

# MEDEA

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Medea by Euripides

## 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, some time 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.

## Characters

**Medea,** grand daughter 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.

### **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.'

**Political 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.

**The notion of the barbarian** The Greeks of the classical period were sensitive to their 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 .