EURIPIDES’ MEDEA
Prologue: Enter Nurse (1-48)

- Rejection of heroic past – wish it had never happened
- The betrayal of Medea and the broken oaths
- The house interior and the woman’s desperate state – hardened in her pain like rock, and like wild sea.
  - Medea’s terrible anger, desperate aversion towards children, and the Nurse’s fears about what she might do.......
  - The children enter with the Tutor at v. 46
Fear and pity for Medea. The news about her impending exile.

Repeated condemnation of Jason for his betrayal of philoi “that man is no friend (philos) to this house” (77); “he is guilty of disloyalty towards his friends (philoi)” (84).

“Oh may it be enemies, not friends, that feel her wrath!” (95)

“Children, go in, into the house” (100)
Prologue: chanted section shared between Medea and Nurse (96-130)

- For the first time we hear the screams from inside, while the children are on the stage (96)
- The nurse’s fears; the children exit into the house
- Medea’s incontrollable anger and despair at that moment:
  
  «O accursed children of a hateful mother, may you perish with your father and the whole house collapse in ruin!»

- Closure with the Nurse’s words of horror that worse may be coming
Entry of chorus of Corinthian women as response to Medea’s desperate cries. The Nurse, the chorus, and Medea from the interior share the entry song and chanting.

The women’s feelings of sympathy, but advice for restraint; Medea’s words about her isolation and her terrible anger.

The chorus condemns the betrayal of oaths and wishes that the traitors be punished.

The chorus asks the Nurse to bring Medea outside; the Nurse’s horror at Medea’s beast-like rage. Constant mentions of the house and its destruction so far.
The marriage of Medea and Jason was based not on the accustomed procedure of agreement between the groom and the kyrios (guardian) of the bride,

but on an official oath and handshake between Medea and Jason! (vv. 490-6, cf. ‘right hand’ vv. 21-22)

It was a ‘gentlemen’s’ pact! Medea plays with gender roles from the start.

Medea and Jason, Roman sarcophagus (2\textsuperscript{nd} a.D.) =>
1st Episode:
Medea’s exchange with the chorus (214-270)

- Medea on stage for the first time; very different from before (when she was out of sight): now she is completely in control (inside vs. outside)
- Responds to the chorus by describing her isolation and betrayal; the prejudice against foreigners.
- The famous speech about women as the most wretched creatures: the nightmare of marriage and the deadly danger of motherhood

“I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once”

- The chorus agrees to keep quiet; Medea starts plotting
1st Episode: Medea and Creon (271-357)

- Enter Creon with threats (from now on we will encounter successive scenes where male characters are contrasted with Medea; these scenes shed light on her plan as it develops, from a different point of view every time)
- He orders her to go in exile because he is afraid of her cleverness and the safety of his daughter
- Society and the prejudices against ‘cleverness’, according to Medea; Creon refuses
- Supplication by Medea (running motif; once already between Nurse and Tutor); the image of hands

“Have pity on them. You too are a parent: it would be natural for you to show kindness toward them. I do not care if I myself go into exile. It is their experience of misfortune I weep for.” (344-47)

- Creon allows her one day although he has a bad premonition. Medea accepts the exile.
1st Episode: Medea’s decision (358-409)

- Exit Creon; Sympathy by the chorus
- Medea rejoices at Cleon’s foolishness; her plans is to kill all three
- Fear about where to escape afterwards; what if she is caught and laughed at? Decision to use a feminine weapon, poison (although she flirts with the idea of using a sword -male/heroic weapon- and then die)
- Plan is incomplete, but Medea is adamant to execute it
- Medea’s obsession with heroic honour

“How do you read these lines of hers? ”

“And furthermore we are women, unable to perform noble deeds, but most skilful architects of every sort of harm.” (407-9)
1st Stasimon (410-444)

“Backward to their sources flow the streams of holy rivers, and the order of all things is reversed” (410)

The chorus on women’s treatment by men:

- The moral / cosmic crisis caused by the betrayal of the oaths
- The ideological representation of women by men in poetry – the ironic conviction that Medea will change this forever
- Sympathy to Medea for harsh fate and isolation (Medea embodies the most extreme negative experience of a bride)
2<sup>nd</sup> Episode: Medea and Jason (446-626)

- Enter Jason (immediately after the song about men’s injustice and the cosmic disorder)
- Euripidean “agon” (verbal contest) with structure of formal rhetorical agones: accusations by Jason, response by Medea, new response by Jason, quick exchange in a stichomythia (who has the last word?)
- Jason feigns interest: “I have come to see if you need anything”
- Medea’s outburst at Jason’s shamelessness and hypocrisy. The past, her benefactions to him, his supplication and their oaths/marriage (again the image of hand); his betrayal, and her and the children’s current despair
- Jason responds point-by-point; his benefactions: he made her into a ‘human being’!! < Greek culture, fame, relation to a royal family; accusations for sexual jealousy; wish that women were not needed for reproduction
- Final response by Medea and quick firing of arguments and counter-arguments; the ultimate estrangement of the two
2\textsuperscript{nd} Epeisode: Medea and Jason (446-626)

- How is each party characterised through this scene?

- Consider:
  - women and the stereotype for emotional reactions, and weakness with logic/logos;
  - Jason and his reputation as a hero
2nd Stasimon (627-662)

- The effects of *erotic passion*: for Jason now, or for Medea before?
- The chorus wish that they are never struck by this feeling
- Condemnation of betrayal of *philoi*
- Medea’s isolation: away from land, family, without support from *philoi*
3rd episode: Medea and Aegeus (663-823)

- Enter Aegeus; relationship of *xenia* and *philia* with Medea; expressed right from the start (664)
- From Delphi on his way to Athens. Anguish at childlessness, especially for his old age
- Aegeus learns about Jason and Medea
- Supplication to receive her in his *oikos*, and in return she will end his childlessness
- Aegeus’ oaths that he will not give Medea up when she arrives
- Medea and heroism, once again

«Now, my friends, I shall be victorious over my foes: I have set my foot on the path. (765-6)»
3rd Episode: Medea’s plan in its final form (663-823)

- The mood is darker now – the final form of the plan is announced: the bride will be killed with a poisoned robe, through the hands of her own children;
- She will also kill her children by Jason. She will devastate Jason’s oikos and leave; no hope for him for successors
- The psychopathology of filicide: ‘they are better off dead’
- Medea’s obsession with heroism: “Let no one think me insignificant and weak or quiet-tempered; I am just the opposite—harsh to my enemies, and well-disposed to friends. this is the life that wins most glorious renown”. (807-10)
- The chorus’ horrified reaction (816-18)
  - Yet will you bring yourself to kill your own offspring, woman?
  - It is the way to hurt my husband most.
  - And for yourself to become the most wretched of women.
- The anticipation of Jason
3rd Stasimon (824-65)

- The idealised image of Athens: moral and intellectual superiority; sacredness of space; natural beauty
- Horror at the thought of Medea as filicide
- How is it possible for a place like that to receive an filicide?

[In this wonderful construction of human civilisation], how is it possible that a mother kills her children?

“How will you summon up the strength of purpose or the courage of hand and heart to dare this dreadful deed?”
4th Episode: Medea and Jason (866-975)

- Enter Jason
- Mirror scene: Medea as submissive wife. Adapts herself to the model she had earlier rejected. “Well, we women are, I will not say bad creatures, but we are what we are” (889-90)
- Asks for children to come in – happy ‘family reunited’ picture
- Jason’s satisfaction that she has come to her senses.
- Medea mourns over her separation from the children
- Medea’s plea that the children stay.
- Notice position of characters’ bodies and height difference in every scene
- Preparation of the wedding gifts, robe and wreath. Exit children towards the royal house
Unlike most choral odes: not general reflections, but specific premonitions of events

The ‘bride of death’ imagery; distortion of marriage ritual; the fabrics as snares

Chorus predict horror and sorrow for all involved
5th Episode: Medea’s monologue; Medea and children (1002-250)

- Enter children and Tutor; the news about their revoked exile
- Medea’s screams of anguish
- Medea’s famous monologue in the presence of her children; struggle with decision; subsequent changes of mind; clash of maternal feelings and heroic passion:
  
  “But what is coming over me? Do I wish to suffer mockery, letting my enemies go unpunished? Must I put up with that?” (1049-51)

- Right hand, and embrace with children; soft touch, maternal love
- Exit children into the house
5th Episode: The Messenger’s speech (1002-250)

- Suspense heightened with short choral ode (not stasimon); the misery of being a parent: the parents’ horror at the childrens’ death.

- Enter Messenger; the horrific events in the palace. The moving scene of the princess’ dying and her father. (1136-1230)

- Medea’s determination to kill the children

- «Come, luckless hand, take the sword, take it and go to your life’s miserable goal! Do not weaken, do not remember that you love the children, that you gave them life. Instead, for this brief day forget them—and mourn hereafter: for even if you kill them, they were dear to you. Oh, what an wretched woman I am!» (1245-50)
The women’s horror, and pity for Medea.

“O light begotten of Zeus, check the cruel and murderous Erinys, take her from this house plagued by spirits of vengeance. (1258-60)”

The murder in the house (song and normal speech combined); the convention of the chorus’ entry into the skene

The myth of Ino: filicide and suicide; wrong sign
Enter Jason, wrathful over Medea
“She will have to hide herself beneath the earth or soar aloft to heaven if she is not going to give satisfaction to the royal house.”
The chorus announces that the children are dead; Jason orders to open the doors. We await an **ekkyklema** scene
Medea on Sun’s chariot, as a cosmic deity of revenge (more specifically ..... ?)
The final clash of the former spouses, Medea’s flight and Jason’s exit
Children and childhood in *Medea*

- One of the primary themes of the play; utterly important for its understanding

- The element of childhood and children fills almost every scene of the play, not just the beginning and the end – would you agree?
Children and childhood elsewhere in tragedy

- *Persians* and the destruction of war
- *Agamemnon* and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia

*Programme for Katie Mitchell’s* Oresteia, NT (1999-2000)
Children and childhood elsewhere in tragedy

- *Trojan women*, and the murder of baby Astyanax as the last act of the victors before they leave Troy
- *Hecuba*, and enemies killing each others’ children
- The *Electra* plays etc.

*Hecuba*, 2003, RSC, London
*Philia* in Greek culture

*Cornerstone of Greek social institutions, including oikos and marriage*

*Philoi* are people who are connected with blood relation and/or (mutual) obligations of care and benefaction: above all blood relatives, ‘loved ones’, but also spouses, guest-friends, suppliant and his receiver etc.
In seventeen plays, the central *pathos* is a violent act, actual or threatened, against a *philos* who is a blood relative. In the majority, the *philoi* are parent and child.

A. Parent harms child in seven plays. In Aiskhylos's *Eumenides*, mother, in the guise of her Furies, torments son. Six plays of Euripides also focus on violence of parent against child. Mother kills child in *Bacchae* and *Medea*, and in *Ion*, mother is about to kill son. Father kills child in *Herakles*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Hippolytos*.

B. In five plays, child harms parent. In Aiskhylos's *Libation Bearers*, son kills mother, in Sophokles’ *Oedipus the King*, son kills father and marries mother, and in the *Elektra* plays of Sophokles and Euripides, children kill mother. The consequences of matricide are the subject of Euripides’ *Orestes*. The stage action of this play represents many *pathê* about to take place among kin. Grandfather (Tyndareos) harms grandchildren (Orestes and Elektra) by urging the Argives to punish them. Uncle (Menelaos) harms nephew and niece (Orestes and Elektra) by refusing to protect them. Nephew and niece (Orestes and Elektra) attempt to kill aunt (Helen), and cousins (Orestes and Elektra) threaten to kill cousin (Hermione).

C. Fratricide is the subject of three plays. In Aiskhylos’s *Seven Against Thebes* and Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*, brother kills brother, and sister is about to kill brother in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris*.

D. Harm to other blood kin takes place in two plays. In Aiskhylos’s *Prometheus Bound*, Zeus tortures his uncle Prometheus, and in Sophokles’ *Antigone*, Kreon condemns his niece Antigone to death.

E. Belfiore (2000)

*MURDER AMONG FRIENDS: Violation of Philia in Greek Tragedy,* Oxford

Pp. 13-14
Childhood (and children as an idea) has a very strong presence in the play – and they are usually shown to be under threat.

The ubiquitous presence of the element of the child becomes a powerful tool for the exploration of the flaws of society, and the human construct of civilisation more generally.

So, as the play shows, not an aim per se...

Through them, the play explores social values such as honour and fame, the heroic ideal, the *oikos*, the role of genders in society, etc.
The opening of the play

- House interior, Medea’s state of rage and despair, the father’s betrayal of the family

- When this toxic mix is at its most intense, the children are asked to enter the house (fresh from their games outside); firstly blocked by Medea’s screams; then they enter.
KREON: Why force me once again by clinging to my hand?

MEDEA: Let me stay here, I beg you, just for this one day, to finish thinking out a plan for exile, and arrange my children’s future, since their father does not see fit to devise provision for his sons. Pity them! You’re a father too, with your own child—it’s reasonable that you should feel good will for them. I am not thinking of my own exile; I weep for them, that they’re involved in this disaster too.

KREON: My natural temper’s far from that of royalty; yet by respecting others I’ve spoiled many things. This time as well I see I’m making a mistake—but your request is granted, woman. Yet I say to you that if the next torch of the sun-god sees you and your sons within the limits of this land, then you shall die. These words of mine will not prove false.
Medea - Aegeus

Aigeus, I implore you as a suppliant, to pity me, yes, pity this ill-fated one! Do not stand by and see me banished all alone; accept me in your country, at your house and hearth. So may the gods fulfill your passionate desire for children; so too may you die a prosperous man. You don’t know what a lucky find you have in me: I’ll end your childlessness and make you capable of sowing fertile seed. I know of drugs for this.

AIGEUS: For many reasons I am eager to bestow this favor on you, woman; firstly for the gods, then for the birth of children that you promise me— as far as that’s concerned I am entirely lost.
In between: Jason and Medea

But you stuck to your folly, to your evil words about the royal house; this caused your banishment. Yet even so, I’m not one to reject my friends; I’ve come here, woman, with your best interests in mind, to keep you—with the boys—from being destitute or needy in your banishment. Exile is dogged

When I moved from the land of Iolcus and came here,
dogged by intractable disasters of all kinds,
what lucky find could I have made more fortunate than this: an exiled man to marry a king’s child? and not in need—I realized that everyone
flees from the path of an impoverished friend; also
to give my children nurture worthy of my house,
sow brothers for the children that I have from you, and then combine the families, bind them into one, to make me happy. Why do you need further sons? But it would profit me to help the children I have now by siring new ones. Is that plan so bad?
The ‘happy reunification of the family’

Medea, National Theatre of Greece (dir. Livathinos)
The Messenger scene

But her poor father didn’t know of the disaster. Arriving suddenly within the house, he fell upon the corpse. He groaned, folded his arms around her, kissing her, and said, “Unhappy daughter, what divinity’s destroyed you so dishonorably? Who has deprived me of you—me, an old man near the grave? Alas, my child, if only I might share your death!” When he’d ceased mourning and lamenting, then the old man wished to raise his aged body up, but that delicate robe adhered to him, the way that ivy clings to shoots of laurel. Awful was their wrestling match. He tried to raise his knee, but she would not let go. And if he pulled away by force, she ripped the aged flesh away from his old bones.
The final scene

*Medea*,
Y. Ninagawa
1984 =>

- What does the final scene mean to you?
- The de-humanisation of Medea (in Ninagawa’s production, neither male nor female; in Greek text, an Erinys)
- Medea as Erinys: the society, its pressures (on both genders) and its ideologies can produce monsters

Medea 2, D. Papaioannou
2008
Murder of children and social reality

Infanticide, filicide and domestic violence in general in a social context

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Source: C Pritchard, R Williams - report to be published in British Journal of Social Work
The representation of children in ancient theatre

Medea,
Y. Ninagawa <= 1984

Μήδεια,
National theatre of Greece 1997 (N. Kontouris)
Myth and tragedy

- Every new work of art was expected to give its own twist, smaller or larger, to the traditional myth.
- How innovative and how shocking was what Euripides did in Medea, i.e. to make the murder deliberate?
Myth and tragedy

- Other versions:
  - Murder of children by mistake
  - Murder by others (Corinthians/Creon’s family => accusations that she had killed them)
Medea as ‘Other’

- In traditional myth, Medea was Greek
- First verse of play: the crossing of the Clashing Rocks (Symplegades; imagined as gates), which divides the foreign space from the Greek space.
- Medea’s first exit from the gates of the house as allusion to that event (crossings of thresholds in theatre in general)
- The ethnic otherness of Medea is crucial to understand how she is treated by other characters
Medea’s thoughts about prejudice against the foreign; the false construction of the ‘other’ (emphasised by the constant emphasis on Medea’s isolation)

The first stasimon and the suggestion that women are constructs of poetic imagination, which is exclusive to men

Medea is in many ways presented as an ‘ideal’ wife and mother for Greek standards (dependent on marriage; sons for her husband)

Nowhere is it shown that Medea is full of raw emotion because she is a foreigner; her reasoning for her anger could not be more Greek

And in fact, the only character who mocks her for her ethnic otherness is Jason Ignore Page (1950s edition), who says that “Medea kills her children because she is a foreigner”!!
Medea is, however, constructed as the extreme ‘other’ for a patriarchal society

- Medea: barbarian, woman, witch, filicide
- Patriarchal prejudices to the extreme: a daimonic figure for patriarchy

[But we may understand her demonisation /de-humanisation on a completely different ground => it is the society that has created this daimon]
Medea as construct of prejudiced imagination => other characters of literature as constructs of hegemonic imagination

The Cyclops of the Odyssey and Odysseus’ colonialist ambitions....

The representation of native peoples by colonial powers in modern times
Medea’s situation embodies the negative experience that marriage could have been for a woman at its most extreme.

Medea’s journey from her paternal house and land, to her new house.

She was not only literally a stranger to her new house (as foreigner), but forever cut off from her paternal house, so that her abandonment from her husband means utter despair.
Medea’s oscillation between ‘Greek’ and ‘Other’

Medea’s oscillation between ‘good wife/mother’ (according to ‘Greek’ values) and destroyer of her house

Medea’s oscillation between ‘woman that gives life’ and ‘male hero, destroyer of life for honour’

The flaws and pressures of Ideology => the system itself, with its immense ideological pressures and flaws, drives its members to the opposite extremes
Medea and representation as hero

The description here and elsewhere has a clear epic colouring to it:

• Achilles’ reaction to his loss of Patroclus (18.205-14, 18.26-7, 18.32-4).
• Medea as rock and as sea storm (cf. Iliad 16.34-5)
• Like Achilles, she argues with her spirit (9.644-8)
• Like Achilles, she is described in language of beasts, creatures outside normal civilisation (9.410-16)

Medea’s obsession with losing her honour and being laughed at (e.g. 1365)

She lies there without eating, gives her body up to grief, melting away all of her time with tears, since she first heard of this injustice from her husband. She doesn’t raise her eyes, or lift her face up from the ground; and when friends try to offer her advice, she hears them no more than some rock or surging sea,
What is the reason Medea is portrayed as obsessed with heroic values, values so opposite to the value of life and family?
Thank you!
'Disgrace' by Carol Ann Duffy

But one day we woke to our disgrace; our house
a coldness of rooms, each nursing
a thickening cyst of dust and gloom.
We had not been home in our hearts for months.
And how our words changed. Dead flies in a web.
How they stiffened and blackened. Cherished italics
suddenly sour on our tongues, obscenities spraying themselves on the wall in my head.
Woke to your clothes like a corpse on the floor,
the small deaths of lightbulbs pining all day
in my ears, their echoes audible tears;
nothing we would not do to make it worse
and worse. Into the night with the wrong language,
waving and pointing, the shadows of hands huge in the bedroom. Dreamed of a naked crawl
from a dead place over the other; both of us.
Woke to an absence of grace; the still-life
of a meal, untouched, wine-bottle, empty, ashtray,
full. In our sullen kitchen, the fridge hardened its cool heart, selfish as art, hummed.

To a bowl of apples rotten to the core. Lame shoes
empty in the hall where our voices asked for a message after the tone, the telephone pressing its ear to distant, invisible lips.

And our garden bowing its head, vulnerable flowers
unseen in the dusk as we shouted in silhouette.
Woke to the screaming alarm, the banging door,
the house-plants trembling in their brittle soil. Total

Disgrace. Up in the dark to stand at the window,
counting the years to arrive there, faithless, unpenitent. Woke to the meaningless stars, you
and me both, lost. Inconsolable vowels from the next room.
30 January: History of Medea in performance with F. Macintosh