

Seneca's medea and
the divine: a call for
support in a time of
foreign hatred



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In a last, desperate attempt to gain support and exercise free will in a society that condemns her, Seneca's Medea calls on the gods for help. Medea finds herself in a country with an oppressive government that despises foreigners, and her foreign identity makes her a target for hateful remarks from the chorus. They lament international travel and ask " what did [Jason's voyage] gain? // A fleece of gold // and a fruit of evil" (363-364), and say that " No one has lost much // following the known road" (602-603). They share isolationist views and believe that the first international sailor was " far too audacious" (301), and that people should stay in their native countries and not explore the rest of the world. When discussing Jason's marriage to Creusa, the chorus remarks that they " consign to silence // and darkness // any woman who runs from home, wedding-veiled for // an alien husband" (113-115). Their hatred of immigrants extends into a hatred of Medea; not only do they see her as an evil witch, they specifically say that they wish she had stayed in her home country. The chorus is composed of the Corinthian people, and so their opinions represent the overall feelings of those people. When the entire population of Corus has turned on Medea for her immigrant status, calling on the gods allows her to find some support that she lacks in the country where she's found refuge.

When Medea's identity as a foreigner is threatened, she calls on her foreign heritage to give her strength when she is challenged. In calling for help from the gods, she repeatedly calls on her grandfather, the sun, and asks her " shining father, give me control // let me drive the coupled power of fire" (901-902). The rest of her family is gone: Jason " took // my father and the country that we ruled // away from me" (117-119), and so she finds herself

turning to her godly ancestor because she can find family support in him. In referencing her divine origins, Medea also draws support from her home country: she tells herself to “take on your native mind // your Cossack mind, that hates all foreigners” (44-45). She is a refugee and is about to be exiled from her country of refuge; she has drifted for years in hope of finding something stable. She dreams of a place that accepted her as she was and that she was ripped from by a man who has betrayed her, and she relies on that place to ground her when the world is being torn up from under her feet. She “set out her evil potions in chaotic rows: arcane // secrets of her own experiments” (678-679), frantically using the magic of her home country to help her take her revenge. In referencing her past she calls on the magic and divinity of her home country, recalling her native culture and her remaining family in a way that establishes her strength.

With the loss of Jason, Medea finds herself robbed of the one person who may have understood her situation as a refugee. She and Jason have both fled a country in which they were no longer welcome; they're described as refugees numerous times. Although they experience marginalized status in Corinth as immigrants, and Jason claims that he married Creusa because “she has the power needed to help // the suffering children of us refugees” (507-508), they would have been able to find support in each other during their exile. When Jason turns on Medea in favor of Creusa, she not only loses her husband and the father of her children, she also loses the one person in Corinth who understands her struggles as an immigrant and refugee, and with who she would have been able to share her worries about her foreigner status and find not only sympathy but understanding. There is a strong

sense of community that comes from sharing marginalization and prejudice, and when part of that community turns away to side with the oppressor, the betrayal becomes twofold. When Jason abandons Medea, joining with the people who make their lives as immigrants so difficult, she is left with nowhere to turn. Her appeal to the divine allows her to rely on something that will not abandon her because she is foreign, and that will not leave her to support a xenophobic monarchy.

Medea's rage, strong enough to call for " powers of feuding vengeance, snakes writhing // repulsively upon a single head // come to me now... kill his new partner, kill his new father // snap all the royal family's living shoots" (15-18) and for her to declare that " I want the world to die with me" (426), is spurred by the double standards that she and Jason encounter. Both are foreigners, both experience discrimination because of this, and both have committed crimes, but while Jason is forgiven for his actions and welcomed into the very royal family that looks down on refugees, Medea is exiled. While Medea attempts to defend herself, and says that because Jason " gained by [her crimes]" (503), he is guilty by association, Creon retorts that " a case // can be made for Jason if we keep // you clear of it... his hands were clean" (268-269). He wants his future son-in-law to have a clean record and be able to lead Corinth as a morally solid leader, and if that means throwing Medea to the side and placing all guilt on her, he is willing to do it. Jason stands by his future-father-in-law and is equally willing to blame Medea for all of their shared crimes; when Medea tells that him that he is guilty of " whatever crime I did" (497), he completely rejects her and insists that he's innocent. While Jason has been involved in all of Medea's crimes, he is not

held to the same standards as she is and is forgiven by the very same people who want to persecute Medea. She calls on the gods because of this extreme anger: not only do the rulers and people of Corinth hate her for her foreign identity, those same people are willing to forgive her husband for the exact same reasons they hate her.

Corinth's oppressive monarchy seeks to control its people and quiet any voices of dissent, and Medea's appeal to the gods is in direct defiance of this stifling system. When she expresses her anger with Creon he asks if she "wants to drag the two of us to banishment" (512-513), and later says that they've "talked too long... people will start to get suspicious" (526-527). The government they live under is one that instills incredible fear in its citizens, to the point where they feel they cannot even gather in public for long periods of time without being subject to persecution. Rather than let herself be smothered by this, especially as a member of this society who experiences prejudice and is therefore especially a target for aggressive action, Medea's appeal to the divine is a direct act of defiance. When she calls on them she does so loudly, in a highly visible display of magical power, where she calls on multiple divinities and graphically describes what she wants to happen to her victims. She uses violent language when describing the magical materials she uses "these wreaths I wove with bloodstained hands // with nine snakes intertwined // these limbs from rebel Typhoeus who // shook Jupiter's control" (771-772), and describes how she wants mythological creatures like the Hydra to descend upon the earth and do her bidding. Medea uses her magic, which comes from her divine ancestry, loudly and violently to the point of her sounding unhinged, in direct defiance

of a government that wants to keep her silent as both a foreigner and a woman.

Medea's anger at her situation increases her desire to bring vengeance and violence down upon Jason. She declares that " I want him to live: to wander through // cities as yet unknown, his confidence // his livelihood destroyed, a refugee // frightened and with nowhere to call home" (20-24). While she's content to bring death down upon Creusa and Creon, death isn't enough for Jason: she wants to reduce him to the same state that she's been reduced to, with no home, no family and an entire society of people bent on her misfortune. He too is a refugee, but as shown through Creon's speech to Medea, he is not viewed with nearly the same contempt that she is, and Medea wishes to punish him for joining up with their persecutors by forcing him to undergo the same persecution and oppression, so that he may understand her pain and anger. Medea is only able to accomplish this through divine appeal; she lacks the power or strength to carry out any kind of revenge on her own, and so she must " derive the brightness... from my grandfather, Sol, the Sun itself" (206).

While in the end Medea's path to revenge is to kill her sons, this form of revenge does resonate with her identity as a foreigner and her desire to make Jason understand her struggles. She claims for Jason " left father // murdered my brother, mutilated him" (277), and recalls with sadness how she took violent action against the family that tied her to her native country. She knows that killing their sons will have a similar effect on Jason, because doing so will destroy his lineage and his familial ties to his country. The

connection is only solidified when she actually kills her sons, because she
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does so remembering her brother and remarking that “ See, brother, I have drawn my sword for you” (969). Once again, not only does Medea show a desire to make Jason pay by ripping his lineage and his link to his home country away from him, she shows a desire to put him in the same situation he put her: she felt compelled to kill her brother because of him, therefore rendering her a refugee without a family, and so she will kill his sons and do the same for him. Using her brother's death as motivation solidifies her use of her foreign identity to support her in a time when it's being challenged; she references the family she killed to strengthen her will.

When Medea is on the verge of being exiled from her country and condemned for her violent magic, she reaffirms her divine heritage and foreign ancestry and uses it to strengthen, rather than weaken, her in the ultimate act of resistance. Not only does she use magic and the power of the gods to help her, she uses both to strengthen her identity in a time when it is being challenged and solidify her attempts towards resistance and revenge.