

Medea Sings: Pop Music as Interpretation

Medea—vulnerable woman in a strange land or dangerous sorceress? Justified or monstrous in her revenge? Early feminist figure (van Zyl Smit 2002)? Maiden? Wife? Mother (Guastella 2001)? The frequency of stage productions featuring Medea alone suggest how compelling she is as a character (see Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin 2000), and, especially in the general education classroom, she consistently elicits mixed responses from students. While they typically side with her in her anger with Jason, struggling to see him as anything less than a “player,” they are often at odds about her decision not to take her revenge directly. Students’ collective responses are likely to be charged with emotion. I propose that the use of popular music provides a productive way to explore the emotional responses Medea elicits.

As a way to explore this idea, I draw from a modern American history colleague’s tried success in a course entitled “Mad Women,” where students explore seminal female figures, including Medea, Lilith, and La Llorona. At the conclusion of their discussion of Euripides’ *Medea*, my colleague asks students to select a theme song for Medea. All of the students’ selections are compiled into a playlist which is then distributed out for the whole class to consider. Students are encouraged to challenge each other to justify their selection, exploring different ways to approach the character.

Thanks to the use of music to set tone in movies, students are used to thinking about drama with a soundtrack. Using popular music as theme music for ancient dramatic characters, students can draw upon what is familiar to them in order to think about a subject that is quite alien. Students’ familiarity with the recurring themes of their favorite artists provide them with a beginning point for interpretation. For example, students might turn to Taylor Swift’s frequent ruminations on break-ups, such as “I Knew You Were Trouble”. Thinking about Medea’s

resolve in the wake of being abandoned by Jason and her refusal to accept his arguments for marrying Glauce, students might think of Swift singing, “No apologies. He’ll never see you cry, / pretends he doesn’t know that he’s the reason why.” (Swift 2012) If they focus on Medea’s seething anger at her betrayal, they might turn to Adele’s “Rolling in the Deep” where she sings “See how I leave with every piece of you. / Don't underestimate the things that I will do.” (Adele 2011) Here is the voice of a woman who knows she has been wronged and will rejoice in the pain to come.

Taking the playlist a step further, teachers could have students read multiple versions of a character. They could, for instance, have students read Euripides’ and Seneca’s versions of Medea, perhaps tossing in modern takes such as Carr’s (2002), compiling a playlist for each author’s version. In comparing the multiple playlists, students could appreciate the power of compelling dramatic characters in eliciting wide-ranging responses (is Medea mad? is she righteous? is her wrath frightening? exhilarating? etc.) while also narrowing in on the collective core for the character.

Though I have focused on Medea, this same exercise could easily be expanded. Turning to Roman comedy, we could ask students to identify a theme song for Pseudolus, that quintessential clever slave, or Phronesium, that *meretrix* who deftly plies her trade to swindle a young man from the city, a boisterous soldier, and a naïve boy from the countryside. One could also imagine themes for characters of epic like Achilles, Hector, Dido, or Aeneas. Again, the aim is to use students’ familiarity with the themes of popular music as a beginning point for character analysis, generating discussion out of a field which they are likely energized about.

We do well by our students when we enable them to apply their own knowledge as a starting point for their interpretation of antiquity. Drawing on students’ thoughts on popular

music provides those who are new to the study of antiquity a place where they can speak with some confidence. Their reactions to songs can be used as proof to them that they are capable of developing their own interpretations, and the variety of songs selected in any given playlist can also help students understand that interpretation is a process of discussion and debate rather than the search for the one true answer.

Bibliography

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