The Medea syndrome

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Abstract: In the last thirty years, Greek tragedy has been increasingly recognized as a ground of moral reflection that is at least as worthy of philosophical attention as are the writings of Plato, Aristotle, or the Stoics, owing to the simple fact that dramatic characters move on the scene like in a living world of relationships that requires them to find their way through complex emotional situations. As regards Euripides, the characters of Phaedra and Medea are particularly revealing for their capacity to understand and express the *reasons* underlying the tremendous emotional stress under which they are.

The paper deals with the problem of Medea's conduct along the drama, facing once more the challenge that Euripides launched on the scene of the Great Dionysia in 431 a.C. A challenge whose meaning can be thus summarized: while Medea perpetrates a horrible crime (the most horrible one can think of, actually), her gesture did not impress the ancient audience (neither does it impress us) for its being "evil", but for its tragic *grandeur*. Indeed, in analyzing the famous monologue in which Medea reflects on how to best achieve her vengeance on Jason, we see that she does not evaluate her strategy in terms of what would be morally good or bad to do, either for herself or for her children, while clearly acknowledging that she is driven by her passion (*thumòs*). Besides stressing the extraordinary lucidity Medea displays in the monologue, we aim to disentangle the diverse and contradictory emotions that constitute her emotional syndrome, that is, love and hate, shame and anger, pleasure in revenge and despair.

Keywords: Greek philosophy; Greek tragedy; Euripides; Medea; shame culture; emotions; anger; love and hate.

The problem I am going to address is anything but new: in fact, it is a much debated problem in the history of ancient literature studies, in conjunction with the inexhaustible reception Euripides' *Medea* has met in Western literature and theater (to say nothing of its more recent developments in filmmaking).[1] I will deal with the character of Medea, facing once more the

[1] Danese (2008: 54-55) gives a list of 20 products ranging from TV to cinema, from *Medea di Portamedina* by Elvira Notari (Italy, 1919) to *Médée miracle* by Tonino De Bernardi (Italy/France, 2007). Notably, Danese dwells not only on the movies by Pasolini and von Trier, to which scholars use

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challenge that Euripides launched on the stage of the Great Dionysia in 431 BC. The core of the problem can be described as follows: Medea perpetrates a horrible crime (the most horrible one could think of, actually), and yet it is not her "wickedness" that has impressed the audience of all time, but her tragic *grandeur*. This "lioness, not a woman", as Jason calls her in expressing his final despair, is apparently "abominable" only to him (ll. 1406-7). Conversely, the audience use to accompany the destiny of the heroine throughout the drama with apprehension and terror, but not without *sumpatheia*, just as the Nurse and the chorus do on the stage: even when she eventually carries out her bloody plans they express horror rather than disapproval, going on to call her unfortunate, not wicked, at the same time as their compassion extends to her victims (31 ff., 176, 267, 358, 438, 443, 659, 818, 976 ff., 996 f., 1274, 1279).

Indeed, as we will see in analyzing the famous monologue in which Medea reflects (and oscillates) on her decision to kill the children as extreme retaliation for Jason's betrayal, she does not evaluate her plans of vengeance in terms of what would be morally good or bad to do, either for herself or for her children, while clearly acknowledging that she is driven by her passion (*thumòs*). Before examining the peculiar description of her "divided self" Medea displays in her famous monologue, we will have to disentangle the diverse and contradictory emotions that constitute her emotional syndrome, that is, love and hate, humiliation and anger, pleasure in revenge and despair.

Let us note first that starting from the prologue of the tragedy, recited by the Nurse (especially ll. 16-33), Jason's decision to abandon Medea to marry the daughter of the king of Corinth[2] is presented as a betrayal of the pacts made with his wife (and, what is more, reinforced by their having had children together), and thus as an injustice that leaves her humiliated (in Greek terms, "dishonoured") in depriving her of her conjugal rights (see *etimasmene*, l. 20; *edikemene*, l. 26; *atimasas*, l. 33). The fact that Jason has committed a real injustice will be repeatedly denounced with aggrieved tones throughout the tragedy both by the protagonist in her reproachful speeches and by the chorus, composed of women of Corinth showing their solidarity with her (ll. 404 ff., 412 ff., 435 ff., 580 ff., 692 ff., etc.). There is no doubt that the Nurse as well as the chorus share Medea's reasons: indeed, they insist on her wretchedness (*dustenos*, l. 20; *talaina*, l. 34) and even on the rightness of

to draw most attention (as it will be done also here, see below), but also on the crucial move made by Arturo Ripstein (*Así es la vida*, Mexico/France/Spain, 2000) in preferring Seneca's Medea as a model for staging the whole story and its climax, the final killing, in all their violence.

[2] During the tragedy she is designated generically as *numpha* (e. g., l. 163), which probably emphasizes her youth: hereafter I will call her for convenience Glauce, with one of the names that are found in the mythographic tradition (the other being Creusa).

her angry reaction (ll. 94, 99), due to the dishonour which Jason threw her in by violating the marital oaths guaranteed by the gods. However, the Nurse starts very soon to note that she glares hatefully at her children and fears that the wrath of her mistress be unleashed against them (ll. 36 ff.); she invites the children to not get too close to their mother because of her "wild" and "arrogant" temper (ll. 103 ff.).

The expectations so produced in the audience are confirmed by the speech Medea makes upon her entry on the stage, lucidly explaining the reasons for her anger (ll. 214-266). After having abandoned her family and her country (along with the royal status she enjoyed in Colchis), after having adapted to the submission of Greek women to their husbands and having faced the perils and sufferings of childbirth ("more serious than those men face in war"!), she has just found out that she has dedicated her life to "the worst of men" (l. 229), who has "outraged" her by leaving her alone in a foreign country (ll. 255 ff.). That is why she now intends to make Jason pay for the evil he has done to her (l. 261: *diken tond'antiteisasthai kakon*).[3]

Henceforth, the most evident *Leitmotiv* of Medea's actions (whose development is the same as that of the drama) will be *anger*. As a matter of fact, anger is mentioned countless times both by the protagonist in explaining her mood and by the other characters in commenting her actions with more and more anxiety. Three words occur to describe this emotion in three different shades, all of them inherited from a long literary tradition of representation of a *pathos* that is central to the Greek world. The word *cholos* stresses rather the physical dimension of anger, by which the subject is struck as by a disease that affects the viscera, while the word *orghè* is most often linked to a cognitive aspect, that is, to the perception of an affront that requires repair, and *thumòs* covers the range of impulsive and aggressive manifestations of passion determined by situations of humiliation.[4]

What is most striking, besides the omnipresence of these notions in the tragedy, is the way in which Euripides represents the anger of a *woman*. Manifestations of female anger are anything but unknown in ancient literary representations, but they are usually disparaged and neutralized by reducing

[3] As to the issue of the stance Euripides takes on the status of women in Medea's famous speech, I refer to the most recent study that I know on the subject, that is Cairns 2014, who calls into question with interesting arguments the thesis that Euripides actually aimed at subverting Athenian stereotypes of womanhood.

[4] *Cholos*: ll. 94, 99, 172, 590 ff.; *orghè*: ll. 121, 176, 447, 520, 615, 639, 870, 909; *thumòs*: ll. 8, 91, 108, 271, 640, 879, 883. Campeggiani helpfully outlines the semantic history of these words from Homeric times to classical age (2013: 11-21). It is inevitable to recall how the aggressive appearance of *thumòs* is taken and integrated into the Platonic psychology.

them to the constitutive irrationality of women, who are generally considered as incapable of assessing and restraining their excessive passion.[5] Furthermore, Attic tragedy offers significant examples of heroines who, while similarly abandoned by a partner fallen in love with a younger woman, react very differently, that is, more appropriately to the standardized image of a wife devoted and submissive to her husband. One may think for instance of Deianeira (in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*): far from taking revenge on Herakles, who is in love with another woman, she tries to regain his love, and she sends the hero the fatal tunic just because she believes it to be imbued with a love potion.[6] Think also of Andromache in Euripides' homonymous tragedy: taken as slave from Troy by Neoptolemus (the son of Achilles who murdered Hector, and murderer himself of little Astyanax), she has given him a son and they are now persecuted by the jealousy of Hermione (Neoptolemus' new wife), and yet she suffers this persecution with calm nobility.

On the contrary, Medea's portrait is dominated by the markedly male theme of wounded pride, which according to the social code of the Homeric hero traditionally combines with the notion that vindictive anger is the reaction that best befits a noble soul. It is significant in this regard that a number of consonances have been noted between Medea's attitude and that of Sophocles' Ajax.[7] Let us just remember that the hero of Sophocles' tragedy, when realising that he has slaughtered cattle instead of the hated leaders of the Achaean army, feels stuck in a ridiculous condition of untolerable shame. To him, it does not matter that he acted in a blind state of delirium (*ate)* caused by hostile Athena: in any case, his gesture has put him into a condition of shame that he feels as irreparable, which is a sufficient motivation for him to commit suicide. He must kill himself not only to escape the eyes (and the laugh) of his peers and even that of his father (who is not there, and yet is very present in his mind as a model of virtue): he also succumbs to his own view of himself, because the values of honour and excellence of the community in which he was born have profoundly shaped, and are deeply rooted in, his identity.[8] Now the analogy with Ajax's situation stands out in Medea showing her concern that someone can surprise her in the middle of her plan

[5] See Harris (2001) and (2004); Konstan (2006: 58-59).

[6] As Thumiger put it: "Deianeira is no Medea, and her position and needs are different altogether" (2013: 35).

[7] See Maddalena (1963), whose remarks were developed in a famous essay by Knox (1979).

[8] I am following of course Bernard Williams (1993) in believing that what determines the suicide of Ajax is, in short, an internalized sense of shame: in other words, his actions and reactions correspond to a network of values that are unquestionably ethical, even if they do not depend on any Kantian imperative.

to kill Glauce: in this case she could not revenge herself as she very much wants, and, worse, she would be mocked by her enemies (l. 383, cf. 797, 1049).

Therefore the fear of becoming an object of derision, a typical emotion of the "shame-culture", determines the behaviour of both Ajax and Medea. The outcomes, however, are different, as the same ossession that drives Ajax to self-destruction (*Aj.* 367, 382, 454, 961, etc.) prompts Medea to carry out more effectively her desire of destructive revenge (see ll. 404, 797, 1049, 1355. 1362). In short, if we compare the two situations, we are tempted to say that Medea's behaviour is more in line with Homeric morals than that of Ajax… All in all, it seems that Euripides wants to justify Medea's actions in the light of that notion of anger that has developed from the Homeric poems to the philosophical thought of 4th century BC: according to this notion, which finds its most neat expression in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, anger (of men) is an emotion well worthy of social recognition:[9]

> Let us then define anger (*orghè*) as a desire, accompanied by pain, of a manifest revenge owing to a manifest slight, affecting the man himself or one of his friends, when such slighting is improper. (Arist. *Rhet.* II 2, 1378a 31)

Let us note that this passage opens the gallery of emotions analyzed by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* 2, and it occurs just a few lines after he has defined emotions as a whole as:

> those affections because of which men undergoing a change differ in regard to the judgements they make, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries. (Arist. *Rhet.* II 1, 1378a 20-22)

Anger, in particular, plays a key role in the construction of judicial speeches, both in the perspective of the individual accused of a crime committed in a state of anger (which will be reduced to the need to restore his social image and thus read as a manifestation of righteousness) and in the perspective of the judges, who will be invited either to being clement towards such crime or to get angry against the offender. So in the situation skillfully put on stage by Euripides it would not be surprising that the judges of the case, namely, the chorus, express their sympathy for Medea almost to the threshold of the infanticide… if Medea were not a woman, and beyond that threshold there were the most terrible murder a woman could commit. From this point of view, it is certainly not sufficient to note that Medea's proud and irascible character can be traced back to her royal lineage from the Sun, nor that her wildness

[9] This point, recently clarified by Campeggiani (2013), cannot be underestimated in relation to the case of Medea.

depends from her barbaric origin. The fact remains that Medea embodies the connection anger-revenge up to an extreme outcome that ends up denying her nature of woman-and-mother (if not of human being) beyond any possibility of rational understanding.

However, it is still possible and is even necessary to delve deeper into Medea's complex psychology, as her personality cannot be reduced to a mix of wounded pride and fury. In the first place, one cannot say that she falls into the stereotype of the woman unable of self-control for lack of rationality: on the contrary, she is fully aware of her reasons, whose consequences will be terrible, and yet accurately thought through.[10]

As has been often pointed out, the most peculiar feature of Medea's character is her *sophia*: in accordance with her ambivalent position between Greece and barbarism, she exerts her intelligence on the one side in witchcraft and noxious drugs (which tended to be perceived as an Oriental feature),[11] on the other in the ability to appropriate the values of the world that has welcomed her, either genuinely (in the several passages where she thinks in terms of honour, offence, and need for retribution) or in hypocritical manipulation of her enemies – particularly enlightening in this respect are a dialogue with Creon – whom she persuades to let her stay in Corinth a day longer, which will allow her to implement her plans for revenge (ll. 271-356) – and one with Jason, with whom she pretends to reconcile in order that her children go and bring as a wedding gift to Glauce the poisonous ornaments (ll. 869-975). However, contrary to the view of most scholars, I do not believe that the sum of humiliation and the ability to formulate plans for revenge is enough to explain Medea's decision to accomplish her revenge through such an act as the murder of her children, that is going to cause her enormous *pain*, and, what is more, in full *awareness* of what she is doing – a state of mind that is most dramatically albeit indirectly suggested by the cries of the children trying desperately to escape behind the scene her ruthless chase (ll. 1271-1272).[12] It is not infanticide itself, but the careful and prudent premeditation of it, that makes Medea's gesture

[10] Both Di Benedetto (1971: 34-46; 1997: 12-19) and Foley (1989: 63-66) have acutely observed this point.

[11] Further features can be explained through Medea's barbaric origin: her uncontrolled display of grief and anger, sensuality (denounced by Jason, ll. 568-575), luxury (see the description of the precious gifts for Glauce, ll. 946-968), duplicity. The last feature also belongs to the conventional representation of female gender.

[12] In his perceptive reading of these lines, Pontani (2016) also tackles, among other intriguing questions, the issue of the existence of an earlier version of the tragedy (possibly attested by a recent papyrus find), in which Medea pushes her rage to calling her son a coward while furiously pursuing him. In any case, the text we have is quite in line with the lucidity Medea displays throughout the whole play.

incomprehensible (just as, I may add, it makes understanding Euripides' intentions extremely difficult).[13] In order to get closer to a comprehension of this situation, we must consider another emotion that can be assumed to be stronger and even more destructive than craving revenge, although it is not equally explicit in the text: I mean, frustrated *eros*.

It is true that Medea never talks of love, and this would seem at first sight to confirm the influent claim, made a few years ago by David Konstan in discussing the anthropological question of the universality or relativity of emotions in time and space, that erotic jealousy is absent as such from the horizon of classical Greece (2003; 232 f.). However, precisely a careful reading of Euripides' *Medea* can prove the contrary of this statement. All throughout the drama the Nurse and the chorus describe Medea's present suffering with a wealth of vivid metaphors that are common in classical literature for describing erotic passion (stings, bites, twisting of the bowels), not to mention the references made by all the characters to the empty bed, betrayed or abandoned (the bed being an obvious metonymy of marriage and/or sex), for a total of thirty-six, more than in any other preserved tragedy. Furthermore, it is significant how the Nurse recalls the first time when Medea encountered Jason, saying that she was deeply "hit by eros" in her soul (*eroti thumòn ekplagheis'*, l. 8) – by the way, this point is well captured by Pier Paolo Pasolini in his film *Medea* (1969), where Medea faints, as truly thunderstruck, at the first glance on Jason entering the sacred space that houses the Golden Fleece. It is worth recalling that the verb *ekplessein*, which also occurs in Gorgias' description of the unsettling effects of a disturbing vision in the *Encomium of Helen* (16), indicates "a physical transformation which can determine a change of state and opinion".[14] Thenceforth Medea's actions have indeed reflected her absolute passion, although she reminds Jason of them not to regain his love (which is over, she knows that), but to throw in his face his ingratitude and unfaithfulness (ll. 475-495). From her helping him to conquer the Golden Fleece to her leaving her family home, to the cunning killing of the hostile uncle Pelias at the hands of his own daughters, everything tells of a woman who put all her skill with magic and manipulative planning in the service of her beloved.[15]

[13] This is pointed out by Beltrametti (2000).

[14] Gemin (2014: 589). Gemin interestingly, and convincingly, argues in his essay that one can detect in Euripides' text, in statements of different characters, four reasons for Medea's behaviour that are equivalent to those Gorgias discusses in relation to Helen's responsibility in leaving home to follow her beloved – namely, love, god, physical constriction, and the power of *logos*. According to the author this correspondance shows that the shared aim of Euripides and Gorgias is to give the sense of "a fragmentation of reality" (2014: 597).

[15] It is to add that to facilitate their escape of Colchis she killed and dismembered her brother

But now she has realized that she has been "more passionate than wise" (*prothumos mallon e sophotera*, l. 485). I find the word *prothumos* here revealing, as it shows that Medea's *thumòs*, that is the essence of her passionate character, encompasses a complex of erotic desire and the hatred resulting from the frustration of that desire. In fact, Jason's abandonment has literally "destroyed" Medea's life (*psuchèn dieptharken*, l. 226) because she had ended up trampling on her sense of identity, although this was tremendous, in devoting herself to a man "in whom there was everything for her" (ll. 228 f.).

Medea's attitude to Jason can only be exarcerbated later, when Jason deprives her feelings of any personal value in claiming that, as a matter of fact, he has been helped in his enterprise by Aphrodite and Eros: *they* instilled in her that passion that determined all of her decisions (ll. 526-31).[16] There is no retort from her on this point, neither one does need it: the audience have by now learnt what sort of self-centered person Jason is, and there is no doubt for anybody that she *must* now reaffirm her identity against him, at all costs.[17] That is why she must kill her children: they are indeed, as Christopher Gill put it, "the most concrete term of the interlocking" of his life with that of Jason (1996: 160).[18]

On the level of the development of the drama, Medea elaborates gradually her plan as she realizes that erasing Jason's offspring will cause him a more terrible grief than death: this point gets more and more clear to her along the sequence of dialogues with Creon, Jason and Aegeus, from which various forms of paternal affection progressively emerge (cf. respectively ll. 282-291;

Apsyrtus: it is notable that Jason remembers a bit too late (see his final tirade, l. 1334) what this event could have told him about the temper of his wife.

[16] On the intertextual level, there is here a significant allusion to Pindar's version of Medea's story in *Pythian* IV, ll. 218 ff., where Aphrodite is said to have taught Jason prayers and incantations aimed at making the Colchian princess to lose any respect for her parents and inflaming her mind instead to the desire of Hellas with the scourge of Persuasion.

[17] Pasolini, who places a good half of his movie in Colchis (set in Cappadocia) in order to tell the mythical antecedents of the story represented in the tragedy, captures at least another key point, though implicit in Euripides' text. In fact, the director recognizes at the core of Medea's story a problem of identity: an identity that is oppressed until when, threatened with annihilation, resurfaces and revolts with unrestrainable, unprecedented violence. In Pasolini's peculiar political reading, the conflict of Medea and Jason symbolizes the unavoidable collision between any archaic civilization centered on the sacred and the modern culture that violently imposes its utilitarian values: a collision he used to see in action, in the Sixties of past century, between the Third World and colonialist countries. On this intriguing point (which also predicts, it seems to me, some elements of the nowadays "clash of civilizations") cf. Fusillo (2007: chapter on *Medea: conflitto di culture*), Michelakis (2013: 181), Shapiro (2013).

[18] Already Paduano (1968: 219-259), made convincingly this case on the grounds of psychological and psychoanalytic concepts.

545-567, 593-596, 610-622; 667-688, 708-724).[19] All in all, I think that the deep psychological tie of love and hate must be taken into account in explaining Medea's final decision, as part of a complex syndrome that includes and boosts her feeling of wounded pride. As Ed Sanders has recently noted in an acute close reading of the tragedy, individuals can respond to situations with several emotions, and the emotional state of Medea, in particular, cannot be reduced to the pair pride/anger (2013: 45). This means neither to underestimate the power of pride and anger nor to downplay the input of pain and hatred in determining Medea's decision. All of these emotions are rather to be seen as factors integrated into an emotional *syndrome* whose core is possessive jealousy linked to an anguished fear of losing all sense of self away in the absence of the beloved.

In psychiatric literature the formula "Medea complex/syndrome" is indeed generally applied to cases of infanticide caused by possessive jealousy of the abandoned mother.[20] However, it seems that such cases are rare in comparison with those of mothers who kill their child(ren) for depression, as they see them as part and parcel of themselves, involved in their own despair. Infanticide fathers, on the contrary, are driven by possessive jealousy much more often than by depression. So modern Western society seems to have maintained a link of eros and (male) power not too different from what Euripides shows in the Greek world when presenting Medea's case as exceptional. On the other hand, depression is not missing in Medea, as one can guess from the description of her mood by the Nurse and the chorus (in particular from the word *dusthumoumene* at l. 91). Neither to her dejection nor to her anger is extraneous that ambivalence that is constitutive of the emotional relationship between mother and child, inasmuch motherhood inevitably entails for the mother sacrificing for *another's* life that time and energy that she might otherwise devote to pursuing her own erotic desires and/or professional goals.[21] But then again, Medea stands up in the Greek world for showing how emotional ambivalence in the parent-offspring relation combining with self-awareness of the female gender may result in destructive and self-destructive effects in situations that are unbearable to the subject.

One last issue is crucial to our problem: although Medea was once driven "crazy" by her love for Jason (as it is assured by the expression *mainomenai kra-*

[19] It is also not to forget that the death of the young wife also contributes to deprive Jason of any hope to have other children.

[20] See, *e. g.*, Cavallone (2008).

[21] I am grateful to Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisic, one of the participants to the colloquium on *Emotions and Conflict*, for reminding me in a email that it is recognizable here a theme central to the writing of Elena Ferrante.

diai, ll. 433-34), she has never lost her lucidity:[22] on the contrary, the magic-and-rational knowledge she had put in Jason's service is now redirected to hatching bloody schemes against him. I will try to disentangle this extraordinary knot of rationality and passion by examining the Great Monologue (ll. 1021-1080), namely, the famous long speech in which, at the peak of the tragic event, Medea gives troubled as well as analytical expression of her own inner conflict. We have here a major example of the so-called rationalism of Euripides, which reaches its peak when he gives characters such as Medea or Phaedra an exceptional lucidity in describing the division in their minds. To this end Euripides makes innovative use of the monologue form, which was traditionally adopted for giving voice to an internal debate on the *arguments* for and against a decision to be made (cf. Hom., *Il.* XI, ll. 404-10; XVII, ll. 91-105; XXI, 553-570; XXII, ll. 99-130). No assessment of reasons *pro* and *contra* the filicide is found instead in Medea's monologue, but rather an "emotional storm" in which waves of different *feelings* overlap, making the subject visualize from time to time the perspective that would be open according to this or that choice and thus changing her mind back and forth before reaffirming the decision she had already made.[23]

So, at the beginning of the Great Monologue, the sad fantasy on occasions to come in which the children (present on the stage) might make Medea happy (their marriage ceremonies, their loving taking care of her burial) is fostered just for a while by the sight of their "bright smile" (l. 1043), which shakes Medea almost to the point of dropping her "plans" (*bouleumata*, ll. 1044 and 1048), as she is well aware of how painful life is going to be without them (l. 1047). But immediately after she figures out the "laughter" to which she would be exposed if she were to leave her enemies alive (l. 1049), then a new, short flash-forward follows, of her children cheering her up in an unlikely future; finally the brutal realization comes that death is inevitable for them, as they will be killed anyway by the Corinthians for giving Glauce the poisonous gifts that murdered the king and his daughter – therefore, she concludes, "given the absolute necessity (*pantos … ananke*) that they die, we will kill them, we who have generated them" (ll. 1062 f. = 1240 f.).[24] And finally, after taking leave of her children with one last tender embrace, Medea stays alone on the stage uttering the famous lines where the psychic conflict that disrupts her is condensed:

[22] Unlike other tragic heroines studied by Thumiger (2013).

[23] Cf. Di Benedetto (1997: 36-37).

[24] To my knowledge no one has dwelled on the peculiar use of plural in this phrase (*pluralis maiestatis* is quite unusual in ancient Greek) except Gill (1996: 167 n. 259): "the plural […] may be literal and may denote the idea that both parents are, in different ways, involved in "killing" the children". As Gill (1996: 171) remarks, in Medea's perspective the death of the children is the final outcome of a disgraceful sequence of events that was started (as she recalls at l. 1372) by Jason himself.

Καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἷα δρᾶν τολμήσω κακά,
θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων,
ὅσπερ μεγίστων αἴτιος κακῶν βροτοῖς

And I understand what evils I will dare,
but my *thumòs* is master of my decisions:
that is responsible of the greatest evils that happen to mortals.

Euripides, *Medea*, 1078-1080

Medea is fully aware that the "evil" she is going to do will be a tremendous burden for her to bear, and she is aware too that her actions are determined by her *thumòs*, namely, by her possessive and aggressive passion focused on vengeance. According to an influential reading by Bruno Snell (1948), Medea is saying that her *thumòs* is "stronger" (*kreisson*) in that it pulls her actions in opposite direction to any right action that reason would indicate, and thus these lines have been read for a long time as the clearest description of the standard moral contrast between reason identifying and tending to what is morally good and irrational desires of immediate satisfaction of the subject's egoistic needs. In these terms, one might see (and has indeed seen) in Medea's conflict an anticipation of the Platonic division of the soul or of Aristotle's conception of weakness of will (*akrasia*). Yet starting from Hans Diller (1966) a different interpretation has been suggested, which has become richer and richer in arguments and is commonly accepted today.[25]

According to this interpretation Medea is rather saying that her *thumòs* is "sovereign" (*kreisson*), that is, it rules and determines her, however clever, revenge strategy.[26] In fact (as Diller most effectively pointed out) the word *bouleumata* (l. 1079) cannot refer to "deliberations" oriented by any "rational will": *bouleumata* means rather, like it does a few lines above (ll. 1044, 1048) and elsewhere in the tragedy, Medea's "plans" for taking revenge (see also ll. 38, 317, 372, 402, 769, 772, 893; *mechané*, ll. 260 and 1014). And it is also important to observe that the "evil" Medea evokes (*kakà*, l. 1078) has no moral connotation: rather than to the evil she is going to do to her children, she is alluding to the pain she is going to suffer in losing them.

[25] After Diller (1966), see at least Rickert (1987), developing a careful analytical argument against a reading of Medea's conflict in terms of *akrasia*; moreover, Foley (1989).

[26] It is significant that this adjective occurs to characterize the superior power of gods in Aesch. *Ag.* 60. In Euripides' *Medea* the omnipotence of gods is usurped by the protagonist, who mentions them, as Knox noted, just for claiming to have allies in his vindicative enterprise (1979: 301 ff.). The *thumòs* to which Medea is submitted is the fully human version of the *daimon* that usually determines the action of the tragic character.

It is worth dwelling on this element of pain, which is rarely noted in readings of the tragedy, and is instead underlined with acute sensibility by Lars von Trier in his extraordinary film version of *Medea* (1988). In fact, von Trier's Medea stands out for her austerity, and the visible sign of her ability to contain her emotions is her hair gathered severely under a scarf. At the very end of the movie, on the contrary, when we see her in Aegeus' boat that will bring her safely to Athens, she lets her hair down, thus emphasizing the suffering that we finally see in her painstricken face.

Including pain into the frame only further tangles Medea's syndrome, considering that the expectation of vengeance normally goes alongside pleasure (as Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1378b1-9 well recognizes). However, it is important to note that Medea's attitude proves to be, once again, self-centered, as she focuses not on the good of the children, but on the fear of her own sufferings. Even according to the morality that she officially invokes, the murder of the children is too high a price for restoring the dignity and identity of their mother, because it is supremely unfair to *them*. The least we can say is that she has not treated her children as *philoi*, while she had claimed to adhere to the traditional Greek morals of being "hard on enemies and well-disposed to *philoi*" (l. 809). [27]

On the whole, Medea makes the heroic moral code work just as a rational scaffolding that supports her action inspired by a complicated whole of emotional drives whose main feature is a desperate need of self-assertion. In portraying such a unique combination of intelligence and irrationality Euripides provokes from the audience existential rather than moral reflections on the complexity of human nature and the difficulty of letting rational criteria of good and evil emerge when human behaviour is dominated by vital emotional needs.

One might find a "lesson" in the *Medea*, namely, that there are impulses in anyone's life that can drive the most rational individuals to decisions that do not take into account any moral issues. But the tragedian's job, as we know, is not to teach things to be apprehended and put to good use. Let us consider the ending of the tragedy, which is significantly deprived of any cathartic function (ll. 1293-1419). What prevails in it is an irreparable lack of communication between Medea and Jason: the latter, who has finally become a victim from the offender he was, does not even get the consolation of touching and burying his children, and thus remains isolated in hopeless despair, vainly shouting his reprimand and pain while Medea merely reaffirms the justness of her however

[27] Lawrence (2013: 199-211) makes several good points on this issue. Let us add that, significantly, it is within a discussion on the misfortunes occurring in the sphere of *philia* that Aristotle famously contrasts the case of Medea with that of Oedipus, noting that the former knows well what she is doing when killing her children, whereas Oedipus could not know how "terrible" (*deinon*) his murder was, being unaware of his kinship with the victim of his wrath (*Poetics*, 1454b 25-32).

terrible act and escapes on the chariot of her grandfather, the Sun. To render the sense of the non-communication between the two main characters Lars von Trier preferred to delete the final scene altogether: with Medea already gone, Jason discovers his childrens' death by seeing from far away the bare tree to which they are hanging, and the impasse into which he is thrown finds anguished visual expression in his desperate riding and beating the bushes around him and still remaining there, just stuck within the frame. Pasolini had chosen instead to adopt Euripides' setting and let the two protagonists confront each other in one last violent face to face: the impossibility of any mediation is expressed by the last words he assigns to Maria Callas, as a forever enraged Medea: "Niente è più possibile, ormai!!".

I think in conclusion that suspending any moral judgement on Medea's behaviour, that is, removing the moral issue from the horizon of the piece, has the advantage of better fitting into what we expect from a tragic representation of conflict (both inside the self and between characters and/or values): I mean, that conflict is irriducible to neat rational categories. After all, this is what Greek tragedy, and often life, is made of.

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