

Myth is a Product of Time and Place: Euripides' *Medea* Between Athenian Context and Enduring Themes

The word "myth" derives from the Greek "mythos," which means "speech," "story," or "narrative" (Leeming D. A., 2005). Originally, myth referred to the act of storytelling itself, but over time, it came to denote traditional tales that convey cultural values, beliefs, and explanations for the world.

Theorists have struggled to define 'myth' due to its diverse forms and functions, influenced by cultural, social, and historical contexts. Despite this, mythological stories often share universal themes related to human existence, such as creation, morality, heroism, and the natural world. Myths also include archetypes – symbolic characters and motifs – that resonate across cultures, highlighting their lasting power and significance (Csapo Eric, 2005).

By focusing on Euripides' version of *Medea*, presented as a tragic play for a fifth-century BCE Athenian audience, I intend to argue that while mythological stories retain universal themes such as betrayal and revenge, each retelling often reflects the specific concerns and contexts of the society that produced it. This essay will explore alternative versions of the Medea myth before examining Euripides' adaptation within its Athenian context. It will then consider the universal aspects of the myth that transcend time and place, including mythemes as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Carl Jung's archetypes.

In the broadest form of the myth, Medea is depicted as a powerful sorceress of semi-divine lineage, skilled in pharmaka (potion-making and magical arts). She falls in love with Jason upon the Argonauts' arrival in Colchis. Driven by passion, Medea aids Jason in completing the dangerous tasks set by her father, King Aeëtes, thus winning the Golden Fleece. She facilitates their escape by murdering her brother, Apsyrtos. Upon reaching Greece, Medea demonstrates her magical prowess by rejuvenating Jason's elderly father, Aison, and tricking the daughters of King Pelias into killing their father under false promises of restoring his youth. Consequently, Medea and Jason are forced to flee to Corinth (Morford M., Lenardon R. J., and Sham M., 2024 pp. 596-607). Variations of the myth appear in several texts, with Medea's role minimised in many (see Hesiod, 2021, pp.31-32; Pindar, 1997, line 250, p. 291; Herodotus, 2007). In earlier versions of the myth, there is no suggestion that Medea kills her children; instead, she is primarily portrayed as a helper-maiden or tragic exile. Later versions, such as *The Argonautika* (Apollonius, 2009), enhance her role within the Argonauts' quest and solidify her status as a powerful sorceress. Local Corinthian myths offer an alternative ending to her tragic story: that Medea did not kill her children but instead concealed them in the sanctuary of Hera, where they died and were honoured with a cult (Morford M., Lenardon R. J., Sham M., 2024 p. 606).

Euripides' version of the myth (Euripides, 1998), first performed in 431 BCE, elevates the story by making Medea murder her children in an act of calculated revenge—an idea dramatically shocking for both Athenian and modern audiences alike. This retelling became the canonical version of the myth that has shaped most subsequent representations. Euripides' adaptation was fundamentally shaped by the social and political climate of 5th-century Athens and explicitly designed to resonate with the concerns, values, and anxieties of an Athenian audience attending performances at the City Dionysia theatrical festival.

Euripides was born in Athens around 485 BCE and is believed to have written between 80 and 92 plays in his lifetime. He was known for psychological realism, subverting traditional myths and challenging social norms (Morwood, 1998, p.x-xiii). A great many of his poems give voice to marginalised or unconventional women, for example, his later work *Hippolytus*, during which Phaedra contends with illicit love for her stepson (Euripides, 1997, p. 37-80) or *Hecuba*, which explores the Trojan queen's grief and revenge over the death of her children (Euripides, 1991). Notably, his gift for narrative and speech was innovative in reflecting real-life conversations. This aspect is believed by many to have contributed to the longevity of his stories (Morwood, 1997, pp. x-xvii).

Euripides was the first to depict Medea killing her children. He highlights her position as a foreigner and emphasises her divine heritage, most notably in the dramatic finale, where she performs her final speech aboard Helios' dragon-led chariot. The play is, at its core, an exploration of familial dynamics between a faithless husband and rejected wife; as Morwood (1998, p. xvii) explains, Medea is timeless in 'the despair, humiliation and vindictiveness of a woman abandoned by her man'. However, due to her subsequent actions, Medea comes across as both a sympathetic victim and a dangerous outsider.

Euripides' instantiation of the Medea myth was performed at the Dionysia festival, a springtime festival held in honour of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, dancing, and theatrical illusion (Morwood, 1998, p. xiv). As was the standard in the competition, Medea was the first of four plays submitted by the poet—three tragedies (*Medea*, *Piloctetes*, and *Dictys*) followed by a satyr play, *Theristai*. Euripides placed third and last in the competition. The Dionysia had religious, entertainment, and political connotations (Cartledge, 2001). The audience was primarily, if not all, male, with distinguished citizens and representatives from allied states. Such a public display of power and theatre solidified the Athenian citizens' sense of unity as a democratic polity with imperial power. The context of the play's performance is vital for understanding Euripides' presentation of Medea, as he directly addresses the audience's concerns and values, and reflects contemporary Athenian anxieties about citizenship, gender roles, and power. Additionally, he explicitly connects the mythical narrative to Athens' history through Aegeus, the legendary king of Athens.

As Hall (1997, p.93) writes: "Athenian democracy was a xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community". The role of women in Athens was extremely limited. Women did not

vote or participate in assemblies, were mainly confined to the home, and were expected to show sexual fidelity and produce sons. As Morwood writes: "The vengeful, competitive and sexually honest, Medea, in escaping unpunished, was any Athenian husband's worst nightmare, realised" (1998, p.xvi). Medea, with her sharp rhetoric and combination of feminine duplicity with masculine action (Foley 2001, p.261), would have horrified the male audience but perhaps also intrigued them. The most famous line from Medea in the play, after she lists the hardships of womanhood: "I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once" (Euripides, 1998, lines 250-251) demonstrates Euripides experimentation with traditional gender roles, inviting his audience to consider the complexities of gender and power dynamics (Foley, 2001, p243).

Euripides also plays upon Medea's otherness in his play; she is not only a foreigner but a barbarian, as Jason exclaims: "I brought you from your home in a barbarian land to a house in Greece, disaster that you are, traitor to your father and the land that nurtured you." (Euripides, 1998, lines 1330-1332). The Athenian audience would be sensitive to Medea's otherness, and the validity of her children would be in the audience's minds. Morwood (p. xvii) notes that in 451/450 BCE Athens, a law was enacted excluding citizenship from people unless both their parents were Athenian. This would potentially have endowed the audience with sympathy for Jason, who seeks legitimate children from his new marriage.

Euripides' addition of the Athenian King Aegeus in the play would certainly have appealed to its Athenian audience. Hall (1997, p.103) explains that, in tragedy, Athenians typically exemplify virtue, piety, and respect for supplicants. By depicting Aegeus as honourable and generous towards Medea (Euripides, 1997, lines 720-757). Euripides reinforces the Athenians' self-image as virtuous and compassionate. This representation can be viewed as a form of moral aetiology – a narrative device explaining or justifying cultural practices or values – reinforcing the Athenians' positive collective identity. Furthermore, this interaction serves as a historical aetiology: the Athenian audience would have recognised Aegeus as the legendary father of Theseus, Athens' greatest hero and king, thus providing a mythological connection between the Athenians' idealised past and contemporary civic identity. Euripides deliberately adapts the Medea myth here, grounding universal themes within a narrative that specifically flatters and engages his Athenian audience's civic pride and values.

Hall writes: "The tragic household is obsessed with its own perpetuation through legitimate male heirs" (1997, p.104). In 5th Century Athens, an extreme but real punishment was *kataskaphé* – the complete ruination of an entire kinship line – razing the house to the ground, exile, destruction of family tombs, and a curse on children and descendants. As such, the destruction of the familial line is a recurring theme in tragedy. It explains Euripides motivation for Medea to commit infanticide against her children as the ultimate, most devastating revenge she can exact on her husband.

In addition to appealing to the sensibilities of an Athenian audience (and, in turn, using those sensibilities to provide shock and awe), staging *Medea* as a play would have affected Euripides's adaptation of the myth. As Burian (2001, p. 195) explains, a combination of overturning theatrical conventions of the time and using a *mechane* crane would have provided dramatic shock. In the play's finale, as Jason hammers on doors after being told by the chorus leader the corpses of his children are behind them, the audience would expect, traditionally, for the doors to open to reveal the gruesome scene. Instead, *Medea* appears as an *ex-machina* on the house's roof in a dragon-led chariot provided by her grandfather Helios. With the corpse of her children, she flies away. This would have been a spectacle, demonstrating how the conventions and mechanics of Athenian theatre contributed to Euripides' instantiation of the *Medea* myth.

While Euripides' *Medea* deals with the specific concerns of 5th-century Athens, its main themes are not limited to that time or place. Ideas like betrayal, revenge, exile, and challenging gender roles are fundamental human experiences. *Medea*'s shocking actions come from emotions that people in any culture can recognise – grief, anger, and a desire for justice. She is both a victim and a perpetrator, which makes her a complicated and interesting character.

The lasting appeal of *Medea* is largely because it deals with these universal themes. Aspects of *Medea*'s story can be compared to other stories from different cultures. For example, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* is humiliated before playing a key role in starting a major war. Similarly, the story of La Llorona in Latin America tells of a woman who kills her children after being abandoned. *Medea*'s status as a foreigner and outsider also links her to figures like Lilith and Morgan le Fay – women who don't fit into society and are often feared or seen as dangerous. Her exile and loneliness can be compared to Sita's banishment in the *Ramayana*, or Sedna's isolation in Inuit myth. These stories show that *Medea*'s situation is not unique to ancient Greece but reflects experiences shared across cultures.

This idea of shared patterns in myth is something that structuralist theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss focused on. Lévi-Strauss argued that myths from different cultures can be broken down into smaller units called *mythemes*, which work like the basic building blocks of myth. These *mythemes* – such as betrayal, revenge, exile, or divine intervention – appear in different combinations across many myths, even when the stories themselves are set in different places and times (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p.210-211). In *Medea*, for example, we can identify *mythemes* such as the foreign woman, the betrayal of marriage vows, and the murder of kin. According to Lévi-Strauss, these repeated structures show that myths are a way of dealing with universal human concerns, often about things like social order, morality, and the roles of men and women.

Similarly, Carl Jung argued that myths reflect archetypes, universal images or patterns that exist within the collective unconscious (Jung, 1980). In *Medea*, we can identify archetypes

such as the Outsider, as Medea is both a foreigner and a woman excluded from Athenian society; the Avenging Heroine, who seeks justice for betrayal; and the Dark Mother, representing both nurturing and destructive maternal forces. These archetypes help explain why Medea's story continues to resonate, as they tap into deep psychological themes that remain relevant across cultures and time periods.

Euripides' *Medea* demonstrates how myth is both a reflection of the time and place in which it is told and a vessel for universal themes that transcend its origins. Euripides reshaped the traditional myth to engage with Athenian concerns about citizenship, gender roles, and social order. Still, at the same time, he crafted a character whose suffering, rage, and desire for justice continue to resonate across cultures and eras. Medea's story endures because it speaks to the deepest aspects of human experience – betrayal, revenge, love, and loss – making her a figure who belongs both to ancient Athens and a universal human narrative.

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