

DEPENDENCE AND CONTROL:  
CONFLICTED IMAGES OF THE SELF IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

by

MATEUSZ STRÓŻYŃSKI

**ABSTRACT:** The paper is an interpretation of Euripides' *Medea* inspired by psychoanalytic methodology, especially by the school of object relations according to which emotional life is understood in terms of affective links between images of the self (the subject or the "I") and the object (the other). From this perspective, the central conflict of the play is a conflict between two sets of object relations. In the first set the self is omnipotent, aggressive, and controls all the weak, poor and devaluated objects, while in the other – the self is dependent, vulnerable and loving, whereas the object is indifferent and cruel. The second self image is represented in the play by Medea's children, whereas the first – primarily by Medea herself. The only moment in which those contradictory self and object images are combined is Medea's "Great Monologue". From this point of view, the necessity to kill the children can be understood as a way to avoid dependence along with the painful conflict involved in it by restoring a defensive image of the omnipotent, destructive self, which is represented in the final image of Medea on the dragon-chariot.

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of *Medea* I will propose in this paper is inspired by psychoanalysis. Controversial as it may seem, I believe and will try to show that some interpretive strategies of contemporary psychoanalysis can be useful in the reading of classical texts, but only if they are employed to support traditional philological strategies, and not as a totally independent method. As Norman HOLLAND noticed: "Psychoanalysis deals with people, specifically people's minds, but literature is words. There is no way, no way!, one can apply psychoanalysis to literature directly. Psychoanalysis can only apply to a person. Therefore, we have to make some kind of a bridge between the person psychoanalysis talks about and the words the literary critic talks about"<sup>1</sup>. That is why we should ask what the mind is that we want to understand as literary critics using psychoanalytic methods. HOLLAND suggested that there are three "persons" or, as I would prefer, three "minds" involved in the reading of literature that can be examined in such a way:

---

<sup>1</sup> N.N. HOLLAND 1993: 9.