Summary

When Medea discovers that Jason has deserted her and married Glauce, the daughter of Creon, she vows a terrible vengeance. Her nurse, although she loves Medea, recognizes that a frightful threat now hangs over Corinth, for she knows that Medea will not let the insult pass without some dreadful revenge. She fears especially for Medea’s two sons, since the sorcerer includes her children in the hatred she now feels for their father.

Medea’s resentment increases still further when Creon, hearing of her vow, orders her and her children to be banished from Corinth. Slyly, with a plan already in mind, Medea persuades him to allow her just one day longer to prepare herself and her children for the journey. She already has decided the nature of her revenge; the one problem that remains is a place of refuge afterward.

Then Aegeus, the king of Athens and a longtime friend of Medea, appears in Corinth on his way home from a journey. Sympathetic with her because of Jason’s brutal desertion, he offers her a place of refuge from her enemies in his own kingdom. In this manner Medea assures herself of a refuge, even after Aegeus learns of the deeds she will soon commit in Corinth.

When the Corinthian women visit her, Medea tells them of her plan, but only after swearing them to absolute secrecy. At first she considers killing Jason, his princess, and Creon, and then fleeing with her own children. After she thinks about it, however, she feels that revenge will be sweeter with Jason living to suffer long afterward. Nothing is more painful than to grow old without a lover, without children, and without friends, and so Medea plans to kill the king, his daughter, and her own children.

She calls Jason to her and pretends that she forgives him for what he had done, recognizing at last the justice and foresight he had shown in marrying Glauce. She begs his forgiveness for her earlier rage, and asks that she be allowed to send her children with gifts for the new bride, as a sign of her repentance. Jason is completely deceived by her supposed change of heart, and expresses his pleasure at the belated wisdom she is showing.

Medea draws out a magnificent robe and a fillet of gold, presents of her grandfather, Helios, the sun god, but before she entrusts them to her children she smears them with a deadly drug. Shortly afterward, a messenger comes to Medea and tells her to flee. One part of her plan has succeeded. After Jason and the children leave, Glauce dresses herself in her wonderful robe and walks through the palace. As the warmth and moisture of her body come in contact with the drug, the fillet and gown cling to her body and sear her flesh. She tries frantically to tear them from her, but the garments only wrap more tightly around her, and she dies in a screaming agony of flames. When Creon rushes in and sees his daughter writhing on the floor, he attempts to lift her, but is himself contaminated by the poison. His death is as agonizing as hers had been.
Meanwhile, the children have returned to Medea. As she looks at them and feels their arms around her, she is torn between her love for them and her hatred of Jason, between her desire for revenge and the commands of her maternal instinct. The barbarous part of her nature—Medea being not a Greek, but a barbarian from Colchis—triumphs. After reveling in the messenger’s account of the deaths of Creon and his daughter, she enters her house with the children and bars the door. While the Corinthian women stand helplessly outside, they listen to the shrieks of the children as Medea kills them with a sword. Jason appears, frantically eager to take his children away lest they be killed by Creon’s followers for having brought the dreadful gifts. When he learns Medea had killed his children, he is almost insane with grief. As he hammers furiously on the barred doors of the house, Medea suddenly appears above, holding the bodies of her dead children, and drawn in a chariot that Helios, the sun god, had sent her. Jason alternately curses her and pleads with her for one last sight of his children as Medea taunts him with the loneliness and grief to which he is doomed. She tells him that her own sorrow will be great, but it is mitigated by the sweetness of her revenge.

The chariot, drawn by winged dragons, carries Medea first to the mountain of the goddess Hera. There she buries her children. Then she journeys to Athens, where she will spend the remainder of her days feeding on the gall and wormwood of her terrible grief and revenge.

Summary

The Medea illustrates many characteristic features of Euripidean tragedy. The play begins with a prologue in which the central conflict of the tragedy is revealed to the audience. This prologue is not delivered by a god or by any member of the nobility, but by a nurse, a character of relatively humble status. Yet the story that the nurse relates contains many fantastic elements and supernatural details: For example, she speaks of the Symplegades (the Clashing Rocks that destroyed ships attempting to sail through them), the Golden Fleece, and Jason’s legendary ship, the Argo. Nevertheless, these mythological details will not be Euripides’ central concern in this play. The poet will devote far more attention to human psychology and ordinary emotions (jealousy, anger, and pride) than to the marvels of legend. Euripides’ answer to the central question of this tragedy—What could lead a mother to kill her own children?—will not be the Golden Fleece or even a tragic curse, but a combination of spurned love, the desperate plight of women and exiles, and the individual nature of this particular mother.

Euripides quickly shifts attention away from the wonders of the prologue to the troubles that exist in Medea’s marriage. For Medea, the predicament of a husband who intends to leave her is compounded by the low status of women in Greek society generally and by her further isolation as an exile. Medea speaks at length about the difficulties of women in ancient Greece (lines 231-251) and about the ill treatment accorded to foreigners (lines 252-258, 511-515). The audience observes that Medea has relatively few choices available to her. If Jason abandons her, Medea’s life will be little better than that of a slave.

Furthermore, in Medea’s debate with Jason (lines 465-519), the audience is reminded that Medea has used violence before when doing what she felt to be necessary. She had killed her brother, Apsyrtus, in order that Jason might escape from her father, Aeëtes. She had killed Jason’s uncle, Pelias, in order that Jason’s father might regain his throne. Thus, the audience begins to understand that Medea is a person who kills whenever she believes that she has no other choice. Because she is a woman and an exile in a world that is hostile to both, Medea’s choices gradually diminish as the play continues.

In this way, Euripides has rewritten a traditional Greek fairy tale as a psychological study. He has brought his mythic characters down to the level of ordinary human beings and has shown that what motivated them were emotions that the audience could readily understand. By so doing, Euripides is able to make Medea seem a sympathetic character, despite her violent actions and the elements of fantasy traditionally found in her story.
Euripides's play takes place in Corinth, where Jason had settled with his Colchian wife Medea after his adventure in pursuit of the Golden Fleece (in Greek mythology, a rare garment made from the wool of a magical flying ram). The scene opens with a prologue spoken by Medea's nurse. She summarizes what has led to her lady's current state of grief and rage: her husband Jason has married the daughter of the local king, Creon. The nurse recounts how Medea aided Jason in his exploits, even killing her own brother to help Jason escape. The nurse knows the many moods that Medea is capable of and fears that her rage may settle on her two children by Jason. When the attendant appears with the boys, the nurse warns him to keep them away from their angry mother.

Next is heard Medea herself chanting a savage curse at her husband, the children, and the whole family. The chorus of Corinthian women interpose comments of sympathy for the "sad wife" with Medea's anguished cries and the nurse's fearful warnings. Finally, Medea herself appears to plead for empathy from the chorus in a long monologue. At its end, Creon enters with more bad news for Medea: because he fears Medea may harm his daughter, the new wife of Jason, he banishes her from the land of Corinth. Medea hypocritically assures him she would not do such a thing and in an extended duet of dialogue (or duologue), begs for just one day to find living arrangements for her sons. Won over, Creon grants her wish, but threatens to kill her if she does not depart the next day.

Now Medea considers how to obtain revenge upon Jason, for she abhors the thought of being a laughing-stock in her loss. The chorus encourages her. Next Jason encounters Medea, with words seemingly calculated to offend her. She reminds him that she saved his life, slew a dragon, left her father's home and killed her brother Pelias, all for the love of him. Jason plays the sophist ("as for me, it seems I must be no bad speaker"), arguing petty points against her valid complaint. His suggestion that he is marrying the princess so that Medea and her children may live in comfort incenses the chorus so much that they defy discretion and accuse Jason of sinning. To appease Medea, Jason merely offers her money; he refuses to help Medea convince Creon to let her stay. Medea scornfully dismisses Jason. The chorus judiciously comments upon the need to moderate passion, thus for the first time indirectly.

The next scene offers another perspective on Medea and underscores the importance of children to a royal family. The ruler of a neighboring city, Aegeus, confides to Medea that he has just visited the oracle to learn how he might reverse his childless life. In a marked shift of mood, Medea calmly and professionally offers advice and promises to cast a potent spell to help him, asking only for asylum in return. Upon learning of her distress, Aegeus offers her sanctuary in his city with the caveat that she must find her own passage there as he does not want to incur the anger of his allies, Creon and Jason.

With a means of escape well in hand, Medea unveils her evil plan for revenge. Not only will she kill princess Creusa and her father Creon, but she will slay her own children, in order to destroy Jason's life completely—because she cannot abide the thought of being mocked for her downfall, and because she knows that the Corinthians will kill the children anyway, in retaliation for her murder of Creusa and Creon. The chorus tries to dissuade her from including the children in her murderous rampage, for her own safety and for the sake of respecting the law. When Medea remains unmoved, the chorus warns her that no city would pollute itself with her presence. Thus is introduced the theme of pollution, a concern that underlies the whole play. Jason returns at Medea's bidding. She shrewdly begs his pardon for her angry words and shares with him her "plan" to ply Creusa with gifts and then request that they be allowed to remain in Corinth. Jason blesses his two children with the wish for long life, bringing unexpected tears to Medea who masks her real reason for sadness with the explanation that she will miss them when she goes.
Thoroughly appeased, Jason departs with the sons and their attendant to deliver Medea's gifts, a robe of gold and a diadem (crown) of gold. The chorus laments the forthcoming death of the young bride and realizes that the two children are doomed as well.

The attendant returns with the simple news that the gifts have been delivered. He is surprised by Medea's tears at this announcement. The appearance of the children causes Medea to dispute her resolve, but she is overcome by her desire for revenge and bids the children leave her. The chorus acclaims that it would be better never to have children at all than suffer the grief of losing them. A messenger rushes in, warning Medea to flee. He recounts in gruesome detail how the princess, at first irritated by the presence of Medea's children, gleefully dons the robe and crown which almost instantly begin to eat her flesh. Embracing her, Creon becomes entangled in the trap and they die together. The chorus, still in league with Medea against Jason, laments that Medea has "gone away to the house of Hades" as the price of her marriage to Jason.

The children's screams are now heard, as they fruitlessly seek to escape their murderous mother. The chorus now accuses Medea of having a heart of stone. Jason rushes in to save his children from Medea, but the chorus informs him that he is too late. In the final scene Jason and Medea hurl stinging reproaches at each other. Jason reminds her that she too suffers from her crime, but Medea still claims that vengeance was worth the pain. In a final act of insult, she carries the children's dead bodies away on her chariot drawn by dragons, refusing Jason even one last touch of their skin. The chorus quickly closes the play with the warning that one never knows how things will turn out.

**Themes**

**Revenge**
In Euripides's *Medea*, revenge—its necessity, its causes, and its price—is the central to the drama. Euripides makes Medea's desire for revenge plausible. Not only has her husband Jason wronged her by marrying the king of Corinth's beautiful young daughter, but the king of Corinth has banished her from the city to prevent her from avenging herself on his daughter. Medea can no longer return to her father's home because she left without his blessing upon her marriage to Jason. Thus she is unlawfully abandoned, emotionally wounded, and legitimately outraged. She bridles at the idea that she might be the laughing-stock of Corinth. Even when Aegeus offers her a secure future in Athens, Medea remains unsolaced—she now only seeks revenge.

The chorus of Corinthian women legitimize her outrage, sympathizing with her grief as well as her desire for revenge. But Medea takes revenge that goes far beyond the conventionally accepted forms of retribution. Euripides altered the traditional myth to include Medea murdering her own children to avenge her errant husband. Her act represents a form of revenge that is shocking to today's audiences. The excess of her revenge can be measured by the reaction of the Chorus: the women of Corinth exhibit no surprise that Medea might want to kill Jason's new bride, nor do they try to dissuade Medea from murdering the king of their city simply because it was his daughter whom Jason loved; but the idea of killing her own children alarms these women. They ask Medea how she will be able to look upon her own children and murder them simply to hurt Jason. When Medea commits her horrendous crime the chorus withdraws its alliance. The women of Corinth also recognize that this act will hurt not just her erring husband Jason but, in a much deeper way, hurt Medea herself. Jason too recognizes her self-inflicted pain and demands that she acknowledge her error. In a final, shocking outburst of hatred, Medea retorts that her pain is worth the price of avenging herself upon him. Medea's revenge is excessive, perverse, and nihilistically potent.

**Passion**
In a way, the theme of passion that overcomes one's better sense lies behind the theme of revenge in Euripides' s provocative play. The ancient Greeks considered passion dangerous, and the chorus expresses this in the song that follows Medea scornful rejection of Jason's offer of money. The chorus sings that love in
excess brings neither glory nor repute, though love in moderation is blissful. Medea's problem is that she loved Jason so much that she left behind her homeland and family—and even killed her brother to slow their pursuers, Medea loved not in moderation but in excess.

Then, when Jason removed himself from her love, her passion turned to anger and since hate is the nearest thing to passionate love, she also hated in excess. It is as though Medea goes mad with the urgent need to punish her husband for his betrayal. The nurse suggests that Medea enrages herself, goading herself to greater heights of fury. In a state of self-aggravated wrath, Medea is immune to the warnings of the chorus of Corinthian women who, although sympathizing with her, warn her not to break the law. But the law is meaningless to Medea; she tells the chorus that its words are wasted. For it is Medea's tragic flaw to succumb to her own fury, a passion that imprisons her better self, and to goad herself into a heedless frenzy of anger that brings her to the point of murdering her own children.

From the very beginning, the nurse warns that Medea is not to be trifled with, that 'she'll not stop raging until she has struck at someone.” It had been Medea's reckless heart that drove her to leave her father's home to take up with Jason. And yet, in the exchange with Aegeus Medea behaves perfectly rationally. Smoldering with rage within, she is capable of convincing Creon to allow her to stay another day and of charming Jason into taking her gifts to Creusa. These moments complicate the question whether Medea could have controlled her passion enough to spare her children. Typically of Euripides, he leaves the question unanswered.

Euripides fabricated the murder of the two children—in variations of the myth they are either killed by accident or not involved at all. Euripides's invention pushes Medea's need for vengeance beyond the bounds of normalcy, thus underscoring that destructive passion reigns in her heart.

**Characters: Characters Discussed**

**Medea**

Medea (mih-DEE-uh), a princess of Colchis and the wife of Jason. Medea had aided Jason in avoiding the traps laid for him by her father, King Aeetes of Colchis, while regaining the Golden Fleece. Fleeing with Jason, she had murdered her own brother to aid in the escape. In Jason’s hereditary kingdom of Iolcus, where they first settled but where Pelias, Jason’s uncle, had cheated him of his rights, Medea tricked the daughters of Pelias into murdering their father. For this deed, Medea, Jason, and their two children were exiled. The play is set in Corinth, where they went after leaving Iolcus and where Jason has put Medea aside so that he can marry Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. It is at this point that the action of the play begins. The dramatic development, centering around Medea, is perhaps the finest example in Greek drama of character development. Medea changes from a woman overwhelmed with sorrow at her husband's desertion to a woman dominated by a fury of revenge in which every other feeling, even love for her children, is sacrificed to a desire to hurt Jason. The opening situation of the play concerns a sympathetic presentation of the sorrowful plight of Medea. She has given up home and position for Jason and can belong to no other except through him; these facts are conveyed by the nurse before Medea appears. Medea cries out violently against Jason before she appears and foreshadows the destruction of the children. When she appears, she is proud but courteous and self-possessed. She expresses her ills as though of all women, but greater, and she asks the Chorus not to betray her if she finds the means of vengeance. They promise secrecy. Creon appears to pronounce a sentence of exile on Medea and the children because he is afraid of her power as a sorceress. She is able only to convince him to grant her a one-day respite. When Creon leaves, Medea reveals her more barbaric and violent side in a terrible speech in which she decides to poison Creon and his daughter. At the appearance of Jason, Medea reveals her full fury as a betrayed mistress and becomes less sympathetic. Blinded by jealousy, she exhibits passion unchecked and untamed. Aegeus, the king of Athens, suddenly appears and promises refuge to Medea if she can make her way to his city alone. Assured of a place of refuge,
she calls Jason to her and, feigning sweetness and repentance, forgives him, asking only that he obtain a
pardon for the children through the princess, his wife. She then gives them a poisoned robe and a golden
crown to present to the princess, and they leave. When the children return, the struggle between Medea’s love
for them and her passion for revenge reaches a height in a speech in which the latter triumphs. A messenger
enters with news of the death of the princess and Creon, and Medea enters the house. Immediately, the
screams of the children are heard. Jason enters and Medea appears above the house, in a chariot supplied by
her grandfather Helios, god of the sun, with the bodies of her children. She has destroyed the house of Jason,
and her revenge is complete.

**Jason**

Jason, the king of Iolcus, the incarnation of a moderation and wisdom that are negative, not rooted in emotion.
He is presented first as the faithless husband and is unreservedly condemned by the Chorus and servants. He
loves neither Medea nor Creon’s daughter. His only passion is his love for his children, which arouses some
sympathy for him.

**The two children of Medea and Jason**

The two children of Medea and Jason, silent except for their offstage screams as they are murdered. They are
central to the plot as Medea’s only successful means of revenge against Jason.

**Creon**

Creon (KREE-on), the king of Corinth. His sentence of exile expresses the fear of Medea’s power as a
sorceress.

**Aegeus**

Aegeus (EE-jews), the king of Athens, who offers Medea a place of refuge. His appearance is a coincidence,
but it provides a glimpse of Medea as she was before the disaster, a princess renowned for wisdom. The scene
also emphasizes the child-motive: Aegeus had gone to Delphi because he is childless, and thus he already is in
the position in which Jason is left at the end of the play.

**A nurse**

A nurse, Medea’s devoted servant. Desperately anxious, she identifies herself completely with the cause of
her mistress. She speaks the prologue.

**A Chorus of Corinthian women**

A Chorus of Corinthian women, sympathetic to the suffering of Medea. They swear secrecy to her revenge,
though they realize the horror of the means.

**The tutor to Medea’s children**

The tutor to Medea’s children, a good and faithful slave. He clearly condemns Jason’s conduct.

**A messenger**

A messenger, who brings the news of the death of Creon and his daughter.
Character Analysis: Medea

Courageous, powerful, and reckless, Medea left her father's home without his blessing to accompany Jason to the land of Corinth, after using her magic powers to slay the dragon that guarded the golden fleece. She also killed her own brother to slow Jason's pursuers. A foreigner to Corinth, Medea nevertheless found favor with the Corinthians and all of Hellas because of her cleverness. For a while she and Jason were in harmony and her life with him and their two sons was blissful. However, when Jason takes as wife the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth, Medea is both grief-stricken at her loss and rage-filled at Jason's betrayal. As her nurse explains during the prologue, "she'll not stop raging until she has struck at someone" and the fact that Medea now says she hates the sight of her own children by Jason leads the nurse to fear for them.

Alone in a foreign land, rejected by her beloved husband, and unable to return to her homeland, Medea goes mad, going to great extremes in exacting her revenge for Jason's infidelity. When faced with their presence, Medea spends a few moments debating the wisdom of murdering those she loves, yet her desire for revenge fully outweighs her mother's heart. Even after she has accomplished the deed her rage outstrips her better nature, for she will not allow Jason to bury or even kiss the children farewell. She claims that the price she has paid is worth the harm she has caused Jason.

In his book *The Poetry of Greek Tragedy*, Richard Lattimore speculated on Medea's motives for murdering her own children: "We are given, not one compelling motive but a whole assortment of motives. She kills them because she hates them, because she loves them, to spite and hurt Jason, to leave him without posterity, to vindicate the rights and prestige of herself and her country, to save them from the Corinthians who, she supposes, would kill them if she did not. In the end she does not know why she kills them and neither do we."

Character Analysis: Other Characters

Aegeus, King of Athens

Aegeus, with his dilemma of childlessness, reinforces the importance of children (heirs) to royal leaders, making doubly hurtful Jason's loss. Aegeus follows the conventional means of solving his problem—consulting an oracle for advice. Aegeus is obviously a kind man. He recognizes that Medea is downcast and asks tactful questions; then gives her his complete sympathy. His accepting attitude toward Medea and his offer to give her shelter in his city elevate her in the eyes of the audience. His refusal to help her travel to Athens because it would offend his allies shows that he is a careful leader—it also reinforces the danger of Medea's situation.

Children's Attendant

The attendant discourses with the nurse in the opening scene to further reveal the nature of Jason's break with his wife. The attendant also displays the cynical attitude for which Euripides was known—rebuking the nurse that every man cares for himself first and for others when it profits himself, only rarely from honest motives.

Chorus of Corinthian Women

The chorus of Corinthian women at first shows a great deal of sympathy for Medea, who is rejected by her heroic husband for the young princess of Corinth. But at the same time, the chorus honors the laws of its city and therefore tries to persuade Medea to control her anger. Occasionally the leader of the chorus interacts with the players, as when the leader criticizes Jason, telling him that he has in fact sinned against his wife. When Medea seems at last determined to kill her children, the chorus pleads with her, suggesting that she will not be able to look upon their faces and do the deed. Thus the chorus represents a more moderate kind of woman than Medea—these women of Corinth show anger at Jason's betrayal but advise control in the retaliation; they even express pity for Jason's downfall. The chorus insists that all women are capable of wisdom. They serve as an antidote to the devastating events of the play, reminding the audience of the broader concepts being
enacted. The final lines of the chorus fall short of the intensity of its other songs, however, saying something to the effect of, "what will be, will be." Their explanations ultimately leave the audience unable to transcend the horror of the final scene.

**Creon**
Creon is King of Corinth and father to Creusa, whose marriage to Jason so infuriates Medea. Creon is well aware of Medea's bloody reputation; fearing that Medea might, in her rage, harm Creusa, he bans the rejected woman. A soft heart causes the King to allow Medea into the city for one day. His love for his daughter brings about his own death. Creon is portrayed as a weak, indecisive man whom Medea easily persuades to allow her another day in Corinth—a day that proves fatal to Creon. He is also ambivalent at his daughter's corpse, first saying he wants to die with her, yet when her poisoned garment ensnares him, he struggles to escape.

**Jason**
Jason, the Argonaut who retrieved the golden fleece, was a well-known character to Athenian audiences and a significant hero in Greek mythology. However, Euripides's portrayal casts him in a rather negative light. Medea catches him lying when he tells her he is marrying Creusa simply to increase their fortune, and he never accepts responsibility for his new love alliance. Medea has a valid complaint, yet Jason attributes her anger to a "stubborn temper" and blames her banishment on her inability to submit to Creon's will. Jason is made even less sympathetic when he minimizes Medea's role in helping him obtain the golden fleece (a feat that involved killing her own brother so that Jason could escape) and suggesting that Medea is merely jealous and not legitimately hurt. Jason almost deserves the punishment Medea serves him.

**Messenger**
The messenger has only one scene to act—he delivers to Medea the news that her gifts smeared with poison have had their desired effect on Creusa and Creon. His is a storytelling role and he is given gruesome details to spin out to Medea's delight.

**Nurse**
The Nurse opens the play with her prologue, reciting Medea's reasons for rage and grief and generally providing a sympathetic first appraisal of her mistress. She also warns of Medea's "wildness and bitter nature," saying that she fears some harm will come to the children Medea now claims to hate. The nurse herself demonstrates more resolve; she catches herself cursing Jason and stops herself because he is still her master. The implication is that Medea cannot so successfully contain her anger, both because the harm is hers and because of her savage nature.

**Sons of Medea and Jason**
Medea and Jason's two sons participate in only four scenes, but the entire action of the play revolves around their vicu'mhood. They appear initially with their attendant, immediately drawing audience sympathy, and are sent inside by the nurse to protect them from their raging mother. When they innocently bear Medea's gifts to Creusa, they garner even more audience sympathy because she at first becomes irritated at the sight of them. Later their sweet smiles cause Medea to pause in her resolve to kill them. Their pitiful screams as she pursues and then slays them are finally heard offstage.

**Analysis**
Commonly regarded as Euripides' greatest work, Medea is a powerful study of impassioned love turned into furious hatred. As a tragedy, this play is completely unlike the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, but it has a nerve-jarring impact. It also reveals the extent to which Euripides diverges from his fellow tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles, in his depiction of human pain. With Medea there is no comforting philosophy to put the tragic agony at a safe psychological distance. Instead, Euripides tries to make Medea as close to an
actual woman as possible, and to show her fiery lust for vengeance in naked action with nothing to mitigate its effect. The audience is witness to a hideous passion and cannot be certain whether Euripides approves of it or condemns it. He simply presents it objectively so that we understand Medea, but he leaves it to his audience to determine his meaning.

Euripides was probably in his fifties when this play was first produced in 431 B.C.E., an age when a sensitive person is fully aware of the agony that life can inflict on a person. What struck him most was the universality of suffering. Confronted with pain, every other human reality seemed to dissolve. In the face of Medea’s consuming hatred, kingship, laws, culture, self-esteem, and even motherly love have become meaningless. In Medea, Euripides portrays a very important aspect of terrible suffering, namely, the desire of the sufferer to create the identical agony in the person who caused it. The dramatist recognized the crucial link between anguish and hate. Reports of Euripides say that he was a bookish recluse, but it is understandable that a man as vulnerable to human misery as he was should shut himself off from people.

Euripides turned to the old legend of Jason and the Golden Fleece to illustrate his preoccupation. He takes up the story after all of Jason’s successes have been accomplished with Medea’s help. Jason has deserted Medea to marry the Greek princess, Glauce, leaving Medea with two small sons. As the nurse remarks in her opening monologue, Medea is not one to take such a betrayal lightly. Although Medea is prostrate with bitter grief and hoping to die as the play begins, the nurse knows how murderous her mistress really is, and she fears for the safety of Medea’s sons. A common technique of Euripides is to use the opening speech or section to explain the background of the action and to suggest the climactic development.

Medea is a barbarian princess and sorcerer who is accustomed to having her own way in everything. Furthermore, as a barbarian she has none of the restraints that civilization imposes. Jason is a Greek, subject to law, rationality, and practical calculation. As a result, he seems cold and indifferent beside Medea, who is a creature of passion. However, this is merely a surface appearance. Euripides exposes the inner layers of their psyches with unflinching honesty in the course of the play.

As a woman of passion, Medea is wholly committed to Jason as the object of her emotional life, whether in love or hate. When she loved Jason she did not hesitate to kill her brother, betray her father and country, or instigate Pelias’s murder for Jason’s sake. She is equally amoral in her hatred. The drama consists of the unfolding of her plans for revenge and their ultimate execution. When Medea first appears on stage before a chorus of sympathetic women, she is the image of the wronged woman, and one feels pity for her. At the end of the play, however, after a bloodbath of four persons that includes her sons and that leaves Jason’s life a total desolation, one feels only horror.

These murders are as coldly calculated as any in classical tragedy, and Medea feels no penitence at all. It is precisely the icy manner in which she goes about the killings that inspires dread. She caters to Creon to gain time to kill him and his daughter, Glauce. Medea plans to kill Jason, too, but when she sees Aegeus heartsick at being childless, she determines to render Jason childless, wifelless, and friendless. Medea pretends a reconciliation with Jason to slay Creon and Glauce in a loathsome fashion. Then, after hesitating to kill her sons because of temporary softness, she butchers them without mercy. Medea is a practitioner of black magic, a cold-blooded murderer, and a total monster; but under Euripides’ spell the audience understands her.

The passion by which Medea lives makes her both subhuman and superhuman. When Euripides finally has her escape in a dragon-drawn chariot through the air, one comes to realize that Medea is a piece of raw nature—barbaric, violent, destructive, inhumanly powerful, and beyond all moral standards. Jason becomes entangled with a force that crushes his dignity and detachment, that tears his successes to tatters. At the end, he is in exactly the same position as Medea. Both are bereaved of mate, children, and friends. Both are free to grow old without comfort. Both are utterly empty inside, except that Jason is now filled with the same burning hatred that possessed Medea.
This play operates on several levels. The antagonism between Jason and Medea can be read as the enmity between man and woman, between intelligence and passion, between civilization and barbarism, or between humanity and nature. In each instance, the woman, the passions, the barbarian, the forces of nature—all embodied in Medea—have the power to turn and reduce the masculine elements to nothing. *Medea* is a strong, depressing, fearsome drama in which Euripides presents his stark vision of life.

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

*Corinth*

*Corinth.* Rich and powerful city in ancient Greece, located on the northeastern portion of the Peloponnesian Peninsula, that is the setting for Euripides’ play.

**House of Medea**

House of Medea. Corinth home in which Jason and Medea live in exile with their young sons. All the play’s action takes place in front of this house. Jason and Medea’s precarious position in Corinth is underscored by this building, which lacks the power and status of a king’s palace. Concerned about his status in Corinth as a noncitizen, Jason abandons Medea and his children in this house, where Medea kills the children to punish Jason for his unfaithfulness.

**Creon’s palace**

Creon’s palace. Home of Corinth’s King Creon. Located offstage in the play, the palace is the focus of Jason’s ambition and of Medea’s vengeance. Jason seeks the power of the palace in his plans to marry the daughter of Creon. Medea sends her sons to this palace with a gift of a poisonous cloak, which kills both Creon and his daughter.

*Athens*

*Athens.* City to which Medea flees with the bodies of her dead sons in a fiery chariot after obtaining a promise of protection from Aegeus, the king of Athens. Euripides’ Athenian audiences would have understood these events in the context of Athens’s role as a place of sanctuary and as the enlightened protector of the oppressed.

**Analysis: Historical Context**

*The End of the Golden Age of Athens*

The year Euripides produced *Medea*, the devastating Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.) began. The tensions which precipitated this conflict between Athens and its neighbors on the Peloponnesian peninsula, primarily the cities of Sparta and Corinth certainly existed before the first recorded battle and possibly led Euripides to set his play in Corinth. Thucydides (c.460-400 B.C.) claims that the true cause of the war was Athen's rise to greatness, which made Spartans fearful. However, trade rivalry with Corinth may also have fueled the conflict. At any rate the Peloponnesian War was to last the next thirty years, with great losses suffered by both winners and losers. Ultimately, after a victory at Aegospotami, Sparta forced Athens—decimated in money and ships, emotionally enervated, and without allies—to submit to its terms. The Golden Age of Athens had come to an end. Herodotus (480-425 B.C.), writing during the early years of the war, hints that Athens had become a tyrant city, and Thucydides records its further corruption as the war progressed. Euripides's life spanned the peaceful years before the Peloponnesian War through the imminent end, although he died before Athens's final defeat. By the time of his death, Euripides had fled his beloved city to take refuge in calmer
Macedonia. The sense of uncertainty and adversity that pervade Euripidean tragedy stem at least partially from the anguished, extended demise of the greatness that was Athens.

**Women and Marriage in Ancient Greek Culture**

Medea’s complaint that Jason married another might have carried less weight had Jason followed the conventional method of divorce in Athens. Although women could only under exceptional conditions obtain a divorce, any Athenian man could rid himself of a wife simply by publicly renouncing his marriage. Marriages were arranged by the parents with no input from the daughter; thus Medea's flight with Jason was scandalous impertinence. The daughter came with a dowry, a substantial one if the family was wealthy. Once married, the woman served her husband by caring for the children and slaves, who legally belonged to her husband. *Medea* accurately describes the conditions of married life for women in lines 231-251. Athenian women never experienced independence during their lives. They received no education, lived in separate quarters from their husbands, and seldom went out. The ideal woman was "spoken of as little as possible among men, whether for good or for ill" according to the historian Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.). Athenian law forbade Athenian men to marry any but Athenian women, but it was not uncommon for Athenian men to keep foreign concubines, who often had more education than their Athenian rivals. However, the children of these unions were not official citizens of Athens, just as the children of Jason and Medea would not be official citizens of Corinth, while Creusa's offspring by Jason would enjoy the full benefits of Corinthian citizenship.

**Greek Theater**

Greek theater evolved from rituals in honor of Dionysus. Three playwrights would each present three tragedies and one satyr play that burlesqued one of the tragedies. To be invited to produce a tetralogy was a significant honor; to win the coveted prize of the festival was a cherished one. Although the dramas belonged to a religious festival, the audience was by no means solemn. In Euripides's time, Dionysus was still carried into the theater in procession and was revered as the god of wine, who inspires music and poetry. It was his festival, conducted in March over a three-day period, that hosted the competition in which *Medea* was performed, the first play of the conventional tetralogy.

Euripides's other two tragedies and satyr play have been lost. His tetralogy containing *Medea* placed last in the competition.

The center of the theater, or orchestra (literally, "dancing-place") in which Euripides's plays were produced consisted of a circle sixty feet in diameter, with an altar to Dionysus at its center. On the South side, a stage building served as backdrop (scene or "skene") and as a place for players to make their entrances and exits. A crane provided the means for gods to drop in from the heavens for the deus ex machina (literally, "god from a machine"). In a horseshoe around the other sides ranged rows of stone seats fitted into a natural hill slope. Because of the bowl-shaped site, acoustics were excellent for the 14,000 or so spectators the theater would accommodate. Unlike modern theatre, Greek dramatic presentations were more like readings. Different characters were represented by masks that the actors would wear. Usually only a handful of actors would enact a play, with one actor often performing multiple roles (or wearing multiple masks). Another difference from modern dramatic performance is the manner in which the actors read their lines. Where contemporary actors emote or "act out" their parts, their Greek counterparts would most often impassively read their lines.

**Analysis: Literary Style**

**Chorus**

Taking his cue from Sophocles, who demoted the chorus from primary character status to that of a speaking spectator Euripides reduced this dramatic device even further. In *Medea* the chorus appears less often than it would have in Sophocles or Aeschylus's plays; its time on stage is limited to mere moments between scenes. At the same time, the acting characters now have chanting parts (a move that eventually led to the
development of opera)—further eroding the unique contribution of the chorus. Euripides also reduced the interaction between chorus and characters. Euripides's reduced use of the chorus ultimately led it to eventual disappearance from ancient Greek theater.

In its modified role, Euripides's chorus of Corinthian women is a kind of precursor to the modern theater's narrator (such as the one employed in Thornton Wilder's Our Town). The chours in Medea goads the consciences of the audience while it sympathizes with, pleads to, and chides Medea. The chorus follows a clear progression of observations that influence and validate the reactions of the audience. At first the women completely sympathize with Medea as an honest woman wounded by an errant husband, and they concur with her desire for revenge ("You are right, Medea, in paying your husband back."). In fact, D. J. Conacher, in his Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme, and Structure, has called the first choral stanza (lines 410-445) a virtual theme "song for feminists." The chorus even goes so far as to accuse Jason of sinning in his betrayal of Medea. The women shift their attitude, however, as soon as they learn that Medea intends to murder her own children. As the play progresses, the chorus moves from sympathy to horror, interacting less with the characters and turning to address the gods of nature and, late in the play, the audience. The chorus does not simply condemn Medea, however. It complicates a too-easy judgement of Medea by showing pity for her throughout the play. When Medea puts her plan into action, the chorus expresses pity for the children, Creusa, Jason, and Medea in turn—in order, apparently, from innocence to guilt. In this crime, all parties deserve pity, even the perpetrator, because the perpetrator had a reasonable cause for anger. The chorus' list blurs Medea's liability by including her as one deserving compassion.

The Euripidean chorus also reminds the audience of the larger issues involved in the action of the play. It evokes the concept of pollution, warning Medea that no city will want to be polluted by her presence if she should commit the deed she threatens. Here the purpose of the chours is to place Medea's deed into the larger context of society, to suggest the greater implications of her personal crime. The Euripidean chorus frequently reminds the audience of ideal values, such as in the second choral stanza when it expounds on the virtues of moderate love and fidelity and proclaims the misery of the loss of fatherland to elicit sympathy for Medea. In Medea, as in most of Euripides's work, the chorus chants poetic asides on the themes raised by the action. This was the typical role of the chorus—to express the ultimate emotion or beauty of even the most painful event, "to translate the particular act into something universal," as Gilbert Murray noted in Euripides and His Age. The action of the play consists of the here and now, while the choral odes consists of the eternal. However, some Euripidean choral odes, including those in Medea, seem only slightly connected with the events of the play, and it was this innovation that led to the elimination of the chorus altogether. The final lines of the chorus, something on the order of "whatever happens, happens," are so far removed from the actions that have just unfolded that they do nothing to dispel the uneasiness the final scene elicits. The same stock ending appears in three other Euripidean plays that have survived. The effect is a rather abrupt return to reality.

Deus ex Machina
In the final scene, Medea rides off with the corpses of her murdered sons in a chariot pulled by dragons. On the ancient Greek stage, this stage effect would have been accomplished by means of a large crane that would permit the contraption to "fly." The "deus ex machina," literally "god from a machine," was a common closing device in ancient Greek theater. Normally, a god would descend from the heavens to bring the action to a close and ordain the ritual the play celebrates. In Medea, no god appears, although the chariot has been supplied by Medea's grandfather, the sun god, thus weakening considerably the invocation of the gods. Perhaps this slight derives from Euripides's skepticism about religious rituals. In any event, the scene is glaringly inconsistent with the realism of the rest of the play. But considering that Medea is now guilty of multiple murders, it seems one of a very few possible means of escape available to her.

Prologue and Duologue
The prologue precedes the action of the play. Before Euripides's time, the prologue was spoken, chanted, or
sung by a chorus, but it had evolved into a presentation by the actors by the time he began writing dramas. Euripides's plays often begin with a single actor who addresses the audience directly, explaining the background of the story to be told (even though his Athenian audience would already be quite familiar with the myth upon which the play would, by convention, be based). Medea opens with a monologue by the nurse, who recounts the cause of Medea's grief. The nurse is joined by the attendant, and together, in duologue (a dialogue among two actors) they discuss the implications and extent of Medea's rage, forshadowing the murder and mayhem that will come. The duologue between Jason and Medea is called the agon, an intense argument between powerful antagonists.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

5th century B.C.: In Greece, humans are considered part of the vast web of life, what was important about any individual is the way in which he or she is like all others and connected to them through society. Thus art, philosophy, and religion sought to explain and represent the whole order of things and not the individual within that order, with fate ultimately in control of human events.

Today: Humans are seen as unique individuals and contemporary art, philosophy, and religion conform to a world view in which the individual is central—and responsible.

5th century B.C.: Women in Ancient Greece essentially lived in a separate society from their husbands and fathers, and they held few rights. Women kept quarters and ate apart from men; they seldom went out and never walked in public without a male escort. They did not own property or money, did not choose their own husbands, did not receive an education, and could only terminate a marriage under extreme conditions.

Today: Women have equal rights to men and, in most fields, equal opportunities in the workplace.

5th century B.C.: Thousands of Greek city-states (polis in Greek) practiced a wide range of different governing systems during this period of fertile political experimentation. In Athens, a form of radical democracy promised equality among Athenian citizens (meaning adult males born of two Athenian parents); these citizens participated freely in the governing of the city and ardently defended the city's political system. The philosopher Aristotle called Athenian democracy "a common life for a noble end."

Today: the very different form of democracy that exists today in many developed nations has little in common with Athenian democracy, for the simple reason that modern democracies serve larger and more diverse populations and extend their ideals to all.

5th century B.C.: Greek tragic theater was produced in March for the ritual celebration of Dionysus, the god of wine. Everyone in the city attended the festival and the overall mood was festive—but also serious—this was a religious festival and the outcome of the competition was a matter of civic pride. It took place in the heart of the city at the altar of Dionysus and was at the center of Greek culture as well.

Today: The Modern theater no longer has ties to religion, although dramas for religious rituals are produced in some organized religions for important holidays. In the public theater, the sense of solemn ritual as experienced by the Athenians has no counterpart today. Theater is a form of entertainment and diversion that holds a rather peripheral status in today's societies.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

What kind of revenge would the Chorus of Corinthian woman have approved? Why do they object to Medea's revenge?
It has been said that the first song of the chorus could well be a feminist's theme song. How so?

What effect might the Peloponnesian War have had on Euripides's writing, and why?

How does Medea's reaction to being rejected by her husband for another woman compare with similar contemporary situations? What are some of the ways spouses exact revenge upon each other for marital indiscretions? What is the impact of these actions and how do they compare to the impact of Medea's revenge?

Analysis: Media Adaptations

Medea's anguished story has been transformed into film, music, opera, art, poetry, prose, and drama. In the early years of the first century A.D., the Spanish Roman, Seneca, wrote a melodramatic version of Medea that portrays Medea as a witch and Jason as being relatively innocent of causing her anger. Ianni Xenakis, a Greek born in Rumania, wrote music for Seneca's version of Medea in 1967.

In 1946, French playwright Jean Anouilh adapted the play to serve as an analogy for modern life. American poet Robinson Jeffers produced a singular Broadway stage production of Medea, a work that Jeffers loosely adapted from Euripides's play and that bears Jeffers's trademark stamp of nihilism and destructive passion. A sound recording is available on Decca Records. Maxwell Anderson, an American contemporary of Jeffers, placed the story in the contemporary United States and named his piece The Wingless Victory.

A 1959 film version was directed by Jose Quintero and starred Colleen Dewhurst and Zoe Caldwell.

A 1971 Italian film version of the play stars opera diva Maria Callas in her only screen appearance. The adaptation by late eighteenth-century composer Luigi Cherubini follows the basic structure of the Euripidean plot line.

A one-act musical interpretation called Medea in Corinth was written by Benjamin Lees in 1985 and is available through Boosey and Hawkes.

A Kabud Japanese version was produced in 1984 by Shoca Sato, with traditional Kabuki music and costume and called Kabuki Medea (available on Illinois Video).

An African version of Medea was created in 1968 by J. Magnuson.

Samuel Barber wrote ballet music for Medea in 1949. A different ballet version of the play was produced in the Soviet Union in 1979 and videotaped; it is available from Kultur Video Distributors. John Gardner, whose other classical adaptation, Grendel, is better known, also adapted the story of Jason and Medea into a long (354 pages) epic poem, Jason and Medea; his version contains a modernistic twist on Euripides's theme. Countee Cullen's translation of "The Medea" can be found in his collection, The Medea and Some Poems.

Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Euripides's Phaedra and Jean Racine's seventeenth-century version of it, Phedre, portray a woman who immorally falls in love with her step-son and in retaliation against his rebuff claims that he tried to dishonor her. The works examine similar moral ground to that examined in Medea.
Toni Morrison's moving novel *Beloved* (1987) revolves around a historical incident of infanticide performed by a slave mother who is moved to this tragic act by the horrors of slavery—she murders her child to remove it from the life of toil, shame, and pain that she has led. Her act haunts characters through several generations of her family.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (c. 1605) Lady Macbeth pushes her husband to commit murder and then goes mad from the guilty thoughts that plague her. Indirectly, her ambition is responsible for a series of murders, including some innocent children, that Macbeth commissions in his vain efforts to obscure their crime.

George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) centers on the relationship between Adam Bede and Hetty Sorrel, who becomes pregnant by a local nobleman and abandons her baby to die.

*The Lion in Winter*, a 1968 film directed by Anthony Harvey and starring Katherine Hepburn as the powerful Eleanor of Acquitaine, concerns the tense interplay between her and Henry II as he chooses between her and his lover's brother for a successor to the throne. Eleanor and Henry's three sons side with her in rebelling against the unfaithful king.

**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**FURTHER READING**

A scholarly examination of the images and devices in Bunpidean drama, finding Euripides thin in meta-phonc images but rich in visual detail.

An analysis of the motivations and psychological forces driving Medea and the intertwining of folk motifs with the familiar myth of Jason and Medea as well as deviations Eunpides's from the prevailing mythical versions.

A convincing argument that irrationalism played as much of a role in ancient Greek culture as did rationalism.

A scholarly examination of Eunpides's decision to have Medea murder her own children, a departure from the Greek myth as his audience would have known it.

A handy guide to the language and structure of two of Eunpides's plays designed for use with the Penguin translation of the works by Philip Vellacott.

A nineteenth-century work of scholarship that describes the life of the ancients in glowing detail; although dated, this work is still respected for its insights and depth.

An anthology of Euripides's plays, including the Rex Warner translation of *The Medea*.
Grube, G. M. A. *The Drama of Euripides*, Methuen, 1961. Explores the role of the gods in the works of Euripides and his contemporaries. Euripides, sometimes accused of being an atheist, did not portray the gods as infallibly rational, but rather as bound by the same passions as humankind.


Kitto, H. D. F. *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*, Methuen, 1961. Kitto suggests that Euripides built his tragedies around a central theme or idea, not a plot line, and that this choice explains his loose dramatic structure.


Lucas, F. L. *Euripides and His Influence*, Marshall Jones, 1923. Lucas describes some of the innovations of Euripides's plays and how his work influenced later generations of writers.

Murray, Gilbert *Euripides and His Age*, Oxford University Press, 1955. A landmark work describing the historical context of Euripides' s Athens, including the Peloponnesian War and the rise of the Sophists. Also includes critical treatments of the major plays of Euripides.


**Bibliography**


Ohlander, Stephen. *Dramatic Suspense in Euripides’ and Seneca’s “Medea.”* New York: Peter Lang, 1989. Scene by scene, Ohlander explores Euripides’ sense of dramatic suspense, examining how motifs from mythic tradition are handled and how Euripides manufactures new ones.

Papageorgiou, Vasilis. *Euripides’ “Medea” and Cosmetics*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1986. Papageorgiou discusses Euripides’ language, which inspires the audience to think beyond polarities, leading them from Jason’s world of light and logic into Medea’s, where light cannot reach.


**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

When Euripides's *Medea*, along with three other tragedies and a satyr play (a tetralogy), were presented at the annual March festival of Dionysus Euripides did not win the coveted prize; in fact, his tetralogy came in last of the three tetralogies performed that day. This initial reaction, however, has not affected *Medea's* reputation over the centuries. Euripides's contemporaries did not consider him a master tragedian, and he won only four prizes during his lifetime, although his elder Sophocles regarded him as a master playwright and ordered that the participants in the next Dionysian festival after Euripides's death dress in mourning out of respect for him.

A tendency to revive fifth-century plays during the fourth century led to a revised judgment of Euripides. His reputation grew significantly during this period, so much so that Aristophanes (448-380 B.C.) dedicated three plays to ridiculing his style. This is not to suggest that Aristophanes admired Euripides—far from it. But burlesque presumes an audience familiar with the original; Athenian audiences must have known enough about Euripides to make Aristophanes's jibes recognizable. Euripides was considered a fine poet with a misguided message. As Philip Vellacott, one of his many recent translators, explained in *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides's Method and Meaning*: "As a poet he was revered; in his function as a teacher of citizens' he was misunderstood."

During the century following Euripides's death Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) called Euripides "with all his faults the most tragic of the poets" and used four of his works to illustrate various concepts of tragedy in his *Poetics*. When Greek culture fell into decline, Euripides's fame went to Alexandria, and then on to Rome and the Byzantine culture. Plutarch (c.46-120 A.D.) tells three historical anecdotes of escapes made good because of an ability to recite Euripidean poetry, suggesting that Euripides's reputation, at least as a poet, persisted in Greece as well.

Euripides was the youngest of the three Greek tragedians (along with Aeschylus and Sophocles) whose plays were required reading for the classical education valued during the Renaissance and Romantic periods, among others. Scholarly writings of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance cite Euripides more often than his contemporaries: Italian poet Dante Alighieri mentions him in his masterwork the *Divine Comedy* and seventeenth-century English poet Ben Jonson used one of his plays as a model. Also in the seventeenth century, Jean Racine adapted many of his plays and considered Euripides his master. Poet John Milton author of *Paradise Lost*, was also an admirer.

The eighteenth century lost interest in Euripides because his work was too innovative for the classical revival then in progress. Then German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (whose work would greatly influence European literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), paid him the ultimate Romantic period compliment by calling his work "sublime." It was of Euripides that Goethe wrote his oft-adapted expression: "Have all the nations of the world since his time produced one dramatist who was worthy to hand him his slippers?" In the nineteenth century, English poet Robert Browning make conspicuous allusions to his plays,
and Euripides was once again central to a good, classical education Gilbert Murray's translation in the early twentieth century once again revived interest in him.

The twentieth century literary criticism holds a reserved judgment about Euripides. Modern critics appreciate his championing of the underdog—slaves, women, the elderly, and children—and his lampooning of religious and secular hypocrisy. But he remains a shadowy figure whose actual political and religious beliefs have been lost. Lacking sufficient evidence to say with certainty how his philosophy manifested itself in his life, many critics have turned to focusing on his dramatic technique and structure. In this context Euripides does not quite measure up to Sophocles or Aeschylus—the poetry of Medea does not reach the heights of beauty that Sophocles achieved in Antigone. Euripides's forte is irony, and he finds a ready audience in the modern period, as Vellacott explains: "Our present generation responds readily to irony, revels in it; therefore we should have the better chance of understanding Euripides." Literary criticism devoted to his play, Medea appears only occasionally nowadays. Writers and artists ranging in cultural background continue to reinterpret Euripides's version of Medea, but they never overshadow Euripides's.

**Essays and Criticism: Modern Audience Versus Fifth-Century Greek Audience**

Euripides's psychologically realistic portrayal of Medea, who indulges in an excessive form of revenge—the murder of her own children. This is a fascinating study of motivation, yet it is a topic safely distant to modern audiences. The people and society in Medea are part of ancient history. Today's audiences can consider and understand Medea's motivation while simultaneously dismissing it as both a work of fiction and as part of a past culture. However, to Euripides's fifth-century Athenian audience, Medea's act would, under the circumstances, make perfect sense. These Athenians, congregated in the temple of Dionysus to celebrate an annual ritual of dramatic performances, would give no more than a moment's thought to Medea's motivations. Instead, the significance of Medea's act would lie in the consequences to her society and in the larger philosophical question "is revenge effective?" The fifth-century Greeks would not see Medea as an isolated fictional character but as part of a grander scheme that was part of their everyday lives. According to historian Edith Hamilton in The Greek Way, "Greeks always saw things as parts of a whole." Medea's story was not an isolated act of uncontrolled passion but a reminder that things are not always what they seem and that contact with someone tainted with evil represents danger to the whole society.

A fifth-century Greek citizen was only important insofar as his or her connection to society. The ancient Greeks thought of the individual not as a unique entity but as a component in the larger organism of society. The Greek view of the individual differed from the modern view, as Hamilton wrote: "To the Greeks [character] was a man's share in qualities all men partake of; it united each one to the rest. We are interested in people's special characteristics, the things in this or that person which are different from the general. The Greeks, on the contrary, thought what was important in a man were precisely the qualities he shared with all mankind." Thus the Athenian audience would consider Medea's resemblance to themselves, her place in society, and her effect upon it. Furthermore, the citizen wholly belonged to the city, sharing in the city's well-being, beliefs, and laws. Religion especially was, according to E. R. Dodds in The Greeks and the Irrational, a "collective responsibility." If one person committed an act of sacrilege, the gods might punish the whole city. Therefore, each citizen had a moral obligation and civic duty to obey the religious customs and honor its gods. To do otherwise was dangerous: during the final thirty years of the fifth century B.C., intellectuals whose ideas threatened tradition were successfully prosecuted on the grounds of disbelieving in the gods. At the same time, there was no separation between religion, law, and customs—rites, prayers, recipes, and legislature peacefully coexisted. All were civic obligations to which the citizens submitted willingly. "The citizen was subordinate in everything, and without any reserve, to the city; he belonged to it body and soul," wrote Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges in The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome.
Rather than feeling bound by confines of a restrictive society, the ancient Greeks valued their membership in a society, it was critical to them. That is why Jason's comment, that Medea had found favor among her new neighbors, was not as trivial as it sounds to the modern ear, and why Medea shows so much dismay at having nowhere to go after Creon banishes her. The fact that Medea left her own city to run off with Jason was, to ancient Greek audiences, evidence of a flaw in Medea's ability to remain connected to her society. The chorus' reminder, "there is no sorrow above the loss of a native land," would only confirm what the audience already knew.

Beyond the perimeter of the city or community, humans were connected in other ways. The emotions and drives that lie behind actions and feelings were not simply common sensations but palpable forces that flowed through all humankind. Fate both surrounded the individual and society and also ran through them, moving individuals to act in a prescribed manner. The impulses which tempted humans to misdeeds were considered outside of human control, and "endowed with a life and energy of their own," according to Dodds. Epidemics and famines were "demons" just as were urges toward sinful acts. Fate was fused with the will of the gods; Dodds quoted Pindar, who put it this way: "the great purpose of Zeus directs the daemon [demon] of the men he loves." Medea realizes, "The gods and I, I in a kind of madness, have contrived all this." Against these forces, humans were helpless to defend themselves; they would be foolish to defy the gods. The ancient Greeks had no concept of "will" in the sense of "freedom of choice" but rather felt at the mercy of sensations moving through them. Passions could overwhelm them and obscure their ability to make rational decisions. These passions might come from the gods, from inherited guilt, or from hubris—excessive arrogance. When Medea argues with herself, she confronts her demon, the irrational force demanding the deaths of her two sons. She acknowledges the wickedness of this act but finds no power to escape the emotions that will force her to act: "Stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury, fury that brings upon mortals the greatest of evils." The chorus acknowledges Medea's powerlessness to free herself from the grip of such a force: "Medea, a god has thrown suffering upon you in waves of despair." Fate possesses Medea, and it becomes Medea's fate to murder her own children. The concept of Medea having a "motive" or "choosing" to kill her sons would not have made sense to Euripides' s audience.

The Greek rationalists Aristotle and Plato argued that humans did not have to fall prey to the demons of passion but could, with training and resolution, endeavor to maintain their rationality in the face of these demons. Euripides pits the rationalists against the fatalists in Medea in the form of the chorus who consistently represent the voice of quiet rationalism. The Corinthian women sympathize with Medea's grief and outrage, but they counsel moderation in seeking revenge: "I both wish to help you and support the normal ways of mankind, and tell you not to do this thing." However, their counsel proves impotent in the face of the forces driving Medea. She tells them that no compromise is possible and turns her attention to calling Jason back. Euripides's audience would have pondered the question whether Medea had the capacity for rational behavior under the circumstances of Jason's betrayal and Creon's decree of banishment. Yet, the question would not have been cast in terms of the conflict between Medea and Jason, two individuals, but of the conflict within Medea, between her rational mind and the fates driving her.

To complicate matters, the Greeks considered guilt a kind of contamination that spread through contact or through inheritance. The Corinthians might indeed have killed Medea's children to eliminate the danger they represented. Although innocent in their youth, Medea's offspring would surely manifest her evilness when they grew up because they were polluted through inheritance. All of Medea's descendants would carry her curse. In a way, her murdering the children and ending her lineage saves Corinth the trouble of either killing them or suffering the consequences of harboring them, for any contact with them was potentially dangerous. The city that hosted them would bring down upon itself the wrath of the gods. Medea's killing the children while they are still innocent, then, serves as a kind of sacrificial act that purifies the city of Corinth.

The chorus recognizes that Medea, already banished from Corinth, will make herself an outcast by committing her horrendous crime. The women tell Medea that she "is not pure with the rest" and ask her what
city could accept a woman who murdered of her own children. The pollution of guilt can result from contact as well as inheritance. Corinth may unwittingly have brought disaster upon itself for welcoming Medea into their society in the first place, falling prey to her charm in spite of knowing that she had abandoned her family and city and had killed her own brother to facilitate Jason's escape. Or perhaps Jason brought on the disaster by his ambition to marry the King's daughter and secure a place in Corinthian society; his hubris put his adopted city into danger. Either or both of these contaminating factors led to the disaster of Medea murdering the King and Princess of Corinth. Jason and Medea sinned against each other, but they also sinned against the city of Corinth—their sin was that of profane contact. Jason and Medea are foreigners who entered the city and covertly brought pollution in their wake.

The year that Euripides presented his play, the devastating Peloponnesian War was being waged. This was the first major war the Greeks had fought against people of their own ethnic background, introducing a new difficulty in identifying the enemy. Medea contains a sub-theme concerning the danger of mistaken appearances. When Medea's sons deliver her gifts to Creon's daughter, she at first is irritated by their presence—she mistakenly takes them for enemies. Ironically, her first reaction was the more accurate one. But seeing the bright gifts, she welcome them and completely accepts the pretext of their visit, as Medea hoped she would. The young princess is tricked by appearances, just as were the Trojans when the Greeks presented a "gift" horse that secretly harbored Odysseus and his best warriors. That night the Greek warriors burst out of the horse's belly and slaughtered the sleeping Trojans. Likewise, the poison in Medea's gifts takes effect the moment Jason's new wife innocently dons the robe and crown. Euripides plays on the anxieties of his audience over their ability to recognize enemies and to know when and when not to trust others. Effectively, the King's daughter was polluted through unknown and dangerous contact with Medea via poisoned gifts. Nor does the cycle end with the young princess. Creon becomes enmeshed in his daughter's poisoned embrace and dies with her, despite his efforts to disentangle himself. This gruesome detail, related by the messenger in almost lyrical prose, demonstrates how even the desire for contact with a known loved one can bring about disaster.

Creon's fate most aptly fulfills the closing lines of the chorus: "What we thought is not confirmed and what we thought not god contrives." This is the Euripidean version of "expect the unexpected," a stock phrase with which a number of his plays abruptly end. Euripides suggests that ironically, passion—the same force that drives humans to desire contact with others—has the capacity to destroy. Jason is guilty of misdirected passion on several counts. He initially brought his fate upon himself by marrying a foreign wife, a known sorceress, and then betraying her. He also allowed his ambitious desire for connection with Corinthian society to turn him away from a faithful, loving wife and their two sons. Medea's culpability is thus compromised by Jason's. Medea herself has a passionate, reckless nature, which makes her a perfect medium for the expression of the forces of passion orchestrated by the gods. Whether Medea or the gods are to blame for the infanticide she commits, her act, as far as Euripides's Athenian audience would have been concerned, would generate a civic disaster. She became a danger for Corinth, and banishing her made her all the more dangerous. Euripides's deeply pessimistic and fatalistic play would have been disturbing to his Athenian audience; perhaps that is why his tetralogy—which include Medea—failed to win the festival prize.


**Essays and Criticism: Eunpidean Drama, Myth, Theme, and Structure**

The intense centripetal focus of this tragedy begins in the prologue. Its three parts, monologue, dialogue and a frightened anapaestic series punctuated by Medea's off-stage cries, produce their complementary effects in an ascending scale of excitement. The first speaker is the Nurse, and so our earliest impression of Medea comes through an intimate and sympathetic witness. Her news, that Jason has deserted Medea for the daughter of
King Creon, is enclosed by accounts of the past services of Medea to Jason and to the city which has sheltered him, and, hideous as these services have been, they are presented in the light of Medea's passionate devotion to her husband. The description of Medea's mood suggests a savage, wounded animal and in the Nurse's apprehension of some monstrous deed (perhaps against the children, whose sight Medea now abhors) we get our first warning, from the one who knows her best, of what Medea can become, when wronged.

Enter the Tutor, leading the children of Medea. As the bearer of fresh news—that Creon is about to exile Medea—and more particularly as the guardian of the children, he increases the sense of apprehension and makes it more specific. The Nurse redoubles her worried chatter:

O keep the children from her.. for even now I saw her glaring at them like an angry bull. She'll not
leave this fit, too well I know it, till she has charged at someone. May it be enemies, not friends, she chooses!

Two savage cries, off-stage, provide the final impact of this prologue: Medea screams her wrongs and curses husband, children, "all the house." The brief intensity of these cries, contrasted with the Nurse's long-winded moralizing, brings the prologue to a chilling climax. The series of emotions traversed—sympathy, apprehension, horror—anticipates in a few rapid strokes the responses which, in the same sequence, the coming action will evoke.

This sinister blend of effects is repeated, in choral terms, in the parodos, where the brief songs expressing sympathy and fear are harshly punctuated by Medea's off-stage cries. The direction of this tragedy requires that the Chorus should begin by feeling sympathy for Medea. Thus, singing as women rather than as Corinthians, they remind us that it was Jason's vows, by which Medea now curses him, which first induced her to take her ill-starred voyage to Greece.

The contrast between the fury of Medea's initial cries and the controlled and calculated rhetoric of her opening address to the Corinthian women has already been compared with the presentation of Phaedra in the Hippolytus. The same dramatic purpose is served in both cases: that of showing in striking contrast the most elemental and the most civilized or even sophisticated aspects of the same personality. What difference there is between the two contrasts is due to the difference between the two women. Even in hysteria, Phaedra seeks to cloak her naked passion (this impulse is, indeed, the cause of her hysteria); later, in her discourse on human frailty (her own included) one feels that she expresses her own character more truthfully than does Medea in her official bid for sympathy. Freudians, no doubt, could express these same distinctions more accurately in terms of the ego, the super ego and the id.

Medea's purpose in her opening speech is, purely and simply, to win the Chorus of female citizens to her side. As an apiece of rhetoric (this time needing no apology for dramatic relevance) the speech is one of the poet's finest passages. It begins on a note of specious but ingratiating familiarity, moves on to the briefest possible indication ("I'm finished, good women, my husband has betrayed me!") of the speaker's plight, and then concentrates with a wealth of poygantly familiar detail on 'woman's lot," a trouble which the Chorus shares. "We women are a timid lot... but wronged in marriage, there's none more murderous!" All Medea has asked is silent co-operation. By the end of her speech, the Chorus, to a woman regards her vengeance as its own.

The poet's purpose in this passage is, perhaps, more complex than Medea's, though it has much in common with it: we, too, like the Chorus, are destined to begin in pity then to move through fear to horrified revulsion. But to see the larger dramatic purpose of the speech we must consider it in relation to the whole presentation of Jason's barbarian wife.
Prior to this speech, Medea is known to us only as the terrifying witch whom the dramatist has received from the tradition; even if we have no direct knowledge of that tradition, both deeds and character of that Medea have been emphatically made known to us in the opening portions of the play. Now, for the first time, we are introduced to another Medea: a woman and a foreigner who can move the Greeks of the Chorus, and perhaps of the audience, with that disciplined compound of passion and reason which the Greeks called rhetoric. Despite her outlandish background, this Medea manages to strike a common chord in people who (as Jason so tactfully reminds her later) regarded their own society as a privilege which a barbarian must enjoy on sufferance. Thus it is that the dramatist begins, at least, to endow his folk-tale witch with something of the stature which a tragic heroine requires: here and in subsequent encounters with Creon, with Jason and with Aegeus, the many aspects of Medea's powerful personality—eloquent and cunning, wise and passionate by turns—are gradually revealed.

In facing Creon, Medea must play the fawning hypocrite to win at least a day's reprieve from exile. With nice irony, the dramatist endows her with the insight and skill to twist what should most tell against her—her reputation as "a wise one" and Creon's protective love for his own daughter—to serve her purpose. The exchange with Creon has other qualities as well. Medea's appeal "for her children's sake" to Creon's paternal instincts keeps the "children theme" before our minds, while the passage in which Medea allays Creon's fears about her special powers allows Euripides a sly, contemporary aside on the slander which clever people must suffer in society.

While something of Medea's power appears even in the scene with Creon, the full force of her personality is necessarily muted by the situation. This briefly piano effect is more than redressed by her next and most dramatic encounter. Here Medea's greatest advantage is achieved at the expense of, and in contrast to, the traditionally "epic" figure of Jason, for the hero of the good ship Argo cuts a very sorry figure in her presence. Generosity, absolute loyalties, action and feeling on the grand scale, are the hallmarks of the heroic character. Jason's quibbling rationalization of his actions Medea answers with the single word... ("O utter shameless brazenness!"), as she launches into an impassioned account of all that she has done for him. Consistently, Jason plays the sophist to a heroic Medea: for past favours, he has really Cypns to thank, not her; besides, for a barbarian, life and fame among the Greeks is more than just requital of her service. Previously, horror may have been our main reaction to Medea's deeds for Jason. Now, confronted by Jason's niggling sums in settling the accounts of love, we are impressed by the wild generosity of passion which made them possible.

The effect of the Aegeus scene on the "public image" of Medea seems often to have been missed by the critics, distracted, no doubt, by arguments concerning its allegedly "episodic" nature. Surely we must be impressed by Aegeus' respect for Medea's advice and the readiness with which he confides in her. Nor does he speak in the tone which one reserves for one's witch-doctor: rather, they converse on terms of mutual regard—witness the warmth of their greetings and the exchange of confidence and sympathy with one another's plight. It should be noted, too, that Medea's utterances acquire a sort of brisk professionalism, completely different in tone from other speeches in the play, as soon as Aegeus begins his consultation; this is our only actual view in the play of Medea as a specialist, a professional "wise woman." And the readiness with which Aegeus accepts Medea's offer to put an end to his childlessness in return for future sanctuary at Athens shows a confidence in her powers at least equal to that which he feels in Apollo's oracle or in the wise and pious Pittheus of Trozen. In general, this treatment from the King of Athens does as much as anything to establish Medea in our minds as a "personage" not to be disposed of as a mere gypsy baggage from barbarian lands.

The Aegeus episode is, of course, important for other reasons as well; it heralds, as we shall see, a turning-point in Medea's career of vengeance and in the sympathy which the Chorus has hitherto afforded her.

In her encounters with Creon and Aegeus, Medea has assumed soft-spoken roles which circumstances have forced upon her. After both these encounters, the essential single-minded Medea reappears in impassioned
outbursts alone with the Chorus. ("Do you think," she reassures the Chorus. ... about her attitude to Creon, "that I’d have ever fawned on that one, if I’d not been weaving wiles to serve my ends?") There is, however, a terrible difference in the content of these two speeches, and this gulf is marked by the sharp contrast in tone between the earlier and later choral lyrics of the play. In the first of these speeches, Medea shows, it is true, a sinister delight in pondering the different routes—poison or the knife—by which her enemies may be despatched, but however much her oath "by Hecate, the sharer of my hearth" may chill us, it is still her enemies she speaks of killing.

In the lyric (almost "a song for feminists") which follows this speech, the Chorus is still full of sympathy for Medea. As often in Euripides, the first strophe and antistrophe generalize on the situation (here, "the injustice done to women") while the second strophic pair applies the theme directly to the tragic sufferer:

Now rivers flow upstream and the established course of justice is reversed—for now 'tis men who are unjust and laugh at oaths ... 

Through the ages, man-made songs show women faithless, but if we women had the gift of song, we'd
sing a different tune (paraphrase)

So with you, Medea. Love brought you across the seas to Greece. But now, abandoned (for no longer do Greeks reverence marriage oaths) you have no refuge, no paternal home, as a royal rival destroys your marriage bed. (paraphrase)

The chorus which follows the encounter with Jason is not, however, quite as single-minded in its championship of women and Medea. The first strophe, praising moderate love, decries that excessive passion which ruins judgment and virtue; the answering antistrophe, which praises self-control (sophrosyne), decries the adulterous love which causes strife. Thus, in the generalizing part of this lyric, the Chorus glances at the faults of both Medea and Jason in turn. In the second half, however, nothing distracts attention from sympathy for the deserted and homeless foreigner.

The decisive change in the dramatic action and in the attitude of the Chorus occurs after the scene with Aegeus, for it is then that Medea announces the awful means by which she plans to take vengeance on her husband. The excellence of the play's structure is well illustrated by the placing of this crisis and by the kinds of effect which precede and follow it. The gradual revelation of Medea's personality has now been completed, save for one essential feature which is to give the agon its tragic meaning. The 'children theme," so essential to this meaning, has been kept constantly before our minds: in the frightened premonitions of the Nurse and in Medea's own off-stage curses; in Medea's exploitation of Creon's paternal instincts, and, ironically enough, in Jason's own claim that he is acting for his family's sake: "For what need have you of children?" ' he asks Medea. The Aegeus episode itself is, of course, vital both to this theme and to the mechanics of the plot. Aegeus' own royal trouble, childlessness, and the lengths to which he goes to cure it, is our most forcible reminder of a king's essential need of sons. Again, in promising the outcast sanctuary in Athens, Aegeus unwittingly removes the only barrier to Medea's plans and her last reticence in revealing them to the Chorus.

Medea's three addresses to the Chorus follow an ascending scale in keeping with the gradually increasing impetus in plot and theme. In the first and most rhetorical of these, Medea's passion is rigorously subordinated to her immediate purpose of winning the Chorus to her side. The second speech with its curse by Hecate and its pondering of the various means of murder, is both more savage and more sinister, but it tells us little of Medea's actual intentions. Only after the scene with Aegeus does she shout for all to hear the full horror of the vengeance which she plans.
One of the most shocking effects of this speech comes from the lack of horror which Medea displays herself. The plan to send her children to the princess bearing poisoned robes is told with hideous matter-of-factness, and only an occasional word or phrase suggests any hesitation at the awful plan of slaying her children for the sake of vengeance on their father. All this suggests that the hints given in the prologue told the truth, that Medea has from the start been determined on this course of action. The main emphasis of the speech is that laughter from one's enemies is not to be endured and the cry, "grievous to my enemies and kindly to my friends" serves as a grim reminder of the accuracy of the Nurse's description (at v. 38) of Medea's spirit.

It is in the ode immediately following these dreadful revelations that the Chorus begins to withdraw its allegiance from Medea. The first strophe and antistrophe deal, in highly poetic terms, with the purity and beauty of Athens. Euripides may well have enjoyed pleasing his fellow citizens and himself with such idealized pictures of his city, but here he does not do so at the expense of the dramatic situation. The point of the description appears in the second strophic pair: "How," asks the Chorus, 'will such a city ever welcome you, Medea, a child-murderer polluting all you meet?" Now the respect and chivalrous treatment which Medea had won from the King of Athens has been one of the most impressive features of her earlier presentation; the immediate effect of that treatment, however, has been to confirm Medea in her secret and terrible decision. Thus to dwell as the Chorus does on the hideous uncongeniality between Medea the child-murderer and the pure and serene haven which she has chosen in an effective way of expressing the self-destruction which her plans involve. The terms in which Athens is described are admirably suited to this purpose: it is the physical serenity of the place which is stressed, for this is the aspect which is particularly vulnerable to the pollution with which Medea threatens it. Thus, Athens is "the sacred, un plundered land—where golden Harmonia produced the Muses nine"; the land whose children "ever culling illustrious wisdom, stride spendidly under skies of glorious brightness." What sharper contrast to the black deeds of Medea could we find than all this bright serenity? Even Cypris, so dread a goddess in Medea's case, "breathes moderate, pleasure-wafting breezes on this land."

The actual execution of Medea's plot against the Princess needs little comment. It provides, of course, one of the most exciting and theatrical of the playwright's intrigues and suggests, perhaps, at least one reason why the Medea, of all Greek drama, has survived most successfully as a play which is still presented on the stage. The gulling of the pompous Jason, unaware as ever of his wife's true nature; the contrast between the children's innocence and the glittering fatality of the gifts they bear; the suspense, heightened by the vivid anticipations of the Chorus, as to whether the Princess will yield to the "heavenly charm" of these adornments; the gruesome account, in the messenger's speech, of the switch from delight to anguish, then all the gory details of the deaths themselves: all this provides many opportunities (and none is missed) for melodrama and irony of the more obvious sort. Such effects are legitimate enough in themselves, particularly in view of the sort of creature which Medea is to become before the last scene is ended; nevertheless, a tendency to overplay this aspect of the drama, from the second scene with Jason to the murder of the children, has sometimes obscured certain more subtly tragic effects with which it is combined. Thus far the dramatist has presented a Medea who combines the elemental passion of the folk-tale witch with certain qualities of mind, emotion and personality which let her tower above the several royal and (conventionally) heroic characters who appear beside her on the stage. Now, in her last speech to the Chorus this human and potentially tragic Medea vanishes: instead we hear an embodiment of the alastor (the avenging spirit from Hades) coldly announcing child-murder as a necessary part of her revenge. If this is the Medea which we are to watch without relief to the play's end, then both the Chorus and ourselves have been the dupes, both of the "heroine" and of the dramatist, for yielding our sympathy and interest. Fortunately, however, it is the air of cold inflexibility which is false: a cloak of desperate resolution hiding the maternal anguish as well as a device by which the dramatist may, in the end, present that anguish more effectively.

The agony of Medea begins quietly and unexpectedly in the scene with Jason. The "reconciliation speech," the apology to Jason, Medea accomplishes with all her usual aplomb. The first onset of grief suddenly occurs at the entry of the children, summoned to heal the reconciliation, when Jason thus addresses them: "Only grow
up! Your father and whatever gods are kindly will assure the rest! Soon may I see you glorying in the strength of youth...." In each instance, the effect of Medea's tears is so veiled by her ambiguous explanations, so muted by her resourceful ironies, that some critics have taken the tears themselves as a calculated device for securing Jason's sympathy. But Medea's dissimulation only shows us the measure of her will in masking, with characteristic ingenuity, the anguish which, for a moment, overcomes her. So viewed, this scene anticipates, in miniature, the major struggle to come.

The alternation of the human and the fiendish Medea in the following scenes corresponds to the curious interweaving of the tragic and the macabre elements in the double catastrophe. The chorus which follows the despatch of the children with the gifts heralds both deeds of violence: the first strophe and antistrophe anticipate, with sinister vividness, the temptation of the Princess and its fatal results, while the concluding strophic pair expresses grief for the woes of Jason and Medea, respectively, in the coming murder of the children. The report of what has happened at the palace is divided, most remarkably, into two parts. The Tutor's announcement that the children and their gifts have been accepted is, to his surprise, greeted with sullen gloom by Medea; on the other hand, the Messenger's announcement in the following episode, of the deaths which the gifts have caused is received with hideous joy. In between these two reports comes the most crucial passage in the play: that agonizing self-debate in which Medea twice revokes and twice confirms her decision to slay her children. After the Messenger Speech, lengthy... with all the harrowing details, we are brought with the speed of necessity to the final catastrophe for, Medea argues desperately, if their mother does not kill the children now, some hostile hand may do so... the beginning of the speech reminds us of the truth of the matter: the original decision to slay the children was a part, perhaps the major part, of the original plan, before the fatal gifts were sent. Medea utters her final determination with the grim conviction that for her a life of misery must now begin: "Steel your heart for one brief day—then mourn thereafter!"

A final brief and despairing lyric precedes the off-stage murder. It is significant that now the Chorus no longer addresses its pleas to Medea but to the "nature" deities, Earth and Sun (Medea's grandsire) to restrain this unnatural murderer, this embodiment of a vengeance-driven Eriny, which Medea has become. For Medea herself they have only despairing questions and equally dismal prophecies. Why are the two deeds of violence, in many ways so different, presented in this interwoven fashion? Partly, no doubt, for the practical reason that the poet does not wish to lose dramatic impetus by having to work up two separate crises. But there are, I think, reasons more significant than this.

From her folk-tale chrysalis, Medea has emerged, in this play, as a human heroine with the power to achieve her ends in a highly civilized social context (as Jason reminds her) against all odds. So far, however, save for a few hints in the second scene with Jason, her passion for vengeance has been tempered by no redeeming emotion: though human, she is not sympathetic (the Chorus sympathizes with her situation rather than with her): we cannot achieve any degree of identification with her. Again, so far there has been no essential conflict in this play. True, Medea, abandoned and alone in a hostile state, has had to bend two kings, a Chorus of Corinthian women and an ambitious husband to her will, but this achievement is only the measure of her greatness: in this play, Medea herself is really the only one capable of resisting Medea. Regarded as a tragic figure, the Medea of the earlier scenes corresponds to a hate-ridden Philoctetes as yet undisturbed by the friendship of Neoptolemus, or to a stubbornly resentful Achilles, untried by the loss of Patroclus.

Medea's first full statement of her plans (in the last of her three addresses to the Chorus) has shocked us by its coldness. More recently, in the second scene with Jason, we have seen signs that this frozen determination does not represent the whole Medea. Now, when the child-murder suddenly becomes imminent with the success of the first phase of the plan, Medea's resolution falters for the first time. Thus the great speech at 1019 ff. is essential to the characterization of Medea and to the meaning of the play.

If Medea's sudden flood of emotion, her passionate regrets for lost maternal joys, should strike us as commonplace, let us remember that that is just its purpose. We are meant, simply, to realize that Medea loves
her children as deeply as any woman does. So, too, the sudden effects of the children's smiles, and of Medea's lightning switches from "I cannot do it" to "I must," and back again, far from being bathetic melodrama, are essential to the realistic presentation of the struggle in Medea's soul. Without this scene, what Medea eventually becomes would indeed smack of melodrama. That monstrous figure attains tragic significance only when we see it as the result of a conflict—of a victory, as Medea herself expresses it—of her all-consuming passion for vengeance over her better counsels. To grasp the nature of this struggle, we must see the good in Medea before we see her at her worst. The plot requires that something of her lethal savagery should appear before the ultimate horror of the child-murder, but had we already seen her gloating over the details of her palace butchery the sympathetic presentation of her own agony would have been impossible. So it is that the first news from the palace, that the children and their gifts have been accepted, is greeted sadly by Medea, and that the horrible sequence to this news is postponed till after the emotional climax at vv. 1019-80. By the time that the second bulletin, showing the first results of Medea's cruelty, arrives from the palace, Medea's self-debate concerning her children, and with it the dramatic need for our sympathy, is over; indeed, the wholehearted gloating over the Messenger's hideous account, contrasting so sharply with her despondent reception of the Tutor and his news, may be meant to illustrate the new Medea, now totally committed to evil, who emerges only after the completion of her interior struggle.

In the concluding passages of the play, after the murder of the children, the monstrous and inhuman aspects of Medea are played up in a variety of ways. The Chorus by its reference to Ino, intimates that no human mother could bear to live after slaying her children and Jason echoes this thought when he cries, "Can you still look upon the sun and earth, after enduring such an impious deed?" And yet Medea lives and flourishes. More significant, perhaps, is Jason's bitter reference to the unnatural deeds of Medea—deeds from which he took the profit—against her own family in Colchis. During the very human action of this play, little has been made of these dark deeds, save as examples of Medea's devotion to the ingrate Jason, but now that "Medea the fiend" has triumphed over the human heroine this reminder of the barbarous, magic-working Medea of the folk tale is all too apposite. Jason complains that the Alastor which should pursue Medea for these deeds is pursuing him instead, but we who have witnessed the moral destruction of Medea in the preceding episode are all too well aware that the alastor has not missed its mark. As for the murderess herself, Medea the avenger, in the final scene with Jason, has quite defeated Medea, the tortured mother: "... Call me lioness or Scylla, as you will... as long as I have reached your vitals "My grief is solaced if you cannot mock!"

The "improbable" and inorganic ending of the play—Medea's departure in the Sun-god's fiery chariot—is a feature of the play which appears to have irritated Aristotle. (Poetics 1454b 1-2) However, such macabre touches, such departures from the real world of tragedy, if they serve some purpose, are surely permissible when the tragic meaning has already been expressed. That, in this instance, the supernatural intervention is not meant to intrude on the real action of the play has already been shown by the fact that, earlier, the human and the tragic Medea has been concerned with such practical matters as the arrangement for asylum at Athens and the impossibility of escaping with her children from the vengeful Corinthians. (See, for example, lines 1236-41). Thus the only point of interest in the deus-ex-machina ending lies in the symbolic purpose which this device fulfills. This has been variously expressed by critics in accordance with their different views of Euripides' "Medea theme." Kitto finds in the device the poet's answer to the Chorus's and Jason's idea that "Sun and Earth, the most elemental things in the Universe, have been outraged by these terrible crimes," while Lesky and M. P. Cunningham both regard the chariot scene as marking the fundamental, qualitative change which her awful deed has effected in Medea. In terms of the present study, it seems fair to suggest that by this final macabre touch of symbolism, the poet is once again expressing the transformation of a human heroine back to the folk-tale fiend of magic powers.

If Medea does not entirely understand every aspect of her whirling character, she would do well to consult Judith Anderson. For Miss Anderson understands the character more thoroughly than Medea Euripides or the scholars, and it would be useless now for anyone else to attempt the part. Using a new text by Robinson Jeffers, she set a landmark in the theatre at the National last evening, where she gave a burning performance in a savage part.

Mr. Jeffers' "free adaptation," as it is called, spares the supernatural bogeymen of the classical Greek drama and gets on briskly with the terrifying story of a woman obsessed with revenge. His verse is modern; his words are sharp and vivid, and his text does not worship gods that are dead.

Since Miss Anderson is a modern, the Jeffers text suits her perfectly and releases a torrent of acting incomparable for passion and scope. Miss Anderson's Medea is mad with the fury of a woman of rare stature. She is barbaric by inheritance, but she has heroic strength and vibrant perceptions. Animal-like in her physical reactions, she plots the doom of her enemies with the intelligence of a priestess of black magic—at once obscene and inspired. Between those two poles she fills the evening with fire, horror, rage and character. Although Miss Anderson has left some memorable marks on great women in the theatre, Medea has summoned all her powers as an actress. Now everyone realizes that she has been destined for Medea from the start.

The general performance and the production are all of a piece. As the nurse, Florence Reed is giving an eminent performance that conveys the weariness and apprehensions of a devoted servant who does not quarrel with fate. John Gielgud's Jason is a lucid, solemn egotist well expressed in terms of the theatre. As Creon, Albert Hecht has the commanding voice and the imperiousness of a working monarch. The chorus of women, which has been refreshingly arranged in Mr. Gielgud's unhackneyed direction, is well acted by Grace Mills, Kathryn Grill and Leone Wilson. The parts of the two young sons are disarmingly represented in the guileless acting of Gene Lee and Peter Moss. Hugh Franklin as Aegeus and Don McHenry as the Tutor give agreeable performances, innocent of the stuffiness peculiar to most classical productions.

Ben Edwards' setting of the doorway to a Greek house is no more than pedestrian designing, although Peggy Clark has lighted it dramatically, and Castillo has dressed the characters well. Your correspondent could do very well without the conventional theatrical effects—the lightning and the surf especially, for, unlike the acting, they derive from the old-fashioned theatre of rant and ham. Out of respect for Miss Anderson's magnificent acting in this incarnadined drama, they ought to be locked up in the lumber room. For she has freed Medea from all the old traditions as if the character had just been created. Perhaps that is exactly what has happened. Perhaps Medea was never fully created until Miss Anderson breathed immortal fire into it last evening.