

Literary Criticism in Euripides' *Medea* *

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In the first stasimon of the *Medea*, we find the following verses which echo Hesiod's famous description of the iron age.

Gone is the grace that oaths once had. Through all the breadth of Hellas honour is found no more; to heaven hath it sped away.¹⁾ (439-440)

To the chorus of the Corinthian women, the attitude and behaviour of Jason and the Corinthian royal family toward *Medea* are indications of the final days of the iron age. On the other hand, it is indeed in this play that the chorus sings the well-known hymn of Athens which praises in highly elevated tone "Athens, city of the Muses, the ideal of civilized splendour, where *Sophia* and the Loves are in harmony."²⁾

The *Medea* was produced in the early spring in 431 B. C., almost concurrently with the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, and the beautiful praise of Athens was in fact the last testimony to the golden fifty years since the time of the victory of the Persian War. "This description of an ideal Athens, set in a play in which a husband cynically betrays a wife and a mother murders her children, was sung in the theatre of Dionysus at the

* This is a revised and slightly simplified version of what I had originally written in Japanese for *Pedilavium*, No. 27, 1988.

1) The English translation is taken from *Seven Famous Greek Plays*, (Modern Library College Edition), edited, with Introductions, by W. J. Oates and E. O'Neill, Jr. 1938 (*Medea*, translated by E. P. Coleridge).

2) P. E. Easterling, *The Infanticide of Euripides' Medea*, Y. C. S. 25, 1977, p.191.

very moment when what it described was about to disappear forever.”³⁾ In other words, Athens in the hymn is more unreal than real, while the dramatic world of Corinth and those characters prominent in it, i.e. *Medea*, Jason and Creon, are the images of the Athens of reality.

B. Knox emphasises Euripides' “prophetic vision” as one of many different aspects of his tragic mood.⁴⁾ In 431 B. C. the people were apparently enjoying flowering prosperity, therefore the praise of Athens in this play and in Pericles' famous funeral oration delivered a few months later was not out of place in the current of the times. At this apex of Athenian civilization, however, Euripides, the poet as prophet, as Knox calls him, was already able to see the sign of its corruption. I would say that his was a kind of eschatological vision of seeing the present from the approaching end. It does not mean that Euripides merely passed a death sentence upon Athens of 5th century B. C. and its civilization. He also saw beyond. Euripides was indeed a religious poet of the 5th century who dedicated his tragedies to the Festival of the Great Dionysia , and in that framework he presented as a Vates a new vision of the coming world of 4th century and later.

In the following part of this paper, I intend to bring to light an aspect of Euripides as a poet, something corresponding, I believe, to “prophetic vision” in Knox' terms, from a rather unusual angle of “literary criticism” found here and there in the *Medea* .⁵⁾ The plot of the *Medea* in itself has nothing to do with literary criticism. It is precisely because of this fact that in the verses on poetry or literary criticism which one unexpectedly comes across in this play, one may find the poet's own view of poetry, and consequently his view of the world. Let me start from a passage spoken by the nurse at the end of the *parodos* .

3) B. Knox, Euripides: The Poet as Prophet, P. Burian (ed.), *Directions in Euripidean Criticism: A collection of Essays*, 1985, p.3.

4) *ibid.* p.1.

5) Easterling points out that one of the recurrent themes in the *Medea* is that of song and Muses. Easterling. *op.cit.* p.191.

Wert thou to call the men of old time rude uncultured boors thou wouldst not err, seeing that they devised their hymns for festive occasions, for banquets, and to grace the board, a pleasure to catch the ear, shed o'er our life, but no man hath found a way to allay hated grief by music and the minstrel's varied strain, whence arise slaughters and fell strokes of fate to o'erthrow the homes of men. And yet this were surely a gain, to heal men's wounds by music's spell, but why tune they their idle song where rich banquets are spread? For of itself doth the rich banquet, set before them, afford to men delight. (190-203)

These lines are murmured by the nurse the moment that she enters the house in order to take *Medea* out. This is indeed a curious occasion for expressing ideas of poetry.⁶⁾ What the nurse means is clear in itself. She complains that the old poets have only brought additional pleasure to feasts and festivals which afford to men delight of themselves. No poet has ever devised songs to heal human miseries. One may wonder if this criticism is justified. In Book IX of the *Iliad*, for instance, there is the lonely figure of Achilles singing of glorious deeds of heroes (*Klea andrōn*) to console himself in grief. One may claim that Aeschylus and Sophocles were great tragic poets who sang the sufferings of human existence. Their tragedies can not have been mere pleasures accompanying banquets. Are these lines, then, only idle talk which the poet put in the nurse's mouth without any particular purpose? Should one not, therefore, inquire into the significance of these lines at all?

I think that one should consider the difference between Euripides and his predecessors in the context, so to speak, in which human miseries are sung. Euripides knew of course that he was a poet punting down the main stream of tragic poetry since Homer. Nevertheless, Euripides was also conscious of the difference that while other poets sang heroes' sufferings, he

6) *loc. cit.*

would sing ordinary persons' miseries, and he would sing to cure them. I consider this to be his manifesto that he would, as a poet, take up such a position so as to sympathize with ordinary people's sorrows. Is this not his declaration of independence from the heroic tradition since Homer, especially from Aeschylus and Sophocles?

Only so interpreted, the nurse's words may be accepted as not absolutely out of place in this context of the *parodos*. Just before these curious lines, the nurse said about *Medea*:

--albeit, she glares upon her servants with the look of a lioness with cubs, whenso anyone draws nigh to speak to her. (187-9)

The criticism of the old poets may be regarded as having something in common with the critical tone in the nurse's words as she describes the heroic, lioness-like attitude of *Medea*. But it is not so simple, since the human miseries indicated by the nurse are most naturally taken in the whole context of the *parodos* as stated in sympathetic reference to *Medea's* miseries.

How is the above stated contradiction to be solved? This is related to the question of how one sees the image of *Medea* in this play. B. Knox says that *Medea* is the only Sophoclean hero in all Euripides, in fact more Sophoclean than any character in Sophocles: heroes in Sophocles win heroic triumph but they feel themselves, sooner or later, abandoned by both gods and men; *Medea*, however, does not. Thus *Medea* becomes a *theos*.⁷⁾ But I consider, however, that there are in *Medea* two conflicting aspects from the very beginning: she is indeed a typical Greek hero but she is at the same time a mother and woman, hence her inner conflict revealed in the famous monologue (from 1019 to 1080). I wrote in detail about her inner conflict in another paper,⁸⁾ so I only present here the conclusion of the thesis. I believe

7) B. Knox, *The Medea of Euripides*, *Y. C. S.* 25, 1977, pp.193-225.

8) Shigenari Kawashima, *Man and Beyond in Euripides' Medea-Another Interpretation of 1062-3 and 1078-80-*, *Humanities* 21, International Christian University, Tokyo, 1988, pp.79-101 (in Japanese with summary in English).

that the heroic code is destined to fail in *Medea's* case. The heroic code is typically phrased by *Medea* herself as in the following:

--dangerous to foes and well-disposed to friends; for they win the fairest fame who live their life like me. (809-10)

But in order to be “dangerous to foes,” she must be not “well-dis-posed” but most “dangerous” to those she holds dearest i.e. her children. At this most crucial moment, however, unexpected help comes from the polar opposite: her 'mother-ness' which has so far resisted the heroic impulse in trying to spare her sons, paradoxically proves to be the very motive to kill them. She says:

Die they must in any case, and since 'tis so, why I, the mother who bore them, will give the fatal blow. (1062-3)

Is not giving both life and death the function of the Earth as Mother-goddess? Thus I suggest that *Medea* transcends here the human dimension to become a *theos*. But this is not an up-ward transcendence, i.e. transcendence from a hero to a *theos*, but a down-ward one: the human mother becomes a Mother-goddess. Thus, *Medea's* suffering is not understood to be that of a traditional hero any more but that of a mother and woman, or a straightforward human being.

When the nurse enters the house with the murmuring of “literary criticism,” *Medea* comes out and enumerates the miseries of being a woman. Her enumeration ends in the following words:

--for I would gladly take my stand in battle array three times o'er, than once give birth. (250-1)

Here *Medea* has clearly stated the sufferings proper to women. This is not, however, the sufferings of heroic women over against heroic men as traditional warriors. This is rather the expression of *Medea's* self-consciousness as a straightforward human being, a plain woman. So *Medea's* enumeration of miseries peculiar to women is an illustration of human miseries indicated

in the nurse's literary criticism. If this interpretation is accepted, the nurse's curious murmur is not taken to be completely out of context of the *Medea*-scene which it precedes.

Let me now turn to the first *stasimon*.

Strophe 1

Back to their source the holy rivers turn their tide. Order and universe are being reversed. 'Tis men whose counsels are treacherous, whose oath by heaven is no longer sure. Rumour shall bring a change o'er my life, bringing it into good repute. Honour's dawn is breaking for women's sex; no more shall the foul tongue of slander fix upon us.

Antistrophe 1

The songs of the poets of old shall cease to make our faithlessness their theme. Phoebus, lord of minstrelsy, hath not implanted in our mind the gift of heavenly song, else had I sung an answering strain to the race of males, for time's long chapter affords many a theme on their sex as well as ours. (410-30)

These verses are the first two stanzas of the *stasimon*. After this, the chorus sings of *Medea's* misfortune in the 3rd stanza, and proceeds to the last stanza which echoes Hesiod's description of the iron age, as I indicated in the very beginning of this paper. Now this *stasimon* starts with the chorus' response to *Medea's* decision to kill Jason, his new wife and Creon. The Corinthian women approve *Medea's* revenge plan, regarding the reversal of the positions of men and women as the revolution of order comparable to the adverse current of the holy rivers.

The 2nd stanza deals with the same situation from the view point of literary criticism. Since this follows the last line of the 1st stanza, i.e. "no more shall the foul tongue of slander fix upon us," I do not say that this is utterly out of context. In spite of that, the literary criticism is abrupt enough, and I cannot help regarding this as the poet's own voice rather than the Corinthian women's. The chorus sings first:

“The songs of the poets of old shall cease to make our faithlessness their theme.” (421-2)

The commentators are of course right in identifying those poets of old with Hesiod, Archilochus, Hipponax, Semonides, etc. One cannot deny that it was a tradition in the history of Greek literature to dwell on the faithlessness of women. Euripides himself was criticized by the “critics,” such as the women in Aristophanes' comedies, because he had created such wicked women as *Medea*, Phaedra and Steneboia. *Medea*, for example, makes a radical statement about women's nature (384-5, 407-9 etc.). No wonder Euripides was taken to be an agitator for men's contempt of women. In spite of all this, we cannot doubt that Euripides was a poet who was sympathetic with women and the weak. It meant a challenge right in front of the orthodox position of the poets in the 5th century Athens which was an absolutely male centered society at least in the political context. It was a declaration of a death-sentence against men's chauvinism, a radical position comparable to the adverse current of the holy rivers.

The chorus sings: “Phoebus, lord of minstrelsy, hath not implanted in our mind the gift of heavenly song, else had I sung an answering strain to the race of males, --(423-8).” This is a challenge against the Apollonian and male centered literary tradition. If one reads this statement in relation to the nurse's words at the end of the parodos, the implication becomes clear: the Apollonian poetry is not above the level of affording pleasures by slandering women in all male banquets; the true poetry is something that could cure the sorrows of the weak: this is how the new poetry should stand. I think Euripides implies here that this is the direction his tragic poetry follows. I dare to call this new poetry “Mother Earth poetry” over against traditional “Apollonian poetry,” in relation to the down-ward transcendence of *Medea*.

Next I would like to cast a glimpse at the *anapaest* part (1081ff) following *Medea's* famous monologue in which she finally comes to the dreadful

decision to kill her children

Oft ere now have I pursued subtler themes and have faced graver issues than woman's sex should seek to probe; but then e'en we aspire to culture, which dwells with us to teach us wisdom; I say not all; for small is the class amongst women-(one maybe shalt thou find 'mid many) -that is not incapable of wisdom. (1081-9)

After this preliminary remark, the chorus counts up the sorrows of women who must bring up children, yet may survive them. These lines certainly echo *Medea's* words which I have already referred to : “-for I would gladly take my stand in battle array three times o'er, than once give birth.” (250-1) What is remarkable here is the fact that the Corinthian women state their views by repeating some technical terms of literary criticism, such as *mythos* (“themes” in the above translation), *mousa* (“culture,” “wisdom”) and *sophia* (“wisdom”). Here I only dwell on the lines 1088-9. I think that by “one-'mid many-not incapable of wisdom,” Euripides indicates himself as the only tragic poet that could create such an impressive statue as *Medea*, because he truly sympathizes with women's miseries, therefore he alone knows their true greatness such as one finds in *Medea*.

Lastly I would consider the part just before the first stasimon , where *Medea* reveals her decision for revenge (364-409). This passage is different from those I have already taken up in the sense that it does not directly refer to literary criticism, nevertheless this is the place where one can see the self-portrait of the poet Euripides reflected in the image of *Medea* indirectly, therefore in a more subtle way. Here *Medea* begins to talk to the chorus as follows:

On all sides sorrow pens me in, who shall gainsay this? But all is not yet lost! think not so. (364-5)

Medea, apparently driven to the edge of despair, rises up for a counterattack. She even scorns the foolishness of Creon for granting her one day's postponement of exile (371-5). Then she proceeds to consider the method

for killing her three enemies. Here it is almost as if she enjoys imagining their murder. She says:

Now, though I have many ways to compass their death, I am not sure, friends, which I am to try first. Shall I get fire to the bridal mansion, or plunge the whetted sword through their hearts, softly stealing into the chamber where their couch is spread?- 'Twere best to take the shortest way-the way we women are most skilled in-by poison to destroy them. (376-85)

“She sees the whole course of her future plan in her mind's eye, and starts out of her reverie at the moment of triumph when she sees her victims dead.”⁹⁾ And then, *Medea* drives herself to the revenge, swearing by Hekate, the queen of Night.

Now what is noteworthy here is the fact that in this long monologue in which she considers the method for killing and states her decision, *Medea* speaks as if she were talking about composing poetry.¹⁰⁾ First of all she says, “Still there are troubles (*agōnes*) for the new bride, and for her bridegroom no light toil (366-7).” *Agōn* is, needless to say, the contest which fundamentally regulated the life of the ancient Greeks: the Olympic and other games, trials in law courts and orations, and dramatic contests dedicated to Dionysus are all called *agōns*. Here the surface meaning of *agōnes* is of course the agony which Jason and his new wife will have to face, fighting with *Medea*, but *Medea* herself seems to accept it as a challenge as though she was a wrestler participating in the Olympic games or a poet presenting his drama to the great *Dionysia*. In the whole monologue, as I have already indicated, there drifts about an almost leisurely mood in which *Medea* behaves as if she enjoys killing her enemies in her imagination, which is hardly appropri-

9) D. Page, *Euripides: Medea, the Text edited with Introduction and Commentary*, 1938, ad. 385.

10) cf. “She composes like a poet; her vengeance, like a victory ode, is made of a series of decisions that lead to most perfect expression of her purpose.” A Burnett, *Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge, C. P.*, 1973, p.14, n.24.

ate for a woman on the edge of despair. This is because *Medea* accepts the reality she faces as an *agōn* .

The word *agōn* comes again in 43, when she urges herself to enact the revenge.

On to the danger (*to deinon*). Now comes a struggle (*agōn*) needing courage. (403)

Here we also encounter another significant word: *to deinon* , which means on the surface “the dreadful thing” (“the danger” in the above translation), but also implies something “skillful” or “wonderful.” *Medea* presses herself to the “dreadful” revenge, but at the same time I think Euripides duplicates his own image as a poet in the figure of *Medea*, and drives himself so as to contribute a “wonderful,” astounding tragedy to the dramatic *agōn* at the great *Dionysia* . Not only that, in this monologue one also finds the related words of *sophia* and *techne*; , those conventional terms in literary criticism, repeated more than once (369, 382, 385, 401, 409). *Medea* indeed ponders the method for slaying her enemies in her imagination. This image of *Medea* is also the self-portrait of the poet himself devising the difficult turn in the plot; that is, how to develop the original plan of killing enemies into the tragic end of killing also one's own children. Thus we are prompted to see in the process of *Medea*'s revenge plan in the play the reflection of the process of Euripides' poetic contrivance which is *outside* the play. It is as though Euripides' self-consciousness as a new poet evolves alongside *Medea*'s powerful self-assertion as a woman.

If this interpretation is accepted, it will mean that the drama *Medea* is also a meta-drama. In conventional drama the dramatic action forms its own self-sufficient world independent of the poet's world, and the audience is absorbed in the dramatic world while the dramatic action lasts. But in the *Medea* Euripides superimposes his own world, especially his own views of poetry upon the dramatic action. This leads the audience to take a step back from the dramatic action, namely to stand “meta-dramatic,” and to think

about the essence of the play with the poet himself. Now concerning “metadrama” or “meta-tragedy” in Euripides, there is an illuminating thesis presented by C Segal in his excellent book on the *Bacchae*.¹¹⁾ The present paper has shown that some traces of this remarkable “modern” trend of Euripides were already apparent in the *Medea*, one of the earliest among his extant tragedies, even though this modern trend is not yet so dominant here as in the *Bacchae*, which is one of his last tragedies and the one concerned with Dionysus, the god of drama. This “modern” device is intrinsically connected with the fact that technical terms on poetry or literary criticism are of frequent occurrence in this play. Thus “metadrama” may be defined as a drama with literary criticism within itself. Euripides, a tragic poet, has proved himself already in the *Medea* to be a literary critic as well, turning his own play and his literary tradition into the objects of study. Literary criticism is the philosophy of literature. With the end of the 5th century B. C., the creativity of the Attic tragedy, which was the elevated self-expression of the city, was exhausted, and philosophy took its place as the flower of the 4th century B. C. Athens. Thus literary criticism was established with Plato, especially Aristotle's *Poetics*. Euripides was a 5th century tragic poet to the last, but he was also a forerunner of literary critics, i.e. he was philosophical poet, anticipating the spirit of the 4th century B. C. I think this is one aspect of what B. Knox called the “prophetic vision” of Euripides.

11. C. Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides' Bacchae*, 1982.