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Don’t Mess with Medea; Seneca vs. Euripides

Euripides' Medea and Seneca's Medea are different in many parts of the two stories. One part that’s more crucial than the others, and sets the differences between both the plays from the beginning, is the characterization and motivations of Medea.

Euripides sets the tone with an isolated, hopeless Medea, sobbing from inside her home. She cries out to the gods about the injustices done to her. Medea's entire predicament is presented to the audience by her Nurse. Without having to see and hear Medea directly, she is distanced from the viewers making her revenge more thoughtful and planned. “But now her world has turned to enmity, and wounds her where her affection’s deepest. Jason has betrayed his own sons, and my mistress, for a royal bed, for alliance with the king of Corinth. He has married Glauce, Creon’s daughter. Poor Medea!...I am afraid some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind. She is a frightening women; no one who makes an enemy of her will carry an easy victory.” (Euripides, Pg. 17-18)

Seneca, on the other hand, uses his characterization of Medea to move the entire tragedy quickly. She states her hatred of Jason and Creon boldly and without hesitation. Her mind is set for revenge from the very beginning. Seneca's Medea does not see herself as "just a woman" to whom tragedy will happen, but as a vibrant, vengeful spirit that will punish those who wronged her. “Unloved, dishonored, I shall contrive such mischief as may remind the groom and bride and her father that sacred vows are not mere playthings... The torches blaze, but my hearts flames will not be contained. His house will be smashed, rubble, ashes, in which he shall lie, sobbing among the ruins with even sharper griefs then my own. I gave up a life for him! I gave him the gift of his own life. He repays me thus? His pledges broken, his words of love all unsaid. It’s creon who did this, as if Medea didn’t exist. But I do.

And the city will know, for the world will mark its towering flames.”(Seneca,line 137-149,pg.137)

Through his characterization of Medea, Euripides seems to be more respectful towards the divine being. Seneca is the opposite. His Medea is not as respectful of the gods. She often condemns them for their actions or lack of actions. Seneca opens his version with Medea herself. She’s the first figure apparent to the audience. Medea's first line sets the tone of her characterization for the rest of the piece. She states, "O gods! Vengeance! Come to me now, I beg, and help me..."(Seneca, pg. 133, line 1) from her first utterance, Medea's thoughts have turned to revenge. She is fully aware of what she must do. Euripides, in his version, introduces Medea more quietly. Medea's first line, quite a bit into the first scene and off-stage, is "Oh. Oh! What misery, what wretchedness! What shall I do? If only I were dead!"(pg. 20) The characterization difference between the two author's leading ladies is readily apparent. Euripides has given the viewer a sense that Medea is not in control of anything. Her entire dilemma is explained by her Nurse and Medea actually asks the gods for death. In her own words she is a ...wretched women. (Euripides pg 20)..." (and her entire life is a ...loathe existence."(Euripides pg. 21) Seneca has taken the opposite approach to Medea. In his version, she is a strong, able woman. The audience learns of the tragedy from Medea's own mouth, and not through the Nurse. Medea even goes so far as to not rely on the gods. Her faith obviously isn't with them when she states, "Or else, in the absence of gods, I pray to Chaos itself." (Seneca, pg. 133-134, line 10-11)Seneca, more then Euripides, is giving us a Medea that should be feared, that has been wronged and is planning a sweet vengeance.

The Chorus' in both plays also play crucial, but different roles in the development of the characters of Medea. Euripides has set up his chorus as a very sympathetic group to Medea's problems. The Chorus begins, "I heard the voice, I heard that unhappy women from Colchis still crying not calm yet."(Euripides, pg. 21) From the onset the Chorus of Euripides is

sympathetic to Medea, as if the way that she is portrayed is in need of sympathy. She is a poor, unhappy woman whose life has been completely destroyed and has left her in shambles. This is echoed by Euripides' Chorus.

Seneca's Chorus seem to represent the average citizen, pulling no punches when it comes to the scandal they are watching. Seneca's Medea needs no sympathy. She is a strong character, convicted to her plan of revenge from the beginning. The Chorus of Seneca begins the play by celebrating the wedding of Jason and Creusa. Immediately after Medea states that she will, "repay a wound with a wound"(Seneca, pg. 135, line 56) in reference to Jason, Creon and Creusa the Chorus appears. Entering in procession they say,
"May the gods of the sky and sea attend and bless the marriage of Jason, our prince. Be kind to them, and grant they may have the full measure of happiness man and woman can find together." (Senica, pg. 135, line 59). Put together with Medea still on stage, the Chorus praise the virtues of Creusa and Jason. They go on to say, "Only a hero like Jason could merit such a prize..."(Seneca, pg. 135, line 76) and calls the both of them, "special mortals." (Senica, pg. 135, line 75)This further infuriates Medea and strengthens her resolve.

Seneca's Chorus, in no way, patronizes Medea like the Chorus of Euripides. Seneca's Medea is more independent of the Chorus, the Gods, her Nurse, etc. and doesn't need the crutch provided to Euripides' Medea.

The final scenes of both versions are the most telling in how the character of Medea was viewed by both authors. In Euripides' final scene, Medea appears to Jason and the others already in a chariot drawn by dragons, the corpses of her children already at her feet. She has already taken the children inside and killed them and is now ready to leave with their bodies. A protracted plea from Jason cannot dissuade her and she is off, not mournful by the fact that she has killed her own children. She even goes so far as to blame Jason for their deaths. Medea states to the corpses of her children, "O sons, your

fathers treachery caused you your lives."(Euripides, pg. 59). Seneca's Medea makes no bones about who killed them or why Jason's sons are dead. She actually kills one of them in front of him. Medea states, "Your wife is dead, and your father-in-law, too? A horrible death I arranged for them. This son of yours is also dead. See?" (Seneca, pg. 168,line 1020). Medea then prepares to kill her second son in front of Jason, she states, "The guilt is yours, yes. And I will strike you where you feel it... Here!"(Seneca, pg. 169,line 1024) Medea then runs the other son through with her sword. She acknowledges killing everyone and gives the guilt to Jason, without blaming him for the deaths.

In Seneca, the chariot drawn by dragons then comes down to Medea. She is not already in it, like the Euripides version, but the chariot comes to Medea after a gesture of her arms. This is another instance where Medea makes the events around her happen, instead of waiting for them to come of their own accord. There was no godly intervention, Medea made that chariot come.

Seneca and Euripides, through their characterizations of Medea have provided a startling amount of evidence to their views of the gods at the time of their writings. Euripides is a more reverent, respectful author. He acknowledges the existence of the gods, and reverently calls upon them in the proper manner. Medea asks for death, she asks for salvation, she asks for guidance.

Seneca, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be as respectful as Euripides. His Medea lashes out at the gods, makes contingency plans for their non-existence and defies them when what she is doing is called into question. The dragon-drawn chariot that Euripides provides for his Medea is called down by Seneca's Medea. Medea in Seneca's world can do what she likes, whether the gods help or not.

Most telling would be the final line in Seneca's version. Medea has ridden off and Jason is left to mourn the fate of his sons. He states, "But there are no gods. No gods! There are no gods.' (Seneca, pg. 170, line 1053).

1. Bovie, Palmer and Slavitt, David R. Seneca, The Tragedies Volume 1. John Hopkins University Press, 1992.

2. Vellacott, Philip. Euripides, Medea and Other Plays. Penguin Books, 1963.