

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.⁶ 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 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 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 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 especially must comply with the city; nor do I praise the townsman who, being stubborn, 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 – or through being stubborn. It is an interesting choice of words, since Medea had already been described as 'stubborn'; earlier, the Nurse had told the children to go in- doors, but to avoid the wild and hateful nature of their mother's 'stubborn mind' (103f.).⁷ 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'; and she speaks of ill manners between a townsman and his fellow-citizens, 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 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.

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 to suggest 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 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 'support- ing' 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' as a separate creature or race (231), and the most wretched one at that. Yet the word 'woman' 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.⁸ 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 are what we are; I will not say (we are) a bad thing; so you shouldn’t imitate our nature or return our foolishness with foolishness. (Medea 889-91)

Soon after, she re-assures him, ‘But a woman is a female thing 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 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. (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.

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. 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 ‘ac- cursed’ (112) and wishes that ‘the whole house collapse in ruin’ (114). After the departure of Kreon, Medea speaks of Jason making a ‘Sisyphian 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 to your house, too’ (608). At the end of the play, when the children are dead, Jason calls Medea a great evil (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 meant for you, for indeed it was after you killed your brother at the hearth that you embarked the lovely-proved 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 chariot 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.⁹ 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 '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 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 "having the most good fame"' (809f.). Like a man, Medea wants to have fame for her memorable deeds.¹⁰ 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.

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.¹² 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.

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 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 and necessary? (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: 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.

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 analysed 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; but I am a miserable woman!’ (1249f).