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Myth, Magic, and Murderous Mothers: An Exploration of Myth and Medea

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Introduction

Many people talk about myth, yet few people clearly define it. Therefore, as a lover of mythology and a scholar of Classics, I decided to tackle this subject by defining the often elusive nature of myth. In the first chapter of this thesis I survey through various sources on its dimensions and aspects in order to establish a clearer definition of myth. In the second chapter I examine this definition by going through the various iterations of myths of Medea, a character whose nature is just as versatile and flexible as myth. Though I focus primarily on Euripides’ Medea, since it has had the largest impact on later versions of her story, I also look at Apollonius’ Argonautica and Pindar’s Pythian 4, as well as Seneca’s Medea and Ovid’s Metamorphoses. All translations in these chapters, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

These chapters are only part of the story. Such a broad/comprehensive study of myth and Medea was a necessary step in order to create my own visual version of Medea’s myth. Thus, my illustrated book is the culmination of all that I learned about this both awe and terror inspiring character, and attempts to capture all of the nuances that I found when translating primary sources, as well as when researching scholarly works on myth and Medea.
Chapter 1: What is Myth?

Myth stems from μῦθος (mûthos), a word encompassing a much broader set of definitions than one might initially suspect. According to Cunliffe’s Homeric Lexicon, mûthos (along with epos) means “something said, an utterance, a word; speech, discourse, words; speech as distinguished from action.” In the context of Hesiodic poetry, however, mûthos becomes “tale, fiction, lie.” But if myth is something spoken, can anything spoken be myth? With such a definition, one is flooded with more questions than answers as to what can truly count. And yet, strangely enough, this response to myth fits perfectly with how it operates. In this chapter, I will examine the components of myth which enable it to act as a flexible framework that people, readers and authors alike, can return to. In order to see this more clearly, let’s first address some of the less abstract elements of myth, as well as analyze both the strengths and shortcomings of defining myth through only a few of its components.

Components of Mythology

While there are as many definitions of myth as there are myths, a large number of these are concerned with covering only a few dimensions of myth at a time. One might focus on the narrative of a myth, which is often pieced together from a culture’s folklore, the body of knowledge that composes the events or legends used in myths. Another might instead focus on

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1 For a thorough analysis on how the following meanings changed throughout history, take a look at Lincoln 1999: 3-18.
4 We must tread carefully once we bring in folklore and folk tales, especially because they, along with fairy tales, are often quite carelessly lumped together with myths. Indeed, they are similar in that they “seem to know something we do not know… they also appear to hold our attention, to keep us in their sway to enchant our lives… we use them in diverse ways as private sacred myths or as public commercial advertisements to sell something… we refer to myths and as lies… but these lies are often the lies that govern our lives.” Zipes 1994: 3. Further, while myths and
its ideology, “the system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.”

As unsatisfactory as my initial set of definitions seems, these are worse because, by focusing only on these aspects, mythology appears static and passive. Indeed, mythology consists of variegated, complex, and even entertaining tales that inform a culture’s identity, and hence can serve as a powerful ideological tool. This is only a part of the puzzle, however. Mythology is also a cycle, a process of telling and retelling, of criticizing and revising. As a result, the stories that act as the framework of a myth are often deconstructed, picked apart so that some pieces can be suppressed while others can be selected, exaggerated, and so on throughout each iteration. Thus, a culture’s folklore or the stories that serve as a vehicle for myth are often adapted over time, and so we must also look at other aspects of myth in order to fully grasp its dimensions.

If we broaden our scope and next examine it through an ideological lense, we note that myths are frequently utilized by societies to explain natural phenomena, to understand their origins, as well as to promote and oppress certain groups and ideologies, rather than solely providing pleasure through their entertaining lore. Similarly, if we follow the Hesiodic definition, we see how this type of myth is something which is socially determined, and “then inverted so as not to appear as a cultural artefact.”

As Barthes would put it:

Myth consists in overturning culture into nature, or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the ‘natural’. What is nothing but a product of class division and its moral, cultural and aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as being ‘matter of course’; under the effect of mythical inversion, the quite contingent

folktales may have blended together in early oral traditions, in the spirit of Richard Martin, we must take massive synonimity (or in our case, similarities) with a grain of salt.


6 See Zipes 1994: 4-7 on his discussion of Barthes and Freud.
foundations of the utterance become Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion, in short the doxa…
(Image-Music-Text 165)

Thus, even under the guise of a seemingly harmless bedtime story, myth is a powerful ideological tool for a society. Therefore, another facet of myth is rooted within the values of a community.⁷ In order for stories, events, as well as people to become mythic, they require a “collective recognition” to do so because myths are “stories that are of psychological importance to a community.”⁸ However, this psychological importance is fluid, because myths can and do move within and across cultures.⁹

An interesting example of this cross-cultural action is the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, a familiar tale of lovers who are forbidden to see each other by their feuding families, and who both tragically and dramatically commit suicide. While in a later life the now obscure myth of Pyramus and Thisbe would become the global sensation Romeo and Juliet, only the names and the settings have really changed through time. The psychological importance of the myth has not

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⁷ Eliade 1963: 201 in his discussion of folk tales (both oral and literary) and myths, notes how although the former, in the West, “has long since become a literature of diversion (for children and peasants) or of escape (for city dwellers), it still presents the structure of an infinitely serious and responsible adventure, for in the last analysis it is reducible to an initiatory scenario: again and again we find initiatory ordeals (battles with the monster, apparently insurmountable obstacles, riddles to be solved, impossible tasks, etc.), the descent to Hades or the ascent to Heaven…” This has all become camouflaged when a tale abandons its “initiatory responsibility.” Zipes 1994: 2 remarks that “it is clear to Eliade that the myth [which he believes narrates a sacred history and tells us how, through deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence] preceded the folk and fairy tale and that it had a more sacred function in communities and societies than the secular narratives.” But what is more important to note is how myth seems to be equated to the secular fairy tale, the thing which people appear to use solely for pleasure. For more on fairy tales (and their relation to myth), see Zipes 1994.

⁸ Morales 2007: 3.

⁹ Even in ancient times, the ideological impact of myths changed, as much then as they do now; while the lore might remain largely the same throughout different iterations and contexts, the ideology of a myth could change for different culture ends.
changed much between its Roman and English iteration; it worked in both Shakespeare’s time and ancient times because both societies understood the romance of these characters as a serious challenge to powerful institutions.

Returning to the components of myth once more, it is easy to sense that there is still something missing, even when we piece together these ideological and folklore aspects to form a more complete definition. This is seen only when one wonders how mythology can exist simultaneously between both a cultural identity and even between different iterations of the same story. While returning to the Homeric definition of myth as something which is spoken still seems unsatisfactory, myth as speech or “a system of communication” offers us a definition that is broad enough to encompass whatever mysterious elements continue to elude our understanding of it.\(^9\) Through this definition we see that myth is not an object, a concept, or an idea, but instead is a mode of signification known as mythic speech.

Mythic speech is a form that is defined by the way it communicates its message rather than by its message alone. Despite the fact that we focus on the way it communicates, mythic speech should not necessarily be treated as a language, nor should it be confined to a single type of speech.\(^10\) After all, mythic speech can consist of “modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity.”\(^12\) This

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\(^10\) Barthes views myth as a semiological system, meaning that it is both “a part of semiology [the study of signification, or meaning, apart from its content], inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology, inasmuch as it is a historical science: it studies ideas-in-form.” (221) This semiological system is one which continues to undergo a political and historical development, though interestingly enough myth attempts to deny this development. In other words, myth uses material which already has a signification and reworks it to make it suitable for a particular purpose, i.e. “for communication in an ideological mode that appears non-ideological.” Zipes 1994: 6. An analysis of myth in this context is outside of the scope of this project.
\(^12\) Barthes 1972: 218.
may seem confusing, since there appears to be vast differences between all of these different modes of communication. However, whatever differences there appear to be between these materials of mythic speech, they are soon blurred or lost the moment they are caught and used by myth. Instead, these various mediums of mythic speech become unified in that they all “come down to the status of a mere language,” acting as a sum of signs or a linguistic system.

Pushing this idea of myth as a type of speech further, scholars like Barthes insist that what gives myth its meaning is something which is already a complete sign itself. In other words, the structure or form of myth is a meaningful sign inherited from culture, which adds further layers of meaning. Myth uses any and all existing signs, such as pictures, artwork, cultural phenomena, etc. This would make myth a type of manipulated speech, since it “takes material that already has a signification and reworks it parastitutionally to make it suitable for communication in an ideological mode that appears nonideological.” Therefore, through such a unique structure, myth creates a sign of double complexity.

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13 Despite the fact that all of these mediums become more or less the same thing once they are caught by myth, I would still like to address how this unification of the various modes of mythic speech is misleading. Do not mistake it to mean that these different ways of communicating myth have no meaning or merit of their own, even if, at the end of the day, they all become a “mere language.” Authors and artists often choose very different, personal ways to communicate myth. Choices in genre, in writing style, art style, art medium, etc. allow artists to convey different aspects of the same story, to promote different ideas through different styles. It is through these choices, in addition to others, that one version of a tale may live and multiply instead of another. This is certainly evident in the myth of Medea; consider how Euripides, in his Greek tragedy, alters the lore of how Medea’s children were killed so that she herself becomes the killer. Through this and by choosing to represent the myth of Medea in tragic form, Euripides emphasizes the issues that male heroic codes of honor pose in his society through her character.


15 Zipes 1994: 6; and Barthes 1972: 123: “myth is a double system, there occurs in it a sort of ubiquity: its point of departure is constituted by the arrival of a meaning.”
Let’s enter the plane of analysis and see all of this in action through an example of Barthes’:

I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young black man in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier.

(*Mythologies* 225)

Thus, myth’s structure allows it to act as a framework that people, readers and authors alike, can return to. After all, if what gives myth its form is a sign, chock-full of cultural meanings, then each rereading can offer an abundance of new meanings. Further, such a level of depth and meaning provides creators of myth with a complex and sturdy framework to challenge societal views or to pose all sorts of questions. One can see this in tragedies like Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, namely the *Eumenides*, where the Furies and Orestes go to trial over the murder of his mother Clytemnestra; here, Aeschylus uses the well-known story of the murder of Agamemnon and its well-known characters to establish his framework, in order to put Athenian values on trial.16

As one might expect, myth is still used in this way; ancient authors are not the only ones who used their folklore as a cultural framework to challenge their current values. Modern authors

16 Just as myth itself is a multi-layered semiological system, the same might be said of the characters used in myth. Some characters and their stories are signifiers, acting as the form and context which shape the story and values they hope to present, while other times characters are signs. In some myths, they might act as both. See Vernant 1988.
and artists alike, whether in direct adaptations of myths or loosely related stories, take advantage of the platform mythology creates in order to investigate ideas, explore values, or to generally pose questions about life. This is one way to understand why myth is something people continue to return to over the course of hundreds of years; myth has become the enduring oracle to whom a creator can pose questions to about the human condition, about the past and the future, or truly anything and everything. More interestingly, when modern authors and playwrights return to myth for these reasons, and as a result myths are adapted and set in different times and contexts than their original ones, their original meanings are not necessarily obscured, but enhanced.

As we shall see, this is evident in adaptations of the myth of Medea, namely of Euripides’ Medea, where the diversity of Medea’s status, that of an exiled foreign sorceress princess deity, coupled with her multidimensional, awe and terror inspiring character, provides authors and artists with a rich framework to pose their questions. Works like Toni Morrison's Beloved reincarnate Medea in order to investigate the infanticidal motivations of a more motherly version of Medea. To do this, Morrison strips her of her divinity. This Medea, named Sethe, is not only victimized but powerless, enslaved and seeking the freedom of herself and her children. In order to shield her children from a life of enslavement, Sethe comes to the same conclusion as Medea: she must kill them. This act is not only an act of motherly desperation though, but also an act of rebellion to financially hurt the slave owners as well as to prove that, while her power might be limited, she has control over her children’s fate. Of course, both Medeas are questioned about the price they must pay, and again both are united in their belief that they made the right decision, despite their pain. Seeing Medea uprooted and dropped into this setting, authors like T. Walters try to insist that Morrison’s Medea, Sethe, was more justified in murdering her children than
Euripides’ Medea, considering all of the things that Sethe had suffered. But such an observation ignores all that Euripides’ Medea has suffered as well within her own context. It is interesting to see how adapting the myth of Medea by placing it in more contemporary or relevant context changes the conclusions readers come to about the actions (and their justifications) of characters and perhaps even the morals of the stories.

**Creative Uses and their Potential Pitfalls**

Aside from seeking out and adapting myths in order to pose questions, there are other, often strange, interpretations and uses of myth. Perhaps the most obvious and entertaining, yet unpredictable use is that of personal identification with a mythological character. This may be as harmless as a child wanting to become Athena when they grow up, or, in less extreme cases, only for occasions such as Halloween. However, other variations of this identification, such as political leaders claiming either kinship with a mythological character or attempting to actually become one, are less whimsical and more dangerous.

While one typically promotes the good aspects of such an association, more often than not the negative associations are amplified just as much, if not more. A terribly fitting example comes straight from Roman history. Though busts and other artistic depictions of the emperor Commodus cast him as a striking figure in his borrowed lion’s pelt and Heraclean club, he took this association far, masquerading as the reincarnation of Hercules.\(^\text{17}\) Despite all the positivity and power Commodus strove to emphasize through roleplaying as Hercules, however, since his passing and throughout history, more negative associations live on than any of the good ones.

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\(^\text{17}\) This association, like many mythological associations made by emperors before Commodus (Caesar, Augustus, etc.), did very little to save his reputation after his passing. See depictions of him in sword-and-sandal movies like *Gladiator*, for a taste of his reputation with the common crowd.
Through this, it is clear that myth is not a secure method of personal aggrandisement, because “it always contains the possibility of a different meaning, and for the moral of a story to be reversed.”

An even less secure way of using and reading myth comes from those who would prefer to read myths as stories that contain nuggets of historical truth. These supposed nuggets, however, are so hopelessly entangled with fiction that they are impossible to trace or extract. This use of myth (i.e. this reading) is dangerous, first and foremost because it ignores how myths are exploited for political purposes. Instead, ones who use myth in this way must acknowledge that it would be more fruitful to look at who is telling the myth and why in order to see how

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18 Morales 2007: 53.
19 See Morales 2007: 14-18 for her discussion of kernels of truth as an example, specifically where she tries to argue that Bernal 1987 reads myths as “preserving ‘historical elements.’”
myths affect current history, rather than reading myths as containing documentary evidence of some potential historical event. Following the former would enable one to see all the gears of myth in motion, how it truly functions, but also would help one understand why myth still matters now. Myths’ continued influence on our culture, as well as how these older myths are appropriated to push ideas, is much more concrete.

**Myths about Myth**

All of these aspects, uses, and interpretations of mythology become obscured by some of the general misconceptions people have about myth. The most prevalent and incorrect of all of these is that there is one correct version of a myth, and that to know any other version is to have the wrong story. This attitude of mythological correctness is either shattered when one reaches a reconciliation between the version one knows and the various versions one hears, ultimately creating a new, collaborative iteration of a story in the process, or it is reinforced when one sticks to one’s own sacred version, insisting that the other is a lie.

Historically, where does such an attitude come from? The Romans are partly to blame. Their approach to Greek mythology was mythography, an intensive and exhaustive compilation of myths which students obsessively memorized. Though they were not the first to have done this, the way they prized and utilized such texts in their education remains unparalleled.20 Mythographers were authors of handbooks of mythology, compiling as many myths as possible into encyclopedias of myth. In addition to establishing one narrative of mythic lore, they created “ingenious genealogies, citing, and sometimes creating sources as authorities for their

20 Mythography was alive and kicking earlier than the appropriation of Greek mythology by the Romans.
information.”\(^{21}\) Even if mythographers perpetuated this idea that there was only one main version of a myth, one can see how they were also innovators of mythology. Mythographers not only fabricated sources for their information, but it is likely that they fabricated a lot of the narratives in their mythographies as well. Interestingly enough, this behavior is mirrored in the authors, artists, creators and even readers of myth today, who often give the impression that there is one main version of a myth from which they derived their inspiration, and that “myths are traditional tales, [untouched as they are] handed down over centuries.”\(^ {22}\)

Part of the multiplicity of Greek myth stems from its origin in an oral culture. Before many of these myths assumed a written form, “there existed an ancient Greek oral storytelling tradition [in which] words were, as Homer himself often characterizes them, ‘winged’ rather than inscribed” and thus, in the beginning, the stories we “cherish as books took shape not as silent texts but rather as audible story-performances.”\(^ {23}\) Milman Parry is largely credited for rediscovering this ancient Greek oral tradition when, in the early twentieth century, he tackled the Homeric Question of “who was Homer?” Parry portrayed the \textit{Iliad} and the \textit{Odyssey} as “products of a generations-long process of composition in performance” in which the oral tradition is “a living inheritance, passed down from one epoch to another and refashioned by each performer.”\(^ {24}\) The complex reality of the unwritten heritage of these works, namely their dynamic nature between and within performances, forces us to accept that there is no single, canonical version of a myth. Further, one must also confront how authors throughout history

\(^{21}\) Morales 2007: 23.  
\(^{22}\) Morales 2007: 23.  
\(^{24}\) Foley 2007: 2.
recorded as well as changed versions of the myths they had heard. In short, there is no one correct version of a myth. A single myth can take on many shapes and forms, and this adds a new dimension to the flexibility inherent in myth.

**The Parallels between Medea and Myth**

Truth is not in the least important here, Medea is a myth. Besides the truth about Medea cannot ever be known, even admitting that there may be one. Let's speak about reality rather than about truth. For all the Medeas are true. They all contain the truth of those who tell them; that is what is interesting in the study of myths. Each interpretation is significant for a period, for an idea. These fables say more about the evolution of humanity than most historical documents.

*(Les Grands Désordres, 169, Marie Cardinal trans. van Zyl Smit)*

We have looked at some of the various ways myth can produce meaning. All that remains is to apply this analysis to a particular myth, namely the myth of Medea. We will find that the flexibility inherent in myth, one which enables it to permeate all sorts of levels of meaning, is reflected in the many layers of Medea’s character. Each facet of her identity is complicated, each conflicting element harmoniously woven together so that Medea acts as the perfect vehicle to examine the human condition and thus embodies the nature and purpose of myth itself. Medea is an incredibly multidimensional figure, as expressed in Marie Cardinal’s quote. Further, the often complicated and hard to pin down layers in Medea’s character make her appear more human, more fleshed out than any other mythic character.

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25 See Mastronarde 2013: 44. “Attic tragedy almost always drew its plots from heroic myth, and the authors wrote with the expectation that their audience had a certain familiarity with poetic and oral traditions… the Greeks of archaic and classical times were aware that depending on the location and occasion of the telling… stories could be told in many different ways.”
Chapter 2: The Many Faces of Euripides’ Medea

Figure 2 (Left) and Figure 3 (Right): (2) Olivia Sutherland as a victorious Medea in MacMillan Films Medea Staging, image from Wikipedia. (3) Sonya Yoncheva as Medea in a staging at the Berlin State Opera, © Bernd Uhlig.

Figure 4: Fiona Shaw as the murderous mother in Deborah Warner’s compelling version of Medea, image from BBC News.

Crimson, black, or bloodied white, whatever colored garments modern costume designers fit her in, Medea’s crimes stain them. For all her divine heritage, ‘still-shots’ found in advertisements or critic’s reviews never capture any version of Medea in repose. Whether her arms are caught flapping wildly like a bird mid-flight while her eyes are afire with her barely contained fury, her knuckles bone-white as she grips her blade in the hopes of strengthening her resolve, or even as she stands rigid, torn between her sorrow and her schemes, these ‘Euripidean’
Medeas are all lionesses- always ready to pounce, if not to roar. No matter the production, the actress, the costume, these Medeas are more nightmare than woman. And yet… In their choice to emphasize the frenzy of the play, do they not perpetuate the myth that Medea is only a monster? Are any of these holistic reflections of Euripides’ Medea? Who is the Euripidean Medea that inspires so many of these modern retellings?

If ever there was a canonical identity for Medea, we can thank Euripides’ tragedy for it. This version, from 431 BCE onward, firmly establishes Medea as a woman of vengeance, as threatening as if she were a sister to the Furies, through the infanticide that modern audiences are all too familiar with. This impending act looms over earlier events of the play and overshadows many of the other facets of her character that are present. Additionally, many adaptations following Euripides’ Medea, whether ancient or modern, fail to recall the other layers of her identity. She loses her heroism, her humanity and even her divinity as they present her as a one-dimensional cardboard cutout of herself. In short, there is more to the Euripides’ version of Medea than this canonical identity (which seems to be the one that is perpetuated in modern adaptations) would let on. Even if one would argue that Medea’s character is only stone (28), one must acknowledge that it is, at the very least, a stratified one.

What will further complicate this ‘geological’ study is the presence of conflicting pieces within a single layer of Medea’s character. Each of these threads has various strands which muddle the overall color of who she is. While this may seem problematic, since it does prevent us from reaching any concrete conclusions on the genuineness of any one of these facets, this

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26 The cacophony of voices from the Nurse, the Chorus, as well as from Jason and Creon further creates a series of false Medeas which we then must reconcile with the true Medea.
rampant ambiguity is characteristic of myth and “invites the reader [as well as artists] to interpret or construct meaning, which is at the heart of myth’s [and Medea’s] enduring appeal.”

**Medea the Heroine and Helper-Maiden**

If, on the other hand, I myself must say anything of female excellence, to those of you who will now be in widowhood, I will say it in this brief address. Great will be your glory lest you do not fall short of your natural character, and greatest will be hers who is talked about the least amongst men whether for good or for bad.

(Thuc. *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.45. 2)

At first glance, Euripides’ Medea is not a heroine whose deeds any reader would proudly boast about. In fact, Medea usually elicits ambivalence from her audience because any enthusiasm she inspires as “a champion of women’s rights” and thus as a modern heroine is tarnished by her crime. Nonetheless, not only is Medea a heroine, but also a number of the elements that audiences find problematic (read: misogynistic) actually stem from her role as a hero. Further, this very Ariadne-like aspect of Medea, a character who shares many of the attributes of a helper-maiden with both her earlier Pindar and her later Apollonius counterpart, is a key component of her identity that is both alluded to and twisted multiple times throughout the play.

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28 Tessitore 1991: 587. Another point to address here is that the modern idea of a hero/heroine is different from the archetype Greek hero. People often conflate their modern definition of a hero with the ancient one.
Evelyn De Morgan’s Medea almost perfectly captures this romantic role, imagining Medea as a beautiful yet resourceful young woman stepping away from her rich surroundings in order to aid Jason on his hero’s quest. By positioning Medea as the center of her surroundings, however, this visual interpretation falsely suggests that the helper-maiden fits into more than a supporting role. While the helper-maiden is often more exciting than the typical princess, who takes little action for herself or her supposed lover, and while she also is the sole force (above even gods and other men) that enables the hero to accomplish impossible deeds, this role lacks the prestige and honors attributed to heros. Further, this role is also disrespected by the hero who, after profiting from her aid, later abandons or mistreats the hardworking helper-maiden.
Euripides’ tragedy starts with the Nurse woefully recounting the voyage of the Argo (1-45), marking the beginning of the many instances where this side of Medea is either hinted at or outrightly spoken about. However, his Medea steps out of the shadows of this role by reminding the audience, as well as Jason, of all the heroic deeds she helped him accomplish. While her outrage still fits within the confines of the trope, it is her outspokenness in establishing both herself and her actions as heroic that separates her from all helper-maidens before her. In a society which insists that the best woman is never spoken about, let alone speaks for herself, such an act truly earns her the label of heroine.

Following the themes set up in this first speech, the Nurse continues to describe Medea “in a series of vivid images as a… natural force” through comparisons to dangerous animals.29 These similes are often “the kind that figure in heroic similes,” but instances like the Nurse’s comparison of Medea to a bull link this emerging heroic side with the established helper-maiden side of Medea.30 While in Pindar’s Pythian 4 Medea saves Jason from the murderous fiery bulls he is forced to harness to a plough (220-227), in Medea she becomes them, “glowering like a bull” (ὦμα νιν ταυρομένη, 92-93) at her children. This association complicates Medea’s helper-maiden status from Pindar and previous traditions; it adds a new and interesting dimension by relating a usually male-serving, submissive role to a destructive force. Any seemingly straightforward roles or tropes, and thus any clear readings one might make of Medea’s character, are replaced by a more complex identity. Medea is not the typical heroine.

29 Boedeker 1997: 129.
Medea the Hero and the Murderess Mother

But then again, Medea is also not the typical hero. After all, there are certainly no other foreign, female, magical heroes in sight (at least within the classical tradition). However, there are many aspects of her heroic identity which mirror those of the great male heroes of Greek literature. As always with Euripides’ work, though, these associations are even more layered than they first appear. His choice to closely link Medea with both the Homeric hero Achilles and the Sophoclean hero Ajax forces her to take on a more comprehensive heroic identity than either of these heroes combined; Medea’s heroic code must contain values instilled from both traditions (or the prevalent traditions within each author’s time). What’s more, while such connections should be enough to establish Medea as a hero within her own right, because she is a woman, Medea seems to undermine the values of this new heroic code that she strives to follow. By creating this female hero, Euripides forces his audience to put all iterations of the heroic code on trial. In a similar vein, the way other characters in the play choose to see her heroic identity also reveals hidden threads of Medea’s character. In particular, Jason’s refusal to acknowledge her as his heroic equal forces Medea into the realm of the courtesan. In the face of this denial of her identity, her quest to be taken seriously as a hero leads her to follow a painful trajectory that will end in the murder of her children.

It is perhaps because of her close resemblance to Achilles that some sources marry Medea and the Homeric hero:

31 To some readers it may seem redundant to consider Medea both a heroine and a hero, but this distinction is consistently emphasized in this tragedy through both the implicit and explicit similarities described between her and other great Greek heroes.
33 See Gilhuly 2017: 30-42.
When your son comes to the Elysian plain, he whom the Naiads are tending in the home of Chiron the Centaur, although he longs for his mother’s milk, it is fated that he will be the husband of Medea, Aeetes’ daughter: so help your daughter-in-law, as her mother-in-law should, and help Peleus himself as well.

(Apollon. Argo. 4. 811-816)

In Euripides’ Medea, however, their similar natures are first evident in destructive force similes, when the Nurse complains that Medea pays no more attention to her friends’ words than would “a rock or a wave of the sea,” (πέτρος ἢ θαλάσσιος/κλύδων, 28-29). Scholars like Boedeker note how this image of Medea “closely resembles Patroclus’ complaint to Achilles: his parents must have been ‘grey sea and steep rocks’ (γλαυκὴ δὲ σε τίκτε θάλασσα/πέτραι τ’ ἥλιβατοι, Il. 16.34-5), so intransigent is the hero in the face of grave danger to his friends.”34 This comparison sets up the expectation that Medea will respond to Jason’s dishonor just as Achilles responded to Agamemnon’s, but more interestingly, it sets up the grievous acts which will later take them out of the human sphere.

This is only the beginning of such resemblances, though, and hardly the most ubiquitous. One of the most well-examined links between the heroic pair is their association with the lion; Medea is to a lioness as Achilles is to a lion. These similes, much like the destructive force

34 Boedeker 1997: 129.
similes mentioned above, continue to emphasize that these heroes are very much cut from the same cloth, especially where their fierce and terrifying heroic nature is concerned.\textsuperscript{35}

However, there are other similes which better explain the complex relationship between heroic identity and familial duty. Foxley presents the following two similes, the first from the beginning of book 16 of the \textit{Iliad}, which depict the unique and intense relationship between Achilles and his cousin Patroclus:

\begin{quote}
‘τίπτε δεδάκρυσαι Πατρόκλεες, ἣντε κούρη
νηπίη, ὥθε θέωσ᾽ ἀνελέσθαι ἀνώγει
eιάνον ἀπτομένη, καὶ τ᾽ ἐσσυμένην κατερύκει,
10δακρυόεσσα δὲ μιν ποτιδέρκεται, ὃφρ᾽ ἀνέληται:
tῇ ἱκελος Πάτροκλε τέρεν κατὰ δόκρυον εἶβεις.
\end{quote}

Why have you been weeping, Patroclus, like a baby girl who, running by her mother, demands to be lifted up, clinging to her fine robe, and holds her, but crying the girl looks at her, so that she picks her up? Like her, Patroclus, you let soft tears fall down.

\textit{(Iliad 16.7-11)}

This is reinforced by a simile in book 23, where Achilles is described as “a father who mourns while burning the bones of his son, a bridegroom, who dying grieves his wretched parents” (ὦς δὲ πατήρ οὐ παιδὸς ὀδύρεται ὡστέα καίων/νυμφίου, ὃς τε θανὸν δειλοὺς ἀκάχησε τοκῆς, 23.222-223). By making explicit the parent-child relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in these two similes, Homer is locating Achilles’ heroic identity within the domestic sphere, just as Euripides later does by presenting Medea as a mother with heroic aspirations. Further, in doing this, both authors begin to highlight what is wrong with the heroic code. In order to transcend

\textsuperscript{35} Foxley 2013 does an excellent job analyzing these lion similes; in short, these comparisons not only highlight the ferocity of Achilles and Medea in exacting their revenge, namely in battle, but also begin to reveal how the close and complex relationship Medea has with her children mirrors Achilles’ own relationship with his cousin Patroclus.
into divine forces and to exact their revenge, Achilles and Medea’s relationships, both of which are founded on *philia* (friendship), must be sacrificed. For Achilles, this is less complicated; he indirectly causes the death of Patroclus, one who is *philtatos* or most dear to him, which is essential in transforming him from a magnificent and terror-inspiring warrior into a godlike force, an immortalized hero.\(^{36}\)

Medea, however, has direct culpability in harming her dearest ones in her quest for heroism. This raises the following questions: Was it truly necessary for Medea to murder her own children in order to become a hero?\(^{37}\) How close could she really be to her children if she was able to murder them? This path is inevitable; by linking Medea so closely with Achilles, she is set up to kill those who are most dear to her, namely her children. After all, this archaic heroic code requires that *philia* motivate heroic action. This, how the heroic code is set up, is exactly what Euripides is calling into question by making Medea kill her children in her quest for heroism. On a man, the heroic code still seems natural, even when it requires that he cause harm to ones he loves. But by casting a woman in the role of a hero Euripides shows how it is not natural at all; motherhood (as well as brotherhood) *should* be at odds with child-killing. The fact that Medea is unpunished by the end of the play, instead becoming some sort of supernatural being, further emphasizes how unnatural and harmful the heroic code is in other spheres of life.

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\(^{36}\) For more rigorous analysis on the ways in which Patroclus is dear to Achilles as Medea’s children are dear to her, see Foxley 2013.

\(^{37}\) Scholars like Fritz Graf note that in other earlier traditions of the myth of Medea, this was not always the case. Instead, the Corinthians or other characters were responsible, which led to the establishment of various cults and rituals. For more, see Graf 1997.
Medea the Courtesan

Further similarities between Achilles and Medea occur when both of our heroes come to accept their animalistic nature for themselves:

τὸν δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν προσέφη πόδας ὡκὺς Ἀχίλλεὺς: ὡς σὺκ ἐστὶ λέουσι καὶ ἀνδρᾶσιν ὀρκία πιστὰ, οὐδὲ λύκοι τε καὶ ἄρνες ὁμόφρονα θυμόν ἔχουσιν, ἄλλα κακὰ φρονέουσι διαμπερὲς ἄλληλοισιν, ὦς σὺκ ἐστ᾽ ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ φιλήμενα…

νῦν δ᾽ ἄθρόα πάντ᾽ ἀποτίσεις κήδε ἐμὸν ἐτάρων οὐς ἔκτανες ἔγχει θύων.’

But swift-footed Achilles glared at him in reply: “Curse you, Hector, and don’t talk of oaths to me. Lions and men make no compacts, nor are wolves and lambs in sympathy: they are opposed, to the end. You and I are beyond friendship… Now pay the price for all my grief, for all my friends you’ve slaughtered with your blade.”

(Iliad 22.260-272, trans. Murray)

While Achilles has struggled throughout the course of the Iliad to find his place in the natural order of the world, this scene marks a turning point for him; by giving into his animalistic nature, Achilles exiles himself from the human sphere. This is the beginning of the end of his complicated journey, and he will soon find his place in the human realm with the help of Priam. Of course, Medea’s lionness association is just as complicated as this, just as multidimensional as the rest of her character. Consider how these associations shift throughout the play; Medea is first the lioness who fiercely protects her cubs (187-188), but through an interesting role reversal she later becomes the lioness that slaughters her own children.
Additionally, Medea’s acceptance of her lioness side comes after Jason’s accusation that she is more lioness than woman, just so she can insist that she has “bitten” (1370) him through the death of their children.\(^3\)

\[
\text{oùk }\varepsilon\text{t} \text{tis }\xi\tau\iotaς \tauουτ’ }\ \text{èn }\ Ελληνις γυνη}
\text{èt} \text{l}
\text{p} \text{o} \text{th’, }\ \text{òn }\ \text{ge }\ \text{προ} \text{ó} \text{s} \text{t} \text{h} \text{en }\ ή\zeta \text{i} \text{ou} \text{n }\ ε\gammao\text{y}
\text{g} \text{h} \text{m} \text{a} \text{s} \text{e}, \ \text{k} \text{ê} \text{d} \text{o} \text{s }\ \text{è} \text{th} \text{r} \text{ôn }\ \text{òlê} \text{th} \text{r} \text{i} \text{ôn }\ \text{t’ }\ \text{ê} \text{m} \text{o} \text{i},
\text{lé} \text{ai} \text{n} \text{a}, \ \text{ou }\ \gamma\nu\alpha\iota\kappa, \ \text{t} \text{h} \text{is }\ \text{Τυρ} \text{p} \text{h} \text{i} \text{n} \text{id} \text{o} \text{s}
\text{Σκύλ} \text{l} \text{l} \text{i} \text{s }\ \text{è} \text{ch} \text{o} \text{u} \text{s} \text{a} \text{n }\ \text{à} \text{g} \text{r} \text{i} \text{o} \text{w} \text{t} \text{é} \text{r} \text{a} \text{n} \ \text{φ} \text{û} \text{si} \text{n}.
\]

No Greek woman would have dared to do this, before whom I thought you were worthy to marry, and a hateful and deadly match this has been. You are a lioness, not a woman, with a nature more savage than Tyrrhenian Scylla.

(Eur. Med. 1339-1343)

Medea responds: “Call me a lioness, then, if you wish, and Scylla who lives on the Tuscan cliff; for I have touched your heart in the vital spot” (πρὸς ταῦτα καὶ λέαιναν, εἰ βούλη, κάλει/καὶ Σκύλλαν ἢ Τυρσηνὸν ὄκησεν πέτραν:/τῆς σῆς γὰρ ὡς χρῆν καρδίας ἀνθηψάμην, 1359-1361) before eventually fleeing from Corinth on her inherited dragon chariot. This is where Medea’s association with lionesses takes a more interesting turn. While there are “numerous fragments from Machon’s Chreiai about courtesans, which parody the lines of Euripides’ Medea”, one in particular alludes to this closing scene.\(^4\)

\[
\text{ὑπερβολή }\ \text{δὲ }\ \text{τῆς }\ \text{Λεαίνης }\ \text{σχήμα }\ \text{τι}
\text{περαινομένης }\varepsilon\upsilon \text{παρά }\text{τ} \text{e }\ \text{t} \text{w }\ \text{Δημητρίω}
\text{εὐμερούσης, }\varepsilon\upsilon \text{i} \text{καὶ }\ \text{t} \text{h} \text{n }\ \text{Λάμιαν}
\text{τὸν }\ \text{βασιλὲ }\varepsilon\upsilon \text{μελ} \text{λῶς }\ \text{k} \text{ελητίσαι }\ \text{ποτέ}
\text{ἔπαινεθη} \text{γά} \text{t} \text{h} \text{´}, \ \text{ἡ }\ \text{δὲ }\ \text{τοῦτ }\ \text{ἀπεκριθή;}
\text{"πρός ταῦτα καὶ Λέαιναν, εἰ βούλει, κράτει."}
\]

\(^{3}\) Boedeker 1997: 132 makes the interesting point that Jason is not the only enemy of Medea who is “bitten”, and notes that the Messenger, when describing the death of the Princess, says “her flesh poured from her bones… through the ‘unseen jaws’ of Medea’s poisons (1201)” (132).

Going above and beyond, Leaina in the lioness position offered herself readily and found much favor with Demetrius: they say that Lamia also once rode the king gracefully and then was praised for it. And she answered in the following way: “in view of that take on Leaina too, if you want.”

(Ath. 13.577d, trans. Gilhuly)

This quotation by Lamia contaminates Medea by reminding us that leaina (lioness) has more than tragic connotations; it was also a common name for courtesans as well as a sexual position. Further, the lioness position required that the woman be on top. This allusion to Medea fleeing Corinth on her dragon chariot, flying over Jason, further reinforces a woman holding power over a man.

Medea as the lioness is only one of her heroic attributes which solidifies the association between Medea and courtesans. Gilhuly notes that Medea’s early interactions with Jason, in particular her confrontation with him in the agon of the play (446-626), demonstrate an “intertwining of female sexuality with the rhetoric of the masculine aristocratic sphere” that is present in the figure of the courtesan.40 Further, Medea makes it clear that Jason has “transgressed the Greek heroic code” by both hurting his friends (470) as well as by forcing Medea to do the same (483-487, 502-505), all in addition to the oaths he has broken with her.41 In his response to this, Jason “refuses to engage in the terms of aristocratic friendship that depend on reciprocity [and] a long-term relationship.”42 By emphasizing Aphrodite’s role in bringing them together (526-527), Jason refuses to acknowledge his debt of charis to her, implying that they are not “bound by the conventions of aristocratic reciprocity,” that she is not a

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40 Gilhuly 2017: 34. In particular, her emphasis on both philia (friendship) and charis (reciprocity) mark her use of the language of aristocratic friendship.
41 Gilhuly 2017: 34.
42 Gilhuly 2017: 34.
heroic equal to him.\textsuperscript{43} This denial continues, transitioning from a refusal to consider Medea a heroic equal into treating her like a prostitute when Jason attempts to offer her payment for his supposed debt to her (609-615).

In her later interaction with Aegeus, Medea further demonstrates both her heroic as well as her courtesan side. While the former is shown in part through the xenia-like relationship she maintains with him, one in which charis and philia are equally as emphasized as in her failed exchanges with Jason, the latter occurs through a similar series of transactions. In exchange for safety in Athens, Medea will end Aegeus’ childless marriage: “I will stop you from being childless, I will enable you to sow the seeds of children for I know drugs such as these” (παύσω γέ σ’ ὄντ’ ἀπαίδα καὶ παιδών γονᾶς/σπεῖραι σε θήσω: τοιῶδ’ οἶδα φάρμακα, 717-718).

After this interaction, however, Medea makes it clear that she intends to achieve honor, vengeance, fame, all trademarks of the male heroism she has inherited from male heroic figures, through a terribly great heroic sacrifice. While “Ajax sacrifices his life as does Antigone, Oedipus sacrifices his eyes and his home, Heracles his humanity, Philoctetes his revenge,” Medea makes “greater sacrifices to her honor” through what she describes as the sacrifice of her own children (807-810, 1053-1055).\textsuperscript{44}

In response to this very masculine side of Medea, the Chorus begins to address Medea by feminine titles, plainly calling her woman and mother as they hope to dissuade her from her plans (997-998). After Medea struggles between her role as a mother and her role as a hero, she ultimately resolves to follow through with her plans, choosing the “male roles of sacrificer and

\textsuperscript{43} “When Medea tries to relate to Jason as an aristocrat, he responds to her as a sex-crazy woman… Jason keeps throwing back in her face the implicit subtext of a woman trafficking in a man’s world- a context in which all she has to exchange is sex for profit.” Gilhuly 2017: 36.
\textsuperscript{44} Bongie 1977: 32.
avenging hero.” While Medea further likens herself to a warrior “girding for battle and taking up the sword” (ἀλλ᾽ εἶ ὀπλίζου, καρδία: τί μέλλομεν/τὸ δείνὰ κάναγκαία μὴ πράσσειν κακά;/χγ’, ὅ τάλαινα χείρ ἐμή, λαβὲ ξίφος, 1242-1245), she acknowledges that she is also a wretched woman who will kill her beloved children.

Euripides establishes Medea as a character whose aspirations for male heroism are entangled with inescapable female concerns, through both her associations with motherhood and prostitution. While these aspirations and concerns should in fact be at odds with one another, they are instead perfectly fitting under the heroic code; her natural, deep love for her children is the exact reason why she must kill them if she wants to be a hero. By having everyone, Medea included, struggle to reconcile these so obviously disparate spheres, as well as by having Medea come out on top in the end despite how grotesquely wrong her actions appear, “Euripides is in fact criticizing the system of values that produced such results.”

Medea the hero is as complex as myth itself. On the one hand, there are many elements of her heroic identity which are at odds with other threads of her character. We have seen how her speech, closer to that of a male aristocrat than a common Greek woman, emphasizes her privileged status and simultaneously clashes with her disadvantaged social status as a woman. However, as often as these individual characteristics which comprise her heroic identity are at odds with other facets of her character, on the whole Medea’s heroism is shockingly well-suited to seemingly unrelated spheres. In particular, her heroism highlights her animal brutality, her courtesan side and her motherhood. Through this, she is able to represent both privileged and

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46 Bongie 1977: 32; see also Boedeker 1997 and Mastronarde 2013: 18.
underprivileged groups at the same time, enabling her to act as an even more complicated yet flexible framework for scholars and artists to build off of.

**Medea the “Feminist” and Modern Heroine**

With her refuge in Athens secured, Medea is ready to set her plan into motion. To accomplish this, Medea appears to give up on appealing to Jason as a heroic equal, and instead chooses to play the role of the stereotypical woman. Through her use of these tropes, Jason “seeks no analogies for Medea [though he describes himself with different metaphors...] he still does not see her as anything but a typical member of the ‘female race.’”

What does it mean that when Medea is presented as a stereotypical woman it is only through the perspective of a horribly misogynistic character? What’s more, what does it mean that the author only has Medea pretending to be the typical woman, playing with Jason’s misogyny to harm him, rather than writing her as one? Does this make Medea a feminist?

A number of scholars would argue against feminist readings of Medea. After all, “the Greek tragedy cannot simply be interpreted as advocating women's rights” even if this is the route the modern playwrights and artists have chosen to explore and advertise most frequently. Through this, Medea is now a more marketable character; audiences can largely put aside their conflicted feelings about the rest of her identity as they rally in support of her. Yet in spite of the apparent scholarly consensus that the play is too nuanced to be reduced to solely a feminist reading, the theme of “the subjugation and domination of women by men” dominates these

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48 See Knox 1977: 21: “The Medea is not about woman's rights; it is about woman's wrongs, those done to her and by her.” See also Harrison 2000: 26: “Those wishing to discuss Euripides' own views on women can, in fact, find passages in Medea to support the view both that he was a proto-feminist and a misogynist.”

adaptations and thus “Medea has become a symbol for women and an icon of feminism.”\textsuperscript{50} Whether it is the scholars or the artists who have the right of it, feminist writer Marie Cardinal’s point still applies. And so, following Cardinal’s lead, let us instead analyze the elements of the play which lead modern artists to view Medea as a feminist work, as well as what further complexities they reveal about Medea’s character.

While Medea already has the sympathy of the Chorus before she even leaves the house, it is her speech (230-265) which earns her their silence and thus their support in getting revenge. Medea appeals to the plight of women, listing out the various injustices which still resonate with modern audiences:

\begin{verse}
πάντων δ’ ὁσ’ ἔστ’ ἔμυσχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει γυναικές ἐςμεν ἀθλιώτατον φυτόν:
ὡς πρώτα μὲν δεῖ χρημάτων ὑπερβολὴ
πόσιν πρίσσθαι, δεσπότην τε σῶματος
[λαβείν: κἂκον γὰρ τοῦτ’ ἐτ’ ἄλγιον κακὸν].
κἂν τὰ δ’ ἄγων μέγιστος, ἥ κακὸν λαβείν
ἡ χρηςτὸν: οὔ γὰρ εὐκλεεῖς ἀπαλλαγαί
γυναιξίν οὐδ’ οἶον τ’ ἀνήνασθαι πόσιν.
ἐκ καὶνὰ δ’ ἐθῇ καὶ νόμους ἀφιγμένην
dεῖ μάντιν εἶναι, μὴ μαθοῦσαν οἶκοθεν,
ὅπως ἄριστα χρησται ἐνευνέτη.
κἂν μὲν τάδ’ ἤμιν ἐκπονομένασιν εὑ
πόσις εὐνοικῆ μὴ βίᾳ φέρων ζωγόν,
ζηλωτὶς ἄριστοι θυμαίνεν, ἵνα μὴ, θανεῖν χρεῶν.
ἄνὴρ δ’, ἄτεν τοῖς ἓνδον ἂθηται ἐννῦν,
ἐξοι μολὼν ἔπαυσε καρδίαν ἀσῆς
[ἡ πρὸς φίλον τιν’ ἡ πρὸς ἕλικα τραπείς]:
ἠμῖν δ’ ἀνάγκη πρὸς μίαν ψυχήν βλέπειν.
λέγουσι δ’ ἡμᾶς ὡς ἀκίνδυνον βίον
ζόμεν κατ’ οἴκους, οἱ δὲ μάρινται δορί,
κακὸς φρονοῦντες: ὡς τρίς ἄν παρ’ ἀσπίδα
στήναι θέλοιμ’ ἄν μᾶλλον ἡ τεκεῖν ἀπαξ.
\end{verse}

Of all beings that breathe and feel, we women are the most unfortunate: first we must buy a husband, master of our bodies, at

\textsuperscript{50} van Zyl Smit 2002: 103.
an unreasonably high price, [this unfortunate thing is more painful than others]. And the outcome of our life’s striving hangs on this, whether we take a bad or good husband: for divorce is dishonorable for a woman, and it is not possible to refuse marriage. And when a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her husband’s household, she must somehow devise, since she has not learned it at home, how she shall best deal with her husband. If, after we have spent a great deal of effort on these tasks, our husbands live with us without resenting the marriage yoke, our life is enviable. Otherwise death is preferable. A man, whenever he is annoyed with the company of those in the house, can go elsewhere and rids his soul of its boredom [by turning to some male friend or age-mate]: but we must fix our gaze on only one person. Men say that our lives are free from danger at home while they fight with the spear, how wrong they are: I would rather stand three times in battle with a shield than give birth once.

(Eur. Med. 230-251)

Medea deserves praise for bringing attention to the overwhelming misogyny that permeates the classical tradition. Her coherent articulation of women’s oppression is an effective tool to combat centuries of women’s silence. Therefore, modern adaptations, which often place a lot of focus on this aspect of Medea, are not exaggerating its importance. Yet, any feminist elements presented here are a double-edged sword. We must take care in how we characterize the *Euripidean* Medea’s sincerity; such characterizations are never as straightforward as they appear.\(^{51}\) After all, Medea uses this speech as a manipulative act to win over the chorus of Corinthian Women, and such a motive can and does undercut many of the positives of her alleged feminism; Medea’s words may or may not be contaminated by her motivations.

\(^{51}\) Any artist, actor, writer, etc. is free to interpret a character as they wish in *their* adaptation of a play, and this is made all the more fun when the original artist has created a character as complex and thus as open to interpretation as Medea. But to later claim that their version is the sole correct interpretation or representation *of the original* is both arrogant and incorrect.
These motives become clearer when, as this speech continues on, Medea begins to distance herself from the Chorus. She seeks not only to link her suffering with those endured by the Corinthian women, but instead to establish that her suffering is worse:

\[ \text{ἀλλ᾽ οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸς πρὸς σὲ κἀμ᾽ ἦκει λόγος:} \\
\text{σοὶ μὲν πόλις θ᾽ ἦδ᾽ ἔστι καὶ πατρὸς δόμοι} \\
\text{βίου τ᾽ ὄνησις καὶ φίλων συνουσία,} \\
\text{ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἐρημοὶ ἀπολλὰς οὖσ᾽ ὑβρίζομαι} \\
\text{πρὸς ἄνδρός, ἐκ γῆς βαρβάρου λελημένη,} \\
\text{οὐ μητέρ᾽, οὐκ ἀδελφόν, οὐχὶ συγγενῆ} \\
\text{μεθορμίσασθαι τήσδ᾽ ἔχουσα συμφορᾶς.} \]

But your story and mine are not the same: you have a city and your father’s house, the enjoyment of life and the company of your friends, but I am without relatives or a city, I am suffering outrage from my husband. I was carried off as treasure from a foreign land, and have no mother, no brother, no family to shelter me from this disaster.

(Eur. Med. 252-266)

With this assertion, Medea is not only representing herself in the recognizable idiom of a victim, she also uses it to secure the Chorus’ silence in order to punish her husband, as well as his bride, for his betrayal through any means possible. Further, while Medea uses the truth of her victimhood to manipulate the Chorus, these ‘facts’ are just as up to interpretation as the rest of her. Medea is no passive victim. In many ways, she plays “an unusually active, ‘male’ role” in her own marriage, which is shown through “the unusually assertive, quasi legalistic way in which she pleads her case to the chorus, Jason and Aegeus” in addition to “her adoption elsewhere of the ‘heroic’ stance and values in pursuing her vengeance.”\(^{52}\) Thus, there appears to be some disconnect between the victim Medea speaks about versus the victim she truly is. As easy as it would be to interpret this misrepresentation as a sign of deceit, Medea is still a victim

\(^{52}\) Gill 1996: 161.
even if she has not experienced each and every injustice she lists.\textsuperscript{53} The Chorus even validates her unique victimhood, in addition to praising the importance of her first speech. They emphasize that Medea’s general complaints against Jason and Creon’s behavior “represents a reversal of poetry’s silencing of women through the centuries” as well as its “maligning of them as sexually unfaithful (410-30).”\textsuperscript{54} Is the Chorus merely deceived, overly eager to agree with anyone who gives a voice to their suffering?\textsuperscript{55} Or is the Chorus right to praise her eloquence and sympathize with her specific situation?

All in all, those who are too eager to label the Euripidean Medea one way or the other often miss the complexity which makes her a fantastic and fascinating feast of inspiration for artists, and thus what makes Medea mythic and enduring. Whether we choose to view Medea as a genuine modern heroine or not, it should be clear that whatever Medea presents about herself, both in personality and in word, should never be taken at face value.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{53} Points like these may seem to undercut the impact of her speech because she does not appear to be the same type of victim that she is insinuating herself as in that speech. However, Medea is still very much a victim, though one of her own making more than she might care to admit. For instance, Medea’s role in choosing Jason as her husband is unique in part because she won him not with money or a dowry “but [with] heroic deeds” of her own, as well as because she not only leaves her family behind, but slaughters her brother in order to insure her escape Gilhuly 2017: 34. Thus, her resulting isolation from her family and her city stems from her actions and Jason’s together, though none of this is to say that Jason has not wronged her in choosing to break his oath to her, as well as in essentially forcing her and her children into exile. Though this usually would eliminate much of the sympathy one would feel for a character, in some ways this act makes Medea’s character more relatable. But really, does Medea have to suffer (in any capacity) to be a feminist? Does she have to go through the same things as everyone else in order to be able to speak for them?

\textsuperscript{54} Foley 1989: 74.

\textsuperscript{55} See Mastronarde: 2013:16-26.

\textsuperscript{56} In my first chapter it is made clear that flexibility in meaning is a key feature of myth. This is one of many things being represented in the multidimensional features of Medea’s character.
Medea the Foreigner or Race and Medea

As a woman, Medea already belongs to a separate, lower race than men in the eyes of the ancient Greeks.\(^57\)

Immediately, he made an evil for men for the price of fire: for the famed limping god formed the likeness of a shy maiden from earth as the son of Chronos willed… For from her is the race of women and female kind, from her a deadly race and group of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no help meets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth. And as in covered hives bees feed the drones whose nature is to do mischief- on the one hand, by and throughout the day until the sun sets the bees are busy and lay white combs, the drones stay at home in covered hives and reap the toil of others into their stomachs- so Zeus who thunders above

\(^{57}\) See O’Higgins 1997: 120-122.
made women to be an evil to mortal men, with a nature to do evil things: and he gave them another evil to be the price for the good that they had: whoever avoids marriages and the sorrows that women cause and will not wed reaches a deadly old age without anyone to care for his years: and although he at least does not lack livelihood while he lives, yet, when he is dead, his kin divide his possessions among themselves: and as for the man who chooses the lot of marriage and takes a good wife suited to his mind, evil constantly struggles with the good: for whoever happens to have disobedient children lives with unending grief in his soul and heart, and this evil cannot be healed.

(Hes. Theog. 570-572, 590-612)

This passage on Zeus’ commissioning of the creation of Pandora, and thus the birth of the race of women, illustrates the extent to which women were both foreign from and inferior to men. Further, it explains that women were viewed as a necessary evil if men wished to live on through their children; if women are not seen as leeches, exploiting their male partners as drones in a beehive reap the toil of others, then the offspring they produce cause other struggles. Yet unlike the typical woman depicted in this passage, however, Medea’s inferior and foreign status is compounded because she is also barbarian.

Interestingly enough, Medea’s foreign status is one of the constants of her mythic identity, and it is not always explored in the negative way one might initially suspect. Medea is always a foreigner “who lives outside of the known world or comes to a city from outside; each time she enters a city where she dwells, she comes from a distant place, and when she leaves that city, she again goes to a distant place.”58 Scholars like Fritz Graf note that this foreignness is a characteristic element of both the goddess Hecate, whom Medea worships “above all others and

name[s] as [her] helper” (395) and who is a goddess of magic and a goddess of crossroads, and of Artemis, a goddess of the outdoors whom Medea serves in some versions.

There are some ancient authors who investigate this foreignness more than others, and a number of them have even accentuated it by not only presenting the Colchian Medea as belonging to a different ethnic group than the Greeks, but to another race as well. Near the end of Pindar’s account of the expedition of the Argonauts, the Argonauts “violently mingled with the black-visaged Colchians” (212-13) once they arrived in Phasis. This unexpected epithet seems to stem from Herodotus (2.103-4), “who explains the existence of a black-skinned people at Colchis as the result of the ancient conquests of Sesostris.” However, it is equally as likely that this epithet comes from Medea’s divine heritage: “Medea was the granddaughter of the Sun, and it was believed in antiquity that a dark skin was the result of being burned by proximity to the sun.”

Medea’s skills in magic further suggest another origin for Pindar’s “black-visaged Colchians.” In book 3 of the *Odyssey*, Helen’s potion/drug mixing reminds us that Egyptian women were famous for their skills in sorcery, since she learned her own skills in such arts from Polydamna, wife of the Egyptian King Thon. According to book 2 of Herodotus’ *Histories*, Egyptians were believed to have customs and cultural norms different from all other groups, so by “calling the Colchians ‘black-visaged’ and thus reminding his readers of their Egyptian origins,” Pindar establishes just how foreign Medea’s culture is to Jason’s.

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59 O’Higgins 1997: 118; I find it hard to entirely agree with O’Higgins conclusion that Pindar must be referring to a real group of black-skinned Colchians since this conclusion feels unsupported by any substantial evidence.
60 O’Higgins 1997: 118; and Lucr. 6.722.
61 O’Higgins 1997: 118.
For those who have only read Euripides’ version, this idea might seem surprising, since Euripides does not go into as much detail about the nature of Medea’s foreignness as other ancient authors do.\(^3\) In fact, Euripides makes no mention of her race. However, Euripides’ Medea is still clearly foreign, and the issues she faces as someone who is not a part of the ethnic majority are not only present in the text but are comparable to/parallel the issues of many other underrepresented or oppressed groups today. For example, consider how Jason uses the fact that he brought Medea to Greece as a way to escape his debt of charis to her:

\[ \text{oipē γὰρ οὖν ὀνήσας οὐ κακῶς ἔχει.} \\
\text{μεῖζω γε μὲντοι τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίας} \\
\text{ἐύληφας ἢ δέδωκας, ὡς ἐγὼ φράσω.} \\
\text{πρῶτον μὲν Ἑλλάδ᾽ ἀντὶ βαρβάρου χθονὸς} \\
\text{γαῖαν κατοικεῖς καὶ δίκην ἕπιστασαι} \\
\text{νόμοις τε χρήσας μὴ πρὸς ἱσχύος χάριν:} \\
\text{πάντες δὲ ἔμη γῆς ἐπ᾽ ἐπῆμες} \\
\text{ὄροισιν ὴκεῖς, οὐκ ἂν ἦν λόγος σέθεν.} \]

So far as you did help me, you did well. Yet in return for saving me, you got more than you gave, as I shall make clear. First, on the one hand, you now live among Greeks and not barbarians, and you understand justice and the rule of law, with no concession to force: on the other hand, all the Greeks have learned that you are clever and you have won fame: but if you lived at the edge of the world, there would be no talk of you.

(Eur. Med. 533-544)

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\(^3\) See Mastronarde 2013: 23: “The first point to make is that Attic tragedy deliberately chooses to portray persons and events at a distinct remove from contemporary reality. The mythic past is, in some sense, a foreign country, to which contemporary categories are applicable only through a filter of difference. Kings and princely heroes like Jason and Creon represent to the audience ‘the other’ almost as much as Medea does…” Even if an ancient audience felt as separate from Jason as they did from Medea, however, Jason certainly inherited their Greek chauvinistic attitude, and thus had more potential to relate to his audience than the foreign Medea.
Instances like this prove that the modern interpretations which cast people of different races as Euripides’ Medea, rather than the Greek/Eastern European Medea of Maria Callas or the White Medeas of Fiona Shaw and Helen McCrory, are not entirely reimagining or modernizing her character. The finer details of Jason’s assertion need little to no tweaking to make an impact on a modern, immigrant audience.

Modern artists are different in that they are attempting to use their racially diverse Medeas to explore contemporary race issues, whereas ancient authors merely used them to ‘other’ Medea. But their changes to Euripides’ Medea are not out of line (or as novel as they appear) with what Euripides has set up by simply making her foreign; the way he presents how her foreignness is viewed by others, namely by Jason, is still relevant. Further, by presenting her as a foreigner, Medea is able to stand outside of ancient Greek strictures on gender. The tale of the barbarian Artemisia of Herodotus’ *Histories* is an excellent example of this:

\[
\text{τὰ τὲ γὰρ ἄλλα, ώς ἔιρηται, αὐτὴν συνήνεικε ἐς εὐτυχίην γενόμενα, καὶ τὸ τῶν ἐκ τῆς Καλυνδικῆς νεός μηδένα ἀποσωθέντα κατήγορον γενέσθαι. Ξέρξην δὲ εἰπεῖν λέγεται πρὸς τὰ φραζόμενα ὁί μὲν ἄνδρες γεγόνασί μοι γυναῖκες, αἰ δὲ γυναῖκες ἄνδρες.’ ταῦτα μὲν Ξέρξην φασὶ εἰπεῖν.}
\]

As I have said, all this happened to bring her luck, and also that no one from the Calyndian ship survived to accuse her. It is said that Xerxes replied to what was told him, “My men have become women, and my women men.” They say this is what Xerxes said.

(Hdt. 8.87-8.88, trans. A. D. Godley)

Thus, modern artists’ changes remind us of how malleable Euripides’ Medea is. Euripides certainly presents overpowering aspects of her character, such as her divine heritage, her status as a princess, a renowned sorceress, and so on. While these facets often overshadow her underpowered aspects, the fact that both sides are present adds a multidimensionality that
continues to captivate artists. What’s more, this gives artists a lot of leeway in how they choose to depict her without losing any of the original Medea; whether presenting Medea as a Mexican immigrant as in Luis Alfaro's production *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles*, a Black slave as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or as a member from any other underprivileged group, their Medeas still feel like Euripides’ Medea.

**Medea the Sorceress**

![Figure 6: Jason and Medea, painted by John William Waterhouse in 1907. Image from Wikipedia.](image)

![Figure 7: Frederick Sandys’ Medea, painted between 1886-1888. Image from Wikipedia.](image)

Despite the overwhelming power Medea’s magical abilities seem to hold over audiences and artists alike, Medea the sorceress exists primarily offstage. This role is an image too tempting for artists to resist rendering, and the sheer number of these images alone has enlightened even the most uninformed of audience members of what to expect. Thus, not only
are many lured in by they promise of magic, but they continue to remain enchanted by the end of the play in spite of any reservations they have on the other facets of Medea’s character.

The power of this spell would be understandable if Euripides’ Medea offered us more than this promise of magic, and yet, while many characters fearfully allude to these divine abilities, Medea’s powers never take centerstage. This is first evident in her interaction with Aegeus, where Medea briefly mentions that she is skilled in potions: “You do not know what a lucky find you have made in me. I will put an end to your childlessness and cause you to beget children, for I know the medicines to do it” (εὑρήμα δ’ οὐκ οἶσθ’ ὠν ἡφηκας τόδε:/παύσω γέ σ’ ὁντ’ ἀπαίδα καὶ παιδῶν γονάς/σπεῖρας σε θήσω: τοιάδ’ οἶδα φάρμακα, 716-718). Just as the audience never sees this promise come to fruition (at least in this play), Medea’s revenge on Jason’s bride also takes place off stage (1136-1231). The complicated nature of Medea’s magical abilities lies in the fact that, despite its overwhelming presence, it continues to elude our sight.

Medea’s powers exist in every iteration of her story, more strongly in some than in others. The formidable sorceress of artist’s imaginations comes from the Medeas of both contemporary and later traditions. Beginning with the former, Pindar’s Pythian 4 initially presents us with a Medea so spellbinding that her oracular powers (11-57) immobilize the powerful demigods aboard the Argo, harkening back to the “Sirens’ monstrous spell whereby men cannot move to save their lives.” Even the prophecies of the striking sorceress Circe (Od. 12.37ff), at the very least an equal in magic to her niece Medea, do not hold such a power over their audience.

And yet, this aspect of Pindar’s Medea (466 BCE) is as complicated as anything Euripides himself would conjure up. Medea, while initially the Muse who immobilized her audience, “has herself fallen victim to the poetic/magical skills of Jason and Aphrodite” through a divine tool known as the ἵνυς.65

μῖζαν Αἰήτα παρ᾽ αὐτῷ. πότνια δ’ ὀξυτάτων βελέων
ποικίλαν ἰγγα τετράκαμον Οὐλιμπόθεν
ἐν ὀλύτῳ ζεύξαισα κύκλῳ
μαίναδ᾽ ὄρνιν Κυπρογένεια φέρεν
πρῶτον ἀνθρώποισι, λιτὰς τ’ ἐπαοίδας ἐκδιάσκησεν σοφὸν
Αἰσονίδαν:
δόρα Μηδείας τοκέων ἀφέλοιτ’ αἰδῶ, ποθεινὰ δ’ Ἑλλὰς αὐτὰν
ἐν φρασὶ καιμέναν δονέοι μάστιγι Πειθοῦς.

But the ruler of the swiftest darts,
Cyprogeneia, binding
the dappled wryneck bird
on a four-spoked indestructible wheel
first brought the maddening bird
to mankind and thus taught the son of Aeson
skills in invocations and incantations,
so that he might strip Medea of all of the deep respect
she held for her parents and that Greece, fiercely desired,
might set her whirling, as she blazed in her soul,
With the scourge of Persuasion.

(Pind. Pyth. 4.214-219)

The goddess teaches Jason how to use this love charm, which will take away Medea’s respect for her parents (218), and thus enchants Medea so that he can use her help to procure the golden fleece; this proves that even “the woman with knowledge of magical plants is not safe from divine love magic.”66

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65 O’Higgins 1997: 123. This instrument is a bird of madness which is yoked to a wheel.
Apollonius of Rhodes (3rd century BCE) also presents us with a sorceress Medea who is equally as powerful as she is powerless. While this Medea is introduced as a priestess of Hecate, as well as an enchantress, our first proper scene with her in book 3 of the *Argonautica* presents her as a lovesick maiden. This is all thanks to Aphrodite once again, who recruits her son Eros to ensure that Medea’s heart would burn with passion for Jason (275-298). Having been shot by a love arrow, the conflicted yet powerful Medea follows the familiar helper-maiden pattern of aiding Jason through all of his heroic deeds such as yoking the fiery bulls, fighting the army of ‘dragon-tooth’ warriors, and slaying the dragon guarding the golden fleece (3.1026-1062, 3.1284-1407, 4.123-182) by putting her magic to use. While her magical abilities are further explored in instances such as her fight with Talos (4.1638-1688), it is the Roman authors who appear most eager to fully explore and take advantage of Medea’s powers.

While Ovid’s *Medea* is lost to us, he still finds ways to incorporate her into book 7 of his *Metamorphoses*, transforming her from helpless maiden to divine witch. While retaining her human form, Ovid’s Medea has lost much of her humanity. Scholars like Carole E. Newlands note that this work is not only the result of “interaction with the rich tradition of Greek” literature but it is also the result of an “interplay with the author’s own earlier poetry- with Medea’s letter to Jason in *Heroides* 12” as well as his aforementioned tragedy. This treatment of Medea is Ovid’s final attempt to “elucidate this complex myth” and unlike his Greek predecessors he “tells

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67 Graf 1997 notes that in similar myths that play upon the father-daughter-stranger triangle, like that of Theseus and the Minotaur, these magical abilities usually belong to a maiden’s father rather than the maiden herself. Medea’s powers in the *Argonautica* are unusual, but are perhaps preserved because of their existence in previous myths about her. Even contemporary Medea myths, such as Dionysius Scytobrachion’s interesting prose version of the Argonautica, maintain both Medea’s priestess status (though she is now a human-sacrificing priestess of Artemis) and her magical abilities.

her story in a linear narrative” that starts in Colchis, where she first meets Jason, and ends in Athens, where she flees persecution from King Aegeus. Following Apollonius’ lead, Ovid opens with Medea struggling to reconcile her lovesickness for Jason with her love and honor for her family (10-70) before she eventually gives in to Eros’ power and prepares Jason for his tasks. After this familiar episode, Ovid launches fully into myths of magic, focusing on both the heroic and horrific acts of Medea as a sorceress; unlike Euripides, Ovid “treats at length material largely suppressed [by the Greek author] in which Medea’s magical powers are central.”

The healing of Aeson (159-293), father of Jason, presents Medea as a remarkable enchantress in every way possible; while some portions read more like a spell book than a story recounting impossible feats, the power she demonstrates by rejuvenating an old man is so extraordinary that even the god Bacchus comes to request her aid. Despite her praiseworthy work here, Ovid presents the downside of her transformation from human to witch by showing how Medea uses the good reputation she has won in order to accomplish horrific deeds. The daughters of Pelias, for example, hear about the healing of Aeson and rush to hire Medea to save their own father (297-349). Medea then cruelly convinces them to chop their father into pieces, thus killing him. Much like the end of Euripides’ Medea, Ovid has his Medea escape on her dragon chariot to King Aegeus of Athens. It is after trying to poison his son, Theseus, that Medea, in a last show of magic, vanishes suddenly, escaping “from death in a dark whirlwind [with] her witch-singing raised” (Effugit illa necem nebulis per carmina motis, 424).

Seneca only amplifies the magic found in all of these previous traditions. His Medea, who is equal parts fury and magic, shares many similarities to her Euripidean counterpart, and

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70 Newlands 1997: 178.
yet her humanity is even less present than Ovid’s witch. An awe-inspiring nightmare, this Medea perhaps most closely resembles the frightening figure which many modern plays strive to represent:

accingere ira teque in exitium para  
furore toto. paria narrentur tua  
repudia thalamis: quo virum linques modo?  
hoc quo secuta es. rumpe iam segnes moras:  
quae scelere parta est, scelere linquenda est domus.

Armor yourself with anger, prepare to wreak destruction with full rage. Let the tale they tell of your divorce match that of your marriage. How should you leave your husband? Just as you followed him. Now break off sluggish delays; the home begotten in crime must be left in crime.

(Sen. Med. 51-55)

This wrathful opening monologue aside, Medea’s interactions with the Nurse (150-179) hint best at the power waiting to be unleashed. No matter how often she is reminded of all she has lost, Medea does not doubt how valuable she is: “Medea remains, here you see sea and land, iron and fire, gods and lightning” (Medea superest, hic mare et terras vides/ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina,166-167). Seneca’s Medea is so magical that even her fury is bewitching.

Each of these versions establishes and showcases Medea’s role as a sorceress while maintaining a distinct focus. Pindar and Apollonius present us with Medeas who are as powerful as they are powerless. Ovid, in turn, focuses on her transformation from helpless maiden to divine witch, while Seneca’s witch is inhumane from the start. Though Euripides’ Medea is perhaps the most influential iteration of Medea’s story and yet has the least amount of magic, all of these versions come together to inform the way Medea’s magical abilities are presented today. The complexities present in the other facets of the Euripidean Medea’s character are not missing here, even though it appears that a lot of her sorcery occurs offscreen. Instead, the unseen magic
hanging in the air is reminiscent of the elusive, mystical elements of mythology. This magic, much like these elements, continue to leave us with more questions than answers, more curiosity than satisfaction, as any good framework is bound to do.

**Medea the Goddess and *Deus ex Machina***

Because she was a foreigner she could kill her children; because she was a witch she could escape in a magic chariot. She embodies the qualities which the fifth-century Athenian believed to be characteristic of Orientals.

*(Page, *Euripides: Medea*, xxi)*

While both earlier and contemporary sources make note of Medea’s divine heritage, none have utilized it in the way Euripides’ *Medea* has. Autors like Hesiod throw Medea into a long catalogue of divine women, briefly mentioning her birth:

> Αἱτὴς δ᾽ ὑὸς φαεσιμβρότου Ἡλίου κούρην Ὀκεανοίο τελήντος ποταμοῖο 960γῆς θεῶν βουλήσιν Ἰδιάιαν καλλιπάρην. ἦ δὲ οἱ Μηδέαιαν ἐύσφυρον ἐν φιλότητι γείναθ’ ὑποδιαίτεισα διὰ χρυσῆν Ἀφροδίτην.

And Aeetes, the son of Helios who shows light to men, took to wife fair-cheeked Idyia, daughter of Ocean the perfect stream, by the will of the gods: and she was subject to him in love through golden Aphrodite and bore him neat-ankled Medea.


While here Hesiod only notes her relation to the sorceress Circe (957), her aunt, Apollonius explores it more deeply, having the pair meet in book four of the *Argonautica*. Apollonius appears to be in the minority of authors who do so, however. The majority of sources, like

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71 Though scholars like Page oversimplify (and racialize) the divine nature of Euripides’ Medea, we shall see just how complex she is. This facet of her character is not as rich as others, and perhaps as a result of this, is often less explored than the other aspects of her character.
Hesiod, leave something to be desired; they do the bare minimum in trailing through Medea’s divinity.

Scholars like Mastronarde note that Euripides’ plays often feature the gods as characters, and yet, Medea does not. In their place, there are references to Medea’s descent from Helios, god of the sun, as well as invocations to him (cf: 406, 746, etc.) calling him down as a witness to the adherence or violation of oaths. Frequently, Medea and the Chorus invoke Zeus, the god of oaths, but aside from these appeals to the gods, the only conspicuous sign of divinity is the dragon chariot, which seems like a spontaneous intervention to both the cast of characters as well as to the audience. Medea did not escape in a magic chariot because she was a witch. Instead, another fantastical and yet more logical reason for her chariot escape is that it allows her to take on the role of deus ex machina, one which no other heroes have held. While “numerous passages in the play cast Medea in the mold of an Achilles, an Ajax, or an Antigone,” there are essential differences: Medea is not dead by the end, but triumphant; “she, unlike them, does not feel herself abandoned by the gods but supported by them.”

The chariot emphasizes the uniqueness of Medea’s role as an enforcer of justice; in a strange twist, Medea fulfills both her and the Chorus’ wish for divine vengeance upon Jason by becoming a goddess. However, this isn’t the whole story. Just as Jason is punished, Medea is also punished by the deaths of her children. While the gods make no direct appearances, Medea is not the only divine enforcer of justice. Further, as much as the gods are on her side, Zeus has “his own score to settle with Medea, notably for the murder of her brother… [Zeus’s

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72 See Mastronarde 2013: 31-32.
73 See Mastronarde 2013: 32; and Kovacs 1993: 50-51.
74 Kovacs 1993: 48; see also Knox 1977: 203-211.
intervention] both destroys Jason in a manner that befits his perjury and insures that Medea will be punished as well.”  

Medea, both her own divine savior as well as divine tool, is a cold goddess. In order to grow into this divine heritage so that she might save her heroic reputation, Medea loses not only those who were most dear to her, but also her humanity. Euripides’ highlights this as her dragon chariot pulls her as far away from the human realm as physically possible; while Jason demands to be let into the house, Medea suddenly appears overhead, looming over him in her chariot. Medea’s distance from the human sphere and thus her position in the divine sphere is further cemented by her speech at 1378-88, where she announces “the institution of a festival, as gods do in tragedy.”

With this transformation, we see that the Nurse’s initial assessment of Medea was not so far off the mark. Medea comes to embody the “threatening, intransigent, inhuman character the Nurse [initially] suggested.” Unlike in earlier instances where the Chorus was constantly at odds with Medea’s aspirations for male heroism, the Chorus leader makes no remarks to disparage this divine Medea:

Zeus on Olympus has many things in his treasure-house, and the gods accomplish many things unexpectedly:
What men expect is not fulfilled,
But the gods find a way to achieve unexpected things.
Such is the outcome of this act.

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75 Kovacs 1993: 54.
77 Boedeker 1997: 132.
This almost defeated reminder of the status quo between mortals and immortals, where it is made clear that Medea’s success and Jason’s suffering could only have come about by the will of the gods, indirectly highlights exactly what is wrong with the heroic code; it is inhuman, not natural. While Medea has not technically died, the mortal Medea we have come to know and examine is dead, and this Medea, stripped of all these rich facets, not only remains but flies off largely victorious.

**Uniting the Threads of Medea (Conclusion)**

In chapter one, I noted that the intrinsic flexibility of myth allows it to pervade multiple levels of meaning. In contrast, in chapter two I explored the scope of the flexibility inherent in nearly all aspects of Medea’s character. This flexibility suggests that Medea, specifically Euripides’ Medea, reflects as well as embodies the polyvalence of myth. While I looked through many iterations of the myth of Medea, I maintained a distinct focus on Euripides’ *Medea*, since it has influenced many of the modern versions of her story.

I started my examination of Medea’s facets by evaluating her role as a helper-maiden and heroine, and later returned to it to investigate her alleged feminism. I saw how Medea both broke and conformed to the established stereotypes that are characteristic of these roles. For example, helper-maidens are often the sole force which drive and enable heroes to accomplish impossible deals, and yet this role is often less prestigious and honorable than the heroes’. Thus, Medea’s outspokenness in establishing her actions as heroic separates her from previous helper-maidens who traditionally remain silent.
After noticing that Medea is not the typical helper-maiden or heroine, I then saw that Medea is also not the typical hero. This goes beyond the fact that most heroes are males whereas Medea is a woman, and instead this complication arises from the fact that Medea’s heroic aspirations are tangled with her maternal inclinations, as well as her courtesan side. On the surface, anyone would agree that these characteristics are in conflict with one another. However, as I dug deeper, I realized that Medea’s heroism is not only shockingly well-suited to these unrelated roles, but that these facets have to be linked in order to explain Medea’s infanticide. While these heroic and maternal aspirations should be at odds with one another, they are instead perfectly suited to one another under the heroic code; Medea’s deep love for her children is the exact reason why she must kill them in order to be a hero.

With this complicated analysis of three entangled aspects of her character complete, I then traced through the different depictions of Medea’s foreignness. This marked the beginning of instances where Euripides underplayed certain aspects of Medea’s character, at least in comparison to how other sources handled certain facets. Though Medea’s foreignness rarely takes centerstage, Euripides’ depiction has enough vagueness to allow later interpretations to play with this aspect of her as they wish. In particular, I saw how modern interpretations which choose her foreignness as their focus still feel like Euripides’ Medea.

A similar situation appeared when I looked into how Euripides’ depicts Medea’s magical abilities. Both contemporary and later iterations of her myth chose to emphasize this aspect over others, showcasing her abilities while maintaining their own focuses. While the Greek sources, Pindar and Apollonius, present readers with magical Medeas who are as powerful as they are powerless, the Latin sources, Ovid and Seneca, amplify her abilities to present her transition
from powerful mortal to inhumane, divine witch. Though Euripides has his sorcery take place offstage, the complexities I analyzed in these other versions, as well as in other facets of Medea’s character, were still present here. This unseen magic mirrors the elusive, mystical elements of mythology in that it also leaves readers and audience members with more questions than answers, or more curiosity than satisfaction.

Lastly, I covered Medea’s role as a goddess. While it is noted that Medea has divine heritage in various works, this aspect of her is often underrepresented or underutilized. Euripides goes further than other sources in emphasizing her divine heritage by not only mentioning it throughout the play, but by making her the *deus ex machina* of the tragedy and thus her own divine enforcer of justice. However, just as Jason pays dearly for his transgressions through the death of his children, this act also punishes Medea, which further complicates her divine status. Further, while Medea’s role as a cold goddess appears to erase every other facet of her character and her humanity, in truth it reinforced the complicated relationship between the other, often contradictory aspects of her character.

I found that one of the best ways to explore and interpret all of the nuances and aspects of Medea, and thus of myth, was through art. Instead of focusing on capturing all of her facets in one image, I chose to dedicate an entire book to examining the aspects presented in this chapter. From my study of book arts, I have learned that books are the perfect medium for a complicated study like this because they are all about establishing patterns as well as breaking them, just as Euripides does in his presentation of Medea. As I thought of which patterns to establish in my own version, one of the first things I decided was that my Medea had to be blonde. Though I knew the color schemes and various other elements would differ from section to section, I
wanted my Medea (and her divine heritage) to always stand out by painting her with flashing eyes and golden hair. I did this not only to separate my Medea from the one of previous traditions, or even to separate her from her surroundings within my work. But rather, I wanted to force the viewers to attempt to grasp the wonderful variety and dimensions of her character by showing them the same figure, always distinct, caught in different emotions and different actions from scene to scene. Further, I felt that this sort of consistency between sections would also link the distinct facets of her character.

On the topic of breaking patterns, however, while I communicate a lot of the material explored in chapter two through traditional illustration, I also incorporated many different kinds of materials into a traditionally flat and smooth medium. I chose textured papers and pop-up elements that allow my book to lay flat and thus preserve its structure. I did this not only to add texture and life into my pieces, as well as to further emphasize how Medea is multidimensional, but also to make my artwork more accessible. As often as books and illustrations are accessible ways of communicating information, not everyone can take away as much information from a visual medium. Thus, the book structure and materials I chose provide alternative ways of expressing what I hoped to capture and express in my drawings.
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