

PRESTWICK HOUSE LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS

MEDEA

by Euripides



UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES



Medea

EURIPIDES



Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

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Notes

What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Medea has meaning in our time because it raises such difficult and disturbing issues. As a barbarian, woman, and witch, Medea is instantly set apart from her community; she is isolated in almost every possible way. Surprisingly, this helps to make her a heroic figure; alone and without aid, she must do everything for herself, in spite of the challenges set against her. She defies the odds and is victorious over her enemies—yet at the end of the play, the audience is far from unanimously on her side. Medea's single-minded devotion to revenge and the horrible things she does to achieve it vitiate the sympathy she would receive. She has just grievances against Jason and Creon, who have been unjust to her. Her actions, however, are shocking and defy the most basic laws and assumptions of human society. Thus, Euripides questions what it means to be a hero, as well as what it means to be a good person and part of a community.

After reading this play, look at the motives and actions of all its characters and see if you can find any truly sympathetic figures. Does anyone deserve what they get? And, if Medea's actions are so truly heinous, why does Euripides elevate her so much at the end of the play, when she is almost a goddess? These are not easy questions to answer, and they point to why Euripides has been one of the most successful psychological dramatists of all time, a poet whose works continue to shock and confound audiences and readers almost 2,500 years after they were written.

Translator's Note

In preparing this edition, I have for the most part followed the Oxford text of Diggle. Like most Greek texts, there are many areas of confusion in the manuscripts of *Medea*; I have tried to stay as close to the Greek as possible, but my primary concern was to produce a coherent English text for a young audience uninterested in the cruces of palaeography and papyrology. I also used the Cambridge commentary of Donald Mastronarde and followed many of his emendations to aid in producing a smooth final product.

J. E. Thomas
Providence, R.I.

READING POINTERS

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Medea*, be aware of the following themes and elements:

- **Greeks vs. Barbarians:** In the 5th century, the area of modern Greece was occupied by dozens of small city-states and islands, each with its own peculiar legal and cultural institutions. Although these peoples were tied together by similar religious practices and often made alliances with one another, there was no unified Greek organization—no country of Greece. Hence, the Greeks viewed the world through a linguistic distinction: Greek-speakers, despite all their differences, were viewed as civilized, rational people, while anyone who did not speak Greek was termed a barbarian. The word *barbaros* had fewer negative connotations for the Greeks than it does for us, but the Greeks still viewed themselves as culturally superior and more enlightened than even the best of barbarians. They applied this designation without exception; all non-Greek speakers—the nomadic Scythians of modern Ukraine, the inhabitants of the powerful, cosmopolitan Persian Empire, even the Romans—were ultimately, in Greek eyes, just barbarians.

This distinction is very important in the play, because Medea is a barbarian and all the other characters are Greek. This makes Medea instantly an outsider, and for the Greeks, ties to homeland and community were very, very strong.

- **Gender:** A second important distinction is obvious: Medea is a woman. In ancient Athens, women of well-born families were expected to stay at home in specially designated women's quarters *all the time*, except during certain religious festivals. Marriages were arranged by a girl's father or guardian. Women were not true citizens of the democracy and could not speak or vote in the assembly. They were not even allowed to speak in court, a basic right for Athenian men. As a woman and barbarian, Medea is very alienated. She, however, thinks of herself as Jason's equal; she refuses to be a submissive wife, which has disastrous results

Setting

SETTING

In front of Medea's house in Corinth. There is an entrance onto the stage from the house, as well as two side entrances leading toward the palace and toward the main road away from the city.

D R A M A T I S P E R S O N A E

Dramatis Personae

(in order of appearance)

Nurse, aged servant of Medea

Tutor to the children of Jason and Medea

Medea, formerly princess of Colchis, now wife of Jason

Chorus of the women of Corinth

Creon, king of Corinth

Jason, hero and captain of the Argo, husband of Medea

Aegeus, king of Athens

Messenger

Children of Medea

various unnamed attendants, servants, and guards



Medea

M E D E A

[Enter Nurse from the house.]

Nurse

If only the ship Argo¹ had never flown
through the dark Symplegades² into the land
of Colchis,³ and the felled pine had never
fallen in the glens of Pelion,⁴
5 and the hands of heroes never manned its oars,
never sought the Golden Fleece for Pelias!⁵
Then my mistress Medea would not have sailed
to the towers of Iolcus,⁶ her heart smitten
by love for Jason. Then she would never
10 have persuaded the daughters of Pelias
to kill their father, and been forced to live
in this land of Corinth with her husband
and children, an exile who pleased the citizens
of her new home, a help to Jason himself
15 in all matters. This is the greatest salvation,
when a wife stands together with her husband.
But, now it's all hate, what was dearest is sick,
for Jason betrayed his children and my mistress
and goes to bed with a royal marriage:
20 he's married the child of Creon who rules this land.
Poor, dishonored Medea shouts oaths

¹the first ship; see
Mythology (page
64)

²the cliffs that
formed the
entrance to the
Black Sea

³city on the Black
Sea where Medea's
father was king

⁴mountain where
the Argo was built

⁵Jason's uncle

⁶city where Pelias
ruled

⁷Normally, the groom shook hands with the bride's father. Medea's active participation in the wedding shows that she is more than an ordinary woman and considers herself Jason's equal.

- and recalls the great faith of their right hands⁷
and calls the gods to witness the sort of return
she gets from Jason. She lies, fasting,
25 surrendering her body to pain,
wasting away in tears ever since she perceived
herself mistreated by her husband,
neither lifting her eyes nor moving her face
from the ground; when she hears her friends rebuke
her,
30 she listens like a rock or the sea's wave,
except when she turns her white face away
and groans to herself for her dear father
and her land and the home she betrayed and left
with a husband who now dishonors her.
35 The poor thing has been taught by misfortune
the importance of not losing your homeland.
She hates her children and hates the sight of them,
and I fear that she's plotting something new.
It'll only bring her greater suffering,
40 for she is terrible; no one takes her on
as an enemy and emerges the victor.
The children are coming! They've stopped
exercising—
they don't understand their mother's trouble,
45 for a young mind doesn't like to worry.

[Enter Tutor with Children from offstage.]

Tutor

Long-time possession of my mistress,
why do you stand by the gates, in solitude,
bemoaning your troubles to yourself?
Does Medea wish to be alone without you?

Nurse

- 50 Old attendant of the children of Jason,
for the best slaves, the affairs of their masters,
going badly, affect even their own wits.
I have gone so far into pain that desire
took me to come here and tell the sky
55 and the earth of my mistress' affairs.

Tutor

So the poor woman has not stopped groaning?

Nurse

I envy you: her suffering's only started.

Tutor

Fool—if one may say this of one's master.
How little she knows of her new troubles.

Nurse

60 What is it, old man? Don't keep it from me.

Tutor

No, I regret even what I've just said.

Nurse

Please, don't conceal it from your fellow slave,
for I'll be silent around here, if I must.

Tutor

65 I was near the dice games, where the old men
sit, around the holy spring of Pirene,⁸
and I heard someone say, when I didn't
seem to be listening, that Creon,
the ruler of this land, intends to drive
these children from Corinthian earth
70 with their mother. I don't know if the story
is sound, although I hope it isn't.

Nurse

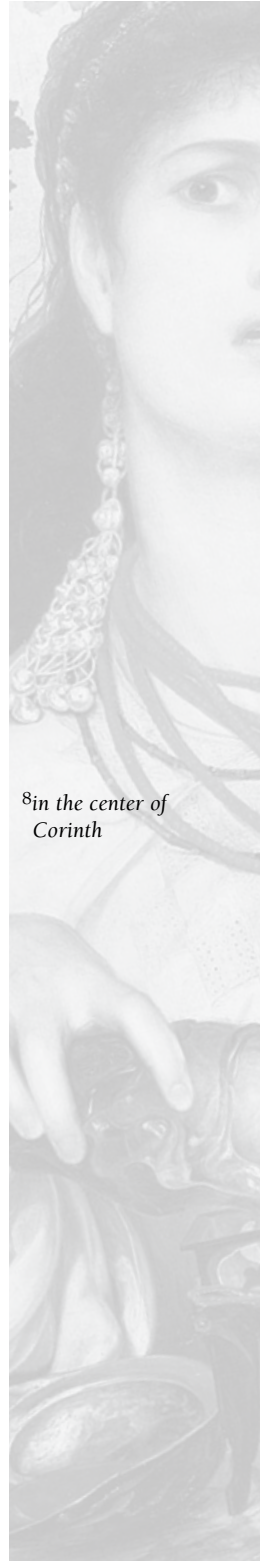
And Jason will allow his children to suffer,
even if he quarrels with their mother?

Tutor

75 Old things are abandoned for the new in-laws,
and that man is not a friend to this house.

Nurse

We're done for, if we add this new trouble
to the old one, before we've suffered it.



⁸in the center of
Corinth

Tutor

But, you, since it's not the right time for our mistress
to know this, keep quiet and tell no one.

Nurse

80 Children, do you hear how your father acts towards
you?
I won't wish him death, for he's still my master,
but he has proven bad to his friends.

Tutor

85 What mortal isn't? Do you learn this now?
Every single person loves himself
more than his fellow man, if a father
does not love his children because of his bed.

Nurse

90 Go inside now, children, it will be all right—
but you, isolate them as much as you can,
keep them away from their mother while she's angry.
I've already seen her looking at them
like a bull, like she was about to do
something; and she won't stop her anger,
I know for certain, before she has fallen
95 on someone. I just hope she does it to
enemies, at least, and not to friends.

*Medea*⁹

*[from within the house*¹⁰*]*

Oh!
I am miserable, unhappy in my labors!
Oh me, I wish I were dead.

Nurse

100 This is it, dear children; your mother
stirs her heart, stirs her anger.
Hurry quickly inside the house,
and don't go within her sight.
Don't go near her, but watch out
for her fierce heart and the hateful nature
105 of her contumacious mind.

⁹The meter*
Euripides uses
here shows
Medea's height-
ened emotion; the
Nurse responds
to her in the
same meter, as if
infected by the
emotion.

¹⁰Greek tragedies
often feature lines
spoken by a char-
acter within the
house and heard
by those outside.

Terms marked in the text with () can be looked up in the Glossary
for additional information.

Glossary

agon: part of a Greek drama in which two characters offer long speeches with sophisticated rhetorical devices, as if they were opponents in a law court. In between speeches, the Chorus leader offers a few lines, usually impartial and removed from the situation, to emphasize their lesser emotional involvement in the situation. Remember that in Athens, the most radical democracy in European history, the juries who decided law cases were made up of hundreds of citizens chosen randomly, and all laws were voted on in an Assembly of at least 6,000. Every Athenian citizen (the original audience of *Medea*) would have some experience hearing speeches like this, so this was a part of a play they could understand from their own lives.

Corinth: one of the major cities of Greece, both in mythology and in 5th century history. Located at the Isthmus of Corinth, the land bridge between mainland Greece (where Athens was) and the Peloponnesus (the hand-shaped peninsula where Sparta, Athens' main rival, was located), Corinth had a very strategic position in controlling the movements of armies from one part of Greece to another. Corinth was also a very important sea-power. Historically, there were rites for Medea's children in Corinth, so Euripides is following tradition by placing the story there.

deus ex machina: Literally, "the god from the machine." Greek tragedies often end with a god appearing in a crane over the stage to sort things out, providing a neat ending with a voice that cannot be argued against.

ecstasy: Greek religion allowed for spiritual ecstasy, considered divine possession by a god, symptoms of which could include falling, foaming at the mouth, speaking 'in tongues,' and so forth. The disease epilepsy was considered a form of this and was called in Greek "the sacred disease."

meter: Dialogue in Greek tragedy is normally spoken in *iambic trimeters*, but in times of heightened emotion may be chanted or sung. When Medea first appears, for instance, she sings in *anapests*, and the nurse sings back to her. *Anapestic* meter is the normal meter for the Chorus' entrance.

Vocabulary

- antistrophe**—the part of a choral ode or kommos following the strophe; metrically identical to the strophe
- aulos**—a wind instrument which accompanied the chorus
- chorus**—group of characters who act as a collective; in *Medea*, they are old women of Corinth.
- episode**—the part of a Greek drama that takes place between the odes; spoken rather than sung
- epode**—the part of a choral ode that follows the strophe and antistrophe
- kommos**—a lyric song sung by dramatic characters and the chorus together, usually at a point of heightened emotion
- lyric**—poetry meant to be sung
- meter**—the rhythmic division of lines in poetry
- ode**—a sung piece between episodes consisting of matched lyric stanzas; also called a stasimon
- oracle**—a holy place where gods pronounced the future or divine will to mortals; the person through whom the gods spoke these pronouncements; a pronouncement itself
- orchestra**—the round circle in front of the stage where the chorus danced
- parodos**—the first entrance of the chorus
- prologue**—the part of the tragedy before the chorus enters
- stasimon**—the Greek term for ode; takes place between dramatic episodes, allowing the chorus to reflect on the action and dialogue that has preceded
- strophe**—the first part of a choral ode or kommos
- tragedy**—dramatic genre, loftier and more serious than comedy, often with a sad ending