

# Our Special Monsters

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**E**uripides begins his tragic play *Medea* by painting a sympathetic picture of a woman scorned. Hiding within her home, “Medea burns with shame. Dishonored, she calls out . . . gives herself entirely up to a terrible despair” (24-30). She does not, however, remain a weeping victim for long. She subsequently appears on stage dry-eyed and furious at Jason, the husband who shamed her by taking a new wife. Medea vows by the gods that she must “set the balance right,” must bring about justice in light of the injustice done to her (164). Justice, to Medea, is a matter of being “a scourge to [her] enemies, a benefactor to [her] friends” (888-89), and in her estimation of things, embodying this justice will certainly make her a heroine, “For those who act as I do, forever, their names live on in glory” (889-90). Jason is her enemy, and for wronging her she decides “foul murder is a fair return” (431-32). Action swiftly follows words, and with righteous glee she plots and carries out the gruesome murders of the new house of Jason—Princess Creusa and King Creon—the new family for which he abandoned hers. Medea stands a shining paragon of her brand of justice, a heroine who upholds tradition by helping friends and harming enemies. She certainly has harmed her enemies, but instead of casting her as heroine, this scene leaves us with the image of a Medusa-like woman, grinning maniacally as she stands over the corpses of her victims, her hands dripping with blood.

The tragedy is as yet incomplete, of course, as is Medea’s revenge. She has resolved that the house of Jason must fall completely—that his name, his legacy, must be eradicated. She must kill her own sons. Medea falters in the face of such a heinous act, “the most unholy deed,” and for a moment we catch a glimpse of the sad, lost woman from the beginning of the play, but this moment is fleeting (877). Medea ultimately commits filicide with the same steely resolve that led her to commit regicide, and the house of Jason is demolished. All that is left for Medea is to bask in the glory of her enemy’s despair, and Jason does not disappoint; he is utterly devastated upon discov-

ering that his sons are dead. He looks at Medea to see that she has become “not a woman, but a lioness, more savage than the sea-monster Scylla” (1469-70). Medea is undisturbed, and, if anything, Jason’s hatred only deepens her satisfaction: “Call me a she-lion or a monster, as you like, for I have aimed and hit my mark—my barb forever lodged in your cleft heart” (1484-85). She has won! She is vindicated! She has harmed her enemy, set the balance right. She has brought justice. And Euripides shows that the gods do indeed stand behind her: Medea’s exit from the play is a *deus ex machina*—an escape granted by the gods. Yet despite all this, as Medea flies off in her dragon-drawn chariot, the still-warm bodies of her sons at her feet, Jason denied “a father’s right to touch their bodies,” she still appears to her audience a cold-hearted monster on the wings of monsters (1538).

I want to cheer for the prototypical triumph of the woman scorned and for the justice she has achieved, as Euripides seems to suggest that we should in granting her a hero’s departure, but instead, like Jason, all I can see is a “child-murdering monster” and the bodies left in her wake (1532). She is, theoretically, a heroine, at least according to the lengths to which she goes to achieve justice, yet the nature of her actions makes her seem a monster. Medea is a strange, startling paradox. Human nature is never black and white: we all fall within a murky, nebulous gray area to some degree, so I can accept the possibility of such a paradox personified. However, by the end of the play we see nothing human left in Euripides’s creation, no trace of the weeping woman she once was. What happened to Medea’s humanity?

Hundreds of years after Euripides created Medea, long after the last Greek tragedy was written, Mary Shelley created one of the most famous monsters of modern literature in her novel *Frankenstein*. Though Shelley’s nameless monster is birthed in a laboratory and therefore inhuman by nature, he is far more than his epithet suggests; against all odds, her inhuman monster is a study in humanity. The monster, like Medea, is not always monstrous, but something has robbed him of his humanity. As the monster explains to Dr. Frankenstein, his creator, “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend” (82). In an effort to prove this to the doctor, the man who despises him most, the monster tells his story, a tragedy not so unlike Medea’s. From the moment he is sent from Frankenstein’s laboratory, the creature’s hideous form inspires the fear and hatred of mankind. He is forced to flee in the face of man’s cruelty, seeking sanctuary in an abandoned hovel in the countryside. He observes the neighboring family, entranced by their daily lives—their struggles, their joys, and most of all their love. Their loving interactions amaze him: “I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering

nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure. . . . I withdrew . . . unable to bear these emotions” (89). His feelings, which he cannot name, are a combination of longing, wistfulness, and loneliness. These are human emotions, yet this inhuman being possesses them. He is called a monster for his horrifying features, but these features are merely physical—his eloquence and sensitivity belie his deformity. He hopes that his protectors, as he has come to call this family, will show him the same compassion they show each other, but when he finally reveals himself, even these gentle humans attack him in horror. They see only a hideous giant and refuse him the chance to reveal the humanity beneath the superficial monstrosity. His hopes that he may find a place in this or any family are heartbreakingly shattered, and from his despair, for the first time, rises a monster. He recalls: “My protectors . . . had broken the only link that held me to the world. . . . the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom” (118).

A broken, wounded animal, hopeless and friendless, he turns his rage upon Frankenstein, his creator and his arch-enemy. The monster is “determined to seek that justice which [he] vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form,” a justice that takes the form of vengeance (119). Frankenstein must be punished for the injustice of casting his creation into a world that cannot and will not make room for him. Ultimately, the monster accepts the role that man’s fear and revulsion have always forced upon him: that of “the fiend,” the devil, the enemy of humankind (83). Like Medea, the monster finds justice in harming his enemy, and like Medea, he finds foul murder a fair return for all the harm done to him. The monster’s first crime is the murder of Frankenstein’s youngest brother. As he looks down at the body of the child, he triumphantly exclaims, “I too can create desolation” (122). I hear the exultation in his triumph, but it seems hollow. The ragged cries of the arch-fiend—the wretched angel cast from heaven to become Satan, king of hell—are audible in his cries. As the fiend triumphs, I imagine the benevolent creature he once was sobbing for the fate of the broken human at his feet, yet another human from whom he wanted nothing more than compassion and understanding, and in whom he found nothing but another rejection.

I ache for Shelley’s arch-fiend, yet I cannot ache for Medea. I simply cannot hail her as the heroine Euripides so strives to create. But both monsters share a sense of justice, both have been hurt, and both have killed in cold blood; why, then, do I struggle so much with Medea and so little with Frankenstein’s creation? Perhaps it is because Shelley depicts her monster’s struggles more fully than does Euripides. She shows each blow that he is

dealt. His pain is tangible as it chips away at his humanity, which is lost when despair and rage finally consume him. I get to see how the monster is born, and so empathize with him. Euripides denies us this understanding, this intimate view of the erosion of Medea's soul: one moment, she weeps and prays for death to "free [her] of [her] hateful life" (144), yet in the next she prays to see Jason and his wife "ground into grit" (168). The tragedy of the woman, Medea, is given only a moment's attention by Euripides, a mere means to an end: his heroine needs a reason to seek the vengeance—or justice—that is Euripides's primary concern. Yet to understand *what* Medea is, monster or heroine, we must understand *who* she is.

To his credit, Euripides does show us elements of Medea's humanity; the problem is that they are lost beneath the weight of the author's concern for justice. The details of Shelley's monster, though, help me to reconstruct the lost character of Medea. The monster's tragedy stems from his very nature—he wanders the earth alone, a foreigner among the human race. Medea, too, is a foreigner: "carried from a foreign land, orphaned by distance; I have . . . no family to offer refuge" (288-90). When Jason left her, he left her truly alone in a land not her own, making his betrayal all the more cruel. She notes the plight of an outsider: "judgment runs before knowledge. . . . they hate so easily and on the least of grounds . . . a foreigner must not resist the general will" (239-44). Shelley's monster agrees: "a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes . . . they behold only a detestable monster" (114). Medea is a target of prejudice—a "barbarian witch"—and her reputation and isolation compound her feeling of hopelessness at her plight (1518). And it is hopelessness that seems to be the final, most dangerous element in birthing a monster: it is only when Shelley's monster loses all hope of being accepted by men that he becomes bent on murderous vengeance against mankind. So, too, for Medea: it is only when she feels "[her] life is worthless anyway" that she resolves to "do this deed" and kill her children (878-79). It seems in both cases that utter despair, pure hopelessness, is the catalyst for the transformation. With nothing left to lose, seeing no joy in her future, vengeful fury against those who stripped her of her hope seems a logical last resort.

Provoked by thoughts of the creature within Shelley's fiend, an image flickers in my mind: I again see the scene of Medea murdering her children, but this time it is different. Though there is no trace of remorse in her stony face and her hands still drip with blood, I imagine the hopeless single mother sobbing again, locked away within the hardened monster, shrieking "What else could I have done?" And for a moment, I ache for Medea. Yet I cannot ignore the dead children at her feet for long—I cannot ignore the atrocity she

has committed—and like Jason, I wonder, “Was a marriage reason enough to slay your sons?” (1493). Medea answers yes. Euripides casts this “yes” as heroism, as the enacting of justice at all costs, but I remain horrified by such a being, by such a justice. The Greek characters in the play acknowledge her as an abomination. They, like me, cannot fathom how “when you gaze upon your sons . . . you keep the ice of your resolve . . . and dry-eyed, kill them?” (950-56). Indeed, her acts have made her “hateful to all of humankind” (1451).

The Greek world would seem to hate Medea, and the human world rejects Shelley’s monster; these two individuals are clearly refused by their respective societies. But what happens if the tables are turned? What of those individuals who hate—who indeed refuse—the entirety of human society? In “A Cover Letter to Molière’s *Misanthrope*,” Stanley Cavell considers the roots and the ramifications of misanthropy—a word, in fact, with Greek origins meaning hatred of the human. Cavell considers Molière’s character Alceste, neither condemning nor praising his refusal to join the human race, remaining neutral as he strives to understand why Alceste’s misanthropy evokes such strong reactions from those around him. Cavell believes that Alceste represents “purity to their purity, or to their sense of their purity lost—not as if corrupted exactly but as if misplaced, thus still present somehow” (98). Alceste possesses an innocence that is compelling because it has fallen out of sight of those participating in society. This innocence is not merely purity to Cavell, but a state of being unacquainted with evil, free from experience of wrong. Nor is it a mere trait—Cavell portrays innocence as a conscious being, one to be cast aside, surely, but “in a time and place of its own consent” (98). To consent to the world, one must first feel “that the world is good enough to want to live in”; misanthropy, then, is a visceral reaction to “the world as it is, [one] not wantable, or not acceptable” (99). The misanthrope says “no” to human society due to a feeling Cavell understands as “a mode of disgust, a repugnance at the idea that your life should partake of the world’s” (99). Cavell’s “disgust” seems a *repulsion*, a profound disappointment in the nature of the world that one has consented to. But the misanthrope proves there is a choice—*not* to do the expected, but to dissent, to dissociate, to be *openly disgusted*, and therein lies his power: “[those within society] think [he is] right . . . and cannot want to live without the thing [he means] to them” (101). That is, in a word, choice—Cavell “[extracts] hope from the very fact that we are capable of genuine disgust at the world,” finds that perhaps “a consenting adult in a world of horrors” may dissent from

being “a conspirator of that world” by spurning “the human capacity for *going along*” (102-03).

There are indeed moments when Cavell’s possibility comes to pass. Medea’s act of filicide sees the Greek world *stop going along*: they unanimously cry out, “do not do this awful deed; Medea, we beseech you!” and then simply, “No!” (943-44). In the modern world, too, such cries of disgust tend to echo everywhere in times of war—protests, newspapers, dinner table discussions, so loud that they can drive us mad. Indeed, Cavell himself has fallen victim to the madness of wartime society. He recalls that as World War II raged on, he dealt with the overwhelming din by dissociating—understandably, he clung to sanity by retreating into his own mind—and contributed to a “society [that] cannot hear its own screams” (104). Medea clearly cannot hear modern society’s screams, and she is undeterred by the screams of Greek society, but dissent does not make monsters; rather, it unmasks them. Perhaps, then, her unthinkable actions become possible only when she can no longer hear the screams of her own conscience.

Cavell, like Euripides and Shelley, writes about his own brand of monster, though these are unfortunately monsters of history, not fiction. He believes Nazis to be “those who have lost the capacity for being horrified by what they do,” who have lost the capacity for genuine disgust at themselves and their world (103). This loss of the capacity for “horror at the human” is what makes them “our special monsters . . . monsters of adaptability . . . [who turn] this human capacity for adapting into a mockery of itself, a mockery of being human” (103). Perhaps, because they are more real than boogeymen or devils or Shelley’s monster, terrible men become our special monsters: they shed light on the very real human capacity to *be* a horror.

As a Jew raised on my grandmother’s stories of the Holocaust and all of my ancestors who died at the hands of the Nazis, I find Cavell’s stark representation at once startling and unsettling. Nazis are human beings who did monstrous things, whose hands are bloodied by genocide, who prove that there is danger, horrific danger, in losing the human capacity for “horror at the human,” and I cannot help but see Medea in this description, and in so doing, finally realize why she disgusts me so (103). I can see why I find myself agreeing with Jason, Euripides’s ostensible villain, and the Greek Chorus. We, as her audience, are made complicit with this woman who has lost the capacity for horror, who has lost the thing that makes her human and become a mockery of humanity. According to Cavell, being her consenting audience, accepting Euripides’s insistence that something we feel to be horrific is instead just, we would be guilty of “complicitous tyranny over ourselves”

(102). After her crimes are complete, Medea is characterized as a “Fury” (1371), “abhorrent to the gods” (1383), “not a woman, but a lioness, more savage than the sea-monster Scylla” (1469-70); none of the characters who have been an audience to her “justice” can bear to call her a member of the human race. And Euripides, by hailing this monster a heroine, demands that we, his audience, abandon our own feelings of horror to take up the banner of Medea’s justice—a justice with no room for fundamental human concerns. There is, however, danger in fulfilling this request: we risk surrendering our own humanity to a human notion of justice, just as Medea has. To crown Medea a heroine, to call her actions just, is to justify monstrosity in the name of what is “right”; isn’t that what the Nazis did? It would require me to set aside my disgust and hush my instinctual screams of horror, to give in to “the human capacity for going along,” so to Euripides I must ultimately say “No!” (Cavell 103).

In telling his story, Shelley’s monster wonders at “the barbarity of man” (88). In his own words, “For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow. . . . Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous . . . yet so vicious and base?” (160). His status as an outsider observing human nature grants him the asset of perspective. In a different yet similar way, I am granted this same asset as a reader, as are all readers (including my own). In reading these works and writing this paper, I exercise this privilege and come to picture another bizarre scene. I see all of my monsters—the world’s monsters—seated together around a table years after the height of their crimes. With each of them stands the author who wrote them into existence, or in Cavell’s case, who brought them into the light of observation. First I see Shelley and her monster. He is as hideous as ever, holding the locket torn from the neck of his first victim—Frankenstein’s brother—with his head in his hands. His rage spent itself long ago, and all that remains is the abyss of loneliness. Shelley crouches next to him, puts her hand atop his, conveying the affection and compassion that he so desperately wishes for. From the monster reemerges the creature; though no longer innocent, he reaches towards hope. I smile. Next comes the Nazi. My grandmother’s family portraits, dozens of them, each depicting another branch of my family tree mercilessly pruned, are piled in front of him. Cavell stands behind him, bending close to the Nazi’s ear, and begins to scream. His screams perhaps offer a cleansing revulsion, redemption for his dissociation from the world back when Nazism was at its monstrous height. The Nazi seems distant, catatonic. I believe that his fate was presciently revealed by Euripides’s Chorus: “Such killers are pursued by horrors in the shape of their worst crimes” (1385-87).

I leave the Nazi subject to Cavell's screams, but not before adding my voice to his own. And finally, I come to Medea. I've described my evolving image of her too many times; I am overwhelmed by her presence already.

I turn to face Euripides, then, for it is he with whom I have truly been struggling. He looks on at Medea impassively, not proudly as I had expected, and then turns to me. I am about to launch into a diatribe on how horribly wrong he was to create such a dangerous "heroine," when he bids me pause. He says, pointing me to a question posed by the Chorus near the end of *Medea*, "But now that *this* has happened, what horror cannot be imagined, what will set the limits of our fault?" (Euripides 1416-18). I am briefly puzzled, and Cavell ceases screaming to call me over. He reminds me of a moment in his essay, during his discussion of human adaptability, in which he asks, "Who does not see that there must be *some* limit to this?" (Cavell 103). Medea springs to mind, and I tell him so. Cavell shakes his head with a smile and Shelley beckons to me. She points out the moment at which her creature cries out, "Oh, praise the eternal justice of man!" (82). She winks as though she has just let me in on a secret, but it remains secret from me. So I return to Euripides, mouth open to protest, but he stops me again. He puts a hand on my shoulder, adopts a conspiratorial smirk, and then he is gone. My imaginary summit dissipates, but the final thoughts linger. Of course, even after his departure, Euripides continues to confound me; I am still left with more questions than answers.

Perhaps the answer is in the very existence of my questions. Perhaps Euripides knew his heroine would be unacceptable—maybe he made her that way, to bring us to question where we will set the limits to our faults. Perhaps Cavell tries to show us that *we, humans*, must set these limits ourselves based upon our intellects, making full, conscious use of our humanity. And perhaps Shelley offers the insight that the justice of man mustn't be eternal. Humans and our justice must evolve, must question, must be questioned. It seems the task falls to humanity—as a race, but especially as a condition—to set it right.

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