

LISTENING TO MEDEA AND LISTENING TO MYSELF LISTENING TO MEDEA

Medea, a character in Greek mythology, is a powerful sorceress, the niece of Circe, granddaughter of the sun god Helios, and daughter of King Aetes of Colchis. Jason is a great Greek hero, son of the king of Iolchis who has been killed by Jason's uncle, who has usurped the throne. Jason's uncle promises to give him his inheritance and the throne if he accomplishes a number of seemingly insurmountable tasks, among which is to retrieve the golden fleece, which was guarded by a powerful dragon on the island of Colchis, a kingdom regarded as less civilized than Iolchis..

Medea falls in love with him and promises to help him in return for which, if he succeeds, he would take her with him and marry her. Medea puts the dragon to sleep with her narcotic herbs, enabling Jason to take the fleece and sail away with her. The king and her brother pursue them. Medea kills her brother so that their father has to bury him, giving them time to flee. The king of Iolchis, who is old and infirm, reneges on his promise. Medea persuades his daughters that if they kill him she will have them reborn as young and healthy, a promise she does not keep. Rather than this winning Jason the throne they and their children are forced to flee. They settle in Colchis where the king offers Jason his daughter in marriage, and he accepts.

Betrayed and abandoned, Medea takes revenge first by sending Jason's future bride a beautiful dress and golden crown covered in poison. She dies and her father dies trying to save her. Medea continues her revenge by murdering her children by Jason, after which she leaves Colchis and flies to Athens in a golden chariot driven by dragons sent by her grandfather Helios, god of the sun—the triumph of primitive emotion over reason..

Medea is a mythical fictional archetypically drawn character created to represent a universal

human dynamic. Euripides warns of the danger of focusing too narrowly on the veneer of civilization, which may hide or obscure but does not change the reality of our powerful, primitive, often irrational but natural human emotions. In this play emotional truth prevails. Euripides did not create the character of Medea in his play in order to explore her intrapsychic development and organizing principles. Other than the concrete events related, which everyone in his audience knew, we know little of her past history, and nothing of her early childhood,. Events of early childhood, of course, are often the primary focus of psychoanalytic inquiry. Euripides' play is successful because Medea's issues are universal, resonating through the ages, lending themselves to identification over a wide range of subjectivities. Since my interpretation of Euripides' Medea is of necessity through the prism of my time and place in history, this adds another element to the subjectivity through which I understand her. Nevertheless she feels real to me.

First I will speak about our imagined therapeutic encounter. Later I will speak about my own experience as related to that encounter. I imagine meeting Medea for the first time after her meeting with Aegeus in which she has arranged for her reception and protection in Athens, and after she has described her plan of retaliation, to which the chorus responds, "This way will bring you the deepest misery." For my reading purposes, she is a victim, not yet a patient. Having been humiliated, hurt and betrayed by someone on whom she counted to protect and cherish her, and given her personality, character, and mood, it is unlikely that at this moment that she would enter psychoanalysis. And yet I imagine her as my patient nonetheless.

Medea has been traumatized. Her trauma is personal, meaning that her trauma is caused by her

close relationships with others. In this way it is different from traumata caused by natural phenomena, such as an earthquake or a tsunami, or traumata caused by shared historical events, such as war. And her response to the trauma is unique to her, her history, her current organizing principles, and the particular circumstances in which she finds herself. Medea needs an empathic listener, someone who mirrors her experience. She feels alienated from most of Corinth, and though there is some sympathy for her, and outrage at her plight, as an analyst I wonder if Medea feels she has been heard. I wonder how much she has allowed herself to say. Her pride is helpful in maintaining her sense of herself as a cohesive whole; and it is central in the image she wants to present to her world.

Medea dissociates and conceals her feelings of inner emotional vulnerability. Her audience, who care about both Medea and her children, are understandably horrified by what she plans. They want to dissuade her from her chosen path. Given that intent, can they really listen? Can they empathize without judgment? Would an analytic audience respond differently?

Though I understand Medea is strong and confident, I believe she is deeply in need of mirroring. It would be helpful for her to know that someone can: 1) empathically connect with the depth and pain of her experience, 2) affirm her perceptions, 3) feel compassion for her, and 4) understand how she made her decisions. That listener might not necessarily agree with her plan. If Medea felt understood, felt able to voice her concerns, might it not be possible that some reordering might take place? Viable alternatives might emerge. I believe that as Medea and I interact with one another in a psychoanalytic mode, our empathic connection would be deepened. Both of us would expand our understanding and her fragmented sense of self would be strengthened.

Medea has been abruptly betrayed and abandoned. She has been discarded for opportunistic reasons by Jason to whom she has given so much. While the earth did not shake for the community, Medea suffered an emotional earthquake. Such traumata evoke terrors deeply buried in the unconscious. On a preconscious preverbal level such traumata evoke fear of disorganization, fear of loss of tenderness, and fear of death. Divorce and moving are among the highest stresses people experience. Add to that total emotional abandonment, turnoff and disconnection for no apparent reason intrinsic in the relationship. Add to that moving when you do not know where you can go.

Medea has been violated by someone she trusted. The proverbial rug has been pulled out from under her. Jason's unexpected coldness is not only painful, it is frighteningly disorienting. It challenges her deepest held beliefs and expectations concerning herself and her relationship to her world. Medea's trust in her world has been challenged—an experience common to trauma victims. Paradoxically at such terrifying moments there is potential for change. Were I her therapist, I believe I would create a holding environment in which hope might be engendered.

Medea has been treated as if she didn't exist. Such an experience evokes unconscious nonverbal memories of early infancy experiences of non-response to a need. Non-response is more frightening than negative response. Non-response evokes fear of disorganization and death. A child would much rather be reprimanded and punished than forgotten. Being forgotten is much more dangerous to a child's existence and well being.

Medea's confidence in her own reality has been shaken. The Jason she knew disappeared. She does not know the Jason who replaced him. This new, unrecognizable person makes light of her plight. Her feelings have no validity to him. Even her sexual feelings are dismissed and derogated. The spotlight shines blindingly on Jason's deceptiveness, his coldness, his ruthlessness. People to him are means to his ends. He exploits her passion for him. And worst of all is his glibness and ability to smoothly rationalize his behavior. Jason is self centered and self serving. He rationalizes, perhaps to deceive others and to maintain his illusions as to his own altruism.

With conviction he says black is white and day is night. He dismisses the importance of anything she has done for him, saying in fact that taking her away from her own land where she was a princess, and bringing her to Corinth, to be an alien with no status, seen as a barbarian, he has done more for her than she for him. This repudiation of Medea's significance in his life is not only frightening. It is annihilating. It is an attack on her sense of self.

We risk when we love. We hope we know who our lover is, but we never can be sure what we will find out. Medea says, "When we need to know bad men over good the flesh bears no revealing mark." This too evokes the fear of disorientation carried from our earliest days. Was the Jason she knew real or fiction? If Medea is so mistaken about Jason, how can she believe in her own reality?

Medea, like other trauma victims, discovered how little control she has over her own life and how few assumptions she can make about her own future. Natural forces impinge on us. Intentional and unintentional acts of others also impinge. Such impingements are especially difficult for people who

perceive themselves to be responsible, conscientious, organized, and in control. In my practice people often come to me because they have been traumatized by accidents. These people are victims, not perpetrators. The awareness that things happen beyond one's control is overwhelming: "No matter what I do, how careful I am, I can't control other people." And thus they suffer severe narcissistic injury, even if they are not necessarily narcissistically organized.

Caught in this maelstrom of the dreaded disorganization and disorientation, fear of death and loss of the source of tenderness, there is hope. Ferenczi says, "Great need, and especially mortal anxiety, seem to possess the power to waken up suddenly and to put into operation latent dispositions, which uncathected, waited in deepest quietude for their development." I agree with Ferenczi because of my work with people deeply traumatized by events beyond their control. This is why I find work with these patients so exciting. There is the seed of this awakening when Medea says she chose "with much love and little wisdom." Later she says, "My folly was committed long ago when I was ready to desert my father's house won over by a Greek." Listening to these words, I see a ray of hope where Medea does not.

As Medea's therapist I wonder how can I leverage this ray of hope? In my imagined role as Medea's therapist, I would do what I could to create an atmosphere that could lead to her letting me in on her emotional and cognitive processes, memories of choices made and how they were made. When she says she showed "much love and little wisdom" coming to Iocus by Mount Pelion, I would be gently curious. Behind those few words there is a world of feeling and thought. My gentle questioning might allow Medea to stop for a moment. We begin to know one another.

Where appropriate I would echo Medea with my own words. I would be careful to mirror rather than to add or change. I would be observing her pattern of being brilliantly calculating in terms of her goal, not visualizing or dismissing the fallout, and burning her bridges. It seems to emerge in intense relationships as when she fell intensely in love with Jason, and now, when she is immersed in intense hatred. At those times, she cannot conceive of other people existing as centers of their own lives. Her perspective becomes narcissistic, a narcissism called into existence by trauma, as a necessary defense against loss of self. People become for her nothing but obstacles in her path or instruments for her use in achieving her objective. Her children have no independent existence for her, and are seen by her as her only weapons in her determination to do to Jason the equivalent to or worse than what he did to her.

I would understand that at this moment only her rage matters to her. When one's survival is threatened, as is hers, one dissociates thoughts or feelings that do not implement the anticipated course. I would need to be very alert to any opportunity to express my curiosity about what she refers to as her folly and lack of wisdom. But I would also need to be very sensitive to when it would be disjunctive. I would need to be very patient and understand that what I think might be inaccurate, but may be more of an effort to provide myself a structure in an upsetting and disorienting atmosphere.

I am now going to talk about my own imagined experience while listening to Medea. Listening to Medea is an extreme and urgent challenge to the limits of one's empathic capacity. How much of the depth of her pain, despair, unacknowledged terror and confusion, and anger am I capable of allowing myself to feel? I know that when one is in danger survival requires focus on the task at hand, and dissociation of other thoughts and feelings. But Medea has disowned other possibilities. She sees evoking horror in

others as necessary for her physical and psychological survival. She chooses increased alienation when what she needs is stronger empathic connection to others. Or does she feel suicide is her only option, and can accept it, if she can deal Jason an emotionally mortal blow in the process? Can I listen to the horror she is envisioning and feel empathy, even compassion? I can identify with her hurt and rage. But a part of me is very judgmental. This is a tendency I am capable of transcending, but could I in this case? And how would I?

My desire to fix it, to alter the course of events, to influence her would emerge. The pull might be overwhelming. Much as it would be to her benefit were it possible, it would subvert my efforts to develop a co-created therapeutic relationship. I would be listening to chinks in her armor. Encountering them I would need to be very finely tuned to my own inner sensations to know what to try to do. Should I do nothing now but just reflect on what I have observed? Should I be curious? Does my curiosity come from my desire to fix it? When I feel I do not know what to do or say should I just listen? Just sitting there not knowing what to do or say, but just listening, might be the best way to create space for Medea to express more.

I would be thinking about different aspects of her personality and character, and Jason's. I would tend to be imagining the interplay between them in developing their relationship, comparing and contrasting them as people in developmental terms. I would want to know more to answer all these questions in my mind. It might be useful for me to think about this while I am away from her. In her presence it would divert me from listening. Perhaps all this thinking is a retreat for me from the empathically shared emotional turbulence into the safer harbor of intellectualizing.

There are other voices I hear when I listen to myself. It's hopeless. She will never change. What is there to work with? Is there any potential interest or will to engage in this process? And then my mind goes to revenge. Seeing Jason more clearly as someone by whom she is repelled, could lead her to say, "Good riddance, thank the gods I have children." She could then occupy herself with getting on with her life. Why does she cling to the bad object? Why does she not consider the advice of her friend Aegeus? He says, "If—as you say—he's a bad lot, let him go." Why are retaliation and revenge, with its negative consequences to herself and others her only option? And here I find myself changing my mode of listening. I have moved from being primarily subject oriented to the more distant role of analyst as participant observer, effecting by doing and being but not manipulating.

I can understand the feelings involved in thinking and fantasizing about revenge. I have gone over in my mind what I remember of people talking to me about revengeful feelings, desires and plans. I have thought about my own anger. I cannot identify with carrying out such fantasies. Perhaps if my listening brought out more of Medea's feelings I might be able to feel what she felt.

I especially have difficulty with regard to her children. I have not been a perfect mother. In fact I have many regrets about my mothering. I have worked intensively with mothers. I have been able to emotionally understand much that I myself never experienced. But I cannot understand Medea's hatred for her children as described by her nurse early in the play. I cannot feel the feelings that could lead to their murder. I feel there is nothing in the play to explain it. Perhaps this is because Medea's character was created to depict universal dynamic tendencies, not to understand a particular individual.

I do not feel empathic resonance when she says, “Not that I would think of leaving my sons behind me for those who hate me to insult.” I do not feel it when she says, “No one will take my children from me.” I do not feel cherishing behind those words. On the contrary, in the context of the intense emotions stirred up by Jason’s behavior, her children have become possessions--objects, projections and extensions of herself. The children are no longer human beings with their own reality. They have become means to her ends, in this case to hurt Jason, to make him feel her reality. It seems to be another expression of her patterning in an intense relationship, whether of love or of hate.

As a clinician with a legal and ethical obligation to report intention to do physical harm to one’s self or to another, and as a human being with concern for the safety and well-being of children, I would have to consider carefully how to intervene with Medea once I heard directly her plans to take revenge by destroying her children, or how to intervene if I intuited her plans.

Medea’s decision is an individually determined one. We know nothing about the developmental experiences that shaped her personality. I wonder, what are some of the dynamics that might feed into her determination to wreak revenge “by any means necessary”?

I can think of a few. One could be her response to being dismissed as someone not even to be considered by Jason, Creon, and his daughter. As if she did not exist, or as if she would not have a voice were she there with them, they have made a decision that undercuts her life completely. This could impel her to want to show them that she is not a nonentity or completely helpless and powerless. She is an individual

with a mind, a will, emotions and power even if the only power she has is to destroy. Medea wants to have an impact. She may feel that her acts will restore her sense of self. She believes they may provide for her safety by terrorizing those who might seek to harm or disrespect her. She would rather be feared than pitied. She says, “The laughter of my enemies I will not endure,” and “Let no one think of me as humble or weak or passive. Let them understand I am of a different kind: dangerous to my enemies, loyal to my friends.” And when she finds herself wavering as she thinks of her children, she says to herself, “You must not invite laughter from Jason and his allies.”

Phillip Vellacott, who translated and introduced the edition I read, writes, “And the ending of Medea, with the sun himself, the source of all life and warmth, vindicating the cause of passion, disorder, violent cruelty, against the cold, orderly, self protective processes of civilized man is a reminder that the universe is not on the side of civilization; and that a life combining order with happiness is something men must win for themselves in continual struggle with an unsympathetic environment.”

A second strong motivation is the quest for justice. There is no legally sanctioned punishment for what was done to Medea. This is another often difficult to accept reality of our lives. Nature is not just. We try to create systems of justice to more effectively live and control our lives, but these systems are flawed, and the frustration engendered by this reality may at times seem unendurable. Medea says, “None of them shall hurt me and not suffer for it. Let me work in bitterness and in pain they shall repent.”

A third trigger to revenge is Jason’s dismissal of Medea’s feelings and his complete denial of the impact on her of his behavior. He deepens the wound, intensifies the pain and thereby further fuels the fire.

Studies have found that a significant factor in recovery from trauma inflicted on one individual by a trusted other, is acknowledgment or non-acknowledgment by the perpetrator.

As I thought about Medea I found myself thinking more about my own life and my own relationships, central and peripheral. I feel or hope that it has led me to be clearer, more caring and accepting of myself and the other, and more patient. I feel it has deepened and expanded my understanding of human nature. In individual relationships and in history we see that oppression seeds and nurtures violence. And when the oppressed rise up they can be cruel, vengeful and unjust, meting out punishment to the innocent and the blameless for the deeds of those who oppressed them over time and generations.

I would like to make two final points. One is an example from more recent history. Recent interest in understanding and acknowledging the important role the Soviets played in defeating Hitler has led to looking into records not looked at before. These records also reveal that many thousand German women were raped by Russian soldiers out of vengeance for the most extreme sufferings of their people during that war. But not all victims reacted that way. Visiting Leningrad I heard a survivor of the 900 day siege of that city say, as he described their ordeal, “I would not want that to happen to my worst enemy.”

The second point I would like to make is that there is a strong feminist strand in Medea. Women had no rights or privileges then except as bestowed by their relationships to men. Medea bitterly refers to this often in the play. There is no wrath like the wrath of a woman scorned. In the role of participant observer, that I slipped into in trying to relate to Medea’s revenge I observe who we are as human beings, and the playing out of cause and effect. The way we treat others leads to feelings in them. These feelings may or

may not be expressed. They may be acted out in different ways, sometimes symbolically. Or they may not be acted out. Or they may be expressed in different seemingly unrelated symptoms or behaviors. It is who we are.

Mildred Antonelli, Ph.D.

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