

## Non-tragic Elements in Euripides's Medea

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### Abstract

The present paper analyzes non-tragic elements in Euripides's *Medea* from the perspective of plot, characterization and the relationship between plot and characterization. Through the analysis, the conclusion that Euripides's *Medea* defies Aristotle's theory on tragedy can be reached.

### Keywords

non-tragic elements; Euripides; *Medea*; Aristotle.

### 1. Introduction

As one of the three great tragedians of classical Athens, Euripides is known primarily for having reshaped the formal structure of traditional Attic tragedy by showing strong female characters and intelligent slaves and by satirizing many heroes of Greek mythology. Among all his works, *Medea*, which tells a story of the revenge of a woman betrayed by her husband, is always considered as his masterpiece. Traditionally, in the eyes of most critics, *Medea* is a tragedy. However, according to Aristotle's theory on tragedy in his *Poetics*, *Medea* possesses many non-tragic elements in its plot, characterization and the relationship between plot and characterization, which may lead it to something of a thriller.

### 2. Body

#### 2.1. Analysis of Non-tragic Elements in *Medea* from the Perspective of Plot

From the angle of plot which holds the most important place in a tragedy, the denouement of *Medea* should not rely on miracles but on probability and necessity. Consequently, *Medea* escapes to Athens with her children's bodies. The chorus is left contemplating the will of Zeus in *Medea*'s actions:

Zeus in Olypus is the overseer  
Of many doings. Many a things the gods  
Achieve beyond our judgment. What we thought  
Is not confirmed and what we thought not god  
Contrives. And so it happens in this story. (Euripides 76)

In Aristotle's opinion, "the end is the chief thing of all" (13) and "the denouement should arise out of the plot and not depend upon stage artifice" (13), but the improbable and inorganic ending of the play—*Medea*'s departure in the sun-god's fiery chariot—appears to have irritated Aristotle. Besides, Erich Segal has argued that "it tends to be irrational that Euripides relies on the *deus ex machina* to resolve *Medea* because it has broken the Aristotle's rules that the denouement of a tragedy conforms with a certain justice" (97). As a matter of fact, the action that a flying car magically arrives to rescue the villainess *Medea* and whisk her to safety has defied the rational analysis of tragedy and has been evaluated as the most non-tragic element in an Aristotelian tragedy.

## 2.2. Analysis of Non-tragic Elements in Medea from the Perspective of Characterization

From the perspective of characterization, Medea, the protagonist of the play, lacks most of the traits of a tragic hero and displays her own character in a highly skewed fashion. According to Aristotle, the ideal protagonist should be:

A man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment or frailty; a personage like Oedipus. In addition, the hero should not offend the moral sensibilities of the spectators. (56)

However, Medea does the opposite. Medea, not good at all but an evil woman who has taken several cruel actions, including killing her little brother, the new wife of her husband and her own children, neither falls for her "hubris" nor apologizes for her excesses. Bernard Knox in his essay has proposed that "Rather than move from a state of noble confidence to humble despair, she actually demonstrates the opposite transformation in the play" (124). Obviously, this kind of transformation has degraded the tragic effect of the characterization of Medea and made her a vengeful vehicle of her own frightening evilness. Meanwhile, since the aim of a tragedy is to arouse pity and fear through an alteration in the status of the central character, Medea should have been a figure whom the audience can identify and whose fate can trigger these emotions. With the offending of the moral sensibilities of the spectators, Medea's cruelty can hardly elicit the "catharsis". Although the bloody scenes do scare the spectators, practically it is not the best way to arouse the emotion of fear. Therefore, as the protagonist of the play, Medea, only loyal to her own anger, does not fit the mold of a tragic hero.

## 2.3. Analysis of Non-tragic Elements in Medea from the Perspective of the Relationship between Plot and Characterization

As to the relationship between plot and characterization in his Medea, Euripides pays more attention to characterization than to the plot, which devalues the purpose of action in a tragedy. In his Poetics, Aristotle has pointed:

Life consists of action, and its end is a mode of activity, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is their action that makes them happy or wretched. The purpose of action in the tragedy, therefore, is not the representation of character. Character comes in as contributing to the action. Hence the incidents and plot are the end of the tragedy. Without action there can not be a tragedy; there may be one without character. (26)

Generally speaking, plot is the first principle and the soul of a tragedy, and character holds the second place. However, in Medea, the dramatist has fixed his eyes on the vivid description of Medea's characterization, which can be especially reflected from a great many accusing monologues of Medea and her psychological conflict on making decisions from the beginning to the end. Because the plot should be intended to illustrate matters of cosmic rather than individual significance, this kind of writing style in Medea has not only easily confused the spectators concerning the purpose of a tragedy, but also has destroyed the structure of an ideal tragic plot. In a typical Aristotelian tragedy, "the plot requires a single central theme in which all the elements are logically related to demonstrate the change in the protagonist's fortunes, with emphasis on the dramatic causation and probability of the events" (13), whereas in Medea, "the seemingly central theme, passion and rage, which does little favor on the development of the plot, especially on 'reversals' and 'recognitions'" (Conacher 194). In fact, the revenge, the indecision and the manipulation can also be regarded as the significant themes in the play, which has weakened the influence of passion and rage. In the aspect of plot arrangement, the method of using several central themes undermines the logic of a tragedy, causing the purpose of a tragedy foggy.

### 3. Conclusion

To sum up, under the definition of tragedy and the analysis on tragic elements by Aristotle, Medea should be appreciated not as a tragedy due to its *deus ex machina* on the plot, the lacking of tragic traits on characterization and the irrational handling of the relationship between the two. For the sake of the bloody scenes in the play, e.g. Medea's dismembering her little brother by the dagger and the horrible death scene of the poisoned new wife, Medea holds more frightening characteristics than tragic elements, which can even cause the trepidation and simply be evaluated as a thriller. Although Euripides's Medea cannot impress us with the mold of an Aristotelian tragedy, it has undoubtedly produced great influence on the successors in the aspect of the method of character description, the embroidering of the horrifying effect and so on, which have made him one of the three great tragedians of classical Athens beyond any dispute.

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