Danielle Steinman
Greek Tragedy
Professor Zeitlin
August 6, 2019

The Inversion of Gender in Euripidean Tragedy

While the inversion of gender within Greek Tragedy does not serve to empower women, it also does not serve to humiliate them. The inversion of sex for women in Greek dramas serves as a way to drive their male counterparts into deeper despair, and to right the societal or social wrongs they have committed. By deconstructing and then rebuilding the norms of male and female behavior to the audience, the play further emphasizes that the tragic hero has fallen out from societal expectations, or that there is a problem that bears correcting. As Froma Zeitlin says in her article 'Playing the Other; Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama':

> "…*functionally*, women are never an end in themselves, and nothing changes for them once they have lived out their drama on stage. Rather, they play the roles of catalysts, agents, instruments, blockers, spoilers, destroyers, and sometimes helpers or saviors for the male characters" (67).

The masculinized women of Greek Tragedy are not exempt from this classification. Even in cases like Medea, where she is the eponymous hero, her inversion is not used to fortify her or even free her from the circumstances that she has been placed in; rather, her undertaking of de-feminization is the process with which she uses to punish her estranged husband Jason as revenge for forsaking their marriage oath. On the other hand, the feminization of men, such as Pentheus in *The Bacchae,* doesn't achieve the same end. The feminized male is not a catalyst for his destruction. Rather the feminization process as whole is just another step that contributes to his eventual fall from grace, humiliation, and destruction.

Medea's inversion from feminine to masculine stems from the despair of her situation. The suppression of her feminine self is more out of desperation and survival than of choice. As a foreigner alienated from her homeland and birth family, once her husband abandons her for the king's daughter, she is left with nothing and forced by the king to exile Corinth. As a disgraced woman with no home or husband all of her outcomes are bleak. The realization of the hopelessness of her situation is initially presented in the drama as a description of physical agony, as Medea cries out "Oh, in pain, in pain,/I'm so unhappy, I…/oh for me, for me,/if only I could die" and "May lightning shatter my skull;/life no longer brings gain./May I find shelter in death,/freed from this hated life" (96, 144). While lamenting her wretched state, she calls out to two goddesses: "Artemis and mighty Themis,/see the pain that I'm enduring" (160-1). The choice of these two goddesses is telling, and helps clarify the spiritual source of her physical pain. Artemis is of course the goddess of the hunt, but she is also the goddess of childbirth, so perhaps the physical pain Medea endures is an echo of the pain she felt while bearing her two children. This relationship between the physical pain of childbirth and the wretched status of a humiliated woman is emboldened later in the text when Medea says she would rather go to battle three times than endure childbirth even once more:

> "They, men, allege that we enjoy a life
> secure from danger safe at home,
> while they confront the thrusting spears of war.
> That's nonsense: I would rather join
> the battle rank of shields three times
> than undergo birth-labor once." (247-252)

By choosing to adopt the hypothetical pain of war that men claim is their burden instead of the reality of her feminine pain, she initiates her intent to begin the gender inversion process. She longs for masculine pain, since feminine pain is too much for her to bear. The other goddess Medea pleads for, Themis, is the Titan goddess of divine law, justice, and also the proper relationships between men and women. Mention of Themis seems to represent Medea's feelings of powerless over her own fate, and how she is forced instead to submit to her husband, Jason, as well as the plight of women who are forced to submit to their husbands in general:

> "We women are the most beset by trials
> of any species that has breath and power of thought.
> Firstly, we are obliged to buy a husband
> at excessive cost, and then accept him as
> the master of our body—that is even worse" (230-4).

It is not only her own wretched fate that Medea curses, she also openly resents the role that women in society are forced to play; women everywhere whose only purpose in life is to marry men, serve them, bear their children, and maintain their home. While men have the agency and freedom to develop lasting friendships, earn glory in battle, and to seek adventures, "women are obliged/to keep our eyes on just one person," their husbands (248-9). The passage makes Medea's opinion that women are trapped by their domestic status clear to the audience. This bleak (although not inaccurate) outlook on the plight of womanhood in Greek society is most likely the catalyst that drives Medea to violence. However, it is telling and important to note that before committing any acts of violence, or even before expressing her eventual intent to commit

violence, one of the first things she does is manipulate Creon into mercy by hiding behind her femininity. Namely, by framing her plea as that of a mother desperate to protect her children:

> "Pity them—you're a father after all: it's only natural
> that you should feel some kindness for them.
> I'm not concerned about myself and exile,
> but them—I weep that they're subjected to distress." (344-9)

She appeals to Creon through his love for his own children. By doing this she is able to trick him into giving her one more day in Corinth before she is exiled. This tactic of manipulation is interesting because, as referenced earlier in the text, Medea has expressed her opposition to her feminine status, her disfavor with feminine pains of childbirth, and the roles that society has forced her to play. However, once she is driven to a state of helplessness when King Creon banishes her, she weaponizes her classically feminine status in order to achieve her goals of manipulation. After doing so, her violent nature begins to manifest itself to the audience. First she expresses her resentment and disgust at pretending to submit to Creon's will, then she makes her savage intention, to "make dead meat of my enemies—/all three: the father and his daughter and my husband" (374-5).

By killing Jason, his new wife, and her father the king, Medea will exact revenge on those that have humiliated and wronged her. She initially intends to kill using "deceit and secrecy," (391). However, she does go on to say that if her plan of using secrecy and deceit are ineffective then " I will take a sword…and slaughter them myself" (393-4). This explanation of her method is once again telling of a gender-based conflict within Medea. In Greek tragedy "women frequently control the plot and the activity of plotting and manipulate the duplicities and illusions

of the tragic world" (Zeitlin 75). Thus, secrecy and deceit were regarded in ancient Greece to be a form of treachery delegated to women. Medea's alternative tactic, using a sword and violently killing them in a direct confrontation, is the more masculine approach to triple homicide. It would seem that this desire for violence and revenge is leading Medea away from the feminine and towards something more resembling masculinity.

It's worth noting at this point that Medea has no intention of killing her children, only her enemies. Once again Medea is torn between her desire for revenge and her own feminine self. Since her wifely status has been forcibly revoked by Jason, her status as mother to his two children is all that remains of her compliance with the societal expectations of her as a woman in Corinth. Even if she kills Jason and his replacement bride, Medea is still inexorably linked to him because she is the mother of his two sons. This is perhaps what leads Medea to her next decision, the act of revenge that would destroy Jason; killing their children. By doing so, she is not only freeing herself from her status as a mother, but most importantly of all, she is free from her ties to Jason. In fact, Medea makes it a point to say that her primary motivation in killing her children isn't to liberate herself from motherhood, or even to rescue her children from the bleak life of an exile. Medea makes it clear that her only motivation for killing the two boys is to get revenge on Jason because "that's the way my husband can be deepest pierced" (817). Additionally, if she kills both his new wife and her own children, she takes away Jason's ability to uphold the societal expectations of the masculine, which is to have sons in order to maintain their bloodline. Thus, she ruins herself in order to ruin him; her de-feminization in exchange for his emasculation. In this endeavor she is successful. She departs triumphantly on a chariot sent by her grandfather, Helios, while Jason laments his despair to Zeus.

Like Jason, Pentheus of *The Bacchae* is faces emasculation. The sexual inversion theme of *The Bacchae* doesn't just masculinize the women in order to achieve its punishment of Pentheus; it also sexually inverses Pentheus from masculine to feminine. First introduced to the audience as a young ruler, Pentheus is adored by his family, a powerful leader, and stubborn. His hubris prevents him from acknowledging Dionysus' divinity. As revenge, Dionysus uses his power to cast a spell on the women of Thebes:

> "So, like a gadfly I have stung these sisters
> to a frenzy, out of their very homes, to live
> crazed in the mountains. And I made them wear
> the trappings of their service to me, also….
> …I've driven them from their homes in a state of madness" (44-50).

Pentheus' first reaction is inherently and stereotypically male; he wants to capture the women that have left Thebes and "bind them up in nets of iron/And stop their evil Bakkhic revels fast" (269-70). Pentheus also has plans for the androgynous stranger who has conveniently arrived in the city at the same time the women started going mad, saying: "If I catch him around here, within our borders/I'll stop him pounding with his thyrsos and tossing/His hair—for his throat I'll cut his head/Off of his body" (278-81). Militarized and violent, Pentheus initially places himself fully in the realm of the masculine. After successfully arresting the mysterious stranger (who is actually Dionysus in disguise) Pentheus' frustration is apparent when his traditional tactics of physical threats and imprisonment don't seem to work on him. As Pentheus becomes increasingly agitated and violent, Dionysus stays calm and unobjectionable. Pentheus loses the upper hand when he accepts the stranger's offer to let him spy on the Bacchae, saying:

"for that I'd give a countless weight of gold" (929). However in order to see the them without being attacked, he has to disguise himself as a woman.

Dionysus emasculation of Pentheus reaches its climax when dressing Pentheus as a female worshipper. Says Zeitlin:

> "the preliminary sign of Pentheus' total defeat, first at the hands of Dionysus and then at the hands of the women, is given to us on stage in the visual feminization of Pentheus when he is induced against all inhibitions of shame to adopt the costume and gestures of the woman" (63).

Once Dionysus has Pentheus in full disguise, even adjusting his hair, posture, and the placement of his holy artifacts so that it perfectly resembles the wild female Bacchae, Pentheus starts to see visions of "two suns,/a double seven-gated fortress of Thebes…" he also says to Dionysus "You seem to have grown two horns upon your head" (1050-5). These visions are important for multiple reasons. First, because it shows Pentheus' declining mental status and his inability to reconcile his two opposing beliefs; that Dionysus is not truly a god, and that Pentheus is going to see the wild Bacchae with the help of Dionysus' divine power. Secondly, Dionysus' description that he now resembles a bull with two horns specifically presents the god in a firmly masculine light. Up until this point, Pentheus had occupied the role of virile male with Dionysus as an androgynous other; not quite entirely feminine but not fully masculine either. Now that Pentheus is disguised as a woman, their roles have shifted; Dionysus is the powerful male and Pentheus is the feminized androgynous figure. This shift in power is cemented when Pentheus tells Dionysus to "Arrange it all! I am dedicated to you" (1069).

Dionysus' conversion of Pentheus from masculine to feminine is not the only gender inversion in *The Bacchae*. Agave, Pentheus' mother, also faces her own gender inversion. After Pentheus goes to the mountain to see the wild Bacchae women, he is forced out of his hiding place and attacked. The women, deeply hypnotized by Dionysus' spell, literally rip Pentheus apart. After Pentheus' death Agave comes into the palace proudly carrying his head like a trophy and telling her father:

> "You begot by far the best of daughters…
>
> …Who left the loom and shuttles for greater things—
>
> The hunting of wild beasts with my bare hands.
>
> See what I carry in my arms—the reward
>
> I've won, the prize for prowess, which will hang high
>
> On your house" (1391-8).

In this passage Agave announces her pride that she has left her domestic duties, the "loom and shuttles" behind and instead assumes the role of hunter, carrying the head around like a trophy. Agave experiences her own sexual inversion; from loving mother into brutal hunter and murderer. Like Medea, Agave's inversion in and of itself does not cause her destruction. Agave's punishment for her dismissal of Dionysus isn't death, but exile. Although it could be argued that she is forced to live with the horrific act she has committed against her own son, her masculinization is not the focal point of the subversion of societal norms. Pentheus is the primary target of *The Bacchae*, not Agave. Her major purpose is to help punish Pentheus; not only is she the major factor that contributes to his brutal death, but also his humiliation at being torn apart by the hands of women. Not just any women, the women from his own family.

In both cases provided in this essay, *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, the sexual inversion of women is not meant to humiliate or belittle. In fact, by masculinizing his female characters Euripides is really just dehumanizing them so that they can commit the acts of violence they need in order hasten the destruction of their male counterparts. By taking away their femininity, the women are able to relinquish their pathos and empathy in order to commit great acts of evil and violence. On the other hand, in the case of the feminized male, their emasculation is simply one of the catalysts for their fall from grace. Acts of violence are put upon them; they are destroyed by these women, but they are not the destroyers. Thus, even in cases of gender inversion, men and women still fall into typical tragedy roles; males are held responsible and made examples of, women are supporters, their narrative is of secondary importance.

Bibliography

Euripides, et al. *Bakkhai*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

Euripides, et al. *Euripides I*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Zeitlin, F. I. "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama." *Representations*, vol. 11, 1985, pp. 63–94.