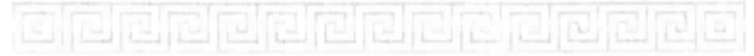


1

INTRODUCING MEDEA

Why should we care about a mythological figure who uses magic, kills children and is never punished? Is there something we can identify with? Does it matter that the mythological figure is a woman rather than a man?

One reason for this book is simply the fact that Medea still has a presence in modern society. Unlike figures of Greek myth who would be unfamiliar to most modern readers (does anyone remember Psamathe or Rhadymanthos?), the name Medea still holds a place in the modern imagination. (This volume will use the common form of her name, rather than the more literal transliteration from the Greek as 'Medeia'.)[1] We might suggest that her name remains in memory only because plays about her have survived, but even the subjects of surviving ancient plays, such as Hekabe or Thyestes, receive little attention outside classical circles. Medea, on the other hand, is known by those who have never read a Greek tragedy; the subject of art throughout the western tradition, she has been used as a figurehead by political movements, and her name is frequently mentioned when society confronts an act of infanticide, even though Greek myth tells of several other child-killers, such as Prokne or Ino. The name Medea means 'The Planner', and it may be her strategic powers which have caused her to be singled out for sustained attention.

Medea is not an obviously sympathetic figure for modern audiences. Her abilities and actions make her an unlikely focus for identification or the glamorisation which can attach to figures such as Herakles or Achilles. If we consider her fascination as part

of a gendered dialogue, focusing on powerful women, there are other figures of Greek myth who would equally deserve attention: Klytaimestra, who murders her husband Agamemnon, the story immortalised in Homer's *Odyssey* and in the most famous of Greek tragedies, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; Eriphyle, an ancient gold-digger who betrayed her husband for the sake of a necklace; the Amazons, warrior women who rode out to battle and famously invaded the city of Athens. This cast of powerful women all have affinities with Medea, but it is she who has remained pre-eminent.

This book has two interrelated aims. First, it will give readers an understanding of the background which is implied when modern artists speak of 'Medea' – the narrative framework, the origins and the meaning(s) to ancient cultures. Secondly, it will explore the myth and the source of its power – why the story of this one figure inspired so much attention in the ancient world, and how it has retained its popularity in the modern world.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MYTH

It is remarkable that the myths of ancient Greece are still current after more than two millennia of use, playing a role in a range of societies with divergent interests. How, then, do these myths survive? The ancient world can be seen to underpin western society, and ideas of cultural authority outlined by Seznec (1953) will be relevant to our discussions of the 'afterlife' of the myth in Chapters 8 and 9, where we will see the spread of the Medea myth as a global phenomenon. A further reason for the continued popularity of Greek myth is that of universality. The key idea, that human nature remains constant and that Greek myths speak to that core humanity, can be formulated in many ways. We can look to the psychoanalytical idea expressed by Jung that there are archetypes in the collective unconscious: Jung believed that we all inherit a mental set of patterns which we use to create our own place in the world, assigning roles to ourselves and to others from a limited number of 'archetypes'. The mental pattern book is the same across different cultures and periods of history, which is why, Jung believed, we are able to relate to ancient cultures as to our

own. A complementary approach is the anthropological stance associated particularly with the nineteenth-century theorist Andrew Lang, which argues that all human cultures progress via the same stages, so that similar motifs develop independently. When we look at a Greek tragedy or a Roman poem it is often easy to apply these stories to our own lives, ignoring the details and focusing on emotions or fundamental human concerns, such as family or love. However, this line of argument is deceptive, particularly when we are considering a figure as complex as Medea, so a few words of caution are in order.

The principle of universality stems from a set of ideas developed in the nineteenth century, when the idea of universality was popular in many fields. Many of the central ideas have been challenged by later intellectual developments. We will be looking at a number of approaches which could be termed 'universalising' as we proceed through the discussions, but it is as well to note some of the principal objections which could be raised.

The opposing view to universal theories comes from the idea of cultural and social constructs. Instead of positing a universal human nature, the idea of constructs emphasises the degrees of interaction between individuals and groups which can create new patterns of meaning. This principle can be taken further. Some have argued that even things which we might assume to be universal, such as the experience of the physical body, are subject to a process of cultural mediation. We may all experience the same biological phenomena, but the ways in which we understand and deal with the process are determined by society. For example, women's bodies have often been treated as inherently imperfect – the Hippocratic approach to women is well discussed by King (1998), and can be seen even today in the loaded term 'hysteria', a madness associated with having a uterus. Medea's action in killing her children places her at the centre of a complex web of ideas about the female body and the relationship of children to their mother, ideas which have social and political implications.

The idea of constructs warns us to be wary when we think we can transfer ideas or images from one culture to another. A striking example of this approach to mythology comes from Freud's use of the Oidipous myth. The famous play by Sophocles was, for its original

fifth-century Greek audience, not so much a play about psychological trauma as about the inevitability of fate. A story can have different meanings in two different contexts.[2] The story of a woman who kills her children can be variously interpreted depending on how a society understands the idea of 'woman', 'killing', 'children', etc. When we look back at a figure from ancient myth, there is a tendency to fill in the blanks and make a coherent picture based on our own beliefs and assumptions. In doing so we may create a false picture of Medea which tells us only about our own individual interests.

LAYERS OF MYTH

There was no canonical version of the story of Medea, and when we talk of myth, we are implying three different levels of story. First, there is the all-encompassing 'Greek myth', which comprises all the stories. Medea is involved in this wider context with many links to other figures – she is part of a nexus of stories, about Jason, Herakles, Theseus, Dionysos and others, which situates her in a complex set of relationships. Her partnership with Jason is central to both their stories, but the interactions with other figures contain much of interest. She is said to have restored Herakles' sanity after he killed his sons, linking the two infanticides. Her attempt to kill Theseus when he arrives in Athens makes her part of father/son dynamics as well as stepmother stories, and incidentally links to Herakles again: Theseus will offer sanctuary to the child-killer Herakles, just as his father Aigeus offered sanctuary to Medea. The wider context of Greek myth will be central to our analysis of the figure of Medea. A second level of 'myth' is the collection of her stories, 'the myth of Medea', a story made up of incidents told in different ways in different time periods. It is a story which overlaps with the stories of other mythological figures, and which can contain contradictory elements, such as the details of how her children were killed at her hand, or by accident, or by the people of Korinth. Finally, there are the specific 'instantiations' of the myth, that is to say the individual tellings of all, or part, of the story of Medea. The connection between the different layers of myth is complicated, and we should remember that works of art or literature which shape the material according to their own particular ends were seldom designed to give any comprehensive overview of the myth.

However, we are relatively well provided with information about Medea. She appears as the central figure in many ancient narratives and is also referred to in the stories of other major figures. Drawing upon the full range of sources we can construct a mythic biography for Medea. The major episodes are described most fully below, but the less well-attested, or less central, episodes and variants will also be discussed in later chapters.

MYTHIC BIOGRAPHY

1. The Golden Fleece. Medea is a native of Kolchis on the edge of the Black Sea, a region which was identified by the Greek world as on the fringes of civilised society. As the daughter of King Aietes, Medea is the granddaughter of Helios, the sun god, and niece to Kirke, the sorceress famed in Homer's *Odyssey*. Medea's mythical life is generally activated by the arrival of Jason and the Argonauts when they come to Kolchis to capture the Golden Fleece. Jason has been set this seemingly impossible task by his uncle Pelias, who is attempting to prevent the young heir from taking the throne in Iolkos. Medea falls in love with Jason and uses her magical powers to help him overcome the obstacles which Aietes puts before him. She leaves Kolchis with Jason, and kills her own brother Apsyrtos in the process. During the journey home, Medea causes the death of Talos, a bronze giant who threatens the Argonauts.
2. Medea comes to Greece as Jason's wife and uses her powers to rejuvenate Aison, Jason's father. There are also references to Medea rejuvenating Jason himself.
3. In Iolkos, Medea causes the death of Pelias, either on her own initiative or at Jason's request as he attempts to secure his position (there are no accounts which show Jason succeeding in gaining the throne of Iolkos). Medea demonstrates to Pelias' daughters (the Peliades) how she can rejuvenate the old, by killing an old ram which then emerges from her cauldron as a much younger

animal. Inspired by this, the daughters decide to procure the same anti-ageing treatment for their father, and proceed to kill him. Medea fails to perform the trick for the old man, who thus remains dead. Medea and Jason are forced to flee.

4. The story moves to Korinth, where Medea, Jason and their children find sanctuary. The most famous narrative resumes when Jason marries the princess of Korinth, who is sometimes called Glauke or Kreousa. Outraged by this betrayal, Medea causes the death of the princess and exacts terrible revenge on Jason by killing her own children, leaving Jason childless. This is the famous version told by Euripides, but other variants of the myth give different reasons for the death of Medea's children which do not make her a deliberate child-killer. In some accounts Jason is the ruler of Korinth and Medea his consort, or Medea herself is the legitimate ruler. In the Euripidean version, Medea then flees from Korinth and goes to Athens.
5. Medea is offered refuge in Athens by King Aigeus, who marries her in some versions of the story. When Aigeus' illegitimate son, Theseus, arrives in Athens Medea attempts to poison him, but Aigeus recognises his son at the last minute and dashes the poison cup away. Medea may also have tried to set Theseus an impossible task to perform. After Theseus and Aigeus are reunited, Medea flees from Athens.
6. The final chain in the story involves one of a number of geographical moves. Medea may go to the East, where her son Medus/Medios/Medeios becomes the founder of the Medes. There are also accounts which make Medea return to Kolchis. Her final resting place is said to be Elysion, the paradise afterlife, where she becomes the wife of Achilles.

The outline given above indicates the wealth of material which comprises 'the myth of Medea', and provides some pointers as to the recurrent themes and emphases: the use of magic, the repeated escapes, the connections with fathers and children, and the fact that at no point is there any direct punishment for her actions. However, this outline conflates many different sources and episodes and blurs some of the problems and contradictions contained within the myth.

The range of contradictions has created a lively set of scholarly debates, with disagreements over the origins of Medea's story. It has been suggested that there were two original Medeas, and there are many competing interpretations about individual details or variants which draw upon, and feed back into, broader debates about the main focus or meaning of the myth as a whole.

This book will outline the main areas for discussion with guidelines on the main critical positions. The next chapter will begin with discussion of the nature of our sources, then Chapters 3 to 5 will proceed to examine key aspects of the myth, beginning with the question of origins. Chapter 6 will consider a particular moment in the evolution of the myth which may well have changed the course of its development, and the following chapter will look at how the Greek story moved into the Roman world. The final two chapters look at the reception of the story of Medea after the decline of Roman power, concluding with a snapshot of the role of Medea in the modern imagination. The fluid nature of Greek myth makes neat schematisation an impossible task (although some ancient writers such as Apollodoros attempted it!), and the figure of Medea is particularly frustrating in this respect. Although this book is intended to provide a workable structure for readers to access the main information, there will be some overlap between different sections, and readers should be prepared to crossreference different parts of the argument in order to gain a better appreciation of the material. Ultimately, the myth of Medea may contain a lesson in living with chaos. In order to appreciate the essence of this mythological figure we must abandon the comfortable illusions of certainty and academic systematisation, and be willing to entertain ways of thinking which are more relaxed and mythological.

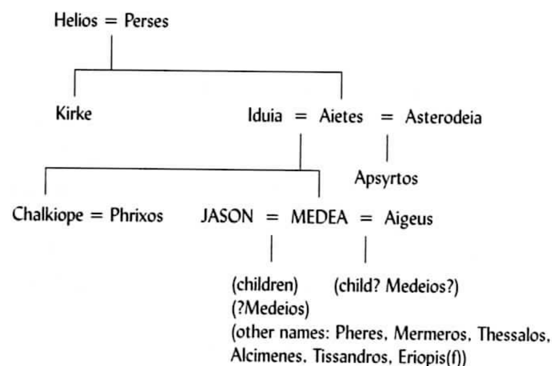
GENEALOGICAL TABLE

Medea is usually presented as the daughter of Aietes and Iduia (also called Eidyuia or Neaira), but the family tree can then be constructed with a number of variants both up and down. The commonest ancestry makes Aietes and Kirke the children of Helios, the sun god, and Perses,

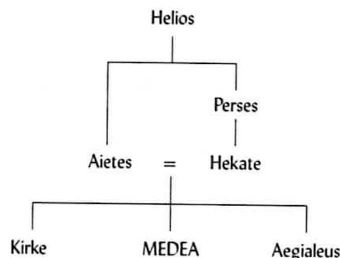
an Oceanid. Aietes and Iduia are the parents of Medea and her sister Chalkiope, while Apsyrtos is fathered by Aietes from his union with the nymph Asterodeia. However, the family tree given by Diodorus Siculus (4. 45 ff.) makes Aietes and Perses the children of Helios, then makes Perses the direct ancestor of Hekate, while Aietes is father of Medea and Kirke.

Moving down the family tree, Medea's children by Jason are variously numbered, named and gendered (anywhere from one son, to seven sons and seven daughters). Euripides gives us two unnamed sons, whereas Pausanias 2.3.9 reports the account of Kinaethon (fr. 2) referring to a daughter, Eriopis, and a son, Medeios. This son, the ancestor of the Medes, is sometimes called Medos, and is sometimes said to be the child of Medea and Aigeus.

Most common genealogy



Alternative table



First published 2006
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2006 Emma Griffiths

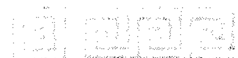
Typeset in Utopia by Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

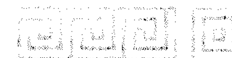
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 10: 0–415–30069–X (hbk)
ISBN 10: 0–415–30070–3 (pbk)
ISBN 13: 978–0–415–30069–8 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978–0–415–30070–4 (pbk)



MEDEA



Emma Griffiths

LONDON AND NEW YORK