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## **Medea. An Example of How Destructive Rhetoric Can Become**

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In the inner conflict between reason and passion common to every man, the Greeks favoured reason over passion as an inherent feature of their civilized society. In this sense, they prided themselves on being different and superior to the barbarians. This prevailing role of reason was shaped and strengthened by the development of the art of Rhetoric, as an art of persuasion through words, regarding words as a powerful means to lead and communicate human thoughts.

Persuasion influenced the whole literary production of 5th and 4th centuries before Christ. This also influences tragedy<sup>1</sup> and Euripides, in particular, impregnates all his works with Rhetoric. His whole work can only be understood as the reflection of a world in which the Greek civilization had been identified with a society ruled by the sophistic culture, where problems were solved in public debates. And where the art of right reasoning and communicating thoughts by means of words had become identified with society itself.

From the point of view of the structure of the work, the extracts where Euripides mainly displays his rhetorical knowledge are the *agons*. The *agons* consist in parallel speeches where two main characters are brought face to face in court-like conditions. They are conceived and shaped as accusation and defence speeches, following the regulations of Rhetoric that in general terms matches with what we later find in the rhetorical treatises of Aristotle and Anaximenes.

The Rhetoric of Euripides reflects the mentality of his time and acts as a reading clue in all his tragedies. This is especially clear in *Medea*, where the conflict before mentioned

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Xanthakis-Karamanos.

between reason and passion identifies with the conflict between barbarian and Greek, between what is fair and what is legal, between divine and human law and finally between truth and lie. The barbarian character of Medea allows Euripides to spread the universal doubt about the benefits that a civilized society, that has learnt to believe its own false consciousness, may bring not only to foreigners, but also to its own citizens.

Because Athenian democracy was at its peak and the Greeks were so aware of their particular cultural identity, Euripides was able to remake the myth of Medea in a rationalist context propitiated by a feeling against the non-Greek, which was easily acceptable to his audience.<sup>2</sup> However, he set out the possibility of opening new horizons in the evolution of the Athenian culture itself, warning the Athenians against their reactionary attitude and making them ask themselves about their future.

Having as a starting point the speeches of the *agon*, I intend to enhance the moments in which the tragedy, from my point of view, helps us understand the tragic outcome.

All the elements of legal speech are displayed in the *agon*<sup>3</sup> between Medea (465-519) and Jason (522-475). The latter accuses the former and he in turn defends himself. Both speeches are shaped with a self-conscious formal structure: they begin with a proem in which Medea, after insulting Jason (465-473)<sup>4</sup> in the terms of ‘Vilest of knaves’, ‘lack of manly worth’, ‘worst enemy [to the gods, to me, and to the whole human race]’, ‘(with no) boldness or courage ... but (with) the worst of all mortal vices, shamelessness’ indicates the purpose of her speech (473-75)<sup>5</sup>: ‘It will relieve my feelings to tell you how

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hall, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lloyd.

<sup>4</sup> 465-473 ὃ **παγκάκιστε**, τοῦτο γάρ σ' εἶπεῖν ἔχω

γλώσση μέγιστον εἰς **ἀνανδρίαν** κακόν·

ἤλθεσ πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ἤλθεσ **ἔχθιστος γεγώς (θεοῖς τε κάμοι παντί τ' ἀνθρώπων γένει) /**

**οὔτοι θράσος** τόδ' ἐστίν **οὐδ' εὐτολμία**

φίλους κακῶς δράσαντ' ἐναντίον βλέπει

ἀλλ' **ἡ μεγίστη τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις νόσων / πασῶν, ἀναίδει**·

‘**Vilest of knaves** – for that is the worst insult my tongue can speak against your **lack of manly worth** – have you really come to see me when you have made yourself my **worst enemy [to the gods, to me, and to the whole human race]**? **This is not boldness or courage** – to wrong your loved ones and then look them in the face – **but the worst of all mortal vices, shamelessness**’.

<sup>5</sup> 473-75 εὖ δ' ἐποίησας μολῶν·

wicked you are, and you will be stung by what I have to say'. Jason (522-525),<sup>6</sup> in turn, resorts to the topic of the rhetorical skills of his rival, 'wearisome prattling', that would demand him 'to be no mean speaker' (...) but a 'good helmsman of a ship'. It follows an exposition of the facts, where Medea (475-487) relates how her relationship with Jason began and he (526-545) exposes the benefits that Medea has been provided with by the civilized society. Then comes the Argumentation: Medea (487-516) proves Jason's part in her present desperate position and Jason (545-572) defends himself making clear the fair purpose of his behaviour. Both speeches conclude with a gnomic ending blaming the opposite sex: Medea (516-519) says 'O Zeus, why, when you gave to men sure signs of gold that is counterfeit, is there no mark on the human body by which one could identify base men?',<sup>7</sup> and Jason (573-575) 'Mortals ought, you know, to beget children from some other source, and there should be no female sex. Then mankind would have no trouble'.<sup>8</sup>

Other characteristics of the judicial speech, which also appear in this *agon*, are the references to external evidence like witnesses,<sup>9</sup> laws,<sup>10</sup> oaths and arguments based on probability.<sup>11</sup>

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ἐγὼ τε γὰρ λέξασα κουφισθήσομαι  
ψυχὴν κακῶς σὲ καὶ σὺ λυπήσῃ κλύων.

'But you did well to come, for it will relieve my feelings to tell you how wicked you are, and you will be stung by what I have to say. I shall begin my speech from the beginning'.

<sup>6</sup> 522-525 δεῖ μ', ὡς ἔοικε, μὴ κακὸν φῶναι λέγειν,

ἀλλ' ὥστε ναὸς κεδνὸν οἰακοστρόφον  
ἄκροισι λαίφους κρασπέδοις ὑπεκδραμεῖν  
τὴν σὴν στόμαργον, ᾧ γύναι, γλωσσαλγίαν.

'It appears, woman, that I must be **no mean speaker** but **like the good helmsman of a ship** reef my sail up to its hem and run before the storm of your **wearisome prattling**'.

<sup>7</sup> 516-519 ὦ Ζεῦ, τί δὴ χρυσοῦ μὲν ὄς κίβδηλος ἦ

τεκμήρι' ἀνθρώποισιν ὅπασας σαφῆ,  
ἀνδρῶν δ' ὅτω χρητὸν κακὸν διειδέναί  
οὐδεὶς χαρακτήρ ἐμπέφυκε σώματι.

<sup>8</sup> 573-575 χρῆν τάρ' ἄλλοθὲν ποθεν βροτοῦς  
παῖδας τεκνοῦσθαι, θῆλυ δ' οὐκ εἶναι γένος  
χοῦτως ἂν οὐκ ἦν οὐδὲν ἀνθρώποις κακόν.

<sup>9</sup> 476-479 ἔσωσά σ', ὡς ἴσασιν Ἑλλήνων ὅσοι

ταῦτόν συνεισέβησαν Ἀργῶ/ον σκάφος,  
πεμφθέντα ταύρων πυρπνῶν ἐπιστάτην  
ζεύγλαισι καὶ σπεροῦντα θανάσιμον γῆν.

'I saved your life – as witness all the Greeks who went on board the Argo with you – when you were sent to master the fire-breathing bulls with a yoke and to sow the field of death'.

<sup>10</sup> 491-495 ὄρκων δὲ φρούδη πίστις, οὐδ' ἔχω μαθεῖν

εἰ θεοὺς νομίζεις τοὺς τότ' οὐκ ἄρχειν ἔτι  
ἢ καινὰ κείσθαι θέσμι' ἀνθρώποις τὰ νῦν,

The debate between Jason and Medea has been an object of attention from different points of view. It has been considered a rhetorical exercise that lowers the quality of the tragedy. That is why we think that it is important to reveal the best side of it and, from our point of view, that would be the depiction of Jason's personality. Euripides has reinvented Jason according to the problem he wants to set out and he has let him introduce himself to the audience in the same way that a speechmaker would do in a court. He has to pass the test of 'the quality control' of persuasion through character, as it was established in the normative of Rhetoric, which we know from the later treatises of Aristotle and Anaximenes.

Jason shows himself (548) as a wise (σοφος), self-controlled (σώφρων), great friend (φίλος) to Medea and their children. Two of these three elements (σόφος and φίλος) match up in general terms, with those considered by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* as the basic ones for the orator to present himself to the audience as a reliable man,<sup>12</sup> that is to say, good sense (φρόνησις), virtue (ἀρετή) and goodwill (εὐνοία).

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ἐπεὶ σύνοισθά γ' εἰς ἔμ' οὐκ εὐορκος ὢν.

'Respect for your oaths is gone, and I cannot tell whether you think that the gods of old no longer rule or that new ordinances have now been set up for mortals, since you are surely aware that you have not kept your oath to me'.

<sup>11</sup> 490-491 εἰ γὰρ ἦσθ' ἅπαις ἔτι,

συγγνώστ' ἂν ἦν σοι τοῦδ' ἐρασθῆναι λέχους.

'For if you were still childless, your desire for this marriage would be understandable'.

<sup>12</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1378a6-16 τοῦ μὲν οὖν αὐτοῦς εἶναι πιστοὺς τοὺς λέγοντας τρία ἐστὶ τὰ αἴτια· τὸσαῦτα γὰρ ἐστὶ δι' ἃ πιστεύομεν ἔξω τῶν ἀποδείξεων. ἐστὶ δὲ ταῦτα φρόνησις καὶ ἀρετὴ καὶ εὐνοία· διαψεύδονται γὰρ περὶ ὧν λέγουσιν ἢ συμβουλευούσιν ἢ δι' ἅπαντα ταῦτα ἢ διὰ τούτων τι· ἢ γὰρ δι' ἀφροσύνην οὐκ ὀρθῶς δοξάζουσιν, ἢ δοξάζοντες ὀρθῶς διὰ μοχθηρίαν οὐ τὰ δοκοῦντα λέγουσιν, ἢ φρόνιμοι μὲν καὶ ἐπιεικεῖς εἰσιν ἀλλ' οὐκ εὖ νοιοῦσι, διόπερ ἐνδέχεται μὴ τὰ βέλτιστα συμβουλεύειν γιγνώσκοντας, καὶ παρὰ ταῦτα οὐδέν. ἀνάγκη ἄρα τὸν ἅπαντα δοκοῦντα ταῦτ' ἔχειν εἶναι τοῖς ἀκροωμένοις πιστόν.

'For the orator to produce conviction three qualities are necessary; for, independently of demonstrations, the things which induce belief are three in number. These qualities are good sense, virtue, and goodwill; for speakers are wrong both in what they say and in the advice they give, because they lack either all three or one of them. For either through want of sense they form incorrect opinions, or, if their opinions are correct, through viciousness they do not say what they think, or, if they are sensible and good, they lack goodwill; wherefore it may happen that they do not give the best advice, although they know what it is. These qualities are all that are necessary, so that the speaker who appears to possess all three will necessarily convince his hearers'.

Jason argues his wisdom saying (559-561) that he desires ‘to live a happy life, and not to be in want, knowing that everyone goes out of his way to avoid a penniless friend’.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle defines wisdom (φρόνησις) as a ‘virtue of reason, which enables men to come to a wise decision in regard to good and evil things, which have been mentioned as connected with happiness’.<sup>14</sup> This feature of the reliable man is not new in Aristotle. He follows<sup>15</sup> a tradition that, coming from Homer, has been developed mainly by Plato. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates demands Calicles wisdom (ἐπιστήμη) in order to be a good partner in a conversation: ‘I meet with many people who are unable to test me, because they are not wise (σοφοί) as you are’.<sup>16</sup> In this sense Jason can be considered a wise man, because he had made his decision thinking that his previous way of life could have led him to an unhappy life. But we can also find where his mistake lies in an excerpt of the same dialogue of Plato: right before the definition to which we have just referred (463a), Plato characterizes the flattering orator as one who is shrewd (ψυχῆς δὲ στοχαστικῆς), ‘experienced’ in a bad sense. A definition that well suits the identification of happiness with wealth and honour carried out by Jason. He would not at all be ἐπιστήμονα τῶν δικαίων (508c), ‘expert in what is fair and unfair’, a definition that suits the good orator.

The third element of the self definition of Jason’s character is to be a great friend (φίλος) to Medea and his children<sup>17</sup> and the evidence is that his marriage would benefit them, as he states in 562-567: ‘I wanted to raise the children in a manner befitting my house, to beget brothers to the children born from you, and put them on the same footing with them, so that by drawing the family into one, I might prosper. For your part, what need have you of any more children? For me, it is advantageous to use future children to benefit those already born. Was this a bad plan?’<sup>18</sup> So the plan benefits the children and,

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<sup>13</sup> 559-561 ἀλλ’ ὧς, τὸ μὲν μέγιστον, οἰκοῖμεν καλῶς  
καὶ μὴ σπανιζοίμεσθα, γινώσκων ὅτι  
πενητα φεύγει πᾶς τις ἐκποδῶν φίλον.

<sup>14</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1366b20-22 φρόνησις δ’ ἐστὶν ἀρετὴ διανοίας καθ’ ἣν εὖ βουλευέσθαι  
δύναται περὶ ἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν τῶν εἰρημένων εἰς εὐδαιμονίαν.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Fortenwauch.

<sup>16</sup> Pl. *Gorg*, 487a ἐγὼ γὰρ πολλοῖ’ ἐντυγχάνω, οἱ ἐμὲ οὐχ οἴοι τέ εἰσι βασανίζειν,  
διὰ τὸ μὴ σοφοὶ εἶναι ὥσπερ σύ.

<sup>17</sup> 548-550 ἐν τῷ/δε δείξω πρῶτα μὲν σοφὸς γεγώς  
ἔπειτα σῶφρων, εἶτα σοὶ μέγας φίλος /καὶ παισὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖσιν.

<sup>18</sup> 562-567 παῖδας δὲ θρέψαιμ’ ἀξίως δόμων ἐμῶν

in consequence, their mother, who, from his point of view could not be damaged. The correlation of Jason's φιλία would be what Aristotle refers to as εὔνοια 'goodwill'.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle says that when orators lack goodwill (εὔνοια) 'it may happen that they do not give the best advice, although they know what it is'.<sup>20</sup> As we have just seen in the case of the previous concept, according to this definition, Jason would be a good friend to his children because his resolution would have repercussions in the future welfare of his children. But if we go back to the aforementioned passage of Gorgias, we see that he fits perfectly into the role of the fake orator, φύσει δεινῆς προσομιλεῖν (463a) 'skilful by nature to human relationships', which means that he is skilful enough to present such a misleading piece of advice as if it were a reliable one.<sup>21</sup>

What Jason's self-definition really lacks is the second of the virtues exposed by Aristotle, ἀρετή, courage. In fact, Medea accuses him of ἀνανδρία at the beginning of her speech, blaming him for his lack of courage for telling what he was determined to do and to bear the negative reaction.<sup>22</sup>

Having highlighted the importance of the self-definition of Jason in the *agon*, let me make some remarks about the function of the *agon* as a whole, with relation to the rest of the work. At first sight, it seems to be a skilful display of Euripides knowledge of the rhetorical theory, but inadequate for a tragedy. The presentation as a public debate of the narration of the facts and of what is only a private dispute has been seen as something close to a parody<sup>23</sup> and as a way of reducing the quality of the main characters putting

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σπείρας τ' ἀδελφούς τοῖσιν ἐκ σέθεν τέκνοις  
ἐς ταῦτό θείην, καὶ ξυναρτήσας γένος  
εὐδαιμονοίην. σοὶ τε γὰρ παίδων τί δεῖ  
ἐμοὶ τε λύει τοῖσι μέλλουσιν τέκνοις  
τὰ ζῶντ' ὀνήσαι. μῶν βεβούλευμαι κακῶς  
οὐδ' ἂν σὺ φαίης, εἴ σε μὴ κνίζοι λέχος.

<sup>19</sup> The relationship between φιλία and εὔνοια becomes clear when he says that 'in our discussion of the emotions will be spoken about goodwill and friendship'

περὶ δ' εὐνοίας καὶ φιλίας ἐν τοῖς περὶ τὰ πάθη λεκτέον (Arist. *Rh*, 1378a19)

<sup>20</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1768a5 διόπερ ἐνδέχεται μὴ τὰ βέλτιστα συμβουλεῦειν γινώσκοντας, καὶ παρὰ ταῦτα οὐδέν.

<sup>21</sup> Pl. *Gorg*, 503. a 4 τὸ παρασκευάζειν ὅπως ὡς βέλτισται ἔσσονται τῶν πολιτῶν αἱ ψυχαί.

<sup>22</sup> For a definition of all this concept ἀρετή, Cf. Hellwig, p. 298, and the commentaries to this passage in Grimaldi (1980).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Goebel.

them at the same level of those of comedy.<sup>24</sup> Regarding the narration of the facts, it is true that it would have been useful to use this technique of the debate to throw some light on the contrast of Jason and Medea's points of view, but it is not the case. On the other hand, given that the judicial debate is taken out of its own area, there is little point in expanding further on it. This is because it is not the task of the audience to judge the facts and to give a verdict based on the way the litigants argue in their speeches. Lastly, from the point of view of the inner development of the tragedy, we also see that not only does Medea fail in soothing her soul when insulting Jason, as she clearly states: 'you did well to come, for it will relieve my feelings to tell you how wicked you are', but also in causing him pain: 'and you will be stung by what I have to say',<sup>25</sup> for he seems immune to criticism. Neither is Jason able to justify his unfair behaviour, as the chorus leader declares just after hearing his defence speech: 'Jason, you have marshalled your arguments very skillfully, but I think, even though it may be imprudent to say so, that in abandoning your wife you are not doing right'.<sup>26</sup>

The resource to the *agon* is valid, however, to embody in a dialogue what must have been a social debate at the time. Characters are placed on the stage not as good orators able to deliver a speech before a court of law, but to test whether they are able to lead their arguments in the direction they defend as suitable partners in order to test beliefs, to try an agreement and to lead to true opinion and even knowledge. In fact, it is what Socrates demands of Calicles in *Gorgias*.<sup>27</sup> Medea and Jason symbolize two opposite ways of approaching a debate: the one who states that an argument should be based on truth, and the one that trusts the power of rhetorical skills. Medea<sup>28</sup> represents 'the strong argument', the one who tries to solve the conflicts in the most rational way. Jason represents 'the weak argument', the skilful speaker who defends an unfair behaviour and

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jaeger, pp. 303.

<sup>25</sup> 473-475 εὖ δ' ἐποίησας μολῶν  
ἐγὼ τε γὰρ λέξασα κουφισθήσομαι  
ψυχὴν κακῶς σὲ καὶ σὺ λυπήσῃ κλύων.

<sup>26</sup> 575-578 Ἰᾶσον, εὖ μὲν τούσδ' ἐκόσμησας λόγους·  
ὄμωσ δ' ἔμοιγε, κεῖ παρὰ γνώμην ἐρῶ,  
δοκεῖς προδοῦς σὴν ἄλοχον οὐ δίκαια δρᾶν.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Fortenwauch. p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Lloyd.



dares to build arguments for his narrow-mindedness. And in this debate, while Medea shows the most frank side of her personality, Jason happens not to be a right partner. Medea comes in conflict with a society that now rejects her, and whose rules she has previously learnt and accepted. She addresses the chorus<sup>29</sup> complaining (238-240) ‘when a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her husband's house, she must somehow divine, since she has not learned it at home, how she shall best deal with her husband’.<sup>30</sup> Even the nurse testifies to her effort (11-12): ‘loved by the citizens to whose land she had come, and lending to Jason himself all her support’.<sup>31</sup> We can now state that it is Jason who now betrays his own culture, mistaking reason with the rhetorical skills.

The dialogue between Jason and Medea that immediately follows the *agon*, is also a clue to understand the development of the tragedy as a whole. Medea strikes up a dialogue with Jason in a sincere way, knowing and respecting the rules of a civilized society. Her passions fit the rule that would be later established in the treatises of Rhetoric. She keeps hope and she is scared and therefore she dares to deliberate, to set out a debate about good and evil. In the treatise about passions, Aristotle says that ‘it is a necessary incentive to fear that there should remain some hope of being saved from the cause of their distress. A sign of this is that fear makes men deliberate, whereas no one deliberates about things that are hopeless’.<sup>32</sup> Fear is also a proof that it is possible to act and therefore it is the moment to deliberate. After this dialogue Medea loses hope and she does not deliberate any more, she resorts to trickery.

After having taken an outrageous or even provocative stand in her present circumstances: (579) ‘I realize I have far different views from the majority of mortals’,<sup>33</sup> she sets out the

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hall, p.191.

<sup>30</sup> 238-240 ἐς καινὰ δ’ ἦθη καὶ νόμους ἀφιγμένην  
δεῖ μάντιν εἶναι, μὴ μαθοῦσαν οἴκοθεν,  
ὅπως ἄριστα χρήσεται ζυνευνέτη.

<sup>31</sup> 11-13 ἀνδάνουσα μὲν  
φυγὰς πολίταις ὧν ἀφίκετο χθόνα  
αὐτῷ τε πάντα συμφέρουσ’ Ἰάσονι

<sup>32</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1383a6-77 ἀπεψυγμένοι πρὸς τὸ μέλλον, ὥσπερ οἱ ἀποτυμπανιζόμενοι ἦδη·  
ἀλλὰ δεῖ τινα ἐλπίδα ὑπεῖναι σωτηρίας, περὶ οὗ ἄγωνιῶσιν. σημεῖον δέ·

ὁ γὰρ φόβος βουλευτικούς ποιεῖ, καίτοι οὐδεὶς βουλευέται περὶ τῶν ἀνελπίστων .

<sup>33</sup> 579 ἢ πολλὰ πολλοῖς εἰμι διάφορος βροτῶν.

terms of a debate about good and evil. And she does it reasoning in an enthymematic way. That is, starting from assumptions based in the general human behaviour and reaching a conclusion that is also probable.<sup>34</sup> Most of the time she does not express her points of view in which she bases her argumentation, but they are easily deducible from the context or from the general mentality of her time. She dares to assume the role of someone qualified to discern between good and bad, for not having been infected by the hypocrisy of social conventions, as she has stated at the beginning. Her own condemnation gives her the right to talk like that.

The majority of mortals (the Greeks) do not make any difference between a real good man and the one who is able to show himself as a good man. I, on the contrary, consider that a ‘scoundrel’ (ἄδικος), even if he is a ‘plausible speaker’ (σοφὸς λέγειν πέφυκε), he still ‘incurs the greatest punishment’ (πλείστην ζημίαν ὀφλισκάνει). And it is just by this lack of criterion that ‘his boldness stops at no knavery’ (τολμᾶ/ πανουργεῖν), for it is easier to be bad when one ‘is confident that he can cleverly cloak injustice with his words’ (γλώσση γὰρ ἀρχῶν τᾶδικ’ εὖ περιστελεῖν τολμᾶ/).

What distinguishes a good man from a bad one, independent of his skill at speaking, is just persuasion. But persuasion must be understood in its right sense. Medea would only be allowed to criticize the excesses of Rhetoric if she kept inside her limits, otherwise the Athenians would not have admitted such a critic. Medea speaks out against the excessive and superficial use of Rhetoric, but not of Rhetoric as a means of reasoning. What grants her permission to issue the judgement that Jason is not a good man (σοφός) but only a good orator (σοφὸς λέγειν), is that good men persuade before doing something, while Jason did not give any explanation about his wedding (χρῆν ζ’ (...) πείσαντά με γαμεῖν γάμον τόνδ’, ἀλλὰ μὴ σιγῆ/ φίλων). She distinguishes between Rhetoric as a means of self-justification of a bad behaviour and Rhetoric as the social side of private life. She places herself in a position similar to that of Socrates when he answers Criton advising him to leave the city secretly in order to save his life, that ‘it would be harmful, and specially for this who less deserves it, to go away from the city without giving an

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<sup>34</sup> Regarding Enthymeme Cf. Hood.

explanation of his own behaviour'.<sup>35</sup> For Medea it is also necessary to use persuasion as a means of mixing with the rest of the citizens.

Jason defends himself using discredit as a weapon for justifying his lack of political correctness (588-590): 'Fine support, I think, would you have given to my proposal if I had mentioned the marriage to you, seeing that even now you cannot bring yourself to lay aside the towering rage in your heart'.<sup>36</sup> He would have wasted his time if he had tried to use reason with a barbarian, unable by nature to use reason. Jason has defined himself as σόφρων (self-controlled). As Hall remarks:<sup>37</sup> 'The third great Platonic virtue, *sophrosune*, entailed the proper restraint of the passions, and many of the barbarians of tragedy are invested with an overbearing temper or wild ethos, thus demonstrating *akolasia*, the philosopher's opposite of *sophrosune* (...). The invention of the barbarian provided a new frame of reference for such psychological portraits, and in many cases the unfettered passions of barbarians came to be closely associated with their ethnicity'. Due to the fact that Jason is Greek, he considers himself different from the barbarian Medea and to be her superior in intelligence. Daring to establish a close connection between intelligible speech and reason, he possesses the monopoly of the *logos*.

What is remarkable here is that this contempt of Jason towards the intellectual abilities of Medea does not match up with what had previously been said. It is true that the nurse had said that 'she has a terrible temper' (39) and many times the nurse has expressed her fear to her choleric reaction, but Medea's personality has not been put down to the fact of her being a barbarian, but to the awful position to which she has been compelled by the disdain of Jason.

It is again Aristotle who, in *Rhetoric*, deals with the connections between anger and slight: 'Let us then define anger as a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent

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<sup>35</sup> Pl. *Cri*, 49e-50a ἀπίοντες ἐνθένδε ἡμεῖς μῆπείσαντες τὴν πόλιν πότερον κακῶς τινας ποιοῦμεν, καὶ ταῦτα οὗς ἤκιστα δεῖ, ἢ οὐ; καὶ ἐμμένομεν οἷς ὠμολογήσαμεν δικαίοις οὓσιν ἢ οὐ;

<sup>36</sup> 588-590 καλῶς γ' ἄν, οἶμαι, τῷδ' ὑπηρέτεις λόγῳ εἶ σοι γάμον κατεῖπον, ἥτις οὐδὲ νῦν τολμᾶς μεθεῖναι καρδίας μέγαν χόλον.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hall, p. 125.

revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved’;<sup>38</sup> and he is not defining barbarians but Greeks. As Hall has also remarked: ‘Medea is in part modelled on the heroic type exemplified by Prometheus, Ajax and Antigone’.<sup>39</sup> Medea is one of the few barbarians in tragedy credited with intellectual powers: Creon tells Medea (285) ‘you are a clever woman’ σοφή πέφυκασι and Aegeus tells her that she is ‘wise mind’ (677) σοφῆς φρενός and that she has shown much prudence in her speech (741) πολλῶν ἐδείξασ’ ἐν λόγοις προμηθίαν.

The attitude of Jason, in contrast, looks very simple-minded when he rejects the ability of Medea for reasoning, due simply to the fact that she is a barbarian. It reminds us the counsel of Isocrates to Filippo: ‘persuasion will be helpful in dealing with the Hellenes, so compulsion will be useful in dealing with the barbarians’.<sup>40</sup>

After this dialogue, the tragic outcome begins. Medea’s irrational reaction is the consequence of the fact that she feels like she has been deceived, unprotected and subjected to the powerful rhetorical skills of Jason, in a society dominated by Rhetoric. It is not her non-Greek character what provokes it. Medea feels the deception of the values she had believed in and still believes. She suffers by the facts but also by the way the state of affairs has turned out.

There are different factors that trigger the tragic and irrational outcome of the tragedy. First there is the fact that Jason’s wedding has been sudden and unexpected. It is stated by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* that one of the causes that provokes anger is what is unexpected.<sup>41</sup> It makes Medea feel unprotected and confused, because she really does not know whether divine law is still valid, as she had stated in the *agon*.<sup>42</sup> This is why she

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<sup>38</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1378<sup>a</sup>30 ἔστω δὴ ὀργῆ ὄρεξις μετὰ λύπης τιμωρίας (φαινομένης) διὰ φαινομένην ὀλιγορίαν εἰς αὐτὸν ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ, τοῦ ὀλιγορεῖν μὴ προσήκοντος.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Hall, p. 125.

<sup>40</sup> Isoc., V 16 Μέλλω γάρ σοι συμβουλεύειν προστιῆναι τῆς τε τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὁμοιοῦσας καὶ τῆς ἐπὶ τοὺς βαρβάρους στρατείας· ἔστι δὲ τὸ μὲν πείθειν πρὸς τοὺς Ἕλληνας συμφέρον, τὸ δὲ βιάζεσθαι πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους χρήσιμον.

<sup>41</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1379<sup>a</sup>24-25 λυπεῖ γὰρ μᾶλλον τὸ πολὺ παρὰ δόξαν, ὥσπερ καὶ τέρπει τὸ πολὺ παρὰ δόξαν, ἐὰν γένηται ὁ βούλεται.

<sup>42</sup> 493-494 οὐδ’ ἔχω μαθεῖν εἰ θεοὺς νομίζεις τοὺς τότε· οὐκ ἄρχειν ἔτι

requires a sacred oath to Aegeus, considering that words are not enough guarantee of his promise of letting her living in his land (734-741): ‘I trust you (...) But if you have made an agreement in mere words, and have not sworn by the gods, you might become their friend and comply with diplomatic requests. For I am weak, while they have wealth and royal power’.<sup>43</sup> The relationship between human and divine laws has been broken and this allows her to break human laws.

Medea alone, humiliated and exiled, resorts to the only weapon she still owns: her magic powers. But once again she is going to use them within the frame of the society she is living in, a society dominated by Rhetoric. Medea realizes that she is only a weak woman fighting powerful people (439-740): ‘I am weak’, she says ‘while they have wealth and royal power’.<sup>44</sup> If she wants to get something from an antagonist, she will have to use *dolos*, trickery. As Buxton<sup>45</sup> has remarked, trickery permits someone who is weaker, yet

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ἢ καινὰ κείσθαι θέσμι' ἀνθρώποις τὰ νῦν.

‘I cannot tell whether you think that the gods of old no longer rule or that new ordinances have now been set up for mortals’.

<sup>43</sup> 723- 740 **Ἀιγεύς** σοῦ μὲν ἐλθούσης χθόνα,

πειράσομαι σου προξενεῖν δίκαιος ὢν.

τοσόνδε μέντοι σοι προσημαίνω, γύναι·

ἐκ τῆσδε μὲν γῆς οὐ σ' ἄγειν βουλήσομαι,

αὐτῆ δ' ἄνπερ εἰς ἐμοὺς ἔλθῃς δόμους,

μενεῖς ἄσυλος κοῦ σε μὴ μεθῶ τι.

ἐκ τῆσδε δ' αὐτῆ γῆς ἀπαλλάσσοι πόδα·

ἀναίτιος γὰρ καὶ ξένοις εἶναι θέλω.

**Μήδεια** ἔσται τάδ'· ἀλλὰ πίστις εἰ γένοιτό μοι

τούτων, ἔχοιμ' ἂν πάντα πρὸς σέθεν καλῶς.

**Ἀιγεύς** μῶν οὐ πέποιθας; ἢ τί σοι τὸ δυσχερές;

**Μήδεια** πέποιθα· Πελίου δ' ἐχθρός ἐστί μοι δόμος

Κρέων τε. τούτοις δ' ὀρκίοισι μὲν ζυγεῖς

ἄγουσιν οὐ μεθεῖ' ἂν ἐκ γαίης ἐμέ.

λόγοις δὲ συμβᾶς καὶ θεῶν ἀνώμοτος

φίλος γένοι' ἂν κάπικηρυκεύμασιν

τάχ' ἂν πίθοιο· τὰμὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀσθενῆ

τοῖς δ' ὄλβος ἐστί καὶ δόμος τυραννικός.

‘**Aegeus** (...) – I tell you in advance: I will not consent to take you from this land. But if you manage by yourself to come to my house, you may stay there in safety, and I will never give you up to anyone. You must go on your own, then, from this land. I wish to be blameless in the eyes of my hosts as well. **Medea** It shall be so. But if you were to give me a promise of this, I would have all I could wish from you. **Aegeus** Do you not trust me? What is your difficulty? **Medea** I trust you (...) But if you have made an agreement in mere words and have not sworn by the gods, you might become their friend and comply with diplomatic requests. For I am weak, while they have wealth and royal power’.

<sup>44</sup> 739-40 τὰμὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀσθενῆ,

τοῖς δ' ὄλβος ἐστί καὶ δόμος τυραννικός.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Buxton, p. 66.

endowed with a cunning intelligence, to outwit someone who is stronger. Cunning is the only resort in situations where one person wishes to get the best from someone who is superior in power and cannot be persuaded, and whose superior strength rules out force. Medea had concealed from Aegeus her plan to kill Jason's wife and sons in order to get from him the oath that he would let her live in Athens in the future. Now she is going to mislead Jason, asking him to give some presents to his wife and concealing from him her purpose to kill his wife. She is playing with the means she has learnt, persuasion. She has learnt to present herself as a 'plausible speaker' (σοφὸς λέγειν), to be good in the eyes of society, just what she had accused Jason of at the beginning of the work, when she was defeated. And as a consequence 'her boldness stops at no knavery' (τολμᾶ/ πανουργεῖν), for it is easier to be bad when one 'is confident that he can cleverly cloak injustice with his words'.<sup>46</sup>

After the dialogue with Aegeus, Medea is a hopeless and fearless character. Her personality has turned to be simple-minded and unpleasant and what she intends to do is not simply for punishing Jason but for revenge. It is again Aristotle who says that 'Passion and anger are the causes of acts of revenge. But there is a difference between revenge and punishment; the latter is inflicted in the interest of the sufferer, the former in the interest of him who inflicts it, that he may obtain satisfaction'.<sup>47</sup> And in the *Ethic* he defines revenge as 'a sort of medicine'.<sup>48</sup> We could state that it is the only possible medicine for someone for whom (797) 'the laughter of one's enemies is unendurable'.<sup>49</sup> It is the only way to achieve the desire she expresses (807): 'let no one think me weak, contemptible, untroublesome'.<sup>50</sup>

Medea is a different person. She has changed from an impressive woman, who triggered the admiration of the audience to a mean person, ready to commit the greatest crimes, and

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<sup>46</sup> 583 γλώσση γὰρ ἀρχῶν τᾶδικ' εὖ περιστελεῖν τολμᾶ/.

<sup>47</sup> Arist. *Rh*, 1369b14 διὰ θυμὸν δὲ καὶ ὀργὴν τὰ τιμωρητικά. διαφέρει δὲ τιμωρία καὶ κόλασις· ἡ μὲν γὰρ κόλασις τοῦ πάσχοντος ἕνεκά ἐστιν, ἡ δὲ τιμωρία τοῦ ποιούντος, ἵνα πληρωθῇ.

<sup>48</sup> Arist. *EN*, 1104b 16 ἰατρεῖαι γὰρ τινές εἰσιν.

<sup>49</sup> 797 καὶ τλᾶς' ἔργον ἀνοσιώτατον. οὐ γὰρ γελαῖσθαι τλητὸν ἐξ ἐχθρῶν.

<sup>50</sup> 807 μηδεῖς με φαύλην κάσθενῆ ν ομιζέτω μηδ' ἠσυχάειαν.

as cynical as to admit as valuable and truthful the counsels of the Chorus-Leader and shows her readiness to ignore them (811-819):<sup>51</sup>

‘Chorus-Leader: Since you have shared this plan with me, and since I wish to help you and uphold the laws of society, I urge you not to do this deed.

Medea: It cannot be otherwise. I excuse you for speaking thus since you have not suffered as I have.

Chorus-Leader: Yet will you bring yourself to kill your own offspring, woman?

Medea: It is the way to hurt my husband most.

Chorus-Leader: And for yourself to become the most wretched of women.

Medea: Be that as it may. Till then all talk is superfluous’.

As a conclusion we can go back to the beginning. Medea is the tragedy of Rhetoric. Even from an outward view it offers a display of rhetorical knowledge in a way that could sometimes damage the quality of the work. This way Euripides creates from the beginning the atmosphere where he wants his characters to perform. Inside this world he dares to question himself and the audience to what extent this culture is being developed in a right direction. Euripides has to resort to a foreign main character to expose that the pressure of a society in which truth can be replaced by rhetorical skills turns out to be destructive. Medea’s speech is true, but her behaviour is wrong. Jason’s speech is wrong but he can find his self-justification. Only a barbarian would be able to reveal the deception from the fact that a civilized society may also be unjust. It is for the audience to ponder on the possibility that a terrible crime could have been avoided by a fairer treatment.

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<sup>51</sup> 811-819 **Χορός** ἐπεῖπερ ἡμῖν τόνδ’ ἐκοίνωσας λόγον,  
σέ τ’ ὠφελεῖν θέλουσα καὶ νόμοις βροτῶν  
ξυλλαμβάνουσα δρᾶν σ’ ἀπεννέπω τάδε.  
**Μήδεια** οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλως· σοὶ δὲ συγγνώμη λέγειν  
τάδ’ ἐστί, μὴ πάσχουσαν, ὡς ἐγώ, κακῶς.  
**Χορός** ἀλλὰ κτανεῖν σὸν σπέρμα τολμήσεις, γύναι  
**Μήδεια** οὕτω γὰρ ἂν μάλιστα δηχθεῖη πόσις.  
**Χορός** σὺ δ’ ἂν γένοιό γ’ ἀθλιωτάτη γυνή.  
**Μήδεια** ἴτω· περισσοὶ πάντες οὖν μέσφ’ λόγοι.

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