
A CASE OF RECEPTION OF THE
ANCIENT GREEK MEDEA OF
EURIPIDES:
**WHEN MEDEA OF EURIPIDES
MEETS MEDEA OF ANOUILH
AND OF BOSTANTZOGLOU**

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Abstract: The Archetype of Medea has been thoroughly examined and Medea has been identified as a symbol of darkness, vengeance and ferocity. Meticulous analysis of Euripides' Medea reveals a multi-dimensional personality, a divine creature, skillful, alluring and human in her essence. The article aims to examine how Euripides' character and speech were perceived by playwrights Jean Anouilh and Mentis Bostantzoglou (better known under the pen name of Bost). All three pieces of literature discuss the eternal themes of love, vengeance, motherhood, betrayal and moral ethics. Euripides, Anouilh and Bost showed fidelity to the myth of The Argonauts, drawing on its symbols and archetypes. Nevertheless, considering the historical era in which the dramatists created their plays, we could discern the adaptations they made in order to diversify the messages they intended to communicate. Anouilh, who was mainly affected by the Second World War, presents a more humanized Medea, sentimental and totally absorbed in her erotic passion for Jason. Medea becomes completely annihilated at the end of the play as the loss of her children leads to the end of her life. Bost reveals a hilarious Medea and the parody revolves around her and the other characters showcasing all traits of modern Greek society in the 20th century. All these varied approaches determine and deepen our belief in Medea's unique strong personality and the timelessness of human condition.

Keywords: Medea, Euripides, Ancient Greek drama reception, Medea's reception, Jean Anouilh, Mentis Bostantzoglou (Bost).

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Is Medea a vindictive dark soul?

The story of a woman as depicted by Euripides, Anouilh and Bostantzoglou.

Introduction

Ancient tragedies and comedies have always constituted the field where notions and ideas are presented, reflecting the times in which they were established. The examination of socio-political values exceeds the era of ancient times and, apparently, these values are reconsidered on a moral, political, psychological and contemporary basis. The themes of love, betrayal, loneliness, abandonment, motherhood and death emerge in the most vigorous manner in the tragedy of Medea. Euripides' Medea, an ambiguous personality, once magnanimous by her husband's side, is now experiencing loss and pain. Her trauma lies in the essence of her own being: rejected and excluded, she can no longer be considered powerful. When she is abandoned by her husband, it is a fundamental truth that she has surrendered all her powers and is ready to fulfill her fate. Medea enters a

game of transformation, a metamorphosis reaching and exceeding the limits of her female role.

Euripides' *Medea* has earned the complete attention of numerous dramatists, playwrights and theatre critics, as she concentrates all the features of a complicated character. Anouilh became interested in the myth of *Medea*, and developed his play in 1946, placing it under the category of post-war theatre. Bost (Mentis Bostantzoglou), on the other hand, a Greek playwright, transformed *Medea* into a parody of modern Greek theatre (1993), which bears no resemblance to the tragic archetype of Euripides.

All three texts are interconnected and the archetypal myth bridges the gap between “there with here” and “then with now” (Kosmopoulou, 2020, pp. 101-103). For this reason, intertextuality brings to the surface the elements that appear in the new text, which is the outcome of the data from an older one (Kraias, 2023, pp. 19-21). Euripides drew on the epic myth of *Argonautica* with a view to composing his tragedy *Medea*, thus interweaving the tragic elements of the myth with a new text (Miles, 2016, pp. 54). Obviously, each author, including Euripides, Anouilh and Bost created their plays from a personal perspective and based on their own historical context. Euripides exploits the ancient myth with a view to attributing a heroic temper to *Medea* (Boedeker, 1991, pp. 6), which is the ideal trait of tragic heroes. As Boedeker states, “*Medea* responds to Jason's betrayal like a male hero...in the manner of an injured Achilles”. Anouilh systematically uses the ancient myth and, through the lenses of his reception of the ancient text of Euripides, creates a more human and contemporary *Medea*. He creates a hypertext, which leaves the original text (hypotext) to be partially discerned (Genette, 2018, pp. 7), thus creating a new multi-dimensional space for the readers.

In that light, Bost decides to totally transform the ancient tragic elements and utilize the characters to depict the reality of modern Greek society in a sarcastic and hilarious manner. His reception of the ancient drama pertains to the adaptation of the old text, in order to create what is, in fact, a new play.

The adaptations we have chosen to present, that of Anouilh and Bost, highlight the fact that “reception is not only a diachronic process, but also a synchronic cultural dynamic between an artist and his contemporaries” (Revermann, 2016, pp. 13). In that light, the reception of the archetype of *Medea* emerges in the works of Anouilh and Bost with new symbols and forms, rendering the interaction among all three plays powerful and simultaneously accommodating the needs of the audience of each historical era.

Euripides' Medea

Medea is a renowned ancient Greek tragedy, produced by Euripides in the year when the Peloponnesian War began (431 BC). It displays the unleashed love of Medea turned to hate, passion to ferocity (Segal, 1968, pp. 33), along with the major changes she undergoes. Medea denounces the passivity of her female role and seeks revenge, which in turn destroys her maternal love and leaves her husband Jason shattered. Euripides harnesses the myth of Argonautica to build up his play around Medea's complex personality. The primacy of the myth is rather precise. Mythos produces logos (Coupe, 2009, pp. 83-84) and people perceive the world through words. Consequently, myths create a solid foundation for the exploration of this world.

Euripides exploits the myth as a canvas to present the universal themes of human existence, including revenge, death, violence, fate and murder (Bierl, 2016, pp. 258). Political issues surface as well, such as the war, lamentation and power (Bierl, 2016, pp. 253), marking the art of ancient Greek theatre with a significant role. Its role involves the necessity to educate the citizens and to instill moral values, as the heroes' deeds are connected to sacrifices for the common good, enabling the archetypes to serve this purpose (Markantonatos, 2022, pp. 16). The myth of Argonautica relates to Jason's quest to steal the Golden Fleece. The gods are by Jason's side and make Medea fall in love with him. The princess of Colchis is a skillful witch and makes use of her potions for the sake of Jason. After retrieving the Golden Fleece, Jason kills Medea's brother, marries her and they both land at Jason's kingdom, at Iolkos. Then, Medea plots the king's death and the two lovers are banished from the kingdom. They seek refuge in Corinth, where they are both considered foreigners. Jason decides to marry Creon's daughter in order to advance socially and Medea begins to hatch a plan to get revenge. Euripides' tragedy begins with the scene of the Nurse informing the audience of Jason's abandoning of Medea. Then, Medea comes on stage and, through her discussion with the nurse, she gives hints of the evil plan to kill her children, and thus her insatiable thirst for revenge is revealed.

Medea's tragedy captivates the audiences and has a riveting power on them. Medea herself is a powerful witch with the ability to cast spells on people and the ability to produce magic potions and "pharmaka" (Tyminski, 2014, pp. 30), either to poison or to heal. Jason's successful mission of the Golden Fleece is attributed to this skill she has. She is a unique woman, who decides upon her actions and functions according to her strong will. The absence of intervention from the Gods serves Euripides' wish to give prominence to that particular aspect of her personality. Her absolute power is illustrated by her deed of creating life (her two children) and of destroying it (the infanticide).

By portraying her personality, we cannot disregard the fact that Euripides created a character open to various interpretations. Euripides used dichotomies to frame his ideas (Vassilopoulos, 2014, pp. 44). Medea oscillates between her human and divine nature. Apart from considering all her superhuman traits (grand-daughter of Helios), Medea was a mother, a daughter and a wife. “She is merely a woman, an extraordinary woman to be sure, but still entirely human” (Schlesinger, 1966, pp. 43). Her failure is analyzed in terms of her relationship with Jason, who decided to wed another woman. Medea’s heartfelt betrayal initiated her need to set things right and awakened her superhuman nature.

Medea is a woman of barbarian identity, since she comes from Colchis. She defies societal norms, when she commits the blasphemous deed. Medea loves with a full heart (Allardyce, 1932, pp. 132). As a result, she fully devotes herself to the man she adores and she is completely immersed in the vengeance she is willing to take against him. Medea is an enraged woman who acts in cold-blood, and not in a state of madness. Judging from the context of the times, Euripides could not have possibly put other than a barbarian to commit the killing of her children. Otherwise, his play would be rejected by the audience of Athens. Moreover, the tragic nature of Medea is highlighted and makes her an ideal character, who embodies the qualities of a heroine, who commits *hybris* and is finally led to *katharsis*. The elements of tragic poetry are maintained to the extent that this tragedy is fully aligned to the prerequisites of the times.

Medea’s inner conflict goes beyond the antithesis between logic and emotions (Mastronarde, 2002, pp. 43). Medea is of heroic temper. She wants to avoid being laughed at, even at the cost of her own offsprings. The main motifs that emerge in the tragedy of Medea are the code of honor, oaths and betrayal (Mastronarde, 2002, pp. 31). The violation of oaths on Jason’s part is quite solemn and equals with betrayal. Medea adopts the male values which entail the notion of courage, honor and domination over enemies. “Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited/ a stay at home but rather just the opposite/one who hurt my enemies and help my friends/ For the lives of such persons are most remembered” (Warner, 1955, pp. 86).

In the above lines, she addresses the main elements of the heroic code, that is honor, loyalty to friends and immortality. All these values are of utmost importance to Medea and are illuminated by her words. She has an appreciation of honor and she is aware of her identity. Medea denotes an interest in protecting her reputation, which is a notion mainly entertained by men (Mastronarde, 2002, pp. 41). Unlike Jason, who is oriented towards social status and recognition by marrying Glauce (Creon’s daughter), Medea epitomizes the superior ideals of friendship and recognition through honorable deeds.

The French Medea of Anouilh

The French dramatist Jean Anouilh (1910-1987) took an interest in the myth of Argonautica and embarked on a journey to present his play *Medea*, written in 1946 and published in 1948. Nothing can be perceived outside the historical context of the particular era a play is created. For this reason, we are obliged to mention the fact that Anouilh's *Medea* belongs to post-war theatre and his work deals with themes of maintaining integrity in a world of moral compromise (Smith, 1985, pp. 440). Following the dark period of World War II, Anouilh's play is a combination of sarcasm and strong conviction. Through *Medea*, which belongs to his *Nouvelles pièces noires* (*New dark plays*, first published in 1956), the playwright viewed France's political attitude as a compromise with the same aversion which *Medea* expresses when she is forced to give up her ideals and yield to the ills of power. Anouilh highlights her struggle and disappointment against the conventional life she led with Jason and her decision to take revenge on him is a reflection of the playwright's need to oppose the political regime.

This particular play by Anouilh focuses on the main characters of *Medea*, Jason, Creon and *Medea's* servant. Anouilh's adaptation does not differentiate from the plot of the ancient text, since *Medea* still betrayed by Jason's decision to marry another woman, is bent on vengeance. Anouilh's *Medea* revolves around the theme of erotic betrayal. *Medea* experienced complete identification with her lover, she idealized Jason and failed to recognize that he was a human being with weaknesses. She refused to place Jason in a realistic setting, as she molded their relationship through the lenses of passion and perfection. Anouilh's Jason is down to earth, an ordinary man, who is terrified of *Medea's* passion. He is ready to compromise. *Medea* fails to accept Jason's imperfect human nature. He opts for peace and an ordinary life. Jason is incapable of dealing with *Medea's* dark instincts and passions and seeks a peaceful conventional life. His new wife is simple and with a pure heart (Allardyce, 2010, pp. 277-278).

Anouilh's reception of *Medea* as a character is interpreted from a new perspective, which leads us to apply new meanings and understanding to the contemporary *Medea* (Patsalides, 2019, pp. 277). The French *Medea* of Anouilh is more human and sentimental compared to the tragic *Medea* of Euripides. *Medea* is presented as more affectionate and the lack of violence in Anouilh's play renders her even more tranquil and accessible to the audience. She does not shed a tear during the infanticide, nevertheless the act of suicide places emphasis on the feelings of defeat and desperation she experiences (Abdulrahman, 2015, pp. 30). *Medea* has failed and resorts to suicide, thus Anouilh pinpoints a fragile character filled with weaknesses. Overwhelmed by

intense emotions, Medea is depicted as a human being rather than a tragic heroine. Anouilh represents melodrama (Allardyce, 2010, pp. 281), and in such cases the protagonists function as ordinary people, who reach a dead-end and try to find a way out. Anouilh humanizes Medea (Rambaux, 1972, pp. 1031) and makes references to the love Medea experiences as part of her essence. Medea exceeds the boundaries of a tragic heroine and becomes a woman who is devastated by the loss and betrayal of Jason.

Medea is all about conflict. Though, the theme of conflict is handled differently by the two dramatists. Euripides focuses on Medea's inner conflict, while in Anouilh the conflict is placed on the world outside her (Kosmopoulou, 2022, pp. 276). Medea rebels against social conventions. The modern heroine fights with the "others". Anouilh's *Medea* is a play of constant rebellion (Mercier, 1995, pp. 38-39). Her wish is to be consistent to herself and in order to achieve this condition she has to defy social rules. Medea is in search of the absolute, an uncompromising woman, unfit to a society which revolves around happiness. Medea's dark soul is motivated by passion, evil and deep feelings. She cannot possibly accept a life without Jason and the betrayal on his part. In her attempt to sustain the heroic image of Jason, her world falls apart. "You will never be free, Jason, Medea will always be your wife!" (Kosmopoulou, 2022, pp. 277), utters Medea. It is evident that Medea's passionate words reveal her vindictive soul and her contempt for social norms.

Anouilh's point of view places Euripides' *Medea* in the contemporary era. While Euripides uses the Archetype of Medea as a symbol to present all the "shades" of the human soul to his audience (Lambadaridou-Pothou, 2007, pp. 152-153), Anouilh's *Medea* has to walk the path of personal transformation and fulfill her destiny. Anouilh is recreating the true essence of the Attic form in the 20th century (Schlesinger, 1966, pp. 75), by providing the lysis of suicide at the end of the play. He stages a glorious exit of Medea by having her jump into the fire. Medea is left alone to face her destiny. She is deprived of any sort of help, as she is abandoned by friends, family and Jason. Not only has she lost friends, but also herself for the sake of Jason. Her act of suicide is an act that represents a mode of expression appropriate to the modern world. On the contrary, in Euripides' play, Medea receives divine help and she escapes by means of the Sun-God's chariot. The infanticide in the ancient drama is registered in a whole different sense, as the playwright has to create all the conditions to release the heroine's emotional baggage.

A satirical Medea by Mentis Bostantzoglou

Medea by Bost was written in 1993 and belongs to the genre of Burlesque¹. It is a form of performance that aims to mimic and distort its subject matter for comic purpose rather than invective criticism². Likewise, Bost used the character of Medea to create an allegory of the political situation of modern Greece.

Bost made use of the ancient myth as part of the human reality (Touchard, 1991, pp. 9), in order to reflect the socio-political system of Athens in the 20th century. He chose to reject the glorious ancient Greek past and added new elements to develop a new identity for his play. He saw the ancient play in a whole new light. Bost drew on the myth of Medea with a view that transformed the drama into comedy, parody (Bakonikola – Georgopoulou, 2000, pp. 122). The reception of the ancient drama aims to shed new light to the contemporary issues, realities and politics. Bost revisited the ancient myth of Euripides and preserved the original elements, that of the wronged wife and the infanticide. Bost's reception of the myth transformed the tragic Medea into an absurd hilarious character.

Bost's parody kept the main protagonists Medea, Jason and their children and added a monk, a nun, Oedipus, Antigone and Euripides himself, but subverted the location, placing the action in the town of Volos. Medea is illustrated as a bloody killer, who slaughtered the nun and her two sons, as her offspring had an affair with the nun and abstained from their studies. His ability to reconstruct and ridicule the myth is unique. In Bost, the paradox is a virtue (Pefanis, 2001, pp. 84). It serves his tendency to exaggerate and distort reality beyond any logical sense. Medea engages in hilarious acts, since not only does she kill her children, but she also admits that they were not hers eventually.

Bost's play was written in 15 syllable iambic rhyming couplets. Bost made use of the colloquial and purist Greek language, as well as similes to comment, criticize and express his resentment. He also used language in a metaphorical and literal meaning in order to evoke comical elements (Bergson, 1998, pp. 94). He also used homophones moving from the side of being literal to being metaphorical, in order to bring about confusion along with laughter to his audience. As for the linguistic aspect of the play, Bost oscillates between linguistic accuracy and verbal distortion (Bakonikola – Georgopoulou, 2000, pp. 120), aiming to accentuate the comical elements. This is evident in the scene where Medea listens to the nun's distorted words. The audience, on the one hand, questions the words' grammatical accuracy and, on the other hand, bursts into laughter.

1 See: Encyclopedia Universalis France, word: 'comédie-burlesque' <https://www.universalis.fr/index/comedie-burlesque-cinema/>

2 See: Norton Anthology of Drama Glossary <https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nadrama/content/review/glossary/B.aspx>

Apart from that, his play is characterized by a black sense of humor and an undertone of irony (Pefanis, 2001, p. 86). For example, he criticizes the current situation with his reference to Oedipus, who is rather nostalgic of his homeland, indirectly alluding to King Konstantinos of Glyxbourg. His slightly ironic tone accommodates his initial aim to satirize the current political affairs. Bost touches upon the issues of modern Greece and it seems impossible not to comment on the unregulated construction, tax evasion, lack of meritocracy, unemployment, irresponsible leaders and voters and the corrupt judiciary system. He denounces money and foreign goods and simultaneously exerts criticism on the educational system. Bost attacks shallow seriousness, arrogance, globalization, hypocrisy and rigid social rules. He spoofs the ills of modern Greek society.

Another innovation Euripides utilizes is that of Meta-theatre, which is fully aware of its theatricality (Slater, 1985, p. 14). The heroes address the audience directly, which did not occur in the ancient tragedy of Euripides. Euripides, as a character appears on stage and discusses the topic of his tragedy with Medea. Bost manages to make his characters more intimate to the audience and also accentuates the comic elements successfully. Depth and seriousness are concealed behind Bost's hilarious characters. Nevertheless, by addressing the audience directly, Bost motivates the spectators to think and reflect on the messages of the parody.

Bost distorted Euripides' tragedy from a "noble play" into a "hideous act" (Diamantakou – Agathou, 2010, p. 6). Even the last scene was subjected to Bost's whims. The lysis in Bost's Medea is given through a song. Unexpectedly, the sonnet highlights all the elements of the parody. The melodious joyful finale alleviates the gloomy situations, leaving the audience with a feeling of katharsis, rendering it the most appropriate ending.

Conclusion

Medea, the archetype of the Terrible Mother, as most people tend to identify her, exchanged oaths with Jason and committed to helping him obtain the Golden Fleece. Jason's decision to marry the daughter of Creon, Glauce, will lead Medea to carry out her plan of vengeance and perform the act of infanticide. In Euripides' tragedy, this deed goes beyond the narrow belief that Medea could have acted otherwise. Medea's inner conflict touches upon themes of love-hate, civilization-barbarism, vengeance-forgiveness. Medea is a woman who seeks vengeance when betrayed by her husband. This is a universal situation, which has occurred across different times and places throughout human history. There is inner conflict in Medea's heart, which serves the aim of the tragic poetry. That is, to lead the heroine to Katharsis, the release of all negative emotions.

The theme of erotic vengeance comes back transformed in Anouilh's *Medea*. Anouilh maintained the myth of Euripides, but the archetype of Medea takes a whole new form, as her human nature emerges in Anouilh's text. He humanizes Medea to make her a contemporary heroine of the 20th century. Medea cannot possibly find fulfillment by pursuing happiness. Anouilh creates a character, who is in search of the absolute. For this reason, she does not hesitate to harm her children and consequently herself in order to give meaning to her life.

On the other hand, Bost reshapes the archetype of Medea in his parody. He gives a comical dimension to his *Medea*, where Euripides' initial text can barely be discerned. Bost synthesizes a parody with even Euripides as a character on stage, and a Medea who is willing to kill her children as they are infatuated by the nun and they refuse to study. Apart from the comical elements, Bost manages to criticize modern Greece society, which differentiates his play from the original text of Euripides. He gives prominence to the political development and malfunctions of a contemporary society, demonstrating lack of fidelity to the ancient Greek drama. Nonetheless, his approach creates a unique Medea.

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