



MEDEA

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A THEATRE VCU HIGH SCHOOL STUDY GUIDE

DAVID S. LEONG, DEPARTMENT CHAIR

A TERRIBLE CHOICE

In the play, Medea must make a terrible choice and she commits a horrific act. This act has been the subject of controversy since the play began. As an actress, Mary Vreeland had to decide how she would play this very difficult situation. “An actor must play honestly those actions that others find repulsive. Truth is not always pretty.” Mary believes that Medea’s “truth” is misunderstood. “Her actions are horrific by today’s standards. She believes that her children are in the hands of a man who betrays both promises and relationships and who manipulates others to fulfill his own needs.” Medea makes the choice to prevent her children from being raised by a man like Jason.

The ancient Greeks were famous for never showing acts of violence (like the ones in Medea) onstage. What was important to the Greeks was that the results of those actions were shown. No matter what choices Medea makes onstage, she must live

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with the consequences of her actions.

Mary C. Vreeland is a second year MFA student in the Theatre program at VCU. She was most recently seen on the VCU stage in *Wait Until Dark*. Mary’s professional credits include: Katrin in *Mother Courage and Her Children* at the Shakespeare Theatre, directed by Michael Kahn (winner of the Helen Hayes Award for Best Supporting Actress); Lydia in *Children of A Lesser God* on Broadway and Sarah in the Broadway National Tour; and Francis in *The Debutante Ball* at The Manhattan Theater Club. Mary’s film and television credits include: Rebecca on “Hunter” (NBC); Patty in “Have You Tried Talking to Patty?” (CBS)-for which she earned the Loreen Arbus Award (Los Angeles Women in Film Foundation for Outstanding Performance). Mary received her BA in Theatre from American University. She is a member of AEA and SAG. She is honored to play this role under the directorship of Heather Davies.

BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

Medea was a princess on the island of Kolchis. She was a sorceress with a great knowledge of poisons, but she was also the granddaughter of Helios (god of the sun), which made her part goddess.

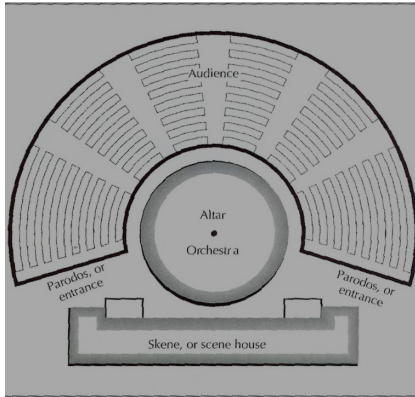
Jason was the exiled prince of Iolkos (Peleias stole the throne from Jason’s father). Peleias told Jason that if he could capture the Golden Fleece from Kolchis, then Jason could return to the throne. Jason gathered a crew of his friends and sailed on the Argo to Kolchis, where he met Medea.

Medea and Jason fell in love and Jason convinced Medea to help him capture the Golden Fleece. Medea even killed her own brother when he tried to stop Jason from taking the Fleece.

Medea and Jason fled Kolchis and married. Medea used her powers to help Jason regain the throne after Peleias tried to renege on his bargain. Jason and Medea decided to leave Iolkos for Corinth (in Greece). They started to raise their family, but they were never allowed to forget that Medea was a barbarian.

THE GREEK THEATRE

The art form that we know of as theatre has a very long and interesting history that has its roots in Ancient Greece. The Greeks started theatre as a form of religious worship in praise of the god Dionysus (god of wine) and this worship eventually grew into yearly theatre festivals like the City Dionysia. The City Dionysia consisted of playwriting competitions (for both tragedy and comedy) and the plays would start at sunrise and would end at sunset. As a Greek citizen, it was actually your religious duty to attend the theatre all day! Festival days were town holidays and everyone was expected to participate.



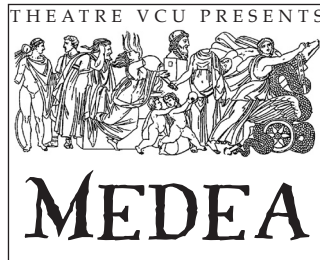
A Greek Amphitheatre - Does it remind you of the Raymond Hodges Theatre of VCU?

The Greeks built their theatres into the side of local hills in a format we call an amphitheatre (the audience surrounds the stage on three sides). Because the Greeks didn't have elaborate scenery or special effects, they used their words to describe what was happening in the play. More importantly, because so many people watched the shows, the theatres had to be very large (some of them held more than 30,000 people). If you sat in the very back of the theatre, the only way you could understand what was happening was if the characters: 1) described the action, or 2) made very large gestures to indicate what they were thinking or feeling.

In fact, just like our version of Medea, the Greeks had a whole language of gestures for specific emotions. The audience would have been familiar with all of these gestures so they knew what the character was feeling when they saw them. Here are some of the traditional Greek gestures:

1. MODESTY - The first three fingers are brought to a point and the hand is brought to the mouth or the breast, then the hand is relaxed (palm downwards and slightly advanced).

2. FEAR - One arm is half outstretched, the hand is upraised with the palm outwards-as if



to drive the object of horror away. The other hand is brought in towards the body. The body itself recoils, the face is turned away.

3. GRIEF- Beating the breast, tearing the hair, beating the ground with fists.

THE CHORUS

One of the most interesting aspects of Greek tragedy is the chorus. The chorus of each play was made up of members of the citizenry of Athens (where most of the festivals took place). Each chorus usually had twelve men in it because women were not involved in theatre until much later. There are specific moments in the show that are called "choral odes." These are the times when the chorus either speaks directly to the lead character (like Medea) or to the audience itself.

Probably the best way to think of the choral odes is to think of them as an opera that we don't have the music for. The only record of this play is the written word, so the artists involved in the show have to create the melody, the rhythm, and the gesture to fit the words.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE?

Imagine that you are in a foreign country. You don't know anyone around you but your own family. You cannot speak the language. You cannot read the road signs. You don't understand the local currency or the customs. What would you do?

This is exactly the situation that Medea has to face in our play. Medea must travel to a foreign country with only her own family to support her. And then, she loses the one thing that should sustain her. How would you react?

Think of this another way. How many times a day do you talk to people? How many times do you physically speak to someone to communicate what you want, or how you are feeling? What if you lost that ability?

One of the biggest challenges that any production faces when attempting an ancient Greek play is to actually be able to understand the chorus.

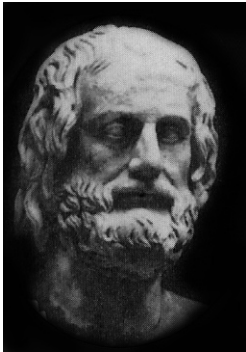


Sara Bernhardt, a renowned French actress in a circa 1900 poster of *Medea*.

Have you ever tried to talk at the same time as two other people? What about three? Now imagine trying to talk at the same time (and say the same thing) as 11 other people! The people of ancient Greece would rehearse not just their lines, but also their movements for months before the yearly festivals.

EURIPIDES

(480-406 BC) Euripides is often considered to be the most “modern” of all of the ancient Greek playwrights because, unlike most other Greek playwrights, he actually included female characters on stage. Euripides’

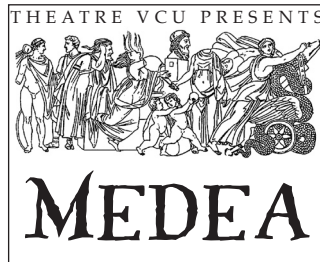


female characters are (like Medea) incredibly strong women, who often overcome social boundaries.

Euripides is also considered a more “modern” Greek playwright because he mixed tragedy and comedy and because he treated the Gods as if they were more human and as if they could make mistakes. This was unusual

because the Greeks believed that the Gods were responsible for everything on earth and they could do no wrong.

Euripides was the son of a wealthy Greek citizen who competed in athletic competitions when he was younger. Like most wealthy citizens, Euripides had no real profession, choosing instead to devote most of his time to writing plays (dramatic



competitions were only held once a year).

Euripides was, unfortunately, rather unlucky in love. He divorced his first wife because of adultery, and many believe that the unsympathetic nature of some of his female characters comes from his bad relationships. Euripides even spent his later years in a self-imposed exile to get away from his second wife!

Euripides is thought to have written more than 80 plays but only 18 of them survive, including: *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Heracles*, *The Trojan Women*, *Electra*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Orestes*, and *The Bacchae*.

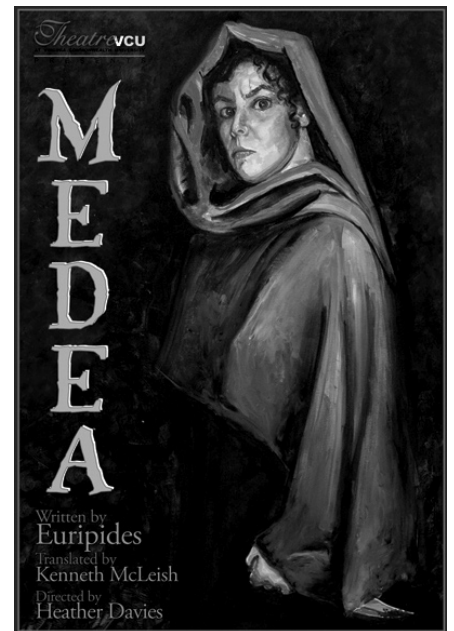
THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY

Medea was entered in the playwriting competition in the City Dionysia with three other plays in 431 BC. It was awarded third prize that year in the dramatic competition.

The play was “re-discovered” by the Romans in the first century. The Roman playwright Seneca re-wrote *Medea* with a far more violent ending.

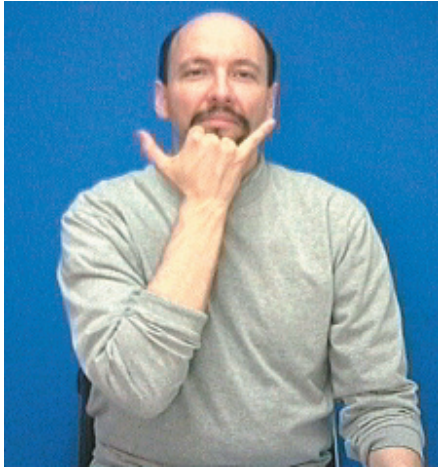
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you sympathize with Medea? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think Euripides chose to write the ending as he did?
3. How does the theme of class, as seen with the Nurse and the Tutor, compare with the theme of the outsider? Does Medea identify with her servants or with the royalty?
4. Other than sign language, what are the ways in which Medea communicates in the play?
5. Did you understand what was going on when there was no dialogue? How?
6. Whose performance affected you the most? Why?
7. What was your favorite scene? Why?



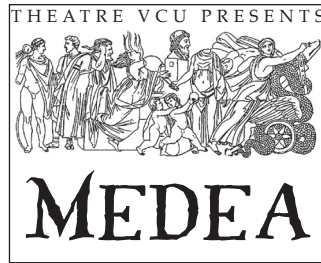
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Sign language is based on the idea that sight is the most useful tool a deaf person has to communicate. American Sign Language uses the shape, position, and movement of the hand; body movements; gestures; facial expressions; and other visual clues to form its words. Just like a spoken language, American Sign Language has its own rules for grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. You will even find that people have different “accents” when they sign just like when people speak.



Look for the sign for “Wrong” in our production of *Medea*. It is repeated often throughout the play. This was the beginning of American Sign Language.

It is thought that American Sign Language was started (oddly enough) by a French teacher named Laurent Clerc in 1817. Clerc began a school for the deaf in Hartford, CT, where he taught a form of French Sign Language. Clerc found that many of his students already used a version of sign language that they created on their own and he incorporated many of their signs into French Sign Language.



Here is an interesting experiment: Pair up with someone in your class and take turns saying this sentence. “We could go to the movies.” Try very hard not to put any inflection on the words. Next, make the sentence into a question. “We could go to the movies?” Pay attention to each other’s body language. What do the other person’s eyes do when they ask the question? Finally, ask your partner the same question without using any words. How much can you communicate without speaking? What kind of gesture can you use to indicate going to the movies?

INTERNATIONAL SIGN LANGUAGE

International Sign Language was created in the 1950s to fill the need for a more universal deaf language. Before ISL was created, American Sign Language and the European Sign Languages were most often used and signers from Africa and Asia were at a disadvantage.

ISL was originally named “Gestuno,” which is an Italian word meaning “the unity of sign languages.” But most people prefer saying ISL or International Gesture today. ISL uses mime and gesture a great deal to convey most words. ISL also has a very large system of something called “classifiers.” Classifiers are used to describe things and, in the world of sign language, they can cross language boundaries. In other words, you don’t have to be from the same country to understand classifiers! By using more classifiers than American Sign Language, International Sign Language allows more people to be understood.

Medea Study Guide Written and Edited by Shaun McCracken and Erin Zimmerman-Moss, 11/06

Designed by Glynn Brannan • Theatre VCU Department Chair, David S Leong

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Member of NAST - National Association of Schools of Theatre

922 Park Avenue • P.O. Box 842524

Richmond, Virginia 23284-2524