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JEFFERS' *MEDEA:* A DEBT TO EURIPIDES

The story of Medea has attracted the attention of several modern playwrights, including J. Anouilh, R. Jeffers and M. Anderson, who have used it to express their own ideas about the nature and fate of man as well as about his position in the world. The purpose of this essay is to examine Jeffers' attempt to use the ancient myth to convey his personal philosophy, and to define his originality. (1)

It seems appropriate to recall Euripides' main themes and his means of conveying them before turning to Jeffers' play. In his *Medea* the Greek dramatist points out the destructiveness of excessive passion, but he also questions the ability of reason to control passion. To dramatize these ideas he makes Medea and Jason embody two extremes, the irrational and the rational respectively. In bringing the two together Euripides renders their conflict inevitable. Through the outcome of this conflict, that is the death of several innocent people, Euripides shows the destructive effects of passion (Medea's love for Jason) not only on Medea's family but also on society as a whole. Through Medea's suffering and inability to restrain her emotions, Euripides implies that she too becomes a victim of those emotions. On the other hand, by emphasizing Jason's cold calculating mind and showing his inability to understand, accept and calm down Medea's passion, Euripides seems to point out the limitations of Jason, both as a character and as a symbol of reason. By making the Sun, one of the elemental irrational forces in the Universe, help Medea to escape the punishment imposed by human laws, he further confirms the existence of irrational forces in the Universe, over which man has no control.

These ideas are also conveyed through the violence, suspense and emotional intensity prevailing in the play. Euripides builds up this atmosphere through various means: a) the use of animal imagery, which stresses the power of instinct in Medea's char-

(1) In several of his works Jeffers used Greek myths. The Medea legend occurs both in his poem "Solstice" and in his play *Medea* (1946). His verse drama *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* (1925) echoes Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. His play *The Cretan Woman* (1954) and his poem "Cawdor" are adaptations of Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

acter; b) the reference to and comments by the nurse, the tutor, the messenger and the chorus on both her past violent actions and present crimes; c) her quarrels with Jason, in which Jason is shown to be unable to restrain Medea's outburst of passion; d) her miraculous escape on the chariot of the Sun. Although Euripides stresses the existence of the irrational inside and outside man and its power in human life, his final view of man and his fate are not pessimistic. The alternative the dramatist seems to offer to the destructive extremes brought into conflict in *Medea* is a balance between reason and emotion, between the rational and the irrational.

In his *Medea* Jeffers, like Euripides, deals with the end results of passion. However, the driving-force in the world he creates is not extreme love, but extreme hatred; "Only a coward or a madman gives good for evil," (2) says his Medea. If in the ancient play love proves to be destructive for society, in the modern play hate brings about complete annihilation. Reason or order are almost non-existent. In Jeffers' world man is reduced to the animal level and sometimes even below that. To convey this Jeffers makes some alterations in his treatment of the two main characters as well as in the plot of the play. He focuses attention primarily on the character of Medea and makes her the embodiment of hatred. He also gives her another dimension by emphasizing her supernatural power as a witch, which she uses mainly to destroy people. Even kings are afraid of her. Creon tries to banish her because he feels threatened by her sorcery, poisons and magic, but he is finally destroyed by her revengeful wrath. Aegeus promises to offer her shelter in Athens, after she guarantees that she can cure his sterility (which receives less emphasis in Euripides). Just before Aegeus' arrival Jeffers adds a long passage in which Medea admits that she is a witch, and asks Hecate to help her revenge through her magic:

> Ancient Goddess to whom I and my people
> Make the sacrifice of black lambs and black female hounds,
> Holy one, haunter of cross-roads, queen of night, Hecate,
> Help me now: to remember in my mind the use of the
> venomous fire, the magic song,
> And the sharp gems. (3)

Jeffers' Medea is so inhuman or subhuman that she arouses only horror, and her presence is so powerful on the stage that Jason is completely overshadowed; as a result his symbolic function as the opposite of Medea is rather weak and vague. Medea's isolation from Corinth and Jason as well as her victory over both are suggested by the way the play ends. Medea, the

(2) JEFFERS, "Medea," *Medea: Myth and Dramatic Form*, Sanderson and Zimmerman, eds, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967, p. 164.
(3) *Ibid.*, p. 149.

invincible witch, escapes through the portal which is protected by two poisonous fire-snakes at the bases of the pillars, beyond which Jason cannot penetrate, and between which he finally collapses. As the curtain falls, her presence dominates the stage:

MEDEA.....
.....But I,
a woman, a foreigner, alone
Against you and the might of Corinth — have met you
throat for throat, evil for evil. Now I go forth
Under the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars: — not
me they scorn. (4)

By projecting Medea's supernatural power and by ending the play with her defiant as well as triumphant speech, in which she also boasts that she can find shelter in Nature, Jeffers stresses not so much the inability of reason to control hatred as the complete triumph of hatred over reason, or any other human passion in the world; as a result the latter becomes a wasteland. Jeffers heightens the image of this wasteland by creating an atmosphere of mystery, magic, violence and horror, which he builds up through a number of devices. First he deliberately reduces his characters, especially Medea, to the animal level; he likens her, for instance, to a lioness, a tiger, a bitch, a bull, a serpent, a wolf, a viper, a cow, Tuscan Scylla, a polluted fiend, a savage beast, a fierce hound, etc., thus dehumanizing her completely. Second, he emphasizes Medea's magic powers, their effect on other people's lives and their contribution to her final escape. Third, he stresses Medea's violent actions through the comments of the chorus, the messenger, the tutor and the nurse. He makes the chorus transform Medea's horror story into a horror story of all humanity. He portrays the quarrel scenes between Jason and Medea or Creon and Medea much more vehemently through shouting, wailing and ranting; he consistently uses images of dryness, fire, blood, violence, destruction, etc. The following passage contains some of these images which convey the picture of the wasteland:

FIRST WOMAN.
I have heard evil
Answering evil as thunder answers the lightning,
A great waste voice in the hollow sky,
And all that they say is death. I have heard vengeance
Like an echo under a hill answering vengeance,
Great hollow voices: all that they say is death.

SECOND WOMAN. The sword speaks
And the spear answers: the city is desolate.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 176.

The nations remember old wrongs and destroy each other,
And no man binds up their wounds. (5)

Jeffers' additions to his source also contribute to increase the mystery, horror and emotional intensity: such are the stories about some irrational and prophetically gruesome events preceding Medea's murders. To a degree these additions serve their purpose. Yet, others tend to become too lengthy, too loose and commonplace, and to weaken his poetic language. Some motifs are also unnecessarily repeated, such as the motif of exile, first used in the conversation between Medea and Creon (6) and later in the conversation between Medea and Aegeus. (7) The word "dog", that Medea uses when she refers to Creon, his daughter and Jason, is repeated so often that it becomes meaningless or confusing, since she applies it to three characters at the same time. In sharp contrast are the corresponding passages in Euripides' *Medea,* whose language is more controlled, coherent, precise and rich in poetic images.

Jeffers' final vision of mankind and its fate must be assessed in connection with his other works as well as with Euripides' vision. One of Jeffers' critics, Hugh Dickinson, suggests that Medea's flight to Athens and her final speech might be interpreted as a symbolic rejection of the human race. He also wonders whether Medea is able to transcend her own humanity by violating her deepest human urge, motherhood. (8) Perhaps Dickinson reads too much into Medea's final escape, since Jeffers does not give us many instances of Medea's « humanity » in the play. Yet, we might accept Dickinson's view if we associated Medea with most of Jeffers' major works, which are characterized by misanthropy as well as with his own isolation from society. We can compare, for instance, the end of his dramatic poem "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia,* with the end of *Medea.* In the former Orestes also expresses his contempt for the human race and finally rejects it. In both works man is presented as a worthless creature: his mere existence turns Nature into a wasteland. There is no hope for mankind, since its actions are prompted by hatred. Only if the individual man manages to reject humanity, like Orestes and perhaps Medea, only then will he be able to transcend suffering and undergo a mystical communion with Nature. Euripides' man also has serious weaknesses and limitations, but the Greek dramatist's vision of man and his world is more positive. Jeffers has turned Euripides' scepticism into complete pessimism and misanthropy.

(5) *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.
(6) *Ibid.*, p. 137.
(7) *Ibid.*, p. 151.
(8) H. DICKINSON, *Myth on the Modern Stage,* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969, p. 137.