

CHAPTER 6

Medea

Laura Swift

Euripides' *Medea* remains one of the most abidingly powerful of all Greek tragedies; its themes of love, jealousy, vengeance, and infanticide continue to enthrall audiences more than two thousand years after it was first produced. Unlike many of Euripides' plays, *Medea* is dominated by a single character, the eponymous heroine, and the debates which have surrounded the play often arise from the question of how we should respond to this complex protagonist. Medea's actions are among the most horrific in tragedy, culminating in the murder of her own innocent children, yet Euripides takes care to portray the motivations which lie behind these actions, and in doing so he creates a character who is in many ways sympathetic and appealing. The question of to what extent we empathize with Medea, then, is a vexed one, and one to which Euripides gives no easy answers. For as scholars have demonstrated, who Medea is, as well as what she does, is of central importance to how an ancient audience might have viewed her. This chapter will begin by exploring two important aspects of Medea's identity which might have affected the way an Athenian audience would have responded to her: her status as a foreigner, and as a woman. Finally, I shall investigate Medea's presentation in the final scene, and how the audience might have responded to the unsettling way in which Euripides chooses to end the play.

1 Medea as Barbarian?

As the Nurse's words which open the play remind us, Medea is no Greek but a Colchian, who abandoned her own land for love of Jason (1–15). Yet the importance of Medea's "barbarian" identity to understanding her actions is debated by characters throughout the play. Thus, while Denys Page in his 1938 commentary could claim that "she embodies the qualities which the fifthcentury Athenian believed to be characteristic of Orientals" (Page (1938) xxi), most modern scholars would take a more nuanced line, contrasting the ways in which Medea is "other" with those in which she is portrayed as emphatically Greek (Allan (2002) 67–79; Mastronarde (2002) 22–4).

Medea's foreign identity is mentioned regularly in the play, both by Medea herself and by the Greek characters who surround her. The Chorus' opening words describe her as "the unhappy Colchian" (133), while they conclude the *parodos* by recalling her journey "to Greece over the ocean, through the dusky seawater over the salty barrier of the Black Sea, so difficult to cross" (210–12). The Chorus may pledge their loyalty to Medea, but they continue to allude to her foreign status by repeatedly telling the story of her long seajourney to Greece (431–5, 1262–4), a motif which emphasizes her exoticism and establishes a sense of distance. In particular the image of the Symplegades or Clashing Rocks (434–5, 1263), which form an impassable barrier between Greece and Medea's homeland, heightens the sense of a natural separation

between Greeks and foreigners.

Jason emphasizes Medea's foreignness in a more pointed way, using it to suggest the superiority of Greeks over barbarians. In his debate with Medea he attempts to argue that far from having acted wrongly in abandoning her, he has in fact benefited her: "Firstly, you live in Greece instead of a barbarian land, and you understand justice and how to use the rule of law instead of giving way to force" (536–7). Jason draws on the stereotype that barbarians do not recognize the rule of law in an attempt to present Medea as morally inferior. Hence by Jason's logic Medea's violent actions reveal her barbarian nature: a point reinforced at the end of the play when he claims of the children's murder "no Greek woman would ever have dared to do this" (1339–40). Jason's stance draws on deepseated Greek stereotypes which associated foreigners with irrational and excessive behavior and so his accusations would have resonated with the Athenian audience.

However, it can be no coincidence that Euripides puts the most overt barbarianstereotyping into the mouth of Jason, the play's least sympathetic character. While Jason's rhetoric may be familiar, the audience can nevertheless see how he draws on the language of Greek superiority to cover up his own culpability in abandoning his wife and children. Though Jason proclaims the virtues of living in Greece rather than a barbarian land, the audience has already seen the desperate plight that Medea is in, with no family to protect her, and facing exile; hence Jason's words are revealed to be shallow and selfserving. It is this vulnerability, and Jason's betrayal of his oaths, which prompt Medea to violence, rather than some inherently barbarian aspect of her character. It is thus the Greek Jason who fails to respect the sanctity of oaths and the legal status which they hold, while the barbarian Medea continually criticizes Jason for his oathbreaking, and in doing so expresses a familiar Greek form of morality (160–3, 492–8, 1391–2). Jason thus uses Medea's ethnicity as an excuse, in order to deflect attention from his own failings. Moreover, Jason's depiction of Medea as a barbarian is undermined by Medea's own representation of her emotions, which are driven as much by Greek ideals and values as by barbarian ones (Friedrich (1993) 222). Thus Euripides does not simply depict traditional stereotypes of Greek and foreign ways of thinking, but rather deconstructs the polarity between them embodied in Jason's rhetoric.

Medea repeatedly represents her primary motivation as a desire for vengeance on her enemies, and a need to avoid being mocked by them. When first pondering her plans for vengeance it is the laughter of her enemies which Medea seeks to avoid (383), and she foregrounds this desire to avoid mockery when she first announces her plan to kill the children:

I shall leave the land, fleeing from the murder of my beloved children and having brought myself to commit a most impious deed. For the laughter of enemies is not tolerable, my friends.

(795–7)

The desire to avoid incurring the laughter of enemies is a common feature of male heroes, and while it may be a masculine value it is certainly a Greek one. Homeric heroes are driven above all by a concern for their reputation and status in the eyes of the wider community, while

in tragedy the desire to avoid mockery is frequently given as a characteristic of the hero (see Knox (1977) 196–9). While a fifth-century Athenian audience might well regard such a philosophy as anachronistic and excessively individualistic, they would also be well aware of its Hellenic associations. Medea's desire to commit murder is presented not as arising from a barbarian lack of self-control, but from a Greek concern for her reputation.

Thus in many ways Euripides downplays the extent to which Medea's foreign status forms a prominent part of her characterization. While Medea's foreign identity is not denied, the beliefs which influence her are predominantly Greek rather than barbarian ones. Medea's perversion of heroic Greek values into a justification for childkilling is therefore a particularly disturbing aspect of the play. The audience is encouraged not only to reconsider the straightforward polarization of Greek versus barbarian, but also to reflect on the negative implications of these traditionally Greek ideals, and their destructive potential.

2 Medea as Woman

Gender roles and dynamics lie at the heart of *Medea*, a play which depicts a failed relationship between husband and wife (for more on gender in Euripides, see Mueller in this volume). Like many tragic females, Medea combines features which are stereotypically feminine with those which are strikingly masculine. Her ability to deceive would have been regarded as typically female. In every scene of the play, we see Medea manipulating other characters to achieve her goals. In particular, she is able to play on female stereotypes in order to manipulate the men around her: thus with Creon she stresses her maternal love for her children to persuade him to allow her more time in Corinth (340–7) and with Jason she plays up to the belief that women are overemotional and changeable in order to make him believe she has changed her mind and now accepts his decision to leave her (889–93). Yet in both cases the audience is aware that Medea is dissembling in order to manipulate her interlocutor. As soon as Creon leaves the stage, Medea drops the appearance of subservience, telling the Chorus “Do you imagine that I would have ever fawned upon this man if I had not been gaining something or hatching a plan?” (368–9). In the case of Jason, the audience knows from the start of the scene that Medea's apparent change of heart is a strategy to allow the children access to the palace. Medea picks up on Jason's misogynistic language and assumptions from his previous scene, where he spoke about the foolish nature of women (570–5). Thus when Medea pretends to be reconciled to Jason's marriage, she refers to Jason's belief that women are irrational, in order to make her dramatic change of heart appear plausible: “But we are what we are—I do not say we are wicked, but we are women. Therefore you should not imitate our nature, or repay childish behavior with more childishness” (889–91). As well as Medea's manipulative use of language, her scheming and devious character, and her use of trickery and poison were all negative female stereotypes familiar from other myths.

Yet Medea's active and bold personality, her intelligence and argumentative powers, and her desire to take action herself to achieve vengeance would have been considered male characteristics; moreover, as we have already seen, her desire to avoid mockery and to protect her honor aggressively is reminiscent of male heroism. This transgressive blending of male and

female elements in Medea's personality makes her a formidable and terrifying character, able to outwit and deceive those around her in the pursuit of her goals. Medea's decision to kill the children is presented as a conflict between her masculine desire to avoid mockery and her maternal love, as she dwells on her hopes for the children's future (1029–36) and her emotions on seeing and touching them (1040–3, 1074–5; Foley (1989)). We are encouraged to take Medea's maternal feelings towards the children seriously: she laments their prospective deaths in terms traditional for a bereaved mother, speaking of the labourpains she endured to bring them into the world (1030–1), her hopes to see them married (1026–7), and her wish to be cared for by them in her own old age (1033–5). In the previous scene, Medea's feelings for the children stand out as the truth she cannot hide amid her other deceptive statements: when Jason prays for the children's future happiness, Medea cannot help weeping (922–4), knowing that their fate has now been sealed. When Jason enquires about her tears, her answer offers a poignant glimpse of her true feelings, even as she continues to deceive her husband: "I gave birth to them, and when you prayed that the children might live, pity came over me as I wondered whether this would come to pass" (930–1). Thus Medea's feminine side is not simply portrayed as embodying negative stereotypes of women as manipulative and deceitful, but Euripides takes care also to show the nurturing aspect of femininity. Yet while the Chorus refuse to believe that Medea will be able to overcome these maternal feelings (860–5), we see Medea suppress and reject her maternal side, prioritizing instead her hatred of Jason and her desire for vengeance.

Gender roles and stereotypes are therefore important to understanding Medea's personality, yet their importance in the play goes beyond this to explore women's position in society more directly. Medea raises these issues in her first speech onstage, where in order to win the loyalty of the Chorus, she tries to bind them to her in a community of women, stressing the common difficulties of women's lives:

Of all things that live and have a mind, we women are the most wretched. Firstly we must buy a husband at vast expense, and take a master over our bodies: this is a misfortune worse than misfortune. The greatest struggle is this: whether we get a bad man or a good one. For there is no honorable divorce for a woman, and it is not possible to refuse a husband. When she comes to new customs and habits of her husband's house, she must be a seer, since she didn't learn it at home, to learn how to handle her husband. When we have made all these efforts, if our husband lives with us and does not take the yoke of marriage badly, our life is enviable; if not, it's better to die. When a man becomes annoyed at spending time with those in the house, he can put an end to his heart's boredom by going outside, but for us it is necessary to look to one soul. They say that we live a life free from danger in the house, while they fight with the spear. The fools! I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once.

(231–51)

Medea is faced with a Chorus which is friendly but not necessarily loyal to her, for, as she notes in the opening words of her speech, they are "women of Corinth" (214), and she is a stranger in their midst. Her strategy is therefore to build a shared identity, based on the

common experience of being a woman, and to emphasize to the Chorus how much they have in common rather than what separates them, exemplified by the repeated use of firstperson plurals in this section of her speech (“we women,” “we must take a husband,” “a master over our bodies”). Medea focuses on the limitations and indignities of women’s lives, and the ways in which they are held to standards different to those which govern their husbands’ behavior. Her account highlights the weak spots and flashpoints of women’s position in contemporary Athenian society, and for this reason the speech has been of particular importance to feminist scholars. Medea presents marriage as a form of slavery, describing the woman’s husband as a “master”; yet ironically while it is the masters who pay to purchase their slaves, in a marriage the women are compelled to purchase their own masters through the provision of a dowry. She draws out the inequalities inherent in the Greek concept of marriage: the dependence of the woman on her husband contrasts with the man’s freedom and his ability to obtain entertainment and sexual pleasure elsewhere. This section of the speech ends with the provocative claim that childbirth is more dangerous and admirable than warfare. Greek thought regularly compares childbirth and soldiering as the respective dangers faced by men and women; for example, in Sparta the only people to be allowed the honor of a named gravestone were men who died in battle and women who died in childbirth (Plutarch *Lycurgus* 27), recognizing the two activities as comparable and equally important to the state. Yet Medea goes beyond this, representing childbirth as three times more hazardous than warfare, and thus implying that women’s efforts should be honored and recognized more than men’s.

As well as expressing the difficulty of being a woman, Medea’s speech helps the audience to understand why she feels that her vengeance is justified, for she explains the importance of marriage to a woman, and hence the duty that husbands have within a patriarchal system to abide by their responsibilities. This is of central importance in understanding not only Medea’s attitude towards Jason, but how Jason’s behavior would have appeared to a Greek audience. Medea has fulfilled her obligations as a wife, remaining faithful and loyal to Jason, and most importantly providing him with two healthy sons. When speaking to Jason, Medea emphasizes her fertility as an additional reason that Jason’s behavior breaches social norms, since she suggests that had she been childless Jason would have been justified in seeking a new wife (489–91). Similarly, Aegeus is quick to condemn Jason’s actions when he hears that Jason has abandoned Medea and taken another woman: “Surely he has really not dared such a disgraceful deed?” (695). As a neutral outsider (and King of Athens), Aegeus’ criticism of Jason is important, since it emphasizes how outrageous Jason’s behavior would appear to be to a reasonable observer, and so further indicates a husband’s responsibility to respect his wife’s position. Towards the end of the play, Jason criticizes Medea for her vengeance by expressing his disbelief that a dysfunctional marriage could lead to such bloody consequences:

Jason:

You thought it right to kill them because of the marriage bed?

Medea:

Do you think that is a small source of pain for a woman?

Jason:

Yes, if she has any sense.

(1367–9)

While Jason dismissively regards Medea's motivations as arising from mere sexual jealousy, Medea's earlier explanation of what marriage means to a woman demonstrates that he is wrong to give marriage such little weight. The stability of a marriage is indeed a crucial issue for women, for as Medea has told us at the start of the play, women must "look to one soul" (247) for their happiness, and the success of their lives depends on the attitude of their husbands.

The final section of Medea's opening speech uses the rhetoric of gender to justify Medea's desire for vengeance, for having emphasized the aspects of a female life she shares with the Chorus, she goes on to isolate herself from them and to explain how their experience as Corinthian women is different from hers (252–63):

But the same argument does not apply to you as to me; for you have this city and your father's home, the benefit of life and the company of friends, but I, deserted and citiless, am treated outrageously by my husband, taken as booty from a barbarian land, with no mother, no brother, no relative to give me anchorage in this disaster. And so I ask to gain this much from you: if a way or means should be found for me to punish my husband for these evils, to keep silent.

Medea lists the normal "safety nets" which assure women protection from bad marriages in order to stress her own vulnerability. Unlike the Chorus, she lacks the protection of her paternal house, or of the wider community, and it is for this reason that she asks them to support her vengeance. Medea is thrown back onto her own resources; since she has no other protectors, she argues, she has no choice but to take action herself, and the Chorus is persuaded by this argument, telling her that her punishment of Jason is "just" (*endikôs*, 267).

To the watching Athenian audience, Medea's account of female life would surely have been provocative and thoughtprovoking: she analyzes contemporary gender relations from a female perspective, and her criticisms of the prevailing ideology are powerful ones. Yet when we interpret the gender politics of the speech, we should not overlook that the speech does not stand alone but fulfils a specific rhetorical purpose within the play. As some scholars have noted, Medea's account of the wretchedness of female life is played up for persuasive effect, and she deliberately elides or suppresses aspects of the system which seek to protect women (Allan (2002) 53). For example, she attacks the dowry system which compels a woman to "buy a master," yet the audience would also have recognized the role of dowries in encouraging stable marriages. A husband was required to return the dowry if he chose to divorce his wife. Thus the system was designed to provide financial incentives for husbands to remain loyal, and therefore to offer some protection for women against flighty husbands such as Jason (MacDowell (1978) 88). Similarly, Medea's description of herself as "taken as booty from a barbarian land" (256) is highly misleading, for the audience has already heard the Nurse's account of Medea's elopement, where she tells us that Medea sailed "with her heart struck by love for Jason" (8). Medea chose to make a marriage against her father's wishes, and to reject

her father's house in favor of total dependency on Jason; yet as Medea herself implies, the ongoing connection to a woman's paternal house was one way in which she could be protected if her marriage turned out to be a bad one. Similarly, Medea's complaint that she has no brother to protect her (257) evokes the myth that Medea herself murdered her brother to facilitate Jason's escape from Colchis, an extreme demonstration of Medea's rejection of her paternal relatives in favor of her new marriage. Thus the effect of Medea's powerful rhetoric is ambiguous: are we, like the Chorus, captivated by it, or do we question its validity? As the play goes on, and we see Medea successfully manipulating other characters by appealing to their weak spots, we are further encouraged to reflect upon her opening speech, and to wonder whether the gender alliance she constructs is a legitimate one, or whether it is simply a rhetorical ploy to achieve her objectives.

The speech raises women's position in society in order to build a female alliance with the Chorus; they are asked to put aside any concerns they have about the legitimacy of Medea's vengeance, or its effects on the Corinthian community they belong to, and to support her on the basis of a shared understanding of the difficulties of women's lot. The Chorus respond enthusiastically to this, singing an ode which opens with a description of the overturning of the status quo: "Uphill flow the waters of sacred rivers, and the whole order of justice is overturned" (410–11). They see Medea's story as marking an end to the patriarchal system, as they claim that not only will men's bad deeds now be brought to light (412–13), but women's reputation will now be restored and they will be regarded with honor (415–17). Yet the community of women Medea creates is ironically undermined by her ultimate choice of vengeance, which strikes at the heart of the female values she and the Chorus share; not only does the murder require Medea to overrule her own female instincts to nurture her children, it is also greeted with horror by the Chorus, who find it hard to imagine that Medea will be able to go through with the murders (860–5). The gender conflict in the play thus operates at two levels: the external level, where Medea forms a community with the Corinthian women against Jason and the men, and the internal level, where Medea's masculine and female sides fight for mastery. Though the Chorus respond to Medea's call for mobilization against the men, they ultimately reject siding with Medea in her internal conflict, instead appealing to her maternal feelings. When the Chorus realize that the murders are inevitable, they sing an ode concluding that it is best for mortals not to have children at all, to spare themselves the pain and disappointment that children can cause (1081–1115). Their words represent the unravelling of their genderbased loyalty to Medea, as their horror at the children's murders lead them not only to condemn Medea's actions but even to reject their commitment to maternity, the ultimate female role, which in Greek society was viewed as the primary goal of a woman's life.

3 Medea as Avenger: The Ending of the Play

Medea has often been described as a "revenge tragedy," and despite the extreme and terrifying nature of Medea's actions, she is motivated by traditional Greek attitudes to revenge. The desire to harm one's enemies was an accepted part of Greek morality, and was often described as the foundation of justice (see Blundell (1989) [chapter 2](#)). While Medea horrifyingly

conflates enemies and friends in her vengeance, enacting violence upon those who should be closest to her, her basic desire for vengeance is not exceptional. Yet human vengeance is usually checked by the fear of reciprocity, for one act of violence incurs the likelihood of a reciprocal act of retaliation, a problem demonstrated most clearly by Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where vengeance becomes an unbreakable cycle. Conversely, the most striking aspect of Medea's vengeance is the impunity with which she acts, for in the final moments of the play we see her elevated above the stage in the dragonchariot, confident in her escape to Athens and facing no retribution for the murders she has committed. This impunity is unusual in tragedy, for while it frequently depicts suffering which is unjust in the sense that it is disproportionate or affects innocents, the principle that one pays for one's actions is normally a pervasive feature of the genre. Even tragic figures who commit dreadful actions in constrained circumstances (such as Agamemnon), or those who act in ignorance (such as Oedipus) incur some kind of reciprocal suffering for their deeds. The character who offers the closest parallel to Medea is Hecuba, who kills the innocent children of Polymestor in vengeance for his murder of her own son: yet while she incurs no human punishment, the play ends with Polymestor prophesying her doom, since she is told she will be transformed into a dog and leap to her death in the sea (Eur. *Hec.* 1259–65). In the case of Medea, the audience have seen her prepare her escape route to Athens, and we are given no indication that she will face any consequences for her actions in Corinth.

Not only does Medea face no consequences for her actions, she does not appear to be traumatized by what she has done, or to regret her decision. While Medea does acknowledge that she too suffers because of the children's deaths, the emphasis is placed on her triumph over Jason and her exultation over his grief. Medea continues to perceive the murders as justified, and regards any sorrow she may experience as a worthwhile cost in her greater aim of achieving vengeance:

Jason:

You too have grief, and you share in these troubles.

Medea:

Yes, but know this: the pain is dissolved if you cannot mock me.

(1362–3)

Medea's selfpossession here is surprising, for we have previously been prepared for the idea that the killing of the children will be a cause of unbearable suffering for her. In her last speech before leaving the stage to commit the murders, Medea describes herself as "wretched woman" (1250), and anticipates the future grief she will have to endure: "Forget the children for this brief day, and mourn later" (1248–9). Thus in presenting Medea in the final scene in a way which suppresses her own suffering and shows her as unrepentant, Euripides confounds the audience's expectations.

Moreover, from the perspective of the Athenian audience, Medea's use of Athens as a place of sanctuary is particularly troubling. Athenian myth includes numerous examples of fallen heroes

from other cities who were taken in and saved by the generosity of Athens. For example, Athens provided salvation for the polluted Orestes and Oedipus, and for the broken Heracles after he had accidentally killed his children (as told in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides' *Heracles*). Athenian kings were portrayed as generous spirited and humane individuals who were prepared to take risks to offer shelter to the weak and helpless: thus Euripides' *Children of Heracles* tells the story of how Athens offered sanctuary to Heracles' persecuted children (see Goslin in this volume), while his *Suppliant Women* (see further McClure in this volume) shows Athens upholding the women of the title in their desire for an honorable burial for their dead sons. Aegeus' offer of sanctuary for Medea evokes this noble tradition of Athenian respect for the weak and helpless, qualities which would have formed an important part of the audience's national selfdefinition. Yet in the case of *Medea*, this generosity is abused, for it is Aegeus' offer which makes it possible for Medea to put her revenge plan into action, as Medea herself comments in the speech where she first reveals her plan to kill the children, "Now there is hope that my enemies will pay the price. For this man has appeared as a harbour for my plans at the point where I was struggling most" (767–9). Not only does Athenian generosity lead to childkilling, it also raises the specter of the unrepentant infanticide Medea making her home in Athens, a troubling notion for the audience. The Chorus anticipate this dilemma when Medea first reveals her plan, and use it to try to dissuade Medea from the murders:

How shall this city of holy rivers, or this land of religious processions take you in among their citizens, the childkiller, the impious one?

(846–50)

The Chorus believe that Athens will not accept Medea, and beg her to reconsider her plan, but the audience would probably be aware of the myth that Medea was indeed accepted into Athens, and the ending of the play gives us no reason to doubt that she will be welcomed there. The Chorus' confidence that a glorious city like Athens would not shelter a polluted murderess is therefore naive, and Medea is able to take advantage of Aegeus' good nature and the oaths he swore in ignorance of her true intentions. At the end of the play, Medea herself confidently announces her own future: "As for me, I shall go to the land of Erechtheus, to live with Aegeus, the son of Pandion" (1384–5). Medea presents herself not as a suppliant but as Aegeus' new sexual partner, for the Greek word she uses (*sunoikeô*) commonly means to live together as man and wife. This evokes the further myth of Medea's stay in Athens, that she attempted to kill Aegeus' son Theseus out of jealousy and to protect her own interests as Aegeus' partner. An audience member who knew this myth would therefore see Medea's arrival in Athens as marking a further chapter of trickery and violence, another way in which the ending of the play avoids straightforward resolution.

The ending of *Medea*, then, is perhaps the most troubling of all the surviving tragedies, for it provides little to help the audience make sense of the terrible events they have witnessed. One way in which scholars have tried to make sense of the end of the play is in seeing Medea's elevation to the *mechane* as a symbol of her dehumanization, as she becomes closer to the gods than to mortal men. In the final scene, Medea's actions and words bear striking resemblances

to those of gods in a traditional *deus ex machina* scene: she issues orders to the mortals onstage (1319), authorizes the creation of a new cult in honor of the dead children (1379–83), and prophesies Jason's own future fate (1386–8), all typical activities of a tragic god. Assimilating Medea's vengeance to divine vengeance helps to illuminate how unusual it is, for while the gods regularly involve innocent bystanders (such as children) in their attempts to punish the wicked, mortals cannot usually go to such lengths, for fear of retribution. It also demonstrates the dehumanizing effects of Medea's actions, since tragic gods are frequently portrayed as being aloof from mortal affairs, and lacking any true sense of compassion. However, Medea's godlike behavior in the final scene should not be regarded as a complete transformation, since her new supernatural powers do not entirely efface the human aspects of her personality. She continues to be drawn into bitter argument with Jason, and her passionate hatred of him is unlike the calm and detached attitudes of Euripidean gods. Whereas human characters have no choice but to accept the edicts of the gods, Jason continues to treat Medea as his wife, and to curse and call down divine justice upon her.

Some scholars have gone further, to argue that we should understand Medea as acting with divine support, and her vengeance to be a fulfilment of the gods' will, in punishing Jason's disregard for his oaths (see for example Kovacs (1993), Burnett (1998) 196–206). Yet while these critics are right to stress the religious sanctity of oaths, and the role of Zeus in upholding them, it is problematic to read a unified divine will behind the action of Medea. We find no indication that the gods are concerned with Jason and Medea's fates. Medea regularly calls upon the gods to witness her position (22–3, 160, 516–19, 764–5, 1352–3), but she ignores the Chorus' advice that Zeus will resolve the matter himself (155–9) and takes vengeance into her own hands. While tragedy regularly presents the gods' will as enacted through the actions of unknowing humans, the tragedian usually shows or alludes to the divine framework which lies behind the human action. Thus, for example, in *Hippolytus* we are told of Aphrodite's will in destroying Hippolytus, even though we then see the human characters make their own choices (see Ebbott's discussion of the play in this volume). In *Medea*, the only divine element in the play is the chariot of the sun given to Medea for her escape, but this can best be explained by Medea's familial relationship to Helios, since it is traditional in Greek literature for gods to support or persecute individual humans for personal reasons, regardless of the broader moral implications of the humans' actions (consider, for example Poseidon's persecution of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*). So while we may condemn Jason's oathbreaking and see Medea's desire to punish him as justified, we should interpret Medea as a selfwilled individual, and not as a personification of an oathdemon.

In the figure of Medea, Euripides has created perhaps his most complex and ambiguous character, a figure who is in many ways attractive yet whose actions are the most repellent in tragedy; a barbarian who espouses Greek ideals; a woman who draws on her femininity to do battle with men, yet whose ultimate vengeance involves the rejection of her most female instincts. There is no simple answer to how we should regard Medea, for the justice of her cause is set in tension with the horror of her actions, and the strength of her arguments with the manipulative and deceitful way she approaches other characters. The ending of the play is particularly troubling, for far from the crushed and distraught woman we might anticipate, we

see an unrepentant and powerful Medea leaving to pursue her murderous agenda elsewhere. Euripides' *Medea* remains a powerful exploration of conflict between genders, and the poisonous consequences of a destructive marriage. Yet much of the play's abiding appeal derives from the enigmatic portrayal of Medea herself, who continues to split opinions and to challenge audiences whenever it is performed.

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FURTHER READING

There is a vast amount of scholarship on *Medea*, and it can be difficult to know where to begin exploring the play. In addition to the works cited above, the following items may be useful starting points.

For an overview of the characterization of Medea, see Boedeker (1997), who explores the alternative versions of Medea which lie behind Euripides' handling of the myth. For understanding the impact of Medea's nonGreek status, VidalNaquet (1997) provides insight into the ways in which Athenian tragedy portrays foreigners. For feminist readings of the play, and discussions of how *Medea* investigates genderconflict and questions the role of women, see Foley (2001) and Williamson (1990), while McClure (1999) and Hopman (2008) explore the relationship between gender, rhetoric, and song. On the infanticide itself and Medea's vengeance, Easterling (1977) is a classic study.

A recent monograph dedicated to *Medea* is Luschnig (2007), which explores the play in great detail and from a variety of angles; another fullscale treatment of the play is McDermott (1989). Mastronarde (2010) is the most recent general study of Euripidean tragedy, and will be of use to the reader interested in understanding *Medea* in its broader contexts.

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Edited by

Laura K. McClure

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John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 021485020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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