

CHAPTER 17

EURIPIDES' MEDEA:

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON TRAGEDY

MAIN POINTS

1. Euripides' plays may have been considered too strange for the taste of the conservative Athenian audience.

2. Medea (431 B.C.) stresses the female perspective: Medea has given up everything for Jason; her reward is to have him desert her for a younger, richer, and prettier woman, a princess.

3. Medea plays the archetypal role of the helper-maiden, saving Jason from many threats. Indeed, his dependence on her for success and even survival is far more complete than that of the usual hero on his helper-maiden's assistance.

4. Jason denies Medea's role in helping him and wants to deprive her of her role as mother of their children, too.

5. Medea has all the strengths of the tragic hero: the intensity, the commitment, and the heroic acts. The chorus implies that motherhood is heroic in itself.

6. Medea believes that her gods, Hecate, Themis, and Zeus, are with her in her fury against Jason; he is a breaker of oaths and deserves punishment, but it is the princess and the children who are made to suffer.

7. The play opens with Medea engaging in a last-ditch attempt to use rhetoric, not violence. Jason is incapable of listening; in language as in life, he confuses style with substance. He often uses "truth" to establish his arguments, but the context reveals his twisting of that truth. He is a prime example of sophistic argument.

8. Medea announces openly her plans and acknowledges the deed afterward. But she can also use speech very cleverly to hide her true feelings and buy time and opportunity.

9. Like the male hero, Medea is a passionate character, driven by irrational forces to actions that hurt the ones she loves. Like Agave and Clytemnestra, Medea has at her disposal none of the expiatory rituals available to male heroes who kill their families. Medea's vague reference to a ritual she will establish may actually reflect the existence at Corinth of rituals associated with Medea.

10. Euripides uses the capacity of the drama to present multiple points of view, shifting angles to make a different perspective appear. Just as the audience begins to sympathize with Medea, the poet shifts our view, to expose a more frightening side of her character.

11. While most other female protagonists pay the price for their crimes in Greek tragedies, Medea escapes punishment by going to Athens, where King Aegeus gives her refuge.

12. In contrast to most other dramas, Medea's murder is described in detail onstage. It is possible that the child murder was Euripides's own invention, as other versions of Medea's story exclude it. If so, the event would have given the Athenian audience a frisson of horrified surprise.

13. There are many diverse myths about Medea. It is possible that she was a goddess of childbirth and nursing. Hera and Artemis, who also receive prayers from birthing women, can turn on such a woman, with disastrous results for her and/or her infant. Medea's behavior in Euripides' play may reflect that ambiguous potential of deities involved in the crisis of childbirth.

14. According to one version of the myth, Medea had to flee Athens after making an attempt on Theseus's life. She then settled in the country that was to be called "Media." Thus she became the eponymous ancestor/founder of the Medes.

15. In non-Euripidean versions of her myth, more attention is focused on Medea's struggle with the conflicting demands of love for Jason and loyalty to her birth family.

16. In Euripides's plays, the common people provide an important perspective, such as the women of Corinth in Medea who make moral distinctions.

17. The nurse in Medea advocates moderation as self-control and comments on the perversity of a self-indulgent upper class. The poet probably intended his democratic Athenian audience to sympathize and agree with the wise "common people" of this tragedy.

18. Medea and Jason belong to the upper class, but they are dispossessed; they are depicted at home, and not on some adventure; their problems are monetary, not metaphysical; in Medea, the heroes act like ordinary people.

19. Medea is the one who comes closest to the suffering protagonist of the Greek drama.

20. Jason will not acknowledge his complicity in Medea's crimes and is revealed as a coward who uses women for his own gain. His death is unheroic; he is struck on the head by a beam while asleep on his ship.

21. In traditional tragedies, important people commit appalling deeds, and their passions as well as their violence are portrayed nobly. In Medea, Euripides shows us the inhuman brutality of the murder by describing it in detail; the violence is not ennobling but merely sadistic.

22. If this is what heroes are like, then perhaps, the play seems to suggest, we should admire ordinary but virtuous people instead.

23. Tragedy takes place in an unpredictable universe where the tragic protagonist may suffer disproportionately; Euripides explores the converse idea that the wicked may also prosper, as in Electra, where the daughter who slays Clytemnestra lives happily ever after.

24. In Electra, Euripides incorporates parody, spoofing Aeschylus's recognition scene between the siblings Electra and Orestes.

25. In Medea, he mocks the traditional tragic vision of the ancient myths' heroic values.

26. In the play's final speech, the chorus comments on the unreliability of the gods. There is no sign of divine acceptance; no gods provide Medea with symbolic sanctions.

27. When Medea taunts Jason with the notion that he thinks the old gods no longer prevail, she may be referring to an older generation of chthonic gods such as Hecate who have taken over. A worshiper of Hecate, Medea appears to have powers beyond those of ordinary mortals: she drives the chariot of her grandfather, Helios; she renews the fertility of the old King Aegeus.

28. If so, we are back in an amoral universe of vengeance where irrational forces prevail.

29. Medea carries out the three functions of the Great Goddess: she gives life, she brings death, and she engineers transformations.

30. Though Athens was a city of justice and equality, it oppressed its women, just as Jason did. Since the city was preparing for the war with Sparta, perhaps the Athenians were receptive to Euripides' vision of the world gone mad.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Euripides,
Medea

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Medea, sorceress daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis, wife of Jason

Jason, Greek adventurer who brought back the Golden Fleece

Aegeus, king of Athens, Theseus's father

Apsyrtus, Medea's young brother, whom she murders as the Argonauts make their escape

Electra, Orestes's sister, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's daughter

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)