

VCE LITERATURE



medea

BY EURIPIDES

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 1

I. Introductions

A. What do we mean by “reason” and “the rational”?

- what does rational behavior look like?
- what might a rational world look like? What might be its pluses and minuses?
- *is* the world we know rational? Evidence either way?
- is there a relationship between a “rational” world and rational thought?

B. What did reason mean to the ancient Greeks?

- quick bit on *logos* (what words come from the Greek word?)
 - > *logic, logistics, logo, -logy*
- animal, vegetable or mineral? → human, *defined* by possession of *rational* soul (Plato, and his influence on *everyone* since)
- BUT the Greeks also had a powerful awareness that reason and the rational were not the whole story (refer back to first discussion—is our world itself rational?)
- all-in discussion: significance for the basic plot of *Medea* (the mother who kills her children in a *calculated* act of revenge—rational? irrational? both?)

II. The Nurse’s introductory speech: where the hell *are* we?

A. the role of myth—*shared* narrative that allows playwright to set up the story economically. Tough luck for later readers who don’t share the same store of story.

B. small groups to use text-notes and/or internet to locate necessary information about people, places and things named in the Nurse’s introductory speech.

III. The Nurse’s Speech

- who is the Nurse? what social status would she have had among the play’s other characters? [→ if there’s time, perhaps a brief discussion of class in ancient Greece]
- what perspective does she bring to what she tells the audience?
- what role does that information and perspective play in setting up the drama to follow?

NURSE: If only they had never gone! If the Argo's hull
 Never had winged out through the grey-blue jaws of rock
 And on towards Colchis! If that pine on Pelion's slopes
 Had never felt the axe, and fallen, to put oars
 Into those heroes' hands, who went at Pelias' bidding
 To fetch the golden fleece! Then neither would Medea,
 My mistress, ever have set sail for the walled town
 Of Iolcus, mad with love for Jason; nor would she,
 When Pelias' daughters, at her instance, killed their father,
 Have come with Jason and her children to live here
 In Corinth; where, coming as an exile, she has earned
 The citizens' welcome; while to Jason she is all
 Obedience – and in marriage that's the saving thing,
 When a wife obediently accepts her husband's will.

But now her world has turned to enmity, and wounds her
 Where her affection's deepest. Jason has betrayed
His own sons, and my mistress, for a royal bed,
For alliance with the king of Corinth. He has married
Glauce, Creon's daughter: Poor Medea! Scorned and shamed,
 She raves, invoking every vow and solemn pledge
 That Jason made her, and calls the gods as witnesses
 What thanks she has received for her fidelity.
 She will not eat; she lies collapsed in agony,
 Dissolving the long hours in tears. Since first she heard
 Of Jason's wickedness, she has not raised her eyes,
 Or moved her cheek from the hard ground; and when her
 friends

Reason with her, she might be a rock or wave of the sea,
 For all she hears – unless, maybe, she turns away
 Her lovely head, speaks to herself alone, and wails
 Aloud for her dear father, her own land and home,
 Which she betrayed and left, to come here with this man
 Who now spurns and insults her. Poor Medea! Now
 She learns through pain what blessings they enjoy who are not
 Uprooted from their native land. She hates her sons:
 To see them is no pleasure to her. I am afraid
 Some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind. She is
 A frightening woman; no one who makes an enemy
 Of her will carry off an easy victory.

Here come the boys, back from their running. They've no
 thought
 Of this cruel blow that's fallen on their mother. Well,
 They're young; young heads and painful thoughts don't go
 together.

Medea

The Nurse's Opening Speech

- What kind of person would the nurse be?
- From what sort of perspective would she view what's happened to Medea?

Medea

Places and Names

Find out something about the following persons, things and places named in the Nurse's first speech, who they are and why they matter to Medea's story.

Medea

Colchis

The *Argo*

Jason (and The Golden Fleece)

Pelion

Pelias (and his daughters)

Iolcus

Corinth

Glauce

Creon

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 2

I. What's Happened to Medea?

A. Characters introduced: Tutor and Medea herself (though only offstage—why?)

- the three speakers (Nurse, Tutor, and Medea) are all talking about the same crisis (more or less), but what is different about each speaker's way of articulating it?
- how do the different perspectives contribute to the play's presentation of broader themes (e.g. the rational/irrational dynamic)

B. The Nurse's and the Tutor's "realism"

- how is it "realistic"? is it the same "realism" in both characters' speech?
- is it based on personal acquaintance/emotional bonding?
- what does it communicate to the audience?
- how does it shape our response to Medea's first outbursts?

C. Medea's offstage response

- obviously emotional, but is it *all* irrational? *Has* she simply lost it?
- what evidence can you find in these speeches (if any) that, even as Medea experiences powerful emotional (= irrational for the Greeks) responses to her plight, she's also begun to respond in more calculated or deliberate ways?

II. Ovid's version (a small detour, but useful at this point)

A. What Ovid had to say about the story

- celebrated poet in the court of Augustus (post civil-war, early empire, self-conscious culture-building)
- *Metamorphoses* as compendium of myth as cultural capital, composed by around 8 A.D. (nearly *five* centuries after Greek tragedies, in a different language)
- Later Roman revisions of Greek originals as purely *literary* performance (i.e. not just folklore, not religious discourse). Often ironic/comic—Roman ambivalence toward Greek culture.

B. Ovid's account of Medea's falling in love with Jason

- what kind of *feel* does Ovid's narrative version have, especially in contrast to the feel of Euripides' dramatic version?
- how does Ovid's more distanced and cooler "novelistic" treatment help us to perceive what's going on in the ancient Greek play?

Section 2 - Just What's Happened to Medea?

from the play:

NURSE: Then neither would Medea,
My mistress, ever have set sail for the walled town
of Iolcus, mad with love for Jason;

NURSE: But surely Jason won't stand by and see his sons
Banished, even if he has a quarrel with their mother?

TUTOR: Old love is ousted by new love. Jason's no friend
To this house.

NURSE: Then we're lost, if we must add new trouble
To old, before we're rid of what we had already.

TUTOR: But listen: it's no time to tell Medea this.
Keep quiet, say nothing about it.

NURSE: Children, do you hear
What sort of father Jason is to you? My curse

On - No! No curse; he is my master. All the same,
He is guilty: he has betrayed those near and dear to him.

TUTOR: What man's not guilty? It's taken you a long time to
learn

MEDEA'S voice is heard from inside the house.

MEDEA: Oh, oh! What misery, what wretchedness!
What shall I do? If only I were dead!

MEDEA [indoors]: Do I not suffer? Am I not wronged? Should
I not weep?

Children, your mother is hated, and you are cursed:
Death take you, with your father, and perish his whole
house!

MEDEA [still from indoors]:

Come, flame of the sky,
Pierce through my head!

What do I gain from living any longer?

Oh, how I hate living! I want
To end my life, leave it behind, and die.

MEDĒA: Mighty Themis! Dread Artemis!

Do you see how I am used –

In spite of those great oaths I bound him with –

By my accursed husband?

Oh, may I see Jason and his bride

Ground to pieces in their shattered palace

For the wrong they have dared to do to me, unprovoked!

O my father, my city, you I deserted;

My brother I shamefully murdered!

from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 7

(composed around 8 A.D.)

On reaching Aeetes' palace, they laid their claim to the

Golden

Fleece,* and the king dictated his terms to the heroes, a

series

of hard and dangerous tasks. Meanwhile, his daughter

Medea

fell deeply in love with the handsome Jason. Despite a

long struggle

against her feelings, her reason was powerless to master

her passion.*

'It's useless to fight, Medea,' she said. 'Some god is

against you.

This, or something akin to it surely, is what they call

love.

How else should I find my father's conditions

excessively harsh?

For certain they are too harsh. How else should I fear

for the life

of a man I have only just seen? – But *why* should I feel

so afraid?

How wretched I am! I *must* extinguish the fire which is

raging

inside my innocent heart. I should be more sane, if I

could!

I am dragged along by a strange new force. Desire and

reason

are pulling in different directions. I see the right way and

approve it,

but follow the wrong. I am royal; so why should I sigh for a

stranger,

or ever conceive of a marriage which takes me away from

my home?

Love can be found here too. It rests in the lap of the gods

whether Jason survives or is killed. – But I want him to live!

I don't

have to love him to pray for that. What crime has Jason

committed?

Only a cruel and heartless person could fail to be struck

by his youthfulness, breeding and courage. And who could

be blind to his handsome

looks, if he lacked all else? My heart, at least, has been

stirred.

10

15

20

25

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 3

I. The Chorus

One of the less familiar structural features of ancient Greek drama to modern audiences (revived by modern playwrights such as Peter Shaffer in *Equus*, but there preserving only the broad commentary function of the ancient Greek chorus—never dialogues with characters). Probably originating in the religious and ritual ancestry of the dramatic tradition—think of how almost all religious ritual can involve collective responses or prayers from participants. “Strophe” and “Antistrophe” as stage directions—originally turning towards or away from an altar.

Just plain odd or unsettling to most of us now. Why?

Identify two or three ways the chorus in Greek tragedy strikes our more naturalistically inclined expectations as odd or abnormal:

- who *are* these people?
- single voice, single identity? sometimes grammatically singular (“I”) sometimes plural (“we”)
- In Euripides’ plays that focus on a female protagonist, the chorus is composed of women, and of men in his plays that focus on a male protagonist. Why?
- Do they somehow represent some aspect of the protagonist’s own psyche? Sometimes the chorus addresses the protagonist as a concerned friend.
- Do they represent the collective/social context out of which the protagonist has stepped through his or her extraordinary actions? Sometimes the chorus expresses a broader social consensus on the protagonist’s actions. Sometimes it speaks of the plight/perspective of women in Athenian society.

II. Responses to Medea’s Plight (see handout)

A. The Nurse (ll. 115-129)

- What grabs and holds her attention?/ What are her priorities?
- “A queen is used / to giving commands, not obeying them; / And her rage once roused is hard to appease”
 - Practical implications of the divide between the rational and the irrational
 - The role of traditional aristocracy as both governors and exemplars
 - Medea’s rage a threat to society as well as to her immediate family and acquaintances

B. The Chorus (ll. 131-138, 148-159, 175-179)

- troubled by Medea’s wish for death. Why?
- expresses common sense (all husbands cheat) and bigger perspective (Zeus will sort it)
- (l. 179) “As a friend I am anxious to do whatever I can”

Section 3 - Chorus and Nurse Respond to Medea's Predicament

Enter the CHORUS of Corinthian women.

CHORUS:

I heard her voice, I heard
That unhappy woman from Colchis
Still crying, not calm yet.
Old Nurse, tell us about her.
As I stood by the door I heard her
Crying inside the palace.
And my own heart suffers too
When Jason's house is suffering;
For that is where my loyalty lies.

CHORUS:

O Zeus, and Earth, and Light,
Do you hear the chanted prayer
Of a wife in her anguish?
[*turning to the door and addressing MEDEA*]
What madness is this? The bed you long for --
Is it what others shrink from?
Is it death you demand?
Do not pray that prayer, Medea!
If your husband is won to a new love --
The thing is common; why let it anger you?
Zeus will plead your cause.
Check this passionate grief over your husband
Which wastes you away.

CHORUS: I wish she would come out here and let us see her
And talk to her; if she would listen
Perhaps she would drop this fierce resentful spirit,
This passionate indignation.
As a friend I am anxious to do whatever I can.

CHORUS:

I heard her sobbing and wailing,
Shouting shrill, pitiful accusations
Against her husband who has betrayed her.
She invokes Themis, daughter of Zeus,
Who witnessed those promises which drew her
Across from Asia to Hellas, setting sail at night,
Threaded the salt strait,
Key and barrier to the Pontic Sea.

NURSE: Oh, the pity of it! Poor Medea!

Your children -- why, what have they to do
With their father's wickedness? Why hate them?
I am sick with fear for you, children, terror
Of what may happen. The mind of a queen
Is a thing to fear. A queen is used
To giving commands, not obeying them;
And her rage once roused is hard to appease.

To have learnt to live on the common level
Is better. No grand life for me,
Just peace and quiet as I grow old.
The middle way, neither great nor mean,
Is best by far, in name and practice.
To be rich and powerful brings no blessing;
Only more utterly

Is the prosperous house destroyed, when the gods are angry.
Enter the CHORUS of Corinthian women.

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 4

Responses to Medea's Plight (cont'd, on previous handout)

I. Medea's first appearance (ll.114-297)

- Contrast with offstage laments: a public performance, every inch a queen
- what *doesn't* she do (i.e. whinge publicly about her own wrongs)?
- analysis of the issues
- acceptance of horrific fact of her situation—*but there are consequences* . . .
- broader account of the plight of “we women” and of the foreigner
- engaging sympathies? ours? the Chorus's?
- Medea's desolation and cry for revenge, seconded by the Chorus, whom she's recruited to silence. Chorus as yet unaware of exactly what she intends.

II. Creon's first appearance (ll.266ff.)

- How does Creon's speech differ here from that of any other character we've heard so far? What's the new note he sounds?
- Authority—*commands* first, *then* reasons, almost as an afterthought
- Calling a spade a spade (“Why wrap up the truth?”), but essentially governed by *fear* of what? “You're a clever woman, skilled in many evil arts”—feminine intelligence/resourcefulness associated with lawless, uncontrolled knowledge and will
- Classic patriarchal paranoia, for which Medea is herself the classic nightmare. Be very afraid . . .
- Beyond fear, Creon's motives are largely pragmatic: he wishes to pre-empt any harm Medea might pose to his daughter (and any children she might have by Jason)
- Essentially he gets it right, but he's hopelessly outclassed by Medea's cunning. The most powerful man on the scene is ultimately rendered the most helpless by Medea.

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 5

Medea's Wiles and the Debate with Creon

I. What do stereotypes of the wily feminine involve?

- Why might aspiring women (or any women, for that matter) have needed to use their wiles in ancient Greek society? Would *all* such wily behavior have crossed serious moral boundaries? How do Medea and other characters seem to regard the issue?
- What do other characters find particularly unsettling about Medea's wiles?
- potions, spells and poisons (think of kitchens and cauldrons—and maybe the witches in *Macbeth*).

II. Consider II. 310-21

- strategy? acknowledgment of present fact, yielding to misfortune? yeah, right
- camouflage, deception
- note narrative strategy—audience *knows* she's shamming humble submission

III. Creon's (vs. Medea's) motives: II.316-54

- pragmatic rationality, totally impersonal (compare Medea's passionate responses)
- what does such pragmatic rationality consider? what does Medea's richer range of responses take in?

IV. “Oh, what an evil power love has in people's lives!”

- what does Medea mean by this?
- how does it resonate with larger concerns?

Section 5 - Medea and Creon Debate Her Fate

EURIPIDES [285-321]

You're a clever woman, skilled in many evil arts;
 You're barred from Jason's bed, and that enrages you.
 I learn too from reports, that you have uttered threats
 Of revenge on Jason and his bride and his bride's father.
 I'll act first, then, in self-defence. I'd rather make you
 My enemy now, than weaken, and later pay with tears.
 MEDEA: My reputation, yet again! Many times, Creon,
 It has been my curse and ruin. A man of any shrewdness
 Should never have his children taught to use their brains
 More than their fellows. What do you gain by being clever?
 You neglect your own affairs; and all your fellow citizens
 Hate you. Those who are fools will call you ignorant
 And useless, when you offer them unfamiliar knowledge.
 As for those thought intelligent, if people rank
 You above *them*, that is a thing they will not stand.
 I know this from experience: because I am clever,
 They are jealous; while the rest dislike me. After all,
 I am not so clever as all that.
 So you, Creon,
 Are afraid – of what? Some harm that I might do to you?
 Don't let me alarm you, Creon. I'm in no position –
 A woman – to wrong a king. You have done me no wrong.
 You've given your daughter to the man you chose. I hate
 My husband – true; but you had every right to do
 As you have done. So now I bear no grudge against
 Your happiness: marry your daughter to him, and good luck
 To you both. But let me live in Corinth. I will bear
 My wrongs in silence, yielding to superior strength.
 CREON: Your words are gentle; but my blood runs cold to
 think
 What plots you may be nursing deep within your heart.
 In fact, I trust you so much less now than before.
 A woman of hot temper – and a man the same –
 Is a less dangerous enemy than one quiet and clever.
 So out you go, and quickly; no more arguing.

26

MEDEA [322-354]

I've made my mind up; you're my enemy. No craft
 Of yours will find a way of staying in my city.
 MEDEA: I knelt to you, I beseech you by the young bride, your
 child.
 CREON: You're wasting words; you'll never make me change
 my mind.
 MEDEA: I beg you! Will you cast off pity, and banish me?
 CREON: I will: I have more love for my family than for you.
 MEDEA: My home, my country! How my thoughts turn to you
 now!
 CREON: I love my country too – next only to my daughter.
 MEDEA: Oh, what an evil power love has in people's lives!
 CREON: That would depend on circumstances, I imagine.
 MEDEA: Great Zeus, remember who caused all this suffering!
 CREON: Go, you poor wretch, take all my troubles with you!
 Go!
 MEDEA: I know what trouble is; I have no need of more.
 CREON: In a moment you'll be thrown out neck and crop.
 Here, men!
 MEDEA: No, no, not that! But, Creon, I have one thing to ask.
 CREON: You seem inclined, Medea, to give me trouble still.
 MEDEA: I'll go. [*She still clings to him.*] It was not *that* I begged.
 CREON: Then why resist?
 Why will you not get out?
 MEDEA: This one day let me stay,
 To settle some plan for my exile, make provision
 For my two sons, since their own father is not concerned
 To help them. Show some pity: you are a father too,
 You should feel kindly towards them. For myself, exile
 Is nothing. I weep for them; their fate is very hard.
 CREON: I'm no tyrant by nature. My soft heart has often
 Betrayed me; and I know it's foolish of me now;
 Yet none the less, Medea, you shall have what you ask.
 But take this warning: if tomorrow's holy sun
 Finds you or them inside my boundaries, you die.

27

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 6

Medea and Jason (finally!): round one

I. In terms of traditional myth/legend, Jason's the main figure here

- a hero like Achilles or Odysseus
- alpha-male achiever—conqueror of distances, adversaries, winner of glory
- BUT the achievement for which he's best known demanded the help of a woman (huh?)
- hence, his part in a play centered on Medea is, at least, problematic—it's all back-to-front

II. Jason enters and announces his purpose

- “What fatal results follow from ungoverned rage” (another “uh oh” moment for audience)
- what are Jason's concerns? (care for Medea, mitigation of Creon's purpose)
- pragmatic, but acknowledging “friendship” Hmm—the awkward-ex syndrome?
- *Placing* Medea as client, asserting authority over her (“I'll do what I can . . .”)
- How *heroic* does any of this sound?

III. Medea's riposte

- opening: puts Jason in *his* place—cp Achilles to Agamemnon in *Iliad* I
- follow-up: Medea pre-emptively Jason's heroic endeavor with her own contribution
- “I lit the torch of your success”
- next: Jason has betrayed her love *and* violated oaths to the gods—so who's the agent of chaos/disruption here?
- pragmatic rhetorical questions (“where can I go now?”)
- closure—why are inside and outside capable of such deceptive difference?
- chorus's revision of Jason's opening

Section 6

Enter JASON.

JASON: I have often noticed – this is not the first occasion –
What fatal results follow from ungoverned rage.
You could have stayed in Corinth, still lived in this house,
If you had quietly accepted the decisions
Of those in power. Instead, you talked like a fool; and
now

You are banished. Well, your angry words don't upset me;
Go on as long as you like reciting Jason's crimes.
But after your abuse of the King and the princess
Think yourself lucky to be let off with banishment.
I have tried all the time to calm them down; but you
Would not give up your ridiculous tirades against
The royal family. So, you're banished. However, I
Will not desert a friend. I have carefully considered
Your problem, and come now, in spite of everything,
To see that you and the children are not sent away
With an empty purse, or unprovided. Exile brings
With it a train of difficulties. You no doubt
Hate me: but I could never bear ill-will to you.

MEDEA: You filthy coward! – if I knew any worse name
For such unmanliness I'd use it – so, you've come!
You, my worst enemy, come to me! Oh, it's not courage,
This looking friends in the face after betraying them.
It is not even audacity; it's a disease,
The worst a man can have, pure shamelessness. However,
It is as well you came; to say what I have to say
Will ease my heart; to hear it said will make you wince.

I will begin at the beginning. When you were sent
To master the fire-breathing bulls, yoke them, and sow
The deadly furrow, then I saved your life; and that
Every Greek who sailed with you in the Argo knows.
The serpent that kept watch over the Golden Fleece,
Coiled round it fold on fold, unsleeping – it was I
Who killed it, and so lit the torch of your success.
I willingly deceived my father; left my home;
With you I came to Iolcus by Mount Pelion,
Showing much love and little wisdom. There I put
King Pelias to the most horrible of deaths
By his own daughters' hands, and ruined his whole house.
And in return for this you have the wickedness
To turn me out, to get yourself another wife,
Even after I had borne you sons! If you had still
Been childless I could have pardoned you for hankering
After this new marriage. But respect for oaths has gone
To the wind. Do you, I wonder, think that the old gods

No longer rule? Or that new laws are now in force?
You must know you are guilty of perjury to me.

My poor right hand, which you so often clasped! My knees
Which you then clung to! How we are besmirched and
mocked

By this man's broken vows, and all our hopes deceived!

Come, I'll ask your advice as if you were a friend,
Not that I hope for any help from you; but still,
I'll ask you, and expose your infamy. Where now
Can I turn? Back to my country and my father's house,
Which I betrayed to come with you? Or to Iolcus,
To Pelias's wretched daughters? What a welcome they
Would offer me, who killed their father! Thus it stands:
My friends at home now hate me; and in helping you
I have earned the enmity of those I had no right
To hurt. For my reward, you have made me the envy
Of Hellene women everywhere! A marvellous
Husband I have, and faithful too, in the name of pity;
When I'm banished, thrown out of the country without a
friend,

Alone with my forlorn waifs. Yes, a shining shame
It will be to you, the new-made bridegroom, that your own
sons,

And I who saved your life, are begging beside the road!

O Zeus! Why have you given us clear signs to tell
True gold from counterfeit; but when we need to know
Bad men from good, the flesh bears no revealing mark?
CHORUS: The fiercest anger of all, the most incurable,
Is that which rages in the place of dearest love.

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 7

Medea and Jason: Jason Strikes Back

I. The Voice of Sweet Reason?

- DO Jason's objections make any sense? What are they? What are their concerns?
 1. It was *Venus* who helped me (by making you fall in love with me [!])
 2. What you did was, well, serviceable (?!), but that's all . . .
 3. You got more from saving me than you gave (???!!!)
 4. My marriage to Glauce is policy, aimed at our childrens' good

II. What's wrong with all this?

- “be reasonable, darling” but why is reason so *wrong* here?
- why should Medea's heart rule Jason's head? She's passionate (=irrational) and female.
- CAN his reasonings affect her response? *Can* the head govern the heart? *Should* it?
- Professed devotion to sons: *either* flagging his vulnerability to Medea's resolve *or* a bogus piece of rhetoric to be discarded as soon as Glauce bears a son.

III. Rhetoric?

- Chorus—what's the basis of its reservations about Jason's plausibility?
- Medea—Jason's very virtue (bourgeoise respectability?) makes him *worse* than a wicked man.

Section 7 - Jason Strikes Back

JASON: I have to show myself a clever speaker, it seems.

This hurricane of recrimination and abuse

Calls for good seamanship: I'll furl all but an inch

Of sail, and ride it out. To begin with, since you build

To such a height your services to me, I hold

That credit for my successful voyage was solely due

To Aphrodite, no one else divine or human.

I admit, you have intelligence; but, to recount

How helpless passion drove you then to save my life

Would be invidious; and I will not stress the point.

Your services, so far as they went, were well enough;

But in return for saving me you got far more

Than you gave. Allow me, in the first place, to point out

That you left a barbarous land to become a resident

Of Hellas; here you have known justice; you have lived

In a society where force yields place to law.

Moreover, here your gifts are widely recognized,

You are famous; if you still lived at the ends of the earth

Your name would never be spoken. Personally, unless

Life brings me fame, I long neither for hoards of gold,

Nor for a voice sweeter than Orpheus! – Well, you began

The argument about my voyage; and that's my answer.

As for your scurrilous taunts against my marriage with

The royal family, I shall show you that my action

Was wise, not swayed by passion, and directed towards

Your interests and my children's. – No, keep quiet! When I

Came here from Iolcus as a stateless exile, dogged

And thwarted by misfortunes – why, what luckier chance

Could I have met, than marriage with the King's daughter?

It was not, as you resentfully assume, that I

Found your attractions wearisome, and was smitten with

Desire for a new wife; nor did I specially want

To raise a numerous family – the sons we have

Are enough, I'm satisfied; but I wanted to ensure

First – and the most important – that we should live well

And not be poor; I know how a poor man is shunned

By all his friends. Next, that I could bring up my sons

In a manner worthy of my descent; have other sons,
Perhaps, as brothers to your children; give them all
An equal place, and so build up a closely-knit

and prosperous family. You need no more children, do you?

While I thought it worth while to ensure advantages

For those I have, by means of those I hope to have.

Was such a plan, then, wicked? Even you would approve

If you could govern your sex-jealousy. But you women

Have reached a state where, if all's well with your sex-life,

You've everything you wish for; but when *that* goes wrong,

At once all that is best and noblest turns to gall.

If only children could be got some other way,

Without the female sex! If women didn't exist,

Human life would be rid of all its miseries.

CHORUS: Jason, you have set your case forth very plausibly.

But to my mind – though you may be surprised at this –

You are acting wrongly in thus abandoning your wife.

MEDEA: No doubt I differ from many people in many ways.

To me, a wicked man who is also eloquent

Seems the most guilty of them all. He'll cut your throat

As bold as brass, because he knows he can dress up murder

In handsome words. He's not so clever after all.

You dare outface me now with glib high-mindedness!

One word will throw you; if you were honest, you ought
first

To have won me over, not got married behind my back.

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 8

Medea Resolves to Kill (again)

I. The bad feminine?

- review Medea's career as a killer: her brother, King Pelias—the modes particularly ghastly, involving dismemberment and cold calculation, yet all driven by her passion for Jason
- the irrational as a force of dissolution, rotting the carefully woven and stitched fabric of society.
- yet she inhabits a masculine warrior aristocracy (or at least marries into one—note her “barbarian” origin, from “out there”, like Dionysus and Athena, as it happens)
- her concern for her honor every bit as strong as any Jason's or Achilles' (note her care for the honorable disposition of her sons' bodies at the end—a deeply *Greek* sensibility)

II. The Tutor's “good news”

- how does it play dramatically? What does Glauce's acceptance of Medea's gift mean to the Tutor, and how is that different from what it means for Medea?
- what does the audience know that he doesn't know?
- how much of Greek drama hinges on characters saying things whose full import they don't know (but we in the audience do—cp. Oedipus, e.g.)?

III. Medea's meditation

- any doubt about how it's going to end?
- since *we* know, what's the interest for us as the audience—what does Euripides seem to be interested in?
- is Euripides “humanizing” the fixed or determined ritual order of the drama? showing us Medea as a *human* figure with *human* doubts and sympathies that conflict with her larger role and are ultimately dominated by it
- a measure of all human existence then?

Section 8 - Medea Resolves to Kill Her Children

MEDEA

[18-1078]

My misery is my own heart, which will not relent.
 All was for nothing, then - these years of rearing you,
 My care, my aching weariness, and the wild pains
 When you were born. Oh, yes, I once built many hopes
 On you; imagined, pitifully, that you would care
 For my old age, and would yourselves wrap my dead body
 For burial. How people would envy me my sons!
 That sweet, sad thought has faded now. Parted from you,
 My life will be all pain and anguish. You will not
 Look at your mother any more with these dear eyes.
 You will have moved into a different sphere of life.

Dear sons, why are you staring at me so? You smile
 At me - your last smile: why?

the Chorus.
 Oh, what am I to do?
 Women, my courage is all gone. Their young, bright faces -
 I can't do it. I'll think no more of it. I'll take them
 Away from Corinth. Why should I hurt them, to make
 Their father suffer, when I shall suffer twice as much
 Myself? I won't do it. I won't think of it again.

What is the matter with me? Are my enemies

To laugh at me? Am I to let them off scot free?
 I must steel myself to it. What a coward I am,
 Even tempting my own resolution with soft talk.

Boys, go indoors.
 [The CHILDREN go to the door, but stay there watching her.]
 If there is any here who finds it
 Not lawful to be present at my sacrifice,
 Let him see to it. My hand shall not weaken.

Oh, my heart, don't, don't do it! Oh, miserable heart,
 Let them be! Spare your children! We'll all live together

EURIPIDES

[1002-1027]

The Tutor returns from the palace with the two CHILDREN.
 Tutor: Mistress! These two boys are reprimanded from banish-
 ment.

The princess took your gifts from them with her own hand,
 And was delighted. They have no enemies in the palace.
 Well, bless my soul!
 Isn't that good news? Why do you stand there thunder-
 struck?

Medea [*to herself*]: How cruel, how cruel!
 Tutor: That's out of tune with the news I brought.
 Medea: How cruel life is!

Tutor: Have I, without knowing it,
 Told something dreadful, then? I thought my news was good.
 Medea: Your news is what it is. I am not blaming you.

Tutor: Then why stand staring at the ground, with streaming
 eyes?

Medea: Strong reason forces me to weep, old friend. The gods,
 And my own evil-hearted plots, have led to this.

Tutor: Take heart, mistress; in time your sons will bring you
 home.
 Medea: Before then, I have others to send home. - Oh, gods!

She weeps.
 Tutor: You're not the only mother parted from her sons.
 We are all mortal; you must not bear grief so hard.
 Medea: Yes, friend. I'll follow your advice. Now go indoors

And get things ready for them, as on other days.
 [Exit Tutor. The CHILDREN come to Medea.]
 O children, children! You have a city, and a home;
 And when we have parted, there you both will stay for ever.

You motherless, I miserable. And I must go
 To exile in another land, before I have had
 My joy of you, before I have seen you growing up,
 Becoming prosperous. I shall never see your brides,
 Adorn your bridal beds, and hold the torches high.

Safely in Athens; and they will make you happy. . . . No!
 No! No! By all the fiends of hate in hell's depths, no!
 I'll not leave sons of mine to be the victims of
 My enemies' rage. In any case there is no escape,
 The thing's done now. Yes, now – the golden coronet
 Is on her head, the royal bride is in her dress,
 Dying, I know it. So, since I have a sad road
 To travel, and send these boys on a still sadder road,
 I'll speak to them. Come, children; give me your hand, dear
 son;

Yours too. Now we must say goodbye. Oh, darling hand,
 And darling mouth; your noble, childlike face and body!
 Dear sons, my blessing on you both – but there, not here!
 All blessing here your father has destroyed. How sweet
 To hold you! And children's skin is soft, and their breath
 pure.

Go! Go away! I can't look at you any longer;
 My pain is more than I can bear.

[The CHILDREN go indoors.]

I understand

The horror of what I am going to do; but anger,
 The spring of all life's horror, masters my resolve.

MEDEA goes to stand looking towards the palace.

CHORUS:

I have often engaged in arguments,
 And become more subtle, and perhaps more heated,
 Than is suitable for women;
 Though in fact women too have intelligence,
 Which forms part of our nature and instructs us –
 Not all of us, I admit; but a certain few
 You might perhaps find, in a large number of women –
 A few not incapable of reflection;

And this is my opinion: those men or women
 Who never had children of their own at all

Enjoy the advantage in good fortune
 Over those who are parents. Childless people
 Have no means of knowing whether children are
 A blessing or a burden; but being without them
 They live exempt from many troubles.

While those who have growing up in their homes
 The sweet gift of children I see always
 Burdened and worn with incessant worry,
 First, how to rear them in health and safety,
 And bequeath them, in time, enough to live on;
 And then this further anxiety:
 They can never know whether all their toil
 Is spent for worthy or worthless children.

And beyond the common ills that attend
 All human life there is one still worse:
 Suppose at last they are pretty well off,
 Their children have grown up, and, what's more,
 Are kind and honest: then what happens?
 A throw of chance – and there goes Death
 Bearing off your child into the unknown.

Then why should mortals thank the gods,
 Who add to their load, already grievous,
 This one more grief, for their children's sake,
 Most grievous of all?

MEDEA: Friends, I have long been waiting for a message from
 the palace.

What is to happen next? I see a slave of Jason's
 coming, gasping for breath. He must bring fearful news.

Enter a MESSENGER.

MESSENGER: Medea! Get away, escape! Oh, what a thing
 to do!

What an unholy, horrible thing! Take ship, or chariot,
 Any means you can, but escape!

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 9

Medea Kills and Jason Responds

- I. Chorus’s “uh, oh . . .” and Medea’s renewed resolve**
- tidings of Glauce’s and Creon’s death dictate her next act
 - “my nature says no, but I have to do it”
 - Chorus’s dismay—what are its grounds? religious scruple? some sense of nature horribly disordered?

II. Children’s offstage cries

- suddenly naturalistic moment—why?
- how many characters call upon the gods futilely?
- “Mother, don’t kill us!” pathos and horror—words that ought never to be uttered

III. Jason’s response and Medea’s apparition

- Poor Jason always behind events, responding to the murder of Creon and Glauce here
- enlightened by choir, his only thought revenge—“the woman I will kill”
- doors never opened, what he thought to see revealed above
- shocker—normally *deus ex machina*, but here is Medea lifted above
- okay, she’s part-divine, but it still beggars imagination and moral sensibility

IV. Medea on high

- Medea points merely to the futility of Jason’s efforts
- she is presumably protected by some divine influence—whose? why is it available to her?
- Jason’s futile rant: IS she abominated by ALL the gods?
- she, like her choices, has passed beyond our grasp in every sense of the word

Section 9 - Medea Kills

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS: Today we see the will of Heaven, blow after blow,
Bring down on Jason justice and calamity.

MEDEA: Friends, now my course is clear: as quickly as possible

To kill the children and then fly from Corinth; not

Delay and so consign them to another hand

To murder with a better will. For they must die,

In any case; and since they must, then I who gave

Them birth will kill them. Arm yourself, my heart: the thing

That you must do is fearful, yet inevitable.

Why wait, then? My accursed hand, come, take the sword;

Take it, and forward to your frontier of despair.

No cowardice, no tender memories; forget

That you once loved them, that of your body they were born.

For one short day forget your children; afterwards

Weep: though you kill them, they were your beloved sons.

Life has been cruel to me.

MEDEA goes into the house.

CHORUS: Earth, awake! Bright arrows of the Sun,

Look! Look down on the accursed woman

Before she lifts up a murderous hand

To pollute it with her children's blood!

For they are of your own golden race;

And for mortals to spill blood that grew

In the veins of gods is a fearful thing.

Heaven-born brightness, hold her, stop her.

Purge the palace of her, this pitiable

Bloody-handed fiend of vengeance!

All your care for them lost! Your love

For the babes you bore, all wasted, wasted!

Why did you come from the blue Symplegades

That hold the gate of the barbarous sea?

Why must this rage devour your heart

To spend itself in slaughter of children?

Where kindred blood pollutes the ground

A curse hangs over human lives;

And murder measures the doom that falls

By Heaven's law on the guilty house.

A child's scream is heard from inside the house.

CHORUS: Do you hear? The children are calling for help.

O cursed, miserable woman!

CHILDREN'S VOICES: Help, help! Mother, let me go!

Mother, don't kill us!

CHORUS: Shall we go in?

I am sure we ought to save the children's lives.

CHILDREN'S VOICES: Help, help, for the gods' sake! She is killing us!

We can't escape from her sword!

Enter JASON, running and breathless.

JASON: You women standing round the door there! Is Medea still in the house? — vile murderess! — or has she gone

And escaped? I swear she must either hide in the deep earth

Or soar on wings into the sky's abyss, to escape

My vengeance for the royal house. — She has killed the King

And the princess! Does she expect to go unpunished?

Well, I am less concerned with her than with the children.

Those who have suffered at her hands will make her suffer;

I've come to save my sons, before Creon's family

Murder them in revenge for this unspeakable

Crime of their mother's.

CHORUS:

Jason, you have yet to learn

How great your trouble is; or you would not have spoken so.

JASON: What trouble? Is Medea trying to kill me too?

CHORUS: Your sons are dead. Their mother has killed both your sons.

JASON: What? Killed my sons? That word kills me.

CHORUS: They are both dead.

JASON: Where are they? Did she kill them out here, or indoors?

CHORUS: Open that door, and see them lying in their blood.

JASON: Slaves, there! Unbar the doors! Open, and let me see

Two horrors: my dead sons, and the woman I will kill.

JASON batters at the doors. MEDEA appears above the roof, sitting in a chariot drawn by dragons, with the bodies of the two children beside her.

MEDEA: Jason! Why are you battering at these doors, seeking

The dead children and me who killed them? Stop! Be quiet.

If you have any business with me, say what you wish.

Touch us you cannot, in this chariot which the Sun

Has sent to save us from the hands of enemies.

JASON: You abomination! Of all women most detested

By every god, by me, by the whole human race!

You could endure — a mother! — to lift sword against

Your own little ones; to leave me childless, my life wrecked.

After such murder do you outface both Sun and Earth —

Guilty of gross pollution? May the gods blast your life!

I am sane now; but I was mad before, when I

Brought you from your palace in a land of savages

Into a Greek home — you, a living curse, already

A traitor both to your father and your native land.

The vengeance due for your sins the gods have cast on me.

You had already murdered your brother at his own hearth

When first you stepped on board my lovely Argo's hull.

That was your beginning. Then you became my wife, and bore

My children; now, out of mere sexual jealousy,

You murder them! In all Hellas there is not one woman

Who could have done it; yet in preference to them

I married you, chose hatred and murder for my wife —

No woman, but a tiger; a Tuscan Scylla — but more savage.

Ah, what's the use? If I cursed you all day, no remorse

Would touch you, for your heart's proof against feeling. Go!

Out of my sight, polluted fiend, child-murderer!

Leave me to mourn over my destiny: I have lost

My young bride; I have lost the two sons I begot

And brought up; I shall never see them alive again.

VCE Literature

Medea

Section 10

Medea's Ascension and the Chorus's Final Word

I. Remember all the while Medea is speaking from an elevated position, perhaps slowly ascending

- “I could explain, but Zeus knows”: explanation=a reasoned account, but Medea turns away in appeal to higher authority
- Gods are frequently named and appealed to as witnesses and powers by various characters, but what evidence does Euripides give of their actual influence on the action of the *play*?
- Medea's departure—her own magic (unlawful, irrational) or divine intervention (sanctioned, according to a plan of justice)?

II. Consider the following

- Given the physical circumstances, what effect does Medea's and Jason's final “debate” have? Having a domestic squabble as she is being lifted into a higher plane?
- “Is that injury / a slight one, do you imagine, to a woman?” BUT Medea is still appealing to *natural* sympathies and antipathies, even as she places herself beyond the merely human.

III. Medea's retreat to, of all places, Athens

- earlier offer of sanctuary from Aegeus
- Medea's insistence on observing the proprieties of her son's burial and enshrinement: a sudden outburst of law/tradition-abiding behavior? Or a poke in the eye to Jason, in effect, “I'm going to make a shrine of the consequences of *your* perfidy
- Medea's final denial to Jason of a last touch of his sons' bodies: human or inhuman?

IV. What was THAT all about?

- chorus's summation—aren't the gods capable of landing surprises on us?
- pull back to consider Euripides' own cultural/historical circumstances, Peloponnesian War, degradation of Athenian democracy and culture under stresses of war gone unaccountably wrong—where are (were) the gods in all this?

Section 10 - Medea's Departure

MEDEA: I would if necessary have answered at full length Everything you have said; but Zeus the father of all Knows well what service I once rendered you, and how You have repaid me. You were mistaken if you thought You could dishonour my bed and live a pleasant life And laugh at me. The princess was wrong too, and so Was Creon, when he took you for his son-in-law And thought he could exile me with impunity. So now, am I a tiger, Scylla? - Hurl at me What names you please! I've reached your heart; and that is right.

JASON: You suffer too; my loss is yours no less.

MEDEA: It is true; But my pain's a fair price, to take away your smile.

JASON: O children, what a wicked mother Fate gave you!

MEDEA: O sons, your father's treachery cost you your lives. JASON: It was not my hand that killed my sons.

MEDEA: No, not your hand; But your insult to me, and your new-wedded wife.

JASON: You thought that reason enough to murder them, that I

No longer slept with you?

MEDEA: And is that injury

A slight one, do you imagine, to a woman?

JASON: Yes,

To a modest woman; but to you - the whole world lost.

MEDEA: I can stab too: your sons are dead!

JASON: Dead? No! They live -

To haunt your life with vengeance.

MEDEA: Who began this feud?

The gods know.

JASON: Yes - they know the vileness of your heart.

MEDEA: Loathe on! Your bitter voice - how I abhor the sound!

JASON: As I loathe yours. Let us make terms and part at once.

MEDEA: Most willingly. What terms? What do you bid me do?

JASON: Give me my sons for burial and mourning rites.

MEDEA: Oh, no! I will myself convey them to the temple Of Hera Acraea; there in the holy precinct I

Will bury them with my own hand, to ensure that none Of my enemies shall violate or insult their graves.

And I will ordain an annual feast and sacrifice

To be solemnized for ever by the people of Corinth,

To expiate this impious murder. I myself

Will go to Athens, city of Erechtheus, to make my home

With Aegeus son of Pandion. You, as you deserve,

Shall die an unheroic death, your head shattered

By a timber from the Argo's hull. Thus wretchedly

Your fate shall end the story of your love for me.

JASON: The curse of children's blood be on you!

Avenge Justice blast your being!

MEDEA: What god will hear your imprecation,

Oath-breaker, guest-deceiver, liar?

JASON: Unclean, abhorrent child-destroyer!

MEDEA: Go home: your wife waits to be buried.

JASON: I go - a father once; now childless.

MEDEA: You grieve too soon. Old age is coming.

JASON: Children, how dear you were!

MEDEA: To their mother; not to you.

JASON: Dear - and you murdered them?

MEDEA: Yes, Jason, to break your heart.

JASON: I long to fold them in my arms;

To kiss their lips would comfort me.

MEDEA: Now you have loving words, now kisses for them:

Then you disowned them, sent them into exile.

JASON: For God's sake, let me touch their gentle flesh.

MEDEA: You shall not. It is waste of breath to ask.

JASON:

Zeus, do you hear how I am mocked,

But now, as time and strength permit,

I will lament this grievous day,

And call the gods to witness, how

You killed my sons, and now refuse

To let me touch or bury them.

Would God I had not bred them,

Or ever lived to see

Them dead, you their destroyer!

During this speech the chariot has moved out of sight.

CHORUS: Many are the Fates which Zeus in Olympus dispenses;

Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.

The things we thought would happen do not happen;

The unexpected God makes possible;

And such is the conclusion of this story.

VCE Literature

Medea

Answer ONE of the following questions with an essay of approximately 500 words. Your essay should be word-processed and double-spaced, using a normal book-font such as Times New Roman 12pt.

1. Discuss how the fact that Medea is a woman influences her responses to Jason's betrayal.
2. How does the Nurse contribute to the audience's understanding of Medea's situation?
3. Discuss how the Chorus interacts with Medea.
4. Compare how male and female characters respond to Medea.
5. Assess the evidence for Medea's rationality and/or irrationality.