

Medea and divinity



Euripides portrays his character, Medea, through a combination of sometimes contrasting traits. She is female in gender yet is largely responsible for the glory achieved by her husband and has achieved Kleos, an honor usually reserved for men. She is both powerless in her relationship to Jason, and powerful in her accomplishments and wit. She is a foreigner, yet, through her marriage to Jason, she is a Greek. Finally, she is both mortal, and because of her grandfather, the sun god Helios, immortal. This relationship to the gods is highly present in Medea. Throughout the play, Medea is often presented, both by herself and others, as the agent of divine will. Euripides uses storm imagery to connect Medea's rage and revenge to the will of Zeus. As both the " Keeper of Oaths" (170) and the God of Thunder, Zeus becomes representative of Medea's rage. Describing Medea's ominous situation, the Nurse frets over " add[ing] new [sorrows] to old... even before the present sky has cleared" (78 79). This metaphor simultaneously forebodes the inevitable trouble that spawns from Jason's actions, Medea's own darkening will, and Zeus's anger. Like rain from the stormy sky of the Nurse's metaphor, Jason's violation of his marriage contract with Medea brings down the wrath of Zeus. The Nurse continues to foretell Medea's revenge, describing how Medea " soon will put lighting / in that cloud of her cries that is rising" (106 107). Medea's revenge, like Zeus' lightning is both direct and immediate. Given only the space of one day, Medea implements her supernatural knowledge of dark magic and potions to destroy all that Jason holds dear. Medea recognizes her own role as the executor of Zeus' will. As both a sign of the intense agony of her situation, and a reference to the god whose will she believes to be on her side, Medea wishes that, like when Zeus asexually bore Athena from his forehead,

lightning would “ split [her] own head open” (144). Medea’s statement demonstrates the lack of sustainability of the present situation and hints at the future violence that will follow from the emotions Jason’s actions have stirred. As the drama of the play progresses and Medea’s anger grows, she persists in relating her actions to Zeus. In “ full force of the storm of hate” (278) that Jason’s actions have conjured, Medea begins to plot the eventual revenge that she will take on Jason. Describing the rage of hatred she feels in terms of a storm creates an unavoidable causal relationship between Jason’s actions and the inevitably tragic outcome that serves to separate Medea from guilt for her actions of revenge. While Medea is often described in terms of Zeus imagery, Zeus’ actual role in Medea’s revenge remains uncertain. Perhaps as a means to separate the patriarchal deity from directly condoning Medea’s disturbing actions (the murder of royalty, the destruction of her husband, and the slaughter of her children), Euripides leaves Zeus’ role intentionally ambiguous. Through the barrage of Zeus imagery surrounding Medea and her rage, it seems that Medea feels confident in the father deity’s support. While Zeus seems one of the most obvious deities to pray to after Jason violates his marital commitments, Medea does not actually ask for his support. Instead, Medea prays to both Themis, “ the goddess of Promises” (169), and Hecate, the goddess of dark magic, for help. As the play progresses, further uncertainty is cast over what part Zeus takes in Medea’s revenge. When the Nurse references Zeus as the god “ whom we believe” (170) to be the Keeper of Oaths, Euripides makes us question whether it is Zeus or Medea who is actually enforcing Jason’s oath. Medea does not ignore the powerful god entirely. In response to Jason’s curse on Medea for her actions, Medea states “ Long would be the answer

which I might have made to / these words of yours, if Zeus the father did not know / How I have treated you and what you did to me” (1351-1353). Medea seems confident that she is an agent of Zeus’ will. However she receives the most obvious divine aid through other deities. Much of our perception of the relationship between Medea’s actions and the gods is built through tricks of speech. Euripides’ uses these tricks to make us question what role Medea takes in fulfilling the gods’ will. During a conversation with Medea, the Nurse notes that “ God indeed, when in anger, brings / greater ruin to great men’s houses” (128 130). Medea proceeds to kill Creon, his daughter and her own children, thus doing the gods’ bidding by destroying the once great house of Creon and bringing about the fall of her husband, Jason, by wiping out all he holds dear. Medea often uses such tricks of speech to present herself as an instrument of gods’ will. Ambiguously referring to either her own marriage with Jason or Jason’s marriage to Creon’s daughter, Medea warns Jason that “ perhaps with the help of God - / [he has made] the kind of marriage [that he] will regret” (625-626). Eventually Medea, through her elaborate punishment, insures that Jason eventually regrets both. Medea issues such statements to foreshadow as well as to justify her eventual actions as in line with the will of the gods. Ultimately, the prophecy rings true as Helios directly aids Medea by presenting her with a chariot pulled by dragons. Medea again suggests her own ability to fulfill the gods’ will during her interactions with King Aegeus. Distraught at his and his wife’s inability to produce children, Aegeus travels through Corinth from having discussed his problem with the oracle. Medea, distraught over Jason, runs into him and wishes that he “ with God’s help” (714) be able to bear children. Once again, Medea promises to act as an agent of the gods’ will by promising “ I will end your childlessness, and I

will make you able / to beget children” (717-718) using drugs. In exchange, she asks for asylum in his country. Eager to rectify his problem and become a father, Aegeus promises to allow Medea to remain in his country “ for the sake of the gods / and then for the birth of children” (720-721). Aegeus recognizes that aiding Medea would, in fact, be a virtue in the eyes of the gods. However he refuses to directly transport her from the country for fear that he may “ incur blame from [his] friends” (730), showing that he recognizes that there may at times be a split between the will of the people and that of the gods. The Chorus also seems to recognize this divide between the will of people and that of divinity. Medea murders Creon and his daughter as well as her and Jason’s children in order to avenge the dishonor she has suffered through Jason’s marriage to Creon’s daughter. The Chorus attempts to dissuade her from murdering her children. However, when it becomes apparent that Medea is resolute on her course of action, the Chorus adamantly protests that if she is punished for her actions “ divine / blood may be shed by men” (1256 1257). Medea, as the granddaughter of Helios, is beyond simply being an agent of the gods’ will of divine blood. For her blood to be spilt by mortal men would disturb the natural order. Euripides makes us question the extent to which Medea has been divinized. In a very real sense, she shares immortal blood with her grandfather Helios. But she seems to have aspirations of, beyond simply acting as an executor of the gods’ will, acting as a god herself. During much of the play, she attempts to position herself on equal planes with other gods. At one point, she refers to Hecate, the goddess of dark magic, as her “ partner” (397). Hecate’s magic allows Medea to take revenge on Creon and his daughter by causing a dress Medea gives to Creon’s daughter to catch on fire. This method of poison

involves not only the magic poison of Hecate but the fire of Medea's grandfather, Helios. Towards the end of the play, Medea begins to blur the line between deity and mortal. Traditionally, the establishment of religious ceremonies is limited to gods. However, having murdered her children as a final blow to Jason, Medea honors her children by establishing " a holy feast and sacrifice" (1382). Medea's powers are certainly supernatural. Not only has her grip on dark magic earned her Kleos in the eyes of the Greeks, but she also successfully foretells Jason's death. Most likely appearing on stage in an area traditionally reserved for gods, Medea claims that Jason will die anticlimactically by being " struck on the head by a piece of Argo's timber" (1387). Nonetheless, it remains unresolved to what extent Medea's divine blood makes her godly. In any scenario, the gods' support of Medea is eventually validated as the gods continue to aid her. Faced with the uncomfortable situation of being trapped in the land of Corinth after having murdered the king and his daughter, Medea is told fatalistically by Jason that in order to escape the " royal vengeance" (1298) she must " hide herself beneath the earth, / or raise herself on wings into the height of air" (1296-1297). In a final sign of support for Medea, Helios sends a chariot pulled by dragons for her to make her escape.