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Myths & mythology: How stories shape the world

At the edges of the Greek world

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Varying Medea

- In this session, we will focus on the myth of Medea:
- Different instantiations and chronological development of the myth
 - Tension between artefacts (literature or art!) with mythological content and mythography
 - Author/artist choice shaping mythological tradition
- Changes in perception of geography (what is *outside* of the Greek world)
- Changes in perception of Medea as a foreigner

Parts Of The Medea Story

(After Graf, 1997, 22)

- The **Colchian** story: Medea helping Jason and the Argonauts to obtain the golden fleece; flees with him.
- The **Iolcan** story: Medea helping Jason to avenge himself on Pelias; again they flee together
- The **Corinthian** story: Medea avenging herself on Jason, killing his new wife, his children and his new father-in-law. Medea's flight from Corinth to Athens
- The **Athenian** story: Medea with King Aegeus in Athens, nearly causing the death of Theseus, and fleeing Athens.
- The **Median** story: Medea settling in present-day Iran, giving her name to its people (the Medes)

The Voyage of the Argo



NB:
Colchis
not
always
located
in this
spot!

Timeline: literary Medeas

- **Hesiod** – *Theogony* (8th century, written form 6th century)
- **Pindar** – 4th *Pythian Ode* (5th century); in honour of a victory in the Pythian games at Delphi)
- **Euripides** – the tragedy *Medea* (5th century); canonical status and highly influential
- **Apollonius** of Rhodes – the epic *Argonautica* (3rd century)
- **Ovid** – the lost tragedy *Medea*, versions of the Medea story in the *Metamorphoses* and in the *Heroides* (1st centuries BC/AD)
- **Seneca** – the tragedy *Medea* (1st century AD)

Archaic Medeas

- The myth of the Argonaut expedition is well-known from the very beginnings of Greek literature:
 - “Only one sea-going ship has indeed made the voyage past that way – the Argo that all men know of, when sailing back from the land of Aietes” (Hom. *Od.* 12.70)
- Fragmentary works about Medea from the 8th century – she’s already an old and popular topic by then!
- Iconography: Various motifs from the 6th century onwards, with growing popularity

Jason and Medea in Early Art



Left: Jason defeating the dragon, with Athena and the ship Argo, c. 460

Constants in Early Treatments

- Aphrodite intervening on Jason's behalf to make Medea assist him;
 - cf. Pausanias' description of the ornaments on a late archaic chest:
 - Now I come to the second space on the chest, and in going round it I had better begin from the left. [...] "Medea is seated upon a throne, while Jason stands on her right and **Aphrodite** on her left. On them is an inscription: Jason weds Medea, as Aphrodite bids." (Paus. 5.18.1-3)
- A prophecy warning Aietes of Jason
 - Altered, in Apollonius, to Medea – the chief character of his narrative

Medea & medicine: *Pharmakeutria*

- Medea as skilled in the use of drugs – but not an outright witch
 - Hesiod *Theog.* 956-962:
Medea the niece of Circe;
Medea listed as a goddess
 - Fragment from the *Nostoi* (7th/6th cent.) dealing with Medea's rejuvenation of Aeson (father of Jason)



Variants in Early Treatments

- Pindar on how to kill a dragon (or not):

“For the fleece lay in a thicket, held in the ravening jaws of a serpent, which in thickness and length surpassed a ship with fifty oars, built by the blows of a hammer. **It is too long a way for me to go by the beaten track**; for time presses, and I know a shortcut. [...] Jason killed the gray-eyed serpent with its dappled back by cunning, Arcesilas, and stole away Medea, with her own help.” (Pi. P. 4.244-250)

- Later versions (incl. Apollonius – Jason gives the snake/dragon a sleeping potion provided by Medea)
- Why does Pindar side-step this description? Graf: likely not heroic enough for a victory ode!
 - Author choice influencing transmission of myth

Questions:

What's the back story? How was Jason swallowed by the serpent?

...and how do we know it's Jason?

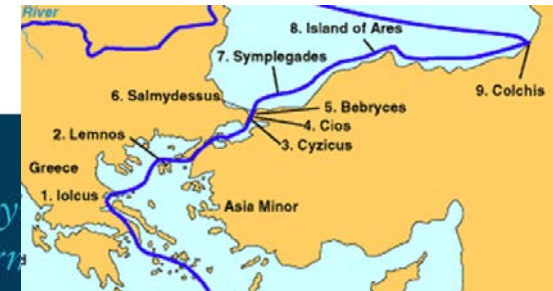




Although the bulls had been yoked, Aietes refused to surrender the fleece; and he wanted to set fire to the Argo and kill its crew. Before he could put his plan into effect, Medea guided Jason to the fleece by night, and used her drugs to send the guardian dragon to sleep, and then carrying the fleece with her, made her way back to the Argo with Jason. (Apollodorus Library 1.9) Left:

Constants: The Stranger (1)

- Early archaic literature: Colchis at the very edges of human geography/imagination
- Mimnermos (7th/6th century): “The city of Aeetes, where swift Helios shines in golden strength, lies at the edge of the Ocean.”
- Mid-archaic times: Colchis brought closer, Pindar locates it in the NE corner of the Black Sea region.
- In this period, epic is made pan-Hellenic and systematised, and located in real geographical locations, but...



For it is plain to see that the Colchians are Egyptians; and what I say, I myself noted before I heard it from others. [...] I myself guessed it, partly because they are dark-skinned and woolly-haired; though that indeed counts for nothing, since other peoples are, too; but my better proof was that the Colchians and Egyptians and Ethiopians are the only nations that have from the first practised circumcision.

Herodotus *Histories* 2.104-105 (mid-5th C BCE)

- From the Hellenistic period (late 300s) onwards, Colchis depicted as less foreign
- ...the region has become an important trading partner and is close to Greek colonies on the S. Blacksea coast
- It becomes a Roman colony in 63 BCE



Constants: The Stranger (2: Art)

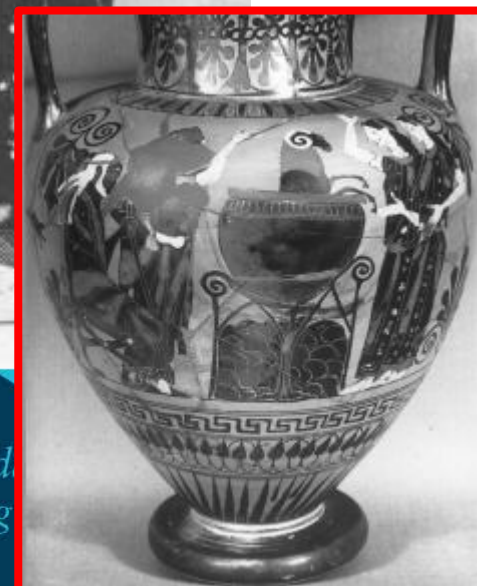
- Before 430 BCE Medea generally depicted as a Greek woman
- Instead, these traits may be highlighted:
- Her divinity
- Her skills in potion making and drugs (rejuvenation scenes common in Attic art of 6th/5th centuries)



c17-442177 fotosearch.com



Amphora found in Etruria (Vulci). c. 550-500 BCE.
 Peleas (seated) with Medea, his daughters present at the
 rejuvenation of the ram in preparation for Peleas' own.



Euripides' *Medea*

- 'Euripides' tragedy of 431 BCE [...] gives Medea her canonical identity: the woman who kills her children in vengeance when her husband deserts her.' (Boedker, 1997, 127)

Overview of the tragedy

Characters on stage

- The nurse
- The children's tutor
- Medea
- Creon (king of Corinth, Jason's new father-in-law)
- Jason
- Corinthian women (the chorus)
- Aegeus (king of Athens)
- Messenger
- The children

- Set in Corinth (=> deals essentially with the 3rd part of Medea's story; only a section of a much larger myth!)
- Medea is advised to leave Corinth first by Creon, then by Jason
- Medea decides to avenge herself on Jason; her ruse, using the children
- The killing of Creusa (Glauke); the killing of the children
- Final agon with Jason; escape to Athens on Helios' chariot

Ethnicity in Euripides' Medea

- Medea depicted as a stranger to Corinth and Greece:
 - 'exile' in the nurse's prologue, almost surprisingly earning the respect of her new people;
 - but her strange ancestry emphasised in the finale
- Would this have made the contemporary audience less likely to feel for her?
 - If so, the atrociousness of her deeds help affirm Greek and Athenian values
- Other protagonists treat Medea as a now Greek woman, as someone who has assimilated fully – thus forcing the audience to view her in the same way

Jason's final speech

(Eur. Med.1329-1344)

Now I am in my right mind, though I was insane before [1330] when I brought you from your home among the barbarians to a Greek house. A great curse you were even then, betrayer of father and of the land that nourished you. But the avenging spirit meant for you the gods have visited on me. For you killed your own brother at the hearth [1335] and then stepped aboard the fair-prowed Argo. It was with acts like these that you began. But now when you were married to me and had borne me children, you killed them because of sex and the marriage-bed. No Greek woman [1340] would have dared to do this, yet I married you in preference to them [...]. But since ten thousand insults of mine would fail [1345] to sting you—such is your native impudence—be gone, doer of disgraceful deeds and murderer of your children!

Stranger (3)

- Art after 430 BC:
- Medea depicted in oriental garb
(cf. slide 7, bottom right)
- New scenes influenced by Euripides
 - The murder of the children
 - Medea's escape on the dragon-drawn chariot of the Sun





Two late 5th C BCE depictions of Medea on Helios' chariot, both found in Italy. Both feature Medea in oriental dress – and in lone command.

Values in the *Medea*

- **Gender norms**

'I'd rather stand three times in the front line than bear one child' (250f)

Establishes the normative pattern...

Male identity defined by participation in defence

Female identity defined by the family (marriage, bearing of children)

...and Medea (who has behaved like any other woman up to this point) **as someone who wishes to break the norm**



Positive or Negative Norm Breaking?

- 'Is Euripides' Medea, then, confirming the audience's worst fears of what will happen when a woman takes action?' (Rabinowitz, 1993, 125-127; 149f)
- '[Although Medea] elicits sympathy for women's lot, she also displays one of the characteristic behaviours, deceit, which formed part of the negative Greek stereotype of women.' (Griffiths, 2006, 75)
- BUT: All the male characters are presented in a negative light and come to a bad end (possibly even Aegeus) and Medea's sentiments are never explicitly contradicted



Lucanian krater, c. 400 (Louvre)
The poisoned robes:
Creon, Creusa/Glauke, servants

Misogyny in the *Medea*

- It is likely that Euripides pushed to the fore the killing of the children – other alternative traditions of the time name other perpetrators. The result of this author choice is a much less human heroine
- Cf. how new images of the Medea myth become popular after Euripides – focussing on the murder of the children. What does this tell us?
- In addition – consider the audience! Medea's comparison of childbirth with fighting in a battle (early on in the text!) would have been startling and potentially offensive to (by and large) male viewers, in a strictly patriarchal society