

EURIPIDES'  
**MEDEA**

ADAPTED BY ROBINSON JEFFERS

A STUDY GUIDE

COMPILED BY  
NANETTE VOSS

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

To understand better the choices I made for this production of *Medea*, a look back at ancient history is in order. *Medea* probably was an historical person, who really existed about 400 years before Euripides wrote his play. That woman had 14 children by Jason, and she is remembered as a very powerful woman, skilled in the arts of magic and such powers that are shared among women. Even then, she invoked fear among the people of Corinth. The king of Corinth, Creon, murdered 13 of her children and scattered their dead bodies in the marketplace as a sign that he was breaking her power.

But, 400 years later, at the time Euripides wrote his play, tourists rarely came to Corinth, because it was believed that a curse was on Corinth on account of what Creon had done. If that history is correct (and the Greeks apparently believed it was true), then the changes Euripides made to the story are significant.

Euripides wrote his play in 431 BCE as part of the playwriting contests that were part of religious festivals. *Medea* won only third place, but it has survived, I believe, for some very good reasons.

First, by making *Medea* herself, rather than Creon, the murderer of her children, Euripides hoped to lift the curse, thereby increasing tourist trade. Hence, we have the old story of blaming it on the woman makes men feel better. Maybe Euripides hoped to increase the possibility of his winning first place. We don't know.

Second, the play has no easy answers, which invites itself into contemporary discussion. For me, the play *Medea* is an indictment of the treatment of women, forced to make choices when all their choices are taken away from them by men. Even in our own culture, women sometimes murder their own children. Although we shake our heads at their disturbed psychology, was it some individual lunacy that drove them to it, or was it cultural circumstances? *Medea* shows a deeply disturbed woman, but clearly the problem lies in the culture. But does that justify her ultimate actions? What options does a betrayed woman have? Has America, and everywhere within the political boundaries, made enough advances so that women are not forced into hateful choices?

It is also an anti-war play, and the *Second Woman of Corinth*—in this adaptation by Robinson Jeffers—expresses those views.

The play is also a disturbing look at how love and justice are balanced against betrayal and political maneuvering. By the end of the play, one realizes that among the adults no one is innocent, and the children have become pawns in a war between the power brokers. How many families in our own country have, at times of divorce, used their children against their former partners? This is very familiar territory for Americans.

Medea is also a story of cross-cultural conflict. The main character has given up, on behalf of her love for Jason, all possibilities of ever returning to her own country. She lives in a foreign land where she is held in suspicion because of her personal power.

Given all that, I made certain choices that the play itself had to be able to bear. I believe the play does warrant the decisions I made.

First, I chose to keep the text of this adaptation as is and not to change any of the language. The text is hard enough for actors not trained in speaking verse. It does present a bit of a contrast given the costume choices I made.

Second, I chose to set the play in a cross-cultural setting that contemporary audiences would recognize. Medea and the nurse, both from Colchis—the far end of the world!--, are in somewhat exotic dress that originated from discussions about Berber dress. The Three Women of Corinth are dressed in typical Iraqi dress, including one full black abaya—with veil--, and then in increasingly upper class dress. The kings are in modern versions of caftans, in clothes that would be recognizable from photographs. Jason and the soldiers are in military dress, including recognizable Merican camouflage fatigues.

The audience can make of this what it will. Obviously, when Euripedes first wrote his play, the costumes would have been contemporary to his audience. I have chosen to do the same. The audience should look at the whole spectrum of the issues presented in the play and try not to take any one side, nor presume that I have either. I am very clear about my views on what has happened in our country for the last 50 years and some of that is seen in the costuming. Even so, the issues we face as American are as implicated as they can be demonstrated. The insanity of Medea is an American tragedy, too.

It is also true that, unlike most presentations of ancient Greek drama, I have chosen not to keep the Women of Corinth (a reduction of the original Greek Chorus), in a formal relationship to the drama. The script has some inconsistencies in this. Sometimes they are, as in much ancient Greek drama, close to moral reflection for the audience. But whenever possible I have directed the actors to fully engage each other.

Unlike the general function of Greek choruses, in this play the chorus are three different characters who have independent views and individual relationships to the story that is unfolding.

I chose to do this play because of the lamentable absence of ancient stories being heard in our midst. These are stories of great power. It is even worse that we have such a huge gap in ancient stories from the many, many peoples of the world. As multinational organizations increase their power grab over more and more of the world, the ancient stories of all the many peoples are in danger of being lost altogether to the power elite who want to control the resources that formerly belonged to the people. When the stories are gone, the people will be blind.

If there is an ultimate tragedy embedded in this play, it is that we have not woken up to the reality that all the contemporary power brokers are slaughtering the children of the world by divesting them of their dignity, bombing their cultural heritage and grabbing the earth beneath them to take away their own self-empowerment. That any one culture should insist, particularly by some delusional divine or elite right, that their own perception ought to be imposed on others, is a cross-cultural tragedy of unspeakable horror. It may even make some kind of perverted sense that there are Medeas among us now who know, at an animal level beyond rational sense, that it is better to kill the children before they are stripped of their heritage and their story and so thoroughly domesticated that they are condemned to wander like beggars in their own homes.

If we want a better world for all of us, “Medea” stands—like the two snakes at her door and like the angel to the Garden of Eden—as a warning for all of us to shoulder the responsibilities that will endow the future with justice-love and justice-peace for every single person on this planet.

It is not an easy play within which to make choices. But there it is. I stand by the choices I made.

Jim Lawer  
*Director*

## (CHARACTERS)

**Medea**- Protagonist of the play, Medea’s homeland is Colchis, an island in the Black Sea, which the Greeks considered the edge of the earth—a

territory of barbarians. A sorceress and a princess, she used her powers and influence to help Jason secure the Golden Fleece.

**Jason**- Jason can be considered the play's villain, though his evil stems more from weakness than strength. A former adventurer, he abandons his wife, Medea, in order to marry Glauce, the beautiful young daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Jason's tactless self-interest and whiny rationalizations of his own actions make him a weak, unsympathetic character.

**Children**- The offspring of Jason and Medea, the children are presented as naïve and oblivious to the intrigue that surrounds them. Their innocent deaths provide the greatest element of pathos—the tragic emotion of pity—in the play.

**Chorus**- Composed of the women of Corinth, the chorus chiefly serves as a commentator to the action, although it occasionally engages directly in the dialogue.

**Creon**- The King of Corinth, Creon banishes Medea from the city. Although a minor character, Creon's suicidal embrace of his dying daughter provides one of the play's most dramatic moments, and his sentence against Medea lends an urgency to her plans for revenge.

**Glauce (or Creusa)**- Daughter of Creon, Glauce is the young, beautiful princess for whom Jason abandons Medea. Although she never utters a word, Glauce's presence is constantly felt as an object of Medea's jealousy.

**Aegeus**- The King of Athens, Aegeus passes through Corinth after having visited the Oracle at Delphi, where he sought a cure for his sterility. He promises Medea sanctuary after she swears to cure his affliction.

**Messenger**- The messenger appears only once in the play—he relates in gruesome, vivid detail the death scenes of Glauce and Creon, which occur offstage.

**Nurse**- Caretaker of the house, the nurse of the children serves as Medea's confidant.

**Tutor**- A very minor character, the tutor of the children mainly acts as a messenger, as well as the person responsible for shuffling the children around from place to place.

# GLOSSARY

- abate:** to reduce or decrease in degree, amount, or intensity
- acropolis:** the upper fortified part of an ancient Greek city
- anemone:** a plant related to the buttercup
- annihilation:** an act of complete destruction
- barbarian:** lacking refinement, learning, or artistic or literary culture
- dregs:** the most undesirable part; the last remaining part
- dynasty:** a succession of rulers of the same line of descent
- fishhawk:** an osprey
- harlot:** a prostitute
- hearth:** a brick, stone, or cement area in front of a fireplace; home, fireside
- hemp:** a tall Asiatic herb grown for its tough fiber used especially in cordage
- imbecile:** a mentally deficient person, fool, simpleton
- indignation:** anger aroused by something unjust, unworthy, or mean
- intemperate:** lacking or showing lack of restraint or self-control; given to excessive use of intoxicants
- quadruped:** an animal having four feet
- rancorous:** showing intense hatred or spite
- wrought:** deeply strived

# ROBINSON JEFFERS

Robinson Jeffers was born on January 10, 1887. His father, a professor of Old Testament Literature and Biblical History at Western Theology Seminary in Pittsburgh, supervised Jeffers' education, and Robinson began to learn Greek at the age of five. His early lessons were soon followed by travel in Europe, which included schooling at Zurich, Leipzig,

and Geneva. When the family moved to California, Jeffers, at age sixteen, entered Occidental College as a junior. He graduated at eighteen.

Jeffers immediately entered graduate school as a student of literature at the University of Southern California, where, in a class on Faust, met another strong influence on his intellectual development: Una Call Kuster, who would later become his wife. In the spring of 1906, he was back in Switzerland studying philosophy, Old English, French literary history, Dante, Spanish romantic poetry, and the history of the Roman Empire. Returning to USC in September 1907, he was admitted to the medical school. The last of his formal education took place at the University of Washington, where he studied forestry.

Jeffers brought enormous learning in literature, religion, philosophy, languages, myth, and sciences to his poetry. One of his favorite themes was the intense, rugged beauty of the landscape in opposition to the degraded and introverted condition of modern man. Strongly influenced by Nietzsche's concepts of individualism, Jeffers believed that human beings had developed an insanely self-centered view of the world, and felt passionately that we must learn to have greater respect for the rest of creation. Many of Jeffers's narrative poems use incidents of rape, incest, or adultery to express moral despair. *The Woman at Point Sur* (1927) deals with a minister driven mad by his conflicting desires. The title poem of *Cawdor and Other Poems* (1928) is based on the myth of Phaedra. In *Thurso's Landing* (1932), Jeffers reveals, perhaps more than in any of his poems, his abhorrence of modern civilization. His many other volumes include *Solstice and Other Poems* (1935), containing early use of the Medea story, to which he later returned.

During the late 1930s and the 1940s Jeffers' genius was judged to have faded, and many of his references to current events and figures (for example, Pearl Harbor, Teheran, Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt) raised questions about his patriotism in a period of national strife. *The Double Ax* (1948) even appeared with a disclaimer from the publisher. However, Jeffers' adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* (1946) was a great success when it was produced in New York in 1947. Robinson Jeffers died in 1962.

(Taken from *The Academy of American Poets* [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org))

## MYTHIC MEDEA

Medea was a devotee of the goddess Hecate, and one of the great sorceresses of the ancient world. She was the daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis, and the granddaughter of Helios, the sun god.

King Aeetes' most valuable possession was a golden ram's fleece. When Jason and the crew of the Argo arrived at Colchis seeking the Golden Fleece, Aeetes was unwilling to relinquish it and set Jason a series of seemingly impossible tasks as the price of obtaining it. Medea fell in love with Jason and agreed to use her magic to help him, in return for Jason's promise to marry her.

Jason fled in the Argo after obtaining the golden fleece, taking Medea and her younger brother, Absyrtis, with him. King Aeetes pursued them. In order to delay the pursuit, Medea killed her brother and cut his body into pieces, scattering the parts behind the ship. The pursuers had to stop and collect Absyrtis' dismembered body in order to give it proper burial, and so Jason, Medea and the Argonauts escaped.

After the Argo returned safely to Iolcus, Jason's home, Medea continued using her sorcery. She restored the youth of Jason's aged father, Aeson, by cutting his throat and filling his body with a magical potion. She then offered to do the same for Pelias the king of Iolcus who had usurped Aeson's throne. She tricked Pelias' daughters into killing him, but left the corpse without any youth-restoring potion.

After the murder of Pelias, Jason and Medea had to flee Iolcus; they settled next in Corinth. There Medea bore Jason two children before Jason forsook her in order to marry the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. Medea got revenge for Jason's desertion by killing the new bride with a poisoned robe and crown which burned the flesh from her body; King Creon died as well when he tried to embrace his dying daughter. Medea fled Corinth in a chariot, drawn by winged dragons, which belonged to her grandfather Helios. She took with her the bodies of her two children, whom she had murdered in order to give Jason further pain.

Medea then took refuge with Aegeus, the old king of Athens, having promised him that she would use her magic to enable him to have more children. She married Aegeus and bore him a son, Medus. But Aegeus had another son, Theseus. When Theseus returned to Athens, Medea tried to trick her husband into poisoning him. She was unsuccessful, and had to flee Athens, taking Medus with her. After leaving Athens, Medus became king of the country which was later called Media.

(Summarized from Thomas Bulfinch by James Hunter)

## INFORMATION ABOUT COLCHIS

Where is it?

Colchis was located at the far eastern end of the Euxine (Black) Sea just north of the present-day border of Georgia and Turkey. For a map, visit <http://www.webcom.com/shownet/medea/colchis.html>.

Ancient Greek legends told of a fabulously wealthy land where Jason and the Argonauts stole the Golden Fleece from King Aetes with the help of his daughter Medea. It was a distant land that was reached by the Black Sea and down the River Phasis. The actual site of this legendary kingdom has never been found but the Greeks must have been greatly impressed by the Colchis region of Georgia, through which the River Phasis (currently the Rioni River) runs, for such stories to have been born.

Geographically, ancient Colchis comprised the land bounded by the Black Sea to the west, the Caucasus Mountains to the north, the Surami Range to the east and the Meskhetian Mountains to the south. In this fertile, sheltered area, Colchian civilization flourished. Their Late Bronze Age (15<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) saw the development of an expertise in the smelting and casting of metals that began long before this skill was mastered in Europe. Sophisticated farming implements were made and fertile, well-watered lowlands blessed with a mild climate promoted the growth of progressive agricultural techniques.

It is likely that the Golden Fleece existed. Earlier in this century, remote mountain villagers in Svaneti (a part of ancient Colchis) were observed using sheepskins to trap the fine gold particles in the rivers that flowed from the Caucasus Mountains. The skins would then be dried and beaten to shake out their contents. However, it is debatable as to whether or not the legendary 'wealth' of Colchis referred only to gold. Archaeological evidence dates the earliest Greek imports of painted pottery and amphorae to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. In exchange, it

is thought that greeks sought the rich natural resources of Colchis including wood and metal ores as well as textiles. Even today, the mountain slopes remain heavily forested and the Ancient Greek writer, Herodotus, referred to the superior quality of Colchian linen.

(From *Adventures Great and Small: Unusual Places/Cultures*)

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EURIPEDES' MEDEA

### **Epictetus: From *the Discourses***

**Chapter 28** That we ought not to be angry with men; and what are the small and the great things among men

“...How says Medea?

‘Tis true I know what evil shall do,  
But passion overpowers the better council.’

She thought that to indulge her passion and take vengeance on her husband was more profitable than to spare her children. ‘It was so; but she was deceived.’ Show her plainly that she is deceived, and she will not do it; but so long as you do not show it, what can she follow except that which appears to herself? Nothing else. Why, then, are you angry with the unhappy woman that she has been bewildered about the most important things, and is become a viper instead of a human creature? And why not, if it is possible, rather pity, as we pity the blind and the lame, those who are blinded and maimed in the faculties which are supreme?

Whoever, then, clearly remembers this, that to man the measure of every act is the appearance – whether the thing appears good or bad: if good,

he is free from blame; if bad, himself suffers the penalty, for it is impossible that he who is deceived can be one person, and he who suffers another person – whoever remembers this will not be angry with any man, will not be vexed at any man, will not revile or blame any man, nor hate nor quarrel with any man.”

### **Chapter 17** How we must adapt preconceptions to particular cases

“...Why, when you desire a thing, does it not happen, and, when you do not desire it, does it happen? For this is the greatest proof of unhappiness and misery: ‘I wish for something, and it does not happen.’ And what is more wretched than I?

It was because she could not endure this that Medea came to murder her children: an act of a noble spirit in this view at least, for she had a just opinion what it is for a thing not to succeed which a person wishes.

Then she says, ‘Thus I shall be avenged on him who has wronged and insulted me; and what shall I gain if he is punished thus? How then shall it be done? I shall kill my children, but I shall punish myself also: and what do I care?’ This is the aberration of soul which possesses great energy. For she did not know wherein lies the doing of that which we wish; that you cannot get this from without, nor yet by the alteration and new adaptation of things. Do not desire the man, and nothing which you desire will fall to happen: do not obstinately desire that he shall live with you: do not desire to remain in Corinth; and, in a word, desire nothing than that which God wills. And who shall hinder you? Who shall compel you? No man shall compel you any more than he shall compel Zeus.”

(Epictetus was an exponent of Stoicism who flourished in the early second century CE about four hundred years after the Stoic school of Zeno of Citium was established in Athens. He lived and worked, first as a student in Rome, and then as a teacher with his own school in

Nicopolis in Greece. Our knowledge of his philosophy and his method as a teacher come to us via two works composed by his student Arrian, the *Discourses* and the *Handbook*.)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the Chorus of Corinthian women feel toward Medea?
2. How is gender explored in the play? Does Medea emerge as a champion of women's plight through either positive or negative example? What is Medea's view of the female sex?
3. What is Jason's view of why Medea had helped him? According to Jason, what advantages did Medea derive from coming to Greece with him?
4. What intentions does Creon have for Medea and her children?
5. Does Jason seem heroic? What is virtuous or sleazy about him? What specifically has he done wrong? What are the reasons that Jason gives for marrying the Corinthian princess?
6. According to Medea, what would she rather do three times than bear once child?
7. What three enemies does Medea plan to attack? By what means? What could these items symbolize?
10. What divinity does Medea venerate above all others? How does her loyalties to this divinity paint her a witch?
11. To what extent does Medea, protagonist of the play, fit the mold of a tragic hero?
12. Who is Aegeus and what is he doing in Corinth? Do you know who is born from Medea's promise to Aegeus? What is significant about this child?

13. The theme of exile is recurrent in *Medea*. How does exile serve as a useful metaphor for Medea's emotional states in the play? How are life and death figured as extensions of exile?

## POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. What did you like about the setting of the play? Was it what you expected? How did it alter the meaning of the play?
2. How did the costuming choices alter your perceptions of the play? Were the costumes what you expected?
3. What characters stood out to you? Did certain performers seem more skilled than others? Why? Did it help you to see the characters in action as opposed to just imagining them?
4. How did the lighting reflect the mood of the play? Enhance it? Detract from it?
5. After seeing the show, can you imagine Medea's in modern day life? Does her story fit into modern day? Can you think of people who have had to make difficult decisions like Medea?

## WRITING PROMPTS

1. What does the word 'tragedy' mean to you? Explain.
2. Do you think Jason was right in marrying the princess? Explain.
3. Do you think Medea is being treated fairly by Jason and the king? Explain your answer.
4. How do you feel about the end of the play? Was Medea justified in her actions?
5. Who is the tragic hero of Medea? Explain.

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBSITES

**Encyclopedia Mythica: An Encyclopedia on Mythology, Folklore, and Legend.** <http://www.panteon.org/>

**Time Line of Greek History and Literature.**

<http://web.uvic.ca/grs/bowman/myth/info/timeline.html>

**The Perseus Digital Library.** <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>

**Greek Mythology.**

[http://edweb.sdsu.edu/edweb\\_folder/people/bdodge/scaffold/GG/greek\\_myth.html](http://edweb.sdsu.edu/edweb_folder/people/bdodge/scaffold/GG/greek_myth.html)

## FERNDALE REPERTORY THEATRE

Ferndale Repertory Theatre is a non-profit educational community organization governed by a Board of Directors elected annually by its members. Construction of the building began in 1918 under the name of the Hart Theatre. As one of the first theaters in the Eel Valley of Northwestern California built specifically for the showing of motion pictures, the Hart Theatre opened on December 8, 1920 with a showing of "The Mollycoddle," a silent adventure comedy accompanied by a

pianist hired from the Minor Theatre in Arcata. Admission in 1920 was 25 cents for adults, 15 cents for children. For nearly 40 years, the Hart Theatre provided the community with entertainment from movies to vaudeville shows. But in 1956, the movie house closed and the building remained stagnant for sixteen years.

By the early 1970's, enthusiastic members of the Ferndale community decided to renovate the old movie theatre into a playhouse, and on April 28, 1972, the doors of the newly named Ferndale Little Theatre reopened with a performance of the old-style melodrama "Ten Nights in a Bar Room." The success of the Ferndale Repertory Theatre spawned a passion for Community Theater and led to the establishment of the North Coast Repertory Theatre of Eureka in 1983. The "little" was changed to "repertory" in 1980, and for the past 30 years the Ferndale Repertory Theatre has produced nearly 200 plays from big Broadway musicals like "Evita" to serious dramas such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" to Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Not only do residents of the north coast community appear in Ferndale Repertory productions, but the building itself has appeared in several Hollywood productions, such as "A Death in Canaan," "Salem's Lot," "Hyperion Bay," "Outbreak," and "The Majestic."

## GENERAL THEATRE ETIQUETTE

1. Please arrive early to allow yourselves ample time to find your seats. Be advised that there is **no late seating**.
2. Remind your students that they are sharing the theatre with many theatre patrons and their actions greatly affect the theatre experience of all.
3. All students must have adult supervision. Please seat chaperones throughout the group.
4. Running, jumping, and climbing over seats is disruptive and will not be tolerated.
5. Remind students to stay in their seats and keep all aisles free.
6. Students may not climb on the stage or handle any props without prior permission and/or supervision.

7. Please respect the actors and other playgoers by turning off all electronic devices, audio beepers, and cellular phones before the play begins.
8. No photography or recording is permitted in the theatre without proper authorization.
9. Please refrain from talking, chewing gum, and unwrapping candy during the performance, as it is disruptive to the cast and surrounding audience.
10. Food and beverages are not allowed in the theatre area.
11. Patrons who leave the theatre during the performance (to go to the bathroom, make a phone call, etc.) will not be allowed to return to their seats until intermission.

Thank You and Enjoy the Show!

## WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Jeffers, Robinson. *Medea*. Samuel French, Inc. London: 1946.
- Spark Notes. "Medea: Euripedes." SparkNotes LLC. 2003,  
<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/medea/characters.html>
- Mitchell-Boyask, Robin. "Study Guide For Euripedes' Medea." 14  
February 2002. <http://www.temple.edu/classics/medea.html>
- Dunkle, Roger. "Medea." Classics Technology Center. AbleMedia, 2000.  
<http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/netshots/medea.htm>
- The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Epictetus." 2004.  
<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/e/epictetu.htm>
- "Robinson Jeffers." Poetry Exhibits. The Academy of American Poets. 1  
February 2001.  
<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=203>
- Hunter, James. "Medea." Encyclopedia Mythica. 24 April 1999.

<http://www.panteon.org/articles/m/medea.html>

“Colchis, the Land of the Golden Fleece, Republic of Georgia.”  
Adventures

Great and Small: Unusual Places/Cultures. [http://www.great-adventures.com/destinations/rep\\_georgia/colchis.html](http://www.great-adventures.com/destinations/rep_georgia/colchis.html)

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. Warner Books. New York: 1969.

Zimmerman, J.E. *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. Bantam Books. New York: 1971.