Medea

by Euripides

Context

Euripides lived during the Golden Age of Athens, the city where he was born and lived most of his years. Born in 484 BC, his infancy saw the repulsion of the Persian invasion, a military victory that secured Athens' political independence and eventual dominance over the Mediterranean world. His death in 406 came as Athens was surrendering its supremacy as a result of its protracted defeat to Sparta, its main rival, in the Peloponnesian War. Sandwiched between these two wars lies a creative period of political, economic, and cultural activity that spawned many of Western civilization's distinctive traits, including the flourishing of tragic drama. The art was mastered by Euripides' older contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles, playwrights who created the dramatic tradition that he would amplify significantly.

Although he is reputed to have written 92 plays, of which 17 (more than any other Classical playwright) survive, Euripides' standing as a dramatist has often been disputed, especially during his lifetime. While Aristotle heralded him "the most tragic of poets," he also criticized Euripides' confused handling of plot and the less-than-heroic nature of his protagonists. Aristophanes, a comic dramatist, constantly mocked Euripides' tendency towards word-play and paradox. Euripides' role as a dramatic innovator, however, is unquestionable: the simplicity of his dialogue and its closeness to natural human speech patterns paved the way for dramatic realism, while the emotional vacillations in many of his works created our understanding of melodrama. Admired by Socrates and other philosophers, Euripides also distinguished himself as a free thinker; criticisms of traditional religion and defenses of oppressed groups (especially women and slaves) enter his plays with an explicitness unheard of before him. More than edifying pieces of art, works such as The Bacchae, Trojan Women, Iphigenia at Aulis, Alcetis, and Electra would become basic components of the Athenian citizen's political education.

As with most of the myths recounted in ancient Greek tragedy, the story-line of Euripides' Medea, originally produced in 431 BC, is derived from a collection of tales that circulated informally around him. His audience would have been familiar with its general parameters and many of its specifics. The play's merit consequently lies in its manner of exposition and its emotional focus, which Euripides places squarely in the flights of amoral passion that afflict the protagonist, Medea. Her infamous murders of her own children challenged the Athenian moral universe that continually hovers in the background of the play.

Comprehensive Summary

Euripedes' *Medea* opens in a state of conflict. Jason has abandoned his wife, Medea, along with their two children. He hopes to advance his station by remarrying with Glauce, the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth, the Greek city where the play is set. All the events of play proceed out of this initial dilemma, and the involved parties become its central characters.

Outside the royal palace, a nurse laments the events that have led to the present crisis. After a long series of trials and adventures, which ultimately forced Jason and Medea to seek exile in Corinth, the pair had settled down and established their family, achieving a degree of fame and respectability. Jason's recent abandonment of that family has crushed Medea emotionally, to the degree that she curses her own existence, as well as that of her two children.

Fearing a possible plot of revenge, Creon banishes Medea and her children from the city. After pleading for mercy, Medea is granted one day before she must leave, during which she plans to complete her quest for "justice"--at this stage in her thinking, the murder of Creon, Glauce, and Jason. Jason accuses Medea of overreacting. By voicing her grievances so publicly, she has endangered her life and that of their children. He claims that his decision to remarry was in everyone's best interest. Medea finds him spineless, and she refuses to accept his token offers of help.

Appearing by chance in Corinth, Aegeus, King of Athens, offers Medea sanctuary in his home city in exchange for her knowledge of certain drugs that can cure his sterility. Now guaranteed an eventual haven in Athens, Medea has cleared all obstacles to completing her revenge, a plan which grows to include the murder of her own children; the pain their loss will cause her does not outweigh the satisfaction she will feel in making Jason suffer.

For the balance of the play, Medea engages in a ruse; she pretends to sympathize with Jason (bringing him into her confidence) and offers his wife "gifts," a coronet and dress. Ostensibly, the gifts are meant to convince Glauce to ask her father to allow the children to stay in Corinth. The coronet and dress are actually poisoned, however, and their delivery causes Glauce's death. Seeing his daughter ravaged by the poison, Creon chooses to die by her side by dramatically embracing her and absorbing the poison himself.

A messenger recounts the gruesome details of these deaths, which Medea absorbs with cool attentiveness. Her earlier state of anxiety, which intensified as she struggled with the decision to commit infanticide, has now given way to an assured determination to fulfill her plans. Against the protests of the chorus, Medea murders her children and flees the scene in a dragon-pulled chariot provided by her grandfather, the Sun-God. Jason is left cursing his lot; his hope of advancing his station by abandoning Medea and marrying Glauce, the conflict which opened the play, has been annihilated, and everything he values has been lost through the deaths that conclude the tragedy.

Characters

Medea - Protagonist of the play, Medea's homeland is Colchis, an island in the Black Sea, which the Greeks considered the edge of the earth--a territory of barbarians. A sorceress and a princess, she used her powers and influence to help Jason secure the Golden Fleece; then, having fallen in love with him, she fled her country and family to live with Jason in Iolcus, his own home. During the escape across the Mediterranean, she killed her brother and dumped him overboard, so that her pursuers would have to slow down and bury him. While in Iolcus, she again used her

devilish cleverness to manipulate the daughters of the local king and rival, Pelias, into murdering their own father. Exiled as murderers, Jason and Medea settled in Corinth, the setting of Euripides' play, where they established a family of two children and gained a favorable reputation. All this precedes the action of the play, which opens with Jason having divorced Medea and taken up with a new family. The play charts Medea's emotional transformation, a progression from suicidal despair to sadistic fury. She eventually avenges Jason's betrayal with a series of murders, concluding with the deaths of her own children. Famously, the pleasure of watching Jason suffer their loss outweighed her own remorse at killing them.

Jason - Jason can be considered the play's villain, though his evil stems more from weakness than strength. A former adventurer, he abandons his wife, Medea, in order to marry Glauce, the beautiful young daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Hoping to advance his station through this second marriage, he only fuels Medea to a revenge that includes the deaths of his new bride, her father, and his children. Jason's tactless self-interest and whiny rationalizations of his own actions make him a weak, unsympathetic character.

Children - The offspring of Jason and Medea, the children are presented as naïve and oblivious to the intrigue that surrounds them. Medea uses them as pawns in the murder of Glauce and Creon, and then kills them in the play's culminating horror. Their innocent deaths provide the greatest element of pathos--the tragic emotion of pity--in the play.

Chorus - Composed of the women of Corinth, the chorus chiefly serves as a commentator to the action, although it occasionally engages directly in the dialogue. The chorus members fully sympathize with Medea's plight, excepting her eventual decision to murder her own children.

Creon - The King of Corinth, Creon banishes Medea from the city. Although a minor character, Creon's suicidal embrace of his dying daughter provides one of the play's most dramatic moments, and his sentence against Medea lends an urgency to her plans for revenge.

Glauce - Daughter of Creon, Glauce is the young, beautiful princess for whom Jason abandons Medea. Her acceptance of the poisoned coronet and dress as "gifts" leads to the first murder of the play. Although she never utters a word, Glauce's presence is constantly felt as an object of Medea's jealousy. (Glauce is also referred to as Creusa.)

Aegeus - The King of Athens, Aegeus passes through Corinth after having visited the Oracle at Delphi, where he sought a cure for his sterility. Medea offers him some fertility-inducing drugs in exchange for sanctuary in Athens. His appearance marks a turning point in the play, for Medea moves from being a passive victim to an aggressor after she secures his promise of sanctuary.

Messenger - The messenger appears only once in the play--he relates in gruesome, vivid detail the death scenes of Glauce and Creon, which occur offstage.

Nurse - Caretaker of the house, the nurse of the children serves as Medea's confidant. Her presence is mainly felt in the play's opening lament and in a few speeches addressing diverse subjects not entirely related to the action of the play.

Tutor - A very minor character, the tutor of the children mainly acts as a messenger, as well as the person responsible for shuffling the children around from place to place.

Summary & Analysis

Lines 1-16

Summary

Outside of Jason's adopted house in Corinth, a nurse recounts and laments the chain of events that have led to the present crisis in the city, where Medea's "world has turned to enmity" (line 15). Jason and the crew of his ship, the Argo, began this history by sailing to Colchis, a city in Asia and Medea's home, in search of the legendary Golden Fleece. Medea, a sorceress and princess, fell in love with Jason, used her magic to help him secure the Fleece, and eventually fled with him to Iolcus, Jason's home. There she continued to use her magic and to participate in intrigues within the royal house, eventually tricking the daughters of a rival king, Pelias, into poisoning their own father. After accepting sanctuary as exiles in Corinth, Jason and Medea had two children, now young boys, and achieved a degree of respectability, earning them a "citizens' welcome" (line 12) in the city. Recently, however, Jason has abandoned Medea and his own children in order to remarry with Glauce, the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. Jason hopes thereby to advance his own station, perhaps even to succeed as king.

Commentary

The nurse's lament expresses an impossible desire: to undo the past. Medea, Jason, the chorus, and others will replay their own versions of this futile wish at various stages in the play. Jason and Medea each express remorse at having inaugurated the events the nurse recounts here; their past love has doomed them in the present.

Tragedy, as an art form, often imparts a very basic message: actions, premeditated or not, bear consequences that must be recognized and endured. A great deal of drama simply revolves around a hero or protagonist suffering through his or her actions and generating a perspective in relation to them (think *Hamlet*). *Medea,* however, is a play that conspicuously lacks any such self-conscious recognition of error by its characters; no one develops a mature perspective on his or her own actions. As the nurse reveals to us, Jason abandons Medea on a whim. Although this abandonment precipitates disastrous results to himself and all those surrounding him, Jason never acknowledges his responsibility for the suffering he has created. Like the nurse here, he simply wishes things had never happened. The predominant mood of the play is denial, and the nurse's tone in these opening moments resonates with everything that will follow.

The story of Jason and the Argonauts was already well-known to Euripides' audience, perhaps second in popularity only to Homer's accounts of the Trojan war. In keeping with Euripides' overriding themes, the nurse selects only those elements that echo with the succeeding action, particularly Medea's cleverness, guile, and willingness to sacrifice connections to family and kingdom in order to pursue the flights of her passions. Unlike Jason, who uses deceptive rationalizations to avoid facing the consequences of his own actions, Medea simply rides her passions unthinkingly. Even before Creon banishes Medea, she is already a perennial exile, unconcerned with the chains of responsibility that bind her. The most visible signs of abandoned responsibility are Jason and Medea's children; shuttled around the stage, used in a murder plot, and then murdered themselves, their silent characters will be masterfully handled by Euripides as testimony of the play's most significant absence--accountability. Thus, the nurse's opening lament establishes both the tone of denial and theme of lost accountability that pervade the entire play.

Lines 17-130

Summary

The nurse testifies to the degree of emotional shock Jason's "betrayal" has sparked in Medea: she refuses to eat and spends her days bed-ridden, pining away her fate, especially her newly-awakened sense of homelessness. The long journey that brought her to Corinth has now left her with nothing. Medea's bitterness grows to such a degree that she even despises the sight of her children. The nurse becomes afraid that some vicious plot is brewing in Medea's mind.

The boys, oblivious to the intrigue that surrounds them, exit the house with their tutor and end the nurse's meditations. The tutor shares the nurse's sympathy for Medea's plight, but also points out that the worst news has yet to reach her: there is a rumor circulating among men in the city that Creon plans to banish Medea and her children from Corinth.

Medea's first words are cries of helplessness issued from inside the house, off-stage. She wishes for her own death. The nurse fears the possible effects of this inflexible mood and sends the children inside to shelter them. In another off-stage cry, Medea curses her own children and their father, Jason, ultimately wishing the death and destruction of the entire household.

The nurse responds to Medea's anger in a soliloquy that expresses the incomprehensibility of Medea's wish to punish her own children for Jason's offense. She attributes part of Medea's stance to her queen-like mentality, which accustoms itself to issuing commands and never compromising its own will, even when it is consumed by a state of rage. Against these tendencies of the wealthy, the nurse preaches the virtues of a "middle way, neither great or mean" (line 126), which can supply the foundation for a peaceful and ordered life, unmarred by the conflicts now afflicting her master and mistress' home. The nurse's own status as a slave has availed her to the possibilities of this other, more humble life.

Commentary

After planting the crucial backdrop to the story, the play immediately introduces us to Medea's total despair upon being abandoned by Jason, offering in the process Euripides' fundamental psychological insight that victims of an intense emotional wound (Medea) not only turn against those who inflict it (Jason) but against their entire world of emotional attachments (her children). Euripides frames this insight in Medea's two opening cries: the first (lines 95-96) displays her suicidal helplessness, while the second (lines 110-114) expresses a wish/curse that every trace of her love for Jason be severed. By placing Medea off-stage, Euripides allows the audience to concentrate on her words and grasp them as a cipher to her whole character. When she eventually emerges in the flesh, the tenor of these initial remarks will cast a shadow over all her succeeding character development.

Against some interpretations of *Medea,* which claim she struggles between her devotion as a mother and her desire for revenge, we could infer from her first cries that her children's murder is fated from the beginning--the natural consequence of Medea's overwhelming emotional shock. The nurse ominously foreshadows that the "rage" stirring inside Medea will not "relax" until it has received an outlet, and the only real hope is that she can target an enemy rather than a friend (lines 94-95). Euripides' tragedies often present ordinary human beings under the sway of extraordinary forces that must be respected and understood, if not wholly accepted. While the nurse may preach the virtues of a "middle way," Medea's character testifies to the fact that such a cautious life remains unavailable to those preyed upon by fearsome impulses. The nurse interprets Medea's excesses as the product of a sense of royal entitlement, her queen-like need to command. It may be more correct, however, to view Media as a vehicle for something greater, as someone chosen by the gods (or the cosmos, for Euripides was often thought an atheist) to reveal inconvenient truths about human nature.

Lines 130-213

Summary

The chorus, composed of Corinthian women, turns towards the house and addresses Medea. They try to reason with Medea and convince her that suicide would be an overreaction. The fickleness of a husband's love is an ordinary occurrence; rather than merit self-torment, it should be dealt with and forgotten. Still within the palace walls, Medea remains unyielding and calls on the gods Themis and Artemis to sanction the death of Jason and his new wife. Because Medea accuses Jason of breaking an oath (his marriage vows), the nurse recognizes the gravity of Medea's threat; no one less than Zeus, king of the Olympian gods, watches over oaths and ensures their compliance. Entering the house in order to encourage Medea to talk with the chorus in person, the nurse performs another soliloquy, this one accusing the "men of old times" (line 190), who invented music, of foolishness. Created as an accompaniment to banquets and celebrations, their songs can never dispel the sorrow caused by broken homes--they have no real power, positive or negative. After the nurse enters the house, the chorus remarks that Themis, a goddess Medea invoked in her tirades against Jason, has already watched over her in the past--

that is, during the various stages of the journey bringing her from the far-ends of Asia to Hellas, or Greece.

Commentary

The function of the chorus varies slightly in every ancient Greek tragedy. At times, the chorus is an active participant in the drama; at others, it can be merely a commentator or spectator. The chorus in *Medea* displays qualities of both, but its central task is to pass value judgments on the behavior of individual characters--its voice stands as the arbiter of objectivity in the play, supplying us with the most normative perspective on the events as they transpire. After having expressed a general sympathy with Medea earlier, the chorus now warns her against indulging in her emotions too severely, as her turmoil, while real, is a "common thing." Medea lacks this common sense perspective. The score of advisors that counsel her to refrain from indulging in her emotions only underscores Euripides' conceit that underneath common human problems (such as marriage breakup) rest potential forces that, although normally controlled, are capable of exploding into such extraordinary catastrophes as those recounted in his play. The chorus's viewpoint, then, though the most sensible, does not fully account for Medea's situation. As she puts it, she has left life behind (line 146) and become the conveyor of a higher, more cruel order of justice. Her appeals to the gods, especially as the protectors of oaths, reinforce her sense of purpose. The chorus' common sense perspective provides a useful counterpoint to Medea's far-reaching vision, and the interplay of each stands as a key source of unresolved tension in the play.

The brief essay on music that Euripides inserts into the nurse's speech (lines 190-200) may superficially appear out of place, and the playwright was not above interjecting irrelevant commentary into his dramas. It's interesting, however, that the nurse's basic point is that music (and, by extension, all the arts the Greeks thought to be inspired by the Muses, including tragedy) does not hold the power to transform us emotionally; if we are sad, we will stay sad, if happy, we will stay happy. One of the hallmarks of tragedy is its supposedly cathartic effect--that is, by experiencing immense sorrow, we are purged of it. Euripides questionable status as a tragedian (see context and analysis) can be linked to the lack of catharsis evoked by his plays, and the nurse may be serving as his mouthpiece in this soliloquy, pointing to his plays as self-conscious explorations of the limits of his art. Euripides found a lack of authenticity behind the traditional form of tragedy, and his plays extended the art to explore new and different expressive possibilities.

Lines 214-447

Summary

Restraining her grief and displaying self-control, Medea emerges from her house to address the chorus in a long speech. She begins by condemning those who are quick to judge silent people without first learning their true character. Continuing in this vein of abstract dissertation, Medea laments the contemptible state of women: they are forced to become their husbands' possessions in marriage (with no security, for they can be easily discarded in divorce), they must endure the

pains of childbirth, and they are kept from participating in any sort of public life (unlike men, who can engage in business, sport, and war). Once their home is taken from them, women like Medea are left with nothing. Medea makes a single plea to the chorus--that Jason be made to suffer for the suffering he has inflicted upon her as a woman. The chorus agrees that Jason deserves punishment.

Having heard Medea's reproaches against Jason, Creon approaches the house to banish her and her children from Corinth, a course of action that had been rumored earlier. Creon fears that Medea may use her infamous cleverness to seek revenge against him, Jason, and his daughter Glauce, whose hand Jason has taken in marriage. Medea claims that her reputation as a clever woman inspires enmity in both the ignorant and the intelligent; the former find her incomprehensible and ineffectual, while the latter are jealous of her powers. Pointing out that the grudge she bears is directed against Jason, rather than Creon and his daughter, Medea pleads with the king to allow her to remain in Corinth, where she will endure her sufferings without protest. Creon is distrustful and unyielding, but ultimately agrees to provide Medea with one more day to make provisions for her family's flight into yet another exile.

As Medea prepares to wander into uncharted lands beyond the walls of Corinth, the chorus continues to lament her fate. Medea, however, is focused on the task she must accomplish over the course of the next day--that is, killing her three antagonists, "father and daughter; and my husband" (line 376). Considering the various possible means of murdering them, she settles on poison as the most effective. Medea calls on the goddess, Hecate, mistress of the underworld and the patroness of black magic, to serve as her accomplice in this mission. She also vows to restore honor to her lineage (Hyperion, the Sun-god, was her grandfather) and shame Jason's own tribe, which descends from Sisyphus. Finally, she concludes her prayer and tirade by claiming the natural affinity of women for acts of evil. The chorus responds to Medea in an imaginative ode, describing a world in which the presumed order of the sexes is reversed: men will be known for deception, women will be honored, male poets will lose their favor, and Apollo, the god of music, will inspire new epics that display a female perspective. The chorus continues by rehashing the tale of Medea's misfortune, "an exile with no redress" (439).

Commentary

Medea's first public pronouncement, a sort of "protest speech," provides one of the highlights of the play and demonstrates some of its complex, at times even contradictory, representations of gender. Simply at the level of character development, Medea's calm and reflective tone, especially after her preceding eruptions of despair and hatred, provides the first display of her unsettling ability to gather herself together in the midst of crisis and pursue her agenda with a staunch, almost inhuman determination. This split in her personality is to a certain degree gendered; the lack of emotional restraint is "typical" of women, and the uncompromising attention to principled action is the hallmark of heroic Ancient Greek males. Medea actually synthesizes these traits so that her uncontrollable emotions fuel her staunch principles, producing a character that fails to assume a clearly intelligible mold.

The speech itself highlights women's inarguably subordinate status in ancient Greek society, especially within the domain of public life. Euripides' introduction of such social criticism into his play remains remarkable because of how unprecedented it would have been to his audience. "Feminist" arguments, most of them not nearly so developed, were the province of a few renegade philosophers in ancient Greece. Works of art hardly ever explored political questions with any degree of self-consciousness. When Medea points out that women, especially "foreign" women, require some knowledge of magic and other covert arts to exert influence over their husbands in the bedroom, she argues for a kind of alternative power that women can enjoy, one that remains invisible to men and unacknowledged by society, yet sways each with unquestionable force. Medea also supplies a method for interpreting her own character towards the end of her speech (lines 251-257): we should read her history of exile as a metaphoric exaggeration of all women's alienation; in fact, her whole plight, past and yet to come, can be read as an allegory of women's suffering and the heights of tragedy it may unleash if left unattended. Under this model of interpretation, Medea portrays the rebellion of women against their "wretchedness." Such a transparent social allegory may seem forced or clichéd in our own contemporary setting, but in Euripides' time it would have been revolutionary, as tragedy generally spoke to the sufferings of a generic (perhaps idealized) individual, rather than a group. It would be a mistake, however, to claim that Medea's speech elaborates a clearly progressive political message, as her concluding remarks appeal to women's natural talent for devious manipulation (line 414). While Euripides' play manifests many revolutionary political sentiments, its social criticisms remain sporadic, forming just a part of some of the many trains of thought he follows.

Aside from providing a time frame that initiates a sense of urgency to the play (Medea only has a day to complete her plans), the exchange between Creon and Medea introduces the theme of her cleverness. At times, Medea appears more dangerous because of her cleverness than her rage--the latter would render her impotent if the former did not allow her to devise schemes for revenge. More than just a cold cunning, Medea's cleverness manifests a sensitivity to other people's psychological weak points: when Creon makes a casual reference to the absolute devotion he feels for his daughter, Medea appeals to him on behalf of her own children and secures the one-day grace period before his decree of banishment takes effect. Unlike other ancient tragedians who used dialogue more abstractly, Euripides places a lot of emphasis on revealing a character's personality through his or her way of maneuvering a conversation.

Concluding this section, the choral song depicts the theoretical reversal of natural order (streams flow up mountains) that would accompany an exchange in social prominence between women and men. This song is a strange hybrid of an archaic artistic form and a radical political sentiment. Choral odes of this type were adopted by older tragedians (particularly Aeschylus) to demonstrate how human actions--especially a murder within the royal house--could set the universe out of whack, tying moral and natural phenomena together. In his characteristically innovative style, Euripides employs the device to suggest that a rise to power by women would similarly unhinge the universe--to contemplate their comeuppance remains as unnatural as a king's murder.

Lines 448-660

Summary

Jason emerges to rebuke Medea for publicly expressing her murderous intentions. While she grows more caustic, he remains in a balanced frame of mind and even presumes to sympathize with her. Immediately recoiling against his gestures of compassion, which Medea interprets as hypocritical "unmanliness" (line 466), she nevertheless uses the opportunity to tell Jason exactly how she feels. She begins by recounting how she helped Jason pass the tests her father had established for him to win the Golden Fleece. She continues by reciting the sacrifice she made in fleeing her father and homeland, as well as the role she played in King Pelias' death. Jason's betrayal after so much strikes her as the grossest offense possible; he has made their vows to each other, protected by Zeus, meaningless. She asks Jason where she could possibly go after he has deserted her--she cannot return home to the father and family she has abandoned, nor to any of the lands where she has made enemies through helping him. The chorus responds to her speech by commenting that the "fiercest anger" arises to fill the place of the "dearest love" (lines 520-521).

After pointing out that Medea's cleverness as a speaker will force him to respond with equally persuasive arguments, Jason denies his debt to her and claims that solely Aphrodite, the goddess of love, holds responsibility for his safe passage home from Colchis. Furthermore, Jason argues that Medea gained far more than she lost in fleeing her homeland; among her newfound privileges he includes residence in a civilized country and a fame that would have been impossible had she remained at the "ends of the earth" (line 541). Lastly, Jason defends his choice to remarry as the best decision for all parties involved, rather than a selfish whim. Marriage with a king's daughter will secure a better life for his children, and Medea, if she could see past her jealousy, would be thankful to him. The chorus lauds Jason's reasoning, but still finds that he remains unjustified in divorcing Medea.

Medea believes that all Jason's arguments stem from a need to rationalize a decision that he intuitively recognizes as wrong. He is unequivocally corrupt, yet successfully hides behind a mask of rhetorical eloquence. Jason continues to offer any help he can provide her--for example, he suggests writing letters of introduction to friends abroad who might be willing to accept Medea into their home. Interpreting these tokens of help as Jason's manner of alleviating his own guilt, Medea refuses his offers and sends him away to his new bride.

Offering a hymn that expresses a wish to remain untouched by Aphrodite's arrows, which afflict their targets with a devastating passion, the chorus preaches against recklessness of love. No goodness can come out of violent desires, only endless disputes. The choral song continues by reiterating that exile represents the worst of all possible fates, a judgment the women of Corinth have formed through the example of Medea's own plight. They end by cursing men who unlock the "secrets" of female desire and then "disown" it (lines 659-660).

Commentary

Jason's arguments with Medea introduce his total lack of backbone as a character; he is the consummate whiner, making excuses for himself and patronizing Medea with the absurd claim that their divorce was for her benefit. Though obviously fueled by her anger, Medea's criticisms of Jason provide a much more convincing account of his actions than his own half-baked self-defense. Rather than supply his character with depth, Jason's offers of help underscore his half-hearted approach to human relationships--he is always offering people the bare minimum, whatever he can manage without sacrificing his self-interest. The play will ultimately punish Jason severely for his flaws, and his opening appearance introduces the stubbornly narrow perspective that will remain unchanged. None of the eventual suffering Jason witnesses sparks a reconsideration of his own responsibility for the destruction of his entire household. On a thematic level, the confrontation of wills highlights how Medea's steadfastness displays elements of heroism (or at least distinction), whereas Jason's makes him a limited, unsympathetic character. Furthermore, the character more in possession of his own reason, Jason, nevertheless exhibits a blindness to truth lacking in Medea's incisive, emotionally-charged speech. Like most tragedians, Euripides was fond of these paradoxes, as they pointed to limits within conventional ways of understanding and the sources of much human error.

While Jason's arguments offer ample opportunities for criticism, it should be recognized that the average Athenian of Euripides' time would have agreed with many of his viewpoints. His claim that Medea ultimately benefited by leaving barbaric Asia conforms with ancient Athens' self-image as the cradle of civilization. Athens' defeat of Persia (see context), an Asian kingdom, was a source of deep pride for its citizens, as well as a hallmark of their identity. In defeating this foreign empire, Athenians felt they had weeded out primitive values from their own culture and established the foundation for a new, enlightened form of life. Furthermore, Jason's attention to public status, even at the expense of domestic responsibility, is typical of the city's burgeoning commercial class. If Euripides' tragedies often serve as reproofs to the assumptions of his audience, then Jason's character can be interpreted as an exaggerated version of their own inclinations and pretenses. Medea, a woman who honors the ways upheld by the old, now "foreign" gods, represents forces that the Athenians were increasingly overlooking. Jason's suffering at her hands displays some of the consequences of a self-assured civilization's blindness to the power of its repressed values. While the cultural resonance of Medea's characters will be explored more in the succeeding commentary, it should simply be recognized here that Jason's perspective bears more than a personal prejudice; his limits belong to his place and time as well.

Lines 660-868

Summary

Aegeus, King of Athens, greets Medea as an old friend and recounts the story of his visit to the Oracle at Delphi. Seeking a cure for his sterility, Aegeus was given advice in the form of a riddle by the Oracle, who told him "not to unstop the wineskin's neck" (line 679). Aegeus is passing through Corinth on his way to seeing the King of Troezen, Pittheus, a man famous for his skill in

interpreting oracular pronouncements. Medea relates to Aegeus the circumstances of her banishment from Corinth, to which he responds by expressing his sympathy for her predicament. Pleading with Aegeus for sanctuary in Athens, Medea offers him a gift in exchange--magical drugs that can restore his fertility. Aegeus seals his promise to offer Medea refuge with an oath before the gods.

Alone on stage after Aegeus' departure, Medea screams out the names of the Olympian gods in excitement. The last obstacle to her plans for revenge has been cleared. Because of Aegeus' promise, Athens now stands as an unconditional sanctuary for her, even in her eventual condition as a polluted murderess. While the nurse listens in secret, Medea discloses the details of her plans. She will begin by pretending to agree with Jason's earlier arguments. Having drawn him into her confidence, she can then ask him to accept their two boys into his new family. The children will be used in a ploy to kill Glauce by bearing her gifts--a beautiful dress and gold coronet--which will be poisoned and kill anyone who touches them. Lastly, Medea will take the ultimate step of killing her own sons. Her revenge against Jason will then be total; the death of his own children along with that of his new bride will be the most severe injury he is capable of suffering, even if it means Medea must hurt herself in the process: "Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible; the laughter of my enemies I will not endure" (lines 796-797).

The chorus, which had been entirely sympathetic with Medea's decisions, now warns her against violating the laws of human existence through her planned infanticide. Offering an ode to the city of Athens, praised for being a kingdom of "Grace" and "Knowledge," the women of Corinth question the possibility of Medea's acceptance into such a civilized society after committing the unnatural act of murdering her children. The chorus concludes its speech by expressing disbelief in Medea's ability to gather enough resolution to complete with her intentions. At the moment of crisis, she will break down and give in to her natural affections as a mother.

Commentary

The Aegeus scene has been pointed out as an example of Euripides' clumsy handling of plot. He arrives apparently out of nowhere, and his offer of sanctuary to Medea turns around the course of events without any logical justification. Yet, despite its abruptness, Aegeus' appearance does extend some themes of the play in often unacknowledged ways. Most obviously, the questions surrounding children continue to be highlighted. Aegeus' sterility makes him an easy target for the assaults of Medea's cunning. Children and marriage are a constant source of conflict in Medea. The sympathies they inspire cause characters to sever ties to home and family, form strange new allegiances, and even, as we will see in Creon's case, suffer death willingly.

At a more abstract level, the play's symbolic structure depends upon Medea's implication in the foundation of Athens. Athens' reputation for being synonymous with high culture and refined civilization, rehearsed by the chorus in its ode, was well-deserved but obviously only a partial truth. Unjustified cruelty existed there to the same extent as it did everywhere else. The exploitation of women and slaves, addressed in Medea and other Euripidean dramas, was much more severe in Athens than in many surrounding cultures. An ancient culture's myths, especially those that recounted its origins, served as the primary tool for fostering its self-image. The tales

of mythic Athenian kings such as Aegeus, who established rule under the approving eyes of the Olympian gods, became arguments justifying the privileged status of Athenian customs and institutions. The presence of Medea, then, a barbarian sorceress and infamous murderess, at the beginnings of Athenian civilization challenge this simplistic picture of its origins and influence; despite Athens' pretensions towards enlightened greatness, it had already wed itself to primal, unrestrained powers at its very mythical roots. Freedom and refinement are not the whole story of the culture; a background of murderous intrigue underlies it and testifies to the persistence of injustice into Classical times. The Aegeus scene, while slightly contrived, adds this crucial thematic depth to the play.

Medea's speech after Aegeus' departure, her most self-confident to this point, rings with an oddly heroic tone. Her exuberance previews the complete transformation from despair to poise she will have undergone by play's end. From the beginning of the tragedy, she claims to be acting without respect to human norms, a judgment with which the chorus does not entirely corroborate until she clearly expresses a wish to kill her children at this stage. At times she attempts to justify their deaths through pragmatic arguments: Creon's family will kill them regardless, better that she accomplish the deed herself than watch them suffer at another's hands. Echoed in later moments, her statement in this speech that she would prefer enduring punishment than humiliation (lines 796-797) seems a more convincing account of her decision. The heroes of ancient Greece often display unswerving convictions to principles that do not conform to common sense, but the extremity of Medea's response to her betrayal forces a recognition of the ambivalence inspired by heroic temperaments; their willingness to let their pride run unrestrained makes them admirable and offensive at once.

Lines 869-1001

Summary

When Jason returns at the nurse's request, Medea begins to carry out her ruse. Expressing regret over her previous overreaction to Jason's decision to divorce and remarry, Medea goes so far as to break down in tears of remorse. Announcing a full reconciliation with her husband, she concedes each of the arguments that Jason made in their last discussion and releases the two boys into his embrace. Fully aware of Medea's expressed intentions, the chorus nevertheless hopes that she has actually changed her mind and decided to curb her desire for revenge. Pleased with how events are now panning out, Jason reimagines his future destiny: after growing into young warriors under the watchful eye of the gods, his children from both marriages will come together and make him a proud father by campaigning against his enemies.

Medea once again breaks down into tears. When Jason inquires into the source of her weeping, she first responds by saying that tears come instinctively to women, then elaborates by saying that she remains upset about being forced to leave. The defensiveness and lack of force behind her statements hint that she may now feel a degree of ambivalence surrounding her planned course of action. Determined, however, she asks Jason that he appeal to Creon to allow their children to stay in Corinth. When Jason indicates uncertainty over being able to convince the

King, Medea tells him to ask his wife, Creon's daughter, to make the plea for him. Medea then offers to bring Glauce the coronet and dress as gifts in exchange for her help. She emphasizes that the gifts must be delivered directly into her hands.

The chorus laments the now-assured doom of Medea's children. They imagine Jason's bride being unable to refuse the attractiveness of Medea's gifts, a perfect enticement for bringing a young and beautiful woman to her unsuspected death. The irony of Jason's position is also acknowledged: confident in his belief that events are unfolding in a manner that will secure the honor of his lineage, Jason is actually serving as an unwitting accomplice in the destruction of everything holding value for him.

Commentary

The balance of the play will continually evidence one of the hallmarks of dramatic art: irony of situation. Irony involves a cleft between appearance and reality. It can manifest itself in a play when a character, such as Jason, lacks a knowledge held by the audience or reader, such as Medea's plans to murder her children. Thus, Jason can be fully confident that Medea has changed her earlier convictions, while we understand that she only means to deceive him. The chorus, which stands apart from the action, often comments directly on the irony of a situation, and its speech in this section (lines 977-1001) serves to point out the complexity, one of the basic symptoms of irony, behind each character's evolving fate. The art of tragedy, which repeatedly stresses the limits of human knowledge, depends on irony to advance its themes; it produces the gap between what characters know and what they think they know.

Like the great tragedians before him, Euripides displays a complex approach to this stock dramatic device. When Medea erupts into tears at the mention of her children, she could be simply acting her part to elicit more of Jason's sympathy, or she could also be struggling internally with the decision she has made to murder them. In either case, her words to Jason are a front, and the audience or reader must look past them to infer her real motivations. Because Medea exhibits some complexity as a character, the reality behind her many appearances may be uncertain or vary from time to time. Deciphering her real moods and motivations requires interpretation within a broader context; for example, Medea's initial curses against her children would seem to challenge the veracity of her present sympathy for them. At times, however, it seems that by acting out false emotions, Medea reveals to herself true ones she had not previously considered. Jason's deeply ironic vision of his children's heroic future (lines 908-923), instigated by Medea's fake reconciliation with him, actually forces her to realize that she also partly desires a successful future for them, making their deaths (which are being sealed at the present moment) even more distressing to her. While the "real" or internal drama being enacted on stage manifests a degree of ambiguity at this point, Medea continues to plot the outward course of her revenge without much hesitation. Jason is totally duped into carrying out her will, and the chorus now considers a great deal of suffering and death to be hopelessly inevitable.

Lines 1002-1116

Summary

The tutor returns with news that the children are "reprieved from banishment" (line 1002) and that Jason's bride has warmly accepted Medea's gifts. The children no longer have any enemies in the city. Recoiling in horror, Medea admonishes herself, "How Cruel! How Cruel!" (line 1009). The tutor fails to understand her negative reaction to his good, anxiously anticipated news. Each character speaks past the other at this point, because Medea's secret intentions make her words gloss over the true source of her distress--the horrible inevitability of her children's death. She claims to be upset over the imminent separation from her children, and the tutor advises her to bear her burden with strength, since many mothers suffer the loss of their children, and some even lose them forever.

Directly addressing her children, Medea protests against the farewell that she must soon offer them. All the experiences they have shared together as a family, including her bearing and rearing of them, will now come to nothing. The children, however, are unaffected by their mother's remorse and continue to play obliviously among themselves. In a speech to the chorus, Medea wavers repeatedly between abandoning and fortifying her decision to murder her children. Finally, she concludes, "Anger, the spring of all life's horror, masters my resolve" (line 1076), and decides to proceed with the murder.

After arguing that women are as capable of abstract reflection as men, the chorus sings a hymn about the "unnecessary" burdens children bring to human life. Parents suffer the constant anxieties of caring for and protecting them, as well providing them with an adequate inheritance. The possibility that death may snatch children away prematurely only compounds those other burdens. The energy parents expend on their children may prove ultimately fruitless.

Commentary

In her dialogue with the tutor, Medea amplifies the irony and complexity of her previous conversation with Jason. Her self-reproaches reveal the remorse she barely managed to hide earlier, and the anxieties she claims to feel over her imminent departure ring true at a deeper level (she is preparing for the definitive separation from her children in death). A tension suffuses the whole scene, as we sense Medea's desire to communicate the struggles of her conscience to her children; their silence and innocence seem to elicit a need for confession. The lack of understanding her children demonstrate parallels the lack of justification behind their deaths. The complicated discourses of the characters in Medea occasionally appear to be attaching a veneer of sense over the senseless, a process of self-deception to which the children, because they are silent, remain immune.

Medea's conflicting impulses, which have been enriching her recent conversations with ambiguities, achieve their fullest expression in the speech (lines 1041-1079) that concludes with her definitive resolution to murder her children. For the balance of the play, she will no longer question her decision. Consequently, this speech has often been seen as a definitive turning point in her thinking as a character. While it can be argued that her children's deaths are fated from the

beginning (see commentary for lines 17-130), it nevertheless remains true that such a fate represents the triumph of perverse forces within human behavior. To reach the point of infanticide, basic human nature has to be transformed, ushering in conflict of some type. Consequently, Medea's motivational conflicts chart the course of natural sentiments warping to the point where something extraordinarily horrific can be accomplished. For example, Medea considers a natural, common sense course of action when she debates fleeing with her children to Athens, where they can renew their lives with guaranteed protection. Such a life would probably provide the most happiness out of the possible alternatives Medea contemplates, yet Medea's decision-making process has left behind debating over personal profit and loss. Her only loyalty is to her "anger" (1076), which has sprung out of her love and needs to vindicate itself through revenge. Abandoning her plan to punish Jason as severely as possible would be equivalent to denying the seriousness of her emotions and the offense they have suffered. Medea calls her forthcoming murders a "sacrifice" (line 1053), one offered for the sake of a higher principle than the logic of common sense can comprehend. Understanding Medea's extraordinary vindictiveness (a basic task for the reader or audience) begins with seeing it overstep the natural sentiments within her.

Lines 1117-1231

Summary

A messenger appears, frantically warning Medea to escape the city as soon as possible. When Medea asks him why, he responds by revealing that she has been identified as the murderer of Creon and Glauce, whose deaths have just taken place inside the palace. To the incomprehension of the messenger, Medea accepts the news with composed satisfaction and asks for the details of their deaths.

Dwelling on the gruesome specifics, the messenger recreates the scene of the murder. Inside her bed-chamber, Jason's bride overcomes her reluctance to face Medea's children and accepts their gifts at his request. Entertained by the display of her own beauty in a mirror, she frolics around the room while showing off the coronet and dress. The picturesque scene begins to reverse itself as soon as the poison takes effect; her crown erupts in an unnatural fire and the corrosive dress begins to eat away her skin. She is left a monster unrecognizable to all but her father, who pathetically embraces her in order to die along her side. Though Creon flinches for a moment, "a ghastly wrestling match" (line 1214) ensues in which both bodies become entangled in a rotting heap. The messenger concludes his story by recognizing that intelligence brings men no advantages; happiness is the product of circumstance and fate.

Commentary

Aristotle and other commentators often criticized Euripides for having abandoned authentic tragedy in favor of grotesque melodrama. Whether or not we agree with their judgments, this elaborate murder scene bears many features that would not appear out of place in a contemporary B-movie horror film. After struggling emotionally through her moral dilemmas, Medea now

appears in the mold of a hardened villain, interested solely in confirming the facts of her crime. Through the messenger's speech, we acquire our first glimpse (albeit limited) into Glauce's character, previously distinguished only by her reputed youth and beauty. Her display of vanity before the mirror--so sincere as to seem almost quaint--opens us onto a scene of luxury and self-satisfaction unique within Medea, temporarily relieving some of its building tension. Allowed to dwell on a physical setting, we are distracted from the weighty questions of conscience that have been recently demanding our attention. Glauce's complete defilement by the poison furnishes an elementary lesson on the volatility of beauty, and her father's dying embrace supplies a vivid ending to the scene. While essentially indulging an appetite for horror, Euripides does provide moments in the murder sequence that complicate the melodrama and make it slightly more human. Creon's brief attempt to disentangle himself from Glauce reveals a glitch in his fatherly devotion; even where they seek to be heroic, Euripides' characters are never excused human weaknesses and limits. Ultimately the scene's excesses do not have to be domesticated to remain convincing; the bizarre deaths simply provide a physical expression of the unnatural dimensions taken by Medea's will for revenge.

Lines 1317-1419

Summary

The palace opens its doors, revealing Medea and the two dead children seated in a chariot drawn by dragons. Impatient, Medea advises Jason to say what he has to say and finish the ordeal--the chariot, provided by her grandfather, the Sun-god, will soon carry them away.

Jason curses himself for having ever wed himself to Medea. Jason believes he should have realized her capacity for evil and betrayal when she abandoned her family and homeland, even killing her own brother. He wishes only to be left alone now to mourn his tragic losses. Medea no longer feels the need to justify herself. She has wounded Jason, and that is enough. Jason points out that she has wounded herself in the process, and Medea, while acknowledging the pain her children's death has brought her, finds it a price worth paying to see Jason suffer.

Jason puts in one last request: to be allowed to see over the proper burial of his children. Medea denies him the right and decides she will bury them and expiate the crime herself. She then tells of her plans to flee to Athens with Aegeus, and finishes by divining an "unheroic death" (line 1388) for Jason, who will perish by being hit over the head with a log from his famous ship, the Argo. As Hyperion's chariot vanishes from sight, Jason laments this "grievous day" (line 1409) and calls on the gods to witness the affliction Medea has cast over his life. The chorus concludes by affirming that the gods work mysteriously and often bring events to a surprising end.

Commentary

Aside from rehashing Jason and Medea's previous arguments, the conclusion of the play provides the novel experience of watching Jason express himself without any condescension. Earlier he had painted himself as mature, high-minded, and capable of sympathizing with Medea's troubles, rather than following in her example of indulging in petty rage. With the murder of his children, he finally discards this facade of diplomacy and hurls sincerely-felt

reprimands at Medea. He accuses her of an unthinkable savageness that has transformed her into the most detestable woman in the human race, a stain in the eyes of the gods. Medea does not deny his accusations and even encourages him to "loathe on!" (line 1376). From their first confrontation, she has often appeared less upset at the divorce itself than at Jason's complacent denial of any wrongdoing. While her murders do not elicit any repentance from Jason, they do dispel the delusion that he has been acting sensibly and working for a greater good. The pity he feels at his children's death opposes his earlier willingness to send them into exile, and the spontaneous quality of his present sentiments contrasts with the artifice of his initial reasoning, proving that he is not above the pull of passion. It would be an exaggeration, however, to consider this a significant character development. The play ends without him ever shouldering any of the blame for the murders; the only recognition he makes is of Medea's cruelty, which he had been completely underestimating previously.

Spoken by the chorus, the final lines of the play claim that the gods work mysteriously and that they have caused unforeseen events to transpire. The reference could simply be to the magical escape vessel that Hyperion has provided for Medea, but the elevated tone suggests a larger significance encapsulating the entirety of Medea's story. On one hand, the central events of the play can be explained without appealing to fate or other supernatural principles. Petty self-interest motivated Jason's divorce of Medea, and the intense anger she felt at being abandoned by him caused her to murder their children out of spite. Basic human psychology--an intelligible chain of moods and motivations--can explain these occurrences entirely. Yet the Greeks did not simply invoke their gods in lieu of natural explanations; rather, the gods attested to nature's ability to exceed ordinary human understanding and expectations. Medea's violent emotions are natural, but their forcefulness carries her beyond accustomed behavior and make her a testament to generally suppressed aspects of reality. In other words, the gods challenge humans to avoid receiving nature with complacence and to recognize its extraordinary, oft-ignored capabilities, many of the them fearsome and tragic. Euripides does not intend for Medea's murders to provoke a god-sanctioned sympathy for the violent excesses of nature, simply respect and understanding.

Study Questions

In Medea's first long speech to the chorus (lines 213-261), she claims that women are afflicted with the most "wretched" existence on earth. How is gender explored in the play? Does Medea emerge as a champion of women's plight through either positive or negative example?

An answer to this question should emphasize that no clear, black and white portrayal of gender relations emerges in the play. Using Medea as a mouthpiece, Euripides does highlight within the cited speech many of the injustices suffered by women in ancient Athens, especially their lack of a public life or autonomy in marriage. Men were free to divorce women on a whim, and thus wives suffered the insecurity of having no control over their own futures. Medea argues that the reputation women have acquired for deception and backhanded manipulation, embodied by her own personal history and practice as a sorceress, derives from the only avenues of power left available to them by society. Women are bad, but they are made bad by circumstances they cannot control. The course of revenge Medea pursues in the play depicts the mythical answer to a hypothetical question: what would happen if a woman were possessed of the conviction and

means to avenge the wretchedness caused by her circumstances? The chorus considers this possible comeuppance equivalent to a reversal of the natural order (lines 413-431). Jason, who begins the play by abandoning Medea and exercising his cultural prerogative as a male to remarry, suffers a complete emasculation in the play. He continually reveals himself to be a weak and whiny character, inconsistent with his reputation as a hero (i.e. an ideal ancient Greek male). Thus, Euripides unmasks men's supposed entitlement to authority and prominence as a buffer for their own insecurity. Jason presumes an enlightened purposefulness to his actions that we recognize as vacuous. Yet Medea should not be considered a mere showcase for women's protest against masculine exploitation. Medea's horrifying murder of her children demonstrates the danger of responding to any form of victimization with an indulgence in unnatural violence. She cultivates a rage surpassing the measure appropriate to her offense and allows it to become an instrument for gratuitous cruelty. Thus, even as Euripides recognizes the injustice of gender roles in his time, he also refuses to blame external circumstances for all manifestations of evil. Appeals to social injustice can become excuses for the loss of personal accountability.

To what extent does Medea, protagonist of the play, fit the mold of a tragic hero?

Medea lacks most of the traits of a tragic hero or displays them in a highly skewed fashion. Traditionally, tragic heroes remain generally sympathetic characters stricken with some overwhelming flaw, especially "hubris" or pride, that causes them to suffer and eventually repent for their errors, yet without ever returning to their initial state of greatness. Medea, while obviously proud, never really apologizes for her excesses, and the play actually concludes with her dramatic escape from any negative consequences to her actions. Rather than move from a state of noble confidence to humble despair, she actually demonstrates the opposite transformation in the play. While her plight does elicit some sympathy, most of the admiration she inspires derives from her refusal to compromise herself and her commitment to an unnatural principle of revenge; we actually applaud her (nervously) as she pursues her frightening and seemingly impossible plans to murder her own children. Lastly, whereas most tragic heroes are the victims of fate, Medea can either be considered mistress of her own destiny or the vehicle of fate's vengeful justice. Despite these many discrepancies, the central function of any tragic hero remains the demonstration by example of some unacknowledged truth about suffering. Medea's case does vividly illustrate the unnatural crimes that an ignored passion can unleash.

As Medea prepares to send off her children with the crown and dress to Glauce's bed-chamber (1041-1081), she wavers five times over whether to proceed in a plan that will end with their deaths. What other evidence in the play justifies her indecision at this moment, and, conversely, what demonstrates a fixed resolve throughout?

It can be argued that Medea seals the certainty of her children's death from her opening cries: after passing through a momentary response of suicidal helplessness (lines 95-96) to Jason's divorce, she immediately wishes the destruction of every remaining trace of their love, including the two boys (lines 110-114). The nurse ominously foreshadows that Medea will not relinquish her rage until it upsets the balance of the city, and Creon admits to banishing her simply out of fear for the possible consequences of her negative mood. Euripides also carefully reveals the elements of Medea's past that demonstrate her readiness to sacrifice family to pursue her

intractable will; Jason and Medea's original tryst, for example, required that she kill her own brother. While it can be argued the children's deaths are fated from the beginning, it nevertheless remains true that such a fate represents the triumph of perverse forces within human behavior. To reach the point of infanticide, Medea's basic human nature has to be transformed, ushering in conflict of some type. Consequently, Medea's eventual indecision and motivational conflicts manifest the warping of natural sentiments. For example, Medea considers a natural, common sense course of action when she debates fleeing with her children to Athens, where they can renew their lives with guaranteed protection. Such a life would probably provide the most happiness out of the possible alternatives Medea contemplates, yet her decision-making process has left behind debating over personal profit and loss. Her only loyalty is to her "anger"(1076), which has sprung out of her love and needs to vindicate itself through revenge. Abandoning her plan to punish Jason as severely as possible would be equivalent to denying the seriousness of her emotions and the offense they have suffered. From the beginning of the play the seeds of this cruel revenge have been planted, but the natural obstacles of a mother's love still had to be surmounted.

Aristotle criticized Medea for its two illogical plot elements, the random appearance of Aegeus and Medea's escape in the chariot provided by the Sun-god. Do these events contribute anything positive to the play's themes? How do they frame the action that surrounds them?

Barring their death cries, the children remain silent throughout the play. How does Euripides handle their characters in order to supply an element of pathos to their deaths?

Euripides has been credited with bringing elements of both realism and melodrama into the art of ancient tragedy (see context). Where in Medea are these innovations evidenced?

The theme of exile is recurrent in Medea. How does exile serve as a useful metaphor for Medea's emotional states in the play? How are life and death figured as extensions of exile?

The gods are invoked sparingly in Medea, yet the chorus concludes the play by saying Zeus brings things to "surprising ends" and makes the unexpected possible (lines 14-15, 1419). *Can the action of the play be entirely accounted for by the self-conscious decisions made by the characters, or do there seem to be some uncanny, fated elements to the story?*

Jason is presented as a character with a heroic past, yet his actions in the play often exemplify the traits of a weak, reactive character. Medea also predicts an "unheroic death" for him at the play's close. *Does anything in the play testify to Jason's background as a hero? Are we meant to sympathize with Jason at all?*

The chorus at one point remarks that the most profound hate emerges out of the loss of the deepest love (lines 521-522). *How does the play explore the ambivalence of violent emotions? Where does it preach against succumbing to such emotions; where, against resisting them?*

Further Reading

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