

Judging Medea: Reimagining Magic and Murder in Syfy's *Olympus*

This spring Medea appeared in two TV series as a recurring or major character. Season 2 of BBC's *Atlantis* offers a young Medea, a witch uncertain of her powers and conflicted over whether her loyalties lie with her aunt Pasiphae or with Jason, to whom she finds herself drawn. Season 1 of Syfy's *Olympus* presents an older and mature Medea, the wife of Aegeus, a queen attempting to rule Athens when he is wounded, maintaining an uneasy relationship with their son Lykos while working with her stepson Hero to obtain the Lexicon and thus entrance into Olympus. Although neither series is stellar, Medea emerges as the strongest character in *Olympus* and more substantial and intriguing than her *Atlantis* counterpart. *Olympus* presents an unexpected Medea, as her sojourn in Athens does not figure prominently in ancient sources or modern receptions, yet her murder of her two sons by Jason lies at the core of this reinterpretation. This paper examines *Olympus*'s reimagining of two essential facets of Medea, witch and murderous mother, and its challenging whether she is a good or bad person.

Medea's reputation as a powerful sorceress intimidates those around her and leads them to certain expectations of her. Although she can conjure a phantom to control Hero, cast a protection spell, or produce a smoke bomb, often she is helpless to free herself or easily solve a problem. Medea's constant praying and making offerings at an altar and her use of potions or herbs establish her more as emblematic of faith and superstition opposed to science and intellect, represented by Daedalus. But her powers and knowledge lead to the unravelling of the Lexicon and allow her to absorb Circe to guide them toward Olympus and successfully reach their goal.

Episode 1 reveals Medea's expected un-maternal side, as she bleeds her teenage son Lykos to obtain the Lexicon. The mythical Medea's fleeing to Athens for refuge after murdering her sons has been reconfigured. Knowing Aegeus held the Lexicon within him and would pass it

on to his offspring, she purposefully married and bore him a child. Medea seems to be a scheming, power-hungry, manipulative, and unloving woman.

Although Hero happens to be the actual host of the Lexicon, the resentful relationship between mother and living son exists so that Medea can bring back to life her other children, a motivation eventually revealed in the latter half of the season. In a novel reworking, the show explores Medea's and the dead children's reactions to the murders. Medea repeatedly apologizes, expresses regret, claims madness, and asserts her love for them. Her sons, however, are divided. Alcimenes, the older son, blames and hates Medea and disagrees with her assertion of love, while Tisander, the younger boy, forgives her and insists their mother loved them too much and had to kill them. Differing traditions and degrees of culpability are channeled into the personal perspectives of the children themselves. Although Medea undoubtedly killed her sons, as she acknowledges her crime and Alcimenes claims she did it to hurt Jason for leaving her, the show leaves the exact circumstances uncertain. Some sympathy arises for a remorseful Medea who lives with the pain and will do anything, including sacrifice her own life, "to make amends" as she reiterates. Ultimately, her children, in an unusual twist, are given the opportunity to judge her, granting her salvation or damnation. With a vote of 2 to 1 (Lykos having died protecting Aegeus), Medea is condemned to damnation and cast into the fires of Hades in the season finale.

Olympus retains the most prominent aspects, and general outlines, of Medea's personae as witch and mother/infanticide, yet plays with and subverts the knowledgeable viewer's expectations. Medea attempts to bring back her children, a variation on her renowned powers of rejuvenation and other traditions of her raising the dead. Except for Alcimenes's remark about Jason's abandonment, the mystery of what exactly happened and some ambiguous comments from Medea make us question her assumed evil character. Her motivations for reaching Olympus

and her interactions with her dead children humanize her and show she is not a monster. To make the murders less horrific for a contemporary audience, *Olympus* presents a more sympathetic and remorseful Medea and attempts to redeem her. Yet the children themselves pass judgment, a rare occasion where they speak for themselves. She is forgiven and exculpated by her youngest but ultimately condemned. A mother killing a child, whatever the circumstances, still remains one of the most terrible crimes conceivable. The show simultaneously situates Medea within a modern day and Judeo-Christian context and remedies an unsettling aspect of her myth, that she was never punished for murder.