

Justice As Mercy and Revenge: *Antigone, Medea, Montecristo, Yong Pal*

Roberto Bertoni, Trinity College Dublin, Italy

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1. Introduction

This paper explores personal justice in two of its opposing manifestations, mercy and revenge. In both manifestations, systems of official, public law are viewed as untrustworthy. It is also about globalized archetypes and intercultural communication. The archetype chosen for mercy is Sophocles' play *Antigone*, and the archetype for revenge is Euripides' *Medea*. Some attention will be given to the evolution of these archetypes in both western and eastern culture. The paper will end by examining a western prototype of modern vendetta, Dumas's *The Count of Montecristo*, and an eastern mass-produced contemporary text, South Korean soap opera *Yong Pal*.

2. Antigone and Medea in antiquity

Let us start with classical *Antigone* and *Medea* by briefly recalling the plots of these plays.

The plot of *Antigone* concerns Creon, king of Thebes, and Antigone, one of the daughters of Oedipus. Following the decision of Creon to bury Eteocles, brother of Antigone and saviour of the city, but to leave unburied Antigone's second brother Polyneices, because he betrayed Thebes, Antigone takes action. She goes to bury Polyneices in the name of the unwritten law of kinship. Imprisoned by Creon in a cave because she broke the state law, Antigone commits suicide. Ismene, Antigone's sister, is spared by Creon. When Creon's son, Haemon, engaged to Antigone, finally persuades his father to free her, it is too late. She is already dead, so Haemon also kills himself, as does Creon's wife Eurydice. Creon is left to his moral dilemmas - he protected the law of the state but challenged the gods and lost his family.

Medea, through her powers as a sorceress from Colchis, helps the Greek Jason to win the Golden Fleece and recapture his kingdom. She follows him to Greece as his wife. After years of marriage, Jason decides to marry Glauce, the young daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. Out of revenge against Jason, but pretending to be resigned to her husband's decisions, she presents Glauce with a dress, apparently as a gesture of appeasement. The dress, though, is poisoned and kills the young woman. Creon also dies by touching the dress while trying to save his daughter. Medea then takes the lives of her two children. She flees to Athens with their corpses on the chariot of the Sun. The Athenians give her sanctuary.

With regard to the question of justice, the characters of Antigone and Medea are clearly antithetical.

In Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone*, justice is understood as the official law of the state as opposed to natural family bonds.¹ In her nature as woman and sister, according to Hegel, Antigone preserves the divine law but opposes the state law.² According to Lesky,³ too, Antigone protects first and foremost the law of the gods. We see Sophocles opposing the values of family against the values of the state. But we also see him restoring a higher level of ancient law, i.e. divine justice. The gods punish Creon because he followed the dictates of earthly laws (*nómoi*) but ignores the dictates of moral conscience. He ultimately pays the price of losing his family. He must repent, or, as the chorus says in the last lines of the play: "no wisdom but in submission to the gods".⁴

In the case of Medea, on the other hand, piety seems absent. She violently takes revenge against the injustice Jason committed against her by his decision to divorce and marry a younger woman. Medea kills her children out of revenge, breaking the natural law of the bonds of blood that Antigone upholds. Even though Medea is worthy of piety because she is “an exile, / humiliated”,⁵ the chorus warns her that “what’s right is wrong, / corrupt counsel prevails”,⁶ and “I’m on your side. / You know that. But there are laws. We’re human. / Medea you can’t do this”.⁷

Yet, Medea receives protection by being carried to Athens on the Sun chariot and she is hosted and stays unpunished there - a situation that is rather puzzling for the modern reader. Notwithstanding her horrendous act, the Athenians defend her because they are committed to safeguarding the rule of law, under which those who seek shelter among them are protected; this despite any crime they may have committed elsewhere.

In brief Athens represents a particular notion of civilization that abides by the law of the state as Creon also does. The Athenians grant the right to asylum to foreigners who negotiated it legally (Medea did this before carrying out the various killings). However, by contrast to *Antigone*, where Creon does not initially pay attention to Teiresias’s warning that the king is bringing calamity on Thebes by not burying Pelyneice’s corpse, thus alienating the gods,⁸ in *Medea* Athenian protection is granted with the support of Apollo. This concept of civilization (similar to the modern refusal of some countries to extradite people considered as criminals by other countries),⁹ whether or not it is perceived as right by a contemporary audience, is opposed to the classical Greek concept of barbarism clearly impersonated by foreign Medea, who is labelled by Jason in Euripides’ play as “a savage, some prehistoric monster”,¹⁰ who comes from a “primitive country”,¹¹ and committed an “uncivilized act” that “no Greek woman would have done”.¹²

These attributes of Medea are so strikingly opposed to Antigone’s. The latter, in a memorable line, states that she exists not to hate but to love.¹³

Remaining with the Mediterranean classical world, and turning to Latin texts, one should add the concept of clemency. Seneca connects such a concept to the idea of revenge when he writes that clemency is “the mind’s moderation when it has the power to take revenge”.¹⁴ In the context of the two Greek plays mentioned above, clemency is an aspect of justice that encourages piety and compassion and discourages revenge. Creon is incapable of adopting it due to his fear of flexibility in applying the law.

3. Antigone and Medea in modernity, East and West

The many reinterpretations, re-enactments and remakes of the two Greek tragedies we have been discussing, forms a long chain of intertextuality. Time and the limited scope of this paper prevent from elaborating too much in this direction. What will be briefly touched upon now is just some modern re-elaborations.

With reference to *Medea*, most modern readings and rewritings are negative towards the Colchidian sorceress. There are, however, some exceptions. Even though the killing of the children is universally condemned, Medea is rescued partly because she was very deeply wronged. Her desire for revenge is therefore understandable even though her eventual act is not the correct way to restore

honour and respect. This would seem the view taken by Pasolini in his film *Medea*.¹⁵

With reference to *Antigone*, modern western interpretations would seem to focus on Creon more than Oedipus' daughter. The king of Thebes, who in the original Greek text "keeps the laws" in order to oppose "anarchy",¹⁶ has become the allegory of authoritarian power. For example, in Brecht's version, based on Hölderlin's translation from Sophocles but set in 1945 Berlin, Creon is an allegory of Hitler.¹⁷ In this case the character of Antigone has the main function of defying state power. Seamus Heaney's version is also rather intense if we consider it against the background of the Northern Irish conflict between divided communities.¹⁸

It is interesting to notice how these universal archetypes of diverging approaches to justice have travelled geographically beyond the West.¹⁹ Iris Hsin-chun Tuan mentions several directors and theorists, including Barba, Brecht and Grotowski among others, whose "contesting theories of the universal versus the specific can help us understand the ritual ceremonies in all cultures and the universal commonalities, and explore a specific culture [...] and its particular meanings".²⁰ She also warns, however, against the still existing "perspective of critics who use western hegemony to interpret the Other".²¹ And finally she maintains that "the ideal of inter-culturalism, which treats different cultures equally" can be practiced only in some countries, for instance it "cannot really be fulfilled in Taiwan yet".²²

An intercultural 21st-century Japanese version of *Medea*, directed by Satoshi Miyagi, is set in 19th-century Japan and adopts the classical device of the Greek chorus, Japanese traditional theatrical costumes, songs and movements, and also incorporates experimental modernized techniques.²³

In China, *Antigone* has been performed, once again this century, directed by Li Liuyi, and it has been presented as "an ancient classic of Greek literature that resounds with audiences today".²⁴ Another Chinese version was adapted as Bangzi opera since, as director Luo Jin Lin says himself, "among three hundred and seventy or more kinds of traditional opera in China, the singing style of Bangzi is very loud and powerful. It provides tailor-made music for Greek tragedy". The artistic result is an original type of hybridization: "Greeks could find western elements there, while Chinese people will take it as Chinese opera. All in all, my play is something completely new".²⁵

In Taiwan, experimental theatre has re-used *Antigone* as an allegory expressing both nationalist and gender-related issues. As Iris Hsin-chun Tuan, once again, notices in relation to Wu Xin Chu's *Slut Antigone*: "the re-theatricalization of *Antigone* implies a post-colonial and feminist critique".²⁶ In another Taiwanese version, by Wang Mo Lin, "the courageous heroine who defied the ruler of Thebes transforms into an East-Asian rebel", re-enacted by Korean actress Hong Seung Hy. This particular play "guides local audiences through a series of historical events including the 228 Incident and White Terror era in Taiwan and China's Tiananmen Square protests" as well as the Gwanju uprising and massacre in South Korea.²⁷

This aspect of the problem of justice, viewed in modernity through the prism of *Antigone*, leans in the direction of social justice, whereas in relation to *Medea*, the idea remains in modernity of a civilized respect for human rights despite ethical condemnation of abominable private actions.

However, a further aspect must be considered, that is the private sphere as opposed to the public domain. Both *Antigone* and *Medea* advocate their unwritten rights to act according to private and personal drives, and it is because of this that they ignore the public official law.

4. Montecristo and Yong Pal

In the sphere of private behaviour, modern European literary texts from the 19th century onwards display an emphasis on personal revenge and lack of clemency which is often due to mistrust of institutions. A paradoxical individual ethics pushes to punish the unjust not only justly through the legal system but also questionably through illegal means even though these might be used to the end of re-establishing justice. The modern western archetype of this variety of vendetta is of course Dumas' *The Count of Montecristo*.²⁸ The archetype of Edmond Dantès, unjustly imprisoned due to having been wronged both privately by friends and even by his betrothed, and politically by ambitious and corrupt officials, escapes from prison, comes into a fortune, returns home incognito as the Count of Montecristo and takes revenge on his enemies. This story is useful for two reasons in our context - it portrays personal revenge justified by suffering, and accompanied by distrust for the legal system, in an extreme guise, and it is a popular novel suitable for a mass audience while remaining a classic of 19th-century fiction.

Remaining on this level of personal behaviour and the mistrust of institutions, but travelling both in time and space to the East, we can now turn to the portrayal of revenge, partly deprived of irony, but partly also accompanied by self-ironic undertones, in Korean soap operas in which it constitutes one of the main narrative motifs and functions. In addition to Korean views on revenge, intercultural reference is made specifically to Dumas, for example, in a TV drama called *Cheondamdong Alice* when a character justifies his wish for revenge by saying: "here comes Montecristo".²⁹

Let us take an even more recent example, *Yong Pal*, a 2015 Korean TV drama,³⁰ in which we find a character named Han Yeo Jin, the heiress of imaginary powerful Hanshin Corporate Group, whose boy-friend was killed by her rival half-brother in a car accident. Yeo Jin was injured in the same accident, but she was kept in a vegetative state in a hospital bed by her enemies even though she had recovered well before the three years of her hospitalization. When her father dies she becomes too dangerous to be left alive, even in an induced coma in the hospital, so the half-brother attempts to have her murdered in order to succeed unhampered as the new Head of the Hanshin Group. Due to a number of complex circumstances Yeo Jin does not die. She is rescued by Kim Tae Hyun, a doctor who works in the same ward where she is hospitalized. She marries him in a marriage of convenience to have a reliable guardian in place of her half-brother - the latter had been responsible for her during her hospitalization. When the half-brother is thus prevented from acting on Yeo Jin's behalf, she becomes the Head of the Hanshin Corporation, and

starts her revenge which will eventually lead to the death of the half-brother and the neutralization of all her enemies.

Tae Hyun tries to persuade her to forgive. In the following dialogue, some typically Antigonean dilemmas are revived, and in particular we witness distrust for the legal system and use of a personalized variety of justice. In addition, and in contrast to *Antigone*, Yeo Jin is motivated by commercial calculations as well as by a hatred which leads her into taking a private revenge which appears to be similar in its intensity to that of Medea. In contrast, Tae Hyun believes not only in clemency, but in mercy, forgiveness and the humanizing function of official, public law. He suggests that Yeo Jin's predicament should be resolved in court. Here is what they say to each other in a crucial scene:

“TAE HYUN - Stop your revenge. [...] I know you are planning to kill Chief Lee.

YEO JIN - It's for us.

TAE HYUN - It's not. Don't do it.

YEO JIN - I don't know about anyone else but Chief Lee deserves to die. A so-called doctor who locked up someone perfectly sane in darkness for three years. And at the end he cut the carotid artery of a woman who couldn't fight back. And I should forgive him?

TAE HYUN - I know. I understand how you feel. Still this is not right. What you are trying to do is not justice, it is murder.

YEO JIN - Then is it justice when Chief Lee does not get punished?

TAE HYUN - You know I don't mean it that way. Why? Why would you punish him?

YEO JIN - Leave it to the legal system? [...] It happened in secret with no security cameras. Am I supposed to argue in court whether or not I committed suicide? Thus exposing the ugly truth about the Hanshin Group? If there is no revenge, there is no justice either”.³¹

In *Yong Pal*, in addition to the debate on clemency as opposed to the cruelty of revenge, we have an inversion of Antigone's attitude. In Medea-like mode, Yeo Jin lets a commercial enemy kill her brother rather than saving him. She thus carries out her vendetta even against a family member - a denial of compassion which reflects the cynicism of the late modern period. However, for those who love happy endings, it must be added that, after all of this has happened, Yeo Jin decides to give up evil behaviour and have a happy and simpler life with her by now beloved husband.

5. Individual and social psychology

The problem posed by Antigone and Medea, and their successors on the intertextual chain, is not only the contrast between family and state, and the private and the public. It is a humanitarian question involving both individual and social responsibility. As Govier puts it, it is the question of “revenge and forgiveness” as attitudes both found in responses to wrongdoing.³²

According to Govier, forgiveness is “a process of overcoming attitudes of resentment and anger that may persist when one has been injured by wrongdoing. Forgiving should be distinguished from condoning, excusing, and forgetting”, and a

distinction should be made between “bilateral, unilateral, and mutual forgiveness”.³³ In divided communities, development of reconciliation implies the repentance of the offender and the exercise of compassion by the offended.

These dynamics are important in political processes as well as in private relationships. If “feelings of vindictiveness and vengeance” can be seen as “basic to our sense of justice”, and revenge can be understood as “retributive justice”,³⁴ it is only when such negative feelings are overcome that a continuation of personal and social relations can take place.

This is indeed a difficult task, yet how could situations such as inter-ethnic conflict, inter-state wars, and person to person litigation be solved if not through an overcoming of the feeling of revenge and an adoption of strategies of detachment, even though perhaps, in the view of the present writer, forgiveness is not possible in all cases. How can crimes such as holocausts and war massacres, and other crimes against humanity, be forgiven while preserving a basic sense of justice? Tragic events such as these may be overcome through duly and legally inflicted punishment on perpetrators, but without employing barbarism (in the classical Greek sense of the term) to oppose barbarous wrongdoing. In addition, justice can be perpetuated through regular commemoration and constant remembrance. In brief, one could perhaps argue that idealistic ethics might actually be the basis for satisfactory solutions to collective and personal pain, thus encouraging progress towards a more advanced practice of justice.

6. Conclusion

A number of ideas have been followed in this paper, and in particular the universality of archetypes applied to local realities, the problem of family bonds as diverging from state duties, the individual acting according to personal consciousness and using unduly means to obtain just aims. Additionally, the paper was concerned with the fact that literary representation highlights ethical problems and invites readers and audiences to think about what is just and unjust, thus resulting not only in cathartic liberation from pain but in committed awareness.

The crucial point, and view of the present writer, is that mercy should be preferable to revenge in the same way as non-violence should prevail over violence. Gandhi showed how non-violence can be not only righteous but politically winning. One might add that, unless ideals are relaunched into the late modern world, Machiavellian behaviour will prevail and it will further dehumanize social behaviour. Compassion might be more suitable for the individual than for the state, at least if one thinks realistically, but a reform of individual consciousness, as we find in Buddhist teachings, is a powerful force to change the whole of society and oppose injustice.

NOTES

¹ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Antigone*, ed. Elisa Virgili, Milan, Albo Versorio, 2013, p. 14. In the Italian translation of relevant passages from Hegel's works, "una naturale comunità etica - è la famiglia".

² Georg W.F. Hegel, *Antigone*, cit., p. 22: "la sorella diviene, e la moglie rimane, la direttrice della casa e la conservatrice della legge divina".

³ Albin Lesky, *Storia della letteratura greca* (1957-1958), vol. 3, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1969, pp. 365-69.

⁴ L. 1040 of Sophocles, *Antigone*, transl. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. PDF Version, available from: https://mthoyibi.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/antigone_2.pdf [Accessed 22-10-2015].

⁵ Ll. 436-37, p. 17 of Euripides, *Medea, The Phoenician Women, Bacchae*, London, Methuen, 2000, trad. J. Michael Walton, pp. 1-43.

⁶ Ll. 411-12, p. 16 of Euripides, *Medea [...]*, cit.

⁷ Ll. 811-13, p. 27 of Euripides, *Medea [...]*, cit.

⁸ Ll. 796-808 of Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit.

⁹ See, for example, the case of Cesare Battisti, an Italian terrorist who lived as a refugee in France from 1990 to 2004, protected by the Mitterand doctrine (or the rejection of extradition requests to countries considered not corresponding to French law), and later also not extradited to Italy by Brasil authorities. A summary of this story is John Rosenthal, "Cesare Battisti: A Terrorist's Path to Freedom", *The Weekly Standard*, 17-6-2011. Available from: http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/cesare-battisti-terrorist-s-path-freedom_574809.html [Accessed 22-10-2015].

¹⁰ L. 1343, p. 41 of Euripides, *Medea [...]*, cit.

¹¹ L. 1331, p. 40 of Euripides, *Medea [...]*, cit.

¹² L. 1339, p. 41 of Euripides, *Medea [...]*, cit.

¹³ "It is my nature to join in love, not hate", l. 418 of Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit.

¹⁴ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On Clemency*, Book 2.3, in Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*, transl. Robert A. Kaster and Martha C. Nussbaum, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 171.

¹⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Medea*. Film: 1969. Published script: Milan, Garzanti, 1970.

¹⁶ "Anarchy, anarchy! Show me a greater evil! / This is how cities tumble and the great houses run down, / This is what scatters armies. / No, no: good lives are made so by discipline. / We keep the laws, then [...]", ll. 534-38 of Sophocles, *Antigone*, cit.

¹⁷ *Sophocles' Antigone Adapted by Bertold Brecht. Based on the German Translation by Friederich Hölderlin and Translated into English by Judith Malina*, New York, Applause, 1990.

¹⁸ *The Burial at Thebes. Sophocles' Antigones Translated by Seamus Heaney*, London, Faber and Faber, 2004. As Neil Corcoran observes in a review of Heaney's version (*The Guardian*, 1-5-2004), Antigone was not new to the Irish modern tradition. In particular, "Yeats also ended his sequence 'A Woman Young and Old' with a version of one of the choral odes from *Antigone*; and that sequence itself concludes his magisterial volume, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*

(1933). Yeats's *Antigone* is implicitly a figure for the depredations of civil war". Available from:

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/may/01/poetry.seamusheaney> [Accessed 22-10-2015].

¹⁹ On the internationalization of *Antigone*, see *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*, ed. Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley, Oxford University Press, 2011.

²⁰ Iris Hsin-chun Tuan, *Alternative Theatre in Taiwan: Feminist and Intercultural Approaches*, Youngstown, New York, Cambria Press, 2007, p. 137.

²¹ Iris Hsin-chun Tuan, *Alternative Theatre in Taiwan [...]*, cit., p. 145.

²² Iris Hsin-chun Tuan, *Alternative Theatre in Taiwan [...]*, cit., p. 147.

²³ A short clip, with English subtitles, produced by New York City Japan Society, is available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgIm0EMdHeo> [Accessed 20-10-2015].

²⁴ This production was presented at Huayi - Chinese Festival of the Arts, 15-24 February 2013. Available from: <http://www.huayifestival.com.sg/2013/antigone.html#.ViYEuGtQC6B> [Accessed 20-10-2015].

²⁵ Li Nin Jing, "When Ancient Greek Drama Meets Greek Opera", *News Plus*, 12-9-2014. Available from: <http://english.cri.cn/7146/2014/12/09/3601s855785.htm> [Accessed 20-10-2015].

²⁶ Iris Hsin-chun Tuan, *Alternative Theatre in Taiwan [...]*, cit., p. 104.

²⁷ Ho Yi, "Antigone Goes Asian", *Taipei Times*, 20-9-2013. Available from: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2013/09/20/2003572557> [Accessed 20-10-2015].

²⁸ Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Montecristo* (1844), transl. Robin Buss, London, Penguin, 2012.

²⁹ Title in Korean: 청담동 앨리스; SBS, 16 episodes, 2012. Original idea by Kim Young Hyun e Park Sang Yeon. Script by Kim Ji Woon e Kim Jin Hee. Directors: Jo Soo Won e Shin Seung Woo. Starring Kim Ji Seok, Moon Geun Young, Park Si Hoo, So Yi Hyun. See also p. 377 of Roberto Bertoni, "Su alcune serie televisive coreane: Universali del sentimento e *topoi* letterari", in Roberto Bertoni, ed., *Scorci di Corea / Glimpses of Korea*, Trinity College Dublin and Trauben (Turin), 2013, pp. 373-84.

³⁰ Title in Korean: 용팔이. SBS, 18 episodes, 2015. Script by Jang Hyeok Rin. Director: Oh Jin Seok. Starring Chae Jun Han, Jo Hyun Jae, Joo Won, Jung Woong In, Kim Tae Hee. The subtitles are quoted here from the drama version available from Internet site *Dramaload*. Available from: <http://www.dramaload.ch/> [Accessed 20-10-2015].

³¹ Episode 14, minutes 39.45 to 42.13.

³² Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. vii.

³³ Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, cit., p. viii.

³⁴ Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, cit., p. 15.

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