

Medea Summary

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Background: Medea

Euripides' Medea is one of the most powerful and controversial plays in the history of ancient Greek tragedy. The play was written in the 5th century BC, a time when drama, philosophy, and democracy were rapidly developing in Athens. During this period, Greek drama was not merely a form of entertainment but a strong medium for expressing social, political, and religious ideas.

Medea was first performed in 431 BC at the City Dionysia festival in Athens. This festival was a grand, dramatic competition held in honor of the god Dionysus, where three prominent tragedians would present their works. Euripides staged Medea at this festival. Surprisingly, the play did not win first or second prize that year, but only secured third place. However, in later centuries, Medea came to be recognized as one of the most discussed and influential tragedies in Greek literature.

The story of Medea is taken from Greek mythology, particularly the events following Jason and the Argonauts' quest for the Golden Fleece. In this play, Medea is not only a symbol of a sorceress's vengeance but also a reflection of female oppression, betrayal, the tragedy of love, and the destructive power of human emotions. From a feminist perspective, the play is especially significant, as it portrays a woman who dares to stand against society and family, raising her own voice in defiance.

Summary

The Beginning of Medea's Anger and Revenge: The main story of Medea is revenge. Medea is furious with her husband Jason because he wants to leave her and marry another woman. Filled with rage, Medea begins to plan her revenge. Medea is a descendant of the gods and has the gift of prophecy. She had married Jason out of love and once helped him obtain the Golden Fleece with her magic. For Jason, she even abandoned her family and homeland.

The play is set in the city of Corinth, where Jason now lives with Medea. But Jason wishes to marry Glauce, the daughter of King Creon. This breaks Medea's heart and fills her with anger. At the beginning of the play, Medea is burning with rage. Her Nurse hears her cries and

laments, worried that Medea might harm herself—or perhaps even kill her own children.

Jason and Medea's Past Story: The Nurse recalls past events that shaped the current conflict. In the kingdom of Iolcos, King Aeson once ruled. At the time of his death, his son Jason was very young and unfit to govern. Aeson entrusted the throne to his half-brother Pelias and sent Jason abroad for education. Aeson instructed Pelias to hand over the kingdom to Jason once he grew up. Thus, Pelias became king of Iolcos.

Many years later, Jason returned as an adult, having completed his education. He demanded his rightful throne from Pelias. But Pelias was unwilling to give up power. Instead, he devised a trick. He asked Jason: "If you see someone you fear or want to get rid of, what should you do?" Jason replied: "Send him to fetch the Golden Fleece." Until then, everyone who had attempted the quest for the Golden Fleece had died. Pelias thought Jason would also perish. So Pelias told him, "To prove you are worthy of ruling, you must show your strength. Bring back the Golden Fleece, and I will give you the throne." Jason, being brave, accepted the challenge. He gathered a group of strong young men and built a ship called Argo. With this band—the Argonauts—he set out for Colchis to retrieve the Golden Fleece.

In Colchis, King Aeëtes was not pleased with Jason's arrival. He did not want anyone to succeed in taking the Golden Fleece, which was a symbol of honor for Colchis. But Aeëtes' daughter, Princess Medea, fell in love with Jason at first sight, and Jason loved her too. Medea was already skilled in magic, so she used her sorcery to help Jason win the Golden Fleece. Out of love for Jason, Medea even killed her own brother, Absyrtus, and betrayed her father. After this, Medea married Jason, and together they fled Colchis with the Golden Fleece, returning to Iolcos.

After bringing back the Golden Fleece, Jason demanded that his uncle Pelias hand over the throne. But Pelias refused. Once again, Medea came to Jason's aid. Using her sorcery, she devised a cunning plan that led to Pelias's death at the hands of his own daughters. Medea tricked the daughters of Pelias by claiming that she possessed a magical power that could make an old man young again. To prove it, she brought forth an old ram. She cut the ram into pieces and boiled it in a cauldron filled with enchanted herbs. Then she made the ram come back to life. Convinced, Pelias's daughters believed her words. Following Medea's advice, they killed their aged father and handed his body to her. But Medea did not revive him. In this way, Pelias was killed through Medea's deceit. The people of Iolcos, however, were enraged by Pelias's murder. As punishment, they banished Jason and Medea.

By this time, Jason and Medea already had two sons. With their children, they went into exile in Corinth, where King Creon allowed them to stay. But Jason, greedy and ambitious by nature,

longed for a more luxurious life. Ignoring Medea's loyalty and sacrifices, he sought to marry Glauce, the daughter of King Creon. This betrayal broke Medea's heart and turned her toward vengeance. In fact, at the very beginning of the play, the Nurse laments this incident, setting the tone for the tragic story of anger and revenge.

Creon's Exile Decree and Jason's Attempt at Justification: Creon realizes that Medea might seek revenge. Therefore, he decides to banish her from the land. When Medea hears this, she falls at Creon's feet, weeping. She pleads with him to allow her just one more day, at least for the sake of her children. At first, Creon is stern, but moved by her tears and desperate pleas, he softens. At last, he grants her permission to remain in Corinth for one more day.

This opportunity becomes crucial for Medea's plan of revenge. She knows it is humiliating to appear as a weak, pleading mother before Creon. But she uses it as a strategy. Medea herself admits: "Would I ever have flattered this man without gain? No, unless it served my need, I would never have spoken to him, never touched him."

In the next scene, Jason enters. He tries to explain why he has committed what Medea calls betrayal. Jason argues that he could not miss the opportunity to marry the princess. In his eyes, Medea is only a foreigner, a woman from a barbarian land. He believes that by marrying the princess, he will secure a royal alliance, and perhaps even unite his family with hers one day. He even offers to keep Medea as his mistress. Medea does not believe his reasoning. The Chorus, too, is unconvinced. Medea reminds Jason bitterly, "It was I who saved you. I betrayed my father and my family for you. Where can I go now? It was I who helped you and destroyed the dragon." To her, Jason's promises have lost all value.

Jason then offers financial support, saying he will provide her and their children with money to live in exile. He says: "If you need extra money for the journey, speak; I shall gladly give it." But Medea scornfully rejects this. With sharp irony, she tells him, "Go, put on your wedding finery. Perhaps you have made such a marriage that one day you will regret it."

Aegeus' Promise of Refuge and Medea's Terrible Plan for Revenge: In the following scene, Medea meets Aegeus, king of Athens. Aegeus confides that though he is married, he has no children. He recently visited an oracle, which gave him a puzzling prophecy: "Do not loosen the mouth of the wineskin." Yet Aegeus cannot understand its true meaning.

Medea shares her sorrow with him, explaining how Jason has betrayed her by marrying another woman and how she is about to be exiled. She then asks Aegeus for protection: if she can cure his childlessness, he must give her shelter in Athens. Unaware of Medea's dreadful plans for revenge, Aegeus agrees to her request. Medea realizes that once her refuge in Athens is

secure, she will be free to unleash her terrifying vengeance in Corinth.

Medea now begins a new phase of her revenge. She decides that she will kill Princess Glauce and King Creon. To do this, she smears poison on a golden robe and crown that had been gifted to her by her grandfather, the sun-god Helios. Medea believes that once Glauce puts on these gifts, she will die from the poison. But this is not the end. Medea makes an even more terrifying decision: she will also kill her own children. Though the children are innocent, Medea thinks this is the most painful way to strike Jason. By doing so, she ensures that Jason will suffer torment for the rest of his life.

Medea then crafts a clever plan. She summons Jason once again and dramatically pretends to apologize. She acts as if her anger over his new marriage was excessive and wrong. Jason believes her. Medea weeps and feigns despair over her coming exile. She then convinces Jason that if their children present gifts to Glauce, King Creon may allow the children to remain in Corinth instead of sending them away. Jason agrees, and Medea's plan begins to succeed.

In front of Jason, Medea speaks calmly, pretending to be a submissive wife. She says, "Forgive me for my anger. I accept your decision. Only one request: let my children stay here in Corinth." She then persuades Jason that their children should take some gifts to Princess Glauce. The gifts include a luxurious robe and a golden crown. Medea tells him these are meant as tokens of respect and a plea for protection from the princess. In reality, these very gifts contain her deadly trap. Outwardly, Medea plays the role of a polite and repentant wife, and in this way, she succeeds in making Jason trust her completely.

Glauce and Creon's Tragic Death, and Medea's Decision to Kill Her Children: In the next scene, a Messenger describes a horrifying event. Jason and Medea's children go to Princess Glauce with the gifts. They present her with the golden robe and crown. Delighted, Glauce immediately puts them on. But soon the poison begins to take effect. Glauce collapses to the ground, writhing in unbearable agony. Her body burns as if consumed by fire. After a dreadful struggle, she dies in torment.

Then King Creon rushes in to save his daughter. In his grief, he clings to her body. But the poisoned robe and crown infect him as well. He, too, is overcome by the venom. Finally, Creon dies in the same horrible agony as his daughter. The Messenger cries out: "Alas! The bride has perished in dreadful torment. No sooner had she put on Medea's gifts than the burning poison devoured her flesh. And in trying to save his child, the old father too has died!" Thus, Medea's first act of revenge succeeds. Glauce and Creon are dead. But Medea does not stop there. Jason has dishonored her, abandoned her, and tried to build a new family. So Medea decides to destroy Jason's own family. She resolves to kill their two children.

Medea knows this act will break her own heart. For a moment, she hesitates. She wonders if it might be better to spare the children. But almost instantly, she hardens her resolve. This, she realizes, is the most terrible way to wound Jason. Therefore, she vows to kill them with her own hands. Taking a knife, Medea rushes off the stage to murder her children. The Chorus, horrified, tries to stop her and runs after her. Suddenly, the audience hears the dreadful screams of the children. Medea has killed her own sons.

Medea's Divine Departure and the Legacy of Infanticide: Jason rushes onto the stage in fury and rage. He accuses Medea of murdering Creon and Glauce. But soon, he learns the even more horrifying truth: Medea has also killed their two sons. Jason collapses in unbearable grief. At that very moment, Medea appears above the stage. She holds the bodies of her dead children in her arms and sits in the sky-chariot sent by the sun-god Helios. In ancient Greece, this scene was staged using a special device called the *mechane*, typically employed to show the appearance of gods or goddesses. Here, Medea is presented almost like a divine figure, with overwhelming power.

Medea confronts Jason with harsh defiance. She takes pleasure in his suffering. She declares, "I will not leave the bodies of my children in your hands. I shall take them with me, so that I may bury them in the sacred temple of Hera. And as for you, who have caused me so much pain, I foretell a wretched fate." Jason cannot even touch his sons. Medea departs with everything, while Jason collapses in despair, empty-handed. Jason curses Medea, declaring that she is the most hated of women in the eyes of both gods and mortals. Yet Medea's presence in the chariot of Helios reveals another truth: the gods are still with her.

Critic Bernard Knox observes that Medea's final appearance mirrors the divine interventions in other plays of Euripides. Like a god, Medea halts human violence, declares her dreadful vengeance as justified, arranges for the burial of the dead, proclaims prophecies for the future, and announces the founding of a new cult. In the end, Medea escapes toward Athens in Helios's chariot, while Jason is left shattered, and Corinth remains a place of grief and ruin. At the conclusion, the Chorus reflects deeply on the will of Zeus and the gods:

"The will of the gods is strange!

What we expected does not happen.

What we did not imagine, the gods bring to pass.

So has this story ended."

Medea's act of killing her own children (filicide) is thought to be Euripides' own invention. Some scholars believe that another playwright, Neophron, may have introduced this variation as well. In any case, the version where Medea herself kills her children became the standard account for later writers. The Roman traveler Pausanias, writing in the late 2nd century AD, mentions that he saw a monument in Corinth dedicated to Medea's children. He also noted that at least five different versions of their deaths circulated, but Euripides' version, where Medea murders them with her own hands, became the most famous of all.

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