

Reading Greek Tragedy Online Series: University Competition
Selections from *Medea*, by Euripides, translated by Diane Rayor
Dramaturgy Notes, created by Emma Pauly

Performance History

Euripides' *Medea* is one of the most frequently performed plays of the classical canon and the title figure looms large in the cultural consciousness: the witch, the scorned woman, the 'evil mother'. Notably, Euripides appears to have been the first creator to assign Medea what has become her most well-known trait in modern reception: her murder of her children.

The play was performed in 431 BCE at the City Dionysia in Athens, where it won third place (along with its companions *Philoctetes*, *Dictys*, and a satyr-play titled *Theristai*; little is known about the other members of this tetralogy and only fragments survive of the two tragedies).

Medea, both play and character, also sit at the center of a larger discourse about Euripides, during his life and after. Along with Phaedra from *Hippolytus*, Medea features prominently in the debate about the misogyny (or lack thereof) in Euripides himself. He acquired such a reputation in the years after his death, but the subject remains controversial to this day.

Cast of Characters

- a) **Medea**, wife of Jason, mother of his children, daughter of the king of Kolchis, descendent of Helios, god of the Sun
- b) **Jason**, husband of Medea, father of her children
- c) **Kreon**, ruler of Korinth, future father-in-law of Jason
- d) **Aigeus**, ruler of Athens, visitor to Korinth (**cut from these selections**)
- e) **Nurse**, enslaved woman from Kolchis, charged with taking care of both Medea and her children (**cut from these selections**)
- f) **Tutor**, enslaved man from Korinth, charged with the education of Medea and her children (**cut from these selections**)
- g) **Messenger**, enslaved person in Jason's household (**cut from these selections**)
- h) **Chorus** of Korinthian women
- i) **Children of Medea and Jason**

Staging and Dramatic Conventions

Keep in mind the following dramatic conventions! Do you have to follow them in your work? Absolutely not!

- Actors (of whom there were only three, doubling all necessary parts) would have been male, masked and elaborately costumed (all the better to be seen in the cheap seats!)
- Choruses (also masked) would primarily sing most of their lines, with 'main' characters joining in on occasion or when emotions run high
- Medea's dragon-drawn chariot at the end of the play would have appeared on a device known as the *mechane*, the crane which lends its name to the *deus ex machina*



Medea in her Dragon-Chariot, Lucanian red-figure calyx krater, 400 BC, attributed to the Policoro Painter, Cleveland Museum of Art



The Theater of Dionysus in the Summer of 2018, picture taken by dramaturg

Context

Quite a bit of Greek tragedy exists in the space *after* major events; *Trojan Women* explores the aftermath of the Trojan War, the *Oresteia* details the fallout of a glorious homecoming, *Oedipus Tyrannos* (better known as *Oedipus Rex*) details the later years of a heroic king. In the space after battle and glory, after the action, what do people show themselves to be? Who gets left behind when the dust settles? Who do people decide to be when they think their stories are over?

Medea picks up where a very famous story leaves off: Jason, the Argo, and the search for the Golden Fleece. A quick breakdown of how that story leads us to the prologue of *Medea*:

- Jason is born to Aeson, king of a region in Greece known as Iolcus. His uncle (and Aeson's half-brother) Pelias, deposes Aeson and attempts to kill Jason. However, Jason's mother Alcimedea sends him away before Aeson can get his hands on him.
- Jason is raised in secret by the centaur Chiron, who teaches him all the ways of heroism. Upon his return to Iolcus, Jason demands the throne that is his by rights, and Pelias sends him on what he hopes to be an impossible quest: to fetch the Golden Fleece, the skin of a magical ram and a priceless treasure. Jason, Pelias hopes, will die before he ever returns home to take the throne away from him.
- Jason accepts the quest and gathers a group of heroes (too many to list here, but some of the most famous include the bard Orpheus, Telamon (father of Ajax), Peleus (father of Achilles), and even Heracles himself!).
- Jason and his band (called the Argonauts, named for the ship *Argo* they travel on) pass through several dangers on their way east, eventually passing through the Hellespont (the strait between Europe and Asia) and arriving in the land of Kolchis (along the Black Sea, in present-day Georgia), where the Fleece is said to be located.
- Time to meet the star of the show! King Aeëtes of Kolchis welcomes Jason and his companions to his court, where they meet his daughter **Medea**. Medea takes after her father's side of the family, especially her grandfather (Helios, the god of the sun) and her aunt Circe (famous for turning men into pigs in Homer's *Odyssey*), and has some magical gifts of her own.
- Depending on the telling, Medea either falls in love with Jason on her own or is shot in the heart by Eros/Cupid himself. Either way, the young princess is *very* into the new young hero in her father's court, and promises to help him obtain the Golden Fleece.
- Aeëtes sets Jason a series of difficult tasks, all of which Medea aids him with (and ensures his survival) until finally Jason seizes the Golden Fleece (guarded by a serpent which Medea drugs into sleep). Jason, the Argonauts, and Medea all flee Kolchis. At an unspecified point in this flight, Medea kills her brother Apsyrtos in order to help Jason escape.
- Upon returning to Iolcus, Medea tricks King Pelias' own daughters into murdering him, falsely claiming that she would magically make him younger in the process. Jason and Medea flee Iolcus and arrive in Corinth, where they are married and bear two children.

Note: As Medea herself states multiple times in the play, it is important to keep in mind that Medea is *foreign*, and the citizens of Korinth treat her differently (and worse) because of that.

Text Notes

I)

- a) **“You are clever by nature”**: The Greek word for ‘clever’ used here is *sophos*, translated elsewhere in the text as ‘wise’. As Rayor details in her own notes, each male character in the play uses this word in different ways, with varying degrees of respect or contempt for Medea’s intellect/guile/knowledge.
- b) **“Puh! Not now for the first time...”**: The Greek here is *pheu*, an interjection that Rayor’s translation captures in its explosiveness and brevity. Many translations will render *pheu* and similar short phrases as “Ah me”, “Oh no”, or “Alas”, but by keeping it out of the realm of coherent language, Rayor maintains the sense of frustration that the Greek conveys.
- c) **“No, I beg you by your knees, by your newlywed daughter”**: Medea here invokes the Greek idea of suppliance, or asking for mercy/favors/etc. Medea has not actually *touched* Kreon in this instance; if she had, he would have been subject to, in Diane Rayor’s words “a powerful and binding ritual act” and been obligated to give Medea what she asked for. Touching of the face or knees were seen as powerful acts of supplication, something Medea here invokes with word alone. She does, however, touch Kreon *later* in the scene (“Then why still pressure me by not releasing my hand?”), and still he denies her.

II)

- a) **“Apollo, god of music...a reply to mankind”**: Though this Chorus would have been played by male actors, there is still something resonant here; this Chorus of women lament their lack of musical inspiration...in song.
- b) **“You sailed from your father’s home/with a maddened heart”**: ‘Maddened’ here in Greek is *mainomenai*, the same word that gives the Maenads (frenzied female followers of Dionysus, in whose honor *Medea* was performed) their name.
- c) **“The Grace of oaths has vanished”**: The Greek vocabulary here is *charis*, a particularly charged word that can be translated as ‘beauty’, ‘charm’, ‘gratitude’, ‘favor’, and even more besides. By capitalizing it, Rayor aligns this translation with the entities known as the Graces (*Charites* in Greek), goddesses meant to personify these desirable traits.
- d) **“Shame no longer stays/in wide Greece”**: Shame is both an entity and an abstract force in these lines; the sense is less the shame of embarrassment or humiliation and more the shame of restraint and knowledge of social mores.

III)

- a) **“Whoever speaks cleverly”**: *Sophos* strikes again here, translated as ‘cleverly’ by Rayor in this instance.
- b) **“You would gladly pull your oar for it”**: Note the nautical metaphor here; it makes a twisted sense that Jason would figure Medea as a sailor on a ship in their relationship to each other, considering their journey from Kolchis to Iolcus together.

- c) **“You know how to change your prayer and seem wiser?”**: *Sophos* again.

IV)

- a) **“A delicate dress and a golden tiara”**: Medea’s gifting of these tokens is a power move in itself; she maintains that she has the authority and power to give gifts, particularly gifts that would be perceived as expensive and finely crafted. As Medea herself states, these gifts are from Helios himself!
- b) **“Take care that/she receives these gifts into her own hands”**: As Rayor notes in the stage directions, the gifts are in a box or basket; consider what Medea has *done* to these presents and why she would want Jason’s bride to be the first to physically lay hands on them.

V)

- a) **“Before prenuptial baths and wives, before/I adorn your wedding beds and raise the torches.”**: The activities Medea here lists would have been her responsibility as the mother of a man about to be married.
- b) **“Living there with us, they will bring us joy”**: The ‘there’ is slightly ambiguous in the Greek, though it is likely that Medea means Athens.
- c) **“No, no, by Hades’ avengers”**: Likely a reference to the Furies, though they are not directly named.

VI)

- a) **“Earth and all-shining ray of Helios”**: A good reminder that Medea herself is the granddaughter of Helios; the Chorus calls on Medea’s own ancestor (and the origin of her magical abilities) to hold her back or to, at the very least, witness her violence.
- b) **“Zeus-born light, hold her/...and bloodstained avenging Fury”**: A more direct invocation of the Furies, also known as the Erinyes or Eumenides. Primordial spirits of vengeance and retribution, the Furies are most famous for hounding kinslayers into madness. Medea’s framing by the Chorus as a Fury carries some dissonance with it, as she is engaged in the very act the Furies hate the most.
- c) **“Leaving the most inhospitable/strait of the dark Clashing Rocks”**: The Nurse invokes these same Clashing Rocks in her prologue-speech, the most famous obstacle that the *Argo* faced on its journey to and from Kolchis. The rocks supposedly framed the Bosphoros, slamming together with deadly force whenever a ship passed between them. Jason, it is said, loosed a dove to time precisely how long he would need, and skillfully commanded the Argonauts through the passage.
- d) **“Oh, help me!”**: The convention of crying for help from offstage is a relatively common convention; it can be seen in the *Oresteia* and *Electra* as Clytemnestra is cut down by Orestes, as well as Euripides’ *Hecuba*. It creates a set of challenges for a visual medium-- how would *you* stage this effectively?
- e) **“When Zeus’ wife Hera drove Ino mad...”**: This is a reference to the story of Ino and Athamas, the former a daughter of Kadmos and princess of Thebes, the latter her husband. Though their story also features the origin of the Golden Fleece itself, the story referenced here comes from a bit later in their history. Ino was the sister of Semele, a figure best known for her fiery death and her illustrious son, born from the ashes after a brief incubation in the thigh of Zeus: the god Dionysus. When Dionysus was born, he

needed to be hidden from the wrath of Hera, a task which Ino and Athamas ended up with. They tried to raise the baby god along with their own children, but Hera (as Hera is wont to do) discovered the child and struck Athamas and Ino with madness. Frenzied, Ino hurled herself into the sea along with her children, killing them all. In most tellings, Ino kills only one son (and Athamas the other), but Euripides may have given her both in order to draw a closer parallel with Medea herself.

- f) **“*Oimoi*, what can I do? Where run from mother’s hands?”**: As in Note b from Excerpt 1, this is a Greek interjection. Rather than translate it, Rayor renders it as it would have been spoken: *oimoi* is an expression of grief or suffering, most often rendered as ‘woe is me’ or ‘alas’.



Medea (left) rejuvenates a ram to restore Jason’s (right) youth (a version of events that does not agree with Euripides’ telling), attributed to the Copenhagen painter, red-figure hydria, 480-470 BC, British Museum



Medea (left) kills one of her children (right), Campanian red-figure neck-amphora, 330 BC, Louvre
Connective Tissue

Before Section 1: Medea's nurse delivers the prologue of the play, informing the audience of Jason's abandonment of her and his imminent marriage to Kreon's daughter. Medea, the Nurse relates, lies inside the house, inconsolable. The Tutor enters with Medea's children with more bad news; Kreon intends to banish Medea and her children, which Jason intends to allow. Medea's distress is heard from offstage as she wishes for death, loudly enough to summon the Chorus of Korinthian women onstage to ask the Nurse for an update. Eventually, Medea enters the stage, emerging from the house to give the Chorus a piece of her mind. She delivers one of the most famous speeches of the play, including the line Rayor translates as "for I would rather stand in the line of battle three times than give birth once" (250-251). Medea is furious over Jason's betrayal, but things are only about to get worse as Kreon enters.

Before Section 2: Kreon exits and the Chorus express their sympathy for Medea, who makes it clear that she has no intention of letting Jason get away unscathed. As of yet, she is unsure of *how* she will implement her revenge, but her anger extends to Kreon, his daughter, and Jason himself.

Before Section 3: Jason makes his first entrance onstage, having heard that Medea 'made a scene' with Kreon. Medea lays at Jason's feet all that she has done for him; the help with the Fleece, the murder of Pelias, and leaving behind everything and everyone she knew and loved. She emphasizes how few options she has if she leaves Korinth, to which Jason replies with little sympathy. He argues that Medea has received far more than she has given, having been brought from a barbarian land to Greece, and that he is making the politically advantageous mood for their children by marrying into a royal line (ignoring that Medea herself is royalty, just not *Greek*).

Before Section 4: The Chorus sing out of *fear* of Aphrodite rather than love; seeing Medea and Jason's impassioned struggles with each other, the Chorus sings for moderation, for peace, and

for security. Aigeus, King of Athens, enters the play, and Medea immediately set about securing a contingency plan for herself and her children. Aigeus is childless and Medea, seeing an opportunity, offers her services in exchange for an oath from Aigeus to see her safely ensconced in Athens. He swears and exits, with Medea promising to follow shortly after. Medea then outlines her new plan to the chorus: to kill Jason's new bride with poisoned bridal-gifts and, finally, her own children. The Chorus react with shock and horror and Medea justifies her decision, saying that it is the best revenge she can muster against Jason. Medea asks that Jason be summoned and the Chorus sings, again, their horror at Medea's plan, begging her to recant. Jason re-enters and Medea plays her part to the hilt; she begs Jason for forgiveness, takes back her anger, and tells Jason she intends to leave the children with him in Athens and bestow gifts upon his new bride.

Before Section 5: The Chorus react with appropriate dread as Medea's children bear their poisoned cargo away; the Tutor re-enters with the children to confirm the bride's receipt of her gifts. Medea sends the Tutor away to address her children alone (save for the Chorus).

Before Section 6: The Chorus sing the evils, pains and sorrows of bearing children before a Messenger breaks in on the scene, bringing Medea the news she has been waiting for--Jason's new bride is dead, as is her father Kreon. The messenger-speech that follows is a detailed, gruesome recounting of the young woman's fiery demise. Medea, unsatisfied with those two deaths, steels herself once more as she enters the house to do her last and greatest act of violence in the play.

Extra Detail

This section is for Classics students or anyone who has a passing interest in Ancient Greek!

I) Name Etymologies

- a) **Medea:** From μήδεα, meaning 'cunning, planning'. Another famous tragic figure whose name shares this root is Clytemnestra, whose name can potentially be translated as 'famed-for-her-cunning'.
- b) **Jason:** From ἰάομαι, meaning 'to heal'; it is unclear exactly *why* Jason bears this particular name, but he is closely associated with not one but two users of healing and magic: Chiron the Centaur and Medea herself.
- c) **Kreon:** From κρείων, meaning 'ruler' or 'master'; the reason is much the same as the Kreon of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.
- d) **Aigeus:** Potentially drawn from αἶξ, meaning 'goat'; however, Aigeus' name-origin is not half so interesting as the feature to which he lent his name. Aigeus is most famous for being the father of the hero Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur. Before Theseus set out for Troy, Aigeus had him promise to fly a white sail if he survived his journey. Theseus forgot his father's request and Aigeus, seeing his son's ships returning home with no white sail flying, threw himself into the sea, called the Aegean from then on in his honor.

- e) **Note:** the daughter of Kreon is nameless in Euripides' telling of Medea's story. In other tellings she is called either Kreusa (a feminine variation on Kreon) or Glauke.

II) Meter

The excerpts from *Medea* in this instance are, with the exception of Section 2 ("Holy rivers run upstream") and Section 6 "Earth and all-shining ray of Helios" are in **iambic trimeter**, the go-to meter for spoken lines in Greek tragedy. There are **anapestic** meters used elsewhere in the play, particularly when Medea is mourning her suffering inside the house and occasionally by the chorus (after the exits of Kreon and Aigeus).

The Chorus, however, is almost entirely in lyric meters, and particularly varied ones at that. The final stasimon (Excerpt 6) begins entwined with the screams of Medea's children from indoors before transitioning to a meter known as **dochmiac**; this meter is only used to highlight extremes of emotion and has a wild, frenetic quality.