

## Didactic Medea: Problems and Possibilities in Using *Medea* to Study Athenian Gender Roles in the Classroom

The character of Medea served as a compelling opening for my Grade 6 Social Studies study of women in Classical Greece; she is captivating, bold, and direct in outlining the plight of Greek women. She lists the injustices endured in her address to the chorus (lines 230-251) and eviscerates the pretexts offered by men who alleged their roles to be equal. As a teaching tool, Medea offered a pedagogical trifecta of a primary source, cross-discipline lesson, and a delivery succinct enough to fit on a one page handout. Yet, because Medea is so engaging, her character's rage can resonate powerfully enough with students to create problems when they reengaged with the rest of the coursework.

Using the 2005 J.E. Thomas translation of *Medea* and guided discussion, the class unpacked the titular character's principal complaints and debated what this meant for women in the ancient Greek world. As the lesson was designed for students who had not yet fully developed the skill set needed to take reliable notes, the accompanying worksheet contained scaffolding that prompted students to take note of seven separate grievances; the humiliating need for a dowry (lines 232-233), the surrender of control to the husband (line 233), the inability to seek divorce (line 236), the possibility of domestic abuse (line 241), the possibility of the marriage creating irreconcilable unhappiness (line 243), the inability to leave the house (lines 246-7), and the falsity of the claim that men faced greater dangers in their gender role (lines 248-251). The students assembled the parts into a picture of what sort of life Medea's character would have faced in the fictional setting of the play.

Yet Medea defies superficial analysis, and while the lesson used Medea's speech to generate significant emotional investment from the students, the lesson ultimately generated a

deep sense of disgust among many students with Classical Greece. While a subsequent lesson highlighting the sayings of Spartan women helped to somewhat mollify the student's disconnect from the material, the fact remains that after the Medea lesson many never felt as willing to emotionally invest in the Greeks, whom they felt were irredeemable bigots and misogynists.

Pedagogically, this presents a non-trivial dilemma. By any modern criteria the Greeks were guilty on all charges and their legacy is intertwined with gender inequality. Yet they provide a vital cornerstone in foundation of the modern world, and their contributions in the arts, sciences, and humanities are incalculably important. On the one hand it is clearly irresponsible for a teacher to actively destroy a student's interest in a culture by stoking a sense of moral outrage into an unbridgeable divide between the past and present, while on the other hand it is negligent to gloss over the injuries inflicted or the reality that the Greeks effectively squandered half of their population's potential contributions by relegating so many women to the private domicile. The compromise of trying to judge an individual only by the moral standards that their society knew holds little solace for those who strongly identify with the people who had to suffer under the societal injustices.

For future iterations of this lesson, the short term answer to this Gordian knot may lie in a threefold approach. The first approach would be delving deeper into the context within the play itself and examine the ways in which Medea destroys the social rules that would bind her. The second would be exploring the larger historical narrative, and demonstrate the ways women subverted the gender rules or used the asymmetric expectations to exert political control. The third potential solution lies in adding the historiographical context, and reminding students that the historical narrative is interpreted by those who study the topic, and if all who disagree with

its views of gender refuse take part in informed conversations and studies, they will cede control of its understanding to those who do not.

Medea offers a lens for students to examine ancient Athens and a tool for them to understand how the Greeks may have seen their world and the nature of their society. Its emotional charge remains self-evident and it can offer teachers a powerful avenue for generating student engagement across all educational levels. The themes and problems raised by the character provide the opportunity to delve into some of the most difficult questions that we face when teaching about gender and inequality in antiquity. Yet despite or perhaps because of Medea's ability to connect and draw forth such powerful connections, it must be the instructor's role to guide and scaffold the learning and dialogue to build a positive learning experience that empowers the students and helps them build an identity as enthusiastic learners.

#### Bibliography

Thomas, J.E. 2005. *Medea*. Clayton: Prestwick House.