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A Critique of Aristotelian Evaluation of Euripides's *Medea*

Abstract

Aristotle left a legacy of countless pages on many diverse topics such as biology, physics, metaphysics, politics and ethics. Of these many writings, one hasn't attracted the attention, at least not to the extent the others have, *Poetics*. *Poetics* deals mainly with poetry, but with tragedy in particular. In this work, Aristotle answers questions concerning this field, such as what makes a fine tragedy, what are the most important parts of a tragedy, what characteristics should a tragedy have, what makes a powerful plot, what magnitude should a fine tragedy be of, what qualities should a hero have, and what kind of a relation a good tragedy should establish with the audience. Aristotle refers to certain poets and their works as examples in answering these questions. One of these works, namely *Medea* was rewritten by the Greek poet Euripides in the 5th century BC. This study aims at giving an analysis of Euripides's version of the famous tragedy of *Medea*, from an Aristotelian standpoint following the principles Aristotle sets in *Poetics*. In line with this objective I argue that *Medea* has been misunderstood or misjudged, especially about its supposed immoral plot and characters; and try to show how it in fact can be moral with an atypical conception of morality.

Keywords: Aristotle, Poetics, Euripides, Medea, Tragedy, Morality, Women.

Euripides'in *Medea*'sının Aristotelesçi Değerlendirmesinin Bir Eleştirisi

Öz

Aristoteles, biyoloji, fizik, metafizik, politika, etik gibi farklı alanlarda sayısız sayfa miras bırakmıştır. Bu pek çok eserden biri olan *Poietika*, diğerleri kadar dikkat çekmemiştir. *Poietika*'nın başlıca konusu şiir olmakla birlikte, özel olarak trajedi başlığı üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır. Aristoteles bu eserinde söz konusu alanla alakalı birtakım soruları cevaplamaktadır. Buna göre Aristoteles, iyi bir tragedya nasıl olmalıdır, tragedyanın en önemli parçaları nelerdir, bir tragedya hangi özelliklere sahip olmalıdır, güçlü bir tema nasıl olmalıdır, iyi bir tragedya ne uzunlukta olmalıdır, bir kahraman ne tür özelliklere sahip olmalıdır ve iyi bir tragedya, izleyicisiyle nasıl bir ilişki kurmalıdır gibi soruların yanıtlarını aramaktadır. Aristoteles bu soruları yanıtlarken, örnek teşkil etmeleri dolayısıyla belli başlı şairlere ve bu şairlerin eserlerine başvurmuştur. Bu eserlerden biri olan *Medea*, Yunan şair Euripides tarafından MÖ 5. yüzyılda tekrar kaleme alınmıştır. Bu çalışma, *Medea*'nın meşhur tragedyasının Euripides tarafından ele alınışının Aristoteles'in *Poietika* eserinde ortaya koyduğu ilkeler uyarınca, Aristotelesçi bir bakış açısından analizini yapmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda bilhassa ahlaka aykırı bir tema ve karakterlere sahip olduğu varsayımıyla *Medea*'nın yanlış anlaşıldığı veya yanlış değerlendirildiği savunulmakta ve alışılanın dışında bir ahlak anlayışıyla *Medea*'nın aslında ahlaki olabileceği gösterilmeye çalışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aristoteles, Poietika, Euripides, Medea, Tragedya, Ahlak, Kadın.

1. Introduction

Euripides, a Greek poet who lived from 480 to 406 BC, was renowned for his tragedies, predominantly on topics regarding women, as is the case with *Medea*. Euripides has rewritten *Medea*, which was originally a traditional Greek tragedy. He has adopted many changes in his version; among these changes the addition of the monologue where Medea decides to murder his sons, and around which the whole tragedy revolves is the most significant, without a doubt (Snell 1960: 124).

The first performance of Euripides's *Medea* on stage dates approximately back to 431 BC (Hall 2007: 264), roughly 47 years before Aristotle was born. The characters of the play in his version in order of appearance can be listed as; the nurse, Medea's sons and their tutor, Medea, the chorus of Corinthian women, Creon the king of Corinth, Jason, Aegeus the king of Athens, and the messenger.

Medea is a –formerly- noble woman of many skills, powers and knowledge; who is the granddaughter of the Sun-god. This organic relation to the Sun-god and him setting a model for Medea (Fraden 2001: 52) is essential to the plot, as it exposes the passionate and heated nature of Medea, maybe more than the degree "suitable" to a woman (Euripides 1963: 50). Between the rational choice of Jason and irrational actions of Medea, the play may well be claimed to have a dual nature also manifested through other excesses, such as love and hatred, joy and sorrow, fidelity and betrayal.

Medea is an exceptional tragedy in many ways including the characters, the plot, the twists and certain tragic elements. However, what makes *Medea* a powerful story is that it points to the problems that women suffered from, in almost every culture including ours. Güngör Dilmen, a distinguished Turkish playwright and dramaturgist who lived in the 20th century, wrote an Anatolian adaptation of *Medea* named "*Kurban*", and mounted the production of the play in 1967, in Istanbul. The play tells the story of Zehra, the mother of two children, who is betrayed by her husband Mahmut; and has a tragic end very similar to Medea's.

Risking to be disliked, and mocked, and ridiculed by authorities, chiefly by Aristophanes (Mitchell-Boyask 2008: viii), Euripides chose to be the voice of the voiceless; the women. In *Medea* the nature of women is discussed in a way that has never been done before in Greek tragedy (Pohlenz 1954: 258). Despite the accusations for being a misogynist, Euripides wrote on women with strong passions, who had yet noble and admirable qualities (Allen 1876: 4). Medea is one of these women, who suffers solely of being a woman, let alone being a stranger woman in a strange land and Euripides aims at putting her misery on stage while questioning the moral status of her actions. Through citing Aristotle's criteria for a fine tragedy and challenging the claim that she is an immoral heroine, this study proposes an alternative perspective to evaluate Medea's actions as moral, given that she –together with the promises given to her- is abandoned for a more advantageous political alliance and thusly betrayed.

A summary of the play can be presented as follows.

2. *Medea*, the Tragedy

The play opens with the words of the nurse. She informs the audience about the desperation and the sadness her mistress Medea suffers from. As the nurse talks, she also hints the nature of Medea. Some of these harbingers are comprised of positive features, such as her tremendous love for her husband Jason; or how obedient and helpful she was to her husband; but some of antagonistic ones as this helpfulness involved her putting her own father and brother to death for Jason's benefit. However, now that Jason has abandoned her and their two sons, and is marrying to Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth; nurse says that Medea, a frightening woman, hates her children and admits the fear this instils in her. After the nurse summarizes the situation as it is, the tutor enters and gives the latest news, that are to only make Medea even more miserable. Creon, the king, decides to banish Medea and her two sons. Since Jason does not interfere with king's decision concerning his sons, he betrays not only his wife but his children as well. At this moment Medea is heard, before she is seen, which reveals her suffering even more, causing a more wretched scene.

As the chorus of Corinthian women shows their sympathy to Medea for the misery she is suffering, Medea comes out, surprisingly calm, silent, by contrast with the way she was heard from inside, hinting about her ambivalent nature. She gives the reasons for her agony as the marriage being unexpected for her, also Jason's being her only family as she is a stranger to Corinth. She already makes up her mind for revenge from her husband, Creon and her daughter even before facing the news about her banishment.

As the chorus soothes her, Creon approaches and notifies Medea regarding the exile of her and sons. He confesses that he fears her due to her reputation with her intelligence and the skills she owns, and acknowledges what an irreparable harm she might do to him and his princess. Throughout her dialogue with Creon we witness a whole different Medea, almost unrecognizable, who is weak, vulnerable, also admitting that the king and the princess did nothing wrong, so she does not intend to hurt them. She asks and begs Creon for one more day in order to prepare and settle a plan for the verdict for their exile. Creon grants her this one more day before their banish, placing his confidence in her inability to accomplish in one day what he is afraid of.

After Creon leaves, Medea informs the audience that she fawned over Creon to gain her real purpose and declares her plan; the death of her three enemies, the king, the princess and her husband. Being the daughter of a king and the granddaughter of the Sun-god she is never to invite laughter from those three.

Then Jason arrives and tells Medea that although she hates him he cannot let them sent away with an empty purse, unprovided. However, this considerate gesture frustrates Medea instead of calming her, inflaming her confession about the past concerning everything she has done for Jason; a confession the audience hears from Medea for the first time. After she has saved his life at the deadly furrow and once more fighting with the serpent, lit the torch to his success and deceived her own father and left her home, and put King Pelias to death, and gave him two sons; after all these sacrifices, it was Jason who betrayed her. In need to defend himself Jason reminds her about her uplift from the barbarous homeland of hers to the civilized land of the Greek,

ruled by law and justice. Albeit he marries someone else, in Jason's eyes that doesn't purport to a betrayal; since he made this choice wisely, out of neither passion nor desire, but only of pure reason. His decision was made for his children and Medea's benefit, ensuring their future by providing them a rich, royal, powerful, secure life; all legitimate reasons according to Jason, none of which convinces Medea.

Following Jason's exit, Aegeus, the king of Athens, enters the stage. Aegeus recently paid a visit to the ancient oracle of Apollo in Delphi, the home of prophecy, and asked for a fertile seed. Medea, recognized by Aegeus for her brain and skills, promises him to end his sterility and beget children in exchange of a safe home in Athens, after her exile from Corinth. As the oaths given reciprocally, Aegeus leaves and Medea transforms her plan to its final version. She decides to call Jason back and admit he was right about her being wrong and that their sons should stay in Corinth with their father. This is the only way she can perform her plot, her hidden agenda; killing the princess with the help of her sons. And it is through this monologue, Medea suddenly sets her mind to the expected tragedy; murdering her own sons. As hurtful as this sounds, to her there is no life of her own; even if there is, it has no significance or meaning anymore. So sacrificing her life for the sake of revenge, her ultimate goal becomes making Jason suffer to the utmost degree possible. In accordance with her purpose, Medea calls Jason back, behaves calmly and lovely, and eventually convinces Jason to take his sons to the palace to ask the king for the suspension of their banishment. She succeeds to send her sons together with the tutor to the royal palace along with Jason holding the casket with a dress and a golden coronet anointed by deadly poison, as her wedding gift to the princess.

Tutor returns with good news, that the princess welcomes her sons. As what Medea asked for is accepted and her sons can stay at Corinth, her dilemma starts to ascend. She is weaker now, as the fortitude her revenge gave her is no more. She is doubtful whether she can hold on to her plans anymore, since she does not have the courage to do so. Nevertheless, as the fear of being looked down by her enemies seems

harder to her; and as she cannot allow her enemies hurt her sons for revenge of her murders, Medea justifies the infanticide, that rejuvenating her strength.

While Medea is expecting the news from the royal palace, a messenger approaches advising her to escape since both the king and the princess are dead now. Despite the joy these news give her, she seeks for details, hoping they died horribly which can only double her pleasure. After giving her the details she is delighted to hear, the messenger leaves; Medea decides that it is time for her to execute the rest of her plan and kill her sons. Looking for the vile murderess of her bride and father-in-law Jason comes to Medea, where he is to receive the news about his sons' murders by their mother's hands. It obviously is sad for the both of them, and Jason wishes to touch their skin and kiss their lips, a wish harshly refused by Medea. In the end, Medea is the victorious not only because she has caused Jason's suffering by destroying his both previous and next family, but also she is still the only one to own her sons' flesh. And as Jason bemoans to gods, Medea moves out of sight, beginning her promised journey to Athens alone.

3. *Poetics*

As *Medea*, the tragedy portrayed by Euripides can be thusly summarized, now it will be analyzed in the light of the principles from Aristotle's *Poetics* (περὶ ποιητικῆς). Aristotle holds almost a scientific approach to poetry, setting law-like principles that a fine tragedy should have and useful rules for the guidance of dramatists (Arnott 1959: 39). In each section after explaining the primary rules given by Aristotle, it will be examined whether *Medea* satisfies them.

3.1. Of the Plot

To Aristotle, of the six formal elements of a tragedy, which are structure of events or the plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle; the structure of events is the most important. This is due to the fact that being the medium of imitation, a tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but "of actions and of life" (Aristotle 1922: 25). Hence, both well-being and ill-being reside in action, along with the characters who are the

initiators of the action the tragedy aims to imitate. So the course of events, i.e. the plot, is the reason tragedy comes to existence; therefore making it the most significant and key element of a tragedy. In this respect Aristotle claims that the real arena the poet will exhibit his competence is not the verse or the measure as is usually assumed, but it is the plot (Aristotle 1922: 35).

Here Aristotle claims that the most important component of a tragedy and the thing that should be imitated through the tragedy is the plot, and it is what tragedy represents. This is essential to all tragedies; to *Medea* as well. Medea as a character is irrefragably a very fundamental part of the tragedy, and she also takes place in most scenes of the play. However, it is not Medea's character that is emphasized during this tragedy. It is rather the tragic story of her, and eventually of her family that is at the center. The fact that Jason has betrayed her is neither a sheer nor a direct repercussion of her character, nor can her last action be claimed to be an absolute result of her evil character, but rather an inevitable consequence of the plot. Obviously it cannot be claimed that everyone in her shoes would behave the same way as she did; there surely is a linkage to her character. Nevertheless, it is the plot that drove her to the edge and left her no choice other than her final act. In connection with this, the ingenuity of Euripides's version of the play is exhibited through the monologue aforementioned, where Medea considers her options and decides her final act, hinting that it is the course of events, hence the plot that pushed her to this end. In *Medea*, the tragedy is strong in plot, rather than mere characters, satisfying this criterion of Aristotle's.

3.1.1. Of Fear and Pity, or Catharsis

Collaterally to the aforementioned element, Aristotle claims there could not be a tragedy without any action (Aristotle 1922: 25). Reference to action is essential in Aristotle's conception of tragedy and as it is in his philosophy. Mimicry, or imitation in this case, is central to his philosophy, especially to his ethics, as it has a pedagogical value above all, a point we will refer to later in detail. A tragedy without an action, or a tragedy that is built merely upon the character cannot be successful.

As he breaks the first and the most important element of a tragedy, i.e. the plot down into its constituents, Aristotle refers to reversal and recognition (*peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*) as major components of a tragedy. These parts of the plot are the most important devices through which the tragedy sways emotions of fear (*phobos*) and pity (*eleos*), also known as "catharsis" (Aristotle 1922: 23).

Catharsis can be defined simply as the purgation of emotions of fear and pity from the audience (Shields 2016). This definition seems simple, however, what Aristotle meant by the purgation of these feelings is still a debated issue. What Aristotle means by purgation of fear and pity may be that since these are suppressed feelings they need to be lifted up to the surface, or it may be completely getting them out of one's system with the aid of tragedies and thusly being and living free of these cumbersome feelings. The discussion on the true nature of purgation is not in the scope of this study, and it is not necessary to the nature of this study either. So, an ordinary concept of catharsis as the purgation of emotions of fear and pity will suffice for our present purposes.

Aristotle asserts that these feelings of pity and fear are aroused most when family members harm one another, rather than enemies or strangers, as in the case of *Medea*. He claims that if two enemies kill each other there is nothing tragic in this event, since this is not unforeseen. To him when this happens between closed friends or family members; there appears a tragic element. Of these close relationships Aristotle gives the possible tragic combinations such as when "brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother- or is on the verge of killing them, or does something else of the same kind" (Aristotle 1922: 49-51). Illustrating a perfect example for the mother killing son type, *Medea* indeed does both: holding the reputation from her earlier life as murderer of her own family to which she was born into, Medea first murders the royal family and then her own sons.

One way to elicit fear and pity is when the heroine goes from good fortune to bad fortune, or even misery, as a result of her own doings. This end should be an inevitable one, and involve a sense of surprise but not of chance, as mentioned earlier. In the case of *Medea*, before she puts her plan into action she stresses the point that she "must" kill

her own sons (Euripides 1963: 55) and that it is "inevitable" (Euripides 1963: 55). She even thinks that "no other thing is possible" (Euripides 1963: 42). This is the case, because after she murders the princess and Creon the king, people of Corinth will seek for revenge, and her sons will be affected and maybe become the victim of this revenge. Consequently, in order to save her sons from other people's slaughter, she, their mother who gave birth to them should kill them. It should also be emphasized that these are all a result of the plot, not of her character, another crucial point Aristotle considered. The remark by Aristotle concerning reversal and recognition, i.e. they "must arise from the actual structure of the plot", is perfectly compatible with Medea's case (Aristotle 1922: 39). Therefore, the flow of events brings them to the present situation they are in and it is intrinsic to the actual structure of the plot.

As to the preparing her own end with her own fair hands, Medea is witnessed confessing to her sins many times, and acknowledging these sins as the main cause of the misery she suffers. The lines from the play such as "my own evil-hearted plots, have led to this" (Euripides 1963: 42), "o my father, my city, you I deserted; my brother I shamefully murdered!" (Euripides 1963: 22) indicate this end's being a result of her own flaws and errors. Here the only problem is Aristotle's further clarification regarding the hero of the tragedy, which is as follows: "This is the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change of bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind" (Aristotle 1922: 45) While mentioning the certain features of the characters Aristotle lists some possibilities; however, none of these is able to evoke fear and pity. They may evoke some other feelings, but what is significant is fear and pity which cannot be present in such cases. So he claims there is only one possibility left and this possibility is described in the quotation above. This person will not be outstanding in moral excellence or justice. So it is highly probable for this person to make a mistake, and cause the tragedy. Here the bad fortune is characterized with not some moral defect but with an erring. So, according to this possible scenario Aristotle describes the structure as hero's committing some terrible error unknowingly and then emergence of

recognition, leading to the tragedy. In *Medea*'s final act on the other hand, when she slaughters her sons, or her actions leading to this end, are definitely not due to an error. This is a planned murder, a rational deliberate choice. Although the plot in a way left her no other choice, she knew that they were her children, and did what she did knowingly. However, this still doesn't mean *Medea*'s character is not in accordance with the hero Aristotle describes; a complicated matter that will be discussed later.

The essential point of tragedies is a person's fortune turning from good to bad, or vice versa; or the unfortunate events that the hero or the heroine has to face. Only through intense turns or severe changes the spectator will experience fear and pity, the main functions of a tragedy, if not the most essential. Aristotle praises these very events' happening spontaneously or based on its own momentum, as the purgation of fear and pity will be achieved more successfully which are feelings a tragedy is supposed to deliver. And through reversal and recognition these emotions can be summoned successfully.

As to this criterion, an explicit recognition cannot be found in *Medea*. If the moment she kills her children were to be considered as an unconscious one, then the moment following their death may be regarded as recognition. Nonetheless, I believe this would be incorrect. This is because *Medea* deliberately murders her sons; although not planned from the very beginning, but still consciously planned and voluntarily put into action. Therefore, this moment cannot be considered as a recognition. There is not a genuine "uncovering" of any hidden relations or facts, not of the kind that Aristotle looks for.

As opposed to this, the other component, i.e. the reversal is surely observed in *Medea*. In the beginning, *Medea*, Jason and their two sons were a family; and they were recognized as one by the people of Corinth (Euripides 1963: 17). The change they went through can best be summarized with the words of the nurse: "Jason's house? It no longer exists; all that is finished" (Euripides 1963: 21). This verse implies that "it was" a house aforesaid, and that it is not anymore. Nevertheless, one can oppose this claim on reversal as well. From the opening line of the tragedy to the final, *Medea* is seen

suffering in constant agony. Her "wounds", or her "collapsing in agony", or her "learning through pain", or her "suffering in her own heart" are just few depictions of Medea that can be found in the first 50 lines. The audience is being informed through the lines of certain characters that they used to have a good fortune before it "reversed" to bad fortune; however during the tragedy the audience never witnesses this state of well being. There is reversal in the plot for sure; but it is an informed reversal the audience learns through the dialogues, rather than a witnessed reversal. So, the element of reversal in *Medea* might be open to question as well as the element of recognition. Hence, it can be claimed that Euripides's plot may have the characteristics of reversal, at least to some degree; although not of recognition at all.

To Aristotle, another praisable aspect that is to be found in a tragedy is reasoning. However, what Aristotle means here is not a rational inference or an argumentation, but rather the ability to say what is implicit in a situation and appropriate to that situation, "which in prose is the function of the arts of statesmanship and of rhetoric" (Aristotle 1922: 29). As the poets of the tragedies decide the way their characters talk and behave as they do, Euripides and Medea can be evaluated in this sense. Medea, as a character, is a clever woman, how much evil she is and she might have done. She knows well enough what to say and when to say, a skill bestowed upon her by her creator Euripides. Just by using her words, Medea has the ability not only to infuriate Jason (Euripides 1963: 31-32), but also to convince Creon, the king of Corinth, when she asks for one more day to stay in Corinth (Euripides 1963: 26), in addition to grant a place for herself in Athens after her encounter with the king Aegeus (Euripides 1963: 39-40). Thus, she – or her words- can be said to be appropriate or in tone with her initial purpose, eventually bringing her the triumph, as debatable as it is. If the whole text of *Medea*, is taken into consideration, it will be observed that Euripides is never lost in unnecessary or irrelevant details, but reaches directly to the heart of the subject. In relation to what Aristotle says in his *Poetics*, this is yet another praisable aspect of *Medea*, hence of Euripides as a poet.

As emphasized before, to Aristotle, the first and foremost component of a tragedy is the plot or the structure of events. Tragedy being the imitation or representation of action, Aristotle further questions what qualities the plot should have regarding action. To that end, he argues that "the tragedy is an imitation of a complete, i.e. whole, action, possessing a certain magnitude" (Aristotle 1922: 31). However, "a certain magnitude" is a vague term, requiring further specification. Since such a determination cannot be achieved through quantitative amounts, Aristotle puts forth the criterion of "having a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory" (Aristotle 1922: 33). Through these lines of Aristotle, plenty can and will be inferred regarding *Medea*.

3.1.2. Of Action

First of all, a tragedy should consist of a whole, complete action; meaning that a plot cannot imitate an action without a proper beginning or an end; or not even with a loose end. This structure should be built in an orderly way. Also it should have a certain magnitude, and the ideal magnitude which, according to Aristotle, is being memorable and materializing within a day. The single day criterion is aimed at revealing the quick devolution of the hero. *Poetics* is not only a work on what constitutes a fine poetry, but also what constitutes a fine tragedy. That is why what Aristotle strives to comprehend in this work is not only the constituents of a fine tragedy as a written work of art, but also the verbal production on stage, rendering memory an important factor since it is impossible to rewind.

Euripides's *Medea*, in this sense, satisfies Aristotle's criteria. It takes place within a day; thus it answers the criterion of ideal magnitude, i.e. being memorable; so that the audience can keep track of the plot. It imitates a whole and complete action, "a single action" (Aristotle 1922: 111) as well, another criterion set forth by Aristotle. It certainly has a beginning, and an end, and a middle connecting the former to the latter. Another genius aspect of the structure of events in *Medea* is how the marriage of Jason and Glauce has already been decided and is known to everyone, which shortens the tragedy

to a great extent. So every event, including the devolution of Medea, happens within a single day, satisfying the ultimate measure of length; i.e. being held in memory.

Nonetheless, the advantage that comes with the magnitude may raise other issues regarding the plot. According to Aristotle a tragedy should consist of "complication and resolution". Of these two components complication is the part that leads to the climax and resolution covers the part from the climax to the final. The complication is sometimes excluded from the play but often some of the complication is covered in the play (Aristotle 1922: 65). As to the complication, *Medea* offers almost nothing; some of the complication is conveyed only as information through narration, but no action takes place during the play that would amount to complication. The way Euripides arranged the plot is as though the story has already developed, and the play starts right at the climax. Of the resolution, *Medea* can be claimed to be a good tragedy, as there are no loose ends, as the play reaches the end the audience is not left with any questions about what happened to whom. Withal, since "both should be treated with equal care" according to Aristotle (Aristotle 1922: 67), a good resolution does not compensate for the absence of the complication. Hence, the advantage that comes with short magnitude becomes a disadvantage regarding the complication; and leads to an unbalanced handling of these two components; thusly dissatisfying Aristotle's criterion.

Unity is listed as the third most important element of the plot, right after completeness and magnitude. In order to correct a common misunderstanding about the relation between plot and the main character, Aristotle asserts that "...a plot is not (as some think) unified because it is concerned with a single person" (Aristotle 1922: 33). So, unity cannot be achieved merely by focusing on a single person. Aristotle gives the example of Homer and how Homer does not tell each event that Odysseus lived (Aristotle 1922: 33-35). In just the same way as Homer does, Euripides does not mention each and every event about Medea, but only the ones related or relevant to the main theme. Furthermore, Euripides does not even mention every event relevant to the main theme explicitly, but only implies them through the dialogue as in the case of Medea's "reputation" regarding her past (Euripides 1963: 26); and when he mentions

Medea's past, of Pelias and his daughters and her own father, it serves his purposes of revealing how dangerous she is capable of being. It is not any inutile information regarding her history, but conveying the message regarding Medea and her character that will contribute to the plot. Hence, as the imitation should be of "a single and unified action" (Aristotle 1922: 31), these remarks concerning *Medea* are in accordance with Aristotle's requirements.

Dwelling on a single and unified action is a necessary condition a fine tragedy should satisfy, but not a sufficient one according to Aristotle. He stresses that an imitation cannot be of "just a complete action, but also of events that evoke fear and pity" (Aristotle 1922: 39) as mentioned above. A tragedy's ability to cause feelings of fear and pity, also referred to as "astonishment", is an essential feature enabling the plot to function. These feelings of fear and pity are evoked from the audience the best, when the factor of chance is replaced with the factor of surprise. In this sense *Medea* demonstrates a perfect example. *Medea* is not merely an imitation of any action, but of a unified action of an optimal magnitude. Neither it is an imitation of an ordinary action, nor told in an ordinary way. Euripides presents the psychology of Medea with a flawless perfection. During the play, Medea is seen experiencing various states of mind, each created by certain course of events. Among these states of mind some can be sympathized, which are to be classified as pity; such as being betrayed, or being banished, or having no land or no identity, or one's urge to protect her own blood, her family. On the other hand some of these states the audience can only fear; like her brutal murders of her own father, brother and sons, along with the royal family. The former ones, i.e. events evoking pity can happen to anyone, portraying Medea as an ordinary figure; however, the latter ones that evoke fear make Medea the unique character she is. Therefore, if "tragedy should be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity" (Aristotle 1922: 41), *Medea* elicits both these emotions successfully, revealing the intensity of Euripides's mind and writing.

3.1.3. Of Tragic Ends

For Aristotle the best tragedy's structure goes from good fortune to bad fortune; accordingly he praises Euripides since he "follows this principle in his plays, many of which end unhappily" (Aristotle 1922: 47). As Euripides wrote a number of plays with spectacularly unhappy endings (Lucas 1968: 147), what he did is actually the correct thing to do from an Aristotelian point of view, since it is how a tragedy should end according to Aristotle. Although Aristotle criticizes his technique, he also recognizes Euripides as "the most tragic of poets" (Aristotle 1922: 47). Since, along with his many other plays, *Medea* has an indubitably tragic final, it satisfies this criterion put forth by Aristotle as well. Nevertheless, in *Poetics* Aristotle rates Euripides well below the poets of traditional tragedies such as Sophocles, claiming that Euripides's heroes are unheroic and he creates unsatisfactory plots. In my opinion Aristotle discards the possibility of Euripides's having another agenda like inventing a new genre altogether, instead of following traditional tragedies. As claimed above, Euripides forthrightly criticizes traditional tragedies and their poets, in an effort to be the voice of women of the ancient world. This view of his is made explicit in the verses "male poets of past ages, with their ballads of faithless women, shall go out of fashion" (Euripides 1963: 29) holding the wish that "a time comes when the female sex is honoured" (Euripides 1963: 29-30). Hence, Euripides can surely be claimed to be a revolutionary artist, fighting against the traditional works of his era which brings up the matters of morality and justice.

3.1.4. Of Morality

Aristotle's ethical theory occupies a tremendous place in his philosophy. In most of the subjects he works in, there usually is a connection to ethics; and tragedy is not an exception in this sense. Hereinbefore tragedy has pedagogical value. If humanbeings learn through mimicry or imitation –as Aristoteles claims they do-, tragedy, being an imitation of action or of real life, gives the opportunity to simulate and hence relate to life without actually experiencing. So tragedy can be used as an internalizing mechanism by the spectator as she witnesses the suffering, fear and pity. In this sense, *Medea* has always been considered as an example of "immoral tragedy", and that it does

not satisfy Aristotle's expectations (Snyder 1991: 87). Therefore, it can be asserted that *Medea* does not fulfill the main purpose of a tragedy. As valid as this sounds, there exists a huge drawback in this line of thought.

As mentioned earlier, according to Aristotle, the bad fortune a hero has to face in a tragedy cannot be "due to any moral defect or depravity" of his character (Aristotle 1922: 45-47). A hero necessarily should be a moral character, and a fine tragedy cannot cast an immoral hero. If it does cast an immoral heroine, then it fails to create feelings of fear and pity; since an evil heroine's suffering as a result of her own evilness is nothing to be pitied, nor can it be feared since the spectator can easily distance herself from the character and break the bond she is supposed to maintain. Nevertheless, I strongly argue that *Medea* as a tragedy is not immoral just like *Medea* as a character is not immoral, nor evil. In order to grasp this, a new perspective on morality is required. Before doing this a brief account of Aristotle's ethics will be given.

According to Aristotle everything aims at and is directed towards a good; and the highest and ultimate good in a person's life that doesn't serve as a means to another end and desired for itself is *eudaimonia*, which is usually translated as happiness (Aristotle 1925: 4-15). This ultimate good cannot be something that is shared by animals or plants, hence must be peculiar to human; and the only thing that makes human unique is reason. Thus, it cannot be mere life, but rather a life of rational nature. This requires working of the soul in accordance with reason in the way of excellence or virtue, and must be reflected in the actions of the person. Then, there is no higher end than a life centered on the exercise of moral virtue –which requires behaving in accordance with a mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess (Aristotle 1925: 37-40)- and practical wisdom (Broadie 1991: 324). Aristotle puts great emphasis on the action and practice, since morality can only be achieved through exercise and thusly the workings in the way of virtue determine whether happiness is attained. This is the reason why it is not inborn or god given, but can only be a result of a process of learning and training (Aristotle 1925: 18) and the nature of these actions determine happiness, hence their

morality (Aristotle 1925: 30). Since Medea's actions are not virtuous at all, she cannot be moral either, consequently *Medea* fails to be a moral tragedy.

However, deciding Medea's immorality, requires more than the number of murders she has committed. These murders, how voluntarily they might be committed, don't prove Medea's immorality; that is a judgment which gradually depends on how morality is defined. Following this idea, Euripides demonstrates how morality is not a definite concept, rather a relative or psychological one on the contrary. If someone or some action is to be condemned as immoral, the boundaries of morality, or of right and wrong has to be redetermined.

Euripides, knowingly, pushes the audience to draw the line between right and wrong; hence forces them to question where to draw it. If what Medea did was wrong, then what should have she done? She has helped her husband with all the power she has from the very beginning, which is an essential trait of a "good" and "committed" wife; she killed her own father because he didn't let her marry Jason, showing her "love" to Jason; she used her skills in order to save Jason's life, a trait of a "wise" wife; and finally she didn't let her sons suffer in stranger's hands, which is a sign of a "compassionate" mother. Taking these points into consideration, it is not as easy to claim that Medea is evil.

Aside from these, another reason for the alleged immorality of Medea can be revealed by probing into the Greek culture. According to this cultural understanding back then, women are expected to have traits of obedience, respect, and acceptance, all of which Medea lacks and hence considered immoral as a heroine. By making her own decisions and performing fully independent actions, Medea goes against her nature as a woman (Mulgan 1994: 180), and rebels against her husband's ruling.

A supporting evidence to this view can be found in Aristotle, who too restricts women to a subordinate role in the household (Mulgan 1994: 180). This restriction is due to the differences between male and female sexes, which is declared in Aristotle's theory of sexual reproduction. According to this theory the female simply provides the

matter, while the male semen provides the rational principle for the embryo. And when the male semen has an imperfect grip on the matter, the occurring embryo is a female. That is the reason why women are rationally inferior to men, as the part providing rationality is not perfectly realized in the embryo (Mulgan 1994: 196). And according to Aristotle, this is also the reason why women are more emotional, more passive, more compassionate, more jealous, more querulous (Mulgan 1994: 197). As a result of these differences in their natural capacities, women should be ruled by the ruler, i.e. men.

However, women are not devoid of all rational faculties, they too have a deliberative element but it lacks in authority (Mulgan 1994: 197). By men's ruling over women, as a consequence of their nature (Annas 1999: 49), this authority is put into action and the subordination of women is justified.

All these add up to the justification of Jason's betrayal in the eyes of Greeks or that Medea was evil. However, accepting the power or rationale of men would certainly not make every action they perform or decision they make legitimate. Since neither these cultural assents nor Aristotle's theory of reproduction justifies Jason's actions, it can be asserted that Medea is incorrectly condemned to be immoral.

3.1.5. Of Justice

Another way to decide who the real evil character in this tragedy is, considering the doings of Jason, since Medea does what she does as a reaction to them. Euripides foreshadows concerning the behaviours and personality of Jason, through the lines of different characters. For instance Aegeus, another male character, considers Jason's behaviours as "shameful" (Euripides 1963: 38) and "disgraceful" (Euripides 1963: 39); or the nurse sees his betrayal as "Jason's wickedness" (Euripides 1963: 18) and thinking that Jason "spurns and insults her" (Euripides 1963: 18) judges him as "guilty" (Euripides 1963: 19). And finally Medea, being the victim of the betrayal, considers herself as the one whose "all hopes deceived" (Euripides 1963: 32) and considering her selfless effort for Jason, asks him "what service I once rendered you, and how you have repaid me" (Euripides 1963: 59). Therefore, Jason has to pay his dues as a result of his

own doings in order for justice to be restored, since he is obviously not innocent in anyway.

Acknowledging these facts, Euripides in fact proposes a reconsideration of justice. From what is witnessed in this tragedy, laws exhibit injustice in themselves, they do not suffice on their own neither to establish nor to secure justice. Thus, a more inclusive and broader sense of justice is needed. Medea, as much as any other human being, should acquire rights not because she is a citizen of a certain city, but because she is simply a human. For instance, as the chorus, along with Medea seeks justice, they claim that "to punish Jason will be just" (Euripides 1963: 25) or "today we see the will of heaven, blow after blow, bring down on Jason justice and calamity" (Euripides 1963: 55), equating justice with calamity for Jason; recognizing this calamity as "earned". Or since "there is no justice in the world's censorious eyes" (Euripides 1963: 24), the establishment of a new justice of their own is proposed. And when the chorus talks to Medea, they stress their wish as "to uphold the laws of human life" (Euripides 1963: 42), not referring to the rights acquired from the city by free citizens, but by "life" as they are all human.

In addition, as mentioned above Medea is not from Corinth; she is an Asiatic barbarian, a stranger to the Greek land. Hence, even if she is married to Jason and recognized by the society as a wife, in the eyes of the law she cannot claim her marriage and cannot claim any rights that she should have through her marriage. So, Medea is not a "savage beast" or a "vile murderess", as Jason claims (Euripides 1963: 61), but a lonely miserable woman, whose hands are tied, without any rights, or any power or constitution to assure her rights.

Furthermore, the way Euripides wrote the play indicates that the foundation upon which morality is built, is not as secure as it is thought to be. As to the ethical code, Medea criticizes Jason on the grounds that "respect for oaths has gone to the wind". She further asks him "do you, I wonder, think that the old gods no longer rule? Or that new laws are now in force" (Euripides 1963: 31-32); meaning that there is no right and wrong anymore. The old laws where one is supposed to hold on to their oaths do not

function anymore, so no one is to be relied what oath they might take. Or when the chorus says "streams of the sacred rivers flow uphill; tradition, order, all things are reversed" (Euripides 1963: 29), and "the grace of sworn oaths is gone" (Euripides 1963: 30), and "honour remains no more" (Euripides 1963: 30), they refer to the fact that it is a different world now where old laws are useless and justice is not to be found in its own flow. Accordingly, this new world order demands new rules since the old ones are not in force anymore.

What Euripides does in this tragedy should not be considered as promoting evil over the good and the virtuous. Medea herself confesses that what she did was "impious" (Euripides 1963: 60) and "evil-hearted" (Euripides 1963: 50), so it is obvious that this is not a manifestation of evil as the new good. However, what he does is a reevaluation of right and wrong from a more Nietzschean perspective, rather than an Aristotelian one. This means that since the old laws are no more valid and since no oath is to be trusted as it used to be, a point quoted both from Medea and the chorus above, new laws are required to establish morality. And in order to establish new laws, as proposed, the old ones need to be destroyed. This understanding of morality seems to be psychological, which takes the agents' emotions as the primary and principle source. The nurse describes Medea's state of mind "as her anger rises, deep in passion and unrelenting" (Euripides 1963: 20), and despite the horror her plans evoke in her, Medea admits her "anger" "masters her resolve" (Euripides 1963: 50). So, there exists an undeniable conflict between the reason and the sentiment, and Euripides, in a way, questions why one should be superior to other, in the unique manner of his. As has been pointed out before, Medea is a disowned, alone, feared and banished woman who has been betrayed by her husband and cannot even seek her rights; so her actions –or reactions- cannot be reduced to a question of "jealousy" as Jason claims (Euripides 1963: 34). There is more to it than mere jealousy of the opposite sex; it is rather a question of social rights, of human rights and the big question of what justice is.

3.2. Of the Chorus

According to Aristotle chorus, another female figure in the play, should be an important part of the tragedy. He argues that the chorus should be handled as "one of the actors" and should be considered as a "part of the whole", and should "contribute to the performance" like an actor does. Aristotle claims that Euripides's plays fail to satisfy this criterion (Aristotle 1922: 69). This is because in his tragedies the role of the chorus is restricted. However, in the case of *Medea*, the chorus has the most essential role of all.

First of all, one of the most stressed features of Medea's character is her being an exile. Throughout the play Medea is repeatedly depicted as "alone" (Euripides 1963: 35), "a stateless refugee" (Euripides 1963: 36), "a wanderer" (Euripides 1963: 28), "disowned" (Euripides 1963: 38), "an exile" (Euripides 1963: 44) and finally being an exile from another exile (Euripides 1963: 48). This is because originally Medea is not from Corinth, but she is an Asiatic wife (Euripides 1963: 34) from a barbarous land that she has left to become a citizen of Hellas (Euripides 1963: 33). Thus, the fact that the chorus in *Medea* consists of a group of women who are native to Corinth, serves Euripides's goals in the most perfect way. In many scenes during the play the chorus is seen welcoming Medea, and showing her sympathy when they say "tell her (Medea) we are all on her side" (Euripides 1963: 23), or recognizing Jason's betrayal through the lines such as "her husband who has betrayed her" (Euripides 1963: 23) and "disregarding right and loyalty, your husband has abandoned you" (Euripides 1963: 47). This group of Corinthian women stand by Medea while they cast Jason out. These instances can be found through the lines such as "he (Jason) shall be no friend of mine" (Euripides 1963: 33), or "bring down on Jason justice and calamity" (Euripides 1963: 55). Therefore, how small or massive their part might be, the chorus in *Medea* serves as an intermediary to justify Medea's feelings; an objective mind outside of her who share her feelings concerning Jason and "justice", which has been discussed above.

4. Conclusion

Medea, has been misjudged as immoral for ages; but on the contrary, it questions the very core of the society and the laws that rule the society. Euripides pushes his audience to the edge, with a strong and overwhelming plot, which makes the audience feel uncomfortable, in accordance with his plan. In my opinion the audience's comfort is not Euripides's concern at all. If new laws are to be founded and put into action, the old ones should be destroyed, which seems to be the hidden agenda in *Medea*. Being wrongly accused of misogyny for centuries, Euripides's reputation should be restored. Considering his attempt for the restoration of women's honour Euripides may even be revalued as an early feminist, and *Medea* as a manifestation of feminism. Seeking for the repayment of justice, Euripides raises brilliant questions on many controversial topics such as the reputation of women, the distribution of justice and social rights and of course more generally human rights. In addition to this, his technique satisfies Aristotle's criteria in many ways; although it should be admitted that *Medea* fails to fulfill some of them. Among these failures, recognition seems to be the most essential, and complication of the plot following it. As to the question of morality, *Medea*, the heroine, can never be considered as moral in the Aristotelian sense. This is mainly due to her motives which are emotional, while they should have been in line with reason and virtues according to Aristotle. In addition to reason her actions do not purport to any virtues, nor approach any mean whatsoever that should be in between two vices. If anything *Medea* would be considered by Aristotle to be on point of the vices of excess. All in all, eventhough she fails to satisfy conditions for being moral put forth by Aristotle, from an atypical perspective her actions would not necessarily qualify as immoral.

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