

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

EURIPIDES

- A writer and thinker sensitive to the flaws of Athenian society - a self appointed critic of the time.
- Fond of revealing the hollowness of current beliefs. He took institutions regarded as sacrosanct by the Greeks - examined them and presented them on stage in strange and unpleasant aspects.
- Part of the new 'spirit of enquiry' permeating 5th Athens.
- His views were too advanced for many of his contemporaries.
- Euripides set himself to revalue the stories of the gods in the light of human motives and behaviour. He attacked popular mythology with logic and force. His method was to strip traditional tales of their aura of romance and present them simply as moral problems.
- Many Athenians were shocked by his arguments though attracted by the skill in which he presented them.
- Medea is a drama of moral issues but unlike the wider scope of the Agamemnon, it does not deal with abstract ethical problems, but with more tangible social questions - woman's status in a man's world; self interest over oaths etc.
- Medea is a paradox as is Euripides's portrayal of her - *is he sympathetic or not?* At one extreme she is the abandoned, betrayed wife, on the other an evil sorceress.
- No conclusions or answers really given. Some of the Athenian audience may have seen his own diluted problems reflected in the Medea - struck a chord they would rather have left in their subconsciousness.
- Sheer theatrical excitement.
NB Deus ex machina scene (comment on)
Bitter quarrels
Acute character drawing
Even smaller parts vividly portrayed - loyal nurse, cynical tutor, Creon's decency etc. - all quite human and therefore psychologically interesting.
Messenger - not so much a character but a conventional piece of stage machinery.

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

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N : "The mind of a queen is a thing to fear"

"She hates her sons: To see them is no pleasure to her. I am afraid some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind"

"Her mood is cruel, her nature dangerous"

M : "I want to die. Jason was my whole life.....the most contemptible of men"

"I'm in no position - A woman - to wrong a King"

"I kneel to you"

"Show some pity: you are a father too"

NB Medea urges Creon by every possible plea and at last wrings from him one final concession.

"Do you think I would ever have fawned so on this man, Except to gain my purpose"

"Medea; scheme with all your skill" (comment on name pun)

"I touch your beard as a suppliant, embrace your knees"

"The laughter of my enemies I will not endure"

"What makes me cry with pain Is the next thing I have to do. I will kill my sons"

"No one shall take my children from me"

"This is the way to deal Jason the deepest wound"

"Jason, I ask you to forgive the things I said"

"Parted from you, my life will be all pain and anguish"

"...my courage is all gone....I can't do it"

"What is the matter with me? Are my enemies to laugh at me?"

"I understand the horror of what I am going to do; but anger..masters my resolve"

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

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Mess: "Are you sane, or raving mad?"

C: "Bloody-handed fiend of vengeance"

M "My pain's a fair price, to take away your smile"

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

JASON

M: "You filthy coward"

J: ".....in return for saving me you got far more than you gave"

"Personally, unless life brings me fame...."

"If women didn't exist, Human life would be rid of all its miseries"

"If my wife values me at all she will yield to me More than to costly presents"

C: "O wretched Jason!
So sure of destiny, and so ignorant!"

- Euripides has built up a prejudice against him in our minds before he enters on to the stage. The Nurse has commented

"Jason has betrayed his own sons and my mistress"
- Guiltless in his own eyes - justifies his second marriage on grounds of pragmatic policy and blames the rest on Medea's reaction.
- He is arrogantly self-righteous - if Medea had kept quiet all would be well.
- Jason would be insufferable if it were not for the fact that he honestly believes what he says.
His only redeeming feature is his love for his children - but even this can be questioned - what are his priorities ?
- He does not attempt to excuse himself or apologise - what he has done is advantageous to himself and therefore to his family - (look at Jason's arguments)
- He believes he has discharged his obligations by offering Medea, his "friend", money.
Love trust and honour are not taken into account.
- So the romantic hero of legend is shown as selfish and unfeeling.
- He is amazed at Medea's ingratitude and believes she has profited from their relationship. He is even bemused and then angered by Medea's 'unreasonableness'

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

FEMINIST QUESTION

N : "Obedience - and in marriage that's the saving thing..."

M : "Surely, of all creatures.....we women are the most wretched"

"I'd rather stand three times in the front line than bear one child"

"A woman's weak and timid in most matters;But touch her in marriage, and there's no bloodier spirit"

❖ She Lists :

No rights, no privileges - a dull, monotonous confined existence

Brought via a dowry

Forced into a sexual relationship she may not wish for

Divorce not respectable

Men can seek company outside the home

Dangers of childbirth.

ALTERNATIVELY (see notes under chorus)

M : "We were born women - useless for honest purposes"

"But we women - I won't say we are bad by nature,
But we are what we are"

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

CHORUS

“Tell her we are on her side”

“Jason... You are acting wrongly in thus abandoning your wife”

“I tell you, you must not do this”

“May the course of evil be checked now, go no further”

“What wickedness, what sorrow you have caused on earth”

End of Play

“Many are the fates which Zeus in Olympus dispenses.....
The unexpected God makes possible”

Chorus

- ☺ Are confided in and so remain uneasy spectators of the outcome.
- ☺ Horrified by Medea's dreadful decision and try to dissuade her.
- ☺ Chorus well used (c/f Electra) have something relevant to say and say it well. They represent ordinary people with ordinary emotions, torn between sympathy and horror.
Typify Greek womanhood, patient and unquestioning.
- ☺ *Against background of their docility Medea's flouting of divine and human law stands out in sharp relief.*

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

CREON

- ❖ Disarmingly honest and makes no attempt to conceal his motives.
- ❖ "I fear you....I fear that you may do my daughter some irreparable harm"
- ❖ Creon allows her one day's grace to make arrangements for her exile.
He acts against his better judgement - he has been stern but is no tyrant.
He is presented throughout as a simple man whose family comes first in his affections.
His humanity is to prove his undoing.

AEGEUS

- ✓ Is the protection Medea is looking for. She throws herself at his mercy and tells him her story. Aegeus is willing, though cautious - but will of course benefit
- ✓ "I promise you shall beget children"
- ✓ NB - it is after the meeting with Aegeus that Medea continues to kill her children.

MEDEA - OVERVIEW NOTES

GODS AND OATHS

J: "I call the gods to witness that I have done my best to help you and the children...."

M: "And God uphold my words -- that this your marriage day will end with.....horror"

"Now confirm your promise with an oath"

"Once you are bound by oaths you will not give me up"

"Swear by the Earth under your feet....and the whole race of gods"

"Touch us you cannot, in this chariot which the Sun has sent to save us from the hands of enemies"

"Who began this feud? The gods know"

J: "Zeus, do you hear how I am mocked"

NB Medea calls on Justice (Themis) daughter of Zeus.
Also calls the murder of her sons a sacrifice.