



Euripides Medea

Topics for Discussion

Below you will find a list of suggested topics to discuss with your class.

Topic 1- Gender

Euripides' *Medea* is – arguably – a play most concerned with the relations between men and women. Some questions to be considered might be:

- How much should we sympathise with Medea's feelings of betrayal by her 'husband'?
- Can we continue to sympathise with Medea once she announces her plan to kill her own children?
- How should we see the role of the Nurse in relation to gender?
- How should we see the role of the chorus also in relation to gender?
- Does Jason deserve what happens to him?

Topic 2 – Being Other

Medea is not only in a difficult position as a woman but also as a non-Greek. Some questions to be considered might be:

- To what extent does she suffer as a barbarian as against being a woman?
- Are there any ways in which Medea's non-Greek origins are viewed positively? If so, by whom and for what reasons?
- Is our view of the apparent sympathy of the chorus for Medea early in the play affected by the fact that it is a Greek chorus in sympathy with a barbarian woman?
- Are there any ways in which Medea might be considered 'other'?

Topic 3 – Rhetoric

Greek tragedy is a highly rhetorical art-form. In particular, tragedies often involve set-piece debates (*agones*) or more general confrontations. There are three encounters between Jason and Medea in the play: the first is a furious exchange; the second, apparently more friendly; the third has Jason confronting the news of the deaths not only of Creon and Glauke, but also of his own children. Some questions that might be considered:

- How does the rhetoric used by Medea in the first debate compare with her rhetoric in the second debate?



- Do we – or indeed the contemporary fifth-century audience – accept the truth of what Medea says in the first debate? When she loses that debate, what does that mean about the relationship between rhetoric and the truth?
- What does her dissembling rhetoric of the second debate say about the relationship between rhetoric and truth?
- How does Jason come across in both debates?

Topic 4 – Context and Staging

Compared to dramatic performances now, *Medea* would have been performed in a very different context and a very different manner. Plays were performed at annual civic/religious festivals; audiences – mainly made up of citizens – would have been huge and almost certainly (mostly) male; all the actors would have been male and masked; the play would have been performed in daylight and without amplification of any sort.

- How different would the theatrical experience have been in the ancient world compared to the way we experience drama today?
- More specifically, what effect does watching masked actors have on the audience?
- It is possible that Medea could have been played by more than one actor during a single performance. How would that affect our experience of the play?
- Think also about the chorus, who periodically interrupt the dramatic action to sing and dance. How does that affect the theatrical experience?

Topic 5 – Modern Versions

Euripides' *Medea* is one of the most famous and performed of all the Greek tragedies. There have been some celebrated productions in the modern era:

- The 1907 production at the Savoy Theatre in London, using Gilbert Murray's translation.
- Jean Anouilh's translation in 1946.
- Robinson Jeffers' production on Broadway in 1947.
- Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 film starring the great opera singer, Maria Callas, as Medea.
- Christa Wolf's novel *Medea* published in 1996 (and translated from the German as *Medea: A Modern Retelling* by John Cullen).
- Diana Rigg starred as Medea in a production in London in 1993; Fiona Shaw in 2001; Helen McCrory in 2014; Kate Fleetwood in 2015 (in a modern retelling by the novelist Rachel Cusk).

There is a superb archive of performances of Greek drama at Oxford University's *Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama* (easily accessible at <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>). (This link is also available, along with other sites in the *Useful Links* section).

Pasolini's *Medea* is still available from all the usual places.

Questions to be considered:

- Were the Suffragettes right to see *Medea* as a proto-feminist play in 1907?
- How well, and how differently, do any of these modern versions capture Euripides' play?
- How well does updating the play work? That is, how much of the ancient cultural context is lost? And how much is gained for us as a contemporary audience?