

# The concept of fate through female avengers in greek drama

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**Abstract:** Greek tragedy is a significant literary genre of the Hellenistic era, often depicting the misfortunes and downfalls of heroic families, as well as a few individual tragedies, such as Euripides' Medea. The Metamorphoses, written during the Roman period, records stories of gods, heroes, and mortals in Greek mythology, imbued with profound tragic elements. Among its characters, Procne and Althaea, like Medea, are portrayed as avenging mothers who commit filicide. This paper analyzes the three female avenger figures in Greek mythology from the perspectives of fate imagery, female consciousness, and concepts of life and death. It also compares the role of fate in individual tragedies versus family tragedies, concluding that the evolution of the concept of fate influenced the rise and decline of Greek tragedy.

**Keywords:** Greek mythological tragedy, revenge, female, fate

## 1. Introduction

Records of the moving legends of the ancient Greek gods can be traced back to the works of wandering poets during the "Dark Ages," such as Homer and Hesiod. At that time, Mycenaean civilization in ancient Greek history was being ravaged by the barbaric Dorians, while the democratic city-state system was still in its formative stage, causing Greek civilization to nearly regress to a primitive state. By gathering scattered folk tales, poets compiled and recorded people's recollections of the Mycenaean civilization—myths passed down orally. As history progressed, mythological works from the Hellenistic period introduced a more somber tone, imbuing literature with a tragic quality that earlier narratives had not prominently exhibited. From the celebrations of the Dionysia to the standardized dramatic forms, Greek tragedy was represented at different stages by three key figures: Aeschylus, the "father of tragedy"; Sophocles, who focused on character portrayal; and Euripides, who introduced realistic elements into mythology. One important aspect of this realism was the expression of sympathy for women at the bottom of society, as seen in Euripides' most famous work, Medea. Although Ovid's Metamorphoses gained popularity in ancient Rome, it records the stories of gods, heroes, and mortals in ancient Greek mythology. This paper draws upon the tragedies of Procne and Althaea from this work, combines them with the experiences of Medea, analyzes the female avenger figures in ancient Greek mythology, and explores the changes in the underlying factor of fate after Greek tragedy reached its peak.

## 2. The theme of revenge and the imagery of fate in mythology

In the story of Medea and Jason, Medea, in order to marry the man she loved, helped him steal the Golden Fleece, killed her own brother and dismembered him. Later, due to Jason's infidelity, she murdered the two young sons she had with her husband. Such brutality evokes dread. In the story of Procne, Tereus, and Philomela, Procne, seeking revenge for her husband's violation of her sister and betrayal of herself, ruthlessly killed her own son and served him as a "feast" for Tereus. In the tale of Althaea, the mother, aware of the prophecy of the Fates, burned the log on the hearth, causing her son to die in agony after he murdered her own brothers.

In these three stories, beyond the horror, bloodshed, and cruelty, readers should also sense the presence of fate manipulating the lives of each character. The premise for the brutal actions of Medea, Procne, and Althaea lies in the injustices they first suffered; they are not, in essence, the instigators of the tragedies.

Moreover, all three women experience profound internal struggles during their acts of revenge. By depicting these agonizing conflicts, the poets elevate the tragic dimension of the narratives:

"Her motherly heart was moved, her anger melted away, and her eyes involuntarily grew wet, tears overflowing. Yet when she realized that her will had suddenly wavered, that her maternal love had grown excessively tender, she turned her face to her sister, avoiding the sight of her son. Still, she could not help but glance from one to the other."

Regarding the methods of revenge employed by these women, opinions have long been divided. Faced with the horrifying act of filicide, the initial response is often to view such women as terrifying, pitiful, and driven by an inflated sense of individualism, willing to harm the innocent at all costs to avenge their own humiliation. However, while acknowledging these negative perceptions, the social causes underlying their actions must also be considered, particularly in relation to the awakening of female consciousness.

### **3. Incomplete awakening of female consciousness in characterization and endings**

While all three women suffer injustices inflicted by fate, their personalities and outcomes also differ. Medea appears more resolute. To be with Jason, she kills her own brother; betrayed by her husband, she kills their sons, along with the princess and king who took Jason from her. Medea is clear in her love and hatred—when deeply in love, she gives everything for the one she loves, yet once her former lover becomes an enemy, she retaliates without mercy. In the end, Jason dies in despair, and Medea returns alone to her homeland. Perhaps such an ending is a form of forgiveness for a woman who dares to love and hate—it is bleak, yet readers cannot expect her to be granted more favor, for she has, after all, killed her own kin.

Procne, unlike Medea, cannot make everything return to the way it was. Her and her husband's transformations are destined to make them eternal enemies, and she must endure the pursuit of natural predators. This ending, an escape from human existence, seems more like a way to evade judgment, for imposing punishment solely on Procne or Tereus cannot be seen as a complete resolution.

Both Medea and Procne are provoked by their husbands' improper desires, which violate their bottom lines. Althaea's situation, however, is different. The conflict she faces is not between love and familial bonds but between two kinds of familial ties. Unlike Medea and Procne, who take indirect paths to revenge, Althaea's target of revenge and the one who harmed her are the same—her son, Meleager. Moreover, Althaea is the only one among the three female avengers who actively chooses death after exacting her revenge.

Regardless of the outcomes, the origins of these tragedies reflect, to varying degrees, the male tendency to trivialize women and treat them as playthings, pointing to the disparity in social status between men and women. In early times, ancient Greece revered women more than other civilizations, admiring the beauty and forms of goddesses and mortal women and taking pride in them. Dong Yajuan notes, in discussing archaeological excavations of Minoan civilization, that studies show women at that time were not subjected to any constraints. However, with the advent of a patriarchal society, ancient Greek literature began to lean toward male worship. For example, Hera, the goddess of marriage, could not ensure her husband's fidelity. Similarly, the underlying reason for Medea's rebellion can be traced to the "strong oppression of her by both marital and royal authority."

Nevertheless, compared to the weak portrayals of women in much of Chinese literature, the free expression of hatred through action by figures like Medea reflects, to some extent, the awakening of female consciousness.

Of course, this awakening is incomplete, for these women also suffer immense pain after their revenge. For instance, as Meleager dies in agony amidst the flames, all of Calydon mourns the loss of the hero. His mother, Althaea, stares blankly as the burning log turns to ash, and she herself dies beside the hearth. As for Medea and Procne, their method of revenge—killing their sons—illustrates, to some degree, how much importance they place on the role of men in a family. Women shouting for the awakening of female consciousness by severing male lineage only highlights the helplessness and incompleteness of such an awakening.

#### 4. A different perspective on life and death

Medea and Procne do not seem to view death as the ultimate form of revenge. Instead, they leave their targets to live a life worse than death. This reflects, to some extent, their belief that death is a release, while enduring suffering in life is an unbearable torment. Thus, both Medea and Procne punish their husbands' infidelity by killing the sons they bore with them, aiming to subject the unfaithful to profound guilt and despair. In Medea, when Medea flies away, Jason's question is not about who killed the princess but about whether their sons have been harmed. Therefore, Medea believes that only by severing his hopes can she truly wound Jason's heart.

In reality, by killing their sons to avenge their husbands, the heroines also leave themselves with a lifetime of pain. This survival intertwined with suffering deepens the tragic nature of the stories. Combined with the second argument, it becomes evident that women remain the ultimate tragic subjects. Re-examining Medea's story, her belief that killing their sons would wound Jason because of his deep love for them may not achieve the effect she desired. Jason, as a man, always had greater concerns. His worry about whether the children were harmed stemmed from the fact that the deaths of the king and princess had already shattered his greater ambitions, forcing his attention to turn to "Medea's sons" (Jason referred to Medea and their children as "you and your sons," reflecting his lack of regard for the offspring of his union with a "barbarian" woman). From this perspective, survival is indeed seen as immense suffering, yet these women also inflict endless pain upon themselves.

It is widely believed that one of the differences between Greek mythology and Christianity lies in the concept of "original sin." In Christianity, humanity's ancestors, Adam and Eve, sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, committing moral transgression and defying God, so humans are born with sin, and life is meant for atonement. Greek mythology, however, does not regard gods as objects of moral reverence, and humans are not burdened with the inherent suffering of original sin, allowing them to live joyfully. The author argues that Greek mythology and Christianity share similarities in their perspectives on life and death. While Greek mythology does not acknowledge inherent sin, it consistently emphasizes the recognition and submission to fate. Humans are born without sin, yet they must acknowledge the absolute authority of fate, making a life of resisting fate equally painful. Just as with the three women discussed in this paper, while their misfortunes deserve sympathy, it is reasonable to say that their acts of defying fate also lead them to even more tragic ends.

#### 5. The diminishing role of fate

Ancient Greek poets emphasized the power of fate because religious beliefs remained deeply ingrained. The ancient Greeks held an extreme reverence for their deities and were highly superstitious regarding oracles. The will of the gods was the root of mortal tragedies, even though these deities might not be morally exemplary. Yet, it was precisely these joyful, ecstatic "Dionysian arts" that formed the spiritual core of the ancient Greeks and the brilliance of Greek tragedy. As Nietzsche observed, "From the deepest pain arises the highest joy; heartfelt shouts of elation drown out sorrows, while the heights of joy provoke startled cries, lamenting the sorrows of eternity."

In Sophocles' renowned Theban trilogy, the curse on the House of Oedipus originated from ancestors rather than individual decisions. The gods' arrangements for mortals seemed arbitrary, yet the ancient Greeks did not resent this capriciousness, for it was precisely this attitude that made the Olympian gods endearing. Fate was like an invisible hand, and out of a vague sense of reverence, people could not even grasp the entity they were resisting. Against this religious backdrop, while people might praise the tenacious struggles of Oedipus or Antigone and even sympathize with them, they did not blame fate for its injustice. As written in the sixth section of Antigone:

"No generation can save another; their path to salvation is struck down under the control of a god, and there is simply no way to rescue this house from suffering."

However, as people began to revere reason, they re-examined the rationality of tragic fates, leading to the decline of Greek tragedy. In Plato's Republic, Socrates explicitly criticized the Homeric epics. Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, analyzed that the loss of vitality in Greek tragedy stemmed from the ancient Greeks' turn to rational thought. Unlike Sophocles, Euripides introduced philosophical contemplation into his

tragedies and highlighted the influence of human factors on life's tragedies. His works focused more on social realities, shifting the narrative center from families to individuals. Although fate plays a part in Medea's tragedy, her ultimate fate is also shaped by her own actions.

## 6. Conclusion

The concept of fate in Greek tragedy should not be subject to the whims of the gods, nor should it change based on the emotions of heroes or ordinary mortals. As history progressed, people gradually ceased to unquestioningly accept the arbitrary arrangements of the gods for human destinies and began to contemplate whether human actions also influenced fate. Consequently, the role of fate in Greek mythology underwent a transformation: while fate was still revered, it was no longer accepted passively or without resistance. In other words, the vengeful fates of Medea, Procne, and Althaea were not mysterious or immutable; they could not be equated with the destinies of figures like Oedipus or Antigone. Since the Sword of Damocles represented by fate is one of the quintessential elements of Greek tragedy, the weakening of the role of fate, in a sense, foreshadowed the decline of Greek tragedy.

## 7. References

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