
Role Of Animal Imagery In Medea

Medea is a story about a Barbarian woman in Greece, who, feeling unloved and alienated from Greek society, wreaks havoc on her husband for cheating on her by murdering their own two children. Animal imagery does not occur very frequently but is used by Euripides at rather crucial points of the play to serve as a tool to shed light on Medea's emotions, thus forcing the reader to see the motives behind her actions, and question them. By comparing Medea to various wild animals throughout the play Euripides explores the idea of the fear of the unknown, puts forward the motif of a sense of alienation, and explores the psychological dilemma Medea is faced with.

In Greek tragedies, wild animal metaphors often serve as a symbol of alienation and the notion of being different, a feature that is very characteristic of the Barbarian Medea. Euripides introduces the motif of animal imagery at the beginning of the play when the nurse says about Medea: "Yet her eye, know ye the eyes of the wild kine, the lion flash that guards their brood?" The context of this quote reveals that the nurse says these words when describing Medea's reaction to finding out that her husband Jason had decided to leave her for another woman, a Greek woman. The author establishes the theme of psychological dilemma and ambiguity of Medea at the beginning of the play by doubling the animal imagery, which further intensifies the impact it has on the reader. One may interpret this line as the kine and the lion being opposites of each other. Euripides emphasizes Medea's bull-like gaze, implying she is gazing angrily at anyone trying to harm her children, but by following the statement of "the eyes of the wild kine" by "the lion flash that guards their brood" Euripides implies that Medea is also vulnerable, like a lioness that has just given birth. Although this particular translation does not ascribe a female gender to the word "lion", in the lion metaphor in Greek tragedies in general, it is almost always the female lion that takes care and protects the cubs after birth, rather than the male lion. Moreover, instead of comparing Medea to a single bull, the author compares her to a kine. This emphasizes how strong her rage is, and also implies that although she feels alienated and alone, it does not make her weaker, quite the contrary.

Therefore, by comparing Medea to a kine and a lion, the author expresses both sides of the psychological dilemma Medea is faced with and establishes that Medea is torn between being the prey, submitting to the power of her husband Jason and Greek society, or, as she chooses to do in the end, being the predator herself. It is also important to note that throughout the play, Medea is the only character that is compared to animals, which further emphasizes this notion of foreignness and alienation of her character. The only exception is when Euripides compares her sons to lion cubs, thus implying the children are the only connection between Medea and the society from which she feels alienated. In this line, Euripides establishes the important role of the "brood" in Medea's dilemma. The author implies the children are the only tool for her to wreak havoc on Jason since they are the only connection between the two after Jason had decided to marry a Greek princess. Therefore Euripides suggests filicide as the only means for Medea to free herself from Jason's power, and ultimately the power of society since Medea's biggest fear is being talked about by others. Therefore the mention of the bull-like gaze and a protective lioness mother also carries in it tragic irony.

The notion of Medea being a prey among the Greek society is also underlined by very frequent

usage of the word “hunt” when referring to herself. For example: “Dark and full of dole their bridal feast shall be, most dark the day they joined their hands and hunted me away.” At this point, Medea resolves the dilemma and decides on becoming the predator. On the other hand, a common adjective that reoccurs throughout the play in the context of other characters talking about Medea is “savage”. For instance: “But nothing good can please thee. In sheer savageness of mood thou drivest from thee every friend.” Jason accuses Medea of her Barbarian nature being the source of her unhappiness. Euripides thus reinforces the Greek stereotype of savage Barbarians. Therefore both adjectives mirror the same contrast as the “kine and lion” metaphor.

Perhaps the most powerful imagery that depicts Medea as the prey is the following: “Shall I not lift the slow yoke, and let life go, as a beast out in the night, to lie, and be rid of the pain?” Despite not challenging the stereotype of a wild and savage Barbarian, using the imagery of a dying beast the author provokes a sense of sympathy in the reader. Thus, without questioning Medea’s savage and selfish decision to commit filicide as a morally unacceptable act, the author forces the audience to understand Medea’s motives, while also condemning them, which underlines the psychological ambiguity of filicide and the implications of submitting to Jason instead.

Another instance of animal imagery is at the end of the play when Jason says: “A bride of hate to me and death, tigress not woman, beast of wilder breath.” With this replica, Euripides puts forward the cultural metaphor presented by animal imagery. By calling Medea a tigress, not a woman, he’s comparing her to Greek women, implying that Medea is inferior to them. Interestingly, some translators choose to use the word “lion” instead of “tigress” in this case, presumably to turn the tables on the lioness metaphor used only twice in the play, at the beginning and the end. However, this particular translation chooses to compare Medea to a tigress at the end of the play, which was done on purpose, because while the two animals are similar in their savageness and cruelty, lions tend to be more protective of their cubs, in nature but especially in Greek literature. Therefore while the lion metaphor is used in rather positive connotations of this animal imagery, and Medea is introduced as a vulnerable mother ready to protect her children, Euripides then departs from this notion. Already having established the lioness metaphor in its positive connotations, he then chooses to compare Medea to a tigress. While the main feature of Medea the lioness is the love for her cubs, comparing her to a tigress then underlines the bestial cruelty of Medea who decided to turn against her own family, as further demonstrated by Jason’s another reference to Medea being a tigress: “Thou, Zeus, wilt hear me. All is said for naught. I am but spurned away and trampled by this tigress, read with children’s blood.”

Euripides rarely challenges the Greek stereotype of savage Barbarians, quite the contrary, he reinforces it by having Medea refer to herself as savage. However, the author provides the audience with a different perspective on this cultural issue in Medea’s response to the insult. The tone of the comparison can also be interpreted more ironically. Right away Medea accepts the tigress comparison, saying: “Call me what thing thou please, tigress or Skylla from the Tuscan seas, my claws have gripped the heart, and all things shine.” Here Euripides slightly departs from the notion of Barbarian women being savage and inferior to Greek women, who are represented as submissive and obedient, when despite Medea not showing regret of her actions, Euripides reminds the audience that despite this, it was Medea whom Jason fell in love with and married first, thus again, forcing the audience to consider the theme of cultural differences from a different angle, Medea’s angle.

In Euripides' *Medea*, the use of animal imagery provides the audience with a better understanding of the main character of the play. It serves as a tool to shed light on Medea's emotions, thus providing the reader with deeper insight into Medea's motives. With the help of animal imagery, Euripides explores the psychological dilemma of committing a loathsome murder or living in humiliation and therefore invokes both a sense of sympathy and disgust in the reader. Animal imagery also serves as a cultural metaphor in *Medea*, when by comparing Medea to various wild animals throughout the play Euripides explores the idea of the fear of the unknown, whether justified or not. Animal imagery thus represents an effective tool of engaging the audience with the play, showing different perspectives of the story.

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