



A STUDY GUIDE FOR EURIPIDES' *MEDEA* BY PROFESSOR JAMES SVENDSEN

I BACKGROUNDS:

A. MYTHIC: “Medea, the daughter of Aietes and a nymph named Iduia (‘she who knows’), is a disturbing mythological figure. She is noted above all for her sinister magical powers. This is just what one would expect from her family background. She was not only the granddaughter of Helios the sun-god (father of Aietes, and a god closely associated with magic), but the niece of Circe and dimly related to the goddess Hecate, Medea, Circe and Hecate are the three most notorious witches in Greek mythology.... Medea used her magic arts to help Jason carry out Aietes’ “impossible” exploits, kill the dragon and abscond with the Fleece, her furious father in hot pursuit. After Medea and Jason delivered the Fleece to Pelias, she used her magic arts to convince Pelias’ daughters to kill him too. Similarly in our play she uses a combination of magic and persuasive speech to destroy the king through his own daughter and crush Jason through his sons. “ (Ruby Blondell)

B. HISTORICAL: “From the start, the play presents us with a woman alienated and victimized in a world controlled by men. We watch with sympathy as she struggles to articulate a set of values different from those that entrap her, striving to break free from the *logos* of the male heroic. The play must have struck the Athenian audience in the spring of 431 BC with special force. War with Sparta was imminent, and whatever patriotic fervor was in the air must have been tempered with the realization that great suffering and loss would follow. We recall the juxtaposition in the Ode to Athens of the peaceful, feminine image of Athens with the picture of the murdered children. Perhaps we are meant to see in Medea’s infanticide a metonym for the oncoming conflict between Athens and Sparta, that is, the murder of the children as a peculiar manifestation of the ‘male’ art of war. Medea boasts that she is on her way to Athens, Euripides’ way of insisting that his fellow citizens cannot avoid the problems of the play, built as they are into the fabric of Athenian society. It is a testimony to the intractability of those problems – and a mark of our own desperate need to find a *logos* beyond that to which Medea succumbs – that *Medea* speaks so powerfully to a modern audience.” (Rush Rehm)

C. EURIPIDEAN: “He was a many-sided poet; even in the fraction of the work that has come down to us –about one-fifth – we can hear many different voices: the rhetorician and iconoclast of Aristophanic travesty; the precursor of Menandrian comedy; the inventor of the romantic adventure play; the realist who brought the myths down to the level of everyday life; the lyric poet whose music, Plutarch tells us, was to save Athens from destruction when surrender came in 404; the producer of the patriotic war plays – and also of plays that expose war’s ugliness in dramatic images of unbearable intensity; above all, poet who saw human life not as action but as suffering.... And this is what the *Medea* and Euripidean tragedy are all about. It is a vision of the future. In it we see at work the poet as prophet, as seer; *vates* the Romans called him, a word that means both poet and prophet.” (Bernard Knox)

II PLOT SUMMARY AND STRUCTURE:

The plot action of the *Medea* falls into three distinct movements: 1) an opening section of exposition with Medea offstage; 2) Medea onstage engaging King Kreon, Jason and the Athenian hero

Aigeus and culminating in the murder of her children; and 3) a final unexpected encounter between the triumphant wife and grieving husband with Medea *ex machina*.

The prologue by Nurse and Tutor introduces the situation and problems swiftly and economically. Their dialogue relates with sympathy that Medea and her children have been abandoned by Jason and that exile is imminent. The chorus of Corinthian women enters, singing the *parodos* (entrance song) wherein they lament Medea's predicament and urge moderation and restraint.

The central scenes of the play are dominated by Medea, who plans and completes, against all obstacles, advice and threats, her intrigue of revenge. After a monologue explaining her own condition and women's helplessness and vulnerability, Medea meets King Kreon and obtains a one-day stay of exile. She then debates her husband Jason in scene (*agon*) reminiscent of the Athenian law court. Jason delivers a moral lecture to his wife and then return to his favorite topic: himself. Medea attacks Jason's manhood, ethics and sense of honor, catalogues her many loyal actions on his behalf, and laments the decline of respect for the gods and vows. The Athenian hero Aigeus arrives from Delphi, explains his childlessness and promises Medea friendship and asylum in Athens. She now initiates her double revenge, sending Jason's new bride a magically treated robe and crown delivered by her own children. In a long monologue she debates with herself whether she should kill her children or not. From a Messenger she hears in lurid and horrific detail of the success of her plan and enters the house to complete her vengeance against Jason by murdering his children.

The play concludes with an unexpected appearance of Medea now high atop the theater in a magic chariot sent by her grandfather Helios. From her unapproachable and "divine" position she justifies her actions, prophecies the future and announces the foundation of a religious cult. Through language and stage action Medea is presented not only as a triumphant hero but also as a *theos* (god), something superhuman or at least inhuman. She then disappears to the final song of the chorus attesting to Zeus' power and the unexpected nature of things.

III THE CHARACTER OF MEDEA:

"What kind of creature was Euripides presenting to his audience? In what familiar category of 'tragic hero/heroine' were they to place Medea? It is not an easy question for us to answer, and it cannot have been any easier for the original audience. Now, this is not to deny that we have before us one of the most powerful creations of the ancient Greek theater, perhaps of the whole range of Western drama. It is just that Medea defies facile classification. Her real nature eludes us. A good deal of the time, particularly in the opening scenes, we think we understand her; she is a woman scorned and rejected, who has sacrificed everything for the man who now insults and abandons her. But there is more to it than that, for we hear her talking of her 'honor,' and using language appropriate to a male, Homeric hero. So an uneasy sense of the contradictions in Medea's character begins to make itself felt." (A.J. Podlecki)

"It is not the crime that makes this drama but the analysis of character which leads to it and the many ironies such a dissection of character by the dramatist reveals. The significant thing is that Medea, despite of the enormity of the crime is shown to be a human being, not a monster, and like most human beings to be a mixture of different elements. Euripides shows her love as a mother fighting for mastery over desire for revenge, her love as a wife turned to hatred and a range of other traits too – bravery, treachery, loyalty, friendship, cleverness, callousness, calculation, despair. But humanity is destructible. Medea may escape physically unpunished in the end, but there is irony because the mental and emotional punishment she has inflicted upon herself more than counterbalances this apparent freedom." (Shirley Barlow)

“Unlike Seneca’s frightful sorceress, Euripides’ protagonist acts with almost surgical precision. First, she annihilates her enemy root and branch by destroying (only) his new connections, his chance for future offspring, and his children by Medea –thereby undoing that marriage and all the deeds and sufferings it entailed. Further, all Medea’s victims are, in part, images of herself: her fellow-tyrant and fellow-parent Creon, her own dear children, her husband whose masculine values she adopts, the bride who so closely resembles the young Medea. In all these ways, Euripides keeps his protagonist and her revenge tremendously concentrated. Later dramatic versions of the myth may emphasize how Medea is *unlike* figures in the play. Euripides, by actively assimilating his heroine to characters and other elements internal to her story, gives his protagonist an almost unbearably focused power and allows her action a certain claim to reciprocal justice.” (Deborah Boedeker)

In Medea’s complex and contradictory character Euripides employs at least five voices: 1) Medea as **WOMAN**, the feminine both as loyal wife and nurturing mother; 2) Medea as **OTHER**, the barbarian sorceress and intruder from an uncivilized land; 3) Medea as **HERO**, honor-obsessed, intent upon action and reputation and fearing laughter by peers; 4) Medea as **ATHENIAN CITIZEN/ATHENS**, defining herself publicly and using the language and rhetoric of the law court and assembly; and 5) Medea as **THEOS**, as evidenced in her final epiphany and pronouncements.

IV THEMES AND ISSUES:

A. *Medea* is of course a play, not a social document. Equally, the ideology it deals with is that of 5th century Athens and specifically the position of **WOMEN** in that society. *Medea* can therefore be read in terms of binary oppositions, with the overriding opposition female and male, Medea and Jason. Beneath the umbrella of the man/woman conflict there are added polarities of custom (*nomos*) versus nature (*physis*), city (*polis*) versus house (*oikos*), of marriage versus sexual love (*eros*), of Greek versus foreigner. In other words, Jason stands for the public world of the Greek city and its value-system; Medea for the private world of the foreign person and its value-system, which stresses love.” (Brian Arkins)

B. “The **MARRIAGE BED** within the *thalamus* (bedroom) symbolized sexual activity and fidelity, and also the bond between husband and wife which is the foundation of marriage and the family. Hence various words for ‘bed’ are often used to signify marriage, as in Jason’s complaint that women are obsessed with ‘the marriage-bed.’” (Ruby Blondell)

C. “Like the *Bacchae*, *Medea* is based on a central key theme **SOPHIA**. Inadequately translated as ‘wisdom,’ *sophia* is an extremely complex term, including Jason’s cool self-interest, the medical and erotic skills of the sorceress Medea, and that ideal fusion of moral and artistic skills which, when fused with *eros*, creates the distinct *arête* (excellence) of the polis.” (Paul Roche)

D. “From the beginning the **CHILDREN** play a decisive role in Medea’s plans. Through them she gains access to the royal house, and through them the wedding gifts are conveyed to Jason’s young bride.... Infanticide is the form her revenge must inevitably take, for that alone can cause the supreme agony. In a sense Euripides’ heroine perishes with the children; the granddaughter of Helios may triumph, but Medea the woman is dead.” (Eilhard Schlesinger)

V INTERPRETATIONS OF *MEDEA*:

Euripides was awarded only third prize for his *Medea*, “but it left a deep and lasting impression in the minds of his Athenian audience; comic parodies, literary imitations and representation in the visual arts reflect its immediate impact and show that the play has lost none of its power to fascinate and repel as the centuries went by. It struck the age as new, but like all innovative masterpieces, it has its roots deep in tradition; it looks back to the past while it gropes for the future.” (Bernard Knox)

“To the witch of folktale, Euripides adds a new dimension; while denying neither her fury nor her magic, he yet makes of her a woman of stature, of potentially tragic power. And the plot, while it retains the theatrical excitement, the Grand Guignol effects suited to the original *Medea*, sustains as well something of the tragic struggle between good and evil.” (D. J. Conacher)

“*Medea* is a terrifying but at the same time breathtakingly beautiful exemplification of the indomitability of the human will, its capacity to fight back from the depths of subjection to others who would trample it or turn it to their own uses. At the close we are appalled at the totality of the destruction she has wrought. She has turned the tables entirely. What *Medea* doesn’t see – and this is perhaps her tragedy- is that in this combat there have been no winners, and she has had to sacrifice everything, even her humanity.” (A. J. Podlecki)

“To read the *Medea* without cognizance of the heroic code, without the realization that *Medea*, despite her gender, lived by the same rules as Achilles, Ajax and the other great literary heroes before her, is to miss one of the important keys to the play. It is *Medea*’s consistent and unwavering dedication to the principles of the heroic code that, more than any other single factor, binds Euripides’ great tragedy into a coherent whole.” (Elizabeth Bongie)

“The notion explored in this play – that when women turn into ‘bad women,’ they use the weapons of the weak, which are both deceitful and violent, and hurt men where they are vulnerable to women, in the *oikos* (house) – was articulated in many myths. What is different here is that the play has explored the great disadvantages of the position of women and has come near to hinting that the so-called bad women have a point: given that position, if men break their oaths and abuse their power over women, it will be their own fault what catastrophe happens, and the gods will not necessarily favor their cause. Such vengeful action by women is wrong, but in some strange way it has a sort of rightness; for the gods appear to have willed *Medea*’s success and Jason’s suffering.” (Christiane Sourvino-Inwood)

“It is this facet of *Medea* that has moved her to the forefront in the 20th century - her role as the other whose allegedly ‘barbarian’ actions force us to reevaluate the depths of our *own* souls.... It is no longer possible to sanction rules that once divided men from women, ‘civilized’ nations from ‘uncivilized,’ blacks from whites. Nor is it any longer possible to pretend terrible crimes such as infanticide do not take place in average towns, among seemingly normal people. For better or worse, we live in a world where there seem to be no limits. Perhaps that is why *Medea* continues to challenge our imaginations: like our neighbors, our colleagues, and the more distant people whom the news media bring to our attention each day, she evokes both our pity and our fear, our admiration and our horror. In confronting *Medea*, we confront our deepest feelings and realize that behind the delicate order we have sought to impose upon our world lurks chaos.” (Sarah Iles Johnston)