

*Medea: Shadows and Longing*



**Μήδεια**

*"O night, faithful friend of mysteries; and you, golden stars and moon, who follow the fiery star of day; and you, Hecate, goddess with threefold head, you know my designs and come to strengthen my spells and magic arts; and you, earth, who offer your potent herbs to magi; and airs, winds, mountains, streams, and lakes, and all you woodland gods, and all you gods of the night: Be present now."*

*—Medea's prayer to Hecate, Ovid, *The Metamorphosis**



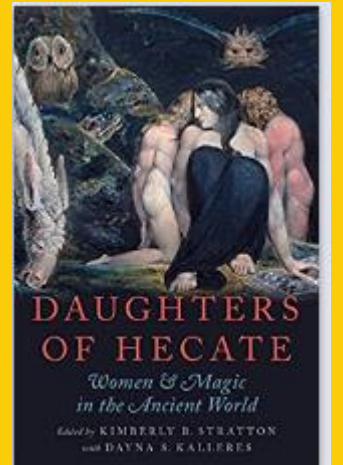
Maria Callas in Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Medea," 1969.






Medea and her children. 0111 detail: A. Feuerbach, 1829-1880: Medea. Neue Pinakotek, München.

Apollonius of Rhodes gives a charming picture of the beautiful witch Medea in the following lines from the Argonautica:

*Now soon as ever the maiden saw the light of dawn, with her hands she gathered up her golden tresses which were floating round her shoulders in careless disarray, and bathed her tear-stained cheeks, and made her skin shine with ointment sweet as nectar (aloiphēi nektareēi); and she donned a beautiful robe (peplon kalon), fitted with well-bent clasps (eugnamptoisin ... peronēisin), and above her head, divinely fair (ambrosiōi), she threw a veil gleaming like silver (kaluptrēn argupheēn).* (Argon. 3.828–35):40



## Family

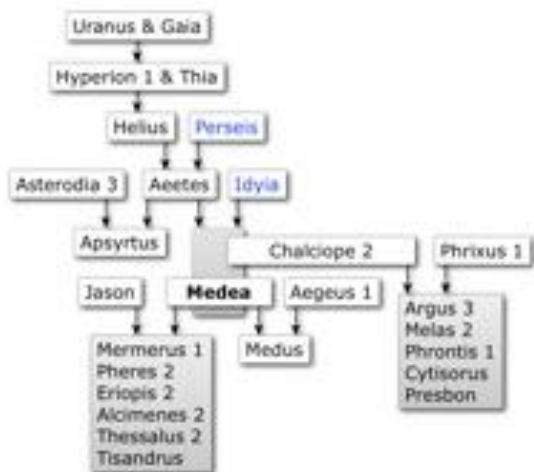
Parentage	Mates	Offspring	Notes
Aeetes & Idyia Aeetes & Hecate	 Jason	Mermerus <sub>1</sub> Pheres <sub>2</sub> Medus Eriopis <sub>2</sub> Alcimenes <sub>2</sub> Thessalus <sub>2</sub> Tisandrus	Mermerus <sub>1</sub> was killed either by Medea, or by the Corinthians, or by a lioness while hunting. Pheres <sub>2</sub> was killed either by Medea, or by the Corinthians. Medus, of disputed parentage, went back with Medea to Colchis and, reigning over a certain country, called it Media after himself. He died when marching against the Indians. It is told that Thessalus <sub>2</sub> escaped being murdered by his mother, was reared as a youth in Corinth, and later moved to Iolcus where he seized the throne and became king. Of Tisandrus it is said that he was much younger than his brothers Thessalus <sub>2</sub> and Alcimenes <sub>2</sub> .
	 Aegeus <sub>1</sub> King of renown	Medus Medus	King Aegeus <sub>1</sub> of Athens was son of Pandion <sub>4</sub> , son of Cecrops <sub>2</sub> , son of Erechtheus, son of Pandion <sub>2</sub> , son of Erichthonius <sub>2</sub> , who was son of Hephaestus, or else AUTOCHTHONOUS. For Medus see above. This king of renown could be Aegeus <sub>1</sub> . For Medus see above.
	 Achilles	---	Medea is said to have married Achilles after death, in the Islands of the Blest (see also Immortals and Underworld).

King Aeetes of Colchis is the son of Heliu and the Oceanid Perseis. According to some Aeetes is brother of Circe and of Pasiphae, wife of Minos <sub>2</sub>. Aeetes is said to have emigrated to Colchis from Corinth. Idyia is the youngest of the OCEANIDS.



Family of Medea

- Arrows indicate descent.
- Siblings are in front of a grey polygon or inside one
- Offspring of Oceanus & Tethys in blue



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### Names in this chart

Aeetes, Aegeus <sub>1</sub>, Alcimenes <sub>2</sub>, Apsyrtus, Argus <sub>3</sub>, Asterodia <sub>3</sub>, Chalcioppe <sub>2</sub>, Cytisorus, Eriopis <sub>2</sub>, Gaia, Helius, Hyperion <sub>1</sub>, Idyia, Jason, Medea, Medus, Melas <sub>2</sub>, Mermerus <sub>1</sub>, Perseis, Pheres <sub>2</sub>, Phrixus <sub>1</sub>, Phrontis <sub>1</sub>, Presbon, Thessalus <sub>2</sub>, Thia, Tisandrus, Uranus.



## Prolog—Medea's Truth

*There are many stories told about us. Few of them are true. You already know that, for you are one of us. This is not a new story for you, but a memory long forgotten, now awakened. The plants of our Mother called out and you answered. Return with me now to her garden. Sit within her sacred grove and remember.*

*In the beginning, there was only darkness and light. They bore a child who became our Mother. With her first breath she created the universe and, with her second, her children. She, in her infinite wisdom, made us of her, uniquely crafted so we could summon the spirits of the world she created for our use. Hekate knew that without challenges to temper our talents we would quickly become restless, so she created the others so that we might learn from them. Their love and hate taught us the lessons necessary so we could transcend our weaknesses. They were the humans, and we were her witches.*

*Mother knows best, although we often fail to see this. She created me and my sister, and all the witches are our descendants. She taught us medicine to heal ourselves and others. This medicine did not merely ease our suffering but offered us entrance into her mysteries. She desired us to understand pain so that we could experience joy. We acquired power through weakness and hope through despair. Our companions were her Pharmakoi Kyrios, the plant masters, whom we wove into our charms and spells. They protected us from the harms of the humans who feared us. We were, and remain, one with her plants. They are bane and blessing—the poison that heals.*



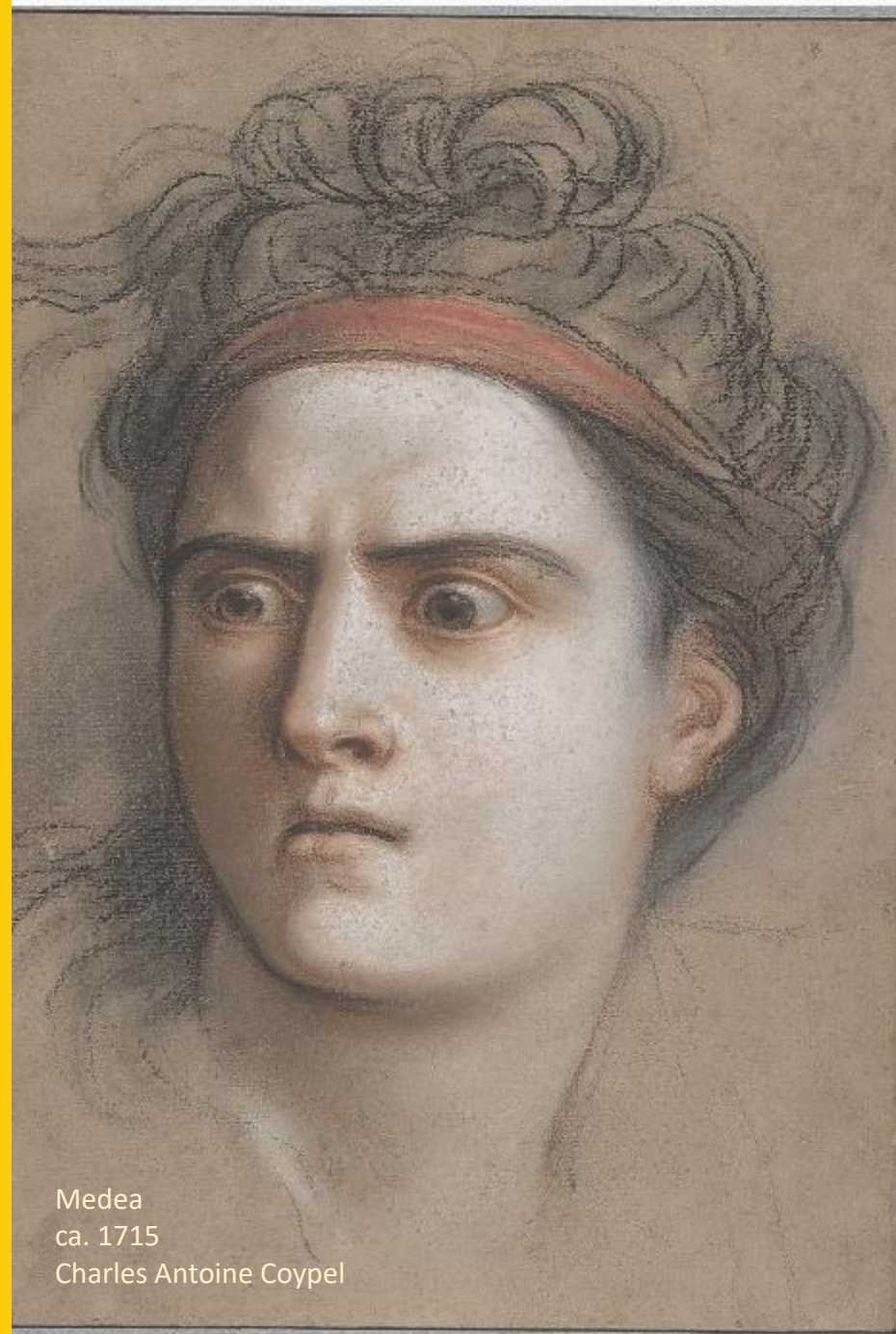
*Medea by Evelyn de Morgan  
Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead  
(Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons)*



*Our ways were not welcome by those who feared our power. At their hands, we suffered greatly. Through their words, we were reviled. It is now time for you to remember the truth and cast aside their lies. We are rising.*

*The men created their own gods, forever reminding Mother that she, too, must bear her burdens. These gods, made in the image of men, feared Mother. They sought to rob us of our rightful inheritance, that of the Green World. Through their so-called civilization, they defiled the natural ways. But you already know this.*

*When I was young, I thought that I knew everything. I would not listen to Mother. She knew that my willfulness needed to be tempered through experience, so she did not interfere with my foolishness. Most likely, you have already learned this. Mother waits. She welcomes us into her sacred grove when we are ready. There are times when we rush into her Garden without thought. Perhaps you, like me, have denigrated her treasures in order to please a man. This was my failure, or so it would appear if you believe the stories they tell about me. Truth be told, it was my necessary lesson. I had to learn not to give away my power to the unworthy.*



Medea  
ca. 1715  
Charles Antoine Coypel





Photo: Metaweb (FB) / Public domain

*Jason came to me, not out of affection, but out of greed. He had heard of my powers, such as they were when I was young. They are much stronger now. Even in my youth, they were considerable. Jason's gods preyed upon his ambitions. They instructed him on how to seduce me. Lonely as I was, I succumbed easily. Not only did I welcome him into Hekate's Garden, but I put a spell on the guardian of one of the most sacred pharmakoi, whom you call oak. This was the Tree of Knowledge, whose branches held the most powerful medicine. The serpent who protected this medicine I put to sleep in the name of my desire. That much of the story is true.*

Jason and Medea  
1907, oil on canvas by John William Waterhouse (1849–1917)

*Most of what you've heard has been twisted to make me the villain. This is a lie. Jason was a violent and greedy prince. I was heartbroken after all I had done to earn his affection. You see, I had raised his father from the dead, banished his enemies, and assured his power, only to be cast aside on his whim. What they tell you is that I killed my children. If I were to concern myself with the beliefs of humans, this is the only part of the story that would bother me. Look into your heart, for mine is within yours. You know I didn't murder them. They live on still, as your angels and guides. I merely spared them the burdens of humanity. As for the serpent who guarded the oak, he has pulled my chariot across the Starry Road ever since.*



Medea About to Kill her Children (Medée furieuse)  
1838, oil on canvas by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863)



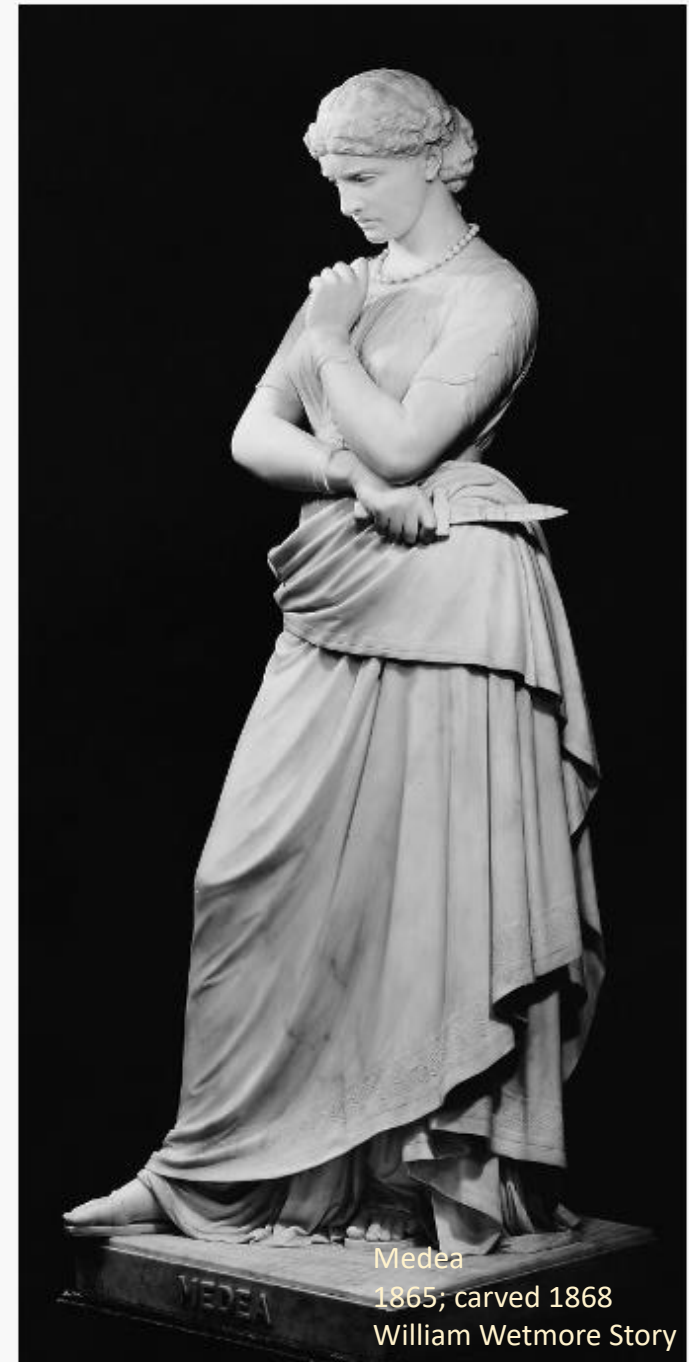
Copy of a Greek marble relief of ca. 420–410 B.C.

*My sister has always been stronger than me. You know her name, for she has returned to your world. Circe has spoken. We all must heed. Yes, I still can have my moments of pettiness when it comes to her. I languished with Jason while she flourished on her island. She would tell you how she suffered at the hands of men—the stories she spins of Odysseus, the web of deception he spun around her until she no longer knew her own name. Her son, too, lives on. I will say this of my sister, her medicine is that of revelation. She didn't turn men into pigs; they had always been so. Same thing for that maiden who was a monster in disguise.*

*There are those who have spoken ill of Mother over the centuries, the same sort who spun their false myths of me and Circe. They created their false religion to control us, and they sought only to destroy the medicine of the Green World. They tortured and murdered her children. We were forced to protect ourselves. That time has passed.*

*Now the time has come for you to remember the magick, the medicine, and the mystery. Return to Mother's Garden.*

*- Medea*



Medea  
1865; carved 1868  
William Wetmore Story

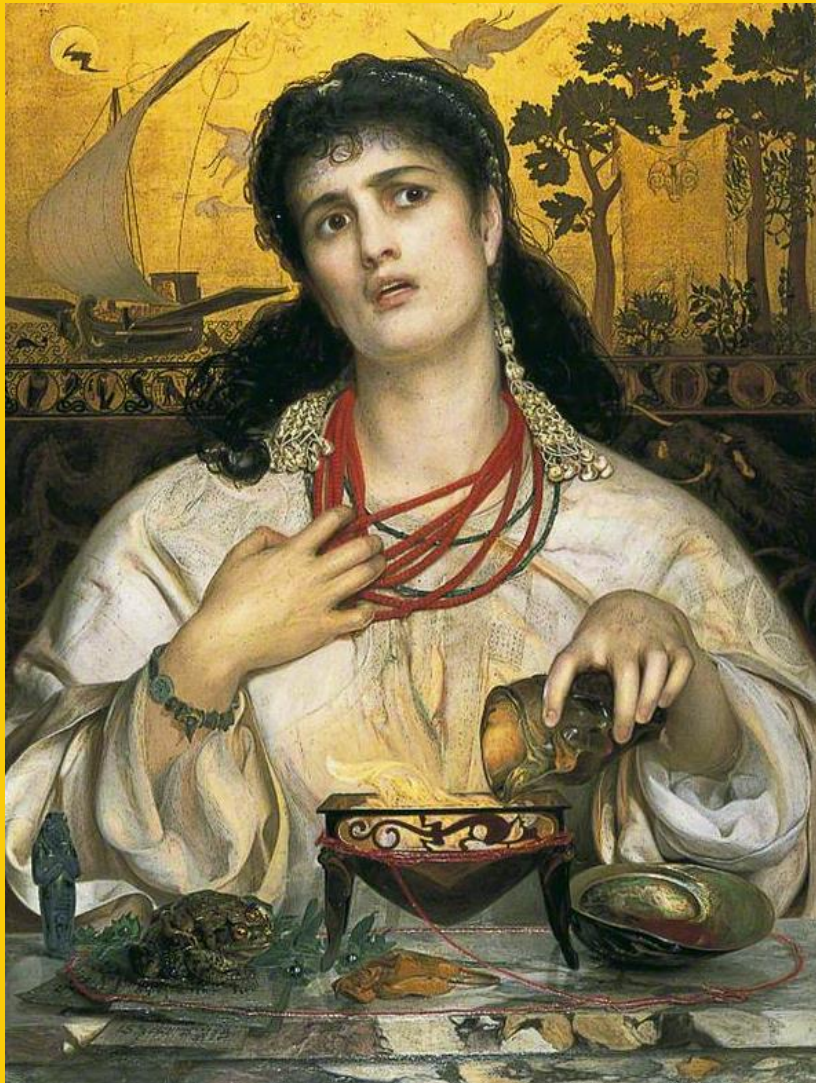


An Episode from the Story of Jason and Medea  
John Downman (1749–1824). Wolverhampton Arts and  
Heritage

*...the starting point of Medea's story was an old cult legend that told about an unintentional murder that she committed in trying to immortalise her children in the Corinthian temple of Hera (cf. Med. 1378). On the basis of this assumption, he asks whether Euripides or another author – probably Neophron – was the first to turn Medea into the vengeful killer of her own children. The controversy surrounding the background and the author of this tragedy in ancient and modern discussions leads to the widespread assumption of a combination of two important mythological oral traditions: (1) the tradition of the Argonauts that brought Medea with Jason and the Golden Fleece from Colchis at the Black Sea to Greece and (2) the tradition that brought Medea with Jason and her seven sons and daughters from Iolcus to Corinth to rule over the city. In a rebellion, the Corinthians killed the children of Medea, who had fled to the altar of Hera. However, Euripides redesigned these mythological traditions, added new features and painted the portrait of Medea killing her own two sons and being herself rescued by a dragon.*

Medea of Euripides and the Old Testament: Cultural critical remarks with special reference to the background of the Septuagint  
Evangelia G. Dafni

# *THE SHADOW*



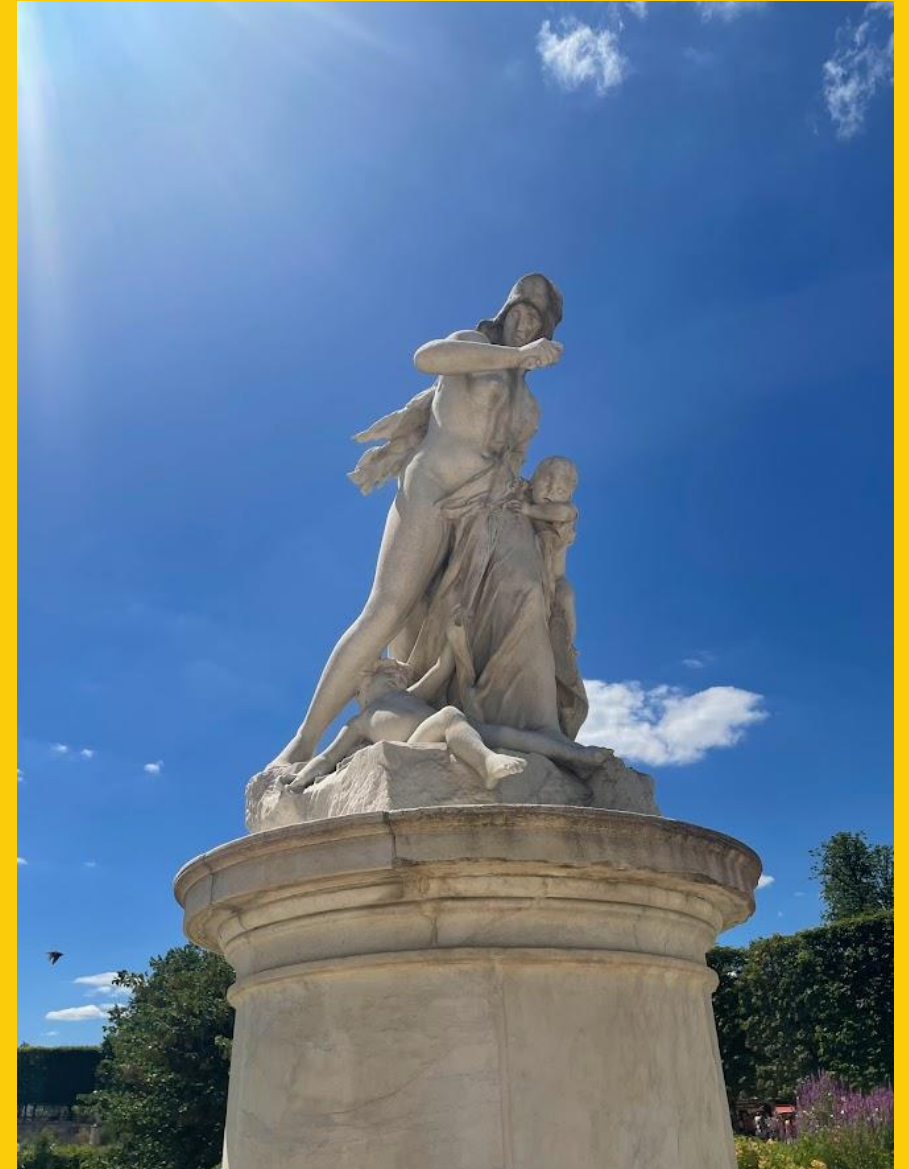
*Medea (Med.), a masterpiece of Euripides performed in 431 BCE, left the deepest impact in the history of culture (Lesky [1972](#):300). It aims at portraying the feminine aspect of the human condition (Jaeger [1954](#):434). Medea, whose name means 'to know the wise advice', is the granddaughter of the sun god, Helios, and the greatest sorceress of Greek mythology. She is presented as someone who has access to advice from a supra-human dimension and can even conquer the powerful dragon. After the basic ethical principle of mutual love, which makes married life happy, is disregarded and abolished by her spouse, she asserts her female rights and goes beyond the limits of what is morally acceptable – she even slaughters her own children – so that she can free herself and achieve all her goals (ed. Eller [1983](#):132; Latacz [2003](#):281ff.).*

Medea of Euripides and the Old Testament: Cultural critical remarks with special reference to the background of the Septuagint  
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Birmingham Museums Trust  
Medea 1868, Frederick  
Sandys

# LONGING

In the earliest versions of the myth, Jason and Medea's children are killed by a crowd of Corinthians, angry at Medea's behaviour. Greek tragedy likes to rework older myths to bring out the nastiest aspects of human relationships, especially within the family. Euripides makes Medea breach a fundamental taboo: the bond between mother and child, and the assumption of unconditional maternal love.



"Infanticide": Medea and her children, 1893, Paul Gascq. Jardin des Tuileries. (Image: Angela Natividad)

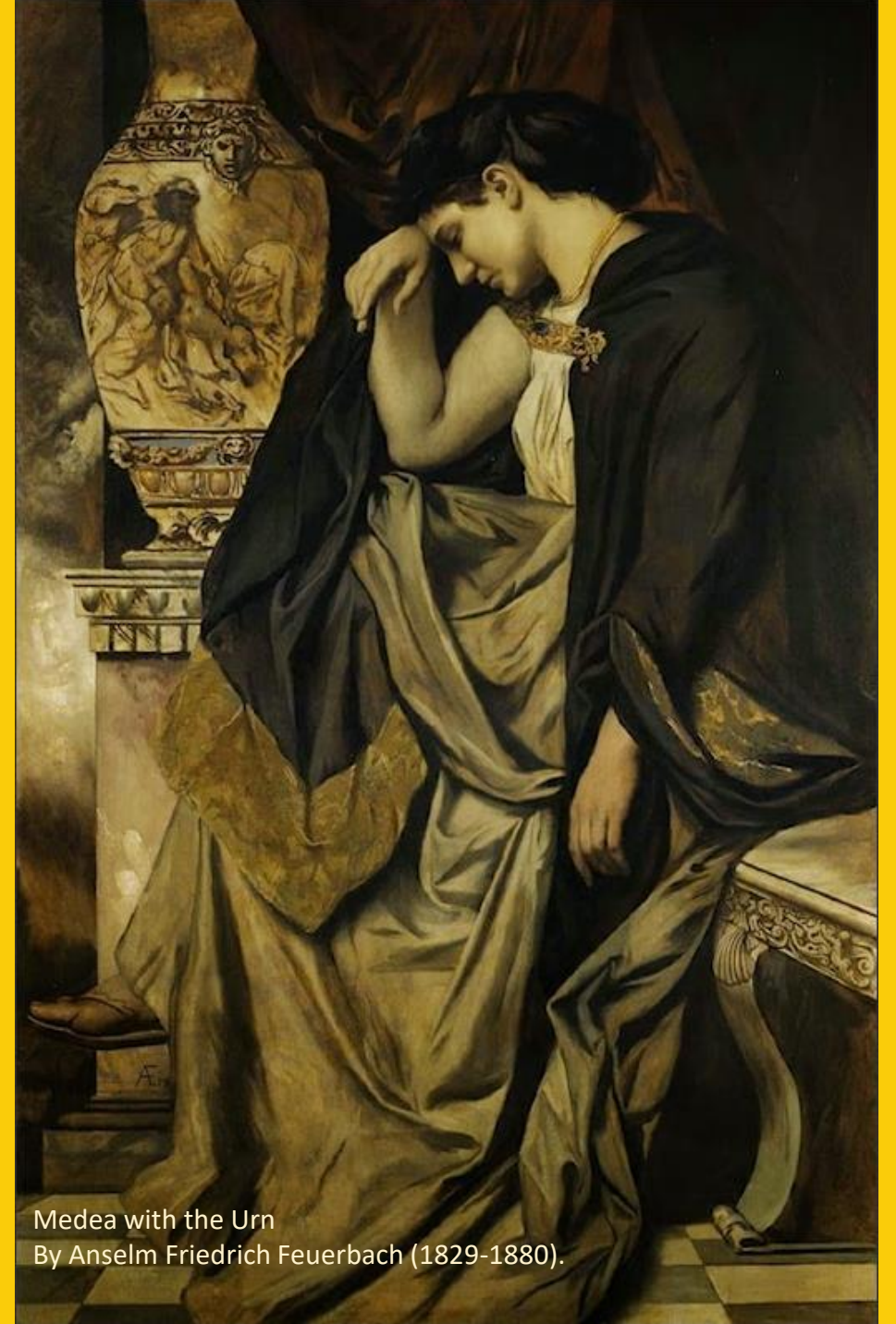
In confronting Medea, we confront our deepest feelings and realize that behind the delicate order we have sought to impose upon our world lurks chaos.<sup>8</sup>



LIKE THE ARGO on which she sailed, Medea has been “of interest to everyone” (*Od.* 12.70) from the dawn of European literature. Although the earliest works in which she appeared are no longer intact,<sup>1</sup> their fragments suggest that her story was an old and popular one by at least the eighth century B.C. The number and the richness of those works that have survived from antiquity attest to her continuing fascination among the Greeks and Romans. From the fifth century B.C. we have both Pindar’s fourth *Pythian* and Euripides’ *Medea*. The third century offers us Apollonius of Rhodes’ epic treatment of her tale. The first century A.D. seems to have found Medea particularly compelling: Ovid explored her myth in three different works, Seneca wrote his tragedy *Medea*, and Valerius Flaccus undertook an extensive treatment of Medea and Jason’s story. In addition to these well-known, lengthy treatments of Medea’s myth, there are references to her tale in the works of countless other ancient poets, philosophers, and rhetoricians. Ancient artists were mesmerized by her as well: we meet her image in Greek vase paintings, engraved Roman gemstones, Italian terracottas, and Pompeian wall murals. Most surprisingly, perhaps, we find her murdering her children on Roman sarcophagi and funerary monuments.<sup>2</sup>



But Medea's popularity has far outlasted antiquity and found expression in a variety of forms, as just a few of many possible examples will demonstrate.<sup>3</sup> Pierre Corneille dramatized her story in 1635; using Corneille's play as a libretto, Gustave Charpentier composed the first of numerous operas about Medea in 1693. The ballet *Médée et Jason* (1763), which was considered the crowning achievement of the French choreographer Jean Georges Noverre's career, helped to earn him the title "Father of Modern Ballet." The pathos that underlies Medea's myth was poignantly expressed in Austrian playwright Franz Grillparzer's trilogy *Das goldene Vlies* (1822), written after his mother's suicide.



Medea with the Urn  
By Anselm Friedrich Feuerbach (1829-1880).



Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women' – Hypsipyle (Hypsipyle) And Medea by Edward Burne-Jones (1864)

What kind of woman casts such an enduring spell? Answering this question is a bit tricky. Narratively, Medea first appears as a lovely and lovelorn princess who enables Jason to steal the Golden Fleece. In this role she fits the paradigm of the “helper-maiden,” which is found in the fairy tales or myths of virtually all cultures. Later in her story, however, Medea appears as a wrathful woman whose lust for vengeance drives her to slaughter her own children. In this role, of course, she is the utter opposite of the “good” or “helpful” woman. Indeed, when we look closely at the variant versions of this story, we realize that infanticidal Medea resembles a type of female demon, feared in traditional cultures throughout the ancient and modern world, who specializes in killing children.

explained with reference to Medea's dismemberment of Apsyrtus' body). Rather than receiving prophecies from a male god concerning future cities, as other virgins do, Medea is a prophetic divinity, who foretells the foundation of Cyrene. Sometimes Medea's connection with foundation presents her in a positive light, fulfilling a desirable role, as I noted earlier in this introduction. More often, however, cities commemorate her brutality or foreignness. In either case, she is once again a character who challenges a boundary—here the boundary between male and female—by acting in ways that are contrary to the norm.



Medea in a fresco from Herculaneum.



Of course, in challenging the assumption that other could be kept completely separate from self, Medea also compelled people to consider what drove the human soul to inhuman behavior, and whether any soul was truly immune. Behind Medea's story lurked the possibility that other Greek women might do what she had done, if pressed far enough. The question of whether there might be justifiable reasons for doing wrong was open to reconsideration as well. Euripides in particular, although not condoning Medea's infanticide, forces us to empathize with her situation. Euripides and several other authors also said that Medea's passion for Jason—which led her to betray her father, kill her brother, and commit many other heinous deeds—was inflicted by the gods. Did this exculpate her? Even if the gods were not responsible for her passion, could love itself excuse all? Or is falling in love itself a culpable mistake?

Future,” shows that even now, “Medea’s name is on people’s lips and she haunts their dreams” (p. 299). Her myth is used especially to express the desperation of the oppressed and the destruction that their rebellion—however justified it may be—brings with it. In particular, McDonald shows that Medea has become an idol for the sexually, politically, and racially oppressed, who, like her, are exploited and then discarded by their exploiters. Just as Sophocles’ *Antigone* has become an inspiring symbol of “civil disobedience” for modern audiences, McDonald argues, Euripides’ *Medea* has come to symbolize the freedom fighter, celebrating the right of the oppressed to fight back with whatever weapons they have. McDonald begins by briefly reviewing the numerous dramatizations of Medea’s story that have been offered in recent years, and she then goes on to explore two contemporary versions of Medea’s story in detail. Brendan Kennelly’s *Medea* (1988) both examines the rage of women betrayed by the men who “colonize” their bodies through sex and also explores the problematic relationship between the Irish (“Medea”) and the English (“Jason”) by setting the play in contemporary Dublin. A Cromwellian Jason argues that Medea

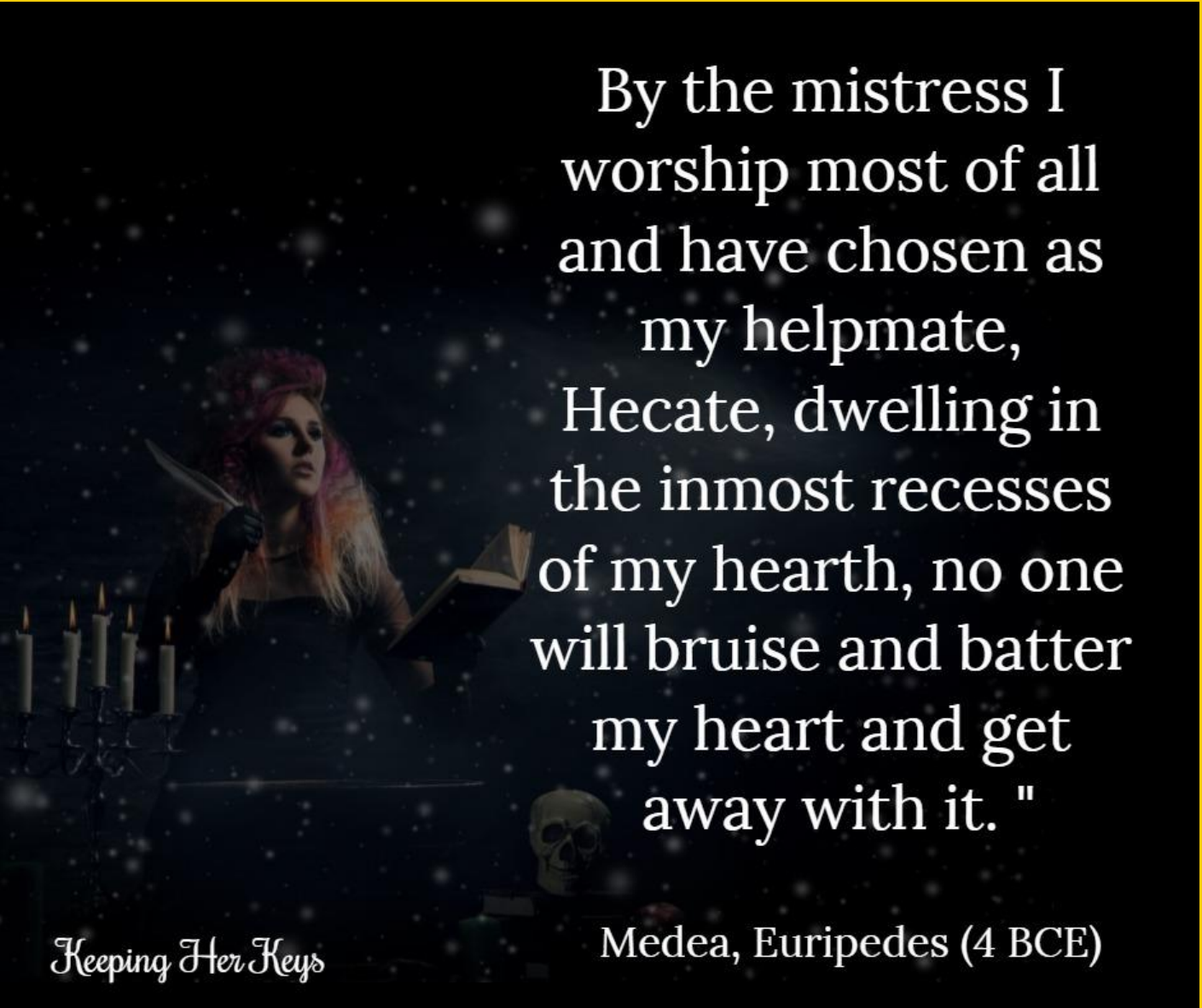


Medea Escaping. Quilt by Marilyn Bedford.



The other confronts us day and night in our newspapers and on our television screens, forcing the realization that it is in most ways just like us, whatever we may imagine “us” to be. It is no longer possible to sanction rules that once divided men from women, “civilized” nations from “uncivilized,” blacks from whites, or any other group from another, as previous societies did. Nor is it any longer possible to pretend that terrible crimes such as infanticide do not take place in average towns, among seemingly normal people. For better and for worse, we live in a world where there seem to be no limits. Perhaps this is why Medea continues to challenge our imaginations: like our neighbors, our colleagues, and the more distant people whom the news media bring to our attention each day, she evokes both our pity and our fear, our admiration and our horror.

Quilt by Marilyn Belford



By the mistress I  
worship most of all  
and have chosen as  
my helpmate,  
Hecate, dwelling in  
the inmost recesses  
of my hearth, no one  
will bruise and batter  
my heart and get  
away with it. "

*Keeping Her Keys*

Medea, Euripedes (4 BCE)



Medea making a potion in the presence of Trip Headed Hekate

Tale of Jason and the conquest of the Golden Fleece (Histoire de Jason et de la conquête de la toison d'or)

Rene Boyvin, 1563



*Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate. First at an exorbitant price we must buy a husband and master of our bodies. [This misfortune is more painful than misfortune.] [235] And the outcome of our life's striving hangs on this, whether we take a bad or a good husband. For divorce is discreditable for women and it is not possible to refuse wedlock. And when a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her husband's house, she must somehow divine, since she has not learned it at home, [240] how she shall best deal with her husband. If after we have spent great efforts on these tasks our husbands live with us without resenting the marriage-yoke, our life is enviable. Otherwise, death is preferable. A man, whenever he is annoyed with the company of those in the house, [245] goes elsewhere and thus rids his soul of its boredom [turning to some male friend or age-mate]. But we must fix our gaze on one person only. Men say that we live a life free from danger at home while they fight with the spear. [250] How wrong they are! I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once.*





Medea by Mucha, 1898

Private collection

(Photo credit: WikiArt)

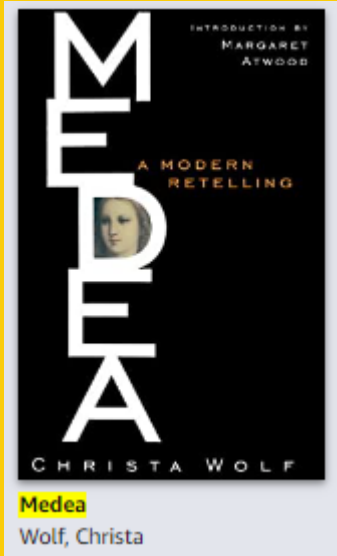
## Death of Jason and his children

But concerning the death of Jason it is also told that Medea foretold that the wreckage of the Argo would fall upon Jason and kill him. And others say that Jason killed himself, being unable to endure the loss of both wife and children. For on leaving Corinth after the murder of Creon<sup>3</sup> and Glauce<sup>4</sup>, Medea also killed her sons with Jason, Mermerus<sup>1</sup> and Pheres<sup>2</sup>, being very well remembered for this horrible murder too. But others have said that her children were stoned to death by the Corinthians, having been removed from the sanctuary of Hera, where Medea, on her flight, had left them for their protection. Still others have said that Jason and Medea had a son and a daughter and that these were Medeus and Eriopis<sup>2</sup>.

## Almost nothing of what has been told before is true

The relation of Medea to Corinth is sometimes described in a completely different way: Aeetes is said to have been king in the region of Corinth, and to have left the kingdom to Bunus when he departed to Colchis. When Bunus died, Epopeus<sup>1</sup> extended his own kingdom to include Corinth, and one of his successors, Corinthus (after whom the land is named), became king. Upon the death of Corinthus, they say, the Corinthians sent for Medea. It is through her, they assert, that Jason was king in Corinth (for they do not mention Creon<sup>3</sup>). The reason of their dispute, they say, was that Medea carried her children to the sanctuary of Hera, where she concealed them, believing this was the proper method to make them immortal. She realized that this procedure did not work by the time Jason detected her, and he, unable to forgive these manipulations, sailed away to Iolcus. For these reasons Medea too departed, and handed over the kingdom to Sisyphus.

# Modern Medeas



*Like a tunnel full of mirrors, it both reflects and echoes. The question it asks the reader, through many voices and in many different ways, is: What would you be willing to believe, to accept, to conceal, to do, to save your own skin, or simply to stay close to power? Who would you be willing to sacrifice? – Margaret Atwood in the introduction.*

Ah, Mother. I'm not a young woman anymore, but according to the Corinthians I'm still wild, as far as they're concerned a woman is wild if she has a mind of her own.

Where can I go. Is it possible to imagine a world, a time, where I would have a place. There's no one I could ask. That's the answer.

But what's truly shocking about Medea is that for most of the play she seems neither irrational nor evil. Euripides points to the broader societal pressures that lie behind what she does. She argues that her situation is an inevitable hazard of the patriarchal rules governing marriage in the Greek world: women are dependent on their husbands, vulnerable, and easily driven to desperation. The chorus of Corinthian wives accepts this argument and promise to help Medea achieve vengeance, swayed by the idea that they too could have been in her place.



Medea (Helen McCrory), Jason (Danny Saouani) and their sons (Joel McDermott and Jude Pearce). Richard Hubert Smith/National Theatre

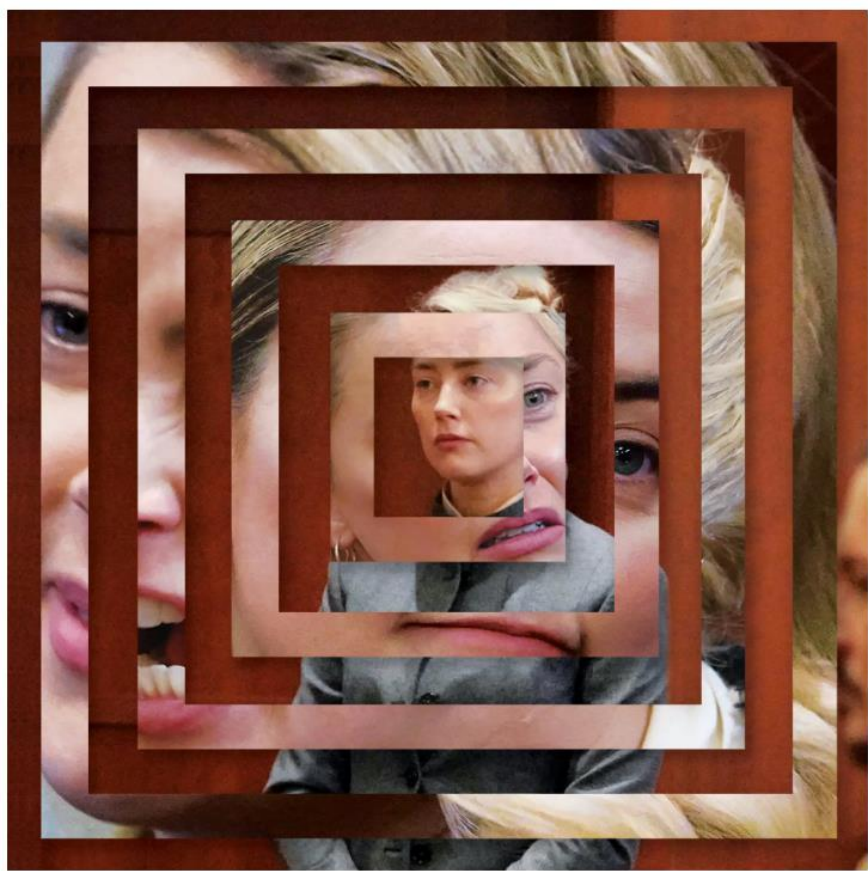
SLATE **Gone Girl: A Greek Tragedy**

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## The New York Times



The trope of the scorned woman who takes revenge goes back much further than “Fatal Attraction,” of course — [Dido cursing the Trojans as she killed herself](#), Medea’s [awful revenge on her unfaithful husband](#). And indeed, this trial could function as a case study in contrived stereotypes used to discredit women, even if you believe there is some truth behind Mr. Depp’s claims.

Ms. Heard has been portrayed as mentally unstable, hysterical, a gold digger, a temptress who brought home other paramours at all hours of the night, a freeloader who moved her friends into Mr. Depp’s many houses, an [attention-seeker](#) with an unquenchable need for drama and of course an untrustworthy liar — textbook undermining strategies, each with its own sexist implications.

And, some have asked, what about the timing of the whole thing? If Mr. Depp was so abusive to her, even before they were engaged, *why didn’t she just leave?* “I knew it was wrong and I knew that I had to leave him,” [Ms. Heard testified](#) in court, a response that rang familiar to anyone with even a baseline understanding of domestic abuse. “And that’s what broke my heart, because I didn’t want to leave him.”

