MEDEA

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

"For he who was all the world to me, as well thou knowest, hath turned out the worst of men, my own husband. Of all things that have life and sense we women are the most hapless creatures; first must we buy a husband at a great price, and o'er ourselves a tyrant set which is an evil worse than the first; and herein lies the most important issue, whether our choice be good or bad… if haply I can some way or means devise to avenge me on my husband for this cruel treatment…For though woman be timorous enough in all else, and as regards courage, a coward at the mere sight of steel, yet in the moment she finds her honour wronged, no heart is filled with deadlier thoughts than hers." (Medea to the Corinthian women)

Medea is among the most interesting (mortal) women in all of classical literature. Later readers have debated over whether she is a (deeply flawed) hero, a super-villain, or a bit of each. In this lecture, we'll be taking a look at **Euripides'** tragic play *Medea,* which tells the story of Medea's (successful) plan to murder her husband's new wife, the King of Corinth, and her own children as an act of vengeance against her unfaithful husband Jason. We'll consider this both as example of Greek theater (from which all later Western theater descends) and as a way of thinking about the portrayal of women in ancient literature.

Who was Euripides? Euripides (480 to 406 BCE) was one of the three main **tragic** playwrights during the "Golden Age" of classical theater (the others being Aeschylus and Sophocles). A number of his complete works have survived to the present day, and they are among the oldest works we have where there is a clear single author (which is NOT the case with the Iliad, Odyssey, Torah, Gilgamesh, etc.). Many of Euripides' plays—including *Medea*—feature famous characters drawn from mythology or from epic poems, as was typical for Athenian theater. However, Euripides portrays these characters as "fully human" and their tragic ends result from the idiosyncrasies of their own human psychology. This general structure—taking a mythical or historical hero and portraying them as "human"—has proved to be a very popular one in subsequent theater (and eventually film), and includes everything from Shakespeare to the *Avengers* movies.

What is "Theater"? How Did it Get Started? Theater (as opposed to recitation of epic poems or songs) involves actors taking on the parts of characters and speaking/acting as if they were these actors. We don't how exactly this got started in Ancient Athens, but writers such as **Aristotle** (who lived a few generations later) hypothesized that it began with religious recitations of poems/song, and that the singers eventually began "acting out" the parts of the characters (such as Zeus, Achilles, Hector, or Athena) that were mentioned in the poems. By 500 BCE, there was an annual tragedy competition during the Athenian festival of **Dionysia.** By this time, plays were written down, and had identifiable authors (who competed to win the prize). The plays were performed in the amphitheater, which could seat somewhere around 14,000 people. The competition required playwrights to submit a total of four plays: three tragedies and one "satyr" play (a "low brow" comedy). With a (very) few exceptions, the plays were performed only once (during the festival), and then never again. We don't have the other plays that Euripides submitted to this competition with *Medea.*

Greek plays generally involved 1 to 3 actors (always male) who played ALL of the roles in the play. They would often wear masks to show which characters they were. The **"chorus"** was a larger group who would stand nearby, and give speeches (and likely sing and dance) commenting on the play's action, and what it means. The protagonists often talk to them, which functions as a way of directly "talking to the audience." In general, the chorus tends to stand in for Greek society (or for the audience) as a whole. This doesn't mean that their interpretations of actions are always meant to be *correct,* however.

THE CHARACTERS

"I shudder at the deed I must do next; for I will slay the children I have borne; there is none shall take them from my toils; and when I have utterly confounded Jason's house I will leave the land, escaping punishment for my dear children's murder, after my most unholy deed. For I cannot endure the taunts of enemies, kind friends; enough! What gain is life to me? I have no country, home, or refuge left. O, I did wrong, that hour I left my father's home, persuaded by that Hellene's words, who now shall pay the penalty, so help me God, Never shall he see again alive the children I bore to him, nor from his new bride shall he beget issue, for she must die a hideous death, slain by my drugs. Let no one deem me a poor weak woman who sits with folded hands, but of another mould, dangerous to foes and well-disposed to friends; for they win the fairest fame who live then, life like me." (Madea to the Chorus)

- **Medea** is the daughter of the king of Colchis (in modern day Georgia), and is a powerful sorceress. Ten years before the play begins, Aphrodite causes her to fall in love with Jason (and his "Argonauts") when he voyaged to Colchis to retrieve the "Golden Fleece." Medea did a lot of the heavy work in helping Jason defeat her father, and her spells/potions are instrumental in helping defeat

dragons, among other things. She even murders her brother to help Jason escape. (As in the Iliad, the goddess of love Aphrodite is way more troublesome and dangerous than she might seem!). Jason and Medea get married, and Medea subsequently arranges the murder of Jason's uncle (who Jason hates). When the play's action starts, the couple has moved to **Corinth,** and Jason has decided to marry another (younger, richer, native Greek) woman to be his queen, though he proposes to keep Medea (with whom he has born two children) as a mistress.

- Medea's **Nurse** and **Attendant** are the people who know Medea best, and they realize (early on) that Medea is NOT going to take any of this lying down. They worry for the children's safety.
- **Jason** was the mythical captain of the ship *The Argo,* and its crew of heroes the **Argonauts** (including Hercules)**,** who successfully retrieved the Golden Fleece from Colchis. He has appeared in a TON of subsequent Greek, Roman, Christian, and modern art. (He's even had his own movies and TV series). However, his betrayal of Medea means he is ultimately destined for a bad end (almost 2,000 years later, Dante's *Inferno* will describe him as being in a fairly deep and unpleasant circle of hell reserved for seducers and betrayers). When the play begins, he has announced his engagement to Corinthian King Creon's daughter **Creusa**. This move would greatly increase his standing/wealth/power.
- **Creon** is the King of Corinth, and would be Jason's father-in-law (if either he or his daughter could avoid being murdered by Medea).
- **Aegeus** is the King of Athens. He doesn't have a child yet, and would like one.
- **The Chorus (of Corinthian Women).** In this play, the "chorus" is the Corinthian women. They alternate between approval of Medea's actions (they think that Jason deserves *something* bad to happen to him after cheating on Medea), but are also repulsed/frightened by them (especially by Medea's murdering of her own children). They will be surprised as anybody when the gods seem to take Medea's side in all of this.

PLOT OVERVIEW

Once you know the characters, the plot of *Medea* is actually pretty straight-forward.

1. **Jason gets engaged, and Medea gets mad.** The first part of the play mostly consists of the Nurse and Attendant chatting about Medea, and the terrible things she's likely to do. Medea appears and talks to the Chorus of Corinthian Women, affirming how angry she is. She swears them to secrecy about her plans, while she plots revenge.
2. **Medea vs. Creon.** King Creon (the father of the new wife) *tries* to banish Medea immediately, since he knows how dangerous she is. However, she talks him into letting her stay one more day, so that she can make arrangements for her children. Creon gives in. His mistake here seems to a sort of moral wishy-washyness that plagues other characters. He's definitely doing something bad (banishing a woman and her children so his daughter can marry her husband!), but still wants to be a "good guy" (he says he's too prone to "pity", but thinks there's not much damage Medea can do in a day).
3. **Medea vs. Jason.** Jason comes by, and gives some long speeches in defense of his bad behavior, and tries to convince Medea he's really done it for her own good! (After all, think of all the benefits of having a rich, well-connected wife.). Medea doesn't buy any of it, and refuses any of his "help."
4. **Medea vs. Aegeus.** Medea begins plotting in earnest. She realizes that she'll need some place to flee to, after killing everyone. So, she talks to Aegeus, and promises to help him have a child (apparently using magic). He agrees to shelter her, though without asking any questions about what she is planning to do. According to other stories/myths, she ends up marrying Aegeus, having a child with him, and then getting in trouble for attempting to murder his *other* child.
5. **Medea kills her enemies, and her children.** Medea pretends to apologize to Jason, and says she just wants her kids to be able to stay with him and their new stepmom. Jason agrees, and Medea sends her kids off with "gifts" for their new stepmom and step-grandfather (Creon). The gifts are a poisoned robe and crown. The attendant comes back to tell Medea how Creon and his daughter died (very painfully), and Medea enjoys hearing about it. After some hesitation and second thoughts, she kills her own children, just to ensure that Jason is left with nothing.
6. **Medea and the gods.** Jason confronts Medea, and seems confident the gods will take his side, and punish her. They don't. Medea rides off on a divinely sent chariot. Later mythology is unclear about what happens to her, but most agree that she'll live to a ripe old age, perhaps as queen somewhere. Jason will die alone, as a piece of his old ship falls on him and kills him. Again, there seems to be a message here: for however brutal Medea is, powerful men like Jason and Creon brought their fate upon themselves, and the gods aren't going to help them escape it.

THEMES

1. **Women as fully human.** Madea is one of relatively few women main characters in classical Greek theater (another notable one being **Antigone**, who is the subject of a play by Sophocles), or in all of pre-modern Western theater. Medea is unique even within this group: (1) she's morally ambiguous, unlike the typical female character (who's either pure good or pure bad); (2) she's more powerful and more intelligent than the men around her, despite her inferior social standing, and (3) she "wins", apparently with the gods'

approval. Medea also (4) displays a clear understanding of the social constraints placed on women, and how they impact her. The fact that *Medea* was written at all (and the fact that it has been so popular for thousands of years!) strongly suggests that the portrayal of women in other literature (e.g., as doormats incapable of creative action) was NOT due to the fact that authors or audiences "couldn't imagine it any other way."

2. **The rage of the oppressed.** While Medea's rage is personal, it's also political. She betrayed her homeland to help Jason in his quest (he wouldn't have succeeded without her!). Now, she finds herself in a strange land, with no friends or allies. Moreover, Jason's decision to abandon her (for a native-born wife no less) is in large part because she's a "foreigner" or "barbarian" who he thinks he can safely ignore. However, it turns out that this is NOT a safe thing to do, as Medea is willing to sacrifice everything in order to hit back at the people (mainly Jason, but also the King Creon) who have made her life a living hell. There seems to be a lesson here for Euripides' audience (which would have included a minority of male "citizens" but far more women and slaves): be careful about how you treat those that you have power over. The mere fact that they have "nothing to gain, and everything to lose" by rebelling does NOT mean that they are going to stand by and take unjust treatment from their so-called "betters."
3. **Between black and white.** Medea does just about everything "evil" a character could possibly do: she kills the king! She poisons the beautiful new princess! She murders her own children! And yet, if the Chorus (and the gods) is to be believed, there's at least *something* sympathetic/understandable about Medea. In particular, it seems likely that, given other circumstances (Jason not betraying her; Creon giving her power/responsibility), she might have been a decent wife, mother, and even ruler. She's smart! She's brave! She's got magical powers! A few thousand years later, **William Shakespeare** (inspired in part by Euripides) will famously write many similar characters—Iago, MacBeth (and Lady MacBeth), Richard III, and others. However, Shakespeare at least ensures that these characters *lose* in the end (thus indicating their fundamental badness).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe Medea's "moral code" or her "principles"? It certainly doesn't seem like she has NO principles (after all, she's willing to do things that she knows will end up making her desperately unhappy!), but its also clear she does not have anything like "normal" moral principles.
2. Compare and contrast Medea with a female hero or villain from contemporary film and literature. How would Medea act if they were placed in the position of this character? How would your chosen character act if they were placed in Medea's position?
3. *Why* do you think Euripides has the gods take Medea's side in the conflict? What's the lesson to be learned?