

Medea

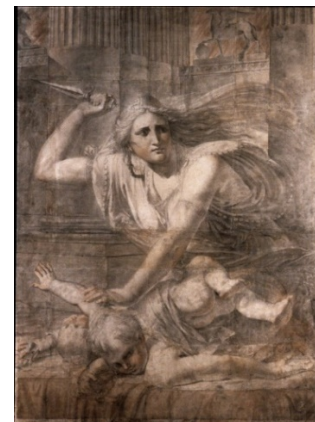
Learning Outcomes

- 2.1. Create a visual representation of the plot and structure of the tragedy studied.
- 2.2. Identify core themes explored in the studied Greek tragedy and how the play may have reflected or challenged the social and (democratic) political norms of the audience.
- 2.3. Critically evaluate how the playwright creates tension, suspense and elicits emotional responses through devices (such as dramatic irony, catharsis, recognition, reversal, divine prologues and deus ex machina scenes).
- 2.6 Explore how the characters in the studied Greek tragedy, including the Chorus, reflect social roles in Greek society.

Introduction

In 431 B.C., the Athenian playwright, Euripides, produced one of his best – if not his *most* famous – plays: *Medea*. The play was well received and yet it only won 3rd place in the Dionysia festival that year. But then again, competition in the Dionysia festival was very intense that year – even Sophocles, one of the greatest playwrights of the time, only came second.

Why though does Euripides play, placed last in the competition, still resonate with us today? Why is it that when we read this play in the classroom today, we can still appreciate its craft, thoughtfulness, and drama? Perhaps, this lies in the wonderful tension between husband and wife, Jason and Medea, whose arguments reflect ongoing opposition between men and women – relevant to Ancient Greece and to us today. Or perhaps it is the dramatic scene that saw Medea slaughter her own sons to spite her husband who has left her for a younger woman. How can Euripides justify this horrific act? And yet (arguably), *he does justify it!*



The play continued to be very popular throughout antiquity (and is a favourite for reproductions today). Both the conceited Jason and Medea were something of a popular comparison when taking down another person's character. For example, the great Roman orator, Marcus Cicero, while defending his estranged pupil Caelius – who is accused of murder – attacks the character of Caelius' ex-lover and a key witness in the trial, Clodia; he dubs her a 'Medea of the Palatine Hill'; obviously trying to call into question the validity of her claims. And yet, this remark was in response to one of Caelius' accusers, Marcus Crassus (the most powerful and richest man in Rome and ally of Caesars) who apparently accused Caelius of being 'a Jason' with lower morals and little integrity. So, both Jason and Medea illicit sympathy and yet also can be used as a means of attack. But who is worse and wrong? Jason or Medea?

Central Themes

Man vs Woman:

Central to Euripides play is the relationship between men and women, and the assumptions that are made about each gender. The relationship of Jason and Medea is the centre of this conflict, however, there are also other women in the play, who act differently to Medea and show different characteristics; there are different men too, who show better qualities than Jason. Euripides explores a range of characters with opposing views about gender.

Be careful however, some characters are clearly sexist – as is to be expected from Ancient Greece – and are perhaps merely expressing the attitudes of the time, others, such as Jason, are more overtly sexist than even an Ancient Greek. If you are asked to discuss the sexism of the play, that is a different discussion to Jason's sexism.

Husband vs Wife:

Closely related to the above theme is the theme of marriage and the conflict within such unions. Again, Jason and Medea's relationship is central. Medea talks about the difficulty of married life for a woman, Jason's attitude shows how a husband can misunderstand the nature of his wife and assume too much. There is also an underlining theme that marriage must lead to prosperity and children – think of Aegeus' childlessness or why Medea killed Jason's children, depriving him of the heirs to his legacy.

Foreigner vs Greek:

Jason expresses his views that Greece is superior; Medea laments her situation as a foreigner without home or family to support her in her dire situation; the Nurse, Tutor, Aegeus, and the Chorus sympathise with her in this. However, the play itself ends with a foreigner killing the children of a Greek – is perhaps Euripides warning Greeks not to marry foreigners because of the repercussions? Either way, the theme will play an important part in the conflict between Jason and Medea.

Divine vs Human/Old Religion vs New Religion:

These themes are less pronounced throughout the main part of the play – however, they play a significant role in the final scene and cannot be ignored. Do the gods side with Jason or Medea? Both claim the sympathies of the Gods, but only one is aided by them and she is aided by an older God and Goddess – Titans – Helios and Hecate. Jason on the other hand is abandoned by favouring Goddess Hera for breaking his marriage vows.

Parenthood:

Central to Medea is the idea of parenthood in Ancient Greece – what does it mean to Medea to be a mother? Does Jason care about his children or his own legacy? What role do children play in the lives of the Ancient Greeks? Medea, Jason, Creon, and Aegeus all express affection for their children, all also talk about the importance of their children to their own glory and legacy – their own *Kleos*.

Hubris:

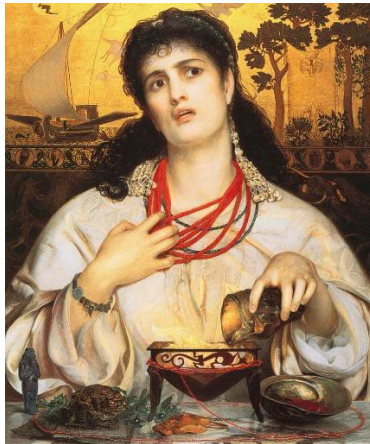
An examination of excessive pride is best seen in the development of Jason's character whose arrogance leads at least partially to tragedy.

Revenge:

An examination of excessive revenge (or is it reasonable revenge?) is best seen in the development of Medea's character and the reaction of other characters to it.

Episodes of <i>Medea</i>		
Section:	Lines	Stasimons and Dialogues
Prologue	Lines 1-130	Nurse and Tutor; Medea off-stage.
Episode 1	Lines 130-447	Chorus and Nurse; Medea and Chorus; Creon and Chorus.
Episode 2	Lines 414-629	Chorus Stasimon on role reversal of men and women in poetry; Jason and Medea.
Episode 3	Lines 629-830	Chorus Stasimon on anguish of love and Medea's misfortune as refugee; Medea and Aegeus; Medea and Chorus.
Episode 4	Lines 830-1002	Chorus Stasimon on greatness of Athens and begging Medea not to act; Medea and Jason.
Episode 5	Lines 1002-1082	Chorus Stasimon pitying children, Glauce, Jason, and Medea; Tutor and Medea; Medea and Chorus.
Episode 6	Lines 1082-1252	Chorus Stasimon and argument by women (supposedly unusual) and grief of parenthood; Messenger and Medea.
Episode 7	Lines 1252-1352	Chorus Stasimon on Medea's murder; children murdered off-stage; Jason enters looking for his sons.
Epilogue	Lines 1352-1433	Medea (on <i>Deus ex Machina</i>); Jason and Medea.

Medea



Background:

- Princess of Colchis, Daughter of Aeetes, Granddaughter of Helios (God of Sun & Titan).
- Worshipper of Hecate (Goddess of Witchcraft).
- Pierced by Cupid's arrow to fall in love with Jason, helps him in the tasks set for him by Aeetes, and in Recovering the Golden Fleece; kills her own brother and chops his body into pieces and throws them into the ocean so she and Jason can make their escape from Aeetes who slows to gather the parts of his sons body for burial.
- Upon returning to Iolcus with Jason, she persuaded/tricked the daughters of Jason's uncle, Pelias (the usurper king), to chop their father up and put him in a pot, thinking it a spell that would return Pelias to his youth.
- Because of this, she is banished to Corinth with Jason for 10 years, having born him two sons.

Characteristics/traits (Adjectives):

Negative: Wicked, deceitful, vengeful, wrathful, proud, dominant, stubborn, Manipulative, dangerous, jealous, heroic (masculine), mystical/skilled in witchcraft, wild, violent, aggressive

Positive: Maternal, loyal, honest (at times), loving (before Jason's betrayal),

Neutral: clever/intelligent, semi-divine, superior

Summary Medea's Actions in Plot:

- Medea cries in pain at Jason's betrayal, threatening all around her, even her children in her wild, jealous rage.
- Persuades/manipulates the Chorus to side with her and keep her secret by appealing to her their womanhood and her dire situation as an abandoned foreigner.
- Persuades/manipulates Creon to pity her and give her one more day in Corinth to prepare for exile with her two sons; she appeals to his fatherly nature and humbles herself claiming she is weak and not as clever as others claim.
- Aggressively confronts Jason claiming he abandoned her after swearing to her oaths of fealty, after she aided him in his quest – betraying her family and country for him – and that he then betrayed her for another family, doing her and their family harm – insulting her.
- Persuades/manipulates Aegeus to give her sanctuary in Athens in exile, offering him help in having children, and again humbling herself by grabbing his knees and beard as a suppliant (religious act) and exaggerating Jason's wickedness.

- Reveals her full plans to the Chorus: that she will kill her own children.
- Persuades/manipulates Jason to beg his new wife for the children to stay in Corinth, playing the “foolish/weak/hysterical” woman.
Persuades him to bring the children and poisoned gift to his new bride.
- Upon hearing a messenger’s account of Glauce (Jason’s wife) and Creon’s death, Medea persuades herself to kill her own children; she struggles with her conscience and her maternal love for the children, but her pride, wrath, and vengeful spirit overcome ensuring her resolve.
- She kills her children (off stage).
Medea appears above the stage on the *Deus ex Machina*, a flying chariot pulled by dragons – her grandfather’s chariot – and taunts Jason, insulting him, predicting his ignoble death, and saying she will not allow him to bury the children, but will do it herself.
- She leaves as Jason continues to insult and berate her.

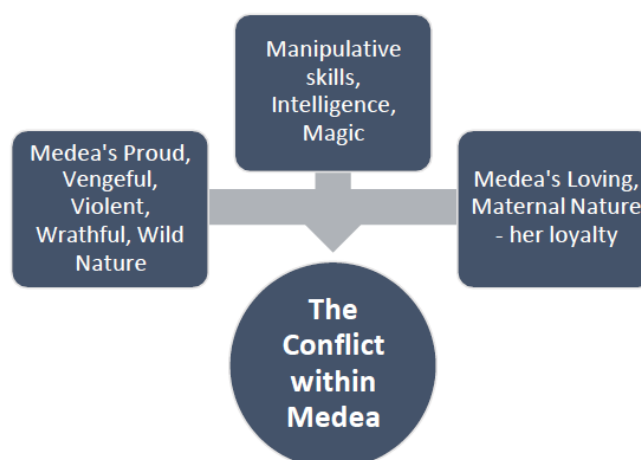
Opinion/Synopsis of Character:

Your opinion of a character should not be personal – avoid personal moral judgements of her character and action. An opinion ought to be formed by empathising with her position in the play and based on evidence. If you are asked to make an observation about the justice in her actions, concentrate on what other characters say in the play. Do not make any opinion without evidence – preferably a quote, if not at least an example.

Medea is certainly amoral from our perspective and that of the Ancient Greeks. However, Euripides explores two sides to her character which are ever in conflict in the play. She has clearly loved and remained loyal (excessively loyal perhaps) to Jason and her sons; however, now betrayed and slighted by Jason, insulted, she like any male hero in ancient myth acts to take revenge – doing acts which seem excessive to us. But with her pride hurt, she will not back down from her task.

Further to this, she is barbaric (often we are reminded of this) and she does not have the same moral code – at least according to Euripides. We can see this by the fact that she can kill her children while the Chorus of Corinthian women (Greeks) are horrified by the very notion. She also has the support of the gods, being semi-divine herself, and is aided in her escape by Helios. This confuses the moral message of the play: is Medea justified in the killing of her own children? An answer is not satisfyingly resolved.

A diagram to help you visualise the conflict within Medea’s character throughout the play:



Jason



Background:

- Son of the ousted King Aeson of Iolcus.
- Raised by Chiron (an immortal/ancient centaur).
- Returns to Iolcus, where his uncle Pelias commands him to retrieve the Golden Fleece in order to prove himself worthy of the throne (his uncle hopes Jason will die or fail).
- Journeys to Colchis – where lay the Golden Fleece – on the Argo (a magical ship built by Hera) with 50 other heroes.
- After many adventures arrives in Colchis, where he is commanded by Aeetes, the King, to perform three tasks to prove himself worthy of the Golden Fleece.
- Medea falls for him and aids him in his tasks; they flee with the other Argonauts (sailors of the Argo).
- After many years travelling the Black Sea, Danube, and Mediterranean, he returns to Iolcus.
- After Medea tricks the daughters of Pelias into killing their father, Pelias' son persuades the people of Iolcus to exile him to Corinth.
- He lives with Medea in Corinth for 10 years and has two children with her.

Characteristics/traits (Adjectives):

Naïve, Hubristic, ambitious (seeks *kleos*/glory), disloyal, foolish, pitiable, ignorant, sexist (even by Ancient Greek standards), xenophobic (probably as much as the Ancient Greeks), arrogant, superior/supercilious, proud, condescending, patronising (aka. mansplains), disloyal (betrays wife and family), irresponsible

Summarise Jason's Actions in Plot:

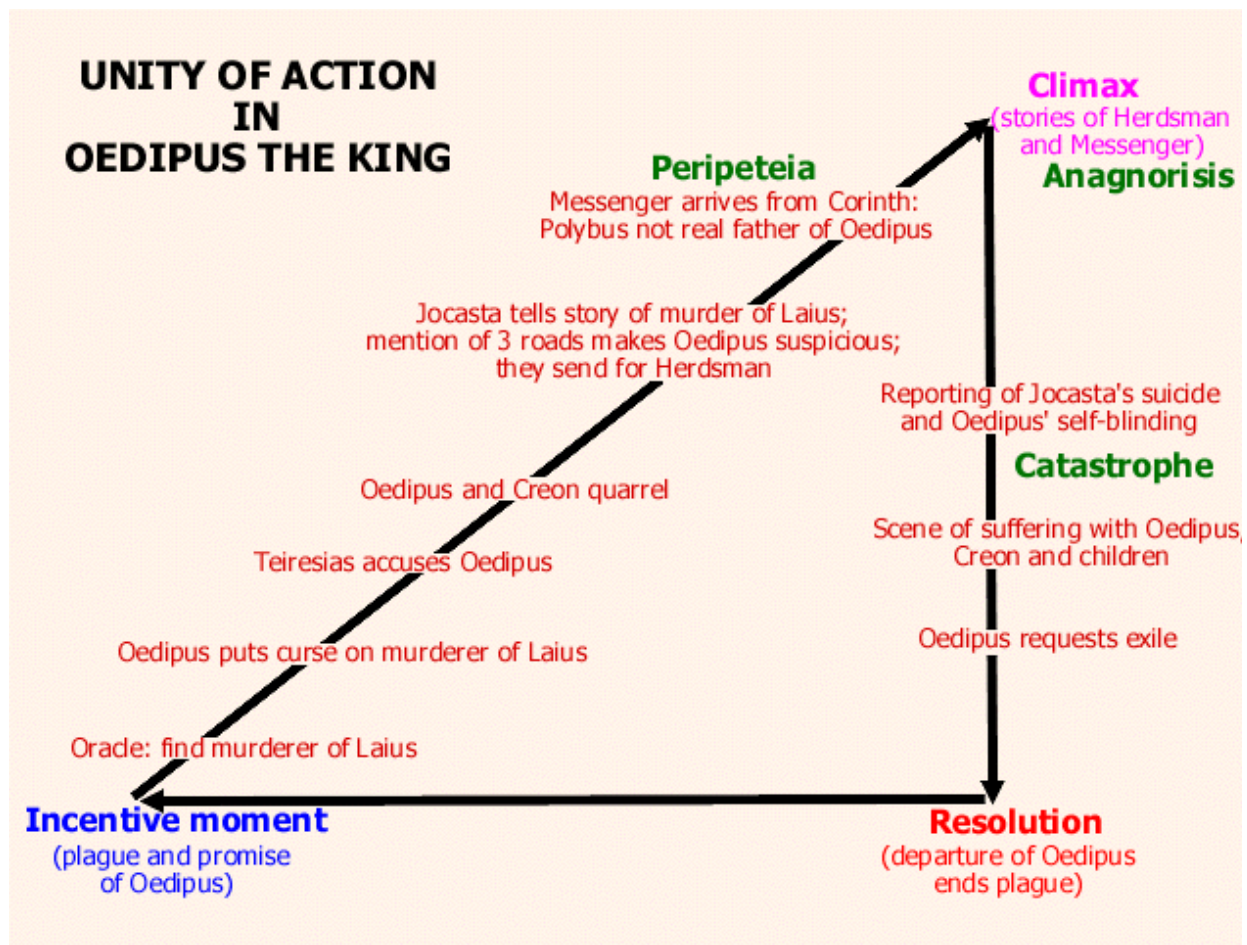
- Marries Glauce the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth.
- Offers Medea friendship and help in her exile, blames her for her situation – denying his own fault – dismisses her help to him in his quest, claims she is simply wild with “sexual-jealousy”, leaves her and his sons to their fate as exiles.
- Returns on Medea's summons and is manipulated into thinking she has changed her mind; he believes her very easily. Brings his sons to his new wife and petitions her to ask for their stay in Corinth.
- Returns at end of play to save his sons from the Corinthian mob; attempts to break into the backstage to see his children's bodies; accosts and rebukes Medea for her horrendous act; asks her to allow him his sons' bodies; curses her as she refuses and flees.

Opinion/Synopsis of Character

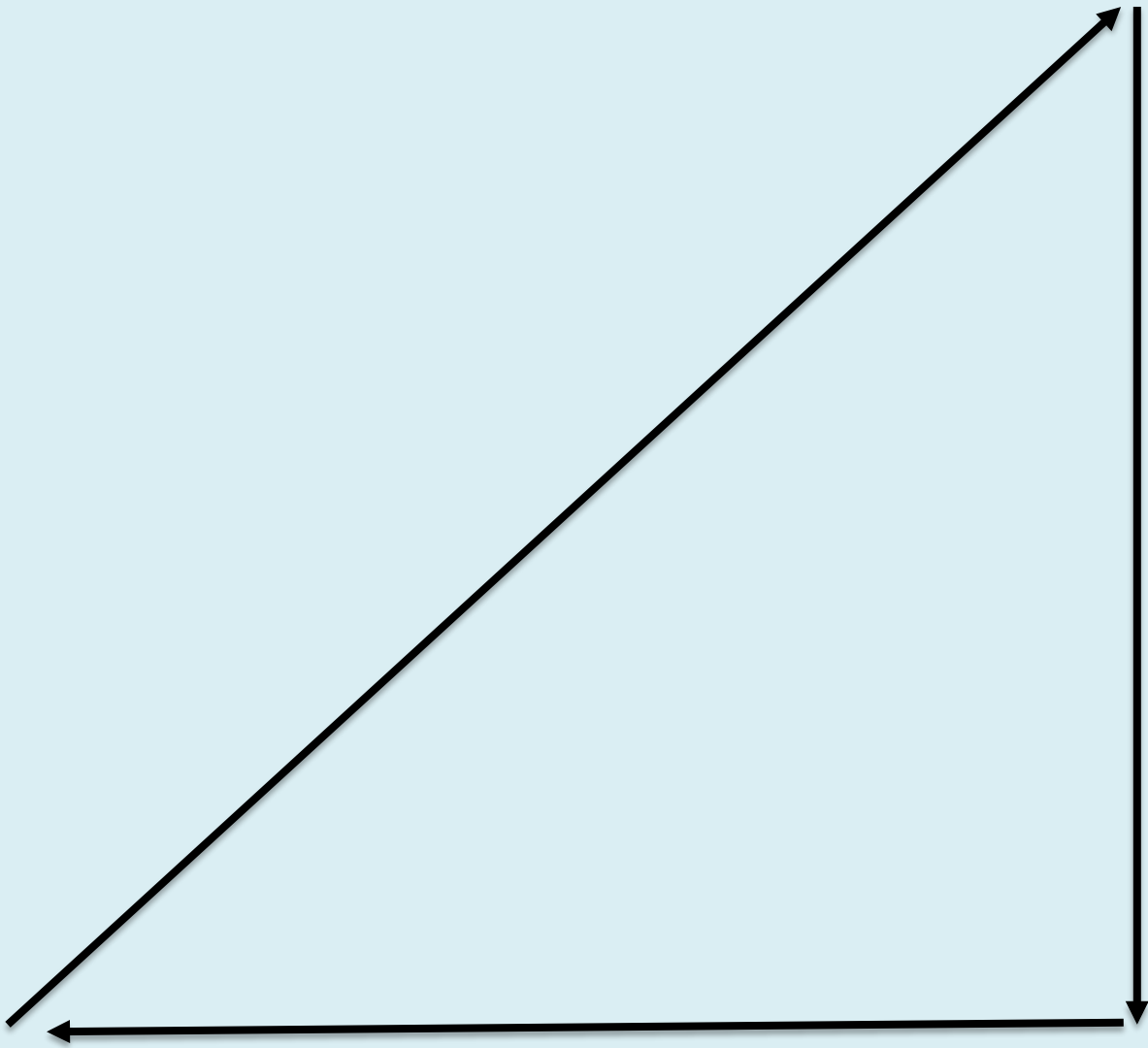
As with Medea, you must be careful not to make any assumptions about Jason or his actions – you are concerned with what the playwright wished his audience to think, with what the Ancient Greeks might have thought. Leave your own personal moral judgements and biases aside.

Jason is ambitious, seeking *kleos* or fame and glory – not a sin in Ancient Greek heroism; it is the only way a mortal can achieve any sense of immortality. However, his excessive ambition and pride (or Hubris) has led him to make a foolish decision of abandoning and betraying his wife Medea – the foreign, wild, proud woman from a line of kings and gods. He assumed that she would support him, as her husband, no matter what; he assumes all the women, including Glauce, will simply obey him because he is a man. This shows his naivety and sexist/patronising attitude towards women. It is this misunderstanding he has of Medea and women that will lead to his own destruction. He can also be accused of certain xenophobic tendencies – however, this may not be all that different from Euripides' opinion, or that of other Ancient Greeks; remember that the play ends with a foreign woman doing horrific things as Ancient Greek women are horrified at the act. We certainly have more sympathy for Jason and his fall into ruin at the end; perhaps because of the excessive, horrific form that Medea's revenge takes, or perhaps because he is simply so naïve in his actions, that he seems to be unaware of his own faults – even to the end.

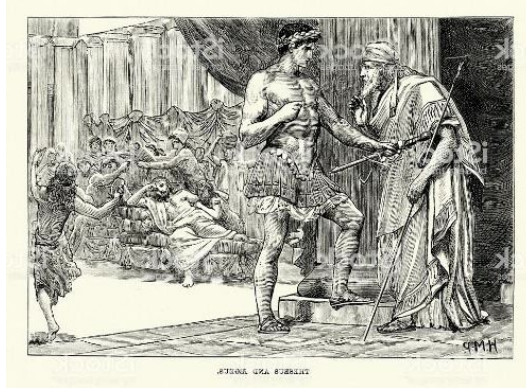
Below is a diagram that shows the tragic plot of another famous Greek Tragedy: *Oedipus Rex*. Examine this and using it as a template, create a similar diagram showing Jason's tragic story and downfall.



Tragic Plot of Jason's Fall



Aegeus



Background:

- King of Athens, one of the cities earliest rulers.
- Future father of the famous hero Theseus who would kill the Minotaur.
- He has failed to father any heirs by the time he arrives in Corinth.
- Will give his name to the Aegean Sea.

Characteristics/traits (Adjectives):

Desperate (for an heir), a good and wise ruler (he puts his people first), clever/intelligent (doesn't allow Medea to put him in a precarious situation), pious, loyal, honest, friendly, good-natured, sympathetic.

Summarise Aegeus' Role in Plot:

- Aegeus arrives in Corinth on his way from Delphi to Troezen (southern Greece). He asked the oracle at Delphi to help him father an heir; he is now journeying to visit his friend Pittheus, King of Troezen, for advice on the prophecy.
- He is persuaded (manipulated?) by Medea into promising her sanctuary from her enemies after she flees Corinth; he ensures that there is an oath taken and that she makes her own way there, this giving him legitimate excuse.

Opinion/Synopsis of Character:

Aegeus character is only important in how he deals with Medea and offers her a place of sanctuary after her act of revenge. He is shown in the best light, as the only Athenian in the play. He is friendly, honest, and loyal to Medea as a guest; he is sympathetic to her plight; he is pious in his dealing with her as a suppliant; yet clever/intelligent in his dealing with her – not allowing his own personal desperation to cloud his judgement: thinking of the good of his city before his own needs. However, he is clearly desperate and distraught at his own situation; and it is this which allows Medea to take advantage and ensure herself a sanctuary.

Creon



Background:

- King of Corinth.
- Father of Glauce.
- New Father-in-law of Jason.

Characteristics/traits (Adjectives):

Fatherly, a somewhat considerate ruler (his name is *literally* ruler in Greek), unjust (?) in marrying his daughter to a married man, soft, weak-willed, compromising, not a tyrant, sympathetic.

Summarise Creon's Actions in Plot:

- Marries his daughter to Jason.
- Banishes Medea and her children from Corinth.
- Recedes his orders slightly to allow Medea to stay one more day (manipulated by an appeal to his fatherhood).
- Grabs his daughter's corpse when she collapses in the pain from the poisoned clothes and dies as he cries out in pain and tries to pull away.

Opinion/Synopsis of Character:

What is most important about Creon is his dealing with Medea – how she manipulates him. To sum up his character in a line, we could say he is a somewhat weak-willed ruler whose concern for his daughter consumes his character, so much so that he feels sympathy for Medea, and commits accidental suicide at his daughter's death.

Chorus of Corinthian Women



Characteristics/traits (Adjectives):

Sympathetic (even empathetic), judgemental (first of Jason then Medea), feminine (obviously).

Summarise Chorus' Role in the Plot:

- They first appear outside Jason's house and beg to see Medea, feeling sympathy for her plight.
- They condemn Jason and are persuaded by Medea to side with her and keep her secrets.
- They sing of how men will be deceitful and women heroic; signalling how Medea is more like a heroic character, such as Achilles, and Jason more treacherous like the "typical" woman according to Ancient Greek thinking; they also sympathise with Medea as a foreigner and abandoned wife.
- They highlight Medea's rage as a jealous lover and clearly side with her in the argument between Jason and Medea.
- They sing another song lamenting the power of Aphrodite (Goddess of Love) to force one to fall in love, only to be betrayed, or for the marriage to lead into conflict; they also sing a song lamenting to possibility of becoming a refugee. Clearly siding/sympathising with Medea.
- They are shocked at Medea's full plan to kill her children, perhaps in some disbelief.
- They sing a song in praise of Athens and accuse Medea of the ultimate wrong; their sympathies have clearly changed.
- They sing a song sympathising with Glauce, Jason, *and Medea*.
- They sing a song declaring that "some" women can make judgement, and that judgment is that being a parent is a burden that brings nothing but grief.
- They are witness to the children's murder; they do not (cannot because of the nature of the stage) interfere; they inform Jason of the crime.
- They sing a song reflecting on the unexpected nature of the Fates and decrees of Zeus and the Gods, mirroring the unexpected ending of the play and Medea's escape by divine aid on the *Deus ex Machina*.

Interpreting the Chorus:

The Chorus acts as a kind of bridge between the audience and the characters on the stage. Their *Stasimon* highlight the central themes within the plot; however, in the case of *Medea*, they also show us where their sympathies lie at that particular time – perhaps indicating which characters we ought to be sympathising with. The plot of Euripides’ play goes from the extreme view that Jason is entirely in the wrong, to the view that Medea is at fault, to a stalemate at the end where both Medea and Jason cannot fully resolve their grievances with the other. Medea has committed a horrific act in the name of revenge, Jason still does not understand his part in his own downfall and cannot understand his wife’s reasoning, and the Gods remain absent. The Chorus never completely lose their sympathy for Medea, but they do grow to sympathise with Jason too. It seems that Euripides wants us to remain unsure at the end; he wants the question of who was right and who was wrong to remain open-ended. The Chorus is his tool for doing this.

Use this table to show how the Chorus’ attitude to Medea’s plight and to Jason changes sympathies throughout the play

Episode	Medea’s Actions	Chorus’ Sympathies
Prologue		
Episode 1		
Episode 2		
Episode 3		
Episode 4		
Episode 5		
Episode 6		
Episode 7		
Prologue		

Key Terms

Hubris = excessive pride.

Hamartia = a fatal tragic flaw that leads to a tragic hero's downfall.

Kleos = fame or glory; all mortals seek fame so that they can a sense of the immortality denied them.

Oracle = a person/priest/priestess of Apollo who can reveal aspects of a person's future.

Irony = something that implies it's opposite: e.g. Oedipus' physical blindness at the end of the play implies that he can at last see. Jocasta and Oedipus are punished by a revelation of the truth which they themselves believed false.

Deus ex Machina = a physical mechanism in Ancient Greek theatre, a platform at the top of the backdrop of a stage where the gods would traditionally appear in a play – it is used in Medea to emphasis her protection from the gods and semi-divine heritage. It now implies any plot that is resolved by the miraculous appearance of someone (God or human) from outside the main plot. E.g., Ron saving Harry Potter from the frozen lake in the Deathly Hallows; the Eagles in Tolkien's Hobbit and Lord of the Rings appearing battle to save the forces of good; Bacteria killing all the Martians in War of the World.

Ekkyklema (literally meaning is "roll-out machine") = a trolley that lay behind doors in the centre of an ancient Greek theatre stage that could be rolled out to reveal a scene that has happened off- stage. It is implied to in Medea at the end as Jason tries to unbar the door and reveal the corpses of his own children only for them to appear on the Deus ex Machina instead. It is then probably used in King Oedipus to reveal the self-mutilated king at the end of the play.

Chorus = a group of singers and dancers who performed throughout Ancient Greek plays often playing the role of people from the city.

Chorus Leader = one from the chorus who would speak and interact with the actors on the stage.

Orchestra = a circular space in front of the main stage and closer to the audience where the chorus would dance and sing. The Chorus Leader would remain here also, but closer to the stage, as he talked with the actors.

Stasimon = a choral interlude. A stationary song about a theme in the play or sometimes the scene that has just occurred.

Masks = all Ancient Greek (and Roman) actors would wear masks. This was to allow for a single actor to play several roles.