

MEDEA

NURSE If only the *Argo* had never winged its way
 To Colchis, through the blue-grey Clashing Rocks!
 If the pines on Pelion's glens had never fallen
 To the axe, and those heroes never pulled the oars,
 Who went, at Pelias' bidding, to find the Golden Fleece! 5
 Then my mistress Medea would not have sailed
 To the towers of Iolcus, her heart smitten with love
 For Jason. Nor would she have induced Pelias' daughters
 To kill their father, nor come here to live in Corinth
 With her husband and their children. 10
 The people here are well disposed to her,
 An exile and Jason's all-obedient wife:
 That's the best way for a woman to keep safe –
 Not to cross her husband.
 But now her deepest love is sick; all turns to hate. 15
 Jason has betrayed his own sons and my mistress –
 Left her for a royal wedding-bed. He's married the princess,
 The daughter of King Creon.
 Poor Medea rages at her loss of honour,
 Cries out he swore an oath, recalls the powerful pledge 20
 He made to her, and calls the gods to witness
 How Jason thanks her for her loyalty.
 She does not eat. She gives herself to grief,
 Wasting away her time in tears.
 Ever since she knew her husband's wrong to her, 25
 She's lain, her eyes fixed on the ground.
 When friends reason with her, she listens
 Like a stone or wave of the sea;
 Just, sometimes, turning that pale neck of hers
 She wails aloud for her dear father, 30
 Her country and her home, which she betrayed

36 dreadful plan: The reference to Medea's hatred of her sons is dramatically placed, just before their entry.

- Do you think the Nurse has a clear idea what the plan is?

The Nurse's speech

The Nurse expresses both anxiety and a longing to undo the past.

- Why do you think Euripides gave the introductory speech to a servant? Are there advantages in her being an old servant of Medea?
- What impression do you get of the character of the Nurse?
- Explore the changes of subject matter in the speech. Is there a predominant mood?
- Speak the whole speech, first as if speaking thoughts aloud, then as if addressing the audience. Which is the more effective?

39 here come the boys: There are no stage directions in the original text. Entrances are usually signalled by characters on stage. (Exits are often not indicated.)

The boys are young, but old enough presumably to understand what others say to them. For most of the play they do not speak, but they are a focus of attention and sympathy throughout.

Child actors are not always available.

- If there are no children to play the parts in a production, can you think of another suitable way of representing them? (For example, in a celebrated production in Berlin the two children were represented by white statues, 'to allow the audience to move beyond horror at the infanticide and engage more directly with the psychological complexity behind it'.)

Entreaties

57 Please: The Greek means literally 'by your chin'.

The Nurse, in pleading with the Tutor to tell her what he has heard, touches his chin. When an entreaty or supplication is reinforced by such a ritual gesture, the person to whom the appeal is made feels under pressure to grant the request. The suppliant may clasp the other's knees or grasp his right hand or touch his chin. This custom will prove important in this play.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-64479-2 - Euripides: Medea
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- When she came here with the man who now dishonours her.
 Poor woman, she's learnt from misfortune what it is
 To lose one's fatherland.
 She hates her sons, takes no pleasure in seeing them. 35
 I'm afraid she's dreaming up some dreadful plan.
 She is dangerous. None who makes an enemy of her
 Will win an easy victory.
 But here come the boys, back from their game.
 They have no idea of their mother's troubles. 40
 Young minds are still untouched by grief.
- TUTOR** Old servant of my mistress' home,
 Why are you standing all alone here by the door,
 Bewailing your troubles to yourself?
 How does Medea like being left alone by you? 45
- NURSE** Old man, tutor of Jason's sons,
 Good servants share their masters' sufferings –
 They touch our hearts. I find it so distressing,
 I had to come out here to tell my mistress' woes
 To the earth and sky. 50
- TUTOR** Poor woman! Has she not yet stopped her crying?
NURSE Stopped! Her misery has just begun: it's not yet reached half-way.
TUTOR Poor fool! – if I may call my mistress that –
 She knows nothing of the latest troubles.
- NURSE** What's happened? Tell me, don't hold it back. 55
TUTOR Nothing. I regret saying what I did.
NURSE Please, don't keep a secret from a fellow slave:
 I will keep quiet, if I must.
- TUTOR** I was walking past the seats, where the old men
 Play dice, by the sacred fountain of Peirene. 60
 I pretended not to listen,
 But heard one say that King Creon intends
 To send the boys away with their mother,
 Expel them from the country. Whether the story's true
 I don't know, but I wouldn't want it so. 65

The importance of sons

The Nurse (66) expresses surprise that Jason feels indifference about his sons. A father, as head of his household (*oikos* or *domos*), was owed total obedience by his sons. He could renounce or disinherit them, but he expected them to look after him in old age and to defend his honour and reputation after death (for example, Orestes was obliged to avenge his dead father, Agamemnon). It was a matter of honour that the *oikos* should not die out or be destroyed, and it was through his sons that a man perpetuated his *oikos*.

The Nurse and the Tutor

Both these long-standing servants of the family are slaves. Slaves commonly appear in the plays of all the Greek tragedians, but they were thought to be a particular feature of Euripides' work. The character Euripides in Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* is proud that in his play a cross-section of society had a voice: 'women and slaves, master, virgin, old crone, all talked ... that was democratic'. In fact, in the Athenian democracy women and slaves took no part.

- Which of the words of the Nurse and the Tutor enable us to establish their attitudes and relationship?
- Explore ways of presenting these two characters and their meeting, remembering the presence of the children.

83 like a wild bull: It is common in epic poetry for heroes to be compared to powerful animals.

- How does this comparison affect our view of Medea?

Friends and enemies (86)

In the ancient world it was believed that it was a matter of pride, duty (and pleasure) to harm one's enemies (*echthroï*). For example in Sophocles' *Ajax*, the hero, feeling his honour slighted, wishes on his enemies the vilest of deaths. Conversely, it was one's duty to help friends and dear ones (*philoï*, 'dear ones', embraces all who are close, such as members of the family and friends).

Medea feels that her honour has been slighted. Jason, by betraying her, is no longer a *philos* but an *echthros* (69).

Music

Medea's first cry, from inside the house, introduces a lyric section (one accompanied by music) which continues until her entrance onto the stage. The iambic metre, used for spoken dialogue, gives way to musical rhythms. The words would have been sung or chanted and accompanied at times by pipes and tympani. (See note on page 12.) Lyric sections are centred in the text.

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- NURSE What, will Jason let his sons be treated
 Like that, even if he's quarrelled with their mother?
- TUTOR His new marriage now comes first.
 He is no friend to this house.
- NURSE We're lost, then, if we must face new miseries, 70
 Before we've drained our present cup.
- TUTOR But keep quiet. Say nothing. This isn't the moment
 For Medea to learn this.
- NURSE Children, do you hear what sort of father Jason is
 To you? Curse him! – no, he is my master – 75
 But he's proved himself a traitor to his family.
- TUTOR He's no worse than others. Are you just finding out
 That people love themselves more than their neighbour?
 With his new lover, Jason has no time for the boys.
- NURSE Go into the house, boys. It will be all right. 80
 (*to Tutor*) Keep them as much as possible on their own,
 Don't let them near Medea in her present mood.
 I've seen her eyeing them, like a wild bull,
 As if there's something that she means to do.
 She'll not give up her anger till she has struck – 85
 Let's hope it is her enemies, not these dear ones!
- MEDEA (*off stage*) Oh misery! How wretched I am!
 I want to die!
- NURSE There it is, my darlings! Your mother
 Racks her feelings, fans her rage. 90
 Quick, hurry in,
 Don't let her see you.
 Keep well away, take care.
 She can be wild and hateful,
 In her stubborn pride. 95
 Go on, as fast as you can, indoors.

98 It is a cloud she will ignite:

- What does this striking metaphor suggest about the Nurse's fears?

110 Beware a royal temper:

- The Nurse's views (110–17) would appeal to the Athenian audience, whose democratic constitution was based on the principle of equality – among male citizens (for the position of women, see note on 220). Who is the Nurse thinking of (110)? Is it clear? (See note on 798.)

Excess

118 Excess brings no benefit: It was commonly accepted in Greek thought, that moderation is wise and safe. Going beyond what is one's natural and rightful lot incurs the anger of the gods.

The Nurse's words (100, 161, 173), and Medea's first lines off stage, suggest anything but moderation in Medea's behaviour – she is on a different scale from ordinary people and is therefore dangerous.

PARODOS (ENTRY OF THE CHORUS) (121–202)

The Chorus (women of Corinth) are drawn to the scene. This entry is unlike the usual, more formal, entries of many plays in which the Chorus come on singing a structured ode. In *Medea* they enter during a lyrical passage, and their first urgent, short lines are easily integrated in the mood of agitation created by Medea's cries.

At the time of *Medea*'s first production (431 BC) there were fifteen members in the Chorus. They entered from the sides (*parodoi*) and performed in the open space of the *orchestra*. Viewed from above by the audience in the tiered seating, their dance and patterns of choreographed movement were an important element in the expressiveness of Greek theatre. (See Introduction to the Greek Theatre, page 107.)

On the modern stage it is common to have fewer chorus members.

- What would be the relevant considerations in deciding how many chorus members to have? Would it be adequate to have only one?

The Greek 'family'

127 The family is finished: The Greeks did not have a word equivalent to our 'family'. Their words for 'house' (*oikos* 119, *domos* 105 and 127, *dōma* 125) described an institution more like our 'household', presided over by the male master (*kurios*) who in this case is Jason. These words are sometimes translated as 'house', sometimes as 'family'.

	I hear the first danger sign, Her wailing. It is a cloud she will ignite To flame as her fury grows.	
	What will she do, that great, passionate soul, Implacable, stung by misfortune?	100
MEDEA	Aiai. Wronged. My wrongs call forth great cries of woe! Boys, your mother's hated. Cursed boys, I wish you dead, your father too. Curse his whole house!	105
NURSE	Oh dear! The children! What have they to do With their father's wickedness? Why hate them? Children, I'm sick with worry That you will come to harm. Beware a royal temper. Those who have power Aren't used to taking orders; It's hard to make them change their mood. Better to live on equal terms With others. I'd feel safest growing old In modest ways.	110
	The middle course is best in name And practice, the best policy by far. Excess brings no benefit to us, Only greater disasters on a house, When God is angry.	115
CHORUS	I heard her voice, I heard that unhappy woman From Colchis crying. Still she is not quiet. Tell us, Nurse. At the gate I heard her Crying inside the house. I don't like to see the family suffering. I sympathise with them.	120
NURSE	The family is finished, it's all over here. Jason's home is now the princess' bed, Medea is in her room, wasting away, Letting no friend comfort her With cheering words.	125
		130

Medea's first words

Medea speaks off stage four times, each time at slightly greater length (87–8, 102–5, 132–6, 149–57).

Analyse her words carefully.

- What are her predominant feelings?
- What do we learn of her desire for revenge?
- Do her words confirm, or differ from, the Nurse's fears?

Gods

Often a god had more than one role or function, and prayers were directed to the appropriate deity or group of deities.

Zeus (137) was the supreme god of the Greeks with a wide range of concerns. He was associated with justice; protector of law and morals; guardian of suppliants, strangers and beggars; and (this is important, as we have already seen) god of oaths. He was also god of the household.

Earth (Ge or Gaia) and **Light** (the Sun) (137) are more elemental deities. There are several significant appeals to the Sun/Helios (from whom Medea traced descent – see Background to the story) and Earth in the play. (See note on page 66.)

Themis (149) was originally identified with Gaia (Earth), and came to stand for 'right' or 'justice'.

Artemis (149) was a daughter of Zeus. She was a huntress and was associated with the wild nature of forests and hills. She herself was a virgin; but, as a god, she was a bringer of fertility and helper of women in childbirth.

- Why do you think the Chorus and Medea call upon these particular five gods?

141 that bed: The Chorus mean 'death'.

Notice how they emphasise the sexual side of Medea's loss in this speech.

156 my country, which I lost: In her distress Medea's thoughts turn to her home and fatherland, but the place which would be her natural refuge is barred to her.

See Index, Medea – thoughts of home.

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MEDEA	Aiai. Lightning, pierce my head! What point is there in living? Oh, oh, I want to end my hateful life, Leave it behind and die.	135
CHORUS	Zeus and Earth and Light! You hear the poor young wife Sing her cry of woe? You're mad. What is this longing For that bed which none should crave? Death's ending will be on you: Do not pray for that. If your husband adores his new love, Let that be: do not vex yourself. Leave it to Zeus to see justice done. Do not waste away like this, Mourning the partner of your bed.	140 145
MEDEA	Mighty Themis! Queen Artemis! Do you see how I am treated, Though I bound my cursed husband By great oaths? I long to see him and his new bride Crushed to pieces, and the whole palace, For the wrong they dare to do to me. O my father and my country, which I lost, When I foully murdered my brother!	150 155
NURSE	You hear what she says, calling on Themis, who hears our prayers, And Zeus, the guardian of mortals' oaths? Only some momentous act Can stop my mistress' rage.	160
CHORUS	If only she would come out And we could speak to her face to face. If only she would drop her present mood, Her anger and resentment. Let me never fail To help my friends.	165

170 We are her friends: The Chorus are well disposed to Medea (126, 168, see also 11). The ‘friends’ whose sympathy she has rejected (27, 130) may be among the Chorus women.

- How does the Chorus’ reaction differ from that of the Nurse?

179 A lioness: Here is a second, powerful animal simile, again suggesting savage power, but here also protective maternal feelings.

In Homer’s *Iliad xvii*, the hero Ajax protects the corpse of his ally Patroclus ‘like a lion, confronted by huntsmen as he leads his cubs through the forest, plants himself in front of the helpless creatures, breathing defiance and lowering his brows to veil his eyes’.

The character of the Nurse

The Nurse is slow to go and fetch Medea. She wishes that the power of music were exploited as a therapy in curing grief rather than in entertaining people at feasts and banquets. It is hard to know how much music was used for personal solace, but certainly it was a regular feature of social events.

- How helpful is the Nurse’s speech (174–94) in establishing her character?

202 gate of Pontus: This is the Bosphorus, gateway to the Black Sea. The reference reminds us how far Medea is from home (see map on page 111).

Staging the lyric section (87–202)

Lyrical passages, which include the formal choral odes, were an integral feature of Classical Greek theatre. They gave an almost operatic quality to parts of the plays, as well as providing their distinctive structure. Their effect would be to raise the intensity of the words and emotions expressed.

In this passage Medea would have been off stage, the Nurse on stage and the Chorus would be in the *orchestra*, moving as well as singing.

Even if not sung, words spoken over music can gain impact, and percussion can point up meaning and add emphasis. Even without instruments it is possible, with imagination and care, to create a musical texture.

- Experiment with patterns of speech, music and movement to develop ideas about how to stage this passage effectively.
- What would be lost by removing the musical element of the lyrical sections?

We do not see Medea, but we do see the effect of her cries on the Nurse and the Chorus.

- Explore ways of expressing their agitation and concern, while keeping Medea’s words as the main focus of interest.