

## Self-Sacrifice and Love Curses in Euripides' *Medea* and *Hippolytus*

Scholars have long commented on the complexity of Euripides' female characters, who are often both pitiable and repulsive at the same time: this is perhaps what makes them appear so authentic. For centuries readers and theater-goers have been fascinated and appalled by the brutality of Medea, just as they have been moved by the misery endured by Phaedra. At first glance the characters might seem to be opposites: Medea is fierce and strong, while Phaedra is pitiful. However, these two figures have a major aspect in common: they are both rejected by the men they love and pay a great price in order to achieve their revenge. In fact, as I will argue, they each take part in a kind of "self-sacrifice" facilitated by a supernatural "curse" mechanism.

Before Medea carries out the brutal plot that leads to the murders of four people, including her children, she gives the explicit motive for such a horrible act (*Medea* 264-267):

γυνή γὰρ τᾶλλα μὲν φόβου πλέα  
κακή τ' ἐς ἀλκὴν καὶ σίδηρον εἰσορᾶν:  
ὅταν δ' ἐς εὐνήν ἡδικομένη κυρῆ,  
οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη φρήν μαιφονωτέρα.

For a woman, with respect to all other things, is full of fear  
and she is horrible when it comes to strength or facing a sword;  
but when it happens that she is dishonored in the bedroom,  
there is not another mind more bloodthirsty.

Phaedra hints that her death will not only bring about restoration of her honor but will also destroy the man who was the cause of her downfall, when she ominously states (*Hippolytus* 599-600):

οὐκ οἶδα πλὴν ἓν, καθθανεῖν ὅσον τάχος,  
τῶν νῦν παρόντων πημάτων ἄκος μόνον.

I only know this one thing, to die as quickly as possible,  
the one cure for these current calamities.

Both characters are motivated, as Medea suggests, to engage in murderous endeavors from which they would, in all other circumstances, recoil. Indeed, they are both ultimately successful in their revenge through some divine assistance. Medea escapes from Corinth in *deus ex machina* fashion in a chariot pulled by dragons, sent to her from the Sun God; while Phaedra's suicide note, which claims that Hippolytus raped her, leads her husband Theseus to ask his father, the god Poseidon, to destroy Hippolytus.

This paper will explore how Medea's and Phaedra's "self-sacrifice" – in Medea's case killing her children, and in Phaedra's case taking her own life – serve as a means to achieve a divinely sanctioned invective "curse" against the men who have erotically rejected them. It will also explore how Medea's and Phaedra's actions represent an extreme inversion of love spells used in ancient Greece: namely that they use a "spell" which serves to destroy the object of their love and erase all evidence of it, as opposed to the usual type of love spell which serves to endear the recipient to the producer of the spell either erotically or emotionally.

By investigating the themes of "self-sacrifice" and "erotic invective" in these plays, I hope to illuminate the connection between the murders committed or caused by these jilted characters and the indirect divine assistance they receive. My analysis will add to the scholarly understanding of the two tragedies, and highlight the intertext between them, by examining specific tropes that have not yet been examined.

#### Working Bibliography

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