

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
**“Medea, in Medea and Other
Plays”**

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AUTHOR NOTES

Euripides was born in 480 BC and died in 406 BC. He was the youngest of the three principal tragic poets of Ancient Greece. The other two were Aeschylus and Sophocles. Euripides wrote nearly 90 plays, of which 18 survive today although there is some debate over whether one of the later plays was actually written by him. His work had a great influence on Roman drama, later English and German drama, and especially 17th-century French dramatic poets Pierre Corneille and Jean Baptiste Racine. Euripides's plays are thought to have first been performed in the Attic drama festivals in 454 BC, but it was not until 442 BC that he won first prize. Records indicate that after this he was only to win again three more times in his life, and once more after his death. Aside from his writings, his chief interests were philosophy and science.

Euripides was interested in the new moral, social, and political movements that were taking place in Athens towards the end of the 5th century BC. It was a period of enormous intellectual discovery, in which "wisdom" ranked as the highest earthly accomplishment. Anaxagoras had just proven that air was an element, and that the sun was not a divine beingity but was instead made of matter. New truths were being established in all departments of knowledge, and Euripides, reacting to them, brought a new kind of consciousness to the writing of tragedy. His interest lay in the thought and experience of the ordinary individual rather than in the experiences of legendary figures of the heroic past. The tragedies of Euripides present the most subtle analysis of human psychology of the three Greek dramatists. Sophocles is quoted as saying that he portrayed people as they ought to be, whereas Euripides portrayed them as they are.

Accounts agree that Euripides was a very serious and solemn person. He spent much of his life living in a cave on the island of Salamis with his many books. He was constantly the object of ridicule by Athenian writers of comedy. Aristophanes in particular made him a subject of a satire in his play *The Frogs* (405 BC). Euripides' plays were criticized in his time for their unconventionality. His heroes and princes spoke the language of everyday life and his plays did not deal with traditional religious and moral values. This is probably why he did not win at the Drama competitions very often. His plays, however, if not overwhelmingly popular, were famous throughout Greece. Late in his life Euripides left Athens for Macedonia, where he died.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Medea in Greek mythology was a sorceress. She was the daughter of Aeëtes, king of Colchis. The hero Jason and his Argonauts visited Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. Medea fell in love with Jason. She agreed to help him secure the Golden Fleece in return for everlasting fidelity and his promise to take her back to Greece with him. Medea used her magic gifts to enable Jason to complete the tasks set by her father and obtain the fleece. Medea then sailed away from Colchis with Jason, taking Apsyrtus, her young brother, with her. To escape from Aeëtes' pursuit, Medea killed Apsyrtus and scattered his remains on the sea. The king stopped to gather them up, and the delay enabled Jason and his party to escape. In another legend, it was Jason who killed Apsyrtus after Aeëtes had sent him in pursuit of Jason and Medea.

When Jason and Medea reached Greece, they found that Jason's wicked uncle Pelias had been responsible for the death of Jason's parents. To avenge their deaths, Jason once again asked Medea to aid him with her magic. Responsive as always to his wishes, Medea brought about the death of Pelias by a cunning trick. Telling his daughters she knew how they could make their aging parent young again, she dismembered an old sheep and boiled the pieces. After she uttered a charm, a frisky young lamb jumped from the pot of hot water. The daughters were convinced they could similarly restore their father to his youth. So, after Medea had given Pelias a powerful sleeping potion, they were persuaded to cut him into pieces, but Medea then disappeared without saying the magic words that would bring him back to life. After this Jason and Medea fled to Corinth, where two sons were born to them. They lived happily there until Jason fell in love with the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. In revenge, Medea killed her rival by sending her a poisoned robe. In some versions the people of Creon killed Medea's children in revenge for her actions. In other versions, fearing that Creon would attempt to avenge the death of his daughter by harming her sons, Medea killed them in a failed attempt to make them immortal. It is thought that the addition of Medea killing them as part of her overall plan was first conceived by Euripides when he wrote this play.

Medea escaped the wrath of Jason by leaving Corinth in a winged chariot and fleeing to Athens. There she achieved great influence over King Aegeus. Through her sorcery, she realised that Aegeus was unknowingly the father of Theseus, a young hero, who was arriving in Athens. She did not wish to have her influence with Aegeus disturbed by the appearance of a son, so she plotted with Aegeus to invite Theseus to a banquet and give him a poisoned cup. Aegeus willingly conspired with her through fear that the Athenians would prefer the popular young hero to him and would want to place Theseus on the throne. Fortunately, Theseus made himself known to his father, who dashed the poisoned cup to the ground. Medea escaped the wrath of Aegeus by fleeing to Asia.