
The Construction of Medea's Identity in the Play

How far is it true to say that Medea loses her identity throughout Euripides' Medea.

Perhaps in order to address this title, it is necessary to look for a definition of 'identity'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'individuality, personality... absolute sameness'. The question now becomes firstly does Medea the character change fundamentally in the course of the play, and secondly do all the aspects of her character remain constant. The answers to these questions lie in an analysis of Medea's character and a comparison of the eponymous villain at the beginning and end of Euripides' masterpiece.

Definition of character can be said to lie partly in perceived social status. Primarily, Medea is a woman, and so falls into traditional Greek stereotypes of the 'weaker sex'. Clearly this core characteristic of Medea cannot change in the course of the play. In the same way, she is irrevocably a witch both at the beginning and at the end of the play. She has been able to rejuvenate Aeson, half-brother of King Pelias of Iolcus, with magic herbs, and here is able to skilfully poison Glauce and Creon. Characters who wield magical powers in Greek Mythology usually set aside from society. Medea herself suggests magic isolates her in her long speech addressed to the chorus. The third and final unchangeable aspect of her character is that she is a foreigner. To the xenophobic 'people' of Corinth (who are both symbolised and represented by the chorus), Medea is a barbarian:

'She learns through pain what blessings they enjoy who are not uprooted from their native land.'

Medea is not part of the community, but rather a 'frightening woman' who should be avoided. Medea is defined by her different nationality, as well as her more obvious characteristics, and these certainly do not change in the course of 'Medea.'

When she married Jason and came to Corinth, Medea (presumably) assumed the nationality of a Corinthian. When Creon declares 'I order you out of Corinth', he attempts to deprive her of this part of herself. Medea's response is fierce:

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'Oh! This is the cruel end of my accursed life.'

Medea fights to retain her place in Corinth, but not out of love for it, but because she wants to topple its figurehead and his daughter. It could be true to say that Medea cares for her public appearance, as she works hard to earn the respect of the people around her; the Nurse declares 'she has earned the citizen's welcome'. Nevertheless, by the end of the play she has been cast out of the county and flees to safety. Her nationality changes, and presumably this part of her identity changes.

Another integral part of Medea's character is her identity as a mother. She rejects this part of herself to exact revenge on Jason for his destruction of their marriage. He has spurned Medea as a wife, and in return she destroys Jason as a father. Medea's killing of her children is her most horrific crime in both modern and contemporary eyes; she 'hates her sons', and her crime seems all the worse for the breaking of this strong natural bond.

Identity is, however, largely subjective, and so the perception of Medea in the eyes of other characters in the play must be taken into account. Jason himself understands Medea to change considerably in the course of the play. Initially Medea seems unreasonable, and Jason describes her as unwilling to 'calm [her] raging temper'. She is unwilling to compromise, or do little more than hurl abuse at her husband, and beginning her tirade with the insult 'you filthy coward!'. By their next meeting, Medea seems to have cooled her temper considerably, and now readopts the position of a traditional, submissive, and supportive wife. She admits 'I was wrong', and as a result Jason himself now takes up again his role of a 'conventional' husband. From his point of view, her character has improved considerably. However, 'Medea' ends with husband disunited even in grief, with Medea refusing to allow Jason to hold his murdered children's bodies. Her character has performed a complete U-turn, and so in her husband's eyes at least, Medea's identity changes twice during the course of the play. However, the change is only apparent because of Medea's cunning subterfuge; it is not evidence of a genuine change in her character.

The other close members of Medea's family, her children, are introduced by Euripides as mute figures to whom Medea is a threat; 'Quick, now, children, hurry indoors; And don't go ... anywhere near her; ... Her mood is cruel'

Initially Medea seems to be a danger to her sons. However, it is impossible to know how they

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feel as they never voice their opinions. When presented with her children in anticipation of murdering them, Medea can be seen to burst frequently into tears. This can be seen to suggest that she is a loving mother. The horror of her later actions compel her offspring to words and cry out 'Mother, don't kill us!'. The children's shock is at this point transferred to the audience when both the cruelty of the deed, and Medea's startling reversal of maternal feeling are divulged to them. In her actions to her sons, and thus in their understanding of her, Medea is anything but consistent.

Aegeus sees Medea from an outside standpoint. His sole appearance in the play shows him as a trustee and a good friend to Medea. The two confide in each other; he describes his quest for children, and she her husband's infidelity. As far as can be extrapolated, Aegeus sees Medea as a constant. They meet and part on the best of cheery terms, and their wrangling conversation seems as full of jest as it is of deadly purpose. Aegeus is, however, aware of Medea's darker side. It must be for this reason that he refuses to give her safe passage to Corinth, only protect her once she is there. They both appear powerful, and rational; Medea contrasting here with her later, and earlier, ranting and passionate speeches. This perhaps suggests that Medea has been driven to her distressed and treacherous state by the actions of Jason. However, it is important to recognise that in Greek Mythology the character of Medea has killed outside the circle of the play, and we are reminded of this by the nurse in the very first speech.

Creon is the other King which Medea deals with. She changes his mind during her encounter with him: initially he flatly states 'I'm not going back into my palace until I've put you safe outside my boundaries.'

Sensible Creon admits to fearing Medea, and he is rightly wary of her. However, by the time he leaves, he has clearly been emotionally manipulated by her and his attitude towards her is sufficiently relaxed as to allow her to spend one more day in his city, to his cost. Thus in his scene, Creon's attitude to Medea changes, but it is not therefore true to say that her identity changes. She is the same fearsome woman at the end of this scene, as her later actions show.

The nurse is also rightly frightened of her mistress. She realises Medea's deadly intentions, remarking 'She'll not relax her rage till it has found its victim.' The nurse realises Medea's true identity early, and her crimes seem more a realisation of deadly potential than a change in character. To her, Medea remains consistent.

The tutor is also a very minor character. He advises Medea not to 'bear [her] grief so hard', and as she agrees we must assume he sees her as a welcome subject for such unfortunate words of wisdom. However, as Medea ignores him completely, the tutor could be forgiven for feeling a little hurt and misled. To him Medea is an errant woman, but although he is deceived on a

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microcosmic scale, this hardly counts as an interpretation of changing identity.

The chorus perceive Medea as 'a friend' initially, but their attitude quickly causes them to describe her as a 'cursed, miserable woman' to whom they no longer speak. At first, the chorus carry our sympathy as well as their own, but as Medea loses this through her crimes, it is possible to suggest that she loses her identity as a friend, and as a victim in their eyes. Her loss of our and the chorus' friendship highlights her increasing isolation towards the end of the play.

Perhaps the most telling interpretation of Medea's character can be seen in her own understanding of herself and her actual personality. After the death of Glauce and Creon, she shows no regrets similar to those which made her weep earlier. To Jason at the end of the play she declares that 'It is a waste of time to ask.' She freezes her emotions in the course of 'Medea', and thus her emotions can be said to change. This vital part of her identity is often indicative of a much deeper and more fundamental inner change. Euripides could be suggesting that Medea is hardened by her crimes and by her experiences with Jason, and has by the end of the play lost all emotional connection she ever had with him, and as a result has become a much darker, shyer figure.

Medea certainly starts her play in a different mood to that in which she finishes it:

'sobbing and wailing, shouting shrill, pitiful accusations against her husband who has betrayed her.'

This emotive description shows a grief-stricken Medea who is portrayed as being in great distress. It is not her, importantly, who is disloyal; at the start she retains her principle characteristics of loyalty, strength, and deep emotion. Even in this early stage there are signs also of Medea's dangerous and unscrupulous desire for revenge:

'Oh, may I see Jason and his bride ground to pieces in their shattered palace.'

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Medea's venom is clear here. She is an ambiguous character; initially she is shown to be a fratricide., an object of pity betrayed by a cruel husband, and a terrifyingly calm and malicious contriver of Pelias' death. She is, however, marked out by her uncertainties as the eponymous star of a great tragedy. None of the other characters possess qualities so open to interpretation.

Medea retains this quality even at the end of the play. She is either an 'unclean, abhorrent child-destroyer', or the 'insulted' wife who merely responds to a 'father's treachery': a man who breaks his sacred oath to her. By her actions in the conclusion of this play, Medea still possesses her viciousness and strength of will, but has turned her loyalty to hate. In this last respect, therefore, she has changed. The already dying embers of her faithfulness are completely black by the end of 'Medea'. Here, at least, she is not 'absolutely the same'.

Parts of Medea's identity can be said to change; she loses her compassion, her loyalty to her husband, and her national identity, becoming, instead of a victim, the perpetrator of a crime to foul to forget. In the eyes of her family she appears to change radically in the course of the play, but this is only evidence of her skill with deception and cunning. Most of her physical attributes remain the same; she is still woman, witch, and unorthodox. However, in the eyes of an audience (which are, in the end, all that count) Medea mutates from a pitiable weeping woman, to a cruel and twisted seeker of vengeance. Thus it could be true to say that Medea's identity is redefined in the course of Euripides' play.

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