

Medea, a play by the Greek playwright Euripides, explores the Greek-barbarian dichotomy through the character of Medea, a princess from the "barbarian", or non-Greek, land of Colchis. Throughout the play, it becomes evident to the reader that Medea is no ordinary woman by Greek standards. Central to the whole plot is Medea's barbarian origins and how they are related to her actions. In this paper, I am attempting to answer questions such as how Medea behaves like a female, how she acts heroically from a male point of view, why she killed her children, if she could have achieved her goal without killing them, if the murder was motivated by her barbarian origins, and how she deals with the pain of killing her children.

As an introduction to the play, the status of women in Greek society should be briefly discussed. In general, women had very few rights. In the eyes of men, the main purposes of women in Greek society were to do housework such as cooking and cleaning, and bear children. They could not vote, own property, or choose a husband, and had to be represented by men in all legal proceedings. In some ways, these Greek women were almost like slaves. There is a definite relationship between this subordination of women and what transpires in the play. Jason decides that he wants to divorce Medea and marry the princess of Corinth, casting Medea aside as if they had never been married. This sort of activity was acceptable by Greek standards, and shows the subordinate status of the woman, who had no say in any matter like this.

Even though some of Medea's actions were not typical of the average Greek woman, she still had attitudes and emotions common among women. For instance, Medea speaks out against women's status in society, proclaiming that they have no choice of whom to marry, and that a man can rid themselves of a woman to get another whenever he wants, but a woman always has to "keep [her] eyes on one alone." (231-247) Though it is improbable that women went around openly saying things of this nature, it is likely that this attitude was shared by most or all Greek women. Later in the play, Medea debates with herself over whether or not to kill her children: "Poor heart, let them go, have pity upon the children." (1057). This shows Medea's motherly instincts in that she cares about her children. She struggles to decide if she can accomplish her goal of revenge against Jason without killing her children because she cares for them and knows they had no part in what their father did. Unfortunately, Medea's desire to exact revenge on Jason is greater than her love for her children, and at the end of the play she kills them. Medea was also a faithful wife to Jason. She talks about how she helped Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece, then helped him escape, even killing her own brother. (476-483). The fact that she was willing to betray her own family to be with Jason shows her loyalty to him. Therefore, her anger at Jason over him divorcing her is understandable.

On the other hand, Medea shows some heroic qualities that were not common among Greek women. For example, Medea is willing to kill her own brother to be with Jason. In classical Greece, women and killing were probably not commonly linked. When she kills her brother, she shows that she is willing to do what is necessary to "get the job done", in this case, to be with Jason. Secondly, she shows the courage to stand up to Jason. She believes that she has been cheated and betrayed by him. By planning ways to get back at him for cheating on her, she is standing up for what she believes, which in this case is that she was wronged by Jason, but in a larger sense, she is speaking out against the inferior status of women, which effectively allows Jason to discard Medea at will. Third, she shows that she is clever and resourceful. Rather than use physical force to accomplish her plans, she uses her

mind instead: "it is best to...make away with them by poison."  
(384-385) While physical strength can be considered a heroic quality, cleverness can be as well. She does in fact poison the princess and the king of Corinth; interestingly, however, she does not poison them directly. "I will send the children with gifts...to the bride...and if she wears them upon her skin...she will die." (784-788) This shows her cleverness because she is trying to keep from being linked to the crime, though everyone is able to figure out that she was responsible anyway. In a way, though, she is almost anti-heroic because she is not doing the "dirty work" herself, which makes her appear somewhat cowardly. Finally, there is the revenge factor. Many times heroes were out for revenge against someone who did them or a friend wrong, and in this case Medea is no exception, since she wants to have revenge against Jason for divorcing her without just cause.

There are two main reasons why Medea decides to kill her children. The first, and more obvious one, is that she feels that it is a perfect way to complement the death of the princess in getting revenge on Jason. When she tells the chorus of the plans to kill the children, they wonder if she has the heart to kill her children, to which she replies, "[y]es, for this is the best way to wound my husband." (817). This shows that she believes that by killing her children, she will basically ruin Jason's life, effectively getting her revenge. The second reason for Medea killing her children has nothing to do with revenge. If she left her children with Jason, they would be living in a society that would look down upon them since they have partly barbarian origins. She did not want her children to have to suffer through that. Also, if her children are mocked for being outsiders, then this reflects badly on Medea, and she said that she does not want to give her enemies any reason to laugh at her. (781-782) Since she does not want to leave her children with Jason, they really have no place else to where they could go, being barbarians in a Greek city: "[m]y children, there is none who can give them safety." (793) For these two reasons, Medea decides that killing her children is the best way to accomplish her plan: getting revenge and keeping her children away from Jason.

Whether or not Medea could have accomplished her goal without killing her children is debatable. On one hand, if we look at Medea's objective only as seeking revenge against Jason, then she could have accomplished that without killing her children. Killing the princess, Jason's new wife, would cause enough grief for Jason so that her goal would be accomplished. We can infer that the death of Jason's wife would be more damaging to him than the deaths of his children because Jason was going to let Medea take the children with her into exile and did not try to keep them for himself. Therefore, once the princess was dead, killing the children, while it causes additional grief for Jason, really is not necessary. Even though Medea does not seem to believe it, killing her children probably causes more pain for her than Jason. She just does not see it because she is so bent on revenge against Jason. On the other hand, if we define Medea's objective in two parts, one being revenge, and the other to keep the children away, then it is possible that she had to kill her children. As for the revenge part, it was not necessary that she kill her children for the reasons just discussed. However, she may have needed to kill them to keep Jason from getting them. If Jason decided he wanted his children, there is not much Medea could do about it, other than kill them. Also, it is possible that she did not want to take them with her into exile because they could make it more difficult for her to reach Athens. For whatever the reason, however, it is probable that she needed to kill her children to carry out her plan, since she accomplished two different goals through their deaths.

The murder of Medea's children is certainly caused in part by her barbarian origins. The main reason that Jason decides to divorce Medea to marry the princess is that he will have a higher status and more material wealth being married to the king's daughter. (553-554) In other words, Jason believes that Medea's barbarian origins are a burden to him, because there is a stigma attached to that. In his mind, having the chance to be rich outweighs the love of a barbarian wife. Medea's barbarian status is a burden to herself as well. Once separated from Jason, she becomes an outsider with no place to go, because the barbarians were not thought too highly of in Greek society. Had Medea not been a barbarian, it is likely that Jason would not have divorced her, and therefore, she would not have had to kill her children. But since she is a barbarian, this sets in motion the events of the play, and in her mind the best course of action is to kill her children. Just because she is non-Greek does not necessarily mean that her way of thinking would be different from the Greeks; in other words, her way of thinking did not necessarily cause her to kill her children.

Medea deals with the pain that the deaths of her children cause her quite well. She does this by convincing herself that her revenge against her husband was worth the price of her children's death. When asked about killing her children, she replies, "So it must be. No compromise is possible." (819) This shows that she is bent on revenge, and that she is justifying their deaths to get her revenge. However, she does struggle with her decision to kill them. She is sad that she must take their lives, but also tells herself that it is in their best interests, as evidenced by what she says to her children: "I wish you happiness, but not in this world." (1073) She does not seem to have a problem with killing her children once it comes time to actually carry out the act. But her motherly instincts will not allow her to totally abandon her children after they are dead, as she decides to hold a yearly feast and sacrifice at their burial site. (1383-1384) But in the end, we can see that she dealt with the pain surprisingly well.

Two main themes are present in Medea: Medea's barbarian origins, and her desire for revenge against Jason. Her barbarian status is really what starts the actions of the play. It is what makes her a less desirable wife to Jason than the princess, and causes him to leave her. This then leads to her thoughts of revenge against Jason, and her decision to kill her children as a way to exact that revenge. As far as revenge goes, Medea is heroic in that she is standing up against an evil done to her. Throughout most of the play, she spends her time plotting her revenge against Jason, waiting until the right moment to unleash her plan. She uses her cleverness to trick Jason and the others into believing that she was not upset with him. In the end, we can see that Medea's barbarian origins were a major factor in the play, and that Medea was no ordinary woman in Greek terms.

