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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Euripides's

Medea

from

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by

Stephanie Polukis



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General Introduction to the Work

Background of Greek Tragedy

GREEK TRAGEDIES WERE WRITTEN to be presented in a competition known as the *City Dionysia*, a festival created by the Athenian ruler, Pisistratus, around 600 BC and given in honor of the god Dionysus. On each of the competition's three days, a playwright presented three tragedies and one satyr play. At the end of the festival, judges would select one playwright as the winner. While there were several playwrights in Ancient Greece, the three most famous were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

All Greek Tragedies focus on a tragic figure, a person who is moral and good, but suffers from *hamartia*—a tragic flaw—that leads to his or her downfall. Usually the tragic flaw is *hubris*, excessive pride. At the turning point in the play, the tragic figure experiences *agnorisis*, in which the hero acknowledges his or her flaw, but too late for the actions or their tragic consequences to be reversed. Almost all Greek Tragedies are divided into the following parts:

- **prologue:** a monologue, presented before the Chorus's entrance, that informs the audience of the play's setting and important past events that have bearing on the play.
- **parados:** the first entrance of the Chorus;
- **episode:** a scene in the play;
- **stasimon:** the choral commentary that follows a scene;
- **kommos:** a song in which the Chorus interacts directly with the characters.

Feminist Theory Applied to *Medea*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining Female Stereotypes in *Medea*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Examining Female Stereotypes in Medea*.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
3. Have the groups complete the handout by following these instructions (on handout):
 - Identify key **quotations** and from the text that suggest a stereotypical view of women. In the first column, copy five quotations from female characters.

In the second column, copy five quotations by male characters.

- For each of the ten quotations, record the **context** in which the lines are spoken, making note of who is speaking to whom and at what point in the play.
 - Then, determine what **female stereotype** is being expressed.
4. Reconvene the class and, as a group, answer the following questions:
 - Is there a disparity between the stereotypes presented by female character and those presented by male characters? Why or why not?
 - Do the suggested stereotypes and the characters' reactions to them illustrate the oppression of women? If so, how?
 - In what ways do the characters respond to gender oppression? Do any of the characters rebel against it?

Marxist Theory Applied to *Medea*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Analyzing Social Class and Character Impact

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Analyzing Social Class and Character Impact*.
2. Have each student complete the chart with the information for each character in the play:
 - The character's social class (bourgeoisie/proletariat)
 - What impact the person has on the other characters and the play
 - The level of impact the person has on the other characters and the play, on a scale of 1 – 10
 - (1) absolutely no impact
 - (5) a moderate level of impact
 - (10) a great impact
3. When all students have completed their charts, have them answer these questions:
 - Which character has the GREATEST effect on the play? What is his or her social class?
 - Which character has the LEAST effect on the play? What is his or her social class?
 - What is the correlation between social class and impact? Why do you think this correlation exists?
4. Reconvene as a class and discuss the answers to the chart and the questions.



Formalism Applied to *Medea*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Studying Allusion in *Medea*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Studying Allusion in Medea Chart*.
2. Divide the class into small groups, or have students work on this assignment individually.
3. Have students scan *Medea* for allusions, and make a list of all that are mentioned and the lines in which they are found.
4. Have students select five allusions that they believe have the most significance and put each one in a box labeled **Allusion**.
5. Have students identify the purpose of each allusion recorded.
 - **For example:** When Jason says “For me I’d rather not have gold at home, nor would I sing sweeter than Orpheus, if no one would know about me” he is using the allusion to Orpheus to emphasize how wonderful it is to be in Greece. He would rather live in Greece than have Orpheus’s power.
 - The students should record the purpose of each allusion in the box labeled **Purpose** to the right of the **Allusion** box.
6. Have the students analyze the allusions they have recorded and discover what commonality they have. In the box to the far right, labeled **Theme/Message**, ask the students to write to what theme or message all of the allusions contribute.
7. Reconvene as a class and have the students discuss their answers.