

Classical Adaptation in Modern Scotland

Medea by Liz Lochhead (after Euripides)

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This teaching note focuses on Liz Lochhead's 2000 adaptive translation of *Medea*, the ancient Greek play by Euripides. Euripides' version was not the only classical tragedy on the subject of the vengeful Colchian sorceress, who slaughters her children after she has been abandoned by Jason. However, today it is by far the most popular classical version, in large part because the play's treatment of Medea herself is felt to be more nuanced than that of the later Roman dramatist Seneca. Euripides' *Medea* continues to be adapted today: a version by Ben Power recently played at the National Theatre in London, with Helen McCrory in the title role. This teaching note chooses to concentrate on Liz Lochhead's version, produced for theatre babel's series 'Greeks' in 2000, in part because of the clearly Scottish context of the adaptation. In Lochhead's play, Medea and her Corinthian opponents speak different languages: what Lochhead terms 'patrician English' and Scots, respectively (Lochhead 2000: Foreword).¹ A play about a quintessential outsider, and the revenge she takes on the society that arrogantly presumes to reject her, thus becomes a self-conscious meditation on conflicting national identities, which is particularly potent in the light of the recent referenda on Scottish independence and Brexit.

1. However, in Graham McLaren's 2001 production of Lochhead's play for theatre babel, Medea speaks with an Eastern European accent. See Charles Spencer's review for the Telegraph, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4724941/A-magnificent-Medea-for-the-21st-century.html Accessed 23 Dec 2016.

Moreover, in her Foreword to the play, Lochhead has drawn comparisons between the xenophobic climate of Euripides' Athens, and the troubling and intolerant attitude to homosexuality that she perceived in some quarters of Scotland, even as it entered the new millennium. It is thus clear that for Lochhead, the revival of an ancient play could speak specifically, and compellingly, to modern Scotland. However, Lochhead's *Medea* was staged first in Glasgow, then at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and then toured nationally, and as this suggests, the play also reflects wider concerns, both poetic and social. First, Lochhead is described as the play's author 'after Euripides', and her drama compels its auditors to think about adaptation as an artistic process (and indeed as a creative one). The play is far more than a translation from ancient Greek: rather, it self-consciously modernises ancient poetry, often in deliberately shocking terms, in ways that invite comparison with similar adaptive or imitative projects, such as Ted Hughes' version of Euripides' *Alcestis*. Second, while Euripides'

RANGE:

- Higher and Advanced Higher English / Drama

KEY TEXTS:

- *Medea* (Euripides, adapted by Liz Lochhead; Nick Hern Books, 2000)
- *Medea* (Euripides, trans. Gilbert Murray; George Allen & Unwin, 1910). Also available online as a free Project Gutenberg e-text. www.gutenberg.org/files/35451/35451-h/35451-h.htm

own play has often been seen as particularly sensitive to the plight of its abandoned heroine, and Edith Hall has demonstrated how it has historically been allied to the suffragette movement, and to early twentieth-century thinking on the rights of women, Lochhead's revisioning often recasts speeches and scenes in an even more clearly feminist light. For example, the Chorus, which in Euripides is composed simply of Corinthian women, is described by Lochhead as being made up of women 'of all times, all ages, classes and professions' (Lochhead 2000: 7), and these women insistently link Medea's suffering to their own, and to that of all women. Lochhead's *Medea* has been described as 'an intense play of sexual strife accentuated by racial disparities' (Gifford and Robertson 2002: 17), and the drama encourages students and teachers alike to think about issues of adaptation, reception, feminism and nationhood.

This teaching note suggests approaches to teaching and discussing Lochhead's *Medea* at Higher or Advanced levels. The recommended edition is by Nick Hern Books: Liz Lochhead, *Medea* (2000). Additional suggestions for teaching the play (particularly from a theatrical perspective) can be found in Anne Gifford and Jane Robertson, *Contemporary Scottish Plays for Higher English and Drama* (Hodder Gibson, 2002), a work that includes the text of Lochhead's *Medea* and tips for students on how to approach essays on it.

Medea's story before Euripides

Like much ancient drama and epic, Euripides' play (and Lochhead's) opens with the story well underway, and Medea and Jason in particular make frequent reference to previous events. It is therefore important that students are aware of these events, to allow them to set the play in context.

Medea and Jason met when Jason came to her father's kingdom, Colchis, to win the Golden Fleece, the kingdom's greatest treasure: Jason was sent on this quest by his wicked uncle Pelias, who hoped he would not return. Medea, a young and beautiful princess with

supernatural powers, agreed to help Jason in his quest in return for a promise of marriage, despite Jason's existing relationship with another princess, Hypsipyle. Medea assisted Jason in his capture of the Fleece by magical means, and fled Colchis with him, killing her young brother to distract her father. The couple landed in Jason's homeland, and Medea assisted him again, killing his uncle Pelias by tricking Pelias' daughters into stabbing him to death, in the mistaken belief that they were participating in a ritual to make him young again. Pursued by Pelias' son, Jason and Medea fled to Corinth, where they were received by King Creon, who insisted that Jason put Medea and their two sons aside, and marry his daughter Glauke (elsewhere Creusa) instead. Jason abandons Medea for this more advantageous match (just as he had abandoned Hypsipyle when he needed Medea's help in Colchis) and Euripides' tragedy opens with Medea having just learnt of Jason's betrayal. These events are referenced by Medea and Jason through the play, and are described in Latin by the Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (Book 7) and *Heroides* (letters 6 and 12) and by the Roman playwright Seneca, in his tragedy *Medea*. (Both Ovid and Seneca wrote after Euripides, who drew on more ancient sources, now largely lost).

Preparatory activities

Euripides' and Lochhead's *Medea* both refer to past events (such as Medea's killing of Jason's uncle Pelias, or the deal Jason struck with Creon to marry Glauke) with various different emphases, depending on who is recalling these events (e.g. Jason, Creon, Medea herself). In pairs, write brief recollections of the events of Lochhead's play, from the point of view of Medea, and any two of the following: Glauke; Jason; Medea's daughter (who is invented by Lochhead); Creon; the Nurse.

Medea is excluded in Corinth both as an abandoned woman, and as a foreigner. What, in your opinion, would make someone feel more vulnerable or different in modern Scotland, their gender or their national and/or racial background?

Reading activities

- Read pp. 6–11 of Lochhead's *Medea* (from 'Why don't you bloody die you / cursed litter of a cursed mother?' to 'what have I done to deserve this?') and the parallel scene in Gilbert Murray's translation of Euripides' *Medea*, pp. 8–17 ('Have I not suffered? ... Unlawful, wilt thou cast me out, O King?')
- List the various contrasts and differences apparent within Lochhead's version of this scene. You may wish to consider contrasting characters and their backgrounds, contrasts in language, contrasts in register of language. Are these same contrasts evident in Murray's translation?
- Murray's is an English translation of Euripides' ancient Greek, whereas Lochhead's is an adaptation, or version, of Euripides' play. Which are the most obvious moments in the passage from Lochhead that show her changing or updating Euripides' work? Where does she choose to keep things from Euripides' play? Why might she sometimes retain what she found in Euripides, and sometimes change it? Does Murray make similar changes?
- Does your attitude to Medea change while reading Lochhead's passage? Note where you feel most and least sympathetic to Medea, and try to explain why. Does your attitude shift in the same way, and to the same extent, when reading the comparable passage from Murray's translation?
- Later in the play, Lochhead cuts a meeting between Medea and her friend Aegeus, who offers her sanctuary in Athens (pp. 37–44 of Murray's version) and replaces it with a confrontation between Medea and Jason's new wife Glauke (Lochhead pp. 23–27). Do you think this new scene is an improvement on Euripides' play (which includes no such scene)? Why, or why not?

[NB: in his adaptation of Euripides' play, Seneca also cuts the meeting with Aegeus, but does not add a meeting with Glauke. In his work *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle had criticised the fortuitous appearance of Aegeus in Euripides' play as improbable].

- Compare the meetings between Medea and Glauke (in Lochhead) and Medea and Aegeus (in Murray). Are they similar in any way? How do the two characters interact, in each case: how do they speak to each other? What does each character want, in these two scenes? How do the two meetings end? How have they contributed to the action of the play?

Discussion questions

- What are the advantages and disadvantages (to both Lochhead's and Euripides' plays) of having such a dominant title character?
- Why does Lochhead choose to adapt a well-known play, rather than write an entirely new play on the subject of an abandoned and vengeful woman?
- Suggest how two readers (differentiated by age, gender, nationality or religious or political conviction) might respond differently to Medea – is she a monster, or a sympathetic figure? Is it possible to read or respond to Medea 'neutrally', or is our understanding of her always coloured by our own views or background?
- Lochhead's play was performed in Glasgow in 2000, and then at the Edinburgh Fringe, before going on a national tour. Do you think seeing Medea on stage, as opposed to reading about her, would make her more or less sympathetic? Would seeing Lochhead's play outside Scotland make it more or less effective?
- Is Lochhead's adaptation a feminist play?

Suggested Assignments

- Read another translation of Euripides' *Medea*, such as that by David Stuttard. (If you wish, you may read just the first 100 lines). Compare this to Murray's translation, and to Lochhead's adaptation. Do the two translations of Euripides (by Murray and Stuttard) differ at all? Why do you think translators continue to produce new English translations of the same classical play?
- Choose a hierarchy or unequal relationship in Lochhead's play, and show how this hierarchy is presented, and how it evolves across the play. Examples might include men/women, masters/servants, home/foreign, parents/children.
- What purpose does the Chorus serve in Lochhead's play? What kinds of people make up the Chorus? Study each of its appearances in the play, and consider how it interacts with Medea, and how it contributes to the development of the play at each point it appears. (The role of the Chorus is discussed by Gifford and Robertson 2002: 15–16).
- Lochhead describes Euripides' play as 'outrageous, impious, jaggedly colloquial' (Foreword). Find instances of colloquial language or profanity in Lochhead's adaptation – what is the effect of this type of language?
- Compare the endings of Lochhead's and Murray's versions. How are they different? Think about who is speaking, what they say, the effect created on stage.

Essay questions

- The following are essay questions from Higher papers that could be answered with reference to Lochhead's *Medea*.
- Choose a play in which a character keeps something hidden or pretends to be something she or he is not. Explain the reasons(s) for the character's behaviour and discuss how it affects your attitude

to the character. [Much of the dramatic tension of Euripides' play, and Lochhead's adaptation, comes from Medea's hiding her true feelings from Jason and from King Creon in particular, pretending that she has accepted her husband's new marriage, and her expulsion from Corinth, and will not seek revenge.]

- Choose a play whose main theme is made clear early in the action. Show how the dramatist introduces the theme and discuss how successfully he or she goes on to develop it. [When Euripides' play opens, Medea has already been slighted by Jason, and from the very outset of both plays, her grief and rage are clearly evident, as is her desire for revenge on Jason and Creon; these emotions gather force as the drama progresses, despite the Nurse's efforts to calm Medea.]

Further reading

Heike Bartel and Anne Simon, eds, *Unbinding Medea: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Classical Myth from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Anne Gifford and Jane Robertson, *Contemporary Scottish Plays for Higher English and Drama* (Paisley: Hodder Gibson, 2002).

Edith Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation Before the First World War', *Greece and Rome* 46.1 (Second Series) (1999): 42–77.

Edith Hall, Fiona MacIntosh and Oliver Taplin, eds., *Medea in Performance, 1500–2000* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000).

Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).

David Stuttard, ed. *Looking at 'Medea': Essays and a Translation of Euripides' Tragedy*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).