



Medea: A Timeless Greek Tragedy

Euripides' *Medea* is one of the most powerful and controversial works of ancient Greek drama. First performed in 431 BCE, this tragedy explores themes of betrayal, revenge, justice, and the devastating consequences of passion. The play follows Medea, a foreign princess with magical abilities, who takes horrific revenge on her unfaithful husband Jason by murdering their children. Through this shocking tale, Euripides challenges audiences to consider questions of justice, gender roles, and the nature of revenge that remain relevant today.

Brief Biography of Euripides

- Born c. 480 BCE in Athens or Salamis, one of three great Greek tragedians alongside Aeschylus and Sophocles
- Produced more than 90 plays, though only 18 survive today
- Known for psychological realism and sympathetic portrayal of women and outsiders
- Was the favorite playwright of philosopher Plato
- Aristotle called him "the most tragic" of all poets
- Had two failed marriages and lived much of his life on the island of Salamis
- May have retired to the court of King Archelaus in Macedonia
- Died in 406 BCE, shortly before Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War

Euripides innovated the story of Medea by making her directly responsible for her children's deaths. In previous versions, the Corinthians killed them in retaliation for Medea murdering their ruler.



Historical Context

Euripides' *Medea* premiered in 431 BCE, the same year the Peloponnesian War erupted between Athens and Sparta. This was during Athens' golden age—a time of cultural dominance following its victory over Persia in 478 BCE. However, the looming war would soon test the very foundations of Athenian identity.

Against this backdrop, *Medea's* themes—exile, betrayal, vengeance, and the tension between Greek “civility” and foreign “barbarism”—would have deeply resonated with its original audience. As Athens entered a prolonged and brutal conflict, the play's moral ambiguity and questions of justice likely echoed the uncertainties of a society on the brink of transformation.



Plot Summary



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Before the Play

1

Jason travels to Colchis on his ship the Argo seeking the Golden Fleece. Medea, a princess with magical powers, falls in love with him and helps him obtain the treasure. She betrays her family, kills her brother, and flees with Jason to his homeland.

2

Opening Scene

The play begins in Corinth where Medea and Jason have lived as exiles. Medea's Nurse reveals that Jason has abandoned his wife and children to marry the Princess of Corinth. Medea is devastated and furious.

Creon's Decree

3

King Creon banishes Medea and her children from Corinth, fearing her threats against the royal family. Medea convinces him to give her one day to prepare for exile, which he reluctantly grants.

4

Jason's Visit

Jason visits Medea, claiming his new marriage will benefit everyone. They argue bitterly, with Medea reminding him of all she sacrificed for him. Jason offers money for her exile, which she rejects.

5

Aegeus' Promise

King Aegeus of Athens visits and promises Medea sanctuary in his city if she can reach it. In exchange, she promises to help cure his infertility with her magic.

6

The Deadly Plan

Medea pretends to reconcile with Jason and sends her children with poisoned gifts (a dress and crown) for his new bride. She resolves to kill her own children to complete her revenge.

7

Royal Deaths

A messenger reports that the Princess died horribly after putting on the poisoned gifts. Creon also perished when he embraced his daughter's corpse and became entangled in the poisoned dress.

8

Children's Murder

Despite momentary hesitation, Medea kills her two sons offstage. Their cries are heard by the Chorus, who cannot intervene.

9

Final Confrontation

Jason arrives to save his children, but it's too late. Medea appears above in a chariot sent by her grandfather, the sun god Helios, with the bodies of their children. She denies Jason the right to bury them and prophesies his miserable death.

Major Characters



Medea

A princess from Colchis, granddaughter of the sun god Helios, and a powerful sorceress. She abandoned her homeland and family to help Jason, only to be betrayed when he abandons her for a new bride. Passionate and vengeful, she challenges the prejudices of Greek society while committing the ultimate transgression by killing her own children.



Jason

A Greek hero who obtained the Golden Fleece with Medea's help. He abandons her to marry the Princess of Corinth, justifying his actions with hollow rhetoric about providing for his family. Portrayed as a hypocritical, self-serving man who values social advancement over loyalty and honor.



Creon

The king of Corinth who banishes Medea out of fear she will harm his daughter. Though he accurately judges Medea's dangerous nature, he makes the fatal mistake of granting her one day's delay before exile.



Aegeus

The king of Athens who promises Medea sanctuary in exchange for her help in curing his childlessness. His desire for children contrasts powerfully with Medea's decision to kill her own.



The Chorus

A group of Corinthian women who sympathize with Medea's plight while being horrified by her actions. They represent the audience's perspective and moral conscience.



The Nurse

Medea's loyal servant who fears for the children's safety and provides exposition about Medea and Jason's history.



The Princess

Creon's daughter and Jason's new bride. She never appears onstage but dies horribly after accepting Medea's poisoned gifts.



The Children

Jason and Medea's two sons, innocent victims of their parents' conflict. They speak only briefly before their murder.

Themes in Medea

1

Exile

Exile is a past reality, present threat, and internal state in the play. Medea and Jason are already exiles in Corinth, and Medea faces a third exile. Her emotional and spiritual displacement fuels her rage and justifies her actions in her mind.

2

Truth vs. Rhetoric

The play contrasts empty, persuasive speech with genuine truth. Jason uses clever rhetoric to justify his betrayal, while Medea uses deceptive speech to achieve her revenge, exposing the gap between words and reality.

3

The Roles of Men and Women

Set in a male-dominated society, the play explores gender expectations and limitations. Medea challenges conventional female roles through her intelligence and actions, while questioning what makes a "good" man or woman.

4

Justice and Natural Law

The play examines what happens when characters violate natural order. Jason breaks his marriage vows, Creon unjustly banishes Medea, and Medea commits the ultimate violation of natural law by killing her children. The play questions whether justice can be achieved through vengeance.

5

Duty

Characters struggle with conflicting obligations to family, state, and gods. Jason fails in his duties as husband and father, while Medea abandons her maternal duty to fulfill what she sees as divine vengeance, creating the central moral conflict.

Symbols and Motifs



The Door

The door to Medea's house represents the boundary between public and private spaces, between what is shown and what is hidden. The murders happen behind closed doors, symbolizing the hidden aspects of human nature.



Fire

Associated with Medea's passion and destructive rage. The Nurse compares Medea's anger to a flame that will grow, and the poisoned crown ultimately burns with supernatural fire.



The Argo

Jason's ship represents his heroic past and the journey that brought him and Medea together. Medea prophesies that a piece of the Argo will eventually kill Jason, showing how his past will ultimately destroy him.



The Poisoned Crown

Symbolizes corrupted rulership and power. Medea uses it to kill the Princess, representing how Creon and Jason have polluted royal authority with injustice.



Chimeras

Mythical creatures composed of different animal parts that pull Medea's escape chariot. They symbolize Medea's divided nature: part human/part divine, part Greek/part barbarian, part mother/part murderer.

Opening (Lines 1-300)

Summary

The play opens with Medea's Nurse lamenting outside her house in Corinth. She recounts how Jason has abandoned Medea and their children to marry the Princess of Corinth. The Nurse fears Medea's rage will lead to violence, especially when she learns from the Tutor that King Creon plans to banish Medea and her children.

Medea's offstage wailing confirms the Nurse's fears. When Medea finally appears, she addresses the Chorus of Corinthian women about her plight as a foreigner and a woman. She describes the injustice of women's position in society, forced to buy husbands with dowries and bear children through painful childbirth.

Creon arrives to announce Medea's banishment, fearing her threats against the royal family. Though suspicious of her intentions, he grants her request for one day's delay—a fatal mistake.

Analysis: Exile and Displacement

The opening establishes exile as a central theme. Medea is already an exile from her homeland, having betrayed her family for Jason. Now she faces another banishment, intensifying her sense of displacement and injustice.

Her status as both foreigner and woman makes her doubly vulnerable in Greek society. The Nurse's opening speech connects Medea's past exile with her present crisis, showing how displacement has shaped her identity and fuels her rage.

Creon's decree of banishment represents the ultimate rejection by Greek society, pushing Medea toward her extreme actions. Her ability to manipulate Creon despite her vulnerable position foreshadows her dangerous resourcefulness.

Confrontations (Lines 301-800)

Summary

After Creon leaves, Medea reveals her plan to kill the Princess, Creon, and her own children. Jason arrives and hypocritically claims his new marriage will benefit everyone. Their bitter argument exposes Jason's self-serving nature and Medea's deep sense of betrayal.

Aegeus, King of Athens, arrives and promises Medea sanctuary if she can reach his city. With escape secured, Medea finalizes her revenge plan. She will send poisoned gifts—a dress and crown—to the Princess via her children, then kill the boys to complete Jason's suffering.

Medea summons Jason again and feigns reconciliation. She apologizes for her anger and asks him to convince the Princess to let the children stay in Corinth. Jason, easily manipulated, agrees to have the children deliver Medea's "gifts" to his new bride.

Analysis: Truth vs. Rhetoric

This section highlights the contrast between truthful speech and empty rhetoric. Jason's arguments defending his betrayal are technically skillful but morally hollow. He claims to marry for Medea's benefit while clearly pursuing his own advancement.

Medea, though planning deception, speaks truthfully about Jason's injustice and women's suffering. Her later deceptive speech to Jason mirrors his own dishonesty, turning his rhetorical weapons against him.

The play suggests that rhetoric divorced from truth leads to moral corruption, while even violent actions based on genuine grievances retain a kind of integrity.

Climax and Conclusion (Lines 801-1400)

Summary

As her plan unfolds, Medea struggles with her decision to kill her children. Despite momentary hesitation and genuine grief, she resolves to complete her revenge. A messenger arrives with news that the Princess and Creon have died horribly from the poisoned gifts.

Medea kills her children offstage while the Chorus listens helplessly to their screams. When Jason arrives to save his sons, Medea appears above in a divine chariot sent by her grandfather Helios, with the children's bodies.

In their final confrontation, Jason curses Medea as inhuman while she insists the gods know he caused their tragedy. She denies him the right to bury his children and prophesies his miserable death. The Chorus concludes that the gods bring unexpected outcomes to human affairs.

Analysis: Justice and Natural Law

The climax explores the devastating consequences when natural law is violated. Jason's betrayal of his marriage vows and Creon's unjust banishment of Medea are met with Medea's even greater violation—infanticide.

The divine chariot suggests the gods approve of Medea's vengeance, complicating our moral judgment. Is Medea restoring cosmic justice or creating greater injustice through her actions?

The play offers no simple resolution to this question. Instead, it presents the tragic irony that Medea's pursuit of justice leads to the deepest injustice—the murder of innocent children—revealing the problematic nature of vengeance-based justice.