Euripides’ Medea

- The Life of Euripides
  - His Life, Death & Reputation
  - His Works
- Medea
  - Background: Jason and the Argonauts
Euripides’ Life and Accomplishments

- Euripides
  - born around 484 BCE
  - from a prominent family
  - nothing reliable known about his education
  - his career began in the tragic competitions in 455 BCE in which he earned a third prize
Medea

- The Structure of the Text
- Drama Terminology
- Characters
Medea: Structure of the Play

- Medea is a *Tragedy*:
  - A literary work dealing with very serious and important themes, in which a dignified tragic figure meets destruction through some personal flaw or weakness.
  - Sophocles was interested in the *situation* that produced the *tragedy*.
  - Euripides was more fascinated with the *psychology* of the characters involved in *tragedy*.
Medea: Structure of the Play

- Classic Greek Dramas had only one setting. No scenes were changed.
- Messengers would often deliver longer vivid speeches describing action that occurred off-stage.
Greek Drama begins with a prologue, a prologue usually depicts a preceding.

The prologue is shortly followed by the an entrance of the chorus

The chorus would often have a leader, the choragos. The chorus would often provide the popular opinion during on-stage debates or arguments.
Medea

- The *chorus* was traditionally composed of fifteen actors and played the part of city elders.
- After the prologue, the play would alternate between episodes (choral odes).
- The episodes are similar to what we think of as acts (play within a play).
Themes

1. Deceptive gifts
2. *Marriage* and sexual antagonism
3. Religion vs. the law
4. Female poetics:
   
   Is Euripides a feminist? Is *Medea* about women's rights or women's wrongs?
Some Background…

- Jason was on a quest to capture the Golden Fleece from Medea’s father…for Protection
- She helps him steal it.
- In the process, they take Medea’s brother and sail away.
- Medea’s father (Aeetes) goes after them.
- So they cut up her brother into tiny pieces and throw overboard
- Aeetes has to stop and collect the pieces
- Thus, Jason and Medea escape
Killing of Children: Taboo

- Killing of children in literature is a literary motif called *kindermord* (Medea or Oedipus as a baby)

- The death of children often represents the killing of some dimension of the parents
Modern Day Analysis (the psychology)

- LOS ANGELES--(BUSINESS WIRE Journal….MORE THAN 600 MOTHERS KILL THEIR CHILDREN EACH YEAR

- "There are six major personality profiles of mothers who kill their children," said Los Angeles psychologist Robert R. Butterworth, Ph.D........
1. **The Mentally Ill Mother**: A woman who may be acutely psychotic.

2. **The Retaliating Mother**: A woman who is jealous of her husband and/or envious of her children.

3. **The Depressed Mother**: Research shows that more than a third of the mothers killed their children under the influence of depression.

4. **The Unwanted or Unexpected Mother**: Unwanted or unplanned children.

5. **The Merciful Mother**: A sick or diseased child is killed by the mother to protect the child from pain and suffering.

6. **The Battering Mother**: In a fit of rage, they accidentally batter the child to death.
Interpretations: Ambiguous Medea

1. Medea as *witch*?

- Poison that brings life and death
- Chariot of Helius
2. How is Medea a “hero” in this play? Characteristics? (Note Greek definition of a hero on p. 1003)

- Central figure of the play like Oedipus
- Exhibits countless heroic characteristics: daring, rashness, resolve, eloquence, inspires fear, etc.
- Like heroes, she is concerned with her glory and being treated unjustly or with disrespect (Achilles), especially being the object of laughter
- She is a help to her friends (e.g., Aegeus), dangerous to her foes
- Deceit and cunning over brute strength (Heracles)
- Confident that the gods are on her side vs. Jason
- She prevails (cf. Oedipus: he too prevails in a way but is still blind)
3. How is Medea characterized as a god?

- "This is the gods' and my deed": sees herself as the gods' instrument and associate!
- Her farewell on the chariot of Helius = deus ex machina (reserved for gods only!); gives prophecy like god
- Cult in Corinth and Athens
- She’s not even punished in the afterlife but marries Achilles there! Why would he be a fitting mate?
4. How is Medea a beast?

- Savage, a lioness, tigress and Scylla
- Aristotle: anyone who cannot live in a partnership is either a god or beast.
- Other characters we’ve read about that fit this definition?
Reversal of Order in *Medea*

- **Marriage:**
  - Medea is from a far off place. Jason should marry a princess in the first place. To the people she’s merely a concubine.

- **Love**
  - Everything love touches causes death

- **Children**
  - The innocent die here/not the evil
  - The natural order of justice is reversed
  - Children are agents of death

- **Medea**
  - Mother kills her children. Kids die then parents…

- **The Princess**
  - Innocence dies an awful death

- **Creon (not the same character from Oedipus)**
  - Tries to save daughter, yet dies.

- **Aegeus**
  - Can’t have children, even though he’s married
Question…

- What Euripides doing in this play with the notion of sexism? (p. 1010-11; 1019)
Discussion

- With which character is Euripides the most sympathetic? Is she a hero or a villain?
- While he makes Medea the most affected of the two main figures, he also turns her into a sorceress and murderer (not just any murder…but of her children)
- On the other hand, Jason, who has acted wrongly, tries to defend himself. Does Euripides try to portray Jason as fairly as possible?
Much of *Medea* is concerned with oratory and being clever at speaking. During the same period of time, a group of philosophers known as the Sophists (who were not from Athens) offered lessons in how to speak cleverly.

In Athenian legal system, where one could be constantly sued by any Athenian citizen, it was useful to know how to speak cleverly.

What tricks of speech are used by Medea and Jason? How can we tell that they are involved in an oratorical contest? (pp. 1018-21)
The nurse shows some understanding of the character of Medea before we even meet her. While speaking to the children, she warns them of Medea’s nature (p. 1007).

How does this affect our initial impression of Medea?

Is she pitiable when we first meet her?

How about at the end of the play?

What makes her pitiable?
What’s missing in this play??

- Beyond the murder, the gore, the revenge, the anger, and the infidelity, what’s missing in this play? Why is the ending so unsatisfactory?

- Much like our discussion of Oedipus, we need a SAVIOR to make things right (to bring Justice), but we’re not provided with one!

- No real divine justice?
Finally, based on this text, what is bothering Euripides concerning Athenian culture?