ON TEACHING EURIPIDES’ MEDEA

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Euripides’ Medea remains one of the most often performed Greek tragedies today, and one of the favourite tragedies for secondary school students to read in Classics or English courses. Since there is a tremendous amount of scholarship already published on this play of plays, this article is intended to provide a quick reminder of the background to the play, a discussion of the character of the chorus and the character of Medea, and thus a variety of topics which students can ‘think about’ or indeed write essays about. It also includes some previously unpublished comments by an actress and a director of an international production of Medea from 2002.¹

1 The original production

We know that Euripides’ Medea was first produced in March of 431 BCE at the City Dionysia festival in Athens. How do we know this? In the medieval manuscripts of the Medea, the play is preceded by a hypothesis or ‘summary’ attributed to Aristophanes the Grammarian (also known as Aristophanes of Byzantium, the Alexandrian scholar of the 3rd to 2nd century BCE), who writes that the play was produced ‘in the archonship of Pythodoros, in the first year of the 87th Olympiad’, which is 431 BCE. Later in the same year, war broke out between Athens and Sparta, inaugurating the Peloponnesian War.

At the City Dionysia it was customary for three tragic playwrights to compete against each other, and each playwright would produce four plays—three tragedies, and a satyr-play (a kind of burlesque with a chorus of satyrs). According to Aristophanes the Grammarian’s hypothesis, in 431 BCE the three competitors were Euphorion (the son of the deceased playwright Aischylos), Sophokles (who was about 65 years old at the time), and Euripides (who was just about age 50). We know that Euphorion was awarded first prize, Sophokles second place, and Euripides third and last.²

Aristophanes the Grammarian’s hypothesis also states that Euripides produced his Medea with the (now lost) tragedies Diktys and Philoktetes, and the satyr-play The Harvesters (Therístai). Diktys was a fisherman, half-brother of King Polydektes of the island of Seriphos. Diktys found Danaë and her infant son, the future hero Perseus, inside a chest that washed ashore, and raised Perseus as his own son; then Polydektes tried to seduce Danaë. Philoktetes was a Greek hero bound for the Trojan War when he was bitten by a snake; he was abandoned on the island of Lemnos when his wound refused to heal; yet it was prophesied that his bow was needed to sack Troy. Sophokles’ version of Philoktetes (from 409 BCE) does survive, but

¹ Throughout this article I have used English transliterations of the Ancient Greek spellings (Kreon, Korinthos, Aigeus, etc.). There are only a few exceptions in Latinized forms, e.g., Medea, Jason, Aristotle, Helen, Athens, and Crete. All English translations of Euripides are my own.
² An English translation by Celia Luschnig of the two hypotheses to the Medea (one anonymous, one by Aristophanes of Byzantium) can be found online at the website of ‘Diotima: Materials for the study of women and gender in the ancient world, URL www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/medeahyposcholia.shtml
Euripides’ does not, except for several fragments and some descriptions of the plot. We know nothing about *The Harvesters*. It is clear that Euripides’ three tragedies in 431 BCE did not revolve around the same myth (as, for example, Aischylos’ *Oresteia* trilogy from 458 BCE did). Nonetheless, there was a certain gender symmetry; *Medea* is about an ‘evil woman’, *Diktys* was about an unhappy (but presumably ‘good’) woman, and *Philoktetes* had no female roles at all. Perhaps an even better ‘common thread’ in these three plays was the theme of abandonment. Medea is abandoned by her husband and fights back (but ultimately to her own disadvantage); Danaë is abandoned by Zeus (the father of her child) and seduced by the half-brother of her rescuer; Philoktetes is abandoned by his Greek comrades because of his physical ailment, yet in the end, when the very persons who betrayed him desperately need his help, he must decide whether or not to forgive them. Philoktetes presumably does choose forgiveness, whilst Medea most memorably does not.

2 Background to the Jason myth

The challenge that every tragedian faced was taking a myth that was familiar to the Greek audience and telling it in a new and interesting way. Screenwriters have the same problem nowadays, if one considers, for example, the number of films that have been made on the legends of King Arthur, Robin Hood, or (most recently) British Tudor history. Any audience familiar with the legends knows that certain plot elements must occur—Guinevere and Lance-lot must commit adultery, Maid Marian and Robin Hood must fall in love, Anne Boleyn and Mary Stuart must lose their heads—but it is the subtle changes in a well-known story that stand out as a signature of a writer’s creativity. It is almost universally accepted that Euripides was the inventor of the story of Medea killing her own children; it appears that in previous versions, Medea’s children were killed by the people of Korinthos who sought vengeance for the death of their king Kreon. However, an anonymous *hypothesis* to the play suggests that Euripides borrowed the idea of a child-killing Medea from the playwright Neophron. Of course, Euripides’ play is the earliest dramatisation of the myth of Medea to survive, so the point is somewhat moot. What is more interesting, however, is how much of the legend before the play even begins is assumed to be common knowledge. Euripides makes very brief and sometimes veiled references to previous events, so it is worth informing students of the fuller details.

Jason’s father Aison, king of Iolkos, was ousted by his half-brother Pelias. Pelias told Jason, when he came of age, that he could inherit his father’s kingdom if he travelled to Kolchis (in the Black Sea) and retrieved the golden fleece (from a magical ram that had saved the life of Phrixos, a cousin of Jason’s father). Jason sailed to Kolchis on the world’s first ship, the *Argo*, with heroic sailors called Argonauts, among them famous heroes like Orpheus, Herakles, and Peleus (the father of Achilleus). When Jason arrived at Kolchis, he learned that the golden fleece was in the possession of King Aietes (a son of the Sun god Helios). Aietes’ sisters were the sorceress Kirke (famous lover of Odysseus) and Pasiphaë (wife of King Minos of Crete, and mother of Ariadne, Phaidra, and the Minotaur). Aietes’ daughter was Medea,

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3 The best discussion in English of the fragments of Euripides’ *Philoktetes* is Christopher Collard (2004).
4 For an English translation of ancient testimonia regarding who ‘invented’ the child-killing Medea (was it Euripides or Neophron?), visit URL www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/neophronnotes.shtml
and because she fell in love with Jason, she used her knowledge of magic to help him survive the challenges that Aietes placed on him. These included the yoking of fire-breathing bulls, and the sowing of dragon’s teeth which sprung up from the ground as armoured men. Medea then drugged the dragon that guarded the golden fleece and ran away with Jason back to Greece. Medea also killed her own brother (a fact she remembers at line 167), although the details are vague. At line 1334, Jason mentions how Medea killed her brother at a hearth before she stepped upon the *Argo*; was her brother an adult?5

When Jason returned to Iolkos with the golden fleece, his uncle Pelias reneged on his bargain and refused to give Jason his kingdom. Medea therefore persuaded the gullible daughters of Pelias to butcher their father; the Nurse remembers this story at lines 9f., as does Medea at 486f., 504f., and 734. Medea convinced the daughters that if they chopped up Pelias’ body and mixed it with special magic herbs in a cauldron, they could restore his youth, and she demonstrated this by cutting up an old ram and transforming it into a young lamb. But when the daughters killed Pelias and chopped him up and boiled his limbs, all they got was daddy stew. In 455 BCE, in his very first competition, twenty-four years prior to the *Medea*, Euripides produced a play entitled *Daughters of Pelias* (*Peliades*), which dramatised this story, and of which about twenty fragmentary lines survive.

With a reputation like this behind her, Medea’s actions in Euripides’ play are a kind of culmination of her monstrous capabilities. She and Jason are in exile in Korinthos because of her complicity in causing the death of Pelias. Now she kills another king (Kreon) and his daughter, and kills her own children before escaping on her dragon-wagon.

### 3 Character (*Ethos*)

In the English language, the word *character* is ambiguous. In discussions of drama, *character* can refer both to the person or rôle that an actor plays (e.g., a Medea, a Jason, an Oedipus), and to the inner qualities and motivations specific to that rôle in the text (and brought to life by the actor). Ancient Greek, however, makes a distinction here. *Prosopon* (literally, a ‘mask’ or ‘face’) means *character* in the sense of a rôle, and *ethos* means *character* in the sense of the ethical qualities of a rôle. The two Greek terms often appear together, as in the anonymous *Life of Sophokles*, which claims that ‘Sophokles made an ethos for a whole prosopon out of a mere half-line or single expression’. Such character-building was apparently a hallmark of Sophokles’ craft. Indeed, Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1460b) imagines that one criticism against the art (*techne*) of poetry might be that ‘it is not true’, to which one might respond, ‘perhaps it ought to be (*dei*)’, in the same way that ‘Sophokles said that he himself portrayed people as they ought to be (*hoious dei*), but that Euripides portrayed people as they are (*hoioi eisin*).’

Aristotle’s comment is a very deep statement. Sophokles might have had the better reputation for creating character (*ethos*), but Euripides’ skill was surely just as great, albeit with a different aim. Euripides is perfectly willing to show characters at their less grand and less attractive, which is less what they ‘ought to be’ and more true-to-life. He portrays Medea and Jason fighting over their divorce, and Kreon exiling Medea from Korinthos and admitting

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5 The well-known story of Medea chopping up an infant brother’s limbs and scattering them in the sea to prevent her father’s ship from catching up with her, is a much later version of the tale, first appearing in the *Library* attributed to Apollodorus and compiled in Roman imperial times.
he’s doing it because he fears her. Readers of fiction tend to search for characters that are morally upright, whom one can barrack for, whom we can hope will overcome adversity and live happily ever after once they have done the ‘right’ thing. But this is not what Euripides’ Medea provides, which adds to its power. There is no moral centre among the royalty in Korinthos. The male lead (Jason) is a rotten old bastard, and the title character is a woman who kills her own children; and yet Euripides makes his audience engage with her story and see things from her point of view. If there is a moral centre, it is with the chorus women who have the bravery to disagree with Medea’s ethics to her face—but they have the unenviable burden of continuing to live in a desolate city after a pair of murders they had knowledge of, but did nothing to prevent.

4 The Chorus

Every Greek tragedy has a chorus, and in the Medea it consists of fifteen Korinthian women who are Medea’s next-door neighbours. From one point of view, these chorus women are rather detached. They interact with Medea and think of her as a friend, but don’t speak much to Kreon or Jason or Aigeus, except in the briefest of platitudes. When the children head off to the palace with the deadly garments, the chorus women feel a sense of doom, that there is no hope left for the children’s lives (976f.), but they do nothing to stop it. They think about rushing into the house to help the children when they are being murdered and screaming, but of course, they never leave their orchestra; they are trapped, as it were, on the dancing floor. Some of my students have even wondered whether the chorus women are really there at all, or are instead in Medea’s imagination (at least until Jason’s final entrance at line 1293, when he has no choice but to ask them about Medea’s whereabouts). In the 19th century, when Euripides was generally unpopular, this kind of female chorus was taken as a sign of Euripides’ failure as a dramatist, an example of how Euripides had ‘degraded’ tragedy from the grandeur of Aischylos and the perfection of Sophokles, whose choruses were felt to be more ‘organic’ to their plays. But the aesthetic of a ‘detached’ chorus is not unpleasant. Because Medea’s house is not their house, the chorus women remain outside the conflict and can maintain a sharper understanding of the ‘big picture’ of the events that are happening. The Korinthian women’s famous ode about the songs of men being reversed (410-45) is a great example of their ability to step back from events and connect them to wider issues—namely, the whole history of Greek literature in which women have been blamed for marital infidelity, when in fact it is men who are the liars and the cheats. The Korinthian women also know the legends of other great persons who have suffered the same fate as the foreign princess they are watching now. When Medea kills her children, they think right away of Ino—an aunt of the god Dionysos—who also killed her sons. But the point of the comparison is that even Ino was not as bad as Medea, because Ino was driven mad before she killed her sons, whereas Medea is doing it willingly.

From another point of view, the chorus are integral to the play, and the drama wouldn’t exist without them. They provide an emotional energy for Medea as her revenge plot develops over time, and their repugnance at Medea’s plans for infanticide is surely parallel to the audience’s own moral reaction. Furthermore, contrary to what they had intended, the whole city of Korinthos itself winds up in disarray with the death of their king; the chorus women therefore have a domestic tragedy of their own to deal with. This is perhaps best explained by Fiona...
Shaw (the actress) and Deborah Warner (the director) whose production of Medea played in the UK and the USA in 2001 and 2002:

I [as Medea] am entirely reliant on them [the chorus], and I can understand anybody approaching the play having difficulty with the chorus, and the chorus themselves having difficulty with what they have to do, which is to follow the argument, sometimes contradict the argument, [and] sometimes accept the argument. […] But in relation to playing with them, I am entirely dependent on them. […] Of course, they’re terribly tired, as I am, at the end of it. The hour and a half is exactly the length you can endure this play for. They’re all out having massages all the time, in saunas trying to undo the tension. (Shaw 2002)

[One chorus member] did everything in her power not to be cast this time round. And when I asked why, she said, ‘Look, it’s terribly difficult for the chorus because they have no release at the end of the evening.’ So there is none of the cathartic enjoyment, if that is the thing to say, that a Jason and Medea have (which I think is rather hard to quantify); but they [Jason and Medea] do get somewhere and they finish, where[as] the chorus are left absolutely stripped of their skin and hung up on a washing line and blowing in the wind and have no point of coming down at all. […] The place is destroyed; clearly the [messenger] speech describes something so colossal that the world has come to an end. I don’t believe there’s any Corinth left at the end of this play, and I don’t believe that those women are going home. I don’t think there’s anywhere to go. (Warner 2002)

5 The Character of Medea

5.1 Witch, barbarian, exile

As has often been noted, the Euripidean Medea is one of the most interesting characters in all of Greek tragedy because she is a combination of so many different identities. First of all, we must contend with Medea as a witch. Witchcraft and magic have a special place within Greek and Roman literature, since the ancient world believed in the power of curses and the ability of one person to ‘bind’ another through a spell or incantation. Numerous ‘magical’ papyri survive from Egypt (during its Hellenistic and Roman periods) indicating that magic was a skill that could be taught. Schools of magic instructed apprentices in the art of magic just as Greek doctors taught their students medicine. The professional magician could tell the future, cure diseases with magic herbs and incantations, contact the spirits of the dead, or cast love spells. In the real world of the ancient Greeks, such professional magicians were men; but in Greek literature, magic is always depicted as the intellectual property of women. In Greek literature—which of course was written by men—fictional witches live outside the city and gather herbs and special ingredients that grow in the wild, usually in dark forests. Witches invoke the goddess Hekate (Medea herself invokes her at 397), who is often associated with such unlucky places as ‘crossroads’. Medea fits into this literary type of ‘witch’, since after

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6 See especially Deborah Boedeker (1997) and her first-rate analysis of Medea’s assimilation of certain characteristics of all her interlocutors.
all, she is Kirke’s niece. She has knowledge of poisons (with which she tinctures the dress that kills Kreon and his daughter), as well as of potions that can bring fertility to Aigeus, or can rejuvenate old men (like the promise she made to Pelias’ daughters). Nor should it be forgotten that she can command the services of dragons. Her reputation clearly precedes her, since the purpose of Kreon’s visit is to banish her before she can ‘do some incurable evil’ to his daughter (283), since Medea is knowledgeable about many evil things (285). Medea laments that her reputation (doxa) has many times done her great harm (292f.). Twice Kreon describes her as sophe (285, 320), in the sense of ‘wise’ and ‘clever’. Twice Medea admits that she is sophe (303, 305), but this is the cause of people’s ill-will towards her. Oddly enough, Jason later tells her she should be thankful that all Greece has learned she is sophe, and that she has earned a reputation (doxa) instead of languishing unknown at the world’s edge in Kolchis.

But unlike her aunt Kirke, Medea is a mortal woman, and one who has fallen in love with a Greek and followed him to his home. Thus she makes frequent reference to her status as a foreigner and a barbarian. Though she lives in a Greek city, she is not a Greek; she is the daughter of the king of Kolchis at the furthest edge of the Black Sea. The chorus women think of her as the ‘unhappy woman of Kolchis’ (132f.) when they arrive in response to hearing her cries. Medea is unaccustomed to interacting with these female neighbours, which is what Greek women expect, so she asks them not to censure her or speak ill of her because of her quiet ways:

**Medea:** Women of Korinthos, I have come out of the house
so that you will not find any fault with me; for whereas I know many mortals
are proud, some out of sight (i.e., in private),
and others out of doors (i.e., in public), still others from their quiet foot
get a bad name and (a reputation for) indifference.

*(Medea 214-18)*

What Medea means by a ‘quiet foot’ is a ‘retiring manner of life’, implying a woman’s foot that is silent because it does not venture forth from the house. This is really quite an interesting thing to say. Many students of Athenian culture might have heard that Greek women were ideally ‘silent’, so one would think that a woman who lives a quiet life would earn a good reputation. But Medea implies that in the world of Greek tragedy, a woman who is indifferent to her neighbours gets a bad reputation. Medea, a woman, is expected by her female neighbours to interact with them. This happens despite the fact that she’s a foreigner, which is what she turns to next:

**Medea:** For justice is not evident in the eyes of mortals
when someone, before knowing clearly a man’s guts (i.e., his inner temper),
hates him on sight, although in no way being wronged by him.
And a foreigner (xenos) especially must comply with the city;
nor do I praise the townsman who, being stubborn (authades),
is bitter to his fellow-citizens through his lack of manners.

*(Medea 219-24)*
Once again, Medea is trying to assure the chorus that if she has been remiss in interacting with them, it was not intended, since she would not approve of anyone who causes offence to neighbours through lack of manners (amathia, literally a ‘lack of learning’ or ‘lack of breeding’) or through being stubborn (authades). It is an interesting choice of words, since Medea had already been described as ‘stubborn’; earlier, the Nurse had told the children to go indoors, but to avoid the wild and hateful nature of their mother’s ‘stubborn (authades) mind’ (103f.). And as for manners, Medea must surely be aware that the Korinthian women have come because they have goodwill towards her household, and consider her a friend (136-38, 178-83). It is worth noting that Medea uses masculine language; she speaks of mortals who make judgments before learning the inner temper of a ‘man’ (aner); and she speaks of ill manners between a townsman (astos) and his fellow-citizens (politai), as if she and the chorus women were male citizens. Even her comment about the foreigner (xenos) is about a ‘male foreigner’, since if she had meant a ‘foreign woman’, she would have said ‘xene’. It’s not impossible that Medea is using the masculine gender to discuss generalities; but it’s also possible that she might be referring to Jason. After all, she and Jason are not living in Jason’s home city, Iolkos; Jason is in exile in Korinthos because of Medea’s collusion in the death of his uncle Pelias. Thus we must contend with Medea as an exile, indeed a double exile, since she is exiled from her husband’s home as well as her natal home. She is a foreigner in exile because of a shady past. She says as much to the chorus:

Medea: But the same story (logos) does not apply to you and me; you have this city and a father’s house and enjoyment of life and company of friends, but I, deserted, without a city, am suffering outrage from my husband, carried off as spoil from a barbarian land, and have neither mother nor brother nor relative to shelter me from this misfortune.

(Medea 252-58)

5.2 Wife, husband, woman

Even though Medea identifies herself as a foreigner from a ‘barbarian’ land, she also does an excellent job of understanding herself as part of a Greek marriage, as a wife. She talks to the chorus women about experiences common to all Greek wives. They must ‘buy’ a husband with their dowries, then must accept men as possessors of their bodies (232-34). Divorce is not respectable for women if the man turns out bad (236f.). All new brides are like foreigners when they marry, in that they need the skill of magic to find out how to please her husband in a land with new laws and customs (238-40). Finally (244-47) if a man is tired of marriage, he can go out and have fun, but a woman must always look to one man alone (literally, to ‘one soul’, mia psyche).

7 ‘Stubbornness’ resurfaces later, when Medea awaits news of the princess’ death and speaks to her sons as though they were going to go on living in Korinthos. She laments that she will never participate in her sons’ weddings, then cries (1028), ‘Wretched me for my stubbornness (authadia)!’
And yet, at the same time, Euripides hints at a reading of Medea as the husband. Oddly enough, she describes men as ‘bearing the yoke of marriage’ (242) when it is usually women who are yoked to marriage in Greek literature. And when Jason blames Medea for causing her own exile, Medea retorts, ‘How? Did I lead into marriage (someone else) and betray you?’ (606). The word she uses for ‘lead into marriage’ is from the verb gameo, used by men to describe leading a wife into matrimony. If Medea had intended that she might have been married to some other man, she would have used the verb gameomai. Medea is arguing from the absurd, of course, but her deliberate choice of a husband’s idiom makes us wonder about the true nature of her relationship with Jason. As he himself admits (527-35), he benefited from Medea’s help in Kolchis, including the saving of his life; but he has the audacity to thank the goddess Kypris (Aphrodite) for making Medea fall in love with him. If we tally all the things Medea has done in the past, we see that they have all been to support Jason; even their relocation to Korinthos was motivated by something Medea, not Jason, had done. As the Nurse informs us as the play opens:

Nurse: She delights
the fellow-citizens to whose land she has come as an exile,
and lends support to Jason himself in all things.
This is the greatest (form of) security:
whenever a wife is not at variance with (her) husband.

(Medea 11-15)

So, the Nurse implies that Medea is popular with the fellow-citizens (politai) of Korinthos; does this include both men and women? Is this merely ‘spin’? She also makes Medea the implied subject of ‘a wife not being at variance/disagreeing with a husband’ in her formulation of ideal domestic security. Surely in a patriarchal society it should be the opposite? That if a husband is not at variance with his wife, all is well? Yet in this play, it is the husband (Jason) whose actions are under scrutiny, whose actions are upsetting to the woman who is ‘supporting’ him. Is Jason a ‘kept man’? Whereas in many Greek myths women are exchanged between men (e.g. Andromache is wife of Hektor, and then concubine of Neoptolemos, and then wife of Helenos; Helen is wife of Menelaus, and then of Paris, and then of Deiphobos; Hermione is wife of Neoptolemos, and then of Orestes), Jason appears to be exchanged between women, between Medea and Kreon’s daughter. The Nurse describes how ‘A marriage with royalty holds him (Jason) fast’ (140), as though he were a woman and had no say in the matter. Medea tells Jason, ‘If you weren’t a wicked man, you should have undertaken this marriage after having persuaded me, and not in secret from your family’ (586f.), as if Jason required Medea’s consent to initiate a divorce. When Aigeus learns that Jason has dumped Medea, he tells her ‘Let him go, then, since, as you say, he is wicked’ (699), implying that Medea could easily find another match elsewhere. And speaking of Aigeus, why does everyone come to Medea’s doorstep, to ‘her’ house, rather than summon her to theirs? Medea entertains two kings and her ex-husband in the course of a single day. Is she somehow ‘mistress of Korinthos’?

Perhaps not. Medea recognises that she has little social power here. It is no surprise, then, that she attempts to win sympathy from the chorus and her own nurse based on their common lot as women. She talks of ‘women’ (gynaikes) as a separate creature or race (phyton, 231), and the most wretched one at that. Yet the word ‘woman’ (gynē) has different meanings in
different contexts in this play. Sometimes, being a ‘woman’ means understanding what marriage is like, or what childbirth is like (248-51); but at other times, it means something more sinister. Medea says that no mind is more murderous than a woman’s when she is injured with regard to her marriage-bed (265-66), and that women are the wisest architects of every evil (409). At the end of her speech with Aigeus, Medea tells her Nurse, ‘Tell Jason nothing of my intentions, if you are loyal to your mistress and you were born a woman’ (822). Medea is telling the Nurse to lie to Jason, on the premise that all women are by nature good schemers and owe loyalty to other women’s schemes. Medea is also capable of presenting herself as the ‘woman’ Jason wants her to be; in her fake reconciliation speech, she says ingenuously:

**Medea**: But we women (gynaikes) are what we are; I will not say (we are) a bad thing; so you shouldn’t imitate our nature (physis) or return our foolishness with foolishness.

*(Medea 889-91)*

Soon after, she re-assures him, ‘But a woman (gyne) is a female thing (thelu) and born to tears’ (928). Jason is so fooled by this that he indulges in his own selfish ideal of what women should be:

**Jason**: For it is natural for the female race (thelu genos) to get angry when a different marriage is presented to a husband. But your heart has changed for the better, and you have recognised the winning plan, although it took time; these are the actions of a prudent/moderate woman (sophron gyne).

*(Medea 909-13)*

But Medea has the last laugh. There are two manuscript readings of this passage 942-45, and the Greek is already ambiguous. In the reading adopted by most translations, it goes like this:

**Medea**: But ask your wife to beg from her father that the children not go into exile from this land.

**Jason**: Of course. And I imagine, at any rate, that I will persuade her [Or, ‘I imagine, at any rate, that she will persuade him’].

**Medea**: (Yes,) if indeed she is one like other women.

In the other manuscript tradition, Jason speaks both lines 944 and 945:

**Medea**: But ask your wife to beg from her father that the children not go into exile from this land.

**Jason**: Of course. And I imagine, at any rate, that I will persuade her [Or, ‘I imagine, at any rate, that she will persuade him’], if indeed she is one like other women.

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8 See also Judith Fletcher (2003), who argues that it is characteristic of Euripidean women that they keep their promises and have no need to swear by gods; this contrasts with Euripidean men like Jason, who break the very oaths they did swear by gods.
Regardless of who speaks line 945, there is an ambiguity in Jason’s words in 944; the grammar could indicate that he thinks he will persuade his new wife, or that he thinks his new wife will persuade the king. Someone (Medea or Jason) believes that the persuasion will be successful if the wife is like most women. Again, this hints at a new blanket definition of ‘women’—that all women are the same, either that they are all susceptible to Jason’s charms (a hilarious idea indeed!), or that all women are capable of persuading and manipulating men. In either case, Jason ironically does not realise that he himself is being manipulated!

5.3 Avenging spirit, goddess

The beauty of Greek tragedy is that it allows for multiple readings. Instead of Medea as an ordinary woman, she could also be read as being quite extraordinary—for example, as an avenging spirit or alastor. Lora Holland (2003) argued that Medea occasionally makes reference to a curse on Jason’s family, for which she is a spirit of vengeance. At the start of the play, when Medea is screaming offstage inside the house, she addresses her sons as ‘accursed’ (kataratoi, 112) and wishes that ‘the whole house collapse in ruin’ (pas domos erroi, 114). After the departure of Kreon, Medea speaks of Jason making a ‘Sisyphean marriage’ (405). Holland argues that, at face value, these words refer to Kreon being descended from Sisyphos; but Jason is also a blood relation to Sisyphos according to some genealogies, and it is creepy that Medea singles out the name of an ancestor most famous for his punishment in hell (he had to roll a stone uphill for all eternity), rather than his military glory. It also means that Jason and his new bride are distant cousins, which would make perfect sense in Greek dynastic terms. But Jason accuses Medea of having laid unholy curses on Kreon’s family, to which Medea significantly replies, ‘Yes, and I happen to be a curse (araia) to your house, too’ (608). At the end of the play, when the children are dead, Jason calls Medea a great evil (kakon mega, 1331), but refuses to acknowledge that his actions were the ones worthy of being punished; instead, it is Medea who is:

Jason: …the betrayer of your father and the land that raised you.
But the gods have visited on me the avenging spirit (alastor) meant for you,
for indeed it was after you killed your brother at the hearth
that you embarked the lovely-prowed skiff of the Argo.
That was just your beginning.

(Medea 1332-36)

Here Jason attributes his misfortunes to the work of an avenging spirit, albeit one that should have descended upon Medea. But if we look at his misfortunes, they are the handiwork of Medea herself. One could therefore easily read Medea (as Holland does) as an avenging spirit taking due punishment on Jason both for a crime of his, and for a crime of his family (which, alas, is not made explicit, but may have been part of a greater mythical tradition that is now lost to us).

Even beyond this role as an avenger, one tends to think of Medea as having immortal privileges, and therefore as a goddess. At the very moment where a deus ex machina often appears at the end of Euripidean plays, it is Medea who appears on a machine, pulled by a char-
iot of dragons given to her by her immortal grandfather, the Sun god (Helios). Medea has killed her sons, as well as the king and his daughter, and she escapes any punishment from the people of Korinthos or Jason. She is, as it were, above the laws of men. Gods are rarely punished for their crimes; Zeus commits adultery and rape constantly, gods kill the mortal lovers of other gods out of spite, but they all get away with it. Medea, too, gets away with killing her own children, and will find sanctuary in Athens (yet another exile from her barbarian home) where she will marry Aigeus and bear new sons. This is a hallmark of Euripides, in that he delights in exploring the possibilities of a universe where good people suffer and the wicked prosper.

5.4 Hero, anti-hero

All of this begs the question: is Medea fundamentally wicked? Oddly enough, it is her total destruction of the husband who betrayed her that allows Medea to be read as an empowering Hero. Medea still resonates powerfully with readers (particularly feminist ones) who see in her a model of the abused woman who fights back against the patriarchal oppression whose embodiment is Jason. She also adopts the language of male heroics and its interest in military success and personal fame. Twice Medea is described as kallinikos (‘celebrating a victory’), which is usually a military term; the Nurse calls her a woman no one can be kallinikos against (45), and she feels she will become kallinikos over her enemies (765) after she has made a pact with Aigeus. She famously tells the chorus, ‘I would wish rather to stand thrice (in battle) with a shield, than to give birth once’ (250f.). Usually this is interpreted as an exemplum in her discourse on the nature of women’s lives; namely, that men don’t appreciate that childbirth is even worse pain than any man’s battle. Yet the optative use of the verb theloim’an (‘I would wish’) suggests she is expressing a genuine desire as well. Is Medea the sort of woman who really would rather fight with a shield than have children?

A concern for heroic fame (kleos) also motivates her. She says she will take revenge so that no one will think her weak or as someone who lives quietly at home (the latter is, oddly enough, the very thing that would preserve the reputation of Athenian women); instead, she wants to prove that she can be ‘harmful to enemies and kind to friends; for the life of such persons is eukleestatos (“having the most good fame”)’ (809f.). Like a man, Medea wants to have kleos for her memorable deeds. The chorus women’s solidarity with Medea throughout the first half of the play adds to the potential for reading her as a positive, almost liberating, character. The fact that the women change their minds in mid-play does not alter the opinion of many young readers, who even when they get to university idolise Medea as the woman who wouldn’t take any more and fought back, yet in so doing sacrificed what was dearest to her.

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9 At the end of Deborah Warner’s 2002 production, Medea did not appear above in a chariot, but carried her sons’ bodies out of the house. Jason did not approach her because ‘She is utterly untouchable. There is nobody who would touch her. And I believe that the reason he [Jason] doesn’t kill her is because there’s nothing left to kill. I don’t think it’s worth his while.’ (Warner 2002)

10 For a fuller discussion of heroic terminology and language in the Medea, see Elizabeth Bryson Bonigie (1977).

11 See Aristide Tessitore (1991) on Medea’s popularity as a champion of women’s rights. Tessitore argues that she is ‘less an object of love and source of inspiration and more an object of fascination’ (587).
Perhaps it’s more appropriate to see both Medea and Jason as anti-heroes ruled by passion. Neither Medea nor Jason acts with the dignity one might expect from important people in the upper classes. Medea is the daughter of a king, and married to a Greek warrior who is the heir to his own kingdom; yet we see Jason and Medea behind their public masks, involved in real-life domestic quarrels inspired by sexual jealousy. The Nurse’s early comments are an insightful sociology lesson:

Nurse: The minds of royalty are terrifying;
seldom obeying, often wielding power,
they change their moods violently.

(Medea 119-21)

This royal couple argues about where the money is coming from, whose fault the divorce is, who started the quarrels, who benefited whom and who owes whom their thanks, and who gets custody of the kids. When Medea kills Jason’s new bride, and then kills their two sons rather than allow Jason to take possession of them, we in 21st century Australia feel we are on all-too-familiar territory. We see headlines like this all the time: ‘Mother drowns her children to spite her husband.’ ‘Distraught housewife poisons her ex’s new flame.’ Euripides forces us to see mythical heroes close up, and when we do, they suddenly look like ordinary people driven to extremes by sexual passion. As Fiona Shaw explained it,

Children are killed all the time, actually. Jason and Medea are narcissistic parents. Some of the audience’s attention is not at the horror of the play, but at the recognisable stages of the play. The whole crass mythology of Western society, that children come first, is just not true. Human passion comes first, and children are merely the off-shoot of that passion. Adults do things for each other, and people will kill to preserve passion, and that is something none of us take on, and I think that the play is a massive warning sign about that. […] If you cannot have the person, you can at least destroy their life. There is a lot of us that needs to do that. It has to do with promises. If you have made vows to each other, the undoing of them is just intolerable. This notion we have about being able to ‘move on’ is entirely a construct that we can either choose, but some people cannot choose it. And I think vengeance is an enormous part of our life. Medea says, ‘I have your heart. Your pain is my comfort.’ If you can’t have pleasure, you will share the pain with them, and at least you’re together in that. I think many, many people suffer from this. Mutual unhappiness is better than no happiness. (Shaw 2002)

In a ghastly way, the children are secondary to this overwhelming passionate affair between Jason and Medea. (Warner 2002)

12 Deborah Warner commented that she chose a translation of Medea that ‘read’ like Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? or A Streetcar Named Desire.
ON TEACHING EURIPIDES’ MEDEA

5.5 The Character of Medea and the murder: Mother, monster, victim

What about these children? The fact that they exist at all requires an audience to consider Medea’s role as a mother. But what kind of mother is she? Many audiences have tried to exonerate her guilt by taking her words at lines 1236ff. at face value:

Medea: Friends, the deed is decided upon, as quickly as possible
to kill the children and start away from this land,
and not, by making a delay, to give my children up
to be murdered by another hand less kindly.
From all sides, it is necessary (ananke) that they die; and since they
must,
we who gave birth to them shall kill them.
But arm yourself in steel, my heart; why do we hesitate
from doing wrongs which are terrifying (deina) and necessary
(anankaia)?

(Medea 1236-43)

Here at the final moment Medea believes that the children’s death are necessary, and that if she does not kill them, others will. Certainly the messenger’s report of the death of Kreon and his daughter implies that the Korinthians will soon come rushing in to kill Medea and her sons; and when Jason arrives at 1293, his main concern is to save the children’s lives from the dead king’s household. So is there a sense in which Medea kills the children to spare them being hurt by others? Perhaps—but I myself am not so quick to afford Medea the same sympathy as we might give the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel Beloved, to which Medea is often compared. Sethe, an African slave in the ante bellum American South, slit her two-year-old daughter’s throat to prevent her from growing up in a life of slavery. But whilst killing a child to spare it from pain or maltreatment or mutilation by others has a certain noble quality (a kind of test of the depth of one’s love), Medea’s motivations for killing her sons are much more varied. Let us not forget that when she first thinks of murder as an option, she couches the idea in terms of not wanting to be mocked by her enemies (797); and she explicitly tells the chorus women that murdering the children will be the best way to wound her husband (817). Even if sparing her children pain becomes the primary reason for the murder at the last minute when Korinthos is in an uproar, such a motivation is seriously undercut by what follows—namely, the murder itself, and her interaction with Jason at the play’s end. The murder is quite horrifying; the voices of the boys from within the house are shouting:

Child A: Oimoi, what shall I do? Where can I flee mother’s hands?
Child B: I don’t know, dearest brother! We are done for!
Chorus: Do you hear, do you hear the children’s cry?
  Alas, miserable one, oh ill-fated woman!
  Shall I enter the house? It seems best to me
to ward off murder for the children.
Child A: Yes, by the gods, ward it off! For (you will help where) there is need!
Child B: How close we are already to the snare of the sword.

(Medea 1271-78)

Many modern productions and adaptations replace the children’s words with screams. But in Euripides’ play, Medea’s children shout brilliant poetry as they are being killed. The first child can hear the chorus women’s deliberation about whether to intervene, and he begs them to do so, en deonti gar, the meaning of which is somewhere between ‘for you will be helping where there is need’, and ‘for it’s the right time’. (In other words, ‘Help now!’) The second child uses the metaphor of ‘the snare/hunting-nets of the sword’, implying that he has been cornered and is close to being caught by Medea’s sharp blade. If Medea had chosen to kill her children gently and quickly, perhaps with a painless poison, the murder might have seemed more motherly, even forgivable. Instead, the children’s panic as they flee the sword in their mother’s hands highlights the gruesome nature of Medea’s murderous intent. It is interesting that she does not use any supernatural means to kill her children; no flesh-devouring garments or magic spells here. Nonetheless, the children do not think of their mother as wanting to spare them pain; if anything, her hand is no more kindly than the hands of others she had envisaged at 1239.

Then in the very next scene, safe in her dragon wagon, with the dead boys’ corpses at her side, Medea essentially taunts Jason with them, saying ‘These boys are no more; (I say this) because this will gnaw at you’ (1370), and ‘(I killed them), at any rate, to cause you pain’ (1398). And when Jason asks pointedly, ‘And did you judge it worthy to kill them for the sake of a bed?’ (1367), Medea does not deny it, but asks her own rhetorical question, ‘Do you think this is a small concern for a woman?’ (1368). Jason responds to his sons’ death by cursing Medea as a monster. At this horrible moment, when husband and wife are hurling abuse at each other because there is no longer any possibility of a reconciliation, Jason calls her ‘a lioness, not a woman, possessing a nature wilder than Skylla of the Tuscan sea’ (1342f.), and once again ‘this hateful and child-murdering lioness’ (1406f.). Elsewhere Medea is compared to inhuman, inanimate things like rocks or steel; the Nurse describes the sorrowful Medea as motionless as a rock or the sea (28f.), and the chorus women imagine that Medea must have been rock or steel in order to kill her own children with her own hand (1280-82). The monstrosity of her daring is linked, in Jason’s mind, to her barbarian origins when he claims, ‘There is no Greek woman who would ever have dared do this thing’ (1339f.). Ironically, however, there is a chorus of Korinthian women standing by who initially saw nothing unjust in plotting the death of Kreon’s daughter.13

This leads to the often-asked question, was Medea justified in killing her children? If it was in vengeance for a man who wronged her, was it OK? Can we read Medea as a victim? And a victim of what? A man? A Greek? Marriage? Society? Herself? And does being a victim make the murder of her children somehow understandable? Should we be happy that Medea gets away it? Well, not quite. The killing of the children is Euripides’ final gesture to show the topsy-turviness of the world he has created. And what kind of world is it? It’s a world in which women are the victims of a society created by and for men, and in which women are driven to commit acts against their own interest. Euripides has over the centuries been ana-

13 This is a point expanded upon by Shirley Barlow (1989).
lysed as a misogynist woman-hater, or as a feminist; but even if neither of these labels is quite accurate, there is no denying that Euripides is fascinated with issues of gender and power, and what happens when women are put into crises that demand that they take action.

Euripides compels his audience to empathise with those extraordinary circumstances that drive people to rash decisions. A scene from Jules Dassin’s 1978 film *A Dream of Passion* is most instructive. A Greek film star named Maya (played by Melina Mercouri) has been preparing for the role of Medea, and is undergoing a mock interview:

*Interviewer:* Do you think she can be justified in killing her own children?
*Maya:* Wrong question, BBC. Ask the right question. Ask what desperation brought her to kill what she loved most in the world.

(*A Dream of Passion*)

The interviewer specifically asks Maya about Brenda Collins, an American woman in Athens who was imprisoned for murdering her children after her Greek husband abandoned her. Yet the question is really about the character of Medea as well. Through her visits with Brenda, Maya has come to realise that Euripides’ play is most moving when we stop trying to justify Medea for killing her children, and begin asking instead what drove her to kill the persons she loved most. As Medea herself says, ‘Even though you kill them, nonetheless they were beloved (*philoi*); but I am a miserable woman!’ (1249f.).

**One Last Thought**

Finally, no analysis of Medea’s character would be complete without appreciating her as a performer. Throughout the drama, Medea is a clever actor, speaker and manipulator, who always says the right thing at the right time to the right people. It is as though she looks at the list of aspects we have just outlined, and decides which one is appropriate for whoever comes to her doorstep. She manipulates the chorus by appealing to them as a woman to women, and gets them to keep silent about all her murderous plans; but in the end they are another one of her victims, as Korinthos collapses around them. Medea wins Aigeus’ favour by appealing to his sense of outrage at her abandonment, and by bribing him with the promise of children (and, presumably, the promise of sexual passion). She appeals to Kreon as a parent to another parent, winning one extra day to provide for her children; and in the end, it is his own natural affection for his daughter which brings him into contact with the fiery poison that kills both of them. Medea convinces Jason that she has changed her mind, and with crocodile tears in her eyes persuades him to take the fatal gifts to Kreon’s daughter. Medea is even in control of the ‘other woman’ that she never meets, Jason’s new bride, in that she anticipates correctly that the young princess will delight in the deadly garments disguised as gifts. Medea even manipulates us, the audience, making some of us believe that she really is a victim or a heroine rather than a monster. Finally, she manipulates herself, convincing herself that she is compelled by *ananke* or ‘necessity’, that she has no other choice but to kill her sons—and that is the ultimate tragedy.
Bibliography


