric traditions, Euripides was able to create a tragic forum for public commentary, which was particularly appropriate considering the tragedy's staging in 431 BC. The production of the *Medea* at that time would have been alarming and discomfiting, especially when considering the Athenian political climate. By transforming Medea from a subservient wife of good repute into an unconscionably destructive Homeric hero, Euripides explores the changing face of cultural norms within the fifth-century Athenian societal construct. Though tragedians such as Sophocles still upheld the Homeric ideal as something romantic and attainable, Euripides overturned this Sophoclean model by portraying Medea in relief against Ajax, subsequently elucidating the flaws and incongruities between the archaic masculine code and Classical social obligations. The age of the Homeric hero was waning<sup>21</sup> and Medea's transformation characterized her in a manner incongruous with fifth-century expectations.

By exploring the presentation and limitations of feminine agency and the underlying causes and motivations for her adoption of a masculine Homeric ethos, the differences between her split φρόνη become more complicated than Foley or Knox have previously presented them: her struggle is not merely about gender, but about culture and the changing face of what it means to be Athenian. Medea's division is not only along gendered lines, but also along temporal lines, thus calling into question the distinction between two societal norms. Though Medea herself was not Greek, she is presented as adopting the indisputable markers of two separate Greek ideologies, archaic and Classical, appropriating not only a Homeric and Sophoclean heroic ideal, but also a distinctly Greek ethos. By taking up these two Greek cultural constructs, Medea's internal division is exacerbated; if Medea was divided about her gendered agency alone, she could have adopted Jason's sophistic arguments and fought back with rhetorical prowess in place of Homeric pejoratives. The adoption of this anachronistic heroic code, however, illuminates the heightened contrast between an implicit cultural ideal and the reality of fifth-century Athens: the heroic paradigm and its practice were no longer in harmony with one another. As Athens faces inevitable war with Sparta, Euripides presents the *Medea* as a tragic arena for contemporary commentary: an arena where a tragedy of gender and divergent societal constructs were matched against one another, yielding what would be an ominous and disastrous end.

## Bibliography

- Cain, R. Bensen. "Shame and Ambiguity in Plato's *Gorgias*." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41.3 (2008): 212-237.
- Cairns, Douglas L. *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Cohen, David. "Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens." *Greece and Rome* 36.1 (1989): 3-15.
- Fisher, N. R. E. "Hybris and Dishonour: II." *Greece & Rome* 26.1 (1979): 32-47.
- Fletcher, Judith. "Women and Oaths in Euripides." *Theatre Journal* 55.1 (2003): 29-44.
- Foley, Helene P. "Tragic Wives: Medea's Divided Self." *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. 243-71.
- Forsdyke, Sara. "Street Theatre and Popular Justice in Ancient Greece: Shaming, Stoning and Starving Offenders inside and outside the Courts." *Past & Present* 201 (2008): 3-50.
- Fowler, R. L. "The Rhetoric of Desperation." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 91 (1987): 5-38.
- Gabriel, Ayala H. "Living with Medea and Thinking after Freud: Greek Drama, Gender, and Concealments." *Cultural Anthropology* 7.3 (1992): 346-373.
- Gill, Christopher. *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Gould, John. "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 38-59.
- Hatzfeld, Jean, and André Aymard. *History of Ancient Greece*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966.
- Hopman, Marianne. "Revenge and Mythopoesis in Euripides' *Medea*." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 138.1 (2008): 155-183.
- Knox, Bernard. "The Medea of Euripides." *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater*. Vol. 1. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. 295-322.
- Lloyd, Charles. "The Polis in *Medea*: Urban Attitudes and Euripides' Characterization in *Medea* 214-224." *Classical World* 99.2 (2006): 115-130.
- Mastrorarde, Donald J., ed. *Euripides' Medea*. 7th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Mead, Margaret, ed. *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003.
- McClure, Laura. "'The Worst Husband': Discourses of Praise and Blame in Euripides' *Medea*." *Classical Philology* 94.4 (1999): 373-394.
- Mueller, Melissa. "The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*." *The American Journal of Philology* 122.4 (2001): 471-504.
- Yamagata, Naoko. *Homeric Morality*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994.

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to consider that extant perceptions of classical Athenian women have been transmitted through the eyes and words of men. Though women are often given a voice in tragedy, this feminine voice is filtered through the language and perspective of the male authorial voice (Gould 38); thus a reader of classical literature must be careful in the extraction of broader societal implications based in the presentation of women's societal roles. Moreover, the difference between normative, cultural ideals of how a woman should behave and the actualization of this behavior must be taken into account (Cohen 4).
- <sup>2</sup> See Foley 261.
- <sup>3</sup> See Knox 296.
- <sup>4</sup> In addition to the persisting informal judicial practices among the populace, ritual mockery also occurred in festival settings such as the Athenian Thesmophoria and the Adonia; at these festivals derisive banter and verbal ridicule abounded among women, even though these "discursive practice[s]" were normally masculine acts (McClure 374). There is one attested instance of women adopting this masculine role in Plutarch which describes a Spartan ritual where girls ritually humiliated cowardly men (McClure 374)
- <sup>5</sup> McClure does qualify that there are five instances of women using masculine pejoratives within the Euripidean corpus, excluding Medea's usage (384); Eur. *Tro.* 943; Eur. *Hipp.* 682; Eur. *Hec.* 1199; Eur. *Heracl.* 947.
- <sup>6</sup> See McClure 384, 382.
- <sup>7</sup> Though some scholars characterize popular justice, such as ritual humiliation and mockery, as characteristic of pre-law stages of a state (Forsyke 4), both archaic and classical Greek cultures practiced various forms of informal public humiliation. Humiliation was practiced in tandem with formal judiciary processes and was most commonly employed in cases of adultery. Some standard punishments, including those for adultery and theft, incorporated a fine, a formal penalty, and a form of popular justice, an informal penalty, which varied on the πόλις and severity of the crime (Forsyke 17). The use of public humiliation in cases of adultery seems to have its roots in Homeric times, perhaps originating from Demodocus' song in Hom. *Od.* 8 when Ares is bound and ridiculed for his affair with Aphrodite (Forsyke 10). Forsyke further notes that informal justice may have retained its function in cases of adultery since no physical markers of an adulterer's crime persisted (21). The continuation of mockery as a persisting form of public justice from archaic to Classical times demonstrates the uncertain division between the two periods and blurs the line distinguishing where one societal ethos ends and the next begins. Public ridicule and "collective justice" by individuals within the πόλις served as a cultural link between these two diverging cultural constructs. The continuation of the Homeric practice of ridicule obscures the lines of acceptable behavior for an outsider such as Medea and makes the basis of her actions, her aversion to humiliation by her peers, all the more justified.
- <sup>8</sup> Medea had forsaken her homeland, her father, killed her brother, and left a trail of enemies behind her; moreover, she cannot look at her children without seeing Jason, so her reputation and honor were all that she had left.
- <sup>9</sup> Yamagata 121.
- <sup>10</sup> This particular verbal concept, τιμάω, occurs two more times in Medea: first, Medea describes herself and the children to Aegeus as ἄτιμοι. . . φίλοι (696), and again in the final scene between Medea and Jason when Medea asks Jason if he thought he would live a happy life τᾶμ' ἀτιμάσας λέχῃ (1354). The idea of κλέος is embedded in Medea's address to the Corinthian women in the discussion of acquiring δύσκειαιαν (218), the result of the absence of δίκη. . . ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς βροτῶν (219).
- <sup>11</sup> The Medea itself is structurally presented much like "that of a Sophoclean heroic play," even down to the inclusion of a desperation speech as in the *Ajax* (Knox 297; Fowler 7).
- <sup>12</sup> Knox 297; Cairns 268.
- <sup>13</sup> γελάω, cf. *Med.* 383, 797, 1041; ἐγγελάω, cf. *Med.* 1355, 1362; προσγελάω, cf. *Med.* 1041, 1162. The one instance where Medea is not the one using a compound of γελάω is when Glauce is described as ἄψυχον εἰκῶ προσγελάωσα σώματος (laughing at her body seeming lifeless *Med.* 1162).
- <sup>14</sup> Knox notes that for both *Ajax* and *Medea* "a time limit of one day is set; both in a set speech explore the possible courses of action open to them and, rejecting alternatives, decide – the one for suicide, the other for revenge. And these similarities are enforced by some striking verbal parallels between the two plays" (297). In addition to these similarities, *Medea* also ignores appeals for her to come to her senses and disregards pleas from the chorus and her peers to moderate her behavior, much like the Sophoclean *Ajax* (Knox 298).
- <sup>15</sup> Knox 297; Foley 260.
- <sup>16</sup> By presenting the play between un-gendered and gendered offenses in Jason and Medea's ἀγών as the purported cause of Medea's outrage, Euripides presents Jason in an immoral but rhetorically advantageous position, highlighting the unbalanced power play between women and men in classical Greece.
- <sup>17</sup> McClure 382.
- <sup>18</sup> Foley 244; Gabriel 348; This is as opposed to the explanation that Achilles' restraint in Hom. *Il.* 1 was not in fact a personal choice, but rather divine intervention when Athena stayed his rage at Agamemnon.
- <sup>19</sup> See Eur. *Med.* 1056ff
- <sup>20</sup> Knox 299
- <sup>21</sup> When looking at a society such as Athens in the classical period, the trouble lies in discerning to what extent underlying, tacit cultural precepts, such as the Homeric ethos, persisted as Greek culture evolved.