

Candidate 1

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9/11

*A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF VENGEANCE IN
"HECABA" AND "MEDEA" BY EURIPIDES AND "ELECTRA" BY
SOPHOCLES*

9/2

The plays of Sophocles and Euripides were recognised as a revolutionary style of Greek tragedy which are centred on protagonists who contradict the traditional literary view of women at the time. The two writers create dire circumstances within the play that develop the characterisation of the protagonist. This leads onto the main focus of the tragedies: vengeance. This theme is the crucial in the tragedies and is explored thoroughly by the two writers in very different styles, including characterisation, symbolism, and structure. Euripides approaches the psychologies of characters- Hecuba and Medea- and uses their mental suffering and desolation to portray the justification of vengeance. Sophocles in *Electra* uses the outcome of certain circumstances to produce the symbolism of vengeance: the protagonist does not drive the action herself but rather narrates the justice of the vengeance taking place. Conversely, the two authors are similar in the way they use a female protagonist driven by passionate desire to examine theme of vengeance.

All the three plays are structured similarly with the immediate representation of the theme of vengeance. The first scenes of each of the plays start in tragedy that justifies the vengeance later:

Old Slave: "Look! The land of your dreams, the ancient plain of Argos, the sacred grove, where Io was plagued by the stinging gadfly"¹

Electra starts immediately with direct reference to vengeance in the slave's imagery "Io was plagued by the stinging gadfly" referring to the Greek mythology of the river goddess Inachus who was having an affair with Zeus. She was transformed into a heifer to escape the wrath of Zeus's wife but Hera still took her revenge and plagued Inachus with gadfly. Sophocles uses several mythological references to show the theme of vengeance. The tragedy is explained by a minor character; the slave and creates pathos for the main character that begins the dramatic climax:

Nurse: "Jason has betrayed his own sons, and my mistress, for a royal bed, for alliance with the king of Corinth"²

In the same way the structure of *Medea* begins with a minor character that summarises the tragedy of the play that creates pathos for the main character. The nurse uses sympathetic word choice in the description of the tragedy to create pathos for the main character "collapsed in agony"³. The word choice of "collapsed" emphasises the image of Medea's mental and physical suffering due to her tragedy. After this soliloquy the dramatic climax commences:

Polydorus: "My father's guest-friend Polymestor murdered me, To get my gold and keep it... My mother then shall see two bodies of her children"⁴

Euripides uses a minor paranormal character, Polydorus, who has come back from the dead to warn his mother Hecuba in her dreams of the misfortune to come. The playwright employs dramatic irony with an insight to future events to heighten the tension in the plot and instigate the climax to the act of vengeance.

¹ Sophocles, *Electra*, line 4, Penguin Classics, 1963

² Euripides, *Medea*, line 1, Penguin Classics, 1963

³ Euripides, *Medea*, line 23, Penguin Classics, 1963

⁴ Euripides, *Hecabe*, line 26-46, Penguin Classics, 1963

9/3

This epiphany provided by minor characters is deliberate - it portrays the reason for the vengeance which drives the action of the play.

In all three plays, the protagonists embody similar character traits in which the playwright didactically highlights his thoughts on vengeance. Medea is a demi goddess and a foreigner to Corinth. She is driven by passion and this is fundamental to the plot of the play as her actions are corrupted by her emotion. Euripides depicts Medea as a heartless, cold mother:

*"Children, your mother is hated and you cursed; Death take you, with your father, and perish his whole house"*⁵.

Our perspective of Medea is twisted to accept her as a cold hearted murder who is the Byronic Hero. There is an underlying subtext behind the examination of Medea. She is depicted as clever and cunning in reflection to the scene where she convinces the king to let her stay one more day in Corinth (*"I'm in no position – a woman to wrong a king. You have done me no wrong"*⁶.) Her convincing deceit plays on the hamartia of other characters resulting in a tragic sequence of events. Nevertheless, Medea's complexity allows an enhanced reflection of the theme of vengeance, especially at the turning point of the play where she is in deep turmoil over killing her children:

*"Oh what am I to do? Women, my courage is all gone, Their young, bright faces. I can't do it"*⁷.

Medea moves to obliterate all chance of retribution. The density of emotions composed in the scene result in the characters formlessly rambling that are parallel to the mixed thoughts of the audience in what course she will take. Euripides dramatization inevitably leads onto the course of destruction for the protagonist as she kills her children:

*"but anger, the spring of all life's horror, masters my resolve."*⁸

Euripides *Hecabe* portrays the image of weakness in the protagonist. He strengthens this presentation with the depiction of Hecuba:

*"hold the old woman up, your fellow slave now, Trojans; once your queen."*⁹

The playwright emphasises the fragility and demise of the protagonist with the plot of her being formally a queen of Troy who transforms tragically into a slave. An objective correlative of the war-like ruins around her parallel the destruction of the characters within the play, however, this is less significant to the development of the character in relation to the production of catastrophic sequence of events that impact Hecabe and weaken her to the point of no return:

*"she lies stretched on the ground, her dress veiling her face."*¹⁰

⁵ Euripides, *Medea*, lines 113-114, Penguin Classics, 1963

⁶ Euripides, *Medea*, lines 308-309, Penguin Classics, 1963

⁷ Euripides, *Medea* lines 1043-1044, Penguin Classics, 1963

⁸ Euripides, *Medea*, lines 1080, Penguin Classics, 1963

⁹ Euripides, *Hecabe*, lines 62-63, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹⁰ Euripides, *Hecabe*, lines 485-486, Penguin Classics, 1963

9/4

The pitiful imagery is similar to a dead corpse which amplifies the pathos for the protagonist. The development of deep emotion is fundamental to ensure the convincing argument of vengeance; equally the constant challenges indicate only tragedy by the conclusion. The turning point occurs with her transformation into a strong, vengeful woman:

"Vengeance on a murderer. To gain that, I'll accept an age of slavery."¹¹

In context, in a time when slavery was acceptable, this transformation from a weak and pathetic into a strong willed character enables the vengeance to take place. Conversely this judgement does not only give the character redeemable qualities, where she would sacrifice herself to carry out an act of vengeance, but also is a deliberate characterisation by Euripides to disguise his morals in the play. Furthermore, it symbolises the consequent punishment of vengeance and articulates the idea that all avengers will be judged. This constant battle between right and wrong is the complex subtext of the play that provokes the audience. Euripides contrasts Hecabe and Medea with two very different characterisations: Hecabe the tragic, composed victim and Medea the bitter, hateful wicked woman.

Sophocles presents Electra through minor characters (*"your sister handed you into my care"*¹²). The narration of the old slave in the first scene talks of Electra as a brave, heroic character regarding the event in which she took Orestes away from the chaos of the murder of his father by his mother. The turmoil and the weakening of the family home represents the demise of the protagonist as she becomes weary and less hopeful of a resolution to her situation which *"left me without any hope"*¹³. Pathos is created for Electra as she is mentally and physically suffering from her father's murders:

"I work as a slave in the house of my father...and eat standing by myself at mealtimes"¹⁴.

Unlike Euripides, Sophocles depicts the protagonist as unable to take her revenge and paints her as the symbol of the expectations of women at that time; to be weak and second class citizens. This restricts her actions and is the reason why Orestes acts out the revenge in the play. However, the importance of Electra's character cannot be undermined as she embodies the reason for vengeance. Her painful treatment in the play develops her to be bitter and hateful towards her mother:

"You god forsaken bitch; are you the only daughter whose father's died?"¹⁵

Euripides paints Electra to be a fantasist and naive to the reality of death even though she has been closely associated with it:

"what glory you'll win for yourself and for me!"¹⁶

This is emphasised by the dialogue of her sister Chrysothemis who sensibly argues the finality of death. The driving force for Electra's character is intense hatred for the mother and her new partner Aegisthus. This eventually culminates in the moment when she enjoys the screams of her mother and her lack of control is evident:

¹¹ Euripides, *Hecabe*, lines 752-753, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹² Sophocles, *Electra*, line 11, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹³ Sophocles, *Electra*, line 185-186, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹⁴ Sophocles, *Electra*, line 189-192, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹⁵ Sophocles, *Electra*, line 288-290, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹⁶ Sophocles, *Electra*, line 974, Penguin Classics, 1963

9/5

"kill him at once: kill him, and throw out his corpse for the dogs and birds"¹⁷.

The use of short sentences and quick action within this scene highlights the excitement and thrill of Electra at the moment of vengeance. This extreme behaviour and the nature of Electra suggests she has changed for the worse; she is no different from her mother.

Religion, the root of all Greek tragedy, is a major theme in all three plays. The emblematic use of religion often provides an acceptance of vengeance and therefore are interlocking themes (*"sent by the gods, I come in the name of justice to purify you"¹⁸*). These plays would have been created for a religious audience and therefore religious beliefs would have been a plausible motive for revenge. On the other hand, the Oracle's statement to Orestes provides no indication of religious support:

"Not with the might of shielded host, shall justice see her purpose done. By lone deceit and stealthy craft must blood be shed and victory won"¹⁹.

The operative word being "not" shows that the "shielded host"- the gods- will have nothing to do with revenge and there is no mention of justice. This deliberate misinterpretation creates more depth and complexity to the religious and philosophical ideas of the theme of vengeance.

Correspondingly in *Medea* the theme of religion is evident in the conclusion of the play. Euripides presents the actions of Medea throughout the play to be monstrous, however, at the resolution of her anger she is rewarded with an escape from punishment by the gods in a *"chariot drawn by dragons, with the bodies of the two children beside her"*. Euripides deliberately structures this sentence with an oxymoron of ideas. One of escape, freedom and a chance for happiness as a reward of her actions contrasting with the penance of her regret of killing her poor children to earn it. Euripides ends the play with a rhyming statement that gives reason to the confusing plot conclusion:

*"Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
the unexpected god makes possible;
and such is the conclusion of this story"²⁰*

This is identical to Sophocles technique of using religion to create an understanding of the plot.

Harmoniously, Euripides *Hecabe* follows the same theme of religious beliefs:

"but the gods are strong, and strong is the great law that governs them."²¹

The playwright's simplistic argument would have been a powerful cause to the audience it was written for. It is fundamental to understand the religious context concerning the belief

¹⁷ Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 1487-1488, Penguin Classics, 1963

¹⁸ Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 69-70. Penguin Classics, 1963

¹⁹ Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 36-37, Penguin Classics, 1963

²⁰ Euripides, *Medea*, lines 1416-1419, Penguin Classics, 1963

²¹ Euripides, *Hecabe*, lines 799-800, Penguin Classics, 1963

9/6

that mistreating a guest was seen as an act of hubris and would have been severely punished. Therefore, the dramatization of Hecabe's son being killed as a guest would have been a significant reason for vengeance. *Hecabe's* plot not only heightens our investment in the conclusion of the tragedy with the dispute of religion but also gives a direct argument for vengeance and convinces the audience that Hecuba is acting out an honourable quest.

Both playwrights, then, use inherent vengeance as their main theme and approach the philosophical ideas of wrong and right:

*"Must his corpse in the ground wretchedly waste away, feebly count for nothing?"*²²

Electra's monody uses sympathetic word choice, in particular "wretchedly" to cause the audience to be astounded by the monstrous act. The narration of Electra is carefully composed to create convincing arguments to why revenge is the only solution. In an aggressive argument with her mother Electra's own life is threatened:

*"I swear by Artemis, you'll pay for this insolence as soon as Aegisthus comes home"*²³

Her mother's allegation could suggest that Electra's vengeance was an act of survival; nevertheless, we would assume her mother would not kill her daughter – however, that is exactly what Medea does. Sophocles also provides a variation, which could lead to a totally different view of the righteousness of the vengeance:

*"although you've often said in public that I'm a harsh oppressive tyrant"*²⁴.

Electra has been taunting her mother and as she is characterised as a queen, any negative propaganda is a direct attack on her mother. In addition, the core of the conflict is twisted by Clytemnestra's defences:

*"he sacrificed your sister to the gods. Iphigenia's birth never cost him the pains of labour I went through"*²⁵

For any mother to lose a child in such a horrific way, her reaction is fully understandable and the audience begins to have sympathy for the mother. Nonetheless, Sophocles' linguistic trickery in her speech brings the reader back to the reality that she is heartless and shows no emotion towards her children. She is livid with the waste of energy in giving birth to her daughter and not angry with the loss of her child. Sophocles' allegory pushes us to consider whether killing is a solution. To determine this, he characterises Electra and her mother similarly, especially when she kills in extreme anger. This action determines that Electra's vengeance is not justifiable - in matter of fact, she is as bad as her mother. This remains part

²² Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 244-246, Penguin Classics, 1963

²³ Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 626-627, Penguin Classics, 1963

²⁴ Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 520-521, Penguin Classics, 1963

²⁵ Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 532-533, Penguin Classics, 1963

9/7

of the power of the play – one commentator remarked that “*it was Euripides who realised that having her kill her own children, deliberately would be a dramatic triumph*”²⁶.

Euripides’ *Medea* also tackles the theme of vengeance and the philosophical ideas of right and wrong. In the first scenes, we are provided with a list of reasons for the reader to sympathise with Medea’s situation. She has sacrificed so much to be with Jason; she has killed kings, killed her brother, killed serpents and run away from home. To enhance our sympathy, he depicts her as a new foreign woman in Corinth in the setting of the play (“*a foreign woman, coming among new laws, new customs, needs the skill of magic to find out what home could not teach her*”²⁷). Medea has tried her best to be a good wife and has sacrificed everything thus Jason’s abandonment is catastrophic to her. She is then forced out of the country by the Jason’s new father-in-law, King Creon, with nowhere to go. It must be understood due to the context of the play, women were looked after by male society and Medea had no one to turn to. Euripides then twists our perspective with Jason’s defences into believing her actions are unjust:

*“I wanted to ensure first- and the most important- that we should live well and not be poor...give them equal place”*²⁸.

Jason’s betrayal is not to spite Medea but only to provide for them. The act of a dutiful father. The playwright makes a direct contrast between Jason and Medea morally on the subject of the care of children and shows the reader the correct behaviour of a parent. This slowly dissolves our belief in Medea’s justice. This continues when we see Medea’s violent, jealous nature from her past has not faded, and she kills Jason’s new bride, Glauce, and Creon with a poisoned garment:

*“Now joined in death, daughter and father-such a sight as tears were made for- they lie there”*²⁹.

The narration of the tragic death of the victims of Medea’s jealousy is deliberately done to create pathos for the characters and a major turning point to the play that convinces the audience that Medea’s extreme behaviour is unjustified. To further the readers disgust Euripides places a significant scene soon after to continue the horrific nature of the play. Medea’s behaviour is not acceptable:

“I am sure we ought to save the children’s lives”.³⁰

The chorus narrates the story to direct the audience thoughts as to how they should interpret the play - therefore this comment finalises our thoughts on Medea’s unjustifiable revenge.

²⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/04/violence-revenge-ancient-greeks-rule-stage>

²⁷ Sophocles, *Electra* lines 239-240, Penguin Classics, 1963

²⁸ Euripides, *Medea*, lines 559-563, Penguin Classics, 1963

²⁹ Euripides, *Medea* lines 1120-1221, Penguin Classics, 1963

³⁰ Euripides, *Medea* lines 1274, Penguin Classics, 1963

9/8

Euripides from the very start of the play indicates that Hecabe's actions are justified and vengeance is acceptable -very different from his play *Medea*. The plot only creates sympathy for Hecabe in relation to her losing her son to murder which all minor characters agree is a hideous act. There is little talk about Hecabe's justice, mainly because seems to evaluate the justification for justice unlike in *Electra* where there is constant discussion about vengeance. This is intentionally done by the playwright to show that her actions are morally right. Even the slightest defence of the murder of Polymestor is absurdly portrayed allowing it to carry no standing against Hecabe:

*"I feared this boy-your enemy-if left alive, might gather toys survivors and re-found the city".*³¹

He takes the boy in knowing the war could go either way. There is no sense of patriotism here, as Euripides makes it obvious he is lying to cover up his theft of gold from the boy by making his defence far-fetched. Every character within the play backs up the revenge against Polymestor; Agamemnon (*"make this murderer friend of your pay fitly for his crime"*³²), Chorus (*"when crime is atrocious punishment will be heavy"*³³) and the act itself is aided by all the Greek slave woman. However, Hecabe also kills Polymestor's innocent children:

*"Lifted my children in their arms, admiring them, and passed them on from one another, to make sure they were far away from me...they whipped daggers from their clothes and stabbed my sons".*³⁴

Consequently, Hecuba pays the penance for her actions. This conclusion to the quick action in the last scene symbolises that vengeance can only be taken with a price, something that is not considered in the other two plays.

In conclusion, the theme of vengeance is imperative to these Greek tragedies to allow understanding of the plot and the characterisation of the protagonist. The climax in each play provides the act of vengeance by the protagonist and each playwright attempts to create a moralistic resolution. Euripides' *Medea* shows that vengeance is a hateful crime and unacceptable which clearly contrasts his other play *Hecabe*, where he shows vengeance is acceptable as long the person pays penance. Sophocles displays that vengeance is intolerable through the development of his characters - in particular the protagonist who transforms for the worse. It is easily argued, then, that vengeance is a real driving force in all three plays, pulling audiences back time and again: "Shocked we may be, but audiences will still flock to see Greek myths and tragedies on the stage"³⁵.

³¹ Euripides, *Hecabe* lines 1136-1137, Penguin Classics, 1963

³² Euripides, *Hecabe*, lines 853, Penguin Classics, 1963

³³ Euripides, *Hecabe* lines 954, Penguin Classics, 1963

³⁴ Euripides, *Hecabe* lines 1156-1157, Penguin Classics, 1963

³⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/04/violence-revenge-ancient-greeks-rule-stage>

9/9

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