
Medea—The Beginning

MARIANNE McDONALD

If anyone knows Medea (even without quite understanding her), it's the nurse of her children. She and their tutor know that trouble is brewing in Corinth:

Medea just lies alone and stares at the ground.
She's as deaf as a stone or a wave of the sea
and won't listen to any advice from her friends.
From time to time she raises her head,
cries out to her father, her native land,
and her new home, now betrayed
by her husband who has dishonored her.
That poor woman has learned a hard lesson:
what it is to be a foreigner in a foreign country.
She hates to see her children now;
I'm afraid of what she may be planning.

As she left her native Colchis to follow Jason, Medea gave up a royal family and her country too; she murdered her own brother to help them escape.

That's how it should be:
a wife standing at her husband's side.

Medea envies the security of the Corinthian women:

It's different with you. You have your own city;
You can visit your parents; you enjoy life
and the company of friends,
But I'm living in a new city.
After he carted me off, like some foreign souvenir,
my husband has abandoned me.

Note: The iambic lines are not regularly capitalized, but those in lyric meters are.

I don't have a mother, a brother,
or a relative to turn to now that
things have gone wrong.

Nurse and tutor worry. What will she do? She is capable of great violence, and she has magic powers and arcane knowledge. Something terrible is in the offing.

The women of Corinth too can feel this threat. Jason has married Creon's daughter, Creon King of Corinth. That is his betrayal of Medea, a betrayal of the oaths he swore to her:

Holy rivers flow back to their sources;
Justice is a thing of the past.
Men lie and break their oaths,
Ones they swore to the gods.

Gone from Greece is the promise of oaths;
Gone a reverence for Shame:
They have flown off, up to the sky!
Poor woman, you have
No land to shelter you from your troubles;
A princess rules over your house,
A greater match than you could offer.

New royal alliances are in the making, but they do not include Medea. Everything that she was, sacrificed for him. Now she is thrown back on being a woman alone, redefining herself. She tries to win over the women of Corinth:

I am the victim of a sudden blow
that has devastated me. Ruined me.
Nothing in life gives me pleasure any more; I want to die.
The man who was everything to me—God, how I loved
him!—
my husband has shown himself to be the worst of men.

We women are the most unfortunate
of all living creatures.
First our fathers have to buy a husband, pay him a dowry,
and then we must make him master of our bodies:
that's even worse than buying him.
Everything hinges on whether
we get a good or a bad husband:
divorce or remaining single is not an option.

It's a new way of life!
A wife has to be a fortune-teller to
know how to satisfy her husband's needs,
things she hasn't learned at home.
Life is enviable if we work this out
and our husband doesn't resent being married.
Otherwise life is hell.
It's easy for a man. If he gets restless,
he simply goes out and drowns his sorrows
in the company of some soul mate, male or female.
We don't have that choice. It's him or nothing.

They say that living at home as we do
is a life free from care; no danger at all,
whereas men have to go out and fight.
Wrong! I'd rather go to war three times
than go through labor pains to give birth once!

You women should understand:
if I find some way to pay my husband back
for what I've suffered, please keep quiet.
In most things a woman
is full of fear and no warrior at all,
but if she is wronged in love
there is no mind more bent on bloody revenge,

The nurse describes her now:

Now Medea is in despair, dishonored
 she screams, “What about oaths?
 What about your right hand in mine
 when you swore you would be faithful to me?”
 She calls on the gods to see how Jason has betrayed her.
 She won’t eat, her body is in agony,
 and she spends her time in tears
 ever since she realized what Jason has done to her.

She’s a very strange woman. Anyone who tangles with her
 should be afraid, very afraid.

And Creon, for one, is afraid of her:

CREON

Medea, scowling at every thing and everyone,
 I order you to leave this land immediately
 with your two children.
 That is my decree; I won’t go home
 until I’ve seen the last of you.

MEDEA

I will go into exile. I’m not asking for that reprieve.

CREON

Then why are you still clutching my hand?

MEDEA

Just give me one day so I can figure out where to go,
 and provide for my children, since their father
 has made no provision for them.
 You’re a parent too; please have some pity on them.
 I don’t care about myself and exile;

my concern is all for my children and how they will suffer.

CREON

I'm not a tyrant, and I've paid for that in the past.
I know I'm making a terrible mistake now,
but I'll give you what you ask.
I warn you though, if tomorrow's sun
still sees you and your children within this land's borders,
you will die. I mean it.
So stay if you must, just this one day.
That's not long enough for you to commit the crimes
which I fear you have in mind.

*And yet, if she is a woman wronged in the core of her life,
and for Medea, even worse, dishonored, she is also a mother
who has risked that life in a bond of love with the children
of her womb, these new lives. Here is her agony:*

Women, I've lost my courage,
by looking on the shining eyes of my children.
I can't do it. Goodbye to my plans for revenge!
I'll take the children with me when I leave.
Why should I stab their father when
I'm stabbing myself twice as deeply?
I can't. Goodbye to my plans for revenge!

What am I saying?
Do I want my enemies to laugh at me
and escape their punishment?
I can't bear it. It's cowardly
to let those soft thoughts into my mind.

Go now, children. Go into the house.

The children exit.

I shall not weaken now.

O heart, don't do this.
Let them go; spare the children.
If I have them with me, I'll be happy.

But by all the avenging furies of hell,
I'll never leave them for my enemies to hurt.
So if they have to die anyway,
I who gave them birth will kill them.
Now it's settled. There's no escape.

Since I'm walking the path to misery
and sending my children on a path more miserable still,
I want to speak to them for the last time.

Medea calls for the children and they return.

Children, let me kiss your hands.
beloved hands, beloved lips!
What lovely shapes and noble faces!
May you be happy! Happy there, where you're going.
Your father has deprived you of this place.
How I love to hold you, kiss you!
Your skin is so soft and you smell so sweet—
That special fragrance of children.

Oh, miserable, why do you look at me like that?
Why do you smile a smile that may be
the very last I shall ever see?
What am I to do?

Go inside; go away.
I can't bear to look at you.

The children leave, bearing the magic gifts for the princess.

I know what evil I'm about to do,
but my passion is stronger than my reason.
That's the worst cause of pain for mankind.

And it is suffering that brings on more, even greater suffering. The messenger reports to Medea:

When she saw the finery, she didn't hold back any more,
but agreed to all her husband said.
He and the children then left,
but before they had gone very far from the palace,
she put on the dress with its fine weave
and set the golden crown on her head.
She sat down before her mirror,
arranged her hair around the crown
while smiling with pleasure at her reflection.
Then she stood up from the chair
and danced around the room on her delicate white feet,
admiring the turn of her leg.
She was delighted with the magnificent gifts.
Then we saw something terrible!
Her color changed; she stumbled;
her legs were trembling.
She slumped into the chair to avoid falling on the floor.
An old servant thought some god was possessing her,
perhaps Pan, and she shouted for joy,
but the girl's eyes started to roll and the blood left her face.
The servant realized her mistake
and began to moan and cry instead.
Another servant went to call her father,
and one to find her new husband
to tell them of the girl's sudden fit. The rafters
echoed with running footsteps.

The poor girl opened her eyes and started to scream.
She was tortured in two different ways:
the golden crown circling her head was like a vise.

It shot down a strange stream of blazing fire,
while the dress of delicate weave, the gift your sons
brought,
ate like acid into the white flesh of the agonized girl.
On fire, she leapt up from the chair,
tossing her blazing hair in all directions
as she tried to shake off the deadly crown.
But the golden crown clamped down on her head even
more tightly,
and when she shook her hair, the fire blazed twice as high.
She fell to the floor, totally defeated and in dire pain.
Only her father could recognize her.
One could not see the shape of her eyes,
vanished her beautiful face.
Blood mixed with fire poured down from her head;
the flesh melted off her bones
like sap from a pine tree, chewed up and digested
by the poison's invisible jaws. Terrible, terrible to see.
Everyone was afraid to touch the body.
Fate had taught us a lesson.

But her father didn't see her on the floor,
And stumbled over her body.
He cried out and threw his arms around her,
kissing her as he spoke:
"Poor child, what god has so unjustly destroyed you?
Who makes me childless at my age, on the threshold of
death?
What misery . . . it makes me want to die with you, child."
He stopped his crying and wailing,
and tried to lift up his old body,
but the fine dress clung to him just like ivy to the laurel.
So began the wrestling match from hell.
He tried to get to his feet, but she clung fast to him
and dragged him down. If he pulled hard,
he ripped his old flesh off his bones.
The old man struggled until he could struggle no more,

and so he breathed his last.
This was a battle he did not win.
Two bodies now lie together,
the old father next to his daughter,
a sight that calls for tears.

With this, Medea's course is set irrevocably. When she comes to face Jason, it is as the murderer of his children and hers, besides his royal bride and the potential for more children. She has destroyed Jason's future along with his past:

MEDEA

No need of opening the doors to see me and
the bodies of your children. That's wasted work.
If you have something to say to me, say it!
You'll never touch me again.
My grandfather the Sun has sent me this chariot
To protect me against my enemies.

JASON

Please give me my children's bodies to bury.

MEDEA

No. I'll bury them myself. I'll take them to
Hera's temple at the top of the city,
so that my enemies won't defile their bodies
by tearing up their graves. I shall establish
a religious festival and rites for the rest of time
for this city of Sisyphus to atone for their unholy murder.
I shall go to Athens, the land of Erechtheus,
to live with Aegeus, the son of Pandion.
You will die as suits you:
a coward's death for a cowardly man,
struck on the head by a timber of the *Argo*.

That's how marriage to me ends for you!

JASON

May the avenging furies of these children destroy you,
and may justice send you a bloody death!
Please let me touch my children's soft skin for the last
time?

MEDEA

No. You're wasting my time and your words.

*Medea flies off in her dragon-drawn chariot with the bodies
of the children.*

JASON, *calling out to her retreating figure*

Zeus, do you hear this?
How I am driven away and what I suffer
at the hands of this vile child-murdering lioness?
With all the strength that I have left
I weep for my children and I call on the gods!
I call the gods to witness how
you murdered my children;
you prevent me now from touching them,
or burying their bodies.
Oh, I wish I had never had children,
to see them murdered by you.

CHORUS

You love your child more than yourself,
Memories, piled on every shelf,
Then comes grim death to carry him off,
And sorrow follows on footsteps soft
To haunt your life forever more;

Your mind is only a bleeding sore.
Peace a stranger to a heart that beats
In time with pain and endless defeat.

Olympian Zeus is the master of many things;
The gods can make the impossible happen.
What you expected did not occur,
The unexpected did: a god found the way.
This is the end of our story.

Medea has set in motion the beginning of *Jason—The End*
by Athol Fugard.