Euripides: Medea
Euripides

Medea

A new translation and commentary by John Harrison

Introduction to the Greek Theatre by P.E. Easterling

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Preface

The aim of the series is to enable students to approach Classical plays with confidence and understanding: to discover the play within the text.

The translations are new. Many recent versions of Greek tragedy have been done by poets and playwrights who do not work from the original Greek. The translators of this series aim to bring readers, actors and directors as close as possible to the playwrights’ actual words and intentions: to create translations which are faithful to the original in content and tone; and which are speakable, with the immediacy of modern English.

The notes are designed for students of Classical Civilisation and Drama, and indeed anyone who is interested in theatre. They address points which present difficulty to the reader of today: chiefly relating to the Greeks’ religious and moral attitudes, their social and political life, and mythology.

Our hope is that students should explore the play for themselves. The conventions of the Classical theatre are discussed, but there is no thought of recommending ‘authentic’ performances. Different groups will find different ways of responding to each play. The best way of bringing alive an ancient play, as any other, is to explore the text practically, to stimulate thought about ways of staging the plays today. Stage directions in the text are minimal, and the notes are not prescriptive; rather, they contain questions and exercises which explore the dramatic qualities of the text. Bullet points introduce suggestions for discussion and analysis; open bullet points focus on more practical exercises.

If the series encourages students to attempt a staged production, so much the better. But the primary aim is understanding and enjoyment.

The translation of Medea is based on the Greek text, edited by J. Diggle for Oxford University Press. Numbers in square brackets at the bottom of each page of translation refer to the lines of the Greek text; line references in the notes and elsewhere refer to this translation.

John Harrison
Judith Affleck
Background to the story of Medea

This story is told in a variety of ways, most famously by Apollonius of Rhodes in his romantic epic *The Voyage of the Argo* which was written in the 3rd century BC.

Medea was the granddaughter of the Sun. Her father was Aeëtes who was King of Colchis, at the eastern end of the Black Sea. In his kingdom was the Golden Fleece, a treasure that was guarded by a dragon. Medea met Jason when he came to Colchis in quest of the Golden Fleece.

Jason was the rightful king of the Greek state of Iolcus (modern Volos). While he was too young to rule he went away to be educated by the centaur Chiron, and his uncle Pelias reigned in his place. When Jason was old enough to return to Iolcus, Pelias was reluctant to give up the throne. He asked Jason what one should do to rid oneself of a man by whom one felt threatened. ‘Send him to get the Golden Fleece’, said Jason. Pelias took the advice and Jason accepted the challenge.

Jason assembled an expedition of fifty of the noblest heroes. They sailed in the ship *Argo*, the first long ship, built with pines cut from the peninsula of Pelion near Iolcus. The expedition sailed through the straits of Bosporus, which were flanked by the formidable Clashing Rocks, and into the Black Sea. After many adventures they came to Colchis. Aeëtes was reluctant to part with the Fleece, but offered it to Jason if he could perform a series of difficult tasks. Jason had first to yoke two monstrous, fire-breathing bulls and plough with them; sow some dragon's teeth, from which would spring armed warriors whom he had to kill; then overcome the dragon which guarded the Fleece. Aeëtes was confident that the tasks were too difficult for Jason. But he did not reckon with Jason's divine protector, Hera, the Queen of the gods, who persuaded Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to make Medea fall in love with Jason. With the help of Medea's magic powers, he accomplished all the tasks.

Having betrayed her father, Medea was forced to flee with Jason back to his native Greece. In some way, during the flight, Medea's brother Apsyrtus was murdered. In one version of the story his dismembered body was scattered at sea, to delay the pursuing Aeëtes, who would be obliged to collect the pieces. In Euripides' play, Medea is said by Jason to have killed her brother at the family hearth.

After many adventures the *Argo* returned to Iolcus where Pelias was still king. Medea again used her magic skills, offering to show Pelias' daughters how to rejuvenate their ageing father. She cut a ram into
pieces and boiled these in a cauldron with magic herbs; the ram emerged as a newborn lamb. But when the daughters cut up and boiled Pelias, Medea withheld the crucial herbs. She and Jason were forced to flee again and came as refugees to Corinth, where this play takes place.