

For She Is Fearsome: Expressions of Gender in Euripides' *Medea* and *Hippolytus*

Tragedy provides us a glimpse into the concerns and thoughts of the everyday citizen in a way other literary mediums are not able to. Euripides uses the idea of female agency to engage with social customs and explore what the world might look like should they be subverted. He plays on existing anxieties about female agency and their movement to engage his audience.

This project explores two plays by Euripides; *Medea* and *Hippolytus* through the use of physical space, particularly the way the female protagonists, Medea and Phaedra, express their gendered behavior. It explores the physical settings of both *Medea* and *Hippolytus* and discusses the realities of women's movement in classical Athens and the perception and control of women's bodies. Furthermore, it analyzes the ways in which Medea and Phaedra both exist in and utilize their interior domain for their pursuit of revenge and what the act of leaving that domain looks like for each of them.

Medea's connection with the interior of the home as a representation of her femininity is dangerous to everyone around her. She takes advantage of the private interior space in order to commit her most horrific acts, out of sight of anyone who can stop her. The home is changed from a symbol of safety, comfort, and maternal care to one of secrecy and death. Medea shows that it is not just women acting outside their domestic confines who are dangerous, but indeed that the women hiding behind them might be scheming as well. She desperately tries to hold together an *oikos* which it is clear to everyone but Medea has been fractured beyond repair. It is only once she has fully abandoned the dream of a healthy *oikos* and stable family unit and her own dedication to her feminine role that she leaves not only her feminine role behind but also what remains of the physical *oikos*.

Phaedra makes clear her desire to remove herself from her home and longing to run free in nature, outside the restrictive barriers of both her *oikos* as well as the larger *polis*. However, Phaedra's body only leaves the confines of her home in death as her actions leave behind the confines of her gender. While the act of bearing a dead body out onto the stage in the theater is not gendered or unique to Phaedra, this comes at a pivotal point within the story regarding her gendered actions. Her physical body is brought out and becomes part of a legal proceeding, a place she would not have been allowed while alive. This occurs as her letter is read aloud and her accusations are made. It is at this point that both her speech and her physical body leave the confines of her gendered space and become a part of the masculine political world. It is only in death that she is able to escape the confines of her gender and emerge into the public. Regardless of how much Phaedra might want to escape and run free of her home she remains contained up until the moment of her death.

P. E. Easterling says, "for the daughter there is nothing *but* the house (no life outside, no victories, however spurious, in the games." (Easterling, 1987) A point which, though made about Sophocles' *Electra*, applies to Medea and Phaedra. Their entire lives are tied up in their *oikos*; there is no life outside for them in the same way there is for their husbands. Neither of them are willing to face a life cast out of their homes. While their actions and outcomes are very different, both make it clear that while the men around them might be able to start over, *they* have nowhere else to go, *they* are stuck on the inside. They are vulnerable, with no resources beyond their wits and talents. Medea uses her cunning to secure herself a new home and the protection that comes with it in Athens. Phaedra does not have the same resources Medea has, and knowing she has nowhere to go and that she will soon be cast out of her home for her actions, decides instead to end things on her own terms, committing suicide and accusing Hippolytus of rape. The threat of

being abandoned outside their homes, without the protection and sanctuary provided by a man, and the threat that the outside poses to them is very real and nearly impossible to overcome. While men perceived it as threatening to them when women left the confines of the home, this action was perilous to women.

Bibliography

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