

You Fight Like a Girl: Medea, Theano II and Diverging Articulations of the Heroic Code

Meg Shields

Medea's worldview is rooted in the Sophoclean heroic code, where τιμή and κλέος are prized and one 'helps friends and harms enemies'. Here, the desire to support and protect allies is "both natural and pleasant," and it is painful to witness an "enemy's success" while pleasurable to behold "their downfall" (Blundell 26-7). Another vital component is "alarm at the prospect of enemies experiencing such pleasure in one's own humiliation" (27). On this subject, Bernard Knox stresses that Medea is more appropriately set beside an Ajax or Odysseus rather than an Ino.¹ Medea's sophistic and contemptibly pathetic enemy, Jason, has undoubtedly wronged her having broken his oath of marriage and leaving her bereft of οἶκος and πόλις. Yet even in light of the injury she has suffered, the way in which she adheres to the heroic framework – the murder of her children, her motherhood and her humanity – is horrific. In contrast to the Pythagorean thinker Theano II,² in a letter to Nikostrate she employs similar heroic language to the end of upholding traditional female gender roles of marital devotion, temperance, and passivity. Through this comparison, the popular conception of Medea as a perverse *female* heroic figure is unsettled. Furthermore, there is an additional implication that the heroic code is not merely an imperative for conduct, but also a τέχνη used to dismantle or uphold the established order depending on its user.

Bernard Knox notes that Medea's language is set in heroic idioms that demonstrate a preoccupation with honour and with

1. The chorus, attempting to comprehend Medea's infanticide by means of comparison, stipulate that "just one other woman" has committed a similar act, being Ino (pg. 55, 1323). The commentator of the Hackett edition notes here, that the chorus "elide other myths of Greek mothers who kill their children," a list including Agavê, Althaea and Procene (55). The negation is chalked up to the dramatic effect achieved "by imagining that only one other could perform it" (55).

2. So named by scholars because "there are sound philological reasons to distinguish at least two Theanos [and] we can be reasonably assured that this is not Theano of Croton" (Waithe 41). She will simply be referred to as Theano for the duration of the essay.

punishing the “enemies” who would “attack [or] laugh at [her]” (Eur. *Medea* 284, 390, 818). Knox describes her heroic character through comparison; though she is characteristically female by 5th century Attic Greek standards, in that she is unrestrained in her emotional expression, “the comparison should be ‘like Ajax, Odysseus, Achilles, Heracles.’ [. . .] [S]he is compared to a wild beast, but so too, sooner or later, are all the Sophoclean heroes” (Knox 309). At its time, Euripides’ *Medea* was the most physically and psychologically violent rendition of the Medea myth, and may have explicitly reminded some audience members of Sophocles’ *Ajax* (Soph. Aj. 296-7). What both Ajax and Medea fear more than anything else is “the mockery of their enemies” (297), to allow [them] to laugh [and] go unpunished” (Eur. 1072-3).³ Medea “is presented to us [. . .] in heroic terms,” as Knox notes the rhetorical and structural similarities between the *Medea* and “the Sophoclean heroic play.” Typically, a central figure holds the stage, initiating and competing against “obstacles, advice and threats,” all while “deaf to persuasion” (Knox 297-8).

In regards to half of the heroic code paradigm, ‘to help friends’, Medea deplores Jason as he has “[had] the nerve to harm [his] friends,” and the chorus echoes this, longing that “he die, the ungracious man who won’t honour friends” (Eur. 475-6, 677-6). Medea herself claims to “treat [her] friends with kindness” and of course to “come down hard on the heads of [her] enemies” (831-2). Furthermore, she justifies her revenge⁴ “on the grounds that she has been treated with disrespect and mockery” (Knox 303), that Jason was “not about to treat [her] bed with dishonor and spend a pleasant life laughing at [her]” (Eur. 1354-55).⁵ Medea, with her “proud” heart, feels that “she has been treated with disrespect” and “with dishonor,” yet she is no passive victim (115, 20). Her rage is “fiercer than the rage of Achilles, even of Ajax;” she is bursting with passionate intensity, “that *thumos* which in her case is so marked [that] she argues with it” (Knox 315, 298). In the end, Knox suggests, this unrelenting spirit is what will make her “something

3. For further instances, see lines 383, 403-4, 797, 1049, 1355, 136 of A. J. Podlecki’s translation in *Medea, Hippolytus, Heracles, Bacchae*, eds Stephen Esposito (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004).

4. Foreshadowing her eventual divine-like status, this justification resembles the opening monologues of *The Bacchae*’s Dionysus as well as *Hippolytus*’ Aphrodite.

5. Alternatively, the more emphatic: “There was no way you could go on to lead a pleasant life, to laugh at me – not you” in the Svarlien translation (Euripides 1402-3).

more and less, than human, something inhuman, a *theos*" (315).

Ultimately, *Medea* is a work that "uses Sophoclean heroic formulas" and yet "produce[s] a most un-Sophoclean result" (306). Medea's stern, grim heroic resolve does not triumph "over an outside adversary" or an adviser, but rather "over the deepest maternal feelings of the hero herself" (300). In so doing, the cost to her "is beyond [Jason's] comprehension" (Walton 109). What Jason has turned her into, and what escapes his understanding about her, "makes Medea the avenger who, to destroy her husband, destroys her own motherhood" (110). Lest we forget, before she encased herself in the heroism through which she "became a (stage) *theos*, she was a woman" (Knox 306). A woman, for whom birthing was "like a battle, only more dangerous" (Esposito 13). However, since "no paradigm except self-sacrifice" was in place "for decisive feminine action against male injustice," her only articulation of resistance, "of winning repute rather than ridicule," was to adopt the traditional male heroic code (15). Consequently, spouses become enemies, the house the battlefield, and children the weapons (15). It may be the case that we may never fully comprehend Medea's actions, let alone sympathize with them.⁶ Yet Euripides accounts for her conduct in terms of "how she was treated, both as a woman and as a non-Greek" (Walton 56). That she is the ultimate outsider, a barbarian female inhabiting this heroic sphere, "reinforce[s] in the audience's mind that disconcerting sense of the disintegration of all normal values" which is at the heart of the work (Knox 305).

In the *Medea* the heroic code is contorted back in on itself, redirected towards demolishing those upholding the traditional patriarchal order (Jason, Creon, etc.). However, by situating female articulations of the heroic code in a Pythagorean context, it cannot be said that the heroic code itself is corrupted by virtue of being enacted by a woman. In her letter to her friend Nikostrate, the Pythagorean philosopher Theano employs the diction of the heroic code, to the end of supporting traditional patriarchal structures rather than obliterating them.⁷ In her letter, Theano councils

6. To what extent we as an audience can applaud the violence she undertakes in the name of the heroic code – what she inflicts upon her children, and upon herself – is concerning, as to do so is to be, like the chorus, complicit in something truly horrible (Walton 103).

7. Discounting Theano's comment that women are more naturally inclined towards temperance (*sophrosyne*) and that "in this way it is even possible for the

Nikostrate, who, not unlike Medea herself, has discovered that her husband has been unfaithful. Theano stresses the importance of maintaining honour, arguing that “good character brings regard even from enemies,” and that “esteem is the product of nobility and goodness alone” (Waithe 45). She draws clear parallels to the militarism of the heroic code, stipulating that, in regards to Nikostrate’s ‘enemy’ the mistress, “a woman who has no tendency to blush is formidable in battle” (45). Furthermore we see resonances of the heroic concern with mockery as we are told that her husband will be “ashamed” once time has passed, and Nikostrate has remained self-controlled and virtuous (44-5).

However, unlike other proponents of the heroic code, Theano urges Nikostrate to “resist the passionate resolutions of [her] suffering,” as to give in to jealousy or revenge would be demeaning, and would place her at the same level as her husband (45). Fittingly, Theano advises Nikostrate that she should refer to tragedy, which she describes as encompassing “a systematic treatise on the actions by which Medea⁸ was led to the commission of outrage;” that we ought to overcome and conquer jealousy (46).⁹ Effectively, she asserts that compounding evils does not restore harmony, and that “by patiently enduring, [Nikostrate] will quench [her] suffering sooner” (46). Theano argues “that marriage is a relationship based on love [that] comes from reflective good judgment about the person,” and by urging Nikostrate to honour this relationship, Theano can be understood as demonstrating the principle of ‘helping one’s friends’. Which is for Nikostrate, to behave justly towards her husband, “even when he fails to act justly towards her” (46,43).¹⁰ From a contemporary perspective, this advice seems to endorse the subordinate place of women in the family and promote Nikostrate’s emotionally abusive relationship. Yet, Theano’s letter “raises the question [of] whether it is our moral responsibility to live our lives according to whichever

power of a woman to surpass that of a man” (Waithe 45).

8. From Pomeroy: “there can be no doubt that Theano II is referring to the story as told by Euripides” (92).

9. Theano’s invocation of tragedy as an educative force is a superb reminder of the medium’s instructive capacity to contemporary audience members. Note how she derives a positive moral principle from the negative example presented on stage.

10. “The idea that a husband’s injustice towards his wife cannot justify her behaving unjustly towards him has its conceptual foundations in this Pythagorean view that some virtues are peculiar to women and others to men” (43). This is of course at odds with the Pythagorean belief that souls are not gendered.

moral theory best takes into account our special circumstances" (42). Ultimately, Theano can be seen to present this stance of accommodation, faithfulness and love "not as subservience, but rather as self-development," as it allows the wife to preserve her own internal harmony (Pomeroy 64).

Although Theano "acknowledge[s] the anguish of the betrayed wife," we cannot ignore that Medea's betrayal extends beyond mere philandering with a mistress (63). Unfaithful husbands were a common occurrence in Ancient Greece; this is true both for austere Pythagoreans and the female chorus of the *Medea*. However, Medea's injury extends beyond infidelity. By abandoning Medea, Jason condemns her and their sons to statelessness. Since Medea had murdered both her father and brother for Jason, she has no home or country to which she can return. In spurning Medea, he strips her of what little she had left, and it's all she can do to return the favour. We can only speculate as to what council Theano would provide for Medea, and whether it would be comparable to what she offers Nikostrate. Medea's actions meet if not exceed the injuries dealt to her by her enemies, in an articulation of revenge that has become no less shocking or unsettling over time. Set beside Theano's use of the heroic code, we see Medea's actions, enacting her revenge through a heroic framework, as not unsettling on account of her gender, but rather they are unsettling because she employs this code in such an intemperate manner.

The use of the word 'employs' should not be taken lightly, as Medea and Theano's divergent implementation of the code to such opposing ends (revenge and moderate temperance respectively), indicates that it is more of a means than absolute moral paradigm. Rather than existing as a determining end in itself, an instrumentalized heroic code would likely be abused by individuals who are both emotionally vulnerable and impulsively violent. There is an unsettling implication here, that as a τέχνη masquerading as moral law, great ills can be given license on the basis of moral authority. What then are we to make of the fact that when a female adheres to the heroic code in a 'moderate' fashion, she encourages passivity to oppressive institutions? We might wonder whether this tool for warriors, for men, was ever capable of being turned against itself without either justifying its own ills, as with Theano, or turning its user into a villain, as with Medea? In his male characters, Sophocles aptly demonstrates the shortcomings of the heroic code, perhaps with Euripides' *Medea* we

gain a female perspective, that when used as a means of dismantling the institution that bred it, the user cannot escape unscathed.

WORKS CITED

- Blundell, Mary Whitlock. *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Euripides. *Medea*. Trans. Diane Arnson Svarlien. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2008.
- Euripides. *Medea, Hippolytus, Heracles, Bacchae*. Eds. Stephen Esposito. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Pythagorean Women: Their History and Writings*. Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2013.
- Walton, J. Michael. *Euripides Our Contemporary*. London: Methuen Drama, 2009.
- Waithe, M.E. *A History of Women Philosophers: Ancient Women Philosophers 600 B.C. – 500 A.D.* New York: Springer Publishing, 1987.