*Medea*

Euripides, [*Medea*](http://www.amazon.com/Euripides-Medea-Cambridge-Translations-Greek/dp/0521644798/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1433949898&sr=8-1&keywords=cambridge+translation%2C+euripides), trans. John Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Summary:

If Sophocles is the kindly grandfather, Euripides is the cranky uncle. These two Greek playwrights were rivals, the former enjoying fame during his lifetime and the latter gaining his in subsequent centuries. Compared to Sophocles’s twenty festival wins, Euripides garnered only five. *Medea* placed third and last the year it premiered, perhaps because Euripides was a tragedian in the Golden Age of Athens who did not hesitate to criticize war and religion while counter-culturally supporting women and slaves. Euripides wrote over ninety plays, twenty of which survive (more than any other Greek playwright).

Premiering in 431 BC, *Medea* is a study in passion vs. reason, where the main character, Medea, a foreigner, has betrayed her family and country to help Jason, her lover. Jason, however, finds another wife, which prompts Medea’s quest to be “[g]ood to my friends, but grievous to my enemies.” She calls on the gods to hold Jason accountable. And if the gods won’t, she will. With only two actors on the stage at a time in a nine-character play, Euripides requires the audience to focus on the dialogue—the manipulation, the pleading, the rage.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Passion. *Medea* is Greek for “passionate love.” Medea even says, “[P]assion is the cause of all of life’s greatest horrors.”
* Honor. A discussion of honor is often a front covering pride. Medea exacts murderous vengeance to preserve her honor, saying to Jason, ”[B]eing spared your mockery takes away the pain.”
* Love. Medea and Jason’s love causes more pain than joy. Medea muses, “Oh, what a great evil love can be for us.”
* Murder, Suicide, & Infanticide. The murder of Medea’s *male* children can be seen as a rebellion against patriarchal society, or motherhood itself.
* Tragedy. In both content and form, *Medea* is certainly a tragedy. Aristotle called Euripides “the most tragic of poets.”
* Gods. The gods, which often represent elements of nature or humanity the Greeks didn’t understand, have a minor role in this play—until the very end.
* Entertainment vs. Education. Greek playwrights were charged with striking a balance between these.

Discussion Questions:

1. Greek plays were part of a religious festival honoring the god Dionysus. Compare and contrast the cultural and moral implications of whether you would presently attend a wedding for a same-sex couple versus going to plays in ancient Greece.
2. Describe Medea. Is she clever? Manipulative? Vindictive?
3. To what animals is Medea compared, and why?
4. Is Euripides a misogynist or a proto-feminist?
5. Medea refers to a “sacrifice” (line 1024). *Whose* sacrifice?
6. Medea gets away with her crime. Does this make her a hero? An anti-hero?
7. Read the description of Creon’s death in lines 1178-1196. What strikes you about this gruesome passage?
8. "She [Aphrodite] sends young Loves [*Eros* or Cupid] to sit with Wit/Helping create their diverse arts.” Would you agree with the chorus that art combines passion and intellect?
9. Discuss the ending. Is this fitting? What does it communicate?