

Reading Greek Tragedy Online Series: High School Competition (UK Edition)
Selections from *Medea*, by Euripides, translated by John Harrison
Dramaturgy Notes, created by Emma Pauly

Who Told This Story? Where? When? Why? How?

Who: Euripides! Unlike most modern playwrights, there's not a lot of detail about the life or thoughts of Euripides. With a modern playwright or creator of any kind of art, you can get a sense of their opinions about the society they live in, whether by point-blank statements (in interviews or in public life) or in actions (Do they advocate for causes? Political parties? Charities? Which ones?). With creators like Euripides, dead for millennia, it can be quite a bit harder to figure out what they might have thought about their culture. All we have to go on is what he wrote, and scholars have been forming their own opinions about what kind of person Euripides might have been almost since he died.

Where: The Theater of Dionysus, on the slopes of the Acropolis, Athens! Seventeen thousand people would have been present for *Medea's* premiere performance, clustered together on the seats embedded in the hillside. The performance would have been in the middle of the day rather than at night-- can you imagine trying to watch a play by torchlight?

When: 431 BC! When *Medea* was performed, Athens was at the very beginning of a long, bloody, and controversial war: the Peloponnesian, a conflict between Athens and Sparta (and the various city-states aligned on either side). *Medea* was among the earliest surviving tragedies we have of Euripides', the only earlier one being *Alcestis*.

Why: To win a competition! Euripides was an entrant in the dramatic competition at a religious festival known as the City Dionysia, a state-run, six-day celebration of the god Dionysus. All Greek tragedies that we possess today (32 in total; seven from Aeschylus, seven from Sophocles, and eighteen from Euripides) were performed in this setting.

How: Extravagantly! These plays were the big-budget Broadway musicals of their time, and had the budgets to match. Actors (all male) were elaborately costumed (all the better to be seen in the cheap seats!) and their masks were large and expressive, allowing for vocal projection all the way to the back of the house. There were only three 'lead' actors (and a chorus of 12-15), meaning that parts had to be doubled; for this play, *Medea* was likely not doubled, but every other character would have been (Jason, Creon, Aegeus, Tutor, Nurse, and Messenger).

And, just like Broadway musicals, there was plenty of song and dance to go around! The Chorus would have sung most of their lines with musical accompaniment, with main characters sometimes joining in when emotions run high.

Who Is This About? (Cast of Characters)

- a) **Medea**, wife of Jason, mother of his children, daughter of the King of Colchis, descendent of Helios, god of the Sun
- b) **Jason**, husband of Medea, father of her children
- c) **Creon**, ruler of Corinth, future father-in-law of Jason, father of Jason's new wife
- d) **Aegeus**, ruler of Athens, visitor to Corinth (**cut from these selections**)
- e) **Nurse**, enslaved woman from Colchis, charged with taking care of both Medea and her children (**cut from these selections**)
- f) **Tutor**, enslaved man from Corinth, charged with the care and keeping of Medea's children (**cut from these selections**)
- g) **Messenger**, an enslaved person in Jason's household (**cut from these selections**)
- h) **Chorus** of Corinthian women
- i) **Children of Medea and Jason**



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

How Did We Get Here?

Medea picks up where a very famous story leaves off: Jason and the Argonauts. The story crops up across most of pop culture in one form or another, but here are some bullet-points to get the basic shape of it!

- 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 Colchis (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 Colchis 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 Colchis. 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 Corinth treat her differently (and worse) because of that.

Previously On...

Since we're using excerpts from the play rather than the entire text, here are some recaps to give you context for what happens *in* the play before every scene we've selected!

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 Creon's daughter. Medea, the Nurse relates, lies inside the house, inconsolable. The Tutor enters with Medea's children with more bad news; Creon 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 Corinthian 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 concerning the unenviable life of women and her own position as both a woman and a foreigner in Corinth. Medea is furious over Jason's betrayal, but things are only about to get worse as Creon enters.

Before Section 2: Creon 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 Creon, his daughter, and Jason himself.

Before Section 3: Jason makes his first entrance onstage, having heard that Medea 'made a scene' with Creon. 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 Corinth, 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. Aegeus, King of Athens, enters the play, and Medea immediately set about securing a contingency plan for herself and her children. Aegeus is childless and Medea, seeing an opportunity, offers her services in exchange for an oath from Aegeus 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 Creon. 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.



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

Textual References

Check here for explanations of references to people, places, or concepts in the text that might be good to know!

- a) **“Aiai. Wretched me, I am utterly destroyed!”**: ‘Aiai’ is a transliteration of the Greek exclamation, less of a word and more of an emotional expression of (in this case) anxiety, fear, or despair.
- b) **“Please! I touch your knees, I beseech you...”**: Medea here invokes the Greek idea of suppliance, or asking for mercy/favors/etc. Medea has not actually *touched* Creon in this instance; if she had, he would have been subject to enormous spiritual and moral weight 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 Creon *later* in the scene (“Then why still pressure me by not releasing my hand?”), and still he denies her.
- c) **“Heaven-born light, restrain her, stop her...accursed fiend of vengeance”**: A 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.
- d) **“Who left behind the blue-grey 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 Colchis. 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.
- e) **“Ino, who was driven mad by the gods...perished with the two”**: 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.

Additional Notes

I) Euripides and Women: In his own time and in the centuries after his death, Euripides acquired a reputation for being a misogynist. Many of his plays feature women front and center, speaking words and performing deeds that a Greek audience would not consider to be 'womanly'; murder, manipulation, and other expressions of anger, grief and pain. Women in Euripides are given the space to behave 'badly', often violently.

II) Women in Athens: According to translator and classicist Diane Rayor: "Women in Athens were lifelong legal minors, who exercised no political or financial rights. A woman was not a legally or morally responsible agent in Athens. Respectable female citizens left home only to attend religious rituals and funerals and to aid in childbirth. Fortunately, they had an active religious life and participated in the many Athenian festivals, including dramatic festivals. A woman's guardian (*kyrios*)--father, husband, son, or closest male relative-- would be her representative for all legal and financial decisions." In light of this, what do you think the audience would have made of Medea herself?

III) The Chorus: The selections for this competition feature two choral odes; these would have been sung (as opposed to the exchanges with the 'main' characters, which are mostly spoken). Music is a strong and constant presence in Greek tragedy, and choruses would train for months before performing to be able to execute the complicated songs and dances. Knowing that Excerpts 2 and 6 would have been sung, how does this change your readings?