

Exile

In Euripides' *Medea*, exile is a past reality, an impending threat, and an internal state. Medea and Jason are exiles before the action of Euripides' play begins. In the play's backstory, Medea was forced to flee from her homeland of Clochis for helping Jason to secure the Golden Fleece. Then Jason and she together were exiled as murderers from Jason's homeland of Iolcus because of Medea's attempt to wrest ruling power for her and Jason from the corrupt king, Pelias.

Euripides' *Medea* begins with Medea's Nurse lamenting that Jason ever came to Clochis. The threat of the sentence of a third exile for Medea is quickly presented by the children's Tutor, who has just come from the castle where he has overheard "That Creon, the ruler of the land, intends to drive/ These children and their mother in exile from Corinth." Exile, or Medea's impending exile, is one of the main driver's of the play's plot. Medea begs Creon to give her one day in which to consider where she should go with her children, and, though Creon grants Medea her request, he recognizes, "Even now I know I am making some mistake." Later, Medea's pretended attempt to relieve the sentence of exile from her children allows her to poison the Princess and results in the Princess and Creon's deaths.

But exile, beyond being a physical condition for Medea, Jason, and their household, is also an emotional and spiritual state. We see this in various lamentations, like the Nurse's, "There is no home. It's over and done with," and Medea's "Oh, my father! Oh, my country! In what dishonor/ I left you..." and "I have no land, no home, no refuge from my pain." Both Medea and Jason invoke their exiled status in their arguments, and Jason even tries to convince Medea that she should "consider/ [Herself] most lucky that exile is [her] punishment" rather than death. For both Jason and Medea the pain of present exile coupled with the fear of future ones serve as motivations and justifications for their actions in the play.

<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes>

The Other

The Other is a key theme. Medea's foreignness is emphasized from the start: the [Nurse](#), from the very opening lines, reminds us that Medea comes from a distant and exotic land. Several points should be born in mind when reflecting on this aspect of the play. Remember that the Other is a complex and multifaceted concept: it comprises the foreign, the exotic, the unknown, the feared. The Other is also essential for self-definition: as the Greeks ascribe certain traits to barbarians, they are implying certain things about themselves. Barbarians are savage; we Greeks are not. Barbarians are superstitious; we Greeks are rational. But throughout the course of the play, Euripides destabilizes these easy binaries. He will show, as he does in other plays, that the Other is not exclusively something external to Greece. The ideas Greeks have about themselves are often false. There is much, for the Greeks and for us, that we do not know about ourselves.

Exile

Modern audiences have difficulty conceiving of how horrible exile was for the ancient Greeks. A person's city-state was home and protector; to wander, without friends or shelter, was considered a fate as horrible as death. Medea, for the sake of her husband, has made herself an exile. She is far from home, without family or friends to protect her. In her overzealous advocacy of her husband's interest, she has also made their family exiles in Corinth. Because of her actions in Iolcus, Jason cannot return home. Their position is vulnerable. Jason, hero of the Golden Fleece (although Euripides emphasizes that Medea was the true agent behind the success of the quest) is now a wanderer. His marriage is shrewd and calculating: he takes a bride of Corinth's royal family. He is faithless, but he has a point when he argues to Medea that something needed to be done to provide their family with security.

Euripides links the themes of exile and the position of women. When emphasizing the circumstances women must bear after marriage (leaving home, living among strangers), Medea is reminding us of the conditions of exile. Her position, then, is doubly grave, as she is an exile in the ordinary sense and also an exile in the sense that all women are exiles. She is also a foreigner, and so to the Greeks she will always be "barbarian."

<http://www.gradesaver.com/medea/study-guide/themes>

Exile and the individual

Most of us hold our home and all that it represents very dear. In Medea, we have a protagonist who has chosen her love for Jason above home, hearth and family. The stage directions tell us that the opening action takes place 'before the house of Jason', introducing us to the idea of male ownership and control here in Corinth. Just as Medea is associated with the heart, the symbolic warm centre of human emotion, the play also explicitly values the hearth—the symbolic centre of the home, traditionally the site of the fire which provides heat and food. The words 'hearth and home' are twinned often in the play; as it opens, Medea is facing the loss of her second hearth. She calls on Hecate 'who dwells above the hearth deep within my home' (lines 398–9). Hecate was also a foreigner, associated with nature and avenging women and witchcraft; she was also linked with fire, often depicted holding two torches. Thus she is a complex symbolic presence, adding authority to Medea. Not only has Medea forsaken her homeland for Jason, she can never return, having killed her own brother, in a most horrible manner, again, for Jason. In a way, this makes her situation worse than that of asylum seekers in our times, as many have the hope that eventually they will be able to at least visit their homelands again. The distance between Corinth and Colchis is stressed, adding to the 'otherness' of Medea. Despite the Nurse claiming she has 'won a warm welcome' in Corinth, some translations suggest that any grudging acceptance Medea achieved has been hard won. She also calls her mistress an 'exile'. Medea's isolation is a governing factor in the play. She is very aware that 'marriage to a foreigner' is hindering Jason's social progress; he has acted on this knowledge; upward mobility will come with the new marriage. In any country with an immigrant population, there is discussion about the extent to which migrants should retain their culture. Jason has adapted; he is a man of the future, willing to move on, and better himself, rationalising his betrayal as the means to 'provide security for our family'.

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Exile

Exile is associated with issues of identity and belonging; a feeling for home and security; the sense of belonging versus the threat of being an outcast; feeling isolated, friendless, abandoned. It involves alienation, a life disrupted and being identified negatively as 'other'.

Medea speaks to us with special poignancy, I think, because issues about belonging and 'place' affect so many of us directly, or through family histories. Being in exile means being separated from our roots, from the familiar environment and community structure in which we grew up. It could mean having to lose our own language and struggling to

learn a new one, or having to change dress and eating habits, or religious practices, even leaving behind sacred objects, places and 'old gods'. The depth of isolation and alienation that all of this brings about is not easy to fathom, for anyone who has not experienced it. Everything is different.

Added to this trauma is the likelihood of being shunned for looking, sounding, smelling and being different, and therefore being feared and misunderstood.

This theme, with its issues, focuses on Medea's plight especially, and the disruptive pattern of her life. Recurrent sea imagery underlines the feeling of being on the move, always seeking a safe harbour, 'a haven ... in heavy seas' (p.71). Creon fears Medea specifically as a foreign woman with magic arts (Section 6), something unknown in civilised Corinth. The Chorus understand sufficiently to imagine themselves in Medea's position (Section 9). When considered in the context of the theme of exile, Aegeus' offer of sanctuary in Athens and the depth of Medea's gratitude (Section 10) become more significant.

Remember that Jason, too, has been a wanderer. Part of his motivation for marrying Glauce is to establish himself somewhere, in one place, and identify himself as a member of a community through alliance with the royal family (Section 8). A nomadic life with Medea and his two stateless sons cannot give Jason the security he must feel to identify himself as a citizen of a civilised place.

Insight - Medea

The Roles of Men and Women

The events of *Medea* take place in a male-dominated society, a society that allows Jason and Creon to casually and brutally shunt *Medea* aside. The play is an exploration of the roles of men and women, both actual and ideal, but it is not necessarily an argument for sexual equality. Creon and Jason find *Medea's* cleverness more dangerous and frightening because she is woman. "A sharp tempered woman..." Creon says, "Is easier to deal with than the clever type who holds her tongue." The chorus, too, feels it can offer *Medea* advice on what behavior best suits a woman. "Suppose your man gives honor to another woman's bed," it says. "It often happens. Don't be hurt./ God will be your friend in this."

Everyone, it seems, has a different opinion on what a good woman or a good man is and does. Jason says it would be better if men "got their children in some other way" and women didn't exist at all. "Then," he says, "life would have been good." *Medea* herself frequently weighs in on the subject, "We women are the most unfortunate creatures." Despite the plethora of opinions, many of them contradictory, the question isn't necessarily resolved in the play. Jason insists *Medea* is "free to keep telling everyone [he is] a worthless man"—not a difficult opinion for him to hold, given the comfort of his new position as Creon's son-in-law and member of the royal household. *Medea* promptly assures him that he is a "coward." She names him such in "bitterest reproach for [his] lack of manliness." The play is imbued with a sense that neither men nor women are doing as they should, neither are behaving as they ought, and, perhaps more importantly, that if they were, the tragedy might have been averted.

<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes>

Medea sharply criticizes the male-dominated society of its time. Its protagonist is a radical anti-heroine who continues to inspire both admiration and fear. We sympathize with *Medea's* downtrodden state and applaud her strength and intelligence. However, her bloody and vengeful rebellion shocks and unsettles audiences even to this day. The play can be seen as a cautionary tale to oppressors as well as the oppressed.

<http://www.shmoop.com/medea/women-femininity-theme.html>

The position of women

Euripides was fascinated by women and the contradictions of the Greek sex-gender system; his treatment of gender is the most sophisticated one to be found in the works of any ancient Greek writer. *Medea's* opening speech to the Chorus is Classical Greek literature's most eloquent statement about the injustices that befall women. He also recognizes that the position of women, and their subordination to men, is inextricable from the very core of social order in Greece. Greek society functions thanks to injustice. Athens, a city that prided itself as a place more free than the neighboring dictatorships, was nonetheless a city that depended on slave labor and the oppression of women. (The typical apology offered by admirers of Athens is that all ancient societies were sexist and dependent on slave labor; this generality is untrue. Many societies were more generous in their treatment of women than the Greeks were; and many societies functioned, even in the ancient world, without slave labor.) Euripides was aware of these hypocrisies, and he often pointed out the ways that Greek society attempted to efface or excuse the injustices it perpetrated.

At the same time, *Medea* is not exactly a feminist role model. Euripides shows the difficulties that befall women, but he does not give us tinny virgin heroines. He gives us real women, who have suffered and become twisted by their suffering. What we see is not a story of female liberation, but a war between the sexes in which all emerge scarred.

The role of women Traditionally, women have been characterised by emotion and irrationality, while men are associated with reason and control. In the twenty-first century, however, this is no longer accepted. In *Medea*, Euripides, writing in a world in which women and slaves had very little autonomy, creates a female protagonist who refuses, ultimately, to accept the place to which she has been relegated in an unjust, inflexible social system. She has been claimed as a feminist figure, has been seen as male in her energy and destructiveness. Camille Paglia writes of her as a ‘Dionysian force destroying hierarchy’.¹² Her counterpart is the princess, Glauce. Shallow, selfregarding (literally), vain, she represents the ranked Corinthian social system. As she ‘stare[s] / back down’ at herself, she begins to melt, and in this melting she becomes a symbol of all that *Medea* opposes. When *Medea* sends her sons away from her as she comes to the conclusion of what she must do, she says, in the hearing of the Chorus, ‘my passion is master of my reason’. Interestingly, the Chorus does not respond to what she says, except to list the many disadvantages of parenthood, after ruminating on their philosophic ability, having a Muse who ‘tutors us in wisdom’ on matters ‘more weighty than the female sex should pursue’. Almost every speech from the Chorus expresses some sort of solidarity with *Medea*, because she is a woman, and because her status as wife and mother is not very different from the Nurse’s status as slave. The Nurse says, ‘Death’s not good enough for him’, unconsciously foreshadowing Jason’s fate, and unconsciously endorsing the appalling progress of *Medea*’s drive for revenge. Having realised earlier what *Medea* plans to do, the Chorus does not condemn her, but does comment that ‘no woman would then know greater misery’. They then sing an ode of praise of Athens, and ask *Medea* a string of questions. Although tricked into keeping *Medea*’s plans secret, and repelled by them, the Chorus is far from an unsympathetic voice.

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Gender antagonism

Gender antagonism is evident in hostility towards the opposite sex. It is also associated with issues of relationships between men and women, arguments expressing women’s views and the social and sexual roles of women.

Given that this play was written by an Athenian man, with a male audience in mind, we suppose, and male actors in all the roles,

Medea

raises some very interesting issues about women in society and their relations with men. In all of their comments, Creon and Jason express the conventionally accepted views of an Athenian citizen audience of Euripides’ time. That is, they expect women to be respected, if they are respectable; to have a domestic role as wives and mothers; and to be obedient to their menfolk. Jason expresses the extreme of misogynistic intolerance when he claims that if reproduction did not require the existence of women, ‘this would rid the world of all its troubles’ (p.65).

Contrast this attitude to Medea with how Aegeus – the only Athenian character in the play – behaves. Not only is he courteous but he positively respects Medea’s intelligence and is grateful for her help.

Views about their lives from the female perspective are presented throughout by the Nurse, the Chorus of Corinthian women and Medea, with a glimpse of Glauce’s relationship with Jason from the Messenger’s report (Section 17, p.80). Note what I interpret as Medea’s ironic

put-

downs of women (p.61 and in Section 12), echoed by the Chorus (Section 16). The Chorus, too, echo Jason’s views that women are responsible for wickedness (p.83).

Can women expect to be valued other than as wives and mothers?

In her conversation with Creon, Medea seems to regret being ‘clever’ (Section 6, p.58) but acknowledges Aegeus’ compliments with pleasure (Section 10). As a sorceress, she demonstrates that she has extraordinary powers to influence her social situation – which is why she is considered dangerously uncontrollable.

Insight - Medea

Gender and 'otherness'

If you were a slave or a woman, and in particular a foreign woman, you would have had no say in ancient Greece. Bear in mind that women's roles in all plays at the time were filled by male actors. In *Medea*, Euripides confronted these two issues of gender and otherness more strongly and more effectively than any other writer at the time. He exposed and criticised ancient Greek society as a patriarchal society where women suffered under men's rule and all foreigners were considered barbaric, superstitious and irrational.

Right from the start of play, through Medea's plea to the Chorus, Euripides conveys his message about the role of women. Medea's suffering and the whole ordeal can be seen as an allegory for the humiliation of women, which may unleash a tragedy of the worst kind. Medea reflects the reality of the time when she declares 'of all creatures that have life and reason, we women are the most miserable of specimens' (p. 56). She says that for women there was no escape 'divorce brings disgrace and in the interval she cannot refuse her husband'. Euripides highlights the sexist and poor conditions for women in ancient Greece. Medea says if an ancient Greek man is bored with their wives at home, they are allowed to go and find another woman. However, women are '...bound to love one partner and look no further' (p. 57). In reply, similar to the Nurse, the Chorus speak about the change of order as a result of men dishonouring their oaths (that is, Jason's betrayal) and hence dishonouring the Gods. The time has come when the gods now honour women and 'recompense is coming for [the] female sex' (p. 61).

Although women were treated the same way the slaves were treated in ancient Greece, foreign women were treated even worse: 'once she finds herself among customs and laws that are unfamiliar, a woman must turn prophet to know what sort of man she will be dealing with as husband' (p. 56). Euripides suggests that foreign women had to have supernatural powers in order to have an impact on their husbands in the bedroom, indicating this covert power all women can enjoy over men. The themes of 'otherness' and gender are further emphasised by Jason at the end of the play. Jason talks about how he chose Medea instead of a Greek woman: 'not a woman in Greece today would ever have dared such a thing and I passed them all over to marry you' and describes her personality as 'a nature more savage than Tuscan Scylla's' (Tuscan Scylla was a six-headed monster, which lived in Italy). Finally, Jason's chauvinistic arrogance and ruthless treatment of Medea's loyalty to him are further exposed when Jason attributes Medea's change of mind in agreeing with his marriage as being the act of a sensible woman.

Justice and Natural Law

Natural Law—the idea of a moral code integral to and inseparable from whatever it is that makes us human—is tested in the events of *Medea* when characters make decisions contrary to their nature, when Jason, a husband, abandons his wife or when Medea, a mother, murders her children. Medea's decision to kill her children, even as a form of retribution, was as shocking to the ancient Athenians as it is to us today. It was then, as it is now, considered a violation of Natural Law. What is less intuitive for the modern reader is that Medea's being a "wild" woman from an uncivilized (i.e. non-Greek) country, rather than a Greek citizen of a city-state, suggests, at least for the other characters in the play, that she is volatile and poised to do something "unnatural." It is Natural Law as well that governs *The Roles of Men and Women*.

The purpose of justice in the play is to restore the natural balance disrupted by Jason's violation of Natural Law, his "unmanliness," in betraying his marriage vows to Medea. Creon, too, is guilty of injustice. His decision to exile Medea is doubly, perhaps even trebly, unjust. First, it is unjust for him to disrupt Natural Law by ignoring, when giving his daughter to Jason in marriage, the simple fact that Jason is already married. Second, he punishes Medea for his own violation of the natural order. Then based on hearsay and fear, he rhetorically justifies his unjust action by suggesting that Medea might harm his daughter: the crime he fears has not been committed. His ultimately being right (correct) does not make the original decision just (fair). There is an overarching sense in the play that Medea isn't seeking justice in response to Jason and Creon's crimes alone, but, rather, is seeking to correct one of Nature's fundamental injustices—the unequal suffering allotted to women and men. And yet, in seeking this justice, Medea commits the most violent act against Natural Law: she kills her own children. And in that action the entire idea of Natural Law becomes more complicated, as Medea's effort to seek justice leads to the deepest injustice, the inconsistencies of Natural Law and the justice required to maintain is revealed as problematic and irresolvable.

<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes>

Duty

The fundamental conflict between Medea and Jason is that she believes she has been faithfully devoted to him while he has not fulfilled his duties as a husband or as a man. "Why is there no mark on men's bodies," Medea says, "By which we could know the true ones from the false ones?" But Jason isn't the only one with duties—the servants have a duty to their masters, Creon is obliged to faithfully steward his city despite personal interests, Aegeus has an obligation to Medea as a friend, an obligation which Medea makes him solidify into duty via oath. We can even feel the Nurse struggle between her obligations to her mistress and to her mistress's children. Medea's grandfather is the god Helios, so she bears both the obligation (common to all people) to serve the gods as well as the obligation to sanctify and assert her own divinity. Nearly all the characters have a duty—to master, spouse, country, law, Nature, or the gods—and their various failures to uphold their duties spiral into tragedy. These obligations are sometimes conflicting. Medea, after all, shirks the responsibilities of motherhood and the requirements of Natural Law in order to exact divine vengeance and fulfill her duty to the gods.

[litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes](http://www.litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes)

Truth and Deceit

Cleverness

Euripides emphasizes Medea's cunning and cleverness. These traits, which should be admired, also cause suffering for Medea. This theme is linked to the theme of pride and the theme of woman's position. Medea tells [Creon](#) that it is better to be born stupid, for men despise the clever. Part of her difficulty is that she has no real outlet for her gifts. Eleanor Wilner calls Medea "a Machiavel without a country to rule" (4). Her force, her intellect, and her strength of will all exceed her station. The Greeks, though they have some respect for her, often treat her smugly because of her sex and her barbarian origins. She is surrounded by people less intelligent and resourceful than she, but social power and respect is theirs. Remember that Aristotle considered the "unscrupulously clever" woman so distasteful as to be a subject unfit for drama; his statement reflects typically Greek attitudes. Medea is despised for talents that should win her praise; she is also terrifyingly free. Because she is an outsider to normal order, she behaves without restraint or morality. Her genius, denied an empire to build, will instead be used on the smaller playing field of personal revenge.

Manipulation

Manipulation is an important theme. Medea, Jason, and Creon all try their hand at manipulation. Jason used Medea in the past; he now manipulates the royal family of Corinth to secure his own ends. Creon has made a profitable match between his daughter and Jason, hoping to benefit from Jason's fame as the hero of the Golden Fleece. But Medea is the master of manipulation. Medea plays perfectly on the weaknesses and needs of both her enemies and her friends. Medea plays to Creon's pity, and to the old king's costly underestimation of the sorceress. With [Aegeus](#), she uses her skills as a bargaining chip and takes advantage of the king's soft-heartedness to win a binding oath from him. Against Jason, she uses his own shallowness, his unmerited pride, and his desire for dominance. She plays the fawning and submissive woman, to her husband's delight and gratification. Jason buys the act, demonstrating his lack of astuteness and his willingness to be duped by his own fantasies.

<http://www.gradesaver.com/medea/study-guide/themes>

Truth vs. Rhetoric

The tragedy of Medea is woven out of a series of deceitful, true-seeming monologues. After acknowledging to the chorus (and the audience) her desire to kill Creon and destroy his house, Medea convinces him that she should be allowed to remain for just one day to make provisions for her children. Medea actually plans to kill her children, so the statement is ironic. Even if the audience didn't know this at the outset of the play, Euripides has already done much to foreshadow it. "For myself I do not mind if I go into exile," Medea lies. "It is the children being in trouble that I mind." We soon see that Medea's rhetorical stretches are her way of besting Jason at his own game. When he first appears shortly after Medea submits her plea to Creon, he attempts to argue that his decision to abandon his wife and two young children was, first, "a clever move,/ Secondly, a wise one, and, finally, that [he] made it in [Medea's] best interests and the children's." The chorus is quick to point out the gap between the truth of the situation and Jason's rhetoric: "Jason, though you have made this speech of yours look well,/ Still I think, even though others do not agree,/ You have betrayed your wife and are acting badly."

Medea, though arguably working in the service of truth—a truth she invokes from her chariot at the plays conclusion when she tells Jason, "The gods know who was the author of this sorrow"—is often all too ready to use deceitful rhetoric herself. Her deceit serves, first and foremost, to reveal Jason's deceit and, secondarily, to give her an opportunity to exact her revenge.

"Certainly," Medea says, "I hold different views/ From others, for I think that the probable speaker/ Who is a villain deserves the greatest punishment." She decides, as we see, to take that punishment into her own hands, exposing, meanwhile, the hypocrisy of Jason and Creon, two men who speak well despite the villainy of their actions. "There is no need to put on the airs/ Of a clever speaker," she informs Jason, "for one word will lay you flat." After her first conversation with Jason, she manages to call him back to their former house and convinces him to let their children beg the Princess to be allowed to stay in Corinth, a privilege Medea never intends to give them. The audience's knowledge of Medea's deeper, true intentions allows it to better grasp the full scope and intensity of her character, both righteous and vengeful. Conversely, Jason's refusal, throughout, to acknowledge the true motivations for his actions, diminishes his.

<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes>

Vengeance (passion and revenge)

Revenge

In an enlightened society, we see revenge as barbaric, a concept and behaviour outside the realms of any developed, progressive community. It is not one of the motivators of our justice system. Revenge springs from emotion, and Medea's revenge is born out of her passions. In her last extended speech to Jason, she recognises her 'impious bloodshed', and she was always acutely aware of exactly what the act of killing her sons meant. She also knows that only this act will exact revenge on Jason.

VATE INSIDE STORIES 2015—Medea

Passion and reason

If equal affection cannot be, Let the more loving one be me. W. H. Auden At the centre of the play is a finely nuanced argument about the conflict between passion and reason. Euripides portrays the extremes of fiery ardour and of rational pragmatic calculation in Medea and Jason. Not only the plot, but the language of the play as well as the evaluation of these characters that Euripides guides us to, suggests that the playwright lays greater value on passion, feeling, and a life predicated on love than on logic, control and a blind adherence to social norms. That is not to say that the play is excusing filicide, but Euripides insists that what Jason has done will not be tolerated by the gods, and shows what ensues when a sacred oath is broken. If the concomitant of passion is chaos, and that of reason is order, it might be surprising that the play, to an extent, advocates for chaos. Or rather, Euripides argues that a passionless life is a tawdry, despicable existence. However, we need to remember the comments made by the Nurse, the Tutor, the Messenger and the Chorus—all either slaves or women. It is the middle, careful way that is safest to take; as in many Greek plays, the idea that if one does not reach heights of achievement, one cannot attract the attention of the gods and any fall will not be from such a great height, the suffering will not be so overwhelming—'moderation' is more 'attractive' (lines 126–7). It's almost better not to have children, say the Chorus, while the quality of the Nurse's life is indicated by her labeling 'those men of earlier days' 'blockheads' for inventing music to 'banish the hateful sorrows we mortals know', jeering at the facile idea that song could be a remedy for 'these ills'. The Chorus's final words create an image of bleak recognition but of little enlightenment. 'This is the way life is', they seem to say. Out of our control; we can't know. Far

from approving of Medea's killing of her sons, the play demonstrates what happens if we do not value feeling, passion, love, if we do not keep our oaths, if we reduce life to the pragmatic business of survival and worldly success, removing any higher value from it. The unleashing of Medea's passion is described in natural imagery, its magnitude emphasised after its damming up during her years in Corinth. Ultimately, Euripides argues for a balance in human existence, but he also constructs a character in Jason who, epitomising the antithesis of passion in everything he says and does, demonstrates that we must recognise and value love and feeling; without them, we cannot be human. Violent and destructive, dangerous and alien in this constricted world, Medea is portrayed as a natural force, and her ascent to the chariot at the end validates the necessity for navigating our lives by love, if the only alternative is its absence. Grand-daughter of the Sun god, Medea is saved by her careful planning and the reciprocal arrangement she has made with Aegeus; she navigates her life according to passion, but her strategy is meticulously worked out. Her reward is safe haven in Athens, where culture, civilisation, order and light dominate. The play's final scene is often viewed as problematic. In the recent National Theatre Live production, the crane, or *deus ex machina*, was replaced by Medea walking,

weighed down by the bodies of the two little boys, through to the back of the stage into a forest, almost into another zone. The limited staging devices available to Ancient Greek theatre did include a crane, though, so that the actor playing Medea would be lifted up from the stage to the Sun god's chariot to be taken to Athens. This can be interpreted as a visual realisation of the playwright's stance. At no stage in the play does any character condone the murder of the sons of Medea and Jason; at no stage is this act spoken of other in terms of horror and abomination; at no stage are we in doubt of Medea's love for her sons, which seems a more organic love than the egotistical need which Jason evinces for them. So, rather than attempt to either excuse or condemn what Medea does, it might be more relevant to focus on what she and Jason represent, and what Euripides is suggesting through this. It is too easy to simply pose Jason and Medea as opposites. Their history is essential knowledge, not merely in terms of plot, but for us to understand the extent of Medea's loss, anger and need to act. She has been subservient, fitted in to the limited space offered to a Corinthian wife. Jason's betrayal liberates the quelled impulses that are unleashed. If Athens is the epitome of an ideal civilised culture, Corinth represents a less lofty reality. Medea sneers at Jason's 'Sisyphean wedding', with the same contempt she aims at Corinth itself. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus king of Corinth was condemned to ceaselessly push a boulder to the top of a hill, then when it had rolled down, to push it up again. This futile, meaningless and hopeless labour was his punishment for his transgression against the gods. Medea enforces this view of Jason; he, too, is guilty of a crime against the gods, and he too must understand his fate because of his transgression. In the play, we do not see the intrepid hero, Jason, who set off on the quest for the Golden Fleece. We are left with an image of a man with no future, his ignominious death foretold, stripped of everything.

VATE INSIDE STORIES 2015—Medea

The notion of justice

The idea of justice, of the broader sphere of a moral universe in which right and wrong are not at the mercy of custom, human law and human ambition. Medea speaks of her hurt, anger and outrage in terms of love, self-sacrifice and damage to her pride, her essential sense of self. She has accepted a demeaning role for Jason's sake, and his abandonment of his family lets loose a fierce fury at the injustice. This suggests that a just society protects and nurtures all of its members.

VATE INSIDE STORIES 2015—Medea

Justice and revenge

Justice and revenge are associated with issues to do with the sacredness of oaths, and with how to deal with acts that pollute sacred bonds of family and the gods. This play also forces us to consider whether passion ever justifies violence.

When people swear solemn oaths, especially if they appeal to gods acknowledged by everyone in that community, they are expected to honour their word. We know that we can make promises ‘with our fingers crossed’ but that they are not real promises; we give ourselves permission to dishonour them later. Justice is about being just, that is, behaving in a fair and ethical way, according to the law. Who punishes us if we break our word? Do we believe that some divine force is watching and judging our actions? Remember that the Greeks personified Justice in two goddesses, Themis – the right way of doing things, established by law, and Dike – justice, including ideas of punishment and revenge. Greek myths are full of stories about people who incur divine justice: some of the worst punishments are reserved for crimes against family or crimes that violate sacred bonds of hospitality or duty.

Shakespeare’s

Macbeth

, also a tragedy, illustrates punishment for violating these bonds, exploring the themes of justice and revenge.

Writing in Shakespeare’s time, an English lawyer considered that revenge is a kind of ‘wild justice’, only permissible, perhaps, when the law can do nothing to help the injured party. He goes on to warn that revenge brings its own trauma to the perpetrator, plus the chance of further retribution. One of the great unresolved debates in Greek tragedy revolved around where the gods stood in relation to human activity, particularly as dispensers of justice. Characters might appeal to gods to dispense divine justice for wrongs but, in Euripides’ plays at least, the gods are silent. Wrongs are more than likely to go unpunished, except through human acts.

Medea’s charge against Jason is that he has broken an oath to her

that was sworn to the gods (Section 4). He is therefore doubly guilty and deserving of divine punishment. The Chorus agree (Sections 3 and 5). Contrast Aegeus' willingness to take an oath by the gods, happy to know it will bind him to keep his word and so avoid future potential difficulties (Section 10).

Rather than wait for Zeus to help her, Medea chooses to take up her own revenge, claiming that what she will do is just, since Jason does not respect oaths given to the gods.

Insight - Medea

Betrayal and revenge

Euripides makes a point about the level of fury and devastation caused by betrayal, loss of trust, loyalty and broken oaths, which lead to desire for revenge. Medea's murders have been incited by Jason's second marriage. Other characters such as the Nurse also believes Jason has hurt Medea and now where her deepest love was 'a cancer spreads' and he 'has betrayed my lady and his own children for a princess' (p. 51). Euripides touched upon a very significant and universal feeling among all between a woman and a man, 'betrayal'. Through this, he not only emphasises the vulnerability of women in society compared to men but also how more vengeful women would become compared to men when betrayed. Medea herself declares this as she appeals to the Chorus for revenge: 'women are timid creatures for the most part, cowards when it comes to fighting and at the sight of steel, but wrong a woman in love and nothing on earth has a heart more murderous' (p. 57).

Betrayal is one of the worst curses, which may be brought upon women and it has disastrous consequences regardless of age and time. Even in today's society, 2500 years later, betrayal still causes many couples to divorce and is even responsible for violence and murders.

Finally, some, including Jason, also believe that Medea's plan for murder and vengeance is in itself a betrayal of Greece, of Jason and, particularly, of her children.

Reason vs passion

Medea's character is ruled by passion. Passion, from the Latin word '*paterere*', meaning 'to suffer', is a compelling and intense emotion. At the start, she is passionately in love with Jason and she shows this by sacrificing a lot for him, even murdering her own brother and leaving her home. However, this destructive passion later becomes unhinged and turns into the wrath she vents on Jason as a result of his betrayal. '*Thumos*' is the Greek word for 'spiritedness' or, as here, 'irrational passion for revenge'. Medea is driven so much by this blinding passion and spiritedness that she even murders her children. During her intense monologue, Medea admits knowing the nature of the murders she is about to commit and yet how she is driven by her extreme emotions: 'the stubborn heart of mine! What misery it has cost me', and 'my passion is master of my reason, passion that causes the greatest suffering in the world' (pp. 77-78).

Passion and reason in the play are polarised. As opposed to Medea's deadly, irrational passion, Jason, as the main perpetrator of Medea's rage, lacks compassion and keeps calm while acting with reason throughout the play, even after he finds out about the murders of his loved ones. Jason becomes angry but never lets his emotions rule his decisions. He even explains his decision to marry Glauce by providing logical reasons for the audience of the time: 'I shall demonstrate that in so doing I have shown wisdom, yes, and prudence, further that I have acted like a true friend to you and my children' (p. 64).

Through his characters in *Medea*, Euripides suggests that life is a struggle between passion and reason. One needs to be able to balance these two extremes for a happier life. According to this, the Nurse's

'Middle way' is what keeps people safe and happy while the extreme passion of Medea or the coldness and immoral acts of Jason bring nothing but disorder and destruction to the mortal world.

Cambridge Checkpoints – Medea

Reason and Passion

Reason and passion are associated with issues related to expressing emotions or exercising self-control. These include rational argument versus angry passionate expression, using a mask of rationality to manipulate or conceal feelings and balancing head and heart. Passion can erupt into loss of control and madness and danger in personality.

Why should there be a perceived division between reason and passion?

Arguments about whether self-control is preferable to emotional expression, and under what circumstances, are part of an ancient conflict which is still unresolved. As children we may be allowed to express emotions freely but as we 'grow up' (as in 'why don't you grow up?') we get the idea that adult behaviour should be 'rational', by which we mean that words and actions should be governed by thought. Using phrases like, 'Don't get emotional' or 'Let's be rational about this' is one way adults curb each other's outbreaks of passion. Only in highly controlled and approved social circumstances of limited duration, like a funeral or a football match, are strong emotions usually demonstrated in public.

Medea terrifies the Nurse, the Tutor, the Chorus and Creon (Sections 1, 2, 5 and 6) because she is violently expressive about her suffering and injury. However, the self-control she is capable of exercising (Sections 5, 6, 7, 12 and at the end) surprises the audience who have been anticipating a passionate outburst. Medea knows how to control and direct her passionate energy.

'Nothing in excess' was the philosophical ground-rule of civilised life in democratic Athens. Balanced though this idea might sound, 'excess' probably referred more to over-expression of passion than over-application of the thinking process, since self-control, *sophrosyne*, was the valued ideal for an individual citizen. As we know, it is possible to use reasoning power emotionally and for specific emotional ends, to plead a special case, to persuade someone, to manipulate their perceptions, or to justify shady acts, which we call 'rationalising', a word that has negative connotations. This is how both Medea – planning 'honeyed words' to trick Jason (p.71) – and Jason – justifying his changed loyalties by stressing how important it is to have governed emotions (Section 12) – use reason to serve their own ends.

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary in our everyday experiences, the view that there is a fundamental divide between reason and passion, between the head and the heart, still holds.

Medea explores the way both head and heart define a human being and shape human relationships, illustrating the terrible consequences when one is dominant, and the other mistrusted or devalued.

Insight - Medea

Betrayal

Betrayal is associated with issues of broken trust, loss of self-worth, guilt, hatred, regret, desire for revenge, contrasting loyalty and disloyalty and the seriousness of oaths.

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Suddenly we doubt whether we can ever trust anyone again and we become suspicious of other people's kindness, wondering what they are really after – they can't really want to help, can they? Betrayal may lead to feelings of being worthless – 'I must be awful if I got dumped like that', of guilt and self-blame – 'It must be my fault, I must have done something awful to deserve it', together with panic – 'I'm on my own, no-one's there to help me', accompanied by deep sadness and grief – 'Life isn't worth living any more'.

This is the catastrophe Medea is experiencing at the beginning of the play as the Nurse describes it (Sections 1, 2 and 3) and as you hear from her cries, before you see her onstage (Section 4). She seems to be blaming herself for causing her own ruin but this may be a ploy to fool Creon, whom she hates for banishing her (Section 6).

Other strong feelings that come with betrayal (particularly when it occurs within a marriage or romantic relationship) are directed outwards, towards the betrayer. We may hate the person we loved passionately a few days before if he or she betrays us, especially if we've been replaced by a new partner, whom we also hate, even though we don't know them at all. Along with hatred may come feelings of intense regret for ever loving that person in the first place – 'What on earth did I see in them?'

How could I have allowed myself to ...' – and a desire for revenge. Medea experiences both hatred and regret. Because she did terrible things to her own family and homeland in order to be with Jason (Sections 4 and 5), she has a deep nagging guilt, which she has been able to justify to herself only as long as Jason is her lover. Jason has been disloyal to Medea after she staked her whole future on him. She demonstrated her loyalty to him by committing acts of violence to help him succeed. In her view, he has violated her trust, her friendship and their sexual relationship.

'What was it all for?' is the feeling that haunts someone who abandoned security for someone who made a promise, then broke it. Most serious to Medea's way of thinking is that Jason has dishonoured a sacred oath (Sections 4, 8 and 9).

In order to exact her revenge, however, Medea turns into a betrayer. She deliberately misleads Creon (Section 6) and Jason, as well as Glauce, the Tutor and the children (Sections 12 and 17). Whatever kind of positive response we might have had to her earlier in the play is now complicated. But we also cannot forget her psychomachia (Section 15), the high point of her conflict in relation to betrayal.

Insight - Medea