

Euripides' guilty Chorus is a dramatic device that shows the world is falling apart. Do you agree?

From the commencement of the play Medea, Euripides plunges the audience into a chaotic world that exposes the problems inherent in human life and society. The protagonist Medea undertakes an emotional journey from suicidal despair to sadistic fury at her husband's violation of their marital vows; the Chorus of Corinthian women join Medea on this journey. Ultimately horrified and enthralled by Medea, they are an essential dramatic device through which the playwright establishes his stance on the themes of love, betrayal and duty and the tragic consequences when men and women act outside 'mankind's laws'. Furthermore, the Chorus lend a rational and reasonable voice to the revolutionary cries of Medea as she rails against the crimes committed against womankind.

In the prologos, the Nurse establishes that Medea has proven to be a good wife by Athenian standards. Despite her past actions and her exile status, Medea has played the stereotypical passive role of wife seeking to "please her husband in all she does". Yet Jason repays Medea's "complete support" with the betrayal of their marital vows by marrying the King of Corinth's daughter Glauce. Jason's adulterous actions would have seemed acceptable to the all-male audience of Euripides' time, and the Chorus initially urge Medea to show self-restraint and moderation rather than allow his actions to "vex her". But a sense that a great injustice has been done to her quickly emerges. In contrast to the vexed hysteria heard from Medea when offstage [evidence can be stage directions], the protagonist exhibits reason and calm when she first enters and speaks, according to stage directions "in measured tones".

The Chorus sympathise with Medea because while the marriage may not be deemed legitimate by Creon, it is valid in the eyes of the gods. When she seeks their "silence", while she devises a "means for making my husband pay for this suffering of mine", their confident judgment that "it is just that you should take revenge upon your husband" reinforces the notion that men are equally as bound as women by the oaths they swear. The Chorus further condemn Jason's actions following the agon between Jason and Medea in which Jason inadequately defends the betrayal of his wife. The Chorus acknowledges the reasonable tone of Jason's argument, yet still conclude by telling him "you have betrayed your wife and are behaving unjustly". The judgment passed down by the Chorus is clear: Jason has gone against natural law by betraying his oaths, and the audience's sympathy should rest solely with the pitiable protagonist Medea- a point later reiterated by Aegeus, King of Athens.

The Chorus' sympathy for Medea stems not only from their belief that Jason has acted unjustly, but from their shared status as women who also suffer under the yolk of oppression as a consequence of their gender. They are also victims of the same patriarchal society which Medea lives, and similarly to Jason's betrayal for Glauce, admit that they are "slaves to masters who can 'play the tyrant' with their bodies". In doing so, they are able to sympathise with Medea's plight. Thus when Medea premeditates her murder of the princess and Creon by poisoning, the Chorus support Medea's intention to "make corpses of her enemies". This reinforces the Chorus' role as the voice of Corinthian women who echo the lack of power that make women "the most wretched" in Athenian society. Hence, the Chorus look to Medea as their "muse", a heroine who "tutors [them] in wisdom" for being able to seek revenge upon Jason's breaking of their sacred marriage oaths. From this, the audience are able to deduce that whilst women may not have a voice in Athenian society, it does not mean that they lack intellect. In fact, Euripides subtly warns his all male audience to be cautious of the equally as destructive force of women. Secondly, Euripides employs the Chorus to deliver a warning to Athenian society that "when nature and all things are overturned" and men betray

pledges sworn “in the name of the gods”, the foundations upon which their society stands are at risk.

The extent of this risk is made clear as the play draws to its tragic climax. The Chorus’ firm support of Medea falters when she announces her plan to kill her children: a plan forged by the transformation of Medea’s passion into rage by Jason’s betrayal. When Medea tells the Chorus of the full extent of her plan, they plead with her not to put it into action because it goes beyond the bounds of acceptability. Indeed, while the Chorus deem that “heaven has rained many blows justly on the head of Jason” with the deaths of Creon and Glauce, the deaths of his children at the hands of their mother betrays the laws of nature- a mother gives life, she does not take it. Medea is therefore transformed in the eyes of the Chorus from a “pitiful mother of sons...forsaken lawlessly by your husband” to a “murderous fiery” and a “wretched accursed woman”. However, this judgment aside, the fact remains that Medea, following direct intervention by Helios, evades all sense of Athenian justice, post the murder of Creon, Glauce and the children. It would seem apparent that Euripides structures the play this way so as to cast Medea as a symbol of the desperately needed cleansing spirit that Athenian society must endure in order to correct such a telling imbalance between male driven logos and feminine imbued pathos.

Whilst an all-male Athenian audience would be left shaken to the core about the bloody and passionate usurping patriarchal power in the play, there is no question that the audience leaves a performance of Medea harbouring doubt over the treatment of the most vulnerable in Athenian society. Clearly logos needs to be balanced with pathos and ethos.

