

Medea has Pierced Our Hearts (Medea, Part 2)

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Transcript:

[Music]

[Mark:] You are listening to the Norton Library podcast, where we explore classic works of literature and philosophy with the leading scholars of the Norton Library, a new series from W. W. Norton that introduces influential texts to a new generation of readers. I'm your host Mark Cirino with Michael Von Canon producing, and today we present the second of our two episodes devoted to the Greek tragedy *Medea* by Euripides. To explore this text further we welcome back its translator and editor Sheila Murnaghan. In our first episode we discussed the *Medea* myth, who Euripides was, and some of the prominent characters in the play. In this second episode we learn more about Sheila Murnaghan's engagement with the play, her favorite line, her favorite way to teach the play, her *Medea* hot take, and much more. Sheila Murnaghan is the Alfred Reginald Allen Memorial professor of Greek at the University of Pennsylvania. Among her many works devoted to Greek epic literature and tragedy and gender and classical culture she is the author of *Disguise and Recognition in The Odyssey*. We are delighted that she joins us today. Sheila Murnaghan, welcome back to the Norton Library podcast,

[Sheila:] Oh thank you! I'm delighted to be here, and really I look forward to continuing this conversation.

[Mark:] Sheila, I'm looking at the cover of this really handsome Norton Library edition of Euripides, and I'm wondering, what you can tell us about the design and the colors? What is the meaning behind it? I myself did not choose these colors, but I agree with you that it's extremely handsome. And to my mind it seems pretty clear that they echo the colors of the image on the Norton Critical Edition of *Medea*, which depicts a Pompeian wall painting in which we see *Medea* in the foreground, but somewhat in the shadows, holding her sword, and the little boys that she's about to kill kind of innocently playing in the middle ground. And the whole image is in, sort of, colors of brown and ochre but with a kind of shaft of light coming in through a window onto the little boys. And so, I think that the brown and yellow of this cover really kind of captures the feeling of that image.

[Mark:] That's excellent.

[Sheila:] The title, "*Medea*," is in a very powerful red, and that seems totally appropriate to this play, which is about an extremely powerful woman and a really bloody action that she decides to take.

[Mark:] I'm very glad I asked, because I wouldn't have seen all of that in this cover. I just knew that I thought it was really attractive. So, that's fascinating. Sheila, do you remember when you first read this play?

[Sheila:] That's an interesting question, because I don't really. It's a play that I've been aware of for a long time. I remember reading it in Greek with a group of students pretty early in my career, but I think I'd already read it, even in Greek, before that. So, I can't give you a very precise answer to that, but I think I would also say that it's just always loomed large in my sense of Greek tragedy and what it's all about. And I think it does for many people. It's one of the plays that has been most enduringly popular.

[Mark:] To what extent does *Medea* or Euripides play a prominent role in your scholarship?

[Sheila:] I have not written a great deal about *Medea* aside from producing this edition. But I have thought quite a lot, and written to a certain extent, about the role of women in tragedy. And *Medea* has got to be one of the principal texts that you go to to think about that question. And so, one of the things that has sort of preoccupied me in thinking about this issue is something that is a sort of question that's on the table for anyone who wants to think about it, which is why a society in which there was such a sharp division between the roles of men and women, and in which men occupied public space and women were at least ideally supposed to be in only in private spaces kind of out of view, why they would have this extremely public performative art form in which extremely powerful and compelling female characters play such an important role. So, for that you have to think about *Medea*.

[Mark:] I can assume that you've taught this book many times to many students, in various levels of expertise in this genre. What are the common challenges that new readers have to reading *Medea*. The context in which I've taught *Medea* most often is in courses on gender, and I think one of the biggest challenges is trying to figure out or trying to elicit some kind of position on gender or statement about gender from this play, and the play really invites you to see it in those terms. Not only does *Medea* present herself very effectively to the chorus of Corinthian women as someone whose troubles stem from the fundamental nature of marriage, and she has the speech when she says basically, 'women are the most wretched creatures that exist,' and then she describes how hard it is to have to enter the house of a stranger, your husband, and make your way there, and then to kind of be confined there. So, that seems like a kind of statement protesting the gender relations of the society, and then the chorus sings this ode in which they complain about the fact that in the poetic tradition, it always seems to be women who are deceitful, devious, and treacherous, and not men, and they're thinking, of course, of Jason, who seems to be exactly exemplifying those qualities. And they point out that women haven't—they say, you know, Apollo didn't give us the lyre—women haven't been the ones composing the songs and that if women were, they would tell a different story. So, both of those things really seem to prompt you to see this as a kind of feminist statement. But then what *Medea* then goes on to do exemplifies every misogynistic idea about what women are like: that women are out of control of their emotions, that they are devious, she's extremely manipulative, that they care more about—one of the things that the Greeks thought was that women were preoccupied with sex and cared much, much more about it than men did, and in fact if women were allowed to get together, all they would do is talk about sex—and, you know, the fact that she seems to actually care that her husband is abandoning her for another woman. And so, in that way the actual action of the play seems to reinforce all of these misogynistic ideas and I think it seems affirm something that Euripides shows in a number of his plays, which is that—I mean, his plays are partly about just the destructive and the sort of pervasive destructiveness of powerful emotions, and he does show women as the ones that are the kind of first point of entry for powerful emotions that then kind of spread through a whole community, and all of that is exemplified in the plot, and *Medea* herself makes a kind of comment about, you know, women may not be good for much, but they're very good at doing evil. So, what are we supposed to make of all of that? Here is Euripides kind of calling for a new kind of song that would tell women's stories correctly, and yet are we supposed to think that *Medea* is such a song?

[Mark:] So, let me turn that last question on its head, and have you found techniques particularly helpful when you present this play to students?

[Sheila:] I sort of take my cue from them and their responses to those issues. I do think that it's always helpful to ask them to kind of inhabit the perspective of various characters. And so, I sort of like them to think about how would they tell the story from Jason's perspective, for example?

[Mark:] Oh, that's interesting. So, are you talking, when you present it, are you focused more on ideas and themes than language?

[Sheila:] It really depends on the context, and, as I said, as it happens, this is a play that I've taught most often in courses on gender. And so, it's really thinking about gender relations. It's funny, I've never really taught this play at the graduate level, but there, I think we would be talking about, to some extent, more Euripides's interventions in the Mythic tradition, maybe how the lyrics are functioning in relation to the action, questions like that as well.

[Mark:] In this play, Sheila, do you have a favorite line.

[Sheila:] I have a lot of favorite lines, but I would pick out two rather different favorite lines. One is—so mentioned already that Medea gives this really remarkable speech about how hard it is to be just a woman in an ordinary marriage. And a kind of culminating, or a kind of high point in this speech is when, you know, she's complaining and then she says “they tell us that we enjoy a sheltered life, / staying at home while they are out fighting.” So it's really a great line for getting at, you know, you're living in this polarized world in which each gender thinks that the other has a better deal, right? And then she says that they're so wrong. She says “I would rather face battle / three times than go through childbirth once.”

[Mark:] Wow

[Sheila:] And that, I mean, first of all, I think that's a really interesting line to think about for this question that we've come back to a number of times, which is how can this genre, which was of poetry that was produced by men, enacted by men—imagine a man playing that role, and a man would have played the role of *Medea*. But just, to give such a pointed account of women's experience in that way, I think is really, really amazing. And the other line that I picked out is actually, again, a group of lines, but it goes back to something that we were discussing in the earlier episode, which is the way in which the chorus responds to Medea's plans when they really understand what she's going to do, because I think it just captures how horrific and incomprehensible it is to them. So, this is a few lines. “How can you find the will, / how can you steel your mind, / to lift your hand against your sons, / to do this awful thing? / How will you stop your tears / when you see them dying? / They will huddle at your knees / and you will not be able / to spill their blood / with a steady heart.” Their sort of projection of just what a really impossible thing for a mother to do this is really just sort of spotlights for us what an extraordinary thing Euripides is portraying. And of course they are completely right, it's extremely difficult for her to do that with a steady heart, and she really waivers in advance, but then she does. She steadies her heart, and she does it. And that's where I think she enters a realm that is, you know, really, really baffling to us, and yet we've understood how she got there step-by-step-by-step-by-step. And we've seen how it's really an extraordinary mythical situation that she's in, but it also really does, as she herself has made clear to us, it simply is a dramatized version of the situation that women were in in that culture. And it's the social arrangements of, you know, ordinary life, that in which it's possible for a husband to just abandon his wife, and that was perfectly possible in fifth-century Athens, that have step-by-step led her to this.

[Mark:] At that moment it seems like the chorus is appealing to Medea's emotion, rather than rather than to morality.

[Sheila:] Absolutely! Yeah, that's what I'm saying. I mean, they talk about it as an awful thing. I don't think that there's any question that they reject it in moral terms, but for them, they're really focused on the emotional. Just, how could you kill your own children?

[Mark:] And so, these two quotes, what both of these combine to do is refer back to what you were saying in the first episode, which is how Euripides had sort of revolutionary insight into female characters.

[Sheila:] Yeah, he really seems to have, and this led to him being viewed in antiquity both as a great lover of women and as a great misogynist. And the misogyny charge was partly because he revealed women's secrets, including their secret desires.

[Mark:] Sheila, we always invite our Norton Library editors to give us a hot take on the book that they've edited. Do you have something controversial or counterintuitive, something headline-making to say about *Medea*?

[Sheila:] I feel as if *Medea* is incredibly pertinent to our contemporary moment because of the way in which it gives us a kind of anatomy of revenge, and it shows us the way in which it's very easy. And I see this, and I want to be very clear about this, I see this in many contemporary situations. It's very easy to be sympathetic with the motives for revenge. And it's also very clear that once revenge is taken it so often is completely disproportionate to the grievance that it's responding to, and that it takes on a life of its own and it has a kind of pervasive destructiveness. And I think Euripides shows us this, particularly by the skill with which he draws us into sympathy for *Medea*, and yet the clarity with which he shows us the horror of what she does.

[Mark:] Well, that's fascinating. I'm wondering if you think that that cycle of revenge in the way Euripides is portraying it—is that something that has been true literally since this play was first performed or is there some inflection about twenty-first-century revenge, contemporary revenge that is particularly relevant when we think about the play?

[Sheila:] Revenge is a human universal, and I think Greek tragedy illuminates it particularly well. I think the cyclical nature of revenge is better exemplified by Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. What I feel *Medea* particularly pinpoints—and I think, you know, I can't say whether this is more relevant now, but it feels very relevant now—is the way in which somehow the impulse to revenge just carries one way beyond anything that is actually pertinent to the grievance being responded to.

[Mark:] So, I know we're embarking on a very long history, but how has *Medea* been adapted or performed, repurposed in a way that might be helpful for us to think about?

[Sheila:] *Medea* is a very frequently adapted play, and I think that probably in, certainly in the more recent times, the role of Medea as an outsider in the culture in which she finds herself is the sort of feature of this play that has really spoken to people and given them a kind of opportunity. So, very, very often Medea is some kind of an outsider. So, there's a wonderful Irish adaptation by Marina Carr in which she's a traveler, you know, married to a sort of proper Irishman. A very important, recent adaptation, or very effective recent adaptation, is Luis Alfaro's *Majada*, in which the Medea figure is an

undocumented Mexican woman living in Los Angeles. So, her aptness for dramatizing the difficulty of someone who is trying to operate in a culture in which she's viewed as an outsider and viewed with suspicion as an outsider I think has been one of the things that's driven retellings of *Medea*.

[Mark:] What about music? Does this invite you to think of anything? Is there a *Medea* playlist that you would suggest? You mentioned this was part of a festival where there would have been music. What kind of music would Euripides and his audience have been familiar with during this time?

[Sheila:] Tragedy comes out of this tradition of sung, performed poetry, and there would have been—so, a play like *Medea* would have included a combination of spoken sections, dialogue, and then these sung sections. Now, a few of the most powerful expressions of the main characters would have been sung, but most of the singing would have been by the chorus, which would have been dancing and singing at the same time, and there would have been accompanied by a wind instrument called an aulos, which is a kind of double flute, a reed instrument, sometimes compared to an oboe, which was thought of as being a kind of highly emotive instrument. You know, when we read a tragedy we're really reading the script of something that was a real multimedia performance and it was, you know, very sensational in the Greek world.

[Mark:] Have you ever seen an adaptation, a modern adaptation, that tried to encompass and include the musical elements, the multimedia aspects of it?

[Sheila:] I haven't, although, I would mention that actually one of the most interesting adaptations is a dance version by Martha Graham, there, stripping away the words but including music and dance. And it's also interesting what any particular later artist is going to focus on, because Martha Graham just is interested in the relationship between Medea and Jason, and it's not about the children at all.

[Mark:] Sheila, I asked you the extremely unfair question of your favorite line in *Medea*, and I wanted to foist one on you, if I could, to see what your reaction was. The line that struck me is actually a line that you chose as an epigraph, and it's line 1360. "I've done what I had to do: / I've pierced your heart." And could you put that into context for us and tell us what drew you to that line as having such power?

[Sheila:] Right, so that is from the very final dialogue between Medea and Jason when they're kind of confronting each other in the full knowledge of what she has done, and I think when she says "I've done what I had to: I've pierced your heart," I think that captures the fact that at the end of the day, the thing that mattered to her most was getting back at Jason and that she puts this, you know, horrible action of killing her children, which was for her also extremely painful, I mean, she also suffers from the death of her children, when she encapsulates it as "I did what I had to," this was the thing she had to do in order to do what became for her the paramount goal, which was "I pierced your heart," and that it was to make him suffer.

[Mark:] She says, "the pain is worth it if it kills your laughter." Wow.

[Sheila:] Yeah, and her sense of, kind of, humiliation and shame over being abandoned by her husband is accompanied by a sense, which people often say is more like what you find in male heroes in tragedy than in female characters, that it's particularly humiliating when your enemies laugh at you. And she says, that's what she wants to avoid, that if you've been in some sense shown up or shown to be weak or bested by someone, then the fact that your enemies can laugh at you is just particularly galling.

[Mark:] Yeah that makes sense to me. Sheila, one of the questions that we might end on is—we haven't talked enough about your role as a translator, and if you could maybe choose one example of your role as a translator and your decision-making process—is there a moment in your translation that might help illustrate just what it means to translate a text like this?

[Sheila:] Well, one of the greatest challenges of translating Greek tragedy is that it's full of these inarticulate cries—that the audience of Greek tragedy clearly was very, very used to the idea that characters would be crying out things like “Ah Ah Ah! Omoi omoi omio!” And in English, for people to say things like “alas” or “oh me” is just not—it just isn't effective. And so, I think many translators of Greek tragedy really, really struggle with this problem and some will include them and some will include them in Greek, so it's like “oh oh oh! A ta ta ta!” or something like that or “oh moi, oh moi.” Some will translate them as “alas” or “oh me” and so forth. I really tried to instead translate them as expressions of what I think is the sort of state of mind that's being described. So, for example, when we first encounter Medea, she's off stage and she's crying out and she's saying this “omoi, omoi,” but I decided to have her say instead, “I've been hurt, I've been hurt, that's why I cry.” So just, I'm in pain, to have her just say that. And she's crying that and she says “I've been hurt, I've been hurt,” and then she says just everything is terrible, “let the whole house come down!” And, I mean, that's, you know, what she actually says.

[Mark:] This kind of goes back to what we were saying in the first episode where Euripides is trying to capture everyday speech as opposed to something lofty or excessively dramatized.

[Sheila:] Yeah, but he's also composing in a poetic idiom where this kind of almost formal, almost ritual-sounding cry is considered to be ordinary speech or expected speech.

[Mark:] Sheila Murnaghan, thank you so much for joining us on the Norton Library podcast to discuss *Medea* by Euripides. Thank you, Sheila.

[Sheila:] Oh, thank you for having me.

[Mark:] The Norton Library edition of *Medea* by Euripides, translated and with an introduction by Sheila Murnaghan is available now in paperback and ebook. Check out the links in the description to this episode for ordering options and more information about the Norton Library, including the full catalog of titles.