

MEDEA TEACHING MODULE¹



November 13, 14, 15, 2008 @ 7:30 p.m.
Sean O'Sullivan Theatre, Brock University
Student Matinee: November 14, 2008 @ 11:30 a.m.

Tickets: Adults \$15, Seniors/Students \$12,
School Groups \$10
For tickets contact the Center for the Arts Box Office
Box Office: 905-688-5550, ext. 3257
email: boxoffice@brocku.ca

A riveting retelling of Euripides' Medea set in a multi-media talk-show environment, with a musical guest appearance, live cameras, and haunting visual effects.

Themes: Betrayal and revenge; citizenship and refugees; the private, the public and the media; violence; tragedy.

Subject areas: English Literature, Drama, Classics, Civic Studies, and Media Studies.

Age Appropriateness: Recommended for ages 14+

Field trip packages are available that include a backstage workshop with faculty and students of the Department of Dramatic Arts, performance, and talk-back with the director and members of the *Medea* creative team. For more information or to book, contact Marie Balsom at: mbalsom@brocku.ca. At time of booking, please indicate the subject area and grade level of the students participating in the field trip package.

Below is a series of thematic topics followed by discussion questions and exercises high school teachers may use in preparation for their field trip to the Department of Dramatic Art's production of Medea.

SUMMARY:

For a summary of Euripides' *Medea* see:

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/medea/summary.html>

¹ My sincerest thanks to Helen Zdriluck for her invaluable feedback on this module.

TOPIC #1: Private versus Public Lives

The ancient Greek sense of private versus public life differed radically from our own. In fact, it's very likely that the boundaries between the two didn't quite exist in the way they do for us today. In ancient Greek tragedy, the "private" matters of its heroes and heroines - the family disputes, intimacy, and emotions - are played out in the public arena, in the way much of Athenian life was conducted in the Assembly, the marketplace, the law courts, and of course, the large amphitheatres that sat between 15,000 and 20,000 spectators for theatrical performances. The heroes and heroines' public telling of very private information in ancient Greek tragedies might, at first, strike us as very foreign. It certainly presents one of the biggest challenges for actors playing these roles today.² But perhaps drawing analogies from modern-day society might help make this aspect of Greek tragedy more familiar.

DISCUSSION: Private versus Public Lives Today

Thinking of your own life, what would you identify as arenas of the "private" versus the "public"? What are the characteristics of each?

Break into groups and discuss how each of the following impacts the dynamic between "privacy" and the public eye:

- Surveillance cameras
- Web Cameras
- Facebook
- Blogging or the "Blogsphere"
- The "paparazzi"
- Talk-shows

Beyond these, are there examples or events you can think in which the private is made public? How does the dynamic change when the private is made public with the person's consent (i.e. Facebook, blogs) versus without consent (surveillance cameras, the "paparazzi", etc.)? How has the media in general impacted our sense of the private versus the public?

² For more on the private-public in ancient Greek tragedy and the challenge this presents to actors, see Simon Goldhill's *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 108-117 and Michael R. Halleran's "Tragedy in Performance" in *A Companion to Tragedy*, edited by Rebecca Bushnell (London: Blackwell, 2005) 198-214.

TOPIC #2: The Ancient Greek Tragic Chorus

One of the biggest challenges for theatre artists who wish to stage an ancient Greek tragedy today is the chorus. The tragic chorus was a group of young men who, as some scholars argue, were recent graduates of the military academy. Originally, there was thought to be 50 chorus members, but this was reduced to 12 by the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus and raised to 15 by the time Euripides writes the play.³ The chorus served a very important dramaturgical function in the play.

Moving in rhythmic song and dance, the chorus would reflect on the action of the play and in doing so, provide a momentary reprieve from the intensity of the dramatic action. In other moments, their choral odes would elevate the emotional pitch of the scene and help build the rising action of the play. When they are not reflecting on the action, the chorus may provide advice to the principle characters of the drama and ask questions that we, the spectators, might find ourselves wanting to ask. In this way, they are extensions of the audience and are thought of as the “ideal” spectator on stage. That is, the chorus shapes and guides our responses to the play. The chorus establishes the moral and ethical framework of the play and in turn, tells us what and how we should think about the events unfolding on stage.⁴

Here is an example of one of the choral odes in Euripides’ *Medea*:

Abandon hope that the children will survive.
Now they walk the murderous road.
The bride will embrace the lacework of gold,
Blind to its enchanting ruin.
She will lace her beautiful hair.
With death’s poisonous ribbon.
Heavenly charms, Helios’s crown of gold
and shimmering gown, glamour
she can’t resist, though it makes her
a bride of the dead. The snare is set.

³ On this point and general background information on the first staging of the play at the Theatre of Dionysus, see the introduction to the translation of *Medea* used in this production by Michael Collier and Georgia Mchemer (London: Oxford University Press, 2006) 3-31.

⁴ For more on the chorus in performance and its function see Michael R. Halleran’s “Tragedy in Performance” in *A Companion to Tragedy*, edited by Rebecca Bushnell (London: Blackwell, 2005) 198-214; Simon Goldhill’s chapter on the chorus in *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 45-79.

Death waits at the center.
No power can come to her rescue.

And you, unfortunate bridegroom
who engineered a royal marriage
to shape his destiny, could you have guessed
your plan would murder your children
and deliver your bride to a hideous death?
Unlucky man, could you have been more wrong?

And Medea, you're wrong too,
in every way, sad and sadder still,
you'll kill your children, justice too harsh
for Jason's heartless crimes –
your husband who left your marriage bed
to occupy another.⁵

The ancient Greek playwright Euripides was not known for having a conventional chorus (indeed, Euripides was considered quite a radical playwright in general, which might explain why his plays were not that popular during his lifetime!). His chorus and their attitudes toward the revenge plot of the play are very hard to pin down. Their opinions are oftentimes contradictory and we are left to wonder whether they are simply undecided about the tragic events unfolding before them or too emotionally swept up in them to find their footing. Euripides was also criticized for his characterization of the chorus as a group of passive onlookers who do not intervene in the action in any significant way (something that this production challenges!).

The indecision and passivity of the chorus in *Medea* leaves the spectator hanging, without a clear moral compass to assess the tragic acts taking place before their eyes. The nature of Euripides' chorus raises several important questions: How does a chorus and by extension, a group of people arrive at a consensus about a particular issue and speak on behalf of an "ideal" spectator? What powers and powers of persuasion does the chorus (or "a" chorus/collective voice) yield?

ACTIVITY: Creating a Chorus

Choose a newspaper report that raises a difficult, challenging issue for the class to discuss (this recent headline, unfortunately, relates all too closely to the issue of infanticide the play raises, though other, less sensitive headlines might be preferred and would work just as effectively: <http://www.thestar.com/News/Ontario/article/507442>)

⁵ This is taken from ll.953-976 of Michael Collier and Georgia Macheimer's translation of Euripides' *Medea* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006) 68.

Break the class into groups and ask them to write collectively a choral ode responding to the events or issues raised in the article. The choral ode can be spoken in unison or, if the group is feeling brave, put to song and movement.

After each chorus shares its ode, discuss the challenges each group faced in arriving at a consensus in terms of a) its moral stance in relation to the issue; and b) how this was expressed collectively.

Ask the groups to reconvene and re-present their odes followed by individual members “breaking out” and expressing his or her individual point of view on the event or issue under discussion. What light did this activity shed on the issue at hand? How does this make us re-think the implications and challenges of arriving at a consensual, collective voice?

TOPIC #3: The Chorus, Citizenship, and Refugees.

In the play, Medea and Jason refer to themselves as refugees in Greece and Medea makes a point of reminding the chorus that she is not like them (“But I’ve been talking as if our lives are the same. They’re not.” (ll. 271-272)) Jason claims he has left Medea for the King’s daughter in order to secure their otherwise precarious status as refugees, and that of their children, as respected members of society.

Twenty years before the first performance of *Medea* (431 B.C.E.), Pericles, the general of Athens, instituted a citizenship law, which decreed that citizenship would only be granted if both parents were proven Athenians. Residents arriving from other cities from this point on were no longer given honourable status. In light of the induction of this law, audience members of Euripides’ play might have found themselves sympathetic to Jason’s strategy, however wrong he was for breaking his oath to Medea.⁶

DISCUSSION: Who “Belongs” and Who Doesn’t?

The chorus in Euripides’ play is a collective voice of female citizens, but even this voice, as we have discovered, is not so collective – they are indecisive and hard to pin down. At the forefront of this indecisive, not-so-collective chorus is Medea, who is referred to as a “barbarian” in the play. She is horrified by the idea of being mocked by her enemies. At times, it seems the idea of being mocked and ridiculed is worse than the prospect of murdering her children.

⁶ On the influx of foreigners in ancient Athens and the refugee status of Jason and Medea, in addition to information about the citizenship law, see the introduction to Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer’s translation of the play (London: Oxford University Press) 10-14 and the footnote for lines 448-66 on page 92.

How do we decide in our own lives who belongs and who doesn't? How do cliques operate? What potential violence is there in drawing lines between who belongs and who doesn't? More broadly, who constitutes "we," especially when it's so difficult to arrive at and locate a common voice, stance, or attitude on a given issue?

TOPIC #4: Tragedy and the Tragic Hero

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle examined the great tragedies of the fifth century B.C.E. and tried to identify the necessary ingredients of an effective tragedy. In his *Poetics*, written roughly 100 years after the "Golden Age" of ancient Greece, Aristotle argues that tragedies typically deal with a reversal in fortune and the eventual downfall of a royal character. The experience of watching this downfall of the tragic hero induces pity and fear in the spectator, and in turn, a "catharsis" that purges those emotions. We feel pity for the tragic hero and fear that a similar fate could befall us "ordinary" people.

In the most sophisticated tragedies, according to Aristotle, the tragic hero has a moment of recognition and discovers what has led to his or her downfall. This is called an *anagnorisis* (a-nag-'nŏr-ə-səs). Why the tragic hero suffers, however, is ultimately a product of a tragic flaw or *hamartia* (hä-,mär-'tē-ə). The precise meaning of *hamartia* is debated however it generally refers to either a character flaw, such as excessive pride, or an error in judgment.⁷

DISCUSSION: Britney Spears – A Tragic Hero?

A recent issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine featured an article entitled, "The Tragedy of Britney Spears" (note that the article contains explicit language):

(http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/18310562/cover_story_the_tragedy_of_britney_spears)

The following YouTube clip is a montage of Britney's career titled "Britney Spears: An American Tragedy":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxmMP5zt9Hw>

Why have both of these features referred to Britney Spears' career as a tragedy, a term that signifies a literary genre? How does Britney, as America's "pop princess"

⁷ For a lucid introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics*, see Kathy Eden's "Aristotle's *Poetics*: A Defense of Tragic Fiction" in *A Companion to Tragedy*, edited by Rebecca Bushnell (London: Blackwell, 2005) 41-50. An accessible, lively introduction to Aristotle for students can be found in Alvin Goldfarb and Edwin Wilson's *Living Theatre* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008) 38-41.

fit the criteria of Aristotle's tragic hero/heroine and his/her tragic journey? What is Britney's *anagnorisis*? What is her *hamartia*?

Things to keep in mind as you watch the production of *Medea*:

- 1) What is Medea's *hamartia*? Does Medea have a moment of recognition or *anagnorisis*? Is Medea the tragic hero of this play? Why/Why not? What about Jason?
- 2) Does the play lend itself to an experience of "catharsis"? Why? Why not?

ACTIVITY: Britney Spears – A Choral Ode

Using the choral techniques developed in response to Topic #2, create a choral ode based on Britney Spears, the tragic heroine. Explore the choral mode through movement, song, poetry, rap, or spoken word.

TOPIC #5: Tragedy and Tragic Forces

Why are we drawn to watching tragedy? Is there a message of hope and redemption, something uplifting to be found in tragic plays depicting human suffering? The influential nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche attempted to answer these questions. Paradoxically, in its exploration of the depths of suffering and angst, Nietzsche felt that tragedy is an art form best suited to transcending pessimism and an otherwise meaningless world.

In his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche refers to two ancient Greek deities – Apollo and Dionysus – to characterize the forces at work in the ancient tragedy. The features of Apollo, according to Nietzsche represent the individual in the material world. The features of Dionysus, on the other hand, remind us of another kind of existence beyond the individual and the material world – a procreative life force that points to a higher realm of existence outside the material. The Apollonian characteristics fall in the realm of rationality realized most vividly in ancient Greek sculpture; the Dionysian is an immersion into the realm of festivities, wild revelry, and irrationality. For Nietzsche, these two forces coming together mark the birth of tragedy as an art form. The tragic hero embodies the Apollonian characteristics and his or her encounter with Dionysian elements allows us to face the terrors human existence may bring from a distance. This encounter renews, in turn, our sense of, and appreciation for, life: "Pity and terror notwithstanding," Nietzsche writes, "we realize our great good fortune in having life..."⁸

⁸ This quotation is taken from an excerpt of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* that is of a manageable length for students, should the instructor wish to assign the reading before conducting this exercise. The excerpt (among other philosophical meditations on tragedy) can be found in a collection titled *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, edited by Robert W. Corrigan (London: Harper & Row, 1981) 343-349.

ACTIVITY: The Nietzschean “Magic Hand”⁹

Choose one member of the class to lead the rest of the group. With an outstretched hand, palm facing the group, the leader manipulates the movements of the group as a whole. The group must give itself up to the movements as the hand dictates, keeping the front of their bodies facing the palm of the hand and moving in synchronicity with the rest of the group. Several students can take turns as leader to experience both the power of the individual and the group.

Next, assign each student in the group a number and ask them to devise a movement in three steps that is easily repeated (a gesture, a turn, a full body movement). When the “magic hand” exercise resumes, the numbers are called out randomly and each student breaks away from the group following his or her sequence of movements.

What did this exercise reveal about the powers of the Apollonian, individual force, and the collective Dionysian? What might this exercise reveal about the dynamic between the principle actors in ancient tragedy and the chorus?

⁹ My thanks to Professor Marlene Moser, who devised this exercise using Professor Glenys McQueen-Fuentes’ work with the “magic hand.”