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psychiatry in literature

Medea: a mythological case of familial serial killer?

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In Greek mythology, Medea is the wife of the hero Jason and originated from Cholcide (in today's Georgia). She is a sorceress associated with the cult of Hecate, goddess of witchcraft, poisons and ghosts. In Seneca's play she kills her younger brother Apsyrtus and cuts him into pieces that she then scatters in the sea. When her husband divorces her for a younger woman, Creusa, Medea presents her with a poisonous burning dress, kills Creusa's father Creon, then sets fire to their palace in Corinth, and finally, she bleeds to death the two children she had with Jason, Mermeros and Pheres. Back in her homeland, she kills her uncle Perses to reinstate her father Aeëtes to the throne. Medea's murderous count totals six homicides, almost exclusively within the family circle. A final, seventh homicide could be added to this list, when Medea encourages the daughters of King Pelias to kill, dismember and then cook their father.

Medea fits the definition of a serial killer, in the sense that she has killed at least three people in different locations and at different points in time. Her character seems clearly psychopathological. She derives satisfaction from killing ('I rejoice, I rejoice', v. 912; 'I feel rising in me, against me, a great enjoyment', v. 992–3). She is described as in a state of 'trance' ('furore') before the act, a state comparable or similar to depersonalisation. Some of these killings appear to have sexual aspects: for example, the murder of her two children is described in terms suggestive of an orgasmic component (v. 991–2) and pleasure (v. 1016–7). She also wants her infamy to outlive her, transforming the murders into a homicidal performance by killing her second son on the roof and showing the corpse of the first son to the crowd of Corinth (v. 976–7). At times, she seems to lose contact with reality, by not recognising and acknowledging Jason's children as her own. And, by constantly reminding herself of her past murders, she gains courage and stimulation to commit new ones.

Medea is the granddaughter of the Sun and hence is symbolically dominated by fire, an element whose preponderance in the body, according to Hippocratic medicine, is a causal factor for yellow bile and a particularly angry mood. How, then, was she to evade this kind of 'genetic' predisposition?

The mythological character of Medea is well known to psychologists and psychiatrists as the 'Medea complex' described as the killing of one's own children in revenge against an abandoning husband. Perhaps, one could add another dimension to Medea's character – that of a serial killer.

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