6

EURIPIDES' VERSION OF MYTH

In the previous chapters we have discussed the malleability of myth, and noted the ways in which several different versions of Medea's story coexisted in the Greek world. In this chapter we will discuss a turning point in the development of the myth, the emergence of one variant which would come to overshadow all other accounts of Medea in the Graeco-Roman world.

MEDEA IN TRAGEDY

Several episodes in Medea's life were dramatised in fifth-century Athens. Tragedy was staged as part of Athens' annual spring worship of the god Dionysos at the festival of the City Dionysia. Three playwrights were chosen to present three tragedies each followed by a satyr play. The playwrights were in competition, which encouraged a lively interaction with mythological material as each strove to impress the audience with his command of the stories. Of the many plays that featured Medea as a character, only one has survived, Euripides' *Medea*, produced in 431 BC. However, from fragments and hypotheses we know of several other plays which are relevant to the development of the myth. Aeschylus' play *Nurses of Dionysos* seems to have referred to Medea's magical rejuvenation of the old women as a favour to Dionysos. We should note that this early play probably reflects the dominant artistic tradition, focused on the Pelias episode. Similarly, Sophocles' play *Rhizotomoi* (Root-cutters) is generally believed to have

been about Medea as a magical figure, the title referring to her production of potions from plants. His *Kolchian Women* also centred around Medea's natal household. In 455 BC Euripides presented *Peliades* (Daughters of Pelias), telling of the death of Pelias at Medea's hands, and both Sophocles and Euripides produced plays entitled *Aigeus* which may well have featured Medea's arrival in Athens, or her later attempt to kill Theseus when he came to acknowledge his father. The loss of these plays prevents us from gaining a full understanding of the role of Medea as a tragic heroine, but it seems unlikely that there was a single, stereotypical image of Medea in fifth-century Athens.

EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

The play is set in Korinth, where Jason and Medea have sought refuge with their two sons after the murder of Pelias. As the play opens we hear from Medea's nurse that Jason has married the princess of Korinth, and that Medea is devastated. As the play progresses we see Medea determine to take her revenge on Jason, deciding that the only way to hurt him as he has hurt her is to kill their children. Although she agonises over the decision, Medea does eventually kill her sons, as well as Jason's new bride. The play closes as Medea takes the bodies of her sons in the chariot of her grandfather, Helios. She will go to Athens where she has been promised asylum by King Aigeus, and she leaves Jason with a prophecy that he will live out his life alone, finally to be killed by a beam falling from the rotting hull of his ship, the *Argo*.

Female characterisation

From the first scene of the play we are aware that this Medea is a dangerous figure. Her nurse speaks of the violence of her grief, and fears that Medea may turn her anger against the children. Her fears are increased as we hear Medea's cries from off stage (vv. 112–14, 'I hate you children of a hated mother. Curses on you and your father'). We also are reminded of an earlier episode in the story, Medea's murder of her brother Apsyrtos, as she calls attention to the crimes she committed on Jason's behalf (vv. 166–7). The violence of Medea's character is a constant feature in this play. She herself highlights this, claiming that all women have the capacity for violence when they are slighted in matters of the heart (vv. 256–60).

Medea's willingness to use physical means to gain her revenge would have been seen as a male trait by the Athenian audience, as their society endorsed rigid stereotypes of masculine and feminine behaviours, and women were believed to be vulnerable and weak. The use of magic and poison in the murder of the princess would have been seen as a feminine trait, but in Euripides' play Medea combines this female source of power with masculine, physical power. Her initial thoughts on how to take her revenge are openly aggressive, 'Shall I sneak in and set fire to the bed or stab them?' (vv. 376–85), and she eventually kills her sons with a sword.

The masculine/feminine dichotomy is fundamental to Euripides' portrayal of his central character. Initially she is presented as a character obsessed by female concerns: Jason sneers at her, 'You women are all alike, obsessed with sex' (vv. 569–73). Medea's ability to deceive and manipulate those around her would also have been viewed as a negative female trait by the Athenian audience. She is presented as having a strong maternal love for her sons, dwelling on the physical connection between a mother and her children (vv. 1069–75). On the other hand, she is able to kill her sons, denying the traditional place of women in Greek society as the natural carers for children. Her action is so horrific that the chorus of women, who had previously supported her, now turn against her. When they try to find a parallel for her situation they cannot, indicating how shocking was her crime. The only comparison they can draw is with Ino, who killed her own children by mistake (vv. 1282–8). Even though the chorus members themselves earlier expressed dissatisfaction with the joys of having children (vv. 1081–115), Medea's actions are extreme, a denial of feminine identity. Some scholars have even claimed that Medea destroys her status as a woman when she destroys her children.

As a counterpoint to this highly feminised portrayal, Euripides presents Medea as possessing male traits of physical violence and high intelligence. Kreon, the king of Korinth, decides to banish Medea because of her intellect. He tells her, 'You're a clever woman, and I'm

afraid of you' (vv. 282–91). For a Greek audience, excessive intelligence in a woman was not just a bad thing, but unnatural. (Aristotle, *Politics* 1254 b 10–14, gives a succinct account of the belief that men had a natural superiority over women because of greater intelligence, just as humans had greater intelligence than animals.) Euripides' play presents a Medea who possesses both male and female characteristics, and is all the more dangerous because of it. In a society where gender roles were prescribed and restrictive, a character who stepped outside the boundaries of accepted behaviour for his or her gender was condemned and feared. This fact alone meant that for the Athenian audience Euripides' character was intrinsically a dangerous woman, regardless of her previous actions or her plan of revenge on Jason.

We should note that the truth of gender stereotypes is challenged in the play, as the chorus of Korinthian women also behave in ways which the audience might have found unfeminine. They support Medea's desire for revenge, even when she plans to kill Jason and the princess, and they talk with anxiety about the ambiguity of the assumed female satisfactions of having children (vv. 1081 ff.). The choruswomen protest that women have been unfairly treated by poets (vv. 416–30) and agree with Medea when she makes her famous assertion, 'I would rather stand three times in the line of battle than bear one child' (vv. 250–1). This statement has often been used as a starting point for feminist readings of Greek tragedy and culture, as it directly confronts one of the defining ideologies of gender relations in the Greek world: male identity was created through participation in warfare, female identity through the process of marriage and childbirth. Men were seen as the protectors, women as the protected, so Medea's assertion of the relative dangers of war and childbirth is a direct challenge to that idea.

However, before we take this statement as an indication that Euripides was presenting Medea as a proto-feminist, we should remember the context of the remark, both within the play and within Athenian society. In the play Medea's assertion of the trials of womanhood forms part of her attempt to gain the chorus' sympathy and their acquiescence to her plans. As with many of her remarks throughout the play, we should not take it at face value, but rather understand it as a deliberate attempt to manipulate and deceive. There

is a paradox that as she elicits sympathy for women's lot, she also displays one of the characteristic behaviours, deceit, which formed part of the negative Greek stereotype of women. In this wider context, we should also remember that the audience of Greek tragedy was predominantly, if not exclusively, male and part of a society which valued men far more highly than women. It is certainly true that childbirth was a dangerous business in the ancient world, but for a woman to assert that it was three times more dangerous than taking part in warfare would have been seen as absurd. Furthermore, her remark may well have been taken as insulting. Greek masculinity was based around military prowess and glory, so the denigration of such activity in comparison to childbirth was shocking. Modern audiences may receive Medea's comments as a positive rallying cry, but the original audience members were probably shocked, even offended, and their views of Medea may have become hardened and hostile at this early point in the drama, colouring their response to the whole of the play.

Mortality and divinity

To this point, we have been exploring the character of Medea as a mortal woman, an interpretation which she herself promotes as she tries to ally herself to the chorus of Korinthian women, and to dispel Kreon's fears. However, Medea's mortality is open to question in this play. We have seen that in previous versions of the myth, Medea's divine genealogy figured prominently. As granddaughter of Helios she belongs to a family with many magical powers. Her father employed powers more than mortal in attempting to stop Jason stealing the Golden Fleece, and Medea's aid to Jason was also magical.

Euripides' version adds an extra layer of complexity to the myth as the play explores the boundaries between mortal and immortal. The liminality of Medea's character will be a strong focus in later versions of the myth, and Euripides' play is where this development first appears explicitly. One of the striking features of Medea's male/female persona in the play is that she displays the traits of both genders *to an extreme*. The excesses of her character can be seen as a mark of

divinity, as gods are presented in Greek religion as taking mortal characteristics to extremes. Furthermore, the ability of one character to be both masculine and feminine could be read in the ancient world as something unnatural, to the extent that it could be taken as indicative of divinity. In modern societies, we are increasingly open to the idea that gender boundaries are to some extent artificial creations of society, as we discussed in Chapter 5. In fifth-century Athens, the gender boundaries were supposed to be natural, and thus anyone who could break them as confidently as Medea would be seen as unnatural and verging on the divine.

Medea's divine powers in this play are largely hidden at the start by Medea herself. It is only as the play progresses that we see more of her family background, as she has the means to poison a dress and thus kill the princess, and finally she is rescued by her grandfather, the sun god, Helios. It is noteworthy that the only successfully supportive family relationship depicted in the play is that between Medea and her grandfather, and the final scene of the play forces the audience to contemplate whether Medea was ever the helpless mortal she has claimed to be. Her high intelligence, her ability to combine male and female traits, her willingness to sacrifice personal attachments in order to achieve revenge could all be understood by an ancient audience as indications that Medea was not mortal. One of the great contributions made by Euripides to the evolution of the myth was to provide such a powerful example of how mortality and divinity need not be directly opposed to each other, as binary opposites in a structuralist model, but could be seen as the extremes of a continuum.

A further aspect of this mortal/divine interaction is the problem of justice which is raised at the end of the play. Medea claims that Jason hasn't a leg to stand on when he calls for vengeance, because he has broken his oath of marriage (v. 1391). This was not an ordinary contract of marriage which could be dissolved, as in Athenian practice. It was a formal oath of loyalty which Jason swore to Medea when he took her from Kolchis, and was therefore overseen by Zeus himself in his role as Zeus Horkios (Zeus of Oaths). Medea presents herself as the agent of Zeus' revenge on Jason, a Fury acting as a divine figure, rather than a mortal woman seeking personal revenge. Medea tells Jason that she will be a 'curse' on his household (v. 608), and the chorus say that there

is a 'fury' in the house (v. 1260). Jason, understandably, does not share this view of Medea's divine authorisation, and cries out at the end of the play that there will be vengeance for the murder of the children, that Medea in turn will be punished for her actions.

Here we see one of the most problematic and worrying aspects of Medea's mythology. Even though she commits many acts of violence which would have been condemned throughout the Greek world, she is never punished directly. She escapes from Kolchis after betraying her family and killing her brother; she escapes from Iolkos after tricking the daughters of Pelias into killing their father; she escapes from Korinth after the murder of the children; and she will escape from Athens after attempting to murder Theseus. This is an element of the story which the Roman poet Ovid explored with particular subtlety, as we will see in the next chapter, but it is the final scenes of Euripides' play which gives this problem its most powerful expression. Medea appears in the chariot of the sun god, placed high on the *mechane*, the stage crane which was used to bring gods on stage in fifth-century tragedy. This spatial alignment makes it clear that Medea is no longer a mortal, and raises the question of whether she ever truly was. The audience is left to contemplate two unpalatable conclusions as Medea escapes unpunished after committing the most terrible of crimes. Either Medea is divine, and the gods can come among us and exact revenge for our crimes with savage force; or Medea is mortal, and sometimes mortal crimes go unpunished.

It has sometimes been said that the message or force of Euripides' play comes in its warning that mortal women are powerful, and can react badly when slighted. However, it is doubtful whether the original audience would have viewed Medea as a simple mortal figure, interpreting her story as one of simple human equations. Certainly the story could be understood as containing hidden warnings about male/female interactions, but the more interesting focus is the interaction between gods and mortals.

This play actively explores the contradictions inherent in the mythology of Medea and provides no simple answers. Euripides' character may be mortal, immortal or something in between, depending on which section of the play we are considering, just as she appears by turns essentially female or male in her behaviour. It could be seen

as Euripides' greatest achievement, to take a complex figure from Greek myth and to encapsulate all of those complicated and often contradictory qualities within one dramatic character. In the final section of this chapter we will look in more detail at the process of *mythopoesis*, the constant reinvention of myth which Euripides employed, and the problems of presenting Medea's story to an Athenian audience. To close this discussion of her characterisation in the play we shall look at the issue of consistency, and ask whether Euripides has managed to pin down the essence of the myth of Medea.

Consistency

In his discussion of the ideal tragedy in *The Poetics* (1454 b) Aristotle cautioned playwrights that their characters should be consistent. The Greek word 'character' means literally a stamp or a brand, and implies that your character is something fixed about you. Indeed, it was a legitimate line of defence in Greek law to marshal enough character witnesses to swear you could not have committed an alleged offence because that would be incompatible with your known stable character, a principle we see in the defence speech composed by Antiphon, *On the Murder of Herodes*. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle argued that character could be changed for the better or for the worse, but the common-sense view seems to have been that you were what you were.

While some scholars, such as Burnett (1973) and Knox (1977), have argued that Medea is consistent in pursuing a heroic model of revenge, others have argued that even a cursory reading of Euripides' *Medea* might indicate that Euripides has not created a consistent character: Medea expresses a number of contradictory views, and is shown engaging in a violent internal debate as she resolves to kill her children. At the start of the play we have just heard Medea's impassioned cries of grief from off stage when she appears calm, and in control of a rational argument, manipulating the choruswomen. At the end of the play we see a character who is far more detached and powerful than the Medea of earlier scenes. Before we condemn Euripides as an incompetent playwright, we should return to Aristotle's words, for he continues to say that if consistency is not possible, the character

should be 'consistently inconsistent'. This is one way in which we could interpret Euripides' figure. She is changeable and unpredictable, such that even Jason, who is presumed to have known her the longest, does not foresee the danger she poses. Her good friend Aigeus similarly does not realise the full extent of her planned revenge, and Kreon, who does have some insight, still thinks she cannot do anything in a single day. Medea's ability to frustrate the expectations of those around her may be one aspect of her divinity, and thus this pattern gives a certain consistency to her character.

We can, however, take the argument further and explore the ways in which Euripides has created his figure with reference to the earlier myths. There have been a number of recent studies of this play which have emphasised the difficulties of defining her character. For our purposes, two of these approaches are most helpful as they indicate how Euripides was responding to, and shaping, the evolving myth of Medea.

Boedeker (1997) has argued that part of the problem for an audience trying to understand the character of Medea in this play is that the other characters are unsuccessful in their own attempts to define her. In her analysis of the play, Boedeker outlines a pattern by which the other characters try to find appropriate imagery with which to describe Medea, ranging from animal imagery (Medea as a lioness, v. 189) to comparisons with inanimate objects such as rocks or the sea (vv. 27–9), or to Jason's final cries that Medea is a mythological monster, 'worse than Skylla' (vv. 1132–3). Medea herself never conforms to any of the patterns suggested, and so remains an elusive figure in a vortex of images, far more so than other female figures such as Antigone or Klytaimestra whose stories can raise similar issues. On related lines, Sourvinou-Inwood (1997) argues that Medea is constantly reinterpreted in relation to different schemata of 'the good woman', 'the bad woman', 'the normal woman', and never consistently conforms to any of the structures Greek society would seek to impose on her.

These lines of interpretation are relevant for our attempts to understand how Euripides responded to the mythological tradition as he inherited it. The technique of dramatic composition has the effect of disorientating an audience, and so has a particular purpose.

However, it can also be seen as a sophisticated response to the mythology of Medea, an attempt to crystallise her figure, not by pinning her down in acts of description, but by accepting the chaos. Euripides may have understood that the myth of Medea was not to be understood or appreciated by simple structures or descriptions. To grasp the meaning of the myth was to accept that the standard tools of interpretation and circumscription which humans apply to the world are not always adequate, that sometimes we have to accept that we will not understand, that the contradictions inherent in the myth of Medea cannot be reconciled, they can only be accepted. Thus, the application of a particular method of dramatic composition may indicate a wider process of philosophical enquiry into myth underlying the production of the play.

Medea the actor

There are, however, other ways of configuring the relationship between Euripides' Medea and her myth. Zerba (2002) suggests that the inconsistencies in Medea's character are most significant if read in the context of the theatre itself. The difficulties of pinning down Medea experienced by an audience mimic the difficulties experienced by the other characters. Medea is such an accomplished liar that no one, the audience members included, can be sure that they have ever seen the real Medea. It may be that the audience can only conclude with certainty that Medea is an expert manipulator.

This line of interpretation is widely accepted in classical scholarship, but Zerba takes the argument one stage further, suggesting that Medea is presented as the consummate actor, able to assume different parts at will. She argues that Medea's manipulation of those around her demonstrates a self-conscious 'actorly aplomb', as she assumes a range of different identities, just like an actor wearing different masks. Zerba suggests that in his Medea Euripides created the forerunner of Shakespearean protagonists such as Hamlet, who display a complex understanding of character and action. There is a strong correlation between the actions of Euripides the playwright and Medea the character, on Zerba's analysis, which forces the audience to contemplate

the nature of drama and reality, a move which may be termed metatheatrical.[1] Thus we see the importance of interpreting context when we look at any version of a myth. It is not just the details of the story which are important; the medium of transmission is just as significant, particularly when dealing with a genre which was as self-conscious and innovative as Greek tragedy.

Medea and Athens

As the previous section has indicated, the status of Euripides' version as a piece of theatre intended for a specific audience is very important in determining the playwright's intentions and the way in which this play fitted into the evolution of the myth. The chapter will conclude, therefore, with a more detailed discussion of the place of the play in the Athenian theatrical tradition, and an analysis of what fifth-century Athenians made of the myth of Medea more widely.

We need to consider the place of Medea in the Greek, and specifically Athenian, imagination. The first question to address is what exactly Euripides did to the mythological tradition he inherited. Some scholars have argued that Euripides was the first to make Medea directly responsible for killing her children in an act of revenge for Jason's infidelity, an issue discussed by McDermott (1989, 9–24). Others, such as Michelini (1987), have argued that the innovation in this respect came from an earlier playwright, Neophron, and that Euripides was following a new variant rather than inventing it. For an excellent summary of the argument plus direct citation of the Neophron fragments see Mastronarde (2002, 57–64), who concludes it is more likely that Neophron wrote after Euripides' play, rather than vice versa.

Given the influence of Euripides' play over later generations, I think it is likely that it was his own invention, or that at the very least he was the first to bring out explicitly the ramifications of such a change. His Medea now develops a complex psychological persona, which throws a spotlight on fundamental relationships in human nature. Delving into the dark recesses of the human mind was a speciality of Euripides, and it is likely that much of the passion and vengeance

which modern readers associate with Medea comes more from the nature of Euripidean drama than from any underlying 'meaning' to the myth.

But let us consider further the reasons for the failure of the play. Any number could be adduced, ranging from the quality of the other plays Euripides presented that year to the prevailing weather conditions on the day of the performance. It is possible that the Athenian audience was disturbed by the presentation of a powerful woman, or that they responded badly to the interplay of Greek and barbarian elements. Some scholars have argued that the original audience would not have related Medea's story directly to their own lives, as they would have viewed her as an uncivilised barbarian. Such are the views expressed by Page (1938) in his commentary on the play, remarks which may say more about his own colonial views than about the original performance conditions. However, many have argued, I believe correctly, that the original audience may well have been directly affected by the story, not just as Greeks, but as Athenians, a line forcefully argued by Knox (1977). Although Holland (2003) has recently argued that the focus of the story is the inherited curse on the Korinthian royal family, the House of Aiolos, there is constant reference to the Athenian perspective. Throughout the play Medea is treated by those around her as a Greek woman; even Jason tells her she is lucky to have become civilised. Although she herself calls attention when it suits her to her lack of status, she acts as if she has become thoroughly assimilated to Greek society. Furthermore, she is only one step away from becoming an honorary Athenian.

The role of Aigeus in the play was potentially the most disturbing element in the story for the Athenian audience. The king of Athens is shown as compassionate, but perhaps not wise. Sfyroeras (1994) has argued persuasively that Aigeus is like a 'surrogate audience member' in the play. By offering Medea a refuge in Athens, he gives her an escape route, and thus makes all of Athens complicit in the horrific murders that follow. This may have been seen as a sideswipe at the much-vaunted Athenian virtue of offering asylum to all comers, a perspective which was not likely to gain favour with the competition judges. The positive portrayal of Athens as a place of refuge can be seen in a number of sources, such as the late fifth-/early fourth-century

writer Xenophon who, in his *Memories of Socrates* 3.5.10, calls Athens 'a sanctuary for victims of oppression'.

However, before we conclude that Euripides' Medea was a figure created from political and psychological problems for a particular audience alone, we must consider one final dimension, which brings in the issue of theatricality we discussed above in relation to Medea's character. Euripides' play is a visual feast which inspired a number of vase paintings showing Medea in the great chariot of the sun. One such painting is illustrated in Figure 3, an image we will discuss in the next chapter. This is a strong visual image which can compete with any of the great theatrical set pieces of earlier tragedians, such as Aeschylus' portrayal of Klytaimestra arriving on stage after the murder of her husband in *Agamemnon*. Euripides may have been trying to establish Medea as the 'worst of women', challenging the crown held in drama by Klytaimestra. The extremity of Medea in Euripides' play could be read as an attempt to outdo previous versions of female villainy, and change her position in the mythological hierarchy. We should never forget that the myths of an individual character did not exist in isolation, and could be influenced in a number of ways by other stories. Furthermore, considerations of dramatic necessity could also have a significant impact on the success of a story; Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 2.23.28) says that Karkinos wrote a tragedy, *Medea*, but failed to control the dramatic tension because the children were sent away during the course of the play.

OVERVIEW

In his handling of the myth, Euripides produced a complex but engaging portrayal of Medea which was influential over later generations because of its artistic strength and mythological subtlety. A wide range of issues is involved in his play, as questions of gender, ethnicity and mortality are shown to be interrelated, and no easy solutions to the great problems of life are offered. As a piece written for competition in a specific set of circumstances, the play tells us about the way the myth was received in fifth-century Athens. However, the long-lasting reputation of this one instantiation of the myth indicates that

Euripides understood something of the essential character of Medea's story, which justifies the extended treatment of the play provided here. In the next chapter we will see how the development of the myth owed a great deal to Euripides' version, and how this one episode came to be viewed as a microcosm of Medea's entire life story.

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MEDEA

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