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Faith and Authority in Euripides' *Medea* and The Bible

Caitlin Kowalewski

As people who are essentially foreigners, whether geographically or ideologically, Medea, Jesus, and his Apostles are forced into positions of subservience by the societies in which they live. They all exist as minorities, whose actions conflict with social norms. Because of the hostility they receive from figures of authority trying to preserve these norms, their relationships with even *higher* authorities, gods, are highly emphasized. However, the perceptions these worshippers have of their gods have a great influence on how they relate to and trust them, and as a result, impact how they clash with figures of power on earth.

In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea struggles with her own subjugation as a foreigner, a woman, and an image of daunting mysticism. She is a fiercely autonomous woman—a paradoxical description in ancient Greece—and additionally reputed as a murderess and enchantress; thus, she is a fairly unorthodox and isolated figure in the nation of Corinth.

As an outsider in a culture that condemns her as a criminal, and whose actions are considered sinful, it is difficult for Medea to trust that the gods will take any active role in her quest for revenge against her husband, who has abandoned her. Though a descendant of Apollo, she does not have his constant presence (like Aeneas does Venus) to assure that her wishes will be fulfilled. For this reason, Medea navigates her life independently and in a much more manipulative, subtle manner than a person whose decisions are divinely affirmed. She says to Creon, the Corinthian king who has banished her out of fear, “Don’t let *me* alarm you, Creon. I’m in no position- / A woman- to wrong a king. You have done me no wrong... So now I bear no grudge against / *Your* happiness: marry your daughter to him [Jason, her husband], and good luck / To you both” (Euripides 26). From Medea’s previous lamentations we know that this is the absolute opposite of what she wishes, but Medea realizes that she is isolated amongst people as a foreigner, and unsure of her favor with her gods as a criminal. Accordingly, she can trust only her own abilities, and manipulates her image to appease those to whom she must submit.

Medea’s relationship with her mortal and divine authorities develops quite interestingly throughout the play, in that she holds her human

counterparts accountable to the higher law of the gods who have potentially abandoned her. While she may remain unsure about her own goodness, she is confident in the fact that her enemies have wronged her, and will be judged by a higher power for doing so. In her interactions with Creon, we can see how this respect for the actions of gods results in disdain for those of men. She says, “Oh, what a fool! / By banishing me at once he [Creon] could have thwarted me / Utterly; instead, he allows me to remain one day” (28). This contempt for the power and decisions of men is revealed in her condemnation of Jason as well. She bitterly convicts him through the eyes of a higher power: “Zeus the father of all / Knows well what service I once rendered you, and how / You have repaid me. You were mistaken if you thought/ You could dishonor my bed and live a pleasant life / And laugh at me” (59). Her disrespect is scathing when she reveals it, and displays her invocation of divine justice, but even more impressive is the manner in which she conceals this contempt to get what she wants.

When appealing to Creon to remain a day in Corinth, she intelligently engages his sympathies as a father, cleverly taking her image into her own hands and assuring him that “I know what trouble is; I have no need of more” (27). Yet after he leaves, it is clear that Medea submits to no unreliable authority, and acts only upon her own. She says, “Do you think I would have fawned so on this man, / Except to gain my purpose, carry out my schemes?... Today three of my enemies I shall strike dead” (28). Medea cannot rely on Creon for any kind of justice or sympathy with her plight, nor can she trust that Fate will not banish her “without resource” (29). Unaided by her gods, she must appease human authority and depend on herself for the execution of her will.

When dealing with friendly powers, her manipulation of authority figures holds no exception. Upon meeting with Aegeus, king of Athens, she seizes her opportunity for safety by promising him what he most desires: “Receive me in Athens; give me a welcome on your house... I know certain drugs / Whose power will put an end to your sterility. / I promise you shall beget children” (39). Though she does not respect his power as a mortal ruler, Medea successfully

presents an image of humility and piteousness to ensure her own safety. She does not demand or wait to be offered sanctuary in his kingdom, faithfully believing the gods will arrange for her salvation, but rather bargains with a leader whose desires she can manipulate.

The manner in which Medea interacts with mortal figures of authority is quite different from that of Jesus and his Apostles in *The Bible*, based on the fact that their relationship with *divine* authority is much more tangible, and for them, reliable. The Apostles distinguish their faith from that of Medea in that they believe God will stand by them unequivocally if they follow His law. Given a clear set of instructions in the Ten Commandments and Jesus, who performs miracles before their very eyes, the Apostles believe in a god whose word and works surround them, and whose instructions will presumably secure their acceptance into the kingdom of Heaven. For the Apostles and Jesus, mortal law is feeble in the face of God's divine command, and if the former conflicts with the latter, they believe it should simply be abandoned.

Because of this belief, Jesus and the Apostles frequently find themselves at odds with human leaders and their laws, a fact clearly seen in the Book of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Because of their devout belief that God will guide the righteous, they are not hesitant to advocate what they believe, or to disobey unjust laws. They treat rulers and kings the same way they treat the common worker, preaching that they should repent their sins and follow the word of God. In Luke, Jesus denounces the practices of Pharisees and lawyers, cursing their impious ways: "Woe to you Pharisees! for you love the best seat in the synagogues and salutations in the market places... Woe to you lawyers also! for you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke. 11.42-45). They do not reserve distinction or reverence for men who will hold no power in heaven.

Jesus and the Apostles not only treat authoritative figures like everyone else, but preach that they should impose their measures of equalization upon themselves. When a ruler asks him how he may attain eternal life, Jesus tells him to obey the commandments. When the ruler says he already observes them, Jesus says, " 'One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me' " (Luke. 18.22). Jesus believes that God's is the only authority that matters, and

speaks his beliefs without hesitation, unlike Medea, because he believes that all men will be judged by God in the way He describes. There is no mystery in the teachings of Jesus' God. The Ten Commandments and the stories of Genesis and Exodus provide a clear image of God's desires and examples of how His laws should be executed. Because of this, Jesus and the Apostles have a concrete source of reference to the word of God and proof of God's covenant: his promise to protect and provide for those who follow Him. Compared to Medea, who has been shunned as a criminal and whose gods are notoriously self-interested and vindictive, it is no wonder that Medea deals more hesitantly with leaders who oppose her. She does not have the support of a sovereign God, whose will is elucidated before her and whose idea of justice she knows she can execute. She can only hope that she incurs favor in her gods' eyes, and carry out her plot for revenge on her own, without any divine protection.

In the course of the story of Jesus and his Apostles, some of the most resonant events occur in Luke and Acts, when the disciples' belief in their God's divine protection is tested by the threat of mortal violence. The conflict between physical and spiritual punishment, the immediate and the obscure, is one that the Apostles face again and again, but ultimately their unrelenting faith in God's benevolence resolves any tension or hesitation they may feel. They know that their suffering, whether it be arrest or crucifixion, will be rewarded in the afterlife as a sign of loyalty to God. In Acts, the prophet Stephen is stoned to death for condemning non-Christian authorities as being a "stiff-necked people" who resisted the Holy Spirit, and who "received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." When the people seize him in anger, he looks up to heaven and says, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts. 7.51). Stephen's faith in God contributes to his boldness in the face of those who despise him, and as a result, his relationship with them is one of unfeigned disregard. For Jesus and the Apostles, the societal authority only matters in service of divine authority, and is thus superseded by the rules of a benevolent and reliable God.

In both *Medea* and *The Bible*, the conflict between divine and mortal authority is one that shapes the very actions of each story's people, revealing how strongly their faith or their doubts control their opinions. Medea, a social outcast, believes that her gruesome revenge will be justified

in the eyes of her gods, but because she has no proof that these gods will vindicate her against her enemies, must associate with them in a manipulative manner, cautiously presenting herself as an object of pity and harmlessness. Contrastingly, Jesus and his Apostles hold devout faith in the god whose laws are presented before them, and unflinchingly criticize human authorities whose powers pale before the law of an all-powerful divinity. So while all of these religious people are forced to face hostile figures of human judgment, the manner in which they do so depends greatly on the nature of their faith in divine judgment, and in their own self-perception as administrators of their will.

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