

# MEDEA

## Euripides

**Overview** *Medea* was first performed at the Athenian Dionysia festival of 431 B.C, where it came in at third place, although its subsequent fame in literary tradition is unparalleled. The mixed views of this play are thus obvious from the beginning. This story of a passionate woman, taken from her home by marriage, jilted upon arrival in a foreign land, and left alone with a young family, has always invited diverse optics. Medea, child of the Asia Minor region of Colchis, was foreign to the Greek culture she encountered when her Greek spouse to be, Jason, stole her away with him. Her wholehearted passion for Jason set her up as a woman who would, soon after arrival in Greece, be abandoned for a younger woman. We pity her. As feminists we cry out. On the other hand, Medea took a terrible revenge on Jason, by killing her children!

### Story

Euripides' *Medea* (431 B.C.E.) is a study of wifely revenge, but also of a cruel husband's infidelity. Medea and Jason rival one another in the ardor with which they complete a vicious marital cycle.

The play opens in Corinth, sometime after Jason has completed that quest for the Golden Fleece, which was the occasion of his meeting and marrying Medea. Medea is in a rage over the discovery that Jason has arranged to marry Glauce, the daughter of the King of Corinth, Creon. Medea's child nurse overhears the Mistress' ranting, and fears what may come of it, particularly in the way of danger to the children.

At this point, Creon himself arrives, eager to keep the new marital plans on track, and to forestall the dangers of Medea's anger. Creon gives Medea one day to prepare for going into exile—her new burden. Jason enters, explaining to the chorus and the audience that he had no choice but to betray Medea, and pledge his troth to a royal princess—Creon's daughter—who will be of far more advantage to him than a barbarian, like Medea, whom he hopes one day to incorporate as a mistress into his new family. Medea is contemptuous and scornful of her husband's protestations, and reminds him that she herself has already given up her home and security to marry him. She leaves stage with the threat that Jason will learn to rue his new marriage.

We grow increasingly chilled by Medea's plans, to plot the murders of Creon and Glauce. She puts poison on some family clothing treasures—golden robes and a crown which she knows Glauce will not be able to resist wearing. Medea also makes clear, in dialogue with the chorus, that she intends to murder her own children, as a terrible form of vengeance against Jason. Medea then begins to enact a psychodrama in the presence of Jason, convincing him that she accepts his new marriage, that she mourns for the exile Creon has imposed on her, and that she hopes the lovely gifts, which she is sending to Glauce, will help to promote her own happiness. Thus said, Medea sends the gifts to Glauce, to be delivered personally by Medea's children.

In the next scene a messenger appears to report the dreadful deaths of Glauce, as she put on the garments sent by Medea, and of Creon, who out of pity had gone to embrace his daughter. No sooner are we absorbing this brutal murder, than we grow conscious of worse; Medea has not satisfied her fury toward Jason. She rushes off stage with a knife, plainly intending to kill her children. We hear the children screaming, know what this means, then perceive Jason coming on stage to confront Medea about the murder of Creon and Glauce—just in time to learn of the murder of his children. At this point Medea appears above the stage in a chariot, carrying the bodies of her children to her ancestor, the sun god Helios. From on high she mocks Jason, reveling in his indescribable pain. We are left with the chorus, reflecting on the terrible unpredictability of human events.

## Themes

**Vengeance** Greek culture is on the whole comfortable with vengeance, though Medea—a barbarian and not a Greek—crosses the line in this regard. We may guess that, for the Greek viewer of Euripides' play, Medea in her vengeance comes over as a 'typical barbarian.'

**Ambition** Jason's unapologetic abandonment of Medea, for a marriage with a Greek princess, exemplifies the common Hellenic assumption that personal advantage comes first in social or financial matters.

**Barbarians.** superiority over other races, or peoples from 'odd places.' The Black Sea region was far and unknown in Greece; the residents of such area spoke languages the sounds of which the Greeks mocked.

## Characters

**Medea,** The granddaughter of the sun god, Helios, is from the Greek standpoint a barbarian, a princess from the remote regions of the Black Sea. The Greek Jason, looking for the Golden Fleece, has discovered this lady, whom he brings home with him.

**Jason** the leader of the Argonauts, who are in search of the Golden Fleece, falls for the barbarian princess Medea, with whom he returns (disastrously) to Greece. He loses his children and his new fiancée, to the vengeful poisons concocted by Medea.

**Creon** The King of the city of Corinth, and father of the royal princess Glauce, with whom Jason intends to replace his barbarian princess bride, Medea.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**MEDEA** (emotional)

**Character** As the overview suggests, Medea is a vengeful character, about whom various opinions are possible. Symbolically embedded in the bewitched land of Asia Minor/Colchis, which to the Athenians seemed remote and mysterious, Medea brings to her new life in Greece a passionate and untamed spirit. For a while (in Colchis) love conquers all, though from arrival in Greece we see Medea's spouse, Jason, as a conventional self-interested womanizer. When political allegiances and Jason's roving eye subvert the new marriage, Medea is crazed with fury and despair, and determines to take a terrible revenge; at the end appearing above the stage in a device normally reserved for gods who appear *ex machinato* resolve a plot. In her arms she clutches her two children she has murdered; as she flies away she taunts Jason, reveling in his horror at the sight of his murdered children.

**Parallels** Medea is among a wide sisterhood of literary women who were wronged (or felt they were) and brewed a bitter response. The story of Phaedra, which is prominent in work of Euripides, Seneca the Younger (*Phaedra*, 50 A.D.), Racine (*Phedre*, 1677), Eugene O'Neill, *Desire under the Elms* (1924) has exercised a compelling interest, and one that compares richly with the theme of Medea: in each case a woman on fire with passion is determined on revenge. (The motives and moralities vary!). Nastasya Fillipovna, in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) takes serial revenge on men, after have been abused and then exploited in her youth. Jose Luis Borges, in *Emma Zunz* (1948), treats us to one of his ingenious explorations of reality, in the tale of a young woman who avenges the death of her father.

## Illustrative moments

**Doomed** Not long after the opening of the play, we meet a woman who has arrived in a foreign land, Greece; whose husband has made clear that he is going for a new wife, and that she, Medea, will (if she likes) remain his mistress. In an unknown land, surrounded by two young children, she finds this news appalling, and hugely infuriating. We meet her 'barbarian'—as the Greeks saw it—directness, her

quickness to protest against the injustice of her situation. Helpless, she is at the same time violent, and we know from her voice that she will not be appeased by sweet talk, with which in fact Jason is going to try to disarm her.

**Diabolical** As the dialogue develops, and Medea passes her initial shock, she begins to evaluate her situation broadly, and to generalize it to women. She is thinking fast. Just then she leaps to a plan, knowing her time for action is limited—for she is about to be banished, and cut off from her children. She decides to ask Creon, the prime minister in Corinth, for a day's delay in her banishment; working on Jason, at the same time, she prevails, and wins the time she needs to hatch a lethal plot. She will persuade Jason to take a wedding gift from her to Glauke, Jason's new bride; the beautiful garments, which Jason will take to his fiancée, will be infected with poison; they will peel away the flesh of the doomed fiancée, and then of Creon himself, when he tries to save the tortured young lady.

**Abandoned** While awaiting the fulfillment of her lethal schemes, toward Jason and his new bride, Medea begins deeply to realize that there is no plan for her future or that of her children. To remain as Jason's mistress would have been humiliating, and a disaster for her children, who would be outcast throughout the Greek world, thanks to their 'barbaric' speech and customs, both of which the Hellenes derided. Medea addresses the Athenian audience, on Euripides' behalf, reminding them of their parochial and ungenerous attitudes. Jason becomes a whipping boy for the entire culture of Greece.

**Reckless** In the midst of her planning for the future, Medea loses her ability to exit the immediate crisis she is embedded in; she proceeds to carry out the horrible deaths of Creon and Glauke, and simultaneously confronts Jason, who rushes onstage to storm Medea about the deaths of his wife and Creon. It is then that Medea senses she has not done enough to avenge Jason's foul behavior toward her. *Why should I wound their sire by wounding them, and get me a twofold measure of sorrow? No, no, I will not do it. Farewell my scheming! And yet what possesses me? Can I consent to let those foes of mine escape from punishment, and incur their mockery?* Medea ultimately reflects that she must do more to make her fury felt! The killing of Creon and Glauke are powerful ways to torture Jason, but only the destruction of Jason's children will suffice to bear in on him the foulness of his behavior.

### Discussion questions

What is Euripides' own view of the revenge Medea takes, especially on her own children? Does her 'foreign' background help to excuse her? Is she justified on the basis of the wrong that has been done her?

Does her vengeance serve any further purpose than itself? Is she planning to escape and exercise power in Greece? Has she any concern for her own life?

At what point does Medea realize that she and her children are on their own in Greece? And that Jason plans to ditch her? Can you track the very moment of her realization?