

Medea: Monster, Mother, Victim

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Abstract: Medea is a complicated figure who elicits both horror and sympathy through her cunning, ruthlessness, and sorrow. Some see her as an irredeemable monster, others as a neglected and mistreated wife, and others, a tempting sorceress. In Euripides' play *Medea*, the titular character is living with her husband and children in Corinth and reeling from the news that her husband Jason is about to leave her for a Corinthian Princess; The story follows Medea as she deals with her husband's betrayal and her revenge against him by killing the Princess and the children Medea had with Jason. The complexity of Medea's character in Euripides's play inspires various receptions of Medea's character. Part of the reason her characterization changes so much is based on the biases of the people or group that gets to write about Medea. Typically, the study of Classics and Classical Literature have been reserved for elites who represent a small percentage of the population, and results in similar receptions of Medea that provide a damning characterization of her. Euripides himself was an elite Athenian male who managed to elicit some sympathies for Medea, but in the end, he portrays Medea as an inhumane force condemning Jason to a life of sorrow. But as the field of Classics has become more accessible to people previously excluded from the study, receptions of Medea became less damning and focused more on Medea as a human being, not as an inhuman monster.

Medea's Story:

What does one call a murderer of children? What name does one give a woman who fought against those that sought harm against her and her loved ones? How does one consider a woman who dismembered her brother to save her lover? How would one condemn a woman who sacrificed everything she had ever known only to be betrayed by the man she loves? Some call her a monster, others call her mother, and others call her a victim.

Nevertheless, we know her name is Medea; Daughter of King Aeetes, Princess of Colchis, Wife of Jason, Granddaughter of Helios, Sorceress of Helios, a priestess of Hekate. Medea is a complicated figure because, on the one hand, she has done a lot of brutal acts that have damaged the lives of innocent people in her wake, but she did all these things for a man that she loved, and the man she fathered children with only to be tossed aside. The complexity of Medea leads to a wide array of receptions ranging from a one-dimensional villain to a poor and broken mother. The changes in reception towards Medea partially stem from an increasing inclusion of marginalized groups in Classical studies.

Receptions of Medea:

Typically, the study of Classics and Classical Literature has been reserved for elites who represent a small percentage of the population and results in similar receptions of Medea that provide a damning characterization of her. Upper-class male receptions of Medea portray her as a character that upsets the status quo to the detriment of the world around her. However, as Classics has become more accessible to people previously excluded from the study, receptions of Medea became less damning. They focused more on Medea as a human being than an inhuman monster. An example is Rhodessa Jones' *Medea Project*. This project is part of Jones' Cultural Odyssey. The *Medea Project* uses Classical theater and finds non-euro-centric ways to portray those plays. The *Medea Project* serves "female inmates, ex-inmates, H.I.V. positive women, college students, and participants across the nation."¹

Reception is how others perceive something; most reception falls into three categories: "Metaphrase: word by word, Paraphrase: a version of the sense, rather than the words, and Imitation: like a jazz improvisation on a melodic base to create an overall equivalence to the original"². An example of a metaphrase reception to *Medea* is a direct translation of myths and plays surrounding her; for example, modern translations of Euripides' *Medea* are translated as literally as possible from the Greek. An example of a Paraphrase from *Medea* is a less literal translation or interpretation of her story; an example of that is *Medea in Manhattan* by Dea Loher, which is a German play set in modern-day Manhattan; this play is about "Medea and Jason...living as illegal immigrants, until Jason marries the daughter of a rich businessman, abandoning Medea and their child; the play takes place on their wedding night."³ An example of Imitation

¹ Cultural Odyssey. RHOESSA JONES & THE MEDEA PROJECT: THEATER FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN/ HIV CIRCLE. (n.d.). Retrieved November 14, 2022, from <https://themedeaoproject.weebly.com/cultural-odyssey.html>

²Mills, S. J. V. (2022, August). Reception: what it is and how to do it. Senior Capstone: Reception of Greco-Roman b. Drama. Asheville

with Medea would be *La Tavola Ritonda*, where Medea is a witch keeping the protagonist captive and trying to seduce him.⁴

To understand why Medea has such a mixed reception, one must examine her myths, more specifically, *Medea* by the Greek playwright Euripides. The play starts with Medea in Corinth, reeling from the news that her husband Jason has agreed to marry the Princess of Corinth, Glauce. At the beginning of the play, the Greek chorus is sympathetic to Medea but also worried about what she might do to her children. She is then forced out of Corinth by King Creon, but she manages to convince Creon to give her some time to prepare for her departure. Creon agrees to give her a day to prepare to leave, but as she leaves, she meets King Aegeus (father of Theseus) and works out a deal with him that would allow her to live in Athens with him after she leaves Corinth. Medea then gives her sons a beautiful dress and crown to present Princess Glauce as a show of goodwill. However, when Glauce saw the beautiful dress, she was immediately put on the poison-coated dress and burned to death. Her father, Creon, tried to save his daughter, but he also burned to death trying to save his child. The next step in Medea's revenge was to erase Jason's legacy, which meant that she would kill the children she had with Jason. When Jason returned to confront Medea, he witnessed his children's corpses, and Medea flew above him, condemning him to a life of sorrow.⁵ Despite the brutal actions Medea took in Euripides' play, the playwright does a lot to humanize Medea; an example of this can be seen with the interactions between Medea and the "chrous: I heard her voice, I heard the cries of that sad lady here from Colchis. Has she not calmed down yet? Old nurse, tell me. I heard from some household servant in there that she's been screaming. I find no pleasure in this house's suffering. We've been friends."⁶ These lines from the chorus are from the beginning of the play, they highlight how concerned and empathetic the chorus was towards Medea. The chorus even cheers Medea on when she announces her plans to destroy Jason: "I'll do what you request. For you are right to pay back your husband. And, Medea, I'm not surprised you grieve at these events."⁷ However, the attitudes of the chorus changes after Medea kills her sons: "You hard and wretched woman, just like stone or iron to kill your children, ones you bore yourself, sealing their fate with your own hands. Of all women that ever lived before I know of one, of only one, who laid hands on her dear children and that was Ino, driven to madness by the gods, when Hera, Zeus's wife, sent her wandering in a fit away from home, that sad lady leapt into the sea, because she'd killed her sons a most unholy murder."⁸ Despite all the empathy that Euripides has built up towards Medea, all of it is stripped away by the end of his play.

³ Loher, D. (2022, October). *Manhattan Medea (1999)*. Graz.

⁴ Shaver, A., Cash, A., & Hiller, C. M. (1983). *Tristan and the round table: A translation of La Tavola Ritonda*. Center for medieval and early Renaissance studies.

⁵ Euripides and Diane J. Rayor. *Euripides' Medea: A New Translation*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

⁶ Euripides. (2008). In I. Johnson (Trans.), *Medea*. essay, Vancouver Island University.

⁷ Euripides. (2008). In I. Johnson (Trans.), *Medea*. essay, Vancouver Island University.

⁸ Euripides. (2008). In I. Johnson (Trans.), *Medea*. essay, Vancouver Island University.

Classical Receptions of Medea:

Medea being a villain is a crucial factor in Classical Receptions of Medea. This paper will define Classical Reception as reception between the Hellenistic era to the classical era c. 1600s. Classical Receptions of Medea are primarily based on three things, her deception, the violation of her motherhood, and sorcery. One example of a reception of Medea that focuses on how she is a deceiver comes from Cicero, the Roman Statesman. Cicero gives his *Pro Caelio* (for Caelius) on April 4, 56 b.c. to defend his friend Marcus Caelius against accusations of conspiracy, murder, and causing civil unrest. In this speech, he blames a woman named Clodia. In the speech, Cicero defends Marcus Caelius.⁹

Pro Caelio and Roman Perceptions of Medea:

By talking about how honorable Caelius has been as a Roman Knight. He also defends Caelius by blaming Clodia whom Marcus Caelius had an intimate relationship with¹⁰. In *Pro Caelio*, Cicero uses Medea to push the blame away from Marcus Caelius and pin any misgivings Marcus may have had on Clodia. Cicero calls Clodia "the Medea of the Palatine" and describes Clodia as "setting out into the great world were the occasions of all our young man's misfortunes, or rather of all the gossip about him." *Pro Caelio* is an interesting reception of Medea because Cicero uses her name as a watchword for deceptive and tempting women. The use of Medea as a watchword gives us an insight into how the Romans perceived her. She is an archetype for deceptive feminine behavior that leads men to dishonor, hence Clodia's comparison to Medea. However, there are more significant cultural reasons why the Romans characterized Medea as a temptress and a deceiver. In mythology, Medea flees to Athens to King Aegeus and marries him. She has a son named Aegeus named Medus and lives as queen of Athens for some years until Aegeus' firstborn son, Theseus, returns. Medea fears that Theseus will kill and disinherit her son Medus, so she tries to kill him. So she tricks Aegeus into thinking Theseus is an imposter and that he needs to kill him. However, she fails because Aegeus recognizes Theseus's sword as one Aegeus had so many years ago. After Medea fails to kill Theseus, she flees with her son Medus to Parthia, a.k.a Persia.¹¹ The Persians were the biggest threat to the Romans and had always held a negative presence in Roman Society. For the Romans, the Parthians represented everything Rome was against: overly sumptuous, sneaky, dishonorable, and even effeminate. For Medea to seek refuge with the Parthians and for them to accept her would mean that Medea is like the Parthians and thus anti-Roman. To make matters even harsher, Medea being described as a monster makes her more inhuman. In Latin and Greek, the word monster means something being other in the most alienating sense possible; a two-headed cow would be called a monster not because it is necessarily evil but because it is so strange and non-human. This added layer of the othering of Medea makes her scarier because she is not a human that does something wrong; she is this other creature that is so unlike the rest of humanity. Medea, the

¹⁰ Cicero, Marcus Tullius, and Andrew R. Dyck. *Pro Marco Caelio*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

¹¹ Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives: Translated from the Original Greek, with Notes, Critical and Historical, and a Life of Plutarch*. New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859.

monster, is even mentioned in the play by Euripides; in lines 1600-1602, Jason says to Medea, "You're not a woman. You're a she-lion. Your nature is more bestial than Scylla, the Tuscan monster."¹²

Medea, in the Classical era, has always had an association with deception and treachery, which are stereotypes of women commonly accepted in the male-dominated Greece-Roman society. Even after the fall of the Roman Empire, the stereotype of women being deceptive and treacherous remained. In Arthurian Legend, Medea reappears as a sorceress who traps and tries to seduce Sir Tristian in *La Tavola Ritonda* – or English, *Sir Tristian and the Round Table*.¹³ Medea had such a hostile reception in the pre-modern era partly because of how exclusive Classical Studies were. Classical Studies used to be reserved for people who had the time and resources to devote to them; in most cases, that was upper-class white men because, for a long time, women, the impoverished, or anyone just not white was not permitted to get an education or have the resources to read or write.¹⁴ For a long time, the only receptions we had of Medea were through the eyes of a privileged class, which led to Medea having depictions as a foreign monster, a seductress, and a witch sent to try and damn people. Finally, however, people who had previously been excluded and even mistreated started to gain access to Classical Studies. This change in who can access Classical Studies has led to a switch in the reception of Classical figures.

Elitism in Classics:

The elitism and exclusion that Classical Studies have been a part of should not be taken lightly; several alt-right and white nationalist groups use Classics to bolster their ideology. One group that uses Classics to bolster white supremacy is Identity Evropa. "Identity Evropa is at the forefront of the racist "alt-right's" effort to recruit white, college-aged men and transform them into the fashionable new face of white nationalism. Rather than denigrating people of color, the campus-based organization focuses on raising white racial consciousness, building community based on shared racial identity and intellectualizing white supremacist ideology."¹⁵ The group is infamous for leaving flyers around college campuses with busts of Augustus or Alexander the Great with messages such as "Protect your Heritage," or "Serve Your People." Identity Evropa strives to create a separate white ethnostate that values traditional European values. These "European values" stem from a fetishized version of ancient Greek and Rome that has sterilized the multicultural and diversity of these civilizations.¹⁶ The

¹² Euripides. (2008). In I. Johnson (Trans.), *Medea*. essay, Vancouver Island University.

¹³ Shaver, A., Cash, A., & Hiller, C. M. (1983). *Tristan and the round table: A translation of La Tavola Ritonda*. Center for medieval and early Renaissance studies.

¹⁴ Yaffe, D. (n.d.). *The Color of Classics* | *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. Princeton University. Retrieved October 24, 2022, from <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/color-classics>

¹⁵ Identity Evropa/American Identity Movement. Southern Poverty Law Center. (n.d.). Retrieved November 28, 2022, from <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/identity-evropaamerican-identity-movement>

¹⁶ Poser, R. (2021, February 2). He wants to save classics from whiteness. can the field survive? *The New York Times*. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html>

elitism that the Classics Field is unfortunately plagued with is an issue many Classicists are trying to resolve. One reason the Classics Field has had an issue with elitism is due to the sources that remain from antiquity. Most of the sources that are available from the Classical Era are from the upper-class male elites, who had the time and effort to write and have their works preserved. In addition, the inclusion of marginalized groups in a field marred by racism and exclusion has led to a more sympathetic look at villainized characters. As aforementioned, efforts such as *The Medea Project* by Rhodessa Jones use inclusions to shift receptions from being a white male-dominated area to one inclusive to marginalized communities. Because the story of a woman leaving her homeland, being treated as "other," and being abandoned by a man who promised to love her is a story that many minorities relate to.

The Quest for the Silver Fleece:

One example of a minority-led reception of Medea comes from W.E.B. du Bois, a Black Abolitionist during the Civil War period in American History. His first novel, *The Quest for the Silver Fleece*, is set in the South during Reconstruction. It follows Blessed "Bles" Alwyn, a young black man who wants to achieve great things in life but is challenged by the racism and the titans of the "Silver Fleece" industry. A big theme with this reception is oppression; a big part of the Black American Experience is how they are kept from achieving and functioning the way White people can. This story takes the Mythos of Medea and puts it in Reconstruction Era America. The story mirrors Jason and the Argonauts because Jason and Bles are struggling and travel worldwide to claim what is rightfully theirs. In Jason's case, he wants his father's land. In Bles' case, he wants to succeed like all the white men. Both fall in love with a strange woman – Jason and Medea and Bles and Zora- and both get close to achieving their goals, but they can only do so if they sacrifice. However, in *The Quest for the Silver Fleece*, Bles sacrifices his relationship with Zora but returns to her because of how disillusioned he becomes with success. However, Jason does sacrifice his relationship with Medea to achieve his goals, but in the end, he does not get to succeed and is left miserable for the rest of his life. *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* focuses on Jason/Bles' relationship with Medea (or, in this case, Zora); it still speaks to some of the themes in Euripides's *Medea*. Both stories deal with themes of oppression and betrayal. In Euripides, Jason was oppressed and betrayed by his uncle, who stole what belonged to Jason, and in turn, Jason oppressed and betrayed Medea.¹⁷

The Medea in du Bois' novel is characterized as strange and different but not monstrous. Zora is characterized as free-spirited and lives in a swamp, representing "all that is free, wild, joyful, and loving, but also the fear, jealousy, ignorance, and poverty fostered by racism, slavery, and the tenant farming system."¹⁸ Zora/Medea being a part of the swamp makes her character a force for good and a force for stagnation. Zora/Medea, being from the swamp, is both a good and joyful character and fearful and ignorant of the outside world. Zora is different from Euripides' Medea because Medea is not portrayed as ignorant and is characterized as highly intelligent, which makes her

¹⁷ du Bois, W. E. B. (1911). *The quest for the silver fleece*. Chicago, Mnemosyne Publishing.

¹⁸ *Quest of the Silver Fleece*. *Oxford Reference*. Retrieved November 2, 2022, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100358737>.

actions more heinous because she is fully aware of what she is doing. However, with Zora, since she is not fully aware, her actions that hinder Bles are less egregious because Zora is not fully aware and was forced into her situation by the racism of her world. The racism that Zora faces is also more intense than the foreign hostilities that Medea in Euripides faces. Medea was treated suspiciously partly because she was a foreigner but mostly because she killed many people before arriving in Corinth. Zora was treated poorly and made ignorant because of the color of her skin, a condition that she had no control over. Zora has little control over how she is and lives, but Medea controls herself and what she does. What makes Zora more sympathetic than Medea is Zora's lack of agency caused by the racial injustice she faces.

The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea

Another example of a minority-led reception of Medea is *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* by Cherrie Moraga. The play is set in a post-apocalyptic United States with different territories for different racial groups. In the play, Medea has been exiled from her homeland Aztlan because of her sexuality. Her son, Chac-Mool, wants to go and be with his father, Jason, who cheated on Medea. Medea is horrified because that would mean her son would go to an anti-LGBT and anti-woman territory. As the play progresses, Medea and her son become more and more antagonistic toward each other until the tension bubbles over in a ritual ceremony called the Sun Dance ritual. Sun Dance ritual is required for Medea's son to enter the society of Aztlan, and Medea is horrified because, to her, the Sun Dance ritual represents a male-dominated and misogynistic worldview. Finally, Medea decides to save her son from becoming like his father and the misogynistic society he wants to be a part of by killing him or, in her words, sacrificing him. Medea is then taken to a mental hospital, and the play ends with her smiling at the visions of her son.¹⁹

This reception of Medea has more elements of racial and LGBT tension. In Moraga's Medea, the main struggle is less between Medea and Jason and more between Medea's identity as a queer Hispanic woman, and the misogyny of the world her son wants to join. Euripides' Medea does not explicitly say that or show a conflict between a marginalized person and an oppressive society. In *The Hungry Woman*, Medea has been exiled from her homeland because of her sexuality, not because she has committed a crime. Another difference lies in the ending for Medea. In Euripides, she flies above Jason in a chariot pulled by dragons belonging to her grandfather Helios and curses Jason to misery. However, in *The Hungry Woman*, Medea goes mad and hallucinates about her sons. However, despite Medea not fully being able to cope with what she did, she still took an active and knowing role in her decision. She was not ignorant of what she was going to do and the implications of it; she may have lost her mind, but she does not regret killing her son, who, to her, now represents the horrors of a misogynistic world. The fact that Medea would go to such great lengths to avoid another misogynistic man in her life highlights how maddening the oppression Medea faces in *The Hungry Woman* is and how desperate she is not to have to go through that again.

¹⁹ Moraga, C., & Moraga, C. (2008). *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. West End Press.

Medea in Los Angeles:

Luis Alfaro creates another Chicano reception of Medea with *Medea in Los Angeles*. Alfaro has other Chicano-inspired receptions of Classical Greek plays such as *Oedipus El Rey* and *Electridad*. Alfaro is a Chicano man that grew up in Los Angeles. Alfaro's plays tend to take place in the Barrios of Los Angeles and showcase the Chicano community's unique problems while living in the United States. One of those struggles is immigration. *Medea in Los Angeles* takes the story of Medea and focuses on Medea's struggles as an immigrant woman. In *Medea in Los Angeles*, Medea illegally crosses the US-Mexico Border with her husband Jason, her son Acan, and her nurse Tita. Eventually, the couple ends up in Corona, Queens, and Jason becomes the client for the patron Armida at her construction company. Medea spends most of her time inside because she is terrified of the new world, she has found herself in, and while Medea isolates herself, her husband Jason becomes closer to Armida. One day Jason brings Armida to his home for dinner, and Armida is rude and arrogant. She tells Medea that she is not legally married to Jason in the United States, and Jason uses that as an excuse to leave Medea. True to the original play, Medea kills her son Acan and Armida and leaves Jason with nothing.

Similar to Medea in Euripides, Medea strongly connects with sorcery and witchcraft. In the first few scenes, Medea and her family perform an ancient ritual that involves her holding up two Banana leaves and chanting. Another similarity in *Medea in Los Angeles* is the theme of immigration and isolation; because Medea has left her homeland, she is left in a foreign land dependent on her husband. The differences between Euripides' *Medea* and *Medea in Los Angeles* lie in what each play emphasizes. Euripides focuses more on a general theme of the isolation of foreign women and the hostility of new people, while *Medea in Los Angeles* is particular about that theme. Euripides has some monologues of Medea lamenting how women never get to go out and how the people hate her, but Jason is loved, while in *A Medea in Los Angeles*, the entire play centers around that idea. From how her new country treats Medea, her resistance to adopting American ways, and Jason's acceptance by the new country's people, *A Medea in Los Angeles* is driven by the theme of how foreign women suffer when they migrate.²⁰ This reception of Medea humanizes Medea by making her a complex character whose suffocating isolation the audience can feel. Medea is less strange and monstrous in Alfaro's play because the focus of the play is on Medea's suffering and less on Medea's rage. An example of the play focusing on Medea's suffering is when Armida confronts Medea and tells her that Jason will leave her. This confrontation puts Armida as an active aggressor and Medea as a victim.²¹ Again, despite Medea being victimized, she still knows and is active in her actions against those who harmed her. The audience can also see why Medea is so isolated and how her trauma made her isolate herself. In Euripides' play, Medea is treated as others by the people of Corinth because of her reputation, but in Alfaro's play, Medea is too

²⁰ Alfaro, L. (2022, October). *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles .

²¹ Morrison, Jayson A. "Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles by Luis Alfaro (Review)." *Theatre Journal* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 68, no. 2, 2016, pp. 279–281.

scared to go out into the world because of all the trauma she faced getting to a new country.

Why Medea:

Medea is a dynamic character who is strong-willed and decisive in her actions. In Euripides, she is clever, cunning, strong, and ruthless, and these traits echo in her receptions. The Medea in du Bois may be ignorant, but she is still strong and holds her own against the racial oppression she faces daily. The Medea in Alfaro's play has been beaten down and isolated but is still active and ruthless in how she deals with her betrayal; the same things apply to the Medea in Moraga's work. One way to read into why these minority-led receptions highlight Medea's victimhood but still have her being a solid and active character is because the story of Medea, in some ways, acts as a microcosm for the struggles minorities face in a world ruled by the majority. In the showdown between Jason and Medea in lines 1329-1340, "must have lost my mind to bring you here, from that savage country to a Greek home. You were truly evil then—you betrayed your father and the land that raised you. However, the avenging fury meant for you the gods have sent to me...No woman from Greece would dare to do this, but I chose you as my wife above them all, and that has proved to be a hateful marriage—it has destroyed me."²² Jason's rant towards Medea reveals that he sees Medea as some barbarian who should have been great full that she was brought to civilized Greece. In the modern zeitgeist, Jason's sentiments are echoed with slogans like "America Like it or Leave it." Often when marginalized communities bring up issues they face, they are given the response that things would be worse for them outside of the United States, so they should be grateful they live in America and not complain. The similarities between Medea's story and the story of minorities stem from a pain unique to marginalized people. That answers a question I asked when researching these receptions: Why did these three distinct plays use the story of Medea to show issues with immigration, exclusion and exile, and racism? Because Medea's story is about a woman who left everything, she had ever known to be with a man who tried to abandon her in a hostile country; this relates to the feelings minorities share in a world where black parents tell their children "that in order to succeed despite racial discrimination, they need to be "twice as good": twice as smart, twice as dependable, twice as talented."

Medea is an immigrant, a minority, and a woman whose struggles echo the struggles minority groups face in a world not built for them.

²² Euripides. (2008). In I. Johnson (Trans.), *Medea*. essay, Vancouver Island University.

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