

MEDEA – A SYMBOL OF FREEDOM IN JEAN ANOUILH’S DRAMATURGY

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Abstract. Jean Anouilh, a prominent representative of 20th-century French literature and a distinguished playwright, offered a unique interpretation of the immortal tragedy of Medea. While maintaining the core narrative of the classical myth—the story of Medea and Jason—Anouilh endowed the plot and characters with profound philosophical and psychological dimensions. His play places a particular emphasis on the internal conflicts and moral journeys of the protagonists. Against the backdrop of France’s tense political climate, and the emergence of Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd, Anouilh crafted what is essentially a drama of the "absurd." In this work, he juxtaposes love and betrayal, freedom and servitude/conformism, identity and self-perception, and civilization and barbarism.

Anouilh’s *Medea* explores the concept of liberty, elucidating what it means to be free and, consequently, happy in a world of compromise—a world that embraces only the like-minded and alienates those who dare to think differently. Jason is depicted as a pathetic conformist and a traitor precisely because he, above all, betrays freedom and true love. In this binary opposition, Jason chooses submission/servitude and vanity/prosperity, whereas Medea chooses freedom, defying even the "dirty games of the gods" with her "sufficiently strong soul."

It is this steadfast, potent, proud, and freedom-loving character—Jean Anouilh’s Medea—who has become a definitive symbol of liberty within European civilization.

Keywords: Freedom, Existentialism, Drama of the Absurd, Conformism, Binary Opposition, Psychological Interpretation.

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The French playwright Jean Anouilh, a prominent figure of twentieth-century French literature, was deeply intrigued by the theme of Medea. In 1946, he offered a unique interpretation of this immortal tragedy, basing it entirely on the Greek myth. While maintaining the core trajectory of the classical plot—the story of Medea and Jason—Anouilh infused the mythological narrative and its characters with modern philosophical and psychological dimensions. The play places a particular emphasis on the internal conflicts and moral undercurrents of the protagonists. Although it is not always considered the pinnacle of his oeuvre, the play nonetheless presents its core message in a compelling manner.

The play was written during a period of profound upheaval in France, a time marked by the emergence of existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd. It was within the tension of these two intellectual forces that Anouilh composed his work. Consequently, the play juxtaposes fundamental dichotomies: freedom versus conformism, love versus betrayal, identity versus self-worth, and civilization versus savagery. It is evident that through this work, Anouilh crafted a play of the "Absurd," positioning Medea as its central protagonist.

The drama opens at dawn with a dialogue between Medea and the Nurse. They are far from the palace, living in a wagon under the open sky. Medea is agitated by the noise emanating from the palace. When the

Nurse attempts to explain the local customs, she highlights Medea's status as an outsider: "With us, the festival is earlier, in June. The girls decorate their hair with flowers, while the boys paint their faces with their own blood and, at dawn, after the first sacrifice, they begin the battles" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:357). This remark serves Anouilh's intent to underscore Medea's "otherness."

Anouilh's *Médée* explores the nature of freedom, examining what it truly means to be free and the specific kind of happiness—or burden—it entails. This motive forms the structural foundation of the play. With the exception of Medea and Jason, the characters are unremarkable, ordinary people. Through them, the author suggests that the world is built on compromise; it belongs to everyone except those with dissenting opinions. Those who hold divergent views are inevitably marginalized by society.

The theme of betrayal is presented through a different lens: here, Jason does not merely betray Medea; he betrays freedom itself. Jason asserts: "So, do you think I am leaving you to seek another love? Do you think I want to start over? I do not only hate you, I hate love itself!" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:377).

These words testify to Jason's resignation. He chooses compromise and a tranquil life with the king's daughter—a life where he would have everything except freedom and authentic love.

Medea remains unacceptable to this world because she is perceived as "different"—she chooses freedom, while Jason chooses prosperity. In these characters, the author mirrors the twentieth-century French populace who, like Jason, sacrificed their liberty for the sake of comfort.

Anouilh's Medea is a formidable woman, possessed by the desire for freedom. She declares: "I am Medea, all alone, abandoned by this wagon; on the shores of this foreign sea, exiled, shamed, hated, but nothing is too much for me!... Let them sing their wedding song! Let them dress the bride in her palace. There is still a long day before the wedding... Ah! Jason, you know me; you know what kind of girl you took from Colchis. And what do you think? That I will start crying? I followed you through blood and crime; now I will need blood and crime again to say goodbye to you" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:365).

In contrast, Jason appears as a frail straggler who has surrendered to life, fighting instead for his own servitude. His words confirm this: "I want to be humble. I want this world, this chaos through which you led me by the hand, to finally take shape. You were undoubtedly right when you said that there is no reason, no light, no rest... but now I want to stop, I want to become a man" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:388).

Ultimately, Jason's struggle against Medea resembles a struggle against a deity. He loved her as a man loves a woman, but upon realizing that Medea represents an elemental, god-like force, he seeks only his own survival.

Medea even exposes the "invincible" Creon, suggesting that a king who is not cruel and ruthless cannot be an effective ruler. Creon fails to kill Medea; instead, he is deceived into believing she is defeated. This is a grave error. Medea threatens him: "I am Medea, you old crocodile! ... Since your blood has cooled and you have become so lax as to grant me this night, it will cost you dearly!" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:374). Medea, true to her nature, carries out this threat.

The author presents Jason and Medea as two halves of a whole. Despite her attempts to betray Jason with other men, Medea remains deeply in love with him. She could have killed him but chose not to, spared by this overwhelming love. "You are finished. You are purified. You can go now. Farewell, Jason!" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:391)—with these words, she releases him.

The work concludes strikingly. Through her children, Medea sends a chest containing an enchanted robe to Jason's new love. Upon opening it, everyone in the palace perishes in a consuming fire. Anouilh depicts this with intense drama: Creon dies in agony while trying to save his daughter, and "now they lie side by side, intertwined in death throes" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:394). When the avengers arrive, Medea confronts them with the sight of her wagon in flames, where her murdered children are burning. She addresses Jason for the

last time: "They are dead, Jason! ... From now on, I have reclaimed my scepter; my brother, my father, and the Golden Fleece have returned to Colchis: I have refound my homeland and the virginity you stole from me. At last, I am Medea forever!" (Berdzenishvili, 2022:397).

Through this act, Medea challenges Jason to try and forget her. Jason replies that he will do exactly that—he will rebuild the "poor scaffolding" of his humanity under the indifferent gaze of the gods. Indeed, he waits for everything to turn to ash before returning to the palace to draft new laws.

The play ends with a dialogue between the Nurse and a guard, who discuss the mundane routines of daily life—brewing coffee, washing clothes, and preparing dinner. They rejoice in the abundance of the harvest; for them, "bread" is paramount, and everything else is insignificant.

The central message of the play is the tragic reality that the majority does not desire freedom, as it requires perpetual struggle. For them, it is enough to have "bread" and to remain peacefully in servitude. It can be argued that Jean Anouilh's *Médée* became a symbol of "freedom" for European civilization within the French literary world. This is why European artists continue to depict her today—sword in hand, yet naked.

The confrontation between Medea and Creon in the play represents a clash between two fundamentally different natures of power. Creon personifies a state-centric, pragmatic authority, prepared to make concessions in the name of order to prevent chaos. However, Medea's "naked" truth exposes Creon's fragility; it demonstrates that a monarch who seeks his peace by negotiating with a "dangerous" element like Medea is already defeated. In Anouilh's interpretation, Medea is not merely an exiled woman, but the inconvenient voice of conscience. She reminds a conformist society of the crimes they committed and the bloody path they traversed to achieve their current prosperity. Her presence at the gates of Corinth serves as a persistent provocation, asserting that happiness cannot be constructed upon the deliberate forgetting of another's tragedy.

Anouilh's dramaturgical vision transforms Medea into a symbol of absolute rebellion, one that opposes not only Jason but the very banality of existence. While in Euripides' version Medea exits the stage in a divine chariot, her disappearance in Anouilh's work is far more terrestrial and, simultaneously, metaphysical. Her freedom is not a gift from the heavens; it is a personal choice that necessitates the renunciation of land, social status, and even maternal instinct. Medea's freedom is inherently destructive because it refuses to acknowledge the "golden mean." For the playwright, Medea is the unyielding force that reveals the fragility of the world and the price one must pay to preserve their true identity.

The character of Jason, in this context, embodies the "tamed" individual of the twentieth century, who has preferred comfort and security over the burden of freedom. His desire to "become a man" and construct the "feeble scaffolding" of a structured life is, in reality, a capitulation to the absurdity of life. Jason attempts to erase the bloody traces of the past and replace them with a rational order, yet Anouilh demonstrates that such an order is merely an illusion. In his struggle with Medea, Jason loses not physically, but spiritually—he is left in a hollow world where laws and peace are but masks for inner emptiness, while Medea, even at the cost of death, maintains her integrity.

The metaphor of fire is particularly significant, serving as a tool for both purification and ultimate liberation in the finale. The fire ignited by Medea is not merely a weapon of vengeance; it is a symbolic act through which she incinerates everything that bound her to the "normal" world. This fire reduces Jason's new life and Medea's old agonies to ashes, allowing the heroine to reclaim her "virginity" and Colchian identity. This represents a paradoxical liberation—finding one's essence through self-destruction—a theme that underscores the tragic optimism characteristic of Anouilh's work: a person is truly free only when they have nothing left to lose.

Ultimately, Jean Anouilh's *Medea* emerges as an "absurdist hero" who recognizes the meaninglessness of the world and becomes the master of this absurdity. Her decision to kill her children and herself is not a manifestation of madness, but the final protest against a world where everything is for sale and everything is transient. The "life at any cost" chosen by Jason signifies spiritual death for Medea, whereas physical death becomes her only means of preserving an unchanging, eternal identity. Through this, Anouilh emphasizes that for European civilization, freedom is not only a right but a moral responsibility that often demands the sacrifice of what is most precious.

The play's conclusion, featuring the mundane dialogue between the Nurse and the Guard regarding the wheat harvest and daily routine, highlights the sheer magnitude of Medea's act. The author illustrates that the world continues to exist after the tragedy as if nothing has occurred. This indifference echoes the Theory of the Absurd—the "bread" chosen by the masses will always outweigh the individual rebellion of the hero. However, against this backdrop of routine, Medea's uniqueness as a symbol of freedom becomes even more distinct. She remains an alien entity in a society that defines its happiness solely through physiological needs and superficial tranquility.

In conclusion, Jean Anouilh's *Medea* serves as a warning to modern civilization, which increasingly renounces principled freedom in exchange for material well-being. The depiction of Medea in European art—sword in hand, yet naked—is not accidental; it represents the synthesis of vulnerability and immense power. She is the symbol of a human being who refuses to succumb to servitude, even when that servitude is adorned with a Golden Fleece or a royal crown. Medea's character remains a literary reminder that true freedom is always painful, solitary, and often sacrificial, yet it is the only thing that grants an individual a timeless identity.

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