Medea's Rage: An Intersectional Analysis

"The story's not the same, though, for you and me." Euripides, *Medea,* 252

Medea is a complex character, and one of fascination to audiences from antiquity to today. Characterized by her rage, she presents readers with a dilemma: do we sympathize with her or condemn her actions? Hirsch (1989, 170) comments: "Those who are heirs to Greek mythology are haunted by the specter of Medea, the woman who turns her anger at her husband into violence against her children." Johnston (1997, 7) challenges us to embrace Medea's complexity. This paper proposes to embrace Medea as a complex figure who the audience sympathizes with and reviles simultaneously through an intersectional analysis, focusing on her identity as a female, non-Corinthian, non-Greek exile (Crenshaw 2000).

It is hard to separate Medea from her rage, that uncontrollable and destructive force that rocked the community of Corinth in Euripides' play. Medea's rage is of such force that she is paired with Achilles in Elysium (Apollonius *Argonautica,* 4.457-867, McDonald 1997). This pairing of Medea with Achilles indicates that Medea's rage, like that of Achilles, was more than human, a force almost god-like in its ability to have on impact on human lives and even those of heroes. Medea's rage and her inability to control it present her character in a negative light, despite circumstances that invite the audience to sympathize with her. Rabinowitz (1993, 127) observes that "Medea is frightening even when she is sympathetic; and an important part of the play's effect is that even when she is terrifying, we cannot forget that we found her sympathetic.

The quote above from Euripides' *Medea*, from Medea's first address to the Chorus of Corinthian women, points to the difficulties in understanding her character. Her story is not the same as that of the Corinthian women – they may feel friendship with Medea and sympathize

with her a woman abandoned by her husband, but they want her to let go of her anger (131-159). Medea, however, calls attention to their differences – they have the city, their fathers' houses, and the company of friends (252-254). In other words, they cannot understand Medea's rage because they are not in her situation, and do not attempt to understand how her situation differs from their own. Perhaps Medea is speaking to us as well here – we fail to understand Medea's rage because we don't fully comprehend who she is and why she is so angry. She is often reduced to her identity as a woman, or possibly seen as both a woman and a "barbarian". Relying on a single axis of identity to explain Medea prevents us from fully understanding her rage.

This paper proposes to come to a deeper understanding of Medea's rage through applying an intersectional analysis and considering the impact of Medea as a female non-Corinthian non-Greek exile. These factors and others intersect to place Medea in a marginalized position, where her uncontrollable rage is born of desperation at her circumstances. This rage is analogous to that spoken of by Black Feminist Andre Lorde (1984/2007). Lorde argues that anger, often dismissed as irrational, useless, unproductive, and immature, has the potential to be a rational and powerful response to the persistence of racism. Just as white feminists have misunderstood the lives of their black sisters because of their failure to understand the ways that race and gender intersect to shape their experiences, the women of Corinth fail to understand the circumstances that are the impetus for Medea's rage. We can better understand the intersection of the constituent elements of Medea's identity by comparing her to the Chorus (with whom she shares the characteristic of being a woman) and by comparing her to Jason (who shares the characteristics of being a Hero and an exile). Medea's particular marginalization is made manifest by the intersection of these identities, and this results in her desperation and rage.

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