EDITED BY
DAVID STUTTARD

BLOOMSBURY

Looking at *Medea*

Related titles from Bloomsbury

Looking at Lysistrata, edited by David Stuttard
9781853997365

Euripides: Medea (Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy),
by William Allan
9780715631874

The Plays of Euripides (Classical World), by James Morwood
9781853996146

Costume in Greek Tragedy, by Rosie Wyles
9780715639450

Euripides Talks, edited by Alan Beale
9781853997129

Looking at *Medea*

Essays and a translation of Euripides' tragedy

Edited by David Stuttard

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

First published 2014

© David Stuttard and contributors, 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

David Stuttard and the contributors have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Authors of this work.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the authors.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-1-47253-051-6
HB: 978-1-47252-772-1
ePub: 978-1-47253-016-5
ePDF: 978-1-47253-399-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Looking at *Medea*: essays and a translation of Euripides' tragedy
edited by David Stuttard.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4725-3051-6 (pbk) — ISBN 978-1-4725-2772-1 (hbk)
1. Euripides. Medea. I. Stuttard, David. II. Euripides. Medea. English. 2014.
PA3978.L65 2014
882'.01—dc23
2013046260

Typeset by RefineCatch, Bungay, Suffolk

To Theo

Contents

List of Illustrations viii
Acknowledgements ix
List of Contributors x
Foreword xi

Introduction – *Medea* in Context *David Stuttard* 1
1 Murder in the Family – Medea and Others *Jasper Griffin* 11
2 Medea Before and (a little) After Euripides *Carmel McCallum-Barry* 23
3 Otherness and Exile: Euripides' Production of 431 BC *Ioanna Karamanou* 35
4 Staging *Medea* *Rosie Wyles* 47
5 The Nurse's Tale *Ian Ruffell* 65
6 Re-evaluating Jason *James Morwood* 83
7 The Final Scene *Richard Rutherford* 89
8 'It Wouldn't Happen Here . . . Could It?' – Chorus and Collusion in Euripides' *Medea* *Sophie Mills* 99
9 Medea's Vengeance *Hanna M. Roisman* 111
10 *Medea*: Feminism or Misogyny? *Douglas Cairns* 123
11 Divine and Human in Euripides' *Medea* *Edith Hall* 139
12 Black Medeas *Betine Van Zyl Smit* 157

Euripides' *Medea*, translated by *David Stuttard* 167
Bibliography 205
Index 213

List of Illustrations

1 Medea in her chariot drawn by serpents, depicted on a Calyx-Krater attributed to Near the Policoro Painter c. 400 BC (© ArtPix/Alamy) 9

2 The rejuvenation of a white haired male: a ram springs from a cauldron towards Medea who is sprinkling the ram with a magic potion. (© The Trustees of the British Museum) 28

3 The Pronomos Vase, showing a *tiara* on an actor's mask, top left (© Leemage/UIG via Getty Images) 55

4 Modern stage production of *Medea*, produced and performed by the Actors of Dionysus 2013 (© David Stuttard) 203

5 Tamsin Shasha as *Medea* in Actors of Dionysus' 2013 production at the Rose Theatre, Kingston. 203

Acknowledgements

I first translated and directed *Medea* in 1996 for a touring production by Actors of Dionysus (**aod**), which included a residency at London's Turtle Key Arts Centre. Many performances were introduced by talks given by eminent UK academics, a combination of scholarship and drama which was, in some respects, the inspiration for the present volume. My translation was thereafter recorded by **aod** for Penguin Audiobooks, and my subsequent adaptation has since been staged several times. I am grateful to the many actors involved in these productions for enhancing my understanding of the play.

At the heart of this volume are the essays, and my profound thanks go to all the contributors, who have given so generously of their time and expertise. I for one have greatly enjoyed reading and working through this collection, and have learned a great deal from it. Special thanks go to Charlotte Loveridge at Bloomsbury Press, who has been an enthusiastic champion of the project from the start, to the excellent copy editor, Jon Ingoldby, and to Ian Buck and Claire Turner, for designing the book and its cover. My greatest thanks go to my wife, Emily Jane, whose support is fundamental to everything I do, and without whom (like Jason on his *Argo*) I would truly be at sea.

List of Contributors

David Stuttard is a freelance writer, classical historian and dramatist who founded the theatre company, Actors of Dionysus

Jasper Griffin was Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, Public Orator and Professor of Classical Literature at the University of Oxford until 2004

Carmel McCallum-Barry is Lecturer in Classics at University College, Cork

Ioanna Karamanou is Assistant Professor in Greek Drama at the University of the Peloponnese

Rosie Wyles is Lecturer in Greek Language and Literature at King's College, London

Ian Ruffell is Lecturer in Classics at the University of Glasgow

James Morwood is Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford

Richard Rutherford is Tutor in Greek and Latin Literature at Christ Church, Oxford

Sophie Mills is Professor of Classics at the University of North Carolina at Asheville

Hanna M. Roisman is Professor of Classics, Arnold Bernhard Professor in Arts and Humanities at Colby College, Maine

Douglas Cairns is Professor of Classics at the University of Edinburgh

Edith Hall is Professor of Classics at King's College, London

Betine Van Zyl Smit is Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Nottingham

Foreword

Medea is one of the most frequently performed of all Greek tragedies. With its universal themes of love, betrayal and revenge, it resonates with modern audiences. However, although the 'script' has remained (for the most part) unaltered since Euripides wrote it two and a half millennia ago, the experience and expectations of audiences have changed significantly. Today's religious beliefs, political structures and social norms are very different from those of polytheistic, imperial, slave-owning, patriarchal fifth-century BC Athens. So, while the human emotions at the heart of the play may be immediately recognizable, their context cannot but be alien, and, as a result, Euripides' audience is likely to have experienced *Medea* very differently to a modern one. Certainly, Euripides cannot have imagined that *Medea* would have proved an inspiration to the early twentieth century suffragette movement, and it is debatable to what extent he conceived the play as the psychodrama as it is so often presented today.

To set *Medea* firmly in its fifth-century BC context and to trace something of its later history, this volume presents twelve new essays by some of the leading authorities on this play in particular and Greek tragedy in general, along with my introduction and a slightly revised version of my 1996 translation. The subject matter of the essays covers a wide range of issues from earlier versions of the Medea myth and the play's original performance context to twentieth-century interpretations. As was the case in *Looking at Lysistrata*, authors were given great freedom to choose which aspect of the play to write about, and each was relatively unaware of what the others intended to say. For this reason, there is occasionally a small degree of overlap between some of the essays, with which (to preserve the integrity of each piece) I have deliberately not interfered. Similarly, certain authors disagree with each other (and with me) about the extent to which Euripides used *Medea* as a vehicle for his own political comment. Again, I have deliberately not tried to impose a three line whip, believing that both this diversity of views and the occasional commonality of subject matter lend a special dynamic to the collection, underlining the fact that *Medea* remains as vibrant and controversial a play today as it was when it was first performed.

Revisiting the translation has been interesting. Since 1996, when I originally wrote it for a production (and subsequent Penguin Audiobook recording) by Actors of Dionysus (The *Independent* kindly declared that it 'gives Euripides' wisdom a classic turn of phrase'), my style has changed

considerably. However, publication of this translation still (I hope) has something to recommend it, not least because it benefited greatly from having been closely read and rigorously commented upon by the late Sir Kenneth Dover. So, aside from a very few revisions, I have kept that original translation essentially as it was. This also means that anyone wishing to hear the words performed can listen to the Penguin Audiobook, a CD of which is now available directly from www.actorsofdionysus.com. Readers wishing to compare my 2001 adaptation of *Medea* can order it from www.davidstuttard.com, where applications for performance of both translation and adaptation should be made before the commencement of any rehearsals.

David Stuttard
Brighton, 2013

Introduction – *Medea* in Context

David Stuttard

'In peace time sons bury their fathers, but in war fathers bury their sons.' If the historian Herodotus was in Athens' Theatre of Dionysus on that brisk March morning in 431 BC, he may well have thought of these, his own words, as he watched *Medea* unfold to its bitter end, where Jason cannot even touch his dead sons, let alone bury them.

For, that spring, war was in the air – indeed, tradition suggests that it was to chronicle the coming conflict that Herodotus returned to Athens at around this time – and, although the democracy's 'first citizen', Pericles, was promising a relatively easy victory, many knew that, once conflict is unleashed (in the words of the late American political scientist, George Kennan), 'war has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it'. To judge by his later works, Euripides was probably cautious of Athens' escalating conflict with Corinth and her Peloponnesian allies, and it may be that he was hinting at these cautions in *Medea*.

So, to set *Medea* in its historical context and to provide something of a general background to the play and to this book, we should begin by outlining a little of the history of the times and (first) of some of what *Medea*'s original audience might have come to the theatre expecting to see.

Greek Drama – a brief history and some technicalities

Tragedy was only one of a number of performing art forms current in classical Athens. Music, song and literature pervaded private homes as well as village and state festivals, where audiences could hear soloists and small ensembles sing to the accompaniment of oboes (*auloi*) or lyres. In the Theatre of Dionysus itself, its wooden benches set on the southern slope of the Acropolis above the flat *orkhēstra* ('dancing ground'), where the chorus sang and danced in front of the *skēnē* (stage building), they could enjoy not

only dramas but also performances of choral *dithyrambs* (hymns to Dionysus). Indeed, it was from these that tragedy was said to have been born, when at a village festival at Icaria one performer, Thespis, assumed the role of one of the songs' characters and interacted with the chorus to become the first recorded actor. Drama had been born, but it took until just before the middle of the fifth century BC for it to settle into the form we see in Euripides' *Medea*.

Performed by three actors and a chorus of fifteen (all masked, all male), plays were written entirely in verse: iambic trimeters for much of the dialogue and soliloquies, with other verse forms used for choral songs, or for passages of heightened emotion, sung by actors. All (surviving) tragedies began with a prologue given by one or two actors. The chorus then entered (*parodos*), usually to remain in view in the *orkhēstra* until they exited at the very end, generally to the accompaniment of a brief song.

The rest of the play consisted of scenes of monologue or dialogue between actors and chorus (*episodes*), linked by *stasima* (singular = *stasimon*), bridging passages of choral singing and dancing. These *stasima* were often used to add new layers of meaning, to provide moments of reflection, or to widen the focus out from the specific story being explored in the play, sometimes through references to parallel myths. The accompanying music (now sadly lost), as well as the chorus' physicality, would have added considerably to their emotional impact.

Most plays included at least one debate (*agon*) between two characters, in the form of a relatively lengthy speech from each (with concluding two-line comments from the chorus) followed by punchy dialogue, in which characters conversed in (often) one-line sentences (*stichomythia*). All extant plays also include a messenger speech, a relatively lengthy account of a usually violent incident, which has happened offstage, and which typically begins in the calm world of the everyday before reaching a crescendo of horror, and ending with a sometimes generalized aphorism.

So popular was the new genre of drama that, in 534 BC, just over a century before *Medea* was first performed, an annual state dramatic festival, the City Dionysia, was introduced into the Athenian calendar. Held in the month of Elaphebolion (mid-March to mid-April), this part-religious, part-artistic festival was attended not only by Athenians but by foreigners, too, and soon became a showcase for not just Athens' creative prowess but her political might as well. Spanning five days, by 431 BC the City Dionysia began with sacrifices, parades and propaganda – an elaborate procession to the theatre, a display of military hardware and of tribute from Athens' subject states, donations of armour to war orphans, and the slaughter of bulls – all before a contest between choruses performing *dithyrambs*.

Competition was at the heart of the City Dionysia: not just Athens' competitiveness to be recognized as the leading *polis* (or city state) in the Greek world, but a contest between performers striving to be judged the best in their class. Thus, while the final day of performances was (probably) devoted to a competition between the writers and producers of five comic plays, the other three days were given over to a contest between three tragedians.

Each day one author presented a *tetralogy*, three tragedies followed by a *satyr* play, a light-hearted romp based loosely on an episode from mythology, in which the chorus were costumed as Dionysus' anarchic snub-nosed, horse-tailed, rampant followers, the satyrs. The *satyr* play was in part an emotional safety-valve, designed to dissipate the undoubted pressures built up during the highly-charged *trilogy* of tragedies which preceded it and allow the audience some respite before leaving the theatre.

Earlier in the fifth century BC, some tragic *trilogies* (exemplified by Aeschylus' extant *Oresteia*) had explored different episodes from the same myth over several generations, but by 431 BC tastes had changed. Now the three tragedies (and probably the *satyr* play) were linked not narratively but thematically. Thus (as Ioanna Karamanou explores), *Medea* was linked to its 'sister' tragedies, *Philoctetes* and *Dictys*, and perhaps to the *satyr* play, *Reapers*, by themes of otherness and exile. Although these 'sister' plays survive only in fragments, it is important to recognize that, as it was in conjunction with them that Euripides intended his audience to enjoy and judge *Medea*, understanding them more fully can afford us greater insights into his original intentions. It should remind us, too, that, although Euripides' *tetralogy* of 431 BC did badly (it came last in the competition), the judgement was not based on *Medea* alone, and, lacking, as we are, not only *Medea*'s 'sister' plays but the two competing *tetralogies*, we are in no position to criticize the judges' decision.

In fact, the artistic merits of a script (the only element, which now survives) were only one of the criteria by which a production was judged – and probably a minor one at that. Of more immediate and popular impact were elements like choreography and music, actors' performances, costumes and stage effects (discussed by Rosie Wyles). Even a dislike of something as superficial as Philoctetes' ragged costume may have been enough to consign the *tetralogy* to third place.

Incidentally, we know that, even if Euripides very rarely came first at Athens' City Dionysia, many other Greeks *did* appreciate his dramas; in 413 BC, eighteen years after *Medea*, enemy Syracusans (presumably barred from recent City Dionysias and craving their 'fix' of Euripides) freed Athenian prisoners of war, who could sing his latest choruses, while when, in 404 BC, at the end of the Peloponnesian War, Athens was defeated, the recollection of a

Euripidean threnody (from *Electra*) is said to have spared the city from destruction and her people from slavery and death.

Foreigners may have appreciated Euripides more than his fellow citizens, but who *was Medea*'s first audience? In recent years, evidence has begun to emerge, suggesting that in 431 BC the Theatre of Dionysus was smaller than previously supposed, being able to hold not 15,000 spectators, as was once believed, but perhaps under half that number – roughly the same as that of the citizens who could be accommodated in the (exclusively male) democratic Assembly on Pnyx Hill. However, 7,500 is still a sizeable audience, around a quarter of Athens' citizenry (although some seats were reserved for foreign visitors), and the correspondence between Assembly and theatre has often been noted. Indeed (as personal experience reveals), because of the architecture and acoustics of Greek theatres, performers must direct their lines not to each other but 'up and out' towards the audience in the manner of an orator addressing a crowd. Even 'internal' monologues, such as Medea's soliloquy (1019–1080), in which she debates killing her children, must be delivered with no little volume to the audience, almost as if seeking their advice or approval – something which increases spectators' involvement in her decision-making. So, if the Church of England was once described as 'the establishment at prayer', the City Dionysia may in many ways be thought of as the Athenian Assembly at play.

This is one of several reasons why I personally believe that the audience at the City Dionysia was exclusively male. Another has to do with Athenians' shamefully misogynistic view of women, especially clever women. Literary sources for fifth-century BC Athens come exclusively from men and cannot conceal the vitriol (worthy of the worst modern tabloid journalism) with which the average Athenian male viewed talented, well-educated women. They smeared one, Elpinice, with rumours that she not only posed for a publically-exhibited painting (which was beyond the pale for a decent matron) but regularly committed incest with her brother, while they accused another, Aspasia (wife of Pericles), of prostituting free-born women. A decent woman's place was in the home. Her role was childbearing and housekeeping, not cleverness, and I find it unlikely that most Athenian males would have countenanced exposing their womenfolk to the kind of political and moral debate which raged in the Theatre of Dionysus, not to mention potentially destructive role models such as the much-too-clever Medea.

The presence of (albeit Greek-speaking) foreigners in the staunchly patriotic Athenian audience had certain implications. It encouraged high production values, as playwrights and producers vied ever more spectacularly to utilize the latest technology – such as the *mechanē*, or crane, which allowed actors and props to 'fly', or the *ekkuklema* (the 'rolling-out machine'), on which tableaux showing horrors committed 'inside' could be shown – or to dress

their characters in sumptuous costumes (another reason why Philoctetes' rags may have provoked a hostile reaction among judges). However, the presence of foreigners had another, less positive effect. It tended to prevent playwrights from openly expressing views which could be construed as hostile to the Athenian political consensus. Just four years after *Medea*, the young Aristophanes was prosecuted for slandering Athens at the Great Dionysia in his comedy, *Babylonians*.

Indeed, Athenian audiences were notoriously volatile. At the beginning of the fifth century BC, they had imposed a heavy fine on the playwright, Phrynichus, for upsetting them with his tragedy, *The Capture of Miletus*. Later, they are said to have rioted when, thinking that some lines of Aeschylus revealed details of the sacred (and taboo) Eleusinian Mysteries, they invaded the stage – only by clinging to the altar of Dionysus did Aeschylus escape death. On another occasion, feelings between one faction, which supported Aeschylus, and another, which supported Sophocles, ran so high that, instead of the usual civilian judges, Athens' ten generals were co-opted onto the panel. However, this did not stop playwrights (comedians especially, but also – *pace* Jasper Griffin – tragedians) from imbuing their work with (albeit veiled) references to, and comments on, current affairs. So, it is to the politics of 431 BC that we must next turn.

Athens in 431 BC

In 431 BC, Athens was at her height. For more than a hundred years (since the time of Peisistratus, who had inaugurated the City Dionysia), despite some severe setbacks, Athens had enjoyed a seemingly unstoppable growth in power and influence. At the end of the sixth century BC, her citizens had embraced *isonomia* (equality under law), a prototype democracy, and, at the beginning of the fifth, they had recovered with remarkable resilience from temporary defeat at the hands of Persian invaders, quickly establishing their dominion over the *poleis* (city states) of the Aegean islands and the western coast of modern Turkey. In the late 460s BC, Pericles, a dangerously charismatic aristocrat, who knew how to bend the people's will to suit his own, began to imbue the Athenians with his own brand of nationalism, plunging them into occasionally disastrous but ultimately survivable wars (a campaign against the Persians in Egypt in the 450s BC was particularly catastrophic), while enhancing their city and the surrounding countryside with an ambitious building programme, at whose heart was the Parthenon.

By the time that temple was dedicated (in 438 BC) and its sculptures complete (a year before *Medea*, in 432 BC), Athens' economic dominance

could be felt from Sicily in the west to the Black Sea in the east. A list of imports by the contemporary comedian, Hermippus, includes carpets from Carthage, ivory from Libya, salt fish from the Bosphorus and almonds from Paphlagonia on the Black Sea's southern shores. But not everyone was happy. Athens' economic rival, Corinth, just over forty miles away to the west, found the situation particularly irksome, especially when Athens (bent, thanks in part to Pericles' propaganda, on being recognized as the leading *polis* in the Greek world) became increasingly determined to impose her military dominance as well.

In 433 BC, the two cities clashed over Corinth's colony, Corcyra, on the island known today as Corfu, where a failure of delicate politicking led to Athens' victory in the sea-battle of Sybota. The next year, Athens and Corinth were fighting once again, this time in northern Greece over control of Potidea, a city whose status was ambiguous, being both a colony of Corinth and a tribute-paying member of Athens' imperial league. Meanwhile, to punish her for choosing the wrong side at Sybota, Athens imposed a trade embargo on Megara, a city halfway between her and Corinth, forbidding Megarian merchants access to any ports under Athenian control. In support of Megara, Corinth set about enlisting the help of fellow members of the Peloponnesian League and especially the militarily powerful Sparta. In 431 BC, as Athenians took their seats in the Theatre of Dionysus to watch Euripides' *tetralogy*, of which *Medea* was the first play, the international stage seemed set for a major war.

Indeed, as Thucydides (writing in the third person) explains at the beginning of his history:

> he believed that it would be a great war, more deserving of record than any which had gone before. There was good reason for his belief. Both sides were in a state of perfect readiness and he could see that all Greeks everywhere were taking sides . . .

The air was thick with expectation.

Medea, a tragedy for its time

Only ten lines into *Medea*, Euripides reveals the scene of his tragedy: 'this land of Corinth'. In many respects, the drama is set firmly in the heroic world of Jason and his Argonauts – a world, moreover, ruled by kings (whereas fifth-century Corinth and Athens were respectively an oligarchy and democracy). But many of the audience must have been familiar with contemporary

Corinth, having visited the city either on business or while attending the nearby Isthmian Games or, like the orator Lysias a generation later, to enjoy the delights of its internationally renowned brothels. So, the almost throwaway yet homely detail, which Euripides gives to the tutor ('I was going to play back-gammon where the old men sit around the sacred waters of Peirene'), cannot but have conjured up personal memories. For modern visitors, the Fountain of Peirene is still an unforgettable site. Thus, as was usual in Greek tragedies, Euripides allows the mythical world to elide with the contemporary in such a way as to blur the boundaries between Corinth 'then' and Corinth 'now'. And Corinth 'now' was the enemy.

Whether the audience did gloat at Euripides' depiction of the murder of Corinth's leading family members we cannot tell. Possibly not. But the link between Medea and Athens, which Euripides takes care to emphasize, must surely have caused many in the theatre to stop and think. In a pivotal scene positioned exactly halfway through the play (there is nothing haphazard about Euripides' craftsmanship), Aegeus, king of Athens, ignorant of the horrors which Medea is about to unleash, is duped into offering her asylum. Despite what Aristotle may have thought, the episode is dramatically brilliant. Having arrived at Corinth with an innocent agenda – to ask Medea to interpret an oracle about his fathering children – Aegeus has become embroiled in something altogether more nasty, exposing Athens to the corrupting influence of an infanticide. The choral *stasimon*, which comes a little after Aegeus' departure, is surely crucial in giving us at least a flavour of the audience's expected response. Beginning with an achingly beautiful evocation of Athens and Attica, the Chorus imagine the impact of Medea's arrival:

> Since time began, the citizens of Athens have been rich indeed, the children of the blessed gods, dwellers in a holy land that's whole and pure. And so they grew strong in the shining light of wisdom, stepping lightly in the clear pellucid air, where once they say that golden-headed Harmony gave birth to the nine sacred Muses – and the clear-flowing waters of Cephisus nurtures them.
>
> And so they say that Aphrodite, goddess of Desire, drinks deep of the Cephisus, sailing in her barge to Athens, fanned by breezes scented in the honeyed air, and on her hair her retinue of Lusts, which bring sweet knowledge in their train, sweet loveliness, scatter flowers, seductive in the soothing scent of garlands twined with blushing damask rose.
>
> And so I ask, how will the city welcome you, Medea? How will Cephisus with his sacred streams, how will the very soil of Athens learn to love

> you, stained by the blood-guilt of your sacrilege, your own sons' murderess.

All has been made more chilling by the oath which Medea forces a reluctant Aegeus to swear (and after which she bundles him off without another word), especially as the audience (familiar with myths, which described the aftermath, and which are outlined in Richard Rutherford's essay) would know what happened, once she reached Athens. For, in mythology, Medea sets up house with Aegeus (the scene between them in this play may already contain a *frisson* of eroticism), has sons by him, and then tries to murder Aegeus' elder son, Theseus (whom he fathers in Trozden shortly after leaving Medea in Corinth). As a result, Aegeus exiles Medea from Athens – according to Herodotus, she flees east, giving her name to the Medes, synonymous in Athenian thought with Greece's foes, the Persians – and so he breaks his oath, which adds significance to the interchange between the two:

> **Medea** But if you don't abide by what you've sworn, what would you suffer then?
>
> **Aegeus** The punishment that waits for all who break the bonds of piety.

By breaking his oath, Aegeus will provoke the Erinyes, or Furies, against Athens – and, lest we, the audience, somehow forget Medea's destination at the end of the play, Euripides has her remind us. Snarling from her flying snake-drawn chariot, the matricide gloats to Jason, 'I shall go to Aegeus in Athens, and there shall live with him'. There can be no escaping her.

So, tricked, Aegeus, the representative of Athens, invites the plague, that is Medea, to come from Corinth to take up residence in Athens. What seemed straightforward at the time (poor Medea, so badly treated by her husband, surely deserves compassion) will turn out to have quite ghastly, unforeseen consequences. Is it too far-fetched to see Medea as an allegory for war? To repeat George Kennan's words, 'war has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it'. I suspect that there were at least some in Euripides' first audience who saw this warning in the play. Sadly, the reality of what happened next was even more hideous than anyone could possibly have foreseen.

The historical aftermath of *Medea*

In spring 431 BC, a matter of weeks after the City Dionysia, the first fighting in what would become known as the Peloponnesian War came, when Thebes

Figure 1 Medea in her chariot drawn by serpents, depicted on a Calyx-Krater attributed to Near the Policoro Painter c. 400 BC (© ArtPix/Alamy)

(not strictly a Peloponnesian *polis* but an old enemy of Athens) attacked the little town of Plataea, Athens' only ally at the Battle of Marathon fifty-nine years earlier. Soon most of mainland Greece was under arms. In time, the conflict would spread not only east throughout the Aegean to Ionia, the Bosphorus and Byzantium, but west to South Italy and Sicily, too. War's momentum would, indeed, carry its architects away from all thoughtful intentions.

Nonetheless, in 430 BC at the end of the first year of the war, Pericles (whose war, in the main, it was) was chosen to make a speech in honour of Athens' fallen. After elaborating at length on his city's greatness and the heroism of its

men, Pericles addressed the women, advising that for them (in Thucydides' account): 'glory lies in not showing greater weakness than is natural for the female sex, and not being spoken of by men, either for good or evil'.

Since Pericles himself had recently been attacked in the lawcourts through his association with the clever Aspasia, this may have been heartfelt advice, but, in its reinforcement of prejudices about the lower status of women compared to men, it reflects, too, the boast of the philosopher Thales (ascribed by some to Socrates), that he gave thanks to Good Fortune, 'first, that I was born a human being and not an animal; second, that I was born a man and not a woman; and third, that I was born a Greek and not a barbarian'. (No wonder that the barbarian Medea says with only a little exaggeration, 'of everything that lives, all creatures sentient, we women are most abject of them all'.)

But Pericles' policies had unforeseen consequences. To avoid fighting the Peloponnesians on land, where the Athenians were weaker, Pericles had ordered all the inhabitants of Attica (the land of which Athens was the chief city) to leave their homes and villages and take refuge within the city walls. The city, Pericles assured them, could easily survive on imports from abroad, shipped in to their port at Piraeus. As a result, Athens' population was swollen to bursting point. Conditions were bad enough, but in 430 BC, months after Pericles had delivered his Funeral Oration, ships arrived, carrying in their holds an unwelcome cargo: plague. Rapidly it spread through the crowded city, and by the time it had eventually abated some four years later, it had claimed the lives of a third of Athens' population. Among its victims was Pericles.

'Life', as Oscar Wilde observed, 'imitates art far more than art imitates life'. Euripides could not have foreseen the extent to which his grim warning would come true. Yet, for us, who have the benefit of hindsight (albeit coupled with the disadvantage of having lost the other plays from the original *tetralogy* and thus being unable fully to appreciate its context), *Medea* can seem almost prophetic: just as welcoming the infanticide from Corinth would threaten to destroy Aegeus' household and risk the life of his son, Theseus, so embracing war with Corinth and her allies would lead to plague, the loss of countless Athenian lives and, in the end, the defeat of Athens herself. Pericles (who was undoubtedly present at the City Dionysia of 431 BC) would not be the only father in Euripides' audience, who would soon be burying his sons.

As for Medea, the princess, whose story predates Homer, she continued to inspire both fascination and fear, the leading character in further plays and epic poems, the heroine of operas and films, but always remembered above all as the protagonist of Euripides' great tragedy, the subject of the chapters which follow in this book.

1

Murder in the Family – Medea and Others

Jasper Griffin

Medea and the world of myth

The myths and legends of the Greeks, like those of most peoples, reach us only in the form which they were given, and which was enduringly preserved, by men. There were also, hardly less importantly, stories that were told and retold by women. They certainly existed, and they were repeated by mothers, both to their sons and also, and (no doubt) especially, to their daughters. Those stories have very rarely come down to us in anything like an original form or colouring. They are now merely a part of that huge and haunting subject: the lost literature, or the lost literatures, of Hellas. Of the very large mass of literature in Greek that once existed, we must always remember that we possess, and that we can read, only a small fraction.

Very often, no doubt, such mythical stories were never written down at all. When they were, their female versions were drowned out for posterity by the usually narrated forms, and by the generally accepted versions. That, consequently, dictated the shape in which they came to be embodied, sooner or later, in the standard works of high and serious literature; and that was how they made a crucial step: on to the syllabus of works that were read in schools.

The beginnings of the Medea story seem, in outline, to be very simple. A dashing young prince, oppressed by his wicked uncle – and uncles in stories all over Europe are all too often wicked – was sent off on a deadly mission: he must sail to the very edge of the world, passing various terrific perils, there to find, and to bring home, a marvellous Golden Fleece. The possession of a fearsome tyrant, it was guarded – to make the situation apparently quite hopeless – by a dragon which never slept. From such an adventure, clearly, the young man was not expected to return.

But the fearsome Eastern tyrant has a daughter, and she will be his fatal weakness. There is a secret that every tyrant should know: however powerful you may be, and however formidable to your subjects, you cannot really control, and you cannot completely trust, your own womenfolk. Women are, by nature, emotional and volatile creatures. Careful and inscrutable in handling,

sample content of Looking at Medea: Essays and a translation of Euripides' tragedy

- **read online Lords and Ladies (Discworld, Book 14) pdf, azw (kindle), epub, doc, mobi**
- **Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica online**
- *download Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*
- Secrets of Action Screenwriting (Fully Revised Edition) online

- http://schrolf.de/books/Anachronic-Renaissance.pdf
- http://betsy.wesleychapelcomputerrepair.com/library/Nomad-Codes--Adventures-in-Modern-Esoterica.pdf
- http://test.markblaustein.com/library/Criticizing-Art--Understanding-the-Contemporary.pdf
- http://fortune-touko.com/library/L---Bas--A-Journey-into-the-Self.pdf