

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**MEDEA***Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Medea** (In Euripides' *Medea*) **emotional**

**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!

**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 machina* to 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 Phillipovna, 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 Glauce, 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 Glauce 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?