

Medea

Written by the great Athenian playwright Euripides (485-406 BC), this play was first performed around 431 B.C. at the Great Dionysia, an annual festival to Dionysus at which there was a theatrical competition. It was written during the time of Athens's intellectual apex, the time when it turned out its greatest art, literature and philosophy. The Periclean program of public building was at its peak, and Corinth was one of the cities that was pushing Sparta to attack Athens and begin the Peloponnesian War in this year. It was a period of growing doubt in the old civic religion (although the rites of Demeter flourished at Eleusis) and of increasing movement toward philosophy to fill in the gaps left by unbelief. It was also a time in which the Athenian system of democracy challenged the Spartan system of aristocracy/oligarchy throughout the Greek world. In *Medea*, think about what sorts of views on government, ethics, the gods, foreigners and women are portrayed.

Cast of Characters:

Medea - Princess of Colchis, wife of Jason

Jason - the hero of the voyage of the Argo, husband of Medea

Creon - King of Corinth

Aegeus - King of Athens (Theseus's father)

Nurse - to Medea

Tutor - to Medea's kids

Chorus of Corinthian Women

Jason and Medea's two kids also appear on stage

Drama actually seems to have evolved from the chorus, which not only spoke or chanted, but also danced. The plays were expected to observe unities of time and place. This means that the perfect drama occurs in the actual time the play takes and in one place. In Greek tragedy, all violence takes place off stage and is reported. Not much exposition was needed for mythologically based plays because the entire audience already knew the basic stories and the main ending. What they came to the performance for was not the plot but the poetry of the writer's words and the themes he could bring out by deepening the characterization of the original myths. While he couldn't change the ending of these stories, he could change the character's personalities and perspectives to some extent in order to make various points. I think this is crucial to remember in *Medea* especially as forgetting this (and some jokes not seen as such by Aristophanes) has led most people to grossly misinterpret Euripides's purpose. **Remember that the basics of what Medea does in this play were pre-determined, but Jason is much more fleshed out in this play than in the original myth.**

Euripides - a younger contemporary of Sophocles, Euripides won fewer prizes but is more popular nowadays. His views are quite different than those of Sophocles on many issues, and his plays tend to resolve themselves quite differently. One of his favorite techniques for ending his plays is *Deus Ex Machina*, which means literally "God by

machine.” He frequently has gods descend onto the stage (elaborate machinery was used to accomplish this) to provide an ending that isn’t exactly plot driven by modern standards. This machinery would have been used to the opposite effect in this play. While these endings seem awkward, they may be appropriate to Euripides’s overall philosophy. Consider how they may be appropriate to what Euripides is trying to say. Euripides also includes different kinds of characters in his action and opens up drama to new ideas and new possibilities. His philosophical emphasis is certainly different than that of Sophocles or Aeschylus. Consider how.

Pondering points for Medea:

Justice: What is it, and how is it determined?

Does Medea behave properly? If she does, to what extent? If she doesn’t behave properly, what would have been proper behavior in her situation?

Gender: Comic playwrights like Aristophanes were always saying that Euripides was a misogynist. Later critics picked up on this in describing him. Compare his treatment of women with previous playwrights and other Greek writers. What do you think his view of women was?

Nationalism: How should foreigners be treated?

Before the play

Jason was a young hero who had been tricked by his uncle/grandfather/step-father Pelias (choose your own version), who had usurped his rightful position as King of Iolcos (in the neighborhood of Mt. Olympus), to agree to go in search of the golden fleece, the skin of a fabulous flying golden Ram that had rescued two children from a bad situation in Greece and had flown them to Colchis at the far end of the Black Sea. One of the kids (Helle) had fallen off in the water near Troy, thus the name Hellespont (Helle’s bridge). Anyway, the fleece was venerated by the later inhabitants of Colchis, a “barbaric” city. It was guarded by a dragon in a sacred grove, where it hung on a tree. In a story that strikingly parallels that of Theseus, Jason uses a supernatural ship, the Argo, manned by the greatest heroes of the day, to get to Colchis. They lose Heracles along the way when his pal Hylas is lured into a fountain by nymphs, but the rest encounter various adventures with Harpies, clashing rocks, an island of only women and a battle with the Amazons before reaching Colchis. Once there, they are entertained by the King, and Jason meets his daughter, Medea, who is a priestess of Hecate. Medea falls in love with Jason, in some versions due to the assistance of Aphrodite, and she offers to help him defeat the dragon and the armed men that spring from the ground that guard the fleece if he will marry her and take her away. He agrees, and she uses her magic to help him succeed in stealing the fleece from her dad. The Argo takes off with the Colchians in hot pursuit, and Medea helps kill one of her brothers in the chase. When they return to Iolcos, Medea tricks Pelias’s daughters into cutting him up into little pieces and boiling

him in a pot in order to rejuvenate him. (She had demonstrated doing this with a ram.) With Pelias out of the way, Jason became king, but at least in this version of the tale, the Pelias incident didn't sit well with the people, and Jason and Medea left for Corinth, where the play takes place. This background is important in judging the characters' actions in the play.