

# Two Temper-Tossed Women

by

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## Two “Temper-Tossed” Women

The modern “temper-tossed” woman of my title was illiterate, so the ancient “temper-tossed” woman she was often compared to obviously meant nothing to her.

Margaret Garner was illiterate because she lived in a place and time (Kentucky 1856) where it was a crime to teach a slave to read, and Margaret Garner was born into slavery. The ancient woman she was often compared to was Medea, and the point of comparison was infanticide: Medea had killed her two children to punish her husband; Margaret Garner killed her two-year old daughter rather than have her be returned to slavery.

Margaret was charged with child murder and her accusers, mostly southerners, reviled her as the “modern Medea,” a depraved creature, whose horrific act demonstrated, once again, that slaves required the guiding hand of a white master to prevent such barbaric acts.

Northerners, however, particularly abolitionists, also identified Margaret as the “modern Medea,” but argued that the deep despair implied by the killing of her child demonstrated the full horror that was slavery.

Medea, in ancient myth, is usually linked to Jason, the heroic Jason who built the first Greek ship and gathered a group of shipmates, including Heracles and Orpheus, to capture the Golden Fleece from the barbaric Colchis. Versions of her story have been told by Herodotus, Ovid, and Seneca, among others, and Medea was the subject of operas by Charpentier (1693), Handel (1713), and Cherubini (1797). Pier Pasolini, in 1969, offered a dramatic film version, with Maria Callas in the non-singing title role, described by a

*Guardian* critic as a “Freudian, Marxist, Christian” interpretation of the myth. I saw the film, but I must confess that I failed to discern the “Freudian, Marxist, Christian” elements. The film was terrible, but perhaps I was distracted by a Maria Callas who over-emoted without ever bursting into song.

Margaret Garner has also been the subject of an opera (2005), with music by Richard Danielpour and a libretto by Toni Morrison, based in part on her novel, *Beloved*.

The crucial part of Margaret Garner’s story began on a bitterly cold January night in 1856, when she and sixteen other slaves, including her husband and four children, stole a sleigh and horses from their Kentucky owner and rode all night to the frozen Ohio River, which they crossed on foot to Cincinnati.

The group divided at that point, and nine eventually made their way to Canada and freedom. Margaret and her four children, her husband and his parents, chose to pause briefly and rest at the home of a freed slave whom they knew. Before they could continue on, however, the slave masters, under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, sought to reclaim their property. The house was surrounded and when the fugitives refused to surrender, the *posse comitatus* attacked. When it became obvious that the slave owners would recapture their escaped property, Margaret, who was in the kitchen in the back of the house, resolved to die rather than be returned to slavery. She seized a butcher knife and slit the throat of her infant daughter. She had intended to kill her other three children and then herself, but she was retaken before she could do so.

An abolitionist lawyer, John Jolliffe, attempted to delay the return of the Garner party to slavery by using a states’ rights argument, contending that since Margaret had committed a murder in Ohio, warrants must be served, and she must stand trial in that

state. “The fugitives have all assured me,” Jolliffe asserted, “that they will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery.”

The trial, which played out over several weeks, became national news, and the “modern Medea,” was personified as hero in the north and depraved villain in the south. A Kentucky newspaper said Margaret was “temper-tossed,” implying that such an ornery character was just the sort of woman who would be likely to kill her children. The newspaper did not suggest, however, that her condition of slavery might have had anything to do with her disposition.

These identifications of Margaret Garner with Medea seemed to focus on that single act of infanticide that they had in common, but the character and circumstances of the Medea of Greek mythology were otherwise largely ignored.

It is through the lens of the Margaret Garner case that I would like to explore the text of the most famous retelling of the myth, the *Medea* of Euripides, performed in 431 B.C., just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.

The Greek audience, who knew their myths as well as evangelicals claim to know their Bibles, might have been surprised to see the play titled *Medea* rather than *Jason*, for they would know the backstory and, according to it, Jason ranked high in the Greek constellation of heroes, for he accomplished great, seemingly impossible deeds.

The Greek audience knew Medea too. She *helped* Jason. Her role was subordinate to his great deeds because, of course, she was a woman, inferior by the nature of things and therefore ranking only slightly better than a slave in Greek society. And, oh yes, she was also a foreigner, and the Greeks had a special word for those who did not know

Greek: barbarian. Her very name must have been troubling too, for Medea means “planner,” or “deviser,” not very lady-like pursuits at all.

The Greek audience would also know the depth of Medea’s passion for Jason, demonstrated by what she did for him. It was her magic spells that allowed Jason to successfully overcome the dragons that were guarding the Golden Fleece and escape with the sacred object of Colchis. She betrayed her father, her country, and her religion for love of Jason. When the Colchian forces sailed in pursuit of Jason’s ship, the Argo, Medea, that “deviser,” killed her own brother and cut his corpse in pieces and tossed the pieces overboard, effectively stalling the pursuit, for a soul had to be whole to enjoy serenity in the afterlife.

The quest for the Golden Fleece had been set in motion by Jason’s uncle, Pelias, who had usurped the throne of Iolcus, once held by Jason’s father. Jason, after his father’s murder, was secreted away to the mountains, where he was raised by Chiron, the centaur, also mentor to Achilles, Patroclus, Heracles, and many other Greek heroes. Chiron the Centaur was mentor to so many Greek heroes, it seems, because his half-man, half-horse nature allowed him a deeper understanding of the human and animal elements in man.

When Jason reached maturity, he demanded that Pelias surrender the throne to him. Pelias demurred, but offered to surrender the throne if Jason would retrieve the Golden Fleece from faraway Colchis. Jason accepted this offer, and here one begins to doubt his wisdom, for the quest he agreed to undertake was, in fact, like being asked to take a long walk on a short pier. It is obvious, at any rate, that Pelias thought he would never see his pesky nephew again.

This may shock you, but when Jason returned with the great trophy, Pelias still refused to surrender the throne.

Medea, the “deviser,” that inferior woman, Jason’s barbarian wife, took action. Her reputation as a sorceress had preceded her and when she suggested to the young daughters of Pelias that she could bestow immortal youth on their father, they gleefully accepted Medea’s thrilling offer.

Medea explained that it was a simple matter.

The daughters merely had to cut their father in pieces, boil him in certain magical herbs and, with a few incantations and appropriate cooking time, presto! he would emerge whole again and he would be forever young.

Perhaps the daughters were a bit too eager, or perhaps they didn’t follow the recipe precisely, for the magic didn’t work, and all of the tears of his daughters could not make Pelias whole once again.

This cooking misadventure forced Jason and Medea to flee Corinth, for even though the throne was now vacant, the people of Iolcus made it clear that they were not very likely to ever be in favor of having Jason as their king.

All of this, of course, is part of that backstory. Euripides’ play begins just after the point where Medea learns that her husband Jason is about to toss her aside in order to secure a more favorable political position by marrying the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth.

Medea’s nurse informs the audience that her mistress, after hearing the news of Jason’s betrayal, has not eaten for days and does nothing but weep and moan. She had even hinted at suicide. The nurse also recalls the circumstances of the marriage of Jason

and Medea, which were far from ordinary. In the typical Greek marriage, the prospective bride had no say whatsoever about who her future spouse might be, and she was transferred from father to groom like a piece of property.

But this marriage of the Greek hero and the barbarian princess was, by force of circumstances, a marriage of equals, where they “clasped right hands together in eternal promise,” as the nurse reports in the opening scene of Euripides’ play.

This may sound like the ordinary vows of a church wedding, but this “eternal promise,” was an oath sworn before the gods and, in classical Greece, an oath was a very serious matter, with force and grave meaning. Oaths were the fabric that stitched the order of society together. Anarchy would reign if oaths were not strictly and honorably observed. And for that reason, the gods had special demons to punish those who violated oaths.

This marital oath is, in fact, alluded to six more times, and each time it is to condemn Jason for violating that oath. The Nurse, the Chorus of Corinthian Women, and Aegeus, the Athenian, all side with Medea. Imagine how extraordinarily subversive it was for Euripides to even hint that justice would be on the side of a barbarian woman instead of a Greek hero.

Jason might have noticed, one would think, that his wife, though inferior as woman and barbarian, was still a rather formidable creature, one not to be trifled with under any circumstances. He clearly did not acknowledge that much of his glory was based on the dirty work that Medea did for him.

The Jason in Euripides' play does not get it, and he struts and frets his hour upon the stage more like a buffoon than a hero, and that, too, must have shocked the Greek audience.

Euripides is clearly on Medea's side. Her first speech to the Chorus, for example, states the plight of every woman in Greek society:

We women are the most unfortunate creatures.

Firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required

For us to buy a husband and take for our bodies

A master; for not to take one is even worse.

One Greek scholar, Moses Hadas, thinking more perhaps of the 1960s than the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., called this speech "a fine feminist harangue."

Medea, in this fine feminist harangue, also points out that the Greek woman in marriage is entirely subordinated to the will of her husband, be he good or bad, and she has no recourse if he is bad. Medea also dismisses the typical masculine harangue that women have it easy at home, while the overburdened men have to go out and fight in wars.

How wrong they are! I would very much stand

Three times in battle than bear one child.



Medea, in this same speech, makes co-conspirators of the Chorus of Corinthian Women, by informing them of her plans and requesting that they keep silent until the deed is done. The Chorus agrees to keep silent and adds, “You are in the right, Medea, in paying back your husband.”

Medea’s plans, at this stage, are not fully formed. She only hopes to find the means, as she tells the Chorus, “or [can] devise any scheme to pay back my husband for what he has done to me—him and his father-in-law and the girl who married him.” The children are not mentioned at this point.

King Creon, accompanied by armed guards, arrives to inform Medea that she must go into exile immediately, for, unlike Jason, he fears that her sorcery might do him harm.

Medea responds with a speech that sounds as though Euripides were thinking of himself in contemporary Athens:

Through being considered clever I have suffered much.

A person of sense ought never to have his children

Brought up to be more clever than the average.

For, apart from cleverness bringing them no profit,

It will make them objects of envy and ill-will.

If you put new ideas before the eyes of fools

They’ll think you foolish and worthless into the bargain;

And if you are thought superior to those who have

Some reputation for learning, you will become hated.

Medea pleads, begs, cries, clasps his knees and, even though Creon doubts the wisdom of his own move, he gives her one more day to plan for her exile.

And that is all Medea, the “deviser,” needs.

Jason arrives, and he indicates that the source of all the difficulties is that cross-temper of Medea:

This is not the first occasion that I have noticed  
How hopeless it is to deal with a stubborn temper.  
For with reasonable submission to our ruler’s will,  
You might have lived in this land and kept your home.  
As it is you are going to be exiled for your loose speaking.  
. . . .

All the same, and in spite of your conduct I’ll not desert  
My friends, but have come to make some provision for you,  
So that you and the children may not be penniless  
Or in need of anything in exile.

Notice that Jason has not said “our children,” or even “my children,” but “the children,” as though he is already distancing himself from them. Medea, barely controlling her contempt, reminds Jason of the things she has done for him, such as saving his life.

Jason denies that she had anything to do with it, for it was all the doing of the goddess Cypris (Aphrodite). Medea, in other words, was merely the human agent of the will of the goddess. Not content with that, he goes further:

But on this question of saving me, I can prove  
You have certainly got more from me than you gave.  
Firstly, instead of living among barbarians,  
You inhabit a Greek land and understand our ways,  
How to live by law instead of the sweet will of force.  
And all the Greeks considered you a clever woman.  
You were honored for it; while, if you were living at  
The ends of the earth, nobody would have heard of you.

How sweet it must have been for Medea to learn that she was living in a land of law, where it was legal for a husband to discard his wife for any reason and embrace another. Just imagine how these lines might have been received by that Greek audience: Jason, one of their greatest heroes, sounds like, and is, an arrogant chauvinistic fool.

I wonder, however, why Moses Hadas didn't identify Jason's speech as a "fine masculine harangue."

After a choral interlude, Aegeus the king of Athens and an old friend of Medea happens by. Some critics (Gilbert Murray among them) have criticized this scene as a clumsy intrusion, comparable to an irrelevant comic scene in an Elizabethan tragedy. It

is, however, an integral part of the play, for it guarantees that Medea will have a place of asylum.

Aegeus is returning from Delphi, where he has gone to ask the oracle about what can be done to remedy the fact he and his wife have yet to have a child. Medea assures him that he needn't bother about the oracle: she has drugs that can bring children to previously barren couples.

Aegeus rejoices at this news, but there is a catch. He must swear an oath before the gods that he will take in and protect Medea if and when she comes to Athens. He does so, and goes his merry way.

Medea, having the assurance of future asylum, lays out her full plan: con Jason into believing that she has had a change of heart, so she can send a present to his new bride that will cause the death of Creon and his daughter. And she will kill her children for, as she says, "this is the best way to ruin my husband."

Jason, needless to say, falls for Medea's change of heart. She apologizes for her bad temper and for being so foolish, for now she realizes that Jason, in his wisdom, was only doing what was best for her and the children.

"I approve of what you say," Jason says. "It is natural for a woman to be wild with her husband when he goes in for secret love. But now your mind has turned to better reasoning. In the end you have come to the right decision like the clever woman that you are."

The presents, a gold crown and a golden dress, are sent to the princess, and as Medea waits for a report on how the gifts were received, she hesitates and doubts that she will have the courage to kill her two sons.

A messenger arrives and, as all Greek theatergoers knew, a messenger never is the bearer of good tidings. One of the conventions of the Greek stage was that no violence could be portrayed in the orchestra (the dancing and singing space). It was a sacred place, dedicated to Dionysius, the god in whose honor the plays were performed. It was perfectly permissible, however, for a messenger to provide an eyewitness, blow-by-blow account of any horrific deeds that happened off stage, such as Oedipus blinding himself, or Jocasta hanging herself.

The messenger in *Medea* lives up to his advanced billing. In one of the longer speeches in the play, he gives us that blow-by-blow account of how the crown and dress clung to the princess and burst into flames, eating into her flesh, and how King Creon, attempting to help his daughter, is engulfed in the same flesh-consuming flames.

The Chorus of Corinthian Women do not waver in their support of *Medea* when they hear of this horrible double murder, and assert, once again, that Jason deserves the evils which have befallen him.

*Medea*, then, like Lady Macbeth, screws her courage to the sticking place, psyches herself up, and takes a sword (offstage, of course) to kill her two sons. Jason arrives, too late to save them, but he does bravely announce that “no Greek woman would have dared such deeds.” He invokes the furies, those agents of the gods whose special charge is tormenting those who kill their own flesh and blood, and calls for justice to destroy her.

*Medea*, up on her roof, and out of Jason’s reach, shouts back a savage question:

What heavenly power lends an ear  
To a breaker of oaths, a deceiver?

A few more insults are hurled back and forth, but it is all meaningless, for Medea sits comfortably, in a chariot, supplied by Helios, the sun god, and drawn by dragons, ready to rush this serial killer off to Athens where, Euripides seems to imply, as another slap in the face for the audience, that murderers are always willingly taken in.

The Chorus, as in many Greek tragedies, has the final words: “Many things the gods achieve beyond our judgment. What we thought is not confirmed and what we thought not god contrives.”

Moses Hadas is not alone in the feeling that the enigmatic ending is one “that no intelligent reader can accept.” I’m not sure, however, whether Hadas is complaining about the ambiguous weasel words of the Chorus, or about Medea’s escape in a chariot drawn by dragons. If the latter, is he objecting to the dragon-drawn escape as a clumsy plot device, or is he rejecting the conclusion because it is immoral to have this murderer get away with it?

The gods of Greek mythology are notorious, of course, for their larger-than-life immorality, so it is possible that Helios, as a relative of Medea, is merely helping one of his own, and the question of morality never enters into his decision. It implies that the gods, and perhaps the entire universe, is quite indifferent to the fate of mere humans.

Another possibility is that the dragon-drawn chariot supplied to Medea by Helios affirms, and reinforces what the Nurse, Aegeus, and the Chorus of Corinthian Women have been maintaining all along: that Medea is justified in retaliating against Jason, for

his crime of violating the oath he swore before the gods threatens the very fabric of civilized society.

Sitting through Euripides' *Medea* must have been difficult for that Athenian audience in 431 B.C., for his play challenged comfortable Greek assumptions of superiority in so many ways. Those challenges to Athenian society are present in all eighteen of his surviving plays, and they supply ample evidence that he, like Socrates, was a gadfly who incessantly pestered and tormented his contemporaries. Athens put Socrates to death and sent Euripides, very late in life, into exile.

Jason, according to subsequent myths, was so devastated by Medea's attacks that he never recovered. The great Greek hero was reduced to an idle beachcomber, where he wandered aimlessly until the prow of the rotting hull of the Argo collapsed and crushed the life out of him.

Medea went on to other adventures, with Aegeus, with Heracles, with Theseus, but some say she was never happy.

There was no dragon-drawn chariot sent to rescue Margaret Garner, however. The Ohio courts ruled that Margaret Garner was a slave, and since slaves were property, she must be returned to her master. Five hundred deputies protected and escorted that property, and Margaret was returned to the hands of her master. It was a minor prelude to the infamous Dred Scott Supreme Court decision of 1857, which reiterated that slaves were property, not entitled any protection under U.S. law.

Margaret's owner, fearing that some wild-eyed abolitionists might attempt to liberate her, sold her down the river, to a Mississippi plantation owner.

The steamboat on which she was being conveyed deeper into the south collided with another steamboat. Sixteen people were killed in the accident. Margaret, according to conflicting accounts, jumped or was pitched into the river by the force of the collision. Her daughter, Priscilla, was drowned, but Margaret was rescued. When she learned the fate of her daughter, Margaret, according to rescuers, “displayed frantic joy,” suggesting, surely, that she still believed that death was preferable to slavery.

Robert, Margaret’s husband, and their two sons, Samuel and Thomas, are listed in the 1870 census in Cincinnati. The record of the Garner family, before, during, and after the Civil War is otherwise largely a blank page.

Margaret Garner survived only eighteen months under her Mississippi owner, dying in a typhoid epidemic.

She, like Medea, seemed to have very good reasons for being “temper-tossed.”

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