

Herodotus, Euripides, and the Fetishization of Foreign Women

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Helen, the symbol for Greek femininity and beauty, often represents the ideal wife. Besides her white arms, unparalleled beauty, and other charms, Helen is Greek, which gives more value to her than anything else. Ironically, other women in Greek literature are not flat characters, but instead are sultry sex symbols slaying enemies for bloodlust; they are violent versions of Helen but they lack Helen's key attribute of Greekness. The Greek male obsession with women extends to "barbarian" women, preferring women of their own race to be more of the traditional flat characters. Medea and Amastris ensnare men in the same way as Helen did with their intelligence, cunning, sexiness, hysteria, and exoticness. Herodotus and Euripides assert that Greek citizens lust after the archetype of a soldierly sex symbol and even develop minimal respect for their warrior ways, but strongly advocate for marriage within Greek blood. While Herodotus and Euripides show how captivating foreign females are, they strongly profess that marriage outside of Greek blood leads to fear, misery, emasculation, and suffering for all those even somewhat involved.

While the Greeks rarely respect their women, Herodotus and Euripides develop respect and admiration for the exotic Medea and Amastris because of their cleverness and masculine capabilities as warriors. Females in Greek society were not citizens and served the purpose of marriage and childrearing. Patriarchal tendencies reinforced the ideas and practices that held women as inferior and subordinated them by severely curtailing their rights/autonomy. In terms of mythology, the supposed Greek warrior women such as Athena, Atalanta, Enyo were either mythological, not Athenian, second to men eventually, virgins due to piety (meaning their sexuality is irrelevant), or not perceived as threat. (Especially with the prophecy given to Zeus that if Metis had a son, the son would overtake him, but a daughter would not). A true Greek hero or even antihero did not

exist nor did a Greek warrior woman thus foreigner warrior women suffice. After Medea articulates her plan, she concludes that “I treat my friends with kindness and come down hard on the heads of my enemies. This is the way to live, the way to win a glorious reputation”, marking the shift between her role as the wife of Jason to the warrior woman, hell bent on his destruction (Euripides 36). Medea’s concern with defeating her enemies and attaining fame highlights the switch from feminine to masculine. Later, Euripides even goes as far to depict her in a chariot with the bodies of her dead children, standing above Jason (Euripides 56). By placing Medea above Jason, one of the Greek greatest heroes, Euripides shows the respect that the Greeks have for Medea as someone with the cunning and capability to route her foes. Likewise, Herodotus invokes the same warrior imagery by describing how Amastris “cut off her [the wife of Masistes] breasts and threw them to the dogs, then cut out her nose, ears, lips, and tongue and sent her back home horribly mutilated” (Herodotus 719). Herodotus and Euripides establish these two women’s ruthlessness and masculinity to qualify how Greek men could possibly respect them.

The respect that Greek society has for Medea and Amastris fosters the Greek fetishism for them. Most can agree that Medea’s decision to kill her children, the king, and Jason’s new princess and Amastris’ form of revenge on the wife of Masistes raise some concerns about the ability to admire their feminine virtue. While Medea and Amastris are both ruthless warriors who avenge in the worst way possible, the Greeks also develop fascination with them. Euripides describes how Jason wants to put Medea up in a house and still take care of her, but Medea refuses (Euripides 25). Jason and Medea came to Corinth in exile and the fact that she was not Greek lowered his rank and that is why he claimed to want a more socially advantageous marriage, but at the same time, Medea was considered physically attractive and intelligent, which attracted Jason. Similar to this situation, Herodotus describes how Amastris controls her anger and does not immediately take vengeance, but instead she strategically arranges a calculated plan (Herodotus 719). In this respect, both of the women are valued for their intelligence, but also are applauded because they are not Greek women. Medea in

particular is more sexualized than Amastris. Medea's objectification her, shows that Greek men were aroused by this type of women. Nevertheless, their desirability comes at a price.

Herodotus and Euripides maintain that whenever a true Greek man marries a foreign woman, not only do they suffer considerably by watching their close ones die or feel pain, but they also come to know their own lack of intellectual power and are subsequently emasculated. The importance of an oath comes into play as both women think to use oaths to set up their plan. Medea asks Aegeus to swear an oath of protection, which ensures that she will have a place to go after she follows through with her plan (Euripides 34). Additionally, Medea had Jason swear an oath to the gods at the time of their marriage, a departure from Hellenic tradition (Euripides 4). Amastris manipulates Xeres to swear an oath to give gifts to the Persians, which means he has to give the wife of Masistes to Amastris (Herodotus 719). By using oaths, both Medea and Amastris were able to intelligently ensure that their plan worked out. Furthermore, Medea and Amastris were able to emasculate their men. Medea proclaims that Jason "will die an evil death, struck on the head by a fragment of the *Argo*", which contrasts with the heroic life that Jason led (Euripides 60). In one sweeping plan, Medea took away Jason's masculinity to make certain that his death would remove all of the glory that his "heroic" deeds brought him. Amastris emasculates Xeres by using his bodyguards to mutilate the body of the wife in addition to the fact that she utilizes his duty as king to emotionally scar his own brother. Amastris and Medea both use their cunning in order to make their men understand that women have a similar amount of power.

After acknowledging the tantalizing and traumatic effect on men that Medea and Amastris possess, Herodotus and Euripides show that a Greek woman would not behave in such a way. The hypersexualization of Medea and the cunning of Amastris enthrall Greek men, but the concept of Greek women is completely different. Marriage in ancient Greek society was predicated upon the business transaction between a man seeking to marry a woman and that woman's father. Taking this as the Hellenistic ideal of marriage, neither Amastris' nor Medea's

marriage came from this. Medea abandoned her fatherland in order to marry Jason, not with her father's permission or decision (Euripides 22). Medea's father did not perform the traditional business transaction, so that his daughter can marry Jason. On the nature of their union alone, their marriage does not fit into Hellenistic society. Then, examining the chorus of women (the women of Corinth), even though the chorus sides with Medea, the chorus warns Medea that her plan is not favorable. Throughout the play, the chorus discusses how they know exactly how Medea feels, but then they go on to say "Since you have brought this plan to us, and since I want to help you, and since I support the laws of mankind, I ask you not to do this" (Euripides 36). The key aspect that the Corinthian women bring up is the idea that laws govern behaviors. As Greek women, these women understand that there are laws to follow and that absence of laws takes away their Greek identity. Medea, who is not Greek, does not have the same worry even though she lives in a Greek society. Furthermore, Herodotus shows how when Xeres cheats on his wife and then kills Masistes without any consequence of law. Additionally, Amastris has no consequence from law despite the fact that she horribly mutilated someone (Herodotus 720). Medea and Amastris do not have the same awareness and fear of law that Greek women would have. Herodotus and Euripides show that these barbarian cultures breed this type of women because there are no laws to contain them. Herodotus and Euripides conclude that barbarian women wreak havoc on Greek society and that men must actively avoid their allure. Therefore Greek men's maintain the belief that the only fitting type of woman is Greek.

Herodotus and Euripides show that Greek men develop a fetish and fear of barbarian women. Greek society is structured is to promote and applaud the Greek race as the master race. In particular, the way that men treat women shows this. Despite lusting after sexy, exotic women, Herodotus and Euripides remind Greek men of the laws that their society has and that these laws protect them from engaging in acts with lawless, destructive women. Both their militarism and intelligence differ from the passive nature of Greek women, which fosters the intrigue that the men have. However, this intrigue, as Herodotus

and Euripides would argue, is acceptable as long as it remains intrigue. Their tales of exotic wives show that taking a barbarian woman home and integrating her into culture is not only a bad idea, but will also end in one's demise. Using women as a vessel to prove that racial purity is most important, Herodotus and Euripides show the negative effects of beautiful barbarians.