

Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy

Lecture IV | The Tragedy of Passion: *Medea*

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The National Law School of India University, Bengaluru hosted an online lecture series on select texts from Greek tragedy by Amlan Das Gupta, retired Professor of English at Jadavpur University and noted scholar of classical studies and English renaissance literature. The series, titled 'Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy', discussed Sophocles' Antigone, Aristotle's Poetics, and Euripides' Medea. The four-part series was transcribed and edited for The NLS Blog. The below fourth and final lecture in the series considers Medea.

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In chapters 13 and 14 of *Poetics*, Aristotle explores the intersection of ethical and structural aspects of tragedy to determine its most effective form. He asserts that the primary goal of tragedy is to rouse the emotions of pity and fear. Pity is felt for one who suffers undeservedly, while fear is triggered when we recognise the sufferer as 'someone like ourselves'. The best tragedy maximises our experience of pity and fear. Aristotle arrives at the ideal tragic plot through a process of elimination, rejecting those where a perfectly virtuous person falls (which is merely repulsive) or where a villain falls (which satisfies our sense of justice but lacks pity). This leaves the 'in-between' (*ho metaxu*) character: a person of high standing and reputation who is not pre-eminent in virtue or justice, but whose downfall is caused not by vice or wickedness, but by some *hamartia*. While *hamartia* is often misinterpreted as a 'tragic flaw' or a moral defect, the text suggests that *hamartia* is more akin to an error in judgment or a 'piece of ignorance'. This allows the protagonist to remain morally relatable while still being the agent of their own destruction.

The complexity of this argument lies in Aristotle's evolving thought. While he initially suggests that the best tragedies end in misfortune—praising Euripides as the 'most tragic' for his unhappy endings—he also wrestles with the ethical implications of these acts. By focusing on families like those of Oedipus or Thyestes, Aristotle highlights the 'terrible' (*deina*) acts that occur within close relationships. Ultimately, the power of the best tragic plots comes from the tension between responsibility and innocence: the hero commits a horrific deed in ignorance but cannot claim responsibility.

The discussion about the best kind of tragic plot continues in chapter 14 of *Poetics*, but as is well known, the discussion takes a very different turn, and Aristotle's assessment of the best kind of tragic plot is strikingly different. I shall look at a brief discussion of *philia*—love or friendship—in the second paragraph of chapter 14. In *Ethics*, Aristotle sees *philia* as a powerful force in the quest for the good life, devoting two books (eight and nine) to this theme. *Philia* and *philos* occur in two remarkable occasions in the *Poetics*, and I shall try to look at them a little closely. Aristotle argues that tragic calamities can rise only among friends (*en tais philiais*), not among enemies, nor among agents indifferent to each other. The consequences, he points out, are terrible (*deina*) or pathetic (*oiktra*)—a rephrasing of the more frequent demand for pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*)—when son kills father, or brother kills brother, or mother son—that is, 'kills or intends to kill or something similar' (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b).

Aristotle seems to be content to use the term *philos* to cover a wide range of relationships, in the family, among friends and lovers, even among guests and hosts. In effect, the ties of friendship, affection, and love that aid in the pursuit of the good life become the site of tragic disruption. We have noted that Aristotle places the

estimation of tragic plots squarely within the bounds of *philanthropia* or fellow feeling, another derivative of the word *philia*. The shocking accuracy of this estimate is clear from the surviving evidence: of the 32 surviving plays, at least 26 involve *philia* in the broad sense, including hospitality and suppliance (Belfiore, 123ff). Aristotle's recognition of love, as that which is common to the pursuit of happiness and the abject reversals of fortune, is deeply compelling. Earlier he speaks of recognition as a change from ignorance to knowledge 'leading either to *philia* or hatred (*echthros*) for those destined to good or bad fortune' (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a).

What sort of events, then, do seem apt to rouse fear, or [rather] pity? This is my next subject. In such actions, people must do something to those closely connected with them, or to enemies, or to people to whom they are indifferent. Now, if it is a case of two enemies, this arouses no particular pity, whether the one damages the other or only intends to; or at least, pity is felt only at the pathos considered in itself. The same is true in the case when people are indifferent to each other. The cases we must look for are those where the pathos involves people closely connected, for instance where brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother—or if not kills, then means to kill, or does some other act of the kind (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b).

Here, Aristotle enquires more closely into the kinds of actions that arouse pity and fear. The best plots do so by the arrangement of events, not by external means. The plot, even when heard, arouses a shudder. To use spectacular aids to achieve the arousal of pity and fear is inartistic and inappropriate, for tragedy seeks to give its own unique kind of pleasure, not just any kind. Thus, one finds that certain kinds of

relationships are more effective in tragedy. It is when people come into conflict with those to whom they are closely related—parents with children, friends with friends, brothers with brothers—that the tragic effect is fully aroused. Even though one cannot alter traditional stories, one can interpret relationships more artistically.

Furthermore:

One can make the act be committed as the ancient poets did, that is, with the agents knowing and aware [whom they are damaging]; even Euripides has the example of Medea killing her children with full knowledge. [And they can have knowledge and not act.] Or they can commit the deed that rouses terror without knowing to whom they are doing it, and later recognize the connection, like Sophocles's Oedipus; this indeed happens outside the play, but we have examples in the tragedy itself, for example, Astydamos's *Alcmaeon* and Telegonus in the *Wounded Odysseus*. Again, apart from these, one might intend to do something irreparable through ignorance and then recognize the victim-to-be before doing it. These are the only possible ways, as they must either do it or not, and in knowledge or ignorance (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b).

To summarise: one can, for instance, show people acting out of ignorance or out of knowledge. He again adopts a classificatory approach: tragic plots must show either people acting or not acting, and they either know what they are doing or they do not. Either they perform 'terrible' (*deina*) acts in full knowledge like Medea slaying her children, or they commit the deed that rouses terror without knowing to whom they are doing it and later recognise the connection, like Sophocles's Oedipus. A third possibility is to intend to do some irremediable action in ignorance and to discover

the truth before doing it. This is left hanging at this point, but Aristotle thinks that this exhausts the possibilities: 'These are the only possible ways, as they must either do it or not, and in knowledge or ignorance' (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b). The fourth, of having full knowledge and intention and not acting is not considered a viable possibility, 'as this is both morally outraging and untragic— "untragic" because it involves no pathos' (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b). A few lines later Aristotle apparently chooses the third variety: of intending to act out of ignorance but avoiding the act because of some recognition as 'the best'. It is here that Aristotle appears to turn around radically. If, earlier, he had demanded that the hero performs or suffers 'fearful' or 'terrible' (*deina*) acts, he now seems to suggest that the best kind of tragedy is the one where the fearful act is avoided because of recognition.

Three examples are given here: two can be recognised as being from Euripides. There is no doubt—in spite of the breaks in the text—that Aristotle is commending a kind of tragedy where disaster is averted at the end: what we might call tragicomedy rather than tragedy. One should note that many Greek tragedies did have such endings. Apart from Euripides, who seems to have specialised in them, the great examples of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* come to mind. It may be that Aristotle is trying to account for a different, but well-established type of tragedy, but there is no avoiding the fact that the recommendations of the two chapters that we have just looked at are quite different.

However, Aristotle does recognise that there are also plays where tragic agents act in full knowledge: even Euripides, he says, 'has the example of Medea killing her children with full knowledge'. This is evidently far from the *hamartia* argument made

earlier, where the preservation of some kind of radical innocence is envisaged. But Aristotle sees that such plays exist and that even such plots are capable of exciting the tragic emotions in the highest degree: after all, he knows that Euripides is the most tragic of all poets. But how are Medea or Hippolytus tragic? Why do they not merely generate horror and revulsion? Would not the agents in these plays lead us back to our earlier discussion fall into the class of injustice (*adikema*), if not show themselves to be symptomatic of a deeper deficiency of character?

Let us briefly consider the plot of Euripides' *Medea*. Medea, princess of Colchis,

adept in the arts of magic, has left her home out of passionate love (*eroti thumon*) for Jason the Argonaut. The Nurse's prologue frames the catastrophe as a domestic crisis already in motion. She recapitulates Medea's past actions, her abandonment of her own *philo*i, her cunning stratagem to destroy King Pelias and aid Jason. But now she seeks terrible revenge on her husband who has abandoned her for Glauke, daughter of Creon:

But now everything has become enmity (*ekhthra*), and things most *phila* are ill. For Jason has betrayed his own children and my mistress, taking to his bed a royal bride; he has wedded the daughter of Creon, master of this land; while Medea, his unfortunate wife, without honor (*tīmē*) appeals to the oaths he swore, recalls the strong pledge his right hand gave, and bids the gods to witness what recompense she gains from Jason (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 18-22).

Medea faces summary banishment, as she is dangerous, and Creon the ruler of Corinth, who welcomes the chance of marrying his daughter Glauke to Jason, knows

that she is a woman who possesses *metis*, roughly translated as cunning intelligence, is empowered by her mastery over magic spells, and is violent and unpredictable in nature. Medea feigns submission and pleads for permission to remain in the polis, but Creon is adamant:

Your words are mild to hear, but I dread in my mind (*phrenes*) that you are devising some evil (*kakon*). Less than ever do I trust you now! For a woman with a sharp passion (*thūmos*), and likewise a man, is easier to guard against than a clever (*sophē*) one who is silent. Leave at once! Don't continue chattering! For this is decreed, and you have no trickery (*technēs*) by which you can remain among us, since you hate me (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 318-23).

Creon orders Medea's immediate exile. Medea pleads for a day's reprieve; Creon reluctantly grants it, fearing her but underestimating her. But Medea has already decided on her terrible path of revenge. She mocks Creon's weakness in acceding to her pleas as 'folly':

But he has progressed so far in folly that, though he might have checked my plot by removing me from the land, he has allowed me to stay this day, in which I will lay low in death three of my enemies (*ekhthroi*): a father, his daughter, and my husband too (Euripides, *Medea* 374-76).

Her encounter with Jason marks the fundamental ideological break in the play. Jason speaks the cold, smug language of patriarchal power and considers his actions justified by the needs of realpolitik, claiming that his new marriage is a pragmatic move for security. He has the temerity to suggest that he is doing her a good turn by offering her financial aid after banishment: 'I have come, woman, making provision

that you not be destitute or needy for anything, when with your children you are expelled' (Euripides, *Medea* 46–62). Medea, on the other hand, indicts his oath-breaking and ingratitude for her past sacrifices. Medea's rebuttal, a blistering catalogue of her past sacrifices, champions the sacred, uncompromising claims of oath-taking and the overwhelming force of passion (*thumos*), which more than anything else drives Medea's actions. She reminds him of how his actions constitute the most utter of betrayals for what he is today is entirely owing to Medea's help:

I will begin at the very beginning. I saved (*sōzein*) your life, as every Hellene knows who sailed with you aboard the Argo, when you were sent to tame and yoke the fire-breathing bulls, and to sow the deadly field. And I slew the dragon that was keeping safe (*sōzein*) the golden fleece, keeping a sleepless watch over it with its many twisted coils; I raised up for you the light of your salvation (*sōtēriā*). My father and my home I left of my own volition, coming with you to Iolkos, beneath the hills of Mount Pelion. My eagerness was greater than my wisdom (*sophiā*). Next, I killed King Pelias by a death most grievous, at the hands of his own children. All these things you experienced (*paskhein*) from us, and you, who are the most wretched (*kakos*) in the world, betrayed us by acquiring a new wife, though I have borne you sons. If you still had none, I might have forgiven your passion for this new marriage (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 476–93).

Their dialogue ends in stalemate, proving the marriage's fracture is irreparable and morally absolute, thus justifying in her mind the escalation to extremes. It is terrible anger and past all cure, says the Chorus, when 'kin (*philoī*) fall to strife (*eris*) with kin

(*philoi*)'. Medea rejects the consolations offered by Jason in a stinging retort: 'May I not have that painful (*lupros*) happy (*eudaimōn*) life, nor such prosperity (*olbos*) as would ever sting (*knizoi*) my mind (*phrēn*)!' (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 717–18).

But one more step remains before Medea finally embarks on her terrible course of actions. She requires a safe haven after her projected escape from Corinth.

The fourth episode with Aegeus is the keystone in Medea's carefully constructed arc of revenge. His arrival seems coincidental but is essential to the plot. He bemoans his childlessness, and Medea offers him the aid of her magic spells to find 'telos from the gods ... I will end your childlessness and cause you to beget a progeny of sons. Such are the drugs (*pharmaka*) I know' (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 717–18). His desire for children starkly contrasts with Medea's growing resolve against her own. More importantly, the binding oath of sanctuary he provides offers her a tangible escape route. With safety in Athens guaranteed, the final obstacle to her total vengeance is removed. This moment transforms her from a suppliant to an agent with a clear finale in view, thus setting her free to execute the terrible plan that she executes in the fifth episode. Here, her performance reaches its zenith as she feigns reconciliation, capitalising on Jason's patriarchal superciliousness by sending their children as gift-bearers to the new bride.

I will send them with gifts in their hands to the bride, begging that they may not be banished from this land: a gown of finest weave and a crown of beaten gold. And if she takes this adornment (*kosmos*) and puts it on, wretchedly (*kakōs*) she will die, and likewise everyone who touches the girl; such are

the drugs (*pharmaka*) that I will smear on the gifts (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 784–87).

As against the promise of a magic potion to aid fruitfulness, the *pharmaka* here is a terrible eviscerating potion that burns and destroys. The speech of the messenger that follows describes in gruesome detail the fiery, flesh-melting deaths of Glauke and Creon and is the visceral payoff of her *metis*. It serves as a public indictment of the royal house's corruption and marks the point of no return. The Chorus's sympathy, carefully cultivated earlier, now shatters as they plead with her to spare the children, realising too late the fearful consequences of their solidarity with Medea.

But that is not all. She knows that her sons have become inextricably entangled in the web of her dark desires and resolves to kill them too:

They absolutely must die. Since they must, I who bore them will give the fatal blow. Their fate is fixed; there is no escape. Already the crown is on her head, and in her gown the royal (*turannos*) bride dies; this I know full well. But now, since I have a pitiful path to tread, and yet more pitiful is the path I send my children down, I wish to say farewell to them (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 1063–68).

Her passion, *thumos*, drives her beyond the limits of sober reflection: 'At last I understand the evils (*kaka*) that I will perform; but my *thūmos*, responsible (*aitios*) for the greatest troubles (*kaka*) for mortals, is stronger than my sober thoughts (*boulemata*)' (Euripides, *Medea* ll. 1089–81).

The Exodos delivers the terrifying, unresolved culmination of Euripides' design. The infanticide occurs offstage, its horror amplified by the boys' screams. Medea's appearance in the chariot of the Sun is a profound perversion of the *deus ex machina* convention. Instead of restoring divine order, it enables the transgressor's escape, visually elevating Medea to a supernatural plane beyond human retribution. Her final dialogue with Jason is not a lament but a chilling forensic analysis of her revenge's efficacy. 'I have wrenched your heart in turn, as was needed,' she says, having violently removed his legacy, his future, and his *kleos* (glory) (Euripides, *Medea* II. 1361). Jason is left bereft of the social anchors that define Greek masculine identity. The Chorus's closing lines refuse any form of consolation and offer no moral resolution: No man among mortals is happy (*eudaimōn*). Prosperity (*olbos*) may pour in and make one luckier than another, but not *eudaimōn*' (Euripides, *Medea* II. 1228–30). Medea departs unpunished, her victory intact, leaving the audience to grapple with the devastating success of her meticulously plotted vengeance.

Medea appears to stand at the farthest remove from Antigone, but she is also embroiled in the same bonds of *philia* but now breeding the most intense hatred. She also knows that she is rashly passing beyond the limit—*tolma*, passion, fury, anger are all contained in Medea's tragic predicament. Above all, Medea is a play about *thumos*, a word that is reiterated over and over in the play. It overrules (*kreisson*), as ER Dodds observes, like a tyrant, to whom she is subject. He writes, 'here victim and tyrant are bound together in one personality' that itself is double, not single. (Dodds, 'Euripides' 99). *Thumos* is a form of desire, says Aristotle, but one which overrules rational consideration. In *Politics*, he observes, 'for when men are led away by *thumos* to assault others they are unsparing of themselves'. As Heraclitus says: 'It is difficult to

fight against *thumos*; for a man will buy revenge with his soul' (Aristotle, Politics, 1315a 29–31, qtd. in Pearson, 113). More than four centuries after Euripides, Ovid's Medea utters the fateful words '*Video meliora proboque,/deteriora sequor* (I see what is better, and I approve of it; I follow that which is worse)' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII. 20–21). To act against reason requires something stronger than reason or, as in Antigone's case, even something that is supported by her own rational considerations but is equally destructive.

Aristotle's attention passes from the tragedy of ignorance to the tragedy of passion. The tragic personage, the one in-between (*ho metaxu*), not only resides on the borderline of guilt and blamelessness, but experiences the tragic potential of love itself in the radical innocence of Antigone but also in the irresistible passion of Medea. Recurrently in Greek tragedy, we are confronted with tales of loss and destruction: of individuals, of families, of communities. As a form it is powerfully founded on the fact of *pathos*, suffering. Yet Aristotle is asserting that the most abject of tragic lives is also illuminated by love, affection, and desire. That is why tragedy re-affirms the strength of all that is human and claims for its unfortunate agents the charity of fellow-feeling—of *philanthropia*.*

* **Note:** Please check the References document for a full reference list, along with suggestions for further reading.

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