Dear Educators,

When listening to our director, Kelly Kitchens, talk about this play, I was most struck by her continued assertions that Medea is not mad. Instead, suggests Kitchens, she’s just a marginalized person in this society who has been pushed to the edge, and she acts in a very human manner to try and take back control. Despite the fact that Medea’s murders are horrible and unthinkable, framing them in the context of her trying to take any control over her life makes her into a sympathetic character, even if we still disapprove of her actions.

To me, this parallels many of the news stories we read every day. We see protesters committing acts of vandalism or violence. We see communities rising up against corporations, governments, or police forces. We see athletes expressing their views by “taking a knee” during the national anthem. While any of these individual acts may seem disrespectful, awful, or even unthinkable, they can also be seen as acts of people who don’t know what else to do to take back control. In that context, we can also sympathize with them as we are asked to sympathize with Medea, even if we still disapprove.

This is the very thing that makes a play a classic. Medea was first performed in 431 BCE, and the issues it raises are the very ones we are still struggling with today. I hope that this performance helps to spark conversation with your students about what it means to be marginalized, oppressed, betrayed, and to at the same time be a human and be deserving of our sympathy.

Best,
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PRODUCTION SPONSORS

“Medea (McLeish/Raphael, trans.)” is presented by special arrangement with SAMUEL FRENCH, INC.
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PLOT SYNOPSIS

The play takes place in Corinth, some years after Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece. Medea, the princess of Colchis, was instrumental in Jason’s success — betraying her father and even killing her brother in order to escape with Jason. After a failed attempt to claim Jason’s throne from his usurper uncle, the couple fled to Corinth and, both now living in exile, started a family together in a period of relative peace.

When the story begins, Medea has learned that Jason intends to leave her for Glauce, the Corinthian princess. Glauce’s father, King Kreon, has anticipated Medea’s anger and plans to exile her from Corinth. Medea pleads with Kreon to delay banishment by one day, and he eventually concedes.

When Jason and Medea meet, he defends his decision, reasoning that he couldn’t pass up a marriage that would establish him as heir to the Corinthian throne. As Medea is considered a barbarian among the Greeks, Jason argues that his marriage to Glauce is a better fit, and suggests their relationship and family can remain intact, with Medea as his mistress. Not believing this plan, Medea reminds him of her role in his success, that none of his achievements could have happened without her. Jason promises to support her, but she rejects him, warning that he will live to regret his choice.

Medea then seeks Aigeus, the king of Athens. She learns that Aigeus is struggling with impotence and currently without an heir. Explaining her situation, Medea offers to give him medicine to restore his fertility in exchange for sanctuary in Athens. Aigeus agrees, unaware that Medea is plotting vengeance.

Medea plans to poison robes and a crown, which she will arrange to have presented to Glauce as a gift. She also plans to kill her children, both to hurt Jason even more and to spare them from Kreon’s wrath after Glauce’s death. She meets with Jason again, saying that she had overreacted. Pleading forgiveness, she asks that their children be sent with offers of robes and a crown to Glauce, in the hopes she will convince Kreon to change his mind about the exile order. Jason agrees to her request.

Everything goes better than Medea had planned. As relayed by messengers, Glauce puts on the poisoned robes and dies. As he tries to save his daughter, Kreon touches the robes and is likewise poisoned.

Faced with the task of killing her own children, Medea struggles with her resolve but ultimately carries out the murders. Jason enters to confront her about the deaths of Glauce and Kreon and is faced with the sight of their dead children.

CHARACTERS

Medea
Princess of Colchis, married to Jason

Jason
Prince of Iolcus, leader of the Argonauts, married to Medea

Kreon
King of Corinth

Aigeus
King of Athens

Jason and Medea’s children

A nurse
A tutor
A servant
Chorus of Corinthian women
Euripides was born in Athens, Greece in 485 BCE. Very little about is known about his life, other than the fact that of 90 plays referenced by classical sources, 19 have survived. His parents were called Mnæsarchus, who is thought to be a merchant, and Cleito.

It was common practice in ancient Greece for playwrights to write plays in competition during the feast day of the god Dionysus. Euripides first entered the festival in 455 BCE and won his first of four victories in 441 BCE. Euripides became a well-known figure in Athens and was friends with Socrates. However, his works were often deemed controversial and he soon left Athens embittered by defeats. He lived in Macedonia until his death in 407 or 406 BCE.

Like other Greek playwrights of the time, mythology provided the foundation of all of Euripides’s work. Myths and heroic epics were an important part of Greek culture, and served as a tool to explore both the natural world and human nature. Much like today’s popular hero franchises (think DC Comics or Star Trek), major characters in classic mythology had their stories retold and reimagined — but over centuries instead of decades. Details changed between versions and new adventures were contributed to collective narratives.

While written accounts of Greek myth and literature only reach back to the 700s BCE, earlier versions of many Greek myth can be found in the written mythology of the Hittite Empire (modern day Turkey) during 1,200–1,300s BCE.

There was robust commerical trade, culture exchange, and military conflict — such as the Trojan War — between the ancestors of the Greeks and the Hittites during the end of the Bronze Age. Stories from this period supplied many of the Greek heroic epics still popular during Euripides’s lifetime. Stories such as The Iliad, The Odyssey, Electra, and possibly even the origin of the Medea and Jason narrative, are all inspired by this historic period of busy interaction between the inhabitants of the Greek peninsula and kingdoms to the East.

The earliest Medea stories predate theater itself and were sung for audiences by a single performer. This form of musical storytelling permeated the ancient world and extends back to oral traditions established before the advent of writing. The written lyrics for these performed narratives are today commonly referred to as “poems.”

By the time Euripides penned his take on Medea in 431 BCE, versions of the story had already been circulating for at least 300 years.

In several versions, Medea’s children are executed by the Corinthians for aiding their mother’s revenge. In another, she kills her own children by accident. Euripides’ version is considered the first in which Medea purposefully kills her children, a reimagining of events that influenced later versions of the story.

And while Medea’s mythology begins within the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece, it does not end with the events of this play. On the run again, Medea’s adventures take her first to Thebes then Athens. There, she marries King Aigeus and starts a new family, but her tragic impulse to resolve conflict with murder — a trait common for male heroes in Greek myth — displaces her again.

Finally, in one version of the story, she returns to the kingdom of her birth, killing her usurper uncle and restoring the father she once betrayed to his rightful throne.

References


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The ancient Greeks developed the artform of western theater as we know it. Several of their innovations live on in most of the stage productions that you see today. Greek theater gradually evolved beginning in the late 6th century BCE from festivals staged to honor of the gods in city centers, to more elaborate productions performed in large outdoor theaters called “theatrons” or “seeing places.” The modern word “theater” is derived from theatron. Several of these “theatrons” were large enough to seat fourteen thousand spectators, roughly the same size as Key Arena. All Greek plays consisted of a chorus of several actors of whom two or three featured actors who would portray the main characters. The plays were only performed once as part of a day long religious festival. Spectators could expect to witness three plays which were voted either first, second or last at the end of the performances by judges. At the festival of Dionysus in 431 BCE, Medea was voted third or last, though it has become the most performed Greek tragedy of the last century.

Many Greek theatrical elements were unitized in early productions of Medea and continue to be used in modern stage plays.

The Theatron: A large curved seating area for spectators. These structures were carved into a hill side so that theatergoers could rise above the level of the stage and see the actors. By the 4th century many of the Theatrons had carved marble benches or seats.

The Orchestra: Translation “dancing space” the orchestra was the flat circular space in front of the Skene. The Orchestra was utilized mainly by members of the chorus.

The Proscenium: In modern times, the proscenium refers to the square aperture separating the stage from the audience. In ancient Greece it referred to a narrow platform or stage in between the Skene and the Orchestra, upon which the main characters would appear.

The Ekkyklema: A wooden wheeled platform, often used wheel dead characters onstage.

The Mechine: A crane like device that lifted actors into the air, often utilized to create the illusion of a God (referred to as “Deus Ex Machina”) or in Medea’s case to present the bodies of her dead children.

The Skene: A building where actors could change costumes and masks without being seen. Today referred to as “backstage,” as the Skene was placed directly behind the stage. The modern word “scene” is derived from the Skene.

The Parodoi: tall arched entrances at the rear side of the Orchestra through which actors and chorus members entered and exited the orchestra.

Another common elements of classical Greek theatre included the use of masks by the performers. The masks had many different functions, allowing the actors to play several different characters, as well as exaggerated features which made it easier to differentiate the characters in large open air theaters.
THE THREE UNITIES

The classical unities are rules for drama as relayed from the philosopher Aristotle in his work, *Poetics*. These three unities, or Aristotelian unities, are as follows:

1. **Unity of action:** A play should have a single action guiding its plot, with very few subplots.

2. **Unity of time:** The action of a play should happen over a period no longer than 24 hours.

3. **Unity of place:** The setting of a play should exist in a physical space which does not change in geography. The stage itself should also not embody more than one place.

At the time Aristotle wrote *Poetics*, many of the Greek playwrights had already written many of their famous plays which often did not adhere to all three of these rules. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle spent some time detailing the unity of action in how it related to tragedy:

> "Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude[1] … As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole.[2]"

Aristotle spent less time discussing the unity of time or place. But, the prevailing interpretation of his writing moved towards interpreting his words of tragedy lasting no longer than a day and being in one place as two separate unities.

Notes
1. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, VII.
2. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, VIII.

Sources

PROTO-THEATRE

The plays of ancient Greece mark the beginning of theatre as an artform, roughly 2,500 years ago. That’s pretty old. But preserved within *Medea* and other Greek plays are three ancient forms of performing arts that contributed to the formation of theatre. All of these performances were written to be sung rather than spoken.

**Dramatized Philosophy**

Fictional dialogue is a great tool for contrasting and comparing philosophical ideas. Similar to writing out a “pros” and “cons” list to help reach a decision, this storytelling tactic prompts audience members to weigh out contrasting perspectives.

Two works of ancient literature written for performance date this proto-theatrical device to 1,000 BCE. *The Babylonian Theodicy* tackles divine injustice and challenges the association of wealth with virtue and poverty with immortality in the form of a debate between two friends. *Dialogue of Pessimism* is a satirical dialogue between an indecisive and distraught master and his clever slave, who pivots to stay supportive of the master’s changing moods with wit and insight.

**Ritual Theatre and the Chorus**

The participation of female lyrical choruses in religious dramatizations (think the tradition of Christmas pageants reenacting the birth of Jesus) date to circa 1,800 BCE. During festivals celebrating divine courtship, female chorus members directly address main characters with caution and advice on navigating the pitfalls of new romantic love, as well as making commentary directed to the audience.

This tradition continued to the period when *Medea* was written and Greek audiences would be familiar with the role of the chorus in storytelling.

**Epic Poetry**

These epic narratives are a tradition rooted in the oral traditions that predated the advent of writing. A single performer, singing, would describe events and recite dialogue for all characters. Famous epics such as *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* or *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Greek theater, this form of storytelling is preserved in monologues given by characters recounting events not acted out onstage.

Sources


Director Kelly Kitchens sees the story of Medea as ultimately a love story gone terribly wrong. When Kitchens thinks about the play, she’s adamant that Medea is not crazy, and she doesn’t go mad during this play. Instead, she’s a woman who has been pushed to the edge and had everything taken away from her, and she takes back power however she can. While Kitchens is also quick to say she’s not defending Medea’s actions, it is a proto-feminist play about a woman taking power in a world where men rule and can determine the course of her life.

Kitchens also see this play as a story for the marginalized, the broken-hearted, and the betrayed. It’s a world turned upside down, where heroes are cowards, a mother can kill her children, and the chorus is used so differently by Euripides than was common at the time. The Corinthian women of the chorus are not merely bystanders commenting on the action. They take sides, and eventually they all agree not to tell on Medea, and in that way they become accomplices to murder.

In the world of our production, the Tutor and the Nanny (Nurse) are being played as undocumented workers, speaking some Spanish and living in a world of fear. The Servant is being played as a representation of the working poor. Many of the people living in Medea’s world are marginalized, and this play asks the audience to understand them and have empathy for them and their decisions.

The costumes for this production are being kept neutral and light, and mostly serve to show the status of the characters, and to ground us in the context of this day being the wedding day of Jason and the daughter of King Kreon. Jason and Kreon themselves will be in their wedding suits, and the children will be in wedding outfits as well. The Chorus women are each in their individual costumes, showing their character’s unique status as a woman in the world. Medea starts the show disheveled in Jason’s button-down shirt and sweatpants. Later, she returns in foundational garments (Spanx, a long-line bra, etc.), showing just how much work she has to put into looking good and put together. For the end of the show, she is wearing her version of a wedding fancy dress.

The set will be simple and polished, to contrast all of the raw emotion and happenings that occur there. It will be an intimate space – the backyard of a house, in a little courtyard outside the master suite. It will be corner-shaped, to show how Medea is trapped and literally “backed into a corner” during the play. It will have simple but intimate set dressing and props to showcase the domestic drama – a bed visible inside, a clothing rack where Medea’s clothes are removed, and toys in the back yard.

The world onstage changes constantly, with the use of lighting. It will switch between naturalism and abstraction. The whole design of the play will be bordering on abstraction, showing both a place and a psychological landscape that changes as Medea does.
PLACING THE PRODUCTION
PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

These questions will help students to think about some of the big ideas behind the play before watching it.

Have you, or anyone you know, ever been in a situation where you were excluded from something you cared about? This could be anything from having to move suddenly, to being dropped from a sports team. How did you feel? What did you do?

POST-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions are to help lead a discussion with your class after seeing the play. For all of these, there are many possible answers and student responses will vary. There is no wrong answer, as long as students use examples from the play to back up their opinions. Some possible responses are provided.

Have you ever felt out of place, like at a new school, in a new neighborhood, or in a space that made you uncomfortable? How did you deal with that?

Who are the people who are powerless in our society?

Who in this play has power? Who does not have power?

- Jason has power in this play — he chose who he wanted to marry, and kicked Medea out.
- Kreon has power, as king in this city.
- Medea does not have power, since she is alone and banished from this land, but she does have some power to affect her situation and take revenge.
- The Nanny and Tutor do not have power, as they just have to watch what’s going on around them.

This play is more than 2000 years old. How did this play measure up to what you already knew about Medea? Does it remind you of any other stories, plays, or movies? (Answers may vary)

Director Kelly Kitchens argues that Medea is not crazy, but she can been seen as a sympathetic human who ran out of options. Do you agree or not? Can you find sympathy for this character? (Answers may vary)

How do you think the play would have been different if Kreon had not given Medea one day to depart the city?

- Medea would not have had time to secure shelter in Athens, so she would not have taken her revenge.
- Medea would still have taken revenge as she did, but would have had nowhere to go after.
- Medea would have figured out a different plan, but it still would have ended in tragedy.
Director Kelly Kitchens is adamant that Medea is not crazy, and that although her actions are horrible, we are asked to understand her as a human who was driven to desperate circumstances. In this activity, students will look at Medea’s actions from two sides — that of a reporter looking at the murders after the fact, and from the perspective of Medea herself.

PART ONE: NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Students should imagine that they are reporters, showing up at the house of Medea and Jason immediately after the events of this play. Write a front-page news article about what happened at King Kreon’s house (optionally: write a script for a TV news segment about the events).

Encourage students to include the following elements of a news story:
- Attention-grabbing headline
- The lead: start off with the most important information about what happened
- Remember to answer questions of WHO was involved, WHAT happened, WHERE did it happen, WHEN did it happen, WHY did it happen, and HOW did it happen.
- Give details about the incident, including quotes from witnesses.
- Write in the third person, and be objective.
- Round out the article with an analysis of the event, or what will happen next.

PART TWO: MEDEA’S LETTER

Students should imagine that they are Medea’s best friend from school, and frequent pen pal since she left with Jason. Imagine receiving a letter from Medea, written immediate after the events of this play. What would this letter include? Write the letter you might receive from Medea, detailing what happened from her point of view, and her feelings about the events.

Encourage students to include the following information in the letter:
- Some backstory and what led up to this day
- What happened, from Medea’s point of view
- How she felt about each incident
- Any original plans that were discarded in favor of the actions she took
- What led her to do what she did — keep it personal
- Any regrets she might have afterward

After completing both parts of this activity, have students discuss the following questions:

1. How did the newspaper article portray Medea? How did the personal letter portray Medea?
2. How does an “objective” point of view change how we see the story and Medea?
3. Which version of the story makes the most sense to you? Which do you believe?
4. How do newspaper articles today shape the story we hear?
5. Can you think of any recent stories that you could imagine seeing from a different point of view? How would a personal account of that event change your feelings about it?
Mission Statement

With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

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Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region’s year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company’s growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

• In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.
• Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.
• Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activities, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

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• Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.
• Schools have the opportunity to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

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• Our summer “Camp Bill” series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.
• In our Fall and Spring after-school “Short Shakes” programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.
• Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.

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