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THE POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP AND HOSTILITY IN EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

Abstract. – Greek lyric poets often represented *erōs* as a form of illness, associating it with the loss of self-control, impulsiveness, and intense emotions that harm those who experience them. Euripides' *Medea* explores the complexity of human behaviour and the emotional force of love, betrayal, revenge, and death. Scholars have sought to understand the significance of Medea's tragedy in classical Athens, especially the death of her children. Its sacrificial imagery is closely connected with the religious foundations of tragedy; indeed, Greek cult practice has often been related to the ritual origins of tragic drama.[1]

Key words. – Medea, passion, revenge, tragedy

Medea at the Theater of Dionysus

Euripides' *Medea*, performed at the Theatre of Dionysus in 431 BC, brought onto the Athenian stage the precarious social condition of a foreign woman living abroad with her two children. Medea has been abandoned by her husband, who intends to marry a younger woman. Euripides presents her as a foreign woman who "just lay there; she would not eat or drink, her body surrendered to pain, wasting away, always in tears, because she had discovered how her husband had dishonoured her."[2]

In Homer, intense desire for another person is designated by the term *erōs*[3], a feeling that may or may not find fulfilment. In Euripides' description, the impossibility of realising and satisfying erotic attachment produces symptoms resembling fever and physical prostration. Greek lyric poets similarly regarded *erōs* as a manifestation of illness, observing

[1] I would like to thank Professor Wander Stayner for reviewing the English text.

[2] Euripides, *Medea* 25.

[3] Homer, *Iliad* 14.315.

in those affected by it a loss of self-control, impulsiveness, and intense emotions capable of injuring their victims.[4]

Euripides' *Medea* allows us to grasp the complexity of human behaviour, as well as the emotional force of love, betrayal, revenge, and death. Scholars have approached the meaning of the tragedy in classical Athens from several perspectives. For Walter Burkert,[5] the death of the children emphasises the play's sacrificial imagery, the religious basis of tragedy, and the connection between Greek cult and the ritual origins of tragic drama.[6] Emily McDermott sees Euripides' play as a drama of human deformation, anomaly, and confusion, marked by a form of nihilism in the tension between the individual and the *polis*, especially on the eve of the Peloponnesian War.[7] Helene Foley interprets Medea's monologue as a struggle between, on the one hand, her passion for revenge and, on the other, her maternal emotions and rational deliberation in defence of her children's survival.[8] Pietro Pucci examines the dialectic of remedial discourse, pity, and suffering, through which the play enabled the Athenians to confront the pain of hardship and death in the context of war. Charles Segal argues that, through the destruction of the most fundamental human bonds, Medea's revenge expresses the radical effects of violence, culminating in death as spectacle.[9] The Greek theatrical audience could imagine this social and dramatic condition because Medea appears before them isolated and desperate. Her status as a barbarian woman, together with the tensions produced by that status, may have been decisive in prompting her reaction against the violence of subordination imposed by Creon and Jason. Both men, in this sense, become her enemies.

In view of the emotional conditions that affect Medea, David Konstan's *Friendship in the Classical World* is especially relevant.[10] In the book, Konstan analyses the history of the relationship known as friendship in the classical world, while also recognising that the concept of friend-

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[4] Faraone 1999, 44.

[5] The idea of human sacrifice remains pervasive in tragedy. Euripides used the motif in several forms, including in the *Heraclidae*, *Hecuba*, *Phoenissae*, *Erechtheus*, and *Phrixus*; he also represented Alcestis' death as a sacrifice, with Thanatos cast as the sacrificial priest. In the case of Orestes, by contrast, he stands beside Aegisthus at the sacrifice, holding the sacrificial knife. See Burkert 1966, 116–117.

[6] Burkert 1966, 117.

[7] McDermott 1989, 5.

[8] Foley 1989, 62.

[9] Segal 1996, 15.

[10] I also had the opportunity to attend the lecture series 'Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation: From Antiquity to the Present', delivered by Konstan during his residency as a visiting scholar in the 'Cesar Lattes' Program from March to June 2023. The series reached a wide audience, was made available on YouTube, and was coordinated by the Institute of Advanced Studies (IdEA) at Unicamp, São Paulo, Brazil.

ship is not uniform across cultures.[11] Medea's drama exposes suffering, pain, shame, anger, and revenge: a range of emotions that generates a powerful affective impact, especially in relation to feminine experience and to the social condition of the abandoned woman. I argue that there is also evidence for the view that drama benefits from the poet's emotional involvement in the construction of his characters. The idea that poetry influences its audience by acquainting them with the emotions of others, through a form of sympathetic involvement, is one way of understanding the representation of emotion.[12] Euripides' *Medea*, and Euripidean drama more generally, deals with powerful emotions, such as hatred, jealousy, and love, in extreme situations; these emotions are especially intense because they often arise within the intimate sphere of the relationship between husband and wife.[13]

David Konstan also examines human suffering in *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*. In this work, he discusses the Greek term *pathos* (*pathē*), denoting strong emotions and giving rise to modern terms such as "pathology" and "psychopath". Konstan notes that *pathos* is related to the Greek verb *paskhō*, meaning to suffer, to experience pain, or to undergo distress. In classical Greek, *pathos* may refer more generally to what befalls or affects a person, often in the negative sense of accident or misfortune. Among the Greeks, the *pathē* included a range of emotional states for which modern equivalents include anger, fear, love, pity, indignation, and despair.[14]

Within the broader context of Greek popular belief, *pathos* was associated with *Erōs* and Pan in the case of Medea, since she is emotionally overcome when she learns that Jason has bound himself by a new marriage tie to the daughter of the king of Corinth.[15] Medea's emotion is marked by disappointment and misfortune, beginning with her decision to follow Jason from her own country, Colchis, to Iolcus with the Argonauts. Medea "sailed away to the palace in the land of Iolcus because her heart was passionately in love with Jason".[16] Medea was infatuated with Jason; she loved him, and this kind of emotion may be understood in terms of *philia*, which is associated with the verb *philein*.

The verb *philein*, from which both *philos* and *philia* derive, is used to denote affective relationships, including those between couples. Aristotle states that *philein*, or loving, consists in wishing for another person what one considers good for that person, not for oneself, and in doing

[11] Konstan 1997, 1.
[12] Konstan 1997, 15.
[13] Xanthaki-Karamanou 2023, 119.
[14] Konstan 2006, 4.
[15] Euripides, *Medea* 155.
[16] Euripides, *Medea* 10.

what one can to secure those goods for that person's benefit. A *philos* loves and is loved in return; those who regard themselves as mutually disposed in this way regard themselves as friends.[17] heodore Tracy's analysis of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *philia* is a central concern, shows that the term is often, though inadequately, translated by words full of human warmth, such as "love" or "friendship". No single word in modern languages corresponds to the broad spectrum of intimate relationships encompassed by the Greek concept of *philia*, and the term "friendship" is too weak to describe the relationship between husband and wife. The importance of *philia*, or friendship, in every aspect of life was enormous. Friends were desirable not only for the pleasure of their company, but also for the help and support they could provide.[18]

Konstan states that *philia* is not simply love, but is often better translated as friendship, while the cognate term *philos* commonly means "friend". In ancient Greece, friendship was fundamentally an affective bond. Konstan questions the view that it had little or no affective character and was instead wholly a matter of duty. Malcolm Heath, for example, argues that *philia* in classical Greece "is not, at root, a subjective bond of affection and emotional warmth, but the entirely objective bond of reciprocal obligation; one's *philos* is the man one is obliged to help, and on whom one can (or ought to be able to) rely for help when oneself is in need".[19] For Konstan, however, no other condition for loving is specified: nothing is said, for example, about duty or obligation. As far as the performance of services is concerned, loving consists precisely in the uncoerced wish to provide them. There is therefore no tension between the sentiment of love and the expectation, or even the demand, that one should help another person attain the goods to which they aspire. If loving (*philein*) as an emotion is the desire to provide such assistance, then failure to help another person demonstrates a lack of love.[20]

Medea and the expectation of reciprocity

Euripides' *Medea* reveals the tension between the sentiment of love and the expectation of assistance: the demand that one person should help another achieve their aims, and the corresponding expectation of reciprocity. Medea articulates this claim when she says: "I'll begin my story at the very start. I saved your life, and every Greek who sailed with you on board that ship, the Argo, everybody can confirm my assistance."[21] Me-

[17] Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.4, 1380b35.
[18] Blundell 1989, 32.
[19] Heath 1987, cited in Konstan 2006, 169.
[20] Konstan 2006, 176.
[21] Euripides, *Medea* 560.

dea's grief lies in the fact that Jason had gained everything through her help, including success in the contest imposed by her father, Aeetes. Sophocles, in *Women of Colchis*,[22] states that Jason obtained possession of the Golden Fleece through Medea's arts of magic and enchantment. Yet the stratagem by which Medea assisted him was discovered by her father, forcing her to flee with the Argonauts and with her beloved Jason.

Her father, King Aeetes of Colchis, pursued the couple across the sea. Medea, however, had taken with her her young brother Apsyrtus. During the flight, she killed him, dismembered his body, and threw the pieces into the sea in order to delay her father's pursuit.[23] Euripides presents Apsyrtus as a child and has Jason recall Medea's act in these terms: "You slaughtered your brother in your home, then came aboard our fine ship, the Argo. That's how you began."[24] The act of fratricide enabled their escape. It succeeded because the king interrupted the pursuit in order to collect the fragments of his son's body, forced to witness the crime through which Medea brought an end to his progeny.

This tragic episode severed Medea's relationship with her family. As a result, she was left "alone, no city", abused by her husband, and "carried off as a trophy from a barbarian land".[25] Euripides presents Medea as mourning for her father, her home, and her country, all of which she had abandoned in order to follow the man who now rejects her. Having lost everything by giving everything, she is left with "no home, no parents, no reputation", and her later desolation in Greece depends upon the faithless Jason.[26]

Medea's lament in this episode appears to evoke the traditional Greek precept "to help one's friends and harm one's enemies", since she believes that this principle is embedded in her relationship with Jason. Friends are a refuge in misfortune and difficulty; they are indispensable in daily life and constitute an essential basis for political ambition.[27] Yet Medea regrets having helped Jason, as she laments:

> "I wish the ship Argo had never sailed to the land of Colchis, past the Symplegades […] nor that the hands of those great men, sent by Pelias to retrieve the Golden Fleece, had ever set off […] her heart, passionately in love with Jason […] should never have persuaded Pelias' daughters to kill their own father."[28]

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[22] Sophocles, fr. 343 Radt.
[23] Sophocles, *Women of Colchis*, TrGF 4 F 337–346.
[24] Euripides, *Medea* 1334-5.
[25] Euripides, *Medea* 255-260.
[26] Euripides, *Medea* 30.
[27] Blundell 1989, 34.
[28] Euripides, *Medea* 5-10.

Friends may be both valuable and pleasant, but this does not entitle one to use them merely for pleasure or advantage. Helping friends is not simply a matter of self-gratification or self-interest, as Jason's conduct suggests. Euripides' Medea recognises Jason as selfish and treacherous, while the chorus observes that "she gave all sorts of help to Jason. That is when life is most secure and safe, when a woman and her husband stand as one."[29] Jason appears self-centred: he loves himself more than Medea and their children, and he manipulates his family in order to secure his own advantage.

When Medea recalls that she should never have persuaded Pelias' daughters to kill their father, she refers to the episode at Iolcus and reminds the audience that she had already become involved in Jason's family conflict. Pelias, Jason's uncle and a *hybristēs*, had violently seized the throne from Aeson, Jason's father.[30] Medea persuaded Pelias' daughters to believe that, by cutting up their father's body, they could restore the aged king of Iolcus to youth through herbs and incantations. She accomplished this deception by demonstrating her powers of rejuvenation on a ram, which she boiled in a cauldron until a young animal suddenly emerged. Pelias witnessed the transformation of the ram. Several types of Greek vase-painting depict old men witnessing the rejuvenation of the ram, and these figures may represent King Pelias.[31]

Pelias' daughters decide to follow Medea's instructions in order to achieve the supposed rejuvenation of the old king. Pelias is killed, but without Medea's herbs and incantations. The result is the cunningly arranged death of the king in one of the worst ways imaginable: at the hands of his own daughters. A related version appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in Diodorus Siculus, where Medea performs the process of rejuvenation and brings about Pelias' death with the help of his daughters.

In light of the episodes of the Golden Fleece and the death of Pelias, one may ask who Medea's friend was in a foreign land, and who could help her in such a threatening situation. A foreign woman, wife, and mother such as Medea, coming from a barbarian land, would have needed the help and support of her husband in a foreign country. Yet Medea declares: "I want to die. The person who was everything to me, my own husband, has turned out to be the worst of men."[32] The classical world understood *philia* and friendship as personal relationships grounded in affection, generosity, and reciprocal obligation. Medea's speeches must ha-

[29] Euripides, *Medea* 10.
[30] Pindar, *Pythian* 4.106–115.
[31] Candido 2024, 15.
[32] Euripides, *Medea* 230.

ve made a deep impression on a fifth-century audience, especially on women, whether Greek or foreign.[33]

Jason replies to Medea: "First of all, you now live among the Greeks, not in a country of barbarians. You are familiar with justice and the law, rather than brute force."[34] This statement presents Medea as an eastern princess from the barbarian land of Colchis, which lies outside Greece. As a non-Greek and a foreigner, she is subject to the restrictive norms that Greek society, organised through the *polis*, *phratria*, and *genos*, had established in order to exclude her. Solon's legislation on the family included a law establishing the procedure for engagement or betrothal and defining the conditions of legitimacy, as well as a law on testamentary disposition and provisions concerning succession.[35]

We must therefore consider Medea's social condition. She came from Colchis to Greece and may consequently be regarded as an immigrant, a resident foreigner, or a resident alien with two children. In these circumstances, her legal status in Greece might have been that of a *metoikos*, *hetaira*, or *pallakē*, since her union with Jason did not satisfy the requirements of a lawful marriage among Greeks. Robert B. Palmer explains that, in Greece, the classical law of the fifth and fourth centuries BC recognised only one form of contracted marriage: the solemn conveyance of the bride to the groom through the combined acts of *engyē* and *ekdosis*. *Engyē* refers to the betrothal, the solemn moment when the *kyrios*, the father or guardian, "hands over" or "entrusts" the bride to the groom, who accepts that trust. It was a preliminary act directed towards a future marriage. *Ekdosis* refers to the formal conveyance of the bride to the husband's house. This followed either immediately or at some later point after *engyē* or *engyēsis*.[36]

Euripides reminds us that Medea is alone and exposed to misfortune. She helped Jason fulfil Pelias' command to obtain the Golden Fleece; she left Colchis in disgrace after betraying her father and killing her brother.[37] Medea's actions resulted in the loss of all protection from her family and from her father, her *kyrios*, at the very moment when she was forced to flee Colchis. Among the Greeks, Medea's legal condition seems to correspond to that of a *pallakē*, a term related to *pallakeia*, which denoted a relatively free form of cohabitation, a union into which the woman entered on her own initiative.[38] Rebecca Futo Kennedy notes that the condition of the *pallakē* has sometimes been considered a form of prosti-

[33] Palmer 1957, 50.
[34] Euripides, *Medea* 535
[35] Plutarch, *Solon* 25.1–2.
[36] Palmer 1957, 51.
[37] Euripides, *Medea* 170.
[38] Sealey 1984, 116.

tution, although other scholars have argued that *pallakeia* was concubinage: an alternative to marriage, especially for foreign women, which defined the status of a woman kept by a Greek man in order to bear free children.[39] Robert B. Palmer identifies Medea as a *pallakē*, using the term to denote any woman who lived with a man without being his wife through *engyē* and *ekdosis* or *epidikasia*.[40]

The *pallakē* was, at least in certain respects, a foreign mother, and both she and her children were protected by law. Nevertheless, uncertainty remained concerning the status of children born to a mother who was not a Greek citizen. Such children were probably illegitimate, that is, *nothoi*. Medea has children with Jason, as the nurse's speech confirms: "But surely Jason would not let his children go into exile, even if he is quarrelling with their mother!"[41] Jason, as father within the patriarchal structure of the Greek household, was the *kyrios* of his lawful wife, children, *pallakē*, and slaves. His functions included various priestly duties, as well as the direct or indirect management of all non-religious affairs of the household. He even possessed the right to accept or reject a child at birth, and could expose any child whom he did not wish to remain within the family.[42]

Creon, king of Corinth, orders Medea to leave the city when he says: "You must go into exile, and take those two children of yours with you."[43] Jason could have prevented the children's exile had he recognised them as legitimate sons. As *nothoi*, however, the children lacked the rights attached to *anchisteia*: access to *hiera kai hosia*, membership in the group of *anchisteis*, or kinsmen, and the consequent rights of succession and *politeia*. *Anchisteia* corresponds to legitimate filiation arising from lawful marriage, and to the bonds of kinship within the family, whether closer or more distant: parents, children, and siblings. Leão explains that such filiation imposed specific duties. Parents were required to care for their children in childhood, and children for their parents in old age; this was *gērotrophia*. There was also a duty to secure the future of women, especially through marriage and dowry. This principle of reciprocity was already present in the laws of Solon. By fulfilling these duties correctly, the heir acquired the primary right to claim his inheritance. At a time when the *polis* was still far from creating any system of social security, protection in old age was the form of assurance that parents expected from their offspring, and it should be understood as the natural counter-

[39] Kennedy 2014, 21.
[40] Palmer 1957, 53.
[41] Euripides, *Medea* 75.
[42] Bardis 1964, 162.
[43] Euripides, *Medea* 270.

part to the effort they had made in raising their children, that is, *paidotrophia*.[44]

Under Greek citizen law, Medea's children were considered illegitimate, *nothoi*, because marriage between a male citizen and a foreign woman was morganatic. Although such a union was recognised and protected by law, the children remained *nothoi*, without citizenship or the right of succession.[45] The status of the *nothoi* should therefore be understood as that of marginal family members, formally excluded from the essential and interconnected privileges of family and *polis*. At the same time, their position remained ambiguous: figures such as Themistocles, Theseus, and Heracles could be represented as marginal while still possessing considerable power.[46]

Jason appears to seek a form of social legitimation for his children when he proposes to raise them properly, in a manner worthy of his new household, to provide brothers for the children born from Medea, and to make them all equal. His new lawful marriage would allow him to establish a new and proper family, into which his children might be integrated. There was also an advantage in this arrangement, since the children born from the new marriage could help those already born.[47] Medea's children might be brought up under their father's care and might need to be adopted, *eispoieisthai*, into the father's new family. Yet they would never be *gnēsioi*,[48] legitimate sons capable of perpetuating the family name and, with it, Jason's symbolic immortality.

In her sorrow, Medea responds to Jason's new life in these words: "The pain of this suffering: this intense pain, am I not right to weep? O my children, cursed children of a hateful mother, may you die with your father and his new house, may it all perish, crash down in ruins!"[49] Faced with heartbreak, the violation of an oath, and Jason's outrage, Medea is overwhelmed by powerful emotions. Aristotle characterises such emotions as consisting of basic elements: every *pathos* is accompanied by pain and suffering, and, in his words, these are the feelings "on account of which people change their judgements".[50]

Medea and the Refusal of Humiliation

It is striking to observe how Medea gradually changes her attitude and moves towards the tragic sequence when she explains: "In other

[44] Leão 2011, 457.
[45] Sealey 1984, 116.
[46] Patterson 1990, 41.
[47] Euripides, *Medea* 670.
[48] Patterson 1990, 43.
[49] Euripides, *Medea* 110.
[50] Konstan 2006, 25.

things, a woman may be timid, in watching battles or seeing steel, but when she has been hurt in love, her marriage violated, there is no heart more desperate for blood than hers."[51] The sequence of the mythical narrative expresses Medea's transformation. She is initially helpless before the power of passion and emotion, isolated because she has been betrayed and abandoned by Jason, and banished by Creon. At the beginning, she laments and cries from inside the house: "I cannot stand this pain, this misery. What do I do? I wish that I could die!"[52] Over time, however, she ceases to mourn and to act as a victim. Her behaviour changes, and she takes the initiative as the active agent of the revenge that has already been announced.

Euripides' *Medea* reminds its Mediterranean audience of a society structured around shame and honour, in which offences demanded a response. Hesiod recommends: "If someone starts it, either saying or doing some unpleasant thing, be sure to pay them back twice as much."[53] Such retaliation is characteristic of tragic figures who seek to avoid humiliation and the mockery of their enemies. David Konstan regards shame as a powerful emotional category for the ancient Greeks, and classical Greek writers understood it as fundamental to ethical behaviour.[54] If shame is the painful emotion produced by the awareness of having been dishonoured, the response it provokes may lead the victim to harm the enemy who has violated an oath and the code of honour.

Medea's conduct appears to resemble that of an epic hero: she cannot endure the thought of being the victim of injustice and betrayal. She cannot tolerate the dishonour, *ētimasmenē*,[55] inflicted by enemies who laugh at the conditions of her present defeat. She is alone, *monē*, without friends,[56] and abandoned, *erēmos*.[57] Medea therefore resolves to react violently, since she does not wish to "make herself a laughing-stock by letting her enemies off scot-free".[58] The priestess of Hecate makes clear that the most serious response to contempt and failure is laughter, *gelōs*,[59] and that only the cruel revenge of death can reverse this shameful condition and transform it into victory over one's enemies.[60] Medea begins her plan of vengeance when she declares that she will murder three of her enemies: the father, Creon; the daughter, Glauce; and her husband,

[51] Euripides, *Medea* 260.
[52] Euripides, *Medea* 90.
[53] Hesiod, *Theogony* 709–711.
[54] Konstan 2003, 1050.
[55] Euripides, *Medea* 1355.
[56] Euripides, *Medea* 513.
[57] Euripides, *Medea* 255.
[58] Euripides, *Medea* 1050.
[59] Euripides, *Medea* 383.
[60] Euripides, *Medea* 395.

Jason.[61] She then reveals that she has already found a way to punish Jason for these injustices.

The analytical sequence of Euripides' dramaturgy exposes the radical transformation in Medea's attitude. It is significant that Medea was known for her expertise in the use of herbs, roots, and magical drugs, a reputation of which the Greeks were also aware. Jason reminds her: "Every single person in Hellas knows that you are wise. You're famous. You'd never have that kind of reputation if you were living at the edge of nowhere."[62] According to Euripides, all Greeks knew that she was skilled, possessed magical expertise, and had achieved fame.

Medea begins to put her revenge into practice by using her magical expertise, together with the decisive word and decisive action characteristic of epic heroes who act individually in order to resolve an immediate situation. The tragedy employs the term *ergasteon*,[63] referring to something that must be done, while *tolmēteon*[64] suggests something daring that must be accomplished. The verb *kteinō* expresses the decision to kill, destroy, or exterminate within a short space of time. In reactions typical of passionate beings, Medea displays a temperament moved by strong emotion, *thymos*, a feeling that marks the entire trajectory of the tragic narrative and is associated with the use of *pharmaka*. *Pharmaka* may denote drugs or spells, like *katadesmoi*, and may be harmful, healing, or both.

It is significant that Euripides brings a barbarian and foreign woman to the forefront of the scene and associates her dramatic action with active verbs such as harm, punish, destroy, avenge, kill, and endanger: words marked by hatred and emotional intensity. I suggest that Euripides uses Medea's skill to expose the perceived danger of this knowledge circulating in the Athenian *polis*. This knowledge may be understood as an extension of the fear felt by Athenian men towards the active participation of Greek and foreign women in the use of herbs and ointments regarded as magical. Euripides' theatre may thus be defined as a space of denunciation. The poet may be understood as complaining about, or drawing attention to, foreign women circulating in Athens and selling magical drugs, charms, enchantments, and *katadesmoi*.

These foreign women were known as *pharmakides*, because they handled *pharmaka* through roots, herbs, sorcery, and *philtrokatadesmoi*. Euripides may have recognised a rivalry between *iatroi* and *pharmakides*, both of whom claimed expertise in the treatment of diseases and the ability to help the sick. These women also provided herbs and roots for purifi-

[61] Euripides, *Medea* 261.
[62] Euripides, *Medea* 550.
[63] Euripides, *Medea* 791.
[64] Euripides, *Medea* 1051.

cation, prayer, and incantation, prescribed food taboos, and invoked divine intervention. Euripides draws attention to them as a group of foreign women regarded as dangerous and present in Athens. They were known as charlatans, *goētes*, deceivers, *alazones*, purifiers, *kathartai*, wandering collectors, *agyrtai*, and practitioners of magic, *magoi*.[65] In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes mentions[66] the existence of foreign women from Thessaly who sold magical drugs and spells in the Athenian agora and offered their services as *pharmakides*. I argue that such magical specialists were already circulating in Athens from the period of the Peloponnesian War, using *pharmaka* for incantation, healing, magic, and *katadesmoi* intended to harm enemies.

Classical literature provides the names of mythical women involved in the manipulation of magical herbs, such as Circe, Calypso, Helen, and Medea. They possess the knowledge and use of herbs as poison or as curative medicine, that is, as *pharmakon*. The knowledge of herbs, magical drugs, *philtrokatadesmoi*, and spells, together with their efficacy for therapeutic and procreative purposes, belonged to standard practices associated with foreign women circulating in the Mediterranean and in Athens.[67]

Through the figure of Medea, Euripides uses the Athenian theatre to articulate anxieties surrounding foreign women and their alleged expertise in magical practices. Herbs, roots, *katadesmoi*, and love potions could be represented as forms of knowledge directed towards healing, persuasion, desire, or revenge. In Medea, this knowledge remains fundamentally ambiguous: it may benefit a friend, but it may also become fatal to an enemy. Her *sophia* therefore marks her both as a figure of power and as a source of danger, embodying the fear that specialised knowledge, when joined to suffering, dishonour, and hatred, may be turned into destructive action.

[65] Candido 2024, 21.
[66] Aristophanes, *Clouds* 750–755.
[67] Candido 2024, 15.

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