

Medea

EURIPIDES

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

THE GREEK TRAGEDY
IN NEW TRANSLATIONS

GENERAL EDITORS
Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro

EURIPIDES: *Medea*

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Medea

Translated by

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and

GEORGIA MACHEMER

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

"The Greek Tragedy in New Translations is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a *re-creation* of these plays—as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times."

With these words, the late William Arrowsmith announced the purpose of this series, and we intend to honor that purpose. As was true of most of the volumes that began to appear in the 1970s—first under Arrowsmith's editorship, later in association with Herbert Golder—those for which we bear editorial responsibility are products of close collaboration between poets and scholars. We believe (as Arrowsmith did) that the skills of both are required for the difficult and delicate task of transplanting these magnificent specimens of another culture into the soil of our own place and time, to do justice both to their deep differences from our patterns of thought and expression and to their palpable closeness to our most intimate concerns. Above all, we are eager to offer contemporary readers dramatic poems that convey as vividly and directly as possible the splendor of language, the complexity of image and idea, and the intensity of emotion and originals. This entails, among much else, the recognition that the tragedies were meant for performance—as scripts for actors—to be sung and danced as well as spoken. It demands writing of inventiveness, clarity, musicality, and dramatic power. By such standards we ask that these translations be judged.

This series is also distinguished by its recognition of the need of nonspecialist readers for a critical introduction informed by the best recent scholarship, but written clearly and without condescension.

Each play is followed by notes designed not only to elucidate obscure references but also to mediate the conventions of the Athenian stage as well as those features of the Greek text that might otherwise go unnoticed. The notes are supplemented by a glossary of mythical and geographical terms that should make it possible to read the play without turning elsewhere for basic information. Stage directions are sufficiently ample to aid readers in imagining the action as they read. Our fondest hope, of course, is that these versions will be staged not only in the minds of their readers but also in the theaters to which, after so many centuries, they still belong.

A NOTE ON THE SERIES FORMAT

A series such as this requires a consistent format. Different translators, with individual voices and approaches to the material in hand, cannot be expected to develop a single coherent style for each of the three tragedians, much less make clear to modern readers that, despite the differences among the tragedians themselves, the plays share many conventions and a generic, or period, style. But they can at least share a common format and provide similar forms of guidance to the reader.

1. *Spelling of Greek names*

Orthography is one area of difference among the translations that requires a brief explanation. Historically, it has been common practice to use Latinized forms of Greek names when bringing them into English. Thus, for example, Oedipus (not Oidipous) and Clytemnestra (not Klutaimestra) are customary in English. Recently, however, many translators have moved toward more precise transliteration, which has the advantage of presenting the names as both Greek and new, instead of Roman and neoclassical importations into English. In the case of so familiar a name as Oedipus, however, transliteration risks the appearance of pedantry or affectation. And in any case, perfect consistency cannot be expected in such matters. Readers will feel the same discomfort with "Athenai" as the chief city of Greece as they would with "Platon" as the author of the *Republic*.

The earlier volumes in this series adopted as a rule a "mixed" orthography in accordance with the considerations outlined above. The most familiar names retain their Latinate forms, the rest are transliterated; *-os* rather than Latin *-us* is adopted for the termination of masculine names, and Greek diphthongs (such as Iphigeneia for Latin Iphigenia) are retained. Some of the later volumes continue this practice, but where translators have preferred to use a more consistent practice of transliteration of Latinization, we have honored their wishes.

2. *Stage directions*

The ancient manuscripts of the Greek plays do not supply stage directions (though the ancient commentators often provide information relevant to staging, delivery, "blocking," etc.). Hence stage directions must be inferred from words and situations and our knowledge of Greek theatrical conventions. At best this is a ticklish and uncertain procedure. But it is surely preferable that good stage directions should be provided by the translator than that readers should be left to their own devices in visualizing action, gesture, and spectacle. Ancient tragedy was austere and "distanced" by means of masks, which means that the reader must not expect the detailed intimacy ("He shrugs and turns wearily away," "She speaks with deliberate slowness, as though to emphasize the point," etc.) that characterizes stage directions in modern naturalistic drama.

3. *Numbering of lines*

For the convenience of the reader who may wish to check the translation against the original, or vice versa, the lines have been numbered according to both the Greek and English texts. The lines of the translation have been numbered in multiples of ten, and those numbers have been set in the right-hand margin. The (inclusive) Greek numeration will be found bracketed at the top of the page. The Notes that follow the text have been keyed to both numerations, the line numbers of the translation in **bold**, followed by the Greek line numbers in regular type, and the same convention is used for all references to specific passages (of the translated plays only) in both the Notes and the Introduction.

Readers will doubtless note that in many plays the English lines outnumber the Greek, but they should not therefore conclude that the translator has been unduly prolix. In some cases the reason is simply that the translator has adopted the free-flowing norms of modern Anglo-American prosody, with its brief-breath- and emphasis-determined lines, and its habit of indicating cadence and caesuras by line length and setting rather than by conventional punctuation. Even where translators have preferred to cast dialogue in more regular five-beat or six-beat lines, the greater compactness of Greek diction is likely to result in a substantial disparity in Greek and English numerations.

Durham, N.C.
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PETER BURIAN
ALAN SHAPIRO

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MEDEA

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INTRODUCTION

MEDEA IN THE MORNING LIGHT

As the sun, rising above Mount Hymettus, lights up the packed wooden bleachers on the south slope of the Acropolis, some fifteen thousand Athenian citizens and resident aliens, their retinues and guests from abroad,¹ revived by warming wine, readjust their cushions, pull their cloaks around their shoulders against the early morning chill, and gaze down at the wide circle of the deserted dance floor (*orchestra*). A short while before, just after dawn, it had been abustle with purifications, libations poured by generals—chief among them Pericles—announcements of gold chaplets (*stephanoi*) awarded to the city's benefactors, panoplied war orphans eligible for the first time to bear arms against the foe, and buckets of gold and silver tribute from subject states. But now the tribute has been removed and all the VIPs have taken their seats at the foot of the hill. In the front row, toes to the orchestra's rim, the year's most prominent office holders and other notables flank the Priest of Dionysus at the center and the ten judges, just chosen by lot,

1. Were women present? There is no good evidence one way or the other, but my guess is no, not so much because of demographics, as because of Greek attitudes toward their wives and daughters appearing in public at all and because I suspect that the satyr plays and old comedies performed along with the tragedies at this festival would have been considered too lewd for proper women to see and hear. Demographics support this conclusion: Thucydides gives figures for the number of troops, both citizen and foreign, available to Athens in 431 BC for the conduct of the war (*Peloponnesian War* 2.13), which, though hotly disputed by modern scholars, suggest that even if only half of these men (numbering in excess of 90,000) were in the city at the time of the festival and that if even fewer than a third of these attended the theatrical performances that spring day, along with their sons, others exempt from service or disabled, numerous resident aliens not serving, and foreign guests (and their servants?), there would have been scant room on that crowded hillside for proper ladies. Even the performers were men. It was almost a men-only political club at play. If women were there, they would probably not have been the chaste wives and daughters of upstanding citizens. For a good discussion of the Athenian audience at the City Dionysia, see Simon Goldhill, "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy," *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge, 1997), 54–68.

who will soon cast their votes for this year's winning poet (not destined to be Euripides, who will come in third or dead last). Nearby stands the old wooden statue of the wine god, brought in procession to the festival and thought to be as eager as the human spectators to watch the show. The trumpets have sounded. Anticipation has settled into stillness. In the backdrop spanning the rear of the dance space, palace doors open. The *Medea*, a new play by the notorious Euripides, is about to begin.

What did the audience expect that morning in mid-March 431 BC, as they watched a solitary man wearing the mask of an old woman shamble toward them, and were their expectations met or frustrated? How might they have interpreted the actions and the words of the masked actors and dancers—fellow citizens all—who came before them that day to sing, to dance, to gesture, to declaim, and to honor the wine god who mingled his spirits with theirs? What circumstances impinged on their consciousness? How would their assumptions and reactions have differed from ours as they witnessed the drama from whose script our Greek text, corrupted over time, is derived, a sometimes uncertain remnant of that first performance?

For months they had known that Euripides, already in midcareer, would be one of the three tragic poets exhibiting that spring at the annual city festival of Dionysus. He, Sophocles (Euripides' senior by at least a dozen years and a frequent favorite with the judges), and Euphion (son of the great playwright Aeschylus and destined to be this year's victor), along with their respective chorus masters, the *chorēgoi*, had been chosen the summer before, shortly after the highest ranking city official, the *eponymous archon*, whose duties included oversight of the great festival of Dionysus, had taken office. Whatever shows the other two poets might put on, Euripides' were sure to rattle the audience, for he had been schooled by the sophists—those foreign-born, self-promoting, self-styled wise men who, with Pericles' encouragement, had arrived in boomtown Athens to peddle their newfangled, high-priced higher education to any with the leisure and means to become conversant with its confounding techniques of arguing the pros and cons of any issue and its unnerving theories about the nature of things—and he often made his characters act as though they had received the same indoctrination.

His fellow Athenians must have had mixed reactions to his characters' more extravagant sophistries. To those who were less than sanguine about the new ideas floating around Athens, who feared for the future of Athens and for their own, and who saw in Euripides' dramatic style a sign of the city's corruption, they must have been painful. How large

this group was and who belonged to it we do not know. We can guess that it included those whose power and prestige was tied (or so they thought) to inherited landed estates (large and small) and who despised the manners and pretensions of newly “sophisticated” youths and their teachers and were opposed to Pericles’ aggressive, populist, imperial policies; or, for that matter, just about any fathers or guardians who at home were scandalized by back-talking, rebellious sons and wards or who in the courts had been bested by captious arguments. The list was probably as long as the motives for disliking Euripides were many. Yet, despite his poor showing with the judges, the list of Euripides’ fans was even longer. He fascinated those among the upper classes, especially the leisured, city-dwelling younger generation, who had imbibed the new learning at its source and were more than ready to applaud characters who thought and talked like, or more cleverly than, themselves. Even the as-yet unenlightened, less well-to-do majority, who were either too busy or too poor to pay the sophists’ exorbitant fees, must have been easily seduced by rousing displays of spellbinding rhetoric unavailable to them by any other means. They were regaled by characters who might at any time begin to wax philosophical and question the veracity, worth, even the existence of the Homeric gods and whether men ought to be worshipping them, and, if not them, who or what.

But to these working men, better than all the logic-chopping and philosophizing was the way Euripides brought the imposing presences from Greek myth—those lofty alter egos of Athens’ proud, Spartan-loving oligarchs—on stage in, shall we say, debasing circumstances. His characters, less remote, more human, delighted the newly enriched and newly empowered lower classes—city-dwelling, landless traders and artisans who had prospered from the manning and maintenance of Athens’ large navy and from the new markets Athens’ supremacy at sea had opened up. Thanks to Pericles, who for the last dozen years or so had been the undisputed master of Athens, and much to the chagrin of the so-called few (*oligoi*), aristocrats who thought themselves more qualified by birth and upbringing to rule, these vulgar many (*demos*), whom Pericles had flattered, rewarded, and led, now dominated the assembly and the courts. It must have been they most of all who a few years back had applauded so wildly when, dressed in rags, the great and noble son of Heracles, the Mysian Telephus (in a lost Euripidean play of that name) had hobbled before ancestral Argive peers to beg for aid. Surely there would be more outrageous surprises of this kind from Euripides’ fertile mental store, something everyone could love hating.

They will not be disappointed. In the play they are about to see,

the wondrous, magical, triumphant marriage of two matchless heroes—Jason, captain of the Argonauts, and Medea, his trophy wife—will enter the divorce court. To an audience raised on Aeschylus's larger-than-life personages, the leading characters of the *Medea* will seem disturbingly like the chattering high-folk of imperial Athens, whose dirty linen, though washed, has been hung out to dry. Under Euripides' tutelage, the art of masking is being transformed from a ritual putting-on of the real presence of a god or antique hero into the presentation of a familiar type confronted with familiar situations. As exotic as Medea is, she is still a woman; as unusual as her story is, it is nevertheless the story of a marriage; as assimilated to the divine nature as her sorcery is, for an ancient Athenian it still rings true to the real-life activities of lady herbalists or "root-cutters." Yet, although Euripides' protagonists will suddenly seem a bit too uncomfortably familiar, the play will be no *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The action will remain public—there will be no displays of unseemly misconduct in the women's quarters—and, by our standards, the diction will seem grave, discreet, and declamatory, though the question of carnal attraction, in keeping with the mythical tradition, will not be altogether avoided. It is mentioned in the prologue (7–8) and emerges prominently as an issue in several of the choral odes and in Jason's caviling.

Not only have the spectators that morning long been expecting something shockingly sophisticated from Euripides, they have also been primed for a "Medea in Corinth." On the day preceding the grand procession that inaugurated the five-day festival, at a preliminary ceremony in the Odeion, the new auditorium flanking the Theater of Dionysus on the audience's left, each competing producer had first presented his poet, his chorus of fifteen men, his actors—also men, usually limited to three, the number necessary to play all the roles throughout the play by assuming different masks—and then announced the subjects and settings of the four plays his team would soon present—as a rule three tragedies, followed by a ribald satyr play (a burlesque of heroic myth in tragic style). Though they held celebratory garlands, the performers were maskless and wore ordinary dress in place of the elaborately embroidered "royal" robes or lewd satyr costumes they would don for their performances. That year Euripides would be offering the *Medea*, along with three other plays now lost: a *Philoctetes*, a *Diktys*, and a satyr play called *Theristai*.

LEGENDARY BACKGROUND

Ancient Greek myths tend to coalesce around ancestral dynasties, in this case, around one known as the Aeolidae, descendants of Aeolus,

Jason's great-grandfather, who had originally ruled in the plains of Thessaly in northern Greece. One of Aeolus's seven sons, Athamas, had two famous wives. The first, Nephele, bore him a son, Phrixus, and a daughter, Helle; the second, Ino, attempted to kill Phrixus. In fifth century accounts of this wicked stepmother's plot and its thwarting—we know of at least three plays of Sophocles and three of Euripides that touch upon it—there seems to have been an abortive sacrifice of Phrixus, after which he and his sister fly off toward the East on the back of a golden ram, sent either by their mother, Nephele, or by a god. Helle falls off, giving her name to Helle's sea (the Hellespont), but Phrixus arrives safely in the land of the Colchians at the eastern end of the Black Sea. Here he sacrifices the golden ram and gives its fleece to Aeëtes, son of the Titan Helios (the Sun) and King of Aia, a city on the Phasis River. In return, Aeëtes welcomes him into his household and gives him the hand of a daughter (Medea's sister) in marriage. After fathering a number of sons, Phrixus dies in Colchis. All this time the unearthly fleece hangs in a sacred grove, safeguarded by a huge serpent.

Meanwhile, back in Thessaly, the scene has shifted to the harbor town of Iolcus, at the foot of Mount Pelion. Athamas is no longer in the picture, and his nephew Aeson, the father of Jason, has been overthrown by Aeson's half brother Pelias. At the time of the coup, Aeson's supporters entrust the boy Jason to the wise centaur Chiron, who raises him far from town in a cave near Pelion's peak. Years pass. Pelias, though tormented by a prophecy to beware of a man wearing a single sandal, rules without opposition. Then, one fine day just such a one-sandaled man arrives in Iolcus: a heroic figure, indeed, in Pindar, who a generation earlier wrote:

a man terrible with twin javelins; and a twofold guise was on him.
A tunic of Magnesian fashion fitted close his magnificent limbs,
and across it a panther's hide held off the shivering rains.
Nor did the glory of his streaming locks go shorn,
but blazed the length of his back. Striding apace
he stood, and tested his unfaltering will
in the market place that filled with people.

They knew him not; yet awe-struck one man would say to another:
“This cannot be Apollo, surely, nor Aphrodite's lord,
he of the brazen chariot. . . .”

(Fourth Pythian Ode, 78–88, tr. Richmond Lattimore)

The man is Jason, come home at last to claim his royal birthright. Along the way he has lost one of his sandals. The lines from Pindar, representative of a tradition familiar to Euripides' audience, allow us

to see what that audience would have realized at once: just how far Euripides' Jason has fallen compared to Pindar's godlike warrior.

When King Pelias learns the identity of this awesome, one-shoed stranger, the wily usurper is ready with a deft proposal: The ghost of Phrixus has been haunting his dreams and has called upon him to bring the fleece of the golden ram back to Iolcus. Would Jason be enterprising enough to wrest it from the formidable Aeëtes? Jason, a hero to his core, accepts Pelias's challenge and calls upon most of the heroes of the age to go with him to the world's eastern edge, a mysterious, potent, sacred spot, charged with danger, where the Sun rises from his Underworld home, and where no Greek had gone before. They come from all over, these brave adventurers. With Athena's help, they build the world's first man-of-war, the *Argo*, and from Iolcus they sail (and row) into untested waters beyond the Bosphorus. On the way, they encounter many obstacles, all of which they overcome, only to find the greatest obstacles of all in Colchis.

As soon as the purpose of the Argonauts' mission is made plain to Aeëtes, the ungracious and devious king sets tasks for Jason to perform in order to win the Golden Fleece—tasks that Aeëtes believes will be impossible. The hero must plow a field with fire-breathing bulls, sow dragon's teeth in the furrows, and kill the fully armed warriors that will sprout from this sinister seed. The gods, however, are on Jason's side. Aphrodite makes the king's daughter Medea fall so madly in love with the beautiful Greek stranger that she, a priestess of Hecate and therefore accomplished in the secret arts of magic, gives him potions to protect him from the bulls' fire and sound advice on how to set his new-grown adversaries to fighting among themselves. When her father does not keep his side of the bargain and refuses to grant Jason the Golden Fleece, she helps her lover seize the prize from under the watchful eye of its guardian dragon and then escapes with him aboard the *Argo*. Along the way, she and Jason kill her brother and, according to at least one fifth-century account (though not attested by Euripides), chop up his corpse and scatter his limbs behind them as they flee, in order to delay her father's pursuit.²

At some point in these adventures, in return for her aid and to protect her from her father's vengeance, Jason solemnly swears to make Medea his lawful wife. This marriage—one of the great marriages of myth, in which the human and the divine worlds come together to

2. Michael Collier incorporates some details of this version at lines 160–62. Euripides, however, tells us nothing about the cause or the manner of this murder, only that it was shameful (160/166–67) and that it took place at Medea's father's hearth (1308/1334).

INTRODUCTION

celebrate an extraordinary union—is accomplished either on the home-ward voyage, during which Medea’s magical powers often come to the aid of Jason and his crew, or upon the couple’s triumphal return to Iolcus. In Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Argonautica*, an epic written about a century and a half after Euripides’ *Medea*, it forms a highlight of the last, culminating book. Significantly, Apollonius has it take place in Phaeacia, the enchanted land where Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* was finally rescued from the sea and sent home to Ithaca. The marriage bed of the god-blessed couple—so often referred to in the play—was, we are told, set up in a sacred cave and covered with the Golden Fleece itself: “Nymphs gathered flowers for them, and as they brought the many-coloured bunches into the cave in their white arms the fiery splendour of the fleece played on them all, so bright was the glitter of its golden wool. It kindled in their eyes a sweet desire. They longed to lay their hands on it, and yet they were afraid to touch it. . . . As for his bride, the place where the pair were brought together when the fragrant linen had been spread is still called the Sacred Cave of Medea.”³

The quest for the Golden Fleece had many sequels. The oldest and most famous was the murder of King Pelias by his daughters, who were tricked by cunning Medea into killing their own father, a tale that is introduced as background in the prologue of the *Medea* to account for Jason’s and Medea’s status as exiles from Iolcus (see notes, lines 8–9/9–10). Another sequel, her stint in Athens with King Aegeus, which is anticipated in the third episode of the play (658–815/663–823; see below) and set after Medea’s flight from Corinth, may well have been devised only in classical times. Both Euripides and Sophocles are known to have written undatable lost plays called *Aegeus*. But even if one of them included Medea in its plot, and that play was produced before our *Medea*, it is unlikely that the Athens episode, in contrast to the murder of Pelias, would have formed a part of the audience’s assumptions or expectations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Because the dates of most of Euripides’ surviving plays are unknown, and because those that are known do not always belong to moments in Athenian history as well documented as the spring of 431 BC, we are not usually in a position, as we are with the *Medea*, to explore the

3. Apollonius, *Argonautica*, lines 1143–48, 1153–55, tr. E. V. Rieu (Penguin 1971), 178. For a complete account of this and related legends, see Timothy Gantz’s *Early Greek Myth* (Johns Hopkins, 1993), where a valiant attempt is made to sort out the many competing versions.

relationship between the action of the play and the events of the world. The *Medea* was produced during the incidents described in the first two books of Thucydides' history of the great Peloponnesian War. Of course, that proud morning the audience did not know what the future would bring or that the war upon which they were embarking would be twenty-seven years long and ultimately disastrous for Athens. They did know, however, that it had already begun, for the previous summer Sparta had declared war, and as soon as the campaigning season got under way in earnest, efficient, ruthless Spartan phalanxes would be marching toward Athenian territory.

Anxious though the majority in the audience must have been about this anticipated invasion, chances are at least one of them, the leader of the anti-Spartan, prowar, expansionist, democratic faction, was outwardly calm, for he had already decided that such an incursion would be of little long-term consequence. Pericles had always aimed for Athens' preeminence in Greece at Sparta's expense, wanting to pit his city's young sea power against the other's venerable land power. Now his efforts were paying off. On his advice, Attic farmers, the mainstay of the heavily armed infantry (the hoplites), would soon send their livestock to neighboring islands and, abandoning their holdings in the countryside, reluctantly take up temporary residence inside the city walls, along with their women and children, their servants, and, we are told, their household furniture. Let the invincible Spartans and their Dorian allies do their worst. What had Athenians to fear, so long as they stayed behind the ramparts? With Athens' coffers bursting and her fleet unchallenged from Corcyra to Colchis, they could count on war supplies and other resources being shipped in from overseas. Meanwhile, their war fleet, manned by the best-trained rowers in the world, would make surprise raids on the inadequately guarded territories of Sparta and her allies.

In this perfervid atmosphere, names like "Argo," "Clashing Rocks," and "Corinth" were laden with implications they can scarcely have for us. Had not the citizens of Athens, like the Argonauts of old, "forced every sea and land to be the highway of [their] daring" (Thucydides 2.41, tr. R. Crawley)? Not only had they sounded the farthest reaches of the Black Sea, but with their own garrisons, settlers, and naval patrols, they had turned its once formidable waters into a large lake, from which big-bellied merchantmen, laden with grain and salt fish, made their swift, unobstructed way past the Clashing Rocks, through the Bosphorus and the Hellespont, to Athens.

Athens' new prosperity and sudden power, however, had brought many problems. Foreigners, both Greek and non-Greek, had flooded

the city. Many of those involved in trade, native and foreigner alike, had become newly rich and influential. As the use of ships and money increased, the land holdings in Attica that supported the hoplite army no longer counted for as much, and the room and board once supplied to farmhands and servants had given way, in the city at least, to wages. With wages came the possibility of freedom and, to the ambitious, hard-working, and lucky, social and political advancement. Old distinctions no longer applied. No one knew anymore who was who. Political allegiances shifted like sand as each man sought his own advantage.

Because tragedy by definition deals with heroes' hard times, it goes without saying that the audience that morning did not expect to see either Jason or Medea as the exultant figures portrayed in early epic or in Pindar's epinician odes from thirty years before. But what would this audience at this time have felt when they saw an old slave woman—and, as they soon learn, the slave of a barbarian princess to boot—emerge from the scene building to speak the prologue of this play? By her very appearance on stage, she immediately reoriented their expectations toward the background of the action about to unfold, toward the immigrant population growth and mixing up of peoples and status that maritime supremacy had brought in its wake. If the surviving Euripidean tragedies are any guide to the common practice of this most "democratic" of the fifth-century tragedians, then the Nurse is indeed unusual. Almost always, a god or hero speaks his prologues; she is an immigrant's slave. Oh yes, she is an aristocrat among servants (see notes, lines 1-39/1-48 and 40/49), but a servant nonetheless, and there she stands in that great circle of empty space and, like any free Athenian citizen, addresses the rulers of the sea, a symbol perhaps of the recognizable confusion of daily life in democratic Athens, where the base-born lord it over their betters and slaves and foreigners cannot be distinguished from freemen (cf. Ps. Xenophon, *Constitution of Athens*, 1.4-12).

Already nonplused by her appearance, what must their astonishment have been when the first words out of her mouth wished the Argo and its triumphs away—the Argo, whose voyage was a mythical emblem of their own sea power—and along with it the whole turmoil of domestic and public life that its sudden success had brought. Who in that audience would not have felt the pull of what she said? Even the overseas clients and the immigrants in Athens (the metics), who had prospered beyond their wildest imaginings, would have felt the anxiety of life in the fast lane, far from home and the old familiar ways evoked by this old servant's lament. But perhaps none there that day would have felt her words more strongly than the slaves, some from as far away as

Colchis, who perhaps were waiting on the edges of the crowd for the signal between plays to bring more refreshments to their masters. They too saw the veil of literary convention raised just enough to reveal a cynical reality with which they and those around them were all too familiar. Underneath the heavy veneer of the ennobling past, the commonplace was peeping through. The Argo was beached.

Then there was Corinth. Ready to pit their seamanship against that of any of Sparta's allies, how could this audience not have reacted to the drama's being set in Corinth? Although we usually say that the Peloponnesian War was between Athens and Sparta, this is merely a neat formula for a far messier reality. In reality the war arose between Athens and her allies—that is, all the subject cities of the Delian League, the maritime federation over which she ruled—and Sparta and her allies, largely the cities of the Peloponnesus, the south Greek peninsula. Of this region the chief naval power was Corinth, the northernmost city of the Peloponnesus. Straddling the neck of the peninsula, she not only controlled the north-south land route, but had once been the busiest port in Greece, until Athens challenged her ascendancy. Indeed, it was actually with Corinth, not Sparta, that the disagreements leading up to the final breach of the Thirty Years' Truce had started. Corinth was the real enemy, her fleet the real threat, her jealousy of upstart Athens the driving cause. In the months leading up to the war, Athens, already first in the Aegean and the Black Sea to the east, had deliberately challenged Corinth's control of the sea lanes between mainland Greece and the prosperous Greek colonies in South Italy and Sicily to the west. Corinth had retaliated. By the time Corinth, during the previous summer, had finally convinced Sparta, with her invincible elite land forces, to join the fight, Athens and Corinth were already fully engaged.

So, whatever his motives, Euripides had picked a myth and a setting that fit the hour. His audience, he well knew, was made up of the same citizens who had voted to aid the city of Corcyra in her rebellion against Corinth and to reject outright the last blunt, impossible Spartan ultimatum that, to keep the peace, the Athenians should give up their empire. Now, on the brink of a war they had asked for, they sat, elated and afraid, and watched Medea wreak havoc upon hostile Corinth's ruler and his new ally, the great Thessalian seaman Jason, who, fool that he was, had suddenly switched his allegiance from her to the Corinthian king Creon.

If the dramatic action had been confined to Corinth, Medea's vengeance would have been riveting, but it would have lacked the frisson generated by the sudden appearance on stage of ancient Athens' King

Aegeus offering asylum to the calculating, yet persuasive Medea (658–815/663–823). Since ancient audiences were used to etiologies in tragedy, like the one at the end of the play that accounts for the historical cult of Medea's children at Corinth, they would doubtless have been alert to the ominous etiological implications of Aegeus's ill-considered promise. Here before their eyes was a myth to explain how Corinth and Athens had become enemies. The scene thus reached out to them in several ways not obvious to us. We have no emotional commitment to Athens' founding hero Theseus, the son Aegeus is going to beget on Pittheus's daughter when he leaves Corinth; not so the Athenians, whose fathers and grandfathers had gone to great trouble and expense to bring this man's bones back from the island of Scyros to Athens and to inaugurate a festival in his honor, replete with a grand procession, sacrifices, and athletic contests. We do not sense the extent of Aegeus's blunder when, needlessly, in exchange for an heir, he welcomes Medea into his home and commits his city to her defense against her new enemies, ipso facto making them his and Athens' own, not for a single generation, but for many generations to come. We do not anticipate, as they did, that Medea will bear to Aegeus a child named Medus, who will become the founder of the ever-threatening Persian kingdom (Media), or that she will attempt to murder the noble Theseus,⁴ nor suspect that the child-destroying taint clinging to her uncanny powers might still be at work in Athens in the shape of her latter-day, root-brewing disciples (see p. 19). Nor do we fear the endless inheritability of blood guilt feared by the Athenians, who, close upon Aegeus's exit from the stage in Euripides' play, discovered from Medea's own lips⁵ that he and hence their shining city had made a commitment to a woman who would murder her own children, an act of pollution so dire that they might have exclaimed along with the Chorus that no ritual cleansing imaginable could make her fit to reside among them (830–39/846–55). With the full extent of Medea's plans revealed, their foreboding at the outcome of her compact with Aegeus is registered musically by the contrast the Chorus draws between Athens' glorious, god-blessed, true wisdom-engendering purity and Medea's depravity (816 ff./824 ff.). Future generations found

4. We know of two undated tragedies that probably dealt with Medea's attempted murder of Theseus, one by Sophocles, one by Euripides. That one of them antedates the *Medea* is proven by "a series of Red-Figure pots starting about 450 B.C. and showing Aigeus, Theseus, the Bull [of Marathon], and a woman who must be Medea . . ." (Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, vol. 1, p. 255.)

5. It has been concluded by many Euripidean scholars that Euripides did not inherit the myth of Medea's murdering her own children but invented it.

Euripides' lyrics the most moving parts of his plays. Was this also true at their premieres? Did the savvy Athenians, unconquered children of the gods and Earth, exult unabashedly in the glory of their city and yet fear for the danger that lay ahead? I cannot help but think so.

The audience's sense of unease at the sinister quality of the Athens-Corinth connection would have been heightened by the way in which Euripides locates the familiar political machinations of the play not in a public space but deep inside a noble house, where the destabilizing quest for personal power, honor, and glory, and for the honor of one's house, began and ended. For ancient Greek politics, as will become clearer when we look more closely at the topic of Medea's honor, was not distant like ours, representative and televised, but immediate, direct and personal, oftentimes played out among participants who had known each other since childhood. Wheeling and dealing could not be left behind when an ancient Athenian or Corinthian went home, because his home and its nexus of alliances with kin and peers constituted his faction, his party. Unstable marriage alliances and bloody vendettas (which Athenian court procedure reflected and often was powerless to replace), coups and countercoups, betrayals and counter-betrayals were the very stuff of political life throughout Greece and often undermined the common good. Not only is Euripides' play centered on one of these explosive political marriages, the maneuvering between husband and wife is brought down from the royal, public heights on which it had been displayed in other tragedies (e.g., Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) into the bathos of a domestic tug of war between a husband and his no-longer-convenient, unrestrained, foreign wife, who refuses to go quietly into the limbo to which she has been consigned and instead, unassisted, outsmarts all her pantywaist foes.

MEDEA'S CHARACTER

In developing Medea's character, Euripides plays the received tradition off contemporary situations and prejudices. Her fierce, mantic nature, to Pindar a sign of her prophetic powers (*Pythian* 4.10), is now a symptom of a defective character type: the aloof, intractable, uncontrollable, uncompromising, stubborn *authades*, who, when crossed, is given to inordinate rage and resentment and resists all attempts on the part of friends at mollification or amelioration. The Greek word is fairly new⁶ and belongs to the emerging discourse of medicine, rhetoric, and

6. Significantly, the word first appears in the *Prometheus Bound*, which, in my opinion, is neither by Aeschylus nor much earlier in date than the 430s BC. But this is a controversial topic out of place here.

ethics, and, although rare in Euripides, is used four times to describe Medea. Up until Jason's betrayal and her unjust abasement, she had managed to conceal her true nature behind a facade of restrained solicitousness, obliging her husband and his friends when necessary (9–12/11–15) and like a true lady, showing just the right amount of reserve and dignity to make others, like the Corinthian women who have extended their friendship to her (131/138; 177–80/178–79, 181), think that she is a perfect wife—modest, chaste, and temperate (*sophrosyne*, or “soundness of mind/integrity of heart,” includes all these attributes of a woman capable of controlling her passions, cf. line 636). But as soon as her anger is unleashed by Jason's betrayal, she starts to behave differently. Instead of passively enduring her fate, or in shame committing suicide like some wilting Madame Butterfly, she becomes totally resistant to moderation, indifferent to the propriety of her actions, incapable of bowing to the will of her betters, much less of her equals. “She is deaf to friends' advice, like a stone, like a wave” (24–25/28–29), the Nurse explains early on to the audience; and later to the Tutor, “She came into the world fierce and stubborn” (94–95/93–94); and still later to the Chorus, “She'll growl and snarl when I approach, like a lioness shielding her cubs. She'll snort like a bull. I doubt I'll lure her out” (190–94/184–89). For it is not just the violence and intensity of Medea's wrath that is at issue in the play, but its utter relentlessness, its unappeasability. Inside the house, she reveals to all her familiars that she has the reach and temper of a thwarted tyrant or of one like an Ajax or a Prometheus, who, though used to high honors, has been suddenly and unendurably shamed; except, unlike them, she has at hand the means to avenge herself upon her tormentors. Outside, before the Chorus and her other interlocutors, like a true sophist, she can play whatever role is necessary to obtain her ends, including, when it serves her purpose, that of a reserved and dignified noblewoman (*semnos*, cf. 222–32/214–224).⁷

Of Medea's great intellectual acumen and professional skill, Euripides' audience had no doubt. Her powers of prophecy and sorcery were essential to her mythic persona. But just as Euripides has disconnected

7. Even though the meaning of the opening lines of this speech remains doubtful, the underlying argument can be shown to be a ploy familiar to us from Plato and Aristotle. Wishing to disguise her true nature and forestall the accusation of *authadeia*, Medea insinuates that she is not really self-willed and recalcitrant as some people think but rather virtuously reserved and worthy of respect, a claim that is convincing because the simulated virtue (*semnotes*) is known by qualities similar to those by which the concealed vice (*authadeia*) is known. Thus anticipated censure is turned into apparent praise. (Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 267A; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.9.28–32 1367a33–b27 and *Eudemian Ethics* 2.3.4 1221a; 3.7.5 1233b 35–38, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.3.26–34 1124b17–1125a16)

Medea's passionate nature from her noble art and turned it from a virtue into a vice, so he makes his audience view her "profession," her *sophia*, in nontraditional ways. By moving her into a situation in which her political power and prestige as Jason's wife are at risk, he exposes the dark, destructive side of her talent. Like other sophists (professors, wise men) of Euripides' day, we see her arguing any side of any case that will at any given point best serve her interests. If she needs the Chorus's complicity, she obtains their good will in specious appeals for sympathy and solidarity. When her arguments fail to convince Creon that he should give her a reprieve from instant banishment, she begs abjectly for pity (abject begging was an often-used ploy in Athenian courts to arouse the pity of the jurors). Confronted by the one who has wronged her, she mounts a strong prosecution. Presented with a chance for asylum, she engages in the question and answer of cross-examination, a technique from the courts that provides the backbone of Socrates' famous method of philosophical interrogation. If upon stepping through the palace doors, she appears by turns calm and dignified, abject, confident, or contrite, she is only doing what other heroes before her had done—what loyal Greeks always still did—when confronted with an enemy. She schemes, she tricks, she deceives. Only, in this play, the enemy is her husband and his friends, and the arguments she uses are taken from the latest instruction manuals for speech-making. Thus, those watching her proficient duplicity must confront not only the power of the new rhetoric but also a familiar truth, that when allegiances change—as they so frequently did in city politics—duplicity is a two-edged sword. Everything depends on who the true enemy—or friend—is.

Just as her transparent sophistry strips her of her inherited grandeur, so it strips her interlocutors of theirs. Thus, as she accuses or feigns submission or gloats, and Jason offers disingenuous (though, as we shall see, in real life often convincing) excuses or condescending approbation or a last, pathetic retort, he is demoted from a great hero and daring explorer to an exiled and humbled former first citizen scheming to better his lot. By the end of the play he has made such a complete mess of things and is so bested by his wife that her prediction—that he will end his life shamefully, one of the lowest of the low, a childless wretch accidentally done to death by a fragment of his old ship—is utterly believable. Nor is Jason the only character who succumbs to Medea's up-to-date tactics and cunning, although he alone exhibits no obvious, compensating virtue. By matching arguments or answering her far-from-innocent questions, both Creon and Aegeus diminish their kingly stature. Creon is less a king because, though he has taken ac-

curate measure of his enemy, he nevertheless succumbs to her pleading and out of misplaced pity fails to make the right decision. The kings in traditional epics made mistakes, but it was the gods who befuddled their wits, not clever women and their own yielding natures. In a different situation, Creon's mildness and mercy might even be deemed princely virtues; but when his kingdom is at stake, succumbing to this side of his nature is folly; it is what Aristotle would call missing the mark most tragically.

As already indicated above, Aegeus's character is more of a puzzle, partly, I think, because, in his encounter with Medea, the techniques of forensic oratory are not being employed, and it is from the argumentative techniques of this kind of rhetoric which were being systematized in the courts that Euripides derived his technique of revealing character through dialogue. Furthermore, true to the politeness of this simpler question-and-answer dialogue, the poet chooses to make neither character say anything by way of praise or blame to the other, nor does he use a third party—a servant, a messenger, a chorus—to introduce Aegeus as he introduces Medea in the prologue. Only Medea, the prevaricator—who in the audience would take anything she says without evident rancor for Jason at face value?—has any opportunity to characterize him, and she doesn't. So Aegeus seems just, generous, and a fool; not grand but tragicomic.

Much has been made in recent times of Medea's exotic nature as a barbarian witch. Of her lack of Greek culture, considering how many important Athenians at the time were the sons or grandsons of non-Greek mothers (see p. 22), too much, I believe, has been made. The only character in the play who denigrates Medea for being a barbarian is Jason, and he, like any aristocratic student of the sophists, will use whatever convenient ploy against her he can find to justify his own actions. But nowhere else in the play does her ignorance of Greek manners or speech stigmatize her socially—in her dealings with Creon, Aegeus, or the Chorus, nor in the servants' comments—although her status as an outsider of a different kind is often at issue: as a woman who does not belong by blood to her husband's family or as the wife of a political exile who is not a citizen of the city in which he finds himself. These categories were quite distinct in the Greek mind, and in the play they are regularly signified by different words, *barbaroi* for non-Greeks, *thuraioi* or *allotrioi* for nonfamily members, and *xenoi* for noncitizens.

But of Medea's proficient barbarian witchcraft, so central to the dramatic action, moderns have made too little, or, rather, they have tended to misjudge its import. To the Athenians of Euripides' day, witchcraft

Editor's foreword. The Greek Tragedy in New Translations is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a re-creation of these plays—as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times. Unless the translator is a poet, his original is likely to reach us in crippled form: deprived of the power and pertinence it must have if Robert Fagles did not, alas, translate Euripides, but his translations of Aeschylus and Sophocles (and Homer, Virgil and Bacchilides) are beyond praise. I first read his Aeschylus's Oresteia when I was about eighteen, and for a couple of days all I... With no prior experience, Kyle Dennis decided to invest in stocks. He owes his success to 1 strategy. Read More. Free online translation from English into Greek and back, English-Greek dictionary with transcription, pronunciation, and examples of usage. Yandex.Translate works with words, texts, and webpages. In site translation mode, Yandex.Translate will translate the entire text content of the site at the URL you provide. Knows not just English and Greek, but 97 other languages as well. Results for: Examples.