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CHORUS
Comment on the unfolding drama: initially sympathetic towards Medea but appalled by her actions.

Medea
An outsider in Corinth, abandoned by Jason, exiled by Creon. Despairing and angry, she exacts revenge by murdering Glauce, Creon and then her own children.

Jason
Former lover of Medea; father of her children; has betrayed her to make a politically advantageous marriage.

Aegaeus
King of Athens; promises Medea refuge in Athens if she can escape from Corinth.

Glaucce
Jason's wife; Creon's daughter; promises to look after Medea's children.

Creon
King of Corinth; Glaucce's father. Tells Medea she will have to leave; dies when he takes the poisoned Glauce in his arms.

Tutor
A slave; old man who is a tutor to Medea's children.

Nurse
A slave; old woman who seeks to avoid trouble, but realises the children are in danger.

Two sons of Medea & Jason

Chorus

Helps

Bitter enemies

Loves; murders

Murders

Feels sympathy for

Exiles

Father of

Jason

Medea

Two sons of Medea & Jason

Jason

Aegaeus

Glaucce

Nurse

Tutor

Messenger

A slave; describes the gruesome deaths of Glaucce and Creon.
INTRODUCTION

Medea was first performed over two thousand years ago. It’s one of a very select group of plays – thirty-one in all (out of several hundreds lost) – that still speak across the centuries from fifth century BC Greece. Nineteen of all the plays that remain are by Euripides. Euripides’ version of Medea was the first, and only, surviving play out of seven on the same subject by other writers.

The underlying theme of this play is deadly conflict, somehow appropriate since Medea was first performed in 431 BC, the year hostilities broke out between the rival city states of Athens and Sparta. This was the beginning of the Peloponnesian War that would drag on for the rest of Euripides’ life. He died about three years before peace was concluded, with the defeat of Athens in 404 BC. Little is known about his life, although there is one poignant connection with the subject matter of Medea: for some reason, when he was over seventy, Euripides left Athens for voluntary self-exile in Macedonia, where he wrote his last great play The Bacchae.

Throughout its long performance history, Medea has moved audiences to pity and terror, the supreme tragic emotions according to Aristotle. Medea herself is one of the great roles for an actor, demanding psychological strength and intense emotional subtlety.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Medea’s cruelty in killing her children became a main focus of interest. Shakespeare connected Jason and Medea as tragic lovers in The Merchant of Venice, also identifying her as a sorceress, which was a favourite way of representing her in Pre-Raphaelite art. With her magic cauldron, she becomes the beautiful, cunning witch, sexually alluring but deadly.

Medea did not win the first prize for Euripides in the 431 BC festival, probably because it spoke out too plainly to Athenian citizens about men’s relationships with women, passion set against reason, and a ‘civilised’ city’s rough treatment of aliens. The play also criticised a popular hero, and contained an ambiguous characterisation, bordering
on the disrespectful, of Aegeus, the wily but sterile old king of Athens. Euripides was never a popular playwright in Athens: Medea, his first real tragedy, gives us some idea why.

Medea as an emblem of the cruel mother. Side A from a Campanian neck-amphora, ca. 330 BC. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Greece in Euripides’ time

Ancient Greece, and Athens especially under the rule of Pericles from the mid-fifth century BC, is still popularly thought of as the home of democracy and the model of ‘civilised’ life, a place where philosophers like Socrates and Plato could think and teach, where sciences and the arts could flourish. This romantic view of Athens as the ideal of civilised community life was absorbed into Roman culture, later filtered through the Middle Ages into Renaissance Europe and thence, through literature, mythology and art, into our world, which is where we begin to study Medea. If Athenian life in reality was less than glorious, we get hints about it through the work of Euripides.

Athenian democracy and citizenship

Medea is ‘Athenocentric’, conscious that it is playing to a crowd largely made up of Athenian citizens, who identify with every reference to their democratic state. At the heart of Greek tragedy as an art form is a concern about Athens and what it stands for: explicit criticism is rare, although, as we’ll see in Medea, citizens at a play were often challenged to think about ingrained attitudes and assumptions.

Euripides, a citizen of democratic Athens, had certain rights and responsibilities. Since early in the fifth century BC, Attica, a geographical unit of ten ‘tribes’ under the control of the most powerful city, Athens, was subdivided into townships or suburbs called ‘demes’. This is the origin of the word ‘democracy’: all citizens, rich and poor, were expected to play a part in the maintenance of their state and to demonstrate interest in what was going on through public debate of matters concerning Attica.

Of course, not everyone qualified to be a citizen, which is why it is praised in drama as something special, to be valued as a privilege. The greatest disaster that could befall a citizen was the loss of that identity.
Medea is all about the trauma of exile and lost identity which Athens steps in to restore. One of the Choric odes specifically focuses on Athens as the epitome of harmonious civil life, blessed by the gods. In another play, by Sophocles, a character in exile declares that being without a ‘polis’ (city) is equivalent to being dead.

Aristotle, writing a century after Euripides, defined a citizen as male, adult, freeborn, legitimate, of citizen descent on both the mother’s and father’s sides, and with an active share in public decision-taking and office-holding. In Euripides’ time this meant about thirty thousand adult men in Athens, all of whom were expected to take some interest in state religious festival activities.

Theatre as a public educator

Greek dramatic spectacles were more than entertainment. They were acts of religion, involving the population as an ongoing public duty. Tragic theatre characteristically both confirmed and questioned Athenian democracy because it was political theatre, staged for and by the ‘polis’ of Athens. One of the aims of Greek tragedy was to educate citizens in the practice of good citizenship: ‘Look, this is how we do things’; ‘Listen, this is how to argue and make a debate’. The ideal to be achieved in personal life was moderation, ‘Nothing in excess’. Plays like Medea articulated difficulties experienced by human beings trying to understand fundamental questions of duty and justice in situations of conflict, where the gods could be appealed to, but rarely gave direct guidance.

The gods

You can find many studies arguing about how Greek tragic playwrights introduced the gods into their plots and what they believed. Despite disagreement among experts, there’s no doubt that Greek tragedies were deeply concerned with spiritual things, trying to work out just how Zeus and his pantheon of gods on Mount Olympus interfered in human concerns. How far were mortals free to pursue or avoid disasters of their own making, within a cosmos that also had room for concepts of Fate,
Right (Themis) and a complex Revenge/Justice/Punishment idea (in Greek – Dike)? Hall argues that: ‘A crucial frontier defined by tragedy is that between man and god’ (cited in Easterling 1997, p.96). It is suggested that when Medea appeals to older gods who were not regularly invoked in Athens, like Helios, Hecate and Ge, she is demonstrating her ‘dangerous foreigners’ status, as someone with ancient mystical allegiances (Mikalson 1991, pp.83–4).

**Key point**

Look up the different Greek gods named in the play and think about why they have been invoked. You’ll find that most of them have specific associations with oath-keeping, for example, or with women.

We can begin to understand how the Greeks thought about divine influence – especially in well-known myths and hero epics, from which tragedy derived its plots – if we think of ‘gods’ in terms of what Carl Jung called **archetypes**, rather than seeing them as a boisterous supernatural family of heavyweights on Mount Olympus. An archetype, in Jung’s terms, is a primal pattern or model, a collection of impulses we experience psychologically that affects our behaviour and thinking. So, for example, Aphrodite, to whom Medea and the Chorus women refer, can be interpreted as an archetype of what it is to be overcome by ‘love’ – with all the conflicting positive and negative impulses, emotions and behaviours that ‘being in love’ can inflict on a helpless mortal. Invoking a god meant calling down powerful life-changing attributes of that dominant archetype, hoping it would take effect in someone’s life. Zeus, or Ge, would help you keep an oath, for example. Artemis, the virgin goddess, would protect you and so would Athena, the warlike, justice-giving patroness of the city state. Dionysos, on the other hand, might drive you crazy but could also inspire creativity.

**Festival drama**

Because drama was an integral part of regional and civic religious festivals, the dedication of performances to the gods was an essential first stage in
the proceedings. Plays were offered especially to Dionysos, whose statue was ceremoniously placed in the theatre to watch the performance.

**Dionysos**

He was the inspirational deity behind religious drama festivals and a god with many attributes. Most commonly associated with the gift of wine and intoxication, and better known by his Roman name – the degenerate party-loving Bacchus, this much-revered god had a strange and dangerous side. He was the god who took possession of the soul, inducing ecstasy in his worshippers (ec-stasis means literally ‘standing outside oneself’). Dionysos caused the self-induced frenzy of women in a cult of worshippers called maenads (meaning ‘the mad ones’), which Euripides made the basis of his last great play *The Bacchae*, composed twenty-five years after *Medea*. (A maenad is illustrated on the cover of the Penguin Classics edition of *Medea.*)

If we look at his attributes and associations with wild nature, fertility, dance, disguise and shape-shifting, mask-wearing and mystic initiation, we can see that Dionysos is appropriate for drama because he embodies what we still think of as the ‘power’ of plays to work on the mind and emotions. There could be no more appropriate place than the theatre of Dionysos to explore *Medea*, a play about madness, sexual passion and violent energies. As the Chorus say at the end, anything can happen here: ‘The things we thought would happen do not happen;/ The unexpected God makes possible’ (p.61).

**The Great, or City, Dionysia**

Of all the religious festivals celebrated in Euripides’ time, our focus is on the main one, the Great, or City, Dionysia, that attracted both local spectators from around Attica and also strangers, who could attend because the sea was navigable again after winter. Because foreigners would be present, the Great Dionysia was a showcase for the city of Athens, with comedy, tragedy and satyr plays being performed in the three days of the dramatic competition. (A satyr play was a short play set in the countryside celebrating Dionysos. As far as we know from fragments and images these appear to have been wild and rude!)