

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Medea is among the most enduring and famous women in mythology. Her story combines myth, legend, and history from three areas: former Soviet Georgia (ancient Colchis, in Scythia, which was Medea's home); Volos (ancient Iolcus, in Thessaly, which was Jason's home); and Corinth (the ancient home of Medea and Jason in Hellas).

In the eighth century B.C., the ancient Greeks considered Colchis to be the great kingdom of Helios, god of the sun. It lay far to the east, and, there, Helios began his daily journey through the heavens. The myth of the Argonauts has remained well-known in Georgia, where the people are direct descendants of the Colchians, Medea's people. The Georgians of today view the Argonauts as folk heroes, and parents name their daughters Medea. Jason's home, Iolcus, was a Mycenaean palace-state, and archaeologists have unearthed the remains of buildings from that ancient time. The introduction to *Jason and the Golden Fleece* provides additional information about both of these areas.

Homer assumed that his audience knew Medea's story because, in Book XII of *The Odyssey*, Circe tells Odysseus, "No ship bearing mortal seafarers has ever survived that passage, except for the Argo—known to all who walk the earth—on her way home from Aetes (Medea's father)." However, Medea owes her enduring fame to Euripides, one of the great writers of tragic dramas in fifth century B.C.

Euripides was a man of fifty-four and living in Athens when, in c. 431 B.C., his *Medea* was first performed. According to Athenian law at that time, in order for a person to be entitled to the legal rights and privileges of a citizen, that person's parents—and the families of both parents, as well—must be citizens. Euripides set his *Medea* in Corinth, Medea's traditional Greek home, but he assumed that the political environment of Corinth was similar to that of Athens. It is possible that, despite the fact that Jason was a prince from Iolcus and entitled to the throne of that kingdom, if he had moved to Athens, he would only have qualified for Athenian citizenship if he married an aristocratic Athenian woman. A Colchian like Medea would have been a foreigner, and Jason's marriage to her would have had no legal validity. Athenian law would have viewed their children as illegitimate as well, and, therefore, their sons would not have been eligible for citizenship. The connections to current events are obvious and tragic.

The characters in Euripides' plays reflect the time in which Euripides was writing. In Athens, even native-born women from aristocratic families had few rights and privileges, and a woman who was a resident alien had none. An Athenian woman lived in a man's world, with little status to call her own. She left her own family when she married, and from that time forth she had to depend on (and therefore please) her husband and his family. Medea's speech on the plight of women is the most famous feminist statement in ancient literature, and it reveals the nature of marriage in fifth-century, male-dominated Athens.

Moreover, once Jason marries Glauce, Medea is a resident alien, and she needs another male citizen to sponsor and protect her. Without that sponsorship, she has no valid place in the community. As an unprotected alien, her legal status is precarious. Moreover, she is vulnerable in that others do not have to honor and respect her. They are free to treat her with contempt without suffering consequences.

In addition, Jason's speech on the value of being Greek reflects the Athenian view of its intellectual and social superiority. Medea's attitude toward her friends and her enemies—reflecting total love and total hate, respectively—and her pursuit of revenge in the form of retributive justice reflect contemporary Athenian values that the great Athenian writers were examining in their plays.

Moreover, in Euripides' time, in order for society to function effectively, people were expected to keep their oral promises. The Athenians viewed oaths as sacred. The gods would honor and protect those who kept their sacred word and would punish those who betrayed their oaths.

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Traces of an earlier matriarchal religion in ancient Greece are present in the myths about Medea.

When King Aeetes thinks that Argus must have told Jason that Medea serves Hecate, the Night-wandering Goddess, Aeetes is describing Medea in a later and transformed human form. Yet Aeetes reveals Medea's earlier identity when he declares that she can manipulate all the herbs that grow on land and all that live in the sea, that she can call forth blazing fires and quiet rushing rivers, that she can make spring

flowers bloom in summer and make grain ripen for harvesting in winter, and that she can make the chariot of the moon appear next to the chariot of the sun in the sky.

Aeetes' description of Medea's powers reveals her to be the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess of an earlier matriarchal religion. The Great Goddess functioned in three related forms. As Goddess of the Underworld, she controlled the three-stage cycle of life: first, the period of birth and childhood; then, the fertile period of maturity and reproduction; and last, the sterile period of old age, with its decline and death. As Goddess of the Earth, she controlled the three-stage cycle of the seasons: first, spring (the period of birth or rebirth and budding growth); then, summer (the fertile period of blossoming and harvest); and last, winter (the sterile period of decay, barrenness, and death or dormancy). As Goddess of the Sky, she was the great Moon Goddess, who appeared in her three-stage cycle of phases: first, as the new and waxing moon (the period of birth or rebirth and growth); then, as the full moon (the period of maturity); and last, as the waning moon (the period of decline and death or dormancy).

The fact that Medea cuts up Jason, Pelias, and (in some versions) Aeson and then puts them into cauldrons of rebirth and rejuvenation reflects earlier religious practices. The myths, legends, and folktales of other cultures—including those of Italy, Germany, Russia, Scandinavia, and the Celts in Ireland—involve similar magic cauldrons. Priestesses would cut up a living human being or animal, put the fragments of the corpse into a magic broth, and then recite proper incantations as a fire caused the soup to boil. The corpse would then revive and emerge rejuvenated. Because fire was thought to be an aspect of the sun, it was sacred in cultures where people worshipped a sun god. Therefore, the fire, as well as the broth, were necessary for the renewal of youth and the extension of life.

Medea's banishment from Iolcus and Corinth (and eventually from Athens, as well) may reflect the Mycenaean conquest of the matriarchal cultures that already existed in Greece. Instead of prohibiting the earlier matriarchal religion in these communities, the Mycenaeans grafted their more patriarchal religion onto it. In the process, the Great Goddess lost her triple form and became less important. For example, in matriarchal religions, the serpent was the symbol of rejuvenation and immortality because it shed its skin, and the serpent-drawn chariot belonged to the

great Moon Goddess. Therefore, Medea originally possessed a chariot drawn by winged dragons on which she traveled through the heavens in order to bring help and joy to mortals. However, later, when religion became more patriarchal, the serpent-drawn chariot was given to Helios, god of the life-giving sun. In the myth of Medea, Helios loans this chariot to Medea because she is (now) his granddaughter.

Earlier literary sources relate—and the text of Euripides' *Medea* alludes to—the murder of Medea's children by the people of Corinth and the Corinthians' subsequent need to atone for their crime. This type of murder and expiation suggests that human sacrifices were a religious ritual in Corinth's earlier matriarchal culture. However, when the Mycenaeans established their more patriarchal religion in Corinth, they dethroned Medea as the Great Goddess, and they prohibited human sacrifice, which they viewed as barbaric. The question of who murdered Medea's children now needed a new explanation, and who committed the foul deed (Medea, Jason, or the Corinthians) became a sensitive issue for the Corinthians. At the end of his *Medea*, Euripides casts Medea in her earlier, divine form—a solution that pleased the Corinthians.

EURIPIDES AND THE LITERARY TRADITION

Our oldest sources of Medea's myth are those in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700 B.C.) and Pindar's *Pythian Ode IV* (fifth century B.C.). Hesiod's version is brief and without detail. He states that, "having accomplished the terrifying tasks imposed on him by the wicked King Pelias, Jason, by the will of the gods, led Medea, King Aetes' daughter, forth from her father's house to his swift ship, and after much suffering, he returned to Iolcus with her and made her his wife. Medea submitted to Jason, shepherd of the people, and bore him a son."

Euripides, the playwright who brought Medea lasting fame, lived between c. 485 and 406 B.C., in Athens. He first entered the annual dramatic competition in 455 B.C., where he depicted Medea as the murderer of Pelias in the lost *Daughters of Pelias*. His *Medea*, produced in 431 B.C., was as shocking in its own time as it is in ours because, as far as we know, Medea is the first woman in Greek myth and literature consciously, rather than in a fit of insanity, to murder her own children.

Many sources were available to Euripides that were lost, in 47 B.C., when Julius Caesar was in Alexandria, Egypt, and fire destroyed the great Alexandrian Library. However, copies of the most valued and popular material survived in other places, and these, plus fragments and scholar's summaries of lost works give us some idea of what Euripides—with his large library—must have known.

For example, in Eumelus's *Corinthiaca*, an epic about the heroic history of Corinth (written between 750 and 700 B.C.), the sun god, Helios, gives Corinth to his son Aeetes, but Aeetes moves to Colchis and leaves the rule of Corinth to a son of the god Hermes. When Hermes' son dies without an heir, the Corinthians send to Iolcus for Aeetes' daughter Medea (after the death of Pelias), and they enthrone her as their queen. Jason accompanies Medea, and through her he becomes king of Corinth. In time, Medea saves Corinth from a plague of famine. Then Zeus, father of gods and mortals, falls in love with Medea, but, fearful of the goddess Hera's vengeful wrath, Medea rejects Zeus's love. Hera gratefully rewards Medea by promising to make Medea's children immortal if Medea will bring them to her sanctuary. Therefore, Medea takes her children to the Temple of Hera Akraia (Hera of the Heights), where she leaves them at the goddess's altar or hides them beneath the floor of the temple. Either way, the children die, and the Corinthians honor them with a cult. However, when Jason discovers how Medea has been treating their children, he is outraged by her behavior, and he returns to Iolcus. Then Medea either leaves, or flees from, Corinth.

According to Didymus (a reputable first century B.C./A.D. Homeric scholar in Alexandria, Egypt), Creophylus of Samos relates a competing but related ancient legend in his epic *The Taking of Oechalia* (seventh century B.C.). In this version, Medea lives in Corinth, and she uses her knowledge of poisonous drugs to murder King Creon.

Expecting retaliation, Medea prepares to flee. However, she decides that her sons are too young to follow her to Athens, so she leaves them as suppliants at the altar in the sanctuary of Hera Akraia. She assumes that Jason will also protect them. However, Creon's relatives and friends do not respect the goddess's sanctuary, and they murder the children at Hera's altar. Then they spread the rumor that Medea has murdered her children as well as Creon.

Based on different earlier sources, the scholar Parmeniscus (second/first century B.C.) relates still another competing but related ancient legend. In this version, the Corinthian women are displeased that their queen, Medea, is both foreign and skilled in the use of poisonous drugs. Therefore, they decide to kill her children (seven boys and seven girls). Medea's children hear of this plan, and they take refuge in the Temple of Hera Akraia. However, the Corinthians ignore the sanctity of the temple and brutally murder them at the goddess's altar. The Corinthians then experience a devastating plague, severe famine, and many infant deaths. When they ask the advice of a divine oracle, they learn that the goddess Hera and Medea's dead children have cursed them.

Moreover, in order to calm their wrath, every year the Corinthians will have to choose seven boys and seven girls from among their aristocratic families and send them—with their heads shaved and their bodies clothed in black (symbols of mourning)—to the Temple of Hera Akraia, where they will live for one year. There, they will serve Hera in her sanctuary and offer sacrifices to Medea's dead children.

Parmeniscus also relates that the Corinthians paid Euripides five talents of silver if he would blame Medea, rather than their ancestors, for the death of Medea's children. Of course, this may not be true. However, the scholarship of Parmeniscus and Didymus reveals why the Corinthians had reason to be self-conscious. Moreover, in his *Medea*, Euripides reveals his knowledge of Corinth's legendary history. In the course of the play, Medea reveals her fear that the Corinthians will avenge Glauce's death by murdering her sons, since it was they who delivered Medea's gifts. Then, at the end of the play, Medea commands the Corinthians to establish the Akraia, an annual sacred festival with holy rites that will atone for the "impious" murder of her children.

Pausanias, the Greek geographer who published reliable historical information based on his travels throughout Greece c. A.D. 160, relates a fourth competing but related ancient legend. According to his sources, the Corinthians stone Medea's children to death because they brought Medea's poisonous gifts to Creon's daughter, Glauce. The ghosts of Medea's children then take revenge upon the Corinthians by killing their infant children. Finally, a divine oracle commands the Corinthians to erect a monument to Terror (the figure of a frightening woman) and to establish the Akraia, the annual tradition of having their children cut their hair and wear the black clothes of

mourning, and to offer sacrifices to Medea's dead children. According to Pausanias, the Akraia continued until the Romans sacked Corinth. Between 1930 and 1933, British archaeologists unearthed the Temple of Hera Akraia (dated at c. 800 B.C.) at the site called Perachora, not far from the modern city of Corinth.

APPEAL AND VALUE

Aristotle states in his *Poetics* that Euripides is "certainly the most tragic of the dramatists" because he is the best at enabling the members of his audience to identify with his characters and to feel pity (for the characters) and fear (for themselves). Certainly what made Euripides controversial during his lifetime is what has made him more appealing in the centuries after his death. Euripides' mind and heart lay with the outsider, which often made the subject of his plays politically incorrect, and he was interested in realistic psychological depiction of character rather than in the larger than life issues of the ideal and the heroic.

As discussed in the introduction to *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, the ancient Greeks believed that all human beings, through their attitudes and actions, are capable of bringing sorrow upon themselves. In traditional myth, characters are all larger than life; nevertheless, even they become victims of this behavior pattern. Under Euripides' pen, characters like Medea and Jason become real and ordinary human beings—like the people who walked the streets of Athens in his day and, in many ways, like us. His principal characters are often women rather than men, and he forces his audience to view life from the point of view of those who, like Medea, are powerless in their society. He accomplishes this by taking familiar characters from the ancient myths and placing them in their time of crisis so that he can explore their attitudes, values, and behavior under stress. It is a powerful theatrical experience for members of the audience (or readers) to see how characters who think and feel like ordinary people—in fact, like themselves—bring tragedy into their lives.

Noting that nothing human is new, the problems Euripides' characters face on stage reflect the in justice of prevailing contemporary Athenian attitudes and behavior. Consequently, at a time when the Athenians valued tragedy for its nobility of character, plot, and theme, Euripides' heroes (like Jason) behave un-heroically, his women (like

Medea) are society's victims, and the consequences are tragic. In this way, Euripides holds a mirror before the eyes of his masculine audience—an audience that reveled in its superiority and would have preferred to turn its eyes and ears away from Euripides' tragic drama.

The continued popularity of Euripides' *Medea* confirms Aristotle's judgment, for *Medea* has left an indelible mark upon the human heart from Euripides' day to our own. Throughout history, audiences have identified with the woman whose husband leaves her for a younger woman. Moreover, in many other societies, racial, religious, cultural, or social differences have placed groups of people outside the establishment, where, like *Medea*, they have been denied rights and privileges. Women and non-binary folks—because of their gender—have either been second-class citizens or else have been treated like resident aliens.

Medea is unforgettable because of her courage, her skill, her conviction, and her moral strength. She scorns society's view of women, and by refusing to accept Jason's shoddy treatment, she reveals that women, too, have a sense of honor, a need for status, and causes for revenge. Euripides makes *Medea* speak like a woman of flesh and blood, and audiences identify with her thoughts and feelings. Her universal appeal resides in the depth of her outrage against injustice and the extent to which she is willing to rebel against it. In the twenty-first century, she represents anyone who is an outsider, a feminist, a foreigner, or an outcast.

Jason is unforgettable because of his ambition, his pragmatism, his prudence, and his moral blindness. From the period of his heroism in the myth of *Jason and the Golden Fleece* to his maturity in the myth of *Medea*, Jason willingly delegates to others what they can do better than he. He is accustomed to persuading others to use their courage, strength, and skill on his behalf, and, therefore, he uses *Medea*—as he uses everyone—to further his own goals. However, with the murder of *Medea*'s brother, Jason's self-serving ambition becomes destructive as well as callous, and his rejection of *Medea* leads to *Medea*'s equally destructive passion for revenge. Therefore, it is interesting to evaluate Jason as a tragic hero, both from an Aristotelian and from a contemporary point of view.

Alexandrian scholars produced *The Collected Works of Euripides* in about 200 B.C., when ten of Euripides' eighty-eight plays (probably few of his tragedies) were already lost. This collection is the source of all the ancient papyrus fragments and all the medieval manuscripts.

The following version of the myth of *Medea* is an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*, with the addition of selected passages from Seneca's *Medea* and descriptions of the death of Pelias from several literary works from ancient Greece (fifth century B.C. and later).

CHARACTERS

ACASTUS: the son of Pelias; an Argonaut; later, the king of Iolcus, in Thessaly

AETES: a son of Helios; a brother of Circe; the father of Medea, Chalciope, and Apsyrtus; the king of Colchis, in Scythia

AEGEUS: the king of Athens

AEOLUS: the king of Aeolia; the lord of the wind

AESON: the half-brother of Pelias (They share the same mother); a first cousin of Phrixus (Their fathers are brothers); the legitimate king of Iolcus

ALCINOUS: the king of Phaeacia; the husband of Arete

APSYRTUS: the son of Aetes; the brother of Medea and Chalciope

ARETE: the wife of Alcinous; the queen of Phaeacia

CREON: the king of Corinth; the father of Glauce

GLAUCE: the daughter of Creon; Jason's second wife

JASON: the son of Aeson; the husband of Medea and later, of Glauce; the leader of the Argonauts

MEDEA: a daughter of Aetes; a granddaughter of Helios; a niece of Circe; the sister of Chalciope; Jason's first wife; a priestess of Hecate; a sorceress

PELIAS: the half-brother of Aeson (They share the same mother); the illegitimate king of Iolcus

PHINEUS: a Thracian king; a seer

PHRIXUS: a first cousin of Aeson; the husband of Chalciope; the father of four sons

THE GODS AND OTHER IMMORTAL BEINGS

APHRODITE: a daughter of Zeus; the goddess of sexual desire

APOLLO: the son of Zeus and Leto; the twin brother of Artemis; the god of prophecy, with his oracle at Delphi; the god of disease and medicine

ARES: a son of Zeus and Hera; the blood-thirsty god of war

ARTEMIS: the daughter of Zeus and Leto; the twin sister of Apollo; the goddess of wild animals and the hunt; a goddess of childbirth; the patron goddess of Iolcus

ATHENA: a daughter of Zeus; the goddess of arts and crafts and defensive war; later, the goddess of wisdom; the patron goddess of heroes; the architect of the Argo

BOREAS: the god of the north wind; the north wind itself; the father of two winged sons who are Argonauts

CIRCE: a daughter of Helios; a sister of Aetes; an aunt of Chalcioppe, Medea, and Apsyrtus; a great sorceress

EOS: the goddess of dawn

EROS: the son of Aphrodite; the god of love

GAEA: the mother of all the gods and of all life; Mother Earth; the Mother Goddess

HADES: a brother of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hera; the ruler of the Underworld

HECATE: a goddess in Hades' kingdom

HELIOS: the father of Aetes and Circe; the paternal grandfather of Chalcioppe, Medea, and Apsyrtus; the god of the sun

HERA: a sister of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades; the wife of Zeus; the mother of Ares and Hephaestus; an aunt of Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, and Hermes; the queen of Olympus; the goddess of marriage

HERMES: a son of Zeus; Zeus's messenger; the patron god of travelers

NYX: the mother of Thanatos; the goddess of night

SELENE: the goddess of the moon

THANATOS: the son of Nyx; the god of death

ZEUS: a brother of Poseidon, Hades, and Hera; the father of Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Hephaestus, and Hermes; the king of Olympus and ruler of all the gods; the god of justice, hospitality, and rain; the patron god of suppliants, fugitives, and strangers, with his oracle at Dodona

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

AEA: the capital city of Colchis, located near the mouth of the Phasis River, in Scythia

AEAEA: an island off the western coast of Italy, south of Rome, where Circe lives after leaving Colchis

AEOLIA: one of the Lipari islands (now Stromboli), located to the north of eastern Sicily at the sea approach to the Strait of Messina

BOEOTIA: the region in the central, eastern part of Hellas

COLCHIS, SCYTHIA: the region at the eastern end of the Euxine Sea and south of the Caucasus Mountains (now the Republic of Georgia)

CORINTH: the region of Hellas that includes part of the northeastern Peloponnesus and most of the isthmus that connects the Peloponnesus with Attica and Boeotia to the east

DELPHI: a city on Mount Parnassus, in Phocis, in Hellas; the site of the oracle of Apollo and, therefore, the principal religious center of the Hellenes

DODONA, EPEIRUS: a city in the region in Hellas that borders on the coast or the Adriatic Sea (now southern Albania); the site of an ancient oracle or Zeus

IOLCUS, THESSALY: a city in the region north of Boeotia, in the eastern part of Hellas (now Volos, in Magnesia)

LIBYA: the region bordering on the African coast of the Mediterranean Sea, between Egypt on the east and the Pillars of Heracles, which line the Strait of Gibraltar, on the west

MOUNT OLYMPUS: a high, snow-covered mountain near the Gulf of Salonika, in the region of Pieria, in northern Thessaly, in Hellas, where the gods of the Hellenes live

MOUNT PELION: a mountain near the city of Iolcus, in Thessaly

PHAEACIA: the island of Drepane; Homer's Scheria; thought to be located "at a far end of the sea" (now Corfu)