



Finglass, P. J. (2018). Euripides' Medea in context. In A. Pociña Pérez, A. López, C. Morais, M. D. F. Silva, & P. J. Finglass (Eds.), *Portraits of Medea in Portugal during the 20th and 21st Centuries* (pp. 11–20). (Metaforms; Vol. 14). Brill Academic Publishers.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383395\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383395_003)

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1163/9789004383395\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383395_003)

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## EURIPIDES' MEDEA IN CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

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A slave-woman standing alone on the stage opens the play. From her the audience learns the tragic situation: having helped Jason gain the Golden Fleece, Medea, together with her children, has been abandoned by him in favour of a Corinthian princess. Another slave now enters, bringing Medea's children and further bad news: Creon, king of Corinth, is intending to send Medea and her children into exile. Such is the beginning of Euripides' *Medea*.

The chorus of Corinthian women arrive, having heard of Medea's distress. Her cries are heard from inside the house; soon she comes out and addresses the chorus in more moderate tones. She laments the lot of women before focusing on her particular misery as a defenceless female in an alien society. After the chorus pledge their support, Creon enters, ordering Medea to leave Corinth immediately with her children. He expresses his fear of her; nevertheless, when she abjectly begs permission to remain just one more day, he eventually concedes, despite strong misgivings. When he is gone, she reveals her intention to kill him, his daughter, and his new son-in-law – her own former husband, Jason. The choral song that follows describes how honour is now coming to the race of women, and commiserates with Medea on how appallingly she has been treated since coming to Greece.

Jason now arrives, criticising Medea for her temper, but offering to assist her and the children before they go into exile. Medea's response is angry and passionate: Jason has abandoned her, despite everything that she has done for him, despite the children that she has given him, despite her having no remaining source of help. Jason counters by claiming that her assistance should rather be credited to Aphrodite and Eros, and by listing the benefits that Medea now enjoys, thanks to him: she lives in Greece, not among barbarians, and thus in a civilised country where she can acquire a reputation for her intelligence. He claims that his marriage to the Corinthian princess is the best way to secure financial and political security for his family. The chorus and Medea are unconvinced, the latter noting that if Jason was speaking the truth, he would have informed her of his intentions in advance. The pair continue to argue

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<sup>1</sup> The standard Greek text is Diggle (1984) 93-155, reprinted with an English translation in Mossman (2011) 82-207; see also the text and translation of Kovacs (1994). Commentaries, all with helpful introductions, can be found in Page (1938), Mastronarde (2002), Mossman (2011); the first two also offer their own Greek text. But despite its popularity, *Medea* has not yet received a modern *editio maior*, unlike many other Euripidean plays.

until Jason departs, after which the chorus sing of the power of Aphrodite and the misery of losing one's homeland.

The next entrance is a surprise: Aegeus, king of Athens, on his way from consulting the oracle at Delphi to Troezen to ask for advice from his friend Pittheus of Troezen. Seeing an opportunity, Medea persuades him to swear an oath that he will give her refuge once she has gone into exile. When he has gone, Medea expresses her joy, and describes how she will send her children with gifts to Jason's new bride – gifts that will kill her if she touches them. But in a new twist, she announces that she will also kill her own children, to wipe out Jason's house altogether. The chorus fail to persuade her to abandon this purpose, before singing in praise of Athens, a song that turns into an impassioned address to Medea not to kill her offspring.

Jason now returns in response to Medea's request. She expresses regret for her former words, and sends her children with him to bring gifts to his new bride – though not before hugging them tearfully, as she contemplates the subsequent terrible stage of her plan. The chorus lament her decision to kill her children, before the Tutor arrives back with them, announcing that her gifts have been warmly received; he is surprised to see Medea react with deep distress to this apparently good news, and departs. Embracing the children, Medea now delivers a great monologue, expressing how inwardly torn she is over the deed which she is about to commit. After she brings them inside, the chorus sing of the woes of women with children. Medea returns on stage, encountering a Messenger who comes with news of the deaths of Jason's new bride and of Creon as a consequence of the gifts sent by Medea, deaths narrated in excruciating detail. Once the Messenger has gone, Medea announces her continuing determination to kill her children, and departs back inside. The chorus's song calling on the Sun to behold what is happening is succeeded by the cries of the children as they are murdered; the chorus then continue to sing, citing Ino as a mythical child-killer parallel to Medea herself.

The final scene begins with the entrance of Jason, appalled at the murder of his new wife and father-in-law. With difficulty, the chorus bring themselves to announce to him a further, far more intense, grief: the death of his children. He attempts to enter the house to revenge himself on Medea, but the doors are locked; suddenly Medea appears on a winged chariot above the house. No longer grieving, but defiant, she blames Jason for her children's deaths, and declares that she will bury them in the sanctuary of Hera Akraia near Corinth, before seeking sanctuary in Athens. The despairing Jason is left alone on stage as she departs.

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Today *Medea* is one of Euripides' most popular plays among audiences and readers alike. When it was first performed at Athens, on the south side of the Acropolis, at the spring-time festival of the Dionysia, in 431 BC, the first play in its tetralogy (the other plays being *Dictys*, *Philoctetes*, and the satyr-play *Reapers* or *Theristae*, all of which are lost), it was less successful; Euripides finished third (that is, last), behind Euphorion, Aeschylus' son, who came first, and Sophocles, who was second. It is tempting to ascribe this defeat to the audience's distaste at the play's controversial subject-matter: the deliberate murder of two children by their mother. Yet the curious way in which votes were tallied meant that a tetralogy popular with the judges might nevertheless finish last;<sup>2</sup> and there was anyway no guarantee that the judges' preferences would correspond to those of the audience. Moreover, if the tetralogy was genuinely unsuccessful, that might have been the fault of one or more of the other plays; and Euripides in general was not fortunate in this competition, winning only four times during his lifetime, and once posthumously.<sup>3</sup> Frustratingly, then, we have no reliable data about the reaction of that first audience for what today is regarded as a supremely important and influential work of European drama.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the spectators who sat in the theatre in Dionysus' sanctuary that spring day in 431 will have been familiar with Medea as a figure of myth.<sup>5</sup> The *Theogony* by Hesiod, in a passage that may be later than Hesiod himself, describes Medea's birth to Idyia, wife of Aeëtes, child of Helios;<sup>6</sup> she may also have been mentioned by Sappho, in an unknown context.<sup>7</sup> She will have been prominent in the epic *Argonautica*, probably a work of the seventh century, which described the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts to the east to recover the Golden Fleece.<sup>8</sup> Later accounts, such as Pindar's *Pythian Four* of 462 BC, Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica* of the third century, and indeed Euripides' *Medea*, emphasised her vital contribution to Jason's success in recovering the Fleece; they will all have been influenced by this lost epic.

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<sup>2</sup> Ten judges, each representing one of the tribes, cast a vote; five votes were chosen at random, and, if a dramatist had a majority, he was the winner; if no dramatist had a majority additional votes were randomly selected, one at a time, until somebody did (see Marshall and van Willigenburg (2004)). A play might have as many as five votes and still come last.

<sup>3</sup> See Eur. test. 65a, 65b *TrGF*. For possible links between the plays of the tetralogy see Karamanou (2014).

<sup>4</sup> For the popularity of *Medea* in the ancient world see Vahtikari (2014) 172-5; for performances of Medea since the Renaissance see Hall *et al.* (2000).

<sup>5</sup> For this subject see Mastronarde (2002) 44-64, which refers to earlier discussions.

<sup>6</sup> Hes. *Th.* 956-62.

<sup>7</sup> Sappho fr. 186 Voigt.

<sup>8</sup> For this poem see West (2005) = (2011-13) I 277-312.

The first account known to have taken an interest in what happened to Medea after her arrival in Greece is the *Korinthiaka* ascribed to Eumelus, composed perhaps not long after the institution of the Isthmian games in 582.<sup>9</sup> In this poem, after the death of their king Korinthos, the Corinthians install his grand-daughter Medea, newly-arrived in Greece from Colchis with Jason, as the new ruler.<sup>10</sup> During her reign, whenever she gave birth to a child, she buried it in the temple of Hera, believing that this would make it immortal. Unfortunately her plan was unsuccessful, and when Jason discovered what she had been doing, he left her, despite her pleas, sailing back home to Iolcus; Medea then herself gave up the kingship in favour of Sisyphus.<sup>11</sup> Medea's association with Corinth, and the deaths of her children in that city, are thus attested at least as early as the 570s. Perhaps a commemoration of some children in a cult that originally had nothing to do with Medea was connected with the story of Aeëtes' daughter by the author of the *Korinthiaka* in his desire to set Corinth – a city barely mentioned in earlier epic – more firmly within the world of Greek myth.<sup>12</sup>

Another version of the story which may date before the treatments found in tragedy involved Medea killing Creon, for an unspecified reason, and fleeing to Athens. Unable to bring her children with her, she laid them on the altar of Hera Akraia, thinking that Jason would respect the protection afforded by the holy place; but Creon's οἰκεῖοι (family, servants?) took revenge by killing them. This is first attested in Creophylus of Ephesus, who dates to the fifth century at the earliest.<sup>13</sup> A related account is recorded by the grammarian Parmeniscus, from the second or first century BC, in which the Corinthians tire of having Medea, a foreign, female, sorceress, as their ruler, and plot against her, intending to kill her (fourteen) children; they flee to the altar of Hera Akraia, and are killed by the Corinthians there.<sup>14</sup>

In both these accounts the threat to Medea's children comes not from Medea herself, but from the Corinthians, or the Corinthian royal family. As we have seen, in the final scene of Euripides' play Jason is afraid that Creon's family may take revenge by killing his children;<sup>15</sup> it may be that Euripides knew a version in which this event took place. We should be cautious in drawing this inference, however. Jason's fear is intelligible in its own terms, and Euripides

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<sup>9</sup> For this poem see West (2002) = (2011-13) I 353-91.

<sup>10</sup> Eumelus fr. 20 *GEF*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* fr. 23.

<sup>12</sup> See West (2002) 124 n. 78 = (2011-3) I 376 n. 78, Johnston (1997) 65-7. I have not seen Hudelson (2013).

<sup>13</sup> Creoph. fr. 3 *EGM*. The attribution of this story to this Creophylus is much more probable than the alternative, to the poet Creophylus of Samos; see Fowler, *EGM* II 232 n. 102. Fowler tentatively dates the Ephesian Creophylus to the late fifth century.

<sup>14</sup> Parmeniscus frs. 12-13 Breithaupt. The sanctuary in question should probably be identified with that of Hera at Perachora; see Menadier (2002).

<sup>15</sup> Eur. *Med.* 1301-1305. Cf. 1236-41, where Medea voices the same fear to justify her decision to kill her children.

did not need to rely on such a putative earlier version to devise this motivation for his entry. The reference to Medea's flight to Athens in Creophylus' story may also be influenced by Euripides' play rather than the reverse. Parmeniscus' version, too, may or may not reflect a pre-Euripidean story. It could have been fashioned to enable the absurd charge that Parmeniscus makes against Euripides, that was he was bribed by the Corinthians to attribute responsibility for the deaths to Medea herself. It is nevertheless tempting to regard it as a survival of an earlier account which Euripides did dramatically alter, prompted however by literary rather than financial motivations.

Greek tragedy shows a particular interest in Medea's story. As well as Euripides' famous play, we have dramas attested by numerous others: Neophron, the younger Euripides, Melanthius, Morsimus, Dicaeogenes, Carcinus II, Theodorides, and Diogenes of Sinope.<sup>16</sup> A recently-published papyrus containing a rhetorical treatise from the early empire remarkably refers to an earlier *Medea* by Euripides himself, in which Medea's killing of her children took place on stage. Careful investigation of this text, however, reveals that it provides evidence not for the existence of another Euripidean *Medea*, but for how literary history can be reshaped and reinterpreted by subsequent generations without regard for historical truth.<sup>17</sup>

Of these other *Medea* plays, one of the few about which we know anything significant is by Neophron. This play, like Euripides', portrayed Medea as a voluntary child-killer.<sup>18</sup> It was suggested in antiquity that Euripides plagiarised this drama,<sup>19</sup> an anachronistic accusation based on the mistaken idea that poets were not entitled to adapt the material of others without acknowledgement; the targeting of Euripides, rather than some other dramatist, probably results from the negative biographical tradition associated with him from as early as the plays of Aristophanes. The bombastic style of Neophron's fragments suggests a much less able poet than Euripides; it has been argued that they show the influence of a later text of Euripides' play, after it had suffered from interpolation at the hands of subsequent producers.<sup>20</sup> More likely than not, Euripides came first.

Euripides certainly predated the only other dramatic account of Medea for which we have significant details, namely the *Medea* of Carcinus II in the fourth century.<sup>21</sup> In that play Medea is falsely accused of killing her children when she had in fact concealed them, probably

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<sup>16</sup> See Wright (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> P.Oxy. 5093; see Colomo (2011).

<sup>18</sup> For discussion see Nervegna (2013) 90-1.

<sup>19</sup> Thus the hypothesis to *Medea*; see Mastronarde (2002) 57-64.

<sup>20</sup> See Diggle (2004) ≈ (2008).

<sup>21</sup> See *TrGF* 1 70 F 1e, West (2007) 1-7 = (2011-13) II 334-45.

in the temple of Hera. Medea had, however, killed Jason's new bride, Glauce, and her concealment of the children was probably intended to protect them from the wrath of Glauce's family; her plan did not succeed, however, perhaps because Glauce had ordered the children to be killed before her own death. This is a quite different version from the one familiar today thanks to Euripides; it reminds us that his account did not become canonical immediately, and that just as Euripides probably innovated in his account of the myth, so too later tragedians felt no compulsion to follow his distinctive version when producing their own plays.

Thus whereas Medea's connexion with Corinth, and the deaths of her children, are certainly pre-Euripidean, Euripides' *Medea* may well be the first literary work that made those deaths the result of Medea's own conscious choice. Such a reshaping of myth was hardly rare in Greek tragedy – having recourse to a finite body of tales, the dramatists constantly innovated in their perpetual attempt to impress their audience – but this one was more striking than most, involving as it did the breach of a fundamental human taboo, the idea that mothers nurture their children. A child-killing parent of any sort is an unlikely repository for audience sympathy; one who is female, and a foreigner, might be thought to suffer from insurmountable difficulties in overcoming the prejudice of Greek spectators to emerge as a character with any tragic credibility.

By making Medea a filicide, Euripides may have been innovating with respect to her myth; but in tragedy as a whole this theme was far from unfamiliar.<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, the figure of Ino was even cited by the chorus as the only possible parallel for Medea (1282-9), but even as they mention her they indicate the fundamental difference between the two women: Ino, according to the chorus, kills her children when maddened by the gods, whereas Medea is appallingly sane both when she takes her decision and when she carries it out. The Ino of Euripides' homonymous play is distinct from Medea, too. Four children are killed by a parent in that drama – two sons by their mother Themisto, Learchus by his father Athamas, Melicertes by his mother Ino – but in every case the parent is attempting to kill someone else's children (Themisto) or driven mad and thus not fully responsible for his or her action (Athamas, Ino).<sup>23</sup> Such failures of recognition, and divine-sent madness (paralleled in Euripides' *Heracles*, where the title character kills his children when out of his mind), are not at issue in *Medea*.

Closer parallels are in fact available, such as Procne, who in Sophocles' *Tereus* killed her own child Itys, and served his flesh as a meal to her unwitting husband Tereus, who had

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<sup>22</sup> See McHardy (2005).

<sup>23</sup> Our evidence for this play comes from P.Oxy. 5131 and Hyg. *Fab.* 4; see Finglass (2014), (2016a), (2017b).

raped her sister Philomela.<sup>24</sup> Althaea in Euripides' *Meleager* was probably responsible for the death of her son by deliberately burning a brand that she knew to be coeval with his life, although that version was certainly attested before tragedy.<sup>25</sup> Astyoche in Sophocles' *Eurypylos* was bribed by Priam to send her son Eurypylos to fight for the Trojans even though she knew that he would die as a result; a surviving papyrus fragment describes her intense grief over his corpse.<sup>26</sup> Laius and Jocasta in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* have their son exposed when he was a baby, thanks to an oracle predicting that it would kill his father and marry his mother.<sup>27</sup>

But if Medea was not unique as a tragic filicide, the presentation of that act of killing is certainly unparalleled in what remains to us of Greek tragedy. The only other case involving the intentional killing of a child by the mother's own hand is that of Procne, and in that case the man's offence was greater (raping the woman's sister) than Jason's (abandoning his wife for another woman). Meleager's mother Althaea is equally culpable for her son's death, but as with Procne, loyalty to her natal family is the motivating force;<sup>28</sup> moreover, she does not actually do away with her child face to face. Only Medea kills both her children with her own hand, not to avenge some other close relative (having already rejected her natal family by killing her brother and abandoning her father), but out of a sense of personal betrayal. And while these other dramas will no doubt have contained moments of high pathos, it is hard to imagine a speech more moving than Medea's great monologue in which her purpose sways back and forth with such emotional power, a speech probably imitated by Neophon some years after its first performance, and probably added to by actors in the fourth century, who had identified it as a high point in their repertoire.<sup>29</sup>

It has been argued that Medea's status as a barbarian, a non-Greek, and as a woman<sup>30</sup> will have severely compromised the capacity of the Greek audience to feel sympathy for her plight. Yet (to take Medea's status as a barbarian first) Greek literature depicted non-Greeks sympathetically from as early as the *Iliad*; in that poem, although the Trojans are at fault for starting the war, their suffering is movingly depicted, especially at the climax, the ransoming and funeral of their greatest fighter, Hector. This tradition is continued in tragedy, where plays

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<sup>24</sup> For Sophocles' *Tereus*, recently augmented by a new papyrus, see Finglass (2016b), (forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> For this and other Meleager plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles see Davies and Finglass (2014) 517.

<sup>26</sup> For this papyrus see Finglass (2018/19) ch. 6.

<sup>27</sup> For the exposure of children in Greek tragedy more generally see Finglass (2018) 63–70.

<sup>28</sup> For this topic see Visser (1986).

<sup>29</sup> For such interventions by actors see Finglass (2015); for the popularity of *Medea* later in antiquity (evident from the healthy number of papyri of that play) see Finglass (forthcoming 1).

<sup>30</sup> For these aspects of Medea's presentation see Mastrorarde (2002) 22–8, Papadodima (2013) 253–62.



such as Euripides' *Trojan Women* are far from an uncomplicated celebration of Greek success. Moreover, our earliest extant tragedy, Aeschylus' *Persians*, sympathetically recognises the grief of the Persians who have lost so much in their attempt to conquer Greece; it is striking that such a production was possible only eight years after the last Persian invasion. A Greek audience (with the exception, perhaps, of its most blinkered and chauvinistic members) would not have been automatically hostile to Medea simply because she was not Greek.

When Jason declares that she should be happy because he has brought her to Greece, allowing her to encounter justice and civilisation (536-44), the audience will be aware that these words are spoken by a man who has just abandoned the person who saved his life at the very moment when she most needs his help. Tragedy relies on this kind of contextualisation; an audience member who took these words as the literal truth without reflecting on who was delivering them, or for what purpose, was probably missing out on quite a bit of the tragic experience besides.<sup>31</sup> Nor were the Greeks of this period unaware that non-Greek peoples had crafted civilisations of their own as complex as anything to be found in Greece, making a nonsense of Jason's Hellenocentric claim that now Medea is in Greece she can acquire a famous reputation.

The form of the encounter between Jason and Medea repays scrutiny in this context. In this type of scene in which opponents are each given one long speech, followed by a section of line-by-line dialogue (the so-called 'agōn'), it is usually the second speaker who has the advantage; he or she puts forward arguments that the earlier speaker is unable to counter. In *Medea*, on the other hand, not only does Jason fail to answer Medea's charges satisfactorily, but his speech also meets with a devastating, unanswerable response from Medea herself: why, if what he says is true, did he not inform her of the plan before going through with it? No other extant agōn-speech receives such a mortal rhetorical blow.<sup>32</sup> In this contest between Greek man and barbarian woman, it is the latter who deploys her arguments with the greater skill and, the audience may feel, sincerity.

As for Jason's further supposed advantage over his ex-wife, his status as a man, that too turns out to be more complicated than we might have thought at first. There is no good reason to think that women were banned from performances in the Athenian theatre – indeed, some passages in comedy, the only genre performed there which explicitly refers to its

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<sup>31</sup> So in Hermione's anti-barbarian tirade in Euripides' *Andromache* (147-80) 'the viewer can easily see how this rhetoric is self-serving and that Hermione is a disreputable character' (Vlassopoulos (2013) 193).

<sup>32</sup> See Finglass (2007) on Soph. *El.* 612-33.

audience, are explicable only under the hypothesis that they were present.<sup>33</sup> Any reading of a play which assumes that men automatically sympathised with men is not only foolish on its own terms – Greek men, like men today, were, it is fair to presume, capable of sympathising with a woman in a dispute with a man – but also chauvinistically denies these women in the audience the right to have their hypothetical views taken into consideration.<sup>34</sup> And indeed, elsewhere in tragedy female figures differ widely in the levels of sympathy that they are likely to have awoken in an audience, just as is the case with male characters. If Medea is less sympathetic to male members of the audience because she is a woman, then the same must be said of Hecuba, of Electra, of Antigone; such an assumption turns Greek tragedy into a rather uninteresting form of literature, into a genre where words, actions, and moral choices are of little significance compared to the contingent facts of gender. We may wonder whether such an impoverished art form could have succeeded in casting its spell over so many subsequent generations, a spell so clear from the contributions to this volume.

Encouraging a Greek audience to feel sympathy for a powerful female barbarian is not in itself a remarkable achievement on Euripides' part. The achievement of his *Medea* is rather to create a mother who deliberately kills her children, face to face, to avenge not a natal relative, or other third party, but herself, and to turn her into a figure with whom the audience can imaginatively sympathise, even as they instinctively recoil from her actions. Euripides does this despite the innovative way in which he handles the myth, probably being the first to make Medea kill her own children, and with her own hand – something avoided by other tragic filicides. He achieves his end through the vivid depiction of the war within Medea's soul between her conflicting desires to preserve her offspring and to punish her children; and through careful plot construction, not having Medea announce her decision to kill her children until the chorus, and the audience, have been won over by seeing the appallingly undeserved suffering which she has had to endure. Only when that sympathy is established does the audience learn of that decision, and although it is natural to regard it with horror, it is nevertheless difficult to abandon all sympathy for Medea's plight at that point, especially since that very plight is driving her to perform this most dreadful act.

Persuading an audience to feel sympathy for someone who knowingly and deliberately commits a terrible crime is perhaps the most challenging aspect of the tragic poet's art. We should perhaps not be surprised, then, that few of the plays that have come down to us involve

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<sup>33</sup> See Csapo and Slater (1994) 286-7 and the passages cited there.

<sup>34</sup> See Finglass (2017a) 315.

this kind of plot; Euripides' *Electra* and Sophocles' *Ajax* are examples, but in both these cases the killing, or attempted killing, in question has taken place before the action of the play begins, and its consequences lead to the destruction of the perpetrator. *Medea* is so distinctive because the killing takes place within the timeframe of the drama itself and the perpetrator is not punished by mortals or by gods, but rather almost appears as a substitute *deus ex machina* at the play's end. And yet the audience is nevertheless encouraged, if not to approve the filicide, yet at least to understand what has driven Medea to the point where such a crime can, in part, seem a legitimate response.

From this perspective, the play is arguably the most intensely tragic of all surviving Greek tragedies. Whether Euripides succeeded in captivating his audience at the play's first performance is impossible to tell; but subsequent readers and audiences have rightly regarded the work as a classic of the genre. Indeed, the play has become such a classic that today 'Medea' is overwhelmingly Euripides' *Medea*, to such an extent that people familiar with the myth are quite unaware that Medea ever did anything else apart from kill her children; and thanks to that success, it is easy to forget how startlingly innovative the play must have seemed when first performed in Athens, all those years ago.