

The Standpoint of Goodness: On the Dramatic Ethics in *Medea*

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Abstract

In *Medea*, Euripides not only portrays the most classic female characters in ancient Greek tragedy through dark, violent, and bold means, but also presents the differentiated ethics and morals in ancient Greek polis to the audiences from a mythological perspective, the core conflict of tragedy points to the irreconcilable micro conflict, which directly involves different standpoints of goodness. This paper combines the concept of "literary judge" with the drama studies, attempting to explore the tragic causes of the Medea murder case from the aspects such as moral oppression in ancient Greek polis life, the transition from maternal mythology to patriarchal mythology, the continuation of personal values, and the consistency of ethics.

Keywords

Medea; drama ethics; the concept of goodness; literary judge.

1. Introduction

Martha Nussbaum's concept of "judging as a literary judge" is an important idea she proposed in her research on law and ethics. This concept believes that judges should not rely solely on strict legal rules and logical reasoning when deciding cases, but should use imagination and empathy like literary readers and deeply understand the individual experiences and moral complexities in the case. This concept is influenced by Aristotelian ethics and literary criticism, and can fully reciprocally enrich literary criticism. "Literary Judgment" emphasizes the interpretation of literary texts from the perspective of moral philosophy and close reading, providing a humanistic perspective for this study and opening a theoretical path through the dual discussion of literary aesthetics and ethics and morality.

Due to Andrew Sayer's normative type division, the introduction of the concept of goodness is built on the situation that this paper sets the discussion of ethics and morality in a relatively clear context: "ethics" corresponds to informal, embodied natures, these natures come from social life, perhaps from specific communities, while "morality" corresponds to formal norms and rules, Sayer blurred the lines between the two and alternated their use for his research, the continuation of this approach in this paper is also to facilitate the discussion of key issues in *Medea*: the standpoint of goodness and kindness - which are considered and used in acquired ethics and morality.

2. Acquired Goodness

Medea has two clear narrative logics: one is the individual behavior constrained by necessity under the impetus of the chain of causality, and the other is the public order influenced by contingency in the moral life of the polis, these two can help identify the consistent behavior logic and the tragic cause of ethical and moral dimension of *Medea*. The nurse's introduction indicates the behavior course of the Argonaut hero Jason and the witch hero Medea from Colchis to Iolcus and then to Corinth, moreover, it also implies the difference in the original behavior goal between Jason and Medea, they were not the fellow-traveler from the beginning: Jason returned to his homeland to steal the Golden Fleece to reclaim the throne, while Medea

impulsively eloped to help Jason orchestrated by the god of love, the early split of the foreign alliance was marked by the murder of Pelias by Iolcus, Jason's ultimate goal of stealing the Golden Fleece - to reclaim the throne - completely vanished, and he was forced to renew a new journey of heroic wandering, here Euripides' skepticism begins to intervene, continuing to live means being connected to the possibility of betrayal in some way at some time. However, if the marriage of the two is regarded as an interest-oriented political alliance, betrayal is inevitable, fresh from this triumph, Medea became the direct promoter of Jason's political persecution again. The change of the political marriage between Colchis and Iolcus was inevitable, as the legitimate heir to the throne by blood, either Jason must marry another princess in a way which law and king recognize, and wait for the king to age to inherit the throne, or forget his origin and accept political asylum. Besides, Jason had another identity - hero, it meant that if he didn't receive appropriate advice, he might turn to choose a new powerful ally, however, he lacked a correct estimation of the situation of potential enemies. The reason why Medea's accusation of Jason's abandonment was not sufficient, no one knew how much love was mixed in the political marriage, the witch could not escape the power of Cupid's arrow, she was a victim of the Argonauts from the beginning. The effective evidence is the pact Jason made with Medea to steal the Golden Fleece, there was no more explicit rebuttal or libretto to confirm that he swore never to betray.

The goodness and the behavior to goodness that Jason and Medea pursued from the beginning to the end were very varied. Jason's pursuit of goodness was aimed at political interests and social status, and he used rational calculation as a means; Medea's pursuit of goodness was aimed at the stability of the oath and the integrity of the marriage, and she used emotional choice as a means. Whether it was the test of the Golden Fleece or the subsequent return home or escape, Jason's behavior pattern revealed the capriciousness driven by interests; Medea's behavior was relatively passive and had a lagging nature, her series of murders before being exiled to Corinth and the bloody revenge after that were all triggered by Jason, it was almost categorical imperative effect of satirical version - lack of restrictions of any morality. However, the moral constraints were still powerful in polis.

The nurse tells process of Jason's flattery towards Princess Glauce and judges it from the perspective of secular ethics and morality. In the eyes of the servants, the matter is no more than the instantaneous changes of love and the tragic fate of deserted wife, it is obvious that Medea's revenge does not have moral justice in the eyes of the public from the beginning - not only due to her status as a murderer and a foreigner, but also because of the upcoming wedding of Creon's daughter. Euripides provides multiple perspectives and standpoints to present this event in an all-round manner, this might be done for the creative purpose of strengthening Medea's emotional storm and ideological conflicts, but it weakened the necessity of bloody revenge, Jason is undoubtedly hateful, but that the following assumption cannot be denied: Creon, Glauce, and Medea's two young sons did not deserve to die, this is precisely the important point of the following discussion, Medea must make her revenge bloody, and this behavior is self-consistent in the concept of goodness.

3. The Dilemma of Goodness

Arthur Miller appropriately described the tragic situation of a hero when he is treated unjustly: since the story is caused by the hero himself, it always reveals what is usually called his "tragic flaw", only the people who do nothing and accept their fate are "flawless". Even Jason, who was no longer favored by the gods, did not meekly wait for his ageing at this time. There were still notable events before the tragedy occurred. Jason might have been the first to notice this event and take measure, while Medea are perhaps content and intoxicated in the temporary family, failed to notice - that heroes also grow old. The shadow of fate descends once more, eating the

hero's spirit and will with the despair of an inevitable ultimate triumph, heroes face the fate of falling to mortals, Jung pointed out the logical inevitability of their ultimate downfall: the essential function of these heroic myths is to develop an individual's self-awareness, namely the awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, thereby helping the individual to cope with the arduous tasks in life. Once an individual passes the initial tests and enters the mature stage of life, the heroic myths lose their significance. The symbolic death of the hero is the achievements made by the individual when are mature. Jason and Medea unconsciously stood on the extreme positions that their characters' shadows arouse, leading to their feud. This opposition was not only a private emotional conflict, but was also incited by the moral public opinion in the public sphere and Creon as the supreme authority, and then evolved into a public confrontation between matriarchy and patriarchy. Neumann's explanation hits the nail on the head: the decline of matriarchy is already reflected in Medea, the principle of patriarchy has devalued matriarchy, what she represents, and the myth she represents has also been personified, thus being denied. Medea is confronted with the total decline of the matriarchal myth, sadly while her decline is the consequence of helping Jason enter his mature period, after Jason entered Corinth, he quickly realized the end of the political convenience brought by his wife and the dead end of the political marriage, the moral customs of Corinth did not welcome foreign wives and did not refuse men to remarry. And Jason's most explicit goal was always to become king.

Now the truth about Jason initiating the marital crisis has been clarified, Medea's lament of her misfortunes to the chorus composed of Corinth women and her refutation with King Creon becomes a vivid scene for Euripides to show her morally isolated circumstances. Medea's lament contains four key points. first, the moral and ethics of Euripides' era were generally apt to male, men could remain unmarried, but women who did not marry were considered shameful, men could divorce, but women who divorced were regarded as unfortunate, and marrying foreigners was not encouraged; second, the women of the polis sympathized with Medea but did not support her revenge, the chorus leader's confidentiality could only be regarded as sympathy from a neutral standpoint; third, spending heavily on her husband's words was actually to emphasizes and defends the incommensurability of the values contained in Euripides' concept of diversity and richness, it meant that the conflicts between concepts were irreconcilable; fourth, when the polis failed to give a fair judgment on Medea's situation, revenge became the new law, because her appeal to the god of oaths was not reciprocated, Medea must take measure, she understood the essential difference between herself and the women of Corinth, she was a foreign hero, a woman who had fallen from a semi-divine bloodline to a mortal, since she was not recognized by the law and goodness, she will never forgive, she did not demand the goodness of love from the faithless lover, switched to using the punishment mechanism to uphold the goodness of moral - the effect of the oath.

Creon's entrance declared the necessity of revenge. This character issues an edict to Medea as the supreme arbiter of the polis' laws and the highest defender of moral values, thus showing an unquestioned standpoint that seeks to balance public considerations and private interests from the beginning of entrance. On the one hand, Creon reminded Medea that she is not an innocent woman, she had the blood of at least two royal families from the polis on her hands, and should not demand judgment or revenge from the polis, this is Creon's disclaimer for himself and the princess, for Jason's abandonment, Creon accuses Medea of betraying her homeland first, Creon strictly forbids Medea's revenge from sentiment and reason, on the other hand, Creon's expulsion order implies his unease, the ban and expulsion are insult to Medea's personal dignity and concept of goodness, she can only take illegal measures to appeal, however, Creon overly optimistically judges the situation, Medea is not only a wife and mother on the verge of collapse and hysteria, but also a witch and outlaw with the blood of Helios.

After all attempts to seek external help and non-violent solutions failed, Medea decided to take revenge. Her revenge targets were two: one was to destroy the new and old families that had deprived her of happiness, and the other was to revenge the unjust judicial system and social moral judgment system. The outcome was bloody and tragic; all the relevant people died except Jason. The supernatural power that Medea had been suppressing was not released in a distorted and incomprehensible way, because the power of the Great Mother character has always been not only to give but also to withdraw and deprive.

4. The Consequences of Goodness

Euripides' famous interest in women is the interest in situations where there is no shelter and they are easily threatened, and the interest in the powerlessness exposed in the face of war, death, and betrayal.

The major disaster that Corinth suffered was both an accidental event caused by the continuous oppression of moral prejudice and unfair treatment, and an inevitable behavior of Medea's consistent preservation of personal beliefs and values. This disaster has complex ethical motives and mythological traditions at its core. No line of dialogue can act as evidence for a reasonable death sentence, because Medea's behavior was not due to their guilts, it is merely a poetic justice that rebel against the belief towards a just world and the simplification of Karmic retribution, it descended upon them in the form of the unpredictability of fate and the contingency of moral luck, it is a momentary response of suffering inequality with theological justice properties and compressing pain to the extreme. From Medea's perspective, her trauma needed to be consoled by murder, just as modern people need to break or kick something when they are extremely angry or in pain. This is the extreme way chosen by the person concerned when the social system is malfunctioning, responding to contingency with contingency, replacing the social balance with the balance of the self.

But this cannot be called injustice. Jason was eventually punished for his betrayal, Creon's jobbery did not get it, the desperate and foolish behavior for revenge even reveals romance with some smell of blood. The instability from external promises reveals a terrifying truth: the boundaries of the so-called noble and dignified life, namely goodness, justice, and good order, all can be deprived, relying on externally established justice is dangerous; the most reliable way is to trust only oneself. In Euripides' era of tottering and widespread doubt, external moral and justice could not withstand reasoning and no longer based on trust and connection, Medea shows us her bravery or recklessness in set on her own individual course, justice has become a tool for personal punishment and safety, namely a lynching. There is no irresponsible behavior; people must be responsible for their own behavior. As Heraclitus said, a person's character is his destiny, people must not only obey the judgments of the earthly court but also those of the court of fate.

The tragedy of the children brought the most terrifying and shocking scene of the whole series. Without the involvement of magic or witchcraft, only this death was accomplished with a sword - a brisk death. The chorus's libretto pointed out that Medea had become a blind avenger, like Euripides' *Hecuba*, blindness is a rejection of trust and connection, and it is also the characteristic of the only person who no longer pays attention to the sunlight, Medea indeed did not look, looking would evoke memories and emotions in the past, the parts of wife and mother would affect the decisiveness of her behavior, she was afraid that compassion would bring more harm, and preferred to lose control and become an hysterical avenger, at this moment she had fallen below human due to her sin, the irrational mystery brought back the factors that could easily incite extreme behaviors, such as the impulse of love instinct and jealousy, to Medea in the form of a dark witch, rationality is vulnerable to supernatural forces, to blaspheme Medea who represented the mother goddess was to profane nature, nature was

by no means calm and restrained; it meant all the unstable factors and unpredictable accidents. Medea's revenge symbolized an end, namely the end of the marriage and the completion of the vow to punish the betrayer. All the meretricious justice and moral were stripped away, the essence of sin was exposed to the sunlight, she wanted revenge, and only she had the right to act, no earthly mortal or hero could judge her again, she announced her revenge to Jason at the cost of blood, and this revenge was named Medea.

So far, Medea completed her fate where she began, she brought Jason back to the situation before they met - an exiled prince, a test that could be achieved and a foreign land. Medea withdrew her love and Jason's interests, and deprived him of all he had gained by breaking his promise, her children were completely regarded as possessions by Medea, if love was unnecessary, then the products of love should also be abandoned. The infinite possibilities and love within the children, the chances for a better and more virtuous life, were all terminated. The Argo and Helios' dragon cart were always headed in opposite directions, Euripides' pessimism makes readers feel no beauty in love, the pain is almost suffocating, praying for the end of the inevitable tragedy, now this disaster has finally swept away the remaining nobility, goodness, and justice of Corinth, ending in a dual nature of suspended goodness and prolonged evil.

5. Conclusion

Starting from the analysis of the standpoints of different goodness of various characters in the play *Medea*, it can be found that the core conflict of the tragedy is tied to the absence of moral and justice, the irreconcilability of the standpoints of goodness ultimately leads to the tragedy. However, it cannot be ignored that although Euripides makes love and oaths to end in failure, he hints at the possibility of the existence of goodness with true value. This negative statement maintains the lofty ideals and pursuits. Aristotle's goodness concerns the courage to face the threats of the world and the true commitment to social justice, the social function of moral education in the text reminds readers not to forget the highest level of value that goodness can have, it may be transitory in life or remain hidden for a long time, but it is always an important human value.

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