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EURIPIDES' PRINCIPLES OF REPRESENTING CONTRARIETY IN MEDEA'S CHARACTER

Underlined contrariety of Medea's character in the tragedy of Euripides has caused considerable interest among scholars. The most typical and popular example is the scene where Medea kills her children. In this scene Euripides reveals the opposition in the protagonist – a loving mother / an unmerciful avenger.

It is considered that in the tragedy two opposite beginnings – emotion and rationality are contrasted with each other and are personified by Medea and Jason.¹ It's also noted that the opposition is a defining factor of the action of this drama. It's emerged on different levels: a man and a woman, heroic – archaic and enlightening – new thinking, barbarity and Hellenism, Eros (feeling) and Sophia (thinking, wisdom).² Medea personifies the first member of the opposition Mowerer, I think that the contrast between emotion and sharp reason (which can be stimulated by emotion) is emphasized in Medea's character as well.

The contrast in Medea's character is one of the most important properties of Euripides' heroine. It conforms to the natural principle and the whole tragedy. The circumstance that at the beginning of the tragedy Medea, horrified by his husband's betrayal at the end of the tragedy is transformed into a person who is elevated above earthy deeds and empty of emotions, takes her vengeance and in fact, devastates Jason's rationalism, is clear-cut exposure of this contrast.

¹ For the interpretation of Euripide' *Medea* cf. A. Lesky, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, München 1971³, 301 ff.

² Nickel R. *Lexikon der Antiken Literatur*, Düsseldorf, Zürich 1999, 551 ff.

Analysis of the drama shows that in Medea's character two spiritual conditions constantly succeed each other: emotional state and illusory tranquility.

Euripides achieves the effect by using incessant scenes, where the protagonist gives proof of her ability to make analytic decisions after outburst of strong emotions.³

From this point of view it's possible to distinguish three pairs of scenes, which essentially create the basis of the play. The first pair includes 96-357 lines and consists of the following scenes: 1. Medea's reaction on learning her husband's betrayal. 2. Medea's meeting with Creon. In the first scene Medea's sharp reaction is shown her words before her appearing on the stage draws our attention: "O hopes I! O miseries heaped on mine head! Ah me! would God I were dead!"(96-7). Insulted by her husband's betrayal, Medea is unable to control her feelings. She sobs and begs immortal god to take mercy and curse her husband, his bride and the whole court. She even doesn't spare herself. The whole extract can be called Medea's lamentation. It manifests that Medea prefers death to such a bad luck.

After appearing on the stage, the protagonist gradually begins to realize an inconsolable lot of wife and woman generally. It is demonstrated by Medea's well-known words addressed to Corinthian women in order to gain their disposition as she realized that she had sacrificed her life to the man who turned out to be the worst among the men. Medea generalizes her life. She tries to show to the Corinthian women that a woman is the poorest and feeblest creature in the world because of a despotic and cruel husband. Women are not even allowed to divorce such husbands and have to conform to new customs, habits, alien atmosphere and keep their eyes on their cruel husbands. They find death preferable to living under such conditions. If a woman is in her motherland, she is supported by her friends and so she is protected. But if she is lonely, without any relatives, has no sanctuary and is outraged by her husband, her lot is very hard. Woman quails at every peril, faint-hearted to face the fray and look on steel, but when in wedlock – rights she suffers wrong, no spirit more bloodthirsty shall be found (213-66).

The first seeds of vengeance are planted in Medea's lamentation and then in her speech to Corinthian women about her own tragedy. But her striving to change the existing situation is an emotional yell and is not sensible.

After Medea's analysis of the lack of woman's rights and the inequality with man, she received sympathy from Corinthian woman and their permission on getting vengeance for adultery and humiliation of dignity that resulted from it.

³ See also J. Latacz, *Einführung in die griechische Tragödie*, Göttingen 1993, 280 ff.

In the scene of Medea's meeting with Creon, Medea judges more sensibly rather than emotionally. Creon doesn't intend to compromise Medea. He demands firmly that she should leave with her children immediately. "Homeward go into again, ere from the land's bounds I have cast thee forth" (271-6).

Medea's whole conversation with Creon includes several points: 1. To make Creon feel sorry for her 2. To give convincing reasons why she can not leave the town at once, which is followed by 3. Her request to permit her to stay only one more day in the town. In this scene Medea contrasts her own rationalism to Creon's strict, but emotional sentence. It's apparent, when she accepts Creon's demands and finds some arguments by which she makes Creon change his demand and let her stay in the town one more day. These arguments were: "Of some my wisdom with my jealousy, lest I work thee harm. Not such am I – dread not me that against princes I should dare transgress. How hast wronged me? Thou hast given thy child to whom so pleads thee. But I hate my husband; So doubtless, this in prudence hast thou done. I grudge not thy prosperity. . . Suffer me yet to farry this one dye, and somewhat for our exile to take thought, and find my babies a refuge, since their sire cares naught to make provision for his sons. Compassionate these – father too art thou of children" (277-89).

At the end of the scene after Creon's exit Medea throws off the mask of a "submissive" and "poor" woman and shows that everything she had told Creon had been planned beforehand by her reason to achieve her aim. Her words demonstrate her attitude: "To such height of folly hath he come, that, when he might forestall mine every plot. By banishment this dye of grace he grants me to stay, wherein three foes will I lay Dead the father, and the daughter, and mine husband" (365-70).

The next stage in the graduation of the contrast in Medea's character is represented by the following pair of scenes – Jason and Medea's two meetings. It is noteworthy that at their first meeting Jason is self-confident. His sophistic arguments make Medea lose her temper. Jason's arguments are based on sophistry and can be formed in this way: Medea could have lived a peaceful life if she had obeyed the king. Her infuriation is hard to understand. The most important thing for parents is their children's happiness. By means of marrying the King's daughter Jason can achieve the status which would guarantee their son's good luck. From this point of view Jason is right when he is going to leave Medea and marry the King's daughter, and she should have been satisfied with her husband's decision (449-64).

Medea reacts sharply, emotionally without self-control to Jason's arguments pronounced quietly. Medea tries to explain to Jason why she is different from ordinary, mortal people: she strictly punishes all who attempts to disguise injustice by eloquence and tries to justify his unmerciful betrayal by

speaking eloquently, who represents villainy as deliberate kindness (579-87). In fact Medea opposes bitterly not only Jason but sophistry as well. Threat is obvious here but it's emotional again: "Away! – impatience for the bride new – trapped consumes thee loitering from her bower afar! Wed: for perchance – and God shall speed the word – thine shall be bridal thou wouldst Fain renounce" (623-6).

The next meeting with Jason is preceded by a short interlude – the scene with Egeus (663-755). It's function is to make Medea acknowledge once more what a son means for will do, she can find a shelter as on her own initiative and rationally as it was in plan how to take vengeance. This makes the contrast between what she thinks and what she says more obvious. In this case, Medea uses the instrument which was used by Jason in the preceding scene. She tries to persuade her husband to accept to play the role of the woman who regained consciousness due to Jason's eloquence. She copes with it so skillfully that Medea manages to convince Jason by his own arguments that she obeys her lot and admits: she can not be against her well-wishers who take care of her children. They need to be taken care of, as she has neither motherland nor devoted friends. Medea should have supported Jason to get merry again (869-905).

Culmination of the tragedy lies in the next pair of scenes – from appearance of a messenger till the murder of the children and the final scene in which Medea is already empty of emotions and elevated above the earthy being existence.

The first scene (1120-250) is full of protagonist's emotions caused by the messenger's description of a terrible fact which happened in Creon's castle. This is followed by Medea's joyous emotions and then by her rage that resulted in her killing of her own children, which is the best example of a person overwhelmed with two opposite emotions. On the one hand the author shows sufferings of a mother who is worried about her children's fate and emotions of an insulted woman who demands her husband's punishment. The former's arguments are: "What need to wring their father's heart with ills of these, to gain myself ills twice so many?" (1047-7). The latter's arguments are: "Would I earn derision, letting my foes slip from mine hand unpunished?" (1048-50). In the scene Medea is filled with rage. She is out of mind with passions. This passions makes her forget her own children's love. She loves and she slaughters. An emotional strife goes on. Medea is guilty – she murdered children, but she is a winner at the same time – she enjoys making Jason unhappy. Medea beholds the misfortune of her rivals and thus she compensates for her own tragedy.

Medea is again without emotions in the final scene (1246-419), but it is accompanied here by apotheosis. In this scene Medea and Jason change their

roles: Jason's wit and eloquence are converted into spontaneous emotional outbursts. And horrified, furious Medea is transformed into an elevated person who contrasts her rationalism and nihilism with Jason's subbing. At the beginning of the scene Jason appears with his aggressive emotionalism. He is seeking for his bride's murderer who will not avoid punishment even if she creeps into the hall or fly up in the sky with her sorcery. Jason expresses his fear that bloodletting Corinthian would take revenge on the children (1294-1305). But Medea leaves no hope for him – she murdered his own children with her own hands. Jason's emotionalism is like lamentations. He curses his bad luck and the day when his children were born (1405-14). As for Medea, she celebrates, especially in the second half of the final scene, where she is standing on the coach with her dead children. In spite of it, she is happy as she took vengeance on her husband, his bride, the king and the whole society who are unable tell the truth from the false.

The above brief consideration aims to maintain the following idea: some scholars' speculations that Jason and Creon personify rationalism and Medea – emotionalism requires certain corrections. Rationalism plays a very significant role in Medea's actions. Some scholars qualify her rationalism as "a cleverly planned action".⁴ Moreover, as we have seen, Medea's character is emotionally involved as well.

⁴ J. Latacz, 106.