

Medea Study Guide

Medea by Euripides

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Plot Summary

"Medea" by Euripides is a play that was written and performed in 431 B.C. It is based on the Greek myth of Medea and Jason. When Jason betrays Medea by marrying a Corinthian princess, Medea plots and enacts her revenge, destroying everyone her husband holds dear. "Medea" is an interesting, yet controversial, version of the popular Greek myth sure to thrill and appall modern audiences.

The play follows the adventures of the Golden Fleece during which Medea betrayed her barbarian country of Colchis as well as her family. Medea happily lives in Corinth with Jason until he betrays her to marry Glauce, Princess of Corinth. As Medea grieves over her loss, her nurse fears what Medea may do to herself and her children. A chorus of Corinthian women visit to comfort Medea.

King Creon, Glauce's father, visits Medea and sentences her and her sons to exile, fearing what she may do to his daughter; however, Medea convinces him to delay her exile for one day, giving her time to enact her vengeance. Jason also visits Medea and attempts to explain himself, insisting that his marriage to Glauce presented a rare opportunity for him which will allow him to better provide for his sons with Medea through their familial relationship to the prince Glauce will bear Jason. Medea reminds him of all she gave up for him, scorning his offer to assist her in her exile and expressing the hope that he will not find joy in his new wife.

Next, Medea receives a visit from Aegeus, King of Athens, who has returned from a trip to the Oracle of Phoebus where he sought guidance to bare children since he is still childless. Medea offers to use magic to help his wife conceive if he grants her refuge in Athens. Aegeus agrees on condition that Medea make her own way to Athens.

Medea resumes her plots for vengeance, planning to poison Glauce and kill her own sons as this is the best way to hurt Jason. Medea summons Jason and apologizes falsely, sending her sons to Glauce with her gift of poisoned robes. Glauce is killed by the poison, as is Creon when he tries to save his beloved daughter.

Determined to complete her revenge, Medea rushes offstage and kills her sons. Jason arrives to protect their sons from the vengeance of the king's relatives and learns that Medea has already killed them. Medea appears in a chariot given to her by the Sun and drawn by dragons, mocking Jason's grief. She refuses his request to bury his sons and escapes to Athens with her sons' bodies as the chorus contemplates the gods' will in Medea's actions.



Section 1: Paragraphs 1-31

Summary

At Medea's home in Corinth, in 431 BC, her nurse wishes the ship Argo had never come to the land of the Colchians to search for the Golden Fleece. If it had not come, Medea would have never come to Corinth where she once dwelled in amity with Jason and her sons until a blight came over their love when Jason abandoned Medea and their children to lie with a royal bride, Princess Glauce, the daughter of King Creon. Medea is prostrate with grief and hates the sight of her own children, causing her nurse to fear her vengeance for "she is cunning. Whoever crosses swords with her will not find victory easy, I tell you."

Giving little thought to their mother's sorrows, Medea's sons enter with their tutor who asks the nurse if Medea is grieving, noting that she does not even know about the latest ills yet. The son has overheard that Creon plans to expel Medea and her children from Corinth, and he doubts that Jason will prevent it. Disgusted with Jason who has proven himself an enemy, the nurse warns the boys' tutor against leaving the children alone with Medea for she does not trust her looks. When Medea can be heard venting her grief from inside the house, the nurse warns the children to beware of their mother's temper because she is troubled. The nurse sends them outside to play. Medea's lament turns to curses against Jason and their sons as she proclaims "ruin seize the whole household" (paragraph 22)! Urging Medea to strive for moderation, her nurse asks her not to blame her sons for their father's actions. A chorus of Corinthian women enters, asking the nurse about Medea's cries and learning that she will receive no comfort because Medea longs for death. The chorus urges Medea not to pray for death as it is not uncommon for a husband to take a new wife, but Zeus will support her cause. Thus, Medea calls to Zeus and Lady Themis to witness Jason's treatment as she laments forsaking her father and country and killing her brother. The nurse fears that Medea will seek no small revenge, so the chorus asks her to bring Medea to them so they can assure her that she has friends. Though doubtful of Medea's acquiescence, the nurse agrees and exits.

Analysis

As the play opens, the sole exposition explains that the play is set in 431 BC at Medea's home in Corinth. The nurse provides some background information, alluding to the myth of the Golden Fleece which would have been well-known by audiences during the time in which this play was written and first performed. She continues to explain that Jason has betrayed Medea's love by taking a new, royal wife. His betrayal has caused Medea to grieve terribly, frightening the nurse who is fearful of the path that Medea might take. Her fears foreshadow Medea's horrendous, atrocious acts of vengeance, especially as she warns Medea's sons to be wary of their mother's temper. The tutor's conversation with the nurse foreshadows Creon's visit to Medea's home where he informs her of her



imminent exile. The nurse, the tutor, and the chorus all disapprove of Jason's actions in betraying his wife, yet they also fear Medea's revenge because, as a barbarian, she is known to be vengeful and wicked when it suits her. These views of Medea by various characters reinforce her characterization and further foreshadow the evilness of her vengeance. Further foreshadowing occurs when Medea's lament turns against Jason and their sons, but the nurse urges her to act in moderation and refrain from blaming the sons for their father's actions. The chorus of Corinthian women arrive at this point and never leave. They visit Medea to assure her that she has friends in Greece. Though they agree that Jason is wrong, they also urge Medea to act in moderation.

Discussion Question 1

What event causes the conflict in this play?

Discussion Question 2

What punishment is Medea and her sons facing?

Discussion Question 3

What does Medea's nurse fear as the play begins?

Vocabulary

Prevailed, enmity, perfidy, prostrated, recompense, incessant, admonitions, optimism, expel, lamentations, impetuous, indomitable, vindictive, provoked, exasperated.



Section 2: Paragraphs 32-95

Summary

Medea comes outside to greet the chorus and to tell them not to criticize her as there is no justice in the eyes of men and this unexpected blow has broken her heart. She says that she would gladly die because the man who was everything to her has proven himself to be the basest of men. Furthermore, women are the unhappiest species of all thinking, feeling creatures because a man can turn to a new woman, such as Jason who has left her alone in a foreign land without family. Medea begs for the women's silence if she finds a way to punish Jason, warning that though women are naturally timid, there is no heart more murderous when wronged in love. The leader of the chorus agrees that Medea's vengeance will be just. Creon arrives to tell Medea that she and her sons will be sent into exile. When she asks why, he admits that he fears Medea and what she will do to his child. Lamenting the damage done to her by her reputation, Medea insists that Creon has not harmed her when she says, "No, it is my husband I hate" (paragraph 40). She convinces Creon to allow her to remain in Corinth for one more day since he is convinced that is not enough time for her to enact the vengeance he fears. After Creon leaves, the chorus asks where Medea will go, and she admits that Creon has furthered her plans by permitting her to stay another day to kill the father, the daughter, and her own husband. While she knows several ways to accomplish their deaths, she chooses poison. Though she wonders where she will find hospitality when she flees Corinth, she focuses on her plot, noting that women are adept at contriving wickedness. The chorus laments that morality has been turned upside-down. Men are treacherous, and women will be honored. Medea points out that she has left her fatherland and is now being driven to dishonor in exile because Jason has no respect for his oaths. She cannot return to her father's house for shelter, and she has no home in Corinth since Glauce has charmed her husband and stepped into Medea's place.

Jason enters and chides Medea for her intractable nature, claiming that she is being exiled because she angers Creon, yet he assures her that he will not allow her and their sons to leave the country without money because he cannot think cruelly of Medea though she hates him. Medea mocks Jason for coming, reminding him that she saved his life, slew a dragon, and left her home for him, only to have him betray her and create a new marriage though she bore him children. She asks where she can turn now that she has made enemies of her family and friends to oblige him. Insisting that Medea got more than she gave in the matter of rescuing him, Jason reminds her that she now lives in Greece instead of a barbarian land. Also, she has learned about law and justice and has won great fame among the Greeks. He defends his marriage to Glauce by claiming it is a good match, but it does not mean he is weary of Medea or smitten with Glauce. His new marriage will allow him to provide better opportunities for his sons with Medea through their relationship to the princes that Glauce will bear him. The leader of the chorus admits that Jason defends himself skillfully, yet he still acting unjustly in betraying Medea. Medea insists that Jason would have sought her consent for the new



match if his intentions were honorable. He again defends his decision by citing how it will present new opportunities for their sons.

When Medea laments that she is helpless and faced with exile, Jason blames her for heaping curses on the king, causing her to promise to prove a curse to Jason's house also. Jason announces that he is finished with the conversation, but he offers to assist Medea with her exile by introducing her to his friends. Medea refuses his offer of assistance, spurning his offer to support her after his marriage and advising him "make the most of the union. Perhaps, god willing, you are making the kind of marriage you will someday wish unmade" (paragraph 95). Jason exits.

Analysis

As the play continues, Medea joins the chorus. Foreshadowing her wrath, she asks them not to criticize her when she seeks vengeance against Jason for his betrayal. She laments her lack of family to turn to in this crisis as she has forsaken them all for Jason, increasing the sting of his betrayal when she has given up all she once had for him. Her comments that there is no heart more murderous than a woman's when wronged in love foreshadows Medea's intention to turn to murder to avenge the slights done against her. Fulfilling earlier foreshadowing, Creon visits Medea and tells her that she and her sons will be exiled because he fears her vengeance, demonstrating how widely known Medea's fierce reputation has become. Medea persuades Creon to let her stay one more day since he believes that she cannot enact the revenge he so fears in such a short amount of time. However, once he leaves, Medea reveals that Creon has acted according to her plans. As Medea explains her plan to poison Jason's new wife, she laments her decision to abandon her life in Colchia for Jason and Greece. The chorus serves as a narrator who laments Medea's actions and shares moral advice and judgments. Overall, however, the chorus plays a minimal role in the events of the play. Next, Jason visits Medea and has the audacity to chide her for making threats against the king and princess. He defends his actions, insisting that his new marriage was the type of opportunity that could not be ignored, plus it will allow him to provide better for his and Medea's sons through their relationship to the princes that Glauce will bear Jason. When Medea argues with Jason about his betrayal as it pertains to everything she gave up to be with him, Jason callously claims that she is better off in Greece than in her barbarian birthplace. Furthermore, Jason's offer to care for Medea after his marriage indicates his desire to have her as his mistress while he is married to the princess, a degrading change in station for the proud Medea. Medea spurns Jason's offers, and her suggestion that he will regret his new marriage again foreshadows her plots against her successor in her husband's bed.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Creon plan to banish Medea, and how does she alter his plans?



Discussion Question 2

What is Medea's plot for vengeance?

Discussion Question 3

How does Jason defend his betrayal of Medea?

Vocabulary

Proclaims, recluse, deficient, tyrant, renounce, timid, forsaken, hostility, dullards, entreat, divine, hospitality, impunity, inflict, treacherous, wiles, monarch, exile, insolence, mollifying, humanity, embark, dispensation, verbosity, beget, invidious, loathsome, villainy, rhetoric, refuge, loiter.



Section 3: Paragraphs 96-171

Summary

Noting that love involves men in dishonor and disgrace, the chorus prays the land of Cyprus uses discernment to assort the matings of women, and they also pray that they are never exiled as that is an intolerable existence. Aegeus, King of Athens, visits Medea, informing her that he has just come from the oracle of Phoebus where he enquired about how to father children since he is still childless, but he does not understand the oracle's advice. When Aegeus asks why Medea is so sad, she informs him of Jason's betrayal, and Aegeus sympathizes with her resentment, unable to believe that Jason is allowing Creon to exile Medea and her sons. Medea tells Aegeus that she knows potions to cause his wife to conceive if he will receive her in Athens, and Aegeus agrees on the stipulation that she make her own way to his lands, swearing an oath at Medea's insistence before he departs.

Now, the time has come for Medea to triumph over her enemies. She outlines her plot to send for Jason and pretend to approve of his new marriage, asking only that her children be allowed to remain, though she would never leave them behind in a hostile country for her enemies to insult. She plans to send a robe and headdress to Glauce, through her sons, but she will soak them in poison to kill the princess. The next part of her scheme grieves her; she will murder her sons and flee Corinth to escape the consequences. She defends her filicide by pointing out that life has nothing, no father or home, left to offer her sons. Though Medea made the mistake of leaving her father's home for Jason, she will ensure that he never sees his sons again in life, nor will he have any more children since his new wife will be dead. Medea refuses to be despised or thought weak because "I am a good friend, but a dangerous enemy" (paragraph 161). The leader of the chorus begs Medea not to kill her children, but Medea insists this is the best and only way to hurt Jason. She sends the nurse to fetch Jason, forbidding her from mentioning Medea's scheme, and the nurse exits. The chorus reminds Medea that Athens is favored by the gods, asking how such a land can receive the slayer of her own children. They chide her and beg her not to murder her sons.

Analysis

The chorus appeals to the gods to be careful how they arrange women's romantic relationships, indicating that the source of Medea's grief is due to an unfortunate match. Aegeus visits Medea after receiving unhelpful advice from the oracle. The reason for his visit to the oracle, being childless, is ironic, as is Medea's offer to help him, since Medea is about to murder her own children, leaving herself childless. Still, Aegeus's visit provides Medea with an answer to one of her questions: where will she find refuge after she commits the deeds she intends as revenge against Jason? Now, she knows that she can flee to Athens, the land that Aegeus rules, though Aegeus agrees without knowing what Medea plans. Now that Medea has found a solution to where she will go



after enacting her vengeance, she proceeds with her plans, sharing them with the chorus and the audience. Medea's explanation that she will use a gift of robes and a headdress to poison Glauce foreshadows these events, as does her outline of her plan to murder her sons. She defends her decision to kill her own children by insisting that Jason's actions have left them in a position where they will never have a fulfilling life, so they may as well die now, plus nothing will hurt Jason more than the deaths of his sons. Despite the chorus appealing to Medea to reconsider, Medea sends the nurse to summon Jason to her, foreshadowing the completion of her schemes.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Aegeus visit the oracle?

Discussion Question 2

What deal does Medea make with Aegeus?

Discussion Question 3

What does Medea plan for her sons' futures, and why?

Vocabulary

Recriminations, piteous, oracle, callous, suppliant, sanctuary, unfettered, diplomatic, sacrilegious, submissive, dictate, superfluous, hallowed



Section 4: Paragraphs 172-273

Summary

Though she hates him, Jason will not refuse Medea an audience. So, he returns to her home when the nurse summons him. Medea apologizes for her childish anger, claiming that she should have supported Jason's new marriage. She calls her sons to make peace with their father. Jason is happy with Medea's apology, and he assures his sons that he has not forgotten them. Medea accepts her exile, but she asks Jason to intercede with Creon to allow their sons to remain in Corinth. Jason agrees to try, suggesting that Glauce may intercede on his sons' behalf. Medea sends her sons to Glauce with gifts to curry her favor, and the children leave with Jason. The chorus laments; their hopes are dead as Glauce and the children will now die. They weep for the sorrow of the hapless mother who slaughters her own children to avenge the dishonor of her husband's betrayal. Medea's sons return with their tutor who tells Medea that Glauce was pleased with the gifts and made peace with the children. He comforts Medea's sorrow by reminding her that she is not the first mother to be separated from her children, and he agrees that she has endured much calamity. Medea sends him away. Contemplating her actions, Medea admits that she will live a life of sorrow and pain without her sons, but she must go on with her plans or be a laughingstock. Moreover, she cannot leave her sons in Corinth to be insulted by her enemies. Unable to look at her children any longer, Medea sends them inside as she is overwhelmed with misery. Though she realizes her crime is terrible, her passion overrules her sentiments, and she believes that passion causes most of the world's misery. The chorus notes that men without children know less sorrow than fathers since they never have to fear for their child's safety, but the worst grief is known by those who are forced to bury their own children. Medea eagerly awaits news from the palace, and she grows excited as one of Jason's attendants approaches. His excited breath indicates that he has a strange tale of evil to share.

The messenger accuses Medea of committing a horrible crime and advises her to flee. Creon and Glauce are dead, a fact that causes Medea to rejoice and ask for details, admitting it will double her delight if they died in agony. The messenger informs her that the servants were delighted when Jason's sons arrived with him. Though Glauce was angry at first, Jason urged her to accept the gifts and make peace with his sons. Unable to resist the finery of the gifts, Glauce agreed and donned the robes joyfully. However, her color soon changed. As she staggered and cried out in pain, Creon was summoned. Glauce tried to remove the robes, but she fell to the ground, a fearful sight as blood poured from her face. All feared touching her, except Creon who threw himself on his daughter and lamented, causing him to suffer the same calamity. Thus, the bodies of the father and the daughter lay side by side. The messenger does not need to tell Medea what punishment awaits her, but he notes "no mortal man has lasting happiness. When the tide of fortune flows his way, one man may have more prosperity than another, but happiness never" (paragraph 235). Once the messenger exits, the leader of the chorus says that fate is visiting Jason's sins on him today, yet she pities Glauce who



is carried through the gates of death by Jason's love. Medea resolves to act quickly in slaying her sons and fleeing the land, lest her children fall into the hands of a murderer who loves them less. They must die, so it should be by the hand of the one who gave them life. She must forget her children this one day as she will have the rest of her life to mourn them. Though she must kill them, at least she loved them first. Though she is a most unhappy woman, Medea exits with sword in hand.

Analysis

As foreshadowed, Jason visits Medea. Medea insincerely apologizes for her anger and frustration. Jason believes her to be sincere and eagerly accepts her repentance. Medea convinces Jason to try to intercede on their sons' behalf to stay in Corinth, furthering her schemes of vengeance. Medea's sons leave her to deliver her poisoned gifts to Glauce, foreshadowing the death of the princess. The chorus laments her actions, especially pertaining to her intention of killing her own sons. When Medea's children return, their tutor informs Medea that their gifts were well met, suggesting that her scheme to kill Glauce will be successful. While waiting for news, Medea debates her plan to kill her sons, arguing for and against her choice. Ultimately, she decides that she cannot let herself be mocked by reneging on her schemes, especially as her actions thus far will make her sons a target for her enemies. She believes it is better that she who loves them be the one who kills them, rather than an enemy. Medea's determination and excitement at her scheme's success returns as one of Jason's messengers approaches her house with news. The messenger reports that Medea's scheme has gone according to plan. Glauce and Creon have both died from the poison she added to the gift. Despite the fact that Medea commits these atrocious crimes, the chorus still blames Jason's betrayal, noting that his sins are revisited on him today. Deciding to kill her children immediately, Medea exits the stage to perform the act, foreshadowing the murder of her two sons. Though her decision makes her unhappy, Medea shows her determination and willingness to do what she feels is necessary, demonstrating the strength of her character.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Medea send gifts to Jason's new wife?

Discussion Question 2

What happens to Jason's new wife when she dons Medea's gifts?

Discussion Question 3

How does Medea murder Creon?



Vocabulary

Rendered, nuptial, intercede, innumerable, raiment, impetuous, exalting, harmonize, calamity, diadem, grappled, paternity, benefactors, offspring, elaborate, assailed, devouring, resin, assert, prosperity, philosophers, subtle.



Section 5: Paragraphs 238-293

Summary

The chorus prays for the Sun to stop Medea from killing her sons, questioning why she feels this murder lust where love once dwelled. From within, the children's cries are heard as they ask where they can escape their mother's murderous hands, and the chorus considers saving the children, chiding Medea's steely heart and comparing her to Ino who killed herself and her two children to punish Zeus. Jason enters and asks whether Medea is inside or if she has escaped, noting that she will be punished for killing Glauce and Creon. However, his true concern is for his children as he fears the king's relatives will injure them in vengeance. The chorus informs Jason that he does not know the sum of his sorrows. His sons are dead by Medea's hands! Astonished, Jason orders the doors opened so he can see his sons' bodies and punish Medea, but Medea appears in a dragon-drawn chariot, telling him that there is no reason to open the door because she has their sons' bodies. Jason can speak to her if he wishes, but he will never touch her again because she has a magic chariot, given to her by the Sun, her paternal grandfather, to protect her from her enemies. Ranting against Medea's abominable deed, Jason curses her but blames himself for marrying a barbarian since no Greek woman would have committed such an act. Now, he will not have joy from his new marriage or see the sons he begot. Medea insists that it is Jason's fault for scorning her love. She could not allow Creon to send her into exile. She is indifferent to Jason's insults since she has properly gotten under his skin, and though she sorrows too, the fact that Jason cannot scoff at her makes the grief worth it. When Jason tells his sons that they have a wicked mother, Medea rebuts that Jason's sins, his lust, and new marriage caused the death of his sons. Jason rejects Medea's right to murder because her love was scorned, but she insists the gods know who began it all. Jason asks to bury his sons and lament them, but Medea refuses. She will bury them herself at the sanctuary of Hera of the Cape where none can violate their tombs, plus she will have a festival and rites to expiate the impious murder. Now, she will flee to Aegeus, while Jason will die the death he deserves now that he has seen the bitter fruits of his new marriage. As Jason laments his sons, Medea tells him to go bury his wife, reminding him that their sons were dear to her, but she slew them to hurt him so she refuses to even let Jason touch their sons' bodies. Crying out to Zeus to witness Medea's murder of their sons and her refusal to let him bury them, Jason wishes he had never begotten children only to see them slain by his wife's hand. In culmination, the chorus adds, "many things beyond expectation do the gods fulfill. That which was expected has not been accomplished; for that which was unexpected has god found the way. Such was the end of this story" (paragraph 293).

Analysis

Fulfilling foreshadowing throughout the play, Medea can be heard killing her sons. As they cry out for help, the chorus debates whether or not they should save Jason's sons.



Medea's actions cause them to compare her to Ino, an allusion to another Greek myth that would have been familiar to Euripides's audiences. Jason shows his concern and love for his sons when he arrives at Medea's home to protect them, lest the king's relatives direct their vengeance against the youths. The chorus informs Jason of his former's wife's actions, leaving him astonished as he orders her door to be broken down; however, before the door can be opened, Medea appears overhead, out of reach in a chariot drawn by a dragon. The chariot is a gift from Medea's paternal grandfather, demonstrating her affiliation with the gods despite being born in a barbarian country. Jason rants against Medea, claiming the cause of her evil is related to her being a barbarian woman, again showing the discrimination the Greeks felt against those from other countries. Medea insists that her crimes are Jason's fault because of his betrayal, and though she grieves for their sons as much as he does, Jason's grief makes her own more bearable. Jason begs to bury his sons' bodies, an important rite in ancient Greece as souls without the proper burial rites could not join their ancestors in the Elysian Fields. Yet, Medea refuses even this, insisting that she will take care of their burials personally in order to ensure that her enemies cannot abuse her sons' corpses. Medea flees to Athens, leaving Jason behind to lament his ill-fortune to the gods who do not appear to avenge him. This, combined with Medea's actions, causes the chorus to question the will of the gods. However, it is apparent that they support Medea's actions to some degree since they do not appear to succor Jason in his grief. This suggests that the gods may see the justice in Medea's decision given Jason's betrayal, a concept very unusual for the patriarchal society of ancient Greece.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Jason come searching for his sons after his wife and father-in-law die?

Discussion Question 2

How does Medea escape from Jason?

Discussion Question 3

What does Medea do with her sons' bodies?

Vocabulary

Maternal, murderlust, tribulations, precipice, recesses, aloft, abominable, barbarian, treacherous, rebuttal, impious, stewardship.



Characters

Medea

Medea is the main character and protagonist of this novel; however, her vengeance against Jason for his betrayal also positions her as the antagonist simultaneously. Following the adventures of the Golden Fleece during which Medea betrayed her barbarian country of Colchis as well as her family, Medea happily lives in Corinth with Jason until he betrays her to marry Glauce, Princess of Corinth. As Medea grieves over her loss, her nurse fears what Medea may do to herself and her children. A chorus of Corinthian women visits to comfort Medea. King Creon, Glauce's father, visits Medea and sentences her and her sons to exile, fearing what she may do to his daughter; however, Medea convinces him to delay her exile for one day, giving her time to enact her vengeance. Jason also visits Medea and attempts to explain himself, insisting that his marriage to Glauce presented a rare opportunity for him which will allow him to better provide for his sons with Medea through their familial relationship to the princes Glauce will bear Jason. Medea reminds him of all she gave up for him, scorning his offer to assist her in her exile and expressing the hope that he will not find joy in his new wife.

Next, Medea receives a visit from Aegeus, King of Athens, who has return from a trip to the Oracle of Phoebus where he sought guidance to bare children since he is still childless. Medea offers to use magic to help his wife conceive if he grants her refuge in Athens. Aegeus agrees on condition that Medea makes her own way to Athens. Medea resumes her plots for vengeance, planning to poison Glauce and kill her own sons as this is the best way to hurt Jason. Medea summons Jason and apologizes falsely, sending her sons to Glauce with her gift of poisoned robes. Glauce is killed by the poison, as is Creon when he tries to save his beloved daughter. Determined to complete her revenge, Medea rushes offstage and kills her sons. Jason arrives to protect their sons from the vengeance of the king's relatives and learns that Medea has already killed them. Medea appears in a chariot given to her by the Sun and drawn by dragons, mocking Jason's grief. She refuses his request to bury his sons and escapes to Athens with her sons' bodies as the chorus contemplates the gods' will in Medea's actions.

Jason

Jason, Medea's husband, is another main character, and he can also be viewed as an antagonist since his betrayal is what leads Medea to seek vengeance in the most atrocious ways imaginable. Jason betrays Medea by marrying Glauce, the princess of Corinth. Jason's betrayal acts as the catalyst which inspires the events of the play. Medea's grief leads her to seek vengeance, and she determines that the best way to avenge herself against Jason is by murdering his new wife and their children. Jason visits Medea and attempts to explain himself, insisting that his marriage to Glauce presented a rare opportunity for him which will allow him to better provide for his sons



with Medea through their familial relationship to the princes Glauce will bear Jason. Medea reminds him of all she gave up for him, scorning his offer to assist her in her exile and expressing the hope that he will not find joy in his new wife.

To further her plots of vengeance, Medea summons Jason and pretends to apologize, claiming she overreacted to his new marriage and that she forgives him. She convinces him to escort their sons to Glauce with gifts and intercede to request that their sons not be exiled with Medea. After Glauce and Creon die from the poisoned robes Medea sent, Jason visits Medea's house and asks whether Medea is inside or if she has escaped, noting that she will be punished for killing Glauce and Creon, but his true concern is for his children as he fears the king's relatives will injure them in vengeance. Astonished to hear that his sons are dead, Jason orders the doors opened so he can see his sons' bodies and punish Medea, but Medea appears in a dragon-drawn chariot, telling him that there is no reason to open the door because she has their sons' bodies. Jason can speak to her if he wishes, but he will never touch her again because she has a magic chariot, given to her by the Sun, her paternal grandfather, to protect her from her enemies. Ranting against Medea's abominable deed, Jason curses her but blames himself for marrying a barbarian since no Greek woman would have committed such an act. Medea mocks Jason's grief and leaves, refusing to allow him to bury his sons' bodies. Crying out to Zeus to witness Medea's murder of their sons and her refusal to let him bury them, Jason wishes he had never begotten children only to see them slain at his wife's hand.

Creon

Creon, King of Corinth and father of Glauce, exiles Medea because she threatens him and his daughter after Jason betrays her to marry Glauce. Medea convinces him to grant her one more day before she is exiled, a day that she uses to send poisoned robes to the palace. Creon is summoned to his daughter's side when she dons the robes sent from Medea, and he also succumbs to the poison as he holds Glauce's body.

Aegeus

Aegeus is the King of Athens who visits Medea after a trip to the Oracle of Phoebus. He agrees to grant Medea refuge in Athens, provided she make her own way to his lands, in exchange for Medea using magic spells to make his wife conceive a child.

Nurse

The nurse is Medea's loyal servant who grieves for her mistress's pain at the same time she fears her revenge.



Medea's Sons

Medea's sons are two young boys whose father is Jason. Medea sends them to Glauce with her poisoned gifts, but then Medea murders her own sons as the ultimate act of revenge against Jason. She flees Corinth with their bodies, intending to bury them at the sanctuary of Hera of the Cape.

Chorus

The chorus is comprised of Corinthian women who arrive early in the play to comfort Medea in her grief and assure her of their friendship. They try to dissuade her from killing her sons, and later, they contemplate the gods' will in her actions.

Tutor

The tutor tends to Medea's sons, and he tells the nurse about Medea's imminent exile. He also reports to Medea that Glauce has accepted the gifts sent in the hands of Medea's sons.

Jason's Messenger

Jason's messenger tells Medea about Creon and Glauce's deaths, advising her to flee Corinth immediately.

Glauce

Glauce is the princess of Corinth and the daughter of Creon. She is not actually seen onstage. Jason betrays Medea by marrying Glauce. Medea sends her sons to the palace to give Glauce poisoned robes which ultimately kill both Glauce and Creon.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Golden Fleece

The nurse laments the search for the Golden Fleece since it led Medea to Corinth with Jason. The Golden Fleece symbolizes the harmony of Medea and Jason's early love and also Medea's betrayal of her family and homeland for Jason.

Oracle of Phoebus

Aegeus has just come from the Oracle of Phoebus when he visits Medea in Corinth, but he does not understand the Oracle's message. This serves as a symbol of the ambiguity of the gods which plays a role later in the play when the chorus questions Zeus for allowing Medea's acts of vengeance.

Poisoned Robes

Medea sends poisoned robes to Glauce through her sons, symbolizing her treachery and plans for vengeance.

Chariot of the Sun

Medea escapes with her sons' bodies by using the chariot from the Sun, her paternal grandfather. This symbolizes the gods' approval, or at least acceptance, of Medea's acts of revenge against Jason.

Sanctuary of Hera of the Cape

Medea plans to bury her sons' bodies at the sanctuary of Hera of the Cape where they can be free from the insults and degradations of her enemies, thus showing her love and respect for her sons which further emphasizes her anger against Jason which led her to kill their children.

Exile

Creon decides to punish Medea for cursing him and his daughter by sentencing her to exile, symbolizing Medea's separation from Jason and her determination to enact her revenge.



Sword

The sword that Medea uses to slay her sons symbolizes her murderous act and the ultimate revenge against Jason.

Jason's Marriage to Glauce

Jason's marriage to Glauce symbolizes his betrayal of Medea.

Medea and Jason's Sons

Medea and Jason's sons, whom Medea murders as revenge for Jason's betrayal, symbolize Medea's connection to Jason. Killing them is the best way to hurt him.

Medea's Grief

Medea's grief symbolizes how hurt she is by Jason's betrayal. As she claims there is no heart more murderous than a woman who has been wronged in love, her grief leads to her revenge, symbolizing her decision to seek vengeance for the wrongs done against her.



Settings

Corinth

Corinth is the main setting of “Medea” as this is where the play’s action occurs. Corinth is ruled by King Creon. After leaving her homeland, Medea lives there happily with Jason. The happiness ends when Jason betrays her by marrying Creon’s daughter.

Medea’s home

Medea’s home, located in Corinth, is the only actual setting that is seen in this play. This is where the entirety of the action occurs, from Medea’s plotting vengeance to her implementation of her revenge.

Colchis

Colchis is Medea’s fatherland which she scorns and abandons for Jason. After his betrayal, she frequently laments leaving Colchis.

Athens

Athens is a country near Corinth which is ruled by Aegeus who swears to grant Medea refuge in exchange for her magical knowledge to aid his wife to conceive a child. However, Medea must make her own way to Athens.

Palace in Corinth

The palace in Corinth is the home of King Creon and his daughter Glauce. Medea sends her sons to the palace with poisoned gifts for Glauce. Thus, the home of Creon and his daughter also serves as the scene of their deaths.



Themes and Motifs

Revenge

The main theme of Euripides' "Medea" is vengeance. After Jason betrays Medea by marrying Glauce, Medea plots and enacts her revenge. This comprises the majority of the play. From the beginning, Medea's nurse fears how she will seek her vengeance because "she is cunning. Whoever crosses swords with her will not find victory easy" (paragraph 2). When the chorus arrives at Medea's house, she begs them to keep silent if she finds a way to punish Jason, admitting that no heart is more murderous than a woman's when she is wronged in love. First, Medea convinces Creon to delay her exile for a day, giving her time to enact her vengeance. Still, she questions where she will find refuge after her vengeance. The answer comes when Aegeus visits Medea and agrees to grant her refuge in Athens in exchange for Medea using her knowledge of magic to help his wife conceive.

With her strategy to exit in mind, Medea plots her revenge. The time has come to triumph over her enemies. She outlines her plot to send for Jason and pretend to approve of his new marriage, asking only that her children be allowed to remain, though she would never leave them behind in a hostile country for her enemies to insult. She plans to send a robe and headdress to Glauce, through her sons, but she will soak them in poison to kill the princess. The next part of her scheme grieves her. She will murder her sons and flee Corinth to escape the consequences. She defends her act of murdering her own children by pointing out that life has nothing, no father or home, left to offer her sons. Medea continues to act according to her plot, feigning peace with Jason and sending the poisoned robe and headdress to Glauce. The robe kills both Glauce and Creon. Medea then kills her own sons and mocks Jason's grief as she refuses to allow him to bury their bodies. She flees with her sons' bodies to Athens.

Betrayal

Betrayal plays an important role in this play as Medea's need for revenge stems from Jason's decision to betray her by marrying Glauce. The most obvious expression of this betrayal is found in the first conversation between Medea and Jason where he tries to defend his actions. Medea mocks Jason for coming, reminding him that she saved his life, slew a dragon, and left her home for him, only to have him betray her. He has created a new marriage even though she bore him children. She asks where she can turn now that she has made enemies of her family and friends to oblige him. Insisting that Medea got more than she gave in the matter of rescuing him, Jason reminds her that she now lives in Greece instead of a barbarian land, plus she has learned about law and justice and has won great fame amongst the Greeks. He defends his marriage to Glauce by claiming it is a good match, but it does not mean he is weary of Medea or smitten with Glauce. His new marriage will allow him to provide better opportunities for his sons with Medea through their relationship to the princes that Glauce will bear him.



The leader of the chorus admits that Jason defends himself skillfully, yet he still acting unjustly in betraying Medea. Medea insists that Jason would have sought her consent for the new match if his intentions were honorable, but he again defends his decision by citing how it will present new opportunities for their sons. When Medea laments that she is helpless and faced with exile, Jason blames her for heaping curses on the king, causing her to promise to prove a curse to Jason's house also.

This conversation also touches on another instance of betrayal which occurred before the play actually begins. Medea betrayed her father, brother, and homeland of Colchis by helping Jason acquire the Golden Fleece. The sacrifices that Medea has made on her husband's behalf makes his betrayal seem even harsher. The final act of betrayal in this play is Medea's decision to enact vengeance against Jason by slaying her two sons. This act of murdering one's own children is the ultimate betrayal as the mother of a child is the person who is supposed to protect them above all others. Yet, Medea slays her own children, going against nature to hurt her husband.

Love

Without love, feelings of betrayal and the need for vengeance cannot be as severe. Thus, love plays an important role in "Medea." Medea's grief and desire for vengeance stems from Jason's betrayal, a grievous offense since Medea has been a loyal, loving wife to him. There is a thin line between love and hate, and Jason's betrayal tips Medea's feelings toward the latter. Medea notes that there is no heart more murderous than a woman who has been wronged in love, admitting her love for Jason at the same time that she foreshadows the murders she will commit as her revenge against him. During Medea and Jason's argument, Jason insists that his decision to marry Glauce does not indicate a lack of love for Medea. He feels that he could not pass up the opportunity to marry a princess, claiming it will provide his sons with a better opportunity through their familial relationship to the children he plans to have with the princess.

Medea's love for Jason is obvious as she betrayed her homeland and her family for his sake, strengthening the force of his betrayal. Medea also insists that she loves her sons, claiming that she kills them so that they will not be hunted by her enemies who love them less. This claim of love despite betrayal creates a parallel between Medea and Jason. It is also evident that Jason loves his sons as he tries to intercede on their behalf to prevent them from being exiled with their mother. He also shows his love for his sons when he visits Medea's home after the murders of Glauce and Creon. He does so because he fears that the king's relatives will seek vengeance against his children, and Jason wants to protect them. Unfortunately, it is too late. Their "loving" mother has already murdered her children, and she flees to Athens with their bodies, leaving a distraught Jason behind to grieve for their lives.

Styles

Point of View

This play is written from a combination of both first and third person as is common for this genre. The point of view is somewhat limited, but it is simultaneously semi-omniscient as there are multiple narrators, each character serving as an individual narrator as well. Additionally, because "Medea" is a play, there are a number of monologues and soliloquies dispersed throughout the text. The characters speak to one another and directly to the audience to further the plot, but most characters are only privy to their own thoughts; however, the chorus seems to possess more knowledge than the other characters, while the nurse seems to have a special insight into how Medea will act which is appropriate given the length of their relationship. The use of multiple narrators is important to the play's format as it allows the audience to see various perspectives of the events transpiring onstage.

The play is comprised mostly of dialogue with a very small amount of exposition. This distribution is used because "Medea" is a play, meant to be acted out on the stage. The description of scenery and actions are the only instances of exposition, maintaining a focus on the characters and their dialogue which is how the plot progresses. The viewpoint of this play is mostly that of Medea, the nurse and the chorus, but there are occasional insights into the viewpoints of Creon, Aegeus and Jason during their conversations with Medea.

Language and Meaning

The language used in this play is fairly stiff and formal which is appropriate for the time period in which it was written, the fifth century B.C. in ancient Greece. The sentences and grammar used is also mostly formal, and it is used to represent the time period depicted and particularly the status of nobility which most of the characters possess. Originally, the play was written in ancient Greek, but it has been translated to English for modern audiences. While some of the style is lost in translation, the use of English allows the play to be enjoyed by a broader audience.

The language utilized in "Medea" serves to characterize the players, the time period and the customs of the time period, including the religion which is now known as Greek mythology. The play is comprised mostly of dialogue with a very small amount of exposition. This distribution is used because "Medea" is a play, meant to be acted out on the stage. The description of scenery and actions are the only instances of exposition, maintaining a focus on the characters and their dialogue which is how the plot progresses. The change in language aids comprehension by presenting the play to a new generation and nation of readers. Overall, it is easy to read and understand though modern American readers are likely to find some of the customs described in the play to be foreign and strange.



Structure

Euripides's play consists on only thirty-one pages with no specific division into chapters, acts or scenes. The play reads as one narrative with no discernible distinction between scenes or events. The play is fairly detailed as Medea laments the cause of her grief and shares her plot for revenge which foreshadows her actions. The entire narrative occurs in less than one day.

"Medea" by Euripides is a play written and performed in 431 B. C., based on the Greek myth of Medea and Jason. When Jason betrays Medea by marrying a Corinthian princess, Medea plots and enacts her revenge, destroying everyone her husband holds dear. "Medea" is an interesting, yet controversial, version of the popular Greek myth sure to thrill and appall modern audiences. The pace of the play is fairly quick, and it is easy to read. The plot is generally linear with a small amount of backstory about Jason and Medea's past; Euripides's original audience would already be familiar with the story concerning how they met during the search for the Golden Fleece. Overall, the story is intriguing and appalling, but it has been a source of entertainment for audiences for over twenty-five centuries.



Quotes

She hates her own children and has no pleasure at the sight of them. I fear she may form some new and horrible resolve. For hers is a dangerous mind, and she will not lie down to injury. I know her and she frightens me (lest she make her way stealthily into the palace where his couch is spread and drive a sharp sword into his vitals or even kill both the King and the bridegroom and then incur some greater misfortune). She is cunning. Whoever crosses swords with her will not find victory easy, I tell you.

-- Nurse (Medea paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote foreshadows Medea's revenge against Jason turning to murder and filicide.

Are you only now learning that every man loves himself more than his neighbor? (Some justly, others for profit, as) now for a new bride their father hates these children.

-- Tutor (Medea paragraph 18)

Importance: This quote expresses a pessimistic view of humanity in general and disdain for Jason specifically.

It's all over, my friends; I would gladly die. Life has lost its savor. The man who was everything to me, well he knows it, has turned out to be the basest of men. Of all creatures that feel and think, we women are the unhappiest species.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 34)

Importance: This quote shows Medea's sorrow and depression in response to Jason's betrayal.

I am afraid of you- there's no need to hide behind a cloak of words- afraid you will do my child so irreparable injury. There's plenty logic in that fear. You are a wizard possessed of evil knowledge. You are stung by the loss of your husband's love. And I have heard your threats- they told me of them- to injure bridegroom and bride and father of the bride. Therefore before anything happens to me, I shall take precautions. Better for me now to be hateful in your eyes than to relent and rue it greatly later.

-- Creon (Medea paragraph 39)

Importance: This quote shows Creon admitting his fear of Medea punishing him and Glauce for Jason's betrayal. It also foreshadows Medea's plot for revenge.

I would not even have spoken to him, nor touched him either. But he is such a fool that though he might have thwarted my plans by expelling me from the country he has allowed me to stay over for this one day, in which I shall make corpses of three of my enemies, father and daughter and my own husband.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 61)



Importance: This quote shows Creon playing into Medea's hand, thus foreshadowing his and Glauce's deaths.

And after all those benefits at my hands, you basest of men, you have betrayed me and made a new marriage, though I have borne you children. If you were still childless, I could have understood this love of yours for a new wife. Gone now is all reliance on pledges. You puzzle me. Do you believe that the gods of the old days are no longer in office? Do you think that men are now living under a new dispensation? For surely you know that you have broken all your oaths to me.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 73)

Importance: In this quote, Medea accuses Jason of breaking his oaths, a serious offense against the gods.

You women have actually come to believe that, lucky in love, you are lucky in all things, but let some mischance befall that love, and you will think the best of all possible worlds a loathsome place. There ought to have been some other way for men to beget children, dispensing with the assistance of women. Then there would be no trouble in the world.

-- Jason (Medea paragraph 79)

Importance: This quote shows that Jason feels his new marriage is justified as he mocks Medea's feelings of betrayal.

Make the most of the union. Perhaps, god willing, you are making the kind of marriage you will some day wish unmade.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 95)

Importance: This quote foreshadows Medea's plot for vengeance against Jason.

But now I must change my tone. It grieves me sorely, the horrible deed I must do next. I shall murder my children, these children of mine. No man shall take them away from me. Then when I have accomplished the utter overthrow of the house of Jason, I shall flee from the land, to escape the consequences of my own dear children's murder and my other accursed crimes. My friends, I cannot bear being laughed at by my enemies.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 159)

Importance: This quote explains Medea's plot for vengeance, foreshadowing the deaths of Glauce, Creon, and Medea's sons.

I am a good friend, but a dangerous enemy. For that is the type the world delights to honor.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 161)

Importance: This quote shows Medea defining her own character.



Jason, please forgive me for all I said. After all the services of love you have rendered me before, I can count on you to put up with my fits of temper. I have been arguing the matter out with myself... These reflections let me see how very foolish I have been and how groundless is my resentment. Now, I want to thank you. I think you are only doing the right thing in making this new match.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 173)

Importance: This quote shows Medea lulling Jason into a false sense of security by feigning forgiveness only to propagate her murderous plot.

My misery overwhelms me. O I do realize how terrible is the crime I am about, but passion overrules my resolutions, passion that causes most of the misery in the world.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 220)

Importance: Medea admits that her anger supersedes her love for her sons, foreshadowing their murders.

Speak on. How did they die? You would double my delight, if they died in agony.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 230)

Importance: This quote reveals the extent of Medea's hatred for Creon and Glauce.

This day, this one short day, forget your children. You have all the future to mourn for them. Aye, to mourn. Though you mean to kill them, at least you loved them. Oh! I am a most unhappy woman.

-- Medea (Medea paragraph 237)

Importance: This quote shows Medea assuring herself that she loves her sons even though she intends to slay them.

Does she think she can slay the rulers of the land and get safely away from this house? But I am not so anxious about her as I am about the children. The victims of her crimes will attend to her. It's my own children I am here to save, in case the relatives of the king do them some injury in revenge for the foul murders their mother has committed.

-- Jason (Medea paragraph 248)

Importance: This quote shows Jason's love for his sons and his fear for retaliation against Medea in the form of injury to her children as he does not yet suspect her of killing their sons.

O Zeus, do you hear how I am repelled, how I am wronged by this foul tigress, that slew her own children? But such lament as I may and can make, I hereby make. I call upon the gods. I invoke the powers above to bear me witness that you slew my children and now prevent me from embracing their bodies and giving them burial. Would that I had never begotten them, to live to see them slain at your hands.

-- Jason (Medea paragraph 293)



Importance: This quote shows Jason's appeal to Zeus to witness Medea's devastating crime. The god's lack of response suggests his acceptance of Medea's form of vengeance.